

RUSSIAN MYTHS OF “ONE AND THE SAME PEOPLE NATION” AND “NATO’S ATTACK ON RUSSIA” IN THE LEGITIMIZATION OF THE RUSSO- UKRAINIAN WAR

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1. INTRODUCTION

On December 17, 2021, the Russian Federation issued an ultimatum to the United States of America, the OSCE and NATO sending draft security agreements between the United States and Russia and between NATO and Russia, respectively. Among other things, second document emphasizes: «The Russian Federation and all the Parties that were member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as of 27 May 1997, respectively, shall not deploy military forces and weaponry on the territory of any of the other States in Europe in addition to the forces stationed on that territory as of 27 May 1997» (Agreement, 2021). In this paragraph, Russian diplomats refer to the treaty concluded between Russia and NATO in 1997, which contains clauses on joint responsibility for security on the European continent (Founding Act, 1997), but does not contain clauses on non-expansion of NATO to the East and non-deployment of weapons at the territories of new NATO member states. According to this Russian requirement, such states as Czechia, Hungary, and Poland (joined NATO in 1999), Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia (2004), as well as Albania and Croatia (2009), Montenegro (2017), and North Macedonia (2020) would have to completely lose the protection they received by becoming members of the Alliance.

In the draft treaties, Russia emphasized on forbidding Ukraine to join NATO: «All member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization commit themselves to refrain from any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine as well as other States» and outlined a wider range of territories of sovereign states with which NATO countries were prohibited from having military relations: «The Parties that are member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization shall not conduct any military activity on the territory of Ukraine as well as other States in the Eastern Europe, in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia.» (Agreement, 2021). At the time of the announcement of the ultimatum, about 100,000 Russian troops were gathered on the border with Ukraine.

Official negotiations with the Russian side began in the second week of the new 2022 year at the level of the USA, OSCE and NATO. The dialogue was based on the illegitimacy of Russia's demands, according to Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that any European country has the right to join the Alliance, and the United Nations Charter refers to the right of states to join organizations and alliances for ensuring their safety. Russia demonstrated its inability to dialogue, emphasizing the unconditional fulfillment of the ultimatum, and on February 24, 2022, invaded the territory of Ukraine, legitimizing its actions through the term "special military operation", which aims to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine.

Putin formally declared war to Ukraine on February 21, recognizing the independence of the puppet states of the Luhansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic, thereby deliberately and unilaterally withdrawing from the Minsk agreements¹. In his address to the Russian people dated February 21, Putin emphasized: "So, I will start with the fact, that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, or to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh for Russia – by

¹ The Minsk Agreements - signed on September 5, 2014, by representatives of Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, and the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, provided for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of Russian troops from the conflict zone, and the federalization of Ukraine with the granting of self-government rights to the Donetsk and Luhansk republics.

separating, severing that is historically Russian land.” (Putin, 2022). Thus, Putin expressed his confidence in not recognizing the sovereignty of Ukraine, emphasized his conviction that Russia and Ukraine are inhabited by the same Russian people and that the invasion of a sovereign state is only a desire to "reunite" one and the same people. It was assumed that the majority of Ukrainians also consider themselves a one and the same people with the Russian invaders. That is why the Russian invasion was planned to be short and effective.

In this chapter, the legitimization of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will not be considered from the point of view of compliance of Russia's actions with the norms of international law. As Jens Stoltenberg stated at a press conference devoted to the threat of Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia violates all norms of international law that prohibit a sovereign state from invading the territory of another sovereign state. (Press conference by NATO Secretary General, 2022). If Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not provoked and legal, how does Russia legitimize military actions on the territory of a sovereign state?

I rely on the theoretical framework of Cuddy and Catton, which is based on the fact that the international law of war and peace was violated by states immediately after the conclusion of the UN Charter, and the invasion of one country into another was based on the primacy of geopolitics and military necessity. An illegitimate "de jure" local war becomes actually legitimate when it averts a total war, turning into an endless local war, which does not affect the entire population of the Globe. (Cuddy B., Kattan V., 2023).

Russia's December 2021 ultimatum and the unity of NATO members that no outside power can dictate which countries are eligible to join the Alliance have provoked the greatest tension since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

“As the Russians threatened the United States and NATO with the “asymmetrical response”, rumors began to swirl around Washington suggesting that nuclear-armed missiles might be installed close to American shores. After Russian officials suggested sending their troops to Cuba and Venezuela, concerns grew that such missiles might not only be carried on submarines but also based on

land. Putin's thread of the previous few months concerning a repetition of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 suddenly acquired new meaning and urgency. (Plokhy S., 2023, p.145)"

Threats of total nuclear war as a consequence of disobeying Russia's ultimatums are part of its information warfare strategy. The fear of total destruction is a strong emotion that excludes critical thinking and appeal to universal rules. The appeal to emotions transfers the legitimation of Russian aggression from the sphere of rational thinking to the sphere of irrational, fear-distorted perception, which prompts audiences who consume the products of Russian propaganda to make decisions beneficial to Russia's interests.

This study will analyze the purpose and methods of Russian propaganda, which legitimizes its aggression and local wars, thereby leveling the world order established after the Second World War. The study focuses on two interrelated myths of Russian propaganda: "NATO's attack on Russia" and "one and the same people", which are imposed on both domestic and foreign audiences. Despite the powerful and systematic subversive activity of the Russian state to destroy democratic values, democracies at the level of the state and society can resist the destructive influence of Russian propaganda. At the end of the chapter, specific ways to debunk the myths of Russian propaganda are given in order to preserve liberal democratic values.

2. THE AIM AND METHODS OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

This chapter uses Jowett and O'Donnell's (2018) definition of propaganda, which focuses on the communicative process of propaganda as a deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitive functions, and direct audience's behavior to achieve a response that promotes the propagandist's desired intent.

The actions of propagandists are not random or thoughtless, but on the contrary, they choose their steps and words considering all possible consequences. The dissemination of propaganda messages occurs according to the plan using special methods and tools. Propaganda aims to produce psychological, cognitive,

and behavioral changes of the target audience. "Shape perceptions" in this definition indicates that propaganda aims to change the way an audience perceives certain information, ideas, or attitudes. Propagandists try to shape perception with the help of language and images. "Manipulate cognitive functions" refers to changing the understanding of information and reformatting the beliefs of the target audience. Propagandists try to influence the actions of the audience by persuading them to change their behavior or take certain actions that are in line with propagandists' goals.

Specific feature of Russian propaganda is the fusion of such completely different concepts of Western discourse as "soft power" and "intangible weapons". According to Joseph Nye's classic definition, soft power is the ability to achieve the state's goals through attraction of its culture, ideas, and policies rather than coercion (Nye, 1990). Nowadays Russia formulates the goal of its humanitarian policy abroad as follows:

“On the world stage, the struggle for cultural influence continues to intensify, with new centers of power being widely involved in it. Globalization not only promotes the mutual enrichment of national cultures, but also threatens the cultural identity of countries and peoples. In this regard, when implementing this Concept, one should consider the increasing number of attempts to belittle the significance of Russian culture and Russian humanitarian projects, to disseminate and impose a distorted interpretation of Russia’s true goals of familiarizing the world community with its cultural heritage and achievements in various humanitarian fields, to discredit the Russian World, its traditions and ideals, replacing them with pseudo-values.” Kontseptsyia humanyarnoi polytyky Rosyiskoi Federatsyy za rubezhom, 2022

The text contains such terms as “the struggle for cultural influence” “threats to cultural identity”, “attempts to belittle the significance of Russian culture”, “to discredit Russian World, its traditions and ideals, replacing them with pseudo-values.” Such definitions have nothing to do with the attractiveness of a country's culture to be perceived by foreign audiences. Rather, these terms show belligerence in imposing the only correct perception of Russian culture.

Van Herpen claims that Russian propaganda totally changes the understanding of soft power concept created by Joseph Nye. Putin's Russia is beginning to rethink this concept after the "color revolutions" in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004. Instead of attracting, Russian soft power is turning into a hybrid weapon. The concept of "soft power" in the Russian sense undergoes a threefold reduction. First, soft power is reduced to only one of its components - public diplomacy.

"This means that soft power – which in Nye's definition is a power emanating from both civil society and the state – was reduced to an instrument used by the state to influence foreign governments and manipulate foreign public opinion". Perception that a soft power is a zero-sum game and to the second reduction: if for the "attractiveness contest" between the states in the original definition there are no winners and no losers, and it has no sense for one country to attack the 'attractiveness' of the other with the aim to increase its own soft power, for the Russian concept of 'attraction' winning and make all other countries lose is essential. In Russia soft power becomes the part of its hard military power, so it can include illegal activities, such as espionage, lies, disinformation and bribery."Van Herpen, 2016, p. 27.

The Russian interpretation of soft power turns the promotion of Russian ideas abroad into an element "nonmaterial" but "hard power", which nevertheless works, taking into account the three components of Russian "soft-power offensive", which were distinguished by Van Herpen. The first element of "nonmaterial hard power" is "Mimesis". Russian state copies Western strategies and institutions which are the most successful in their country's promotion. The second element is the "Rollback" which means elimination of the activities of Western soft-power institutes inside of Russia.

The state-formed propaganda concept of spreading messages needed by Russia to promote its own interests is completely carried out by state bodies imitating Western public organizations. At the same time, Russia outlawed the activities of Western cultural centers and NGOs, such as the British Council and USAID in

Russia, and forced NGOs that received funding from abroad to declare themselves "foreign agents".

The third component "Invention" demonstrates Russian "innovations" in the field. Van Herpen defines "Invention" as

"Strategy to invent new soft-power strategies, making ample use of the possibilities offered by the open Western societies. It includes legal as well as illegal activities in order to enhance the Kremlin's influence abroad and ranges from hiring Western public relations firms to improve its image to setting up spy rings, illegally financing political parties, and directly "buying" people." Van Herpen, 2016, p.34

This tool of communication warfare fully corresponds to the description of espionage, which was previously used by the KGB. Modern Russia uses these illegal elements of creating propaganda "channels" in order to destroy the very existence of objective truth and, accordingly, objective reality. After all, now Russia's reputation can be laundered for money by a respectable Western company that spreads messages in the West "as if it were its own", and pro-Russian messages can be delivered by members of parliament to their voters, convincing them that the interests of Russia are theirs, the voters of the democratic countries, interests.

A slightly different approach to describing the model of Russian propaganda is proposed by Nimmo. Nimmo describes this technology as 4 D model, which has four steps: dismiss, distort, distract, dismay. Regarding the first tool of manipulation of public opinion, Nimmo gives as an example the case of destroying audience's the cognitive abilities when Putin first denied the presence of Russian troops in March 2014 in Crimea, then partially admitting the presence of troops to strengthen the protection of the Black Sea Fleet, and finally fully admitting that the troops were there from the very beginning, openly mocking those who believed his assurances that Crimea was not captured by the Russian army. Thus, Putin devalues the cognitive abilities of audiences, "dismissing" them.

Distortion of information is perhaps the most massive tactic of Russian propaganda, which creates dozens of fake news every day, using paid actors as witnesses of real or completely fabricated events. Russia often distracts the attention of the audience from its crimes by offering many versions of reality, including conspiracy theories, insisting on a complete investigation and refutation of these very versions before "unfairly accusing" Russia of a crime, having in hand the facts and all the evidence pointing to Russian guilt. The last key tool of Nimmo's 4D model of Russian propaganda is to "dismay" the audience by constantly threatening to use nuclear weapons on all opponents of Russian propaganda. This technique is used starting from 2007 for the CIS countries and from 2022 for the Western audiences. (Nimmo, 2015).

Paul and Matthews complement Nimmo's analysis by characterizing the methods of Russian propaganda as 1) High-volume and multichannel 2) Rapid, continuous, and repetitive 3) Lacks commitment to objective reality 4) Lacks commitment to consistency, explaining the effectiveness of their approach from the point of view of psychology.

Using all available channels of information transmission, such as radio, television, internet platforms and paid bloggers and trolls, Russian propaganda "bombards" the audience with its messages. Because information is believed to be true and verified by checking multiple sources and channels, audiences readily believe those messages received from different sources. Often repeated lies or half-truths transmitted through various channels are believed by the audience as having been verified. The speed of Russian propagandists allows Russian messages to be the first to convey their distorted picture of the world. Those who try to refute Russian messages act reactively, and the repetition of accusations, for example, against any democratic leader, leaves him with the role of the accused, someone who justifies himself, proving his own innocence again and again.

To the question "Why is rapid, continuous, and repetitive propaganda successful?" the authors of the article give the following answer: "First impressions are very resilient. Repetition leads to familiarity, and familiarity leads

to acceptance.” Very often, Russian propaganda has nothing to do with reality. But most consumers of information are too lazy to verify the facts. Disproving fake news takes time and effort, but even disproved information over time modifies audience behavior. As an example of inconsistency in statements, the authors cite Putin's narratives, which often contradict each other. However, research shows that audiences tend to believe the diametrically opposite statements of this leader every time (Paul and Matthews, 2016).

What should Russian propagandists be like? What is the specificity of Russian communicators to convey clearly false information without trying to find the truth and debunk lies? Natalia Roudakova's research, which combines ethnography, moral and political theory, and media analysis, is devoted to this question. Using specific examples, Roudakova shows how already in the mid-2000s, the sphere of public life in Russia, where private individuals could publicly express their opinion and discuss common problems, respecting each other, was practically destroyed by the state. Only the state and atomized individuals remained in Russian communication sphere. Journalists and media, instead of covering real events and searching for the truth, criticizing the government and oligarchs, turn into "political prostitutes", or members of the "second oldest profession", as they are commonly termed in Russia, who monetize their truth-seeking skills for the manipulation of public consciousness in favor of the "customer" the state or an oligarch. Reality, truth, consistency in this case have no importance, what matters is the wishes of the "customer", from whom Russian journalists receive money. In contrast to the West, where the state and business must be accountable to taxpayers, and journalists as the "third power" must ensure that the abuse of the "first power" - the state, and the "second power" - business do not occur, harming citizens, in Russia journalists and media easily fabricate any reality for the money of the state or business, completely ignoring the interests of citizens to know the truth and control the government and business. (Roudakova, 2017)

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba (March 4, 2020 – now), who is the developer of Ukraine's communication foreign strategies, in his book *The War for Reality* claims that Russia is pushing its vision of the world, influencing the identities of the audiences it needs, destroying the harmful

(democratic) and cementing useful (uncertain) reality it needs: "Russia has unleashed a global hybrid war and is clearly aware of its goals - to destroy people's trust in democratic institutions (to disorient) and to impose on others the unconditional acceptance of Russian policies (to set new benchmarks)." (Kuleba 2022, p.108-109).

The effect of the change in the reality of Western societies, the leveling of liberal values and complete distrust of the facts, is significantly intensified, taking into account the rather long period of aggressive communication war, which Russia has been waging since the mid-2010s and significantly intensified its efforts after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

3. RUSSIAN MYTHS OF NATO'S ATTACK AND ONE AND THE SAME PEOPLE NATION

Mark Schorer (1959) sees myths as tools using which people try to make their experiences understandable (p.360). He describes myth as a construct that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of everyday life and organizes experience. Wars can be caused by the clash of different mythologies. Schorer argues that society can disintegrate into conflicting mythologies that cannot adapt to each other. This indicates that disputes and conflicts may arise due to differences in ideologies based on different mythological foundations. Another important idea in Schorer's concept is the emphasis that ideologies can activate behavior only when they rely on images and metaphors that people understand and accept. This makes myths a necessary component of any form of ideology. Myths give ideologies a visual and symbolic basis, making them more accessible and appealing to the masses.

Sherlock (2007) emphasizes the importance of political myths for managing a political regime. He argues that political leaders use myths to change the historical narrative in order to legitimize their power and gain support for their political actions. This is done by controlling the perception of the past and reinforcing the rights of one's group or regime. Sherlock points out the differences between history and myth. History is based on objective research and avoids

predetermined outcomes. It is aimed at a systematic and critical study of the past without preconceived views or approaches. Myth, on the other hand, does not analyze historical events, but presents them as already resolved and analyzed. A myth may contain elements of truth, but its form and use of facts are dramatic and subjective. Events are selected to serve the purposes of the myth, and facts that might threaten the integrity of the myth may be ignored or distorted.

The Russian myth, repeated thousands of times by Russian propagandists, was summarized by Nimmo into a linear sequential narrative of the confrontation between the "bad guy" represented by the West and the "good guy" represented by Putin:

“The US has always used NATO and European countries as a tool for its own foreign-policy aims. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the US acted like a victorious aggressor, trying to shape a world in which it would be the sole arbiter of power. As part of that goal, it supported separatists in the Caucasus in a bid to ‘dismember’ Russia, and absorbed the states of CEE into NATO in an attempt at ‘encirclement’, breaching a promise given to President Gorbachev.

When Putin came to power, he opposed the US attempt at world domination, and thus became the main stumbling-block to American ambitions [...]

NATO and the EU wanted to force Ukraine to turn West. They therefore gave it an ‘either-or’ choice of joining NATO and the EU’s free-trade zone or staying in Russia’s orbit. When President Yanukovych rejected their pressure, neo-Nazis in Kyiv staged a violent coup and began an assault on Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, NATO planned to move ships into Crimea. Russia therefore had no choice but to intervene to protect its compatriots, and the Russian-speakers of the East rose up against the Kiev junta in defense of their lives and their language.” (Nimmo, 2015)

The Russian myth found support among powerful Western intellectuals, representatives of the school of realism in international relations. It is worth analyzing the views of John Mearsheimer, which he voiced at the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. When asked by a journalist about the

cause of the war, Mearsheimer said on March 1, 2022: "I think all the trouble in this case really started in April 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, where afterward NATO issued a statement that said Ukraine and Georgia would become part of NATO." (Chotiner, 2022).

Russia's reaction to the possibility of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO was not delayed - just a few months after NATO's statement, in August 2008, Russia invaded the territory of Georgia, calling the invasion a "peacekeeping mission" against the aggression of the central government of Georgia and in defense of Abkhazian separatists. As a result of the so-called "five-day war", Russia reached a peace agreement with the mediation of the European Union. According to the agreement, Georgia should grant special rights to South Ossetia and Abkhazia with self-government and broad autonomy, and Russia should withdraw its troops from sovereign Georgian territory. The Russian troops, whose withdrawal was guaranteed to Georgia by the personal mediation of Nicolas Sarkozy during the conclusion of the cease-fire agreement, were never withdrawn. Already in 2008, it became clear that the EU has no leverage to influence Russia regarding the implementation of peace agreements, the guarantor of which is the EU (Solovey, G., Kovtun, K., 2021). The Western response to Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was so similar to the strategic appeasement of Munich 1938 that it allowed Russia to believe that its full-scale invasion of Ukraine would have a similar response from the West, limited to public condemnation, sanctions and localization of the conflict, which will quickly end with a change of government in Kyiv to a pro-Kremlin one.

The limitations imposed by the theoretical framework of realism namely, consideration of the international system as a set of states as rational actors differing in the size of economies and military power allowed Mearsheimer to believe that if Russia demands that Ukraine sacrifice territories and establish a pro-Kremlin regime in Kyiv, that is exactly what a 40-million democratic state should do without going to war, because Russia greatly outnumbers Ukraine in terms of military power.

The determined, successful and long-term resistance of the Ukrainian people to the aggressive attempts of Russia debunks the myth of the inevitability of "the reunification of one and the same people" under the threat of the use of force declared by Putin.

"The Russian invasion destroyed the last vestiges of the belief that Ukrainian and Russians were fraternal peoples, to say nothing about their being one and the same people. That was true even of those features of common heritage to which Putin had sought to appeal in his articles and speeches, including historical roots, religious tradition, and joint resistance to the Nazi occupation." (Plokhy S., 2023, p.193)

Mearsheimer also provides advice on the Western response to Russia's demands. He does not think that Russia is a serious threat to the United States. US do face a China's serious threat in the international system. Maintaining friendly relations with Russia seemed to John Mearsheimer to be the best strategy at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which everyone believed would end in a military victory for the Kremlin in a few days or weeks, as it happened in Georgia in 2008. (Chotiner, 2022).

In reality, by making the choice to resist the Russian invasion and shattering the myth of a quick and mutually desired reunification of one and the same people under the Putin autocracy, and by demonstrating the atrocities committed by the Russians in Bucha, Ukrainians succeeded in uniting European leaders in condemning the crimes of Russian aggression at the end of summer 2022.

Since the Ukrainians were united in their desire to militarily resist the Russian invasion and held out for a long time even with limited help from the US and the EU, the discourse in the Western media changed to the beginning of autumn 2022. Francis Fukuyama opposes the argument that the expansion of NATO to the East is a threat that the US poses to Russia. "The argument was made, even before the Russian invasion, that Vladimir Putin was being driven by fear of NATO expansion and was seeking a neutral buffer to protect his country." (Fukuyama, 2022). NATO's expansion was not a plot hatched in Washington, London, or Paris

to drive the alliance as far east as possible. It was driven by the former satellites of the former USSR, which had been dominated by that country since 1945 and were convinced that Russia would try to do so again once the balance of power turned to Russia’s favor.

“A Russian defeat and humiliation will puncture this narrative of the advantages of authoritarian government and might lead to a rekindling of democratic self-confidence. It has been easy for publics in Western democracies to take for granted the peace and prosperity brought about by the liberal world order. It may be the case that every generation needs to relearn the lesson that the alternatives to liberal democracy lead to violence, repression, and ultimately economic failure.” (Fukuyama, 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

Russia's threats to start a total nuclear war, its long-term total communication war and the practice of strategic appeasement, used by Western countries for decades, have called into question the relevance and universality of compliance with the norms of international law and undermined liberal democratic values. Granting Ukraine the status of a candidate for EU membership in the summer of 2022, recognition of Russia as a global threat at the NATO summits in Madrid and Vilnius, the desire of democratic countries to make Russia incapable of threatening Euro-Atlantic security in the long term, force the states of the European Union to move away from the long-term policy of strategic appeasement of Russia in order to counter its hybrid threat and vigilance in rooting out Russian propaganda.

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