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Misperception in Foreign Policy as a By-Product of a Dogmatic Ideology: The Case of Russia's War in Ukraine

Abstract. The article examines how dogmatic ideology leads to misperceptions in foreign policy, using Russia's actions in Ukraine as a case study. Specifically, the authors aim to show how Russia's dogmatic ideology has led to significant misperceptions in its foreign policy towards Ukraine, resulting in aggressive actions and escalating conflicts. The central research problem addressed in this article is the impact of dogmatic ideologies on foreign policy decision-making. For the sake of the paper, we conceptualise the ideology of "Putinism". The article explores how this ideology acts as a cognitive filter, shaping and often distorting the perceptions of political leaders. This leads to misinterpretations of other nations' intentions and actions, as exemplified by Russia's misperception of the events in Ukraine as a Western conspiracy rather than a grassroots movement against corruption and authoritarianism. The authors conclude that dogmatic ideologies significantly contribute to foreign policy misperceptions, leading to flawed and often aggressive decisions. In the case of Russia, these misperceptions have resulted in severe international consequences, including economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and a protracted con-

flict in Ukraine. The article highlights the necessity for policymakers to recognise and mitigate the influence of dogmatic ideologies in order to avoid such detrimental misperceptions. The research also suggests that highly dogmatic systems are more prone to strategic failures due to their rigid belief structures and resistance to new information.

Błędna percepcja w polityce zagranicznej jako produkt uboczny dogmatycznej ideologii Przypadek wojny Rosji z Ukrainą

Streszczenie. Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób dogmatyczna ideologia prowadzi do błędnego postrzegania polityki zagranicznej, wykorzystując działania Rosji w Ukrainie jako studium przypadku. W szczególności autorzy starają się pokazać, w jaki sposób dogmatyczna ideologia Rosji doprowadziła do znaczących błędów w postrzeganiu jej polityki zagranicznej wobec Ukrainy, co doprowadziło do agresywnych działań i eskalacji konfliktów. Głównym problemem badawczym jest wpływ dogmatycznych ideologii na podejmowanie decyzji w polityce zagranicznej. Na potrzeby artykułu autorzy konceptualizują ideologię „putinizmu". W artykule zbadano, w jaki sposób ideologia ta działa jak filtry poznawcze, kształtując i często zniekształcając postrzeganie przywódców politycznych. Prowadzi to do błędnej interpretacji intencji i działań innych narodów, czego przykładem jest błędne postrzeganie przez Rosję wydarzeń na Ukrainie jako zachodniego spisku, a nie oddolnego ruchu przeciwko korupcji i autorytaryzmowi. Autorzy konkludują, że dogmatyczne ideologie znacząco przyczyniają się do błędnego postrzegania polityki zagranicznej, prowadząc do błędnych i często agresywnych decyzji. W przypadku Rosji te błędne przekonania doprowadziły do poważnych konsekwencji międzynarodowych, w tym sankcji gospodarczych, izolacji dyplomatycznej i przedłużającego się konfliktu na Ukrainie. Artykuł podkreśla konieczność rozpoznania i złagodzenia przez decydentów politycznych wpływu dogmatycznych ideologii, aby uniknąć takich szkodliwych błędnych wyobrażeń. Badania sugerują również, że wysoce dogmatyczne systemy są bardziej podatne na strategiczne niepowodzenia ze względu na ich sztywne struktury przekonań i odporność na nowe informacje

Słowa kluczowe: wojna w Ukrainie, błędne postrzeganie, dogmatyczna ideologia, teoria opanowywania trwogi, Rosja, „putinizm"

Introduction

Foreign policy decisions are often influenced by a particular political ideology adopted by the political elites, which can shape their perceptions of the world and guide their actions. However, when ideology becomes dogmatic, it can lead to

misperceptions and misunderstandings that can have serious consequences for international relations. Any ideology uses a simplified and more or less biased image of reality, but Azar Gat (2022) is right that this is not to say that "all ideological factual claims are invalid, equally misleading, or equally mythical". This article examines how dogmatic ideology can lead to misperception in foreign policy, using Russia's war and its recent escalation in Ukraine as a case study. As a part of the analytical framework, we are using the Terror Management Theory (TMT).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been struggling to define its role in the international system. Many Russian policymakers and analysts believe that the West, particularly the United States, is hostile to Russia and seeks to undermine its interests. This worldview has been increasingly shaped by a dogmatic ideology that sees Russia as a victim of Western ruthless expansionism and justifies its aggressive actions as defensive, proactive responses to perceived threats.

This dogmatic ideology, acting as a perceptive/cognitive filter and prescriptive guidance, has contributed to misperceptions and misunderstandings in Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine. When Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovych, was ousted in a popular uprising in 2014 (Euromaidan), Russia saw this as evidence of Western conspiracy and a threat to its interests. The Russian government responded by annexing Crimea and supporting separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine. The path dependency based in this misperception has led the Russian leadership to even more costly mistakes, especially the full-scale invasion which started on 24 February 2022.[1]

Since the very beginning, Russian actions were based on misperception. Russia saw the uprising in Ukraine as a Western-backed coup, when, in fact, it was a grassroots movement against a corrupt and authoritarian government. By supporting separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine, Russia also misperceived the situation on the ground, seeing the rebels as freedom fighters against a fascist and genocidal Ukrainian government.

The misperceptions created by dogmatic ideology have had serious consequences for international relations. Russia's actions in Ukraine have led to economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, dramatically worsening its relations with the West and its allies. The conflict in eastern Ukraine has also led to thousands of deaths, displaced millions of people, and renewed long-dormant fears of a military

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[1] We agree with William Burns, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, that "Putin's war has already been a failure for Russia on many levels. His original goal of sizing Kyiv and subjugating Ukraine proved foolish and illusory. His military has suffered immense damage. At least 315,000 Russian soldiers have been killed or wounded, two-thirds of Russian prewar tank inventory has been destroyed, and Putin's vaunted decades-long military modernization program has been hollowed out. All this is a direct result of Ukrainian soldier's valor and skill, backed up by Western support. Meanwhile, Russia's economy is suffering long-term setback, and the country is sealing its fate as China's economic vassal. Putin's overblown ambitions have backfired in another way too: they have prompted NATO to grow larger and stronger" (Burns, 2024).

conflict between NATO and Russia in Europe, and even of a nuclear escalation. This article argues that misperception in foreign policy is partially a by-product of extremely dogmatic ideology, which can radically distort the image of reality, blinding policymakers to alternative viewpoints and evidence.

In the following sections of the article, we present the main concepts of the paper, the theoretical framework of dogmatic ideology with connection to the TMT, and an analysis of the Russian dogmatic ideology in the perspective of the theoretical model. We test the thesis that Putinism, a radically dogmatic ideology, has a positive correlation with the level of misperception that Russian decision-makers exert in their decisions and practices. In order to conduct this test, we critically analyse, among others: speeches of Russian politicians, interviews with important public figures, official documents (e.g. the Russian national security strategy), the Kremlin-controlled media outlets, analyses of experts, publications of the Kremlin-associated pundits and ideologists, and non-Russian media outlets.

The main concepts

The article revolves around the concepts of ideology, dogmatism, and misperception. We mostly combine the concepts of ideology and dogmatism together in the term of dogmatic ideology. We assume that dogmatic ideology is one of the main sources of misperception in international relations. The relations between these two, i.e. the dogmatism of an ideology and misperception, is at the core of our research. In this dyadic model, we see misperception as a dependent variable and the dogma of a given ideology as an independent variable. It is, of course, a very limited model, without an ambition to explain all the roots for misperceptions. Nevertheless, our aim is to scrutinise described relations between these variables, using the case study of Russians' was escalation in Ukraine in 2022.

Robert Jervis defines misperception as "the difference between the way in which an actor perceives an international situation and the way in which that situation actually is" (Jervis, 2017: 19). In other words, misperception occurs when decision-makers misunderstand or misinterpret information about a situation, leading to flawed policy decisions. Jervis argues that misperception is a common occurrence in international politics due to a number of factors, including incomplete information, cognitive biases, and the difficulty of accurately predicting the behaviour of other actors. He identifies three categories of misperception: misperceptions of others' intentions, misperceptions of others' capabilities, and misperceptions of the consequences of one's own actions (Jervis, 2017).

Misperceptions of others' intentions refer to situations in which decision-makers mistakenly believe that other actors have hostile intentions when they actually do not (and vice versa). This can lead to a spiral of mistrust and conflict, as each

side believes that the other one is acting aggressively. Misperceptions of others' capabilities occur when decision-makers overestimate or underestimate the military, economic, or political power of other actors. This can lead to miscalculations about the potential success or failure of military interventions or diplomatic negotiations. Misperceptions of the consequences of one's own actions occur when decision-makers fail to accurately predict the responses of other actors to their own actions. This can lead to unintended consequences, such as the escalation of conflicts or unintended alliances or, as in this case, the fulfilment of alliance's declarations (NATO). Overall, Jervis (2017) argues that misperception is a common and dangerous phenomenon in international politics, which can lead to disastrous policy decisions and the escalation of conflicts. In order to prevent misperception, decision-makers must be aware of their own cognitive biases and limitations, gather accurate information, and consider multiple perspectives on a situation.

Yaacov Vertzberger (1982) provides a typological framework for analysing misperception in international politics. The author identifies four types of misperception: perceptual simplification, perceptual distortion, cognitive rigidity, and ideology-induced misperception. Perceptual simplification occurs when decision-makers simplify a complex situation by oversimplifying it into binary terms. Perceptual distortion happens when decision-makers view a situation based on their own experiences and biases. Cognitive rigidity refers to decision-makers' inability to adjust their perceptions in response to new information. Finally, ideology-induced misperception arises when decision-makers' adherence to an ideology results in a misperception of a situation. Over time, the gap between reality and perception can either increase (maladaptation), remain the same (non-adaptation), or decrease (adaptation).

The authors of this article argue that understanding these types of misperception is essential for the effective analysis and prevention of conflicts in international politics. Ideology is a set of beliefs, values, and ideas that shape an individual's understanding of the world and guide their behaviour and decision--making (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, Sulloway, 2003; Jost, Thompson, 2011). It is a cognitive framework that helps individuals make sense of complex information and provides a sense of coherence and direction to their lives (Altemeyer, 1998). Ideologies can be both explicit and implicit, and they can take many forms, including political, religious, and cultural (Jost, Thompson, 2011). Ideology plays a significant role in shaping political attitudes and behaviours, with individuals tending to align themselves with political parties and movements that share their ideological beliefs (Jost, Thompson, 2011). The factual claims of ideology tend to be upheld with far greater emotional investment than those aroused by ordinary assertions of facts (Gat, 2022). Ideology can lead to bias and misperception, as individuals may selectively attend to information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs and dismiss information that contradicts them (Jost, 2017).

Dogmatic ideology refers to a rigid and uncompromising set of beliefs and values that are resistant to change and alternative perspectives, often characterised by an unwavering commitment to a particular doctrine or worldview (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, Sulloway, 2003; Jost, Amodio, 2012). Dogmatic ideology can have negative effects on decision-making and perception, as individuals and collectives may categorically dismiss or ignore information that contradicts their pre-existing beliefs, and may be resistant to changing their positions even in the face of new evidence (Jost, Amodio, 2012; Jost, 2017). This can lead to misperception and polarisation in political discourse, as individuals become more entrenched in their beliefs and less willing to engage in constructive dialogue (Jost, Federico, Napier, 2009). The relationship between dogmatism and misperceptions is well established in social psychology and political science literature. Research has shown that dogmatic ideology can lead to misperceptions in a variety of domains, including politics, religion, and science (Bizer, Krosnick, Holbrook, Wheeler, Petty, 2000; Jost, Thompson, 2011). For example, in political contexts, dogmatic individuals may be more likely to misperceive the motives and intentions of opposing political groups, leading to heightened polarisation and conflict (Jost, 2017). In science, dogmatic individuals may be more resistant to accepting new evidence that contradicts their pre-existing beliefs, leading to a lack of progress and innovation (Kuhn, 1962). Moreover, dogmatic individuals may also be more susceptible to misinformation and propaganda, as they are less likely to critically evaluate the accuracy and reliability of information (Jost, Amodio, 2012; Rokeach, 1960). This can lead to misperceptions about important issues and events, such as conspiracy theories or false beliefs about scientific phenomena.

We treat dogmatism as a dynamic spectrum on which particular ideologies and its proponents can be situated. The level of ideological dogmatism can be measured using the following criteria:

• **the rigidity of beliefs**, measured by the intensity of adherence to a set of fixed beliefs (assumptions about reality treated as absolute truths). The stronger the rigidity, the lesser readiness to question or change its components;

• **closed-mindedness** may be measured by the levels of tolerance for the diversity of opinions inside a given sociopolitical environment and by the intensity of efforts directed by political, propaganda, and security apparatus at the suppression of the expression of opinions challenging the core tenets of "official ideology". The higher the level of closed-mindedness of a particular worldview, the lower the capacity of critical thinking, intellectual experiments, and the readiness to face reality at the expense of ontological (existential) security;

• **intolerance to dissent** (Jost, 2017) may be measured by the intensity of efforts to actively suppress, marginalise, and ridicule opinions opposed to the "official ideology" by labelling them as dangerous to the collective stability and identity, an existential threat to the state and society, "heretical", "insane", "subversive", and "treacherous". It is reflected by the intensity of efforts by the security

and justice apparatus to eliminate dissident voices (and to marginalise and punish dissidents expressing them) from the public sphere;

• **absolutist thinking** is a tendency to treat the unverifiable (and often also unfalsifiable) beliefs as obvious, absolute, and ultimate truths that because of their status may be undermined or questioned only because of ill-will, insanity, or hostile intentions. It is also a tendency to treat the opposite of – or something that is even slightly different from – one's official opinions as entirely wrong and misguided. Absolutist thinking leaves no room for any nuances, complexities, and uncertainties that could shake the foundations of the ideological construct and thus the foundations of political power, public order, and society. It works as a double-edged sword: it may be psychologically (emotionally and intellectually) comforting (as it responds to intolerance for uncertainty[2]), but strategically dangerous or even catastrophic;

• **authoritarianism** (Jost, 2017) is another useful criterion for measuring dogmatism. The proponents of highly dogmatic ideologies are exhibiting authoritarian tendencies manifested in imposing strict rules, fetishising order and hierarchy, as well as encouraging blind obedience to leaders and "holy texts" interpreted in rigid ways by closed groups of carefully selected and designated people.

As we defined previously, dogmatic ideology is a set of interconnected doctrines, beliefs, principles, and practices considered as unquestionable (often described as "natural"), morally right, and intellectually infallible. The human tendency to avoid uncertainty (connected to the need for ontological and existential security) – to treat ambiguities and unpredictability as a source of discomfort or threat – makes many people susceptible to rigid worldviews providing a sense of order, meaning, security, and stability. They can also produce a valuable sense of agency and control, especially by establishing a set of strict rules (dogmas), guidelines, and codes.

A high level of dogmatism in the political realm is associated with strong resistance to change, because clinging to established practices and ideas is identified as a foundation of sociopolitical stability. It is also connected to high levels of suspiciousness (and low level of trust) to the "outside world" and outsiders and dissidents, constructed as (essentialised) forces producing an existential threat. Highly dogmatic political ideologies are often based on the narcissistic narratives of resentment, historical humiliations, and regaining lost dignity (usually echoing and rhetorically amplifying real historical or ongoing conflicts and crises). They make the political systems based on them prone to adapt and to identify with the extremist worldviews.[3] There are several basic elements of such narratives:

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[2] The intolerance of uncertainty and negative urgency has been identified as significant unique correlates of all domains of paranoid thinking (see: Zheng et al., 2022).

[3] For the purposes of this article, we use a J.M. Berger's definition of extremism: "a spectrum of beliefs in which an ingroup's success is unseparated from negative acts (like verbal attacks, diminishment, discriminatory behaviors or violence) against an outgroup" (Berger, 2017).

ingroup (essentialised as united, homogenous, unjustly wronged, and deprived, endowed typically by some transcendental forces with a special origin, uniquely positive features, meaning, and destiny); outgroup (essentialised as also united, homogenous, and endowed with uniquely negative features, meaning, and destiny); the central (existential) crisis produced by the outgroup, and the historical (or even metaphysical) obligation of the ingroup to solve the crisis, which involves the necessarily hostile actions against the outgroup.

These narratives and ideologies based on them play a critical role as a psychological tool of compensation. Some studies indicated the correlation between the levels of helplessness, senselessness, and alienation, and the readiness to accept highly dogmatic worldviews (Radkiewicz, 2007). Thus, it may be tempting for political leaders seeking to consolidate power to both instrumentalise such feelings/perceptions and to strengthen them with the use of propaganda and ideological tools. Highly dogmatic ideologies are prone to paranoia and conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff, Lamberty, 2018; Martinez, 2022). They are often being used as tools conducive to maintaining and strengthening fear-based loyalty and the political mobilisation (or at least political passivity) of the general population. The consequent application of the most dogmatic ideologies to the political processes is a characteristic feature of the "paranoid states" (paranoid political systems):[4] we argue that Putin's Russia on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine (and even more so after) should be treated as such a case.

Dogmatic ideology in the light of the Terror Management Theory (TMT)

According to the Terror Management Theory, developed since 1984 and corroborated by hundreds of experiments,[5] human activity is driven (partially unconsciously) mostly by the strong need to deny and transcend death. The universal human awareness of mortality has a profound influence on thoughts, emotions, and individual and collective behaviours. It is obviously also influencing the sociopolitical realm, where existential dread is universally mitigated by dedicated, elaborated social constructs or cultural worldviews serving as a buffer between reality and our minds. The never-ending search for ontological security is reflected

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[4] P.S.J. Rožič identifies four elements sustaining the paranoid state: excessive order, rumination (dwelling on paranoid suspicions without expressing them to others), emulation (of others who behave in a paranoid way), and memory abuse (Rožič, 2015).

[5] Rosenblatt, A. et al. 1989. Evidence for Terror Management Theory I: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Violate or Uphold Cultural Values. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57(4), pp. 681–690; Greenberg, J. et al. 1990. Evidence for Terror Management Theory II: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Threaten or Bolster the Cultural Worldview. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58(2), pp. 308–318.

by collective identities and shared perceptions. Worldviews and ideologies act not only as necessarily reductive "maps of environment", but also as fictional micro-realities functioning as "safe spaces" inside a hostile, chaotic, highly volatile and unpredictable environment. These constructs basically make the existential dread manageable by producing the sense of significance rooted in a membership in stable, durable communities engaged in noble and deeply meaningful tasks, thus creating the illusions of collective and/or individual immortality.

In the light of the assumptions behind the TMT, dogmatism can be a very useful tool both from the psychological and the instrumental-political perspectives. We would argue that generally higher levels of particular ideology's dogmatism make it more efficient at buffering existential anxiety and thus more efficient as an instrument of political mobilisation and the legitimisation of power. At the same time, however, higher levels of dogmatism are negatively correlated with the adaptive capacity of particular political systems and social environments, which may result in particularly high susceptibility to misperception and thus in serious strategic deficiencies. The consequences of these can be very dangerous, especially in highly volatile and hostile strategic environments, and can result in devastating conflicts based on the self-fulfilling prophecy mechanism. We argue that the TMT adds an additional layer of explanation to the "very distinctive and strong" phenomenon of "ideological fixation" described by Azar Gat (2022). If we use the Terror Management Theory as a point of reference for analysing ideological dogmatism, we can gain greater clarity about the origins, functions, and internal dynamics of political systems founded on strongly dogmatic ideologies. Thus, we can estimate how prone they are to misperception. We can also postulate (theory) and isolate (reality) their characteristic components, which are a derivative of these dynamics and functions performed. One of us had previously undertaken such a task in an article on the worldview of the Islamic State considered from the perspective of the TMT (Bolechów, 2022). If we treat the strongly dogmatic political system as a radical terror management device, we should expect significant similarities between them, despite equally significant differences in the specific ideological content and cultural/historical identity. From the theoretical/analytical point of view, we can expect the presence of the following elements:

• the idea and the political practice of charismatic leadership (great leader narrative), whose destiny and mission is to restore dignity, honour, and greatness to an undeservedly humiliated community;

• the idea that an ingroup is not just a (by)product of history, but a collective holder of eternal values assigned a unique mission by supernatural or non-human forces according to Nature, History, or divine entities. The group's worth is not subjective but based on an objective standard in the universal order. Hence, the ingroup's ideological failure is not conceivable, as it would disrupt the very fabric of reality (natural progression, historical reasoning, divine will, etc.);

• the idea that dignity and meaning are finite resources, so the actions towards the outgroup are a zero-sum game. Thus, one of the postulated elements of the narrative and (if possible) political practice of such systems is a phenomenon that we call a radical redistribution of humiliation. There is an assumption that dignity can only be regained by reversing roles between the humiliating and the humiliated;

• the idea that for a political project to succeed, it must be free from undesired influences, unorthodox views, and dissent. The project's effectiveness hinges on the ideological purity of its group, as it forms a "virtual reality" or "augmented reality" system, wherein the group's ideology could be perceived as an undeniable reality. Any disruption to this illusion risks system stability. Thus, a stable sociopolitical equilibrium can only be achieved in a safe space, free from any inputs that would lead to ideological contamination. However, complete ideological purity is usually beyond reach, as some level of cognitive dissonance is inevitable and any failures in realising the perfect ideological project are typically blamed on a perceived (more or less fictional) enemy;

• the idea that an ingroup lives in a "special time", under exceptionally threatening circumstances, in a unique moment of historical breakthrough (often described in the apocalyptic terms), and is under an existential threat by the actions and the very existence of the defined outgroup/s. The outgroup/s is/are often belittled and vilified, portrayed as a monolithic entity embodying chaos, decline, and even metaphysical evil in ideological narratives. They are depicted as both degenerate and contemptible, bolstering the ingroup's confidence, and simultaneously being as cunning and powerful, accounting for any challenges faced and validating sacrifices, thereby highlighting the heroism of the mission;

• the imperfect ideological purification and challenging combat against the outgroup typically intensifies as the political project progresses. Political rhetoric escalates, often leading to confrontational actions. This growing conflict can be portrayed as existential or even apocalyptic. The enemy's mere existence threatens the ingroup, necessitating elimination through assimilation or destruction. Ultimately, the ingroup's primary goal can become the outgroup's eradication, even if it demands significant sacrifices or self-destruction;

• the TMT explains why and how cultural worldviews often "detoxify" death and glorify martyrdom. These worldviews revise reality, replacing certain aspects with more desirable alternatives. If denying death is the central function of these views, then real death is replaced with a culturally-modified version, no longer an end but a gateway to symbolic or even literal immortality. The concept of martyrdom thus becomes a key tool for mobilising and motivating individuals within a group to reinforce their value and contribution to the community's significant endeavours;

• the TMT helps to explain human ambivalence towards sexuality (Landau, Goldberg, Greenberg, Gillath, Solomon, Cox, Martens, Pyszczynski, 2006).

Inside radical terror management devices, "animal" (and thus psychologically-disturbing) connotations of sexuality are going to be used as a rhetorical tool to weaken the corrosive influence of competing systems of meaning (worldviews). The alleged tendency of hostile outgroups to freely indulge "animal desires" and indulge in "unnatural" and "depraved" sexual practices, presented against the background of the ingroup's alleged sexual discipline (the ideals of "chastity", "temperance", "modesty", "traditional values", "natural sexual behaviours", etc.) facilitates the process of dehumanising and demonising opponents. At the same time, it is strengthening the confidence and credibility of one's own existential anxiety buffering system.

Putinism as a radical terror management device

"Putinism" – understood as highly dogmatic, extremist state ideology – is a relatively new phenomenon. Stoeckl and Uzlaner (2022) argue that crucial developments did not took place until 2012 when President Vladimir Putin entered office for the third time. At this time,

> moral conservatism in support of 'traditional values' has become the dominant social, cultural, and political model. Since 2012, laws have been passed in Russia that conjure up a culture-war dynamic while allowing the state to manage and curtail political protest: new laws targeting 'immoralism' have been implemented (against blasphemy, against public display and information on "nontraditional" sexual relations). At the same time, panic about 'foreign funded agents' promoting liberal values has given currency to the vision of Russia as a religio-political entity with a global mission to defend these traditional values against the liberal West. The development culminated in the constitutional reform of 2020, which enshrines faith in God, the defense of traditional family values, and marriage as a union between man and woman as core Russian political principles (Stoeckl, Uzlaner, 2022).

The passage of power from Dmitry Medvedev to Vladimir Putin

> coincided with a radical shift of the political agenda from democratization and modernization, the two key themes of the presidency of Medvedev, to political authoritarianism and confrontation with the West under Putin. One of the key elements of Putin's new agenda became the ideology of traditional moral values. For the first time in the history of post-Soviet Russia, moral conservatism moved to the very center of politics (Stoeckl, Uzlaner, 2022).

According to Andrei Kolesnikov, "Putinism" is just another variation on the "Russian Idea": "a concept originally meant to convey the country's separateness

and exalted moral stature but that in practice came to stand for raw militarised expansionism". In this case, we are dealing with re-stalinisation with anti-modern imperialism (which in the same time is presented as an anti-imperial ideology; in fact – anti-Western) (Kolesnikov, 2023). Ian Garner (2022) sums up Putinism as "contorted but wildly popular mix of historical memory, Orthodox Christianity and messianic nationalism" which "could push him (Putin) towards an apocalyptic endgame".

Stoeckl and Uzlaner (2022) single out four main ideological elements (ingredients) of "Putinism". These are: spiritual purity, evil influencers from outside ("foreign agents"), moral anti-Westernism, and Russian messianism. It is easy to see that all of them are strictly compatible with the model of highly dogmatic ideology and a radical terror management device based on the assumptions of the TMT.

One can isolate in Russian propaganda and strategic communication all eight elements of radical terror management devices that we mentioned above:

• **the great leader narrative** – in 2012, the Russian Patriarch Kirill said that "through a miracle of God, with the active participation of the country's leadership, we managed to exit this horrible, systemic crisis" and, turning to Putin, that "you personally played a massive role in correcting this crooked twist of our history" (Bryanski, 2012). We are dealing with a narrative in which Putin – by the will of the God – plays the role of a collector of Russian lands, a restorer of the dignity and greatness that Russia deserves, a leader offering a solution to the central existential crisis. As Brian Michael Jenkins put it, "Some observations suggest that Putin may suffer from a 'Joan of Arc complex,' seeing himself as the one chosen to fulfill a heroic mission", whose destiny is "to recover Russia's lost territory, unify its people, and restore the country to its rightful place in the world. Putin's messianic vision makes no distinction between the country and himself" (Jenkins, 2023; see also: Garner, 2022; Roth, 2022);

• **a collective holder** o**f eternal values that is assigned a unique mission by supernatural or non-human forces** – as Andriei Kolesnikov (2023) noticed, "By 2022, Putin and many around him were actively adopting the most extreme forms of Russian nationalist-imperialist thought. A common refrain in Putin's circle is that the West is in moral and spiritual decline and will be replaced by a rising Russia (...). Putin's ideologues now suggest that Russia can only uphold its status as the defender of civilization by combining a reinvigorated empire with the conservative precepts of the church. 'We are fighting a war to have peace,' Alexander Dugin, the ultranationalist thinker and self-styled Kremlin philosopher, said in June. (...) According to the Kremlin's propaganda, Ukraine is slipping into the grip of a dangerous and 'satanic' West that has been encroaching on the historical lands of Russia and the canonical territory of the church. In a post on Telegram, a messaging service popular among Russians, in November 2022, Medvedev cast Russia's fighting in Ukraine as a holy war against Satan, warning that Moscow

would 'send all our enemies to fiery Gehenna'". Generally, Russia is definitely portrayed as an entity with unique genesis and characteristics, intended by super-human forces for extraordinary purposes – namely of saving humanity against great and also superhuman (metaphysical but represented by earthly, material, human, and geopolitical forces) evil. As Alexander Dugin (called by Anthon Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn [2014] "Putin's Brain") describes it, the Russian fate is fixed and clearly defined, so the conflict in Ukraine has its metaphysical dimension: Russia's destiny "will not be complete until we unite all the eastern Slavs and all the Eurasian brothers into one big space. Everything follows from this logic of destiny – and so does Ukraine" (Lister, Pennington, 2022);

• **a radical redistribution of humiliation** – the narrative of Russia being constantly humiliated by the West is almost omnipresent in Russian public space. Vladimir Putin himself often refers to this narrative, referring, for example, to the fall of the Soviet Union, which led to enlargement of NATO, which was ultimate proof that the West is constantly trying to undermine, and thus humiliate, Russia (Dibb, 2022). After the full-scale invasion, Putin reiterated many times that "the West wants to humiliate Russia and destroy it as a civilisation" (*Rossiya* 1, 21.02.2023) and is using Ukraine to do so (*Vladimir Putin Address on Socioeconomic Strategy for Russia*, 16.03.2022). In this narrative, it seems "only logical" to redistribute humiliation, i.e. to defend the Russian Federation from the evil intrigue of the West, and stop the creeping growth of Western influence, especially in Ukraine. According to Russian propaganda, the West was so weak that there should not be any heating for Christmas 2022 in Western Europe. The food would also be scarce – so scarce, that children would be eating hamsters… (Sputnik BR, Сказка о хомячке или Счастливого «русофобского» Рождества). Thus, the West was to suffer the humiliating bankruptcy of its anti-Russian policy;

• **an ideological purity in a safe space** – the idea that great Russian destiny can only be realised in isolation from foreign (i.e. hostile and destructive) influences is clearly a crucial element of the official state narrative. In order to protect the Russian society from the moral corruption coming from the West, it is necessary to cleanse it of the influence of all "foreign agents", disruptive cultural contents, and non-traditional values. As Sergey Kiriyenko (the first deputy chief of staff of the Presidential Administration and one of leading Putin's ideologists) stated (Russian News Agency TASS, 2023), those who "have set the task to destroy Russia, or at least to make it weak, compliant, to bring it to its knees, have the most fundamental tool left – to try to ruin it from the inside". The West is being accused of unleashing "a full-blown war of reason", targeting Russian youth: "In fact, there is no other way to bring Russia down at all; so, they have launched a full-scale war of reason, a psychological war, whose target is the younger generation" (Russian News Agency TASS, 2023);

• **a unique moment of historical breakthrough and an existential threat by the actions and the very existence of the define**d **outgoup/s** – as one can read

in the official presidential document, "this is a time of radical, irreversible change in the entire world, of crucial historical events that will determine the future of our country and our people, a time when every one of us bears a colossal responsibility" (Putin, 2023). The idea that the ingroup is in a state of existential threat posed by a demonised, homogenous outgroup is one of the main axes of Russian propaganda. The essentialised archenemy seeking to destroy Russia is, of course, "the collective West", depicted as simultaneously degenerate/politically-bankrupt and powerful/ruthless. Ukraine, in this case, was cast as the lesser Satan on the western payroll, although we must make a caveat here. As Mykola Riabchuk argues,

> The crude Manichean dichotomy between the mythical 'good' Ukrainians, who are presumably one nation with Russia, and the 'bad' East Slavonic folk, spoiled by Western influence, lays at the core of Putin's propagandistic narratives. Unable to recognise that Ukrainians have their own agency and, regardless of their political views, do not want to be 'one nation' with Russians, Putin follows Dugin's line: the 'true' Ukrainians, according to him, strive to embrace Russian 'liberators' but are kept hostage by the 'wrong', 'bad' Ukrainians, the fascist minority on the American payroll, who represent anti-Russia and therefore should be exterminated (Riabchuk, 2022).

The (mis)perception of Ukraine is rooted in imperial, escapist thinking:

> the only way to accommodate the imperial psyche to this uncomfortable reality is to deny it, to discursively relegate the real Ukrainians into the chthonic, subhuman space of cyclops and anthropophagi, bastards and cretins, Banderites and neo-Nazis. Ukraine should be cleaned up of Ukrainians, the space emptied and 'freed' for the 'wonderful Slavonic people' of the imperial imagination (Riabchuk, 2022).

Ukrainian policy towards Russia is constructed as an existential threat: in (in)famous Putin's article (Putin, 2021) it was characteristically compared to the weapons of mass destruction.

As for the West, the list of charges against it is very extensive and constantly expanded in official state documents. However, what is most important is the construction of the West as an entity determined to destroy Russia. The West thus becomes the essentially treacherous, "satanic" antithesis of Russia (a kind of anti-Russia: this phrase appears systematically in Putin's speeches): its only raison d'être and its only significant motivation is purely destructive (Putin, 2022). What is also important, the West is presented simultaneously as powerful (materially) and weak (spiritually and intellectually);

• **elimination through assimilation or destruction** – in the model based on the TMT that we are using, the only way to overcome the fact that there are other axiological systems existing that are not unconditionally accepting the "one truth" of "our" system, is to get rid of them. That is why the solution is elimination,

either through assimilation or destruction. As early as 2008, Vladimir Putin, in his conversation with Georg W. Bush, reportedly stated: "You don't understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a state. What is Ukraine? Part of its territories is Eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us" (Time Magazine, 2008). Dmitry Medvedev said multiple times that Ukraine is not a state (The Moscow Times, 2016), and Putin argued that there is no historical basis for arguments that Russians and Ukrainian are separate nations (Putin's article, 2021). Among persons close to the Kremlin, one can find countless statements pointing to the lack of the Ukrainian statehood and the need to eliminate the state of Ukraine or even Ukrainians themselves. Those arguments were and are being used by Putin himself, by Medvedev, and, among others, by: Vladislav Surkove (Putin's aide), Ramzan Kadyrov, Leonid Slutsky (Head of the Duma Committee on International Affairs), Vyacheslav Volodin (Chairman of the State Duma), Sergey Aksyonov (Russian head of occupation authority in Crimea), Timofei Sergeitsev (putinist pundit; see: Apt, 2024). The scope of arguments stretches from "reunification" to straightforward calls for the genocide of Ukrainians. It leaves absolutely no space for any doubt that this narrative of the elimination of Ukraine is widely present in Russian public sphere;

• **the concept of martyrdom** – our model predicts that as a pragmatic and cynical regime transforms into a radical terror management device (which is partially a conscious political decision and partially a consequence of independent decisions, processes, and politics), the language of heroism and martyrdom is going to become increasingly important in political propaganda. As Kolesnikov (2023) has recently observed, the ideas of individual heroism and martyrdom did not constitute a significant element of the Russian propaganda message until the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. These ideas have been traditionally (and somewhat ritualistically) used as an element of strengthening the national identity within the official historical policy. However, the authorities were not interested in arousing social mobilisation to participate in any national "heroic project" requiring citizens to be ready to die as martyrs for their homeland. Rather, the Russian social contract assumed political passivity and the demobilisation of society in the face of the actions of the authoritarian government in exchange for guarantees of a rising standard of living and basic sociopolitical stability. Since the invasion in Ukraine, the technocratic, dry language of "special military operation" has been replaced by the language of martyrdom, heroism, and historical analogies well rooted in the Russian society ("the great liberating mission of our nation"; *Signing of Treaties…*, 2022). For example, in September 2022, Patriarch Kirill announced that Russian soldiers dying in the war in Ukraine should be treated as martyrs and their sins would be forgiven (Orthodox Times, 2022). During the meeting with mothers of soldiers in November 2022, Putin described Russian soldiers as "real heroes" who "have decided to serve and protect our Homeland, our Motherland, Russia, to protect our people". He also used an argument characteristic for martyr

narratives – namely that the ultimate value of life can me measured by the circumstances of death – which recently one of us has analysed in the case of the Islamic State's propaganda (Bolechów, 2020):

> We are all in God's hands. And one day, we will all leave this world. This is inevitable. The question is how we lived. With some people, it is unclear whether they live or not. It is unclear why they die – because of vodka or something else. When they are gone it is hard to say whether they lived or not – their lives passed without notice. But your son did live – do you understand? He achieved his goal. This means that he did not leave life for nothing. Do you understand? His life was important. He lived it, achieving the result for which he was striving (*Meeting with mothers…*, 2022);

• **"unnatural" and "depraved" sexual practices** – Russia is othering the LGBTQIA+ community, portraying it as depraved, weak, dominating in the West and Ukraine, and as a threat to Russian traditional values. Using demonisation and marginalisation, Russian propaganda aims to marginalise LGBTQIA+ individuals through slurs, dehumanisation, and stigmatisation, creating the "us vs. them" narrative. This approach is used to discredit opposition movements and consolidate power by promoting a singular, intolerant view of society. Anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments are institutionalised in the Russian society, with laws banning LGBTQIA+ "propaganda" and criminalising nontraditional sexual relations. These laws underscore the extent of the state's commitment to suppressing LGBTQIA+ visibility and rights. The rhetoric associates LGBTQIA+ rights with weakness and degradation, discrediting political leaders, international organisations, and Ukraine by linking them to LGBTQIA+ rights. This is part of a broader narrative that contrasts "weak and pervert" Western ("Gayropa") values with "healthy and normal" Russian values rooted in tradition.

Conclusions

Over the past dozen or so years, there have been increasingly clear signs of Russia's transformation from a rather ideology-less, authoritarian, kleptocratic political system, based on sociopolitical mass demobilisation and the promise of relative material stability, into a typical radical terror management device (Stoeckl, Uzlaner, 2022). One of the early signs of this process was the securitisation of the so-called spiritual-moral values for about a decade, especially as a reaction to mass protests after the State Duma elections in December 2011. As Jardar Østbø noted, in the Russian National Security Strategy in 2015, "the preservation of traditional values" is "identified as the most important strategic goal, the term 'spiritual' occurs 15 times throughout the document, and the spiritual sphere is

highlighted as one of the sectors (along with the economic, political, and military) where the Russian Federation should develop its potential" (Østbø, 2016). Østbø rightfully stated that in Russian hegemonic discourse, spiritual-moral values "are treated as something self-evident, eternal, absolute, and unchangeable – but also something that is under attack and must be protected" (Østbø, 2016). As we argued above, the idea of an ideological "safe space" requiring "decontamination" and protection against external and internal enemies is one of the elements of a radical terror management device. It is characterised repeatedly by a set of specific parameters resulting from the functions performed by this type of system. Contemporary Russia perfectly meets the criteria of the evolution from a kleptocratic regime into a radical terror management device. The invasion of Ukraine was both a consequence and fuel for this device. As such, it represents the mutually reciprocal relationship. There is no doubt that Putinism is currently a strongly dogmatic ideology, as measured by the rigidity of beliefs, closed-mindedness, intolerance for dissent, and absolutist thinking. In Russian decision-making, one can clearly see the strong signs of perceptual distortion, cognitive rigidity, and ideology-induced misperception, which makes this system highly susceptible to maladaptation.

Over time, the most intransigent dogmatic systems collapse or radically transform through cumulative effects of misperception. The thicker and more impenetrable the protective 'armour against reality', the more difficult the task of maintaining mobility and flexibility. It becomes harder to keep up with changes in the environment and to ensure that perception is sufficiently free of dangerous distortion. Cutting off signals from the environment that generate psychological discomfort and social anxiety produces a gap between reality and perception, creating an information vacuum filled by compelling but potentially lethal individual and collective fantasies. Ultimately, challenges with regard to the actual security environment and the real activities of competitors and enemies make strategic, political, and ideological escapism a very risky and costly choice. This is one of the reasons why Russia, due to serious misperceptions about the surrounding reality, decided to invade Ukraine. It has abandoned the highly effective strategy of hybrid war for the sake of open conflict that brought a humiliation of the Russian military forces and, in our opinion, long-term strategic defeat.

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