

Putin's article: historical revisionism at the service of great-power politics

Maria Domańska

On 18 June, the American conservative magazine *The National Interest*, which represents US intellectual circles favouring a pragmatic dialogue with Russia, published an article written by Vladimir Putin. In his long essay the Russian president discusses the causes of the outbreak of World War II. The Russian president had already announced his intention to write such a text during a meeting with CIS leaders in December 2019. He then made a series of statements presenting his own interpretations of the course of political events in the late 1930s; *inter alia* he accused Poland of collaboration with Nazi Germany, and claimed the Polish leadership of the time had been jointly responsible for the outbreak of the war.

The article also includes a proposal to convene a summit of permanent members of the UN Security Council in order to prevent the further destabilisation of the international situation (Putin announced this initiative for the first time in his speech at the World Holocaust Forum in January 2020). The Russian-language version of Putin's essay was published at midnight on 19 June on the Kremlin website, as well as on the website of the official government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

Commentary

- The chronology of the article's publications (first in the English version in *The National Interest*, and only one day later in Russian media) means that it is addressed above all to foreign readers, mainly the leaders of the states which are permanent members of the UN Security Council.
- The article is an eclectic conglomerate of previously repeated lies and manipulations about the pre-war and wartime period, a play on emotions and demagogic appeals to Western leaders to take Russian interests into consideration during the process of building the contemporary global order, and *de facto* to base this order on the Yalta logic. The set of the standard neo-Soviet interpretations of the causes and the course of World War II was enriched with numerous quotations from Western leaders' statements, as well as quotations derived from 'archival documents' (although no photographs of these documents were published). Principally, the article does not discuss any new topics beyond the issues Moscow has regularly raised over the past few months and years. The ritualistic attack on Poland was again reinforced with accusations of alleged Polish pre-

war anti-Semitism (see: the 'Hitler monument' issue cited in the text), but this topic was not discussed in detail on this occasion.

- The timing of the article's publication was influenced by the current dynamics of the international and domestic political situations. As regards the international situation, Russia is trying to capitalise on the West's serious problems caused by the pandemic (the US leadership crisis and divisions inside NATO, tension within the US, disputes inside the EU about the anti-crisis strategy, and the unstable epidemic situation in China), as well as on the increasing uncertainty about how the international situation will develop. Moscow's goal is to take the initiative and win a key position in the global 'concert of powers'. It also intends to convince the West to lift sanctions on Russia, meaning not only those sanctions which have been imposed so far, but also the very logic of the sanctions themselves. The latter assumes that the international community may punish Russia for its activity in the 'near abroad' if it violates international law. At the same time, the content of the article (the anti-Polish accents) may be used *inter alia* to torpedo the plans for enhancing the US military presence in Poland.
- World War II has been treated in the article as a current issue to be raised in contemporary international politics. This has been manifested in two ways: firstly in the poorly veiled, reiterated threats that the world is on the verge of another war; and secondly in the suggestions that only Russian proposals concerning the new world order can prevent global destabilisation. The fact that several references have been made to the pre-war Soviet proposal to create a 'collective security system' illustrates Russia's contemporary strategic interests. For years it has been making efforts to marginalise NATO's role in the European security system and to replace it with a vague idea of a 'non-bloc security' where Russia would in fact play the key role (partly through minimising US engagement in Europe).
- The essay is intended to establish the dominance of the Kremlin's narrative as regards international security issues, and thus build a desired atmosphere ahead of the summit of the UN Security Council's permanent members, upon which Russia insists. The article's purpose is also to reach those circles inside the trans-Atlantic establishment which traditionally take Russian offers of co-operation at face value for the sake of combating global threats. Another of its intentions is to drive a wedge between the 'pragmatic' West and those Central & Eastern European countries which are traditionally anxious about the West's possible concessions to Russia. Putin's appeals to open the archives and avoid the ideologisation and politicisation of historic issues are especially cynical, given the tight restrictions of access to historic documents in Russia, and the fact that these remain under total control of the secret services, the successors to the KGB.
- As regards the domestic situation in Russia, the article fits in with the political calendar of June and July 2020. This includes the victory parade (rescheduled for 24 June) and the vote on constitutional amendments (planned for 25 June–1 July), which is of utmost importance for Putin. The amendments include regulations on defending 'historical truth' and the Soviet tradition. The Kremlin is facing increasing public dissatisfaction and falling support for the president (public trust in him and support for his policies have reached the lowest levels in 20 years – 25% and 59% respectively, according to the

independent Levada Centre). The emotional accents contained in the article, emphasising the human dimension of the war and highlighting the heroic aspects of the Soviet nation's achievements is intended to rally the public around the government. The tactics obviously being employed in this case build on creating a sense of external threat: this refers to the West's alleged falsification of the historical truth, the unstable international situation and the threat of global conflict. At the same time, Putin is presented as the only responsible global leader who should take the main, well-deserved position among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. The clear intention behind this is to evoke 'compensational' sentiments among the Russian public, so that the foreign policy successes will compensate for the worsening socio-economic problems at home.