OSW | 35 YEARS

Jolanta Darczewska

Capturing minds and reshaping the world

Russia's strategy of subversion and disinformation

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I dedicate this book to the former and current staff of the Centre for Eastern Studies

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Instead of an introduction

Russian influence operations never end

According to Margarita Simonyan, head of the international television network RT, information is a way of weakening the enemy, dismantling their worldview, sowing confusion, instilling fear and conducting subversion. In an interview published a year before the annexation of Crimea, she spoke like a military strategist, emphasising the constant need for 'informational warfare':

> It is clear that the Ministry of Defence cannot begin training soldiers, preparing weapons and organising defences once a war has already started. If we don't have an audience today and don't have one tomorrow or the day after, we will find ourselves in a situation similar to 2008. Back then, our audience was far from ideal, though we had already done some groundwork. It was, however, much weaker than it is now: our voice was drowned out by the chorus [of Western voices – J.D.], but today it will not be anymore.[1]

As a fighter in Russia's information war against the West, Simonyan sees her foreign audience as targets to be prepared in times of peace and, as she puts it, "exploited" during armed conflict. She believes that a war won on the battlefield, such as the "small victorious war" against Georgia in 2008, can be lost in the information space. By blurring the boundary between war and peace, she implies that Russia's conflict with the West is permanent and will not end "tomorrow or the day after that" – in other words, neither in the near nor distant future.

Simonyan embodies just one of many fronts in Russia's wars against the world – the media battleground. She represents a state imbued for centuries with a distinct mentality, covert methods of operation and a tradition and culture where information is one of the primary tools of influence in both domestic

1 И. Азар, '«Не собираюсь делать вид, что я объективная» Интервью с Маргаритой Симоньян', Лента.Ру, 7 March 2013, lenta.ru.

and foreign policy. How is she fighting and what for? Traditionally, it is not a battle of arguments, but of words and ideas – a fight for peace, "informational sovereignty" and Russian "sovereign democracy". She is waging a war against fascism, colonialism, the American "evil empire", and so on, depending on the Kremlin's relevant instructions, which represent the strategic level of managing informational influence operations.

In fact, the Kremlin can frame almost anything as an influence operation, even an outright attack, simply by labelling it an 'anti-terrorist operation' (as in Chechnya), a 'peace enforcement operation' (as in Georgia in 2008), or a 'special military operation' – a term it has used to describe its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This partly defines the unique nature of Russia's approach to wars and armed conflicts. In practice and theory alike, Russians do not see any issues with this attitude. It poses a challenge for international security and military theorists, who engage in endless debates attempting to establish the difference between 'information warfare' and 'full-scale aggression', between the 'infosphere', 'cybersphere' and 'noosphere', and between netwar and cyberwar.

Russian theorists have readily adopted Western terms, such as the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' or 'hybrid warfare', and then popularised them among the domestic audience as their own counterarguments. They have cynically neutralised any criticism by asserting that an 'information war' is underway, where words carry the meanings assigned to them by the aggressor, and by portraying global protests as being no more than the result of so-called freedom narratives and covert operations carried out by the United States and NATO. This leads to a paradox: efforts to examine Russia's strategy are used by Russia to disseminate the Kremlin's worldview. Moscow turns Western narratives on their head, emphasising their anti-Russian dimension while amplifying its own aggressive messages.

These messages have remained unchanged for years, if not centuries. They are the product of an imperial mindset rooted in both real and imagined historical victories, drawing on emotions and myths. One example is the claim that the West has always accumulated its power at Russia's expense. Or that Russia is not interested in territorial gains and has no intention of planting its flag on foreign lands – it merely 'liberates' its own territories and people. It never wages wars of aggression, always acting in self-defence. It protects global justice, historical truth and its own values. It wages war for years without ever formally declaring it.

As in any war, the goal of this information warfare is to weaken the opponent, in this case by creating a distorted image of them ("Ukrainians are 96.7% Russians", "since the Orange Revolution, the West has been testing anti-Russian technologies in Ukraine") and by reinforcing imposed thought patterns

("Ukraine is an unviable state ruled by a Nazi junta"). The Kremlin defines the areas of conflict in a way that allows it to present itself as the voice of the 'global majority', to manipulate concepts such as 'great Russia' and the 'Russian world' and to suggest to international public opinion that it holds sway over the rest of the globe. It brainwashes the global public and reshapes the world to match its vision.

The Kremlin also creates stories and myths for its own citizens, such as the one about Vladimir Putin, whose leadership saw "Russia rise from its knees" and who is now "saving the world",[2] or about the Chekists who prevented Russia from sliding into the abyss by "hanging it on the Chekist hook". It promotes the dogma that a true patriot supports intelligence operations – an idea suggested by Sergey Naryshkin, head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, who has cited Alexander Pushkin, Dmitri Mendeleev, Nikolay Przhevalsky and other prominent cultural and scientific figures in this context.[3] It perpetuates the notion that an invincible, powerful Russia has a mission to preserve a 'Russian world' under attack by the 'American world'.

Before our eyes, the "small victorious special military operation" has been transformed into an endless story about the eternal struggle of Holy Rus against a duplicitous West, while the imagined and artificially created concept of Novorossiya has turned into a coherent framework reshaping perceptions of the true situation in Ukraine. Many such self-promotional psychological and cultural dogmas emerged at the very dawn of Russian statehood (for example, Moscow as the Third Rome, or the myth of gathering Russian lands). Repeated over the centuries, they have entrenched the Russian school of deceit and refined the machinery for disseminating it, which has been continuously adapted to the changing contexts in which it functions.

Apparently, there has been no need to change specific methods that have brought tangible benefits to Russia's rulers and reinforced their key pillar – the secret services – especially as the West has tolerated Russia's approaches to handling international issues, often downplaying them out of a sense of superiority and at times even falling into Russian traps. It appears unwilling to recognise that Russia's political strategies are rooted in its confrontation with the West and that its security and defence forces primarily serve to protect and stabilise the political regime…

The war against the West continues unabated as Russia eagerly employs its tried-and-tested methods. For instance, the Arctic migration route that Russia

2 Т. Зургалова, '«Путин сегодня спасает человечество»', Республиканское информационное агентство «Дагестан», 22 March 2022, riadagestan.ru.

3 В. Рудаков, 'Интервью Сергея Нарышкина журналу «Историк». «Есть такая профессия»', Российское историческое общество, 2 December 2020, historyrussia.org.

opened in 2015 to put pressure on Finland to curb its cooperation with NATO[4] was reactivated in 2024 when Finland ultimately joined NATO. Putin has turned to this familiar 'subversion weapon' to demonstrate to the world that the West has drawn the wrong conclusions from the war in Ukraine. At the same time, he has shown that Russia is honing its subversion capabilities for the long game and continues to employ them even as its position weakens; in fact, their importance increases in these moments. After all, Russia has managed to mislead or 'wait out' the West on numerous occasions.

* * *

What is this book about? It explains that the current war narrative ("Russia is the victim of a Western conspiracy and is not responsible for the outbreak of the war") is also deeply rooted in the historical and cultural context. It explores how Russian wars are not solely fought on the battlefield but also in the realm of ideas and consciousness. As a result, the ongoing battle over Ukraine involves psychological pressure, propaganda and agitation and appeals to entrenched stereotypes and symbols...

A narrative of this kind does not emerge overnight; it is shaped over years, even centuries, and it draws on the national mentality and unique characteristics as well as cultural and historical traditions. It is aimed at mobilising society, sustaining soldiers' morale, creating a negative, demonised image of the enemy, justifying claims to foreign territory, legitimising Russia's actions and political reasons, and at gaining allies.

The official propaganda always shapes both internal and external messaging. The former, internal messaging, is built on the confrontational dichotomy of 'us versus them' and is addressed to the Russian people. The latter presents Russia to international public opinion as a distinct, independent civilisational centre, justifying the necessity to defend territories beyond its borders to which it lays 'historical and cultural' claims. This approach instrumentalises history and culture as tools of influence.

This is also a book about the unique mindset and operational methods of the *siloviki*, a legacy of the Russian state's strategic culture. In addition to their traditional roles of ensuring security and defending the country's territory, the *siloviki* (a collective term for officers of the uniformed services that embody the factor of 'force') are tasked with the mission of entrenching the Russian empire and shaping both the domestic and international order.

4 P. Szymański, P. Żochowski, W. Rodkiewicz, 'Enforced cooperation: the Finnish-Russian migration crisis', OSW, 6 April 2016, osw.waw.pl.

These reflections are tied together by the universal concept of 'information warfare' – a key to understanding the unique position which the *siloviki* have in Russia's power structure, the imagined and projected geography and history of the world, and also the 'geopolitical catastrophes' that Russia has faced due to Western machinations. These include the Western-orchestrated 'colour revolutions' and the delegitimisation of elections as tools to undermine Russia. It would be out of the question to admit that Belarusians, Georgians and Ukrainians take to the streets because they want freedom and democracy; instead, these developments are portrayed as a result of Russia being pushed to the margins of global politics...

These ideologically charged metaphors, elevated to the status of formal terms, derive from the arsenal of so-called informational geopolitics. Agents masquerading as geopolitical scholars, such as Professor Igor Panarin, have long argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of deceitful operations conducted by Western intelligence services, which infiltrated the Soviet establishment under the guise of reforms. Today, they claim, the West continues to import dangerous ideologies with the aim of dismantling the Russian Federation and its 'sphere of responsibility'. The Russian security services justify their presence in nearly every sphere of socio-political activity 'in times of war and peace' and use this for self-promotion, projecting an image of strong statehood and robust Russian leadership. Today, the 'unparalleled Russian active intelligence and counterintelligence' continue to battle their Western counterparts, claiming that their core aim is to undermine the plans and intentions of their adversary through methods of disinformation, propaganda, sabotage, subversion and terror.[5]

Finally, this book is about the enduring nature of these methods and tools. According to Professor David Gioe of the US Military Academy at West Point, identifying them is essential to understanding the contemporary toolkit of Russian influence operations. They should be examined within a historical perspective and require a comparison of the current and past situations which intelligence functioned in.

> To understand the mission of Russian intelligence [which, incidentally, he refers to as 'hybrid intelligence' – J.D.], we must combine current cyber technologies (including hacking, trolling, etc.) with the historical perspective of Russian intelligence operations, particularly 'active measures' and the recruitment of agents of influence.[6]

5 О. Хлобустов, 'Разведка в годы войны и мира', samlib.ru.

6 D.V. Gioe, 'Cyber operations and useful fools: the approach of Russian hybrid intelligence', *Intelligence and National Security* 2018, no. 33(7), at: cosmos.ualr.edu.

The extended perspective applied in this monograph also helps to at least partially reduce the limitations that afflict research into the contemporary activities of the Russian intelligence services and their associated entities, leading to the conclusion that there is continuity in their organisational structure and operational methods. Familiarity with the history of these agencies can be helpful in identifying the latest operational trends, such as promoting holy war through religious content. This is important because the dominant approach in the rapidly growing literature on Russia's destructive attacks in cyberspace often oversimplifies them as mere cyberterrorism operations.[7] Incidentally, even during the Cold War, tools typically associated with the media (which Russia refers to as the information space) were narrowly framed as 'psychological warfare' and later as 'disinformation' and 'propaganda'. In this context, the Western term 'hybrid techniques', which combines full-scale military aggression with actions in the areas of economics, culture and the media, represented an attempt to take a comprehensive view of Russia's influence operations, such as those seen today in Ukraine, where they have been destabilising the country both internally and externally. By definition, this term is a catch-all phrase for various forms of Russian interference in the affairs of other countries undertaken with clearly harmful intent.

This is the nature of the wide-ranging operation launched in 2023 under the codename *Maidan-3*, which Ukrainian intelligence has estimated to be worth $1.5 billion. Russia has sought to divert attention from its bloody war by spreading disinformation about Ukraine's armed forces, sabotaging its mobilisation efforts, using nuclear blackmail, inciting panic and attempting to spark internal conflicts both within Ukraine and in the countries that support it.[8]

Russia has adopted the terms 'hybrid techniques' and 'hybrid warfare' as evidence of an eternal struggle between the West and Moscow. However, Russian literature continues to focus on the concept of 'information warfare', internalising it as an extension of the country's own 'active measures'.[9] In the Russian context, the meaning of these terms, as well as 'active intelligence' and 'hybrid intelligence', is identical. All of them signify the use of various state and non-state actors to support intelligence operations and domestic/foreign policy as well as leveraging organised crime to gather information, transfer funds,

7 See, for example, A. Kozłowski, 'Środki aktywne – cyfrowa broń Kremla [Security Case Study 2018]', CyberDefence24, 17 September 2018, cyberdefence24.pl; *idem*, 'Rosyjskie „środki aktywne" w cyberprzestrzeni w wyborach prezydenckich w Stanach Zjednoczonych w 2016 roku', *Rocznik Bezpieczeństwa Międzynarodowego* 2020, no. 14(1), rocznikbezpieczenstwa.pl.

8 'Спецоперація Росії «Майдан 3» досягне кульмінації у березні-травні – розвідка', Укрінформ, 27 February 2024, ukrinform.ua.

9 In this context, it is telling that Thomas Rid's excellent book, an example of the aforementioned comprehensive approach, originally titled 'Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare', was published in Polish (Warsaw 2023) under the title 'Wojna informacyjna' ('Information Warfare').

carry out assassinations and create shell companies. This represents a broad set of actions aimed at undermining the social fabric of the targeted countries.

This terminological confusion does not stem solely from the current instrumentalisation of concepts for the purposes of information warfare. First of all, they lack clear definitions and are subject to certain trends which are often accompanied by high imprecision of content. Some terms, such as 'active measures', emerged at a time of heightened Cold War confrontation; therefore, any attempts to adapt them to contemporary research frameworks must consider their new context. It is also worth noting that in Polish discourse, actions defined as 'active' have always been regarded as a hallmark of Russian/Soviet strategy and political culture. Włodzimierz Bączkowski, a prominent interwar-era scholar of Russia, described them as "Moscow's sophisticated arch-Machiavellianism", highlighting the "enormous bulge of intelligence, political police and subversion tools in the Russian state structure". He believed this led Russian strategists to focus on "deep political action characterised by subversion, disintegration and propaganda" while their Western counterparts largely confine themselves to exploring "manoeuvre and operational matters".[10]

Today, when it is difficult to determine what is the result of natural developments and what is the product of manipulation and 'deep political action', Bączkowski's reflections have found renewed relevance. It is also worth consulting Western materials from the Cold War era, as they refer to the same toolkit of influence now described through the lens of 'fashionable' research trends: subversion, toxic dependencies and proxy wars. For instance, the first of these terms appeared in the literature as early as the 1960s as a hallmark of 'political war', describing covert efforts to undermine an opponent's ideology. The process of intoxication was thoroughly examined by Pierre Nord in his 1971 book *L'Intoxication*, published in Paris. He also coined the apt term 'proxy war', which he understood as an undeclared, permanent war of an ideological, political and subversive nature. Vladimir Volkoff[11] presented the works of several prominent theorists and practitioners of this subject, adding insightful commentary to highlight the goals, methods and tools of subversive influence on the populations of the targeted countries.

Today, many analysts continue to draw on the conceptual framework of this classic work. For example, the Lublin-based researcher Grzegorz Gil has expressed a view which is hard to dispute, claiming that the Russian Federation has used and continues to use subversive measures against the breakaway internal entities in Moldova and Georgia, the so-called para-states of Transnistria,

10 W. Bączkowski, 'Uwagi o istocie siły rosyjskiej' [in:] W. Konończuk (ed.), *Istota siły i słabości rosyjskiej. Pisma o Rosji*, Kraków–Warszawa 2022, pp. 8–25.

11 V. Volkoff, *Psychosocjotechnika, dezinformacja, oręż wojny*, Komorów 1999.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as against Ukraine's Crimea and Donbas. Separatist sentiments in these regions would not have emerged with no Russian patrons, just as the annexation of Crimea and the current project for political expansion and the partitioning Ukraine under the banner of Novorossiya would have been unthinkable without Russian involvement. These outcomes are the result of Moscow's use of non-kinetic active measures, which have not been sufficiently examined from this perspective.[12] At the same time, they reveal the true expansionist goals of Russia's foreign policy, implemented in part through its intelligence services. Ultimately, however, when it comes to seizing territory, the Kremlin will deploy its 'full-scale', kinetic military force.

* * *

A few editorial notes. In the book, I have separated the concepts of 'active measures' (Chapter I) and 'hybrid techniques' (Chapter II), even though, as I stressed above, they both essentially cover the same activities. This purely technical step was intended to highlight the role of the main actors involved in these actions while also demonstrating the repetitive nature of their methods. In Chapter III, I attempted to extend the perspective of the phenomena under analysis to show that Russian influence operations are long-lasting. For centuries, using all means necessary, Russia has fought against the label of 'invaders', instead portraying itself as the defender and liberator from colonisation imposed by Western aggressors.

Due to the terminological challenges outlined above, I adopted the principle of explaining the terms used at the beginning of each chapter. In this way, I also wanted to draw attention to the 'terminological disinformation' to which we are constantly exposed. As a result of this, today every author has to redefine terms describing well-known issues that have already been examined. I have avoided using buzzwords such as 'cyberwar', instead placing this topic within the context of 'digital active measures'. I have also omitted their complex IT aspects, striving to present them in an accessible manner to readers who may not be interested in the intricacies of digital communication. To this end, I have provided a glossary of basic terms related to this subject.

The titular metaphor 'capturing minds and reshaping the world' encapsulates the essence of Russian strategic culture and references the concepts of the 'Russian world' and 'Russian order in the world', which are inherently confrontational towards the West. The subversion and disinformation mentioned in the subtitle were the focus of many of my earlier works, which I drew

12 G. Gil, 'Subwersja w polityce (nie)bezpieczeństwa w Europie Wschodniej: wybrane problemy', *Wschód Europy. Studia Humanistyczno-Społeczne* 2021, no. 7.2, at: dlibra.umcs.lublin.pl.

upon in this book.[13] In those studies, I emphasised that these are both recurring and long-term phenomena and that Russia's approach to the West remains unchanged. This was confirmed by Putin's interview with the owner of the Tucker Carlson Network digital platform, published on the Kremlin's official website on 9 February 2024,[14] which can be considered a textbook example of Russian political discourse.

The Russian president reinforced his manipulative messaging with remarks such as "Ukrainians are Russians", "It was the Poles who invented Ukrainians", "The ball is in the West's court when it comes to ending the war", "Western leaders have realised that it is impossible to deliver a strategic defeat to Russia", "Russia will fight for its interests to the end" and "Russia is always ready for dialogue". At the same time, as in 2016, he endorsed Donald Trump as the 'Russian' candidate in the US elections. Acting as a moderator of 'active' propaganda, he effectively initiated another electoral and post-electoral disinformation campaign by pledging to intensify activities in Western countries in a bid to reduce their political, military and economic support for Ukraine.

Above all, by remaining in the mainstream of local propaganda, Putin has been reshaping the world – from a US-led one to a Russian one. He has supported the anti-Western front of allies in the 'fight against global anarchy' and has fuelled an atmosphere of fear, European pacifism and American isolationism. He has continued to exacerbate crises on the European continent, suggesting that the 'American/Anglo-Saxon civilisation', so detrimental to the Kremlin, is equally harmful to Europe. Circles of 'those who understand Russia', which are present in particular (but not exclusively) in Germany, still emphasise the importance of Russian-European relations, the tradition of cooperation and shared interests. Putin's key narratives also deserve attention as a psychological projection of Moscow's intentions. In Russia, Putin's interview with the Tucker Carlson Network was met with enthusiasm, as "the Russian president was heard in the West". Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov was in a triumphant mood:

13 In this monograph, I used theses and excerpts from many of my previous texts in an updated and significantly revised form. This applies in particular to the following materials: *Federalna Służba Bezpieczeństwa w zwierciadle rosyjskiego dowcipu sieciowego*, OSW, Warszawa 2014; *The anatomy of Russian information warfare. The Crimean operation, a case study*, OSW, Warszawa 2014; *The devil is in the details. Information warfare in the light of Russia's military doctrine*, OSW, Warszawa 2015; *Russia's armed forces on the information war front. Strategic documents*, OSW, Warszawa 2016; *Russophobia in the Kremlin's strategy. A weapon of mass destruction*, [co-authored by P. Żochowski], OSW, Warszawa 2015; *Active measures. Russia's key export*, [co-authored by P. Żochowski], OSW, Warszawa 2017; *Defenders of the besieged fortress. On the historical legitimisation of Russia's special service*, OSW, Warszawa 2018; *Between overt disinformation and covert practice. The Russian special services' game*, OSW, Warszawa 2019 [all of these available at osw.waw.pl/en], 'Wojna informacyjna Rosji z Zachodem. Nowe wyzwanie?', *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego* 2015 (special ed.), pp. 59–73, as well as the following monographs: *Ruś porwana? Rosyjska wojna o tożsamość Ukrainy*, [co-authored by J. Getka], Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2022, wuw.pl; *Faszyzacja antyfaszyzmu. Kulturowe kody wojny Rosji*, [co-authored by J. Getka], Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2023, wuw.pl.

14 'Интервью Такеру Карлсону', President of Russia, 9 February 2024, kremlin.ru.

within the first 24 hours, the interview garnered 150 million views on the X platform alone. The fact that there will always be a Carlson abroad only confirms that today, as in the past, Russia's message must be amplified through active measures: coercion, blackmail, intimidation and straightforward corruption.

Chapter I

Active measures: beyond disinformation and propaganda

1. Overview of the issue

In recent years, the political and military pressure exerted by Russia on its immediate and more distant international environment, as well as its readiness to escalate tensions, have become central topics in the discourse on international security. It has also become the focus of numerous analyses and articles, along with several books that synthetise these issues.[15] However, reflections on this subject remain fragmentary as they fail to encompass all of its aspects and manifestations. Most authors concentrate on disinformation and propaganda – activities confined to the information sphere. While these are indeed dominant tools, they are only one component of Russia's crisis-generating toolkit.

Pretexts for overt and covert disinformation operations include intelligence, border and migration provocations, events organised both domestically and abroad (such as conferences, festivals and peace camps), interference in parliamentary and presidential elections, financial or political support for radical groups and separatist movements, the disruption of decision-making processes, efforts to discredit political leaders unfriendly to the Kremlin while supporting pro-Kremlin figures, etc. During the Cold War, these actions were collectively referred to as 'active measures'. This historical term also helps to understand present-day influence operations, including those aimed at weakening Western support for Ukraine in the war with Russia.

15 I.M. Pacepa, R.J. Rychlak, *Dezinformacja. Były szef wywiadu ujawnia metody dławienia wolności, zwalczania religii i wspierania terroryzmu*, Warszawa 2015; E. Lucas, *Deception: The Untold Story of East-West Espionage Today*, Walker, New York 2012; T. Rid, *Active Measures..., op. cit.*; M. Olechowski, *Bezpieczeństwo informacyjne Rosji. Czynnik duchowy i kultura strategiczna*, Toruń 2023.

In the context of Ukraine, recent literature has typically examined these efforts within the paradigm of 'hybrid wars', understood as a hybrid of old and new warfare. It combines armed aggression with indirect actions in areas such as the economy, culture and the media with the aim of destabilising this country from within. Active measures are also treated as synonymous with terms such as 'information warfare', 'psychological warfare' and 'political warfare'. The prevailing trend in the literature on Russia's destructive activities often narrows the focus to digital invasion and cyberespionage (the hacking and automated dissemination of data leaks).[16] However, the Internet has become little more than a natural extension of the sphere where these methods are applied, offering a number of convenient targets and tools for conducting attacks. This confusion stems from the lack of clear definitions for the aforementioned terms and the fact that they are subject to certain trends which are often accompanied by a high imprecision of content. This creates challenges in identifying and countering this threat, which experts predict will continue to intensify.

The growing interest in active measures seen in the West today also prompts a closer examination of this topic. This interest is largely driven by the aforementioned lack of clarity in terminology and by efforts to adopt a more comprehensive approach to newer forms of Russian aggression. The fact that many terms have a military origin often obscures the undeniable assumption that the armed forces are not the sole participants in these wars. In this context, the historical term 'active measures' aptly captures the complex nature of this phenomenon. It emphasises the role of the intelligence services in preparing and establishing the operational framework for the Kremlin's influence campaigns as well as the close links between these operations and acts of provocation, subversion, terrorism, international organised crime, pressure through artificially created illegal migration routes and other forms of destabilising action.

Today, modern active measures are primarily described through the lens of Ukraine's experiences, with the 'Crimean operation' serving as a textbook example of their application. Russia achieved its main objective (seizing the Crimean Peninsula with the use of special forces and irregular formations and then annexing it after a sham referendum) by using intensive, multidimensional, long-term information-psychological operations, including blackmail, disinformation, deception and propaganda. The speed of Russia's aggressive actions caught the international community off guard, effectively preventing any coordinated and effective response beyond the imposition of sanctions.

16 See, for example, A. Kozłowski, 'Środki aktywne – cyfrowa broń Kremla [Security Case Study 2018]', *op. cit.*; *idem*, 'Rosyjskie „środki aktywne" w cyberprzestrzeni w wyborach prezydenckich w Stanach Zjednoczonych w 2016 roku', *op. cit.*

At that time, the Kremlin was pursuing several objectives, and these remain valid today. The minimum goal is to prevent the countries it considers to be part of its sphere of influence, including Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, from joining the EU and NATO. This is designed to weaken Euro-Atlantic unity while enabling Russia to seize all the available resources, including the human capital, of the countries within its sphere of interest. The maximum objective, on a global scale, is to perpetuate the proposed division of the world into spheres of influence, which would effectively restore the 'Yalta order'.

Russia holds a significant advantage in its confrontation with the West. This is largely due to the very nature of the Putin regime, which disregards the principles of international law. Russia views the achievements of democratic systems, such as the electoral alternation of power, pluralism of opinion and freedom of speech, as weaknesses to be exploited. It has used both legal and illegal means to enlist various non-state actors in activities such as intelligence gathering, acquiring classified data, establishing smuggling routes, facilitating financial transfers, carrying out contract killings and setting up front companies. The continuity of its leadership has enabled it to pursue certain political objectives that have remained unchanged for years. Its strategic narrative is underpinned by a neo-imperial doctrine rooted in the concept of the 'Russian world' and its own criteria of what constitutes the 'truth'. Russia has also employed long-term information warfare strategies covering various thematic areas. It has been adapted to the specific characteristics of the target audience.

Contrary to Russia's 'defensive' narrative, its complex arsenal of influence tools, initially referred to as active inspirational measures and later as support measures and hybrid techniques, includes offensive disinformation, subversion, destabilisation and espionage operations. These measures stem directly from the objectives and priorities of the state's foreign policy; their purpose is to compel or persuade adversaries to act in ways aligned with Moscow's interests. They are deeply rooted in Russia's tradition and its political and strategic culture, encompassing a wide range of tactics: from overt propaganda and disinformation campaigns based on falsehoods to political assassinations and state-sponsored terrorism. Lying between these is an extensive grey zone, which constitutes the primary battlefield in Russia's confrontation with the West focused on undermining the administrative-political, socio-economic and cultural-ideological foundations of the targeted countries. Analysing this sphere poses significant challenges due to the secretive and semi-legal nature of the relevant activities, the lack of tools to measure their scale and impact, and also because of the multitude and diversity of the actors involved, who draw on a wide range of funding sources.

In this chapter, I attempt to take a more comprehensive approach to the concept of 'active measures'. I focus on more recent examples of their application as well as their evolution in response to the emergence of so-called new media. While referencing well-known cases, I have chosen as my case study the largely unexplored political project to destabilise Ukraine known as 'Novorossiya'. Launched a decade ago and based on subversion, this project initially envisaged granting this historical province a non-bloc status, which would abandon aspirations for European integration, but – provide extensive autonomy to its regions and keep it in a state of perpetual social, economic and political crisis. Modelled on the Transnistrian scenario, it was conceived as a tool for Russia to exert influence over Ukraine. The plan's ultimate goal was to divide the Ukrainian state and establish Novorossiya as a para-state under Russian protection. In 2022, this project was used to justify Russia's expansion and the annexation of four Ukrainian regions.

2. Active measures – a historical and contemporary perspective

2.1. Clarifying the concept

'Active measures' is a historical yet imprecise term. Like many Russian concepts, it acts as a façade that conceals various methods of exerting influence on the international environment. A variety of actors have employed these measures, often under the inspiration and control of the country's secret services. The term emerged in the 1960s amid the escalating ideological confrontation between the Soviet Union and the West as a catch-all phrase encompassing numerous operational techniques (disinformation, special propaganda,[17] sabotage, subversion, and more) that carried inherently negative connotations in the public perception. Moreover, it concealed the offensive nature of actions portrayed as defensive.

Definitions of active measures (Russian: *aktivnye meropriyatiya*) can be found in available KGB documents (an acronym for *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* – the Committee for State Security). In the *Counterintelligence Dictionary* published by the KGB's Felix Dzerzhinsky Higher School in 1972, active measures were described as "counterintelligence actions that make it possible

17 In Polish academic literature, disinformation and propaganda are assigned distinct and strictly defined meanings. See, for example: M.J. Wachowicz, 'Ujęcie teoretyczne pojęcia dezinformacji', *Wiedza Obronna* 2019, vol. 266–267, no. 1–2, wiedzaobronna.edu.pl; T. Kacała, 'Dezinformacja i propaganda w kontekście zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa państwa', *Przegląd Prawa Konstytucyjnego* 2015, no. 2(24), at: cejsh.icm.edu.pl. In this text, these phenomena are treated as components of 'active measures', techniques of influence based on the use of manipulated information. They are further linked by ideological and informational subversion.

to uncover the adversary's intentions, pre-empt their undesirable steps, mislead them, seize the initiative from them and thwart their subversive activities".[18]

According to this document, active measures are inherently offensive in nature. They enable the detection and disruption of hostile activities at an early stage, force adversaries to show their hand, impose the initiator's will on them and compel them to operate under adverse conditions and in ways favourable to counterintelligence efforts. In the counterintelligence practice of state security agencies, these measures included actions aimed at embedding agents within the adversary's organisation and its broader environment, conducting operational games with the adversary, disinforming, discrediting and demoralising them, transferring individuals of particular operational value into Soviet territory, gathering intelligence, and other similar activities.

A definition of active measures from the perspective of the intelligence services was formulated by Vasili Mitrokhin, a former KGB intelligence officer and archivist who highlighted their political, economic, military and ideological dimensions. The Soviet intelligence service described active measures as "espionage-operational actions aimed at influencing the foreign policy and internal political situation of the targeted countries, conducted in the interest of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, global communism and national liberation movements; weakening the political, military, economic and ideological position of capitalism as well as thwarting its aggressive plans in order to create favourable conditions for advancing Soviet foreign policy and ensuring peace and social progress".[19]

As such, the term 'active measures' referred to those offensive operations involving disinformation, deception, subversion, destabilisation and espionage which stemmed from the principles and priorities of Soviet foreign policy and were designed to compel adversaries to act in Moscow's interests. The term encompassed various techniques employed in influence operations targeting the Soviet Union's international environment and designed to support the Kremlin's policies. Both definitions described the essence of active measures in identical terms: influencing adversaries to create favourable conditions for advancing Soviet foreign policy objectives.

In Poland, this term emerged as a borrowing from Russian via English. The English-language literature had adopted the term 'active measures', which was essentially a linguistic calque. In a 1986 report on anti-American disinformation and propaganda campaigns, the US Department of State described active measures as "covert or deceptive operations conducted in support of

18 *Контрразведывательный словарь*, Москва 1972, pp. 161–162, at: genocid.lt.

19 W. Mitrochin, *KGB Lexicon: The Soviet Intelligence Officer's Handbook*, London 2002, p. 13.

Soviet foreign policy. Active measures are distinct both from espionage and counterintelligence and from traditional diplomatic and informational activities. The goal of active measures is to influence opinions and perceptions of governments and/or publics to achieve a specific response". According to the US Department of State, their essence lay in deceptiveness: disinformation and forgeries, front groups and media manipulation. They could also involve covert operations, but this was not always the case.[20]

KGB researchers hold varying views on the scope of the historical concept of 'active measures'. For some, it includes physical attacks, such as sabotage and assassinations (Yevhen Konovalets in 1938, Leon Trotsky in 1940, Stepan Bandera in 1959, Hafizullah Amin in 1979, and many others) which the intelligence services carry out abroad; they see the more recent killings of Alexander Litvinenko and Aslan Maskhadov as a continuation of these actions. Most researchers mention techniques such as spreading disinformation and producing 'forgeries' – fabricated documents intended to discredit individual politicians, governments or organisations; setting up front organisations – fictitious entities presented as non-political NGOs; and carrying out political provocations using operatives who conceal their ties to the KGB or unwitting 'useful idiots'. Similar mechanisms were outlined in the 1987 FBI report entitled *Active Measures in the United States 1986–1987*, which distinguishes 'false agents' (individuals unaware of the influence being exerted on them) from those recruited through espionage methods, who knowingly act in the adversary's interest to the detriment of their own country.

Another key component of active measures – subversion, which is often qualified by the adjective 'ideological' (Russian: *ideologicheskaya diversiya*) – has both a broad and narrow meaning. It is often equated with active measures per se. According to the common definition, subversion involves activities aimed at destabilising political authorities and undermining the morale of society and armed forces in order to provoke a crisis and ultimately produce changes in the domestic and foreign policies of the targeted state. Indirect methods of subversion include inspiring, creating and directing covert and overt organisations within a country as well as employing diplomatic, informational, agitprop and psychological tactics alongside blackmail and corruption. Direct forms of subversive activities include acts of terrorism and sabotage carried out by KGB-trained militias posing as spontaneous resistance groups, the assassinations of political and social activists, and military interventions carried out to suppress anti-communist revolutions, such as Operation Whirlwind in Hungary in 1956,

20 *Active Measures: A Report on the Substance and Process of Anti-U.S. Disinformation and Propaganda Campaigns*, US Department of State, August 1986, p. 1.

Operation Danube in Prague in 1968 and the 1979 intervention in Afghanistan, which installed a puppet government led by Babrak Karmal.

This kind of influence targeted various spheres of state and social activity, including religion, the dominant ideology, politics, the economy, the ethical system, culture and science. The scale of these efforts is illustrated by an extensive list compiled by French researcher Thierry Wolton,[21] detailing entities regarded by the Kremlin as extensions of the KGB. These included the World Peace Council (which brought together 135 national organisations), the World Federation of Trade Unions (90); the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (91); the World Federation of Democratic Youth (210); the International Union of Students (118); the International Organisation of Journalists (114); the Women's International Democratic Federation (129); the Christian Peace Conference (86); the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (64); and the World Federation of Scientific Workers (33). All of them operated in the Soviet Union's interests and received financial support from it.

The World Peace Council enjoyed particular favour from the Kremlin; as revealed in the 1990s, around 90% of its funding came from the Soviet Union and the so-called socialist bloc. In addition to the offensive operations outlined above, extraordinary precautions were taken to prevent any Western influence on Soviet citizens. As a result, Moscow played a game without rules: Soviet propaganda and disinformation were presented as entirely legitimate aspects of the free flow of information and people-to-people contacts, while Western efforts to counteract informational subversion were portrayed as interference in the Soviet Union's internal affairs and as the illegal practices of 'imperialist agents'.

Moscow continued to employ active measures in the 1990s, even after the Soviet Union collapsed, the KGB was disbanded and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) was established as a separate institution. This was confirmed by intelligence Colonel Sergei Tretyakov, who defected to the United States in 2000. According to his account, Service A (from the Russian *aktivka*, meaning 'active measures') within the intelligence structure was renamed as MS (*meropriyatiya sodeystviya* – 'support measures'). Officially, the SVR disbanded this unit, a step which the US had encouraged.[22] It is worth noting that, according to journalists Irina Borogan and Andrei Soldatov,[23] a similar structure named the Directorate for Assistance Programmes was created within the FSB in 1999. Its first head

21 T. Wolton, *Le KGB en France*, Paris 1986.

22 P. Earley, *Towarzysz J. Tajemnice szefa rosyjskiej siatki szpiegowskiej w Stanach Zjednoczonych po zimnej wojnie*, Poznań 2008, pp. 184–185.

23 A. Soldatov, I. Borogan, *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB*, Public Affairs, New York 2010, p. 109.

was Aleksandr Zdanovich, previously the director of the FSB's Centre for Public Relations.

2.2. The institutional framework of active measures

The Soviet Union's intelligence services began employing active measures thus defined at the very inception of the state; the Kremlin expected them to hasten the triumph of communism over capitalism. Both civilian and military structures utilised these methods, operating in close coordination under the guidance of the ideological and international departments of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The names of these bodies reflect an effort to find a collective term that would capture the complex nature of their activities. In simplified terms, this was referred to as disinformation or, as we would say today, disinformation techniques. The first so-called bureau of sabotage, disinformation and special propaganda (Russian: *dezinforbyuro*/*dezbyuro*) was established in 1923 on the initiative of Józef Unszlicht within the Unified State Political Directorate (OGPU), the successor to the Cheka.[24] In the Ministry of State Security, a separate unit named Bureau No. 1, headed by Pavel Sudoplatov, was in charge of 'hard' (terrorism) and 'soft' ideological subversion abroad. Bureau No. 2 handled these activities within the Soviet Union.

The establishment of a new, separate unit called Department D (in Russian operational jargon: *deza*, disinformation) within the First Chief Directorate (KGB intelligence) in January 1959 marked the beginning of a systemic approach to these operations. A similar body was created within military intelligence (Russian: *Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye*, abbreviated as *Razvedupr* – the Intelligence Directorate, later renamed the Main Intelligence Directorate, GRU). Within the structures of the Chief Political Directorate, the VII Directorate for special propaganda operated until 1991.[25] Department D absorbed the assets of the disbanded Information Committee at the Soviet Union's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had coordinated the efforts of both civilian and military intelligence.[26] Creation of the department is credited to Ivan Agayants, who

24 This topic is discussed in greater detail by Yevgeny Gorbunov, a historian of the Russian intelligence services. He places this initiative within the context of the Soviet government's foresight and glorifies intelligence as a factor of strategic stability. See: Е. Горбунов, 'Фактор стабильности – стратегическая дезинформация', Независимое военное обозрение, 12 May 2006, nvo.ng.ru; *idem*, 'Стратегическая дезинформация' [in:] *Сталин и ГРУ*, Москва 2010, at: history.wikireading.ru.

25 On its beginnings, see for example: 'Их оружие – слово. Первому выпуску факультета спецпропаганды – 40 лет', Красная звезда, 29 June 2011, old.redstar.ru.

26 Much less is known about similar structures within military intelligence. As Gorbunov notes, the course entitled 'Fundamentals of Military Disinformation' was resumed in 1941 at the initiative of the General Staff; a brochure under the same title also appeared at that time. However, its author did not take into account the experiences of the 1920s: all the heads of Soviet military intelligence perished during the purges of 1937–38 (see Е. Горбунов, 'Фактор стабильности – стратегическая дезинформация', *op. cit.*).

was subsequently appointed its head. The SVR describes him on its website as an outstanding intelligence officer and a resident in France and Iran.[27]

Initially, Department D consisted of around 50 officers who engaged in both verbal and operational disinformation. The unit's first mission was to discredit West Germany as a 'neo-Nazi state'. As part of this effort, East German agents were sent to desecrate Jewish graves, paint anti-Semitic slogans on synagogues, shops and the offices of Jewish organisations and to incite local residents to carry out similar actions. As reported by John Barron,[28] within a year the West German government recorded 833 anti-Semitic acts, which exposed it to international condemnation and tarnished its image in the eyes of global public opinion.

Following its successes, in 1963 the department was transformed into Service A within the First Directorate of the KGB (as noted earlier, 'A' stood for the Russian *aktivka*, or 'active measures') and was tasked with inspirational and planning functions. According to information that is difficult to verify, it was successively headed by Ivan Agayants (1963–1967), Sergei Kondrashev (1967–?), Nikolai Kosov (?–1975), Vladimir Ivanov (1975–1990) and Leonid Makarov (1991). Makarov had previously headed the residency in Oslo and later the KGB's intelligence division in the Ukrainian SSR. His appointment to lead Service A was seen as the crowning achievement of an illustrious career – hence the conclusion that this position was reserved for the KGB elite.[29]

The names of the directors of Service A appear on the lists of participants in the arms limitation talks (Helsinki 1970) and the negotiations that led to the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act of the CSCE (1974). However, trips aimed at coordinating operations were privileges reserved for its leadership. According to Oleg Kalugin, a former KGB general and defector living in the United States, rank-and-file officers believed that the unit offered little opportunity to climb the career ladder, which was often equated with assignments abroad. Many of them lacked experience in operational work outside the Soviet Union and based their assessments on conspiracy theories about "insidious plots by imperialists and Zionists controlled by the CIA". Service A at the KGB headquarters prepared guidelines and operational instructions for personnel in foreign residencies. In practice, such operations were carried out by officers from the so-called geographical departments of the KGB's First Directorate, which was responsible

27 Before World War II, Agayants specialised in subversion, participating in operations such as the one that brought Spanish Communist Party leaders Dolores Ibárruri and José Díaz to Moscow. During the war, he worked in Iran, targeting Nazi Germany's intelligence networks, studying fascist propaganda mechanisms and conducting counter-propaganda activities. After the war, he was reassigned to the Paris residency, where he co-founded the Soviet-French Friendship Society while also working (from 1946) as a member of the abovementioned Information Committee and a lecturer at the KGB's intelligence School 101.

28 Cited in: V. Volkoff, *Psychosocjotechnika, dezinformacja, oręż wojny, op. cit.*, p. 130.

29 'Отдел «Д» – Служба «А»', Валентин Мзареулов, shieldandsword.mozohin.ru.

for intelligence. The residencies in Bonn and Washington were the exceptions, as they were reinforced with officers from Service A.

This restructuring also reflected an effort to merge various forms of influence into a single coordinated process, which aligned with the Soviet Union's plans for broader ideological expansion. On the one hand, this required recruiting and managing agents of influence, conducting covert financial operations and establishing footholds in influential media outlets. On the other, it involved sabotage and subversion, provoking conflicts, supporting opposition groups and resistance movements, and conducting paramilitary and military operations. When methods of ideological persuasion proved ineffective, the force of argument gave way to the argument of force. The extensive array of active measures was then supplemented with the 'force factor'. Intelligence services organised, and often initiated, these efforts, conducting reconnaissance in targeted countries, preparing action plans and selecting individuals to carry them out.

3. Active measures as an intelligence threat

3.1. The specifics of Russian 'active intelligence'

Having no connection with gathering and analysing information, influence operations referred to as active measures fall outside the scope of typical intelligence activities; instead, they are tools for advancing Russia's foreign, economic and defence policy objectives. Broadly speaking, what sets active measures apart from 'classic' intelligence activities is their agency. Researchers of Russian secret services approach this concept in various ways. Tomasz R. Aleksandrowicz associates it with the intelligence function of creatively managing the state's strategic security by stimulating situationsfavourable from the perspective of its national interests.[30] Kazimierz Kraj uses the term 'active intelligence'[31] while Mirosław Minkina describes it as 'non-informational intelligence operations'.[32] The purpose of these measures is to cause something to happen, unlike informational activities, which are designed to affect decision-making once something has already occurred. Aleksandr Bartosh, a military analyst who specialises in these issues[33] explains

30 T.R. Aleksandrowicz, 'Wywiad jako narzędzie w koncepcji nowych wojen. Casus konfliktu ukraińskiego', *Studia Politologiczne* 2017, no. 43, studiapolitologiczne.pl.

31 For more on this topic, see K. Kraj, 'Wywiad – szczególny rodzaj Sił Zbrojnych Federacji Rosyjskiej' [in:] M. Banasik, A. Rogozińska (ed.), *Perspektywy zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego kreowanych przez Federację Rosyjską*, Warszawa 2019, pp. 219–225.

32 M. Minkina, *Sztuka wywiadu w państwie współczesnym*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 209–245.

33 See, for example A. Бартош, *Конфликты XXI века. Гибридная война и цветная революция*, Москва 2018; *idem*, *Туман гибридной войны. Неопределенности и риски конфликтов XXI века*, Москва 2019; *idem*, 'Москва по-прежнему цель номер один', Независимое военное обозрение, 14 December 2018, nvo.ng.ru; *idem*, 'Модель гибридной войны', Военная мысль, 1 May 2019, vm.ric.mil.ru.

that the goal is to design and shape the adversary's future. Like all other Russian authors, Bartosh emphasises the defensive nature of active measures, asserting that "Moscow is the number one target of the United States, the West and NATO". In line with current trends in Russian information analysis, active measures are equated with 'hybrid activities' or 'hybrid techniques/technologies' (often with the qualifier 'covert') and portrayed as the key to understanding the contemporary 'Western aggression'. Within this categorisation, 'hybrid technologies' are considered part of the arsenal of indirect, kinetic measures below the threshold of the use of force.

The new realities were primarily associated with the shift away from rigid communist ideology after the fall of the Soviet Union and the rapid social, economic and technological changes; these enhanced the capabilities of Russian intelligence services both domestically and abroad. The SVR, which reports directly to the president, from the outset operated with a strong sense of purpose underpinned by the Law on Foreign Intelligence, which was prepared by the SVR itself and adopted in August 1992. It allowed intelligence personnel to hold positions in ministries, departments, enterprises and organisations without disclosing their affiliation with the parent institution.

During the KGB era, foreign intelligence operations were concentrated in residencies under diplomatic cover and in facilities widely recognised in the West as intelligence fronts, such as Aeroflot offices, trade missions and foreign correspondent bureaux. However, the SVR could now operate under the guise of any political, economic or social organisation. The Russian-speaking diaspora scattered across the post-Soviet countries further added to this expanded scope of opportunities. In addition, Russian intelligence leveraged the new technological environment, marked by advances in information and communication devices, the widespread use of computer technology and the growing dependence of countries on IT infrastructure. This situation made it easier not only to collect information but also to manipulate it.

In the struggle for information (knowledge), Russian strategic intelligence has typically conducted a broad range of operations across political, economic, social, scientific-technical, sociological, cultural and military domains. In Russian intelligence doctrine and strategic planning, this contest was quickly reframed as an informational (or more precisely, disinformational) clash across battlefronts which corresponds to the components of intelligence. It is worth noting that the term 'information warfare' emerged in the West only in the mid-1990s and was almost immediately introduced into Russian official documents, appearing in the Information Security Doctrine and the Military Doctrine that were adopted in 2000. This was facilitated by the longstanding tradition of employing tools of information-psychological warfare as well as more recent experiences from the two Chechen wars and the challenge posed to Russia by

the enlargement of NATO and the EU, which was accompanied by extremely vigorous information campaigns. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that most Russian theorists emphasise the critical role of informational tools at all stages of hybrid operations – from monitoring the situation to identify fractures and inconsistencies in the targeted countries, through planning and selecting executors, to the implementation and media coverage of the operations.

In this context, Yuri Bobylov argues that the creation of mobilisation-driven information networks was a move of immense significance. They were built on intelligence mechanisms, public-private partnerships and on capacity-building efforts, including the training of analytical and operational personnel capable of conducting independent actions. According to Bobylov, these networks should serve as a model for 'hybrid activities' in other domains, such as the economic, financial, trade and industrial innovation sectors.[34]

Emphasising the auxiliary role of intelligence,[35] Bobylov distinguishes between special operations, which intelligence agencies execute, and special projects, in which they participate.

Destructive operations are characterised by:

- **secrecy (covert actions can be both legal and illegal),**
- **the lack of spatial limitations,**
- **the use of both domestic and foreign citizens,**
- **a wide range of methods applied at various levels of problem-solving,**
- **specialised execution structures (the use of permanent resources and organisations/companies created specifically for the task),**
- **special material and financial support,**
- **a special approach to managing operations, with responsibility delegated from the decision-making centre to the operational structures,**

34 Ю. Бобылов, 'Экспортно-ориентированные инновационные промышленные прорывы России по стратегиям гибридных войн', *Информационные войны* 2015, no. 1, pp. 55–61. The following articles are particularly relevant to the issues discussed: 'Спецслужбы и стратегия гибридных войн', Нанотехнологическое общество России, 30 March 2015, rusnor.org; 'Проблема внешней ведомственной конкурентной разведки России. Информационные, правовые и организационные аспекты', *Информационные войны* 2016, no. 4, pp. 67–79; 'Новые наукоемкие гибридные войны для ГК «Росатом». Окончание', ПРоАтом, 29 March 2017, proatom.ru. According to Bobylov, the contemporary global economic realities pose a new mobilisation challenge for Russia: how to build adequate structures of state governance and a mobilisation-driven economic network that leverages covert technologies, intelligence resources and a range of private entities, including the criminal world. In this context, the author calls for the establishment of a distinct structure (the so-called troika focused on economic security) within government offices, strategic enterprises and private companies. It would be modelled on *edinitsa* (a unit responsible for protecting state secrets and informational security in the broad sense) and *dvoika* (mobilisation and crisis management). This suggests that Russian conceptualists remain attached to old Soviet bureaucratic solutions.

35 Russian intelligence also highlights its auxiliary role. This is reflected in the contemporary term for active measures: 'support measures' (implicitly in service of Russia's foreign policy).

- diverse tools tailored to particular objectives,
- a focus on exploiting the adversary's weaknesses (vulnerabilities),
- surprising and disorientating the adversary,
- a planned approach,
- an informational-psychological framing.

Sergey Rastorguyev highlighted the role of intelligence by categorising 'information weapons' into six groups:

1. tools for surveying and monitoring the technical environment,
2. tools for surveying and monitoring the social environment,
3. tools for actively influencing technical resources,
4. tools for actively influencing social entities,
5. tools for planning, managing and evaluating the effectiveness of information operations in the technical sphere,
6. tools for planning, managing and evaluating the effectiveness of information operations in the social (human) sphere.

The first two groups include technical tools for monitoring the behaviour of Internet users and collecting data on their IP addresses and the security software on their computers. This makes it possible to create profiles of members of surveilled organisations/social networks or specific individuals. The third group consists of tools for disabling the technical communication infrastructure, including eliminating its individual modules and segments. These include covert influence programs and various proxy resources, such as botting technologies (see 'Glossary of digital active measures' below) that execute commands from the central control hub. The fourth group covers tools for generating and distributing specially prepared multimedia materials on targeted platforms with the use of emails, discussion forums, chats, blogs, social networks and comments on press articles and television programmes. The latter two groups include tools for planning and managing information operations and for evaluating their effectiveness. Depending on the area of their application (technical or social), these tools use different characteristics and algorithms to affect the behaviour of the targeted entities.[36]

In another book, Rastorguyev identified specialised units ('sections') within intelligence structures operating in social and technical spheres, including:

- **analytical** – responsible for forecasting, modelling developments and planning information-psychological operations at the strategic, operational and tactical levels,

36 С. Расторгуев, *Математические модели в информационном противоборстве. Экзистенциальная математика*, Москва 2014, pp. 91–92, in: obuchalka.org.

- **reconnaissance** – gathers all the relevant information on targets of informational influence using operational reconnaissance methods and tools,
- **information-generating** – prepares materials used in information-psychological operations, such as articles, books, brochures, leaflets, memes and internet posts,
- **executive** – develops communication channels for reaching audiences and target groups, tailoring content delivery methods to the profiles of the intended recipients,
- **evaluative** – collects feedback from audience members and target groups and evaluates their attitudes/behaviours based on information from various sources.[37]

Rastorguyev is a pioneer of Russian studies on the theory of information warfare and the author of academic textbooks in this field. His scientific career began in the second half of the 1990s.[38] He defines the term 'information warfare' as "the overt and covert informational influence of one information system on another in order to gain specific benefits in the material sphere".[39] Unlike other Russian researchers, Rastorguyev's comprehensive concept of information warfare places greater emphasis on its technical aspects.He writes: "every type of information weapon is linked to the concept of an algorithm and is defined through that concept"; algorithms also determine the effectiveness of specific types of this weaponry.

3.2. Actors of destructive influence

According to Russian analysts, an informational and psychological influence on public opinion is exerted by three primary groups of actors in information warfare:

1. state institutions, particularly those associated with the intelligence services and issues of communication and information,
2. private organisations, which focus on generating profit,
3. instrumentalised social organisations, which work toward noble goals and are often described as humanitarian due to their transparent sources of funding.

The existing literature offers limited information about the operational resources required for carrying out special operations and projects. This is hardly surprising as neither the Russian intelligence services nor the Kremlin

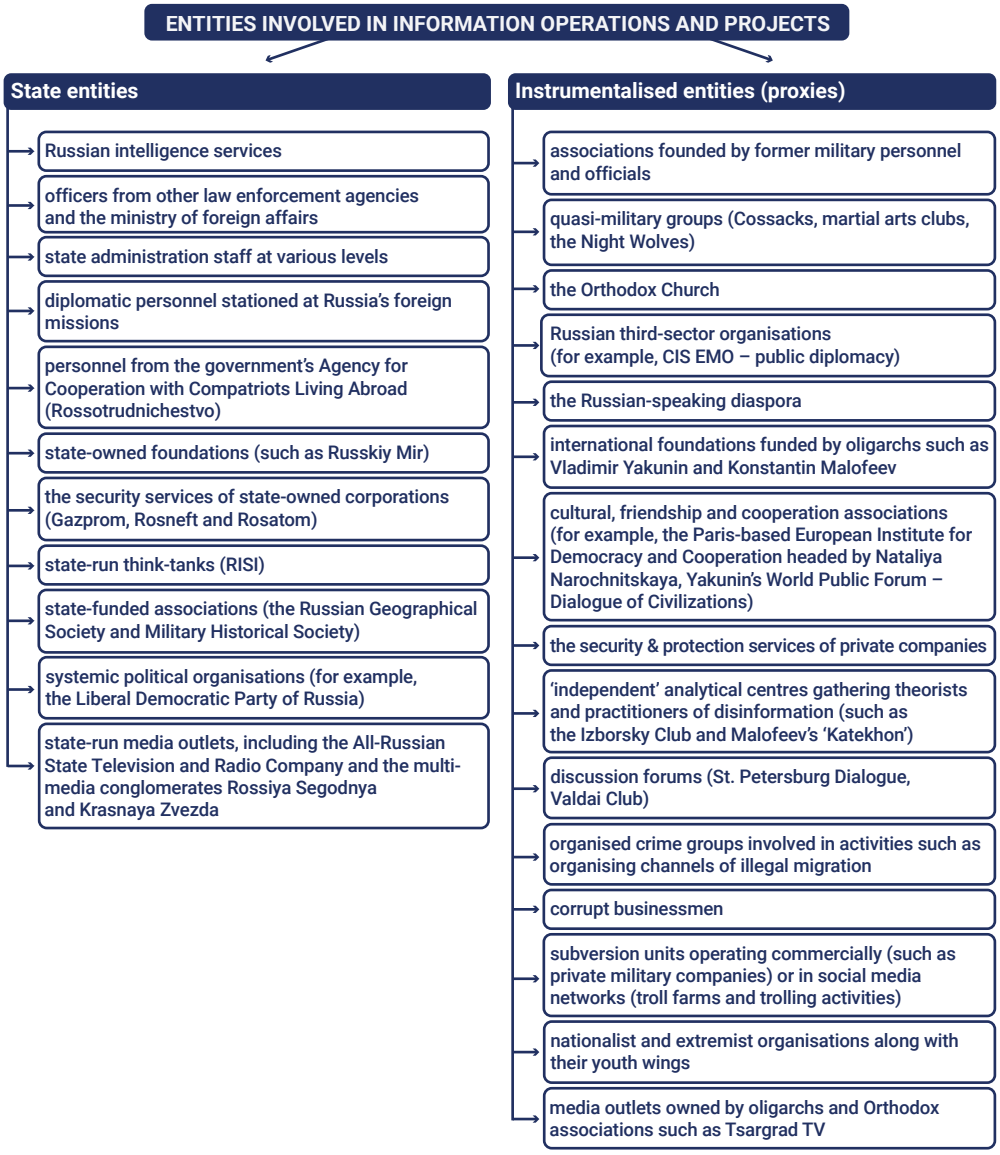
37 *Idem*, *Философия информационной войны*, Москва 2003, p. 358.

38 For example, see *idem*, *Информационная война*, Москва 1998; *Выборы во власть как форма информационной экспансии*, Москва 1999, *Вирусы: биологические, социальные, психические, компьютерные,* Москва 1996; *Основы информационной безопасности*, Москва 2007.

39 *Idem*, *Информационная война*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

disclose their involvement, nor do the executors of these endeavours. The historical studies on active measures and the research on modern mechanisms for spreading disinformation indicate that these operations are initiated by a wide range of actors, which can be broadly categorised into two groups: state actors and instrumentalised intermediaries (proxies).

DIAGRAM 1. Participants in information warfare



Source: author's own compilation.

Russian theorists consider these structures to be so-called internal resources. These covertly managed non-state entities are supposed to function as independent elements within organisational 'mobilisation networks'. Individuals and legal entities that form part of foreign intelligence assets can be identified as a separate group. This includes so-called illegals, operatives embedded in targeted countries and unwitting agents commonly referred to as 'useful idiots' or 'friends of Russia' in the West, also known as *Russlandversteher* ('those who understand Russia'). The latter group consists of, among others, corrupt politicians and businessmen, political parties, environmentalists, anti-globalists and pacifists.

The outlined perspective aligns with the Western one. Authors of the special report entitled *The Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda*, prepared by the Global Engagement Center at the US Department of State, identified five such pillars or levels of influence.[40]

The pillars of Russian psychosocial influence:

- **messages crafted by official state bodies and top-level politicians, including statements issued by the Kremlin, articles by Vladimir Putin and social media posts by Dmitry Medvedev,**
- **state-funded government and pro-government media with global reach that cater to both domestic and international audiences, such as RT and Rossiya 24,**
- **proxy sources, such as portals and blogs created for local audiences, as well as instrumentalised media that propagate Russian narratives intentionally or unintentionally,**
- **social media: trolls and bots used to amplify Russian messaging, sway public debates, conduct discrediting campaigns aimed at undermining trust in specific politicians and public institutions, as well as to inspire protests and provocations,**
- **cyberspace: hacking attacks, cloning and hijacking websites, spreading fake news and AI-generated deepfakes, blocking undesired information, as well as paralysing critical infrastructure and the operations of the state media.**

Experts at the US Department of State view disinformation and propaganda as integral components of active measures. Their effectiveness increases when all or some of these pillars are used simultaneously, which makes reality-distorting

40 *Основные элементы экосистемы российской дезинформации и пропаганды*, Центр глобального Взаимодействия, August 2020, state.gov.

messages appear more credible to their audiences. Disinformation spread by official state bodies is the easiest to identify, whereas covert disinformation with obscure sources of funding presents the biggest challenge.

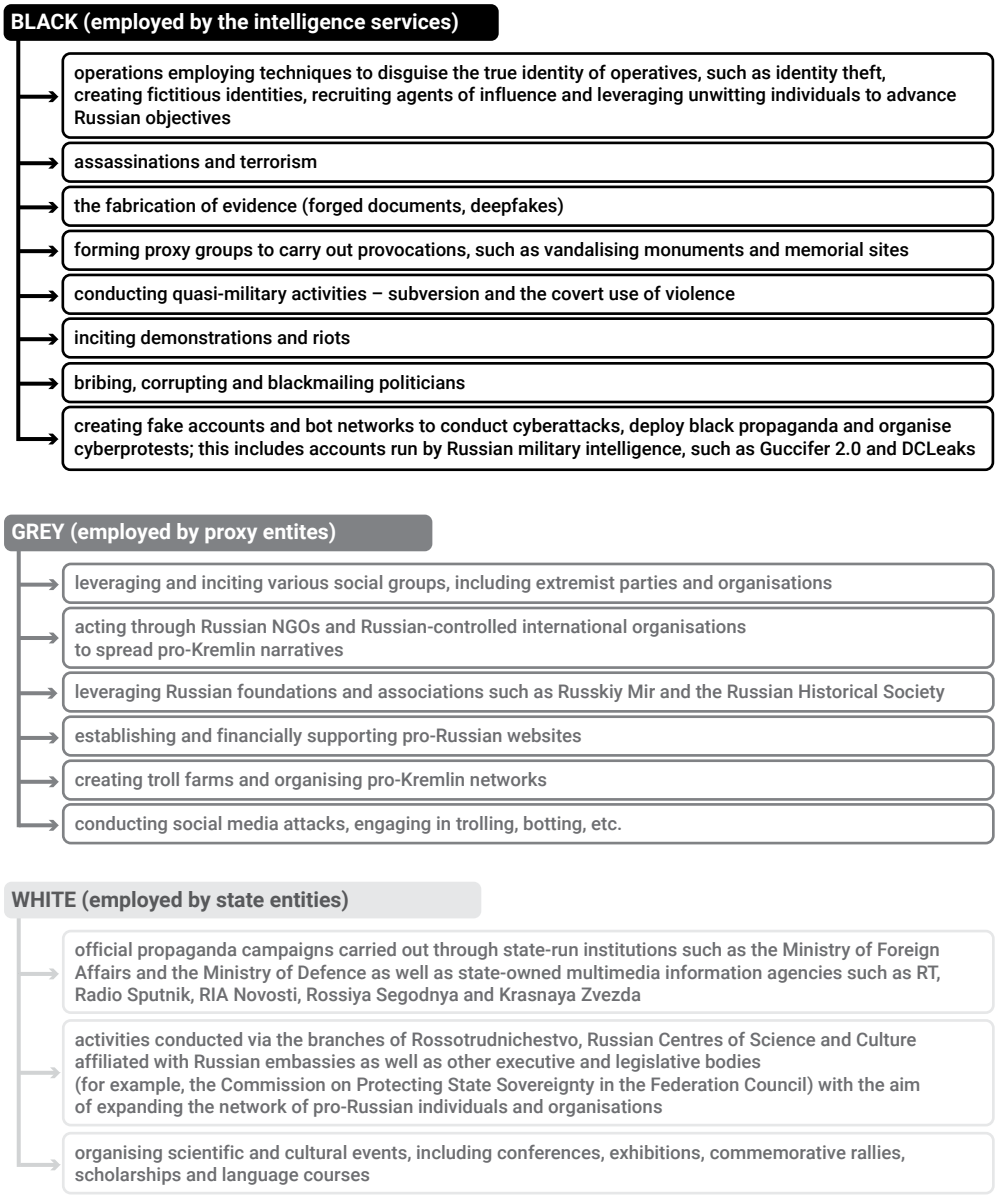
The US perspective incorporates research conducted during the Cold War and information technologies employed in cyberspace. Professor David Gioe argues that in order to understand the modern approach of Russian intelligence, which he refers to as 'hybrid intelligence', it is essential to combine contemporary cyber technologies (including hacking, trolling, etc.) with the historical perspective of Russian intelligence operations, particularly active measures and efforts to recruit agents of influence.[41] The US Department of State's Active Measures Working Group, which operated from 1981 to 1992 and was headed by Deputy Secretary of State Dennis Kux, made a significant contribution to analysing this toolkit. The group's experts and members produced regular reports on Soviet activities. Kux himself attempted to categorise these various tools, adopting a classification model based on the type of intelligence source: white, grey and black. He attributed responsibility for actions in the white (overt operations conducted legally) and grey (semi-legal methods under various covers) zones to the Kremlin, while assigning those in the black zone (involving intelligence methods) to specialised structures of the KGB and GRU.

Similarly, based on how covertly individual entities acted, he deconstructed the operational apparatus engaged in active measures. The 'white' segment included propaganda disseminated by state-run media outlets such as TASS, RIA Novosti and Radio Moscow under the guidance of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the CPSU Central Committee. The 'grey' segment relied on foreign communist parties, organisations, social movements, experts and other channels managed by the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee. The 'black' segment, which employed the most secretive tools, included activities such as using agents of influence and fabricating materials which would subsequently be disseminated to misinform the public and decision-makers.

This model, essentially based on the typology of propaganda tools and the level of secrecy among the executors, can be successfully applied to today's realities. When digital tools are included, it presents a contemporary set of active measures.

41 D.V. Gioe, 'Cyber operations and useful fools: the approach of Russian hybrid intelligence', *op. cit.*

DIAGRAM 2. The contemporary apparatus of active measures



Source: author's own compilation based on: D. Kux, 'Soviet Active Measures and Disinformation: Overview and Assessment', *Parameters, Journal of the US Army War College*, winter 1985 [in:] С. Абрамс, 'Больше, чем пропаганда: активные советские мероприятия в путинской России', *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 2016, no. 1, connections-qj.org.

After the Cold War, Moscow abandoned its efforts to reshape the world according to the ideological preferences that underpinned its active measures of that era. However, the doctrinal model justifying its current efforts is equally

rigid: it highlights the contrast between the Russian world and the Western world stemming from the civilisational distinctiveness of the former, understood in a wider sense as the 'Eurasian world'. The narrative associated with the so-called academic geopolitical worldview should be seen as similarly simplistic and devoid of any binding system of values because the Kremlin has yet to define one. In practice, it boils down to undermining the values of others. Geopolitics also shapes the tone of this narrative: the United States and NATO have been cast as the 'absolute enemy' who challenges Russia's role as a significant global power, abuses its trust and continues to humiliate it by shaping global developments through colour revolutions.

Rivalry with the United States and NATO has become a universal 'argument' for both domestic policy (creating the illusion of a threat, widespread anti-Russian hysteria and Russophobia) and foreign policy. By challenging the values of others, such as Georgia's and Ukraine's sovereign right to determine their own development paths and choose alliances, and by striving to expand its sphere of influence, Russia has portrayed these moves as acts in defence of its own sovereignty and a mirrored response to the West's cynical game. This perception of the outside world underpins the thinking and actions of Russia's government and law enforcement agencies, who regard it as an effective 'conceptual weapon' in the realm of information warfare.

The essence of its organisational base, or 'organisational weapon', lies in managing social systems and mechanisms of their organisation/self-organisation and ultimately leveraging the various entities mentioned above. From the theoretical standpoint, this is framed within the paradigm of 'reflexive control'.[42] Naturally, shaping the behaviour of an adversary's population requires detailed knowledge, which is provided by intelligence.

According to the sociologist Igor Eidman, the intelligence services play a central role, but they are only one of many operational entities and recruitment centres for auxiliary actors.[43] Eidman portrays this expansive organisational system as a pyramid. At its apex is Putin, who makes strategic decisions. His instructions are implemented by the Presidential Administration, notably its deputy head Alexei Gromov, who oversees propaganda-related matters, including the media conglomerate that comprises the RT television network and the Sputnik news agency; their international branches are also tasked with 'organising friends of Russia'. The president's advisors coordinate efforts in this

42 For more on this topic, see: M. Wojnowski, '„Zarządzanie refleksyjne" jako paradygmat rosyjskich operacji informacyjno-psychologicznych w XXI w.', *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego*, no. 12 (7) 2015, pp. 11–36, abw.gov.pl; *idem*, 'Paradygmat wojny i pokoju. Rola i znaczenie materializmu dialektycznego w rosyjskiej nauce wojskowej w XXI w.', *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego*, no. 17 (9) 2017, pp. 11–55, abw.gov.pl.

43 И. Эйдман, 'Первая мировая гибридная война', Aravot, 5 October 2017, aravot-ru.am.

area with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries, such as those in charge of culture and science. Within the Presidential Administration, specific 'command points' coordinate and finance operations through companies, social associations, international foundations and individual oligarchs. Ultimately, the Kremlin mobilises the executors, gives the green light to start influence operations and activates their successive stages.

The actions outlined here, initially referred to as active measures and later as support measures and hybrid techniques, have evolved alongside the changing technological conditions that provided new tools, such as television and online communication platforms. These methods have seamlessly integrated into the Russian tradition, and its political and strategic culture.

4. Hacking, trolling and deepfakes – active measures in cyberspace

4.1. The advantages and dysfunctions of the new media

In the era of widespread Internet access, active measures have undergone significant transformations. The new communication platform has proven to be an excellent space for employing digital tools, while the role of traditional methods has diminished. The nature of mass communication has changed: the Internet-based media, particularly social networks, have become an essential part of this, alongside the print media, radio and television. All instruments, both new and traditional, also require adaptation to the new conditions of multi-channel narratives. The Internet, as a global meta-medium, transmits multimedia messages combining text, image and sound that reach unprecedented audiences. Furthermore, active measures have gained new momentum from the broad capabilities for group communication in real-time, which allows for immediate responses.

New forms of media have become central to understanding the transformation of active measures, since the Internet acts as a borderless platform enabling states with clearly destructive and subversive intentions to interfere in the internal affairs of others.[44] This pivotal feature is only one of the factors that make new media uniquely effective in information warfare. From a communication perspective, its major advantage is the growing number of web users, a process driven by technological advances. Today, almost anyone can afford a 'personal' transmitter – a smartphone that is capable of filming anything and instantly sharing it with the world.

44 W. Rosenau, 'Subversion and Insurgency', *RAND Counterinsurgency Study – Paper 2*, 13 December 2007, rand.org.

The rapid development of active measures in the new media environment is closely linked to the changes that have been taking place since 2004 following the emergence of the second-generation Internet (Web 2.0). While Web 1.0 primarily served as a source of information, Web 2.0 has become a hub for communication between users. This interaction takes place across various points in cyberspace, such as blogs, forums, podcasts and especially social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, WeChat, Instagram, TikTok and X/Twitter as well as the Russian-language platforms LiveJournal, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and the Yandex search engine and website. Depending on the audience profile, platform operators offer a variety of tools, such as messaging apps, blogging platforms, video aggregators and networking websites, enabling users to participate in specific communities. A number of factors have made new media particularly suitable for active measures: their global reach, the removal of communication barriers (particularly those stemming from linguistic differences), the possibility of using diverse communication techniques, anonymity, the speed and permanence of messages, high interactivity, low costs and ease of use.

New media are also invaluable from the perspective of intelligence services. The Internet has provided them with real-time access to data (including through illegal means), quick and low-cost communication and also tools for advanced search and analysis of images and videos, enabling the informational penetration of targeted areas. Activities such as online identity theft, impersonating official websites and creating situations to benefit specific state actors and interest groups have all become easier, both at home and in international relations. The Internet has also made it possible to rapidly disseminate fabricated content by broadcasting it globally, replicating it, removing unwanted segments and imposing a specific interpretation while remaining anonymous. This enhances the sender's online security as they can mask their actions and cover their trail using chains of intermediaries while maintaining access to the audience. Furthermore, the Internet offers the possibility to 'whitewash' disinformation: when recipients seek to fact-check a message they have received, they encounter it in a number of other disinformation sources. In short, the global network has provided tools that make contemporary information operations difficult to detect.

In his report entitled *A View from the Digital Trenches*, the American social media expert Bret Schafer argues that disinformation campaigns can be effectively conducted on modern digital platforms in a matter of weeks, whereas during the Cold War, this could take years. Rumours and data leaks spread across the Internet within days, if not hours.[45] According to Schafer, today's

45 B. Schafer, 'A view from the Digital Trenches – Lessons from Year One of Hamilton 68', *Alliance for Securing Democracy* 2018, no. 33, securingdemocracy.gmfus.org.

information-psychological operations are also characterised by aterritoriality (they can be conducted from anywhere in the world) and the automated manner of spreading disinformation (for example through botting). These days, disinformation can be aimed not only at people but also at machines – so-called malicious bots manipulate online traffic by altering the ranking of specific information in search engine results generated by so-called good bots. The use of bots enables a small number of operators to multiply their messages across numerous platforms and channels. Automated bots have the capacity to achieve massive reach and thus spread propaganda messages to far larger audiences than ever before. In this way, networks of bots and trolls can create a political consensus by boosting public support for a particular idea or politician, or conversely, damage their popularity by distorting their image.

It is also important that the activity of social media users makes it easier to reveal some aspects of their personality profiles, including religious, ideological and political beliefs. In doing so, they are inadvertently assisting entities conducting information-psychological operations in identifying larger communities and targeting them with tailored messaging. Another factor shaping the new conditions of information warfare is that its scale has expanded dramatically. For instance, on a single day, 14 March 2022, four disinformation 'nests' comprising about 3,000 accounts were suspended or removed from the Polish Internet.[46]

Entities that employ digital active measures exploit both the positive and negative aspects of new media. Today, people are exposed to an overload of information and a decline in its quality. The Internet does not adhere to universal standards for disseminating only reliable, verified and filtered original data. Protecting yourself from the flood of disinformation is nearly impossible, primarily due to the decentralised nature of information and its repeated processing and replication. This leads to distorted perceptions of reality, increasingly radical political views, the polarisation of social groups, conflicts and widespread online hate speech.

The dysfunctions of social media stem from their technological and social characteristics. According to Justyna Balcewicz, a cybersecurity analyst at NASK, information is tailored to meet the expectations of its audience. "Such profiling creates a filter bubble, trapping users in a distorted, homogeneous world where it seems that everyone shares the same views". The mechanism is simple: algorithms analyse a user's online behaviour, create their profile and then deliver content aligned with their individual preferences. This results in the formation of so-called digital ghettos – the segmentation of society into audience groups

46 P. Korzeniowski, 'Przeglądam fake newsy o uchodźcach z Ukrainy. Jak rozpoznać rosyjskiego trolla', Noizz, 16 March 2022, noizz.pl.

repeatedly exposed to the same content, which reinforces internal cohesion while simultaneously isolating them from other groups. "The group strengthens its members' cohesion by leveraging the effect of polarisation – dividing the world into 'us' and 'them'. Naturally, 'we' are always the ones who are right. In addition, it employs the argument of truth that can be accessed only by the informed and enlightened few, reinforcing the users' belief that they belong to an elite", Balcewicz explains.

The new technologies have disrupted the traditional role of gatekeepers – individuals responsible for ensuring the reliability of information. "The role of gatekeepers has transformed. In traditional media, the first step was to filter information, followed by publishing it. In new media, this process is reversed. Publication comes first, and filtering takes place later within individual social networks", Balcewicz says. Despite often lacking the necessary competence, network users themselves act as both transmitters and filters of data. They verify content from other media, add their own commentary and then disseminate it within their communities.[47]

The dysfunctions of social media have been exacerbated by psychological mechanisms underlying social influence. As inherently social beings, we remain susceptible to the influence of others, even in the informational space. The development of new technologies and the Internet has made it possible to exploit this fact on an unprecedented scale. Paweł Zegarow, a cyberpsychology specialist who has been studying this phenomenon, points out that the negative impact of fake news (which originates from rumours, accusations, conspiracy theories, propaganda, etc.) is reinforced by strong emotions. "False information that evokes feelings of anger, fear or empathy deepens the recipients' belief in the false message, makes it more memorable and increases the likelihood that it will be shared online", he explains.

The psychological mechanisms identified and described by Zegarow to help explain the impact of false information on human functioning also include 'information stress', a specific form of internal discomfort caused by an overload of data that we cannot process, an empirically proven 'innate difficulty in recognising fake news', and 'motivated reasoning', or the influence of motivation on how we evaluate information, shape attitudes and make decisions. The last of these leads to the selective processing and retention of information, reinforcing

47 J. Balcewicz, 'Społeczeństwo informacyjne w czasach cyfrowej rewolucji – o zjawisku bańki informacyjnej i jego następstwach' [in:] *Zjawisko dezinformacji w dobie rewolucji cyfrowej*, *NASK. Cyber Policy*, Warszawa 2019, pp. 25–28, cyberpolicy.nask.pl.

bias and polarising opinions. This has disastrous consequences, particularly for decision-making processes.[48]

4.2. The Russian government's approach to new media

One key factor shaping the landscape of the Russian digital media is the political culture of an authoritarian state. In these systems, the ruling elite has a vested interest in controlling the media. At the very beginning of the Russian regime's transformation, the Kremlin leadership crushed the oligarchic opposition, which had its own media empire. The Internet (more specifically, the Russian-language Runet) has been a focal point of interest for the Russian intelligence services from its inception, being seen as a bastion of opposition forces. Due to its global reach and infrastructural dependence on Western countries, particularly the United States, it has posed a major challenge for Moscow.

New media has long resisted the Kremlin's attempts to subjugate it. Initially, the government's efforts to control Runet, which had been developing spontaneously for many years and had become deeply integrated with the global network, were motivated by the concept of reintegrating the Russian-speaking diaspora around the Russian Federation and increasing the global presence of Russian culture and the language. These objectives were pursued through systemic programmes that the Russkiy Mir foundation and the Rossotrudnichestvo state agency started implementing in 2007. Interventions in the cyber domain of the 'Russian world' were aimed at expanding Russia's sphere of influence while nostalgia for the great Soviet Union and great Russia was exploited for domestic purposes.

In this context, Bartosz Gołąbek views Runet as a kind of virtual extra-territorial space that materialises in Russian-language social media sites and search engines (Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Mail.ru, Yandex) as well as Russian-language channels within global networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc.), which exert influence beyond Russia's borders.[49] These platforms reinforce the image of Russia as a military, economic and cultural power, drawing on the stereotype of the 'big brother', which in turn revives the image of an omnipotent Soviet Union. In this perspective, Runet, as a part of the global information space that is legally and infrastructurally subject to the Russian state, facilitates the integration of the diaspora residing in the former Soviet republics and more distant regions, consolidating them around specific ideas.

48 P. Zegarow, 'Dlaczego wierzymy w dezinformację? – analiza mechanizmów psychologicznych' [in:] *Zjawisko dezinformacji w dobie rewolucji cyfrowej*, *NASK. Cyber Policy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–30.

49 B. Gołąbek, 'Anatomia „Runetu". Rosyjskojęzyczny Internet jako extra territorium byłego ZSRR', *Prace Naukowo-Dydaktyczne Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Zawodowej im. Stanisława Pigonia w Krośnie*, issue 63, Krosno 2014, pp. 124–151, at: kksw.ifw.filg.uj.edu.pl.

Runet's 'extraterritoriality' expands the scale of its influence on Russian-speaking audiences living abroad.

Perceiving Runet as an extension of its own territory and a part of the Russian mental space, Moscow later introduced the concept of a sovereign Internet to reinforce its unique role in cultural reunification.[50] Viewed through this lens, Runet is primarily seen as a target of Western aggression that must be countered. This perspective provides an ideological justification for placing Runet under state control, intensifying anti-Western agitation within Russian society, rallying pro-government citizens and engaging them in online active measures.

Some authors link the intensification of surveillance to the turning point that came in 2012 amid public protests. They note that until that time, Twitter had been awash with criticism of the government: Putin was frequently called a 'thief', while United Russia was dubbed the 'party of thieves'. During the demonstrations in late 2011, the narrative was dominated by posts supporting the protesters, marked by an emotional, even revolutionary tone. However, by January 2012 the balance was reversed after pro-Kremlin messages targeting opposition forces gained traction. Tweets expressing support for Putin took centre stage. In the following months, the discourse became increasingly combative, with pro-government accounts accusing protesters of being influenced by the United States. Besides the struggle to dominate the debate, official media outlets started reporting on planned anti-opposition demonstrations.[51] At that point, new media began to be employed for the traditional purposes of agitation and propaganda.

The first clear sign of the state tightening its control over the Internet was the establishment of the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media – Roskomnadzor. This body combined oversight of both Runet's infrastructure and user activity. It was established by a presidential decree issued on 3 December 2008.[52] Russian observers link its formation to the propaganda war and efforts to improve Russia's image, which had been tarnished by the five-day war against Georgia in August 2008.[53] Bartosz Gołąbek notes that the agency was established while events were underway in Central Europe, which were referred to as the 'first Twitter revolution'.

50 For more on this issue, see M. Domańska, 'Gagging Runet, silencing society. 'Sovereign' Internet in the Kremlin's political strategy', *OSW Commentary*, no. 313, 4 December 2019, osw.waw.pl; A. Legucka, 'The Future of Russia's Sovereign Internet', PISM, 29 March 2021, pism.pl.

51 V. Spaiser *et al.*, 'Communication power struggles on social media: A case study of the 2011–12 Russian protests', *Journal of International Technology & Politics* 2017, vol. 14, no. 2, at: tandfonline.com.

52 Interestingly, Roskomnadzor considers the Main Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets as its predecessor. See the agency's website: rkn.gov.ru.

53 И. Глинская, 'Факторы формирования имиджа России в период грузино-осетинского конфликта', *Вестник РУДН. Серия: Международные отношения* 2009, no. 4, at: journals.rudn.ru.

Similarly to unfavourable comments on social media networks, these developments provided the Kremlin with a justification for greater interference in citizens' freedom to access information. Since then, Roskomnadzor has been developing a specialised system for filtering online content,[54] essentially aiming to create an 'information bubble' in which Russian society would exist.

Under Russian law, so-called dangerous content can be blocked at the level of Internet service providers without a court order. Regulations restricting Internet freedom have been gradually tightened. For example, a 2012 amendment to the Law on Information, Information Technologies and Protection of Information introduced a 'blacklist' of banned websites that must be made inaccessible. A 2013 amendment expanded it to include calls for riots and extremist activities, effectively allowing a website to be blocked for any criticism of the government. Another amendment from 2014 introduced a registration requirement for bloggers with over 3,000 readers, while a 2017 change made it possible to designate media outlets as 'foreign agents'. State propaganda was also reinforced by a 2013 revision of the Law on Protecting Children from Harmful Information, which flagged content promoting 'Western immorality and decadence' and emphasised the defence of traditional Russian values. Moreover, provisions in the criminal and administrative codes penalising prohibited activities in new media have been repeatedly tightened.[55] In 2021, Roskomnadzor gained new technical capabilities for monitoring and regulating Internet traffic. Operators were forced to install deep packet inspection systems, enabling the agency to slow down undesirable connections. This was tested on 10 March 2021, when Roskomnadzor ordered a slowdown in Twitter's loading speeds.

At the very beginning of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Roskomnadzor introduced sweeping measures, thus becoming a key tool of Russia's wartime dictatorship.[56] In an effort to suppress criticism of the Kremlin and prevent the formation of any protest movements, on 24 February, the first day of the full-scale invasion, the agency obliged all domestic media outlets to report on events in Ukraine using official Russian sources only, threatening penalties including website bans. This requirement was enshrined in law: on 4 March an amendment to the criminal code introduced severe penalties for "deliberately spreading false information about the activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation", including referring to the 'special operation' as a war. These offences can lead to prison sentences of up to 15 years.

54 B. Gołąbek, 'Anatomia „Runetu"…', *op. cit.*, p. 166.
55 See M. Domańska, 'Gagging Runet, silencing society…', *op. cit.*
56 M. Domańska, K. Chawryło, 'War dictatorship: power and society in Russia', *OSW Commentary*, no. 433, 22 March 2022, osw.waw.pl.

As a direct consequence of these regulations, several independent media outlets were closed or suspended, including the Dozhd online television channel and the Echo of Moscow radio station. Many Western organisations, such as the Russian services of the BBC, Radio Free Europe and Voice of America, were forced to leave the country. However, they continue to publish reports about the war that contrast with the official coverage, as do Russian outlets broadcasting from abroad, such as Meduza and Radio Svoboda. The websites of anti-Kremlin media outlets, both Western and Russian, have been blocked. In March 2022, this approach was applied to the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram platforms – a district court in Moscow declared Meta Platforms Inc. (the owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) an extremist organisation, effectively banning its operations in Russia.[57] As an alternative, the government has been pushing the public to use Russian networks and messaging platforms such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, which have been forced to cooperate with the security services. The rising number of registrations on these platforms reflects the intensification of pro-government propaganda and anti-Western counterpropaganda on the Internet.

According to Katarzyna Chawryło,[58] the Kremlin's war propaganda has become total: state-run media outlets have completely focused on the war effort, aligning their coverage with the narrative promoted by the government and key institutions such as the military and the Orthodox Church. The state's monopoly on reporting events in Ukraine, its censorship of the few remaining independent sources of information, internal war propaganda and agitation as well as its efforts to intimidate citizens have proven effective. However, within Runet, the 'extraterritorial space of the former Soviet Union', support for the invasion's objectives remains uncertain, particularly on social media platforms.

The invasion has dealt a devastating blow to Moscow's relationship with Russian-speaking communities, regardless of their ethnic origins. Both smaller nations, such as Moldova and Georgia, and Russia's formal allies who are members of the 1992 Tashkent Treaty, such as Kazakhstan, may fear becoming Putin's targets. The Kremlin has made no effort to assuage these concerns. On the contrary, it has exacerbated them through direct threats, propaganda and intimidation.[59] Once again, it has demonstrated that its proclaimed commitment to preserving shared potential and cultural unity is merely a façade for a ruthless

57 K. Chawryło, 'The Kremlin's crackdown on Western social networks', OSW, 15 March 2022, osw.waw.pl.

58 *Idem*, 'Weapons of mass deception. Russian television propaganda in wartime', *OSW Commentary*, no. 443, 6 May 2022, osw.waw.pl.

59 R. Pszczel, 'Konsekwencje inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę dla bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego – w odniesieniu do NATO i w szerszej perspektywie', *Przegląd NATO*, 7 July 2022, nato.int.

regime. By instrumentalising the diaspora and Russian-speaking communities, it has revealed that it does not treat them as strategic partners.

4.3. 'Active' interference in social media discourse

Initially, interventions in Runet's discourse were aimed at plugging the gap in the state's ability to control and neutralise phenomena in cyberspace that the country's establishment perceived as dangerous. These included criticism of the government, the promotion of liberal values, pro-US sentiments among the public and challenges to the legal and social order – issues that could not be addressed through legal and technical measures alone. Hidden actors used fake news to advance narratives aligned with their interests. These fabricated stories also acted as a form of censorship, drowning out unwanted information. Consequently, new media, as tools of social communication, turned into instruments of political communication – propaganda and agitation designed to shape the government's image and generate public approval for its actions.[60] The idea of using the media to manufacture consent is often attributed to Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays, who studied the conditions for effective propaganda in the 1920s. Joseph Goebbels later used the Bernay's work entitled *Crystallizing Public Opinion* to manipulate the minds of German people.[61]

As noted by the authors of the first available report on social discourse within Runet,[62] before 1999 online forums were fairly homogeneous in terms of the sociological profile of their users. Individuals with liberal views, members of the intelligentsia and the Russian-speaking diaspora accounted for some 70–80% of participants. However, within just four years, these proportions were reversed: in 2003, 60–80% of users expressed totalitarian views, including hostility towards the United States, support for the 'anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya' and full approval for Putin's policies. This shift followed a massive influx of individuals with identical ideological profiles, who quickly dominated discussions on online forums. Their activity was so unusual that it drew the attention of other Internet users.

Tweets signed using the name Ramsay (the pseudonym of the Soviet intelligence officer Richard Sorge) are a striking example of such activity. This was an organised anti-US digital propaganda project: its executors provided real-time commentary on allied actions in Iraq in 2003, citing GRU intelligence. They operated primarily through websites – first 'iraqwar' and later "war and

60 See, for example, Ю. Балашова, 'Цепные собаки зоны Ру', Новая газета, 23 October 2009; А. Гармажапова, 'Где живут тролли. И кто их кормит', Новая газета, 7 September 2013, novayagazeta.ru.

61 *Postprawda jako zagrożenie dla dyskursu publicznego*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Ignatianum w Krakowie, Kraków 2018, wydawnictwo.ignatianum.edu.pl.

62 А. Полянская, А. Кривов, И. Ломко, 'Виртуальное око старшего брата. Попытка исследования', at: censor.net.

peace" (warandpeace.ru). However, their posts were also amplified across forums on new media platforms and on the comment sections of traditional media websites. The authors of the aforementioned report referred to the Ramsay group as a 'web brigade' (Russian: *veb-brigada*). They accurately identified its *modus operandi*, which was characterised by an aggressive, totalitarian ideology (pro-state, xenophobic, anti-American and anti-Semitic), intolerance towards dissenters, a shared group ethos, a reliance on the same sources of information, specific methods of debate and 'engagement with targets', as well as low linguistic standards that served as a vehicle for lies, slander and disinformation. According to the report's authors, web brigades first emerged in 1999[63] and were instrumental in shaping Russian digital propaganda.

The main directions of propaganda on Runet:

- whitewashing Stalinism and the imperial idea of the great Russian nation,
- glorifying the armed forces (returning to the traditional themes of Russian military glory after the failed operations in Afghanistan and Chechnya) and the intelligence services (for example, by promoting the cult of Chekism while making topics such as lustration and the crimes of the Cheka-NKVD-KGB taboo),
- propaganda depicting the 'victorious Chechen war' fought to the last Chechen, featuring mythical narratives about 'hundreds of thousands' of Russians killed by Chechen fighters,
- promotion of loyalty to the government and the cult of Putin: from his first presidential campaign, the Russian media has consistently portrayed Putin as an ideal leader; after assuming the presidency, he was depicted as a just arbiter and tireless overseer who takes interest in every matter and adeptly instructs inept administrators,
- xenophobia, racism and justifications for pogroms against migrants from Asia and the Caucasus,
- hate speech directed at defectors from the former KGB,
- nostalgia for the Soviet Union and a revival of Soviet-era propaganda tropes (anti-US and anti-NATO attitudes),
- hate speech targeting dissidents, human rights defenders and political prisoners,
- criticism of *perestroika*, its ideology and key figures,
- criticism of Boris Yeltsin and his policies,
- creating the image of Russia as a great power, identifying its enemies and accusing opponents of Russophobia.

63 *Ibid.*

From today's perspective, it may be argued that the web brigades engaged in what is now known as social media trolling. Both share the following definitional criteria:

1. context – both web brigades and trolling emerge in spaces conducive to debate, such as social media, online forums, comment sections, discussion threads and chatrooms,
2. anonymity – the greater this is, the more favourable the conditions for their activity,
3. distinctive messaging – typically ideologically-driven and focused on discrediting opponents through compromising materials (a tactic considered a hallmark of the Russian intelligence services), but also frequently off-topic, aggressive or misleading, designed to derail discourse,
4. organised group forms, which step up their activity during crises,
5. varied motivations, which include intimidating other Internet users, sowing discord by provoking arguments, or shifting discussions to different topics.

Therefore, trolls might spend one day discrediting a particular politician, the next day enhancing the positive image of another, and the following day debating the prices of theatre tickets.

If we agree with the premise that trolling has existed since the dawn of social networks, we must accept that the Russian specificity of this phenomenon has granted it fresh momentum over time by creating 'online manipulation services'. Troll 'farms' produce and disseminate the graphics and videos necessary to carry out their assigned tasks while also managing their cooperation and forms of activity (as 'bot herders', 'moles' or anti-trolls engaging in debates with supposed trolls). Like other, more loosely coordinated forms of organised trolling, these farms have influenced the direction of online conversations while ensuring that the mocking and provocative comments they amplify gain greater reach (views) and spread more quickly than organically popular content. At the same time, they have helped to build a 'unified information space', aiming to eliminate any signs of an emerging independent public opinion in the virtual sphere. They have operated on the principle that propaganda must be total, as even small pockets free from the state's ideological influence undermine its effectiveness. In essence, online interference in debates on social media groups has consistently sought to neutralise and marginalise undesired topics. Controversial corrections or abrupt changes in discussion topics have often prompted participants to withdraw voluntarily, that is to exclude themselves from further discussions.

The referenced report also sought to highlight the activities of covert network operators who become more visible during critical moments, revealing

the mechanisms of operations that employ digital active measures. Contrary to the narratives imposed by Russian propaganda, these interventions in the social discourse have nothing to do with spontaneous grassroots initiatives – they are fully orchestrated efforts. Participants are trained and provided with up-to-date instructions. Emilia Musiał, citing testimonies from practitioners,[64] explains that paid trolls undergo various forms of training, including:

1. legal training: they sign agreements to maintain secrecy, remain anonymous online, delete the provided software after completing their projects, refrain from copying or sharing instructions, etc.,
2. technical training: they learn how to change IP addresses in order to inflate likes for selected online comments and to be able to post under different usernames, how to set up email accounts needed to register on different websites, how to use software to clear the history of likes and comments, and how to maintain full anonymity online,
3. 'ideological' training: this defines the 'troll's mission', specifying who should be promoted through likes and shares and who should be undermined or discredited.[65]

An in-depth article containing examples of instructions for trolls operating within English-language networks was published by Anna Mierzyńska.[66]

Events in 2014 confirmed the existence of covert network operators and their overt collaborators. For example, during a ceremony at the Kremlin on 18 March 2014 to mark the incorporation of Crimea, Putin summed up "Russia's peaceful actions" and thanked all those who contributed to the "success of the Crimean operation". In doing so, he implicitly acknowledged that the peninsula's annexation was carried out using both covert and overt mechanisms as part of a planned special operation. On the same day, Professor Igor Panarin, a theorist and practitioner of information warfare, shared an instructional post entitled 'The Technology of Victory' with his discussion group on the VKontakte platform, in which he advised his students:

> 1. It is especially important to emphasise that compared to August 2008, Russia acted pre-emptively in Crimea, preventing the execution of a planned bloody scenario.
> 2. Russia has found a solution to countering colour revolutions, which are carried out in the form of coups *d'état*.

64 The blog 'Byłam bankowym trollem', bylambankowymtrolem.wordpress.com.
65 E. Musiał, 'Trolling jako przykład zagrożeń informacyjnych w cyberprzestrzeni', Uniwersytet Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie, rep.up.krakow.pl.
66 A. Mierzyńska, 'Tak to robi Kreml. Lektura instrukcji dla rosyjskich trolli budzi zimny strach', mierzynska.marketing.

3. The world has been offered an alternative path of development, grounded in spiritual and ethical values.
4. The Spirit of Fortitude has crystallised: the accumulated impulse of Berkut's courage has been channelled into the right path.
5. Russia's comprehensive actions across all spheres of informational countermeasures (diplomatic, financial-economic, military, etc.) have been coordinated and personally directed by Vladimir Putin.

On 10 March 2014, Aleksandr Dugin, a theorist of the Russian netwar, posted a similar directive on the website rossia3.ru. His text entitled 'The Rules of Polemics with the Internal Enemy' referenced the geopolitical divide of 'us against the West'. In Dugin's view, Runet had become a battlefield pitting the West (and Russians infected with Western values) against patriotic communities defending themselves from Western aggression. Dugin instructed the patriotic youth camp to engage in disputes with those who promoted pro-liberal and pro-Western values. He provided an example of a symmetrical set of keywords to use in polemics and suggested employing arguments of adequate emotional intensity:

> It is clear that we have two camps in our country: the patriotic camp (Putin, the people, US) and the liberal-Western camp (we know who – THEM). WE stand for a Russian Crimea, a Russian Ukraine, and against the US, NATO and liberalism. If necessary, we will support war, although it is preferable to advance our strategic interests through more effective, soft methods. THEY are against war, for an independent (from us) Ukraine, against Putin (as a patriot) and for liberalism, the 'civilised West', the US and the EU. WE are Russians and stand with Russians; THEY are against Russians. It is necessary to develop a system of synonyms for use in polemics, remembering that they must be symmetrical. For instance, if THEY call us 'patriots', WE respond with terms like 'liberals' and 'Westerners' (Russian: *zapadniki*). If THEY label us 'nationalists', 'communists' or 'Soviets', counter it with 'US agent of influence' or 'fifth column'. When THEY use terms like 'Nazi' or 'Stalinist', respond coldly with 'spy', 'traitor', 'how much did the CIA pay you' or 'death to spies'. If THEY immediately deploy terms like 'Russian fascist' or 'Stalinist', pit them against novice but aggressive polemicists. Such arguments are used by intellectually limited people who are not worthy of our time. You can also deploy an automatic program of patriotic trolling against them, as well as demotivators, memes and viral videos featuring Navalny outside the US embassy or the faces of Echo of Moscow editors, or the similar visual agitation of a budding patriot.

These instructions exemplify the transparency of 'white' active measures, much like public political and academic discussions about the 'informational wars and attacks waged by the West against Russia'. According to RAND

Corporation analyst John Arquilla, this is "a kind of informational equivalent of strategic bombing".[67] Participants in these discussions seek to elevate informational attacks to a strategic level: they are less interested in inflicting damage than in generating publicity and achieving specific political goals both domestically and internationally.

The 'budding patriot' mentioned by Dugin became a particular focus for Russian strategists of information warfare. In the 2010s, a number of platforms were set up to facilitate the activities of these people. Besides the 'nests' of cyber brigades affiliated with the Eurasian Youth Movement, the interregional youth social movement Cyber Squad (*Cyberdruzhina*) was launched in 2011 by the Safe Internet League. Two years later, volunteers from a high school in Taganrog, Rostov Oblast, reported on their website that the Cyber Squad had 20,000 members who were active in 36 regions.[68] According to their account, Runet's youth monitoring enabled law enforcement agencies to "initiate hundreds of criminal proceedings related to the distribution of child pornography, sexual violence against children and other crimes against society and the state. Hundreds of thousands of websites promoting drugs, suicide and other types of dangerous content were blocked".

Since 2013, members of the Cyber Squad have been holding gatherings in Moscow. Students from the Dimitrovgrad Institute of Engineering and Technology have shared an interesting account of these events on their website.[69] In addition to the Cyber Squad's coordinators and officials from the Interior Ministry's Directorate K, workshops organised during the first of these meetings were also attended by several prominent figures, including Igor Shchyogolev, former Minister of Telecommunications and presidential advisor on Internet communications, Maksim Ksenzov from Roskomnadzor, Konstantin Malofeev, chairman of the Safe Internet League, the oligarch Igor Ashmanov from Ashmanov & Partners, and Leonid Reshetnikov, director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, which operated under the Foreign Intelligence Service until 2007 when it became part of the Presidential Administration. The training was conducted in three sections: information wars, information security and Russia online. The latter, focused on fostering connections between activists from Russia and abroad, included attendees like Alexei Komov from the ideologically oriented organisation Oblast Dobra (Field of Good) and Ilya Yefremov from the Organisation of Russian Young Pathfinders (Organizatsiya Rossiyskikh

67 J. Arquilla, 'The Computer Mouse that Roared: Cyberwar in the Twenty-First Century', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 2011, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 42.

68 'Кибердружина', ТМОЛ, tmol.su.

69 'Студенты ДИТИ НИЯУ МИФИ приняли участие в Первом Всероссийском слете участников движения «Кибердружина»', ДИТИ НИЯУ МИФИ, diti-mephi.ru.

Yunykh Razvedchikov). The composition of these gatherings indicated that the Cyber Squad had been pursuing a far broader range of objectives than its officially stated mission of 'scouring' Runet for harmful content. However, publicly available information about the group has remained sparse and localised. It is known that legislative attempts to legalise such youth activity were unsuccessful and that it was moderated and financed by various proxy organisations. In November 2016, the K. Razumovsky Cossack University in Moscow established the Youth Cossack Cyber Squad; by April 2017, similar squads had been formed in 15 branches of this university. Moreover, in April 2019, it launched a course entitled the 'Fundamentals of Cybersecurity', which is also available to non-students and ends with an examination. This programme, reportedly funded by the Moscow Department of Education and Science, trains IT personnel for the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Roskomnadzor.[70]

4.4. Funds for active measures

Funding for projects involving activities on Runet, while difficult to verify, may provide clues about their scale and effectiveness. Being aware of this, the authors of the aforementioned report entitled *Big Brother's Virtual Eye* compared the budgetary allocations for propaganda in 2002 and 2003. Unlike the areas officially presented as priorities, such as space research and military reform, which received less funding, the state-run media benefitted from increased funding.

TABLE 1. Selected items in Russian budget (in billion roubles)

Year	Space research	Military reform	State media
2002	9.74	16.55	9.50
2003	7.65	15.80	11.02

Source: А. Полянская, А. Кривов, И. Ломко, 'Виртуальное око старшего брата. Попытка исследования', at: censor.net.

Over the next two decades, by 2022, the funds allocated to state-owned media had soared tenfold to 115 billion roubles, equivalent to $1.5 billion. This surge was closely linked to the influence operations in Ukraine and then the efforts to justify Russia's full-scale military invasion of this country. Between January and the end of March 2022, spending on the media tripled compared to the first quarter of 2021. According to a report by DebunkEU.org, over 50% of these funds went to three state-run news agencies: the All-Russian State

70 'Молодежная казачья кибердружина', Московский государственный университет технологий и управления им. К.Г. Разумовского (ПКУ), mgutm.ru.

Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (which includes the television channels Rossiya 1 and Rossiya 24), the Rossiya Segodnya conglomerate (comprising Sputnik, RIA Novosti, InoSMI.ru and Ukraina.ru) and the RT television network (formerly Russia Today), which is primarily aimed at foreign audiences and broadcasts in six languages: English, Spanish, French, German, Arabic and Russian.[71] RT received the largest share of funding of these three organisations – nearly 25%.

However, we should remember that in a country like Russia, analysing expenditure on the mass media, special services and the military presents considerable challenges. Detailed data on the funding of these entities is classified, which leads to significant discrepancies between reports from different sources. While part of the funding for the state-run media comes from the official budget, additional support is provided through separate projects and grants. For example, one might wonder why funds for special projects at the Cossack University come from the capital city's budget. The actual sums allocated to the media are difficult to estimate but they are undoubtedly much higher than official figures suggest. The state-run media operate within the 'white' zone of active measures. The situation is even more complex in the 'grey' and 'black' zones. Organisations active in these areas operate anonymously through proxy entities, enabling them to conceal or misrepresent their sources of funding. External sponsorship of activities such as trolling and inflating likes (astroturfing) creates the illusion of widespread support and mass participation in an event. In Russia, where business groups within the ruling elite and patron-client networks play a role in shaping the political landscape, this kind of external, often coerced, funding of state-led initiatives is commonplace.

For example, recent reports have suggested that Mikhail Fridman has been funding the war in Ukraine.[72] However, it is a well established fact that the most prominent oligarchs in this regard were the late Yevgeny Prigozhin, whom Putin referred to as the 'Russian Soros',[73] and Malofeev, described as the 'anti-Soros' in contrast to Prigozhin and as the 'Orthodox oligarch' due to his ties with the church's hierarchs.

Prigozhin organised the infamous troll 'farm' and one of the most notorious mercenary companies – the Wagner Group. The Internet Research Agency, which began operations in 2013 and was commonly known as the St Petersburg troll 'farm', had a monthly budget of €1 million. These funds were used to amplify

71 'Tyle Rosja wydaje na propagandę i dezinformację', Stowarzyszenie Polskich Mediów, 18 August 2022, polskiemedia.org.
72 S. Palczewski, 'Ukraina. Sponsor wojska Rosji i wojny; są dowody', CyberDefense24, 7 September 2023, cyberdefence24.pl.
73 I. Arkhipov, H. Meyer, I. Reznik, 'Putin's 'Soros' Dreams of Empire as Allies Wage Ukraine Revolt', Bloomberg, 15 June 2014, bloomberg.com.

Russian war propaganda and disseminate fake news with the aim of radicalising social and political attitudes.[74]

Malofeev gained recognition as a patron of proxy organisations that employ both 'classic' and digital active measures. He founded the Katekhon think tank, whose supervisory board includes Dugin, and the Double-Headed Eagle historical education association. He also serves as vice-chairman of the World Russian People's Council. In 2015, he restored the monument to Catherine the Great in Simferopol; currently, he is building two theme parks that will glorify Russian history, one in Moscow and another in Yalta, Crimea. His 'charitable' activities are financed through the St. Basil the Great Fund. In 2014, he used this fund to sponsor ultraconservative pro-Russian right-wing movements in Europe, such as the Freedom Party of Austria, Bulgaria's nationalist Ataka party and France's National Front. In Republika Srpska, he supported pro-Russian President Milorad Dodik and dispatched security forces dressed in Cossack uniforms to help him secure re-election. He also backed the failed 2016 coup in Montenegro. Since 2014, Malofeev has faced criminal proceedings in Ukraine, where he stands accused of supporting separatism and funding illegal armed formations. He was the formal employer of Alexander Borodai, the first 'prime minister' of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), and Igor Girkin, its former 'defence minister'.

Malofeev has expanded digital active measures through the Tsargrad media group, which he founded in 2015 to provide informational support for Russian activities in the Donbas.[75] Earlier, in 2011, he authorised the creation of the aforementioned Safe Internet League (SIL), a quasi-governmental organisation that effectively facilitates the censorship of Runet. The St. Basil the Great Fund was its founding body. Malofeev became the SIL's first chairman, while the presidential advisor Igor Shchyogolev headed its supervisory board. Initially, the association was supposed to monitor websites promoting extremism, homosexuality, child pornography and paedophilia. However, it soon became clear that the government also found use for it as a platform to disseminate approved content and to suppress information deemed unfavourable.

The Safe Internet League has closely collaborated with the legislative authorities and law enforcement agencies: for example, it initiated the creation of a registry of banned websites. Yekaterina Mizulina, the daughter of pro-Putin deputy and senator Yelena Mizulina, has been its director since 2017.

74 A. Legucka, 'Countering Russian Disinformation in the European Union', PISM, 6 August 2019, pism.pl.

75 S. Łupak, 'Bóg, Putin, ojczyzna. Jak TV Cargrad robi propagandę dla Kremla, Cerkwi i wojny', WP Teleshow, 6 September 2022, teleshow.wp.pl.

She set out to 'filter' the Russian Internet according to her own preferences[76] and became known for filing complaints with the prosecutor's office against creators of songs and music videos popular among young people as well as journalists critical of the Kremlin. She accused the well-known rapper Eldzhey of promoting drug use in his songs. Moreover, many bloggers, including the journalist Yury Dud, have been fined 100,000 roubles for disseminating inappropriate content.

In 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the SIL turned its focus to detecting anti-war posts. It sued Wikipedia for allegedly spreading 'fakes' and demanded the removal of entries such as 'Bucha Massacre' and 'Mariupol Hospital Shelling'. The new director's ambitions expanded beyond 'cleansing' the Russian Internet of anti-Kremlin content to instilling Putinism in the younger generation.

In a move clearly linked to the invasion of Ukraine, the SIL was reorganised: its previous sponsors, including telecommunications/digital communication operators (Rostelecom, Megafon, VimpelCom and MTS) and IT companies such as Kaspersky Lab disassociated themselves from the organisation in February 2022.[77] As a result, its status changed: it now presents itself as an organisation "established in 2011 with the support of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Telecommunications and the Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children".[78] In practice, this means that it is funded from the central budget.

This does not mean that Malofeev has been removed from the list of donors of active measures. On the contrary, it suggests a shift towards 'optimising the management' of the state-private partnership (a euphemism for the sponsorship scheme that has been imposed on the oligarchs) and regrouping the 'volunteer cyberwarfare forces'. This conclusion is supported by the reported emergence of an Orthodox troll farm modelled on Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency. In 2019, when Malofeev became vice-president of the World Russian People's Council (headed by the Patriarch), the Russian Orthodox Youth Committee (ROYC) was reactivated. It is led by Andrei Afanasyev, a journalist for Tsargrad TV, who also heads the Moscow branch of the Double-Headed Eagle. When the ROYC began posting advertisements online to invite administrators of nationalist websites to collaborate, media outlets reported that an 'Orthodox troll farm' had been

76 A. Łabuszewska, 'Galeria figur nieforemnych, część 2', the blog '17 mgnień Rosji', 25 November 2023, labuszewska.blog.tygodnikpowszechny.pl; 'Киберстукачество класса люкс: сколько стоит гардероб Мизулиной', Навальный LIVE, 24 January 2022, youtube.com.

77 С. Мингазов, '«Коммерсантъ» узнал о реорганизации Лиги безопасного интернета', Forbes, 10 February 2022, forbes.ru.

78 More about the Safe Internet League (Лига безопасного интернета) see: ligainternet.ru.

created.[79] The SIL's partner, the Friendly Runet Foundation, has openly admitted that the SIL aims to "eradicate illegal content from the Internet through the self-organisation of professional communities, Internet market participants and ordinary users".[80]

4.5. The 21st century: a golden age for digital active measures?

According to Thomas Rid, a professor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, the 2007 episode in Estonia around plans to remove the 'liberator' monument in Tallinn, known as the Bronze Soldier, was a pivotal moment in the resurgence of active measures and their shift to cyberspace in the 21st century.[81] Rid has offered his own periodisation of digital active measures, identifying the years 1999–2014 as the 'era of hackers' and the period since 2014 as the 'era of leaks'.

This division is highly arbitrary: during the 'era of hackers' online troll brigades used leaks in their activities; therefore, that time can be seen as a period of testing old techniques such as data theft and sabotage on a new communication platform. In Tallinn, old and new active measures were combined: while cyberattacks and trolling against 'fascist eSStonia' unfolded, members of the Night Watch volunteer group stood guard by the monument to prevent its removal. Moreover, techniques used in today's social media are widely regarded by contemporary authors as an integral part of 'classic' active measures, which have been adapted to the realities of cyberspace, modern technologies and the information networked society. In line with Rid, these experts make no distinction between 'forgeries' and 'fakes', or between so-called controlled leaks and electronic leaks, viewing the latter as an extension of active measures in new media.

Sharing this view, I would add that, true to tradition, Russian intelligence relies on both skilled programmers and cybercriminals to carry out their online operations. Combined with intelligence methods, this approach has led to a number of high-profile actions. The first of these was Operation 'Moonlight Maze' in late 1999 and early 2000, during which hackers launched a massive assault on servers belonging to the Pentagon, NASA and key US research institutions, copying a large volume of classified materials. At the time, these events were cautiously referred to as a 'series of computer incidents'.

79 Cited in: В. Альперович, 'Новички: Малофеев и все-все-все' [in:] *Националисты оттолкнулись от дна? Публичная активность ультраправых групп. Лето-осень 2019 года*, Исследовательский центр «Сова», 28 December 2019, sova-center.ru; see 'Двуглавый орел и православные тролли: как медиаимперия бизнесмена Малофеева пытается захватить интернет', Открытые медиа, 15 November 2019, openmedia.io; 'Придворный монархист Кремля Малофеев массово скупает информплощадки «беспартийных» националистов', Комитет «Нация и свобода», 10 November 2019, vk.com.

80 'Партнёрство', Дружественный Рунет, friendlyrunet.ru.

81 T. Rid, *Active Measures...*, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

The aforementioned attack on 27 April 2007, which targeted Estonian government websites, banks, media outlets and communication firms, was dubbed the 'first cyberwar' due to its unprecedented scale. According to cybersecurity experts, the botnet network used in this attack was the largest of its kind at the time (terms used in the text are explained in the 'Glossary of selected digital active measures' – see below). Due to the sheer scale of the operation, it was described as a cyber invasion. Estonia was abruptly cut off from the Internet and communications. This attack demonstrated to the world that Russia had entered the cyber arms race and was prepared to stage further shows of strength; these came shortly afterwards.

The label of the 'second cyberwar' was given to the DDoS attacks that Russia carried out during its brief war against Georgia in August 2008. Russian hackers disabled Georgian government servers, including those of the defence ministry and the official website of the head of state, as well as major media outlets. This disruption was followed by a massive propaganda campaign aimed both at discrediting President Mikheil Saakashvili and whitewashing Russia's actions, which were described as an "operation to force Georgia to peace". In this campaign, conventional military operations were combined with cyber activities and classic active measures.

As Piotr Łuczuk noted, emboldened by their successes on the virtual battlefield, the Russians decided to wage another cyberwar against the Pentagon. In 2008, it infiltrated the US military network with a dangerous virusand used it to steal classified data. Investigators determined that the attack was conducted by Russian intelligence, which had previously operated using a virus with a similar source code.[82]

Rastorguyev states that cyberwarfare is conducted by "surveying and monitoring technical environments" and by "active measures targeting technical resources". Operations such as hacking, destroying, or simply disrupting the opponent's assets represent just one application of digital tools. Online campaigns are usually hybrid operations. Hacker groups linked to the military intelligence Unit 26165 were led by Viktor Netyksho until 2018[83] and have operated under various hacker aliases (Sofacy, Pawn Storm, APT28, Strontium, Fancy Bear, CyberBerkut, CyberCaliphate and Anonymous Ukraine) and have combined hacking with disclosures of the adversary's classified information alongside ordinary forgeries. Between 2013 and 2014, during the escalating crisis in relations with the West amid the Euromaidan events and the annexation of Crimea, Russia employed the full array of these measures.

82 P. Łuczuk, *Cyberwojna. Wojna bez amunicji?*, Warszawa 2017, p. 66.

83 'Украинские хакеры нашли единственное фото полковника рф, которого разыскивает ФБР', Рубрика, 22 May 2023, rubryka.com.

Russian digital attacks during Euromaidan

- **23 October**: The international hacktivist platform CyberGuerrilla.org hosted a link to a folder containing documents from the Ukrainian foreign ministry. These weremainly correspondence between Ukrainian officials and their Western counterparts, and also copies of the diplomatic passports of US State Department officials. The documents were purportedly leaked by a Ukrainian activist from the international Anonymous movement that advocates for greater transparency of online information.

- **28 October**: Another post from Anonymous Ukraine appeared on the same platform, declaring Ukraine's independence from both the European Union and Russia. It included a video of a man in a signature white mask and hoodie chanting, "We will not be NATO's lackeys!".

- **11 November**: After Viktor Yanukovych deployed the Berkut special police units, US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland arrived in Kyiv. She met with the president, condemned police brutality on behalf of the United States and visited protesters on Maidan, handing out sandwiches and pastries. The Russian government quickly seized on her visit, portraying it as an "escalation of the crisis" and "interference in Russia's sphere of influence". The so-called 'Nuland cookies' or 'State Department cookies' became a popular meme, which circulates online to this day; they have also entered the Russian language as a new phrase synonymous with 'thirty pieces of silver'.[84]

- **4 February 2014**: Two videos were uploaded to YouTube from an account called Re Post, which was created on 14 December 2013, during the height of the Ukrainian events. The first video featured a recording of a telephone conversation between Nuland and US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, in which Nuland, frustrated with the EU ("F*** the EU"), suggested that the UN could help "glue" Ukraine's failed association agreement with the EU. The second video contained a recording of Helga Schmid, a German official in Brussels, speaking with EU Ambassador to Ukraine Jan Tombiński. In the call, she complained about US criticism of the EU and urged Tombiński to discuss the matter with Ambassador Pyatt. The political intent behind

84 Nuland remains a consistent target of informational aggression by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, see Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement: "In particular, Victoria Nuland discussed with the US Ambassador to Ukraine the members of the future government to be formed by the coup plotters. At the same time, she reminded the EU of its actual place in global politics telling it to mind its own business". See 'Artykuł Ministra spraw zagranicznych Federacji Rosyjskiej Sergeya Ławrowa, 10 października 2023 r.', Russian Embassy in Poland, poland.mid.ru.

these leaks was clear: by highlighting differences between the US and EU over Ukraine, Russia sought to drive a wedge between Washington and Brussels. The dual message was intended to amplify this narrative.

These efforts to discredit the United States and strain EU-US relations quickly dominated the political information landscape in Europe and the US. The White House issued an apology for Nuland's blunt remarks while labelling the leaks as a Russian active measure. The Russian tactic proved effective: the recordings were released just as Nuland was returning to Kyiv on a mission to persuade Yanukovych to resolve the crisis using American mediation. These operations combined traditional techniques such as wiretapping and video surveillance with modern methods of leveraging and amplifying compromising material online using viral memes.

However, the most high-profile active measure operation was the hacking of the email account of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, on 19 March 2016, followed by an attack on the Democratic National Committee on 18 April. These breaches allowed Russian military intelligence to infiltrate the Democrats' internal and external communications, gaining access to their telephone conversations. Posing as American hacktivists, it created the website DCLeaks.com to publish the stolen data. The first batch of documents from Podesta's email was released on 4 June. However, this move failed to generate significant attention, which prompted Russia to reach out to Julian Assange and provide the stolen materials to WikiLeaks.

Meanwhile, the Democrats decided to share the story of the double breach with the public through The Washington Post, with technical assistance from CrowdStrike. The cybersecurity company revealed details of the Russian *modus operandi*, including command-and-control nodes, communication links and secret access codes. This disclosure effectively 'burned' the digital equivalents of classic dead drops, namely the infrastructure of Russian intelligence's digital active measures in the US. In an attempt to conceal the scale of the damage, Russian operatives set up the guccifer2.word-press.com blog, where the virtual hacker Guccifer, claiming to be acting independently, published a further eleven documents, including a list of Democratic donors and polling data on Donald Trump's popularity, while also highlighting the transfer of thousands of files and emails to WikiLeaks. However, this strategy failed. On 29 December 2016, the White House responded to Russia's election interference by expelling 35 Russian agents, seizing two coastal properties and placing Russian intelligence organisations on a blacklist of institutions targeted by sanctions. A high-profile operation ultimately turned into a spectacular failure. In July 2018, after gathering credible evidence, the US Department of Justice indicted 12 officers

of the Russian General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) by name, accusing them of cyberespionage and election interference and announcing that an international arrest warrant had been issued for them.[85]

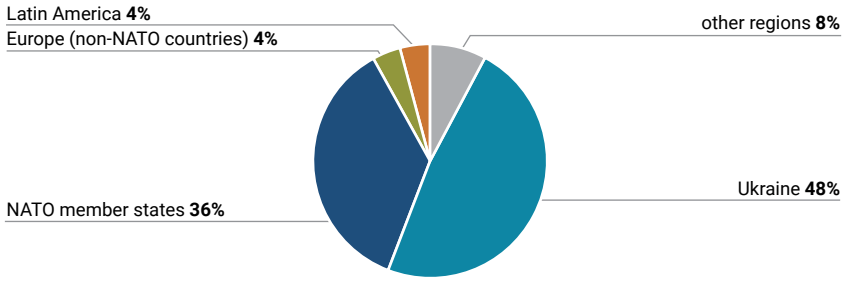
It is highly likely that Russia was less concerned with effectiveness than with projecting an image of its power ('flexing its muscles online') and showcasing its digital capabilities. It appears that Russia's cyber activities during its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 should also be examined in this context. Researchers closely monitored these actions from the outset. They found no evidence of large-scale cyber operations designed to destroy or disable Ukraine's critical infrastructure, apart from a few incidents early in the war. Experts also believe that the offensive use of cyberweapons had little impact on the course of the conflict. Attacks on Ukrainian news websites, coupled with a missile strike on the TV tower in Kyiv on 1 March 2022, only briefly limited Ukraine's ability to disseminate information. Over the following months, the sophistication and frequency of these operations declined significantly. Instead of deploying wipers (data-destroying malware), Russia resorted to simple phishing attacks and DDoS campaigns. US analysts uniformly concluded that "Russian cyber operations in Ukraine have had little military impact", with some even describing them as an "embarrassing experience" for Russia.[86] This has been attributed to a lack of coordination between the cyber and kinetic operations in this war as well as the different understanding of the invasion's objectives in each of these two domains: Russian strategists primarily view cyberspace as a battlefield for information warfare and treat kinetic operations as a means of seizing territory. Therefore, Russia's failure to leverage its cyber capabilities for attacks on Ukraine's critical infrastructure likely reflects divergent priorities rather than insufficient skills.

The absence of spectacular, or even visible, Russian successes in cyberspace has not lulled Ukraine or its neighbouring countries into a false sense of security. Following a relative operational hiatus, a resurgence of Russian activity in this field was seen in early 2023. The Slovak cybersecurity firm ESET reported that a new wiper had been developed by the Sandworm group, while the Computer Emergency Response Team of Ukraine (CERT-UA) revealed that the Ukrinform news agency had been attacked using a combination of five wipers. It was also widely concluded that Russian information operations (conducted alongside cyberterrorism and cyberespionage) had expanded beyond Ukraine to target NATO member states.

85 'В США назвали имена предполагаемых хакеров из российской военной разведки', РБК, 13 July 2018, rbc.ru.

86 For a comprehensive review on this topic, see D. Dziwisz, B. Sajduk, 'Rosyjska inwazja na Ukrainę a przyszłość cyberwojny – wnioski w rocznicę „specjalnej operacji wojskowej"' [in:] A. Gruszczak (ed.), *The war must go on. Dynamika wojny w Ukrainie i jej reperkusje dla bezpieczeństwa Polski*, Kraków 2023, pp. 43–52, books.akademicka.pl.

CHART. The most common targets of Russian cyberattacks



Source: *Microsoft Digital Defense Report 2023*, microsoft.com.

Today, there is a widespread belief that Ukraine has developed significant resilience in the information sphere and that this has considerably reduced the effectiveness of Russian influence operations. However, Russia has not abandoned these tactics. Trolling remains the primary method of disrupting communication in the information space, both globally and within Ukraine. The present-day Internet troll is an anonymous figure whose opinions circulate online, provoking emotional reactions from readers who are flooded with targeted content at the right moment. The troll's role is to insert persuasive opinions and often unsubstantiated fake news into broader discussions with the aim of influencing how the audience thinks. Typically, this content is disseminated by a network of trolls, sock puppets and bots. Trolling on social media encompasses various methods of psychological manipulation, including the creation of 'information noise' or 'information fog' to obfuscate an issue to the point of incomprehensibility. For example, during the annexation of Crimea, Russia went out of its way to prove that the peninsula did not belong to Ukraine. This 'information fog' was generated through historical references, appeals to the ethnic Tatar population and narratives surrounding Russian military bases in Crimea. However, the arsenal of trolling also includes other tactics, such as the mass reporting of 'inappropriate' content (one that does not align with the Russian point of view) to social media administrators and popularising 'correct' slogans and hashtags, such as #KrymNash ('Crimea is ours').

Trolling is widely used as an active measure and a political tool for manipulating public perception with the aim of defending narratives about Russia's war objectives. The Kremlin views any critical opinion as hostile. The government has employed a wide range of methods to discredit journalists, columnists and academics whose coverage of the war is divergent from the official propaganda. One striking example is the case of Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro, who analysed the impact of Russian trolling on public opinion in Finland and covered

the war in Ukraine. Between 2014 and 2016, she faced a coordinated campaign of harassment orchestrated by a pro-Russian website and a network of trolls, which included psychological violence, waves of online hate, threats and compromising materials. The trolls spread false allegations that she is a drug addict, stole her personal data, published her home address and disseminated fake medical records. To feel safe, Aro had to leave Finland. Her reporting on Russia's information warfare earned her a Pulitzer Prize and her experience has since become a case study for understanding Russia's *modus operandi*.[87]

It is important to emphasise that Ukraine's success in developing a system of resilience to Russian disinformation stemmed from its historical experiences and its ongoing conflicts with post-Soviet Russia, where active measures, particularly in the information sphere, have played a significant role. This framework was implemented in a systemic manner: in 2017, Ukraine adopted the Doctrine of Information Security, institutionalised its measures to combat disinformation, and undertook initiatives to enhance its counter-propaganda capabilities. In 2022, the country was well-prepared to confront Russia in this domain. Ukraine's key asset in information warfare was a system of strategic communication between the central government, local authorities and the public.[88] This was reflected in Ukraine's effective response to the appearance of Russian deepfakes in the information space, whose potential impact was neutralised, at least in known cases, through prompt countermeasures.

Russia's use of new, AI-powered deepfake technology, which emerged in 2017, reflects its ongoing efforts to refine its disinformation tactics. Early in the war, Russia employed this technology with a clear intention of weakening the Ukrainian military's morale and eroding trust in President Volodymyr Zelensky. On 16 March 2022, a deepfake video showed him calling on his soldiers to lay down their arms.[89] Hours later, Putin claimed that "peace with Ukraine had been achieved". These two 'symmetrical' videos were intentionally false (both leaders were shown speaking words that they had not uttered) and were quickly disseminated on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Telegram and VKontakte. Ukraine weakened the disinformation potential of these videos by warning in

87 J. Aro, *Putin's Trolls: On the Frontlines of Russia's Information War Against the World*, Ig Publishing, New York 2022.

88 Alongside new state structures in the government and presidential administrations, various initiatives emerged from within civil society. One of the first involved the creation of the StopFake organisation in March 2014 on the initiative of graduates and lecturers of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Other projects included the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center, InformNapalm, Information Resistance, LIKBEZ: The Historical Front and VoxCheck. In addition, sections dedicated to these issues appeared on well-known media research websites such as Detector Media and Telekritika as well as on independent expert platforms such as the Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication. For more on this topic, see: W. Baluk, 'Wojna informacyjna Rosji przeciwko Ukrainie w latach 2014–2022', StopFake, 24 October 2023, stopfake.org/pl.

89 For example, see 'Deepfake video of Volodymyr Zelensky surrendering surfaces on social media', The Telegraph, 17 March 2022, youtube.com; 'Deepfake presidents used in Russia-Ukraine war', BBC, 18 March 2022, bbc.com; M. Chwistek, 'Do sieci trafił deepfake z prezydentem Zełenskim. W fałszywym wideo „namawiał" do poddania Ukrainy', Komputer Świat, 17 March 2022, komputerswiat.pl.

advance that Russia had been preparing fabricated footage 'featuring' Zelensky. The president himself promptly took to Instagram to dismiss the deepfake video as a "childish provocation". The swift response from the Ukrainian leader, the media and social networks undoubtedly limited the impact and reach of these fabrications. Their persuasive power was further reduced by the poor quality of the manipulated recordings.

According to Adam Majchrzak, the use of AI-generated images likely signals the next phase of operations involving deepfake technology.[90] In the near future, we can expect recordings of this kind to be used on a larger scale and in more advanced forms, a process that will be facilitated by accumulated experience, the ongoing development of AI, and its increasing accessibility. Majchrzak also emphasises that disinformation involves a process of continuous learning: even ineffective campaigns can serve as lessons for the future, which helps to optimise these operations.

Finally, it is also worth noting that the rising number of fabricated multimedia materials, along with our growing understanding of the advanced technologies used to create them, is making these materials more recognisable and, consequently, less credible. One example is the response to a fabricated image aimed at the 'Russian world' that purported to show a weather forecast aired on Poland's TVP1 on 17 January 2023, where the presenter was standing in front of a map of Poland that encompassed western Ukraine, including Lviv. The forgery was clumsy: the city names did not contain Polish diacritical marks and the presenter's image was actually taken from the Catholic television station Trwam.[91]

The alleged weather map featuring Lviv as part of Poland is yet another piece of fake news promoting the claims about the 'Polish imperial syndrome' and Poland's aspirations to 'reclaim' the western Ukrainian territories. The narrative of Poland's plans to partition Ukraine has been propagated for years. The report about the weather forecast featuring the false map was quickly picked up by a number of Russian propaganda outlets, including Izvestia, zavtra.ru and topwar.ru. The latter stated that "Warsaw has no intention of abandoning its plans to annex Western Ukraine. The Polish public is gradually becoming accustomed to the idea that Lviv and its surrounding areas belong to them". Incidentally, the 'weather narrative' is not a novel active measure. Before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian state television routinely displayed weather maps that included Ukrainian Crimea to 'familiarise' viewers with the vision of its 'return to the motherland'.

90 A. Majchrzak, 'Rosyjska dezinformacja i wykorzystanie obrazów generowanych przez sztuczną inteligencję (deepfake) w pierwszym roku inwazji na Ukrainę', Media Biznes Kultura, no. 1(14) 2023, at: czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl.

91 See Н. Новоселов, 'Польский телеканал TVP 1 в прогнозе погоды показал Западную Украину в составе Польши', МедиаПоток, 17 January 2023, potokmedia.ru.

The disinformation potential of Russian active measures has been diminishing due to their rising recognisability within the so-called 'Russian world'. The response to this fake news story in Russia's neighbouring countries was telling. The very next day, the Georgian website factcheck.ge published a brief analysis of the coordinated effort to spread it and listed the media outlets that shared it "on pro-Kremlin websites and social networks".[92] Ukraine's StopFake website, which is aimed at Russian-speaking audiences,[93] and Moldovan media outlets[94] took similar steps to debunk it. A more detailed account of the campaign was provided on 24 January by the Estonia-based website provereno.media.[95] It reported the fake news story's reach across various platforms: it had 199,000 views on both Газета.Ru[96] and Рен ТВ,[97] and on Telegram, it had 341,000 views on *Россия сейчас*, 186,000 on *Скотт Риттер в Telegram*, 145,000 on *С места событий*, 41,000 on *Абзац*, 335,000 on *Мир Михаила Онуфриенко*, 88,000 on *Репортёр Руденко V* and 30,000 on *Илья Кива – zov крови*.[98]

The website provereno.media had previously published similar analyses debunking fake materials allegedly sourced from Polish television. On 23 January 2023, it debunked a crude video posted on Telegram that reported on plans to establish LGBT units in the Polish army.[99] In August 2022, it deconstructed a story propagated by Russian media which alleged that President Zelensky had promised to hand over part of Ukraine to Poland.[100]

Interventions in the information space are detectable. However, it is crucial to remember that the category of 'active measures' encompasses a broad spectrum of more or less subtle methods of influencing both domestic citizens and other societies. Focusing solely on mechanisms such as digital attacks or

92 For example, see 'Польский телеканал показал в эфире карту страны с частью Западной Украины', Рамблер, 17 January 2023, news.rambler.ru; 'В Сети показали карту из эфира с Западной Украиной в составе Польши', Рен ТВ, 17 January 2023, ren.tv; В. Ханенева, 'В сети появилась карта из эфира польского канала, на которой Западная Украина показана частью Польши', Газета.Ru, 17 January 2023, gazeta.ru; М. Нуар, 'На телевидении Польши показали карту страны с частью Украины в составе', Пятый канал, 17 January 2023, 5-tv.ru; 'На польском телевидении территорию Западной Украины показали уже присоединенной к Польше', Военное обозрение, 17 January 2023, topwar.ru.

93 'Фейк: На польском телевидении использовали карту Польши, включающую территорию соседних областей Украины', StopFake, 18 January 2023, stopfake.org.

94 'Фейк: польский телеканал показал на карте Западную Украину как часть Польши', СП, 24 January 2023, esp.md.

95 А. Титов, 'Правда ли, что польский телеканал во время прогноза погоды показал карту Польши, в составе которой есть территории Западной Украины?', Проверено, 24 January 2023, provereno.media.

96 В. Ханенева, 'В сети появилась карта из эфира польского канала, на которой Западная Украина показана частью Польши', *op. cit.*

97 'В Сети показали карту из эфира с Западной Украиной в составе Польши', *op. cit.*

98 'Украинский Львов теперь принадлежит Польше?', Россия сейчас; 'Украинский Львов теперь принадлежит Польше?', Скотт Риттер в Telegram; 'Украинский Львов теперь принадлежит Польше?', С места событий; 'Ничего особенного, просто Польша оккупировала Львов', Абзац; 'Мир Михаила Онуфриенко; Репортёр Руденко V; Илья Кива – zov крови'; all of these at: tgstat.ru, uk.tgstat.com.

99 'Петушиные войска из Польши', Военкор l Z l Лисицын ZOV-TV, at: tgstat.ru.

100 Д. Федкевич, 'Правдива ли первая полоса польской газеты, сообщающая, что Зеленский «отдаст Украину Польше»?', Проверено, 6 August 2022, provereno.media.

disinformation and propaganda campaigns carries the risk of overlooking various traditional and potentially more dangerous tactics. These include the funding of political parties and separatist movements through so-called agents of influence as well as the long-term cultivation of political influence by foreign state entities through the penetration of key sectors and institutions in democratic countries or the coordinated use of multiple tools, including television, the print media, the Internet, entertainment, science and culture. This leads to the conclusion that an analysis of active measures in the information space cannot be separated from activities in the physical realm – armed groups supporting separatists, sabotage units, Russian special forces and the myriad actors operating on different 'sections of the battlefront' (the media, science, culture, history and religion) who propagate narratives that shape a version of reality aligned with the Russian perspective.

Glossary of selected digital active measures

Astroturfing – derived from AstroTurf, a company which produces artificial grass, this term refers to artificial, manipulative online activity designed to imitate natural behaviour. Along with the synonymous term *fake reviews*, it was initially associated with public relations and online product advertising: it involved buying fake positive reviews to mislead consumers. Today, astroturfing is understood as creating the illusion of genuine public reactions. According to Mateusz Mrozek, head of the Counteracting Disinformation Department at NASK, "Astroturfing is closely intertwined with the concept of disinformation and its elements can be seen in many information operations. Broader information campaigns may involve astroturfing".[101]

Botting – refers to the use of bots (software that automates online activities), particularly in social media; this term is also used to describe automated accounts. Depending on their purpose and method of use, bots can be classified as 'good' (performing useful tasks such as reminders and updates) and 'bad' (engaged in harmful activities). Botting encompasses a range of practices, including rapidly disseminating existing content and creating new material, building the illusion that people, profiles, fan pages and posts are more popular than in reality, simulating support for (or opposition to) certain issues or perceptions of current events, as well as interacting with other users.

101 M. Górski, '#CyberMagazyn: Astroturfing to przeżytek? „Zjawisko, które zrosło się z dezinformacją"', CyberDefense24, 11 March 2023, cyberdefence24.pl.

Cyberbullying – violence carried out using communication and information technologies, involving components of the Internet such as email, messaging platforms, chat rooms and social media sites. Examples of cyberbullying include intimidation, blackmail, harassment, dissemination of embarrassing or humiliating videos and photos, identity theft and impersonation.

Cyberterrorism – politically motivated attacks or threats against computers, networks and information systems aimed at destroying infrastructure or intimidating/coercing victims in order to achieve certain demands.

Cyborgs – hybrid accounts that combine human and bot input. Human intervention occurs when there is a risk that the platform could suspend the account or remove its content, or when the bot is unable to handle interactions with users independently. In addition, some bot operators only temporarily automate their accounts, supplementing bot activity with human input only during periods of inactivity.

DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) – a cyberattack method that involves flooding systems with access requests, rendering them inoperable. A prominent example is Russia's cyberattack on Estonia in 2007, which marked a major shift as previously criminals had mainly used various types of computer viruses.

Deepfake – an audio or video recording created using artificial intelligence. The technology gained prominence in late 2017 after a false pornographic video featuring the actress Gal Gadot was shared on Reddit by a user nicknamed Deepfakes – hence the term. It now refers to technology used to produce fabricated videos and audio recordings superimposed on original video and audio sources. To perform this manipulation, all you need is the right knowledge and software. Deepfakes have opened a new chapter in information warfare and may generate unpredictable political and personal consequences. Their equivalent in the catalogue of traditional active measures is the so-called *kompromat* (compromising materials).

Fake news – a term commonly used to describe content (news) that is entirely or partially false and intentionally misleading, which is disseminated both via the Internet and through the traditional media, such as print, radio and television. On the Internet, fake news can appear in various forms, including text, graphics, audio recordings and video. It often appears credible at first glance, but closer analysis and verification of its sources often expose it as distorted information.

Hacktivism – disruptive online activity employing hacking methods to interfere with specific targets.

Influencers – popular figures in new media (politicians, actors, musicians, athletes, journalists, bloggers), the equivalent of so-called opinion leaders in the traditional media. Due to their extensive follower bases, trolls and bot operators frequently try to attract their attention and encourage them to share certain content by commenting on their posts or mentioning them in their own content.

Leak – a colloquial term for the release of data from the Internet, referring to the disclosure of secret information previously hidden from the public. It is the equivalent of the so-called 'controlled leak' used in the traditional media and politics for manipulative purposes. A spectacular example of the application of this technology is WikiLeaks, a whistleblowing website created by Julian Assange and presented as a key tool for 'freedom of speech'. It was purportedly designed to allow the anonymous submission of materials, which would then be verified by thousands of volunteers. In practice, however, alongside authentic documents, it also shared countless fake news items, creating challenges for journalists and causing a lot of public controversy.

Social botnets – groups of bots on social media, typically managed by a single person. These bots 'collaborate' by sharing each other's posts and adding likes, which increases the visibility of promoted content and the perceived popularity of narratives. Bot operators strive to make automated accounts resemble those of regular users.

Sock puppets – fake identities used to create multiple accounts by the same user. They 'authorise' accounts described as false, fictitious or (colloquially) fake. In reality, they belong to or are controlled by someone other than the person identified in their description. Sock puppets are primarily used to multiply content by a single person and to manipulate discussions, for example by creating artificial engagement. Their profiles usually contain false personal information. Trolls often 'nurture' these identities by assigning them specific traits, views and interests and making them more credible with a consistent history of activity. To obscure their connection to the main accounts, trolls frequently diversify their communication styles and networks of friends; the latter makes it easier for many users to accept invitations from strangers. Having a large number of contacts increases the credibility of sock puppets and the reach of the content they spread.

Trolling – broadly defined as efforts to disrupt communication by disseminating false content. Some researchers use a narrower approach: Alina Naruszewicz-Duchlińska points out that "trolling persistently hinders the operation of a given group (for example, by repeatedly sending the same message)". She differentiates trolling from other similar forms of disrupting online communication, such as flame wars, defined as "an online argument marked by exceptionally intense hostility, far beyond the level of ordinary debate", and online hate, meaning "an attempt to denigrate a person or an idea through ruthless, often unfounded, but exceptionally emotional criticism". The primary goal of flame wars is to engage in a conflict and to win it at any cost, overcoming active participation from opponents. Without someone to argue with, a flame war cannot occur. Trolling, for its part, seeks to hinder understanding; trolls aim to provoke irritation and cannot exist without an audience to test their manipulative skills on. Hate is about venting aggression; haters do not need interaction with their target as their focus is purely based on attack.

Wiper – malicious software used by hackers to steal and destroy hard drive data; it erases all information, including its own activity logs.

Based on: A. Grycuk, 'Fake newsy, trolle, boty i cyborgi w mediach społecznościowych', *Analizy BAS* 2021, no. 1(152), 8 February 2021, at: orka.sejm.gov.pl; K. Basaj, 'Czym jest deepfake?' [in:] *Deepfake – wydanie specjalne Biuletynu ACKS*, Akademickie Centrum Komunikacji Strategicznej, wojsko-polskie.pl; A. Naruszewicz-Duchlińska, 'Intencjonalne językowe zakłócenia komunikacji internetowej (trolling, flaming, hejting)', *Prace Językoznawcze* 2014, no. 4; K. Liedel, *Zarządzanie informacją w walce z terroryzmem*, Warszawa 2010; M. Górski, '#CyberMagazyn: Astroturfing to przeżytek?...', *op. cit.*

5. Case study: "the battle for Novorossiya"

According to Włodzimierz Bączkowski, Russia has always made its conquests in an atmosphere of '*podyom*', or 'exaltation'. It evoked the desired emotions and then used them manipulatively to justify the annexation of 'liberated' territories.[102] It also rationalised these actions by the need to extend fraternal assistance, to protect populations (Orthodox, Slavic or Russian-speaking), to 'gather lands' and restore them to the motherland, to deliver historical justice, to ensure the right of nations to self-determination and to pursue Moscow's civilisational mission. In this way, in the past, Russia annexed Kievan Rus, Belarus, Western Ukraine, the Hetmanate, 'Russian Vilnius' and many other territories. Later, fraternal assistance and 'patriotic exaltation' were cited to incorporate the limitrophes

102 W. Bączkowski, *Istota siły i słabości rosyjskiej. Pisma o Rosji*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

(from the Latin *limitrophus*, meaning 'bordering'), an ironic term Soviet Russia used for the countries that emerged on the edges of the former Russian Empire in 1917: Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, Ukraine, Poland and Romania.

In Bączkowski's view, propaganda narratives, as a component of broader political action characterised by "subversion, disintegration and covert thrusts", are one of the key elements which distinguish the Russian strategy from that of the West. While Western defence strategies are considered primarily in manoeuvre-operational terms, Russia devotes much of its efforts to shaping specific perceptions of itself and the territories within its sphere of interest in order to lay the groundwork for future expansion. This is achieved through measures such as the "anarchisation of ethnic relations within countries surrounding Russia",[103] which in modern terms translates to 'subversive-disinformation operations' or 'influence operations'.

Subversion and the resulting disintegration are the most critical components of active measures. Overt and covert deceptive actions are designed to escalate tensions, which is an inherently long-term process. In modern Ukraine, these methods were visibly applied during the Orange Revolution, the political protests which erupted after the public rejected the 2004 presidential election results as fraudulent. Consequently, the runoff was repeated and the initial 'winner' Viktor Yanukovych, widely regarded as Moscow's candidate, lost to Viktor Yushchenko. The most important consequences of the Orange Revolution included the opening of the European pathway for Ukraine, the deterioration of Russia's image in this country and its diminished prestige within the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Kremlin accused the United States and its NATO allies of engaging in subversion to produce these outcomes and described the Ukrainian events as a fascist coup accompanied by surging nationalism.

The aftermath of the 2008 war in Georgia seems to have been a pivotal moment. The West's weak response to Russia's support for separatism in South Ossetia and Abkhazia undoubtedly encouraged Moscow to step up its subversion in Ukraine. In addition, from 2007 onward, the Kremlin undertook systemic disinformation and propaganda efforts in its immediate neighbourhood. These were signified by the establishment of the Russkiy Mir Foundation in 2007 and Rossotrudnichestvo (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation) a year later. Today, Russia continues to use the framework developed at that time, which involves the creation of institutions (so-called Russian Houses or Russian Centres for Science and Culture) that forge cooperation with the diaspora and pro-Russian communities. Entities carrying out these ostensibly

103 *Ibid*, pp. 25–27.

grassroots initiatives, which are in fact orchestrated by Moscow, can receive grants to support their activities.

In Ukraine, this approach was reflected in the activities of numerous cultural organisations funded by the Russian budget, such as For Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, the Union of Orthodox Citizens of Ukraine, the Russian Community of Crimea, the Russian-Speaking Ukraine movement, the Russian Movement of Sevastopol, the Novorossiya movement, and many others. It also involved unrestricted access to the Russian media, the creation of outlets imitating Ukrainian ones (such as ukraina.ru), the export of Russian literature, including propaganda and pseudo-historical works, as well as the organisation of concerts by Russian performers and the promotion of Russian music. From today's perspective, it is clear that these active measures, largely aimed at keeping Ukrainian society within the reach of Russia's media, informational and cultural sphere, sought to destabilise Ukraine's socio-political situation, discredit its statehood and help the Kremlin win allies for its plans in both countries – that is, to prepare the ground for a future military intervention and a prolonged international conflict. Information-psychological operations conducted under the banner of defending the 'Russian world' contributed to successive waves of destabilisation in Ukraine, deepening divisions among its citizens while also mobilising support within Russia for these efforts.

The StopFake organisation, which was established in 2014, has analysed the core themes of Russian propaganda and identified the most common ones, emphasising their repetitive nature, long duration, distortion of reality and constant refreshment within new contexts. This research was featured in the White Paper on Special Information Operations against Ukraine 2014–2018, which placed Russian propaganda narratives within the context of active measures and described them using the unique 'series' method developed by Dmytro Zolotukhin, an expert on information warfare and former Deputy Minister of Information Policy of Ukraine. In his view, the disseminators of disinformation continuously tell the same stories, merely expanding their context with references to both real and fabricated events:

> Based on years of observing how the Russian intelligence services and the political elite manipulate the information space, we have concluded that their actions can be likened to producing a television series. Seeking to reach a specific audience, Russian propagandists construct thematic narratives using the method of series production, which features individual seasons and episodes.[104]

104 D. Zolotukhin, '„Biała księga" specjalnych operacji informacyjnych wobec Ukrainy w latach 2014–2018', *Biuletyn «Monitoring propagandy i dezinformacji»* 2020, no. 1. The titular White Book was compiled as part of the StopFake project, an organisation of experts and social activists working to uncover Russian propaganda falsifications. For more on this topic, see: Y. Fedchenko, 'Kremlin Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures by Other Means', StopFake, 21 March 2016, stopfake.org.

Zolotukhin has employed this 'series' method, which divides events into seasons and episodes, to develop a detailed contextual analysis of the Crimea operation. Following his example, I will attempt to outline the main narrative themes associated with the 'Battle for Novorossiya',[105] or the 'return of historical Russia to the motherland', as well as their evolving contexts.

Season 1. Novorossiya as a tool for escalating tensions

As a propaganda construct, Novorossiya represented the continuation of Russia's confrontational policy towards Ukraine following the end of the 'hot' phase of the 2014 Crimea operation, which involved military action. This stage culminated in the annexation of the peninsula and the destabilisation and anarchisation of Ukraine's southeastern regions as a transitional step towards seizing control of them. In Russia's official political discourse, the term 'Novorossiya' first appeared in Putin's address to the Russian people delivered after the annexation of Crimea on 17 April 2014:

> I remind you, this is Novorossiya. During the Tsarist era, Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolaev and Odessa were not part of Ukraine. These are territories that the Soviet authorities transferred to Ukraine. Why this was done – God only knows.

Since then, the term has been increasingly used in the state-controlled media. President Putin has repeatedly referenced it publicly while addressing both domestic and international audiences. During the annual Valdai Club conference, he reiterated:

> In reality, it was one region with its centre in Novorossiysk, which is why it was called Novorossiya. It included Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolaev and the Odessa Oblast. When the Soviet Union was being established, these lands were transferred from Russia to Ukraine.[106]

Obviously, Putin did not invent 'Novorossiya gunpowder'. Propagandists had been working on it earlier, as demonstrated by a map that the private cartographic company Pechatkart produced between the first and second rounds of Ukraine's presidential elections (17 January – 7 February 2010). The cartographers implied that, unlike the electorate of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, those voting for the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych lived in the historic region of Novorossiya, "artificially woven into Soviet Ukraine, which

105 This was the title of a series of propaganda books. In January 2024, it comprised 13 volumes. See: 'Книги серии «Битва за Новороссию»', Вече, veche.ru.

106 'Пять громких заявлений Путина об истории Украины', BBC News Україна, 10 November 2014, bbc.com; 'Владимир Путин сделал пять громких заявлений об истории Украины', Gazeta.ua, 11 November 2014.

since the collapse of the USSR has remained a distinct historical and geographical region in terms of the cultural, mental and political characteristics of its inhabitants".

MAP. Novorossiya in 2010

Source: 'Карта Новороссии', Печатькарт.рф.

In Putin's 2014 narrative, the 'Novorossiya project' served to justify both the supposed necessity of returning this part of Ukraine to the 'motherland' and the intensified military effort required to achieve this. Putin euphemistically referred to Novorossiya as the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) zone and repeatedly addressed the 'Novorossiya militia', emphasising its alleged successes. By escalating Ukraine's destabilisation, this initiative also exerted pressure on international public opinion, which had rejected both the results of the rigged referendum (96% of Crimeans purportedly voted to join Russia, while polls from the Gallup Institute indicated that only 23% of them supported separatism) and Crimea's annexation. In subsequent 'episodes' of this 'season', Russia made efforts to convince the international audience that Crimea, as part of Novorossiya, had always been Russian and that Ukrainian people themselves had come to terms with losing it. Putin also suggested that the issue was settled and that the peninsula would never return to Ukraine.

According to narratives at that time, the 'residents of Novorossiya' also desired its 'return' to Russia. This explicitly echoed Putin's abovementioned remarks that questioned Ukraine's statehood and even its capacity for independent existence, claiming that its territories were merely 'gifts' from the Bolsheviks and the Communists. Assuming the role of the reclaimer of Ukraine's southeastern territories, Putin ignored these regions' history and traditions, both Ruthenian and Tatar from the time of the Crimean Khanate. He glossed over the Russification processes and population shifts caused by the settlement pressure which took place under the Russian Empire, the terror and famines of the 1930s and the forced deportations to Siberia.[107] For Putin, historical Novorossiya represented a means of reasserting Russia as a regional power at the expense of deconstructing its neighbour's statehood.[108] Tomasz Białobłodzki, author of an in-depth analysis of the imperial conceptualisation of this construct, notes that the emergence of Novorossiya itself was the result of plundering Ukraine's ethnic lands:

> The term 'Novorossiya' was first mentioned in 1764 in reference to the Novorossiysk Governorate… as well as lands that had previously belonged to the Lower Zaporizhzhia Host and the Crimean Khanate. The 1775 manifesto 'On the Liquidation of the Zaporizhzhian Sich and Its Incorporation into the Novorossiysk Governorate' stated that the territories annexed to the Russian Empire following its victorious war with Turkey (1774) had always been part of Malorossiya, a region whose inseparable attributes included the rights and freedoms of the Cossacks as well as the traditional way of life of the Ukrainian ethnos. This means that the Russian Empire blatantly grabbed ethnic Ukrainian lands, which were initially named 'New Serbia' (1752–1764) and later designated the 'Novorossiysk Governorate'. A notable feature of this process was that from 1760 Ukrainians/Lesser Russians ("Malorossians") were forbidden from settling within the administrative boundaries of these territories. Instead, paramilitary measures were undertaken to settle colonists (foreigners, including ethnic Russians/Great Russians), which significantly altered the ethnic composition of the population in the territories and lands comprising the Novorossiysk Governorate.[109]

As territorial expansion continued, 'historic Novorossiya' absorbed new regions. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it encompassed the territories of the Kherson, Yekaterinoslav and Taurida Governorates, parts of the Stavropol

107 J. Winiecki, 'Putin marzy o Noworosji. Ta idea pchnęła go do wojny', Polityka, 7 March 2022, polityka.pl.

108 M. Orzechowski, 'Noworosja jako element dekonstrukcji państwowości Ukrainy i odbudowy mocarstwowej pozycji Rosji w regionie', *Wschodni Rocznik Humanistyczny*, no. 4/2017, pp. 129–141, wrh.edu.pl.

109 T. Białobłocki, 'Procesy etniczne, historyczne i wyborcze zachodzące na Ukrainie w kontekście budowy koncepcji „Noworosji": weryfikacja poprawności, zasadności i aktualności. Część I', *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia* 2016, no. 1(10), czasopisma.marszalek.com.pl.

and Bessarabia Governorates, as well as Kuban Oblast and Don Host Oblast of the Russian Empire. Over time, it expanded to include the following administrative units of present-day Ukraine: the Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kirovohrad, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, Odesa and Kherson oblasts, along with the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. It also covered areas within present-day Russia (Stavropol Krai, Rostov Oblast, the Republic of Adygea, Krasnodar Krai, parts of Volgograd Oblast and the Karachay-Cherkess Republic) and Moldova, including parts of Transnistria and cities such as Chișinău, Bender and Bălți.[110]

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the subsequent 'episodes' of the 'season', Novorossiya, alongside Malorossiya and Taurida (the ancient name for Crimea, derived from the Tauric tribes that once inhabited the peninsula), rose to prominence as an active measure. The propaganda-driven 'battle for Novorossiya' was integrated into the doctrine of the 'Russian world' and the myth of the 'lost homeland of Russian speakers'. Above all, however, it was used to legitimise Russia's presence in this region and justify its military aggression.

Season 2. The proclamation of the Novorossiya state

The first season of the Novorossiya scenario showcased the propaganda potential of this construct. At the same time, as a result of the developments following the annexation of Crimea, Novorossiya became a tool for fuelling separatist sentiments in Ukrainian territories. In the context of subversive activities, including the deployment of units commanded by Igor Girkin and groups of mercenaries from the peninsula, it legitimised clashes between pro-Ukrainian activists of the Revolution of Dignity and pro-Russian forces in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv and Odesa, many of whom were brought in from Russia and Transnistria. In April 2014, after occupying the Donetsk State Administration building, these forces proclaimed the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). Twenty days later, a similar operation took place in Luhansk, leading to the establishment of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). Shortly after this, reports began circulating in the information space about a possible merger of these two entities and even their unification into a single state – Novorossiya.[111] These reports were disseminated by the Russian state media and newly established websites and traditional media outlets that formed Novorossiya's media system, including dnr-news.com, novorosinform.org, novoross.info, rusvesna.su (*Russkaya Vesna* – Russian Spring), novorossia.su/ru

110 *Ibid.*

111 П. Губарев, 'Провозглашенные Донецкая и Луганская народные республики объединились в составе единого государства Новороссия', ТАСС, 24 May 2014, tass.ru; 'Донецкая и Луганская народные республики объединились в Новороссию', Лента.Ру, 24 May 2014, lenta.ru; 'Донецкая и Луганская республики объединились в „Новороссию"', РБК, 24 May 2014, rbc.ru; 'Донецкая и Луганская народные республики объединились в Новороссию', РАПСИ, 24 May 2014, rapsinews.ru.

(Novorossiya. Analytical Information Portal), the radio stations Novorossiya FM and Golos Naroda (Voice of the People) and the newspaper Golos Respubliki (Voice of the Republic).

The establishment of the 'Novorossiya state' under Moscow's protectorate enhanced the Kremlin's capacity to destabilise Ukraine and offered a potential platform for influencing other Ukrainian regions. This explains the surge in disinformation surrounding the 'proclamation' of more separatist republics both within Ukraine and beyond, including the Kharkiv, Lviv, Odesa, Zakarpattia, Vilnius and Bessarabian republics. They became the backbone of false narratives aimed at creating a sense of threat not only within Ukraine but also among its neighbouring states.

However, Russia's ambitions were thwarted by social upheaval and the actively pro-Ukrainian stance of residents in southern Ukrainian cities. It quickly became clear that the support given to Russia by parts of the local administration was not as widespread as had been portrayed. Moreover, according to Michał Marek,[112] the concept of Novorossiya failed to gain broader support in the occupied territories at that time. Nourished by the myths of Soviet Donbas, the cult of labour and working-class friendship, the population did not embrace the narrative that invoked the era of the Tsarist Empire. Efforts to construct the identity of Ukraine's pro-Russian residents by labelling them 'Malorossians' (Lesser Russians) or 'Novorussians/Novorossiyans' (New Russians, an ethnonym meant to signify the alleged 'new territorial-ethnic quality') underscored their unequal status within the Russian world when compared to the 'Great Russians'.[113]

By late 2014, the Novorossiya expansion scenario had entered into a crisis. The independent Novaya Gazeta reported at the time that the modern propagandistic image of Novorossiya had clashed with the myths and archetypes that were imprinted in the minds of Russian people and Russian-speaking Ukrainian population during the previous era. As a result, there were now four distinct 'Novorossiyas':

1. Igor Strelkov's Novorossiya – a model for a new Russia: patriotic, nationalist and shaped by military history,
2. The Kremlin's geopolitical vision aimed at blocking Ukraine's access to the Black Sea and ensuring seamless Russian communication with Crimea,
3. The 'new' Novorossiya represented by the DPR and LPR,
4. A vague, undefined project more closely associated with Novorossiysk (a city in Russia) than with Ukraine's southern territories.

112 M. Marek, *Operacja Ukraina. Kampanie dezinformacyjne, narracje, sposoby działania rosyjskich ośrodków propagandowych przeciwko państwu ukraińskiemu w okresie 2013–2019*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 41–50.

113 *Ibid*, p. 50.

This was reflected in opinion polls conducted by the Levada Centre at the time. When asked 'What is Novorossiya?', 46% of respondents answered that it was 'a historical region in southern Russia', 25% said that 'this historical term means nothing today', 8% saw it as 'a myth invented in Moscow', while 21% struggled to define the concept.[114]

The Rosbalt news agency placed this crisis within the context of criticism directed at Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's overseer of the project, as well as the dismissal of staff from the Presidential Administration responsible for managing relations with the separatist regions in Georgia and Ukraine:

> Surkov has also been criticised for the 'Novorossiya' project. This criticism has come from those who genuinely believed that the DPR and LPR would either become part of Russia or, at the very least, gain independence based on the Transnistrian scenario. This includes former DPR Defence Minister Igor Strelkov, philosopher Alexander Dugin, and others.[115]

Surkov's involvement in influence operations in Ukraine and his conflict with the FSB were confirmed by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a renowned British think tank which focuses on security and defence issues. Its report stated that Surkov coordinated political initiatives conducted in parallel with the activities of the FSB and military intelligence, both of which were responsible for destabilising the social situation and training separatists.[116] As a result, in the spring of 2015, the Kremlin officially announced that it was freezing the project for the 'Novorossiya state', delivering the news through Oleg Tsaryov, the leader of the Novorossiya movement, and the DPR's other representatives.[117]

The final 'episodes' of this 'season' revolved around narratives highlighting Moscow's supposedly noble intentions: it allegedly had no plans to annex the Donbas and Luhansk regions but only sought to secure recognition of their distinctiveness from the rest of Ukraine and to ensure that they would enjoy greater autonomy within the Ukrainian state. Some also claimed that Russia had forced the suspension of this 'grassroots project' to avoid obstructing negotiations on settling the conflict (the Minsk agreements). According to Yevhen Mahda,

114 Д. Розанов, 'Четыре Новороссии и один Крым', Газета.Ru, 10 December 2014, gazeta.ru.

115 Е. Винокурова, '«Проект Новороссия» поставлен на паузу', РосБалт, 8 December 2014, rosbalt.ru.

116 The report noted that Surkov had fallen into conflict with the FSB in the DPR. See: A. Shandra, R. Seely, 'The Surkov Leaks. The inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine', Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, July 2019, rusi.org, p. 26. For more on the developments in information warfare during the initial period of Ukraine's destabilisation in 2014, see: M. Marek, *Operacja Ukraina...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–54.

117 А. Колесников, 'Почему Кремль закрывает проект «Новороссия»', Carnegie Politika, 20 May 2015, carnegiemoscow.org.

a Ukrainian political scientist and director of the Institute of World Policy, this approach was aimed at achieving a 'Teflon effect' for Russia and Putin.[118]

Season 3. The landscape after the 'first battle'

The freezing of the project did not mean the removal of the Novorossiya construct from the public sphere in the years that followed. In particular, it was kept alive by Russian nationalists disguised as Donbas separatists, who compared Novorossiya to Catalonia and Kosovo while insisting that the push for its sovereignty remained on course.

PHOTO 1. A mural with the inscription 'Catalonia is not Spain. Novorossiya is not Ukraine'

Source: '*Каталония – Донбасс: курс на независимость не меняется!*', dnr-pravda.ru, 16 October 2019.

A notable shift in propaganda concerning Novorossiya can be seen on the website geopolitika.ru.[119] After sharply criticising the Kremlin for suspending the project, it placed its focus to equipping the Russian public with polemical arguments, including statements such as: 'The Novorossiya nation never emerged' because it lacked proper support from the 'motherland'; 'The Russian people do not want war' – hence victory is the only viable option; and 'Russia will be

118 J. Mahda, 'Rosyjska propaganda: 20 miesięcy kłamstw i manipulacji', StopFake, 2 November 2023, stopfake.org.

119 See 'Против освобождения Новороссии нет весомых аргументов', 14 January 2018; 'Рыцари Новороссии', 23 January 2017; 'Новороссия и другие: сходные ситуации – различные правила', Геополитика.ru, 5 February 2018, geopolitika.ru.

branded an aggressor' as Western propaganda has always portrayed it as such and will continue to do so. The site then moved on to commemorating figures considered heroes of the struggle for Novorossiya, such as Igor Strelkov and Arsen Pavlov (known as Motorola), and pushing the anti-Western narrative accusing the US and NATO of double standards: they recognised Kosovo and the former Yugoslav republics but demanded the capitulation of Novorossiya. The concept of Novorossiya was further solidified by journalists and experts from the Izborsk Club,[120] who promoted themes such as the inevitable collapse of Ukrainian statehood, which they tied to the alleged territorial ambitions of Poland, Romania and Hungary (claims to Lviv, Bukovina and Zakarpattia, respectively). They also wrote about Ukrainian fascism, 'Banderite' pogroms and the brutal mistreatment of Novorossiya's population by the Right Sector.

As in previous 'seasons', these narratives relied on a mix of genuine and fabricated events. Visits from prominent cultural figures were used to legitimise Novorossiya. Its notable 'ambassadors' included Iosif Kobzon, a Russian artist from Donetsk who was awarded honorary citizenship and the title of Hero of the DPR in 2015, and the controversial writer Zakhar Prilepin, a supporter of the separatists who participated in the fighting in the Donbas. Many emotionally charged texts were written following Ukraine's withdrawal from the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate.[121] A decree by the Patriarch of Constantinople ultimately the canonical authority of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, sparking claims of a 'Turkish Patriarch of Ukraine', a 'schismatic Ukrainian Church', an 'unsacred Ukrainian language' and the 'need to provide spiritual care to the residents of Novorossiya'. This development also revived the narrative about the 'Russian world' and 'Russian civilisation'. Informational chaos was created to capture public attention: for example, it was falsely claimed that Patriarch Kirill had distanced himself from the 'Russian world'. From 2020 onward,[122] about the "possible accession of six Ukrainian oblasts to the Russian Federation".[123]

120 For example, see С. Глазьев, 'Украина: между Западом и Россией', Изборский клуб, 25 April 2014, izborsk-club.ru; *idem*, *Украинская катастрофа: от американской агрессии к мировой войне?*, Москва 2015; А. Проханов, *Убийство городов*, Москва 2015; *idem*, *Новороссия, кровью умытая*, Москва 2016; З. Прилепин, 'Украина бесстыдно лжет', Изборский клуб, 1 February 2017, izborsk-club.ru; В. Коровин, *Имперский разговор. Империя, геополитика, идеология, традиция*, Москва 2016; А. Дугин, 'О Новороссии и вводе войск. Геополитический анализ', Геополитика.ru, 1 July 2014, geopolitika.ru. For Dugin's geopolitical analyses on Greater Novorossiya, see also: *idem*, 'Большая Новороссия и Великое Наступление', МООВ ВМФ Союз выпускников СВВМИУ, moov-vmf.ru; 'Лекция А.Г. Дугина для студентов ДНР. „Идеология рождается в Новороссии"', Всемирный Русский Народный Собор, 3 March 2023, vrns.ru.

121 'Турецкий патриарх Варфоломей подписал томос об автокефалии раскольнической «ПЦУ»', Новороссия, 5 January 2019, novorosinform.org.

122 'Новороссия, бандеровщина и патриарх Кирилл', РОЙ ТВ, 4 May 2021, youtube.com.

123 'На Украине заявили о риске потери еще шести областей страны', Ведомости, 28 December 2020, vedomosti.ru.

It was increasingly suggested that the Novorossiya project had merely been conditionally and temporarily suspended – as part of the Minsk agreements which Ukraine was accused of failing to honour. Alleged evidence included fabricated atrocities against the civilian population attributed to Ukrainians.

Season 4. Novorossiya as the anchor of narratives justifying military aggression

The revival of the Novorossiya construct in 2022 is the clearest indication of its role in unifying various active measures aimed at territorial expansion. That year, Crimea and Novorossiya became the anchors of the narrative accompanying preparations for military aggression. Ukrainian volunteer battalions, particularly the Right Sector and the Noman Çelebicihan Battalion, a Crimean Tatar volunteer unit stationed in Chonhar near the border with occupied Crimea, were portrayed as particularly dangerous. Although these units had ceased operations in 2017, the propaganda ensured they remained ingrained in the public consciousness as part of the anti-Ukrainian narrative, depicting them as 'Nazi' units and a source of threat. In this way, it legitimised the need to 'liberate' the Kremlin-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. However, Russia's growing ambitions and plans to annex more territories, the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, demanded further creative efforts to justify the invasion. According to analysts from the Centre for Security Studies at the Warsaw-based War Studies University, several such concepts were developed (Southern Rus, Malorossiya, Taurida), all of them referencing the historical boundaries of provinces from the Tsarist era and even the "early medieval rule of Kievan Rus over the northern coasts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov".[124] The Taurida project received the most attention. The 'new' Taurida was supposed to include not only Crimea, but also Kherson Oblast and the southern part of Zaporizhzhia. In 2022, the idea was publicised by Georgiy Muradov and Mikhail Sheremet, two Crimean politicians who collaborated with the occupying authorities. However, it had already emerged earlier: in 2015, Sergey Tsekov, Crimea's representative in the Federation Council (the upper house of Russia's parliament), declared that the annexed region should return to using its ancient Greek name. This proposal was supported by the late Vladimir Zhirinovsky, then Deputy Chairman of the State Duma and leader of the Liberal Democratic (read: nationalist) Party of Russia.

> Taurida is a Greek name. And Sevastopol, Theodosia, Kerch – all of these are Greek names. Crimea is a purely Crimean Tatar name. But everything should

124 'Projekt „taurydzki" oraz inne scenariusze legitymizacji rosyjskiej okupacji południa Ukrainy', Ośrodek Studiów Przestrzeni Postsowieckiej, *Analiza OSPP*, no. 38, 10 May 2022, wojsko-polskie.pl.

return to its origins! Not Volgograd but Tsaritsyn, not Kirov but Vyatka, not Ulyanovsk but Simbirsk, not Noginsk but Bogorodsk.[125]

By invoking these historical names, this controversial politician created informational noise. The proponents of reverting to the name 'Taurida' were not thinking of its Greek origins but instead referred to the Taurida Governorate in Tsarist Russia. Similarly, the toponyms 'Tsaritsyn', 'Vyatka', 'Simbirsk' and 'Bogorodsk' originate from Tsarist-era traditions, in contrast to their Soviet-era counterparts: Volgograd, Kirov, Ulyanovsk and Noginsk. Zhirinovsky muddied the core issue and derailed the discourse, asserting that Crimea was as inherently Russian as Tsaritsyn and Vyatka. At the same time, he reminded his audience that in the Soviet Union place names were used for propaganda and agitation, similarly to slogans on banners and posters. As tools of propaganda, Soviet-era toponyms reinforced state-promoted ideologies in the public consciousness. An intensive effort to rename places, aimed at reflecting Soviet realities, began after 1917.[126]

In this context, it is clear that Novorossiya, Malorossiya, Southern Rus and Taurida (Russian historical terms applied to the contemporary realities of Ukraine) have been used as tools to construct the imperial vision of present-day Russia. Today's 'Novorossiyans' and 'Malorossiyans' are portrayed as proponents of union with Russia and as representatives of the 'triune' Russian nation encompassing Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. These narratives have served to justify the Kremlin's expansionist ambitions towards Ukraine, a fact that was underscored by the sham referendums held from 23 to 27 September 2022 on the annexation of the Donetsk (DPR), Luhansk (LPR), Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts into the Russian Federation. On 30 September 2022, Putin signed the relevant 'agreements', declaring that Russia would defend its territory by any means necessary. He justified these new annexations by claiming that Russia was fighting for its physical survival against the full might of NATO and had reached a point where retreating from the war's objectives was impossible.[127]

By legitimising conquest and expanding Russia's territory, these historical terms blur the inter-state, ethnic boundaries (between the indigenous Ukrainian population and the Russian-speaking diaspora) and the cultural (as part of a national mythology shaping identity in relation to a specific territory)

125 Cited in: M. Wawrzeńczak, 'Krym zniknie z mapy? Proponują Taurydę', historia.org.pl, 24 January 2015.

126 J. Mędelska, M. Sobczak, 'Ideologiczne elementy nazewnicze w toponimii miejscowości niemieckich w ZSRR lat 20. i 30. XX wieku', *Slavia Orientalis*, vol. LXVII, no. 2/2018, repozytorium.ukw.edu.pl. Soviet toponymy undoubtedly holds first place in terms of the number of renamed localities. Researchers who examined this issue in relation to German place names found that 224 major city names had been changed by 1941. The campaign also extended to smaller towns and rural areas, where names associated with religious worship, which were deemed incompatible with the zeitgeist, were removed; in one Crimean city, *Mechetny* (Mosque Alley) was renamed *Bezbozhnikov* (Alley of the Godless).

127 M. Menkiszak, M. Domańska, P. Żochowski, 'Russia announces the annexation of four regions of Ukraine', OSW, 3 October 2022, osw.waw.pl.

boundaries. Therefore, they serve as tools for transforming specific Ukrainian lands into an ideologically reimagined Russian space – one imbued with symbolic significance, reinterpreted and repeatedly 'reclaimed'.

This is by no means an amicable process. No one here has been waiting for the Russians with the proverbial flowers. Occupying forces have entered territories 'liberated' from the Ukrainian government using brutal methods of repression, including searches for Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers, the torture of civilians, deportations of women and children to Russia, abductions of mayors and local government officials, and forced conscription. Given the absence of collaborators and the failure to establish pro-Russian governing bodies, they have imposed a military administration under Rosgvardiya's command. With its support, they have implemented the tried-and-tested scenario of absorbing the conquered territories.The latter includes formal requests for annexation into the Russian Federation and the holding of sham referendums. At times, propagandists have also declared that "We're taking back what's ours", thus putting pressure on neighbouring countries while exposing their awareness of the repetitive nature of Russia's mechanisms of conduct. A notable example is a remark that Vyacheslav Nikonov, grandson of Vyacheslav Molotov, made during an episode of The Great Game TV talk show aired by Russia's Channel 1 on 25 July 2022. He reminded viewers that the date marked the anniversary of the First Partition of Poland and said: "At that time, Western Ukraine and Western Belarus returned to the empire: we took back what was ours". He then declared: "We are doing the same thing now".[128]

Season 5. A return to imperial roots

It is a truism that disinformation and propaganda rely on repetition. For this reason, the term 'Novorossiya' remained in use throughout 2023. Earlier narratives were mostly reiterated.[129] It was also stressed that Russophobes had been working to undermine this idea. For example, the historian Ivan Skorikov lamented that during a meeting with the heads of the ministry of transport on 5 June 2023, Putin addressed the "transport situation in Novorossiya", continuing to use the term while "communist Ukraine" was trying to shoot it down:

> And where is this Novorossiya? Where is the promised Novorossiya Federal District? Why are city authorities in the liberated territories planning to restore names like Tsiurupynsk, after the Ukrainian activist Tsiurupa, instead of the thousand-year-old Oleshky, which was the original name of this port? Why

128 See 'Большая Игра 25.07.2022', ruspolitnews.ru.

129 Л. Смирнова, 'Идею «Новороссии» саботируют на местах – Скориков', ПолитНавигатор, 8 June 2023, politnavigator.net.

was Karl Marx Street reinstated in Mariupol instead of Vorontsov Street, even though it was Governor-General Vorontsov who founded Mariupol? Why has the History of the Novorossiya programme still not been implemented in the liberated territories?... The people need to be re-Russified after a century of Ukrainisation: 100 years ago, the Bolsheviks adopted the policy of *korenizatsiya*[130] in the Ukrainian SSR and squeezed both Novorossiya and Malorossiya into this programme.

Like many other participants in the moderated political discourse, Skorikov, the head of the Ukrainian branch of the Institute of CIS Countries, has been promoting the claims made by the official propaganda, emphasising the imperial roots of Novorossiya:

> When Catherine launched her project, essentially the project of the New Russia Krai, Novorossiya was a wild steppe that opened a path to Constantinople for Russia. We didn't reach Constantinople, but all these Greek and Byzantine names – Sevastopol, Odessa, Melitopol – were part of the messianic idea of Moscow as the Third Rome.[131]

The essence of Novorossiya as a term rooted in an imagined history and geography has been aptly captured by Aleksandr Vasiliev, an editor at the Regnum news agency. He has described the active measures employed under this banner as the 'canonisation' of Novorossiya. According to him, this effort is not only about returning the region to the 'motherland' but also about "incorporating this concept into the canon of national history, which represents a huge step forward in the development of Russian self-awareness".[132] Noting a breakthrough in the propaganda surrounding the 'reclaimed lands', he has emphasised the importance of official initiatives like the 'Novorossiya' exhibition at the State Historical Museum, which Minister of Culture Tatyana Golikova opened on 5 September 2023.[133]

There are plenty of other examples that illustrate the coordinated use of various tools and actors. The widely publicised meeting on transport issues led to the establishment of the Novorossiya Railways enterprise and the R-280 Highway appeared on road maps bearing the name of Novorossiya (Rostov-on-Don–Mariupol–Melitopol–Simferopol). As always, science and culture can serve as sensitive barometers of the situation. Historian Aleksandr Chalenko

130 *Korenizatsiya* was a process initiated in the 1920s to increase the participation of local populations (from the Russian *korennoy*, meaning 'indigenous') in the socio-political life of the Soviet republics.

131 Л. Смирнова, 'Идею «Новороссии» саботируют на местах – Скориков', *op. cit.*

132 А. Васильев, 'Русская Атлантида. Почему мы так и не научились рассказывать о Новороссии', Регнум, 22 September 2023, regnum.ru.

133 'Татьяна Голикова приняла участие в открытии выставки «Новороссия» в Государственном историческом музее', Правительство России, 5 September 2023, government.ru; 'Выставка «Новороссия»', Культура.РФ, culture.ru.

has published yet another book, his fourth, on the history of Novorossiya,[134] while the publishing house Veche has produced the aforementioned impressive series entitled *The Battle for Novorossiya*.

In early 2023, the Presidential Fund for Cultural Initiatives announced a youth competition entitled 'Novorossiya'. The invitation highlighted Putin's role, stating: "The Black Sea peninsula of Crimea has been annexed to Russia twice: under Empress Catherine II and under the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin; indeed, the new territories of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk and Donetsk hold special significance for the history of our country". Particularly notable was an online video showing the digital, multimedia-rich presentation of the competition's results.[135] On 30 September 2023, the anniversary of the annexation of the four Ukrainian oblasts, a mass propaganda event was held on Red Square. Leading artists from the country's propaganda-infused entertainment industry appeared at the Russia–Donbas–Novorossiya ceremonial concert. The event's highlight was a song called 'Russian World', with lyrics and music by Denis Maidanov, a political activist and recipient of the title of Honoured Artist of Russia; he performed it alongside guests from Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Melitopol.[136] These 'special guests' also joined Oleg Gazmanov to deliver a rendition of the pompous song 'We Are Together'. These performances can still be seen on YouTube.[137] offering a vivid illustration of the peculiar atmosphere of 'patriotic exaltation', as Bączkowski termed it. Modern digital tools make it possible to multiply this sentiment without limits.

The 'Novorossiya' construct is key to understanding Russia's conquests and its motives. Although the frequently used 'liberation motif' is inherently false, forcibly 'liberated' lands are immediately absorbed into Russia, which casts itself as the saviour of nations – whether they desire salvation or not. In context, Russia's contemporary expansion is most broadly justified by the doctrine of the 'Russian world', with the 'reclaimed territories' of Taurida/Crimea and Novorossiya serving as its symbols. Russia has also used them to portray its invasion of Ukraine as a defensive war. Above all, the endless disinformation 'series' The Battle for Taurida and The Battle for Novorossiya reflect Russia's reliance on tried-and-tested active measures. Their importance is certain to grow. It is no coincidence that in late 2023, the website of the Russian Embassy

134 А. Чаленко, *Новейшая история Новороссии: сборник статей и интервью (2007–2022)*, Москва 2023. Earlier works initiated by the Russian Historical Society and the Institute of Russian History at the Russian Academy of Sciences include: А. Смирнов, *Проект Новороссия. История русской окраины*, Москва 2015; А. Шубин, *История Новороссии*, Москва 2015; В. Захаров (ed.), *История Новороссии*, Москва 2017.

135 'Новороссия: от Екатерины Великой до наших дней', conkurs-history.ru.

136 'Большой праздничный концерт «Россия – Донбасс – Новороссия»', Смотрим, smotrim.ru.

137 'Денис Майданов, „Русский мир"', 30 September 2023, youtube.com.

in Poland added a section titled 'The Special Military Operation in the Donbas, Novorossiya and Ukraine'.[138]

6. Summary: netwars *à la Russe*

The digital era has facilitated access to a wide range of domestic and international sources of information and improved communication. Through various channels, both restricted and publicly available, users can connect to formal and informal networks, the latter lacking the distinct characteristics of state organisation. According to John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, analysts at the RAND Corporation, digital technologies are excellent tools for conducting 'netwars'. In 2001, they defined these as "an emerging mode of conflict at societal levels... in which the protagonists use network forms of organization and related doctrines, strategies, and technologies attuned to the information age". Netwar actors can operate collectively, are linked to multiple networks, bound by strong social ties, equipped with secure communication technologies and focused on promoting a shared narrative that explains why they must act together and what they aim to achieve. They are formidable opponents.[139]

These American analysts have incorporated netwars into the broader concept of cyber warfare, envisioned as a transformation from mindless wars of attrition into intelligent strategic manoeuvres requiring insight into the adversary's plans. After disorientating them, sapping their morale and neutralising military information and communication systems, cyber forces target the remaining government and information servers. They argued that future conflicts would be wars of machines waged in cyberspace using artificial intelligence algorithms. Cyber warfare was supposed to fulfil the vision of non-kinetic wars – conflicts that incapacitate the adversary without causing mass casualties.

Russian analysts have reinterpreted this concept within the framework of their own strategic culture and system of values. They have viewed the ideas presented by Arquilla and Ronfeldt primarily through the prism of operations targeting the collective consciousness of societies to shape their pro-American worldview and behaviour. They have framed actions classified as netwar primarily as a form of anti-Russian warfare. They have therefore reversed the narrative vector and directed it against the US and NATO. They treat cyberspace as an additional arena for exerting force and sowing discord, harassment, subversion and intimidation by threatening to escalate the conflict – essentially,

138 'Specjalna operacja wojskowa w Donbasie, Noworosji i na Ukrainie', Russian Embassy in Poland, poland.mid.ru.
139 J. Arquilla, D. Ronfeldt, 'Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy', RAND Corporation, Santa Monica 2001, rand.org.

as a new field for deploying tried-and-tested active measures. New communication technologies have expanded the scope of these measures and the pool of operatives with new types of agents of influence: alongside paid agents and 'useful idiots', online communities are now plagued by mercenary online militias (web brigades, cyber squads) and troll farms.

Active measures have retained their key distinctive features: they are continuous and multidimensional; they are used by the apparatus of the intelligence services with the involvement of proxies. In the broadly defined information space, these services inspire, create and control disinformation operations by establishing channels for distributing fake content (such as websites) and employing specially trained 'journalists', so-called war bloggers. Meanwhile, in the physical domain, they create the conditions for such operations through provocation and sabotage. When it comes to seizing the adversary's territory and 'planting a flag' on it, force remains the ultimate argument, embodied by the Russian military and its longstanding strategy of pursuing victory.

Chapter II

The hybrid battlegrounds of the Russian Armed Forces

1. Overview of the issue

If a mission of the armed forces is to be successful, it must meet its information needs and gain the general public's understanding and acceptance for the actions it has undertaken. All militaries worldwide develop communication strategies and establish structures to implement them. In this regard, Russia is no exception; indeed, its military officials have pointedly emphasised this in messages directed at their own society and in interactions with the outside world. What sets Russia apart? I will address this question by highlighting the specific directions of the Russian Armed Forces' activities in the communication space.

Even a cursory analysis of the practical implementation of strategic objectives in this area reveals two extreme tendencies. On the one hand, the defence ministry's stated openness has led to the militarisation of the public space and even overt war propaganda, which is prohibited under international law. On the other, the ministry's monopoly on managing information about the armed forces has ensured stringent control over all reports concerning the military, which is legally enforced. For instance, Russian people still do not know the causes of the 2000 sinking of the Kursk submarine. They are still oblivious to the scale of human rights violations and war crimes that the military committed during the pacification of Chechnya. Moreover, they enthusiastically supported the illegal annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated into a full-scale war in 2022.

Official statements from the defence ministry have omitted inconvenient facts. Any criticism of military abuses that occasionally surfaces in the media has failed to alter the general perception of the Russian armed forces in the eyes of the average citizen. Society takes pride in its homeland as a military power that commands global respect and as "the only country in the world capable of countering the United States' information dominance". Putin uttered these

words during the famous 'Crimean speech' on 18 March 2014, has reiterated them on various occasions and they amplified by the media, becoming deeply ingrained in the Russian public consciousness.

The image of an 'invincible army' is the result of the state's long-term efforts in the public sphere to reinforce the belief that violence and the force factor, embodied primarily by the military and its nuclear weapons, are Russia's main assets as a major power. Dissenting opinions are viewed as attempts to undermine its position. Military information policy has been integrated into the broader state strategy by entrusting the armed forces with functions that extend beyond defence, including ideological, nation-building, educational, unifying and culture-forming roles.

In its information campaigns directed at soldiers and the general public, the Russian Ministry of Defence emphasises that it "unites the efforts of the government, the armed forces and the public to promote military education among the younger generation and to instil values rooted in patriotism". This activity has fostered a form of militarism among citizens, who are convinced that the West and NATO (portrayed in the domestic narrative as ideological saboteurs seeking to impose alien beliefs and values on Russian people) have been waging information and psychological wars to humiliate Russia. In its extreme form, this has led to militaristic patriotism, recently dubbed 'turbo-patriotism', among nationalist figures linked to the military and intelligence services, such as Igor Girkin (also known as Strelkov), Vladimir Kvachkov and the late Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin (alias Wagner), the infamous leaders of the Wagner Group. These 'turbo-patriots' have denounced anyone they believe to be "thwarting the Russian nation's victory over the West, which seeks to partition Ukraine", including Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov.

This chapter is dedicated to the origins of the military and propaganda aggression seen in today's Russia, as well as its conceptual and organisational foundations. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in Russian traditions. Its modern resurgence is linked to the 'extraordinary information situation' that was cited to justify the need to develop a new communication strategy to accompany the use of the Russian Armed Forces on domestic territory during the intervention in Chechnya. To control the narrative around this operation, the government reinstated censorship, established new organisational mechanisms and developed guidelines for communicating about the anti-terrorist campaign. As political practice during Putin's presidency has demonstrated, this 'extraordinary information situation' persists to this day.

The debate on information security, which was initiated in the early stages of Putin's presidency, led to a systemic analysis of threats in this area and the

development of 'Russia's unified information space'. This resulted in the Kremlin taking greater control over the public and the media as well as a revision of the post-Cold War international order. In short, the issue was instrumentalised to suit the needs of Putin's administration, aligning seamlessly with Russian strategic thinking and strategic communication.[144] However, the problem lies in the fact that, considering the political context and calling things by their proper name, Russia's information policy in the field of defence should actually be termed military propaganda or information warfare.

2. Information warfare in theory and practice

2.1. Specifics of the Russian conceptual framework

Even a cursory review of the relevant literature reveals that the Russian conceptual framework differs from that of the Western, which means that the terminology associated with information security can be potentially misleading. However, a critical analysis of this framework makes it possible to identify features that capture its specifics.

Firstly, information security is framed within the context of international rivalry. Information is seen not only as a protected resource and a target for adversaries but, above all, as a weapon. The information struggle (more commonly referred to as the information-psychological or propaganda struggle) and its extreme form of information warfare are tools to achieve the state's objectives in international, regional and domestic politics and to gain a geopolitical advantage.

Secondly, core concepts are defined using general terms. For example, in the 2000 Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation, information security was described as "the state of the protection of the national interests of the Russian Federation in the information sphere, as determined by the overall balanced interests of the individual, society and the state". Such essentially hollow terms are embedded within an ideological context. In this document, the term was accompanied by a number of threats spanning foreign policy, defence, science and technology, the spiritual life and the legal order. The doctrine highlighted the catastrophic state of the country's information and telecommunication infrastructure and an unfavourable international environment marked by "attempts at resisting the consolidation of Russia's role as one of the influential centres in an emerging multipolar world... increasing the technological edge of leading world powers and building up their capabilities to create the information

144 For a more detailed discussion on strategic communications (abbreviated as stratcom) in NATO terminology, see N. Bolt, L. Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, NATO StratCom COE, Riga, June 2019, stratcomcoe.org.

weapon". In addition, the document underscored the need to align information security with objectives such as "ensuring the spiritual renewal of Russia" and the "reinforcement of traditions of patriotism and humanism".

Thirdly, information security is approached broadly. Strategic documents do not address the issue of cybersecurity, although they do emphasise that new technologies have expanded the arsenal of tools for influencing human psychology and public consciousness. The technological context has been overshadowed by political, ideological and civilisational considerations; Russian theorists perceive the Western concept of cybersecurity as too narrow to address the full scope of this issue.

Fourthly, the domestic approach to information warfare integrates various methods of conducting it: electronic, psychological and information warfare, counter-propaganda efforts, strategic and operational deception, and more. As a result, information security encompasses all aspects of political, economic and social life, including the private lives of citizens. It spans a broad range of activities in areas such as politics, economics, social affairs, military, intelligence, counterintelligence, diplomacy, technology, propaganda and education.

The debate on information warfare reached its peak with the emergence of the Colour Revolutions – social movements in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005). These signalled a shift towards a new, post-Soviet developmental path that would be distinct from Russia's trajectory. This led to a revival of traditional Cold War-era themes centred on the psychological confrontation between East and West. In the literature, the Colour Revolutions were described as a "socially dangerous struggle of the intelligence services"[145] and framed within the ideology of Chekism that views the security sector as central to the power of the Putin regime, which has its roots in the special services.

The theory of information warfare was developed in opposition to the Western theory of cybersecurity, emphasising the latter's perceived anti-Russian orientation. Its axioms were applied to the Russian context and tailored to local conditions. As a result, Russian terminology is often misleading, as demonstrated by a critical review of the key definitions. The Russian terms do not align with the definitions accepted in the West.[146] 'Cyber war' and 'netwar' have a different scope. Only a handful of theorists differentiate between these two concepts; most consider them components of information warfare.

The vast majority of Russian authors blur the lines between the military and non-military domains as well as between the technological ('cyberspace') and social ('information space') spheres. They reference the Cold War and

145 А. Манойло, *Государственная информационная политика в особых условиях*, Moscow 2003, p. 293.

146 For an overview of Western terminology, see K. Liedel, P. Piasecka, 'Wojna cybernetyczna – wyzwanie XXI wieku', *Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe* 2011, no. 17, bbn.gov.pl.

'psychological wars', equating them with 'political' and 'propaganda wars' between East and West. The terms they use are all-encompassing notions consisting of various components, such as manipulation, social engineering, propaganda, agitation, counterpropaganda and even patriotic military education, which are all framed as tools to counter the adversary's aggression and strengthen society's resilience against Western influence.

This is consistent with established practices. The theory of information warfare originates from the theory of special propaganda,[147] which the Military Institute of Foreign Languages introduced as a separate subject in 1942. It was later taught at the KGB school, but discontinued in the 1990s. However, it was reinstated in 2000 and is now taught at the Department of Military Information and Foreign Languages of the Military University under the Ministry of Defence and at the FSB Academy. Revival of the subject coincided with the approval of the 2000 Information Security Doctrine. Over time, departments or institutes for information security were established at all institutions training uniformed personnel and at many civilian universities. Their activities are coordinated by the FSB's Institute of Cryptography, which initiated the establishment of the Educational and Methodical Association of Higher Education Institutions in Russia; as of 2018, it comprised 74 research institutions.[148] Consequently, the study of information warfare has gained the status of an academic discipline and an interdisciplinary applied science. It is now included in training programmes for diplomats and university curricula in fields such as sociology, philosophy and political science.

Regardless of its genetic code being based in 'special propaganda', Russian terminology was, from the start, designed to align with Western concepts. For example, Sergey Yastrzhembsky, a practitioner of official propaganda, became famous for his aphorism: "All military operations begin and end with PR specialists". This phrase captured the essence of Russia's efforts to obscure the reality of the Chechen wars. Yastrzhembsky euphemistically suggested that the Kremlin was not waging wars but merely conducting military operations. He referred to the accompanying propaganda using the fashionable Western term 'public relations', understood as a form of political campaign marketing. However, 'Russian PR' fails to meet this and other criteria. Russian society lacks the tools for political communication with the government, relying instead on official information channels that are controlled and censored. Unable to critically assess the government's actions, the public depends entirely on a top-down, one-way interpretation. Psychological operations are viewed through the lens

147 Д. Суржик, 'Оружие слова. Советская спецпропаганда в годы Великой Отечественной войны', *Журнал российских и восточноевропейских исторических исследований* 2010, no. 1, at: cyberleninka.ru.

148 See УМО website, isedu.ru.

of hard power, unlike in US strategies, where they are considered a component of soft power.

Notably in this context, the term 'information warfare' is more appealing as a propaganda tool and far more frequently used than 'information struggle'. According to the definition provided in the 2012 document entitled *Conceptual Views on the Activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Information Space*, 'information warfare' is defined as a "competition between two or more states in the information space aimed at causing damage to the information systems, processes and resources of critical infrastructure as well as other structures; undermining the political, economic and social system; conducting a mass psychological brainwashing of the population in order to destabilise society and the state; and forcing the state to make decisions aligned with the opposing side's interests".[149]

Analysing information warfare as a distinct form of Russian military communication necessitates a clarification of its component concepts, such as 'propaganda', 'agitation', 'persuasion' and 'manipulation'. Below, I draw on the findings of Polish linguists.[150] Generally, they identify two meanings of the term 'propaganda'. In its broader sense, it refers to the organised dissemination of ideas, doctrines and theories through the selective presentation of content and the use of influence techniques to persuade people to change their attitudes, adopt different views, or perform actions that serve the sender's interests. In its narrower sense, it is defined as a form of political communication aimed at shaping public opinion.

In both approaches, propaganda exerts ideological influence on the recipient. This distinguishes it from agitation, whose aim is to prompt immediate action by mobilising the public through both linguistic and non-linguistic means. The concepts of persuasion and manipulation are also frequently used to analyse propaganda texts. Both refer to influencing the audience's views and opinions, but the key difference lies in whether the message meets the criterion of reliability. Unlike persuasion, which does not evoke any evaluative judgement, the term 'manipulation' has a negative emotional charge and refers to deliberate, typically covert influence aimed at persuading the recipient to act against their own interests.

The language of propaganda has been the subject of numerous studies. Researchers unanimously agree that its purpose is not to describe reality but to shape it by influencing the recipient's perception of the world and persuading

149 'Концептуальные взгляды на деятельность Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации в информационном пространстве', The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, function.mil.ru.

150 See I. Kamińska-Szmaj, 'Propaganda, perswazja, manipulacja – próba uporządkowania pojęć' [in:] P. Krzyżanowski, P. Nowak (ed.), *Manipulacja w języku*, Lublin 2004.

them to adopt opinions and views favourable to the one delivering the propaganda. Models of propaganda communication typically include the following elements: the source of information (an institution that determines the ideological coordinates of the message), the channel for transmitting the encoded message (for example the media) and the reception of the signal (which requires the recipient's attention to be focused and their personal preferences, perceptual determinants such as myths/stereotypes and their current emotional state to be factored in). Based on the source and degree of content distortion, propaganda is classified into three types: white (the source of the message is known and its content is easy to verify), grey (the sender conceals themselves behind a chain of intermediaries; the message is tailored to a specific narrative or goal, such as discrediting opponents) and black, also known as 'the big lie', where the sender is hidden and difficult to identify while the message is fabricated and based on false information.

The language of propaganda texts is formulaic and relies on standardised phrases and the repeated use of labels, myths and stereotypes. The latter, as representations of reality that bear little relation to the truth, influence subconscious patterns of negative valuation. They often shape a distorted view of phenomena, individuals, or even entire nations, reinforcing imposed viewpoints. Propaganda techniques such as stereotyping are based on schematic thinking and seek to construct a hierarchical worldview, dividing reality into one sphere that the official propaganda endorses and another that it disparages. This creates a binary system of an 'us' versus 'them' judgement. Its manipulative potential lies in the sender's egocentric belief in the superiority of their own values and opinions. The terms 'propaganda' and its interchangeable counterpart 'propaganda war' share this characteristic with 'information warfare' and 'psychological warfare'.

2.2. The origins of Russia's contemporary military-propaganda aggression: the role of force and ideology

The surge in official propaganda seen in Russia since the early 21st century is closely tied to the collapse of democratisation efforts and the consolidation of the centralised bureaucratic system and authoritarian governance. The failure of democracy in Russia did not stem solely from the incompetence of its reformers and the aggressive exploitation of free-market opportunities by emerging business leaders. One crucial factor, if not the most important one, was the political consciousness of the population, which was completely unprepared for changes to the political and economic system following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The declining standard of living for most citizens, which stood in contrast to the prosperity of a handful of 'new Russians', and the barrage of information

in the mass media that was perplexing to the average Russian, threw post-Soviet society, shaped by the 'golden dream' of Soviet propaganda, into a state of confusion. The diversity of media broadcasts, perceived as informational chaos, coupled with the population's inability to filter content from a pluralist mass media, as well as the flood of *kompromat*, cheap sensationalism, violence and erotica, prompted audiences to recognise the need for control over information sources. The country's new leadership began moving in this direction.

After Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, the new political elite began gradually taking control of the mass media, focusing primarily on television. Using harsh administrative controls and economic pressure, they quickly took over the most influential organisations, gaining an unrestricted ability to disseminate their own narratives. The inevitable consequence was a shift from democratic, two-way forms of social communication typical of a pluralist mass media to propaganda, or one-way communication flowing from government institutions to a mass audience.

A specific personnel policy, combined with economic and administrative pressure, intimidation and even the physical elimination of independent journalists, enforced self-censorship and loyalty to both the state and non-state gatekeepers of the mass media – despite the formal absence of censorship. This made it possible to carry out top-down propaganda efforts aimed at suppressing information deemed unfavourable to the Kremlin, promoting a distinct, unique Russian path of development, rebuilding imperial traditions and, most importantly, legitimising Putin's regime.

Militaristic propaganda was also fuelled by the absence of decolonisation and de-imperialisation. In the so-called new Russia, many remnants of colonialism persisted, gradually laying the groundwork for the revival of imperial traditions.[151] As a result, the methods and ideology that Moscow has employed in dealings with its former colonies are anachronistic. Colonial thinking, trapped in Soviet-era tropes of great-power chauvinism, has appropriated the history of republics like Tatarstan and Buryatia as well as independent countries such as Ukraine and Belarus. In the 1990s, public discourse in Russia was openly racist and discriminatory towards other nations, ethnicities and cultures within its borders. The Chechen wars led to a certain 'opening' of public communication, unleashing aggression against the colonised 'other'. The fact that Chechnya was a constituent part of the Russian Federation was obscured and sidelined in discussions. In the public consciousness, this republic became a bastion of international terrorism while its leader Dzhokhar Dudayev was vilified as a hated terrorist ringleader.

151 See A. Saifullayeu, 'Kolonialny byt kultury', 4 August 2023, by-ua-studium.pl.

2.3. The Russian Presidential Administration as a laboratory for concepts of wartime communication

The informational framing of the military intervention in Chechnya provided the foundation for Russia's modern conceptual and organisational approach to wartime communication. According to the Ukrainian researcher Heorhii Pocheptsov,[152] this approach emerged between the two Chechen wars. When the government recognised the inevitable failure of the first one, it established a special commission led by the diplomat Sergey Yastrzhembsky to develop a new model for communicating about this event. In May 1995, the commission produced a document entitled *The mythology of the Chechen crisis as an indicator of Russia's national security problems*, which recommended framing the conflict as a 'clash of civilisations' within Samuel Huntington's then-popular paradigm. The commission's primary message was directed at the West: the Chechens, who had renounced the federal agreement, were portrayed as an 'Islamic civilisational threat' in an effort to garner a favourable reception of Russia's actions.

The document acknowledged the Kremlin's failure in the information war and the dominance of the Western mythologised version of the Chechen crisis. It also noted that the mechanisms reinforcing the state and Russian identity had broken down and that the government had underestimated the importance of the symbolic and ideological spheres. To remedy this, it recommended developing a competing model to describe this conflict with the aim of neutralising the anti-Russian narrative promoted by the West. This model was called an 'anti-myth' as it sought to reverse the adversary's narrative by invoking and producing a mirror image of the key themes of the 'Western Chechen myth' that portrayed terrorists as freedom fighters pursuing a just cause.

The document recommended developing two versions of this 'anti-myth': one designed for domestic use and another for foreign audiences. The latter would be "more sophisticated than crude black-and-white propaganda, as only psychological precision – tailored to different audiences, with nuanced semitones and varying shades of the informational product – will enable the federal government to reclaim the lost ground". It concluded that: "This method involves the consistent execution of a series of persuasive influence operations, so-called measures of political acupuncture, which require few resources but a higher level of responsibility from the government".[153]

The document's language, referencing experiences in the field of "persuasive influence operations" (using specific operational jargon), highlighted the military background of the 'Yastrzhembsky Commission'. Its leader, Sergey

152 Г. Почепцов, *Информационные войны. Новый инструмент политики*, Москва 2015, p. 82.
153 *Ibid.*

Yastrzhembsky,[154] was recalled from his role as Russia's ambassador to Slovakia in 1996 and appointed as press secretary to President Boris Yeltsin. He proved to be the 'right man in the right place', equipped with extensive experience and expertise in public communication. Yastrzhembsky began his career in the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU, which determined the main directions of Soviet propaganda; he implemented these as a journalist and self-described 'PR specialist'.[155] In 2000, he was appointed as an advisor to the new president on information policy. He labelled himself Putin's 'communication Sherpa', a role he secured thanks to his hands-on experience in managing public information as Yeltsin's spokesperson. During press conferences, he did not hesitate to manipulate journalists, adhering to the principle of "always tell the truth, but not the whole truth".[156] He also coined several phrases about Yeltsin that entered the Russian language as colourful aphorisms: "The president is working with documents" (to explain Yeltsin's absence from public life), "The president was tired" (to explain his physical and verbal missteps) and "The president has a firm handshake" (in response to a journalist's question about Yeltsin's health just before heart surgery). Even today, Yastrzhembsky's rhetorical skills remain admired by Russian military bloggers who have been critical of the lacklustre informational framing of the 'special military operation' in Ukraine, particularly the dull monologues of Major General Igor Konashenkov, head of the Department of Information and Media Affairs of the Russian Ministry of Defence.[157]

Alongside Yastrzhembsky, Alexei Gromov[158] was also transferred from Bratislava to Moscow in 1996. Ever since then, he has been in charge of the

154 Sergey Yastrzhembsky (b. 1953) has Polish roots, tracing his lineage to the Grodno nobility, which bore the Ślepowron (night heron) coat of arms – something he has openly acknowledged. He graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in 1976, earning a doctorate in history. Between 1979 and 1981, he worked at the Academy of Social Sciences under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). From 1982 to 1989, he was employed by Problems of Peace and Socialism/World Marxist Review (*Проблемы мира и социализма*), a theoretical monthly of communist parties that was published in Prague from 1958 to 1990 under Soviet patronage in 37 language versions. The magazine primarily featured policy statements from leaders and analyses of global events and developments within communist parties. In the final years of the Soviet Union, Yastrzhembsky worked in the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee. From 1992, he served in Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, holding the post of ambassador to Slovakia until 1996. Between 1996 and 1998, he was Boris Yeltsin's press secretary. After Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov was dismissed in 1998, he moved to the press service of Moscow's city administration. From 2000–04, he served as an advisor to the Russian president on crisis communications. Between 2004 and 2008, he was the president's special envoy for relations with the European Union. Since 2008, he has been a film producer and owner of YastrebFilm, focusing primarily on documentary films about environmental issues.

155 'Гость Сергей Ястржембский. Познер. Выпуск от 03.04.2017', Первый канал, 1tv.ru.

156 *Ibid*.

157 М. Артемьев, 'Война блогеров началась не случайно: нужен ли России «новый Ястржембский»?', Блокнот, 22 September 2022, bloknot.ru.

158 Aleksei Gromov (b. 1960) graduated in history from Lomonosov Moscow State University in 1982 and was then assigned to work abroad. He first served as secretary at the Soviet Consulate General in Karlovy Vary and later, from 1985 to 1988, as an attaché at the Soviet embassy in Prague. After returning from these postings, he worked in the secretariat of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs until 1992. From 1992 to

Kremlin's media relations. Commentators often refer to him as the 'minister of propaganda'.[159] According to an anecdote reported by the independent news website Proekt.media, a sign reading 'Branch of the Ministry of Propaganda' appeared on the door of his office after a meeting with heads of information support from Russia's power ministries. The joke was well-received and the sign reportedly still hangs there to this day.[160]

Gromov's routine duties include holding briefings with journalists. He reportedly meets with officials from the uniformed services once a quarter; day-to-day interactions are managed by his subordinate Alexander Smirnov, who oversees public communications. Every Thursday, Gromov hosts a meeting in his office with the heads of Russia's major television stations, both state-owned and nominally private (the All-Russia State Television and Radio Company, Channel One, TV Tsentr, NTV, Channel Five and others). These weekly 'operational meetings' are also attended, depending on the current agenda, by the relevant Kremlin officials. One constant participant is the foreign ministry's spokesperson Maria Zakharova, which indicates that the Kremlin also 'formats' the media narratives of her ministry. A journalistic investigation by Proekt.media has revealed that during these meetings, Gromov instructs attendees on how to interpret current events, what to emphasise in broadcasts and reports, and what to omit. In extraordinary situations, he personally calls journalists to issue instructions. He also oversees the office responsible for managing the Kremlin's press pool (a select group of journalists who cover presidential events) and a unit that prepares Putin's daily informational bulletin. According to journalists, Gromov is a highly influential member of the presidential

1993, he served as acting Consul General in Bratislava; from 1993 to 1996, he was an advisor to Russia's ambassador to Slovakia, Sergey Yastrzhembsky. In August 1996, both men returned to Moscow: Yastrzhembsky was appointed Boris Yeltsin's press secretary and Gromov became head of the presidential press service.

In January 2000, Gromov was appointed press secretary to President Vladimir Putin. That year, the magazine Ogonyok named him the winner of its award for "ensuring the transparency of the Kremlin's communications". He remained in office after Putin's re-election. In 2005, he became deputy head of the Presidential Administration responsible for media relations. The English-language channel Russia Today (RT) was established on his initiative. He is also credited with promoting Margarita Simonyan, a former foreign correspondent, to the role of RT's editor-in-chief, a position she has held ever since. Gromov retained his post when Dmitry Medvedev assumed the presidency in 2008, reporting to Sergei Naryshkin (currently head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, SVR). When Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012, Gromov was promoted to first deputy head of the Presidential Administration while maintaining his previous responsibilities. He is a low-profile politician. His wife holds a doctorate in history and chairs the supervisory board of the Orthodox foundation Elisavetino-Sergiyev Posad Educational Society (ESPO Foundation). His sons are businessmen with ties to prominent oligarchs including Oleg Deripaska and the Rotenberg brothers. In 2014, the United States and the European Union placed Gromov on their sanctions lists for his role in destabilising Ukraine.

159 'Aleksiej Gromow – minister putinowskiej propagandy. „To autor koncepcji, że nie ma takiego państwa jak Ukraina', Polska Agencja Prasowa, 6 April 2022, pap.pl.

160 М. Рубин, М. Жолобова, Р. Баданин, 'Повелитель кукол. Портрет Алексея Громова, руководителя российской государственной пропаганды', Проект, 23 January 2019, proekt.media.

administration, as the attitudes and actions of Russia's elites and society are shaped by the worldview he has crafted.[161]

Let us return to the history of communication in 'extraordinary' situations. Yastrzhembsky and Gromov began their efforts in 1996, a presidential election year. The timing was no accident: the results of the 1995 Duma elections showed that the so-called democrats were lagging behind, finishing third behind the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). The Chechen issue,[162] which was supposed to drive Yeltsin's campaign, became a clear threat to his success. It had turned into a political weapon for his opponents who were vying for the presidency, particularly Gennady Zyuganov, who was appealing to nostalgia for the order of the Soviet era. Yeltsin's campaign was criticised for lacking ideological substance. At the same time, the CPRF promoted 'law and order' while the LDPR's leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky championed an imperial vision for Russia, calling for the incorporation of Ukraine and Belarus into the country as federal districts. In his infamous 1993 book titled *Posledniy brosok na yug* (The last dash to the south), he envisioned Russia's borders extending to the coastlines of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

Many also believed that without an ideologically guaranteed certainty of victory, the outcome of the war in Chechnya was unpredictable from the outset. Parts of the military leadership, led by Boris Gromov, commander of the intervention forces in Afghanistan, opposed the plans to intervene in Chechnya. The Chechen people's pursuit of sovereignty was driven by a strong sense of national identity and the memory of the February 1944 ethnic cleansing. In that year, accusing the Chechen Republic of treason, Stalin ordered 400,000 of its inhabitants to be transported in cattle wagons to Siberia and Kazakhstan. More than a quarter of them died during the journey. The survivors were only allowed to return to their homeland in 1957, during the Khrushchev Thaw.

Unlike the determined Chechens, the federal forces suffered from weak motivation. The media denounced Yeltsin's November 1994 decree that authorised the invasion, labelling it unconstitutional and therefore illegal. Moreover, the war was fought on Russia's own territory, unlike the previous campaigns

161 Д. Журавлев, 'От Ельцина до Путина: как Алексей Громов стал одним из самых влиятельных чиновников России', ИА Реалист, 13 June 2023, realtribune.ru.

162 In late 1991, the Chechen people elected Dzhokhar Dudayev, a former Soviet Army General, as their president. When Moscow challenged the legality of this vote, Dudayev declared Chechnya's independence. In response, Yeltsin imposed a state of emergency in the rebellious republic and deployed interior ministry troops. However, they were unable to leave the airport, which was blocked by crowds of protesters. Fearing an escalation of the conflict, Yeltsin withdrew his forces. These events coincided with the collapse of the chaos-ridden Soviet Union. Russia's autonomous government turned its attention to other pressing issues and the Chechen question was set aside until 1994, when Moscow orchestrated an opposition-led coup against Dudayev. When this attempt failed, Russian troops entered Chechnya in December, encountering fierce resistance.

aimed at expanding the empire. Defence Minister Pavel Grachev promised a swift and victorious war, yet Grozny was only captured after three months of fierce fighting which saw heavy casualties. Carpet bombing the densely populated city resulted in a massacre of civilians. A growing backlash against the conflict, dubbed 'Yeltsin's war', posed a serious threat to the incumbent president's re-election campaign. Therefore, Yeltsin announced the start of negotiations with Dudayev. The ceasefire agreement signed in Khasavyurt in August 1996 committed the government to withdraw troops from Chechnya and deferred a final decision on its status until 31 December 2001.

It was concluded that the federal forces failed for a number of key reasons: they misjudged the situation, conducted operations without a plan and, most notably, lacked adequate informational support. Many argued that the ambitions of 'hawks' with ties to the military, the arms industry and the former KGB also contributed to this defeat. These individuals prematurely engaged in a power struggle, projecting a message that the era of democracy (or '*dermokratia*', meaning 'shitocracy', a term commonly used at the time) was over and that it was time to restore order in the country. The FSB also likely played a significant role – both in instigating the war and in commanding operations in its early stages.

During the Second Chechen War, dubbed 'Putin's war', these mistakes were rectified. The new campaign was more carefully planned and announced well in advance. In September 1999, Putin declared: "Russia is defending itself. We have been attacked. And therefore we must throw off all syndromes, including the guilt syndrome".[163] First of all, a *casus belli* was deliberately created: Chechen rebels launched an incursion into neighbouring Dagestan, followed by a series of bombings in Russian cities, which were carried out by the FSB but blamed on the insurgents. The war was framed as a response to attacks by Chechen terrorists. An appropriate ideological ground underpinned the military intervention: while the first war was presented as a police action against Chechen bandit separatism, the second was portrayed as a major counterterrorism operation, "a real war against international Islamic terrorism". Volunteer formations were involved, which gave the conflict a patriotic dimension. Finally, and particularly importantly, the Kremlin 'Chechenised' the conflict, presenting it as a result of factional struggles within the republic and positioning itself as a peace broker.

Although the active measures devised by the Russian security services very quickly became an open secret to the global audience, the Kremlin effectively controlled the flow of information about the situation in Chechnya within the country. It also soon became clear that any public criticism of official narratives about these developments was dangerous – something that was later

163 Cited in: M.H. van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, p. 139.

underscored by high-profile attacks on politicians and journalists, including Sergei Yushenkov, Yuri Shchekochikhin, Alexander Litvinenko, Yelena Tregubova, Anna Politkovskaya and many others.

The office dealing with information emergencies, established in 2000 within the Presidential Administration with Sergey Yastrzhembsky at its head, became the main pillar of the Kremlin's information policy, operating independently of the press secretary's office. The communication model developed at that time came to dominate the Kremlin's information strategy. To this day, it remains focused on challenges to national security, framed as a struggle against 'universal evils' such as international terrorism, extremism, a 'predatory' West and an 'expansionist' NATO, all of which are portrayed as undermining the foundations of Russia's sovereign existence. It has become clear that the security elites who consolidated their power through this narrative will never relinquish it. Indeed, they will respond to any threat to their position with increasingly dictatorial measures, aggression and new legal sanctions.

The 'counterterrorism operation' that was launched in 1999 in violation of the Khasavyurt Agreement did not officially end until 2009 with a Pyrrhic victory for Russia. The main beneficiary was Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who secured autonomy for his feudal province that was financially dependent on Moscow by pledging his loyalty to Putin. Kadyrov has ruled it like an Eastern despot, instilling fear through his mercenary ('volunteer') units known as the Kadyrovtsy, which have terrorised the local population while carrying out various missions assigned by the federal centre.

The communication model developed for the Second Chechen War proved effective. Despite the immense brutality, cruelty and torture inflicted on civilians during the so-called '*zachistki*', which claimed an estimated 150,000–200,000 lives, Russian society accepted the Kremlin's decisions. Apart from convictions handed down by the European Court of Human Rights, the war crimes in Chechnya faced little criticism from the international community. It could be argued that Russian propaganda succeeded in persuading the world that these actions were part of the 'global war on Islamic terrorism'. Taking the long-term perspective, though, it appears that the lack of sanctions and condemnation of these crimes likely reinforced the Russian government's belief that further violations of human rights and of the Geneva Conventions, which govern the treatment of civilians during armed conflicts, would also face little resistance and go unpunished.

The Second Chechen War, which dragged on for nearly a decade, helped Putin secure two presidential terms. In 1999, it became the blueprint for 'Operation Successor'. In his policy declaration entitled 'Russia at the Turn of the Millennium', Putin, then serving as Prime Minister, also addressed the Russian idea, which had failed to capture public attention despite a competition

announced by Yeltsin. He argued that, in order for the state to revive, social consensus, was an essential condition, and this would be achieved through the patriotism of citizens, internal strength and great-power status (*derzhavnost*). These goals were accompanied by vague promises of strengthening democratic values, adapting them to the Russian conditions and developing the market economy. From today's perspective, Putin's assessments of Western values, as outlined in that document, are particularly interesting:

> Russia will not quickly, if ever, become a new United States or United Kingdom, where civil liberties have a long tradition and are deeply rooted in history. Here, the government, its subordinate institutions and the entire power structure have always played an important role in the life of the country and its citizens. For Russians, a strong government is not an anomaly but, on the contrary, a source and guarantor of order as well as the initiator and driving force of change.[164]

The ideology promoted by Putin was founded on the state as a fundamental value. The message was clear: every Russian should contribute to the revival of a strong state and powerful government – the guarantor of order, progress and Russia's great-power status. However, the ideas articulated at the dawn of his presidency quickly revealed their fundamental flaw: a disconnect from reality. War, rather than peace (social consensus), became the defining feature of strong government.

The term 'counterterrorism operation' used at the time reflected the need to conceal the strictly military nature of the federal forces' actions on domestic territory. The military struggle was complemented by efforts in the realm of ideas and public consciousness. Propaganda, agitation and the creation of stereotypes and symbols all became part of the war over Chechnya. One slogan in particular took the country by storm: the promise to flatten the fortress of international terrorism and eradicate its defenders, whom Russia would pursue anywhere, "even in their outhouses".

The components of the aforementioned 'anti-myth', a technique of information warfare based on subversion (reversed perspective), included the linguistic discrimination of Chechnya's residents, who were portrayed only in negative terms. Today, the so-called *Kadyrovtsy* are synonymous with terror-spreading criminal groups carrying out the orders of the Chechen mafia. In another relic of the Chechen wars, Russian dictionaries feature a host of derogatory terms that describe the rebellious republic's population, reflecting Russian perceptions of the culture and appearance of Caucasian people. Examples include *chernozhopyy*

164 'Rosja na progu nowego tysiąclecia', at: wyborcza.pl.

('black-arse'), *chernozadyy* ('black-butt'), *churka* ('dirty'), *chernota* ('swarthy'), *chumazyy* ('grubby'), *chuchmek* ('chump'), *khacha* ('hach', a racial slur for people from the Caucasus), *chechenoid*, *mongoloid*, *chernyy shashlyk* ('burnt kebab'), and more. These epithets mobilised federal soldiers and unleashed their aggressive identity, laying the groundwork for 'defensive nationalism' within society. In its extreme form, they fostered chauvinist and even fascist attitudes, described by commentators as 'turbo-patriotic'.

3. The conceptual foundations of contemporary information warfare strategy

3.1. Geopolitics as the source of Russian revisionism

Paradoxically, the conceptual foundations of the Cold War's geopolitical framework became the reference point for exploring Russia's communication strategy. In the West, geopolitics was a subject of academic study; in the East, it was dismissed as bourgeois pseudoscience. Soviet strategists presented Western theories of geopolitics in a confrontational manner; Russian strategists adapted them as a useful 'conceptual weapon' to gain an informational advantage. Consequently, the post-Cold War rivalry between Russia and the United States triggered an unprecedented surge of interest in geopolitics and led to its introduction into academic discourse.

The key to understanding Russia's domestic and foreign policies, marked by the creation of fictitious threats and the alleged omnipresence of anti-Russian hysteria, lies in its information rivalry with the US and NATO. The contemporary concept which justifies actions in this sphere is as rigid as its Cold War predecessor: it is based on the contrast between the Russian and Western worlds, grounded in the alleged civilisational distinctiveness of the former, envisioned as the broader 'Eurasian world'. This strategic narrative, constructed around an artificially created geopolitical 'scientific worldview',[165] is simplified, tailored to the audience's perspective and covers a wide range of thematic areas. The revival of geopolitics also shapes the tone of the narrative, which is dominated by confrontational rhetoric.

165 According to Jakub Potulski, the surge in interest in geopolitics following the collapse of the Soviet Union was part of a broader international revival of this field. However, he notes that "in Russia, this phenomenon is unique, as geopolitics has never held the status of an academic discipline in this country. Unlike in France or Germany, there are no formal traditions that could have provided a foundation for such rapid development, especially that throughout the existence of the Soviet Union, geopolitics was dismissed as a pseudoscience, essentially a means of legitimising imperial aggression". See J. Potulski, *Współczesne kierunki rosyjskiej myśli geopolitycznej. Między nauką, ideologicznym dyskursem a praktyką*, Gdańsk 2010, p. 11, at: bibliotekanauki.pl.

The United States and NATO have been cast as the 'absolute enemy' that challenges Russia's role as a major power centre, abuses its trust and continues to 'humiliate' it – whether by shaping global developments through colour revolutions or expanding NATO. Russia contests the values of others and denies countries such as Georgia and Ukraine the sovereign right to chart their own developmental path and choose their allies, portraying its efforts as acts defending its own sovereignty and a response to the West's cynical game aimed at dismantling the Russian sphere of influence.

Blaming the West for the war in Ukraine has become a feature of Russia's geopolitical concept. This anti-Western trend emerged long before the Euromaidan events of 2013–14. "Russian shift away from the West coincided with the Rose and Orange Revolutions, which brought to power new elites in Tbilisi and Kiev who wanted to take their countries in exactly the opposite direction", Ronald Asmus wrote following Russia's war with Georgia.[166] This shift coincided with Russia's turn towards authoritarianism. At that time, the Kremlin's leaders prioritised regaining control over adjacent areas and rebuilding the Soviet-era spheres of influence. They sought to prevent neighbouring countries (Georgia, Ukraine, previously the Baltic States, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) from pursuing pro-Western paths.

During that period, Russian campaigns against the expansion of NATO, focused primarily on discrediting the countries aspiring to join it, revealed a stance holding that Central and Eastern Europe belong to Russia's sphere of influence and that any actions challenging this position were tantamount to undermining Russia's status as a great power. However, Russia's resistance to the enlargement of NATO was tempered by an awareness of its own limitations. As an alternative to the pro-Western orientation of countries aspiring to join the EU and NATO, Russia put forward 'positive' offers to provide them with cross-security guarantees, to create a nuclear-free zone or to transform NATO into a political bloc within a new regional security system involving Russia. The concept of a 'Greater Europe' stretching from Brest to Vladivostok emerged during this period alongside the parallel 'Greater Eurasia' initiative. Moscow used these widely publicised ideological constructs to argue that Russia, spanning two continents, should play a central role in shaping Europe's security system rather than the United States. The Kremlin's push for Eurasian integration also had an anti-Western dimension: at its heart was the idea of creating a separate

166 R. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2010, p. 217.

civilisation centred in Moscow, with its own values and development model that would be distinct from those imposed by the West.

Russian geopolitical projects have undergone a notable evolution. They began with a mild version represented by the 'near abroad' doctrine that was justified in the so-called Primakov Report, a public SVR report from 1993 entitled *Russia's role in the CIS area*. Then, in 1999, they evolved into geopolitics in action, exemplified by the 'Primakov loop', named for the Russian prime minister who turned his US-bound plane around upon learning that NATO had launched an intervention in Kosovo, and General Ivashov's 'dash to Pristina', in which he led Russian commandos stationed in Bosnia to seize the airport in Pristina without waiting for arrangements on the areas of responsibility for individual KFOR (Kosovo Force) contingents forming part of the peacekeeping mission in Kosovo. This evolution culminated in Putin's high-profile revisionist speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference.

The roots of Russia's geopolitical revisionism should not be attributed to a shift in the perception its elite has of the international order and Russia's place in it. For Russian strategists, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not signify the end of the world's dichotomous division. After the Russian Federation declared sovereignty, they assumed that their nation's weakness was temporary and that it was only a matter of time before its great-power status was restored. Putin was in a position to articulate this stance at the Munich conference due to the political stabilisation and the military modernisation initiated during that period. He sharply challenged the post-Cold War model of Russia's relations with the West and outlined its objectives in unequivocal terms: Moscow sought de facto recognition of the CIS as its sphere of interest and demanded the right to be involved in shaping the European order and to have an equal say with the Western countries on all major international issues.[167]

Marcin Kaczmarski argues that this speech was largely subjective. Putin accused the West of harbouring a Cold War victory syndrome and disregarding Russia's interests. He also stressed his confidence in Russia's resurgence as a great power and the weakness of its rivals, which reflected a desire to retaliate for the post-Cold War period, when the West ignored and marginalised Russia.[168] At that point, Russian revisionism took on a direct form. Previously, Moscow had relied primarily on psychological proxy actions, such as confrontational rhetoric, demonstrations of its capabilities, threats, or conversely, offers of closer cooperation addressed to Western countries; after Munich, it took steps to change the status quo. These included withdrawing from the Treaty on Conventional

167 'Выступление и дискуссия на Мюнхенской конференции по вопросам политики безопасности', President of Russia, 10 February 2007, kremlin.ru.

168 M. Kaczmarski, 'Russia's revisionist policy towards the West', OSW, Warszawa 2009, osw.waw.pl.

Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) in 2007, terminating the Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) in 2009, launching war against Georgia in 2008 and engaging in a bitter dispute over gas with Ukraine in 2009.

Geopolitical projects have immense practical value for the Kremlin. They have provided the basis for programmes aimed at the political reintegration of the post-Soviet area and the restoration of Russia's neo-imperial status. These projects, which proclaim the existence of a distinct Russian-speaking historical-cultural community and expand the idea of the Russian nation to include regions dominated by the Russian language and culture, have evolved over time into the concept of the 'Russian world'. It has become a versatile tool both for managing conflicts in the post-Soviet area (such as those in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea) and confronting the Western world, which is portrayed as an aggressor endangering Russian interests. It is an important instrument for mobilising and consolidating Russia's multi-ethnic society and an alternative offer for countries that "refuse to accept US hegemony in the world". This project has allowed Russia to swiftly revert to bloc-based thinking. After the Soviet Union's collapse, this way of thinking resurfaced in the form of geopolitical-civilisational blocs, with the 'Russian world' positioned against the 'American world', Eurasianism opposing Euro-Atlanticism and NATO countries confronting members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (the so-called Tashkent Treaty). Furthermore, Russia's geopolitical rivalry with the United States is grounded in the simplified principle that whoever controls the sources and flow of information within a given territory also controls the territory itself.[169]

Information campaigns built on a dichotomous, confrontational foundation are nothing new. Propaganda axioms about Russia's sphere of influence and constructs like "the world cannot be unipolar" were repeated throughout the Cold War. Moscow's goals – to 'de-Americanise' Europe and secure a dignified place for Russia and its allies in the world – have remained unchanged, as has its perception of the global geopolitical landscape where Washington imposes the American world's values on other nations. For this reason, the government of Ukraine is currently depicted as a "pawn in the United States' geopolitical game", Poland and the Baltic states in turn are "US footholds in the fight against Russia" and the intervention in Syria is as an arena where Putin took the initiative in combating the so-called Islamic State from Obama after US counter-terrorism tactics had failed.

169 Л. Медовкина, 'Геополитический аспект информационного противостояния РФ и США', *Via in tempore. История. Политология*, vol. 47, no. 3/2020, p. 629.

3.2. The troubadours of geopolitics: the Dugin and Panarin 'schools'

The revival of these propaganda constructs has been aided by the activity of geopolitical theorists and their personal involvement in information wars as so-called opinion leaders. This is particularly true of the prescriptive (and pseudoscientific) deliberations of Igor Panarin[170] and Alexander Dugin, who are both regarded as the leading troubadours of this approach. As a result of their reflections on neo-Eurasianism, a version of the interwar émigré Eurasianist ideology adapted to contemporary cultural and civilisational realities, geopolitics began to be seen as a state doctrine. Given that Lev Gumilev's Eurasian concept evolved from Pan-Slavism, which is often seen as a nationalist ideology glorifying Russia at the expense of Western Europe, references to Tsarist traditions of propaganda battles against the West should come as no surprise.

Panarin introduced the concept of information geopolitics, defined as a system for managing data flows within an adequately prepared information-psychological space. He identified its components as information and communication networks, specialised information response forces, communication channels and information-analytical centres for detecting and forecasting crisis situations. At the apex of this system, he placed a centre for coordinating and integrating the efforts of state and non-state entities engaged in information warfare.[171] Panarin, a professor at the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), is one of the most frequently cited theorists in Russia, having previously worked with the KGB as an analyst and, following its dissolution, with the Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information (FAPSI).

According to Panarin, 'information warfare' is a multifaceted amalgamation of various forms of influence. It encompasses the following components: social steering – exerting influence on society; social manoeuvring – steering society

170 Igor Panarin (b. 1958) holds a doctorate in psychology and is a member of the Academy of Military Sciences and a number of expert bodies which advise the Presidential Administration and the Federation Council. He began his career in the KGB. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he worked for FAPSI, headed the analytical department of Russia's Central Election Commission and led the press office of the Roscosmos space agency. He has also lectured at the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) and MGIMO. In addition, he was a presenter for Golos Rossii (Voice of Russia), a state-run international radio broadcaster. He has written around 20 books on information security, including: *Informatsionnaya voyna i Rossiya* (2000), *Informatsionnaya voyna i vybory* (2003), *Informatsionnaya voyna i diplomatiya* (2004), *Informatsionnaya voyna i geopolitika* (2006), *Informatsionnaya voyna za budushchee Rossii* (2008), *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna. Razval SSSR* (2010), SMI, propaganda i informatsionnye voyny (2014), *Gibridnaya voyna protiv Rossii 1816–2016* (2021), *Gibridnaya voyna i Yalta-2* (2023). He has also published numerous articles on information warfare and strategic analysis and has put forward several controversial proposals, such as the concept of Eurasian Rus and a confederation of post-Soviet states led by Vladimir Putin. Most of Panarin's books are available as e-books (see Библиотека «Куб», koob.ru).

171 И. Панарин, *Информационная война и геополитика, op. cit.*; Г. Почепцов, 'Информационная война: определения и базовые понятия', «ПСИ-ФАКТОР» 2014, psyfactor.org.

with the intention of achieving specific benefits; manipulating information – using accurate information in ways that lead to false conclusions; disinformation – distributing manipulated or fabricated information; fabricating information – creating false information; lobbying; blackmail; and extorting information and data. These actions are carried out systematically using both overt and covert tools of information warfare, particularly through propaganda messages, intelligence gathering, influence operations and special forces missions.

Panarin uses the terms 'information warfare' and 'information struggle' synonymously; they are essentially extensions of the active measures discussed in the previous chapter. In his article entitled 'On the doctrine of Russia's information struggle',[172] he describes this concept as "a form of struggle between parties that employs specialised methods and means (political, economic, diplomatic, military and other) to influence the adversary's information environment and defend one's own in order to achieve specific objectives". He distinguishes two types of information struggle: information-technical (which targets communication channels, telecommunications systems and radio-electronic devices), and information-psychological (which seeks to influence the psyche of political elites and populations of the opposing sides, institutions that shape public opinion and decision-making centres).

His model of information struggle consists of three components:

1. strategic political analysis,
2. information influence,
3. information counteraction (counteroffensive).

Panarin includes Russia's armed forces and special services in this model of a warfare system, equated here with an information deterrence system, arguing that they should develop the capability to defend the country against information aggression during peacetime. To achieve this, it is necessary to form rapid-response forces supported by the Glonass satellite monitoring system. In Panarin's view, this model of defending the state's information sovereignty requires Russia's presence in this domain to be strengthened across all the world's strategically important regions. Such an expansion would allow for a swift operational response in any emergency while helping to establish a strategic balance of power in areas vital to Russia's interests.

Panarin has explored various aspects of information warfare in his studies, believing that it continues unabated despite periods of peace between major

172 И. Панарин, 'О Доктрине информационного противоборства России', Центральный Комитет Всесоюзной Коммунистической Партии Большевиков, 17 July 2012, vkpb-skb.ru.

powers. He has focused on psychology, a subject that has been central to his research since the early stages of his career. In 1993, he defended his doctoral thesis entitled 'Psychological factors in the activities of officers under conditions of innovation' (*Psikhologicheskiye faktory deyatelnosti ofitsera v usloviyakh novovvedeniy*). In 1997, he earned his habilitation in political science with a dissertation entitled 'The information-psychological safeguards of Russia's national security' (*Informatsionno-psikhologicheskoye obespecheniye natsionalnoy bezopasnosti*).[173] He has devoted considerable attention to the international context of information influence and, more recently, to the role of information warfare in new-generation wars.

In his view, the struggle and competition in this domain amount to a global psychological war. They serve as a means of conducting politics and achieving political, economic, social, military and even spiritual goals. The United States, the global hegemon in this rivalry, is also the core of a geopolitical construct that Panarin calls the New British Empire (NBE), which – according to his thesis – claims to be on a special mission, ostensibly to protect universal values, but in reality is aiming for global domination through a 'world government' that parasitically feeds on the nations it controls. Europe, Russia's natural ally, has been greatly weakened by the two world wars. For this and other reasons, Panarin expands the Eurasian alliance to include a "continental geopolitical arc" running along the Paris–Berlin–Moscow–Beijing–New Delhi–Tehran axis, which unites these capitals in collective defence against common threats.

Russia's unique position in this global rivalry is determined by its geographical location and other attributes, such as being a space for the peaceful coexistence for nations, cultures and religions, in contrast to the NBE's Anglo-Saxon puritanism, and its history stretching back more than a thousand years. However, Panarin's vision is disconnected from research and sources, serving primarily to construct a desired historical awareness within society. To this end, for example, he has 'colonised' the historical 'Rus'. In his original concept of the continuity of Rus-Russian civilisation, he has identified the following 15 epochs (original spelling retained): Pagan Rus, Novgorod-Kievan Pre-Christian Rus, Christian Kievan Rus, Christian Vladimir-Suzdal Rus, Moscow Rus of the Rurikids, Romanov Rus, Petrine Rus – the Empire, the Russian Empire, the Provisional Government, Lenin-Trotsky Rus, Stalinist Rus, Post-Stalinist Rus, Liberal Rus (1991–1998), Post-Liberal Rus (1998–2002) and Great Power Rus (2002–).[174]

173 'Кто такой Игорь Панарин', Коммерсантъ, 25 April 2006, kommersant.ru.
174 И. Панарин, Л. Панарина, *Информационная война и мир*, Москва 2003, pp. 283–285.

Panarin's views are close aligned with the historiosophical and geopolitical concepts of Alexander Dugin,[175] who has also delved into eschatology, mysticism and the occult. Similarly to Panarin, Dugin views history as being primarily the product of a worldview, which leads to fundamental differences between its domestic and external versions. Advocating for Eurasianism as a national doctrine/idea, Dugin outlined a vision of Rus-Eurasia in his book *The Eurasia Project*.[176] Like Panarin, he expanded Russia's historical and geographical scope to include Kievan Rus. In the final chapters, he used this perspective to argue that a non-imperial Russia is inconceivable, that a renewed division of the globe into spheres of influence is inevitable and that the Eurasian movement is a categorical imperative in the postmodern world.

In this approach, geopolitics serves a practical purpose, providing pseudo-scientific arguments to craft a desired perception of reality. This constructed (imagined) vision lays the groundwork for shaping societal worldviews and fostering pro-state attitudes. In this context, Dugin's primary achievement is the synthesis of Eurasian ideology with the geopolitical paradigm to justify the state's imperial aspirations. By seeking historical foundations for the ideology and identity of modern Russia, he has revived the Eurasian concept in a contemporary, neo-Eurasianist version. It draws on cultural, geographical and religious factors, blending them with neo-imperial values to legitimise the necessity of Russia's political, economic and military expansion. As such, it resonates strongly with the mentality of Russian military circles, still deeply rooted in a totalitarian state. Indeed, it should now be considered a variant of totalitarianism, a Russian project for a global Eurasian empire. Thus, a geopolitical theory that regards northern Eurasia as the heartland of the world has been transformed into a political initiative for reconstructing and expanding Greater Russia. This vision assigns a unique status to Orthodoxy, as the only true faith and the bearer of the idea of sacralising the state and power, and to the Tatar-Mongols, who are credited with helping to forge a new, powerful

175 Aleksandr Dugin (b. 1962) is a self-taught scholar, geopolitical theorist, religious historian and philosopher. From 2008 to 2014, he lectured at Lomonosov Moscow State University. He is the leading ideologue of neo-imperialism, Eurasianism and integral traditionalism as well as the founder of the Eurasian Youth Union. In 2014, he was banned from entering the European Union's member states. Dugin's work centres on the concept of Russia as Eurasia – an independent Eurasian civilisation distinct from both the West and the East. He has built this concept on a synthesis of ideas, values and visions drawn from diverse religious, philosophical and geopolitical sources, spanning both the political right and left. He has combined various antiliberal and anti-Western concepts, arguing that Russia's and the Eurasian civilisation's greatest enemy is liberalism, which he sees as inseparably linked to Western civilisation and the United States. He is a prolific author of books and has published hundreds of articles in both the Russian and international media. In the 1980s, Dugin was involved in counterculture and occultism while also engaging in political activism. He joined the National-Patriotic Front 'Pamyat'. In 1993, he co-founded the National Bolshevik Party with Eduard Limonov. Since 2004, he has been the chief ideologue of the Eurasian Youth Union, delivering online lectures via Evrazia.tv. Since 2012, he has been an active member of the conservative Izborsk Club; in 2016, he became editor-in-chief of Tsargrad, a television channel that promotes conservative Orthodox values.

176 А. Дугин, *Проект „Евразия". Путь России*, Москва 2004, pp. 5–45.

Russian statehood and, most importantly, forming a new civilisation together with Russia and a new super-ethnos: the Russian nation.

As both a theorist[177] and practitioner (leader of the International Eurasian Movement and activist of the Eurasian Youth Union), Dugin has advocated the view that only a society attached to its native values can compete with global powers. He views international relations through the lens of a confrontation between two civilisations: the maritime (Atlantic) and the land-based (Eurasian). He envisions Russia as the unifying centre for continental nations, standing in opposition to Western civilisation, which seeks to impose its system of values, globalism and materialism on the rest of the world. According to Dugin, this fuels extremism and subversive movements that undermine countries, including Western-orchestrated colour revolutions designed to destabilise entire post-Soviet regions. From this perspective, information warfare takes on special importance, particularly in leveraging the opportunities provided by new information technologies, notably the Internet.

According to Russian researchers, Dugin's main contribution to information warfare theory is the popularisation of terms such as 'netwar' (also referred to as 'network-centric warfare') and the 'Eurasian network'. By introducing the English-language term netwar, which refers to the social component of cyberwar, Dugin essentially created a stereotype of network warfare; however, it remains vague on the technology behind 'network struggle'. He envisioned the 'Eurasian network' as a response to the US network-centric challenge. In organisational terms, it would be "a special group composed of senior officials, elite mission-driven (passionate) personnel from Russia's special services, intellectuals, political scientists, a corps of patriotically orientated journalists and cultural figures". This model of the Eurasian network combined elements of American postmodernism but with Russian characteristics. However, the vectors of influence, symmetrical to those of the United States, would be aimed in precisely the opposite direction.[178] Dugin's proposals are closely tied to the Kremlin's current strategy of information warfare and the interwar Eurasianist ideology developed by figures such as the philosopher Nikolai Trubetzkoy and the historiosopher Lev Gumilyov. The latter introduced the term 'passionarity' into scholarly discourse and identified passionary and non-passionary periods in Russian history.

177 See, for example, *idem*, *Основы геополитики. Геополитическое будущее России*, Москва 1997; *Четвертая политическая теория*, Москва 2009; 'Сетевые войны', Изборский клуб, dynacon.ru.

178 *Idem*, *Геополитика постмодерна. Времена новых империй. Очерки геополитики XXI века*, Санкт-Петербург 2007; *idem*, 'Сетевые войны', *op. cit*. An excerpt from the book *Geopolityka postmoderny* titled 'Koncepcja wojen sieciowych', translated by Przemysław Sieradzan, was published in the journal *Geopolityka* in 2009, no. 1–2.

In Dugin's view, information and network warfare have become fundamental components of the rivalry between East and West; a properly shaped public consciousness is the decisive factor in achieving information superiority. This rivalry did not end with the Cold War – only its strategic objectives have shifted and now revolve around geopolitics. The opinion of Michał Wojnowski is particularly relevant in this context. He argues that Dugin's interest in information geopolitics was not driven by a desire for academic, objective analysis, but by an intention to demonstrate that the US network-centric warfare is primarily aimed at Russia's political interests.[179]

Dugin's views on geopolitics resonated with military leaders, who quickly recognised its practical value. They embraced it as an alternative ideology to communism, which was rooted in class struggle and became outdated and unappealing in the context of the emerging state capitalism in Russia. In 1992, the Military Academy of the General Staff began teaching geopolitics, with other military academies soon following suit. It is believed that Dugin's flagship book entitled *The foundations of geopolitics. The geopolitical future of Russia*, was inspired by General Igor Rodionov, who was then the academy's commandant and later Russia's defence minister. The book's consultant, General Leonid Ivashov, subsequently adopted Dugin's ideas, methodology and intellectual discourse, becoming a prominent advocate of Eurasianist ideas within military circles. This was reflected in his books, articles and, most notably, his activity at the Academy of Geopolitical Problems that he headed for many years.[180]

Dugin's body of work is contested in international discussions: both he and his constructs have long evoked extreme emotions. Some researchers view him as the 'Kremlin's ideologue' and 'Putin's brain', while others dismiss him as a charlatan and fraud. Some exaggerate his actual influence on the Russian head of state, while others call him the 'Kremlin's attack dog' or 'the president's puppet'. However, this debate is largely irrelevant. What undoubtedly connects Putin and this self-styled ideologue is a simplified theory of international relations that appeals to Moscow because it claims that it would be enough to form a Eurasian Union or a 'Russian world' in order to elevate Russia to the status of a global superpower. They also share a similar perception of Ukraine; indeed, Russia's invasion of this country triggered renewed interest in Dugin's ideas. In his concept presented in 'The foundations of geopolitics', Ukraine cannot survive as an independent entity. He describes it as a borderland 'limitrophe', a space where Central European and Eurasian influences are in constant conflict.

179 M. Wojnowski, 'Aleksandr Dugin a resorty siłowe Federacji Rosyjskiej. Przyczynek do badań nad wykorzystaniem geopolityki przez cywilne i wojskowe służby specjalne we współczesnej Rosji', *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego* 2014, no. 10(6), abw.gov.pl.

180 'История Академии', The Academy of Geopolitical Problems, akademiagp.ru.

He portrays a 'sovereign Ukraine' as an anti-Russia, a Western creation that was brought into existence artificially in order to undermine Russia's position in the region. To counter Western influence in Ukraine, Russia must bring it into its sphere of influence.[181] Ukraine occupies a particularly prominent place in Dugin's considerations. As early as the Orange Revolution, Dugin argued that the country is inhabited by two culturally and geopolitically opposed nations, which would ultimately cause it to split into two distinct entities: one aligned with the Atlantic West, the other – with continental Russia. In his 2015 book entitled *Ukraine – my war*, he reiterated that it is in Eurasia's interests to break up 'New Europe' and establish cooperation with 'Old Europe'.

In the context of information warfare, Dugin's role as the leader of the International Eurasian Movement and the Eurasian Youth Union, both established in 2004, appears more important. These two organisations combine analytical and research activities on their online platforms[182] with direct actions, such as hosting international conferences and roundtable discussions and engaging in street activism. Their extreme slogans, aesthetics and methods resemble those of the fascist-leaning National Bolshevik Party during the early 1990s. Notably, former members of that party, Pavel Zarifullin and Valery Korovin, became leaders of these two Eurasian entities.[183]

Today, Dugin continues to spread his beliefs among new generations of Eurasianism supporters. He remains active in discussions on various forums, influencing the contemporary discourse and educating new cohorts of conceptualists (*smysloviki*, literally 'seekers of meaning'). He has occasionally made high-profile blunders, such as in May 2014, when, as a lecturer and head (since 2009) of the Department of Sociology of International Relations at Lomonosov Moscow State University, he declared emphatically that "Ukrainians must be killed, killed and killed again, I say this as a professor".[184] These remarks led to his dismissal from the university. Dugin views practical activity as the essence of geopolitical engagement. In the introduction to a book by his student Valery Korovin, he wrote:

181 J. Ignaczak, 'Wzajemne stosunki Rosji, Ukrainy i Polski w koncepcji Aleksandra Dugina', Teologia Polityczna, 3 March 2022, teologiapolityczna.pl.

182 See, for example: 'Россия-3 — Портал сетевой войны ЕСМ'; 'Портал Международного Евразийского Движения'; 'Информационно-аналитический портал Евразия'; 'Арктогея — Философский евразийский портал'; 'Евразия-ТВ'.

183 Valery Korovin is a political scientist, sociologist and journalist. He is the founder and director of the Centre for Geopolitical Expertise and is affiliated with the Eurazja.com website and the Izborsk Club. He has authored several books, including *Konets proekta 'Ukraina'* (The end of the 'Ukraine' project), published in St Petersburg in 2014. He considers Ukraine an 'unviable state' and has described Ukrainians as "subhumans", claiming they have failed to establish a 'fully-fledged' state.

184 'Профессора МГУ Дугина потребовали уволить за призыв «убивать, убивать и убивать»', Московский Комсомолец, 16 June 2014, mk.ru.

> Valery Korovin is, in every sense of the word, a practical geopolitician, actively engaged in the historical processes through which various geopolitical trends become reality. His involvement with the Centre for Geopolitical Expertise and the Eurasian Movement has provided him with a unique opportunity to participate in international activities, including numerous conferences, discussions, meetings and political actions aimed at strengthening Eurasianist positions both within Russia and abroad. In other words, Valery Korovin's theoretical interpretations are grounded in firsthand knowledge of the processes he describes, in direct participation in these processes. In addition to his theoretical background, the author has extensive personal experience in conducting network operations, information wars and other specific forms of influence aimed at solidifying geopolitical leverage on the global stage.[185]

Building on the geopolitical-Eurasianist concepts outlined by Dugin, Russian experts have focused on 'reflexive control' – studying the adversary's behaviour and what is required to provoke and persuade them into voluntarily making decisions that benefit the aggressor. The analyses required to achieve this goal provide insights into the consciousness matrices of the targeted country's citizens. These refer to the past (historical facts, events and the personalities of rulers), the present (assessments of the current situation, the worldview) and the future (aspirations, prospects and expectations for change).

Contemporary Russian literature on the subject explicitly draws on works that were created long before the emergence of theories on psychological warfare, special propaganda (*spetz-propaganda*), active measures, public diplomacy, political marketing and similar concepts. For example, Panarin dedicated Chapter 11 of his book *Information warfare and geopolitics* to the historical roots of propaganda warfare in pioneering Tsarist-era works. He highlighted the geopolitical ideas of the Slavophiles Konstantin Leontiev and Nikolai Danilevsky, who examined international rivalry through the lens of civilisational differences and warring cultures. Drawing on the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome, they provided an ideological foundation for Tsarist policies. Panarin placed particular emphasis on the role of Fyodor Tyutchev, dedicating an entire chapter to him: 'The geopolitics of Russophobia'. As early as the mid-19th century, this author introduced the term 'Russophobia' into broader discourse, analysing it as a manifestation of the European elites' bias against the policies of the Russian Empire; he argued that this served to obscure the West's double standards.[186]

185 Foreword to В. Коровин, *Главная военная тайна США. Сетевые войны*, Эксмо, 2009, at: Электронная библиотека, RoyalLib.com.

186 For more, see J. Darczewska, P. Żochowski, *Russophobia in the Kremlin's strategy. A weapon of mass destruction*, Warszawa 2015, osw.waw.pl.

Contemporary literature also draws on the works of Soviet and émigré theorists, who developed a number of original concepts that serve as reference points for current theories on new-generation warfare. They primarily viewed war as a social phenomenon and emphasised the importance of the morale of the soldiers. The Red Army was portrayed as both the defender of the Soviet people and the liberator of oppressed masses in other countries. Consequently, special attention was devoted to fostering a so-called worker-peasant class consciousness, educating soldiers and civilians about the communist state and instilling pride in the army and its weaponry. Indeed, this was the purpose of the institution of political officers and other educational platforms established at the very inception of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. When examining the role of new weapons, early Soviet theorists such as Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Mikhail Frunze argued that war is shaped less by technology than by the human factor – willpower and energy.[187]

Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov brought significant attention to figures such as Aleksandr Svechin and Georgii Isserson by referencing them in his publications (see below). According to Svechin, armed conflict is merely one of the tools of strategy; it is dominated by politics and also includes economic and information competition, or 'political agitation'. Flexibility, manoeuvring, evasive tactics and apparent compromises are essential tools in this context. In the gruelling war of attrition between communism and the capitalist world, any method of deceiving the adversary is not only permissible but even necessary.[188] Similarly, in his book on the evolution of operational art, Isserson combined so-called deep operations with non-linear actions, including propaganda. He also believed that the element of surprise, along with concealing mobilisation campaigns and troop deployments, should play a key role in any campaign planning.[189]

In the context of the continuity of Russian strategic thinking, treating geopolitics as a doctrine is a hallmark of contemporary Russian research. Russian theorists have thus stripped geopolitics of its value as a scholarly discipline, which is in contrast to Western analysts, who recognise its academic merit. This is reflected in the valuation of reality, a tendency to bend the facts to suit the Kremlin's current needs and interests. This peculiar approach is visible in the works of both academics, such as Panarin and Vadim Tsymbursky, and so-called '*institutchiksi*' such as Sergey Karaganov and Vladimir Karyakin – advocates of the geopolitics employed in research institutions such as the Institute for the

187 For a broader discussion on Soviet military theory, see M. Budzisz, *Wszystko jest wojną. Rosyjska kultura strategiczna*, Warszawa 2021.

188 А. Свечин, *Стратегия*, Москва 1927, pp. 30–41.

189 Г. Иссерсон, *Эволюция оперативного искусства*, Москва 1937, pp. 126–143.

USA and Canada Studies, the nstitute of Oriental Studies and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies. It is even more pronounced in the publications of countless entities that support the official propaganda, including the Academy of Informational Self-Defence, the Izborsk Club and the Valdai Club. As a result of their activities, geopolitical doctrine has become a cornerstone of Russia's strategy for information security.

3.3. The popularity of concepts for permanent new-generation warfare

Modern theorists of information warfare argue that non-military operations (also referred to as non-linear or asymmetric) essentially produce outcomes similar to those achieved through military actions. These include: breaking the will to resist, disorganising the armed forces and infrastructure, paralysing the ruling elites psychologically, and intimidating the public. These views are rooted in the 1960s concept of reflexive control. Its primary proponent, the émigré military theorist Vladimir Lefebvre, understood it as influencing the opponent's perception (their "psychological processing") through methods such as manipulation, disinformation, provocation and camouflage. The essence of reflexive control lay in moulding the images-reflections of a given target, for example public opinion, selected social groups and decision-makers. These included:

1. self-perception – how the target of reflexive control views itself,
2. perception of the adversary – how the target perceives the entity conducting reflexive control (the aggressor – the party managing the process),
3. perception of the issue at stake – how the target views the object, problem, or topic central to the conflict between itself and the aggressor.

The methods of reflexive control in Lefebvre's classic interpretation include creating false grounds for protests on the adversary's territory, generating false objectives for the adversary, manipulating the adversary by spreading a distorted image of one's own actions (for example through doctrines) and neutralising the adversary's deductive capabilities by overwhelming them with excessive amounts of information. In practice, they are indistinguishable from the active measures described above in the context of information warfare.

Wojnowski notes that over time, the concept of reflexive control has been updated and refined, becoming a consistent focus of study for subsequent theorists such as Vladimir Lepsky, Yuri Shankin, Valentin Kantorov, Mikhail Ionov, Sergey Komov and Andrei Manoilo. Wojnowski asserts that the paradigm of reflexive control largely underpins modern information-psychological operations. In contemporary Russia, it has applied in a wide range of situations: not only in the field of information security but also in social sciences and security

studies, where it has been used to develop so-called reflexive models, such as those of terrorists.[190]

In the 1960s, Evgeny Messner encapsulated similar methods (leveraging ethnic and psychological factors, conducting subversive/propaganda operations and engaging the opponent's citizens and organisational structures) in the term 'insurgent war'. At the heart of his concept was the struggle through 'insurgency', utilising the potential for protest, rebellion and unrest.[191] In a conflict of this kind, the primary tool is psychology: demoralisation, fear and a sense of threat imposed on the population by guerrillas and saboteurs. To wage an effective insurgent war, it is necessary to first create a psychological profile of the hostile state's society and then subject it to specialised processing. In this type of conflict, the front line extends to various spheres of human activity, such as the economy, politics and culture. The goal is to unite the residents of your own state and influence at least part of the hostile state's population. This task is carried out by journalists, saboteurs, provocateurs, propagandists, political parties and social organisations. The secret to psychological control over rebellious masses lies in sensing their expectations and aspirations and then shaping their new consciousness so that they recognise it as an expression of their own will.[192]

The concepts of permanent war play an enormous role in the modern practice of information warfare, particularly through the conceptual apparatus popularised by its theorists, which is filled with slogan-like terms such as 'the geopolitics of Russophobia', 'cognitive-psychological operations', 'information weapons', 'historical weapons', 'information *spetznaz*', 'mission-driven cadres', 'guerrilla warfare' and 'protest potential'. These militarised terms shape confrontational attitudes, imposing a distorted picture of reality on both domestic and international public opinion. One example of such functionally charged terminology in the Russian literature is the concept of 'hybrid warfare'. Its interpretation evokes past solutions described by military theorists while also creating the impression that the Kremlin has developed a symmetrical response to Western ideas or has even come up with innovative solutions that give it a military edge over NATO. This is reinforced by the propaganda slogan of the 'Gerasimov Doctrine', the Russian equivalent of hybrid warfare.

The Western concept of hybrid warfare as a form of new-generation warfare gained prominence following the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in southeastern Ukraine in 2014. It was characterised as the coordinated use of

190 For more on this issue, see M. Wojnowski, '„Zarządzanie refleksyjne" jako paradygmat rosyjskich operacji informacyjno-psychologicznych w XXI w.', *op. cit*.

191 K. Kraj, 'Wojny asymetryczne czy miatieżwojna Jewgienija Messnera zagrożeniem dla bezpieczeństwa w XXI wieku', Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i Praktyka, no. 3/2012, at: eRIKA, repozytorium.ka.edu.pl; *idem*, 'Miatieżwojna Jewgienija Messnera', *E-Terroryzm.pl*, no. 2/2012, e-terroryzm.pl.

192 Е. Месснер, *Всемирная мятежвойна*, Москва 2004, pp. 59–64.

political, economic, military, social (psychological influence) and information measures, collectively referred to by the acronym PEMSI. At that time, Western experts noted that Russia's actions featured a skilful combination of propaganda and disinformation, the use of diplomacy and economic tools, activity in cyberspace and informational 'concealment' to obscure military operations. They identified these elements in the Russian Chief of the General Staff's thoughts on new-generation warfare, labelling them the 'Gerasimov Doctrine',[193] after concluding that they offered insight into Russia's strategy towards Ukraine. However, Russian analysts and commentators have used this slogan as an argument to highlight the 'hybridisation' of the West's anti-Russian policies.[194]

3.4. The 'Gerasimov Doctrine'

The Russian Chief of the General Staff outlined the principles of new-generation warfare during the annual general assembly of the Academy of Military Sciences in 2013. These ideas were later published in an article on 21st century trends in armed conflict. Gerasimov stated: "The emphasis in the methods of warfare is shifting toward political, economic, information, humanitarian and other non-military means, implemented with the use of the local population's protest potential. All of this is supported by covert measures, including the execution of information warfare operations and the activities of special operations forces".[195]

In Gerasimov's view, changes in the nature of warfare were highlighted by the course of the colour revolutions, which posed significant challenges for Russian military science. The classic paradigm of war is giving way to the gradual dismantling of the hostile state's structures through 'indirect actions' employing asymmetric non-military means (political, economic and humanitarian measures utilising protest potential) alongside military means, such as operations carried out by special forces and the tools of information warfare. These methods are designed to break the adversary's resistance, incapacitate the ruling elites psychologically and disorganise the armed forces and strategic infrastructure. Military actions can be initiated during peacetime by small, mobile military units or irregular formations, which blurs the line between war and peace. The primary objective of military measures is to destroy the hostile state's military and economic potential by conducting rapid, precise strikes on its critical infrastructure with the use of precision-guided weapons. War is fought simultaneously on land, at sea, in the air and within the information

193 R.N. McDermott, 'Does Russia Have a Gerasimov Doctrine?', *Parameters*, no. 46(1)/2016, US Army War College, press.armywarcollege.edu; R. Coalson, 'Russian Military Doctrine article by General Valery Gerasimov', 21 June 2014, facebook.com.

194 See, for example: А. Манойло, 'Гибридизация современной мировой политики и национальная безопасность Российской Федерации', *Геополитический журнал*, no. 1(17)/2017, at: elibrary.ru.

195 В. Герасимов, 'Ценность науки в предвидении', *Военно-промышленный курьер*, no. 8/2013, at: vpk.name.

space. Some activities are carried out by paramilitary formations, including military-civilian mercenary/volunteer units and various armed groups.

In another fragment, Gerasimov elaborated: "The importance of asymmetric and indirect actions is growing. These may involve political isolation, economic sanctions, blockades of maritime, air and land transport routes, intimidation through the threat of force and the deployment of international peacekeeping forces under the pretext of defending human rights and conducting humanitarian operations. Within the system of indirect actions, information and special operations will play a special role".[196]

Russian analysts have continued to popularise Gerasimov's thoughts on combining the tools of undeclared war, both kinetic and non-kinetic, military and non-military, as the Russian equivalent of hybrid warfare dubbed the 'Gerasimov Doctrine'.[197] For example, it was the central theme of an issue of the journal Vestnik AVN, published by the Academy of Military Sciences.[198] These discussions are aimed at both the domestic audience (emphasising the significance of Gerasimov's insights) and foreign military experts. The practice of transposing Western terminology into the Russian discourse, which is widespread in specialised literature, often leads international researchers astray. They mistakenly interpret the Russian conceptual framework as a direct reflection of their own, but in fact Russia has been remarkably consistent in adapting Western terms based on its own assumptions and logic, tailoring them to its needs, traditions and strategic culture. In 2015, Ukrainian analyst Volodymyr Horbulin noted that, when adapting Western theories, Russia blends offensive and defensive concepts to suit its geostrategy of revanche.[199] Consequently, Russian analysts have turned the literature on new-generation warfare, indirect action strategies and related topics into both a platform for confrontation and a vehicle for deploying conceptual disinformation.

Gerasimov himself has never referred to his thoughts as a doctrine or characterised modern warfare as hybrid. The term 'Gerasimov Doctrine' was first used in 2014 by Mark Galeotti on his blog 'In Moscow's Shadows'. In 2018, Galeotti explicitly apologised for this in an article for Foreign Policy,[200] clarifying that he had used the catchy title for his commentary on Gerasimov's article while being fully aware that the concept was not a doctrine and that Gerasimov

196 See 'Начальник Генерального штаба В. В. Герасимов: «О состоянии Вооружённых сил Российской Федерации и мерах по повышению их боеспособности»', Арсенал Отечества, 5 December 2013, arsenal-otechestva.ru.

197 'Бои нетрадиционной ориентации', The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 3 July 2020, army.ric.mil.ru; П. Фельгенгауэр, 'Добиться превосходства над остальным человечеством', Новая газета, 9 March 2019, novayagazeta.ru.

198 See *Архив номеров журнала Вестник АВН* (no. 2/2023), Academy of Military Sciences, avnrf.ru.

199 В. Горбулин, '„Гибридная война" как ключевой элемент российской геостратегии реванша', Зеркало недели, 23 January 2015, zn.ua.

200 M. Galeotti, 'I'm Sorry for Creating the 'Gerasimov Doctrine'', Foreign Policy, 5 March 2018, foreignpolicy.com.

was not the author of the ideas it included. Galeotti issued similar corrections several times,[201] but to no avail – the Russian narrative was bolstered by a flood of domestic and international articles referencing the 'doctrine'. These were clearly deliberate moves: the message was reinforced by presenting Gerasimov's subsequent speech in March 2019 as the 'new Gerasimov Doctrine 2.0'. That speech reaffirmed the principles outlined in his 2013 paper while placing greater emphasis on military potential and developing capabilities based on advanced weapon systems.[202] Gerasimov portrayed hybrid measures as a means of supporting military objectives. He reiterated many of his earlier points, highlighting the following key features of modern armed conflict: combat operations during peacetime (no distinction between war and peace), the high manoeuvrability of forces, the unique role of special forces and operations, battlefield automation, simultaneous engagements across multiple operational domains and the integration of asymmetric and conventional actions.

Polish experts have accurately assessed Gerasimov's thoughts as yet another myth highlighting Russia's desire to showcase its purportedly new strategy. In reality, these ideas were neither innovative nor groundbreaking – they simply repackaged familiar concepts of new-generation warfare.[203] According to Polish researchers, the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' is yet another catchy but ultimately hollow term within the realm of Russian military thought. Gerasimov's thoughts do not deviate from earlier concepts or introduce any new content; they are also included in Russia's strategic documents. Their prominence stems largely from their propaganda appeal which has sustained enduring interest in this term and spawned a vast number of Russian publications straddling the boundaries of science, analysis and commentary. Western theorists have realised this after initially attempting to use this 'doctrine' to explain the current challenges related to Russia's competition with the West. Now, they largely support the conclusion that Russia makes use of a variety of tools for managing conflicts, including those provided by its conceptual apparatus.[204]

201 See, for example: *idem*, 'The mythical 'Gerasimov doctrine' and the language of threat', *Critical Studies on Security*, vol. 7, no. 2/2019; '„The Gerasimov Doctrine"', Berlin Policy Journal, 28 April 2020, berlinpolicyjournal.com.

202 'Szef Sztabu Generalnego rosyjskiej armii zwolennikiem wojny hybrydowej', Defence24, 5 March 2019, defence24.pl.

203 M. Wojnowski, 'Mit „wojny hybrydowej". Konflikt na terenie państwa ukraińskiego w świetle rosyjskiej myśli wojskowej XIX–XXI wieku', *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego* 2015, special issue; J. Meissner, 'Rosyjska koncepcja wojny nowej generacji w świetle pierwszych doświadczeń z wojny w Ukrainie', *Roczniki Nauk Społecznych* 2022, no. 4, ojs.tnkul.pl.

204 See, for example: C. Bilban, H. Grininger, 'Mythos Gerasimov-Doktrin. Ansichten des russischen Militärs oder Grundlage hybrider Kriegsführung?', *Schriftenreihe der Landesverteidigungsakademie* 2/2019, Landesverteigigungsakademie, bmlv.gv.at.

4. Information wars in Russian strategic documents

4.1. The doctrinal assumptions of information struggle

Russian official documents have assigned a military dimension to information since 2000, when the country published its first Information Security Doctrine. An in-depth analysis of this issue reveals a number of general, expanding trends in Russia's security policy between 2000 and 2023. These boil down to a blurring of the lines between external and internal threats as well as between peacetime and wartime, introducing non-military methods and organisational structures into information warfare and bestowing an ideological character upon it. Over time, this has obscured the contours of international conflicts, which is reflected in the fact that Russia has been waging a full-scale war against a neighbouring country while claiming that it is "not a party" to the conflict. Officially, it is only restoring order and saving Ukraine's Russian-speaking population from the "genocide unleashed by the West".

In the view of Russian strategists, information warfare represents a type of struggle between two sides which are employing both conventional and unconventional methods, overt and covert means, as well as military and non-military organisational structures, such as special forces, irregular formations and the political opposition within the adversary's territory. In this approach, it operates on two levels: the broader, as an independent form of conflict conducted across various dimensions (political, economic, diplomatic, humanitarian and military-technical) and the narrower, as a form of support for military operations.

In academic discourse, information warfare is identified as an analogue to strategic communication (in NATO's terminology) and Russia's information policy in the field of defence.[205] In strategic documents, these spheres are differentiated: the latter is defined as protecting information security and national interests. In Russia's 2016 Information Security Doctrine (currently in force) it is broadly defined (item I.2.g) as "the implementation of mutually supportive measures (legal, organisational, investigative, intelligence, counter-intelligence, scientific and technological, information and analytical, personnel-related, economic and others) to predict, detect, suppress, prevent, and respond to information threats and mitigate their impact".[206] Russia's national interests

205 In the Russian approach, strategic communication is viewed as a form of the West's information warfare. Western information and communication technologies are perceived as a threat to the sovereignty, integrity and stability of countries. They are seen as instruments of cybercrime, technological dominance, the monopolisation of the computer market and the restriction of other countries' access to this market, leading to information inequality and the mental dependency of their societies. See 'Основы государственной политики Российской Федерации в области международной информационной безопасности', The Security Council of the Russian Federation, 12 April 2021, scrf.gov.ru.

206 'Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации', The Security Council of the Russian Federation, 5 December 2016, scrf.gov.ru.

in the information sphere are similarly defined in broad terms (item II.8). These include: protecting the constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens with regard to accessing information; providing information support to civil society in the field of state governance; preserving the cultural, historical and spiritual-ethical values of the multiethnic people (this repeats a phrase used in the Russian Constitution: *mnogonatsionalny narod*); ensuring the operation of information infrastructure during peacetime, periods of direct threat and wartime; developing information technologies, products and services to enhance information security; providing the Russian and international public with reliable information about Russia's state policies and the official positions of its government on major domestic and global events; supporting the development of an international legal regime to counter the misuse of information technologies aimed at destabilising the state's strategic stability; promoting equitable strategic partnerships in the field of information security; and ensuring Russia's sovereignty in the international information space.

In line with the identified threats and challenges, the defence ministry's strategic tasks in the information space (item IV.21) include strategically containing and preventing armed conflicts; enhancing the system of forces and means for conducting information warfare within the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation as well as other military units, formations and bodies; forecasting, detecting and assessing information threats, including those targeting the Armed Forces in the information domain; supporting the defence of the interests of Russia's allies in the information sphere; and neutralising information-psychological operations aimed at undermining the historical and patriotic foundations of the tradition of defending the homeland.

On the one hand, the document explicitly emphasises the ministry's authority over Russia's war machine, which encompasses not only the armed forces but also "other troops, formations and bodies".[207] On the other, it highlights the broad range of "legal, organisational, operational-investigative, intelligence, counterintelligence, scientific-technical, information-analytical, personnel, economic and other measures" employed in carrying out its tasks. These relate both to cybersecurity and information warfare; the scope of the latter includes defending spiritual, ethical, historical and cultural values as well as educating the younger generations of Russians in the spirit of the patriotic defence of the country.

207 "Other troops, formations and bodies" are part of the state's military organisation that item I.8 (Basic concepts) of the doctrine defines as "all the state and military management services, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, other troops, formations and bodies, special formations created during wartime (hereinafter referred to as the Armed Forces, other troops, formations and bodies), which constitute its foundation and conduct their activities by military means, as well as the country's defence-industrial complex, whose joint efforts are directed at preparing for and executing the armed defence of the Russian Federation".

Paradoxically, the 2014 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation places little emphasis on strictly military objectives and tasks related to information warfare. They are linked to the highlighted need to undertake integrated actions in the information space, to further enhance the forces and means of information warfare, strengthen and tighten the security system of the armed forces and other military units/bodies and to create conditions to reduce the risk that information and telecommunication technologies could be used for unlawful political and military purposes. This approach signals the existence of two types of information warfare: information-technical, which is conducted via communication and transmission channels, and information-psychological, targeting the psyche of military personnel, decision-making centres and the societies of the warring parties. The broad outlines of the armed forces' strategy in the information space are also contained in the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, the Fundamentals of the Russian Federation's Policy in the Field of International Information Security until 2020[208] and the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. These documents are available on the website of Russia's Security Council and fall under its information patronage, acting as tools of the long-term propaganda campaign.

These documents also describe information warfare as a means of 'non-nuclear deterrence'. The December 2014 doctrine defines it as a "set of foreign policy, military and military-technical measures aimed at preventing aggression against the Russian Federation without the use of nuclear weapons". Information warfare is an auxiliary tool since nuclear deterrence has been, and remains, Russia's primary deterrent; indeed, it was reinforced following the annexation of Crimea. The cited document explicitly states that Russia may use nuclear weapons if it or its allies are attacked with nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction, or in response to a conventional attack that poses a threat to the state's existence. Since the concept "vital threats to the existence of the Russian Federation" is interpreted broadly, any attack on Russia, including on territories that were "liberated" and "reintegrated into the motherland" in 2014 and 2022, could serve as a pretext for a nuclear strike that would unleash nuclear war, in light of the doctrine and official propaganda narratives.

4.2. The functions of Russian strategic documents

According to Witold Rodkiewicz, Russian strategic documents serve two functions. Firstly, they act as a tool of foreign policy, signalling intentions to adversaries and potential partners, while also fulfilling a propaganda role as they

208 For more on this topic, see J. Darczewska, *Russia's armed forces on the information war front. Strategic documents*, OSW, Warszawa 2016, osw.waw.pl.

shape the image of Russia and its actions on the international stage. Secondly, these documents serve as directives for the state apparatus, including diplomacy and official propaganda, providing instructions on how to present Russia's foreign policy and what narratives should be use when doing so. Moreover, they confer the status of state doctrine on the narrative's language and components (terms, arguments) that emerged in the official discourse and media propaganda following the adoption of earlier versions of these documents. They can also be seen as a reflection of the Kremlin elite's perception of the international situation and, to some extent, its foreign policy objectives and the measures it intends to employ.[209]

This opinion pertains to the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation from March 2023. A similar document from 2016[210] highlighted Russia's willingness to cooperate with all interested countries and international organisations in resolving the "internal Ukrainian conflict" while calling for "constructive cooperation" with the United States based on shared interests and an equitable partnership with Europe. In contrast, the text from 2023 emphasises the confrontation with the West, contrasting it with Russia's alliance with the "Global South which opposes the logic of global dominance and neo-colonialism employed by the West", here understood primarily the United States and its NATO allies. This document underscores the growing importance of power in international relations and predicts an increased risk of armed conflicts, including clashes between nuclear powers, warning that such conflicts are highly likely to escalate into a global war. It also highlights the role of indirect actions, such as engaging in "attempts to restrain the natural course of history" towards a multipolar world, eliminating competitors in the economic and political-military spheres (for example, through sanctions policies), provoking coups and armed conflicts, using blackmail and manipulating the consciousness of specific ethnic groups and entire nations, carrying out offensive and subversive operations in the information space, imposing neoliberal values on societies which are in contradiction to their traditional values and, more broadly, exerting a destructive influence on all areas of international relations.

The March 2023 edition of the *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* reaffirmed the country's global aspirations, pursued through the use of force and information tools. In this context, the document introduced a new chapter

209 W. Rodkiewicz, 'An anti-colonial alliance with the Global South. The new 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation'', *OSW Commentary*, no. 506, 7 April 2023, osw.waw.pl.

210 The texts of both documents compared in this paragraph can be found on the Kremlin's website: 'Об утверждении Концепции внешней политики Поцийской Федерации', President of Russia, 30 November 2016, static.kremlin.ru; 'Указ об утверждении Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации', President of Russia, 31 March 2023, kremlin.ru.

titled 'Information support for the foreign policy of the Russian Federation', which primarily relates to counter-propaganda measures. These are described as efforts to "counter the coordinated anti-Russian propaganda campaign carried out on a systematic basis by unfriendly states, involving disinformation, defamation and incitement to hatred". The priorities of this activity include:

1. making truthful information about the Russian Federation's foreign and domestic policies, its history and achievements in various spheres of life, and other accurate information about Russia available to the widest possible foreign audience,
2. facilitating the dissemination of information abroad to promote international peace and understanding, develop and establish friendly relations between states, strengthen traditional spiritual and moral values as a unifying principle for all mankind, and enhance Russia's role in the global humanitarian space,
3. ensuring protection from discrimination abroad and assisting in strengthening the position of Russian information and communications media, including domestic digital information platforms, in the global information space, as well as constructively-minded media of compatriots living abroad towards Russia,
4. improving the tools and methods of information support for the foreign policy activities of the Russian Federation, including more effective use of modern information and communication technologies, including social networks,
5. improving international mechanisms and norms of regulation and protection of information and communication media, for ensuring free access to them and creating and disseminating information,
6. creating an enabling environment for foreign media to operate in Russia on the basis of reciprocity,
7. the further formation of a common information space of the Russian Federation and the CIS member states, increasing cooperation in the information sphere by states pursuing a constructive policy towards Russia.

These actions are justified by the doctrinaires' perception of how the world and global politics operate and of Russia's place in the world. They have divided the globe into the 'Russian world' along with countries that pursue constructive policies towards Moscow and the rest of the world which is unfriendly to Russia, labelled as 'anti-Russia'. They describe Russia as a 'Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power', the cultural heir to more than a millennium of statehood and a civilisation-state that has united the Russian people with other nations forming the cultural and civilisational community of the 'Russian world'.

Building on its earlier diagnosis regarding the development of a multipolar world and the imminent decline of the West as the dominant pole of power, the 2023 concept explicitly states that the 'Russian world', together with its anti-Western allies from the 'Global South', has an opportunity to overcome the hegemony of the American, or more broadly, Anglo-Saxon 'colonisers'. In this context, alongside the growing importance of power, it highlights the role of ideology, which is crucial in the civilisational clash. This is significant because until now ideology has largely been an unofficial factor and only appeared in a veiled, implicit form in strategic documents. Expanding on the outlined propaganda and directive functions of strategic documents, it is worth adding several others: the worldview function (demonstrating Russia's place in the world and its struggle against major global centres of power), the methodological function (shaping a coherent approach to the challenges faced by the Kremlin in domestic and foreign policy), the didactic function (fostering morale within the military and cultivating a shared 'national spirit' in Russia's multi-ethnic society), the mobilisational function (facilitating the use of all available resources and managing this potential) and the function of consolidating Russian society and integrating countries that pursue 'constructive policies' towards Russia. However, the propaganda function – fostering a confrontational mindset, distrust and hostility towards the West – remains paramount.

4.3. Domestic and international audience of Russia's strategic thought

It is worth noting that the 2023 edition of the Foreign Policy Concept expanded the number of entities responsible for implementing the new course in Russia's foreign policy. Alongside the state institutions traditionally listed in this area of responsibility (the president, the Federation Council, the State Duma, the government, the Security Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Rossotrudnichestvo agency and the State Council) and structures that form the social base for implementing the strategy (the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, NGOs, business circles, political parties and the media), the document mentions socio-cultural associations, the Russian Orthodox Church and religious organisations of other traditional faiths, as well as representatives of expert and academic communities. It emphasises that the "broad involvement of constructive social forces in the foreign policy process promotes national consensus on foreign policy, assists in its implementation and plays an important role in terms of the more effective resolution of a wide range of issues on the international agenda" (item 75).

Russian strategic documents are initiated from the top down, as demonstrated by the presidential decrees that release them into the public sphere. They are part of the Kremlin's broader information strategy and, in line with

the functions outlined above, are aimed at specific audiences, both domestic and foreign. Anti-American, great-power rhetoric has long been used in Russia's domestic politics.[211] Similarly to the narrative aimed at external audiences, it introduces the dichotomous division of 'us' versus 'them'. 'Us' means constructively minded, patriotically inclined social forces, while 'them' refers to anti-state actors, enemies of the Russian nation, foreign agents, fascists and others. Previously, anti-Western rhetoric was primarily intended to generate demand for a strong, internationally respected state, but now it is focused on fostering the sense of a mythical threat from the West, which allegedly seeks to colonise and mentally subjugate the Russian people.

The second audience is the public in the CIS countries. Efforts to gain its support are intended to advance the Kremlin's geopolitical interests, such as maintaining political and cultural influence in the former Soviet Union and preventing the post-Soviet states from pursuing integration with the West. Despite the diminishing reach of the Russian language, the Kremlin's narrative in this region has mirrored the one it has presented to the domestic audience. For example, the expansion of the use of force to include defending Russian-speaking populations in the 2010 Military Doctrine was aimed at both audiences. Those with a 'constructive' attitude towards Russia received the message that "Putin does not abandon his own". Meanwhile, those considered 'Russophobic' came under pressure through the narrative designed to discredit the liberal values of the "decaying West". The portrayal of Crimea as a "historically Russian land" was perceived by the CIS countries as both a warning and a potential pretext for further territorial claims; for Russian people, it instilled pride and a sense of justice.

The third group of recipients includes Western opinion leaders and, more broadly, the international public. The former consistently receive messages emphasising the ineffectiveness of any forms of pressure which the United States and NATO apply on Russia. In contrast, the latter are inundated with narratives highlighting the "diversification of influence in favour of new centres" led by Moscow, alongside threats of nuclear war. This audience has been targeted with new propaganda constructs opposing US-led Western dominance, such as the 'global majority' and the 'Global South'.[212]

In propaganda practice, strategic documents are presented as a sign of information transparency and a credible source for analysing Russia's perception of threats, its planning and the intentions of its military and civilian authorities. However, it is important to remember that information related to

211 For more on this issue, see M. Menkiszak, *Russia's best enemy. Russian policy towards the United States in Putin's era*, OSW, Warszawa 2017, osw.waw.pl.

212 Ф. Лукьянов, 'Глобальное большинство – на перекрёстке мировой политики?', Россия в глобальной политике, 18 May 2023, globalaffairs.ru.

security and defence is subject to strict procedural limitations stemming from Russia's stringent state secrecy laws. This makes it necessary to adopt a cautious approach to public documents and official military statements, which are often filled with platitudes about Russia's peaceful intentions. Their 'defensive' rhetoric also warrants justified scepticism, as it consistently emphasises Russia's peaceful goals, strict adherence to international law and its desire to demilitarise international relations while calling for an end to the arms race. This narrative is a tool in Russia's confrontation with the West, which is portrayed as seeking to limit Russia's ability to conduct a sovereign foreign policy. According to this rhetoric, it is the West, specifically the Anglo-Saxon world, that has launched an information war against Russia and kickstarted an 'information arms race'. In this context, it becomes clear that the aforementioned documents, shaped by distorted assessments of the domestic and international situation, cannot genuinely be considered to be the strategic planning documents which they are portrayed as. Their prognostic function has been relegated to a footnote, while the ideological function, which justifies the Kremlin's global ambitions, has taken centre stage.

5. The practical application of conceptual assumptions

5.1. The defence ministry's organisational structure: task segments for information warfare

Modern theories of new-generation warfare and strategic documents emphasise the need for inter-ministerial cooperation. In practice, such cooperation makes it possible to consolidate and display power as well as to expand the list of non-military actors involved in warfare and the scope of non-military actions, such as blocking communication routes, striking critical infrastructure and intimidating the adversary through the threat of force, sabotage and subversion. Therefore, Russia's model of information warfare is difficult to define. It is a cross-sectoral domain that encompasses many fields, including the social, economic, educational and cultural spheres. Consequently, activities within its scope are entrusted to various institutions and state bodies. Its core structure consists of the armed forces, intelligence agencies, police units, local administration and their supporting networks of experts, training centres and research institutions. The state system is further augmented by the private sector: a synergy effect is achieved through top-down mandates for cooperation and interdependencies within the so-called public-private partnership. However, these partnerships often exhibit mafia-like features, which further exacerbates the criminalisation of Russia's security and defence sector.

This pattern extends to various subsystems in Russia, including information security. The Interdepartmental Commission on Information Security of the Russian Security Council exercises conceptual oversight in this area, while organisational supervision falls under the Information Security Directorate within the Security Council's apparatus.[213] Officially, these bodies are responsible for ensuring information security through legal methods (regulating relations in the information sphere), organisational-technical methods (coordinating the system of collecting, processing, protecting and disseminating information) and economic methods (funding projects to develop the information sphere and coordinating various efforts as part of information warfare, such as establishing 'troll farms').

Each segment of this subsystem has distinct characteristics tied to its assigned area of responsibility. This also applies to the individual task segments managed by the Ministry of Defence, which include both covert institutions, such as the Main Directorate of the General Staff,[214] and fully transparent ones. The National Defence Management Centre (NDMC) provides information support for the activities of the Russian Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence, collecting and processing data on the military situation at home and abroad. At the same time, the NDMC performs a propaganda function: equipped with modern facilities, including rooms named after prominent Russian military commanders, it hosts official ceremonies, conferences, video link-ups and both national and international meetings, serving as a flagship representation of the Russian Armed Forces.

Since 2000, the Press Service and Information Directorate has handled all communications concerning the Russian military and its actions. Since 2011, it has been led by General Igor Konashenkov. In 2017, this body was restructured into the Department of Information and Mass Communications of the Ministry of Defence. Konashenkov has consistently commented on all of Russia's military operations in recent years; he has also personally maintained contact with war correspondents.[215] The Ministry of Defence's Public Council manages relations with the media through two permanent commissions: one on patriotic education and the preservation of Russia's cultural heritage and another on information support to the military. The armed forces also have their own media outlets, including print media, television and the websites Zvezda and

213 See the entry 'Безопасность информационная' in the encyclopedia of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, encyclopedia.mil.ru.

214 For more details, see M. Weiss, 'Aquarium leaks. Inside the GRU's psychological warfare program', Free Russia Foundation, 7 December 2020, 4freerussia.org. As a side note, this directorate is commonly (albeit mistakenly) referred to as the GRU (an acronym for the 'Main Intelligence Directorate'). However, in 2010, it was renamed the Main Directorate of the General Staff (GU GSh).

215 'Конашенков Игорь Евгеньевич', Деловой Петербург, whoiswho.dp.ru.

Zvezda Plus, which form part of the Krasnaya Zvezda state-owned media holding. Their publications and broadcasts disseminate patriotic content, highlight the historic victories and accomplishments of Russian commanders and trumpet the military's recent achievements.

The Directorate of Culture oversees the organisation of military-historical and patriotic events. The ministry emphasises the importance of these activities in fostering a patriotic education among younger generations, preserving the memory of the Russian nation's great victories and reinforcing the combat readiness and traditions of Russia's Armed Forces. According to the Directorate's website, cultural tools have created an appealing image of the Russian military that instils pride in every soldier.[216] Annual events of this kind are held at various levels. These include the all-military festival Army of Russia, the military press festival Media-AS and regional festivals of military songs, such as Katyusha. The Ministry of Defence also participates in nationwide initiatives such as Museum Night, Book Night and Art Night.

Military culture is also the domain of the Central House of the Russian Army, which was established in 1927. Its responsibilities include overseeing the Central Academic Theatre of the Russian Army, the A. V. Alexandrov Academic Song and Dance Ensemble of the Russian Army, the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, the Central Military Band of the Ministry of Defence and the Central Army Sports Club (CSKA). The Central House hosts award ceremonies for various competitions, such as the Homeland Army military poster contest and a number of military-patriotic song contests, including Our Song, New Star and Accordion – A Friend on theCombat Trail.

Alongside the Military Historical Society, which is presented as a civic organisation, the state's politics of memory is also shaped by the Department for Commemorating Soldiers Fallen in Defending the Fatherland. The Main Military-Political Directorate "secures" the moral and psychological readiness of military personnel, handles the ministry's cooperation with veterans' organisations and promotes desirable role models in the Russian military. The Main Military-Political Directorate,[217] which was re-established in 2018, plays a central role in this area of responsibility. Its tasks include "organising political-military propaganda and agitation in the Armed Forces" and "conducting military-patriotic work in the Armed Forces".[218] It draws on the tradition of a similar structure in the Red Army called *Glavpolitupr*, which oversaw the activities of *politruks* (political officers, usually deputy unit commanders). From 2018 to 2021,

216 'Об армейской культуре', The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, sc.mil.ru.
217 'Политруков вернули в российскую армию', Лента.Ру, 30 July 2018, lenta.ru.
218 'Задачи', The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, mil.ru.

the Directorate was headed by General Andrei Kartapolov,[219] who also served as Deputy Defence Minister; currently, it is led by General Viktor Goremykin. It closely cooperates with social organisations dedicated to military-patriotic education, including the All-Russian Children and Youth Movement 'Yunarmiya',[220] established in 2016, which organises patriotic education classes, shooting and first aid courses, sports activities and recreational camps. Above all, the Directorate focuses on maintaining soldiers' morale and ensuring their loyalty to the Kremlin.

The ministry's infrastructure has been tailored to achieve its objectives. For example, the NDMC has been equipped with a number of functions: it combines elements of command, control, communications and intelligence systems, integrates them with the logistics system and serves as a videoconferencing hub for information and propaganda purposes. Meanwhile, a team of military history specialists has been established at the Central Military Archive to counter any alleged falsifications in this field. The ministry's role in mass propaganda is supported by its thematic museums, such as the Central Museum of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, the Peter the Great Central Naval Museum and the Military Medical Museum, as well as parks like Moscow's Victory Park (more specifically, the Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) on Poklonnaya Hill[221]) and Patriot Park in Kubinka, just outside the capital.

Victory Park is managed by the city authorities who, along with partners such as DOSAAF,[222] Rosgvardiya, the Ministry of Civil Defence, Emergencies and Disaster Relief (MChS) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, oversee events held there. However, the Ministry of Defence's involvement in the museum, advertised as the "main site of patriotic memory in the country", is underscored by its participation in state ceremonies hosted at the venue. The events and figures presented in the museum are hailed as symbols of Russian military glory which, in turn, form the foundation of shared norms, behavioural models and meanings, ensuring their transmission to younger generations. This connection to the past is sustained through two mechanisms: the psychological, related to an emotional engagement with historical narratives, and the physical, based on memory carriers such as 'Russia's tallest victory monument' on Poklonnaya Hill, which is 142 metres tall.

The full name of the second site is the Military-Patriotic Recreation Park of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation 'Patriot'. It was established on the

219 Kartapolov commanded the Russian military operation in Syria. He is currently the chairman of the State Duma Committee on Defence.

220 'О Движении «ЮНАРМИЯ»', yunarmy.ru.

221 'Парк Победы', victorymuseum.ru.

222 A mass defence and sports organisation in the Soviet Union and later in Russia, abbreviated from *Dobrovolnoye obshchestvo sodeystviya armii, aviatsii i flotu* (Volunteer Society for the Assistance to the Army, Aviation and Navy).

grounds of the Red Army's testing range, which had been in operation since 1931. Initially, the site was used for testing prototypes of domestically produced tanks and armoured vehicles. Later, technical examinations of equipment captured in battle were also conducted there. The military brought pieces of equipment used by its adversaries to Kubinka, where they were analysed and then added to the collection. This tradition continues to the present day: exhibits include weaponry captured during the 'special military operation' in Ukraine. Indeed, a special section of the park's official website is dedicated to the 'heroic' actions of participants in this operation.[223] In 1938, a museum was established at the testing range, but it was not opened to visitors until the 1970s. In 2014, construction began on a grand project for a modern war-themed museum complex. Today, the park spans 4,000 hectares and features a conference centre and a hotel as well as a military-historical reconstruction zone that depicts colourful scenes from the Patriotic War of 1812, World War I and the Great Patriotic War (World War II). Other attractions include the Aviation Museum of the Kubinka Air Force Base, the Kubinka Tank Museum and the Partisan Village military-historical complex. In 2020, the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces was completed at the park and there are also plans to open a Museum of the Armed Forces.

Patriot Park has become a popular recreational destination. For children, it serves as a kind of military-themed Disneyland, where they can shoot live rounds, throw knives at targets, play at the Partisan Village and pose for photos next to Stalin or in front of posters glorifying the Red Army. Victory Day offers a special opportunity for immersive propaganda designed to manipulate visitors' perceptions and influence their behaviour while actively engaging them. Visitors can see, touch and try everything on display. Since 2015, the park has hosted the 'Army' International Military-Technical Forum. Kubinka is the official site of major events promoted by the Ministry of Defence, which focus on the military-patriotic, spiritual and moral education of Russian citizens.

In contrast to the publicly highlighted mission of the Ministry of Defence as outlined above, our knowledge about covert information operations remains limited. According to comments by Defence Minister Shoigu, a command for Information Operations Forces was established under the General Staff in 2014.[224] Its responsibilities include: waging cyber warfare, conducting cyber espionage and attacks on the adversary's networks, defending Russian communication networks and organising propaganda and counter-propaganda in cyberspace. These activities remain largely unexplored in publicly available studies, despite some sensational claims, such as the assertion that Russia's cyber forces rank

223 See the 'Z Heroes' tab on the Парк «Патриот» website, parkpatriot.ru.
224 'В Минобороны РФ создали войска информационных операций', Интерфакс, 22 February 2017, interfax.ru.

as the fifth most powerful in the world following those of the United States, South Korea, China and the UK.[225]

The activity of cyber squads had been observed earlier. A report by the investigative journalist Michael Weiss from the Free Russia Foundation titled 'Aquarium Leaks: Inside the GRU's Psychological Warfare'[226] concluded that psychological operations conducted by Russia's military intelligence continued uninterrupted even after the Cold War. For example, during the First Chechen War (1994–96), a secret unit, No. 54777, was established to carry out information and psychological operations. This unit remains active to this day, conducting such activities in support of Russia's military engagements and against NATO and EU member states. It is worth noting that similar reports, which are difficult to verify based on publicly available sources, have also been related to civilian intelligence. For example, in 2014 reports emerged about systems named 'Storm-12', 'Disput' and 'Monitor' designed to monitor anti-Russian activities and conduct counter-propaganda operations, which were allegedly commissioned by a mysterious military unit, No. 54939, subordinated to the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).[227]

Since the structure of the Main Directorate of the General Staff is classified, the activities of units overseeing information-psychological operations in cyberspace can only be assessed based on their results and a distinct *modus operandi* involving leaks, harassment, forgeries and a specific linguistic style. We also know that, during the Crimean operation at the turn of 2013 and 2014, Unit 74455 disguised itself under names such as Anonymous Ukraine and CyberBerkut. During the invasion of Crimea, this unit created a number of websites featuring the red wartime banner and names like Ukrainian Front, Eastern Front and For the Independence of Crimea. Posts on these sites were aimed at discouraging support for the new government in Kyiv and pro-Western parties/organisations, labelled as neo-fascist. The military intelligence's hacking infrastructure was also used to set up the fake group Cyber Caliphate, whose activities coincided with Russia's operation in Syria.

Subsequent reports revealed that Unit 74455 hacked the official websites of states and the private accounts of politicians, forwarding the stolen data to WikiLeaks. It also interfered in the 2016 US presidential campaign by publishing posts intended to discredit the Democratic Party and its candidate, Hillary Clinton. Unit 26165, which specialised in breaking encryption and had engaged in hacktivism in the 2000s, assisted it in the attack on Clinton's campaign team. US intelligence confirmed the Russian cyber operations, exposing their digital

225 'В интернет ввели кибервойска', Коммерсантъ, 10 January 2017, kommersant.ru.
226 M. Weiss, 'Aquarium leaks…', *op. cit.*
227 M. Olechowski, *Bezpieczeństwo informacyjne Rosji. Czynnik duchowy i kultura strategiczna*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

covers in the US, such as Guccifer 2.0 and DCLeaks. Ukrainian intelligence corroborated these findings, providing examples of attacks carried out by the military unit known as Sandworm, supported by an FSB division operating under the codename Gamaredon.[228]

5.2. Supporting organisations: non-governmental institutions

Several non-governmental research and cultural organisations support the government's military propaganda apparatus. One of the most notable of these is the **Academy of Military Sciences**, which we have already mentioned several times. Despite its name, it is not a scientific institution but an association of military analysts. It was established by Boris Yeltsin's decree in 1995 as a "centre for independent defence studies". Its long-serving president, General Makhmut Gareev, led the Academy until his death in 2019. The position is currently held by Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov. In the mid-1990s, the Academy absorbed personnel from disbanded research institutions as well as political-military and military-technical staff who had been placed in the reserves. Today, it operates as a civic association of analysts from the armed forces, the interior ministry and intelligence services, alongside civilian experts and journalists specialising in defence issues.

This group combines research and conceptual work with organisational efforts: it builds regional analytical and research support networks and implements systemic projects. The Academy promotes military issues through its publications including Strategic Stability (*Strategicheskaya stabilnost*), AVN Bulletin (*Vestnik AVN*) and Information Wars (*Informatsionnye voyny*). Its members also contribute to journals and magazines such as Foreign Military Review (*Zarubezhnoye voyennoye obozreniye*), which has been published since the 1970s, Military Thought (*Voyennaya mysl*) and the irregularly issued Humanitarian Problems of Military Affairs (*Gumanitarnye problemy voyennogo dela*). Despite the stated openness, access to these publications has recently been restricted – only the contents of individual issues are available.[229] Moreover, the Academy has not updated its membership statistics. According to the 2015 activity report, it had 839 actual members, 438 correspondents and 91 honorary members; 30% of them were active-duty officers while retired generals and reserve or retired research personnel accounted for the remaining 70%. The prestige of this body of military researchers and experts is underscored by its title, a manipulative reference to the Russian Academy of Sciences. Membership is open to citizens

228 T. Rid, *Active Measures, op. cit.*, p. 387. For more on this issue, see *idem*, pp. 368-387. See also: J. Lyons, 'Ukraine accuses Russian spies of hunting for war-crime info on its servers', The Register, 26 September 2023, theregister.com.

229 See 'Архив номеров журнала Вестник АВН; Журнал «Военная Мысль»'; 'Гуманитарные проблемы военного дела', Академия военных наук, avnrf.ru; '«Информационные войны»', ПСТМ, pstmprint.ru.

of Russia and other countries (in practice this means Belarus, where it has a regional branch) who are at least 18 years old and hold a doctoral degree (*kandidat nauk*). Lecturers and experts affiliated with the Academy use the title Professor of the Academy of Military Sciences.

The Academy's projects play a significant role in propaganda efforts designed to shape the collective consciousness and perceptions of the world. One notable initiative is the Academy of Information Self-Defence, which aims to foster a counterintelligence-minded society. According to a report published on the institution's website, the Academy contributes to promoting and disseminating expert and counter-propaganda activities. It says that "the Academy's civic organisational structure not only stimulates the scientific community but also enables rapid responses to ongoing geopolitical and military-strategic developments worldwide". Among the Academy's achievements, it lists "significant successes on the military-historical front" (notably, its Information Wars journal, published since 2007, includes a section dedicated to history) and "popularising the concept of the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and introducing it into the academic discourse both at home and abroad". The report also signals a deepening focus on strategic activities in space and the information domain by incorporating lessons from the military operations in Syria and Ukraine.[230]

On a side note, patriotic education and youth engagement are also priorities for the Russian Geographical Society, which Defence Minister Shoigu has led since 2009. Its new areas of focus include the study of military-historical geography, with dedicated structures operating in its regional branches.[231]

The aforementioned **Russian Military Historical Society** (RMHS) plays an indispensable role in crafting both propaganda and counter-propaganda narratives. Established by presidential decree in December 2012, the organisation considers itself to be the successor to the Imperial Russian Military Historical Society and presents itself as the public guardian of Russia's historical memory.[232] The RMHS was co-founded by the Ministries of Culture and Defence. At its inaugural congress in March 2013, Vladimir Medinsky, the then Minister of Culture, was elected its chairman, a position he has held ever since. Medinsky also serves as Putin's adviser and special envoy, including for negotiations with Ukraine.

The institution's official mission includes researching and promoting military history as well as preserving monuments to Russia's military-historical cultural heritage. Unofficially, however, it specialises in manipulating historical narratives for political purposes and staging high-profile provocations. Many

230 'Тезисы доклада на Общем собрании АВН', Академия военных наук, avnrf.ru.

231 See the website of the Commission on Military-Historical Geography of the Russian Geographical Society: 'Комиссия по военно-исторической географии', rgo.ru.

232 See the website of the Russian Military Historical Society: rvio.histrf.ru.

of these actions have targeted Poland. For instance, in 2014, the RMHS announced a competition on its official website to design a monument in Cracow commemorating the Bolshevik prisoners of war from the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–22 (commonly referred to as the war of 1920). The public media reported on a fundraising campaign for this purpose, adding that this monument could be erected at Cracow's Rakowicki Cemetery, which holds the remains of more than a thousand Red Army soldiers killed during that conflict. However, the Polish government was not informed of this initiative. In 2015, the organisation posted a note on its website titled 'The Battle of Grunwald, 15 July 1410 – a memorable date in Russia's military history', claiming that "on this day in 1410, Russian troops and the allied forces, Lithuanians, Poles and Czechs, defeated the German knights at the Battle of Grunwald" and that "the Smolensk regiments withstood the onslaught of the Teutonic Knights, deciding the battle's outcome" (three of the 50 banners under the command of King Władysław Jagiełło and Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania were linked to the Smolensk Land; at that time, this region belonged to Lithuania, which was in a union with Poland). The RMHS also came up with the initiative to redesign the Russian section of the memorial complex in Katyn dedicated to the Russian victims of Stalinist repression by installing plaques commemorating Soviet prisoners of war from 1920. In 2018, the Society organised an exhibition in Katyn entitled 'Russia. Poland. The 20th Century', which highlighted the theme of 'Polish concentration camps for Red Army prisoners in 1919–22'.

In 2015, the organisation announced a rival project to the Great Soviet Historical Encyclopedia and Wikipedia – a historical platform called Ripedia (short for 'Russian Encyclopaedia'). Only registered experts are allowed to contribute articles to its website. However, its interpretation of events that aligns with the government's official narrative has drawn criticism from historians, alongside accusations of plagiarism.[233] Medinsky also became embroiled in this controversy, facing allegations of plagiarising his habilitation thesis.[234] Independent observers on social media have compared the RMHS's chairman to Sergei Uvarov[235] and Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment. The Society prides itself on its achievements in combatting the falsification of Russian history. Its latest initiative, launched in 2023, is a recruitment drive

233 'Энциклопедия. Всемирная история', w.histrf.ru; 'Что случилось с «Рипедией»?', Мир энциклопедий, 23 May 2017, encyclopedia.ru.

234 'Казус Мединского: чем закончился спор из-за диссертации министра культуры', РБК, 20 October 2017, rbc.ru; 'Историк Марк Солонин – о новом министре культуры', Idel.Реалии, 17 October 2019, idelreal.org.

235 Sergei Uvarov was the minister of education in the Russian Empire from 1833 to 1848 and the author of the 'orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality' formula. Announced in 1833, it became the ideological foundation for the policies of successive tsars, from Nicholas I onwards. It defined three pillars of the state: autocracy, the Russian Orthodox Church and a multinational society (the Russian nation) acting as the protector of the ruling dynasty.

for the 'Young fighter's course. The information front', with "378 people from 66 regions of Russia, most of them from Donetsk Oblast and the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics" reportedly signing up for the course. The young fighters will be trained to create educational online content under the guidance of renowned specialists, including Dmitry Puchkov, Mikhail Onufrienko, Trofim Tatarenkov, Ivan Kondakov, Larisa Rzhondovskaya, Yegor Yakovlev and experts from the VKontakte network and the Komsomolskaya Pravda media group.[236]

The **community of Russian veterans**, including those who fought in World War II, Afghanistan and Chechnya is another important participant in information warfare. The data on their numbers is inconsistent. According to the Ministry of Defence, 896,806 veterans lived in Russia in 2021. However, in 2023 Labour Minister Maxim Topilin reported that his ministry provided care for 66,000 veterans of World War II.[237] These estimates are not necessarily contradictory, as nearly 80 years after the war's end, the number of surviving veterans is understandably small. It is important to remember that under the 1995 law 'on veterans', this group also includes support staff, military personnel from so-called 'other forces', the NKVD, internal troops, security officers and penitentiary staff. The law has been amended on several occasions and expanded to include participants in later conflicts, such as those in Chechnya and Syria. Most recently, in April 2023, it was revised to cover those who have fought in Ukraine, specifically in the DNR, LNR and the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts.

Support for veterans is provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the FSB. A particularly prominent role is played by the 'Victory' Russian Organising Committee – a joint government and veteran body operating under the patronage of the President. This institution is directly involved in developing projects and programmes to commemorate anniversaries of the nation's most significant historical events.

Veterans are organised into a number of social associations under the umbrella of the All-Russian Public Organisation 'Union of Russian Veterans', which traces its origins to the Soviet Committee of War Veterans. From 1992, it operated as the All-Russian Organisation of War and Military Service Veterans until adopting its current name and statute in 2013. Since April 2023, it has been chaired by General Vitaly Azarov. The union comprises over 80 sectoral and regional associations, such as the Union of Social Veterans of the Border Services, the Russian Union of Afghanistan Veterans and the 'Army and Culture'

236 'Завершен прием заявок на форум РВИО «Курс молодого бойца. Информационный фронт»', The Russian Military Historical Society, 18 September 2023, rvio.histrf.ru.

237 'Сколько осталось ветеранов Великой Отечественной войны в России?', Память Поколений, 4 May 2023, pamyatpokoleniy.ru.

Russian Association.[238] Given the size of the veteran population, keeping this group under control has become a challenge for the government, which has resorted to the promotion of so-called public-private partnerships and a range of loyalty programmes. These offer benefits to trusted individuals (such as easier access to sanatoriums and medication) and legal entities (such as tax breaks for veteran-run businesses), including security companies and private military firms. In return, veterans play an active role in the state's military organisation and cultivate patriotic-military rituals that reinforce submission, hierarchy, discipline and obedience to orders within society.

It is necessary to clarify here that Russian military theorists[239] employ a broad definition of the state's military organisation, which includes the regular armed forces as well as so-called other forces – formations from other power ministries (Rosgvardiya, MChS, the Federal Protective Service and other special services), so-called peripheral military support organisations (military-patriotic clubs, sports clubs promoting martial arts and extreme sports, cadet schools, veterans' organisations and foundations) and cover organisations that operate under various legal and organisational guises. Beyond state structures, the military organisation – or, in effect, the state's war machine – also includes irregular forces such as Cossack troops and volunteer units as well as private military companies, security firms and volunteer groups for securing mass events. These are often established by private individuals, particularly veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, but they are ultimately coordinated, funded and supported by the state, which provides resources such as shooting ranges and parachute training facilities. Since 2014, in addition to the notorious Wagner Group, a number of organisations which are informal and even illegal under Russian law have fought in Ukraine. These include groups designated as terrorist organisations, such as the far-right St. Petersburg-based Rusich unit, and the Russian Imperial Movement Legion. Separatist forces have been regularly bolstered by *Kadyrovtsy* from Chechnya, Russian Cossacks and various volunteer units, including Orthodox brotherhoods financed by the 'Orthodox oligarch' Konstantin Malofeev. Following the invasion of Ukraine, private and state-linked military companies have proliferated. Examples include Gazprom's volunteer units Alexander Nevsky, Potok and Pokhodnya; Redut, a mercenary unit contracted by the Russian Ministry of Defence and linked to Gennady

238 'Список общественных организаций – юридических лиц коллективных членов ООВ «Российский Союз ветеранов»', Российский Союз ветеранов, soyuzveteranov.ru.

239 See, for example: В. Бараненков, 'Понятие, виды и правовая сущность военных организаций', *Военное право* 2011, voennoepravo.ru; Ф. Обнорский, А. Кривенко, 'К вопросу о сущности и структуре военной организации России', *Вестник Военного университета* 2012, no. 2(30), at: cyberleninka.ru; В. Корякин, 'Военная организация государства: структура, предназначение и перспективы развития', *Вестник военного права*, 1/2016, millaw.ru.

Timchenko; and the so-called 'governor's volunteer armies'.[240] It is obvious that these entities have operated in Ukraine with the Kremlin's consent and in its interests. Moscow has also made veiled attempts to legalise such formations. On 25 July 2023, the Duma amended the law 'on the circulation of weapons'. Under its current provisions, governors, with presidential approval, can establish special armed formations during mobilisation and martial law. These new structures, referred to as 'specialised enterprises', are supposed to operate under the supervision of the FSB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Their tasks include supporting the power ministries in maintaining public order, guarding the state border and combating subversive groups from foreign countries.[241]

This understanding of the war machine inherently integrates political power, military capabilities and the activities of various social and institutional entities that prepare citizens for defence and, more broadly, educate them in patriotism and military values. This was clearly seen in 2014 with the widespread enthusiasm for the annexation of Crimea and again in March 2022 when, in a survey by the Levada Center, 81% of respondents expressed support for Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.[242]

The patriotic fervour of the Kremlin's propaganda has increasingly radicalised domestic nationalists, now referred to as 'turbo-patriots'. They interpreted the annexation of Crimea as a 'Russian Spring' and a total revolution that was supposed to transform society. On social media, they glorified violence, displayed fascist symbols and demanded extreme measures regarding Ukraine. In response, the Kremlin took decisive action by removing the ultraradicals from the Donbas, including those from the so-called volunteer formations led by Igor Girkin, also known as Strelkov. This move drew a chorus of criticism from 'patriotic' circles. At that time, Girkin openly boasted that he had "pulled the trigger of the war" after fighters under his command transferred from Crimea seized Sloviansk, an event that later came to symbolise the beginning of the Donbas occupation. A similar development occurred in July 2023, when Girkin was arrested on charges of extremism.[243]

240 See, for example: М. Крутов, С. Добрынин, 'Лаборатории смерти. «Частные» армии России будущего', Радио Свобода, 19 May 2023, svoboda.org; Л. Яппарова, А. Перцев, А. Славин, 'Грубо говоря, мы начали войну. Как отправка ЧВК Вагнера на фронт помогла Пригожину наладить отношения с Путиным — и что такое «собянинский полк». Расследование «Медузы» о наемниках на войне в Украине', Медуза, 13 July 2022, meduza.io.

241 *The calm after the storm. Russia following Prigozhin's mutiny*, OSW, Warszawa 2023, osw.waw.pl.

242 'Конфликт с Украиной', Левада Центр, 28 April 2022, levada.ru. According to a poll by the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), 73% of Russian people believed the 'operation' was justified: 'Украина. Опрос 20 марта', Фонд Общественное Мнение, 28 March 2022, fom.ru.

243 Prigozhin and his Wagner Group's disapproval of Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine gradually escalated into sharp criticism of the leadership of the 'special military operation' and Putin himself as the supreme commander-in-chief. This led to political initiatives: Prigozhin launched his march on Moscow, while Girkin founded the Club of Angry Patriots, which was active on social media, calling for a change at the highest levels of power. See P. Siegień, 'Girkin aresztowany zamiast Prigożyna. Kreml próbuje pokazać siłę Putina', Newsweek, 23 July 2023, newsweek.pl. Inciden-

In this context, it is worth mentioning organisations of reservists that are not affiliated with the Union of Russian Veterans, such as the All-Russian Officers' Assembly, whose name harks back to the officer clubs of individual army and navy units during the Russian Empire. Information from the organisation's now-defunct website, ooc.su, indicates that it was established in 2003 by "veterans and active members of the security structures" as an association independent of government officials and state leadership. The founders also considered it a continuation of the All-Army Officers' Assembly, whose inaugural meeting took place in 1989 under the chairmanship of Marshal Dmitry Yazov. Until March 2022, the Assembly was headed by Leonid Ivashov,[244] the famed commander of the commando unit that in 1999 advanced from Bosnia and Herzegovina and deployed at Pristina Airport without waiting for official arrangements on the deployment of combined peacekeeping forces in Kosovo, an operation that was later dubbed the 'dash to Pristina'. Shortly before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, General Ivashov signed an appeal addressed to Russian citizens and President Putin, warning of the consequences of a military intervention against a "brotherly nation" which, he argued, could "threaten Russia's very existence as a state".[245] The Russian Ministry of Defence sharply criticised the appeal, dismissing it as either 'fake' or merely an expression of the officers' personal views, with little resonance among the general public. In a notice to veterans posted on the social section of its website, the ministry emphasised that the Assembly was not a typical veterans' organisation as it had never helped anyone.[246]

In March 2022, 75-year-old Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov[247] succeeded Ivashov, who stepped down "due to age and health reasons". The new chairman moved the

tally, Sloviansk, which Girkin's forces seized in 2014, was later recaptured by Ukrainian forces. Based on this, the Kremlin's propaganda now portrays the former separatist as a traitor who surrendered the city to 'Banderite fascists' and caused the downfall of the Donbas uprising. See М. Родионов, Д. Алифанова, 'За что задержан Игорь Стрелков', Газета.Ru, 21 July 2023, gazeta.ru.

244 Leonid Ivashov is a general and a retired Soviet senior officer. He was involved in the planning of the war in Afghanistan and the suppression of Czechoslovakia. From 1996 to 2001, he headed the Main Directorate for International Military Cooperation at Russia's Ministry of Defence. He has consistently criticised the West and opposed NATO's eastward expansion. As a member of the Izborsk Club and the founder of the Party of Action and the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, he is one of the ideologues of Russian nationalism. In January 2022, he warned Putin against provoking a war, predicting that it would only place a moral burden on Russia and could even threaten its existence. He also argued that the invasion of Ukraine was intended to consolidate society around a fabricated, illusory threat from the West. In his view, the Kremlin was unable to resolve Russia's deepening domestic problems and resorted to war in an effort to shield itself from the risk of social unrest while protecting the interests of corrupt elites.

245 'Обращение Общероссийского офицерского собрания к президенту и гражданам Российской Федерации – 31 Января 2022'. Today it can be found, for example, on the website milnewsca.wordpress.com.

246 'Заявление Совета «Общероссийского офицерского Собрания»: очередной фейк или гражданская позиция офицеров России', The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, mil-ru.ru.

247 Vladimir Kvachkov is a controversial retired colonel of military intelligence (former GRU), a doctor of military sciences and a theorist of special military operations – specifically, the use of special forces to advance Russia's political objectives abroad. A staunch critic of Russia's civilian and military leadership, he became a target of the country's judicial system. In 2005, he was arrested on charges of organising an assassination attempt on former Prime Minister

Assembly's blocked websites to private accounts on so-called patriotic channels on Telegram and other social media platforms. He has criticised commanders for what he calls unforgivable mistakes in Ukraine and has consistently reiterated that the fundamental mission of the Russian armed forces is a "national liberation war against the fascist occupier seeking to exterminate Russia's indigenous peoples and destroy the Russian state". Unlike Ivashov, Kvachkov has encouraged confrontation, further radicalising the sentiments of military officers. In late March 2022, the Assembly's website published Kvachkov's open letter to officers the General Staff and the special operations command, in which he called for "ideological support for the process of denazification, the eradication of Russophobia and the return of Malorussian lands to the Russian world". He asserted that the fight for 'Malorussia' would only be won when Russian truth was delivered to Ukraine on tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, adding that this was an "Orthodox truth" without which "there will be no victory – neither military nor any other".

In May 2022, the All-Russian Officers' Assembly demanded a general mobilisation in the areas bordering NATO countries, the establishment of territorial defence units in these regions, an extension of military service from one year to two and the creation of military administrative bodies in the DNR, LNR and other occupied Ukrainian territories. The officers also called for the death penalty for deserters, the formal recognition of the full-scale war against Ukraine and the introduction of martial law.

In late 2022, as part of efforts to disseminate state ideology, Kvachkov authored a pamphlet entitled 'Manifesto of the Russian world' (*Manifest russkogo mira*), which focused on "organising a national ideological resistance movement against the global liberal-fascist dictatorship and digital enslavement". It was published on the Assembly's website and released as a book. After the website was blocked, the manifesto became available on the aforementioned so-called patriotic channels on Telegram.[248]

Anatoly Chubais, but was released three years later due to a lack of evidence. In 2013, as the leader of the informal organisation called People's Liberation Front of Russia – Minin and Pozharsky's Militia, he was accused of planning an armed rebellion. His original 13-year prison sentence in a penal colony was reduced to six years on appeal to the Supreme Court. Kvachkov denied plotting a rebellion of his self-defence volunteer militia and a march on Moscow, claiming instead that he had been training his forces to repel a foreign intervention. His views have evolved from antisemitism (he once referred to Putin's regime as a "Judeo-despotism") to what he now describes as Christian socialism, an ideology he associates with the 'Russian world'. He has vocally criticised Russia's current military leadership by adopting an ultranationalist stance. In August 2023, he was charged with publicly discrediting the Russian Armed Forces and fined 40,000 roubles. Kvachkov has written a number of books, including: *Opasen vernostyu Rossii* (2006), *O voyennoy doktrine i Russkoy Armii* (2006), *Spetsnaz Rossii* (2007), *Glavnaya spetsialnaya operatsiya vperedi* (2009), *Kto pravit Rossiyey* (2013), *Strana russkikh* (2014), *Manifest russkogo mira* (2022). Many of his books and articles have been classified as extremist and banned from distribution.

248 'Общероссийское офицерское собрание', VKontaktie, vk.com; 'Полковник Квачков и соратники', Telegram, t.me.

In 2023, the 'Army of Defenders of the Fatherland' Russian National Squad and the Brotherhood of Veterans of Combat Operations joined the Assembly; Kvachkov took charge of their joint headquarters. The new leadership nominated the Army's chairman Ivan Otrakovsky, a reserve captain, as its candidate for the 2024 presidential election. Previously, Otrakovsky had been a prominent activist in the Holy Rus movement, which gained notoriety in 2012 for organising Orthodox patrols on Moscow's streets following the high-profile provocative act by the Pussy Riot art collective, which performed a prayer-like song called 'Mother of God, Drive Putin Away' in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Ultimately, in December 2023 the Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation rejected Otrakovsky's candidacy, citing his failure to meet the formal requirements.

5.3. The issue of unaffiliated organisations

Unaffiliated organisations, such as the Army of the Defenders of the Fatherland, which have openly criticised the state and military leadership while asserting their independence, are viewed through different lenses. Their activity is not a new phenomenon; nor is public criticism on social media over how the war has been handled. Military bloggers, often equated by commentators with war correspondents (*voenkory*), were particularly vocal during the 2008 war with Georgia and in 2014, following the withdrawal of some informal military formations from the Donbas and Luhansk oblasts. They generally voiced criticism by adopting the so-called patriotic, pro-presidential and pro-war stance: while attacking military commanders, they hardly ever questioned Putin's leadership or decisions. However, Igor Girkin,[249] one of the most influential critics of the Russian military, crossed this 'red line' by mocking Putin himself. In January 2023, he posted a 90-minute video on Telegram claiming that "the head of the fish has completely rotted". A month later, he compared Putin to former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, suggesting that the Russian leader may flee "when the situation becomes critical".

249 Igor Girkin, also known as Strelkov, fought as a volunteer on the Serbian side during the Bosnian War, supported armed separatists in Moldova's Transnistria and participated in both Chechen wars. According to his own statements, he worked for the FSB from 2006 to 2013 before being transferred to the reserves with the rank of colonel as a result of a conflict with a superior. In 2014, he was involved in the annexation of Crimea and later became the chief military commander of the separatist forces in Donetsk, serving as the so-called defence minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). He led special operations, including the seizure of Ukrainian administrative buildings in Crimea, Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. He was also responsible for the abduction of OSCE observers in April 2014. After returning to Moscow, Girkin gained popularity as a hero of the fighting in the Donbas. He frequently appeared on television, gave interviews and wrote articles for newspapers and websites. He took credit for igniting the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, stating: "I was the one who pulled the trigger of this war. If our unit hadn't crossed the border, everything would have ended like it did in Kharkiv and Odesa". Girkin identifies as a monarchist.

According to Galeotti, figures like Girkin and Kvachkov serve as spokespersons for competing factions within the military and security apparatus. 'Silencing' them would turn them into martyrs, generating media buzz and leading to unpredictable consequences. More importantly, it would deprive the government of a means of gauging sentiments within the power ministries. Galeotti interpreted the government's tolerance of media activity by Putin's critics as a sign of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring within the 'court', noting that Shoigu and Gerasimov do not enjoy universal support in the military. In short, what unfolds on social media reflects realpolitik and Putin's method of managing interest groups within his circle through 'controlled conflicts'.[250]

The US-based Institute for the Study of War has estimated that the community of Russian military bloggers consists of about 500 online users, mainly on Telegram, who write about the war and push their own narratives. This group includes individuals who support the Kremlin but criticise the Ministry of Defence as well as those who blame Putin himself for Russia's military failures. Most have adopted pro-war, ethnocentric and ultrapatriotic stances. On the one hand, they are associated with prominent nationalist ideologues; on the other, they have links to the armed forces, Chechen units, private military companies and proxy entities such as separatist formations.[251]

Combined with the use of modern information technologies and channels for reaching audiences, posts by military bloggers have become a semblance of opinions independent of the Ministry of Defence in the Russian information space. At times, they have diverged radically from official narratives. In recent years, Russia's Armed Forces have come under unprecedented criticism largely due to the activity of these bloggers. However, claims regarding their independence are likely overstated. To understand this, we must realise the differences in how power functions in Russia compared to the West. In Russia, governance is shaped by informal rules and structures. For example, all armed formations, even those which in formal terms not subordinate to the military command, are ultimately controlled by the special services, particularly military counterintelligence, which is part of the FSB. Military bloggers play a similar role in the realm of information warfare on social media. At times, they are personally briefed by Putin[252] and even hosted at the Kremlin. Their tasks include gauging sentiments within the military, imitating independent opinions, covering up genuine criticism and neutralising it. In this way, they set traps for domestic and foreign observers who dismiss official narratives as unreliable and see disinformation as more 'credible'. For example, military bloggers often amplify conspiracy theories that

250 K. Bayer, 'Rosyjscy blogerzy wojenni: walka o wpływy na Kremlu', DW, 4 January 2023, dw.com.
251 K. Ryncarz, 'Rosyjscy blogerzy wojskowi silni w przestrzeni informacyjnej', Euractiv.pl, 21 November 2022.
252 See, for example: 'Встреча с военными корреспондентами', President of Russia, 13 June 2023, kremlin.ru.

reveal supposed frictions within the security apparatus: they have claimed that the Chekists rather than the military planned the war in Ukraine and that the armed forces and its General Staff opposed this by all available means, a narrative that was allegedly confirmed by Ivashov. War propaganda thrives on informational noise, ranging from sharp criticism of frontline operations from radical nationalist positions to appeals from the 'peaceful army' to end the fratricide.

The information activity of military bloggers is clearly aimed at the deepening divisions within the Western world. In this context, nuclear threats are a critical propaganda asset for Russia. The nuclear scare tactic, widely used as a tool in propaganda campaigns, has also been employed by Ivashov. In an interview with the Novye Izvestia newspaper, he warned of the potential use of nuclear weapons, stressing that this would lead to a scenario where everyone loses. He painted an apocalyptic landscape of destroyed cities and massive casualties, playing the 'good cop' by emphasising the need to rule out nuclear war under any circumstances. At the same time, acting as the 'bad cop', he reminded his readers that Russia's military doctrine permits a first nuclear strike if the country's territorial integrity is threatened – a danger he considered imminent.[253] General Ivashov, like other Russian veterans and bloggers, is far from being a pacifist. As a military man and academic in geopolitics, he views the world through the lens of a staff map – rather soberly. This sets him apart from the Kremlin's spin doctors, pro-Kremlin bloggers and Kremlin-affiliated journalists, who routinely reduce Russia's NATO opponents to radioactive ash. This infamous threat was coined in 2014 by Yevgeny Kiselyov, a leading state TV propagandist, who responded to US criticism of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea by declaring that "America can be turned into radioactive ash". This phrase has since become a fixture in Russia's political lexicon, semantically reflecting a cultural attitude in which human life holds little value. Returning to Ivashov, he was likely aware that the Kremlin's geopolitical designs in its war against Ukraine were unattainable. Nevertheless, both he and the entire 'turbo-patriotic' faction associated with the 'Z' sign have shared the same confrontational, anti-Western rhetoric. From their perspective, the strategic goals of war as an extension of Russian policy remain unchanged – this is about advancing the state's great-power interests. These narratives are often inconsistent. As noted by the Meduza news site, Kvachkov called for a 'special military operation' in Ukraine as early as 2014.[254] Yet today, he vehemently opposes the use of this term for Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, arguing

253 'Генерал-полковник Ивашов: Сейчас идет выбор между войной вынужденной и несправедливой', Новые известия, 19 February 2022, newizv.ru.

254 'Антисемит и ксенофоб Владимир Квачков еще в 2014 году призывал Путина провести в Украине «спецоперацию». Нынешняя риторика Кремля все чаще похожа на его высказывания', Медуза, 18 August 2023, meduza.io.

that "This is strategic warfare! Only the strategy is missing – because Shoigu and Gerasimov are in charge".[255] These messages also serve as an emotional safety valve: they diffuse social discontent, boost morale and foster an online community that claims to know better how to win and safeguard the 'Russian world' against traitors and the 'degenerate Tuvan' (a derogatory reference to Shoigu, an ethnic Tuvan).

As a result of these propaganda battles, the term 'special military operation' has been increasingly replaced in Russia by 'the war in Ukraine', meaning a war against the West and NATO rather than Ukraine itself. This shift serves several purposes: it justifies failures and troop mobilisations while preparing citizens for a permanent state of war and the need to endure wartime hardships. It has also made it possible to blame the General Staff and the Ministry of Defence for battlefield defeats by claiming that they have failed to provide adequate resources. Meanwhile, NATO forces have been disparaged as 'deviants' in contrast to the 'healthy' Russian military with "NATO's combat pederasts who are only capable of fighting with joysticks". When Kvachkov said this, he was obviously aware of the changing nature of warfare, but his narrative was aimed at drawing attention and provoking collective emotions. The pro-war rhetoric of nationalists and ultranationalists, who are eager for vengeance and blood to avenge the humiliation of 'Mother Russia', aligns with the publicity-seeking model employed by official propaganda. Both strive to keep the audience focused on the war and the invincible 'Russian world' while recruiting soldiers to defend it. Kvachkov has been fined for defaming the military, but he is still free to express his viewsand does so in a theatrical manner. The law is applied selectively: others who commit similar political crimes and offences, such as 'discrediting the Russian armed forces' or 'spreading disinformation about the Russian military and its operations', face penalties of up to 15 years in prison.

The arrest of Girkin in July 2023, which the state media covered extensively, was not a surprising development. Independent observers saw it as part of the Kremlin's media operation aimed at neutralising the blow to Putin's image following the so-called Prigozhin march on Moscow, an event that exposed the weakness of the president and the security and defence agencies in a spectacular fashion. From the outset, the information campaign surrounding the march was full of surprising twists: the initial silence, as was later explained, did not reflect the Kremlin's astonishment but rather the fact that it dismissed the rebellion as insignificant. Moreover, the awkward fact of Putin's meeting with the Wagner

255 В. Постнов, 'Макароны калибра 7,62: Владимир Путин против «честных вояк»', The Moscow Times, 21 July 2023, moscowtimes.ru.

fighters was quietly ignored.[256] After some time, a wide-ranging media campaign was launched to discredit Prigozhin personally rather than the mercenary units themselves. He was portrayed as a common criminal, a fraudster running illegal businesses, violently eliminating competition and using his own media outlets to manipulate public opinion. After Prigozhin's death in a plane crash,[257] the official propaganda, despite suggestive ambiguities, implied that the 'traitor' had met his deserved fate. Putin himself commented on the crash's causes, confirming that hand grenade fragments were found at the crash site. Speaking at the Valdai Club in Sochi in October 2023, he suggested that an explosion had occurred onboard the plane, meaning that the Wagner fighters had blown themselves up. He also accused the Wagner Group's leaders, who had previously been received at the Kremlin, of drug abuse and the mistreatment of their fighters, including denying them social benefits. This narrative sought to undermine the earlier portrayal of Prigozhin and Utkin as 'defenders of the fatherland'.

For the audience of the propaganda broadcast on state television channels, the cases of Girkin, Kvachkov and Prigozhin delivered a clear message: the Kremlin's patience had run out and it would no longer tolerate criticism of the government or defeatist sentiments, even among the 'patriots'. On social media, these events triggered the usual wave of conflicting speculations. Some argued that the aim was to recast Girkin and Kvachkov as anti-Putin opposition figures, while others claimed that the special services they represented, or at least their 'hawkish' factions, were losing influence. The Kremlin, meanwhile, presented itself as a defender of the 'rule of law': Girkin, prosecuted under Article 282 of the Criminal Code, was sentenced in January 2024 to five years in a penal colony. His public insults towards Putin, calling him a "coward incapable of creating the conditions for waging war" and declaring that "the country won't survive another six years of this mediocrity in power", were classified as "inciting extremism and organising extremist activities".

5.4. The 'Russian world' as the conceptual basis of the hybrid warfare front

The Ministry of Defence is actively involved in propaganda activities to promote the projected vision of the world and Russia's place in it. This vision is shared by the country's government, military elites and most of its society. To this end,

256 On 29 June 2023, a three-hour meeting was reportedly held at the Kremlin between the president, members of the Wagner Group and Prigozhin himself. Official confirmation only came on 10 July, after the French press had published reports on the event, suggesting an attempt to conceal it from the public. After all, Putin had met with a man he had previously branded a traitor. For more, see *The calm after the storm. Russia following Prigozhin's mutiny*, *op. cit.*

257 Prigozhin and Utkin, the Wagner Group's commander, were killed in a plane crash on 23 August 2023. The Russian Investigative Committee confirmed that all ten people on board lost their lives. A few days after the crash, Reuters reported that, according to the US authorities, the aircraft carrying Prigozhin had been shot down by a surface-to-air missile.

the ministry has instrumentalised the deterministic interpretation of geopolitics, has framed as the perpetual clash of global forces shaped by geographical, strategic, economic, demographic and cultural factors. It has also weaponised history, primarily to highlight the persistence of threats to the country, particularly from the West. The prevailing historical and cultural narrative imposes the conviction that Russia's survival has been secured solely through its military power, rooted in its capacity to mobilise significant armed forces, and a strategic depth that derives from its vast territorial expanse. Equally important is the belief in Russia's cultural superiority and uniqueness as an independent civilisational centre. As described above, this conviction underpins the Russian political and military doctrines that legitimise the subjugation of neighbouring countries, especially those over which Russia claims 'cultural' rights.

These briefly outlined components have converged into a vision of a grand civilisation synonymous with a Russian state that must be a great power not only to ensure its own security but also to fulfil its mission. It faces constant threats from Western civilisation, which is viewed as hostile and degenerate. The state, also understood as a structure of power, serves as the primary reference point for military theorists and their political, social and ideological assessments. Today, Andrei Ilnitsky and Alexander Losev, both associated with the Ministry of Defence, claim that:

> Russia is a historically unique, thousand-year-old civilisation that represents much more than just a 'sovereign world'. For Russian civilisation (***rossiyskaya tsivilizatsiya***), history and culture hold a fundamental, defining importance, as they form the basis of the civilisational code of the Russian man (***russkiy chelovek***) – in the ontological rather than ethnic sense.
>
> [...] The Russian world is a cultural and semiotic synonym for Russian civilisation; it is a geosocial and cultural space far broader than the territory of the Russian State (***Rossiyskoye gosudarstvo***). However, the State – as the core, the central element – acts as the glue and foundation of the Russian world. This is the essence, even the sacred foundation, of Russian civilisation (***russkaya tsivilizatsiya***).
>
> If the Russian State weakens, is destroyed or reduced to the role of a mere service and maintenance provider, the Russian world will disappear in an instant. It will be relegated to folklore, ethnicity, rituals, pleasant memories, books, architectural monuments, etc. The empire is the form of governance that has historically and traditionally defined our state, guaranteeing the strength and unity of the state and Russia's multi-ethnic nation. This is why, in shaping ideology, we must rely on the cultural-civilisational, spiritual-religious and geopolitical foundations of Russia's thousand-year-old statehood and civilisation

(***russkaya tsivilizatsiya***), based on the principle that the Russian idea (***russkaya ideya***) is a concept of universal ethical standards draped in a patriotic form.[258]

The terms referenced in parentheses, with adjectives that are untranslatable into foreign languages (*russkaya/rossiyskaya*), are intentionally ambiguous and used interchangeably. This is seen in the cited text, where the phrase *russkaya tsivilizatsiya* appears alongside *rossiyskaya tsivilizatsiya*. On the one hand, this allows the construct of the 'Russian world' to be interpreted as a dual offer: directed at Russian people as the population of the Russian state (*rossiyane*) and at the broader Russian-speaking community outside the country. On the other, it blurs the line between the '*Russkiy*' (ethnic) and '*Rossiyskiy*' (state-related) elements, providing a basis for the manipulative expansion of the concept of 'Russian civilisation'. At the same time, by concealing the special status of ethnic Russians (*russkiye*), which has always been associated with Great Russian chauvinism, this approach becomes a tool for restoring the dominance of the Russian language and promoting the secondary Russification of environments where its usage is in decline.

The 'Russian world' is a construct that turbo-patriots have eagerly embraced. In the aforementioned 2022 manifesto, Kvachkov explained that the adjective *russkiy* (written in uppercase: RUSSKIY) plays a pivotal role because the triune Russian nation has been the state-building nation of historic Russia for over a thousand years. According to him, it was the Russians who created the original state, Kievan Rus, which evolved into the Grand Duchy of Vladimir, the Tsardom of Moscow, Imperial Russia and then the Soviet Union. In his view, the "Zionist-liberal way of life leading to ruin", which has been established in both Russia and Malorossiya, collides with the traditional way of life of this triune nation and negates the very essence of Russia's historical statehood:

> We – are the Russian World [original spelling retained here and below], which is founded on the triune Russian Nation [*Russkiy Narod*] – Great Russians, Malorussians and Belarusians, speaking respective dialects of the common Russian Language [*Russkiy Yazyk*]. On this basis, We, the Russians, ominously remind the world that We, together with the other indigenous peoples of our Motherland, are a great God-bearing nation and that historic Russia is a great global Power destined to lead the worldwide struggle against the global Evil on our planet.
>
> They – are the global backstage forces (*mirovaya zakulisa*), or, in transatlantic terminology, the global 'deep state' allied with Satan's dark, infernal forces. Under the pretext of COVID restrictions, they have openly dismantled human

258 А. Лосев, А. Ильницкий, 'Почему русские не сдаются', Парламентская газета, 17 February 2022, pnp.ru.

rights and freedoms in European and other countries. Under the pretext of fighting the coronavirus, state authorities have effectively stripped national constitutional bodies of their legislative, executive and judicial power, handing it over to the secret structures of the Global Conspiracy.

The essence of Kvachkov's vision is encapsulated in the concept of a 'Russian Europe' emerging after a victorious war in Ukraine:

> We, the Russian World, solemnly declare that through the national liberation war in Malorossiya–Ukraine, we are launching a struggle for Russo-Russian (*Russko-Rossiyskoye*) and pan-European liberation from racial, national and social oppression. We remind Europeans that, throughout its centuries-long history, Europe was Greek in ancient times, then Roman, and in more recent history – Swedish, French and German. The time has come for a Russian Europe![259]

As we can see, the pro-Kremlin stance on the 'Russian world' aligns with that of the opposition. The cited military experts share an identical worldview, much like the majority of analysts. They all advocate for a strong, authoritarian state with a wide scope of influence. They all disdain the political, military and social realities they live in, indulge in wishful thinking and remain convinced that their homeland is powerful and its adversaries weak. They all stress the need to resist hostile forces and highlight the transnational nature of Russia. And they all envision a vast 'living space' for their country, extending far beyond the borders established after the collapse of the Soviet Union, while placing emphasis on the Russian state as the "core" and "sacred foundation of the Russian world". These shared traits form the basis of their participation in the information and propaganda warfare.

The 'Russian world' is the flagship product of the contemporary conceptualisation of realities. Such constructs shape patterns of perception and, once entrenched in language and consciousness, contribute to a cultural code that enables communication based on shared images of reality. They also form the essence of ideological discourse, which explains facts (and unfounded 'fake news'), to manipulate the audience by suggesting how to interpret them. The 'Russian world' undoubtedly provides a strong ideological foundation for promoting the desired vision of the world and educating the younger generations of citizens. This concept has been incorporated into state doctrine as the Russian state and its security constitute the primary points of reference. It justifies policy based on the use of force: externally, it asserts Moscow's 'right' to launch armed humanitarian interventions aimed at protecting Russian-speaking populations and to expand its empire; internally, it ensures that ethnic Russians enjoy

259 'Программный манифест Русского Мира, Владимир Квачков, 1 часть', Каша.Пресс, kasha.press.

a privileged 'elder brother' status and provides non-ethnic Russians with a sense of great-power pride. At the same time, it facilitates the secondary mental 'nationalisation' of the Russian-speaking populations in the post-Soviet states. In the Kremlin's policy, this has been expressed in intense passportisation campaigns, such as the one in 2007–08 targeting the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (which provided a pretext for the August 2008 military intervention) and those in Crimea and the Donbas prior to the wars of 2014 and 2022. On the eve of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Putin announced that around 800,000 residents of the DNR and LNR held Russian citizenship.[260]

The propaganda appeal of the metaphorical concept of the 'Russian world' and its utility for the Kremlin have ensured its enduring presence in academic, political and military discourse. Valery Tishkov, director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences, has actively joined the debate to promote this national myth, framing it around three pillars: the Russian language, Russian/Soviet culture and historical memory, and a sense of connection to Russia. As early as 2007, he stated that:

> The conversation about the 'Russian world' must begin with a discussion about the Russian nation (*rossiyskiy narod*). It created the world's largest country, which ranks among the world's ten most populous countries. Our country boasts many outstanding achievements; its contributions to global civilisation and culture are impressive. Not all countries have managed to create a phenomenon on a global scale that can be called a 'world,' that is, a transnational and transcontinental community united by engagement in the state's affairs and loyalty to its culture. Besides Russia, only Spain, France and China possess such 'worlds'. Perhaps Ireland and Great Britain as well.
>
> A 'world,' or diaspora, is not merely the sum of emigrants who left the historical state's territory at various times and settled in different countries. [...] An indisputable part of the Russian world consists of those who have retained knowledge of the Russian language along with loyalty and attachment to Russia [...]. Even if they are not Russians, but Armenians, Georgians or Ukrainians whose roots lie in both Russia and the new independent states.[261]

In 2007, the concept of the 'Russian world' was institutionalised and the Rossotrudnichestvo state agency and the Russkiy Mir Foundation were tasked with promoting it, supported by countless websites and social media profiles amplifying the official geopolitical, historical and cultural narrative. This effort has been further reinforced by the use of paid trolls and bots. The propaganda

260 'Два года независимости народных республик', Победа РФ, 21 February 2024, pobedarf.ru.
261 'Что такое русский мир?', РИА Новости, 1 June 2007 (updated: 26 May 2021), ria.ru.

image of the 'Russian world' has continuously evolved, acquiring new connotations. Initially rooted in tangible, physical markers such as territory, a Russian-speaking population and loyalty to Russia, it now also incorporates markers that enhance its ideological value, including an Orthodox and sacred space, a shared space of historical memory and, most recently, a civilisational space where the inevitable clash of civilisations has been unfolding. This vision has been bolstered by imagined geography and history: constructs such as Malorossiya, Novorossiya, Taurida, the 'triune nation' and Russia's statehood of more than a thousand years have resurfaced in public discourse, evoking an imperial past that can (and must) be restored by force to overturn the order imposed by the alien Western civilisation. To achieve this, it is necessary to 'de-Ukrainianise' the 'Russian world' by pressing on with the Great Patriotic War against fascism, which the West is allegedly trying to impose on Malorossiya, which is depicted as being under the occupation of a Banderite regime.

6. Case study: the brochure *I live, I fight, I win! Rules of life in war* as an example of wartime propaganda

The brochure *I live, I fight, I win! Rules of life in war* (*Zhivu, srazhayus, pobezhdayu! Pravila zhizni na voyne*) was released in late 2022.[262] Widely distributed and reproduced, including by local branches of the United Russia party, it was handed out at military recruitment offices and initially featured on the official website of Russia's Ministry of Defence in its training section.[263] Prepared by veterans with experience in Afghanistan and Chechnya, the brochure provides a ministry-recommended set of guidelines for soldiers fighting in the war in Ukraine. Its target audience includes a broad range of conscripts, students at military academies and personnel from various power ministries. It also exemplifies the propaganda of victory. The introduction has a text from Frants Klintsevich, a former political officer and public opinion leader who frequently appears on state television and identifies himself there as the leader of the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan and Special Military Operations; he writes that the publication addresses "wartime realities, which make up 80% of any war [...], experiences that help you survive and win". This text can be seen as a treasure trove of insights into the mechanisms of Russian propaganda. Its uniqueness lies

262 For an excellent contribution to the text, see Professor Grzegorz Przebinda's article 'Czy znajdzie się rosyjski Remarque?', Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej, 24–26 December 2022, at: przebindapisze.pl.

263 А. Разумов, Г. Крюков, А. Кузнецов, *Живу, сражаюсь, побеждаю! Правила жизни на войне*, The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2022, vvo.ric.mil.ru. This tab has been removed; today, the brochure is available on so-called patriotic websites, such as 'БоевойЛисток.рф', boevojlistok.ru.

in its focus on war as *praxis* – real actions and the actual state of things. Above all, however, it reveals the narrative aimed at soldiers being sent to the battlefront.

The brochure fits into the tradition and strategic culture of the Russian military seamlessly. It is sufficient to mention that cadets from Moscow (*suvorovtsy*[264]) have been promoting it in much the same way as the book by their patron, Field Marshal Aleksandr Suvorov, entitled *The science of victory* (*Nauka pobezhdat*),[265] one of military bestsellers with a large number of reprints. There is good reason for this: the author devoted significant attention to the education of soldiers and issues of morale and patriotism, emphasising that courage, perseverance and resilience are quintessentially Russian traits. He also asserted that soldiers of the Russian Empire should take pride in their country and background. The book's enduring popularity also stems from the belief among Russian strategists that fostering the fighting spirit of soldiers and mobilising the entire society for an intense war effort (and, ultimately, 'victory') must be a continuous process pursued both during peace and war.

The war propaganda presented in the brochure emerged at a specific moment when pro-war agitation had suffered a heavy blow. The 'partial mobilisation' decreed by Putin on 21 September 2022 faced public opposition.[266] It triggered an exodus of individuals seeking to avoid conscription, arson attacks on military administration buildings and, most notably, an unprecedented wave of disapproval, unseen since the first Chechen war. This backlash was driven by military abuses such as the conscription of students and bribes of up to 1 million roubles for deferments as well as the failure to provide mobilised troops with essential equipment and clothing, the non-payment of promised wages and the deployment of recruits to the front without prior training. As a result of mounting social tensions, support for those drafted into the military became the number one topic for all media outlets, effectively overshadowing and dampening criticism of the mobilisation. Needless to say, repression and fines imposed on draft dodgers also contributed to this.

All of this once again demonstrated the critical importance of militaristic agitation for conducting military operations. This kind of agitation can reinforce the population's will to fight and influence the armed forces by boosting their fighting spirit or, conversely, it can foster pacifist sentiments. Therefore, this publication was designed to reinvigorate war propaganda, whose priorities include maintaining public support for the Russian leadership and its war against

264 *Живу, сражаюсь, побеждаю! Правила жизни на войне*, Московские Суворовцы, mccvu.ru.

265 Suvorov compiled his thoughts on the art of war in 1796, following the suppression of the Kościuszko Uprising. 'Nauka pobezhdat' is also available online, for example on the website of *Литрес bookstore*, litres.ru.

266 For more on this issue, see K. Chawryło, I. Wiśniewska, 'Mobilisation in Russia: society's reactions and the economic consequences', *OSW Commentary*, no. 486, 20 January 2023, osw.waw.pl.

Ukraine as well as rallying society around Putin. For this reason, the general public is the most important audience for the Kremlin's war propaganda and agitation. The tools and techniques employed as part of these efforts are aimed at shaping the desired attitudes and behaviours.

The brochure consists of 66 short practical tips. The introductory, indoctrinatory recommendations are a textbook example of manipulative techniques employed as part of wartime propaganda. For instance, the first recommendation, despite its promising title 'What is a special military operation?', uses standard ambiguity: the concept is left undefined and deliberately misrepresented using vague terms. To recall, this term typically refers to operations conducted by specially designated, organised, trained and equipped special forces which employ methods and techniques that go beyond the standards applied in conventional forces. The military actions in Ukraine do not meet these defined criteria. Adding the adjective 'military' to the phrase 'special operation' does not obscure the fact that Russia has been conducting regular military operations and a full-scale war in Ukraine. To illustrate the propaganda nature of this term and the flawed logic of wartime propaganda, I will quote the following excerpt:

> Politicians described the Russian military's actions in Ukraine as a special military operation, framing it as justified under international law. For its participants, however, **this is a real war – a bloody war that brings pain and the bitterness of losses, but also the joy of victories**.[267]

By suggesting that the truth of soldiers differs from that of politicians and by referring to the Russian military's 'operation' as a war, and a bloody one, the authors have committed an outright crime. In fact, this word, banned by censors and punishable under law, appeared in the subtitle and Klintsevich's introduction. According to the revised criminal code from March 2022, the use of this term is equivalent to disseminating false information about the special military operation in Ukraine, a crime that carries a penalty of 3 to 15 years in a penal colony. However, it appears that the regulations governing this censorship do not apply to the official and semi-official narrative, which swiftly adapts to any fluctuations in public sentiment. When it became necessary to quickly eradicate negative emotions among the population, the term 'war' was reintroduced opportunistically, despite the war censorship laws not having been updated.

Another recommendation mythologised the war to obscure its real objectives. The brochure's authors departed from reality when they referred to one of the Putin regime's foundational myths by calling the war in Ukraine 'The Great Patriotic War 2.0'. Propaganda requires a proper ideological context that is taken

267 А.Н. Разумов, Г.А. Крюков, А.Н. Кузнецов, *Живу, сражаюсь, побеждаю...*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

for granted. In this case, it is built upon Russia's messianism and its perceived special role in world history, particularly during World War II:

> Consider the list of countries that have imposed sanctions against us and have been aiding the Ukrainian regime – Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Norway, Denmark, Japan, Italy... They have all fought against us. Today, in Ukraine, they are exacting revenge for our Great Victory. **For us, this means the continuation of the Great Patriotic War. And we, like our forefathers in '45, have a duty to win**.[268]

The depiction of the war as a continuation of the victorious mission of fathers and forefathers emphasises the existence of a broad front of Russia's enemies who "fought against it" (implicitly during World War II). This narrative imposes a suggestive cause-and-effect relationship between that war and the invasion of Ukraine. This tactic is known as false proof. Lies justify the disinformation narrative that portrays the actions in Ukraine as defensive. They also evoke emotions: positive ones directed towards one's comrades-in-arms and negative ones aimed at the alleged adversary. It is worth recalling that propaganda seeks to provoke emotions and has little regard for facts. For this reason, Putin justified the 'special military operation' as a necessary step to defend the population against the 'genocide' allegedly being perpetrated by the Ukrainian government. The euphemism 'special military operation' concealed the reality, serving as a softening term for an invasion that otherwise could have provoked fear or outrage. The use of propagandistic constructs attributed to the West, such as 'Nazification', 'militarisation', 'genocide' and 'bandit terrorism' is intended to produce similar reactions. Most Russian people do not understand these terms, but they sound either menacing or grandiose and, crucially, refer to contexts that are vividly present in peacetime propaganda.

The propagandists eagerly draw on familiar themes of the West's hostility and the threat it poses, contrasting it with Moscow's allegedly peaceful intentions. They argue that Russia has never Russified any nation and is not currently doing this; they claim that its actions are part of a strategy to modernise the local communities within its multi-ethnic state. They also assert that Russia has never waged offensive wars, only defensive and just ones. The current conflict, they maintain, is not about trying to subjugate Ukraine; instead "Russians are defending Russia" and saving the Ukrainian population because:

> **Ukraine as a state does not exist**. What exists is the territory of the former Ukrainian SSR, temporarily occupied by a gang of terrorists. All power there

268 *Ibid*, p. 8.

> is concentrated in the hands of citizens of Israel, the US and the UK, who have organised the genocide of the indigenous population, reducing it by 20 million people during the period of 'independence'. To survive, people, like black Americans in the US in the past, must work for peanuts on European plantations. European brothels are filled with young Ukrainian women. Men are forced to fight against Russia. [...] This future was planned for us as well. This is why, **by fighting in Ukraine, we are defending Russia and saving the Ukrainian population from the genocide unleashed by Ukrainian and Western politicians**.[269]

The claim about Ukraine's non-existent statehood is based on ideas that were previously developed and introduced into the public discourse and which became self-evident through persistent repetition. The phrases 'the population of Ukraine' and 'indigenous inhabitants' are used deliberately here. This language is a legacy of Soviet propaganda, where such expressions emphasised the lack of agency among the residents of the individual republics. The ethnonym 'Ukrainians', along with falsified statistics on the ethnic composition of Ukrainian society, is used to undermine the Ukrainian people and discredit their identity as being Russophobic.

> [We read further] Not long ago, **96.7% of Ukrainians were Russians**. Over 30 years of independence (*nezalezhnosti*), they were deprived of a proper education, culture, their mother tongue and transformed into 'savage' Russophobes. However, something Russian still remains within them. Just like us, they were raised on the great deeds of their forefathers, who defeated fascism. They are equally brave fighters, steadfast in defence and courageous in attack. **In time, after denazification, they will once again become Russians, but for now, they are our enemies** – unyielding and cunning. This means that they must be pummelled until they surrender, until we achieve victory.[270]

It should be emphasised that Ukrainians are not portrayed as ordinary enemies but as their 'savage' variant – unyielding and cunning. They are depicted as inhuman and unworthy of mercy. The theme of dehumanising the enemy, reducing them to 'subhumans', was a consistent feature of Nazi racist propaganda. The 'savage Russophobe' is both an external and internal enemy (Ukrainians allegedly borrowed courage and resilience from Russians), which makes them very strong and very weak simultaneously. The theme of "Ukrainians meaning Russians" also appears in the brochure's conclusion as its 'obvious' final argument: "Sooner or later, Ukrainians will once again become Russians. Because they have always been Russians".

269 *Ibid.*
270 *Ibid*, p. 9.

While asserting that current Ukrainian soldiers will once again stand shoulder to shoulder with Russian troops against the West, which allegedly provoked this "fratricidal war",[271] the propagandists claimed adherence to the principles of international law, which mandates the humane treatment of civilians. Specifically, they referenced the Geneva Conventions on the protection of war victims and their Additional Protocol. However, they conveniently omitted that these acts relate to occupation law and are crucial for holding Russia accountable for war crimes and prosecuting their perpetrators. Instead, they turned the conventions on their head, interpreting them as instructions for killing. They conflated civilians with the military by alleging that the widespread acts of protest, sabotage, espionage and subversion by the local population in the 'liberated territories' were orchestrated by the command centres of the Armed Forces and Security Service of Ukraine. Consequently, invoking Article 45 of the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, they asserted that civilians hindering Russian soldiers in their duties should be treated as combatants and prisoners of war. Moreover, they insisted that the occupying forces should fire on the local population in situations where it poses a threat to their life and health. After sanctioning the killing of civilians, they further declared, citing Article 46 of the same Additional Protocol, that those acting against the Russian military during combat operations forfeit their right to prisoner-of-war status, with all the resulting consequences.[272]

The brochure's indoctrinatory sections reinforced all the familiar themes of the 'just war' propaganda: the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine, the need to ensure Russia's national security, the liberating mission of its armed forces, the pathological Russophobia of the countries of Central and Eastern European, the eastward expansion of the West and NATO, which foster hatred against Russia and support Nazism in Ukraine, as well as the struggle against the "satanic West" and the "battle of good versus evil" in Russia's "holy war", a theme that has featured particularly prominently on Orthodox websites. The notion that the war against Ukraine is a 'holy war' has been affirmed by the authority of the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces. Recommendation 65 quoted Putin in the title: "We will go to heaven and they will simplydie like dogs",[273] followed by an explanation of his words:

> Today, Russia and its soldiers are fighting on the side of Good, as proven by the fact that thousands of Russians of all nationalities and various faiths have vol-

271 *Ibid*, p. 55.
272 *Ibid*, p. 17.
273 He made these remarks during the annual meeting of the Valdai Club in 2018, stating: "We, as martyrs, will go to heaven, while they [Ukrainian nationalists] will simply perish.", "'Мы как мученики попадем в рай, а они просто сдохнут'. Путин на "Валдае"", BBC News Русская служба, 18 October 2018, bbc.com/russian.

> untarily, following the call of their conscience, joined the military ranks to combat evil. This happened only once before: during the Great Patriotic War, when our forefathers fought against rampant fascism. **Today [...] we are fighting Ukrainian nationalism and the global Satanism that supports it. And our President was certainly not joking when he said that we, as martyrs, will go to heaven, and they will simply die liake dogs**. Surely, Putin knows something that cannot be disclosed yet.[274]

This war has revived the cult of martyrdom, which is promoted by the Orthodox Church and the military. For example, Andrei Ilnitsky, an adviser to Defence Minister Shoigu, has argued that dying on the battlefield is a reward for heroic combat. Invoking the words of the Gospel, he framed his militant philosophy within the context of faith: "There is no greater sacrifice than to give one's life for one's fellow fighters, for family and home, for the nation, for the Motherland. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (Gospel of John 15:13). The meaning of life lies not only in life itself – it lies beyond it".[275]

Putin also argues that Russians "live to fight" and die with dignity, whereas their enemies "simply drop dead" – like animals. Here, the glorification of death is intertwined with praise for the supreme commander. The implied message, imbued with conspiratorial undertones, is reinforced by the authority of the president, who "certainly knows more and better". The propaganda technique that appeals to the authority of a leader or a respected state institution is known astestimonial. In Russia, this method is used extensively, as shown by the direct involvement of Putin and other top politicians in propaganda campaigns.

The authors of the text move seamlessly from metaphysical themes to the realities of war. The fighters for Good confronting the forces of "global Satanism" face an exceptionally challenging mission: "The West has been preparing Ukraine for war against Russia for 30 years". According to the text, the West has chosen the vilest strategy: just like the Nazis, it has set up defensive strongholds in populated areas, deploying tactical groups supported by artillery, sabotage units and advanced reconnaissance and communication systems. These strongpoints are equipped with cable Internet, enabling online observation and the transmission of fire orders. The defending forces also use NATO's missile and artillery systems, night vision devices and thermal imaging equipment.

In the context of the patriotic rhetoric about the "second army in the world", equipped with "state-of-the-art, next-generation weaponry", and

274 А. Разумов, Г. Крюков, А. Кузнецов, *Живу, сражаюсь, побеждаю...*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
275 А. Ильницкий, 'Идеология настоящего', Парламентская газета, 18 March 2023, pnp.ru.

Ukraine's "NATO-standard" equipment, the next recommendation addressed to commanders may come as a surprise. The authors suggested that they should carry a complete set of spare batteries for radios, a good pair of binoculars, a GPS navigator, a laser rangefinder, thermal imaging goggles and power supplies for these devices. Amidst the pervasive wartime censorship in the media, the following statement is particularly surprising: "The Ministry of Defence does not provide these gadgets; the commander has to purchase them on his own. It is time to accept that the commander, like any professional, must have his own personal work tools".[276] Thus, the image created by Russian propaganda, an unrealistic, imagined world of ideological pretence, collided with the harsh reality on the ground. There is a clear dissonance between the public's fascination with cutting-edge technologies, which evoke emotions, admiration and appreciation among Russian people, and the basic limitations faced by soldiers fighting in a 'real' war.

The quoted passage highlights the challenges faced by the ministry of defence and the stark gap between the propaganda of an 'invincible army' and the grim reality on the front lines. This became clear in the first weeks of the invasion of Ukraine, as it quickly turned out that Russia did not have enough professional soldiers and was deploying conscripts to the battlefield. Facing equipment shortages, it resorted to sourcing supplies from abroad, notably by purchasing Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones. Moreover, mobilised troops were inadequately equipped, lacking essentials such as winter uniforms. It also emerged that military rations had expiration dates as early as 2007 and that some tanks were missing critical parts, such as electronic components, which had likely been sold on the black market.[277]

Subsequent reports in local media outlets revealed that maintaining even minimal standards for clothing required coercing 'loyalty' from oligarchs. According to the website of the Sverdlovsk branch of United Russia, its chairman arranged the purchase of winter uniforms for recruits. A local businessman, Aleksandr Nikiforov, director of the Tagansky Riad holding, personally bought 100 sets. He also provided each mobilised soldier with a copy of the brochure *I live, I fight, I win!*. On 1 December 2022, during a meeting with troops departing for Ukraine, veterans of the Chechen wars shared their experiences. One of them, Sergeant Konstantin C., praised the oligarch while admiring the quality of the winter jackets and insulated rubber boots, saying: "When heading to the front

276 А. Разумов, Г. Крюков, А. Кузнецов, *Живу, сражаюсь, побеждаю...*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

277 S. Hedlund, 'The collapse of the Russian military machine', Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 2 May 2022, gisreportsonline.com.

in the North Caucasus in 1999, we could not have dreamed of such uniforms. In combat situations, this assistance is invaluable".[278]

Incidentally, actions of this kind discredited the Russian defence ministry and revealed the inefficiency of its mobilisation efforts. This topic was picked up by Ukrainian intelligence and Western agencies, which highlighted the fact that Russia was deploying old, malfunctioning Soviet-era military equipment while its soldiers were 'dressed like the homeless' and had to personally procure dressings and underwear.[279] Even Putin addressed this issue, reprimanding the defence ministry's leadership: "Equipment, specialised tools and gear for participants in the special military operation should not only be available but should also be comfortable, effective and modern".[280] Despite his appeal, traditional foot wraps made a return to the front lines, as reflected in recommendation 43: "The foot wrap is your friend".

> Socks last 2–3 days in boots. When they become unusable and you have no spare ones, you can use foot wraps made from soft fabric. Pieces measuring 36 × 75 cm can be cut from bedsheets, flannel shirts, or sports jerseys. It is important for these pieces to be free of seams and sharp edges that could cause foot abrasions. Foot wraps take up more space in the footwear. If they become soaked, they can easily be rewrapped: wrap the dry part around your foot and the wet part around your shin to minimise chafing during long marches. You can wear wet boots over dry socks and foot wraps, but never the other way around. During troop relocations, you can dry foot wraps on your body under the outer layer of clothing.

This set of instructions provides some insight into the current state of the Russian armed forces: in the 21st century, they continue to suffer from the same trench plagues and hardships that afflicted Second World War Soviet troops and, even earlier, Tsarist-era soldiers. One new threat has emerged: "an idiot with a mobile phone becomes their own enemy" as they can be tracked by the adversary. Otherwise, problems have remained unchanged for centuries: these include hunger and insufficient supplies, as demonstrated by warnings against consuming an entire daily food ration at once or filling one's stomach with items found in abandoned houses. Lice, infectious diseases, alcoholism and untreated wounds are still widespread in the trenches. Soldiers are given instructions for dealing with body lice that may be sound but are in fact unworkable under field

278 'Сергей Мелехин передал зимнее обмундирование для мобилизованных', 1 December 2022, United Russia – Sverdlovsk Oblast, sverdlovsk.er.ru.

279 M. Tomaszkiewicz, 'Wyposażenie Rosjan na wojnę w Ukrainie. Kredki, flamastry i latarki z ZSRR', Radio ZET, 3 March 2022, wiadomosci.radiozet.pl.

280 'Putin zwraca uwagę na wyposażenie żołnierzy. Chce nowoczesnego sprzętu', Rzeczpospolita, 26 October 2022, rp.pl.

conditions. For example, lice can be eradicated by boiling underwear for an hour in a barrel or pot over an open fire, cleaning it with petrol, freezing it for about 12 hours, or burying it in the ground while leaving a small piece of fabric exposed on the surface for the lice to gather.[281] There is also a lot of wishful thinking in the recommendation that alcohol be used strictly for personal hygiene or for "softening" stiff military boots.

In this propaganda narrative, war also resembles a survival camp. Soldiers are advised to bring only a tourniquet, an individual first-aid kit or a 5 cm × 10 m bandage, a set of plasters of various sizes, 2–3 packs of gauze and loperamide for gastrointestinal issues. Antihistamines are more useful than dressings as "from the summer until the first frosts, a strong allergen, ragweed, remains in bloom" in Ukraine. In addition, "even in the harshest conditions of trench warfare, in the cold, while wearing wet and freezing clothing, soldiers do not fall ill. Therefore, carrying a full set of medications is pointless".

As a result, the truth about the reality on the front lines in the occupied territories of Ukraine (which are, for example, deprived of medical care due to the mobilisation of doctors) reaches the Russian public only indirectly. This conclusion is supported by a recommendation adopted during a meeting of the Russian Security Council on 7 December 2022, which stated that "the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, together with the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation and the executive authorities of the DNR, LNR and the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts, have been obliged to present proposals on exemptions from military duty for prosthetists, orthopaedists and doctors of other specialisations mobilised for service in the ranks of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation".[282]

In this context, the guide under discussion leads to the conclusion that the presented reality has been manipulated and crafted to serve the war's needs. War greatly increases the demand for propaganda, which begins to spread hate speech without the restraints and limitations imposed during peacetime. The language of war is designed to drive military success: it fuels hatred towards the enemy, turns victims into perpetrators, speaks on behalf of everyone and disregards logic and consistency in presenting the imagined world. It favours non-substantive argumentation which is inherently selective, offering narratives and 'images' aligned with top-down directives and which appeals to emotions: positive when referring to one's own camp (US) and negative towards the OTHER side (THEM). Distorted and falsified representations create the intended reality, influencing the motivations and attitudes of the

281 А. Разумов, Г. Крюков, А. Кузнецов, *Живу, сражаюсь, побеждаю...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–42.

282 'Перечень поручений по итогам заседания Совета по развитию гражданского общества и правам человека', President of Russia, 12 January 2023, kremlin.ru.

audience. Language becomes a weapon of war while the information sphere serves as one of the theatres of armed conflict. Russian strategists emphasise that the significance of this domain will only continue to grow; after all, it is possible to win the information war (that is, to gain an advantage in the media and political spheres) while suffering defeat on the battlefield.

7. Summary: the 'Russian code' is a code of war

In 2014, a propaganda-infused society reacted as the Kremlin had expected. "The Russian code worked", the conceptual architects declared in triumph. The population's wartime reflexes were further reinforced by the persistent construct of the victorious Great Patriotic War, solidified by the military propaganda machine and a military-patriotic education. Russian people became convinced that the West had been pursuing a project to turn Ukraine into an 'anti-Russia'. They were persuaded that the post-Soviet space is an exclusive sphere of Russia's influence and that the dismantling of the Yalta order in Europe was a humiliation for Russia. The war in Ukraine, they were told, would allow Russia to restore 'historical justice' and reclaim the victory won in World War II, which the West is seeking to usurp from Russia.

Concepts such as the 'Russian world', 'anti-Russia' and the 'triune nation', which are lexical units referring to the realm of ideology and shaping human consciousness on that level, have been described by Professor Hasan Huseynov as ideologemes. A dedicated scholar of Russian political discourse, Huseynov has authored a number of books and articles on this subject. In a 2015 paper, he noted that Russia's propaganda machine, operating at full capacity, creates a virtual product: the readiness to kill and die for the wrongs allegedly inflicted upon Russia by neighbouring countries, Europe and the United States. These 'wrongs' have never been clearly defined, even as their supposed consequences have been relentlessly highlighted: the restriction of Russia's 'living space' and the destruction of the 'sacred integrity of the Russian world'. According to Huseynov, "This is a simple mechanism through which Putin and his circle instil in Russian citizens contempt for international law, along with a complex of being the victimised bearers of the highest values. Such complexes, as the narrative suggests, can only be alleviated by force – through a military onslaught against Ukraine…".[283]

283 Г. Гусейнов, 'Фашизация антифашизма, или как Российская Федерация легитимирует захват Украины. Фашистский дрейф языка: манящий и маниакальный', Гефтер, 23 March 2015, gefter.ru. The text was originally published in German: G. Gusejnov, 'Die Faschisierung des Antifaschismus oder wie die Russische Föderation die Okkupation der Ukraine legitimiert', *Beton International*, 10 March 2015, no. 2.

These effects of ideological and psychological influence have shaped the current state of the Russian public consciousness. Russian people have supported the policy of unlawful border changes and human rights violations in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the Donbas, Luhansk and Crimea. In essence, they have endorsed the 'right to lawlessness', demanding recognition of Russia's territorial seizures and spheres of influence, as well as the restoration of the European security architecture to its pre-1991 state – a demand that Putin made in his December 2021 ultimatum to NATO and the United States. These societal attitudes are largely the result of the theoretical and practical efforts of the Russian ministry of defence, including its affiliated analysts and bloggers such as Ilnitsky and Kvachkov. These figures have been propagating the belief that the presidential power centre can arbitrarily determine what constitutes a threat to the state. By invoking fictitious threats, they have sharpened a narrative which effectively amounts to war propaganda, which is prohibited under international law.[284]

284 '26. Zakaz propagandy wojennej, podżegania nienawiści na tle rasowym, religijnym czy narodowym', Polski Instytut Praw Człowieka i Biznesu, pihrb.org.

Chapter III

Methods as old as Russia: on Russian strategic culture

1. Overview of the issue

In the previous chapters, I focused on the current conditions shaping the theory and practice of Russian information warfare. Applying the systemic analysis method, I emphasised that, in Russia information security is seen as a key factor in ensuring the stability of the political system. However, this approach produces certain limitations certain limitations, as it restricts the timeframe to Putin's rule, which began in 2000. Meanwhile, today's arena of information warfare often features constructs from previous conflicts, particularly those of the Cold War era, but also from even earlier periods. They return like boomerangs, gaining sharper edges and new meanings. This is especially striking in cultural and civilisational contexts, which also reveal the similarities between historical and contemporary experiences. For example, when Russia entered the Crimean War under the pretext of defending the Orthodox Slavic population, Tsar Nicholas I issued a manifesto on 14 June 1853, entitled 'On the movement of Russian troops into the Danubian Principalities', stressing that "We do not seek territorial gains – Russia does not need them. We seek justice, redress for such a blatant violation of the law".

Thus began the 'just war' which mobilised supporters of Slavophilism. They amplified their calls for the 'liberation of the Slavs', urged the ruler to crown himself in Tsargrad (their term for Constantinople) and called for all Slavs to be united under the Russian sceptre. Meanwhile, poets composed celebratory odes. In 1854, Alexei Khomyakov wrote a poem titled 'To Russia', emphasising its messianic mission: "God has called you to a holy war, / Our Lord has favoured you, / He has given you invincible strength...". That same year, Pyotr Vyazemsky, a friend of Alexander Pushkin and the first president of the Russian Historical Society, published a collection entitled 'To arms', calling for the Slavs to be liberated from the Turkish yoke. An anthology of patriotic poetry called

God Is with Us,[285] was also released in 1854. It carried a more varied message: pathos-filled references to Suvorov's campaigns and Napoleon's 1812 invasion which glorified Russia stood alongside works that condemned the 'treacherous policies of the West'. The anthology's title echoed a phrase attributed to Alexander Suvorov: "We are Russians. God is with us". Tsar Nicholas I popularised it in his manifestos: during the Crimean War, he proclaimed successive crusades against Western godlessness, anarchy and moral decay. Over time, it became an iconic phrase as it perfectly encapsulates the essence of the 'Russian idea' – from the monk Philotheus and his concept of the 'Third Rome' to today's notion of the 'Russian world'.

Poetry from that era can be found in modern collections of wartime songs.[286] There is also a contemporary equivalent of the Slavophile collection of patriotic poetry – an anthology titled *ПоZыVнОй – Победа!* (Call Sign – Victory!). The eclectic mix of Cyrillic and Latin letters in the Russian title emphasises the new wartime symbolism associated with Latin characters: Z, V and O. More precisely, this anthology consists of four volumes of poetry dedicated to participants in the 'special military operation' which were published in 2022. Prepared under the patronage of the Union of Russian Writers and funded by the Presidential Foundation for Cultural Initiatives, they have been distributed among soldiers in hospitals, at military academies and at military-run patriotic education centres. This initiative is on an unprecedented scale: it includes poems by more than a hundred authors "from all Russian regions, including the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics", as stated[287] website of the Union, whose mission includes "restoring which was severed by the collapse of the USSR".[288]

In this chapter, moving beyond the previously defined timeframe, I will attempt to present the issue within its historical and cultural context. This perspective suggests that Russia's strategic culture is deeply rooted and that the capital of its war culture has been accumulated over centuries. In any case, its manifestations examined below have reappeared time and again in different historical and cultural periods.

285 Н. Шаповалова, 'Крымская война в художественном творчестве ветеранов 1812 года (по произведениям П. А. Вяземского и Ф. Н. Глинки)', *Человек и культура* no. 2/2018, at: cyberleninka.ru.

286 For example, Ю. Бирюков, *«Наши деды – славные победы». Антология русской военной песни*, at: music-festivals.ru.

287 'Сборник „ПоZыVнОй – Победа!". Антология современной патриотической поэзии', Союз писателей России, pisateli-rossii.ru.

288 'История союза державников', Союз писателей России, pisateli-rossii.ru.

2. The essence of Russian strategic culture

2.1. Defining features

Specialists in information warfare recognised the importance of the cultural factor centuries ago. Today, it is typically analysed within the paradigm of strategic culture. The term 'strategic culture' itself is relatively new. It emerged from American academic discourse, which was influenced in the 1960s and 1970s by the rise of cultural anthropology, a discipline represented in the US by Clifford Geertz.[289] Broadly speaking, this term refers to the relationship between political culture and the strategy of using military force for political purposes. It first appeared toward the end of the Cold War as a result of efforts by RAND analysts to understand the Soviet Union's responses to the new US nuclear doctrine. In 1977, Jack Snyder, a pioneer in this field, concluded that these reactions could not be explained within the framework of political realism, but could be understood through a cultural paradigm. He defined strategic culture as "the sum of ideas, emotionally conditioned answers and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of a national security community with regard to the nuclear threats".[290] Subsequent efforts by Western analysts to refine the concept led to its evolution.[291] In their view,[292] Soviet-Russian strategic culture was characterised by several key features: a relentless pursuit of 'total' national security without regard for the security of other nations, the assumption that international politics is a constant struggle for dominance and power, with war and peace as its different phases, the belief that military strength is never high enough (this fuelled a continuous arms race), the mythologisation of the Russian military's valour and effectiveness, a reluctance to make any concessions of their own, even in response to concessions from other countries, and a persistent 'expectation' of war among both military strategists and the civilian government.

The Soviet Union's strategic culture during the Cold War can be most concisely described as a "culture of a besieged fortress and a perpetual victim

289 For more detail, see W.J. Burszta, 'Clifford Geertz (1926–2006). Odejście Mistrza', *Kultura Popularna* 2006, no. 4(18), at: open.icm.edu.pl.

290 J.L. Snyder, 'The Soviet Strategic Culture: implications for Limited Nuclear Operation', Rand Corporation, Santa Monica 1977, pp. 8–9.

291 A detailed discussion on this topic can be found in: R. Wiśniewski, 'Kultura strategiczna, czyli o kulturowych uwarunkowaniach polityki zagranicznej i bezpieczeństwa', *Przegląd Strategiczny* 2012, no. 1, at: pressto.amu.edu.pl; R. Kłaczyński, *Strategia polityczna Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec Białorusi i Ukrainy od 1990 do kwietnia 2014*, Kraków 2014, at: rep.up.krakow.pl; R. Kupiecki, 'Kultura strategiczna podmiotów zbiorowych. Przypadek NATO', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 2017, no. 4, at: academia.edu; A. Włodkowska-Bagan, 'Kultura strategiczna Rosji', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 2017, no. 3, at: academia.edu; *idem*, 'Kultura strategiczna in statu nascendi. Casus Ukrainy', *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 2020, no. 18, at: ies.lublin.pl.

292 For example, see C.S. Gray, 'National Style in Strategy. The American Example', *International Security* 1981, Vol. 6, No. 2, at: robertsmcnamaracom.wordpress.com. For a comprehensive discussion of the article, see J. Czaja, *Kulturowy wymiar bezpieczeństwa. Aspekty teoretyczne i praktyczne*, Kraków 2013, pp. 250–263, at: repozytorium.ka.edu.pl.

of external aggression". It was largely shaped by propaganda-driven fears and sentiments as well as the militant nature of the communist superpower. Later, researchers identified additional factors, such as the vastness of the country's territory and the authoritarian regime's deep-seated fear of revolt. They also pointed to the alienation and passivity of the population, which the regime kept in a constant state of mobilisation, and the influence of the imperial experience – the collective memory of the empire's territorial gains and its collapses in 1917 and 1991. This was an expansionist experience: in every case, efforts to create buffer security zones ultimately led to their annexation. Most contemporary theorists also highlight the enduring nature of Russian strategic culture across the centuries, regardless of the state's political system – whether it was the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation.

Polish researchers have examined strategic culture in the context of Poland's accession to the EU and NATO as well as globalisation and its impact on international relations.[293] Reflecting on the future relationship between the kinetic and informational dimensions of warfare, General Stanisław Koziej placed this issue within the context of security philosophy, the information revolution and the revival of.[294] Former director of the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Olaf Osica, analysed strategic culture as a three-layered structure consisting of:

1. cultural patterns – experiences, ideas, values and goals shaped through historical processes,
2. political signposts – perceptions of the international environment, available policy options and strategic courses of action,
3. modes of thinking and legitimising security-related political decisions, including the approach to the use of force.

The last of these layers also includes the manner of articulating security-related thoughts or, in other words, the narrative style.[295]

Although Russian strategic culture has been examined by scholars from various fields – including military theorists, political scientists, cultural studies experts, media researchers and historians – it has been under-explored in analytical research. In recent years, interest in this subject has surged, largely due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This 'pressing' contemporary context has introduced new aspects into the discussion. For example, Piotr Grochmalski,

293 See, for example, L. Zacher, *Globalne problemy współczesności: interpretacje i przykłady*, Lublin 1992; B. Balcerowicz, *Pokój i „nie-pokój" na progu XXI wieku*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 90–98; R. Kuźniar, 'Globalizacja, geopolityka i polityka zagraniczna', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 2000, no. 1; A. Bógdał-Brzezińska, 'Kategorie globalizacji w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 2001, no. 1–2.

294 S. Koziej, *Między piekłem a rajem. Szare bezpieczeństwo na progu XXI wieku*, Toruń 2008, p. 24.

295 O. Osica, 'Polska wobec operacji NATO i polityki bezpieczeństwa i obronnej UE' [in:] K. Malinowski (ed.), *Kultura bezpieczeństwa narodowego w Polsce i w Niemczech*, Poznań 2003, p. 103.

director of the Institute of Strategic Studies at the Warsaw-based War Studies University, has refined the concept by highlighting the role of psychological tools in Russia's operational art:

> Traditionally, Russian strategic culture has emphasised the demonstrative use of violence as a psychological tool to influence the adversary. One example is Field Marshal Alexander Suvorov's 1794 massacre of Praga [a district of Warsaw, located on the east bank of the Vistula River], which was intended to break the will of Warsaw's defenders and resulted in the slaughter of 20,000 civilians. Suvorov happens to be Vladimir Putin's favourite historical figure. The use of extreme violence as a major component of operational art was well documented by journalists during the First Chechen War, when mass killings of civilians occurred during urban assaults. At the same time, Russian commanders displayed a blatant disregard for their fallen soldiers. Aslan Maskhadov, who led the Chechen forces, repeatedly offered temporary ceasefires so that Russian troops could recover their dead. Hundreds of bodies were left on the streets of Grozny. Maskhadov personally knew many Russian commanders; he had served as a colonel in the Soviet army. And yet, the Russians allowed wild animals to tear apart the bodies of their soldiers. Therefore, the disregard for their own casualties in Ukraine is neither new nor surprising; it is deeply rooted in the imperial traditions of the Russian state.[296]

Jan Czaja[297] has offered the broadest definition of Russian strategic culture, examining it in close connection with political culture. As the author of fundamental works on the cultural dimension of security, he argues that strategic culture is essentially the culture of national security. In his view, this term refers to the perception of security threats and the methods of countering and eliminating them, including through the use of force. He argues that Russia's political culture is a fusion of Tsarist autocracy, a lack of democratic traditions, great-power arrogance, communist totalitarianism and the once-powerful influence of the Orthodox Church, which is now experiencing a resurgence owing to state support. It also encompasses 'managed democracy' (guided democracy), the factor of military power, a distinctive politics of memory based on the reinterpretation of both events and facts and also the traditions of authoritarian central rule that imposes a one-way, top-down relations between the state and its citizens. This is a classic system of subordinating citizens to the state's authority. It also determines how social and political conflicts are resolved – most

296 'Rosja chce zdestabilizować cały świat', Nasz Dziennik, 11 March 2022, naszdziennik.pl.

297 J. Czaja, *Bezpieczeństwo kulturowe. Zarys problematyki*, Kraków 2004; *idem*, *Kulturowe czynniki bezpieczeństwa*, Kraków 2008; *idem*, *Kulturowy wymiar bezpieczeństwa. Aspekty teoretyczne i praktyczne*, Kraków 2013, at: repozytorium.ka.edu.pl.

often through struggle, intrigue and manoeuvring, where force is the method preferred to dialogue and negotiation.

Most researchers emphasise that Russian strategic culture has been shaped by diverse influences, particularly those deeply rooted in , shared by both the elites and the general public, that only an authoritarian, hierarchical government can maintain effective control in the country. Agata Włodkowska-Bagan has offered her own classification of these influences, dividing them into material components, such as territory, natural resources and economic, military and social potential, and non-material factors, including history, experiences in relations with other countries, religion, traditions, values, and also symbols and myths embedded in the collective 'historical memory'. This memory does not necessarily reflect actual historical events but rather how they have been remembered.[298] She classifies all these factors as internal. With regard to the external (international) determinants, she mentions geographical location, neighbouring countries, the regional balance of power and membership in international organisations. The following table summarises the findings so far.

TABLE 2. Sources of strategic culture

Physical components	Political components	Cultural components
Geographical environment	Historical experiences in relations with other countries	Myths and symbols, stereotypes, values, religion, traditions
National territory, climate	Political system, including authoritarian traditions	Managing public opinion through science and culture
Natural resources	Regional balance of power, membership in international organisations	Cult of victory, power and the military
Social potential	State military organisation	Pursuit of security without regard for the security of other countries
Economic potential	Role of force in international relations, violence as a tool to influence opponents	Communication style in defence matters
Modern technologies	Approach to international law	Great-power historical memory

Source: J.S. Lantis, D. Howlett, 'Kultura strategiczna' [in:] *Strategia we współczesnym świecie. Wprowadzenie do studiów strategicznych*, Kraków 2009; R. Kłaczyński, *Strategia polityczna Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec Białorusi i Ukrainy od 1990 do kwietnia 2014*, *op. cit.*; A. Włodkowska-Bagan, 'Kultura strategiczna in statu nascendi. Casus Ukrainy', *op. cit.*

Strategic culture helps explain the reasons behind Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. More broadly, it sheds light on the enduring principles of its military doctrine, which are rooted in the aforementioned 'besieged fortress' syndrome, the prioritisation of domestic political security over other aspects of

298 A. Włodkowska-Bagan, 'Kultura strategiczna in statu nascendi. Casus Ukrainy', *op. cit.*

state security (external, social and economic), the continuous effort to ensure the population remains prepared for mobilisation and, most notably, the threat perception outlined in the previous chapters. For the Russian government, the spectre of the regime's delegitimisation (a key factor in the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the Soviet Union in 1991) and the population's radicalisation appear more threatening than economic or demographic decline. Strategic culture also clarifies the inconsistencies and anachronisms in the official narrative and the doctrine's language, which are difficult to interpret through the lens of political realism. Like the Soviet Union before it, Russia, as a global nuclear power, continues to frame its actions as a struggle for peace, global denuclearisation, the demilitarisation of space and the information sphere, and the defence of its own values and model of development.

The theory and practice of information warfare expand the characteristics of Russian strategic culture to include:

1. **the belief that the rise of Russia's power depends on external factors,**
2. **a tendency to secure state interests through pre-emptive actions, including the extra-legal use of force,**
3. **a legalisation syndrome – the desire to create a façade of legal resolution for disputed issues, such as incorporating Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the DNR and the LNR into a shared security space with Russia,**
4. **the imposition of limited sovereignty on neighbouring and allied countries (the 'near abroad' doctrine and the concept of the 'Russian world'),**
5. **the cult of the military, which organises civilian life around military norms (patriotic-military education for young people, the militarisation of state and social institutions),**
6. **the mythologisation of an imagined (projected) history and geographical space through concepts such as Eurasian Rus, Novorossiya and the DNR, etc.,**
7. **and most importantly, the enduring role of propaganda (*spetz-propaganda*), which keeps the population in a state of perpetual uncertainty about the intentions of the supposed enemy while reinforcing the belief in the exceptional, messianic role of the *siloviki* (security and military elites).**

Incidentally, the now-common term 'power ministries' (and its colloquial synonym '*siloviki*') first emerged during the Soviet era. At that time, it referred to the KGB, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Internal Affairs – institutions that relied on force and served as both the backbone of the Communist Party's rule and an instrument for enforcing its decisions. In this context, it is worth noting that Russian strategic culture is characterised by a distinct

communication style that features ideologically charged slogans, standard catchphrases and key terms which are constantly repeated. In the humanities, these are regarded as part of the cultural legacy – sensitive indicators of the cultures of various groups or even entire nations. They are known as 'culturemes' and defined as "key terms essential to a community's self-identification, reflecting its attitude towards its tradition and inherited values as well as its approach to the present and current engagement with the world".[299] This category includes many of the terms mentioned earlier, such as 'Russian world', 'sovereign democracy' and 'Russophobia'. Culturemes can be useful in identifying the motivations and arguments used in Russian information warfare and many of its enduring cultural features.

2.2. The shift in strategic culture under Putin: from lumpen-militariat to militocracy

It is widely believed that strategic culture resists change. However, it sometimes experiences a fundamental reorientation as a result of traumatic national and state experiences, such as major crises, revolutions or lost wars. This was the case following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the Soviet Union 74 years later. Both events weakened the political position of the power ministries, particularly the military. The dissolution of the Okhrana (1917) and the KGB (1991) further diminished the prestige of both the ruling elite and the *siloviki* in society.[300] For them, this was a deeply traumatic experience, as the image of a strong state had historically been built primarily by mythologising the effectiveness of these institutions and by consolidating the security elite around the central authority.

The KGB's dissolution was officially justified by the need to depoliticise this agency after the involvement of its chief Vladimir Kryuchkov in the August 1991 coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev, which underscored the dangers

299 A. Nagórko, M. Łaziński, H. Burkhardt, *Dystynktywny słownik synonimów*, Kraków 2004, p. XIX. Key terms, culturemes and cultural concepts (ideologically charged notions tied to the world of values and carrying culturally specific connotations) were the subject of review articles by leading experts in a special issue of *Przegląd Humanistyczny* (no. 3, 2016), at: wuw.pl. See, for example: J. Bartmiński, *Słowa klucze, kulturemy, koncepty kulturowe*, pp. 21–29; W. Pisarek, *Słowa ważne i ważniejsze*, pp. 12–20. This topic has also been explored by Maciej Rak. See *idem*, 'Co to jest kulturem?', *LingVaria* 2015, no. 2(20); *idem*, 'Kulturemy podhalańskie', *Biblioteka LingVariów*, vol. 19, Kraków 2015, ruj.uj.edu.pl.

300 A survey conducted in 1992 by the Institute of Sociology of the USSR Academy of Sciences on public views regarding the tasks of the KGB's successor agencies indicated that their priorities should include: combating the mafia, terrorism and drug addiction (82% of respondents), protecting state facilities and classified information (75%) and preventing the unlawful seizure of power (73%). At the same time, 40% of respondents said that the new security services should combat ideological subversion by foreign intelligence services, 34% viewed them as the country's greatest threat, while 33% claimed that "Western intelligence services are conducting subversive activities in CIS countries". In her summary of the survey, Professor Olga Kryshtanovskaya remarked that these assessments were "relics of the defensive mindset" imposed on the Russian people by official propaganda. See О. Крыштановская, 'Сторонники и противники госбезопасности: Явного преимущества нет ни у тех, ни у других', *Независимая газета*, 10 June 1993.

of losing control over the *siloviki*. President Boris Yeltsin applied a 'divide and rule' strategy to this organisation. During his first three years in office, he reorganised the former KGB on three occasions and repeatedly replaced the leadership of its successor agencies. However, the unfavourable environment for the *siloviki* was primarily reflected in staff reductions and budget cuts. In 1992, Yeltsin signed a decree to reduce the 137,000-strong central apparatus of the then Ministry of Security, the KGB's main successor, to 75,000. The significant outflow of personnel affected all the security agencies.

The power ministries themselves embarked on an effort to reverse these unfavourable trends. This was reflected in the emergence of the term 'lumpen-militariat' in public discourse, which brought the *siloviki*'s struggles out into the open. This typical cultureme carried an ambiguous meaning: on the one hand, it highlighted the dire situation of the uniformed services, while on the other, it raised concerns that chronic underfunding and frustration could lead to rebellion. The first attempt to mitigate the effects of reform and adapt to new economic conditions relied on the familiar institution of 'active reserve officers', who were permitted, with the approval from the leadership, to work in any enterprise, regardless of its ownership structure.[301] This informal support for the power ministries inevitably led to their commercialisation and criminalisation, the consequences of which are still visible today.[302]

As Vladimir Lukin observed, "due to financial constraints, the state at the time entered into an unwritten agreement with the lumpen-militariat, granting it access to the grey economy and treating this as a form of support".[303] Leveraging their connections within their parent agencies, experience working abroad and foreign contacts, these individuals brought expertise and coercive resources to their new workplaces, ensuring compliance with agreements and obligations. They also facilitated links between their new superiors and the state administration, proving valuable to both the oligarchs and authorities who sought their backing. The legal framework for this arrangement was introduced into a carefully prepared environment: the security apparatus was

301 The status of 'active reserve officers' was classified as a state secret. In 1998, they were placed under the 'apparatus of seconded employees'. Their exact numbers were never disclosed. For more on this topic, see: А. Солдатов, И. Бороган, *Новое дворянство. Очерки истории ФСБ*, Москва 2011, pp. 35–39, at: Agentura.ru.

302 Recent examples of criminalisation have involved senior figures within the security services: according to reports that are difficult to verify, Sergei Beseda, the head of the FSB's 5th Directorate, which is responsible for intelligence operations in the CIS, and his deputy Anatoly Bolyukh, were held in pre-trial detention at Lefortovo prison. As Andrei Soldatov claims, their arrest was related to a major corruption scandal: FSB agents sent to Ukraine to conduct subversive activities, such as recruiting pro-Russian candidates for a new government, allegedly embezzled operational funds and submitted falsified reports to their superiors. According to Soldatov, Putin reinstated them in their positions to deflect criticism of the FSB. See 'Генерал Сергей Беседа из 5-й службы ФСБ помещен в СИЗО «Лефортово»', Agentura.ru, 8 April 2022; А. Солдатов, 'Разведка России после года войны', Agentura.ru, 9 May 2023; S. Hedlund, 'The collapse of the Russian military machine', *op. cit.*

303 В. Лукин, 'Армия в тени', *Pro&Contra*, no. 3/1999.

at the core of the transition into what was later described as an alternative, covert economy. Scholars who use these terms[304] reference a classified memo from 23 August 1990, in which the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union advised the party, Komsomol and KGB elites to enter the global stock markets in order to secure funding for the party's survival. These researchers also point out that the ability to navigate market conditions had long been part of the financial infrastructure supporting the KGB's and GRU's foreign operations.

By the end of the last millennium, the security establishment had consolidated, increasingly positioning itself as a counter-elite to the ruling oligarchic groups and was becoming more assertive about its own interests. 'Authority within the power ministries' became a key argument in the struggle for power – this wording was used to justify the appointments of successive prime ministers with security backgrounds (Sergei Stepashin, Yevgeny Primakov and Vladimir Putin) and Putin's selection as acting president following Boris Yeltsin's resignation. This triggered a new mechanism for recruiting the state's administrative and political elites, the privileged status of *siloviki*'s. The sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya described this phenomenon as 'liberal militocracy'. By 2002, 26.6% of the ruling elite had backgrounds in the security.[305]

Out of necessity, the direction of reforms in the security sector was now determined by the interests of the group that had produced the new president. And not only that – the *siloviki*, who had regained their traditional position as the pillar of state power, played a crucial role in the redistribution of property and the administrative reform that subordinated the regions to the federal centre, establishing the infamous 'power vertical'. They also exerted considerable influence over the construction and consolidation of 'unified spheres' in the information, legal, cultural and other domains.

Putin reversed the direction of changes introduced by his predecessor. Yeltsin, at least initially, sought to reduce the security sector's influence on Russian policy and place it under the strict control of the presidential administration. By contrast, his successor saw this sector as a model of a vertically structured organisational culture and as a tool for stabilising the state and strengthening presidential power. By helping to resolve the succession issue and pull Russia out of its deep political crisis, the *siloviki* regained their institutional prestige. Over time, they came to dominate the domestic scene, transforming into a political body that monopolised key positions and controlled the competition for power.

304 W. Marciniak, *Rozgrabione imperium. Upadek Związku Sowieckiego i powstanie Federacji Rosyjskiej*, Kraków 2001, p. 333; V. Bukovsky, *Judgment in Moscow: Soviet Crimes and Western Complicity*, Ninth of November Press, 2019, pp. 563–566.

305 О. Крыштановская, 'Режим Путина: либеральная милитократия?', *Pro&Contra* 2002, vol. 7, no. 4, at: pavroz.ru.

3. Between the past and the present: culture, tradition and institutional memory in Russia's uniformed services

3.1. 'A new-type Chekist civilisation': patriots and defenders of the motherland

The perception of the security sector's cultural continuity was reinforced by the ideological construct of Chekism, which was actively promoted during the early years of Putin's presidency. As a flagship cultureme, it carried broader significance: it challenged previous narratives about the Soviet Union's collapse and paved the way for a return to the old frameworks of interpreting reality. Earlier explanations cited internal factors as the reasons for the Soviet Union's dissolution. However, from 2005 onward, the causes of this event, which Putin called "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century", were increasingly attributed to external forces and the 'insidious schemes' of Russia's geopolitical adversaries. The president's assessment aligned with the sentiments of most former KGB personnel, who saw the Soviet Union's collapse as their personal tragedy. In the era of what Yegor Gaidar, former acting prime minister, called the "cheap state", it meant the end of privileges, stable and well-paid jobs and comfortable early retirements. The rehabilitation of Chekism signified the rehabilitation of Soviet values and attitudes. This process proceeded cautiously and was infused with imperialist rhetoric: official propaganda portrayed the security apparatus as the state's stronghold and its members, the Chekists, as the elite of society, a 'new nobility' (see below).

The anniversary of the establishment of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage provided a convenient opportunity to showcase the new essence of Chekism. The founding date of the Cheka, 20 December 1917, is celebrated as a holiday for officers of the security services. Commonly known as Chekist Day,[306] it is observed by the Cheka's successor agencies, including the FSB, the SVR, the Federal Protective Service (FSO) and the Main Directorate for Special Programmes of the President. Institutional continuity is particularly emphasised by the first two of these agencies, which trace their lineage back to the era of Felix Dzerzhinsky. This reinforces the Chekist self-stereotype, a simplified image that portrays their professional group in a positive light. Chekism draws on a mythologised version of history. Its persistence as the cornerstone of Russian security culture stems from its adaptive capacity – its ability to evolve and reshape itself.

306 Security Agency Workers' Day was introduced on 20 December 1995 by presidential decree no. 1280 issued by Yeltsin. At the time, the move was widely seen as marking a fundamental shift in the president's stance towards the security services. Later, in an address congratulating officers on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Cheka, Yeltsin acknowledged that the exposure of crimes committed by the security services had "gone too far", noting that their history also contained chapters of which Russians should be proud.

The (literally) legendary traditions of the Russian security services play a key role in transmitting experiences across generations. These agencies have always been assigned a central systemic role, whether as Praetorians, a personal guard, a new nobility, or the punitive sword of the revolution – a vital component of the strategy for legitimising the system. In this context, the 2000 Chekist Day celebrations are particularly noteworthy. The then FSB chief Nikolai Patrushev justified the status of Chekists as follows:

> The arrival of Chekists in Staraya Square,[307] the Kremlin and the regions [...] was dictated by a vital necessity. It was crucial to inject fresh blood into Russia's administrative corps and revive the spirit of state service. Chekists are people of service, the modern new nobility. They are thoughtful, educated people who understand the logic of international and domestic events as well as the emerging contradictions and threats. They fully grasp that a return to the past is impossible and recognise the need for the country to develop by rationally combining liberal values with traditional, conservative values.[308]

Emphasising the centuries-old traditions of Russia's security system also helped to raise the self-image of uniformed personnel. This was particularly evident in articles published in the journal 'FSB: za i protiv' (FSB: for and against) to mark the 100th anniversary of the Cheka. The psychologist Mikhail Burenkov presented a modern, and in a sense universal, set of desired values for security officers. These included high professional ethics, solidarity within their professional group, loyalty to the state, legalism, humanitarianism, a comprehensive, thorough and up-to-date education, and specialised and psychological training. He framed qualities such as courage, bravery, dedication, heroism and honour within the ethos and history of the security services, equating them with a patriotic attitude. "Adhering to these principles", he wrote, "has always contributed to the success of our national security services at various stages of Russia's historical development".[309] By invoking the names of "outstanding theorists and practitioners of Russian intelligence and counterintelligence", including Sergei Zubatov, who is presented as the founder of the Moscow intelligence school (see below), Burenkov extended the perspective of patriotic traditions among security officers to include the period before the 1917 revolution and emphasised the enduring power of the tradition of serving the state. He equated it with defending the country, thus recognising security officers as defenders of the fatherland, a designation that was previously reserved primarily for the

307 The seat of the Russian government.
308 Н. Патрушев, 'День чекиста', *Комсомольская правда*, 20 December 2000.
309 М. Буренков, 'Неизменные ценности', *ФСБ: за и против* 2017, no. 1(47), osfsb.ru.

Russian Armed Forces (Defender of the Fatherland Day, a professional holiday for the military, is celebrated on 23 February).

Patriotism, dedication and defending the homeland, the defining personality traits of Russian intelligence officers, also formed the central themes of interviews given at that time by FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov and SVR director Sergei Naryshkin. The latter also praised the high intellectual level of Russia's intelligence personnel "combined with healthy, soldierly discipline" and their "decency, dedication and ability to work under stress". He described Dzerzhinsky as "a leading figure in the first stage of building the young Soviet republic, who played an enormous role in establishing the national intelligence service. He was also the author of numerous social and economic projects". When recalling the historical trauma of violence and civil war, Naryshkin expressed hope that "Russian society will never again be divided into Whites and Reds".[310]

According to Bortnikov, today's intelligence officers are characterised by professionalism, legalism, a special bond with citizens and public trust. He particularly emphasised the importance of creativity and intergenerational continuity within the security apparatus: "The current generation of officers wisely applies the operational experience accumulated by their predecessors, it builds upon it and introduces innovations. This expertise will be passed on to the next cohort of officers, ensuring the continuous improvement of our agency's work".[311] Putin echoed similar themes in his address to uniformed personnel, after previously describing them as people "who consider service to the state a sacred duty". During the centenary celebrations of the Cheka, he declared that "Chekists are true patriots and defenders of the fatherland who form a lasting security barrier against foreign interference in our social and political life". Putin has constantly adapted his rhetoric. In 2022, he invoked the origins of Chekism, pledging to wage a renewed, relentless struggle against terrorism, militant extremism, traitors, espionage, provocations and subversion, just as in earlier times.[312] In essence, by surrounding the security services with a special, almost sacred ideological aura, he has signalled to them that they have the support of the entire nation, particularly the ruling elite which also cultivates Chekist traditions.

Naturally, the above-listed desired qualities of Russian officers are independent of both their personal experiences and how these experiences are perceived by a foreign audience. Intelligence analysts, who emphasise the

310 'Глава СВР Сергей Нарышкин: Мне всегда нравился памятник Дзержинскому', Московский комсомолец, 19 December 2017, mk.ru.

311 'Александр Бортников: ФСБ России свободна от политического влияния', Российская газета, 19 December 2017, rg.ru.

312 'Видеообращение по случаю Дня работника органов безопасности', President of Russia, 20 December 2022, kremlin.ru.

importance of past experiences, have failed to consider key facts stemming from historical contexts that had a significant impact on the attitudes of the Ukrainian nation, its unity and its determination to resist the occupying forces. Before the 2022 invasion, Russian intelligence also completely underestimated Ukraine's military potential.[313] Meanwhile, Russian people tend to associate work in the security services more with material incentives than an ideological commitment, as well as with an elite social status, the right to use force with impunity, and other advantages.

Nor is there any deeper reflection on the inherent contradictions between the old and new elements of modern Chekism. Today's officers are far removed from Dzerzhinsky's ascetic lifestyle; moreover, his men were, above all, devoted to the cult of revolution. Soviet propaganda reinforced the myth of 'clean hands, warm hearts and cool heads' and the idea that Chekists represented a 'new type of security organ' that differed fundamentally from both their Tsarist predecessors and the Western counterparts. Despite its absurdity, this purely ideological claim has been repeated for decades and persists to this day. The Chekist ethos originally emerged from the struggle against imperial ideology, but over time, it absorbed some culturemes from the Tsarist era, such as the belief in the 'superiority of the Russian spirit', contradicting its own internationalist propaganda.

The regime's opponents understood perfectly well that the 'Russian spirit', the model of Russian spirituality, was a special project designed by the government to highlight a culturally distinct system of values and model of development that set Russia apart from the West. The same was true of the political role of the Okhrana, which had been a constant target in the ideological war waged by anti-Tsarist forces. For example, Leon Trotsky reacted to the St. Petersburg-based newspaper *Svet*, in print from 1882, which called for the "resolution of the workers' question in a purely Russian spirit", by denouncing it as an "ultrareactionary nationalist pamphlet closely tied to the Okhrana". He explained:

> It has long been known that the 'purely Russian spirit,' patented by the Police Department, combines three elements: police autocracy, police Orthodoxy and police nationality. However, given the current mood among the working masses, I believe that the Orthodox priest is now too anachronistic and discredited a figure to be sent into the workers' districts with an olive branch of 'social peace'. The agents of Mr Zubatov are far more useful here. [...] In St. Petersburg, just as earlier in Moscow, 'legal' workers' meetings will be organised, where the

313 A. Jawor, 'Nietrafione analizy rosyjskiego wywiadu [opinia]', InfoSecurity24, 6 May 2022, infosecurity24.pl.

> Zubatovites will, on the one hand, try to reconcile the irreconcilable, the autocracy and the proletariat, and on the other, hunt down workers who are speaking out against the 'purely Russian spirit'. As a result, discussions that begin at legal gatherings will end at the Okhrana Department.[314]

In 1917, the Bolshevik security apparatus, the Cheka, adopted similar police-state methods. From its very beginning, Soviet Russia was governed by decrees; the unilateral decisions of political leaders were binding for all state authorities. The slogan of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' provided ideological cover for the Bolsheviks' unrestricted rule based on force. Over time, especially during the Civil War and World War II, they increasingly invoked Russia's age-old messianism, promoting the 'historic mission of the Russian nation' in the 20th century: exporting revolution and establishing communism worldwide. They continued to contrast the 'purely Russian spirit' with the 'spirit of proletarian internationalism'.

Today's heirs of the Cheka firmly reject the idea of revolution, as this poses a threat to the post-KGB ruling elite. The revolutionary myth, once dominant in Soviet Russia, has been deconstructed. The official narrative portrays colour revolutions as chaos, destabilisation and an evil imposed on Russia by the West. The Kremlin has also ideologically combatted foreign upheavals, such as Ukraine's Orange (Dignity) Revolution and Georgia's Rose Revolution, perceiving them as dangerous precedents. At the same time, modern Chekists have revived the 'Russian spirit' and embarked on a project to build the 'Russian world', claiming that it is more just than the 'American world'.

As a cultural concept, Chekism has many contradictions. While serving the communist state, it sought to eliminate 'capitalist remnants' and opposed capitalism as a class enemy; yet today's Russia is building state capitalism. Chekism abolished social divisions, such as the nobility and the aristocracy, and cultural foundations, breaking with the Orthodox Church as a pillar of tradition. However, present-day Chekists emphasise their attachment to Orthodoxy and claim to belong to the nobility. Another significant flaw of Chekism is the enduring memory of repression, which has spurred efforts to revise the history of the security services and to understate the scale of the Great Purge.

The persistence of the Chekist myth as an 'origin' myth of is closely tied to the institutional memory of Russia's current ruling elite, which represents the KGB generation – a legacy reflected in the FSB's adoption of its emblem, the symbolic shield and sword. All the Soviet secret services referenced the Cheka as its legendary predecessor. A variety of means were employed to sustain this myth, ranging from popular culture, media and film to literature and official

314 Л. Троцкий, 'Зубатовщина в Петербурге', *Искра*, no. 30, 15 December 1902, at: marxists.org.

historiography. The cult of the Chekist had its own pantheon of 'holy martyrs', iconography and rituals, all serving to legitimise both the political police and its principal – the Kremlin. At times, particularly in the KGB's final years, the government avoided radical methods, replacing aggressive propaganda with gentler forms of influence, such as beauty pageants for female officers and literary / film competitions.

PHOTO 2. The unveiling of the Dzerzhinsky monument in front of the headquarters of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) in Yasenevo, near Moscow, on 11 September 2023

Source: 'В штаб-квартире СВР открыли памятник Дзержинскому', РИА Новости, 11 September 2023, ria.ru.

The emphasis on the exceptional status of the Chekists has solidified a peculiar cult of state security within Russian society.[315] This cult is continuously renewed, as the government selectively highlights past experiences to serve its current needs while dismissing inconvenient events as 'ideological garbage'.[316] Figures in the security services' pantheon rise and fall depending on the political circumstances. The 'great reformer' Yuri Andropov has been replaced by Yevgeny

315 For more on this topic, see: Дж. Федор, *Традиции чекистов от Ленина до Путина. Культ государственной безопасности*, Петербург 2012, at: readli.net.

316 A phrase used by Putin during a meeting with historians in January 2014. See: 'В. Путин избавит единый учебник истории от «идеологического мусора»', РБК, 16 January 2014, rbc.ru.

Primakov, an advocate of restoring Russia's great power status. Meanwhile, Lavrentiy Beria and Sergei Zubatov have been rehabilitated. The interpretative context for cultural symbols is also fluid. Under Felix Dzerzhinsky, Chekism was measured by proletarian ethics, which portrayed the Red Terror as a reaction to the White Terror. Today, however, 'Orthodox Chekism' is grounded in religious ethics, which supposedly binds the entire society together (incidentally, it proclaims that 'all authority comes from God'). While such conceptual hybrids may be shocking to the rationalist West, they are commonplace in Russia. The return to Stalin-era experiences and his mobilisation-based model of development, partly dictated by the need to reinvent the strategy for legitimising Putin's rule, has produced constructs such as 'Orthodox Stalinism'. Putin has been attributed the historical role of the 'Fifth Stalin' (with Vladimir of Kyiv, Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great portrayed as the dictator's previous incarnations), a narrative that has been picked up by nationalist-propaganda websites.[317] Perhaps the most telling sign of the Chekist myth's endurance is the return of the 'First Chekist' monument to the state's symbolic landscape.

3.2. Revision of Soviet assessments of the Tsarist-era Okhrana (on the example of Zubatovshchina)

Similar examples of manipulating historical memory and the content of entrenched stereotypes can be found in contemporary references to the legacy of the Tsarist security services. Moreover, that legacy itself contains numerous examples of these distortions. In line with the authoritarian political structure of the Russian Empire, all power was concentrated in the hands of the monarch. He was the supreme authority in the state and the source of law; his decisions (*ukases*) were implemented through a constantly expanding apparatus, including the Tsarist police forces, whose numbers increased in response to the emerging threats and challenges to Tsarist rule. For example, the Decembrist uprising of 1825 led to the establishment of the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery. Contemporary historiography regards this body to be a modern service, modelled on its Western counterparts that had emerged in Europe during the Napoleonic era. However, while European police forces of the time were primarily responsible for conducting investigations and referring cases to the judiciary, the Third Section had far broader powers: it could arrest and exile suspects without a court ruling. Today, it is recognised

317 See, for example: 'Проханов заявил, что Путин творит «сталинские вещи»', Правда.Ру, 26 December 2022, pravda.ru. These constructs were coined by Aleksandr Prokhanov, founder of the Izborsk Club. Notably, he had previously promoted the idea of 'Putin's fifth empire'. In his concept of successive 'imperial phases', he identified Kyivan Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. According to Prokhanov, since Putin came to power, a 'fifth empire' has been taking shape and should eventually transform into a 'network empire'. See А. Проханов, *Симфония «Пятой Империи»*, Москва 2006.

as the first operational-investigative service for political cases and an information body tasked with gathering all the data on crimes against the Tsarist government obtained by the police and gendarmes from the Ministry of War. The political police force was established as part of a broader centralisation of power. The Third Section, also known as the Supreme Police, was intended to coordinate the uniformed state security forces (the Corps of Gendarmes, the palace security services and Cossack military units), which functioned as its executive arms and relied on hundreds of civilian informants.

The architect and long-time head of this unit, General Alexander von Benckendorff, a German from Estonia, entered the history of the security services not only as a pioneer of Russia's police state but also as a self-proclaimed 'social engineer'. A well-established legend in the historical literature says that when he asked Nicholas I for instructions, His Imperial Highness was holding a handkerchief. The Tsar handed it to the newly appointed head of the Supreme Police, saying: "This is my only guidance. Use this handkerchief to wipe away the tears of my people".[318] Another instance of manipulation, involving the projection of the majesty of the 'first person in the state' onto the services under his command, appears in von Benckendorff's memorandum justifying the creation of the new body. He proposed an elite centre be established in St Petersburg, supported by a network of agents who would "embrace all the Empire, would subject itself from to strict subordination, would be feared and respected, and would be inspired by the moral authority of its chief".[319]

The Third Section's direct successors demonstrated a similar ability to distort reality. They referred to Mikhail Loris-Melikov (a distinguished general from the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78) and the architect of a comprehensive reform of the Tsarist security apparatus, including the establishment of the Okhrana in 1881) as a 'viceroy'. His tenure as minister of internal affairs was described as a 'dictatorship of the heart',[320] suggesting that the police under his leadership employed less brutal methods than during von Benckendorff's era. However, history tells a different story. Fontanka Street in St Petersburg, the headquarters of the Third Section and later the Okhrana, evoked the same fear and apprehension as Moscow's Lubyanka would in later years. These reforms came as a response to the crisis of absolutist rule following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II and were aimed at improving the inefficient state security services. As part of the changes, all intelligence gathered by the gendarmerie, police and other civilian structures (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and military

318 Э. Стогов, *Записки жандармского штаб-офицера эпохи Николая I*, Москва 2003, p. 108; Д. Олейников, *Бенкендорф*, Москва 2009.

319 Ch.A. Ruud, S.A. Stepanov, *Fontanka 16. The Tsars' Secret Police*, McGill-Queen's Univeristy Press, 1999, p. 18.

320 *Ibid*, p. 48.

structures (the Ministry of War) was concentrated in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The coordination of their operational and investigative activities was entrusted to the highly secretive Special Department, the headquarters of the Okhrana's intelligence and counterintelligence.

However, intelligence and counterintelligence tasks were not separated until the Okhrana was disbanded in 1917. In fact, both were subordinated to its policing role. The reforms also had a purely pragmatic dimension: the Tsarist government was caught off guard by the rapid rise of terrorist movements and needed extraordinary measures to combat them and limit their disruptive impact on public opinion, which was being compounded by the revolution-driven democratic changes in the West. The gradual expansion of the Okhrana's network of local branches, all reporting to the central authority, ultimately led to the emergence of a police state. In 1907, the organisation comprised 31 governorate and eight district branches.

Politics was considered the exclusive domain of the Tsarist administrative elite and any interference by unauthorised individuals was a criminal offence punishable by law. The enforcement of this principle was entrusted to the Police Department and the Corps of Gendarmes, which were granted the authority to conduct searches, make arrests, interrogate suspects and exile anyone guilty of political activity or merely suspected of engaging in it. The Police Department also gained the power to deny citizens a certificate of 'political loyalty'. Without this document, they faced severe restrictions in daily life: they were unable to study at universities or work in either public or state institutions. The department also oversaw all forms of cultural activity and had the authority to approve the statutes of public associations. Neither the Police Department nor the Corps of Gendarmes were subject to judicial oversight or the jurisdiction of civilian administrative bodies in their operational domains. Using a range of repressive measures, including surveillance, exile to Siberia and hard labour, the political police sought to isolate 'disloyal' individuals from the rest of society. Without censorship approval, no book or periodical could be published in the country or imported from abroad. Moreover, the minister of internal affairs had the power to declare a state of heightened security in any part of the empire, suspending legal protections and institutional activity while placing the local population under military authority. This briefly outlined period in the history of Russia's secret services is now viewed favourably by contemporary historiographers of this field. They have a particular affinity for the Corps of Gendarmes and the Okhrana, which have been the subject of numerous recent studies. The prevailing conclusion is that the predecessors of Russia's current security services were not only imbued with a reformist spirit but also embodied the 'Russian idea', which,

since the time of Nicholas I, has been defined as the 'specific mission the safeguarding of state security'.[321]

Zubatov (the long-time head of the Moscow Okhrana who – in recognition of his achievements – was later appointed director of the Special Department with its headquarters in St Petersburg) is often cited as the paradigm of a creative officer and reformer. His success stemmed from his ability to identify human weaknesses and exploit them skillfully, as well as from his more refined treatment of victims when compared to his fellow officers.

Soviet historiography presented a stereotypical view of Zubatovshchina. Zubatov was depicted as the 'gravedigger of the revolution', a figure committed to fighting revolutionary movements and the architect of 'police socialism'. However, contemporary historical websites portray him as a distinguished reformer of the Okhrana, the founder of the national intelligence school and an official with exceptional organisational skills, as an enterprising figure widely regarded as a professional and, above all, a devoted statesman who was unwaveringly loyal to the tsar, the state and the monarchy, a man who took his own life upon hearing of Nicholas II's abdication. Orthodox Christian websites also insist that he could have stopped the revolution and saved Russia. The redefinition of Zubatovshchina is also reflected in specialist literature and general history textbooks, indicating that the official historical narrative has been adjusted to align with the Russian government's current needs and is aimed at broad segments of society.

It is important to clarify that the 'police socialism' implemented by the Okhrana was an experiment aimed at integrating the opposition into the political system under the banner of defending the monarchy's interests. It does not receive much attention today, even though the concept itself is not disputed, just as it was not questioned during the Okhrana's existence.[322] Zubatov legalised workers' organisations and trade unions controlled by the Okhrana's agents, used them to establish political groups such as the Independent Jewish Workers Party, organised patriotic demonstrations and conducted anti-Socialist Revolutionary and anti-socialist counterpropaganda. However, as an ideological construct, 'police socialism' made little sense: after all, Zubatov was actively fighting socialism. As he himself explained, "the primary goal was to gain the workers' trust. Revolutionaries derived their strength from that trust and it had to be reclaimed from them at any cost". He believed that the intelligentsia and

321 R. Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1974, p. 291.

322 A student of Zubatov summarised it as follows: "Zubatov's idea was right and not new, but its amateurish, police-style implementation went beyond the ministry's remit. At the critical moment, no national leader was found for the professional workers' movement [...], the government showed neither understanding of the workers' issue, nor interest, nor any sense of raison d'état". (А. Спиридович, 'Записки жандарма', 1928, at: *Электронная библиотека*, RoyalLib.com; *idem*, 'Зубатовщина', *Былое* 1917, no. 4, at: hrono.info).

educated workers were particularly valuable in this effort. "When revolutionaries, fearing the loss of their monopoly on influencing the workers, raised the alarm, they drove away the lecturers [...]. To preserve the workers' organisations, the only option left was to seek the support of the clergy's intelligentsia".

Incidentally, Zubatov's experiment ultimately led to his removal from office. His direct superiors accused him of inciting protests and exiled him to the provinces under supervision. He became a scapegoat for the wave of strikes in 1904 and then for 'Bloody Sunday' which triggered the 1905 Revolution. Zubatov himself blamed both his agent, Father Gapon, and the interior ministry's leadership for the events. He criticised the ministry for mishandling Gapon, stating: "After handing over the workers' question to Gapon, they rested on their laurels. Left without support in his confrontation with St Petersburg's industrialists, he began acting independently, beyond their control. That is how the idea of delivering the workers' petition directly to the tsar was born".[323]

Today, greatest prominence is given to Zubatov's intelligence schools – training courses lasting three to six months, during which gendarmes and the Okhrana's agents were taught basic policing skills, the principles of covert operations and techniques for combating *kramola* – subversive activities by the monarchy's opponents. The most promising trainees were sent to Zubatov's school in Moscow, which was considered a model institution. As its head, Zubatov pioneered advanced training, requiring trainees to be familiar with revolutionary literature and the history of opposition movements. In Moscow, and later in St Petersburg, he established libraries that housed professional literature as well as banned publications, propaganda materials, works by theorists of the labour movement and leaflets. He enlisted university professors to train gendarmes and employed experts. Following the example of the Western police forces, he introduced innovative surveillance techniques and compiled extensive files on suspects, which included photographs, fingerprints, anthropometric measurements, aliases and codenames. He also implemented a network of safe houses and, most importantly, created a structured intelligence system consisting of external agents (*filery* – tasked with surveillance) and internal informants (*seksoty* – *sekretnyje sotrudniki*, or secret collaborators). He formed the so-called flying squad of *filery* that was capable of conducting rapid operations, including abroad when necessary. To facilitate these missions, lockers at railway stations were used to store money for tickets and other operational costs. He also established posts for *filery* working as coach drivers to enable a combination of on-foot and mounted surveillance.

323 *Письмо в «Вестник Европы»*, vol. 2, March 1906, pp. 432–436, at: hrono.ru.

The secret intelligence network, widespread use of paid informants and highly refined methods of provocation became the Okhrana's hallmarks. The requirement to keep records on suspects led to the bureaucratisation of the secret police. According to a 1907 circular from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, its effectiveness was measured not by the number of 'liquidations' (cases resulting in the conviction of suspects) but rather by the number of investigations initiated; these also served as a preventive measure and a means of recruiting agents. In turn, the growing number of 'enemies of the regime' justified the need to expand the service, to increase its budget and radicalise its methods. The Corps of Gendarmes and its leadership were critical of the Okhrana's bloated bureaucratic apparatus. As Aleksandr Spiridovich wrote in his memoirs:

> Only the young people were pleased, as they were given access to interesting work. The heads of departments, who saw themselves as gods, felt insulted. Their standing in the eyes of the local administration and police diminished because funds allocated for intelligence operations were redirected to the newly established bodies. The staff viewed this reform primarily as an expansion of police influence. Some gendarmes were removed from the staff's authority. They were dismissively referred to as 'department boys' or 'Okhrana men'.[324]

3.3. The symbolic return of Batyushin: the popularisation of Tsarist Russia's military intelligence and counterintelligence methods

The use of agent-based methods led to the rapid expansion of Russian foreign espionage. Contemporary historians of intelligence services regard General Nikolai Batyushin as the quintessential spymaster of the Tsarist era. A distinguished officer, he was assigned to the Nikolaev Academy of the General Staff; after graduating in 1901, he was posted to the Warsaw Military District. In 1905, he took charge of the military intelligence station in Warsaw. General Alexander Zdanovich, a former head of the FSB's Assistance Programmes Directorate (a euphemistic name for the structure responsible for spreading disinformation, the successor to the former Directorate A for active measures) and now a leading figure in Russia's official institutional historiography, wrote: "It so happened historically that the first specialists in [military intelligence and counterintelligence] emerged on Russia's western frontier, in the Kingdom of Poland, home to the Warsaw Military District wedged between the territories of two neighbouring countries, Germany and Austria-Hungary".[325] The foundations of Warsaw-based military intelligence and counterintelligence operations were

324 А. Спиридович, *Записки жандарма*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

325 Zdanovich is co-author of the foreword to the reprint of the book: Н. Батюшин, *Тайная военная разведка и борьба с ней*, Москва 2002, militera.lib.ru. It was originally published in Sofia in 1939.

laid by Batyushin's predecessor, Nikolai Monkevich. According to Zdanovich, both he and Batyushin were the first Russian generals dedicated to the secret services'. The historian offered a very positive assessment of Batyushin, saying that he "stood out for his diligence, initiative, operational thinking in systemic terms, had extensive specialised knowledge that enabled him to make unconventional decisions". Batyushin's greatest claim to fame was his handling of the agent Alfred Redl, who provided Russia with Austria-Hungary's operational war plans and many other General Staff documents. He is also regarded as an outstanding practitioner and theorist: his book entitled *The secret military intelligence and the fight against it* represents Russia's contribution to the 'global' theory of intelligence and counterintelligence, which began to develop in the early 20th century. Understandably, Zdanovich highlights his counterintelligence achievements: between 1900 and 1910, Batyushin was credited with uncovering "more than 150 foreign spies".[326]

The rapid expansion of Russian espionage before World War I is reflected in statistics cited in the memoirs of Maximilian Ronge, head of the Austro-Hungarian General Staff's intelligence service. In 1913, his department, the Evidenzbureau, identified around 6,000 incidents that required investigation (compared to 500 in 1905), made 560 arrests (up from just 32 in 1905) and secured convictions for nearly one-seventh of those detained. Espionage trials provided valuable insight into Russia's intelligence system. Operations targeting Austria-Hungary were overseen from two centres, Kyiv and Warsaw, with the latter also coordinating efforts against Germany. According to Ronge, then-Colonel Batyushin's headquarters on Warsaw's Saxon Square functioned as a "full-fledged enterprise employing a number of directors, department heads, recruitment agents, inspectors and women; the latter were most often used as intermediaries and recruiters [...] Russian women, perhaps due to the domestic political climate, possessed exceptional talents. Some of Batyushin's recruiters and intermediaries maintained".[327] Ronge noted that these spies were highly effective, though their equipment made them too conspicuous. For example, all agents surveying fortifications were given pocket-sized US-made Expo cameras, which gave them away. In this intelligence work, quantity was prioritised over quality: "Since numbers always mattered greatly to the Russians, Batyushin maintained an entire army of informants, lodging providers, building caretakers and other helpers".

326 However, Zdanovich admits that only 17 cases were successfully brought to court. In all of the trials, Batyushin acted as both prosecutor and military expert. The legal basis was weak and the espionage law drafted under his supervision was only adopted by the Duma in 1912. In this context, it is worth noting that the infamous legalism of the Russian security services, including their practice of initiating legislation concerning their own operations, has deep historical roots.

327 M. Ronge, *Dwanaście lat służby wywiadowczej*, Warszawa 1992, pp. 46–49.

For Ronge, the presence of "spies in priestly robes" was a surprising discovery. He also noted that Russian operations relied heavily on agitation and propaganda methods. Espionage was particularly widespread in Galicia. Intelligence penetration was adapted to local conditions: in Galicia, Pan-Slavist agitators found support among Russophile Ruthenians, who "saw their homeland in Russia and their ruler in the Tsar, praying for him in churches built with Russian money". In Bohemia and Moravia, Russian intelligence relied on the backing of supporters and the promoters of anti-war movements. Czechs were trained in Russia and then sent back home to organise demonstrations calling for peace. Thus, the activity of foreign intelligence at the time was not limited to gathering information – efforts to shape political movements and events in ways favourable to St Petersburg formed a significant part of this activity. Both military and civilian intelligence were engaged in these operations, and both were overseen by the Okhrana's Special Department.

Batyushin confirmed these observations in his book. He wrote that it was "a modest response to Colonel Ronge's grumblings about the persistent silence of Russian military intelligence".[328] On the eve of World War II, he also sought to emphasise "the immense importance of the secret services both in peacetime and wartime" and "highlight the role of intelligence and its secret weapon – political propaganda". He devoted particular attention to this last aspect, which he described as "a diverse toolkit of political intelligence". Recounting his experiences from World War I, he took a broad view of its objectives, seeing it as a means to "boost the morale of our own population, partly by trumpeting our successes" while "undermining the enemy's fighting spirit, either through direct actions or via third countries". He noted that selecting propaganda targets was no simple task, as "you cannot dismantle a nation's moral foundations without considering its psychology". As examples of well-organised Russian operations of this kind, he mentioned those targeting Poland during the partitions and the long-running Pan-Slavist propaganda campaign carried out through the Imperial Slavic Benevolent Society. At the same time, Batyushin issued a warning:

> The immense importance of propaganda has been recognised by the Bolsheviks, who spare no expense in keeping the Russian masses in ignorance, as well as by the Germans, who are systematically re-educating their nation under the direc-

328 In 1930, Max Ronge published his book entitled *Kriegs und Industriespionage* (War and Industrial Espionage). In 1923, Walter Nicolai, head of intelligence for the German General Staff, also published a work on the role of intelligence services, entitled *Geheime Mächte* (Secret Power). Both were translated into Russian and repeatedly reissued. According to Russian intelligence historians, Ronge and Nicolai met Batyushin in Vienna in 1926. As a side note: in 1945, General Nicolai was abducted by the NKVD and taken to Moscow, where he died in 1947. See О. Хлобустов, 'Разведка в годы войны и мира', *op. cit.*

tion of Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda. This is achieved through the work of an entire army of propagandists.[329]

This led him to conclude that "**the psychological weapon – the word – is a means as powerful as firearms**". In his reflections on intelligence and counterintelligence, he emphasised the importance of "agent-based operations, in which broad swaths of the population, raised in a spirit of patriotism, serve as valuable allies of the security services", resulting in the conclusion that both civilian and military intelligence and counterintelligence organically grew out of the political police. More broadly, Batyushin synthesised his own insights with the thoughts of the theorists of his era. This is clear in his terminology, which he partly borrowed from the Okhrana ('external agent', 'internal agent') and partly from Walter Nicolai, head of Section IIIb (intelligence) of the German General Staff. Like Nicolai, he made a difference between active intelligence and passive intelligence (counterintelligence). He also adopted Ronge's classification of intelligence into political, economic, scientific and technical branches. In his conclusion, he expressed solidarity with his counterparts from the European military intelligence corps, stating that "General Ronge and Colonel Nicolai are figures of historical significance in the field of intelligence".

Notably, in translating these historical theories into contemporary terms, Oleg Khlobustov, a lecturer at the FSB Academy, equated the concept of 'active intelligence' with the term 'active measures', explaining: "In addition to traditional intelligence, whose task is to gather information about the enemy, their intentions and resources, the countries involved in World War I employed active intelligence, which essentially sought to influence the execution of the adversary's plans and intentions through methods such as disinformation, propaganda, sabotage, subversion and terror".[330]

The final years of Tsarist Russia marked Batyushin's downfall. He sat out both the 1917 revolutions in detention as a political enemy of the Tsarist regime. The extraordinary commission he headed to combat espionage uncovered treason at the highest level – the trail of a spy scandal and the speculative sugar trade with Germany that led to Grigori Rasputin. However, this was dismissed as a plot by the Police Department aimed at curbing the influence of the Tsarist family's favourite. In the ensuing campaign, Batyushin's commission was discredited and accused of corruption. This was part of the confrontation between the Socialist Revolutionary-led Provisional Government and the Tsarist secret services, which were soon dismantled. In late 1917, Batyushin escaped from detention. He did not take part in the Civil War; instead settling in Belgrade, where he lectured

329 Н. Батюшин, *Тайная военная разведка и борьба с ней*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
330 О. Хлобустов, 'Разведка в годы войны и мира', *op. cit.*

at military courses, eventually publishing the aforementioned book. During World War II, he moved to the Netherlands, where he died in a nursing home in 1957. In 2004, his remains were brought to Moscow by the Association of Researchers of the National Secret Services (see below) with the support of the Association of Veterans of the Secret Services. The information campaign surrounding this event, as well as subsequent media reports on Batyushin, echoed Zdanovich's words: "A patriot remains a patriot, even in exile".

3.4. 'Reclaiming' the history of security services as a means of rehabilitating them

In the early 1990s, the cult of security was seriously shaken. During protest demonstrations in August 1991, the statue of 'the first Chekist', Felix Dzerzhinsky, was removed from the symbolic space, while the KGB grappled with a crisis of public trust. According to Khlobustov, this was related to the government's legitimacy crisis and the radicalisation of public attitudes following the collapse of the Soviet Union, as citizens searched for someone to blame for the state's woeful condition.[331] The security services quickly recovered from their ideological paralysis and the 'humiliation' of the KGB's dissolution. Improving their public image became the top priority. Since the political climate did not favour emphasising the role of Soviet-era security services, efforts to restore the Chekist founding myth turned towards the legacy of the imperial period. Reconciling this with the Soviet legacy proved to be a lengthy process, one that remains unfinished to this day. It began in the 1990s and one of its earliest signs was a conference of security officials held in 1994 with the slogan 'A strong Russia needs strong security services', followed by the publication of the 'White book of the Russian security services'.[332]

The pressure, which appealed to the security services' sense of historical responsibility for the fate of the country, signalled the revitalisation of their political role and impending changes at the highest levels of power. Yeltsin enjoyed little authority among the security agencies, which accused him of deconstructing the system and plunging the country into disorder and paralysis. It was not surprising, therefore, that from the outset pro-Putin campaigns were built around the dichotomy of chaos versus stability.

The rehabilitation of the security services, which included 'reclaiming the utterly distorted image of the KGB', was aimed at restoring public trust.[333]

331 'Хлобустов О.В. Общественное мнение населения об органах государственной безопасности (конец 1980-х – 1990-е гг.)', Румянцевский музей, rummuseum.info.

332 *Белая книга российских спецслужб*, Москва 1995, p. 12.

333 А. Зданович, 'Всероссийскому форуму историков отечественных спецслужб – 20 лет', 9 January 2018, history.milportal.ru.

According to General Zdanovich,[334] a prominent historian and long-time lecturer on the history of the security agencies at the FSB Academy, this 'unprecedented falsification' of their past resulted from a combination of several factors. These included the opening of previously inaccessible archives, particularly the archival resources of the KGB and the CPSU, in preparation for a planned trial against the Communist Party, the wide-ranging campaign to discredit the security agencies led by the Memorial association as part of its research project on the mass repressions of 1937–38 and the influx of Western literature based on reports from KGB defectors. According to Zdanovich, figures such as Oleg Gordievsky and Vasily Mitrokhin presented a biased view of the KGB's activities.

The SVR, then headed by Primakov, was the first to 'respond operationally', as Zdanovich put it. It launched the monumental publication entitled *Essays on the history of Russian foreign intelligence*. The first volume, which covered the pre-Bolshevik era, was published in 1996; the sixth came out in 2006. The series has been reissued several times.

The FSB, for its part, responded with the annual conference 'Historical lectures at Lubyanka', organised since 1997 by the Association of Researchers of the Russian Secret Services, which was led by Zdanovich for over a decade. The organisation's active members include lecturers from universities affiliated with the security agencies, including Khlobustov, Aleksandr and Andrei Plekhanov, Yuri Ovchenko, Oleg Mozokhin, Vladlen Izmozik and Vasily Khristoforov. Their articles are regularly published in the multi-volume series 'Works of the Association of Researchers of the National Special Services' and disseminated through specialised websites (lubyanka.org, a-lubyanka.org, lubyanka-shield.ru and fssb.su) and blogs on social media platforms, such as mozohin.ru.

The groundwork laid for 'reclaiming' the history of the security services also provided the foundation for a political-ideological narrative aimed at reinforcing the cult of security, the uniform and victory within society. The volume of books and articles produced by historiographers affiliated with the security agencies,[335] although the vast majority of these works continue to focus on the Soviet period, effectively continuing the Soviet historiography of these

334 Aleksandr Zdanovich was born in 1952 in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, where his grandfather had been resettled from the Brest area during the time of the Russian Empire. He began his professional career in 1972 in KGB military counterintelligence. From 1991, he worked at the Centre for Public Communications of the FSK/FSB, becoming its head in 1996. From 1999 until his retirement in 2002, he headed the FSB's Assistance Programmes Directorate. After retiring, he pursued an academic career. He specialises in research on military counterintelligence and Polish affairs, commenting on and interpreting Polish topics in the public sphere; he has authored a number of articles on the policies of the Second Polish Republic. These were compiled in his book entitled *Polskiy krest sovetskoy kontrrazvedki. Polskaya liniya v rabote VChK–NKVD* – 'The Polish cross of Soviet counterintelligence. The Polish line in the work of the VChK–NKVD, 1918–1938'; Moscow 2017). Published to mark the centenary of Russian counterintelligence, the book offers a critical view of the relations between the Second Polish Republic and the Soviet Union, which, in the author's view, were dominated by the rivalry between the two countries' intelligence services.

335 See, for example, the bibliography of Khlobustov's works on the hrono.ru website.

institutions. Efforts to reconcile this legacy with the Tsarist tradition rely on the selective glorification of figures and events from the period of the Russian Empire – those that can be pragmatically repurposed, such as Zubatov and Batyushin. As a result, the institutional memory of Russia's security services is shaped by selectivity and syncretism.

The project to rehabilitate the security services, which is also aimed at strengthening their institutional memory, was incorporated into a broader strategy for legitimising the Russian government. During a presentation of the association's achievements, Zdanovich made no secret of the fact that "the main criteria guiding its work are to consolidate state power and legal order in the Russian Federation".[336] By saying this, he confirmed that the history of Russia's security services, as framed through selective events and figures, is intended to shape desired social attitudes and behaviours. This curated version of their past has been incorporated into the narrative of returning to 'the sources of success'. In Russia's strategic culture, there is scant tradition of openly discussing failures. Historiographers consistently argue that these result either from weak leadership or from the intrigues of external forces that have caused geopolitical disasters throughout Russia's history. According to this view, the West's information warfare that first targeted Tsarist and Soviet Russia and is now aimed against the contemporary, democratic Russian state has long had the central objective of diminishing Russia's international standing. Efforts to undermine Russia's security agencies are a key element of this strategy. Consequently, the rehabilitation project places Russia's intelligence agencies at the heart of this confrontation.[337]

The new historical identity being instilled in Russian security officers is eclectic and inconsistent, tailored to the regime's current needs and rooted in the search for shared experiences between the institutions of the Tsarist and Soviet states. Despite the rupture in institutional memory caused by the Bolshevik Revolution, both the imperial and Soviet traditions share key features:

- emphasis on single-person (autocratic) leadership,
- the role of the security services as the primary instrument of power; they assumed functions beyond those of their Western counterparts, including shaping political, social and economic realities,
- state security as the ideological safeguard of the ruling elite,

336 'В культурном центре ФСБ состоялась презентация Общества изучения истории отечественных спецслужб', РИА Новости, 17 December 2001, ria.ru.

337 See J. Darczewska, '„Wojny pamięci": historia, polityka i służby specjalne Federacji Rosyjskiej', *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego*, no. 11(20)/2019, at: bibliotekanauki.pl.

- the unchanged mission of security institutions, which remains relevant today: to protect and strengthen the regime,
- the portrayal of officers as coming from society's elite: they were 'the best, most educated and most patriotic' representatives of society, becoming a pillar of state power and its legitimisation strategy.

In 2000, this strategy was linked to the concepts of 'the dictatorship of the law' and 'the new nobility'. In 2008, during the early years of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, it was tied to 'liberal modernisation'. A mobilisation strategy based on the military organisation of the state took shape during Putin's third presidential term (2012–18). Integrated into the national defence system and portrayed in the information and propaganda sphere as defenders of the homeland, security officers became beneficiaries of the prevailing cult of victory.

Efforts to strengthen the mechanisms for managing Russia, its security, economy and population through continuous emergencies and crises have led to the emergence of a mobilisation model of the state. It encompasses the spheres of ideas, culture, information, education, law and more. It is sustained by all the power ministries, led by the Ministry of Defence, which holds the greatest symbolic potential for instilling patriotic values in society as such efforts must take place in the public sphere. This indicates that the elevated status of these agencies is chiefly a product of Russian authoritarianism. This status remains secure, as the ruling elite will increasingly feel that its interests are threatened, which is likely to generate demand for new forms and methods of protecting the status quo, framed as the defence of the sovereignty of a neo-imperial Russia.

4. Culture and history as categories of influence

4.1. Above all image

The monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky, dismantled in August 1991, was originally unveiled on 20 December 1958. This event should be understood in the context of the upheaval inside the Soviet security agencies following Stalin's death, which heralded purges, reorganisations and reassessments of past policies. In December 1953, Lavrentiy Beria, a high-ranking official in the successive incarnations of the Cheka – the NKVD, NKGB and MGB – was executed. In 1954, the security apparatus was rebranded as the KGB. Beria and several of his associates were labelled 'agents of imperialism' and accused of 'anti-party activities'. The crisis within the security services was further exacerbated by Nikita Khrushchev's speech on Stalin's personality cult, delivered at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956, as well as by the new leader's liberalising

policies. Political prisoners were released from labour camps, the Gulag system was dismantled, the concept of the 'enemy of the people / nation' was removed from the criminal code and the most repressive Stalinist laws were repealed. In short, the Khrushchev Thaw challenged the values that had been at the core of the system. The KGB thus faced the challenge of restoring its ideological foundations. Most importantly, the interpretation of 'errors and distortions' was revised: the Stalinist era was glorious, but Stalin himself was to blame for its excesses. As part of the effort to restore the security services to their former standing, it was also necessary to craft a suitable image. In this context, the unveiling of the monument to Dzerzhinsky signified the end of the Thaw and the return of the Chekist archetype.

To improve the KGB's image, public relations specialists employed various methods of persuasion, including official documents, statements and announcements published in special sections of daily newspapers, such as 'In the KGB under the Council of Ministers of the USSR' and 'TASS reports'. Great emphasis was placed on book and film propaganda. The Chekists had a particular preference for documentary films, or rather pseudo-documentaries. These were cheaper and less time-consuming to produce and, most importantly, could be presented as collections of independent opinions, absolving the creators of responsibility for the content. In the television era, documentaries also ensured access to millions of viewers. Recently, TikTok and YouTube have exponentially expanded the reach of this format, providing platforms for Russia to use pseudo-documentaries as portrayals of reality.

The 1962 documentary 'Po chernoy trope' (On the black path) glorified the activities of the Chekists following the 20th Party Congress. A year later, 'And again on the black path' was broadcast, focusing on Oleg Penkovsky, a GRU officer who was arrested by the KGB on charges of espionage. In 1964, as many as three feature films about the *Chekists* hit the screens: '*Sotrudnik ChK*' (Cheka operative), '*Gosudarstvenny prestupnik*' (State criminal) and '*Vystrel v tumane*' (A shot in the fog). A new era in shaping the impeccable image of security officers began with Yuri Andropov's appointment as KGB chairman in May 1967. He was embedded in an artificially constructed, media-enhanced reality and portrayed as a 'reformer in jeans' and a 'polyglot intellectual' who spoke excellent English, read French philosophers in the original, was brilliant at tennis, had a taste for whisky, wrote poetry and collected contemporary paintings. Moreover, he was presented as the only Politburo member who opposed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Needless to say, this image, aimed primarily at the West, had been carefully crafted by the KGB itself. By that time, it had perfected the art

of manipulating the public consciousness, employing advances in information technology associated with the 'television revolution'.

The accumulated experience was put to effective use during the Putin era. Efforts to improve the Chekist's image naturally translated into the portrayal of the new leader, a process that has continued into the 21st century. Cinema (feature films and TV series) and television (news-propaganda programmes and pseudo-documentaries) remain the preferred communication channels of influence. In 2001, the TV series 'Special Unit' was released. Its main character comes from an intellectual family in St Petersburg, fights in the *Spetsnaz* in Afghanistan and, upon returning home, joins the FSB to protect the Hermitage's priceless collections from thieves smuggling artworks out of the country. Two science fiction films about the eternal rivalry of the intelligence services were produced with Lubyanka's support: 'Night Watch' (2004) and 'Day Watch' (2006). The 16-episode series '*Spetsgruppa*' aired in 2007, depicting the FSB's efforts to uncover financial scandals and prevent terrorist attacks. The 2004 feature film 'Identification number', which presented the 'correct' official version of the Moscow apartment bombings and the behind-the-scenes machinations of oligarchs that led to the deaths of nearly 200 audience members at Dubrovka Theatre in 2002, was also dominated by the theme of counterterrorism. Two other films were produced under the FSB's patronage: 'The Apocalypse Code', about an FSB officer who saves seven major global cities, and 'Liquidation', about the fight against smuggling gangs from Odesa. Notably, both won awards in the FSB's competition for the best work dedicated to the security services, a prize that was first introduced by the KGB in 1978 and then revived in 2006.

The 2006 documentary 'Spies' about the activities of British intelligence in Russia also attracted considerable attention. It was broadcast shortly after the adoption of the law on foreign agents, which targeted NGOs receiving foreign funding. The film was intended to illustrate the 'consequence' of this support – the supposed rise in espionage. It included surveillance footage showing a British embassy employee checking a dead drop hidden in a rock in a Moscow park, followed by revelations linking the diplomat to Russian NGOs and British intelligence. The documentary was widely dismissed as blatant propaganda and ridiculed on social media. Another film that sparked considerable controversy was the 2008 documentary 'Plan Caucasus', which claimed that the CIA was behind the outbreak of war in Chechnya.

The key word 'Chekist' features in the titles of numerous films. These productions have also been created, clearly at the request of the federal centre, by regional branches of state television. For example, a branch in Volgograd produced the documentary titled 'Chekists' and aired it on 20 December 2022.

As stated in the introduction, the film "tells the story of the heroic deeds of officers whose names remain classified to this day".[338] TV series and films available on YouTube depict a fabricated reality, yet they are perceived as being based on real events.[339] Cinema has always been one of the most powerful propaganda tools and it continues to serve this purpose today: the Russian government has been using it to manipulate history and educate future generations in a totalitarian spirit.[340]

Russian institutional historians, along with those from the so-called patriotic camp, have actively challenged this critical view. For example, Khlobustov has commented on Julie Fedor's in-depth analysis of films dedicated to the Chekists,[341] highlighting what he called its 'biased message': "The main flaw of this and similar studies is that they fail to make even the slightest attempt to analyse the intelligence and subversive activities of foreign services against the USSR, the socio-political situation in the country and especially the reforms of Soviet legislation".[342] He made these remarks during a 2017 academic conference in Omsk marking the centenary of the Cheka. Non-institutional participants at the event emphasised the need for a cultural (civilisational) approach to history. Arguing from this perspective, the Omsk-based historian Alexei Sushko claimed that "the defining historical feature of Russian civilisation is the greater role of the state and, by extension, of its security organs compared to the West". In his view, this stems from the fact that "the state has organised the Russian civilisation's[343] response to external challenges' Distinguishing between scholarly and ideological approaches and calling for a contextual analysis of historical events, he wrote:

> The task of scholars is to understand the activities of [state security organs] within the context of their time, even when we are explaining their actual, unjustifiable brutality. Extraordinary methods were actively used in the USSR during the Stalinist era. To a significant extent, this was linked to the threat (challenge) posed by Western civilisation as well as the difficult internal situation following the recently concluded civil war. Under such conditions, people habitually divided their surroundings into 'us' and 'enemies'. State terror was considered the norm by a large part of the Soviet population.

338 'Чекисты', 20 December 2022, at: smotrim.ru.
339 A long list of these is available on the TimeOut website, timeout.ru.
340 'Kino w służbie rosyjskiego totalitaryzmu – 3. MFFoTEK', IPN, 7 April 2022, youtube.com.
341 Дж. Федор, 'Традиции чекистов от Ленина до Путина. Культ государственной безопасности', *op. cit.*
342 'Хлобустов О.В. Общественное мнение населения об органах государственной безопасности (конец 1980-х – 1990-е гг.)', *op. cit.*
343 'Сушко А.В. К вопросу об использовании цивилизационного подхода для изучения истории отечественных спецслужб', Румянцевский музей, 2017, rummuseum.info.

He offered a similar explanation for the role of the security services in introducing necessary changes in Russia. In the cases he cited, where Russian society was modernised by force under Ivan the Terrible, Peter I and Stalin, their actions were invariably presented as an "organised state response to the challenges and threats facing Orthodox Russian civilisation".

4.2. The historical-cultural standard as a 'historical weapon'

The growing interest of institutional historians in collective memory eventually expanded into a broader struggle over the population's historical memory. Over time, this has become a significant area of state activity[344] and a popular topic in the public debate, driving a return to imperial traditions and state control over them. According to participants in these discussions, Russia's defining attributes include its historical power, which is safeguarded by the government. Historical narratives, treated as a 'historical weapon', have been reinforced conceptually, institutionally and organisationally through the so-called historical-cultural standard (*istoriko-kulturnyy standart*). The creation of the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History can be seen as the first attempt to institutionalise historical memory. Active from 2008 to 2012, it was headed by Sergey Naryshkin, then head of the Presidential Administration, later Speaker of the State Duma and now Director of the SVR. The commission's role was to ensure the 'correct' interpretation of difficult chapters in the country's history. In the public sphere, it functioned as a propaganda body focused on rebutting domestic and foreign publications that allegedly undermined Russia's national interests. It also served as a disciplinary tool, commissioned analyses of content that aligned with the government's perspective and funded publications. This approach cultivated a reliable network of 'court historians'.[345]

The start of Putin's third term (2012–18) opened a new chapter in the fight against the alleged falsification of Russia's past. 2012 was declared the Year of History, in reference to ideologically charged major anniversaries: 1612,

344 Several factors served as catalysts for the perception of Russian politics of memory as a struggle over remembrance. These included the incorporation of historical issues into political discourse after the collapse of the USSR; an unfavourable environment in the immediate neighbourhood, in which the shared past divided post-Soviet states and brought previously overlooked 'white spots of history' (tragic, traumatic events) into public debate alongside 'black spots' (previously taboo issues due to censorship); an adverse climate in the European Parliament, where countries that had experienced the trauma of Soviet totalitarianism launched efforts to commemorate the victims of the Gulag, most notably through the symbolic Prague Declaration of 2008, which called for establishing a remembrance day for victims of both totalitarianisms, effectively equating communism with Nazism; the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and more broadly, the nationalisation of history in Central and Eastern European countries and their promotion of a memory narrative opposed to Russia's; and finally, the identity crisis within Russian society following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

345 For more on this topic, see J. Darczewska, 'The Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests (2009–12)', *Institute of National Remembrance Review*, 3/2021–2022, ipn.gov.pl.

marking the expulsion of the Poles from the Kremlin, and 1812, commemorating Russia's victory in the Great Patriotic War against Napoleon. In the same year, Putin reinstated the Russian Historical Society (RHS) and the Russian Military-Historical Society (RMHS). Under the supervision of the RHS and the leadership of Naryshkin, the first 'Concept of a new educational-methodological complex on national history' was developed with the aim of standardising historical narratives in textbooks and publications. The need to establish a mandatory teaching standard was a recurring theme in Putin's speeches; he also personally discussed it at several meetings with historians.

Interpretations of the past in line with the historical-cultural standard have also made their way online. They have been widely disseminated through the websites of the RHS (historyrussia.org) and the RMHS (*история.рф*) as well as on blogs and countless history websites. Education in the spirit of defending Russia's historical and cultural heritage has also been incorporated into the broader 'Programme for Patriotic Education in the Russian Federation', which is implemented by a number of state entities, divided into primary executors and co-executors. The first group consists of four central institutions: the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Culture and the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs. The list of co-executors, however, is far more extensive: it includes ministries, security services, government agencies, regional executive authorities and so-called public-state NGOs. The list of organisations involved in this programme may raise questions, as some of them are not involved with education. They appear to have been selected primarily based on their compliance and access to funding. This explains the strong presence of military entities, which have the most extensive capabilities in this area.

Patriotic education is also promoted on an individual level by writers who specialise in interpreting history through the media – figures that Stalin once called the "engineers of the human soul". Most of them are affiliated with think tanks that toe the Kremlin's line, such as Aleksandr Prokhanov, founder of the Izborsk Club (which operated until 2012 as the Byzantine Club and the Institute of Dynamic Conservatism), and Natalya Narochnitskaya, president of the Historical Perspective Foundation. They identify key lines of ideological influence within the historical-cultural standard: Russia's unique developmental path, the image of a strong state and strong autocratic power, the Russian nation's legendary victories and an imperial determinism expressed in the 'reunification' and 'voluntary' integration of new territories into the Moscow-centred state. The unified vision of Russia's past they have promoted in the mass media, which echoes Nikolai Karamzin's thesis that Russian history begins in Kyiv, focuses on events that favoured the formation of the imperial state. It emphasises its continuity from the earliest times to the present, highlighting facts that justify

its power, civilisational wealth and the 'purity' of its traditions, which the hostile, demoralised and decaying West allegedly seeks to corrupt.

Public debates about the past have deepened the division within the community of historians between the so-called patriotic current and the research-based critical current, with the latter defending history as a scholarly discipline. However, the critical approach has failed to reach a wider audience, as bookstore shelves remain dominated by works straddling academic and popular history as well as overtly ideological and propaganda-based manifestos. Representatives of the patriotic current have been working to reinforce the population's belief in the uniqueness of Russia, its civilisation and its civilisational mission that supposedly predestines it to act as a counterweight to the corrupt, consumerist West. They have been waging a battle against present-day cosmopolitans and 'enemies of the nation'; most importantly, they have sought to 'set the record straight' on Russian history by countering 'Western slanderers'.

Unlike the campaign-style actions of the Naryshkin Commission, the historical-cultural standard has ensured systemic, continuous and large-scale indoctrination. It forms the foundation of the teaching concept for the 'History of Russia' course across all the educational institutions in the Russian Federation. Its latest edition, approved in October 2020,[346] expands upon a similar document from 2014. The concept's stated goal is to "create a unified educational space for teaching history" – in other words, to align the compulsory 'History of Russia' course with the histories of various nations that have been incorporated into the Russian state at different historical stages. As noted, this objective will be achieved through:

- **a multi-dimensional approach to historical processes**, which takes into account various factors such as domestic and foreign policy, state-citizen relations, the economy, social stratification, military affairs / national defence and spiritual culture,
- **a historical-anthropological approach**, based on the idea that "the human dimension of history fosters students' respect for their country's past and serves as both a source and a tool for the emotional perception of history",
- **a historical-cultural approach** aimed at providing "a balanced perspective on contentious issues" in both Russian and world history.

The historical-cultural approach is defined there as 'creating a space for dialogue' based on a shared worldview:

346 *Концепция преподавания учебного курса «История России» в образовательных организациях Российской Федерации, реализующих основные общеобразовательные программы*, The Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 23 October 2020, at: akadem-centr.ru.

> In history education, cultural images are an important resource for shaping a worldview and the primary means of transmitting the traditions and values of Russian society. Highlighting the diversity and interplay of cultures that, at various points in history, became part of the multinational Russian State helps students develop a sense of belonging to a shared, rich cultural-historical space and respect for the cultural achievements and best traditions of their own and other nations. This, in turn, forms the basis for the ability to engage in dialogue during both classroom and extracurricular activities as well as in social practice. From a worldview perspective, it is also important that students perceive historical and cultural monuments as a valuable heritage of both their country and humanity as a whole – one that everyone should protect.[347]

Due to its manipulative potential, the historical-cultural standard has been used as a platform for reinforcing a deeply rooted vision of imperial Russia. Rather than addressing contentious and sensitive historical issues, which would require scientific methods and honest academic debate, it serves to preserve memory and pride in the achievements of the 'multinational Russian State'. Political correctness ensures that Russian collective memory leaves no room for acknowledging opposing viewpoints. The opponent must accept the premise that the exceptional Russian (Soviet) nation has always heroically defended itself and emerged victorious. Searching for one's own flaws or weaknesses and attempting to justify adversaries in historical debates is seen as corrupting and unworthy of a patriot. This line of reasoning was among the justifications for a series of repressive measures against members of the independent historical association Memorial. When harassment of its individual members failed to achieve the desired effect, the organisation was added to the list of 'foreign agents' and ultimately dissolved in 2021.

The historical-cultural standard, outlined in a 100-page document, confirms the Russian government's desire to regulate historical facts, their evaluations and the terminology used. This is particularly evident in the annexes: 'Synchronisation of teaching content in national and world history courses' (p. 21), 'The historical-cultural standard in national history education' (p. 28) and 'A list of key events and figures in national history' (p. 83). The most extensive section, dedicated to historical-cultural standards in teaching, is divided into nine chapters:

I. From the Rus State to the Russian State,
II. Russia in the 16th–17th centuries – from the Grand Principality to Tsardom,
III. Russia in the late 17th and 18th centuries – from Tsardom to the Empire,
IV. The Russian Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries,

347 *Ibid.*

V. Russia during World War I and the Great Russian Revolution (1914–22),
VI. The USSR from 1922 to 1940,
VII. The Great Patriotic War (1941–45),
VIII. The USSR from 1945 to 1991,
IX. The Russian Federation from 1991 to 2020.

The concept, much like the revised Constitution of the Russian Federation, places particular emphasis on the enduring nature of the 'thousand-year Russian state'.[348] Its linear continuity from Saint Vladimir to the present is underscored by this periodisation and the interchangeable use of the terms 'Rus State' and 'Russian Land' with the aim of cementing the false notion that they are synonymous.

The proposed topics for lessons on Russia's earliest history include the significance of Chersonesus (in Crimea) in the context of the cultural ties between Rus and Byzantium (p. 29). However, what is ultimately emphasised is that "the Grand Principality of Moscow led the heroic struggle of the Russian people [*russky narod*] against the rule of the Golden Horde".[349] The idea of a continuous, 'thousand-year' Russian state is reinforced through selective omissions, such as the conspicuous absence of Kyiv and the appropriation of Ukrainian heritage. At the same time, emphasis is placed on the fact that Kyivan princes belonged to the Rurikid dynasty, which is widely associated with Russia.

The appropriation of Kyivan Rus' legacy as belonging to Russia is nothing new. The belief that Kyiv is the cradle of Russian statehood was widely promoted in Tsarist scholarship from the time of Nikolai Karamzin. His contributions to national historiography and public education are difficult to overstate. Dubbed the 'Columbus of Russian history' by scholars, Karamzin was a man of the Enlightenment – a traveller, writer and creator of the country's first children's magazine, 'Children's Readings for the Heart and Mind'. Most notably, he was the author of the monumental multi-volume 'History of the Russian State'. Recognising its value, Tsar Alexander I appointed him as the official court historian and granted him an annual stipend of 2,000 roubles.

Professor Andrzej Nowak attributes the popularity of Karamzin's ideas, which were later developed by Sergey Uvarov, to the need to find a new ideological foundation for imperial ideology in order to replace the models developed

348 See, for example, the wording in the 2020 amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation: "The Russian Federation, united by a thousand years of history, preserving the memory of its ancestors who passed on to us ideals and belief in God as well as the continuity of the development of the Russian state, recognises the historically established unity of the state". See 'Полный текст поправок в Конституцию: что меняется?', The State Duma of the Russian Federation, 14 March 2020, duma.gov.ru.

349 'Московское княжество во главе героической борьбы русского народа против ордынского господства', *Концепция преподавания учебного курса «История России»…*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

in the period from Peter I to Catherine II. In 1812, after all, nearly the full might of Europe descended upon Russia:

> In the first quarter of the 19th century, Russia's rivalry [with the great powers of Western Europe] changed its nature – it shifted from being purely political (strategic) towards an ideological contest between the Russian Empire and Europe. The Enlightenment model, under which Russia could expect to be recognised by European powers as a partner in spreading the 'light' of progress across Asia, Eastern Europe and Southeastern Europe, had collapsed.[350]

At that time, another foundational myth was also revitalised – the concept of 'Moscow as the Third Rome'. This is yet another archetype behind modern manipulative concepts that justify the civilisation of the 'Russian world'. The idea emerged after the fall of the Byzantine Empire as a plan to strengthen the Orthodox Church; it was therefore a religious concept. Over time, however, it was transformed into a state doctrine that was used to justify the ambitions of Muscovite princes to 'gather', meaning unify, the lands previously conquered by the Golden Horde, to elevate their own status to that of tsars and to turn their principality into a tsardom (starting with the reign of Ivan the Terrible). In addition, the Byzantine court ceremonial added grandeur to the Grand Duchy of Moscow. Over time, this myth also became the foundation of the ideology of the Orthodox Empire, encapsulated in its defining slogan: "We are Russians. God is with us".

An analysis of the facts also supports the argument that the early rulers of the Muscovite state showed little real interest in the legacy of Byzantium. For example, their claims to its heritage did not translate into any efforts to defend their Orthodox brethren in the Balkans, who had been conquered by the Turks. The Moscow Patriarchate, established in 1589, was instead used as a tool of expansion in the immediate neighbourhood. From this perspective, the concept of Moscow as the heir to Byzantium can be interpreted as a camouflage for the 'strategic' objective: taking over the legacy of the Kyivan principalities and the Archbishopric of Kyiv.

Incidentally, the slogan 'Moscow – the Third Rome' has resurfaced repeatedly in subsequent concepts, including 'Panslavism', 'official nationality', Eurasianism (which asserts that Russia can exist only as an indivisible empire and must not allow Ukraine to break away), 'Orthodox Bolshevism' (which is represented by Nikolai Trubetzkoy), and today's 'Russian world'. This myth underpins the notion of an all-Russian Orthodox community and the thesis of the continuity of Russia's statehood. It also evokes the perpetual rivalry between Orthodox

350 A. Nowak, *Powrót „Imperium Zła". Ideologie współczesnej Rosji, ich twórcy i krytycy (1913–2023)*, Kraków 2023, p. 309.

(Byzantine) and Roman civilisation, which allegedly seeks to occidentalise (Polonise or 'Catholicise') the Russian lands.

Laying the historical foundations for today's Russian society requires not only a carefully crafted narrative about Russia's interactions with other nations and its influence over them but also the presentation of its history in a way that emphasises the continuity of its tradition of state power. The true picture of the past is obscured by omitting or generalising selected facts. Such generalised assessments clearly diverge from historical truth. For example, the discussed educational document states that "the culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was characterised by concern for the individual, their daily practices, work and consumption culture, and the political and legal culture". Slogan-like characterisations, which are presented as the keys to understanding historical periods, also amount to serious distortions. The era of Alexander I has been labelled 'the age of state liberalism' while his successor, Nicholas I, is associated with 'state conservatism' and the official doctrine of 'autocracy–Orthodoxy–nationality'. Alexander II is credited with 'the modernisation of the state and reforms towards a rule-of-law state and civil society' (sic!), while Alexander III represents 'national autocracy' and the ideology of Russia's distinct developmental path, which supposedly led to 'the strengthening of Russia's great-power status'. The Great Russian Revolution (1917–22), written with capital letters, encompasses the February and October Revolutions as well as the Civil War, up until the formation of the Soviet Union. The term Stalinism is clearly a taboo; instead, Stalin's era is divided into the periods of the 'great transformation', the 'Great Patriotic War' and the 'post-war period'. The standard interpretation of World War II should primarily emphasise 'the unity of the battlefield and the home front'. In the section 'The USSR and its allies', the issue of the Second Front is mentioned only superficially, while developments on the Eastern Front are framed as a 'clash of civilisations'. The dominant narrative of the early 1990s, which held that the risky communist experiment left the country in a state of civilisational backwardness, has also been reversed. Recent history is divided into four broad periods, summarised with the slogans: 1991–93 – the formation of a new Russia; 1993–99 – a time of political and economic turbulence; 2000–13 – stabilisation and consolidation of the power vertical (that is, a vertically hierarchical system of government); 2014–20 – rising international tensions. This final 'understatement' is explained in greater detail:

> "As a result of Russia's active role in resolving crisis situations, its international standing and authority have noticeably increased. This, along with the strengthening of Russia's economy, the revival of its military and an independent line in Russian foreign policy, prompted efforts by a number of Western countries to limit

> Russia's economic and political influence. The growing tensions surrounding Russia were triggered by its response to the Western-backed coup in Ukraine and the subsequent return of Crimea to its homeland (2014), Russia's unwavering stance on the necessity of implementing the Minsk agreements regarding the Donbas and its humanitarian operations in the region. The consequences included a political-information war and the imposition of harsh economic sanctions aimed at 'punishing' Russia. However, this pressure proved ineffective [...]. Russia regained the positions it had lost after 1991 and became one of the leaders in global politics.[351]

Beyond this history-related content, the document's language is particularly striking. The names of historical periods, such as 'the Great Russian Revolution', and events, like the 'operation to compel Georgia to peace' listed under 8 August 2008 (referring to the support for separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the open conflict with Georgia), as well as concise characterisations of the era, are far from neutral terms used for identifying specific facts. These are instead culturemes that present events in the desired light, imposing a singular, correct interpretation and the 'proper' image that is usually favourable to Russia. They function as important tools of the Russian historical discourse and, to a large extent, represent unique phraseological mutations. Examples include terms such as 'dictatorship of the heart', 'police socialism', 'revolutionary rule of law', 'new nobility', 'Orthodox Chekism', 'dictatorship of the law', and many others. While often illogical, inconsistent and at times shocking to outside observers, these terms serve a practical function – charged with emotional pathos, they act as rhetorical weapons in ideological battles. This discourse is also marked by the deliberate avoidance of terms that could provoke controversy among historians. And so, Stalinism has been replaced with euphemisms such as 'modernisation' and 'great transformation', reminiscent of Orwellian Newspeak and an educational approach guided more by ideology than by scholarship. This imposition of positive connotations onto Stalinism inevitably distorts the content of education, even if teachers honestly inform their students about the scale of the repression, deportations and ethnic purges of that era. Ultimately, both the document's essence and language suggest that the vectors of the political and social transformation initiated during 'the era of turbulence in the new Russia' have been definitively reversed.

The historical-cultural standard fits well into the theory of information warfare. Its strategists use terms like 'politics of memory' and 'historical policy', but transform them into tools in their unilateral campaigns to impose a singular narrative of the past. They have also coined the term 'historical weapon' – a tool intended to defend Russia's memory in the face of what they perceive as the West's psychological subversion. As a result, historical confrontations with

351 *Концепция преподавания учебного курса «История России»...*, *op. cit.*

neighbouring countries have become a systemic phenomenon and a defining feature of Russia's strategic culture.

Needless to say, this approach is rooted in the tradition of historical propaganda. The interpretative models derived from this tradition also feature in strategic documents, including Russia's 2014 military doctrine, which introduced the principle of limited sovereignty for Russia's allies and its neighbouring countries, asserting that they had to unconditionally respect Russia's interests. Importantly, this document expanded Russia's sphere of influence to encompass the entire territory of the former Soviet Union and parts of the former Eastern Bloc (in previous versions, it only covered the Commonwealth of Independent States). As a result, it also included Ukraine, which was portrayed as a country forcibly colonised by the West.[352]

4.3. Did Pushkin, Tyutchev and others collaborate with the secret police?

The creation and dissemination of a new imperial ideology, something that Russia came to see as a necessity in the early 19th century, required a broad base of executors. The intelligentsia, including journalists, writers and professors, played a key role in this effort. For the system to function effectively, discipline was essential in speech. As a result, censorship in Russia was ideological from the outset. There had been no previous need for a formal office to inspect publications as very little was being written. Moreover, censoring court writers was pointless, while high-profile cases of criticism directed at Catherine II's regime were easily detected without establishing a dedicated institution. For example, after publishing 'Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow', Alexander Radishchev was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress and then sentenced to death, a punishment later commuted to ten years of exile in Siberia. It could be argued that Russia's civilisational lag was also reflected in the delayed emergence of its modern literature and the belated introduction of its censorship systems, which remained in place for a longer time than elsewhere.

From the time of Alexander I, the 'government of souls' exercised through censorship was overseen by the Ministry of Public Education. It was responsible for controlling educational content and fostering a patriotic education while also 'defending freedom from abuses' – a justification for restricting freedom of speech in response to foreign liberal trends that were deemed harmful to the state. A ministry endowed with such powers needed to enjoy the monarch's full trust. Under Nicholas I, who early in his reign faced the challenge of suppressing the Decembrist uprising, censorship was further tightened. From that point on, censors even had the right to 'correct authors' style and language'. The ministry's

352 J. Darczewska, *The devil is in the details…*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

influence grew after 1833, when Sergey Uvarov, the architect of the official imperial 'autocracy–Orthodoxy–nationality' doctrine, was appointed as its head. Although in practice the tsar increasingly relied on the secret police in matters of censorship, responsibility for updating relevant regulations remained with the head of the education ministry.[353] During Uvarov's tenure, censorship came to be known as 'iron' as the atmosphere of 'cultural imperialism' and intellectual oppression worsened.

According to censorship regulations, the Tsar held ultimate authority on what was right or wrong in literature. This was not merely a symbolic formality; for example, Nicholas I granted Pushkin the extraordinary privilege of having the Emperor of All Russia himself as the first reader and censor of all his works, as noted by Bogusław Mucha, the author of comprehensive studies on the subject.[354] Nicholas I's censorship system quickly evolved into an elaborate apparatus, as the tsar obviously could not review every publication personally. At that point, the head of the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Chancellery extended a helping hand. This led to a notable event:

> When an exceptionally heated dispute between Pushkin and Bulgarin (a Polish nobleman whose real name was Bułharyn and a particularly colourful figure) played out publicly in literary periodicals, both the tsar and Count von Benckendorff, the head of the secret police, followed its escalation with concern. Outraged by the critical tone towards 'Eugene Onegin' in Bulgarin's journal 'The Northern Bee', the tsar demanded that the periodical be shut down. However, von Benckendorff intervened to protect the editor, as Bulgarin was one of his secret agents.[355]

The Third Section, established in 1826, was tasked with tracking and prosecuting political criminals, conducting domestic intelligence, monitoring the political loyalty of citizens and gathering information on foreigners residing in Russia. Using contemporary language, it also took steps to improve Russia's international image and legitimise Nicholas I's foreign policy, which was focused

353 Tighter censorship regulations adopted in 1836 prohibited the dissemination of the following: official articles, government rescripts and news about Russia without prior approval from the highest authorities; ukases by deceased tsars that were not issued during their lifetimes without permission from the minister of education; poems and texts in honour of the imperial family without 'supreme authorisation' and the approval of those family members to whom they were addressed; and memoirs by private individuals relating to court proceedings. The government also made it illegal to disseminate content that undermined the Christian faith and dogmas or criticised the government and local administration. One of the regulations penalised unauthorised interpretations of historical facts and events that contradicted the officially sanctioned narrative. 'Harmful theories', such as the notion of human descent from apes and rejection of the divine nature of state authority, were also suppressed. Censorship served a dual function: preventive and repressive. It targeted not only authors, but also publishers and censors, who could all be held legally liable. Writers faced severe penalties, the most common of which was exile.

354 B. Mucha, *Dzieje cenzury w Rosji*, Łódź 1994; *idem*, 'O cenzurze rosyjskiej za panowania Mikołaja I', *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis*, Folia Literaria, 37, 1995.

355 M. Bąkowski, 'Józef Mackiewicz i cenzura', 2013, jozefmackiewicz.com.

on Southern Europe. These efforts were aimed at convincing Western public opinion that all the Slavic nations belonged in Russia's sphere of influence. Domestically, the focus was on educating the elites in a patriotic, Orthodox and monarchist spirit. In this regard, the Third Section wielded extensive negative powers. Using tools such as provocation, intercepting private correspondence and planting agents in literary clubs and societies, it monitored officials, censored publications, monitored sectarian activity within the Orthodox Church, collected intelligence on individuals under police scrutiny and supervised both prisoners and the resettlement areas designated for those deemed suspicious and 'harmful' to the state. After 1830, it also oversaw the network of foreign agents assigned to monitor Poland's Great Emigration.

Alongside the Ministry of Public Education, the Third Section scrutinised the messages conveyed in literary works, periodicals and works of art, silencing anyone who voiced inconvenient truths. These spheres, like history, were meant to serve the regime. Its critics were punished as a warning to others – a fate that befell figures such as Pyotr Chaadayev, a former guards officer, publicist and author of the 'Philosophical Letter', as well as those held responsible for its publication: Nikolai Nadezhdin, the editor of Telescope (the journal in which it appeared), who was sentenced to exile, and Alexander Boldyrev, the censor and rector of Moscow University, who was dismissed from his positions. On Nicholas I's orders, Chaadayev was officially declared mentally ill, forced to undergo medical supervision and barred from writing. All of this happened because he expressed 'incorrect' views about what he saw as Russia's backwardness, particularly its autocracy and Orthodoxy, at a time when the new imperial ideology was being implemented to justify wars against Turkey and provide an argument for creating a Slavic community under Russian rule, united by a single faith.

One of the elite's key tasks was to promote this perspective and persuade both the Russian population and the outside world to accept it. A broad diplomatic, academic and cultural effort was mobilised to achieve this goal. The tsar, his officials, writers and poets all spoke with one voice about Russia's right to imperial ambitions, framed in civilisational terms. The cult of Russia's cultural greatness, unique traditions and endless expanses was nurtured by some of the most prominent figures in 19th-century Russian literature: Pushkin, Tyutchev, Mikhail Lermontov, Alexander Griboyedov, Nikolai Nekrasov and Ivan Turgenev, all of whom participated in the cultural battles against the West.

The challenge they faced was far from easy: Russia's image at the start of the 19th century was, to put it mildly, somewhat tarnished. A number of assassinations at the highest levels of power (including regicide), peasant revolts driven by famine, rebellions within the tsar's guard regiments and insurrections in conquered territories provided ample reasons for critical commentary. These

developments contradicted the empire's portrayal of its conquests as a civilising and liberating mission. Moreover, following the partitions of Poland, Europe was swept by a wave of Polonophilia which often included expressions of open dislike and even hostility towards Russia. The Poles themselves, humiliated by the division of their country, viewed the aggressor from the East, in both political and metaphysical terms, as the embodiment of global evil. Professor Marian Broda, a historian of ideas and sociologist who has studied this issue, notes that in the 19th century, Russia, described by foreigners such as Marquis Astolphe de Custine as 'barbaria Moscovia', came to symbolise despotism, contempt for the individual, widespread servility, hypocrisy and xenophobia.[356]

Gifted with a fluent pen and captivating in their originality, intelligence and personal charm, writers and poets undoubtedly proved to be effective champions of the state. They were also well-suited to advancing the Third Section's pro-Russian lobbying efforts. As they were educated members of the aristocracy, the tsar often appointed them to diplomatic positions. At the same time, as Russia was waging a cultural battle against foreign influences, they sought to prove that the Russian language was just as elegant as French or German. They operated on two fronts: on the one hand, they embedded a favourable image of Russia in their works to shape perceptions among foreign audiences; on the other, they actively participated in European political discourse, promoting narratives beneficial to the Tsarist regime.

Pushkin gave in to pressure: he made a verbal commitment to cease his criticism of the political order, because he wanted to return from exile. Over the course of 11 years, from 1826 until his death in a duel in 1837, he wrote 58 letters to his 'personal censor', the tsar – an average of one every two months. These letters passed through von Benckendorff, who also replied to them, illustrating the difficult and ambiguous atmosphere of life at the time. In one of his letters, Pushkin requested access to state archives related to the history of Peter I, a subject he intended to study. He was granted permission to use the Hermitage Library, but he in fact focused on the Pugachev Rebellion during Catherine II's reign. According to scholars, this topic became particularly relevant to Pushkin due to a wave of peasant uprisings that swept Russia in 1830–31, including the so-called cholera riots (social unrest triggered by the cholera pandemic) and revolts by military settlers, as well as upheavals in Europe, particularly the French Revolution of 1830. Shortly afterwards, the head of the Third Section announced that Pushkin had been appointed as an official at the College of Foreign Affairs; as a result, the writer gained broader access to the imperial archives and the opportunity to pursue his interests. In another letter,

356 'Rusofobia' [in:] A. de Lazari (ed.), *Idee w Rosji. Leksykon rosyjsko-polsko-angielski*, Łódź 2000, vol. 3, p. 334.

von Benckendorff wrote that "the tsar has instructed me, as a trusted individual, to discreetly supervise him and guide him with advice".[357]

Pushkin's role extended beyond writing patriotic poems and 'correct' books such as *The History of Pugachev*. His 1831 poem *To the Slanderers of Russia*, written in the wake of the Polish November Uprising, was a response to a major anti-Russian campaign in the French parliament following General Ivan Paskevich's capture of Warsaw. Some French deputies went as far as to call for a military intervention in support of Poland; a Polish Committee was even formed, led by Marquis Marie-Joseph de La Fayette, a veteran of the American War of Independence. Pushkin's fiery poem, aimed "against the slanderers" in France who "fail to understand that this is a matter within the Slavic family", perfectly aligned with Russia's counter-propaganda efforts at the time. A year later, in 1832, Adam Mickiewicz reproached him for this in the poem called *To My Friends the Muscovites*, which was included in his major work *Forefathers' Eve, Part III*. Honouring the sacrifice of the Decembrists Ryleyev and Bestuzhev, Mickiewicz contrasted them with Pushkin, who had "sold his free soul forever for the tsar's favour / And now bows at his doorstep". Even later, after the Russian writer's death, Mickiewicz stressed that politics had cast a shadow over their friendship: "it divided us, but poetry brought us closer". Mickiewicz, a Polish patriot and exile, had his own 'truth', while Pushkin had a different, unquestionable, Russian 'truth' that ignored the historical context but aligned with imperial interests. It was a truth that gave him the right to brand as slanderers all those who rejected the offer of security under Moscow's wings.

Was Pushkin a secret collaborator of the Third Section? This cannot be confirmed conclusively without access to the archives. However, Prince Vyazemsky, his friend and the first president of the Russian Historical Society that was established in 1866, was indeed a collaborator, as were the playwright and diplomat Alexander Griboyedov, the chemist Dmitry Mendeleev and the geographer Nikolai Przhevalsky, a fact that was authoritatively confirmed by Sergey Naryshkin, the current head of the SVR.[358] This claim is also supported by experts cited in the documentary 'What secrets did Russian writers hide? The mysteries of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol and Turgenev', which aired on state television in April 2022 and was later posted on YouTube.[359] Well-known Russian writers, 'exposed' as agents of the Third Section, are portrayed in the

357 В. Есипов, *Переписка А.С. Пушкина с А.Х. Бенкендорфом*, Москва, Санкт-Петербург 2021, p. 17, at: litved.com.

358 'Сергей Нарышкин: «Работа историка – разведка во времени»', Российское историческое общество, 20 December 2020, historyrussia.org; 'Интервью Сергея Нарышкина журналу «Историк»…', *op. cit.*

359 'Какие секреты хранили русские писатели? | Тайны Пушкина, Лермонтова, Гоголя, Тургенева', Центральное Телевидение, 27 March 2022, youtube.com. For an extensive discussion of this film, see 'Puszkin, Tiutczew i Turgieniew czyli tajne służby i bardzo krótka historia literatury rosyjskiej', Szkoła Nawigatorów, 28 May 2022, pink-panther.szkolanawigatorow.pl.

film as exemplary models of patriotism. Eduard Makarevich and Iosif Linder, historians of the secret services, and Marina Sidorova, head of the literary department at the State Archive of the Russian Federation, argue that Pushkin actively promoted patriotic education in society and firmly believed in the 'necessity of managing public opinion' through literature and the press – which is why he proposed the creation of a political journal to serve this purpose. Though the project never materialised, relevant to this day.

It should be clarified that no organised forms of public opinion existed in Russia at the time. Any anti-regime circles or clubs were immediately disbanded and their members were severely punished. For example, Fyodor Dostoevsky and twenty of his fellow members of the Petrashevsky Circle narrowly escaped execution when the tsar commuted their death sentences to exile at the last moment. Therefore, expressions of dissent could only reach the public through the printed word and art. In his famous 'Letter to Gogol' (1847), written in the health resort of Szczawno-Zdrój (Ober Salzbrunn), Vissarion Belinsky hailed[360] "the only leaders, defenders and saviours from the darkness of autocracy". This statement underscored the writer's ethos and literature's missionary role, something that the Tsarist regime refused to accept under any circumstances. In his furious and sarcastic manifesto, Belinsky denounced Gogol as "a preacher of the knout, an apostle of ignorance, a champion of obscurantism and a glorifier of Tatar customs". Scholars believe that he was spared certain death or imprisonment in a fortress only because he was terminally ill. The regime simply did not tolerate criticism, literary or otherwise; reality could only be described uncritically. In Russia, only loyalist literature could be trusted.

This is precisely the message conveyed by the referenced documentary. It instrumentalised Pushkin and other eminent 19th-century poets and writers as examples of loyalty to Russia and advocates of the idea that Western Europe harboured eternal prejudices against it. 'Exposed' as agents of the Third Section, clearly for the purposes of the so-called patriotic and spiritual education, they were presented as exemplary models of patriotism.

According to the experts cited in the film, the secret police generously rewarded Pushkin for his cooperation. The Third Section paid him around 50,000 silver roubles, a sum comparable to the value of a sizable village. It also extended a protective umbrella over the philandering bard, shielding him from betrayed and furious husbands. This involved a common practice in Russia – corruption. Von Benckendorff would summon the aggrieved husband and, depending on the situation, offer either money or a promotion and pay increase as 'compensation'. Nicholas I's appreciation for Pushkin's contributions was further demonstrated

360 W. Bieliński, *Pisma literackie. Wybór*, Wrocław 1962, p. 527.

by the fact that, after the poet's death, the tsar paid off his debts, which were in excess of 140,000 roubles, granted a pension to his widow, Natalia Goncharova, and provided financial support to his four children.

Pushkin was undoubtedly a great poet, which made him an ideal candidate to spread imperial propaganda and counterpropaganda. His contribution to the development of the Russian literary language is undeniable and he is rightly regarded as its founding figure. Early in his career, he was associated with the anti-Tsarist Decembrist movement. In some ways, he could be compared to today's celebrities: he captivated people with his colourful, romance-filled life, daring personality and striking appearance. He was the great-grandson of Abram Hannibal, an Ethiopian-Abyssinian slave who became a favourite of Peter I due to his intellect and character; the tsar granted him freedom and noble status. Pushkin was also legendary for his intelligence: Nicholas I reportedly called him "the most intelligent person in Russia". His fluency in French gave him access to the salons of the 19th-century cultural elite. During his time at the renowned Lyceum in Tsarskoye Selo (now Pushkino), his classmates nicknamed him 'the Frenchman'. In short, as someone seen as credible by his contemporaries, he was well-suited to burnishing the empire's image and reinforcing the idea of Russia as a distinct civilisation.

Pushkin's tragedy lies not so much in the fact that he was broken, succumbed to pressure and followed von Benckendorff's instructions, but rather that the works of this great poet, who initially held liberal views, were exploited to serve the agendas of successive Russian regimes, first the Tsarist and later the Stalinist. He became a state-building symbol. A telling fact: 1937, the centenary of his death, was officially declared the Year of Pushkin. He was recast as a fighter in the class struggle and a hero of the 'proletarian cultural front'; 14 million copies of his works were published that year. He was transformed into a tool of the oppressive state and remains one to this day. In 2010, Putin announced that 6 June, the poet's birthday, would be celebrated as Russian Language Day. Russians at home and abroad collectively recited Eugene Onegin and other works by Pushkin on that day. According to the ideology of the 'Russian world', Russia ends where the Russian language ends. In this context, such tangible and intangible monuments to Pushkin serve as symbolic, visible markers of this 'Russian world'.

As Poland knows from its experience of communism, censorship can take various forms – both institutional and informal pressure. The latter is often more effective than formal restrictions because it is harder to resist. It easily transforms into self-censorship: writers restrict themselves to align with the government's expectations. They renounce the right to express their opinion in the name of a higher good, ignore inconvenient facts and ultimately submit

to what is known as patriotic discipline. In Russia, this phenomenon was widespread. At times, the regime also applied a hybrid form of censorship, blending institutional and informal methods. Informal censorship was mastered by Fyodor Tyutchev (1803–73), a diplomat, mystical poet, publicist and, from 1844, also a censor.

Bogusław Mucha[361] notes that in the early 1840s, censorship appeared to ease somewhat as 'struggling writers' joined the ranks of censors; they earned a living this way but also treated creators with greater leniency. However, this did not last long: the 1848 Spring of Nations and then the Crimean War ushered in a new wave of repression. The notorious Buturlin Committee was formed,[362] significantly expanding the use of surveillance over authors. The ascension of Alexander II to the throne in 1855 brought about the so-called post-Sevastopol thaw and a renewed easing of censorship. The new tsar had no intention of reducing the scope of his autocratic power, but sought to create the illusion of enlightened rule involving the 'fourth estate', as we would say today. As part of this approach, his regime approved the publication of open memoranda that criticised restrictions on creative freedoms, including letters by Tyutchev and Vyazemsky.

A similar view is held by Pavel Reifman, a representative of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, who has studied censorship within the broader context of literary history and state propaganda in Russia. Explaining the various fluctuations and complexities surrounding this issue, he writes that the continuous tightening of restrictions and expansions of the limitations on free speech inevitably deepened public distrust of the government. This, in turn, necessitated periodic 'thaws', which were aimed at balancing the growing demand for transparency in public life with the need to protect 'public order, autocratic rule and the Orthodox Church'.

According to Reifman, under Alexander II these tensions were reflected in the discussions on censorship reform in the early 1860s, which were initiated and moderated by Tyutchev. He presented himself as a realist and an advocate for easing censorship, arguing that "you cannot restrict and suppress reason for too long and too harshly without harming the entire state organism". He maintained that transparency should be the foundation of social life, though he also cautioned against "excessive freedom" and the "misinterpretation" of disseminated works.[363] Inevitably, the conflict between proponents and opponents of

361 B. Mucha, *Dzieje cenzury w Rosji*, *op. cit.*, pp. 100–101.

362 The Buturlin Committee (Special Committee for Supervision of the Press) was established in 1848 within the Third Section. Its common name derives from its first head, Dmitry Buturlin. Ten years later, Tyutchev took charge of this unit and headed it until 1873.

363 П. Рейфман, 'Цензура в дореволюционной, советской и постсоветской России', reifman.ru.

greater freedom of expression remained unresolved – the simulated discourse was dominated by fears of dangerous tendencies, leaving the debate at a standstill. The idea of reforming censorship was ultimately abandoned and should, therefore, be seen more as a contemporary exercise in managing public opinion than a genuine attempt at change.

Tyutchev's censorship activity was part of his broader pro-state engagement as a diplomat, poet and publicist. He fully earned the title of an ambassador of literature committed to advancing Russia's imperial influence. The author of the immortal phrase "You cannot understand Russia through reason" (1866) volunteered to join the Third Section as he sought to regain favour after falling from grace for breaching diplomatic protocol. He spent over 20 years in diplomatic service; he was stationed in Munich, Turin and Genoa. In Munich, he married Eleonore Peterson, a German aristocrat and widow of a Russian diplomat, while simultaneously maintaining a relationship with Countess Ernestine Doernberg, née von Pfeffel. After Eleonore's death, he decided to marry Ernestine and requested official permission for the marriage and a leave of absence. He was granted the former, but denied the latter. He then committed insubordination: he simply abandoned his post and left. He also took diplomatic documents and ciphers, which he later either lost or, as Semyon Ekshtut claims in the aforementioned documentary, it is more likely they were stolen by the emissaries of foreign states.

This incident provoked the wrath of the Tsarist government, which demanded that he return to Russia immediately. Tyutchev hesitated, being fully aware of the serious consequences he was facing. Ekshtut, the author of the book entitled *Tyutchev: Tayny sovetnik i kamerger* (Tyutchev: secret councillor and chamberlain[364]), a doctor of philosophy and historian specialising in the history of Russian secret services, who had access to their archives and provided authoritative testimony in the referenced documentary, noted that anyone else would have faced trial for such an offense. However, Tyutchev took the initiative. He did return to Moscow in 1843, but then reached out to Count von Benckendorff and offered his services as an ideologue and political writer shaping Russia's positive image abroad. In his own words, he proposed nothing less than a "guerrilla war behind the lines of the European press". The plan was to create a network of correspondents who would serve the empire's interests – essentially employing an early form of active measures in the media. In the era of Nicholas I, marked by Russia's growing isolation on the eve of the Spring of Nations, this offer helped Tyutchev regain the tsar's trust and ensured he received a passport.

364 Kamerger (from German *Kammerherr*) – a high-ranking court title in Tsarist Russia, equivalent to a chamberlain.

Tyutchev published a series of articles in the foreign press generating significant impact and triggering a debate around them that continued for about 30 years. Ekshtut views this initiative positively: "In these texts, Europe was able to hear, for the first time, the voice of a true Russian patriot…".[365]

Eduard Makarevich, an expert on the issue of the influence of communication on individuals and the author of publications on counterintelligence and the role of Russian literature in psychological warfare, notes in this context that Tyutchev (in his view, an outstanding statesman and patriot) operated on two fronts. He carried out intelligence tasks for the Third Section using agent-based methods, establishing a network of operatives in the West. At the same time, he organised a counterpropaganda campaign, directing these agents to win over Western public opinion. According to Makarevich, Tyutchev's work was part of a broader concept involving a structured plan with specific materials and topics. "These texts were meant to be produced by individuals who would present Russia's role in the world and its policies to Western audiences as a counterpoint to the views prevailing in the West".[366]

In 1844, Tyutchev became an advisor for special assignments and senior censor at the College of Foreign Affairs; in 1848, he joined the Buturlin Committee. From 1858 to 1873, he led this institution,[367] becoming the highest-ranking official in the field of counterpropaganda, a domain that was already highly valued and being systematically developed in Russia. Even then, there was a prevailing belief that counterpropaganda could be more effective than the actions of entire military divisions. In this context, Napoleon's famous maxim was often quoted: "Two hostile newspapers are more dangerous than a hundred-thousand-strong army". In the realm of counterpropaganda, Tyutchev performed both conceptual and organisational functions. In his letters to journalists, such as Alexander Georgievsky, editor of Moskovskiye Vedomosti (Moscow News), he outlined the current situation in the West and the related information tasks.[368] He also actively influenced publications both in Russia and abroad. At his initiative, Alexander Moller produced a pamphlet titled '*Situation de Pologne au 1-er Janvier 1865*' (The situation in Poland on 1 January 1865). Tyutchev personally oversaw its dissemination in both the domestic and foreign press and organised polemics about books and articles critical of Moscow.

365 'Какие секреты хранили русские писатели?…', *op. cit.*

366 *Ibid.*

367 А. Рейтблат, 'Русские писатели и III отделение (1826–1855)', НЛО 1999, no. 6, at: magazines.gorky.media.

368 For the discussed correspondence, see Ф. Тютчев, 'Письма к московским публицистам. А.И. Георгиевскому 1864–1866' [in:] *Литературное наследство, том 97, Федор Иванович Тютчев*, Москва 1988. 'Литературное наследство' ('Literary heritage'), a monumental publication series of the USSR Academy of Sciences, is a true treasure trove of knowledge about Tyutchev's life and work. Two substantial volumes of issue 97 were dedicated to him. The series has been digitised by the Russian Academy of Sciences and is available on the website of IMLI RAN, old.old.imli.ru.

Professor Nowak writes that Tyutchev emerged as the most prominent voice in the chorus of Russia's champions who spoke out against the 'slanders' of Astolphe de Custine contained in his book *La Russie en 1839*.[369] Published in 1843, it became a true bestseller of its time and sparked outrage among both the paid and voluntary apologists of the empire.

> In this area of activity, the subtle lyricist had many collaborators under contract with the Third Section – the Tsarist political police. Those tasked with countering anti-Tsarist narratives in Western propaganda included Yakov Tolstoy, the Paris-based 'foreign correspondent of the education ministry' and a veteran of Russian foreign intelligence, and Karl Eduard Goldmann, the Germany-based author of the well-known work 'Die europäische Pentarchie'. Many others took on specific, ad hoc tasks assigned to them by their principals in St. Petersburg.[370]

In 1844, as part of an intense counterpropaganda campaign, Tyutchev took to the pages of *Allgemeine Zeitung* to defend the dignity of the Russian army, which de Custine had "besmirched", before launching an attack on his views in the Munich-based *Gazette Universelle*. References to de Custine's book also appeared in the poet's later political writings. His polemical message was unequivocal: engaging in a pathetic debate with a book that revealed intellectual shamelessness and moral decay was pointless. A Russian author, he argued, should concern himself with more serious matters – highlighting the judgments of history and uncovering the historical mission of his homeland.

It is worth noting that Tyutchev's statements provoked strong reactions from Polish publicists, including Zygmunt Krasiński, Wacław Lednicki, Hieronim Kajsiewicz and Józefat Bolesław Ostrowski. According to Nowak, as victims of Tsarist expansion and rule, they understood it better than anyone. They were fully aware that "falsehood forms the fabric of Tsarist propaganda and the foundation of the elaborate ideology of Tsar-worship, whose universally binding authority is ultimately protected by the police system".[371]

As a censor and practitioner of the 'information security policy of the then-Russia', Tyutchev wrote several articles in French and German, including 'Russia and Germany' (1844), 'A note to the Tsar' (1845), 'Russia and revolution' (1849) and 'The papacy and the Roman question' (1850). He also outlined

369 The book was listed as a prohibited publication. During the final years of the Polish People's Republic, two abridged translations appeared under the identical title 'Letters from Russia' – one by Beata Geppert (under the pseudonym Katarzyna Czermińska, published by Aneks, London 1983) and the other by Maria Leśniewska (under the pseudonym Marian Górski, published by Editions, Paris 1983). Numerous reprints of both versions circulated in the underground press, often with no place or date of publication provided. The first full translation, by Paweł Hertz, was not published until 1995 – see A. de Custine, *Rosja w roku 1839*, Warszawa 1995, vol. 1–2.

370 A. Nowak, *Powrót „Imperium Zła"…*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

371 For more on this topic, see *ibid.*, pp. 210–225.

the theses of his unfinished treatise 'Russia and the West'. In these works, he proposed potential programmes for the empire's foreign policy and called for a partnership with the "still healthy Germanic element" as a remedy for the "decay spreading from France". Supporting his government both conceptually and informationally, he crafted an image of Russia as a thousand-year-old power. He argued that only two forces existed in the "modern world", revolutionary Europe and conservative Russia, which were destined to clash in a decisive battle, with the political and religious future of the Old Continent hanging in the balance. According to Tyutchev, the Russian nation held the moral high ground, as the crisis of Western Christianity had entered its final stage – the West was decaying. Suppressing the revolution would not eliminate it, he claimed, because it was an inherent form of the West's existence, a product of its civilisation dating back to the time of Luther.

Tyutchev's political writings, which constituted his contribution to the cultural war against the West, gained considerable attention there due to the discussion being sustained by Russians. However, 'unsponsored' texts had a vastly different tone than commissioned works. Paul de Bourgoing reprinted extensive excerpts from the pamphlet 'Russia and Germany', but prefaced them with his own critical introduction, dismissing Tyutchev's ideas as "colossal nonsense". He also concluded that they reflected the official stance of the Russian government, which would indicate a deep internal decline in Russia and an effort to rehabilitate Nicholas I's image rather than revealing a crisis in the West.[372] He also accurately noted that Tyutchev's article was a response to unflattering portrayals of the Russian Empire in the German and French press. In this text, Tyutchev argued that Germany's only viable policy was to maintain close ties with Russia, as Europe's peaceful development depended on the Tsarist Empire – after all, Germany owed its liberation from France to Moscow. De Bourgoing was right: the poet's message aligned with the official position of the Tsarist regime. According to Tyutchev's own account, after reading the article, Nicholas I remarked that it expressed his own thoughts. How could it be otherwise? After all, Tyutchev acted on his behalf in advancing the regime's aspirations to be the supreme defender of the true faith and the guarantor of a just global order while glorifying Russia as an eternal and boundless empire. He outlined his vision of his homeland in the draft of his unfinished treatise 'Russia and the West' (*Rossiya i Zapad*). Its very title suggested a bipolar, confrontational worldview, where Russia, as the civilisation of the East, would replace that of the West: "Westerners speaking about Russia are like the Chinese speaking

372 This refers to his publication titled 'Memoir politique', Paris 1849. For further details, see 'Публицистика Тютчева в оценке западноевропейской прессы конца 1840 – начала 1850 годов' [in:] *Литературное наследство, том 97, Федор Иванович Тютчев, книга первая*, Москва 1988, old.old.imli.ru.

about Europe or the Greeks speaking about Rome. Apparently, this is the law of history: no society will ever understand those that will replace it". He continued:

> What is Russia? What does it represent? Two things: the Slavic people and the Orthodox Empire. [...] Pan-Slavism, which has fallen into revolutionary phraseology, is a camouflage for revolution. True Pan-Slavism lies in the masses. It reveals itself when a Russian soldier meets any ordinary Slavic peasant – a Slovak, a Serb, a Bulgarian, or even a Hungarian. They all treat Germans the same way. Pan-Slavism is also the following: **for the Slavs, Russia is the sole political nationality possible**.
>
> However, the tribal question is of secondary importance – it is more of a setting than a principle. The fundamental principle is the Orthodox tradition. Russia is more Orthodox than Slavic. And it is precisely as an Orthodox power that it embodies and safeguards the Empire.
>
> What is the Empire? The Empire is immortal. It is passed down. The revolutionary school rejects this tradition just as it rejects the teachings of the Orthodox Church. It is individualism that denies history. Yet the idea of Empire has been the soul of the entire Western history – Charlemagne, Charles V, Louis XIV, Napoleon. The revolution has killed it, marking the beginning of the West's decline. The Western Empire, however, was always built through annexation and appropriation – conquests that the Papacy divided with the German emperors (hence their conflicts). Meanwhile, the legitimate Empire [of the East] remained hereditarily tied to the legacy of Constantine.
>
> [...] The Eastern Empire was passed on to Russia. As Emperor of the East, the Tsar is the Lord of Russia. "We want an Orthodox Tsar of the East", the Malorussians used to say. And so say all the Orthodox of the East, the Slavs and others. As for the Turks, they occupied the Orthodox East to protect it from Western nations until the rightful Empire could be established. The Empire is a unity. The Orthodox Church is its soul and the Slavic tribe is its body. Had Russia not become an Empire, it would never have matured. The Eastern Empire is Russia in its full and final form.[373]

In formulating his project for a union of Slavic-Orthodox states under Russian rule, Tyutchev relied on antinomies: Russia vs. the West, Orthodoxy vs. Roman Catholicism and the conservative empire vs. revolution. He addressed the first of these in his 1844 text entitled 'Russia and Germany', written in French and later incorporated into the outline of his planned treatise *Russia and the West*. By contrasting the Empire of the East with Western civilisation, he clearly perceived the 'revolutionary' threat emanating from the West. In his view,

373 See 'Незавершенный трактат <Россия и Запад>' [in:] Ф. Тютчев, *Россия и Запад*, Институт русской цивилизации, Москва 2011, rusinst.su, pp. 117–119, author's own translation.

'revolution' was a complex and multi-layered concept. For example, we know that as a censor he banned the Russian-language publication of 'The Communist Manifesto', which was circulating across Europe. He explored the theme of revolution in great depth in his article called 'Russia and revolution', leading the reader to the conclusion that Russia, owing to its unblemished Christian values, had a unique role to play as the only force capable of resisting revolution, preserving the old order and saving the decaying West from its downfall.

In the quoted passage, however, Tyutchev focused primarily on the consequences of the Spring of Nations, national awakening and the ongoing discourse on nationality in Europe. He firmly declared: "For the Slavs, Russia is the sole political nationality possible". The mental revolution unfolding in the West, which was engaged in a debate on political and state-based ethnicity, posed a clear threat to the emerging Slavic Empire of the East. This compelled Tyutchev to update the cultural memory preserved by Orthodoxy – one that emphasised Russia's inheritance and preservation of the legacy of the Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantium. In this context, he viewed the Malorussians (Ukrainians) as Slavs under special supervision who, just like the West, had to be constantly reminded of the 'Orthodox' sphere of influence and Russia's liberating mission. However, the central pillars of his imperial project were the defence of Byzantine Orthodoxy against Roman Catholicism and the formation of a broader Slavic community. Both were enduring elements of Russia's cultural identity and provided ideological justifications for territorial expansion carried out in accordance with the centuries-old project to gather the 'Russian lands'.

Tyutchev's political writings, which expressed his imperial intuitions, had little to do with reality – they were pure (counter)propaganda. At the same time, the ideas they contained were reflected in his political poetry, which amplified the informational and psychological impact through culture. In his poem 'Russian Geography' (*Russkaya geografiya*), written during the Spring of Nations (in 1848 or 1849), the poet asserted that the empire was boundless and immeasurable and that the scope of Russia's inheritance could not be defined in real-time – it was a matter of the future. This inherited territory encompassed three capitals (Rome, Constantinople and Moscow), seven inland seas and seven rivers, from the Nile to the Neva, from the Elbe to China, from the Volga to the Euphrates, the Ganges and the Danube. It was also a sacred territory which, according to the will of the Holy Spirit and the biblical prophets, would endure forever. In short, Russia had no end point, either in space or in time.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Tyutchev, hailed by the above-quoted commentators on Russian state television as the father of counterpropaganda and influence operations, is also regarded by contemporary admirers of his poetry and political writings as a precursor of national geopolitics, an ideologue

and a distinguished philosopher of history.[374] He extolled the 'holy empire', even if it was the empire of a fevered imagination.

5. Case study: Russia's struggle with the West (viewed through the lens of Tyutchev)

It is widely believed that Russians' attitude towards the West reflects their concerns about preserving their own identity should they become part of globalisation processes. For centuries, the image of the West, perceived as the embodiment of the 'other', has inevitably been burdened by mythological and confrontational thinking. This remains the case today. As Marian Broda observed:

> The West is not only a symbol, an image, or a code for denoting the 'Other' – in the mutual relationship with this symbol, deep-seated, latent traumas resurface. These often contain an underlying sense of internal dependence which is concealed and suppressed through self-suggestion by emphasising and justifying Russia's self-sufficiency, superiority, uniqueness, exceptionalism, forward-looking nature and universality. In their perception of the West, they [the Russians] readily identify flaws that make it appear to be trapped in petrification, a 'senile' twilight, fragmentation and decay, unable to break free from these confines on its own; as a result, it needs a Russian mission: one of unification, guidance and salvation.[375]

While from Russia's perspective the West needs it and its mission, Western thinking about Russia has always retained a sense of distance. Consequently, Western attitudes towards Russia have typically oscillated between a rationalised coolness and emotional fascination with the 'Eastern folklore'. Russia has perceived this either as a lesson highlighting its inferiority and civilisational immaturity, a rejection of partnership, or a slap in the face, a lack of due interest. Each of these responses has reinforced stereotypes about the 'other' and Russia itself. Given their social, cognitive and emotional functions, historically shaped stereotypes tend to reproduce themselves. They are not built on facts but rather on negative emotions rooted in prejudice. Embedded in the image of the adversary, they appear to be merely a response to the pressure from the 'other'. Needless to say, stereotypes, such as that of the Russophobe, serve as highly effective tools for conducting long-term information-psychological operations.

374 For example, see В. Цымбурский, 'Тютчев как геополитик', *Общественные науки и современность* 1995, no. 6, at: ruthenia.ru; В. Кожинов, 'Пророк в своем отечестве' ('Фёдор Тютчев. Россия. Век XIX'), Москва 2001; О. Соловьева, 'Историко-философские взгляды Ф.И. Тютчева', *Вестник МГУ* 1999, no. 4 (Сер. 8, История).

375 M. Broda, *Zrozumieć Rosję? O rosyjskiej zagadce-tajemnicy*, Łódź 2011, p. 324, at: dspace.uni.lodz.pl.

The current tendency to cast Tyutchev as an authoritative witness to the eternal conflict between Russia and the West is understandable. He was a Slavophile and the Slavophile picture of Russia was constructed in opposition to the pro-Western image of Europe. In contrast to the 'bad', 'Europeanised' Westernisers, the advocates of this vision argued that Russian culture was primordial and grew out of its national and religious roots. "To prove this, Slavophile writers had to build a Russian historiography that is one grand fabrication. It boils down to portraying the past as a development of harmony. This stands in contrast to Europe, whose history, equally fabricated, appears as a chain of disasters".[376] Most importantly, however, the Slavophiles suggested to both their own society and the outside world that Russia eluded any form of Western-style criticism or rational analysis as it was ineffable. Tyutchev expressed this idea in his immortal quatrain:

> You cannot understand Russia with reason,
> Or measure her by any common standard.
> She stands alone and unique –
> In Russia, you can only believe.[377]

The renewed interest in Tyutchev bears all the hallmarks of politicisation and clear top-down orchestration. I will illustrate this with an example of a broader information and propaganda operation that draws on his ideas. Spin doctors have instrumentalised his legacy in a selective and manipulative manner. The utopian vision of empire that emerges from his works is, of course, far removed from reality, but, as I mentioned earlier, propaganda does not strive for consistency; it focuses on symbols and stereotypes that become tools. Thus, efforts to popularise Tyutchev's work continue unabated. His legacy is presented and interpreted by dedicated websites[378] as well as official, Orthodox and nationalist platforms.

This is how the boundaries of social acceptance for the state's expansionist policy are gradually widened. Anti-Western campaigns in response to the condemnation of the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 were built on Tyutchev's concept of Russophobia.[379] The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 gave fresh impetus to interest in the poet. A kind of prelude to the current information battle, rooted in themes from Tyutchev's poetry and political writings, came in a speech by Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on 15 February 2022.[380] Commenting on reports in the Western press about Russia's preparations

376 See A. Besançon, 'Edukacja religijna Rosji', *Znak* 1981, no. 9(327), p. 1212; *idem*, *Święta Ruś*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 75–76.
377 The epigram in Radosław Alf's translation.
378 See, for example: 'Тютчевиана. Сайт рабочей группы по изучению творчества Тютчева', ruthenia.ru; 'Федор Тютчев', tutchev.lit-info.ru; ftutchev.ru.
379 J. Darczewska, P. Żochowski, *Russophobia in the Kremlin's strategy…*, *op. cit.*
380 The foreign ministry began showing interest in Tyutchev years ago: in 2017, he was used to bolster the image of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. The media widely reported that Putin had presented Lavrov with a volume of Tyutchev's

for an occupation of Ukraine, she falsely dismissed them as disinformation and quoted a poem about "winter which is angry for a reason". She also added that "Tyutchev devoted much attention to neutralising 'fakes' (though at the time they were called slander, defamation and lies) about our country". As an example, she cited the aforementioned book *Russia in 1839*, which Tyutchev described as "a testament to intellectual shamelessness and moral decay". To drive the point home, she declared: "Centuries pass, but the attitude toward Russia does not change".[381] Zakharova invoked Tyutchev once again after the invasion had begun. In a Telegram post on 26 February 2022, she addressed Internet users, who were likely concerned Russia's image abroad would deteriorate further, sharing a passage from his 1867 poem titled 'Naprasny trud' (Futile effort), in which the poet reminded his compatriots that "they will never earn the recognition of Europeans". She then added: "These words are more relevant than ever. History repeats itself. Sometimes I hear: why dwell on the past, we should look to the future! The thing is, without knowledge of history, instead of moving forward, we will be going in circles".[382] In both instances, she suggested that the inevitable assault on Ukraine was part of Russia's eternal conflict with the West and its struggle against global Russophobia.

Since March 2022, we have witnessed a 'full-scale' media operation based on Tyutchev's themes – a textbook example of Russian disinformation campaigns involving politicians, diplomats, journalists and the analytical, expert and academic communities. It began online and continues to unfold there, occasionally spilling over from the virtual world into the real world. This relatively simple information campaign was built around a single quote. On 12 March, RT's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan posted the following excerpt from the poet's 1854 letter to his wife on her Telegram account. Like all those who cite Tyutchev, she emphasised its relevance:

> It had long been clear that the furious hatred against Russia, fuelled year after year in the West, would one day break free of its chains. And that moment has arrived. The entire West has decided to express its negation of Russia and block its path to the future. Quite simply, Russia has been offered suicide, a renunciation of the very foundations of its existence, a solemn declaration that it is a savage and senseless phenomenon, like an evil that must be corrected.

The signal sent abroad by Russia's chief propagandist did not go unnoticed: the very next day, the quoted passage appeared in the news broadcast on

poetry, published in 1913, as a birthday gift. Reporting on this 'symbolic' gesture, TV Zvezda explained that "Tyutchev himself worked in the diplomatic service and Sergey Lavrov, like his distinguished predecessor, also writes poems". See 'Путин подарил Лаврову раритетный сборник стихов Тютчева', Телеканал «Звезда», 22 March 2017, tvzvezda.ru.

381 Н. Анисимова, 'Захарова ответила на заявления о «вторжении на Украину» стихами Тютчева', РБК, 15 February 2022, rbc.ru.

382 'Мария Захарова', 26 February 2022, Telegram, t.me.

Channel One. It was accompanied by a commentary suggesting that the West, in its hatred of Russia, does not shy away from using force:

> Anyone who still thinks that Western Russophobia is a new phenomenon is mistaken. Our great poet Fyodor Tyutchev, who was also an outstanding diplomat, wrote these words on the eve of the Crimean War. At that time, our country was attacked not only in the Black Sea but also in the White Sea, the Baltic and Kamchatka. These words are 170 years old, yet how powerfully they resonate today![383]

Then matters gathered pace. That same day, the excerpt appeared in the same form on the website of the Russian Embassy in Argentina. On 15 March, it was cited in a speech by Russia's representative to UNESCO, Tatyana Dovgalenko. Soon, the quote spread rapidly across social media, especially after Dmitry Medvedev, former president and prime minister who is currently deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, posted it on Telegram on 17 March. He added that "the anti-Russian hysteria we are witnessing today is nothing new. It occurred in both the 19th and 20th centuries".

To dispel any doubts among the audience and capture their attention, an anonymous expert from the provereno.media website traced the quoted passage to *Tyutchev*, a book by Vadim Kozhinov that was first published in 1988 and reissued in 2009.[384] He determined that it originated from a biography of the poet written by his son-in-law, Ivan Aksakov, who cited a letter Tyutchev had written in French to his wife while she was undergoing medical treatment in Germany.[385] The unidentified researcher confirmed the letter's authenticity but noted certain "abridgements that did not alter its substantive content". However, a comparison of the full quote with the excerpt cited above demonstrates once again that contemporary counter-propaganda eagerly avoids content that is unfavourable from the perspective of its executors. In this case, the redacted section contained an unflattering depiction of Russia featuring animal imagery, comparing it to a chained dog: irrational, savage, driven by instinct and lacking self-control:

> **That thing which in official language was called Russia, no matter what it did to avert its fate – wagged its tail, bargained, hid its flag, renounced itself – nothing helped.** And then came the day when a clearer proof of its moderation was demanded. Quite simply, Russia was offered suicide.[386]

383 'Почти 170 лет назад русский поэт Федор Тютчев написал о ненависти Запада к России и русским', Первый канал, 13 March 2022, 1tv.ru, author's own translation.

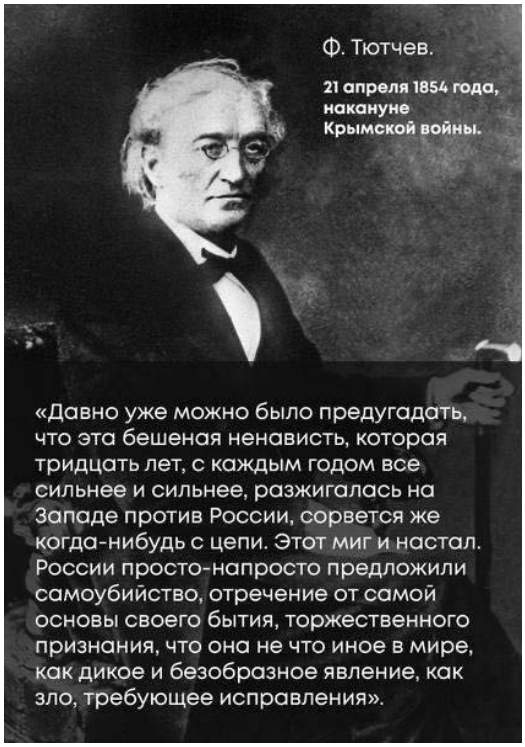
384 В. Кожинов, *Тютчев*, Москва 2009; cited from the online edition, no page numbers, at: ftutchev.ru. The quote is taken from chapter 11: 'In the service of Russia'.

385 See И. Аксаков, 'Федор Иванович Тютчев', Москва 1874, at: viewer.rsl.ru. The digital edition does not include page numbers; the letter appears in columns 307–310.

386 Full version of the original quote (differences indicated in bold): "Давно уже можно было предугадывать, что эта бешеная ненависть – **словно ненависть пса к привязи, – ненависть**, которая **тридцать лет**, с каждым годом

For months, the popular news and entertainment social media platform Pikabu actively supported the campaign to demonise the West, frequently engaging in crude propaganda efforts. The site is filled with themed memes and posts conveying the unequivocal message that the West seeks to destroy Russia, dismantle its statehood and strip it of its sovereignty. Among them is a widely shared image featuring Tyutchev's likeness alongside the quote used in this campaign.

ILLUSTRATION. An online meme featuring a quote from Tyutchev



Source: '*Слова Тютчева актуальны и сегодня*', TangoVpampasah, pikabu.ru.

More than a year later, Lavrov 'revived' this quote while launching a new cultural and educational project entitled 'Literary Salon: Ambassadors of Russian Culture' (*Literaturnaya gostinaya: posly russkoy kultury*). The initiative is carried out by the V. Dal State Museum of the History of Russian Literature

всё сильнее и сильнее, разжигалась на Западе против России, сорвётся же когда-нибудь с цепи. Этот миг и настал. **То, что на официальном языке называлось Россией – чего уже оно ни делало, чтоб отвратить роковую судьбу: и виляло, и торговалось, и прятало знамя, и отрицало даже самоё себя, – ничто не помогло. Пришёл-таки день, когда от неё потребовали ещё более яркого доказательства её умеренности**, просто-напросто предложили самоубийство, отречение от самой основы своего бытия, торжественного признания, что она не что иное в мире, как дикое и безобразное явление, как зло, требующее исправления".

and the Main Directorate for Servicing the Diplomatic Corps under Russia's Foreign Ministry. The first event in the series, held on 27 September 2023, was indeed dedicated to.[387]

Lavrov engaged in a revealing act of manipulation. The excerpt that began with the words "It had long been clear that the furious hatred against Russia, fuelled year after year in the West, would one day break free of its chains" ended with the phrase: **"Let us not deceive ourselves. Russia will, in all likelihood, choose to confront all of Europe"**. The passage, which originally conveyed bitterness over the West's 'ingratitude' and its treatment of Russia as an 'entity' inferior to itself, was altered in tone – disappointment was replaced with a threat. The message is unmistakable: Moscow has lost patience and intends to take revenge on Europe.

In this case, the disinformation involved merging two separate quotes: the beginning of the text comes from the poet's letter to his wife dated 21 April 1854, while the ending is taken from another letter to her, written on 24 February of the same year. Why did Lavrov combine them? To modernise the message, link it to the occupation of Ukraine, to highlight the gravity of the situation and to conclude:

> That is why everything we are doing today, what our president, army, society and state are doing – all of this is aimed at ensuring that the intentions [Tyutchev] wrote about nearly two hundred years ago never materialise. The memory of him is one of those symbols that compel us to always defend our truth.[388]

At the same time, the minister resorted to the familiar 'war scare tactic', reinforcing the official propaganda line that the 'special military operation' in Ukraine was also a means of preventing the outbreak of World War III. The *Izvestia* newspaper[389] highlighted this excerpt in the title of its article and recalled that just a few days earlier, during the 78th plenary session of the UN General Assembly on 23 September 2023, Lavrov had also spoken of the "gravity of the current situation". He accused the West of bringing about the "disintegration of the Ukrainian state" and argued that the world now had to focus on preventing a global war.

387 *Вступительное слово Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова на церемонии открытия «Литературной гостиной. Послы русской культуры», посвященной жизни и творчеству Ф.И.Тютчева, Москва, 27 сентября 2023 года*, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, www.mid.ru; 'Министр иностранных дел Российской Федерации Сергей Викторович Лавров открыл цикл литературно-музыкальных вечеров «Литературная гостиная: послы русской культуры»', The Main Administration for Service to the Diplomatic Corps under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 28 September 2023, updk.ru.

388 'Лавров процитировал слова Тютчева о схватке России и Запада', ТАСС, 27 September 2023, tass.ru; '*«Россия вступит в схватку с целой Европой». Лавров процитировал Тютчева и пообещал, что «такой позор не повторится»*', Фонтанка.Ру, 27 September 2023, fontanka.ru.

389 'Лавров процитировал слова Тютчева о схватке России и Запада', Известия, 27 September 2023, iz.ru.

Mikhail Shvydkoy, former minister of culture and currently the President's Special Representative on International Cultural Cooperation, supported the foreign minister. He pointed out that Tyutchev was among the first Russian diplomats to express concern about the country's unfavourable image in Europe. To address this, Tyutchev decided to present von Benckendorff with his "vision for influencing European public opinion, which was met with approval from both the head of the Third Section and Nicholas I himself". Tyutchev's articles in European newspapers not only provoked keen interest but also fear in the Old World, Shvydkoy stated. "In any case, they did not go unnoticed and even opened a new career path for him in state service". He also referred to the discussed quote, stating that the minister simply could not have ignored it: "After 170 years, the historical parallels have turned out to be identical".[390]

This is actually a valid point. The poet's bitterness stemmed from a misjudgment of the situation. Nicholas I and his secret advisers still expected Europe to be grateful for 'liberating it from Napoleon', a victory sealed by the 'Holy Alliance' of great powers. In 1853, after unsuccessful attempts to persuade Britain to partition the Ottoman Empire, Russian troops entered the Danubian Principalities. The goal was to pressure Constantinople into accepting 'Russian protection' over all the Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire. During the Crimean War (1853–56), the West did not 'block Russia's path to the future', but prevented its expansion into the Balkans and the Middle East. It formed a coalition with a weak Ottoman Empire, which, as Tyutchev put it, resulted in a "humiliating disaster" for the Russian Empire. Under the terms of the Treaty of Paris, it withdrew from Sevastopol and lost the Danube Delta and part of Bessarabia to the Ottoman Empire; in addition, the Orthodox population would now be protected by all the major powers. Navigation on the Danube was internationalised and the Black Sea was declared neutral, meaning that Russia lost the right to maintain a naval fleet in those waters or fortifications along the coastline. Therefore, the treaty significantly diminished Russia's international standing, reversing the gains it had secured at the Congress of Vienna.

The Crimean War weakened the regime's authority and undermined its foundations. Historians attribute Russia's defeat to the superior equipment of the Western armies allied with the Ottoman Empire and to internal factors, including widespread corruption and theft within the civil and military administration, the lack of tactical skills among commanders and the poor training of troops, which led to heavy losses.[391] For Tyutchev, who was striving to shield the image of a powerful and invincible empire through ideology and propaganda,

390 М. Швыдкой, 'Россия и Европа на протяжении тысячелетия вглядываются друг в друга', Российская газета, 3 October 2023, rg.ru.

391 A. Chwalba, *Historia powszechna. Wiek XIX*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 337–339.

this must have been a profound humiliation. More importantly, however, the Crimean War exposed Russia's expansionist nature and laid bare to both the world and its own society that the Tsarist regime was not as powerful as many had believed.

The Russians aggression that triggered the Crimean War sparked outrage among Western public opinion. After the defeat, Tyutchev, a respected expert on Western affairs, became an adviser to the new foreign minister, Prince Alexander Gorchakov, under the next tsar, Alexander II. However, he never abandoned his anti-Western stance. In a direct exchange with the minister, he wrote bluntly:

> There can be no alliance between Russia and the West, either on the basis of interests or principles. We Russians must always remember that the principles on which Russia and Europe are founded are so diametrically opposed, so mutually exclusive, that the existence of one is possible only at the expense of the other's demise. It follows that Russia's only viable policy towards the Western powers is not to ally with one or another, but to divide them. Only when they are divided do they cease to be hostile towards Russia – out of sheer helplessness.

This quote comes from a memo to Gorchakov dated 26 June 1864, as cited by Kozhinov.[392] He began studying Tyutchev's legacy in the 1970s and viewed him primarily as a diplomat who loyally served the state. In his assessment, Tyutchev "placed the interests of Russia as a state above those of the government and the tsar and sought to alter the course of Russia's foreign policy so that it would benefit the Russian people". Tyutchev played an active role in crafting a foreign policy concept aimed at neutralising the effects of the 'Crimean disaster' by overturning the provisions of the Treaty of Paris, particularly the clause on the neutral status of Sevastopol and the Black Sea. This strategy sought to exploit the differences between the Western powers in their approach to Russia, an effort that would be pursued "not by military means, but through diplomacy". This overarching approach, now also referred to as the 'Gorchakov Doctrine', continues to shape the of contemporary Russia, which positions itself as a Eurasian empire.

Tyutchev took various steps to reinforce these principles. In mid-1866, when the idea of convening a pan-European congress in Russia emerged within court circles, he bypassed official channels and sent a letter directly to Alexander II, urging him to "stop the organisers before it is too late". He argued that the outcome of a gathering of this kind was entirely predictable: "Russia will become the scapegoat, blamed for all of Europe's difficulties". He warned that

392 В. Кожинов, 'Пророк в своем отечестве…', *op. cit.*, p. 248; see also 'Цитаты известных личностей', ru.citaty.net. The same quote appears in Kozhinov's book *Тютчев*, chapter 11, 'In the service of Russia', *op. cit.*

the congress would be even more disastrous than the defeat in the Crimean War, as it would cement that humiliation in the Western consciousness and lead to "the renunciation of our entire past and our entire future". Ultimately, the congress never took place, which may reflect the effectiveness of Russia's expert circles at the time. It also indicates that von Benckendorff's 'general line', which envisioned a bright future for Russia rooted in its glorious past, aligned well with Soviet historiography and culture, and retains its relevance and vitality to this day. This largely stems from an accurate understanding of the preferences of a predominantly poor society, which is highly susceptible to populist arguments.

Of course, Tyutchev had a thorough grasp of imperial politics and social life, which he compared to the Western models he had encountered during his diplomatic service abroad. His vision of the empire was, in a sense, a utopian vision of Russia's future, a proposed historical and political ideal that stood in stark contrast to the actual events of his time. It is no coincidence, then, that Slavophilism and Pan-Slavism, the dominant ideological currents under Nicholas I and Alexander II, focused on justifying the superiority of Russia's system of government, its Orthodoxy (untainted by foreign values) and the Russian people, who were portrayed as standing above the other Slavic nations. Furthermore, these currents emphasised Russia's distinctiveness and the uniqueness of its geography, history and civilisational mission while arguing that the mechanical adoption of European values would spell disaster for the country.

Similar themes can be found in all the ideological concepts of that era, both earlier and later ones. And it is hardly surprising that similar conditions tend to produce similar reactions. Just as 'Polonophilia' following the November 1830 and January 1863 Uprisings triggered intense information campaigns in Russia that accused the West of Russophobia, so too did 'Ukrainophilia' after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Moscow has not abandoned its utopian projects, such as the 'Russian world' and does not recognise any link between the sanctions imposed on Russia and the 'situation on the Ukrainian battlefronts'; instead, it sees only Western obstacles on the path to its 'bright future'.

In the war against the 'Western aggressor', the cultural front has long-standing traditions and a firmly established position. Tyutchev's poetry and thought were instrumentalised during the Soviet era and continue to be actively employed today. There is no shortage of opportunities for this. Since 1996, the All-Russian F.I. Tyutchev Prize 'The Russian Path' (*Russky put*), has been awarded for artistic achievements in literature, journalism, music and the fine arts.[393] It is

393 'Всероссийская литературная премия им. Ф.И. Тютчева «Русский путь»', Брянский край, libryansk.ru.

presented in Bryansk, the native region of the poet, who was born in the village of Ovstug in Bryansk Oblast. It is only natural that Bryansk Oblast responds actively to the central government's initiatives related to him.[394] Events marking the anniversaries of his birth and death (5 December 1803 – 27 July 1873) receive a 'lively response' from cultural departments across Russia. In 2023, on the 220th anniversary of his birth, a large number of these institutions marked the occasion with exhibitions or, at the very least (such as Chukotka) with commemorative articles.[395] Naturally, the largest celebrations in honour of the poet took place in Moscow and St Petersburg. Their central themes were 'poetry and service' (the title of an exhibition at the Moscow Museum of Literature[396]) and 'the resonance of the Russian word'.[397] The latter served as the guiding idea for a joint project between Channel One and the Ministry of Culture called 'The word of the classic', which features politicians reciting poetry and prose. It was launched in January 2023 by Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, who read excerpts from Tyutchev's correspondence with the editor of *Vseobshchaya Gazeta* (Universal Gazette), Gustav Kolb, in which the poet reflected on the sources of Russia's successes and conquests.[398] The first episode in the series opened with his words: "For many centuries, the European West naively believed that there was and could be no other Europe beyond itself".

The literary monthly *Novy Mir*, published since 1925, held an essay competition dedicated to the poet's work. A total of 98 submissions were received and the winning entries were published in the December 2023 issue.[399] To conclude the Year of Tyutchev, Moscow hosted 'Tyutchev Week'[400] which featured poetry evenings, concerts, literary competitions and tours. The city's libraries commissioned a new design for their membership cards featuring the poet's image.

Individual initiatives have also emerged as part of anti-Western propaganda. For example, a certain Viktor collects Tyutchev's quotes from the time of the Crimean War on his blog hosted by the Seven Arts socio-cultural magazine.[401] In 2022, a mural was created in Lyubertsy, near Moscow, featuring one of

394 'Научно-практическая конференция «Тютчев и тютчеведение в начале третьего тысячелетия»', Культура.РФ, culture.ru.

395 'Поэт. Гражданин. Мыслитель', БезФормата, pevek.bezformata.com.

396 Н. Соколова, 'В Москве откроется выставка, посвященная Пушкину, Тютчеву и Аксакову', Российская газета, 21 September 2023, rg.ru.

397 'Выставка «Как слово наше отзовется...» к 220-летию со дня рождения Ф.И.Тютчева', Государственный музей А.С. Пушкина, pushkinmuseum.ru.

398 'Медведев процитировал Тютчева, рассуждая, как Россия достигла успехов', РИА Новости, 30 January 2023, ria.ru.

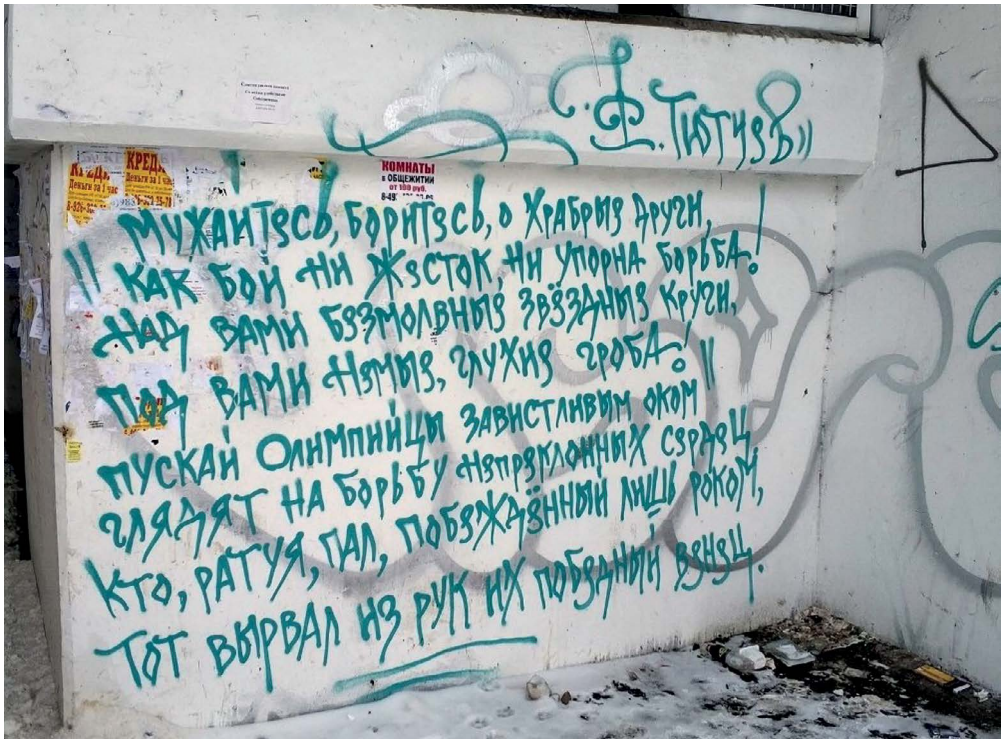
399 'Конкурс эссе к 220-летию Федора Тютчева', Новый мир, September 2023, new.nm1925.ru. The initiative was publicised by institutions such as the Gorky Literary Institute: 'Конкурс эссе к 220-летию Федора Тютчева', litinstitut.ru.

400 'В Москве пройдет Неделя Тютчева', Известия, 25 November 2023, iz.ru; Е. Малкова, 'К 220-летию Федора Тютчева в столице подготовили культурные площадки', Агентство официальных новостей, 25 November 2023, msk.dixinews.ru.

401 'Высказывания Фёдора Тютчева до начала и после Крымской войны', Блог Виктора (Бруклайн), 16 February 2023, blogs.7iskusstv.com.

Tyutchev's poems which offers metaphysical justification for the need to make sacrifices in a just war between 'good and evil'.

PHOTO 3. The mural in Lyubertsy featuring Tyutchev's poem *Two voices* (1850)



Source: 'Федор Тютчев: истории из жизни, советы, новости, юмор и картинки – Горячее', pikabu.ru.

The Pikabu website sustained interest in Tyutchev throughout 2023, repeatedly sharing earlier memes featuring his aphorisms and excerpts from his works. The platform has amassed a vast collection of diverse materials, including audio and video content. They include songs and romances set to his poetry, performed by renowned Soviet artists such as Elena Obraztsova and Ivan Kozlovsky as well as contemporary performers. The site also contains a textbook example of Soviet propaganda: a 1975 documentary in which Tyutchev's great-grandson and biographer, Kirill Pigaryov, presented the poet's legacy within the cultural context of the time. He claimed that Vladimir Lenin recognised the "monumental propaganda value" of Tyutchev's writings, was fascinated by him and even kept the poet's portrait in his office. As a side note, it was not until after the fall of the Russian Empire that this ardent supporter of the Tsarist regime attracted wider interest among readers and researchers, leading to numerous reprints and new

editions of his poetry and political writings. There is a certain paradox in this: the ideologues of the 'great' and 'bloodless' October Revolution instrumentalised the work of this staunch conservative and opponent of revolutionary change. Tyutchev also proved useful in promoting the Soviet Union's new political course after it abandoned the idea of a global proletarian revolution in favour of building a Soviet empire. Under the banner of the USSR, Russia was elevated to the role of a distinct political model. The rehabilitation of the past inevitably led to the rehabilitation of imperial Russia itself. The historical-cultural standard outlined in this chapter has helped to normalise both the contemporary version of the empire and the continuity of the imperial idea.

Returning to Pikabu, its most frequently shared content was the previously discussed quote, both in its original and manipulated versions. It also garnered the most likes: 16,180 as of 1 December 2023. By comparison, a romance performed by Obraztsova, set to Tyutchev's lyrics and music by Sergei Rachmaninoff, received only eight likes. Tyutchev's well-known epigram about Russia was another widely circulated piece.

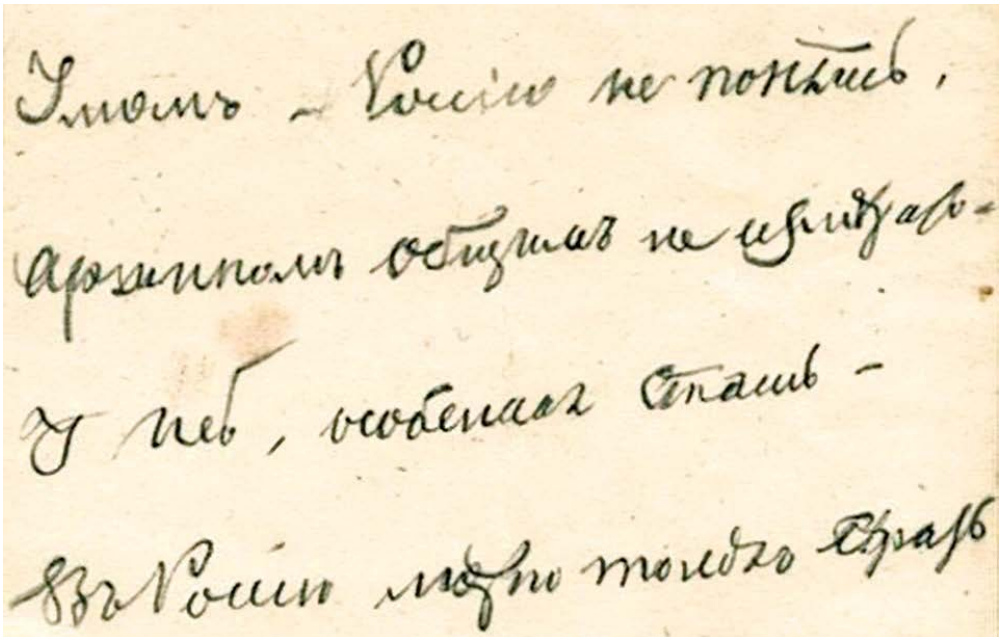
The famous line 'You cannot understand Russia with reason' has been repeated millions of times over the past year. However, Anatoly Stepanov, editor-in-chief of the nationalist-Orthodox agency Russkaya Narodnaya Liniya (Russian National Line), feels a sense of dissatisfaction, as there is still no monument to Tyutchev in St. Petersburg, even though "the poet is mystically connected to St. Petersburg". He believes that even the poet's thoughts expressed in prose sound like poetry. He describes Tyutchev's words "In Europe, there are only two forces: Revolution and Russia" as "a real prophecy that has come true before our eyes: it is Russia that has stood against the latest global homosexual-gender revolution, the apocalyptic revolution".[402]

Despite the laments of Stepanov and other 'turbo-patriots', Russian propagandists are not sitting idle. The Year of Tyutchev, at least in St. Petersburg, has been extended by another 12 months. From 20 December 2023 to 31 December 2024, the Hermitage is hosting a grand exhibition called 'Diplomat, poet and censor: on the 200th anniversary of Fyodor Tyutchev's birth'.[403] Meanwhile, Moscow is set to unveil a new monument to propaganda – the Tyutchevskaya metro station, which was originally scheduled to open in 2023.

402 А. Степанов, 'Тютчев мистически связан с Петербургом', Русская народная линия, 28 July 2023, ruskline.ru.

403 'Выставка «Дипломат, поэт и цензор: к 200-летию со дня рождения Федора Тютчева»', Афиша, kp.ru. As a side note, the exhibition actually marked the 220th anniversary of Tyutchev's birth – the poet was born in 1803.

PHOTO 4. Autograph of the epigram 'You cannot understand Russia with reason'



Source: 'Федор Тютчев: истории из жизни, советы, новости, юмор и картинки – Горячее', pikabu.ru.

6. Summary: imperial themes in Russian culture

As I have already mentioned, Tyutchev's imperial vision of Russia's future, the 'Great Empire of the East', provided justification for the alleged superiority of its system of government, its Orthodoxy untainted by foreign values, and the Russian people, seen as rising above the other Slavic nations. It argued that the liberation and unification of these nations could only be achieved under Russia's patronage, based on its language and culture. This vision serves as a convenient counterpoint, highlighting Russia's eternal struggle against both its immediate and more distant surroundings. By emphasising Russia's distinctiveness and the uniqueness of its geography, history and civilisational mission, Tyutchev argued that adopting the values of the "decadent West" would lead to self-destruction.

Even today, Tyutchev 'bears witness' to this perennial antagonism, as his work fits perfectly into the contemporary political discourse about the West. His arguments, which align with the Kremlin's narrative, reveal the imperial payload of Russia's information and propaganda 'weaponry'. His poetry and political writings are a treasure trove of aphorisms and powerful metaphors, or culturemes, which are easily deployed in this struggle, such as 'Russophobia',

'the rotten West', 'the Judas of Slavdom', 'the Tsar-Liberator' and 'the post-Sevastopol thaw'. Culturemes serve a specific purpose: they uplift the Russian 'soul', stir emotions (both positive and negative) and provide explanations both for the supposed failures of adversaries and Russia's own victories. They also have the invaluable quality that, whether in spoken or written form, they are easy to replicate and disseminate from official platforms or across social media. On the organisational level, they make it possible to expand the battlefield to new arenas: the diplomatic, cultural, historical and academic. As a result, this struggle unfolds across multiple 'hybrid' battlefronts.

It is self-evident that the cultural factor makes it easier to win allies, enhance the state's prestige and expand its influence. However, Russia has a distinct understanding of culture: it helps to achieve its political objectives through confrontation with other cultures (such as American culture) or through their marginalisation and appropriation, as in the case of Russia's ethnic minorities and neighbouring nations – the Ukrainians and Belarusians. As a key component of Russia's strategic culture, it does not operate independently of the goals of imperial policy. For this reason alone, it functions under the strict control of the security services. This was the case during the Tsarist era and the Soviet empire, and it remains so today.

A long-term analytical perspective on Russia's strategic culture also suggests that its roots run deep and its capital has been accumulated over centuries. As a result, themes from past conflicts, both from the Cold War and earlier wars, reappear on the modern battlefield of information warfare. They return like a boomerang, gaining sharper edges and new meanings. The cultural and civilisational contexts highlight the parallels between historical and present-day experiences, helping to refine the definition of Russia's strategic culture. In times of crisis, its crucial component comes into focus: the figure of the Other – a fierce enemy of the empire, a staunch Russophobe. In the case of Ukraine, this means a failed state, a bastard offspring of the Belovezha Accords that dissolved the Soviet Union, which plays no meaningful role on an international stage that Russia seeks to shape according to its own design. In contrast to the Other, Russia projects an image of itself as a global player, a great power that pursues its eternal mission to impose a just order and bring structure to a chaotic world.

The final word

White is black, war is peace, evil is good...

On 8 March 1983, Ronald Reagan delivered his famous speech signalling Washington's new approach to the USSR, calling it the "evil empire". The détente policy pursued by previous US presidents had yielded no tangible results. In the 1960s and 1970s, Soviet intelligence services, the KGB and the GRU, intensified their efforts aimed at destabilising Western societies. They organised and supported a variety of protest and pacifist movements, demonstrations against the Vietnam War and campaigns for nuclear disarmament. Through diverse means, they sowed confusion among Western populations and strove to discredit the governments and the militarism of the United States and NATO. Reagan was aware that making concessions to the Soviet Union and treating it as a partner playing by the same rules was a misleading approach. In announcing a turning point in relations with this country, he relied on the archetypal narrative of a struggle between good and evil, truth and falsehood. The metaphor resonated strongly: for over a decade, fans of 'Star Wars' had been awaiting the final triumph of 'good over evil'.

The narrative constructed by Reagan, his promotion of human rights, the imposed embargoes and the announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which forced the USSR into an arms race in space which it could not sustain, enabled the United States to seize the initiative in the East-West rivalry. The inter-bloc conflict was increasingly seen through the lens of contrasting visions of the social and political order shaped by cultural foundations – a clash over values. The West's counteroffensive, employing a broad range of diplomatic, ideological and economic tools, contributed greatly to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ultimately, it was dismantled from within by the peoples of its constituent republics who, during the 1980s, entered a period of intense awakening and a search for their own identity.

The collapse of the USSR was a traumatic experience for its ruling elite, a generation now mostly in their sixties and seventies; Putin has even described it as a "catastrophe". In the West, this landmark event was seen as marking the end of the dichotomous division of the world. Russian strategists, for their part, assumed that their country's weakness was temporary and developed a narrative centred on national revival and Russia's unmatched 'civilisational weapon'. What was then seen in the West as fashionable soft power,[404] Russia perceived in terms of warfare.

A reversed version of the same archetype, the struggle between good and evil, gradually became the core of Russia's communication strategy. This approach has been, and still is, described in various ways: as an information war, propaganda war, psychological warfare, narrative warfare, proxy war, a subliminal conflict, hybrid warfare, cognitive war, a civilisational struggle, mental warfare, etc. Its objective, like that of any war, is to undermine the political, economic and social system of the targeted state and to compel its government and population to adopt behaviours and make decisions aligned with the attacker's interests. Regardless of the differing definitional criteria used in discourse on this subject, Russia's methods of conducting informational confrontation have remained unchanged for centuries. They are rooted in psychological mechanisms that accentuate the mental distinctions between the people of East and West and exploit political, social and cultural differences framed in antagonistic terms. A mass influence on audiences is achieved by imprinting pre-constructed images of the world and current events into their minds and emotions, along with predetermined interpretations, meanings and narratives, so that the adversary's way of thinking may be reshaped. Hence the efforts to control not only the media and publishing, but, most importantly, the process of training the warriors of information warfare, the patriotic education of citizens and the nation's cultural and artistic life. Information and subversive attacks aimed at seizing control over human minds continue unabated: Russia's operational machinery is built for the long run and functions continuously, repeatedly employing tried and tested methods. Only the tools of influence change, as they are adapted to the evolving technological landscape.

These mechanisms underpin the dominant thesis in Russia's narrative: that 'the world cannot be American' and that the emerging global order must

404 The concept of soft power, introduced into international relations in the 1990s, is attributed to Joseph Nye of Harvard University. It is defined as "a nation's or state's ability to attract allies and gain influence through the appeal of its culture, policies and political ideals". While hard power relies on coercion and various forms of pressure (political, economic or military), soft power is rooted in consolidation, unity and attractiveness.

be multipolar, because Russia, whether imperial or Soviet, as a major pole of power, has always belonged to the narrow group of actors shaping the course of world affairs. This perspective contributed to the consolidation of its political system and a conservative turn in both domestic and foreign policy. Andrei Kozyrev, who emphasised the West's role as a guarantor of Russia's security, was dismissed. Official propaganda portrayed his views as an infatuation with the supposed 'achievements' of American culture – hamburgers and Coca-Cola. His successor Yevgeny Primakov, who had previously served as the first director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, quickly reasserted Russia's distance from the 'Anglo-Saxon world'. He officially challenged the idea of Pax Americana by amplifying Russian criticism of the NATO interventions in 1995 following the massacre in Sarajevo committed by Serbian forces, and as part of the alliance's crisis-response operation in Kosovo in 1999.

The ideological framing for this shift in Russia's foreign policy was provided by Eurasianism and the nationalist concepts of 'Greater Eurasia' and 'Greater Russia'. Igor Panarin and Aleksandr Dugin emerged as key voices advancing geopolitical doctrines that framed confrontation with the West as inevitable. They argued that the heart of Eurasia – the Russian civilisation – represented a distinct world from the Western one, which was portrayed as individualistic, consumerist, degenerate and ruled by godless Atlanticists intent on forcibly remoulding Russian people in their own liberal image and destroying their traditional values. Eurasianism laid the groundwork for legitimising Russia's neo-imperial international policy through the concept of the 'Russian world'.

It is important to note that, from its very beginnings, imperial ideology has been rooted in a specific vision of the present and a projection of the desired future – Moscow as the Third Rome, Pan-Slavism, communism, etc. The concept of the Russian world was originally constructed around a civilisational mission attributed to the Russian nation, understood as a linguistic, ethnic and cultural community encompassing Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, bound together by the values of Orthodox Christianity. Over time, this idea was broadened: for communities outside the Orthodox sphere, the unifying elements included knowledge of the Russian language and the recognition of Russia as a key political and economic partner and an attractive socio-cultural model. As a strategic idea, it imposes a worldview shaped by the eternal rivalry between Russia and the West, which is accused of pushing Russia to the margins of international politics. Furthermore, it serves to justify the Kremlin's neo-imperial expansionism: today, it is a tool for legitimising Russia's seizure of Ukrainian territory.

The universalist claims underlying the state's communication strategy were also directed at Russian citizens in an effort to immunise them against

Western influence and to 'prevent self-annihilation'. This made it necessary to train a new generation of agitators and propagandists. The "formation of sound-minded individuals, capable of resisting the expansion of foreign structures and cultures was one of the key objectives of the information policy, since this expansion leads to an informational devastation of consciousness – in other words, the mental genocide of Russians". In the longer term, this effort was intended to secure "a historical transition towards a new geopolitical situation, the management of hierarchically organised social systems, including the mechanisms of their self-organisation, and the implementation of special projects", as noted by FSB Colonel Yuri Kurnosov,[405] a promoter of the Russian School of Analytics (in practice, a system of manipulation), which seeks to elevate Russia's standing in the same way its national schools of ballet and chess have done before. New cohorts of analysts, referred to as 'conceptualists' and 'interpreters', were equipped with a specific worldview and special 'information-analytical technologies', such as the 'automation of argumentative support for proposed theses' and 'enhanced psychological resistance to stress' (all of these are Kurnosov's own terms). The 'Russian world' naturally served as the project's conceptual foundation.

These measures should be interpreted as part of a broader process of social control, described in Russia using various terms, including political technology, social engineering, reflexive control and the engineering of souls. The last of these was popularised by Stalin, who referred to writers as "engineers of souls", tasking them with defining the themes that should be addressed in literature and taking control of the narrative and, by extension, of the minds and 'souls' of Soviet citizens. During a meeting with representatives of the cultural sector on 26 October 1932, he raised a toast to the "engineers of souls", highlighting what was then a key priority: the mass "production of souls" and the central role played by literature in this effort.[406]

The phrase coined by Stalin offers a telling insight into Russian strategic culture, which treats human beings as depersonalised, replicable units, much like objects produced on an assembly line. Their physical attributes and material

405 Yuri Kurnosov is a retired FSB colonel, Doctor of Philosophical Sciences and a member of both the Union of Writers of Russia and the Academy of Military Sciences. He is the author of several books, including *Тайные доктрины вчера и сегодня* (1997), *Азбука аналитики* (2008, 2013, 2018), *Аналитика как интеллектуальное оружие* (2009, 2015), *Алгебра аналитики* (2015), *Философия аналитики* (2016), *Аналитика и разведка. Размышления профессионала* (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). He leads the interregional project Russian School of Analytics – see 'Русская Аналитическая Школа', ранш.рф. The quotations are taken from the book: Ю. Курносов, П. Конотопов, *Аналитика: методология, технология и организация информационно-аналитической работы*, Москва 2003.

406 According to a modern account, Kliment Voroshilov, who was present at the banquet, objected and declared that in his view, tank production was more important. Stalin, fully aware of the marshal's intentions, immediately countered: "Tanks are worthless if the souls meant to drive them are made of clay. That is why I say: the production of souls is more important than the production of tanks". See А. Веселов, В. Дятликович, '„Человеческая душа – интересный товар": как Сталин наставлял советских писателей', ТАСС, 26 October 2017, tass.ru.

needs as well as their souls can be standardised and made uniform.[407] The Union of Writers of Russia continues this tradition today. It is currently headed by Nikolai Ivanov, a representative of war literature and author of some 30 books, primarily reportage glorifying the military operations in Chechnya, Tskhinvali, Crimea, the Donbas and Syria. In the past, he served as editor-in-chief of the journal Soviet Warrior (*Sovietskij woin*); he is currently on the EU's sanctions list for disseminating Russian propaganda and disinformation.[408]

The emerging conclusion of the transmissibility across generations of ties between literature and power, along with social roles, ethical judgements and attitudes is reinforced by the fact that attempts to instrumentalise writers began as early as the reign of Nicholas I, who placed them under the supervision of his secret police. Count von Benckendorff, head of the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery, was the first to refer to himself as an 'engineer of social affairs', a precursor to the later terms 'engineer of souls' and 'political technologist'. The scale of contemporary sociotechnical operations, which was unimaginable in Benckendorff's time, has been shaped by the structure of the post-Soviet ruling elite, drawn in large part from the ranks of the former KGB. This is hardly surprising: this elite possessed knowledge of the outside world and exercised control over foreign trade, the media, academic institutions and analytical centres. In its confrontation with the West, it drew on historical experiences. Psychological pressure and physical violence have been employed by all the Russian security structures, from Ivan the Terrible's *oprichnina*, his personal guard that enforced obedience through terror, to the secret chanceries and the Okhrana, followed by the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (Cheka) and the KGB…

Sociotechnics, which compensates for internal difficulties with the imperial hubris and arrogance of an authoritarian regime preoccupied with maintaining order, security and sovereignty while claiming a role in shaping global affairs, has become a lasting feature of Russia's strategic culture, a speciality of the security services and a priority of the governing apparatus. The concept of 'soul engineering' also contributed to the longevity of the imperial civilisational model, in which an indispensable circle of decision-makers monopolises all the

407 It goes without saying that writers promptly responded to Stalin's call and began organising an extensive structure called the Union of Soviet Writers. Without membership in the Union, it was impossible to publish any work. Soon after, at the All-Union Congress of Writers in 1934, the party officially announced its new cultural policy – socialist realism. As a result, so-called production literature began featuring pioneers bringing civilisation and socialism to Kazakhstan, Ukraine and other colonised republics (though the term "colonised" was reserved exclusively for the hostile capitalist world), as well as various surrogate enemies, such as kulaks, foreign agents, traitors and Trotskyists. However, the anger of the people was primarily directed towards the imperialist West by fuelling populist nationalism. Production literature offered a simplistic interpretation of the world, its present state and the radiant prospects of communism.

408 See 'Российский писатель', rospisatel.ru; 'Дзен', dzen.ru/rospisatel.

instruments of persuasion (the media, education, culture, the security services, the military and the Church) and compels citizens to abandon democratic standards and values such as free elections, an independent judiciary, free media and respect for human rights. It also imposes the patterns of a patriotic education for the younger generation: sober-minded and ethically pure Chekists; self-sacrificing, 'mission-driven' defenders of the homeland recruited from among criminals like the infamous militant Arsen Pavlov, known as Motorola; and the state's true friends – the collaborators of the intelligence services drawn from the ranks of scholars, poets and writers, such as Mendeleev and Tyutchev.

Sociotechnics helps to explain the elevated status of the state's security institutions. Entities that routinely overstep the legal boundaries for the use of violence have long enjoyed the highest levels of public trust: the president, as their commander-in-chief has 76%, the armed forces – 72% and the security services – 60%. These consistently high approval ratings for the state and its institutions do not reflect their performance, effectiveness or relationship with the public. Instead, they stem from artificially constructed public perceptions, in which the power ministries are portrayed as a bulwark against threats allegedly emanating from the West that endanger both the regime and the population. This also explains their role in the Russian-Western political discourse, which, since its earliest days, has been characterised by informational confrontation, active measures and hybrid techniques.

The rise of informational geopolitics accelerated work on the Military Doctrine and the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation, both adopted in 2000, the first year of Putin's presidency. These documents left no doubt regarding the perception of threats. Among the internal challenges, the former listed "hostile information operations (both information-technical and information-psychological) detrimental to the military security of the Russian Federation and its allies". Among the features of modern warfare, it identified "active information rivalry and the disorientation of public opinion in individual countries and the global public opinion as a whole". The international situation at the time was described as marked by "the intensification of information warfare" and "the use of information technologies and other tools for aggressive, expansionist purposes". These were understood broadly, encompassing notions such as "humanitarian intervention" and "spiritual subversion".

The training of information warfare specialists, conducted under the FSB's supervision, has extended beyond the academic platform to include special projects such as the aforementioned Russian School of Analytics and the Academy of Information Self-Defence. The security services have returned to proven methods of recruiting agents from among journalists working in Western states, generating fake content and preparing operational instructions, for example to

support the narrative of 'Western hypocrisy and degeneration'. Tried-and-tested active measures have been adapted to new technological capabilities. Different actors deploy different 'weapons': television journalists manipulate information, omit key facts, use half-truths, amplify isolated incidents as norms and cherry-pick data. Troll and hacktivist brigades, for their part, generate fake news, conduct cyberattacks to disrupt information systems, paralyse information channels deemed harmful to the Kremlin's interests, create information noise, steal and publish data to sow discord in targeted societies and influence electoral outcomes. At the same time, the power ministries continue to operate on the domestic front, actively participating in how citizens are educated, particularly in the field of history, which is treated as a form of preventative medicine against the 'mental colonisation of Russia's younger generations'.

Their current activity is often compared to that of the Cold War era; Russian analysts even interpret it as a symbolic act of revenge for the defeat in that confrontation.[409] Furthermore, it functions as a tool of anti-Western propaganda, as is the case with references to the offensive doctrine of 'liberation', contrasted with the West's defensive doctrine of 'containment'. Today, the Western approach continues to focus primarily on countering disinformation, while the more aggressive Russian doctrine serves as a means of expansion, though still framed as liberation, now targeting the alleged victims of Western colonisation: nations within the Russian Federation and foreign countries including Georgia, Ukraine, Iraq and Syria.

The Cold War struggle is only one facet of Russia's experience. As is made clear by a longer analytical perspective, deception and manipulation are embedded in its tradition and political/strategic culture. Equally enduring are the stereotypes and leitmotifs of its communication strategy, which are projected onto the world with the aim of highlighting crises in the West. The Kremlin's objective remains unchanged: to weaken the opposing bloc by consistently demonising it through a simplified, black-and-white worldview. The West, painted in black, is portrayed as deceitful, duplicitous and in decline, while Russia, pure and white, appears as a wellspring of revitalising inspiration, a force destined to liberate Europeans (and the so-called collective West) from their destructive traditions, fill the void with genuine values and restore order to the chaotic world of the new millennium.

409 See, for example: 'Сергей Караганов: России надо думать, как победить в холодной войне', Российская газета, 24 June 2021, rg.ru; С. Караганов, 'О новой холодной войне и русской идее', Российский совет по международным делам, 26 July 2021, russiancouncil.ru; 'Взять реванш можно, лишь осознав проигрыш в холодной войне – Кургинян', Красная Весна, 12 March 2023, rossaprimavera.ru; И. Леванов, 'Реванш за поражение в Холодной войне', Проза.ру, 4 October 2022, proza.ru.

Forged through centuries of experience, the Russian school of manipulation remains highly effective. Every form of Russian government – the tsarist, 'the people's' and the authoritarian – has consistently instilled ideas in its citizens which shape the image of their country in opposition to the West. To confront the West, those in power have always enlisted the cultural elite: journalists, writers, publishers and academics. The resulting culture, science and information 'front' has served as more than just a vehicle for the Kremlin's ideas and plans – it has been a tool of power. By sketching an ideological blueprint of a perfect order, it has promoted a vision of a desirable future and an ideal society. Meanwhile, ordinary people, fed on myths, have accepted this patriotic and mobilising rhetoric without resistance – not only because they have been shaped to respond this way, but also because they know from experience that resistance is futile.

Vladimir Putin himself is among the active 'agents of influence': he imposes a clear division between 'us' and 'anti-us', calls for a "purge of traitors to strengthen Russia" and denounces the "accomplices of the West".[410] In fact, the methods and tools of political and ideological subversion used in external operations, including acts of terror, assassinations of opponents, bombings of residential buildings, disinformation, propaganda and corruption, have also been employed to poison the minds of Russian citizens. They believe their leader when he tells them they have nothing to feel guilty about, because it was not them who started the war. This is a war between two worlds – the American and the Russian – and it is the latter, its 'true' values (as opposed to the West's 'mythical' ones) and very existence, that is under threat. Everything that is bad, they are told, comes from the forces of evil – the so-called collective West, the Americans, NATO and their puppets in Central and Eastern Europe (a natural sphere of Russian influence in this worldview), including the 'Nazis and Banderites' in Kyiv as well as the Balts and Poles who desecrate the shared memory and destroy Russian monuments. Russian people believe that the war against Ukraine is not a war of conquest, because 'Russia is already the world's largest country by territory' and is also building a just global order. As Putin declare:[411] "This is about the principles on which the new world order will be based. Lasting

410 'В Кремле объяснили слова Путина о самоочищении России', РИА Новости, 17 March 2022, ria.ru.

411 See, for example: 'Владимир Путин: Россия заканчивает войну, начатую Киевом при поддержке Запада', Baltnews, 5 October 2023, baltnews.com. In February 2024, two years into Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, Putin appeared on the weekly programme 'Moscow, Kremlin, Putin' on the Rossiya-1 channel, where he expressed only one regret: that "active measures" against the West had not been taken earlier. He stated: "As I've said, it wasn't us who started this war – we're merely trying to end it. At first, we tried to do this by peaceful means, through the Minsk Agreements. As it later turned out, we were led by the nose: both the former German chancellor and the former French president admitted this, stating publicly that they had no intention of honouring those agreements. They simply wanted to buy time to pump the Ukrainian regime full of weapons – and they succeeded. The only thing we can regret is that we didn't launch our active measures earlier, as we assumed that we were dealing with decent people". See 'Ответы на вопросы журналиста Павла Зарубина', President of Russia, 14 February 2024, kremlin.ru.

peace will come when everyone feels safe. When they understand that their voice is respected". Putin's aggressive messaging has fallen on fertile ground, delivering the intended results, including outcomes as drastic as the physical elimination of his political opponents, such as Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny.

No one in the country has blamed the leader for failing to achieve any of the objectives declared at the outset of the war against Ukraine. No one has criticised the *siloviki*, nor the fact that the president expects them to reinforce and justify his policies, or that he protects them using all possible means. Instruments of coercion have silenced dissenters, while the official narrative has concealed any shortcomings of the security services, such as the FSB's flawed intelligence assessments which predicted that Russia's 'liberating' army would receive support from the local population and that Moscow would swiftly succeed in installing a puppet leader in Kyiv. This plan envisaged the construction of a social and political base that would ensure local support for the invasion. The adversary's strength was underestimated, while Russia's own capacity was overstated.[412]

However, dismissing Russia's security services as amateurish would be a serious misjudgement. They have retained their flexibility, adjusting their approach to shifting international circumstances. They have been trained to play the 'long game', even from a position of weakness. They have repeatedly succeeded in 'waiting out' the West and they expect to do so again. Russia draws strength from the West's 'weakness', which allegedly stems from its democratic values, respect for the rule of law, the aforementioned doctrine of 'containment' and the pluralism of opinion. This diagnosis of Western 'weakness' remains relevant today, even though nearly 200 years ago Marquis de Custine wrote in this context:

"Instead of prudently concealing our weaknesses, we reveal them passionately each day, while Russian policy, as secretive as it is Byzantine, carefully hides what is thought, what is done and what is feared in Russia. We advance openly, they move in secrecy – it is not a fair fight".[413]

By contrast, Ukrainians have proven resistant to Russia's sociotechnical manipulation. Their distinct perception and critical evaluation of reality have not only prevented the Kremlin from achieving its objectives, but have actually pushed this prospect further away. The liberation narrative has also failed to produce the desired results in the other post-Soviet states and in the Central and Eastern European countries that once formed part of the so-called Eastern Bloc. Centuries of experience living under the threat posed by Russia's proximity have

412 S. Hedlund, 'The collapse of the Russian military machine', *op. cit.*; A. Jawor, 'Nietrafione analizy rosyjskiego wywiadu [opinia]', *op. cit.*

413 A. de Custine, *Letters from Russia,* translated and edited by Robin Buss, Penguin Books, London 1991, p. 129.

enabled these nations to take a realistic view of its ambitions for an imperial reintegration of its sphere of influence.

Russian disinformation has fallen on more fertile ground in Western Europe. There, Russia, and later the Soviet Union, succeeded in imposing its perspective, for example regarding its annexations of neighbouring territories. Russian/Soviet conquests are portrayed differently than the overseas possessions of Britain, France and Spain. The country's modern-era growth is not widely recognised as a form of colonial expansion. The West still seems unaware of how many peoples, nations and cultures were subjugated by the Russian, and then Soviet, 'civilisational community'. This perception is further reinforced by the geopolitical framing of the ongoing debate, which imposes a form of geographic, historical and cultural determinism on the surrounding region. Russia's self-interpretation of its own history, particularly its appropriation of the Kyivan past and the glorification of its Patriotic Wars, persists to this day, having been introduced to Western historians, who largely internalised them.[414]

The Kremlin has also successfully exploited the recurring belief that Europe is decadent and weak. Politicians and intellectuals, debating the nature of its crises, have long proclaimed the decline of the Old Continent – and continue to do so. In 1918, the German philosopher Oswald Spengler put forward this idea in his book titled *The Decline of the West*, contrasting an ageing Europe with the freshness of communism in the East and the power of fascism in the West. Soviet-friendly intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, André Gide, Pablo Neruda and John Reed also predicted the West's imminent collapse. In the 18th century, Voltaire displayed a similar fascination with the illusory image of the "empire of the north". Convinced that excessive freedom led to anarchy, he promoted the image of Peter I and Catherine II's Russia as an enlightened and stable state across Europe.

The third source of the effectiveness of this narrative, alongside disinformation-driven influence operations and Western empathy, is the widespread lack of understanding of the real situations in Russia. The Tsarist Empire was home to an ethnically and religiously diverse population, ranging from established nations with state traditions, such as Lithuania and Georgia, to Siberian hunting tribes and nomadic peoples from Central Asia. These groups are often conflated with ethnic Russians; Russia itself is frequently mistaken for a nation-state. The fragility of the ethical foundations of Orthodox civilisation is clear, for example, in the liberal attitudes of its adherents towards abortion, divorce and the consumption of alcohol. Russia's so-called 'superior' traditional values are

414 E.M. Thompson, *Imperial knowledge: Russian literature and colonialism*, Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut, London 2000, p. 185.

presented in contrast to 'degenerate' Western ones, symbolised by '*liberasty*' and '*Gayropa*', which are the targets of attacks much like those that were once directed at 'bourgeois morality'. These historical and civilisational situations are overlooked by the aforementioned '*Russlandversteher*' ('those who understand Russia'), who insist that 'Crimea has always been Russian' and suggest freezing the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as did Rolf Mützenich, the head of Germany's SPD parliamentary group in March 2024. There is a risk that the Kremlin could take steps to further strengthen this camp. Pacifist-leaning Western populations are growing increasingly weary of the war and alarmed by its economic and social consequences. Consequently, the will to provide support to Ukraine is weakening among both Europeans and Americans.

For the rest of the world, however, Russia offers a different message: that of 'defending those wronged, humiliated and demeaned by the Anglo-Saxons'. Seeking to revive bloc-based rivalry, it is building an authoritarian alliance with countries of the so-called Global South and those that challenge the liberal vision of the world and international relations. It is deepening cooperation with the Arab states and North Korea, asserting its presence within BRICS and expanding its engagement in Africa. Russia presents itself as a power bold enough to challenge the West; in its anti-Western rhetoric, it draws on anti-colonial themes that continue to resonate in African and Latin American countries. This is a key factor in the context of Russia's influence operations and strategic culture.

The very model of authoritarian leadership itself, projected as strong and effective, also draws undemocratic actors to Russia. These states have been helping Russia to circumvent sanctions and supporting it in votes at the United Nations Security Council. While in Poland, Europe and the United States, strategic communication based on the 'denazification' of Ukraine appears absurd or plainly ridiculous, it can be an effective tool of influence in countries untouched by World War II. The narrative portraying the invasion of a neighbour as a proxy war against the United States – and, more broadly, the so-called collective West – finds a receptive audience in various parts of the world, including India, China, South America and Africa.

Can Russia afford to wage war? No, but the Kremlin is indifferent to the costs. It does not feel responsible for the lives of those sent to the battlefront. It would seem that the only real problem, lies in the mobilisation techniques needed to replenish its depleted troop numbers. It refines these methods continuously, arming itself with new sociotechnical tools.

In line with the principles of the art of capturing minds, influence operations regularly incorporate new influencers. One of the notable figures to emerge in the 2021 season, which signalled a 'new' mental war waged by the West against Russia (while in fact masking Moscow's true intentions ahead of

its full-scale invasion of Ukraine), was the aforementioned Andrei Ilnitsky. An adviser to Defence Minister Shoigu, he rapidly expanded his online following, attracting users who engaged with his posts and participated in confrontational exchanges. He was active across media outlets associated with the military, parliamentarians and the Russian Orthodox Church and quickly joined the propaganda-based mainstream of persuasion. Ilnitsky argues that the ongoing war reflects the West's failure to take responsibility before the future, the past and God. He claims that the West pursues a radiant liberal future while completely disregarding national interests (implicitly, those of Russia). The cynical machinery of this evil world falsely imitates Christ and in truth represents "the devilishly effective technology of the Antichrist".[415] While the writings of Ilnitsky, a *kandidat* (equivalent to a PhD) of the military sciences, offer little in the way of intellectual merit and fail to meet any standard applied to academic work, their practical significance is difficult to overstate: their purpose is to gain new supporters rather than to provoke critical thinking.

These researchers are waging their war in plain sight. On the website of the Russian Political Science Association, two prominent contributors – Andrei Manoilo (an expert for the organisation and a professor at Lomonosov Moscow State University) and Konstantin Strigunov (an analyst with the Association of Specialists in Information Operations and, in his own words, "a participant in operations against the CIA in Venezuela in 2019") identified a new US technology of the "preventive delegitimisation of elections". In their view, the refusal by the United States and the EU to recognise the mandates of the 'democratically' elected presidents of Bolivia (2018), Venezuela (2019) and Belarus (2020) laid the groundwork for a scenario that could one day be applied in Russia. A few years ahead of the presidential election, they already offered accessible guidance:

"If Trump recognises Navalny as president (and Navalny is a political project of the West), he'll immediately seize all the personal savings from our former and future officials and state oligarchs and hand them over to that guy".[416]

Today's 'engineers of souls' are constantly updating and expanding their catalogue of anti-Western arguments. For example, the historian Yuri Erusalimsky from the University of Yaroslavl and Archimandrite Sylvester are co-authors of a book on the chaos brought about by globalisation, and are reinforcing the

415 See Ilnitsky's articles on the Парламентская газета website, pnp.ru.

416 А. Манойло, К. Стригунов, 'Новые технологии организации государственных переворотов от Лиссабона до Владивостока, от Каракаса до Минска: Делегитимизация выборов', ruspolitology.ru (the text has been removed, but summaries remain available, for example: Х. Галицкий, 'Под копирку: эксперты изучили современные методы организации госпереворотов', Известия, 15 December 2020, iz.ru or Е. Булкина, 'Исследователи сравнили организацию протестов в Белоруссии и Венесуэле', Взгляд, 15 December 2020, vz.ru); see also К. Стригунов, А. Манойло, Г. Фэнли, 'Фейковые новости и технология превентивной делегитимизации выборов', *Гражданин. Выборы. Власть* 2022, no. 2(24).

claim that the West has been educating a new ruling elite drawn from the ranks of the Russian and Belarusian diaspora:

> Emigrants from Russia and Belarus are being trained at the school of strategic propaganda in Riga and at similar institutions in Tallinn, Warsaw and Helsinki. Western activity towards the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus is overseen by NATO, Britain's MI6 and the Pentagon. The financial support and coordination of these centres are provided by the US Department of the Treasury, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), NATO and EU member states, the European Endowment for Democracy, the Soros Foundation and others. [...] Moreover, those who graduate from these institutions are specialists ready to act in the field of destabilisation and exacerbating societal crises.[417]

This publication was released under the auspices of the 'International Academy of Communicology', an association that has been active for over a decade: since 2013, it has published the journal *Коммуникология* (Communicology). The development of communication theory, considered the youngest of the social sciences, is supported by the Russian Presidential Academy of the National Economy and Public Administration. The journal's editor is Professor Felix Sharkov, head of the Department of Public Relations and Media Policy at the same institution. This new field of knowledge has become a tool for stirring anti-Western sentiment, shaping pro-Russian political discourse and mobilising young people both within Russia and across the CIS. The 2023 anniversary conference called 'Managing contemporary communications' focused on the media preferences of young people and their stimulated interests. Young content creators are awarded every year. In 2023, prizes were handed out in the categories of 'youth scientific perspective', 'patriotic publication', 'outstanding author' and 'topic addressed'. The last of these was dominated by works with an anti-Western slant.[418] This suggests that the presidential academy has launched yet another strategic project for educating young people, one aimed at preparing them for living in an environment of prolonged mental and hybrid warfare.

Archimandrite Sylvester's co-authorship is no coincidence. He serves as chair of the Yaroslavl Historical Society, chaplain to the Russian Martial Arts Union and advisor to the Foundation for the Socio-Economic Rehabilitation of Employees and Veterans of the Special Services and Law Enforcement Agencies. Religious propaganda occupies a special place within the arsenal of

417 Ю. Иерусалимский, арх. Сильвестр (С. Лукашенко), *Хаос и новый мировой порядок: политический инструментарий глобального управления*, Ярославль 2022, pp. 41–42, at: klex.ru.

418 See, for example: А. Зайцев, Ф. Ахунзянова, 'Типология фейков о спецоперации на Украине в цифровой публичной сфере', *Коммуникология* 2023, no. 11(4), communicology.ru; А. Хубежова, 'Манипулятивные приемы в формировании медиаповестки на примере телеканала Euronews', *Коммуникология* 2023, no. 11(4), communicology.ru.

contemporary active measures, no longer remaining confined to traditional verbal forms, but also manifested in action. The anti-Western 'word' is the domain of the Church hierarchy, with Patriarch Kirill at its head. During the annual Christmas meeting with deputies on 23 January 2024, he once again proclaimed the decline of Europe:

> The Western elites are devastating the Christian legacy and disavowing their spiritual roots – everything that shaped Western civilisation and enabled its past successes and achievements in science, culture and socio-political life. The European House, to use a biblical expression, increasingly resembles whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but are full of dead bones and decay on the inside (Gospel of Matthew 23:27–28). Yes, the building may still seem attractive from the outside, with its grandeur and splendour, but its foundations are hopelessly sinking, its corridors are crumbling and its load-bearing walls are on the verge of collapse.[419]

The Patriarch's message, disseminated through media channels, continues the long tradition of the altar-throne alliance that dates back to the Grand Duchy of Moscow. Today, the Orthodox Church's persuasive influence is expressed in more diverse ways, such as its participation in the military education of the younger generations. For example, Sarov hosts an annual laser tag tournament for children and teenagers, who compete for the cup of the prior of the Sarov Spiritual Centre, affiliated with the local monastery.[420] The shooting-themed event offers plenty of excitement, as players are eliminated when hit by a shot from a laser assault rifle. At the same time, the Church teaches that real strength lies in the truth. And the truth, it asserts, is on Russia's side, just as God is... Much like Putin, it instils in believers the conviction that "those who fight for the truth will go to heaven".

These mechanisms of legitimising aggression should provoke resistance, as Christianity explicitly rejects war as a means of resolving international problems. Not in Russia though... Here, war has taken on a sacred dimension: framed as a battle between good and evil, it has been elevated to the level of a Holy Rus value.[421] During church services, the faithful pray for the victory of the Russian world. The Russian Orthodox Church has not only introduced historical commanders and heroes of World War II and the Donbas conflict into its sacred space, but has also embraced the figure of the modern 'emperor' – Vladimir

419 'Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на XII Рождественских Парламентских встречах в Совете Федерации РФ', The World Russian People's Council, 23 January 2024, patriarchia.ru.

420 'В Сарове пройдет городской турнир по лазертагу на кубок Духовно-научного центра саровского монастыря', Саров24, 3 November 2017, sarov24.ru.

421 See, for example, the resolution adopted by the World Russian People's Council: 'Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора «Настоящее и будущее Русского мира»', 27 March 2024, patriarchia.ru.

Putin. Clergymen bless the 'holy war', consecrate icons hung on tanks and routinely preach that goodness is a quality of Russia, while evil is the mark of the 'Antichrist' – the West. In doing so, they legitimise war crimes and promote religious fundamentalism.

Journalists, scholars, clergymen, analysts, political scientists and cultural figures are the frontline fighters in the visible battle for minds – its skirmishers and 'artillerymen' in mass influence campaigns. These campaigns employ a wide range of psychosocial tools, from overt propaganda and state-directed science and culture, to the covert destabilisation of targeted countries, disinformation operations based on fabrications and even political assassinations and state terrorism. Operating beneath the surface is the vast domain of active intelligence and its networks, which rely on extra-legal methods of 'delivering justice', ideological subversion, energy blackmail, migration and grain-related leverage, nuclear threats, provocations and other so-called active measures. This domain is the primary theatre of Russia's war for the minds of Western societies, which is aimed at dismantling the administrative-political, socio-economic and cultural-ideological foundations of the targeted countries.

The war for minds is a battleground of meanings, symbols, stereotypes, monuments and other 'visible signs'; it is also narratives that impose a 'single correct' interpretation, which have long been governed by the principles of repetition and reversal (subversion) of the adversary's messaging. The narratives and moves that shape the desired interpretation may appear at different times, but they serve similar functions and share a common context. The audience is not required to rediscover their meanings or make an effort to decipher them – the official interpretation provides the key. These messages are rooted in utopian ideas and are accepted on faith. Putin's aspiration to create a triune Ukrainian-Belarusian-Russian nation and impose a Russian order on Ukraine differs little from the unification of the 'Slavic world' under the Russian crown and its "liberation from the Turkish yoke" (as Tsar Nicholas I justified the Crimean War) and Stalin's ambition to implement the "final solution to the national question" that would merge all Soviet peoples into a single, Russian-speaking Soviet nation.

As we can see, Russia continues to replicate previously tested techniques. It imposes an imperial ideology on the rest of the world that once formed the conceptual foundation of tsarism and Stalinism and now underpins Putinism, as well as the force factor and the other key elements that bind the rulers, the state and the citizens: a chauvinistic nationalism that underlies both isolationism and universalism, a tendency towards idealism, support for imperial conquest and the belief in Russia's special mission. All of these have been reinforced through myths and stereotypes. Fear of Western ideas compels the government to keep society in a constant state of mobilisation and cultivate its anti-Western

resilience by imposing a confrontational worldview. As in Orwell's book, the government spreads destruction while insisting that this will lead to national rebirth. Today's sociotechnical slogans, framed in opposition to the American vision, are essentially its grotesque parody: the Kremlin, a global gangster, presents itself as a benefactor of humanity, assassinations are rebranded as cleansing the country from traitors, while death in a 'holy war' is portrayed as a springboard to paradise.

Only a handful of Russians recognise the dangers this entails. The aforementioned linguist and cultural scholar Hasan Huseynov has encapsulated these dangers in the phrase 'the fascisation of anti-fascism'. The opposition writer Dmitry Bykov has also identified them as the primary mechanism driving Russia's fascisation. He has argued that the essence of Russian fascism lies in three elements: the idea of national exceptionalism, the constant search for an enemy and the privileged position of the security services which operate above the law. In his view, fascisation and totalitarianism are, in fact, inscribed into Russian culture.[422]

The 'fascisation of anti-fascism' encapsulates the Kremlin's inverted perspective: it attributes fascism to the NATO countries, claiming that they are seeking to provoke a new world war. In this context, the Chairman of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, has announced measures to step up the prevention of subversive activities by Ukraine and its NATO supporters. These measures include intensified censorship, the final resolution of the problem of opposition movements, the consolidation and modernisation of society and its accelerated de-Westernisation.[423] To this end, another legislative proposal to tighten criminal penalties for criticising the military was submitted to the Duma in late January 2024. The draft law equated criticism of the war and the armed forces with criminal activity threatening the security of the Russian Federation. Those found guilty face the confiscation of property, financial assets and valuables, as well as the revocation of academic and honorary titles.[424]

The conclusion is difficult to avoid: escalating military operations, intensifying state repression, continuing war propaganda and confrontation with the West and the consolidation of support for the authoritarian leader will remain the primary tools for defusing internal tensions. However, these frictions will

422 'Дмитрий Быков о генезисе русского фашизма, ведуший: проф. Г. Пшебинда', Przebinda Pisze, 11 March 2022, youtube.com.

423 'Trzecia wojna światowa. Szef rosyjskiej Dumy ostrzega', DW, 27 January 2024, dw.com.

424 The proposal concerned tightening existing legislation aimed at increasing Russians' resistance to Western influence. It was submitted to the Duma by Deputy Speaker Irina Yarovaya, Chair of the Culture Committee Yelena Yampolskaya and Chair of the Security Committee Vasily Piskarev. See 'Вячеслав Володин: каждый, кто пытается разрушить Россию, предает ее, должен понести заслуженное наказание', The State Duma of the Russian Federation, 20 January 2024, duma.gov.ru; 'Володин: проект о конфискации за фейки об армии внесут в Госдуму 22 января', Ведомости, 20 January 2024, vedomosti.ru.

undoubtedly continue to grow as the number of those killed and wounded rises and the costs of sustaining the war continue to mount. Responsibility for all of this has already been shifted onto the West and NATO, which are accused of seeking to impose a liberal ethnocracy on the Russian world – in contrast to Russia, which portrays itself as bringing 'order and civilisation'. It is hard to resist the impression that we have seen all this before.

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