

EASTERN REVIEW 2023, VOL. 12(2)

Walenty Baluk


 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3295-4872>

Uniwersytet Łódzki

Instytut Stosunków Międzynarodowych UMCS

e-mail: walenty.baluk@mail.umcs.pl

Patrycja Mac

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4246-253X>

Szkoła Doktorska Nauk Społecznych UMCS

e-mail: patrycja.mac21@gmail.com

The Strategic Culture of the Russian Federation During Vladimir Putin's Rule

Abstract. Strategic culture represents a relatively new research perspective in the study of international relations. It has been noted in scholarly discourse that strategic culture represents an opportunity to understand and explicate the behaviour of states in the international environment. We view strategic culture as a system of culturally-determined values, influencing foreign policy and national security decision-making. The purpose of this article is to analyse the strategic culture of the Russian Federation and, in particular, to discuss its geopolitical dimension during Vladimir Putin's rule, which is linked to other components, including the besieged fortress syndrome, the idea of collecting Rus lands, the myth of the Third Rome, or the concepts of Russia-Eurasia and the *Rus mir*. The geopolitical aspect in the Russian strategic culture is a peculiar combination of two opposing dimensions – the material and the immaterial. On the one hand, space is a strictly physical element; a constituent part of the state is a territory with defined borders. On the other hand, Russian decision-makers have given it a metaphysical character; there is a visible sacralisation of the spatial factor among the population. Vladimir Putin's policy is determined by history and geopolitics, and the main objective of his actions is the resti-

tution of Russia's imperial power and the renewal of Russian influence in the world. The essential feature of the policy created by Putin is a kind of revanchism, the militarisation of the state and society, and the cult of force and war. The strategic culture of the Russian Federation is heavily influenced by the Russian geopolitical thought and historicism. Russia's war against Ukraine after 2014 is a classic example of the influence of strategic culture on the current policy of the Russian state. In the perception of Russian political elites, Ukraine, dubbed Little Russia, appears as a fundamental component of the Russian Empire. The emergence of an independent Ukraine was seen as an existential threat to the Russian imperial identity. Thus, Vladimir Putin's policy aimed at the complete subjugation of Ukraine or the resolution of the Ukrainian question by force. It is part of Russia's strategic culture to deny not only Ukraine's sovereignty and independence, but also the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian people.

Keywords: strategic culture, Russia, geopolitics, geopolitical thought, Putin, cult of war

Kultura strategiczna Federacji Rosyjskiej podczas rządów Władimira Putina

Streszczenie. Kultura strategiczna stanowi stosunkowo nową perspektywę badawczą w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych. W dyskursie naukowym zauważono, że kultura strategiczna stanowi okazję do zrozumienia i wyjaśnienia zachowania państw w środowisku międzynarodowym. Postrzegamy kulturę strategiczną jako system wartości uwarunkowanych kulturowo, wpływających na politykę zagraniczną i podejmowanie decyzji w zakresie bezpieczeństwa narodowego. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza kultury strategicznej Federacji Rosyjskiej, a w szczególności omówienie jej geopolitycznego wymiaru w okresie rządów Władimira Putina, który jest powiązany z innymi komponentami, w tym syndromem obłożonej twierdzy, ideą zbierania ziem ruskich, mitem Trzeciego Rzymu czy koncepcjami Rosji-Eurazji i Rusi. Aspekt geopolityczny w rosyjskiej kulturze strategicznej jest swoistym połączeniem dwóch przeciwstawnych wymiarów – materialnego i niematerialnego. Z jednej strony przestrzeń jest elementem ściśle fizycznym – częścią składową państwa jest terytorium o określonych granicach. Z drugiej strony rosyjscy decydenci nadali jej charakter metafizyczny – widoczna jest sakralizacja czynnika przestrzennego wśród społeczeństwa. Polityka Władimira Putina jest zdeterminowana przez historię i geopolitykę, a głównym celem jego działań jest restytucja imperialnej potęgi Rosji i odnowienie rosyjskich wpływów na świecie. Zasadniczą cechą polityki kreowanej przez Putina jest swoisty rewanżyzm, militaryzacja państwa i społeczeństwa, kult siły i wojny. Kultura strategiczna Federacji Rosyjskiej jest pod silnym wpływem rosyjskiej myśli geopolitycznej i historyzmu. Wojna Rosji przeciwko Ukrainie po 2014 roku jest klasycznym przykładem wpływu kultury strategicznej na obecną politykę państwa rosyjskiego. W percepcji rosyjskich elit politycznych Ukraina, nazywana Małą Rosją, jawi się jako fundamentalny składnik Imperium Rosyjskiego. Powstanie niepodległej Ukrainy było postrzegane jako egzystencjalne zagrożenie dla rosyjskiej tożsamości imperialnej.

Dlatego też polityka Władimira Putina miała na celu całkowite podporządkowanie Ukrainy lub rozwiązanie kwestii ukraińskiej siłą. Częścią rosyjskiej kultury strategicznej jest zaprzeczanie nie tylko suwerenności i niepodległości Ukrainy, ale także odrębności narodu ukraińskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: kultura strategiczna, Rosja, geopolityka, myśl geopolityczna, Putin, kult wojny

A new research and analytical perspective

Strategic culture represents a relatively new research perspective in the study of international relations. It has been noted in scholarly discourse that strategic culture represents an opportunity to understand and explicate the behaviour of states in the international environment. We see strategic culture as a system of culturally-determined values, influencing foreign policy and national security decision-making. Strategic culture provides the context for shaping state strategy (Greiff, 2016). Very often, it is seen as a cultural condition that exerts a significant, sometimes decisive influence on the making of a strategic choice (Johnson, 2006).

The American political scientist and analyst Jack Snyder is considered the originator of the concept of strategic culture. In his book titled *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, the researcher defined it as “the sum of ideas, emotionally conditioned responses and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of the national security community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share in relation to [nuclear] strategy” (Snyder, 1977: 4–7). In doing so, the political scientist pointed to significant differences in the understanding of containment strategy by US and Soviet decision-makers. However, Snyder stated that a state's containment stems from its unique culture and requires a consideration of cultural aspects such as the uniqueness of the situation, historical heritage, military culture, and the role of the military in the policymaking process, among others (Snyder, 1977: 10).

A considerable influence on the development of culture in security studies has been exerted by Collin S. Gray, who defined strategic culture as “a way of thinking and acting through strength, derived from historical experience, from the aspiration to behave responsibly and in accordance with the national interest” (Gray, 1986: 20). According to Gray (1986: 20), strategic culture was an effective tool for understanding ourselves, but also for knowing how others see us. This is all the more important as a lack of cultural awareness implies a phenomenon known as “cultural fog”, which limits the possibility of mutual understanding and can, therefore, pose a threat to peace and international security (Gryz, 2008: 46).

Strategic culture is a set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and ways of behaving that derive from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and

written) that shape collective identity and relationships with other groups. In addition, they define the appropriate goals and means to ensure security (Johnston, 2006; Kuznar, Heath, Popp, 2023).

The core of strategic culture is formed by four variables: 1) identity (a state's international identity, the characteristics of its national character, intended regional and global roles, the perceptions of its mission); 2) values (material and ideological factors, having priority); 3) norms (accepted and expected modes of behaviour); 4) perceptual lens (true or false beliefs and experiences, or lack thereof, projecting perceptions of the world) (Johnston, 2006; Kuznar, Heath, Popp, 2023). Factors such as geography, history, access to technology, political traditions (democracy vs. authoritarianism) and religion, among others, influence the formation of the above variables.

There have also been a number of valuable works in the Polish literature on the strategic culture of states. According to Jan Czaja (2008: 227, 233), strategic culture is the culture of national security, referring to the perception of security threats, countering and combating them, including by force (Włodkowska-Bagan, 2020). In turn, Beata Surmacz (2022: 6) defines strategic culture as “the way states perceive their security, the threats to it, their position and international role, the means and methods by which they strive to ensure their security. The shape of strategic culture is influenced by many conditions: geographical location, historical experience, regime, norms, development perspective, external environment, as well as cultural and national identity”.

As mentioned above, due to the multiplicity of the sources of strategic culture, diversity can be observed in the academic discourse regarding the division of the determinants of the cultural research concept. For the purposes of the following discussion, a classification by Agata Włodkowska-Bagan (2017: 36–37) will be presented, who emphasises that, in general, the determinants of strategic culture are usually divided into two categories: internal (tangible and intangible) and external (international). Among the internal tangible determinants, one can distinguish the surface of the state, natural resources, economic, military, and social potential. Intangible internal determinants include history, the experience of relations with other states as well as historical (in)memory, i.e. a set of myths that are designed to build and bind the community and common consciousness. As Włodkowska-Bagan (2017: 36–37) notes, “the set of historical myths consists in a selective recording of history, often a consequence of the mechanism of repression of an overly traumatic (or inconvenient) past hindering the construction or maintenance of the internal cohesion of the state and/or nation”. External determinants include geographical location, neighbourhood and the regional balance of power, as well as membership of international organisations. Intangible internal factors, on the other hand, include religion, tradition, professed values, as well as symbols and myths associated with and enshrined in collective “historical memory” (Włodkowska-Bagan, 2017: 37).

The category of strategic culture has also come to the attention of Russian researchers and analysts, who define the concept as a specific style (character) of behaviour inherent in a given nation and state during the use of military force, which has important implications for the process of strategic planning, decision-making, and action (Kokoshin, 1998). Russian researcher E. Ozyganov (2012: 94–96) also points to six important reasons in favour of using the concept of strategic culture in analytical and research work. First, it shatters the notion that ethnocentrism is the dominant influence on strategy theory and practice. Second, understanding strategic culture is a fundamental part of one of the basic principles of warfare (“By knowing your enemy you know yourself”). Third, history helps to understand our identity and motivations as well as those of other actors. Fourth, strategic culture demolishes the artificial boundary between the domestic and international environment in political decision-making. Fifth, strategic culture helps to understand the irrational behaviour of other actors. Sixth, strategic culture provides a perspective that allows a critical analysis of scenarios and threats, as it draws attention to important details and allows understanding actors' decisions (Bartoš, 2020).

Referring to the paradigm of strategic culture, this article will attempt to verify the claim of the dominant influence of the Russian strategic culture shaped on the basis of imperial traditions, the cult of the leader, and the strong state on the policies of the Russian government during Vladimir Putin's rule. The Russian case study will require the use of the factor analysis method and the incorporation of the constructivist research perspective.

Russian geopolitical concepts

Despite the emergence of Russian geopolitical concepts (Holy Russia, the unification of Russia's lands, “Moscow – the Third Rome”) during the period of the Muscovite state, the development of Russian geopolitical thought occurs in the 19th and early 20th centuries – the time of the rise and fall of the Russian Empire. It was then that the first doctrines containing a geopolitical component appeared in relation to cultural and civilisational divisions: the unification of the Slavic world under the sceptre of the Russian Tsar (Tyutchev, 1868), anti-Western Russia called upon to form the Slavic empire (Danilevsky, 2013), and the Byzantine roots of the Russian tradition (Leontsev, 2020). The basic currents of Russian geopolitics studying military statistics (e.g. Milutin), the influence of space on the development of the state and society (Solovyov; Mechnikov), space as a cultural-civilisational phenomenon (e.g. Tyutchev; Danilevsky), and the importance of space in international relations were formed during this period. In Russian geopolitical thought, the leading place is occupied by the cultural-civilisational current, while the precursors of Russian geopolitics include V. Semyonov Tien-Shanskii,

the author, *inter alia*, of the work titled *On the Possibility of Territorial Dominion over Primenitelno k Rossii* (1915) and the founder of the Russian school of geopolitics (Gerdt, 2012; Tihonravov, 2002). Among other things, the researcher analysed the global role of Russian colonisation, conducted a study of the territorial forms of the Russian rule, and developed the concept of the communication routes of Russia and its neighbouring countries in terms of rule over a given territory (Potulski, 2009).

The next important stage in the development of Russian geopolitical thought turned out to be the interwar period of the 20th century, when the Eurasian concept (e.g. P. Savitsky; N. Trubetskoy) emerged, forming the foundation of contemporary Russian geostrategy and foreign policy in the form of the concept of neo-Eurasianism (Gumilev, 2020; Dugin, 2000). This concept defined Russia's geopolitical identity as a Eurasian state-civilisation, characterised by the unity and indivisibility of the geopolitical space, having a mission and a unique character (Panczenko, 2016)

One of the main representatives of Eurasianism appears to be Lev Gumilev, a Russian historian and ethnologist, who contributed to the revival of the Eurasian thought after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and whose assumptions largely determine the contemporary policy of the Russian Federation. In his work, Gumilev (2020) distinguished the importance of two fundamental factors to rebuild Russia's power on the international stage. Firstly, an important task of the Russian state is to repel the threats coming from the so-called broader West, which constitutes the "eternal enemy" of the Eurasian civilisation. The Russian thinker emphasised that Russia's not inconsiderable opponents for centuries were the Pope and the Emperor, who by their actions (including sending missionaries to the East) tried to influence the Russian system and introduce their own ideas (Janicki, 2011: 90–94). This approach is analogous to the contemporary situation in which Russian decision-makers emphasise the hostility of the collective West and the efforts of Western institutions to destabilise Russia's security. Secondly, a fundamental element of the Eurasian civilisation is the religious factor, namely Orthodoxy, which constitutes a kind of link between both the material and immaterial worlds. Gumilev emphasised that religion was meant to sacralise power, legitimise it in the perception of citizens, and determine Russia's political relations with other actors in the international environment (Gawor, 2006: 79).

The traditional and contemporary currents of Russian geopolitical thinking can be framed within a paradigm depicting the rivalry between the Occidentalists (ratepayers/Atlanticists) and the Pervenniks, which in a broad context can also include Slavophiles and proponents of Eurasianism. Despite the presence of certain elements of isolationism in the concepts of the *poczvniks*, Slavophiles, and Eurasianism, it was not until the end of the 20th century that a separate current called isolationism emerged in Russian geopolitical thought (Tsymbursky, 1993; Popov, Čerenov, Saraev, 2006).

The primary task of contemporary Russian geopolitics was to shape the geopolitical identity of Russia, which quickly rejected the Western (Atlantic) direction, returning to the geopolitical code of the Russian Empire and the USSR. The popular ideas of Eurasianism shaped the two fundamental approaches of “Russia-Eurasia” (Dugin, 2000; Panarin, 1996) and “Russia in Eurasia” (Tsymbursky 1993; Shul’ha, 2006). Pragmatic concepts also emerged (Sorokin, 1995, 1996; Kolosov, Turovsky 2000), attempting to overcome the geopolitical dilemma of Russia as the centre/core, and Russia as an island of world politics (Shul’ha, 2006: 474). The Russian geopolitical identity of Russia as a centre/core, and Russia as an island of world politics were not a matter of the past. In addition, attention should be paid to Orthodox and nationalist geopolitical concepts (Solzhenitsyn, 1991; Ustian, 2002).

Alexander Dugin (2000) stresses that the disintegration of the post-Soviet space will transform Russia into a regional state. The states of the area essentially have two options to choose their geopolitical orientation. The first one, desired by Russia, is a return to Eurasian reintegration projects. The second one is the development of sovereign and independent states, aspiring to NATO and expressing pro-American attitudes. The existence of a sovereign Ukraine is an undesirable development for Russian geopolitics, as pro-Western Kiev controls the northern coast of the Black Sea. Opposing the influence of Atlanticism, Dugin (2000) proposed, among other things, the establishment of a Moscow–Berlin geopolitical axis of strategic importance, which would allow Russia to control Eastern Europe, and Germany to control Central Europe. He believed that Germany traditionally had a consolidating role in Central Europe, which he viewed as a relatively homogeneous political and cultural area with the participation of parts of Polish and Western Ukrainian lands (Dugin, 2000: 220, 348–349, 796–802).

Vadim Tsymbursky proposed an original change in the geopolitical code of the new Russia treated as an island, surrounded by a strip of “great limitrophe”, a contiguous zone of geopolitical interests that were clearly separated from intra-Russian affairs (Potulski, 2010: 231–232). Cymburski counted Ukraine and other states of the post-Soviet area as part of the “great limitrophe”, a buffer zone separating Russia from the West. He wrote that Russia should use the potential crisis of the Ukrainian state to its advantage. However, he did not advocate the “annexation” of Crimea, Novorossiia, and the Left Bank, but proposed the recognition of the independent status of these lands (quasi-states) (Mezhuyev, 2017).

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, an opponent of Occidentalism, acted as a supporter of a superpower Russia, looking after national interests and the *raison d'état* (Bäcker, 2007: 138–140). He criticised the USA for allegedly urging Kiev to separate from Russia and to align itself militarily with NATO. He believed that Ukraine, by organising exercises with the US fleet, was openly pushing Russia out of the Black Sea. He considered it a strategic mistake for Ukraine to “overextend itself into areas that had never been Ukraine until Lenin’s time: the two Donetsk

regions, the entire southern strip of New Russia (Melitopol-Cherson-Odessa) and Crimea”. On the other hand, he called the finding of Sevastopol within the borders of independent Ukraine “state thievery” and called on Russia to defend compatriots living in the states of the former USSR. He was a proponent of the concept of a tri-Slavic nation (Solżenicyn, 1999, 23–32, 51–55).

The pragmatic current, including that of K. Sorokin (1995, 1996), defended the concept of “dynamic balance”. It was believed that Russia could not afford to maintain a neo-imperial geopolitical construct. Russia’s relations with post-Soviet states should take place on the basis of pragmatism and respect for Russian interests. Two approaches were proposed as part of the policy towards the CIS states. The preferred model of Russia’s influence was to be economic relations (the “liberal empire” concept). The second model was about political and military influence (Sorokin, 1995; Sorokin, 1996: 7). The pragmatism of the concept consisted in constructing a geopolitical strategy to reach Russia’s lost position on the international arena (Shul’ha, 2006: 477).

Russian researcher V. Dergachev (2004, 2009) proposed the theory of the “great multidimensional space”, also known as the theory of borderland communicability.¹ He saw Eurasian Russia at the beginning of the 21st century as a continuation of Peter I’s geopolitical project “Europe + Russia”. As a regional power with nuclear weapons, the Russian Federation will be able to act as a “communicative bridge/borderland” in the West–East (China) relations. Russia’s geopolitical identity is located between the Eurasian civilisation and Eastern Christianity (Orthodoxy). The author argued that “the future of Eastern Europe depends on the fate of Russia, and the stability of the region rests in its hands” (Dergachev, 2004: 118–125, 260–281). This determines Russia’s domination of the Eastern European region in order to concentrate in one hand the space of the “communicative bridge/border” between the West and the East. It considers Ukraine as a European border state situated in South-Eastern Europe between Russia-Eurasia and CEE. The natural vectors of the Ukrainian politics are: the West (EU), the East (Russia), and South the (Sea). Unlike Russia, there is no Eurasian syndrome in Ukraine, but it has contributed to the fracturing of the Eastern European geopolitical space, playing the role of a “fifth column” of the West and becoming a “grey zone” of Europe. South-eastern Europe, including Ukraine, would be one of the main battlegrounds. The said author considered Crimea as an island not integrated into the Ukrainian state, which could provide a platform for cooperation for development

¹ Borderland – a specific space of intersecting borders and clashing interests. The classical geopolitical division based on the rivalry between maritime and land powers was supplemented by the division of space into the EWRAMAR (the great Eurasian multidimensional space) and the MOREMAR (the great multidimensional space emerging at the interface between land and sea/ocean). The above division takes into account geo-economic and geo-cultural issues in addition to the geopolitical context.

or confrontation at the border of civilisations. “Once Crimea was annexed, Russia came stubbornly close to losing it over the course of two centuries” (Dergachev, 2004: 268–276, 329–338). Poland was described by Dergachev as the “white crow” of the European geopolitics. Poland’s geopolitical situation is influenced by its location between Germany and Russia. The pro-American attitude of Poland and other CEE (“New Europe”) countries intensifies the conflict between “Old Europe” (Germany, France) and the USA. The Russian geopolitician believes that Poland will not be able to effectively balance between Berlin (economic interest) and Washington (political and military interest) (Dergachev, 2009).

Undoubtedly, a concept that occupies an important place in Russia’s strategic culture is the idea of “Moscow – the Third Rome”, which corresponds significantly with the assumptions of Eurasianism (Baluk, Doroshko 2021: 123). With the rise of the Grand Duchy of Moscow in the 13th century (claiming the inheritance of Rus’) and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, it was Moscow that appeared as the main centre where Orthodoxy played a leading role. At the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, the Grand Duchy of Moscow was forced to shape its new identity. Moscow’s idea came to take over the Byzantine legacy and rebuild the great empire, thus becoming its successor and an influential actor in the international environment. It is worth mentioning that the Principality of Moscow, while adapting Byzantine traditions, also adopted a sceptical attitude towards the West, thus deepening its previous aversion to that part of the world (Toynbee, 1991: 115).

A peculiar precursor of the messianic concept of “Moscow – the Third Rome” is considered to be the monk Philotheus, who in the 16th century developed a theory that is a permanent feature of Russia’s identity today. According to Philotheus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow was to take upon itself the duty of propagating the Christian (Orthodox) faith and to be a kind of leader for states with the Eastern Christian religious code, while Moscow’s society appeared as a chosen people (Toynbee, 1991: 115).

The concept of “Moscow – the Third Rome” has become the ideological foundation of contemporary Russia, i.e. a unique, messianic state that is predestined to be the defender of Orthodox believers against geopolitical opponents – the wider West (Catholicism, Protestantism) and the Islamic part of the world. The notion that the Russian Federation’s aim is to defy the world and to completely separate itself from an external culture that appears “corrupt” and “immoral” has become entrenched in the Russian identity. The above concept is at the heart of every Russian’s imperial policy.

An important idea that exerts a significant influence on the strategic culture of the Russian Federation is the concept of the “*Russkiy mir*”, which determines the Russian state’s intense involvement in the post-Soviet area. The Russian-Ukrainian war of 2014–2022/2023, and especially the full-scale invasion, confirm speculations about the geopolitical perception and importance of the “*Russkiy mir*” idea

for Putin's entourage, as the confessional and cultural and civilisational dimensions of the concept recede into the background.

As Marek Delong (2020: 53) states, "the basis of this concept is the existence of a community, identified by the Orthodox religion and culture, encompassing primarily Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, but also other states of the post-Soviet area. The peoples of these states are offered an integration consisting in de facto subordination to the spiritual, cultural and political Russian tradition". Moreover, it is closely linked to the religious plane of the Russian identity. The concept of the "Russian world" has been adapted from the Orthodox Church, while its foundation is the uniqueness of Russia and its role as a guardian of the Christian values, which derives from the idea of "Moscow – the Third Rome". As Alicja Stępień (1999: 79) notes, "According to the Russian Orthodox Church, the *Russkiy mir* are the Eastern Slavs who are part of the 'Holy Rus' (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians), as well as the Russian-speaking and Orthodox diasporas in other countries of the world. They are part of one Church and one nation". Fundamental to this concept is the renewal of the tri-unity of the Russian nation, without which Russia is unable to fulfil its role as a Eurasian empire. The unity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians was also discussed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who wrote that the original nation was "divided into three factions after the terrible misery caused by the Mongol invasion and Polish colonisation" (Sołżenicyn, 1991: 64).

Nevertheless, the concept of *Russkiy mir* is founded on legitimising Russian actions to expand its influence in post-Soviet states. The main idea of Russian decision-makers is a kind of expansion at the foreign, economic, or military level. As Olga Wasiuta (2017: 23) states, Russia's activity within the framework of the "Russian world" concept is characterised by a multi-stage approach. The first stage focuses on claims in the ideological area – the priority is a kind of "protection" of the Russian language and "meeting the cultural needs of the Russian-speaking population". The next stage concerns separatist actions dictated by the values of the "Russian world" concept. The final stage is direct military intervention, which is a kind of completion of the process of rebuilding the Russian empire (Wasiuta, 2017: 23).

The basic elements of Russia's strategic culture

When analysing the strategic culture of the Russian Federation, one can conclude that its key components are space, historical experience, culture (ideas about one's own civilisation), and the geopolitical plane. As Ken Booth (1979: 66) stated, "We learn from history feelings as well as facts – and these learned reactions make it possible to predict a group's response to certain stimuli and to determine

its attachment to certain ideas and interests.” Russia’s actions have for many years been marked by a particular interpretation of its historical legacy. History and geopolitics are a peculiar combination in the Russian strategic culture, and an analysis of the synthesis of these two elements makes it possible to understand the foundations of the Russian state’s conduct in the international environment.

As historian Georgiy Vernadskiy (1997: 12) states, “All civilisations have to some extent been influenced by geography, but the best example of the influence of geography on the culture of a given society is the Russian nation.” An inseparable component of the Russian identity since its inception has been the spatial factor, linked to the Russian history and determining the consciousness and attitudes of the Russian people. In Russian geopolitical thinking, space has a dualistic character – a peculiar combination of metaphysical aspects and pragmatic elements. The mythologisation of the spatial factor lies at the heart of the Russian strategic culture. Territorial vastness gives Russia a kind of power, being a component that supposedly proves the state’s influence on the international arena. For both the Russian public and political elites, space is not just in material terms the territory of a sovereign state, but is also an indicator of the uniqueness and power of the state (Potulski, 2010: 12).

When analysing the role of space in the Russian strategic culture, it should be mentioned that vast territory is not only a symbol of power in the international arena, but also a kind of “burden” for the Russian people. The philosopher Ivan Ilyin (2018) introduced the concept of the “burden of space” into Russian geopolitics, the essence of which is based on the shortcomings of Russia’s territorial vastness. The vast area of the Russian state has been a significant problem in economic and security terms for centuries. The vast territory and its role as a world empire placed a significant burden on the state, as territorial expansion and the colonisation of large areas affected the Russian economy; the maintenance of vast areas consumed considerable resource. As Vaclav Veber (2001: 35) states, “the fundamental cause of Russia’s backwardness was the excessive size of the empire. Maintaining its growing power, and especially managing such a large territory, significantly weakened the Russian economy“.

Russian philosopher Nikolai Bierdiajew, who dealt among other things with the issue of space in the psychology of the Russian society and its mythologisation, pointed out that Russia does not belong to either of the two cultures of the East and the West. According to Bierdiajew (1999: 227), the Russian state has its own distinct path of development, which makes it a kind of link between both the Western and the Eastern worlds, as components of both these cultures clash in Russia. The essence of the mentality of the Russian people was well-described by Bierdiajew, who noted that the Russian culture largely refers to the factor of space. The term “Russian soul” is correlated with the Russian mentality – it is a mythical identification of the society’s identity, while Russia itself is created as “ungraspable” and “mysterious” (Majcherek, 2022). The essence of the “Russian soul” is

founded on the creation of the character of the uniqueness of the Russian state, which is supposed to make it impossible to compare it to other subjects of the international environment. The mythical factor of the Russian identity is linked to the historical history of this nation; as Bierdiajew states (2005: 5), in order to understand the nature of the “Russian soul”, one must analyse Russia’s centuries-old tradition from the genesis of its statehood to the Soviet era.

The Russian state and its security policy has been shaped by the absence of natural geographical barriers – oceans, rivers, or mountains. It should also be mentioned that the length of Russia’s borders is 58,562 km, which is linked to the multiplicity of neighbours and a peculiar sense of insecurity (Matwiejuk, 2012: 277). This state of affairs implied the emergence of an authoritarian character of power in Russia, since a huge territory is associated with the fear of losing it. According to Bierdiajew, “One had to accept responsibility for the vastness of the Russian land and bear its burden. The elemental power of the Russian land shielded the Russian, but he too had to defend and develop it. The result was a morbid hypertrophy of the state stifling and often destroying the people” (Bierdiajew, 1999: 227). The Russian philosopher’s narrative was based on an explication and a kind of motivation of the actions of the Russian authorities, which sought to limit the freedom of Russians and to decisively subordinate their lives to the interests of the state. Moreover, the centralisation of power in Russia was also influenced by the Russian mentality. The problem of the national character of Russians was also written about by Bierdiajew, who noted that a citizen of the Russian state was incapable of managing the area around him/her – he/she transferred the responsibility of organising space to the ruling elite, which led to the centralisation of power. As Bierdiajew (2001: 193) further states, “It was easy for the Russian people to come by vast spaces, but it was not easy for them to organise these spaces into the world’s largest state and to maintain and preserve order in this state. The Russian people gave the greater part of their strength to this”.

An indispensable element of Russia’s strategic culture is the cult of the leader, whose origins date back to the Tartar-Mongol yoke, while the person of the khan (Mongol ruler) appeared as a model for Russian elites as a symbol of absolute power. The paternalism of power and the need for strong leadership are key systemic features of Russia, derived from the Russian history. As George F. Kennan (1946) noted, “Russia is deaf to the logic of reason, but highly sensitive to the logic of force“. According to the Russian tradition, force is the component that effectively influences the nation, which is also a legacy of the Tartar-Mongol enslavement (Roles, 2022). The Russian tradition dictates an almost servile relationship between the individual and the leader of the state. As Włodkowska-Bagan (2017: 39) notes, the consolidation around the symbol of the leader was a result of the traumatic experiences of the Russian people during the times of captivity. A condition intended to counteract the resumption of a situation analogous to the Tatar-Mongol yoke was the centralisation of power based on a strong military factor as the deterrent and

guarantor of security. Over time, this led to the mythologisation of leadership in Russia and, consequently, to its sacralisation. A kind of summary of the value of the myth of the leader in Russia's strategic culture is historian Feliks Koneczny's (2015: 373) statement: "This civilisation, even in its best days [...] always nurtured the camp method of the system of collective life. The leader is a demigod, lord of life and death of everyone without exception, and his/her rights are by no means diminished during peace, but the community becomes stagnant and inert. The peoples of this civilisation rot when they do not war; but there is an uninterrupted worship of the chief, i.e. of him/her who would be commander-in-chief in the event of war. The whims of his/her bad or good humour supersede all public law".

Russia's historical processes implied the formation of a characteristic feature of the Russian strategic culture, correlated with the need for a strong leader, namely the besieged fortress syndrome. This component appears as a peculiar foundation for exercising control over the Russian society, as it acts as a communication tool between state structures and Russians. "It is a socio-technical active means for the Kremlin authorities to manage Russia's multicultural/ethnic/religious society according to the interests of the Kremlin (not necessarily the citizens themselves)" (*Rosyjski syndrome*, 2022). The essence of the besieged fortress syndrome is rooted in the creation of a kind of psychological discomfort among the population. Russian citizens feel fear and entrapment, which is implied by the political elite, which shapes threats in the consciousness of citizens. Russian decision-makers define the enemies of the Russian Federation, thereby creating a kind of division of the world into allies and dangerous adversaries of the Russian state. Thus, the issue of security in the Russian strategic culture is to a large extent based on the Russian political elite's articulation of the fundamental threat from the broader West, which, according to Russia, is trying to take over its sphere of influence. Moreover, the sense of external threat is designed to distract citizens from internal problems (Włodkowska-Bagan, 2017: 44–45).

A peculiar consequence of the Russian people's constant sense of insecurity is that the Russian Federation's strategic culture is based on the military factor, which is a kind of continuation of the actions of the Soviet political elite, for whom the priority was to increase the power of the armed forces during the Cold War. Expenditure in the military area is a major task for the Russian state, leading to security and implying a return of the Russian Federation to the world power status. Russia is permanently modernising the armed forces, which is supposed to lead to their political usefulness. Modernisation plans for the second decade of the 21st century envisaged the expenditure of 767 billion USD, and the bulk of this amount is to be spent on the purchase of 1,000 helicopters, 100 space devices, 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles, 2,300 tanks, 600 aircraft, 80 submarines and surface ships, as well as 17,000 other military vehicles (Tomczyk, 2019).

According to Russian decision-makers, the basic component of the Russian Federation's imperial identity is the idea of a strong state, excluding the model

of cooperation with other actors in international relations. According to Putin, the factor that constitutes the power of the state, the main component of the defence policy, and an important foreign policy tool is military power and, in particular, nuclear weapons, which in the Russian perception appears as a guarantor of advantage in negotiations with other states and even an element of blackmail (Eitelhuber, 2009: 7). According to the Russian political elite, nuclear weapons ensure the Russian Federation's position as a key actor in the international arena, whose voice must be taken into account in the field of international politics. The military factor is a symbol of imperial power for Russia, and Vladimir Putin presents the value of this component to other actors in the international environment by means of a kind of show of force, the main purpose of which is to confirm the state's identity as a powerful force. As the President of the Russian Federation emphasised in his 2012 speech, "If Russia is strong enough, others will listen to what it has to say" (*Putin tells...*, 2012). How important the military factor is in Russian imperialism is illustrated by Mikołaj Kwiatkowski's (2023) statement that: "Geopolitical thinking is strictly related to the belief that politics is war, but waged by other means, while regular military conflicts to pursue one's interests are something completely natural".

The Russian strategic culture continues to be heavily influenced by the Uvarov formula (Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality), which determines Russia's identity on the international stage. The authoritarian power (the Kremlin) is interested in maintaining control over the society (the collective) as well as in subordinating the Russian Orthodox Church to geopolitical interests (Curanović, 2020).

The fundamentals of strategic thinking and action under Putin

Geopolitics, both internally and externally, determined Vladimir Putin's rule, which is subordinated to the doctrine of "historical and superpower reconstruction of Russia" (Putin ob SSSR, 2020). Political scientist B. Isayev, in his article titled "Putin as a Geopolitician and Geostrategist", writes about the assumptions of the president's international policy aimed at restoring and maintaining the high geopolitical status of the Russian state (Isayev, 2016), which involved a return to the geopolitical code of tsarist and Bolshevik Russia (the empire-state). French researcher M. Eltchaninoff (2022), in his book titled *In Putin's Head*, points out that the leader is creating his own hybrid geopolitical concept, selecting for his doctrine the necessary ideas and views from the Russian conservative thought, concepts proclaiming Russian exceptionalism (*osobiy russkiy put*), the "Eurasian empire", anti-occidentalism, and aggressive Soviet policy patterns (Shuman, 2016). The above indicates the embedding of Vladimir Putin's policy in the foundations of the Russian strategic culture.

Ideologically, Putinism also draws fully on Eurasian concepts (Gumilev, 2020; Dugin, 2000) and the Russian nationalist thought (Ilyin 2018; Sołżenicyn, 1999). In the first case, a very important reference is the identification of the international identity of the Russian state as a Eurasian empire, forming the basis of its own and unique civilisation. In turn, the doctrine of the empire-state, firmly embedded in the Russian nationalist tradition, determined the question of “how to rebuild Russia?” (Sołżenicyn, 1991), in which Russians would be the hegemon and the community responsible for the fate of the Eurasian state and empire.

Putin's publicly expressed grief over the collapse of the USSR as a form of continuation of the imperial traditions of tsarist Russia² largely determined the president's course of action, particularly in the organisation and management of the space of the so-called internal empire (the Russian Federation) and external empire (the area of the former USSR).

In domestic politics, Putin's entourage has proceeded to build a system of hardline authoritarianism with recourse to traditional elements of Russia's political culture. According to Dmitry Trenin (2017), “Traditional Russian political culture is markedly different from European political culture. The basic tenets of Russia's political culture are the sole authority, the indivisibility of power and the sacralisation of supreme authority, the vertical system of governance, sobornity (social consultation), the dominance of collective interest over private interest, hierarchicality (perceived as a symphony) between the ruling class and the ruled” (Kozhukhova, 2022). Thus, in internal politics, the main effort was focused on building a *de facto* centralised state, counteracting the centrifugal tendencies of the federated subjects (e.g. Tatarstan and Chechnya), significantly limiting the autonomy of the regions and introducing federal districts, allowing the head of state to maintain control on the ground. In this respect, the traditional demand of the Russian society for a strong government and state as guarantors of internal and international security was appealed to. Thus, in domestic policy, the main effort was concentrated on building a *de facto* centralised state, counteracting the centrifugal tendencies of the federated subjects (e.g. Tatarstan and Chechnya), significantly limiting the autonomy of the regions and introducing federal districts, allowing the head of state to maintain control on the ground. In this respect, reference was made to the Russian society's traditional demand for a strong government and state as guarantors of internal and international security. In addition to the institutional dimension of organising the internal space, the authorities reached for an ideology commonly referred to as Putinism, firmly rooted in the traditions of the

2 Putin has repeatedly called the collapse of the USSR a tragedy and geopolitical disaster of the 20th century. In *Russia: Recent History*, Putin states that the collapse of the USSR was a tragedy and the disintegration of historical Russia, the loss of 40% of the country's territory and economic potential. They became a different state, and the achievements of a thousand years of state-building were effectively lost (*Putin nazval*, 2021).

Russian imperial statehood and the Russian culture, treated as a distinct civilisation. The formation of the *de facto* state ideology during Vladimir Putin's rule was based on classical models of the Russian ideology (*russkoy ideii*) anchored in the traditions of the Greater Russian state and imperial chauvinism (Ejdman, 2022: 346). It will be significant to refer to Putin's 2012 article titled "Russia and National Issues", which refers to a historically great Russia, a unique cultural code, a strong state, and a mission to unite peoples within the Russian state and the Eurasian space (Putin, 2012).

Historical determinism plays an important role in the actions of the Russian government. Referring to historical figures, the imperial the tradition of Russian statehood of the tsarist (Peter I, Catherine II) and Soviet (Stalin) times is on the agenda of political practice. The above approach of the authorities plays a two-fold role. Firstly, the myth of a great and strong Russia consolidates the collectivist-authoritarian Russian society. Secondly, it serves as a justification for the Kremlin's desired leadership of Russia in the region and the world. Finally, cultural and civilisational issues were written into the Basic Law, amended in 2020. "The Russian Federation, united by a thousand years of history, preserving the memory of the ancestors who passed on ideas and faith in God, and preserving the continuity of the development of the Russian state, adheres to the historically formed state unity. The Russian Federation respects the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland, safeguards the protection of historical truth" (Koposow, 2014). In turn, the Russian Federation's National Security Strategy (2021) repeatedly includes the phrase "strengthening traditional moral-ethical values and protecting the cultural and historical heritage of the Russian people". The US policy has been identified as a fundamental threat to Russia's system of moral-ethical values and cultural-historical traditions. Russia declares to oppose attempts to allegedly falsify Russian and universal history as well as to destroy the truth and historical memory (*Strategiya*, 2021).

Countering the trends of globalisation and democratisation, Putin's regime has relied on anti-Western rhetoric and actions in both domestic and international politics. In Vladimir Putin's foreign policy, there is a noticeable tendency to subordinate the post-Soviet space to the Russian Federation as an exclusive sphere of influence within the so-called "near abroad" and the limited sovereignty of the states of the area. Putin's entourage continued the policy of reintegrating the post-Soviet space within Eurasian structures (the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation), but also relied on interference in the internal affairs of the newly independent states with the help of the agents of political and economic influence. Economic pressure, energy blackmail, the threat of military force, and the installation and management of low-intensity conflict on the territory of the former USSR became a kind of hallmark of the Kremlin's policy. Russia's wars against Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine confirm the thesis that the Kremlin is countering the

democratisation processes in the former Soviet republics and attempting to forcibly re-establish its own supremacy in the region, wanting to displace the West. For geopolitical and cultural-civilisational reasons, Ukraine occupied a special role in Moscow's imperial policy.

According to Zbigniew Brzezinski (1998), "Ukraine, an important new field on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because the very existence of an independent Ukrainian state helps transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire: it may still try to gain imperial status, but it would then be a predominantly Eurasian empire".

Vladimir Putin's attempts to subjugate Ukraine by political means (strategic partnership) and economic means (the idea of a common economic space, a customs union), despite deep penetration, did not yield the desired results. Hence the ideas of federalising Ukraine (*de facto* break-up) or installing a low-intensity conflict, with using the Russian-speaking population, to whom the concept of "*Russkiy mir*" was attempted to be imposed. Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 confirmed the realisation in the Russian Federation's strategy of the Eurasian concept (the annexation of Crimea) and isolationism (the creation of quasi-states in the form of so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics as part of limitrophe). By contrast, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 indicates a definitive shift in the centre of gravity towards the creation of a Eurasian empire with an anti-Western orientation, ready to "devour" the buffer zone. It is natural that, in such a situation, Ukraine, being in the security grey zone, went "first fire" as a kind of gateway to Central and Eastern Europe and as an area (Russia is countering the formation of the Ukrainian state) that is economically, socially, culturally, and civilisationally important for Vladimir Putin's imperial concepts and ambitions. Thus, Ukraine and Eastern Europe are important in the context of building a powerful Eurasian empire. The geopolitical and historical determinism in the Russian Federation's strategy makes Vladimir Putin's march into the 21st century to resemble the 17th and 18th centuries' subjugation of Ukraine and the road to the creation of a great empire.

The emergence of an independent Ukrainian state on the geopolitical map of Europe was seen as an existential threat to imperial Russia. For this reason, Alexander Dugin (2000) explicitly wrote about Ukraine being the key to rebuilding not only the empire, but also the Russian statehood. The division into two states – Russia and Ukraine – is advantageous for the Atlanticists, so the emergence of a single Eurasian state with Moscow's ideological dominance should be pursued at all costs (Dugin, 2000: 796–802). Eurasian concepts were not widely supported in Ukraine, so the idea of a "*Russkiy mir*" – within the context of which V. Putin claimed that Russians and Ukrainians were one nation, while the Ukrainian state was an artificial creation invented by Russia's enemies – proved helpful (*Stat'ya Vladimira*, 2021). It was significant that after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda media quoted Ivan Ilyin, who claimed that Malorussians and

Greater Russians were united by faith, origin, geography, politics, economy, as well as historical and cultural heritage. In the event of the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state, Russia should mobilise all forces and resources for its liquidation (Yamshanov, 2022).

In global politics, aiming to rebuild Russia's position as a world power (great/powerful Russia), Putin has challenged the dominance of the United States and demanded a "new world order" in which the Russian Federation will "shape a just and stable international order" (Perepelytsya et al., 2021: 208–301) Presidential advisor V. Surkov (2021) argues that "Russia will be given its share in the new division of lands (space), confirming its status as one of the few global players, as it was during the period of the Third Rome and the Third International" (*Surkov predrek*, 2021). Thus, he made it clear that Putin's Russia is seeking to build another empire. Furthermore, "Russia should constantly expand, as this is the existential basis of its historical being" (*Kuda delysya*, 2021). Priorities conceived in this way and the means of implementing them in global and regional politics inevitably lead to confrontations and wars. By reforming its armed forces, Russia was preparing for wars at the local and regional level, and, in perspective, also for a decisive clash over the division of the global space into spheres of influence. The anti-Western policy was pursued not only at the domestic level, but also in international relations. The Kremlin primarily focused on pushing the West out of the post-Soviet area, torpedoing all forms of cooperation and the integration of the countries of the region into Western structures (NATO and the EU). The potential accession of Ukraine and Georgia to the North Atlantic Alliance was seen as a challenge and a threat to Russian imperial policy. Even the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, devoid of membership prospects, was perceived as a threat to Russian domination in the post-Soviet area. The Kremlin's anti-Western policy was also practiced in its relations with the countries of the so-called Global South on the continents of Africa, Asia, and South America. Such cooperation initiatives as BRICS (Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa) and RIC (Russia–India–China) had an anti-Western dimension for Moscow. The above approach suggests that Putin's return to the USSR's geopolitical code required a new iteration of the Cold War's forgotten rivalry between socialism and the capitalist world. Currently, given also the potential of the Russian Federation, Putin has proposed confronting the rest of the world with the West. Moreover, in accordance with the principle of divide and rule, he supports anti-Americanism in European politics.

In relations with the West, Vladimir Putin gradually shifted from a selective partnership with Western states to a strategy of rivalry and confrontation, "constantly balancing on the brink of escalation with the West, including to the level of limited nuclear war" (Karaganov; see: Budzisz, 2021). Before the war began, Putin, in the form of an ultimatum, had demanded not only security guarantees, but also the finlandisation of Ukraine and the withdrawal of NATO to the borders from before the expansion of the Alliance (Legucka, 2021). The strategy of

de-escalation through escalation was necessary not only for Putin, but also for the West. The war with Ukraine and the strategy of deescalation through escalation was needed by Putin for several reasons: first, in order to consolidate the elite and the public around the idea of a great and powerful Russia; second, to initiate on a larger scale the process of subjugating the post-Soviet area by resolving the so-called Ukrainian question; and third, the revision of the balance of power and order in Central and Eastern Europe makes it possible to think about reducing American influence and the role of NATO in the region.

Analysing the foreign policy concepts as well as the war doctrine and the security strategy of the Russian Federation during Vladimir Putin's rule, one can see a clear influence of the Russian strategic culture on the process of planning and implementing the Russian state's strategy in the new geopolitical conditions. Firmly rejecting Kozyrev's pro-Western doctrine, initially referring to Primakov's pragmatic doctrine, the president's entourage developed its own doctrine, called Putinism. Ukrainian researcher Hryhoriy Perepelytsya, analysing the foreign policy concepts of the Russian Federation in 2000, concludes that Putin's doctrine took into account the new geopolitical realities, including the division of Eastern Europe, focusing on preserving influence in the post-Soviet area. By proposing a strategic partnership to the West, including the USA, he seeks to limit its influence in Russia and the former USSR area as much as possible. Reducing the global influence of the Russian Federation at the beginning of the 21st century, the West is trying to accumulate adequate resources to return to global competition and shape a multipolar order. In contrast, Putin's speech at the Munich Conference (2007) and the new foreign policy concept (2008) indicate Russia's desire to return to global geopolitics as a major player. Putin challenged the hegemony of the United States in world politics (unipolar order) and pointed to the destabilising role of the US and NATO in Europe. Thus, as part of a strategy of actively defending its interests, Russia has begun to demand the acceptance of its interests within the "new world order" (including an exclusive sphere of influence in the CIS area). Russia, having limited leverage over the West, used asymmetric methods of action in the first place, using its strengths in the energy, information, and ideology sectors. The narrative layer avoided the terms confrontation, replacing them with the need for dialogue between civilisations (Western and Eurasian) and respect for different values. According to the above-mentioned researcher, it was only in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (revised in 2016) that one can see the decisive influence of Eurasianism on Vladimir Putin's strategy, pointing to, among other things, the civilisational dimension of the rivalry of global powers and Russia's responsibility for global and regional security. The last postulates were to absolve the Kremlin's so-called military interventions not only in the post-Soviet area (Georgia, Ukraine), but also in other regions of the world (Syria, Libya). In the concept, regional priorities were subordinated to global interests, which was supposed to indicate Russia's return to the world's

leading states. In addition, the assumptions of the concept of Russia-Eurasia and the Eurasian Union, categories of global geopolitical and civilisational space appeared there (Perepelytsya et al., 2021: 208–301).

In this context, the assumptions of the latest Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation from March 2023, which reads about a period of revolutionary changes in world politics (dismantling the colonial order) and the formation of a more equitable global order, will be telling. “Countering the realisation of Russia’s role as one of the leading centres of development of the modern world, recognising its independent foreign policy as a threat to its own hegemony, the United States and its satellites took advantage of the situation related to the Russian Federation’s use of means to defend its existentially important interests in the Ukrainian direction to exacerbate the long-standing anti-Russian policy and unleash a hybrid war of a new type” (Kontsepsiya, 2023). The confrontational narrative of the concept is built on the anti-Western mindset, the need to defend its own civilisational identity, and Russia’s alliance with emerging powers within BRICS and RIC in the context of a joint “crusade” against the West, which opposes the formation of a “more just world order.” Russia’s vital interests also require the ordering of the post-Soviet space as well as security responsibilities call for global and regional intervention.

One can find similar strategic assumptions in the 2014 Russian War Doctrine. The document mentions, among other things, increasing competition at the global and regional level between the main centres of influence, the growing threat from NATO and armed conflicts near Russian borders, the use of nuclear weapons not only in the event of a nuclear conflict, but also in a conventional war situation, and the use of the Russian Armed Forces as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) contingent to settle various types of conflicts under the UN’s or CIS mandate (*Voyennaya doktrina*, 2014). The document was a development of the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine (2013) (Bartles, 2016) and, following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in February 2014, it was an acrimonious statement confirming the growing importance of force in international relations as well as the Kremlin’s readiness to use it to pursue its interests, including in a new type of war (hybrid warfare).

Similar formulations about rivalry and confrontation in a globalised world appeared in the 2009 National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (revised in 2014). The document described Russia’s ambitions as a significant economic power. Furthermore, it stated that values and development models had become the subject of global competition. The Kremlin was betting on the formation of a common political-military space (CSTO), economic space (Customs Union), and cultural and information space within the CIS structures (*Strategiya*, 2009). Furthermore, Russia countered the colour revolutions in the post-Soviet area, halting democratisation processes and supporting authoritarian regimes (Baluk, 2023). On the other hand, the 2015 National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation contains formulations

about the resurgence of traditional Russian moral and spiritual values; the consolidation of the Russian society around Russian freedom and independence; the unity of the Russian multinational cultures, family, and religious traditions; and attachment to the Russian history and patriotism. The document raises accusations against the USA and the EU for allegedly unleashing a civil war in Ukraine (*Strategiya*, 2021). Other priorities in global and regional policy, including in the CIS area, remained unchanged. The next National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation of 2021 maintains the preoccupation with the intensification of geopolitical instability, conflicts, and increasing contradictions between states. In addition, an increase in the importance of military power and the perception of Russia as a threat is indicated. The likelihood of local conflicts transforming into local or regional wars, including those involving nuclear states, is increasing. The Russians emphasise attention to the processes of shaping a new architecture of the international order, accompanied by geopolitical instability, conflicts, and contradictions in international relations. The creators of the strategy also made it a point to address the civilisational dimension of the rivalry with the West, which includes the proposed defence of historical truth, obviously in line with the Russian narrative, as well as the preservation of the historical memory of the Russian state (the imperial state). The document accuses the West and the USA of attacking and discriminating against Russian moral and ethical values as well as historical, cultural, and religious traditions. In addition, there is the issue of protecting the rights of the Russian population abroad and strengthening fraternal ties between the Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian peoples (the concept of “*Rus mir*”) (*Strategiya*, 2021).

Referring to Western experts on the Russian strategic culture, one can say that it is based on the preventive and offensive use of force (Snyder, 1977), which is confirmed by Putin's actions towards Georgia and Ukraine. Thus, it is the most militant and militarised strategic culture (Ermarth, 2009). Furthermore, the Russian strategic culture is strongly influenced by historical and geographical factors (Gray, 1986).

According to Polish researcher Marek Budzisz, the Russian strategic culture as a corpus of strategic thinking is focused on preserving the unity of the elite around the idea of a strong and centralised state, controlling society, and cultivating the historical traditions of a great and imperial Russia, which is a kind of state ideology (Budzisz, 2021: 456). In the Russian strategic culture, it is force that determines the rationale of the parties, which is why there is no clear demarcation between war and peace. Russia, seeking to revise the balance of power in Central and Eastern Europe, attacked Ukraine, deciding on a kind of “armed peace” with the West. From Moscow's perspective, Ukraine is a state carrying a constant threat, and it is because of this rivalry that the entire geo-strategic thinking and internal order is managed for years. Ukraine, in the view of Russian politicians, cannot be controlled, and the Ukrainian state can always be used against Russia (Budzisz, 2022: 100).

Russian researchers emphasise the importance of state-centricity and the equality and sovereignty of Russia in its relations with other powers (Trenin, 2017). In addition, they point to the priority of the interests of the community over the interests of the individual as well as the mission of the Russian state to fight for a just international order (Kozhukhova, 2022: 39–45). In turn, Ukrainian researcher and expert O. Lytvynenko (2013) lists a number of important elements that are part of Russia's strategic culture: 1) historical conditions of the cult of force; 2) the lack of trust in international politics, especially in relations with neighbours; 3) power politics and the militarisation of the state; 4) the besieged fortress syndrome; 5) defensive imperialism (through conquests, the creation of a so-called "security belt"); 6) insensitivity to human losses; 7) the zero-one perception of the world (winner–loser); 8) the formation of the Russian identity as opposed to the West (anti-West); 9) the constancy of political tools or the constancy of policy tools (e.g. military force, economic blackmail) as well as flexibility in the realisation of goals (force must meet force); 10) the situationality of the strategy of action (a change of previously set goals depending on the situation); 11) deep penetration of the enemy as well as the infiltration and creation of permanent networks of connections and influence; 12) the destabilisation of the enemy's political, economic, and social life; 13) the policy of divide and rule on the enemy's territory and during conquests; 14) the creation of a system of dependent states (the so-called external empire); 15) the strategy of the Russian Federation; 16) the creation of the Russian Federation; 17) the creation of the Russian Federation's external empire; 18) the strategy of warfare is to destabilise the enemy, seize their capital and dictate terms; 19) the leading role of force structures and special services in empire-building (Lytvynenko, 2013).

Conclusions

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that strategic culture is an important tool for analysing the behaviour of actors in international relations. Despite its initial marginalisation in the study of international relations (due to its multiple sources), it is now key to understanding the foundations of state strategies.

A fundamental component of the Russian strategic culture is historical experience (national memory), which makes it possible to understand the motivation behind the Russian Federation's actions in domestic and international politics. Russia's strategic culture was formed during the periods of the Moscow State, the Russian Empire, and the USSR. Vladimir Putin's regime is merely making an effort to adapt traditional strategies and doctrines to new geopolitical conditions. The return of the Russian Federation to the path of imperial policy and the rediscovery of the Russian idea (*russkoy idei*) has contributed to the "dusting off"

of the concept of Holy Rus, the unification of the Russian lands and Moscow the Third Rome, as well as the implementation of the concept of *Rus mir*, and the Eurasian empire within the state strategy. The return to history under Vladimir Putin meant a return to the tradition of imperial Russia.

Another important element of Russia's strategic culture remained the cultural-civilisational factor, perceived by Russians as a determinant of their own way (*osobogo puti*) and of a distinct civilisation (Eurasian). The notion of one's own uniqueness was synonymous with a sense of mission, imposing on Russians/Moscow a duty to unite the Russian lands as well as to defend Orthodoxy, the Slavs, or traditional values in relations with the evil West (anti-occidentalism). The above factor also implied the development of several essential features of Russia's strategic culture, including the cult of the leader and the strong state, the collectivist-authoritarian nature of the state-imperium community, the besieged fortress syndrome, and the militarisation of the state.

One of the most important dimensions of Russia's strategic culture appears to be the geopolitical plane, which influences the organisation of the imperial space within the so-called internal and external empire as well as the shaping of the country's relations with other actors in the international environment. Thus, in order to fully understand the motivation behind the actions of Russian decision-makers, it is necessary to analyse the role of space in Russian strategic thinking.

When analysing the Russian identity, it should be noted that the spatial factor is its intrinsic component, shaping the mentality of the Russian people. It is worth noting that Russian geopolitical thinking is a peculiar combination of two opposing dimensions – material and immaterial. On the one hand, space is a strictly physical element; a constituent part of the state is a territory with defined borders. On the other hand, Russian decision-makers have given it a metaphysical character; there is a visible sacralisation of the spatial factor among the population.

In Russian geopolitical thought and strategy of action, a dichotomous division is apparent between proponents of Occidentalism (ratepayers/Atlanticists) and opponents of Russia's Western direction (post-Vovniks, Slavophiles, Eurasians). However, historical experience confirms the thesis of the dominance in Russia's strategic culture of currents aspiring to be traditional in the Russian national idea (*russkoy ideyeye*). Drawing on a number of geopolitical concepts, Putin's regime appeals to two – Eurasianism and *Russkiy mir* – in the process of shaping its state ideology. Putin's geopolitical doctrine *de facto* synthesises these most important concepts for contemporary Russia.

An important geopolitical trend in the Russian Federation appears to be Eurasianism, whose assumptions correspond significantly with the Russian strategic culture. The main assumptions of this approach include the formation of an image of the state as a separate continental empire and a kind of collective antagonism of the West. Similarly, the geopolitical framing of the *russkiy mir* concept allows the rulers to justify territorial expansion (the gathering of *russkiy winters*) as well as

makes it possible to interfere in the internal affairs of third countries in defence of the Russian population (*russkiy*) and allows for the Orthodoxy associated with the tradition of the Moscow Church. Referring to the concept of *Rus mir*, the Russian authorities are appropriating the historical and cultural identity of Kievan Rus as well as denying the national and state distinctiveness of Ukrainians and Belarusians (the concept of a triune nation).

The article demonstrates the significant influence of the Russian strategic culture on the domestic and international policy of the Russian Federation during Vladimir Putin's rule, determined by history, culture, and geopolitics. The main objective of his actions is the renewal of Russian influence in the world and the restitution of Russia's imperial power. In other words, the essential feature of the policy created by Putin is a kind of revanchism, based on a permanent struggle with the western part of the world and the involvement of the Russian state in the post-Soviet area. The Russian-Ukrainian war (2014–2022/2023) shows, as through a lens, the most important planes of Putin's team's strategic thinking. Firstly, it has been used to preserve and strengthen the power of a narrow group of people (*siloviki*) in Russia, to shape a regime of hard authoritarianism (Putinism), and to consolidate the Russian society around the idea of an empire-state. Secondly, it allows those in power to portray the war as an internal conflict within the Russian *mir* and the Ukrainians as breakaway and separatists. Thirdly, it is a demonstration of force in the post-Soviet area and the application of the doctrine of limited state sovereignty of weaker actors. Last but not least, the war being waged on the Ukrainian territory is also seen by Russia in the context of the confrontation with the West in a struggle for space.

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