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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

restitution 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 oblężonej 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, Čerenev, 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 (Sołżenicyn, 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, Novorossiya, 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 (Sołženicyn, 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

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[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; Sołženicyn, 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?" (Sołženicyn, 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 Russia[2] 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

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[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 idei*) 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 twofold role. Firstly, the myth of a great and strong Russia consolidates the collectivist-author-itarian 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 delsya*, 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" (Kontseptsiya, 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. Las 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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Misperception in Foreign Policy as a By-Product of a Dogmatic Ideology: The Case of Russia's War in Ukraine

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

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

Keywords: war in Ukraine, misperception, dogmatic ideology, terror management theory, Russia, Putinism

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The main concepts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Putinism as a radical terror management device

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

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

The passage of power from Dmitry Medvedev to Vladimir Putin

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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The History of the Legal Status of the Ukrainian Language: From Kyivan Rus' to Contemporary Ukraine

Abstract. The insecurity resulting from the Russian invasion on Ukraine signifies that the political future of the country is still being formed. Multiple aspects of the further functioning of the country are being decided now. This also concerns the Ukrainian language, which has a significant number of native speakers not to be considered even remotely endangered, yet, its future status as the main language of the state institutions is continuously under threat.

If one looks at the turbulent history of Ukraine, one can observe that this is not a new issue at all. Throughout the centuries, the Ukrainian lands have been controlled by many countries. They included the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Austro-Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. All of them conducted various policies towards the Ukrainian people as well as their language. In

addition, these policies were constantly being altered. This article aims to present the evolution of the Ukrainian language, in particular its legal status in entities controlling the Ukrainian territories. Save the above-mentioned unions and empires, the language status is also explained, as it existed in the proto-states attempting to form independent Ukraine in the past, such as the Kyivan Rus', Zaporozhian Sich, the UPR, the WUPR, and the Ukrainian SSR.

A particular emphasis is put on the modern history, namely the development of the language laws in the Soviet Union and in independent Ukraine. Whether Ukraine will become a *de jure* and *de facto* monolingual European democracy is up to the aftermath of the currently ongoing events.

Keywords: history of Ukraine, Ukrainian language, language policy, Soviet policies, contemporary Ukrainian law, state-building, endangered language

Historia statusu prawnego języka ukraińskiego
Od Rusi Kijowskiej do współczesnej Ukrainy

Streszczenie. Niepewność wynikająca z rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę oznacza, że polityczna przyszłość kraju wciąż się kształtuje. Obecnie rozstrzygane są liczne aspekty dalszego funkcjonowania kraju. Dotyczy to również języka ukraińskiego, który ma znaczną liczbę rodzimych użytkowników, których nie można uznać za nawet zdalnie zagrożony, a mimo to jego przyszły status jako głównego języka instytucji państwowych jest stale zagrożony.

Jeśli przyjrzymy się burzliwej historii Ukrainy, możemy zauważyć, że nie jest to wcale nowy problem. Przez wieki ziemie ukraińskie były kontrolowane przez wiele krajów. Należały do nich Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów, Austro-Węgry, Czechosłowacja, Rumunia, Imperium Rosyjskie i Związek Radziecki. Wszystkie one prowadziły różną politykę wobec narodu ukraińskiego, jak również jego języka. Ponadto polityka ta była stale zmieniana. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie ewolucji języka ukraińskiego, w szczególności jego statusu prawnego w podmiotach kontrolujących terytoria ukraińskie. Oprócz wyżej wymienionych unii i imperiów, wyjaśniono również status języka, jaki istniał w protopaństwowych próbach utworzenia niepodległej Ukrainy w przeszłości, takich jak Ruś Kijowska, Sicz Zaporoska, URL, ZURL i Ukraińska SRR.

Szczególny nacisk położono na historię współczesną, a mianowicie rozwój praw językowych w Związku Radzieckim i niepodległej Ukrainie. To, czy Ukraina stanie się *de jure* i *de facto* jednojęzyczną europejską demokracją, zależy od następstw aktualnie trwających wydarzeń.

Słowa kluczowe: historia Ukrainy, język ukraiński, polityka językowa, polityka radziecka, współczesne prawo ukraińskie, budowanie państwa, język zagrożony

Why is the topic of the Ukrainian language raised so often in the media? What is, in fact, its current legal and official status? How can it be compared with the general linguistic situation in Ukraine? The problems regarding the functionality of the national language, which undoubtedly exist in the country, have been subject to several political and social debates. The formation of the modern Ukrainian language was influenced by multiple historical factors. In this light, this article has two main objectives. First, it aims to present the languages and dialects spoken in the Ukrainian lands against the background of history, as well as to demonstrate the differences between the *status quo* and the legal solutions applied by different states that held governance over the territories of current Ukraine. The process of forming the Ukrainian language alongside other languages is also shown. Second, the article attempts to answer the question about whether the Ukrainian language can remain the sole universally-used language of contemporary Ukraine despite all historical challenges and the linguistic diversity in all Ukrainian territories.

Most of the existing elaborations focus either on the whole history of Ukraine (Serczyk, 1990) or its particular periods (Wilson, 2015), or they strictly describe the process of legal evolution quoting particular acts (Dyczok, 1994), or they simply deal with the issue of the languages in the country, as if the topic was taken out from any political or social frame (Dalewska-Gren, 2007; Vydaychuk, 2021). Here, the more holistic picture is provided. It is to be shown how the above-mentioned factors interrelate. The methodology principally bases on a qualitative historical context analysis as well as the content analysis of several key documents mentioned in the text.

<p align="center">***</p>

According to Article 10 of the 1996 Ukrainian Constitution, Ukraine has one official language – Ukrainian. However, the complexity of the law on the issue as well as the turmoiling history of the country led to divergent language policies implemented through various periods of history, which frequently promoted languages different from those actually spoken in the Ukrainian lands. In modern times, the issue has been of a strong political nature. It has largely been connected with the policies defining the very essence of the *nationhood* of Ukraine.

The current sovereign state of Ukraine in its internationally-recognised borders, i.e. including the areas under the temporary Russian occupation, does not correspond with territories that can be classified as all Ukrainian historical lands. Some ethnographers consider the latter much larger (Kubiyovych, 1935). However, for the transparency of this article, the areas of contemporary Ukraine will only be investigated. The others proved to be of lesser importance to the pan-Ukrainian language policies.

The understanding of '*the legal status of a language*' within a state or a region is a key factor of this analysis. Hence, the term '*official status*' has to be defined.

According to a definition by McArthur (1998), "An official language is a language enjoying certain rights in defined situations. These rights can be created in written form or by historic usage". Less important functions may also be legally entrusted to other languages that do not have official status but may be used in other formal circumstances, e.g. in courts, in education, or on information signs. The precise role of an official language (including in Ukraine) varied in different epochs. For instance, Latin was an official language of many European medieval states, yet, it was not *a national tongue* of any of them. On the other hand, *a national language* is usually *a proper language of an ethnic group that considers itself a nation and inhabits a given territory*. In the more mono-ethnic countries, the national language also usually constitutes the official or the state language. In the more multi-cultural states, there can be more national languages, and some of them may be given an official status, while others may not.

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In order to address the problem with the Ukrainian languages in proper frames, first we have to define the phenomenon of language endangerment. A language becomes extinct when there exist no more native speakers and, subsequently, no one is able to speak it anymore, even as a second language. When it is assessed that such a scenario is likely to happen to a tongue in the foreseeable future, we deal with an endangered language (Crystal, 2002: 10–26). Many languages in the world are considered endangered. The level of threat for a particular language may differ and several institutions dealing with the issue, such as UNESCO, recognise various degrees of danger (Mosley, 2011: 11–12). Most of them are regional tongues. However, fully national and official state languages are certainly not without risks, either. The primary examples are Belarusian, Irish, and Scottish Gaelic (Mosley, 2011: 32–42).[1] Belarusian is the national and one of official languages of the Republic of Belarus, i.e. the neighbouring country of Ukraine, sharing a common and analogous history. Unlike in Ukraine, the Russian language also holds an official status in the country. The latter predominates. According to the latest 2019 census, it is assessed that the Belarusian language is spoken by 26% of the Belarusian population only (National Statistics Committee Belarus, 2020: 36). In addition, it may be presumed that many Belarusian native speakers do not use their language publicly due to the huge number of citizens who are not able to speak it. Similarly to Irish and Scottish-Gaelic, Belarusian is also endangered. It is worth noticing that the policy of Russification implemented

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[1] Some consider Scottish-Gaelic as a regional language only; however, even though Scotland is not an independent country, it is an officially recognised separate nation within the United Kingdom rather than a region, thus Scottish-Gaelic fulfils the criteria of being a full national language.

at first by the Russian tsars and then by the authorities of the Soviet Union played a huge role in the process of a gradual disappearance of the Belarusian language.

The very same or similar policies were also applied to Ukrainian in the respective times. Even though, the level of the endangerment of the Ukrainian language is still remote from that of Belarusian, a strong analogy exists. Both languages have been affected by the same historical mechanisms aiming to eradicate the singularity of their respective cultures. Thus, their current use is not as exclusive, as it is most often the case with national and state languages.

The population of Ukraine has always been bigger than that of Belarus. The history of a separate Ukrainian identity may have been older than that of a Belarusian one. The opposition against the tsarist and communist authorities in Ukraine has probably been stronger than in Belarus. Therefore, the Ukrainian language survived with stronger foundations. Nonetheless, the Russian language was widely spoken in Ukraine, equally as in Belarus.

Though the Ukrainian language may not be an endangered language as per the above definition, its role as the main national language in Ukraine has continuously been under threat.

Ukrainian has competed with Russian for the *de facto* official status in Ukraine for many years. After the adoption of the 1996 constitution, the problem has been challenged by multiple politicians proposing the equal status of both languages. If such decisions had been taken, the Ukrainian language would probably have faced the fate of the Belarusian language (even if the number of native speakers had been much higher than those of the Belarusian language). Similarly, it would also have become '*a second*' language in the state politics.

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Although Ukraine became an independent country only in 1991, there had been a few attempts to establish the sovereign Ukrainian state before. It is worth mentioning that the lack of continuous existence of Ukraine as a single sovereign country has been used as one of the pretexts by the Russian propaganda to justify the 2022 full Russian invasion (Putin, 2021).

The Kyivan Rus' was a proto-state (as it did not fulfil the contemporary definition of a state) located in the current Ukrainian lands. It was formed in the 9th century. Its existence lasted until the 13th century when it fell to the Mongol Invasion. Following these events, most of the Ukrainian lands were incorporated by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then by Poland, finally forming a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the aftermath of the Union of Lublin of 1596 (Serczyk, 1990: 64).

As argued by authors such as Krause and Slocum (2013) as well as Schenker (2015), the Old Ruthenian language probably originated from the common Old East Slavic language (the ancestor of all modern East Slavic languages) and subsequently evolved into the Ruthenian language (approximately in the 16th century). It

became at first the *de facto* and then also *de jure* official language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. At the time, the Lithuanian language had barely developed any official written forms (Frost, 2015: 18–35). The Ruthenian language is considered to be the common ancestor of three contemporary languages, namely: Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Rusyn. It is estimated that Russian had split from this group much earlier, i.e. approximately in the 13th century (Vakareliyska, Pugh, 1996: 414–415). One of the first written artefacts in the Ruthenian language is '*Francysk Skaryna's Bible*'. The work was published sometime between 1517 and 1519 (Skaryna, 1517–1519). Following the signature of the Union of Lublin, the official status of the Ruthenian language was revoked. It was *de jure* replaced by the Polish language.

The Ruthenian language had also become the *de facto* official language of the self-declared autonomy of the Cossack Zaporozhian Sich (in the southeast of the Commonwealth), with little control or influence from the central governance.

The subsequent political events shaped the new linguistic map of the area. In 1648, Bohdan Khmelnytsky sparked off his uprising against the Polish-Lithuanian dominance. As a result, he founded the Hetmanate (the Zaporozhian Host) by taking over the power from the Kish Otaman (chief elder of the governance) of the Sich. Khmelnytsky allied himself with the Crimean khan, and then the Russian tsar, against the Commonwealth. The Hetmanate (the left-bank of the Dnipro River) was incorporated into the Russian Tsardom as an autonomous entity. The division into factions caused several internal conflicts. Hetman Ivan Mazepa turned his back on Russia. Since then, autonomy was gradually being downgraded until the complete abolition of the Hetmanate. The Cossack state lasted until the late 18th century as a protectorate of the Russian Empire (Serczyk, 1990: 171–199). Serhii Plokhy claims that "the abolition of the Hetmanate and the gradual elimination of its institution and military structure ended the notion of partnership and equality between Great *[current Russia]* and Little Russia [Ukraine] imagined by generations of Ukrainian intellectuals" (Plokhy 2017, 59).

The whole period of the Russo-Polish War (1654–1667) also led to massive depopulation of the Ruthenian speakers. In the aftermath, the language of the latter completely lost its significance. The incorporation of the eastern part of Ukraine (including Kyiv) to Russia constituted the *de facto* cultural split into the left-bank and right-bank Ukraine. The division was also later reflected in the language. An ethnic group speaking the same language found itself in two different states. Eventually, the language underwent the process of deep dialecticalisation. The Ukrainian language began to separate gradually from the Ruthenian language. Finally, the development of the standard literary language followed the publication of *Eneida* by Ivan Kotlyarevsky in 1798 (Andrusyshen, Kirkconnell, 1963).

The above-mentioned events were also of momentous social meaning. They signified the *de facto* birth of the Ukrainian (then still referred to as Ruthenian) identity, which was supposed to be separate from those of the neighbouring nations including: Polish, Lithuanian, Muscovite (Russian), and Ottoman (Turkish)

(Wilson, 2015: 40–57). This led to demands for the official recognition of the Zaporozhian Sich. The Cossacks hoped for the similar privileges as those enjoyed by the Polish and Lithuanian noble class. There came up with an idea for the Grand Principality of Ruthenia, then represented by Hetman Ivan Vyhovsky, to become an equal part of the Commonwealth together with the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Great Duchy of Lithuania. The Ruthenian language was to regain its official status. Its prominence as the state language of one of the three constituent parts of the Commonwealth was only expected to grow. Despite all the potential political advantages, the legally-binding duration of the Treaty of Hadiach was very short. It only lasted from 1658 to 1659. It was ultimately rejected by the Polish and Lithuanian nobles who *de facto* held the state power.

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Following the partitions of the Commonwealth, most of the Ukrainian lands became a part of the Tsarist Empire. Eastern Galicia (Eastern Halychyna) was annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Neither held a separate autonomous status, though the whole of Galicia/Halychyna (including the native Polish lands) did in Austro-Hungary. Additionally, two more Ukrainian lands that had been beyond the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Tsardom joined Austro-Hungary, as well.

Transcarpathia (together with the rest of the Grand Principality of Transylvania) entered the Habsburgs' Empire in 1875. Along with a few others, the following languages were spoken in the region: Ukrainian, Hungarian, Romanian, German, Slovak, and Rusyn (Frank, 2000). Bukovina was annexed from the principality of Moldavia to Austro-Hungary only eight years later. Therein, the Romanian language prevailed (Pascu, 1992). Consequently, it can be observed that several minority languages (including non-Slavic ones) were already common in the Ukrainian territories.

Not until the 19th century was the Ukrainian language standardised. In the Russian empire, the full separate Ukrainian identity was beginning to rise amongst the intelligentsia of that century. Initially, the society was much divided.

The standardisation of any language often results from the development of literature at the time. Early Ukrainian authors, for instance Mykola Gogol[2] (1809–1852), wrote in Russian considering the Ukrainian language a regional dialect of people with little education. Despite having such views, Gogol tended to popularise the Ukrainian culture and folk in his stories. Such an opinion was shared by many intellectualists of the epoch (Wilson, 2015: 77–85).

The next generation of writers, though, brought a noticeable difference. One of the protagonists of the classical Ukrainian literature was, without a doubt, Taras

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[2] Mykola Gogol is usually referred to as Nikolai Gogol as per the Russian transliteration of his name, yet this article copes with the Ukrainian problematics and the author was Ukrainian, hence the transliteration of his Ukrainian spelling seems more appropriate for the purpose of this article.

Shevchenko (1814–1861), who wrote mostly in Ukrainian. Many amongst the even further generation, e.g. Lesia Ukrainka, did not only write almost exclusively in Ukrainian, but also criticised the Russian governance as well as underscored the differentiation amid the Russians and Ukrainians. In Ukrainka's *Бояриня* (*Boyarynya – The Noblewoman*), the main character states that the Ukrainians are the *borderline*, the so-called *last nation* of Europe, while the Russians are a barbarian people from Asia (Ukrainka, 1914). Such a forcible form of the anti-Russian sentiment became fairly common in Ukraine at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. No matter how inaccurate it was from the point of view of ethnography, it did reflect the actual views of a significant part of the population. However, people were still very much divided, not to say polarised, on the issue (Kruhlova, 2003: 76–79). A large number of the inhabitants of the Ukrainian lands continuously shared the view of Gogol and considered Ukraine or *Malorossiya* as a region of the huge pan-Russian empire. Nonetheless, the tendency kept changing throughout the 19th century. The number of advocates of the latter concept was decreasing, while there was a notable rise amongst the supporters of the former one (Wilson, 2015: 95–99). Additionally, the issue of identity highly varied amidst different social groups.

The altering moods became a threat to the Tsarist Empire. Therefore, the decree of Tsar Alexander II of 1876 banned all printing publication in the Ukrainian language (Internet Encyclopaedia of Ukraine, 2001). The Belarusian language had already been banned by Tsar Nicholas I in 1840 (Arloŭ, Sahanovič, 1996). The Ukrainians (analogously to their fellow Belarusians) were given a choice to consider themselves as Poles or as Russians. Let us notice here that both languages had been heavily influenced by Polish, mostly in terms of vocabulary, which dated back to the Commonwealth times. The repressive policies were relaxed in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution. The Ukrainians were free to choose religion and leave the Russian Church if they wished so. The Ukrainian language was recognised as a separate language, and the newspapers in it could be printed once again. Whether these policies were fully respected remains dubious, yet they officially existed in law until the First World War broke out (Plokhy, 2017: 163–167).

The Austro-Hungarian policies were much more liberal than those of Russia. The central government encouraged people to participate in the public life of the whole empire. Galicia/Halychyna, similarly to other regions inhabited by minorities, was autonomous. Although the Ukrainians wished for full autonomy for themselves (as East Galicia/East Halychyna), they shared the region together with the Poles, whose majority lived in the western part of the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria.[3] Nonetheless, the Ukrainians living in the region enjoyed more rights

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[3] It is not to be confused with Western Ukraine in the contemporary meaning of the word. Regions such as Volhynia had been under the occupation of the Tsarist Russia, and the Russian laws applied there.

than their compatriots in the Tsarist Empire, especially in view of the implemented policies of Russification. For instance, the majority of Ukrainian writings were printed in Austro-Hungary, where it was legal (Wilson, 2015: 101).

<div align="center">***</div>

Russia withdrew from World War One in early 1918 by the Brest-Litovsk Treaty (Lesaffer, *n.d.*), following the two revolutions and the outbreak of the civil war. The Central Powers were defeated by the Alliance, thereafter. In the aftermath, a significant number of independent countries emerged in Central and Eastern Europe on the territories of the former empires. Not all of the independent movements in the region turned out to be successful, though. In January 1918, most lands of contemporary Central and Eastern Ukraine declared independence as the Ukrainian People's Republic. It had already existed for six months as a self-declared autonomous entity within the borders of Russia. Then, the Western Ukrainian People's Republic was formed in the territory of Eastern Galicia (Eastern Halychyna) in November 1918. The two states merged later. These were the first attempts at creating independent Ukraine in the contemporary meaning of the word. The main policy of initially both states – and, after the unification, of the whole of the UPR – was to gain a fully recognised international independence.

At the same time, the Bolshevik forces continued the civil war with the White Movement in the former Russian Empire. The communists attempted to establish the Ukrainian Soviet Republic twice: in 1917 (as the Ukrainian Social Republic in Kharkiv) and in 1919 (as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in the same city). The latter attempt was successful. The communist entity, as a constituent republic which later joined the USSR, came into existence (Service, 2010a).

The Ukrainian language had already been standardised before the time of the creation of the UPR, the WUPR, and Communist Ukraine. The official use of any other language but Ukrainian was out of the question. The only exception was the brief period of the alliance of the UPR and Poland when the Polish language was also allowed. The 1920 Treaty of Warsaw stated that Poland recognised the Ukrainian People's Republic as an independent state, while the Ukrainians agreed to transfer most of the territories of the former Western Ukrainian People's Republic to Poland. Accordingly, both the Poles and the Ukrainians recognised each other as minorities with equal rights in their respective newly formed states. Nonetheless, the UPR only enjoyed a very short existence and was soon divided amidst the Second Republic of Poland and the above-mentioned Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic of the USSR.

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Shortly after the October Revolution, Vladimir Lenin and the first generation of Bolsheviks claimed that the USSR should be a union of peoples. Therefore, the Ukrainian language was a *de facto* official language of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Nonetheless, the Russian language was also widely used. The choice of a language was almost always dependent on an individual holding the official post. These policies lasted until Joseph Stalin came to power.

The split of the factions between Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky led to a further disturbance of the language policies. Trotsky perceived the spread of the communist revolution as a challenge for the whole of humanity rather than an internal affair of one nation. On the other hand, Stalin was of a different mind and insisted on building a new system basing on the 'socialism in one country' principle. This led to sacking Trotsky and his collaborators from the party, the condemnation of their views, and the eventual assassination of Trotsky himself. Trotsky believed that the communist revolution should bring changes on a worldwide scale and considered the role of the nations, not to mention the languages spoken in their territories, as mostly irrelevant (Service, 2010c). Therefore, the issue whether the Ukrainian language or the Russian language was spoken in Ukraine was of little importance.

Initially, the multilingualism did not consider any burden for the first generation of Bolsheviks. On the contrary, it went along with their propaganda, as at the time, the hopes raised for the world revolution where each and every nation was 'liberated'. Stalin did not pay too much attention to the use of proper languages himself (i.e. the first languages spoken in the given territories) of the lands belonging to the Soviet Union, either. The politics of Ukrainisation was even enhanced by the central Soviet government. Effectively, in the 1920s, the number of Ukrainian speakers began to grow, which was visible particularly in the regions bordering the Ukrainian and Russian republics. This nationalism (only in its very limited form) was not perceived to be a threat to the existing political system. The situation was about to change in the early 1930s.

The attitude of Stalin regarding one-state 'socialism' must have eventually made all the nationalist movements within at least partly hostile to the regime. The split with Trotsky made Stalin look at the issue more pragmatically. He was aware of the potential independence or self-governance movements across the Soviet Union, which could threaten the whole system, not to mention himself personally. The 'socialism in one country' principle directly indicated the existence of the very one country, i.e. the *Soviet Nation* (Service, 2010b). The hitherto ideologies that the communists of all the nations within the Soviet Union had stood for must have been thoroughly overhauled. In particular, they must have favoured the cult of personality. The leader had to fit in the whole system (Service, 2010b: 357).

Speaking in languages other than Russian became somewhat undesirable, but not officially prohibited. Therefore, in the 1930s, the Ukrainian language was taken out of the public sphere of life. Those who disagreed were forcibly silenced. The use of the tongue was *de facto* limited to private households (Service, 2010b: 356).

The 'socialism in one country' principle meant that the spread of revolutionist ideals behind the Soviet borders was only to result from the political convenience rather than the essence of any revolutionary ideology of the Bolsheviks. The achievement of the fully socialist world was no longer the primary objective. It can be assessed that such a change of orientation led to dissatisfaction among some high officials, including many members of the Central Committee. The policy contradicted the earlier assumptions of the communist party, particularly Trotsky's way of thinking, not to mention the original ideas of communism (Engels, 1847). Subsequently, Stalin labelled his opponents (in particular, the members of the so-called 'Opposition Left', but not only) as Trockyists, discrediting his former political rival even more. Then, he commenced his infamous purges in order to eliminate all his potential political foes. According to the new policies, the nationalists from the republics became the natural target (Service, 2010b: 323).

The shift of the pan-Soviet politics had an enormous impact on Ukraine. The national sentiment was at the time one of the highest in the Soviet Union. The ongoing process of Ukrainisation was completely retracted. The political and cultural elites of the republic were arrested. Some of them faced death penalty. Further repressions continued. They included the creation of *Holodomor* ('Famine'). This Stalinist policy was conducted in Ukraine, but it also occurred in a few other parts of the Soviet Union. It aimed to restrain the grain production artificially in order to create famine, which was supposed to stop the population from any political activities. Although some researchers claim that the *Holodomor* resulted from multiple factors such as the failures of the industrialisation and agriculture collectivisation processes, most contemporary literature shows without doubts that the *Holodomor* was a man-made operation (Applebaum, 2018).

Following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the admission of Volhynia to Poland, parts of the Ukrainian lands remained in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. The Ukrainians living in the respective countries used their language on a daily basis, yet the Polish, Czechoslovak,[4] and Romanian languages, respectively, were the official languages in Ukraine's inhabited areas.

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[4] At the time, there was no differentiation between Czech and Slovak as two separate languages.

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The borders were changed again in 1945 after the end of World War Two in Europe. The previously Polish lands of Eastern Galicia (Eastern Halychyna) and Volhynia, as well as Czechoslovak Zakarpattia and Romanian Bukovina (Chernivtsi land), were wholly incorporated into the Soviet Union (as a part of the Ukrainian SSR). The borders stayed this way until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

After Stalin's death, Mykola Khrushchov,[5] born to Russian parents, a resident of Ukraine since his teenage years, introduced the political process of de-Stalinisation. The new Soviet leader denounced the policies of his predecessor, admitting that Stalin had been a dictator who had committed numerous crimes against the Soviet people, which had threatened the security and even existence of the Union. In particular, he criticised Stalin's cult of personality (*About the Cult of Personality…*, 1956). In Khrushchov's times, the Ukrainian language enjoyed its revival, especially after the nomination of Petro Shelest for the First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party in 1963. The republic leader made his fame by introducing many new policies that promoted Ukraine as a separate nation within the USSR. This included the expansion of the use of the language, also into the area of education. Shelest promoted Ukrainian writers and claimed the Cossack origin of the then-contemporary nation of Soviet Ukraine. He even proposed the introduction of the Ukrainian language as a mandatory language of higher education in the Ukrainian SSR. The last proposition ultimately failed (Bertelsen, 2022).

On the other hand, in the late 1950s, Khrushchov initiated some reforms in education, which, in some schools, included the replacement of a non-Russian medium of instruction with Russian. This mostly concerned small nationalities and the already bilingual communities (Bilinsky, 1962: 138–147). Thus, it did not affect the Ukrainian language.

Having forced Khrushchov to give away power, Leonid Brezhnev, a true Ukrainian by birth (Schattenberg, 2019: 32–33), became the new General Secretary of the Soviet Union (i.e. the *de facto* Soviet leader). Nonetheless, Brezhnev's vision of the Soviet Union was different than that of his predecessor. He aimed to restore a few of the former Stalin's policies. Although some new repressions were imposed, they were not as severe as those implemented by the former dictator. Brezhnev insisted on centralising power in the USSR. He also inclined towards the collective leadership to a more notable extent than Khrushchov did. The main

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[5] Similarly to the previous cases, the most common transliteration of the Soviet Leader's name in the English language comes from Russian (Nikolai Khrushchev), yet, even though he was Russian by birth, he spent his youth in Ukraine, and later, as a political leader, he strongly advocated Ukraine. Following the assumptions of this article, which copes with the Ukrainian matters, the text uses the transliteration of his name written in Ukrainian, which has always been common in the Ukrainian SSR.

figures of the communist party fully participated in the central decision-making process. This signified no more autonomy for the culture of the republics. The Ukrainian language was once again threatened, as Russian was supposed to be the only pan-Union language (Schattenberg, 2019: 242). Brezhnev's politics also impacted the raise of corruption throughout the whole of the USSR in the contemporary meaning of the word (Plokhy, 2016: 307). This also led to gradual nationwide economic stagnation (O'Sullivan, 2008).

Effectively, the new central Soviet government sacked Shelest (Kuzio, 2010). The leader of the Ukrainian SSR was replaced by Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, who significantly contributed to the Russification of Ukraine. Shcherbytsky was a close ally of Brezhnev. The change in language policy was notable. The Ukrainian language could no longer be used officially even in local matters. It remained in the public life unofficially, yet the authorities did not look at it favourably. For example, during Shcherbytsky's tenure, all the signs in the Kyiv Metro were temporarily changed from Ukrainian to Russian (Ermak, 2012: 22).

The subsequent leaders of the USSR, Yuri Andropov and Konstantyn Chernenko, stayed in power for a relatively short time. No major legislative changes concerning the Ukrainian language took place when they held the position of the General Secretary (Kenez, 2017: 214).

In the second half of the 1980s, the Soviet economy was performing very poorly. It brought the very existence of the Soviet Union into risk. The disaster of the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant in Prypyat, the Ukrainian SSR, in 1986 brought further complications to the pan-Union authorities. Though never officially stated, the issue of the potential Ukrainian independence became a threat to the already weak USSR (Judah, 2016: 31–35). Additionally, the continuous unsuccessful war efforts in Afghanistan were not helping. The fate of the USSR had already been sealed. Only four years after the biggest nuclear disaster in history, the Nakhchivan ASSR, as the first part of the Union, declared independence (Bolukbasi, 2014: 138–139). It was the first blow to the unity of the perceived 'invincible state' (14 months before the even more famous declaration of Lithuanian independence).

However, in order to save the Soviet state, its new leader Mikhail Gorbachev set in motion a number of reforms, the so-called *perebudova* and *hlasnist* (*perestroika* and *glasnost* in Russian, i.e. *reconstructing* and *transparency* in English), aiming to democratise the Soviet Union to a certain extent so as to make it more capable to compete in international business relations. The introduction of the new laws gave the Ukrainian language more manoeuvres. However, Russian still remained the preferable tongue in Ukraine. Shcherbytsky was still number one in Ukraine. He did not desire Ukraine to separate too much from Russia. Therefore, he maintained some Russification policies from the Brezhnev era. Let us notice that at the time, the central government became less influential in Ukraine than in the past.

It is worth adding that despite various recommendations from the central authorities regarding linguistic policies, and the treatment of regional languages (the republic level as well as more local level) in different periods of its history, the USSR had no language with an official status until 1990. It was only then that Russian became officially acknowledged as a state language, as a language for interethnic communication (though the latter status had already been denoted in written statements), while the national languages of the republics were given an official status within their jurisdiction (Law of the USSR, 1990).

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The rivalry at the highest level of power was one of the most significant drivers leading to the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union. Ukraine became an independent state. It was decided that Ukrainian ought to be the only state language, even though Russian was widely spoken (Ukrainian Census, 2001). The latter was predominant in the east and southeast of the country. Even though most inhabitants of the central and northeast parts declared Ukrainian as their primary language (undoubtedly, they were fluent in it), Russian and Surzhyk (the dialect continuum between Ukrainian and Russian) remained their main media of everyday communication. Surzhyk was also widely used in the Ukrainian central west and in principally Russian-speaking areas. The dialect continuum was also present in big cities which had internal migrant populations, such as Lviv (though in the case of this city, Ukrainian was predominant). Rural areas as well as smaller cities and towns in the west used almost exclusively the Ukrainian language (though the population was still fluent in Russian, which had been a *de facto* and then *de jure* state language of the former Union). The east and south, as well as autonomous Crimea (the autonomous status of the peninsula was returned after the Ukrainian independence) used mostly the Russian language (Schmid, Myshlovska, 2019: 188–192). Nonetheless, some Russian speakers from the east of the country had a notable Ukrainian influence on their accent, e.g. due to the characteristic use of a voiced glottal fricative sound, i.e. replacing the sound [g] with [ɦ], which is typical of Ukrainian speakers. The sound [g] appearing in Russian words is usually replaced by [ɦ] in the Ukrainian words of the same etymology (Divanovskiy, 2019; Dalewska-Gren, 2007: 100–103). The phenomenon was uncommon amongst the majority of the Russian-speaking Ukrainians from the south, as well as the Crimeans.

The Ukrainisation process reinitialised. The most important steps were to enhance the use of the Ukrainian language in education as well as in the media. The Russian-language media were still very popular, though, including those broadcasting from Russia, especially in the east. Likewise, more motion pictures were translated into Russian than into Ukrainian. However, the use of the Ukrainian language in business was encouraged by the government. Ukrainian was

also supposed to become the new language of interethnic communication. Despite these policies, the spread of the Ukrainian language had limited successes.

Though Ukrainian was the sole official language of the whole country, some documents were allowed to be issued in Russian and Crimean Tatar in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, as per Article 4, section 2 of the 1998 Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Russian had been the unquestionable majority language in the peninsula for at least 200 years (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

The Orange revolution of 2004 was a series of protests in Ukraine that led to the invalidation of the presidential election won by a widely considered to be pro-Russian candidate – Viktor Yanukovych. Whether he was pro-Russian indeed can be questionable. He was born in Donetsk. Being a native Russian speaker, he managed to learn some Ukrainian (Parafianowicz, Potocki, 2015, 45–55). He was presented in Oliver Stone's documentary titled *Ukraine on Fire* (Stone, 2016). The film undoubtedly took a hard pro-Russian stance; however, it also demonstrated that Putin blackmailed Yanukovych, trying to achieve his own political goals. This was confirmed by numerous scholars, including Dragneva and Wolczuk (2015) as well as Parafianowicz and Potocki (2015: 172–179). It seems quite plausible that Yanukovych aimed to build his own influence in Ukraine (e.g. via building the clientelistic networks), only using Moscow as a backup at times when it caused a real burden for the implementation of his policies. Nonetheless, the Russian speakers were frequently associated with pro-Russian political views, while the Ukrainian speakers were linked to pro-Europeanism and pro-Westernism. The truth is that such a simplification happens to be a huge mistake. Of course, this does not exempt President Yanukovych from any responsibility or criminal charges brought against him in the aftermath of the further events. It only demonstrates that many actions of his were not dictated by the pro-Russian stance. Moreover, the fact of him being a Russian-speaker probably had little impact on his actual policies (save the pure linguistic ones).

The repeated election took place in late winter 2004 and pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko was declared the winner. The change of the orientation of the Ukrainian politics towards the West had little influence on the language policies yet. Ukraine signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1996, and, subsequently, it ratified it in 2005, indicating 18 regional tongues (including the previously mentioned Crimean Tatar, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Rusyn, Slovak, and several more) (European Charter, 1996).

The language politics continued without farther changes until Viktor Yanukovych won the following presidential election and took the office in 2010. Shortly after this, his Party of Regions won the parliamentary election and Mykola Azarov became the Prime Minister. The perception of the use of a language has always been controversial. It was never rid of a political context.

Yanukovych's presidency as well as the government of his own party made the discussion over the language policy alive again. In 2012, the new Law of Ukraine 'On the Principles of State Language Policy' was signed and entered into force (Law of Ukraine, 2012). The then-Ukrainian opposition considered the law controversial. Although it reaffirmed the Ukrainian language as the sole official tongue of the country, it allowed the other languages spoken in regions by at least 10% of the population to be used in some official purposes, e.g. as a medium of instruction in schools. Even though it would probably be perceived as a step towards the growth of democracy in the majority of free countries, the specificity of the Ukrainian realities and history contributed to the rise of anger amongst the opposition. It constitutes an analogous situation to the artificially-slowed-down process of the decentralisation of Ukraine (Slukhaii, 2015). The particular problem was the fact that the Russian language had already been widely spoken in many areas of Ukraine. The members of the opposition parties feared that the law would allow Russia to enlarge its influence on the internal affairs of the state (Guardian, 2012). The legislation also aimed to enhance the locals to use the regional languages, which the opposition labelled as *de facto* promoting the 're-Russification'. Additionally, it was suggested that the law contained numerous substantive and legal errors (Draft Law of Ukraine, 2012). The proposal was accused of not corresponding with the principles of linguistics concerning the function of a native language (Davies, 2003: 237). The idea of eventual granting Russian the status of the second state language in Ukraine was also supported by some members of the Party of Regions (Moser, 2015: 188–189).

In 2013, Ukraine faced the biggest pro-democratic and pro-Western protests in history (significantly larger than the Orange Revolution) (Marples, 2017) that ultimately led to the outbreak of the Revolution of Dignity. In February 2014, Yanukovych was ousted and escaped to Russia. A new pro-Western government was to be formed and a new presidential election was to be held. This happened, respectively, later in February and in May of the same year. The changes were also reflected in language policies. The previous law 'On the Principles of State Language Policy' became the subject of a major debate (Reznik, 2018: 169). The court declared it unconstitutional in 2018. The works on a draft of the new law also brought about many controversies. Even some pro-Western politicians, including the members of the presidential Petro Poroshenko bloc, showed some restraints, as the law could be considered repressive, since it *de facto* forced the Russian speakers of the south and east to adapt quickly to the life in a solely Ukrainian-speaking state (Moskvichova et al., 2018). In practice, the law forbade any official use of Russian. Those employees who served customers were obliged to commence each conversation in Ukrainian. The television was to be broadcast exclusively in Ukrainian. The limit was set for a number of non-Ukrainian songs played in the radio as well as non-Ukrainian language books sold in bookshops (BBC News, 2016). The European Commission for

Democracy through Law (the so-called Venice Commission) also criticised the project (Denber, 2022).

In 2019, the Verkhovna Rada (the Ukrainian parliament) passed a new law 'On Protecting the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the State language', which aimed to replace the old legislation. Accordingly, two new institutions were created. The first one was the post of a State Language Protection Commissioner and the other one was the National Commission on State Language Standards. The latter is an executive body deciding about the standards of the language, while the Commissioner's role is to monitor whether the laws are followed properly. The law defined the areas of public life where the Ukrainian language should be used. This *de facto* indicated all areas of the social sphere leaving the liberty of using any language in private communication. Some Ukrainian politicians, even those with pro-Western stance, continued to oppose the law, accusing it of the discrimination of minorities (Language Policy Portal, 2019).

In 2019, a pro-EU and pro-Western candidate, Volodymyr Zelensky, won the presidential election. The Venice Commission withdrew its earlier concerns regarding a new language law after several modifications had been applied to the original draft. In particular, they brought more flexibility regarding the use of minority languages as well as those of the European Union. The changes were also visible in the sphere of education. Even though Ukrainian was still supposed to be the sole medium of instruction in primary education, any language of the European Union and/or Ukrainian could optionally be used in secondary and higher education (European Commission, 2024). The instruction of the humanities has also been influenced by the changes. The Ukrainian curriculum shifted away from teaching the Russian culture and literature, now focusing primarily on the matters native to Ukraine. More emphasis was also put on the world history and literature rather than on the Russian ones (Sklokin, 2016: 250–261).

The survey conducted during the Revolution of Dignity indicated that the Russian language still dominated in the south (e.g. 43% in Odesa and 42% in Mykolaiv). Similar results came from the east (e.g. 42% in Kharkiv, but only 27% in Dnipro). Many of the inhabitants of both regions claimed to be bilingual. The highest rate of the Russian speakers was in the oblasts, which were occupied by Russia later on (48% in Donetsk and 55% in Luhansk). In Crimea, the numbers reached almost 90%. In the north, most citizens declared Ukrainian to be their first language (e.g. 70% in Poltava). In the City of Kyiv, the numbers were around 67% of Ukrainian speakers, and in the oblast they reached 84%. The traditionally Ukrainian-speaking west confirmed the expectations (from 90% in Zakarpattia, where there are additionally many Hungarian speakers, to 96% in Lviv and more than 99% in Ivano-Frankivsk) (Schmid, Myshlovska, 2019: 188–192). Alas, this data cannot be considered thoroughly accurate, because many Ukrainians are, in fact, bilingual. They very often declare a given language to be their first or native

language solely according to their political views. In real life, they may speak the other language or Surzhyk, too.

The Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 convoluted the situation even more. Many citizens migrated to other parts of the country. The war definitely enhanced the anti-Russian and pro-Western sentiment. Speaking Ukrainian rather than Russian became symbolic. Hence, many citizens whose first language was not Ukrainian began to speak it as a form of demonstration of their identity. Many 'former Russian native speakers' commenced to consider themselves Ukrainian speakers. Therefore, conducting a new objective statistical research regarding the issue even when the war is over will be extremely difficult.

<p align="center">***</p>

Some authors, including Petro Tolochko, claimed that the Kyivan Rus' was an ancestor of all modern Eastern Slavic states (Tolochko, 1987: 246). Others, such as Mykhailo Hrushevsky, researched the history of Ukraine focusing on the continuous culture of the Ukrainian nationhood, even at times when it was not an independent state (Hrushevsky, 1911). The latter author believed that the Kyivan Rus' was the direct ancestor of proper Ukraine only. No matter which framework one considers, the existence of the Ukrainian statehood has never had continuity.

The Zaporozhian Sich was a self-declared autonomous proto-state whose appearance on the map led to the formation of the Ukrainian identity (separate from other Eastern Slavic, as well as Polish and Lithuanian). The most significant development of the latter took place in the 19th century among the intelligentsia.

Not until 1917 were there any realistic attempts at establishing a functional independent Ukrainian state in the contemporary meaning of the word. Then, Ukraine became one of the republics of the Soviet Union. Finally, it won independence in 1991. During the turbulent history, the language policy was at times dictated, and at times heavily influenced by Poland, Russia, Austro-Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. The legal solutions were diverse. The Ukrainian language had to compete for its place with other languages. Even though it is not endangered at the moment, its future as the main national language is still not certain. Although it received a sole official status after the regaining of Ukrainian independence, it was continuously undermined by the Russian language, which was spoken by a huge part of the population (including native Ukrainian speakers) on a daily basis. Perhaps, the new policies which aim to reduce the use of Russian as well as the large-scale social changes caused by Putin's invasion on Ukraine will transform the country into a monolingual society in the nearest future (Petrova, 2023). Also, the unwillingness of speaking Russian may redirect people's attention towards learning foreign western

languages, including English, French, and German. This will definitely constitute a big step in social transformation. On the other hand, if Russia is successful on the battlefield, the pro-Ukrainian policies might reverse. Without a doubt, the turbulent history of Ukraine has not ended yet, as is the case with the formulation of its long-term language policy. Unfortunately, there are still many issues to be resolved before this kind of stability is reached.

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Iran's Resistance Front Policy in the Strategic Calculations of the Russian Federation

Abstract. One of the most important pillars of Iran's geopolitical activities in the region and beyond is the Axis of Resistance concept. It creates opportunities to expand Tehran's influence and power as well as counter-balance its enemies as far from its borders as possible. However, this confrontational policy in the region is not carried out in a political vacuum. It impacts not only regional actors, but also the world's leading powers. Russia is one of them. The primary objective of this article is to analyse Russia's approach towards Iran's Resistance Front policy. To achieve this, the paper will touch upon several crucial elements, including the Iranian concept of the Resistance Front, the historical perspective of Russia's approach to Iran (after the Cold War), and limitations of the Kremlin's support to Tehran's policy.

Keywords: Iran, Russia, foreign policy, security, Resistance Front, Axis of Resistance

Polityka irańskiego Frontu Oporu w strategicznych kalkulacjach Federacji Rosyjskiej

Streszczenie. Jednym z najważniejszych filarów geopolitycznych działań Iranu w regionie i poza nim jest koncepcja Osi Oporu. Stwarza ona możliwości rozszerzania wpływów i potęgi Teheranu oraz równoważenia jego wrogów jak najdalej od jego granic. Ta konfrontacyjna polityka w regionie nie jest jednak prowadzona w politycznej próżni. Ma ona wpływ nie tylko na podmioty regionalne, ale także na wiodące światowe mocarstwa. Rosja jest jednym z nich. Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza podejścia Rosji do polityki irańskiego Frontu Oporu. Aby to osiągnąć, artykuł poruszy kilka kluczowych elementów, w tym irańską koncepcję Frontu Oporu, historyczną perspektywę podejścia Rosji do Iranu (po zimnej wojnie) oraz ograniczenia wsparcia Kremla dla polityki Teheranu.

Słowa kluczowe: Iran, Rosja, polityka zagraniczna, bezpieczeństwo, Front Oporu, Oś Oporu

Introduction

One of the key components of Iran's contemporary geopolitical strategy is known as the "Axis of Resistance". This policy has been negatively perceived by the Western powers and contributed to more regional tensions, including deepening sectarian divisions. However, it also allowed Iran to expand its presence externally. This aligns closely with the realist school of International Relations, which claims that the primary goal of every nation is to increase its power, even if it comes at the expense of other international actors. Simultaneously, this long-term and relatively comprehensive policy also serves a defensive dimension. Tehran gains valuable tools to counterbalance its adversaries and endeavours to maintain a buffer zone around its borders.

However, Iran's active and assertive policy does not occur in a political vacuum. It affects, either directly or indirectly, not only regional actors, but also certain powers that, like Iran, are revisionist states seeking to dismantle Pax Americana and establish a new paradigm (Hicks, Dalton, 2017). Russia – a former global power that has never accepted its international degradation – is a good example. Under the rule of Vladimir Putin, it has been seeking a restoration of its influence, including the Middle East, where the Russians have become more active in recent years.

The primary objective of this paper is to examine and analyse Russia's approach towards Iran's Resistance Front policy. It is based on the assumption that Russia supports Iran's Resistance Front only partially. As for the Kremlin, relations

with Tehran are part of a broader regional policy. In other words, Russia strives to act flexibly and pursue a multi-vector policy. Excessive support for Iran would undermine Russian foreign and security policy goals. Undoubtedly, the relations between Iran and Russia are a significant issue in contemporary international relations, security, diplomacy, and military studies. They are also a crucial element of one of the most important case studies, namely the rivalry in the Middle East and the tensions between Iran and the West, primarily with the United States.

This article will touch upon several crucial elements, including the Iranian concept of the Resistance Front, the historical perspective of Russia's approach to Iran (after the Cold War), and the limitations of the Kremlin's support of Tehran's policy. Several research questions will be addressed, such as the extent to which Moscow's ambitions in the region align with Tehran's plans, whether the Kremlin perceives Iran's Resistance Front policy as a threat, challenge, or opportunity, and whether Russia is truly interested in supporting Iran's activities.

The Resistance Front policy

Before analysing key elements, i.e. Russia's approach towards Iran's policy, it is essential to briefly explain the Resistance Front policy. It can be derived from Islam and the Palestinian philosophy of resistance (*moqawemat*) against evil and injustice, and an associated concept of non-negotiable sovereignty. Both Ruhollah Khomeini's and Ali Khamenei's demand for resistance against oppression (also in a political sphere) placed upon Iranians is inspired by Imam Husain and his resistance against Caliph Yazid. Khamenei associates it with the Greater Jihad, which he defines as a state where one does "not follow others in matters of politics, economy, culture, and art" (*We Are in an Asymmetric War*, 2016).

Politically, the official narrative emphasises, in alignment with the principles laid out by Imam Khomeini, that non-Muslim states should not hold sway over Muslim societies. A pragmatic outcome of this approach is Iran's strong rejection of any form of external interference in the internal affairs of Muslim countries. This also applies to any involvement of foreign forces, mainly the United States, which, according to apologists of the Islamic Republic, obstructs the formation of a regional (thus solely Muslim) collective security system (see: Amirahmadian, 2016: 1). However, any military presence of friendly powers – such as Russia's – is met with significant reluctance.

In this official narrative, the United States is portrayed as an embodiment of evil and a source of many woes for both Iran and the Middle East. As stated during a sermon at the Imam Husain Mosque in Mashhad, "The Islamic Republic not only liberated Iran from American control but also inspired other countries with the spirit of resistance and courage. Today, people in many countries within the

region and beyond chant 'Death to America' and burn American flags. The Iranian people have shown them that they can resist" (*Islamic Republic Has Destroyed Enemy*, 2016; *Ayatollah Khamenei elaborates on 6 key points*, 2018). Economically, the Iranian authorities have been promoting the concept of "the economy of resistance", which, according to an official narrative, includes self-reliance and enduring hardships in the face of pressure from "arrogant powers" seeking to suppress the Islamic Republic.

Iranian decision-makers argue that the United States is no longer a hegemon and the world has become multipolar in recent years. Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic is still at war (Zimmt, 2023). As argued by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Iran is "in the midst of a major battle, on one side stands the Islamic Republic, and on the other side is an extensive and powerful front of enemies" (*We are in the midst*, 2018). This front mainly includes the United States, Israel, and some Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This policy manifests in assertive actions against what is perceived as the "Western-Arab-Zionist front" (*Safar-e se ruze*, 2017). It encompasses various elements, including Iran's regional policies and Tehran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

The Resistance Front consists of various participants, all of whom are pro-Iranian and receive support from Tehran. The linchpin of this cooperation is Syria, which was referred to as the "golden link in the chain of resistance against Israel" by former Foreign Minister and senior adviser to the Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati (*Velayati Sees Syria*, 2012). Likewise, General Qasem Soleimani, back then the commander of Al-Quds Force, referred to Syria as the "bridge in the resistance front... Any intelligent person should understand that defeat in the war [*in Syria*] means defeat for all of us" (*Daesh dar Eraq*, 2016). During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005–2013), Venezuela was also part of the "Resistance Front". It includes numerous paramilitary and political organisations in the Middle East, primarily in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestine, but there are also reports of its presence in Africa. These groups serve as a confirmation of a well-known saying that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter". While Western perspectives often categorise them as terrorist organisations, Iran and its supporters see them as fighters against "global arrogance", champions of justice, and advocates for oppressed people.

This concept has a geopolitical rationale behind it. As indicated earlier, according to political realism in International Relations, a pursuit of enhancing its own power is a natural and inherent aspect of every state's instinct, especially in the Middle East, where distrust, hostility, and perpetual rivalry prevail. Therefore, having a presence in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq is rational from security and defence perspectives. General Yahya Rahim Safavi, who was a commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (1997–2007), rightly noted that the Iranian river of "Shalamche is no longer our defence line. Instead, this line now runs in southern Lebanon against Israel. Our defence lines are currently spread

along the Mediterranean coast, reaching the top of Israel" (*Omq-e defa'-ye*, 2014). The Iranian approach is not exceptional. The concept of expanding lines of defence as far from one's borders was a strategy pursued by NATO during the Cold War. Now we are witnessing a similar strategy carried out by China in the Indo-Pacific region. In the case of Iran, this forward defence serves as a protective sheath for the viable centre, which is the regime in Tehran. This concept has also been used to shield Iran's influence in critical places, such as Syria. With presence in Lebanon, Iran gains a tool to exert pressure, at least partially, on two of the Islamic Republic's enemies: Israel (directly) and the United States (indirectly, as Israel's ally).

Russia towards Iran after the Cold War

Iran has such abundant yet complex and difficult relations with few countries worldwide as it does with Russia. The common history of both nations is marked by periods of closed cooperation, including against a common enemy – Ottoman Turkey – but also by many violent wars. The 20th century was a difficult period, in which Russia was dominant. Examples include the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and the Gilan crisis (1945–1946).

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union wanted – through the Tudeh Party – to increase its influence in Iran in order to gain access to the Persian Gulf and undermine the Western sphere of influence. A communist *coup d'état* that would turn Iran into an anti-American and pro-Soviet state, agreeing to host Soviet military bases on its coast, was a negative scenario for the authorities in both the United States and Tehran. Unfortunately for Moscow, during the Cold War, Iran maintained relatively cool relations with the Soviet Union – friendly, but at a safe distance. According to the Shah, "The more active Iran's contacts with the USSR, the less chance the Soviet Union would support subversive movements in Iran" (Parker, 2009: 5).

After the Cold War, the Islamic Republic welcomed the words of Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev (1990–1996), who expressed Moscow's eagerness to establish a "strategic partnership" with Iran (Harris, 1995: 41). Tehran looked for a partner with global influence that could serve as a counterbalance to the United States and as leverage to undermine Pax Americana in the Middle East. Russia, which has not pursued any regime change in Tehran, was perceived as one of the best candidates for such a role, if not the best.

Cooperation was established quickly. As early as 1992, Russia became a significant supplier of weapons, including submarines and tanks, as well as spare parts. Additionally, after the end of the Cold War, Russia actively supported Iran's nuclear programme. As early as 2000, Vladimir Putin unilaterally cancelled the

Russian-American agreement from 1995 and allowed Russian companies to export more arms to Iran. Nevertheless, any attempts by Iran in the last 20 years to secure consistent and strong support from Moscow failed. The Kremlin engaged in cooperation with Tehran on select matters, always taking care to prevent any adverse effects on its relations with the West or with Middle Eastern partners. As a result, arms deliveries, as mentioned later (notably the issues with the S-300 air/missile defence system), were occasionally halted, while the nuclear programme faced challenges, leading to mutual accusations between the two sides.

Iran with its anti-Western policy and rhetoric soon became more significant for Russia and Putin, who at some point became more "determined to reverse the humiliating decade of the 1990s, guarantee Russia's territorial integrity and restore Russia's role as a great power" (Stent, 2014: 78). This shift occurred concurrently with a deterioration of relations between Russia and the United States, leading to a more assertive and imperialistic policy under Putin, who even compared the foreign policy of the United States to that of the Third Reich (Kramer, 2007). Very soon, "channels of communications – particularly those that were out of public sight and had never been extensive at the best of times – had narrowed, and acrimonious public megaphone diplomacy was on the rise" (Stent, 2014: 136). In 2007, Russia suspended its participation in the CFE (the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe), causing relations to sink to a dangerously low level. This created an opportunity for Iran to gain importance in the Kremlin's strategic calculations as Russia sought ways to weaken the West. In the same year, Vladimir Putin visited Tehran, marking the first visit of a Kremlin leader since Joseph Stalin in 1943. This visit was primarily a tactical move by Russia, which wanted to use the "Iranian card" as leverage against the United States.

Within the same logic, in 2007, Iran was also allowed to purchase the S-300 system, but was not able to complete the deal anytime soon. Russia opted to improve its relations with the West under Obama's "Reset" policy and, as a result, Iran's significance waned. In 2010, President Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree banning arms deliveries to Iran (including the S-300 missile system), and consented to UN sanctions. This was met with significant dissatisfaction in Tehran. Consequently, Iran brought suit against Russia in a Swiss court, while, in response, Moscow threatened Tehran to withdraw its diplomatic support for Tehran. However, both nations eventually managed to mend their relations. It is not coincidental that this occurred when Russia's relations with the West, primarily with the United States, deteriorated once again.

A decision to rebuild ties was made in Moscow, not Tehran, as the latter consistently desired close relations. Iran has a limited number of state allies, so having good relations with a relatively powerful country such as Russia was very significant. To some extent, Russia can serve as leverage against the United States, be a supplier of military equipment, and provide certain technologies, both military and civilian (including nuclear). Without Russia, Iran's nuclear programme

(despite some problems) would not have been as successful. Part of the progress was attributed to completing the first Russian-built nuclear reactor (in Bushehr) in 2012, which finally reached its full capacity.

Iran in Russian calculations after the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring, which erupted in late 2010 and rapidly transformed the region's geopolitical landscape, served as a crucial catalyst for the strengthening of bilateral cooperation. As noted by an Iranian scholar, this event was seen in Tehran as a grassroots, social protest by Muslims against pro-Western, authoritarian regimes in the region (Haji-Yousefi, 2019: 506). The turmoil of the Arab Spring gave birth to new axes of cooperation, while conflicts raging in the region "sucked in" various regional powers, including Iran, who faced an opportunity to put its concept of the Resistance Front into practical testing. This political and social phenomenon also impacted Russia – on the one hand, it created a window of opportunity, but on the other, it threatened Moscow's position at that time. The future of the Assad family in Syria, a long-standing ally of the Kremlin, became uncertain, while as a result of NATO intervention, Russians lost their influence in Libya. Iran, with its regional ambitions and expanding network of partners in the region, quickly became much more attractive to Russia.

New regional dynamics brought Iran and Moscow closer together, as both nations recognised a shared objective: to safeguard the existing positions, to expand into new territories, and to enhance their influence and power. Additionally, both perceived the Arab Spring as "a US-inspired phenomenon, which posed a potential threat to both their own internal stability and their geopolitical positions in the Middle East. Both feared that the Arab Spring could lead to a strengthening of the United States in the region or the activation of radical Sunni movements" (Rodkiewicz, 2020). A critical condition to achieve these goals was to support and save Bashar Al-Assad, the President of Syria, whom Ali Jafari referred to as the "frontline of the Islamic revolution" and an example of "one of the greatest failures of our enemies, led by America and Israel" (*Tamas-ha-ye miyan-e*, 2016). Qatar-based Russian expert and scholar Nikolay Kozhanov rightly noted that "the geostrategic factor seriously favoured for strengthening the Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria. For Tehran, the beginning of Moscow's military involvement in Syrian affairs finally gave the Iranian authorities what they had been looking for the last decade: a solid political and military base for the development of bilateral relations" (Kozhanov, 2019: 451).

A milestone was reached in 2015 when Russia decided to directly intervene in the conflict and tilt the balance of power in favour of Al-Assad, and, consequently, in favour of Iran as well. As Iran provided ground forces and controlled various

militias, they became a tactical yet crucial partner for Russia, which relied on aerial operations. Tehran warmly embraced Russia's decision to intervene. Velayati used the opportunity to signal that the Iranian authorities were determined to pursue "lasting and long-term cooperation" with Moscow: "Russian efforts to resolve the Syrian issue are entirely coordinated with Iran. In the past, there have been instances where Russia and Iran held differing opinions on certain matters, but ultimately, both nations have managed to reach agreements here as well" (*Velayati: Asad khatt-e*, 2015). General Soleimani became a frequent guest in Moscow at that time, facilitating an "exchange of information" between Russia and Iran regarding Syria. Iran even took an equally unusual and controversial step[1] – in August 2016, it allowed the Russians to deploy its Tu-22M3 and Su-34 bombers, used to attack targets in Syria, in the Shahid Nojeh Air Base in the northwestern province of Hamedan.[2] Within several months, the IRNA – which is an official news agency of the Islamic Republic – announced with satisfaction that "a resistance front" of Iran, Syria, and Russia was "bearing fruits" (*Iran, Syria, Russia, resistance front*, 2017).

However, Russia's decision to step in and assist Iran was not motivated by an altruistic desire to support the Resistance Front. Instead, Russia pursued its objectives, which included neutralising potential Western expansion in Syria and combating Sunni jihadism in the country to prevent it from inspiring Russian jihadists, especially in the Caucasus region. Russia also aimed to act as a mediator and enhance its influence, not only in the Middle East but also in the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, Iran once again became a valuable leverage for the Kremlin in its deteriorating relations with the West. These relations had been strained by various factors, most notably Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the subsequent illegal annexation of Crimea.

In 2021, it was revealed that Russia, Iran, and Syria established a joint centre intending to secure a flow of oil, wheat, and other materials to Syria via the Mediterranean Sea. It was agreed that the Iranian ships – previously attacked by the Israeli Navy – would be protected by the Russian naval forces operating in the region ("تالقان إيرانية" 2021). Again, the Russian decision was a result of Russian's pursuit of its own goals, which included a desire to increase permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea. To achieve it, Russia had to (1) seize

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[1] In response, a group of twenty parliamentarians called for a closed-door session of the Majlis (Iran's parliament) to discuss this matter (*Darqkhast-e bist namayande*, 2016). This issue returned in a public discourse in April 2018, when the government denied that the Russian had requested access to their military facilities (*Esteqrar-e havapeyma*, 2018).

[2] The first time Russians used that base was in 2015. At that time, Su-34 fighter/bomber and Il-76 transport aircraft were spotted there in satellite images. The agreement with Russia from August 2016 was indirectly confirmed by the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani, who stated the following: "A cooperation between Tehran and Moscow in the fight against terrorism in Syria is strategic. We exchanged resources and facilities on this matter" (*Top Security Official Indirectly*, 2016).

Ukrainian naval facilities in the Black Sea (which was done after the 2014 invasion) – since this is the shortest connection to the Mediterranean Sea – and (2) secure strategic footholds in Syria. For such an ambitious and long-term strategy, Iran was a crucial partner. At the same time, the decision to protect Iranian ships allowed Russia to pose as a security provider and a significant player in the region.

The significance of Iran increased further after 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine and very soon became bogged down in the war. As a result, the Kremlin, "pressured by the West (…) openly shifted toward Asia and the Islamic Republic" (Avdaliani, 2023). Russia began receiving Iranian military equipment. Iran transferred unknown quantities of drones, including the Shahed-136 UAVs, which have been used to attack multiple civilian and military targets. The list also reportedly includes artillery shells and various ammunition (Czulda, 2022), but there is a space for its expansion to include personal gear, medical equipment, light arms, tactical vehicles, rocket and missile artillery systems, and anti-tank weapons. As noted by Emil Avdaliani, "In many ways, the present alignment is exceptional; such cooperation has not been seen since the late 16th century when both Russia and Persia feared the expanding Ottoman Empire" (Avdaliani, 2023).

The limits of Russian support

The Kremlin is well aware that it shares many interests with the Islamic Republic. From the Russian perspective, Iran remains a valuable partner – friendly, relatively stable, predictable, and eager for cooperation. The Islamic Republic also wields significant influence in regions "critical to Russia's security: the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Caspian region (...) Russia views cooperation with Iran as an essential component of maintaining stability along its southern frontier" (Reardon, 2014: 195). What is more, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a fiercely anti-Western country, particularly anti-American. Tehran's stance is highly beneficial to Russia – particularly now that the West is involved in a new "Cold War" with Moscow, while Russia is interested in intentionally stirring tensions. In other words, Russia views Iran as a valuable asset and a tool to strengthen its bargaining position with the West, particularly the United States (Rodkiewicz, 2020). In this equation, Iran can serve not only as leverage but also as a buffer, safeguarding Russia's backyard, mainly the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, from any Western penetration. As long as Iran maintains its presence in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, these countries are unlikely to be penetrated by the United States or its partners, which also aligns with the Russian interests. For example, when Russia vacated some of its facilities in Syria and moved some of its units to Ukraine, these bases were taken over by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

Owing to a partnership with Iran, Russia got an opportunity to increase its presence in those countries. Maintaining good relations with Tehran gives Russia positive references among regional militias. As reported, "Russia engages with Hashd al-Shaabi (or Popular Mobilisation Forces) in Iraq on security challenges, defends Hezbollah from terrorism allegations, and holds negotiations with the Houthis on ending the Yemen war" (Ramani, 2021). Regarding Lebanon, good ties with Hezbollah – labelled by the Kremlin as a "legitimate socio-political force" (*Russia says Hezbollah*, 2015), were crucial for Russian companies in terms of getting access to the local energy sector (Mroue, 2023). It is likely that as Russia has expanded its presence in Africa in recent years, it may have also used assistance from Iranians, who have cultivated a network of contacts there. However, further research is needed on this subject.

Nonetheless, there are some serious deficiencies, too. Cooperation with Iran has a limited military significance for Russia – although both countries conduct joint exercises, their armed forces are not operationally integrated. From the Kremlin's perspective, Iran's presence in the Caspian Sea waters is not of great importance, as Russia also controls this area. The same holds true for a relatively insignificant (from Russia's perspective) access that Iran has to the Persian Gulf. Moscow's ideal scenario would involve having access to Iranian bases near the Strait of Hormuz, but due to several factors, including Iranian legal constraints, this is not feasible. Furthermore, when it comes to Middle Eastern countries, it is challenging to argue that Russia has attained a significant position owing to Iran. Much closer relations which have developed in recent years with states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia are a result of Russian diplomacy efforts and an alignment of national interests rather than an outcome of Iranian support. In other words, overestimating Iran's value in Russia's regional policy would be a mistake.

Russia's collaboration with Iran has always had its limitations. It remains more of a pragmatic arrangement, riddled with various challenges and impediments, rather than a fully-fledged strategic partnership or a truly profound alliance, which is understood as a formal agreement that pledges the states to co-operate militarily (Dufield, Michota, Miller, 2008: 293). This has been evident in Syria, where Iran has been trying to establish a Shiite axis with Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah. President Bashar al-Assad plays a pivotal role in this vision, while Moscow wanted to establish its own presence, extend its influence in the Middle East, and diminish Western dominance in the region. In this scenario, al-Assad has never been indispensable. Iran is undoubtedly aware that Russia intends to strengthen its position in Syria without setting a collision course with Tehran. Nevertheless, Moscow is striving to assume a more prominent role within the Iranian-Russian partnership – a fact underscored in the Mediterranean region, where both actors have increased their presence in recent years. Iran has successfully secured control of a strategic section of the container port in Latakia, thereby bolstering its capacity for power projection in the Mediterranean Sea and advancing

its economic initiatives. However, this development was met with resistance from Russia, which had opposed a plan of converting the Tartus port into an Iranian military base as early as 2011.[3] In June 2018, Russians deployed their troops near Al-Kusayr in western Syria, close to the border with Lebanon. This move was not well-received by both Iran and Hezbollah (*Syria: Deployment of Russian Forces*, 2018). Economic competition and the fact that more contracts were awarded to Russian companies than Iranian ones was also reported (Therme, 2022).

Differences that determine the extent of Russia's support for Iranian policy are also evident in a broader perspective. Iran's foreign policy calculations, including its concept of the Resistance Front, are built on the assumption that regional security should not be guaranteed by external powers. Tehran staunchly opposes any foreign military intervention in the region, whereas Russia introduced its concept of collective security in the Persian Gulf back in the 1990s, reiterating it in 2021. This concept emphasises Moscow's insistence on "recognising the interests of non-regional players" (Kozhanov, 2022; see also: *Otvety na voprosy Ministra*, 2021). Although officially Tehran endorsed Russia's "more inclusive" approach (*Zarif Rusiyeh va Chinra*, 2019) and compared it to its own HOPE (Hormuz Peace Endeavour) initiative, and is keen to see any idea undermining a dominant position of the United States in the Persian Gulf, it does not want to have another broker in regional affairs (*Zarif: Be yek mantaqe-ye*, 2020). Furthermore, the Russian concept envisions cooperation among all countries in the Middle East and North Africa, including Israel. This stands in stark contrast to Iran's approach and the underlying principles of its Resistance Front.

Political and military support that Moscow provides to Iran is very limited, despite official declarations of close and friendly bilateral relations. For instance, the Kremlin does not support Iran and its Resistance Front strongly enough to provide Tehran with used military equipment for free. Donations of surplus hardware are common in cases of warm ties between a major power and its weaker partner, but such gestures have not occurred between Russia and Iran. Additionally, commercial transactions between these two are also very limited and problematic. For example, it has been reported that the Iranians have been unable to obtain RD-33 engines and spare parts for its MiG-29s since at least 2013 (Nadimi, 2016). In 2016, both states failed to agree on details of a future sale of T-90 tanks to Iran. The same story was repeated in 2023 with Su-35 jets – a deal was first officially confirmed, but later some delays have been reported. No deliveries were carried

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[3] The main reasons for Russian reluctance include, firstly, the loss of Moscow's dominant position in Syria, including exclusive control over the Syrian coast. Secondly, it might have complicated Russian–Israeli relations and, due to Israeli–Iranian tensions, increased a risk for Russian forces in Syria.

out as of late September 2023, despite earlier reports that they would commence by mid-2023.[4]

At the political level, it is evident that Russia offers limited support and regards Iran more as a subject rather than a partner. For example, Russia's backing for Iran's nuclear programme is far from being comprehensive and unconditional. In 2003, Russia was among the states that exerted pressure on Iran to suspend nuclear enrichment. When the United States withdrew from the JCPoA in 2018, "Russia has become a major advocate of maintaining it, and has undertaken active diplomatic efforts to persuade its Western European signatories to resume economic relations with Iran – in defiance of the American sanctions" (Rodkiewicz, 2020). Partially, Russia's actions were sincere. Breaking a US-led anti-Iranian bloc and limiting the effectiveness of US economic sanctions would be a significant accomplishment for Russia, as it would undermine American prestige. At the same time, Russia positioned itself as a concerned, impartial, and reliable mediator, who respects international agreements and always seeks peaceful resolutions (the same applies to Russia's efforts at that time to promote a new security architecture in the Persian Gulf).

On the other hand, Russia has additional motives. The Kremlin has valid reasons for not endorsing the revival of the JCPoA. This hypothesis was reiterated by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who expressed his disappointment that the Russians had never backed the Iran Deal and had "unsuccessfully attempted to derail talks three times" (*No one in Iran can figure*, 2021). Similarly, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, selected as the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy in 2018, expressed a similar sentiment, warning that "Iranians have often been a toy in Russian politics" (*Falahat Pisheh Namayandeh-ye Majles*, 2016). The Nuclear Deal opened new opportunities for Tehran to export and develop its energy infrastructure. Iran has ambitions to become a regional transport hub, connecting various regions, including Asia and Europe. One such example is the INSTC (International North–South Transport Corridor), which was established in 2000 in collaboration with India and Russia.

However, the situation changed significantly when the United States withdrew in 2018 and re-imposed some sanctions. President Trump forced all countries to choose between trading with Iran or with the United States. States importing crude oil from Iran had to find another provider. Russia, whose national budget heavily relies (72%) on revenues from natural gas and crude oil (Kardaś, 2023), and who does not want to see any emerging competitors, increased its attractiveness as a supplier. Relatively severe international sanctions on Iran prevent Tehran

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[4] It is worth adding that the UN arms embargo expired in October 2020. It was partially imposed in 2010 and amended five years later.

from emerging as a substantial exporter of crude oil. The same holds for natural gas. Iran possesses the potential to become a significant natural gas exporter, which could challenge Russia's dominant position as the current world's largest exporter. Furthermore, the lack of access to Iranian energy resources might, in the long term, weaken European sanctions against Russia. For now, the Russians have achieved export successes at Iran's expense, notably in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Türkiye. Iran was compelled to "cut its own gas prices to compete with Russia's discounts" (Taslimi, 2022).

While the JCPoA would not have resolved all of Iran's issues – it was not a magic wand – it could have potentially increased the Islamic Republic's independence and bolstered its political and economic activity. This, in turn, would have provided Iran with more resources to pursue its Resistance Front policy. Admittedly, it might have also escalated tensions with the Americans and Europeans, but it offered a chance for rapprochement with the West. In such a scenario, Russian economic influence in Iran could have diminished or even disappeared. Western companies generally possess greater financial resources for investment and can offer more advanced technologies compared to their Russian counterparts (the evident shortcomings in Russia's economic and technological portfolio are particularly evident in Russian-African relations). It is neither coincidental nor surprising that, following the implementation of the JCPoA, numerous business agreements worth billions of dollars were swiftly announced between Iran and Western companies. However, with the eventual derailment of the JCPoA, most of these agreements were either frozen or cancelled. In fact, "Russia did not benefit much economically during the initial post-JCPOA period" – between 2015–2018 Russian export to Iran was worth "barely more" than 5 billion USD. It was roughly 2.5% of the 210 billion USD in goods exported to the Islamic Republic during this period (Mahmoudian, Cafiero, 2021). Now, without a functional JCPoA, Iran is left with no alternative but to prioritise its relationships with non-European partners, including Russia, which lacks any incentive to promote reconciliation between the Islamic Republic and the West.

In this context, an intriguing yet unanswered question is whether Iran will ultimately succeed in attaining full membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), established in 2015 and comprised of Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia. Tehran has formally declared its intention to join this organisation, but thus far, it has only managed to secure a free trade agreement, which was signed in 2023 after long negotiations. However, full membership remains a vague plan for the future, despite President Putin openly expressing his desire for Iran to join the organisation as early as 2016 (*Iran Will Soon Join*, 2023). If Russia genuinely wanted Iran to become a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, the negotiation process and full membership would likely be a mere formality.

Divergent interests – as seen, for example, in a competition for a leading position in an energy market – are not the only explanation for clear limitations

in Russian support for Iranian policy. It can be, at least to some degree, also explained by Russia's broader strategic perspective and a need to consider its relations with other leading actors in the region. This not only applies to Syria, where – despite bilateral warm relations – "Tehran has long been worried about a potential 'grand bargain' between Moscow and Washington over Syria at the expense of Iran's interests" (Mejidyar, 2017). Regarding a broader context – while Iran's list of political, military, and economic partners is very limited – Russia has been making efforts to establish strong ties with numerous states in the region, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Egypt, and Libya. Russia rightly believes that having good relations with several regional powers is the only way to increase its regional position and influence.

Qatar-based Russian expert and scholar Nikolay Kozhanov rightly noted that "the Russian diplomacy in the Middle East is based on the principle of balancing between different states as long as they are ready to deal with Moscow. Despite the current political turmoil in the region, the Kremlin, so far, is very successful in maintaining relatively good relations with the key players of the Middle East" (Kozhanov, 2019: 462). This is partially a result of disappointment among certain Arab states with the United States' policy, which, when signing the Iran Deal, "insufficiently took into account concerns of both Israel and the Arab Gulf monarchies in the Persian Gulf" (Czulda, 2021).

The Russian goal of avoiding direct involvement in regional disputes and tensions is one of the most significant factors that limit Moscow's support for Iran's Resistance Front. Tehran cannot expect that Moscow would provide more substantial support at the expense of Russia's own interests. A good example of Russia pursuing its own goals is its endorsement of the demands of the United Arab Emirates regarding three islands in the Persian Gulf, which Iran has controlled since 1971. A joint diplomatic statement of Russia and the GCC states, which was released in July 2023, undoubtedly served to improve Russia's position in the Arab monarchies, but at the same time, it was a blow to Iran. In response, the Islamic Republic summoned the Russian ambassador and called on Moscow to revise its statement (Iordache, 2023). This is a small price for the opportunity to foster improved relations with the Persian Gulf monarchies and to pursue a vision of expanding Russia's economic engagement with the United Arab Emirates, which in 2022 rose by 68% to 9 billion USD (Katz, 2023).

Another example of Russia's delicate balancing act is the relatively limited arms deliveries to Iran. While these could potentially enhance Russia's standing in Tehran, they would also be viewed unfavourably by Arab nations and Israel (Russia has been trying to sell its weapons to Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE). In recent years, the Kremlin has cultivated strong ties with the latter, which, paradoxically, is a staunch adversary of the Islamic Republic. Although this might appear contradictory at first glance, in practice, it reflects classic *Realpolitik* – the art of balancing among diverse actors to achieve

one's objectives. Despite Russia's relations with Iran, Vladimir Putin was able to establish cordial ties with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Despite this, the Kremlin showed no objections to engaging with Hamas (Nahia, 2022). This has been a constant and characteristic element of Russia's policy under Putin's rule – the Kremlin has always been looking for a "fertile ground" that could be used to enhance its position.

In the light of this pragmatic approach, Iran's Resistance Front, particularly its presence in Syria, amplifies Moscow's influence over Israel. Iran's involvement in Syria not only helped preserve President Al-Assad's regime, but also posed a substantial challenge to Israel. The positive rapport between Russia and Iran allows the Kremlin to present itself as a player capable of influencing the Iranians and limiting their anti-Israeli endeavours. In a sense, Israel finds itself in a position where it must maintain good relations with Moscow, indirectly viewing Russia as a provider of security. Russia has skilfully leveraged this advantage over Israel. In January 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov openly assured "dear Israeli colleagues" that Syria would not become a battleground for the conflict between Israel and Iran (*Russia will not allow Syria*, 2021). However, despite the Russia–Iran ties, Moscow did not shield the Iranian forces and pro-Tehran militias from Israeli airstrikes. For instance, in 2019, reports indicated that Russia greenlit Israeli airstrikes on a Hashd al-Shaabi military facility near Baghdad (Hamidi, 2019).

Conclusions

Russia's approach towards Iran and its Resistance Front policy has evolved over time, not due to changes in Iran's policies (which have remained largely consistent since the Islamic Revolution in 1979) or Iran's attitude towards Russia (as Tehran consistently seeks close ties with the Kremlin), but primarily because of the cyclical shifts in Russia's priorities, including its relations with the West. These relations resemble a sine wave since 1991 (Czulda, 2013: 165–182). In other words, Russia's relations with Iran are a derivative of its relations with other states, which are deemed more crucial to the Russians. This primarily involves the United States, while in the regional perspective, the list includes Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. In this context, Iran's Resistance Front philosophy is sometimes regarded by the Kremlin as an opportunity and from time to time as an obstacle.

Iran has never been the most important – and certainly not the sole – partner for Russia, and it is highly unlikely to become so in the future. Close relations with Iran undoubtedly bring certain benefits, but they also create undeniable costs that Russia is not willing to bear. This includes difficulties in relations with

economically more attractive Arab countries. An illustration of this cost-benefit analysis is the fact that in a crucial matter for Iran, namely its nuclear programme, Moscow did not support Tehran, and, in fact, it supported the UNSC resolutions against Iran six times between 2006 and 2010 (Azizi, 2023). Arms deliveries, including the S-300 system, were also suspended, leading to a cooling of bilateral relations.

Regarding the West, when Russia had good relations, Moscow's cooperation with Iran was rather limited. However, in times of strained ties, especially after 2022, collaboration with Tehran, including the military dimension, became much more important to Russia. During this period, Iran became a significant counterbalance to the West and was additionally viewed as a means to establish alternative trade markets and transit networks. Nevertheless, the Kremlin is not genuinely interested in allowing Iran to become too powerful and influential, as this could potentially lead to the rebuilding of economic ties with the West at the expense of Russian companies. The Russian approach is thus not based on mutual trust and a true partnership but, rather, on tactical cooperation between two internally similar autocratic entities that occasionally identify areas for collaboration. Simultaneously, in economic terms, "Russia and Iran are competitors, not partners, by default" (Batmanghelidj, 2022). This is especially applicable to the energy sector, where both states vie for the same customers.

Currently, both countries are once again in a phase of close relations. In addition to symbolic gestures, such as courtesy visits of warships and numerous memorandums of understanding, there are also concrete political and economic commitments as well as particular actions. Among these, high-level visits and agreements, such as the one in January 2021 regarding "information security," should be mentioned. Furthermore, in 2022, both countries pledged to negotiate a new 20-year strategic cooperation agreement, intended to replace the one signed in 2001.

However, it is important to emphasise that this does not imply unwavering the Kremlin's support for all Iranian actions carried out under the banner of the Resistance Front. Additionally, in the military sphere, which is currently particularly significant, cooperation remains relatively limited. The most notable outcome is a transfer of the aforementioned Shahed-136 UAVs, with reports indicating their production in Russia. It is worth noting that these drones are technologically rather rudimentary in design. One of the most prominent examples of tightening cooperation is the delivery of Yak-130 light combat trainer jets (24 in total) as well as a deal for 24 Su-35SE aircraft and Mi-28NE assault helicopters (18) that are yet to be handed over.

Given the current international situation, an attempt to further strengthen bilateral cooperation is highly likely. This stems from several reasons, including Iran's failure to improve relations with the West (marked by the actual death of the JCPOA), the election of Ibrahim Raisi as president in 2021 (who has embraced

the 'Look East Policy' and sought alternative trade partners), and the drastic deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. As aptly noted by Alex Vatanka, currently, both states are the "most sanctioned countries on earth" (*Iran & Russia*, 2023). This pushes them towards increased cooperation, a goal that Tehran and Moscow both declare. Furthermore, Russia now aligns even more with Tehran's vision of a post-Pax-Americana world. They are also becoming increasingly similar internally – two anachronistic autocratic regimes that share a common concern for their survival while grappling with mounting problems. The Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine (2022) and its consequences, including Western sanctions, compel Moscow to place greater focus on non-European partners, such as Iran. Additionally, what further solidifies bilateral relations and enhances Iran's importance in Russia's policy is the Kremlin's need to acquire more weaponry and ammunition.

Does the currently increased political and military attractiveness of Iran in Moscow's eyes lead to a more favourable approach of Russia towards the Resistance Front? For the time being, there is no evidence to suggest that a heightened significance of Iran, due to the full-scale war in Ukraine and a challenging situation faced by the Kremlin, has increased Russia's support for the Iranian regional concept and Tehran's policy in general. Even now, when the relations are deeper than before, Russia prioritises its own interests, including actions aimed at countering the West. A good illustration of this perspective can be found in the candid words of Mikhail Ulyanov – Russian permanent representative to the nuclear negotiations – who said that "Russia could have helped push JCPOA over the finish line", but it will not do it – regardless of Iran's position – due to the Russian–US "proxy war" (Taslimi, 2022).

Iran still lacks the potential to become a more significant partner, not to mention to balance other regional countries that remain very important to Russia, and perhaps even more so, given Russia's economic challenges. There is no solid reason to believe that a hitherto weak economic cooperation, with just roughly 4 billion USD annually in bilateral trade (Batmanghelidj, 2022), could suddenly flourish, and that both countries will establish efficient banking channels. Iran is a financially-constrained partner grappling with severe economic issues and mounting debts to Russia. It is true that Iran, with its population of approximately 89 million people, represents a potentially lucrative market. However, for now, it remains merely a potential market. Among Russia's neighbouring countries, including Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus, Iran has the lowest export share. Russia accounts for only 5% of Iran's foreign trade volume, while Iran's share of Russia's foreign trade is only 6%. The same source pointed out that due to international sanctions, trade between Russia and Iran experienced a decreasing trend between 2011–2018 (Halalkhor, Rad, 2021). In comparison, "according to unofficial estimates, the Arab monarchies' total investments in Russia have reached around 25 billion USD" (Rodkiewicz, 2021).

It is not coincidental that over the past 30 years, both countries have managed to complete only a single flagship project – the Bushehr nuclear plant. Despite its actual and symbolic significance, even this project encountered serious challenges, including technical shutdowns and unpaid debts by Iran. The same scepticism currently applies to the INSTC project, sometimes seen as a factor that would bring these two players closer in the coming years. However, it was unveiled more than 20 years ago. Regional infrastructure projects, such as railways, are mostly subject to delays. The fact that both countries, particularly Iran, face financial difficulties and that geopolitical reasons threaten the implementation of investments such as the construction of a 162 km railway connection between Iran's Rasht and Azerbaijan's Astara does not inspire optimism about the success of a project presented as strategically significant. This is the case despite Putin's pledge to provide 1.7 billion USD for the mentioned railway connection (*Russia and Iran ink deal*, 2023).

In summary, the Kremlin largely supports Iran and its concept of the Resistance Front against the West – especially now that Russia has strained relations with the United States and Europe. However, this support is situational, based on a transactional approach, and is a result of Moscow's current calculations as it strives to balance between various actors in the Middle East. These calculations define the limits of the Russian support for Tehran. There is no reason to assume that getting closer and more entangled with an isolated regional state plagued by significant economic problems and unpaid debts will become more attractive to the Kremlin than it currently is.

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Dżihadyzm w Tadżykistanie i Uzbekistanie w kontekście oddziaływania tzw. Państwa Islamskiego Prowincji Chorasan

Streszczenie. Azja Środkowa, w tym także dawne republiki radzieckie, jest obszarem działalności nurtów dżihadystycznych, co wpływa destabilizująco na sytuację w regionie i potęguje zagrożenia ze strony ekstremizmu. Egzemplifikację tych mechanizmów stanowi widoczna w ostatnich latach aktywność tzw. Państwa Islamskiego Prowincji Chorasan, organizacji odpowiedzialnej za liczne przejawy działań terrorystycznych i werbunkowych. Przykładem tych zagrożeń był zamach przeprowadzony na obrzeżach Moskwy w marcu 2024 r. Artykuł ukazuje zarys rozwoju radykalnego islamu w regionie, co ilustrują kazusy Tadżykistanu i Uzbekistanu. W państwach tych od dawna uwidaczniają się ugrupowania integrystyczne, co związane jest ze wskazanymi w analizie uwarunkowaniami politycznymi i społecznymi. Artykuł przedstawia głównych protagonistów tego nurtu w kontekście oddziaływania tzw. Państwa Islamskiego Prowincji Chorasan. Wskazuje na mechanizmy rozwoju dżihadyzmu z perspektywy konwergencji ugrupowań wywrotowych i terrorystycznych, dysfunkcyjności państwa oraz katalizatorów procesu radykalizacji. Analiza opiera się na integracji analizy historycznej i metody przyczynowo-skutkowej oraz odwołuje się do teorii Marca Sagemana ujmującej dżihadyzm jako swoisty ruch społeczny bazujący na interakcyjnej sieci powiązań.

Słowa kluczowe: Tadżykistan, Uzbekistan, Państwo Islamskie Prowincji Chorasan, dżihadyzm, radykalizacja

Jihadi Terrorism in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the Context of the Activity of the Islamic State Khorasan Province

Abstract. Central Asia, especially former Soviet republics, is one of the area of the activity of jihadi terrorism. In the future, it can be one of the more important factors of the destabilisation of the region. For more than two decades, this extremism has been creating serious threat for international security. It is exemplified by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province and by the act of violence that occurred in Moscow in March 2024. This article deals with the problem of violent radicalisation and radical islam in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It focuses on the conditions of these mechanisms in the region, referring to the convergence of subversive and terrorist movements. The paper also mentions some strategies introduced during recent years in response to the jihadi activity. The methodological analysis is based on the integration of historical and cause-and-effect method, and refers to the Marc Sageman's theory of the jihadist network, which is more appropriate in the context understanding how they appear and operate.

Keywords: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Islamic State Khorasan Province, jihadi terrorism, radicalisation

Wstęp

Za przeprowadzony w marcu 2024 r. zamach w sali koncertowej na obrzeżach Moskwy, który pochłonął ponad sto czterdzieści ofiar, odpowiedzialność wzięło tzw. Państwo Islamskie Prowincji Chorasan [*Islamic State Khorasan Province* – ISKP, ISIS-K], prowadzące walkę m.in. w rządzonym przez talibów Afganistanie. Wykonawcami ataku w stolicy Rosji byli obywatele Tadżykistanu, którzy – skuszeni profitami finansowymi – zdecydowali się zrealizować ten akt przemocy. Zamach zwrócił uwagę na stale obecne, ewoluujące zagrożenia dla bezpieczeństwa, wynikające z funkcjonowania ruchu dżihadystycznego w różnych częściach świata, w tym również na terenie Azji Centralnej. W ostatnich latach, a zwłaszcza w 2023 r., uwidoczniła się intensyfikacja poczynań ISKP, obejmująca m.in. rozbudowę narzędzi dyskursywnych, podporządkowanych staraniom rekrutacyjnym na obszarach byłych radzieckich republik środkowoazjatyckich.

Celem pracy jest ukazanie oddziaływania ruchu dżihadystycznego, a szczególnie tzw. Państwa Islamskiego Prowincji Chorasan na byłe republiki radzieckie – Tadżykistan i Uzbekistan – a zarazem przybliżenie zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa wynikających z aktywności siatek terrorystycznych. Należy podkreślić, że nurty radykalnego islamu są obecne w Azji Środkowej od dawna i znajdują tam

szeroką reprezentację. Całościowe ich ujęcie przekracza jednak ramy niniejszej analizy, wobec tego koncentruje się ona na casusach dwóch państw, których znaczenie z perspektywy omawianych tu zagadnień jest współcześnie istotne; zarazem stanowią one egzemplifikację wielu tendencji, obrazujących ewolucję zagrożeń kreowanych przez ten rodzaj ekstremizmu w regionie i na świecie. Głównym założeniem niniejszego opracowania jest stwierdzenie, że ISKP, będąc kolejną inkarnacją dżihadyzmu, odzwierciedla mechanizmy znane z innych obszarów aktywności ugrupowań o takim profilu, wpływające na krystalizację tego nurtu. Wyznaczają je dysfunkcyjność państwa, konwergencja działalności terrorystycznej i przestępczej, uwarunkowania społeczno-ekonomiczne procesu radykalizacji, które sprawiają, że „walczący islam" nadal stwarza wyzwania w kwestii bezpieczeństwa i jest w stanie podejmować akcje zbrojne o różnej skali.

W niniejszym opracowaniu przyjmuje się, że dżihadyzm jest swoistym ruchem społecznym o zasięgu międzynarodowym, spajającym ideologię o charakterze radykalnie salafickim i wywrotowym z praktyką działań terrorystycznych, w czym ważne znaczenie ma struktura sieciowa powiązań o charakterze bezpośrednim i wirtualnym, która odgrywa istotną rolę w kluczowym w tym kontekście procesie radykalizacji. Zjawisko to jest ujmowane z takiej perspektywy przez licznych badaczy zagranicznych i polskich (Hegghammer, 2009; Kosmynka, 2023; Machnikowski, 2009; Sageman, 2008; Vidino, 2006; Wejkszner, 2010).

Interdyscyplinarność metod jest często wskazywana jako podejście charakteryzujące metodologię badań nad terroryzmem (Bolechów, 2012: 24, 33). Podejście to sytuuje się w obrębie tak często pojawiającego się w opracowaniach pluralizmu metodologicznego w zakresie nauk o polityce. Obok analizy materiałów źródłowych w ukazaniu mechanizmów krystalizacji siatek dżihadystycznych w regionie Azji Środkowej – Tadżykistanie i Uzbekistanie – pomocna jest integracja analizy historycznej oraz metody przyczynowo-skutkowej w sensie diagnozy zaistnienia czynników sprzyjających aktywizacji nurtów integrystycznych oraz porównania tych mechanizmów we wskazanych państwach. Ujęcie to dotyczy w tym kontekście również analizy współczesnej roli regionu dla ruchu globalnego dżihadu – w tym przypadku ISKP. Należy dodać, że w badaniu procesu przeobrażeń współczesnego terroryzmu, inspirowanego radykalnym salafizmem, ważne miejsce zajmuje wpisująca się w wymiar ruchów społecznych teoria sieci, która nawiązuje do prac Marca Sagemana. Autor ten postrzega komórki dżihadystyczne zarówno jako swoisty ruch społeczny, złożony z licznych nieformalnych sieci inspirujących do terroryzmu, jak i formę organizacji (Sageman, 2008: 29–31). Obejmuje ona kontakty w ramach grup znajomych i przyjaciół [*bunch of guys*], w których dokonuje się swoista socjalizacja do przyswajania postaw ekstremistycznych. Koncepcja ta pomaga zrozumieć złożone trajektorie radykalizacji; te z kolei implikują określony charakter środków zapobiegawczych, po które sięgać muszą na poziomie decyzyjnym oraz wykonawczym władze – odpowiednie organy i służby państw, zarówno krajowe, jak i międzynarodowe.

Problematyka rozwoju ruchów radykalnego islamu w Azji Środkowej jest szeroko analizowana przez uczonych polskich i zagranicznych. Wielopłaszczyznowe studium sytuacji wewnętrznej państw byłych republik radzieckich w kontekście krystalizacji ruchów integrystycznych zawiera publikacja Józefa Langa. Zagadnienia te przybliżają także publikacje Mirosława Jaremby, Stanisława Zapaśnika, Emmanuela Karagiannisa, Damona Mehla, Nartsiss Shukuralievej. Zagrożenia kreowane przez tzw. Państwo Islamskie Prowincji Chorasan i inne organizacje terrorystyczne są z kolei przedmiotem analiz prowadzonych m.in. przez Catrinę Doxsee, Jareda Thompsona, Grace Hwang, Jasona Wahlanga, Thomasa F. Lyncha III, Michaela Bouffarda, Kelseya Kinga, Grahama Vickowskiego. Edwarda Lemona. Amirę Jadoon, Andrew Minesa oraz Andula Sayeda.

Implikacje działalności tzw. Państwa Islamskiego Prowincji Chorasan w Azji Środkowej

Od lat 90. XX w. radykalny islam coraz wyraźniej zaznacza swoją obecność w środkowoazjatyckich byłych republikach radzieckich. Na rozwój ten miało wpływ rozprzestrzenianie się postaw fundamentalizmu religijnego w odniesieniu do proponowanych rozwiązań społecznych i politycznych, a także ukazywanie świata islamu jako „oblężonej twierdzy", atakowanej przez „krzyżowców i żydów" oraz wszystkich innych „niewiernych". Narracja ta stała się paliwem ruchu dżihadystycznego w kolejnych dekadach. W odniesieniu do Azji Środkowej potrzeba swoistego przebudzenia religijno-politycznego oraz walki w obronie wiary była często uzasadniana losami Afganistanu oraz Czeczenii, zmagających się w różnych okresach z inwazjami radziecką i rosyjską, jak również doświadczeniami związanymi z rodzimymi opresyjnymi reżimami, brutalnie pacyfikującymi opozycję. Na przełomie wieków i później w tej części kontynentu azjatyckiego powstawały organizacje radykalnego islamu, m.in. Hizb ut-Tahrir (Partia Wyzwolenia) (Karagiannis, 2009) czy Islamski Ruch Uzbekistanu (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – IMU). Niektóre z nich, np. Hizb ut-Tahrir, rozwijały działalność w wielu innych państwach, także w Europie (Kosmynka, 2019: 129–141), i deklaratywnie odcinały się od stosowania przemocy; inne, jak wspomniany IMU, ukierunkowywały działalność na muzułmanów mieszkających w byłych republikach radzieckich. Rola tych i innych ugrupowań z perspektywy inicjowania procesów radykalizacji jest bardzo ważna (Echeverría Jesús, 2009: 2).

Aktywizacja nurtów dżihadystycznych w Azji Środkowej nasiliła się w drugiej dekadzie XXI w. Była ona wynikiem kilku zespolonych ze sobą czynników. Niewątpliwie dla ruchu globalnego dżihadu ogromne znaczenie miały rozwój i oddziaływanie tzw. Państwa Islamskiego, co najwyraźniej widać było na przykładzie inspiracji samozwańczego kalifatu w wielu częściach Afryki czy w zagrożeniach

dla Europy Zachodniej i Południowej, płynących ze strony „rodzimego terroryzmu" [*homegrown terrorism*] i komórek dżihadystów odwołujących się do idei i symboliki „świętej wojny". Również obszary Azji Środkowej stały się forum aktywności nurtów wywrotowych o orientacji radykalnie salafickiej. Ich krystalizacji sprzyjają zazwyczaj złożone uwarunkowania endogenne, do których należy zaliczyć m.in. dysfunkcyjność państwa i konflikty wewnętrzne, czego egzemplifikację stanowi obecność siatek dżihadystycznych w wielu częściach Afryki, a zwłaszcza w regionie Sahelu (Kosmynka, 2022: 35–57).

Intensyfikacja zagrożeń o takim profilu stała się szczególnie widoczna wraz z powstaniem i oddziaływaniem tzw. Państwa Islamskiego Prowincji Chorasan, struktury powstałej w połowie drugiej dekady XXI w. i kierowanej przez Hafiza Khana Saida, a od czerwca 2020 r. przez Szahaba al-Muhadżira, działającej w Afganistanie, a także w Pakistanie. Celem organizacji, w której szeregach znalazło się wielu byłych talibów (Ożarowski, 2024: 29), stała się restytucja formuły kalifatu, co oznaczało konfrontację z armią afgańską, siłami międzynarodowymi, a także zwalczanie – zbyt liberalnych według jej liderów – talibów. Liczące w 2016 r. około 3–4 tys. członków ISKP (dwa lata później tylko około 600–800 osób) (Doxsee, Thompson, Hwang, 2021) skoncentrowało się na działaniach terrorystycznych na obszarze Afganistanu i Pakistanu. Ugrupowanie postuluje stworzenie rozległego państwa muzułmańskiego, obejmującego części Afganistanu, Pakistanu, Tadżykistanu, Uzbekistanu, Turkmenistanu oraz Iranu na drodze walki zbrojnej. Tak np. w latach 2017–2018 ISKP było odpowiedzialne za przeprowadzenie 84 ataków na obiekty cywilne w Afganistanie oraz 11 w Pakistanie, w wyniku których śmierć poniosło ponad 1100 osób (Doxsee, Thompson, Hwang, 2021). W kolejnych latach zaznaczają się przejawy dywersyfikacji działań operacyjnych komórek powiązanych z ISKP, o czym mowa dalej. W ostatnim czasie organizacja rozwinęła również wzmożoną aktywność skierowaną ku byłym republikom radzieckim, m.in. Tadżykistanowi i Uzbekistanowi, prowadząc tam akcje prozelickie i werbunkowe. Zaangażowała się także w bezpośrednie ataki terrorystyczne przeciwko tym państwom, co znalazło wyraz m.in. w incydentach zbrojnych, do których doszło wiosną 2022 r. (Mills, 2022). Miały one zarazem wywołać efekt propagandowy i skłonić sympatyków dżihadyzmu do akcesu do tej organizacji.

Prowadzona przez USA i sojuszników globalna wojna z terroryzmem objęła również, w reakcji na ewoluujące zagrożenia, konfrontację z tzw. Państwem Islamskim Prowincji Chorasan. Jej wyrazem była likwidacja przywódców ugrupowania w Afganistanie: Hafiza Khana Saida (lipiec 2016), Abdula Hasiba (kwiecień 2017), Abu Sajeda (lipiec 2017), Abu Saada Orakzaiego (sierpień 2018). Eliminacja doświadczonych w prowadzeniu operacji w Afganistanie, Pakistanie i Uzbekistanie dżihadystów, a potem liderów ISKP świadczyła, z jednej strony, o efektywności działań kontrterrorystycznych, z drugiej – unaoczniła zdolność reorganizacyjną siatek ekstremistycznych, które były w stanie odtworzyć

zniszczone struktury dowodzenia i kontynuować aktywność. Wycofanie sił USA z Afganistanu latem 2021 r. nie pozostało bez wpływu na kolejny rozdział funkcjonowania tego nurtu dżihadyzmu.

Znaczenie Tadżykistanu i Uzbekistanu dla ruchu globalnego dżihadu

a) Tadżykistan

Sytuacja polityczna i gospodarcza Tadżykistanu została mocno naznaczona eskalującymi od 1992 r. krwawymi starciami między siłami rządowymi i opozycyjnymi, które zakończyło porozumienie pokojowe zawarte w 1997 r. (Matveeva, 2009: 34–36). Nie przyniosło ono jednak stabilizacji. Zastój ekonomiczny, brak efektywnych reform, a równocześnie wysokie wskaźniki korupcji i coraz wyraźniej rysujące się tendencje autorytarne elit rządzących pogłębiały niezadowolenie społeczne i brak zaufania do sprawujących władzę. W połowie drugiej dekady XXI w. szacowano, że około 30% terytorium państwa – na którym w okresie konfliktu wewnętrznego dominowała opozycja – pozostawało poza kontrolą rządu (*Tayikistán*…, 2015). Od początku XXI w. miało tam miejsce wiele ataków terrorystycznych, czemu towarzyszyły animozje tadżycko-uzbeckie (Echeverría Jesús, 2009: 4–5). W ciągu dekady (2008–2018) zamachy przeprowadzone na obszarze byłych radzieckich republik tej części Azji pochłonęły około 140 ofiar (Lemon, 2018: 5). Warto zauważyć, że celem tych operacji byli przede wszystkim funkcjonariusze państwowi, jednostki policji i wojska, a z czasem również osoby niezwiązane z instytucjami rządowymi. W lipcu 2018 r. w Tadżykistanie, w wyniku ataku na zachodnich turystów, śmierć poniosło kilka osób; odpowiedzialność za ten akt przemocy wzięło na siebie tzw. Państwo Islamskie.

Nie kwestionując istnienia wyzwań dla bezpieczeństwa na tym tle, nie sposób zarazem nie dostrzec, że w walce z opozycją sprawujący urząd od 1994 r. prezydent Tadżykistanu Emomali Rahmon posługiwał się bardzo inkluzywnym rozumieniem pojęcia „terroryzm", często określając nim siły kontestujące politykę władz (Omelicheva, 2011: 118). Dodajmy, że wybory prezydenckie w ciągu ostatnich dekad znacznie odbiegały od standardów demokratycznych (Dagiev, 2014: 34–38). Chociaż zagrożenia płynące ze strony ekstremizmu wciąż dają o sobie znać (uwidoczniły się zwłaszcza w ostatnich latach), to walka z terroryzmem stała się dla władz wygodnym pretekstem legitymizującym działania autorytarne, wymierzone w opozycję. Rządzący w Tadżykistanie i innych państwach regionu (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) w dużym stopniu opierali się na rozbudowie resortów siłowych, czemu towarzyszyły niewydolność instytucji państwowych, osiągająca wysokie wskaźniki korupcja oraz brak reform (Shukuralieva, 2018: 39–40). W pierwszych dekadach XXI w. zarysowuje się w tym

kontekście wyraźne upolitycznienie działań realizowanych w zakresie bezpieczeństwa i przeciwstawiania się ekstremizmowi (Lemon, 2018: 5). W ramach tej strategii w 2015 r. zakazano działalności Partii Przebudzenia Islamskiego Tadżykistanu (IRPT), a także rozbudowano narzędzia dyskursywne skierowane przeciwko muzułmańskiemu radykalizmowi. Dodajmy, że podobną strategię stosowały zresztą również władze Uzbekistanu czy Kirgistanu.

W 2015 r. miały miejsce liczne aresztowania przedstawicieli opozycji; w marcu został zamordowany jej lider przebywający w Turcji. Wydarzenia te wpłynęły na radykalizację części zwolenników środowisk opozycyjnie nastawionych wobec rządu, nie tylko zresztą o profilu integrystycznym, lecz także przedstawicieli nurtów umiarkowanych. Należy zarazem pamiętać, że usytuowanie państw tej części Azji (bliskość Afganistanu) odegrało ważną rolę z perspektywy ich znaczenia w międzynarodowej wojnie z terroryzmem. Między innymi w Uzbekistanie i Tadżykistanie USA, Niemcy i Francja

> (…) otrzymały zgodę na korzystanie z przestrzeni powietrznej i rozmieszczenie swoich kontyngentów wojskowych służących do wsparcia działań w Afganistanie. Stąd też kraje Zachodu nie tylko zawiesiły krytykę oszustw wyborczych, ograniczania praw i wolności obywatelskich czy tłumienia opozycji. Podejmowały one także kroki, które sprzyjały wzmocnieniu lokalnych reżimów autorytarnych (Shukuralieva, 2018: 41).

Uzasadnieniem prowadzenia takiej polityki była istotna rola regionu, szczególnie Uzbekistanu, dla wojny z terroryzmem i sytuacji w Afganistanie, na co u schyłku pierwszej dekady XXI w. zwracały uwagę analizy (Echeverría Jesús, 2009: 4).

Rozwój tzw. Państwa Islamskiego w kolejnej dekadzie okazał się jednocześnie ważnym bodźcem aktywizującym sympatyków idei kalifatu, choć radykalizm religijno-polityczny ma, jak wspomniano, dłuższe tradycje w regionie. Leżąca na terenie Uzbekistanu, Tadżykistanu i Kirgistanu Kotlina Fergańska stanowi od lat 90. XX w. ośrodek fundamentalizmu religijnego w Azji Środkowej, w dużym stopniu o profilu wahhabistycznym (Raufer, 2011: 185). Ideologia ISIS stała się natomiast silnym impulsem reaktywującym dżihadyzm po znacznym osłabieniu Al-Kaidy i jej franczyz. Szacuje się, że w okresie rozwoju samozwańczego kalifatu trafiło tam około 1700 bojowników (tzw. *foreign fighters*) z obszaru Azji Środkowej (Wahlang, 2023). Ocenia się, że w 2015 r. na terenie Syrii walczyło od 500 do 1000 Uzbeków (Lynch III i in., 2016: 16). Część z nich udawała się na obszary kontrolowane przez tzw. Państwo Islamskie z terenu Kirgistanu, a także Rosji, dokąd od lat trafia znaczna liczba imigrantów zarobkowych z dawnych radzieckich republik. Przypadki te ilustrują losy Tadżyków – Rizwona Achamdowa i Farruka Szarifowa, którzy po pobycie w szeregach ISIS skorzystali z amnestii, a następnie w środkach masowego przekazu przestrzegali przed akcesem do tej organizacji (Lynch III i in., 2016: 14).

Po upadku samozwańczego kalifatu w Iraku i Syrii przetrwało bądź powstało wiele filii organizacji (co egzemplifikuje tzw. Państwo Islamskie Prowincji Chorasan), których szeregi zasilili m.in. byli jej bojownicy oraz nowi rekruci. Liczne analizy zwracają uwagę na zagrożenia wynikające właśnie z działalności werbunkowej tej i innych organizacji ekstremistycznych w państwach Azji Środkowej, a szczególnie na terenie byłych republik radzieckich. Oddziaływanie propagandowe dżihadystów zazwyczaj ukierunkowane jest, jak wiadomo, szczególnie na osoby młode, w wieku 20–30 lat, doświadczające ekskluzji społecznej i frustracji z powodu sytuacji w państwie. To one w szczególnym stopniu są od dawna adresatami zabiegów rekrutacyjnych realizowanych w ramach kontaktów bezpośrednich i za pośrednictwem przestrzeni wirtualnej przez „apostołów świętej wojny”. Osoby te są nierzadko podatne na proces radykalizacji. Mechanizm ten można zaobserwować m.in. w ciągu ostatnich lat w Tadżykistanie, do czego przyczyniają się sygnalizowane tu uwarunkowania społeczno-ekonomiczne (*Strengthening*…, 2020: XIV). Niebagatelną rolę odgrywa także obietnica gratyfikacji finansowej za zrealizowane akcje, co stanowiło prawdopodobnie istotny motyw zamachowców z Moskwy.

W ostatnich latach widać rosnącą obecność materiałów o różnym charakterze (zarówno tekstowych, jak i wizualnych), zamieszczanych w przestrzeni wirtualnej, m.in. w mediach społecznościowych, w językach tadżyckim i uzbeckim. Służą one radykalizacji i pozyskiwaniu nowych ochotników do szeregów ISKP. Przykładem tego rodzaju propagandy są nastawione na przyciąganie obywateli Uzbekistanu platformy: Xuroson Ovozi i Al-Azaim Uzbek (Jadoon, Mines, Sayed, 2023: 9). Co ważne, ISKP prowadzi dyskurs dżihadystyczny w lokalnych językach – uzbeckim, tadżyckim, kirgiskim, zwiększając tym samym spektrum oddziaływania na potencjalnych sympatyków. W materiałach tych władze Tadżykistanu i Uzbekistanu są przedstawiane jako apostatyczne reżimy, prześladujące muzułmanów i sprzymierzone z zagranicznymi wrogami islamu: Rosją i Zachodem. Ważną rolę w tym przekazie odgrywają wypowiedzi osób tej narodowości, które związały się z dżihadystami, jak tadżyccy więźniowie uwolnieni z więzienia w Dżalalabadzie w 2020 r. wyniku ataku bojówki ISKP (Wahlang, 2023).

Oczywiście uzasadnienie problemu akcesu do grup terrorystycznych i wywrotowych czynnikami natury ekonomicznej byłoby znacznym uproszczeniem. Warto podkreślić, że nie tylko jednostki zajmujące dolne szczeble drabiny stratyfikacji społecznej bywają podatne na bezpośrednią lub wirtualną narrację salaficką. Zdarza się, że ulegają jej także osoby należące do wyższych warstw lub środowisk wywodzących się z kręgów wojskowych. Najbardziej wymownym przejawem rozprzestrzeniania się idei dżihadystycznych był akces lidera jednostek specjalnych płk. Chalimowa do ISIS. Po przedostaniu się na terytoria kontrolowane przez tzw. Państwo Islamskie zamieszczał w przestrzeni wirtualnej, na YouTubie, groźby pod adresem władz. Ilustruje to jedna z jego licznych wypowiedzi: „Posłuchajcie uważnie, psy, Prezydencie i ministrowie. Gdybyście wiedzieli, ilu chłopców, naszych braci, jest tutaj, którzy czekają, aby powrócić do Tadżykistanu i ustanowić prawo

szariatu. Idziemy po was z Bożą pomocą, idziemy was zabić. Posłuchajcie, amery-kańskie psy, byłem w Ameryce wiele razy i widziałem, jak ćwiczyliście żołnierzy do zabijania muzułmanów. Z Bożą pomocą przyjdziemy do waszych miast i domów i was pozabijamy" (*Tayikistán…*, 2015; tłum. własne).

Zarówno ta, jak i inne wypowiedzi odzwierciedlają wątki typowe dla narracji prowadzonej przez dżihadystów; we frazeologii tej wrogiem są nie tylko „krzyżow-cy i żydzi", lecz także – w takim ujęciu – apostatyczne reżimy państw zamieszkiwa-nych przez muzułmanów. Terenem wzmożonej aktywności środowisk integrysty-cznych stały się szczególnie obszary położone w pobliżu granicy z Afganistanem. Zwłaszcza od 2023 r. odnotowuje się nasilenie działań realizowanych na tym obsza-rze przez członków ISKP. Należy pamiętać, że do państwa tego w minionej deka-dzie docierali bojownicy zagraniczni i w ramach swoistej „międzynarodówki dżiha-dystycznej" prowadzili akcje zbrojne przeciwko wojsku afgańskiemu (szczególnie w prowincji Badachszan). Byli to m.in. obywatele Tadżykistanu, Uzbekistanu, Cze-czenii i Kirgistanu. Część z nich współpracowała z siłami talibów, część z organiza-cjami związanymi z tzw. Państwem Islamskim. Aktywiści tego nurtu podejmowali niejednokrotnie w ciągu ostatnich lat operacje zbrojne wymierzone w szyitów, m.in. na terenie Iranu, w czym udział brali również bojownicy wywodzący się z Tadżyki-stanu (Burke, 2024). Tak np. w styczniu 2024 r. w zamachu zorganizowanym przez ISKP w irańskim mieście Kerman zginęło około 100 osób (Burke, 2024). Komórki tej organizacji zostały wykryte i dezaktywowane również na terenie Europy, m.in. w Niemczech, gdzie latem 2023 r. zatrzymano kilku imigrantów z Tadżykistanu, Kirgistanu i Turkmenistanu. W grudniu tego samego roku niemiecka policja za-trzymała Tadżyka i Uzbeka, podejrzewanych o planowanie zamachu w noc sylwe-strową na katedrę w Kolonii. W styczniu 2024 r. komórka terrorystyczna, do której należał także obywatel Tadżykistanu, przeprowadziła atak na kościół w Stambule, powodując śmierć jednej osoby i obrażenia u innej. Wyniki śledztw wskazywały na związki ze wspomnianą organizacją.

Warto przypomnieć w tym kontekście, że wycofanie sił USA z Afganistanu i opanowanie go przez talibów, jak również upadek ISIS w Iraku i Syrii – wszyst-ko to skłoniło wielu członków organizacji do powrotu oraz kontynuowania dzia-łalności wywrotowej na terenie własnych państw, szczególnie w rejonach trudno dostępnych, na których kontrola administracji rządowej jest szczątkowa. Tak więc mechanizmy funkcjonowania tzw. Państwa Islamskiego oraz kolejnych inkarnacji i odłamów tego tworu niezmiennie potwierdzają transnarodowy charakter dżiha-dyzmu, którego sieci realizują przedsięwzięcia nie tylko na obszarze Afganistanu czy Pakistanu, lecz także w wielu innych częściach świata.

Na sytuację w Tadżykistanie oraz w regionie destabilizująco wpływa również proceder obrotu substancjami psychoaktywnymi, z którego czerpią zyski lokalne i międzynarodowe sieci przestępcze, w tym także często przedstawiciele władz czy funkcjonariusze resortów siłowych. W drugiej dekadzie XXI w. było to naj-uboższe państwo z byłych radzieckich republik (Lynch III i in., 2016: 13–14);

wielu jego obywateli decydowało się na emigrację bądź poszukiwało zysków z czynów kryminalnych. Warto zaznaczyć, że relacja symbiotyczna, łącząca organizacje kryminalne z nurtami ekstremistycznymi, jest tu bardzo znamienna i wynika w dużym stopniu ze słabości instytucjonalnej państwa. Tak np. „siatki dżihadystyczne obejmują kontrolą wiele szlaków kontrabandy, organizują i eskortują transport substancji odurzających oraz czerpią zyski z tego procederu" (Kosmynka, 2019: 50). Mechanizm ten ilustruje przykład Sahelu Zachodniego czy Afganistanu, z którego trafia do Europy większość wytwarzanej z opium heroiny, co od dawna stanowiło dla talibów ważne źródło pozyskiwania środków finansowych.

W reakcji na przejęcie Afganistanu przez talibów władze Tadżykistanu zintensyfikowały przedsięwzięcia antyterrorystyczne. W 2021 r. zawarto szereg porozumień ze Stanami Zjednoczonymi w celu m.in. dostarczenia wyposażenia logistycznego służącego uszczelnieniu monitoringu granicy tadżycko-afgańskiej oraz zwalczaniu terroryzmu (*Country*…, 2021). Współpraca w tym zakresie (np. szkolenie służb antyterrorystycznych czy ratyfikowana przez tadżycki parlament w grudniu 2021 r. umowa dotycząca kwestii bezpieczeństwa) rozwijana jest także z Rosją, która od lat konsekwentnie dąży do pogłębiania na omawianym terenie swoich wpływów politycznych i wojskowych. Opracowano również narodową strategię walki z terroryzmem i ekstremizmem na lata 2021–2025 oraz wprowadzono zmiany legislacyjne poszerzające spektrum instrumentów przeciwdziałania tym zagrożeniom. Odzwierciedleniem tych ostatnich były przyjęte w grudniu 2021 r. regulacje prawne, modyfikujące rozwiązania istniejące od 1999 r. w zakresie zwalczania terroryzmu. Reorganizowały one m.in. funkcjonowanie instytucji i agend powołanych do tego celu. Warto zaznaczyć, że podobne kierunki działań w ramach kontrterroryzmu zostały wprowadzone w Uzbekistanie. Ogółem, w samym tylko 2021 r. zatrzymano w Tadżykistanie około 340 osób pod zarzutem prowadzenia działalności terrorystycznej lub ekstremistycznej (*Country*…, 2021), choć do liczby tej należy podchodzić ze sceptycyzmem. Jak zaznaczono wcześniej, oskarżenia o przynależność do grup terrorystycznych od dawna stanowią dla władz tego państwa przydatny oręż do walki z przeciwnikami politycznymi. Bezpośrednio po zamachu na obrzeżach Moskwy w marcu 2024 r. do Tadżykistanu udali się rosyjscy śledczy; na terenie tego państwa zatrzymano około 10 osób powiązanych z ISKP.

b) Uzbekistan

Rozwój radykalnego islamu w Uzbekistanie jest związany z Islamskim Ruchem Uzbekistanu (IMU) oraz główną postacią tego ugrupowania – Żumabojem Chodżijewem (*alias* Dżuma Namangani). Na początku lat 90. XX w. ten były wojskowy, który służąc w armii rosyjskiej w Afganistanie zetknął się z ideami salafickimi, rozpoczął aktywność integrystyczną na terenie Uzbekistanu. W obawie przed represjami stosowanymi wobec islamistów przez administrację prezydenta

Karimowa Namangani zbiegł do Tadżykistanu, gdzie wraz z Tahirem Juldaszewem rozbudowywał organizację i zrealizował różnorakie przedsięwzięcia terrorystyczne i przestępcze w Kotlinie Fergańskiej (Jaremba, 2018: 168). Deklaracje IMU obejmowały postulaty stworzenia tam (czyli na obszarach Tadżykistanu, Uzbekistanu i Kirgistanu) państwa muzułmańskiego, zbudowanego na filarze prawa szariatu. Xavier Raufer przypomina, że organizacja ta, w której szeregach znajdowało się wielu weteranów wojny w Afganistanie, utrzymywała się i rozwijała w dużym stopniu dzięki profitom finansowym, płynącym ze wspomnianego handlu substancjami psychoaktywnymi (opium i heroina); na przełomie wieków kontrolowała około 70% prowadzonego przez Azję Środkową przemytu opium z Afganistanu (Raufer, 2011: 189). Obrazuje akcentowaną tu i widoczną na wielu obszarach konwergencję działalności ekstremistycznej z transnarodowym procederem kryminalnym.

IMU stanowi zarazem egzemplifikację ruchów wywrotowych o profilu dżihadystycznym; prowadząc narrację integrystyczną, organizacja podejmowała liczne akcje zbrojne skierowane przeciwko władzom Uzbekistanu, Tadżykistanu i Kirgistanu. Znalazła się też w orbicie oddziaływania ISKP, dążąc do destabilizacji regionu (Wahlang, 2023). W drugiej dekadzie XXI w., obok innych organizacji salafickich, takich jak Związek Islamskiego Dżihadu (Islamic Jihad Union – IJU), była stale aktywna także na terenie Afganistanu oraz Pakistanu. Utrzymywała w tym czasie kontakty z czynnymi w Waziristanie komórkami Al-Kaidy i talibami. To właśnie na terenie Afganistanu i Pakistanu (Lang, 2013: 5) IMU pozyskiwała nowych ochotników i ich szkoliła. Rozwinęła działalność w górach Batkenu, a w kolejnych latach jej członkowie zaktywizowali się w Afganistanie w ramach Al-Kaidy, deklarując podporządkowanie tzw. Państwu Islamskiemu oraz ogniskując poczynania w północnej części Waziristanu (Jaremba, 2018: 169–171). We wrześniu 2014 r. deklarację taką złożył przywódca organizacji Usman Ghazi (Mehl, 2015: 11). Warto wspomnieć, że na początku XXI w. została ona przez USA wpisana na listę organizacji terrorystycznych; w następnych latach jej znaczenie zmniejszyło się wskutek strat poniesionych w trakcie walk (Raufer, 2011: 189). Zdołała jednak przetrwać i się zreorganizować, generując wyzwania dla bezpieczeństwa w kolejnej dekadzie.

Ewolucja Islamskiego Ruchu Uzbekistanu odzwierciedla tak znamienną dla dżihadyzmu fluktuację partycypacyjną organizacji, siatek i komórek, afiliujących się do tego ruchu, ale często pod „zmiennym szyldem" – symbolizowanym przez Al-Kaidę czy tzw. Państwo Islamskie. Prowadzenie działalności na obszarze różnych państw, współpraca z filiami lub swoistymi „franczyzami" dużych organizacji stały się istotnym elementem funkcjonowania międzynarodowego ruchu dżihadystycznego. Aktywność Islamskiego Ruchu Uzbekistanu w regionie stanowi ilustrację tego trendu, tak dobrze znanego również z innych części świata.

Należy zaznaczyć, że w ostatniej dekadzie XX w. Uzbekistan stał się teatrem aktywności także i innych organizacji o profilu salafickim. Wśród nich znalazła się wspomniana wcześniej Hizb ut-Tahrir, której przedstawiciele kierowali

fundamentalistyczny przekaz szczególnie do osób młodych, borykających się z brakiem perspektyw i doświadczających wykluczenia społecznego (Karagiannis, 2006: 261–280; Zapaśnik, 2014: 54–56). Bojownicy tej struktury od 1995 r. koncentrowali swe akcje głównie w Taszkiencie i w Kotlinie Fergańskiej.

W pierwszej dekadzie XXI w. dżihadyści byli odpowiedzialni za szereg zamachów samobójczych w Uzbekistanie (m.in. w marcu i lipcu 2004 r.). Były one wymierzone przede wszystkim w obiekty rządowe, a także w bazy amerykańskie oraz przedstawicielstwa dyplomatyczne USA i Izraela. Dodajmy, że całokształt działań tego nurtu wpłynął na radykalizację wywodzących się z Azji Środkowej przedstawicieli środowisk imigracyjnych w różnych częściach świata. O skali rozrostu prowadzonych akcji świadczy szereg przykładów. Otóż na początku stycznia 2017 r. zamachowiec z Uzbekistanu, Abdulkadir Maszaripow, zabił 39 osób w jednym z nocnych klubów w Stambule. Wyniki śledztwa ujawniły, że terrorysta przebywał w obozach dżihadystów w Afganistanie i Pakistanie, a następnie brał udział w konflikcie w Syrii. W kwietniu 2017 r. inny Uzbek zrealizował zamach w petersburskim metrze, który pochłonął piętnaście ofiar. W tym samym miesiącu Rakhmat Akilow, obywatel Uzbekistanu, który bezskutecznie starał się o uzyskanie azylu w Szwecji, skradzioną furgonetką uśmiercił kilkoro osób w Sztokholmie. Pod koniec października 2017 r. Sajfull Sajpow wynajętą furgonetką taranował rowerzystów i spacerowiczów w Nowym Jorku, w wyniku czego śmierć poniosło osiem osób, a kilkanaście odniosło obrażenia (Clifford, 2017). We wcześniejszych latach udaremniono w USA kilka zamachów, w które zamieszani byli imigranci z Uzbekistanu (2011, 2012). Powyższe przykłady nie świadczą oczywiście o masowych konwersjach na radykalny islam wśród Uzbeków i obywateli innych państw regionu. Obrazują jednak ustawiczne ryzyko, wynikające z procesu (auto)radykalizacji podatnych na taki dyskurs jednostek, a proces ten, jak wiadomo, w skrajnych przypadkach może przekształcać się w różne formy przemocy.

W odpowiedzi na zagrożenia terrorystyczne władze uzbeckie zastosowały represje nie tylko wobec środowisk islamistycznych, lecz także uczestników antyrządowych demonstracji. W pierwszej dekadzie XXI w. miały miejsce liczne zamieszki i starcia, które pochłonęły setki ofiar, przyczyniając się do destabilizacji sytuacji w państwie, która – jak wiemy – bywa czynnikiem sprzyjającym rozwojowi ruchu dżihadystycznego. W tym właśnie kontekście w 2016 r. Anthony Blinken określił priorytety polityki USA wobec Azji Środkowej w ramach wojny z terroryzmem: umacnianie stabilnych, niezależnych i demokratycznych rządów, które będą odgrywały kluczową rolę w powstrzymywaniu ekstremizmu w regionie (Lynch III i in., 2016: 6). Konsekwencją tego typu polityki było wsparcie o charakterze militarnym, gospodarczym i rozwojowym (w tym także humanitarnym) dla państw regionu (Lynch III i in., 2016: 7). Warto jednak podkreślić, że w zakresie bezpieczeństwa i innych sfer polityki głównym partnerem dla regionu była i jest Rosja, umacniająca strefy wpływów w dawnych republikach.

Podsumowanie

Region Azji Środkowej zajmuje szczególne miejsce w kontekście walki z międzynarodowym terroryzmem oraz wyzwań dla bezpieczeństwa. Od kilku dekad obserwujemy aktywizację różnych nurtów radykalnego islamu, co najdobitniej obrazuje sytuacja w Afganistanie, Pakistanie, a także w byłych republikach radzieckich w tym regionie. Ta część Azji stanowi jeden z segmentów aktywności organizacji dżihadystycznych, które wykorzystują sygnalizowane wyżej wewnętrzne czynniki, sprzyjające rozprzestrzenianiu się idei walczącego salafizmu. Zagrożenia kreowane przez ten nurt wykraczają poza dotychczasowy wymiar lokalny i mogą eskalować – staje się to prawdopodobne, jeśli uwzględni się widoczną od dawna konwergencję przedsięwzięć wywrotowych i ekstremistycznych. Ruch ten, początkowo koncentrował się na aktywności w skali lokalnej (Afganistan, Pakistan), a z czasem stał się w szerszym stopniu generatorem zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa. Włączył się w nurt światowego dżihadu, budując powiązania z siatkami istniejącymi na wielu innych obszarach, w tym także w Europie (Lang, 2013: 5). Złożone uwarunkowania rozwoju ekstremizmu w Afganistanie i Pakistanie są nadal bezpośrednim katalizatorem zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa tego obszaru, co nie pozostaje bez wpływu na problem oddziaływania ruchów wywrotowych na państwa ościenne. Jakkolwiek w Tadżykistanie i w Uzbekistanie radykalny islam nie jest – jak do tej pory – dominującym nurtem, jednak staje się tam coraz bardziej widoczny i w przyszłości może okazać się potencjalnym sprawcą dalszej destabilizacji regionu. Niewątpliwie przyczyniają się do tego wspomniana dysfunkcyjność struktur państwowych oraz pozyskiwanie przez nurty dżihadystyczne dogodnych „przyczółków" do kontynuowania aktywności destabilizacyjnej.

Rozpad tzw. Państwa Islamskiego na obszarach Iraku i Syrii, chociaż bardzo osłabił ruch skrajnie radykalnego islamu, to nie doprowadził do wyeliminowania kreowanych przezeń zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa. Ilustrują to procesy zachodzące w Afryce Subsaharyjskiej oraz – w mniejszym zakresie – w Azji Środkowej, na co wskazuje funkcjonowanie Państwa Islamskiego Prowincji Chorasan. Głosząc postulat ustanowienia kalifatu na terenie tej części kontynentu azjatyckiego, ISKP intensyfikuje w ostatnich latach wysiłki zarówno werbunkowe, jak i terrorystyczne, skierowane przeciwko władzom państw regionu. To właśnie organizacja ta jest głównym, choć nie jedynym sprawcą zagrożeń dla regionu, wynikających z aktywności ruchu globalnego dżihadu. Pozostając w swoistej synergii z innymi ugrupowaniami radykalnego islamu, jak wspomniany Islamski Ruch Uzbekistanu, oddziałuje destabilizująco na sytuację w tej części Azji. Oczywiście nie jest na tyle silna, aby móc w najbliższym czasie zrealizować swój postulat ustanowienia „parapaństwa" i tym samym sprawować kontrolę nad znacznym terytorium, jak było to w przypadku rozwoju ISIS. Nie ulega jednak wątpliwości, że organizacja ta będzie kontynuowała działalność terrorystyczną i agitatorską, werbując w swe

szeregi młodych, pozbawionych perspektyw obywateli Uzbekistanu, Tadżykistanu i innych państw regionu. Frazeologia apologetów „świętej wojny" nierzadko trafia w takich przypadkach na żyzny grunt.

W odniesieniu do byłych środkowoazjatyckich republik radzieckich wysoce prawdopodobne są zatem dalsze – dwupłaszczyznowe – przejawy obecności tego nurtu. Można antycypować zarówno przygotowywanie i próby realizacji bezpośrednich aktów przemocy w regionie, jak i pozyskiwanie tam osób, które będą przysposabiane do wykonania misji poza tym obszarem. Należy również prognozować akces do ISKP pomniejszych komórek i nurtów walczącego salafizmu, które z tego rodzaju kroku będą usiłowały czerpać wymierne profity, a zarazem intensyfikować zagrożenia terrorystyczne w regionie. Stąd tak bardzo potrzebne jest opracowanie właśnie strategii antyterrorystycznej w ramach „twardych" instrumentów zwalczania komórek ekstremistycznych, ale – przede wszystkim – eliminowaniu terroryzmu powinna towarzyszyć dbałość o redukowanie endogennych uwarunkowań podatności na radykalizm. Ryzyko to staje się udziałem szczególnie osób młodych, na co zwracają uwagę raporty (*Strengthening*…, 2020), odnoszące się zresztą nie tylko do sytuacji we wspomnianych państwach. Właściwe oddziaływanie „znaczących innych", odpowiedni poziom edukacji, wyposażającej w kompetencje sprzyjające znalezieniu zatrudnienia przy jednoczesnej dbałości o wolny od ekstremizmu przekaz treści religijnych – wszystko to minimalizuje niebezpieczeństwo akcesu do grup kryminalnych, wywrotowych i terrorystycznych. Świadomość tego, jak trudne jest to przedsięwzięcie w kontekście wspomnianych wyżej przeszkód strukturalnych, politycznych i gospodarczych oraz agitacji nurtów integrystycznych, nie powinna dezawuować zasadności podejmowania starań w tym kierunku.

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