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## **THE IMAGE OF POLAND IN PRO-KREMLIN RUSSIAN MEDIA DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF THE FULL-SCALE WAR IN UKRAINE**

### **A b s t r a c t**

The goal of the present article is to discuss the image of Poland and Poles created in Russian media in conjunction with the current war in Ukraine. From 24 February 2022 there was hardly a day when some text did not appear about Poland, or Polish themes were not discussed in Russian television. This changed only in October 2023 after the beginning of another conflict in the Middle East. Poland in this media is, first of all, presented as ‘Russophobic’ and hostile country willing to regain—lost with the partitions in the 18<sup>th</sup> century—great power status through weakening of the geopolitical position of Russia as well as annexing the former Eastern Borderlands. This article was based on materials from the most watched Russian TV political talk shows as well as information agencies and portals.

**K e y w o r d s:** Russian-Ukrainian War, Poland, pro-Kremlin media, propaganda.

On the morning of 24 February 2022, the army of the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine. As the Kremlin, followed by propaganda functionaries, announced, the goal of the invasion, called in Russia a ‘special military operation’, was the ‘demilitarization’ and ‘denazification’ of Ukraine. An additional goal was to ‘free’ the separatist Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics established in 2014. An operation that was to have the character of a blitzkrieg

extended to many days, resulting in huge losses of life<sup>1</sup> and did not bring the projected military progress and territorial gains for Russia.

From the first day of the Russian aggression thousands of Ukrainian inhabitants who wanted to leave their country started to arrive in various European countries.<sup>2</sup> From the very beginning of the conflict the Polish authorities took a determined and unambiguous stance in the matter of the conflict, which boils down to absolutely condemning the Russian aggression as well as demanding that the international community undertake decisive measures in the form of painful sanctions against the Kremlin. Similarly Polish society assumed a clear pro-Ukrainian stance. Many Polish offices put up Ukrainian flags, which hung there for a very long period of time. Many public individuals wore ribbons in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. This kind of 'honeymoon' in Polish-Ukrainian relations ended in mid-2023 with the persistence of the Ukrainian side in not giving approval for the exhumation of Polish victims murdered by Ukrainian Banderites in the Volhynian massacre of 1943, the matter of the embargo on importing cheap Ukrainian grain, which flooded the Polish market, or in general the change of orientation of Kyiv in its policy directed more and more toward Berlin. And all this took place during the parliamentary election campaign in Poland.

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<sup>1</sup> On 21 Sep. 2022 the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation Sergei Shoigu said that Ukrainian losses amounted to more than 110 thousand killed and wounded, of which 61,207 killed and 49,368 wounded. However on the Russian side 5937 soldiers perished. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2022/09/21/941821-shoigu-vsu-100-000> (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 21 September 2024.). According to Ukrainian data from the same day Russia lost over 55 thousand soldiers. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=414336590879425&set=a.229159252730494>. The Ukrainian losses, according to Kyiv, were over 9 thousand killed. <https://vechirniy.kyiv.ua/news/71867/>. On 1 Dec. 2022 the adviser of Zelensky Mykhaylo Podolak said that since the beginning of the war 10 to 12.5–13 thousand Ukrainian soldiers were killed. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3626005-v-ofisi-prezidenta-nazvali-vtrati-ukrainskoi-armii-za-cas-vijni.html>. According to the data of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, by 2 March 2023 Russian losses amounted to 150,605 'eliminated persons', that is, killed and/or gravely wounded. <https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1631245720849195008?cxt=HHwWglC9yeTVrKMtAAAA>.

<sup>2</sup> According to the data of the Polish Border Guard, in the period from the beginning of the war to 6 Aug. 2023 14.35 million people crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border. According to the data of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy by May 2023 the Polish state paid out in only social welfare benefits for Ukrainians in Poland 2.6 billion zloty [equal to over \$600,000], of which the most, 2.4 billion, were for the 500+ program. According to the data of the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS), at the end of May 2023, 744 thousand Ukrainians were registered as working in Poland. In the same period childrearing benefits were received by 211,800 Ukrainians. <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-wiemy-ile-polska-wydaje-na-swiadczenia-dla-ukraincow,nId,6949204>.

The war in Ukraine has already inspired countless varied types of analyses and publications. Analyses of the general mechanisms of Russian propaganda have also started to appear.<sup>3</sup> However, there is still no broader analysis of the image of Poland in Russian media during the war on Ukraine.

Whereas prior to the war of 2022 Polish topics were generally ‘a marginal or completely unimportant’, for both Russian elites and society as well as in the historiography,<sup>4</sup> after the invasion this changed decisively. From 24 February 2022 there was hardly a day when some text did not appear about Poland, or Polish themes were not discussed in Russian television. This changed only in October 2023 after the beginning of another conflict in the Middle East.

The goal of the article is to present the image of Poland and Poles created in Russian media in conjunction with the full-scale war in Ukraine. The period in which I analyze anti-Polish threads falls essentially in the first year of the war. To keep the size of the article down, in this essay it will not be possible to discuss all threads concerning Poland.<sup>5</sup> I intend to focus on the ones that are most visible—the so-called Russophobia, accusations of Poland supposedly having plans to occupy the part of Ukraine that once belonged to the Polish state (Lwów/Lviv and the *Eastern Borderlands*) as well as historical questions. I would like to make it clear that my article is a historical study and I use historical methodology here, which involves analyzing available material from the Russian media. It was not my intention to engage (once again) in a broader theoretical or conceptual argument about Russian foreign policy or propaganda, as historiography is full of such attempts.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Vera Tolz and Stephen Hutchings, ‘Truth with a Z: Disinformation, War in Ukraine, and Russia’s Contradictory Discourse of Imperial Identity’, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39: 5, 2023, pp. 347–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2023.2202581>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Chwalba and Wojciech Harpula, *Polska-Rosja. Historia obsesji, obsesja historii* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2021), pp. 18–19; Mariusz Wołos, ‘Historiografia rosyjska pierwszej dekady XXI stulecia wobec historii Związku Radzieckiego oraz węzłowych problemów z dziejów stosunków polsko-radzieckich (zarys problematyki)’, *Dzieje Najnowsze* XLIII: 3, 2011, pp. 133–154.

<sup>5</sup> Soon my monograph on the subject will be published, where I will completely discuss the aforementioned threads.

<sup>6</sup> One of the most recent analyzes depicting Russian propaganda in the context of preparations for war against Ukraine was presented by Ukrainian scholars Vasyl Ilnytskyi, Volodymyr Starka and Mykola Haliv in their article ‘Rosii’s’ka propahanda iak element pidhotovky do zbroinoi ahresii proty Ukraïny’ [‘Russian Propaganda as an Element of Preparation for Armed Aggression Against Ukraine’], *Ukraïns’kyi istorychnyi zhurnal [Ukrainian Historical Journal]* 5, 2022, pp. 43–55, <https://doi.org/10.15407/uhj2022.05.043>.

The basis of the article are materials of the pro-Kremlin Russian media directed first of all to the Russian audience. Above all I analyzed materials from the most important and most watched political talk shows, such as *60 minut* (60 Minutes), *Večer s Vladimirom Solov'ëvym* (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov)—on Sundays the program is broadcast in a slightly different set under the name *Voskresnyi večer s Vladimirom Solov'ëvym* (Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov), *Vremia pokazhet* (The Time Will Tell), *Bol'shaia igra* (The Great Game), *Mesto vstrechi* (Meeting Place), *Kto protiv?* (Who is against?), *Otkrytyi éfir* (Open Broadcast) and others, broadcast by the biggest, and thus most watched, Russian television stations, such as first of all 'Pervyi kanal' (Channel 1), 'NTV', 'Rossiia 1' (Russia 1), 'Rossiia 24' (Russia 24), 'Zvezda' (The Star). Besides television I used materials of Russian information agencies and portals.

According to the independent Russian polling agency Levada Center state media are for the majority of Russians still the source of information 'of the highest reliability'. Where the war in Ukraine is concerned, most Russians trust the information broadcast by state television stations (42%). Second place (25%) is taken by social media, and third (20%) by state information agencies (RIA Novosti, TASS). The position of foreign media broadcasting in Russian or Russian media broadcasting beyond the borders of the country is minimal.<sup>7</sup>

One must underscore that, despite the existence of many various political programs, the threads that appear in them are very similar, and at times identical, just like the invited experts—there is usually a narrow group of several dozen individuals that takes part in them sometimes on the same day in various television or radio programs and, clearly, they share similar views. Let us now look at the Russian media devoted to the picture of Poland.

### 'RUSSOPHOBIA'

Before the war in Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states were considered by Russia to be the 'main Russophobes' in Europe. After the war began little has changed. Yet one must pay attention to the fact that in the Kremlin's narrative essentially each criticism of the fundamental vectors of Moscow's imperial policy is considered

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2022/08/16/vospriyatie-novostnoj-informatsii-sredi-rossiyan-otnoshenie-k-presledovaniyu-v-internete/>.

'Russophobia'. Thus many actions of Poland were treated by the Kremlin as 'pathological Russophobia'. The former Russian president Dmitrii Medvedev, in his text for *Rossiyskaya gazeta* summing up the year 2022, devoted a fragment to Poland, describing the country as 'an example of impotent spite and rare crazy Russophobia'.<sup>8</sup> These words were no exception, they were a typical Russian propagandistic anti-Polish narrative. For example the well-known political scientist Sergei Mikheyev, who often appears in pro-Kremlin media, called the Polish political elite 'sick with Russophobia, sometimes transmogrifying into a paranoia that does not allow [it] to think straight'.<sup>9</sup> The television journalist of „Channel 1” and co-emcee of one of its most popular political talk shows *Vremia pokazhet* Anatolii Kuzichev said that in Poland 'one spits on Russia with great satisfaction and fury'.<sup>10</sup> The *Vesti FM* radio journalist Gia Saralidze went even further and said on the 'Rossiia 1' television channel that in Russia the phrases 'Pole' and 'enemy' are synonyms.<sup>11</sup> Whereas in the program *Otkryti efir* in the 'Zvezda' television it was claimed, 'If there is something eternal in the world, it is without a doubt Russophobia'.<sup>12</sup> On the program *60 minut*, doctoring the words of Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki,<sup>13</sup> it was announced that the defeat of Russia is 'the essence of the existence of the Polish state'. Evgenii Popov developed this further, calling Morawiecki 'a Polish lord' (*pol'skii pan*) in the following manner: 'The head of the Polish government proves yet again that the very existence of Poland makes no sense'.<sup>14</sup>

According to the Kremlin, the anti-Russian policy of Warsaw stems from 'Polish complexes' *vis-à-vis* Russia, from historical reasons, as well as from a desire 'to regain the great power status' that was lost by Poland with the partitions at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Even thoughts appeared that Poland was ready not only to 'regain the

<sup>8</sup> <https://rg.ru/2022/12/25/nashi-liudi-nasha-zemlia-nasha-pravda.html>.

<sup>9</sup> *Bol'shaia igra*, 17 Jan. 2023.

<sup>10</sup> *Vremia pokazhet*, 20 Feb. 2023.

<sup>11</sup> *Kto protiv?*, 1 Feb. 2023.

<sup>12</sup> *Otkryti efir*, 13 Feb. 2023.

<sup>13</sup> In an interview for *Corriere della Sera* he said that defeating Russia is the raison d'état of Poland and Europe, and the return of Russia to the ranks of civilized states will take place after Putin is gone. <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1533320%2Cpremier-morawiecki-pokonanie-rosji-polska-i-europejska-racja-stanu.html>. Meeting 20 Feb. 2023 in Warsaw with Giorgia Meloni he used a similar formulation: 'Defeating Russia is today the condition of the return to normality'. <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/premier-mateusz-morawiecki-w-bardzo-wielu-waznych-sprawach-wiem-ze-polska-moze-liczyc-na-wlochy-a-wlochy-moga-liczyc-takze-na-polske>.

<sup>14</sup> *60 minut*, 9 Feb. 2023.

former Eastern Borderlands' (Pol. *Kresy Wschodnie*) but also 'make it to Moscow', in order to 'settle accounts' for its 'lost great power status'. It was often underscored that Poles overestimated their abilities and that it always turned out badly for them, that is, with the loss of their independence.

Russian propaganda during the war noted, that, inasmuch as the Polish, Baltic, or Ukrainian approach to Moscow did not earlier have an impact on 'old Europe', after 24 February, it became the 'mainstream' view. The editor-in-chief of *Baltnews* Andrei Starikov in an interview for RIA Novosti informed that the European Union had 'Balticized' and 'Polonised', becoming a 'large Poland and Baltic region'.<sup>15</sup> A member of the State Duma, general Andrei Gurulov called Poland and the Baltic states 'countries that have gone out of their minds' (*sumashedshie strany naglukho*), where there is 'crazy (*ogoltelaia*) Russophobia'.<sup>16</sup>

On 28 September 2022 on the program of Aleksandr Gordon *Vremia vspomnit* in the television 'Pervyi kanal', devoted to 'Russophobia' it was announced that Poles, 'eyeing Ruthenian territories', were the first 'Russophobes' in Europe already in the sixteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Precisely through the Poles, as the program announced, 'the myth that Russia is a terrible and wild country spread in Europe'.<sup>18</sup>

Certain anti-Russian movements of Poland are explained in Russia exclusively as 'blind Russophobia'—such as the resigning from Russian gas or the unconditional assistance for Ukraine, and even the beginning of the construction of the border wall with Belarus that is supposed to protect Poland and the EU from the influx of immigrants, who are moved to illegally cross the border by Minsk and Moscow. That same 'Russophobia' also explained the statements of Polish politicians, such as Piotr Gliński on 'the need for Russian culture to disappear',<sup>19</sup> or on

<sup>15</sup> <https://ria.ru/20220811/evrosoyuz-1808563626.html>.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.pravda.ru/world/1779354-polskaja\\_rusofobija/](https://www.pravda.ru/world/1779354-polskaja_rusofobija/).

<sup>17</sup> On one of his later programs on 3 November 2022 Gordon presented the words of the Polish king Sigismund I the Old on the subject of Russia, which he called 'an enemy of Christianity ready together with the Turks and Tatars to destroy the Christian world'. Gordon commented on this, that 'it is very similar to how people in the West look at us now'.

<sup>18</sup> In the program among other things the 'Russophobic' statements of one of the 'leaders of communism', Friedrich Engels, were presented, underscoring that even Karl Marx had statements to that effect. The conclusion of the program was the statement that Russophobia always grew when the international position of Russia was strong.

<sup>19</sup> The deputy prime minister and minister of culture Piotr Gliński, on 4 March 2022, called for the 'expulsion or at least the suspension' of Russia from the work of the Intergovernmental Committee of the Protection of Global Cultural and Natural Heritage UNESCO. Then he called for a boycott of Russian culture. In 'Radio Łódź' he said: 'As long as Russians murder children, women, and are turning war into the murder of civilians, my view is unequivocal: no Russian culture'. At the beginning of April 2022 at a session

‘the Russian world’ as a ‘cancerous growth’ of Mateusz Morawiecki, which one needed to excise.<sup>20</sup>

On 20 November 2022, the program *Moskva. Kreml’. Putin* broadcast every Sunday on the television station ‘Rossiia 1’, where in propagandistic form the most important actions of Putin in the past week are covered, was dedicated almost entirely to ‘Polish Russophobia’, which Pavel Zarubin named ‘practically the main center in the world’. The history of Polish-Russian relations since 2000 was shown by a 40-minute-long set of statements of Putin (as president and prime minister).<sup>21</sup> Of course they were portrayed in the Muscovite propagandistic spirit, in which Russia ‘always tried to maintain correct relations’ with Poland, but Poland did not want that. As manifestations of the escalating moves of Poland were mentioned, among other things, the process leading to the location of an American anti-rocket shield in Redzikowo; the destruction of monuments to Soviet soldiers; the rejection of Russian findings in the matter of the Smolensk catastrophe of 2010, during which the Polish president Lech Kaczyński as well as 95 other passengers, in the main representing the Polish political elite, perished; the criticism of the construction of Nord Stream 2; or Polish support for the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, as a result of which Viktor Yanukovych was brought down in 2014. This process was portrayed as a Polish policy consistently realized by a series of presidents: Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Lech Kaczyński,<sup>22</sup> Bronisław Komorowski and Andrzej Duda. All of this was titled in a segment of the program as ‘Polish Russophobia’, and

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of the EU Council for Education, Youth, Culture and Sport [EYCS] in Luxembourg Gliński stated that Russian culture should disappear from the public sphere. <https://dzieje.pl/kultura-i-sztuka/glinski-dopoki-rosjanie-morduja-cywilow-moj-poglad-jest-oczywisty-zadnej-kultury>; <https://www.polskieradio24.pl/5/1222/Artykul/2933197,To-nie-czas-na-Czechowa-czy-Puszkina-Glinski-do-czasu-zakonczenia-wojny-zero-kultury-rosyjskiej>.

<sup>20</sup> Such a phrase was used by Morawiecki in his piece for the British *The Telegraph* on 10 May, 2022, [edition from 11 May], where the Polish prime minister warned about Russian imperialism as expressed in the concept ‘Russian world’ [*Russkii mir*], which—as he said—is ‘a cancer that is devouring not only the majority of Russian society but also is a deadly threat for all of Europe’. *Russkii mir* was named by Morawiecki ‘the counterpart of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century criminal ideologies of communism and Nazism’, thanks to which ‘the Kremlin justifies completely bogus rights and privileges for its country’. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2022/05/10/russias-monstrous-ideology-must-defeated/>.

<sup>21</sup> One of these was a statement from 2009 that he wanted ‘to give a signal to the Polish nation that Russia wants and intends to build relations with Poland as with a friendly state [...], take hands and go forward’.

<sup>22</sup> It was underscored that from the period of the presidency of Lech Kaczyński a ‘too active American military domestication of Poland’ had begun. At the same time Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński were confused, with the inscription ‘Lech Kaczyński’ under a photograph of his brother.

the crowning achievement of this production was Putin's statement of 4 November 2022 insinuating that Poland wants 'to swallow up Ukraine'.

One must underscore that Russian media does not only accuse Poland of 'Russophobia'. These accusations were directed toward the entire 'collective West'. This was part of the broader context of Russian internal policy, which taught society that the country was and is constantly under threat from the West, which has tried to undercut Russia several times in the past. Hence, as Andrzej Nowak stressed 'the need for sacrifice was emphasized, thanks to which these threats could be overcome'.<sup>23</sup> In speaking about the 'Russophobia' of the West more than once reference was made to the policy of Nazi Germany *vis-à-vis* the Jews. In this Russians were identified as the Jews persecuted, then murdered by Germans. One of the most popular media functionaries of the Kremlin Vladimir Solovyov often used such a comparison, repeatedly reminding that he has a particular right to do this, as he himself is an ethnic Jew. For example, on 16 November 2022, on his Sunday night program he said: 'Anti-Russian hysteria for me, as a Jew, unambiguously recalls the approach that was used *vis-à-vis* my nation. "You are a Jew, so you are guilty"'. On such occasions Solovyov, when speaking about the ethnic provenance of the president of Ukraine, many times repeated that Zelensky 'is not a [real] Jew'.

Criticism of 'Polish Russophobia' was not limited to Russian propagandistic media. Protests were also organized in front of Polish consulates on the territory of the Russian Federation. They were not very popular, and thus there was minimal interest on the part of Russian media. Usually a small group of protesters took part. At the beginning of September 2022 in front of the Polish consular agency in Smolensk local communists and Komsomol members organized a protest against 'the cynical Polish Russophobia' connected with the 'support for the neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine', the destruction of monuments of Soviet soldiers on the territory of Poland. On the photograph published in the newspaper *Pravda* one sees seven individuals holding anti-Polish posters.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Andrzej Nowak, *Polska i Rosja. Sąsiedztwo wolności i despotyzmu X-XXI w.* (Cracow: Biały Kruk, 2022), p. 436.

<sup>24</sup> [https://gazeta-pravda.ru/issue/99-31302-8-sentyabrya-2022-goda/pozor99-22/?sphrase\\_id=129905](https://gazeta-pravda.ru/issue/99-31302-8-sentyabrya-2022-goda/pozor99-22/?sphrase_id=129905).

## THE ROOTS OF 'POLISH RUSSOPHOBIA' ACCORDING TO THE KREMLIN

The skeptical policy of Warsaw towards Moscow, called 'Russophobia' by the Kremlin, came out of, as already was mentioned, in accordance with the latter's narration, 'Polish imperial complexes' *vis-à-vis* Russia, above all for historical reasons, when Russia not only took away Poland's great power status but with the help of other states led to her liquidation twice—in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the partitions, and in 1939 with the outbreak of World War II. Not only has such an interpretation held sway among Russian historians and columnists, such contents were snuck into fictional productions. In the third episode of the historical series *Ded-Morozov: 2* (Grandpa Morozov) (2023) directed by Viacheslav Lavrov and broadcast the evening of 23 February 2023 on the television station 'NTV' in precisely this way the titular Nikolay Morozov, a Russian revolutionary activist, explains to one of his interlocutors why Poles 'so hate' Russia:

There was a period when not the Russian but the Polish empire was to occupy a sixth of the globe and, more than that, [occupy the territory] from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But it turned out that Russia destroyed those plans (...). It was Russia that destroyed the empire of the Polish Commonwealth and turned her into a Russian guberniia.

Various declarations or the behavior of Polish authorities supporting Ukraine were explained by Russian propaganda as precisely 'a complex of empire'. This is how the proposal of Jarosław Kaczyński in Kyiv on 15 March 2022 to send to Ukraine 'a NATO peace mission',<sup>25</sup> declarations about de-Russifying the economy, or even the statement of Lech Wałęsa about making the Russian population smaller,<sup>26</sup> and the like were explained.

The first expressive voice in the course of the Russian intervention in Ukraine about 'the Polish imperial complex' were the words of the former Russian president and prime minister Dmitrii Medvedev, who at the time was serving as the deputy of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. On his profile on the social portal Telegram on

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<sup>25</sup> This proposal did not awaken enthusiasm either from NATO or from Kyiv.

<sup>26</sup> On French television 'LCI' on 9 July 2022, Wałęsa, in his usual half-baked way, spoke of the need to 'reduce the number of the population of Russia to 50 million'. He meant that the Russian Federation was composed not only of ethnic Russians but also other nations connected to it, which ought to gain independence.

21 March 2022, in response to the words of Morawiecki on de-Russifying the Polish and European economy, which would cost them dearly, he wrote,

He is absolutely and entirely right: it will be expensive and senseless. But Poland seems not to count the costs anymore. Everything that it could lose on account of its own long-term pathological Russophobia, it has already lost. Thus now, as our beloved Polish neighbors say, 'the shed has burned down—let the cottage burn' (*sgorel saraĩ—gori i khata*).

This 'pathological Russophobia' he explained precisely as stemming from the loss territories of the Polish Commonwealth to the Russian empire, the result of which was its downfall<sup>27</sup>.

Medvedev later, on the occasion of other occurrences, repeatedly recalled his thesis. In an interview for RIA Novosti on 25 March 2022 he said that Poland

tries to get revenge for lack of success, maybe even, not had in the course of the last decades but centuries and if it cannot resurrect the Commonwealth, then at any rate it will try to remind that it once was a very serious player in the world, in Europe, and as a matter of fact aspired to be an empire.<sup>28</sup>

On 31 March 2022 in the Polish version of 'Sputnik' he published a text *Seven Short Polemical Theses*. It was a mishmash of well known and typical Russian lies, maligning Poland as a 'maniacally Russophobic' country trying at all costs to demonstrate before 'the American older brother', longing for its former imperial position, in consequence of which wanting as if to regain Lwów (Lviv) and the Eastern Borderlands.<sup>29</sup>

In my attempt at summing up the Russian narration of 'the Polish imperial complex', it seems that the problem is inherent in something quite the opposite. It is Russia, which is desperately trying to keep Ukraine in its sphere of influence, which has a complex of a post-Soviet great power. Poland, with which it fought in the past and defeated, is for Russia a symbol of successful battle for supremacy in Eastern Europe—Poles who conquered Moscow were not only chased out of it but years later their country was wiped off the map of the world, with Russia a main party to it. That Russia has a complex of a lost (tsarist

<sup>27</sup> [https://tigrm.ru/channels/@medvedev\\_telegram/11](https://tigrm.ru/channels/@medvedev_telegram/11).

<sup>28</sup> <https://ria.ru/20220325/polsha-1780027609.html>.

<sup>29</sup> <https://pl.sputniknews.com/20220331/dlaczego-sa-nieskuteczne-jakiekolwiek-kontakty-z-obecnym-polskim-kierownictwem-17675965.html>.

and Soviet) empire was admitted unwittingly by Aleksandr Gordon on the eve of the holiday celebrated in Russia on the occasion of expelling the Poles from the Kremlin in 1612: 'Tomorrow we celebrate the day when our state could have disappeared, simply disappeared, as Poles really achieved a victory and practically incorporated Russia into itself'.<sup>30</sup> One must underscore that the entire program was dedicated to the 'Polish great power complex'. The same theses resounded that were present in the propaganda—which I described above—accusing Poles of 'eternal imperial ambitions', which always turned out badly for Poland.

### LWÓW/LVIV AND THE EASTERN BORDERLANDS

As I already wrote, Poland, according to Russian propaganda, never came to terms with the loss of its imperial status, lost definitively with the partitions to the advantage of Russia, and would want to regain it. That could happen via activities on two planes. The first was the activity of Warsaw directed towards the geopolitical weakening of the position of Russia, so as in the end of that process to assume the latter's geopolitical place. The second plane was to be the regaining of lands that had formerly belonged to it. In this context above all was mentioned the western part of Ukraine, to a lesser extent also the western part of Belarus, and even on occasion Lithuanian as well as ... parts of Russia.

The motif of regaining great power status through annexing Ukrainian or Belarusian territories was nothing new in Russian propaganda. Such disinformation began to appear from 2014, and with the change of political power in Poland in 2015, only increased.<sup>31</sup>

After the invasion began, the message of 'Polish regaining' of the former Eastern Borderlands as a means to 'renew Polish imperialism' became a constant presence in Russian propaganda. In effect each Polish action concerning Ukraine, each visit of Polish politicians to Ukraine, each declaration of help for Ukraine in the course of the conflict summoned forth a consistent narrative, if one

<sup>30</sup> *Vremia vspomnit'*, 3 Nov. 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Michał Marek, *Operacja Ukraina. Kampanie dezinformacyjne, narracje, sposoby działania rosyjskich ośrodków propagandowych przeciwko państwu ukraińskiemu w okresie 2013–2019* (Warsaw: Difin, 2020), pp. 61–64; Tomasz Chłoń and Krzysztof Kozłowski, *Selected Case Studies of Systemic Disinformation: Russia and China*, in Robert Kupiecki and Agnieszka Legucka, eds, *Disinformation and the Resilience of Democratic Societies* (Warsaw: PISM, 2023), pp. 37–68 (p. 46).

varying in its details, in this sphere in the media. At precisely the time when Russia invaded Ukraine with tanks, and on part of the occupied territory introduced changes designed to swallow up these territories (introduction of the ruble, Russian telephone codes etc.), Kremlin manipulators accused Poland the most, that it is 'a threat to the territorial integrity of Ukraine', calling it often 'the hyena of Europe'. In addition to the name of hyena, to change up the Russian propaganda, other animal terms were also used, for example, jackal, skunk, sheepdog.

Sometimes it was added that other countries were also interested in the 'partition' of Ukraine. Most often mentioned were Hungary and Romania, and even Moldova made an appearance. Never however in this context was Russia obviously mentioned. Russia, just like the Soviet Union, in the period of World War II fashioned itself as 'the liberator of the Russian lands'.

The accusation of having plans of partitioning Ukraine were connected with the narrative of Ukraine as an 'artificial creation' created by 'territorial presents' made in turn by Lenin, Stalin and Khrushchev. The Donbas was mentioned, as were the south-east region called Novorossiia, territories included in the course of World War II as well as those given to Ukraine in 1954. Putin himself recalled this, among other times, during the discussion of the Valdai Club on 27 October 2022, stating that 'the sole real, serious guarantor of Ukrainian statehood, its sovereignty, and territorial integrity could only be Russia, which created today's Ukraine'.<sup>32</sup>

One could hear about Poland from the lips of Putin several days later, on 4 November 2022, during the celebration of the Day of National Unity, established in memory of the capitulation of the Polish garrison in the Kremlin in 1612. He spoke again about lands 'forcibly removed from Hungary, Romania, and Poland' by Stalin and given to Ukraine. He also mentioned another constant thread of Russian propaganda, the purported Polish desire 'to swallow Ukraine'.<sup>33</sup> He also recalled this lie, often repeated by Russian propaganda, on 7 December 2022 during a session of the Council for the Development of Civic Society and the Rights of Man:

There [in Poland] nationalistic elements dream and look at how to regain their so called historic territories, that is, the western territories that Ukraine

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<sup>32</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.

<sup>33</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69781>.

received as a result of the decision of Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin after World War II. As you know, these territories were taken from Poland and given to Soviet Ukraine. Of course nationalistic elements in Poland dream and see [how to get to it] that these territories should return to Poland, and they will strive for this, regardless of what and who might say this. We see this even in their literature, in their considerations and appearances. They will lead to this in the end, of which I have no doubt.<sup>34</sup>

The statements of Polish politicians have been doctored, presenting them as ‘direct declarations of Polish territorial pretensions’ *vis-à-vis* Ukraine (for example, the words of Andrzej Duda about the lack of a border between Poland and Ukraine);<sup>35</sup> documents have been prepared, such as the command of the Commander of the General Armed Forces of the Polish Republic General Jarosław Mika on the purported introduction of Polish military into Ukraine,<sup>36</sup> which was to attest to the ‘aggressive plans’ of Poland. In the end it was fabricated that Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki directly proposed to the President of Ukraine that his country come under a ‘Polish protectorate’.<sup>37</sup> Important politicians such as Sergei Naryshkin, Dmitrii Medvedev, Dmitrii Peskov led such propaganda, helped by servile journalists who in their statements or posts in social media portals maintained such a vision of ‘the Polish threat’.

After the beginning period, when the Polish military incursion into Ukraine was dreamed up, from the end of May 2022 the narrative slowly started to change. The content of the incursion of the military into western part of Ukraine slowly disappeared, and the thought was put forth that it will come to a ‘soft annexation’ based on the fact that Poles, ‘who have special preferences’, purportedly given by a special law of Zelensky’s,<sup>38</sup> will, for example, settle in Lviv, taking

<sup>34</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70046>.

<sup>35</sup> During his speech on the occasion of the Polish national holiday of the 3 May Constitution, Duda hoped that the border between Poland and Ukraine ‘in fact will not exist’: ‘We will live together on this land, rebuilding and building our common happiness and our common strength, which will permit [us] to stand up to every danger, and which each will fear in the future to attack and will fear to threaten’. <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/wystapienie-prezydenta-podczas-uroczystosci-naplacu-zamkowym,53158>.

<sup>36</sup> This purported order was first published on 2 May 2022 by the journalist and politician, the deputy speaker of the Moscow municipal Duma, Andrei Medvedev on his Telegram account. <https://t.me/OpenUkraine/15825>.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, *Vremia pokazhet*, 6 Feb. 2023.

<sup>38</sup> The law on the particular status of Poles in Ukraine was passed on 28 July 2022 without any opposition, nor anyone abstaining. It went into effect on 16 September 2022. As its originator Zelensky underscored, it was a sign of ‘thankfulness for the Polish nation for solidarity and support for Ukraine under conditions of a full Russian armed aggression

additional advantage of zero percent (sic!) mortgage credits. This, together with the endeavours of Poland to locate a center for Ukrainian reconstruction in Warsaw, was presented as an idea for the financial domination of Ukraine, that is, a 'soft annexation', where Poles would not only coordinate the reconstruction and be its main beneficiaries, but also use it privatized many 'reconstructed places', becoming their 'owner', and by this means the real 'lords of these lands'.

After organizing from 23 to 27 September 2022 their fake referendums on the occupied Ukrainian lands, Russian propagandists stated that Poles will organize their referendums in the western oblasts of Ukraine. Another time there was talk of creating in western part of Ukraine 'Bantustan', that is, an autonomous region for Ukrainians where they will have second-class status or about a 'Polish protectorate'. It was stated that even if Poland does not incorporate these territories in fact, it will entirely dominate them in the creation that was to be the Three Seas Initiative. Despite the certain differences articulated above, the Russian propaganda message boils down to the main statement: Poland is trying to occupy Lviv and the former Eastern Borderlands, but will not be satisfied with only Ukraine. 'Waiting in line' were Belarus, Lithuania, and even Kaliningrad and...the Pskov oblast.

Polish assistance for Ukraine was interpreted by the deputy minister of information of the so called DPR Daniil Bezsonov as a desire to prolong the conflict so as to weaken Russia, then occupy the western regions of Ukraine. The international expert of the newspaper *Kommersant* Sergei Strokan acknowledged that, thanks to the 'Ukrainian crisis', Poland had new possibilities to realize its plans of 'a great power from sea to sea'. According to him, within these plans were also 'the swallowing and eating of part of Ukraine, when it falls'. He also used the animalistic terms loved by Russian propagandists indignant at all manifestations of 'Russophobia' to describe Poland. He said that Poland 'is not already a complete hyena', but a 'sheepdog', which on American 'command' 'runs between the European states' and 'chases the herd' to 'war with Ukraine'. But as a 'partial hyena' it still wants to 'swallow up part of Ukraine'. In addition to 'hyena' and 'sheepdog' he used the term 'parasite', preying on European funds.

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as well as taking into consideration the principle of reciprocity'. See the text of the law: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2471-IX#Text>. The Ukrainian law was the mirror of a legal act accorded in Poland on 12 March 2022. See: *Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy w związku z konfliktem zbrojnym na terytorium tego państwa*, Dz. U. 2022 poz. 583.

Ruslan Ostashko seized upon this thread, calling Poland ‘no kind of sheepdog’ but rather a ‘leech trying to transform into a frog’.<sup>39</sup>

In Russia media on various occasions a map purportedly made in Poland is shown that shows the partition of Ukraine amongst its neighbors. In reality it was a map appended to a proposal of dividing Ukraine among Russia, Poland, Romania, and Hungary, which came in 2014 from the then deputy chair of the State Duma and head of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia Vladimir Zhirinovskii. The central swath was to remain with Ukraine, ‘being a colony of Poland’. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs termed that letter at the time as ‘bizarre’.

- III. 1. The map of the partition of Ukraine presented in Russian television.  
According to Russian propaganda, in Poland it was supposedly  
‘shown and analyzed’



Source: *Vremia pokazhet*, (Pervyi kanal), 23 March 2022.

As already shown, Russian politicians of the highest rank many times repeated the lies about Poland preparing to annex part of Ukraine. Many times such nonsense was announced by Medvedev. For example on 20 April 2023 he posted that Ukraine could join NATO ‘only as regions of Poland, Hungary, and Romania’.<sup>40</sup> On 23 June 2023 he made a longish post on the topic of the purported plans of Poland ‘to swallow up what remained of Ukraine’.<sup>41</sup> Medvedev again made reference to

<sup>39</sup> *Vremia pokazhet*, 7 Mar. 2023.

<sup>40</sup> <https://tass.ru/politika/17573837>.

<sup>41</sup> [https://t.me/medvedev\\_telegram/313](https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/313).

the purported desire of Poland to annex the former Borderlands after a statement appeared in the media by the chief of staff of the general secretary of NATO Jens Stoltenberg, Stian Jenssen, that it could come to compromise—in exchange for the approval of Kyiv to lose part of its territory to Russia, Ukraine could become a member of NATO. Later, after a wave of criticism, Jenssen retracted his statement. In the meantime Medvedev wrote in Telegram that, since Ukraine was to resign from the disputed territories to gain entrance into NATO, it would have to give up Kyiv and move the capital to Lviv, under the condition that ‘necessarily the *psheki* [a Russian and Ukrainian derogation for Poles] would agree to leave Lemberg (sic!) to the lovers of lard with coke’.<sup>42</sup> Those words naturally appeared elsewhere in Russian media. On 24 August 2023 on the anniversary of Ukrainian Independence Day Medvedev once again accused Poland of having plans to ‘swallow up the rest of Ukraine’, calling it Washington’s plan.<sup>43</sup>

Also active in spreading disinformation about the occupation of the western parts of Ukraine by Poland was the head of the Service of Internal Intelligence Sergei Naryshkin. On 28 April 2022 his statement that the services under him had received the information that Poland and the United States want to make happen the transfer to Polish rule the country’s former ‘historic territories’ in Ukraine. It was supposed to take place according to the already tested scenario from the period of World War I, when the Entente states at the outset gave the right to Poland to occupy Galicia to protect those territories from the Bolsheviks, and then they agreed to the incorporation of these territories into the Polish Republic. This time, the head of the internal intelligence said, Poles will enter the western oblasts of Ukraine with the slogans of protecting them from Russian aggression. According to these insinuations, Polish secret services ‘are looking now to negotiate with members of the Ukrainian elite, in order to form them into a democratic counterweight to the nationalists’. ‘In Warsaw they expect that consolidation in the west of Ukraine will most likely lead to a split in the country, and Poland will receive under its administration territories occupied by a ‘peace mission’, as Naryshkin summed up.<sup>44</sup>

On 30 November 2022 Naryshkin gave an interview to RIA Novosti.<sup>45</sup> His long narrative about the supposed Polish plans to occupy the west of

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<sup>42</sup> [https://t.me/medvedev\\_telegram/374](https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/374).

<sup>43</sup> <https://tass.ru/politika/17590473>.

<sup>44</sup> <http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2022/04/o-polskikh-prityazaniyakh-na-zapadnuyu-ukrainu.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> <https://ria.ru/20221130/polsha-1835283674.html>.

Ukraine is an accumulation of propagandistic contents that appeared earlier. He said that Poland, afraid that certain NATO allies will try to reach agreement with Moscow during the approaching winter, against the interests of both Ukraine and Poland, 'is speeding up preparations for annexation' of the oblasts in western part of Ukraine: Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Ternopil. The last was to be occupied not in its entirety, just 'in great part'. This imagined once again by a Kremlin dignitary 'annexation of Ukraine' was to be 'generous compensation' for Poland for giving military help and supporting Ukrainian refugees, and also for the event in Przewodów.<sup>46</sup> Naryshkin insinuated that President Duda gave a command to the appropriate Polish services to prepare in a short time a document justifying 'Polish claims on western Ukraine': 'The starting point in the ongoing archival searches is the Volhynian massacre of 1943 (...). In Warsaw they are convinced that the data in the state archives will suffice for making *vis-à-vis* Kyiv serious restitution demands'. He stated further that Poland will want to organize referendums on the territories that were to become part of Poland, making use of the Russian 'successful experience' in the east of Ukraine.

On 21 July 2023 Naryshkin once again—during Putin's meeting with the permanent representatives of the Security Council—stated that Poland is planning to move its military into the west of Ukraine. It would do this on account of the fact that decision makers in Warsaw had ascertained that no Western aid would be able to successfully help Ukraine in its war with Russia.<sup>47</sup>

The spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mariya Zakharova stated on 2 August 2023 that claims on Ukraine 'are already becoming the main current in Polish society'. She claimed that in Poland 'books, conferences, speeches are appearing, the corresponding symbols are gradually being incorporated into stamps, coins with certain nostalgic recollections of the lands of western Ukraine within Poland. This demarcates a certain societal contour, that is why it makes no sense to pretend that no one understands it'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> On 15 Nov. 2022 pieces of a Ukrainian rocket killed two farmers in the Polish locality of Przewodów, which lies near the border with Ukraine. Ukraine persisted in denying its involvement, stating that it was a Russian rocket, despite the rather clear stance of Joe Biden ruling out a Russian attack. Less than a year after the event Poles confirmed that it was a Ukrainian missile that fell on Przewodów at the same time ruling out it being shot from Russia. The Polish investigators had to work independently as the Ukrainian side did not provide Poland with any materials.

<sup>47</sup> <https://tass.ru/politika/18330435>.

<sup>48</sup> <https://tass.ru/politika/18425491>.

Minister of Defense of Russia Sergei Shoigu said on 9 August 2023 in his appearance before the higher military officers that annexation was to be done under the cover of 'Polish-Ukrainian unification to guarantee the security of western Ukraine, but in reality—for the subsequent occupation of this territory'.<sup>49</sup>

Of course the fact that none of this type of predictions ever came true did not bother the Russian propagandists. They never admitted that their diagnoses, such as that of the military occupation of strategic buildings in Ukraine by Polish military groups never came true. To the contrary, they treated them like the interruption of supposed Polish plans after their revelation by Russian intelligence. And the quintessence of the strategy of using Poland to frighten that does not refer to previously announced nonsense is the statement of the co-emcee of the program *Mesto vstrechi* in the television station 'NTV' Ivan Trushkin that one need not wait for the Polish military to enter Ukraine, as they are already there in the form of 'Polish mercenaries', of which there were supposed to be many: 'There Poles are everywhere'.<sup>50</sup>

A military expert, Andrei Klintsevich expressed an equally odd thesis. Commenting on a film with visible military vehicles traveling the streets of allegedly Lviv [in reality the vehicles were moving about Poland], he said that, on account of the fact that Ukrainians were not undergoing training on the Polish equipment shown in the film, 'one can conjecture that regular Polish military groups have already started to enter [Lviv] on their newest equipment'. The emcee Kuzichev nodded. In the next part of his statement Klintsevich cited the 'Polish press' and declared that a name for the new state has already been invented: Ukropolina.<sup>51</sup>

An example of the absurdity of Russian propaganda on the purported preparations of Poland to regain the Eastern Borderlands is seeing such plans even in the military song *Przybyli ulani pod okienko* sung traditionally by marching Polish soldiers. There is such a fragment there:

When we visit Warsaw, already we are keen  
To see our old Wilno (Vilnius),  
And from Wilno the road is ready,  
It leads straightaway to Lwów (Lviv).

<sup>49</sup> <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/18474529>.

<sup>50</sup> *Mesto vstrechi*, 24 Oct. 2022.

<sup>51</sup> *Vremia pokazhet*, 15 Sept. 2022.

That this song was written in 1914 in a completely different historical context, when Poland fought for to regain independence, and its future borders were one great unknown, had no significance for the Kremlin propagandists. Presenting it to their viewers in the most primitive way possible: since Polish soldiers march and sing about ‘the road leading straightaway to Lviv’, and Lviv now is in Ukraine, then the Polish Armed Forces are planning to annex Lviv and the former Eastern Borderlands.

The text of the song appeared, among others, on the program *Bol'shaia igra* on 24 October 2023. Emcee Dmitrii Suslov hinting at what was to come stated that ‘in Poland such moods are spreading in relation to Ukraine’. After its broadcast he was surprised that no accusations of Poland being revisionist appeared. One of the guests of the program, the political scientist and professor of MGIMO Kirill Koktysh, said something on that subject; he stated that so far for the ruling party in Poland, ‘Law and Justice’, after the elections (15 October 2023) ‘they were in a big hurry’, and, before giving up power, they will want to ‘realize all of the things which they had sought to undertake’, that is, to regain the former Eastern Borderlands. In the opposite case, the policy of Law and Justice of ‘investing in the Eastern Borderlands in order to gain Ukraine’—Koktysh continued—will turn out to be its catastrophe, if it is not brought about. He further agreed with Suslov that in the new geopolitical situation, when Washington will want to help Israel above all, ‘the masks will fall’ and Poles will be asking about gratification for helping Kyiv, for supporting Ukrainian refugees in Poland (financial or territorial in the form of regaining the Borderlands). Suslov, agreeing with the guest, commented: ‘Very tragic are the perspectives facing the Kyiv regime, among others from the side of his big brother Poland’.

## THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE DATE OF POLES ENTERING INTO UKRAINE

The Russian propaganda narrative every now and then added fuel to the fire in order to keep up the narrative of Poles ready ‘any time now’ to partition Ukraine. Despite the fact that from the beginning of the war, propagandists announced this thesis, which led to nothing, in mid December 2022 they resolved to give a concrete date of the

supposed Polish entry into Ukraine. It was 4 May 2023.<sup>52</sup> The source of this fabrication was the Polish-language, Kremlin *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny* (Independent Political Daily). This is an obscure portal, which does not even have a Polish domain, and whose editors no one had ever seen, which was often used by Russian propaganda as a source of information from the so-called 'Polish press'. The above-mentioned date was calculated as follows: in the days 23–27 March 2023 all Polish reservists (at that time there were exercises of the reserve of the Polish Army) were already to be in the military compounds, exercises were to last 33 days, and after their end the army was to move into a 'liberation parade'. On the anniversary of the Volhynian massacre, 11 July 2023, a referendum on the incorporation of these territories into Poland was supposed to take place.<sup>53</sup>

An expert of the Bureau of Military-Political Analysis Vladimir Yeranossian, resolved to 'explain' why exactly 4 May 2023. So, in each of sixteen Polish voivodships there is one territorial defense brigade. The government planned to increase the number of defenders by 17 thousand, which amounts to five new brigades. And since there will be five new brigades they will be sent to five 'new voivodships'. Where does those 'new' administrative districts come from? Of course, from the 'partition of Ukraine'. 'These people [Duda and the Defense Minister Mariusz Błaszczak] create exactly as many as they need'—thus the propagandist finished his 'unmasking of the Polish plan'.<sup>54</sup>

A little later a different, earlier, date appeared. On 17 January 2023 in a 'special report' devoted to Poland *Zapadnyj rubezh*, broadcast on TV 'Zvezda', presented as 'journalistic investigation', came the information that at the beginning of February 2023 Poland intends to 'invade' western parts of Ukraine and Belarus. Probably realizing how absurd the thesis presented was, a bit later they added that the ongoing common Russian-Belarusian maneuvers in Belarus 'perhaps will throw cold water on Warsaw's plan'. In this way they had covered for themselves and given already a ready answer 'why a Polish invasion of Belarus did not take place'. One of the experts speaking, Yuri Knutov claimed that Poland was preparing to invade Belarus during the protests in Minsk (2020–2021), but Lukashenka's request for and receipt of Russian military assistance staved off that invasion.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2022/12/17/15958405.shtml>; *Otkrytyj efir*, 21 Dec. 2022.

<sup>53</sup> <https://dziennik-polityczny.com/2022/12/14/hanna-kramer-polska-szykuje-do-marszu-wyzwolenczego-na-ukrainie-juz-znamy-najwazniejsze-daty/>.

<sup>54</sup> *Otkrytyj efir*, 21 Dec. 2022.

## THREATS DIRECTED AT POLAND

Poland was presented as a ‘warmonger’, executing Washington’s orders, being a threat to Russia as well as trying to engage the entire NATO in the war. From this in the Russian media suggestions of the need to ‘denazify’ Poland too appeared, once the identical operation will end in Ukraine. This was not however a dominant interpretation in Russian propaganda, although it was mentioned regularly in Russian media. Threats against Poland appeared usually as commentary to the statements of Polish politicians (for example, the afore-mentioned *russkii mir*), declarations of unconditional support for Ukraine or real actions in that direction, such as the sending of armaments. In threads about the sending of armaments some propagandists postulated bombing Rzeszów as the main transit place from which armaments were shipped to Ukraine. It is however characteristic that, when the explosion in Przewodów took place on 15 November 2022, when it was suspected at first the Russia was involved, Russian propaganda (portals, press and television) did not take advantage of that fact in their narrative threatening Poland, but precisely the opposite, they absolutely denied it, and then mocked the Ukrainian narrative. However, both beforehand and afterward threats appeared consistently in Russian propaganda.

In the Russian media message the motif of another partition of Poland relatively often returned. Some joked in this way, others in a more serious way postulated the division of Poland (sometimes it was mentioned that this could be done together with Germany) as punishment for its anti-Russian policy. One of those who spoke of partitioning Poland was Vladimir Solov’ev, who suggested repeating what Stalin had done, citing the words of the Soviet dictator that Warsaw was a ‘Russian city’.<sup>55</sup> That Poland ‘deserved’ to be partitioned again said Solovyov together with his guests in his program on 7 February 2023. The inspiration for this was the broadcast, a day earlier, during his program of the film *Giena Evropy* (Hyena of Europe) directed by Yuriĭ Starikov as well as the appearance of Mateusz Morawiecki on 6 February 2023 inaugurating the first meeting of the *Warsaw Conference—the Permanent Working Conference Review of Support for Ukraine*.<sup>56</sup> The program was called

<sup>55</sup> *Večer s Vladimirom Solov’evym*, 13 Dec. 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Morawiecki said, among other things: ‘Poland is ready to take upon itself co-responsibility for the shaping of a new world order. Poland is ready to become one of the

‘Morawiecki’s Polonaise’. Solov’ëv began by mocking Morawiecki’s declaration by shouting the threats:

Poland! I want to find somewhere [then he looked down, as if searching for something] a piece of rotten meat to feed the hyena! Poland! You haven’t looked into the mirror for a long time! You don’t have an atomic bomb, you have few people, no economy! What, you will throw apples? According to me, it is high time that Warsaw put up a monuments to Suvorov.<sup>57</sup> On each street after Suvorov. Or Poland does not like the number three. That is, we don’t like saying three partitions of Poland? We like four, yes? Why Poles, do you need this? What in the world are you going there for? Each time you bump into something and each time you get it in the nose. Even so you didn’t understand.

On the same program other guests followed the narrative of the host. The president of the Institute of the Near East Evgeniĭ Satanovskii claimed that one should return to the borders from the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), where in accordance with its dictates both Warsaw and Finland were given to Russia. The former Ukrainian deputy Igor Markov claimed that ‘neither history nor God teaches Poles anything’. Recalling the Russia ‘dogma’ that the ‘Soviet leadership and Soviet nation gave Poland statehood in 1945’ he claimed that ‘one should not make the same mistake again’, as the majority of Poles support the policy of their government. ‘One should not forgive those who declared war of annihilation on us (...). Poland has made its choice’—he said. Vladimir Kornilov stated that ‘exactly today’, 7 February, 210 years ago to the day when the Russian army conquered Warsaw, the Russian emperor treated the Poles very gently – ‘punished with mercy’ (*pokarali milostiu*), ‘despite the terrible things that they did in Smolensk, in Moscow—they murdered, raped, and burned down Orthodox churches’. He claimed further that for such a ‘gentle policy’ in relation to Poles and others—‘punishing with mercy’—no one ever thanked them. ‘Poles take revenge on us for punishing them with mercy’, he summed up.

Also often appearing as a guest on pro-Kremlin media, the dean of the Higher School (Department) of Television of the M. Lomonosov Moscow State University Vitaliĭ Tretiakov was famous for voicing threats towards Poland. At the end of December 2022, while on the

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key links in post-imperial Europe. It is not enough to defeat Russia, one also has to build a world in which Russian imperialism and colonialism, Russian domination do not find room for themselves’. <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/premier-mateusz-morawiecki-polska-jako-pierwsza-stanela-po-stronie-ukrainy-po-stronie-wolnosci>.

<sup>57</sup> This is about Aleksandr Suvorov, leader of the Russian forces that put down the Kosciuszko Insurrection, under whose command, during the attack on Warsaw on 4 Nov. 1794, civilians were massacred.

program *60 minut*, he asserted that Poland—on account of its relation to Russia, but also to Germany, and also on account of its relation ‘to that Ukraine, which they are forced to fight’—‘deserved’ a fourth partition.<sup>58</sup> Appearing a month and a half later with Vladimir Solov’ev, he postulated taking away Poland’s access to the Baltic Sea.<sup>59</sup> However, in the day of Joe Biden’s trip from Kyiv to Poland on 20 February 2023 he said ‘to decisively resolve the Polish question’, like the tsarina Catherine II had done in the eighteenth century. Before ‘resolving the Polish problem’ he proposed ‘training’ on Estonia.<sup>60</sup> Earlier he had proposed to declare war on Latvia.<sup>61</sup>

## HISTORICAL QUESTIONS

In the anti-Polish narrative of the Kremlin, historical threads often appear<sup>62</sup>. One of the most popular historical threads connected with Poland has been the Volhynian massacre, during which Ukrainian Banderites murdered Polish civilians in what was at the time under German occupation Volhynia as well as other parts of the former eastern Polish Second Republic. In Russia the current Polish policy *vis-à-vis* the Volhynian massacre is presented as ‘cynical behaviour’ based on not featuring this crime in the hopes of maintaining good relations with Ukraine. Russian archives during the war uncovered new documents about the Volhynian crime. They do not shine new light on the already known facts. They are yet another detailed description of known facts of the bestiality of the Ukrainian Banderites in relation to the murdered Poles but also representatives of other nationalities.

This does not mean that no distortion of the facts regarding the ‘Volhynian message’ took place. Taking into consideration the equivocal Polish position in relation to the memory of the victims of the Volhynian crime in the first year of the war (2022, a year

<sup>58</sup> *60 minut*, 27 Dec. 2022.

<sup>59</sup> *Večer s Vladimirom Solov’evym*, 8 Feb. 2023.

<sup>60</sup> *Večer s Vladimirom Solov’evym*, 20 Feb. 2023.

<sup>61</sup> *Večer s Vladimirom Solov’evym*, 2 Feb. 2023.

<sup>62</sup> There are many analyzes relating to the goals of Russian historical policy in Putin’s era. See e.g.: Wojciech Materski, ‘Polityka historyczna Federacji Rosyjskiej po 2000 r.’, *Dzieje Najnowsze* XLVI: 4, 2014, pp. 93–115; Maria Domańska, ‘Mocarstwowy mit wojny we współczesnej polityce zagranicznej Kremla’, *Komentarze OSW* 316, 2019, pp. 1–9; Dagmara Moskwa, *Matka ojczyzna używa! Wielka wojna ojczyźniana w edukacji i polityce historycznej putinowskiej Rosji* (Warsaw: ISP PAN, 2020); Lech Wyszczelski, ‘Putin i jego wersja „polityki historycznej” kierowanej do Rosjan’, *Studia Orientalne* 11: 4, 2022, pp. 125–147, <https://doi.org/10.15804/so2022408>; Agnieszka Legucka, ‘Targeting Poland: History as a Tool of Russian Disinformations’, in Kupiecki and Legucka, eds, *Disinformation and the Resilience*, pp. 69–89 (pp. 72–76).

later the position of Warsaw, in conjunction with the approaching autumn's parliamentary elections, became much more pointed and decisive), the Kremlin propaganda stated that Warsaw was inclined to accept the cult of Stepan Bandera. An offensive manipulation of the 'acceptance' of the cult of Bandera by Warsaw had taken place on 26 November 2022, when Morawiecki once again went to Kyiv, where among other things he met in the format of the 'Lublin triangle' with the prime ministers of Ukraine and Lithuania Denys Shmyhal and Ingrida Šimonytė and also took part in the conference *Grain from Ukraine*. He however began his stay by placing a wreath in front of the monument to the victims of the Holodomor (famine) from the years 1932–1933 in conjunction with the anniversary of the Bolshevik crime, commemorated in Ukraine on the fourth Saturday of November (this took place on 26 November). Some Russian media wrote and printed doctored photos from the profile of the channel 'RUPOST' of the social portal Telegram, where one sees the Polish Prime Minister laying a wreath not at the foot of the monument to the victims of the Holodomor but in front of the ...Stepan Bandera monument. They also provided the purported words that Morawiecki was to allegedly have said: 'In our hearts the memory of this great soldier will remain forever. Bandera was always a great friend of the Poles'.<sup>63</sup>

- III. 2. Prime Minister Morawiecki places a wreath on 26 November 2022 at the foot of the monument to victims of the Great Famine of 1932–1933.  
Photograph from the Twitter account of the Prime Minister's Chancellery.



Source: Twitter account of the (Polish) Prime Minister's Chancellery, 22 November 2022, <https://twitter.com/PremierRP/status/1596417837215764482/photo/1>

<sup>63</sup> <https://t.me/ruposts/22667>.

Ill. 3. Doctored photograph of Mateusz Morawiecki paying homage to Bandera in front of his monument, from the profile 'RUPOST' in the portal Telegram on 27 November 2022



Source: Telegram profile of the portal 'RUPOST', 27 November 2022, <https://t.me/ruposts/22667>

The obvious falsifications spread by the Russian social media notwithstanding, on their basis the informational internet channel 'Tsarygrad TV' announced that the Polish prime minister 'forgot the history of his nation and bowed down to Bandera'.<sup>64</sup> The dean of the Faculty of Administration and Politics of the Moscow State Institute of Foreign Relations Genri Sardarian, on Solov'ev's program, imitated the bow of the Polish prime minister from the photomontage of the photograph and suggested that the Polish authorities were two-faced, 'in the morning they placed wreaths in front of the monuments to the victims of the Volhynian massacre, and in the evening the bowed before Bandera monuments'. After these words Solov'ev interjected: 'They now say that this is as if a photomontage, but that does not change the essence of the thing. They are greeted with Banderite slogans, when they arrive in Kyiv'.<sup>65</sup> However, in the traditional informational channels the afore-mentioned news, being a primitively prepared

<sup>64</sup> [https://kz.tsargrad.tv/news/polskij-premer-moraveckij-zabyt-istoriju-svoego-naroda-i-poklonilsja-bandere\\_673256](https://kz.tsargrad.tv/news/polskij-premer-moraveckij-zabyt-istoriju-svoego-naroda-i-poklonilsja-bandere_673256).

<sup>65</sup> *Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'evym*, 1 Dec. 2022.

photomontage, did not appear, although Russian media recalled the same visit of Morawiecki and other leaders in Kyiv.<sup>66</sup>

Yet another example of Russians doctoring historical matters is the spreading of false information about the ethnic heritage of Polish president Andrzej Duda. Russian propaganda states that his grandfather or uncle (depending on the version) was the Banderite Mykhailo Duda. There is no truth in this, but the lies about the Polish president's heritage were repeated by other propagandists and, one can say, became a constant element of propaganda. This disinformation was spread on many programs. The Oscar winner from 1995 Nikita Mikhalkov also repeated it on his program *Besogon TV* on 'Rossiia 24'. On 4 June 2022 he mentioned present-day politicians, as he put it, 'with Nazi heritage'. One of them was called Andrzej Duda. Mikhalkov said the balderdash that 'his grandfather was Mykhailo Duda', Banderite and friend of Stepan Bandera himself. Next, showing the embrace of presidents Duda and Zelensky in the Verkhovna Rada from 22 May 2022, he permitted himself to make a very primitive antisemitic comment that the Polish president 'tried to smother in his embrace' the Ukrainian leader. The same embrace, according to Mikhalkov, could be interpreted in two ways:

If you take into consideration that the grandfather of Andrzej Duda was a supporter of Bandera, then that embrace could be read as the desire of the grandchild to smother the Jew Zelensky in his embrace. One could interpret this in another way—as genuine thankfulness for the fact that the Ukrainian president betrayed his country and gave up the borders with Poland.

On 15 June 2022 the Belarusian general procurator Andrei Shved stated that the grandfather of President Duda served in a penal battalion that committed crimes of genocide on the territories of the Minsk and Vitsebsk oblasts.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to the matter connected with the activities of the UPA, Russian media showed 'traditional' anti-Polish threads with a historical connection, namely, Poland was accused of starting the Second World War. Marginalizing on one hand the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact,<sup>68</sup> they

<sup>66</sup> See, for example *Vremia pokazhet*, 28 Nov. 2022.

<sup>67</sup> The general procuratorship of Belarus already in Apr. 2021 began an investigation into the matter of the crime of genocide of the Belarusian nation during the Great Patriotic War. The plenipotentiary of the Polish government for the Security of the Information Space Stanisław Żaryn called this Belarusian initiative 'informational banditry'. See: <https://twitter.com/StZaryn/status/1537125580105297921?ctx=HHwWgsC9lcbk-9QqAAAA>.

<sup>68</sup> The Kremlin's position towards the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact during Putin's rule was analyzed relatively recently by Paweł Bielicki in his article 'Stanowisko Federacji Rosyjskiej

highlighted the non-aggression declaration signed by Poland and Germany on 26 January 1934, saying that it was the Piłsudski-Hitler pact that led to the outbreak of the war. This document was already used by pre-war Soviet propaganda to accuse Poland of preparing, together with Germany, plans to attack the Soviet Union,<sup>69</sup> continued to be used in the Putin era,<sup>70</sup> and contemporary Russian propaganda uses it to portray Poland as ‘the first country to sign an agreement with Hitler’.<sup>71</sup> Russia accuses Poland of ‘not being thankful for liberation’ from the Germans, at the same time stating that the Soviet aggression on Poland together with the Germans in September 1939 was ‘liberation’. The Kremlin was indignant at the removal of Soviet monuments from the public sphere (this concerned other East-Central European states as well).

Of other historical threads present in the Russian media one should mention the Katyn crime of 1940. In the main media it was very rarely the topic of discussion. In addition, more than once the thesis of German responsibility for the crime, as it was in the times of the most coarse Stalinist propaganda, was circulated. The initiative to distort the truth about the perpetrators of the Katyn crime belonged to the local Smolensk communists. It was they who stood behind the appeal from the beginning of March 2022 to destroy the Polish part of the military cemeteries in Katyn and Mednoe.<sup>72</sup> They also organized on 10 April 2022—that is, on the day of the anniversary of the Smolensk catastrophe of 2010, as well as three days before the anniversary, celebrated in Poland (13 April), of the Katyn crime—an action that posed as the destruction of the Katyn cemetery. At that time a convoy appeared at the Katyn cemetery composed of around 30 pieces of heavy equipment—trucks, tractors, and bulldozers with Russian flags as well as the letter Z, which became a symbol of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Two bulldozers drove up to the cemetery entrance and in front of the inscription ‘Katyn’ took up a position, suggesting that they were going to destroy it.

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wobec paktu Ribbentrop-Mołotow za rządów Władimira Putina’, *Dzieje Najnowsze* 54: 2, 2022, pp. 197–216, <https://doi.org/10.12775/DN.2022.2.10>. See also earlier Polish analyses, e.g.: Wojciech Materski, ‘Rok 1939 w historiografii rosyjskiej’, *Dzieje Najnowsze* XLI: 3, 2009, pp. 73–88; Wołos, ‘Historiografia rosyjska pierwszej dekady XXI stulecia’, pp. 147–49.

<sup>69</sup> Tadeusz Paweł Rutkowski, *Pańska, szlachecka, faszystowska. Polska w sowieckiej propagandzie, kulturze i historiografii 1917–1945* (Warsaw: NCK, 2020), p. 168, 393.

<sup>70</sup> See: Wojciech Materski, *Od cara do ‘cara’. Studium rosyjskiej polityki historycznej* (Warsaw: ISP PAN, 2017), pp. 298–300.

<sup>71</sup> See e.g.: *Otkrytyi efir*, 21 Jun. 2022; *Vesti nedeli*, 29 Jan., 5 Feb. 2023.

<sup>72</sup> <https://history.circleoftruth.info/>.

III. 4. Bulldozers in position, suggesting they would destroy the inscription of the Katyn cemetery, 10 April 2022



Source: YouTube canal of the portal 'Gorod i my. Smolensk', video: U memoriala v Katyni proshla aktsiia, obrashchennaia k prostym pol'skim grazhdanam, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmPnM4lsTB0>. 10 April 2022.

## A SKETCH OF OTHER THREADS

I have described above the most often encountered threads concerning Poland in the Russian media during the war on Ukraine. Of course the list is much longer. However on account of the limited size of the article it is not possible to describe all of them in detail. They are to be found in a monograph being prepared by the author of these words. In Russian media short-term threads resulting from concrete events appeared. To them belong such questions as, for example, showing the Ukrainians staying in Poland in the worst light possible, the statement that in Ukraine a very great number of foreign mercenaries are fighting, Poles in particular, or the matter of the falling of pieces of a Ukrainian rocket in Przewodów, which killed two Polish farmers, and so on.

## CONCLUSION

Prior to the outbreak of a new conflict in the Middle East, in Russia one spoke or wrote about Poland to a greater or lesser extent practically daily. Overall, the 'Polish threads' are not dominant in the propaganda, although they are noticeable. The presenting of Poland as an 'eternal Russophobe', a country that, pretending to want to help Ukraine really

wants to annex it are constant and continuous elements of the Russian anti-Polish narrative. During the war in Ukraine, the anti-Poland message became much more expressive. It is the consequence of the clear siding of Poland with Ukraine and its decisive condemnation of Moscow for its aggressive position and actions. Such an image of Poland in Russia is and will be maintained, regardless of the worsening of relations of Warsaw and Kyiv, for showing in the worst light possible its opponent during the war, while using sometimes doctored and imagined events, is one of the means of fighting a war.

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