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RESEARCH ARTICLES

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WHAT DOES ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY THEORY TELL US ABOUT RUSSIA'S DECISION TO START THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE?

A b s t r a c t

Both in discussions on the determinants of Russian foreign policy before February 2022 and the reasons for the unleashing of the war against Ukraine, ontological security studies mark their presence. The growing popularity of them for the study of Russia's foreign policy, and in particular the interpretation of the causes of Russian aggression, is largely due to the shock of the outbreak of war, the inability of traditional schools in the field of International Relations to provide a satisfactory answer to questions about the causes of Russia's aggressive actions and the ability to predict and/or prevent war. Studies on ontological security work best in cases where other explanations fail, when the behaviour of a political actor is contrary to his material interests. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which was a continuation of the 2014 decision to unleash a war in Donbas, bore all the hallmarks of an action harmful for the Russia's national interests. Post--Soviet Russia attempted to alleviate its ontological anxiety with a narrative discourse, but also by undertaking bold military interventions outside its borders, annexing territories, and initiating local armed conflicts. The central point of the article is the analysis of two speeches by Vladimir Putin delivered on 21 and 24 February 2024. The aim of the article is: 1. to interpret the content of the Putin's speeches to determine the causes and sources of Russia's ontological insecurity on the eve invasion on Ukraine; 2. to answer

the question of how the war was supposed to alleviate the Russian sense of ontological insecurity; 3. to clarify how ontological security theory could help students of modern Russia better understand its behaviour and predict future actions of Kremlin. In order to achieve the above-mentioned goal, the author refers to an analytical scheme by Hugo von Essen and August Danielson's mechanism of ontological insecurity.

K e y w o r d s: ontological (in)security, war, Ukraine, Russia.

INTRODUCTION: WHY ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY THEORY FOR STUDYING RUSSIAN AGGRESSION?

Given the unprecedented nature of Russia's decision to launch a full--scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the relentless efforts to understand its causes were quite justified. In addition to analysing the material dimension, studies on the war's immaterial (ideational and psychological) background also made their presence felt. These include research in the constructivist current, concerning the nature and legitimacy of Russia's political regime, the reconstruction of Vladimir Putin's political biography, and his psychological traits.[1] Sometimes, material and non-material approaches were combined in attempts to understand the causes of war, as exemplified by the use of the concept of Russia's strategic culture.[2]

Some scholars suggest that the outbreak of war should be interpreted with the use of many schools in the field of international relations, in a more flexible and eclectic way, as Mikhail Polianskii put it, 'adopting a more flexible and fine-grained approach, possibly borrowing insights from other approaches in causally coherent ways […]. The scholarly community would be ill-advised to dismiss some explanations in favour of others'.[3]

Cognitive eclecticism started appearing in research on Russia's international activity long before the outbreak of a full-scale war—the turning point was the Russian limited-scale aggression against Ukraine

[1] Vicente Ferraro, 'Why Russia Invaded Ukraine and how Wars Benefit Autocrats: The Domestic Sources of the Russo-Ukrainian War', *International Political Science Review* 45: 2, 2024, pp. 170–91, https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231215048.

[2] Elias Götz and Jørgen Staun, 'Why Russia Attacked Ukraine: Strategic Culture and Radicalized Narratives', *Contemporary Security Policy* 43: 3, 2022, pp. 482–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2082633.

[3] Mikhail Polianskii, 'Russian Foreign Policy Research and War in Ukraine: Old Answers to New Questions?', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 57: 2, 2024, pp. 156––72 (p. 167), https://doi.org/10.1525/cpcs.2024.2112378.

in 2014.[4] Researchers such as Elias Götze and his accompanying authors have started building capacious, eclectic research matrices within which the main schools of international relations and research approaches (i.e., geopolitical, ideational, regime, personality) are combined to analyse Russian foreign policy. Russian international activity was, for example, studied in the global, local, and individual dimensions.[5] Causes of Russian aggression against Ukraine were divided into: deep, indirect, and direct causes.[6]

In discussions on the determinants of Russian foreign policy before February 2022 and the reasons for unleashing a full-scale war against Ukraine, ontological security theory marked its presence. Initially inspired by R.D. Laing's social psychology and Anthony Giddens' social theory, ontological security refers to the idea that 'humans need relatively stable expectations about the natural and especially social world around them, to be able to sustain a coherent autobiographic narrative'.[7] Ayşe Zarakol emphasise that ontological security 'entails having a consistent sense of self and having that sense affirmed by others'.[8] Jenifer Mitzen defines ontological security as the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time, as being rather than constantly changing, to realise a sense of agency.[9]

As Nina C. Kricel-Choi observed, the notion of ontological security operates mainly at the intersection of securitisation theory and the study of identity and emotions, combining insights from existentialist philosophy, psychoanalysis, and critical security studies. This innovative scholarship has contributed to international relations by providing new insights into core concerns of the discipline, such as

[4] Elias Götz, 'Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited', *International Studies Review* 19: 2, 2017, pp. 228–53, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw009.

[5] Ibid., p. 245.

[6] Elias Götz and Per Ekman, 'Russia's War Against Ukraine: Context, Causes, and Consequences', *Problems of Post-Communism* 71: 3, 2024, pp. 193–205 (p. 198), https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2024.2343640.

[7] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Stefano Guzzini, '"Vision of Itself" in Foreign Policy Analysis: From the Role of Ideas to Identity and Recognition, *Teoria Polityki* 6, 2022, pp. 33–57 (p. 46), https://doi.org/10.4467/25440845TP.22.001.16001.

[8] Ayse Zarakol, 'Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan', *International Relations* 24: 1, 2010, pp. 3–23 (p. 6), https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809359040.

[9] Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations* 12: 3, 2006, pp. 341–70 (p. 342), https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346.

conflict and conflict resolution.[10] For scholars of international relations, 'the concept of ontological security provides a way of understanding the relationship between values, identities, and routinised actions'.[11] Mitzen argues that 'physical security is not the only kind of security that states seek. States also engage in ontological security seeking. Like the state's need for physical security, ontological security is extrapolated from the individual level'.[12] Moreover,

> ontological security can conflict with physical security. Even a harmful or self-defeating relationship can provide ontological security, which means states can become attached to conflict. States might prefer their ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty regarding the other's and one's own identity.[13]

Brent J. Steele focuses on the states' need for biographical continuity, which is made salient by the emotion of anxiety and shame, both retrospective (making up for past misdeeds) and prospective (avoiding future misdeeds). According to Steel, states pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence, so surprising foreign policy choices are made to avoid anxiety, shame, or both—'an agent is ontologically secure when they choose a course of action comfortable with their sense of self-identity'.[14]

Although ontological security theory is a relatively young school in international relations and, as Andrew Latham noted, may bear the hallmarks of 'Shiny Object Syndrome (or, in academia, Shiny Concept Syndrome) defined as the chronic tendency of people to be easily distracted by the flashy and new, often at the expense of the useful and enduring', the case of Russian aggression against Ukraine is such a complex problem that attempts to understand it should not be simplified.[15]

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[10] Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'The Concept of Anxiety in Ontological Security Studies', *International Studies Review* 24: 3, 2022, viac013, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac013.

[11] Simon Frankel Pratt, 'A Relational View of Ontological Security in International Relations: THEORY NOTE', *International Studies Quarterly* 61: 1, 2017, pp. 78–85 (p. 79), http://www.jstor.org/stable/44510865.

[12] Mitzen, *Ontological Security*, p. 342.

[13] Ibid., p. 342.

[14] Brent J. Steel, 'Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of International Studies* 31: 3, 2005, pp. 519–40 (pp. 526–27), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006613.

[15] Andrew Latham, 'The "Shiny New Concept" that May Explain Russia's War in Ukraine', *The Hill*, 21.12.2022, https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3781056-the-shiny-new-concept-that-may-explain-russias-war-in-ukraine/ (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URL's cited in this article were accessible on 11 Jan. 2025).

Ontological security theory has been frequently used to analyse Russia's foreign and domestic policy. The Russian case (precisely, involvement in the civil war in Syria) even became the starting point for the construction of a universal, synthetic model of the analysis of ontological anxiety.[16] Researchers belonging to the broad church of ontological security studies have long postulated that there should be a place for it in studies on Russian foreign policy, given that they do not contradict other approaches, but rather can fill existing cognitive gaps—tying together the efforts made so far to understand Russian thinking and decision-making in the sphere of foreign policy from a systemic perspective.[17] The findings by researchers belonging to this trend complement observations made using other schools in international relations.[18] They enriched the interpretative findings on the material and non-material level (ideational, legitimisation of the political regime, psychological portrait of the political leader).[19]

Even scholars who remain faithful to the school of realism suggest room for an ontological approach. Nicholas Ross Smith and Grant Dawson write:

> Whereas structural realist accounts of the Ukraine war omit crucial ideational and psychological factors, contrariwise, looking specifically at the role of ideational and psychological factors like civilizationism and ontological security should not be done at the expense of omitting the similarly crucial role underlying power dynamics have played. [...] Realist theories, such as classical realism and type II neoclassical realism, can coherently marry material, ideational, and psychological factors into an overarching power politics framework which can offer useful and convincing realist explanations for the Ukraine war.[20]

Last but not least, the ontological security concept appears in the works of Russian authors as a more or less direct cause of the aggression

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[16] Hugo von Essen and August Danielson, 'A Typology of Ontological Insecurity Mechanisms: Russia's Military Engagement in Syria', *International Studies Review* 25: 2, 2023, viad016, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad016.

[17] Jonas Gejl Pedersen, *The Russian Quest for Ontological Security: An Inquiry into the Reconstruction and Translation of the "Russian Self" in Relation to the Military Intervention in the Kosovo and Ukraine Crises,* PhD Dissertation, Submitted 30 November 2018, The public defense takes place 15 March 2019, Published March 2019, https://politica.dk/fileadmin/politica/Dokumenter/Afhandlinger/jonas_gejl_pedersen.pdf, p. 33–34.

[18] Brendan Chrzanowski, 'An Episode of Existential Uncertainty. The Ontological Security Origins of the War in Donbas', *Texas National Security Review* 4: 3, 2021, pp. 11–32 (pp. 19–21), 4 (3), http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/13990.

[19] Pedersen, *The Russian Quest for Ontological Security*, pp. 34–35; Ferraro, 'Why Russia Invaded Ukraine', p. 171.

[20] Nicholas Ross Smith and Grant Dawson, 'Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War', *Analyse & Kritik* 44: 2, 2022, pp. 175–200 (p. 186), https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2022-2023.

against Ukraine. Russian political scientist Dmitry Yefremenko justified the Russian decision to launch the 'special military operation' not so much with a standard set of material (security-oriented) reasons (NATO enlargement as a threat to Russia's national security) officially championed by Kremlin, but with a sense of ontological anxiety. In his article in *Russia in Global Affairs* writes that,

> Russia embarked on the path of the most risky confrontation, but it was precisely in this way—by lowering the threshold of its physical security—that Russia chose in favour of continued existence as an independent Self, and on this basis, of self-assertion as an agent in its own right with a potential for redefining autonomously (or in cooperation with other centres of power) the principles and norms of behaviour in the international arena.[21]

According to Andrei Tsygankov, the outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine was preceded by an increase in nationalist sentiments in Russia and a sense of Russian exceptionalism—but the impulse came not from within but from the outside. As Tsygankov noted,

> it was related to the policy of the West, which did not want to use the unique opportunity of Russia's readiness to cooperate with the West immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia is a great power that felt humiliated by the West after the Cold War. […] Western military interventions accompanied by NATO expansion and a lack of policies to integrate the country into global structures, both politically and economically, have stimulated the rise of political nationalism in Russia since the mid-2000s. Nationally exceptionalist impulse came from the Western centre of the international system. Putin decided he had the right to do in Ukraine what the U.S. did in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere.[22]

The lack of recognition in the eyes of the West was supposed to be, in Tsygankov's view, a source of emotional and psychological pressure (ontological insecurity) and consequently conducive to the fortification of an anti-Western identity.[23]

On the other hand, many representatives of the circles critical of the Kremlin in Russia had no illusions that Russia wanted war with Ukraine and the West. Regardless of the efforts to subjugate

[21] Dmitry V. Yefremenko, 'World Order Z: The Irreversibility of Change and Prospects for Survival', *Russia in Global Affairs* 20: 3, 2022, pp. 10–29 (p. 15), https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-3-10-29.

[22] 'Interview – Andrei Tsygankov', *E – International Relations*, 25.06.2023, https://www.e-ir.info/author/e-international-relations/.

[23] Ibid.

all of Ukraine or want a part of it, the core of the February 2022 aggression was the confrontation with the West, which began in 2008. Russia sought conflict with the West and the invasion of Ukraine——negotiations with the United States about the European security architecture were only a smokescreen; thus, the rejection of Russian proposals was a credible alibi for deciding on war.[24]

Ontological security theory is said to work best in cases where other explanations fail. There are too many doubts and loopholes in existing reasoning, e.g., when a political actor's behaviour seems either contrary to his material interests or perceived as 'irrational'.[25] Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which was a continuation of the 2014 decision to unleash a war in Donbas, bore all the hallmarks of an action harmful to Russia's national interests. The war does not favour Russia either in the material dimension (for the first time since WWII, its territory was occupied by a foreign state) or non-material (ideational) – Russia's international status and Putin's prestige have not increased due to the war with Ukraine.[26] The evident inconsistency of the Russian narrative regarding the Ukrainian nation and the reasons for the launch of the so-called special military operation (Slavic brothers, who must be defended against the Banderites and neo-Nazis and for this purpose must be bombed and killed),[27] can be explained by resorting to the fantasy construction concept also used in studies on ontological security.[28]

The first articles and analyses concerning Russia's rationale for starting the war and using ontological security theory were very diverse in methodology and content. In the theoretical and methodological dimension, they drew to varying degrees from the extensive resources of studies on ontological security. At the same time, they analysed only

[24] 'Aleksandr Baunov – o rossiĭskoĭ diplomatii i itogakh putinizma', *Polit.ru*, 19.12. 2023, https://polit.ru/articles/konspekty/aleksandr-baunov-o-rossiyskoy-diplomatii-i-itogakh-putinizma/; Polina Zavershinskaia, 'State's Legitimisation of Violence through Strategic Narration: How the Kremlin Justified the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *The International Spectator* 59: 2, 2024, pp. 18–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2327492.

[25] Steel, *Ontological Security*.

[26] Mike Corder and Raf Casert, *International Court Issues War Crimes Warrant for Putin*, Associated Press, 18.03.2023, https://apnews.com/article/icc-putin-war-crimes-ukraine-9857eb68d827340394960eccf0589253.

[27] 'Putin zaiavil o terroristicheskikh deĭstviiakh natsistov na Ukraine', *Izvestiia*, 25.02. 2022, https://iz.ru/1297020/2022-02-25/putin-zaiavil-o-terroristicheskikh-deistviiakh-natcistov-na-ukraine.

[28] Federica Prina, 'Fantasies of Cultural Sovereignty and National Unity: Russia's Ontological (In)Security and Its Assertion of "Spiritual-Moral Values"', *International Politics* 62: 4, 2024, pp. 839–68, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00600-w.

a limited fragment of reality and lacked an empirical layer concerning discourse analysis. The first studies on Russian war borrowing from the ontological security theory identify the causes and sources of Russia's anxiety. Still, they do not connect the internal, external and systemic sources and the causes of shame and the feeling of lack of trust experienced allegedly by Russia on the eve of war.[29]

The attitude of individual authors to the role of Ukraine from the point of view of the outbreak of war also varied. It could be divided into two groups. In the first case, the invasion of Ukraine resulted from many years of confrontation between the West and Russia, a fragment of it, or a lens in which the centuries-old rivalry between Russia and the 'significant Other' has been concentrated. In the second case, Ukraine played an independent role—attempts to subordinate it were part of the previous routine in Russia's behaviour. Ukraine was an object of shame and a source of uncertainty, resulting from well-established ideas about it (it is denied the right of an independent state). At the same time, Ukraine played a unique, sometimes almost religious role from the point of view of Russia's identity and its autobiographical narrative.[30]

The central point of this article is the analysis of the Russian autobiographical narrative contained in two war manifestos made public on the eve of the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine, during Vladimir Putin's speeches on 21 and 24 February 2024[31], imbued with the spirit of Putin's article *On the Unity of the Ukrainian and Russian Peoples*.[32]

The aim of the article is: 1. to interpret the content of the Putin's speeches to determine the causes and sources of Russia's ontological insecurity on the eve invasion on Ukraine; 2. to answer the question of how the war was supposed to alleviate the Russian sense of ontological insecurity; 3. to clarify how ontological security theory

[29] Andrej Krickovic and Richard Sakwa, 'War in Ukraine: The Clash of Norms and Ontologies', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 22: 2, 2022, pp. 89–109; Katie Ryan, 'Russia's Search for Ontological Security and the Ukraine Invasion', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 15: 1, 2023, pp. 82–93; Smith and Dawson, 'Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War'.

[30] Richard Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society. Fifth Edition* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 307.

[31] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, The Kremlin, Moscow, 21.02.2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67828; *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, The Kremlin, Moscow, 24.02.2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843.

[32] *Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"*, 12.07.2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

could help students of modern Russia better understand its behaviour and predict future actions of Kremlin.

To achieve the above-mentioned goal, the authors refer to key concepts in the ontological security theory; the current state of research in the Russian struggle with ontological insecurity and Hugo von Essen and August Danielson's typology of ontological security mechanisms.[33] The article continues the methodological approach of both authors while developing it to solve the puzzle of how aggression against Ukraine was to help relieve ontological anxiety.

MAIN FINDINGS ON RUSSIA'S ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

Russia has been a frequent object of research within ontological security studies. However, quest for ontological security is not solely a Russian phenomenon. Still, because it has been 'a more promising case than any other state, from the point of view of accumulating signs of ontological insecurity because of its turbulent history (two social revolutions), its status as an outsider and its conflictual relations with the West, and its relentless efforts to be recognized as a superpower'.[34] Gulnaz Sharafutdinov considered its identity to be 'incomplete and uncertain'.[35] Jonas Gejl Pedersen wrote that Russia belongs to that category of states that are more insecure than secure about the authenticity of their alignment between Selves. Russia is a nation that has been most preoccupied with the fundamental existential questions of 'Who are we?' and 'What do we want to be?'.[36]

The ontological insecurity that Russia allegedly feels is said to be historically deeply rooted. It has persecuted Russia since it recovered from the Mongol yoke and decided to enter the arena of international relations, only to be immediately met with incomprehension, hostility and contempt in response to its ambitions as a superpower and its European vocation.[37] The interactions with its 'significant

[33] Essen and Danielson, 'A Typology of Ontological Insecurity Mechanisms'.

[34] Ibid., p. 12.

[35] Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[36] Pedersen, *The Russian Quest for Ontological Security*, pp. 37–38.

[37] Iver B. Neumann, 'Russia as Europe's Other', *EUI-RSCAS Working Papers* 34, 1996, European University Institute (EUI); Natalia Morozova, 'From Ontological Insecurity to Counter-Hegemony: Russia's Post-Soviet Engagement with Geopolitics and Eurasianism', in Roberto Belloni, Vincent Della Sala, and Paul Viotti, eds, *Fear and Uncertainty in Europe.*

Other'—Europe—affect Russia's ontological security. Russia's relations with Europe have historically been the source of most significant ontological insecurity, soul-searching, status concerns and incentives for change.[38]

Despite the historical roots of Russian ontological insecurity, the very collapse of the Soviet Union was crucial to the current phase of the rise of ontological anxiety. The Soviet collapse was undoubtedly a radical disjuncture for Russia and the Russians, who were used to thinking about the Soviet Union as 'their own' land.[39] The collapse of the Soviet Union undermined the continuity of the autobiographical narrative of Russia (as a great power). It evoked a sense of disbelief (defeat without war) and shame (due to the squandering of power).

From the Russian point of view, the West (Europe) was a natural (historical) point of reference in constructing an autobiographical narrative in the post-Soviet/post-imperial period. However, as Flemming Splidsboel Hansen noted, Russia began to find a sense of ontological security not by cooperating with it, but by entering the path of confrontation with it.[40] Although Hansen assumed that the anti-Western turn in Russian thinking and political activity was deliberate and meticulously prepared[41], not all authors share this view. Some, like Andrei Tsygankov, thought,

> Russia cooperates with the Western nations when its fundamental values and interests are not challenged. Each time Western nations have pressured Russia to revise its values in line with the West's, Russian society and elites mobilise for a counter-response. Due to Russia's cultural distinctiveness, such pressures serve to alienate Russia from its significant other.[42]

Andrei and Pavel Tsygankov suggest that 'Western attempts to pressure Russia through sanctions over Ukraine (after Crimea

Global Issues (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 153–176 (pp. 158–164), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91965-2_8; Tanya Narozhna, 'Revisiting the Causes of Russian Foreign Policy Changes: Western Recognition and Russia's Ontological Security-Seeking', *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 15: 2, 2021, pp. 56–81 (p. 61), https://doi.org/10.51870/CEJISS.A150203.

[38] Morozova, 'From Ontological Insecurity to Counter-Hegemony, pp. 158–64.

[39] Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 27, cit. Rogers Brubaker, 'Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutionalist Account', *Theory and Society* 23: 1, 1994, pp. 47–78, http://www.jstor.org/stable/657812.

[40] Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, 'Russia's Relations with the West: Ontological Security through Conflict', *Contemporary Politics* 22: 3, 2016, pp. 359–75 (pp. 359–60), doi:10.1080/13569775.2016.1201314.

[41] Ibid., pp. 370–71.

[42] Interview – Andrei Tsygankov, *E – International Relations*, 25.06.2023, p. 2–3, https://www.e-ir.info/2023/06/25/interview-andrei-tsygankov/.

annexation—authors), most Russians have rallied behind Putin and grown more anti-Western and anti-American'.[43]

Post-Soviet Russia attempted to alleviate its ontological anxiety with a discourse narrative that reflected Russian foreign policy elites' inability and unwillingness to rely on the previously established Soviet and traditional Russian self-understandings. This discursive innovation was the emergence of the 'geopolitics/Eurasianism' constellation in the post-Soviet Russian foreign policy discourse following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Both 'geopolitics' and 'Eurasianism' acquired particular relevance amidst the post--Soviet Russian identity crisis because their conceptual history pre--dated and/or was not part of the Soviet experience.[44] Discourses on 'Russian civilisation' or the 'Russian world' were invented to produce consistent state identity narratives. Natalia Morozowa posits that they were another instance of innovative instruments of the Russian establishment by which a holistic identity was articulated across multiple 'dislocatory events' or ruptures in Russia's biographical narrative. The concept of 'civilisation' was, as Aleksy Khazarski observed, uniquely convenient for this task, as it allows one to articulate a holistic unity across the ideological, societal, and spatial cleavages that the Russian discourse discovers in the wake of the Soviet Union's disintegration. The civilizational narrative could thus be interpreted as an attempt to construct trauma from the available historical experiences and simultaneously propose a civilizational identity to overcome it.[45]

Russia has brought relief to its ontological insecurity not only by constructing more or less coherent stories about itself, but also by undertaking military interventions outside its borders (Syria, Kosovo), annexing territories and initiating local armed conflicts (Donbas). This has been the subject of interest for researchers belonging to the ontological security studies trend, as well as from the point of view of efforts to compare material, ideational, and ontological approaches to interpreting Russian foreign policy. In the light of Pedersen's findings, the material perspective was related to Russia's desire for the role of

[43] Andrei P. Tsygankov and Pavel A. Tsygankov, 'Constructing National Values: The Nationally Distinctive Turn in Russian IR Theory and Foreign Policy', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17: 4, 2021, orab022, p. 11, https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab022.

[44] Morozova, 'From Ontological Insecurity to Counter-Hegemony'.

[45] Aliaksei Kazharski, 'Civilizations as Ontological Security? Stories of the Russian Trauma', *Problems of Post-Communism* 67: 1, 2019, pp. 24–36 (p. 24), doi:10.1080/10758216.2019.1591925.

a regional hegemon. In ideational terms, it reflects Russia's desire to obtain recognition of its aspirations, status, and role in the region, which is denied to it by the West. In contrast, in the ontological approach, Russian interventionism and tendency to use force in international politics reflected a quest to reestablish a sense of security about the post-Soviet Russian Self, meaningfully realigning the present with past and future'.[46]

Before Russia decided to launch a full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, it carried out aggression against it with a limited territorial scope. From the point of view of considerations on the conditions of Russian foreign policy, this was a fundamental event—it resulted in an unprecedented increase in analyses and attempts to interpret the events related to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Also, for ontological security studies, the Russian aggression against Ukraine has become a breakthrough event in developing both considerations concerning Russia and ontological security. Research on the war in Donbas revealed a picture of Russia as a state undertaking irrational actions, not reconciled with losing its status as an empire, an undigested trauma, dependent on confrontation with the West, which is part of the centuries-old scheme within which Russia operates. The Kremlin was looking for opportunities to regain control over Ukraine for material reasons, as well as for symbolic and prestige reasons, which were not denied, but also for emotional and psychological reasons. As Chrzanowski noted, while domestic policy issues could justify the annexation of Crimea and effectively pumped up Putin's legitimacy, which was tarnished by his return in 2012, the Donbas did not lend itself to interpretation so easily, due to the scale of the war and the degree of Russia's involvement in it, as well as the justifications formulated by the Kremlin about the actions taken.[47] In other words, the ontological approach, and within its reference to Steel's findings and the phenomenon of routine (subordination of Ukraine to Russia on a vassal basis), complemented other attempts to interpret Russia's actions in the aftermath of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity.

At the same time, the Russian intervention has provided tangible evidence that the source of Russia's ontological anxiety is not only the West, but also Ukraine. From the perspective of research on ontological security, the intra-Russian reflection on the place and

[46] Pedersen, *The Russian Quest for Ontological Security*, p. 35.
[47] Chrzanowski, 'An Episode of Existential Uncertainty', pp. 19–21.

role of Ukraine constituted a form of 'retranslation' of ontological security, wherein the focus is on the inner self-self dialogue taking place within Russia, what strays from Mitzen's ontological security theory wherein the focus is commonly on the routinized self-other relations between states. Chrzanowski 'recognised the importance of the self, but placed equal importance on the other about the self', and at the end of the day, 'the internal narrative ('self') plays a critical role in providing ontological security, though only in the context of relations with a significant other'.[48] This dovetailed with the findings that Russia suffers from ontological anxiety on a broad spectrum. This is the conclusion reached by von Essen and Danilson, who claim that Russia's ontological security was threatened and that Russia experiences existential anxiety. Russia's anxiety is caused by both a sense of shame and uncertainty/lack of trust, and its sources are threefold: reflexive, relational, and systemic.[49]

TYPOLOGY OF ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY MECHANISMS AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING THE CAUSES OF THE RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

Following previous works on ontological security, Hugo von Essen and August Danielson proposed a model of the typology of ontological insecurity mechanisms. Their aim was primarily to build an aggregated, clear, and at the same time complex interpretative and forecasting tool. They assumed that countries communicating specific content concerning ontological insecurity can also take specific actions to minimise this anxiety. Their typology included six mechanisms of ontological anxiety, which are a combination of three sources of anxiety (reflective, relational, and systemic) and two causes of anxiety: shame (lack of self-regard) or discontinuity (lack of certainty/ stability). The basis for formulating conclusions about the causes and sources of ontological anxiety and attempting to understand the approaches of states in the process of counteracting anxiety was to be the analysis of political discourse and the search for 'clues' that both authors define as 'indirect inferences from statements that express ontological security seeking, which can then provide clues to underlying insecurity'.[50]

[48] Ibid., p. 32.
[49] Essen and Danielson, 'A Typology of Ontological Insecurity Mechanisms', pp. 20–21.
[50] Ibid., p. 11.

The first pair of mechanisms of ontological anxiety resulted from self-reflection, reflections on one's status, ideas about oneself, identity, and self-narrative and the accompanying ones, shame and discontinuity: 1. inadequacy in one's own eyes; 2. distrust of self. The following two mechanisms of ontological anxiety were to link shame and a sense of inadequacy with relationships with other subjects. Emotional tension, including ontological insecurity, is born during interaction. 'Significant Others' influence the subject's self and stimulate reflection on their identity and imagined identity transferred to the level of self-narrative. The last two mechanisms of ontological insecurity relate to shame and a sense of lack of coherence/continuity with the external world surrounding the subject, the normative order, and the system of international relations.[51]

In the case of the selected research method, i.e., the analysis of political discourse in Russia on the eve of its aggression against Ukraine, doubts will arise from the sense of credibility of the statements of representatives of the Kremlin power elite, from the point of view of obtaining relevant information, and thus the value of the conclusions obtained regarding the mechanisms governing the Russian decision--making process. In the light of the existing arrangements, there should be no illusion, for example, that Russia is weaponizing information. Elias Götz and Jørgen Staun openly formulated those doubts—'can we believe the representatives of the Russian government?' In their view, however, it was unlikely that the Russian elite would maintain two distinctly different discourses—one secret, the other for public use—devoid of flaws and doubts about their argumentation over time. Therefore, they rejected the assumption that the long-term discursive patterns propagated by Kremlin officials are a smokescreen hiding the 'real' motives of their political actions.[52] A similar line of argumentation on the admissibility and in defence of the method of discourse analysis was proposed by Stefano Guzzini, who pointed out that despite the fact that political discourse is basically one big manipulation, full of empty words, instrumentalization of ideas, this does not mean that it is pointless, from the point of view of understanding the world of politicians' concepts. Because when they practice propaganda, they must know their audience and be aware of what will meet with its acceptance and positive response.[53]

[51] Ibid., p. 11.
[52] Götz and Staun, 'Why Russia Attacked Ukraine', pp. 483–84.
[53] S. Guzzini, '„Vision of Itself" in Foreign Policy Analysis', pp. 33–57.

ANALYSIS OF VLADIMIR PUTIN'S PUBLIC SPEECHES ON THE EVE OF THE INVASION OF UKRAINE, THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE MECHANISM OF ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

As has already been noted, the subject of the in-depth and critical analysis will be Putin's two speeches (war manifestos), which occurred in February 2022, one after the other, on the eve of the aggression against Ukraine, strongly referring to his article on the issue of the Ukrainian nation. Their importance and content can justify the choice of the above-mentioned source texts, timing, and authorship.

Firstly, they reflected the ideas of their deliverer and author (Putin) about the condition of the broadly understood international order and the place and role of Russia in it.[54] Secondly, their delivery a few days before the invasion of Ukraine left no doubt that they constituted a war manifesto. Both analysed speeches seem to be a coherent and reworked reflection of Russia's worldview, an extensive and complete catalogue of expectations and fears. Thirdly, they were with very high probability authored by Putin himself (although the real authorship is sometimes granted to Vladimir Medinsky),[55] a central figure of Russian political system—the person who made the final decision on war,[56] as public opinion around the world could see first-hand during a meeting with Russia's top state officials on recognition for rebel-held regions of Ukraine.[57] Putin is also the undisputed 'ideological guru' of modern Russia. He is supported by a small group of people who share his vision of the world, such as Sergei Naryshkin, Nikolai Patrushev, and Sergei Lavrov.[58]

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[54] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees, 17 December 2021 13:30*, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 17 December 2021 13:26*, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en&clear_cache=Y.

[55] 'У Путина сильна своего рода одержимость. Киево-Печерская лавра важна для него лично' ['"U Putina sil'na svoego roda oderzhimost". Kievo-pecherskaia lavra vazhna dlia nego lichno'], *Gazeta.by*, 25.10.2023, https://gazetaby.com/post/u-putina-silna-svoego-roda-oderzhimost-kievo-peche/195401/.

[56] So, he is according to Carl Schmitt's assumption a true sovereign, because: 'sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception'. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 5.

[57] 'Speak directly! Putin Has Tense Exchange with His Chief Spy', *Guardian News*, 22.02.2022, Moscow, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9A-u8EoWcI.

[58] Martin Kragh and Andreas Umland, 'Putinism beyond Putin: The Political Ideas of Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin in 2006–20', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39: 5, 2023, pp. 366–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2023.2217636.

REFLEXIVE SOURCE OF ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

Referring to the first type of ontological anxiety mechanism—inadequacy in one's own eyes, which is the result of a lack of self-regard and self-reflection—it could be recorded according von Essen and Danielson 'through Russian representatives' concern for and descriptions of how Russia's actions reflect and confirm this status and narrative of power and greatness'. In this case, it should be stated that in both speeches, it is difficult to find a reference to the greatness of Russia and its power, which could be expected in this configuration of variable sources and causes of anxiety. One of the few times Putin appeals to the power of Russia is in the military dimension, which in his opinion contrasts strongly with the economic dimension, in which he is not able to match the United States, that is still a global, financial, scientific-technological and military hegemon, but 'modern Russia, even after the collapse of the USSR and the loss of a significant part of its potential, is today one of the most powerful nuclear powers in the world and has certain advantages in a number of the latest types of weapons'.[59]

The second of the identified mechanisms of anxiety—distrust of self is operationalised as statements 'expressing and referring to Russia's history and historical role, and Russian historical struggles and traumas', but also 'the historical battle with the West, and "othering" of the West'.[60] However, we are dealing with a manifestation of ontological insecurity made by Putin, almost *expressis verbis*:

> The Soviet Union weakened in the late 1980s and then collapsed altogether. The events that occurred then are a good lesson for us today; it has convincingly shown that paralysis of power and will is the first step to complete degradation and oblivion. We had to lose confidence in ourselves for a while, and that was it—the balance of power in the world was broken.[61]

Putin uses a phrase that leaves no doubt that Russia was 'suffering' from ontological insecurity, precisely about the loss of self-confidence. The collapse of the Soviet Union, which was essentially the fault of the USSR authorities themselves, brought misfortune to Russia—the loss of self-confidence and, consequently, the harm to the international position, the collapse of the entire foundation of

[59] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21.02.2022.
[60] Essen and Danielson, 'A Typology of Ontological Insecurity Mechanisms', p. 14.
[61] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21.02.2022.

the global order that was formed after the end of World War II, and the birth of the American hegemony. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin said, Russia had to face the hostility of the West, which exploited Russia's weakness in the 1990s and 2000s—'the collective West was most actively supporting separatism and mercenary gangs in southern Russia', and were trying to 'destroy our traditional values and to impose their pseudo-values on us, which would corrode us, our people from within'.[62]

Hostility from the West was an inseparable element of Russia's historical experience. According to Putin, the West was supposed to hate Russia only because it exists and strives to contain and eliminate it as an independent and sovereign centre of power in the international arena, guided by its interests and values. The West has been doing it in the past and will continue to do so in the future; no formal reasons are necessary.[63] Ukraine is another area of rivalry with the West, but simultaneously, it is unique.

> Ukraine's subordination to the West is for Russia a question of life or death, a question of our historical future as a nation. And this is not an exaggeration—it is true. This is a real threat not just to our interests, but to the very existence of our state and its sovereignty. This is a very red line that has been repeatedly spoken about. They have crossed it.[64]

Therefore, the loss of Ukraine is also a source of trauma for Russia, as Putin said: 'For us (Russia), it is (Ukraine) not just a neighbouring country. It is integral to our history, culture and spiritual space'.[65]

In Putin's opinion, the Soviet Union's authorities committed several grave historical and strategic faults in the economic and ethno-political dimensions, which led to its disintegration and squandering the historical power of Russia. Putin has no reservations about naming the person responsible for the Russian tragedy: 'Regarding the historical destiny of Russia and its peoples, Lenin's principles of state development were not just a mistake; they were worse than a mistake […]. The collapse of historical Russia under the name of the USSR is on their (communist officials') conscience'.[66] The West benefited from this, as it 'consistently supported the construction of anti-Russia, breaking ties with the brotherly Ukrainian nation.

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 24.02.2022.
[65] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21.02.2022.
[66] Ibid.

Foreign countries directly supported the Maidan of 2014 and the actions of the radicals'.[67]

THE RELATIONAL MECHANISM OF ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

Within the mechanism of inadequacy in the eyes of others, we can talk about 'existential anxiety about self-worth and the value of our biographical narrative in the eyes of others, which is formed out of a sense of shame in relationships with others'.[68] This mechanism is 'operationalised as statements expressing and referring to comparisons of morality, power and status with Western states'.[69] Reading through Putin's February war manifestos, one can note several accusations of hypocrisy and harmfulness of the actions of both the West and Ukraine, which, according to Putin, strongly contrast with the sincerity, honesty and readiness to cooperate on the part of Russia with all partners. On the other hand, this is the essence of another type of ontological anxiety mechanism—'distrust of others that involves a lack of (basic) trust and certainty in the stability and continuity of our relations with others'.[70]

First, it should be noted that, according to Putin, Ukraine was an ungrateful partner:

> Ukrainian authorities preferred to act in such a way that in relations with Russia they had all rights and advantages but no obligations. The officials in Kyiv replaced the partnership with a parasitic attitude, acting at times in an extremely brash manner. Suffice it to recall the continuous blackmail on energy transit and the fact that they stole gas.[71]

Kyiv was supposed to blackmail the West by rapprochement with Russia and strengthening Russian influence in Ukraine to gain additional financial preferences. At the same time, Ukrainian statehood that Putin described with derogatory terms—'it should be noted that Ukraine never had stable traditions of real statehood'—and the legitimacy of its authority to govern were questionable. In the light of Putin's words, Ukraine was a failed, corrupt state (even compared to Russia), and the elections were a smokescreen for the division

[67] Ibid.
[68] Essen and Danielson, 'A Typology of Ontological Insecurity Mechanisms', p. 15.
[69] Ibid., 15.
[70] Ibid., 16.
[71] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21.02.2022.

of power and state resources between oligarchic clans. Ukrainians suffered from the 'political adventures' of oligarchs, and the country itself was ruled by a fascist junta that did not have democratic legitimacy; the economy was decaying, and economic migration was reaching apocalyptic proportions. State institutions are controlled outside of Ukraine, which is not a sovereign state.[72]

Regarding the West, the allegations of hypocrisy were equally serious and concerned Ukraine and, more broadly, international politics globally. NATO, for example, was said to have violated Ukrainian legislation by not deploying foreign military bases on its territory. Western countries did not honour the international obligations to which they were signatories. They have been consistently destroying the foundation of the European security architecture for decades.[73] The West undertook illegal actions that were not sanctioned by the United Nations, which destroyed civilian infrastructure and cities (Serbia); destruction of statehood, humanitarian catastrophe, and stimulation of the development of international terrorism (Libya).[74] Putin said openly that 'in general, it seems that practically everywhere, in many regions of the world, where the West comes to establish its order, the results are bloody, non-healing wounds, ulcers of international terrorism and extremism'.[75]

However, the sense of moral superiority over Ukraine and the West (Russia's perfidious and unreliable 'partners') was combined with a readiness to continue cooperating with them (despite the lack of trust in them). Putin's declarations in this spirit were part of the mechanism of distrust of others that involves a lack of (basic) trust and certainty in the stability and continuity of our relations with others. Russia did not trust the West and Ukraine, which were 'controlled by external forces', and yet tried to establish ties with them. Tangible evidence of the presence of such emotions and attitudes is the statements referring to the loss of trust in the West/NATO in the face of the decision to expand NATO to the East, contrary to the agreement reached in this area, for which no one has ever presented material proof. Although Russia has fulfilled its part of the bargain—it has withdrawn its troops from Germany and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and thus contributed to overcoming the legacy of

[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 24.02.2022.
[75] Ibid.

the Cold War, it has been deceived.[76] Nevertheless, 'at the same time, Russia has always been and still is in favour of resolving the most complex problems through political and diplomatic methods, at the negotiating table'.[77] Putin acknowledged that 'after the collapse of the USSR, Russia adopted new geopolitical realities. We will continue to respect all newly formed countries in the post-Soviet space. We respect and will continue to respect their sovereignty'.[78] The Russian initiative on security guarantees, which Russia launched in Washington in December 2021 and was mentioned in Putin's speeches, also fell into this category of the mechanism of ontological anxiety—Russia proposed a working solution to the problem of European security architecture, but they were all rejected.

THE EXTERNAL WORLD AS A SOURCE OF ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

Regarding the last group of two types of ontological insecurity mechanisms, which are supposed to manifest themselves in the form of a sense of shame (lack of self-respect) or uncertainty/stability in response to the subjective perception of the functioning of the system of international relations, its norms and principles, we are dealing with two mechanisms of ontological insecurity: inadequate norm compliance and distrust of the outside world. The external world, i.e., the system of international relations, the values and norms that make it up, affects Russia, and the influence isn't a source of ontological comfort and security. Russia, as can be seen from Putin's statements, clearly feels that its behaviour and autobiographical narratives are incompatible with the existing norms and values of the system of international relations. At the same time, it is trying to prove otherwise. With all this, there is no trust in the existing model of international relations. Putin does not feel confident in it but also fears its further erosion.

A verbal testimony to Russia's anxiety about the outside world, which is a derivative of the sense of shame (inadequate norm compliance), will be the formulation in which Putin refers to international law and 'natural law' resulting from the Russian statehood's sovereign,

[76] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21.02.2022.
[77] Ibid.
[78] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 24.02.2022.

exceptional nature. In the first case, Putin will refer primarily to the Charter of the United Nations, i.e., those fragments that speak of the rights of nations to self-defence and self-determination;[79] in the second case, to the fact that the West violates the agreements negotiated with Russia (the Minsk Agreements), the need to defend life and the norms of the international order sanctified by blood and history. At the same time, Putin denounced the idea of violence in international relations: 'Our plans do not include the occupation of Ukrainian territories. We do not intend to impose anything on anyone or anything by force'.[80] Russia steadily defends the right of nations to self-determination and to choose their fate.

At the same time, Russia, as Putin says, feels that the world it knows, i.e., the one in which it occupies a prominent, privileged place, formed after World War II, is irreversibly falling apart. The 'American hegemon' seeks to revise the Yalta order and disregards the sacrifices made by Russia during the Great Patriotic War.[81] Putin protests against the model of international relations, in which the binding norm is 'lies, deceit and hypocrisy, in which morality, truth and justice are lacking'.[82] Meanwhile, Russia—according to Putin—is an unwavering supporter of maintaining the international order formed and functioned in 1945–1991 and the so-called concept of equal and indivisible security in the security architecture, and feels responsible for maintaining global order and security.[83]

HOW WAS THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE TO ALLEVIATE THE RUSSIAN SENSE OF ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY?

How was aggression against Ukraine supposed to solve Russia's ontological insecurity, which stretched almost across the entire spectrum determined by the variables of source and cause of anxiety? One could expect that a successful 'special military operation' in Ukraine should have restored the state of coherence between the perceptions (positioned in official state narratives) prevailing in Russia about itself and the actions taken by Russia, as well as the continuity of the narrative constructed about itself, which could be

[79] *United Nations Charter (full text)*, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text.

[80] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 24.02.2022.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.; *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21.02.2022.

supported by specific actions that confirm its authenticity. However, this assumption needs a particular comment. Aggression was directed at another ending—it was about being a quick and successful military operation with the seizure of Kyiv. This is how the expected results of Russia's actions against Ukraine in February 2022 should be read through ontological security theory.

Military intervention against Ukraine was either to subordinate Ukraine to Russia or/to force the West to accept the Russian demands, in the field of security architecture in Europe. Should it happen, Russia would derive several intangible nonmaterial benefits, such as those that could be classified as prestige or status confirmation in the eyes of the 'significant Other' or concerning its relations with Ukraine, conducive to alleviating Russia's ontological insecurity, resulting from shame and uncertainty. In Russian political thinking, fears of the West (being part of Russian strategic culture) are accompanied by a desire to build a new concert of powers—to integrate firmly Russia into global politics and provide it with a decisive role in shaping decisions in international relations. Sergei Lavrov's words seem to illustrate this tendency perfectly:

> For more than two centuries, any attempts to unite Europe without Russia and against it have invariably ended in grave tragedies, the consequences of which could be overcome each time only with the decisive participation of our country. I am referring, in particular, to the Napoleonic wars, after which Russia emerged as the saviour of the system of international relations based on the balance of power and mutual consideration of national interests and excluding the total domination of any one state on the European continent.[84]

The conquest of Ukraine and the installation of a puppet government in Kyiv would restore Russia's faith that it is a truly sovereign state, gifted with the will to act and the strength to oppose the hostility of the West, which is interested in weakening Russia as an independent pole of global order. Retaking Ukraine from the hands of the West would be a convenient opportunity to overcome the shame that comes from the inability to oppose the policy of the West and endure humiliation from it for years, but also to restore the historical routine, existing

[84] *Статья Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова «Историческая перспектива внешней политики России», опубликованная в журнале «Россия в глобальной политике» 3 марта 2016 года* [*Stat'ia Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova 'Istoricheskaia perspektiva vneshneĭ politiki Rossii', opublikovannaia v zhurnale "Rossiia v global'noĭ politike" 3 marta 2016 goda*, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2124391.

principles of subordination of Ukraine to Russia. By battling the 'evil' West that threatens it, Russia is regaining its self-confidence.

If the annexation of Ukraine was successful, and its new (non--sovereign) authorities accepted Russia's domestic and foreign policy proposals, it could triumph once again as a 'guarantor of order and security' in the region. It would not have to feel ashamed of its actions, because it has achieved its goals, even in the face of determined resistance from the West. Ukraine, on the other hand, must bear the consequences of its perfidy and acting to the detriment of Russia; it must return to the 'bosom' of Russia. Ukraine was supposed to be a protectorate of Russia; it did not have the right to independent statehood, as this would question Russia's autobiographical narrative. In Putin's opinion, the 'cradle' of Russian statehood cannot be outside Russia. The subjugation of Ukraine would be an act of historical justice, a liberation from the shameful legacy of Lenin's ethnonationalism policy. The Soviet Union still evokes ambivalent feelings in Russia, perfectly illustrating Putin's attitude towards it. The Soviet Union, and in particular Lenin's ethno-political policy ('Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine'), is a source of deep emotional and psychological discomfort in contemporary Russia.[85]

Ukraine, in Kremlin official narratives, is not an independent state—it is denied subjectivity, it is a tool in the hands of the West, found to diminish role of Russia in European politics; if it cannot be conquered/controlled, then its lands may become the object of negotiations with the powers of the world, *ergo* the construction of a new concert of powers.

The conquest of Ukraine, which began in 2014 and did not end with the regaining of control over Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy, as the Kremlin expected, was a *de facto* 'overturning the table' from the point of view of Yalta's international order, which Russia felt degenerate after the end of the Cold War, as it ceased to favour Russia as the victor of World War II. Russia did not intend to agree to such humiliating treatment, recognising that it deserved a different one in which the strongest, the sovereigns, have the decisive voice. Russia openly embarked on the path of revisionism. This role entirely suited her identity, in line with the persistent narrative that the Soviet Union played this role.[86]

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[85] *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21.02.2022.

[86] Vyacheslav Shuper, *Russia as the Cradle of Revisionism*, Valdai Club, 25.05.2022. https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-as-the-cradle-of-revisionism/ (access: 13 June 2025).

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS—HOW ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY THEORY EXTENDS KNOWLEDGE ABOUT MODERN RUSSIA

Russia is ontologically insecure and manifests itself in a broad spectrum of phenomena. The negative emotions it experiences result from self-reflection, relationships with 'Others' and thoughts about the external world—the international order, and are caused by shame and uncertainty/lack of trust. The ontological insecurity present in Russia, as reflected in the two analysed speeches, is almost the same as the one Russia has already faced in the past, diagnosed in 2015––2017, i.e., during the intervention in Syria.[87]

The case of Russia's February 2022 assault on Ukraine is in line with the existing theoretical findings on ontological security studies. This applies, among others, to the aforementioned issue of states' readiness to sacrifice physical security for a sense of emotional and psychological comfort. Russia's launch of aggression against Ukraine was very clearly in line with the assumption of the need for routine from the point of view of regaining a sense of ontological security. The Russian war also positively verifies Steele's assumptions that a state may not feel ashamed of its actions if they are in line with its political traditions and culture—Russia, since the times of the Principality of Muscovy, habitually resorted to violence to resolve political conflicts, recognises violence in international institutions as a legitimate solution. Russia is repeating actions from the past—in the light of the concept of ontological security, Putin is restoring the natural order of things in Russia's foreign and domestic policy, referring to the well-known instruments and ideological background.[88]

Russia's actions towards Ukraine and the West have a spatial and a historical (temporal) dimension. The source of the ontological anxiety, as the case of the Russian war confirms, can be not only other actors, but also itself from the past. The concept of temporal security, as Kathrin Bachleitner observed, 'assumes that states in international relations are temporal-security seekers: to be secure, countries seek integrity with their temporal self".[89] The Soviet Union

[87] Essen and Danielson, 'A Typology of Ontological Insecurity Mechanisms', pp. 20–21.

[88] Prina, 'Fantasies of Cultural Sovereignty and National Unity'.

[89] Kathrin Bachleitner, *'Ontological Security as Temporal Security? The Role of "Significant Historical Others" in World Politics', International Relations* 37: 1, 2023, pp. 25––47 (p. 31), https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211045624.

and, in particular, Lenin's ethno-political legacy ('Lenin's Ukraine') is a source of deep emotional and psychological discomfort in contemporary Russia. A reckoning with the Soviet Union, not in the longing and sorrow for a dilapidated status of great power, but in the sense of its legacy of failures, has not ended in Russia.

Russia's ignorance of the threat of jeopardising not only its material interests, but also its prestige or international status, is not surprising or incomprehensible in the light of the study's findings on ontological security. According to its findings, the purpose of the state is not so much about achieving a specific status or role in the system of international relations, but its acceptance by the 'Others'. As Mitzen and Larson put it, 'for ontological security, recognition is about the Other acknowledging the identities of the Self in a way that reinforces the Self's understanding of its role in the relationship'.[90] In the analysed case, this could be the Russian role or status of 'revisionist state', anti-imperialist, non-colonial power fighting for a better and just world order against Western hegemony.[91]

The Russian political regime has not only adapted to the conditions of the war, putting its economy on the war track, but also benefits from it in terms of legitimacy and disciplining the elite and society.[92] Moreover, in the third year of the war, there was no indication that the Kremlin wanted to end it. On the contrary, representatives of the Russian government disseminate statements that prove that Russia is ready to fight on and at the same time fight for a long time.[93]

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[90] Jennifer Mitzen and Kyle Larson, 'Ontological Security and Foreign Policy', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedias. Politics*, March 2017, p. 16, https://oxfordre.com/politics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-458?d=%2F10.1093%2Facrefore%2F9780190228637.001.0001%2Facrefore-9780190228637-e-458&p=emailAqwxxBpiz4x12.

[91] Vladislav L. Inozemtsev, *Russia: The Self-Contradicting Anti-Imperialist Empire*, MEMRI, 14.11.2022, https://www.memri.org/reports/russia-self-contradicting-anti-imperialist-empire.

[92] Tatiana Stanovaya, *The Era of Wild Putinism: How War Is Changing the Russian Regime and Elites, Russia Can Afford to Take a Beating in Ukraine*, Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, 30.01.2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/russia-wild-putinism-politics?lang=en (access: 13 April 2025); Collin Meisel and Mathew Burrows, *Russia Can Afford to Take a Beating in Ukraine*, War on the Rocks, 21.05.2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/05/russia-can-afford-to-take-a-beating-in-ukraine/ (access: 13 June 2025).

[93] *We're prepared to fight forever. How about you?' Moscow Opens First Direct Talks with Ukraine in Three Years by Threatening Endless War and New Land Grabs*, Meduza, 16.05.2025, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/05/16/we-re-prepared-to-fight-forever-how-about-you (access: 13 June 2025); *Хотят победить нас на поле боя? Пусть пытаются – Сергей Лавров* [Khotiat pobedit' nas na pole boia? Pust' pytaiutsia — Sergeĭ Lavrov], Dzen.ru, 4.03.2024, https://dzen.ru/video/watch/65e5cc3a52bc5537c699f802; https://tass.ru/politika/24645141.

This leads to worrying conclusions about the prospects for ending the war and Russia's future actions. These statements seem to prove Russia's readiness to 'embrace its destiny', reconciliation with fate, strengthening one's identity and, in general, alleviating the sense of ontological insecurity. This is still a working assumption because a separate analysis is required to prove it. However, we should expect a further escalation of conflicts and tensions in relations with the West from Russia, as war against Ukraine not only helps stabilise Putin's regime of power but also decreases Russia's ontological insecurity.

Studies on ontological security are not a cognitive 'philosophical stone', they help to interpret political reality in the long (historical) term, but they do not explain, for example, why the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine took place exactly in February 2022. It can be accused of acting as an alibi for Russia—a tool for explaining Russia's aggressive, neo-imperial aspirations, by shifting responsibility to unprocessed traumas such as shame or guilt. However, the most serious accusation will concern excessive generalization and identification of Putin's phobias and emotions with the whole of Russia and the feelings of Russian society. This problem is recognized in the literature and concerns the question of who is the subject of analysis—whose ontological anxiety we are dealing with? The subject of research can be the abstract state, the elite or society. This problem is related to another issue of (un)conscious awareness of ontological anxiety and manipulation of social moods, legitimizing government policy by building specific narratives infused with emotions.

In the case of this article, the reference point of the analysis is Russia as a state, but this does not mean that Putin's pro-war speeches cannot be used in other ways as part of ontological security studies, i.e. to analyse the relationship in the triangle of Putin–war––Russians, with an emphasis put on trying to answer the question: how Russian society reacts to the Kremlin's pro-war rhetoric.

Given the importance and scale of disinformation activities in modern Russia, the continuous efforts to legitimise the war and mobilise behaviour favouring the Kremlin's (Putin's) agenda, it can be assumed that Putin's pro-war speeches were intended to produce certain set of emotions (shame, guilt and uncertainty) that aggression (being successfully completed) was intended to discharge—war as emotional *catharsis*. In other words, one can attempt to prove the thesis that Putin manipulated the ontological anxiety of the Russians in order to legitimize the war and then ask the question was this

endeavour successful one. This type of research approach expands both ontological security studies and sheds additional light on Russian manipulation of information and emotions in the process of claiming legitimacy in general and aggression against Ukraine in particular.

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