



# WHY MUST THE UKRAINIAN WAR HAVE HAPPENED? HOW DID THE WEST IGNORE THE SIGNS OF IMPENDING TRAGEDY?

**Summary.** The article is going to reflect on the variety of origins leading to the current armed conflict in Ukraine. It will adopt the interdisciplinary approach, mainly sociological, political, and historical. Thus, instead of focusing on one important issue, I will try to gather the collective cause of the ongoing tragedy. The elaboration will analyse the recent history of the relations between Russia and the Western countries, and try to place the role of Ukraine in it. The main errors regarding the foreign policies of the West, as well as those regarding the Euro-Atlantic integration will be pointed out, too. The other issues that the Western world is facing will not remain unmentioned. It will be demonstrated what could have been done, so that the conflict had never broken out. The assessment of the current circumstances will provide suggestions what the countries should do to avoid any similar dramatic scenario in the future. Finally, I will consider several possible outcomes of the present situation. Apart from describing the pure facts available in the literature, I will share with my own experiences in the West, in Russia, and in Ukraine. I will stress how the phenomenon of propaganda is affecting the population. I will try to combine the general knowledge with the perception of the facts by ordinary people.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, war, NATO, Euro-Atlantic integration, society, propaganda

## 1. The socio-political aspects

Having lived in the UK for quite a long time now, far away from the War Zone, but also far enough from the other problems typical for Central and Eastern Europe, I made an interesting observation. The understanding of Eastern politics in the West seems to lack certain very important elements. It does not only regards the UK itself. Unlike the Eastern Europeans, the Westerners may be unfamiliar with multiple nuances typical to Eastern countries and relations,

which shape the politics over there. Therefore, the ignorance of some tiny but crucial details might have affected the general perception of the recent events in Ukraine from the point of view of the Western European and American Academia.

The problem appears to be quite common among the academics who major in politics. If it comes to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, most of them, without a doubt, blame Vladimir Putin for the bloody ongoing tragedy. Some political analysts would argue that the responsibility is shared amongst the president's entire narrow group of cronies (where Putin is the most powerful voice anyway).<sup>1</sup> In any case, there is little doubt that the current Russian president is the main person accountable for this diabolic decision. It is also widely agreed that the way things that are happening now are reprehensible.

However, during one of the academic debates at the University of Reading in England (where I am writing up my PhD on Internal Policies of Ukraine), a question was asked: „Was it wise for states such as the UK to suppose that they could bring Ukraine into the Western orbit without that posing a serious (...) challenge to a Russia led by Putin?“. The very question made me feel quite uncomfortable. It felt as if the whole problem was totally misunderstood. If I were to answer this question, my first notion would be that Putin's Russia has been underappreciated by the Western world since the new Russian leader, first as the Prime Minister (in 1999), and then as the President (in 2000) came to power. The troubles had commenced even before the infamous 2007 Munich conference, during which, in the aftermath of Putin's speech, Russia was assessed to make a U-turn in its politics.<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to the events such as the Second Chechen War, the Litvinenko case,<sup>3</sup> and a few other issues, including mysterious murders of Russian journalists,<sup>4</sup> etc. After the conference, the signs of Russian authoritarianism heading towards totalitarianism became even more visible.

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<sup>1</sup> C. BELTON, *Putin's People. How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West*, London 2020, pp. 448–500.

<sup>2</sup> M. STUERMER, *Putin and the Rise of Russia*, London 2008, pp. 14–24.

<sup>3</sup> *Vide*: A. GOLDFARB, *Death of a Dissident: The Poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the Return of the KGB*, London 2007.

<sup>4</sup> M. BENNETTS, *I'm Going to Ruin Their Lives. Inside Putin's War on Russia Opposition*, London 2016, pp. 17–19.

Undoubtedly, the attitudes across the different Western states varied significantly. As it is commonly believed, the Anglosphere nations have probably had a tougher stance on Putin's government than the majority of continental Western European states. However, the above mentioned university debate, which took place after the invasion had begun, was in the UK. It only proved that well-educated specialists were still unaware how much damage people in power like Vladimir Putin could do.

My main argument is that the collective West has never been naïve whilst trying to „westernise” Ukraine simply because the Ukrainians wanted it themselves. All the failures resulted from the fact that the West should and could have done a lot more in order to achieve this goal before the situation became so perilous. The Western actions were simply insufficient.

## 2. The beginning of the full scale invasion

Before the Russo-Ukrainian War escalated to such an extent (it may not be forgotten that it had been continuing since 2014). Putin had demanded from the West a neutral status for Ukraine by banning its accession to NATO (which *de-facto* signified a very un-neutral status of the country, similar to that of Lukashenka's Belarus or Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan), as well as the withdrawal of the NATO troops from the Easternmost countries of the Alliance. The West (mainly the US and the UK) called it 'non-starters'. In my opinion, it was only a language of diplomacy, for some leaders and politicians of the Western powers would not mind the „neutrality” of Ukraine and *de-facto* letting it back to the Russian sphere of influence. Nonetheless, removing troops from the existing NATO countries would literally mean „The Russians dictating the US (and to the lesser extent the other allies) what to do”. This has never been even a remote possibility. Putin was well-aware of that. He might have only counted on the Western lack of unanimity and wilful turning back on Ukraine. Nonetheless, 'selling' Ukraine to the mercy of Putin's Russia, amongst other reasons, would not have been considered a good PR. Therefore, it was denied, too. Eventually, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, the Russian Armed Forces commenced a full attack on the sovereign state of Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> M. GALEOTTI, *A Short History of Russia. How to Understand the World's Most Complex Nation*, London 2022, pp. 208–223.

### 3. Russia is always one step ahead

As the course of events shows, Russia has always been one step ahead. During the 2008 Georgian War, the Western countries did very little to react. In fact, they did not know how to react. It was a great surprise to everybody.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the situation in Georgia was completely different. The war (with a number of ceasefires) has been ongoing since the collapse of the USSR or it is even possible to claim (in the case of Abkhazia) that it had begun before the Soviet Union was formed. South Ossetia might have been nothing more than a Russian client state (more similar to Transnistria) but the history of Abkhazia has been a little different.

After the Ukrainian invasion, the stance of the Abkhaz politicians became even more pro-Russian, hence, the true objectives of the unrecognised Abkhaz authorities suddenly became very unclear, whether their ambition was the protection of their ethnicity (which has never been the case in South Ossetia) or nothing more than protecting Russia in its anti-Western rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> Though this is a topic for another elaboration. Nevertheless, in that conflict (at least in the direct aftermath of it) it was not yet possible to claim that only one side was to blame. From the current point of view, it may be more disputable.

The Ukraine crisis had a completely different scenario. It was an artificially started war after the significantly long lasting peace, in which Putin used the pretext of the far-right Ukrainians repressing the Russians and Russian-speakers inhabiting Ukraine. The Kremlin's unexpected strategy of the hybrid war, once again, surprised the Western world, which signified that Russia was one step ahead one more time. The assistance that the Western countries are providing now should have already been provided eight years ago during the described crisis. Likewise, the answer to the above-mentioned Georgian conflict should have been proportionally stronger, too. Following this logic, the answer of the West to the current crisis ought to be even more powerful. Despite the general positive assessment of the Western unity and the collective reaction, only with

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<sup>6</sup> M. MALEK, *Georgia & Russia: The „Unknown” Prelude To The „Five Day War”*, „Caucasian Review of International Affairs” 2009, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 227–232.

<sup>7</sup> N. MIKHELIDZE, *After The 2008 Russia-Georgia War: Implications for the Wider Caucasus and Prospects for Western Involvement in Conflict Resolution*, „Documeti Istituto Affari Internazionali” 2009, issue 1, p. 6.

few setbacks, in my opinion, the response is still far from the proper one. In the next sections, I will attempt to explain the whys and wherefores, as well as to indicate the failures of its insufficient implementation.

#### 4. The Russians continue to threaten

Since the beginning of the War, the Russian officials: Putin himself, but also the former president and prime minister Dmitriy Medvedev (it looked as if he was purposefully assigned to this role), a few other politicians, and several journalists from the mainstream television channels such as *Channel One*<sup>8</sup> and *RTR Planeta*<sup>9</sup> have been constantly threatening that the Russian Federation may use the nuclear weapons. Probably, it frightened much of the Western public, some Western politicians (who, after all, represent this public). The question that ought to be taken into consideration in such circumstances is: why is it us who should we be afraid of the nuclear war, rather than Russia itself? We do also have nuclear weapons, after all.

As the War in Ukraine has shown, our conventional weaponry appears to be much more effective. The next interesting question is the following. Why does Russia put itself into a position of blackmailing us if the people in the Kremlin (rather than Putin himself) are perfectly aware that the nuclear attack on any Western ally would likely lead to a scenario, in which Russia as a state would cease to exist. Even the use of tactical warheads in Ukraine only, will also probably encounter a very decisive reaction. Obviously, nobody desires an Armageddon but the Russian leadership counts on the Western common sense, simultaneously excusing themselves from keeping it. Perhaps, the threats against Russia should have been louder and harsher from the very first day of the invasion. Perhaps, the West should loom over its threats, so they would sound so real, that the people in the Kremlin began to believe in them genuinely, and became so frightened, realising that if Ukraine had been attacked at the first place, the imminent full

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<sup>8</sup> Channel One – TV programme *Время покажет* from 26.04.2022 – reference to Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's words about the risk of nuclear conflict, <https://www.1tv.ru/> (access: 26 IV 2022).

<sup>9</sup> RTR Planeta – TV programme *Вечер с Владимиром Соловьёвым* from 28.04.2022 – discussion amongst the Russian journalists regarding the risk of nuclear conflict, <https://vgtrk.ru/rtrplaneta> (access: 26 IV 2022).

counterattack actually may have come true. This might have stopped the numerous atrocities and war crimes committed by the Russian military in the territory of Ukraine. As long as we are much stronger than Russia, such a stance of the American and European politicians would pay off. Instead, we chose to observe the situation, condemn the Russians, namely, accept it, as it happened.

Summing up, from the very beginning, the Western politics should have been conducted the other way around. In fact, it is us who should always be one step ahead. We should have made more efforts to make sure that the basic freedom, human rights and democracy have been followed since the 1990s when Russia was economically weaker and there were real chances that it would become a democratic country one day in the future. Actually, we ruined these opportunities.

## 5. What the West is doing now

Considering the circumstances, the question arises what the West should do now. There already exist a variety of opinions. At the beginning, we have to realise, though, the less we do and, simultaneously, the more we allow the Putin's regime to do, the bigger likelihood of an even greater escalation, including, at the worst case scenario, the full III World War with the use of the nuclear weapons. Certainly, it does not have to go that far. I am only arguing that the passiveness brings us closer to such or even a slightly less dreadful (but still horrid enough) scenario.

During the first phase of invasion, there were strong voices of opposition when a no-fly zone over Ukraine was an issue. The analogous problem occurred when it came to the transfer of the American-built, Polish fighter jets to the country. The restraints aimed not to provoke Russia and, obviously, to avoid the World War Three. Actually, these restraints only made Russia a little bit stronger at that time. The fear built in the West reflected by the indecisive policies turned out to be a perfect fitting element of the propaganda machine. The issue will be discussed further in this article.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that if the war spread into the wider area, the eventual death toll might be much larger, especially if nuclear weapons were to be used. However, that is only a guess. In fact, Putin never needed any particular actions to be provoked. The regime has been perfectly capable

of coining them by itself. It is reasonable to claim that if Putin wanted to attack NATO countries, he would do it anyway using any illogical pretext, like he did many times before. If he did not want it, he would not do it no matter how many planes or other equipment we would deliver to Ukraine.

Whether looking (even having provided some military support) at dying children, women, and men, as if it was a chess game, is moral is not so easy to answer. To tell the truth, whether the bombs fall on Kyiv, Warsaw, or London, they kill the identically good people. Sometimes, we have to forget about the national borders and defend the greater values, such as basic freedom and justice. These words were quoted many times „It is not the war between Ukraine and Russia. It is a war between freedom and tyranny”. Together, we may be able to save many lives, and the total death toll may actually fall down at the end of the war. Whether or not NATO should intervene, risking a potential nuclear war but also enlarging the chances of bringing everything back to peace much faster, remains an open question. I guess very few people would be able to make such a decision. It would resemble a lottery.

However, it seems probable that nobody will have to make it, anyway. The Ukrainians, having made significant gains at the battlefield, forced the Russian commanders to take more extreme steps. The Kremlin announced the *de-jure* partial mobilisation (the programme, which has already had numerous failures, which rarely take place when the draft has been announced in most of the countries in the recent history). The countries considered „Putin’s allies” implied to him during the recent Samarkand summit that they were losing patience due to their disappointment of the Russian policies. At the beginning of the „Special Military Operation”, the censorship in Russia has reached the levels unseen since the times of the USSR. Even the use of words „war” or „invasion” were punishable by law. Many people were arrested. Many others fled the country. Now, more and more people who hold the political post openly criticise Putin’s assessment of the situation. Unfortunately, it may lead to Putin wishing to use his last resources. If the stance of the Western nations was stronger at the very beginning, Putin would not be left so isolated with very few options left (including the button to the bomb). Luckily, there are still people in the Kremlin who can stop him but this might turn into a fight for power in Russia itself and maybe a civil war of unpredictable scale. In such a case, it is not possible to foresee what policies the new authorities will introduce, either. It is probable, though, that, at the time, Russia will be already on a verge of bankruptcy.

## 6. The Eastern enlargement of the pro-Western institutions

It was discussed what opportunities the Western countries are having at the moment (and what they have been having recently due to the constant and dynamic changes of the overall situation). Nonetheless, there were things that could have been done in earlier the past (until 2021), which would have allowed to shun the whole tragedy. First of all, the process of Euro-Atlantic integration for Ukraine and other aspirant countries could be instigated much sooner and performed much faster.

As it was assumed that Russia was always one step ahead, the obvious question arises why the answer of the West was always delayed. In order to try to answer it, let us have a closer look at the end of communism in Europe in 1989. Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and a few other countries were totalitarian regimes at the time, *de-facto* cut off economically from the free world. With regard to three above-mentioned ones, it took them ten years only to join NATO.<sup>10</sup> It took them just fifteen years to join the EU. The process included the changes of the whole political systems, judiciaries, law enforcements, and so on. In comparison, let us look at the Balkan countries, which have unsuccessfully been attempting to join the EU for more than 20 years. Of course, the Yugoslav Wars have been the main cause. However, when the conflicts finished, the states have significantly changed. Moreover, the wars did not cover all the nations of the region (such as [North] Macedonia and Albania). Those countries, unlike Poland, Czechoslovakia, and so on, were already flawed democracies, rather than totalitarian communist regimes at the beginning of their European and Euro-Atlantic path. The same can be said about the post-Soviet Western-oriented states like Ukraine but also Moldova, and Georgia.

The Western institutions, particularly the European Union, became dissuaded from the further enlargement after Bulgaria and Romania had joined the latter organisation.<sup>11</sup> The problems of corruption in those countries significantly exceeded the threshold of tolerance of the whole European structure. The problem of the enlargement fatigue incurred. However, the question is how

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<sup>10</sup> This is referred to the Czech Republic only, rather than the whole of Czechoslovakia; Slovakia needed five additional years to join NATO.

<sup>11</sup> G. GOTEV, *Romania and Bulgaria were not ready for accession, EU auditors confess*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/auditors-romania-and-bulgaria-were-not-ready-for-accession/> (access: 16 VI 2023).



big the corruption problem in a limited number of member states is, in comparison to the problem of bombing the entire cities in a neighbouring country. It has to be looked at economically, ethically and morally, as well as from the point of view of the regional security.

The enlargement of NATO went a little smoother, although it also experienced serious problems, and it has not definitely finished, either. As it will be proved later, the indecisiveness was one of the main reasons that led to the current Ukrainian conflict.

It seems that after the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU, the enlargement process simply stopped (save Croatia, which had already been significantly more developed than the rest of the candidates). The other Balkan countries, Türkiye, and pro-Western oriented post-Soviet countries could only wait. Not only were their perspectives of accession in the foreseeable future *de-facto* unreal but also the negotiations did not move forward, at all. In the case of Türkiye, the process has been officially frozen. In the case of North Macedonia (earlier: the Republic of Macedonia), it was frozen for many year before unfreezing it this year. Nevertheless, the other countries, which had open negotiations were also *de-facto* at standstill. Considering all the candidate countries together, only three new negotiations chapters have been closed during the last sixteen years. It is longer than the whole accession process of the post-communist countries, which had entered the EU, as the first ones.

I have been conducting a research on the internal corruption in Ukraine for four years now. According to the independent institutions such as Transparency International,<sup>12</sup> the corruption in Ukraine has been much more widespread than in Romania, and Bulgaria, and some EU candidate/aspirant countries such as Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. However, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina had similar results to Ukraine (only a few points fewer than the latter). Moreover, as of 2021, the perception of corruption in Hungary was higher than in Romania and only a little lower than in Bulgaria. A NATO member and EU candidate – Türkiye – has also a very high level of corruption.

However, it must be added that during the last eight years, the perception of the phenomenon in Ukraine dropped by around 35 points. Thus, as long as there is a political will, which is not lacking in contemporary Ukraine, the corruption may be defeatable to a notable extent. Beyond any doubt, the problem

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<sup>12</sup> Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021> (access: 24 VI 2023).

of corruption would have been more resolvable for the Western society than an armed conflict, like the current one. It could have been avoided if Ukraine had already been an integral part of the *so-called* Western world.

The euphoria caused by the end of the Cold War sped up the process of integration of Eastern Europe with the West. Many authors used to predict the coming of the new peaceful era.<sup>13</sup> When the first obstacles occurred, it all stopped, as if the earlier hopes were all gone. Let me return to the academic discussion quoted at the beginning of this article. „Was it wise for states such as the UK to suppose that they could bring Ukraine into the Western orbit without that posing a serious (...) challenge to a Russia led by Putin?” If Putin’s Russia is concerned, I barely think so. Actually, this should have been done much faster without depending on any Russia’s opinion. The hitherto policies, considering Putin’s regime a negotiable partner, directly led to the current situation. Ukraine (and Georgia) should have already been accepted in NATO at least a few years ago. Likewise, the Balkan countries should have already been the members of the EU. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova should be at the point of accession negotiations approximately at the current time. Then, it would be much less likely that Russia would conduct any of „its military operations” now. The problem of overwhelming corruption in some of the new EU and NATO countries would have been either in major part solved by now or, if it still required much work, it would be easier to cope with it (especially if the countries were inside rather than outside) than with the military invasion. Although this debate frequently appeared in the Polish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, and Georgian discourse, it was largely incomprehensible in the most Western European countries. It also regarded countries such as the UK, which has probably become the closest Ukrainian ally in the whole of Western Europe.

## 7. The democratic deficit

The additional difficulty comes from the resistance of several Western leaders who are afraid of admitting new members to either of the two organisations referring to the democracy deficit existing in the so-called „fresh democracies” like Hungary or Poland. No matter if the *Democratic Deficit* really exists, its presence

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<sup>13</sup> *Vide*: F. FUKUYAMA, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London 2006.

in the discourse deters some Western countries from the EU (and maybe also NATO) enlargement. They appear not to consider the fact that these problems do not directly result from the shorter time of these countries being democracies. Let us what happened to the US during the Donald Trump's tenure, a country that had been the world model for democracy for so many years. Alternatively, imagine what might have happened to the Western unity, if Ms. Le Pen had won the presidential election in France (which is still possible in the future). At the time of writing the article the results of the Italian parliamentary election are not known yet. However, Ms. Meloni (who is leading in the polls to become a new Prime Minister) may threaten the Western unity in the same way as Mr. Trump, Mr. Orbán in Hungary, the other populist and radical governments elsewhere. The policies conducted by such politicians bring significant risks that the EU (or other pro-Western international organisations) will be inefficient on the global stage.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Western division may origin equally from older democracies, as well as from the new democracies. However, at this point, Ukraine is hardly a candidate to produce this kind of a burden in the unified West. The populism is not the sole problem that divides the West, though.

## 8. The Western division

The long-lasting division of the West is, in fact, another factor that has strongly contributed to the current crises. The different voices (in reference to Russia, the harsher ones like American, British, Polish, or Baltic versus the lighter ones like French, German, and Italian) frequently made the common Western response inconsequential, while Russia's strength depended on its unity, i.e. on the basis: „whatever Putin has said, it is sacred”. These two forms of governance are, of course, balanced by the incomparably stronger West in economic terms, in comparison to Russia. It is also understandable from the point of view of countries such as Germany and Italy, which have been dependent on economic ties with Russia to such a large extent. After all, nobody could predict a full war breaking out in the foreseeable future. Despite some (usually single) voices, mainly from the Central and Eastern European countries, the perspective

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<sup>14</sup> C. MUDDE, C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2017, pp. 97–118.

of the current conflict appeared to be surrealistic to the Western public, even though the signs that I mentioned before continued to appear.

Now, we are able to conclude that the previous model of conducting politics was a short term solution, indeed. The lack of unity makes us weaker. If the European Union, or more general the Western Integration, continues to weaken, i.e. it does not accelerate and it is continuously blocked by different political, sociological, and economic factors or simply by the right of veto by a single party of any of the organisations, it will lead to a certain disaster. The economic struggles elsewhere, caused, for example, by the current rise of the COVID pandemic in China, will only give us (the collective West) a short-term advantage. Sooner or later every crisis comes to an end, and the potential superpowers such as China, India, and Brazil will take the lead. Russia should not be counted here, as probably in the aftermath of its attack on Ukraine, it will not count seriously on the international arena anymore, no matter what the final result of the conflict will be. The main European democracies, Germany, France, and the UK (or England alone if the latter is dissolved, which is constantly becoming more probable) may become only as influential in the world politics, as the contemporary G20 middle income economies, such as Mexico, Argentina, South Africa, or Indonesia.

To put it simply, the shortage of unified Western leadership may eventually lead to the collapse of the democratic world, in which we live and whose values we take for granted in our part of the globe. It is worth to add that the Western countries are still more reliable partners for the poorer and developing states than „the potential new world leadership”. This may eventually lead to the global political and economic chaos, which will be followed by numerous local conflicts, especially in the poorer countries. Such a course of events must be shunned for any price.

## 9. The sociological picture of Russia

When I was doing my Master Studies in politics in Poland (though my major was dedicated to some other field), one of my minors was Ukraine. It was around the time when the Revolution of Dignity broke out. I partook in several academic discussions on this subject. The common opinions occurred that a lot of political analysts continuously kept making the same mistake. The mainstream analysts were supposed not to understand that the Russian

mentality was so different from ours. They stressed that the citizens of the biggest Slavic nation only spoke a different language but they were pretty much like ourselves, i.e. the Westerners. A huge amount of academics disagreed with these opinions pointing out that the misunderstanding of the Russian nature was the main mistake of the West. Of course, the Russian logics of pursuing politics could not be fully understood in the Western countries but this refers more to the elites responsible for governing the country, rather than to the whole of the nation. Therefore, I am more keen on agreeing with the former group of academics who do not distance Russia from the West so much.

I visited Russia many times. My wife is Russian. I have many Russian friends, with whom I openly discuss politics. Some of them have specialised knowledge in the field of social and political science since being a scientist myself, I was looking to discuss certain issues with people who share similar interests, i.e. historians, political scientists, sociologists, etc. Therefore, I met the whole spectre of individuals and opinions. I spent there enough time to realise that the mentality of the Russians does not vary a lot from that of the Europeans and Americans. As always, there are some cultural differences but they are not much bigger than those between the Scandinavians and Italians or between the Germans and the French.

The origin of our common culture lies in Christian Europe. Undoubtedly, Christianity was the dominating religion, as well as ideology in Europe beginning from the Middle Ages, i.e. the times when the contemporary nations originated. Let me underscore that I am using here a huge simplification, for the role of a state has altered completely for the last 1000 years or more. The split of Christianity into Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, then approximately, a half a millennium later, the emergence of Protestantism did not alter the grounds, on which the current Western civilisation had been based. It definitely contains the whole of Europe, including Russia, but also North America, Australia, New Zealand, a few other assorted countries and territories, and only partially, Latin America

Therefore, having observed everyday lives of the ordinary Russians, I cannot agree with S.P. Huntington who presented Russia in *The Clash of Civilisations* as a diverse cultural zone from the rest of Europe and America.<sup>15</sup> Let me remind

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<sup>15</sup> S.P. HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of World Order*, London 2002, pp. 26–27.

that he placed Romania, as an Orthodox country in the same zone, as Russia. Nevertheless, the relations between contemporary Russia and Romania are very similar to those between Russia and Poland. The Russians dress in a similar way, watch similar TV programmes, listen to similar music, and enjoy the same Western style of life. The problem they cannot defeat is the propaganda, which also exist in other Western countries. However, unlike in Russia (and probably Belarus) it never oversteps certain borders in the contemporary world.

I should also add that, while conducting my research, I visited Ukraine many times, too. These trips left me no doubt that Ukraine was a free and fully Western-oriented country. I also have a lot of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances there. Some of them work in the Academia. We discussed the relevant issues multiple times. However, further in the West, I met up with multiple opinions that Ukraine was not a real democracy, either. This brings several additional questions. Is Poland a real democracy? Is Germany a real democracy? Does a real democracy really exist? These questions could be perceived and answered very individually. However, there exists a non-governmental institute in the USA, named the *Freedom House*, which conducts annual research assessing objectively the level of democracy in all countries and some territories.<sup>16</sup> Its reports may be considered a standardised and effective measurement whether a state/entity is democratic or not. The common misunderstanding of the term „democracy” makes me think that the well-known Churchill words would be in place.<sup>17</sup> In fact, it is all about not crossing certain lines. Despite all the internal problems within the country, Ukraine has not done it. On the other hand, the Russian authorities have. And it is not because Russia is not a western country but because, unlike Ukraine, it is a totalitarian system with very effective propaganda tools. Nonetheless, as history has shown multiple times, such systems tend to collapse sooner or later. Ukraine, on the other hand, has already become a democratic country despite the problems with corruption and poverty. The West discreetly

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<sup>16</sup> Freedom House is a think-tank, which assesses the level of freedom and democracy in countries across the world, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores> (access: 24 VI 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Winston Churchill's quotation from the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1947: „Democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others that have been tried from time to time”, [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/nov/11/parliament-bill#S5CV0444P0\\_19471111\\_HOC\\_292](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/nov/11/parliament-bill#S5CV0444P0_19471111_HOC_292) (access: 21 VI 2023).

turning back on Ukraine, while orally declaring support to it, actually made the gravest of its mistakes. Since the first signs of the upcoming troubles, we all should have worked united and in an efficient and decisive manner.

## 10. The Russian propaganda

The Russian public opinion differs so significantly from the other European societies because of the omni-present propaganda in the country. The seriousness of this problem tends to be underestimated in the West. It is easier to blame the cultural differences, rather than to analyse the well-developed instruments, which are capable of making people believing in almost everything. Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson in their *Age of Propaganda* prove that such mechanisms do exist and their efficiency is much underappreciated.<sup>18</sup>

My wife, who has been living with me in the UK for a couple of years now, entered into some conflicts with a few of her acquaintances and family members concerning the views on the situation in Ukraine. However, there are also numerous people in Russia who openly claim that Putin is a criminal who attacked another sovereign nation without any particular reasons. Nonetheless, most of the people from my wife's surrounding are educated. Thus, I assume that if the whole of the Russian society were being concerned, the ratio would incline towards Putin's side.

However, the published official statistics regarding support of Putin (reaching up to 78%)<sup>19</sup> and the so-called „Special Military Operation” (up to 72%)<sup>20</sup> both in Russia and in the West might be overstated, as it is in the interest of both parties. At home, Putin wishes to boast how much the nation supports him and how unmistakable his decisions are. On the other hand, in the West, the media tends to show how „barbaric” the Russian nation is. When I was gathering

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<sup>18</sup> A. PRATKANIS, E. ARONSON, *Age of Propaganda*, New York City 2001, pp. 227–284.

<sup>19</sup> В. КОШЕЧКИНА, *ВЦИОМ раскрыл уровень доверия россиян политикам*, <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/07/29/vciomdobro/?fbclid=IwAR0Myk07--T9XuRolq1-tgm5aso5rCDt9OLNMs9ZA-KkMzKtRjAl5xSne6Q> (access: 29 VII 2022).

<sup>20</sup> В. ГЕРДО, *ВЦИОМ сообщил о 72-процентной поддержке среди россиян СВО на Украине*, *The TASS Agency*, [https://tass.ru/obschestvo/15083961?fbclid=IwAR2nMWVakL4B9UaO3RafUkARSKgTTh1Sz9mRGryYfUKQU\\_Cxtsa26i0AMnvQ](https://tass.ru/obschestvo/15083961?fbclid=IwAR2nMWVakL4B9UaO3RafUkARSKgTTh1Sz9mRGryYfUKQU_Cxtsa26i0AMnvQ) (access: 30 VI 2022).

the materials for my doctoral thesis, I conducted an unstructured interview with a Russian historian Mr. Oleg M. Lykov, MA. In Spring 2022, he assessed that the true support for Putin might have been around 50%. Considering the overall circumstances, the value appears to be very realistic. Nonetheless, there is no evidence to confirm this because all the genuine data is non-existent. However, I was assured that the real support was much lower than it was shown publicly.<sup>21</sup>

In the public discourse, it often appears to be forgotten that „the Russian government”, „Russian forces” and „the Russian society” are not synonyms. According to the content analysis performed on a tiny sample of texts and comments by journalists from several countries, the most common synonym replacing the three above-mentioned terms was „Russia”, closely followed by „the Russians”.<sup>22</sup> Psychologically speaking, a common enemy unites the society, or in this case, societies. This might have caused the rise of voices in Europe lobbying for banning all the Russians from entering the EU, alas, also including the declared oppositionists and anti-Putinists.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the problem of Russia ensues from its enormous size. Unlike the citizens of the other European states, most of Russians rarely travel abroad. The domestic travels are attractive enough and sufficient for the majority of the society. They rarely speak any foreign languages, so they have very few opportunities to gain information from any other sources but the Russian ones, i.e. those which only stand in accordance with the official policies of the Kremlin regime. Not to mention that the minority speakers of other languages and those who

<sup>21</sup> An unstructured interview with Mr. Oleg M. Lykov, a historian from Ordynskoye, Novosibirsk Oblast from 4 May 2022.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., P. KIRBY, *Why Russia is trying to capture eastern Ukraine*, BBC News from 26.05.2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60938544> (access: 24 VI 2023); Newsroom (joint publication) *Τρεις μήνες πολέμου στην Ουκρανία: Πού επικεντρώνει την επίθεσή της η Ρωσία – Οι απώλειες και οι εκτοπισμένοι* (*Treis mίνes polé moy stin Oykranía: Poú epikentrónēi tin epíthēsē tis i Rosía – Oi apóleies kai oi ektopisménoi* / *Three Months of War in Ukraine: Where Russia Is Focusing Its Attack – Casualties and Displaced Persons*), „Η Καθημερινή” („I Kathimerini”), 24 V 2022, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/world/561874936/treis-mines-polemoy-stin-oykrania-poy-epikentronei-tin-epithesi-tis-i-rosia-oi-apoleies-kai-oi-ektopismenoi/> (access: 24 VI 2023); L. ARVIDSSON, *Vad är det för fel på Ryssland och majoriteten av ryssarna?* (*What is wrong with Russia and the Majority of Russians*), [in:] *Kristianstadsbladet* from 31 May 2002, <https://www.kristianstadsbladet.se/debatt/vad-ar-det-for-fel-pa-ryssland-och-majoriteten-av-ryssarna-0bb8b469/> (access: 24 VI 2023) and a few others.

<sup>23</sup> Naturally, there exists a risk that amongst the declared enemies of the system, there will be many so-called sleeper agents.



could read, watch or listen to the Western news translated into Russian had been pre-warned that following any of this information is pointless, as it is nothing more than a lie. This excludes a huge part of the Russian society from standing against Putin, even if not actively, then passively.

It also has to be mentioned that a significant amount of Russians do not have any position on the matter. They simply wish to remain passive. On one hand, they have been kept away from politics, probably from the beginning of the history of Russia, on the other hand, they do not want to admit that their homeland may be responsible for any international crimes. They stubbornly follow the rule: „Ignorance is a bliss”.

Thus, the real support for Putin’s „Special Military Operation” is probably smaller than the statistics display but, alack and alas, it is still likely to be significant enough. This is only an estimation, as there exists no data, which could produce any independent reliable results. This support has begun to drop since the announcement of the „partial” mobilisation and the reintroduction of full conscription.

## 11. The analogous propaganda outside Russia

Not only Russia but also the other countries use the propaganda tools and the citizens tend to underestimate its strength. Usually, its effects are not so tragic, as in the case of the Russian-Ukrainian War. It does not mean, though, that people in the democratic countries should not ignore the issue, for the situation might get out of control unnoticedly everywhere. Let me provide a few sample questions.

How much has the British society become divided during and after the Brexit process? How much was the American society divided during the Trump presidency? Many analogous situations can be found in the other European and non-European countries. What is important here is not the matter of the division itself, but rather the difference between the ideals and values that affect each part of the mentioned societies. I dare say they look at the world from a completely different angle. The same angle divides the Russians from the rest of the peoples whose history origins in Europe (as well as the Putin’s supporters and the opposition minority in Russia). Of course, the extent of the horrendous events in Ukraine is incomparable with the recent drawbacks in the Western

countries. I have already discussed the issue of populism caused by different forms of radicalism. Though the socio-mechanism remains the same.<sup>24</sup> The media-portrayed „information war” has become a real information war at the level never seen in history before. The good news is that post-Putin Russia will also have a chance to become a free and democratic country. Whether it uses it, it is unfeasible even to try to answer. The attitude of people must be changed by providing them with the truth and evidence of the crimes of the Putin’s regime. Then, they must accept them and break free from the inglorious past.

## 12. The aftermath of the current events

We do not know how the war will end. The full Ukrainian victory would signify the return of all the Ukrainian lands to the control of Kyiv. This includes Crimea and Donbas. The full Russian victory would signify the annexation of the whole of Ukraine (probably also Belarus) or at least installing a puppet regime in Kyiv and annexing a large bit of the country. There are also multiple options in between, such as: Ukraine regains everything, save Crimea, Ukraine regains everything, save Crimea and Donbas, Ukraine regains everything, save the currently occupied regions, and Ukraine loses more lands but survives, as a democratic country. The war may last for many years or it may shortly end. Alternatively, it may change into a frozen conflict with little ongoing violence but with no (even unrecognised) fixed borders. The war may spread. The atomic or chemical weapons might be used. NATO may enter the conflict. Putin may be removed from power. His successor may seek peace or become even more aggressive. The negotiations may begin at one point. It may be soon or we will have to wait very long for that moment. There are so many possible scenarios of development of the situation, that at this moment, it is hard to even make any remote predictions. Ukraine has a clear goal. Russia does not seem to have one since the authorities have changed it so many times for the entire time of the war. Therefore, it is hard to assess what the Russians are up to and what they will be up to when the situation alters again. Due to the dynamics of the war, it is almost certain that it will alter shortly.

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<sup>24</sup> A. PRATKANIS, E. ARONSON, *Age of Propaganda...*, pp. 46–71.

If the negotiations commence (and Ukraine still holds advantage), the main choice will be between peace and justice. Many international actors (with varying views will probably wish to participate in the peacekeeping process). For the moment, it all seems unpredictable. There are a few things, though, of which we are certain. We know who started the war and we know what course of events would be the most just. The sooner the end of this tragedy comes, the better. Too many people have already died.

Let me express great hope that the darkest scenarios presented by different political analysts, quoted in this material, will turn up false, and Ukraine will be totally free and peaceful soon, being an integral part of the Western world. As stated above, I have no doubts whatsoever that it is a Western nation, similar to the UK, US, France, Germany, Sweden or Poland. Russia may join this group one day, too. Though, alack and alas, it will probably be a very long process, lasting for a number of generations.

### 13. Comparison with Belarus

The last part of this article will cope with Belarus, a country, which since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian tensions, played the role of „the man in the middle”. Belarus is the third and the smallest of the East Slavic nations, yet, it differs much from both Russia and Ukraine. During the invasion, the government took officially the pro-Russian stance, though it did not agree to send the Belarusian soldiers to fight in Ukraine. Sooner or later, as all such regimes tend to do, Lukashenka’s will fall, too. The suspected results of the last presidential elections, the mass demonstrations thereafter, and the support for Tsikhanouskaya two years ago signify that the Belarusians are not keen on living in the Soviet-style regime.

Thus, in Russia both the government and the majority of the society incline towards the post-Soviet form of government. In Ukraine neither the leadership, nor the people opt for such a solution. On the other hand, in Belarus the government is pro-totalitarian, while the society has similar desires to the Ukrainians. This makes the Belarusians potential allies of the Ukrainians despite the official hostile policies of the ruling class. This assumption can be supported by the number of Belarusian volunteers who fight for Ukraine.

Currently, the Belarusians have neither resources and nor opportunities to liberate the nation from the dictatorship. When there finally occurs a system transformation in Belarus (Russia is an important factor restraining this, though, through the War in Ukraine, the other country is only becoming weaker), the West must avoid the mistakes it made with Ukraine. The majority of Belarusians will probably wish to become a part of the West and a member of the Western institutions. From the very first day, then, it should not be delayed or blocked. We ought to allow them to „westernise” as soon as it becomes possible and the Belarusians express such a wish. We may never forget that „United we stand, divided we fall”.<sup>25</sup>

If Russia loses in Ukraine, Lukashenka will lose his last supporters. He will be forced to leave the office (for the partial support of Putin during the War, not to mention the other crimes against his own people). If Russia wins and gradually annexes the whole Ukraine (which seems very unlikely now), from the point of view of Putin and other Kremlin leaders, all the Russian lands should be unified, and there will be no place for independent Belarus. If the war and instability prolong, Belarus will probably balance, as long as it is able to. However, all the scenarios lead to the eventual collapse of the Minsk regime.

## 14. Conclusions

At the end, it is vital to sum up all the major caveats that the Western countries have committed during the current conflict and had been committing for many years before in their relations with Russia, Ukraine, and other states from the post-Soviet space.

During the current conflict, the constant hesitations and voices of opposition against supplying Ukraine with weapons, and the common opinion that the West should not intervene, in fact, only prolong this war. Many Western leaders do not make right conclusions from the previous mistakes. This gives Putin’s Russia quite an advantage.

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<sup>25</sup> The Slogan was first used in the Ancient Greece by Aesop, then it was also used in the New Testament of the Holy Bible; finally, it has been popular during the state-building of the United States of America.

Russia does not need any reasons to be provoked. Its government may simply think up a pretext if it wants to attack any Western country. Some of the precautions not to help Ukraine too much are highly exaggerated.

Each and every time, since Putin came to power, the Western response to breaking international laws by Russia has been delayed and insufficient. Instead, it should have been faster, harsher, more decisive, and, simultaneously, more effective.

The shortage of the proper Western reaction to the Russian escalations has been continuous and erroneous policy. The Russian leadership got accustomed to it, only allowing itself to make more and more provocations with full impunity (e.g., In the case of the current conflict, not only should the status of Ukraine in NATO have already been being debated, its defence should have been guaranteed by the NATO members during the then-starting accession talks long before the Russian invasion. This would have been a real deterrent to any potential Putin's war).

Slowing down of the entire process of the Euro-Atlantic integration remains much to blame for the entire crisis.

The lack of unanimity is an enormous problem of the West. The right of veto of every member state of the EU and NATO blocks the efficiency of both institutions.

The misinterpretation of the nature of the Russian society constitutes another serious problem. Too much focus has been put on the cultural differences. At the same time, there has been too little interest in the Russian propaganda, especially during the peace time before the invasion.

Finally, the lack of the proper conclusions whilst Russia '*was testing the West*' many times before, partially, also led to the current situation.

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## **ЧЗЫ МУСІАЉА ДАЉЌ ДА ВАЙНЫ В УКРАІНЕ? ЖАК ЗАХАД ЗІГНОРОВАЉ ОЗНАКІ ЗБЛІЖАЉАЌЕЉ СІЉ ТРАГЕДІЉ?**

**Стрэсцэнне.** В артыкуле порушана застаа квестія рА́знороднасці чынных фактараў прыводзячых да канфлікту збройнага в Украіне, трываючага ад 2022 р. Артыкул ма характар інтэрдyscyплінарны, гА́ўнае сацыялагічны, палітычны і гісторычны. Аўтар не скупіа сід на адным важным зааадніеніу, лещ прА́буе прещедзіч прывічыны трываючага трагедіі. В апрацаваніу прещаналізавана застаане наановша гісторыя стасункаў мідзьу Расія а паіствам заааднымі і паджета прА́ба уміещавенія в неа ролі Украіны. Всказане са рА́внеч гА́ўнае бліды, дотычаюча палітыкі зааадначнага Зааоду, а тааке дотычаюча інтэграцыі еуроатлантычага. Застаане рА́внеч паказане, ао можа быа зробіч, абы канфлікт ніды не выбуах. Ацена абечнага сідуацыі дотарчы wskазА́век, ао краеа павінны зробіч, абы унікач падобнага драматычнага сценарыуса в прывічы. На канеч рашаючых застаане кілка можаааых саауаак абечнага сідуацыі. Апрач апису сухых фактА́в, дотычаючых в літэратурещ, аўтар дзід а сід власнымі дотычаючымі аспыааненіамі, вынікаючымі з побыту в Еуропа Заааднага, Расіі і в Украіне. Порущана застаане квестія влыву прапаганда на луднощ. Аўтар стара сід поаючыч вездещ ааА́лна з пострещаніем фактА́в прещ звыаааых лудзі.

**Слова клучае:** Украіна, Расія, вайна, НАТО, інтэграцыя еуроатлантычага, сааечнаство, прапаганда

Яцек Станіславський

## **ЧІ МУСІЛО ДІЉТИ ДО ВІЉНИ В УКРАЉНІ? ЖАК ЗАХІД ПРОІГНОРУВАВ ОЗНАКІ НАБЛІЖЕННЯ ТРАГЕДІЉ?**

**Анотація.** У статті порушено питання різноманітності факторів, що призвели до широкомасштабного збройного конфлікту в Україні, який триває з 2022 року. Стаття має міждисциплінарний характер, переважно соціологічний, політологічний та історичний. Аўтар не зосереджується на одній важливій темі, а намагається простежити причини трагедії, що відбувається. У дослідженні буде проаналізовано новітню історію відносин між Росією та західними країнами та спробовано з'ясувати в них роль України. Також вказано на основні помилки щодо зовнішньої політики Заходу та євроатлантичної інтеграції. Також показано, що можна було зробити, щоб даний конфлікт не вибухнув. Оцінка поточної ситуації дасть рекомендації щодо того, що країни повинні робити, щоб уникнути подібного драматичного сценарію в майбутньому. Насамкінець будуть розглянуті деякі можливі наслідки поточної ситуації. Крім опису сухих фактів, наявних у літературі, аўтар поділиться власним досвідом перебування в Західній Європі, Росії та Україні. Обговорюватиметься питання впливу пропаганди на населення. Аўтар намагається поєднати загальні знання зі сприйняттям фактів простими лудьми.

**Ключові слова:** Україна, Росія, війна, НАТО, євроатлантична інтеграція, суспільство, пропаганда