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THE DOMESTIC DETERMINANTS OF THE KREMLIN'S
ANTI-WESTERN POLICY

Maria Domańska

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Content editors
Adam Eberhardt, Marek Menkiszak

Editor
Halina Kowalczyk

Co-operation
Katarzyna Kazimierska, Anna Łabuszewska

Translation
Jim Todd

Graphic design
PARA-BUCH

DTP
GroupMedia

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Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia
Centre for Eastern Studies

ul. Koszykowa 6a, Warsaw, Poland
Phone: + 48 /22/ 525 80 00
Fax: + 48 /22/ 525 80 40
osw.waw.pl

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The antagonism remains. It is postulated. And from it flow many of the phenomena which we find disturbing in the Kremlin's conduct of foreign policy: the secretiveness, the lack of frankness, the duplicity, the wary suspiciousness, and the basic unfriendliness of purpose. [...] When there is something the Russians want from us, one or the other of these features of their policy may be thrust temporarily into the background; and when that happens there will always be Americans who will leap forward with gleeful announcements that 'the Russians have changed'.

George Kennan, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct' (1947)¹

INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact that the West's policy towards post-Soviet Russia has failed, if we consider it from the perspective that, since the beginning of the 1990s, its goal has been the integration of Russia with the West – understood as Moscow's acceptance of the fundamental political and economic standards of the West, and the foundation of a mutually advantageous cooperation in the security sphere (if we exclude those circles in the West whose sole purpose was to maximise their profits from cooperating with Russia, even when doing so required them to participate in pathological business practices). The current state of bilateral relations permits the assertion that the results of this policy have proved to be quite the reverse of those intended. To a great extent, this is the result of either a mistaken recognition of Russian intentions by Western policy makers (perceiving Russia through the prism of the West's political culture), or of drawing false conclusions from correctly formulated diagnoses (the hope that Russia's pathological political-economic system could be gradually reformed thanks to a pragmatic, depoliticised economic cooperation with the West).

¹ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct>; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Sources_of_Soviet_Conduct

The current state of affairs results both from the logic of the development of the international situation after the Cold War, and from the Euro-Atlantic community's vested interests. It seems, however, that **the West also made a serious mistake in underestimating the importance of the entire complex of domestic political determinants for Russia's behaviour on the international stage.** Due to the nature of the Russian political system, Moscow's interest lies not in cooperation with the West, according to the logic of mutual benefits, but rather in confrontation and conflict. Such 'zero-sum game' thinking is not the result of the Kremlin's current, short-term needs and interests, but is rather the foundation of the Russian elite's view of the world as a whole. This will last for as long as the current political model prevails in Russia, so for the foreseeable future we may rule out any real normalisation of mutual relations (understood in the West as demilitarisation and the economisation of relations, together with pragmatic cooperation in the management of selected global issues).

The aim of this text is to offer a description and analysis of these domestic determinants and of their relationship to the Kremlin's foreign policy. These include both the objective determinants resulting from the non-consensual, non-public nature of policy in the authoritarian system, and above all, the entire complex of subjective determinants. These are associated with the particular mentality of Putin's elite and the complexes and phobias held in common by both the ruling class and Russian society. They assume the principled rejection of the Western liberal democratic paradigm and its implementation in international relations. They also explain why Moscow has not made authoritarian China its main adversary, even though objectively Beijing's rising international power poses a real threat.

The starting point of the text (part I) presents the characteristics of Russian authoritarianism in its version under Vladimir Putin. It is conditional upon the past status of Russia as a superpower and empire, and upon the particular vision of

the international order resulting from this, which by its nature stands in opposition to the liberal vision. This in turn was accompanied by the experience of the disintegration of the USSR's superpower statehood as a result of losing the Cold War to the West, and of the dysfunction of both state and government in the 1990s. This also, next to the non-consensual political culture and the centralisation of decision-making processes typical of authoritarian systems, is why Putin's regime is characterised by the perception of foreign policy as first and foremost a tool of domestic political legitimacy, and at the same time, as an area which offers not so much opportunities as threats. Relevant in this context are the attempts to bring undemocratic practices specific to Russia into the realm of international relations. Moreover, these confrontational trends are reinforced by the structural crisis of the Russian economic model; this leads to a need to legitimise power by the use of non-traditional criteria drawing upon the logic of the 'state of emergency'.

The second part of this work will be dedicated to a reconstruction and analysis of the mentality of the ruling elite in Russia, which is largely determined by the worldview of those of its members whose backgrounds lie in the Soviet security apparatus. This mentality is not a simple continuation of the Soviet mentality; it was formed under the influence of the personal and generational experiences of the 'wild capitalism' of the 1990s. This allows us to analyse how the Russian elite thinks and exercises power through the prism of the rules prevailing in the criminal world. These two types of experience have led to the establishment in Russia of a Chekist-kleptocratic feudal model – a system based on the elite's paranoid anxiety of losing power, and on suspicion of the outside world. In this system, the aim of foreign policy, on the one hand, is to eliminate any external impulses that may affect the development of the socio-political situation in Russia; and on the other, to maximise the particular financial benefits to the elite, who act as a parasite on the body of the state.

The third part is an attempt to understand the source of the social mandate for the Kremlin's confrontational, anti-Western policy. This policy does not in fact exist in a vacuum, but enjoys continuing support from a substantial part of Russian society, thanks largely to the skills with which official propaganda has reactivated the public's deeply ingrained mental matrices. These extend not only back to the Soviet era, but further to the earlier history of Russian autocracy; the public's experiences connected with the first decade of the existence of the Russian Federation are also of great importance. This legacy assumes the persistence of an 'authoritarian personality', of an identification with a culture of violence and the virtualisation of politics, and also strengthens the 'imperial syndrome' present in the social mentality.

I. THE NATURE OF PUTIN'S AUTHORITARIAN SYSTEM AS A CONTEXT FOR RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The environment in which Russian thought on foreign policy has been formed is **the authoritarian system of government**, which derives from the model of centralised authority that has been deeply rooted in Russian history. No genuine implementation of liberal democracy has ever succeeded in breaking through this model during the centuries of the construction of Russian statehood. This system is characterised by the fundamentally undemocratic relationship between the rulers and society, as well as by the specific relationships within the ruling elite. Both of these features directly affect how the Kremlin formulates the ideological and operational dimensions of Russian foreign policy.

1. The 'classic' characteristics of authoritarianism present in the Russian model

The most important element of this model is the vertical, hierarchical structure of the management of the state. The result of concentrating state power in the hands of the leader and his immediate surroundings is a highly personalised system of decision-making in both domestic and foreign policy (moreover, it is important that the decision-making circle closest to the President is for the most part made up of people whose roots are in the special services²). The decision-making processes are not under the supervision of parliament or the judiciary (due to the lack of a genuine tripartite division of power), nor of the general public. The underdevelopment of civil society structures and the repression applied to critics of the authorities, as well as the Kremlin's *de facto* informational monopoly and marginalisation of the free media, allows the Russian government to manipulate the moods

² For more about the origins of Russia's decision-makers, see Chapter II of this study.

of society quite freely. The vast majority of the political elite and the bureaucracy also lack any influence in shaping the decisions.

Foreign policy in Russia, then, is a non-public domain. This causes the policy to become hermetic in nature, and allows a narrow elite to impose an arbitrary definition of the national interest. The goals of foreign policy are perceived through a prism of the vested (political and financial) interests of the ruling group, at the expense of the socio-economic interests of the general public. The key beneficiaries of the system are the persons who hold the highest positions of state (particularly the President, the Prime Minister, the heads of both chambers of parliament, and members of the government), senior representatives of the regional authorities, and the oligarchs who are close to them (especially those who have personal ties to Putin).³

The non-public nature of the decision-making process allows the ruling class to quickly take and implement even the most controversial decisions, which remarkably extends the scope of the authorities' room for manoeuvre, as well as their ability to surprise their rivals on the international stage. The most important threat resulting from this is the lack of any 'brakes' on the decision-makers in the form of restrictions on the selection of instruments of foreign policy, including the use of force.

³ The closest oligarchs to Putin include Igor Sechin, Yuriy Kovalchuk, Genady Timchenko and the brothers Arkady and Boris Rotenberg; these have all enriched themselves from public procurements. The selfish definition of the 'national interest' as the financial benefit of the representatives of the elite is exemplified by the introduction of an embargo on food imports from the West in 2014 (the lack of competition and the government subsidies for the domestic agriculture sector makes money for the family of the agriculture minister Aleksandr Tkachov, among others), as well as the protection of Putin's oligarchs (at the expense of the state budget) from the negative effects of the Western sanctions imposed in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine (including the so-called Timchenko Act of April 2017, allowing exemptions from the payment of taxes in the Russian Federation for persons covered by international sanctions).

One of the key differentiators of Russian foreign policy is the government's desire to **project elements of the Russian authoritarian model onto the country's international surroundings**. Attempts to move this uncontrolled model of government to the outside have resulted in the absolutisation of the category of sovereignty. In the era of globalisation and international integration, Russia sees global order as a kind of an idealised 'Westphalia' system,⁴ in which the government has the exclusive right to control the internal affairs of the state (although Moscow does not apply this rule to other, especially smaller countries).

The Russian elite's attitude towards international law derives from its attitude to the domestic legal sphere. In Russia itself, the highest executive power is limited only by its own will, so in international relations Moscow seeks to unilaterally establish the primacy of its own national law over international agreements, which involves the arbitrary and selective treatment of the latter. This leads to the increasing neglect – in the name of making Russia 'sovereign' – of the standards and guidelines of international organisations which Russia belongs to; and the international commitments it has undertaken must give way before the sovereign decisions of the authorities and the provisions of national law.⁵ This is an attempt to overcome the situation in which the Kremlin encounters external limits to its powers which it had long ago disposed of in its domestic policy. In the interests of its authoritarian regime, Moscow seeks above all a kind of 'disarmament', that is, the erosion of those political organisations and institutions whose ideological

⁴ R. Allison, Russia and the post-2014 international legal order: revisionism and Realpolitik, *International Affairs* 93:3 (2017).

⁵ One sign in this context was the amendment to the Act on the Russian Federation's Constitutional Court in December 2015, in which the Court acquired the right to determine that the enforcement of judgements by international courts was not possible if they violated the principle of the primacy of the provisions of the Russian Constitution. This option was first used in April 2016, when the Court refused to comply with the judgement of the European Court of Human Rights (which is a violation of the commitments Russia made in connection with its membership of the Council of Europe).

foundations are human rights in the liberal understanding of the term. Moscow wishes to influence and manipulate them in its own political interests, to impose its own rules of the game;⁶ the empowerment of the individual and society as political actors is in conflict with the vital interests of the Russian ruling elite.

Another characteristic of the Kremlin's foreign policy is **the perception of the domestic and foreign policies of other countries through the prism of Russian domestic political reality**. Foreign societies are not seen as full participants in international relations, and in the view of the Russian government, 'public opinion' is only a product of the propaganda campaigns controlled by the authorities of other countries. In the Kremlin's logic, any voices critical to Moscow or pressure coming from outside the structures of executive power of other states are perceived as being controlled by foreign governments, as a manifestation of the implicit agenda of their foreign policy, or as planned manipulations. The activities of foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are seen in the same light. According to Moscow, these are 'branch offices' of foreign governments and the espionage structures subordinate to them, and are merely tools for their 'hostile' policies – in the same way that the Kremlin-controlled Russian GONGOs⁷ are 'branch offices' of the government, performing the tasks abroad which have been entrusted to them by the President's Administration or the special services. The policy makers in the Kremlin perceive foreign NGOs as the avant-garde of operations aimed at overthrowing 'sovereign' regimes similar to that of Russia. Russia recognises as 'independent' (from the local governments) almost exclusively radical, anti-system, anti-liberal

⁶ Россия против международного права: не подорвать, а манипулировать, <https://republic.ru/posts/78655>. The Russian doctrine was vividly described in May 2017 by the President of the Russian Constitutional Court, Valeriy Zorkin: «The defence of human rights should not pose a threat to state sovereignty, and nor should it undermine the morals and religious identity of society»; www.newsru.com/russia/19may2017/zorkin.html

⁷ Pseudo-NGOs, *de facto* created or controlled by the government (government-organised non-governmental organisations).

groups from outside the Western mainstream, who thus become the natural environments for implementing the Kremlin's operations of informational and espionage work. Moscow tries to make a 'fifth column' out of these groups, with the intent of dismantling Western liberal democracy from the inside, just as how (in the Kremlin's view) the 'fifth column' in Russia is formed by the pro-democratic, anti-Kremlin non-government and opposition organisations which the regime is fighting against.

2. The historical and cultural peculiarities of Russian authoritarianism

The phenomena sketched above cannot *per se* be employed as a comprehensive explanation of the specific political culture of Russia⁸ as manifested in the international arena in both the sphere of diplomacy and in its practical political, economic and military activities. We must therefore look into the **deeper, historical-cultural fundament of Putin's model of government which distinguishes Russia from other authoritarian states. This consists of a centuries-old imperial and superpower heritage which has resulted in a certain vision of the international order, as well as a legacy of recent history** in its domestic political dimension **which has formed the Kremlin's philosophy of power.** This legacy has been created by twentieth-century totalitarianism, the trauma of the dissolution of the empire, and the attempts to overcome the imperial-superpower heritage by Gorbachev's *perestroika* and Yeltsin's pseudo-democratic transformation. All of this lies at the root of the behaviours included in the

⁸ According to the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, political culture is a set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments that give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system. Political culture is thus a manifestation of the psychological, subjective dimension of politics, and is a product of both the history of the political system, as well as the experience of its participants.

paradigm of the psychology of Russian policy, which goes far beyond the logic of the purely authoritarian.

The Kremlin's attitude to Russia's historical heritage, as reflected in its perception of the substance of foreign policy, is focused around reflections on the role of international interactions in the acquisition, maintenance and loss of power. This leads the Russian elite to the conviction that strengthens the traditional authoritarian logic: **foreign policy must serve the objectives of domestic policy in almost every dimension** (on a scale much greater than in democratic countries, where the rotation of governing groups is a regular part of the political process). These objectives include the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime and the reproduction of the current model of government, which is equivalent to securing the interests of the ruling group.

An important factor in the Kremlin's anti-Western policy is **and still remains the unconquerable psychological complex resulting from the collapse of the empire and the degradation of Soviet power**, and the imperative of rebuilding the state's position as a superpower on the world stage. This is intended to serve, by means of effective influence on the global order, both the defence of the regime's interests on the domestic stage, and the implementation of the objectives of its foreign policy, which are often fundamentally contrary to the interests of its Western partners. Russia wants to obtain consent to dominate the post-Soviet area, rebuild Europe's security architecture in accordance with its own interests, and maximise the economic and political benefits of cooperation with the West without making any concessions on its part.

The 'imperial-superpower' complex strengthens the authoritarian tendency to absolutise the nation's sovereignty in external relations. **The Kremlin's criterion for superpower status is military power** (in the case of Russia, mainly its nuclear potential), **geopolitical influence and geostrategic territorial potential**,

which are intended to ensure ‘full sovereignty’ for the state.

In this understanding, the criteria which are important in a globalised world, drawing upon the sphere of cooperation – economic power or ‘soft power’, the ability of the state to attract allies and gain influence thanks to the attractiveness of their own culture, politics or ideology – are relegated to the background. This is the result of Russia’s deepening backwardness compared to the West, and its decreasing attractiveness for its neighbours.

The Russian version of superpower status, therefore, is first and foremost the ability to resist the rest of the world, which accentuates its potential for destruction and destabilisation, as well as the desire to ensure its own security without considering the security of others. This also has implications for its political culture; Russia’s specific negotiation culture, based on the idea of ‘rising from its knees’ refers to the ‘culture’ of an army, which does not negotiate, but sets conditions from a position of strength. Bringing the country’s nuclear capability to the foreground as a key determinant of superpower status, which has the character of a final solution, means a willingness to raise the stakes in international negotiations, to escalate tension, and to employ blackmail. **The consequence of this is a confrontational, contentious vision of international order, typical of the military dimension,** which was exercised to the highest extent in the age of Moscow’s zenith as a superpower, when the Soviet Union enjoyed the status of a global power and was one of the two poles of global governance. Even today, this position is still a reference point for Russia’s ambitions and national interests.

Alongside its superpower status, the prism through which Russia sees its international environment is also drawn from historical experience (both that of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union) – the **category of imperialism.** Empire, as a form of organising a state, is based on a hierarchy of power in its domestic dimension and on expansionism in its external dimension – extending its influence and authority beyond its own borders, and subjugating

other polities, often as a result of conquest. In imperial thinking, which is based on elements such as territorial expansion, strategic depth, and competition for spheres of influence, the key concept is that of the enemy; it orders the philosophy of existing in an international environment.

The ‘imperial-superpower’ paradigm is reflected in Russia’s attempts to apply a hierarchical model of inter-state relations to the international environment which is of a fundamentally anarchic character. In the hierarchical model postulated by Moscow states have different rights depending on the degree of their self-sufficiency, and full sovereignty is only an attribute of the great powers. This manifests itself in demands to construct a ‘multipolar order’ and a *de facto* ‘concert of powers’ – the division of spheres of influence among the strongest players. The actions of the powers in those zones would be entirely sovereign, that is, free from the evaluations of the ‘international community’, such as is currently taking place in Russia, where the state’s authority is limited only by the current interests of the decision-makers. This would also create a kind of ‘strategic depth’, in terms of protecting Putin’s regime from a diffusion of liberal values approaching the borders of the state too closely.

This vision, and above all Russia’s right to implement it, is intended to be legitimised by the historical policy of a superpower, drawing primarily from the heritage of the Soviet Union, but also from earlier periods; one constant element is the association of positive moments from history almost exclusively with military victories and conquests. Its founding element is the victory over Nazism in 1945, which – contrary to historical truth – is increasingly being presented as something Russia achieved on its own. Victory is associated not so much with its cooperation with the Allies as with the later confrontation of the Cold War, and the fabric of the myth of war and victory is a messianic idea, combined with a thesis about the Soviet Union’s absolute moral superiority over the rest of the world, owed to war martyrology.

The resuscitation of the superpower heritage, in both domestic and foreign terms, is intended to serve as a kind of compensation for the still-raw trauma caused by the breakup of the Soviet Union and its consequences. The Russian elite has drawn the conclusion from that period that the key threat both to the security of the ruling class and the position of the state on the international stage (meaning primarily the ability to block external impulses to change) is the weakness of the state's institutions: the inability of the government to exert full control over domestic socio-political processes. This conviction is common to all authoritarian regimes, but in Russia it has been reinforced with the fresh experience of the disintegration of the state and its consequences for the ruling elite.⁹ Of no little importance in this context was the weakness and dysfunction of the Russian state (above all, the institution of the Presidency) in the 1990s which, although it created unprecedented opportunities for the elite to enrich themselves in the terms of the predatory 'market democracy', posed serious threats to its representatives.¹⁰ Preventing another collapse and striving for full control of the domestic situation became an *idée fixe* for Putin's generation. It became established as a certainty that dismantling Russia's traditional authoritarian model (in the spirit of Gorbachev or Yeltsin) would pose a lethal threat to the vital interests of the narrow elite.¹¹ This conviction was exacerbated

⁹ This experience is associated, among others, with Vladimir Putin's personal experiences on 5 December 1989 in Dresden: a crowd of demonstrators stormed the HQ of the Stasi, and it was feared there would also be an attack that day on the local branch of the KGB, which Putin then commanded. The Soviet military units stationed nearby refused to assist him without orders from Moscow, and Moscow itself did not respond to requests for such orders. At that time Putin suffered what he has referred to as the 'paralysis of power': the humiliating experience of the state's powerlessness was interwoven with his fear for his own safety, <http://inosmi.ru/politic/20170227/238781368.html>

¹⁰ As in the case of the bloody events of autumn 1993, when parliament introduced a procedure to impeach President Boris Yeltsin (this domestic political crisis ended with the shelling of the parliament building).

¹¹ In this context, two situations seem particularly emblematic: the initially real risk of Yeltsin losing the 1996 presidential elections (which would also have meant a defeat for the whole Yeltsin team); and the investigation initiated against Anatoliy Sobchak, the former mayor of St. Petersburg, which

by the specific character of Putin's regime which – as something much more personalised and less institutionalised than the Soviet regime – is inherently more susceptible to shocks.

In this context, an essential element of Russia's modern foreign policy has been that **the erosion of the state in the Soviet Union's twilight period (especially in the years of Gorbachev's *perestroika*), and then under the Yeltsin regime, is, in the eyes of the Putin regime, the fault of the West, specifically the United States.** The Kremlin perceives international relations according to the paradigm of 'the clash of civilisations'; in this approach, the international arena is not so much a field of coexistence, but rather a battle between various models of identity and internal organisation. In the game to strengthen its own international position, the West – as Russia sees it – is committed to the diffusion of its own constitutional model, and is trying to dismantle its rivals' systems of governance and undermine their statehood with the aim of weakening their position on the global stage.

This is a kind of mental holdover from the period of the Cold War's confrontation between political blocs, when proxy wars and campaigns of (dis)information were aimed at discrediting and undermining the internal stability of their main opponents. **In the Russian viewpoint, one of the key tools of the Western proxy wars is the attempt to promote the model of liberal democracy.** Moscow sees this not as a stand-alone axiological model, which enjoys genuine popularity in many societies, but only as a tool of American hegemony, something cynically used as an instrument of imperial policy, for overthrowing 'truly sovereign' (i.e. authoritarian) governments. **Threats to the regime are thus raised to the rank of existential threats to the state itself.** Also visible here is the association with the Soviet period, when

also directly threatened Putin (both were implicated in illegal financial operations when they worked together in the Town Hall; in 1997 Sobchak – with the help of Putin, who was then deputy head of the President's Administration – saved himself by fleeing abroad).

top-down consent to the cautious adoption of elements of Western constitutional patterns in order to reform the state led not only to uncontrolled socio-political and economic changes, but also to the collapse of the state body. **In this understanding, the boundaries between internal and external threats become blurred**, which in turn leads to “a blurring of the contours of inter-state conflicts, which allows Russia to take part in armed conflicts in which it is not officially a party”¹² (as in the conflicts with Georgia in 2008 and with Ukraine in 2014).

George Kennan’s diagnosis from 1946 therefore remains valid: the sense of threat that consumes the Russian elite results from the awareness that their system of governance is archaic, has a weak ideological base, and would not withstand competition from the much more attractive Western system.¹³ This rules out a cooperative model of international relations, as the Russian system is permanently trying to strengthen its defences. **Moscow’s attitude to the liberal Western political mainstream is characterised by intrinsic suspicion**, and is subject to the overriding objective of maintaining power at all costs, while aiming to strengthen Russia’s international position on its own terms.

Particularly in this context, the wave of ‘colour revolutions’ in the 2000s, the ‘Arab spring’, the civil war in Syria, and above all the Ukrainian Maidan (2013-2014) all revived the Russian elite’s fear of a possible loss of power, revealed its uncertainty of its social legitimacy, and filled it with what seems to be a real fear of being overthrown as a result of a conspiracy led by Washington (the elite’s anti-Western attitude was also previously affected by, among other events, the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and the

¹² J. Darczewska, The devil is in the details. Information warfare in the light of Russia’s military doctrine, *OSW Point of View*, 19 May 2015, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2015-05-19/devil-details-information-warfare-light-russias-military-doctrine>

¹³ Kennan’s Long Telegram, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>

war in Iraq; for Moscow, these events were conclusive proof that US foreign policy was based on undertaking special operations under the banner of humanitarian intervention). One personal trauma for Vladimir Putin was the protests in 2011-2012 that followed his resumption of the office of President (he accused the US State Department of directly inspiring and supporting the protests).¹⁴ In this way the Kremlin resuscitated the Soviet tradition of legitimising its authority on the basis of confrontation with the West, finally overcoming the legacy of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, which had been based on the idea of cooperation.

3. The dysfunction of the economic system

The elite's culturally and historically conditioned fears of internal destabilisation are compounded by **the lack of prospects for Russia's economic development**. The source of the problem is both the authoritarian state's pursuit of control over all areas of activity, which is deadly for the economy, and the pathologies of the raw-materials model of development, which have been accruing for decades. The statistical data on Russia's GDP, its industrial production and investment dynamics clearly expose the weaknesses of the kleptocratic system based on corruption, which to a great degree runs in opposition to the principles of the free market. This is a specific stage in the evolution of the Putin model: **the spectre of years of stagnation** means that economic failure should be treated as one of its

¹⁴ http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2011/12/111208_putin_opposition_protests.shtml. The activation of social protests in Russia in 2017 has fuelled the fears of the authorities. (For more see J. Strzelecki, I. Wiśniewska, M. Menkiszak, Antyrządowe protesty w Rosji, *Analizy OSW*, 27 March 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2017-03-27/antyrzadowe-protesty-w-rosji>; J. Strzelecki, M. Domańska, Antykorupcyjne protesty w Rosji, *Analizy OSW*, 13 June 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2017-06-13/antykorypcyjne-protesty-w-rosji>). One manifestation of these fears is the creation in June 2017 of the Federation Council committee for the prevention of external tampering in the affairs of the country, including interference carried out with the use of NGOs; <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/568115>

permanent features.¹⁵ This raises potential political risks for the regime, but has made carrying out any structural reforms even more risky for the ruling elite's own interests.

In this way, **the Russian government finds itself trapped** by the need to permanently replicate the existing system of government while resources are dwindling and the elite's financial appetites remain huge. This model can only work at the expense of the general public, and at the same time its endurance requires appeals to false, patrimonial axioms about the community of interests between the public and the government, an approach which is rooted in Russian political tradition. This dilemma can be resolved only by **shifting the reference point on which the government/public relationship is based, from domestic issues** (the classic model in which the government's efficiency is assessed according to the criteria of economic development, standards of living, the efficiency of state institutions and the public's confidence in them) **to external issues** (the primacy of national security and prestige, and the position of the state on the international stage).

The overriding aim of anti-Western propaganda in Russia, therefore, is to mobilise support for the government, despite the substantive quality-of-life problems which are being increasingly clearly felt by the population.¹⁶ Once again, this draws upon a specific interpretation of the experience of the dissolution of the USSR, when poverty and inertia were accompanied by the abandonment of the traditional compensatory mobilisation of the public based on confrontation with the West. So the earlier Soviet propaganda tropes have been reactivated, referring to

¹⁵ For details see M. Domańska, Crisis in Russia. The degradation of the model of economic governance, *OSW Studies*, 3 March 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2017-03-03/crisis-russia-degradation-model-economic-governance>. Statistics from Rosstat: www.gks.ru

¹⁶ Real income has decreased since November 2014, and by May 2017 may have decreased by more than 19%. See www.gks.ru and <https://isp.hse.ru/monitoring>

the motives of the enemy and the ‘besieged fortress’, explaining the socio-economic problems as the result of ‘Western plotting’.¹⁷ The logic of the ‘state of emergency’ adopted by the authorities assumes that in an emergency situation, the people will prefer to entrust their fate to the elite as being more competent in the field of crisis management. This kind of impulse works strongly, but is relatively brief in effect, and so it requires regular feeding, escalating the atmosphere of risk to a practically military level (hence, for example, the acute criticism of ‘NATO’s expansion eastwards’). This completely changes both the source of the leader’s legitimacy and the language of communication between the government and the people; in symbolic terms the leader is not merely an effective manager, but the chief defender of the homeland and the nation from existential threat.

These efforts are amplified by **attempts to cope with the lack of a legitimising ideology** (a typical problem of authoritarian systems). What has been created is an inconsistent, eclectic model of pseudo-conservatism based on a discourse drawing on national dignity,¹⁸ whose sole purpose is to build a national identity around the idea of the absolute subordination of the individual to the state. In the absence of any positive values, the axis of this model is the discreditation *en bloc* of Western liberal-democratic values, as being allegedly unbecoming of Russia’s cultural and historical specificity, and downright harmful to the spiritual-moral dimension of the nation’s identity, and thus as something fundamentally anti-state. This kind of thinking is intended to preserve and reproduce

¹⁷ The flagship example of falsifying the discourse is the argument that the Western sanctions, which are mainly targeted at Russia’s political elite, are responsible for the general public’s falling standards of living. Aside from the obvious fact that the sanctions were a response to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the rising prices and the deterioration in the quality of food were caused not by Western sanctions, but by the Russian embargo on imports of many food articles which was introduced in response to them.

¹⁸ This focuses around the slogans of Russia ‘rising from its knees’, of its nurturing the true values of European civilisation, its rich national cultural heritage, and its resistance to the ‘moral corruption’ of the West.

in Russian society the mental tropes which consolidate social acceptance for the Putin model. Not coincidentally, in this context the social trauma of the 1990s is exploited – the trauma of the failed transformation whose costs were borne above all by the general public; it is intended to overshadow their current material problems. The chaos and personal dramas which millions of people experienced after the dissolution of the empire are being associated in official discourse with attempts to implant the ‘foreign’, ‘hostile’ axiological, political and economic model upon Russian soil.

At the same time, the Russian authorities are concerned that these attempts may only be effective for a limited time. Hence the emphasis they place on ‘negotiations’ with the West, or on trying to force it – with the aid of blackmail, lobbying, espionage or information warfare – to return to ‘business as usual’ (which was disturbed by Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine and the resulting introduction of sanctions), even though Moscow is continuing its aggressive foreign policy. Lucrative contracts, Western investments, a return to full membership of ‘decision-makers’ clubs’ such as the G8 would guarantee Russia financial transfers and thus remove the spectre of public protests, while at the same time providing more support for a propaganda of success, and therefore doubly reinforcing Putin’s regime. By bandying around false slogans of being ready for ‘constructive cooperation’, **Russia wants to push the West into consolidating a system that in essence remains anti-Western:** its anti-Western nature is being enforced not by the state’s current interests, but by the inherent nature of the authoritarian model of government. The Russian vision of this ‘cooperation’ is thus just as parasitic in nature as the relation of the Russian elite to the general public. This vision assumes maximalising the material and prestige benefits and the political power exercised by the Russian government, which would allow it to ruthlessly force its partners to act in accordance with the interests of the Russian Federation.¹⁹

¹⁹ This strategy also has a purely individual, vested-interest dimension, as members of the Russian elite locate their assets in the West in search for

Any explanation of Moscow's methods of operation in the area between open confrontation and pseudo-cooperation requires us to delve into the substance of the individual and group mentalities of the ruling elite. This influences the specific features of Russian authoritarianism, and determines fundamental difference of Russian political culture from that of the West – a difference which often causes communication problems and misperceptions about Russia's intentions.

guarantees of their property and security interests (the property laws in Russia are of rather a conventional character). However, this kind of 'integration' with the West on an individual level does not mean there have been any changes at the level of the anti-Western group mentality.

II. THE MENTALITY OF THE RULING ELITE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

In order to understand the logic directing how Russia's decision-makers reflect on foreign policy, not only in the dimension of its worldview but also operationally (the choices of instruments and working methods), it is necessary to analyse the consequences of the individual and generational experiences which formed the political careers of today's ruling elite, including Vladimir Putin himself and his 'inner circle' (i.e. his closest friends and advisors). **The shape of the ruling elite's collective mentality is largely based upon the strong position of the people in it who are linked to the special services and the other 'structures of force', which have transferred the mindset, habits and working methods of the 'Chekists' environment onto the policy of the state.²⁰ At the same time, the ethos and the range of methods used by the special services are being strengthened as a result of the filtering through into Russian policy of the rules governing the criminal world.**

1. The 'Chekist' features

The mass influx of 'Chekists' into business and the structures of power had already begun under President Yeltsin: at the time of the USSR's dissolution, certain groups of 'people from the services'

²⁰ In the strict sense of the word, the 'Chekists' were officers of the ChK, the Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle against Counter-Revolution and Sabotage operating in the years 1917-1922; in the broader sense, the term refers to officers of the state security authorities, including the FSB (the heirs of the Soviet KGB, NKVD and ChK), the Federal Security Service and the Foreign Intelligence Service. 'Chekists' are one category of a wider range of 'siloviki', which in Russia includes the army and special services, the border guards, the organs of the internal affairs departments, the National Guard, the Federal Penitentiary Service and others. From a functional point of view, the 'structures of power' must also be said to include the public prosecutor and the Investigative Committee, which in Russian reality is the tool of the Russian executive authority and an instrument of repression. The system of government in the Putin period is often referred to as the 'Chekistocracy' because of its leader's professional background, but also because of the noticeable strengthening of this group in the Russian power structures since the year 2000.

gained access to important political and economic-financial information, and took control of huge assets inherited from the Soviet period. This money went into the creation of commercial and banking empires. In the mid-1990s there were hardly any big businesses which were not under the leadership of former KGB employees. In the second half of the decade they began to penetrate the structures of the state.²¹ The two Chechen wars made it easier for the institutions of repression to build up their position within the state by accustoming the general public to a 'special operations regime', violence, and the use of emergency measures. The mission of the 'siloviki' was to break with the inheritance of the 1990s, to 'restore order' to a state in chaos.²² Their current position in the system, however, is not a simple continuation of the Soviet tradition.²³

The participation of representatives of the power structures in the organs of Russia's central government and regional bodies has increased significantly since Vladimir Putin's rise to power. This figure is assessed at from around 20% to 40% of the ruling elite; their importance, however, derives not so much by their number as the important decision-making positions they are given.²⁴ One example is the crucial importance of the Security

²¹ Спецслужбы в российской экономике и политике, <http://www.iprnou.ru/print/010250/>

²² Операция «Внедрение» завершена!, interview with Olga Kryshtanovskaya, 30 August 2004, <http://2004.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2004/63n/n63n-s43.shtml>

²³ Whereas in the Soviet Union these services were controlled by the Party and lacked many of the rights they have today, the FSB is much more powerful and is responsible only to the President, who himself has his roots in the KGB.

²⁴ For details see D. W. Rivera & Sharon Werning Rivera, Is Russia a militocracy? Conceptual issues and extant findings regarding elite militarization, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30:1, 2014; O. Kryshtanovskaya, Sovietization of Russia 2000-2008, *Eurasian Review* vol. 2, November 2009. Kryshtanovskaya estimates the percentage of 'siloviki' in the senior ranks of government at around 40% in 2008, although she emphasises that many officers from the special services do not officially admit to their professional affiliation, especially those who are in the second rank, such as vice-ministers or deputy governors.

Council – a body dominated by the *siloviki* – in drawing up decisions concerning the broader internal and external security of the state. The most significant determinant of the ‘Chekists’ importance to the political system, however, is **the dissemination of their mentality and ethics among the ‘civilian’ part of the elite**: in the era of Putin “there have been formed among the elite specific codes and standards, a matrix that allows the reproduction of the model – not necessarily by directly planting [government institutions] with the representatives of the corporations of power, but through entrenched norms and mechanisms of operation”.²⁵ These include a suspicious, closed-off way of thinking, formed during the Soviet era, as well as the perception of official policy as an area of lies and deception into which the unauthorised cannot penetrate.²⁶

The *siloviki*’s strong position in the decision-making circles affects Russian foreign policy in two ways, at both the ideological and operational levels. First, the degree to which the state administration has been penetrated by the services and the mutual rivalry between them mean that, in order to maximise their influence and financial benefits, they must try to demonstrate that Russia is constantly under threat: ‘if the special services are there, then there must be an enemy there too’.²⁷ The definition of the ‘enemy’ is derived from the Soviet logic of confrontation between power blocs, where Washington and NATO are still the traditional adversaries: after all, it was the *siloviki* who ran (and lost) the Cold War.²⁸ Even before the deterioration of the relationship with the West, the special services were convinced that Russia is under threat from a serious, even existential danger that requires

²⁵ Н. Петров, Построение силовиков, www.vedomosti.ru, 25 July 2016.

²⁶ A. Soldatov, M. Rochlitz, The Siloviki in Russian Politics, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55510affe4b06afeca50df07/t/57d3923859cc684a23285460/1473483331787/Siloviki+Final+Aug+17+.pdf>

²⁷ Операция «Внедрение» завершена!, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Почему мы не любим Америку, www.vedomosti.ru, 24 April 2016.

radical countermeasures.²⁹ Thus, although the rivalry between the services may have negative consequences for the current position of individual services within the system, at the same time it deepens the authoritarian and confrontational tendencies of the system itself towards the international environment.

Secondly, due to their professional viewpoint, these circles are characterised by thinking in terms of a permanent special operation, as well as by a high propensity to take risks.³⁰ This fits in with their belief that the international sphere of the state's activity is primarily a field of competition between special services, where the activity of 'civilians' is of secondary importance. There is thus no room for the participation of the 'technocratic' elites, such as the economic bloc of the government, in the decision-making process; by the very extent of their competence in the sphere of pragmatic economic cooperation, they would be more willing to adopt the Western viewpoint of a 'positive-sum game'. In the view of the special services, 'cooperation' with the West is seen as a way for the West to infiltrate Russia – unless it means that the Russian services are infiltrating the West.

The moment when **the interests of the power structures coincided with the neo-imperial logic of the authoritarian system and the interests of the 'civilian' decision-makers** was the protests in Russia at the end of 2011 and the start of 2012, and ultimately, another 'colour revolution' in Ukraine in 2013-14. In Russian thinking, 'colour revolutions' are treated as the 'most socially dangerous way of special services coming into conflict',³¹ and the embodiment of all the Kremlin's fears at the same time. The ideology of the special services, anti-Western and based on the eternal search for an enemy, has thus become an essential element

²⁹ M. Galeotti, *Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services*, May 2016, www.ecfr.eu

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ J. Darczewska, *The devil...*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

in the service of the regime and the state's leadership.³² Since the 'Crimean spring', the Russian elite's thinking has been determined to an even greater extent than before by the logic of the zero-sum game:³³ the West is either an enemy or a competitor,³⁴ an approach which has deprived the *siloviki's* viewpoint of any real counterweight.

This phenomenon also has another important dimension: the increasingly bitter struggle for dwindling resources, and – as a side effect – the special services' increasing lawlessness under the slogan of the alleged 'fight against corruption'³⁵ mean that "public anti-Americanism and support for the annexation of Crimea have taken on the nature of a ritual in which the elite confirms its loyalty to the political regime", and in which pro-Western groups are thus treated as 'foreign'.³⁶

One consequence of the Chekist/special-service viewpoint is the selection of tools to implement Russian foreign policy.

³² Thereupon the situation became a pretext for the '*siloviki*' to strengthen their pressure on society and consolidate their own position in the Russian political system.

³³ Д. Волков, Настроения российских элит после Крыма, www.carnegie.ru, November 2015.

³⁴ As Vladislav Surkov, then deputy head of the President's Administration, slyly put it in 2005: at that time he described Europeans not as enemies, but competitors, which ironically meant he would have to fight them even harder. According to Surkov, "An enemy – that's when you can die heroically in a war. And losing a competitive battle – that means being a loser. And that's doubly offensive." From an unauthorised transcript of a speech: www.ng.ru/politics/2005-07-13/1_suverenitet.html

³⁵ Starting from 2015, there has been an escalation in the struggle within the Russian elite, whose tool – and beneficiary – is often the special services (mainly the FSB). This struggle is fought under the banner of the fight against corruption, and the victims are mainly senior regional officials (including a number of governors). The real goal of this campaign, however, is the redistribution of property and political influence, and not the eradication of corruption as a fundamental phenomenon of the system (because it still generates huge profits for the government's highest policy makers, led by the President and Prime Minister).

³⁶ Д. Волков, Настроения..., *op. cit.*

These include classic activities from the realm of soft power (propaganda, manipulation of information), as well as the arsenal (covert and overt) of political and special-service policies (infiltration, sabotage, open disinformation,³⁷ the threat of the use of force, or even force itself). **This way of working is, on the one hand, subject to the principles of efficiency and flexibility** (the choice of methods is a secondary matter), **and on the other, to the principle of prevention.** The conviction is strong that in the paradigm of conflict which frames the relationship between Russia and the West, attack is the best form of defence, and the attacker has a better chance of winning.³⁸ Hence the tendency to intimidate the opponent with feigned unpredictability, creating the impression that Moscow is ready to undertake unreasonable actions. This ‘management by unpredictability’ is intended not only to confuse or blackmail the enemy, but also to allow the widest possible scope for flexible methods of operation and response in Russia’s foreign policy. The culmination of this strategy was Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and its intervention in Syria: in the Kremlin’s perspective, independently of any other (mainly geopolitical) goals, these operations are preventive proxy wars against the United States. Although the action in both these situations was carried out under different sets of conditions and served different purposes, the most important is the defence of authoritarianism as a peer of the liberal-democratic political model.

One of the key tools of foreign policy as a ‘special operation’ is the language of information dissemination, used both as an instrument of sabotage on the international stage, and as justification of the purpose and methods of the state’s foreign policy

³⁷ Russia assumes that the war is being directed in the minds of its participants, hence the importance placed on disinformation operations. K. Giles, Russia’s ‘New’ Tools for Confronting the West. Continuity and Innovation in Moscow’s Exercise of Power, March 2016, www.chathamhouse.org

³⁸ “50 years ago, the Leningrad street taught me: If a fight is inevitable, you had better hit first.” Statement by Putin from October 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98x2Z3rHbxk>

on the domestic stage. The language of the authorities reflects the very substance of the mentality and habits of the special services, as well as the still extant Soviet code ('double-think'³⁹), which has been enhanced with the communication codes of the criminal world (of which more later). This in turn corresponds to the phenomenon, familiar to Western reality, of 'post-truth'. All these patterns **reject the possibility of coming to an agreement** with the use of language, both because of the conscious intent to falsify the intention of communication, and because of the annihilation of meanings. The primary function of language here is not to name and explain, but to manipulate. Words in their traditional expression are used to signal an intention contrary to the real. This is how the word 'cooperation' should be considered, as meaning subordination, 'humanitarian intervention': armed aggression, 'Nazis': opponents of the Kremlin. Those who communicate their real intentions with words – referents to reality – are seen as having revealed their weaknesses, leaving themselves open to blows.

In the case of propaganda addressed directly to Western societies, the maximum target is to disseminate the Russian point of view, and to bring about those societies' active opposition to the narrative of their own governments. The minimum aim is **the permanent breaking of ties between words and their meanings**: such semantic chaos is intended to bring about total relativism in the assessment of reality. The aim is to cast doubt in the power of objective information, especially regarding reports coming from Russia's opponents or victims, and to cause passivity to the expansion of Russian influence. Poisoning the flow of information with lies and disinformation is also intended to create a decision-making context for foreign leaders by providing them with crafted content.⁴⁰

The Chekist 'philosophy of language' is associated with the specific attitude of the President and his immediate

³⁹ See Chapter III, p. 1.

⁴⁰ K. Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools...*, *op. cit.*

environment towards the incoming information they receive. The information considered important in principle is exclusively secret information which has been obtained by espionage and counter-espionage, while any information which is generally available is treated as deliberate disinformation.⁴¹ This represents the direct projection of the authoritarian system's mechanisms (the Kremlin finances disinformation aimed at Western audiences) onto the practices used in liberal democracies. This often results in the dismissal of public statements issued by Western policy makers and press reports, and a preference for personal, covert contacts and behind-the-scenes negotiations,⁴² which also offer the option of blackmailing partners later.

It is hard to believe that such deeply ingrained habits of perceiving language and communication as methods of sabotage and geopolitical struggle could be changed if Moscow simply announced a change in its political course in the direction of another 'reset'. It should be assumed that the rhetoric of such a 'reset' will serve a similar function – to subject the enemy to confusion and thus manipulate him with it.

2. The features of the 'criminal world'

Although most representatives of the contemporary Russian political and business elite were educated and began their professional activity under the Soviet system, **the moment which was ultimately formative in their political culture**, also in foreign policy, **was primarily the period of constitutional transformation in the 1990s.** At that time, the uncontrolled dismantling of the Soviet model of government, the economy and society was accompanied by the construction of a specific, anarchic quasi-democracy and a Darwinist, criminal proto-capitalism. Against the

⁴¹ А. Гольц, Страна победившего милитаризма, *Контрапункт* 5, September 2016, p. 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*

background of the dissolution of the existing structures and institutions, the deepening dysfunction of the state and law, a broad field opened up for rapid albeit risky business and political careers, but also for the flowering of the activities of the organised criminal groups which had first appeared in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Due to the crisis of state power, including the administration of justice, and the temptation of huge profits related to trading in raw materials or the 'wild' privatisations, liberated from the supervision of an ailing state, the struggle for influence in these circumstances was particularly ruthless.

The intermingling of politics with the criminal world,⁴³ the rise in the links between criminal groups and the interests of the representatives of federal and regional government,⁴⁴ and also the fact that the fight for financial assets and influence often went literally to the death, resulted in the **transfer of mafia-style thinking and methods onto state policy**. In this way the ethos of the Soviet *nomenklatura*, which had operated in the conditions of a closed planned economy and been forced into the straitjacket of Soviet state structures, was replaced by a quasi-criminal ethos, governed by the rules of political Darwinism. The Russian political context of the 1990s therefore permits the identification of **similarities between the current culture of the political salons of power and the criminal ethics of the underworld**, as manifested in the attitudes and statements on foreign policy expressed by high-level Russian officials.

⁴³ Members of organised crime groups were then commonly hired to undertake political and economic retaliation; they also built up their financial empires through the infiltration of state politics.

⁴⁴ This text presents only some general reflections on the subject. Details of the biographies of the political and business members of the Russian President's 'inner circle', as well as information on the realities of the political-business world in the 1990s and the subsequent period, confirming the thesis presented in this text, are fully described by, among others, Karen Dawisha in Putin's Kleptocracy. Who Owns Russia?, New York 2015.

This culture is characterised by several key mechanisms of thought and action, which are permanently rooted in the domestic politics of Russia and have been projected onto the realm of foreign policy. First of all there has been an **absolutisation of the category of power**, the determinant of which is its dominant position and strength, which is constantly being confirmed. **The use of force has become permanently embedded among the instruments of the struggle for wealth and influence** as a way of settling conflicts, including economic conflicts. At the same time, participation in the game of dividing the spoils after the Soviet Union required **a high readiness to take risks** – the possible profits were gigantic, but they came hand in hand with a high price tag. In the political thought of the Russian elite, this gave rise to an identification of the power one possessed with material resources obtained illegally or semi-legally, and with personal security. In conditions of fighting without formal rules, **all kinds of tricks were allowed**, provided they were effective. The post-Soviet elite generation, which had been tempered in the era of ‘wild capitalism’, therefore acknowledges the logic of **‘winner takes all’**, which means that by definition the interests of a competitor or opponent are not taken into account.⁴⁵

These principles are reflected in the methods employed in Russian foreign policy. Each international game is treated as an all-or-nothing contest; the position of the state and the elite requires constant confirmation and a series of successes (at least in propaganda), and the threshold of tolerance for risk is much higher in the case of the Russian elite than for the Western elites, for whom – in the face of a democratic rotation of governments – a loss of power or prestige is rarely seen as the end of the world. As when criminals settle their scores, the arsenal of measures to be used is not defined *a priori*, there are no rules imposed ahead of time, no

⁴⁵ Пути российского посткоммунизма. Очерки, ред. М. Липман, А. Рябов, Moscow 2007, p. 70.

'red lines' that should not be crossed; this results in the brutalisation of Moscow's political activities.

This flexibility of the instruments used in this all-out war for survival has enhanced the ability, learned in the Soviet socio-political and economic reality, **to function simultaneously in the worlds of formal and informal rules**, of written laws and customary norms (*poniatiya*);⁴⁶ **and also alternately and flexibly to use instruments from both these registers, from the realms of legality and illegality.** The '*poniatiya*', these customary norms, have absolute precedence over written law in the field of regulating the relationships between the superiors and the inferiors. They draw upon strength and patrimonial interdependencies as sources of law. This model has not changed fundamentally in the Putin era, despite the apparent strengthening of state structures in comparison with the Yeltsin period. In a corrupt system, it is personal loyalty and interests, and not formal rules and obligations, which mutually binds the participants together; representatives of the state bodies, including the departments of force, often cooperate closely with the criminal world in their search for profits.⁴⁷

The specific ethos of the ruling elite and the way it conducts its international policy also includes the **standards governing the model of leadership in the criminal world.** The rules of conduct are determined by **the ideal of 'hegemonic masculinity'**,⁴⁸ one of the most important determinants of the fundamental differences that exist between Western and Russian political culture, the understanding of the rules of politics, including the *savoir-vivre* governing diplomatic contacts. This means – next to the classic

⁴⁶ '*Poniatiya*', literally 'things understood', is one of the key elements of the criminal (and prison) code of conduct – the unwritten rules of conduct, known only to those who have been made privy to it, to 'our guys' (*свои*).

⁴⁷ S. Stephenson, *Gangs of Russia. From the streets to the corridors of power*, 2015, pp. 80, 84, 227, 231.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

characteristics of the leader, such as his ability to demonstrate the hardness of his character, his courage or earning respect – his ability to intimidate an opponent: the position of the leader within a group is determined by his readiness to demonstrate strength, to scorn the weak, to take revenge for real or alleged insults,⁴⁹ though direct violence is used only when considered necessary. **In foreign policy, this means the absolute primacy of rules imposing his own will on the dialogue;** and courtesy, a willingness to compromise or to hold discussion are all seen as signs of weakness.⁵⁰ The affirmation of strength therefore leads to a brutalisation of the language of foreign policy.⁵¹

In addition, the logic of the relationship with foreign partners resembles **the logic of the patron/client relationship in the interactions between a criminal group and its external environment.** The strategy of activities is subjugated to the constant confirmation of the right to arbitrarily shape the rules on home soil, where the boundaries of the territory are determined by the group leader himself. This logic is based on the **formation of an asymmetric interdependence with the surroundings,** on the unilateral dependence of the ‘clients’ on the ‘protectors’ – in such a system, the parties do not have equal rights, and the ‘protector’ provides the ‘client’ with protection, first and foremost, from himself.⁵² Therefore it is not the potential benefit which comes to the fore, but rather the choice between minimising and maximising the potential for harm. Such a mechanism is clearly visible in the Russian discourse of global policy as addressed to the West, and in

⁴⁹ See Putin's use of criminal slang in an interview in February 2000: “Whoever touches us, he won't live three days”, http://www.ltv.ru/news/2000-02-07/290442-analiticheskaya_programma_odnako_intervyu_v_v_putina

⁵⁰ Cf. S. Stephenson, *Gangs of Russia...*, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ One representative example of this approach was the aggressive speech in April 2017 by Russia's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations, Vladimir Safronkov; he deliberately offended the British Ambassador, who had been criticising Russia's actions in Syria. The tone of the speech caused consternation among those assembled.

⁵² S. Stephenson, *Gangs of Russia...*, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

Russia's actions on the international stage. The creation of facts, in the form of a unilateral creation of threats to international security, is followed by requests for negotiations and compromises from the opponent, concessions which will supposedly allow Moscow to put forward a solution to the problem which it created itself. A key concession which is always demanded is the recognition of the situation of asymmetrical interdependence, that is, granting Russia the right to unilaterally dictate terms, and consenting to a fundamental inequality of rights and obligations. This logic has been repeatedly revealed in Russia's policy towards the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet area, reaching its climax in its armed activities on the territories of Ukraine and Syria.

Also, according to the logic of the criminal, the 'client's cooperation with the 'protector' does not oblige the latter to do anything. **The rules of ethics or morals are characterised by a kind of quasi-tribal thinking; they are exclusive in nature**, and are valid only in relation to their own group. Because the 'alien' is outside the world populated by one's own kind, one does not need to take any account of him.⁵³ In this way, the members of the group do not see lies or manipulation as anything offensive, still less so if they win. This precludes any respect for those rules of cooperation that were shaped in the Western paradigm of liberal democracy and the rule of law. Russian discourse, regardless of its subject matter (be that a historical issue, the implementation of international agreements, or the course of the conflict in Ukraine) regularly involve lies, not only at the level of communication in the media, but in international discussions at the highest level.⁵⁴

In this context, the mistake commonly committed in the name of seeking an 'understanding of Russia' is based on the assumption

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁵⁴ In this context, it is at least worth recalling the lies Vladimir Putin told during his talks with Angela Merkel on the activity of Russian troops on the territory of Ukraine.

that openness to dialogue and concessions from the West will lead to real compromise and appropriate concessions from Moscow. Meanwhile these same concessions are treated as weakness, and only encourage further demands, extortion and blackmail. The 'owner' of the territory arbitrarily determines the law which applies in that territory, and this need not have anything to do with notions of justice.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ S. Stephenson, *Gangs of Russia...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 178–9.

III. THE PUBLIC AS AN ALLY IN THE KREMLIN'S CONFRONTATIONAL FOREIGN POLICY

The determinants of Moscow's confrontational foreign policy, which result from the inherently authoritarian regime, its Russian-specific characteristics, and the mentality of the ruling elite, correspond to the historical-cultural subsoil from which the mentality of most of Russian society originates. To a great degree it accepts (passively or actively) the ideology and the toolkit of the Kremlin's actions on the international stage. Regardless of the fascination with the Western model of economic development, and with Western culture itself, the anti-Western fears and complexes of the Russians are often made clear as regards their assessment of mutual political relations. **The Kremlin's anti-Western propaganda would not be as effective were it not based on the deeply-rooted social matrices of the Russian world view,** which have not been changed either by Russia opening up to the world after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, or by the evolution of individuals as a result of the subsequent socio-economic transformation. Pro-Western circles remain marginalised, and they will have no effect on the policy of the government in the foreseeable future.

1. Russian paternalism. The authoritarian personality

Social consent to the elite's arbitrary definition of national interest and their choice of measures to implement it is possible largely thanks to the deep roots in Russian history of the paternalist, hierarchical model of the relationship between authority and the citizens. These relations are based on the assumption that the state, in the name of the proclaimed good of the citizen, is entitled to restrict his rights and exercise control over him, thus releasing him from responsibility for the shape of the surrounding reality. Society in Russia, then, is not the subject, but the object of politics; it is the victim, and not the partner of the authorities' actions, which on the one hand are aimed at maintaining these

passive attitudes (thus neutralising the potential for active opposition), and on the other on instilling a set of beliefs, reinforced by official propaganda, aimed at obtaining at least declarative support for government policy. The guarantor of the existence and the reproduction of such a model is the **authoritarian personality**, the ‘Soviet man’ type of character, who was formed in the era of Soviet totalitarianism and is still relatively widespread in Russian society.

The ‘Soviet man’ is characterised by his tendency to follow the authority of the state in its assessment of reality, to adopt an attitude of mistrust and anxiety towards anything foreign and unknown, and is convinced of his own powerlessness and inability to affect the surrounding reality; from here, it is only a step towards lacking any sense of responsibility for that reality.⁵⁶ His suppressed aggression, birthed by his chronic dissatisfaction with life, his intense sense of injustice and his inability to achieve self-realisation, and his great envy, all erupt into a fascination with force and violence, as well as a tendency towards ‘negative identification’ – in opposition to ‘the enemy’ or ‘the foreigner’.⁵⁷ Such a personality suits a quasi-tribal approach to standards of morality and law (the things ‘our people’ have a right to do are condemned in the ‘foreigner’).⁵⁸

These features translate into a tendency to self-isolation, to faith in the black and white, stereotypical, confrontational view of the world served up by Kremlin propaganda.⁵⁹ ‘Soviet man’ suffers

⁵⁶ See the poll by the Levada Centre from July 2016: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/07/13/otvetstvennost-i-vliyanie/>

⁵⁷ In the case of the Russian people, this is not a temporary manifestation of the situational potential of collective mobilisation, but rather a deeply cultural feature. Л. Гудков, *Негативная идентичность. Статьи 1997–2002 годов*, Moscow 2004, pp. 156–7.

⁵⁸ Л. Гудков, *Повесть о советском человеке*, *Ведомости*, 28 December 2016.

⁵⁹ According to sociological research, about 90% of Russians derive their knowledge of the world principally from national television, and no more than 30% use alternative sources of information. *Почему мы не любим...*, *op. cit.*

from the 'imperial syndrome'⁶⁰ and projects onto himself the achievements of past generations, which fills him with a sense of superiority to other nations. As compensation, in this context, he receives a belief in the particular, civilisational identity of Russia, based on a non-democratic system of values. For him, the state's authority becomes the guarantor of order and the point of reference for his national identity. He can experience self-esteem only by identifying with the state: especially in times of trial, of the mobilisation of the whole community against a common enemy, which leads to his susceptibility to militaristic rhetoric. Personalities displaying such characteristics are easily guided and manipulate, but are also inert and resistant to change by nature.

According to the results of sociological research, people with this kind of personality type make up about 35-40% of the population of Russia, but individual characteristics or behavioural patterns appear at appropriate moments of mobilisation (economic, political or social crises) in up to 80% of respondents. With regard to the strengthening of authoritarianism in Russia and the elimination of pluralism, this type of personality is beginning to come to the fore, and is moreover being reproduced in the younger generations.⁶¹

Open-access terrestrial television is monopolised by the discourse of the Kremlin, which in recent years has been built upon an often extreme anti-Occidentalism, the hunt for domestic enemies ('fifth column'), and narratives exploiting the syndromes of the 'besieged fortress', the 'conspiracy', frequently drawing upon the complex of lost greatness and the rebirth of the superpower might of Russia.

⁶⁰ This refers to a nostalgia for empire, a sense of historic defeat and inherent defectiveness as a result of the loss of empire, a susceptibility to 'imperial populism' serving slogans of revanchism, based on demands for a reconstruction of lost greatness. To a great extent this syndrome cripples the ability to reflect rationally on the nature of the challenges facing Russia in the modern world.

⁶¹ Л. Гудков, Повесть..., *op. cit.* This reproduction occurs under the influence of social institutions descended from the totalitarian system, which have preserved their essence despite later modifications. These institutions are: the vertical system of power, beyond the supervision of the general public; the courts and parliament, which are subordinate to the executive govern-

Authoritarian personality traits give rise to key determinants of social attitudes, of a kind which foster the confrontational worldview as implemented in foreign policy: compared with other Western societies, the boundaries of tolerance for certain phenomena lie in different places, and the list of actions or attitudes deemed acceptable or unacceptable is also different. Firstly, there is a widespread culture of violence, characteristic of authoritarian reality, which is reinforced by the legacy of totalitarianism and the widespread use of violence as a regulator of political, economic and social relations in the criminal reality of the 1990s. Secondly, there is a profound relativism in the assessment of reality, arising primarily from the Soviet tradition of ‘doublethink’,⁶² as well as the understanding developed in the 1990s of politics as something completely virtual, based entirely on manipulation and fraud. Thirdly, there is the ‘imperial syndrome’: a kind of resentment allowing compensation for the inferiority complex thanks to the anti-Western models (built up in the Soviet era) of a worldview seen through the prism of the (now lost) might of the superpower.

2. The culture of violence

The culture of violence – which by its very nature excludes dialogue and compromise, and is based on the assumption of the fundamental inequality of the participants in any interaction – **has for centuries been the key regulator in the relationship between the state and the citizen in Russian reality.** Violence is one of the

ment; the existence of a political police and a conscript army; an extensive system of prisons and camps (‘the zone’); a lack of free elections and local government structures; and finally a school system that reproduces Soviet standards of education.

⁶² A term coined by George Orwell in his novel *1984*, denoting the ability to demonstrate the simultaneous belief in mutually contradictory views. The ability to ‘doublethink’ is a mechanism for overcoming cognitive dissonance resulting from the incompatibility of the results of rational thought to the need, conditioned by the survival instinct, to demonstrate obedience to the content transmitted by official propaganda.

fundamental elements of the system; it permeates all levels of the Russian state, and defines the real structure of superiority and subordination, regardless of the existing system of written law as formally publicised. In its direct form, it is revealed both in the power relationship between the government and the people (the arbitrary behaviour of the special services, violations of human and civil rights, the expansion of the prison system as an instrument of political struggle), in relationships within the power elite (such as the use of the special services in the fight for influence among interest groups), and in the domestic social context (violence as a way of resolving conflicts between people, something which is to a great extent the result of the dysfunction of the dimension of justice). It manifests itself in public life as the repression of political opponents, the omnipotence of corrupt officials, and the fiction of the legal code. While not taking on the form of mass terror (repressive means are applied relatively selectively in their direct form, usually against individuals who openly demonstrate against the regime), violence is deeply rooted in society's mental matrix, which makes it easier to activate coercive mechanisms for political needs, in the absence of any broader bottom-up resistance.

On a social basis, violence has been 'familiarised' as part of everyday life, in large part due to **the universality of the gulag experience in the Stalin period, and also as a result of Russia's subsequent failure to punish those responsible for the terror.** Attempts are made to justify it as the price for wielding the might of a superpower, and as a path towards restoring order and justice. One illustration of the public's attitude towards violence is how views of Stalin's repression have changed. From 2012 to 2017 the proportion of Russians who believe it was a political crime has fallen significantly (from 51% to 39%), and today 36% justify the crimes by the achievements of the Stalin era.⁶³ Positive attitudes towards Stalin increased markedly in spring 2014, according to sociologists: the beginning of the conflict with the West

⁶³ <http://www.levada.ru/2017/05/23/stalinskie-repressii/>

spawned the need for a strong leader, something corresponding to familiar Soviet mythology. This is favoured by state propaganda, which glorifies or whitewashes Stalinism, taking on a state-centric viewpoint in which the government is always right.⁶⁴

This mechanism was reinforced by the logic of the state of emergency which marked the first decade of the Russian Federation's existence. The political crisis, which ended in the shelling of the Parliament building in 1993, and the two wars in Chechnya formed a specific scheme of the government's legitimacy. This is based on a common belief that in a crisis threatening the community, a government which is maximally focused and unfettered will be more effective than one which is limited by democratic procedures: therefore it is not the law which is of value, but rather effectiveness. This meant the suspension of the principles of ethics and morals which apply in normal conditions. In this way the limits of tolerance for the use of exceptional and unconstitutional means, as well as for the extra-legal expansion of the government's mandate to act, were permanently shifted, both in domestic and foreign policy. These models were updated once again, with full public support, early in spring 2014 during the conflict with Ukraine and the economic crisis, when the atmosphere of the 'state of emergency' was reactivated.

Justifying the state's violence in the historical context promotes the acceptance of violence in contemporary circumstances. In addition, having become accustomed to the parasitic relationship between the government and the citizen, the mixture of fear, the sense of one's own powerlessness and one's shamefaced participation in the system results in at least a passive public acceptance of the use of violence in foreign policy, be this armed aggression on someone else's territory, blackmail or intimidation. Sociological surveys show that **in Russia the exercise of government is**

⁶⁴ Россияне стали безразличнее относиться к сталинским репрессиям, www.vedomosti.ru, 23 May 2017.

associated not so much with authority as with force,⁶⁵ and the ability to use violence (also in an arbitrary manner) is often associated with success.⁶⁶ This phenomenon is reflected in public opinion polls: at the beginning of 2017, after several years of confrontation with the West, 85% of respondents expressed the belief that Russia inspires fear abroad, and 75% saw this fear as a positive phenomenon.⁶⁷ Individuals who are powerless and have been humiliated by those in power paradoxically see compensation for their own frustration in identifying with a strong government which uses violence against the 'other', thus bringing about a rise in collective self-esteem.

The culture of violence is also boosted by standards of thinking and acting which had previously been known mainly from stories about the world of prisons and concentration camps which, because of the universality of these experiences during the 20th century, became etched into the cultural code of the Russians, and finally took shape as the criminal world penetrated political and social life after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In Russian popular culture during the 1990s, violence became something of a routine. In social relationships, as well as among the elite, a phenomenon foreign to the Western culture of positivist legalism became deeply ingrained: **informal rules of social conduct, in Russian 'poniatiya'**. These rules facilitate the practical operation of the Russian state, in which the arbitrariness of power creates a phenomenon where universal standards are substituted by informal and individualised rules – a situation which is characteristic in processes of demodernisation.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2016/08/25/654377-vlast-silu>

⁶⁶ S. Stephenson, *Gangs of Russia...*, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

⁶⁷ A survey by the Общественное Мнение Foundation from the beginning of 2017: <http://rosbalt.ru/russia/2017/01/14/1583114.html>

⁶⁸ Жизнь по понятиям: «реальные пацаны» и их моральные правила: <http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/6614>

Against the background of these experiences, the two embodiments of the idea of a strong government are, on the one hand, the figure of the ‘good Chekist’, and on the other, the criminal. The roots of the fascination with the figure of the ‘secret service man’ should be sought in the militaristic, mobilising mentality of the Soviet period, built up by conspiracy theories and the myth of the eternal fight against the external and internal enemy, as well as in the longing for a strong state during the ‘times of trouble’ in the 1990s. In turn, the reasons for the popularity of criminals as role models in Russia are connected with people’s ideas about justice. The criminal is not only a rebel who had the courage to stand up to the oppressive state: for many people, the informal, criminal system of standards replaced the law of the state during the chaos of the 1990s, and even imposed a semblance of order.⁶⁹ Both these ideals are consciously exploited by Vladimir Putin in his public image: the former KGB man has recreated himself as a ‘hooligan’, even using the language of the criminal subculture in order to strengthen his charismatic social legitimacy.⁷⁰ The model of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ which hypnotises ‘the Soviet man’, centred in the person of the creator of Russia’s foreign policy, is a strong persuasive element. This image is deployed when, in the name of the interests of authoritarian power, there is a need to mobilise society around the idea of confrontation with the enemy, the need for the use of force in foreign policy, or a need to return to quasi-isolationism in the name of Russia’s ‘greatness’.

As violence becomes commonplace, and the people get used to it, as distrust and suspicion towards the ‘other’ rise, a kind of ‘axiological community’ is being built between the

⁶⁹ S. Stephenson, *Gangs of Russia...*, *op. cit.*, p. 225

⁷⁰ For examples of Putin’s usage of criminal language: К. Харатьян, *Жаргон Владимира Путина*, www.vedomosti.ru, 25 December 2012. The beginning of Putin’s popularity is associated with his famous threat, expressed in criminal jargon, that he would ‘shaft [Chechen terrorists] in the toilet’. See interview with Lev Gudkov: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/video/2017/07/23/725405-putinu-restavratsiya-totalitarizma>

decision-makers and Putin's voters, as reflected in the acceptance of the instruments which the Kremlin uses in its foreign policy. This allows Moscow to use the element of surprise in its relations with Western governments, which are much less inclined to use coercive measures, military force in place of persuasion, or purely verbal pressure. The belief that rule based on dialogue is weak makes it easier for the Russian elite to acquire a social mandate for its principled rejection of the paradigm of liberal democratic culture in its essence. This impedes the diffusion of Western models for organising the state or the relationship between the government and the people, as well as the adoption of the Western culture of international negotiations.

3. Virtual politics: the sphere of lies and manipulation

Another product of the culture of violence is the acceptance of manipulation and lies as a standard instrument of foreign policy. Two phenomena form this fertile soil: the legacy of Soviet 'doublethink' and quasi-tribal thinking, built on a fundamental opposition between 'us' and 'the other' as the axis of the world's structure. For a substantial part of Russians, deception, like violence, is an acceptable tool of external action, because their interactions with their own state have been built upon it since time immemorial. The inferiority complex, in combination with the complex of lost greatness, births the desire to achieve satisfaction by outwitting one's opponent. There is no fair play in the fight, the more so as the desire to retaliate and promote one's self-esteem cannot be met by the state's economic performance or the attractiveness of its ideology, and the use of military advantages as a bogeyman pose too high a risk in the long run. In this kind of fight, all moves are permitted, and lying and manipulation are raised to the rank of a military art. One testament to such thinking is the survey carried out by the Levada Centre at the beginning of 2015. When asked about the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine, 37% of respondents replied that the Russian government were telling the truth (that there were no Russian troops in

Ukraine), but another 38% felt that although the authorities were lying, ‘in the current international situation Russia is doing the right thing by denying’ [the troops’ presence].⁷¹

The **relativism** of values appropriate to the ‘Soviet man’, which is a kind of precursor to the postmodern concept of ‘post-truth’, **has been deepened and cemented by the ‘political technologies’⁷² of the 1990s**, the era of virtual politics. In the first decade of post-Soviet transformation, the lie – as a fundamental factor in a Soviet reality which was “governed by the logic of the spectacle, which replaced reality and became reality” – became an unconditional and generally used tool of relatively free political struggle, so that next – in the Putin era – it could become a tool for dismantling democratic freedoms and strengthening authoritarianism. The media became the key link between the elite and the national version of the ‘culture of deceit’.⁷³

In this context, **politics is understood** not so much as the process of the interests of various social groups rubbing along together, and a game which is played according to rules – which get bent, but at least they still exist – but rather **as a thoroughly virtual sphere, subject to any kind of manipulation and ceaseless recreation**, free even from the limitations of logic and facts. In this approach, facts are merely the magma from which any kind of message can be moulded. Whereas in the West virtual politics is generally an addition to real politics, in Russia it is a substance of

⁷¹ K. Giles, Russia’s ‘New’ Tools..., *op. cit.*

⁷² A tool for conducting politics, consisting in manipulating public opinion in order to raise support for a politician or discredit his opponents. The Russian concept of ‘political technologist’ corresponds to the English term ‘spin doctor’, although the former’s room for manoeuvre is generally incomparably greater, due to the lack of transparency in public life in Russia and the lack of mechanisms controlling power. Political technologies were applied in Russia for the first time on a large scale during the presidential election in 1996.

⁷³ A. Wilson, *Virtual Politics. Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven-London 2005, pp. xvi, 8-9. As the author writes, virtual politics is how the elites manage, manipulate and restrain democracy.

the authorities' activity and takes on a much more radical form.⁷⁴ The sense of disorientation deliberately cultivated in the audience either creates a need for a black and white view of a world, which is eagerly provided by the Kremlin's propaganda, or it arouses the passivity of the audience, who have lost all faith in the possibility of objective information.

4. The imperial syndrome of Russian society

The susceptibility of Russian society to mobilising rhetoric in a militaristic, confrontational spirit stems largely from the void of identity after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the political-economic turmoil of the 1990s, and the absence of an attractive project for a modern Russia. **After a period when Russian society underwent a short-lived fascination with the West**, born during the *perestroika* period by naïve expectations of integration on an equal footing and catching up with the Western states in their level of development, **the painful response of the 'imperial mentality' to the USA's superpower politics arose**. Since then, it has primarily been the US upon which the criticism and negative emotions of the Russian people have been focused. The individual frustrations and individual feelings of innate defectiveness are added to the sense of the defectiveness of the state, the collapse of its prestige on the international stage.

Russian society decided to take refuge in the safe and familiar model, affirmed by the state, of Soviet-style great power, underpinned by a historical policy based on the **militaristic national mythology**, which legitimises strong government. The Soviet wartime mythology was underpinned by the militaristic traditions of imperial Russia. Its central element is the category of war, the 'enemy syndrome' typical of the authoritarian personality, and, above all, the sacralisation of the victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941-5). This has become basically the only positive point of

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8.

reference for structuring the Russians' collective identity, the highest manifestation of their superpower status and the effectiveness of their international policy, and as such is not subject to revision. The war has never been rationalised and has not been analysed from the point of view of the individual – only and always from the perspective of the superpower might and interests of the state.⁷⁵

While the victory of 1945 gave Russian identity a strong messianic element, the Cold War which occurred shortly after it led to **a coupling in the collective mentality of these messianic elements with anti-Occidentalism**. When the former ally became the enemy, the subject of existential threats to the nation's existence, its martyrology, the 'besieged fortress' syndrome, thus became permanently associated with the need to resist the West, as an absolute condition for the power and the security of the state and the nation: anti-fascism became opposed to Western capitalism and liberalism.⁷⁶ Of considerable importance is the current cynical playing on emotions through the use by Kremlin propaganda of the term 'Nazism', associated with the mass deaths of the war, in order to discredit the West (and in recent years, Ukraine first and foremost). This means shifting the psychological barriers towards the acceptance of radical methods in foreign policy.

Paradoxically, the effectiveness of anti-Western propaganda is also linked to the fact that **in the public reception the imagined West is assigned those features, motives, beliefs, which according to the Russian people are proper to the Russian government**. Transferring negative values onto the 'Other' helps the citizens of an aggressive state to free themselves from their own imperfections.⁷⁷ The greater the pride in Russia, the more the perceptions,

⁷⁵ For details see Л. Гудков, Негативная идентичность. Статьи 1997-2002, Moscow 2004, p. 33.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷⁷ *Idem*, Механизмы кризисной консолидации, *Контрапункт* 5, September 2016.

uncomfortable and offensive to the collective consciousness, of Russia or the Soviet Union as a backward and poor country are crowded out. This helps compensate for the cutting frustration resulting from low standards of living, the amorphous value system, the lack of any sense of meaning, and the constraints on individual development due to the nature of the institutional system.⁷⁸

A marked increase in negative attitudes to the West has been observed since the mid-1990s, culminating in 1999 (mainly in connection with NATO's enlargement eastwards, and the bombings of Yugoslavia by NATO forces).⁷⁹ The importance of domestic political conditions to Russian attitudes is demonstrated by the fact that the reanimation of the great-power and confrontational attitudes was an echo of the internal Russian symptoms of crisis at that time,⁸⁰ anti-Occidentalism and anti-Americanism became powerful instruments of political struggle.⁸¹ Whereas in 1996 only 6% of Russians were ready to call the US an enemy, in 1999 America found itself top of the polls of the enemies of Russia (in 2008, 35% called the US an enemy).⁸² In May 2017, 61% of Russians said their attitude towards the US was bad or very bad.⁸³

In the Russian people, then, a lasting prejudice against the West has arisen, but one which had hardened even before Putin's rise to power.⁸⁴ Whereas in the 1990s the rise of anti-Western sentiments was rather natural, a genuinely bottom-up

⁷⁸ *Idem*, Негативная..., *op. cit.*, pp. 156-7.

⁷⁹ Почему мы не любим..., *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ Л. Гудков, Негативная..., *op. cit.*, p. 673

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 674.

⁸² In May 1998, 75% of Russians believed that the US was seeking to weaken Russia and transform it into a warehouse of raw materials. Почему мы не любим..., *op. cit.*

⁸³ Survey by the Levada Centre in May 2017. The zenith of Russia's negative views (a 'bad' attitude towards the USA) was reached in January 2015, with a figure of 81%. www.levada.ru

⁸⁴ Почему мы не любим..., *op. cit.*

phenomenon, over the next decade the Russian authorities began to deliberately stoke it and use it to justify their superpower ambitions as a response forced upon them by the ‘aggressive actions’ of the US and NATO.⁸⁵ These negative trends were enhanced in 2003-5 (the second wave of NATO enlargement eastwards, the wave of ‘colour revolutions’); then the sense of belonging to Western culture, which had been important for collective identity in the 1990s, began to wane; thereafter, the belief arose that Russia is a separate civilisation with its own normative system. Thanks to this, public support for suspending or violating the formally recognised norms of international law has been built up, and the sanctions for violating them are not seen as a justified punishment, but rather as testimony to the growing power of Russia and to other countries’ unfair competition with her.⁸⁶ **This has therefore led to a convergence between the public’s images of Russia on the international stage and the understanding of international politics in Putin’s inner circle.**

In connection with the annexation of Crimea, which is seen as the highest manifestation of the Russia’s might as a superpower, the self-esteem of the Russian people increased remarkably, as did the belief that Russia has started to be more respected in the world⁸⁷. In 2014, this success in foreign policy (the ‘recovery’ of Crimea) almost doubled public support for the Russian political system compared to 2013.⁸⁸ At that time 70% of Russians said that Russia was becoming a great power again (compared to 47% in 2011); admiration for Putin, who is seen to have demonstrated the greatness of Russia in action, also rose.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Л. Гудков, Механизмы..., *op. cit.* Д. Волков, Настроения..., *op. cit.*

⁸⁷ Л. Гудков, Механизмы..., *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ The average score rose from 3.3 points to 6.0, on a scale from 1 to 10. NEORUSS survey from 2013-2014: М. Alexseev, H. Hale, A New Wave of Russian Nationalism? What Really Changed in Public Opinion After Crimea, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 362.

⁸⁹ Почему мы не любим..., *op. cit.*

The bottom-up demand for an enemy or opponent as an external centre around which to crystallise identity therefore correlates to the top-down need to build a society in a state of mobilisation. In such a society, the image of an enemy is a prerequisite for maintaining the 'state of emergency'⁹⁰ in which the traditional criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of the authorities are suspended.

⁹⁰ Л. Гудков, *Негативная...*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

CONCLUSION

The Kremlin's confrontational stance towards the West is not a temporary matter; it does not derive from the current historical moment, from specific differences of interests which could be defined and overcome through dialogue. **Rather, it is a permanent strategic theme of Russian foreign policy.** The year 2014 as a caesura in mutual relations was not so much a qualitative breakthrough as the culmination of a trend which had been growing for a long time.

The confrontation with the West on a variety of levels – political, economic, social, propaganda – **derives from the inherent characteristics of the Russian authoritarian regime** (both in terms of 'classical' authoritarianism and in its specifically Russian instance), **and from the mentality of the ruling elite included within it.** The latter, in turn, is largely **a product of a particular type of society and of the specific path of the state's historical development,** which is likely to remain unchanged in the foreseeable future. In the Russian paradigm, shaped by a system of rules which has governed political struggles for centuries, there is no room for a 'positive-sum' game, because in the Russian viewpoint conflict is inevitable; victory is only possible by taking the initiative, dictating the 'agenda', and imposing upon the confrontation a dynamic which accords with its self-interest.

Foreign policy in its Russian version is treated as an element of domestic policy to a much greater degree than in the case of other states. It is subjugated to the domestic political objectives of the elite, the most important of which is the **permanent reproduction of the Chekist-kleptocratic model of feudalism.** In this model, the state is actually owned by a small group of decision-makers; the values enshrined in the constitution (including property rights) are merely a matter of convention, and the members of the elite harbour a paranoid fear of losing political influence, as in the face of the degradation of the institutional

system and the fiction of law, this influence is the only guarantee of the preservation of their property, and the liberty and security of their persons. Frequently, therefore **the reasons for their behaviour, which is often incomprehensible to Western political culture, should be sought outside official policy:** in the 'grey area', where the spheres of the legal and illegal, the spheres of acquired habits, cold calculation and subconscious, existential fears, phobias and complexes all intermingle.

In this approach, the 'traditional' criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of foreign policy, such as credibility in the international arena, constructive contributions to the development of international integration, foreign economic turnover, and the attractiveness of the 'soft power' of the state, **all fall by the wayside.** Russia's attitude to international law increasingly reflects the arbitrary attitude of the elite towards the law of the state, and is subordinate to the Kremlin's desire to retain as much room for manoeuvre as possible in both domestic and foreign politics. In the face of the fact that **Russia has little to offer its international environment, while at the same time it is struggling to return to the position of a superpower** (of which the only sign it currently has is its nuclear arsenal and, to a lesser extent, its permanent place on the UN Security Council), **its foreign policy is being implemented by means of force,** manipulation, coercion and blackmail. All this determines the shape of Putin's specific neo-Sovietism, which - adapted to the conditions of globalisation - carries within itself the old Soviet mental matrices.

Such policies have a favourable context in the social attitudes of the Russian people, which are still largely governed by a set of characteristics typical of the authoritarian personality. The government's anti-Occidentalism does not therefore carry any domestic political risk with it. While the Russian authorities' domestic policies are often assessed negatively by the general public (mainly in the light of the country's socio-economic problems), the sphere of foreign policy, which is virtually impossible

to verify in the everyday experience of the Russian people, is the bearer of particular significance – the national honour, the dignity and power of the state, the defence of his authority and security. “It is precisely this sphere which unites the atomised Russian society in a collective whole, to compensate for the deficits and inferiority complex of the citizens’ private life.”⁹¹

However, because the relationship between the government and the people in Russia is based not so much on voluntary subordination as on compulsion, the morbid fear of a ‘colour revolution’ (especially when faced with the threat of long-term stagnation) prompts the Kremlin to deepen its isolation from society and combat any manifestations of independence. In this situation, **only confrontation and the designation of an ‘enemy’ can legitimise the poor state of the economy, the deterioration of standards of living for the general public, and the lack of any prospects for development, as well as the regime’s throttling of any opportunities for innovative development**, which would be politically risky. The only alternative to this anti-Western ‘conservatism’, which mobilises the people around the government, would probably be xenophobic nationalism, which in a multiethnic state, hosting masses of immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, would seriously jeopardise Russia’s domestic political stability.

MARIA DOMAŃSKA

⁹¹ Л. Гудков, Механизмы..., *op. cit.*