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WE ARE NO LONGER EUROPEANS: THE EVOLUTION OF THE IMAGE OF EUROPE AND THE WEST IN RUSSIAN STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS (2007–2023)*

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Abstract

Since Vladimir Putin commenced his third presidential term in 2012, anti-Western and anti-European discourse has markedly intensified in both the Russian public sphere and the state-controlled media. Accusations levelled against the West and endeavours to underscore Russia's moral and cultural pre-eminence have escalated in

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concert with the burgeoning tensions in Russia's relations with the West. This crescendo of official Russian anti-Western sentiment is manifest in the pronouncements of Putin and other government officials subsequent to the initiation of Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine. This article aims to elucidate how this formalised anti-Western narrative has permeated Russian strategic documents pertinent to the security and foreign policy of the Russian Federation. An examination of documents promulgated in successive phases of Russia's escalating conflict with the West (Phase 1: 2007–2014; Phase 2: 2014–2022; Phase 3: post-24th February 2022) reveals that anti-Europeanism and anti-Westernism, concomitant with a historiosophical conception of Russia as a distinct civilisation, have transitioned from the realm of political discourse and propaganda to codification in documents that guide Russian security and foreign policy, thus constituting a salient ideological component therein.

Keywords: Russian security policy, Russian foreign policy, anti-Westernism, anti-Occidentalism, Vladimir Putin.

Abstrakt

Już nie jesteśmy Europejczykami: Ewolucja obrazu Europy i Zachodu w rosyjskich dokumentach strategicznych (2007–2023)

Od rozpoczęcia przez Władimira Putina trzeciej kadencji prezydenckiej w 2012 w rosyjskiej przestrzeni publicznej i w kontrolowanych przez państwo mediach coraz wyraźniejszy jest dyskurs antyzachodni i antyeuropejski. Oskarżenia kierowane pod adresem Zachodu oraz próby podkreślania moralnej i kulturowej wyższości Rosji nasilają się stosownie do wzrostu napięć w relacjach Rosji z Zachodem. Kulminację tego oficjalnego rosyjskiego antywesternizmu widać w retoryce Putina i innych przedstawicieli władz po rozpoczęciu pełnoskalowej zbrojnej agresji Rosji przeciwko Ukrainie 24 lutego 2022. Ten artykuł odpowiada na pytanie, w jaki sposób oficjalny antyzachodni dyskurs wyrażał się w treściach rosyjskich dokumentów strategicznych odnoszących się do polityki bezpieczeństwa i polityki zagranicznej Federacji Rosyjskiej. Analiza dokumentów publikowanych w kolejnych etapach narastania konfrontacji Rosji z Zachodem (etap 1: 2007–2014, etap 2: 2014–2022, etap 3: po 24 lutego 2022) wskazuje, że antyeuropejskość i antywesternizm, wraz z historiozoficzną koncepcją Rosji jako odrębnej cywilizacji, weszły z języka dyskursu politycznego i propagandy do dokumentów orientujących rosyjską politykę bezpieczeństwa i politykę zagraniczną i stanowią ważny ideologiczny element kształtujący je.

Słowa kluczowe: rosyjska polityka bezpieczeństwa, rosyjska polityka zagraniczna, antywesternizm, antyokcydentalizm, Władimir Putin.

Introduction

Amidst the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war and the virulent anti-Western and anti-European rhetoric promulgated by the Russian state, it becomes increasingly per-

plexing to recall that Russia, at the inception of the 21st century, sought recognition as an equal amongst European nations. Today's Russian propaganda characterises the war against Ukraine as an act of defiance against Western coercion, thereby accentuating Russia's independent and autonomous role on the global stage. Over time, Europe has metamorphosed from a collaborator to an existential threat and opponent.

The Russian strategic documents, extant from the advent of Putin's leadership, delineate a confrontational posture towards the West. These documents evince attempts to situate Russia in antithesis to both Europe and, more broadly, the West. Following Putin's ascendancy to power, the revised National Security Concept of 2000 contained claims that Western nations were in pursuit of global hegemony, rendering the entire West subservient to the United States (NSC 2022: I, III). Yet, up until 2007, the dominant tenor within Russian political discourse was one of affinity towards the European cultural milieu. In the initial stages of Putin's governance, he frequently affirmed Russia's cultural and political affinity with the West. His confrontational address at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, in which he avowed resistance to US and NATO influence, did not substantially alter this perception. Furthermore, the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, which garnered an insipid response from European states, failed to shift this perspective. The policy of modernisation promulgated during Dmitriy Medvedev's presidency epitomises this erstwhile period of purported Europeanisation.

The hypothesis underpinning this article suggests that Russia's unbridled military aggression against Ukraine, initiated on 24 February 2022, signifies the apotheosis of an ideological and political trajectory inaugurated with Putin's rise to power – a trajectory that appeared to momentarily abate during Medvedev's presidency. This trajectory embodies a radical schism with the West, particularly concerning Western lifestyles, the organisational principles of social and political life, and the conceptualisation of human rights and freedoms. It is propelled by the neo-imperialist ideology of Putinism, which amalgamates elements of Soviet propaganda, 19th- and early 20th-century Russian Slavophile and Eurasianist thought, and the nationalist, imperial, and fascist ideologies of post-revolutionary Russian émigrés – most notably the views of Ivan Il'in, who is ideologically proximate to Putin (Yegorshina and Ivanova 2023: 57).

Subsequent to the instigation of full-scale aggression against Ukraine, this break with the West has become enshrined within Russian security policy. Domestically, virulent anti-Occidentalism serves to rationalise curtailments of the rights and freedoms of Russian citizens, including constraints on their access to non-state-controlled information. On the international stage, however, it aims to lay the groundwork for forging alliances capable of resisting Western predominance. Whilst anti-Occidentalism has thus far yielded scant results in the realm of foreign and security policy, it has precipitated far-reaching legislative changes domestically and accelerated a transition towards a totalitarian, highly militarised, and increasingly insular Russian society.

The primary sources for this article comprise an array of strategic documents related to various facets of the Russian Federation's security policy: Foreign Policy Concepts (2013, 2016, 2023), the Concept of Humanitarian Policy Abroad (2022), Information Security Doctrine (2016), Migration Policy Concept (2018), National Security Concept (1997/2000), National Security Strategies (2009, 2015, 2021), and the Foundations for State Policy on Preserving and Strengthening Traditional Russian

Spiritual and Moral Values (2022). This paper seeks to analyse the diachronic evolution of Western imagery in Russian strategic documents since Putin's confrontational 'Munich Speech' of 2007. Through such analysis, we intend to discern alterations in these documents in the lead-up to, and in the wake of, the full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Our study aims to address the following questions: (1) What representation of 'Europeanness' is discernible in Russian strategic documents published subsequent to 2014, which marks the onset of aggression against Ukraine?; (2) How does Russia define itself vis-à-vis Europe, and the West more broadly, by employing points of contrast?; (3) What role does the image of Europe and the West occupy within the overarching framework of Russian security policy?

Between Confrontation and Collaboration: From Putin's 'Munich speech' to Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine in 2014

The initiation of the so-called conservative turn in Russian domestic and foreign policy is commonly attributed to the commencement of Putin's third presidential term in 2012 (Składanowski 2021: 75). However, from the vantage point of Russian security policy orientation, this genesis should be repositioned to as early as 2007. It was in this year that Putin, at the Munich Security Conference, declared Russia's overt opposition to Western interests wherever feasible (Danilov 2011: 73). This marked Russia's reversion to an aggressive, imperialistic, and anti-Western trajectory, substantiated the subsequent year by the military conflict with Georgia. Hence, it can be inferred that Dmitriy Medvedev's proclaimed modernisation of Russia during his presidency (2008–2012) and his intention to integrate Russia into the global order were largely rhetorical and failed to manifest in concrete actions. This is substantiated by key tenets delineated in Russian strategic documents of that era.

Contained within these strategic documents are the foundational anti-Western tenets that gradually evolved into an anti-Western hysteria permeating Russian official discourse and state propaganda. Yet, there are discernible undertones of Russia's endeavour to position itself as an integral component of Europe, albeit with a divergent understanding of 'Europeanness' compared to Western societies.

Concerning the anti-Western discourse, there is an emergent narrative that portrays the West as not merely a threat to Russia, but also a destabilising force in global security. Specifically, the onus for undermining the Euro-Atlantic security framework is placed on NATO (NSS 2009: 8), which is portrayed as having transitioned from a regional defence pact to a military-political alliance with global reach (Ivanov 2018: 15). Accordingly, such a transition intrudes upon the purview of organisations in which Russia is a participant, most notably the United Nations. Western countries are accused of seeking to erode the bedrock principles of global governance, even to the extent of revising international law and the UN Charter (FPC 2013: 31b).

However, an additional facet of the anti-Western discourse warrants scrutiny. This element encapsulates traditional Russian anti-Western sentiment, which has crystallised into a permanent ideological fixture in the official political discourse and state propaganda, particularly in the lead-up to and during the full-scale military interven-

tion in Ukraine. The West is depicted not merely as faltering but as mired in a profound structural crisis that predominantly afflicts its social and economic realms. This crisis is not insular; it has reverberations on the global stage (FPC 2013: 11). At stake is not solely the social and economic malaise or the purported waning influence of the West in international politics. Also implicated is a perceived moral deterioration, characterised by the abandonment of traditional values and the embrace of what are deemed to be 'anti-values.' Consequently, the role of the 'historic West' in global politics and economics is envisaged as being on an inexorable decline, with the locus of global power and development expected to shift eastward, specifically towards the Asia-Pacific region (FPC 2013: 6).

The initiation of an anti-Western, confrontational policy by the Russian Federation, which became particularly conspicuous with the onset of Putin's third presidential term and the corresponding 'conservative turn,' did not necessarily entail a severance of Russia's identity links with Europe. Intriguingly, Russia's 2013 Foreign Policy Concept endeavours to position the nation as an integral component of European civilisation. Russia's affiliation with Europe was articulated as transcending mere geographical proximity, economic interdependence, and historical intersections; it was portrayed as rooted fundamentally in deep civilisational underpinnings (*глубокие общецивилизационные корни*) (FPC 2013: 54). Consequently, Russia perceives itself as an inherent and organic part of European civilisation. This informs its ambition to forge a unified economic and cultural expanse with the European Union, extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific (FPC 2013: 56). Furthermore, Russia expresses a keen interest in multifaceted cooperation with the European Union, encompassing economic, security, educational, scientific, and cultural dimensions. The Council of Europe is envisaged as the most appropriate institutional mechanism to orchestrate this comprehensive collaboration, given its mandate to fortify continental unity (NSS 2009: 12; FPC 2013: 54; FPC 2013: 61).

In sum, within Russian conservative discourse of the period under discussion, the aspiration for a unified economic space spanning the Atlantic to the Pacific serves to reorient Russian foreign policy. The primary aim is to attenuate U.S. influence in Europe through partnerships with countries like France and Germany (Dugin 2015: 215). In this schema, Russia envisions itself as the custodian of conservative European values, in stark contrast to the liberal values prevalent in Western societies. Thus, the anti-Americanism discernible in Russian strategic documents is not inherently anti-European but seeks to augment Russia's influence within Europe by diluting U.S. hegemony.

Towards the Rejection of the West: From the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity to Russia's Full-Scale Aggression Against Ukraine (2014–2021)

In Russian strategic documents published subsequent to the unlawful occupation and annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, as well as Russia's support for separatists in portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, a notably adverse portrayal of the

West is evident. The West is construed not merely as a military menace but also as an existential risk to Russian society, specifically due to its European culture and values. Concurrently, these documents amplify the supposed ethical degeneration of the West while claiming Russia's moral ascendancy.

In the second stage of the conflict with the West – following the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol and the onset of hostilities in the Donbas – the espousal of Russia's European identity has been conspicuously absent from successive Russian strategic documents. Instead, the West's refusal to legitimise Russia's actions in Ukraine and its support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration have catalysed the ideological intensification of previously existent anti-Western and anti-European sentiments. Three principal lines of argument are discernible in these documents.

Firstly, the West is depicted as an imminent threat to both Russian and international security. The source of this menace is twofold: the military presence of the United States in Europe (NSS 2015: 14–15) and the West's international policies aimed at retaining global supremacy (FPC 2016: 5). Russia argues that the Western efforts to isolate it imperil an already precarious European security system (NSS 2021: 18). Hence, in Russian security policy – as in the Soviet era – the West, conceptualised primarily as comprising the United States and other NATO member states, has once again become Russia's principal potential adversary. Military confrontation with NATO is now regarded as a realistic scenario in the context of Russia-West relations.

Secondly, the West stands accused of orchestrating anti-Russian initiatives, most notably its backing of the 'coup' in Ukraine in 2014 and thwarting Russian integration endeavours in Eurasia (NSS 2015: 17). Such allegations are intricately connected with the burgeoning use of the term 'Russophobia' in Russian public discourse and state-controlled media. Although the term lacks precise definition, it is deployed to characterise any actions deemed detrimental to Russian interests. Importantly, manifestations of Western Russophobia are identified in the operations of state-independent, externally funded NGOs and religious organisations. These entities are said to negatively influence Russian citizens, particularly the youth, thereby eroding traditional Russian spiritual and moral norms (ISD 2016: 12). This rationale gains particular importance as it subsequently served as the justification for the disbanding of certain NGOs – either by designating them as 'foreign agents' or by liquidating them altogether – as well as for the dismantling of the last vestiges of media outlets that maintained some degree of independence from state authorities.

Thirdly, Russian strategy documents evince a focus on the purported crisis engulfing the West. The migrant dilemma affecting the European Union is posited as revealing its structural and economic frailties (NSS 2015: 16) and as a precursor to escalating criminality and terrorism in Europe (MPC 2018: 10.3a). The inevitable waning of Western political and economic pre-eminence is underscored in these documents (FPC 2016: 4; NSS 2021: 7). Moreover, the crisis of the West is not confined to political and economic dimensions; it is depicted as having axiological and cultural ramifications. The West is charged with moral bankruptcy, and a series of cultural critiques follow. These range from the dilution of traditional values to historical distortion and the rehabilitation of fascism. Anti-Russian information campaigns and restrictions on Russian media and sport are cited as further evidence of this moral decline (NSS

2021: 19). The discourse surrounding the inevitable decline of the West and Russia's role as a custodian of traditional values has thus been institutionalised in Russian security policy, exemplified by the list of 'traditional spiritual-moral values' in its 2015 and 2021 National Security Strategies (NSS 2015: 78; NSS 2021: 91).

Under the Conditions of a Full-Scale War Against Ukraine

Russian discourse on security matters predominantly focuses on ideological and axiological considerations when depicting the West. Whilst acknowledgements of Russia's cultural affinity with Europe endure, liberal Western societies are increasingly portrayed as existential threats to Russian integrity.

In the wake of Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, and subsequent to the West's unequivocal endorsement of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russian strategic documents have undergone a partial radicalisation. This shift pertains not only to the portrayal of the West and Russia-West relations but also incorporates novel motifs hitherto absent. The West has transmuted from a mere political, economic, and military threat to an existential nemesis that seeks to undermine the societal values that define Russia. Four salient components of this anti-Western discourse are discernible in Russia's latest strategic documents.

Firstly, enhanced attention is devoted to the so-called 'Russophobia' emanating from the West, understood as a series of actions aimed at undermining Russia as a centre of global development (FPC 2023: 13). Notably, the purported Russophobia is now ideologically framed; the Foreign Policy Concept of 2023 avers that the majority of European nations are pursuing aggressive policies to destabilise Russia, actions which include the undermining of 'traditional Russian spiritual and moral values' (FPC 2023: 59) and the negation of Russia's civilisational role (FPC 2023: 13).

Secondly, the recurring thesis posits the inevitable collapse of Western domination, which originates in colonialism (FPC 2023: 7). Particularly compelling in this context is the document entitled 'Bases for State Policy on Preserving and Strengthening Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values,' signed by Vladimir Putin in 2022. According to it, the declining West poses a pernicious threat to Russia, systematically eroding its traditional values whilst promulgating ideologies that are discordant with Russian social and cultural norms. This onslaught against Russian society is orchestrated through various channels, including mass media, transnational corporations, and foreign-funded non-governmental organisations (PSTV 2022: 13, 16). The document elaborates in meticulous detail on the ramifications of the West's deleterious activities, arguing that these efforts not only dismantle traditional Russian values but also foist upon the Russian populace the values and lifestyles emblematic of liberal Western societies. Such Western cultural encroachments are purported to result in the attenuation of social cohesion, the undermining of human dignity and the intrinsic value of human life, and the propagation of antisocial and immoral behaviours. Additionally, the document posits that Western influences contribute to the absolutisation of concepts such as freedom and violence while exacerbating issues related to alcohol and substance abuse. Concomitantly, these Western pressures aim to precipitate

a wholesale rejection of Russia's spiritual and moral tenets, engendering a distortion of historical veracity and collective memory. Such manipulations consequently erode Russian identity and corrode citizens' confidence in state institutions. The ultimate impact of these anti-Russian activities, as delineated in the document, would be the diminution of the cultural and societal importance accorded to patriotic service, accompanied by the propagation of negative perceptions surrounding military service (PSTV: 2022, 17).

Thirdly, amidst the ongoing armed aggression against Ukraine and associated war crimes attributed to Russian forces, a new concept of 'Russian civilisational distinctiveness' has been enshrined in the latest Foreign Policy Concept. Originating from Russian Slavophilism (Pain 2016: 51), this notion has been espoused by conservative and neo-imperialist circles in Russia (Tsygankov: 2008) and has recently permeated Putin's public statements (Popov, Cherenev, Sarayev 2020: 18; Snyder 2018: 60–61). It underpins Russia's foreign policy, premised on the belief that Russia constitutes a self-contained Eurasian civilisation and superpower, encapsulated in the 'Rus world' (FPC 2023: 4).

Fourthly, recent Russian strategic documents articulate a redefined vision of Russia's relationship with the West. The documents mark a significant departure from Russia's previous assertions of affinity with European civilisation. Instead, they restrict commentary to Russia's engagement with what is referred to as 'traditional' European culture – an engagement treated analogously to its associations with other Eurasian cultures (FPC 2023: 4). In the milieu of the aforementioned ideologisation of 'traditional values,' which has permeated the lexicon of Russian national security and foreign policy documents, it is pertinent to note that the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept accords recognition solely to Russia's affiliations with those aspects of European culture it deems 'traditional.' While the concept of 'traditionality' remains conspicuously undefined within these documents, one may deduce that the term is employed to delineate those elements of European culture devoid of U.S. influence. Notably, it is the United States that stands accused of orchestrating a dual-pronged strategy: weakening the sovereignty of European nations while consolidating U.S. hegemony in Europe, and simultaneously exacerbating the schism between Europe and Russia (FPC 2023: 60). Furthermore, Russian strategic documents underscore a geopolitical bifurcation of Europe into Eastern and Western spheres, each subject to divergent Russian objectives. In relation to Western Europe, Russia proclaims an absence of hostile intent (FPC 2023: 13), asserting a commitment to the preservation of peace and stability (FPC 2023: 50). Such actions only constitute a measured response to Western policies perceived as antagonistic (FPC 2023: 4). Conversely, when considering Central and Eastern Europe, Russia delineates a strategy centred upon the sustenance and expansion of its cultural influence in the region (HPC 2022: 97).

Conclusions

The growing clarity with which Russia positions itself as an antithesis to Europe ought to be contextualised within the broader academic discourse, particularly in re-

lation to Western scholars who are inclined to justify Putin's policies. For instance, Marlène Laruelle vehemently contested Timothy Snyder's (2018: 145–146) opinion that Putin's Russia is a fascist state. Laruelle (2020: 103) claimed that '[a]busing historical parallels, Snyder uses a simplistic labelling technique, and deploys reductive explanatory frameworks.' By attributing Russian-European tensions largely to Central and Eastern European states, and negating – even in contradiction to contemporary Russian academics (Yegorshina & Ivanova 2023: 57) – the influence of Ivan Il'in on Putin (Laruelle 2020: 104), she and others of the 'Putinversteh'er' group posit that Russia remains integral to European cultural identity. However, such justifications of Putin's policies are increasingly untenable, particularly post-24 February 2022.

Evans (2008: 899–900) accurately observed that Western Europe has historically been a primary point of reference for Russia's sociocultural development. Russian identity has long been constituted in relation to the West, whether as an ideal or as an ideological opponent. According to Pain (2016: 51), '[t]he West always functions as the constituting "Other" in relations to Russian nationalism.' This duality is present even in contemporary Russia. In Putin's Russia, reference to the West is a key element in the search for a new Russian identity and understanding of its role in international politics and the global security system. During the nascent years of Putin's rule, the European identity was initially embraced as an extension of Russia's own (Evans 2008: 901). However, with the reorientation of Russian politics towards neo-imperialism and confrontation with the West, liberal European societies are now positioned as Russia's antithesis. Stanislav Mal'chenkov's (2022: 57–66) analysis illustrates this transformation. Initially, Putin promulgated the idea of Russia as part of Europe, sharing common values. Yet, since his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Western culture has been increasingly framed as an existential threat to Russia.

The evolution of Russia's strategic documents, particularly those pertinent to its security and foreign policy, underscores this shift. Anti-European and anti-Western sentiments are no longer just an element of conservative and imperialist public discourse or the content of state-controlled propaganda. Defining Russia in opposition to the West, adopting the language of Russian historiography (in particular, the idea of Russia as a distinct civilisation morally superior to the fallen West) and seeing Western states as a real threat and potential adversary in armed conflict have become crucial elements of Russian security and foreign policy. This ideological codification has imparted a confrontational, militaristic, and imperialistic character to Russia's international engagements and domestic governance.

The findings of this study underscore the significant role played by the negative portrayal of Europe and the creation of an image of Russia as the antithesis of Europe within the Russian war propaganda. To a large extent, the Russian society, influenced by the propaganda disseminated through state-controlled media, has adopted this negative image and incorporated it into its own identity. Therefore, simplistic theories suggesting that the mere replacement of Putin could restore Russia's integration into European and global security architectures are wholly inadequate. Achieving such reintegration necessitates substantial legal, social, and cultural transformations within Russia.

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