

PARADOXES OF RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: can political science help?

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The war against Ukraine launched by Vladimir Putin's regime on February 24, 2022, from the very beginning raised multiple questions concerning its rationale and goals. Pundits from political science and international relations were tirelessly trying to discern the logic of the invasion and interpret Russia's ultimate intentions. Not all these attempts were successful, and many questions –including one as simple as “What exactly does Putin want?”– still remain unanswered.

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Any rationalization of Russian aggression is an uneasy task for analysts, and the ongoing war is full of paradoxes. First, it seems paradoxical that Vladimir Putin was preparing for the war months before the invasion, but only a few analysts believed that the war was about to happen. When the aggression started, most of public figures and opinion makers, including think tankers, were shocked and for some time remained speechless.

One of the possible explanations of this phenomenon lies in the dominant perception of the Putin regime as **largely performative**, investing its limited resources mostly in the symbolic sphere full of groundless storytelling, disinformation and fake news. This school of thought assumes that social world consists of artificial phenomena (representations and appearances) produced by the industry of entertainment and consumed through the media, gaming, and advertisement; the ubiquity of simulacra (virtual, artificially created objects that generate interest and emotions) makes the borderline between the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ blurred and uncertain.

However, this over-concentration on the semantics of the propagandistic imageries has paradoxically constrained the political imagination of the watchers of the Kremlin-produced performances, and prevented many from seriously considering the prospect of a real fight in the battleground. What was largely underestimated is the ability of the artificially constructed fairy tales –about “fascists” and “drug addicts” in the Ukrainian government, or about “one single people of Russians and Ukrainians”– to produce material, physical effects with devastating consequences. In other words, many in the academia have succeeded in unpacking the theatrical nature of Putin’s rule, but failed to see how the “**society of the spectacle**” can kill.

Second, another puzzle is the apparently unclear and vague aims and goals of the war. The Kremlin's plans remain obscure: what, for example, stands behind Putin's bizarre appeal to the Ukrainian military to take power in their own hands and then negotiate with the Kremlin? What exactly is meant by "de-militarization" and "de-Nazification" of Ukraine: how these two ideas might be executed?

Three explanations might be helpful at this juncture. One is rooted in what is known in the discipline of foreign policy analysis as **analogical argumentation** that in practice is often used not to learn from history, but to justify the extant policies. The Russian script of the war is deeply embedded in politicized, securitized and weaponized historical parallels with the Great Patriotic War, a sacral point in Russian historical narrative. Of course, these historical analogies are analytically absurd: suffice it to mention the half-Jewish roots of the president Zelensky who in the Russian propaganda is portrayed as the head of the "neo-fascist regime". Moreover, analogical reasoning can work against Putin who himself is often compared with Hitler, both in Ukraine and in the West.

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Another explanation comes from the **operational approach**. Its key presumption argues that beliefs –rather than material interests or financial calculations– define and drive actions, particularly in illiberal or non-democratic regimes. Belief systems are not purely ideational phenomena – they are causal mechanisms of taking decisions. By the same token, belief systems are cognitive maps, or 'scripts' infused with emotional, motivational and intellectual narratives and imageries related to foreign policy decisions. These beliefs are shaped by academic knowledge and personal experiences of power holders, depend on production and organization of knowledge and linkages between different ideas. Beliefs include historical myths, perceptual stereotypes, phantasies, utopias, and selective memorization of the past, often boosted by highly accentuated emotional drive.

One more explanation is of cultural background: Putin's obsession with Ukraine might be grounded in the concept of **hegemonic masculinity**. Anthropologists and cultural sociologists can say a lot about phallogentric features of Russian philosophy of power, but now we clearly see how they render geopolitical effects and become a major factor of insecurity for Russia's neighbours. For years Ukraine was

feminized in the Russian mainstream discourse of a big Slavic “family” that implicitly implies the “right” for domestic violence (which, by the way, has been de-criminalized in Russia). Having said that, we are entering the domain of political psychology rather than political science *per se*, and may think of applying such concepts as existential anxiety, obsessive and possessive dreams, and objects of desire, all rooted in **Jacques Lacan’s writings**.

Thirdly, much has been said in the last weeks about poor implementation of Putin’s plan and clear under-performance of Russian troops in Ukraine. Experts speak about at least two miscalculations: underestimation of the will to resist and withstand in the Ukrainian society, and the overrating of Western political weakness and indecisiveness.

Where do these failures come from? One of possible explanations lies in the **concept of groupthink**: if crucial decisions are taken in a small group, most likely they would be sub-optimal, since alternative information would be filtered out, and dissent within a small group is unlikely. In other words, team-based coherence prevails over plurality of opinions, especially when it comes to politically stressful situations. According to the groupthink explanation, desire to minimize controversies compromises quality of discussion and decisions, since important information might be ignored or misinterpreted, and alternatives to the preferred course of actions might be not taken seriously. The decision-making group might tend to persist in the original policy shaped by self-appointed “mindguards”; to preserve the clubby atmosphere, group members tend to suppress personal doubts, silence dissenters, and follow the group leader. Group cohesion is likely to lead to defective decisions, limited review of alternatives, objectives, and risks, selective use of information and ultimately to paralysis in decision making. Apparently, in authoritarian systems with homogenous, uniform, monolithic worldview of group members this scenario seems to be more likely than in democracies where plurality of opinions, views, and perceptions of group members have more chances for success.

Fourth, in Ukraine, Russia is playing a unilateral military game, with no supporting coalition or alliance. How this “**geopolitical loneliness**” can be explained?

One of possible sources of analysis might come from the **liberal theory of international relations** that presumes that historically multilateralism worked better within the liberal type of international society based on rules and values. China explicitly rejects binding commitments and is skeptical about participation in military alliances, and Russia is simply weak in mobilizing support even among its satellites. In a long run this means that the illiberal segment of world politics is to remain quite fragmented, which creates new opportunities for the West.

Of course, there are plenty of other inputs from political science and international relations that can be instrumental for constructing the genealogy of the current war. As any groundbreaking event in world politics, Russia’s invasion into Ukraine will make us reassess and further problematize such major political concepts as sovereignty, security, borders, and many others. The failure to predict the war does not prevent us from learning lessons from it.