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The Contradictions in Vladimir Putin's "Just War" against Ukraine: The Myths of NATO's Containment, Minority Protection and Denazification

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ABSTRACT

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Putin has mobilized different arguments to justify his bellicose stance, mainly the pursuit of NATO containment, the protection of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking minorities, and the "denazification" of Ukraine. In this article I analyze the contradictions and inconsistencies in these three arguments. Firstly, I show that, although Russian elites had legitimate considerations to contest NATO enlargement during the post-Cold War era, there is no evidence that Putin's military aggression was motivated by this issue: as previously expected, the invasion has further strengthened the alliance, provided it with a legitimate *raison d'être*, and contributed to an even more intense military presence near Russian borders; the European balance of power is now much more favorable to NATO than before the conflict. Secondly regarding the humanitarian intentions of protecting the Russian-speaking communities in Eastern Ukraine, the Russian invasion has so far led to the opposite result: ten months of war caused more civilian deaths than eight years of war in Donbas, and the Russian-speaking population has been exactly the most affected victim. Finally, with regard to the "fight against Nazism", although in Ukraine there are ultranationalist groups, there is no evidence that such groups currently count on significant political influence and broad support in society; furthermore, the Russian authorities themselves have ties to similar groups. The "denazification" narrative represents a strategy of demonizing the opponent, mobilized to legitimize the dismemberment and extinguishing of Ukraine as a state and nation. The current war has laid bare the Kremlin's double standard politics: civilian deaths resulting from attempts by Ukraine to regain control of its territory are evidence of "genocide"; while the civilian deaths resulting from the Russian invasion are just the "side effects" of a legitimate fight against "Nazis" and NATO.

Keywords: War in Ukraine (Russo-Ukrainian War); NATO Enlargement; War in Donbas, Denazification; Vladimir Putin.

As contradições na "guerra justa" de Vladimir Putin contra a Ucrânia: Os mitos da contenção da OTAN, proteção de minorias e desnazificação

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RESUMO

Desde a invasão em larga escala da Ucrânia pela Rússia em fevereiro de 2022, Putin mobilizou diferentes argumentos para justificar sua política agressiva, principalmente a busca pela

contenção da expansão da OTAN, a proteção dos russos étnicos e das minorias de língua russa e a "desnazificação" da Ucrânia. Neste artigo, analiso as contradições e incoerências nesses três argumentos. Em primeiro lugar, mostro que, embora as elites russas tivessem considerações legítimas para contestar a expansão da OTAN no período pós-Guerra Fria, não há evidências de que a ação militar de Putin tenha sido motivada por essa questão: como já era esperado, a invasão veio a fortalecer ainda mais a aliança, propiciando-lhe uma "razão de ser" legítima e contribuindo para uma presença militar ainda mais intensa próxima às fronteiras russas; o equilíbrio de poder europeu está agora ainda mais favorável à OTAN do que antes do conflito. Em segundo lugar, em relação às intenções humanitárias de proteger as comunidades de língua russa no Leste da Ucrânia, a invasão russa até agora levou ao resultado oposto: dez meses de guerra causaram mais mortes de civis do que oito anos de guerra no Donbas, e a população de língua russa tem sido exatamente a maior vítima. Finalmente, no que diz respeito à "luta contra o nazismo", embora na Ucrânia haja grupos ultranacionalistas, não há evidências de que tais grupos contem atualmente com significativa influência política e amplo apoio na sociedade; ademais, as próprias autoridades russas mantêm laços com grupos semelhantes. A narrativa da "desnazificação" representa uma estratégia de demonização do adversário, mobilizada para legitimar o desmembramento e extinção da Ucrânia como Estado e nação. A guerra atual revelou a política de "dois pesos e duas medidas" do Kremlin: as mortes de civis resultantes das tentativas de a Ucrânia recuperar o controle de seu território são evidências de um "genocídio"; enquanto as mortes de civis resultantes da invasão russa são apenas os "efeitos colaterais" de uma luta legítima contra "nazistas" e a OTAN.

Palavras-chave: Guerra na Ucrânia (Guerra Russo-Ucraniana); Expansão da OTAN; Guerra no Donbas, Desnazificação; Vladimir Putin.

Las contradicciones en la "guerra justa" de Vladimir Putin contra Ucrania: Los mitos de la contención de la OTAN, la protección de las minorías y la desnazificación

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RESÚMEN

Desde la invasión a gran escala de Ucrania por parte de Rusia en febrero de 2022, Putin ha movilizado diferentes argumentos para justificar su postura agresiva, principalmente la búsqueda de contener la ampliación de la OTAN, la protección de las minorías étnicas rusas y de habla rusa y la "desnazificación" de Ucrania. En este artículo analizo las contradicciones e inconsistencias en estos tres argumentos. En primer lugar, muestro que, aunque las élites rusas tenían consideraciones legítimas para contestar la ampliación de la OTAN durante el periodo posterior a la Guerra Fría, no hay evidencia de que la agresión militar de Putin estuviera motivada por este problema: como se esperaba anteriormente, la invasión ha fortalecido aún más la alianza, le proporcionó una "razón de ser" legítima y contribuyó a una presencia militar aún más intensa cerca de las fronteras rusas; el equilibrio de poder europeo está ahora mucho más favorable a la OTAN que antes del conflicto. En segundo lugar, con respecto a las intenciones humanitarias de proteger a las comunidades de habla rusa en el este de Ucrania, la

invasión rusa ha llevado hasta ahora al resultado contrario: diez meses de guerra causaron más muertes de civiles que ocho años de guerra en Donbas, y la población de habla rusa ha sido precisamente la víctima más afectada. Finalmente, con respecto a la “lucha contra el nazismo”, si bien en Ucrania existen grupos ultranacionalistas, no hay evidencia de que dichos grupos cuenten actualmente con una influencia política significativa y un amplio apoyo en la sociedad; las propias autoridades rusas tienen vínculos con grupos similares. La narrativa de la "desnazificación" representa una estrategia de deshumanización del oponente, movilizada para legitimar el desmembramiento y extinción de Ucrania como estado y nación. La guerra actual ha puesto al descubierto la política de doble rasero del Kremlin: las muertes de civiles resultantes de los intentos de Ucrania de recuperar el control de su territorio son evidencia de "genocidio"; mientras que las muertes de civiles resultantes de la invasión rusa son solo los "efectos secundarios" de una lucha legítima contra los "nazis" y la OTAN.

Palabras clave: Guerra en Ucrania (Guerra Ruso-Ucraniana); Ampliación de la OTAN; Guerra en Donbas, Desnazificación; Vladimir Putin.

The Contradictions in Vladimir Putin's "Just War" against Ukraine: The Myths of NATO's Containment, Minority Protection and Denazification¹

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Introduction

Since the 2014 Ukrainian political crisis, Russia has been engaged in efforts to dismember Ukraine according to Vladimir Putin's expansionist ambitions. Moscow annexed Crimea and began to promote armed groups which aimed at having the eastern region of Donbas to secede from the country. On February 24, 2022, Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which became the tensest geopolitical conflict since World War II. Significant parts of Ukraine's territory are currently under Russian occupation.

In this article I discuss the inconsistencies in Vladimir Putin's main justifications for initiating the full-scale war against Ukraine, drawing on official statements, public opinion polls, and reports from international organizations and the United Nations. Given the temporal proximity to the events, I also address media content from Western, Russian and Ukrainian sources.

Three main arguments (the *casus belli*) were mobilized by the Kremlin to justify the war, in particular the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Eastern Europe, the protection of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine's east and the fight against Nazism. Although Russian elites' arguments against NATO enlargement is legitimate, there is significant evidence that contradicts it as a motive for Putin's aggression. Instead of tipping the European balance of power in favor of Russia, the invasion, as expected, has strengthened NATO. Contrary to the Kremlin's allegedly humanitarian intentions to protect ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking minorities, ten months of invasion led to a number of civilian deaths higher than eight years of war in Donbas³ — the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine's east and south was exactly the major victim until now, and has presented

¹ This paper is an updated and translated (from Portuguese) version of the chapter *As contradições nos argumentos de Putin para invadir a Ucrânia: Os mitos da OTAN, da proteção de minorias e da desnazificação* ["The contradictions in Putin's arguments for invading Ukraine: The myths of NATO, minority protection, and denazification"], published in the book: GOMIDE, Bruno and JALLAGEAS, Neide (eds). *Ensaio sobre a Guerra Rússia-Ucrânia [Essays on the Russo-Ukrainian War]*. São Paulo, Brazil: Kinoruss, 2022. This updated and translated version was authorized by the publisher and is being considered for publication in the book *On War: Essays about the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict from a Global Perspective* (organized by Professor Angelo Segrillo), by the Center for Asian Studies at the University of São Paulo (LEA-USP).

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³ *Donbass* in Russian and *Donbas* in Ukrainian; *Lugansk* (Russian) and *Luhansk* (Ukrainian).

significant resistance to the “liberation” onslaughts promoted by Russia. With regard to the denazification argument, although there are ultranationalist groups in Ukraine, there is no evidence that such groups count on significant social support or political influence. Furthermore, radical and violent right-wing groups are also present in Russia. The Nazism argument constituted a strategy of “demonization” of the opponent, mobilized to contest Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign nation and state as well as to boost nationalism in Russian society by reviving the WWII collective trauma.

In the final sections, I briefly discuss other *casus belli* mobilized by the Kremlin and Putin’s real motivations for launching the invasion.

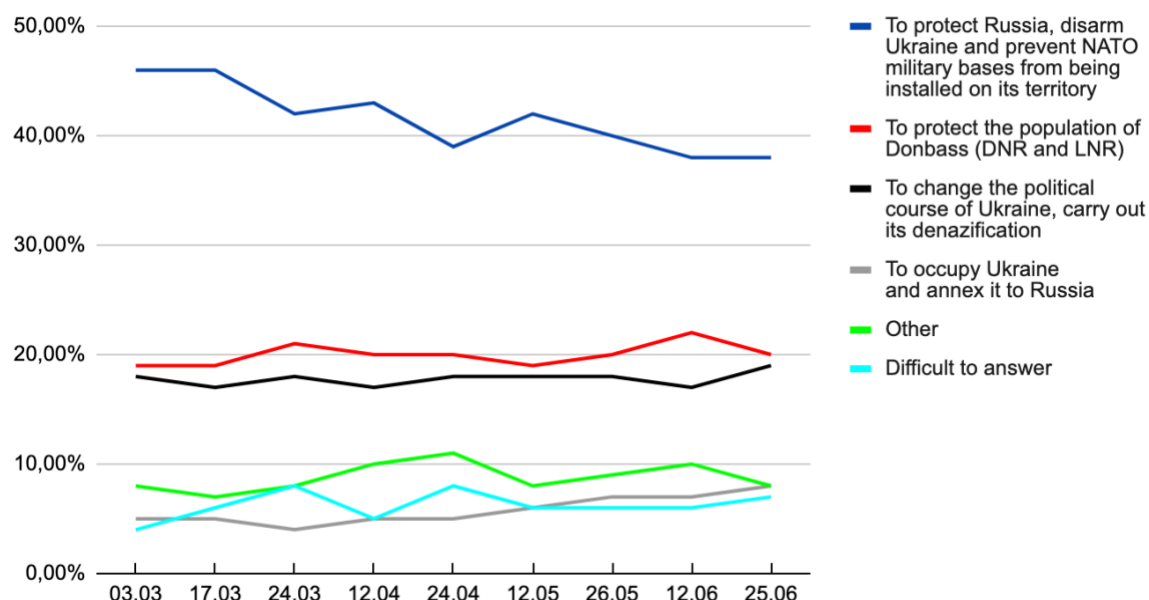
I. The “just war” against NATO expansion

The NATO threat was among the most discussed arguments in academic debates, propagated by scholars of the Realist school of International Relations and the Russian state propaganda. Although very mobilized in Russia, it was not at the top of popular mentions at first glance. In a public opinion poll by a state institute, conducted a few days after the beginning of the invasion, 20% of respondents answered that the main objective of the “special military operation” (the official mandatory euphemism for the invasion) was to prevent NATO from installing military bases on Ukrainian territory⁴ — the response lagged behind the humanitarian motivation to protect the Russian-speaking population of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and Lugansk People’s Republic (LNR), breakaway regions of Donbas, with 26%.⁵ However, when concerns about NATO are grouped with other security considerations, one sees a significant preponderance of its mentions over the months, ranging between 38% and 46%, as shown in chart 1.

⁴ The second most mentioned option (25%) was avoiding an attack/threat against Russia; protect its borders so that Ukraine does not attack it.

⁵ WCIOM. Spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya v Ukraine: otnosheniye i tseli [Special military operation in Ukraine: attitude and objectives]. 28.02.2022. Available at: <<https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/specialnaja-voennaja-operacija-v-ukraine-otnoshenie-i-celi>>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

Chart 1. In your opinion, what is Russia's main objective for conducting the special military operation in Ukraine?



Source: compiled by the author based on data from the Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (WCIOM).⁶

NATO enlargement was one of the main bones of contention between Russia and Western powers in the post-Cold War period. As early as in the 1990s, Russian diplomacy and President Boris Yeltsin had questioned the expansionist policy of the alliance. Two waves of expansion were particularly contentious: the 1999 enlargement, which incorporated states of the former socialist bloc in Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic), and the 2004 enlargement, which, in addition to incorporating more countries of that bloc, included three former republics of the Soviet Union (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). Although there was no treaty between NATO members and Russia to restrict its eastward enlargement, Russian elites have claimed that such assurances were orally given to Mikhail Gorbachev during the 1990 discussions for the Two Plus Four Agreement on the reunification of Germany.⁷ Some documents indeed seem to confirm this assumption,⁸ whereas some transcripts of negotiations in the different countries involved indicate that the discussions revolved around the military status of Germany and its eastern portion and the accession of Eastern European states was not

⁶ WCIOM. Spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya: monitoring [Special military operation: monitor]. 30.05.2022. Available at: <<https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/pecialnaja-voennaja-operacija-monitoring>>. 30.06.2022. <<https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/specialnaja-voennaja-operacija-monitoring-20223006>>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

⁷ Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany.

⁸ ZAKHAROVA rasskazala, gde bylo zakrepleno obeshchaniye NATO ne rasshiryat'sya [Zakharova told where NATO's promise not to expand was recorded]. RIA Novosti, 15.06.2021. Available at: <<https://ria.ru/20210615/obman-1737101938.html>>. Accessed on: 04.06.2022.

AKHTYRKO, Aleksandr. Oni dali SSSR obeshchaniye ne rasshiryat' NATO [They promised the USSR not to expand NATO]. Gazeta.ru, 19.02.2022. Available at: <<https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2022/02/19/14554111.shtml>>. Accessed on: 04.06.2022.

even imagined as a possibility at that time.⁹ Other reports, documents and statements by participants in these and other negotiations disprove¹⁰ or confirm this thesis.¹¹

In the academic mainstream, there is an acute debate around whether NATO enlargement was a geostrategic mistake or not. Some analysts consider that the enlargement violated the post-Cold War balance of power and further contributed to deteriorate the relations between Russia and the West, while others claim that the measure was necessary to guarantee security to Eastern Europe against possible Russian nationalist revisionism (like the current invasion of Ukraine) and that Putin's arguments are just a pretext for his expansionist ambitions.¹²

Since the demise of the USSR, Russia's relations with NATO have faced significant oscillations. There were moments of rapprochement and establishment of channels of dialogue, such as the "honeymoon" period in the early 1990s and the "war against terrorism" phase, in which the fight against Chechen separatists and the attacks of 9/11 brought Vladimir Putin and George Bush together.¹³ Nonetheless, the policy of enlargement and the hegemonic-oriented stance of the alliance contributed, in part, to cooling these relations. The initiative to carry out military interventions without the approval of the UN Security Council or the OSCE, the intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and in Iraq in 2003, the ballistic missile defense/shield projects in Eastern Europe (supposedly to deter Iran) and the negotiations to incorporate other former Soviet republics, such as Georgia and Ukraine, caused new frictions. It should be noted that in his first years in power, Putin was not very confrontational toward NATO enlargement in the Post-Soviet Space: in 2002, he mentioned that the decision to join NATO should be made independently by Ukraine and that this would not harm its bilateral relations with Russia;¹⁴ in 2005, he stated that, although he did not consent to, if other former Soviet republics wanted to join NATO, he would respect that choice as it constituted their "*sovereign right to decide their own defense policy*".¹⁵

⁹ KRAMER, M. The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia. *The Washington Quarterly*, v. 32, n. 2, p. 39–61, abr. 2009.

¹⁰ WIEGREFFE, Klaus. NATO's Eastward Expansion: Is Vladimir Putin Right? *Spiegel*, 15.02.2022. Available at: <<https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/nato-s-eastward-expansion-is-vladimir-putin-right-a-bf318d2c-7aeb-4b59-8d5f-1d8c94e1964d>>. Accessed on: 04.06.2022.

¹¹ ARIS, Ben. Gorbachev and the verbal promises of no Nato eastern expansion. *BNE Intellinews*, 13.01.2022. Available at: <<https://www.intellinews.com/gorbachev-and-the-verbal-promises-of-no-nato-eastern-expansion-231651/>>. Accessed on: 05.06.2022.

NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard. *National Security Archive*, 12.12.2017. Available at: <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>>. Accessed on: 05.06.2022.

¹² WAS NATO Enlargement a Mistake? *Foreign Affairs Asks the Experts*. *Foreign Affairs*, 19.04.2022. Available at: <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2022-04-19/was-nato-enlargement-mistake>>. Accessed on: 08.06.2022.

¹³ FORSBERG, T.; HERD, G. Russia and NATO: From Windows of Opportunities to Closed Doors. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, v. 23, n. 1, p. 41–57, 2 jan. 2015.

¹⁴ KREMLIN official website. After the Russia-NATO Summit President Vladimir Putin took part in a joint press conference with NATO Secretary General George Robertson and Italian Prime Ministers Silvio Berlusconi. 28.05.2002. Available at: <<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/43122>>. Accessed on: 12.06.2022.

¹⁵ KREMLIN official website. Interview with French Television Company France 3. 07.05.2005. Available at: <<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22952>>. Accessed on: 12.06.2022.

The deterioration in the bilateral relations accelerated with the occurrence of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. At that time, Putin accused the West of encouraging instability and rebellion against Russia's allies. In 2007, during his famous contentious speech at the Munich Security Conference, Putin harshly criticized NATO's defense policy, questioning why the organization, established to contain the USSR during the Cold War, continued to exist despite the breakup of the USSR and the extinction of the Warsaw Pact.¹⁶ The 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the Russian aggression against Ukraine during its 2014 political crisis (with the annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in Donbas) further brought the relations to critical levels. The channels for dialogue were significantly exhausted.

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian diplomats accused the alliance of violating the principle of "indivisible security," according to which a state cannot maximize its own security by increasing the insecurity of others.¹⁷ The prerogative was contemplated in the Helsinki Accords in 1975, the Charter for European Security,¹⁸ established at the OSCE Summit in Istanbul in 1999, and in the Declaration of the OSCE of Astana in 2010.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Russian diplomats also admitted that this principle had not been codified in a treaty with legally binding effects (due to Western powers' resistance).²⁰ Another document often mentioned by the Kremlin is the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997,²¹ which advocated the need for mutual consultation in military decision-making.

As the aforementioned facts show, prior to 2014 Russia had legitimate arguments to question NATO enlargement and its security policy. However, as I argue below, there are five indications that combatting NATO expansion was not among Putin's main motives and interests for starting the full-scale war against Ukraine.

(a) The invasion only strengthens NATO

¹⁶ KREMLIN official website. Vystupleniye i diskussiya na Myunkhenskoy konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti [Speech and discussion at the Munich Security Conference.]. 10.02.2007. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>. Accessed on: 12.06.2022.

¹⁷ MINISTRY of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Tekst poslaniya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V. Lavrova po tematike nedelimosti bezopasnosti, napravlenno 28 yanvarya s.g. glavam vneshnepoliticheskikh vedomstv SShA, Kanady i ryada yevropeyskikh stran [Text from the message of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov on the topic of the indivisibility of security, sent on January 28 of this year to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the United States, Canada and several European countries]. 01.02.2022. Available at: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1796679/. Accessed on: 06.08.2022.

¹⁸ OSCE. Istanbul Document. 19.11.1999. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/mc/39569>. Accessed on: 08.06.2022.

¹⁹ OSCE. Astana Commemorative Declaration: Towards a Security Community. 01.12.2010. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/mc/74985>. Accessed on: 08.06.2022.

²⁰ Sergey Lavrov: postavlena tsel' lyuboy tsenoy vyvesti Rossiyu iz ravnovesiya [Sergey Lavrov: the definite aim was to throw Russia out of balance at any cost]. TASS, 10.09.2014. Available at: <https://tass.ru/top-officials/1432200>. Accessed on: 08.06.2022.

²¹ NATO. Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France. 27.05.1997. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm. Accessed on: 08.06.2022.

Russian political elites expected that the gains on the military and geopolitical fronts would offset other losses in the economic, diplomatic and reputational (soft power) fronts. Nonetheless, even on the geopolitical front Russia has been facing acute losses. Several analysts did not believe in the possibility of a Russian invasion exactly because there was a highly feasible expectation that an invasion would have the opposite effect to that claimed by the Kremlin: it would further strengthen NATO and bring the alliance even closer to Russian borders. This expectation has in fact come true.

Unlike the fragmentation and underfunding of NATO observed during Donald Trump's leadership, the Russian aggression has boosted strong cohesion in the alliance and rapid collective action among its members. Its presence in Eastern Europe, close to Russian borders, is being substantially reinforced²² with troops, equipment, weapons, military training, and defense systems (a trend that had already been reinforced with the annexation of Crimea in 2014).²³ The alliance announced in June 2022 that it will increase rapid reaction forces from 40,000 to over 300,000 troops.²⁴ NATO multinational battalion-size battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have been reinforced and four more were established in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.²⁵ There are signs of an arms race in Europe, with countries such as Germany,²⁶ Estonia,²⁷ Latvia,²⁸ Lithuania,²⁹ and Poland³⁰ raising their military budgets.

²² MASON, Rowena. NATO to deploy extra troops to alliance nations in eastern Europe. *The Guardian*, 25.02.2022. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/25/nato-deploy-extra-troops-eastern-europe-ukraine-russia-war>>. Accessed on: 20.06.2022.

UK government forces arrive to reinforce NATO's eastern flank. 26.02.2022. Available at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-forces-arrive-to-reinforce-natos-eastern-flank>>. Accessed on: 22.06.2022.

²³ NATO. NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance. 08.07.2022. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

²⁴ CHISLENNOST' sil bystrogo reagirovaniya NATO prevysit 300 000 chelovek [NATO's rapid reaction force to exceed 300,000]. *Golos Ameriki*, 27.06.2022. Available at: <<https://www.golosameriki.com/a/nato-high-readiness-forces-strategy/6634745.html>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

²⁵ NATO. NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance. 21.12.2022. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm>. Accessed on: 03.01.2023.

²⁶ SHEAHAN, M., MARSH, S. Germany to increase defence spending in response to 'Putin's war' - Scholz. *Reuter*, 27.02.2022. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/germany-hike-defense-spending-scholz-says-further-policy-shift-2022-02-27/>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

GERMANY commits €100 billion to defense spending. *Deutsche Welle*, 27.02.2022. Available at: <<https://www.dw.com/en/germany-commits-100-billion-to-defense-spending/a-60933724>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

²⁷ NEW €3.8-billion defense spending plan for 2023-2026 unveiled. *ERR*, 20.05.2022. Available at: <<https://news.err.ee/1608604033/new-3-8-billion-defense-spending-plan-for-2023-2026-unveiled>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

²⁸ MOTIVANS, Ivars. Government approves proposal to raise Latvia's defense spending to 2.5% of GDP. *Leta*, 22.03.2022. Available at: <<https://www.leta.lv/eng/home/important/04ACB9A4-5BA7-4576-A50D-AC1A9220B61C/>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

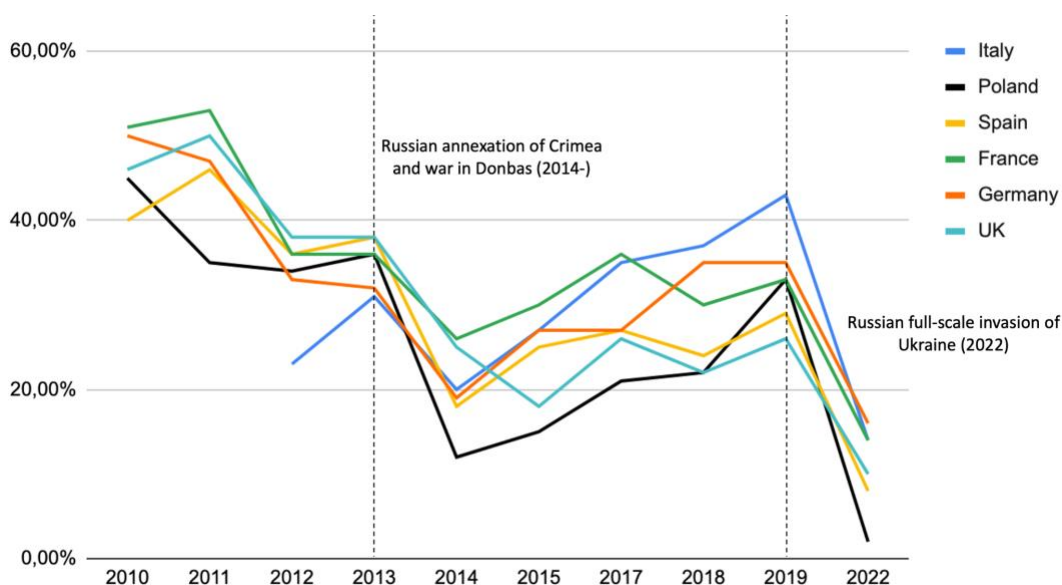
²⁹ LITHUANIA raises defence spending to 2.52 percent of GDP. *LRT*, 17.03.2022. Available at: <<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1647017/lithuania-raises-defence-spending-to-2-52-percent-of-gdp>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

³⁰ POLAND to ramp up defence spending, army as Ukraine war rages. *Reuters*, 03.03.2022. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-ramp-up-defence-spending-army-ukraine-war-rages-2022-03-03/>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

Several NATO members have been providing Ukraine with a range of economic resources, weapons and military equipment. It is difficult to imagine that Russian elites had not expected such reactions beforehand.

The invasion also offered a *raison d'être* for NATO, a legitimization for its post-Cold War existence: if before 2014 the “Russian threat” was an anachronism from the Cold War era and NATO lacked a real “enemy” that could provide significant cohesiveness among its members, recent bellicose policies by Moscow have been filling this vacuum. For European states (especially Eastern ones), there is no doubt that the alliance is a fundamental instrument for protecting their independence and sovereignty against potential expansionist ambitions by Putin. As evidence of this trend, Chart 2 shows a sharp decrease in favorable views of Russia among NATO members, breaking negative records: in Poland, these views plummeted to 2% in 2022. Conversely, favorable views of NATO increased significantly in major member states, such as in Germany (from 59% in 2021 to 70% in 2022) and the UK (from 66% to 74%) as one can see in Chart 3. Positive attitudes toward economic and military support to Ukraine, as well as the adoption of sanctions against Russia (despite its economic costs), remain high in several European countries.³¹

Chart 2. Favorable views of Russia among NATO member states

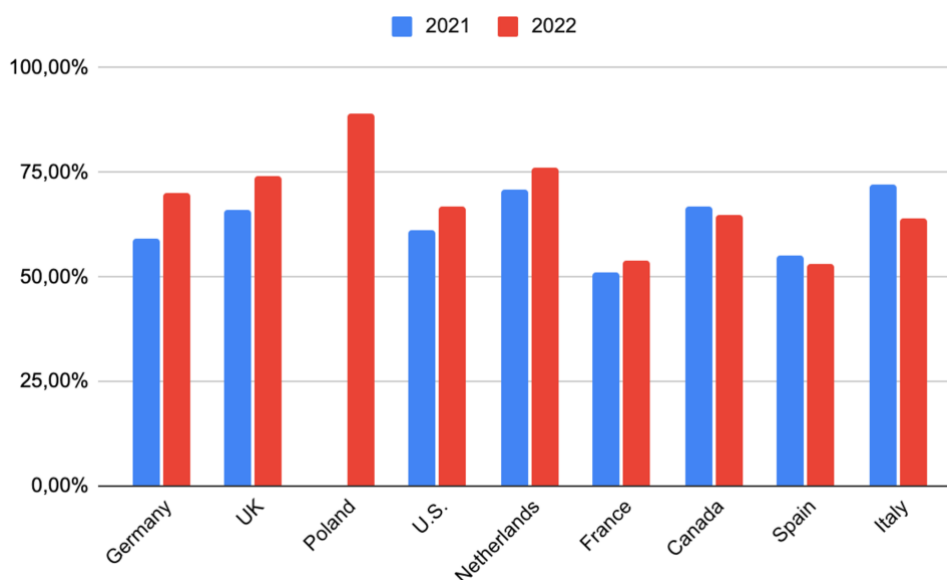


Source: compiled by the author based on data from the Pew Research Center (2022).³²

³¹ EUROPEAN Parliament. Eurobarometer. Public opinion on the war in Ukraine (December 8, 2022). Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2022/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine/en-public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine-20221208.pdf>. Accessed on: 04.01.2023.

Kumar, Nikhil and Labbate, Mariana. The war in Ukraine brought the West together. For the rest of the world, it's complicated. Grid, 14.11.2022. Available at: <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/11/14/the-war-in-ukraine-brought-the-west-together-for-the-rest-of-the-world-its-complicated/>. Accessed on: 05.01.2023.

³² WIKE et al. International attitudes toward the U.S., NATO and Russia in a time of crisis. Sharp decline in favorable views of Russia. Pew Research Center, 22.06.2022. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/22/international-attitudes-toward-the-u-s-nato-and-russia-in-a-time-of-crisis/pg_2022-07-22_u-s-image_3-02/. Accessed on: 05.01.2023.

Chart 3. Favorable views of NATO among its member states

Source: compiled by the author based on data from the Pew Research Center (2022).³³

Just as the US interventionist policy in the Cold War left resentment and suspicion in Latin America, the Soviet/Russian interventionist policy fostered animosity in Eastern Europe, which explains at least in part the decision of many states to seek NATO membership. Sporadic statements by Russian nationalists and the “Russian World” doctrine (the idea that Russia must protect ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking minorities abroad) have heightened suspicions in countries with significant shares of ethnic Russians, such as Estonia and Latvia. Other states that historically maintained a position of military neutrality, like Finland and Sweden, are now applying for NATO membership³⁴ – the former has an extensive border strip with Russia (near Saint Petersburg, the second largest Russian city), a large and modern army and was a victim of Russian expansionism at different historical periods. Since the onset of the invasion, public opinion in these countries, which until then had been in favor of neutrality, leaned mostly toward joining the alliance.³⁵ The feeling of mistrust and insecurity on the continent may last for decades.

If economic sanctions deepen in the long run, the West continues to seek independence from Russian oil and gas, and China (along with other countries) fails to make up for these losses, Russia’s state and military capabilities may be undermined. Recent data show that

³³ WIKE et al. International attitudes toward the U.S., NATO and Russia in a time of crisis. Positive ratings for NATO. Pew Research Center, 22.06.2022. Available at:

<<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/22/positive-ratings-for-nato/>>. Accessed on: 05.01.2023.

³⁴ NATO. Finland and Sweden submit applications to join NATO. 18.05.2022. Available at:

<https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_195468.htm>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

³⁵ GROWING majority of Swedes back joining NATO, opinion poll shows. Reuters, 20.04.2022. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/growing-majority-swedes-back-joining-nato-opinion-poll-shows-2022-04-20/>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

YLE. Yle poll: Support for Nato membership soars to 76%. 09.05.2022. Available at: <<https://yle.fi/news/3-12437506>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

European gas imports from Norway and the US have surpassed those from Russia³⁶ – its share of trade in value fell from 39,3% in 2021 to 15,0% in the third quarter of 2022. In the same vein, the share of oil imports from Russia decreased from 24,8% to 14,4%. These losses were partly compensated by the increase in the price of these commodities in the world market.³⁷ Nevertheless, Moscow is losing an important bargaining tool in its relations with Europe.

In summary, there is significant evidence of a strengthening of NATO and an even greater presence near Russian borders, as a (expected) response to the invasion, which partly refutes the Kremlin's argument — propagated by many scholars from the Realist school of International Relations — that Russian action was aimed at protecting Russian borders against the alliance and keeping the European balance of power. Gains on the geopolitical front are not tangible so far.

(b) The absence of an ultimatum to Ukraine

Russia's position in the face of NATO enlargement and Ukraine is sometimes compared to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when the US issued an ultimatum to the USSR: withdraw its medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles from Cuba or face direct confrontation. Unlike this episode, Russia's representatives never issued an ultimatum to Ukraine, such as refraining from its plans for joining NATO or from its military cooperation with the alliance. On the contrary, on several occasions they reiterated that the expectation of invasion was "hysteria" by the West³⁸, and that its military buildup near the Ukrainian border had exclusively defensive motivation. At the end of January, a representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared: "*For our part, we have repeatedly stated that our country will not attack anyone. We find even the thought of a war between our peoples unacceptable.*"³⁹ Volodymyr Zelensky himself raised doubts about the possibility of a full-scale invasion and claimed that the feeling of "panic" was hurting the Ukrainian economy.⁴⁰ Russia had carried out several maneuvers close to the Ukrainian border in recent years, so there was doubt whether there would in fact be an attack or whether the buildup was just another form of intimidation. If the real objective was to obtain official commitment from Ukraine to abstain from its plans

³⁶ SHIRYAEVSKAYA, Anna. For the First Time, US Is Sending More Gas to Europe Than Russia. Bloomberg, 01.07.2022. Available at: <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-01/us-Ing-supplies-to-europe-overtake-russian-gas-iea-says>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

³⁷ EUROSTAT. EU imports of energy products - recent developments. 12.2022. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU_imports_of_energy_products_-_recent_developments#Main_suppliers_of_natural_gas_and_petroleum_oils_to_the_EU>. Accessed on: 06.01.2023.

³⁸ ISTERIYA na Zapade o "vtorzhenii" Rossii vyzyvayet udivleniye, zayavil Lavrov [The hysteria in the West over the "invasion" by Russia is surprising, declared Lavrov]. RIA Novosti, 16.02.2022. Available at: <<https://ria.ru/20220216/lavrov-1773105900.html>>. Accessed on: 08.06.2022.

³⁹ CHERNYSHOVA, Elena. Moskva zayavila o nedopustimosti «dazhe mysli» o voyne s Ukrainoy [Moscow declared the inadmissibility of "even the thought" of a war with Ukraine]. RBC, 27.01.2022. Available at: <<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/01/2022/61f296ec9a794785fb8175af>>. Accessed on: 07.06.2022.

⁴⁰ DETTMER, Jamie. Kiyev i NATO razoshlis' vo mneniyakh po povodu neizbezhnosti rossiyskogo napadeniya [Kyiv and NATO disagreed over the inevitability of a Russian attack]. Golos Ameriki, 30.01.2022. Available at: <<https://www.golosameriki.com/a/ukraine-nato-differ-on-imminence-of-russian-attack/6418277.html>>. Accessed on: 07.06.2022.

to join NATO, the Kremlin could have issued an ultimatum with a specific date for the Ukrainian government to revise its position. At different times after the invasion, Zelensky expressed his willingness to negotiate Ukraine's military neutrality and reaffirm its non-nuclear status if effective security guarantees were given,⁴¹ but Russian demands went far beyond the NATO issue, involving the recognition of the Crimean Peninsula as a Russian territory, the independence of Donbas, the imprecise objective of Ukraine's "denazification" and the annexation of new territories.

(c) The scope of Russia's demands

Shortly before the invasion, the Kremlin had presented a list of demands to the United States in order to ensure compliance with the principle of "indivisible security."⁴² In addition to not enlarging the alliance and not installing military systems close to Russian borders, there was one item that would certainly not be accepted by NATO member states — the return of the military infrastructure of the alliance to the status of 1997, when the NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed.⁴³ Judging by later events, Ukraine's fate was at the mercy of requirements far beyond Kyiv's reach and the Kremlin knew in advance that its demands would never be accepted by NATO members.

(d) The little prospect of Ukraine joining NATO

Although the objective of joining NATO was written into the Ukrainian constitution in 2019⁴⁴ and military cooperation with the alliance was boosted after Russia's annexation of

⁴¹ FURSEEV, Ilya. Zelenskiy zayavil o gotovnosti govorit' s Rossiyei o neytral'nom statuse [Zelensky announced his readiness to talk with Russia about neutral status]. RBC, 25.02.2022. Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/02/2022/62180a5b9a79475fd50ff949>. Accessed on: 09.06.2022.

V OFISE Zelenskogo zayavili, chto Ukraina obsudit neytralitet pri garantiyakh bezopasnosti [Zelensky's cabinet declared that Ukraine will discuss neutrality with security guarantees]. TASS, 09.03.2022. Available at: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14015105>. Accessed on: 09.06.2022.

KROPMAN, Vitaliy. Prezident Ukrainy dal bol'shoje interv'yu rossiyskim zhurnalistam [The President of Ukraine gave a long interview to Russian journalists]. Deutsche Welle, 27.03.2022. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/ru/prezident-ukrainy-dal-bolshoe-intervju-rossijskim-zhurnalistam/a-61275001>. Accessed on: 09.06.2022.

DUBENKO, Vadim. My gotovy poyti na neytralitet i bez'yadernyy status — Zelenskiy [We are ready to pursue neutrality and the nuclear-free status — Zelensky]. Zerkalo Nedeli, 27.03.2022. Available at: <https://zn.ua/POLITICS/my-hotovy-pojti-na-neytralitet-i-bezjadernyj-status-zelenskij.html>. Accessed on: 09.06.2022.

⁴² MINISTRY of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Dogovor mezhdru Rossiyskoy Federatsiyey i Soyedinennymi Shtatami Ameriki o garantiyakh bezopasnosti [Treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States of America on Security Guarantees]. 17.12.2021. Available at: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

⁴³ PUTIN: Zapad proignoriroval printsipial'nyye trebovaniya RF v otvetakh po bezopasnosti [Putin: West ignored Russia's fundamental demands on security responses]. TASS, 01.02.2022. Available at: <https://tass.ru/politika/13586841>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

⁴⁴ PARLIAMENT of Ukraine (Rada). U «Vidomostyakh Verkhovnoyi Rady Ukrayiny» opublikovanyy Zakon pro vnesennya zmin do Konstytutsiyi Ukrayiny shchodo stratehichnoho kursu derzhavy na nabuttya povnopravnoho chlenstva Ukrayiny v YeS ta NATO [The Law on Amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine

Crimea in 2014, there were no indications that Ukraine was close to realizing it, at least in the short and medium terms. As early as the beginning of the 2000s, part of the Ukrainian elites had expressed their intention to join the alliance. In 2008, during the pro-Western government of Viktor Yushchenko, NATO officials announced at the Bucharest Summit that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become members.⁴⁵ Progress in this direction, however, has not been significant. In addition to carrying out political reforms, one of the admission criteria is to enhance the alliance security prospects.⁴⁶ It would be difficult for the thirty member countries to consent to the membership of a state involved in an indirect conflict with a nuclear power since 2014, what could further bring insecurity and instability to the organization. According to Article 5 of the 1949 NATO Treaty, *“if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked”*.⁴⁷

In practice, by intervening in Crimea and Donbas, Russia pressured Ukraine toward NATO, but at the same time obtained a tacit veto to its entry (though formally the alliance does not recognize that an external player can constrain its “open door” policy). In 2021 the Ukrainian minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, sharply criticized the fact that little progress had been made since 2008.⁴⁸ The country obtained the Enhanced Opportunities Partner status in 2020, which allows access to military exercises and information sharing,⁴⁹ but the main entry mechanism, the Membership Action Plan (MAP), has not yet been offered. From MAP status to effective membership there is a long way to go, in which several political and military reform criteria must be met. Scholars such as Daniel Treisman consider that, despite NATO’s declarations, Ukraine and Georgia were not on the path to membership.⁵⁰ Zelensky later admitted that there was no real prospect of joining it.⁵¹ On the eve of the invasion,

on the strategic course of the State towards full membership of Ukraine in the EU and NATO was published in the "Journal of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine]. 07.03.2022. Available at:

<<https://www.rada.gov.ua/news/Novyny/168096.html>>. Accessed on: 10.07.2022.

⁴⁵ NATO. Bucharest Summit Declaration. 03.04.2008. Available at:

<https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm>. Accessed on: 07.07.2022.

⁴⁶ CHADWICK, Lauren. How do you join NATO and how close is Ukraine to becoming a member? Euronews, 18.02.2022. Available at: <<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/02/18/how-do-you-join-nato-and-how-close-is-ukraine-to-becoming-a-member>>. Accessed on: 07.07.2022.

⁴⁷ NATO. Collective defence and Article 5. 20.09.2022. Available at:

<https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm>. Accessed on: 06.01.2023.

⁴⁸ KULEBA, Dmytro. Why is Ukraine still not in NATO? Atlantic Council, 16.02.2021. Available at: <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-is-ukraine-still-not-in-nato/>>. Accessed on: 07.07.2022.

UKRAINE Unhappy With Lack Of Progress In Joining NATO As Kyiv Is Not Invited To Summit. RFERL, 26.05.2021. Available at: <<https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-nato--summit-kivy-not-invited-kuleba-lack-progress-membership/31275358.html>>. Accessed on: 07.07.2022.

⁴⁹ NATO. NATO recognises Ukraine as Enhanced Opportunities Partner. 12.06.2020. Available at:

<https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176327.htm>. Accessed on: 07.07.2022.

⁵⁰ WAS NATO Enlargement a Mistake? Foreign Affairs Asks the Experts. Foreign Affairs, 19.04.2022.

Available at: <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2022-04-19/was-nato-enlargement-mistake>>. Accessed on: 08.06.2022.

⁵¹ ZELENS'KYY: yakshcho zavtra nam zaproponuyut' vstupyty v NATO - budemo vstupyty. Ale ts'oho ne bude. [Zelensky: If tomorrow we are offered NATO membership, we will join. But that won't happen].

Evropeyska Pravda, 05.04.2022. Available at:

<<https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2022/04/5/7137248/>>. Accessed on: 07.07.2022.

therefore, there was no indication that NATO enlargement toward Ukraine was a feasible possibility in the short and medium terms.

(e) Other negotiation alternatives

If the real intention was to contain NATO, Putin could have resorted to a series of measures (even based on hard power) that would be less costly, less controversial and potentially more effective. As an example, he could have used Europe's dependence on Russian gas as a bargaining tool, threatened to increase the military presence in the Kaliningrad exclave or expand military cooperation projects with allies close to US borders, such as Cuba and Venezuela, or even with China and other countries antagonistic to the West. He could also have issued an ultimatum to Ukraine and threatened to annex the Donbas territories that in fact were already under his control. The resolution of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis involved this kind of bargain: the Soviets withdrew medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles from Cuba, while the US withdrew its ballistic missiles from Turkey. Whether these measures would be successful is uncertain, but they would certainly be less costly than the full-scale invasion. Furthermore, Putin has a close relationship with some "strong men" inside NATO, such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. These ties could be eventually used to block Ukraine's accession to NATO.

II. The "just war" against the "genocide" in Donbas and the protection of the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine

The protection of Ukraine's Russian speaking population in the east and in the Donbas region was another paramount argument pointed out by Russian elites for launching the "special military operation."⁵² In Russia, there is a widespread view (promoted by the Kremlin ideologues) that the Donbas region has been suffering a genocide for eight years, neglected by the West, and that Ukraine is now paying the price for this violence. A well-known Russian journalist stated that formally the war in Donbas (2014-) is an internal Ukrainian problem, but in practice it is a Russian problem. In his words ("as Russian values advocate"), "we do not abandon our own."⁵³ Before discussing the reasons for why this was not Putin's real main motivation, I present a brief history of the 2014 conflict.

For purposes of simplification, Ukraine is divided into two macro-regions: west and east. The west, which had been part of different European states, has historically been inclined toward integration with Europe and presented a more negative view of Russia and the Soviet past, in addition to the predominant use of the Ukrainian language. The east, on the other hand,

⁵² LEVADA-CENTER. Konflikt s Ukrainoy [Conflict against Ukraine]. 31.03.2022. Available at: <<https://www.levada.ru/2022/03/31/konflikt-s-ukrainoj/>>. Accessed on: 03.06.2022.

⁵³ SADULAYEV, German. Svoikh ne brosayem: pro yevraziyskiye interesy i tsennosti. Za chto Rossiya vstupila v bor'bu, tsennosti geroyev Marvel i Marii Zakharovoy [We do not abandon our own: about Eurasian interests and values. Why Russia joined the fight, the values of the heroes of Marvel and Maria Zakharova]. VN News, 21.03.2022. Available at: <<https://vnnews.ru/svoikh-ne-brosaem-pro-evraziyskie-inte/>>. Accessed on: 01.09.2022.

was part of the Russian Empire for an extended period and is characterized by a higher diffusion of the Russian language (even among ethnic Ukrainians), a greater concentration of ethnic Russians, a more positive view toward the Soviet past and (before 2014) a greater inclination toward integration with Russia.⁵⁴ There is also an economic divide — the agricultural west and the industrial east. Some of the identity symbols and national heroes worshiped in the West were viewed with aversion in the East and vice versa. This historical polarization in the national identity between a Ukrainophile west and a Russophile east gained strength in the post-Soviet period, mainly in the 2000s, and ended up being reflected in the electoral-party system.⁵⁵ As a result, the country has experienced alternations of power between pro-Russian and pro-Western elites.

In late 2013 the polarization reached its peak when pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign a trade deal that could eventually facilitate Ukraine's entry into the European Union. Crowds gathered in protests in the capital Kyiv, a movement that became known as Euromaidan. The EU issue was the trigger for the mobilization, but the Yanukovich government was highly unpopular for a number of reasons.⁵⁶ After weeks, the protests acquired violent contours, with the murder of demonstrators and police officials, which culminated in the overthrow of the president and his escape to Russia. The participation of ultranationalist groups from the western regions (an issue addressed in the next section) in the radicalization of the movement caused fear in the east. Russia took advantage of these animosities to annex the Crimean Peninsula (a region with high concentration of ethnic Russians) in March 2014, and to promote armed secessionist groups in Donbas, specifically in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Due to Russia's active role in the crisis, there is a debate about the nature of the conflict in Donbas. Some authors point to domestic sources, especially the reaction of part of the local population to the violent overthrow of a legitimately elected government,⁵⁷ nostalgia for the Soviet past and the regional elites' interest in economic relations with Russia.⁵⁸ Other observers (and the Ukrainian elites) emphasize the external elements and consider that this is not a conventional separatist war, but rather an invasion,⁵⁹ since some of the main leaders of the movement were Russian citizens.⁶⁰ Russian nationalists directly participated in the combats, and there was direct economic and military support from the Kremlin, without which such armed groups would not have managed to control Donbas. Local activists were not influential

⁵⁴ There were also intense family ties and commercial interchanges.

⁵⁵ WAY, L. *Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

⁵⁶ Among them, corruption, authoritarianism (imprisonment of opponents), co-optation of Constitutional Court judges and the revision of the 2004 agreement that had strengthened the parliament.

⁵⁷ KUDELIA, S. Domestic Sources of the Donbas Insurgency. *PONARS Eurasia*, 29 set. 2014.

⁵⁸ GIULIANO, E. The Social Bases of Support for Self-determination in East Ukraine. *Ethnopolitics*, v. 14, n. 5, p. 513–522, 20 out. 2015.

ZHUKOV, Y. M. Trading hard hats for combat helmets: The economics of rebellion in eastern Ukraine. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, v. 44, n. 1, p. 1–15, fev. 2016.

⁵⁹ Oleksiy Haran is among leading Ukrainian political scientists who advocate this perspective.

⁶⁰ UMLAND, A. In Defense of Conspirology: A Rejoinder to Serhiy Kudelia's Anti-Political Analysis of the Hybrid War in Eastern Ukraine. *PONARS Eurasia*, 30 set. 2014.

from a military point of view, but were very useful as a political instrument⁶¹ to legitimize Moscow's claim that it was a "separatist" or "civil" conflict. The Kremlin propaganda addresses the issue as an internal Ukrainian crisis, a conflict between "neo-Nazi Ukrainians" (encouraged by the West) against oppressed Russian-speaking minorities and ethnic Russians.

In order to regain control over Donbas, the new Ukrainian authorities launched the so-called "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO), promoting frequent shelling that hit civilian urban areas⁶² and led to the further alienation of the region. From 2014 to July 2021, the war left around 14,000 dead, including 3,901 civilians, 4,200 Ukrainian military servicemen and 5,800 members of Russian-backed armed groups.⁶³ Over 3 million citizens abandoned the region.⁶⁴ There were civilian casualties on both sides, but the separatist-held regions, more densely populated and closer to the front, saw significantly more deaths.⁶⁵ Russia accused the West of ignoring the Ukrainian attacks and claimed that Kyiv was promoting genocide.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the armed groups backed by Russia also attacked civilian areas on several occasions⁶⁷ and tried to conquer other parts of Donbas that were under Ukrainian control, such as Mariupol — an objective partially achieved with the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. Local communities close to the front contact line have been facing a context of daily violence and crossfire since 2014.⁶⁸

Despite the fact that the Ukrainian government's attempts to retake Donbas have caused civilian deaths and a high number of displaced people, reducing the prospects of reintegrating the region into Ukraine and causing grievances in the local population and in Russian society, there are three reasons why the protection of minorities and humanitarian concerns were not among Putin's main motivations for the 2022 invasion.

⁶¹ WILSON, A. The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War. *Europe-Asia Studies*, v. 68, n. 4, p. 631–652, 20 abr. 2016.

⁶² HEAVY shelling hits centre of rebel-held Donetsk. *France 24*, 14.08.2014. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20140814-ukraine-heavy-shelling-hits-donetsk-city-centre-first-time>. Accessed on: 07.07.2022.

WALSH, N., SMITH-SPARK, L. Bodies in streets as shelling rocks Ukraine city of Donetsk. *CNN*, 30.01.2015. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/30/europe/ukraine-crisis/index.html>. Accessed on: 07.07.2022.

⁶³ RADIO Svoboda. OON pidrakhvala kil'kist' zhertv boyovykh diy na Donbasi, pochynayuchy z 2014 roku [The UN has counted the number of victims of hostilities in Donbas since 2014]. 15.07.2021. Available in: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-un-donbas-vtraty-gertvy/31359458.html>. Accessed on: 07.01.2023.

⁶⁴ Detailed number and sources provided on next pages.

⁶⁵ CRISIS Group International. Visualising the Dynamics of Combat and Negotiations in Donbas. 03.08.2021 (atualizado em fevereiro de 2022). Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/visualising-dynamics-combat-and-negotiations-donbas>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

⁶⁶ WEST'S "blind eye" policy towards shelling in Donbass can provoke Kiev attack — diplomat. *TASS*, 20.02.2021. Available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1406781>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

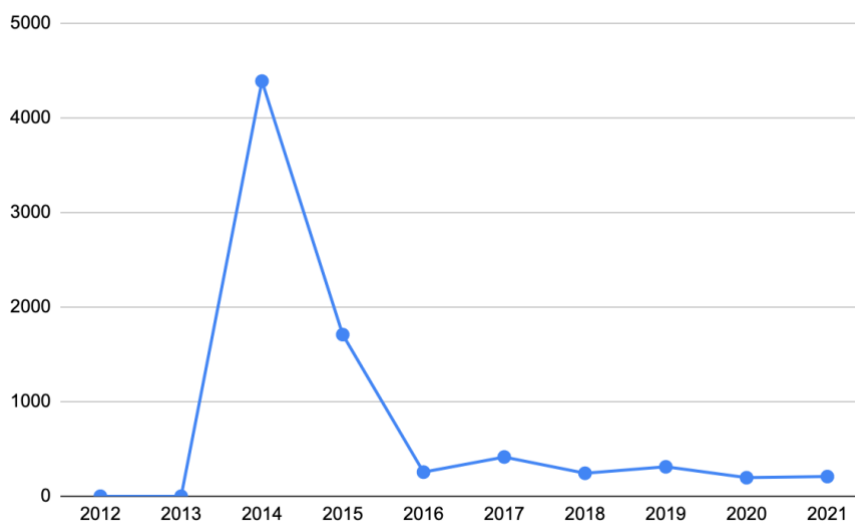
⁶⁷ HARDING, L., WALKER, S., HARRISON, E. Shelling by Russian-backed separatists raises tensions in east Ukraine. *The Guardian*, 17.02.2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/17/shelling-by-russian-backed-separatists-hits-school-in-east-ukraine>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

SHELLING Strikes Two Schools In Eastern Ukraine, Including Kindergarten. *RFERL*, 17.02.2022. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-donbass-vrubivka-shelling/31708351.html>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

⁶⁸ GONCHARUK, Tatiana. Donbas: "We're used to the shelling". *Open democracy*, 28.07.2017. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/donbas-we-re-used-to-shelling/>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

Firstly, when one observes the variation in the dynamics of the conflict, it is remarkable that the most intense moment was the initial phase (2014-2015), with a higher concentration of casualties (chart 4). From 2018 to 2021, there was a significant reduction in the intensity of fighting.⁶⁹ In the months leading up to the invasion, the number of occurrences and casualties had been experiencing a notable drop, apparently seasonal (chart 5). Contrary to the Kremlin’s arguments, there were no indications that Ukraine was planning a broad military retake of Donbas. The mass evacuation of Donbas citizens to Russia in the weeks before the February invasion, under the pretext of an imminent full attack by the Ukrainian army, was perceived as a blatant “false flag operation.”⁷⁰

Chart 4. Number of deaths in the Donbas war according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)



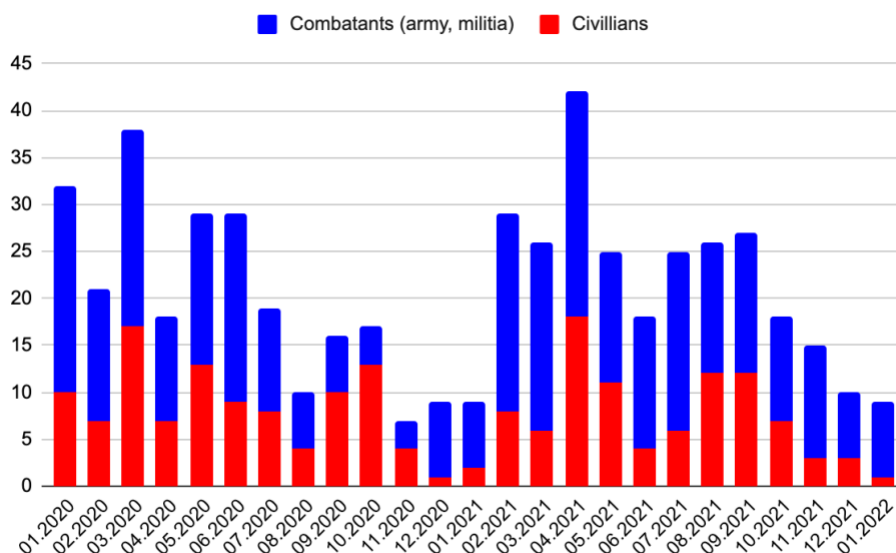
Source: compiled by the author based on data from the UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset version 22.1.⁷¹

⁶⁹ CRISIS Group International. Conflict in Ukraine’s Donbas: A Visual Explainer. 02.2022. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/conflict-ukraines-donbas-visual-explainer>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

⁷⁰ HERSZENHORN, David. Ukraine and West see false flags flying as pro-Russian separatists urge civilian evacuation. Politico, 18.02.2022. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-west-false-flags-pro-russia-separatist-urge-civilian-evacuation/>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

⁷¹ DAVIES, Shawn, Therese Pettersson & Magnus Öberg. Organized violence 1989-2021 and drone warfare. Journal of Peace Research 59(4). 2022. Note: The UCDP toll differs from other official statistics, but its inclusion is valid as it allows assessing the variation in the intensity of the conflict over time.

Chart 5. Number of deaths in Donbas in the months before the Russian 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine according to Crisis Group



Source: compiled by the author based on data from Crisis Group (2022).⁷²

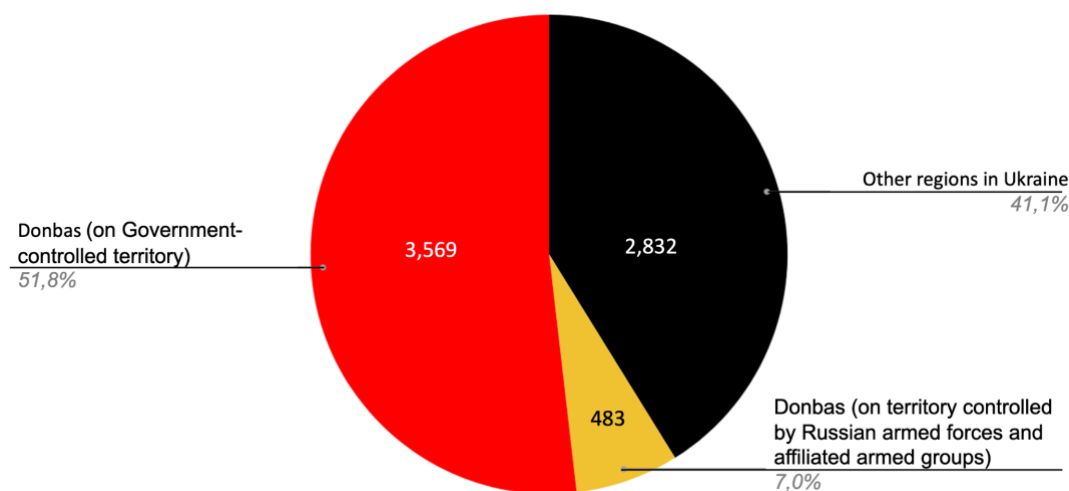
If the invasion were motivated by a humanitarian concern for the population of Donbas, it is doubtful why Moscow did not take this decision in the most intense period of the conflict, but only in a phase of significant reduction of its intensity. Moscow opted to mobilize its control over Donbas' armed groups as a bargaining tool in its relations with Ukraine from 2014 to 2021.

Secondly, the "humanitarianism" of Putin's foreign policy contradicts the results of his "special military operation" on Ukrainian territory so far. According to official data from the United Nations, in ten months of war almost 7,000 civilians were killed,⁷³ a toll higher than the number of civilian deaths (near 4,000) in eight years of war in Donbas, not counting the number of wounded and disabled people, or the tens of thousands of casualties among Ukrainian and Russian soldiers. Of this total, over 3,500 civilians were killed in areas of Donbas including those with a predominance of Russian-speaking population (chart 6). Therefore, Putin's action to protect the "Russian World" has so far inflicted more damage exactly in the Russian-speaking regions. According to the Kremlin's double-standard approach, the civilian casualties resulting from the attempts by the Ukrainian state to regain control of part of its territory correspond to a genocide, but the civilian casualties (in that same region) occasioned by its own actions are only collateral effects justified by "legitimate" ends.

Chart 6. Civilian death toll in the war in Ukraine from 24 February to 26 December 2022

⁷² CRISIS Group International. Conflict in Ukraine's Donbas: A Visual Explainer. 02.2022. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/conflict-ukraines-donbas-visual-explainer>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

⁷³ UNHCR (ONU). Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation. 27.12.2022. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-civilian-casualties-26-december-2022-enruuk>. Accessed on: 02.01.2023.



Source: compiled by the author based on OHCHR data (2022).⁷⁴

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has expressed concerns that the Russian armed forces are not respecting international humanitarian law, by causing daily civilian casualties, extensive destruction of urban infrastructure, arbitrary detention, and mass displacement of civilians. She also mentioned infractions in the detentions by Ukraine.⁷⁵ Ukrainian authorities report casualty figures much higher⁷⁶ than those of the UN and accuse Russia of having committed genocidal acts in Bucha, Irpen, Hostomel, Mariupol, Chernihiv and Kharkiv.⁷⁷ The humanitarian catastrophe can also be measured by the high number of civilians who had to leave their places of residence. By January 2023, around 7.9 million refugees were recorded across Europe (since the onset of the war)⁷⁸ and 4.9 million of

⁷⁴ UNHCR (ONU). Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation. 27.12.2022. Available at:

<<https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-civilian-casualties-26-december-2022-enruuk>>. Accessed on: 02.01.2023.

⁷⁵ OHCHR (ONU). High Commissioner for Human Rights: High Numbers of Civilian Casualties in Ukraine Raise Concerns that Attacks by Russia are not Complying with International Humanitarian Law. 05.07.2022. Available at: <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/07/high-commissioner-human-rights-high-numbers-civilian-casualties-ukraine>>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

⁷⁶ KARMANAU, Y., SCHRECK, A., ANNA, C. Mariupol mayor says siege has killed more than 10K civilians. Associated Press, 11.04.2022. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-state-of-the-union-address-zelenskyy-biden-kyiv-7cc069b80178629a60f4f2d166348d45?fbclid=IwAR2ZV0fSOOuZJnG_UYw3PL4fYzd6LYQO346mdSlQBxwcz4Js13VoLFdVh0Q>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

⁷⁷ UKRAINIAN forensic investigators start exhuming bodies from Bucha mass grave. Reuters, 08.04.2022. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-forensic-investigators-start-exhuming-bodies-bucha-mass-grave-2022-04-08/>>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

BALACHUK, Irina. Na Kharkivshchyni spravzhnii henotsyd, hynut' desyatky myrnykh – holova oblasti [There is a real genocide in the Kharkiv region, dozens of civilians are dying – governor of the region]. Ukrayinska Pravda. 28.02.2022. Available at: <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/02/28/7326854/>>. Accessed on: 08.07.2022.

⁷⁸ UNHCR. Ukraine Refugee Situation. 03.01.2023. Available at: <<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>>. Accessed on: 07.01.2023.

internally displaced people were registered in Ukraine⁷⁹, one of the biggest migration crises in history.

Thirdly, the Kremlin's double-standard approach is also evident when one examines how it has tackled separatism in Russia. The Ukrainian government undoubtedly bears responsibility for civilian deaths in Donbas in its attempt to regain control over the region. However, Moscow's wars to fight separatists and regain control of Chechnya left tens of thousands of civilians dead⁸⁰ and journalists who investigated cases of human rights violations in Chechnya were murdered.⁸¹ The solution of the Chechen conflict, at high humanitarian costs, is cited by opinion polls as one of Putin's major political achievements.⁸² Other former Soviet republics, such as Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova also witnessed separatist conflicts with a high humanitarian impact and Russian direct or indirect interference.

It should be noted that the Kremlin's discourse about the protection of ethnic Russian/Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine (the "Russian World" doctrine) is not limited to Donbas, but also addresses other regions in eastern/southern Ukraine that were before considered "pro-Russian" and, according to Moscow, had been oppressed by nationalists and the Ukrainian state.⁸³ During the 2014 tensions, around 50 pro-Russian activists were slaughtered in the southern city of Odessa⁸⁴. However, apart from this episode, there is no evidence of systematic violence against Russians and Russian-speaking communities: less than 10% claimed to have witnessed discrimination against Russians and, although phobia toward Russians has grown, it is marginal and much lower than phobia toward other ethnic minorities.⁸⁵ The Kremlin's argument about the oppression of Russian-speaking minorities revolves around the language issue. Despite state pressure aiming at promoting the diffusion of Ukrainian language and a regionally polarized discussion over controversial language policies,⁸⁶ Russian is still widely spoken. Zelensky's comedy series that propelled him

⁷⁹ MINISTRY of Social Policy of Ukraine. Sotsial'nyy zakhyst-2022 u tsyfrakh i faktakh: Pidtrymka VPO [Social protection-2022 in figures and facts: Support for IDPs]. 04.01.2023. Available at: <https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/22495.html>. Accessed on: 07.01.2023.

⁸⁰ CHECHEN official puts death toll for 2 wars at up to 160,000. The New York Times, 16.08.2005. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/16/world/europe/chechen-official-puts-death-toll-for-2-wars-at-up-to-160000.html>. Accessed on: 11.07.2022.

⁸¹ Anna Politkovskaia (2006) and Natalia Estemirova (2009).

⁸² Levada-Center. Balans dostizhenij i neudach Putina [The balance of achievements and failures of Putin]. 08.04.2021. Available at: <https://www.levada.ru/2021/04/08/balansdostizhenij-i-neudach-putina/>. Accessed on: 12.04.2021.

⁸³ TOKAREV, Aleksey. Pochemu Moskva ne khochet i ne budet prisoyedinyat' Donbass [Why Moscow does not want and will not annex Donbas]. Vedomosti, 16.05.2021. Available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2021/05/16/869921-moskva-donbass/>. Accessed on: 11.07.2022.

⁸⁴ AMOS, H., SALEM, H. Ukraine clashes: dozens dead after Odessa building fire. The Guardian, 02.05.2014. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/02/ukraine-dead-odessa-building-fire/>. Accessed on: 11.07.2022.

⁸⁵ Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (NAN). Dodatok: tablytsi monitorynhovoho opytuvannya "Ukrayins'ke suspil'stvo - 2018" [Monitored poll tables "Ukrainian Society - 2018"]. NAN, Ukrayiny, 2018. Available at: <https://i-soc.com.ua/ua/edition/ukrainske-suspilstvo/issues/>. Accessed on: 20.05.2022.

⁸⁶ CHABARAY, Hanna. Po rusyfikovanykh mistakh. Shcho ukrayintsi dumayut' pro movnyy zakon ta «utysky rosiys'komovnykh». [In Russified cities. What Ukrainians Think About Language Law and "Oppression of

politically was shown mostly in Russian. According to a survey conducted in August 2022, 13% speak Russian at home and 34% both Russian and Ukrainian.⁸⁷

Ultrationalist groups are more of a threat to minorities like the Roma than to ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking groups — indeed, they have Russian-speaking members and Russian is sometimes used as a *lingua franca* by them.⁸⁸ The fact that Russia has faced strong resistance from Russian-speaking eastern and southern regions shows that the language issue does not stimulate an automatic loyalty to the Russian state and Putin’s expansionist ambitions; possibly, Moscow did not expect this reaction from the local population. Even in Donbas, solidarity with the “Russian World” in 2014 was ambiguous. Around 1.7 million inhabitants took refuge in Russia,⁸⁹ but another 1.4 million took refuge in other parts of Ukraine.⁹⁰ Public opinion polls in early 2014 showed that only 29% of the local population supported separatism.⁹¹

Putin’s war has contributed to overcoming the historical national identity polarization between a pro-Russian east and a pro-EU/NATO west.⁹² After 2014, positive attitudes toward Russia dropped sharply, while support for NATO membership, hitherto low, grew substantially (Chart 7). This is due, in part, to the fact that the most Russophile regions have fallen out of Ukrainian control, but also to a growing perception of Russia as an aggressor state, even in the east. Just after the February 2022 invasion, support for joining NATO reached a record 76% of

Russophones"]. Tyzhden, 15.09.2020. Available at: <<https://tyzhden.ua/Society/2477311>>. Accessed on: 11.07.2022.

⁸⁷ RATING Group. Simnadsyate zahal’nonatsional’ne opytuvannya: Identychnist’. Patriotyzm. Tsinnosti (17-18 serpnya 2022) [XVII National Survey: Identity. Patriotism. Values (August 17 to 18, 2022)]. 23.08.2022. Available at:

<https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/s_mnadcyate_zagalnonac_onalne_opituvannya_dentichn_st_patr_otizm_c_nnost_17-18_serpnya_2022.html>. Accessed on: 07.01.2023.

⁸⁸ WALKER, Shaun. Azov fighters are Ukraine's greatest weapon and may be its greatest threat. The Guardian, 10.09.2014. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/10/azov-far-right-fighters-ukraine-neo-nazisl>>. Accessed on: 11.07.2022.

⁸⁹ OKOLO 1,7 mln ukrainsev s 2014 goda obratilis’ k RF za ubezshishchem [About 1.7 million Ukrainians have applied to asylum in Russia since 2014]. Izvestiya, 09.06.2021. Available at: <<https://iz.ru/1176313/2021-06-09/okolo-17-mln-ukraintcev-s-2014-goda-obratilis-k-rf-za-ubezhishcheml>>. Accessed on: 11.07.2022.

⁹⁰ MINISTRY of Social Policy (MSP) of Ukraine. Oblikovano 1 473 650 vnutrishn’o peremishchenykh osib [1.473.650 internally displaced people were counted]. 06.07.2021. Available at: <<https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/20309.html>>. Accessed on: 11.07.2022.

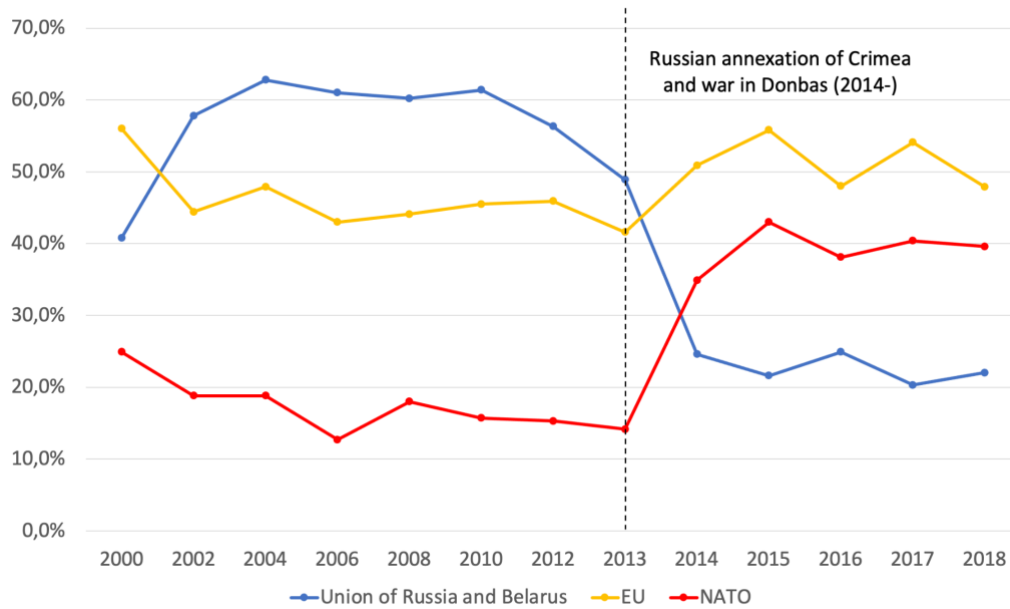
Pereselentsi v Ukrayini: skil’ky yikh i v yakykh oblastiakh zareyestrovani. Slovo i Dilo, 29.07.2021. Available at: <<https://www.slovoidilo.ua/2021/07/29/infografika/suspilstvo/pereselenci-ukrayini-skilky-yix-yakyx-oblastiyax-zareyestrovani>>. Accessed on: 11.07.2022.

⁹¹ GIULIANO, E. Who supported separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and popular opinion at the start of the Ukraine crisis. Post-Soviet Affairs, v. 34, n. 2–3, p. 158–178, 04.05.2018. About 15% expressed uncertainty and 52% were opposed. At the same time, 40% supported the adoption of a federal structure, 68% opposed radical nationalists and stated that the Right Sector party was a threat, as well as 68% defended Ukraine’s entry into the Customs Union, an economic bloc promoted by Russia.

⁹² AREL, D. How Ukraine has become more Ukrainian. Post-Soviet Affairs, v. 34, n. 2–3, p. 186–189, 2018. FERRARO, Vicente. A Guerra na Ucrânia: uma análise do conflito e de seus impactos nas sociedades russa e Ucrâniana [The War in Ukraine: An analysis of the conflict and its impacts on Russian and Ukrainian societies]. Conjuntura Austral: Journal of the Global South, v. 13, n. 64, p. 25–50, 2022. Available at: <https://www.seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/ConjunturaAustral/article/view/128157>. Accessed on: 04.01.2023.

the population (Chart 8). In the east, despite having recorded a lower percentage (55%), only 16% did not support the measure.⁹³

Chart 7. Support for Ukraine's membership in the Union of Russia and Belarus, the European Union and NATO⁹⁴

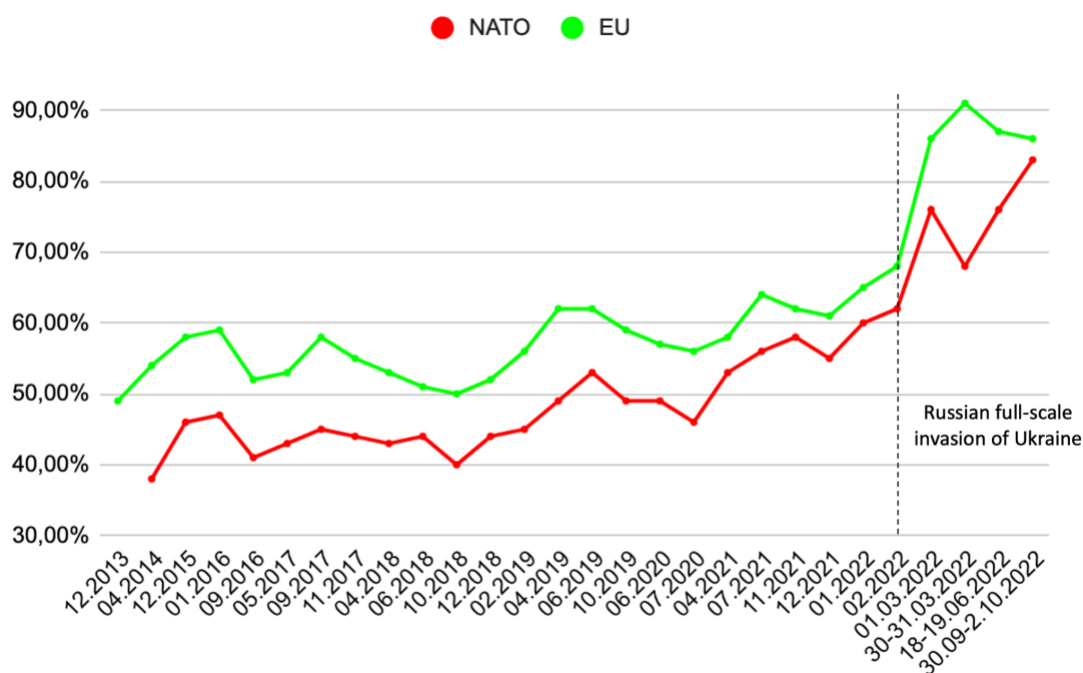


Source: compiled by the author based on data from the report “Ukrayins’ke suspil’stvo” by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (2018).⁹⁵

⁹³ RATING Group. Zahal’nonatsional’ne opytuvannya: Ukrayina v umovakh viyny (1 bereznia 2022) [National survey: Ukraine in the conditions of war (March 1, 2022)]. Available at: https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/obschenacionalnyy_opros_ukraina_v_usloviyah_voyny_1_marta_2022.html?fbclid=IwAR2LvNLxicdO0OIdLoQF3NvHPpAfi7PbbV2GjIHv2IzTSinKBF74u6GzFz4l. Accessed on: 11.07.2022.

⁹⁴ The survey offered three responses regarding attitudes towards Ukraine's entry into these blocs ("probably positive", "probably negative" and "difficult to answer").

⁹⁵ Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (NAN). Dodatok: tablytsi monitorynhovoho opytuvannya "Ukrayins’ke suspil’stvo - 2018" [Monitored poll tables "Ukrainian Society - 2018"]. NAN, Ukrayiny, 2018. Available at: <https://i-soc.com.ua/ua/edition/ukrainske-suspilstvo/issues/>. Accessed on: 20.05.2022.

Chart 8. Support for Ukraine's membership in the European Union and NATO

Source: compiled by the author based on data from Rating Group (2022).⁹⁶ Presented also in Ferraro (2022).⁹⁷

The current war may provoke long-term effects on the relations between Ukraine and Russia. Resentment and animosity resulting from collective social traumas impact the very national identity and perceptions about the “other.” Anti-Russian tendencies, which gained momentum with the Russian aggression from 2014 onward, have been reinforced since February 2022. Between 2014 and 2019, the number of Russian-speaking schools was reduced from 621 to 194 and this trend has continued.⁹⁸ Accusations that Russia promotes the “genocide

⁹⁶ RATING Group. Stavlennyya ukrayintziv do vyrishennyya pytannya okupovanykh terytoriy [Attitude of Ukrainians towards the issue of occupied territories]. 02.10.2019. Available at: https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/otnoshenie_ukraincev_k_resheniyu_voprosa_okkupirovannykh_territoriy.html. Accessed on: 20.10.2022.

_____. Zahal'nonatsional'ne opytuvannya: Ukrayina v umovakh viyny (1 bereznya 2022) [National poll: Ukraine at war (March 1, 2022)]. 01.03.2022. Available at: https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/obschenatsionalnyy_opros_ukraina_v_usloviyah_voyny_1_marta_2022.html. Accessed on: 06.10.2022.

_____. Simnadsyate zahal'nonatsional'ne opytuvannya: Identychnist'. Patriotyzm. Tsinnosti (17-18 serpnya 2022) [XVII National Survey: Identity. Patriotism. Values (August 17 to 18, 2022)]. 23.08.2022. Available at:

https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/s_mnadcyate_zagalnonac_onalne_opytuvannya_dentichn_st_patr_otizm_c_nnost_17-18_serpnya_2022.html. Accessed on: 04.10.2022.

_____. Dynamika zovnishn'o-politychnykh nastroyiv naseleennya (1-2 zhovtnya 2022) [Dynamics of the population's foreign policy attitudes (October 1 to 2, 2022)]. 03.10.2022. Available at: https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/dinam_ka_zovn_shno-pol_tichnih_nastro_v_naseleennya_1-2_zhovtnya_2022.html. Accessed on: 05.10.2022.

⁹⁷ FERRARO, Vicente. The War in Ukraine: An analysis of the conflict and its impacts on Russian and Ukrainian societies. *Journal of the Global South*, v. 13, n. 64, p. 25–50, 2022. Available in: <https://www.seer.ufg.br/index.php/ConjunturaAustral/article/view/128157>. Accessed on: 04.01.2023.

⁹⁸ SHCHUR, M. HORBATENKO, S. Mayzhe 200 tysyach uchniv pereyshly na ukrayins'ku, i tse nezvorotn'o – movnyy ombudsmen [Almost 200,000 students have switched to Ukrainian, and that is irreversible - linguistic ombudsman]. *Radio Svoboda*, 03.09.2020. Available at: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/mayzhe-200-tysyach->

of the Ukrainian people” and discussions on the need to “decolonize” and “de-Russify” Ukraine have gained resonance. Russian and Soviet street names, monuments, and symbols have been replaced. The study of Russian literature in schools has been questioned. Classical Russian authors are being considered instruments of an “imperial culture,” since on their works there is exaltation of the Russian Empire’s territorial conquests.⁹⁹ The proponents of these measures argue that Russian was disseminated by colonial policies with the repression of the Ukrainian language. Thus, the adoption of laws and efforts to disseminate the latter are conceived as an affirmative action policy and positive discrimination. The limits of “decolonization,” however, risk being blurred by Russophobia, affecting the rights of minorities. There are records of discrimination against internally displaced persons from the east.¹⁰⁰ Today, less than 10% of the population corresponds to ethnic Russians, but the identity issue in the country is still complex, involving linguistic, regional, historical and economic cleavages that are not necessarily congruent. The division between a Russian-speaking east and a Ukrainian-speaking west is a simplified abstraction of that reality.

III. The "just war" against Nazism

The “denazification” of Ukraine was another pretext widely mobilized by the Kremlin to justify its bellicose policies. Nearly 20% of Russians point to “denazification” as a fundamental reason for starting the “special military operation”, the third most mentioned justification.¹⁰¹ Three elements have facilitated Moscow’s instrumentalization of this narrative: the identity policy of Ukraine’s central government, especially after the Orange Revolution in 2004; the performance of ultranationalist parties in some political events; and the formation of paramilitary groups, with neo-Nazi members, during the Donbas War of 2014 onward.

Since the mid-2000s, Ukrainian identity politics has been exalting the figure of some controversial historical personalities, such as the fighters of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). These groups fought for Ukraine’s independence from the USSR and against Germany in the 1940s-50s, but some of their members collaborated with the Nazi occupation and participated in massacres of Poles and Jews. One such controversial leader was Stepan Bandera, who in 2010 was posthumously awarded the title “Hero of Ukraine” by then-pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko — the decision was later overturned by the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. Overall, UPA fighters are seen in Ukraine’s western regions as heroes in the struggle for national independence and in the east as radical nationalists and Nazi collaborators. Just as in Russia

[uchniv-pereyshly-na-ukrayins%CA%B9ku-i-tse-nezvorotn%CA%B9o-movnyy-ombudsmen/30817619.html](https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2022/07/13/7357778/)>. Accessed on: 12.07.2022.

⁹⁹ BERKOVSKIY, Vladislav. Henotsyd – tse nevid'yemne zavdannya suchasnoyi rosiys'koyi kul'tury [Genocide is an integral task of modern Russian culture]. *Ukrayinska Pravda*, 13.07.2022. Available at: <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2022/07/13/7357778/>>. Accessed on: 14.07.2022.

¹⁰⁰ SEREDA, Evhen. Yak v Ukrayini zhyvut' pereselentsi. Rozpovidayemo v tsyfrakh. [How displaced people live in Ukraine. We inform in numbers]. *Ukrayinska Pravda*, 05.07.2020. Available at: <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2020/07/5/7257986/>>. Accessed on: 06.07.2022.

¹⁰¹ LEVADA-CENTER. Konflikt s Ukrainoy [Conflict against Ukraine]. 31.03.2022. Available at: <<https://www.levada.ru/2022/03/31/konflikt-s-ukrainoj/>>. Accessed on: 03.06.2022.

there is a romanticization/idealization of Stalin's image (in which his role in the defeat of Nazism is exalted while facts such as his relationship with Nazis before the invasion, draconian repression, mass torture and detentions, deportations of ethnic minorities and massacres are ignored or relativized), in Ukraine there is a similar situation with the UPA. Its links with Nazism and massacres are downplayed (sometimes even denied) and its struggle for independence exalted. The national identity polarization between east and west gained strength with these controversial topics and Moscow's propaganda. The Kremlin associated the rehabilitation of the UPA with a process of "nazification" of the country – its propaganda machine often uses the term *banderovtsy* (Banderites, associated with Stepan Bandera) to refer not only to ultranationalist groups, but also to any group promoting Ukrainian identity from pro-Western/anti-Russian positions dissociated from Russia. In this regional identity polarization, stereotypes of a "Nazi" west and a "separatist" or "traitor" east (Russia's "fifth column" of collaborators in Ukraine) gained currency.¹⁰²

From the second half of the 2000s onward, the performance of ultranationalists, including neo-Nazis (albeit few in number), contributed to deepen this regional polarization. They were present majorly in the right-wing *Svoboda* (Liberty) party, whose electoral representation was until then low, with less than 1% of the electoral results. In the 2012 parliamentary elections, due to its strong opposition to President Viktor Yanukovich,¹⁰³ the party reached 10% of the electorate (37 seats from 450). Although the 2013-2014 Euromaidan movement counted on protesters from different ideological spectrums and social groups, leaders of *Svoboda* and another ultranationalist group, *Pravyy Sektor* (Right Sector), took part in the radicalization of the movement and the overthrow of Yanukovich. A former member and founder of the *Svoboda* party, Andriy Parubiy, was later appointed to high posts in the national security sector and in the Ukrainian parliament.¹⁰⁴ Such facts facilitated the diffusion of the Kremlin's narrative that Euromaidan was a coup d'état promoted by neo-Nazis ("ukronazis") and a "fascist junta," which generated apprehension in parts of Ukraine's eastern Russian-speaking and Russophile population, facilitating the annexation of Crimea and the Russian interference in Donbas. *Svoboda's* performance did not last: in the 2014 elections, it obtained 4.71% of the votes (6 seats in 450), and in the 2019 elections, in coalition with other extremist parties such as *Pravyy Sektor* and the *Natsionalnyi korpus* (National Corps), only 2.15% (1 seat).¹⁰⁵

Contrary to the Russian narrative that Ukraine is controlled by Nazis, the recent low performance of far-right parties reveals that ultranationalist ideas have low adherence in society, even in the face of external aggression (propitious to nationalism and radicalism) and

¹⁰² There are several regional pejorative terms such as *ukronazi*, *mankurty* and *separiy*.

¹⁰³ SHEKHOVTSOV, A.; UMLAND, A. Ukraine's Radical Right. *Journal of Democracy*, v. 25, n. 3, p. 58–63, 2014, p.62.

¹⁰⁴ Andriy Parubiy was secretary of the National Security and Defense Council (RNBO) in 2014 and speaker of the parliament (the *Verkhovna Rada*) from 2016 to 2019.

¹⁰⁵ CENTRAL Electoral Commission of Ukraine. Pozacherhovi vybory narodnykh deputativ Ukrayiny 21 lypnya 2019 roku [Extraordinary election of people's deputies of Ukraine on July 21, 2019]. Available at: <https://www.cvk.gov.ua/vibory_category/vibori-narodnih-deputativ-ukraini/pozachergovi-vibori-narodnih-deputativ-ukraini-21-lipnya-2019-roku.html>. Accessed on: 17.07.2022.

the war that the country has been suffering since 2014. A survey by the Pew Research Center¹⁰⁶ shows that the incidence of phobia toward Jews in Ukraine is one of the lowest in Eastern Europe, much lower than in Russia; President Volodymyr Zelensky himself is of Jewish origin. The rates of xenophobia also did not show substantial variations in recent years,¹⁰⁷ although the number of registered cases of discrimination has seen significant growth.¹⁰⁸ The change may be associated both with a greater incidence of discrimination and a greater activity of the institutions that fight these crimes.

Regarding the performance of ultranationalist paramilitary groups with neo-Nazi elements, at least two stood out since the 2014 war in Donbas – the Aidar battalion and, mainly, the Azov battalion. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch,¹⁰⁹ Amnesty International,¹¹⁰ and the United Nations¹¹¹ have accused these “volunteer battalions” of committing abuses, intimidation, torture and executions during the Donbas conflict. There are records that far-right extremist groups promoted attacks against Roma minorities, members of the LGBT+ community, feminists and activists¹¹² in addition to the desecration of religious temples (such as synagogues) and anti-Semitic, racist and pro-violence statements.¹¹³ Freedom House declared that the actions of these extremist groups and the leniency of the authorities represent a threat to democracy in the country.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁶ PEW Research Center. In some countries in Central and Eastern Europe, roughly one-in-five adults or more say they would not accept Jews as fellow citizens. 28.03.2018. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/28/most-people-accept-jews-as-fellow-citizens-and-neighbors-but-a-minority-do-not/ft_18-03-26_polandholocaustlaws_map/. Accessed on: 06.07.2022.

¹⁰⁷ KIIS. Mezhetnicheskiye Predubezhdeniya V Ukraine [Interethnic prejudice in Ukraine]. 09.2019, Available at: <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=904&page=1>. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

¹⁰⁸ STRAKH "chuzhoho". Chy ye v Ukrayini problema z rasyzmom i neterymistyiu [Fear of "different". Is there a problem with racism and intolerance in Ukraine?]. RBK Ukrayina, 10.09.2021. Available at: <https://daily.rbc.ua/rus/show/strah-chuzhogo-ukraine-problema-rasizmom-1631182082.html>. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

¹⁰⁹ HUMAN Rights Watch; Amnesty International. “You Don’t Exist” Arbitrary Detentions, Enforced Disappearances, and Torture in Eastern Ukraine. 07.2016. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/ukraine0716web_2.pdf. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

¹¹⁰ AMNESTY International. Ukraine must stop ongoing abuses and war crimes by pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces. 08.09.2014. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/09/ukraine-must-stop-ongoing-abuses-and-war-crimes-pro-ukrainian-volunteer-forces/>. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

AMNESTY International. Breaking Bodies: Torture and summary killings in Eastern Ukraine. 2015. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EUR5016832015ENGLISH.pdf>. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

¹¹¹ OHCHR (UN). Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 16 February to 15 May 2016. 05.2016. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine_14th_HRMMU_Report.pdf. Accessed on: 02.07.2022.

¹¹² HUMAN Rights Watch. Ukraine: Investigate, Punish Hate Crimes. 14.06.2018. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/14/ukraine-investigate-punish-hate-crimes>. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

¹¹³ BORTNIK, R. O., M. Ye. Semenov, Ye.A. Antonenko. Ksenofobiya V Ukraine: Prichiny, Formy Sushchestvovaniya I Posledstviya [Xenophobia in Ukraine: causes, forms and consequences]. Dnepr: Serednyak T.K. Ukrainskiy Institut analiza i menedzhmenta politiki, 2019.

¹¹⁴ LIKHACHEV, Vyacheslav. Far-right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy. Freedom House, 2018. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/analytical-brief/2018/far-right-extremism-threat-ukrainian-democracy>. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

In November 2014, after pressure to contain the action of paramilitary groups, the Azov battalion was incorporated as a regiment into the National Guard of Ukraine. Ukraine's army relied on its support to repel attempts by pro-Russian military groups to conquer other areas of Donbas in 2014 and 2015, as well as in the battle of Mariupol in 2022 against the Russian army. These episodes favored the social recognition of Azov battalion members as national heroes. The controversy over the group¹¹⁵ reached the US Congress, which discussed its classification as a terrorist organization and the ban on sending weapons to this regiment in 2018.¹¹⁶

Part of the Ukrainian media claims that the association of Azov with neo-Nazism was a Russian propaganda strategy, successfully disseminated in the West, and that in the regiment there are volunteers from different ideological spectrums and ethnic groups, including Russians and Jews.¹¹⁷ It is also argued that neo-Nazi and ultra-radical activists participated in the founding of the regiment in 2014, but left it later, and although human rights violations were recorded in Donbas by some of its members, they were not orchestrated in a systematic way (as in the case of the armed groups backed by Russia), and even the Russian media does not have conclusive evidence of war crimes.¹¹⁸ After the 2022 Russian invasion, representatives of Azov declared that they “despise both Nazism and Stalinism,” since Ukraine was a victim of both regimes and ideologies.¹¹⁹ Although the group denies such accusations, some of its members and founders are adepts of neo-Nazism and its official symbols make references to Nazism.¹²⁰ Among the foreign volunteers fighting in the conflict, there are supporters of the extreme right.¹²¹

There is evidence of the actions of these groups and the leniency of the authorities — discussing the extreme right issue has become a taboo in society for fear of feeding Kremlin propaganda. Nonetheless, it is incorrect to claim that Ukraine is a “Nazi” state or has a “Nazi-

¹¹⁵ The group was even banned on Facebook. Source: JAMAL, Urooba. Facebook is reversing its ban on posts praising Ukraine's far-right Azov Battalion, report says. Business Insider, 25.02.2022. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-reverses-ban-praise-ukraine-far-right-forces-2022-2>. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

¹¹⁶ KHEEL, Rebecca. Congress bans arms to Ukraine militia linked to neo-Nazis. The Hill, 27.03.2018. Available at: <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/380483-congress-bans-arms-to-controversial-ukrainian-militia-linked-to-neo-nazis/>. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

¹¹⁷ SKLYAREVSKA, Gala. Pochemu «Azov» — ne «neonatsyst:skyy batal'on» [Why "Azov" is not a "neo-Nazi battalion"]. DM Media Sapens, 04.06.2022. Available at: <https://ms.detector.media/propaganda-ta-vplivi/post/29605/2022-06-04-pochemu-azov-ne-neonatsystskyy-batalon/>. Accessed on: 01.07.2022.

¹¹⁸ MOSKALENKO, Yuliya. Polk «Azov»: otvety na samyye rasprostranennyye na Zapade voprosy o spetsotryade Natsgvardii ["Azov" regiment: answers to the most common questions in the West about the National Guard special regiment]. Zerkalo Nedeli, 03.04.2022. Available at: <https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/polk-azov-otvety-na-samye-rasprostranennyye-na-zapade-voprosy-o-spetsotryade-natshvardii.html>. Accessed on: 02.07.2022.

¹¹⁹ ETRENKO, Roman. Polk "Azov" obratilsya k rossiyanam i pozhelal svergnut' Putina ["Azov" regiment addressed the Russians and wished to overthrow Putin]. Ukrayinska Pravda, 28.03.2022. Available at: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2022/03/28/7335237/>. Accessed on: 02.07.2022.

¹²⁰ WALKER, Shaun. Azov fighters are Ukraine's greatest weapon and may be its greatest threat. The Guardian, 10.09.2014. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/10/azov-far-right-fighters-ukraine-neo-nazis>

¹²¹ HARP, Seth. Foreign Fighters in Ukraine Could Be a Time Bomb for Their Home Countries. The Intercept, 30.06.2022. Available at: <https://theintercept.com/2022/06/30/ukraine-azov-neo-nazi-foreign-fighter/>. Accessed on: 02.07.2022.

oriented” society.¹²² According to representatives of the Counter Extremism Project, far-right actors are present on both sides of the conflict (including in Russia and the Donbas areas controlled by separatist armed groups), but there is a bias in associating the problem only with Ukraine.¹²³ For Likhachev, this problem stems in part from Russian state propaganda and disinformation efforts to legitimate the occupation.¹²⁴

In fact, there are normative contradictions in the Kremlin’s justification for combating Nazism, since in Russia itself there are ultranationalist groups (with neo-Nazi members), some of which count on the connivance and even collaboration from the Kremlin¹²⁵ in the so-called “managed nationalism” strategy aimed at mobilizing the support of these groups to the regime.¹²⁶

In the second half of the 2000s, Russia recorded a high number of violent racist attacks (including homicides) against ethnic minorities, mainly immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia.¹²⁷ An activist and a journalist were murdered by neo-Nazis in 2009.¹²⁸ Since the early 2000s, there were at least seven cases¹²⁹ of major local ethnic clashes between ethnic Russians and minorities. A major episode, of great resonance, happened in 2013, after the murder of a Russian and ended with riots (*pogroms*) in street markets run by minorities on the outskirts of Moscow¹³⁰ and mass arrests of immigrants.¹³¹ The problem of xenophobia still

¹²² COLBORNE, Michael. Silence won’t make the Ukrainian far right go away. *The New Statesman*, 22.02.2022. Available at: <<https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/02/silence-wont-make-the-ukrainian-far-right-go-away>>. Accessed on: 02.07.2022.

¹²³ COUNTER Extremism Project. New CEP Report: Career Break or New Career? Extremist Foreign Fighters in Ukraine. 04.05.2020. Available at: <<https://www.counterextremism.com/news/freetags/azov-regiment>>. Accessed on: 02.07.2022.

¹²⁴ LIKHACHEV, Vyacheslav. Ksenofobiya v Ukraine posle Maydana: chto izmenilos’? [Xenophobia in Ukraine after the Maidan: what has changed?]. Helsinki Association for Human Rights, 28.04.2014. Available at: <<https://ccl.org.ua/ru/positions/ksenofobyia-v-ukrayne-posle-majdana-chto-yzmenilos/>>. Accessed on: 02.07.2022.

¹²⁵ HORVATH, Robert. Putin’s fascists: the Russian state’s long history of cultivating homegrown neo-Nazis. *The Conversation*, 21.03.2022. Available at: <<https://theconversation.com/putins-fascists-the-russian-states-long-history-of-cultivating-homegrown-neo-nazis-178535>>. Accessed on: 02.07.2022.

¹²⁶ HORVATH, R. Putin’s fascists: *Russkii Obraz* and the politics of managed nationalism in Russia. Routledge, 2021.

¹²⁷ SEVORTYAN, Anna. Ksenofobiya v postsovetsoy Rossii [Xenophobia in Post-Soviet Russia]. *The Equal Rights Review*, No 1–7 (2008–2011). Available at:

<<https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/Anna%20Sevortyan.pdf>>. Accessed on: 28.06.2022.

RUSSIA’S new racism. *The Guardian*, 06.10.2006. Available at:

<<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2006/oct/06/guardianweekly.guardianweekly11>>

¹²⁸ RUSSIA nationalist leader jailed for life over hate crimes. *BBC News*, 24.07.2015. Available at:

<<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33657409>>. Accessed on: 28.06.2022.

¹²⁹ Kondopoga (2006); Stavropol (2007); Manezhnaya square in Moscow (2010); Udomlya (2013); Pugachev (2013); Biryulyovo Zapadnoye, in Moscow (2013); Chemodanovka (2019).

¹³⁰ BESPORYADKI v Biryulevo [Disorder in Biryulevo]. *Kommersant*, 30.12.2013. Available at:

<<https://www.kommersant.ru/gallery/2319324#id933209>>. Accessed on: 28.06.2022.

¹³¹ AMNESTY International. Russia: Detention of 1,200 migrants ‘discriminatory and unlawful’. 15.10.2013.

Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/10/russia-detention-migrants-discriminatory-and-unlawful/>>. Accessed on: 28.06.2022.

persists, albeit on a smaller scale.¹³² The nationalist slogan “Russia for (ethnic) Russians”¹³³ has enjoyed significant support (51% in 2020).¹³⁴ Another social minority, the LGBT+ community, has long been suffering homophobia and repression by the Russian state and radical groups.¹³⁵

Controversial nationalist leaders, like the recently deceased Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, have received widespread media attention on major state channels. Zhirinovskiy was known for his xenophobic statements, such as the proposal to “encircle” the territory of the North Caucasus (a region that concentrates several ethnic groups, mostly Muslims) with barbed wire and to introduce restrictive measures to reduce the birth rate in the region.¹³⁶ His party, the LDPR, won 7.55% of the votes in the 2021 parliamentary elections. Although it presents itself as an opposition party, it often endorses government initiatives. Another controversial nationalist group is the Imperial Russian Movement, which played a significant role in the onset of the war in Donbas in 2014.¹³⁷

In recent years, Moscow’s ties with ultranationalist groups have been remarkable, such as with the European extreme right (Marine Le Pen¹³⁸ in France and the German AfD party¹³⁹), the Russian mercenary group “Wagner” (Rusich unit, which has neo-Nazi members and operates in conflicts abroad, including in Ukraine),¹⁴⁰ and nationalist paramilitary groups that took part in the Donbas war, especially the Sparta battalion (with neo-Nazi members and accused of torture and summary executions in the conflict;¹⁴¹ one of its leaders, Vladimir

¹³² YUDINA, Nataliya. Ksenofobiya v tsifrakh: Prestupleniya nenavisti i protivodeystviye im v Rossii v 2017 godu [Xenophobia in Numbers: Hate Crimes and Fighting them in Russia in 2017]. Sova-Center, 31.01.2018. Available at: <https://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/publications/2018/01/d38732/#_ftn5>. Accessed on: 28.06.2022.

¹³³ Russia is a multinational (multi-ethnic) country. Nearly 20% of the population are non-ethnic Russians.

¹³⁴ LEVADA-CENTER. Ksenofobiya i natsionalizm [Xenophobia and Nationalism]. 23.09.2020. Available at: <<https://www.levada.ru/2020/09/23/ksenofobiya-i-natsionalizm-2/>>. Accessed on: 28.06.2022.

¹³⁵ KURTANIDZE, Elene. Dismantling LGBT+ rights as a means of control in Russia. Freedom House, 30.04.2021. Available at: <<https://freedomhouse.org/article/dismantling-lgbt-rights-means-control-russia>>. Accessed on: 28.06.2022.

¹³⁶ VASILIEV, Viktor. Zhirinovskiy i Kavkaz «za kolyuchey provolokoy» [Zhirinovskiy and the Caucasus “behind barbed wire”]. Golos Ameriki, 28.10.2013. Available at: <<https://www.golosameriki.com/a/vv-zhirinovskiy/1778404.html>>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

¹³⁷ CENTER for International Security and Cooperation. Russian Imperial Movement. 2021. Available at: <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/russian-imperial-movement#text_block_22704>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

¹³⁸ NIKOLSKAYA, P., LOWE, C. Putin hosts French presidential contender Le Pen in Kremlin. Reuters, 24.03.2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-france-lepen-putin-idUSKBN16V1CP>>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

¹³⁹ GERMANY’S far-right AfD lawmakers visit Moscow. Deutsche Welle, 10.03.2021. Available at: <<https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-afd-lawmakers-visit-moscow/a-56829773>>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

¹⁴⁰ TOWNSEND, Mark. Russian mercenaries in Ukraine linked to far-right extremists. The Guardian, 20.03.2022. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/russian-mercenaries-in-ukraine-linked-to-far-right-extremists>>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

¹⁴¹ AMNESTY International. New evidence of summary killings of Ukrainian soldiers must spark urgent investigations. 09.04.2015. Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/ukraine-new-evidence-of-summary-killings-of-captured-soldiers-must-spark-urgent-investigations/>>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

Zhoga, received the official title of “Hero of Russia” after his death in the 2022 war).¹⁴² In Russia there are numerous reports of human rights violations by the *kadyrovtsy*,¹⁴³ military groups subordinated to the governor of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov.

Since Russian interference in Ukraine in 2014, a pejorative term for the Putin regime has gained space in Ukraine: *rashizm* (Russian fascism). After the full-scale invasion in 2022, the term gained resonance abroad, especially with the articles by historian Timothy Snyder in The New York Times.¹⁴⁴ Snyder argues that three characteristics allow classifying Putin’s regime as fascist: the cult of the leader, the cult of the dead (the victims of World War II) and the mythical vision of a golden past of imperial greatness, which can be restored through war (the cult of violence). On the other hand, Russian political scientists, such as Grigoriy Golosov¹⁴⁵ and Alexander Kynev,¹⁴⁶ consider the use of the term inaccurate, once these characteristics are common to several authoritarian regimes. Among other elements often associated with *rashizm* by critics of Putin are: the regime’s Manichaeism and socio-political intolerance toward dissidents; the use of the letter "Z" to distinguish those who support the regime in its “special military operation” (compared to the use of the swastika), massive state propaganda in mass media, the instrumentalization of nationalism, the recurrent use of security services and censorship for repression, the corporate state, the spread of conspiracy theories, and the use of war strategies implemented by the Nazis, such as territorial annexation on the basis of ethnicity, the *blitzkrieg*, the total encirclement (suffocation) of large cities, and the pursuit of the destruction of Ukraine as a state and nation. The Ukrainian press sometimes refers to Russian soldiers and Kremlin supporters as “occupier *rashists*,” “fascists” and “orcs”; to Putin as “Putler” (in analogy to Hitler) and to Russia as a “terrorist state.”

On different occasions, Putin and high-ranking members of the Russian elites have quoted Ivan Ilyn, the ideologue of Russian fascism in the 1930s.¹⁴⁷ Putin’s expansionist ambitions and its “Russian World” doctrine are also related to arguments by influential ultranationalist ideologues, such as Alexander Dugin (the most prominent Eurasianist intellectual) and a series of regime propagandists (journalists, analysts and commentators) in

AMNESTY International. Breaking Bodies. Available at: <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EUR5016832015ENGLISH.pdf>>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

OHCHR (ONU). Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine. 05.2015. Available at: <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/10thOHCHRreportUkraine.pdf>>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

¹⁴² KREMLIN official website. Meeting with father of Hero of Russia Vladimir Zhoga. 09.05.2022. Available at: <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68369>>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

¹⁴³ HUMAN Rights Watch. *Worse than a War: Disappearances in Chechnya—a Crime Against Humanity*. 03.2005, Available at: <<http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya0305/>>. Accessed on: 29.06.2022.

¹⁴⁴ SNYDER, Timothy. The War in Ukraine Has Unleashed a New Word. The New York Times, 22.04.2022. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/magazine/ruscism-ukraine-russia-war.html>>. We Should Say It. Russia Is Fascist. 19.05.2022. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html>> Accessed on: 04.07.2022.

¹⁴⁵ GOLOSOV, Grigoriy. *Fashistskaya Rossiya?* [Fascist Russia?]. Riddle, 30.05.2022. Available at: <<https://ridl.io/ru/fashistskaya-rossiya/>>. Accessed on: 04.07.2022.

¹⁴⁶ KYNEV, Alexander. An autocracy tightening the screws. Russia.Post, 01.06.2022. Available at: <<https://russiapost.net/society/autoritarizm>>. Accessed on: 04.07.2022.

¹⁴⁷ BARBASHIN, Anton. Ivan Ilyin: A Fashionable Fascist. Riddle, 20.04.2018. Available at: <<https://ridl.io/ivan-ilyin-a-fashionable-fascist/>>. Accessed on: 04.07.2022.

the major state TV channels.¹⁴⁸ Publicly opposing the war or even calling it a “war” instead of the official euphemism “special military operation” can incur administrative and criminal sanctions:¹⁴⁹ over 20,000 people were detained for their anti-war stance from February to December 2022.¹⁵⁰

In face of the aforementioned contradictions, one can affirm that the Kremlin’s argument on the “denazification” of Ukraine corresponds to a rhetorical instrument of “demonization” and “dehumanization” of the opponent for political and military purposes, mainly to boost nationalism, bolster support for the regime, and facilitate war mobilization. Such a strategy had several precedents, such as the “war on terror” discourse, widely used to legitimize US interventions in the Middle East and which contributed to the growth of Islamophobia in Western societies.¹⁵¹ A study of Russian media outlets in Crimea from 2014 to 2017 found that hate speech was promoted for years in the region, with the association of Ukrainians to fascism.¹⁵² The “denazification” argument has been also mobilized to justify the dismemberment and extinguishing of Ukraine as a state and nation. Such a conception was evident in an article (“What Russia Should Do with Ukraine”) by an ideologist of the “Russian World” doctrine, published in one of Russia's largest state newspapers in April, openly advocating collective punishment against the “Nazified” population:

[...] in addition to the elites, a significant portion of the population, which is passive Nazi, an accomplice of Nazism, is also guilty. They supported the Nazi regime and favored it. [...] The peculiarity of modern Nazified Ukraine is the amorphousness of ambivalence, which allows it to mask Nazism, aiming for “independence” and the “European” (Western, pro-American) path of “development” (in reality, of degradation), stating that there is “no Nazism in Ukraine, only individual excesses.” After all, there is no main Nazi party, no Führer, no full-fledged racial law (only its truncated version in the form of repression against the Russian language). As a result, there is no opposition and resistance to the regime. [...] Ukronazism poses not a lesser but a greater threat to the world and to Russia than Hitler's version of German Nazism. The name “Ukraine” apparently cannot be preserved as the title of any fully denazified state formation in the territory liberated from the Nazi regime [...] Denazification will inevitably be de-Ukrainianization [...] Unlike the Baltic countries and Georgia, Ukraine, as history has shown, is impossible to exist as a national state, and attempts to “build” such a state lead naturally to Nazism. Ukrainianism is an artificial anti-Russian construction that does not have its own civilizational content, a subordinate element of a foreign, alien civilization. [...] the denazification of Ukraine is also its inevitable de-Europeanization. [...] The social “swamp” supporting [the Nazi elites] actively and passively by action and inaction, must survive the pains

¹⁴⁸ Popular nationalist journalists recurrently endorse Putin's actions and narratives, such as Dmitry Kiselyov, Vladimir Solovyov and Margarita Simonyan.

¹⁴⁹ V ROSSII vynesli pervyy prigovor po stat'ye o diskreditatsii VS RF [In Russia, the first sentence was handed down under the article on discrediting the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation]. TASS, 08.07.2022. Available at: <<https://tass.ru/proisshestviya/15164537>>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

¹⁵⁰ OVD-Info. Repressii v Rossii v 2022 godu. Obzor OVD-Info. [Repression in Russia in 2022. Overview by OVD-Info]. 12.2022. Available at: <<https://data.ovdinfo.org/repressii-v-rossii-v-2022-godu#1>>. Accessed on: 07.01.2022.

¹⁵¹ See TYRER, D. *The Politics of Islamophobia: Race, Power and Fantasy*. Pluto Press, 2013.

¹⁵² *Hate Speech in the Media Landscape of Crimea: An Information and Analytical Report on the Spread of Hate Speech on the Territory of the Crimean Peninsula (March 2014 – July 2017)* / under the general editorship of I. Sedova and T. Pechonchyk. Kyiv, 2018. 40 p. Available at: <<https://crimeahrg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Hate-book-EN-1.pdf>>. Accessed on: 04.07.2022.

of the war and learn the lived experience as a historical lesson and redemption for its guilt. (SERGEYTSEV, 2022).¹⁵³

Vladimir Putin has also questioned the existence of Ukraine on different occasions, suggesting that its current borders are the result of flawed Soviet ethnic policies and that Ukrainian identity is an artificial anti-Russian construct. In June 2022, former President Dmitry Medvedev declared that within two years Ukraine may no longer exist on the map.¹⁵⁴ The de facto territorial annexations in the south and east of the country by Russia and the forced cultural assimilation (the issuance of Russian documents to the local population, the replacement of Ukrainian flags by Russian and separatist ones and the Russification of school contents) have heightened concerns in Ukrainian society that Putin's real intention is indeed the extinguishing of Ukraine as a state and a nation.

Manichaeism and “dehumanization”/“demonization” discourses spread among soldiers from different parts of the conflict can have detrimental consequences on the battlefield, leading to the promotion of atrocities and war crimes. After an attack in the center of Vinnitsa, with many civilian casualties (including a child), state officials and regime propagandists claimed that there was a “temporary Nazi shelter” on the site.¹⁵⁵ Once again, the “double standard” Kremlin's approach is remarkable: the civilian deaths in the conflict against separatists in Donbas represent a “genocide” committed by Ukraine, while the deaths of civilians after the Russian invasion are a justifiable side effect of the “fighting against Nazis,” or even the price of redemption for their “guilt” for colluding with Nazis. The demonization discourse also makes it difficult to conduct negotiations and establish peace agreements. For Russians it may not make sense to negotiate with a state “dominated by Nazis” and that represents a paramount “threat” to Russia. Likewise, for Ukrainians, what seems to be at stake in the war is not the issues of NATO, Donbas or Crimea, but the very existence of Ukraine — therefore, it would make no sense to negotiate with a “terrorist” and “genocidal” state.

IV. Other arguments for Putin's “just war” against Ukraine

In addition to the three arguments analyzed above, other justifications were mobilized by the Kremlin to endorse its invasion, such as the risk of Ukraine developing nuclear and biological weapons.

A few days before the onset of the war, when Ukraine was already surrounded by Russian troops and under the imminence of an invasion, Volodymyr Zelensky announced that he could withdraw the country from the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the agreement through

¹⁵³ SERGEYTSEV, Timofey. Chto Rossiya dolzhna sdelat' s Ukrainoy [What Russia Should Do With Ukraine]. RIA Novosti, 03.04.2022. Available at: <<https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html>>. Accessed on: 04.07.2022.

¹⁵⁴ MARTYNOVA, Polina. Medvedev ne isključil otsutstviya Ukrainy na karte mira cherez dva goda [Medvedev did not rule out Ukraine's extinction from the world map in two years]. RBC, 15.06.2022. Available at: <<https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/62a98a859a79471ec85ad632>>. Accessed on: 04.07.2022.

¹⁵⁵ SIMONYAN: udar v Vinnitse nanesli po punktu razmeshcheniya natsionalistov [Simonyan: Attack in Vinnitsia was carried out in nationalist accommodation point]. RIA Novosti, 14.07.2022. Available at: <<https://ria.ru/20220714/vinnitsa-1802446632.html>>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

which Ukraine handed its nuclear weapons to Russia and forsook its nuclear-armed status in exchange for security guarantees (respect for its sovereignty, independence and borders) by Russia and other global powers. In practice, given the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Donbas since 2014, Putin had already violated the memorandum. Zelensky's statement was promptly exploited by Moscow to claim that Ukraine posed a nuclear threat to Russia. Shortly before the invasion, Putin announced that the threat "had been heard."¹⁵⁶ The Russian press also gave wide coverage to the issue at the time. To exemplify, an article published in a major media outlet highlighted the need for an armed intervention:

When the president of the Russophobic Ukraine, Vladimir Zelensky, announced his plans to withdraw from the Budapest Accord, Russia was left with no alternative. The special military operation is now a forced but most humane solution to the crisis. (TSOTS, 2022)¹⁵⁷

Despite the resonance in the period, the subject quickly faded in the official discourse. There have been other attempts to present Ukraine as a real threat, such as the alleged development of biological and chemical weapons in cooperation with the US,¹⁵⁸ but these also have fallen into disuse.¹⁵⁹ The risk of NATO expansion, the protection of the Russian-speaking communities and the fight against Nazis remained the main *casus belli* mobilized by Moscow to justify its bellicose policies.

Conclusion

In this article, I showed how the main arguments propagated by the Kremlin to justify the invasion of Ukraine present a series of contradictions. Firstly, although the Russian elites' arguments against NATO enlargement have legitimate grounds, the invasion, as previously expected, had the opposite effect to those claimed by Moscow: it has contributed to strengthening NATO and reinforcing its military presence near Russian western borders, with troops, weapons, military equipment, training, defense systems and a strong economic and military support to Ukraine. States with a historical position of neutrality now aim to join the alliance. The formerly anachronistic argument of the "Russian threat" now seems plausible,

¹⁵⁶ ROSSIYA uslyshala zayavleniye o yadernykh ambitsiyakh Ukrainy, zayavil Putin [Russia has heard the statement on Ukraine's nuclear ambitions, Putin announced]. RIA, 22.02.2022.

Available at: <<https://ria.ru/20220222/putin-1774442412.html>>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

¹⁵⁷ TSOTS, Evgeniy. Yadernoye oruzhiye Ukrainy — ugroza dlya Rossii, kotoruyu uzhe ne otbit' [Ukraine's nuclear weapons are a threat to Russia, which can no longer be defeated]. Regnum, 27.02.2022. Available at: <<https://regnum.ru/news/3518785.html>>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

¹⁵⁸ MO RF soobshchilo o razrabatyvayemom na Ukraine biologicheskoy oruzhii pri finansirovani SShA [The Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation has announced that biological weapons are being developed in Ukraine on US funding]. 06.03.2022. Available at: <<https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/13987899>>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

¹⁵⁹ MOSKVA zayavila o razrabotke v Ukraine biologicheskogo i khimicheskogo oruzhiya. Chto ne tak s etim obvineniyem? [Moscow has denounced the development of biological and chemical weapons in Ukraine. What's wrong with that accusation?]. BBC News, 11.03.2022. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60709478>>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

providing the organization with a legitimate *raison d'être* in the post-Cold War period. Furthermore, since the beginning of the 2000s, members of Ukrainian elites have expressed their intention to join NATO, but there was no evidence that this was about to be consummated in the short or medium terms. If containing the alliance were indeed his intention, Putin could have resorted to less costly alternatives with greater potential of effectiveness, such as ultimatums, military alliances and economic bargains. In short, the European balance of power is now much more favorable to NATO than before the 2022 February invasion.

Secondly, the Ukrainian state has committed human rights violations when trying to recover the Donbas territories, but Russia's humanitarian intentions present several contradictions. There was no evidence that the conflict had been intensifying, and the Russian invasion generated a humanitarian catastrophe much greater than the war in Donbas itself: in a few months of intervention more civilians died than in eight years of conflict. Not by chance there has been an intense resistance against Russian troops exactly in the Russian-speaking regions that would supposedly be "liberated" — something that Putin probably was not expecting. The war has revealed the double-standard approach adopted by the Kremlin: civilian deaths resulting from Ukraine's attempt to retake Donbas are conceived as a genocide, but civilian deaths resulting from its own shelling are just the "side effect" of a legitimate fight against "Nazis". Moreover, thousands of civilians were killed in the war in which Moscow re-established control over its breakaway region, Chechnya. The resistance to the invasion observed so far and the growing support for NATO membership even in the eastern and southern Russian-speaking regions show that cultural and language ties to Russia do not necessarily generate loyalty to the Russian state and Putin's expansionist ambitions.

Finally, with regard to the argument of combating Nazis, although there is leniency on the part of the Ukrainian authorities toward certain radical groups, there is no evidence that neo-Nazis enjoy significant support in Ukrainian society and politics. Furthermore, the Russian state itself has links with extreme right-wing groups (some with neo-Nazi members) and paramilitary organizations known for a history of human rights violations inside and outside Russia. The discourse of "combating Nazism" corresponds to a strategy of demonizing the opponent, with potentially deleterious consequences in the war, by encouraging and justifying excessive violence. Ideologues of the "Russian World" doctrine referred to "denazification" to plead for the extinction of Ukraine as a state and a nation. The death of civilians is considered by them as a cost to be paid, a "redemption for their guilt."

What then were Putin's real motivations and interests for invading Ukraine? I have discussed his true motivations in different articles.¹⁶⁰ In summary, three major factors have possibly guided his decision: (1) the ideological legitimation of his autocracy (the domestic factor), using external and internal threats to boost nationalism, authoritarian attitudes and support for his repressive rule, as several authoritarian regimes do. Putin needs a hostile West for self-legitimation; (2) his ideological, nationalist and neo-colonial stance toward Ukraine, questioning its right to exist as a sovereign state, and presenting himself as a new "Peter the Great" (the ideational factor); and (3) the maintenance of Russian hegemony in the Post-Soviet

¹⁶⁰ FERRARO, Vicente. O que está por trás da crise entre a Rússia, Ucrânia e Otan? Poder 360, 05.03.2022. Available at: <<https://www.poder360.com.br/opiniao/o-que-esta-por-tras-da-crise-entre-a-russia-ucrania-e-otan/>>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

Space by force (the geopolitical factor), aiming at curbing eventual spillover effects from “Color Revolutions” that can endanger his influence in neighboring countries and his own grip on power in Russia. Contrary to Putin’s alleged intentions, it is unlikely that Ukraine will voluntarily return to the Russian orbit of influence. The collective trauma and animosities caused by the war may have detrimental long-term consequences for Russian-Ukrainian relations. Wars shape states and identities.¹⁶¹

Many “realist” approaches indirectly endorse the Russian invasion, arguing that NATO expansion and the Western “democracy promotion” policy prompted Russia to such an outcome. According to this view, Putin has just spontaneously reacted to maintain the European balance of power, performing what any other realist leader would have done. In this normative perspective, they ignore the domestic, ideological and agency factors that motivated the Kremlin’s actions. Regime survival is also a *realpolitik* concern. These approaches disregard the security interests and strategies of Ukraine (also “realist”), as if Ukrainians were just irrational pawns in the hands of Western powers, easily deceived by liberal ideologies and naively handled in a geopolitical dispute. As I have shown, even from a “realist” perspective of international relations, the invasion is not justified, since the European balance of power is much more favorable to NATO now than before the invasion, and this was already expected before the war. Furthermore, if Putin’s intention were solely to contain NATO, there would be no need to recurrently mobilize different *casus belli* to legitimize his faulty decisions, and to promote an ideological project of territorial annexation and dismantling of Ukraine, the largest land grab in Europe since Nazi expansionism in World War II.

To conclude, Putin’s narratives may have gained resonance in different countries due to several reasons, such as: Russia’s machine propaganda effectiveness; Russian-centrism among scholars that conduct research on the Post-Soviet Space; the lack of access to Ukrainian original sources (or lack of interest thereof); the superficiality of some International Relations analyses that ignore domestic, ideological and agency factors; the Soviet nostalgia among some scholars (the utopic perception that Putin’s politics represents a viable and positive alternative to an American liberal and capitalist world-order); and the suspicions toward Western powers’ political stances (and media), motivated by resentment for their history of imperialism, colonialism, and interventionism in the Global South. Paradoxically, there are scholars that condemn Western imperialism in the Middle East (for example), but consent to Putin’s incoherent justifications for his imperialist aggression against Ukraine, and turn a blind eye to his blatant authoritarian and repressive policies in Russia.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ FERRARO, Vicente. A Guerra na Ucrânia: uma análise do conflito e de seus impactos nas sociedades russa e Ucraniana [The War in Ukraine: An analysis of the conflict and its impact on Russian and Ukrainian societies]. *Conjuntura Austral: Journal of the Global South*, v. 13, n. 64, p. 25–50, 2022. Available in: <https://www.seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/ConjunturaAustral/article/view/128157>. Accessed on: 04.01.2023.

¹⁶² FERRARO, Vicente. 'Vladimínions' acadêmicos condenam imperialismo americano, mas veem Putin como messias [Academic 'Vladimínions' Condemn US Imperialism, But See Putin as a Messiah]. *Folha de São Paulo*, 09.05.2022. Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2022/05/vladimínions-academicos-condenam-imperialismo-americano-mas-veem-putin-como-messias.shtml>. Accessed on: 15.07.2022.

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