RUSSIAN SOCIETY DURING THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: LETHARGY, FRUSTRATION AND CONFUSION

The essay discusses how different segments of Russian society react to the aggression against Ukraine.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, war, domestic politics.

The was against Ukraine that Russia started on February 24, 2022 has all chances to be referred in future history textbooks as one of the most irrational military adventures in Europe Three points are the most remarkable. First, the officially declared goals of Moscow – “de-Nazification” and “de-militarization” of Ukraine – were formulated so broadly and vaguely that their interpretations might be endless. This uncertainty, coupled with the implicit references to the language of the Second World War, attest to a lack of a clear strategy in the Kremlin, both politically and militarily. Second, the invasion in Ukraine has destroyed many myth that Russian propaganda machine was producing for years and even decades – about “Russian world” as a “soft power” instrument, about Ukrainian “brothers” as allegedly being part of the Russian civilization, as well as about a “common history” of Russia and Ukraine. This self-destruction of the discursive base for Russian hegemony is an amazing confirmation of Russia’s political failure in the whole post-Soviet space. Third, Putin has demonstrated an unusual ability to achieve effects that are diametrically opposed to his initial aims: instead of a fragmented Ukraine he is facing a remarkable consolidation of Ukrainian society, and instead of his expectations of NATO’s withdrawal from the Baltics the reality is the opposite, namely a strengthened military infrastructure all across Russia’s western borders, including Finland.

Yet how much the war against Ukraine changed Russian society? One of its immediate effects is a significant polarization of Russian public opinion. Domestically, one should distinguish between ordinary people who largely still prefer to live in disinformation bubbles created by the Kremlin propaganda, war opponents and the educated minority who might be considered as opinion makers. In other words, between passive consumers of state-produced narratives, critically thinking Russians, and those who generate and shape public discourses about Ukraine through state-owned or associated media, including speakers coming from intellectual circles who are presented as knowledgeable people, which is meant to boost their speaking positions and “epistemic power”.
When it comes to the “ordinary people”, two types of reaction are observable. One is the denial of the war as such: in their minds, it does not exist because it is not covered by Russian TV. The rejection of the very fact of the war waged by Russia in Ukraine might be accompanied by such argument as, for instance, “Russia does not have an interest whatsoever to invade Ukraine”. Another reaction is the acknowledgement of the war, accompanied by the simultaneous rejection of any responsibility for it: “They in the Kremlin know better what they are doing, what can simple people do about this?”. For illustrative purposes I’ve quoted some remarks from numerous videos featuring Russian soldiers imprisoned by the Ukrainian Army and allowed to give calls to their families in Russia.

The Russian military had to admit substantial casualties among Russian troops, and in many regions of the country funerals were covered by the local media. Soldiers and officers killed in Ukraine are portrayed as heroes perished for the patriotic cause of military defence of Donbas against “Ukrainian nationalists and fascists”. Obviously, with the growing number of human losses the war is to become less and less popular, and the cultural protests against the war seem to contribute to that: a good example is a musical band ‘Elysium’ from Nizhny Novgorod with a series of new pacifist and anti-Putin songs [1]. However, so far it is hard to discern any contours of an organized anti-war movement that could seriously change the domestic situation.

Partly this is due to the fact that anti-Putin opposition – including Alexei Navalny – has always been focussing on uncovering domestic sources of corruption and usurpation of power by the Kremlin, and paid much less attention to foreign and security policies which, as it turned out, are nowadays the most crucial in all possible respects. Obviously, Russia does not have opposition in a democratic sense of this word. The open demonstration of the unity of the Security Council and the State Duma in taking the decision to invade Ukraine clearly showed this [2]. However, the state of minds within the Russian society is more diverse and complex.

A few days before Putin started the war, the retired general Leonid Ivashov on behalf of a veteran organization issued a public statement making a strong case against any preparatory moves for a military scenario [3]. With the eruption of the Russian invasion a bunch of Russian left-wing groupings have launched a campaign for stopping the hostilities. A number of open demands to withdraw Russian troops from Ukraine were signed by thousands of Russian scientists and artists. In many large cities all across the country spontaneous anti-war protests took place, followed by detention and arrestation of thousands of participants.

Indeed, a certain part of the population – obviously a small minority – does have an anti-war stand, which is only natural. Those protesters have different backgrounds – some of them have a long record of anti-Putin oppositional activities, others simply are critics of the regime and position themselves as independent citizens with a pacifist mindset. However, this community of resistance so far was unable to produce
a strong domestic narrative beyond simply requesting “No to War”. Three approaches articulated among critically minded Russians are illustrative of this state of affairs.

One group of Putin’s opponents – in particular, those participating in or sympathetic with Alexei Navalny’s anti-corruption network – deem that for the anti-Putin opposition it does not make much sense to develop a full-fledged foreign policy program, because the core roots of Russia’s problems are domestic – the usurpation of power by a corrupt clique in the Kremlin. In this light, policies towards Ukraine were never among the top priorities of this group of civil society activists. They, by and large, ignored the annexation of Crimea and the war-by-proxies in Donbas, focusing their limited resources on a rather narrow agenda of exposing the financial wrongdoings of the ruling elite and shaming the Putin inner circle for that.

Another group of “critical Russians” were trying – perhaps sincerely – to diminish the threat of war, arguing that Putin is bluffing and is capable for only threatening the West through media performances. They ridiculed alarmist voices in the West warning about the high probability of a full-scale military attack, and averred that the Kremlin has neither resources nor intentions to declare a war on Ukraine. This logic of rationalization of Russian military policy has as we now know ultimately failed, and ruined the reputation of its promoters.

The third group of non-mainstream voices would fully agree with all the futility and irrationality of the war, as well as its deadly and scary effects. However, they stop half way and, instead of empathically caring about and openly expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian victims of the aggression, start thinking about their own interests that might been severely damaged by the new packages of mass-scale Western economic, financial and political sanctions. Many of these Russians are cosmopolitan and, in a sense, trans-national intellectuals, but their distancing from the Putin regime is less normative and more pragmatic. They don’t feel responsible for the war, and don’t want to bear any material losses. In other words, in their mental and cognitive maps the safety of their foreign banking accounts and the perspective of travelling abroad trump self-identification with the Ukrainian people that goes through unprecedented ordeals.

These three groups are illustrative of three major problems with anti-war sentiments in Russia. First, the anti-Putin opposition does not have a coherent and consistent vision of Russia’s international role, including those issues that nowadays are at the very center of attention – the Russian world doctrine and Moscow’s relations with neighbors. Second, many of independent opinion makers in Russia drastically underestimated the aggressive potential of the Putin regime, which demobilized anti-war attitudes before the commencement of the invasion. Third, many progressive Russians simply reproduce standard pacifist slogans and tend to blame the West for introducing retaliation measures that might affect their well being and careers. What unites all three groups is what in the academic literature is known as depoliticization, or different forms of distancing from the cruel reality of politics – a luxury that none of Ukrainians can afford.
When it comes to discourse makers – experts who gravitate to the Kremlin, share its core assumptions and form the mainstream / dominant / hegemonic discourse – some of them are overtly frustrated. For example, Moscow Carnegie Center, a formally independent and often quite critical think tank that however wants to avoid conflicts with the Kremlin – is completely silent for about a month: there was no single publication about the war in Ukraine on its web site since February 24, 2022.

Another example is Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), a think tank that was never in opposition to the officialdom, but its members expressed their opinions in a more critical, objective or allegedly neutral way, trying to produce a subtle and intelligent alternative to the Kremlin. They also were always eager to be in demand in the West, for which a certain degree of independent thinking is a prerequisite. After the invasion in Ukraine Andrei Kortunov, the director of RIAC, has publicly acknowledged that the decision to invade Ukraine was a professional shock to him. He didn’t accept the aggression, but formulated it quite mildly: “My calculations of risks turned out to be different from Putin’s, but hopefully he knows what he is doing” [4].

It is very much telling that those public speakers who can’t hide their critical attitudes to the war basically formulate their arguments in the categories of huge and inevitable financial and economic losses, almost completely omitting normative and legal dimensions of the aggression. In other words, the war is bad because it can inflict damage on Russia, and not because invading a foreign country and killing its people is unacceptable and immoral. This type of discourse poos up since Russian society, including its educated elite, lacks due empathy for Ukraine and remains insensitive to its sufferings.

In the meantime, a much larger army of pro-Kremlin spin doctors produce different versions of the “military operation” that ultimately are aimed at its justification. The most popular rhetorical tool at this juncture is “whataboutism”, or constant references to the allegedly similar military actions undertaken by the United States and other Western countries in the past. False and incorrect historical analogies with wars in Iraq or Afghanistan are invoked to divert attention from the war against Ukraine and somehow “normalize” it [5].

Another key element in Russian mainstream discourse after February 24 is the reinvigorated version of Russian self-inflicted victimization. This was quite visible in the operation of the Valdai Discussion Club which is very close to the Kremlin and invites experts only among those who might say something compatible with – and supportive of – Moscow’s foreign policy. Two good examples came from the Valdai Club that in March 2022 convened a panel session on new Western sanctions. In a typical for the Kremlin propaganda manner, the war in Ukraine was not even mentioned during the discussion, which facilitated Russia’s self-portrayal as a victim of “unilateral” restrictive measures of the “sanction coalition” [6]. A similar script could be discerned during another Valdai Club’s session on global nuclear agenda:
Ukraine was referred to as a trouble-making country that allegedly threatens non-proliferation regime, which apparently might be used as an argument in favour of its enforced “de-militarization” [7].

All in all, different segments of Russian society are more adjusting and adopting to the war rather than openly challenging it. Many Russians say and think that they should not be blamed for the war and don’t want to publicly engage in discussions about it. This type of attitude has a lot to do with Russian vernacular conservatism which is not about religiosity or family values, but rather about fear of change. Most Russians are still in a state of lethargy and passively consume the official interpretation of the events, others try to distance from the war which leads them to what in the Soviet times was known as “internal outmigration”. By the same token, many are physically leaving the country escaping from the increasingly repressive and prohibitive regime, as well as from the forthcoming economic hardship. No drastic alteration in this picture can be predicted in a short run. A serious change can be triggered only by a simultaneous constellation of three factors – a military failure, an economic breakdown and mass-scale public mobilization. These three factors at certain point should overlap and give a synergetic effect (a new perestroika or something along these lines). In the sense that economic crisis without military fiasco and without mass-scale readiness to protest in the streets won’t work.

РОСІЙСЬКЕ СУСПІЛЬСТВО ПІД ЧАС ВІЙНИ ПРОТИ УКРАЇНИ: ЛЕТАРГІЯ, РОЗЧАРУВАННЯ ТА СПАНТЕЛИЧЕНІСТЬ

Резюме
Есе розглядає реакцію різних верств російського суспільства на агресію проти України.

Ключові слова: Україна, Росія, війна, внутрішня політика.

References
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МЕТОДОЛОГІЯ ІСТОРИКО-КУЛЬТУРОЛОГІЧНОЇ ОСВІТИ: ОСОБИСТІСНИЙ ТА ДІЯЛЬНІСНИЙ ПІДХОДИ


Ключові слова: особистісний підхід, діяльнісний підхід, історія, культура, мистецтво, майбутній фахівець.

Формування професійних компетенцій майбутніх учителів історії, художньої культури, мистецтва початкової, базової та профільної середньої школи вимагає переосмислення методики викладання фахових освітніх компонентів та перегляду тих методологічних підходів, які виявляються основоположними. Метою цієї розправи є аналіз особистісного та діяльнісного підходів, втілених при підготовці вчителів-істориків, вчителів-філологів, вчителів початкових класів у Державному вищому навчальному закладі «Донбаський державний педагогічний університет». Майбутні фахівці повинні втілювати концепцію «Нової української школи», працюючи в закладах загальної середньої освіти, реалізовувати власні здібності, забезпечувати своє майбутнє та майбутнє наступних поколінь.

Узагальнені особливості освітніх програм зазначених спеціальностей: спеціальна освіта для забезпечення освітньо-виховного процесу в закладах середньої освіти (за предметною спеціалізацією «Історія», «Художня культура», «Мистецтво»), з урахуванням теоретичних основ історичних, культурологічних,