

Nazism, Genocide and the Threat of The Global West: Russian Moral Justification of War in Ukraine

Arseniy Kumankov

Department of Politics and the University Center for Human Values, Princeton University; Cluster of Excellence SCRIPTS, adkumankov@gmail.com

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A few public actions prepared the way for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the purpose of which was to define a special military operation as forced, necessary and inevitable. The use of armed force against Ukraine was discussed during those public events. The Russian authorities applied many arguments, and a great deal of attention was paid to the moral justification of war. In this article, I consistently analyze three problems: why did Russian officials use moral language to justify the war, what arguments did they use, and would these arguments retain their effect in the long term. I will examine several addresses made by the President of Russia and the Russian Federation Security Council meeting materials to address these questions. I conclude that Putin's lack of legitimacy forced him to justify the war in moral terms, and the peculiarities of Russian moral discourse allowed him to do that. However, even if this strategy was effective to a certain extent at the beginning of the war, it can hardly be stable and sustainable.

Keywords: invasion of Ukraine, Russia, Ukraine, just war, morality

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was launched on 24 February 2022, was largely unexpected and caused a shocked reaction from many. In retrospect, it may be perceived as a militarily poorly prepared invasion. Russian troops are constantly changing their strategy, withdrawing from previously occupied territories, and suffering severe defeats and high losses. Even according to the statements of the official Russian authorities, the Russian army reported almost 6 000 troops killed as of the end of September, during seven months of war (Izvestija, 2022). These are very conservative and probably low estimates. International experts give estimates as of November 2022 that range from 10 000 to 15 000, up to almost 85 000 killed (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine 2022; Stewart, Ali 2022). Before that, the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) saw approximately 15 000 dead over its ten years (Konovalov 1989: 3), and about 11 000 (Dixon, Raghavan, Khurshudyan, Stern 2022) in both Chechen Wars (1994–1996; 1999–2009).

Much more attention has been paid to justifying the war for Russian citizens. After the 2013-2014 Maidan Revolution, Russia began aggressive actions against Ukraine, in which the media space was actively involved. Russian politicians and propagandists constantly challenged the independence of Ukraine, its sovereignty and the very existence of the Ukrainian people and culture. Many Russian political leaders, including President Putin, were directly involved in that activity. The justification for the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 — or ‘special military operation’ as the Russian authorities officially call it — provides an excellent example of the role that could be played by moral reasoning in enhancing the legitimacy of political decisions and the mobilization of people.

In this article, I intend to analyze arguments used by the Russian authorities to explain the necessity of a military attack on Ukraine, in order to legitimize it and to gain the support of Russian citizens. I argue that Russian officials initially defined the conflict with Ukraine as a war of values, not just as a political confrontation or an attempt to achieve a balance of power, as political realism might interpret it. Putin deliberately presented the conflict as a clash of morals and values in order to enhance its legitimacy. Political arguments were applied, but they were also given within a moral domain. The war was treated not only as a clash with hostile Western forces and a reaction to the threat of the United States or NATO’s growing strength but also as a forced preemptive strike to protect cultural frontiers. It was described as a conflict of values, a defense of Russia’s civilizational path, and a uniquely Russian way of living. Ukraine was assigned the role of a battlefield in this fight for national identity. Besides that, the struggle was also fueled by the desire to restore national dignity and, to a certain extent, to repay the West for the unjust wars it has waged in recent decades. This, in turn, also added moral justification for the invasion.

To deal with the Russian strategy of moral justification for war in Ukraine, I intend to answer several sub-questions. Why was the strategy of moral and value justification of the invasion used? What reasons were used to legitimize the invasion of Ukraine at its initial stage, and what place was assigned for morality at that point? To what extent do Russians respond to the strategy of moral justification of war and accept it? In this way, I will show the role morality plays in Putin's political rhetoric and arguments that were used to explain to Russian citizens why the invasion should be treated as morally justified. The primary sources will be the official addresses of President Putin, as well as speeches by members of the Russian Security Council, some of whom were also quite active in the public sphere. My analysis will be primarily descriptive, aimed at detecting morally loaded arguments in favor of using military force proposed by the Russian authorities to justify their actions. I will also mainly work within the conceptual framework of the just war theory with a set of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* principles typical for this theory. The modern just war theory emphasizes the problem of justifying war. It is a convenient analytical tool because it helps to identify specific parts of the argumentation about war and characterize it by the principle to which this judgment refers. Accordingly, the just war theory framework allows us to determine the moral content of the arguments used by a political or military leader to give a moral assessment for the decision to start a war. The just cause principle — the idea that a state or political community must have a weighty reason to start a war and publicly announce it — is one of the essential principles applied by just war theorists to study a conflict. Self-defense, assistance to an ally in a just war, a preemptive

strike and humanitarian intervention are usually named as just causes. The principle of right intentions is also crucial for my analysis; war may be fought only by and within the limits of its just cause. As we will see, these ideas are used in the speeches of Russian politicians, but not in the way that just war theory suggests.

I used public speeches and talks by Russian politicians in February 2022 as sources for analysis. I have reviewed all the materials published in January and February 2022 on the official website of the President of Russia, www.kremlin.ru. Three events are directly related to the invasion, justifying and interpreting it: the Security Council meeting on 21 February 2022 (Security Council 2022) and addresses by the President of the Russian Federation on 21 and 24 February 2022 (Putin 2022a, Putin 2022b). I have analyzed them in detail in this paper. Initially, I read these speeches in Russian and then used their official translations published on the English version of the Kremlin website. The translations seem pretty accurate, although I did not compare them to the original. Additional sources of my analysis include Putin's article on the unity of Russians and Ukrainians published in 2021 (Putin 2021) and the State Duma appeal to the Russian President for LPR and DPR recognition (The State Duma 2022). In the last section of the paper, I turn to statistical data on the attitude of Russian citizens to the war in Ukraine, collected this year by VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) and the Levada Center, Russian polling centers. This data may be unreliable, as it was collected under conditions of war and censorship. Nevertheless, they help to give at least some idea of the mindset of the Russian people.

To interpret the justification of the Russian invasion expressed in the official speeches of senior Russian politicians and officials, I turn to the research of Olga Malinova (Malinova 2022), Denys Kiryukhin and Svitlana Shcherbak (Kiryukhin, Shcherbak 2022). These political scientists conducted discourse analysis of Putin's addresses, speeches, and articles from 2000 onward, so the results of their work helped to put my research into a broader context. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova's work on Putin's leadership strategy and morality politics have served as an essential source for interpreting Putin's political rhetoric and explicating its moral aspect.

Drawing the chronological border of the Russo-Ukrainian war raises a specific methodological issue. The military intervention of Ukraine began in 2014 when Russian troops occupied Crimea. Fighting between Russia and Ukraine started in the spring of 2014, and then in the spring-summer of 2014, Russian military and paramilitary units began operating in eastern Ukraine. This conflict entered a low-intensity phase in 2015. And on 24 February 2022, a large-scale invasion of Ukraine started, which meant the beginning of a significant conventional conflict, or a real war. I will be referring to this last phase of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in this paper. Accordingly, the sources I analyze will relate to this short period. I intend to use the results of this study for further work on a more comprehensive description of the Russian strategy of legitimizing the war in Ukraine since 2014. I should also note that I use the concept of Russian in the text to designate Russian citizens and not to indicate a particular ethnic group.

Moral justification and its significance in the Russian public sphere
Nowadays, political realism, geopolitics, or the idea of a clash of civilizations is most often used to explain the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The conflict is often interpreted as a conflict of opposing ideologies (The Second Cold War), as Russia's

attempt to defend its place among the great powers and challenge the unipolar world, or as Ukraine's desire to get rid of its dependent position on Russia and protect its European "Civilizational Choice" (see Mearsheimer 2014; Mearsheimer 2022; Brusylovska 2022; Shmelev 2021; Karaganov 2022; Safranchuk 2022; Merry 2016). However, we should not overlook consideration and interpretation of the Russo-Ukrainian War as a moral clash. The arguments used by the Russian officials during the invasion were moral rather than political (I will analyze them in detail in the next section). The dominant interpretation of the conflict in terms of structural realism focuses on the threats and power, and on the responsibility of the West that forced Russia to attack Ukraine. As I will show, this approach seems incomplete at best, but also somewhat irrelevant. Putin and his inner circle used the moral justification of the war as an essential rhetorical and political tool. And this strategy has worked, at least to a certain extent. As the Public Sociology Laboratory's research shows, 'most supporters of the "special operation" justify their position with cause-and-effect explanations that are simultaneously moral justifications' (Public Sociology Laboratory 2022: 51). The Russian authorities described the conflict with Ukraine as moral and value based. Their supporters are ready to go along with this narrative.

Putin depicted the war in Ukraine as morally necessary and inevitable, but why, in principle, would he do this in such a manner, and why has this strategy received a supportive response in Russia, at least to some extent? We should note several factors that allowed or even forced Russian authorities to apply a moral strategy to justify the invasion of Ukraine. First, we see a lack of legal legitimacy typical of autocracy in Russia. The urgent tasks for Putin's regime are acquiring legitimacy and the struggle for the president's rating. These tasks can be solved by continually rewriting and supplementing legislation. Another strategy is associated with attempting to gain charismatic legitimacy through public explanations of the tasks facing the people and ways to achieve them. For that purpose, Putin makes public addresses or publishes program articles. Putin also achieved bright symbolic victories, strengthening his charisma and the image of a strong, successful, victorious leader. They included the 'peace enforcement' operation against Georgia in 2008, the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 World Cup, and particularly the 'return' of Crimea to Russia (the latter's significance for strengthening Putin's charisma is examined in Petersson 2017: 246-249). Moral speculations and symbolic steps, rather than rational or legal arguments (although they could also be involved), strengthen Putin's claim of having sound justification for his decisions and, *inter alia*, a valid *casus belli* to attack Ukraine.

Secondly, the moral arguments used by the Russian political and military leaders to justify the invasion of Ukraine referred to the fight of the Soviet people against Nazi Germany. To a certain extent, the special military operation pretends to be a reconstruction of the Great Patriotic War since it was initially described as a fight against Nazis and fascists in the Ukrainian government that were oppressing the Ukrainian people. Thus, sending the troops to Ukraine was not an intervention but the liberation of Ukrainians. At the same time, Russians consider the Great Patriotic War a sacred event in Russian history, and Victory is treated as the most significant moral achievement. Using these images allowed the authorities to increase its moralizing of the offensive on Ukraine that was symbolically associated with the Great Patriotic War.

Finally, the Russian government is playing on the injured sense of national dignity and pride due to the Soviet Union's defeat in the Cold War and subsequent collapse. Russia declared itself the successor of the USSR, and therefore the victories and losses of the latter could be symbolically transferred to modern Russia. In turn, Russia now aims to gain its own victory over the forces of evil represented by the global West and thus take revenge and resurrect its wounded pride. Putin contributed to spreading the sense of national resentment, which, if not peculiar to Russians, was persistently offered to them and cultivated. It is no coincidence that the special military operation was described as a confrontation not so much with Ukraine but as a clash with the West. In this case, war is a way to defend Russia's values and unique way of life, which are threatened much more by the West than by Ukraine.

Let us consider each of these three factors separately. Putin lacks legal legitimacy in Weberian terms, especially after the "castling" of 2011 (the term is used in Russia to describe Putin's nomination as a candidate for the third presidential term by then-president Dmitry Medvedev, contrary to the expectations of a part of Russian society) and the constitutional coup of 2020, when amendments were made to the Russian Constitution, which allowed Putin to concentrate more power in his hands and extend the possible term of his presidency (Mendras 2020: 27-30). Because of this, he always seeks to enforce his legitimacy through constantly updated legislation and moralizing. Referendums that do not comply with the law and appeal to particular moral values and a unique Russian culture serve this purpose most often (on morality, spirituality and values see: Evans 2015: 424; Malinova 2014; Stepanova 2015; Stepanova 2022; Tsygankov 2016; Hutcheson, Petersson 2016; See also Østbø 2017: 202, 212 partly contesting the meaning of legitimacy frame; on quasi-referendums see: Yudin 2020; Stanovaya 2020). The Russian government periodically claims the need for spiritual improvement, the development of a moral code, and the search for spiritual bonds (Malinova 2014). 'Sovereign morality' has been adopted since the 2000s to characterize Putin as a political leader responsible for securing vital moral values and thereby respond to critics accusing Putin's regime of immoralism or insufficient adherence to Russia's traditional values (Sharafutdinova 2014: 618-619; Sharafutdinova 2020: 90-93).

In this scheme, public speeches help to imitate the democratic process and manipulate information, which is typical of informational autocracy (Guriev, Treisman 2019: 101-102). Moral arguments allow a leader to give depth and thoroughness to these speeches. Putin's few theoretical works — the article of 2021 on the Unity of Russians and Ukrainians (Putin 2021) is critical in this case — are most often devoted to history, which becomes a source for making moral assessments of certain modern events or decisions. Propagandists then reproduce those, claiming them to be scientific studies.

The rhetorical strategy chosen by Putin and his associates also strengthens the legitimacy of the decision taken: a long list of reasons was proposed in favor of conducting a special military operation. They were numerous repeated and explained in detail. In addition, this list was gradually added to. New facts and circumstances were added to it, pointing to the need for a military solution to the conflict with Ukraine. However, in just war theory, prominent and indeed just wars usually do not require an excessively long list of just causes. A real defensive war, when the enemy openly acts aggressively and forces you to take up arms, allows you to act without complex multi-stage justifications. Examples are Finland's defense of

its territory in 1939-1940 and the Nazi aggression against the Soviet Union, which is so significant for modern Russia. This long list of reasons claiming to justify the invasion of Ukraine reveals the desire to justify the war at all costs. For this purpose, moral and sacred strategies for mobilizing support are used.

The Russian authorities manipulate Russians' reverent, almost religious attitude toward the Great Patriotic War and the fight against Nazism. Victory Day on 9 May was named the most important national holiday in Russia. Its importance and popularity far surpass the importance of religious holidays: Easter, Christmas, or Kurban-Bayram (VCIOM 2022b). Moreover, Great Victory has become a real cult or civil religion in post-Soviet Russia (Petrov 2021: 71-88). Therefore, the images of Nazism that has raised its head and must be dealt a crushing blow are fiery. At the same time, this imagery is understandable for Russians, as is framing Russian soldiers as the grandchildren and successors of the victorious soldiers who defeated Nazi Germany. Turning to the history of 80 years ago and relating yourself to the people and circumstances of that time are extremely common. In recent decades, before the celebration of Victory Day on 9 May, Russian cars were traditionally decorated with stickers such as 'Thank you, grandfather, for the Victory', but also 'We can repeat it'. The idea of fighting Nazism was part of the collective Russian imagery, since it was perceived as a morally significant landmark. In such circumstances, the appeal to this discourse turned out to be a valuable and convenient means of justifying the war with Ukraine.

Besides that, it allowed Russian officials to justify the way the war was being waged. It was implied that Russia always followed fair conduct in war and that Russian soldiers were highly moral warriors endowed with many virtues. In this case, the Ukrainian military resisting the invasion could be called Nazi criminals, and the people supporting them could be accused of complicity with Nazism or of being deceived by their government. Fighting an enemy like this means Russian troops cannot commit war crimes. That is why so much effect was gained by the idea repeated by both officials and propagandists, that Russian forces attack only military targets and objects, so they are all legitimate targets — and the Nazis cannot but be legitimate targets.

Finally, another source of the moralization of the war in Ukraine was the national dignity and underestimation of Russia. Starting in the mid-2000s, Putin began to use the idea of the unjust position Russia occupies in the international arena, thereby cultivating a sense of resentment (Malinova 2022: 61). He repeatedly called the collapse of the Soviet Union a major geopolitical catastrophe. Yeltsin's Russia was immersed in misery and humiliation, while Russian 'partners' in the West were unfair and did not give Russia the honor and respect it deserved. In 2014, this discourse of revenge and the return of dignity 'has also provided Russia's leadership and the public with the sense of entitlement and justification behind the country's aggressive foreign policy actions in Ukraine' (Sharafutdinova 2016: 146). Recall that Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula almost without armed clashes and denied its military participation in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The value and spiritual confrontation with the West and the struggle for the possibility of following a 'special path' remained the focus of Putin's pro-war propaganda right up to 2022. This attitude to the war in Ukraine resonates in the minds and hearts of Russians, who correlate the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West with the struggle for national dignity (Public Sociology Laboratory 2022: 43-44; 125).

To sum up, reliance on resentment and the Great Patriotic war imagery simplified the task of justifying the war. It made the proposed arguments more convincing and reliable for Russians. At the same time, the appeal to moral language to explain the invasion reveals the desire to emphasize the spiritual significance of the struggle with Ukraine and, through it, with the whole West.

Moral Justification for the Invasion of Ukraine

The Russian Federation Security Council held a meeting on 21 February 2022, at which the situation in the Donbass region was discussed. On the agenda was the recognition of the sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic following the appeal of the heads of these republics and the corresponding resolution of the State Duma of the Russian Federation. Earlier the Duma had appealed to the President of Russia to recognize the independence and sovereignty of these republics (The State Duma 2022)). Fourteen members of the Council, including Putin, spoke at the meeting. Each of them supported the proposal to recognize the independence of the republics. This meeting can be considered a stepping stone to the invasion of Ukraine and the source of its legitimization. Despite the agenda, the meeting was not focused on the problems and interests of the residents of Donbass. Instead, the threats to Russia's security and relations with the West dominated the discussion. An edited version of the meeting was shown on Russian television. Citizens could thus become acquainted with a whole set of reasons for why the senior officials were forced to recognize the sovereignty of the Donbass republics and, in fact, to use military means against Ukraine and the West. The start of a full-scale operation was not announced at this meeting. However, the significance of this meeting for further use of the armed forces was apparent since the recognition itself did not radically change the situation in the Donbass. At the same time, the invasion was both expected and feared. That is why indirect statements approving the use of force became an important detail, such as Viktor Zolotov's sentence that ended the debate: 'We should go ever further to defend our country' (Security Council 2022).

After the meeting of the Security Council, President Putin delivered an almost hour-long address to the Russian citizens, and the signing of the decrees 'On the recognition of the Donetsk People's Republic' and 'On the recognition of the Luhansk People's Republic' was announced. Then, early on 24 February, a new video address appeared announcing the decision to carry out a special military operation. Each of these appeals contained a long list of arguments to legitimize Ukraine's invasion. I will group and briefly describe these arguments.

The Security Council meeting on 21 February (Security Council 2022) provides the most extensive list of arguments used by the Russian authorities to prepare Russian citizens for a future invasion. They are listed below in a summary form. Working with Putin's 21 and 24 February addresses, I review the texts of these speeches to identify all the causes expressed to justify the offensive on Ukraine. As we will often see, these causes are the same but expressed in different ways and sometimes placed in different contexts. I quote each of them, as the statement's author did. It is worth noticing this technique of repeatedly using the same reasons to increase their number. I also indicate how many times each reason was mentioned by different speakers. The reasons justifying the Ukraine offensive are:

- 1) illegitimacy of the Ukrainian regime established by the military coup d'état (4 mentions);
- 2) Ukrainian military aggression: the Kyiv authorities are conducting armed operations against the residents of Donbass who did not accept the coup d'état of 2014 (5 mentions);
- 3) humanitarian reasons: the genocide of the people of Donbass, shelling of civilians, blockade, repression, lustration, and violation of human rights (10 mentions);
- 4) non-implementation of the Minsk Package of Measures for the peaceful solution of the problem in the region by the Ukrainian authorities (10 mentions);
- 5) the West uses Ukraine as an instrument of confrontation with Russia; it is not an independent, sovereign state (the concept of Ukraine as anti-Russia was not used at the meeting) (3 mentions);
- 6) the threat to Russia's security related to Ukraine's accession to NATO: Ukraine will try to take back Crimea by force, which will cause a war with NATO (1 mention);
- 7) the threat posed by the United States and NATO, which act aggressively, expand, and openly declare Russia an enemy (5 mentions);
- 8) United States and NATO evasion of negotiations on security guarantees and non-compliance with previously reached agreements (4 mentions);
- 9) nuclear threat due to Ukraine's desire to become a nuclear power (2 mentions);
- 10) past positive experience: recognition of the sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia saved many lives and served as a lesson to the West (1 mention);
- 11) protection of the Russian people of Donbass and Russian culture (5 mentions);
- 12) attacks on Russian territory by Ukraine (2 mentions);
- 13) protection of 'usual European values' shared by the residents of Luhansk and Donetsk; their right to economic autonomy and Russian language (1 mention);
- 14) concern for pan-European security: the peaceful and stable development in Europe is threatened due to the establishment of the regime of nationalists and Bandera in Ukraine (1 mention).

President Putin announced the first eight reasons. His associates provided the rest. Only prime minister Mikhail Mishustin did not talk directly about Russia's national interests, the humanitarian catastrophe in the Donbass, or the nature of the Ukrainian regime. His speech focused on the internal problems that must be solved after recognizing the sovereignty of the region and using armed forces to maintain this solution. He spoke very indirectly about international relations: 'Russia cannot afford to lose pace'. Two people, Nikolai Patrushev, Security Council secretary and former director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), and Sergey Naryshkin, director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, came up with a proposal to hold another round of negotiations with Ukraine and the United States, threatening the recognition of the republics. The rest of the Council was determined to recognize their independence. It is worth noting that Valentina Matvienko, Chairwoman of the Federation Council, spoke about the 'moral duty' Russians have towards the people of Donbass.

As we can see, a legal argument was among the most popular arguments in favor of recognizing the sovereignty of the republics and of using the armed forces to help them. Ukraine had not complied with the Minsk Agreements; therefore, the republics could become independent. The recognition of the republics and providing them with armed force was described as an extreme measure that Russia used after all other means had been tried. Ten people expressed this argument. The same number of people spoke directly about the importance of humanitarian grounds as a reason to favor the recognition and protection of Donbass, thus giving a moral justification for their decision. The acts of genocide and attacks on the civilian population were the moral duty that Valentina Matvienko was talking about.

Political arguments focused on the issues of interests and the balance of power are reflected in arguments 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12 and 14. Legal grounds were applied in arguments 1 and 4. Values and moral reasons were expressed by arguments 3, 11, and 13. However, this classification should not be perceived as strict since questions of legitimacy, the exhaustion of non-military means, or the degree of security threat a particular political community faces are directly related to the moral justification of war if we use the conceptual basis of just war theory. Adduced political and legal arguments are important for assessing to what extent *jus ad bellum* has been observed by Russia. We have received several judgments that resemble reasoning in terms of just war theory. Argument 1, and to some extent arguments 2 and 3, which describe Ukraine as a state that does not take into account its former citizens, contradicts the idea of legitimate authority and reinforces that a state should be governed by those who have a legitimate right to do so. Arguments 2 and 3, 6-9, and 12 challenge proportionality which states that the use of force is permissible only in response to a very serious threat. Arguments 4, 8 and to a certain extent 7 deal with the idea of last resort, that force may be applied only when all other means are exhausted. In one way or another, all the arguments are aimed at protecting the innocent and keeping a just peace, as the right intention principle implies. Finally, just cause in this case is defined by humanitarian reasons (3 and to a certain extent 13), the right of self-defense (5-9, 11, 12), and concern for global peace (the protection of the pan-European security system expressed in argument 14).

For the most part, Putin's 21 February address on the recognition of the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic turned into a lecture on history as President Putin understood it (Putin 2022a). The arguments, often applied by Putin, about the inferiority of the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian nation were repeated in that speech. In Putin's analysis, Ukraine appeared to be a state created by mistake by the Bolsheviks (See Putin 2021; a study of Putin's view of Ukraine and the historical lessons he gives can be found in Kalb 2015: 19-27). At that moment, it was an illegitimate state waging a criminal war against its former citizens in the Donbass. Ukraine was thus deprived of the right to exist. Part of the address was devoted to NATO and Ukraine's possible accession to NATO as a threat to Russia. In other words, Putin repeated in a condensed form part of the arguments presented at the Meeting of the Security Council and discussed above.

In turn, the address on 24 February announcing a special military operation overflows with moral arguments. It was somewhat shorter than the 21 February address. There were seven arguments that directly explain the need to use force to

resolve the conflict and that have extreme moral loading as it was focused on genocide and Nazism that flourished in Ukraine. Here is a list of the grounds that were announced as causes of the war or, officially, the special military operation (Putin 2022b):

- A) The West threatens Russia militarily. It supported separatism inside Russia; NATO expanded despite all the agreements;
- B) The West threatens Russia culturally. It imposes pseudo-values. It underestimates the significance of the USSR-Russia in the post-World War II world: 'The outcomes of World War II and the sacrifices our people had to make to defeat Nazism are sacred';
- C) the West has been waging illegitimate and illegal aggressive wars, undermining global security;
- D) the genocide of the people of Donbass. The primary purpose of the special military operation is to stop the genocide;
- E) the West supports nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine who seized power during an armed coup; Ukraine now has an illegitimate puppet regime, a people's adversary regime;
- F) preemptive self-defense, 'The showdown between Russia and these forces cannot be avoided'; clashing with the West and Ukrainian punitive units trying to obtain nuclear weapons is inevitable. The experience of the Great Patriotic War shows that an attempt to appease the aggressor does not prevent war and is hugely expensive. 'For eight years, for eight endless years we have been doing everything possible to settle the situation by peaceful political means'. This did not yield any result, and that is why a further delay is inadmissible;
- G) Self-defense: a real grave threat is already present. Ukraine, used by the United States and its allies, is a territory of an 'ever mounting and totally unacceptable threat for Russia... It is not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty'. That is why 'Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today's Ukraine'.

Putin concluded that 'in accordance with Article 51 (Chapter VII) of the UN Charter, with permission of Russia's Federation Council, and in execution of the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic, ratified by the Federal Assembly,' he 'made a decision to carry out a special military operation' (Putin 2022b).

These seven reasons are a summary of what was discussed on 21 February. They focus on some points that Putin himself apparently considers important or weighty enough to legitimize an invasion. We can observe a legalist approach in his words since he refers to generally accepted documents, the UN Charter and agreements with the recognized republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, but also a scattering of moral arguments designed to strengthen these claims.

Reasons A, B, C and G were presented as grounds for the war of self-defense. Reasons D and E justify the invasion as a humanitarian intervention. Reason F is an appeal to a preemptive strike. All the reasons but D either talk about a special military operation as a direct clash with the West or describe Ukraine as a puppet in the hands of the West. In other words, Ukraine itself is deprived of subjectivity, which somewhat simplifies the task of justifying the war. The West poses a more

severe and tangible threat than Ukraine, which is often condescendingly perceived in Russia as an incompetent younger brother.

Putin also identified several goals of the war. They appear in different parts of his speech, and each of them has a moral and/or legal character: protection from genocide; demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine; bringing to justice those who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation; realization of the right of nations (living on the territory of Ukraine) to self-determination. Putin also emphasized: 'It is not our plan to occupy the Ukrainian territory'. A just war theorist, unfamiliar with the context, could say this is an excellent example of right intentions thinking; however, on 30 September 2022, treaties on the accession of four Ukrainian regions into Russia were signed.

Putin tried to infuse legitimacy into the invasion of Ukraine through these seven causes, since permissible warfare must have an apparent and indisputably weighty reason. In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we see a long list of claims and reasons. But naming too many reasons makes it unclear what the most important reason is and whether an attack against a particular state can be justified in this way. The real just cause, if there is one, thus becomes blurred. The justification strategy was not aimed at an international audience, for whom it would be possible to limit the listing of threats, but at Russian citizens. The aim was to mobilize them rather than to propose logical proof for the necessity of war. Therefore, a moralizing narrative was applied.

In a situation when the decision has already been made and only needs to be presented properly, an appeal to morality is an attempt to popularize that decision. This is not a unique strategy used exclusively by the Putin regime but also relates to the strategy of enumerating causes of war intended to make a decision look more reasonable. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 is an example of this from the relatively recent past. Nick Fotion, in his analysis of that campaign, defined the strategy used by the US government and military leaders as multiple reasons thinking (Fotion 2007: 73). That was a way of listing reasons, each of which could not give a moral justification for the war and be considered a just cause, but which, when presented as a list, could make us believe in the existence of a valid cause. Fotion himself was not skeptical of multiple reasons (Fotion 2007: 77-80). However, he insisted that a state must confirm the soundness and validity of its decision and give a logical explanation of why and how these reasons justify the war.

Nick Fotion described a procedure for dealing with multiple reasons. He suggested several steps that should be taken to form a list of valid reasons (Fotion 2007: 79-80). I will focus on only one of his points here. Fotion stressed that one must 'gather facts to determine whether the reasons actually apply to the situation' (Fotion 2007: 79). He insisted that not being able to fulfill the requirements of this principle leads to the failure of the entire procedure. The reasons declared by the Russian authorities are unlikely to pass verification by this criterion. Their reasons point to various threats to Russia's security. But even the unsuccessful development of the campaign in Ukraine during the spring-autumn of 2022 — when the Russian army demonstrated its incompetence and inability to conduct combat operations, and revealed the weakness of its defense capability — did not lead to a military attack by NATO or some other union or state. NATO has been on Russia's borders since 2004 when the Baltic countries joined the alliance, which again did not lead to an attack by NATO. Thus, it is impossible to talk about any immediate and direct military threat hanging over Russia or therefore to interpret

an attack on Ukraine as a pre-emptive strike. Moreover, even when Russian officials refer to threats from the West, they discuss them in value categories, as sacred symbols that are being questioned. The West is responsible for the collapse of the USSR, for the humiliation of the dark and 'wild' 1990s and now threatens Russia's special path. That is, the conflict is not limited purely to confrontations between the state or blocs. For Putin, this is a sacred war for values, that for him are directly related to state power (Kiryukhin, Shcherbak 2022: 20). Finally, Russian authorities speak directly and frequently about the humanitarian grounds for the invasion.

Putin denies Ukraine a legitimate government after the Maidan revolution. By this logic, Russia will free Ukrainians from an illegitimate government, which will bring them a better life. However, a coup d'état cannot be considered a just cause of war, and the revolution happened long before the invasion. During this time, presidential and parliamentary elections were held twice in Ukraine. No mass antigovernmental activity occurred in the territories controlled by Kyiv. Accusations of a Nazi Ukrainian regime do not correspond to the facts. Vladimir Zelensky does not represent a nationalist party. The candidate of the nationalist parties, Ruslan Koshulynskyi, won 1.63% of the votes in the 2019 presidential election; in the same year, the nationalists (All-Ukrainian Union 'Freedom') gained 2.15% of the votes in the parliamentary elections and did not have enough votes to win a seat in parliament. The Radical Party of Oleh Liashko, which received 4.01% of the votes, is another party that could be described as nationalist and did not get into parliament. Notably, it opposed integration into NATO and the EU. However, accusations of Nazism should be seen not only as a political argument — 'we do not approve of the Nazi regime, so we must attack' — but as a moral one. It means we condemn the value content of Nazism, and Russia also has a special moral status and the right to fight Nazism when it is detected (more on this below).

Putin and his officials claim that Ukraine has committed genocide on the Donbass people. According to various estimates, 2600-3600 people died in the Donbass between 2014 and 2021 (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022: 3). Essential to this argument is that these figures were confirmed by the Investigative Committee of Russia (Investigative Committee 2022). Of course, none of these individuals should have been victims. However, the relatively low number of victims in a conflict on such a large territory testifies against genocide in the Luhansk and Donetsk republics. More importantly, these people have become victims of artillery shelling and untargeted attacks, during which it is impossible to single out a single ethnic or religious group for committing a deliberate killing that could be called genocide.

Besides the fact that Putin and Russian authorities distort facts to justify the war, they are also trying to strengthen the moral value of their argument. For this purpose, they make constant references to the founding event of modern Russia — the Second World War, which turns out to be the basis of their justification strategy. Several times Putin returns to that war in his speech: 1) 'the fundamental norms that were adopted following WWII and largely formalized its outcome — came in the way of those who declared themselves the winners of the Cold War;' 2) the USSR 'was not prepared to counter the invasion by Nazi Germany... The country stopped the enemy and went on to defeat it, but this came at a tremendous cost;' 3) 'members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and Hitler's accomplices;' 4) 'an increasing number of statements coming from the West that there is no need any more to abide by the documents setting forth the outcomes of World War II,

as signed by the totalitarian Soviet regime;’ 5) ‘The outcomes of World War II and the sacrifices our people had to make to defeat Nazism are sacred;’ 6) ‘Your fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today’s neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine;’ 7) the word ‘junta’ is used once to describe the Ukrainian regime (Putin 2022b). Why is there so much focus on a war that ended 75 years ago?

Nazism, fascism, Hitlerism, Nazi Germany, the Third Reich — all these concepts in the Russian language have acquired a highly negative connotation. They serve as a substitute for the idea of absolute evil and are highly moralized terms, not just concepts related to the past. Using these terms, you can map mortal threats, foes and friends. A comparison of the conflict with the struggle against Nazism allows you to describe it as literally a Manichaean existential struggle for the very existence of goodness and life.

At the very beginning of the process of untangling Putin's cult of the Great Patriotic War and Great Victory in it, Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov wrote about that war and its importance for maintaining Russian mass identity:

All components of the positive collective unity of the idea of "us" are eroding. After their devaluation has brought to the fore a range of complexes of hurt self-esteem and inferiority, Victory now stands out as a stone pillar in the desert, the vestige of a weathered rock. All the most important interpretations of the present are concentrated around Victory; it provides them with their standards of evaluation and their rhetorical means of expression (Gudkov 2005).

The significance of the Second World War, or as Russians refer to it, the Great Patriotic War and the Great Victory, is exceptionally high in Putin's Russia. They exemplify great sacrifice, suffering, unprecedented courage and perseverance. They certify the unprecedented moral height to which the Soviet people have ascended and which the Russian people now occupy as the legal successor of the Soviets. However, the memory of the Second World War serves not only the moral education of Russians. It is also one of the sources of legitimacy of the Putin regime. Elizabeth Wood described perfectly how ‘Vladimir Putin has repeatedly personified himself as the defender, even the savior of the Motherland’ (Wood 2021: 249; see also further 250-263). In February 2022, using images of the Second World War, Putin was trying to draw a parallel between the war in Ukraine and the Great Patriotic War. The invasion of Ukraine was justified by the need to destroy the Nazi regime there and once again save Europe and the whole world for a great moral victory. Such a move would give a special military operation much greater legitimacy and sacralize it. The War in Ukraine is no longer a routine political conflict but rather a value and ideological clash. It is noteworthy that in discussing multiple reasons thinking, Nick Fotion stipulates the danger of ideologizing the causes of war.

I suppose that is why, if we compare the declarations of 21 and 24 February, we can see that the decision to recognize the independence of the two republics and the de facto first round of discussion on the justification of war against Ukraine was not as heavily loaded morally. But the decision to invade Ukraine, a much more fateful and vitally important decision, was justified mainly in moral and value language. This strategy of transferring the discussion of war into a value domain was used by the Russian authorities to define their decision to invade as necessary and inevitable. Comparing this war with the Great Patriotic War was supposed to

present it as an existential choice of Russian citizens and thereby strengthen its support.

At this point we can challenge the political realist's interpretation of the conflict in Ukraine. If we limit ourselves to considering the threats that come from Ukraine, or rather from the West, we will gain a very narrow understanding of the causes of the conflict and the method of its public justification. First, we will focus only on the international sphere. As we can see, the speeches of Russian officials were aimed primarily at the domestic audience. This was why so much attention was paid to Russian values and the sacred status of the Great Patriotic War. Realists care more about the international level and react to the statements and actions of political leaders addressed to other political leaders, but it is important to keep the internal consumers of their statements in focus. In the case of the invasion of Ukraine, the internal level is probably the most important. Ukraine is not only the battlefield of superpowers (or those who claim such a role) but also the arena of the struggle for Putin's regime stability.

Second, if the basis of Mearsheimer's scientific analysis is the idea that states are in a system of relations where each of them seeks to maximize power in order to become a 'hegemon in the system' (Mearsheimer 2001: 40), then the statement 'the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis' (Mearsheimer 2014: 77; this notion was repeated in Mearsheimer, 2022) loses validity. Moreover, the category of responsibility and guilt becomes meaningless. If the system of international relations is such that states necessarily attack each other, then none of them would be guilty of having to attack another state at some point. It is impossible to provoke someone to attack and therefore be responsible for that, because the very structure of international relations forces the offender to attack, and the influence of this system cannot be resisted. Similarly, we cannot blame the cup for breaking because it fell to the floor under the influence of gravity.

Third, there is another element in the realist approach that sounds contradictory. Mearsheimer calls Russia a great power, which makes it possible to overlook the interests of Ukraine. At the same time, he considers Russia weak and inferior militarily and economically. As he states, 'abstract rights such as self-determination are largely meaningless when powerful states get into brawls with weaker states' (Mearsheimer 2014: 88), which implies that Russia is a powerful state and Ukraine is weak. But earlier, Mearsheimer stated that Russia has a 'mediocre army', 'Moscow is also poorly positioned to pay for a costly occupation', and 'its weak economy would suffer even more in the face of the resulting sanctions' (Mearsheimer 2014: 85). So, can Russia be treated as a great power in the hierarchy of realists?

Finally, by stating that the West had threatened Russia and thus caused the invasion, we are simply ignoring the entire line of justification for the conflict that was outlined above. Indeed, official Russian apologetics of war points to the military threats of the West, but moral arguments dominate. It is built on accusing the Ukrainian regime of genocide and Nazism and represents Russia as a state that fights against the Nazis and thus again saves the whole world from an existential threat as it did in 1945. At the same time, the West is accused of challenging special values and discrediting Russia's sacred status as a winner in World War II.

Remarkably, some realists are trying to distance themselves from Mearsheimer and present him as only one of the representatives of realism or as a representative of one version of realism, namely structural realism (Smith, Dawson 2022).

However, Mearsheimer's authority is extremely high, and his interpretation of the Ukrainian crisis is probably the most notable. Neoclassical realists also focus on the global, geopolitical level of conflict, although they pay attention to such things as human errors, identity and perceptions in the decision-making process.

To what extent does this moral justification of war succeed inside Russia?

This is the most challenging question because we do not have enough empirical data for a precise analysis.

Morality gives us one of the perspectives on the Russo-Ukrainian war. We must note here the political dimensions, both international (the desire to challenge American hegemony, contest a unipolar world, and thus return Russia to the status of a superpower) and internal (Putin's and his elite's desire to preserve power), or simply socio-psychological (authoritarian leaders often begin to overestimate their ability to analyze situations and then make mistakes). The atomization of Russian society, the depoliticization of Russians, and their learned habit of not participating in political life have created conditions for tacit, passive support for the war. It is worth considering that war is a tax on poverty. We still have little sociological and demographic data available on the participants of the war on the Russian side. But it can be presumed with some degree of confidence that people from poor and depressed regions, not from large cities, are going to war, either voluntarily or by being mobilized. War can be an attractive career prospect, so some of them may be interested for that reason. Yet, as we saw, moral grounds were presented as the key cause of the conflict in Putin's address announcing a special military operation. And he deliberately used these grounds to emphasize that the political confrontation with the West, the United States, or the 'Anglo-Saxons' — as he calls his opponents — is at the same time, a value conflict and fight against global injustice. I assume that Putin's moral narrative to justify the war helped people to explain the war and strengthen their support for it.

The fact that moral language was used to justify the war can explain the support of the invasion by some Russian citizens. Official measurements (VCIOM 2022c; Levada Center, 2022; Russia Watcher 2022) show a consistently high level of approval, but sociologists dispute the validity and objectivity of researching the attitude to the war in a state where condemning the war and simply using the word 'war' is a basis for criminal prosecution (Yudin 2022). At the same time, as polls by the Levada Center show, older generations are most active in support of the war. To the question 'Do you personally support the actions of the Russian military forces in Ukraine?' 75% of respondents answered 'Definitely yes' or 'Rather yes' in both the 40-54 and 55 years and older age groups. Most active TV-viewers belong to this group: 43% of the group of 60-year-olds and older only watch TV a few times a week and do not use the Internet, while in other age groups most people are both Internet users and TV-viewers or do not watch TV at all (VCIOM 2022e). Among people aged 18-24 and 25-39, 58% and 70% support the Russian army, respectively.

We can understand the high level of fear for Russians in expressing their private opinions publicly and may distrust all statistical data from Russia, but we have to admit that the moral compass of Putin and at least part of the Russian population is set up similarly. They share some common values. As discussed above, Russians

understand the moral significance of the victory in the Great Patriotic war as a source of national honor. Yet they still feel the infringement of their dignity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russians are not ready to give a political or economic assessment of the causes of the war, and thus react more positively to its moral interpretation.

But is it possible to expect a change in Russians' attitude to the war itself and not to the fact that the war is unpleasant because it might affect you personally after the mobilization is announced? We can make several assumptions about how stable reception of the moral justification of war is. Russians do not trust TV and propaganda, which rather convinces them that it is not necessary to accept a certain point of view, but that you can't trust anyone (Kachkaeva, Kolchina, Shomova, Yarovaya 2020; The Insider 2022). Being depoliticized, Russians often do not have their own opinion, especially when it comes to issues that are solved by the authorities and especially by Putin. Therefore, they have to accept and use the means of explanation offered by the official Russian media or Putin directly through their appeals or articles. Even if people initially did not think of the war with Ukraine categories such as fighting Nazism, stopping genocide, or a preemptive strike, they may adopt these terms and use them. The key question is how stable and deep rooted this support is. Have Russians internalized a moral view of the war?

Russians could be characterized as having a dual view of the political use of morality. They believe the Russian state is fairer than other states (VCIOM 2022a). This would make them view the Russian authorities' decisions as more just and reasonable. Russians also think the state is responsible for ensuring moral life (71% agreed with that, VCIOM 2022d). But at the same time, the desire for a strong hand is combined with a sense of injustice and corruption by the authorities and the state (Zemtsov 2020: 109). In a difficult moment, Russians are more likely to rely on themselves than on the opinion or decision of an authoritative person (Public Opinion Foundation 2014). That is, in extreme situations, Russians rely only on themselves and not on the state, which they do not treat as a source of moral guidance. A difficult situation is apparently a matter of personal life and death, not the suffering of other fellow citizens or foreigners.

In addition, Russians are more likely to believe that wars are unjust in principle, which can be illustrated by the polls of the Levada Center (Levada Center 2014). Polls have shown that Russians in general are not inclined to believe that any wars in Russian history can be called just. Often, they find it difficult to answer the question 'Was this war just?' Even the Great Patriotic War is described as definitely just or rather just by 54% of respondents in 2014. Russians might therefore assess the war in Ukraine as unjust. However, this view will also allow them to consider it as not being significantly different from any other war, and they will not see it as a moral challenge. We can imagine a such point of view: 'Even if the Great Patriotic War was unjust, so is a special military operation. Indeed, how can war, that is, large-scale murder and destruction, be just?' 'Whataboutism' may also be involved here, which is a reproducible way of thinking in Russia. 'If the West or the United States can start wars, bomb Yugoslavia, and torture people in Guantanamo, why shouldn't we be allowed to do that?' This attitude makes it very difficult to rethink the war and accept responsibility for it and the related destruction and suffering.

We can expect that Russians will rethink the moral assessment of the Russo-Ukrainian war. It will happen not by admitting guilt or responsibility but rather by

morally framed arguments provided to justify the war losing their force and significance since they are not deeply internalized. As soon as the state media stops supporting the moral narrative of the war in Ukraine, the explanatory schemes proposed by the Putin regime can be deconstructed.

Conclusion

In this article I have reconstructed the Russian strategy of justifying the attack on Ukraine as it was submitted just before the invasion by the Russian authorities, who explained why such a strategy was chosen. To do this, I analyzed Putin's and other senior officials' addresses and speeches. I have shown that the conflict was initially described as a clash of values and morals with the West, and not pure political rivalry. This strategy of justifying the war was designed to give legitimacy to the decision to attack Ukraine.

I have reproduced and classified the arguments expressed in support of the war. As I have shown, the Great Patriotic War was used as the core framework for its justification. For decades, the image of the infallible Soviet warrior-liberator has been broadcast in Russia, symbolically highlighting the achievements of modern Russia. Putin's regime applied the Great Patriotic War as a source to maintain the image of Russia as a victorious and highly moral state. Putin, Russian authorities, and propagandists relied on that resource to justify the war in Ukraine, explaining the necessity and inevitability of the special military operation and mobilizing Russian citizens. War was described not just as a struggle for a dominant position in the international arena but as an attempt by the West to challenge Russia's unique spiritual values and revise the results of the Second World War. The United States or the West is presented not only as an alternative force threatening Russia, but more specifically as a carrier of wrong values, which therefore poses a threat to Russian values, culture and civilization. In addition to the threats from the West, the genocide of the people of Donbass, the illegitimacy of the Ukrainian regime and its Nazi character were named as causes of the war. I conclude that popular realist or geopolitical explanations of the war in Ukraine can be considered one way to interpret it, but they only provide a partial understanding of this conflict and not an exhaustive explanation.

To address the important question of how well the strategy of the moral justification of the war in Ukraine is working, I turned to the statistics. Although we need to be careful with the opinion polls conducted in an authoritarian state during wartime, the data revealed that support for the war, at first glance, is high. This is not least due to the arguments that were used to justify it. I also showed that we have reason to doubt the depth of Russian moral support of this war or that these arguments have been internalized by Russians — and thus we can question their commitment to these arguments in the long term.

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