

Great power totalitarianism of the Russian Federation, its sources and consequences

Abstract: The paper is devoted to the analysis of the origin and evolution of modern Russian totalitarianism, the study of its key features, anthropological and socio-psychological characteristics, the hypotheses of the possible Kremlin transformation regime are offered.

Keywords: Russkiy mir, destructive cults, political aggression, crisis anthropology

Introduction

The world order, according to which the Russian Federation is recognized as the successor to the USSR, has ceased to guarantee security in Europe and the world. Instead, the self-proclaimed status of great power means that Russia can, at its discretion, interfere in the affairs of foreign powers, including using the methods of hybrid warfare and through open military aggression. Russia regularly violates international law, in particular waging aggressive wars accompanied by war crimes, perpetrating arguably crimes against humanity and even genocide. In 2014, Russia for the first time self-created “precedent of revision” of the borders that emerged after 1991 through the occupation of Crimea. In fact, this act of aggression went unpunished, as Russia was able to cushion low efficiency sanctions imposed on it and enjoyed appeasement towards its behavior by the European and international partners, which further stimulated the occupation of certain territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and establishment of the self-proclaimed Russia-controlled entities in these territories. And the unpunished aggression led to the next act of war against Ukraine in 2022, aimed at either its complete destruction, or return to the de facto colonial status of Ukraine within the Russian Federation. Similar violations of international law were observed both in the territories of the states that have been part of the USSR before 1991 and outside them. Thus, the recognition of Russia’s right for a certain sphere of influence, including the right to conduct punitive operations (notably in the vicinity of its so-called “near abroad” sphere of influence of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Tajikistan) does not prevent aggressive actions outside this area, as it was clear the case in Syria.

We should note only some characteristic samples from the impressive corpus of texts related to the concepts of near abroad and Russian world (*russskiy mir*). Near abroad is usually related to the states of former USSR, and Russian world has no clearly defined borders. It is spread at every place where at least some people speak Russian. A moderate version could be found at the discussions of

Valdai club, think tank close to official Kremlin¹. An extremist version was proposed in a paper of political technologist Sergeitsev². Close extremist opinion was expressed by ex-president of RF Medvedev³. The official long read signed by President Putin is not that openly extremist, but it is based on biased interpretations of historical facts mentioning neither international law nor social reality of contemporary Ukraine⁴. It is not clear how Ukraine would benefit from de-facto restoration of the dependency status, and still less clear how RF could force the restoration. However, Putin's statements were evaluated as a call for genocide of Ukrainians by Snyder⁵.

How can the world community ensure that Russia would refrain from further aggressive actions in the future, release the occupied territories and not only those of Ukraine, address losses to victims of death, mass murder and slaughter, torture, rape and looting committed against the civilian population on large scale, pay the reparations for damaged infrastructure, property and provide compensation for to material and other damage? During 30 years we have been convinced to consider the Russian Federation as a "state-civilization", a certain constant and non-arguable value in world politics. Now it appears counterproductive. This state regularly violates international law, its general principles recognized by the civilized nations, international agreements and conventions, enforcement and compliance architecture of international law, not speaking about clear and apparent disrespect towards customary international law, notably the customs of war and Geneva Conventions. It has deeply corrupted low-efficiency economy, largely focus on extraction of energy resources, oil and gas, that is disproportionate to its military power. This economy is largely operating outside the ambit of the law and its value is generated by mostly illegal means. Russia is developing many internal conflicts that cannot be resolved by its current political leadership. In addition, the current political leadership cannot be changed through democratic elections with the participation of the opposition, having large support of society that is poor, uneducated and heavily influenced by the propaganda machine. The disintegration of the Russian Federation could provoke multiple risks to the entire world and humanity, but its existence in its current format is also a risk for several reasons, which we will discuss in detail in the next section. Similarly, a number of risks accompanied the collapse of the USSR. But this collapse allowed a number of states to break free from the communist dictatorship and avoid overt post-colonial dependence on the

¹ Караганов, С.А. (2022) От конструктивного разрушения к собиранию. *Россия в глобальной политике*. Т. 20. No. 2. С. 52-69.

² Сергейцев, Т (2022) Что Россия должна сделать с Украиной <https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html>.

³ Медведев, Д.А. (2022) Преобразившуюся ментально в Третий рейх Украину его же судьба и постигнет. *Реальное время*. Общество. <https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/246686-medvedev-napisal-post-o-feykah-i-nastoyaschey-istorii>

⁴ Путин, В.В (2021) «Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев» 12 июля 2021 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁵ Snyder, Т (2022) Opinion: Putin has long fantasized about a world without Ukrainians. Now we see what that means. *Washington Post*. March 23, 2022 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/23/putin-genocide-language-ukraine-wipe-out-state-identity/>.

imperial center. According to the Constitution of RF, Republics are de jure states within the Federation⁶ but de-facto they are gradually deprived on self-governance and cultural autonomy, see the case of Tatarstan⁷.

An efficient project for the transformation of society must be based on its internal resources, which in the case of Russia are relatively weak, as the democratic opposition has been systematically repressed and protest movements have mostly been channeled in a government-safe way. Central government's policy has significant population support; therefore, we can hardly hope to deal with active minorities ready to seize power. In addition, some of the minorities opposed to the regime are anti-liberal and anti-Western even in comparison with loyal to Putin supporters. We do not have reliable data on the structure of the Russian society and its current state, as social science in Russia is severely censored. However, the state is not completely isolated from the outside world. We can get the data from open sources, using purely scientific methods, and avoiding special investigative operations or on the spot fact-finding. Anyway, this work will have a number of features common to collaboration with dissidents in the USSR.

Paradoxically, the official ideology of the Russian Federation considers Ukrainians as one people with the Russians. At the same time such ideology provides for the physical destruction of disloyal to the imperial project part of this so called "one people" (*odin narod*). Ukrainians are the most interested among other European nations in establishing lasting positive peace in Eastern Europe, the most affected by Russian aggression in 2014-2022, and they, as former active participants in the imperial project since its inception, are best in understanding its vulnerabilities. One of the risks is the disintegration of Russia under the pressure of economic factors into enclaves controlled by special services and the army. Such enclaves might not have proper governance and are unlikely to comply with international law. An example of such an enclave are the ISIS-controlled enclaves that emerged with significant influence of the Saddam Hussein's special services. However, at the same time there are options for positive transformation, including the transition of a hyper centralized pseudo-federation to a confederate system, and the formation of nation-states by the indigenous peoples of the former Russian Federation. The purpose of the proposed study is to consider these ways of transformation - national, confederate and destructive-terrorist, and then recommend measures to support the first two ways as potentially leading to peaceful transformation.

Great power totalitarianism - an attempt of the definition

⁶ Конституция Российской Федерации. Глава 3. Федеративное устройство, ст. 65-79, <http://www.constitution.ru>.

⁷ Аблякимов, Р (2021) День Республики "для галочки": как Татарстан потерял остатки самостоятельности 30 августа 2021 <https://www.idelreal.org/a/31433741.htmlfbclid=IwAR0DEhiBAr0fCNHj3Jq4qgpek5CRCI5f15KWCnY7C1SuHgFvTdHiNPqzEvs>.

The state ideology of modern Russia does not have an established official name or the clearly defined set of canonical texts. It has a number of features common to all totalitarian regimes. This kind of totalitarianism attaches considerable importance to its own status of great power. It aims to expand the influence on the foreign states ignoring established boundaries. An approximate ideological definition is the “Russian World” (*Russkiy Mir*), a construct that gained official status around the beginning of Putin's first presidential term. In official narratives, Russia is more than a regular nation state, but a distinctive civilization that challenges the global West, the United States, and the EU. The current Russian Constitution includes provisions on the supremacy of national legal system over demands of the international law. Such an approach is contrary to international law and the existing international obligations of the Russian Federation. The totalitarian regime forces its subjects to provide active public support to its policies; this is its fundamental difference from the Russian state authoritarianism of the 1990s, which only forbade actions that were clearly directed against the government.

The totalitarian regime resorted to practices initially tested by “destructive religious cults” in smaller communities. We can hardly equate a cult that covers a small part of society with the whole state. However, we note the common peculiarities between them

- focus on charismatic leaders, not on rules and procedures. Putin as an omnipotent first person, not a Western type of president as an elected official with a certain range of functions and discretion limited by law.
- irrational basic assumptions structuring the group's activities. In this sense, the Russian World is a weak equivalent to Trotskyism with its permanent world revolution, or National Socialism with the idea of restoring the Millennial Reich. For the Trotskyists the social base is the proletariat, for the Nazis the racially pure Aryans, and for the great-power totalitarianism, somewhat tautologically, the Russian World.
- It is easier to join a group than to leave it. Almost everyone can become involved in the Russian World; the socialization procedure is simplified as much as possible. But leaving the group is difficult and costly process.
- informational closeness of the group, uncritical attitude to their own narratives, and hypercritical attitude to information that contradicts them. Classical logic, the distinction between faith and rational knowledge is not welcome;
- social identity coming from membership in the group, competes fiercely with other social identities; it also competes for a resource with a personal identity. The less visibly a person is different from the rest, the less problems (s)he has. Particularly vulnerable to involvement are

people with broken social ties who do not have a normal family, close friends, professional environment.

In this context, it is worth mentioning some destructive cults, constructed with the participation of Russian special services in Ukraine:

- White Brotherhood (Beloye Bratstvo), and its later moderate analogue Allat Ra;
- Oplot (the Stronghold), a hybrid of a destructive cult, militia and fighting club, which included mostly former employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, retired or fired for abuse, was based mainly in Kharkiv;
- Cascade, an approximate analogue of the Oplot, focused on ex-military servicemen, active mainly in Kyiv and Odesa;
- Separate units of the Cossacks, in particular the Crimean Hundred, led by the psychopath Khramov⁸;
- Long-term social experiments conducted in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Technocratic quasi-modernization according to the recipes of the Shchedrovitsky group (methodologists) in the Donetsk region, and conservative revolution based on the teaching of Dugin and Prokhanov in the Luhansk region⁹ (9).

If in Ukraine both the government and self-organized citizens opposed the functioning of destructive cults, then in the territories controlled by the Russian Federation under the roof of special services, destructive cults can operate virtually unhindered.

The social base of the current Kremlin regime is probably quite broad. Due to the strict censorship of scientific research in the Russian Federation, we lack information on how actually broad the social base is, how resistant to competing influences, and how potentially influential are groups that oppose the regime. Muscovites have a historical habit of living in a vertically organized community, where hierarchies extend to all spheres of activity, and horizontal interaction has certain boundaries. At the same time, the vertical organization has features that we can attribute to the consequences of genocide. Bolshevism destroyed the nobility (dvorianstvo) as the old military and administrative elite, as well as entrepreneurs as a class of exploiters. Representatives of the poor peasantry and urban marginals, organized on the principle of committee, came to local power; their customs and ways of operation were largely passed on to subsequent generations of leaders. Sociologist I. Kon describes a specific construct of masculinity for the culture – muzhychism¹⁰. Its bearer, the simple man, is not only a gender opposite to the woman, but also a social opposite to the noble person (barin), an essentially counter-elite character. When we observe a group of muzhyki in the role of

⁸ Pushkar V. & Malysheva O. (2015) Social Identities and Their Relationship with Borderland Conflicts. In *Strategy for Transformation and Prevention of Borderland Conflicts in Ukraine*, Galytska vydavnycha spilka (in Ukrainian). ISBN 978-966-1633-99-4.

⁹ Kostyuchenko, Y. V., Pushkar, V., Malysheva, O., & Yuschenko, M. (2019). Big Data Analysis for Terroristic Behavior Identification and Study Using Social Networks: Illegal Armed Groups During the Conflict in Donbas Region (East Ukraine). In *Developments in Information Security and Cybernetic Wars* (pp. 197-235). IGI Global.

¹⁰ Кон, И.С. (2009). *Мужчина в меняющемся мире*. Время, ISBN 978-5-9691-0397-9, 84x108/32.

heads of a corporation or government agency, it is easy to notice some tension. Homogeneous male communities arise in most societies, but they differ structurally. Elite old boys club in the West is structurally different from the Russian club of muzhyki, ambivalent between the sense of elitism and the complex of the impostor, a random man in a chair too high¹¹.

The dubious achievements of the Soviet era include the breakup of a large family and the beginning of the breakup of a nuclear family. The family was entrusted with too burdensome social functions; according to Marx's theory, the family became mainly a cell of society. Mutual trust and respect, which are characteristic of close relationships, have been weakened to the point of extinction. If we try to apply the theory of Dunbar¹² to the bearers of Russian imperial culture, the inner circle of Dunbar will in many cases be weakened, or non-existent. Most culture-bearers were raised in families where there was no father at all, or he did not properly perform parental responsibilities, was weak or indifferent to raising children, involved in alcohol abuse or addictions. Hence, as a result, what the Russian society has is the weakened emotional and intellectual connection with real relatives, the projection of parental figures on public figures and media characters. In modern Russia, such processes have only deepened. These are atomized communities, where the surrogate of the family is the social notion of belonging to a particularly majestic large group whose parental figure is the dictator. Social psychology of the group in Russian diversion is better understood in terms of indigenous science, specific to local cultures than in Western terminology. The role of personality is diminished, and there is a systematic gap¹³ in the study of diade relationship¹⁴. However, it is not clear if Russian group theory works similar way for Tatarstan, Sakha or Dagestan.

Support for Putin's policies is largely correlated with growing positive attitudes toward Stalin personally, and the Soviet era, when Russia was great, but presumably not toward communist ideology. An important component of the great-power totalitarian identity is the cult of victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), ideologically very different from real historical events. In sense, this cult is based on mythologized imaginary ancestors ("*grandfathers who fought*") and the encouragement of external aggression ("*we can repeat*" - repeat what?). At the same time, the projections of the images of the fascists to be defeated are the most unexpected. These include former allies in World War II (the USA and the UK) and peoples of the former USSR (Ukraine) who, according to propaganda, came under the influence of fascism and are also russophobic. Hypercompensation for collective trauma involves identification

¹¹ Triandis, H. C., & Gelfand, M. J. (1998). Converging measurement of horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(1), 118-128. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.74.1.118.

¹² Dunbar, R. I. M. (1992). "Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates". *Journal of Human Evolution*. 22 (6): 469-493. doi:10.1016/0047-2484(92)90081-J.

¹³ Кричевский Л.Р., Дубовская Е. М. (2001). *Социальная психология малой группы*, Москва, Аспент-Пресс, К 316.6 ББК 88.5 К82.

¹⁴ Краснов А. В. (2020). *Социальная психология: психология малых групп. учебное пособие*. Пермский государственный национальный исследовательский университет. Пермь, 88 с.

with the victor (USSR) and simultaneous identification with the aggressor (III Reich) in an attempt to create a chosen glory¹⁵.

The elites of Russian Federation in charge of public administration are mainly associated with the secret services, the FSB and the KGB of the USSR, so their management practices have much in common with special operations. Staff rotation in high level governmental structure and government-controlled entities, including corporations, is possible mainly at the expense of the special services. Such a system proved to be less flexible than the Soviet one, which provided some kind of balance between the communist party and economic nomenclatura functions. The descents of nomenclatura families have not disappeared completely from political stage, but their position in social structure is low relatively to *siloviki*, representatives of FSB, army and national guards¹⁶. Soviet-era system of checks and balances was far from high efficiency. But the new one doesn't appear to be functioning neither. In Russian Federation, parliament is not a place for debate, it is place for consensual support of the nation's leader. The assimilation of minorities and indigenous peoples leads to an increase in the entropy of a system in which change can become uncontrollable. The regime had lost its ability of diversity management and applies questionable efforts toward total unification that is not supposed to work in such a complex social system, with poverty and lack of education becoming key negative factors influencing dynamics of the Russian society. An update version of internal conflict within elites rather confirms earlier findings regarding state capture by FSB¹⁷.

Concluding remarks

So, to conclude on our hypotheses:

There are common features in practices of great-power totalitarianism and destructive cults. Some practices previously tested on subcultures were included into mainstream social life. Working with the population affected by propaganda should include something structurally similar to deprogramming, and somewhat similar to the denazification of Germany after 1945. Rehumanisation of dehumanized is a part of the process. The methods of this work can be partly adapted, partly developed from scratch, taking into account the uniqueness of the situation.

The system is incapable of transformation within the limits imposed by the existing Constitutional framework and legislation of the Russian Federation and its existing borders. There is a need for a fundamentally different social organization of the post-Russian space. We need to find out what the social basis for the transformation of the post-Russian space can be, in particular - to work out versions of the creation of the nation-states by indigenous peoples, a confederate system instead of the current super-centralized one, as well

¹⁵ Volkan V. (2000). Горбулін, В., Литвиненко, О., Белов, О. (2009). *Національна безпека. Порядок денний для України*. Видавництво Стилос, 128 с. ISBN 978-966-193-007-9.

¹⁶ Горбулін, В., Литвиненко, О., Белов, О. (2009). *Національна безпека. Порядок денний для України*. Видавництво Стилос, 128 с. ISBN 978-966-193-007-9.

¹⁷ Становая, Т. (2022) Раскол среди своих. Как ужесточение режима в России сталкивает госолигархов и силовиков. Архив Фонда Карнеги. <https://carnegie.ru/2022/02/07/ru-pub-86379>

consider the risks of the formation of multiple terrorist organizations led by the FSB in the new post-Russian states.

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