Internal and External Factors of Putin's War on Ukraine

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Introduction

In literature it has been widely debated that domestic politics and international relations are often somehow entangled to the extent that it is quite difficult "whether domestic politics really determines international relations, or the reverse" (Putnam 1988: 423).

In this respect, the study of the Russian invasion in Ukraine can offer an opportunity to understand better the relationship between domestic and external factors that have determined Vladimir Putin's choice to attack the Ukrainian territory.

Late in 2021, big numbers of Russian troops were deployed close to Ukraine's boarders but Putin denied he would invade his neighbour. Some months later, Putin announced the beginning of the so called "special military operation" to defend Russia from NATO's threats to attack "our historic future as a nation", and, mostly important, to stop the process of "nazification" in Ukraine[1].

Since 22 February 2022 it has been argued in Russia that president Putin authorised a "special military operation" against Ukraine to demilitarise Russia's Southern neighbour: "to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide (…) for the last eight years. And for this we will strive for the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine"[2]. The Kremlin chief's announcement followed an appeal from the Russian-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine for military help against what they said was growing Ukrainian aggression (Yudin 2022).

Nonetheless, many scholars argue that Putin's invasion of Ukraine also marks a distinctive challenge to the liberal international setting led by the American presidential administrations to pave the way to a "new era" in the global order with the support of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping (Mankoff 2022; Ellison *et al*. 2023; Wahyu *et al*. 2024).

Being at the crossroads between the East and the West, Ukraine has become a land of political conflict where both the American and the European institutions have tried with the passing of time to anchor the Ukrainian society and politics to Western values. As we will see, the Western support to countries in a democratization process has always perceived by the Kremlin as a threat and a domestic interference in post-Soviet States that are still considered as a part of a Russian sphere of influence (Suslov 2018).

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[1] See https://theahseagle.com/15039/news/the-full-breakdown-of-russias-invasion-in-ukraine/, accessed on 28th October 2023.

[2] See https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-authorises-military-operations-donbass-domestic-media-2022-02-24/, accessed on 28th October 2023. See http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843, accessed on 28th October 2023.

So far, studies have interpreted "Putin'war" as a nostalgic choice based on the will to restore former imperial glories to unify the Russian peoples denying, at the same time, the Ukranians' right to live in an independent State (Kuzio 2022; Zaporozhchenko 2024).

Other scholars argued that the Russian invasion was mainly the effect to the Western policies – especially the NATO enlargement – perceived as a security threat by the Kremlin (Maersheimer 2014).

More recently, Kseniya Kizilova and Pippa Norris have theorized that Putin may have decided to invade Ukraine in February 2022 as an attempt to manufacture a "rally-around-the-fag" effect at home, designed to boost his fagging personal popularity among ordinary Russians (Kizilova, Norris 2024: 235).

What it is still missing in literature is an analysis, which combine the main domestic reasons - *i.e.* Putin's personality and ideology, the institutional design, the legacies of the historical and cultural traditions – as well as the role played by the external factors (NATO, EU, the US) in determining Russia's reaction against Ukraine.

Consequently, this article aims at describing the main reasons why Putin decided to attack Ukraine and challenge the West trying to analyse both the domestic situation and the international environment, which constitutes the political background of the Russian war.

In doing so, the first paragraph provides a general overview of the main political decisions implemented by Putin as soon as he was elected in 2000 until nowadays. This approach is useful to better understand on which principles the emergence of the so-called "vertical power" has been shaped to guarantee a more stabilized political system after the Boris Yeltsin's chaotic era. Moreover, it provides the ideological background of the so-called Putinism which consists of two principles: *tsivilizatsiya* (civilization) as a cultural entity and *konservatizm* (conservatism) as a tool to preserve population and to reject extremism as a means of action[3].

The second paragraph will describe the main concepts of Russian foreign policies showing a shift to the East starting from 2008 with the beginning of a more revisionist attitude towards both US and NATO (Termine, Natalizia 2020).

Moreover, using a psychological approach, it will be analysed the role played by his personality, beliefs and ideology which have shaped his mind and political strategy during his presidency. Taking into account any kind of methodological fallacy when speaking of personality and psychological attitudes (Greenstein 2014), it will be finally discussed the relationship between the main independent variables (institutional setting, personality, and ideology) and the dependent one with regard to the Russian attack in Ukraine.

Such an approach will allow a wider overview of the multiple domestic and international factors, which provoked the war bearing in mind that some of the findings in this study should be seen as suggestive rather than conclusive.

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[3] See https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/what-does-putins-conservatism-seek-conserve, accessed on 28th October 2023.

1. The Two Sides of Putinism: Domestic and Foreign Policies

Putin's era has been marked by a shift from a hybrid regime towards a more authoritarian one, especially starting from 2004 (Morini 2020; Robinson 2019, 2020). His long-lasting presidency has made some analysts talk about "Putinism" as a personalistic regime who has completely changed the Russian path towards democratization (Fish 2017; Applebaum 2013; Hill, Cappelli 2013; Inozemtsev 2017; Colton 2017). The so called "vertical of power" has marked a political system where repressive policies against extra-parliamentarian opposition, control on traditional and social media and a centralization of power in few hands are the clearest empirical evidence of such an authoritarian regime (Monaghan 2012; Chaisty 2012).

Nevertheless, it would be a superficial approach to state that Putinism is mainly a direct expression of the man in power. Reading the articles of the Russian Constitution (1993), we can easily understand that the institutional origins of his leadership style are based on the constitutional design implemented by his predecessor: Boris Yeltsin. It was Yeltsin who wanted that the President of the Russian Federation had to be a *super partes* political actor, *i.e.* a sort of a fourth power which controls the judicial, legislative and executive ones (Partlett 2022). A president who should save his Motherland in times of trouble and act basically to express people's will in domestic politics and, in the international setting, to make Russia stronger again as it was in the Soviet period.

These are the main principles, which characterize the Russian Constitution and the role of the president on which both Yeltsin and Putin wanted to develop their political power. What makes a great difference between the two presidents is that in 2000 Putin was younger and healthier than Yeltsin and he took also advantage by the observation of all the main obstacles and problems that Yeltsin faced during his presidency (1991-1996).

That's why as soon as Putin was elected, he decided to implement some institutional reforms to make more stable and stronger his presidency and, in general, the presidential administration. He understood the importance of having a "party of power" which dominates in the lower Chamber (Duma) to avoid any attempts by the opposition to impeach Presidents or to weaken the legislative procedure as it happened with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPFR) led by Gennadi Zyuganov between 1993-1995 (Kunov *et al*. 2005; Gel'man 2009; Remington 2013).

Putin also wanted to reduce the political autonomy of governors and reorganize the presidential administration to better rule and control the institutional and political activities (Klimovich 2023). That's why he believed in the importance of the emergence of a "party of power" able to control both local and federal politics and to act without any legislative obstacle in Parliament with a larger margin of control over the voting of the members. Unlike Yeltsin, who never believed in political parties, Putin created a dominant party regime where party and State are closely intertwined. The Russian president also relied on a network of security services and law enforcement veterans known as *siloviki* (power agents) who form "the backbone of the President Putin's administration (Treisman 2007: 141)".

Putin can also get the support of the military faction led by his intimate friend Sergey Shoigu that is extremely important in terms of maintaining power without any threat of a potential coup d'Etat.

As Lanskoy and Miles-Primakoff describe: "Putin's Russia offers a vivid illustration of how kleptocratic plunder can become not only an end in itself, but also a tool for both consolidating domestic political control and projecting power abroad" (Lanskoy and Miles-Primakoff 2018: 76).

At the domestic level, Putin's efforts are based on the will to make the political regime more stable thanks to specific choices which deal with repressive policies, propaganda's tools and economic policies which can re-establish the Soviet model with a set of authoritarian strategies.

In foreign policy, the Kremlin has developed a distinctive, pragmatic and ideological driver, which underline the Western threat to weaken and destabilize Russia in order to avoid the resurgence of its rightful place among great powers in the world (Salimzade 2018; McFaul 2020).

The NATO enlargement, the so-called "promotion of democracies", the "coloured revolutions" and the EU expansion towards East are the main topic of discussion both at the elite level but also among Russian citizens who usually get political information in TV channels.

Therefore, it is not surprising that some political events such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian invasion in Ukraine can determine positive feelings and support towards Putin's among Russian citizens[4].

Reading through the speeches of the Russian Presidents or analysing the "Foreign Policy Concepts" from 1993 till 2008, there is no doubt that there was a general and positive attitudes towards the West, both the US and the EU, during the Nineties and the first couple of years of Putin's term (Kubicek 1999; Tsygankov 2019, 2023).

The Nineties has been characterized by the wave of the so-called Westernizers *i.e.* those politicians who strongly believed that Russia is European and should effectively interact with Western countries and international organizations. This is particularly true when we refer to some statements by the former Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrey Kozyrev (1992-1996) who argued that Russia should become a member of both the EU and NATO because such a process would have anchored a more democratic Russia in the West (Kozyrev 2022).

Kozyrev realized that Russia and the EU have same common interests in developing cooperation and a constructive dialogue should have been implemented. This foreign policy marks the period of the legal basis of this relationship by the signature of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in force since 1997 and valid for 10 years. Based primarily on trade, investments and economic relations this document paved the way to a large number of cultural and political activities developed in the following years.

Among them, the Four Economic Spaces which consisted of 1) a common economic space; 2) a common space of freedom, security and justice; 3) a space of co-

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[4] See the trend since the beginning of the war at the following website: https://www.levada.ru/en/, access on 31st October 2023.

operation in the field of external security; 4) a space of research, education, and cultural exchange. In the framework of this partnership Russia stated that the parties' shared "respect for democratic principles and human rights and a commitment to international peace and security as defined in particular in the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris for a new Europe"[5].

In 1997 the Russian Prime Minister, Viktor Cernomyrdyn, argued that "Russia ought to become an EU member in the not-too-distant future" and he added that Moscow's "entire relationship with the EU" is primarily aimed at achieving that goal[6].

These common activities went on for many years to the extent that the EU became Russia's largest trading partner while Russia was the largest exporter of oil and gas till 2014.

Following the illegal annexation of Crimea and the civil war in Donbas the EU-Russia dialogue worsened because the EU reacted with economic sanctions against Russia. It was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, who stated, in 2021, that "there are no relations with the European Union as an organisation. The entire infrastructure of these relations has been destroyed by the unilateral decisions of Brussels"[7]. If this statement best represents Russian attitudes towards EU after 2014, the war in Ukraine has provoked the end of any cooperation both in the economic and political sectors.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to think that the turning point of this political change between these two actors started in 2014. Conjunctural events and changes in the Russian leadership determined a shift in the Russian foreign policy at the end of the Nineties. It was the period when Evgenij Primakov succeeded to Kozyrev as Minister of Foreign Affairs (1996-1998) being supporter of a different approach in foreign policy aiming at looking at East.

Primakov stressed the importance of multilateralism as an alternative to the American hegemony in the international order and strongly believed in the "strategic triangle" (namely Russia, China, and India) to counterbalance the US. He was against NATO's expansion into the former Eastern Bloc and US attack in Bosnia while he believed in expanding Russian influence towards both the East and the Middle East (Sakwa 2013; Janeliūnas, Kojala 2019).

As Prime Minister, Primakov, did U-Turn over Atlantic after the NATO airstrikes against Yugoslavia and refused to meet with the Americans politicians to talk about the Kosovo issue. Primakov was well known to be a representative of the so-called "Eurasianism" and a potential presidential candidate after Yeltsin. However, the latter chose Putin, his protégé, who came from the former KGB – State Security Committee - and represented the right man who could provide a peaceful and prosperous future for Yeltsin and his entourage.

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[5] "Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of one part, and the Russian Federation, of the other part". Archived from the original (PDF) on 31st October 2017. Retrieved 18th August 2015. "European Commission – PRESS RELEASES – Press release – The EU-Russia Partnership – basic facts and figures". europa.eu. Retrieved 18th August 2015.

[6] See https://www.rferl.org/a/1085916.html, access on 31st October 2023.

[7] See https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/lavrov-pronounces-russia-eu-relations-as-dead/, access on 31st October 2023.

Since then, Putin uses the pseudo-philosophical rhetoric of the Eurasianists to justify Russia's Great Power status and a greater role for it in East Asia with pragmatic and geoeconomic aspects of Russia's Eurasianist identity that are being stressed most by the presidential administration, especially on energy and transport links (Rangsimaporn 2006; Schmidt 2005; Morozova 2009).

As Aglaya Snetkov states Putin paved the way to a change in the regime's conceptualisation which moved from a Western oriented policy towards the East, prioritising internal security threats to a strong state confronted by the West as the main "Other" (Snetkov 2014).

2. Putin's Personality between Myth and Reality

In 2016 Valerie Sperling published an article in the journal *Communist and Post-communist Studies* on "Putin's macho personality cult", which best represents the contemporary narrative on the Russian president in power[8].

As soon as he was elected in the first term (2000-2004) it was quite evident to Russian people that the new president was younger, healthier, stronger and resolute then his predecessor just looking or listening to him. A stronger president for a stronger Russia was the main chatting at the mass and elite levels and the new institutional reforms and his speech abroad made this idea spread throughout Russia and beyond.

In TV channels, in libraries, in radio and also in social media Putin's image and cards depicted him in hunting, swimming, riding, making different sports with a large coverage in many Russian and foreign magazines (Simons 2019).

Putin's image reminded those times in the Soviet Union where Josef Stalin's cult of personality was part of the Soviet propaganda and regime: an infallible, omnipotent leader whose cult was one of the strongest in modern history.

Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" given at the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956 denounced "the cult of individual" "(*kul't lichosti*) which would have led to pervert Party's principles but in times of personalization and presidentialization of politics it can be argued that Putin's cult is still an important aspect of the so called Putinism.

The construction of a macho politics around Putin can be considered as a political strategy in domestic and foreign policy strongly connected to the "surges of masculinezed and patriotic nationalism in contemporary Russia (Sperling 2016: 17).

During Putin's presidency the Russian population has seen "a tough, patriotic leader protecting Russia from the nefarious plans of Western States to weaken Russia and take advantage of her oil and gas resources" (Sperling 2016: 15). Since his first term Putin was considered a "real-man" in Russian politics (Riabova and Riabov, 2011) who represents a well recognized national pride and patriotic machismo.

Putin's masculinity has been a political strategy to secure leader's position in power, taking advantage of the cultural legacies of the past, which constitutes a good

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[8] See "The United States' 2018 National Defence Strategy", which identifies Russia and China as revisionist States: https://www.dau.edu/sites/default/files/Migrated/CopDocuments/2018%20National%20Defense%20Strategy%20Summary.pdf, accessed on 5th November 2023.

background of a patriarchal system where macho's politics is widely accepted, especially if this also represents a way to country's resurgence.

These attitudes towards Putin's macho politics can be recognized also in the Russian foreign policies. Starting from the well-known Munich's speech against the West in 2007, the attack to Georgia and, especially, the annexation of Crimea, the more Russian assertive, aggressive stance in the international order has been a matter of political debate in Western countries (Borozna 2022).

In the last decade, Russia and China have increasingly been referred to as revisionist powers, which seek to alter the international system to their advantage being unsatisfied of the status quo distribution of power.

In 2015, Putin asserted that "the pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine were not fighting merely the Ukrainian regular army, but rather, a NATO-sponsored foreign legion". As Putin explained, Ukraine's army was, "in effect (…) no longer an army but a foreign legion e in this case NATO's foreign legion e which does not of course pursue Ukraine's national interests." NATO's proxy forces in Ukraine boasted a "completely different agenda" and a broader geostrategic goal, namely, "containing Russia" (Whitmore, 2015).

And what about the relationship between the cult of personality and Putin's individual characteristics?

Is it a legitimate political strategy based more on leader's image and narrative or Putin's nature facilitates such a propaganda tool (Bäcker, Rak 2022)?

In 2022, after the Russian invasion an update on Vladimir Putin's mental state took place[9].

A research project conducted at the Unit for the study of Personality in Politics (USPP) in 2017 and 2023 (Immelman, Trenzeluk 2017) has tried to develop a psychological profile of the Russian President, taking into account data from open-source intelligence and synthesized into a personality profile using the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (MIDC), which represents the basis of interpretive guidelines provided in the MIDC and Millon Index of Personality Styles manuals.

In doing so, the results of an indirect assessment of the personality of Vladimir Putin are based on the levels of interaction that a person can have in his environment (family, education, politics, and so on). In this respect, the dissolution of the USSR, the economic and political consequences of this change, the hope to live in a better future for his country, and a sort of revenge towards the US can undoubtedly affected Putin's personality and leadership.

In sum, the report states that "Putin's primary personality patterns were found to be Dominant/controlling (a measure of aggression or hostility), Ambitious/self-serving (a measure of narcissism), and Conscientious/dutiful, with secondary Retiring/reserved (introverted) and Dauntless/adventurous (risk-taking) tendencies and lesser Distrusting/suspicious features. The blend of primary patterns in Putin's profile

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[9]   https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11788913/Putin-Russian-presidents-physical-mental-state-deteriorated-year-war.html, accessed on 5th November 2023. See also, https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-02-28/russia-putin-behavior-mental-health, accessed on 5th November 2023.

constitutes a composite personality type aptly described as an *expansionist hostile enforcer"* (Immelman, Goff 2023).

Applying the personality model by Theodore Millon (Millon, Davis 1996), the founder of the *Journal of Personality Disorders*, Putin's personality would be summarized as follows: dominant (26%), ambitious (23,3%), conscientious (20%), retiring (11,7%), and dauntless (8,3%).

All these aspects describe a man who likes to be competitive, to get power, to intimidate, enjoy the power to direct others and to evoke obedience and respect; they are tough and unsentimental and often make effective leaders. This personality pattern comprises the "hostile" component of Putin's personality composite. He easily assumes leadership roles, expect others to recognize their special qualities, and often act as though entitled. This personality pattern delineates the "expansionist" component of Putin's personality composite.

As far as *conscientious individuals* are concerned, they are dutiful and diligent, with a strong work ethic and careful attention to detail; they are adept at crafting public policy but often lack the retail political skills required to consummate their policy objectives and are more technocratic than visionary. This personality pattern fashions the "enforcer" component of Putin's personality composite.

Individuals tend not to develop strong ties to others, are somewhat deficient in the ability to recognize the needs or feelings of others, and may lack spontaneity and interpersonal vitality.

Being *dauntless individuals* means to be adventurous, individualistic, daring personalities resistant to deterrence and inclined to take calculated risks.

In sum, the analysis made by this team describes Putin's particular blend a set of personality patterns, which suggest a foreign policy orientation best described as that of a *deliberative high-dominance introvert* and a major personality-based strengths in a political role based on commanding demeanour and confident assertiveness. His major personality-based shortcomings are his uncompromising intransigence, lack of empathy and congeniality, and cognitive inflexibility.

The second issue concerns Putin as a risk-taker. Apparently, Putin did not believe in Western economic sanctions if he decided to take Crimea. The strongest reaction he expected from Western countries was a boycott of the G8 summit in Sochi (Zygar 2016: 572). Still, according to Zygar, the riskiness of the Crimea action was recognized by everyone in the Kremlin (Zygar 2016: 557). There was a real chance that Ukraine would fight back, and nobody knew for sure how the West would react. The concern here is both with Putin's personality in terms of taking risk, and with the risk-taking in this particular situation.

Unfortunately, according to many analysts, due to his overall personality traits, cognitive inflexibility, and uncompromising demeanour, it will be extremely challenging to negotiate with Putin over the Ukrainian war. And if we refer to his 2000 biography *Ot pervogo litsa* (In the First Person), when Putin mentioned that when studying at the KGB-academy it was registered as a negative trait of his personality that he had a "lowered sense of danger" (Gevorkian, Timakov, Kolesnikov 2000: 34), it is

highly likely that the war in Ukraine is a very complicated issue to solve (Dylan, Gioe, Grossfeld 2023).

As Greg Simons argues, "Putin is a controversial figure in international politics (…). He has cultivated a very specific image for the Russian publics, a nonsense leader and man of action, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and a patriotic guardian of Russia who is anti-democratic and is leading Russia into a more nationalistic and militaristic state with some religious overtones" (Simons 2019: 307-308).

3. Putin's Ideology

The Putin's ideological background is basically determined by readings of some philosophers such as Ivan Il'in, Nikolay Berdyaec and Lev Gumilev and the historical role played by the Tzars as Peter the Great, Alexander the Third and Catherine with a particular attention to the late Empire Era (Morini, Savino 2022).

Used as to legitimate political decisions through symbols, keywords and the cult of the past (which it is still present) are the main elements which shape the modern and contemporary Russian nationalism based on the concept of a "Greater Russia" (*bol'šaja russkaja nacija*) (Nygren 2007; Szporluk 2006).

In this respect, the three Eastern-Slavic population – Belarus, Russian, Ukrainian – are a single ethnic-cultural-religious entity where the Great Russians are literally predominant on the Little Russian (Ukrainians) and the Belarus (White Russians). As a matter of fact, Moscow and Saint Petersburg have represented the core of power in different centuries without taking into account the legitimacy of an independent Ukrainian identity which has been considered a mere regional periphery at the beginning of the 21st century.

Consequently, any Ukrainian attempt to revenge its own autonomy and independency has been described by the Kremlin as a threat for Russian identity from the Ukrainian nationalistic movements (Roberts 2022).

Putin's conservatism is based on a strong State whose main goals are to defend its citizens from domestic (terrorism) and Western international actions aiming at weakening Russia, to promote processes of modernization of the country, to spread welfare policies in the Russian Federation and to guarantee sovereignty, order and stability as it was expressed by Putin in his speech in 1999 (*Millenium Message*) (Morini, Savino 2022: 4; Prozorov 2005; Kaylan 2014; Suslov, Uzlaner 2019).

During Putin's presidency the Russian nationalism has also developed the idea of a *Russkij Mir* ("Russian world" but also Russian "peace"), elaborated by Sergej Karaganov in 1992 where Moscow should defend the Russian diaspora and Russophone people in the "near abroad" and post-soviet States trying to support their rights and avoid any kind of discriminations by other populations around the world. For a patriotic ideologue such as Putin, this separation of Russophones from their motherland was an existential threat to the survival of the great Russian civilization. That's why the Kremlin decided to establish a cultural foundation in 2007 in cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church to spread the Russian language and culture

as it was also mentioned in the Foreign Policy Concept in 2016 in the following statement: "actions of foreign policy of the State must aim at assure protection and effective rights of Russian citizens and their compatriots abroad" (Natalizia 2022: 2).

According to Benjamin Young (2022):

> Putin believes an invasion of Ukraine is a righteous cause and necessary for the dignity of the Russian civilization, which he sees as being genetically and historically superior to other Eastern European identities. The idea of protecting Russian-speakers in Eurasia has been a key part of Putin's "Russkiy Mir" worldview and 21st-century Russian identity. Under the rubric of "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World), Putin's government promotes the idea that Russia is not a mere nation-state but a civilization-state that has an important role to play in world history[10].

For the last 20 years, Putin has used the concept of *Russkiy Mir* to justify the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Ukraine plays a special role because without a Russophone Ukraine, there is no Russian World.

President Putin expressed these ideas in a long article where he stated that Russians and Ukrainians are "one nation", and he also described the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 as the "disintegration of historical Russia". As far as this last sentence is concerned, it could be argued that in Putin's mind the breakup of the Soviet Union is not a mere nostalgia for the Soviet political system rather a real disappointment for the loss of territories of the Soviet Republics. Consequently, the annexation of both Crimea and Donbas or the entire Ukraine could be also interpreted as the will to expansion of lands and populations for the Russian Federation since the problem of demography is a matter of concern in his political agenda (Eltchaninoff 2018).

Thus, when Putin came back to power in 2012, he decided that it is needed "to be active on the Ukrainian front, otherwise we may lose the country" (Zygar 2016). In Mikhail Zygar's opinion, Putin could not stand anymore the fact that the Ukrainian leadership has always mentioned and supported its "ukrainstvo" *i.e.* the constant "tendency to always point out the differences between Russians and Ukrainians" (Zygar 2016).

In a pre-dawn TV address on 24 February, President Putin declared Russia could not feel "safe, develop and exist" due to the constant threat from modern Ukraine led by fascists since 2014 who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians. That's why he used a false narrative stating that Ukraine must get rid of oppression and "cleansed of the Nazis". According to the head of the Russian Security, Nikolai Patrushev, the US supported the current rise of Nazism in the Baltics and Ukraine but reading through the Ukrainian history there are several examples of Ukrainian presidents since 1991 who called Ukraine is not Russia also among the Eastern Ukrainian business elite.

Another important element to take into consideration is what it could be called as "the Russian obsession": the security issue. In this respect, NATO enlargement to Ukraine has always perceived by the Kremlin as a potential threat and the Western strategy to distance Ukraine from the Russian sphere of influence. This was also one main messages in Putin's famous 2007 Munich speech where he said that the end of the cold war had

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[10] See http://personality-politics.org/russia, accessed on 12th November 2023.

been made possible by a "historic choice of the people of Russia" but the West was not grateful at all and reacted by creating new walls around Russia (Putnam 2016).

This is quite evident in Putin's speech at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008 where he declared that if Ukraine would have joined NATO the country will have to do that "without Crimea and the East". To sum up, in Zygar's words, the former Putin mantra of "we need to deal with Ukraine", was gradually transformed into "if Ukraine goes to NATO, we take Crimea" (Zygar 2016: 557).

He has not only demanded that Ukraine never join NATO but that the alliance turns the clock back to 1997 and reverses its eastward expansion.

Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy wrote in their political Putin's biography Mr. Putin that "if Russia had not intervened in Ukraine after the fall of Yanukovych, the interpretation in Moscow was that Russia would not only have lost Kiev, but also the Eurasian Union would have become meaningless and Russia's general position in Europe would have been greatly reduced" (Hill, Gaddy 2012; Hill, Gaddy 2015: 363).

4. Conclusion

The description of Putin's personality, ideology and political strategy has provided a wider picture of the Russian president that can be used for a better understanding of the revisionist stance of the last 15 years in the international stage.

On the one hand, Putin can be defined as a conservative in the exact sense because he defends the *status quo* and opposes all programs for economic, social and political transformation. One of his main goals is to restore a glorious past relying on traditional values and historical events that made both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to be considered as a powerful political regime in the world.

After the spreading of an humiliating feeling among Russians due to the collapse of the Soviet union and its defeat in the Cold War, Putin stressed the importance of patriotism relying on the ethnonationalist call for *Rossiia dlia russkikh* (Russia for the ethnic Russians) with a more belligerent and aggressive stance.

In literature, the nature of Putin's regime has been labelled in different ways with a common red line which combines both element of authoritarian regimes with that one of a "personalist" dictatorship, which places no institutional constraints on his whims. According to some analysts, Putin's attitudes should also derive from his personality, preferences, personal beliefs which determines a much larger role in shaping the Russian foreign policy.

A combination of strategic, ideological, and political considerations likely motivated his decision to invade Ukraine, which under the Western influence was considered by the Kremlin as an existential threat to the autocratic rule (Egorov, Sonin 2023).

His individual orientation to face risk-decision made him to ignore warnings about the economic and political effects of the aggression but it seems that Russia's political and economic system was able to react to all the Western sanctions.

The weakening of Russia is still a matter of discussion among Western leaders and nobody knows to what extent Russia will be able to survive and be resilient so far.

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