

**MYTH-MAKING IN VLADIMIR PUTIN'S DISCOURSE  
ON 2022 INVASION OF UKRAINE.**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to analyze discursive construction of myths in Vladimir Putin's speeches justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, 2022. I draw on interdisciplinary scholarship of nationalism studies, memory studies, and sociology of conspiracies to explore which myths were employed by Putin and why. Using the Discourse-Historical Approach, I deconstruct two president's addresses that were made on the verge of invasion with regard to memory work and discursive strategies. I identify five dominant myths. While some of them are well-established in Russian political discourse, others are new or have changed in terms of content to serve current political goals. Adopting Bouchard's conceptualization of myths, I demonstrate how the analysis of relations between these myths can reveal a complex hierarchical web of national mythology as well as Putin's attempts to resolve controversies between the already existing myths and the Russian invasion. Additionally, I find evidence that Putin's initial attempts to justify the war with Ukraine are best understood in terms of Brubaker's two-dimensional model of populism and nationalism. My research contributes to the scholarship on Russian nation-building and memory politics.

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## Introduction

On the 24th of February, 2022 Russian army invaded Ukraine. This marked the beginning of the war, which has already resulted in thousands of Ukrainian civilians and soldiers killed, mass destruction of many Ukrainian cities, and the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. As of June 2022, Russia has become the most sanctioned country in the world and is facing ostracism from the global political community for severe violation of international law and human rights. Dreadful evidence of Russian army's war crimes conducted in Bucha, Sumy, Borodianka, Kyiv, Chernihiv, and other Ukrainian regions has flooded mass media. Against this background, results of Russian polls demonstrating continuing support of invasion among the local population seem terrifying. One cannot help but ask how it is possible in the country where the popular attitude towards the war since the end of the Great Patriotic War was commonly expressed as clearly as «Never again»?

Unfortunately, issues of polls' biases and problematic representation under the authoritarian Russian regime don't fully answer this question. Living in Russia myself, I got quickly disillusioned as I saw an increasing number of «Z» signs hand drawn on walls and cars in Saint-Petersburg. In February, shortly after the war began, my friend Sasha and I walked around the city centre distributing leaflets that said «No war» when a woman approached us. She started asking who pays us for it and got aggressive, shaming us in disbelief that it was our own initiative and that we might be genuinely against the war. That small confrontation sank into my mind as it was the first time that I got out of my social bubble and realized that there are ordinary citizens supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I now think that woman must have experienced the same astonishment.

Existing literature on the Russian-Ukrainian crisis often portrays it in terms of the «war of words» highlighting the importance of discursive construction of the conflict. The latter is especially crucial for Russian citizens, most of whom cannot eyewitness the military events unraveling in Ukraine. As a result, their political imagination and interpretative frameworks are largely determined by narratives on the conflict existing in public discourse. Therefore, to understand how people make sense of the war, one has to analyze how it is portrayed discursively for the domestic audience.

Unprecedented persecution of opposition members and an almost complete ban of independent media in the country took place in Russia after the onset of 2022 conflict. Additional ban of Instagram, Facebook, together with the newly adopted legislation prohibiting «Public dissemination of deliberately false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation,» including the calls for «obstruction of the use of Russian troops to protect the interests of Russia, maintain peace and security» or for discrediting such use, made it unsafe to share opinions on the war diverging from the pro-governmental ones even on social media. According to Alexandra Arkhipova, who analyzed causes of persecution based on this law, as of May, 2022 one third of such cases were opened based on one's social media activity: posts, comments, profile pictures<sup>1</sup>. As a result, pro-governmental narratives on the conflict became dominant, if not exclusive, in Russian political and media discourse.

In my thesis, I analyze political discourse to understand how Russian invasion of Ukraine and the following events were constructed by the state for domestic audience. Relevant scholarship on discursive aspects of Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which mostly focuses on 2014 crisis, highlights the crucial role myths and memory work have played in Russian

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<sup>1</sup> “How Russia's New Law Against 'Fakes' is Being Applied”, The Moscow Times, April 22, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/04/21/how-russias-new-law-against-against-fakes-is-being-applied-a77445>.

political discourse during that period. According to Pasitselska, an overarching framework presented the conflict in civilizational terms — as a battle between the «Russia world» (Russkii mir) and «the West,» whereby Ukraine often played a minor role of a «puppet state» absorbed by Western forces. It's during the Ukrainian crisis that the myth of the «Russian world» reached its peak of popularity, presenting the global arena in clearly conspirational terms of confronting civilizations with opposite value-systems. One of the main challenges for Russian political actors on the verge of invasion in terms of myth-making was to reconstruct Russian-Ukrainian relations in an uncontroversial way to adapt explanatory frameworks both to the previous myth of enduring «brotherhood» of the two countries and to the new position of Ukraine as an enemy. Tipaldou and Casula's research suggests that it was achieved through populist rhetoric by distinguishing brotherly Ukrainian people from the corrupt elites who seized the power in the country through illegitimate revolution and were now serving the interests of the West. This dichotomous portrayal of Ukrainians enabled Russian elites to treat them both as the hostages of the situation who required salvation, and the villains who must be pushed back. McGlynn and others argue that cultural memory of the Great Patriotic War served as the key framework through which the Russian audience was invited to interpret the conflict. Instrumentalization of cultural trauma and active re-contextualization of the Great Patriotic War symbols within the realm of Ukrainian crisis resulted in a demonized depiction of some Ukrainians as «fascists.» Other Ukrainians were portrayed as their victims who were discriminated and in the need of Russian protection. Appeal to Russian origins of Crimean peninsula and its representation as a cradle of the «Russian world» where Prince Vladimir was baptized enabled Putin to legitimize annexation of Crimea in the eyes of domestic audience and portray Crimean annexation in terms of reunification of primordial Russian («ruskiye») territories.

Taking these findings as the starting point of my research, I analyze political myths used by Vladimir Putin to describe the beginning of the war with Ukraine in 2022. My primary research question is the following: Which myths were initially employed in Vladimir Putin's discourse on the war with Ukraine, and why? While I expect some earlier myths to be still present in 2022 war discourse, like the one about the Russian-Western confrontation, others seem to have lost their relevance. For example, the Crimean peninsula was a «suitable» annexation target for Russian political actors in terms of memory work because of its specific cultural and historical legacy. However, it seems more challenging to justify Russian invasion of other Ukrainian territories. Moreover, whereas annexation of Crimea was usually portrayed in Russian political and media discourse as a peaceful and rightful decision Ukrainians made themselves, it's problematic to present a war in similar terms. Thus, I suggest that Russian political elites were in the need of new myths, which could convincingly justify the Russian invasion.

In the first chapter, I develop a framework to situate my research theoretically. My research lies at the crossroads of nationalism scholarship, memory studies, and literature on conspiracies and political myth-making. I employ the notion of cultural memory suggested by Jan and Aleida Assmann and adopt their overall social constructivist approach to collective memory as being constantly reconstructed and serving present political goals. Following Aleida Assmann, I define a myth as «an idea, an event, a person, a narrative that has acquired a symbolic value and is engraved and transmitted in memory.» Furthermore, I borrow Bouchard's idea of a pyramidal structure of political mythology, which suggests that the most established and sacred myths are located at the top of the pyramid and enable production of derivative myths, which depend upon parental ones. Following Giry's understanding of conspiracies as political myths, I inscribe conspiracy discourse into the same analytical pyramid. I argue that integrating historical myths and conspiracies under the framework of



political myths can enrich one's analysis and allows to trace interdependencies between new and old myths. Moreover, sometimes these two are hard to distinguish, for example, in case of the myth about the civilizational confrontation between the West and the «Russian world.»

The second chapter contextualizes my research within the existing literature on Russian nationalism and myth-making practices in Russian political discourse after Putin's return to presidency in 2012.

In the third chapter, I describe the methodological basis of my research. I employ discourse-historical approach (DHA) to analyze Putin's discourse on the war with Ukraine. Following Wodak, I conceptualize discourse as being «a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action [which are] socially constituted and socially constitutive, related to a macro-topic, linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity involving several social actors who have different points of view.» DHA seems relevant for the purposes of my research at least for two reasons. First, DHA has a specific historical orientation, which allows to trace interdiscursive and intertextual connections while accounting for the historical context discourses are embedded in. Second, the strong social constructivist stance of DHA and its key objective to unravel the emergence and development of new discourses go hand in hand with my research goals.

In the fourth chapter, I focus on Putin's speeches to identify five initial myths justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I argue that his two extensive addresses made right before the beginning of the war are crucial for a better understanding of the discursive construction of the 2022 war. During the analysis, I first single out these dominant myths, deconstruct them with regards to memory work and discursive strategies. Then, I situate each myth within the pyramid of national mythology to better understand, which previously established myths were involved in construction of new myths and why.

It should be made explicit that my position as Russian citizen both provides me with a better insight into the topic of research and might affect my analytical perspective. Although I aimed to conduct an impartial analysis, a lack of distance from research subject might have limited my reflexivity.

## **Theoretical framework**

In this chapter, I overview relevant scholarship and present a theoretical framework of current research. The theoretical basis of my thesis lies at the intersection of nationalism studies, memory studies, and literature on political conspiracies and myth-making. The first part of the chapter discusses several approaches to nationalism, which inform my general perspective to the subject. Though these perspectives are diverse and sometimes controversial in their understanding of nationalism, each of the authors offers valuable insights guiding my research.

The second part is dedicated to the relevant scholarship on collective memory and memory politics. Drawing on the pioneering works of Maurice Halbwachs, I clarify my social constructivist approach to memory. I then discuss Jan and Aleida Assmann's concept of cultural memory and explain its analytical relevance for my research. Zheng Wang's works on memory politics further inform my approach.

Finally, I overview existing academic literature on political myth-making and conspiracy theories. Analytical frameworks suggested by Gérard Bouchard and John Coakley are useful with regard to understanding the functions of political myths, their distinctive features, and constitutive elements. Additionally, I employ Bouchard's idea of a pyramidal structure of national mythology to analyze how «core» myths can serve as a basis for derivative myths' construction. Ilya Yablokov's works on political conspiracies and Julien Giry's conceptualization of conspiracies as political myths further contribute to my theoretical framework as I analyze both historical myths and conspiracies within Bouchard's framework of «mythology pyramid.»

Overall, these three theoretical pillars provide a framework to problematize and analytical tools to explore discursive myth construction in the context of national mobilization.

### ***Nationalism as discourse***

Discursive turn in nationalism studies has shifted scholars' attention from macro-level transformations in socio-economic structures as precursors of modern nation-states to more nuanced cultural issues of language, memory, and identity. Aligning with this strand of scholarship, I conceptualize nation as a matter of (self-)representation, rather than in terms of ethnicity or any other groupist characteristic. Benedict Anderson's seminal works laid the ground for the development of this perspective.

Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>2</sup> In his pioneering work «Imagined communities,» Anderson argues that back in the 17th century, a fundamental transformation happened, which later enabled people to think of themselves as a nation. While agreeing with modernist theorists in that the nation is a product of modernity, he emphasized the ultimate role language played in the rise of nation-states. According to Anderson, in the context of Latin book market saturation, print capitalism contributed to popularization of vernacular languages, which gained importance as a means to reach new audiences and thus expand the market. In this process, numerous dialects were combined into a smaller number of written languages. As a result, new communities emerged, which were smaller than globe-spanning religious communities but larger than local groups sharing the same dialect. The fall of Latin as a «sacred language» and the rise of new practices associated with vernacular press — such

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

as reading newspapers in the morning — created a sense of belonging to the same imagined community and provided a basis and means to communicate within it<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, for Anderson, it was language (or, more specifically, written languages) that enabled the invention of nationalism. An important implication of his perspective is the idea that a nation can be discursively constructed and reconstructed. In the same vein lies Stuart Hall's argument that "a national culture is a discourse — a way of constructing meanings which influences and organises both our actions and our conception of ourselves."<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, such understanding implies that a nation can only exist if its members think of themselves in respective terms — through the shared lense of national identity. On the other hand, by defining a nation as a system of cultural representations, Hall highlights the multitude of coexisting national representations and the complex organization structuring them.

Similarly, Craig Calhoun speaks of nationalism as "a 'discursive formation', a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness, but also is problematic enough that it keeps generating more issues and questions, keeps propelling us into further talk, keeps producing debates over how to think about it."<sup>5</sup> In other words, he argues that nationalism should be understood as a product of discursive field where certain patterns of thinking and talking about a people as of nation emerge historically; an environment that is constantly developing — producing new meanings and altering the old ones.

Despite the big variation of nationalism conceptualizations, most of them share a common perspective regarding the key role of national history. As Kumar put it, «a nationalism that

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (California: Sage Publications Ltd., 1996), 613.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

does not appeal to history is unthinkable. Whatever the differences of definition, all concepts of the nation include some reference to the past, to history or tradition.»<sup>6</sup>

As opposed to approaches focusing on political aspects of nationalism, ethnosymbolism was developed to bring culture back to the studies of the nation. Ethnosymbolists argued that leaving culture and tradition outside the scope of analysis doesn't allow to adequately understand the power and scale of nationalism as well as to fully explore the questions of national identity and belonging. A major ethnosymbolic critique addresses the modernist disregard of ethnic components of nationalism. Arguing with the main modernist postulate of «invention» of nations, Anthony Smith suggested that this invention would be impossible without a preexisting cultural basis: traditions, ethnic symbols, etc. He introduced a notion of «myth-symbol complex» to refer to the «core» of ethnic identity consisting of cultural values and memories, which creates a feeling of solidarity, makes ethnic identity «reproducible», and allows to preserve it intergenerationally<sup>7</sup>.

While arguing for the importance of a myth-symbol complex rooted in the past of ethnic, Smith stressed that ethno-history — «ethnic members' memories and understanding of their communal past or pasts» — can be and is constantly reconstructed. He highlighted the role of national elites and «nationalist intelligentsias» (primarily historians) in this process of identity reconstruction<sup>8</sup>. Smith's perspective suggests treating history as a pool of symbolic resources: limited but providing a choice to activate or leave aside existing memories and symbols.

Ethnosymbolism in general and Smith's works specifically have been largely criticized for their slippery middle-ground position between modernism and primordialism. In his 2020

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<sup>6</sup> Krishan Kumar, "Nationalism and the Historians." In *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, ed. Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar, 7-21. (London: Sage, 2006), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 16.

article «Primordialism for Scholars Who Ought to Know Better: Anthony D. Smith's Critique of Modernization Theory», Maxwell reviews the main ideas of Smith and his critique of modernist scholars to conclude that «the only constant feature in Smith's work appears to be his desire to delegitimize modernism.»<sup>9</sup> Maxwell reveals (although he is not the first one to point it out) the conceptual confusion surrounding the difference between definitions of ethnic and nation. However, his main criticism is directed towards the very idea of ethnosymbolism. He argues that, as a theoretical framework, ethnosymbolism «emphasizes unsurprising continuities and downplays surprising discontinuities» and should be thus deemed worthless<sup>10</sup>.

While criticizing Smith's thesis that national histories are rooted in pre-modern times (either by calling it a «functionally equivalent to primordialism» or by pointing out that it doesn't contradict modernist approaches), Maxwell neglects valuable implications of ethnosymbolism, such as its clear focus on issues of collective memory, national myth-making, memory politics and the overall importance of history as a constantly reconstructed aspect of nationalism. When the latter is analyzed without groupist assumptions but rather as a discourse, ethnosymbolism can bring important insights to the understanding of nationalist appeals and their success or failure over time. Such a perspective directly follows Brubaker's suggestion to treat nations in terms of relevant claims-making — as a practical category — rather than in groupist terms of national or ethnic entities<sup>11</sup>. This approach allows one to «analyze the organizational and discursive careers of categories—the processes through which they become institutionalized and entrenched in administrative routines and embedded in culturally powerful and symbolically resonant myths, memories, and narratives.»<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Maxwell, "Primordialism for Scholars Who Ought to Know Better: Anthony D. Smith's Critique of Modernization Theory," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 5 (2020): 13.

<sup>10</sup> Maxwell, "Primordialism for Scholars Who Ought to Know Better: Anthony D. Smith's Critique of Modernization Theory," 13.

<sup>11</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups," *European Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 163.

<sup>12</sup> Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups," 169.

### ***Cultural memory and memory politics***

Apart from outlining the overall significance of history for nationalism, in his works Smith highlighted an important distinction between history and memory. His concept of ethno-history differentiated collective memory from history, where the former was characterized as «multi-stranded and contested», «always subject to change», «globally uneven», and the latter — as an «objective and dispassionate analysis by professional historians.»<sup>13</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, the pioneering scholar in the field of collective memory studies, articulates the difference between the two concepts — history and collective memory — in a somewhat similar manner, though more profoundly and without confining the latter to ethnic groups. Halbwachs highlights that history is disconnected from individual or group identities, has a goal to develop full and neutral accounts of the past, whereas memory is selective and value-oriented<sup>14</sup>. For Halbwachs, memory (both individual and collective) is a social phenomenon, as it is always embedded in social frameworks of interpretation. He describes collective memory as impersonal and linked to specific groups, such as families, religious communities, nations. This implies that collective memory can vary from one group to another, reflecting specific shared experiences.

Notably, Halbwachs suggests a rather instrumental approach to collective memory. Using the term «presentism» he stresses that «collective memory reconstructs its various recollections to accord with contemporary ideas and preoccupations»<sup>15</sup>. In other words, for Halbwachs the content of collective memory is tightly bounded with group's present and reflects its current goals and needs. For him, collective remembrance doesn't simply vary from one group to another but also changes temporarily, as it becomes reconstructed depending on social context. In the same vein lies Lowenthal's argument articulated in his book «The past is a

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Myths and memories of the Nation*, 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992), 51.

<sup>15</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 224.



foreign country»: «We extend the past forwards as well as backwards, renovating in line with current predilections.»<sup>16</sup> Presentism of collective memory has crucial analytical implications since it raises the questions of who and why engages in memory reconstruction.

Taking Halbwachs's works on collective memory as their starting point, Aleida and Jan Assmann developed a theory of cultural memory, which provides a way to answer both of the questions. Sharing the presentist approach of Halbwachs, Aleida Assmann writes that social groups, including nations, «do not “have” a memory - they “make” one for themselves with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments. Together with such a memory, these groups and institutions “construct” an identity»<sup>17</sup>. Social constructionist approach is guiding Assmanns' conceptualization of memory, but not any kind of memory. Within the concept of collective memory, Jan Assman differentiates between communicative and cultural memory, which marks his departure from Halbwachs's perspective. For Assmann, communicative memory exists in non-institutional, embodied form. In other words, these are shared memories of those events people actually eyewitnessed themselves and remember in subjective ways<sup>18</sup>.

On the other hand, cultural memory is institutionalized, «exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another.»<sup>19</sup> Cultural memories can be activated or «archived», in other words, put aside until they become useful or relevant again. According to Assmann, repetition and consistency of cultural memory are crucial for nationalism as they

<sup>16</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 561.

<sup>17</sup> Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2008): 55.

<sup>18</sup> Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," In *Cultural Memories*, ed. Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder, 15-27 (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," 17.

allows to imagine national past as continuous by recombining historical elements into a meaningful picture of national history. This approach to collective memory and the clear social constructivist character of the concept enable one to analyze identity functions of cultural memory, and trace the process of national history reinterpretation.

But who is the one playing with the history puzzle? Aleida Assmann argues that cultural memory is manipulated «from above» through institutional means and guided by the authorities<sup>20</sup>. This perspective seemingly positions cultural memory within the Marxist realm of ideology. For example, Susan Sontag goes as far as to argue that there is no such thing as collective memory: «What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating [...] Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings<sup>21</sup>.» For her, collective memory is indeed just another name for ideology. Other Marxist scholars, especially the representatives of the Frankfurt School, share a similar perspective. For example, Althusser's term «ideological state apparatus» refers to hegemonic history and culture translated by the state. From this angle, memory is largely understood as being constructed by elites to serve their domination.

Arguing with Marxist scholarship, Aleida Assmann highlights the shift that took place in the second half of the 20th century. Back then, after a period of popularity, the usage of «ideology» concept decreased in academic discourse, whereby the term «collective memory» became more pronounced in relevant scholarship. She suggests that this was not just a change of labels, but a more profound shift in an epistemological understanding of the terms' implications. Assmann points out the derogatory connotation of the ideology concept, which «denounces a mental frame as false, fake, manipulated, constructed, insincere and harmful,

<sup>20</sup> Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," 63.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 85.

thereby presupposing an absolute truth that is as clear as it is indisputable.<sup>22</sup>» On the contrary, cultural memory provides a more neutral constructivist framework, where memory is not treated as the opposite of «reality» while still accounting for the crucial role of those in power to affect patterns of collective remembering.

Assmann and others highlight the difference in the ways cultural memory is constructed in democratic and authoritarian states. To summarize, democratic states provide a larger number of groups opportunities to engage in collective memory construction and to contest certain depictions of the past. As a result, democracies are associated with more multifaceted cultural memories. On the other hand, in the case of autocratic regimes «states aim at a monopoly over truth and the past.<sup>23</sup>» In the most extreme totalitarian scenarios — in the context of complete media alignment with the state and absence of free speech — states successfully monopolize memory discourse and establish complete control over the past.

Following Assmann, I employ the concept of cultural memory to refer to the ways in which national past is mirrored in national remembering. In contrast, I use the term «memory politics» to describe the attempts of political actors to engage in this reconstruction and promote a particular depiction of historical events. Therefore, memory politics is defined here as a «political process of negotiating the meaning of the past.<sup>24</sup>» According to Wijermars, history serves as an important framing device in political discourse<sup>25</sup>. In the context of nationalism, memory politics allows political actors to «create a master commemorative narrative that emphasizes a common past and ensures a common destiny»<sup>26</sup>. John Coakley

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<sup>22</sup> Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," 53.

<sup>23</sup> Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," 64.

<sup>24</sup> Marielle Wijermars. *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia: Television, Cinema and the State* (S.L.: Routledge, 2019), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Wijermars, *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia: Television, Cinema and the State*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Zheng Wang. *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict: Historical Memory as a Variable* (New York: Springer, 2019), 31.

suggests that nationalist politics can use cultural memory in several ways<sup>27</sup>. First, memory can be used to legitimize the overall regime or certain political decisions. For example, depiction of the imperial past in a particular way — as oppressive and self-serving — enabled USSR to lay the ground for communist ideology.

Second, «contemporary ideological and political battles can be fought out by highlighting certain features of the past and suppressing others.»<sup>28</sup> Verovsek notices that instrumental approach to the past enables political actors to «use historical analogies to frame and think through important issues [...], deploy the past strategically, manipulating memory to legitimize their actions with reference to formative events in the collective consciousness of their community»<sup>29</sup>. Finally, appeals to history can be made to justify territorial claims.

Zheng Wang stresses that memory politics can play a crucial role during political conflicts as it affects the audience's worldview. She highlights four functions of collective memory in such contexts. First, it allows to justify the beginning of the conflict and the course of its further development. Second, «group's beliefs of collective memory present positive images of the group itself, as it engages in intense self-justification, self-glorification, and self-praise.» Third, memory politics can be directed towards delegitimization of the «enemy.» Finally, collective memory can result in portraying the aggressor state as a victim of the past deeds of the opponent state and thus reverse the dynamic of the conflict in the eyes of the people. Wang highlights that «analyzing the frames people use in a given conflict provides fresh insight and better understanding of the conflict dynamics and development of said conflict.»<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> John Coakley, “Mobilizing the Past: Nationalist Images of History,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 10, no. 4 (2004): 531.

<sup>28</sup> Coakley, “Mobilizing the Past: Nationalist Images of History,” 532.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Verovšek, “Collective Memory, Politics, and the Influence of the Past: The Politics of Memory as a Research Paradigm,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 3 (2016): 529.

<sup>30</sup> Wang, *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict: Historical Memory as a Variable*, 31-32.

Verovšek argues that memory politics should focus «on both (1) the substantive content of collective memory expressed by actors within state institutions and (2) on the interactive channels through which ideas about the past are conveyed, disputed, silenced, and negotiated outside these formal settings»<sup>31</sup>. However, in my thesis I will primarily focus on the first part — institutional memory politics, without analysing its contested aspect. It is done for several reasons. Firstly, since the beginning of the war with Ukraine, Russia has experienced a significant totalitarian shift, which resulted in a rapid decrease of independent opinions in the public sphere. The government has mostly monopolized the discourse on the war. Secondly, my research can be seen as the first step of analysis, which could be later enriched by the analysis of memory politics' success and reception.

### ***Myths and conspiracies***

One cannot discuss cultural memory and memory politics without acknowledging the crucial role of national myths. It is important that, while in everyday perception, myth is usually understood as the opposite of «truth» or «fact», it has a different meaning in memory studies. According to Assmann, the concept «may refer to an idea, an event, a person, a narrative that has acquired a symbolic value and is engraved and transmitted in memory.»<sup>32</sup> She highlights that myths can refer to both fictional and historical stories, although the divide between the two categories is hardly traceable, since memory work is associated with constant reconstruction of events.

In his pioneering work on the subject, Anthony Smith argued that political myths describing stories of national origin and the nation's shared experiences throughout history are key to creating national identity<sup>33</sup>. He stressed that for national belonging «what counts are not blood

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<sup>31</sup> Verovšek, "Collective Memory, Politics, and the Influence of the Past: The Politics of Memory as a Research Paradigm," 531.

<sup>32</sup> Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," 68.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Myths and memories of the Nation*, 57.

ties, real or alleged, but a spiritual kinship, proclaimed in ideals that are allegedly derived from some ancient exemplars in remote eras. The aim is to recreate the heroic spirit (and the heroes) that animated ‘our ancestors’ in some past golden age.<sup>34</sup>» Smith talks of national myths in terms of grand narratives describing national identity and national past. In his groundbreaking book on the topic, «Myths and memories of the nation», he breaks down ideal-typical national myths into their «component myths»: a myth of temporal origins, a myth of location and migration, a myth of ancestry, a myth of heroic age, a myth of national decline, and a myth of regeneration. Each of them describes crucial aspects of national history, while altogether these myths provide a framework of values, symbols, and attitudes guiding national identity. However, while providing a detailed account of the role of myths in nationalism, Smith often conflates the terms «memory» and «myth». As Bell states, «although he refers constantly to ‘myths and memories of the nation’, these concepts are never distinguished adequately, and are often employed without sufficient differentiation, and as such they become almost synonymous.<sup>35</sup>»

Claudia-Florentina Dobre and colleagues address this confusion by conceptualizing myths as «important elements of cultural memory transmitted from one era to another through ideological discourses and cultural practices.<sup>36</sup>» Gérard Bouchard provides a more nuanced conceptual framework for the sociological analysis of myths. He employs a notion of social myth to refer to the narratives «promoted by collective actors [, which] convey meanings, values, beliefs (religious or not), and ideals.<sup>37</sup>»

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<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Myths and memories of the Nation*, 58.

<sup>35</sup> Duncan S.A. Bell, “Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 70.

<sup>36</sup> Claudia-Florentina Dobre, “Introduction,” In *Quest for a Suitable Past Myth and Memory in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Claudia-Florentina Dobre and Cristian Emilian Ghiță (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Gérard Bouchard, “The Small Nation With a Big Dream,” In *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, ed. Gérard Bouchard (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

According to Bouchard, myths are characterized by four main features. Established social myths are perceived as sacred and can provide a basis for social mobilization; they are hybrid as fiction and history become tightly intertwined in mythological depictions of reality; and they are characterized by the duality of myth's concrete socio-historical contextualization and perceived universalism. Discussing the role of political myths with regard to nationalism, John Coakley identifies key functions they can have, including: «definition of the conceptual boundaries of the nation; reinforcement of a sense of pride in national achievements; capacity to promote commiseration over unjust suffering that justifies compensation; legitimization of the current national struggle by reference to its roots in the past; and inspiration regarding the bright future of the nation.<sup>38</sup>» The same myth is able to function in several ways simultaneously, and his function is a subject to change over time. Bouchard notes that myths constructed in the context of crisis tend to rely heavily on Othering strategies, which aims to boost national morale.

Theorizing the process of myth construction, Bouchard singles out its key elements: anchor, imprint, ethos, narrative, sacralization, discursive strategies, and social actors. Anchor is an event serving as «raw material» for the myth. Imprint is an emotional component of the historical event — feelings of pride or trauma — facilitated through its mythologization. Ethos refers to the values and ideas resulting from historical event interpretation. These ideas are then reconstructed into stable mythological narratives, which become sacralized through repetition and/or commemorative rituals. Discursive strategies employed by individual or collective social actors are «designed to craft, to disseminate, and to root the message. This component is active and front and central in each of the preceding components or phases<sup>39</sup>», since discursive strategies' success defines whether the myth will become accepted by the

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<sup>38</sup> Coakley, "Mobilizing the Past: Nationalist Images of History," 541.

<sup>39</sup> Gérard Bouchard, "The Small Nation With a Big Dream," 5.

audience. Overall, this theoretical framework can be employed to deconstruct national myths in order to identify their objectives and social actors operating the myth.

Within his approach, Bouchard views national mythology as a complex pyramidal structure, where “master myths” — narratives addressing the key issues of social identity — are located on the top of the pyramid<sup>40</sup>. Master myths are relatively stable and usually stay unchanged over longer time periods. Such «grand narratives» provide an opportunity to produce «derivative myths», which are more easily changeable. The pyramid of national mythology suggests that derivative myths can, in turn, become a basis for other myth’s production and so on. An important implication of such structure is that it allows «for a piggyback or leverage strategy: attempting to promote a new myth, a social actor will present it as a corollary of, or in continuity with, an old, well-established master or derivative myth, as a way to facilitate the accreditation process.<sup>41</sup>» Bouchard's idea opens numerous analytical possibilities, highlighting that one might explore not only the very myths but also relations that structure them.

While adopting Bouchard’s idea of a pyramidal structure of national mythology, I alter it to include conspiracy narratives. Following Julien Giry, I conceptualize conspiracies as political myths. Giry argues that «conspiracism presents as a myth in its claim to expose or uncover a political and historicized representation of the world whose comprehension is dependent on its mastery.<sup>42</sup>» From this perspective, conspiracies are understood as interpretative frameworks, which allow «various social actors and social movements to define and problematize social, political and economic issues to pursue their political goals.<sup>43</sup>»

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<sup>40</sup> Gérard Bouchard, “The Small Nation With a Big Dream,” 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Julien Giry, “Conspiracism: Archaeology and Morphology of a Political Myth,” *Diogenes*, 62, no. 3 (2020): 30.

<sup>43</sup> Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 54.



Approaching conspiracies as myths has several analytical advantages. First, it allows to include them into a complex web of cultural memory and, borrowing Bouchard's words, to analyze which other myths conspiracies piggyback or are dependent upon and, vice versa, how «master» conspiracies give birth to derivative ones. Second, using Bouchard's analytical framework, we can deconstruct conspiracies to identify key elements used in their construction, such as discursive strategies, social actors, etc.

Yablokov notes that conspirational rhetoric often becomes an important tool in authoritarian contexts, which allows to establish loyalty and mobilize the people. Describing the crucial role of conspiracy myths during crisis, he notes that «during periods of social turmoil [...] this mobilisation is not necessarily physical, i.e. taken to the streets or digital space. It is instead a 'nudge' that stimulates hitherto indifferent, apolitical and apathetical individuals or groups towards a kind of political consciousness, one that is based on a Manichean dualism in which 'us'/'the self', i.e. the ordinary and innocent majority of 'good' people, are perceived to be threatened by an evil 'them'/'other' driven by a desire for absolute economic and political power.<sup>44</sup>» In terms of discursive strategies used to convey conspiracy myths, one can clearly identify the distinguishing features of populist discourse in this quotation. Indeed, Yablokov argues that «populist rhetoric is the principal method of vocalizing conspiracy theories on a political level.»<sup>45</sup>

Though Yablokov doesn't explicitly define his approach to populism, it seems relevant to use Brubaker's approach described in «Why populism?»<sup>46</sup>. I employ this model following Yablokov's hypothesis that «the use of anti-Western conspiracy theories by [Russian] political elites divides the world into the West on the one hand, presented as a single entity

<sup>44</sup> Julien Giry and Doğan Gürpınar, "Functions and uses of conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes," In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Michael Butter (New York: Routledge, 2020), 318.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "Why Populism?," *Theory and Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 357–85.

with a powerful elite, and Russian political leaders and intellectuals on the other, who are speaking on behalf of ‘the people’,»<sup>47</sup> which suggests the simultaneous juxtaposition between Russia and «the West» both in populist and nationalist terms. According to Brubaker, it is often more analytically fruitful to analyse populism and nationalism as separate but related phenomena by employing a “two-dimensional vision of social space, defined by the intersection of vertical and horizontal oppositions<sup>48</sup>”. Simply put, the vertical dimension is based on a populist distinction between the good people and self-serving elite. Horizontal dimension describes “the people” in terms of an “imagined community” — as being culturally bounded. In this case, “the Other” is presented as an outsider who doesn’t fully belong to the community and is often regarded to be a real or potential threat to “the people’s” collectivity.

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<sup>47</sup> Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia*, 52.

<sup>48</sup> Brubaker, “Why Populism?,” 362.

## **Myths in the context of changing Russian nationalism: 2012-2022**

In 2012, when Putin returned for his third presidential term, Russian political discourse on national identity, history, and future has started to change dramatically<sup>49</sup>. Until then, a civic idea of national identity introduced by Boris Yel'tsin and promoted by his term «rossiyane» (Russians) defined the nation based on citizenship — as opposed to «ruskiye» (Russians), which commonly referred to ethnicity<sup>50</sup>. During the late 90s and early 2000s, Russian political discourse tried to portray the state as one of the greater Western civilizations, seeking reintegration into the world politics and economy as a reliable partner with common interests and values. During the 2000s, Putin's presidencies went under slogans of modernization, improvement of living standards and economic prosperity. Morozova notes that at the beginning of his rule, Putin showed no interest in ideology and focused on the «stable endurance of the present.<sup>51</sup>» Back then, Putin mostly followed Yel'tsin's idea of civic nationalism, although his rhetoric on Russian identity was becoming increasingly instrumental<sup>52</sup>. Yuri Teper describes it as being purposefully ambiguous: «[Putin] inconsistently combined diverse civic, ethnic and even some imperial components of Russian identity, without fully committing to any of them.<sup>53</sup>» Teper argues that such ambiguity allowed Putin to appeal to different audiences depending on current political goals and to gain broader public support without actually addressing the problematic issue and clarifying his definition of «Russianness».

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<sup>49</sup> Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia*, 279.

<sup>50</sup> Pal Kolstø, "The ethnification of Russian nationalism," In *The new Russian nationalism*, ed. Pal Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 38.

<sup>51</sup> Natalia Morozova, "Geopolitics, Eurasianism and Russian Foreign Policy under Putin" *Geopolitics* 14, no. 4 (2009): 683.

<sup>52</sup> Alexander Tabachnik, "Russian Intervention in Ukraine: History, Identity Politics, and National Consolidation," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 26, no. 3 (2020): 312.

<sup>53</sup> Yuri Teper, "Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2015): 381.

Everything changed during the next decade when Putin returned to the office for the third time with a grand narrative on Russian identity and mission. Unlike the previous presidencies where the focus of his programmes was set on economic goals, in 2012 Putin «has been recast as the saviour of the Russian nation.<sup>54</sup>» During his third presidential campaign, Putin published several newspaper articles clarifying the main points of his programme. One of them — «On the national question» directly addressed the issues of national identity. Although in this article Putin explicitly criticized ethnonationalism, his narrative on «Russianness» carried obvious ethnonationalist undertones<sup>55</sup>. Notably, it was the first time that Putin clearly shifted from the use of the civic term «rossiiskii» to the ethnic one — «russkii» to refer to Russian identity. Acknowledging the multiethnic composition of the state, Putin nevertheless positioned ethnic Russians (russkii narod) at its core, marking them as a «state-forming nation» (gosudarstvoobrazuiushchaya natsiya), whose mission is to reunite the civilization<sup>56</sup>. Importantly, the opposition with the West (and foremost the USA) and appeals to enduring common history were represented as the two central pillars of his definition of the «Russian nation.» Putin writes: «historically, Russia is not an ethnic state and not an American melting pot [...] The Russian experience of state development is unique: we are a multinational society but we are one people [...] attempts to preach the idea of a Russian ‘national’, mono-ethnic state contradict our thousand-year-long history. Indeed, it is the fastest path forward towards the destruction of the Russian (russkii) people and Russian (russkii) statehood.<sup>57</sup>» During his third presidency, Russia’s portrayal in political discourse changes to highlight country’s dominant position in the global arena as civilisationally

<sup>54</sup> Teper, “Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?,” 381.

<sup>55</sup> Kolstø, “The ethnification of Russian nationalism,” 38.

<sup>56</sup> Veera Laine, “New Generation of Victors: Narrating the Nation in Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 28, no. 4 (2020): 523.

<sup>57</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Rossiia: natsional’nyi vopros” [Russia: The National Question] . *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, January 23, 2012, At [http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1\\_national.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html).

superior to the «declining West» and having its unique mission<sup>58</sup>. According to Teper, around this time the previously marginal narratives about Russia's geopolitical ambitions — «a mission to protect the citizens of the 'Russian World' that live beyond the borders of the Russian Federation» — and the very notion of the «Russian world» shift to mainstream political discourse<sup>59</sup>.

Analyzing the notion of the «Russian world,» Feklyunina similarly notes that though this idea wasn't new, it's in the early 2010s that it gained broader political recognition and got promoted on an official level<sup>60</sup>. She highlights four characteristics of the «Russian world,» which were regularly emphasized and thus of key importance for nationalist discourse during that period. Firstly, «Russian world» was defined in perennialist and essentialist terms — «as a naturally existing civilisational community.<sup>61</sup>» It was commonly used to refer to cultural proximity and shared values — orthodoxy, speaking Slavic languages, etc. — rather than ethnic identity, highlighting that all «Russian world» countries are united by relations of enduring «brotherhood.» Nevertheless, three countries were seen as the core of this brotherhood: Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine — an idea often articulated by both Russian political and religious actors<sup>62</sup>.

Secondly, Feklyunina highlights how collective memory was reconstructed in a specific way to promote the idea of the «Russian World.» Putin himself as well as other officials emphasized common origins of Slavic nations as dating back to Kievan Rus. Needless to say that this perspective facilitated a view of Russia and Ukraine as «one people,» sharing the

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<sup>58</sup> Teper, “Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?,” 390.

<sup>59</sup> Teper, “Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?,” 389.

<sup>60</sup> Valentina Feklyunina, “Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian World(s),” *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2016): 773–96.

<sup>61</sup> Feklyunina, “Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian World(s),” 783.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

same cultural and historic legacy, the same glorious past. While promoting the idea of common origins, an attempt was made to present the following history as continuous — «this interpretation emphasised an organic nature of the Russian empire and downplayed any examples of coercion.»<sup>63</sup>

Thirdly, Russian political discourse ambiguously projected a hierarchical structure within the «Russian world.» Although «brother-countries» were often discursively constructed as being equal to Russia, the term «Russian world» itself promoted the idea of Russia occupying the dominant position within this realm<sup>64</sup>.

Finally, the opposition to the West is central to the idea of the «Russian World.» It outlines civilisationist uniqueness of the «Russian world» and implies its distinct mission. Within this framework, the West was portrayed as the main «Other,» whereas selective comparisons with it enabled political elites to reconstruct the people of the «Russian world» as sharing an opposite set of values centered around conservatism, Orthodoxy, and «morality.»<sup>65</sup>

Discursive attempts to impose a new Manichean vision of the world were further facilitated by political aspirations to create the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). EAEU was seen by Russian political elites as a way to promote reintegration and increase Russian political and economic dominance in the region, with its official descriptions clearly echoing the mission of the «Russian world». As Putin himself put it: «The Eurasian Union is a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world. Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an

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<sup>63</sup> Feklyunina, “Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian World(s),” 784.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Feklyunina, “Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian World(s),” 785.

independent centre for global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia.»<sup>66</sup>

Within the civilisationist framework, the «Russian world» was unthinkable without Ukraine — Russia’s closest «brother.» However, after the Orange revolution of 2004-2005, Ukraine has been gradually moving out of Russian sphere of control and aligning more with European states. In 2014, Euromaidan became a turning point when Russian political elites saw an opportunity for nationalist mobilization. Tabachnik highlights that in Russian political discourse, the «conflict has been presented as an existential threat to the ethnic Russian and the general Russian-speaking population in Eastern Ukraine»<sup>67</sup>. He argues that using memory politics and appeals to cultural trauma Euromaidan events were reinterpreted as «a situation that called for Russian support.»<sup>68</sup> Discursive construction of this conflict marked another crucial shift in patterns of myth-making in Russian political and media discourse.

From the very onset, domestic media coverage of Ukrainian protests and the following conflict was characterized by several distinctive features. Firstly, the intensity of media coverage on both Russian TV and in newspapers was unprecedented. Several new TV shows were launched, which focused solely on the situation in Ukraine. Horbyk notes that the scale of conflict coverage even predominated domestic news<sup>69</sup>. Secondly, official narratives constructed the conflict in a way that actively involved memory work and resulted in a production of a qualitatively new interpretative framework through which the audience was invited to make sense of the Ukrainian events. Fedor highlights that this framework had a

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<sup>66</sup> "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", Website of Russian President, September 19, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>.

<sup>67</sup> Tabachnik, "Russian Intervention in Ukraine: History, Identity Politics, and National Consolidation," 303.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Roman Horbyk, "Little Patriotic War: Nationalist narratives in the Russian media coverage of the Ukraine-Russia crisis," *Asian Politics & Policy* 7, no. 3 (2015): 507.

«strong tendency towards mythologization of the events and actors in Ukraine.<sup>70</sup>» Early portrayals of Euromaidan protests were characterized by a framework of «public disorder», which accentuated their illegality<sup>71</sup>. Fedor highlights that employing the popular tagline «Gayromaidan», Russian media sought «symbolic demasculinization of Ukraine» and further delegitimization of the protests<sup>72</sup>. Focusing on «deviant» identities and behavior of protesters, the narrative positioned the Russian state «as a powerful guarantor of “normality” in the face of a degenerate West.» Combined with portrayal of Ukraine as «the West’s puppet state,» the narrative further reconstructed the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in civilizational terms — as a battle between the Russian and the Western civilizations, where Ukraine only played a minor role. As the conflict unfolded, Russian officials increasingly drew upon collective memory to increase public support for Russian intervention and further annexation of Crimea. According to existing scholarship, the memory of the Great Patriotic War served as the main material for myth-making strategies during the crisis<sup>73</sup>. Instrumentalization of the past and widespread depiction of Ukrainians as «fascists», «neo-nazis», etc. served to appeal to collective trauma and reinterpret Russian intervention in terms of salvation of «Ukrainian compatriots.» The annexation itself was presented as «a historic territory re-joining the motherland» and as «the correction of an arbitrary and capricious historical wrong,» thus aligning with ideas of the «Russian world», which reached its peak of popularity during the conflict<sup>74</sup>. Notably, in his Crimean speech, Putin further stressed the juxtaposition between the «Russian world» and the West, partly justifying the annexation in terms of protection of local population from the

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<sup>70</sup> Julie Fedor, "Introduction: Russian media and the war in Ukraine," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, no. 1 (2015): 4.

<sup>71</sup> Tomila Lankina and Kohei Watanabe, "'Russian Spring' or 'Spring betrayal'? The media as a mirror of Putin's evolving strategy in Ukraine," *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 10 (2017): 1528.

<sup>72</sup> Fedor, "Introduction: Russian media and the war in Ukraine," 9.

<sup>73</sup> Wijermars. *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia: Television, Cinema and the State*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia*, 585.



Western discrimination<sup>75</sup>. To overcome the ideological controversy of Ukraine as a brotherly nation versus Ukraine as «the enemy», Putin distinguished between the people — ordinary citizens of Ukraine — with whom he sympathized, and the corrupt elites, who abused people's rightful protest against corruption and inequality to impose the Western rule over the country. Thus, borrowing Tipaldou's words, «for Putin, it is the government of Ukraine that has failed, not the Ukrainian people.<sup>76</sup>» The same myth allowed the officials to justify Crimean annexation as being «peaceful» and chosen by the people<sup>77</sup>.

Overall, the 2014 conflict marked the beginning of a new period in Russian nationalism characterized by intensive memory work and growing popularity of conspiracy narratives. According to Yablokov, «the Ukraine crisis produced a peculiar phenomenon: for the first time in seventeen years, top-ranking politicians, including Putin himself, started to regularly voice conspiratorial notions in public.<sup>78</sup>» He argues that as a result of 2014 events, conspiracy discourse became a mainstream political and media tool as political elites realized its potential with regard to national mobilization and persecution of opposition<sup>79</sup>. Yablokov further suggests that, as the authoritarian regime in Russia became stricter and more oppressive, the role of information manipulation proportionally increased.

In contrast to the scholarship, which emphasizes the rise of ethnonationalist sentiments in the aftermath of 2012 elections, Laine's analysis of Putin's presidential addresses from the 2012–2019 period reveals another tendency. She argues that, after a peak of populist appeals to ethnonationalist rhetoric around 2012-2014, Putin's discourse on national identity has

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<sup>75</sup> Sofia Tipaldou and Philipp Casula, "Russian nationalism shifting: The role of populism since the annexation of Crimea," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 27, no. 3 (2019): 358.

<sup>76</sup> Tipaldou, "Russian nationalism shifting: The role of populism since the annexation of Crimea," 360.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia*, 612.

<sup>79</sup> Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia*, 610.

experienced yet another change. She argues that the term «russkii» itself was reconstructed during the following years to become «a cultural-linguistic term rather than a narrow ethno-national one.<sup>80</sup>» In 2018, an amendment clarifying the definition of the Russian nation was adopted. According to it, «the multinational people of the Russian Federation (the Russian nation)» was characterized as «a community of free equal citizens of the Russian Federation of various ethnic, religious, social and other affiliations, with civic consciousness.<sup>81</sup>» Laine suggests that instead of appealing to ethnic sentiments, Russian political elites started to increasingly construct national identity in cultural terms of common past and shared values. Wiermars refers to this period as a period of «history mobilization.»

Thus, cultural memory, shared values, and linguistic proximity became the most prominent signifiers of «Russianness.» Laine suggests that «the idea of a shared past helps to define the explicit character of the Russian nation.<sup>82</sup>» Memory politics resulted in a number of legislations, which were adopted in Russia and aimed at establishing a uniform vision of the past. In 2014, a law on «Nazism rehabilitation» was passed, which prohibited «dissemination of information expressing clear disrespect for society about the days of military glory and memorable dates of Russia related to the defense of the Fatherland, as well as desecration of the symbols of Russia's military glory, insulting the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland», as well as «dissemination of deliberately false information about the activities of the USSR during the Second World War.» Later, in 2021, Russian Investigative Committee formed a new branch, whose primary goal was described as «combating history falsification.» Overall, the importance of history and foremost, the legacy of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, cannot be overestimated for Putin's regime. According to Putin himself: «We

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<sup>80</sup> Laine, "New Generation of Victors: Narrating the Nation in Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019," 527.

<sup>81</sup> Laine, "New Generation of Victors: Narrating the Nation in Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019," 529.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

will not allow anyone to cross out this heroic page of history, we will expose any attempts to distort history, to consign to oblivion the spirit of alliance and our military brotherhood.<sup>83</sup>» Thus, it should be to no surprise that during the second half of 2010s Victory Day becomes the most prominent holiday nationwide. Victory Day's military parades got especially pompous after 2014. For example, in 2015, the parade's scale was the largest ever and involved a demonstration of weapon of mass destruction<sup>84</sup>. Along with visual symbols of victory, Putin diligently reconstructed Russia as a «victorious nation,» whereby he started opening his Victory Day speeches with a phrase: «Glory to the victorious nation!» (Slava narodu-pobediteliyu)<sup>85</sup>. Although always present, the myth of the victorious nation became especially central to official rhetoric after the Ukraine crisis. Laine argues that «one of the key shifts in the discourse of the shared past takes place after 2014, when the “victorious nation” started to function as a parallel between the past and present.<sup>86</sup>» Comparing the Great Patriotic War and the Ukrainian conflict, political elites tightly connected the two to establish a straightforward interpretative framework for the audience.

The period of history mobilization reached its peak in 2020, when several constitutional amendments were passed, changing it for the first time in the past decades. Along with other changes, Russian constitution now mentions that «The Russian Federation, united by a thousand-year history, preserving the memory of the ancestors who gave us ideals and faith in God, as well as continuity in the development of the Russian state, recognizes the historical unity of the state,» as well as that «The Russian Federation honors the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland and ensures the protection of historical truth. Derogation of the

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<sup>83</sup> "Concert celebrating the Day of Motherland's defender", Website of Russian President, February 23, 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62851>.

<sup>84</sup> Laine, "New Generation of Victors: Narrating the Nation in Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019," 530.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Laine, "New Generation of Victors: Narrating the Nation in Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019," 531.

value of the heroism of the people in the defense of the Fatherland is not allowed.»<sup>87</sup> Thus, the amendments crystallized the myth of the shared past, Orthodoxy and traditionalism as the main pillars of Russian nation in the key state document.

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<sup>87</sup> “Full Text of Constitutional Amendments: What is Changing?” Website of Russian State Duma. March 14, 2020, <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48045/>.

## Methodology

My empirical analysis is guided by Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) — a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) originating in Ruth Wodak's works. Following Wodak, I define discourse as «a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action, [which are] socially constituted and socially constitutive, related to a macro-topic, linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity involving several social actors who have different points of view.<sup>88</sup>»

CDA, as a broader overarching methodological framework, seems relevant for the purposes of current research since CDA's primary interest is in dialectical relations between discourse and power. Fairclough describes these relations as «meaning in the service of power: ways of representing aspects of the world, which may be operationalized in ways of acting and interacting and in 'ways of being' or identities, that contribute to establishing or sustaining unequal relations of power.<sup>89</sup>» For my research, the attention to the ways, in which power relations get (re)constructed through discourse, is crucial because of Russia's position as an aggressor state. I expect to see how power dynamics gets reinterpreted discursively to justify Russian invasion.

Additionally, CDA's focus is on «socially constructive effects of discourse.»<sup>90</sup> Social constructivist outlook of CDA defines one of its key objectives — to trace the emergence and development of particular discourses and to analyze their evolution over time. Since I analyze the emergence of the Russian political discourse on the war with Ukraine, I believe that CDA

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<sup>88</sup> Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (California: Sage, 2015): 23-62.

<sup>89</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 1995), 79.

<sup>90</sup> Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 34.

will contribute to a better understanding of the role of myth-making strategies and provide adequate analytical tools for their investigation.

I chose DHA specifically for two reasons. First, because of its focus on historical context. According to Wodak and Reisigl, «the historical orientation permits the reconstruction of how recontextualization functions as an important process linking texts and discourses intertextually and interdiscursively over time.<sup>91</sup>» In other words, taking into account one of the main assumptions of discourse analysis — that production of discourse involves borrowing elements of previously existing discourses, accounting for historical ‘roots’ of discourse becomes of key importance in terms of understanding of its goals, audience and meaning. By historical roots I mean the knowledge about preexisting context, actors and narratives involved in discourse construction. This aspect of DHA seems especially important in terms of understanding memory work in Putin's addresses.

Second, DHA has valuable critical implications as it seeks to «demystify ideology.» Seeing texts as sites of political struggle, DHA explicitly focuses on manipulative aspects of discourse. Although I don't employ the concept of «ideology» because of its derogatory and positivist connotations, my focus is still on the constructive effects of discourse. Adopting a critical stance, I would like to analyze how Russian political and media discourse on the war with Ukraine established a particular interpretative framework through which the audience was invited to see the war, and which discursive tools were drawn upon to make this framework convincing.

### ***Research design***

My analytic strategy is guided by a roadmap proposed by Wodak: I identify the main themes structuring the discourse and then analyze linguistic means utilized to convey the main ideas

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<sup>91</sup> Reisigl and Wodak, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 29.

of the theme. I integrate this framework with Bouchard's conceptualization of myths to deconstruct each myth with respect to its key components: anchor, imprint, ethos, and discursive strategies employed. My analytical goal is threefold. First, I would like to single out explanatory frameworks (myths) justifying the war with Ukraine, which were introduced by Putin. Second, I aim to deconstruct each framework. Finally, I would like to trace the relations between the myths to figure out how they are contextualized within a broader pool of cultural memory.

Two DHA concepts seem to be of special importance with this regard: intertextuality and interdiscursivity. The former refers to the idea «that texts are linked to other texts, both in the past and in the present. Such connections are established in different ways: through explicit reference to a topic or main actor; through references to the same events; by allusions or evocations; by the transfer of main arguments from one text to the next, and so on.»<sup>92</sup>, whereas interdiscursivity «signifies that discourses are linked to each other in various ways [...] discourses are open and often hybrid; new subtopics can be created at many points.»<sup>93</sup> I suggest that Putin's attempts to establish a new discourse on invasion of Ukraine will rely heavily on both intertextuality and interdiscursivity to contextualize it within the pool of existing cultural memory and promote a specific understanding of the situation.

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<sup>92</sup> Reisigl and Wodak, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 90.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

## **Analysis**

In what follows, I analyze the key five myths evident in Putin's addresses from the 21st and the 24th of February, 2022<sup>94 95</sup>. I deconstruct each of them based on the integration of Bouchard's conceptualization of myth components and DHA framework. Following Wodak, I treat each myth as one of the main themes structuring Putin's narrative on the war with Ukraine. I then employ Bouchard's notions of anchor, imprint, and ethos to highlight memory work, emotional appeal, and the translated values, respectively. Finally, I single out discursive strategies and linguistic means used to convey each myth and analyze how they relate to each other.

My analysis has revealed that these two speeches had different goals and appealed to different audiences. Despite that, they intertwine significantly to form a unified narrative on the war. Though the speeches are structured uniquely and activate diverse myths in different ways, they complement each other, whereby the former address primarily lays out the «historical grounds» of the conflict and the second one accentuates the present threats resulting from them. This dynamic relationship between the speeches is mirrored in their emotional undertones, which reach the climax in the address from the 24th of February.

### ***The myth of «Ukraine of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin»***

Putin starts his 21st of February speech from afar stating that «to understand what is happening today [...] it is necessary to say at least a few words about the history of the issue.»

He then makes a previously articulated appeal to common Russian-Ukrainian history.

However, this time it is contextualized within another pool of cultural memory. Whereas in

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<sup>94</sup> “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii,” Website of the President of the Russian Federation, 21.03.2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

<sup>95</sup> “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii,” Website of the President of the Russian Federation, 24.03.2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.



his earlier speeches on the topic, Kievan Rus served as the main historic «material,» highlighting common cultural «roots» of the two countries, this time, the myth becomes centered around the Soviet memory. More specifically, around bolshevist national politics. The main thesis of this reconstructed myth is that «modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, more precisely, Bolshevik, communist Russia.» Presenting his version of the Soviet history since 1917, Putin stresses that being ready to do anything to stay in power, Lenin «made concessions to the nationalists,» providing the right of nations to self-determination, which was later enshrined in the Soviet Constitution. Putin constructs this event as a breaking point in Russian history and interprets Russian-Ukrainian conflict in terms of the consequences of that political decision: «Lenin’s principles of state building turned out to be not just a mistake, it was, as they say, much worse than a mistake.» This perspective leads Putin to draw a radical conclusion that «as a result of the Bolshevik policy, Soviet Ukraine arose, which even today can with good reason be called «Ukraine of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. (Ukraina imeni Vladimira Ilyicha Lenina) He is its author and architect.» Portraying modern Ukraine as a Soviet «mistake,» Putin further delegitimizes its sovereignty by arguing that «Ukraine, in fact, has never had a stable tradition of its true statehood [...] and has taken the path of mechanical copying of foreign models, divorced from both history and Ukrainian realities.» Thus, he undermines the Ukrainian state to a level of a Soviet republic, which failed to establish its own nation-state.

While drawing this picture, Putin constantly uses populist appeals to the people, presenting Ukrainian sovereignty as a fault of Soviet elites: «the national question, the essence of which was not some expectations and unfulfilled aspirations of the peoples of the Union, but, above all, the growing appetites of local elites,» «the collapse of historical Russia under the name of the USSR is on their conscience.» This part of his narrative is of crucial importance for two reasons. First, here he clearly identifies the borders of what he sees as «historical Russia.»

This vision is further supported by his description of Ukraine as «not just a neighboring country. It is an integral part of our own history, culture, spiritual space,» which connects current myth with an already established one on Russian-Ukrainian common cultural identity.

Second, presenting Ukrainian sovereignty in terms of Soviet elites' mistake allows Putin to establish a connection between the past and the present. In his second, more pompous and emotional speech he appeals to justice stressing that «neither during the creation of the USSR, nor after the Second World War, people living in certain territories that are part of modern Ukraine, no one ever asked how they themselves want to arrange their lives.» Thus, Putin invites the people of Ukraine to correct the past mistakes by exercising their agency and making the «right choice». Drawing parallels with Crimean annexation where «inhabitants of the peninsula made their free choice — to be together with Russia,» Putin actively encourages Ukrainians to follow this example: «Our policy is based on freedom, the freedom of choice for everyone to independently determine their own future and the future of their children. And we consider it important that this right - the right to choose - could be used by all the peoples living on the territory of today's Ukraine, by everyone who wants it.»

Overall, this myth heavily draws upon the preexisting myth of Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood and the shared past. However, the focus on Ukrainian separation from Russia instead of their common history allows Putin to mobilize resentment, which is further fostered by his populist appeals to the people who weren't asked back then but now have an opportunity to correct the historical injustice.

His definition of «historical Russia» unambiguously positions Ukraine within its borders, which is supported by Putin's predication strategy. Most notable is his pronoun use. While explicitly acknowledging that the audience of his address includes both Russians and Ukrainians, he blurs the national distinction between the two referring to both nations as

«us»: «the fate of Russia is in the reliable hands of our multinational people,» «we know that real strength is in justice and truth, which is on our side.» The Other in this case is a historical figure of Soviet political elites, which are presented as having «growing appetites,» greedy and corrupt. Putin distances himself from Soviet politicians by labeling their decisions as «unexplainable,» «mad,» and «frank verbiage.» Another linguistic device employed for this purpose are Putin's numerous rhetorical questions, which allow to stress his complete misunderstanding of their decisions: «Why was it necessary to satisfy any, endlessly growing nationalist ambitions on the outskirts of the former empire from the lord's shoulder (s barskogo plecha)?», «Why it was necessary to make such generous gifts, which the most ardent nationalists had not even dreamed of before?», «Was it not obvious what such formulations and decisions would lead to?»

Finally, Putin constantly appeals to historical accuracy to present his portrayal of history as a one without «any slips of tongue (ogovorki) and without any political overtones»: «I just want to say that this is exactly what happened. This is a historical fact», «The fact remains to be the fact (fakt ostayotsa faktom).» It is understandable taking into account his attempts to legitimize a new version of reconstructed history in the eyes of the audience.

### ***The myth of weak Ukrainian elites and «the virus of nationalism»***

Discursively linked to the myth of Ukraine as a state formed «by a mistake» is the myth of Ukrainian weak elites enslaved by nationalists. Unfolding his narrative, Putin presents current Ukrainian political authorities in the following terms: «a stable statehood in Ukraine has not developed, and political, electoral procedures serve only as a cover, a screen for the redistribution of power and property between various oligarchic clans.» Here, Ukrainian elites are portrayed as «weak,» self-serving, changing major Ukrainian institutions «to suit rapidly formed clans with their own vested interests.» According to Putin, their rule is characterized

by unprecedented corruption, which «permeated and corroded Ukrainian statehood, the entire system, all branches of power.» Logically stemming from this narrative is a straightforward idea that Ukrainian statehood is damaged. Putin further delegitimizes Ukrainian sovereignty by rejecting an idea that Ukraine might have its own national identity. He argues that «it was from the very first steps that the Ukrainian authorities began to build their statehood on the denial of everything that unites us; they sought to distort the consciousness, the historical memory of millions of people, entire generations living in Ukraine.» Therefore, he diminishes Ukrainian national identity as being simply anti-Russian.

Notably, while an idea of Ukrainian nationalism plays a crucial role in Putin's narrative, for him it's usually not Ukrainian political authorities characterized by nationalist ideas but someone else. Though Putin does mention rarely that Ukrainian political actors also got «afflicted with the virus of nationalism and corruption and skillfully replaced the true cultural, economic, social interests of the people, the real sovereignty of Ukraine with various kinds of speculation on national grounds and external ethnographic paraphernalia,» he mostly promotes an idea of Ukrainian elites as stripped of any political ideology and being predominantly occupied with enrichment and private interests.

Instead, Putin refers to «nationalists» as a conspiratorial force without a clear face. For him, these nationalists constitute a force that emerged on the eve of Euromaidan and, «having carried out a coup d'état, the nationalists and those political forces that supported them finally brought the situation to a standstill, pushed Ukraine into the abyss of civil war.» In Putin's narratives, «nationalists» are equated with «radicals», «neo-nazis» and «fascists» and are heavily demonized. He portrays them as participating «in terrorist gangs in the North Caucasus», «imposing their will on a weak [Ukrainian] government,» and being solely

responsible for «organizing persecution, real terror against those who opposed anti-constitutional actions [in 2014].»

Here again, Putin draws on populist discourse to appeal to justice, stressing that «the radicals took advantage of the just discontent of the people» during 2014 protests. The distinction between the radicals and the people established in his previous narratives on Ukrainian crisis allows to portray the latter as «law-abiding, moderate views, accustomed to trusting the authorities», unable of expressing aggression or «resorting to illegal actions.»

As for discursive strategies used to convey this myth, Putin heavily relies on the cultural memory related to the Great Patriotic War to demonize the image of the «radicals».

Addressing Ukrainian soldiers, Putin states that «they [the radicals], of course, will climb into the Crimea, and just like in the Donbass, with a war in order to kill, as punishers from the gangs of Ukrainian nationalists, Hitler's accomplices, killed defenseless people during the Great Patriotic War.» Taking into account the cultural trauma associated with the Great Patriotic War, it becomes evident that Putin's depiction invokes the framework of Motherland protection to appeal to Ukrainian military. He further calls them «comrades» to remind that «Your fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazis, defending our common Motherland, so that today's neo-Nazis could seize power in Ukraine. You took an oath of allegiance to the Ukrainian people, and not to the anti-people junta that robs Ukraine and mocks these same people.»

Of special interest are the metaphors used by Putin to describe Ukrainian nationalism.

Opposing it to Russian «traditional multiculturalism,» Putin portrays nationalism as a political disease: «[after the dissolution of the USSR] The bacillus of nationalist ambitions has not disappeared, and the initially laid mine, which undermines the state immunity against the infection of nationalism, was only waiting for its hour.» Combined with his rhetoric on

Ukrainian identity as anti-Russian, this depiction of nationalism draws upon the previously established myth of Rusophobia and metaphorically portrays Ukraine as a state requiring “medical intervention”.

### ***The myth of «external control» of Ukraine***

Stripping Ukrainian political elites of their agency, Putin tightly connects the previous myth with the one about «the Western forces» ruling the state. According to this myth, «Ukraine was simply driven under external control» after Euromaidan events. This framework reduces Ukraine to a «puppet state» where «external forces, [...] with the help of an extensive network of NGOs and special services, grew their clientele [...] and promoted its representatives to power» after 2014.

While the narrative on Ukrainian nationalism is conspirational in itself, Putin adds another conspiracy layer by arguing that it’s the «Western forces» who are standing behind «the nationalist forces» in Ukraine: «the leading NATO countries, in order to achieve their own goals, support extreme nationalists and neo-Nazis in everything in Ukraine.»

It’s through this myth that Putin connects the discourse on Ukraine with his civilizationist definition of Russian mission. His narrative heavily draws upon the conspirational rhetoric of Dugin and other Eurasianist thinkers to present the world in terms of a binary juxtaposition between the West and the «Russian world». While sometimes referring to «the West» in general, Putin often stresses that it’s the USA who is at the centre of it. The United States’ primary feature is their immorality. In the context of Russian-American political relations, the latter are depicted as an «empire of lies»: «at the heart of the policy of the “empire of lies» [...] is primarily brute, straightforward force. In such cases, we say: “There is power, mind is not needed”.» Bringing up the notion of the «empire of lies,» Putin portrays the USA as a cynical state, which doesn’t comply with political agreements and solely focuses on the

achievement of its own corrupt goals. To support his argument, Putin reconstructs the history of Russian-NATO relations as a continuing story of NATO breaking existing agreements and expanding closer and closer to Russian borders. This narrative will be further used by Putin to construct the myth of the «immediate threat» Russia is facing from the West.

Importantly, the civilizational battle is discursively constructed as targeting Russian cultural identity rather than territory or resources. He stresses that the West aims to «destroy our traditional values and impose on us their pseudo-values that would corrode us, our people from the inside, [...] lead to degradation and degeneration, because they contradict the very nature of humans.» Here again, Putin conducts identity work and highlights the cultural basis of Russian identity.

Stigmatization of American morality goes hand in hand with recognition of its power and influence. In fact, Putin describes other Western countries as occupying subordinate positions of «satellites [who] not only resignedly and submissively agree, sing along to it [the USA] for any reason, but also copy its behavior, enthusiastically accept the rules proposed by it.»

Ukraine is positioned differently compared to these enthusiastic satellite states — as a mere «theater of potential military operations» of the West. Putin argues that «the essence of the pro-Western civilizational choice of the Ukrainian oligarchic government was and is [...] to keep the billions of dollars stolen from Ukrainians and hidden by oligarchs in accounts in Western banks by obsequiously rendering services to Russia's geopolitical rivals.» Here, he again refers to the myth of Ukrainian self-serving elites to facilitate the image of Ukraine as a state lacking any substantial ideological basis.

To construct convincing images of Ukraine serving the West, Putin uses emotionally charged language and numerous metaphors. Whereas the West «seized and holds power in Kyiv,» the Ukrainian people is portrayed as its «hostage.» Appealing to security, he presents the situation

in Ukraine in highly dramatic terms of «activation of cells of extremists, including radical Islamic organizations, [who] send sabotage groups to commit terrorist acts at critical infrastructure» in the country «carried out with the support of foreign intelligence services». In his second, more pathetic address, Putin's narrative on Russian-Western confrontation culminates with the following statement: «whoever tries to interfere with us [Russia and Ukraine], let alone create threats for our country, for our people, should know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead you to such consequences that you have never experienced in your history.» This direct threatening appeal constructs Russia as a strong opponent to the West and refers to Russia being a nuclear state.

### ***The myth of Ukrainian «genocide» and the Russian saviour***

Another myth introduced by Putin describes a pre-war situation in Ukraine in terms of discrimination of ethnic Russian population. The myth draws on current Ukrainian domestic politics to characterize it as being directed at «de-Russification and forced assimilation» of ethnic Russians living there. The focus here lies on linguistic and religious aspects of the politics. Putin stresses that «in accordance with the laws on education and on the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the state language, Russian [language] is expelled from schools, from all public spheres up to ordinary shops,» whereas the Orthodox church schism has resulted in the «infringement on the rights of believers.» The narrative on discrimination again appeals to the ordinary people, however this time the people is mainly constructed as ethnic Russians residing in Ukraine. Reinterpreting Ukrainian politics using the framework of ethnic oppression allows Putin to distance ethnic Russians from the rest of the population and discursively situate them outside of Ukrainian nation: «People who consider themselves Russians and would like to preserve their identity, language, culture, were made clear that they are strangers in Ukraine.» Combined with his rhetoric about the Ukrainian people who were not asked if they wanted to separate from Russia after the dissolution of the USSR, this



myth actively engages with the idea of the people's right to self-determination. Portraying Ukrainian sovereignty as a historical mistake, Putin implies that ethnic Russians living in Ukraine now have their second chance to make the right choice.

Positioning Ukraine as a part of historical Russia and «one people,» Putin asserts Russian authority over the country, which allows him to portray international intervention in terms of justice and salvation. Talking about «the radicals who seized power and organized [...] a real terror against those who opposed anti-constitutional actions,» Putin states that «we know them by name and will do everything to punish them, find them and bring them to justice.»

Focusing on post-2014 events, Putin yet again actively engages with cultural memory of the Great Patriotic War to construct the following years as incessant «killings of civilians, blockade, mockery of people, including children, women, the elderly» on the territories of Donbas and Luhansk regions.» He constantly refers to these years as the years of «horror, genocide, which affects almost 4 million people,» intensifying his narrative on ethnic discrimination. In this context, the future intervention is articulated as a necessary response to the «millions of people who rely only on Russia, hope only on us.»

Whereas in his first speech Putin turns to the use of rhetoric questions to ask «How long can this tragedy continue? How much longer can you endure this?», in his second speech he returns to answer them: «One cannot look at what is happening there without compassion. It was simply impossible to endure all this. This nightmare had to end immediately.» Directly from this idea of the need to establish «justice» in Ukraine stems his declaration of the war: «these aspirations, feelings, pain of people were for us the main motive for deciding to recognize the people's republics of Donbass», «the people's republics of Donbass turned to Russia with a request for help [...] I have decided to conduct a special military operation.»

The notion of «special military operation» is crucial for Putin's framing of the conflict. Taking into account that during the following months it became legally prohibited in Russia to label the conflict a war, one can clearly see Putin's attempt to resolve the controversy between the long-term myth of Russia as a country that «doesn't begin wars but ends them» and current political reality. Appeal to cultural memory allows him to frame the war in terms of «demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine», drawing obvious parallels with post-Second World War Germany when these terms were first introduced. Playing on both cultural pride and trauma related to the war with fascist Germany, Putin erases the temporal divide between the past and the present to invoke the interpretative framework of the glorious nation, which combated fascism, and promote it as the main interpretation of the conflict.

### ***The myth of the «inevitable attack on Russia»***

Finally, Putin constructs a qualitatively new myth suggesting that «Russia cannot feel safe, develop, exist with a constant threat emanating from the territory of modern Ukraine.» In my view, this is the key myth in Putin's justification of the war with Ukraine. Constructing the current political situation as threatening Russian national security, Putin appeals to Russian audience with his main thesis that «they simply didn't leave us any other opportunity to protect Russia, our people» except for a military intervention. To convince the audience that there is indeed a security threat, he refers to several arguments. First, to the 2021 Ukrainian Military Strategy. Putin argues that it is «almost entirely devoted to [Ukrainian] confrontation with Russia, aims to draw foreign states into a conflict with our country.» He goes as far as to state that «the strategy proposes the organization in the Russian Crimea and on the territory of Donbass, in fact, a terrorist underground.»

His other argument focuses on «demonstrative» buildup of military forces taking place on the territory of Ukraine during the previous period: «In recent months, Western weapons have

been coming to Ukraine just in a continuous stream, defiantly, in front of the eyes of the whole world.» Putin highlights that this process is evident for everyone in the world to make his narrative more convincing. Drawing on the myth of the hostile West, he integrates it within current myth to stress that «the activities of the armed forces and special services of Ukraine are led by foreign advisers.» Here, again passivity of Ukraine is highlighted and juxtaposed to the West, who is portrayed as «the real enemy»: «the command and control system of the Ukrainian troops is already integrated with the NATO ones. This means that the command of the Ukrainian armed forces, even individual units and subunits, can be directly exercised from NATO headquarters.»

Putin's narrative is emotionally intense and aims to intimidate the Russian audience. He draws vivid pictures of the possible future. In case Ukraine joins NATO, «The flight time to Moscow for Tomahawk cruise missiles will be less than 35 minutes, ballistic missiles from the Kharkov region - 7-8 minutes, and hypersonic strike weapons - 4-5 minutes. It is what is called a “knife to the throat”.» Putin further develops his argumentation to suggest that Ukraine might soon create its own nuclear weapon. In this part of Putin's speech, the myths of the West as Russia's main enemy and the one of Russian-Ukrainian common history get peculiarly intertwined. Rejecting the idea that Ukraine might be able to develop nuclear weapon by itself, he explains its possible emergence either in terms of «Soviet nuclear technologies» inherited by Ukraine after the dissolution of the USSR, or through «the Western patrons [who] can contribute to the appearance of such weapons in Ukraine.»

Putin constantly refers to the objectivity of his depiction of political situation emphasizing that there is a «real danger.» Inevitability of the constructed conflict enables him to portray invasion in terms of self-defense. As he peculiarly put it in one of his later speeches — it was a «preemptive rebuff to aggression.» Presenting the war as a necessary self-defense, Putin

abdicates responsibility for its future consequences, stating that «all responsibility for possible bloodshed will be entirely on the conscience of the regime ruling on the territory of Ukraine.»

## Conclusion

Since 2014, Russian-Ukrainian conflict has been often characterized in both academic and popular literature in terms of «war of words,» highlighting the crucial role of discursive construction of the conflict by both countries. Relevant scholarship, which mostly focuses on 2014-2015 Ukrainian crisis, stresses the importance of myth-making practices in Russian political discourse, which enabled local elites to promote a specific interpretation of events and justify Russian aggression in the eyes of domestic audience. Taking this literature as my starting point, I analyze the political myths evident in Putin's discursive construction of the war with Ukraine in 2022. My main research question is the following: Which myths were initially employed in Vladimir Putin's discourse on the war with Ukraine, and why?

My research was originally driven by two suppositions. First, while I expected some previously established myths to be still present in 2022 discourse, others seemed to have lost their relevance within the new political context. Myths about the peaceful nature of Russia's 2014 intervention and appeals to historical right to the territory in case of Crimean peninsula seemed to be hardly transferable to 2022 full scale military invasion. Additionally, scholarship on Russian political conspiracy discourse points out that, since 2014 events, conspiracies became one of the main tools used to legitimize Russian politics for the domestic audience. Therefore, initially I expected that myth-making practices would intensify in 2022 political discourse, resulting in a mix of previously established and new myths about Russian-Ukrainian relations.

To answer my research question, I analyzed two speeches of Vladimir Putin, which were aired on the 21st and 24th of February 2022. I suggest that these extensive addresses are key to understanding the initial framework promoted by the state to establish a particular

interpretation of Russia's invasion among the local population. Using Discourse-Historical Approach, I was able to identify five dominant myths and deconstruct each of them with regard to memory work, the main appeals and discursive strategies employed to convey the idea.

The first myth portrays Ukraine as a state created «by mistake» as a result of poor bolshevist national politics. Aiming both to appeal to common history and to delegitimize current Ukrainian sovereignty, it undermines the Ukrainian state to the level of a failed Soviet republic. Putin's definition of Russian «historical borders» as Soviet ones clearly positions Ukraine under Russia's authority. Heavily relying on cultural memory about the common Soviet past, Putin reinterprets history in populist terms to distinguish between the Soviet elites whose political ambitions resulted in Russian-Ukrainian separation, and the people who were not asked whether they wanted it. This populist appeal enables Putin to discursively connect the current political situation to those historical events and invite the people to correct the wrongs of the past by joining Russia. This myth heavily draws upon the myth about enduring Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood. However, unlike Putin's 2014-2015 appeals to the memory of being one people under Kievan Rus, his 2022 narrative focuses on Ukrainian separation from Russia to mobilize resentment.

The myth of Ukrainian government being overtaken by nationalist «radicals» further develops Putin's narrative on Ukraine as a failed state, presenting the country as being ruled by corrupted oligarchic «clans», exclusively occupied with private economic interests. Drawing on Euromaidan events, he reinterprets them in terms of illegitimate power seizure by conspirational nationalist forces. Putin's conspiracy rhetoric on Ukrainian «radicals», «neo-nazis», and «fascists» presents them in a highly obscure way and distinguishes both from the weak elites and the law-abiding people. In contrast to the latter, Ukrainian «radicals» are

portrayed as the dominant national force defining the Ukrainian course of political development over the past years. This force is highly demonized, whereby cultural trauma of the Great Patriotic War becomes activated. Notably, within the frame of this myth, nationalism is discursively constructed as a political «disease», which infected Ukraine after its independency. Putin problematizes Ukrainian nationalism by diminishing Ukrainian national identity to being simply anti-Russian. This narrative draws upon the previously established myth of Russophobia and metaphorically portrays Ukraine as a state requiring medical intervention.

Another myth appeals to the previously established notion of the West as Russia's main «Other» to present Ukraine as a country ruled externally by the USA. Putin adds another conspirational level by arguing that there are «Western forces» standing behind Ukrainian «nationalist forces.» It allows him to portray Russian-Ukrainian conflict in dramatic terms of the civilizationist battle between the West and the «Russian world.» Importantly, the battle is discursively constructed as targeting Russian cultural identity rather than territory or resources. Whereas the USA and, more generally, the West are constructed as morally declining, their political goal is portrayed as destroying Russian traditional values. To support his argument about Western hostility towards Russia, Putin reinterprets the history of Russian-NATO relations as a history of NATO successively breaking the established agreements and spreading its influence closer and closer to Russian borders. Overall, this myth serves two crucial aims. The first one is identity work, which highlights the cultural basis of Russian identity. Second, it enables Putin to further delegitimize Ukrainian sovereignty, diminishing the country to a puppet state and the battleground for Russian-Western confrontation.

This myth serves as a basis for the myth of Russia bringing salvation to the Ukrainian people. Describing pre-war situation in Ukraine in terms of ethnic and religious discrimination, Putin explicitly appeals to ethnic Russian citizenry of the country, discursively positioning them outside of the Ukrainian nation. This narrative is tightly intertwined with the myth about Ukrainian people who wasn't asked if it wanted to live in a separate nation-state to further convey an idea of people's right to self-determination. Intensively exploiting the cultural trauma associated with the Great Patriotic War, Putin intensifies his narrative on ethnic discrimination through its portrayal in terms of genocide of the ethnic Russian population. Locating Ukraine within the borders of «historical Russia» and thus establishing Russia's symbolic authority over the country allows Putin to justify Russian invasion in terms of the salvation of these people. Labeling the war a «special military operation» aiming to «demilitarize» and «denazify» Ukraine invokes obvious parallels between modern Ukraine and post-World War II Germany, and situates Russian actions within the popular myth of Russia as a victorious nation that combated fascism. Thus, playing on both cultural pride and trauma related to the Great Patriotic War, Putin erases the temporal divide between the two events and portrays the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a continuing war with fascism.

Last but not least is the myth about the threat of an inevitable attack on Russia, which, in my opinion, is key to Putin's justification of the war. He promotes a conspirational idea that the West is actively preparing for the war with Russia using Ukraine as its future battlefield. Appealing to security, Putin draws vivid imageries of missiles, which will be able to reach Russian cities in minutes as soon as NATO establishes its bases on the territory of Ukraine. Discursively constructed inevitability of the conflict enables Putin to portray Russian aggression in terms of necessary self-defense, taking off the responsibility for its possible consequences and resolving the controversy between invasion and the myth of Russia as a country that «doesn't begin wars but ends them.» Here again, Putin draws on cultural memory



of the Great Patriotic War to portray current intervention in terms of correcting the mistakes of the past — referring to the country being caught off guard by a fascist attack in 1941.

Analysis of Putin's speeches reveals the complex structure of his discourse — both intertextual and interdiscursive. Aired within a short time period, these addresses are very different with regard to their goals. While the February 21 address aims to discursively construct the conflict and establish the problem, the second speech provides the needed solution — the beginning of the war. This relationship between the speeches is facilitated through several seemingly rhetorical questions, which are raised in the first speech and directly addressed in the second («How much longer can you endure this?» — «It is simply impossible to endure all this any longer.»), as well as a gradual escalation of emotional undertones. The February 24th speech is significantly more dramatic and pathetic, utilizing numerous metaphors and presenting the issue in terms of binary oppositions — as «a question of life and death.»

Of special interest for me was the structure organizing the myths in these speeches and the way they relate to each other within the broader realm of cultural memory. During the analysis, Bouchard's idea of myths' pyramidal structure proved to be relevant. Myths articulated by Putin in these extensive speeches are highly intertwined and refer to numerous other myths, more or less established in Russian cultural memory to the moment. Situating new myth within this context allows one to understand which other myths were involved in the process of its construction, as well as to trace emerging controversies between different myths and how they get discursively resolved. Moreover, conceptualizing conspiracies in terms of political myths has turned out to be analytically fruitful. I suggest that integration of «historical myths» and «conspiracy myths» under the same conceptual framework can result in less research fragmentation and a richer understanding of certain discursive strategies.

Comparing Putin's discourse on current invasion with the one on 2014 crisis, it's easy to notice that while some myths stayed the same, they became much more nuanced in terms of memory work. Other myths, like the one about the inevitable attack, though being marginally present in Russian political discourse since the mid-2000s, blossomed during these speeches and gained central stage in Putin's rhetoric appealing to national security. Finally, in some cases, myths got internally reconstructed — like the one about Russian-Ukrainian historical integrity — whereby new cultural memories were drawn upon to make the myth more efficient and appealing to resentment.

Finally, my research contributes to the scholarship on contemporary Russian nationalism. In line with Tipaldou and Casula's findings, I find evidence that populism plays a major role in Putin's narratives on Russian-Ukrainian relations. However, while they argue that Putin appeals to nationalism and populism interchangeably, depending on the audience, I don't see such a tendency. Instead, Brubaker's two-dimensional model of populism and nationalism seems more relevant in my case. Discursively reconstructing Russian borders to include Ukraine, Putin portrays Russian and Ukrainian (mostly ethnic Russian Ukrainians) citizenry as the people who is juxtaposed to numerous «Others,» identified both in populist and nationalist terms.

The main limitations of current research are associated with the narrow focus of my analysis. Increasing the number of Putin's speeches would allow me to extract thicker descriptions and establish a more profound understanding of his interpretative repertoires and myths employed. Taking into account the assumption that both myths and discourses are constantly reconstructed, the temporal dimension of analysis becomes very important. In other words, tracing the development of political discourse on the war with Ukraine would enable one to see how it changes and why certain myths prove to be efficient, whereas others vanish.

Finally, taking into account different actors engaging in discourse construction — other politicians, media outlets, ordinary citizens, etc. — could reveal conflicting narratives and parallel interpretations of current events.

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