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PRESENT AND FUTURE GEOPOLITICAL ROLE OF RUSSIA IN PUBLIC OPINION AND MEDIA DISCOURSE

■ INTRODUCTION

Global transformations of the political realm, and attempts to reshape the global world order as well as transit of local conflicts to the international ones and hybrid mode of current conflicts – all listed above make actual and pivotal academic research of problems related to design and legitimization of conflicts of different levels and character.

Modern military conflicts are increasingly acquiring a quasi-permanent nature, with the growing role of the media component, providing both support from the population and the sympathy of those participants in international relations who are not active parties to the conflict. The hybrid nature of wars turns them into ordinary everyday life activities, deprives them of the status of an exceptional, epoch-making event, and demonstrates almost unlimited space for representative manipulation of the real situation developing „on the ground” (Taki 2024).

To understand the prospects and dynamics of conflict interactions, especially in crisis conditions of global uncertainty, it seems productive to study issues related to constructing an image of the future. The mentioned uncertainty results from the numerous uncontrolled information streams, which shape the images of the surrounding world in the context of different civilisational paradigms. Due to these facts individuals feel an additional need in self-identification and in gaining the sense of belonging to various communities and in determining their place both at the local and global levels. As Aleksandr Neklessa noticed an active representation of the future involves a struggle for dominance in the process of choosing, editing and approving the preferred version of civilization (Neklessa 2019: 152).

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The war acts of Russia in Ukraine, which are called in the Russian public discourse and officially named by the Russian government the „Special Military Operation” (SVO), became a divisive issue for the Russian society and political elites. This led to several socio-political consequences, which should be conceptualized. Protests against the SVO began but were promptly neutralized by the series of arrests and criminal prosecution, introducing several legislative acts that imposed barriers and curbs on mass media activities, which, of course, transformed the information space.

Around 300 media outlets were closed and blocked in Russia since the SVO started². Also the Russian media have been significantly affected by adopting in 2022 amendments to the Criminal and Criminal Procedure Codes of the Russian Federation against spreading and distributing „fake news”. These amendments have imposed restraints on media by introducing administrative and criminal liability for the dissemination of deliberately false information about the use of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, as well as for public actions aimed at discrediting the Russian Army³. According to the data provided by the Judicial Department at the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation in 2023 65 people (in 2022 there were 14 such court verdicts) were condemned for spreading „fake news” about the Russian Army (Article 207 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) and for discrediting the Russian Army (Article 280.3 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) were condemned 50 people in 2023 and only 3 people in 2022⁴. The number of people convicted of anti-terrorism articles was 730 people, most of them were prosecuted for public justification of terrorism in the media. In other words people were condemned for the SVO media covering if their opinion did not comply with the official position of the Russian authorities⁵. The number of materials with „fakes” about the Russian Armed Forces that were deleted or blocked last year fell by almost half compared to 2022: 73.5 thousand in 2023 versus 129.4 thousand in 2022, when the amendments about „fake” news and discrediting of the Russian Army were adopted⁶.

² UNIVERSAL SERVICE for checking access restrictions to sites and (or) pages of Internet sites // Federal Service for Supervision of Communication, Information and Technologies and Mass Communications, <https://blocklist.rkn.gov.ru/> (access 20.02.20240).

³ Federal Law of March 4, 2022 No. 32-FZ On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and Articles 31 and 151 of the Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation.

⁴ Punishment ranges from 3 to 15 years. Judicial statistics data//JUDICIAL DEPARTMENT under the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, <http://www.cdep.ru/index.php?id=79&item=8690> (access 20.02.2024).

⁵ Within the framework of this article, for example, there is a trial of play-writer Svetlana Petriychuk and director Evgenia Berkovich, who voiced their anti-war position, and are now under investigation for the play *Finist the Clear Falcon*.

⁶ Roskonnadzor blocked more than 670 thousand prohibited materials in 2023. Interfax 26.01.2024, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/942025> (access 20.02.2024).

The statistics mentioned above are needed to demonstrate that the media space in Russia has significantly collapsed and there is no room for any disputes about the Russian military actions coverage in the media, only the official voice of the Russian authorities has the place.

However it will be a simplification to explain the high level of the SVO support by the Russian citizens only by the repression pressure. The SVO's mass support was recorded by different think tanks including those which are known as disloyal towards actual Russian authorities. This fact may bear testimony to the high level of the Russian society consolidation on the SVO support issue.

This may be explained by not only the peculiarities of the information field, where opinions opposite to the position of the Russian authorities are actually illegal today, but also by the general socio-cultural situation in the country.

There are no doubts that the unity of the nation is built on the basis of consent and consolidation of society regarding the general rules and directions of the socio-political process, which actualizes the consideration of the Russians' ideas about the geopolitical future of Russia, as well as the dominant foundations of the socio-political consolidation that we observe in the Russian society.

The theoretical and methodological basis of the study became the concept of the image of the future offered by the futurist Fred Polak, who substantiates the objectivity and necessity of assessing the present to form an image of the future, which is determined by the existing value system in society and those moral guidelines that are postulated as the highest ideals (Polak 1973) and John Urry, who emphasizes that the future is a social phenomenon, and changes in the „structures of feeling” – meanings and values, in the form in which they are experienced and felt by society, have a serious impact on the future (Urry 2016: 26).

This has determined our interest not only in political and public discourse, but also in public opinion about the future of Russia.

The empirical base is built on data obtained during the implementation of two research projects:

- 1) data of the annual monitoring survey *How are you, Russia?*, conducted by the Institute of Socio-Political Research – Branch of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ISPR FCTAS RAS) since 1992⁷. The sample size varied from 1,312 to 1,866 respondents in different years of the study. In April 2024 the sample size of the survey was of 1,600 respondents. The research is based on a proportional

⁷ Annual monitoring survey *How are you, Russia?*, conducted by the Institute of Socio-Political Research – Branch of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences with the participation of the author of the article, Nataliya Velikaya. Head of the project is Victor Levashov, PhD in sociology, Director of the Institute of Socio-Political Research.

quota all-Russian sample with interdependent characteristics of the general population as gender, age, education, place of residence. The toolkit includes a set of indicators measuring the dynamics of social and political views of Russian citizens over 30 years, including dominating values, level in trust to different political institutions, relationships with different countries, goals of the Russian state.

- 2) content and discourse analysis data collected by discourse analysis of articles issued from July, 2013 to July, 2014 and from July, 2022 to July, 2023. The general sample includes 521 articles in the following periodicals: „Moskovskiy komsomolets”, „Rossiyskaya gazeta”, „Komsomolskaya pravda” and „Novaya gazeta”, which also have electronic versions on the Internet. The total sample was 174 articles: 87 for the first period and 87 for the second period. The method of selecting units of analysis was systematic; every third article was analyzed, all mentioned quotes in the text of this research paper are taken from the analyzed articles. Research methods include quantitative and qualitative content analysis of texts, elements of critical discourse analysis by Theo Leeuwen (Kress, Leeuwen 1996). The selected methods allowed to identify the dominating topics of the publications and particular discourse practices of the media.

■ SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE ALL-RUSSIAN IDENTITY DESIGN AND NEO-IMPERIAL SENTIMENTS

When the USSR collapsed, all the newly made on the ex-Soviet territory states faced the challenge to create and support their national identities. The rapid growth of ethnonationalism on the ruins of the communist ideology in the former republics of the Soviet Union has developed against the background of a certain inertia of these processes in the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), and then in the Russian Federation.

Monoethnic states have built their national identity on their ethnic and religious identity, they also used „negative identification” techniques to exclude all Russian and Soviet items from their socio-cultural space. Following these policies there occurred conflicts in the end of 80s and early 90s, which led to mass exodus of the Russian and Russian-speaking population from a number of national republics.

Russia differs from national republics as it is a multinational state populated with multireligious citizens. Owing to this the country faced the urgent task to preserve the unity of the nation and integrity of its territory, a single cultural space and identity, and the construction and reproduction of an all-Russian civic identity.

The main subject of such construction in the absence of significant institutions of civil society became the task of the political elite and intellectuals close to

authorities, who, however, failed to formulate a clear and attractive project for the „Russia of the Future”.

The protracted process of redefining national identity in Russia, the search for new meanings and guidelines in a changing world contributed to the formation of prerequisites and conditions for the construction of a contradictory, „patchwork” (fragmented) national identity, which was based on resentment of the idealization and glorification of the historical past of the Russian people. Since the group identities of this type contain negative self-identifications and are built on the fixation of imaginary internal and external enemies and feelings of resentment for „historical injustice”, the public consciousness constantly generates a feeling of crisis and anxiety.

It should be noted that there were two dominating concepts of the ideological discourse: adaptation to the Western world terms to build a political and economic system according to Western liberal economics and democracy terminology or the second concept, which speculated on the opposition to the Western world and claimed the construction of a new center (Pole) of the world order based on their own, different from the Western civilizational identity.

During the first decade of the XXI century the major state aim was to modernize the economic and political system. This idea was declared numerous times, particularly when Dmitry Medvedev was appointed to the Russian President position. However later the focus of the state policy shifted to the search of justification of the idea of „Russia’s own way”, while it was distancing from Western influence. This idea was most fully expressed in the concept of „Russia-island” developed by Vadim Tsymburskiy and his followers (Tsymburskiy 1997; Mezhuiev 2012).

What a „special, third way” should look like was very clearly presented by Alexandr Dugin in his book *The Fundamentals of Geopolitics. The Geopolitical Future of Russia*, published in 1997: to defend the independence of Greater Eurasia, Russia-Eurasia must assemble a global counterweight to America, the so-called New Empire. At the same time, the „neo-Eurasian Russian Empire” will exist as a political entity without obvious land borders and limits, and without a clear sphere of influence (Dugin 1997). Dugin’s geopolitical works and his appeals to Russian Eurasianism increased the popularity of patriotism and a new version of *pochvennichestvo* in the 1990s, which gained popularity among the current political elite, including Vladimir Putin. This, by the way, allowed (Carlson Tucker)⁸, which he took from Dugin, to call it Putin’s brain.

⁸ The Tucker Carlson Encounter: Aleksandr Dugin Encounter/ Published April 29, 2024 (21 mins) Tucker Carlson Network, <https://tuckercarlson.com/the-tucker-carlson-encounter-aleksandr-dugin/> (access 01.05.2024)

Also in the course of ideological searches and discussions, neo-Eurasianism, the Russian idea and other conservative ideas developed into the neoconservatism which is considered now as dominant political trend and as a specific ideology.

Claiming to be an extensive explanatory doctrine in the field of geopolitics, neoconservatism is expressed by the concept of the „Russian world”, which postulates the uniqueness of the Russian civilization, justifies the revival and preservation of a national identity as a strategy for resisting Western influence and culture. The Russian neoconservatives, who are considered anti-globalists, have actively advocated and are in favor of promoting traditional Orthodox values and limiting the expansion of „liberal” ideology, which included representatives of the Russian Orthodox church in the zone of ideological discussions as well. Moreover, the definition of a Russian national identity through the Orthodox faith is a leitmotif in all the „ideological” documents of the Russian Orthodox Church and the speeches of the hierarchs of the Church. Some researchers see in these texts signs of the transition of the Russian Orthodox Church to the positions of nationalism and statehood (Verhovskiy 2011: 12).

In general terms, we can say that the concept of the „Russian world” includes identification components that appeal to the Russian culture, which is seen as an instrument of soft power (Dugin 1997; Shchedrovitsky 2000). At the same time, it was assumed that the „Russian world” should include those territories that were previously part of the Soviet Union or were in its zone of influence.

However the „Russian world” as a soft power has demonstrated poor performance, which pushed politicians to use the Russian idea as „a pressing tool in international relations” (Vasiliev 2021), also the Russian idea was used to articulate and protect an idea of irredentism, which clearly manifested itself during the SVO in Ukraine.

It should be highlighted that the current government legitimizes military actions in terms of civilizational divisions, contrasting Russia with Western civilization, on the one hand, and in terms of the messianic role of Russia, on the other.

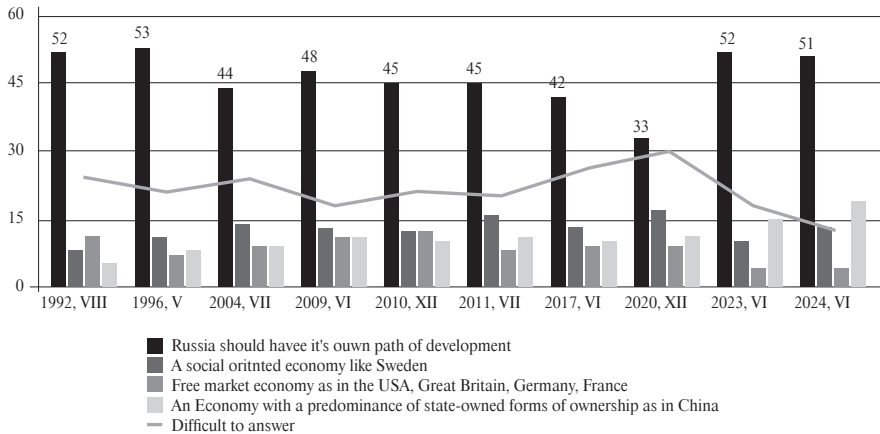
It is no coincidence that in a number of his speeches, Vladimir Putin mentioned not only the course towards sovereignty, but also the need to preserve the Russian identity and traditional spiritual and moral values. Specifically, in his annual address to the Federal Assembly in 2021, Putin said that „as always during challenging times, our traditional religions stepped up to provide spiritual support to our society (...). Today, family, friendship, mutual assistance, graciousness and unity have come to the fore as well. Spiritual and moral values, which are already being forgotten in some countries, have, on the contrary, made us stronger. And we will always uphold and defend these values”⁹.

⁹ V. Putin, 2021, Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, Kremlin.ru, 21 April (online), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418> (access 20.04.2024).

The opposition of Russia to the West was vividly articulated by Sergey Karaganov¹⁰, who is one of the ideologists and spokesmen of the „Russian world”: „One of the aims of Russia is to stop kicking and screaming from the West. We must look at them with a sufficient level of arrogance. They are experiencing a civilizational crisis. We can even look at them with sympathy, without reacting to any rubbish that they pour out” (Karaganov 2020).

The increasing distance between Russia and the Western countries is validated by the data of the all-Russian surveys, according to which the majority of Russian citizens (65%) are close to support the idea that Russia is rather a special Eurasian civilization, and in the future the center of its interests will shift to the East. In 2007 the number of people who supported the idea of Russia as a part of the Eurasian civilization was 45%, and in 2008 – 42%. The number of people who consider Russia as a part of Europe and believe that the Russian and European future will be allied in the XXI century has fallen to 20%.

According to the monitoring data by ISPR FCTAS RAS after 30 years of the USSR collapse the number of people who believe that Russia should have its own path of development returned to the indicators of the 90s, reaching 52% in 2023 (in 2020, this figure was at 33%) (*How are you, Russia? 2023: 57*).



Graph 1. Respondents’ opinion on which type of economic development is most acceptable for Russia (RF, % of the number of respondents)

Source: Center for Social and Socio-Political Studies of ISPR FCTAS RAS; Sociological monitoring *How are you, Russia (1992–2024)*.

The development of the situation allows a number of Russian researchers to argue that the elites and the population of Russia have „turned away” from the

¹⁰ Sergey Karaganov is the Chairman of the Editorial Board of the magazine „Russia in Global Affairs”, Dean and Scientific Director of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at Moscow’s Higher School of Economics.

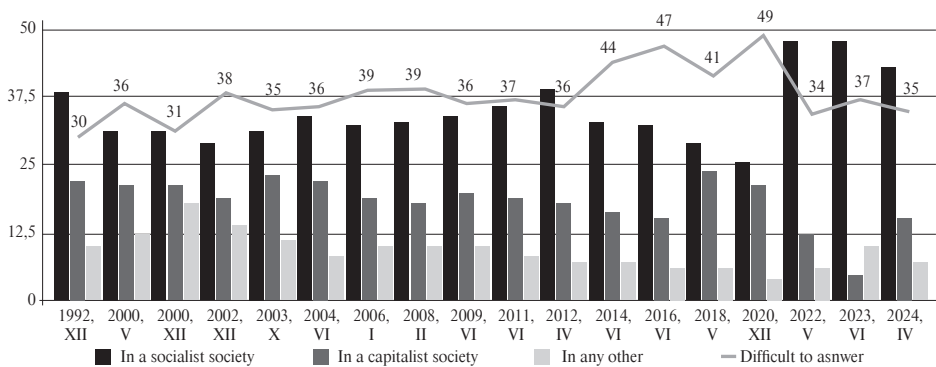
European perspective and reoriented to Asia, that the core of the newfound Russian identity should be precisely the detachment from Europe (Miller, Luk'janov 2016).

It was also determined by a negative attitude of Russians towards many of the social consequences of the radical neoliberal reforms that occurred in the 90s. Respondents believe that the major beneficiary party of those reforms are different groups associated with the family of ex-president Boris Yeltsin.

At the same time, in recent years the political elite has been actively exploiting nostalgic sentiments, constructing a delusive political image that is increasingly mutating towards a Soviet dystopia. There are even intensive attempts to rehabilitate the darkest pages of the Soviet past. On the one hand the authorities have sponsored reconditioning of monuments to Iosif Stalin¹¹, on the other they have imposed additional restrictions on the work of organizations, which were engaged in preserving the memory of the repressed people during the Soviet era. These actions have led to an increase of a number of people, who have a fellow feeling for the Soviet leaders. An illustrative fact is that of the dynamics of attitude change towards Stalin. The number of people who demonstrate a philo-Stalin attitude has grown from 15% in 1995 to 40% in 2022 (*How are you, Russia? 2022*).

The mentioned resentment, associated with the glorification and mythologization of the socialist era and criticism of democratic and market reforms results in an increase in the number of people who consider socialism as an optimal model of the political structure.

In the last three years, almost half of the respondents (48%) expressed a desire to live under socialism (Graph 2), which they semantically associated with stability, peace and social security.



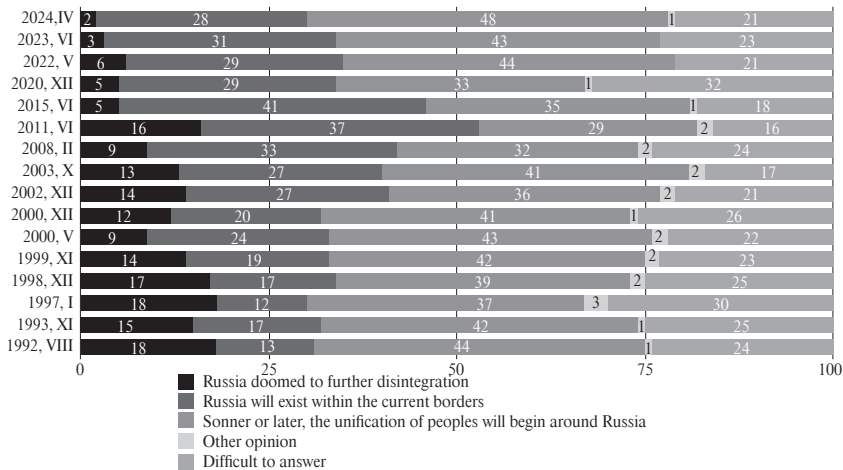
Graph 2. Respondents' opinion about the type of society they would prefer to live in (RF, % of the number of respondents)

Source: Center for Social and Socio-Political Studies of ISPR FCTAS RAS. *Sociological monitoring How are you, Russia? (1992–2024)*.

¹¹ In 2022 and 2023 monuments to Stalin were made and established in Volgograd, Velikiye Luki, and Naberezhnye Chelny.

The future of Russia in the context of the SVO seems quite optimistic, which is associated with the expansion of the zone of the Russian influence, with the emerging sense of a pride in the power, which, according to fellow sociologists, „symbolically compensates for the everyday feeling of constant humiliation” with declarations of belonging to the victorious country. At the same time, the peaks of identification of Russians with Russia as a „Great Power” occur (with a shift per year) during military campaigns, moments of a sharp increase in propaganda, arousing sentiments of revenge and domination in the post-Soviet space: the second Chechen war (2000), the war with Georgia (2008), Annexation of Crimea expressed by the maxim „Crimea is ours” (2015) and the Special military operation in Ukraine (Gudkov 2023).

According to monitoring data over 30 years the number of citizens who believe that Russia is doomed to further collapse has decreased by approximately 3 times (from 18% in 1992 to 6% in 2022). At the same time the SVO and the intensification of the discourse of „Soviet resentment” significantly increased the number of respondents (by 11% compared to 2021) who believe that a process of unification of peoples will begin around Russia (Graph 3).



Graph 3. Respondents’ opinion about the future that awaits Russia (RF, % of the number of respondents)

Source: Center for Social and Socio-Political Studies of ISPR FCTAS RAS. Sociological monitoring How are you, Russia? (1992–2024).

A dream of the great Russia gathering lands unites ordinary people, the intellectuals, and representatives of the political elite. Aleksandr Dugin, one of the ideologists of modern Eurasianism, writing about the urgent need to „recreate a common homeland of Great Russia at its new historical stage”, described the

future possible merger of a number of former republics of the Soviet Union: „The Eurasian Union is serious. This is the most serious thing that Putin has outlined in all his presidential terms (...). This is a kind of strategic guideline, this is the future, a description of the horizon of who we are and who we want to be. The concept of Eurasia and the Eurasian Union is not only strategic, not only spiritual or economic, but also political in the highest sense. Consciousness of a single integration space, a new policy” (Dugin 2012). And although today the Eurasian Union project does not show great success either in the economic or political space, it is still considered by the Russian political elite as promising.

■ FUTURE OF THE RUSSIAN STATE IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

As is often the case in times of crisis social mythology becomes the most important source for the shaping of a new identity (Ivanov 2021: 373), especially if it is voiced by prominent people and circulated in the media, which are considered by the current authorities as the most important tool for legitimizing the political regime and the policies it pursues, which determine both the content and discursive strategies when presenting information. For this research we have chosen the publications issued when the Crimea was annexed in 2014 and during the first year of the special military operation (SVO) that began in 2022.

An analysis of thematic clusters presented in the corpus of texts from two time periods shows that the construction of the image of the future Russia is formed on the basis of two groups of factors – internal (national, regional) and international, external (Velikaya, Zaytseva, Irsetskaya 2023).

Internal factors are mainly described through the successful implementation of social policies and the preservation of the country’s human capital, adherence to traditions and reproduction of culture, through increasing economic potential and maintaining environmental sustainability.

External factors are designated either as a confrontation between Russia and other international and political actors, or as messianism or leadership of Russia in a globalizing world, which makes sense to dwell on in more detail.

Both long-term and short-term optimistic models of the future of Russia were constructed within the framework of several discourses, of which the most significant for understanding the problems of the articles in the analysis below, are the following:

- 1) The **„Renaissance of Russia”** discourse was detected in $\frac{1}{3}$ of sample articles¹². In terms of content, this discourse is represented by the following semantic constructs: Russia is a country-civilization with a unique Eurasian or all-Russian

¹² Note. One article may contain several discourse frames.

identity. The restoration of the country's greatness should be built on the basis of traditional values, high spirituality and the uniqueness of the all-Russian or Eurasian identity, the special role of Russia in the formation of a multipolar world order and the construction of the Eurasian community is emphasized.

Within the framework of this discourse, the image of the future Russia in 2013–2014 was mainly constructed on the idea of preserving historical heritage and historical memory of past victories, on rethinking the historical experience of socialism, which was filled with exclusively positive connotations, even the most pompous: „Look at the USSR Coat of Arms! It shows how The Sun rises above the Earth. I am sure that despite all the problems, horrors, disasters, this Sun will rise and illuminate the future of all humanity”¹³. The appeal to nostalgic sentiments and the Soviet resentment continued in 2022–2023, accompanied by a demand for the restoration of at least the unity of the three Slavic peoples: „Thirty years of chaos is too much, it's time for three Slavic parts of the Russian Empire: Russia, Malorossia [poetical and historical term to describe some territories of the modern Ukraine] and Belorussia to merge into one state before the «global community» eats us away one by one”¹⁴.

- 2) The second discourse type may be conditionally called the „**besieged fortress**” discourse. This discourse makes readers to focus on a complex geopolitical situation, on the need to protect their identity and the country's integrity in the face of threats of modernity: „We always know and today we are reassured that Russia's sovereign, independent and safe future depends only on us, on our strength and will”¹⁵.

Most articles on international topics that build the geopolitical future of Russia describe it both in terms of risks and threats, and in terms of opportunities and perspectives. Regarding partner and antagonist countries, the situation in 2013–2014 looks contradictory: some actors are indicated simultaneously as both promising partners and hostile countries (USA, European countries, Ukraine, Japan, Canada, Georgia). By 2022–2023 BRICS countries, Belarus and Iran are usually considered as partners, while the US, EU countries and UK are described as enemies and antagonistic countries.

¹³ The USSR was killed in its prime// „Moskovskiy komsomolets” (website) 28.12.2022, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2022/12/28/sssr-ubili-v-samom-rascvete-sil.html> (access 20.02.2024).

¹⁴ The luxury of fighting out of compassion// „Moskovskiy komsomolets” (website) 10.10.2022, <https://www.mk.ru/social/2022/10/10/roskosh-voevat-iz-sostradaniya.html> (access 20.02.2024).

¹⁵ Together we will overcome all difficulties and keep our country great and independent: Vladimir Putin delivered a New Year's greeting// „Rossiyskaya gazeta” (website) 31.12.2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/12/31/vmeste-my-preodoleem-vse-trudnosti-i-sohranim-nashu-stranu-velikoj-i-nezavisimoj-vladimir-putin-vystupil-s-novogodnim-obrashcheniem-glavnoe.html>. (access 20.02.2024).

Also we have to stress the point that the particular attention was devoted to the Ukrainian future in 2012–2014, the hope was voiced that this country would remain in Russia's zone of influence: „Russia is the master of diplomacy and skillfully uses carrots and sticks methods. But it's impossible to draw an attractive image of the future. Even for ourselves, let alone for our neighbors”¹⁶.

In a significant set of publications, issued in 2022–2023 and in which the future of Russia was described somehow, that were related to the SVO (10 out of 87 articles show explicit context, 25 out of 87 demonstrate latent context). Russia in these materials appears as the party of the conflict that is surrounded by enemies and resists aggression from different directions. „It is a war being waged against Russia, a war on a very broad front, the military confrontation in the SVO is only a part of this war. In addition to this, there is a colossal economic war – there have never been so many sanctions introduced against any country in the world in history. There is the war... the informational, psychological war against the fundamental frameworks of the Russian culture”¹⁷.

The SVO is positioned and promoted through historical necessity and as necessary measure: „We mustn't allow the renaissance of the ideology, which caused millions of human deaths around the world”¹⁸.

- 3) The „**war discourse**”. It is semantically realized through the thesis of irreconcilable ideologies and value differences that lead not only to a war of meanings, but also to a war on the battlefield. The key words of the news agenda with certain semantic connotations aimed at creating oppositions „friend – foe”, „ours – enemies” were: „terrorism of Bandera's supporters”, „real consolidation of the Russian society”, „Western pressure”, „friends of Russia”, „the isolation of Russia has failed”, „Russophobia”, „our cause is just”, „counterthrust”, „liberation”, „foreign mercenaries”, „victory”, „enemy losses”, „collective West”, „aggression of NATO”, „nazi henchmen”, etc.

The discursive strategies of this cluster are dominated by an aggressive strategy of discrediting the Ukrainian side of the conflict, presented more than emotionally and aimed at forming an associative series with the Great Patriotic War (a part of the WWII, this historical term is usually used in the Soviet and Russian sources instead of the name Second World War): „the butcherly tactics of the Ukrainian

¹⁶ Fëdor Luk'janov: Russia skillfully uses carrots and sticks method// „Rossiyskaya gazeta” (website) 03.12.2013, <https://rg.ru/2013/12/04/vibor.html> (access 20.02.2024).

¹⁷ Preserve the memory of great feats: the head of Yakutia region told how a unique historical exhibition was created in Patriot Park// „Komsomolskaya pravda” (website) 20.08.022, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27434.5/4635365/> (access 20.02.2024).

¹⁸ Preserve the memory of great feats: the head of Yakutia region told how a unique historical exhibition was created in Patriot Park// „Komsomolskaya pravda” (website) 20.08.022, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27434.5/4635365/> (access 20.02.2024).

Nazis”, „cruel reprisal raid”, „unacceptable threats to the security of Russia”, „protecting the people of Donbass from the genocide of the Kyiv regime”, „soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and nazi battalions are hiding behind the civilian population as a human shield”, „we are protecting the people of Donbass over whom mocked”, „untrained lads and released prisoners”, „grinding the enemy and saving their people”, „Ukrainian Nazis who played too long into the cult of the Third Reich”. Some articles emphasize the role of the Western countries in the conflict, as it was in an interview with Boris Rozhin¹⁹, who argued that „the people who started the war in Ukraine have not changed their goals since the Obama era. Their aim is to destroy Russia as an actor of international politics. It is not Ukraine, but the United States, Britain and other NATO members who are waging war against us now. The Ukrainian army is their proxy army (like Hezbollah for Iran). Our enemies are the USA and Britain”²⁰.

The classic discursive strategy of constructing the image of the enemy and dehumanizing the enemy is also implemented when Ukrainians are described. They are often presented as devoid of subjectivity and humanity: „Ukrainians today are... they are just figures in a large computer game on tablets at NATO headquarters. These headquarters are the places where the war against Russians is held”²¹. This rhetoric helps to design and maintain the image of the enemy as a subject who doesn't merit sympathy.

The participation of the Western countries in the conflict is described as a threat to the Russian state sovereignty and integrity. The words used to support this idea are: „terrorist attack”, „murder”, „cooperation with foreign states”, „aggression against Russia”, „refuse to negotiate with Russia”, „eight years of genocide of Donbass people”, „The West is trying to split our society”, „sanctions”, „espionage”, „recruited by the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine)”, „Bandera's ideology”, „Ukrainian fascists”, „sabotage”, etc. (Velikaya, Zaytseva 2023).

- 4) The fourth type of discourse is „**justice discourse**” (the fourth part of the analyzed articles) and it is focused on designing the image of Russia as a victim country in relation to which partners did not fulfil their obligations, and on the other hand as a country restoring global justice mainly in the context of shaping a new multipolar system. In this system the main task for Russia is to preserve its values and shape a multipolar system of relations between states. The current socio-political conditions

¹⁹ Boris Rozhkin is one of the popular patriotic bloggers from Sevastopol (Crimea), an expert at the Center for Military-Political Journalism.

²⁰ Who is interested in aggravating conflicts in countries near the borders of Russia: The political scientist gave a clear answer. „Komsomolskaya pravda”. Tolstushka. 28.09.2022, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27451.3/4653679/> (access 20.02.2024).

²¹ Russia crushed the Ukrainian military machine back in May, since the summer the West has been fighting with us: how long will the special operation last? „Komsomolskaya pravda” 25.08.2022, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27436/4637517/> (access 20.02.2024).

are considered as unfair and offensive for Russia: „Russia ought to be lifted from its knees!”²² [idiomatic phrase, which means that the country’s greatness should be restored]. The conflict with Ukraine is also analyzed in this vein, which is seen primarily as the restoration of justice for the inhabitants of its eastern territories. In the articles studied, a special role in building a just future is given to the Russian military acts in Ukraine called by the authorities the SVO: „We are going into battle for the right of our mother tongue”, „Yes, we are going into battle for such a small thing. But behind this little detail lies the very history and very future of Russia”²³.

To sum up we should stress out that in 2013–2014 the publications’ content reflected a latent stage of Russia – Western countries confrontation. These countries were described either as supporters of Russia, or as antagonists and rivals. In contrast to this latent period in 2022–2023 these countries were described as hostile countries and Russian enemies. The beginning of the special military operation is presented as a way out of the historical trap in which Russia found itself, having lost its leadership position in the international sphere. The future victory after the SVO is considered to be a guarantee for a multipolar world, in which Russia will have a leading position and save its status of a powerful country with traditional values and an efficient economy built on import substitution, their own production capacity and investment potential.

The cloud of semantic tags is dominated by the words integration and consolidation, mainly around the president of the country, to preserve the unity of a multinational and multi religious state. However the absence of changes in the semantic elements used to describe the future partly confirms the preservation of the chosen vector of the country’s strategic development, which is the preservation of the country’s sovereignty based on the reproduction of traditional values, a focus on technological development, as well as the formation of a multipolar system of world order, where Russia plays a leading role.

■ THE PLACE AND ROLE OF RUSSIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

Analyzing the prospects for possible conflicts in the public opinion of Russian peoples, it is necessary to put a special focus on assessments of the role of Western countries in international political processes. The dominant frames of a public

²² Yevgeny Yevtushenko in Vladimir: „How can you rejoice at the quarrel between two nuclear powers?” // „Komsomolskaya pravda” (website) 20.05.2014, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26232/3115032/> (access 20.02.2024).

²³ Words in camouflage: Ural poets presented a collection of poems about the Northern Military District // „Rossiyskaya gazeta” (website) 19.06.2023, <https://rg.ru/2023/06/19/reg-urfo/slova-v-kamufliazhe-uralskie-poety-predstavili-sbornik-stihov-pro-svo.html> (access 20. 02. 2024).

political discourse, replicated by the domestic Russian media, were for the most part aggressive in nature, associated with the construction of the image of the enemy embodied in the European countries and the United States (Zonova, Giannotti 2020).

Leading spokesmen – experts on foreign policy issues, as a rule, do not hesitate to demonstrate negative emotions and voice harsh assessments of Western countries, which are considered and presented as enemies.

In the framework of our study of media discourses reflecting the role of Russia during the SVO, the dominant semantic accents can be reduced to three theses: Russia is a provider of freedom and peace, Russians are a liberating nation, Russia is a victorious country.

It is possible to agree with those researchers who record against this background the actualization of national identity, when the understanding of one's belonging to the country, which was present on the periphery of consciousness, moves to the center of attitudes that shape people's worldview. The main reason for this was the growing feeling of hostility from the surrounding world (Pushkareva 2023).

Due to economic sanctions imposed on Russia, to a risk of the second mobilization of Russian men to serve in the Russian Army and over-long-running military actions in Ukraine the number of Russian citizens, who feel anxiety and threat to be attacked by enemy troops has grown from 31% to 41%²⁴.

Most Russians share the opinion expressed by one of the ideologists of the Russian world: „We have always been disliked, primarily because we are big and strong. Now it has increased many times due to the fact that we have knocked the foundation out from under their domination. A powerful feeling of vulnerability. For ten or fifteen years in a row, the West felt like a winner. And then once – and everything fell down. I even understand them to some extent. But why should we seek their love? Let's love ourselves” (Karaganov 2020).

The number of negative connotations regarding the actions of the Western countries is increasing. According to our respondents, developed (Western) countries in relations with Russia, first of all, want to „get rid of a potential strong military enemy, a rival in world politics” and „undermine the stability of the political regime” (Table 1).

²⁴ Russia as a Great State. Russian Public Opinion Research Center (WCIOM), <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/rossija-velikaja-derzhava> (access 20.02.2024).

Table 1. Respondents' opinion about the goals pursued by developed countries in their relations with Russia (Russia, % of the number of respondents)

Response options	2005, IX	2014, XII	2020, V
Get rid of a potentially strong military enemy, a rival in world politics	47	52	59
Undermine the stability of the political regime in Russia			51
Enrich themselves and save their economy on the Russia's expense	52	34	42
Dictate Russia the culture and values of a consumer society		22	28
Protect themselves from the consequences of the crisis in Russia	32	10	11
Bring Russia onto the path followed by developed countries, transform it into an economically prosperous state	11	4	3
Help Russia become an equal partner, one of the centers of world politics	7	5	2
No option is suitable/ Not ready to answer	16	20	9

Note: the sum of responses exceeds 100%, as respondents could mark several positions.

Source: *Center for Social and Socio-Political Studies of ISPR FCTAS RAS, Sociological monitoring How are you, Russia? (1992–2024).*

Moreover there are widespread fears among Russians that the West is only interested in Russian natural resources and wants to enrich themselves at Russia's expense. In 2020 42% of respondents shared this opinion.

These threats are justified from the point of view of Russian citizens, the growth of government investments in the further development of the military-industrial complex of the Russian Federation. Russia cannot be weak politically and in terms of providing weapons, since the topic of ownership of natural resources is becoming one of the most important today.

The growth of negative assessments of the policies of Western countries was also affected by the sanctions policy, the tightening of which was caused by the implementation of the SVO. Our respondents understand that sanctions will inevitably lead to a deterioration in the level and quality of life, see in their tightening the possibility of a new „Cold War” and increased confrontation in the world (See Table 2).

Table 2. Respondents' opinion on what effect the sanctions announced by the United States and Europe will have on life in our country (Russia, % of the number of respondents)

Response options	2014, XII	2018, V	2022, V
Force politicians and businesses to develop domestic industry and agriculture	42	45	40
Lead to a new Cold War and confrontation in the world	18	31	34
The development of the domestic economy and cooperation between Russia and the world community are hampered	16	20	30
Strip away the illusions and force the Russian politicians to work for the greater good of the country	23	20	28
Drop the level and quality of life for me and my family members	18	18	25
Overall they are useful to our country	20	13	22
Sour relations between Russia and Ukraine	15	15	20
Improve stability of the political regime in Russia			10
Allow to escape from the constrained culture and values of consumer society	14	14	
No option is suitable/ Not ready to answer	13	11	7

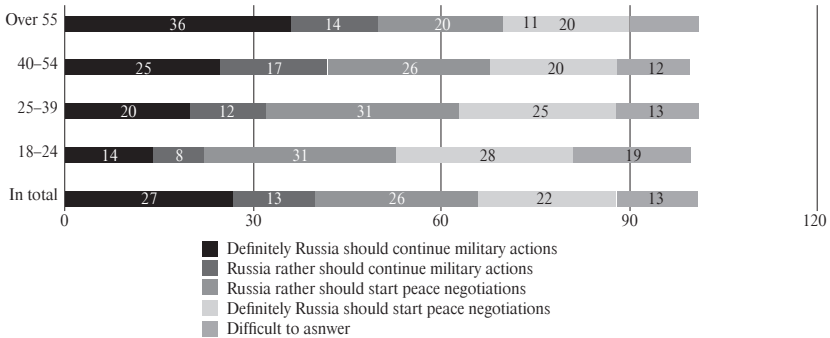
Note: the sum of responses exceeds 100%, as respondents could mark several positions.

Source: Center for Social and Socio-Political Studies of ISPR FCTAS RAS, *Sociological monitoring How are you, Russia? (1992–2024)*.

At the same time, both the subjective feeling of a deterioration in the quality of life and the objective indicators of a decrease in income levels have virtually no effect on loyalty to the authorities.

We will not dwell in detail on the methodological pitfalls that do not allow us to talk about the possibility of obtaining objective sociological data in conditions of crises and military operations, accompanied by repressive actions of the political regime against freedom of speech, among other things.

However, even with limited opportunities to express their opinions, Russian people are showing fatigue with current policies. In all age groups, except the oldest, the number of those who are for peace negotiations is higher than those in favor of continuing military actions (See Graph 4).



Graph 4. Distribution of the respondents' answers to the question: „Do you think we should continue hostilities or start peace negotiations?” (% of respondents in each age group)

Source: Levada-Centre, *Conflict with Ukraine: mass estimates of March 2024*, 04.04.2024.

The analysis of answers to open questions (when the answers are recorded from the words of the respondents and then combined into semantic groups) demonstrates that among those who support the continuation of military actions, 40% of respondents explain their opinion by saying that „it is necessary to go to the end”, „finish what we have started”, 17% – „it is necessary to destroy fascism”. The opinion that „peaceful negotiations are useless”, „will lead to nothing” and „it is necessary to protect and secure Russia” is expressed only by 15% and 14% of respondents²⁵.

Among supporters of peace negotiations, half of respondents (49%) explain their position by saying that there are already „many victims”, „many people are dying”. Among the reasons for the opinion about the need to move to peace negotiations, 15% of respondents named „tired from war”, another 14% would like „there would be no war”.

As for Russia's international policy, according to monitoring data, our citizens are very consistent and committed to interacting with the outside world, believing that our country should more actively develop relations with all countries.

²⁵ *Conflict with Ukraine: mass estimates of March 2024* / Levada Center (recognized as foreign agent in RF), <https://www.levada.ru/2024/04/04/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-massovye-otsenki-marta-2024-goda/> (access 20.04.2024).

Table 3. Respondents' opinion on how Russia should build its relations with the outside world based on its national interests (Russia, % of the number of respondents)

	2004, VII	2008, XI	2010, XII	2014, XII	2016, XII	2020, XII	2022, V	2023, VI	2024, IV
Russia has to develop actively relations with the rest of the world	52	49	47	49	49	44	49	54	45
Russia should reduce its activity on the international stage and focus on its internal problems	26	26	28	24	32	25	30	26	29
Relations between Russia and the rest of the world should remain as they are now	12	14	13	13	10	14	11	9	15
No option is suitable / Not ready to answer	10	10	12	14	9	17	10	11	11

Source: Center for Social and Socio-Political Studies of ISPR FCTAS RAS, Sociological monitoring How are you, Russia? (1992–2024).

Not only the media discourse, but also the political discourse is aggressive in today's Russia. The modern political language, saturated with stereotypes of the past and the fluids of hostility, is „(...) essentially a language of hatred, open militarism and triumphalism, which affects the social behavior and assessments of the current situation of significant sections of the population” (Velikaya, Tartygasheva 2023: 288).

Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council and the former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev explained the harshness of his statements in the telegram channel with hatred of Russia's enemies: „I hate them. They are bastards and degenerates. They want death for us, Russia”, Medvedev wrote: „And while I'm alive, I will do everything to make them disappear”. By the way, this statement was widely circulated in the Russian media.

In order to maintain the feeling of a besieged fortress among the population, it is necessary that people know exactly who their enemies are. For decades, Russian propaganda has sculpted the image of an enemy not only of Ukraine, which it is now fighting against, but also of the West and even of a large number of its own citizens: „Against us today is part of a dying world. This is a bunch of crazy Nazi drug addicts, a people drugged and intimidated by them, and a large pack

of barking dogs from the Western kennel. With them is a motley pack of grunting pigs and narrow-minded ordinary people from the collapsed Western empire with saliva running down their chins, because they are degenerates. They have no faith, no ideals, the only thing they have is made up by their obscene habits and the standards of double-thinking they installed by force and denial of gifted to normal people moral. Since resisting against them we have received a rule of sacral moral²⁶.

Content analysis data show that in 2022–2023 among partners there were listed India, China, Belarus, Brazil, Iran, etc. The rival or hostile countries are the USA, EU countries, Vietnam, Estonia, South-Eastern Europe, Great Britain. The expressions „collective West”, „Anglo-Saxons”, „NATO” are widely used and exclusively with negative connotations.

■ CONCLUSIONS

Dominant in public opinion elements of the future of Russia are shaped by the established image of the country, which can be described as a „besieged fortress” in opposition to the opposition of the rest of the world. These elements are supported by a neoconservative consensus, which was made common in the Russian society. In the core of this consensus (Melville 2017) there are ideological concepts of the Russian world and its „special way” supported and shared by the political and bureaucratic Russian elites.

War narratives are reproduced by the propaganda methods and using representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and key figures of the Russian culture as spokesmen of these narratives help to promote and maintain the high level of anxiety in the Russian society and also plays in favor of building social consolidation. According to our monitoring, the structure of anxiety in mass consciousness shows its qualitative restructuring compared to previous periods (*How are you, Russia?* 2023: 9 and 10). Anxieties related to the problems of conducting a military defense in Ukraine, the threat of a nuclear war and the fear of the future rose to the top positions in the rating of troubling problems.

In this context Russian citizens understand actions of the state foreign policy as the least-evil solution and a response to the aggressive politics of other countries, which try to exclude Russia from the club of the leading and prosperous countries. Multiple external threats justify not only the increase of state continuous expenses on the military industrial sector improvements, but also they justify the clampdown methods against the political opposition.

²⁶ Publication written by Dmitry Medvedev in his Telegram account 4.11.2022, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/206 (access 20.02.2024).

In this regard, in political, media and scientific discourses, one of the most popular concepts has become the concept of consolidation, which involves the integration of society and government in unfavorable times of external pressure, loyalty to power and unity in the name of victory and preservation of sovereignty and, what must be emphasized, cultural identity. The cultural uniqueness of the Russian civilization is described in terms of spiritual values, spiritual bonds, which implies traditionalism, patriotism. The appeal to a „special way” concept results in the legitimization of a „state-centric” model of relations between the state and civil society, where a personal individual interest is subordinated to the collective good formulated hierarchically „from top to bottom”. In the absence of significant civil society institutions and additional pressure on them during the period of the Special Military Operation (SVO), it is impossible to appear to alternative development models. If in the political sphere the course towards traditionalism leads to the strengthening of an authoritarian regime, in social relations it leads to violation and revocation of human and civil rights, and in the cultural sphere it causes a reduction of artistic freedom and freedom of expression, then in international politics neoconservatism stimulates isolationism on the one hand, and territorial expansion on the other.

At the same time, the current public discourse practically does not include the image of Russia as a „civil” nation which is multinational, multireligious, united by common civic values and interests, bound by solidarity practices. This image has given way to a statist Russia, where the society is called upon only to support authorities. It is clear that transformations and fluctuations of the political regime influence both the public opinion and the agenda of the media, which try to avoid covering sensitive and dangerous topics. Such silent zones and unwillingness to discuss actual and political problems lead to stagnation and freezing of the political regime.

The identified and described above discourses of the image of the future Russia are built on different sociocultural, ideological, institutional and organizational foundations, but the leading role belongs to ideological attitudes associated with ideas about the place of Russia in the new system of world order and the opposition of Russia to the countries of the „collective West”²⁷.

The construction of a national identity based on Russia’s „special way” and the expansion of the Russian world has turned into a global rivalry with the West, which is clearly reflected in the narratives describing the current conflict in Ukraine.

The use of enemy images and negative identification mechanisms in the public discourse may result in the temporary and short-term nature of socio-political consolidation.

²⁷ The collective West is a persistent propaganda expression used in political and public discourses when constructing the image of the enemy.

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Nataliya Velikaya

PRESENT AND FUTURE GEOPOLITICAL ROLE OF RUSSIA IN PUBLIC OPINION AND MEDIA DISCOURSE

The problems of constructing a new national identity and preserving Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space have become now particularly relevant in the framework of the global confrontation with the West and special military operation in Ukraine. The purpose of the article is to analyze public opinion and political discourse regarding the geopolitical future of Russia in the context of modern conflicts of a regional and international nature.

The empirical basis of the article is the results of the sociological monitoring *How are you, Russia* (1992–2024) and the data of content analysis of mass media during 2014 and 2022. The sociological monitoring survey allowed to study the dynamics of citizens' perceptions of the geopolitical future of the Russian Federation and to trace the connection of the main trends with the indicators of consolidation of society included in the toolkit. The mass media discourse showed the strengthening of neo-imperial topics and allusions.

The preservation of the integrity of the Russian Federation and its sovereignty in the long term does not cause doubts among population, even in the conditions of a crisis and an uncertain future associated with the formation of a multipolar world. Optimistic scenarios are considered, emphasizing the strengthening of Russia's role in the new world order, and pessimistic ones, reflecting isolation models of development.

Russia's powerful progressive development in the future is associated with arguments and ideologems about Russia's special path, the uniqueness of Russian civilization, which became one of the main topics in the Russian political discourse.

Keywords: future; special military operation; territorial and cultural integrity; threats and risks