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Nationalism, Sovereignism, Virilism: the sources of Russia's war against Ukraine

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[1] See [Robert Schuman's declaration May 1950](#)

[2] Theodor W. Adorno, *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013 [1971], p. 104.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, first preliminary article.

[4] On this doctrine, read for example the text by Kremlin ideologue Vladislav Surkov, *Putin's Long State* (Долгое государство Путина), *Независимая Газета* (Nezavisimaya Gazeta), 2019, translated into French by Galia Ackerman, Pierre Bonnet and Théo Lefloch; Vladimir Putin's signed article, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* (Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев), July 2021, a French translation of which was produced by the Russian Embassy in France; and the speech of 21 February, an annotated French translation of which was given by Milàn Czerny.

[5] Emil Pain, "The imperial syndrome and its influence on Russian nationalism" take up the term, in *Kolsø and Blakkisrud*, *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016. Also see Neil Marvin, "Nationalist and Imperial Thinking Define Putin's Vision for Russia", *RUSI*, 2022.

[6] P. Caussat, D. Adamski and M. Crépon, *La langue, source de la nation. Messianismes séculiers en Europe centrale et orientale (du XVIIIe au XXe siècle)*, *Sprimont*, 1996.

[7] Jean-Benoît Poulle, « La guerre sainte de Poutine », *Le Grand Continent*, 7 March 2022.

[8] Galia Ackerman et al., *ibid.*

Because war is the ultimate negation of all autonomy, all freedom and, *a fortiori*, all democracy, maintaining peace is the first of political necessities. Post-war Europe[1] knew this only too well.

In the industrial age, education for peace and tolerance has become the condition for the survival of humanity: according to Adorno, "*all political education must have at its centre the demand that Auschwitz cannot be repeated*[2]", not only because horror is imprescriptible, but because, in the absence of consistent education, it is destined to reproduce itself and sweep away the entire civilisation in which it is rooted.

With the return of war in Europe, the question of collective education cannot be eluded. The mental patterns that led - directly or indirectly - to the massacres in Ukraine will have to be questioned in depth, lest any future peace be obliterated in advance, since "*no peace treaty can be considered as such, if it secretly reserves for itself some subject for starting war again*[3]".

PUTIN'S GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

The invasion decreed on 24 February 2022 by Vladimir Putin is the latest stage in a structured ideological development, based on a doctrinal edifice patiently established over the past two decades[4]. Evidently since the invasion of Crimea in 2014, the Russian president has been developing a vision of history combining neo-imperialism and ethno-nationalism into a new imperial nationalism[5].

This Russia - with its mythical roots in the Rus' of Kiev, in the Empire of the Tsars and in the world power of the Soviet Union governed from Moscow - is believed to have a destiny, a mission, a grandeur. It would

also have a people (*narod*) definitively constituted by history: not only Russian citizens, but also all Russian speakers and other populations speaking an East Slavic idiom, including Ukrainian (called '*Little Russian*' by Putin nationalists) and Belarusian ('*White Russian*'). It would have its own culture, religion (the Orthodoxy of the Moscow Patriarchate) and sense of belonging, carnal and spiritual solidarity, enjoying not only a right to existence, but also an irrevocable and indivisible sovereignty.

In the continuity of Eastern European political messianisms, often based on a mystique of language[6], the battle it is waging is '*metaphysical*'[7].

When critically addressing the irredentist or expansionist temptations of contemporary Russia, references to imperialism are far the most common. These are perfectly relevant in view of both of the Russian regime's intentions (revisionism, conquest) and the domination of Russian elites over the country's periphery, the exploitation of ethnic minorities and the considerable extension of the Russian state. Nevertheless, nationalism remains preeminent in the order of logic, the Empire being the tool that should give the Russian people their living space and satisfy their desire for expansion. According to the Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov, "*after the Soviet framework collapsed [...], Russia [...] gradually recovered and returned to its natural condition [...]: that of a great community of expanding peoples, which continues to reclaim land. [...] The trials that the Russian state has endured and is still enduring have shown that this specific and organic model of political functioning constitutes an effective means of survival and ascension for the Russian nation*[8]".

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In the case of Russia, nationalism, which proclaims the unity of Orthodox Slavs within a large state ruled from Moscow, and imperialism, which justifies the extension of this state to the immense Eurasian territories it has historically administered, condition each other in practice: on the one hand, the unity, both real and fantasised, of Russian speakers from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok is key to the survival of an immense state, whose power politics is dependent more than ever on its capacity for ideological mobilisation; on the other hand, the resources of the Russian Federation ensure its 'titular nation' its greatness and prosperity - a terrible euphemism at a time when the forced conscription declared by the Kremlin disproportionately affects ethnic minorities.

But the impetus comes first from the centre, following a well-known pattern: the expansionism of twentieth-century ideologies and the greed of European imperialisms were rooted in a movement towards increasing the power, wealth and glory of the 'race', the nation and the metropolis. It is nationalism that morally and politically justifies imperialism, not the other way around.

However, after the fall of the USSR, Russia, reduced to its core, withdrew to the national principle, the only moral and cultural residue of the collapse of a Soviet state that had progressively evolved towards a '*national-social mode*[9]'. A few years later, this nationalism may have appeared to have no alternative - it was all that was left in common between the legacy of Stalinism, of 'socialism in one country' and the new post-Cold War world order. Reunified Germany and the former Soviet republics freed from the Moscow's grip demonstrated the hegemony of this principle. And while some critical voices were heard, the mass of the European intellectual and political space did not seem to have anything to say about this return of a 'natural', spontaneous (i.e. culturally persistent) and apparently pacified nationalism, which seemed to fit into the narrative of an '*end of history*'.

THIRTY YEARS OF NATIONAL ERRANCE

Not only was the 1990s the scene of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, a direct consequence of this return

of nationalism, but the current situation continues to demonstrate the illusory nature of the rhetoric about the benefits of peaceful nationalism[10]. The recipe for such nationalism is skilfully distilled by the proponents of '*nation versus nationalism*[11]': mutual respect for borders, tolerance of minorities should allow for peaceful cohabitation between national entities. However, there is an external risk in such '*pacified nationalism*': that of placing the '*interests of the nation*', as subjectively perceived by its people or leader, above those of peace and autonomy. In the case where a war can be subjectively seen as coinciding with the interests of the nation, nationalism can then naturally serve to justify aggression.

However, because it has a considerable power to mobilise the masses of the population, because it requires each member to adhere to and show total solidarity with political action in moments of danger, the destructive potential of nationalism - starting with its capacity for conscription - is extreme: nationalism then serves as an amplifier for violent phenomena driven by the state. "*Peaceful*" or "*moderate*" nationalism can be a powerful tool for organising political mobilisation and thus resistance against aggression; but this same nationalism also easily provides the starting point, the motivation, the arguments and the concrete means for breaching the peace, provided that it finds sufficiently fertile ground in the social and political situation or in the character of those in power.

In addition to this general trend, there is a particular incompatibility between nationalist ideology and the reality of the linguistic, cultural and demographic situation in Eastern Europe. Despite massive population displacements in the course of the twentieth century, the East of the continent is still marked by a situation of mixing and continuity between different ethno-linguistic groups. In most Eastern European states, between 15% and 30% of the population are not native speakers of the "*national*" language. This is also the case in Ukraine, where 30% of the population is Russian-speaking, including a majority of inhabitants of southern and eastern regions, but also in the three Baltic States[12].

[9] Étienne Balibar, *Nous, citoyens d'Europe ?* 2001, p. 156-160.

[10] Nationalism is understood here in the most general sense as a doctrine proclaiming the overriding need to establish or maintain a nation, understood as a group of individuals sharing exclusively a political unity, a sense of belonging and a collective solidarity.

[11] Gil Delannoi, *La nation contre le nationalisme*, PUF, recently revived the formula 2018.

[12] On the situation of Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic States, see Cristina Carpinelli et al. "The citizenship policies of the Baltic States within the EU Framework on Minority Rights". In : *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 48.2 (2019), p. 193-22.

Importantly, Eastern European nationalism, in its 'Slavic' variety, was from the beginning based on ethno-linguistic premises[13] : the people at the basis of this conception of the nation is the one who speaks a language and shares the culture and history it conveys. Depending on the period, this approach has served to affirm the singularity of the various Slavic languages or, on the contrary, to found the idea of a 'federal' Pan-Slavism implicitly or explicitly placed under Russian hegemony, as promoted, e.g., by Danilevsky (1822-1885). The imperial nationalism of contemporary Russia makes it the ultimate justification for its desire to conquer.

Thus, the nationalist programme, which could provide an ideological framework for violence and give the state the means for mass mobilisation, is being implemented in Russia in a context where its actual achievement - or even just the temptation to achieve it - can only lead to aggression.

SOVEREIGNTY AT THE SERVICE OF VIOLENCE

But nationalism, while it can explain some of the mental patterns behind Putinism, is not sufficient to explain the real danger of the Russian president's military action. An evil yet powerless will is no threat. While nationalism is the source of Putin's violence and his capacity to mobilise, state sovereignty is the condition for the implementation of this violence.

Since 24 February, sovereignty has been brandished to denounce the illegal nature of the Russian intervention. Paradoxically, however, the international community's inability to stop this war to date is caused by the very fact of Russia's sovereignty. Not its sovereignty in the 'Westphalian' sense - which combines absolute authority over a territory with, essentially, non-intervention in the affairs of other states[14] - but rather its absolute sovereignty, i.e. its material and political capacity to act within and outside its borders without being prevented from doing so by any higher authority.

The actual manifestations of Putin's sovereignty bring it closer to the 'absolute and perpetual power' theorised by Jean Bodin than to its Westphalian variant.

The current crisis reveals once again the ineffectiveness of an international law based on the myth[15] of

Westphalian sovereignty, as it does not provide any mechanism to prevent armed aggression. In a context where international law would like to impose on states " the use of sovereignty in a non-sovereign manner[16]", the promise of peace is always fragile and almost contradictory: if absolute sovereignty is barbaric, Westphalian sovereignty is powerless, and can be quickly overtaken by barbarism.

The same reasoning that showed that nationalist ideologies entail an actual risk of war can also be applied to sovereignism. A sovereign state, especially a powerful one, will try to enforce effective control over its immediate geopolitical environment, lest it exert a harmful influence on it that is contrary to its interests. When given the opportunity to do so, obtaining 'security guarantees' (to use the revealing Russian propaganda phrase) very quickly becomes an effort to dominate its immediate environment. While it is still theoretically possible to conceive of 'well-understood' conceptions of sovereignty in which all aggression is excluded sovereignty can easily be exploited to justify and implement a plan of aggression aimed at retaining and extending that sovereignty.

The nuclear threat gives this challenge an existential dimension. The Russian nuclear doctrine, as published in 2020, states that "*Russia recognises the right to use nuclear weapons [...] when the existence of the state is threatened*[17]". The wording, again, is revealing: it is Russia that claims this right for itself, placing its own perpetuation above any other end. Vladimir Putin said in 2018: "*What use is such a world to us if Russia is not part of it?*" In both cases, nationalist and sovereignist logic, taken to its extreme, subordinates the very existence of the world to the pursuit of its own ends. Here, security aspects meet ecological aspects[18]: in a nuclearised world, in a world affected by climate change, state sovereignty in the international order generates considerable risks, which cannot be ignored.

THE WAR OF MEN

Just as nationalism is the ideological origin of war and sovereignism, its legal origin, masculinity is its social origin.

[13] Caussat, Adamski and Crépon, *ibid*, also see Anna Colin Lebedev, *Jamais frères ? Ukraine et Russie : une tragédie postsoviétique*, Paris, Seuil, 2022.

[14] Andreas Osiander, "Sovereignty, international relations, and the Westphalian myth." *International organization* 55.2 (2001): 251-287. Also see Claire Vergerio, *Au-delà de l'État-nation*, Le Grand Continent, 2021.

[15] Andreas Osiander, *ibid*.

[16] Panu Minkinen, "The ethos of sovereignty: A critical appraisal." *Human Rights Review* 8.2 (2007): 33-51.

[17] « *Fondements de la politique d'État de la Fédération de Russie dans le domaine de la dissuasion nucléaire* », *Oukaze présidentielle n°355* (Указ Президента РФ "Об Основах государственной политики Российской Федерации в области ядерного сдерживания"), 2020, III, 17.

[18] Notably developed by Dardot and Laval, *op. cit*.

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In this war, those who give the order to kill are almost exclusively men. Their victims, on the other hand, are representative of the population of the territory attacked, and pain is exclusive to any gender or social category. It is no exaggeration to say that the current war is a war waged by Russian men, or even some Russian men, against Ukraine.

The soldiers of the Russian regular army are caught up in an almost exclusively masculine universe, based on unbridled virilism - as the imagery of the Russian president himself testifies[19] - marked by harassment disguised as initiation rites[20] and draped in the garments of short-sighted heroism.

In this context, the role of the soldiers' mothers' committees, associations that support young (and, often, mistreated) conscripts, is all the more essential, as the soldiers themselves are largely unable to defend themselves. These associations provide a 'minimum service' of counting the wounded and dead, while the Russian state provides almost no support to the families of military victims. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia was, as early as 2014, in the sights of the Russian state after it denounced the conditions of Russia's intervention in Crimea. Since then, some regional committees have been classified under the infamous label of "foreign agents", while others have been harassed by state services. While the Committees are still active, their work is increasingly complicated by Russian authorities and their withholding of relevant information and exposes involved individuals to persecution by the state apparatus[21].

The dominance of masculine fantasies in the military sphere is an essential part of Russian warmongering. Women make up 16% of Russian parliamentarians (21% in the upper house) and 10% of their governments, according to [the International Parliamentary Union](#), far below that of European countries, but also below that of a number of African and South American states. There is little doubt about the effect on the warlike propensity of the Russian state of this over-representation of men in its political system, the majority of whom may well adhere to the virilistic vision we have described.

THE URGENT NEED TO MOVE BEYOND IDEOLOGY

Nationalism - sovereignism - virilism. Faced with this infernal triad, Europe has been caught off guard. For sure, the compass of the European states is opposed in almost every respect to that of the Kremlin, and Europeans are generally aware of this: the regular demonstrations held in European cities in support of free elections, and a free press, against arbitrary detentions and police repression in Russia and, more generally, against the government's imperialism and authoritarianism, bear witness to this awareness of an ideological and moral distinction between Moscow and Brussels, for which Europe is ready to commit itself.

On this basis, Europe must now renew its international doctrine. Having been built on the necessity to relativise and reinterpret the ideas of nation and sovereignty, rather than simply abandon them; the European Union is the ideal tool for facilitating a progressive evolution beyond nationalism and sovereignism. The essential thing, even before formulating any objective in terms of "influence" or "power", is to recall which are the higher objectives that must prevail in the future, as they have prevailed until now in the construction of Europe: peace, democracy, and the rule of law.

FOR A WELL UNDERSTOOD EUROPEAN POWER

It is vital to build a united Europe, capable of influencing world affairs. The European Union must be able to bring its principles to the world stage and, to that extent, assert itself as a "power". Europe's solidarity, its ability to defend itself and to assert itself globally are now more relevant than ever before. But although the European project must learn to live and develop with war on the continent, it must not be forgotten that it was conceived first and foremost to build peace, to go beyond borders and power relations; to go beyond nationalism and sovereignty, in their Bodinian sense at least.

Autonomy must therefore be the political and geopolitical project of contemporary Europe. Not merely '[strategic autonomy](#)' as a *method* for carrying out a more genuinely European foreign policy, but also

[19] Voir Valerie Sperling, *Putin's macho personality cult, Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49:1, 2016.

[20] Known as *dedovshchina*, the practice of institutionalised hazing also includes aspects of ethnic violence. See Alena Maklak, *Dedovshchina on trial. Some evidence concerning the last Soviet generation of "sons" and "grandfathers"*. *Nationalities Papers* 43.5 (2015): 682-699.

[21] Inna Hartwich, [Soldatenmütter in Russland: Seit drei Wochen Stille](#), TAZ, 27 February 2022; [Conscript soldiers are being sent to fight against Ukraine, their relatives say. Here's what their families told Meduza](#), Meduza (Медуза), 25 February 2022.

autonomy as the *ultimate goal* of Europe's internal and external action. Autonomy, in this context, can be broadly conceived of as the capacity of each group and each individual to freely choose their own destiny. This autonomy is opposed to nationalism, sovereignism and virilism: the vast majority of Europeans do not desire anything else than peace, security and respect for individual and collective freedoms. The ethics of autonomy, places individual and collective self-determination at the root of political action, rejecting cultural and historical determinisms. In this respect, it constitutes an extension of the democratic ideal.

Furthermore, it is important not to allow discourses that rehabilitate nationalism or sovereignism as the only bulwark against aggression to flourish in the European public arena under the pressure of the current war; it is equally essential to oppose discourses that conflate nationality, language and political opinion, or equate the attitudes of states and individuals. The current war shows the devastation that the continuation of these discourses and amalgams can cause, when they are integrated into a political agenda. The fight for the rule of law and respect for human rights should not be negotiable within the European Union, just as it must be a constant of its global action. Otherwise the war of ideas cannot be won.

Finally, Europe must fully acknowledge its historical responsibility towards the candidate countries and those in its immediate neighbourhood, whether

European or not. While institutional adaptations are necessary to allow for more flexible decision-making in an enlarged Union, the promises of accession cannot remain empty words. Without prospects for membership, there is a real risk of a return of hard-line nationalism, or of a slide into the sphere of influence of neo-totalitarian states. The current tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the eve of a crucial election, are just one example of the danger hanging over part of the European neighbourhood. The rejection of nationalism, an offer of solidarity and the prospect of integration will be essential to help overcome this situation.

The fact that necessity for Europe to acquire a common operational military capability and strengthen its security architecture is now becoming increasingly consensual, does not mean that Europe should give up the very ideals on which it was built. While the time has come for a general revision of Europe's geopolitical concepts, this revision should not aim to diminish its ethical ambitions, but rather to give the continent the means to achieve them.

The fundamental objective of Europe's global action can only be the return of a just and lasting peace in Europe and beyond.

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