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# Untangling the Russian-Ukrainian Knot: Representations of the neo-imperialistic Russian political discourse and its analysis in the Polish press materials in the period of 2013–2014 and 2022

## Introduction

‘War is a mere continuation of policy by other means,’ Carl von Clausewitz stated famously in his military treatise *On War* (1832).<sup>1</sup> The military theorist aptly captured the dynamics governing warfare as a continuation of political agenda yet performed by other mechanisms. In other words, a war is only a way of realizing a political goal; however, it should not be perceived as an objective.<sup>2</sup> The abovementioned quotation holds true in case of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian military conflict. Russian authorities have been preparing a favourable ground for the ongoing war. Realizing this goal included ‘going back to the roots’ by glorifying the pre-revolution era, the Great Patriotic War (WWII) and the Soviet Union, but more importantly by reaching for

<sup>1</sup> “Der Krieg ist eine bloße Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln”. English translation: C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, transl. by J.J. Graham, originally published in 1874, Chapter 1, Section 24, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1946/pg1946-images.html> [accessed: 12.02.2023].

<sup>2</sup> C. von Clausewitz, *Wojna i polityka. Na podstawie traktatu O wojnie*, Bellona, Warszawa 2022, pp. 55–57.

the notion of ‘Ancient Rus,’ comprising of three nations – Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Slowly but surely, the idea of Russian-Ukrainian unity, forming a ‘single whole’ started to loom large. Already in 2007, a Russian journalist, M. Smolin, wrote that ‘Ukrainians have torn a piece from the pan-Russian body.’ Significantly, a year before the war, Putin himself authored an essay ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’ in which he used the disparaging term – Little Russia – when referring to Ukraine. Clearly, the phrase conveys a neo-imperialist view that the Ukrainian territory and people (‘Little Russians’) are merely a part of one, indivisible Russia.<sup>3</sup> It is no secret that the post-Soviet period witnessed Russia’s ‘fraternal suzerain relationship with Ukraine.’<sup>4</sup> The bilateral relationships of the two countries have been asymmetric for decades.

There is no denying that this situation, despite strategic and economic factors, was also triggered by mutually exclusive views on state sovereignty and international relations. When Russia persists in adopting its traditional Great Power approach, deeply entrenched in the concept of *derzhavnost*, then Ukraine strives for reaching Western democratic ideals. Would it be plausible to conclude that Russia’s bellicose drives are merely motivated politically and/or economically? Or are there socio-cultural paradigms that have led to the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022? This paper makes no claims to give any systematic analysis of the present conflict in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> Its aim is to present Russian cultural heritage, which has significantly influenced the so-called ‘Russian mindset,’ leading to suzerain, if not imperialistic attitude.

## The role of culture in international relations and political science

Religion, identity, and culture were in the limelight of neither international relations (IR) nor political science until the 1990s. The end of the Cold War marks the advent of culture as a variable in peace and conflict studies. The introduction of constructivism opened a new phase in the IR research by employing quite dissimilar yet intrinsically bounded realms of culture, religion, and warfare. In a nutshell, constructivist

<sup>3</sup> W. Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, 12.07.2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [accessed: 03.10.2023].

<sup>4</sup> E.W. Merry, *The Origins of Russia’s War in Ukraine: The Clash of Russian and European “Civilizational Choices” for Ukraine*, [in:] E.A Wood et al., *Roots of Russia’s War in Ukraine*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Columbia University Press, Washington D.C., NY 2016, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> For the origins of the conflict in Ukraine and its anticipated effects, see: E.A Wood et al., *op. cit.*, J. von Bladel, *Captivated by war: The Russian People in the face of the Ukraine War, Mobilization, and Tactical Defeat*, Brussels 2023 (Egmont Paper 118); O. Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare”. Resurgence and Politicisation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018; J. Watling, O.V. Danylyuk, N. Reynolds, *Preliminary Lessons from Russia’s Unconventional Operations During the Russo-Ukrainian War, February 2022 – February 2023*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, London, 29 March 2023.

theory ‘emphasizes the meanings that are assigned to material objects, rather than the mere existence of the objects themselves.’<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the assumption that the reality is constructed socially results in deeper investigation of norm development, identity, and ideational powers.

One of the first seminal works devoted to interrelation between war and culture was that of Samuel Huntington entitled *Clash of Civilizations* (1993, 1996). In his book, he divides the world’s major civilizations, which are set apart from each other ‘by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion.’<sup>7</sup> The American political scientist advocated a hypothesis that the post-Cold War World’s conflicts would primarily have cultural (civilizational) rather than economic groundings:

The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, he recognizes also so-called *cleft countries*, which comprise of substantial groups of people representing (or identifying themselves with) separate civilizations. Among others, Huntington includes Ukraine as cleft betwixt-and-between the Eastern Rite Catholic tradition on the West and the Orthodox on the East.

The idea of cultural genetic heritage reverberates across primordialism, which argues that nations or ethnic groups share an innate identity independent of historical processes.<sup>9</sup> Although explicit primordialist assumptions have been discarded after the Second World War, it is worth acknowledging that ‘primordialism, as an approach that stresses the workings of sub-national loyalties and solidarities operative in the collective consciousness of communities, is still capable of furnishing an epistemological and conceptual tool informing and opening up a unique space for inquiry and into social and political action.’<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, one should bear in mind that the abovementioned approaches are only attempts to interpret reality, yet they do not constitute reality *per se*. Nevertheless, a certain cultural trait is undeniably transmitted intergenerationally. The clash

<sup>6</sup> J. Cristol, *Constructivism*, 29.12.2019, Oxford Bibliographies, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0039.xml?rskey=CbTL8O&result=1&q=cristol+2019#firstMatch>, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OBO/9780199743292-0039> [accessed: 20.03.2023].

<sup>7</sup> S.P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations?*, “Foreign Affairs” 1993, vol. 72, no. 3, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, ed. K. Chandra, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012; M. Bayar, *Reconsidering Primordialism: an Alternative Approach to the Study of Ethnicity*, “Ethnic and Racial Studies” 2009, vol. 32, no. 9, pp. 1–20.

<sup>10</sup> K.F. Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq: The Making of State and Nation since 1920*, Routledge, London–New York 2015, p. 36.

between the two standpoints seems to have more theoretical, rather than practical grounds. More often than not, core ideas constructivists appeal to stem from the primordial realm. The very existence of cleavages supports the abovesaid. If we agree that a cleavage ‘is a historically determined social and cultural line which divides citizens within a society into groups with differing political interests, resulting in political conflict among these groups,’<sup>11</sup> then ‘social or cultural cleavages become political ones when they are politicized.’<sup>12</sup> In other words, cleavages stem from deeply entrenched values, perceptions, beliefs, and values which are an indispensable part of national identity.

## Representations of neo-imperialistic tendencies of Russia’s policy in the Polish press materials

The previous sections were aimed at presenting the connection between cultural heritage then this section depicts how it has been harnessed in public discourse.

### Methodology and terminology

The scientific objective of this paper is to detect and present traces of neo-imperialistic tendencies in Russia’s political discourse in the Polish press materials. In order to achieve this goal, a thorough analysis of articles devoted to Russia in the period of 2013-2014 and 2021 was conducted. “Polityka”, a news weekly, was chosen as source material. The criterion for the choice was the circulation. According to the Polish Research on Readership for 2022, the “Polityka” magazine reached the top selling numbers among weekly opinion periodicals, with circulation of 88 496 copies.<sup>13</sup>

The process of gathering raw data included qualitative and quantitative research of subsequent issues of the magazine in search for relevant content a thorough analysis of which revealed some underlying patterns. This, in turn, enabled grouping applicable quotations into thematical categories, which included:

1. the myth of Peter the Great,
2. the myth of a powerful tzar,
3. the Soviet resentment.
4. the notion of *derzavnost’*.

<sup>11</sup> S. Bartolini, P. Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability. The stabilization of European electorates 1885–1985*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> H. Kriesi *et al.*, *New Social Movements in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, UCL Press Limited, London 1995, p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> „Polityka” najchętniej kupowanym tygodnikiem opinii. „Newsweek” z wyższą sprzedażą niż „Do Rzeczy” i „Sieci” łącznie, Wirtualnemedi.pl, 12.09.2022, <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/sprzedaz-tygodnikow-opiniow-2022-rok-polityka-gosc-niedzielnny-newsweek-tomasz-lis-zwolniony> [accessed: 20.03.2023].

Delineating such a thematic scope is very telling. Already at this preliminary stage, it became evident that the Russian political discourse builds on nationalism deeply rooted in historic heritage. Since categories 1, 2 and 4 are tightly connected, they have merged together under the label of Authoritarian Rule and Imperialism.

### Data analysis

As it was already mentioned, the material has been organized around four major categories. Since a meticulous analysis of gathered material would go far beyond the scope of the present article, the focal points of the Russian political discourse have been fused together. Moreover, the thematical categories serve only as a departure point and have been made up for the sake of clarity. The interpretation will show that they are tightly intertwined with each other.

#### *Authoritarian rule and imperialism*

Russian imperial drives have never ceased to exist. Conversely, after years of propaganda, they have re-emerged in an unprecedented form.

The history of Russian imperialism is long, as the pursuit of the world's great power status is historically rooted. One of the core concepts of 'Russia's Great Power' was *derzavnost*. The term has no direct equivalent in English, yet it can be compared to the French *étatisme*. The idea behind this term is that the Russian state enjoys a special sort of primacy and greatness. A belief was so powerful that it was raised to a status of a secular religion. Indeed, its traces can be spotted in other cultural notions of the Holy Rus, Moscow the Third Rome, and the Russian World.

The concept of *derzavnost* legitimizes 'the subordination of the rights and welfare of the citizen at home and the practice of pure power politics in relations abroad.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the post-Soviet political apparatus was organized around the Old-Russian traditions:

The word *oligarch* entered the Russian vocabulary in the second half of the 1990s. In 1995, seven of the most influential Russian businessmen – Boris Berezovsky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Mikhail Fridman, Vladimir Gusinski, Vladimir Potanin, Aleksandr Smolensky and Vladimir Vinogradov – formed a political alliance with Yeltsin. In the media, they were called *siemibankrischina*, similar to *siemiboyarshchina*, the council of seven boyars that ruled in the Kremlin during the Great Troubles. [...] Vladimir Putin has fully subordinated his business to the Kremlin. In practice, this means financing social and industrial state projects.<sup>15</sup>

It is a well-grounded opinion that the oligarchs should pay off their debt to their motherland which has brought them wealth. The abovesaid is corroborated

<sup>14</sup> E.W. Merry, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> K. Kwiatkowska, *Zmierzch oligarchów*, „Polityka”, 3–9.04.2013, no. 14 (2902), p. 45.

by another note, concerning the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. It stated that ‘the Olympic village was built partly from the funds of the richest Russians.’<sup>16</sup>

Notably, the state continues to play the role of suzerain towards its citizens. It is the state which is the only (real) administrator of private possessions. In other words, an individual may have private property, yet it is the authority, which really possesses and disposes of it. As a consequence, this leads to the conclusion that a Russian citizen has no real *agency* understood as ‘the capacity of individuals to have the power and resources to fulfil their potential.’<sup>17</sup> Andrei Zubov’s words perfectly illustrate this phenomenon: ‘[I]n Russia, we have no possibility to influence our government or our parliament. But I signed [anti-war petition – SH] so that I could express my opinion and distance myself from Russia’s ruling elite which is breaking international law.’<sup>18</sup> However, a subservient citizen needs a strong and powerful leader (tzar, emperor) on which they can lean. Such an attitude opens a ritualized dialogue between the authority and society based on fear, violence, and unduly reverence.

If it is possible to pinpoint any prevailing motif of the Russian political narration, then it is a myth of an omnipotent emperor. Putin has successfully positioned himself as a new czar. He has adopted Peter the Great as a role model. The Russian President in no uncertain terms compared himself to his famous predecessor by stating that ‘Peter the Great waged the Great Northern War for 21 years. It would seem that he was at war with Sweden, he took something from them. He did not take anything from them, he returned [what was Russia’s – SH].’ Putin went on saying: ‘[A]pparently, it is also our lot to return [what is Russia’s – SH] and strengthen [the country – SH]. And if we proceed from the fact that these basic values form the basis of our existence, we will certainly succeed in solving the tasks that we face.’<sup>19</sup> He drew this parallel on 10 June 2022, after visiting an exhibition dedicated to the great czar.

What makes czar Peter so Great? Piotr Skwieciński advocates that the Russians have a fetish of territory. Peter the Great embodies power. He represents the empire, as during his reign, Russia became vast.<sup>20</sup> Symbolically, Peter the Great ordered establishing Russia’s new capital in the land he conquered from Sweden. The project was not cheap – it cost the lives of tens of thousands of serfs who ‘opened the window to Europe’ in the swamps of the Baltic Sea coast.

<sup>16</sup> J. Winiecki, *Władimirograd*, „Polityka”, 5–11.02.2014, no. 6 (2944), p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ch. Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, Sage, London 2005, p. 448.

<sup>18</sup> *Ukraine-Russia crisis: What’s Putin’s next move?*, BBC News, 23.02.2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60497653> [accessed: 28.03.2023].

<sup>19</sup> *Putin compares himself to Peter the Great in quest to take back Russian lands*, The Guardian, 10.06.2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/10/putin-compares-himself-to-peter-the-great-in-quest-to-take-back-russian-lands> [accessed: 28.03.2023].

<sup>20</sup> P. Skwieciński. *Koniec Ruskiego Miru? O ideowych źródłach rosyjskiej agresji*, Teologia Polityczna, Warszawa 2022, p. 22.

It would be erroneous to claim that Putin's admiration for Peter the Great is the latest fad. Putin endeavours to turn Sochi, a place with a subtropical climate, into a Winter Olympic centre in 2014, bear a strong resemblance to Peter the Great's efforts to build St. Petersburg. We read the following:

[W]ith the selection of Sochi as the venue for the Winter Olympics, this historic comparison made itself felt. In a place seemingly unsuitable for such an undertaking, the ruler of Russia decided to manifest the power of his country and mark its geopolitical importance. The Sochi 2014 project symbolically reflects another great project from the distant Russian past – St. Petersburg 1703, and Vladimir Putin is trying to disguise himself as Peter the Great.<sup>21</sup>

Notably, Russia took control of the Black Sea shore only 25 years after the death of the tsar. The final touch of this campaign was the Circassia Genocide. It was also hard to overlook another striking similarity. While St. Petersburg was built by peasants, the Olympic village – with the hands of immigrant workers from Central Asia. Sochi became the third capital of the country. Importantly, the city enjoyed Stalin's and Beria's sympathy and many political decisions were made there.

Russia started to act like a real empire. Apart from having nuclear weapons and economic opportunities, it started to construct its soft power. Russia was already fighting this battle for prestige at the front of great sports and political events, i.e., in the areas of life that Putin reveres. The Winter Games in Sochi were the best proof of this.

Russian imperialistic drives did not escape the attention of Polish journalists. In May 2021, Putin tested the limits of European patience. The Russians smuggled almost 100,000 soldiers across the border with Ukraine. Officially, these were only routine exercises. Yet Kiev perceived this as a threat of another invasion and began to look for support in the West. Ukraine received it, especially from Washington. Zelensky himself proposed a meeting with Putin. The Russian president replied that he could receive him in the Kremlin, but only if he first met with the leaders of the separatist 'republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk. This situation was commented on in the following way:

Putin's Russia, like a big cat among buffaloes, is trying to pick out weaker individuals, hoping that the stronger ones – too strong for it – will not react. It was so with Ukraine and – on a different level – with the Czech Republic. While Moscow is threatening Kiev and Prague, Berlin has no intention of giving up Nord Stream II, and the Prime Minister of Saxony Michael Kretschmer is talking in the Kremlin about the purchase of a Russian vaccine. Germany calls for these cases not to be combined. That is enough for Putin.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> J. Winiecki, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ł. Wójcik, *Putin wśród bawołów*, „Polityka”, 27.04–04.05.2021, no. 18 (3310), p. 10.

Indeed, Russia managed to create an image of a special position of simultaneous fear and reverence on the international arena. Again, such an attitude fulfils the Russian definition of respect: 'they are to be afraid! In Russia, the prevailing thinking is that respect is the same as fear. They beat the weak – that's what Vladimir Putin thinks, and has said it publicly many times. That's what the Russians think. You are either strong or you are gone. The law of the jungle.'<sup>23</sup>

The complexity of the communication problem with Russia on an international level, apart from its obvious political-economic reasons, has its roots in culture. While the Western world appreciates dialogue and consensus, in the Russian cultural realm intransigence is of the essence.

The extremely hierarchized system is not meant for democratic ideas. Russian people have been ruled with an iron hand over centuries. Even if they nowadays use terms such as equality, peace, values, it does not necessarily mean that they understand these concepts in the same way as the rest of the so-called Western world does. The cultural clash between the political West and the East has deeply permeated the Russian mindset. This profound difference is a powerful tool used by nationalistic propaganda. A comprehensive analysis of press materials corroborates this conclusion. In 2014, one could read the following note:

Vladimir Yakunin warns against the West. In his only book *Problems of Contemporary World Futurology*, he writes that Russia must go its own way. Opening up to the West, selling out for money, Yakunin claims, is destroying the Russian spirit and the values on which Russian civilization is based. The author himself is a member of the National Glory of Russia, an organization promoting the purity of the Russian soul and defending it from the corrupt West.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, both Putin and Yakunin allude to 'the Russian spirit and values,' yet they do not specify what this precisely means. Therefore, it can be concluded that it has to be a reference to the unique Russian world. By the same token, any messages that contradict the official narration of the Kremlin are deemed as being of Western origin. For instance, Navalny's political activity was portrayed as a betrayal of his own homeland, which he should be punished for: 'it is a pity that Navalny was not effectively poisoned because he is a spy from America.'<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the fact that Ukraine has (partially) chosen its own path and turned its back on Russia is perceived in terms of conspiracy: 'It is difficult for the Russians to understand that the Ukrainians have become an independent nation. For several hundred years, in the form of various myths, the state instilled in them that Russia and Ukraine are

<sup>23</sup> J. Prus-Wojciechowska, *Dmuchane imperium*, „Polityka”, 26.03–01.04.2014, no. 13 (2951), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> O. Szewczyk, *Rosjanie znów w grze*, „Polityka”, 19–25.03.2014, no. 12 (2950), p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> P. Reszka, *Iwan Wyrzypajew: Ojciec nazywa mnie zdrajcą*, „Polityka”, 10–16.02.2021, no. 7 (3299), p. 21.



one. Today, it is easier for them to believe that Ukrainian nationalism is an instrument in a Western conspiracy.<sup>26</sup> The continuous juxtaposition of the two cultural realms is clear propaganda. By strengthening the feeling of alienation, the public opinion develops moral panic that Western civilization threatens the values, interests, and well-being of the society. This state, in turn, leads to the arousal of siege mentality which is a shared feeling of victimization. Importantly, the consequences of this manipulation technique include biased thinking and survivalism and they strengthen social cohesion, but above all, make the society easy to control.

Another manifestation of the *ancient régime* is the authoritarian position of a president. In his work *Development of Morality*, Feliks Koneczny writes that Turanian civilization 'leads all public life out of the camp authority and it is fundamentally unethical'.<sup>27</sup> It concentrates around the leader, who is a 'demigod', the master of life and death. Putin has put a lot of effort into building his image as a ruler. Among various press materials, the most interesting include positioning himself higher than other prominent individuals, which manifests itself in being late: 'Vladimir Putin was almost an hour late for his audience with Pope Francis last week. The Russian president is notoriously late. [...] Yulia Tymoshenko spent three hours in the Kremlin in 2009.'<sup>28</sup> Another important area of self-creation is stressing Putin's masculinity. 'The country's most desirable bachelor' – this is how the incumbent president is presented on the cover, quite seriously, by the most popular Russian women's weekly, with a circulation of nearly half a million. 'Each of us would love to marry Putin,' declares the popular actress and singer Kristina Orbakaite.<sup>29</sup> And a year later we read: 'There are plenty of photos of fishing Putin, presenting his torso. [...] The biggest hit in Russia was the song "Takowo kak Putina" – if you have to choose a husband, choose someone like Putin.'<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Putin is presented as a role model for children: '[A] lot of biographical books for "Putin's children" are being written. For example, about Vova and Dima, that is about Putin and Medvedev, as they were childhood friends. Heroes of children's imagination. Such books were written about both Mussolini and Stalin.'<sup>31</sup>

Yet, the tzar is aging – '[T]he tzar has aged noticeably. Governments changed, parliaments changed, and he continued to enjoy the support of the people. Meanwhile, approval ratings for Vladimir Vladimirovich, as Putin is commonly referred to here, have been going down for two years.'<sup>32</sup> According to the Levada Centre, it is the

<sup>26</sup> O. Szewczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> F. Koneczny, *Rozwój moralności*, Wydawnictwo Antyk – Marcin Dybowski, Komorów 1997, s. 25.

<sup>28</sup> *Czekaj, czekaj*, „Polityka”, 4–10.12.2013, no. 49 (2936), p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Najbardziej pożądany kawaler kraju*, „Polityka”, 10–16.07.2013, no. 28 (2915), p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> J. Winiecki, *Dziwna wojna*, „Polityka”, 12–18.03.2014, no. 11 (2949), p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> P. Reszka, *Instrukcja wymiany cara*, „Polityka”, 3–9.03.2021, no. 10 (3302), p. 47.

lowest in the youngest group, 18–24 years old. In 2018, 80% of them believed that the president was doing well. In 2021, only 51%, and 46% are of the opposite opinion.

Putin is aware of the fact that without Ukraine Russia will not become an Asian empire, Russia can be a global power only by controlling Ukraine. On top of that, the Russian president has no accountable successor, which makes the Russian political scene unstable and unpredictable. Presumably, Putin wanted to begin an irreversible chain of events, which would be continued after his resignation. In this way, he would be remembered as the president who re-opened the window to the Black Sea.

## Conclusions

The Russian-Ukrainian war, apart from its obvious geo-political reasons, is culturally motivated. For nearly two decades, the Russian president has been using socio-political tools to recreate national romanticism which nurtured the neo-imperialistic attitude.

The mechanism was quite simple, as Putin used the most widespread and deeply engraved cultural motifs to strengthen the feeling of Russia being the Messiah of all nations on the one hand, and the perception of being alienated on the other. According to the conducted research, Putin presents himself as a new emperor who wants to regain and empower the state. Time will show whether he is going to accomplish his goal. One conclusion seems to be undeniable. Unlike his famous predecessor, Peter the Great, who has opened a window to Europe, Putin is hammering it up with rotten planks from the time of Ivan the Terrible, as Andrei Kolesnikov stated.

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*Untangling the Russian-Ukrainian Knot: Representations of the neo-imperialistic Russian political discourse and its analysis in the Polish press materials in the period of 2013–2014 and 2022*

**Abstract**

Military conflicts have symbolic foundations. Be it religion, identity, values, or language, they all may serve as 'weapons of war' that either help to rationalize the military action or mobilize the nation. The Russian-Ukrainian war is no exception. The ongoing conflict exceeds the premises of a geo-political game or a socioeconomic ambition and proves itself to be deeply entrenched in a cultural conflict between the two countries. Therefore, the thrust of the paper is to explore the cultural-historical context of the Russia-Ukraine war. Russian imperialistic desires have been whetted by neo-romantic historical narration for the past two decades. The article comprises of two parts – historical and empirical. When the former depicts the history of direct imperial Russian rule over Ukraine, then the latter is a critical overview of Polish press materials commenting on the change in the Russian political discourse concerning Ukraine in the years 2013–2014 and 2022. Such an analysis sheds different light on the current Russian-Ukrainian war, but it also indicates that the conflict we are witnessing now has been carefully prepared on both military and socio-political levels.

Keywords: Russian imperialism, discourse analysis, Ukraine, cultural divisions, conflict, Polish press materials