



CEPS EXPLAINER

# UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA'S PERCEPTION OF INTERNATIONAL AGENCY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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# SUMMARY

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*Russia's invasion of Ukraine has dominated international politics in 2022 and this looks likely to continue for the foreseeable future. But how did we get to this point in the first place? The core argument presented here is that Russian foreign policy agency – the intention and the ability to act as transgressor and challenger to the liberal international order, defined as the space for norms-based multilateralism – played the key role in the full-fledged restart of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. Taking a critical look at the five pillars of Russian agency, this inaugural CEPS Explainer concludes that the current model of Russia's international agency is a precarious and vulnerable construct that is unlikely to survive the regime currently sat in the Kremlin.*



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Agency is essential when it comes to describing Russian military interference as a series of war crimes and acts of genocide, as well as to the nascent debate on guilt and responsibility in Russian society for the atrocities committed. But first a few remarks on contrary arguments. A few weeks ago, this author had the chance to attend a workshop of young and mainly left-minded European artists discussing the wrongdoings of late capitalism and the neoliberal order in fostering today's security crises. At some point he enquired as to whether it is the global capitalist economy that should be blamed for the execution of thousands of civilians in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol. To his surprise, the answer was affirmative – allegedly, the ultimate sources of all wars are the unfair distribution of resources and global inequalities.

## SETTING THE SCENE: THE CURRENT ACADEMIC DEBATE ON THE WAR

The current academic and policy debate on the war also features Western voices that adhere to structural explanations of Russia's military intervention. For example, John Mearsheimer has [reiterated](#) that it is NATO's eastward expansion that has provoked Russia and Henry Kissinger has [claimed](#) that the West should prevent Russia's possible humiliating on the Ukrainian battlefields to avoid further complications for European security. In this vein, Marlene Laruelle [deems](#) that the West is responsible for the war in Ukraine because of its alleged hostility to the Kremlin. This speculative argument implicitly justifies the Russia-initiated war by the Kremlin's structurally predetermined fight against the US and NATO's hegemony.

These structural explanations that *de facto* normalise, if not justify, wars are dominant in today's Russian narratives. For example, Irina Khakamada, who was previously known as one of the most liberal Russian political figures, has [referred](#) to the current break in relations between Russia and the West as a reflection of high international politics alongside Russia's macho understanding of power, especially of great powers.

However, these arguments are hardly convincing for those who see the war as a direct product of Russia's deliberate intentions and decisions taken in the Kremlin, rather than as something allegedly inevitable or driven by the invisible hand of the predetermined logic of confrontation.

Illustrating the latter is the opinion of Slavoj Žižek, who [writes](#) that *'both sides present their acts as something they simply had to do: the west had to help Ukraine remain free and independent; Russia was compelled to intervene militarily to protect its safety. The latest example: the Russian foreign ministry claiming Russia will be "[forced to take retaliatory steps](#)" if Finland joins NATO. Actually no, it will not be "forced", in the same way that Russia was not "forced" to attack Ukraine. This decision appears "forced" only if one accepts the whole set of ideological and geopolitical assumptions that sustain Russian politics.'*

By making this point, Žižek challenges the notions of 'Russian fears' and 'concerns' as something self-evident and objective, and helps to look at them as figures of speech, or discursive constructs that are used for specific political purposes.

This debate has practical consequences duly noted by Andreas Umland, who connects academic debates with a policy split between specialists who recommend more military support for [Ukraine](#), and others who propose accommodating [Russia](#). In his [words](#), the Kremlin-sensitive voices blame their opponents of emotionally-loaded approaches, while Ukraine supporters suspect their rivals of suffering from a lack of empirical and contextual information, as well as from a poor understanding 'of key peculiarities of the [Russian-Ukrainian war](#)'.

### THE VICTIMS OF AN EVOLVING *HOMINES PUTINUS*

Those who discard or underestimate Russian agency might be misled by the fact that before his presidency Putin himself was neither a charismatic personality nor a power seeker. Kremlin insiders have [described](#) him as a low-profile bureaucrat and a weak person with a mediocre level of education who disengaged from publicly talking politics and was more interested in technocratic management. But, in the [metaphor](#) of the Russian political analyst Vladimir Pastukhov, 'we were perceiving Putin as a rational KGB-trained officer, but he turned out to be a Khomeini'.

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What a significant part of the policy community missed therefore was not Putin's complaints against the Euro-Atlantic West, but the trajectory of his transformation. Its starting point, [according](#) to former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov, was the 2004 Orange Revolution and the subsequent evolution of Russia's attitudes to Ukraine

from annoyance and irritation to complete enmity. By the same token, as Leonid Nevzlin [argues](#), Putin practically started preparing for a military intervention when he understood that President Zelensky would not stick to the Russian interpretation of the Minsk agreement, which would ruin the Kremlin's plans.

The incremental maturing of Russia's transgressive agency was always accompanied by a strong anti-Americanism that resonated not only domestically, but also in non-Western countries that support Russia as a challenger to *Pax Americana*. From today's perspective, a major victim of Russia's growing self-assertiveness is the general trust in international law and global/regional organisations, including the United Nations and the Red Cross, whose representatives were quietly observing Russian filtration procedures on the outskirts of destroyed Mariupol.

Other victims include almost basic beliefs that stem from the first post-Cold War decades, such as the modernisation paradigm of '*Wandel durch Handel*' (i.e. the more you trade, the more you politically influence your trading partner). In a more general sense, the war set the limits of the EU's normative power. All earlier expectations of liberal development in Russia, as well as Russia's indispensable integration into the European security architecture have had to be reconsidered/readjusted to the new reality, with borders that divide rather than connect, and energy that has more to do with politics than with economics.

Russia's modernisation did not bring a higher demand for democracy and even civil society remained immature and ill-developed. After six months of war, we see Russia's population being dominated by [\*homines Putinus\*](#), exemplifying the self-inflicted cultural ignorance of Russia's closest neighbours, along with what sociologists [identify](#) as a paradoxical combination of aggression (towards Ukraine) and submission (to Putin's rule). Leading opposition figures, such as Grigory Yavlinsky, have had to accept the failure of exhaustive efforts to liberalise Russia from the inside.

## THE FIVE FACES OF RUSSIAN AGENCY

Yet what is Russia's agency *really* about? For answering this question, we need to go beyond such traditional categories of political analysis as elites, institutions or ideologies, and look at more nuanced sources of Russia's agency that need to be scrupulously studied and properly understood.

### A POST-COLONIAL MINDSET

First, Russia's attack on Ukraine must be understood as a post-colonial war undertaken by a former hegemon against a formerly colonised periphery that defies its subjugation to the imperial sphere of influence. Moscow's repeated failures to install a loyal regime in Kyiv, along with Ukraine's success with its [Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area](#) with the EU, became strong irritants for Putin, who ultimately chose to pursue a military response over non-military issues of substance.

The original idea of a short 'special military operation' [fits perfectly](#) into the colonial war framework, as opposed to a full-fledged mobilisation for a 'real' war with a truly strong adversary. Russia did not want to accept its loss of influence and ultimately resorted to mass-scale violence, known in post-colonial literature as [necropolitics](#), or the 'politics of death'. This of course has included placing cities under siege, the shelling of civilian targets, the mass murder of non-combatants and the destruction of urban infrastructure in occupied areas.

## A WARPED VERSION OF HISTORY

It is at this point that the second feature of Russia's agency becomes visible – Putin's specific vision of history. In the mind of the Russian president, [nothing has changed](#) in international relations since at least the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Russia was waging a lengthy war with Sweden for territorial expansion. In this regard, Putin is not a Schmittian type of political leader whose power is overwhelmingly based on decisionism; he rather builds his logic of power on a self-inflicted sense of constant victimisation, often referencing the invasions of Russia by Napoleon or Hitler.

This constructed victimisation does not accept the validity of the 'never again' philosophy that is deeply rooted in post-World War Two European norms. Yet it allows Putin, (foreign minister) Sergey Lavrov and (former president) Dmitry Medvedev to often juxtapose Russian military campaigns with the allegedly similar examples of Western belligerence – from the American nuclear strikes against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 to the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003.

## SOVEREIGNTY AND TECHNICAL GOVERNANCE

A third source of Russian agency is a strong nexus of overarching sovereign power and governmental technocracy. The trajectory of the Russian world concept is exemplary in this regard – the idea was born in the late 1990s as a mostly managerial and administrative tool, and in only two decades transformed into a militarised doctrine of Russian power projection in neighbouring countries.

Illuminating in this regard is [Sergei Kirienko](#), one of the best examples of the endured linkage between sovereignty and technical governance. As one of the most visible figures on the liberal flank of the Russian political spectrum in the late 1990s and having served as prime minister, Kirienko later chose a strategy of adapting to the Putin regime. Being close to the so called 'methodologists' – a group of policy advisers, consultants and spin doctors – he exchanged his well-articulated image of a public politician for the role of an educated and enlightened technocrat, a professional manager in charge of the state corporation Rosatom, then the main coordinator of Putin's domestic policies, and ultimately as a key figure in integrating the occupied Ukrainian territories into the Russian Federation. Kirienko is now increasingly mentioned in the Russian media as a potential successor to Putin.

## MOSCOW'S MASTERING OF 'THE SOCIETY OF A SPECTACLE'

Fourth, Russia's agency is grounded in the production of *simulacra* (the representation or imitation of a person or thing) as an inherent part of what the French political philosopher Guy Debord called '[the society of the spectacle](#)' and Judith Butler conceptualised as '[political performativity](#)'.

### THIS IS HOW POST-TRUTH OPERATES IN PRACTICE – THROUGH THE LEGITIMISATION OF FALSE STORIES AND INTENTIONALLY DISTORTED INFORMATION UNDER THE PRETEXT OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Indeed, the Kremlin uses and capitalises on both conservative/right-wing discourses with their emphasis on nationalism, EU-scepticism, and anti-globalism, and some narratives built on liberal premises and adjusted to its current foreign policy expansionism. Thus, in the Kremlin's performative

glossary, 'human rights' refer to the so-called discriminated Russophones in Ukraine and the Baltic states, the 'responsibility to protect' is equated to Russian military operations in support of its 'compatriots', and 'humanitarian convoys' simply mean Russian assistance to Ukrainian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk.

This is how post-truth operates in practice – through the legitimisation of false stories and intentionally distorted information under the pretext of freedom of speech. The propagandistic 'society of the spectacle' also uses plausible deniability – 'we don't know what happened' was for years a familiar trope heard from pro-Kremlin speakers commenting on the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and the Skripal family in the UK, as well as the MH17 tragedy.

Appeals to neutrality, impartiality and objectivity ('let's be non-judgmental and non-accusatory', 'let's avoid *ad hominem* references', 'politics is about searching for pragmatic solutions, not about sanctioning or punishing someone' etc.) are indispensable parts of the theatrical shows performed by the Russian mainstream media.

And, of course, words do matter for camouflaging speaking positions through such neutral tropes as 'the events of 2014', 'the situation in Ukraine', or through formulations that attribute equal responsibility for hostilities to both parties ('Russian-Ukrainian conflict'). Those who prefer the language of a 'civil war' in Ukraine would also choose to call Luhansk and Donetsk '*de facto* states', 'unrecognised states-like entities', or 'territories with limited sovereignties', rather than what they actually are – seceded or occupied territories beyond the control of Ukrainian central authorities.

The society of the spectacle is far from being a purely academic concept – it does have practical consequences. The most important of them is depoliticization. As an insightful analysis concluded, politics as a performative stage undermines *'the opportunity for active participation and interaction with other citizens. By habituating the audience to theatrical modes of self-presentation, they also weaken the capacity for empathy. Habituated to viewing the suffering of others as pleasure or entertainment, the audience becomes unable to empathize with others<sup>1</sup>.*' This argument should be given serious attention in any attempt to understand the Russian collective mindset, particularly during times of war.

### FREEDOM IS FOR SOVEREIGN STATES ONLY

Finally, Russia's transgressive agency (it's perceived right to violate other countries' borders) is grounded in a particular sense of freedom which is attributed not to individuals, but to sovereign states.

In this perception of sovereignty, in Putin's eyes, an operational free hands policy is a prerequisite, a privilege that only a few countries can afford. Within this logic Ukraine – unlike Russia itself – is not seen as a 'free' political subject due to its voluntary association with the EU and, as the Kremlin sees it, subjugation to NATO.

### CONCLUSIONS

To summarise, Russia today is not a state existentially offended or marginalised by the West, but rather (1) a revenge-seeking imperial power that (2) does not believe in the normative foundations of world politics, (3) mobilises state technocracy for the sake of foreign policy adventurism, (4) produces state-sponsored propaganda as a means to depoliticise society, and (5) claims its right for unlimited freedom of action against any other member of the international system, whether that be Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Estonia or any other country that it perceives as threatening its interests.

On all five accounts, Putin seems to have a broader field for manoeuvring domestically rather than internationally. According to the recent polls, in the diametrically opposed options of either continuing the war until Kyiv is seized or sitting at the negotiating table with Ukraine, Putin would either way still receive the [support](#) of a majority of Russian voters.

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<sup>1</sup> Kohn, M. (2008) 'Homo Spectator: Public Space in the Age of Spectacle', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 34 No 5, pp 467-486.

Yet Russia's violently assertive transgressive agency, paradoxically, does not serve Russian long-term interests – expansion into Ukraine brings Moscow closer to NATO which is officially recognised as an enemy. In the meantime, with Ukraine's and Moldova's intensified drive towards the EU, the concept of eastern Europe as an 'in-between space' is bound to either eventually disappear or be drastically transformed. The two poles – the EU and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia with Belarus on the other – are gradually moving closer together, the complete opposite to Putin's original geopolitical blueprint.

This makes the current model of Russia's international agency a precarious and vulnerable construct that is unlikely to survive the current regime sat in the Kremlin.

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