

NAVIGATING STRATEGIC CULTURE: ANALYZING RUSSIAN INSECURITIES IN UKRAINE-WEST RELATIONS

UOT 327
DOI:10.30546/3006-0346.2024.3.81.0076

LAMAN GAHRAMANOVA
Khazar University, graduate student

E-mail: laman.gahramanova@khazar.org

Introduction

Understanding the dynamics of strategic culture has always been of utmost importance. Strategic culture describes how states and their leaders view the role of war, the nature of their enemy, how force should be used, and against whom [13, p.8].

Historical legacies, volatile geographical locations, identity, and narratives have played a crucial role in shaping Russian strategic culture. Russian strategic culture has been historically characterized by a sense of insecurity towards the West, which in turn, has originated from a history of invasions as well as its aspiration for creating buffer zones. This has been due to its volatile geography, which does not have features that would serve as barriers to defense [5, p.32]. The Russian strategic culture is one of the key factors that shape its relations with its neighbors and Western powers. President Vladimir Putin has made a considerable evolution in Russian strategic culture, which has had a significant impact on the country's interactions with the West and its fraternal neighbor Ukraine.

This article delves into Russian foreign policy, which has become more assertive since the turn of the new millennium. The annexation of Crimea leading to the subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine and hostile policy towards the West have been key events that illustrated the shift in Russia's strategic culture.

Annexation of the Crimean Peninsula

In 2014 Ukraine experienced a political upheaval, which led to the ousting of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich. Euromaidan movement, also known as the "Revolution of Dignity" was driven by Yanukovich's decision to reject a trade deal with the European Union to nurture closer ties with Russia. The protestors expressed their discontent over economic stagnation, corruption, and an aspiration for integration into the EU. Subsequently, a new government under an interim Western-oriented president Oleksandr Turchynov was formed once Yanukovich fled Ukraine [7].

Western-oriented policy of the Ukrainian leadership was accompanied by conflicts with pro-Russian

separatist groups in the eastern part of Ukraine. Taking advantage of the instability in the country, Russia annexed the peninsula. Apart from the concerns over increasing Western-oriented aspirations of Ukraine, which Putin perceived as a "brotherly nation", the symbolic importance of the peninsula to Russia played a role in making such a decision. The annexation of Crimea was perceived as re-uniting with historically Russian land, which was "gifted" to Ukraine by then-Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. Putin in his address after the annexation of the peninsula, portrayed the decision as follows: "The decision was made behind the scenes. Naturally, in a totalitarian state, nobody bothered to ask the citizens of Crimea and Sevastopol. They were faced with the fact" [11].

By doing so, the Russian leadership intended, to secure its interest, which is not of only strategic importance, but also has essential cultural and historical ties to Russia. Such a policy, however, leads to a clash in narratives. The narratives around "fraternal" relations between the two nations, clashed with the widespread propaganda against the reforms and protests that occurred in Ukraine. Apart from that the Russian leadership claimed to be ready to normalize its relationship with Ukraine while maintaining its support for separatist groups in Donbass [1, p.16].

These contradictions have led to notable confusion among Russian strategic thinkers. The Russian strategic culture lacked clarity regarding how to treat Ukraine in the context of its dispute with the West. Russia has found itself in a dilemma. On the one hand, the leadership of Russia has intended to keep Ukraine in Russia's sphere of influence, and on the other hand, there have been concerns about the instability in Ukraine, which is perceived as a threat to Russia's security.

The roots of Russia's insecurities vis-a-vis the West

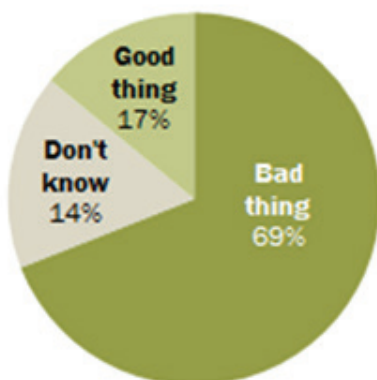
Historical invasions and perceived betrayals Russia experienced over the centuries have led to a sense of vulnerability towards the West. These memories have been transformed into collective narratives influencing the strategic culture of Russia. The western part of the world has been at the core of these

narratives. The war with the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth (17th century), Napoleonic wars leading to the invasion of Russia (19th century), fighting WW2 against Nazi Germany (20th century), and the confrontation with the US and NATO during the Cold War period starting in 1947, two years after the end of WW2, and leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union are all key historic events that shaped the Russian strategic culture. Currently, existing negative perceptions and narratives towards the West have their deep roots in the experiences of the past [4, p. 484; 5, p. 33]. The Russian leadership seems to feel proud of their past Soviet legacy and perceives the dissolution of the Union as a catastrophe. Such a perception was also common among the general public in Russia. According to the survey conducted by the Pew Research Center majority (69%) of Russians perceived the disintegration of the USSR as something bad [10].

Figure 1: Russian Public Opinion on the Dissolution of the USSR

Overwhelming Majority of Russians Say Breakup of USSR Was Bad for Russia

Do you think the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a good thing or bad thing for Russia?



Source: Spring 2015 Global Attitudes survey, Q34.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew Research Center

URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/06/10/2-russian-public-opinion-putin-praised-west-panned/>

In today's ongoing war against Ukraine, Russian strategic thinkers and decision-makers perceive NATO as an existential threat. The expansion of NATO towards the post-Soviet space and the existence of "military infrastructure" near the borders of Russia has been portrayed as a danger or threat in National Security Strategies and Russian Military Doctrines since 1993 [4, p. 485].

Criticism towards unipolarity

A unipolar world that emerged after the disintegration of the USSR, where the US emerged as a sole great power has been criticized and viewed as an unfair system by the Kremlin. The existing world order has been viewed as an unfair system, which is backed by a group of international legal norms imposed by the West and portrayed as modern Western neo-colonialism.

International financial institutions have also been blamed by the Russian leadership for reinforcing the unjust system. The promotion of the neo-colonial system, from the Russian point of view, enabled the West to exploit the global resources due to the prevalence of the dollar and state-of-the-art technology and subsequently helped the US to ensure its position as a world hegemon [12].

The Russian leadership also accuses the West, particularly the US of acting domineeringly and being the culprit of the existing unrest and instability around the world. According to them, the interference of the US in the domestic affairs of any country leads to disintegration. Russia condemns such an approach by taking Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan as an example. Thus, interfering countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, which used to be in the Russian sphere of influence, led to insecurities and anxieties in the Kremlin.

Russia also blames the US for acting single-handedly without taking the concerns of other countries into account. Therefore, the Russian leadership believes that non-western nations especially the ones that align with Russia should have a greater influence in global decision-making processes. The concept of "multipolar world" and the organizations like the G20 and BRICS are largely promoted by Russia to counterfeit, the US dominance and gain more legitimacy and influence in the global arena [6].

Embracing the East in the Face of the West

Apart from the idea of promoting a “multipolar world”, the shift towards the East, particularly towards China intensified because of the deterioration in relations with the West, especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the eruption of the conflict in 2022.

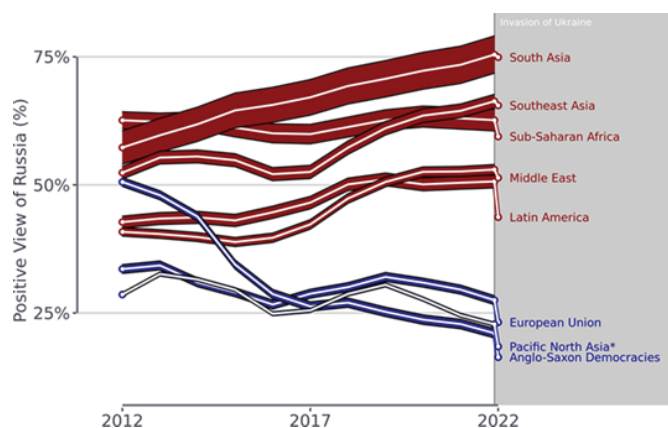
With the help of this tactic, Russia hopes to minimize the implications of the economic sanctions and seize new commercial and diplomatic opportunities. This strategy largely relies on close cooperation with China, as both states are interested in establishing diplomatic and economic ties as well as geopolitical coordination, which sometimes goes against the foreign policy of the US.

Before the Ukraine crisis, the Kremlin had a divided view of China’s expansion in Central Asia. On the one hand, the Russian leadership was content with China’s quest for cheap gas as long as Beijing was able to support Gazprom in safeguarding its position in the European gas market [8]. On the other hand, the leadership of Russia was discontent about Beijing’s increasing role in post-Soviet areas worrying that those countries would end up being more dependent on China than Russia.

Nevertheless, the two nations managed to unite within multilateral organizations countering the global influence of the West. To garner support from developing nations, Russia and China founded their organizations such as BRICS (Brazil, India, and South Africa). The BRICS has proven to be an especially potent force in the world economy, which is supposed to counter the US dollar’s hegemony by promoting “de-dollarization”. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates have formally joined the BRICS group by the year 2024 [3].

This in turn, from the Russian perspective, may put an end to unipolarity and increase the role of other countries in world affairs. It also influences the way those countries perceive Russia. In most developing regions positive sentiment towards Russia was growing before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Inevitably, the conflict in Ukraine has led to a significant reevaluation throughout most of Africa and Latin America, but less so in Asia, probably because the events were reported through the lens of preexisting Russian sympathies. The general public of the European Union, Pacific North Asia, and Anglo-Saxon Democracies on the other hand, have been developing more negative views towards Russia since 2014 [2].

Figure 2: Diverging Global Sentiments Toward Russia



*Pacific North Asia refers to Japan, South Korea, and the Republic of China (Taiwan).

Source: Center for the Future of Democracy

URL: <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/a-world-divided/>

From a “brotherly nation” to an “adversarial counterpart”

Analysis of the Russian strategic culture and insecurities vis-a-vis the West provides clearer insights into the origins behind the hostilities in Ukraine since 2014. As a general rule, the shift in the way Russia perceives Ukraine has been shaped by a variety of factors. First of all, due to shared historical and cultural ties, Russia has historically viewed Ukraine as a part of its sphere of influence, and even a part of Russia rather than a separate sovereign state. For Russia, Ukraine is of significant geopolitical importance owing to its strategic location which provides access to the Black Sea. Maintaining control over Ukraine gives Russia a degree of leverage in regional politics and security dynamics. The expansion of Western institutions, such as NATO and the EU, eastwards exacerbates the already existing sense of vulnerability and insecurity, thus leading to the adoption of a more antagonistic approach towards the West. Involving Russian close neighbors, particularly Ukraine into NATO and the EU is viewed as a menace to Russian national and security interests. The possibility of Ukraine getting closer to the West, and eventually becoming a member of the Western military alliance, exacerbates Russian anxieties about encirclement. Alexander Grushko, who was a deputy foreign minister of the Russian Federation, portrayed Georgia’s and Ukraine’s membership in the alliance as “a huge strategic mistake, which

bears “the most serious consequences for pan-European security” [9]. American political scientist and a prominent scholar of international relations, known for his theory of offensive realism, John J. Mearsheimer, blames the West for the crisis in Ukraine and posits as follows: The taproot of the crisis is the American-led strategy to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia’s borders, by integrating Ukraine into the EU, turning Ukraine into a pro-Western liberal democracy and most importantly, incorporating Ukraine into NATO” [9 p.18].

The conflict is also driven by differing competing identities and aspirations. Since the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine has sought to assert its independence and intensified its integration into the EU. Such an aspiration has become even stronger since the Euromaidan revolution in 2014. The Ukrainian government portrayed this turn of events as a desire for independence and an aspiration to embrace Western democracy and norms. Meanwhile, the leadership of Russia intends to maintain its power and influence and prevent Ukraine from completely seizing independence from its sphere of influence. In other words, to achieve this objective Russia has resorted to numerous strategies ranging from military to informational ones in a tactic known as “hybrid warfare”. The hybrid warfare waged by Russia involved the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, support for separatist groups in eastern Ukraine, economic pressure, propaganda campaigns, and cyber operations.

Hindering Ukraine’s full integration into Western institutions and thus adopting Western norms and practices, and sustaining influence over its internal affairs, are on the list of priorities to achieve Russia’s strategic objectives vis-a-vis Ukraine. These objectives have their deep roots in historical events, imperial and Soviet legacies, perceived grievances, and negative narratives around the Western powers.

Conclusion

While analyzing Russia’s strategic culture at the turn of the new millennium several major issues emerge. Russia has undergone significant shifts in its strategic culture, which has been characterized by assertive foreign policies towards the West and countries in its sphere of influence, particularly Ukraine.

Russia’s aspirations to assert its power within as well as beyond its borders stems from historical narratives around security, sovereignty, and a sense of insecurity vis-a-vis the West and an ambition to

hinder perceived Western encroachment. Due to the existence of such perceptions, the relations with the West have become more antagonistic. The situation has been exacerbated more owing to the narratives around the expansion of NATO and critiques of Western-dominated global systems. Russia’s closer ties with China have been a strategic imperative employed as a coping mechanism in the face of sanctions posed by the West for the hostilities carried out in Ukraine.

To resolve the conflict peacefully, Russian strategic culture needs to adopt a balanced approach and in this case, engagement with the West is of utmost importance to tackle shared concerns and promote stability.

In the face of geopolitical rivalry, calls for negotiations, dialogues and an acknowledgment of common interests have to be on the list of priorities. The Russian leadership needs to adopt a more flexible strategic culture as it has the power to determine its relations with the West as well as Ukraine. Russia can advance its national interests and promote stability and cooperation on a global scale by skillfully managing these dynamics.

Keywords: *Russian strategic culture, historical narratives, Ukraine-West relations, geopolitical tensions, annexation of Crimea.*

REFERENCE LIST:

1. Baev, P. (2020). *Transformation of Russian strategic culture: Impacts from local wars and global confrontation (Russie.Nei.Visions No. 118)*. French Institute of International Relations (IFRI).
2. Foa, Roberto S., Margot Mollat, Han Isha, Xavier Romero-Vidal, David Evans, and Andrew J. *A World Divided: Russia, China and the West*. Center for the Future of Democracy, October 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/a-world-divided/>
3. Fong, C., & Maizland, L. (n.d.). *China and Russia: Exploring ties between two authoritarian powers*. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-russia-relationship-xi-putin-taiwan-ukraine>
4. Götz, E., & Staun, J. (2022). *Why Russia Attacked Ukraine: Strategic Culture and Radicalized Narratives*. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 43(3), 482–497. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2082633>
5. Hayat. (2022). *Russia-Ukraine War: A Const-*

ructivist Analysis. *Journal of Politics and International Studies*, 8(2), 29-40.

6. Hutchings, S., & Szostek, J. (2015, April 28). *Dominant Narratives in Russian Political and Media Discourse during the Ukraine Crisis*. *E-International Relations*. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/28/dominant-narratives-in-russian-political-and-media-discourse-during-the-crisis/>

7. Krapfl, J., & Kühn von Burgsdorff, E. (2024). *Ukraine's Euromaidan and Revolution of Dignity, ten years later*. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 325-334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2023.2293420>

8. Lewis, D. "Strategic Culture and Russia's "Pivot to the East." *Russia, China, and 'Greater Eurasia,'* *Marshall Center Security Insight*, no. 34, July 2019, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/strategic-culture-and-russias-pivot-east-russia-china-and-greater-eurasia-0>

9. Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin." *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5), 77-84, 85-89

10. *Pew Research Center* <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/06/10/2-russian-public-opinion-putin-praised-west-panned/>

11. Putin, V. (2014, March 18). *Address by President of the Russian Federation*. Retrieved from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

12. Snigy, O. (2023, November). *Russian Strategic Narratives, 2022–2023*. *Orbis*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2023.11.002>

13. Wiltenburg, I. (2020). *The Importance of Understanding Russian Strategic Culture*. *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 44(1), 7-12. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48600538>

Ləman Qəhrəmanova

Xəzər Universiteti, magistrant

E-mail: laman.qahramanova@khazar.org

**Strateji Mədəniyyətin İdarə Edilməsi:
Ukrayna-Qərb Əlaqələrində Rusiyanın
Təhlükəsizlik Narahatlıqlarının Təhlili
XÜLASƏ**

Məqalədə Rusiyanın strateji mədəniyyətinin Ukrayna və Qərb dövlətləri ilə münasibətləri kontekstində təhlili verilmişdir. Məqalə strateji mədəniyyət və tarixi rəvayətlərin Rusiyanın Ukrayna və Qərb ilə bağlı təsəvvürlərini və hərəkətlərini necə formalaşdırdığını araşdırır. Məqalədə əsas diqqət Rusiyanın

Qərbə qarşı həssaslıq və etibarsızlıq hissəsinə və Rusiyanın strateji məqsədləri, o cümlədən öz təsir dairəsində hakimiyyəti saxlamaq və Qərbin şərqlə doğru genişlənməsinin qarşısını almaq cəhdlərinə yönəlmişdir. Ukrayna və Qərblə geosiyasi gərginlik şəraitində sabitlik və əməkdaşlığa kömək etmək üçün Rusiyanın strateji mədəniyyətində qarşılıqlı əlaqə, dialoq və çevikliyin vacibliyi vurğulanır. Məqalədə Rusiya-Ukrayna-Qərb münasibətlərinə xas olan çoxsaylı problemlərin həlli üçün qarşılıqlı anlaşma və əməkdaşlıq çərçivələrinin zəruriliyi vurğulanır.

Açar sözlər: *Rusiyanın strateji mədəniyyəti, tarixi rəvayətlər, Ukrayna-Qərb münasibətləri, geosiyasi gərginlik, Krımın ilhaqı.*

Ламан Гахраманова

Хазарский Университет, магистр

Эл.почта: laman.qahramanova@khazar.org

**Навигация по стратегической культуре:
Анализ российских опасений
в отношениях Украины и Запада
РЕЗЮМЕ**

В данной статье представлен анализ стратегической культуры России в контексте ее отношений с Украиной и странами Запада. Исследование рассматривает, как стратегическая культура и исторические нарративы формируют восприятие и действия России по отношению к Украине и Западу. Основное внимание уделяется чувству уязвимости и незащищенности России перед Западом, а также стратегическим целям России, включая усилия по сохранению власти в своей сфере влияния и предотвращению экспансии Запада на восток. В условиях геополитических напряженностей с Украиной и Западом подчеркивается важность взаимопонимания России для содействия стабильности и сотрудничества, а также необходимость общения, диалога и гибкости. Статья выделяет значимость установления рамок сотрудничества и взаимопонимания для решения многочисленных проблем, характерных для отношений между Россией, Украиной и Западом.

Ключевые слова: *стратегическая культура России, исторические нарративы, украинско-западные отношения, геополитические напряженности, аннексия Крыма.*