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PUTINOVA DILEMA: RUSIJA IN SLOVANSKA DIMENZIJA NATOVE ŠIRITVE

PUTIN'S DILEMMA: RUSSIA AND THE SLAVIC DIMENSION OF NATO ENLARGEMENT

Povzetek Morebitna naorožitev slovanstva je slabo raziskana tematika v literaturi o hibridnem vojskovovanju kljub slovanski dimenziji zveze Nato po nekaj krogih širitve. Deloma gre za posledico tradicionalno zadržanega odnosa ruskih oblasti do slovanske ideje, ki je v nasprotju z idealizirano nadnacionalno naravo Rusije in lahko spodbudi domači etnični populizem. Čeprav Moskva do zdaj še ni posegla po tem orodju, zgodovinske izkušnje kažejo, da bi kaj takega lahko storila kdaj pozneje, če bi bil pod vprašajem njen obstoj. Instrumentalizacija slovanske identitete zato zahteva pozornost, pri čemer ne le kot grozeča nevarnost, temveč tudi kot mogoč katalizator sprememb na ruski strani.

Ključne besede *Hibridno vojskovovanje, slovanstvo, Nato, širitev, Rusija.*

Abstract The potential weaponization of Slavdom is a poorly researched topic in the literature on hybrid warfare, despite the Slavic dimension of NATO after several rounds of enlargement. Part of the reason is the traditionally reserved attitude of Russian authorities to the Slavic idea, which runs counter to the idealized supranational character of Russia and can incite domestic ethnic populism. Even though Moscow has not used this instrument so far, the historical record shows that it could do so at a later stage if its very existence is at stake. The instrumentalization of Slavic identity therefore requires attention, not only as an impending threat, but also as a potential catalyst for change on the Russian side.

Key words *Hybrid warfare, Slavdom, NATO, enlargement, Russia.*

Introduction

Hydra, in Greek mythology, was the gigantic snake-like monster with several heads that became one of the labours of Hercules. Once the legendary hero engaged the creature, he discovered that as soon as a head was cut off, two new ones would emerge in its place. It was only with the help of his loyal squire Iolaus, who immediately cauterized the fresh wounds, that Hercules finally prevailed – only to succumb to Hydra after all: since he had dipped his arrows into the dead beast's venomous blood, he ended up accidentally dying from its poison.

This mythical story succinctly encapsulates the paradox of Russia's hybrid activities since its annexation of Crimea. The spectre of a possible weaponization of Slavdom began to haunt some of the front-line NATO states early on. Estonia thus organized an exercise in 2015 which included the scenario of a separatist attempt in its north-eastern region, around the town of Narva, with the support of a neighbouring state, the fictional "Aslavia" (Salu, 2015). However, even though this bogus Slavic entity ended up launching a full-scale attack against Estonia, Moscow itself has yet to resort to such an explicit approach. In 2014, the two self-declared states in eastern Ukraine, the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic, drew inspiration from the Soviet era, eschewing any overt ethnic references in their public iconography (Šmíd and Šmídová, 2019, p 547). It is almost as if the Kremlin, which has been accused of behaving "in a 19th century fashion" by invading Ukraine, is wary of activating the Slavic option, which was otherwise closely associated with Russia during that historical period (Epstein, 2014).

In this sense, it is not surprising that in 2015, when the NATO Defence College published a collection of analyses entitled *NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats*, not one of the expert contributions mentioned the potential Slavic aspect of Russian hybrid activities (Lasconjarias and Larsen, 2015). This was despite the fact that by then the Alliance had already acquired a Slavic dimension of its own, through several previous rounds of enlargement. However, while seemingly paradoxical, Moscow's reluctance to engage in identity politics reflects the historically ambiguous approach of Russian authorities to the Slavic idea, which has been mostly perceived as potentially subversive – although not always. It is these exceptions to the rule that warrant a consideration of the potential of Slavdom for hybrid warfare. This article therefore makes a contribution to the field by identifying the possible challenge of Slavic-themed influence operations and the trigger points that could lead Russia to use the option, with a view to undermining stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.¹ It also explains the reasons behind Moscow's cautious approach to such a possibility so far, and highlights why Slavism is perceived as a double-edged sword that could also turn around to haunt the Kremlin itself.

¹ According to NATO's new Strategic Concept: "The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. It seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation. It uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means against us and our partners" (NATO, 2022).

1 SLAVIC NATO

Alfred Rambaud, the respected French expert on the Slavic world, once said that “the Slavs occupied a greater place in the geography of Europe than in the history of Europe” (Waskovich, 1962, p 84). It seems that this also extends to the process of NATO enlargement. Even though it has been analysed at length and sometimes even subjected to extensive criticism, NATO’s Slavic dimension has never really been highlighted. This is despite the fact that it was precisely the events in the Slavic-speaking world that made the post-Cold War rounds of expansion possible in the first place. Russian *perestroika* and the consequent dissolution of the Warsaw Pact created a new reality on the ground in Central and Eastern Europe. It was the conflict in the territory of former Yugoslavia that led NATO to engage for the first time in an out-of-area operation. The annexation of Crimea and subsequent Russian aggression against Ukraine has also had a profound impact on the Alliance.

The enlargement rounds of 1999, 2004, 2009, 2017 and 2020 brought a total of eight Slavic countries into NATO. This new dimension of the Alliance is all the more relevant today, almost four decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall. As it can be seen in Figure 1 (see page 120), altogether there are thirteen Slavic countries in Europe, including the Russian Federation, which geographically extend from the Adriatic and the Baltic Seas in the West to the Pacific Ocean in the East, covering more than one eighth of the Earth’s surface. Table 1 shows that the Slavs number almost 300 million, with nearly a third of them now members of NATO and the European Union, while the remainder represent the bulk of the Euro-Atlantic neighbourhood.

Table 1:
Basic data
on Slavic
countries
(The World
Factbook,
2024)

COUNTRY	EU	NATO	AREA (km ²)	POPULATION
Belarus			207,600	9,383,853
Bosnia and Herzegovina			51,187	3,807,764
Bulgaria	✓	✓	110,879	6,827,736
Croatia	✓	✓	56,594	4,169,239
Czechia	✓	✓	78,867	10,706,242
Montenegro		✓	13,812	602,445
North Macedonia		✓	25,713	2,133,410
Poland	✓	✓	312,685	37,991,766
Russian Federation			17,098,242	141,698,923
Serbia			77,474	6,693,375
Slovakia	✓	✓	49,035	5,425,319
Slovenia	✓	✓	20,273	2,099,790
Ukraine			603,550	43,306,477
TOTAL	6	8	18,705,911	274,846,339

Attention to the possible implications of this development was initially limited to academic circles. In 1993, a Slovenian linguist, Milan Dolgan, published a Declaration on Mutual Language-Cultural Awareness among Slavic Countries, Nations and Minorities. He based his initiative on the following assessment:

We live in a time of intra-Slavic confrontation. We do not accept the leading position of Russia and the Russian language. The most at odds with each other are the neighbouring Slavic peoples: Czechs and Slovaks, Russians and Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Macedonians, Slovenes and other Yugoslavs, Serbs and Croats, etc. A savage fratricidal Slavic war is going on. Terrible devastation is taking place in the political, economic and spiritual (cultural) spheres, as well as in private life (Dolgan, 1993, p 193).

Despite this prescient analysis, the appeal fell on deaf ears. It seems as if, due to the disappearance of the Soviet Bloc and the desire to join Western institutions, there was uneasiness in the general public in referring to all things Slavic. This, at least, was the assessment of the then Czech President, Vaclav Klaus (1995), when addressing the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London on the occasion of its 90th anniversary:

To proclaim openly one's affinity to Slavism was always a symptom of having an alternative, substitute political programme (Ersatzprogramm) to civic freedom, to political democracy, to Czech patriotism, to our pro-European orientation, etc. The adjective "Slavic" does not deserve it, but its fate has been rather complicated. At least in our part of the world. So, to summarize, I like being a Slav but I feel being a Slav more as an object of inquiry than being a Slav as a subject of history.

And yet, the question of agency remains, partly due to the developments in the largest of the Slavic countries, the Russian Federation.

2 NEW (OLD) RUSSIA

The establishment of Russian identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union was a complex process. This was not only due to the confusion following the loss of the superpower status in which the Russians played the role of a "master nation". The Russian Federation is a quarter smaller than the Soviet Union, but territorially still the largest country in the world. More importantly, the proportion of the ethnic Russian population in the territory controlled by Moscow rose from 50% to over 80% (Rupnik, 1999, p 194). In comparison with the Soviet Union, therefore, today's Russia is a relatively homogeneous entity. The dilemmas triggered by this new fact were most clearly evident in the uncertainties and debates over Russian national symbols.

The consensus that ultimately prevailed among the elite emphasized the focus on great power continuity, which is particularly evident every year on May 9, at the beginning of the traditional Victory Day military parade in Red Square. The event, reinstated in 1996, begins with a procession of standard-bearers before the honour tribune at Lenin's Mausoleum, carrying in succession the modern Russian tricolour and the battle flag of the 150th Infantry Division of the former Red Army, which was hoisted over the German Reichstag in Berlin in the final operation of World War II (Godzimirski, 2008, p 21). All of this runs to the sounds of the Preobrazhensky March, the elite military formation of former Imperial Russia.

It therefore seems that not only official Moscow but also the broader population draws direct parallels between the situation of today's Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the position of former Imperial Russia in the period following the painful defeat in the Crimean War in 1856. Renowned Russian historian Radzinsky (2007, p 7) even dubbed this part of the 19th century as the "first Russian *perestroika*". It is perhaps for this reason that such importance is attributed in official Russian foreign policy circles to Prince Alexander Mikhailovich Gorchakov, the legendary Foreign Minister during the reign of Tsar Alexander II, known in Russian diplomatic history for his call for the systematic restoration of the country's international status as a great power, and his associated statement: "They say that Russia is angry. No, Russia is not angry. It is pulling itself together" (Trenin, 2007, p 64).

Such shaping of national identity and drawing of inspiration from a specific historical period automatically raises questions about Moscow's attitude towards some prevailing themes of that time. Among these, Slavic identity stands out, as it was one of the central domestic and foreign policy issues of Imperial Russia in the 19th century, especially in the form of "Pan-Slavism", which represented a convenient response to the Russian dilemma after the Crimean War, seeing in relations and cooperation with the European Slavs not only the possibility of compensating for defeat, but also ensuring an appropriate response to the challenge posed to the Russian side by the emerging great national states of the West (Hosking, 1997, p 368). In this sense, the Slavic idea, through the activities of influential Slavic committees in many Russian cities, and with the unprecedented mobilization of public opinion in support of Serbian and Bulgarian insurgents in the Balkans, was also an undeniable catalyst for the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 (Tuminez, 2000, p 79; Stone, 2006, p 131). The question that poses itself is, therefore, will Russia play this card again?

3 HYBRID HORIZONS

Hybrid challenges to security appeared on the Euro-Atlantic horizons in 2014 with the Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine. At that time, they were defined by the former NATO Deputy Secretary-General, Alexander Vershbow, as "combining military intimidation, disguised intervention, the covert supply of weapons and weapon systems, economic blackmail, diplomatic duplicity and media

manipulation, with outright disinformation” (Topychkanov, 2015). The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, which was established in 2017 in Helsinki under the auspices of the European Union and NATO, treats them as “a wide array of harmful activities with different goals, ranging from influence operations and interference all the way to hybrid warfare” (Hybrid CoE, 2024). Nonetheless, many analysts caution that despite the attractive name, the concept of hybrid operations is not fundamentally new. The legendary Chinese general and strategist Sun Tzu (2004, pp 31, 37) emphasized as early as the 6th century BC that “all warfare is based on deception” and that “supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting”.

The conclusion that during the hybrid era the focus of multi-layered operations lies precisely in influencing target populations is also something that General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, emphasized in his well-known paper of 2013.² His analysis of the causes, course and consequences of the Arab Spring led him to the following conclusion:

The very “rules of war” have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population (Gerasimov, 2013).

This immediately raises the question of whether Slavic identity is also one of these “nonmilitary measures”, which Moscow could utilize with the aim of exploiting its “protest potential”. The issue is all the more pertinent as the Russian side, with actions such as the sabotage of an ammunition depot in the Czech Republic in 2014, the use of nerve agent Novichok against arms dealer Emilian Gebrev in Bulgaria in 2015 and its former agent Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom in 2018, as well as a similar attempt on the life of political dissident Alexei Navalny in 2020, has already shown its readiness to go to the extremes. Commenting on these events in the light of the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and the subsequent cooling of relations between the West and Russia, Galeotti (2021) stated:

Since then, a Russian leadership convinced it is fighting an underground yet existential struggle for its country’s place in the world and true sovereignty, has adopted a wartime mentality, willing to take risks, accept tactical defeats and bear the burdens of sanctions and censure alike in the name of the struggle.

The situation thus raises the possibility that, due to this heightened sense of vulnerability, the Russian side will also resort to appeals to Slavic unity and

² Some have even named this approach after him, styling it the “Gerasimov Doctrine”. However, his article actually represents the Russian interpretation of the modern Western way of war (Galeotti, 2018).

weaponize them, in the same way it has weaponized information in the new hybrid Cold War reality (Waltzman, 2017, pp 3-4).

4 PUTIN'S CRITERION

Ironically, the Russian President Vladimir Putin has already addressed the issue in December 2014, during his annual press conference. At that time, he received a rather direct question from a participant, who first stated that the sanctions and hostility of certain countries towards Russia are one thing, whereas “it is frustrating that Slavic nations that we always considered friendly have joined in” (Kremlin, 2014). He therefore asked: “Do you think Slavic nations . . . could establish some sort of a friendly union, not necessarily even a formal alliance?” Putin responded to the provocative inquiry as follows:

As for the Slavic countries, you probably know that they operate in a tough economic environment, and are consequently subject to a lot of pressure. Even the Russian economy is influenced by the foreign economic landscape, and to a certain extent, by sanctions, let alone those small countries. They are highly dependent and face many challenges in ensuring their sovereignty. However, I strongly believe that deep down, there is an aspiration among Slavic nations to preserve cultural and spiritual, if not political, unity. This aspiration is still there and will always be there, it cannot be uprooted (Kremlin, 2014).

This answer is interesting for a number of reasons, as it contains not only a principled recognition of intra-Slavic kinship, but also a clear demonstration of confidence in Russian uniqueness: on one side “those small countries”, and on the other, Russia. The former are not only “dependent”, but barely maintain their “sovereignty”, while for Russia, international economic trends and sanctions are primarily a matter of cognizance, as it is immune to pressures. On one side, therefore, are weak principalities; on the other, a powerful tsardom. However, in the end, Putin does acknowledge their “cultural and spiritual” affinity, which cannot be denied and cannot be eradicated, although primarily because of the peoples themselves and despite their state formations, which are apparently not even capable of real foreign policy independence.

The reason for this duality in approach is the official vision of Russian identity and mission. An important document on this topic is the article “Russia: The National Question,” which then-Prime Minister Putin published in January 2012 as part of his campaign for the presidential elections. In it, he emphasized from the outset that the issue of identity is important for Russia precisely because of its “diversity of languages, traditions, ethnicities and cultures” (Putin, 2012). According to him, historically, Russia is neither an ethnic entity nor an American melting pot, but a multinational state. This, he claims, is evidenced by ancient chroniclers, who noted that on Russian soil, some spoke “in the Slavic language”, while others spoke “in their own languages” (Putin, 2012). The stem and connecting fabric of this unique

civilization are Russian culture and the Russian people, who emerged from the fusion of various Slavic tribes. Putin specifically mentions the Polyans, Drevlyans, Novgorodians, Polotskians, Dregoviches, Severians and Buzhans. Therefore, those who seek to uproot this stem from Russia with entirely false arguments about the right of Russians to self-determination and their racial purity are actually attempting to force people to destroy their own homeland with their own hands. In this regard, Putin (2012) emphasizes the following:

I am deeply convinced that attempts to preach the idea of building a Russian “national” mono-ethnic state are contrary to our entire millennia-old history. Moreover, this is the shortest path to the destruction of the Russian people and Russian statehood, as well as any effective and sovereign statehood in our country.

According to Putin, the Russian people long ago self-identified as a multi-ethnic civilization, connected by a Russian cultural core. This means that the Russian people are primarily and above all state-forming, and their statehood derives from the very existence of Russia. Outside this context, there is no Russian identity, as evidenced most clearly by the fact that ethnic Russians have never formed enduring national diasporas in emigration. The great mission of the Russians is thus to unite and strengthen their own civilization through language, culture and universal engagement: “Such a civilizational identity is based on the preservation of Russian cultural dominance, the bearers of which are not only ethnic Russians but also all other bearers of such an identity, regardless of nationality” (Putin, 2012). In this sense, Russia has long surpassed the model of a contemporary nation-state which is in crisis, as well as the American assimilationist model, which has also failed under the pressure of multiculturalism. According to Putin, the unique Russian experience of state development must therefore be nurtured and preserved through a national policy based on civic patriotism.

5 SLAVDOM CRIMINALIZED

Putin’s argumentation to a large extent explains the current Russian reservations towards ethnic Slavdom, as well as the fear of Russian nationalism. As a rule, modern Slavic states and societies are predominantly mono-ethnic, with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, held together by the Dayton Accords, and North Macedonia, dependent on the Ohrid Agreement. However, this contemporary Slavic ethnic principle is directly at odds with the great power ideal of the Russian elite. As a result, scepticism and suspicion towards Slavic identity and the Slavic idea in today’s Russia also extend to law enforcement agencies, such as the Russian Ministry of Justice.

In 2004, both the “Asgardian Slavic Community” and the “Slavic Community of Temples of the Wisdom of Perun” already found themselves on the official Russian list of extremist organizations (Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, 2018).

In 2006, they were followed by the “Krasnodar Orthodox Slavic Community” and in 2010 by the “Interregional Social Movement Slavic Union” and the “Primorsky Regional Social Organization for Human Rights – Union of Slavs”. Given that the “Group Jamat of Muvhahids” was only banned in 2007 as the first Muslim organization, it means that in contemporary Russia, an individual is almost more likely to be suspected of extremism if they are interested in Slavdom than in Islam.³

While the Russian authorities pre-emptively targeted organizations emphasizing Slavic identity, their crackdown on Russian-oriented associations was no less thorough. According to the Russian Ministry of Justice, the first one to be banned was the “Assembly of the Kuban Land and the Spiritual-Tribal State of Rus” in 2006. It was followed by “Russian National Unity” in 2009, and the “National Socialist Workers’ Party of Russia” and the “Army of People’s Will” in 2010. The “National Socialist Initiative of the City of Cherepovets”, the “Spiritual-Tribal State of Rus”, the “Russian All-National Union” and the “Movement against Illegal Immigration” followed in 2011. The turn of “Blood and Honour” and the “Northern Brotherhood” came in 2012, while the “Patriotic Club of the White Cross” was blacklisted in 2015. The “Ethnopolitical Association Russians”, the “Russian National Association Attack” and the “All-Russian Political Party Freedom” were banned in 2016, with the “Autonomous Organization of Youth Education Northern Boundary” following in 2017. The “National Bolshevik Party,” which is essentially nationalist, was already sanctioned in 2007.

In light of these measures, it seems as if the biggest threat to Russia comes from – the Russians themselves. As Ransel and Shallcross (2005, p 3) pointed out: “In the Russian context, with its emphasis on the supremacy of the state and dynasty (or Party), the type of ethnic and linguistic nationalism that had developed in the West could not but seem subversive, even when used to mobilize ethnic Russians themselves”. Due to this fear that identity politics could have on their citizens, Russian authorities vigilantly monitor activities of political parties. National-oriented ones are subject to special treatment, usually a combination of carrot and stick. A good example is the story of the “Motherland” party and its leader, Dmitry Rogozin. In 2003, it received over 9% of votes in the State Duma elections, which means that 5.5 million voters identified with its “national-patriotic” platform. As a result, Rogozin even became the Deputy Speaker of the Russian parliament. In light of his increasing popularity and the fact that the party had become the second-largest in the country, the Kremlin intervened just before the local elections to the influential Moscow City Council in 2005 and banned “Motherland” from participating, ostensibly because of the chauvinistic nature of its anti-immigrant television commercials (Jack, 2004, p 327).

³ This also explains the story of a young female student who was charged in 2012 with publicly promoting Nazi iconography simply because she had been carrying a plastic bag with the depiction of the ancient, swastika-like Slavic symbol of “kolovrat” (Korol, 2013). This was not an isolated incident, as similar legal proceedings were also started in other cases.

Rogozin was later co-opted and sent to Brussels as the Russian Ambassador to NATO. However, even there, he ultimately proved to be an annoyance to the authorities, both for nationalist and Slavic reasons. In 2011, for instance, he launched the idea of establishing Slavic military units in the Russian army, modelled on the French Foreign Legion: “Why couldn’t we create, for example, a similar ‘Slavic battalion’ of Serbs, Bulgarians and representatives of other nations – those who would like to serve in the Russian Armed Forces?” (Kostyukova, 2011) He further suggested granting Russian citizenship to the interested Kosovo Serbs and settling them in abandoned Russian villages beyond the Urals. The response was immediate, with then-President Dmitry Medvedev publicly warning – at a meeting with representatives of civil society from North Ossetia – against “nationalistic outbursts using offensive nationalist rhetoric” and emphasizing that in the Russian Federation, “where 180 nations live, this must not be allowed under any circumstances” (Samarina, 2011).

6 HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

Although seemingly paradoxical, this reaction is actually in line with the historical record. Contrary to the often-held misconception, Slavism as a philosophical and social phenomenon was not born in Russia, but in Central Europe (Kohn, 1961, p 323). While the kinship of Slavic peoples was already noted in the oldest Slavic chronicles, including that of Nestor of Kyivan Rus’, the first worked-out proposal of Slavic cooperation was addressed to the Russian Tsar by a Kajkavian Croat.⁴ A Jesuit by training, who arrived in Moscow in 1659 of his own accord, Juraj Križanić hoped for Slavic unification and Church unity, which he thought would protect the smaller Slavic nations from both Germanization and Ottomanization (Benedejčič, 2016, p 1146). He therefore lobbied for the opening up of the tsarist administration to all Slavs; for the exclusion of non-Slavic merchants from Russia; for the expulsion of foreign diplomats and military advisers; and for putting an end to wars with other Slavic nations, including Poland: “Today the Turks and the Crimean Tatars wish to the Poles, while the German emperor and the Swedes wish to us – nothing better than what a wolf wishes to sheep. Still, some manipulate – us, while others – them, just as they want” (Križanić, 2003, p 239). However, his Slavic righteousness was perceived as a disruptive fundamentalism that went against the tsarist *realpolitik*. As pointed out by Rupnik (1999, p 46), Muscovite princes “fought more often with their own Slavic brothers than with traditional non-Slavic enemies; furthermore, in battles against ‘their own’, they often forged alliances with Tatar khans”. Consequently, Tsar Alexis exiled Križanić to Siberia, where he spent a full fifteen years, despite

⁴ The reference to other Slavs is found in the opening pages of the Primary Chronicle from the early 12th century: “Among these seventy-two nations, the Slavic race is derived from the line of Japheth, since they are the Noricians, who are identical with the Slavs. Over a long period, the Slavs settled beside the Danube, where the Hungarian and Bulgarian lands now lie. From among these Slavs, (6) parties scattered throughout the country and were known by appropriate names, according to the places where they settled. Thus, some came and settled by the river Morava, and were named Moravians, while others were called Czechs. Among these same Slavs are included the White Croats, the Serbs, and the Carinthians” (Nestor, 1953, pp 52-53).

numerous pleas for clemency, leading Petrovich (1956, p 8) to conclude: “This first program of Panslavism found no fertile soil at all in the Tsar’s domains.”

This hard-headed and unsentimental approach was maintained by successive Russian rulers. A good case in point is Tsar Nicholas I, who witnessed the emergence of Slavophilism. This was born out of the Moscow society salons of the 1830s, and represented a response to Westernism by attempting, for the first time in Russian history, to explain the uniqueness of Russian identity. It also required addressing the question of how it differs from that of other Slavic nations. The answer was found in the claim that it is only the Russians who have managed to preserve a direct connection with genuine Slavic roots.⁵ However, the resulting choice of name caused early Slavophiles considerable trouble with the Russian authorities. It almost seemed as if their love for genuine, Slavic Russia was taken for subversive activity. According to Desyaterik (2002, p 348), the suspicious attitude of the powers that be towards their activism was vividly demonstrated by the Tsar’s own handwritten remarks in the margins of the responses of the renowned Slavophile Ivan Aksakov on the questionnaire of the Third Section of the Imperial Chancellery, that is, the Russian secret police:

Supposed concern for the imaginary oppression of Slavic tribes conceals within itself the criminal thought of rebellion against the lawful authority of neighbouring and partly allied states, and of a common union, not expected from God’s grace, but from resentment, which is disastrous for Russia! . . . And I regret this, for it means mixing the punishable with the sacred.

After some thought, Tsar Nicholas I also added the following in writing: “Only God can determine what will happen in the distant future; however, if circumstances were indeed to lead to such a union, it would be the death of Russia” (Desyaterik, p 353, 2002).

In this sense it might appear strange that his son, Tsar Alexander II, is associated with the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, which was ostensibly fought on behalf of the oppressed Southern Slavs against the Ottoman Empire. In reality, the episode bears witness to the impact that public opinion can have on Russian rulers in times of reforms, in this case the Great Reforms of the 1860s. The Tsar himself was actually reluctant to start the hostilities. In fact, in his meeting with the German Ambassador in early August 1876 in Saint Petersburg, he confided to him in French that he did not wish for complications with other major European powers, only “pour les beaux yeux des Slaves”, that is “for the beautiful eyes of the Slavs” (Geyer, 1987, p 69). In this he resembled his contemporary, the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky (1919, p 897), who wrote in his diary the following thoughts: “According to my inner, my fullest and now irresistible conviction, Russia has never had such haters,

⁵ In 1848, one of the founders of the Slavophile movement even wrote that Czechs and Poles are lost for Slavdom, because “the German-Roman damage . . . has gnawed into their bones and brains” (Khomakov, 1900, p 177).

enviers, calumniators and even open enemies as she will have in these Slavic tribes – just as soon as Russia has liberated them and Europe has consented to recognize their liberation!”

7 FUTURE PROSPECTS

Is Slavism, then, a spent concept, an incongruous Chimera, a figment of imagination?⁶ One would be inclined to think so, were it not for the persistent ambiguity from the Russian side. The self-same Dostoyevsky (1919, pp 900-901), while railing against the “narrowness”, “obstinacy”, “bad habits” and “betrayal” of smaller Slavic nations, also stated that Russia is still obliged to protect them, “perhaps, occasionally, even drawing her sword in their defence”. Why? Because it is only thus that Russia can live for a loftier purpose. In other words, according to Dostoyevsky, Russia must remain pro-Slavic primarily for its own good, for its higher mission, its all-human purpose, which, according to him, is also the essence of the Russian idea. It is therefore not unimportant that even though he publicly dismissed the other Slavs as belonging to weak statelets, President Putin nonetheless emphasized their cultural closeness with Russians, which “will always be there and cannot be uprooted” (Kremlin, 2014).

These mixed messages are important, especially in the light of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has opened up a number of dilemmas. In addition to sanctions, a significant part of the Western response to Moscow’s actions has been the adoption of a number of deterrent and defensive measures. In practice this means that soldiers from all the Slavic members of NATO are present in multinational commands and battle groups on the Alliance’s eastern flank.⁷ To be sure, this is not the first time that the Russian side has been directly confronted by soldiers from other Slavic nations. Poles represented a good sixth of Napoleon’s Grande Armée, which marched towards Moscow in 1812, and several thousand Slovenes were also directly involved in the campaign as members of the Illyrian Regiment (Gieysztor et al., 1982, p 338; Švajncer, 1992, p 73). A similar situation occurred at the outbreak of World War I, when the Russian side in Galicia faced representatives from practically all the Slavic nations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A quarter of a century later, both Tiso’s Slovakia and Pavelić’s Croatia were militarily engaged against the Soviet Union, the latter with a reinforced regiment.

The World War II episode is especially instructive. Faced with a momentary existential crisis, Moscow did the unthinkable and actually publicly appealed to Slavic solidarity. In August 1941, the All-Slavic Committee was founded in

⁶ Udovič (2011, p 47) went as far as claiming “that Slavism is passé and that its relevance in the today’s world is obsolete”.

⁷ In 2023, soldiers from Czechia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia were stationed as part of the multinational NATO battle group in Latvia. Czech soldiers were also stationed in Lithuania, while Croatians joined Poles in Poland, where they monitor the vulnerable one hundred kilometre stretch between the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus near the town of Suwalki (NATO, 2023). Bulgarians are present in Poland within NATO’s multinational command element in Bydgoszcz (NATO, 2024).

Moscow, and simultaneously, an All-Slavic Congress was organized, attended by representatives from all the Slavic nations (Benedežić, 2021, p 155). The Committee itself was based in the building of the SovInformBureau, which was responsible for Soviet propaganda, including in the countries of occupied Europe (Hosking, 2006, p 207). As can be observed in Figure 2 (see page 120), the latter began regularly incorporating Slavic-themed posters into its mass production, with messages such as “Brother Slavs! All rise against the common enemy – fascism!” and “To arms, Slavs! – Let’s destroy the fascist oppressors!” The Committee primarily relied on communists from other Slavic countries in its work, who were actively involved in preparing its informational programmes and propaganda activities, which had a global reach. As such it represented the apotheosis of “the ideologues of the Slavic revival of the 19th century about establishing a community of Slavic nations” (Dostal, 2000, p 185). However, its existence came to an abrupt end in 1948, with the breakdown in relations between Belgrade and Moscow.⁸

It follows that while the Russian state as such has had a historically reserved attitude to Slavic cooperation, there are important exceptions to this rule. These are associated with periods of democratic populist reforms, and instances of severe national danger.⁹ Otherwise, in the official circles, Slavism has been mostly regarded as a relatively dangerous and basically undesirable phenomenon, which runs contrary to the idealized supranational character of Russia and which could unleash destructive ethnic populism. And herein lies Putin’s dilemma: to resort, or not to resort to Slavism? It is therefore interesting that while in 2013 the “Slavic Corps” became the first ever Russian private military company to be unceremoniously abolished, in 2015 Russia hosted the “Slavic Brotherhood” military exercise, which brought together, for the first time at the tactical level, elite units from Russia, Belarus and Serbia, with Russian used as the language of communication (Spearin, 2018, p 44). The turning point between these two episodes – one “anti-Slavic” and the other “pro-Slavic” – was the outbreak of the crisis in and around Ukraine in 2014. In the following years, the “Slavic Brotherhood” drills became a regular occurrence, with those in 2017 even interpreted by some Western analysts as a prelude to the extensive manoeuvres “Zapad 2017”, which were supposed to threaten the Baltic states and Poland (Sukhankin, 2017). When in 2019 the exercise took place in Serbia, its participants were addressed by Brigadier General Miroslav Talijan, commander of the 72nd Brigade for Special Operations of the Serbian Army, with the following

⁸ As emphasized by Kohn (1960, p 325): “The Pan-Slav programme of a union of all Slavs into a powerful whole, shaping the political and cultural destinies of mankind, has never come near realization except in the brief period from 1945 to 1948, when for the first time in history it became part of the official ideology of a powerful government.”

⁹ In fact, even Tsar Nicholas I, when faced with the pressure of the Crimean War, toyed for a while with the idea of activating the Slavic option. In distress, he even contemplated inciting unrest in Austria, which kept holding up part of his forces by maintaining its military presence on the Russian border. Thus, he sent the following message to his ambassador in Vienna: “It is highly likely that our victories will lead to Slav revolts in Hungary. We shall use them to threaten the heart of the Austrian Empire and force her government to accept our conditions” (Figes, 2010, pp 167-168).

words: “We are not only descendants of brothers in arms, but also brothers by blood!” (Grozni, 2019)

A Slavic “imagined community” is thus not merely an analytical construct, but an objective reality.¹⁰ As already observed by editors of *Osteuropa*, a specialized German monthly on Eastern Europe, “in the many manifestations of the Slavic idea over almost two centuries, the flexibility and openness of this ideology are evident” (Sapper and Weichsel, 2009, p 6). In that sense, parallels can be drawn with Arab collective identity and the persistent tensions between pan-Arabism on the one hand and state-centric models on the other. Barnett (1996, pp 401, 404) thus highlighted that although “Arab leaders routinely paid lip service to the ideals of pan-Arabism while engaging in power-seeking behaviour”, they also understood that “pan-Arabism represents both a force to be reckoned with and a potential threat to other Arab regimes by challenging their legitimacy, sovereignty and internal stability”. This is also why “the waxing and waning of pan-Arabism has had a profound effect on military alliances in the Middle East” (Jepperson et al., 1996, p 64). In similar vein, the waxing and waning of Slavism has the potential to either threaten the stability of the Kremlin or affect the unity within Euro-Atlantic structures. It is therefore deeply symbolic that the new Slovak Prime Minister, Robert Fico, marked the second anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine by criticizing the collective West with the claim that its “only plan is to continue supporting the mutual killing of Slavs” (Fico, 2024). It was, after all, a Slovak, by the name of Ján Kollár, who in the first half of the 19th century not only formulated the very concept of “Slavic reciprocity”, but also provided a programme of action with the aim of deepening mutual cooperation (Benedejčič, 2016, p 1147).

Conclusion

The seamless annexation of Crimea by Russia and its insidious intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014 not only shook the international rules-based order to the core, but also led to a focus on the role of hybrid techniques in achieving military objectives. Instead of developing further its Afghanistan-acquired know-how in expeditionary warfare and becoming the hub of a global security network, NATO turned back to the basics of deterrence and defence. Yet, as the enlarged Alliance strengthened its posture on the eastern flank, the subject of its newly acquired Slavic dimension and its possible security implications was not addressed. This was despite the fact that the current confrontation between the West and Russia is in many ways an intra-Slavic one, and is therefore fraught with historical complexities that extend from episodes of interventionism to periods of collaboration.

¹⁰ In the revised and expanded edition of his pioneering bestseller on the origins of nationalism, Benedict Anderson (2006, p 211) had this to say about the “geo-biography” of the book *Imagined Communities*: “In the US, which has never had a ‘quality press,’ it was scarcely noticed. The academic journals were no different. It was only in the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, and the rapid rise of identity politics on the domestic front, that this situation changed.” The success of one of today’s standard references in the study of nations and national identity was thus linked to developments in the Slavic world.

The main reason why the potential instrumentalization of Slavic identity has not been particularly highlighted in the burgeoning literature on hybrid threats is because the Russian side has not really reached for it. This is in line with the historically reserved attitude of Russian authorities to the Slavic idea, which has the Hydra-like potential of causing unpredictable consequences, including on the domestic front in Russia proper in the form of ethnic nationalism. However, it would be wrong to assume that the relatively reserved stance of Moscow with regard to Slavism will continue in the future. The fact that the Russian state has not used this instrument so far during the new crisis period with the West does not mean that it will not do so at a later stage. The historical record shows that this could happen if the Kremlin were to conclude that its very existence is at stake.

Acknowledging such a possibility is the first step to addressing it. As pointed out by Kohn (1960, p xvii), although the Slavic idea “has so far not become a political or cultural reality”, it has not only “moved many Slavic minds”, but also “enthused the Slav masses” and “become an instrument of Russian imperialism”, and as a result “preoccupied and frightened the statesmen and political observers of other nations”. It would therefore make sense for NATO to update its hybrid toolbox by openly identifying this potential challenge to its internal cohesion, with a view to having it addressed by the Allies, if necessary. This would not require reinventing the wheel, just updating the institutional memory by reaching back in history. A principled position on this issue was most clearly formulated at the Slavic Congress in Sofia in 1910 by Karel Kramář, the Czech founder of the Neo-Slav movement in Austria-Hungary: “No Slav may oppress another Slavic nation” (Benedejčič, 2021, p 139). This was true then and it is true now. NATO’s International Secretariat and its Public Diplomacy Division could thus engage with the Allies by increasing awareness of Ukrainian ethnogenesis and its political history. This would go a long way towards dispelling numerous misconceptions and misunderstandings, especially among those members of the public in Slavic members of the Alliance, who tend to approach the ongoing conflict by projecting their own, language-based understanding of identity onto a country and a people, who first and foremost base their self-perception and trace back their origins to Kyivan Rus”.¹¹

While taking into account the potential challenges of identity politics, the collective West should not only acknowledge, but also try to make use of its newly acquired Slavic dimension. After all, the original Slavic practices and traditions, unlike those of Muscovy, are in their essence deeply democratic, as evidenced by “the old city democracies of Novgorod and Pskov” (Banac, 1987, p 46). Putin, on the other hand, believes that what other Slavs lack in actual subjectivity is what the Russians

¹¹ The translator of the Slovenian edition of the acclaimed history of Ukraine, *The Gates of Europe* thus explains at the very outset to the reader that “in the Slovenian language the ethnonym Rus’ (Pycn) and its variants are usually equated with the expression Kievan Russia” (Plokhy, 2022, p 27). This is also true of a number of other Slavic languages, and goes a long way towards highlighting a persistent gap in mutual awareness and understanding, even though a very clear distinction in form and meaning between the terms Rus’ and Russia exists in both Ukrainian and Russian.

have supposedly achieved by transcending their Slavic identity through a powerful state and a civilizational mission. In this sense, the struggle that the Ukrainians are waging today is also a battle over Putin's disparaging assessment of other Slavs. It is therefore imperative to make him not only face his dilemma but, even more importantly, to have him witness its consequences through the emergence of what the late democracy advocate Alexey Navalny envisioned as “the beautiful Russia of the future” (Noble and Petrov, 2024).

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