



REPORT

RUSSIAN EXPERTISE ON UKRAINE

| IGOR GRETSKIY |

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BelSU	Belgorod State University
CBUS	Centre for Belarusian and Ukrainian Studies, Moscow State University
CES	Centre for Eurasian Studies, Moscow State Institute of International Relations
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
Comecon	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
CPSS	Centre for Post-Soviet Studies
DA MFA	Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia
DNR	Donetsk People's Republic (<i>Донецкая Народная Республика</i> , Russian-backed separatist entity)
FDI	foreign direct investment
FIIA	Finnish Institute of International Affairs
FOI	Swedish Defence Research Agency (<i>Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut</i>)
GARF	State Archive of the Russian Federation
GONGO	government-organised non-governmental organisation
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate (<i>Главное разведывательное управление</i> , Russia)
HSE	Higher School of Economics
IE	Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences
IIS	MGIMO Institute for International Studies
IMEMO	Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences
IMF	International Monetary Fund
InEcon	Institute of Economics, Russian Academy of Sciences
INION	Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences, Russian Academy of Sciences
IRH	Institute of Russian History, Russian Academy of Sciences
ISPR	Institute of Socio-Political Research, Russian Academy of Sciences
ISS	Institute of Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences
KGB	Committee for State Security (<i>Комитет государственной безопасности</i> , the USSR)
LDNR	Combined reference to the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics
LNR	Luhansk People's Republic (<i>Луганская Народная Республика</i> , Russian-backed separatist entity)
LSU	Leningrad State University
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MGIMO	Moscow State Institute of International Relations (<i>Московский государственный институт международных отношений</i>)
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MPSU	Moscow Pedagogical State University
MSU	Moscow State University
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NLR	National Library of Russia
OPFL	Opposition Platform – For Life (Ukrainian political party)
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSW	Centre for Eastern Studies (<i>Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich</i> , Poland)
RANEPA	Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration
RAS	Russian Academy of Sciences
RAU	Russian Association of Ukrainianists
RGGU	Russian State University for the Humanities
RIAC	Russian International Affairs Council
RISA	Russian International Studies Association
RISS	Russian Institute for Strategic Studies
RSL	Russian State Library
RT	Russia Today (Russian government-controlled and state-funded international propaganda outlet)

RUDN	Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (<i>Российский университет дружбы народов</i>)
SBU	Security Service of Ukraine
SPbU	St Petersburg State University
SVOP	Council on Foreign and Defence Policy (<i>Совет по внешней и оборонной политике</i>)
SVR	Foreign Intelligence Service (<i>Служба внешней разведки</i> , Russia's civilian foreign intelligence agency)
TRT	Turkish Radio and Television (Turkish state broadcaster)
TVTs	TV Centre (Russian TV channel)
UN GA	United Nations General Assembly
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WoS	Web of Science database by Clarivate
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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Any errors of fact or interpretation remain entirely my own responsibility.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IGOR GRETSKIY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines how expertise on contemporary Ukraine developed in Russia, what institutional and professional characteristics shaped it, and what role Russian experts play in the production and dissemination of narratives about Ukraine. Its conclusions are supported by evidence from several sources, including archival material, expert directories, dissertation records, bibliometric data from the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, and analysis of Ukraine-related publications and books. Among the study's key findings is the concept of a neo-imperial discursive matrix, an analytical tool for tracing how a persistent set of narratives about Ukraine has radicalised across different stages of Russia's post-Soviet history.

The Russian expert system is poorly equipped to produce independent, Ukraine-specific knowledge. The field has remained institutionally underdeveloped, heavily dependent on state structures, and shaped by a state-centric corporate culture. Russian experts often lack specialised competencies for studying Ukraine. Many prominent commentators have backgrounds in American studies, international security, or other broad fields rather than Ukrainian affairs. Knowledge of Ukrainian is exceedingly rare, limiting direct engagement with Ukrainian-language scholarship, media, and primary sources. Russian analysis consequently relies heavily on Russian-language information. As a result, it tends to reproduce the Russian information agenda rather than critically engage with Ukraine's own intellectual and informational environment.

The Russian expert community treats foreign-policy expertise primarily as a service to the state rather than as an independent professional activity. Archival evidence indicates that neo-imperial and revanchist thinking dominated within Russia's foreign-policy and security establishment from the very earliest days of post-Soviet Russia, targeting Ukraine specifically. Russian experts serviced this line intellectually, dressing it up in the language of analysis and justification. They placed greater weight on loyalty and usefulness to the Kremlin's agenda than on methodological rigour. This is borne out by the near-total absence of genuine reflection on decades of expert failure on Ukraine.

Knowledge about Ukraine produced in Russia is systematically ideologised, which is evident across different forms of scholarly output, namely academic journal articles, dissertations and books. The Russian book market likewise shows a persistent presence of openly propagandistic and pseudo-historical titles, with 'Z-literature' emerging as a distinct subgenre after 2022. At the same time, Russian authors remain marginally involved in the global production of knowledge on Ukraine.

Russian experts generally do not appear to play any role in strategic foreign-policy decision-making. Rather, their primary task is to interpret, legitimise, and operationalise a course set by the Kremlin. Across decades, expert debate has revolved not around whether Ukraine should be drawn back into Moscow's orbit of influence, but how to do so most effectively. The solutions they proposed fall into three main approaches: revanchist neo-imperialism, pragmatic neo-imperialism, and a Yalta-style bargain with the west. Disagreements between proponents of these tactical approaches are persistent, and western observers frequently mistake them for a strategic split, or even dissent from the Kremlin's line.

Institutionally, Russian expertise has been structured around three Ukraine-related functions: (1) to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty through information warfare and political interference; (2) to reshape western public debate in ways favourable to the Kremlin, among other means, exploiting the very platforms western universities provide them, and learning from Hamas's messaging tactics; and (3) to legitimise Russia's policy towards Ukraine for domestic audiences. Although some organisations tend to specialise in a particular form of influence, these functions largely overlap.

Taken together, these findings show that the state-aligned Russian expert milieu on Ukraine functions, in effect, as a factory of propaganda and disinformation. Hence, engagement with the Russian expert community creates specific risks for western institutions. These include mistaking rhetorical distance for moderation, giving Russian narratives institutional legitimacy, lending academic authority to unqualified voices, overlooking propaganda cloaked as legitimate scholarship, and allowing perceived insider access to distort expert assessment.

For western institutions engaging with Russian international-relations experts, the report recommends:

- presume institutional affiliation with the Russian state unless meaningful autonomy can be demonstrated;
- assess the substance of experts' positions rather than their rhetorical distance from the Kremlin;
- treat claims of insider access with extreme caution;
- verify actual subject-specific expertise and publication records;
- strengthen methodological scrutiny of ostensibly academic material.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Soviet period, Russia has had an extensive ecosystem of government-adjacent organisations producing expertise on international relations. Experts in this field are commonly referred to as ‘*mezhdunarodniki*’ (международники). Western studies of the Russian expert community have most often examined it through broad surveys of the institutional structure of its most publicly visible organisations and analyses of their participation in debates on key areas of Russian foreign policy, where Ukraine is just one of many topics.¹ This approach reveals some broad institutional and ideological differences, but offers little insight into the substantive characteristics of their work. This gap can be addressed through a rigorous, in-depth analysis of the narratives that Russian experts promote on a narrowly defined topic such as Ukraine. This report undertakes such an examination.

Even a cursory look at Russian expertise on Ukraine has led the few observers who have studied it to identify three particularly problematic issues: a near-complete absence of Ukrainian-language skills among experts, the absence of specialised research structures, and a shortage of substantive, professionally written literature.² This report begins by testing the extent to which these observations correspond to reality. It analyses the competencies of Russian experts, systematises data on the main centres of Russian expertise on Ukraine, and examines

the publication record both quantitatively and qualitatively. It further assesses the extent to which the expert community influences political decision-making in the Kremlin.

Researchers have already established that the promotion of particular strategic narratives is a central component of Moscow’s foreign policy.³ To this end, the Kremlin employs a wide array of instruments, including efforts to influence western expert communities, academic discourse, and intellectual elites in ‘unfriendly countries’. Understanding how Russia’s expert community is structured and how it operates on Ukraine-related issues can help identify the risks of engaging with actors whose work may also serve to reproduce or transmit Russian strategic narratives, improve tools for countering Russian disinformation, and strengthen resilience against information manipulation. It further contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Russian strategic culture.

Understanding how Russia's expert community is structured and how it operates on Ukraine-related issues contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Russian strategic culture

This report identifies the narratives about Ukraine most actively articulated by Russian authors and traces their evolution through a periodisation developed in the course of this work. It examines not only these narratives individually, but also how they interact to produce a broader interpretation of Ukraine’s place in relation to Russia and the wider international order. The findings show that these narratives are interconnected and form part of a broader hierarchical conception of international relations in which Russia is represented as a major centre of power with special interests and rights in its neighbourhood. On this basis, the report develops the concept of the ‘neo-imperial discursive matrix’ as an analytical tool that may also prove useful for further research on the Russian expert community.

¹ Carolina Vendil Pallin and Susanne Oxenstierna, *Russian Think Tanks and Soft Power* (FOI, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, 2017).

² Yaroslav Hrytsak, “Ignorance Is Power,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2014): 218–228.

³ Bartłomiej Gajos and Ernest Wyciskiewicz, *Narracje polityczne w duchu rosyjskiej propagandy* [Political narratives in the spirit of Russian propaganda] (Centrum Mieroszewskiego, 2025), 222.

METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

This report approaches Russian expertise not as an autonomous professional field, but as a field structurally embedded within, and closely oriented towards, government policy needs. In his classic book, Oded Eran showed that the Soviet regime treated its foreign-policy scholarly establishment as a service provider to the state rather than an independent professional community, drawing on it for three related functions: the training of qualified personnel, the application of specialised knowledge to policy problems, and the legitimisation of the regime's official line.⁴ All three functions run through this report.

Throughout this report, the terms 'Ukrainian studies' and 'expertise on Ukraine' are used in a narrow sense, referring specifically to engagement with contemporary Ukraine. The study also does not examine in detail the Ukraine-related activity of Kremlin-adjacent spin doctors such as Gleb Pavlovsky's Foundation for Effective Politics, since Ukraine was not the object of their systematic professional work. Although Russian political technologists occasionally took part in Ukrainian election campaigns before 2004, they were engaged for their expertise in electoral technology drawn from Russian experience, not as experts on Ukraine as such. Their activity was tied primarily not to Ukraine, but to running electoral and propaganda campaigns within Russia and building large-scale information projects.

The analysis draws on a combination of sources: articles, essays, and reports by Russian experts; video recordings of their lectures and conference presentations; archival materials; and the author's own ethnographic observations from inside the Russian expert community. The databases used include Web of Science, Scopus, and the eLibrary portal, as well as the electronic catalogues of the National Library of Russia (NLR) and the Russian State Library (RSL).

Access to Russian archival materials relating to Ukraine posed a particular difficulty. Formally, access to this part of the collections is not closed, but in practice, since the invasion of Ukraine began, archives have frequently reported that the requested folders are 'currently in use' by their own staff. In fact, this practice serves as a way of restricting access to sensitive materials without a formal denial.

A separate source consisted of published abstracts (*авторефераты*) of candidate and doctoral dissertations in political science and history dealing with contemporary Ukraine, as well as the full texts of some of these dissertations. *Avtoreferats* present, in condensed form, the methodology and structure of a study and are required to contain the key theses submitted for defence, which makes them usable as a compact source of data on a dissertation's content. Analysing their substance and the changing number of *avtoreferats* and dissertations reveals not only a rise or decline in interest in the topic but also shifts in which questions and conceptual approaches are considered most significant in the field. It also provides insight into which organisations actually serve as centres for training expert personnel on Ukraine.

The report deliberately avoids using the term 'think tank' for Russian analytical organisations, since functionally and organisationally, they differ substantially from the western think-tank tradition. First, independent think tanks – like civil society in general – depend on a favourable cultural and political environment that permits a certain degree of autonomy, whereas Russian expert organisations operate within an undemocratic system of coordinates in which public competition of ideas is not encouraged and the process of political decision-making is closed and hyper-centralised. Calling Russian analytical organisations think tanks implicitly attributes to Russia institutional features it does not possess. Second, as Diane Stone has written, the policy focus of think tanks presupposes a two-way "dynamic between knowledge and policy-making."⁵ In the case of Russian expert organisations, this type of dynamic is highly constrained. Third, the

⁴ Oded Eran, *Mezhdunarodniki: An Assessment of Professional Expertise in the Making of Soviet Foreign Policy* (Turtledove Publishing, 1979), 1–2.

⁵ Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (Frank Cass, 1996), 14–16.

funding of Russian expert organisations is excessively dependent on the state and state-affiliated structures and is opaque in character.⁶ Fourth, their public purpose lies not in contributing to open public debate, but in promoting a prescribed position to a specific target audience, maintaining visibility among decision-makers, or demonstrating loyalty. Fifth, when Russian expert organisations themselves openly declare their task to be “promoting Russian foreign policy in the world,”⁷ this seriously calls their intellectual independence into question.

Accordingly, there is insufficient basis for treating Russian expert organisations as think tanks in the conventional western sense. Other designations may therefore be more appropriate, including GONGOs or influence tanks.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the Soviet period, Ukrainian studies, constrained by communist ideology and state censorship, were cultivated almost exclusively at universities and the Academy of Sciences in Ukraine itself. Outside Ukraine, the largest centres of Slavic studies in the USSR were Moscow State University (MSU), Leningrad State University (LSU), and the Academy of Sciences, but Ukrainian studies as such were almost absent there. A basic course on the history of Ukraine could be taken only at LSU.⁸ Consequently, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia had virtually no established institutional capacity for studying contemporary Ukraine.⁹

In effect, Ukraine was *terra incognita* for post-Soviet Russia.¹⁰

The personnel shortage was compounded by a sharp deterioration in the financial position of state universities and Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) institutions. Real wages fell several-fold. Budgets for conducting research,

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia had virtually no established institutional capacity for studying contemporary Ukraine

holding expert events, publishing, and maintaining contacts with foreign partners were severely cut. Trips abroad were financed mainly by the host side, by chance donors, or even out of researchers’ own pockets. Delays in paying scholars’ salaries were widespread. In the early 1990s, monthly salary allocations fell short of the required level by almost 30–40%.¹¹

Academic institutions sharply reduced staff positions. At the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ISS RAS), for example, the number of full-time research staff had fallen by a third by the late 2000s. In reality, however, the number of people actually working may have been smaller. The practice of maintaining ‘dead souls’ on the staff became widespread. Researchers who had started their own businesses, unsure of their success, remained formally listed as Academy employees. Their salaries were informally redistributed, ‘common-pot’ (*общак*) style, to cover bonuses and unforeseen expenses.¹² The practice of multiple affiliations also spread widely, with employees taking fractional positions at several organisations simultaneously.

⁶ Pallin and Oxenstierna, *Russian Think Tanks and Soft Power*, 17.

⁷ Dmitri Trenin, interview by Elena Chernenko, “Мы - нация самодержавная: ни под кем не ходим и не даем упасть миру” [“We Are an Autocratic Nation: We Answer to No One and We Won’t Let the World Fall”], *Kommersant*, 3 April 2026.

⁸ Искусство ТВ (@iskusstvotv), “Проф. Татьяна Таирова-Яковлева, директор Центра по изучению истории Украины СПбГУ. Интервью, 2011” [“Prof. Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva, Director of the Centre for the Study of Ukrainian History at SPbU. Interview, 2011”], YouTube, 1 March 2020.

⁹ Vladimir Volkov, “Российское славяноведение: вчера, сегодня, завтра” [“Russian Slavic Studies: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow”], in M.A. Robinson (ed), *Институт славяноведения и балканистики. 50 лет* [The Institute of Slavic and Balkan Studies: 50 Years] (Indrik, 1996), 7–32.

¹⁰ Konstantin Zatulin, *Война и мир: проблемы и перспективы* [War and Peace: Problems and Prospects] (SPbGUP, 2022), 7.

¹¹ Institute of Slavic Studies RAS, *Отчет Института Балканистики и славяноведения РАН о научной и научно-организационной работе в 1993 г.* [Report of the Institute of Balkan and Slavic Studies, RAS, on Scientific and Organisational Work in 1993] (ISS RAS, 1993), 23.

¹² Pyotr Cherkasov, “Время выживания” [“Time of Survival”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 3 (2014): 98–110.

Preoccupied with their own survival, most researchers and lecturers simply had no incentive for professional development.¹³ Young, promising scholars were among those most likely to leave or lose their positions.¹⁴ The sharp slowdown in staff turnover meant that by the early 2010s the average age of Russian professors was already close to retirement age.¹⁵

Unable to adequately fund science, the state's capacity to exercise administrative control over the academic sphere weakened precipitously and, until the late 2000s, educational institutions enjoyed considerable latitude in choosing their own survival strategies. Centralised administrative control over the allocation of resources was preserved only within the Russian Academy of Sciences, which in turn became independent of governmental agencies in making such decisions.¹⁶ The monopoly of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) as the sole university training specialists in international relations was also broken.¹⁷

The diffusion of institutional autonomy across the academic sector created a temporary window of opportunity for grassroots educational and research initiatives in Ukrainian studies to emerge. Although new pockets of the field subsequently appeared,

The diffusion of institutional autonomy across the academic sector created a temporary window of opportunity for grassroots initiatives

they mostly rested on the efforts of individual enthusiasts. Centres for Ukrainian studies were created only as formal subdivisions of history faculties (e.g., at MSU and St Petersburg State University, SPbU) or as NGOs (e.g., the Scholarly Centre for Ukrainian Studies in Ufa in the 1990s). They had almost no full-time staff. At the same time, the status of a specialised

Interest in the post-Soviet space in general, including Ukraine, remained extremely low

university subdivision made it possible to approach various authorities and, to some extent, eased the search for external funding.

The existence of university departments and centres of Ukrainian studies depended to a considerable degree on student demand for the subject. Interest in the post-Soviet space in general, including Ukraine, remained consistently extremely low. For example, of all 13 master's programmes at the School of International Relations of SPbU, "International Relations in the Post-Soviet Space" attracted one of the smallest numbers of applications. In 2011, of 217 applicants, only 4 (the lowest figure) listed the programme as their top priority. In the last two years – 2024 and 2025 – the programme ranked worst among all master's programmes of the SPbU School of International Relations by the average

¹³ Искусство ТВ (@iskusstvotv), "Проф. Татьяна Таирова-Яковлева" ["Prof. Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva"]; Grigory Golosov, "Политология в России: не очень радостный юбилей" ["Political Science in Russia: A Not-Very-Joyful Anniversary"], *Троицкий вариант. Наука* [Troitsky Variant. Science], 15 November 2016; Volkov, "Российское славяноведение" ["Russian Slavic Studies"].

¹⁴ ISS RAS, "Отчет Института Балканистики и славяноведения РАН о научной и научно-организационной работе в 1993 г." ["Report of the Institute of Balkan and Slavic Studies, RAS, on Scientific and Organisational Work in 1993"], 23.

¹⁵ Tatiana Klyachko, "Образование в Российской Федерации: проблемы и тенденции развития в начале XXI века" ["Education in the Russian Federation: Problems and Development Trends at the Start of the 21st Century"], *Мир России* [Russia's World], no. 1 (2011): 88–124.

¹⁶ Mikhail Sokolov et al., *Как становятся профессорами: академические карьеры, рынки и власть в пяти странах* [How One Becomes a Professor: Academic Careers, Markets, and Power in Five Countries] (Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015), 480–482.

¹⁷ Konstantin Khudoley, "Факультет международных отношений Санкт-Петербургского государственного университета: основные вехи развития, достижения и вызовы (к 30-летию создания)" ["The Faculty of International Relations at St. Petersburg State University: Key Milestones, Achievements, and Challenges (on the 30th Anniversary of Its Founding)"], *Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Международные отношения* [Bulletin of St. Petersburg University. International Relations] 17, no. 4 (2024): 391.

admission score of enrolled students.¹⁸ Programmes in PR in international relations, diplomacy, world politics, and American and European studies traditionally enjoyed the highest student demand. Thus, the “International Relations in the Post-Soviet Space” programme was largely filled, on a residual basis, by the least motivated applicants.

Another example is Russia’s first department of Ukrainian studies, established at Belgorod State University (BelSU) in 2003. Between the 2004/05 and 2007/08 academic years, its teaching load fell by 39.3%.¹⁹ All of the courses it offered were electives, suggesting low student demand for Ukrainian-studies courses. The university’s rectorate tried to solve this problem by increasing the number of faculties commissioning Ukrainian-studies courses, but the department was ultimately closed in 2012 all the same.

The 2000s nevertheless saw attempts to consolidate and institutionalise the community of Ukrainianists in Russia. In 2003, for example, at the initiative of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, a joint Russian–Ukrainian Commission of Historians was established to study disputed questions of the past. In the autumn of 2009, an attempt was made to unite Russian Ukrainianists into a single non-profit organisation, the Russian Association of Ukrainianists (RAU). Its first conference took place in 2010 at the Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU), where 12 papers

were presented, only 4 of which concerned contemporary Ukraine.²⁰

From the late 2000s, conditions for the development of Ukrainian studies in Russia began to deteriorate sharply. First, as rapidly rising energy-export revenues began to refill government coffers, the state began restoring centralised control over the higher-education system, with the natural sciences, rather than the humanities and social sciences, prioritised for development. Second, after Ukraine’s Orange Revolution of 2004, the Russian government became increasingly affected by Maidanophobia – a persistent fear that the Ukrainian scenario of mass protest

After Ukraine's Orange Revolution, the Russian government became affected by Maidanophobia and suspicious of any organised activity related to Ukraine

could be replicated inside Russia – and grew increasingly suspicious of any organised activity related to Ukraine. From this point on, pressure by Russian authorities on activists of the Ukrainian cultural-educational movement intensified,²¹ blanket inspections of Ukrainian diaspora organisations were carried out,²² and a deepening penetration by the security services into the institutional environment associated with promoting Ukrainian culture was recorded.²³ Third, tendentious and aggressively propagandistic media coverage of developments in Ukraine further contributed to the devaluation of political science as a discipline in Russia and of specialist knowledge of contemporary Ukraine in particular. Russian

¹⁸ SPbU, “[Информация о результатах приема на обучение в СПбГУ по образовательным программам магистратуры в 2024 году](#)” [“Information on Admission Results for SPbU Master’s Programmes in 2024”], 2024, accessed in September 2026; SPbU, “[Информация о результатах приема на обучение в СПбГУ по образовательным программам магистратуры в 2025 году](#)” [“Information on Admission Results for SPbU Master’s Programmes in 2025”], 2025, accessed in September 2026.

¹⁹ Nikolay Oleynik, “Из опыта деятельности кафедры украиноведения Белгородского государственного университета по укреплению дружбы между российским и украинским народами” [“From the Experience of the Department of Ukrainian Studies at Belgorod State University in Strengthening Friendship between the Russian and Ukrainian Peoples”], in H. Skrypnyk (ed), VIII Міжнародний конгрес українців. Українознавство. Освіта [VIII International Congress of Ukrainian Studies. Ukrainian Studies. Education] (IMFE im. M.T. Rylskoho, 2017), 8–14.

²⁰ “Первая конференция Российской ассоциации украинистов. Отчет” [“First Conference of the Russian Association of Ukrainianists: Report”], *Восточная Европа. Перспективы* [Eastern Europe. Prospects], no. 1 (2011): 135–138.

²¹ Irina Tumakova, “[Как в библиотеке побеждали украинский национализм](#)” [“How Ukrainian Nationalism Was Defeated in the Library”], *Fontanka.ru*, 29 October 2015.

²² “[Украинская диаспора в России заявляет о жестком политическом давлении](#)” [“Ukrainian diaspora in Russia claims to be facing severe political pressure”], *UNIAN*, 17 May 2010.

²³ Zoya Svetova, “[Наталья Шарина: Когда государственная машина начинает раскручиваться, от маленького человека ничего не остается](#)” [“Natalia Sharina: When the State Machine Starts Spinning, Nothing Is Left of the Little Person”], *Open Russia*, 3 July 2017.

media often used the label ‘political scientist’ for people with no relevant expertise or educational background, so long as they articulated theses that did not contradict the Kremlin’s official position.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in 2014 severely disrupted contacts between Ukrainian and Russian experts. The Russian–Ukrainian Commission of Historians effectively ceased operating.²⁴ In April 2014, the third RAU conference took place, but it was held not as a stand-alone event but as part of the Russian International Studies Association (RISA) convention hosted at MGIMO, without the participation of Ukrainian scholars. No further separate RAU conferences were held. Individual panels on Ukrainian topics continued to appear within RISA conventions until 2019, after which RAU became entirely inactive.

University subdivisions dealing with post-Soviet studies continued to work on Ukraine within the Kremlin’s ideological framework

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked the final stage of this institutional decline. In 2022–23, the centres for Ukrainian studies at MSU, SPbU, and the Institute of Europe at the Russian Academy of Sciences (IE RAS) – structures whose work had rested mainly on the enthusiasm of individual researchers – ceased operating. In other cases, university subdivisions dealing with post-Soviet studies continued to work on Ukrainian topics mostly within the ideological framework set by the Kremlin’s dominant framing.

²⁴ Viktor Mironenko, Украинский транзит. Опыт ситуационного анализа [Ukrainian Transit: An Exercise in Situational Analysis] (IE RAS, 2020), 12; Elizaveta Surnacheva, “Неизвестные соседи” [“Unknown Neighbours”], *Kommersant*, 19 May 2014; Alexander Shubin, interview by Alexei Sakhnin, “Пора понять, что XX век закончился” [“It’s Time to Understand That the 20th Century Is Over”], *Moskvich Mag*, 21 March 2022.

2. COMPETENCIES, IDENTITY, AND INFLUENCE

The character of Russian expert work on Ukraine is shaped by a range of factors – both those bearing on its substantive quality and those bearing on its place within the policy process. The most important of these appear to be: (1) the professional culture of Russian *mezhdunarodniki* – the community of which these experts form part – that has taken shape over nearly a century; (2) the particularities of their educational background; and (3) the possession of skills specific to the study of Ukraine, including command of the Ukrainian language – all three of which bear directly on the quality of the resulting analysis. A fourth factor, the degree to which Russian expertise is actually sought out by its key recipients – that is, government structures – by contrast determines the place this expertise occupies within the policy process itself, irrespective of its quality. These four factors are examined in turn below.

2.1. ETHOS

Russian *mezhdunarodniki* share broadly similar views on the nature of international relations, their relationship with the state, and their own role as experts. Taken together, these ideas constitute a professional ethos that is largely neo-imperial in character and structurally rooted in Soviet and Russian political culture. Within this ethos, the primacy of might over law in international relations is taken for granted. Analytically, this understanding is structurally analogous to the logic of Almond and Verba’s subject political culture transposed into the realm of international relations.²⁵ Just as citizens are expected to rely on the state rather than claim political independence, neighbouring countries are expected to accept Russia’s dominance as a centre of power. These and other characteristics of the ethos are outlined below.

²⁵ Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1963), 19.

2.1.1. INTERNATIONAL ORDER AS A HIERARCHY OF GREAT POWERS

For the most part, Russian international-affairs experts perceive international relations not as a system of equal sovereign actors, but as a hierarchical order in which only 'great powers' enjoy full sovereignty and set the rules for smaller states. In this picture, Russia is positioned as one of the natural centres of power and as a 'distinct civilisation' embodying

Russia is positioned as a natural centre of power and as a 'distinct civilisation' embodying major-power status, an irrevocable historical mission, and special rights to a sphere of influence

major-power status, an irrevocable historical mission, and special rights to a sphere of influence. Russia's sphere of influence is conceived chiefly as encompassing the post-Soviet space. Claims to it are presented as deriving from Russia's civilisational, historical, and cultural ties to the region, as well as from its status as the heir to Soviet influence.²⁶

The loss of this influence is perceived not as the normal result of historical change or an exercise of national self-determination, but as an anomaly requiring correction. Accordingly, the strengthening of independence and sovereignty among post-Soviet states is framed as a loss of Russian influence

and a contradiction of Russia's national interests. The enlargement of NATO or the EU is described not as the sovereign choice of states, each acting in accordance with its own interests and historical experience, but as an 'advance' or 'expansion' of outside hostile forces. The agency of the post-Soviet states themselves is virtually absent from this picture.

Within this worldview, the west – most often embodied by the United States – has always been considered the main obstacle to establishing Russian influence within its 'legitimate' sphere of interest. Distrust of the west has therefore long been considered an acceptable and even expected position within the Russian expert milieu, and has extended almost automatically to the analytical judgements of those few colleagues whose engagement with western NGOs, as well as analytical and academic institutions, is deemed excessively active.²⁷

2.1.2. EXPERTISE AS SERVICE TO THE STATE

Unlike western think tanks, where institutional independence from the government is

A large, centralised power with vast geopolitical ambitions ensures that loyal experts are always in demand

generally treated as a condition of professional legitimacy, Russian expert circles regard dependence on it as the norm and even as an advantage. A large, centralised power with vast geopolitical ambitions ensures that loyal experts are always in demand, while public funding provides institutional stability. Renouncing an aggressive foreign policy and decentralising authority are, conversely, perceived in this milieu as threats to one's own status. This is partly why, in the late 1980s, not all Moscow-based international-affairs experts welcomed Gorbachev's perestroika, preferring a 'firm hand' that would guarantee the familiar

²⁶ Anastasia Naumova, "Позиция России в ходе 'оранжевой революции' в Украине" ["Russia's Position during the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine"], in Galina Lesnaya (ed), 'Цивилизационно-культурные связи России и Украины'. Вторая конференция Российской ассоциации украинистов: материалы международной научно-практической конференции. Москва, 1–3 декабря 2011 г. 'Украинская история, культура и национальная мысль в наследии Тараса Шевченко: опыт переосмысления от XIX века до наших дней'. Третья конференция Российской ассоциации украинистов: материалы научно-практической конференции. Москва, 25 апреля 2014 г. ["Russia-Ukraine Civilizational and Cultural Ties." Second Conference of the Russian Association of Ukrainian Studies: Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference. Moscow, 1–3 December 2011. "Ukrainian History, Culture and National Thought in the Legacy of Taras Shevchenko: Reconsidering the Experience from the 19th Century to the Present." Third Conference of the Russian Association of Ukrainian Studies: Proceedings of the Scientific and Practical Conference. Moscow, 25 April 2014] (MGIMO-Universitet, 2015), 138–144.

²⁷ Anatoly Korobeynikov (ed), *Россия в новом веке: внешнеполитическое измерение* [Russia in the New Century: The Foreign-Policy Dimension] (Federation Council of the Russian Federation, 2006), 456.

type of client-patron relationship between the expert and the state.²⁸

More broadly, Russian experts place little value on open competition among ideas or on independent expertise. Instead, there has long been strong demand for reintegrating expert organisations into the state system of personnel training and foreign-policy administration, along the lines of how things worked in the USSR.²⁹ In other words, Russian experts tend to gravitate towards being a cog in a large state 'power vertical' rather than an independent adviser.

Despite the seemingly diverse composition of the Russian expert community, the majority have always been so-called pragmatic loyalists (*прагматики-охранители*) – those who, for pragmatic reasons, see their function as defending state policy, however confrontational it may be.³⁰ They regard direct criticism of the official course as harmful, since it creates domestic tension, causes problems in the expert organisation's relations with the state, and complicates career prospects, as dissent is perceived by the Kremlin as an indirect sign of political disloyalty.

None of this means that discussion and debate within the Russian expert community are absent. They occur constantly and are often genuinely sharp. However, the boundaries of these debates are, as a rule, set in advance.

Most expert debates have revolved around which instruments would bring Ukraine back into Russia's orbit

Means and tactics are discussed, but not the strategic goals of Russian foreign policy. The effectiveness of the course is analysed, but not its legitimacy. On Ukraine specifically, most

expert debates have revolved around which instruments would most effectively bring Ukraine back into Russia's orbit of influence. The underlying premise – that Russia is a great power entitled to its own spheres of influence – has rarely been questioned.

This conception of the expert as a civil servant naturally extends to work with foreign audiences as well. If the expert's function is to serve the state rather than to produce independent knowledge, then legitimising the official course before a foreign audience is perceived as a natural extension of that function.³¹ This logic is structurally similar to that underlying the work of a diplomat. Russian international-affairs experts can therefore most accurately be described as diplomats in civilian clothes or, more broadly, as state agents of influence in expert camouflage. They

Russian international-affairs experts can be described as diplomats in civilian clothes or state agents of influence in expert camouflage

readily take on a role structurally unavailable to official diplomacy: skewing western expert debate and the political agenda in formats that presuppose independence and trust.³²

2.1.3. LOYALTY AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF PROFESSIONALISM

The quality of expertise in international relations is assessed differently in Russia than in the western world. The value of expert output is determined not by the objectivity and methodological rigour of the analysis, but by how closely its conclusions correspond to the political line set by the Kremlin and how effectively the expert works towards the tasks formulated by the state.

One of the main markers of professional success is approval from the Presidential

²⁸ Ruslan Grinberg, "До и после перестройки" ["Before and after Perestroika"], in Igor Orlik (ed), "Это было недавно, это было давно...": Воспоминания ["It Was Recent, It Was Long Ago...": Memoirs] (Institute of Economics RAS, 2010), 55–79.

²⁹ Lidia Kosikova, "Консолидация постсоветского пространства" ["Consolidation of the Post-Soviet Space"], *Мир перемен* [World of Change], no. 3 (2007): 33.

³⁰ Lilia Shevtsova, "Охранители" ["The Guardians"], *Радио Свобода* [Radio Freedom], 27 August 2017.

³¹ Korobeynikov, *Россия в новом веке: внешнеполитическое измерение* [Russia in the New Century: The Foreign-Policy Dimension] (2005), 253.

³² Korobeynikov, *Россия в новом веке: внешнеполитическое измерение* [Russia in the New Century: The Foreign-Policy Dimension] (2006), 324.

Administration or the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. If a forecast was correct from the standpoint of the state line but turned out to be factually wrong, this is not a problem for one's career or reputation. On the contrary, an inconvenient forecast can become a career dead end even if it later proves to have been entirely accurate. Accuracy here is more dangerous than inaccuracy.

In such an environment, the pathology known as positive reporting is systematically reproduced. Experts do not necessarily analyse reality but instead confirm the authorities' expectations. This explains why, even amid obvious failures of Russian foreign policy, expert discourse remains stable and is not falsified from within. Setbacks on the international stage are, as a rule, explained by the machinations of third parties, and counter-evidence is reinterpreted as further proof that the Kremlin was right all along.

2.2. BACKGROUNDS

Serious, professionally grounded coverage of Ukraine is virtually absent from the Russian media environment.³³ What stands out, however, is the extent to which public commentary on Ukraine is provided by experts

Serious, professionally grounded coverage of Ukraine is virtually absent from the Russian media

trained in American studies or by generalists whose declared specialisations – 'international security', 'world politics', and the like – are so broadly defined that they do not indicate any particular country or region.

This is partly a legacy of a structural imbalance that took hold in Soviet political and military circles during the Cold War, when the United States was perceived as one of the two 'superpowers' and Moscow's principal

adversary.³⁴ That imbalance persists in the Russian expert milieu today. By institutional and intellectual inertia, foreign affairs continue to be viewed chiefly as an arena of great-power struggle for global influence. And since the United States is still regarded as the dominant major power, a background in American studies is widely considered sufficient grounds to comment publicly on virtually any subject in this field, including Ukraine.

A telling illustration of this structural bias can be found in the Russian International Affairs Council's (RIAC) 2016 reference directory of 1 000 experts and 100 organisations in the field of international relations.³⁵ The community of Russian *mezhdunarodniki* is, of course, larger than this, but according to the directory's compilers, the selected segment 'objectively reflects' the potential of the entire Russian international-affairs expert milieu and conducts the most extensive and prominent research.³⁶

The directory was published ten years ago, but given the low turnover within the Russian expert community, it reflects three observations that are almost certainly still relevant today. First, the production of expertise on international politics is concentrated predominantly in Moscow (Figure 1).

Second, the majority of declared specialisations are formulated in excessively broad terms, such as 'international security' and 'world politics'; among those with a clear regional specialisation, Americanists dominate (Figure 2), including several

figures who frequently appear in prime time on Russian television. Third, the directory lists only five experts who indicated Ukraine as their area of professional specialisation, which

³³ Искусство ТВ (@iskusstvotv), "Проф. Татьяна Таирова-Яковлева" ["Prof. Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva"]; Viktor Mironenko, "Украина. 2021 год. Декабрь" ["Ukraine. Year 2021. December"], IE RAS, 4 January 2022.

³⁴ Artem Malgin, "Европейская политика России. Проблема ко-эволюции международного контекста и внешнеполитических подходов" ["Russia's European Policy: The Problem of the Co-Evolution of the International Context and Foreign-Policy Approaches"], in W. Grabowski, A. Malgin, and M. Narinsky (eds) Европейские страны СНГ: место в 'Большой Европе' [European CIS Countries: Their Place in 'Greater Europe'] (Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 2005), 60–61.

³⁵ Igor Ivanov (ed), *Международные исследования в России. 1000 экспертов и 100 организаций. Справочник* [International Studies in Russia: 1 000 Experts and 100 Organisations. A Directory] (RIAC, 2016).

³⁶ Ivanov (ed), *Международные исследования в России* [International Studies in Russia], 27–28.

- Affiliated with Moscow-based Russian organisations
- Affiliated with non-Moscow-based Russian organisations
- Affiliated with foreign organisations

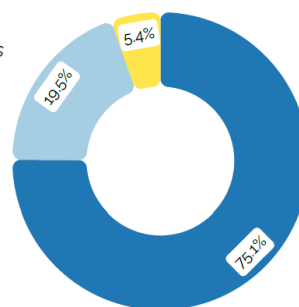


Figure 1. Professional affiliation of Russian international-affairs experts, by location of employing organisation, 2016.

Source: Author's calculations based on: Igor Ivanov (ed) (RIAC, 2016).

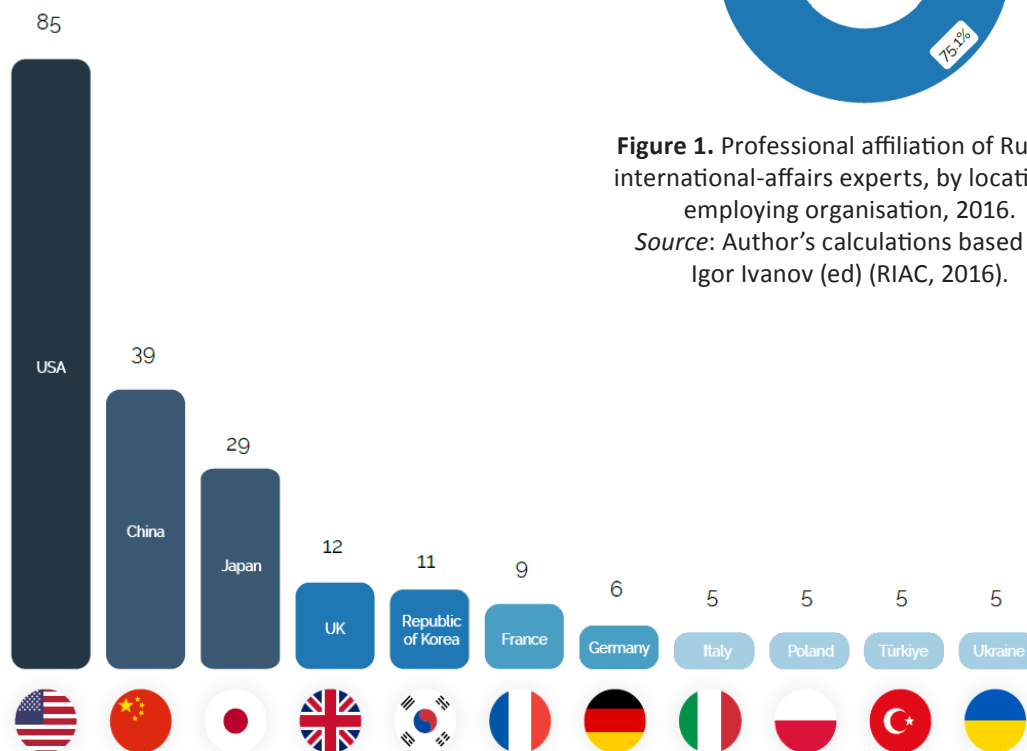


Figure 2. Number of Russian international-affairs experts by country of declared specialisation, 2016.

Source: Author's calculations based on: Igor Ivanov (ed) (RIAC, 2016).

may indirectly confirm that Ukraine remains a marginal field of research and expertise in Russia.

2.3. LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Russian Ukraine experts have an extremely poor command of the Ukrainian language. Even those who claim proficiency often switch to Russian after only a few phrases in conversation.³⁷ Of the five Ukraine specialists listed in RIAC's 2016 directory, only one declared proficiency in Ukrainian, and among all 1 000 experts, only eight did so.³⁸ Unsurprisingly, before 2022 Russian experts with sufficient command of Ukrainian were exceedingly rare on Ukrainian-language television programmes.

Russian analyses of Ukraine also tend to rely predominantly on Russian media, supplemented by Russian-language Ukrainian outlets.³⁹ In this way, elements of the Russian information agenda and official Kremlin narratives can be reproduced through what is presented as expert commentary. Direct use of Ukrainian-language sources is correspondingly limited, and critical engagement with them is particularly uncommon.

Elements of the Russian information agenda and official Kremlin narratives can be reproduced through what is presented as expert commentary

³⁷ Hrytsak, "Ignorance Is Power," 219.

³⁸ Ivanov (ed), *Международные исследования в России* [International Studies in Russia].

³⁹ Nikolay Rabotyzhev, "Социально-экономическая ситуация на Украине накануне нового электорального цикла" ["The Socio-Economic Situation in Ukraine on the Eve of a New Electoral Cycle"], *Россия и новые государства Евразии* [Russia and the New States of Eurasia], no. 4 (2018): 30–41.

One reason for this state of affairs is a dismissive attitude towards Ukrainian as a language supposedly easy to understand without dedicated study.⁴⁰ Moreover, pointing to the sheer volume of Russian-language literature published even in Ukraine itself, some Russian intellectuals and experts concluded that Ukrainian was increasingly “losing cultural ground to Russian” and that Ukraine could enter the global cultural process only through the Russian language and a shared “all-Russian identity.”⁴¹

This worldview helps explain why Russia never developed either sufficient demand for studying Ukrainian or a corresponding system of language training at universities. At MGIMO, training in Ukrainian for students was introduced in 1996–97, but only as a ‘third foreign language’.⁴² This meant that classes began only in senior years, as an elective, and were allotted fewer hours than the first and second foreign languages. In practice, such training generally provided no more than text comprehension and basic communicative ability. Put differently, a third foreign language is rarely brought to a level of fluency.

The training of philologists specialising in Ukrainian in Russia also did not begin immediately. At MSU, for example, this process began only in 1999 and faced a shortage of teaching materials of its own.⁴³ It was only in 2010 that Russian universities produced their first Ukrainian-language textbook at the A1 level.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Galina Lesnaia, “Становление и развитие украинистики в современной России” [“The Formation and Development of Ukrainian Studies in Contemporary Russia”], *Восточная Европа. Перспективы* [Eastern Europe. Prospects], no. 1 (2011): 127–134.

⁴¹ Alexander Tsipko, “Аксиома трезвого подхода к российско-украинским отношениям” [“The Axiom of a Sober Approach to Russian-Ukrainian Relations”], *Вестник аналитики* [Bulletin of Analytics], no. 3 (2001).

⁴² Lesnaia, “Становление и развитие украинистики” [The Formation and Development of Ukrainian Studies], 128.

⁴³ Oksana Ostapchuk, “Україністика в МДУ: історія та проблеми розвитку” [“Ukrainian Studies at MSU: History and Problems of Development”], in A.A. Skrypnyk (ed), *Україністика в Росії: історія, стан, тенденції розвитку* [Ukrainian Studies in Russia: History, Current State, and Development Trends] (Ufa Branch of the Sholokhov Moscow State University for the Humanities, 2010), 180–182.

⁴⁴ “Первая конференция” [“First Conference”], *Восточная Европа. Перспективы* [Eastern Europe. Prospects], 136.

2.4. INFLUENCE

The extreme secrecy surrounding foreign-policy decision-making in Russia makes it difficult to establish whether experts exercise direct influence on policy.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, debate about their place in this process continues. It is sometimes acknowledged, for example, that although Russian experts generally do not exercise direct influence on decision-making, in periods of crisis the ideas they have previously developed may acquire instrumental value for the Kremlin.⁴⁶

Formally, many Russian experts sit on advisory and academic bodies attached to institutions such as the Security Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Federation Council, and the State Duma. This adds a veneer of status and indicates connections in the upper echelons of officialdom, but it hardly amounts to definite evidence of any involvement in shaping foreign policy.

Under President Vladimir Putin, foreign-policy decision-making remains concentrated within an exceptionally narrow circle. According to Sergey Lavrov, Putin determines Russia’s foreign policy to the same degree as the Russian emperor once did.⁴⁷ Even the Russian Foreign Ministry does not set strategy but merely executes what has been ordered from the Kremlin.⁴⁸ Influencing this process therefore requires direct contact with the president. Yet the only format in which Putin regularly meets with international-affairs experts is the Valdai Club, and he goes there once a year not

⁴⁵ Felix Rieffer, *Russlands Außenpolitik unter Putin 2000–2018: Welchen Einfluss haben russische Think Tanks auf die auswärtige Politikgestaltung des Kremls?* [Russia’s Foreign Policy under Putin, 2000–2018: What Influence Do Russian Think Tanks Have on the Kremlin’s Foreign Policy-Making?] (Springer VS, 2020), 160.

⁴⁶ Anton Barbashin and Alexander Graef, *Thinking Foreign Policy in Russia: Think Tanks and Grand Narratives* (Atlantic Council, November 2019), 38.

⁴⁷ Sergey Lavrov, interview by RBC editorial team, “Интервью Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова объединённой редакции “РБК”” [“Interview of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to the Joint Editorial Board of RBC”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 6 June 2019.

⁴⁸ “В СПбГУ прошла открытая лекция представителя МИД России в Санкт-Петербурге Максима Полетаева” [“An Open Lecture by Maxim Poletaev, Representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry in St. Petersburg, Took Place at SPbU”], Faculty of International Relations, St. Petersburg State University, 6 April 2026.

to solicit advice but to articulate his position. Russian experts, for their part, treat what he says there not as an invitation to debate, but rather as the general line, which they are subsequently expected to interpret for a wider audience.

Moreover, the Kremlin does not seem to trust the expert community enough to involve it in discussing foreign-policy strategy. This is consistent with the professional culture of Russia's security services (Chekist mindset),

The Kremlin does not seem to trust the expert community enough to involve it in discussing foreign-policy strategy

which presumes that any exchange of information is inherently aimed at shifting the other party's worldview and is therefore itself a form of influence. Contacts with outsiders may accordingly be viewed not simply as an exchange of professional knowledge, but as a potential channel for hostile recruitment or disinformation.

It is therefore unlikely that the substance of Russian experts' analytical materials reaches its intended recipient. More likely, it simply remains lodged within the multi-layered filtering system at the level of academic and expert councils. There it may well serve separate localised objectives. Sergey Karaganov, for example, takes great pride in the fact that the term 'world majority', which he coined together with Fyodor Lukyanov, was picked up by the Russian Foreign Ministry, allowing it to avoid, in its official rhetoric, the need to invoke the 'non-west' or 'developing countries'.⁴⁹

Russian experts themselves are keenly aware of this distrust, acknowledging that the Kremlin relies on information from the security services, while the analysis experts submit

goes unused.⁵⁰ Even in cases where individuals from the Russian expert community simultaneously serve as members of parliament and enjoy the support of the foreign minister, their initiatives fail without the Presidential Administration's approval, which forces them to openly acknowledge their powerlessness to influence foreign-policy decision-making.⁵¹

There is a further indication that Russian experts do not exert significant influence on strategic policy decisions. If they did, one might expect at least some shifts in the Kremlin's course to follow changes in Russian analysts' views. In practice, the direction of adaptation is more often reversed: experts adjust

their positions to the zigzags of the official line. Alexander Dynkin, for instance, evolved from editing a report in 1992 that named China among new sources of uncertainty and threat for Russia's security,⁵² to claiming in 2024 that China's presence in the sanctions-battered Russian economy was insufficient.⁵³

The same pattern is visible in the case of Timofei Bordachev. When the Kremlin urgently needed technology and investment from the EU, he wrote favourably of a 'Norwegian model' for Russia–EU relations, maintaining that "some form of integration between Russia

⁵⁰ Katarzyna Kaczmarek, *Making Global Knowledge in Local Contexts: The Politics of International Relations and Policy Advice in Russia* (Routledge, 2020), 207; Igor Istomin, "Внешнестроительная экспертиза и конструирование международной среды" ["Foreign-Policy Expertise and the Construction of the International Environment"], *Международные процессы* [International Processes], no. 3 (2012): 69.

⁵¹ "Вашингтон губит Украину" ["Washington Is Destroying Ukraine"], *Воскресный вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым* [Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov], *Rossiia 1*, 19 December 2021; Ksenia Veretennikova and Anastasia Kornya, "Проза о российском паспорте" ["Prose about the Russian Passport"], *Kommersant*, 10 January 2022; Konstantin Zatulyn, "Законопроект о гражданстве – совсем не то, на что мы надеялись" ["The Citizenship Bill Is Not at All What We Hoped For"], *Tsargrad*, 29 December 2021.

⁵² ИММО, under the direction of V. Martynov, A. Dynkin (ed), "Россия и вызовы современности" ["Russia and the Challenges of the Present"], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 4 (1992): 102.

⁵³ Alexander Dynkin, interview by Sergei Bolotov, "Академик Александр Дынкин: Новый порядок установит мир на Украине и отменит правила, установленные США" ["Academician Alexander Dynkin: A New Order Will Establish Peace in Ukraine and Overturn the Rules Set by the US"], *Российская газета* [Russia's Newspaper], 24 June 2024.

⁴⁹ "Zoom-Семинар 'Мировое большинство': концептуальное осмысление и потенциал популяризации в приоритетных странах" ["Zoom Seminar 'World Majority': Conceptual Understanding and Potential for Popularisation in Priority Countries"], HSE, 25 April 2025.

and Europe is inevitable.”⁵⁴ Later, Bordachev came to argue that, from the standpoint of Russian interests, it would be good if the EU fell apart.⁵⁵

Another prominent Russian expert, Dmitry Danilov of IE RAS, followed a similar trajectory. At the start of Putin’s rule, he approved of the course towards rapprochement with Europe and lamented that the west had allegedly failed to respond to Russia’s outstretched hand.⁵⁶ In 2022, Danilov prepared an analytical memo advising Russian authorities on how the Kremlin could most effectively provide a legal basis for the ‘illegitimacy’ of western arms supplies to Ukraine, invoking the narrative of ‘genocide’ and ‘war crimes by Ukraine’.⁵⁷ To this end, he proposed appealing to EU legal restrictions on arms supplies related to the risks of human rights and international humanitarian law violations, and actively accusing Ukraine of ‘genocide’, ‘internal repression’, and ‘war crimes’. Assuming that the EU would remain highly sceptical of Russian accusations against Ukraine, Danilov recommended promoting these narratives from within EU member states, primarily through civil society institutions capable of influencing decision-makers, as well as through international NGOs.

3. INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE

Expertise on Ukraine in Russia is produced by analytical organisations, institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and specialised university subdivisions. These are summarised in Table 1 below. Individual researchers working on the subject can also be found, for instance, at Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN), Higher School of Economics (HSE), Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod, and some other institutions, but since their work on contemporary Ukraine is either sporadic or takes place outside any dedicated unit specialising in the topic, they are not included in the table.

Table 1 likewise omits discussion platforms such as the Valdai Club, the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy (SVOP), or RIAC. These essentially have no pool of their own full-time experts on Ukraine or relevant research subdivisions. Their work is built around a set of recognisable public figures acting as frontmen, together with a core of administrators, event organisers, and media managers, who draw on staff from academic and expert organisations to take part in their projects and programmes.

The presence of individuals close to the Kremlin, alongside former and current senior Foreign Ministry officials, among the leadership of these discussion platforms lends them an aura of respectability. This attracts many Russian and foreign experts, who see participation in their projects as a way to expand their connections with people close to Russian power or to gain, through informal contact, an insider sense of what is really happening in the Kremlin. Such involvement, in turn, broadens the Russian discussion platforms’ pool of participants and contributors, which serves two purposes: first, it gives the platforms the appearance of an independent expert community rather than a state mouthpiece, and second, it boosts their brand recognition by expanding their reach on social media and in the press. Both, in turn, serve the platforms’ central aim – to amplify the Kremlin’s voice and deliver the Russian government’s messages to an international audience more effectively.

⁵⁴ Timofei Bordachev, “Европейский выбор России” [“Russia’s European Choice”], in Andrew Kuchins and Dmitri Trenin (ed), *Россия: ближайшее десятилетие* [Russia: The Near-Term Decade] (Carnegie Moscow Center, 2004), 123–124.

⁵⁵ Timofei Bordachev, interviewed by Vadim Bondar, “Тимофей Бордачев: ‘Довольно глупо сейчас мечтать о каком-то компромиссе с Западом. Его не будет’” [“Timofei Bordachev: ‘It’s Rather Foolish to Dream of Any Compromise with the West Right Now. There Won’t Be One’”], *Biznes Online*, 19 May 2021.

⁵⁶ Dmitry Danilov, “Россия и Запад больше не враги... а кто?” [“Russia and the West Are No Longer Enemies... So What Are They?”], *Вестник Европы* [Bulletin of Europe], no. 7 (2002).

⁵⁷ Dmitry Danilov, “Поставки Евросоюзом вооружений на Украину. Соотнесение с международным правом” [“EU Arms Supplies to Ukraine: Correlation with International Law”], in Kirill Gusev (ed), *Европейская аналитика 2022* [European Analytics 2022] (Institute of Europe RAS; Art-Print, 2022), 14–26.

Organisation	Primary unit addressing Ukraine	Researchers working on Ukraine
IMEMO RAS	Centre for Post-Soviet Studies	Mikhail Krivoguz Nikolay Rabotyzhev Elena Tsedilina
Institute of CIS Countries	Ukraine Department	Alexander Dudchak Ivan Skorikov Kirill Frolov
Institute of Economics RAS	Centre for Post-Soviet Studies	Leonid Vardomsky Boris Shmelev Maksim Borodenko
RGGU	Department of Post-Soviet Foreign Countries	Alexander Gushchin Elena Kosovan Alexander Levchenkov Tamara Guzenkova
RISS	—	Oleg Nemensky Sergey Yermakov

Table 1. Russian research and expert organisations working on Ukraine, 2026.
Source: Compiled by the author from the official websites of the organisations listed.

Beyond those shown in Table 1, which form the core of Russia’s institutional infrastructure on Ukraine, the sections below also examine other organisations that attempted to build research capacity on contemporary Ukraine. Though most such efforts proved short-lived, they nonetheless merit closer attention, both for what they reveal about the conditions under which Ukrainian studies developed in Russia and for what their eventual fate suggests about the field as a whole.

3.1. EXPERT ORGANISATIONS

3.1.1. INSTITUTE OF CIS COUNTRIES

The Institute of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Countries is, formally, an autonomous non-commercial organisation founded by Konstantin Zatulin in 1996 with the active support of the Moscow city government, after he failed to win re-election to the State Duma. In the early 1990s, he was part of the inner circle of Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, who viewed Crimea and Sevastopol as “historically Russian lands” and opposed the recognition of Ukraine’s borders.⁵⁸ From 1997 until Luzhkov’s departure from office in 2010, Zatulin served as his staff adviser.

⁵⁸ “Лужкова заподозрили в попытке аннексии” [“Luzhkov Suspected of Attempting Annexation”], *Interfax*, 12 May 2008.

The Institute of CIS Countries has always had its own sharply defined ideological agenda, grounded in great-power revisionism. The institute became a magnet for radical nationalists and Orthodox ultraconservatives. Its leadership proclaimed the restoration of the influence of a “single and indivisible Russia” in the “near abroad” as its main goal.⁵⁹ Zatulin considered Russian–Ukrainian relations the key issue across the entire post-Soviet space. In his view, “the supreme state form for realising the deep national interest of the Russian people [...] is Empire, whoever heads it – emperor, general secretary, or president.”⁶⁰ Zatulin liked to quote Zbigniew Brzezinski’s remark that Russia is not an empire without Ukraine, which he interpreted as implying that Moscow must, in one form or another, restore control over Ukrainian territory.⁶¹ His favourite slogan was: “Fight against Ukraine, for Ukraine.”⁶² This was, in

⁵⁹ Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 22 (2001): 59.

⁶⁰ Konstantin Zatulin, “Триста и тридцать лет спустя: по пути Российской империи” [“Three Hundred and Thirty Years Later: Following the Path of the Russian Empire”], *Московский комсомолец* [Moscow Komsomolets], 8 December 2021.

⁶¹ Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 22 (2001): 59.

⁶² “Константин Затулин о будущем России и Украины” [“Konstantin Zatulin on the Future of Russia and Ukraine”], *Institute of CIS Countries*, 20 February 2022.

effect, an endorsement of Russian expansion: the first “Ukraine” evidently denoted the independent state, while the second meant merely a territory.

The institute pursued this goal through the most active possible interference in Ukraine’s domestic political processes, the merciless exploitation of vulnerabilities, the exacerbation of social tension, and the creation of a consolidated conglomerate of pro-Russian political forces inside Ukraine under the guise of ‘compatriot’ organisations. In effect, the Institute of CIS Countries functioned less as a research centre than as an instrument of large-scale non-military intervention in Ukraine’s internal affairs.

The Institute of CIS Countries functioned less as a research centre than as an instrument of large-scale non-military intervention in Ukraine's internal affairs

From the very beginning, the Institute of CIS Countries opposed the recognition of Crimea as Ukrainian territory. Tellingly, the institute’s subdivision responsible for Ukraine was originally called the “Department of Ukraine and Crimea.” Its first heads were Alexander Sevastyanov, an ideologue of radical Russian nationalism, followed by A. V. Kovalev, a former Russian diplomat who had served at the mission in Lviv, and then Kirill Frolov, an ultra-nationalist activist with an Orthodox-imperial worldview, who, after 2014, began actively popularising the odious term “Ukro-Reich” in reference to Ukraine.⁶³

The Institute of CIS Countries’ ties to the mayor of Moscow gave it access to resources needed to scale up its activities. This enabled it to quickly ramp up publication output, expand its staff, launch its website, and, from 2002, regularly produce its own socio-political programme on TVTs, a television channel controlled by the Moscow city government. In

addition, the institute’s experts were regular participants in conferences organised with the involvement of the Moscow mayorality, as well as in round tables and hearings in the Russian parliament.

The Institute of CIS Countries evidently prioritised identifying and establishing contacts with Ukrainian communities, NGOs, and politicians sympathetic to the pro-Russian agenda. As a result, its staff had a fairly detailed picture of the balance of political forces in Ukraine, down to the level of individual regions and cities. Among the Russian analytical organisations examined in this study, it is the only one that actively developed its own network of representative offices in Ukraine.

From 2005, it became considerably more active in intervening in Ukraine’s political life, taking a direct part, through specially created branches in Kyiv and Sevastopol, in the political struggle then unfolding on the side of pro-Russian political forces.⁶⁴

The institute’s subversive activity did not go unnoticed by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), which regularly declared its staff *personae non gratae* and eventually shut down its offices on Ukrainian territory. Konstantin Zatulin himself was repeatedly barred from entering Ukraine, under both Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko.⁶⁵ However, after Viktor Yanukovych won the 2010 election, the ban was officially lifted, and Zatulin was even able to take part in Yanukovych’s inauguration events.⁶⁶

For a time, the Institute of CIS Countries was in a state of public confrontation with the Russian MFA over the tactics of Russia’s Ukraine policy.

⁶⁴ Institute of CIS Countries, *Институт диаспоры и интеграции (Институт стран СНГ) 1996–2021* [The Institute of Diaspora and Integration (Institute of CIS Countries), 1996–2021], booklet (Institute of CIS Countries, 2021), 70.

⁶⁵ “Главы стран Содружества дадут оценку решениям Думы” [“The Heads of the Commonwealth States Will Assess the Duma’s Decisions”], *Kommersant*, 22 March 1996; Matvei Nikitin and Elena Golovko, “Российскому депутату запретили въезд на Украину” [“A Russian Deputy Has Been Barred from Entering Ukraine”], *Kommersant*, 6 June 2006.

⁶⁶ Taras Kozub, Oleg Andreev, Kirill Zheleznov, and Kirill Bilun, “Инаугурация Януковича: что осталось за кадром” [“Yanukovych’s Inauguration: What Was Left Off-Camera”], *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukrainie*, 26 February 2010.

⁶³ Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье*, no. 1 (2000): 32; Kirill Frolov, *Русская православная церковь – последняя крепость исторической России. К столетию возрождения Русского патриаршества* [The Russian Orthodox Church – the Last Fortress of Historical Russia: On the Centenary of the Revival of the Russian Patriarchate] (Aletyya, 2018), 24–25.

Konstantin Zatulin believed that “Crimea had been stolen from Russia” and that ratifying the 1997 ‘Big Treaty’ with Ukraine closed off the path, if not to its return, then at least to its use as leverage against Ukraine. He called the Russian Foreign Ministry’s participation in signing and ratifying the treaty “criminal negligence.”⁶⁷

Russia has always used a broad array of tools to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty, but in the 1990s and early 2000s specifically, the Kremlin’s red line was any action that risked creating problems in relations with the west – a strategic source of desperately needed technology and investment. Therefore, the Foreign Ministry’s response to Konstantin Zatulin’s open revisionism and anti-westernism often went beyond diplomatic restraint. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, for example, questioned the competence of the Institute of CIS Countries’ analysis of Ukraine, accusing it of manipulation and biased misrepresentation of materials.⁶⁸

The mutual animosity continued even after Ivanov left the ministerial post for RIAC. Zatulin continued publicly calling Ivanov a coward.⁶⁹ For its part, RIAC’s directory of experts and analytical organisations working on foreign policy and global issues included neither Konstantin Zatulin himself nor his Institute of CIS Countries.⁷⁰

By 2004, however, the relationship had changed sharply. The Russian Foreign Ministry began to publicly defend the institute and its experts, regularly describing them as ‘scholars’ whenever its staff were expelled from Ukraine

as *personae non gratae*.⁷¹ Sergey Lavrov gave flattering assessments of the institute’s work,⁷² and its staff were regularly honoured with top ministerial and state awards.⁷³

After 2014, the Institute of CIS Countries opened an office in occupied Crimea⁷⁴ and continued its anti-Ukrainian activity, positioning itself as a defender of Russian-speaking residents in Ukraine. According to Konstantin Zatulin, it was the institute that proposed Putin’s 2019 decree⁷⁵ providing for a simplified procedure by which residents of the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics (LDNR) could obtain Russian citizenship.⁷⁶ Under this decree, more than 600 000 Ukrainian citizens were issued Russian passports.⁷⁷

⁶⁷ Konstantin Zatulin, “Российско-украинский договор: обман века” [“The Russian-Ukrainian Treaty: The Deception of the Century”], *Независимая газета* [Independent Newspaper], 26 January 1999.

⁶⁸ “Стенограмма сорок второго заседания Совета Федерации” [“Transcript of the Forty-Second Session of the Federation Council”], Federation Council of the Russian Federation, 27 January 1999.

⁶⁹ Konstantin Zatulin, “Чтобы никто не мешал России строить свое будущее (о политике РФ в новом зарубежье)” [“So That No One Hinders Russia in Building Its Future (On Russian Policy in the Near Abroad)”], lecture delivered to students of the Faculty of Law, Sochi State University, 21 May 2016 (Institute of CIS Countries, 2016).

⁷⁰ Ivanov (ed), *Международные исследования в России* [International Studies in Russia].

⁷¹ “Комментарий Департамента информации и печати МИД России в связи с выдворением с территории Украины К.А. Фролова” [“Commentary by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry on the Expulsion of K.A. Frolov from the Territory of Ukraine”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 28 January 2006; “Комментарий Департамента информации и печати МИД России в связи с вопросом СМИ о закрытии украинского филиала Института стран СНГ” [“Commentary by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry Regarding a Media Inquiry on the Closure of the Ukrainian Branch of the Institute of CIS Countries”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 October 2008.

⁷² Sergey Lavrov, “Выступление на Всемирной конференции соотечественников” [“Address to the World Congress of Compatriots”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 31 October 2008.

⁷³ “Константину Фёдоровичу Затулину – 55!” [“Konstantin Fyodorovich Zatulin Turns 55!”], Zatulini.ru, 7 September 2013; “Россия наградила институт провокаторов за антиукраинскую деятельность?” [“Has Russia Awarded an Institute of Provocateurs for Anti-Ukrainian Activity?”], Украинская Правда [Ukrainian Truth], 31 October 2008; President of the Russian Federation, *О награждении орденом Дружбы Затулина К.Ф.* [“On Awarding Konstantin F. Zatulin the Order of Friendship”], Decree No. 747 (President of the Russian Federation, 24 July 2006).

⁷⁴ “Институт стран СНГ открыл свое представительство в Крыму” [“The Institute of CIS Countries Has Opened Its Representative Office in Crimea”], Institute of CIS Countries, 10 July 2014.

⁷⁵ President of the Russian Federation, *Об отдельных категориях иностранных граждан и лиц без гражданства, имеющих право обратиться с заявлениями о приеме в гражданство Российской Федерации в упрощенном порядке* [On Certain Categories of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons Entitled to Apply for Russian Citizenship under a Simplified Procedure], Decree No. 187 (President of the Russian Federation, 29 April 2019).

⁷⁶ “Константин Затулин о будущем” [“Konstantin Zatulin on the Future”], *Institute of CIS Countries*.

⁷⁷ “Более 600 тысяч жителей ЛНР и ДНР получили российские паспорта” [“Over 600,000 Residents of the LNR and DNR Have Received Russian Passports”], *Interfax*, 14 July 2021.

Although only 2 people are formally listed as working in the Ukraine department, nearly half of the institute's experts continue to provide regular commentary on Ukraine in the Russian media.

3.1.2. RISS

The Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) is a state institution that existed in the Soviet era as the Committee for State Security (KGB) Scientific Research Institute of Intelligence Problems. Under President Boris Yeltsin, it was reorganised and placed under the authority of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). In 2009, the institute became subordinate to the Presidential Administration, then headed by Sergey Naryshkin, who later became the head of the SVR. Since then, its principal institutional clients have been the Presidential Administration's Directorate for Foreign Policy and its Directorate for Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation with CIS Countries.⁷⁸

The post-Soviet space has consistently remained one of RISS's priority areas of activity. In the early 2010s, at least 17 of RISS's roughly 100 experts worked in the Centre for Studies of the Problems of Neighbouring Countries, the institute's largest subdivision, long headed by Tamara Guzenkova.⁷⁹

In 2013, RISS began publishing an initially non-public analytical bulletin, *Russian Vector* (*Российский вектор*), exclusively for the Security Council, the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Ministry, and the Presidential Administration. Marina Yanglyaeva served as its editor-in-chief. The bulletin contained policy briefs and surveys of the foreign press to track 'strategic information operations' against Putin as well as foreign reactions to

Russian foreign policy.⁸⁰ For this purpose, RISS compiled its own 'aggressiveness index' – the ratio of western media publications critical of Russian foreign policy to the number of neutral or positive ones. Publications for analysis were selected using the tag 'Russia' and translated by staff of the Inosmi.ru portal, affiliated with the state-run Rossiya Segodnya information agency, after which they were processed by RISS staff. An index value above 5 was interpreted as indicating an information war against Russia.

From February 2014, *Russian Vector* was published more frequently, appearing once every one to two weeks with the stated purpose of alerting Russia's leadership to what the bulletin called a global "information-psychological operation" aimed at convincing foreign populations of the Russian leadership's "supposedly aggressive intentions" towards Ukraine. Its editors proceeded from the premise that Russia was simultaneously the target and an active participant in a global information war waged through news and analytical content to shift mass sentiment in a desired direction.⁸¹ They defined countering the Russian information agenda and its narratives as the west's efforts "to hinder to the maximum extent possible the revival of the Russian state as a superpower, or even to call its continued territorial integrity into question."⁸²

After 2018, the Centre for Studies of the Problems of Neighbouring Countries was no longer mentioned on the RISS website. This change appears to have followed the 2017 dismissal of Leonid Reshetnikov, the institute's

⁷⁸ Leonid Reshetnikov, interview by Marina Perevozkina, "Идея минских соглашений родилась в Финляндии" ["The Idea of the Minsk Agreements Was Born in Finland"], Московский комсомолец [Moscow Komsomolets], 10 February 2015.

⁷⁹ Leonid Reshetnikov, interview by Evgenia Pyadysheva, "Российскому институту стратегических исследований - 20 лет. Аналитический центр, издательский дом и даже киностудия" ["The Russian Institute for Strategic Studies Turns 20. Analytical Center, Publishing House, and Even Film Studio"], *Международная жизнь* [International Affairs], no. 2 (2012): 180–190.

⁸⁰ "Как Россия сражается в информационной войне, или Почему у Госдепа кишка тонка" ["How Russia Fights the Information War, or Why the State Department Doesn't Have What It Takes"], RISS, 17 December 2015.

⁸¹ Marina Yanglyaeva, "Российские нарративы в американском исполнении" ["Russian Narratives, American-Style"], in Marina Yanglyaeva (ed), *Кризис на Украине и крымские события 2014: практика информационной войны* [Crisis in Ukraine and the Crimean Events of 2014: The Practice of Information Warfare] (RISS, 2015), 211–216; "Увидела свет самая подробная в мире книга о практике информационной войны" ["The Most Detailed Book in the World on the Practice of Information Warfare Has Been Published"], RISS, 11 November 2015.

⁸² М.М. Yanglyaeva (ed), *Кризис на Украине и крымские события 2014: практика информационной войны* [The Crisis in Ukraine and the 2014 Crimean Events: The Practice of Information Warfare] (RISS, 2015), 16–17.

director and a committed monarchist and proponent of the idea of a ‘Russian Orthodox civilisation’, and the subsequent structural reorganisation of RISS. Many key figures close to Reshetnikov departed, including Marina Yanglyaeva (to HSE) and Tamara Guzenkova (to RGGU).⁸³

Under Mikhail Fradkov, RISS, which had always been a highly opaque institution, became even less transparent in its activities.⁸⁴ Unlike his predecessor, he almost never communicates with the media. As for the public-facing part of its work on Ukraine, RISS appears to have changed its form but not its substance, remaining focused on reproducing and promoting the Kremlin’s general ideological line in the information space.

RISS staff regularly comment in Russian media on topics related to the Russia–Ukraine war. Their commentary focuses on discrediting the idea of European aid to Ukraine and disparaging Ukraine’s political leadership. RISS also promotes a set of recurring narratives: that the Ukrainian front is supposedly about to collapse, that Ukrainian is a minority language in Ukraine, and that Ukraine is carrying out an ‘ethnocide’ against Russian speakers. Beyond this, RISS claims that the transfer of frozen Russian sovereign assets amounts to theft and that Ukrainian refugees are not welcome in European countries. As before, RISS still does not publish substantive, in-depth research on Ukraine. Since mid-2022, RISS’s journal *National Strategy Problems* (*Проблемы национальной стратегии*) has carried no articles devoted specifically to Ukraine.

3.2. RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

Unlike other major world regions from Latin America to Asia and Africa that have long had their dedicated research institutes within the Russian Academy of Sciences, the RAS

has never had an institute dedicated to the comprehensive study of contemporary Ukraine or the post-Soviet space as a whole. None emerged because the area was not perceived as requiring deep study, trained personnel, and serious financial resources. At least until the mid-2010s, the RAS’s humanities-oriented units remained severely underfunded.⁸⁵

The Russian Academy of Sciences has never had an institute dedicated to the comprehensive study of contemporary Ukraine

Working there held little appeal, and staff positions were being cut. Even Russian Foreign Ministry officials who interacted with them acknowledged that the RAS remained “so impoverished that people there barely scrape by.”⁸⁶

3.2.1. INSTITUTE OF SLAVIC STUDIES

The first dedicated centre for the study of Ukraine within the RAS appeared at the Institute of Slavic and Balkan Studies (now the Institute of Slavic Studies – ISS RAS) in 1992, under the name Centre for Belarusian and Ukrainian Studies. Its staff were drawn mainly from those who had previously specialised in central and eastern European countries and Russian history. Two years later, a separate Centre for Ukrainian Studies was spun off under the leadership of Sergey Knyazkov.⁸⁷ Like its parent structure, it did not analyse contemporary developments in Ukraine, but instead it studied earlier historical periods as well as Ukrainian culture and philology.

Interestingly, from the moment of its founding, one of the centre’s priority tasks was

⁸³ Pyotr Multatuli and Leonid Reshetnikov, “Россия! Встань и возвышайся!” [“Russia! Arise and Ascend!”], *Проблемы национальной стратегии* [Problems of National Strategy], no. 2 (2012): 12–26.

⁸⁴ Barbashin and Graef, *Thinking Foreign Policy in Russia*, 23.

⁸⁵ Pyotr Cherkasov, “ИМЭМО в первой половине 2000-х (Кадровые и организационные вопросы)” [“IMEMO in the First Half of the 2000s (Personnel and Organisational Issues)”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations] 66, no. 2 (2022): 123–131.

⁸⁶ Anatoly Korobeynikov (ed), *Россия в новом веке: внешнеполитическое измерение* [Russia in the New Century: The Foreign-Policy Dimension] (Federation Council of the Russian Federation, 2005), 75.

⁸⁷ Sergey Knyazkov, “Центр украинистики” [“The Centre for Ukrainian Studies”], in M.A. Robinson (ed), *Институт славяноведения и балканистики. 50 лет* [Institute of Slavic Studies and Balkan Studies: 50 Years] (Indrik, 1996), 261.

studying and combating ‘the phenomenon of Russophobia’, supposedly originating in those western countries most fiercely opposed to Russia on the international stage.⁸⁸ Ukraine was named as a new locus of Russophobia, where “radical nationalist elements” were allegedly using it to construct an “image of the enemy” out of Russia.

However, unfavourable conditions for scholarship apparently made it difficult for the ISS’s leadership to retain the centre’s research team. The centre was abolished in 1998, and replaced with a larger research unit – the Department of Eastern Slavic Studies.⁸⁹ It still exists today but does not cover present-day Ukraine in its work.

3.2.2. INSTITUTE OF ECONOMICS

At the Institute of Economics RAS (InEcon), a subdivision dedicated to studying Russia’s economic relations with CIS countries appeared in 1992, led by Lidia Kosikova. Three years later, it was transformed into the Centre for Post-Soviet Economic Development and Cooperation headed by Ruslan Grinberg and, from 1998 to the present, by Leonid Vardomsky.⁹⁰ After several name changes, it has operated since 2010 as the Centre for Post-Soviet Studies (CPSS).

Initially, no one at the CPSS had prior experience researching Ukraine. Its staff consisted mostly of experts who had previously worked on the economies of the Council for Mutual Economic

Assistance (Comecon) countries. The centre’s early work focused mainly on general issues of economic integration within the CIS, prospects for resolving trade disputes, debt settlement with Russia, and World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession.

Systematic publications on Ukraine’s economic development – for instance, the experience of privatising state property and the consequences of global crises for Ukraine – appeared at InEcon only from the 2000s onwards. The quality of its analysis and the accuracy of its forecasts, however, were extremely poor. In 2010, for example, its leading analysts predicted that restoring Russian–Ukrainian trade volumes to 2008 levels “would take quite a few years.”⁹¹ Their prediction was wrong almost immediately. Trade volumes significantly surpassed that level that same year.

Ukraine was treated as an arena of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the west

InEcon’s specialists consistently treated Ukraine as an arena of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the west. Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution was framed as a product of US and European patronage, aimed at pushing Russia out of its traditional sphere of interests.⁹² After the Revolution of Dignity, InEcon’s publications became more tendentious and ideologically charged. Pseudo-analytical assertions and propaganda *clichés* appeared more frequently. In particular, the post-Soviet space was described as a passive object of US and EU expansion, allegedly driven by an obsession with containing Russia, while Ukraine was depicted as a state holding an “irreconcilable Russophobic position.”⁹³ Until 2022, one of the

⁸⁸ Volkov, “Российское славяноведение” [“Russian Slavic Studies”].

⁸⁹ Elena Borisenok, “Работа Отдела восточного славянства Института славяноведения РАН в области украинистики” [“The Work of the Department of Eastern Slavic Studies of the Institute of Slavic Studies, RAS, in the Field of Ukrainian Studies”], in A.A. Skrypnyk (ed), *Украинистика в России: история, состояние, тенденции развития* [Ukrainian Studies in Russia: History, Current State, and Development Trends] (Ufa Branch of the Sholokhov Moscow State University for the Humanities, 2010), 69–73.

⁹⁰ Leonid Vardomsky, Natalia Kulikova, Georgy Toloraya, and Artem Yakovlev, “Страны российского пояса соседства в исследованиях Института экономики Российской академии наук: история, методология, результаты” [“Countries of Russia’s Neighbourhood Belt in the Research of the Institute of Economics, Russian Academy of Sciences: History, Methodology, Results”], *Вестник Института экономики Российской академии наук* [Bulletin of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences], no. 4 (2025): 33–58.

⁹¹ Leonid Vardomsky and Artem Pylin, “Глобальный кризис в Украине: причины глубокого спада и противоречия экономической политики” [“The Global Crisis in Ukraine: Causes of the Deep Downturn and Contradictions in Economic Policy”], *Белорусский экономический журнал* [Belarusian Economic Journal], no. 1 (2010): 15.

⁹² Kosikova, “Консолидация” [“Consolidation”], 24.

⁹³ Leonid Vardomsky, “Постсоветский интеграционный проект: что хотели и что получили” [“The Post-Soviet Integration Project: What Was Wanted and What Was Achieved”], *Мир перемен* [World of Change], no. 3 (2016): 20.

main research topics remained the search for ways to restore Russian influence in Ukraine through economic instruments.⁹⁴ Following Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine nearly disappeared from the titles of InEcon staff publications.

3.2.3. INSTITUTE OF EUROPE

Ukraine was also studied on a residual basis at the Institute of Europe RAS. In the 1990s, its best-known expert on Ukraine was Arkady Moshes, until his departure for the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) in 2002. In 2009, the institute established a Centre for Ukrainian Studies under the leadership of Viktor Mironenko. Apart from him, the centre essentially had no full-time staff. The centre participated in several research projects on the history of Ukraine and played a notable role in efforts to institutionalise Ukrainian studies in Russia. It published analyses of Ukrainian domestic political developments with varying degrees of regularity.

The centre's publications are marked by conceptual heterogeneity and the absence of a unified analytical framework. On the one hand, they advanced a thesis highly marginalised within the Russian expert community – the need to recognise Ukraine as an independent state with agency of its own. Yet at the same time, they found justification for the doctrine of limited sovereignty. Viktor Mironenko, for instance, implicitly recognised Russia's exclusive right to determine where the line lay between an independent and an 'aggressive' policy by Kyiv and warned against a decline in Russian influence in Ukraine.⁹⁵ Moreover, by asserting that both countries had irrational mindsets – Russia a "complex of historical mission" and Ukraine a

"victim complex" – Mironenko created a false equivalence between the two sides' historical grievances.⁹⁶

With the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Institute of Europe's Centre for Ukrainian Studies ceased its work entirely and was shut down in 2024.

3.2.4. IMEMO

For a long time, the Institute of World Economy and International Relations at the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO) had no specialised subdivision dealing with the countries neighbouring Russia. It was not until 2014 that a Centre for Post-Soviet Studies was established there. The institute's leadership acknowledged that its creation had come very late.⁹⁷

The centre has at least 29 staff members, distributed across five sectors. The Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine sector (5 staff) focuses primarily on issues of Eurasian integration and political dynamics in Belarus and Moldova. The sector conducts virtually no systematic research on Ukraine as such. This topic is essentially assigned to the Russia and the New Eurasian States sector, where one of the seven experts – a former employee of the Russian trade mission in Kyiv – covers aspects of Ukraine's economic development, while two others work on its domestic and foreign policies.

The centre's analysis suffers from substantial flaws. Its texts are often heavily biased, reproducing the official Russian information agenda under the guise of expert commentary. Quotes and statements are most often selected to fit a predetermined thesis. The practice of citing data attributed to unnamed experts without providing a source or reference is widespread. Articles are written predominantly on the basis of materials from Russian and

⁹⁴ Lidia Kosikova, "Российско-украинская дезинтеграция" ["Russian-Ukrainian Disintegration"], *Россия и современный мир* [Russia and the Contemporary World], no. 1 (2016): 107–120.

⁹⁵ Viktor Mironenko, "Политическое влияние России в Украине: цели и результаты" ["Russia's Political Influence in Ukraine: Aims and Results"], in G.M. Lesnaya (ed), *Цивилизационно-культурные связи России и Украины* [Civilizational and Cultural Ties between Russia and Ukraine] (MGIMO, 2015), 87–96; Viktor Mironenko, "Этноконфессиональные конфликты на Украине: условия, вероятность и потенциал" ["Ethno-Confessional Conflicts in Ukraine: Conditions, Probability, and Potential"], in B.N. Florya (ed), *Белоруссия и Украина: история и культура* [Belarus and Ukraine: History and Culture], vol. 4, (Tezaurus, 2011), 504–544.

⁹⁶ Mironenko, *Украинский транзит* [Ukrainian Transit], 12.

⁹⁷ Valery Vyshutovich, "Смена вектора" ["A Change of Vector"], *Российская газета* [Russia's Newspaper], 6 December 2022, 1, 5.

Russia-affiliated media.⁹⁸ Ukrainian-language sources and English-language scholarship are almost never used.

The conceptual framework employed by the centre's staff treats Ukraine not as a subject of international relations but as an arena of struggle for spheres of interest between the United States and Russia. In effect, the centre is yet another niche source of state propaganda and disinformation, whose main task is to justify Russian foreign policy.

3.3. UNIVERSITIES

3.3.1. MSU

Back in 1991, at the peak of demand among the USSR's constituent republics for self-determination and the restoration of their independence, historians specialising in Slavic studies at MSU, led by Mikhail Dmitriev, established a Centre for Belarusian and Ukrainian Studies within the Department of the History of Southern and Western Slavs at the Faculty of History. Only one staff position was allocated to support the centre's work, while other activities relied on the voluntary efforts of enthusiasts. The centre's research focused chiefly on the history of Ukraine from the sixteenth to the twentieth century and did not address contemporary Ukraine.

The 2000s were likely the peak of activity for MSU's Centre for Belarusian and Ukrainian Studies (CBUS). During this period, it managed to publish several books whose concepts had been planned back in the 1990s but had been postponed for better times because of a lack of funding. In addition, jointly with the Department of Eastern Slavic Studies at the ISS RAS and the Institute of Europe's Centre for Ukrainian Studies, CBUS was able to carry out a number of research projects and hold several major conferences.⁹⁹ From the early 2010s, its activity gradually faded, with fewer

and fewer events and projects, until it was finally shut down in 2023.

In 2004, a Department of the History of the Near Abroad Countries was established at MSU. Nearly half the department is engaged in studying the countries of the Caucasus. Judging by the publication record of its remaining staff, none of the department's members conducts systematic research on Ukraine.

3.3.2. SPbU

Russia's first specialised undergraduate programme on the countries that had previously been part of the USSR was established at St Petersburg State University's School of International Relations in 1997, followed four years later by a master's programme in International Relations in the Post-Soviet Space. To support it, a department of the same name was established in 2012. Two of its staff members conducted research on Ukraine in modern international relations, but after 2022 all systematic activity in this field ceased.

From 2004, a Centre for the Study of the History of Ukraine also operated within SPbU's Faculty of History, headed by Prof Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva.¹⁰⁰ It was a formal structure designed to help attract external funding for publications and research based on Russian archival materials on the history of Ukraine. The centre never addressed contemporary Ukraine. Following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Prof Tairova-Yakovleva expressed hope for Ukraine's victory and was dismissed from St Petersburg State University, after which the centre she had headed ceased to exist.¹⁰¹

3.3.3. RGGU

At RGGU, a Centre for the Study of Post-Soviet Foreign Countries was established in 2006 and reorganised as a university department a year

⁹⁸ Elena Tsedilina, "Четвертая годовщина 'революции достоинства': расчеты и просчеты Киева" ["The Fourth Anniversary of the 'Revolution of Dignity': Kyiv's Calculations and Miscalculations"], *Россия и новые государства Евразии* [Russia and the New States of Eurasia], no. 2 (2018): 9–28.

⁹⁹ ISS RAS, *Институт славяноведения РАН в 2009 году. Планы 2010 года. Справочник* [The Institute of Slavic Studies, RAS, in 2009. Plans for 2010. A Directory] (ISS RAS, 2010), 45.

¹⁰⁰ Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva, "Петербургская украинистика: от истоков до современности" ["St. Petersburg Ukrainian Studies: From Its Origins to the Present"], *Славяноведение* [Slavic Studies], no. 4 (2015): 83–89.

¹⁰¹ "СПбГУ уволил главу центра изучения Украины, выступившую против войны" ["SPbU Has Dismissed the Head of the Centre for Ukrainian Studies Who Spoke Out against the War"], *Радио Свобода* [Radio Freedom], 30 June 2022.

later.¹⁰² It offers training in Ukrainian affairs within the International Relations programme. From 2012, it briefly admitted students to a major in Post-Soviet Studies, but the major was apparently closed due to insufficient student demand.

It was at RGGU that the first conference of the RAU took place in 2010. Staff at the Department of Post-Soviet Foreign Countries produce expert briefs for the Federation Council and have experience cooperating with Foreign Ministry structures on projects related to “Russian compatriots.” They see themselves as the spearhead of Russian “soft power” in the ideological struggle for the cultural and linguistic identity of “Russian compatriots” in neighbouring countries.¹⁰³ Accordingly, the department’s researchers see one of the main functions of Russian universities as turning foreign students into “agents of influence” and keeping them within Russia’s cultural sphere after graduation.¹⁰⁴

This partly explains the very high concentration of propagandistic content on Ukraine at RGGU. Ukraine is presented there merely as a western foreign-policy instrument for containing Russia.¹⁰⁵ Its researchers have also categorically asserted that, until Ukraine stabilises its economic situation through concessions to Russia, its course towards strategic rapprochement with the west would be “postponed to an indefinite future.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Alexander Gushchin and Alexander Levchenkov, “Развитие украинистики в РГГУ – результаты и перспективы” [“The Development of Ukrainian Studies at RGGU: Results and Prospects”], *Вісник Харківського національного університету імені В. Н. Каразіна* [Bulletin of V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University], no. 965 (2011): 238–242.

¹⁰³ Alexander Gushchin and Alexander Levchenkov, “Роль гуманитарного университета в решении социальных и внешнеполитических задач” [“The Role of a Humanities University in Addressing Social and Foreign-Policy Tasks”], *Высшее образование в России* [Higher Education in Russia], no. 2 (2017): 150–156.

¹⁰⁴ Gushchin and Levchenkov, “Роль гуманитарного университета в решении социальных и внешнеполитических задач” [“The Role of a Humanities University in Addressing Social and Foreign-Policy Tasks”].

¹⁰⁵ Efim Pivovarov and Aleksandr Bezborodov (eds.), *История СССР/РФ в контексте современного российеведения* [The History of the USSR/Russian Federation in the Context of Contemporary Russian Studies] (Prospekt, 2014), 266.

¹⁰⁶ Pivovarov and Bezborodov (eds.), *История СССР/РФ*, 273.

RGGU’s publication activity on Ukrainian topics peaked in 2019–20. After the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022, its staff shifted more towards analysing western countries’ foreign policies towards Ukraine or switched entirely to topics unrelated to Ukraine.

3.3.4. RUSSIAN MFA UNIVERSITIES

The educational organisations under the authority of the Russian Foreign Ministry are chiefly MGIMO and DA MFA. Although the Academy’s staff quite regularly prepared analytical materials for Russian governmental bodies, above all the Foreign Ministry, the institution did not enjoy the reputation of a serious research centre and was traditionally regarded as a comfortable haven for retired diplomats. In 2025, DA MFA was subordinated to MGIMO as part of a reorganisation process.

At the DA MFA, a small research unit – the CIS Centre, established in 1994 within the Institute of Contemporary International Problems – touched on Ukraine-related topics in its work. It was initially headed by Anatoly Shutov, a committed proponent of restoring Russian great-power status and of conspiracy theories about western plots.¹⁰⁷ In 2008, he was succeeded by Sergey Zhiltsov, whose writings systematically delegitimised Ukrainian agency and statehood in a condescending tone.¹⁰⁸ Likely owing to the decline of the CIS and the emergence of newer Moscow-led projects, the centre was renamed the “Centre for the Study of the Post-Soviet Space” in an internal restructuring in 2015. As of today, the centre conducts no activity whatsoever. Meanwhile, DA MFA’s leadership has increasingly produced

¹⁰⁷ Anatoly D. Shutov, “Искажение истории: сфальсифицированные претензии” [“The Distortion of History: Falsified Claims”], *Национальная безопасность / Nota Bene* [National Security / Nota Bene] 3, no. 20 (2012): 121–130.

¹⁰⁸ Sergei S. Zhiltsov, “Технологии политической борьбы за власть на Украине” [“Technologies of the Political Struggle for Power in Ukraine”], *Полис. Политические исследования* [Polis. Political Studies], no. 6 (2014): 52–61; Sergei S. Zhiltsov, “Украина: новый этап политического развития” [“Ukraine: A New Stage of Political Development”], *Проблемы постсоветского пространства*, no. 1 (2014): 4–23; Sergei S. Zhiltsov, “Истоки современного украинского национализма” [“The Origins of Contemporary Ukrainian Nationalism”], *Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Политология* [Bulletin of RUDN University. Series: Political Science], no. 4 (2014): 21–36.

overtly aggressive, anti-Ukrainian and anti-western propaganda justifying Russia's invasion.¹⁰⁹

At MGIMO, a Centre for Post-Soviet Studies was created in 2000 within the Institute for International Studies (IIS).¹¹⁰ In 2021, it was merged with two other IIS subdivisions – the Centre for Caucasus Problems and Regional Security and the Centre for Central Asian and Afghanistan Studies – into a Centre for Eurasian Studies (CES). Within it, in 2025, a research programme titled “The New Political Role of Post-Soviet States” was created, with the greatest attention devoted to the Caucasus region. As of today, none of the programme's seven staff members systematically conducts research on Ukraine.

As before, the programme's affiliated experts continue working mainly on topics assigned under a research agenda set by the Foreign Ministry, so their publications broadly follow the official line of Kremlin foreign policy. Among the most popular research directions are exploring opportunities for advancing Moscow-led integration projects, analysing western activity in the post-Soviet space, and looking for ways to consolidate the countries of the region around Russia. Ukraine's internal social, economic, and political development lies on the periphery of the programme's interests.

Although at first glance MGIMO analysts write texts that are somewhat less propagandistically charged than, say, those of their colleagues at RGGU, their reasoning is based on the very same conceptualisation of Ukraine as an arena of competition between Russia and the United States for influence, western aid to Ukraine is discredited by every possible means, and critical scrutiny of Russian policy is almost entirely absent.

4. PUBLICATIONS ON UKRAINE

The volume and character of publications on Ukraine are an important indicator of the state of Ukrainian studies in Russia. This section examines three aspects of this output in turn: trends in book publishing, including the share of overtly propagandistic literature; the publication activity of Russian authors in peer-reviewed academic journals; and Russian dissertations on Ukraine, considering both their number and their content.

4.1. BOOKS

Under Russian law, publishers are required to send a legal-deposit copy of printed output to the country's major libraries, including the National Library of Russia (NLR).¹¹¹ The number of Ukraine-related titles entering the collection each year can therefore serve as a proxy for broader trends in Russian book output on this topic.

Before 2005, overtly propagandistic literature was practically absent, but its share became noticeable after the Orange Revolution

NLR catalogue data show that the strongest surges in publishing activity occurred in 1997, 2004, 2014, and 2022 (Figure 3). Among all the items in the catalogue, this report identified those that, by title, description, or content, could be classified as explicitly propagandistic. Before 2005, overtly propagandistic literature was practically absent. Its share became noticeable after the Orange Revolution and fluctuated from a few per cent to 12%. This may have reflected not so much a sustained expansion of academic interest in Ukraine as a state-driven effort to pre-emptively satisfy public demand for interpretations of political developments in Ukraine.

¹⁰⁹Oleg G. Karpovich, “[Территория реальной свободы](#)” [“Territory of Real Freedom”], *Международная жизнь* [International Affairs], 13 June 2024.

¹¹⁰A.V. Torkunov (ed), *МГИМО – Университет: Традиции и современность. 1944–2004* [MGIMO University: Traditions and Modernity, 1944–2004] (Moskovskie uchebniki i Kartolitografiya, 2004), 11, 34.

¹¹¹President of the Russian Federation, [Об обязательном экземпляре документов](#) [“On the Compulsory Copy of Documents”], Federal Law 77 (President of the Russian Federation, 29 December 1994), art. 19, sec. 1.

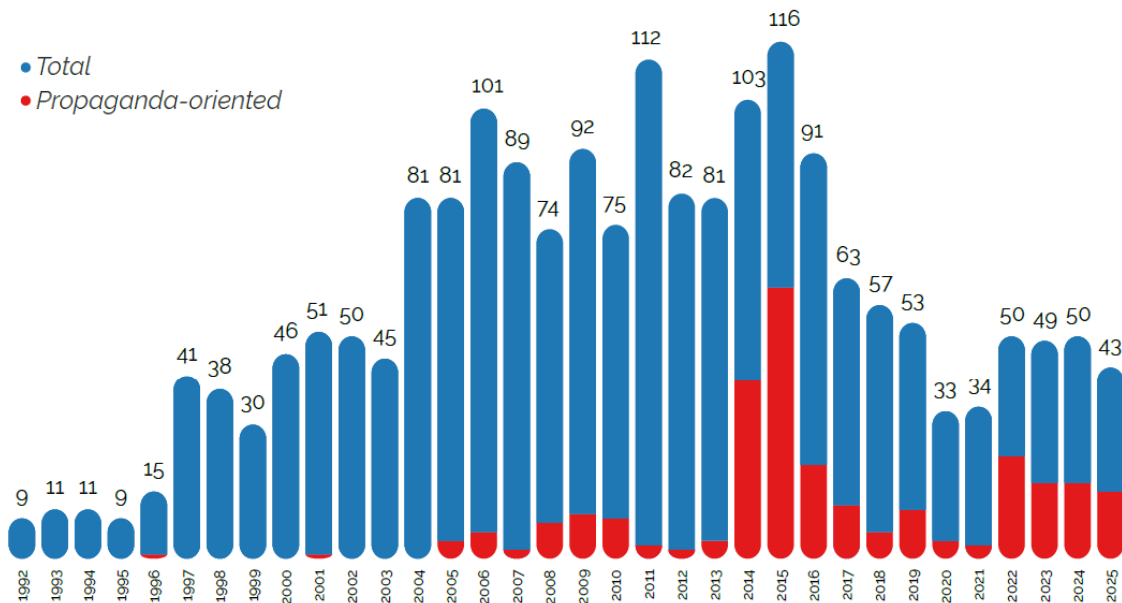


Figure 3. Books on Ukraine and share of propaganda-oriented literature, by year, 1992–2025.

Source: Author's calculations based on the NLR electronic catalogue, 2026.

Indirect support for this hypothesis may be found in the rise, from 2005, in the activity of prolific pseudo-historians and propagandist writers such as Alexander Shirokorad, Armen Gasparian, Nikolay Starikov, and Anatoliy Vasserman. In their books on Ukraine, all of them promoted neo-imperial and great-power narratives. They described Ukrainian statehood as 'artificial', devalued the Ukrainian language and culture, attributed to Russia an unconditional right to interfere in Ukraine's internal affairs, and drew false parallels between contemporary Ukraine and Nazi Germany.¹¹²

It is also from 2005 that militaristic fiction began to spread in Russia, depicting Ukraine as a battlefield between NATO and Russia.¹¹³

¹¹²Alexander Shirokorad, *Россия и Украина. Когда заговорят пушки...* [Russia and Ukraine: When the Cannons Speak...] (AST; Khranitel, 2007); Anatoliy Vasserman, *Украина и остальная Россия* [Ukraine and the Rest of Russia] (AST, 2013); Nikolay Starikov, *Украина: хаос и революция – оружие доллара* [Ukraine: Chaos and Revolution – the Dollar's Weapon] (Piter, 2014); Armen Gasparian, *ДеНАЦИфикация Украины. Страна невыученных уроков* [The DeNAZification of Ukraine: A Country of Unlearned Lessons] (Piter, 2018).

¹¹³See, for example: Gleb Bobrov, *Эпоха мертворожденных* [The Age of the Stillborn] (Eksmo, 2008); Georgy Savitsky, *Поле боя – Украина. Сломанный трезубец* [Battlefield Ukraine: The Broken Trident] (Eksmo, 2009); Fyodor Berezin, *Война 2010: Украинский фронт* [War 2010: The Ukrainian Front] (Eksmo, 2009); Vladimir Melnik, *Законы войны* [The Laws of War] (Lenizdat, 2011).

The typical plot of such books describes the outbreak of hostilities as the result of an aggressive policy by 'Ukrainian Nazis' and NATO against the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine's southern and eastern regions, whom the Russian army is portrayed as being forced to defend.

It is from 2005 that militaristic fiction began to spread, depicting Ukraine as a battlefield between NATO and Russia

With the 2014 annexation of Crimea, a new and far more noticeable surge occurred in the quantity of propagandistic literature, which by 2015 accounted for more than half (52.6%) of all books on Ukraine received by the NLR. In content, this genre shifted towards imitating the style of war prose and documentary writing, extensively interweaving fictional elements and propaganda messaging with real events.¹¹⁴ These works glorify the separatists, emphasising their agency in every way, while delegitimising Ukraine's political leadership as a west-dependent 'junta' and dehumanising the Ukrainian army as 'punishers' (*каратели*) and 'Nazis'. Russia itself is often left outside the frame of the narrative.

¹¹⁴Vladimir Polikarpov, *Донбасс. От Славянска до Дебальцево. Хроники, записанные кровью. Окопная правда гражданской войны* [Donbas: From Sloviansk to Debaltsevo. Chronicles Written in Blood. The Trench Truth of the Civil War] (Knizhny mir, 2016); Sergey Shargunov, *Свои* [Our Own] (AST, 2018).

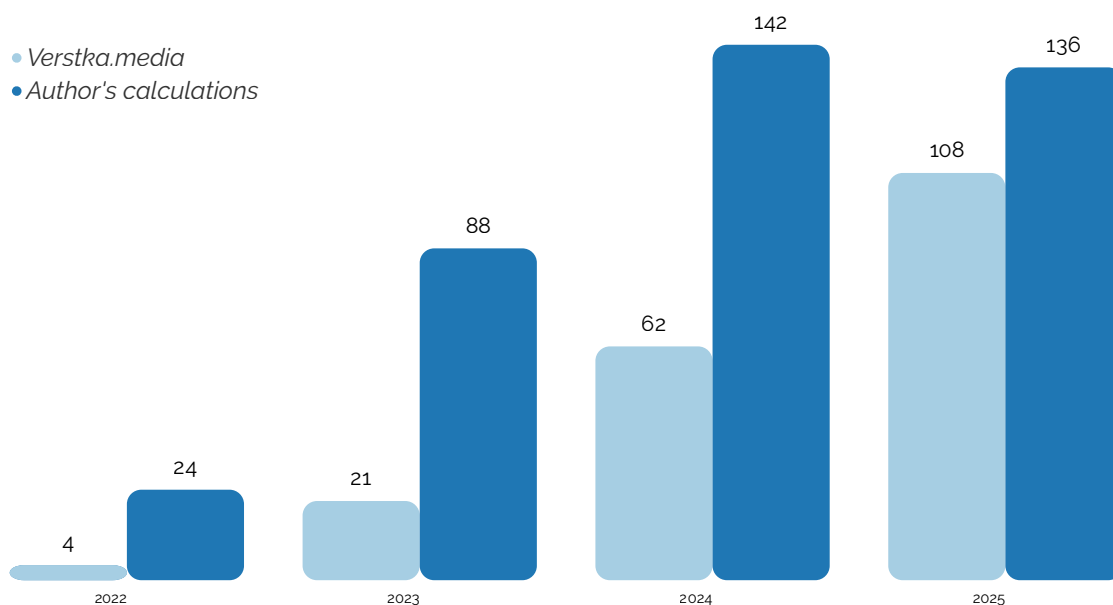


Figure 4. Number of books in the Z-literature genre published in Russia, by year, 2022–25.

Source: Verstka.media, 2026; author's calculations based on the NLR electronic catalogue, 2026.

From 2022, a layer of fiction and pseudo-historical literature has appeared in Russian bookstores, produced within a similar ideological framework. This body of titles comes on top of the propagandistic titles about Ukraine already discussed above. It is sometimes called 'Z-literature', after one of the symbols of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – a genre in its own right, whose subject is not Ukraine itself but the ideological justification of Russia's military aggression. According to a count by the online outlet Verstka, which examined the catalogues of major Russian publishing houses, 195 such books were released between 2022 and 2025.¹¹⁵ However, analysis of NLR's electronic catalogue using keywords related to the 'special military operation' suggests that the actual volume of literature in this genre is at least twice as large (see Figure 4).

community's reaction to specific events, the emergence of state demand for expertise of a particular orientation, or a shift in the status of Ukrainian studies as a field within the Russian academic and analytical milieu. Declines in activity, conversely, may indirectly signal an institutional crisis, a loss of interest, censorship constraints, or a reorientation of research priorities.

This report analyses these dynamics using the Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus databases, as well as the Russian portal eLibrary, which provides broad coverage of publications by Russian authors. eLibrary's underlying citation system has been shown to include a substantial share of journals engaged in predatory publishing practices, including fabricated peer review and editorial boards populated by individuals flagged by Dissernet,

4.2. ACADEMIC ARTICLES

Studying the dynamics of Russian authors' publishing activity on Ukraine-related topics makes it possible to capture what would otherwise remain at the level of general impressions. A rise in publications may indicate the expert

Only from 2004 did the number of articles on Ukraine's history and political development begin to grow, reaching historical peaks in 2014 and 2022

Russia's academic-fraud watchdog.¹¹⁶ Because this analysis draws on eLibrary solely for

¹¹⁵Yulia Balakhonova, Ivan Smurov, "Читателя трудно обмануть. Кто в России пишет и читает книги о войне в Украине" ["It's Hard to Fool the Reader: Who in Russia Writes and Reads Books about the War in Ukraine"], *Verstka*, 10 June 2026.

¹¹⁶Alexei Kassian, Larisa Melikhova, "Russian Science Citation Index on the WoS platform: a critical assessment," *Journal of Documentation*, 2019, vol. 75, no. 5, 1162–1168.

quantitative purposes, this limitation does not affect the validity of the results reported below.

eLibrary data demonstrate that interest in studying Ukraine in Russia was almost non-existent for a long time. Only from 2004 did the number of articles on Ukraine's history and political development begin to grow rapidly, reaching historical peaks in 2014 and 2022 (Figure 5).

At the same time, publications by Russian authors in peer-reviewed journals indexed by WoS and Scopus remained isolated cases until 2014 (Figures 6 and 7). A noticeable rise in their number occurred at that stage. This was likely linked not only to heightened attention to Ukraine following the Revolution of Dignity, but also to the state policy of promoting Russian publications in international academic journals. In May 2012, Vladimir Putin, by decree, set a goal of raising the share of Russian researchers' publications in WoS journals to 2.44%.¹¹⁷ From then until May 2022, publications in WoS- and Scopus-indexed journals were among the

requirements for obtaining grants from Russian scientific foundations and for evaluating the performance of research institutions.



Figure 5. Number of articles on Ukraine in academic journals indexed by eLibrary, by year, 1992–2025. *Source:* Author's calculations based on the eLibrary.ru platform (Scientific Electronic Library, 2026).

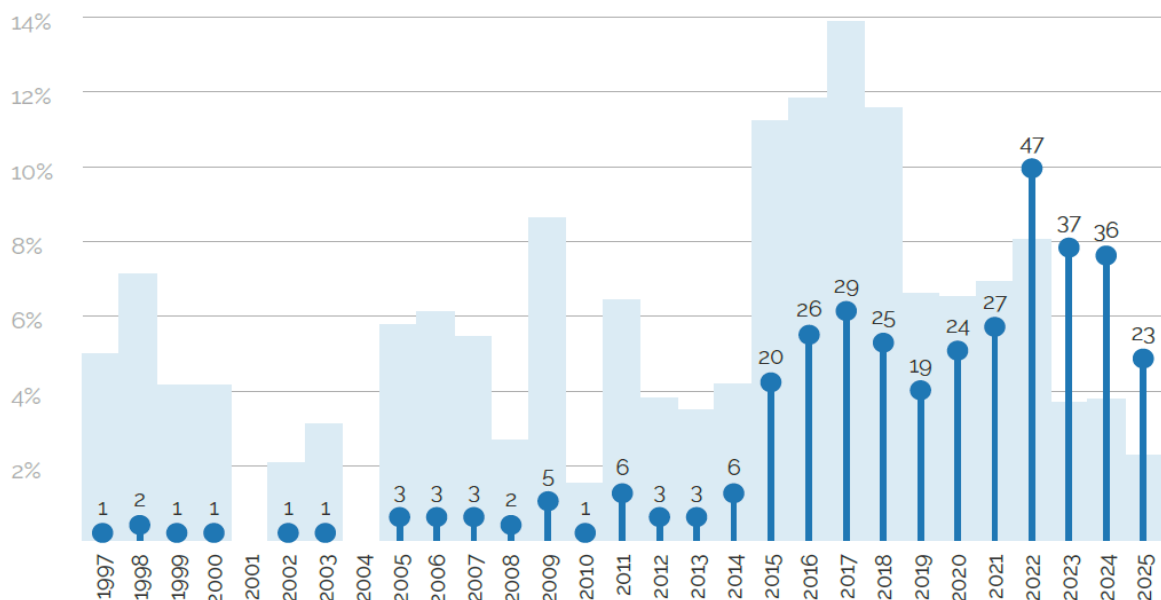


Figure 6. Number and share of articles by Russian authors on Ukraine in the Social Sciences field in academic journals indexed by Scopus, by year, 1997–2025.

Source: Author's calculations based on the Scopus database (Elsevier, 2026).

¹¹⁷President of the Russian Federation, *О мерах по реализации государственной политики в области образования и науки* [On Measures to Implement State Policy in the Field of Education and Science], Decree No. 599 (President of the Russian Federation, 7 May 2012).

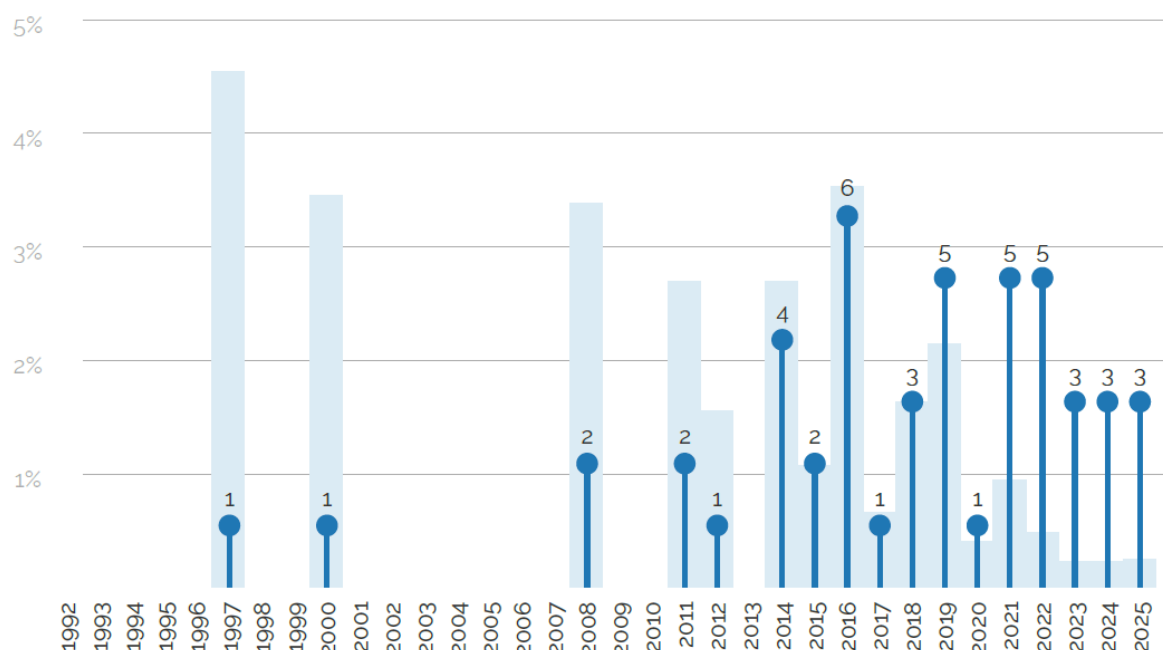


Figure 7. Number and share of articles on Ukraine by authors affiliated with Russian institutions in the fields of International Relations, Area Studies, History, and Political Science in academic journals indexed by WoS, by year, 1992–2025.

Source: Author's calculations based on the Web of Science Core Collection (Clarivate, 2026).

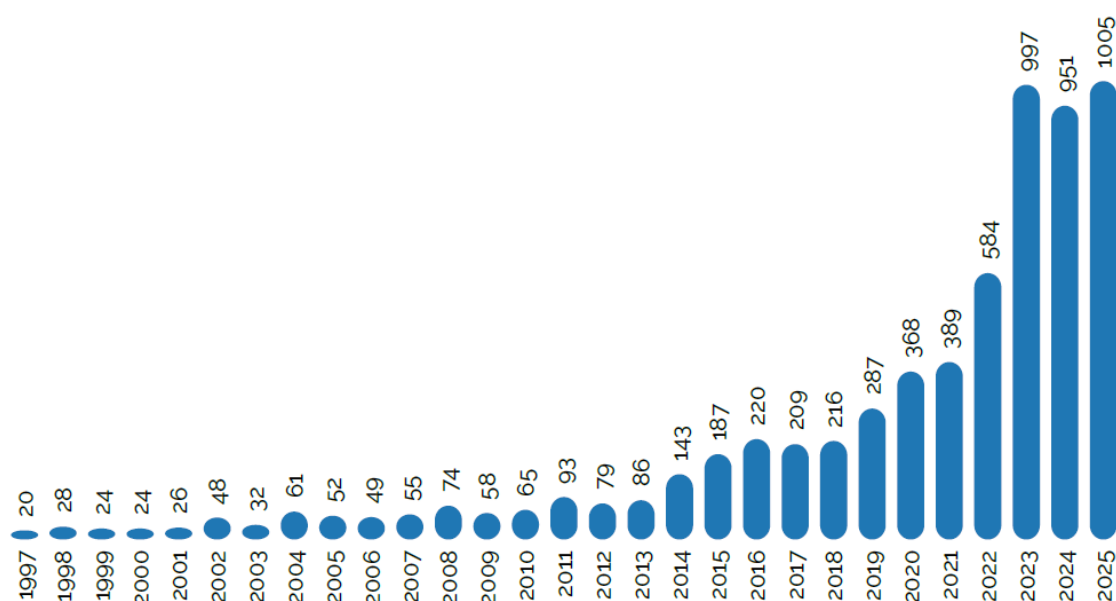


Figure 8. Number of articles on Ukraine in the Social Sciences field in journals indexed by Scopus, by year, 1997–2025. Source: Author's calculations based on the Scopus database (Elsevier, 2026).

Nonetheless, the overall number of publications by Russian authors on Ukraine across all three databases has been declining since 2022. This runs sharply counter to the international trend of a rising number of articles on Ukraine in Scopus and WoS (Figures 8 and 9). As of 2025, Russian authors account for only 0.25% of publications on Ukraine in WoS across the combined fields of International Relations, Area Studies, History, and Political Science. In Scopus, their share

of Social Sciences publications on the country stands at 2.29%.

All of this indicates that the recorded decline is a specifically Russian phenomenon, reflecting the institutional and political conditions under which Russian expertise operates. The output of Russian authors is increasingly concentrated within the national publishing circuit, where exposure to international peer review is extremely limited. The negligible

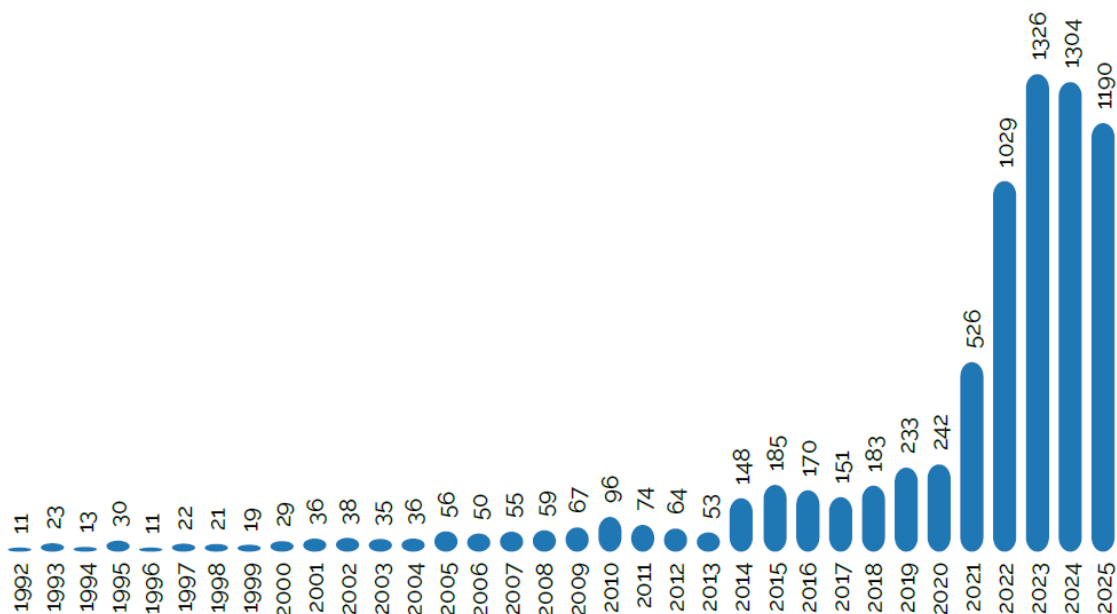


Figure 9. Number of articles on Ukraine in the categories of International Relations, Area Studies, History, and Political Science in academic journals indexed by WoS, by year, 1992–2025.

Source: Author's calculations based on the Web of Science Core Collection (Clarivate, 2026).

share of Russian authors in the overall body of international publications on Ukraine calls into question the very assumption that Russia has a fully fledged field of Ukrainian studies integrated into global scholarship.

4.3. DISSERTATIONS

Dissertations are generally assigned an important role in training and reproducing personnel for both academia and the expert community.¹¹⁸ This is not merely a formal stage in a researcher's professional socialisation, but also a comprehensive indicator of the state of a given field of study. Dissertations show which questions become the object of sustained research interest, which theoretical approaches and methodological tools gain currency and which institutions train experts on a given topic – in this case, Ukrainian studies. Other genres are less suited to this kind of systematic analysis. The sheer volume of books and articles makes in-depth content analysis impractical, and not all such publications are indexed in bibliographic databases. Dissertations, by contrast, constitute a particularly useful body of material for examining the characteristics and dynamics of Russian expert discourse on Ukraine.

¹¹⁸George E. Walker, C.M. Golde, L. Jones, A.C. Bueschel, and P. Hutchings, *The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), xi, 11–12.

4.3.1. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The overall number of Russian dissertations on Ukraine from 1992 to 2025 is relatively small. In total, 205 dissertations were defended in Russia during this period: 149 in history and 56 in political science. Of these, only 25 and one, respectively, were doctoral dissertations (Figure 10).

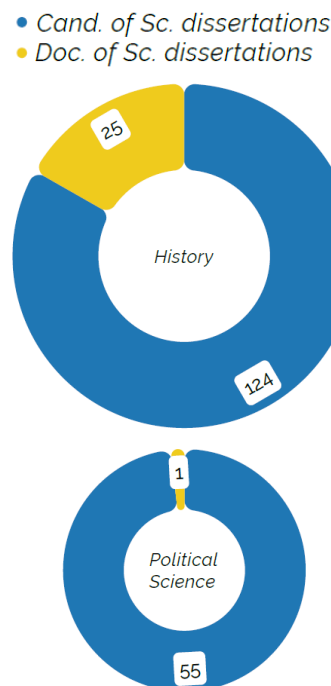


Figure 10. Distribution of Candidate of Sciences and Doctor of Sciences dissertations on Ukraine defended in Russia in history and political science, 1992–2025. Source: Author's calculations based on NLR and RSL electronic catalogues, 2026.



Figure 11. Russian dissertations on Ukraine in history and political science, by location of institution, 1992–2025. *Source:* Author's calculations based on NLR and RSL electronic catalogues, 2026.

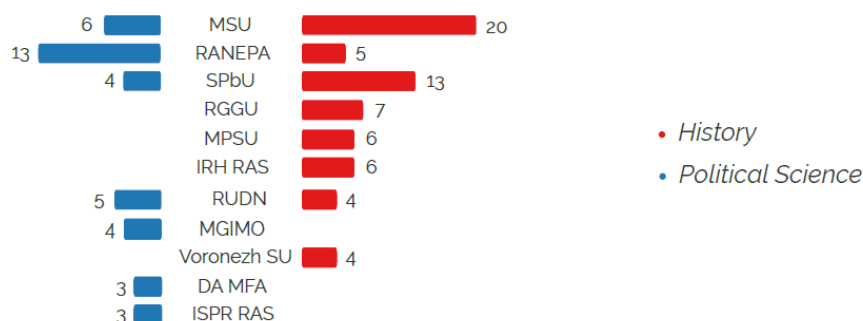


Figure 12. Russian dissertations on Ukraine in history and political science, by institution, 1992–2025. *Source:* Author's calculations based on NLR and RSL electronic catalogues, 2026.

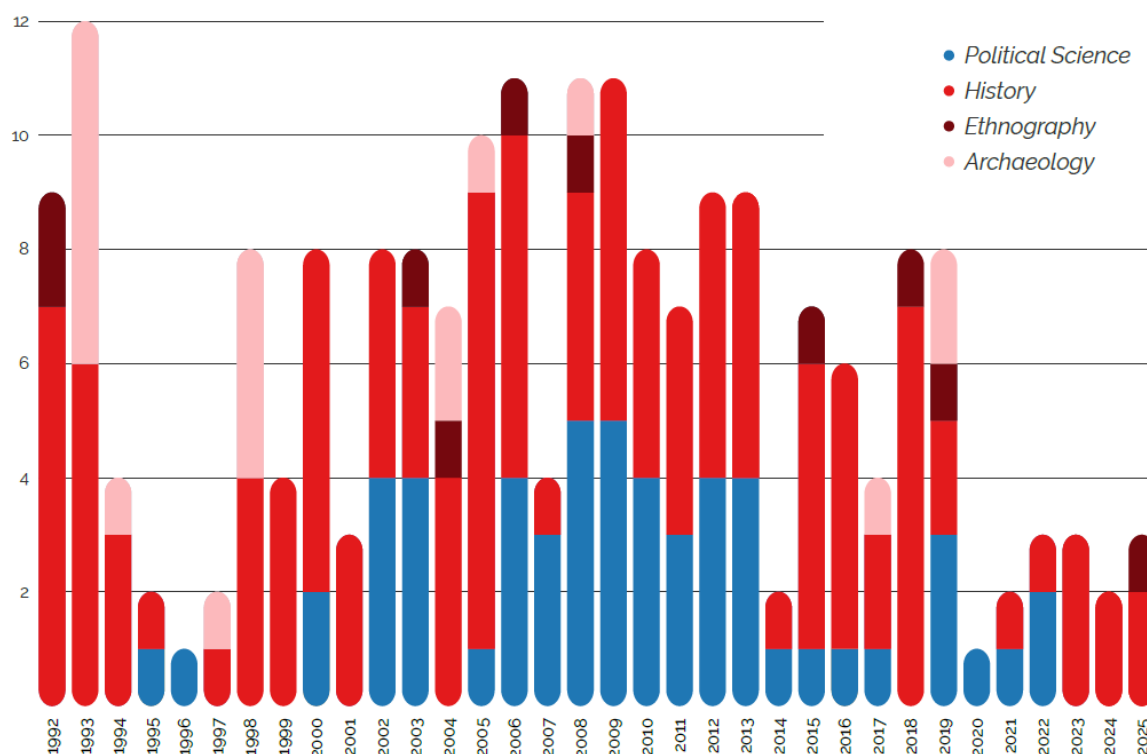


Figure 13. Number of dissertations on Ukraine defended in Russia, by field and year, 1992–2025. *Source:* Author's calculations based on NLR and RSL electronic catalogues, 2026.

History



Political Science

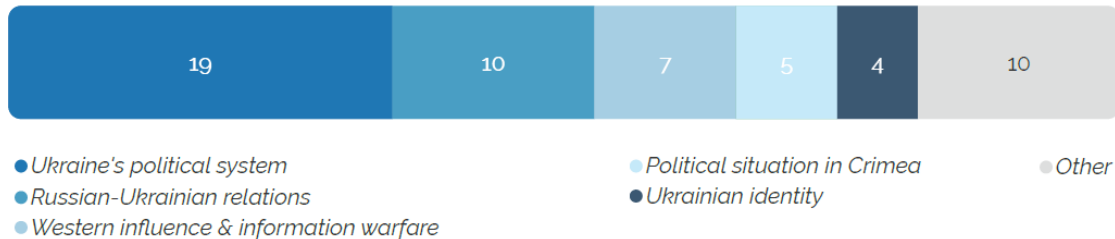


Figure 14. Most common topics of Russian dissertations on contemporary Ukraine, 1992–2025.

Source: Author's calculations based on NLR and RSL electronic catalogues, 2026.

Geographically, dissertations on Ukraine have been produced predominantly in Moscow. Over the period in question, the capital of Russia accounted for almost 50% of dissertations in the historical sciences and 61% of those in political science (Figure 11). Across individual universities and both fields combined, three led by a wide margin: MSU (26 dissertations; 12.7%), RANEPa (18 dissertations; 8.8%), and SPbU (17 dissertations; 8.3%) (Figure 12).

Beyond this geographic pattern, the number of dissertations also follows a clear chronological pattern (Figure 13).

The decline in the early 1990s can primarily be explained by the declining appeal of academic professions. During this period, by inertia, topics closely tied ideologically to the history of the Soviet state continued to be submitted for defence – for example, on the trade-union movement and the ‘working class’ of Ukraine. Meanwhile, some of the period’s dissertations addressed the archaeology and ethnography of the Northern Black Sea region, fields that the Russian classification system does not treat as independent disciplines but subsumes under the historical sciences. Notably, 5 of the 25 dissertations on Ukraine defended in Russia in 1992–94 were prepared by authors who worked at Ukrainian universities.

From the late 1990s, interest in Ukraine as a research subject rose somewhat, peaking by the end of the 2000s. This was likely linked in part to the 2004 Orange Revolution and the growing presence of Ukraine-related coverage in Russian media. However, from the early 2010s to the present, Ukraine has appeared with declining frequency in dissertation titles and has remained a marginal subject.

From the late 1990s, interest in Ukraine as a research subject rose somewhat, peaking by the end of the 2000s

Of all 205 dissertations concerning Ukraine written between 1992 and 2025, only 94 (39 in history and 55 in political science) concern contemporary, post-1991 Ukraine. This body of work is of primary interest here, and it is this corpus that is analysed below.

The corpus reveals clear thematic patterns (Figure 14). Before 2014, the most popular subjects were surveys of Ukraine’s political landscape, comparative studies of the transformation of its political system, and Russian–Ukrainian relations. The Revolution of Dignity was followed by a surge in dissertations on external influence over Ukraine, framed within the broader information confrontation between Russia and the west.

Thematic classification alone, however, captures only part of the picture. A closer reading of the corpus uncovers a set of recurring narrative structures that shape how Russian dissertations treat Ukraine regardless of the specific subject at hand. The following section traces these structures and their evolution over time.

4.3.2. THE NEO-IMPERIAL DISCURSIVE MATRIX

Dissertations, as a genre of academic writing, are conventionally considered a space of scholarly inquiry set apart from politically expedient agendas. Analysis of the Russian corpus on Ukraine calls this presumption into

In 1992–2004, geopolitical determinism serves as an unchanging backdrop for most dissertations. Ukraine appears as the same dependent variable in an equation in which major powers compete for influence over it. In 2005–13, this concept acquires a conspiratorial dimension. The United States is no longer merely pursuing its own interests but is deliberately stoking crises, financing colour revolutions, and ‘dragging’ Ukraine into NATO – that is, not so much reacting to Ukraine’s choices as manufacturing them. In 2014–21, a civilisational sub-narrative in the spirit of Alexander Dugin appears, in which Ukraine is presented no longer simply as a geopolitical unit but as a zone of civilisational schism, where an Orthodox-Slavic cultural matrix competes with the western one. After 2022, geopolitical determinism fuses completely with the official narrative of the ‘special military operation’ as the result of accumulated ‘NATO aggression’.

Ukrainians as an illegitimate nation.

Russian dissertations systematically contest the very fact that a separate Ukrainian people, language, culture, and historical agency exist. Ukrainians are described as part of a ‘single

The most persistent narratives constitute a 'neo-imperial discursive matrix' that recurs throughout the dissertation corpus

question. These texts often represent not so much research on a neighbouring country as the systematic production of neo-imperial narratives about it. Seven of the most persistent stand out. Taken together, they constitute a ‘neo-imperial discursive matrix’ that recurs throughout the dissertation corpus, gradually radicalising as Russian foreign policy becomes more aggressive and reaching its most extreme form after 2022.

Ukraine as an object of great-power competition.

Geopolitical determinism is the almost unchallenged, dominant conceptual framework in Russian dissertations. Ukraine is systematically described as an arena of rivalry between Russia and the west. The United States is considered the principal rival, as the

Russian dissertations systematically contest that a separate Ukrainian people, language, culture, and historical agency exist

people’ with Russians, artificially cut off by Galician nationalists and ‘western manipulators’. The Ukrainian language is dismissively characterised as ‘predominantly rural’, while the Ukrainian elite is labelled ‘Russophobic’ and portrayed as a deviation from the norm of civilisational unity with Russia.

Geopolitical determinism is the almost unchallenged, dominant conceptual framework in Russian dissertations

party seeking to prevent Russia’s restoration as a great power. American support for Ukraine is therefore treated exclusively as an instrument for containing Russia. Ukraine’s fate, according to this logic, should be decided in dialogue between Moscow and Washington.

This is the foundational narrative, present throughout the period under review, on which all those below are built. Its main logical thrust is that if the Ukrainian nation does not exist as an independent subject, then its state’s sovereignty is conditional, the aspiration to independence is pathological, Russia’s territorial claims are justified, and exploiting Ukraine’s vulnerabilities is merely helping ‘one’s own’, namely those who desire ‘reunification’ with Russia.

Ukraine as a state with conditional sovereignty.

Russian researchers accept Ukrainian sovereignty only insofar as Ukraine remains within Moscow's orbit of influence. Ukraine's territorial integrity is treated as conditional on its geopolitical choices. Even authors who formally acknowledge this sovereignty and insist on the need to treat Ukraine "like Germany or France" make the legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood contingent on Kyiv's adherence to what they consider a legitimate interpretation of the Soviet past and a Moscow-compatible foreign policy, while attributing any rapprochement between Ukraine and the west to the latter's manipulation or a "grant-funded push" (*грантовая накачка*).

Ukraine's territorial integrity is treated as conditional on its geopolitical choices

That is, a declarative recognition of Ukrainian sovereignty coexists with a categorical refusal to accept its full independence. Ukraine, in this corpus, is of interest not as a valuable object of research in its own right, but as the terrain on which Russia and the west contest control. This underlying premise explains two recurring features of the corpus. First, dissertation authors see the hand of the west whenever Ukraine drifts away from Russia, while finding nothing unnatural in Russia's own expanding influence there. Second, their policy recommendations consistently come down to retaining levers of Russian influence, among them the Black Sea Fleet, the Russian language, culture, diaspora, and information space.

In 1992–2004, this conditionality was framed as friendly advice: Ukraine was urged to recognise on its own that its interests lay in alliance with Russia. In 2005–13, this was stated more harshly, as a condition for Russia's continued recognition of Ukrainian sovereignty. After 2014, that condition hardened into a claim of Ukraine's 'loss of agency', presented not as a normative demand but as an objective reality. That is, Ukraine's sovereignty disappeared as a category altogether. Dissertation authors stated that "only in alliance with Russia could

Ukraine preserve its statehood," meaning that a sovereign Ukraine outside Russia's orbit was, by definition, unviable.

Ukraine as a failed state.

Ukraine is most often described in Russian dissertations as a weak, unviable, fragmented,

Authors propose an institutional arrangement that would entrench dependence on Russia and strengthen its influence

and incompetent state incapable of pursuing an independent course. As the solution to these 'objectively' diagnosed problems, authors propose an institutional arrangement that would in fact entrench dependence on Russia and strengthen its influence: participation in Russian integration structures and/or federalisation. That is, the diagnosis and the prescription turn out to be inseparably linked, and any alternative – EU and NATO integration – is discredited in advance, cast either as unattainable or as an instrument of subjugation.

At times, the idea of participation in Russian integration projects was presented in a more elaborate form, with integration into Moscow-led structures framed as a step towards eventual integration with Europe. Recognising Ukraine's strategic orientation towards the EU, the authors framed Russian-led integration as a pathway towards that goal, thereby turning Ukraine's European aspirations into a mechanism for drawing it into Moscow's orbit of influence. In reality, this construction was a trap for Ukraine, since engagement with Moscow-led integration projects structurally

Following the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine's perceived weakness was used as a post-hoc justification for actions Russia had already taken

reproduces Russia's geopolitical grip and effectively blocks the institutional changes needed for European integration, turning that goal into a horizon that can never be reached.

Over time, this narrative appeared quite unevenly. In 1992–2004, it was very weakly

expressed, apparently because of the then-widespread conviction that Kyiv would never truly break away from Moscow. After Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, the assertion that Ukraine was a failed state became a standard backdrop in dissertation texts. Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Ukraine's perceived weakness began to be used as a post-hoc justification for actions Russia had already taken: Crimea 'reunified' because Ukraine supposedly could not ensure its 'normal development'.

In 2005–13, an active inversion of victimhood was added, in which Russia was described as the wronged party

Ukraine as historically Russian territory.

Dissertations frequently featured revisionist theses, such as that Sevastopol 'was always Russian' and that the transfer of Crimea was a break in 'historical continuity' and did not conform to international law. Yet the authors offered no source-based legal analysis of the 1954 decision itself. Instead, they either cited existing texts that had already advanced this thesis or simply presented it as axiomatic.

In 1992–2004, clear manifestations of this revisionism in dissertations were few. It began to intensify from 2005 onwards, though it remained, for most authors, a peripheral rather than a foundational premise. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, it moved from an academic fringe position to the mainstream of the corpus, and after 2022 it merged completely with official state doctrine.

Ukraine as a victim of its own phobias.

Many authors downplayed the threat Russia poses to Ukraine and shifted responsibility for tension in bilateral relations onto Ukraine's 'inadequate perception' of Russia. Moscow's aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine is either explained as a defensive reaction by Russia against 'western expansion' or passed over in silence altogether. They consider Kyiv's efforts to defend its statehood unfounded, insisting that the source of problems in bilateral relations is Ukrainian 'phobias' about Russia's imperial ambitions. This often shades into outright victim-blaming, casting Ukraine itself as responsible for provoking Russia.

In 1992–2004, this narrative was expressed chiefly through the rhetoric of the 'myth of imperial ambitions'. Russian authors insisted that Ukraine's fears were irrational and

that Russia posed no threat whatsoever to Ukrainian statehood. In 2005–13, an active inversion of victimhood was added, in which Russia itself was described as the wronged party – a victim of 'western expansion', the colour revolutions, and Ukraine's political instability. After 2014, this inversion reached its

peak. The annexation of Crimea was described as 'minimising costs' and 'facilitating free self-determination' of the peninsula's population rather than as aggression. After 2022, the 'special military operation' is directly called an "exercise of the right to self-defence." In other words, Russia is ultimately transposed from the position of aggressor to that of a victim facing a pre-emptive threat.

Ukraine as a space of discrimination against Russians.

The corpus very often contains claims of allegedly systemic oppression in Ukraine of the Russian-speaking population, as well as of the Russian language, culture, and the Russian Orthodox Church, while the far-reaching consequences of many years of Russification for the Ukrainian language and culture – under both the Soviet and tsarist regimes – go essentially unaddressed. Authors also sometimes assert that Ukrainian national policy towards the Russian-speaking population of Crimea amounted to 'covert genocide'.

The specific function of this narrative within the discursive matrix is to justify Russia's moral right to interfere in Ukraine's internal affairs. It underlies, in particular, the doctrine of defending 'Russian compatriots', which Russia invoked during its aggression against Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The evolution of this narrative in Russian dissertations followed the political conjuncture. Before 2004, it was present as a background theme, but after the Orange Revolution it intensified and became more structured. After 2014, 'discrimination' in Crimea and the southeast became the main

retroactive justification for the annexation, and after 2022, ‘denazification’ served as the justification for the full-scale invasion.

Overall, viewed chronologically, the matrix passed through four fundamentally distinct functional states.

- Official statements on Ukraine during the first period (1992–2004) varied in tone, but beneath that surface variation lay a consistent, discernible line: the Kremlin would not let Ukraine go. It was this underlying consistency, rather than any settled doctrine, that dissertation authors picked up on and intuitively translated into their own texts. Although these dissertations included declarative recognition of Ukrainian sovereignty, this was often accompanied by an insistence that Ukraine remain within Russia’s orbit of influence.
- In the second stage (2005–13), the matrix hardened into a more widely used analytical framework. The language of dissertation texts radicalised, with elements of conspiracy thinking and intensifying revisionism. Narratives about colour revolutions as externally managed operations appeared.
- In the third stage (2014–21), the matrix was increasingly deployed as a tool for legitimising the annexation of Crimea and Russia’s right to interfere in Ukraine’s internal affairs, with texts from institutions in occupied territories, such as Crimean Federal University, contributing to it. By this stage, the matrix had become unfalsifiable from within, making it fundamentally

After 2022, Russian authors stopped pretending to be neutral, and the matrix merged with official state doctrine

- incompatible with academic inquiry.
- In the fourth stage (after 2022), Russian authors stopped pretending to be neutral altogether, and the matrix merged fully with official state doctrine. Vladimir Putin was cited as an academic authority, the term ‘denazification’ was introduced without quotation marks, and the full-scale invasion

– like the earlier annexation of Crimea – was now presented as not merely justified but historically necessary. In other words, the matrix existed as a self-reproducing doctrine whose narratives were activated situationally, depending on which thesis needed justification at a given moment.

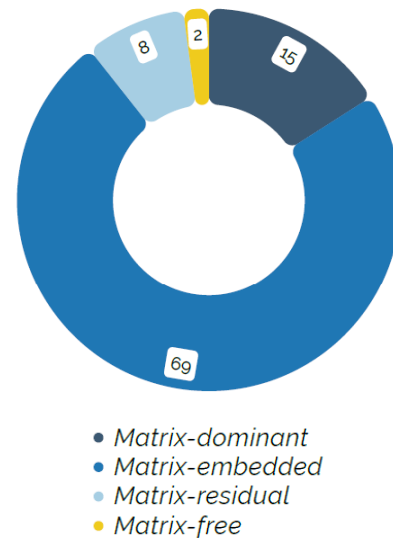


Figure 15. Typology of Russian dissertations on Ukraine by degree of neo-imperial discursive matrix presence. *Source:* Author’s analysis and calculations based on the dissertation corpus.

Texts in the corpus differ substantially in the degree to which the neo-imperial discursive matrix is present – from its almost complete absence to a maximum concentration in which the academic genre serves merely as a shell for a political manifesto. By this criterion, the dissertations can be divided into four groups: (1) matrix-dominant (the matrix is explicit and pervades the entire text); (2) matrix-embedded (the matrix is systemic but implicit); (3) matrix-residual (the matrix is present marginally and unintentionally); and (4) matrix-free (the matrix is effectively absent) (Figure 15). The corpus is dominated by matrix-embedded (69) and matrix-dominant (15) works, which together account for 89.4% of the dissertations examined in this study. Only two show no signs of the matrix whatsoever, and a further eight can be characterised as matrix-residual.

The clearest predictor of the matrix’s reproduction is institutional dependence on state patronage. The closer an institution is to the state apparatus – the Foreign Ministry,

the Ministry of Defence, the Presidential Administration, and the security services – the higher the likelihood that the matrix will be reproduced and the more intensely it will manifest in texts. These are the structures where career incentives, corporate culture, funding, and the choice of research topics are all oriented towards reproducing the state line.

Conversely, where institutional independence from state patronage is combined with research practices rooted in the international academic tradition, the matrix is not reproduced. Tellingly, only two dissertations in the whole corpus are entirely free of traces of the matrix – both were written at the European University at St Petersburg – and of the eight dissertations with only minor traces of the matrix, five were written outside Moscow.

Other variables alone – in particular, individual academic conscientiousness – can reduce the intensity with which the matrix manifests itself but, as the analysis of the corpus shows, cannot eliminate it entirely. The author's own dissertation (2008), included in the corpus and assessed by the same criteria as every other entry, illustrates this limit precisely.¹¹⁹ Despite a deliberate, methodologically grounded effort to distance itself from the matrix's conspiratorial framing, the dissertation still falls into the matrix-residual category, retaining subtler structural traces.

Accordingly, the neo-imperial discursive matrix cannot be reduced to the intentional ideological commitment of individual authors. It may surface even in work by authors who sincerely strive for academic neutrality, through the choice of theoretical framework, the nomenclature of analytical categories, the structure of the bibliography, the distribution of critical attention, and linguistic norms. Foreign dissertation authors at Russian universities may likewise absorb elements of the matrix as a local condition of academic acceptability.

In other words, the neo-imperial discursive matrix is a structural property of the conceptual language of Russian political science, shaped by several interrelated factors: (1) a longstanding intellectual tradition of treating Russia as the natural centre of power over a vast space extending far beyond its internationally recognised borders; (2) the dominance of geopolitical determinism as the basic analytical framework within the Russian expert community in international relations; (3) the institutional entrenchment of experts within the system of state patronage, which has structurally rendered academic independence impossible; and (4) Moscow's official foreign policy line.

In essence, the components of the neo-imperial discursive matrix are Kremlin metanarratives, regularly present in the statements of Russia's

Russian academic scholarship has become largely incapable of understanding Ukraine or producing substantive research on the country

top officials and in major state propaganda media. Within its confines, reliable knowledge about Ukrainian society, politics, and identity cannot be generated. Instead, it yields a politically functional image of Ukraine that serves to legitimise Russian foreign policy. As a result, Russian academic scholarship has become largely incapable of understanding Ukraine or producing substantive research on the country.

This neo-imperial discursive matrix is not limited to the corpus analysed here, which comprises only dissertations directly devoted to Ukraine. It can also be found in works where Ukraine figures as merely one case within a dissertation on a broader topic. A telling example is the doctoral dissertation of Natalia Tsvetkova, acting director of the Institute for US and Canadian Studies RAS, on US public diplomacy, which includes a section on Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution.¹²⁰ Arguing that US public diplomacy functions

¹¹⁹ Igor Gretskiy, *Роль внешнеполитических факторов в президентских выборах 2004 года в Украине* [The Role of Foreign-Policy Factors in the 2004 Ukrainian Presidential Election], Cand. of Hist. Sciences dissertation (St. Petersburg State University, 2008).

¹²⁰ Natalia Tsvetkova, *Публичная дипломатия как инструмент идеологической и политической экспансии США в мире, 1914–2014 гг.* [Public Diplomacy as an Instrument of US Ideological and Political Expansion in the World, 1914–2014] (DSc diss., St. Petersburg, 2015), 328–341.

as an instrument of regime change, Tsvetkova systematically attributes to American structures – the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute – the authorship of Ukrainian laws, the creation of specific NGOs and political parties in Ukraine, as well as control over the country’s television channels and the Central Election Commission. The documents she cites in support, however, either describe substantially more modest and routine forms of technical assistance, or do not contain the statements she attributes to them at all. It is symptomatic that the very formulation of Tsvetkova’s research topic – “Public diplomacy as an instrument of US ideological and political expansion” – sets a teleological frame into which the Ukrainian case is inserted as a ready-made illustration. Within this framework, the text never examines the recurring discrepancies between her claims and the content of the sources cited.

As a result, Natalia Tsvetkova’s dissertation falls short of the basic evidentiary standard expected of academic scholarship and reproduces the very same conspiratorial dimension of geopolitical determinism traced throughout this section. This example suggests that a fuller mapping of the neo-imperial discursive matrix across the wider corpus of Russian political science writing remains a task for future research.

5. RUSSIAN EXPERT DISCOURSE ON UKRAINE

The neo-imperial discursive matrix identified above in the analysis of dissertations is also evident in the broader corpus of Russian public expert discourse on Ukraine. This section traces how this matrix found expression in specific narratives that dominated the Russian expert community at different stages of Russia’s post-Soviet history. The material is organised chronologically, since the set of dominant narratives changed in response to shifts in the political context and the Kremlin’s policy towards Ukraine.

Two methodological clarifications are important for understanding what this section covers and what falls outside its scope.

First, the discussion concerns specifically the narratives that dominated expert discourse at a given stage, not an exhaustive list of every thesis ever voiced. Many of the narratives discussed below existed even before the period to which they are assigned here. For example, narratives of ‘forced Ukrainisation’ and ‘discrimination against the Russian language’ appeared in Russian expert discourse as far back as the 1990s, but they became dominant only after the Euromaidan of 2013–14.¹²¹

Second, the analysis covers not only experts for whom Ukraine is their core specialisation. As shown above, there are critically few such specialists in Russia. The sample therefore also includes experts who regularly commented on contemporary Ukraine, irrespective of their declared field of expertise.

¹²¹See, for example: Ekaterina Cherkasova, “Севастополь: еще раз о территориальной проблеме” [“Sevastopol: Once Again on the Territorial Problem”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 9 (1999): 108–114; Tsipko, “Аксиома трезвого подхода” [“The Axiom of a Sober Approach”]; “Комментарий Департамента информации и печати МИД России в связи с вопросом РИА Новости относительно продолжающейся дискриминации русского языка на Украине” [“Commentary by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry in Response to a RIA Novosti Query Regarding the Continuing Discrimination against the Russian Language in Ukraine”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 27 September 2006.

5.1. 1992–2004

Although post-Soviet Russia renounced communist doctrine and proclaimed a course towards democratic and market reforms, it never gave up its great-power ambitions. It entered this new historical stage badly weakened, but intent on geopolitical revenge. Russian society, from the political elite to the broader public, was permeated by nostalgia for past greatness, and the very existence of an independent Ukraine on the world map, in the eyes of many, symbolised that loss.

From its very first days, post-Soviet Russia's general foreign policy line was to establish control over the 'near abroad' – the states that had gained independence as a result of the USSR's collapse and that the Kremlin considered a zone of its exclusive domination.¹²² The chief priority of Moscow's neo-imperial policy was Ukraine. The strategy for drawing it into Russia's orbit rested on two parallel tracks. The first operated through bilateral relations with Ukraine. Within this track, two approaches described below quickly took shape.

Revanchist neo-imperialism involved pushing Ukraine towards the desired geopolitical choice through interference in internal affairs

Revanchist neo-imperialism involved intensively pushing Ukraine towards the desired geopolitical choice through open, large-scale interference in Ukraine's internal affairs, using the broadest possible set of instruments – the Russian diaspora, the Russian Orthodox Church, and tools of negative motivation, that is, veiled threats and the exploitation of Ukraine's vulnerabilities, the greatest of which was seen as its territorial integrity. In effect, this meant various non-military means of undermining Ukrainian sovereignty both from within and from without, including direct political pressure and blackmail, economic expansion, and the fostering of separatism. Adherents to this

approach included not only great-power nationalists and communists nostalgic for the USSR, but even part of the political elite oriented towards democratic reform, who cynically viewed raising territorial claims against Ukraine as an easy way to score points in domestic political struggles.¹²³

Pragmatic neo-imperialism rested on achieving Ukraine's subordination through soft dominance. Unlike revanchist neo-imperialism, this approach relied not on large-scale coercion but on the gradual formation of pro-Russian identity and loyalty through a cultural and informational presence in Ukraine.

Pragmatic neo-imperialism rested on achieving Ukraine's subordination through soft dominance

Its proponents assumed that attraction to Russia through the Russian language, a shared media space, historical memory, and Orthodoxy would, over time, create a stable social base for Ukraine's geopolitical reorientation without the need to resort to overt pressure.

The bilateral track was complemented by a western track, in which Moscow sought to secure its dominance over the post-Soviet space through a Yalta-style bargain with major western countries. Put simply, by exploiting fears of escalation and nuclear confrontation, Russia offered the west 'strategic stability' on its eastern flank in exchange for tacit recognition of a Russian zone of 'special interests'. For the Kremlin, the ultimate purpose was to strip neighbouring states of their sovereignty by western hands.

Perceiving Ukraine's independence as an undesirable anomaly to be overcome, Russian *mezhdunarodniki* focused on proposing the most effective means of achieving the Kremlin's goals on both the bilateral and western tracks. They simply fitted themselves

¹²²GARF, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 1264, l. 32–56.

¹²³"Как случился распад Советского Союза. О России и Украине. Беседа с Галиной Старовойтовой" ["How the Collapse of the Soviet Union Happened. On Russia and Ukraine. A Conversation with Galina Starovoitova"], *Вестник Европы* [Bulletin of Europe] 46–47 (2016): 153–165.

into the great-power consensus that had by then formed within the Russian political elite, adhering to one of the three approaches described above or combining them.

Russian mezhdunarodniki focused on proposing the most effective means of achieving the Kremlin's goals on both the bilateral and western tracks

In September 1992, for example, analysts of the Russian parliament under Vladislav Achalov recommended that the Russian leadership systematically influence political processes from within the post-Soviet states by consolidating Russian minorities into a single 'cultural-educational society', which was intended to draw in 7 mn people within two years.¹²⁴ Notably, Achalov's group cited the Sudetenland and 1930s Austria as evidence that using a diaspora as political leverage over neighbouring countries could succeed. The experts also recommended sparing no expense in buying up enterprises in Crimea in order to increase influence on Kyiv. As other studies show, this was not an isolated proposal, but reflected a broader trend within Russian political and expert elites towards viewing the diaspora as an instrument of pressure on neighbouring states.¹²⁵

On the international track, IMEMO experts most consistently developed the logic of strangling Ukrainian sovereignty through western acquiescence, in the spirit of a 'new Yalta'. The essence of their argument was that Russian dominance over the post-Soviet space served western interests no less than Russian ones. They maintained that dividing up the Soviet army created risks for European security and that the sovereignty of the new states was economically unsustainable. Russian control over them, they argued, was the only alternative to chaos and civil wars

"with attendant international consequences." It followed that the west itself should be interested in preserving Moscow's centralised control over the former USSR's nuclear arsenal and military infrastructure and, therefore, should not obstruct Russian regional hegemony.¹²⁶

The implication was that, for the west, cooperation with Russia on security should matter much more than the full sovereignty of the other former Soviet states. By persistently promoting the narrative of 'strategic stability' in Europe, therefore, Moscow counted not on its own direct coercion but on western pressure to slow the post-Soviet states' efforts to build their own armies and hinder western economic assistance to those states that drifted from Russia's orbit.

Sergey Karaganov of the Institute of Europe RAS formulated his recommendations along similar lines. As early as January 1992, in an analytical memo to Ruslan Khasbulatov, Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet, he insisted that Russia needed to pursue a policy of "active friendly neglect" towards Ukraine.¹²⁷ Calling Ukrainian statehood "semi-artificial," he proposed doing everything possible to limit Ukraine's economic development and independence, prevent its rapprochement with Belarus, and maximise Ukraine's

As its main instrument for blackmailing Ukraine, Russia used its territorial claims to Crimea

international political and diplomatic isolation by cultivating a negative image of Ukraine in the west as a country with an "authoritarian-nationalist regime."

As its main instrument for blackmailing Ukraine, Russia used its territorial claims to Crimea. Already in January 1992, Russian

¹²⁴ GARF, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 1221, l. 20–26.

¹²⁵ Bartłomiej Gajos, "Imperialism and Ethnonationalism in Russia's Turbulent Years (1989–1994): How Narratives of Unjust Borders Shaped Putin's 'Time Bomb' Metaphor," *Nationalities Papers* 54, no. 1 (2026): 20–38; Igor Gretskey, "The 'Ukrainian Issue' in Russia's Foreign Policy: 1990–1993," in Sebastian Schäffer (ed), *Ukraine in Central and Eastern Europe: Kyiv's Foreign Affairs and the International Relations of the Post-Communist Region* (Stuttgart, 2022), 19–44.

¹²⁶ IMEMO, "Россия и вызовы" ["Russia and the Challenges"], 101–103; Margarita Maksimova, "От 'имперского' Союза к Содружеству независимых государств" ["From the Imperial Union to the Commonwealth of Independent States"], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 4 (1992): 5–20.

¹²⁷ GARF, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 1277, l. 25–39.

Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, in principle, saw no problem in using political statements containing territorial claims against Ukraine as “a form of political pressure,”¹²⁸ while his deputy at the time overseeing relations with the former Soviet republics, Fyodor Shelov-Kovedyaev, explored formalising Russia’s position on Crimea under international law.¹²⁹

At closed parliamentary hearings in January 1993, another of Kozyrev’s deputies, Sergey Lavrov, openly acknowledged that Russia was deliberately keeping the territorial issue unresolved as leverage to pressure Ukraine.¹³⁰ Moscow repeatedly proposed to Kyiv a draft founding treaty that recognised Ukraine’s borders only conditionally, using language from the Belovezha Accords: “within the framework of the CIS.” Lavrov described this as a deliberately built-in “limiter” (“ограничитель”). He further insisted that the treaty not be open-ended but concluded for a fixed number of years, so that Ukrainian territorial integrity would always remain hostage to Moscow. He stated outright that Russia would never sign a document committing it never to make territorial claims against Ukraine.¹³¹

This approach found vocal backing from the military as well. Rear Admiral Ivan Semyonov, Deputy Head of the Main Directorate of the Russian Navy at the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD), who attended the hearings, fully endorsed the territorial claims against Ukraine, stating that “the fact that Sevastopol belongs to Russia is clear to every sane person.”¹³²

Notably, the head of Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), Fyodor Ladygin, held similar positions. In his memo of 8 June 1993 to Sergei Stepashin, then chairman of the Russian parliament’s Committee on Defence and Security, he addressed the unresolved dispute over dividing the Black Sea Fleet, advocating a solution heavily favourable to Russia.¹³³ Should Kyiv resist Moscow’s

position, Ladygin recommended that Russia use as leverage “the legality of Crimea’s incorporation into Ukraine” under the 1954 Supreme Soviet decree. He further pointed to Ukraine’s near-total dependence on Russian supplies to sustain the fleet – at the time, 95% of its weapons and ammunition, 85% of its fuel, and 60% of its spare parts – as additional grounds for pressure.

Russian experts consistently followed Moscow's general line

Russian experts consistently followed Moscow’s general line. When an ad hoc parliamentary commission approached specialists in early 1993 for their opinion on Russia’s claims to the city of Sevastopol, most experts, especially those from RISS, MGIMO, and RUDN, considered such claims well-founded.¹³⁴

On the international track, while Kozyrev repeated that Russia was a great power for which “the entire geographic area of the former USSR is a sphere of vital interest,” Russian experts explained why the west needed to accept this as axiomatic.¹³⁵ Alexei Pushkov, for example, argued that the west should not perceive “Russia’s tough talk with the Baltic States and Ukraine” as a bid to restore empire. On the contrary, he recommended that the west take Moscow’s “legitimate concerns” into account, which “would help Russia to affirm itself as a stable, active, and influential member of the international community.”¹³⁶

In the mid-1990s, the Institute of CIS Countries emerged under Konstantin Zatulin, built around a doctrine of the total destabilisation of Ukraine. The institute proposed ‘reintegrating’ Ukraine through the harsh exploitation of its internal vulnerabilities. This doctrine also identified the west as the main adversary,

¹²⁸ GARF, f. 10026, op. 1, d. 609, l. 91–93.

¹²⁹ GARF, f. 10026, op. 1, d. 2288, l. 1–3.

¹³⁰ GARF, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 1220, l. 45–46.

¹³¹ GARF, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 1220, l. 53–54.

¹³² GARF, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 1220, l. 23–24.

¹³³ GARF, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 2777, l. 49–51.

¹³⁴ GARF, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 3509, l. 50–85.

¹³⁵ Andrei Kozyrev, “The New Russia and the Atlantic Alliance,” *NATO Review* 41, no. 1 (1993): 3–6; Georgy Bovt, “Россия пересматривает внешнюю политику. МИД избавляется от ‘беловежского синдрома’” [“Russia Reconsiders Its Foreign Policy: The Foreign Ministry Sheds Its ‘Belovezha Syndrome’”], *Kommersant*, 19 January 1994.

¹³⁶ Alexei Pushkov, “Russia and the West: An Endangered Relationship?,” *NATO Review* 1 (1994): 19–23.

accused of creating alternative 'centres of power' to contain Russia. The declared ultimate goal was a *de facto* 'confederation' under Moscow's aegis, with common citizenship, a single economic space, and joint defence.¹³⁷

In the mid-1990s, the Institute of CIS Countries emerged, built around a doctrine of the total destabilisation of Ukraine

The Institute of CIS Countries functioned less as an analytical structure than as a hub for undermining Ukrainian statehood. By the late 1990s, it had already formulated a programme for the managed disintegration of Ukraine, comprising four interconnected directions.¹³⁸ First, the deliberate cultivation of separatist self-identification in "Donbas, Novorossiia, and Sloboda Ukraine" through existing Russian organisations. Second, support for Rusyn separatism in western Ukraine as an instrument for pressuring Kyiv from the western flank. Third, working with the 4 mn Ukrainians living in Russia to create organisations of 'imperial Little Russians' – bearers of the concept of a 'tripartite people' – for subsequent use as agents of influence in Ukraine. Fourth, weakening Ukraine through maximum decentralisation of its political system. As Zatulin repeatedly put it, "Russia has absolutely no need for a strong Ukrainian president and a strong Ukraine."¹³⁹

As a factor favourable to Ukraine's disintegration, experts at the Institute of CIS Countries viewed the possible start of international recognition of Chechnya, following its *de facto* victory over the Russian

army in 1996. In their view, such a development would give Moscow a powerful argument for a wholesale revision of the entire system of border agreements across the post-Soviet space, allowing it to disregard the principle of territorial integrity and reopen the question of

redrawing that space on the basis of nations' right to self-determination. This applied above all to Ukraine, which the institute's director, Konstantin Zatulin, called a "non-historical formation."¹⁴⁰ Later, this

same argument found a new vehicle in the Kosovo precedent, which Russia went on to use to justify the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of territories in eastern Ukraine.¹⁴¹

The approach of Zatulin's group provoked considerable irritation within the Russian Foreign Ministry.¹⁴² The ministry understood that great-power ambitions required an economic base that Russia did not have. It therefore kept its criticism of the west sharp but stopped short of a full-blown confrontation that could isolate Russia and estrange it from the countries on which the modernisation of the Russian economy and army depended. Moreover, even while exerting heavy pressure on Kyiv, the ministry tried to do so without giving Ukraine grounds to draw closer to the west. Whenever Ukraine moved towards the west anyway, the Kremlin would temporarily moderate its pressure, as when the Russian Foreign Ministry publicly distanced itself from the revisionist 1993 resolution of the Russian Supreme Soviet on Sevastopol, even though top Russian diplomats had taken an active part in drafting it.

It is important to understand that the conflict in the second half of the 1990s between Zatulin's group and the Foreign Ministry was a dispute over tactics. The strategic priority remained the same for both: Moscow's hegemony over the post-Soviet space. This goal enjoyed broad sympathy within Russia's

¹³⁷ Konstantin Zatulin, "Испытание Украиной. Экзамен на общенациональную внешнюю политику" ["The Ukraine Test: An Examination for a Nationwide Foreign Policy"], Независимая газета [Independent Newspaper], 15 May 1996; Konstantin Zatulin and Andranik Migranyan, "СНГ: начало или конец истории. К смене вех" ["The CIS: The Beginning or the End of History? Toward a Change of Landmarks"], Независимая газета. Содружество [Independent Newspaper. Commonwealth], 26 March 1997.

¹³⁸ Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 16 (2000): 12–19; Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье*, no. 20 (2000): 5.

¹³⁹ Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 28 (2001): 13–15.

¹⁴⁰ Zatulin and Migranyan, "СНГ" ["The CIS"].

¹⁴¹ Vladimir Putin, "Обращение Президента Российской Федерации" ["Address by the President of the Russian Federation"], President of Russia, 18 March 2014.

¹⁴² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Заседание Совета по внешней политике при МИД РФ" ["Session of the Foreign Policy Council under the Russian MFA"], *Дипломатический вестник* [Diplomatic Bulletin], no. 5 (1995): 52–59.

ruling and expert circles, as was especially clear during the debates surrounding the signing and ratification of the Russian–Ukrainian Big Treaty.¹⁴³

A clear marker of the enormous popularity of neo-imperial sentiment in Russia was the reaction to Brzezinski's 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*.¹⁴⁴ The storm of outrage was provoked not by Brzezinski's observation of Russia's imperial ambitions as such – that was,

References to The Grand Chessboard by Zbigniew Brzezinski as proof that the US intends to contain Russia's influence remain common in its experts' publications

in fact, perceived as the norm – but by his call to support Ukraine's independence and its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures as the main means of countering those ambitions.¹⁴⁵ References to the book as proof that the United States intends to contain Russian influence – invariably tinged

with indignation – remain extremely common in publications by Russian experts.¹⁴⁶

Nonetheless, in the 1990s many Russian experts and politicians had a good understanding that Russia lacked sufficient resources to restore control over neighbouring countries and therefore could not yet afford open confrontation with either Ukraine or the west.¹⁴⁷ Alongside outright revanchism, then, a more cautious approach to Ukraine existed within the expert milieu, defined here as pragmatic neo-imperialism. This concept did not require an immediate revision of state borders. To deprive Ukraine of the ability to pursue an independent policy and firmly tie it to Russia, emphasis was placed not on the full range of available non-military

instruments, but only on those judged to be relatively inexpensive and free of serious costs for relations with the west. Even liberal politicians, such as Irina Khakamada, given the scarcity of resources, defined the priority of

Emphasis was placed only on those instruments judged to be inexpensive and free of costs for relations with the west

Russian foreign policy as creating a “system of Russia's echeloned presence” across the post-Soviet space through Russian culture.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ “Заседание Совета по внешней политике при МИД РФ” [“Session of the Foreign Policy Council under the Russian MFA”], *Дипломатический вестник* [Diplomatic Bulletin], no. 6 (1995): 60–64; Sergey Chugrov, “Украина и Россия: неминуемое свидание?” [“Ukraine and Russia: An Inevitable Rendezvous?”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 3 (1995): 155–156; State Duma of the Russian Federation, “[Transcript of Session](#),” 23 October 1998; Ilya Mogilevkin, “Борьба за российское пространство” [“The Struggle for Russian Space”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 3 (2000): 98–106; Sergey Chugrov, “Извилистые дороги братства” [“The Winding Roads of Brotherhood”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 10 (2000): 123–124.

¹⁴⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1997).

¹⁴⁵ Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 22 (2001): 59.

¹⁴⁶ Nikolay Rabotyazhev, “Украина между Россией и Западом: опыт геополитического анализа” [“Ukraine between Russia and the West: An Exercise in Geopolitical Analysis”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 8 (2008): 75–83; Konstantin Kurylev, “Украина в западных геополитических концепциях” [“Ukraine in Western Geopolitical Concepts”], *Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения* [Bulletin of RUDN University. Series: International Relations], no. 4 (2013): 20–31; Vyacheslav Dashichev, *От Сталина до Путина. Воспоминания и размышления о прошлом, настоящем и будущем* [From Stalin to Putin: Memories and Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future] (Novy Khronograf, 2015), 398.

¹⁴⁷ “Заседание Совета по внешней политике при МИД РФ” [“Session of the Foreign Policy Council under the Russian MFA”], *Дипломатический вестник* [Diplomatic Bulletin], no. 5 (1995): 52–59.

¹⁴⁸ “Заседание Совета” [“Session of the Council”], 60–64.

SVOP took a similar line, defining Russia as a “weakening pole” unable to challenge US dominance and proposing that the Kremlin adhere, in its foreign policy, to Gorchakov’s principle of “concentrating” only on the most important priorities.¹⁴⁹ Chief among these was the post-Soviet space, where Russian influence was to be sustained, in its view, through a combination of means: acquiring neighbouring countries’ property and assets in payment for their energy debts, cultivating the Russian diaspora, and expanding Russian-language television broadcasting.¹⁵⁰

Arkady Moshes of IE RAS also formulated his recommendations in the spirit of pragmatic neo-imperialism. On the economic front, he insisted on ending the supply of natural gas to Ukraine at below-market prices – calculating that this would push Ukraine’s economy to the brink of collapse and force it to pay with its assets – and advocated creating a “layer of joint ownership” as an instrument of Kyiv’s long-term dependence on Moscow.¹⁵¹ On the ideological front, he called for “powerful Russian cultural expansion” through a “struggle for history” and a “struggle for the unity of the [Russian Orthodox] Church,” as well as for strong pressure on Kyiv to secure broad Russian access to Ukraine’s information space. Alongside all this, Moshes dismissed Ukrainian fears of the resurgence of imperial Russia, calling them “entirely self-induced.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹This is the policy pursued by the Russian Empire and its foreign minister Alexander Gorchakov after its crushing defeat in the Crimean War in the mid-nineteenth century. Its essence was to rebuild internally and gather strength by focusing on the most important issues, before returning to the international arena as one of the world’s most influential powers. What matters here is that in Russian political culture, Gorchakov’s formula has typically implied not an abandonment of great-power ambitions but merely their temporary postponement.

¹⁵⁰SVOP, “Возродится ли Союз? Будущее постсоветского пространства” [“Will the Union Be Reborn? The Future of the Post-Soviet Space”], *Независимая газета* [Independent Newspaper], 23 May 1996; Sergey Karaganov (ed), *Стратегия для России: Повестка дня для президента-2000* [A Strategy for Russia: An Agenda for the President-2000] (Vagrius, 2000), 77–100.

¹⁵¹Arkady Moshes, “Россия-Украина: проблемы взаимоотношений” [“Russia-Ukraine: Problems in Relations”], *Современная Европа* [Contemporary Europe], no. 3 (2000): 63–73; Institute of CIS Countries, Страны СНГ. *Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 5 (2000): 54–56.

¹⁵²Moshes, “Россия-Украина” [“Russia-Ukraine”], 64.

Notably, the neo-imperial discursive frame with respect to Ukraine was reproduced even by Russian experts whose main area of specialisation lay far removed from Ukraine. A telling example is an article by Ekaterina Cherkasova, an IMEMO specialist on Spain, published in *World Economy and International Relations* (*Мировая экономика и международные отношения*), then probably Russia’s most influential journal on international relations, in which she argued that Russia had no legal claim to Sevastopol.¹⁵³

The neo-imperial discursive frame with respect to Ukraine was reproduced even by experts whose area of specialisation lay far from Ukraine

This thesis diverged so sharply from IMEMO’s prevailing view of Ukraine that the journal’s editors felt it necessary to append the exceedingly rare disclaimer that “the material reflects the author’s own point of view.” Cherkasova’s legal honesty, however, did not change the underlying framework or the conclusions, both of which were shot through with elements of the neo-imperial matrix. She framed Sevastopol’s military-strategic and symbolic significance for Russians as entirely legitimate grounds for revising its status, and, among other claims, blamed Kyiv for “forced Ukrainisation.”¹⁵⁴

The neo-imperial frame worked similarly for Alexander Tsipko of InEcon RAS, for whom Ukraine was likewise not a primary specialisation. He reproduced the imperial cultural hierarchy, asserting that “Ukraine can enter the world cultural process only through the Russian language.”¹⁵⁵ But unlike the Zatulin camp, he bet not on directly undermining Ukrainian statehood and cultivating his own presidential candidate from radically pro-Russian movements, but on keeping Ukraine within Russia’s orbit by working with

¹⁵³Ekaterina Cherkasova, “Севастополь: еще раз о территориальной проблеме” [“Sevastopol: Once Again on the Territorial Problem”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 9 (1999): 108–114.

¹⁵⁴Cherkasova, “Севастополь” [“Sevastopol”], 111.

¹⁵⁵Tsipko, “Аксиома трезвого подхода” [“The Axiom of a Sober Approach”].

whichever Ukrainian elites showed even a minimal degree of loyalty to Moscow. This is why Tsipko opposed the thesis, promoted by the Institute of CIS Countries, of federalising Ukraine. He believed decentralisation risked creating unnecessary splits within Ukraine's ruling elites, alienating from Moscow precisely those figures for whom decentralisation could become a fundamental obstacle to cooperation with Russia.

With the change of leadership in the Kremlin in 2000, proponents of neo-imperial nationalism at the Institute of CIS Countries quickly sensed that their approach to Ukraine would find greater demand under the new administration. The First World Congress of Compatriots, held in Moscow in October 2001, at which Vladimir Putin spoke and stated that Russia was "clearly falling short in defending [its] diaspora, in defending Russian culture and the Russian language," sparked a surge of enthusiasm among them.¹⁵⁶ They concluded that Putin's arrival had created the conditions for a "genuine foreign policy in the CIS."¹⁵⁷

Confirmation of Moscow's shift towards a more assertive diplomacy came with the appointment, in the spring of 2001, of Viktor Chernomyrdin as Russia's ambassador to Ukraine. Observers described his role as the Kremlin's "executive power in Ukraine."¹⁵⁸ On the eve of his departure for Kyiv, he met with the Moscow Patriarch to discuss Ukrainian "schismatic organisations," and then began publicly advising the Verkhovna Rada to vote for Anatoliy Kinakh as Ukraine's prime minister. This arrogant style on the part of the new ambassador appealed to experts at the Institute of CIS Countries, who consequently

began defending Chernomyrdin in the press whenever he came under criticism.¹⁵⁹

Ahead of Ukraine's 2002 parliamentary elections, the Institute of CIS Countries proposed concrete tasks for absorbing Ukraine from within: consolidating pro-Russian forces into a single political conglomerate, betting on Mykola Azarov and constructing an

The Institute of CIS Countries proposed concrete tasks for absorbing Ukraine from within

"image of the [internal] enemy" in the form of "Galician ethno-fascism" and a "colonial ersatz-democracy à la Yushchenko under a US protectorate."¹⁶⁰ Tellingly, Galician separatists were regarded as potential "partners for dialogue" because they were seen as expedient allies in the cause of destroying Ukrainian statehood.

It very soon became clear that the Kremlin was not yet prepared to go that far and instead bet on creating conditions for Ukraine's irreversible economic dependence on Moscow, chiefly by offering lower natural gas prices in exchange for greater geopolitical loyalty. Arguments in favour of this policy were advanced with increasing energy by InEcon RAS experts.¹⁶¹ At the same time, Kremlin-linked political consultants such as Sergey Markov, Vyacheslav Nikonov, and Gleb Pavlovsky began promoting the narrative of Russia and Ukraine moving towards Europe in tandem, even though, in reality, Moscow never set integration into the EU and NATO as a strategic foreign policy goal

¹⁵⁶Vladimir Putin, "[Выступление на совещании руководящего состава сотрудников дипломатической службы России](#)" ["Address to a Meeting of Senior Officials of Russia's Diplomatic Service"], President of Russia, 26 January 2001.

¹⁵⁷Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 34 (2001): 24–30; Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 36 (2001): 31–40.

¹⁵⁸James Sherr, "[Viktor Chernomyrdin's Appointment as Ambassador to Ukraine](#)," *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, Occasional Brief 82, 18 May 2001.

¹⁵⁹Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 30 (2001): 30–31.

¹⁶⁰Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 22 (2001): 59; Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье*, no. 24 (2001): 13–14.

¹⁶¹Lidia Kosikova, "[Единое экономическое пространство времен Владимира Путина](#)" ["The Single Economic Space in the Time of Vladimir Putin"], *Независимая газета* [Independent Newspaper], 5 April 2004.

in its official documents and discourse.¹⁶² This was evidently designed to ensnare Ukraine.

Konstantin Zatulin and his experts considered such an approach too soft and clearly disliked it. He called the agreements restructuring Ukraine's payments for Russian natural gas supplies "shameful and capitulationist"¹⁶³ and continued to attack the Russian Foreign Ministry sharply, complaining that it was unwilling to address the "real problems of imperial expansion."¹⁶⁴

Thus, from the very first days of post-Soviet Russia's existence, its expert discourse on Ukraine remained loyal to one founding premise: Ukraine was not supposed to exist as a fully independent and sovereign country. It was perceived as a weak or failed state, transiently present on the political map, which, given its overwhelming dependence on Russian natural resource supplies, would inevitably be reabsorbed into a Moscow-led geopolitical formation. Without questioning the legitimacy of the Kremlin's great-power ambitions towards Ukraine, intense debate within this milieu concerned only the tactical and operational means of putting them into

until late autumn 2004, Vladimir Putin had explained the colour revolutions across the post-Soviet space by the systemic failures of the governments themselves, afterwards he increasingly placed the blame on external interference by the west, and by the United States in particular.¹⁶⁵ At the same time, he never explicitly relinquished Russia's intent to secure dominance over Ukraine. His concern with the "stability of the post-Soviet space" indicated that the Kremlin considered it a zone reserved for exclusive Russian influence. Even before his 2007 Munich speech, Putin was signalling that Russia's substantially increased economic strength now allowed it to pursue the most ambitious geopolitical goals.¹⁶⁶

Russian expert discourse immediately followed these changes. The main intellectual frames of publications in this period became the rationalisation of Maidanophobia, the coercion of Ukraine into Moscow-led integration projects, and cultural expansionism aimed at binding Ukraine more closely to Russia. Alongside this, experts worked systematically to discredit Ukraine's integration with the EU and NATO, promoted federalisation as a supposed path to Ukraine's own stability, and continued trying to convince the west to accept a Yalta-style bargain. Each of these directions is examined separately below.

Ukraine's fate was considered a foregone conclusion

practice. In other words, Ukraine's fate was considered a foregone conclusion. The only question for experts was not whether, but *how* to subordinate it more effectively and reliably to Russia's orbit of influence. Views outside this mainstream were vanishingly rare.

5.2. 2005–13

After Ukraine's Orange Revolution, Russia's official rhetoric changed noticeably. Whereas

5.2.1. RATIONALISING MAIDANOPHOBIA

Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution was perceived in Moscow as a painful foreign policy defeat that could have serious consequences for the Russian political regime. There was concern that the Ukrainian example, or the "modular effect" of a successful revolution, could trigger similar political processes inside Russia itself.¹⁶⁷ The Kremlin could not acknowledge that the threat to the regime came from within society itself and hence

¹⁶²Sergey Markov, "В Европу – вместе" ["Into Europe - Together"], *Независимая газета* [Independent Newspaper], 29 August 2001; Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье*, no. 28 (2001): 13–15.

¹⁶³Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 39 (2001): 38–39.

¹⁶⁴Anatoly Korobeynikov (ed), *Россия в новом веке: внешнеполитическое измерение* [Russia in the New Century: The Foreign-Policy Dimension] (Federation Council of the Russian Federation, 2004), 31–55.

¹⁶⁵Vladimir Putin, "Ответы на вопросы российских журналистов" ["Answers to Questions from Russian Journalists"], President of Russia, 6 December 2004.

¹⁶⁶Vladimir Putin, "Выступление на совещании с послами и постоянными представителями Российской Федерации" ["Address to a Meeting with Russian Federation Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives"], President of Russia, 27 June 2006.

¹⁶⁷Mark R. Beissinger, "Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 2 (2007): 259–276.

blamed ‘aggressive’ western interference. Russian experts followed suit, largely ignoring Ukraine’s own internal causes of the revolution.

A characteristic example of this reversal is MGIMO professor Andranik Migranyan. Before Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, he advocated cultivating liberal institutions in Russia for the sake of a pragmatic rapprochement with the west, arguing emphatically that “life itself is pushing the country in a liberal direction.”¹⁶⁸ But by 2005, he was presenting the development of democratic institutions in Russia as “a path to yet another destruction of the state itself,” since it would allegedly make the country vulnerable to pressure from without and within.¹⁶⁹

Vyacheslav Nikonov, a political consultant embedded in Kremlin circles who later headed the Russkiy Mir Foundation, underwent a similar metamorphosis. As he firmly maintained in 2003, “Russia, mired in poverty,” could not modernise its economy without Washington’s help.¹⁷⁰ He therefore considered the “instinctive anti-westernism” common in Russian political circles “unproductive.”¹⁷¹ “The twenty-first century is the American century. And the sooner we understand this, the better for us,” Nikonov advised the Russian elite.¹⁷²

But from late 2004, he himself began actively espousing anti-westernism, asserting that the revolutions across the post-Soviet space

had “foreign authors” who were ruthlessly “cleansing out” governments they disliked.¹⁷³

By delegitimising popular protest as a foreign technology, the apologia for Maidanophobia worked on two fronts simultaneously. It justified a harder policy towards Ukraine while, domestically, providing cover for pre-emptive repression to guard against the same scenario. In December 2010, officers of the Russian Interior Ministry’s anti-extremism department searched the Library of Ukrainian Literature in Moscow, declaring the need to confiscate and destroy “nationalist and Russophobic literature.” After a series of subsequent searches, the library was liquidated in 2018, and its director was given a suspended sentence on fabricated charges of extremism and embezzlement.

The perception of colour revolutions as a western-inspired project to push Russian influence out was nearly universal

The most explicit apologists for Maidanophobia were the Institute of CIS Countries and RISS, but on the whole, the perception within the Russian expert milieu of the Orange Revolution – and of colour revolutions in general – as a western-inspired project to push Russian influence out of Ukraine was nearly universal.

5.2.2. COERCING MOSCOW-LED INTEGRATION

After the Orange Revolution, the Kremlin moved to actively coerce Kyiv into participating in its integration projects through economic blackmail, the main instrument of which was the price of Russian natural gas supplies. On the eve of the signing of the 2010 Kharkiv Accords, Ukraine was paying substantially more for Russian gas than, for example, Germany.¹⁷⁴

The Russian expert community translated this blackmail into the language of rational

¹⁶⁸ Andranik Migranyan, “Что такое путинизм?” [“What Is Putinism?”], *Стратегия России* [Strategy of Russia], no. 3 (2004): 9–22.

¹⁶⁹ Andranik Migranyan, “Век империй прошел?” [“Has the Age of Empires Passed?”], *Стратегия России* [Strategy of Russia], no. 4 (2005): 23–29.

¹⁷⁰ Anatoly Korobeynikov (ed), *Россия в новом веке: внешнеполитическое измерение* [Russia in the New Century: The Foreign-Policy Dimension] (Federation Council of the Russian Federation, 2004), 46–47.

¹⁷¹ Konstantin Kosachev and Vyacheslav Nikonov, “Внешняя политика России: тезисы к стратегии” [“Russia’s Foreign Policy: Theses toward a Strategy”], *Стратегия России* [Strategy of Russia], no. 4 (2004): 11–21.

¹⁷² Anatoly Korobeynikov (ed), *Россия в новом веке: внешнеполитическое измерение* [Russia in the New Century: The Foreign-Policy Dimension] (Federation Council of the Russian Federation, 2004), 46–47.

¹⁷³ Vyacheslav Nikonov, “Слово главного редактора” [“Editor-in-Chief’s Word”], *Стратегия России* [Strategy of Russia], no. 6 (2005): 3–4.

¹⁷⁴ Simon Pirani, Jonathan Stern, and Katja Yafimava, “The April 2010 Russo-Ukrainian Gas Agreement and Its Implications for Europe”, *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, NG 42, 2010, 12–13; “Wide Variations in Prices for Russian Gas in Europe,” *OSW*, 2 March 2011

economic choice. RISS and the Institute of CIS Countries took the harshest, most ultimatum-laden positions here, arrogantly asserting that Kyiv would have to demonstrate “political loyalty to Moscow” because of its dependence on the price of Russian-supplied energy resources and commodities.¹⁷⁵ Konstantin Zatulin summed up the essence of this logic thus: “Whoever pays the piper calls the tune.”¹⁷⁶

The Russian expert community translated blackmail into the language of rational economic choice

Most Russian commentators operated according to the same logic, presenting Ukraine with a false dilemma: either participation in Moscow’s integration projects, which would guarantee political stability, or eventual economic collapse.¹⁷⁷ Detailed analysis and evidence for this supposed benefit, however, were generally not provided in their publications.

Curiously, while using the language of geopolitical determinism and accusing the EU of aggressively ‘dragging’ Ukraine into its orbit of influence, InEcon RAS experts nonetheless proposed that the Kremlin present the Single Economic Space not as an alternative to European integration but as “a mechanism for cooperation between Russia, the EU, and the

countries of the shared neighbourhood.”¹⁷⁸ In effect, this amounted to packaging the Russian integration project as a preparatory stage of European integration, deceptively drawing Ukraine into Moscow’s orbit of influence. Kremlin political technologist Sergey Markov framed it as pragmatic advice for Ukraine’s own benefit. A poor Ukraine held no appeal for the EU, he argued, so Ukraine would do better to build up its economy through union with Russia first and seek EU accession only once it had something to offer.¹⁷⁹

5.2.3. CULTURAL EXPANSIONISM

Among Russian experts, proponents of both open revisionism and pragmatic neo-imperialism interpreted Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution as vindication of their own views. The former argued that betting on Kuchma and his successor had been a dead end. They lamented that the Kremlin had failed to fully mobilise pro-Russian forces in Ukraine and had not cultivated a presidential candidate from within their ranks.¹⁸⁰ The latter concluded that Russia was not yet capable of openly competing with the west for influence across the post-Soviet space and therefore insisted on pursuing soft-power expansion while minimising confrontation with the west.¹⁸¹

Experts from both camps continued to formulate recommendations for the Kremlin without ever abandoning the neo-imperial frame underlying their views on Ukraine. Ruslan Grinberg of IE RAS, for instance,

¹⁷⁵ “Эксперты о политической ситуации на Украине” [“Experts on the Political Situation in Ukraine”], *Украина: информационно-аналитический мониторинг* [Ukraine: Information and Analytical Monitoring], no. 5 (2010): 31.

¹⁷⁶ Konstantin Zatulin, “Наше сочувствие на стороне украинской власти” [“Our Sympathies Lie with the Ukrainian Authorities”], *Украина: информационно-аналитический мониторинг* [Ukraine: Information and Analytical Monitoring], no. 5 (2010): 37–39.

¹⁷⁷ Lidia Kosikova, “[Отношения Москвы и Киева требуют пересмотра](#)” [“Moscow-Kyiv Relations Need Revisiting”], *Независимая газета* [Independent Newspaper], 14 April 2008; Khazbi Bogov and Yuri Godin, “Десять лет Большого договора: болевые точки российско-украинских отношений” [“Ten Years of the Big Treaty: Pain Points in Russian-Ukrainian Relations”], *Мир перемен* [World of Change], no. 2 (2009): 98–112; “Россия – Украина: шаги к модернизационному альянсу?” [“Russia-Ukraine: Steps toward a Modernisation Alliance?”], *Проблемы национальной стратегии* [Problems of National Strategy], no. 4 (2011): 77–106; Nikolay Rabotyazhev, “Геостратегические дилеммы Киева” [“Kyiv’s Geostrategic Dilemmas”], *Россия и новые государства Евразии* [Russia and the New States of Eurasia], no. 4 (2013): 49–67.

¹⁷⁸ Lidia Kosikova, “Как России строить отношения со странами СНГ?” [“How Should Russia Build Relations with the CIS Countries?”], *Россия и современный мир* [Russia and the Contemporary World], no. 1 (2005): 140–160; Svetlana Glinkina (ed), *Россия - Евросоюз - страны СНГ: экономические и политические отношения на пространстве общего соседства* [Russia - the European Union - the CIS Countries: Economic and Political Relations in the Shared Neighbourhood] (NIS, 2007).

¹⁷⁹ Sergey Markov, “[Киевские баталии](#)” [“Kyiv Battles”], *Независимая газета* [Independent Newspaper], 23 October 2006.

¹⁸⁰ Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [CIS Countries: Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 115 (2005): 8–10.

¹⁸¹ Ruslan Grinberg and Boris Shmelev, “Внешняя политика Российской Федерации: некоторые итоги” [“The Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation: Some Results”], *Мир перемен* [World of Change], no. 4 (2007): 57; Kosikova, “Консолидация” [“Consolidation”], 33.

recommended pursuing a more active policy of cultural expansion and forming a shared information, cultural, and linguistic space.¹⁸² He saw this as a kind of compensation for Russia's forced retreat on other fronts, reasoning from the premise that the border with Ukraine would become "less permeable" in the immediate future and Russia would have to withdraw its military base from Crimea.

His colleague Lidia Kosikova echoed him almost verbatim. She viewed Russia's abandonment of trade and economic preferences for CIS countries in favour of a 'pragmatic approach' as a strategic mistake.¹⁸³ In Kosikova's view, if Russia was not prepared to invest seriously in creating new levers of dependency, its sphere of influence was, in the long run, doomed to evaporate, with the CIS space falling under the sway of rival powers. To prevent this, Kosikova recommended switching to the humanitarian sphere and pursuing a more active policy of 'cultural expansion', forming a shared information and cultural space across the Commonwealth.

Meanwhile, experts at the Institute of CIS Countries recommended relying on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as a conduit of Russian influence.¹⁸⁴ They believed that parishes loyal to Moscow possessed substantial organisational capacity to mobilise the Ukrainian population against being 'dragged' into NATO.

In essence, all these recommendations amounted to expanding Russia's presence across various spheres of Ukrainian society.

¹⁸²Ruslan Grinberg, "Стержень постсоветской конструкции: Экономические и гуманитарные аспекты взаимодействия стран СНГ" ["The Core of the Post-Soviet Construction: Economic and Humanitarian Aspects of CIS Countries' Interaction"], *Стратегия России* [Strategy of Russia], no. 7 (2006): 13–26; Ruslan Grinberg, "Гуманитарные и экономические аспекты взаимодействия стран СНГ: миграция, образование, права человека" ["Humanitarian and Economic Aspects of CIS Countries' Interaction: Migration, Education, Human Rights"], *Экономическое возрождение России* [Economic Revival of Russia], no. 3 (2006): 7–16.

¹⁸³Kosikova, "Консолидация" ["Consolidation"], 29.

¹⁸⁴Nikolay Kruglov, "Украина в роли жертвы. Возможные риски для российско-украинских отношений" ["Ukraine as Victim: Possible Risks for Russian-Ukrainian Relations"], *Украина: информационно-аналитический мониторинг* [Ukraine: Information and Analytical Monitoring], no. 1 (2007): 31–33.

One institutional embodiment of this strategy was the creation, in 2007, of the Russkiy Mir Foundation under Vyacheslav Nikonov, which promptly deployed a broad network of offices in Ukraine. By early 2014, under its aegis, 12 Russian centres and 8 Russkiy Mir offices were operating in the country.¹⁸⁵

5.2.4. THE CASE AGAINST UKRAINE'S EUROPEAN CHOICE

In parallel with coercing Ukraine into participating in Moscow-led integration projects, Russian experts systematically discredited Ukraine's European vector as such,

If Russian-led integration was presented as the only sensible choice, then European integration was described as a foregone dead end

presenting European integration not as the country's sovereign choice but as western manipulation leading to economic catastrophe and a loss of agency. This was always framed as a starkly polarised dichotomy: if Russian-led integration was presented as the only sensible choice, then European integration was described as a foregone dead end.

The first and most persistent element of this discrediting was the claim that EU membership was, in principle, unattainable for Ukraine, and that Washington and Brussels dangled European prospects only to keep Ukraine "on a short leash" and prevent rapprochement with Russia.¹⁸⁶ IMEMO researcher Nikolay Rabotyzhev doubted that Ukraine would gain much from European integration at all, while Sergey Zhiltsov, a professor at the DA MFA, went so far as to deny any basis whatsoever for equal cooperation between Ukraine and the EU.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵Russkiy Mir Foundation, "Отчет об основных направлениях деятельности за 2013 год" ["Report on the Main Areas of Activity for 2013"] (Russkiy Mir Foundation, 2023).

¹⁸⁶Glinkina (ed), *Россия - Евросоюз - страны СНГ* [Russia - the European Union - the CIS Countries].

¹⁸⁷Nikolay Rabotyzhev, "Геостратегические дилеммы Киева" ["Kyiv's Geostrategic Dilemmas"], *Россия и новые государства Евразии*, no. 4 (2013): 49–67; "Россия – Украина: шаги" ["Russia-Ukraine: Steps?"], *Проблемы национальной стратегии* [Problems of National Strategy], 77–106.

The second element was the thesis that European integration would turn Ukraine into an “appendage of the European economy” and destroy its industrial potential. Zhiltsov insisted that European integration would lead to the “degradation of many sectors of the Ukrainian economy,” while Nikolay Kruglov from the Institute of CIS Countries painted an apocalyptic picture. According to him, NATO and EU accession would mean the “self-destruction” of the defence industry, aviation, and shipbuilding, with “90% of the economy and energy sector passing under the control of western multinationals.”¹⁸⁸ Neither author, however, backed these assertions with anything resembling a serious comparative analysis of the real economic consequences of Ukraine’s European integration.

The third element was the notion that Ukraine’s European orientation was imposed from outside by western elites, NGOs, and foreign-funded structures. This view denied Ukrainian society’s very capacity for an independent civilisational choice. For instance, Elena Tsedilina of IMEMO, presenting European integration as expansion rather than voluntary union, argued that the EU “consistently draws Russia’s closest neighbours into its orbit.”¹⁸⁹ More overtly conspiratorial versions of this thesis also existed, casting Ukraine’s European aspirations as the product of deliberate foreign engineering.¹⁹⁰ The logical consequence of this frame was inescapable: if Ukraine’s European choice was not sovereign, then it did not need to be respected. And if that choice was merely one more manifestation of western interference in Russia’s sphere of influence, then Russia was held to have every right to oppose it by whatever means were available.

¹⁸⁸ Kruglov, “Украина в роли жертвы” [“Ukraine as Victim”], 31–33.

¹⁸⁹ Elena Tsedilina, “Политика ЕС на постсоветском пространстве: от сотрудничества к интеграции” [“EU Policy in the Post-Soviet Space: From Cooperation to Integration”], *Россия и новые государства Евразии* [Russia and the New States of Eurasia], no. 1 (2009): 15–31.

¹⁹⁰ Anastasia Naumova, “Позиция России в ходе ‘оранжевой революции’ в Украине” [“Russia’s Position during the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine”], 138–144.

5.2.5. WEAPONISING FEDERALISATION

Russian experts very often based their analysis on an image of Ukraine as a politically unstable country with unclear historical prospects, whose “destiny is to be the protectorate of some great power.”¹⁹¹ This condition was attributed to a large number of causes, the most frequently cited of which was the existence of cultural, national, and religious contradictions between the country’s east and west. The unfailing remedy proposed for Ukraine’s fragmentation was federalisation.¹⁹² Along with renouncing NATO membership, granting state status to the Russian language,

Russian experts based their analysis on an image of Ukraine as a politically unstable country with unclear historical prospects

and preserving Orthodox unity under the Moscow Patriarchate, it was a constant part of the conditions put forward for ‘normalising’ relations with Russia. Tellingly, federalising Ukraine was openly acknowledged as an institutional lever needed to block the country’s sovereign course from within or to enable the subsequent secession of “pro-Russian regions.”¹⁹³

Interestingly, federalisation was systematically presented by Russian experts as a democratic norm rooted in the experience of developed states worldwide.¹⁹⁴ Such rhetoric ignored the specificity of the context, namely that the idea

¹⁹¹ Grinberg and Shmelev, “Внешняя политика” [“The Foreign Policy”], 52.

¹⁹² German Moro, “Президентские выборы на Украине: реалии и перспективы развития российско-украинских отношений” [“Presidential Elections in Ukraine: The Realities and Prospects for the Development of Russian-Ukrainian Relations”], *Проблемы национальной стратегии* [Problems of National Strategy], no. 2 (2010): 69–79; Vladimir Lapkin and Vladimir Pantin, “Кризис украинской государственности: политико-правовой, ценностный и геоэкономический аспекты” [“The Crisis of Ukrainian Statehood: Political-Legal, Value, and Geoeconomic Aspects”], *Полис. Политические исследования* [Polis. Political Studies], no. 5 (2014): 68–89.

¹⁹³ Aslambek Aslakhonov and Vladimir Solovoyov (eds), *Россия в новом веке: внешнеполитическое измерение* [Russia in the New Century: The Foreign-Policy Dimension] (Federation Council of the Russian Federation, 2010), 76–77.

¹⁹⁴ “Децентрализация, федерализация, распад: куда идет Украина” [“Decentralization, Federalization, Disintegration: Where Is Ukraine Heading?”], *RISS*, 6 March 2018.

was not gradually maturing through an organic political process but was being imposed under Russian pressure. In effect, Russia sought to implant federalisation as an instrument for stripping Ukraine of its sovereignty, while its experts provided the intellectual justification for this effort.

5.2.6. SELLING THE NEW YALTA

As before, in 2005–13 Russian experts continued their efforts to promote the idea of western countries recognising a Russian sphere of influence in exchange for ‘strategic stability’. In effect, through them, the Kremlin was testing the west’s readiness for a deal made behind the backs of the post-Soviet states, in the form of a ‘new Yalta’. The institutions most engaged in international expert contacts – especially MGIMO and IMEMO – pushed hardest on this track.

The most candid in formulating this idea was Alexei Arbatov, director of IMEMO’s Centre for International Security and a former State Duma deputy from the liberal Yabloko party. Apparently encouraged by “Russia’s victory over a *de facto* US ally” in Georgia in 2008, he proceeded from the premise that the west would be ready for a broader deal that would effectively legitimise Moscow’s sphere of influence. Arbatov proposed linking the question of NATO’s non-enlargement into the post-Soviet space to negotiations on missile defence and nuclear arms reductions.¹⁹⁵

A far subtler approach was taken by Nadezhda Arbatova, head of IMEMO’s sector on European international-political problems, who packaged the same idea in the language of western values. Exploiting western elites’ wishful thinking about Russia and their fear of conflict with a nuclear power, she argued that if the west wanted to see Russia become democratic, “then the answer lies in the sphere of regional cooperation and coordinating actions across the space of the

former USSR.”¹⁹⁶ In other words, the western audience was presented with a false dilemma: either sacrifice Ukraine’s independence and gain a more democratic and less aggressive Russia or support Ukrainian sovereignty and thereby ‘provoke’ Moscow into escalating confrontation in Europe. Predictably, Nadezhda Arbatova never explained how exactly indulging Russia’s neo-imperial expansion was supposed to advance its democratisation.

The western audience was presented with a false dilemma: either sacrifice Ukraine's independence and gain a more democratic and less aggressive Russia or support Ukrainian sovereignty and 'provoke' Moscow

In a similar way, the idea of a Yalta-model settlement was developed by MGIMO experts. While affirming the correctness of Russia’s foreign policy course, they nonetheless acknowledged that conducting the conversation – whether with the EU or with the elites of the post-Soviet states – in terms such as ‘spheres of interest’ was a futile exercise. Instead, they formulated Russia’s principal task in the region as “preserving the possibility of a conflict-free Russia-centric consolidation of the post-Soviet segment.”¹⁹⁷ This formulation appeared, on the surface, somewhat softer than the language used by Russian officials, but its substance was entirely identical to the Kremlin’s general line.

Following Arbatova, MGIMO experts hinted at the possibility of ‘Russia’s Europeanisation’ should the EU demonstrate willingness to resolve post-Soviet space issues jointly with Moscow. Drawing a false equivalence between Russia and the EU, they defined both as “centres of attraction” with “comparable potential for influence” – building towards

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in Pyotr Cherkasov, “Think tank XXI века (Часть первая)” [“The Think Tank of the 21st Century (Part One)”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations] 68, no. 4 (2024): 131–141.

¹⁹⁶ Nadezhda Arbatova, “Станут ли страны СНГ ‘яблоком раздора’ в отношениях России и ЕС?” [“Will the CIS Countries Become an ‘Apple of Discord’ in Russia-EU Relations?”], *Мировая экономика и международные отношения* [World Economy and International Relations], no. 6 (2006): 15–20.

¹⁹⁷ Irina Bolgova, Artem Malgin, Anatoly Torkunov, Anna Tsibulina, and Olga Shishkina, “Роль и перспективы России в регионе ‘новой Восточной Европы’” [“Russia’s Role and Prospects in the Region of the ‘New Eastern Europe’”], in Alexander Dynkin and Natalia Ivanova (eds), *Россия в полицентричном мире* [Russia in a Polycentric World] (Ves Mir, 2011), 400–406.

the conclusion that a bilateral agreement on “co-adapting” their policies across the post-Soviet space would be the natural next step.¹⁹⁸ In doing so, they entirely ignored the fundamental differences in the character of their respective integration projects – voluntary in the EU’s case, coercive in Russia’s.

The most academically polished version of the ‘new Yalta’ was presented by MGIMO Associate Prof Mikhail Troitskiy and American researcher Samuel Charap.¹⁹⁹ The conceptual core of Troitskiy and Charap’s approach was the notion of an “integration dilemma,” constructed by analogy with Robert Jervis’s classic security dilemma.²⁰⁰ Building on this frame, Troitskiy and Charap called for dialogue between the EU and Russia on the ‘mutual compatibility’ of their integration projects. Their appeal to the language of an “escalation spiral” and a “zero-sum game” exploited western fear of direct conflict with Russia, implicitly presenting this arrangement as a way to avoid it.

On closer inspection, however, Troitskiy and Charap’s analogy departs so far from Jervis’s original that it collapses into a false one. First, the analogy discards the one variable that gave Jervis’s theory its explanatory power in the first place: the distinguishability of offensive from defensive capabilities. For Jervis, a security dilemma is acute or mild depending on whether states can distinguish offensive from defensive postures. Integration projects have no structural equivalent of this variable. A free-trade agreement cannot meaningfully be classified as offensive or defensive. Stripped of this mechanism, Troitskiy and Charap’s integration dilemma loses analytical substance.

Second, the parallel between interstate confrontation and competition between integration projects is deeply misleading on the question of stakes. For

Jervis, the threat of attack between states carried existential weight. Misreading a defensive move as offensive and failing to respond could mean the state’s disappearance. The price of error was the actor’s extinction. Integration projects operate under an entirely different logic. Should such a project collapse, the states that belonged to it remain. There is no persuasive evidence that Russia itself would cease to exist along with the collapse of Moscow-led integration entities. At least, Troitskiy and Charap made no effort to supply such evidence in support of their position.

Third, the security-dilemma frame presupposes an absence of hostile intent. As Jervis describes it, the dilemma arises precisely because harm results from unintentional, defensively motivated action. Troitskiy and Charap explicitly built this presupposition into their argument, insisting that “Russian motives are far more defensive and reactive” than commonly assumed. Yet, as this report’s own analysis of Russian expert discourse shows, the dominant currents of Russian thinking on Ukraine throughout this period amount to a consciously articulated revisionist agenda. Applying a framework that precludes the presence of intent to a case driven by intent is not a neutral analytical choice.

Fourth, while the architecture of Jervis’s security dilemma does not require that only major actors be its parties, Troitskiy and Charap chose to build their dilemma around Russia and the west, leaving Ukraine’s own agency with no place in the frame at all. Tellingly, the

The dominant currents of Russian thinking on Ukraine throughout this period amount to a consciously articulated revisionist agenda

authors systematically legitimised Russian security concerns regarding the integration of Eastern Partnership states into western structures, while entirely ignoring those of the Eastern Partnership states themselves. Yet it was precisely these concerns that were among the main drivers of Ukraine’s European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

In sum, Troitskiy and Charap constructed a symmetry where none existed, and the word ‘dilemma’ lent an air of scholarly rigour to

¹⁹⁸ Bolgova et al, “Постсоветский сегмент ‘новой Восточной Европы’” [“The Post-Soviet Segment of the ‘New Eastern Europe’”], in Alexander Dynkin and Natalia Ivanova (eds), *Россия в полицентричном мире* [Russia in a Polycentric World] (Ves Mir, 2011), 376–390.

¹⁹⁹ Samuel Charap and Mikhail Troitskiy, “Russia, the West and the Integration Dilemma,” *Survival* 55, no. 6 (2013): 49–62.

²⁰⁰ Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.

what was, in essence, a Yalta-style bargain struck without Ukraine and at Ukraine's expense. Their call for dialogue between the EU and Russia on the 'mutual compatibility' of their integration projects legitimised Russia's claim to a sphere of influence in the form most palatable to a western audience.

The call for dialogue between the EU and Russia on their integration projects legitimised Russia's claim to a sphere of influence

The 2014 annexation of Crimea and Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 ultimately exposed the fundamental untenability of Troitskiy and Charap's entire conceptual construction. These events, combined with evidence discussed in this report, showed that Russia's real objection to Ukraine's European aspirations was never an integration dilemma, but Moscow's desire to keep Ukraine isolated and vulnerable to Russian attack. In other words, the motives behind Russia's foreign policy cannot be characterised in the way Troitskiy and Charap do. This, however, was hardly likely to stop adherents of a Yalta-style bargain from seeking other ways to sell it in the west.

5.3. 2014–21

The annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas considerably changed the conditions in which Russian expert discourse on Ukraine operated. Before 2014, its main concern had been keeping Ukraine within Russia's orbit of influence through non-military means. After Moscow resorted to force, Russian experts increasingly sought to justify and normalise the new reality. Six key narratives came to dominate this effort, each of which is examined separately below.

5.3.1. DELEGITIMISING UKRAINIAN STATEHOOD AND IDENTITY

Undermining the legitimacy of post-Maidan Ukraine became the most comprehensive direction of Russian expert discourse in the period 2014–21. This narrative was formulated in its most detailed form by Vladimir Putin

in his speech of 18 March 2014, timed to coincide with the annexation of Crimea.²⁰¹ In it, Euromaidan was described as a "coup d'état," as a result of which power in Ukraine passed to "nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites" directed by "foreign sponsors." The annexation of Crimea was declared necessary to protect Russian-speaking residents from them and to correct a "historical injustice." State bodies in Kyiv were said to have been "usurped by impostors," with no legitimate government remaining in Ukraine.

Putin's portrayal of post-Euromaidan Ukraine became the dominant interpretative frame for both Russian propaganda and expert discourse. It encompassed two interrelated but distinguishable levels: (1) discrediting

Putin's portrayal of post-Euromaidan Ukraine became the dominant frame for both Russian propaganda and expert discourse

the political regime that emerged after Euromaidan and (2) denying the legitimacy of the Ukrainian nation and state as such.

At the first level, the term 'coup d'état' became a universal linguistic marker, reproduced by authors from a wide range of institutional affiliations.²⁰² Using it, Russian experts

²⁰¹ Vladimir Putin, "Обращение Президента Российской Федерации" ["Address by the President of the Russian Federation"], President of Russia, 18 March 2014.

²⁰² Nodari Simoniya and Anatoly Torkunov, "Энергобезопасность ЕС и Россия" ["EU Energy Security and Russia"], *Полис. Политические исследования* [Polis. Political Studies], no. 5 (2014): 9–19; Boris Shmelev (ed), *Украинский кризис: причины, эволюция, уроки* [The Ukrainian Crisis: Causes, Evolution, and Lessons, Part 1], part 1 (Institute of Economics RAS, 2014); Zhiltsov, "Истоки" ["The Origins"], 21–36; Dashichev, *От Сталина до Путина* [From Stalin to Putin]; Nikolay Rabotyazhev and Eduard Solovuyov, "Украинский кризис: между политикой идентичности и геополитикой" ["The Ukrainian Crisis: Between Identity Politics and Geopolitics"], *Россия и новые государства Евразии* [Russia and the New States of Eurasia], no. 3 (2017): 9–28; Boris Shmelev, *Россия - Украина: партнерство или конфронтация?* [Russia-Ukraine: Partnership or Confrontation?], research report (Institute of Economics RAS, 2020); Leonid Vardomsky, "30 лет после СССР: этапы трансформации миссии постсоветского пространства" ["30 Years after the USSR: Stages in the Transformation of the Post-Soviet Space's Mission"], in B.P. Guseletov (ed), *Постсоветское пространство: между Европой и Азией* (FNISts RAS, 2022), 59–70.

systematically described the post-Euromaidan authorities as illegitimate, puppet-like and unviable, and as being under the ‘external management’ of the United States and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In addition, Russian texts began frequently drawing parallels between post-Euromaidan Ukraine and Nazi Germany in the 1930s.²⁰³ Although these parallels became standard across Russian expert discourse as a whole, they were used most systematically by RISS and the Institute of CIS Countries.²⁰⁴ This parallel was also implicit in the baseless, fabricated claim that the new Ukrainian authorities were allegedly seeking to build an “ethnically homogeneous” state.²⁰⁵

At the second level, delegitimation became more fundamental, calling into question Ukrainian statehood and national identity as

nation “is artificial” or “unformed.”²⁰⁶ The Institute of CIS Countries published materials referring to Ukraine as “South-Western Rus,” denying its statehood and making its territorial integrity conditional on its political subservience to Moscow.²⁰⁷

Another highly common construct in the Russian expert milieu was the propagandistic notion of Ukraine as “anti-Russia,” implying that Ukraine exists only as an instrument of hostile external forces and has no positive

The very existence of an independent Ukrainian state was viewed as incompatible with Russia's security

identity, history, or statehood of its own.²⁰⁸ In this framework, the very existence of an independent Ukrainian state was viewed as absolutely incompatible with Russia’s security.

Delegitimation became more fundamental, calling into question Ukrainian statehood and national identity as such

such. It was claimed that the history of Ukraine “is based on lies and fabrications,” that the Ukrainian state “holds no primary value” for Ukrainians themselves, and that the Ukrainian

5.3.2. DENYING RUSSIAN INTERVENTION

Beginning in 2014, Russian experts systematically denied or heavily

²⁰³ Dmitry Malyshev, “Современная Украина: основные тренды развития” [“Contemporary Ukraine: Key Development Trends”], *Россия и новые государства Евразии* [Russia and the New States of Eurasia], no. 4 (2017): 27–28; Alexander Levchenkov, “Историческая политика современной Украины в геополитической парадигме” [“The Historical Policy of Contemporary Ukraine within the Geopolitical Paradigm”], in *Тридцатилетие независимости Украины: состояние политики и экономики* [Thirty Years of Ukraine’s Independence: The State of Politics and the Economy], RIAC working paper no. 61/2021 (NP RSM, 2021), 34–40.

²⁰⁴ Kirill Frolov, *Проект Украины как анти-России: искоренение канонического православия на исторических землях Малороссии, Новороссии и Подкарпатской Руси* [The Project of Ukraine as Anti-Russia: The Eradication of Canonical Orthodoxy in the Historical Lands of Little Russia, Novorossiya, and Subcarpathian Rus] (Aleteyya, 2016): 100, 104, 140; I.A. Romanov (ed), *Украинский кризис – инструмент геополитики Запада* [The Ukrainian Crisis: An Instrument of Western Geopolitics], issue 6 (RISS, 2014): 8.

²⁰⁵ Lapkin and Pantin, “Кризис украинской государственности” [“The Crisis of Ukrainian Statehood”], 70, 79.

²⁰⁶ Sergei Perevezentsev, “Линия фронта прошлое” [“The Front Line of the Past”], *Россия в глобальной политике* [Russia in Global Affairs] 16, no. 2–3 (2018): 66–82; Boris Shmelev, *Россия – Украина: партнерство или конфронтация?* [Russia-Ukraine: Partnership or Confrontation?], research report (Institute of Economics RAS, 2020).

²⁰⁷ Kirill Frolov, *Проект Украины как анти-России. Искоренение канонического православия на исторических землях Малороссии, Новороссии и Подкарпатской Руси* [The Project of Ukraine as Anti-Russia: The Eradication of Canonical Orthodoxy in the Historical Lands of Little Russia, Novorossiya, and Subcarpathian Rus] (Aleteyya, 2016), 44, 175.

²⁰⁸ Dmitry Gudimenko, “Украинский национализм как идеология и политическая практика” [“Ukrainian Nationalism as Ideology and Political Practice”], *Бюллетень Центра этнорелигиозных исследований* [Bulletin of the Center for Ethno-Religious Studies], no. 4 (2016): 27–38; Kirill Frolov, *Проект Украины как анти-России: искоренение канонического православия на исторических землях Малороссии, Новороссии и Подкарпатской Руси* [The Project of Ukraine as Anti-Russia: The Eradication of Canonical Orthodoxy in the Historical Lands of Little Russia, Novorossiya, and Subcarpathian Rus] (Aleteyya, 2016); Dmitry Yefremenko, “За флажки: Россия в авангарде пересмотра мирового порядка” [“Beyond the Flags: Russia at the Vanguard of Revising the World Order”], *Россия в глобальной политике* [Russia in Global Affairs] 15, no. 6 (2017): 202–219; E.G. Solovyov and G.I. Chufirin (ed), *Политические процессы на постсоветском пространстве: новые тренды и старые проблемы* [Political Processes in the Post-Soviet Space: New Trends and Old Problems] (IMEMO RAS, 2020), 29.

downplayed Russia's role in the hostilities in eastern Ukraine. The most common method was the use of the terms 'civil war' and 'Ukrainian crisis'.

Describing the war as 'civil' bracketed out Russia's involvement and its key role, as an external aggressor, in fomenting separatism in Ukraine, in the covert deployment of 'little green men' during the annexation of Crimea, and in the fighting in Donbas. RISS, in particular, appears to have promoted this frame especially actively and tracked its spread in the west as an indicator of the success of Russia's information operations.²⁰⁹

The term 'Ukrainian crisis' was ambiguous and thus had broader application in the Russian expert milieu. First, against the backdrop of geopolitical determinism, it denoted the confrontation between the west and Russia over Ukraine, creating an illusion of symmetry, as if both sides were equally 'involved' in the conflict and its resolution required equal effort from all parties. Second, 'Ukrainian crisis' was also used to refer exclusively to Ukraine's internal dimension. Absolving Russia of responsibility for destabilising the situation, the 'crisis' was described as a consequence of the failure of Ukrainian statehood, oligarchic governance, and inter-regional divisions. In both cases, it was not a neutral term but a political euphemism that transformed a war between an aggressor state and its victim into a phenomenon whose culprit could be anyone except Russia.

Recognising that flatly denying Russia's aggression against Ukraine would be poorly received in the west, Russian experts working with international audiences stopped short of doing so directly. Instead, Moscow's actions were presented as a forced response to the behaviour of geopolitical opponents (such as Ukraine, NATO, or the west more broadly), who either constantly provoked Russia (as with

Georgia) or pursued policies hostile to it.²¹⁰ This retrospective spin recast the Kremlin's actions not as aggression but as defensive measures warranting understanding and compromise rather than condemnation. Such accounts typically ended in talk of 'mutual mistakes' and 'missed opportunities' by Russia and the west, which apportioned responsibility for the conflict symmetrically and laid the groundwork for bargaining at Ukraine's expense.

Moscow's actions were presented as a forced response to the behaviour of geopolitical opponents

Curiously, beneath the pretence of impartiality afforded by the 'Ukrainian crisis' and 'civil war' frames, the texts of Russian experts sometimes revealed a certain intoxication with Russia's audacity and a sense of satisfaction that the west had missed the moment when Russia began re-consolidating as a great power, and that, with the annexation of Crimea, Moscow had at last given Washington a bloody nose.²¹¹ This euphoria was especially characteristic of authors with Marxist and far-left convictions, who viewed Russian expansionism as a far lesser evil than the west. They harboured hopes that it would be precisely the Russian authorities who would challenge the 'absolute dominance' of 'global capitalism' and halt the 'expansion of the western neoliberal order'.²¹² On the whole, this interpretation structurally served official Russian propaganda.

²⁰⁹ Yuri Glushchenko, "Новые власти Украины пытаются снизить зависимость от поставок российского газа" ["Ukraine's New Authorities Try to Reduce Dependence on Russian Gas Supplies"], *Российский вектор* [Russian Vector], no. 15 (2014): 9.

²¹⁰ Andrei Sushentsov, "Ukraine - A Battlefield or a Bridge between Russia and the West?," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 1 (2016): 178–193; Andrei Sushentsov and Dmitry Ofitserov-Belsky, "Инструменты политической стратегии России в Восточной Европе: экономическая взаимозависимость" ["Instruments of Russia's Political Strategy in Eastern Europe: Economic Interdependence"], *Современная Европа* [Contemporary Europe], no. 3 (2019): 139–149.

²¹¹ Yuri Godin, "Последний рубеж" ["The Last Frontier"], in *Украинский кризис: причины, эволюция, уроки* [The Ukrainian Crisis: Causes, Evolution, and Lessons], part 1, ed. Boris Shmelev (Institute of Economics RAS, 2014), 86.

²¹² Alexander Buzgalin, "Ukraine: Anatomy of a Civil War," *International Critical Thought* 5, no. 3 (2015): 327–347; Boris Kagarlitsky, "Ukraine and Russia: Two States, One Crisis," *International Critical Thought* 6, no. 4 (2016): 513–533.

5.3.3. DISCREDITING UKRAINE'S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Before 2014, Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU generally provoked condescending smirks among Russian experts. Russian energy resources seemed too important to the Ukrainian economy for Kyiv to dream of EU membership. Many were convinced that Ukraine would sooner or later accept the terms of geopolitical vassalage to Russia.

Many were convinced that Ukraine would sooner or later accept the terms of geopolitical vassalage to Russia

Yanukovich's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU at the Eastern Partnership's Vilnius summit in November 2013 further reinforced this conviction. The Kremlin's trade and economic blackmail appeared to have worked, and Ukraine seemed already to be 'in its pocket'.²¹³

However, despite Moscow's arm-twisting, Kyiv proceeded with the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement after the Revolution of Dignity.

The more progress Ukraine made towards European integration, the more criticism it drew from Russian experts

The more progress Ukraine made towards European integration, the more criticism it drew from Russian experts. As before, this criticism rested on the same claims about negative consequences for Ukraine – 'de-industrialisation', 'economic bankruptcy', and 'becoming an economic appendage of Europe' – but after 2014, its geopolitical dimension came to the fore. European integration was now described not so much as economically disadvantageous for Ukraine as an instrument of the west's anti-Russian policy, deliberately turning Ukraine into a 'forward outpost' and a 'cordon sanitaire' against Russia.

²¹³ Mikhail Krivoguz, "Украинский кризис 2013–2014: взгляд из торгпредства" ["The 2013–2014 Ukrainian Crisis: A View from the Trade Mission"], *Россия и новые государства Евразии* [Russia and the New States of Eurasia], no. 3 (2019): 79–90.

The intensification of geopolitical determinism and the increasing propagandisation of expert discourse further degraded texts that were already poor in quality. When Russian authors made forecasts about the Ukrainian economy, these were very often unprofessional and inaccurate.

For example, amid Russia's frontal assault in 2014, as Ukraine sought alternative energy supply options, RISS believed that reverse gas supplies to Ukraine from the EU would be hard to implement "owing to the absence of the necessary pipelines." It also assumed that the west's sanctions regime against Russia would be purely political in character and would not last long.²¹⁴ In reality, reverse supplies were successfully launched as early as 2014, via Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland; Ukraine ceased direct purchases of Russian gas in November 2015; and the sanctions regime against Russia has continued to intensify and remains in effect.

Another example comes from RGGU experts. Accustomed to talking condescendingly about the Ukrainian economy, they believed that the Ukrainian government would be unlikely to keep inflation within its own 7.4% forecast for 2019, since "foreign investment will not come to Ukraine in an election year."²¹⁵ They forecast inflation in Ukraine at 10–12%. Meanwhile, Ukraine's foreign direct investment (FDI) inflow reached \$5.86 bn that year, the highest figure since 2014,²¹⁶ while the inflation rate was 4.1%.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Glushchenko, "Новые власти Украин" [Ukraine's New Authorities], 18.

²¹⁵ Alexander Gushchin and Alexander Levchenkov, "Западный фланг постсоветского пространства и программа 'Восточное партнерство': опыт и перспективы взаимодействия" ["The Western Flank of the Post-Soviet Space and the 'Eastern Partnership' Programme: Experience and Prospects for Interaction"], *Современная Европа* [Contemporary Europe], no. 7 (2019): 105–114.

²¹⁶ World Bank, "Foreign Direct Investment, Net Inflows (% of GDP) – Ukraine," World Development Indicators, accessed 26 July 2026.

²¹⁷ "Річний звіт Національного банку за 2019 рік: 10 показників, як змінилася економіка та фінансова система України" ["The National Bank's 2019 Annual Report: 10 Indicators of How Ukraine's Economy and Financial System Have Changed"], National Bank of Ukraine, 8 May 2020.

5.3.4. WAGING AN INFORMATION WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

After Euromaidan, the already high level of ideologisation in expert discourse rose sharply. It shifted from promoting concepts of cultural and informational influence to openly waging information warfare against Ukraine and the countries supporting it.

This was clearly visible in the further propagandisation of the language used. Rather than critically examining the validity of labels originating in official Russian discourse, experts rapidly and en masse incorporated them into their own terminological repertoire. Linguistic constructs that had previously dominated mainly at RISS and the Institute of CIS Countries became ubiquitous across virtually the entire Russian expert milieu. It became the norm to use terms such as ‘forced Ukrainisation’ and ‘Russophobia’, while the Revolution of Dignity was consistently described in terms of the ‘forcible overthrow of Yanukovych’, a ‘coup d’état’, an ‘uprising in Donbas’, and a ‘civil war’.

Many experts began to interpret what was happening in terms of a geopolitical information confrontation over Ukraine. Within this frame, Euromaidan was described as the result of external informational influence and its participants as objects of brainwashing by western media.²¹⁸ This

Many Russian experts assumed the role of soldiers in Russia's information war

excluded the agency of Ukrainian political actors and any interpretation of Ukraine’s political dynamics as a process driven by domestic factors. The logic of reducing it to a confrontation between ‘information centres of influence’ demanded an intensification of disinformation in order to defeat the adversary. Consequently, many Russian experts effectively assumed the role of soldiers in Russia’s information war.

²¹⁸ Natalia Burlinova, “Украинские события: информационные аспекты кризиса” [“The Events in Ukraine: Informational Aspects of the Crisis”], Вестник аналитики [Bulletin of Analytics], no. 2 (2014): 37.

The spread of factual distortions and propaganda fakes took on a systemic character. In order to demonise the new Ukrainian government as ‘Russophobic’, numerous baseless claims were made. The Institute of CIS Countries, for example, spread disinformation about ‘friendship trains’ allegedly being prepared by Right Sector to travel to Crimea, and about Kyiv and Washington being behind the downing of MH17.²¹⁹

It became axiomatic to interpret the fighting in Donbas as the consequence of an ‘uprising’ in which the Kremlin allegedly played no part. Andrei Sushentsov and Ivan Loshkarev of MGIMO, for example, described it as an internal conflict that had transformed into a ‘civil war’, attributing its root cause not to Russian intervention but to the inflexible, uncooperative policy of the new Ukrainian authorities, which allegedly pushed some Russian diaspora organisations towards a secessionist uprising.²²⁰ In their account, Russia’s involvement in the fighting was ‘limited’ and motivated purely by defensive goals, such as protecting the Russian diaspora and preventing the collapse of Ukrainian statehood.

Russian experts sought to substantiate the image, cultivated by Russian state media, of the west as a hypocritical and inconsistent actor that had always wanted to draw Ukraine into NATO. A telling example is Eduard Solovyov of InEcon RAS, who asserted that “not a single western politician ever expressed respect for Ukraine’s choice in favour of non-alignment” during Yanukovych’s rule.²²¹ In fact, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen

²¹⁹ Konstantin Zatulin, “Ще не вмерла Україна?” [“Ukraine Has Not Yet Perished?”], *Institute of CIS Countries*, 27 February 2014.

²²⁰ Ivan Loshkarev and Andrey Sushentsov, “Radicalisation of Russians in Ukraine: From ‘Accidental’ Diaspora to Rebel Movement,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 71–90.

²²¹ Eduard Solovyov, “Геополитические аспекты кризиса на Украине” [“Geopolitical Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine”], in Boris Shmelev (ed), *Украинский кризис: причины, эволюция, уроки* [The Ukrainian Crisis: Causes, Evolution, and Lessons], part 1 (Institute of Economics RAS, 2014), 132.

made statements of exactly this kind on more than one occasion.²²²

Over the same period, the number of openly conspiratorial publications rose sharply in the Russian-language segment. It became standard for these to mention an anti-Russian 'shadowy conspiracy' between Ukrainian elites and the west, and a 'coup d'état' prepared by Washington, complete with bribery and recruitment by American intelligence services.²²³ RISS stood out especially in this context, indulging its taste for smearing the west by spreading fabrications about western-driven 'chipping' of people to establish the control of a world government.²²⁴ Notably, such texts often amounted to a digest of materials from Russian and Russia-affiliated media, tailored to fit a particular narrative.²²⁵ This was not analysis but pseudo-scholarly propaganda in pamphlet form, bearing the signature of someone with an academic degree and an affiliation with a scholarly institution.

A common phenomenon in the Russian expert milieu was the embedding of propaganda narratives within English-language academic texts. A very characteristic example is Alexei Gromyko, director of the Institute of Europe

A common phenomenon in the Russian expert milieu was the embedding of propaganda narratives within English-language academic texts

RAS, who claimed in an article in a peer-reviewed western journal that a "significant

body of evidence suggests that neither Russia nor the rebels in Eastern Ukraine were responsible for shooting down MH17," citing in support only a portal of dubious reputation, a *Guardian* article, and a briefing by the Russian Ministry of Defence.²²⁶

Meanwhile, his colleagues at RIAC and IMEMO promoted a reassuring narrative for international audiences that the annexation of Crimea was a special case and that no further annexations by Russia would follow.²²⁷ The events of 2022 showed that these texts may well have been disinformation dressed in academic or expert clothing.

5.3.5. MANUFACTURING A NARRATIVE OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST RUSSIAN SPEAKERS

After something of a lull during Viktor Yanukovich's presidency, the Russian Foreign Ministry sharply intensified its use of the narrative of language-based discrimination against Russians from spring 2014 onwards.²²⁸ It provided a 'humanitarian' justification for Russian intervention, presenting the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support for separatists in Donbas not as aggression but as the defence of a threatened ethnic and cultural minority. Yet this framing rested on systematic exaggeration and factual distortion rather than on evidence of systematic persecution.

This narrative was one of the most persistent in Russian expert discourse in the period 2014–21. Russian experts consistently presented any efforts by the Ukrainian government to strengthen

²²² Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "Ukraine and NATO: Partners in Security," speech at Taras Shevchenko National University, Kyiv, NATO, 24 February 2011; "НАТО уважает политику внеблоковости Украины - Расмуссен" [NATO Respects Ukraine's Non-Bloc Policy - Rasmussen], UNIAN, 24 February 2011.

²²³ Dashichev, *От Сталина до Путина*, 424, 466; Tsedilina, "Четвертая годовщина" [The Fourth Anniversary], 9–28.

²²⁴ Igor Romanov (ed), *Украинский кризис - инструмент геополитики Запада* [The Ukrainian Crisis: An Instrument of Western Geopolitics], issue 6 (RISS, 2014), 22–23.

²²⁵ Tsedilina, "Четвертая годовщина" [The Fourth Anniversary]; Dmitry Malyshev, "Основные аспекты российско-украинских отношений в 2021 г.: состояние и перспективы" ["Key Aspects of Russian-Ukrainian Relations in 2021: State of Play and Prospects"], *Постсоветские исследования* [Post-Soviet Studies] 4, no. 3 (2021): 202–207.

²²⁶ Alexey Gromyko, "Russia–EU Relations at a Crossroads: Preventing a New Cold War in a Polycentric World," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 15, no. 2 (2015): 141–149.

²²⁷ Andrei Kortunov, "Утешение историей" [The Consolation in History], *Россия в глобальной политике* [Russia in Global Affairs] 16, no. 2–3, part 2 (2018): 6–11; Nadezhda Arbatova and Alexander Dynkin, "World Order after Ukraine," *Survival* 58, no. 1 (2016): 71–90.

²²⁸ Sergey Lavrov, "Выступление и ответы на вопросы депутатов Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова в ходе пленарного заседания Государственной Думы Российской Федерации" ["Address and Answers to Deputies' Questions by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during a Plenary Session of the State Duma of the Russian Federation"], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 20 March 2014.

the position of the state language as ‘forced Ukrainisation’ and an unjustified squeezing out of the Russian language from public space.

Russian experts consistently presented any efforts to strengthen the position of the state language as ‘forced Ukrainisation’

The Institute of CIS Countries was an especially active promoter of this discrimination claim, since the expansion of the Russian language and culture had always been one of its top priorities. Long before the Revolution of Dignity – at least since 2004 – the institute’s experts regularly used the term ‘ethnocide’ to blacken the Ukrainian authorities’ policy of developing the Ukrainian language.²²⁹ From 2017, the term was instrumentalised by the Russian government. It first appeared as a characterisation of Ukraine’s education law in a State Duma resolution co-authored by Konstantin Zatulin and then passed into the lexicon of the Russian Foreign Ministry.²³⁰

Notably, Konstantin Zatulin systematically resorted to this narrative in his public statements, describing laws that encouraged a gradual transition of school education to Ukrainian as an assault on the Russian language and promising state assistance to what he called “hostages of forced Ukrainisation.”²³¹

²²⁹ Institute of CIS Countries, *Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье* [Russians and Russian Speakers in the New Abroad], no. 109 (2004), 13–24.

²³⁰ State Duma of the Russian Federation, [О заявлении Государственной Думы Федерального Собрания Российской Федерации ‘О недопустимости нарушения фундаментального права коренных народов и национальных меньшинств Украины обучаться на родных языках’](#) [On the Statement of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation “On the Impermissibility of Violating the Fundamental Right of the Indigenous Peoples and National Minorities of Ukraine to Be Educated in Their Native Languages”], Resolution No. 2296-7 GD, (State Duma, 27 September 2017); Alexander Lukashevich, [“Выступление Постоянного представителя Российской Федерации при ОБСЕ А.К. Лукашевича на заседании Постоянного совета ОБСЕ о ситуации на Украине и необходимости выполнения Минских договоренностей”](#) [“Statement by Alexander Lukashevich, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE, at a Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council on the Situation in Ukraine and the Need to Implement the Minsk Agreements”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 5 October 2017.

²³¹ [“Депутат ГД о насильственной украинизации: закон войны против русского языка”](#) [“State Duma Deputy on Forced Ukrainianisation: A Law of War against the Russian Language”], *REGNUM*, 4 October 2018.

Addressing the State Duma in 2017 to criticise Ukraine’s language policy, he ended his speech with the grandiloquent words: “This is a case where Carthage must be destroyed.”²³²

During this period, the narrative of discrimination against Russian speakers in Ukraine also became widespread among many other Russian expert organisations. Staff at InEcon RAS, for instance, described Ukraine’s language policy as ‘forced Ukrainisation’ but never specified exactly what the ‘force’ consisted of or how it manifested itself. Yuriy Godin went so far as to claim that “there is not a single Russian-language kindergarten left” in Kyiv, although in reality Russian was removed from kindergarten curricula only in 2022, amid Russia’s full-scale invasion.

The rhetoric of Russian experts was often accompanied by hints at the possibility of repression by the Ukrainian government and accusations that Ukraine was employing Nazi practices. IMEMO researchers Vladimir Lapkin and Vladimir Pantin, for example, argued that Ukraine’s understanding of nationhood was narrowly ethnic in character and that its nation-building policy bore an unmistakable resemblance to Nazism.²³³ They claimed that the post-Euromaidan authorities were allegedly hunting down dissenters and encouraging the creation of ‘death squads’, and posed the plainly rhetorical question of whether Ukraine might, on this path, arrive at ethnic cleansing.

Thus, Russian expert discourse did not so much shape an independent agenda on the question of ‘discrimination against Russian speakers’ as seek to assist the authorities by reproducing and reinforcing the official line in concert with them. In doing so, experts did not always even employ pseudo-scholarly argumentation, turning their commentaries into anti-Ukrainian political agitation and disinformation.

²³² State Duma of the Russian Federation, [“Transcript of session,”](#) 27 September 2017.

²³³ Lapkin and Pantin, “Кризис украинской государственности” [“The Crisis of Ukrainian Statehood”], 79.

5.3.6. PROMOTING VARIATIONS OF THE NEW YALTA

Following the annexation of Crimea and Russia's covert intervention in eastern Ukraine, proponents of a 'new Yalta' began presenting these developments as evidence that Moscow

Russia's aggressive behaviour was presented as a reluctant Kremlin reaction to the US and EU's unwillingness to recognise a Russian sphere of influence

would ultimately achieve its foreign policy objectives. Russia's aggressive behaviour was presented as a reluctant Kremlin reaction to the US and EU's unwillingness to recognise a Russian sphere of influence.²³⁴ By deploying the same symmetrising language of shared responsibility for the 'Ukrainian conflict' and squandered chances to resolve it, Russian experts continued trying to convince western audiences that a Russian veto over the sovereign choices of the post-Soviet states would be an acceptable price for European security.²³⁵

Russian experts continued trying to convince western audiences that a Russian veto over the sovereign choices of the post-Soviet states would be an acceptable price for European security

Beyond this, other typical components of the proposed Yalta-style arrangements were speculation about the risks of a direct confrontation between Russia and the west and promises of benefits from cooperating with Russia on other global issues.

Notably, MGIMO figures such as Andrei Zagorsky and Anatoly Torkunov, following

Troitskiy and Charap, similarly built their arguments around the need to begin a direct dialogue between the EU and Russia on the 'problems' of associating post-Soviet countries with the EU and the compatibility of such association with Russian integration projects.²³⁶

In essence, this would have amounted to Brussels *de facto* recognising Russia's right to limit the sovereignty of Eastern Partnership countries.

At the same time, IMEMO proposed options for institutionalising a Russian sphere of influence based on constructs derived from the Helsinki Final Act.²³⁷ Nadezhda Arbatova, for instance, operationalised this as a "Helsinki+" formula, with a legally binding treaty between Russia and the west on the neutral status and territorial integrity of the post-Soviet states.²³⁸ Her IMEMO colleagues, following the same logic, proposed a 'new security architecture' based on the OSCE as a 'European UN' with a deeply transformed decision-making mechanism that would effectively imply a Russian veto right.²³⁹

Up to 2022, the philosophy of the 'new Yalta', in its most sophisticated form, was also actively promoted by RIAC's leadership. For instance, Andrei Kortunov formulated it in a far more elaborate way than the overwhelming majority of Russian experts. He conceded the collapse of the Kremlin's narrative of Ukraine as a failed state and spoke of the need for Russia to recognise Ukraine's agency and "build relations with it on the same basis as, for example, with Warsaw, Bratislava, or Bucharest."²⁴⁰ However, he immediately went on to declare the need for a "serious correction" of Ukraine's "radically

²³⁴ Shmelev, *Россия - Украина* [Russia-Ukraine], 29.

²³⁵ "Внешняя политика России в новых условиях" ["Russia's Foreign Policy under New Conditions"], Institute of CIS Countries, 21 July 2014; Nadezhda Arbatova and Alexander Dynkin, "World Order after Ukraine," *Survival* 58, no. 1 (2016): 71–90; Andrej Krickovic and Maxim Bratersky, "Benevolent Hegemon, Neighborhood Bully, or Regional Security Provider? Russia's Efforts to Promote Regional Integration after the 2013–2014 Ukraine Crisis," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 2 (2016): 180–202.

²³⁶ Andrei Zagorski, *Россия в системе европейской безопасности* [Russia in the European Security System] (IMEMO RAS, 2017), 139; Anatoly Torkunov, *По дороге в будущее-2.5* [On the Road to the Future 2.5], 3rd ed. (Aspekt Press, 2017), 144.

²³⁷ Nadezhda Arbatova and Alexander Dynkin, "World Order after Ukraine," *Survival* 58, no. 1 (2016): 71–90.

²³⁸ Nadezhda Arbatova, "European Security in the Context of the Ukrainian Crisis: Russian Perspective," Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies (@monterey_initiative), YouTube, 18 May 2016.

²³⁹ Alexander Dynkin (ed), *Мир 2035. Глобальный прогноз* [The World in 2035: A Global Forecast] (IMEMO RAS; Magistr, 2017), 301–302.

²⁴⁰ Kortunov, "Утешение историей" ["The Consolation of History"], 6–11.

pro-western, ethno-nationalist agenda.” That is, Kortunov recognised Ukraine as a sovereign state only to the extent that its political course remained acceptable to Moscow.

Kortunov also proposed freezing the fighting in Donbas along the Georgian model, which would have meant tacitly accepting the results of Russian aggression as the starting point for normalisation. He argued that “the problem of Ukraine’s NATO membership” could be removed by opening parallel negotiations on a “new European security system.” In practice, this would have made Ukraine a hostage to a bargain between Russia and the leading western powers.

RIAC’s president, Igor Ivanov, was himself the author of yet another sophisticated version of the ‘new Yalta’. In April 2019, he proposed expanding the Normandy Format to include the EU and the US and creating a high-level contact group modelled on the Bosnian crisis.²⁴¹ The Bosnian model *de facto* legitimised Republika Srpska and cemented the territorial results of Serbian aggression through a multilateral settlement. Invoking this precedent for Donbas transparently signalled the desired outcome: entrenching the ‘DNR’ and ‘LNR’ as essentially autonomous entities within Ukraine with special status, which would mean a permanent Russian lever of influence over Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy.

The push for a Yalta-style settlement was traceable in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine

Expanding the Normandy Format in this way would have turned a bilateral military conflict between Russia and Ukraine into a multilateral settlement, allowing Russia to recast itself as a mediator rather than an aggressor. Moreover, Ivanov’s echo of Kortunov’s thesis – that negotiations on a new security system should proceed in parallel with the ‘Ukrainian agenda’ – pointed towards a broader goal of institutionalising Russian influence across the continent, far beyond Ukraine alone. Given the close institutional ties between the Foreign

²⁴¹ Igor Ivanov, “Помочь Украине - помочь себе” [“Helping Ukraine Is Helping Ourselves”], *Kommersant*, 22 April 2019.

Ministry and RIAC, and the near-verbatim overlap between Ivanov’s and Kortunov’s key theses, this Yalta-esque scheme may well have been coordinated between the two.

RIAC’s push for a Yalta-style settlement was also traceable in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine. Andrei Kortunov, for example, wrote in December 2021 that only an agreement between Russia and the west on a gradual de-escalation in Ukraine, and on “reducing the incentives motivating Ukraine to persistently seek NATO membership, and the incentives motivating NATO to expand,” could “finally rule out even the hypothetical prospect of a major armed conflict in the centre of Europe.”²⁴²

Ivan Timofeev of RIAC offered a similar logic in January 2022, laying out three scenarios: war, permanent tension, and a deal between Russia and the west.²⁴³ He raised the prospect of Russia becoming a ‘European North Korea’ as an outcome of the first two – a comparison that might, at first glance, read as sober self-criticism. In fact, it functioned as leverage aimed at the west rather than a warning to the Kremlin: an unpredictable, sanctioned, nuclear-armed pariah state on Europe’s doorstep was not an outcome that western governments, accustomed to comfort and stability, would want to live with either. Timofeev’s preferred option was the third scenario, which he presented as a reasonable middle path for both sides: downgrading Ukraine to a secondary issue within the broader Russia–west relationship while leaving Moscow free to continue eroding Ukrainian sovereignty.

5.4. 2022 ONWARDS: THE FULL-SCALE INVASION

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered yet another restructuring of Russian expert discourse. Narratives that had previously been deployed to legitimise Russian claims to a sphere of influence over Ukraine and to justify the annexation of Crimea were now repurposed to rationalise a new act of

²⁴² Andrei Kortunov, “Хотят ли русские войны?” [“Do Russians Want War?”], *RIAC*, 6 December 2021.

²⁴³ Ivan Timofeev, “После ответа из Вашингтона: три сценария” [“After Washington’s Response: Three Scenarios”], Valдай Discussion Club, 31 January 2022.

aggression. As the ‘special military operation’ dragged on, the discourse grew increasingly mendacious, whitewashing Russian policy for both domestic and international audiences. This section traces the main lines of effort pursued by Russian experts in this regard: laying the intellectual groundwork for the invasion; legitimising narratives that took hold once the war had begun; the search for new formulas for a grand bargain with the west; efforts to erode western support for continued assistance to Ukraine; and, finally, the promotion of pro-Russian narratives through academic texts aimed specifically at western audiences.

5.4.1. LAYING THE INTELLECTUAL GROUNDWORK FOR THE INVASION

Restoring formalised spheres of influence has long been one of the most persistent aims of Russian foreign policy – visible in Putin’s 2007 Munich speech, Dmitry Medvedev’s proposed 2008 European Security Treaty, and, in 2020, Putin’s call for a summit of the ‘nuclear five’. When it became clear by spring 2021 that no such Yalta-style deal was forthcoming, Putin turned to military pressure instead, massing troops on Ukraine’s border, staging large-scale exercises with Belarus, and, in December 2021, issuing an ultimatum demanding NATO’s rollback to its 1997 configuration.²⁴⁴ The invasion that followed in February 2022 was the pursuit of a European order on Russia’s own terms – now by force.

From late summer 2021, at Putin’s prompting, a new and persistent leitmotif of Russian propaganda emerged. NATO was accused of the ‘military development’ (*военное освоение*) of Ukraine, a claim Putin later invoked as one of the pretexts for the full-scale invasion.²⁴⁵ RIAC, IMEMO, InEcon, IE, HSE, and many others quickly incorporated

this term into their professional vocabulary and retransmitted the Kremlin’s corresponding message in their texts.²⁴⁶

Even amid an aggressive anti-Ukrainian campaign in the Russian media and large-scale military exercises on the border with Ukraine, when it was already entirely obvious that Moscow was driving up tensions, Russian experts symmetrised the situation as an ‘exchange of signals’ and an ‘information confrontation’ between Russia and the west, and dismissed the possibility of Russian aggression as an untenable hypothesis imposed from outside.²⁴⁷

From the second half of December 2021, the tone of Russian expert publications shifted again. Two events likely contributed to this. First, after a call with Putin on 7 December 2021, US President Joe Biden made clear that neither the US nor NATO countries would send their own troops into Ukraine in the event of Russian armed aggression.²⁴⁸ Second, Washington responded in a lukewarm, conciliatory manner to the brazen ultimatum Russia issued in December 2021. Having thereby become convinced that Ukraine would be left one-on-one with Russia, the Kremlin and the experts serving it adopted a more assertive, uncompromising line.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ See, for instance: Timofeev, “После ответа из Вашингтона” [“After Washington’s Response”]; Elena Tsedilina, “Украинский разлом (анатомия вооруженного конфликта)” [“The Ukrainian Fault Line (Anatomy of an Armed Conflict)”], *Россия и новые государства Евразии* [Russia and the New States of Eurasia], no. 2 (2022): 27–43; Leonid Vardomsky, “Интеграционная миссия постсоветского пространства” [“The Integration Mission of the Post-Soviet Space”], *Мир перемен* [World of Change], no. 1 (2022): 115–128; Alexey Gromyko, “Дипломатия vs балансирование на грани войны” [“Diplomacy vs Brinkmanship”], *RIAC*, 7 February 2022; Vasily Kashin, “Пропагандистское оружие” [“Propaganda Weapon”], *Profil*, 2 November 2021; Dmitry Suslov, “Следует честно объявить, что Россия и НАТО – противники” [“We Should Honestly Declare That Russia and NATO Are Adversaries”], *Kommersant*, 14 January 2022.

²⁴⁷ Ivan Timofeev, “Война России и Украины: базовый сценарий?” [“A War Between Russia and Ukraine: The Base-Case Scenario?”], Valdai Discussion Club, 25 November 2021; Andrei Kortunov, “Хотят ли русские войны?” [“Do Russians Want War?”], *RIAC*, 6 December 2021.

²⁴⁸ “Russia Ukraine: Sending US Troops Not on Table – Biden”, *BBC News*, 8 December 2021.

²⁴⁹ Sergey Karaganov, interview by Andrei Uglanov, “Украина в НАТО – это однозначная большая война в Европе” [“Ukraine in NATO Would Unambiguously Mean a Major War in Europe”], *Аргументы недели* [Arguments of the Week], 1 February 2022.

²⁴⁴ “О российских проектах документов по обеспечению правовых гарантий безопасности со стороны США и НАТО” [“О российских проектах документов по обеспечению правовых гарантий безопасности со стороны США и НАТО”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021.

²⁴⁵ Igor Gretskey, “Russia’s Propaganda War,” *Russia’s War in Ukraine* series, no. 9, *ICDS*, August 2022.

This dynamic can be traced, for example, in the publications of Ivan Timofeev. In November 2021, he stated that the idea of the west's decline was a consensus view within the Russian expert milieu, but cautioned against hasty conclusions, carefully suggesting that the west's margin of resilience remained high and that the decline of this 'selfish giant' could stretch across decades or even centuries.²⁵⁰

Having become convinced that Ukraine would be left one-on-one with Russia, experts serving the Kremlin adopted a more assertive, uncompromising line

Yet by January 2022, Timofeev had concluded that "Washington clearly does not want to irritate Russia,"²⁵¹ describing the west as a weakening power.²⁵² His recommendation, in essence, was that Russia maintain a high level of confrontation with the west without moving to military action, which he believed would be enough to force the west into geopolitical concessions. Timofeev assumed that, should war begin, "the Ukrainian army could be defeated relatively quickly."²⁵³

On the eve of the invasion, Russian authorities categorically denied accusations that Russia was preparing to attack Ukraine.²⁵⁴ Russian diplomats insisted, right up to the last moment, that such accusations were "aggressive verbal

exercises."²⁵⁵ Russian experts did exactly the same, with one voice. Konstantin Zatulin and Ivan Timofeev, for example, denied that Russia had any intention of invading Ukraine and accused the west of psychosis and hysteria.²⁵⁶ Fyodor Lukyanov of HSE firmly stated that reports of an impending Russian attack on Ukraine were "nonsense" being pushed "with maniacal persistence" by the US and the UK.²⁵⁷

Interestingly, after the invasion began on 24 February 2022, Russian experts engaged in essentially no reflection on how well-founded their forecasts and claims from before the full-scale invasion had actually been. At first glance, such reflection appeared in a text – rare for this genre – by that same Ivan Timofeev.²⁵⁸ On closer inspection, however, it proved hollow. Timofeev referred to his own November forecast, listing seven consequences of a military scenario: sanctions, diplomatic isolation, the consolidation of the west around Ukraine, and so on. Yet he did not change his analysis's ideologically charged, neo-imperial conceptual frame in the slightest. Tellingly, he labelled those who correctly predicted the invasion "Russophobes." Timofeev's "reflection" never once mentions his own text

²⁵⁰ Ivan Timofeev, "[Упадок Запада? За и против](#)" ["The Decline of the West? For and Against"], *Valdai Discussion Club*, 2 November 2021.

²⁵¹ Ivan Timofeev, "[Отсутствие паники - правильный выбор](#)" ["The Absence of Panic Is the Right Choice"], *Kommersant*, 13 January 2022.

²⁵² Timofeev, "После ответа из Вашингтона" ["After Washington's Response"]

²⁵³ Timofeev, "После ответа из Вашингтона" ["After Washington's Response"]

²⁵⁴ "[Россия заверила, что не собирается нападать на Украину](#)" ["Russia Assured That It Does Not Intend to Attack Ukraine"], *Interfax*, 19 January 2022.

²⁵⁵ Sergey Vershinin, "[Выступление и ответные слова заместителя Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Вершинина на брифинге СБ ООН по письму Постпреда России S/2014/264 в связи с семилетием принятия резолюции Совета 2202 \(2015\), утвердившей Комплекс мер по выполнению Минских соглашений](#)" ["Statement and Responses by Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergey Vershinin at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Letter from Russia's Permanent Representative S/2014/264, on the Occasion of the Seventh Anniversary of the Adoption of Security Council Resolution 2202 (2015), Which Endorsed the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements"], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 18 February 2022.

²⁵⁶ Polina Khimshiashvili and Anastasia Serova, "[Чем вызвано обострение ситуации вокруг Украины. Мнения экспертов](#)" ["What Has Caused the Escalation around Ukraine? Experts' Views"], RBC, 12 February 2022; Mikhail Akinchenko, "Запад нагнетает истерию вокруг мифического вторжения России на Украину" ["The West Is Whipping Up Hysteria over Russia's Mythical Invasion of Ukraine"], *Время [Time], Первый канал* [First Channel], 15 February 2022.

²⁵⁷ Fyodor Lukyanov, interview by Sergei Mardan, "[Получится ли у России сломать американский мир](#)" ["Will Russia Manage to Break the American World"], *Радио Комсомольская Правда* [Radio Komsomol Truth], 14 February 2022.

²⁵⁸ Ivan Timofeev, "[Почему эксперты не верили в вероятность вооруженного конфликта с Украиной](#)" ["Why Experts Did Not Believe in the Likelihood of an Armed Conflict with Ukraine"], *RIAC*, 2 March 2022.

from 31 January 2022, in which the military scenario already figured as one of three equally probable options for Russian policy, complete with a worked-out logic for a swift military victory over Ukraine. Had the reflection been genuine, it would have had to address this text above all others. And had the self-criticism not been ritualistic, admitting the error should logically have been followed, in one form or another, by a break with the practice of promoting the Kremlin's official narratives. Yet this occurred neither in Timofeev's case nor in that of his colleagues. On the contrary, without changing anything in their method of work, Russian experts continued communicating Ukraine-related Kremlin messages to domestic and international audiences alike.

A similar pattern is visible in Fyodor Lukyanov's remarks. In August 2026, having described himself as initially sceptical about the necessity of the invasion, he concluded that the 'special military operation' made much more sense when viewed as part of a global struggle "without any rules of the game" against the restoration of western dominance, in which Russia's task was to demonstrate its "resilience and strength."²⁵⁹ His apparent self-reflection, however, does not involve revisiting the assumptions underlying his initial assessment or identifying where they proved to be wrong. Instead, the admission of his earlier scepticism serves as a rhetorical device for reframing the invasion, turning that very scepticism into part of a post-hoc rationalisation and legitimisation of Russian foreign policy.

The absence of reflection across decades of expert failures on the topic of Ukraine is evidence of the lack of independence of Russian expert platforms and organisations

The widespread absence of deep reflection across decades of expert failures on the topic of Ukraine is further evidence of the lack of independence of Russian expert platforms and organisations. Independence, after all, is not what an institution says about itself,

²⁵⁹ Glenn Diesen (@GDiesen1), "Fyodor Lukyanov: Russia's Strategy as the World Order Collapses", YouTube, 15 August 2026.

but what happens to its analytical apparatus once reality proves it wrong. The primacy of loyalty to the regime implies that, in essence, for a Russian expert, an error made within the Kremlin's general line is not really an error at all. Hence, the purpose of displaying 'reflection' is to preserve credibility with the western professional community, so that Russian expert platforms continue to be perceived in the west as sources of objective analysis. Interestingly, this feigned 'reflection' appeared precisely among those who had previously been actively engaged with the western expert milieu.²⁶⁰ In the end, what makes Russian experts successful in the Kremlin's eyes is not the accuracy of their analysis, but how credible their propaganda remains to the very audience it was designed to persuade.

What makes Russian experts successful in the Kremlin's eyes is how credible their propaganda remains to the audience it was designed to persuade

5.4.2. LEGITIMISING THE INVASION

By the time of the full-scale invasion, Russian expert circles had long operated on the premise that Ukraine was a non-sovereign, west-controlled state with a political regime hostile to Russia. In this sense, their texts after 2022 offered little new. What was striking, rather, was how quickly they embraced this existing frame and normalised in the media the specific terminology used by the Kremlin and articulated by Putin on the very first day of the invasion.

The Institute of CIS Countries, for example, justified the 'special military operation' as a war with NATO forced upon Russia by the United States and presented Ukrainians as a people "whose

²⁶⁰ Timofeev, "Почему эксперты не верили в вероятность" ["Why Experts Did Not Believe in the Likelihood"]; Alexei Arbatov, "Украинский кризис и стратегическая стабильность" ["The Ukrainian Crisis and Strategic Stability"], *Полис. Политические исследования* [Polis. Political Studies], no. 4 (2022): 10–31.

brains had been washed by propaganda.”²⁶¹ Its experts constantly described the Ukrainian authorities as ‘totalitarian’ and explained Ukraine’s very existence solely by western support rather than the political will of Ukrainian society itself. Ukraine was also frequently referred to as a springboard created by the west for geopolitical confrontation with Russia, while Vladimir Putin was described as “the gatherer of Russian lands.”²⁶² Moreover, developing his earlier thesis that Ukrainian national identity is a heresy,²⁶³ the institute’s staff member Kirill Frolov defined the ‘special military operation’ as a “sacred war for Russian reunification” and called for the liquidation of the Ukrainian state.²⁶⁴

RISS reproduced the same narratives, while placing particular emphasis on producing propaganda materials that discredited Ukraine as a state that had continuously degraded since the collapse of the USSR, was steeped in irrational hatred of Russia, and professed Nazism.²⁶⁵ These materials claimed that Ukrainian identity was an artificial phenomenon held together only by the support of official Ukrainian institutions and could therefore simply be abolished.²⁶⁶ In addition, RISS staff helped Russian propaganda frame the arrests of figures accused of collaborating with Russia as the persecution of politically motivated opposition figures. Oleg Nemensky,

for example, described the arrest of Viktor Medvedchuk, suspected by the Ukrainian authorities of treason, as an act carried out in “the logic of a gang.”²⁶⁷ He also repeatedly lent credibility to SVR disinformation leaks in his public commentaries, at one point affirming that Poland allegedly harboured territorial ambitions towards western Ukraine and wanted to turn Ukraine into “its own colony.”²⁶⁸

The most common means to legitimise Russia's invasion of Ukraine was to interpret it as a defensive war against the west

Perhaps the most common means by which Russian experts legitimised Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was to interpret it as a defensive war against the west. Ivan Timofeev of RIAC, for example, explained that Russia had gone to war because the west had failed to heed Russia’s security concerns.²⁶⁹ Dmitri Trenin also wrote that Russia’s military actions were forced.²⁷⁰ His HSE colleague Vasily Kashin, attributing responsibility for the war in Ukraine to the Biden administration, even welcomed it, believing that severing “neo-colonial relations” with the west was a great boon for Russia.²⁷¹

Another recurring element was the denial of Ukraine’s agency and sovereignty, with experts treating it as a western instrument for inflicting maximum harm on Russia. MGIMO Prof Ivan Safranchuk claimed that the west

²⁶¹ Vladimir Yevseyev, interview by Kirill Kurbatov, “Если бы Россия не начала спецоперацию на Украине, она бы воевала с НАТО в Донбассе” [“If Russia Had Not Started the Special Operation in Ukraine, It Would Be Fighting NATO in Donbas”], *Ukraina.ru*, 9 March 2022.

²⁶² Ivan Petrov, “Восстановление русского мира или историческая миссия Владимира Путина” [“The Restoration of the Russian World, or Vladimir Putin’s Historical Mission”], *Общественная служба новостей* [Public News Service], 11 March 2022.

²⁶³ Frolov, *Русская православная церковь* [The Russian Orthodox Church], 9.

²⁶⁴ Kirill Frolov, “СВО как Священная Война” [“The SVO as a Holy War”], *Institute of CIS Countries*, 1 March 2023; Kirill Frolov, “Донбасс восстал против ‘ереси украинства’. Проект Украина должен быть закрыт” [“Donbas Has Risen against the ‘Heresy of Ukrainianism.’ The Ukraine Project Must Be Closed”], *Institute of CIS Countries*, 22 May 2024.

²⁶⁵ RISS (@RUanalysis), “Проект ‘Украина’. Часть вторая” [“The Ukraine Project, Part Two”], YouTube, 7 April 2022.

²⁶⁶ Oleg Nemensky, interview by Tatiana Bespalova, “Сознательный украинец - это тот, кто ненавидит русских, ненавидит Россию” [“A Conscious Ukrainian Is One Who Hates Russians, Hates Russia”], *REGNUM*, 13 May 2022.

²⁶⁷ “Воскресное время” [“Sunday Time”], *Первый канал* [First Channel], 17 April 2022.

²⁶⁸ Renat Abdullin, “Раскрыты планы Польши на Украину” [“Poland’s Plans for Ukraine Revealed”], *Московский комсомолец* [Moscow Komsomolets], 29 April 2022; Oleg Nemensky, interview by Evgenia Vasilyeva, “Политолог: Польша намерена сделать Украину полуколонией” [“Political Scientist: Poland Intends to Turn Ukraine into a Semi-Colony”], *Pravda.Ru*, 8 August 2022.

²⁶⁹ Ivan Timofeev, interview by Evgenia Volgina, “Умные парни” [“Smart Guys”], *Говорит Москва* [Moscow Speaks], 29 December 2023.

²⁷⁰ Dmitri Trenin, “Стратегическое сдерживание: новые контуры” [“Strategic Deterrence: New Contours”], *Россия в глобальной политике* [Russia in Global Affairs] 22, no. 4 (2024): 74–86.

²⁷¹ Vasily Kashin, interview by Evgenia Volgina, “Умные парни” [“Smart Guys”], *Говорит Москва* [Moscow Speaks], 8 February 2023; Vasily Kashin, interview by Olga Vandyshcheva, “Новая холодная война – это не просто нормально, а очень хорошо” [“The New Cold War Is Not Just Normal, It’s Very Good”], *Business Online*, 9 June 2026.

was using Ukraine as a “geopolitical suicide bomber” meant to die in the confrontation with Russia, while Alexei Gromyko, director of IE RAS, called Ukraine a west-made “anti-Russia” that had, “with its own hands, [...] brought the situation to armed conflict.”²⁷²

Following Putin’s lead, Russian experts very often inscribed the ‘special military operation’ within a much broader time frame, presenting it as an inevitable result of historical trends.

By dissolving the decision to invade Ukraine into a long historical chain of causes, authors absolved Russia of responsibility

By dissolving the decision to invade Ukraine into a long historical chain of causes, authors adopting this interpretation absolved Russia of responsibility. RGGU Prof Tamara Guzenkova, who had spent many years at RISS, cited as such trends the “processes of the destruction of Ukrainian statehood and social degradation that had spun out of control,” as well as an “anti-Russian and Russophobic foreign and domestic policy.”²⁷³

Another device commonly used in the Russian expert milieu to legitimise the invasion of Ukraine was the drawing of false historical parallels with Nazi Germany. A researcher at the Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences at the Russian Academy of Sciences (INION RAS) and MGIMO professor, Filipp Trunov, for instance, wrote that by supporting Ukraine, western countries were nurturing a “strategic monster” that, like Nazi

Germany, could turn its power against them.²⁷⁴ Underlying this thesis, which rests on false historical analogies, is an appeal to Europe not to hinder Russia from destroying Ukraine. In his arbitrary comparisons, Trunov goes so far as to declare, absurdly, that the USSR and Russia are “the true bearers and guardians of democracy.”

Even more elaborate in this respect are the texts of Vladislav Belov, senior research fellow at IE RAS. He draws a false parallel not directly between Nazi Germany and Ukraine, but between German arms manufacturers of the 1930s and 1940s and those of today, presenting both as having served evil.²⁷⁵ In doing so, Belov attempts to project the sense of moral guilt over German companies’ complicity in the Third Reich’s war machine onto their supplies to Ukraine today, which he presents as evidence of Germany’s own incomplete denazification.

Sergey Karaganov applies this device far more bluntly. He literally equates the Ukrainian population with the German population that supported Nazism in the 1930s and treats Russia’s ‘special military operation’ as morally warranted to the same extent as the denazification of Germany was.²⁷⁶ In this way, Karaganov presents the invasion not as an act of aggression against a sovereign state but as a repetition of a previously legitimised military action, thereby excusing violence against

²⁷² “Воскресное время” [“Sunday Time”], *Pervyi Kanal*, 17 April 2022; “В РАН рассказали о превращении Украины в ‘анти-Россию’” [“The Russian Academy of Sciences Explains How Ukraine Turned into ‘Anti-Russia’”], *Lenta.ru*, 25 July 2025, based on comments to RIA Novosti.

²⁷³ Tamara Guzenkova, “От ‘Нероссии’ к ‘Анти-России’: радикальный национализм как фактор украинской политики” [“From ‘Non-Russia’ to ‘Anti-Russia’: Radical Nationalism as a Factor in Ukrainian Politics”], *Свободная мысль* [Free Thought], no. 3 (2022): 31–46; Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko, “Совместная пресс-конференция с Президентом Белоруссии Александром Лукашенко” [“Joint Press Conference with President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko”], President of Russia, 12 April 2022.

²⁷⁴ Filipp Trunov, “Уроки Великой Победы как императивы для формирования справедливого миропорядка” [“The Lessons of the Great Victory as Imperatives for Forming a Just World Order”], *Международная жизнь* [International Affairs], no. 6 (2025).

²⁷⁵ Vladislav Belov, “Ответственность и забвение: крупный капитал Германии между нацизмом и социальной рыночной экономикой” [“Responsibility and Oblivion: German Big Capital between Nazism and the Social Market Economy”], *Научно-аналитический вестник ИЕ РАН* [Scientific and Analytical Bulletin of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences], no. 2 (2025): 7–18.

²⁷⁶ Sergey Karaganov, interview by Alexei Krasovskiy, “Сергей Караганов: Я посодействовал отрезвлению и усилению ядерного сдерживания” [“Sergey Karaganov: I Have Contributed to Sobering Up and Strengthening Nuclear Deterrence”], *Daily Storm*, 27 December 2023; Sergey Karaganov, “Недопустимо сохранение украинской государственности на основе смеси русофобии и чудовищного компрадорства ее элит” [“The Preservation of Ukrainian Statehood on the Basis of a Mixture of Russophobia and the Monstrous Comprador Character of Its Elites Is Unacceptable”], *Российская газета* [Russia’s Newspaper], 1 March 2023.

Ukrainians, forced regime change, and the ideological remaking of Ukraine's population. The very vocabulary Karaganov uses to define Russia's war aims – “the reunification of the historically Russian lands” and “the re-education of people infected with fascism, as the Germans were after 1933” – echoes the language and logic used by Nazi Germany to justify its own expansion.

A separate effort was underway to win over a different constituency – the global south

This entire body of legitimising narratives, however, was addressed chiefly to domestic and western audiences. A separate effort was underway to win over a different constituency altogether – the global south. Instead of the ‘Russia vs Ukraine’ frame, which left little room for interpreting Russia's actions as anything other than a war of conquest, Russian discourse increasingly employed the frame of ‘the west vs the rest of the world’. Within it, Russia's genocidal war against Ukraine was presented as an episode in a supposedly just defensive reaction against the west's global ‘neo-colonial expansion’. Meanwhile, Russian diplomats at international events began presenting Russia as a vanguard force in the

struggle against “waning western hegemony” and “neo-colonialism.”²⁷⁷

Tellingly, whereas on the first day of the invasion Putin mentioned the term “hegemon” only in passing, with an indirect allusion to the west, by his October 2022 speech at the Valdai Club the thesis of a struggle against “western hegemony” had already become central.²⁷⁸

Putin declared at the time that it was the west that had “ignited the war in Ukraine” in order to “preserve its power over the world.”

Russian experts responded immediately to this Kremlin demand to reframe the invasion for international audiences. In September 2022, Sergey Karaganov, prompted by Fyodor Lukyanov, proposed abandoning the terms ‘non-west’ and ‘global south’ in favour of ‘world majority’. As Karaganov later explained, the purpose of introducing this term was to present Russia to international audiences in

²⁷⁷ Maxim Buyakevich, “[Выступление заместителя Постоянного представителя Российской Федерации при ОБСЕ М.В.Будякевича на заседании Постоянного совета ОБСЕ](#)” [“Statement by Maxim Buyakevich, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE, at a Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 26 May 2022; Sergey Lavrov, “[Вступительное слово Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова на встрече с руководителями российских некоммерческих организаций внешнеполитической направленности](#)” [“Opening Remarks by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at a Meeting with the Heads of Russian Non-Profit Organisations Working in Foreign Policy”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 22 July 2022; Alexander Lukashevich, “[Выступление Постоянного представителя Российской Федерации при ОБСЕ А.К.Лукашевича на заседании Постоянного совета ОБСЕ](#)” [“Statement by Alexander Lukashevich, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE, at a Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 22 September 2022; Konstantin Gavrilo, “[Выступление руководителя Делегации Российской Федерации на переговорах в Вене по вопросам военной безопасности и контроля над вооружениями К.Ю.Гаврилова на 1022-м пленарном заседании Форума ОБСЕ по сотрудничеству в области безопасности](#)” [“Statement by Konstantin Gavrilo, Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation to the Vienna Negotiations on Military Security and Arms Control, at the 1022nd Plenary Meeting of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 21 September 2022.

²⁷⁸ Vladimir Putin, “[Обращение Президента Российской Федерации](#)” [“Address by the President of the Russian Federation”], President of Russia, 24 February 2022; Vladimir Putin, “[Заседание Международного дискуссионного клуба ‘Валдай’](#)” [“Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club”], President of Russia, 27 October 2022.

the guise of a liberator of other countries.²⁷⁹ The Russian Foreign Ministry now employs the expression regularly, and Putin first used it in a speech in December 2022.²⁸⁰

5.4.3. CHASING A GRAND BARGAIN WITH THE WEST

As the Russian army's blitzkrieg failed and the conflict turned into a war of attrition, the prospect of a Yalta-style deal with the west receded. Western support for Ukraine turned out to be far more consolidated than the Kremlin had expected. Nor were most of the world's countries on Russia's side: 141 countries supported the UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Besides Russia itself, only its co-aggressor Belarus, along with North Korea, Syria, and Eritrea, voted against it.²⁸¹

Kremlin-adjacent experts directed their efforts at persuading the west that a deal with Moscow would be more advantageous than continued support for Kyiv

Against this backdrop, Kremlin-adjacent experts directed their efforts at persuading the west that a deal with Moscow would be far more advantageous and promising than continued support for Kyiv. A telling example is Andrei Kortunov's essay in *The Economist* published in May 2022.²⁸² In it, he brackets out Russia's armed invasion altogether, substituting for it a "collision between the Russian and the Ukrainian models." To steer this "conflict" towards a non-military mode, Kortunov proposes "a less-than-perfect compromise between the west and Russia." Such a deal, he suggests, would in turn pave the way for rapprochement between the west and China, as well as broader "recalibrations" of international institutions. The absence of a deal with Putin, in Kortunov's telling, would

come at a very high price for the entire world, with a long list of negative consequences: mounting chaos, the collapse of international institutions, an accelerating arms race, and nuclear proliferation.

Meanwhile, on the international stage, the Kremlin increasingly framed the invasion of Ukraine as a struggle against 'western hegemony' and an allegedly unjust world order. Such rhetoric was evidently intended to obscure Russia's responsibility for the invasion, win sympathy in the global south, and pressure the west into striking a deal over Ukraine. By autumn 2023, this had crystallised into the 'Eurasian security architecture' concept that closely echoed the 'new European security architecture' idea from the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. Sergey Lavrov first road-tested this construct in a speech at a conference in Minsk.²⁸³

Its overall design was amorphous and loose, but its references to 'new centres', a 'balance of interests' and the exclusion of 'extra-regional and extra-continental players' indicated that this was another attempt to justify a 'concert of powers' with their own spheres of interest. The key difference lay only in the fact that Russia now legitimised its demand through the narrative of a 'world majority' dissatisfied with western dominance and was clearly seeking to enlist China's support as well.

After Putin's speech at the Russian Foreign Ministry in the summer of 2024, the concept of a 'Eurasian security architecture' became part of the conceptual apparatus of Russian experts. Proponents of the 'Eurasian security architecture' – mostly affiliated with HSE and MGIMO – tried to universalise its basic tenets, presenting the west as an actor objectively exiting the world stage, with new centres of

²⁷⁹ "Zoom-семинар 'Мировое большинство'" ["Zoom Seminar 'World Majority'"], HSE.

²⁸⁰ "Заседание Совета по развитию гражданского общества и правам человека" ["Meeting of the Council for Civil Society Development and Human Rights"], President of Russia, 7 December 2022.

²⁸¹ United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution ES-11/1, A/RES/ES-11/1* (UN GA, 2 March 2022).

²⁸² Andrei Kortunov, "Andrey Kortunov Offers Three Scenarios for the End of the War in Ukraine," *The Economist*, 20 May 2022.

²⁸³ Sergey Lavrov, "Выступление Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова на Международной конференции высокого уровня 'Евразийская безопасность: реальность и перспективы в трансформирующемся мире'" ["Address by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the High-Level International Conference 'Eurasian Security: Realities and Prospects in a Transforming World'"], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 26 October 2023.

influence breathing down its neck.²⁸⁴ At the same time, they acknowledged that hierarchy and anarchy would, in any case, remain structural features of international relations – “the basic problem of injustice caused by states’ differing power capabilities cannot be solved.”²⁸⁵

After Putin's speech at the Russian Foreign Ministry in the summer of 2024, the concept of a 'Eurasian security architecture' became part of the conceptual apparatus

Indeed, the very term ‘architecture’ openly indicates that the world order advocated by the Kremlin’s intellectual proxies has a vertical dimension. The problem, however, is that despite the abundance of texts, Russian experts have never offered a convincing answer to why the Eurasian concert of powers they propose – with Russia and China at its helm – would be more just than the current ‘liberal hegemony’.

Alongside the apologists for the ‘Eurasian security architecture’, there is another group of experts who directly, without unnecessary intellectual flourish, tie Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to its attempt to restore the Yalta system as “genuinely just.”²⁸⁶ Beyond “a high level of security,” they see its main value as “the absence of dominant western-centrism.” The unravelling of this order following the USSR’s collapse is treated as the direct cause of the

subsequent degradation of the international system, and the ‘special military operation’ as an act of restoring lost historical justice.

Even though Russian experts realised that relations between Russia and the west would remain hostile over the long term, there was still an expectation that the volatility of ruling coalitions in western countries might result in adjustments to their foreign policy in a direction favourable to Russia.²⁸⁷ The bet was on the rising popularity and eventual ascent to power of right-wing populists, for whom supporting Ukraine would not be a priority.

Confidence that this calculation was correct was fuelled by Washington’s shift, after Trump’s victory in the 2024 election, towards unilaterally coercing Kyiv into capitulation, and by the new administration’s clearly signalled desire to strike a deal with Moscow at Ukraine’s expense. After the Trump–Putin summit in August 2025, Russian diplomats began using the phrase “the spirit of Anchorage,” signalling that the long-sought Yalta-style deal was at last within reach.

Russian experts radiated delight at this prospect. Alexander Dynkin of IMEMO called the Anchorage summit a “landmark event” and “a nightmare for Zelensky and Brussels.”²⁸⁸ Dmitry Suslov of HSE characterised it as a “historic milestone” and saw in it a sign that “the process of Ukrainian settlement will develop in accordance with the Russian, rather than the European, approach.”²⁸⁹ He predicted that if President Zelensky and Europe did not accept the Anchorage arrangements, Trump would cut off aid to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, leading to their defeat on the battlefield within a few weeks.

Perhaps the greatest sense of triumphalism could be heard in the voice of Timofei Bordachev of HSE and the Valdai Club.

²⁸⁴ Oleg Barabanov, Timofei Bordachev, Fyodor Lukyanov, Andrei Sushentsov, and Ivan Timofeev, [Мир снизу вверх, или Шедевры евразийской архитектуры](#) [The World from the Bottom Up, or Masterpieces of Eurasian Architecture] (Valdai Discussion Club, November 2024); Sergey Karaganov, “От не-Запада к Мировому большинству” [“From the Non-West to the World Majority”], *Россия в глобальной политике* [Russia in Global Affairs] 20, no. 5 (2022): 6–18; Dmitri Trenin, “[Политика и стратегия](#)” [“Politics and Strategy”], *Valdai Discussion Club*, 1 February 2023; Ivan Timofeev, [Архитектура евразийской безопасности: генезис, принципы и возможные направления развития](#) [The Architecture of Eurasian Security: Genesis, Principles, and Possible Directions for Development] (Valdai Discussion Club, December 2025).

²⁸⁵ Oleg Barabanov, Anton Bepalov, Timofei Bordachev, Fyodor Lukyanov, Andrei Sushentsov, and Ivan Timofeev, [Доктор Хаос, или Как перестать бояться и полюбить беспорядок](#) [Doctor Chaos, or How to Stop Fearing and Love Disorder] (Valdai Discussion Club, September 2025), 28.

²⁸⁶ Trunov, “Уроки Великой Победы” [“The Lessons of the Great Victory”].

²⁸⁷ Viktor Zhdanov, “[“Кошмар для Киева”. Украина потеряла в Европе еще одного союзника](#)” [“A Nightmare for Kyiv. Ukraine Has Lost Another Ally in Europe”], *РИА Новости* [RIA News], 25 November 2023.

²⁸⁸ Alexander Dynkin, “[Август в Анкоридже](#)” [“August in Anchorage”], *Interfax*, 17 August 2025.

²⁸⁹ Dmitry Suslov, “[Comments to Tass](#),” *Tass*, 16 August 2025.

He interpreted the subsequent visit by European leaders and Volodymyr Zelensky to the White House immediately after the US–Russia Anchorage summit as the final subordination of Europe to the United States, staged as a theatrical political show in Trump’s style.²⁹⁰ In his view, at this meeting European leaders swore “oaths of loyalty to American interests” and completely abandoned their own. Bordachev enthusiastically interpreted Trump’s phone call to Putin immediately after the meeting as “a demonstration that the US determines the policy of the entire west.”

One of the most recent examples of an attempt to sell the west the idea of a grand bargain with Russia as the only realistic outcome is Andrei Kortunov’s 2026 essay in *Foreign Affairs*.²⁹¹ Ukraine appears in his text not as an international actor, but as the subject of a “long-standing conflict” between Washington and Moscow. Moreover, he implicitly places the blame for the conflict on the west’s “dismissiveness” towards Russian interests. While critical of Russia’s “besieged fortress” posture as strategically short-sighted, he concludes that Russia “is, to the dismay of its critics, holding strong.”

Kortunov’s central message is that Russia “cannot beat the west outright, but it can [...] play for a draw – until, that is, today’s competitive and fragmented order gives way to compromise, de-escalation, and stability.” Addressed to a western readership in the ‘balanced’ register, the argument functions as an invitation to accept that a negotiated deal, largely at the expense of Ukraine, is the wiser course for the west to pursue. Even after relinquishing his leadership roles at RIAC, Kortunov seems to remain useful to the Kremlin, doing what he has long done: operating within the same paradigm and feeding doubts about the west’s own strength.

²⁹⁰ Timofei Bordachev, “Шоу в Белом доме завершило подчинение Европы” [“The White House Show Completed Europe’s Subjugation”], *Взгляд* [Point of View], 19 August 2025.

²⁹¹ Andrei Kortunov, “The Coming Risks to Russian Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, 10 September 2026.

5.4.4. UNDERMINING WESTERN SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

Recognising that one of the key pillars of Ukraine’s capacity to resist the invasion is the massive financial, humanitarian, and logistical support it receives from partner countries, together with supplies of arms and ammunition, the Kremlin has consistently sought to undermine this pillar by spreading outright disinformation. Russian *mezhdunarodniki* are among its most active instruments in this effort. To erode the willingness of western publics and elites to sustain aid to Ukraine, they draw on the widest possible range of arguments – from discrediting Ukraine itself to undisguised, mafia-style nuclear threats.

- **The first strand holds that western aid in fact only harms Ukraine by increasing the human cost of the war.** The argument runs that the longer Ukraine resists, the more people die, and responsibility for this is placed on the countries supplying it with weapons. HSE’s Iryna Zhyrun spoke in precisely this vein when she claimed that western military aid to Ukraine was worsening the suffering of the Ukrainian people.²⁹² MGIMO’s Mark Entin and HSE’s Ekaterina Entina argued that the continued supply of western weapons “in reality shift[s] onto Brussels the responsibility for all the casualties and destruction, as well as for the crisis in world politics and the economy.”²⁹³
- **The second strand maintains that western funds are simply being stolen,** while western politicians turn a blind eye to corruption in Ukraine.²⁹⁴ This is among the most frequently used theses in Russian state propaganda, but among the expert GONGOs examined in this study, it appeared most often in the commentary of staff at

²⁹² TRT World Now (@TRTWorldNow), “Has Western Sanctions United Russians?,” YouTube, 18 March 2022.

²⁹³ Mark Entin and Ekaterina Entina, “Позиционирование Европейского союза в условиях трансформации миропорядка” [“EU’s Positioning amidst the World Order Transformation”], *Проблемы национальной стратегии* [Problems of National Strategy], no. 4 (73) (2022): 84–113.

²⁹⁴ “Песков: на Западе понимают, что часть их помощи разворовывается на Украине” [Peskov: The West Understands That Part of Its Aid Is Being Stolen in Ukraine], *Ведомости* [The Gazette], 5 November 2023.

the Institute of CIS Countries. For instance, its expert Alexander Dudchak described the embezzlement of western aid as having become systemic and the principal source of income for the Ukrainian elite.²⁹⁵

- **The third strand contends that western weapons supplied to Ukraine risk ending up on black markets**, from where they could reach criminal networks and terrorists, making suppliers, as Dmitry Medvedev has claimed, “a sponsor of international terrorism.”²⁹⁶ Alexei Podberezkin, director of MGIMO’s Centre for Military-Political Studies, echoed this view. He argued that the sheer, sustained volume of western arms deliveries makes it inevitable that some will end up in the wrong hands. He pointed in particular to portable air-defence systems, which Ukraine could supply to buyers in quantities previously unobtainable.²⁹⁷

Each strand functions as a rhetorical instrument for making western support appear costly, complicit, or dangerous

- **The fourth and starkest strand holds that continued western support risks escalation with Russia** that could culminate in the use of nuclear weapons. This thesis found its most systematic expression in the writings of Sergey Karaganov. His prescription for a Russian victory over Ukraine, in effect, is to lock western political elites into a choice

The prescription for a Russian victory, in effect, is to lock western political elites into a choice between support for Ukraine and nuclear war

between ending support for Ukraine and nuclear war. To implant this false dichotomy into the west’s strategic calculus, Russia, as Karaganov argues, should “lower the

nuclear threshold,”²⁹⁸ thereby undermining the west’s confidence that Moscow would almost never resort to nuclear weapons. It followed that the Kremlin needed to threaten Europe with nuclear weapons more credibly, to a degree sufficient to make Europeans believe these threats. His central premise was that Europeans are reluctant to enter into a “strategic duel” with Russia and will eventually back down as the stakes rise.²⁹⁹

None of these four strands was offered with any reliable evidentiary basis. Each functions less as an empirical claim than as a rhetorical instrument for making continued western support appear costly, complicit, or dangerous.

5.4.5. EXPORTING RUSSIAN NARRATIVES THROUGH ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP

Russia has long conducted information operations targeting western countries, including through the indirect promotion of its strategic narratives in academic publications.³⁰⁰ Since 2022, a particularly notable development has been the attempt to penetrate western academic discourse with narratives that undermine dominant interpretations of the war and erode public sympathy for Ukraine.

One institution involved in these efforts is HSE in Moscow. It houses several researchers who deploy critical theories developed within western academia, from post-Marxist discourse theory to critical discourse analysis. Such tools are, in principle, diagnostic rather than normative. They show that a given account of events is shaped by a particular discourse without thereby precluding judgement about its accuracy or

²⁹⁵ Ivan Chuprov, “[Давайте еще. Госсекретарь МИД Украины разворовал помощь Запада](#)” [“Let’s Have More. Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry State Secretary Embezzled Western Aid”], *Аргументы и факты* [Arguments and Facts], 3 August 2026.

²⁹⁶ Dmitry Medvedev, “[Оружие, которое есть и которого сразу нет](#)” [“Weapons That Exist and Immediately Don’t”], *Telegram*, 19 July 2022.

²⁹⁷ Alexander Karpov and Alyona Medvedeva, “[“Продаётся по бросовым ценам”: к чему может привести реализация на чёрном рынке поставляемого Украине оружия](#)” [“Sold at Bargain Prices”: What the Sale of Weapons Supplied to Ukraine on the Black Market Could Lead To”], *RT*, 20 July 2022.

²⁹⁸ Karaganov, interview, “Сепрей Караганов: Я поспособствовал” [“Sergey Karaganov: I Have Contributed”].

²⁹⁹ Sergey Karaganov, “[Функции ядерного сдерживания](#)” [“Functions of Nuclear Deterrence”], *Международная жизнь* [International Affairs] (June 2024), 16–27.

³⁰⁰ Gajos and Wyciszewicz, *Narracje polityczne* [Political narratives], 219–222.

fairness. In the hands of the authors examined below, however, this diagnostic apparatus is quietly repurposed as a normative one.

Russian researchers' use of these theories is driven by practical considerations. First, to erode international sympathy for Ukraine. Second, to normalise Russia's invasion by describing the war against Ukraine as a clash of 'narratives' or 'identities'. Third, to cast doubt on established interpretations of Russia's imperial role both in the past and present. The key methodological question, therefore, is whether these analytical tools are applied symmetrically to the relevant actors and evidence. The cases discussed below suggest that they are not.

These patterns are clearly visible, for example, in the work of HSE lecturer Iryna Zhyrun. Her 2023 article in the journal *Russian Politics* is built around the thesis that "the discourse and polic[i]es of Ukraine's ruling elites" were among the causes of the interstate conflict, turning internal disagreements into a matter of existential threat to the state and allegedly silencing those Ukrainians who opposed Euro-Atlantic integration.³⁰¹ Zhyrun likewise shifts responsibility onto Ukraine for the absence of negotiations. As she argues, "[p]ersistent victimization, the securitization of identity, and the construction of Russia as a radical, irrational, and imperial Other" limited Kyiv's capacity for dialogue, while Ukraine's unwillingness to accept neutrality is explained by the self-interested desire of the pro-NATO elite to prolong the conflict in order to retain power.³⁰² For Ukraine "to [...] regain a semblance of independence and agency in international relations," Zhyrun tentatively suggests that Kyiv revise its definition of national identity in public discourse so as to "allow for amicable relations with both the US and Russia." Zhyrun seems to envision the ultimate resolution of the conflict as a "settlement on spheres of influence between Russia and the US" – one in which Ukraine appears not as a party negotiating its own

security but as the object of an agreement between Moscow and Washington.³⁰³

As Zhyrun herself writes, the 2023 article contains the "key research results" of her dissertation, effectively presenting it as a condensed version of the dissertation's core findings.³⁰⁴ The defence itself, originally planned for Moscow, eventually took place at the University of Bonn in November 2024.³⁰⁵

Nevertheless, moving the dissertation defence to Bonn apparently did not produce any substantive break from the patterns already established. Nowhere in the entire text does Zhyrun, in her own voice, use a formulation of the type 'Russia annexed Crimea'. She systematically uses constructions that erase the agency of the Russian side, whereas Ukrainian political actors are given full agency for their own actions. Describing the very same events, Zhyrun moves from the passive "Ukraine lost control over the territory of Crimea and parts of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions" to full active voice for Ukraine's response: "[Ukraine's] army started engagement into military operation in the Eastern Ukraine, which the Ukrainian government proclaimed an 'Anti-Terrorist Operation'."³⁰⁶ She also describes the events since 2022 with the symmetrising term "the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict" rather than 'invasion' or 'aggression'.³⁰⁷

In discussing whether Russian policy towards Ukrainian identity can be considered "colonial," Zhyrun lays out in detail the well-established tradition within western Ukrainian studies that treats Ukraine as a postcolonial country and a victim of Moscow's imperial policy.³⁰⁸ Yet she immediately contrasts this tradition with a single counter-reference – an article by the Russian author Aleksandr Degtyarev,

³⁰¹Iryna Zhyrun, "Ukrainian Discourses on NATO: Securitization, Otherness, and Their Effects on Russo-Ukrainian Relations," *Russian Politics* 8, no. 2 (2023): 165–180.

³⁰²Iryna Zhyrun, "Ukrainian Discourses on NATO": 179–180.

³⁰³Iryna Zhyrun, "Ukrainian Discourses on NATO": 180.

³⁰⁴Iryna Zhyrun, *Ukraine – NATO Identity Politics 1997–2018: Representations of National Identity on the Question of Accession* (PhD diss., University of Bonn, 26 August 2025), iii.

³⁰⁵Iryna Zhyrun, *Ukraine – NATO Identity Politics 1997–2018*, ii–iii.

³⁰⁶Iryna Zhyrun, *Ukraine – NATO Identity Politics 1997–2018*, 156.

³⁰⁷Iryna Zhyrun, *Ukraine – NATO Identity Politics 1997–2018*, 2, 105, 212, 219.

³⁰⁸Iryna Zhyrun, *Ukraine – NATO Identity Politics 1997–2018*, 132.

published in 2016 in a regional journal of Belgorod State University and written in an openly ideological rather than academic style, in which Ukrainian identity is described as built on “Russophobia” and “xenophobia.”³⁰⁹ On the basis of this manifestly unequal comparison, Zhyrun concludes that “any analysis of identity politics from a post-colonial perspective largely depends on a researchers’ [sic] point of view and is not based on objective scientific criteria.”³¹⁰ The problem here is not that Zhyrun considers a minority view. It is that she uses a single source of markedly lower evidentiary and scholarly weight to cast doubt on a much broader body of scholarship.

Throughout the dissertation, Iryna Zhyrun tends to go beyond the study’s methodological scope, moving from describing Ukrainian elite discourse to making her own politically charged claims about Ukraine’s agency and prospects. As in her 2023 article, she adheres to the thesis of Ukraine’s lack of agency, arguing that “the place Ukraine will occupy in European security architecture will be decided by the principal actors of European security, such as Russia and the U.S., in a new changing global environment.”³¹¹ Zhyrun categorically asserts that “[t]he major problem for Ukraine is that a close-knit partnership with NATO did not yield security guarantees for Ukraine, while Ukraine provided its infrastructure and supplied manpower to fight the conflict it cannot win on its own.”³¹² This claim falls well beyond the evidentiary base of a discourse analysis, as Zhyrun offers her own assessment of Ukraine’s military capacity and casts the country’s national self-defence as a kind of outsourcing of combat operations in others’ interests, rather than as the defence of its own territory and population against Russian aggression.

A related, though distinct, pattern appears within the discourse analysis itself. Zhyrun removes from the analytical frame the entire class of threats emanating from Russia to Ukraine’s security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. In her texts, for example, no distinction is drawn between political opposition, on the one hand, and Russian-backed separatist and subversive structures, on the other. As a result, Ukraine, in her account, appears to the reader essentially as a political regime sliding towards ever more

Ukraine appears as a regime sliding towards authoritarian governance, rather than as a country defending itself against an existential threat

authoritarian forms of governance, rather than as a country defending itself against a real existential threat posed by Russia.

Elsewhere, Zhyrun suggests, without offering any legal or evidentiary support, that Ukraine’s 2019 constitutional amendments on NATO membership could create a genuine threat of criminal prosecution for anti-NATO speech.³¹³ In fact, no such prosecutions occurred either before or after the amendments took effect. For instance, the pro-Russian Opposition Bloc and its successor, Opposition Platform – For Life (OPFL), continued to hold anti-NATO positions openly throughout.

Thus, what emerges from Zhyrun’s dissertation is an entire series of analytical choices, each of which diminishes Russia’s responsibility while shifting blame towards Ukraine. If these were random or unintentional errors, one would expect them to be distributed in both directions. But in Zhyrun’s dissertation they are skewed consistently in the same direction. Such systematic one-sidedness is difficult to reconcile with the model of conscientious but careless scholarship and is more consistent with a text structured around a predetermined conclusion.

Outside her academic writing, Iryna Zhyrun is considerably more candid. Speaking to

³⁰⁹ Alexander Degtyarev, “Национальная идентичность и перспективы украинской государственности” [“National Identity and the Prospects of Ukrainian Statehood”], *Научные ведомости Белгородского государственного университета. Серия: Философия. Социология. Право* [Scientific Bulletin of Belgorod State University. Series: Philosophy. Sociology. Law], no. 24 (245), issue 38 (2016): 71–76.

³¹⁰ Iryna Zhyrun, *Ukraine – NATO Identity Politics 1997–2018*, 132.

³¹¹ Iryna Zhyrun, *Ukraine – NATO Identity Politics 1997–2018*, 99.

³¹² Iryna Zhyrun, *Ukraine – NATO Identity Politics 1997–2018*, 99.

³¹³ Iryna Zhyrun, *Ukraine – NATO Identity Politics 1997–2018*, 221.

Türkiye's *TRT World* on two occasions shortly after the invasion began, she described Russia's actions not as an act of aggression but as a pre-emptive act of self-defence, stating that the invasion "was actually the last resort..., an attack that would serve to protect Russia, not to suffer from the attack first."³¹⁴ Zhyrun equated western arms shipments to Ukraine with Russia's own military involvement, describing both as "external intervention to Ukraine from both sides."³¹⁵ Moreover, she suggested that western support to Ukraine "mak[es] the suffering of the Ukrainian people worse."³¹⁶ Echoing Russian state messaging, Zhyrun described the Russian army as refraining from storming Ukrainian cities out of humanitarian considerations.³¹⁷ These statements make it difficult to treat her academic formulations as isolated or merely contestable instances of critical discourse analysis; rather, they point to a consistent pro-Russian agenda.

The same pattern – creating false symmetry between aggressor and victim, and selectively applying critical theory – can be found in the writings of HSE researcher Olga Baysha, who relies extensively on the post-Marxist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In her texts, the annexation of Crimea is consistently described in euphemistic and agency-obscuring terms, such as "Russia took control of Crimea as a response to the overturning of power in Kyiv."³¹⁸ The word 'annexation' itself is used only when quoting other sources, never in Baysha's own voice.³¹⁹ Ukraine's Azov battalion, by contrast, is characterised with no hedging whatsoever as "widely known for its association with Nazi ideology and the use of Nazi symbols, as well as for allegations of war crimes."³²⁰ This is presented as an unassailable fact,

sourced to *The Grayzone*, a far-left American outlet widely criticised by fellow journalists for promoting conspiracy theories and pro-Kremlin narratives.³²¹ Baysha, for her part, makes a similarly conspiratorial claim when she flatly asserts, without any qualification, that "the United States had been deeply involved in staging the Euromaidan coup d'état."³²²

Analogous distortions appear where Baysha turns to assessing the domestic political decisions of a country at war. Like Iryna Zhyrun, she draws no distinction between political opposition and forces deliberately working towards the destruction of Ukrainian statehood, insisting that oppositional voices have been "removed from the field of political representation within Ukraine."³²³ Baysha approvingly examines five anti-Maidan public figures whose statements, in her own characterisation, "help to destabilize the post-Maidan hegemonic discourse endorsed by Zelensky."³²⁴ In the same vein, she asserts that Ukraine's 2022 media law violates the Constitution and establishes censorship, relying solely on an opinion piece by Ukrainian journalist Serhiy Guz and presenting his evaluative judgement as established fact.³²⁵

More broadly, Baysha systematically applies peacetime standards of democracy to a country subjected to armed aggression. And while she acknowledges in passing that any war requires the mobilisation of public opinion and the creation of a united front against the enemy, Baysha ignores the fact that Russian military intervention began with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and continues to this day. This omission allows her to accuse the Ukrainian authorities of "authoritarian populism."³²⁶

Another recurring pattern in Baysha's texts consists of warnings that a "regional war" risks escalating into a nuclear one.³²⁷ This is precisely the same rhetorical device by which Russian state propaganda has, throughout

³¹⁴ TRT World Now (@TRTWorldNow), "[Has Western Sanctions United Russians?](#)" YouTube, 18 March 2022.

³¹⁵ TRT World Now (@TRTWorldNow), "[Russian Currency Crashes Nearly 30% as Markets Open on Monday](#)," YouTube, 28 February 2022.

³¹⁶ TRT World Now (@TRTWorldNow), "Have Western Sanctions United Russia?"

³¹⁷ TRT World Now (@TRTWorldNow), "[Russian Currency Crashes Nearly 30% as Markets Open on Monday](#)," YouTube, 28 February 2022.

³¹⁸ Olga Baysha, *War, Peace, and Populist Discourse in Ukraine* (Routledge, 2023), 22.

³¹⁹ Olga Baysha, *Дискурсивный разлом социального поля: Уроки Евромайдана* [The Discursive Rupture of the Social Field: Lessons from Euromaidan] (HSE Publishing House, 2021), 99.

³²⁰ Baysha, *War, Peace, and Populist Discourse*, 90.

³²¹ "[US Media Outlet with Ties to RT Uses AI-Generated Sources in Article on Navalny's 'Fake Poisoning'](#)," The Insider, 14 March 2023.

³²² Baysha, *War, Peace, and Populist Discourse*, 23.

³²³ Baysha, *War, Peace, and Populist Discourse*, 9.

³²⁴ Baysha, *War, Peace, and Populist Discourse*, 73.

³²⁵ Baysha, *War, Peace, and Populist Discourse*, 52.

³²⁶ Baysha, *War, Peace, and Populist Discourse*, 49.

³²⁷ Baysha, *War, Peace, and Populist Discourse*, 7.

the war, sought to dissuade the west from supporting Ukraine and to steer it towards a division of spheres of influence in the Yalta spirit.

All these examples converge on a single picture if one turns to Baysha's own interview from 2024, in which she appears not as an impartial researcher but as someone actively advancing Russia's side in the information war.³²⁸ She acknowledges that critical theories are "capable of destroying everything in the world... just as nuclear weapons are" and appeal to her because they help dismantle western "common sense" from within.

She explains exactly how this can be done with respect to the Russia–Ukraine war using the example of Hamas. Studying its experience, Baysha found that Hamas's media structures deliberately address students in those departments of American universities where critical theories are taught, in the very language of those theories, thereby normalising an image of the State of Israel as an unjust formation. Having laid out the 'ABCs' of such an information campaign – define a strategy, present yourself as the victim, identify target audiences, and develop tactics for each of them – Baysha extends this same method to the case of the Russia–Ukraine war, applying it to "our state narrative." Her target audience is the western left-wing intellectual milieu, "infected with the bacillus of critical theories."

This moves Baysha's position beyond biased scholarship into the realm of a deliberate communications strategy to be pursued, in her own words, "from the standpoint of our national interests." Which interests she has in mind becomes clear enough elsewhere in the same interview: "I have no doubt that Ukraine can be defeated by military means."

³²⁸ Olga Baysha, interview by Fyodor Lukyanov, "[Mirovoy Fakultet](#)" ["World Faculty"], podcast, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 10 May 2024.

6. RISKS

It is worth bearing in mind that Russia has not, for a single day in its history, been a consolidated liberal democracy. Unlike European countries, Russia has a long tradition – with roots reaching back to the Soviet era – of deep penetration by the security services into the fabric of society.³²⁹ This is all the more true of academic and policy research institutions, which often interact with foreign counterparts and are consequently kept under close watch.³³⁰ Against this background, a limited understanding of the Russian expert milieu can carry serious risks. Several of these are worth discussing separately.

6.1. MISTAKING RHETORICAL DISTANCE FOR MODERATION

Western observers studying the Russian expert community sometimes mistake tactical disagreements among Russian experts for strategic ones. This error most often occurs when analysis is built around a framework – such as the Bourdieu-inspired notion of an actor's 'distance from state values' – that

Western observers mistake tactical disagreements among Russian experts for strategic ones

assesses how far an expert's stance keeps from the state's official positions.³³¹ The problem is that, in practice, this framework tends to be operationalised through observable rhetoric and public positioning, which may easily be conflated with strategic disagreement, even though the underlying theoretical model also gestures towards institutional and cognitive proximity that are harder to detect directly.

³²⁹ Sanshiro Hosaka, "The Elephant in the Lecture Hall: Russian Intelligence and Western Academia," *Studies in Higher Education* (2025): 1–19, doi: 10.1080/03075079.2025.2556211.

³³⁰ Olga Bertelsen, "Aspects of Russian Active Measures Targeting Western Academia," in *Russian Disinformation and Western Scholarship: Bias and Prejudice in Journalistic, Expert, and Academic Analyses of East European, Russian and Eurasian Affairs*, ed. Taras Kuzio (ibidem-Verlag, 2023), 17–18.

³³¹ Alexander Graef, "The Limits of Critique: Responses to the War against Ukraine from the Russian Foreign Policy Expert Community," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26 (2023): 763.

It is precisely this conflation that may lead researchers, for example, to characterise RIAC as a “relatively independent” or “moderate” institutional pole allegedly striving “to preserve an objective view” despite state funding.³³² One such account even describes its Academic Director Andrei Kortunov’s position on the war in Ukraine as having “come close to contradicting the official narrative.”³³³ This interpretation holds only if one overlooks that he himself had long promoted the same narratives, merely in more tactically measured terms.

On closer inspection, however, it turns out that RIAC systematically advances a specific Kremlin geopolitical agenda. Neither Kortunov nor RIAC’s leadership more broadly disputes any of the basic categories on which Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine is built. Their disagreement with other voices, such as Sergey Karaganov or Konstantin Zatulin,

The Kremlin does not trust its own experts and diplomats enough to let them influence its strategic calculations

concerns only the means of achieving the same Kremlin strategic goals, not the goals themselves.

One may argue that Andrei Kortunov’s apparent moderation could be an attempt to influence the Kremlin by speaking its language. But the Kremlin does not trust its own experts and diplomats enough to let them influence its strategic calculations. Instead, it uses them to project its narratives and expand its influence abroad. This can hardly be unknown to Kortunov himself, given his institutional position and decades of experience within this system.

The characterisation of Andrei Kortunov as having “come close to contradicting the

official narrative” rests entirely on texts in fact addressed to a western audience. His messaging for a Russian domestic audience tells a markedly different story. In an interview published in April 2022 by *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the official newspaper of Russia’s Ministry of Defence, Kortunov described Ukraine’s armed forces as reinforced by “paramilitary neo-Nazi formations.”³³⁴ Asked how to counter “fakes about Russia” and the “Russophobia reigning in the west,” he called for improving the quality of “information work with various target audiences in the west.” Even the west’s perception of Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression he attributes, with evident regret, to “powerful information influence.”

Hence, the risk here is that the label “moderate expert” or “moderate strategist” by definition increases trust in that expert’s words, even where there may be no serious substantive grounds for it. Once such mistaken characterisations take hold, they can become an entrenched frame of perception, with negative practical consequences.

6.2. GIVING RUSSIAN NARRATIVES INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY

Engaging with state-affiliated Russian organisations in familiar academic formats – joint publications, conferences, and mobility programmes – can gradually normalise the perception of these institutions as ordinary

Engaging with state-affiliated Russian organisations can normalise the perception of these institutions as partners

dialogue partners, while at the same time legitimising the propaganda narratives they transmit under the guise of academic cooperation.

Since the mid-2000s, a points-based system for publication activity has operated in Poland, used not only to evaluate individual

³³² Pallin and Oxenstierna, *Russian Think Tanks and Soft Power*, 23; Tatiana Romanova, “The Dynamics of State and Societal Actors in Russia’s Policy on the EU,” in *The Routledge Handbook of EU-Russia Relations*, ed. Tatiana Romanova and Maxine David (Routledge, 2022), 26–36; Pavel Luzin and Evgeny Roshchin, *Russia’s Strategy and Military Thinking: Evolving Discourse by 2025* (Center for European Policy Analysis, April 2025).

³³³ Graef, “The Limits of Critique,” 770.

³³⁴ Andrei Kortunov, interviewed by Alexander Frolov, “Запад упорно стремится к ослаблению России” [“The West Is Persistently Seeking to Weaken Russia”], *Красная звезда* [Red Star], 13 April 2022, p. 9.

faculty performance but also to influence the allocation of funding among universities. RISS took advantage of this incentive to build institutional contacts with Polish academia, especially with those segments most receptive to Moscow's foreign-policy argumentation. In 2015, using RISS resources, a collection of texts by Polish experts was translated into Russian, published, and presented in Warsaw.³³⁵ In the preface, anti-Russian sentiment in Poland was attributed to "persistent prejudices."³³⁶ The editors also argued that, without taking into account the interests of Russia – which allegedly holds significant 'trump cards' – the key problems of international relations remain practically unsolvable. They warned that the expert community should recognise the danger of an approach that "stokes negative stereotypes, fosters mutual grievances, justifies a course of escalating distrust, and whips up anti-Russian phobias in [Polish] society." Such conduct, in their words, often manifests as "hysterical and affective reactions" by individual Polish politicians and media.

Here, the factual asymmetry in the aggressiveness of the two sides' behaviour on the international stage dissolves into talk of 'mutual grievances' and shared responsibility for the tension. Poland's legitimate concerns, meanwhile, are irrationalised through labels such as 'phobias' and 'prejudices'. The episode illustrates how easily joint academic publication can become a vehicle for legitimising Russia's narratives.

6.3. LENDING ACADEMIC AUTHORITY TO UNQUALIFIED VOICES

The difference between a contested academic viewpoint and propaganda is determined by the presence of a verifiable methodology, transparency of sources, and a match between the speaker's qualifications and the subject of their talk. When all three criteria are absent at once, a guest professor's lecture, delivered without the corresponding expertise, can become an instrument of propaganda for which the university simply provides the platform.

A guest lecture, delivered without the corresponding expertise, can become an instrument of propaganda for which the university provides a platform

A telling example of this risk being realised in practice can be found in the lectures held under the Visiting Experts Programme of the Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies.³³⁷ In the autumn of 2014, after Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, Russian Prof Oksana Gaman-Golutvina, of MGIMO and HSE, was invited to lecture on Russian–Ukrainian relations. The programme's director, Anna Vassilieva, introduced her as "a leading specialist in the Russian Federation on topics such as political elites and Ukraine, the Ukrainian crisis today, and Russian–Ukrainian relations."³³⁸

However, neither in October 2014 nor today does the available list of Prof Gaman-Golutvina's publications contain a single work devoted to contemporary Ukraine.³³⁹ It is therefore unsurprising that, instead of a lecture, she delivered a substantial helping

³³⁵ "Эксперты РИСИ приняли участие в сессии Лаборатории по изучению России и постсоветских государств Варшавского университета" ["RISS Experts Took Part in a Session of the Laboratory for the Study of Russia and Post-Soviet States at the University of Warsaw"], *RISS*, 12 June 2015.

³³⁶ Stanisław Bielań, Dmitry Karnaukhov, et al. (eds), *Российско-польские отношения в зеркале геополитических концепций* [Russian-Polish Relations in the Mirror of Geopolitical Concepts] (RISS, 2015), 5–7.

³³⁷ Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, "Visiting Experts Program," Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies, accessed 27 July 2026.

³³⁸ Graduate Initiative in Russian Studies, MIIS at Monterey (@graduateinitiativeinrussia8005), "Dr. Oksana Gaman Golutvina, 28 October 2014," YouTube, 22 December 2014.

³³⁹ HSE, "Гаман-Голутвина Оксана Викторовна" ["Oksana Gaman-Golutvina"], faculty profile, accessed 27 July 2026; "Гаман-Голутвина Оксана Викторовна: список публикаций" ["Oksana Gaman-Golutvina: List of Publications"], eLibrary.ru, accessed 27 July 2026.

of empirically unfounded claims and Russian propaganda narratives. Though some students in the audience immediately noticed them, relying on the vigilance of individual students is hardly a sound safeguard. She told students that Russia was more democratic than Ukraine, that “Novorossiia is primordially Russian land,” that Ukraine was close to a failed state, and that signing the Association Agreement with the EU would spell catastrophe for the Ukrainian economy. She equated Ukrainian nationalism with German Nazism and did everything possible to justify the annexation of Crimea.³⁴⁰ Gaman-Golutvina categorically denied the participation of Russian army soldiers and officers in combat operations against Ukraine, even though reports of them being taken prisoner had been coming in since at least August 2014.³⁴¹

Nor did she spare well-documented historical facts. She flatly rejected, for example, the discrimination against Ukrainians in the Russian Empire and the USSR, and claimed that “when the Russian Empire wrested the territories of the former Crimean Khanate from the Ottoman Empire [...] these were essentially Russian-speaking lands,” even though Russian historians themselves note that both before the Russian Empire’s conquest of Crimea and for a very long time afterwards, the peninsula’s territory was not Russian-speaking.³⁴²

Prof Oksana Gaman-Golutvina’s lecture may well have given students a vivid picture of the neo-imperial stereotypes about Ukraine dominant in Russia. It is, however, less clear whether inviting her all the way from Moscow was truly necessary to make that point. After all, her pronounced sympathy for Russia’s imperial past could easily have been discerned from texts she had already published.³⁴³

³⁴⁰ Graduate Initiative (@graduateinitiativeinrussia8005), “[Dr. Oksana Gaman Golutvina](#)”; Graduate Initiative in Russian Studies, MIIS at Monterey (@graduateinitiativeinrussia8005), “[Dr. Oksana Gaman Golutvina 29 October 2014](#),” YouTube, 23 December 2014.

³⁴¹ “[Captured Russian Troops ‘in Ukraine by Accident’](#),” BBC News, 26 August 2014.

³⁴² Vladimir Kabuzan, *Украинцы в мире: динамика численности населения. 20-е годы XVIII века – 1989 год* [Ukrainians in the World: Population Dynamics, the 1720s–1989] (Nauka, 2006), 132–133.

³⁴³ Oksana Gaman-Golutvina, “Элиты и империи” [“Elites and Empires”], *Вестник аналитики* [Bulletin of Analytics], no. 2 (2008): 15–20.

6.4. OVERLOOKING PROPAGANDA CLOAKED AS LEGITIMATE SCHOLARSHIP

The cases discussed above in section 5.4.5 illustrate the risk of granting a pro-Russian position the appearance of scholarly legitimacy: the very apparatus of western humanities scholarship can be used as a shell for Russian narratives. Such texts can gain access to respectable journals, publishing houses, and course curricula – thereby creating the impression among western audiences that a pro-Russian interpretation represents one of several defensible research positions rather than a biased point of view.

The very apparatus of western humanities scholarship can be used as a shell for Russian narratives

The main problem here is that academia’s standard protective mechanisms – peer review and requirements of theoretical rigour – do not seem well equipped to detect this type of risk. Publishers, academic journals, and dissertation committees may give a green light to pseudo-scholarly manuscripts that contain Russian propaganda, since such texts can satisfy formal requirements. The bias could be identified through more refined tools for verifying the quality of texts, including analysing the selectivity of sources and systematic omissions, examining patterns of grammatical agency, and checking for consistency between an academic text’s formulations and the same author’s more candid public statements on the same specific claims.

6.5. DISTORTING EXPERT ANALYSIS THROUGH PERCEIVED ACCESS TO INSIDERS

Unlike Russia, western democracies are characterised by far more intensive communication between politicians and experts, meaning that the latter have real access to their countries’ political leaders and are genuinely capable of influencing the decision-making process. Compounding this asymmetry, the western culture of inclusive dialogue and commitment to free speech

leaves room in public discourse even for the most dubious opinions. For Russian leaders steeped in the thinking of the security services, both of these features are viewed as entry points that can be deliberately exploited. The main goal here is reflexive control – that is, changing the perceptions of western decision-makers on matters important to the Kremlin. As Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept put it, “foreign representatives and civil-society institutions constructively disposed towards Russia, along with political scientists and members of the expert and academic community,” are merely instruments for achieving such control.³⁴⁴

The process of foreign-policy decision-making in the Kremlin is traditionally shrouded in secrecy, which creates among outside observers a persistent demand for insider information about the real mechanics of how the Russian political system functions. Especially vulnerable here are those western specialists whose public status and professional careers depend directly on access to Russian sources.

The line between real insider knowledge and disinformation is impossible to draw with confidence

The problem here is that the line between real insider knowledge and disinformation is impossible to draw with confidence, and, consequently, there is practically no way to verify the information received. The closeness of a Russian ‘insider’ to the Kremlin creates, in the western expert, the illusion of exclusive access to the holy of holies of Russian politics and the sense that they know how things really work. This sense lowers critical vigilance and makes them vulnerable to targeted influence. Informal contacts between experts thus become a channel through which the Kremlin can deliberately ‘feed’ western audiences the interpretations, narratives, and versions of events it needs them to have.

Those who study the Russian expert milieu sometimes tend to accept as given that

Russian pro-government experts may possess exclusive access to insider information about political decision-making in the Kremlin. Anton Barbashin and Alexander Graef, for example, write that platforms such as SVOP, the Valdai Club, and RIAC give western readers access to “(insider) information about the Kremlin’s political kitchen.”³⁴⁵ Yet, as shown above in section 2.4, Russian experts themselves lack any substantive role in devising foreign policy. Continuing the kitchen metaphor, it would be more accurate to say that Russian experts can fetch the ingredients, take part in preparing the food, and serve the finished dishes, but they have no say in drawing up the menu. Proximity to power does not amount to access to its inner workings. In any case, the opposite should be proved, not simply assumed.

CONCLUSION

At the time of the USSR’s collapse, Russia had no institutionalised system of scholarship on contemporary Ukraine. Despite the liberalisation of state control over educational institutions, efforts to develop such scholarship were hindered by chronic underfunding of the humanities and an exodus of personnel. Interest in Ukraine began to grow at the beginning of the 2000s, driven by the emergence of financial resources within academia and elements of autonomy. However, this coincided with growing Maidanophobia among the Russian authorities and the gradual restoration of state control over education. Russia’s annexation of Crimea gave new impetus to the ideologisation of Ukrainian studies, while the 2022 invasion reinforced this trend and accelerated the field’s decline. The development of Ukrainian studies was also constrained by the traditional prestige attached to research on the ‘great powers’ in Russia. Ukraine, like the post-Soviet space more generally, never belonged to this category. Thus, the deficit of expertise on Ukraine that emerged in Russia after 1991 was never fully overcome. Although the 1990s and 2000s saw some attempts to build an institutional base for such expertise, that base began to erode even before 2014 and

³⁴⁴ President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 229, “Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации” [“The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”], 31 March 2023, §§43–44.

³⁴⁵ Barbashin and Graef, *Thinking Foreign Policy in Russia*, 38.

had virtually disappeared by 2022. In fact, an intellectually independent and autonomous body of expertise on Ukraine never took shape in Russia, not least because the major institutions involved in studying Ukraine were concentrated in Moscow and closely tied to the Russian state.

On the whole, Russian experts possess only limited specialised competencies for studying contemporary Ukraine. Yaroslav Hrytsak's observation about the vanishingly low level of Ukrainian-language proficiency is well founded. This stands in stark contrast to the study of Ukraine at western think tanks and universities. In Poland, for example, a high level of language proficiency is generally regarded as a prerequisite for entering the field.

Foreign-policy expertise in Russia is conceptualised primarily as a service to the state rather than as an independent professional activity. This understanding forms part of a broader neo-imperial professional ethos. Its other defining features include placing greater weight on loyalty and usefulness to the Kremlin's foreign-policy goals than on methodological rigour. This is precisely why reflection among Russian experts on their own mistaken forecasts, scenarios, and judgements has been minimal. Where some errors are acknowledged, this is done only insofar as it serves the more effective pursuit of Russian foreign-policy goals aimed at destroying the Ukrainian state.

The primary task of Russian experts lies in justifying the political line already set and explaining decisions already taken

This report has found no grounds for concluding that Russian experts are directly or indirectly involved in devising foreign policy on Ukraine. Operating within a Chekist political mindset, the Kremlin is unlikely to regard them as sufficiently trustworthy to allow their views to shape strategic decision-making. Instead, the Russian authorities readily make use of their services at the tactical level. The primary task of Russian experts lies in creatively justifying the political line already set by the Kremlin and intelligently explaining decisions already taken, rather than in formulating policy or influencing decision-making.

Archival evidence indicates that the powerful impulse behind Russia's neo-imperial course towards Ukraine found early institutional expression within the Russian MFA, MoD and GRU from the very first days of post-Soviet Russia's existence. Given how Yeltsin-era decision-making worked, this could hardly have proceeded without at least his tacit approval. Russian experts began servicing this neo-imperial impulse intellectually from the very same moment, translating it into the language of analysis and justification both domestically and abroad. Russian *mezhdunarodniki* can therefore be most accurately described as conduits of Russian influence, or diplomats in civilian clothes.

Within Russian expert circles, Ukraine has consistently been perceived not as a country in its own right but chiefly as territory over which the Russian state needed help asserting control, with the west cast as the principal geopolitical adversary standing in the way. Expert debate in Russia on Ukraine has typically revolved around a single underlying issue: not whether Ukraine should be drawn back into Moscow's orbit of influence but how to do so most effectively. As this analysis has shown, the solutions proposed by Russian experts clustered around three main approaches: (1) revanchist neo-imperialism, (2) pragmatic neo-imperialism, and (3) a Yalta-style bargain with the west.

Russian expert GONGOs perform three key Ukraine-related functions for the Kremlin. All three were present, in varying combinations, across the organisations examined here, although some showed substantial imbalances that suggest a degree of functional specialisation.

- **Ukraine-oriented:** information warfare and direct political interference aimed at undermining Ukrainian sovereignty. RISS and the Institute of CIS Countries were most strongly associated with this function. RISS appears to have long been dominated by a view of domestic and foreign policy as a battle between competing narratives in a total information war and therefore focused on producing outright disinformation and propaganda about Ukraine.

The same features were evident at the Institute of CIS Countries, but its activities were more directly aimed at destabilising Ukraine. It sought to become a rallying point for pro-Russian organisations and political forces within Ukraine under the guise of defending ‘compatriots’, Russian speakers, and the Russian Orthodox Church. Against the broader backdrop of the field’s low research standards, the Institute of CIS Countries was one of the few organisations to show any signs of systematic engagement with contemporary Ukraine. This engagement, however, was harnessed entirely to undermining Ukrainian sovereignty rather than understanding the country.

- **West-oriented:** reshaping western public debate in ways favourable to the Kremlin. The main effort here was directed at promoting the thesis that Ukraine belongs within Russia’s sphere of influence. MGIMO, IMEMO, and RIAC were most engaged in this function. In various forms, their activities

At present, Russian experts are focused on discrediting the very idea of western assistance to repel Russian military aggression

exported the idea of a Yalta-style deal into the intellectual and expert space of western countries. At present, Russian experts are focused on discrediting the very idea of western assistance to repel Russian military aggression. A separate, related effort is aimed at overturning widespread western perceptions of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Researchers engaged in this effort study Hamas’s experience in realigning moral judgements among students at western universities about Israel and Palestine and seek to apply the same method in order to generate western demand for a foreign-policy shift beneficial to Russia.

- **Russia-oriented:** legitimising Russia’s foreign policy towards Ukraine primarily for the domestic Russian audience. This function was present in one form or another at all the organisations examined here but was especially pronounced at RGGU and

InEcon RAS. Representatives of the former explicitly identify young people as a key target audience for their propagandistic activities.

Russian dissertations on Ukraine proved to be a particularly rich source of insight into Russian expertise on Ukraine. Their analysis shows that the study of Ukraine in Russia is not only becoming increasingly ideologically distorted but is also a field in institutional decline. The number of dissertations on contemporary Ukraine has always been small and has continued to fall since the 2010s, while in the 2020s interest in Ukraine as a subject of research has all but disappeared.

The dissertation corpus also made it possible to delineate the contours of the neo-imperial discursive matrix, which comprises seven interrelated key narratives through which Russian authors frame their analysis. It rests on four structural pillars: an old intellectual habit of treating countries neighbouring Russia as natural objects of Russian influence; the dominance of geopolitical determinism as an analytical framework; the institutional entrenchment of experts within a system of state patronage; and alignment with Moscow’s official foreign-policy line. Consequently, the matrix displays considerable inertia, surfacing even in texts devoted to broader research topics, suggesting that it operates as a structural feature of Russian political science more generally rather than a bias confined to Ukrainian studies as such. As an analytical model, it may accordingly prove transferable to examining Russian expert discourse on other former Soviet states.

This matrix has become increasingly radicalised in line with the Russian political context. Within its confines, reliable knowledge about Ukrainian society, politics, and identity cannot be generated. Instead, the matrix yields a politically functional image of the country designed to legitimise Russian foreign policy. In this sense, for over three decades, Russian academic scholarship, placed in the service of an imperial political project, has systematically deprived itself of the ability to understand Ukraine. Given the structural constraints, the institutional peculiarities of the knowledge-production system, and the

specific professional culture, the quality of Russian expertise on Ukraine is unlikely to change in any fundamental way.

Data from the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases show that Russian authors are only marginally involved in the global production of knowledge on contemporary Ukraine. This may indirectly point to the generally low competitiveness of their scholarship and the poor quality of Russian expertise on Ukraine. The presence of their articles on Ukraine in international peer-reviewed journals was marginal until 2014, after which it increased sharply in connection with state incentives to raise the number of Russian publications indexed in WoS and Scopus. After this requirement was lifted in May 2022, the number of such publications collapsed to pre-2014 levels, even as global scholarly attention to Ukraine grew substantially.

Openly propagandistic literature has maintained a steady presence on the Russian book market since 2005, reaching a peak in 2015, when it accounted for more than half of all Ukraine-related titles. After 2022, a distinct subgenre emerged – Z-literature – legitimising what in Russia is officially referred to as the ‘special military operation’. It now accounts for about a third of all titles on Ukraine. Spikes in the share of pseudo-historical and propagandistic literature followed the events of 2004, 2014, and 2022. These surges may have been linked to state efforts to ensure that the book market, as part of the broader information space, was supplied with ideologically aligned interpretations that justified Russia’s actions and denigrated Ukraine.

Taken together, these findings show that the central problem is not simply a shortage of expertise on Ukraine but the structural inability of the Russian expert system to produce independent knowledge about the country. The system is better suited to interpreting, legitimising, and operationalising an established political line than to independently informing it. The state-aligned Russian expert milieu on Ukraine therefore functions, in effect, as a factory of propaganda and disinformation.

In this regard, the study systematises the practical risks that engagement with the Russian expert community poses for western institutions. Among these, five types of risk

The state-aligned Russian expert milieu on Ukraine functions as a factory of propaganda and disinformation

stand out: (1) mistaking rhetorical distance for moderation; (2) giving Russian narratives institutional legitimacy; (3) lending academic authority to unqualified voices; (4) overlooking propaganda cloaked as legitimate scholarship; and (5) distorting expert analysis through perceived insider access. These findings point to a number of practical recommendations for western think tanks, academic institutions, and publishers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Start from a presumption of affiliation, not autonomy.** Russian mezhdunarodniki share a state-centric corporate culture combined with the neo-imperial ethos and are strongly tied to the Russian government. Whatever their institutions’ formal status, their intellectual independence and autonomy therefore remain doubtful. Hence, any Russian organisation involved in producing expertise on Ukraine should, by default, be considered an instrument of state influence unless there is evidence to the contrary.
- 2. Prioritise substance over form.** When assessing the texts and statements of Russian experts, a broader analytical toolkit should be used, one that focuses on the substance of their positions rather than their rhetorical distance from political power. Characterisations built on measuring such distance risk mistaking disagreements over means for disagreements over ends, thereby granting unwarranted credibility to actors whose fundamental goals remain aligned with the regime and facilitating their legitimisation within the western expert field.
- 3. Treat insider claims with caution.** Insider knowledge of the mechanics of Russian decision-making is, in principle, unverifiable.

Such information is often unavailable even to Russian experts themselves, given the structural opacity of the decision-making process in the Kremlin. Therefore, any ‘insider information’ deserves heightened scepticism rather than unconditional trust, however authoritative the source may appear and however long-standing one’s personal acquaintance with them may be.

4. Apply basic vetting standards. A Russian expert’s public status – membership in a well-known institution and frequent media appearances – does not guarantee genuine specialisation in the subject. Before inviting a guest lecturer to address students, especially in educational settings, institutions should check the expert’s actual publication record and contribution in the field. Skipping this step carries serious risks. Where doubts remain about an expert’s independence or expertise, it would be

preferable to invite them to a moderated discussion, alongside highly qualified opponents, rather than give them an unchallenged lecture platform.

5. Strengthen methodological scrutiny.

Standard peer-review practice does not seem properly designed to detect texts that use the academic apparatus as a shell for a politically biased position. Dissertation committees, editorial boards, and publishing houses could check manuscripts for selectivity of sources and systematic omissions with greater rigour. It would also be helpful to expand their verification toolkit, including by checking whether an author’s carefully hedged academic formulations on a given claim are contradicted by their own more candid public statements on that same claim, and by analysing patterns of grammatical agency.

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