PUTIN'S EXTREMIST REGIME AND ITS SECURITISATION OF THE INVASION OF UKRAINE THROUGH THE LABEL OF TERRORISM

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ABSTRACT

In this article, Putin's regime as an aggressor in the current war with Ukraine is examined against Cassam's (2022) extremism framework, encompassing ideological extremism, methods extremism, and, notably, extremist mindset, which is independent of any specific ideology and motivates extremist behaviour. This article offers insights into how Putin's regime's extremism underpins the construction of Russia's offensive actions against Ukraine as counterterrorism measures. An analysis of Russian MFA's statements is conducted on the empirical level, employing assumptions (Fairclough, 2003) to detect both explicit and implicit processes of meaning-making and to demonstrate how Putin's regime's extremist features underlie its securitisation of the invasion of Ukraine through terrorism.

INTRODUCTION

Terrorist attacks are crises by default and tend to be perpetrated by extremist actors. In today's security as well as socio-political discourse, extremism and terrorism are consequential stigmatising labels. According to Crenshaw (2011, p. 2), the use of the term *terrorism* "is not merely descriptive but as currently understood deprives the actor thus named of legitimacy". As per Hoffman (1998, p. 31), if one party succeeds in labelling its opponents as terrorists, then it also indirectly succeeds in convincing others to adopt its moral stance. Furthermore, according to Cassam (2022, pp. 7, 11), *extremist* is "a political label, the application of which is a political act with political consequences". At times, this label and the label *terrorist* are misapplied to delegitimise opposition to the established order.

It can be said that, since the announcement of the Global War on Terrorism (GWT) by G. W. Bush, terrorism has, in terms of Laclau and Mouffe's (2001), become a socially significant nodal point and an empty signifier, which various forces seek to fill or articulate with their own meaning and struggle for hegemony of their articulations. Since the outset of the GWT, the hegemonic articulation of terrorism has been with Islamist extremism/terrorism and jihadist organisations like / associated with al-Qaida, ISIS, and the Taliban. Although this articulation has been largely accepted and is reflected in UN Security Council resolutions[1], various actors struggle to articulate terrorism equally with other forces/states and to make these articulations prominent in the international discourse on counterterrorism. In this manner, attaching the label of a terrorist threat to a chosen actor can prove to be an effective means for securitising an issue of interest. In other words, constructing a crisis as terrorism or a counterterrorism offensive is a discursive strategy that can be employed rather diversely – for example, the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was constructed by anti-government actors as *COVID terrorism* (Belova-Dalton, 2021, p. 199) – while, during climate crises, governments in different countries used counterterrorism measures against environmental defenders (Tayler & Schulte, 2019).

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[1] For instance, UNSC resolutions No. 1267 (1999), No. 1989 (2011), and No. 2253 (2015) concerning Da'esh [or ISIS] and al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities.

55

Among its various objectives, Putin's regime seeks to designate individuals, organisations, and states that oppose its policies as extremists and/or terrorists. As to Ukraine, since Russia deployed portions of its armed forces to take control over parts of the Ukrainian territory in 2014, Russia has continuously claimed that Ukraine was employing terrorist tactics against residents of Donbas in its political struggle against the so-called peaceful Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (hereinafter jointly as *the LDNR*) (EUvsDISINFO, 2021). The claims made by Putin's regime after launching an all-out war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 are diverse, including allegations that Ukrainian nationalists are employing terrorist tactics against civilians in Ukraine (EUvsDISINFO, 2022); that the Ukrainian authorities are a fascist regime and a real terrorist organisation (EUvsDISINFO, 2022a); that Ukraine threatened Russia with terrorist attacks on its territory (EUvsDISINFO, 2022b); that Russia's military operation in Ukraine is aimed at containing the expansion of NATO, a terrorist and hostile organisation (EUvsDISINFO, 2022c); that the U.S. is recruiting ISIS terrorists to fight in Ukraine (EUvsDISINFO, 2022d), etc. Therefore, it can be said that, following the commencement of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russia significantly increased its references to Ukraine in terms of terrorism. However, Russia has been associating terrorism with Ukraine since at least 2014.

In Ukraine, following the conflict orchestrated by Russia in 2014 between the LDNR and the Ukrainian establishment, Ukraine initiated an anti-terrorist operation in the Donbas region. Subsequently, Ukrainian law enforcement authorities have brought terrorism charges against the LDNR militants, and Ukraine has lodged allegations in the United Nations International Court of Justice, claiming that Moscow supported terrorist activities in the Donbas conflict (Euromaidan Press, 2019). In light of the intensive and wide-scale hostilities, which included missile strikes conducted by Russian military forces against Ukraine's civilian population since February 2022 (see, e.g., UN OHCHR, 2022), President Zelenskyy asked the U.S. to add Russia to the list of state sponsors of terrorism (Hudson & Stein, 2022). Furthermore, President Zelenskyy, along with other Ukrainian officials, repeatedly accused Russia of being a terrorist state (see, e.g., VOA News, 2022; Kyiv Independent, 2022). Ukraine also accused Russia of inflicting terror on Europe by cutting gas supplies (Nanji, 2022) and perpetrating food terrorism by stealing Ukrainian

grain and blocking its exports, which is leading to a world food crisis (Currents News, 2022).

Despite the considerable support for the terrorism sponsor designation for Russia within the U.S. Congress (e.g., see S. RES. 623 of 07/27/2022), Russia has not been designated as a state sponsor of terrorism by the U.S. government (Ward & Swan, 2022). In contrast, Russia has been designated as a state sponsor of terrorism by the European Parliament, as a terrorist state by NATO Parliamentary Assembly, while the Russian regime has been designated as terrorist by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. However, there are currently not many academic accounts that conceptualise the current Kremlin regime as extremist or Russia as an extremist/terrorist state or a sponsor of terrorism. Regarding extremism, academic accounts tend to focus on extremist non-state actors within Russia rather than examining the regime itself (e.g., Mitrokhin, 2006; Myagkov, *et al.*, 2019). When it comes to terrorism, there are accounts of Russia's counterterrorism strategy, shedding light on Russia's persistent imperial traditions (Omelicheva, 2009), the rise of militant Islam in Russia as a consequence of human rights abuses (Borshchevskaya, 2013), the deficiencies of Russia's 2016 antiterrorism legislation regarding the restriction of missionary activities which has led to groundless state prosecution of non-Orthodox churches in Russia (Homer, 2017), etc. The aim of this article is twofold: first, to apply Cassam's (2022) framework to analyse the current Kremlin[2] regime and examine how it relates to the elements of extremism; second, to analyse how the Kremlin regime, in view of its own extremist features, has employed the concept of terrorism in its rhetoric to securitise Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, it can be asserted that this research constitutes a contribution to the field of Russia studies and, more broadly, to the study of political violence.

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[2]   The Kremlin in this article is used synonymously with Putin's government or Putin's regime, currently waging the war against Ukraine. Sometimes Putin's regime is difficult to distinguish from Russia as a whole – as former Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Vyacheslav Volodin (now Chairman of the Russian State Duma) said, "There is no Russia today if there is no Putin", while "any attack on Putin is an attack on Russia" (The Moscow Times, 2014) In Galeotti's (2019, p. 250) terms, in Putin's Russia, interests of the current regime are framed as the interests of Russia as a whole, while dissent is framed as treason. This article focuses on Putin's regime and its invasion discourse, without extending Putin's regime's extremist properties to the wider Russian population or researching whether the regime's securitisation moves have been successful.

METHODOLOGY

In today's security environment, terrorism is heavily primed, while terrorists have become close to the ultimate outgroup. A terrorist label is often instrumentalised, allowing politicians and policymakers to delegitimise targets, legitimise ethically disputable security policies, shape public opinion, and win political support. Baele and colleagues (2017, p. 535) demonstrate the performative power and effect of the terrorist label by experimentally showing that it significantly alters the audience's perception of the security environment and their security policy preferences when the label is used by an authorised actor within the context of high terrorism saliency. Thus, terrorism as a performative label can be considered in the context of securitisation theory: presenting something as terrorism is a powerful securitising move which implies the existence of an existential threat to the referent object and requires extraordinary countermeasures or urgent counterterrorism measures, going beyond the realm of normal politics. Baele et al.'s (2017) experiment shows that the audience tends to accept such a securitising move by an authoritative actor in a terrorism-salient context and, hence, legitimises emergency measures. There are many examples of securitising moves using terrorism: for instance, the securitisation of migration and asylum (Balzacq, 2011; Vezovnik, 2018; Hraishawi, 2021); the Uyghur community in the PRC (Finley, 2019); Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asian states (Lenz-Raymann, 2014), cyberspace in Singapore (Aljunied, 2020), but also the securitisation of Greek domestic terrorism (Karyotis, 2007) and organisations connected to ETA in Spain (Bourne, 2018), etc.

Securitisation combines in itself a theory, a policy, as well as a framework and can be defined as

> an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilised by a securitising actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions), about the critical vulnerability of a referent object, that concurs with the securitising actor's reasons for choices and actions, by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customised policy

must be undertaken immediately to block its development (Balzacq, 2011, p. 3).

In securitisation theory, language is deemed constitutive in the realm of world politics (Balzacq, 2011, p. xiv). This premise unites securitisation theory with discourse analysis, in which text and social reality are mutually constitutive, while language is considered as social practice (Fairclough, 1989, p. 1) Furthermore, securitisation theory sees an existential threat as presented and constructed as such through discourse (Vezovnik, 2018, p. 40). In many cases, the operationalisation of securitisation theory has involved the application of critical discourse analysis (CDA); e.g., Vezovnik (2018), Hraishawi (2021), Aljunied (2020). In the terms of Buzan and colleagues (1998), securitisation is achieved through speech acts. Nevertheless, they also emphasise the importance of context in the study of securitisation. Security is always seen as a "political construction in specific contexts" (Strizel, 2014, p.16). In turn, CDA, which focuses on the relationships between text and its socio-political context, can assist in detecting the deeper motivations and pre-conceived assumptions underlying securitisation moves.

This article analyses the socio-political context of Putin's regime concerning its war on Ukraine and the securitisation of that war through terrorism, using Cassam's (2022) framework of extremism, partly because conventional warfare constitutes the most extreme form of political violence. Cassam categorises extremism into analytical categories: ideological extremism, methods extremism, and psychological extremism. The value of Cassam's approach is that it offers an analytical tool for determining whether an object of analysis exhibits extremist characteristics and, if so, in which particular ways (Cassam, 2022, p. 91).

While a universally accepted definition of extremism is lacking, extremists typically aim to replace the liberal democratic order and alter the fundamental constitutional principles associated with it. Hence, terrorism can be viewed as a set of violent tactics primarily employed by extremists. (EU TE-SAT, 2020, p. 7) This is how terrorism is perceived in this article, in line with Tore Bjørgo (2005, p. 2), for whom "terrorism is primarily an extremism of means, not one of ends". Extremism is often conflated with radicalism. It is assumed, however, that radicalism can function within the limits of democratic action, while extremism goes

59

beyond these limits, rejecting diversity and the rule of law, often considering the use of violence as a legitimate tool. (Coolsaet, 2022, p. 189) The reason that Putin's regime is analysed through the lens of extremism in this article is precisely because it deems violence against Ukraine as acceptable means.

Extremism has been widely conceptualised in terms of ideology (Finley, 2019; Canetti-Nisim, 2003, Cassam, 2022): "terrorism is a tactic, whereas extremism is a belief system" (Berger, 2018, p. 30). However, in this case, the link between a belief system and the perpetration of political violence remains ambiguous. Hence, extremism is understood here in line with Cassam's (2021) definition: "Extremism is a mindset, a way of seeing the world and others that cuts across ideologies and methods of achieving them". In Cassam's terminology, radicalisation, or the process of becoming an extremist, entails either acquiring an extremist mindset or is a process facilitated by the possession of an extremist mindset (Cassam, 2022, p. 173). An extremist mindset develops hand in hand with cognitive radicalisation and facilitates potential behavioural radicalisation when an individual begins to perceive themselves as a soldier with a duty to fight for their cause (Cassam, 2022, p. 175). In this article, Putin's regime is analysed in terms of cognitive, behavioural, and psychological radicalisation.

The overarching framework for this article is securitisation theory. As per Buzan and colleagues (1998, p.32), "based on a clear idea of the nature of security, securitisation studies aim to gain an increasingly precise understanding of who securitisation, on what issues (threats), for whom (referent objects), why, with what results and, not least, under what conditions". Cassam's framework of extremism is employed to address these questions, offering insights into the ideological, behavioural, and psychological factors that underlie Putin's regime's securitisation of its invasion of Ukraine through terrorism. A limitation of this study is that it does focus on the results of securitisation, or the legitimisation of the invasion by Russian society.

In the empirical section, Putin's regime's securitisation strategies, grounded in its ideological, methods, and psychological extremism are examined as discursively projected both domestically and internationally by the spokespersons of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

According to Widdowson (2007, p. 70), "discourses are kinds of genre, institutionalised modes of thinking and social practice, and those who compose texts are taken to be not so much individuals as socially construed spokespersons or representatives of discourse communities". The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs operates under the Russian government and is overseen by the Russian president; hence, Putin's discourse is inherently embedded in the MFA's text production, which encompasses the drafting and execution of Russia's foreign policy and legal regulations in the realm of foreign relations.

The reception or consumption of the Russian MFA's messages is extensive, both internationally and nationally, and is heavily influenced by the key figures within the MFA. In addition to Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lavrov, who has served as the Kremlin's primary representative in major international negotiations and has been active in giving interviews to foreign as well as Russian state media, another remarkable figure within the Russian MFA is Maria Zakharova, the head of the Information and Press Department of Russian MFA since August 2015. She has become the "official voice" of Russian foreign policy course, presenting Russian foreign policy in the most favourable light (Martynenko & Melnikova, 2016). Presently, Zakharova stands as one of the most frequently cited Russian diplomats, having achieved fame through her participation in political talk shows on Russian state TV and her commentary on current political issues on her public social media (ibid.). As per Martynenko and Melnikova (2016), Zakharova altered the language of the Russian MFA, merging the traditional official style with an informal, conversational style on social media, thereby making "the ministry more modern and using the best practices of foreign states" (ibid.). Zakharova herself has now emerged as one of the central newsmakers in both Russian and foreign media (ibid.). Consequently, it can be affirmed that the primary audience for Russian MFA comprises not only other states but also Russian population.

This article conducts an empirical analysis of the properties of texts contained on the website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, using Fairclough's (2003) assumptions as a tool. The examination of assumptions helps to uncover the subtlest nuances of meaning-making that are largely overlooked and taken for granted. In Fairclough's (2003) methodology, the term *assumptions* is used to describe the implicit processes

of meaning-making in texts. Fairclough's account delineates existential (assumptions about what exists), propositional (assumptions about what is or can be the case), and value assumptions (about what is good or desirable). Most assumptions are implicit, but some are triggered by linguistic features in texts. Assumptions assist the interpreter in revealing the value systems that underlie a text. The content of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs webpage was analysed from 24 February 2022 to 31 August 2022. Texts containing keywords *«терроризм»* *(terrorism), «террорист»*, and *«террористический» (terrorist)* as well as *«террор» (terror)* during this period were checked for their references to the current war on Ukraine and, if relevant, copied into a separate Word file. Out of a total of 94 texts in the Word file, assumptions were detected, which helped in the examination of the securitising strategies employed by Putin's regime, grounded in its own extremist properties.

1. PUTIN'S REGIME AND EXTREMISM

1.1. PUTIN'S REGIME AND IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM

One way to define extremist ideology is to determine its position at the extreme left or the extreme right end of the Left/Right ideological spectrum, or to identify how extremist the ideological position is on the following issues: the size and role of the state, private property, freedom, human rights, democracy, justice, equality, nationalism, and free speech (Cassam, 2022, pp. 42, 45). Nevertheless, in Cassam's terms, not all ideologies can be neatly categorised along the Left/Right ideological spectrum; some may occupy extreme ends on other spectrums, e.g., the Pro-Violence or Authoritarianism spectrum. At the extreme end of the latter, you find anarchism, whereas, on the opposite extreme, there is a "strictly ordered society in which infringements on authority are to be punished severely" (Cassam, 2022, p. 57). Concerning the Pro-Violence spectrum, on one extreme end, you find pacifism, whereas, at the opposite extreme, ideologies advocate violence for political ends (Cassam, 2022, p. 40). Promoted violence is not a measure of the last resort and is indiscriminate on a large scale (ibid.). An extremist pro-violence ideology views violence as the first resort, a means of imposing its views on the politically recalcitrant, and a way to protect "our deepest values and

our collective survival" from imminent danger (loc. cit., p. 57). Notably, it is typically states rather than sub-state actors that tend to be the perpetrators of the most extreme violence (ibid.). Furthermore, "all forms of political extremism, regardless of their specifics, are distinguished by their penchant for taking political ideas to their limits" (e.g., pushing the idea of violence as a legitimate means of achieving one's political objectives to its limits) (Cassam, 2022, p. 59).

On the Left/Right ideological spectrum, it is evident that Putin's regime is firmly positioned on the extreme right end. According to Laqueur (2015, p. 248), following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Marxism-Leninism in Russia has been replaced by authoritarian nationalism. This shift was accelerated by the annexation of Crimea, the concurrent war in eastern Ukraine, and the attack on the MH17 airplane, while "the Russian Extreme Right and the lunatic fringe have grown in influence over the years" (loc. cit., p. 250). Morozov (2015, pp. 5–6) defined Russia's radical traditionalist ideology as paleoconservatism, a perspective that aligns with Western far-right movements. Russia's politics has shifted towards imperialism, with a focus on the securitisation of the West and implementing offensive policies in the post-Soviet region. In Kuzio's (2022) view, the seizure of Crimea and the denial of the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainians have driven Russian conservatism towards an emphasis on imperial nationalism as a central concept. Nationalism in Putin's Russia has combined Tsarist imperial and Soviet nationalisms into an eclectic ruling ideology, which fuels Putin's regime's aggression against Ukraine. The former type of nationalism serves as the ideological basis for denying the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainians, whereas the latter contributes to the ideological discourse that describes as Nazis the Ukrainians who resist being labelled as Little Russians and endorse Ukraine's European orientation (ibid.)

Building on the above, there are three central ideas that Putin's regime is taking to their limits in the war on Ukraine. Firstly, the idea that Ukrainians constitute an artificial nation and that Ukraine is not a sovereign state. It suggests that Ukraine's existence is a historical error made by Lenin and Soviet politicians and that, despite gaining independence, Ukraine failed to establish a stable statehood and has instead become a puppet state of the West. Significantly, upon reassuming presidency in 2012, Putin portrayed himself as the 'gatherer of Russian [or

eastern Slavic] lands', willing to incorporate Belarus and Ukraine into the Russian World, a concept formulated in 2007 and based on the notion that the three eastern Slavs form a pan-Russian nation, sharing common language, culture, and history. This was the unresolved matter that Putin aimed to address before entering the history books. (Kuzio, 2022) During the Soviet era, Ukrainians were considered a separate nation, although closely linked to Russians. In Putin's Russia, however, the notion of Ukrainian national statehood, the Ukrainian people, and their language was disparaged as artificial (ibid.). For instance, in a 2020 interview, Kremlin ideologist and political technologist Vladislav Surkov emphatically denied the existence of Ukraine: "There is no Ukraine... There is a brochure "Samostiyna Ukraina" [Independent Ukraine], but there is no Ukraine" (cited in Sazonov & Saumets, 2022, p. 13). Consequently, the idea that Ukraine is an inherent part of Russia forms an essential component of Russian imperialist nationalist ideology and is being pushed to its limits in the course of Putin's regime's invasion of Ukraine.

Secondly, the idea is taken to the limits is that Ukrainians are neo-Nazis. Putin (2022a) refers to nationalist aspirations within the Soviet Union as a virus and attributes the collapse of the Soviet Union to the "disease" of nationalism. In independent Ukraine, "Neanderthal and aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism have been elevated /.../ to the rank of national policy" (Putin, 2022a), with its current government consisting of "fascists" and "drug addicts" (Putin, 2022c). In Putin's (2022a) terms, the reasons for the rise of far-right nationalism which quickly transformed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism can be attributed to the fact that Ukrainian authorities set out to build Ukrainian statehood on the negation of everything that united Ukraine with Russia. So, in Putin's view, Russian soldiers in Ukraine are defending Donbas and Russia against the threat emanating from the anti-Russia enclave. Putin securitises Ukrainians as intending to attack Crimea like Donbas to kill innocents just like Ukrainian nationalists who were Hitler's accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War (Putin, 2022b). Putin's cult of the Great Patriotic War is deeply connected with the promotion of Russia as the country which defeated Nazism in WWII and is now fighting Nazis in Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic States (Kuzio, 2022). The narrative involving Nazis, Nazi collaborators, and fascists was revived by Russian political technologists in Ukraine back in 2004 to discredit presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko. Following the 2004 Orange Revolution,

the Russian media described Ukraine as being governed by fascists and neo-Nazis, where Russian speakers were persecuted and subjected to genocide [though the International Court of Justice dismissed this claim on 16 March 2022] and pro-Russian politicians and media were suppressed (ibid.). Hence, Putin constructs Russia's clash with anti-Russia forces in Ukraine as inevitable, taking the idea of denazification of Ukraine to the limits.

To strengthen his argument, Putin securitises Ukrainians as terrorists. For instance, in Crimea, he claims that Ukrainian authorities, unable to challenge the people's free choice, resorted to activating extremist cells, including radical Islamists, who staged terrorist attacks on critical infrastructure and kidnapped Russian citizens, all with the support of Western security services (Putin, 2022a). About Ukraine's 2021 Military Strategy, Putin says that it advocates for the establishment of a terrorist underground movement in Crimea and Donbas and it even mentions a potential war with Russia (ibid.).

Thirdly, Putin is pushing the idea that Russia is being persecuted and existentially threatened by NATO and the collective West, both led by the U.S., to its extreme limits. In his view, the West supports nationalists in Ukraine, while NATO is militarising Ukraine to target Russia from that vantage point. Putin blames the U.S. and NATO for not accepting Russia's proposals for an "equal dialogue" in the context of increased threats to Russia, justifying Russia's right to respond to ensure its security (Putin, 2022a). Putin also claims that Ukraine might acquire weapons of mass destruction with Western assistance in order to target Russia, necessitating Russia's response. According to him, the West is "pumping" Ukraine with arms, while the U.S. and NATO are conducting anti-Russia joint military exercises there. Putin stresses that Ukrainian accession to NATO constitutes a direct threat to Russia's security (ibid.). Notably, neither Ukraine's NATO membership (despite joint military exercises) nor the installation of offensive missiles in Ukraine was on the agenda of NATO or the U.S. (Kuzio, 2022) As per Laqueur (2015, p. 4), the besieged-fortress feeling and fear of the West (*zapadophobia*) have been inherent in Russia's doctrine and ideology for centuries.

To further securitise the U.S. and NATO, Putin constructs them as perpetrators and instigators of terrorism worldwide. In his view, in 2000,

65

when he asked Clinton if Russia could be admitted to NATO, the U.S. overtly supported terrorists in the North Caucasus, while NATO continued to expand. This all led to making an enemy out of Russia who wanted to be an ally (Putin, 2022a). Furthermore, the U.S. is blamed for breaching international law and creating "bloody, non-healing wounds and the curse of international terrorism and extremism" (ibid.). Putin also blames the collective West for supporting separatism and, through this, international terrorism in the Caucasus (ibid.).

Looking at Putin's extremist ideas on the Pro-Violence spectrum, they lean towards the extreme end of advocating violence, but rather implicitly, explaining that violence committed against Ukraine is a supreme emergency defence against an existential threat to the referent object, which is Russia. Justifying the need for violence, Putin contextualises the planned offensive against Ukraine within the framework of counterterrorism, arguing that it is legitimate to use the military against terrorists: first, Russia used its military to combat terrorists in the Caucasus to preserve Russia's integrity; then, in 2014, Russia supported Crimea, and, in 2015, Russia employed its military to prevent terrorists from Syria from infiltrating Russia. The war on Ukraine is also constructed in this chain of events as defending Russia, presented as the only available option. (Putin, 2022b) Nevertheless, some of the Kremlin's top officials and pro-Putin elites are more explicit in their endorsement of violence and genocide against Ukraine and Ukrainians for political purposes. For example, Dmitry Rogozin, former head of Roskosmos, proposed "to put an end to Ukrainians once and for all", as Ukraine represents "an existential threat to the Russian people, Russian history, Russian language, and Russian civilisation" (EUvsDISINFO, 2022e).

On the Authoritarianism spectrum, Russia is currently clearly authoritarian, with any infringements on authority being severely punished. In 2020, changes to the Russian constitution effectively made Putin president for life, leading to an increase in political repressions and worsening media censorship during Russia's aggression against Ukraine. All these developments signal Russia's transition to a totalitarian regime (Kuzio, 2022).

Overall, Putin's regime exhibits ideological extremism by positioning itself at the extreme right end of the Right/Left ideological spectrum,

advocating for violence on the Pro-Violence spectrum, embracing extreme authoritarianism on the Authoritarianism spectrum as well as making fierce attempts to push to the limit the ideas of Ukraine being a part of Russia, Russia being a victim of NATO, the U.S. and the West's persecution, as well as the idea of liberating Ukraine and, by extension, the entire world from Nazism. Consequently, by taking the above ideas to their limits, Putin anticipated that the Russian military would be welcomed by the Little Russians as liberators of Ukraine from the U.S.-imposed nationalist and neo-Nazi captivity, ultimately leading to the fall of the artificial Ukrainian state and its retake by Russian forces within two days. Notably, terrorism is used as a securitisation mechanism in pushing the above ideas to their limits.

It is worth noting that all aspects of the ideological extremism exhibited by Putin's regime grew exponentially with the commencement of Russia's aggression, aligning with the idea that conventional war represents an extreme form of political violence and is inevitably about extremes. For instance, the idea that Ukrainians are neo-Nazis became drastically more prevalent in Russia's rhetoric on Ukraine following the commencement of the aggression, as compared to the months preceding it (Semantic Visions, 2022, p. 2). It can be observed that all other elements of extremism discussed above (e.g., the extreme right and the extreme authoritarian ideology) also intensified in Putin's regime, although they were already strong before the invasion and largely facilitated it. It can also be said that evolving ideological extremism facilitated the superficial interpretation by the Kremlin regime of the FSB survey which measured the opinions of Ukrainians before the invasion, without providing any indications of how sentiments could change after the invasion (Reynolds & Watling, 2022).

1.2. PUTIN'S REGIME AND METHODS EXTREMISM

In Cassam's view, "a methods extremist is an individual or group that uses extreme methods (however exactly these are defined) in pursuit of its [political] objectives" (ibid.) Violent methods extremists (VMEs) commit unnecessary violence without exploring alternative options, taking the need for violence for granted and making no effort to minimise

67

their violence (Cassam, 2022, p. 70). Some extremist political objectives are so unrealistic that violence appears to be the only way to achieve them, and even in this case with little chance of success. Furthermore, VMEs commit disproportionate violence, claiming that it is proportionate and enacted in self-defence (loc. cit., pp. 73–74). When it comes to selecting targets of violence, some VMEs do not specifically target non-combatants but, at the same time, do not consider civilian casualties as a compelling reason to stop the violence (loc. cit., p. 76). Other types of VMEs may target the military, civilians, and innocents. In their view, the first two categories are legitimate targets, while innocents, such as children, are seen as illegitimate targets, as they "had done nothing to make themselves liable to attack" (ibid.)[3]. Hence, such VMEs often commit indiscriminate violence as they have a broad perspective on who is considered liable to attack[4] (loc. cit, p. 78). Even if the target is found to be illegitimate, an extremist fails to feel distressed or modify their tactics.

Putin's regime's violence in the war on Ukraine can be viewed as extremist for several reasons. First, the violence being committed by the Russian armed forces in Ukraine is unnecessary. On 2 March 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/ES-11/1 which strongly deplored Russia's aggression against Ukraine. According to the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo (2022), the war on Ukraine had no just cause; it was initiated by choice without any unavoidability of the suffering it has caused. Similarly, most commentators consider the aggression irrational (Kuzio, 2022). Second, the violence being perpetrated by Russian soldiers is disproportionate, as it is not committed in self-defence, although Putin's regime claims the opposite. The abovementioned resolution of the UN General Assembly refers to reports "of attacks on civilian facilities such as residences, schools and hospitals, and of civilian casualties, including women, older persons, persons with disabilities, and children (A/RES/ES-11/1, p. 2).

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[3] "A person is liable to harm as long as they are 'implicated in some way' in the problem to which the extremist is reacting with violence" (McMahan, 2009, p. 8, cited in Cassam, 2022, p. 77).

[4] Similarly, according to Crenshaw (2011, p. 5), terrorism is never purely random and indiscrimination in terrorism is relative.

In response to the numerous airstrikes on civilian targets in Ukraine, Putin's regime either completely denies Russia's involvement, blaming the strikes on the Ukrainian military and securitising Ukrainian Defence Forces as committing violence as well as using terrorist tactics against their own people (e.g., Zakharova, 2022; Zakharova, 2022a; Buyakevich, 2022, etc.) or, alternatively, after some time, claims that the strikes aimed at legitimate targets (e.g., the Ukrainian forces, officials, Western arms dealers, etc.). The main findings of the Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, submitted in March 2023, read as follows:

> The Commission has concluded that Russian armed forces have carried out attacks with explosive weapons in populated areas with an apparent disregard for civilian harm and suffering. It has documented indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, and a failure to take precautions, in violation of international humanitarian law.

Mueller (2022) notes that Russian leaders appear to have little concern about causing civilian casualties and may even view the tactic of terror attacks on civilian targets as useful for diminishing the enemy's morale and resources. Consequently, Putin's regime can be defined as a methods extremist because its instigated violence in Ukraine is unnecessary, indiscriminate (including innocents and children) and disproportionate, while no effort has been made to minimise it and no adjustment of tactics has been made following the acknowledgement of causing civilian casualties.

1.3. PUTIN'S REGIME AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EXTREMISM

In Cassam's terms, it is best to view extremist psychology as an extremist mindset. Elements of the extremist mindset include interrelated extremist preoccupations, emotions, attitudes, and ways of thinking. Extremist preoccupations include purity (racial, religious or ideological, so that many extremists engage in a respective 'cleansing'); victimhood and supposed humiliation; virtue (meaning that extremists are solely doing what is right to defend themselves and their people) (Cassam, 2022, p. 5). Cassam does not attempt to present an exhaustive list of

69

extremist preoccupations and rather stresses their interrelation (loc. cit., 96). Related to the above preoccupations are Saucier's (2009, quoted in Cassam, 2022, p. 87) identified 16 components of a militant extremist mindset (MEM). Although not all extremism is militant, in the context of Putin's regime and its aggression against Ukraine, the following MEM themes appear to be important: the indispensability of unconventional and extreme measures; the application of tactics to avoid responsibility for aggravated consequences of promoted or perpetrated violence; the use of military vocabulary where it is uncommon; the feeling of the group that it is being prevented from achieving its deserved position; the glorification of the group's past; the utopianism, or constantly speaking about a future heaven or a land of milk and honey; a duty to purify the entire world from evil; praise for dying for the cause; a strong imperative to kill or start an offensive war; the dehumanisation and demonisation of opponents; perceiving the present-day world as a calamity. These themes serve as ways of framing and interpreting events by those having a militant extremist mindset (Cassam, 2022, p. 88).

Furthermore, as actions are spurred by emotions, Cassam identifies emotions that are central to the extremist mindset: anger, resentment, self-pity, and feeling humiliated. Within the extremist mindset, all of these emotions are disproportionate, irrational and disconnected from reality. Extremists fail to see the extent to which their emotions are inappropriate and, even if they do, they fail to modify these emotions. (Cassam, 2022, p. 98) Another relevant emotion closely related to the extremist mindset is ressentiment, described by Nietsche as "an existential resentment of other people's being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness" (Mishra, 2018, p.14, cited in Cassam, 2022, p. 99).

Among the core components of the extremist mindset are the following attitudes: hostility to compromise (compromise is seen as a shameful capitulation or betrayal of the core principles); indifference to the suffering of those they harm while imposing their principles; intolerance of the Other (manifested in complete absence of tolerance of any member of the disdained outgroup); and anti-pluralism (believing that there is only one right way and answer as well as only one good side, or Us) (Cassam, 2022, pp. 102–107). Additionally, there are ways of thinking associated with extremist mindset: conspiracy thinking (or seeing conspiracies of

70

the Other as the cause of one's victimisation); apocalyptic thinking (or being preoccupied with the end of the world); and catastrophic thinking (the perception that great disasters have occurred, are occurring or will occur) (Cassam, 2022, pp. 109–110).

During the war on Ukraine, Putin's regime's preoccupation with purity has been manifested in the filtration camps set up in various places of Ukraine occupied by Russia. It can be said that Russian soldiers engage in hostile ideological cleansing, detaining Ukrainian citizens who are either prisoners of war, have connections to the Ukrainian armed forces or have symbols (on their bodies) that support Ukrainian sovereignty (these are equated to Nazi symbols) (Tsyganov, 2022). For instance, as of 25 August 2022, there were 21 filtration camps in Donetsk oblast, where people were treated in a humiliating and inhumane way, including torture (Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health, 2022). Additionally, Putin's regime's preoccupation with purity is also evident in the narratives of denazification and demilitarisation of Ukraine. For example, in the Kherson oblast on 18 August 2022, Russian officials arrested teachers and burnt coursebooks, as they contradicted Putin's curriculum for the new academic year. The coursebooks imposed by the Russian authorities do not mention key events in Ukrainian history; also, students are required to wear Soviet uniforms (Kivil, 2022).

Putin's regime's hostility to compromise has manifested not only in the impasse at peace negotiations with Ukraine but also in its activities aimed at undermining the agreements achieved through negotiations. For instance, a missile strike on the port of Odesa occurred after a deal had been reached on the exports of Ukrainian grain (Voa News, 2022a). Additionally, as per Kuzio (2022), achieving a compromise was impossible for Zelenskyy already in 2019 when he became president and attempted to negotiate with Putin. In line with Minsk peace process, Ukraine was to capitulate to Russia's demands and placed within Russia's sphere of influence. As Ukraine's submission was not achieved through the Minsk peace process, it had to be achieved by what Lavrov called 'military-technical means' or launching the so-called special military operation (ibid.).

During the war on Ukraine, Putin's regime put the blame for the events on NATO and the collective West. For instance, Russia's permanent

representative to the UN Gatilov accused the West of using the war in Ukraine "as a matter of pressure on Russia, as a tool to isolate Russia, damaging our position, economically and politically" (Financial Times, 2022). Such statements are numerous in the Russian official political discourse and manifest Putin's regime's preoccupation with victimhood and humiliation as well as perceived persecution by the West, accompanied by the emotions of self-pity and feeling humiliated. This situation can be explained by Morozov's (2015) account of Russia as a subaltern empire in a Eurocentric world, meaning that Russia is not only an empire that conducts imperialist politics in the post-Soviet space (its so-called colonial periphery), but it is also a European colony, a peripheral country, whose agency is limited and whose voice is not heard in the international Eurocentric hegemonic order. Russia, as a nation, has internalised the neo-liberal capitalist model of development and has no other consciousness than Eurocentrism, while Russia's being a peripheral country is due to uneven and combined development (Morozov, 2015, p. 5). Hence, Russia is heavily reliant on the West economically[5] and normatively, while increasingly trying to justify its foreign policy by blaming the West for neocolonialism and criticising the injustices of the current international order (loc. cit., p. 9).

Russia's feeling of subordination and speechlessness in the relations of domination with the West, as well as constantly feeling threatened by what Russia views as an expansion of Western empire and its hegemonic position in the world, can be seen as the source of ressentiment (or envy of the West, intense resentment of its existence, and Russia's powerlessness in trying to make its voice heard) that escalated to the extremist level with Putin's regime's aggression against Ukraine. Laqueur (2015, p. 251) also stresses that Russia has always blamed its internal issues on foreigners and felt like a besieged fortress, which served as the justification for Russia's authoritarian rule.

Furthermore, Putin's regime's extremist emotions of anger and resentment during the war are manifested not only in Putin's addresses, where he, for example, explicitly refers to the Ukrainian government as a gang of drug addicts and neo-Nazis (Putin, 2022c). Russia's ex-president Medvedev, who used to manifest liberal attitudes and promote Russia's modernisation, has switched to a belligerent language in the current

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[5] Laqueur (2015, p. 249) also stresses Russia's financial dependence on the West.

overly conservative environment in Russia, claiming that Russia will ensure that Ukraine will disappear from the map soon and saying "I hate them. They are bastards and degenerates. They want us, Russia, to die. And while I'm still alive, I will do everything to make them disappear" (Walker, 2022). Genocidal rhetoric similar to Medvedev's has become central in Russia's wartime political discourse.

These emotions are disproportionate, irrational and disconnected from reality, as they are not justified by facts. Those who express these extremist emotions fail (or simulate to fail) to see the extent to which these emotions are inappropriate. Notably, such angry and frequent calls for genocide influence the Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine, as "this continued maelstrom of "disappear / cease to exist / hate them" is one big green light for soldiers to go ahead with any action one could imagine" (EUvsDISINFO, 2022e). All of the above manifests dehumanisation and demonisation of the opponent as well as the attitude of intolerance of the Other, or members of the despised outgroup, based on their supposed evil nature and posing an existential threat to Russia.

Other elements of the extremist mindset exhibited by Putin's regime are: a preoccupation with virtue (for instance, Putin expressed that, as opposed to the U.S. and NATO, Russia has always promoted "the resolution of the most complicated problems by political and diplomatic means, at the negotiating table" (Putin, 2022a)); an attitude of indifference to casualties (as manifested by Putin's statement at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok on 7 September that, in the war on Ukraine, "we have lost nothing. And we will not lose anything. The main goal is strengthening our sovereignty" (Preobrazhensky, 2022); conspiracist thinking (e.g., according to the Kremlin's discourse, an artificial Ukrainian nation and Ukrainian puppet state were created by the West as an anti-Russian conspiracy to divide and rule the pan-Russian nation (Kuzio, 2022)); in addition, there has historically been a prevailing sense that "the whole world was engaged in conspiring against Russia" (Laquer, 2015, p. 6). There is also a fixation on Soviet nostalgia and the glorification of the past as expressed in, for example, the imposition of Soviet uniforms in schools.

In summary, as evident from the above, Putin and his regime display a sufficient number of interrelated extremist preoccupations, attitudes,

73

emotions, and thinking styles. It can be reasonably concluded that Putin and his regime are cognitively, behaviourally, and psychologically radicalised, aiming at taking the entire Russia in this direction. To further discuss the extremist properties of Putin's regime, being discursively projected on Russia and internationally, a textual analysis has been conducted, examining cases in which Russian officials securitise Ukraine and the West as extremists and terrorists during the so-called special military operation in Ukraine.

2. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

2.1. OVERALL RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS OF 94 TEXTS BY THE RUSSIAN MFA

Overall, at the level of assumptions, representatives of the Russian MFA securitise Ukraine based on its extreme right ideology, with members of neo-Nazi military formations assuming important positions in the government instead of criminal punishment and with current Kyiv authorities relying on ultranationalists and neo-Nazis who, since 2014, have gained control over Ukraine and terrorised its population. The Ukrainian government is also securitised based on its extreme authoritarianism, as Kyiv's new authorities came to power in 2014 after an unconstitutional coup d'état supported by the West. Hence, there is an assumption that Kyiv's regime is illegitimate and denies the Donbas people, who legitimately opposed the coup, the opportunity for political self-determination, declaring them terrorists and initiating antiterrorist operations against them. Furthermore, Ukraine's government is securitised based on the extreme pro-violence ideology. It is assumed that the Ukrainian armed forces have attacked civilians in Donbas without any justification, thus perpetrating state terrorism acts irrationally; that the inhuman and immoral Kyiv regime also approves of the extremist violence conducted by Ukrainian neo-Nazis and Islamist terrorists who are part of Ukraine's Territorial Defence Forces.

Taking ideas to their extreme limits involves the forceful securitisation of the West, as it promotes an impending terrorist threat to the entire world by supplying military aid to Ukraine; the securitisation of NATO's

transformation of Ukraine into a hub of experienced foreign terrorists and mercenaries; the securitisation of neo-Nazi, Nazi, and nationalist ideologies that are spreading from Ukraine; the securitisation of absence of control by the Ukrainian government over migration, the distribution of weapons, and virtually any aspect of governance.

Ukrainian combat methods are securitised as terrorist tactics and extremist violence, characterised as being unnecessary, indiscriminate, disproportionate, taken for granted, and seeking to maximise civilian casualties. The emphasis is consistently on the atrocities harming innocent civilians, particularly women, the elderly, and children, as well as maternal hospitals, kindergartens, schools, and medical facilities. When it comes to the extremist mindset, Ukraine is securitised based on the assumed preoccupation with purity (elimination of everything Russian), hostility to compromise (imposed by the West), demonisation and dehumanisation of the opponent (e.g., calling Russian soldiers "cockroaches"), the need to kill or start an offensive war (primarily in Donbas), indifference to casualties, even on a global scale. Within this context, Ukrainians are constructed to avoid responsibility for the perpetrated violence and to even plan chemical and nuclear attacks to shift blame onto Russia.

Beneath these securitisation strategies, on the level of assumptions, are the forceful extremist properties of Putin's regime. Notably, a strong emphasis is placed on the preoccupation with virtue, constructing Russian soldiers as doing everything to protect civilians, providing them with humanitarian and medical aid, and destroying Western weaponry left behind by the retreating Ukrainian soldiers, thereby preventing these weapons from ending up in the hands of terrorists, etc. Russia's combat methods are constructed as being aimed at preventing (nuclear) terrorist attacks and exclusively targeting military infrastructure, ISIS terrorists, and foreign mercenaries. Russia is constructed as "unable to remain indifferent" and protecting its deepest values, or human rights, assumed to have been ruthlessly violated in Donbas. Furthermore, there's a strong preoccupation with legitimacy, as Russia is assumed to possess the ability to distinguish between a terrorist and a freedom fighter, while the West wrongfully treats actual terrorists as freedom fighters. Russia is assumed to speak the truth and promptly debunk false information regarding its armed forces.

75

Ressentiment has become increasingly prominent as Russia is constructed as persistently reaching out and appealing to the West, yet not being heard by it, implying a sense of powerlessness on Russia's part. Simultaneously, there's a strong expression of resentment for the West: the assumption is that the West supports terrorists, creates and spreads terrorism, lacks principles and values, applies double standards, imparts terrorist tactics to nationalists, etc. Russia's preoccupation with victimhood and persecution by the West is expressed in the West's assumed informational and cyber-terrorism against Russia; the urging of Ukraine to attack Russia with Western weapons; NATO's refusal to give Russia security guarantees; taking Ukraine hostage and using it as NATO's front against Russia; blaming all the problems and threats on Russia as their way of conducting foreign policy, etc.

Extreme dehumanisation and demonisation of the opponent are evident in constructing Ukrainian combatants, foreign mercenaries, and Islamist terrorists in Ukraine as intentionally targeting everyone with inhuman brutality. Hostility to compromise is reflected in the unbendable demand for demilitarisation, denazification, the neutral status of Ukraine, and the recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea. A duty to purify the entire world of evil is reflected primarily in the assumed need to eradicate Nazism and Nazi ideology that is assumed to have been revived in Ukraine. Against this background, it is implied that Putin's regime has an incentive to start an offensive war. It remains unclear, however, how Ukraine is being denazified if Russian soldiers only target military infrastructure, Islamist terrorists, and foreign fighters: attacks on assumed Ukrainian neo-Nazis or other soldiers are never mentioned or implied. Instead, tactics to avoid responsibility for the aggravated consequences of Russia's perpetrated violence are employed by accusing Ukraine of orchestrating nefarious deceptions to blame Russia for Ukraine's violence.

The analysed texts prominently feature Putin's regime's conspiracy thinking: assumed is, for instance, a planned invasion of the LDNR and adjacent Russian territories on 8 March 2022; the U.S. testing of dangerous biological substances on Ukrainians; all combat activities of Ukrainian armed forces amounting to their fear of neo-Nazis, etc. Furthermore, the analysed texts exhibit extreme anti-pluralism: on the level of assumptions, only Russia has principles and values and is always

right; only Russia genuinely saves, helps, and protects. It is stressed that Russia has not started the war but is ending it, so Russia's invasion is assumed to be desirable and urgently needed. Due to space constraints, this article provides a detailed examination of only three representative excerpts from the analysed texts.

2.2. DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THREE REPRESENTATIVE EXCERPTS

2.2.1. Excerpt 1

The following excerpt comes from the briefing of Maria Zakharova on 31 August 2022:

> Today, the allied forces are moving forward, albeit gradually but steadily, step by step, relieving and liberating Donbas from the neo-Nazis who have established strongholds in its towns and villages over the past eight years. All of this has caused anger in the military and political leadership of the Kyiv regime, prompting them to issue insane and criminal orders for massive strikes against civilian targets in the DNR and the LNR, as well as the liberated territories of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, causing maximum damage and an even greater number of civilian victims and casualties. The Ukrainian armed forces are especially savage in their attacks on kindergartens, schools, and other educational establishments, which is even more blasphemous on the eve of 1 September. We have been through all of this. We remember the Beslan tragedy vividly, which unfolded as children were heading to school. The individuals who committed this are called terrorists by the whole world. Those who shell and strike at children's institutions (especially on 1 September) are terrorists. There can be no other definition for them (Zakharova, 2022).

The propositional assumption in "allied forces" is that it is not only Russian troops fighting in Ukraine, indicating that Russia has allies. Through this, Russia implicitly claims legitimacy. The propositional assumption in "albeit gradually but steadily" is that Russian troops could move faster, the implication being that there is an obstacle on their way and that Russia is not using extreme measures. The existential assumption is that the Kyiv regime does indeed exist, implying that the Ukrainian

77

government has not been elected fairly and is thus illegitimate. The propositional assumption here is that the Ukrainian government "issues insane and criminal orders for massive strikes against civilian targets" out of anger at the gradual progression of Russian troops in Donbas, implying that Ukraine has no alternative means of expelling Russian troops from the LDNR, the Kherson as well as the Zaporizhzhia regions, and that the people in those regions, including the Russian troops, are at risk of being harmed. The Ukrainian government is constructed as insane and criminal, and, therefore, illegitimate. In the phrase "to cause maximum damage and even more civilian victims and casualties", the propositional assumption is that the Ukrainian government (implicitly equated with the neo-Nazis and constructed as giving them orders) has already caused damage and civilian casualties in Donbas, and now they are seeking maximum damage, the implication being that their anger and desperation has grown, being irrational and disproportionate.

The propositional assumption here is that the Ukrainian armed forces are savage, but they are especially brutal in attacking educational facilities for children and innocent victims, implying that the Ukrainian armed forces are inhuman to the highest degree. They are also constructed as blasphemous, because they seek the extermination of children in schools on the eve of 1 September, the implicit assumption being that they are godless, while God is, therefore, on the Russian side. Ukrainians are equated with the Chechen militants who attacked a school in Beslan and, consequently, with terrorism. Emphasising the date of 1 September implies that the Ukrainian armed forces are even more extreme terrorists in their targeting of innocent civilians than the Chechen militants who attacked the school in Beslan in 2004. In the phrase "we have been through all of this", the propositional assumption is that Russia has experience in dealing with terrorism and, therefore, has the right to designate actors as terrorists. By emphasising that the Beslan perpetrators are called terrorists "by the whole world", a similar international designation of the Ukrainian armed forces as terrorists and, by extension, defining Ukraine as a terrorist state, is demanded and also considered a legitimate claim. "No other definition" implies that the degree of Russia's certainty and knowledge of the matter is absolute, implying a strong unwillingness to compromise.

In this extract, on the level of assumptions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is justified by securitising Ukraine primarily on the grounds of extremist ideology, which is constructed to be at the extreme end of the Pro-Violence spectrum (as the government only issues orders to commit violence and takes violence for granted); at the extreme end of the Authoritarianism spectrum (as the Ukrainian government was elected illegitimately; issuing criminal and insane orders); and at the extreme right end of the Left/Right ideological spectrum (as the boundary is blurred between the Ukrainian government, the Ukrainian armed forces, and the neo-Nazis in Donbas). Indeed, here, Russia is taking to the limit the idea that the Ukrainian government (including its political and military leadership), as well as the Ukrainian armed forces, are all neo-Nazis. Secondly, on the level of assumptions, Russia securitises Ukraine as employing extremist methods: being brutally savage and committing acts of terrorism which are constructed as more inhumane than even the Beslan school siege. The violence of the Ukrainian armed forces is constructed as disproportionate (involving massive and maximum force, aiming at even more casualties and victims), indiscriminate (targeting innocents), unnecessary, and taken for granted, while efforts are made to rather maximise than minimise the violence. Thirdly, in terms of extremist psychology, on the level of assumptions, securitisation is employed by blaming Ukraine for demonstrating the need for unconventional and extreme measures, as well as for their indifference to all the innocent victims of airstrikes. The Ukrainian government is accused of irrational and disproportionate anger. Importantly, what characterises Putin's regime itself, based on the underlying assumptions present here, are features of the extremist mindset. First of all, its preoccupation with virtue (doing the right thing by "liberating" Ukraine from neo-Nazis gradually and steadily), the absolute dehumanising and demonising of the opponents, and the attitude of absolute intolerance towards the Other. Additionally, its preoccupation with legitimacy (Russia has allies; Russia knows what terrorism is; Russia seeks to prove that the Ukrainian government is illegitimate), although closely related to the preoccupation with virtue, could be added to the list of preoccupations strongly manifested by the Putin's regime.

2.2.2. Excerpt 2

The following extract comes from an address by a member of the Russian delegation at the Vienna talks on military security and arms control, at the 1018th plenary meeting of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation, on 20 July 2022:

> Third. For some reason, the Western participating states in the FSC [Forum for Security Cooperation] think they have the right to lecture others on how to fulfil their politico-military commitments. At the same time, as the saying goes, they cannot see the log in their own eye. In violation of the principles of responsible export control policy, the OSCE Document on SALW [Small Arms and Light Weapons] and the OSCE Principles Governing Conventional Arms Transfers, for eight years they have been actively "helping" Ukraine to kill civilians in Donbas by supplying tons of military products. Not only does it risk "settling" with terrorists outside Ukraine, but it is already being used for terrorist purposes. Today, the key to maximum damage to the civilian population of Donbas is strikes from American multiple rocket launchers together with similar Soviet-designed systems with a minimum launch time interval. This is terror in its purest form. Since mid-February, intensive shelling, including by Western military equipment, has destroyed more than 5,500 residential buildings in the DNR alone, killing 258 citizens, including 16 children. Their blood is also on your hands (Zhdanova, 2022).

In "for some reason", the propositional assumption is that there is no mutual understanding between Russian and Western FSC participants, and a clear distinction between Russia and "them" is being created; there is a reason for "their" actions, but Russia is unaware of it, the implication being that, for Russia, this reason is null and void. Therefore, the propositional assumption is that the West has no right to "lecture" Russia on politico-military commitments, with the implication being that such actions hurt Russia's virtue. "Lecture" implies an unequal power dynamic between Russia and the West, suggesting conceit on the part of the West and evoking feelings of victimhood and humiliation on the part of Russia. Another implication here is that Russia knows well how to fulfil its "politico-military commitments", needs no recommendations and, hence, manifests its hostility to compromise. In "they cannot see the log in their own eye", the propositional assumption is that the West is

being hypocritical, while there is only a speck in Russia's eye, the propositional assumption being that Russia fulfils its politico-military commitments more effectively than the West. By using a Bible verse [while referencing it as something commonly said], Russia's emphasis on virtue is reiterated.

Additional propositional assumptions include the belief that Ukraine has been killing civilians in Donbas for eight years for no reason, or irrationally; that the West's aid to Ukraine equals the killing of civilians, while "supplying tons of military products" implies that the West's military support to Ukraine is irrationally unlimited, leading to more innocent people being killed by these weapons. Here, both Ukraine and the West are demonised and considered irrational, while true help is implicitly monopolised by Russia, as help is closely tied to doing the right thing, virtue, and legitimacy. Additional propositional assumptions include the idea that the West's weapons could potentially end up in the hands of terrorists outside Ukraine, implying that the West's military equipment export policy is irresponsible and even criminal, as it facilitates terrorism globally and "actively" contributes to terrorism in Ukraine. The propositional assumption in "key to maximum damage to the civilian population of Donbas" is that the West is indifferent to casualties among the civilian population, as it continues to supply Ukraine with the weapons that cause maximum harm to the civilians of Donbas. The propositional assumptions are that "terror in its purest form" is taking place in Donbas, and that the West is not countering it effectively, but is instead facilitating it. Here, both Ukraine and the West are implicitly constructed as inhuman. Notably, once again, Ukrainians are constructed as irrational, with the implicit assumption being that they engage in terrorism in its purest form for no reason and this method is common for them. In "their blood is also on your hands", the propositional assumption is that Ukraine and the West share equal blame for the civilian casualties, including children. In turn, the implication is that Russia is struggling to ensure the security of the people in Donbas and to counter terrorism in Ukraine and worldwide.

In this excerpt, Russia's "politico-military commitments" in Ukraine are justified through the securitisation of both Ukraine and the West, equally constructed as terrorists, whereas the West, through its unlimited military aid to Ukraine, is constructed as endangering the wider

world by potentially escalating terrorism. Moreover, on the level of assumptions, both Ukraine and the West are blamed for using extremist methods, with the emphasis on the "tons" of military equipment for terrorist purposes that cause "maximum damage" to the civilian population in Donbas. Ukraine and, by extension, the West, are constructed as taking the intensive use of terrorism for granted. In terms of the extremist mindset, Ukraine, together with the West, is securitised on the level of assumptions as having a strong attitude of indifference towards civilian casualties of the intensive terror that Ukraine is committing on its territory with Western military aid.

As for Putin's regime's ideological extremism, on the level of assumptions, the idea is taken to the limit that both Ukraine and the West are terrorists, and their behaviour and motivations are irrational. Regarding the extremist mindset, Putin's regime manifests an extremist preoccupation with victimhood and being humiliated by the West (through being lectured), a strong preoccupation with virtue, along with a preoccupation with legitimacy (e.g., using a Bible verse, constructing Russia as the sole provider of the right help and right counterterrorism struggle), a hostile attitude to compromise (manifested in rejecting Western recommendations as hypocritical), absolute demonisation and dehumanisation of the adversary as well as absolute intolerance of the Other. "Their blood is also on your hands" implies this extreme degree of uncompromisingness and resentment on the part of Putin's regime.

2.2.3. Excerpt 3

The following excerpt comes from the briefing by Maria Zakharova on 22 June 2022 in Moscow:

> 81 years later, the Russian military is once again fighting Nazism, neo-Nazism, and the very same kind of virulent fascism (which apparently was not finished with back then), freeing Ukraine from the neo-Nazi stranglehold fostered there over the decades by Western "partners". Now, our [soldiers] are being killed again with weapons now manufactured in NATO countries. Let me remind you what the motto of the Third Reich was: "Drang nach Osten". It has now effectively become the motto of the alliance (I did not make that up, that is what they say). Remember the

statements by all the EU and NATO representatives in their integration and national capacity about the "battlefield", that nothing positive concerning Russia can be allowed, let alone victory, denying Nazism and fascism, raising funds and sending military equipment just to the east of Brussels? All this against the backdrop of years of moving the alliance's military infrastructure closer to our borders. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian armed formations, retreating from the battlefield, are waging real terror against civilians. Even now, their Western supervisors do not notice their nationalist and misanthropic nature (Zakharova, 2022a).

"Not been finished with back then" triggers the propositional assumption that what was fought against 81 years earlier in WWII, "the very same kind" is now escalating in an identical form, the implication being that it needs to be conclusively resolved and that this is what Russia's military is doing. The existential assumption is that there is a neo-Nazi stranglehold in Ukraine. The propositional assumption here is that the West's partnership with Ukraine is harmful, as it fostered this stranglehold, the implication being that the West reinforces Nazism and virulent fascism. "Is once again fighting" triggers the propositional assumption that Russia is in an identical situation to WWII, implying that Russian soldiers are heroes, Russia's cause is just, and victory will be with the Russia's side. The propositional assumption in "now, our [soldiers] are being killed again with weapons now manufactured in NATO countries" is that this time, NATO is the enemy just like Nazi Germany was in WWII.

"Let me remind you" triggers the propositional assumption that the audience might not remember this specific motto of the Third Reich ("Drang nach Osten", or "Drive to the East"). "I did not make that up" triggers the propositional assumption that the audience might suspect Zakharova of lying; moreover, "that is what they say" implies that the audience trusts NATO and its statements. By equating their mottos, NATO is likened to the Third Reich based on anecdotal evidence, which signals conspiracy thinking. The implication here is that NATO wants to conquer Russia, just like the Third Reich did.

The existential assumption here is that there exists a battlefield where the EU and NATO are acting with their statements against Russia. NATO and the EU are collectively constructed as Russia's Other, with

the propositional assumption being that they intentionally communicate only negative perceptions of Russia, viewing it as an adversary and withholding acknowledgement of Russia's achievements. NATO is constructed as having been moving its military equipment closer to Russia's borders for years, the implication being that this is the military extension of the above symbolic battlefield. On another battlefield, or in Ukraine, Russia is constructed as winning the war and causing the Ukrainian military to retreat. The propositional assumption is that, in the event of retreat, the Ukrainian military wages a form of real terror against civilians. "Real terror" triggers the propositional assumption that Ukrainian armed forces are particularly savage. In "even now, their Western supervisors do not notice their nationalist and misanthropic nature", the propositional assumptions are that the Ukrainian armed forces have become even more nationalist and misanthropic; in "their", the boundary is blurred between the Ukrainian armed forces and Ukrainians in general; that Western supervisors view the Ukrainian armed forces (and Ukrainians in general) in a positive light, are strongly connected to them, but have a different nature; Ukrainians cannot act on their own or without Western supervisors; Russia wants the West to view the Ukrainian armed forces as nationalist and misanthropic and, subsequently, end their support to Ukraine due to the loss of legitimacy. Consequently, even though NATO is constructed as the Third Reich, the facilitator of Nazism, neo-Nazism, and fascism worldwide as well as Russia's enemy, Russia wants to manage the two battlefields separately, with the implicit hope of achieving victory in each.

As in the previous excerpts, here, on the level of assumptions, the securitisation of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine occurs through constructing the Ukrainian armed forces and, by extension, all Ukrainians as extremists. Ukrainians are constructed as ideological extremists (taking nationalism to the limits); methods extremists (using "real terror", or unnecessary, disproportionate, and indiscriminate violence, taking it for granted); and psychological extremists (having a misanthropic nature implies having an indifferent attitude to the suffering of the casualties of their attacks; having an attitude of absolute intolerance towards other people; having extreme emotions of anger and resentment as well as being preoccupied with purity due to their extreme nationalism). The degree of these extremist features is constructed to be escalating. Another securitisation strategy is manifested in constructing NATO as

the Third Reich and, thus, a threat to the entire world. The EU, NATO, and the collective West are constructed as the facilitators of Nazism, neo-Nazism, and virulent fascism on a global scale (although they are not nationalist or misanthropic like Ukrainians). Their partnership with Ukraine is constructed as harmful.

This excerpt exhibits a significant number of features associated with Putin's regime's extremism. When it comes to ideological extremism, the idea is taken to the limits that Russia is once again fighting to free the world (with a primary focus on Ukraine) from Nazism, neo-Nazism, and virulent fascism. Another extreme idea is that NATO is the present-day Nazi Germany. In terms of the extremist mindset, there is obviously preoccupation with virtue (Russia being the beacon of the fight against Nazism, neo-Nazism, and fascism as well as a major party to victory in WWII); the preoccupation with legitimacy (evident in the desire to discredit Ukrainians in the eyes of the West); the preoccupation with purity (evident in the desire to completely purify the world of Nazism, neo-Nazism, and fascism). Most prominently, Putin's regime is preoccupied with victimhood, humiliation, and perceived persecution (evident in the assumptions that the EU and NATO always speak negatively of Russia, intending to humiliate it; they do not support Russia's objectives in Donbas; there are NATO's continued militarily presence near Russia's borders and symbolic attacks through official statements). Equating all EU and NATO representatives with the Other reinforces the sense of victimhood that Russia is surrounded by enemies, like a besieged fortress. All of that signals Russia's powerlessness, resulting in the feeling of ressentiment.

On the level of assumptions, Putin's regime exhibits extremist attitudes of intolerance (NATO, the EU, the West, and Ukrainians are all constructed as linked to Nazism and fascism and, hence, as Russia's enemies) and hostility to compromise (fascism must now be eradicated). In this excerpt, Russia's sense of victimhood is explicitly attributed to a Western conspiracy, thus manifesting conspiracy thinking which, as per Cassam (2022, p. 110), plays an important role in the extremist mindset (assumptions that NATO's self-proclaimed motto revolves around eastward expansion, that NATO and the EU are intentionally concealing any positive aspects of Russia, and that NATO is advancing militarily towards Russia's borders). Furthermore, there are several components of

85

the militant extremist mindset to be brought up. For instance, the use of military terminology in areas of discourse where it is uncommon (a "battlefield" when referring to political talks); glorifying the past in relation to one's group (glorifying the Soviet Union's victory over the Nazi Germany); the duty to purify the entire world from evil (in Russia's case, eliminating alleged Nazism and fascism); praise for dying for the cause (Russian soldiers who are dying for the liberation of the world from Nazism, neo-Nazism, and virulent fascism); a strong imperative to kill or initiate an offensive war (to free Ukraine from neo-Nazi strangleholds and the entire world from fascism); dehumanisation and demonisation of opponents (viewing the EU, NATO, the West, and Ukrainians as absolute adversaries); and perceiving the present world as a catastrophe (evident in the escalation of Nazism, neo-Nazism, and fascism).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis conducted, Putin's regime can be regarded as extremist, specifically as an ideologically, behaviourally, and psychologically extremist actor. In terms of ideological extremism, the belief that Little Russians (Ukrainians who support Ukraine's alignment with Russia within the Russian World) would welcome the Russian military as liberators from the U.S.-imposed nationalist and neo-Nazi yoke, leading to the rapid fall and recapture by Russia of the artificial Ukrainian state within two days, can result from taking these ideas [Ukraine is not a sovereign state / the Ukrainian government does not control anything; Ukrainians are (neo-)Nazis / Nazism is spreading from Ukraine; NATO (and the West in general) is persecuting and posing an existential threat to Russia and, by extension, to the entire world through military aid to Ukraine] to the limit, which signals ideological extremism. Extreme right, pro-violence, and authoritarian ideologies only contributed to these extremist beliefs. In turn, the analysis has shown that the Kremlin securitises Ukraine as an ideological extremist, whose ideology is on the same spectrums as Putin's regime's ideological extremism.

Putin's regime can further be clearly defined as methods extremist, since its instigated violence in Ukraine is unnecessary, indiscriminate, disproportionate, and not minimised or avoided despite the acknowledgement

86

of civilian casualties. Additionally, when examining the Russian missile strikes on critical infrastructure facilities in Kharkiv and the Kharkiv region as the Russian troops were retreating from Russia-occupied territories due to the successful counteroffensive by the Ukrainian forces (e.g., Tondo & Koshiv, 2022), one can say that this is exactly the basis of securitisation of the Ukrainian military in Zakharova's statements, namely using extremist methods against civilians during their alleged retreat. Hence, the Russian military does exactly what the Russian MFA strongly denounces as terrorism. Notably, according to Kuzio (2022), "fascists rely on projection; that is, they accuse their enemies of the crimes which they themselves are guilty of". The analysis revealed that Putin's regime securitises Ukraine (and the West) as terrorists, blaming them for using extremist methods, considering it normal, and seeking to escalate.

As for psychological extremism, during the war on Ukraine, Putin's regime's preoccupation with purity has been manifested in the filtration camps, set up in different Russia-occupied locations of Ukraine, as well as a strong desire to completely purify the world of Nazism. Putin's regime's preoccupation with humiliation (e.g., through being "lectured") and victimhood, perceived persecution by the West, as well as emotions of resentment and ressentiment (e.g., the EU and NATO ignore or intentionally always speak negatively of Russia to humiliate it) result, among other things, from Russia's subordination and powerlessness in its relationship of domination with the West, along with the perceived threat of the Western colonial expansion. Putin's regime exhibits a hostile attitude towards compromise with the West (through, among other things, aggressively rejecting Western "hypocritical" recommendations) and with Ukraine (as the stronger party is always right) as well as uses tactics to avoid responsibility for the perpetrated violence. Putin's regime's emotions of resentment and anger (for instance, as expressed in the wartime genocidal rhetoric against Ukrainians) are disproportionate, irrational, and disconnected from reality.

The analysis also revealed Putin's regime's strong preoccupation with virtue, dehumanisation and demonisation of the opponents, and attitude of complete intolerance of the Other. Additionally, its preoccupation with legitimacy is manifested, which is intricately linked to its preoccupation with virtue. Putin's regime employs military terminology in contexts

of communication where it is typically uncommon; it exhibits the duty to purify the entire world from evil, glorifies Russia's past, praises the military for dying for the cause, expresses a strong imperative to kill or initiate an offensive war (but only to protect civilians and target terrorists, foreign mercenaries, as well as military infrastructure), perceives the modern world as a catastrophe, and exhibits extensive conspiracy thinking. The analysis suggests that when political rhetoric becomes too difficult to take seriously due to the overwhelming conspiracies, this is a signal that a government is extremist psychologically, as extremism is often inherently connected to conspiracy thinking. Notably, the analysis detected that Putin's regime employs far fewer elements of the extremist mindset (only demonisation and dehumanisation of the opponent, intolerance of the Other, indifference to civilian casualties, a strong imperative to kill or start an offensive war, use of tactics to avoid responsibility for the perpetrated violence, the preoccupation with purity, and hostility to compromise) to securitise Ukraine and the West than the Kremlin itself exhibits, meaning that the Kremlin's own psychological extremism outweighs that of any adversary it seeks to securitise as such.

The analysis has revealed a wide spectrum of features of the extremist mindset manifested by Putin's regime. In summary, it can be concluded that Putin's regime is cognitively, behaviourally, and psychologically radicalised. That extremism drives the Kremlin's multifaceted securitisation strategies, which involve constructing Ukraine and the West as extremists and terrorists to justify Russia's aggression against Ukraine and/or obscure the fact that what Russia is waging in Ukraine is a conventional war rather than anything else (e.g., a counterterrorism operation or special military operation). Cassam's framework for analysing extremist actors has proved to be effective in the examination of securitisation moves through attaching the label of terrorism. On the textual level, an analysis of assumptions has revealed both securitisation strategies and the extremist properties of the securitising party, with the latter largely driving the former. It can be observed that the Kremlin's extremism is strongly projected onto Russian society and the international community through extensive propaganda. One of the limitations of this analysis is that it did not address the matter of whether the Kremlin's securitisation of the invasion of Ukraine through terrorism was successful with the Russian audience or whether the citizens share the extremist attitudes promoted by the government. According to Pocheptsov (2022,

p. 118), "propaganda is propaganda when it is successful, and, in it, at least the majority of the population should find answers to their questions. According to Russian data, 20% of the population does not support the war". While it is beyond the scope of this article to assess how extremism, in its various forms, is rooted and manifested within Russian society, it is evident that the Kremlin's extremism is undeniably having a profoundly destructive impact on Russian political identity and society as a whole.

It was clear already during Medvedev's presidency that an anti-Western shift in Russia's foreign policy discourse was the only option for Russia, as Obama and Medvedev could not overcome the deeply ingrained structure of adversarial relations between the U.S./West and Russia (Belova-Dalton 2020, p. 308). Notably, in Cassam's (2022, p. 2) view, the rising levels of political polarisation result in extremism. Thus, it can be stated that Russia's regime's psychological extremism (a sense of victimhood and humiliation by the West as well as the fear of losing its core values) has continued to evolve since the end of Medvedev's presidency and Putin's return to office in 2012. As to Ukraine, Russia demanded that the Minsk peace process be adhered to for Ukraine to capitulate to Russia's demands. Russia made efforts to hinder Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO through the annexation of Crimea and the initiation of the war in Donbas as well as officially demanding, in 2021, that the U.S. and NATO reject Ukraine's NATO membership bid (Russian MFA, 2021). Since the Euromaidan, Russia has also engaged in hybrid warfare against Ukraine. However, after the U.S. and NATO rejected Russia's aforementioned ultimatum, Russia committed aggression against Ukraine. Hence, Russia's pro-violence ideology and its preference for extreme violence as a legitimate and preferred choice concerning Ukraine has increased exponentially since 2014.

Given the extent to which all the constituent elements of extremism can be detected in Russia's current domestic and foreign policy discourse, it is crucial to produce and spread effective counter-narratives to challenge the Kremlin's securitisation of the invasion. One should also be prepared for negotiations with Putin's regime to become complicated, time-consuming, discouraging, and, even if fruitful, to prove unstable, deceptive, narrow, and unenforceable (U.S. Institute of Peace, s. a.). In the current situation, there appear to be no practical measures that are

89

both politically feasible and would sufficiently satisfy the Kremlin's demands in the long run. For instance, the idea that the formation of the Ukrainian state by Lenin, largely from historically Russian lands, was not just a mistake but an extreme one, aligns with the belief that the independence of the Baltic States was also a grave error. A state Duma bill was initiated on 8 June 2022 to de-recognise Lithuanian independence, as it went against the Soviet constitution in 1991 (Labanauskas, 2022). Additionally, Medvedev commented on the Estonian Prime Minister's call not to issue tourist visas to Russian citizens by stating: "you being at large not your merit, but our shortcoming"[6] (The Baltic Times, 2022). Putin (2022b) openly declared that territories adjacent to Russia are considered its "historical land", while Crimea chose to return to its "historical homeland", aligning with Russia's imperial nationalism. Hence, the situation can be described in terms put forth by Cassam (2022, p. 213): "Some extremists are too far gone and must be defeated rather than deradicalised".

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[6] In Russian; „То, что вы на свободе, не ваша заслуга, а наша недоработка".

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97

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98