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War in Ukraine and the Idea of the *Russian order*. Report

Part 3

Ideology of Old Rus — a myth of the past?

Vladimir Putin's speech of February 22, 2022 (which, as we now know, justifying Russia's attack on Ukraine) will go down in history as one of the most important speeches of his presidency. Not because it was particularly erudite, but because, drawing a comprehensive picture of Ukraine's recent history, fully presented the Russian state's contemporary policy based on the concept of the Russian order. He questioned the meaning of life of independent Ukraine, pointing out, one by one, the mistakes, mainly from the communist era, which in his opinion led to the formation of independent Ukraine. Firstly, he accused Lenin of mindless establishment of the Ukrainian republic and then pointed out the mistakes of Stalin and Khrushchev. Putin's speech, proving the unreasonableness of the existence of Ukraine detached from Russia, though it mainly referred to the Soviet era and was based on much older, 19th-century tsarist concept of the Russian order. And although the name itself was not mentioned in his speech, there can be no doubt that the policy of contemporary Putin-led Russia, especially in relation to the two former Western post-Soviet republics of Ukraine and Belarus, is based on this concept.

In order to better understand the idea of contemporary Russian policy, it is necessary to go back right to the end of the 19th century, when the dispute over the heritage of the former eastern lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth entered a new phase after the January Uprising, that took place in 1863. The conviction that the fundamental dispute over the future of the Belarusian and Ukrainian lands would take place between the Russian and Polish culture was shared by both the local and central Russian authorities of that time. In the post January Uprising reality, attempts were made in the western lands of the empire to make the increasing use of ever-growing Orthodox-Catholic animosities and the effects of the expropriation reform, introducing new social and legal relations in the relationship between the village and the mansion. Russian authorities made an attempt to use the peasant cause for their own political ends. The plan was to introduce concessions for peasants so that they could stand on their feet economically after the emancipation. Also at the level of culture and religion, the differences separating the two communities, peasants and nobles, were deliberately deepened. Efforts were made to ensure that the peasant would see a greater threat in the neighboring nobleman than in the tsarist official.

Under the concept of the lands of Western Russia, which was promoted with increasing intensiveness, among other things the term 'former lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania' was avoided in order to emphasize the historical connection of these areas with Russia. The most famous ideologist of the rapidly developing concept of the Old Rus was the son of a Uniate clergyman, Mikhail Kojalowicz, born in Kuznica Bialostocka. As an Orthodox Christian, he was very negative about the idea of the Union of Brest and the rapprochement with the Latin (Polish) culture. The eastern territories of the pre-partition Poland were treated by him as old Ruthenian lands, subjected to polonization through the church union of Brest (1596) and the political ties of Lithuania and the Crown. According to the propagated thesis, the area of the former Great Ruthenia was inhabited by one Ruthenian (Russian) nation,

consisting of three groups: Russians, Ukrainians and Western Russians (Belarusians). They were part of the East Slavic, Orthodox community. Based on this concept, the time of the Polish Commonwealth was portrayed as an episode in the Russian history of these lands, which interrupted the formation of a unified community based on the Ruthenian heritage, rooted in the history of the Kievan Rus. According to this idea, Ukrainians and Belarusians were not treated as separate nations, but only as branches of the great Russian community. Although the *Old Rus*' concept was not formally defined as an official political current, in practice it became an indicator of the governmental policy in the western provinces of the Russian Empire. This way of looking at the past of the empire's Western lands became the basis of the official historical descriptions. This concept attempted to reach the minds of the peasant masses mainly through the Orthodox Church. The Russian authorities considered the *Old Rus*' concept as the most obvious and natural solution for the Western Governorates of the Russian Empire, biding these lands most effectively, on an emotional level, to the rest of the tsarist state.

The first years of the existence of the communist state were undoubtedly the time of departure from the *Old Rus*' concept. According to Lenin's and then the party elites decision, the Ukrainian state was formed, which Vladimir Putin in his speech of February 22, 2022 pointed out as the biggest mistake of the Soviet revolution leader. Putin negated the sense of creating national republics instead of creating a single and unified communist state. Furthermore, he accused modern unthankful Ukrainians of destroying Lenin's monuments, instead of respecting him as the 'creator' of their state.

In the early years of the Soviet Union, under the influence of the instructions coming from Moscow, nation-creating elements were being strengthened in the policies of the Soviet republics. This was, among other things, the result of the beginning of Joseph Stalin's attempt to gain full power in the communist party. Through stronger nationalization of the party and state apparatus in the non-Russian republics, efforts were made to persuade a larger number of people to accept the changes. As part of these changes, the freedom of rewriting historic descriptions was enlarged. It was able to gain its more national character. In practice, this meant that at that time the supporters of the national Ukrainian or Belarusian concept, even the one written within the socialist system, gained an advantage over those who emphasized the strict connection between the Ukrainian or Belarusian and Russian heritage deriving from the Tsarist *Old Rus*' concept. At that time, being a communist did not necessarily mean resigning from the national elements.

In the 1930s the Soviet state was already pursuing the fully centralized national policy. It was the period of building the only one nation — the Soviet nation. Education was completely unified and children and young people who were getting familiar with the Soviet picture of history knew very little about the history of their own countries. The aim of all propaganda activities undertaken by the totalitarian Soviet state (the Stalinist model) was to build the Soviet community, the basis of which was to be the culture and history of Russia. Ukrainian and Belarusian heritage was inscribed in the soviet historical message. Some very minor elements of distinctiveness could only be found at the folklore level.

This policy was also pursued in the Eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic incorporated into the Soviet Union after September 17, 1939. The society, living in the Polish state in the interwar period and subject to the influence of Western culture, now underwent complete

sovietization in order to quickly overcome the differences between the eastern and western parts of Soviet Ukraine and Belarus.

After the end of the World War II, the idea of building the Soviet nation only grew stronger. The main objective of the education system was to show the history of the Soviet Union as a whole, of which the individual republics were just a small part. The history of Russia was presented in the textbooks only with the addition of the history of the nations that were included in the 19th century Russian Empire. The press of the time was also full of slogans like: *We, the Soviet people, or Soviet men/women, Soviet character*. The creation of one Soviet nation identified with the communist party (which, in turn, was identified with the communist way of thinking) became the basis of the entire state ideology. Everything could be hidden under the slogan 'nation' — `specific people, selected events, but also the strivers. The term 'Soviet nation' became the axis around which the entire multinational society of the Soviet Union was mobilized. In Ukraine and Belarus, a large part of the population began to believe in the existence of a Soviet nation, within which there were no differences between the Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian people. That way, Ukrainians and Belarusians became a part of the great nation, united by the idea of the October Revolution. They were proud of the power of their state, the Soviet Union. The official ideology, internationalist in its nature, for the Soviet Union's own internal use was being transformed into the concept of building a single political nation - the Soviet nation, immersed in Russian culture and language. Through the carefully and consistently constructed propaganda message, the Russian authorities managed to convince the public that communism and the Soviet nation within it was the only possible solution.

Since the 1960s, the events related to the World War II became increasingly important: they were supposed to unite the whole society. The message pertaining to the years of the great war was total in nature — from large state demonstrations to lectures, theatre performances, films, school academies. On the occasion of successive anniversaries, propaganda posters were issued to remind people of the great victory. The memory of the war was supposed to be present in almost every aspect of political and social life. In line with the concept of Soviet nation-building adopted after 1956 and reinforced in subsequent years during the years of the so-called Great Patriotic War — the entire Soviet nation was victorious. It is therefore no coincidence that the war period became the main axis around which Soviet citizens' identity was built. The whole Soviet nation made a sacrifice, whose particular nations were only a small part. The memory of the Great Patriotic War, especially the Victory Day, became the key historical moment around which much of the Soviet ideological message was constructed. May 9th was portrayed as a 'great memorable day' that should be remembered by everyone in the Soviet Union.

In the final years of the existence of the Soviet Union, only a few circles in Ukraine, mainly in the west, questioned the concept of the existence of the Soviet nation. In Belarus, the construction of a unified Soviet nation based on Russian-speaking culture proved to be even more successful. The idea of the new Soviet political nation was seemingly triumphant.

The beginning of Ukrainian independence coincided with the 'Time of Troubles' in Russia - the period of Boris Yeltsin's rule. The worse the economic situation became and the more time passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the more nostalgia for the great Soviet state grew in the hearts of its people. Attempts to bring Russia closer to Ukraine failed. In the

case of Belarus, the effects were better, but they were due not so much to Russian activity as to the actions of President Lukashenko.

After Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, the Russian public expected Russia's previous role and importance to be restored. It was realized that without maintaining the centrifugal tendencies (the war in Chechnya), and then without commencing the real expansion of Russian influence over the former, especially the post-Soviet Slavic republics (Ukraine and Belarus), it would not be possible to rebuild Russia's greatness. Putin, trying to shift between both relations — with Ukraine and Belarus, tried to expand the sphere of Russian influence. The *Old Rus'* concept has become a determinant of Moscow's policy again. Creating a vision of post-Soviet Russia with reference to the heritage of the Orthodox Church naturally correlated with the Russian-Orthodox order. After 2000, Vladimir Putin began to gradually implement the plan to strengthen Russia's influence. After 2000, Vladimir Putin proceeded to gradually implement his plan to strengthen Russia's sphere of influence.

Putin could not allow the rapprochement between Ukraine and the West, because it would mean, in his mind, not only the loss of this strategically important region, but the disturbance of the entire political concept he had been successively pursuing since coming to power. Without Ukraine, Russia cannot become a superpower, both from a military as well as historical and political point of view. Kiev, being the cradle of Russian culture, cannot be located in another country, not speaking about playing the role of the capital city of the Russia's enemy state. That is the way the whole concept of the Russian order would be destroyed. Moscow's perception is that only Russia is entitled to Kiev's Orthodox heritage. Moscow can share this heritage with Ukraine, even if it is formally independent, but only after fulfilling the basic condition - both countries must constitute one political and military structure.