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

Part 4

Moscow's model of annexation

The Russian attack of February 24, 2022 on Ukraine was preceded by the official recognition of the two separatist republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. This step did not surprise Western analysts who had expected Moscow to make the implementation of these measures. The policy of expanding the Russian sphere of influence by recognizing the 'independence' of parts of the former Soviet empire has already been used by Russia for years (for example in the Caucasus - the formal recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008).

The recognition on February 21, 2022 of the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics was also a natural consequence of the events of 2014, when the Western world was speechless watching Russia violate all standards of international law and absorb Ukraine's Crimea. It was hard to believe that we were actually dealing with this kind of operation in Europe.

The fact that Russia had no intention of stopping in Crimea or even absorbing fragments of the eastern part of the Ukrainian state was obvious to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, experienced by the legacy of Russian conquests in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries and the criminal expansion of Russian communism in the twentieth century, but not for Western European countries. After all, it was the 'peace-loving' Soviet Union that brought the liberation of Europe from Nazism. Could it be quite so vile as the countries of central and eastern Europe perceived it to be? Yes, the criminal nature of Stalin's regime was recognized, but there was no desire to equate it with Hitler's crimes. The mass murders, the world's largest system of prisons and labor camps — the Gulag, mass resettlements, etc. were treated as an internal matter of the Russian state. Reprehensible, but all in all acceptable.

However, Russia does not seem to care about the reaction of Europe and the rest of the world. After all, this type of annexation policy has been used for long decades. And despite initial pushback, it was always ultimately accepted by the West. So why would it be any different now? After all, the Soviet Union never invaded anyone and was never the aggressor. Admittedly, it used to successively expand its territorial possessions, but it always either defended itself (the attack by Nazi Germany) or merely listened to the requests of other nations 'wishing' to be part of the Russian communist state.

Similarly to Russia in 2014 and then in 2022, the Soviet Union in September 1939 participated in the aggression against Poland and wished to officially argue all its actions with higher reasons - in this case assuming them to be the protection of national minorities. The plan for the annexation of Polish lands, which had been prepared and then carefully implemented, was intended as a great propaganda spectacle aimed at convincing both its own citizens and Western public opinion of the legitimacy of the action taken. The duality of this policy was an inherent element of the totalitarian communist system.

The creation of a new administration in the occupied territories was extremely efficient and quick. The administrative apparatus of the provisional authorities grew within a few weeks. Despite the proclaimed slogans about the individuality of newly emerging structures, in

reality, they were composed of selected members of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Belarus (CP(b)B) or the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine (CP(b)U) from the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), that were highly experienced in party activities. Nikolai J. Yachimovich, 1st Secretary of the CP(b)B District Committee in Kopyl (a border town in the BSSR), described the moment of his 'election' as Chairman of the Provisional Board of the Augustow District as follows: '(...) I was called to Minsk. At the Central Committee they dressed us up in military uniforms. I was told that I had been appointed chairman of the Provisional Board of the Augustow District. I was given a short briefing. A group of about 30 of us gathered.'

The local population joined the ranks of the delegated, reliable party or army activists. The selection criteria was loyalty to the new authorities. People assigned to delegated to temporary boards positions at all levels were supposed to have an appropriate social background (preferably working-class or peasant), but also to unconditionally support the policy of the Soviet authorities. The appointed committees had considerable powers in administrative matters. Their tasks included controlling the work of civil servants, banks, industrial plants in the cities and preparing land reform in the countryside. In theory, they were also supposed to prevent theft, but in reality they were often involved in the private property robbery.

The real intensification of the propaganda gesture came with the start of the election campaign for the people's assemblies of Western Belarus and Western Ukraine. The establishment of the provisional authorities was only the first step towards the full implementation of the Soviet scenario of the 'legal' incorporation of the lands occupied after September 17, 1939 into the USSR. After the preliminary decisions contained in Directive 01 of September 16, 1939, announcing the convening of people's assemblies in the occupied territories, the central authorities in Moscow at the beginning of October began the final, practical specification of tasks. At the meeting on October 1, 1939, the Central Committee of the VKP(b) in Moscow passed a resolution entitled Problems of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus. The document with Stalin's personal approval, was prepared by a team consisting of Andrei Zhdanov (secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)), Nikita Khrushchev (first secretary of the Central Committee of the CP (b) U), Panteleimon Ponomarienko (first secretary of the Central Committee of the CP (b) B) and Lavrentiev Beria (head of the NKVD).

Stunned by the information noise and tired of the frequency of the meetings, the local population did not always realize what the actual purpose of the campaign was. The agitators themselves, not wanting to antagonize those attending the meetings, did not specify the actual purpose of the electoral farce. In their actions, they focused primarily on deepening the doom and gloom that had gripped a significant part of Polish society after the September defeat, and on eliminating faith in a possible future victory. Using methods demeaning both human and national dignity, efforts were made to create a feeling of inferiority in Polish society towards the Soviet system.

The elections to the People's Assembly of Western Belarus and the People's Assembly of Western Ukraine, scheduled for Sunday on October 22, 1939, were intended by their architects to be, above all, a kind of festival confirming the legitimacy of the occupant's actions. The intensive election campaign was to be concluded by mass participation of the population in the vote. In order to increase the effectiveness of the influence of the state

apparatus on citizens, all available Soviet forces in the occupied area were mobilized on the election day.

Simply voting was a perfect time for the soviet authorities to manipulate and falsify its results. Treating the universality of the vote in a typically instrumental way, all methods were allowed to guarantee ultimate success. In addition to the local population, officers and soldiers of the Red Army and officials arriving from the USSR also took part in the vote. People who were not even included in the electoral registers were also required to vote.

The momentum of the preparations undertaken by the Soviet authorities to "legally" sanction the military aggression was astonishing and terrifying. The local population asked themselves what was the purpose of this whole electoral farce: was it really only to consolidate the communist power in the occupied territories? Military strength of the aggressor, not the falsified election results decided about the actual affiliation of these lands to the USSR. The power of propaganda, actively supported by the security services was not fully understood. The world created by the soviet system was acceptable only when one believed in the created reality whilst rejecting all that argued with the image created by the propaganda. In order to function normally in the new reality, it was necessary to adopt the rules of life imposed by the state and with time, the difference between what was fictional and real got blurred.

As a consequence of the elections, the People's Assembly of Western Belarus was announced to convene on October 26, 1939 in Bialystok, and the People's Assembly of Western Ukraine in Lviv. The general version of the scenario of the meetings was that the deputies would first deal with the approval of the communist nature of the government, and then immediately proceed to incorporate, in accordance with the 'will' of the voters, the lands of Western Belarus and Western Ukraine into the Soviet Union. According to the adopted arrangements, the Soviet power and the Red Army had not acted as an aggressor, but only as a force that had finally made it possible for the local population to express their aspirations. After all, the proposal to incorporate the 'liberated' lands into the Soviet Union had been allegedly made by the local community itself. By convening people's assemblies, the Soviet authorities not only 'legally' normalized the status of the occupied territories, but at the same time, without their own official participation, became the owner of all the seized property.

The final act of 'legal' incorporation of the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic occupied by the USSR after September 17, 1939 took place in Moscow. The Plenipotentiary Commissions elected at the end of the meeting in both the Lviv and Bialystok sessions (each composed of 66 persons) travelled to Moscow to present, during the Fifth Session of the Supreme Council of the USSR, a request for the incorporation of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus into the USSR.

Wasn't this 1939 scenario repeated in 2014 in Crimea, when the local population expressed its will in the vote, and all that was left for Putin and - this time - the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation to do was to accept the will of the people?

It seemed that the time of hypocrisy from the years of the World War II ended up in Europe along with the collapse of the communist system. However, reality has shattered this belief. Dreaming of rebuilding its imperial position, Russia must, in accordance to the doctrine dated back to the 19th century, conquer new territories. And Russia is doing it in accordance with a pre-developed and often tried-and-tested scenario. Of course, the rhetoric of liberating an

oppressed community asking Moscow for help is only carried out for the benefit of its own citizens. Although the West did not accept this rhetoric, sooner or later it had to accept the changed reality anyway normalizing relations either with the Soviet Union or now with Russia. Moscow counts on the fact that the same will also happen now, after the aggression on Ukraine: first protests, then passivity, and acceptance in the end.

The Russian people in their mass dreaming of the return to Russia's imperial role also accept this rhetoric of conquest, according to which Russia does not attack or occupy, but only defends itself, taking into account the will of local communities on top of that. This type of message was always widespread in both Soviet and Russian propaganda. It is not a surprise that not only a significant proportion of 'ordinary' Russian citizens accept it. Even the head of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch of Moscow and the entire Russia, Kirill (Vladimir Gundiaev) is a believer of the non-aggression thesis. In his speeches, contrary to what the whole world sees with its own eyes, Russia is not the aggressor, it does not attack, it does not drop bombs on residential areas, it does not commit crimes, it only defends itself. Just like the Soviet Union, now Russia is not an aggressor, but it has always been and still is nothing more than a victim of the West and all that is associated with it instead. Before the World War II, it was supposed to be the aggression of capitalism; after the war — the expansive plans of NATO; commonly also it came to the 'decadent' policy of the European Union and its attempts to absorb even the holy Kievan Rus'. So, according to the slogans proclaimed by Moscow, does Russia not have the right to defend itself in such a situation? Just like in 1939, now also in 2022 — Russia is attacking, but only to defend itself!