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FROM AN IDEOLOGICAL WAR TO AN IDEOLOGY OF WAR: ALEKSANDR DUGIN'S ASSUMPTIONS OF NEO-EURASIANISM AND THEIR APPLICATION TO RUSSIAN PREPARATIONS FOR THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE²

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Abstract

This article compares the main aspects of Dugin's neo-Eurasianism with the content of two important texts published in 2021: Putin's article 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians' and the new National Security Strategy. These texts can be understood as part of ideological preparations for the war against Ukraine in 2022. The presence of elements of Russian nationalist ideology in these texts will make it possible to answer the question of whether the neo-Eurasian ideology is the authentic basis of Russian neo-imperialist policy or whether it is merely a useful propaganda façade.

Keywords: national ideology, eschatologism, anti-Occidentalism, imperialism, Russian-Ukrainian war.

Abstrakt

Od wojny ideologicznej do ideologii wojny: Założenia neoeurazjatyizmu Aleksandra Dugina i ich zastosowanie w rosyjskich przygotowaniach do wojny przeciwko Ukrainie

Artykuł porównuje główne aspekty Duginowskiego neoeurazjatyizmu z treścią dwóch ważnych tekstów opublikowanych w 2021 roku: artykułu Putina *O historycznej jedności Rosjan i Ukraińców* oraz nowej *Strategii bezpieczeństwa narodowego FR*. Teksty te można rozumieć jako część ideologicznego przygotowania do wojny przeciwko Ukrainie w 2022 roku. Obecność w nich elementów rosyjskiej ideologii nacjonalistycznej umożliwi odpowiedź na pytanie, czy neoeurazjatycka ideologia jest rzeczywistą podstawą rosyjskiej polityki neoimperialistycznej, czy też jest ona tylko użyteczną fasadą propagandową.

Słowa kluczowe: ideologia narodowa, eschatologizm, antyokcydentalizm, imperializm, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska.

Introduction

Since at least the beginning of the 21st century, Aleksandr Dugin has been portrayed as one of the leading ideologues of Russian conservatism and neo-imperialism in Western debates on contemporary Russian nationalist ideology. At times, Western authors have attempted to present him as a 'Kremlin ideologue' with influence over Vladimir Putin or the Russian political elite. Dugin seems to uphold this image of being an influential actor in Russian social life.³ Nevertheless, as a participant in Russian public debate, Dugin plays a marginal role. He does not have any measurable influence

³ See, e.g., an interview given by Dugin to a Polish magazine 'Do Rzeczy' where he is presented as 'Putin's advisor' (Globalizm i liberalizm to cywilizacja Antychrysta. Z Aleksandrem Duginem, rosyjskim filozofem, doradcą Władimira Putina, rozmawia Maciej Pieczyński. *Do Rzeczy*, 1/203, 8 Jan 2017).

on the theories of an ideological nature contained in Putin's public speeches. However, the rejection of the myth of Dugin as a 'Kremlin ideologue' does not mean that an analysis of his thought is irrelevant to understanding Russia's contemporary ideological evolution. On the contrary, an examination of Dugin's thought is extremely useful. This is because Dugin, in a radicalised form, reveals ideas that are permanently present in the history of Russian thought and that form the basis of Russian nationalist and imperialist ideologies.

In strategic documents on Russia's national security and statements by Vladimir Putin and other representatives of the Russian elite, especially in 2021, we can see an increasing emphasis on ideological issues. A new Russian ideology, based on a specific set of values (the so-called "traditional" or "spiritual values") and a rejection of those associated with Western democratic societies, is to become the basis for the formation and development of Russia as a separate civilisation and, at the same time, as a superpower with a sphere of influence. The constituent elements of this ideology, exposed increasingly strongly in the year preceding Russia's open military aggression against Ukraine, show much convergence with the basic tenets of Dugin's neo-Eurasianism. The claim that the ideology contained in more recent Russian strategic documents and statements by government officials depends on Dugin's thought is not provable and seems far from the truth. Nevertheless, these similarities indicate that both Dugin's thought and the ideological layer of the language of Russian public debate share a common origin in the evolving current of socio-political thought over the centuries of Rus'/Russian history.

This article aims to determine whether the ideological assumptions of Dugin's neo-Eurasianism are revealed in the language of the Russian authorities during the period of immediate preparations for the war against Ukraine. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has been ongoing since the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol and Russian involvement in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014. It is also reasonable to assume that the plan for the Russian military aggression against Ukraine had been developed and refined since at least 2014. Nevertheless, the unequivocal pro-war orientation of Russia's fully state-controlled media became apparent in 2021. That year saw the publication of key documents and statements that can – especially from today's perspective – be regarded as elements of direct, mainly ideological and political, preparations for the war. Two of these texts are the most important – first, Vladimir Putin's programmatic article 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians,' published in Russian and Ukrainian on the Kremlin's website on the 12th of July; second, the new National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation signed by Putin on the 2nd of July.

In order to establish what ideological content related to Dugin's neo-Eurasianism is present in these documents, we will first show its main elements. Then, in the second section, we will highlight the analogous elements in the indicated documents. Finally, in the third part, we will, in the light of the lively scholarly debate on the subject, offer an answer to the question of whether the neo-Eurasian ideology is the authentic basis of Russian neo-imperialist policy or whether it is merely a useful propaganda façade.

The main tenets of Dugin's neo-Eurasianism in the context of contemporary Russian imperial policy

Dugin considers himself a continuator of Russian Eurasianism. He believes that under changed political and historical conditions, he can develop the ideas of Russian Eurasians by emphasising the non-European character of the Russian civilisation. Nevertheless, contrary to these declarations, Dugin's thought fundamentally deviates from the basic assumptions of Russian Eurasianism, which reached its climax of development in the 1920s and 1930s in the milieu of Russian 'White Emigration' after the Bolshevik Revolution. Dugin's historiography has much more in common with older currents of Russian socio-political thought, most notably Russian Old Believer eschatologism (Składanowski and Borzęcki 2022: 70). Despite Dugin's repudiation of westernisation, which was initiated in Russia by Peter the Great, and of communist ideology, his thought also contains clear imperialist elements, which were also evident in the ideology of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

Russian *émigré* Eurasianism of the interwar period had limited significance as political or social thought. Its ideological centre was a desire to valorise Asian elements in Russian culture in an attempt to de-Europeanise Russia and reverse the process of westernisation initiated by Peter the Great (Berdyayev 2017: 12–15; Laruelle 2012: 39; Linklater 2021: 4–5; Składanowski 2019: 67). Dugin has a different starting point in his historiography, the development of which leads him to propose a new Russian national and state ideology. He emphasises the Asian elements of Russian culture and the sources of the norms of social life less and the distinctiveness of Russia more – from both European and Asian sources. For Dugin, Russia is a separate civilisation that has emerged from an original synthesis of European and Asian elements. This thesis has become increasingly popular in Russian public debate since the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Converging views have been expressed by Vladimir Putin, among others. Thus, Dugin does not seek to valorise Asian elements, but to separate Russia from Europe and Asia as a distinct civilisational entity.

This fundamental difference between Russian Eurasianism and Dugin's neo-Eurasianism has a crucial ideological consequence. Dugin's thought, as a rule, does not value Asia and, therefore, the contribution of the Asian peoples that make up the contemporary multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Russian society. Despite his verbal declarations, 'Greater Russian' nationalism is evident in his writings. He treats the demographic transformation of contemporary Russia, also expressed in the growth of the non-Slavic population, as a threat to Russia. He believes that the Russian (Slavic) population is and must remain the basis of Russian society as the source and mainstay of its cultural identity. Similar views cannot be derived from Eurasianism. They are a transformation of Russian exclusivism and nationalism.

In the context of contemporary political applications, it is worth mentioning three aspects of Dugin's neo-Eurasianism, understood here primarily as a historiographic concept and, therefore, of a limited scientific value, but with the potential to influence the direction of political discourse. These aspects are: eschatologism, anti-Occidentalism and imperialism.

Eschatologism

Dugin's eschatologism refers directly to the views of the Old Believers, which he sees as an inspiration. In Dugin's secularised version, eschatologism is expressed in the belief that Russia has a special mission in world history. It can only fulfil it by following a 'distinct path' clearly different from those of the East and the West. This vague belief, however, has consequences for state ideology. Russia is, for Dugin, a supra-historical entity. Specific state structures (Kyivan Rus', Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or the Russian Federation) are only its temporally contingent concretisations. This also means that the Russian Federation – as a contemporary concretisation – is the sole heir of Kyivan Rus'. Neither Ukraine nor Belarus can play this role. Likewise, the culture of Kyivan Rus' can only be fully manifested and developed in Russian culture, namely that of Moscow. Ultimately, Dugin's views lead to questioning the ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity, as well as the distinctiveness of Ukrainians and Belarusians.

Dugin's eschatologism also has a second functional ideological side. It is rooted in Russian Manichaeism – the belief that the eternal conflict between good and evil is the fight of the Holy Rus' against an unholy world. In Dugin's interpretation, there is an inherent struggle in the history and identity of the Rus'/Russia. War is part of Russian identity and, as such, has an exclusively positive dimension. As Dugin writes, the 'Russian people live by war' (Dugin 2015b: 10).

Anti-Occidentalism

Dugin's thought is anti-Western. This anti-Occidentalism is by no means an original feature of his work. On the contrary, anti-Occidentalism is an enduring feature of Russian culture (Berdyayev 2006: 26–27; Tsygankov 2016: 8). With some weakening during the period of attempts at superficial westernisation of the Russian Empire, it was also a constituent idea of the Russian state ideology. Dugin's anti-Occidentalism, however, is total (Składanowski and Borzęcki 2020: 69). He explicitly refers to the United States, which he understands as a synthesis of the West, as the centre of world evil (Dugin 2014a: 633). He sees the West as the eternal enemy and the primary existential danger to Russia. He explicitly demands the rejection of the values inherent in Western democratic societies and the dominant way of life stemming from the Western anthropology (Dugin 2014c: 67; Dugin 2015a: 146–147).

Dugin's anti-Occidentalism focuses on one key aspect of his historiosophy: anti-individualism (Dugin 2017: 140). It deserves a special mention here, as it is the theoretical foundation of Dugin's reflections on the human person, society, and the state. In rejecting the values of the West, Dugin is particularly strongly opposed to the recognition of the autonomy of the human person whose rights and dignity would derive from being a person rather than from belonging to a community or manufactured structures such as society and the state (Dugin 2014a: 516; Dugin 2014c: 112–116). In this, Dugin undoubtedly draws on Orthodox anthropology, which fundamentally questions human dignity and rights in isolation from the community. In socio-political terms, this was expressed by the Russian Orthodox Church's resistance to introducing the concept of human rights into Russian legislation in the 1990s (Stoeckl 2014: 43–45). Dugin argues that the true human being, in the most appropriate sense, is the

‘empire’, not the individual (Dugin 2014a: 142). The individual becomes human only in a community that is concretised in the society and the state. For this reason, the idea of a civil society is, for Dugin, unacceptable (Dugin 2014b: 460–461). In the Russian tradition, the subject of social life is not the individual/citizen, but the state. It is not the state that serves the citizen, but the citizen who serves the state. Such radical anti-individualism opposes the constitution of the Russian Federation, which states: ‘The human person, their rights and freedoms are the highest value. Recognition, preservation, and defence of the rights and freedoms of a person and citizen are the state’s duty’ (Article 2). It also declares that the people are the sovereign and only source of power in Russia (Article 3 sec. 1). For these reasons, we can assume that this aspect of Dugin’s ideology cannot find reception in official Russian political discourse.

Imperialism

The anti-individualism that underpins Dugin’s anthropology and axiology leads to imperialism. In Dugin’s understanding, imperialism has a much deeper meaning than just pursuing Russia’s military, political, or economic expansion – especially in the post-Soviet area. In his view, only the state has real value. Moreover, in the history of the world, only great states (empires) that, above political or economic structures, can produce civilisation or are the main centres of a civilisation count. Dugin also assumes that Russia can only exist as an empire (Dugin 2014a: 142; Tsygankov 2008: 771). For this reason, he regards Russia as a separate civilisation. Moreover, he does not allow for the possibility that there could be states truly independent of Russia in the post-Soviet area, which he considers to be a ‘Russian strategic space’ (Dugin 2015d: 147; Dugin 2018: 22). Dugin’s imperialism reveals itself in the belief that the existence and development of smaller nations depend on empires and that the sovereignty of states is relative (Dugin 2015a: 451–455; Shlapentokh 2007: 233–234).

Dugin’s imperialism is particularly strongly expressed in his theses regarding Ukraine, published since Russia’s annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol in 2014. Dugin rejected the possibility of a separate Ukrainian nation with its own language, history, and culture (Dugin 2015c: 107, 136; Dugin 2018: 22). He allowed only for some autonomous Ukrainian existence under conditions of Russian subjugation. For these reasons, Dugin demanded an armed intervention against Ukraine in 2014 and 2015 (Shekhovtsov 2017: 192). His ideas were radicalised after Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine on the 24th February 2022. In public speeches, he now demands the physical extermination of Ukrainians fighting against the Russian invaders, rejecting any thought of an independent Ukraine.

State ideology in pre-war Russian documents

It is surprising how many elements of Dugin’s historiosophy and ideology are present in two publications of a strategic and political nature, which we propose to call “pre-war documents”. These examples differ in their natures and objectives. Vladimir Putin’s article (Putin, online) is more of a historiosophic reflection than a historical one, and it attempts to justify the Russian policy towards Ukraine that has been pur-

sued since 2014. The National Security Strategy (*Strategiâ...*, online), on the other hand, is a standard strategic document indicating threats to national security and the state's priorities as well as planned actions regarding national security. Despite these fundamental differences, the similarities in the ideological layer are striking and cannot be considered coincidental.

Eschatologism

Although Putin's article 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians' is primarily an attempt to reinterpret history, it reveals the Manichaean eschatologism inherent in the contemporary radical right-wing Russian thought. In Putin's view, the perpetrators of the division between Russians and Ukrainians are external and hostile forces. These external forces are not clearly defined, but Putin repeatedly points to the negative role of Western states and the pro-Western-oriented Ukrainian elite – in both the past and under current conditions. According to Putin, the main aim of these forces is to destroy the unity of Russians and Ukrainians who are indeed 'one people'. As an example of actions destroying this profound spiritual unity, Putin points to establishing the Orthodox Church in Ukraine as independent of Moscow.

The 2021 National Security Strategy is dominated by a vision of Russia as a state experiencing increasing threats, primarily of an external type. The sources of these threats are both foreign states and transnational corporations (sec. 7). However, the threats faced by Russia are not only of a military nature. Russia is experiencing attempts to undermine its integration activities in the post-Soviet area (sec. 17) and to form its negative image in the world (sec. 19). The main means of conducting particularly intensive anti-Russian information campaigns is the Internet, which is controlled by the West (sec. 52–53). Against this background, the strategy devotes a surprising amount of space to portraying Russia as a state characterised by exceptional moral excellence. The strategy singles out 'the defence of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, culture, and historical memory' as one of Russia's national security priorities and devotes much attention to it (sec. 84–93). Russia's moral superiority is evidenced by the values that are supposed to be the basis of the Russian state and society. The document explicitly lists the following spiritual-moral values: life, dignity, patriotism, civic responsibility (*graždanstvennost'*), creative work, humanism, mercy, justice, collectivism, mutual help and respect, service to the homeland and responsibility for its fate, as well as high moral ideals, human rights and freedoms, and strong families, in addition to the priority of the spiritual over the material, the historical memory and continuity of generations, and unity of the peoples of Russia (sec. 91). The defence of traditional values is necessary for Russian citizens in the face of external pressure (sec. 11).

Anti-Occidentalism

Putin takes a strongly anti-Western position. The West has been for centuries the main perpetrator of the divergence of the historical paths of Russia and Ukraine. In Putin's view, from a historical perspective, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had an unambiguously negative role to play for the people of the present-day Ukraine. It should be noted, however, that in his historiosophic reflection Putin refers to

Ukrainians then as ‘Malorossians’ (inhabitants of Little Russia). Unlike the Russian Empire, in which the people of Little Russia (‘Malorossiya’) were supposedly free, in the commonwealth, they experienced oppression. For this reason, Putin considers the stages of the Russian Empire’s conquest of the lands of ‘Malorossiya’ to have been a liberation process. Similarly, Putin regards the annexation of western Ukrainian lands to the Soviet Union after the outbreak of the Second World War as their ‘return’. For these reasons, he views positively only those political forces that sought to unite Ukraine (‘Little Russia’) within Russia (‘Greater Russia’) at the end of the First World War. In his opinion, Ukrainian independence tendencies were controlled and inspired by the Germans. Similarly, the Ukrainians who cooperated with Poland against the Bolsheviks during the Polish-Bolshevik War (1919–1921), like Symon Petlyura, acted against the genuine good of the people. Ukraine is under external control today as well, primarily under that of the United States and the European Union. The West thus seeks to limit the cooperation between Russia and Ukraine and even to create an ‘anti-Russia,’ to which Russia can never agree.

Separately, it is worth noting another essential ideological element. According to Putin, the actions of the West were one of the two factors (along with Lenin’s intentions) that have led to the idea of a separate Ukrainian nation and state. According to Putin, since the end of the 19th century, ‘among the Polish elite and a certain part of the Malorussian intelligentsia, views about the Ukrainian nation separate from the Russian one appeared and strengthened’. The Austro-Hungarian authorities, which controlled Galicia until the end of the First World War, were also responsible for the emergence of the idea of a Ukrainian nation.

In the National Security Strategy, anti-Western themes are linked to the portrayal of Russia’s situation as being under an increasing threat. It is nothing new in Russian political discourse to point to the alleged aspirations of the West to preserve global hegemony (sec. 7). In the document, however, there is a clear ideological dimension in pointing to the West’s aspirations to destroy traditional Russian spiritual and moral values. The strategy directly accuses the United States and its allies, as well as multinational corporations and non-governmental organisations, of doing so. The West is trying to psychologically influence Russian citizens to destroy social unity. Western actions, such as ‘information-psychological diversions’ and the westernisation of culture, threaten Russia’s ‘cultural sovereignty’ (sec. 88).

Imperialism

In Putin’s programmatic, anti-Ukrainian article, imperialism is the central ideological motif. As a rule, Putin does not use the terms ‘Ukrainians’ and ‘Ukraine’ in a historical context. He believes that Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians are one people, historically formed on the lands of the ancient Rus’ (in doing so, he avoids using the historically grounded term Kyivan Rus’). The historical development of the Rus’ led to Moscow becoming the heart and centre of the unification of the dispersed Rus’ lands. This Putinian historical vision cannot occur without deprecating the Ukrainian language and culture. According to Putin, the Ukrainian language emerged as a dialect (*góvor*) because of long centuries of separation from Moscow. The unity and statehood of Ukraine are also not justified. Apart from the actions of the West indicated

above, the responsibility for the creation of Ukraine lies with Lenin. Moreover, the separate Ukrainian national consciousness resulted from the Soviet policy of the 1920s and 1930s, which valued the cultures and languages of the union republics (*korenizaciâ*). The eastern areas that formed the Ukrainian republic during the Soviet period ('Novorossiia' and Crimea) have no historical or cultural links with the contemporary Ukraine. Putin, therefore, claims that the contemporary Ukraine 'is completely and fully a child of the Soviet era'. This leads him to conclude that Ukraine cannot develop separately from Russia if it is to remain true to its own culture and history.

Most of the content of the 2021 National Security Strategy, which reveals Russian imperialism, refers to the need for a stronger integration role for Russia in the post-Soviet area, as well as a more active creation of international policy, including outside Eurasia. Nevertheless, it should be noted that while declaring its willingness to develop international relations based on respect for international law, the strategy provocatively identifies Abkhazia and South Ossetia as areas with which Russia should strengthen cooperation (sec. 101.5). There is also an ideological overtone in the declaration that Russian security policy aims to 'strengthen fraternal ties between the Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian peoples' (sec. 101.20). This is significant because Ukraine is not mentioned even once in the document, in contrast to the 2015 Strategy.

Discussion: Ideology – The basis or façade of Russian neo-imperialism

Under the conditions of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, it is a truism to recall that many Western scholars denied until recently that ideological motives guided Vladimir Putin. Prominent scholars in Russian studies, such as Marlène Laruelle (2020a: *passim*; 2020b: 98–99), rejected the idea of the system of power and control over society built by Putin since 2000 as fascist.

Until February 2022, the predominant view in the Western discussion of Russian studies was that Russia – although it did not meet the criteria of a democratic state in the Western sense – was subject to rational interpretation. Putin was also regarded as a rational politician, pursuing understandable goals of a political and economic nature with quick and decisive actions (Sakwa 2019: 66–67). These goals were to strengthen Russia's dominance in the post-Soviet area, increase rapprochement with China, and oppose US expansion in Central and Eastern Europe. The political goals of Putin's Russia were also to be realised in cultural policy, which was a form of Russian 'soft power' (Sergunin and Karabeshkin 2015: 356, 360). A key element of this policy was the prominence of traditional values and norms, including moral principles that would supposedly guide the life of Russian society in contrast to the 'decadent' West. The central thesis of the consensus of Western scholars, aiming to portray Putin's Russia as a predictable state with a rational foreign policy, was that ideologies – including the extreme right-wing, nationalist, and ultra-Orthodox types – do not have any real influence on Russian politics. To some extent, this argument has been lent credence by more recent research indicating that the ideological aspect does not play a significant role in Russian foreign policy (Curanović 2021: 112–119).

However, the war against Ukraine and its ideological justification – stated by both Putin and other government officials, as well as by the propagandistic, fully state-controlled media – make us approach the idea of the lack of the ideological justification of Russia's policy with more caution. Russia's war against Ukraine cannot be explained logically by reference to political and economic interests or military threats. Moreover, the political processes accompanying the war reveal their ideological roots. This is particularly true of the repeatedly declared plans to hold referendums in the occupied Ukrainian territories and to annex them to the Russian Federation. The measures taken in the occupied territories to reduce the importance of the Ukrainian language are also ideologically motivated, including through the complete elimination of education in Ukrainian and the destruction of Ukrainian literature and other cultural monuments. Unlike war crimes committed by the Russian army against Ukrainian civilians, these actions cannot be justified other than by appealing to an ideology present in pre-war Russian public discourse.

Conclusions

An analysis of the content of two significant publications, which we have identified as pre-war documents, has indicated that, despite their different nature, they contain an astonishingly abundant ideological load. The ideological aspect of these documents is consistent with the most radical theses of Aleksandr Dugin's neo-Eurasianism. Indeed, there are no grounds to speak of a direct dependence of the analysed documents on Dugin, nor of his actual influence on Russian political life. Nevertheless, this convergence is not coincidental.

In our view, this convergence is due to two factors. First, Dugin, in his historiosophic synthesis, proposes a systematic account of Russian nationalism and imperialism that collects the ideological elements present in the Russian intellectual tradition. For this reason, his nationalism and imperialism are consistent and multifaceted. Second, the authorities of the Russian Federation, after 2014, in the process of preparations for the war with Ukraine, decided to motivate their actions explicitly ideologically in terms of domestic and foreign policy. The initial ideological preparation consisted of the strategic documents produced after 2014, the amendments to the law that limited the scope of civil freedoms, and the constitutional amendments made in 2020. The closer ideological preparation consisted of the actions taken in 2021 – above all, the publication of the two documents discussed in this article and the political discourse and media coverage in Russia inspired by them.

Without questioning strictly political methods of explaining Putin's thinking, we pose the idea that his actions cannot be properly understood without considering the ideological element as one of the key factors shaping Russian domestic and foreign policy. This ideological element, in turn, consists of extreme nationalist and imperialist theses, a systemic exposition of which can be found in Dugin's works.

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