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# Putin's Great Patriotic War: Russia's Securitization of the West and Humiliation Narratives Surrounding the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The paper seeks to analyze Vladimir Putin's securitization of the West in his speech at a military parade in Moscow's Red Square on the 9th of May 2022. Thereby, the article employs political discourse analysis and Copenhagen School's securitization theory to show how Putin uses speech acts to transform the West into an existential threat and justify the adoption of extraordinary measures, such as the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, the research refers to Richard Sakwa's concepts of "cold peace" and "neorevisionism" to make sense of the emergence of such discourse. By using humiliation narratives and evoking patriotic images, Putin exacerbates a sense of victimhood and historical right in the Russian audience that emphasizes the state's isolationism and historic role to fight against the "Nazified" West and Ukraine. Putin also promotes an image of Russia's superiority, supporting cultural and civilizational pluralism and diversity ending the pre-existing Western universalism. The paper concludes that with these practices, the Russian president manages to not only successfully securitize the West but also spur significantly the public's support for his war.

**Keywords:** Putin, securitization, discourse analysis, Ukraine, West, United States, invasion, Russia, neorevisionism, Europe.

## Introduction

"I spoke about our biggest concerns and worries, and about the fundamental threats which irresponsible Western politicians created for Russia consistently, rudely and unceremoniously from year to year."- said the President of Russia during his speech on the day of the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (Kremlin.ru, 2022). This statement is just one of the many instances over the last months where Vladimir Putin has painted a picture of Russia as being the target of a Western and Ukrainian plot-directed war with the ultimate aim of breaking up and destroying the Russian Federation. The frequent use of such imagery in Putin's speeches indicates that it is not another "whataboutism" or just a linguistic gymnastic. Instead, as the paper argues, these are speech acts aiming to depict the West<sup>3</sup> as an existential threat to Russia's security and identity.

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<sup>3</sup> Inspired by the work of Oleksandra Seliverstova (2015) and her concept of Imaginary West, the paper refers to West as the imaginary construction of the West within the discourse of the populist based on geographic, cultural, and socio-political distinctions (e.g., the division Islam-Christianity, South-North, developing and developed countries).

Securitization in International Relations occurs when a state or other influential actors (‘securitizing actors’) define some issue as a vital interest under existential threat, implying that someone must take forceful action in its defence. The paper argues that by using polemic discourse and humiliation narratives, Putin seeks to securitize the West and “create and bolster the perception that the Russian state is existentially threatened”, in order to keep the population in ‘survival mode’” (Østbø, 2017: 212-13). In parallel, the Russian leader has employed the ideational state of emergency to either adopt or justify extraordinary policies domestically and externally. To showcase these leitmotifs, the paper proceeds with the discourse analysis of Vladimir Putin’s May 9 speech at a military parade in Moscow’s Red Square marking the anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it presents the theoretical framework and methodology, namely securitization theory and political discourse analysis, which are used to make sense of how the West developed into a security issue and a justification for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Then, it proceeds with a brief analysis of the historical context behind Russia-Western relations that help understand the emergence of this discourse and its success. Finally, the paper examines Vladimir Putin’s statements referring to the West during his speech on 9<sup>th</sup> of May to test empirically the hypotheses.

### **Securitization theory and methodology**

Securitization in International Relations is the process that describes how state actors transform a specific issue into being a matter of security in order to adopt extraordinary measures in the name of that security. Securitizing actors are successful when they manage to securitize the issue and construct it into an existential threat for a particular audience. In lieu of traditional approaches to security in the fields that treat threats as natural given or inherent in human nature (see; Realism), it claims that security issues become security problems by securitizing actors (Wæver 1995: 55; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998: 24-6). Therefore, it is a highly studied concept in Constructivism because of its focus on the ideational factors (which are historically and socially constructed) that enable the securitization and the adoption of extraordinary policies.

Securitization was first introduced by Ole Wæver in 1995 to broaden security beyond the narrow concepts of state and military security (Buzan et al. 1998; Williams 2003: 512-13). Wæver was connected with the Copenhagen School, which considers security as an outcome of a special social process or speech acts rather than an objective condition (Williams 2003: 513). For the scholars of this school, speech acts are rhetorical structures that decision-makers use to frame an issue as a security matter (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998: 26). They are central to the securitization theory

as they show that words do not merely describe reality, but constitute reality, which in turn triggers certain responses. As such, threats are not just threats by nature but they are constructed as threats through discourse.

Speech acts require the existence of an audience that collectively agrees on the nature of the threat and supports taking extraordinary measures. Only through this acceptance can the issue transcend beyond normal politics, permitting political elites to break normal procedures and rules to fight for security (Balzacq, 2005: 173). Thereby, the securitizing actors frequently seek to convince the audience by drawing attention and exaggerating the urgency and the gravity of the threat, creating what the German philosopher, Carl Schmitt (2007), refers to as a state of exception. Emotions, policy tools, images, and other means are also mobilized to build feelings and thoughts about the critical vulnerability of a subject (see: Balzacq, 2015). For example, by evoking images from World War II, Putin emphasized Russia's moral quest for the de-Nazification of Ukraine.

Scholars have long highlighted Putin's use of securitization to legitimize his actions domestically and abroad. Indicatively, Edward Bacon et al (2016) have argued that many developments in Russia's domestic politics can be explained by the discourse of "securitization" and Russia leadership's rhetoric of existential threat used to adopt measures increasingly perceived as authoritarian. Similarly, Beril Nygren (2007) pointed out that Putin has securitized Western actions as a threat to the Slavic identity both in Russia and in the near abroad while creating a firm counter identity based on the rejection of the liberal-democratic-centered world order. Other scholars like Håvard Bækken and Johannes Due Enstad (2020) displayed the Russian leader's attempts to securitize national history and identity.

The paper seeks to contribute to the existing debate by analyzing how the West developed into a security issue and a justification for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Hence, it employs political discourse analysis (PDA) that focuses on the comprehension of the nature and function of political discourse and the role discourse plays in producing, maintaining, abusing, and resisting power in contemporary society (Van Dijk, 1997: 11-15). It assumes that politicians use words to affect political attitudes and opinions, manipulate public opinion, manufacture political consent, or legitimate political power. At the same time, the discourse functions itself as a manifestation of the intentions and beliefs of the politicians and the parties they represent. Within the context of this research, this methodology thus allows the establishment of the rationale, the social context, and the discursive practices used by Vladimir Putin to securitize the West in his speech on 9th May 2022.

**Historical background: The emergence of Russia's neo-revisionism and the cold peace**

After the end of the Cold War, Russia found itself in unfavourable circumstances. The West had not only established a narrative of superiority emphasizing its victory in the Cold War but also continue to expand its influence in spheres of political influence traditionally belonging to the Soviet Union such as Central European states (Friedan, 1998). Hence, the American commitment to not enlarge NATO "one inch" eastwards, let alone incorporate all former Soviet clients into the Western military alliance, was soon violated with NATO's enlargement in 1999. This "expansionism" led to the accumulation of frustration and the generation of resistance on the part of an excluded country, which became very prominent after the 2008 Western recognition of Kosovo (see: Mullholland, 2007). It became apparent that the traditional perception of Russia as "a country dying to attack Western Europe" remained, and in structural terms, the cold war never really ended (Friedman, 1998).

The political scholar Richard Sakwa (2013, 4) highlights that the structures that characterized the Cold-War period are still in place, but without the realization of its existence as there is no "acceptance of the logic of behavior." He highlights that the post-cold war era is one of a "cold peace": a term he introduces to describe "an unstable geopolitical truce, typically found in inter-war periods, where the 'defeat' of the one side is not accepted as legitimate, while the 'victory' of the other side cannot be consolidated" (Ibid.: 4). Under the new circumstances, the victim status provides motives for conflict for one side, while the victory is bitter and unsatisfying for the other, hence leading to "powerful inherent tensions and endlessly iterated clashes of perceptions and misperceptions" (Ibid.).

The existing "cold peace" prompted Putin to form a neo-revisionist behavior which is "more than mere resentment, reflecting the hurt of the weak and the outcast, but frustration that the international society as constituted at the close of the Cold War had been unable to adapt to the new circumstances (Ibid.: 10). Russia has approached the existing cold peace by neither challenging the international order; instead, it seeks to modify the international system in a way that gives Russia what is perceived to be its due weight (Ibid.: 11-12). That is why regardless of the existing structures, the West and Putin have continued to cooperate on issues like curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions (Hirsh, 2022). Another manifestation of Russia's neo-revisionism is the discourse promoting cultural and civilizational pluralism and diversity ending the pre-existing Western universalism (Ibid.: 10-12). This discourse seeks to criticize the Western hypocrisy and show "the gap between the proclaimed values of the Atlantic order and its practical manifestations" but also "the [Western} negligence of Eastern narrative" (Sakwa, 2014).

Nonetheless, Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 signalizes a new phase in the cold peace between Russia and the West. In lieu of the last years, the Russian leader has confronted directly the West, threatening Western countries and helping Ukraine with missile strikes and nuclear attacks. As the paper shows, by using speech acts and drawing back on its neo-revisionism, Putin has sought to securitize the West to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

### **Analysis: Russia's securitization of the West in his speech on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2022**

The examined speech is not the first instance of Vladimir Putin's targeting the West. As Julie Wilhelmsen and Anni R. Hjermann (2022: 8) show, Russia has sought to securitize either the United States as an aggressive and offensive power that is pursuing global dominance and the leader of the Western camp or NATO and the EU as expansive forces that forget their own security at the expense of Russia. Against the "axis of evil", Putin is just reacting adequately and adopting an analog response to what the West first does to Russia. In parallel, the securitization is supported by the re-articulation of Russia's identity to fit its neo-revisionist role in the international system. The Russian state as such is portrayed as a legitimate, proud power, with rich culture, heritage, and traditions of its own and a historical protector of diversity and universal moral principles (Ibid.: 9-11).

Similar leitmotifs are also present on 9th May. Putin starts his speech by promoting a state-centered and patriotic view of Russia's victory in the Great Patriotic War, which has been "enshrined in the world history forever as a triumph of the united Soviet people" (Bloomberg, 2022). As Bækken and Enstad (2020: 344) point out, images of military achievement aim "to rally the nation around a positive and heroic memory - to encourage respect and love for the Russian state, historically and today" (Bloomberg, 2022). Such discourse has also simultaneously another function: it creates an illusion of Russia's historical right to protect not only itself and its citizens but also the global order from forces of evil. For example, following the vivid imagery, Putin states that: "it is our duty to preserve the memory of those who defeated Nazism and (...) thwart the horror of another global war" (Ibid.).

For Putin, it is this historical right that prompts Russia to act as a protector and wage "humanitarian" interventions in its region to protect not only the Russian nationals but also its Ukrainian "brothers" from its Nazi government (see: Putin's speech on the 21st of February). Indicatively, he underlines that despite all the controversies, Russia has "always advocated the establishment of an equal and indivisible security system for the entire international community" – a discourse that goes in line with its neo-revisionist policies. However, although Russia adheres to the rules and seeks open dialogue



with the West, the latter has a total disregard for Russia's interests and instead focuses only on the fulfillment of its "evil" agenda.

In his speeches, Putin exacerbates a sense of victimhood for Russia and promotes an oppressor's image for the West. As Vamik D. Volkan (1988) highlights, the "humiliation" narratives" forge a link between national heritage and "chosen traumas"- the selective remembrance of persecutory events to ascribe them an excessive amount of emotional and historic meaning. He as such exploits Russia's isolationism and the existing "cold peace" structures to spark "entitlement ideologies of restoration and revenge" (Volkan & Fowler, 2009: 214); while simultaneously he omits Russia's expansionism in the region. Yet, the tension that emerges between past and present serves as a political tool that "weaponizes the emotion of nostalgia" (Stanley, 2018: 19–20) and assigns new political meaning to national myths and memories (Kinnvall, 2018: 525). These narratives also help evoke feelings of patriotism and the creation of a sense of historical and continuous threat, thus facilitating the induction of enemy/foe distinction and the securitization of the Other (Schmitt, 2007: 26-28).

A successful securitization consists of three steps: (1) identification of existential threats; (2) emergency action; and (3) effects on inter-unit relations (audience) by breaking free of rules (Buzan et al. 1998: 6). Not surprisingly, following Putin's appeal for victimhood and "chosen traumas," continues his speech by labeling the West as a security issue. To create a sense of existential threat, he states that: "Kiev declared that it could attain nuclear weapons. The NATO bloc launched an active military build-up on the territories adjacent to us" (Bloomberg, 2022). He also draws parallels to the Great Victory Day by identifying the Ukrainian government with "neo-Nazis and Banderites backed by the United States" (Ibid.). By upgrading the West and its ally Ukraine to a security matter, Putin seeks to proceed to the second step—the adoption of emergency action. Therefore, supported by graphic and polemic images, Putin portrays his decision to launch a "pre-emptive strike at the aggression" as a "forced, timely, and the only correct decision" (Ibid.)

To justify the invasion, the Russian leader returns to the pre-existing victimhood narrative to boost the securitizing's move-impact on the audience. Seeking to underline Western hypocrisy and exploit the traumas of the existing "cold peace," he highlights again the double standards guiding the US, NATO, and Europe's policies. Furthermore, he juxtaposes the Western hypocrisy to Russia's patriotic, moral, and pluralistic behavior in the modern system: "The United States began claiming their exceptionalism, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, thus denigrating not just the entire world but also their satellites (..) But we are a different country (..) We will never give up our

love for our Motherland, our faith and traditional values, our ancestors' customs, and respect for all peoples and cultures" (Ibid.).

These statements exemplify narratives that rouse seemingly mismatched emotive reactions—"a deep sense of grievance and a high sense of superiority" (O'Toole, 2018: 2–3). Putin also constructs the members of the target audience as an idealized community of shared origin and destiny, who have been betrayed and humiliated because they represent "love for our Motherland, our faith and traditional values, our ancestors' customs and respect for all peoples and cultures." Meanwhile, he identifies the enemy (the West) with moral degradation: "escalating Russo-phobia, praising traitors, mocking their victims' memory and crossing out the courage of those who won the Victory through suffering" (Bloomberg, 2022). Indicatively, Putin's use of discourse that advances a sense of superiority is visible, especially in the last part of his speech where he praises all soldiers, even those of the allied armies, that fought against Nazism and militarism; while stressing the bravery of the Russian soldiers fighting against the Nazi-government of Ukraine and the suffering of "the old people, women, and children of Donbas who were killed in atrocious and barbaric shelling by neo-Nazis" (Ibid.).

## Conclusions

The paper seeks to make sense of how Putin developed the West into a security issue and a justification for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To do so, the research employed a discourse analysis of Vladimir Putin's May 9 speech at a military parade in Moscow's Red Square marking the anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. By utilizing the findings of the Copenhagen's School securitization theory, the paper argues that Putin uses speech acts that focus on: (a) the long-standing Western interventionism in Russia's sphere of influence and the exclusion of the state in the post-Cold War era; (b) the Western hypocrisy and double standards against non-Western states; (c) Russia's legitimate right to protect itself from the existential threat that Western expansionism poses; (d) Russia's legal and historical right to protect its citizens against the West and the Western-supported Nazi government of Ukraine; (e) Russia's rich history and culture, and its role as protector of plurality and diversity in the international system.

To boost the securitizing's move effect on the audience, Putin exacerbates a sense of victimhood for Russia through humiliation narratives that highlight the state's isolationism and the remaining cold peace structures; while, at the same time, he evokes images, symbols, and memories of the past to promote the perception that Russia has historic right and role to fight against the "forces of evil" present in the global order. As Volkan (1998, 2009) and O'Toole (2018) highlight, such narratives



prompt not only a sense of superiority and trauma in the audience but also foster feelings of revenge against their source, hence facilitating the adoption of extraordinary measures and the formation of ideational enemy/foe distinction. Furthermore, in line with its neo-revisionism, Putin draws an image of Russia that promotes cultural and civilizational pluralism and diversity ending the pre-existing Western universalism.

While the paper focuses on the securitizing act and Putin's discourse, it is important to look at its effects on the audience. Buzan et.al (1998) argue that an issue becomes securitized when an audience collectively agrees on the nature of the threat and supports taking extraordinary measures. As the latest data suggests, apart from a boost in ratings since the start of the war, more than 80% of Russians support Putin's actions (RFE/RL, 2022). Such high support shows not only that Putin's securitization of the West and Ukraine has been successful but also the difficulty to both de-securitize the issues and return to the pre-existing status quo.

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