
Russia in the western media discourses in early 2021

Ivan Ablazov *¹ A; Mariia Karmazina ² B

*Corresponding author: ¹ Ph.D. in Political Science, Associate Professor, Chief of the Department of International Relations, e-mail: ablazov@ukr.net, ORCID: 0000-0001-6293-8043

² Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor, Head of Department of Social and Political History, e-mail: karmm@ukr.net, ORCID: 0000-0003-2887-6824

^A Military-Diplomatic Academy named after Yevgeny Bereznyak, Kyiv, Ukraine

^B Kuras institute of political and ethnic studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine

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Abstract

The article considers the peculiarities of assessments, conclusions of western analysts, experts, and politicians on Russia, which were published earlier this year in the electronic versions of a number of media, such as *Der Spiegel*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Bild*, *The Telegraph* and others. The relevance of the proposed analysis is determined by the fact that it allows understanding the “specifics of the moment” – the perception of actions, behavior of Russia by Europeans and Americans, so to speak, while “fresh in the mind”, but not over a certain time. The analysis of views of the representatives of several European countries as well as of the USA (as countries that support Ukraine and condemn the Russian occupation) in real time (early this year) will serve as a basis for expert assessments coming out in the future and will confirm or refute the expectations of Europeans and Americans.

The conducted qualitative analysis allowed identifying a range of issues that proved to be a priority for western analysts and, accordingly, most often came to their attention in the first months of 2021. It is established that Russia is perceived as an anti-democratic state led by an authoritarian leader suffering from technological backwardness, environmental problems, but shows its aggressiveness, which is manifested in the occupation of the part of Ukrainian territory, in intervening in conflicts in Syria, Myanmar, Libya and other countries. Despite this, there are those among Europeans who do not lose hope of modernizing Russia and promoting its democratic foundations, of taking steps that will prevent the Russian Federation from moving towards the People’s Republic of China, which would contribute to strengthening the European security.

Key words: Russia, discourses, technological, an aggressor.

Introduction

Analysis of assessments, statements, and conclusions of western experts, analysts, politicians (active now or in the past), as well as the reflections on their fears, anxieties, priority topics for discussion, debate and predictions about Russia provide a deeper understanding of the process, which take place in the international arena in early 2021 with the participation of the Russian Federation, or in

view of its behaviour, and help, first, to identify the most pressing issues of today, which are the focus of Europeans and Americans; second, they make Ukrainians aware of their chances for support from democracies in the fight against the aggressor and the restoration of sovereignty – an issue that is still relevant with view of Russia’s on-going eighth year of occupation of the parts of Ukrainian territories.

Material and methods

With the help of qualitative content analysis and the use of the method of “real-time analysis”, there were selected and analyzed a

number of expert materials (of different levels of depth) on the activities of the Russian Federation on the international arena in

electronic versions (available in Ukraine) of media resources such as *Der Spiegel*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall*

Street Journal, *Financial Times*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Bild*, *The Telegraph*, *Le Huffington Post*, *Le Monde* and others.

Results and discussion

In the analysis of the array of dominant problems covered on the pages of the above-mentioned western media, there is one to which the attention of western experts is growing almost daily – the problem of functioning of the Russian Empire in its current state – the Russian Federation. Mimicry of being a “union” and then “federation” does not change the imperial essence of Russia, its desire to threaten / intimidate, to “swallow” (occupy the territories of other states) and to “trample down” (Russify, turn citizens into subordinates, laws and borders – to dust). Russia does not give up the “persistence in its authoritarian tradition” (Ulrich, 2021). However, according to the analyzed publications, despite understanding of the fact that “Russia is a dangerous country” (Lasserre, 2021), “the mafia state” (Vindman, Kasparov, 2021), a country that does not believe in ‘the virtues of democracy’ (Girard, 2021) and the power structure in Russia equals “Putin plus gas” (Barluet, 2021), not everyone is ready to notice the collapse under Russia’s impending “border shifting revisionism” (Bartels, 2021). Leaders of a number of countries even hope for the possibility of modernizing Russia (as is demonstrated by Berlin, for example), because there are fears about something else: the collapse of Russia could cause chaos. So for some in Europe today, “Putin and his corrupt elite are better than chaos” (Lasserre, 2021).

“The friends of the Empire”, in some cases, try to glorify Russia as a “global player” (along with the United States, Europe and China), as does, for example, G. Schröder in a book that was published in early 2021 and was written co-authored with his own (G. Schröder) biographer G. Schöllgen entitled “Last Chance. Why do we need a new world order today?” (Schöllgen, Schröder, 2021). In others, “under the guise of scientific seriousness”, as demonstrated, for example, by the *Working Group on Syria* (which positions itself as a free association of scientists from key British universities), it produces

messages and conclusions that (as noted by German *Der Spiegel* (Reuter, Schmid, 2021) dated March 26, 2021), always “confirm the narratives of Russian and Syrian propaganda” and create the impression that they are exposing a conspiracy of the western media and politicians.

However, not everything is simple here. Reflecting on the publications of the group mentioned, which lacks experts on the topics it focuses on, *Der Spiegel* drew attention, among other things, to such an “expert” as P. McKeigue, and got interested, what compelled a professor of medical statistics (as well as other similar “experts”) with such an “inspiration to dedicate themselves to slandering people completely strange to them”? It is assumed that P. McKeigue is a kind of victim of conspiracy myths, one of the “faithful” to the idea of British-American world plot. That is, they are becoming “friends of Putin” for various reasons.

Perception of Russia and attitude towards it has many nuances and shades and develops between two peculiar poles. One of them reads: “Russia with love”, the other – “from Russia – with blood” (as the articles published in *Der Spiegel* (Reuter, Schmid, 2021) and *The Times* (Callaghan, Maronova, 2021), respectively, were called). And the “blood” is much more frequently mentioned. Thus, analysts focus on the “bloody traces” left by Russia in a number of countries on different continents. The authors of the article in the British *The Guardian* of March 30, referring to UN experts, told how Russian mercenaries violate human rights in the CAR (Harding, Burke, 2021); on the same day, the American resource *The New York Times* (Kramer, 2021), and on April 1, *The Wall Street Journal* (Grove, Cullison, 2021) wrote about the death of the Ukrainian military and the advance of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine. The London *Financial Times* (2021) noted that Russia, which supported the bloody military

junta in Myanmar led by General Min Aung Hlain, entered the game with little risk to itself, even if Myanmar plunged into a civil war: the country is located “not on the threshold of Russia”, so the latter will not suffer any losses and the Russian borders will not be stormed by refugees; and if the junta stays in power, Russia will strengthen its position in the arms supplier market, as in previous years and even in January 2021, agreements were reached between the two countries on the supply of Russian weapons to Myanmar.

Thus, Russia advocates for authoritarian regimes. As evidenced by the situation in Belarus, assessing which, the Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Zogg, 2021) noted that Lukashenka’s power is based on three “pillars” – a certain part of the population, the state apparatus and Russia.

In Libya, Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who hired Russian Wagner mercenaries with the intention of seizing the capital and declaring himself a dictator, could later become a servant for them, according to *The Times*, as about 2,000 of these mercenaries, scattered in eastern and southern Libya and have the support of Russian fighters, carry out orders only from the Russian Defense Ministry and the Kremlin, have already begun to “refuel” in the country that has the largest proven oil reserves in Africa (S. al-Atrush, 2021).

Analyzing Russia’s foreign policy orientations, western experts stated in early spring 2021 that “Putin’s course” was clear: since Russia’s occupation of Crimea in 2014 began to lag far behind other countries with “transition economies”, Putin is making efforts to isolate the country from the West, from western sanctions, and relies on the development and autarky of the economy, turning more and more towards China (Brüggmann, 2021). However, this attempt to “escape from the West” is unlikely to be successful in a globalized world with its interdependencies (including economic ones), given that Russia’s economy receives Western investment and goods. But it is clear that Western European countries are deep in thought about Russia, trying to make sense of various aspects of their security in a situation where “Russia does not recognize borders”.

Thus, Norway stopped the sale of the ship engine plant to Russia, based on the interests of national security, as noted by *Der Spiegel* (2021). According to *Bild*, German security authorities are sounding the alarm because Russia is “purposefully reaching out to German patents, technologies and increasingly to entire companies” to obtain technology to modernize Russia’s technologically backward military industry (Tiede, Aswad, 2021). And in this desire, Russia has never hesitated smuggling, let alone efforts to persuade German citizens to cooperate illegally.

Assessing their realities, the British remain vigilant and consider Russia as the “number one enemy”, which was fueled, not least by the constant Russian invasions into the air and water space of the UK and their willingness to use state-sanctioned assassinations of dissidents on British territory (Shipman, 2021).

The fears of Europeans have other, more compelling reasons, because Russia, as noted by *The Telegraph* (Oliphant, 2021), since the early 2000s has carefully invested in its military capabilities and directly in 2021, two-thirds of Russia’s military budget (which amounted to 44.1 billion pounds), which is slightly less than in the UK) is planned to be spent on the purchase and modernization of military equipment. At the same time, while some countries are reducing, for example, the number of tanks, relying on cybernetics and automation, Russia is not neglecting “conventional firepower”. So now Russia has, according to *The Telegraph*, the world’s largest tank fleet, which includes more than 15 thousand tanks, and given the fact that Russia ranks fourth in the world in the number of troops – 900 thousand people, it will have numerical superiority in the “pan-European war”; as an advantage is that the Russian army is “hardened in battle” (in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, Syria).

Europeans are concerned not only with Russia’s constant increase in its military presence abroad, but also with its active spread of subversive and propaganda activities and the implementation of cyber-attacks. Figuring out Putin’s wishes and behavior on the eve of the 2024 election, experts say that if he wanted to

start another short victorious war (to increase his own rating in the eyes of Russian voters), he would have no problems with potential targets that could serve as five neighboring countries – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as “hotbeds of frozen conflicts”, Belarus, which is “the half” of the formal “Union State” with Russia, and, finally, Kazakhstan, which is home to about 3.5 million ethnic Russians – more, than in any other former Soviet state (Aron, 2021). In addition, Putin’s ambitions may push him to seize Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and will NATO not appear in this situation only as a “paper tiger”?

As for NATO itself, the Alliance Secretary General spoke unequivocally in his threat assessment, saying that the biggest ones were Russia (its persistent destabilizing behavior), China (which is changing the balance of power globally, with implications for security, values and lifestyle of the NATO countries) and terrorism (which remains a challenge to the world and undermines stability) (Stroobants, 2021).

Analyzing Russia’s destructive propaganda activities in Europe, the European External Action Service (EAD) noted in its report that since the end of 2015, more than 700 cases of Russian media spreading fakes about Germany have been registered, which is twice as many as the spread of false information about France (the number of fakes for which was more than 300 cases); about four times more than about Italy (more than 170 cases); Spain has been affected by fake messages more than 40 times (Becker, 2021). According to EAD, this situation is explained not only by the fact that Germany is one of the largest countries in the EU, but, apparently, by the fact that Moscow probably considers some German politicians more loyal to Russia than in other countries; in addition, Russia is taking advantage of the readiness of Europe and Germany for dialogue.

At the same time, Europeans are considering whether the EU should insist on the introduction of radical economic sanctions that would harm the Russian economy as a whole. The author of the article in *Le Huffington Post*, in particular, was concerned with whether, for example, the access to the European capital market should be

completely closed for Russian companies and banks, and whether a decision to stop Nord Stream-2 should be taken (Berner, 2021)? Doubts are fueled by the fact that several European countries are major importers of Russian gas and oil, so tightening sanctions will mean higher costs (losses) due to rising energy prices and in the case of Germany, where gas is a substitute for coal, the environment will be damaged. In addition, the unanimity of Europeans on sanctions is questionable: even if Poland and the Baltic states demand tough measures against Russia, the governments of France and Germany will say that “we should not push Russia into the arms of China”, and will remain supporters of such an element of European security policy, as support of the dialogue between Moscow, Berlin and Paris, and furthermore, will work to promote the idea that “Russia belongs to Europe”. Therefore, the introduction of targeted sanctions will be more painless, and therefore more expedient, from the point of view of a number of Europeans, as well as further cooperation with Russia in areas of mutual interest: arms control, non-proliferation, climate issues, negotiations with Iran, military security in Europe, and joint action against the current pandemic.

Reflecting on the prospects of Nord Stream-2, its defenders propose to create an “emergency brake” mechanism that would stop the withdrawal of Russian gas in the event, for example, when Russia ceases to comply with promises to use Ukrainian infrastructure for gas transportation (Ischinger, 2021). In addition, the author of the article in *Der Spiegel* stressed that in any case, Germany must coordinate its decisions with the EU and with partners such as Ukraine and Washington.

Western analysts of various levels are focusing on Russia’s internal problems, the most threatening of which are those linked to Russia’s technological backwardness, as noted above. The lag has affected even the once powerful space industry: its degradation can now be observed with the accumulated difficulties due to poor governance, lack of strategic vision, industrial and financial problems, corruption, the effects of international sanctions and

increasing pressure from competitors (Americans and Chinese) (Barluet, 2021).

A separate problem of Russia is ecology. Thus, *Le Monde* drew attention to the state of the environment in the Siberian Federal District, which occupies 25 percent of the area of the Russian Federation, and where 11 percent of its population lives. Referring to the research of Russian scientists, *Le Monde* drew attention to the critical situation in 14 cities of the district (including Abakan, Kemerovo, Kizil, Krasnoyarsk, Norilsk, Novokuznetsk), where pollution of surface waters, soils and air is ten times higher than normal. This results in an increase of the incidence of the local population, the birth of children with various disabilities (Vitkine, 2021), and so on.

Analyzing the state of Russian society, analysts point out that for a long time in Russia the state itself contributed to the spread of various conspiracy theories (for example, for B. Nemtsov – as a man working for the benefit of Western governments, for A. Navalny – as a person who cooperated with US intelligence services). Conspiracy theories were a specific tool for managing and controlling society. Currently, the Russian government is reaping the rewards: the population does not trust the vaccine against coronavirus produced (in an opaque way) in Russia and is in no hurry to be vaccinated (Huber, 2021), which poses a threat to both the state and society. And even recent statements about Putin's vaccination have not changed the situation. *Stern* wrote (Vakzin, 2021) that no one had seen Putin being vaccinated, and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Putin was not in favor of

“vaccination on camera”, and that “Putin needs to take his word for it”. This mannerism of the Russian president seemed strange to many observers, as *Stern* noted, because in the past nothing prevented the Russian leader from riding through the taiga with a naked torso or swimming in a pool in swimming trunks, but for some reason he was ashamed to bare his shoulder.

Kolesnikow A. (the head of a Moscow Carnegie Center program), analyzing in his article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* the state of civil society in Russia, noted that in Russia there is actually a civil war between civil society and the state that is trying to openly suppress it at various levels – street protests, on the Internet, social networks, branding organizations and individuals as “foreign agents”, imposing restrictions on education (Kolesnikow, 2021). In addition, A. Kolesnikow noted that the mainstay of power is a “middle-class man” who does not like power, but obeys it and expresses distrust of all liberal, opposes modern civil society, and when he comes to the polls – performs a ritual of loyalty and votes for the ruling elite. The conclusion was that as long as the Kremlin has such a support, it will, in cooperation with the security forces, adhere to the chosen strategy: the suppression of a minority – representatives of civil society and the non-parliamentary opposition.

All this gives grounds to agree with the description of the Russian president given to him by the American leader and concentrated in one word – a *murderer*: a murderer of Ukrainians, Georgians, Syrians, a murderer of democracy in his country.

Conclusions

The foregoing suggests that the analysts of western democracies (from Europe and the USA) and the NATO leadership perceive the Russian Federation quite adequately: as anti-democratic, technologically backward, with many internal problems (social, political, environmental), but an aggressive state, which in early 2021 appears in a number of military conflicts in different regions of the world; which interferes with the help of various tools

(propaganda, cyberattacks, etc.) in the life and politics of European countries and threatens their security. The Europeans are concerned about Russia's gradual “drift from Europe” towards China, calculate the directions of possible further Russian aggression and look for options for cooperation with it. At the same time, it is noteworthy that in a number of cases they emphasize the importance of taking into account the interests of Ukraine, seeing the

Ukrainian state as a partner.

At the same time, there are those in Europe who sympathize with Russia, work to protect its

interests and to the detriment of their own states.

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