A damaged administrative building in the aftermath of a Russian shelling in downtown Kharkiv on March 1. 2022
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THE ETERNAL PAST:
THE IMPORTANCE OF UKRAINE IN POST-TRUTH RUSSIA

"We are born to make fairy tales come true." – The Song of Soviet Aviators, 1923[1]

PREFACE

Here we offer an extraordinarily insightful article that, over six months after it was written, still contains very pertinent and useful food for thought. It is an article that catches the attention for a number of reasons. First, it was written just before the invasion of Ukraine, and yet still offers us a thoughtful insight into why (and how) the subsequent 'unjustifiable' military action taken by Russia might be seen as 'self-evidently justifiable' by a large and influential swathe of the decision-makers and decision-influencers in Russia. Second, it explores why (and how) such a narrative and mindset has been disseminated into the Russian population at large. Third, as we pause to consider the possibility of Russian failure and the likely consequences of that failure, for Russia, for Ukraine and for the rest of Europe, NATO and the wider world, this article provides a really useful avenue of contemplation about the Russian mindset beyond Putin and his immediate supporting and self-reinforcing circle – a mindset that is not likely to disappear simply because Putin, or any possible Putin-successor, with whatever regime they may bring with them, disappears, changes or moves on. And fourth, and finally, because it was written by a lance corporal of the Intelligence Corps working at JFHQ, but written when he was working in Kyiv before the invasion. It is encouraging to see such thought-provoking work going on, by clearly capable and talented people, at the heart of the UK's military decision-making. **– Maj Gen (Retd) Dr A R D Sharpe CBE, Director CHACR**

AT THE time of writing, the 12th of February 2022, Russia has positioned hundreds of thousands of troops and associated military equipment along Ukraine's northern and eastern borders, as well as in occupied Crimea. The increasing possibility of a Russian military incursion into Ukraine is not borne of pure geopolitics or strategic gain. Conversely, it seeks to realise the fairy tales and myths that underwrite Russia's artificial, imagined democracy and by extension Russia's national identity. These myths are concerned with righting the wrongs of an imagined humiliation and posit Russia as a renewed imperial power vis-à-vis Ukraine. The primary audience is not NATO, or the West, but the Russian population.

In 2020 Vladislav Surkov argued that: "There is no Ukraine. There is Ukrainian-ness. That is, a specific disorder of the mind. An astonishing enthusiasm for ethnography, driven to the extreme."[2] Surkov is an avant-garde artist and long-term Kremlin adviser who, in his own words was given the "unique opportunity to pick Ukraine as a project in 2013".[3] Since the beginning of Russia's campaign against Ukraine, Surkov and other Russian political technologists have constructed a narrative of a Russian world which is rising again to right the injustices imposed on Russia by Western powers after the fall of the Soviet Union.[4] Surkov's words speak to an often contradictory mythology which casts Russia as both victim of the United States and NATO, and a "mighty state that will inevitably triumph over a smaller Ukraine".[5]

Mykola Rabchuk has argued that "Ukraine remains a crucial part of the Russian imperialistic mythology and

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[1]*Mondry, Henrietta And Pavlov, Evgeny. 2020. Russia's Futures, From Fairy Tales And Editorials To Kremlin Narratives: Prokhanov, Dugin, Surkov. New Zealand Slavonic Journal.*

[2]*Alexander Düben, Björn. 2020. "There is no Ukraine": Fact-Checking the Kremlin's Version of Ukrainian History. London School of Economics.*

[3]*The Moscow Times. 2020. 'I Created the System': Kremlin's Ousted 'Grey Cardinal' Surkov, in Quotes.*

[4]*Mondry, Henrietta And Pavlov, Evgeny. 2020. Russia's Futures, From Fairy Tales And Editorials To Kremlin Narratives: Prokhanov, Dugin, Surkov. New Zealand Slavonic Journal.*

[5]*Antonova, Natalia. 2021. Russians Believe Ukrainians Want to Be 'Liberated'. Foreign Policy.*

imagination and will remain a 'sublime object of desire' for too many Russians unable to reconcile with its sovereignty, independent development and integration outside the Russkii Mir (Russian World)". In this sense, an independent, European Ukraine poses a strategic threat not so much to Russian national security as to Russian premodern, imperial identity.[6] The power of these myths in Russian political and public discourse are central to maintaining an artificial democracy which Russia's political technologists constructed after the fall of the Soviet Union. This artificial democracy sought to entrench the power of Russia's existing political elites and eschew genuine political pluralism.[7]

This text will argue from the constructivist perspective that Russia's hostile intent towards Ukraine is not borne of the material threat which Ukraine poses to Russia, but the ideational threat that a liberal, European Ukraine poses to the myths which are central to an *imagined*, post-truth Russia. Ukraine is not a threat to Russia's security, but a threat to the idea of Russia, constructed by Surkov and other political technologists to hide what has always been an autocratic state with power concentrated in a narrow political elite. The consequences for Ukraine are existential. Russia's attempts to realise its mythological imperial goals in Ukraine are confronted by an absolute rejection by the Ukrainian people who have responded by

"TECHNOLOGISTS ENABLED RUSSIA'S RULING POLITICAL ELITES TO APPEAR 'LIBERAL' TO SECURE THEIR HOLD ON POWER BY DEVELOPING MEANS OF 'FAKING' LIBERAL DEMOCRACY. WHAT CAME TO THE FORE WAS A SYSTEM WHEREBY ALL THE AUSPICES OF FORMAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS WERE IN PLACE BUT IN WHICH FRAUD, CIVIL LIBERTY VIOLATIONS AND THE ABUSE OF STATE AND MEDIA RESOURCES DISRUPT THE LEVERS OF POLITICS TO SUCH AN EXTENT THAT THE SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE COULD NEVER BE VIEWED AS DEMOCRATIC."

developing a far more realised Ukrainian state. This essay will further argue that the failure of Russian myths when confronted with Ukrainian realities since 2014, have forced Russia to stop *imagining* and begin military

planning to make the myths that bind Russian society a reality.

FROM ARTIFICIAL DEMOCRACY TO ETERNITY

Russian political scientist Sergei Markov characterised Russia's experience of 'democracy' in the 1990s as 'uncertainty and competition', which were the characteristics of both democracy and anarchy that he concluded Russia had no desire to go back to.[8] In response, the political technologists in Russia enabled Russia's ruling political elites to appear 'liberal' to secure their hold on power by developing intricate means of 'faking' liberal democracy. What came to the

fore was a new system whereby all the auspices of formal democratic institutions were in place but in which fraud, civil liberty violations and the abuse of state and media resources disrupt the levers of politics to such an extent that the system of governance could never be viewed as democratic.[9]

To distract the Russian people from this illusory democracy, Russia's political elite mastered a combination of authoritarianism and entertainment culture understood as a 'new propaganda', intended not to persuade anyone, but to keep the viewer hooked and distracted – it cares little about facts, evidence, credibility, internal coherence and possible contradictions. The new Russian propaganda machine tries not so much to convince viewers of any one version of events, but rather to leave them confused, paranoid, and passive living in a Kremlin-controlled virtual reality that can no longer be mediated or debated by any appeal to 'truth'.[10] The result is a reinvention of reality, creating mass hallucinations that then translate into political action.[11]

However, in 2019 Surkov wrote a text called *Putin's Long State*, in which he goes beyond discussion of the illusory democracy which defined Russian politics since the early 1990s and argues that the Russian model should discard the notion of democracy (as imagined by the West) altogether. Rather, Surkov argues that: "The illusion of choice is the most important of all illusions, the trademark trick of the Western way of life overall, and of the Western democracy... a rejection of this illusion in favour of realistically acknowledging what is predetermined has led our society first to contemplate its own, special, sovereign version of democratic development, and then to a complete loss of interest in discussions on what democracy should be like and whether it should exist at all."[12]

[6]*Riabchuk, Mykola. 2016. Ukrainians as Russia's negative 'other': History comes full circle. Institute of Political and Nationalities' Studies.*

[7]*Wilson, Andrew. Ukraine Crisis: What it means for the West. Yale University Press.*

[8]*Markov, Sergei and McFaul, Michael. 2006. How Democratic is Today's Russia? Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*

[9]*Partlett, William. 2012. Can Russia keep faking democracy? Brookings.*

[10]*Riabchuk, Mykola. 2016. Ukrainians as Russia's negative 'other': History comes full circle. Institute of Political and Nationalities' Studies.*

[11]*Pomerantsev, Peter. 2014. Russia and the menace of unreality. The Atlantic.*

[12]*Mondry, Henrietta And Pavlov, Evgeny. 2020. Russia's Futures, From Fairy Tales And Editorials To Kremlin Narratives: Prokhanov, Dugin, Surkov. New Zealand Slavonic Journal.*

Russia's predetermined alternative to the illusion of choice is what Surkov, and others such as Aleksandr Dugin understand as Russia's need to fulfil the myths of its forgotten imperial destiny. Dugin argues that: "No stone will remain from today's transitional state as no stone was left from the Russian Empire and then the USSR. We are going forwards, not backwards. Eternity is not the past, it is always the present, and most importantly, the future. Eternity is ahead. It is the very real avant-garde." In this sense, Russia's state of being, and its future is the realisation of the passage through a period of disintegration and a return to "natural and solely possible state of a great power", one which increases in size, gathering communities of nations with it like Muscovvy in the 14th-15th century. At the heart of the Russian state is an eternity bounded in what Surkov posits as 'land gathering' and military expansion.[13]

RUSSIA'S ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

The vanguard of Russia's reimaging of its imperial mythology can be witnessed in the Russian 'sphere of influence' which comprises former Warsaw Pact countries along Russia's borders, particularly Russia's 'little brother' Ukraine. Russia's conflict in Ukraine since 2014 and the associated propaganda is one example of an "extreme expression of a resentment held by both the Russian political class and Russian society at large to Ukraine's obvious otherness that challenges and undermines a

Servicemen of the Ukrainian National Guard take positions in central Kyiv on February 25, 2022
Picture: Gleb Garanich/Reuters - CC BY 2.0

"NOBODY WHO LIVES IN WHAT PUTIN TERMED NOVOROSSIYA EVER THOUGHT OF THEMSELVES AS LIVING THERE. NONETHELESS, RUSSIAN POLITICAL ELITES TRIED TO IMAGINE NOVOROSSIYA INTO BEING."

Russian imperial identity".[14]

Molly Krasnodębska has argued that Ukraine's mythologised role within Russian political narratives and foreign policy can be explained by the concept of 'ontological security' in international relations theory. Whilst traditionally the security of states is considered to be the eradication of physical threats, Krasnodębska argues that ontological security "lies in a stable and consistent identity as international actors that is affirmed and routinised through relations with significant others". For Russia, it's "self-identity is strongly tied to a close hierarchical

relation with its neighbourhood, especially Ukraine".[15] This has manifested itself since Ukrainian independence in 1991 through Russia's continuous efforts to influence politics in Ukraine and the broader former Soviet Union. Russia has seized upon opportunities within Ukraine's flawed and evolving politics to undermine and diminish Ukraine's possibilities of reform and development. This became most tangible with Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for Russian aligned separatists in the Donbas since 2014.

NOVOROSSIYA

Taras Kuzio has argued that Russia's identity "continues to misunderstand, Ukraine and Ukrainians through stereotypes and myths of Ukraine as an 'artificial state' and Ukraine's Russian speakers as 'fraternal brothers' and Russians and Ukrainians as 'one people' (odin narod)".[16] Vladimir Putin has himself argued that Ukrainians and Russians are 'one people': "Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus... bound together by

one language, economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and – after the baptism of Rus – the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir (St Volodomyr), who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines our affinity today".[17]

These notions led Putin to term both the occupied Donbas and five other regions of eastern and southern Ukraine 'Novorossiya' in April 2014.[18] The term is borrowed from Tsarist history and referred to a different geographical space. Indeed, nobody who lives in what Putin termed Novorossiya ever thought of themselves as living there. Nonetheless, Russian political elites tried to imagine Novorossiya into being. Peter Pomerantsev has argued that "the invention of Novorossiya is a sign of Russia's domestic system of information manipulation going global". He further argues that "today's Russia has been shaped by political technologists... who are viziers of the system who conjure up puppet political parties and the simulacra of

[13]Mondry, Henrietta And Pavlov, Evgeny. 2020. Russia's Futures, From Fairy Tales And Editorials To Kremlin Narratives: Prokhanov, Dugin, Surkov. New Zealand Slavonic Journal.

[14]Riabchuk, Mykola. 2016. Ukrainians as Russia's negative 'other': History comes full circle. Institute of Political and Nationalities' Studies.

[15]Krasnodębska, Molly. 2021. Confrontation as Ontological Security. Russia's Reactions to the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. European-Russian Power Relations in Turbulent Times. University of Michigan Press.

[16]Kuzio, Taras. 2019. Russian stereotypes and myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and why Novorossiya failed. Communist and Post-Communist studies.

[17]Putin, Vladimir. 2021. On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians. President of Russia.

[18]Pieniążek, Paweł. 2017. Greetings from Novorossiya: Eyewitness to the war in Ukraine. University of Pittsburg Press.

> "VOLODOMYR ZELENSKY, A PRO-REFORM, PRO-EUROPEAN CANDIDATE WON 73 PERCENT OF THE VOTE IN THE 2019 ELECTION. FAR FROM FULFIL RUSSIA'S IMPERIAL AMBITIONS, RUSSIAN MYTHS INTERACTED WITH THE REALITY OF UKRAINIAN INDEPENDENCE. THIS EXPERIENCE, AND THE APPARENT INEVITABILITY OF UKRAINE'S SLIDE TOWARDS THE WEST, HAS FORCED RUSSIA TO NOT ONLY IMAGINE NOVOROSSIYA INTO BEING BUT TO REALISE IT THROUGH MILITARY FORCE."
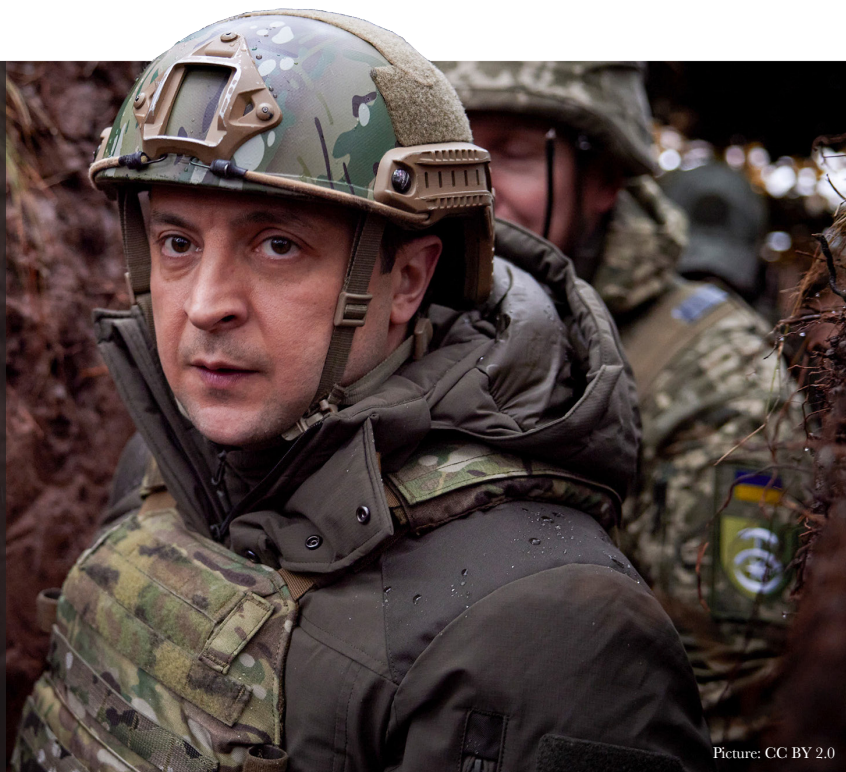
Picture: CC BY 2.0

civic movements to keep the nation distracted as Putin's clique consolidates power".[19] In this sense, Pomerantsev's argument can be viewed as a combination of Russia's new propaganda and its untruths designed to protect Russia's artificial democracy, and that which Surkov and Dugin argue makes that new propaganda increasingly redundant; Russia's predetermined, inevitable imperial restoration.

UKRAINIAN REALITIES

In 2014, Russian mythical misconceptions of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people came face to face with the reality of Russian-speaking Ukrainian patriotism and their low support for the Russkii Mir.[20] Tatiana Zhurzhenko of the Centre for East European and International Studies has argued that: "Russian aggression has done what previous Ukrainian presidents from Kravchuk to Yanukovych had failed to achieve – catalyse the creation of a political nation. Ukrainian identity, which for so long had been associated with ethnicity, language and historical memory, suddenly has become territorial and political and thus inclusive for Russian speakers and Russians, as well as for Ukrainian citizens with other ethnic origins."[21]

Recent polling and Ukraine's Presidential elections further evidence Zhurzhenko's argument. In April 2017 57 per cent of Ukrainians polled expressed a very cold or cold attitude toward Russia, as opposed to only 17 per cent who expressed a very warm or warm attitude.[22] In May 2014 only 31 per cent of Ukrainian's surveyed thought that Ukraine should join NATO, compared to 56 per cent in January 2021.[23] Furthermore, both the 2014 and 2019 elections both returned pro-reform, pro-European Ukrainian presidents. Volodomyr Zelensky, a pro-reform, pro-European candidate won 73 per cent of the vote in the 2019 election, Ukraine's first majority rule President.[24] Far from fulfil Russia's imperial ambitions, Russian myths interacted with the reality of Ukrainian independence. This experience, and the apparent inevitability of Ukraine's slide towards the West, has forced Russia to not only imagine Novorossiya into being but to realise it through military force.

CONCLUSION

When the Melians argued their neutrality meant that they posed no threat to the Athenians, the Athenians replied: "No; for your hostility cannot so much hurt us as your friendship will be an argument to our subjects of our weakness and your enmity of our power."[25] In the same way, Russia's hostile intentions towards Ukraine are borne not of legitimate security concern, but to the extent to which the possibility of a liberal, reformist and European Ukraine threatens a mythical imagined Russia, and by extension, the continuity of Putin's political power.

This text has argued that Russian security approaches towards Ukraine are not driven by legitimate geopolitical motivations but rather part of the mythology which underpins Russia's artificial democracy. Vladislav Surkov, one of the chief architects of the illusions which have entrenched the power of Vladimir Putin and Russia's political elite, has argued that Russia's internal politics is not driven by choice but a predetermined and inevitable need to return to an eternal past; to fulfil Russia's imperial mythology.

This mythology was tested in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support for separatists in the Donbas. Russia's mythological conceptions led to a war with Ukraine, which far from prove these fairy tales to be true, resulted in a new Ukrainian reality, crystalising the notion of a Ukrainian identity with a geographic fixity which Tatiana Zhurzhenko asserts no Ukrainian leader had been able to achieve since Ukraine's independence in 1991.

The confrontation between myth and reality are central to Russia's military build up in Ukraine today. The final decision which Russian premiere Vladimir Putin must make is whether to make 'the fairy-tale come true'.

[19] Pomerantsev, Peter. 2014. Russia and the menace of unreality. The Atlantic.

[20] Kuzio, Taras. 2019. Russian stereotypes and myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and why Novorossiya failed. Communist and Post-Communist studies.

[21] Zhurzhenko, Tatiana. 2014. From borderlands to bloodlands. Transit – Europäische Revue.

[22] Pifer, Steven. 2017. How Ukraine views Russia and the West. Brookings.

[23] Thomson-DeVeaux, Amelia. 2022. War with Russia has pushed Ukrainians Toward the West. FiveThirtyEight.

[24] BBC. 2019. Ukraine election: Comedian Zelensky wins presidency by landslide.

[25] Thucydides. 1963. The History of the Peloponesian War. Penguin Classics.