

Forum Contribution

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FORUM

Putin’s Understanders, Russia’s Normalizers: Discursive Palettes Beyond the East–West Divide

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Abstract: This Forum focuses on a variety of discourses that in one way or another “understand” and normalize the logic of Putin’s war against Ukraine. These discourses have different epistemologies – some of them might simply reproduce Russian propagandistic clichés, while others are embedded in – and adjusted to – specific national contexts; some of them emanate from political milieus, while others have academic pedigrees. Of particular interest for the reader is a comparative frame of the Forum that gives floor to European and non-European perspectives on the topic that at some point resonate, engage, and communicate with each other. The authors discuss social and cultural conditions that produce professional and vernacular narratives sympathetic to or compatible with the Russian officialdom, and deploy them in different theoretical contexts – from neorealist to post-colonial.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, pro-Russian narratives, global south, analogical reasoning

Introduction to the Forum*

This Forum focuses on a variety of discourses that in one way or another “understand” and normalize the logic of Putin’s war against Ukraine. These discourses have different

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epistemologies – some of them might simply reproduce Russian propagandistic clichés, while others are embedded in – and adjusted to – specific national contexts; some of them emanate from political milieus, while others have academic pedigrees. Of particular interest for the reader is a comparative frame of the Forum that gives floor to European and non-European perspectives on the topic that at some point resonate, engage, and communicate with each other. The authors discuss social and cultural conditions that produce professional and vernacular narratives sympathetic to or compatible with the Russian officialdom, and deploy them in different theoretical contexts – from neorealist to post-colonial.

These discourses deserve attention due to two main reasons. First, as seen from the academic perspective, they are part of the scholarly discussions and reflect certain ways of reasoning, ranging from structural realism's emphasis on the alleged Western responsibility for NATO expansion and the war against Ukraine, to the arguments of Westsplainers who claim that Ukraine, along with other countries of Eastern and Central Europe, ought to find accommodating options and avoid escalation in relations with Russia. Needless to say that these arguments are robustly debunked by scholars who stick to the basic principles of international law and see no reason in rewarding the aggressor. Secondly, discourses that normalize and rationalize Russian foreign policy lay ground for legitimizing a range of policy options, including unconditional ceasefire, peace at any price and Ukraine's *de facto* acceptance of territorial losses. Academic and political logics are tightly intertwined and cannot be decoupled from each other.

Within Europe this blend of narratives set the scene for multiple splits and cleavages – for example, between those who believe that Putin should have been allowed to save his face in Ukraine, and those who insist that Russia should face a humiliating defeat in the battlefield. This dilemma translates into other splits – such as, for instance, between those who deny the reality of NATO's military conflict with Russia and are sceptical about Ukraine's NATO membership, on the one hand, and proponents of Ukraine's integration with the Euro-Atlantic security order and the ultimate isolation of Russia from this order, on the other hand.

The boundaries between pragmatic realism and *de facto* support for Russian narratives often appear to be blurred and uncertain, which confirms that a division of discourses into pro-Russian and anti-Russian, as well as pro-Ukrainian and anti-Ukrainian, would be a gross oversimplification. There exists a nuanced variance within Western discourses and multiple discussions between those who are convinced of the inherent weaknesses of the Russian military, and their opponents arguing that Russia will remain strong enough even after the defeat in Ukraine; or between advocates of Russia's dissolution and their critics who find this option dangerous and risky in a long run. To this one may add debates on the strategic choices that the West faces – to help Ukraine de-occupy its Russia-controlled territories as soon as possible, or to make Russia lose as much of its military potential in Ukraine as possible.

Discourses can be studied from the viewpoint of specific discursive techniques (such as analogical reasoning (Kurnyshova 2023), or variety of arguments sustaining pro-Russian agenda (Makarychev 2023b). Other contributors pointed to political and electoral conditions that make Russia-sympathetic discourses possible in Western Europe (Braghiroli 2023), and discuss how political repercussions of such IR theories as structural realism resonate with some local discourses in Central European countries (Kazharski 2023).

The war in Ukraine was a strong blow to many Russia-sympathetic parties in Europe that found themselves in an awkward position of associating themselves with the toxic Kremlin. Yet in the Global South local “Putin’s understanders” largely define political choices and preferences of the governments in power. However, it would be an exaggeration to portray the non-Western world as a terrain for Russia-sympathetic discourses. The cases of Japan (Hosaka 2023), Taiwan, and Singapore demonstrate that in some countries the dominant narratives are far from being pro-Russian. This might have some practical consequences in the light of an engagement with the Global South as a new priority for Ukrainian foreign policy, actualized, in particular, by the visit of the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia to Kyiv in February 2023.

Two takeaways from the non-Western case studies are important. First, as Radityo Dharmaputra suggests, two perspectives might conflate in the Asian context: post-colonial (exemplified by Indonesia) and de-colonial (ascribed to Russia) (Dharmaputra 2023). What matters the most is how exactly the post-colonial paradigm is understood in countries of the Global South, and what prevents them from extending this paradigm to an explicit support for Ukraine struggling with imperialist policies of the former metropolitan power. When it comes specifically to Indonesia, pro-Russian narratives are quite widespread in this country, yet at the same time as the host of the G20 summit in November 2022 president Widodo invited and gave a floor to president Zelenskiy at this global event, which to some extent predetermined Putin’s refusal to attend and address the summit.

Second, as Clarissa Tabosa shows in her essay, some leaders of non-Euro-Atlantic countries are in search of a proper verbalization of their balancing strategies, referring to equilibrium, neutrality and impartiality as nodal points of their attitudes to Russia’s war against Ukraine (Tabosa 2023). Each of these concepts can be approached as empty signifiers that might be differently interpreted, depending on the contexts. Moreover, they might be extended to other concepts such as equidistance, multilateralism, and perhaps a new version of non-alignment that survived the end of the Cold War and seems to have many sympathizers around the world. This diversity betrays the plurality of various interpretations of new security challenges in countries heavily affected by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine yet due to numerous reasons reluctant to take sides in the battle between aggressor and its victim. This hesitance which is very much appreciated by Russia is substantiated by references to such appealing principles of international relations as multipolarity, yet this discursive manoeuvring might ultimately compromise these principles: if multipolarity requires invasions and multiple casualties, how attractive it might be for international society?

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