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## Facts and Narratives: Russia's Geopolitical Representations in Justifying the Attack on Ukraine\*

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### Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine involved a combination of hard and soft power measures, with geopolitical representations strategically employed to justify violations of international law. Despite their significance for understanding Russia's regional actions, academic literature has mainly underexplored geopolitical representations. This paper aims to address this gap and answer to the following questions: (1) how did Russia use geopolitical narrations to justify the war against Ukraine, and (2) why did Russian geopolitical representations fail to achieve the aims? The research hypothesis is that 'the purpose of geopolitical narratives of perceived threats from Ukraine was to receive internal support and legitimize the war from the point of view of International Laws'. The research findings suggest that Russia's initial military intervention was primarily based on a geopolitical narrative portraying Ukraine as an immediate threat through the alleged presence of Nazis, which served as a pretext to justify military action. In reality, this narrative was also used to retain Ukraine as a buffer zone against NATO expansion. This paper examines how geopolitical representations have influenced Russia's foreign policy and its implications for regional security, and shows how they have been used to justify and sustain Russia's military actions against Ukraine.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Russia, Representation, Security, Ukraine

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## 1. Introduction

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in early 2022 has once again demonstrated the profound influence of geopolitical representations in shaping international conflicts. Central to Russia's justification for its military intervention are perception and representation of territorial security and fear. These representations serve as strategic tools to mobilize domestic support, justify policy decisions, and influence international perceptions amidst a highly charged geopolitical arena. As the physical act of invasion that attracts global attention (Der Derian, 2009a), the nature of geopolitical representations (Rashidi et al., 2021, pp. 79-81) is also crucial. Therefore, in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, looking at discursive processes and representations that Russia used to portray Ukraine and its actions is equally critical to understanding the dynamics of this conflict.

At its core, the Ukraine conflict exemplifies a broader pattern, where constructed narratives of threat, insecurity, and victimhood often underpin wars and military interventions. The portrayal of Ukraine as a threat—whether through claims of neo-Nazi influence, Western encroachment, or ethnic-identity threats—functions to legitimize Russia's actions in the eyes of its population and allied nations. These representations are not created in isolation; they are embedded in a complex web of geopolitical imagery, emotional appeals, and spatial discourses calibrated to resonate deeply within societal and political spheres. As Der Derian (2009b) argues, military actions are repeatedly justified through representations introduced as 'Virtuous Wars'. Thus, the importance of understanding these representations lies in their capacity to shape behavior, influence public opinion, and impact international policy, often with consequences that ripple beyond the immediate conflict zone.

The strategic use of representations and spatial emotions in geopolitics reflects a fundamental principle: territories and borders are not merely geographical entities, but highly charged symbols loaded with emotional and psychological significance. The construction of 'us' versus 'others' or in geopolitical terms, the differentiation between friendly and hostile spaces, serves as a mechanism to justify actions and reinforce identity boundaries. As Furisch (2010, p. 116) states, "The representation of others has become a focal point for critical-cultural media studies". Its importance lies in the representation's ability to divide 'us' from 'others' for both territorial and geopolitical reasons. Since international law emphasizes sovereignty and territorial integrity, narratives and representations that challenge or distort these principles can facilitate justifications for military interventions that exceed legal norms. In the case of Russia and Ukraine, the narrative framing the conflict as a defense of Russian minorities, historical rights, and regional security encapsulates this phenomenon, revealing how geopolitical representation becomes a vital instrument in conflict justification. Therefore, it is crucial to provide an analysis of geopolitical narratives created by states such as Russia to justify illegal actions against other nation-states' sovereignty.

The significance of analyzing geopolitical narratives extends beyond Ukraine; it encompasses the broader implications of how states utilize representations of fear and security to shape domestic and global policies. With the proliferation of information and disinformation, these representations often become powerful tools, capable of mobilizing support or dissent, shaping alliances, and potentially escalating conflicts. Because of the emotional and psychological potency embedded in these narratives, they are

persuasive beyond rational argumentation—affecting perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately, actions. Therefore, understanding the mechanics and implications of geopolitical representations during the Ukraine war is critical not only for scholars of international relations and geopolitics, but also for policymakers and civil society actors seeking to navigate and counteract manipulative discourses.

This paper examines the role of geopolitical representations—particularly those grounded in fear, insecurity, and spatial identities—in justifying Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It examines how these representations are constructed, mobilized, and disseminated to serve geopolitical objectives, while also considering their potential to exacerbate divisions, trigger broader conflicts, and erode international norms.

The article therefore addresses the following questions: *How did Russia use geopolitical narratives to justify its war against Ukraine? and why were these narratives not unsuccessful?*

The research hypothesis is that The purpose of geopolitical narratives of perceived threats from Ukraine was to receive internal support and legitimize the war form view point of International Laws. To do this, the research will employ a post-structural methodology. Using this methodology, we tend to shed light on the complex interplay between emotion, imagination, and geopolitics. In addition, we use our discussion to reveal the ethics, effectiveness, and consequences of using representations as instruments of power in international conflicts.

## 2. Literature Review

From a geographical perspective, security is inherently tied to spatial dimensions, making it a geopolitical concern. In international relations, geopolitical practices are always accompanied by representation, underscoring their significance in scholarly research (Pain, 2009). This has led scholars to investigate how geopolitical representations shape national security discourses. Geopolitical representations are essential, because without them, states struggle to garner domestic and international support for their actions. Consequently, governments rely on these representations to legitimize their policies in the global arena. This reveals a misalignment between state interests and those of other nations or the public at large. Without persuasive representation, geopolitical decisions risk triggering far-reaching and prolonged crises. The power of geopolitical representations lies in their ability to mobilize allies while countering opposition. However, security-related representations are complex, requiring justification through various frameworks. These include distinguishing security from fear and insecurity (Cottingham, 2000), migration regimes (Straehle, 2017), memory and lived experience (Dauphinee, 2015), populism (Krämer, 2017), economic interests (Kaunert et al., 2023), spatial divisions ('ours' vs. 'theirs'), and geographical imagination (Gregory, 1994). Such mechanisms likely played a pivotal role in justifying the war in Ukraine.

The representation of others (Fursich, 2010) is crucial for providing narratives that justify geopolitical actions, as it enables measures to be presented as necessary and understandable to the public. Therefore, by differentiating between us and others, security becomes a right that should primarily be provided through geopolitical actions for us. In this context, the dichotomy between

us and others, which relies on imaginative geographies (Gregory, 1994), consistently segregates people within a framework of fear and hope (Pain et al., 2010). Since international laws regarding national sovereignty prevent territorial expansion and violations of other nations' rights, states pursuing military actions beyond their borders often use representations to motivate people and gain their emotional support. Spatial emotions could be considered because of 'processes of securitization and their uneven effects' (Williams & Massaro, 2013). As Williams & Massaro (2013, p. 752) argue, the securitization refers to measures that "target the space for regulations and surveillance in the name of ensuring security for a group of people" (e.g., economic, physical, and cultural). Throughout this process, states highlight differences, inconsistencies, and hostilities by casting certain groups, ideas, ethnicities, religions, racial identities, countries, locales, or states in a negative light. Essentially, they instill fears within society and the environment regarding the initiation of policies that cannot be implemented without a prevailing sense of insecurity.

Pain et al. (2010, p. 974) argue that fear and hope represent two sides of the same coin. For humans, shaped by historical, social, spatial, and emotional contexts, these emotions can drive significant social, political, spatial, and geopolitical transformations. Thus, spatial emotions evolve through the dialectic of security and insecurity, generating events and processes that often culminate in fear. Fear transcends the notion of a mere emotion; it can be understood as a *result* (Rebotier, 2011, p. 107) of 'processes of securitization' (Williams & Massaro, 2013), which advance geopolitical agendas. It also functions as 'a driver of political maneuvering and a constraint on personal well-being' (Pain & Smith, 2008, p. 1). Consequently, the experience of fear—

and its spatial manifestations—reinforces boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘others’, since “societies can exist only by defining themselves against an external standard—an ‘other’ without which the Self could not see itself as distinctive” (Agnew, 2003, p. 23). Geopolitically, discrimination constructs a Manichaeian worldview, where discriminatory policies justify geopolitical actions by demonizing the ‘other’—their culture, geography, demands, and territory. As a result, security discourse has long been intertwined with the sense of insecurity attributed to adversaries. In this way, geopolitical representation serves to moralize and rationalize conflict.

Agnew (2003) emphasizes the critical role of representations in justifying foreign policies and advancing geopolitical objectives. Their effectiveness, however, hinges on their ability to evoke *emotions* in the audience. Physiologically, emotions shape how individuals perceive the world, rendering them powerful tools for political mobilization. As Crawford (2000, p. 16) argues, despite their importance, international relations (IR) scholars—including realists who focus on security (fear) and nationalism (love and hate)—often neglect the role of emotions and their broader implications. While realists have traditionally emphasized state rationality (Keohane & Nye, 1987), strategic decision-making under structural constraints (Waltz, 1993), and the dangers of irrational politics (Morgenthau, 1985), emotional factors—such as those highlighted by Fearon (1995)—remain significant. These emotions can exacerbate interstate tensions and even precipitate conflict. Despite being marginalized in mainstream IR debates, emotions have garnered substantial attention in geopolitics and political geography. Davidson and Milligan (2004, p. 524) observe that while emotions remain crucial as we move ‘out’ from the

individual body, they become ‘less obvious’ in studies of broader scales, such as the home, community, or city. Consequently, rather than focusing solely on emotions *themselves*, it may be more productive to examine their *spatial and geopolitical effects* within the surrounding environment.

Spatial emotions play a fundamental role in shaping our sense of place and contribute to the formation of spatial identities. However, these emotions are not uniform; they vary across environments and individuals, influenced by personal experiences, historical contexts, social relationships, and collective imaginations cultivated within societies over time. These subjective perceptions of space profoundly influence how people interpret and respond to geographical issues and territorial concerns. Recognizing these dynamics, states strategically employ spatial representations to reinforce dominance and advance geopolitical objectives. According to Mamadouh and Dijkink (2006, p. 357):

Geopolitical representations become more explicit—yet more divisive—when critical decisions must be made during crises. Significant shifts in the geopolitical landscape often necessitate the reformulation of geopolitical visions, requiring revised geographical representations to legitimize and justify foreign policy changes.

### 3. Theroretical Background

This paper examines the role of geopolitical representations in justifying Russia’s war against Ukraine through the lens of post-structural geography (Gregory, 1995). While traditional geopolitics provides a relevant context for analyzing state policies that Russia employs to legitimize its military actions, it often neglects the

geographical dimensions of imagination and representations (Gregory, 1994). Classic geopolitics tend to adopt a state-centric perspective in conflict analysis; however, contemporary approaches rooted in critical geopolitics and post-structural geography shift the focus toward individuals.

Theoretically, post-structural geography is an approach in human geography that undermines classic discussions on space, identity, and power. In the application of this approach, post-structural geography progressively utilizes the ideas presented by social thinkers such as Foucault (1980), Butler (1990), Derrida and Gregory (1995) to deconstruct grand narratives. The core of debate in post-structural geography is how spaces and societies, as forms of social products, are constructed. In assessing various aspects of space, society, and power, post-structuralism is concentrated on narration and imaginings that utilize both historical and geographical contexts to convey meaning and images regarding social forms of production within and about space (Gregory, 1995; Gregory & Pred, 2007). In this regard, post-structural geography examines the relations of power in the creation of geographical imaginations and geopolitical representations that are constantly used to produce narratives and interpretations that shape both space and social image (Ahmadypoor & Rashidi, 1401 [2020 A.D.]). Post-structural geographers generally believe that neither subjectivity nor identity is fixed, and both can be altered through geographical imagination. These changes, which occurred over the last century and even during the age of colonialism, were the tools that altered the context of geographical meanings and connotations. They helped political powers to facilitate their social strategies, accompanying allies and supporters, persuading individuals, and facilitating their geopolitical actions against other nations, spaces, and those categorized as 'others'.

These discursive abilities transform post-structural geography into a foundation to expand the domain of geopolitical debates through a critical lens (Painter, 2008). Scholars interested in critical geopolitics employ this approach to explore various aspects of events on both national and international scales, demonstrating how narratives and discourses have become a crucial part of events in the international arena (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dittmer et al., 2008). Given the fact that critical geopolitics expands the domain of debate from state-centric approaches toward more humanistic discussions (Dalby, 1991), the role of post-structural geography is crucial because, instead of simply concentrating the debate on the justification of actors' actions, it attempts to assess how geopolitical measures utilize representations as a catalyst to achieve their goals. Thus, it can be said that in the exploration of the unseen aspects of conflicts, post-structural geography could be a point of departure for shifting the debate<sup>1</sup>. This shift enables geographers to adopt more humanitarian methodologies in their research and assessments, leading to more unbiased discourse. In this framework, post-structural geography provides a ground to expose politics behind geopolitical actions.

Historically, geopolitics has been accompanied by imaginative constructions and representations used to justify territorial policies, often based on the assumptions and perceptions held by states. For example, Friedrich Ratzel's concept of *Lebensraum* classifies individuals outside national borders as 'others', forming a foundational basis for German geopolitics (Halas, 2014, p. 2). Although German geopolitics was widely condemned following World War II, its underlying principles have not been entirely abandoned, as evidenced by the territorial expansion practices of

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1. See: Gregory, 1994, 1995, 2004; Gregory & Pred, 2007

some states, including Russia. Geopolitics, therefore, remains a fundamentally state-centric discourse, wherein principles may be broadly accepted internationally, but are subject to conflicting interpretations driven by divergent national interests.

Given this landscape, it is crucial to establish frameworks that facilitate the dissemination of truth and effectively persuade various stakeholders engaged in geopolitical discourse. This imperative has fueled the development of innovative approaches within geographical and geopolitical studies. In this context, representations play a crucial role in understanding the nature of conflicts within the realm of international security and geopolitics.

Political leaders utilize textual, visual, and religious metaphors to justify their actions, decisions, and ideas supporting their geopolitical objectives. These representations generate vital images that shape foreign policy narratives. However, these creative images are neither inherently true, nor objective, transparent, accurate or humanitarian. Instead, their primary function is to advocate policies and legitimize geopolitical actions (Agnew, 2003). In essence, geopolitical representations are central to pursuing aggressive foreign policies and military interventions, often framed as virtuous wars. A virtuous war is defined as one “That cleans up the political discourse as well as the battlefield” (Der Derian, 2009a, p. 243).

Transcendence concepts frequently underpin such measures, encompassing warfare and conflict. As Der Derian (2009b, p. 238) articulates: “A mimetic war is a battle of imitation and representation, in which the relationship of who we are and who they are is played out along a wide spectrum of familiarity and friendliness, indifference and tolerance, estrangement and hostility”.

It is essential to examine the foundations that allow states to vilify ‘others’ and legitimize acts of violence, operations, and restrictions against them. To this end, and aligning with Foucault and Deleuze’s (1977) framework, this paper prioritizes an analysis of Russia’s geopolitical representations of war, a dimension that has often been overshadowed within the geopolitics of this conflict.

In practice, geopolitical representations take various forms, deliberately crafted to evoke emotional responses and mobilize public support. Such mechanisms enable states to consolidate power and pursue hegemonic ambitions. From a critical geopolitics standpoint, this pursuit manifests both domestically, through efforts to stabilize control, and internationally, through attempts to extend influence over rivals beyond territorial borders. Political and economic elites, wielding institutional power, actively work to entrench their dominance within their own societies, while projecting strength abroad.

Representations in this domain serve as a vital instrument for power’s institutions, providing a framework to legitimize geopolitical actions that safeguard entrenched interests. As Sharp (1996, p. 558) contends, hegemony—a complex and multifaceted form of dominance—establishes *norms that regulate the reproduction of national power*. These norms not only facilitate the expansion of hegemonic influence, but also underpin discriminatory policies that reinforce binary distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘others’. This dynamic compels us to scrutinize the *internal workings* of geopolitical representations, as states deploy them to construct persuasive narratives that justify their geopolitical agendas to citizens. Here, critical geopolitics emerges as an indispensable analytical lens. By interrogating state-produced geographies—whether intentionally manipulative or

unintentionally biased—this approach reveals the underlying rationalities employed to shape public perception and manufacture consent.

This 'rationality justifies outrageous actions' against others (Springer, 2011, p. 93) and significantly influences human existence. Therefore, it is our collective 'responsibility' (Lawson, 2007, p. 2) to elucidate thoughts and practices that can broaden emotional and spatial boundaries within societies and locations. The expansion of vulnerability in response to circulating fear stemming from political reasons is cautioning (Hyndman, 2007). This vulnerability has intensified since 2022, and there exists a diverse array of concerns regarding the potential justification of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to undermine international laws and security. Furthermore, there is a significant risk that superpowers may utilize this event as a precedent to manipulate international laws and infringe upon the sovereignty of other nations. This instills widespread fear in the global arena. The circulation of fear within international politics necessitates considerations of security, the representation of hostilities, and the pervasive sense of insecurity. Given the significant implications of these issues for both states and individuals, this paper examines how Russia employs geopolitical representations to substantiate its war efforts, as well as the potential outcomes that may arise from such policies.

#### **4. Discussion**

Eastern Europe has long served as a pivotal battleground for geopolitical competition. From the early conceptualizations concerning the geopolitical significance of space in the pursuit of *Lebensraum* (Giaccaria & Minca, 2016) to classical geopolitics—

where space is regarded as a fundamental source of national power (Herwig, 2008)—geography has played a central role in shaping and safeguarding the strategic interests of states. Since the origins of geopolitics, Eastern Europe has consistently been one of the primary regions where the concept of *Lebensraum* has been applied—an idea historically pursued by figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte and the Russian Tsars, emphasizing territorial expansion to secure national vitality.

In Kjellén’s (in Herwig, 2008, p. 222) view, “state and power were synonymous. States rose because they were powerful; they maintained their status only if they remained powerful”. Maintaining this power hinges upon both seducing and coercing populations to sustain support for the ruling regime. This dynamic highlights the importance of geopolitical narratives and strategies in consolidating authority and expanding influence.

Following the Cold War, Russia faced numerous challenges, notably a significant contraction of its sphere of influence as Western powers increasingly extended their reach. However, from a geopolitical standpoint, Russia perceived itself as being threatened by NATO’s eastward expansion and the growing influence of the United States within Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. It was thus hardly surprising that Russia sought to reassert its geopolitical dominance and influence within the European continent (Tsygankov, 2012; Toal, 2017). Nevertheless, such efforts are inherently constrained by the delicate nature of sovereignty and international law. When national security and sovereignty are challenged, geopolitical actions often become contentious both domestically—where public support must be mobilized—and internationally, where diplomatic and legal norms come into play. In scenarios where tensions escalate toward

conflict or war, the importance of geopolitical representation becomes especially salient, as it helps garner widespread support and justify contentious policies.

States employ diverse methodologies and tools to promote their initiatives, shaping support through mechanisms such as geographical imagination, narrative framing, and strategic representations. These resources aim to influence public perception and policymakers by fostering geographical awareness based on perceived intrinsic differences—i.e., cultural, ethnic, or ideological. This process typically produces landscapes marked by various prejudgments, imaginations, and discriminations, all maintained to protect national interests from external threats (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Gregoty, 1994, 1995). Consequently, security remains a primary concern for every state, particularly in regions marked by intense geopolitical tension.

As noted by Williams and Massaro (2013, p. 752), the concept of security in mainstream geopolitics is primarily framed as “A top-down and state-centric approach”, where discourses tend to treat state interests as directly aligned with those of individuals or populations. However, there can be significant divergence between official representations of national interests and the actual aspirations or concerns of ordinary citizens. The notion of ‘national interest’ itself remains controversial, because despite its etymological neutrality, it often denotes “The general interest of the state, the definition of which is frequently shaped by domestic struggles and embedded power relations” (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006, p. 350). This reflects the reality that state narratives about security and sovereignty are often politically constructed, serving elite interests and influencing public perceptions to support specific geopolitical objectives.

In authoritarian regimes such as Russia, public opinions and demands are often suppressed or manipulated by mechanisms that serve to protect those in power, sustain economic benefits, and secure financial advantages. Consequently, the Russian government's conception of national security for its citizens is primarily designed to reinforce and maintain the existing political order, aiming to minimize internal challenges and dissent. It is generally understood that the definitions of national security and interests are articulated by state officials rather than emerging organically from the civilian populace (Lipman, 2016). These official narratives are typically rooted in diverse backgrounds, including perceived imminent threats or risks, political objectives, economic interests, ideological agendas, and broader geopolitical calculations. Such delineations serve to justify policies and interventions, while limiting public influence on the framing of security concerns.

Notwithstanding, beyond mere structural capabilities, the successful dissemination and acceptance of a security policy—at least among its proponents—necessitate credible justifications. These justifications are often articulated through geopolitical representations (Agnew, 2003), which serve to delineate clear boundaries between 'us' and 'others' and to divide space into territories owned or controlled by each of them. Consequently, the politics of otherness becomes a central component of unifying policies within authoritarian regimes such as Russia, aiding the pursuit of specific geopolitical objectives.

In the announcement of the invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin purported to “The demilitarization and denazification” of Ukraine (NBCNEWS, 2022) and to prevent Russia from reliving the horrors of World War II. He claimed that

this military intervention would protect the predominantly Russian-speaking populations of eastern Ukraine (Rossoliński-Liebe & Williams, 2022, p. 1). The portrayal of external Nazis—an image of foreigners stationed just beyond Russia's borders—became a key justification for the military campaign in 2022. Putin has at times claimed that Ukraine's government or some aspects within Ukraine harbor neo-Nazi ideologies, portraying it as illegitimate or extremist, especially marking the Azov Battalion and far-right groups. He frames Ukraine as a 'de-Nazified' state, equating the current government to extremist elements, to justify military intervention as a necessary step (BBC, 2022; The New York Times, 2022; Reuters, 2022). While debates about the presence and influence of far-right movements within Ukraine remain contentious, this justification is fundamentally flawed, as alternative measures could address such concerns without resorting to military force. Russia's use of the Nazi threat as a pretext thus exemplifies how geopolitical narratives are exploited to rationalize aggressive actions against sovereign states.

Russia hoped that emphasizing denazification could justify its military actions in Ukraine, both in the eyes of the international community, and as a means of gaining widespread support domestically. This effort was complemented by promoting Russian Pan-Slavism—a 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideology centered on the cultural, territorial, religious, and linguistic unification of the Russian people. The core of this ideology emphasizes safeguarding this unity against external threats, including cultural, territorial, linguistic, and religious risks (Tsygankov, 2016; Kuzio, 2022). However, evidences suggest that the Russian government was unable to garner full support from its citizens through this narrative.

The term ‘Nazism’ is extensive and often ambiguous due to its politicized usage and associated sensitivities. Although Nazism is fundamentally a racist ideology (Steizinger, 2021, p. 98) historically responsible for numerous crimes against humanity, far-right movements are increasingly regarded as modern manifestations of racist ideologies that echo aspects of Nazism in post-war Europe. In this context, racial policies and approaches—such as racial preferences, exclusion, and xenophobia—can be classified alongside Nazism (Kahn, 2022). These classifications often connect far-right movements because of their shared approaches toward those they perceive as ‘others’, including ethnic, racial, or cultural minorities.

Far-right movements are not limited to Western Europe; notably, Russia hosts some of the most prominent far-right groups in Europe (Butt & Byman, 2023). Consequently, the geopolitical narratives propagated by Russia appear hypocritical and strategically manipulative. While Russia invokes Ukrainian far-right groups and militias as the primary justification for its military intervention, Russia frames the Ukraine conflict as a Slavic war against ‘savages’ and ‘Nazis’ beyond its borders (Plokhly, 2023), representing a form of right-wing propaganda that distorts reality for geopolitical gain.

This underpins Russia’s approach to Ukraine. Russian narratives about threats originating from Ukraine were persuasive internationally, but fundamentally flawed in their assessment. Russia’s primary concern was not Ukraine itself, but the potential loss of buffer zones between Russia and NATO—territories perceived as essential for national security (Menon & Snyder, 2017). Believing that a preventive war was justified, Russia sought to preempt Western influence and NATO expansion. Putin’s

narratives often evoke fear, suggesting that Ukraine might join NATO as a way to surround Russia or threaten its sovereignty. He has repeatedly argued that NATO's eastward expansion poses a direct threat to Russian security. In his speeches, especially the 2022 pre-invasion address, he emphasized that NATO's presence near Russian borders undermines regional stability. He claimed that NATO's military infrastructure in Ukraine and other neighboring countries is a provocation meant to weaken Russia. He has also cultivated fears about 'Russophobia' and alleged persecution of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine, claiming Russia must act to protect these populations (Reuters, 2022). The military invasion has instead been viewed as a significant shift—marking a new phase in Russian foreign policy—where geopolitical interests take precedence over diplomatic norms (Al-Hasnawi, 2022), risking undermining the authority and effectiveness of international laws and norms (Lanza, 2022).

This geopolitical framing has sparked widespread concern regarding the viability and integrity of international legal frameworks. Some critics argue that states are increasingly willing to prioritize deterrence and power projection over adherence to international laws, which may prove ineffective when confronting superpowers and aggressive regimes (Lupovici, 2023). Only a limited number of actors can utilize geopolitical representations effectively to extend their hegemony or advance 'grand visions' on a global scale. Most states, however, deploy such representations primarily as domestic tools—either to justify certain policies (like colonialism, neutrality, or peace initiatives) or as components of national identity strategies (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006, pp. 356–357). Therefore, it seems that Russia's geopolitical representations were largely ineffective outside its borders—they primarily aimed

to mobilize internal support rather than persuade international audiences. This inward focus highlights how such narratives primarily serve domestic political purposes rather than global diplomatic efforts. Internationally, regardless of the presence of Russian speakers in Ukraine or the strategic alliances within the region and beyond, most countries did not accept Russia's claims of immediate threats posed by the far-right and Nazi militia of the Azov Battalion (Kirillova, 2022).

Furthermore, although Russia claims that its military action aims to eradicate Nazism in Ukraine, this justification coincides with broader factors that have contributed to the rise of far-right movements throughout Europe (Wondreys, 2025). Interestingly, some far-right groups within Europe maintain positive or cooperative relationships with Russia. In contrast, others promote nationalist policies within their own countries—some even encouraging their members to travel to Ukraine to fight against Russia (Kaunert et al., 2023).

This complex web of alliances and oppositions reveals a stark contradiction between Russia's official narrative on Ukraine and the actual geopolitical landscape, where far-right groups operate with diverse motives—often in direct opposition to Russian propaganda. Russia's geopolitical narrative, which frames Nazism as an imminent threat in Ukraine and promotes Pan-Slavist ideology, has been disseminated through state media, pro-Kremlin outlets, and social networks. Vladimir Putin's regime has systematically weaponized media and disinformation to shape narratives around the Russia-Ukraine war, employing a mix of state-controlled propaganda and exploiting Digital Platforms. Treyger et al. (2025) showed that pro-Russian accounts dominate Russian-language spaces, spreading dehumanizing

content. However, RAND research argues that these efforts often fail to engage global audiences deeply.

This strategy aimed to garner both international sympathy and domestic support for its actions. However, while data on internal Russian support for the war remains limited, evidence suggests that a significant minority (22%) of citizens oppose the invasion (Levada Center, 2025). Moreover, Russia's geopolitical maneuvering has produced an unintended consequence: it has galvanized ideological opposition and strategic rivals in Western media and politics. Historical precedents—such as Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe (Brown, 2009)—coupled with growing alarm over Russia's territorial ambitions, have fueled resistance to its war rather than sympathy for its narratives. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian narration of war was more influenced by Russian geopolitical narrations than by those of the US and Western Europe, which emphasize Russia's geopolitical and territorial ambitions. Ultimately, the clash between Russian propaganda and Ukrainian-Western geopolitical narratives has undermined Moscow's war rhetoric, eroding its persuasive power.

In Russia, geopolitical representations predominantly draw on historical narratives, serving to reinforce a sense of national identity rooted in Slavic heritage. The Russian government exploits these representations to evoke historical conflicts, particularly recalling events from World War II and earlier centuries when Russia contended with Ukraine and other neighboring nations. Consequently, the war in Ukraine is framed domestically as a continuation of Russia's longstanding struggle against external enemies, especially Ukrainians (Wondreys, 2025). This indicates that Russia seeks to employ emotional politics within its

geopolitical discourse, leveraging historical memory to legitimize its actions.

While these representations outside Russia often serve as political instruments to justify territorial expansion in Eastern Europe, within Russia, they primarily mobilize and galvanize domestic support for the military effort. In essence, the geopolitical narratives of war are tailored to reinforce internal unity and bolster patriotic sentiment. The perception of Putin's security and war narratives in Russia varies significantly across different segments of society, including youth and ethnic minorities. Younger Russians, particularly those under 30, were initially more resistant to state propaganda due to their internet-savvy nature and access to alternative information sources like VPNs and Telegram. Many held favorable views of the West and participated in anti-war protests early in the invasion. The Kremlin has aggressively targeted youth through 'patriotic education' in schools, rewriting history curricula to justify the war and organizing pro-war rallies. Children have been made to write letters to soldiers and sing patriotic songs redrawing Russia's borders (e.g., 'from Alaska to the Kremlin') (Klain, 2022).

Ethnic republics were targeted first in the 2022 mobilization, with men dragged from homes at night, including those legally exempt (e.g., fathers of five). Activists describe this as "ethnic genocide". Interestingly, minorities from regions like Buryatia, Dagestan, and Tuva suffer higher death tolls. For example, Buryats are 7.8 times more likely to die in Ukraine than ethnic Russians, and Tuvans 10.4 times more likely. These groups are often recruited as 'cannon fodder' (Petkova, 2022).

Domestically, the language of fear, righteous wars, and defensive security is predominant. Such narratives serve to portray

the country as besieged by external threats, thereby rationalizing aggressive policies and military actions. Conversely, externally, Russia endeavors to persuade the international community to respect its security concerns. Internally, it aims to project the image that Russia's military actions are necessary to deter and confront those threatening its sovereignty. Ultimately, these geopolitical representations serve a dual purpose: externally, to legitimize Russia's assertiveness; internally, to foster nationalist sentiment, justify military campaigns, and portray the nation as a formidable power capable of safeguarding its interests and security.

## 5. Conclusion

Although Russia intended to gain support from both inside and outside for its war against Ukraine, its geopolitical representations during the Ukraine conflict have primarily functioned as a domestic propaganda tool rather than a persuasive international narrative. While the Kremlin has framed its invasion as a necessary campaign against 'Nazism' in Ukraine to save the Slavic nation as well as the Russian people in that country from immediate dangers, these claims lack substantive historical or political basis. Instead, the conflict is fundamentally rooted in Russia's broader strategic objectives: maintaining buffer zones to insulate itself from NATO's eastward expansion and reasserting dominance over what it perceives as its traditional sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Therefore, despite support from its allies, most states either opposed Russia's claims or remained neutral during the Ukraine crisis. More than Russian state media narratives or official statements, it was broader geopolitical concerns—particularly the

perceived confrontation between the US and Russia in Ukraine—that dominated global discourse. In this framing, the conflict is often reduced to a familiar Cold War-style narrative: the US expanding its influence toward Russia's borders in Europe, while Russia responds by entrenching its territorial presence in Eastern Ukraine. These ambitions reflect a continuation of Russia's historical competition with Western powers, particularly the U.S. and the EU, over regional hegemony.

Despite Moscow's efforts to export its narratives abroad—particularly through state-sponsored media and disinformation campaigns—its messaging has largely failed to resonate with international audiences. The portrayal of Ukraine as a hotbed of far-right extremism has been met with widespread skepticism, given the country's democratically elected government and the absence of any immediate and credible Nazi threat. Nevertheless, within Russia, these narratives persist, serving as a crucial mechanism for justifying military aggression and sustaining domestic support. The Kremlin's reliance on hyperbolic rhetoric—such as equating Ukrainian nationalism with existential peril—reveals awareness that external credibility is secondary to internal cohesion. Russia's aggressive history in Eastern Europe over the past few centuries, especially during the Cold War, remains vivid for European citizens and states. As a result, it is not merely Russian geopolitical narratives and representations that attract attention, but rather Russia's historical actions and strategic aims. In this context, it appears that opponents of Russia in Europe primarily focus on the geopolitical dynamics surrounding Ukraine, rather than on Russian portrayals of threats from Ukrainian Nazis. Therefore, despite continuous efforts to disseminate propaganda justifying the war against Ukraine, the underlying geopolitical

realities—particularly the competition between the US and Russia over Ukraine—have played a more functional role in shaping perceptions.

In this regard, an analysis of Russia's geopolitical discourse reveals deep-seated historical patterns. The invocation of Slavic unity and the supposed defense of Russian-speaking populations echo imperial and Soviet-era justifications for territorial expansion. During the Tsarist and Communist periods, Moscow similarly framed its interventions as protective measures, whether under the banner of Pan-Slavism or proletarian internationalism. Today, this legacy manifests in the securitization of national identity, with the Kremlin presenting Ukraine's independence as an artificial Western construct threatening Russia's civilizational integrity.

The emphasis on World War II parallels is particularly revealing. By casting the invasion as a continuation of the struggle against fascism, the Russian state taps into deeply ingrained historical trauma, reinforcing a siege mentality among its populace. However, this narrative collapses under scrutiny: Ukraine, a victim of Nazi occupation, has no significant far-right influence in government, and its Jewish president, Volodymyr Zelensky, undermines Russia's claims of systemic Nazism. The dissonance between rhetoric and reality underscores the performative nature of these representations, which are designed primarily for domestic consumption rather than international persuasion. Moreover, while Russia tends to recount history only up to 1945, most Eastern European countries reinterpret their history from 1945 until the collapse of the USSR. During this period, many of these nations were under the control and repression of Communism and the Red Army, especially throughout the 1950s and 1960s. As a result, official and public historical narratives in these countries often

counter the Russian version of history, thereby challenging Russia's broader geopolitical narratives.

As a result, the effectiveness of Russia's geopolitical narratives has waned, both domestically and internationally. Internationally, the blatant disconnect between Moscow's anti-Nazi rhetoric and its overt territorial ambitions—such as the annexation of Crimea and the attempted annexation of eastern Ukrainian regions—has eroded its credibility. The war's prolonged duration and Russia's failure to achieve a swift victory have further exposed the flimsiness of its justifications, leading to growing disillusionment even among traditionally sympathetic audiences in the Global South.

Domestically, while state-controlled media have succeeded in galvanizing specific segments of the population, cracks have begun to emerge. The reliance on increasingly fantastical claims—such as accusations of Western biolabs or Ukrainian "genocide" in Donbas—has strained believability, even within Russia. Moreover, the economic toll of sanctions and military mobilization has prompted quiet dissent, suggesting that nationalist fervor alone cannot sustain public support indefinitely.

Faced with these challenges, Russian policymakers appear to be recalibrating their approach. Rather than doubling down on anti-Nazi rhetoric, the focus has shifted toward more pragmatic justifications, such as securing Russia's 'historical lands' and preventing NATO encroachment. This adjustment reflects a tacit admission that ideological narratives have limited utility in shaping global opinion. Instead, Moscow is prioritizing raw geopolitical calculus: consolidating territorial gains, weakening Ukraine, and deterring further Western involvement.

In summary, Russia's geopolitical narratives surrounding the

Ukraine war have proven ineffective as tools of international persuasion, but remain potent domestically. The Kremlin's ability to frame the conflict as a defensive struggle against Western aggression has allowed it to sustain a degree of internal cohesion, despite mounting costs. However, the increasing transparency of its strategic motives—coupled with the failure to legitimize its actions abroad—underscores the diminishing returns of ideological propaganda in modern conflict.

Ultimately, Russia's reliance on contradictory and ahistorical narratives has compromised its soft power, leaving it increasingly isolated. The war has exposed a fundamental tension in Moscow's strategy: the pursuit of regional dominance through military force clashes with the need for credible justifications in an interconnected world. As the conflict drags on, the hollowness of its representations may further undermine both domestic morale and international standing, reinforcing the lesson that in contemporary geopolitics, brute force cannot compensate for the absence of persuasive legitimacy.

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