

# Why did Putin go too far? The rationality of Vladimir Putin's decision to begin a war with Ukraine

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Roman Bäcker<sup>1</sup> & Joanna Rak<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nicolaus Copernicus University, Faculty of Political Science and Security Studies, Batorego 39L, 87-100 Toruń, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0002-3796-3711, Email: [backer@umk.pl](mailto:backer@umk.pl)

<sup>2</sup> Adam Mickiewicz University, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego 5, 61-614 Poznań, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0002-0505-3684, Email: [joanna.rak@amu.edu.pl](mailto:joanna.rak@amu.edu.pl)

**ABSTRACT:** The paper aims to determine the extent of the rationality of Vladimir Putin's decision to begin a war with Ukraine. Its central argument is that this decision was irrational on three levels. Firstly, the Russian decision-making elites failed to foresee the ability of the Ukrainian army and people to resist efficiently. It might have resulted from the imperial superiority syndrome reinforced by the experiences of 2014. Secondly, the elites treated the reports on the Russian army's combat readiness as reliable and did not make an effort to verify them. Probably no one can determine the scale of the kleptocracy, and therefore no one has reliable data on the quality of the Russian army's combat preparation. Thirdly, the elites failed to envisage the scale of support for Ukraine from Western democracies. What is more, they did not take into account the democratic rationality of Western politicians. The same politicians who appeared to Putin to be weak and incapable of action, immediately after the mass social protests and condemnation of Russia's aggression by public opinion, acted following the clearly expressed will of the political nation. The article reflects on the systemic reasons for such a poor definition of the decision-making situation and then tries to formulate the general relationship between the quality of the decision-making elite and the acceleration of the bifurcation processes of the Russian autocratic regime.

**KEYWORDS:** Russia, Ukraine, war, political decision-making, authoritarianism, kleptocracy, Western militant democracy

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The entry of Russian troops into the territory of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, became a crucial date in the modern history of the world. On that day, the outright war between Russia and Ukraine began. However, a note should be taken that a small-scale war, limited in terms of territory and scope, largely silent, lasted from February 2014, when Vladimir Putin sent “polite green people” to Crimea (Alison, 2014; Dunn & Bobick, 2014; Friedman, 2014). The full-scale war also marked the beginning of an increasingly escalating new “cold war” between Russia and the West (Mărcău, 2022, pp. 9–10).

Undoubtedly, the decision to take over Ukraine by armed forces was made much earlier than on the morning of February 24, 2022. We can assume that it was one of a few significant scenarios developed by Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu during a short vacation in Siberia in September 2021 (The Kremlin, 2021). On December 15, 2021, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs formulated demands to guarantee security by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), especially the USA (*MID raskryl*, 2021). According to the Kremlin, Russia would be safe if NATO withdrew its military installations from post-communist states and Ukraine was entirely subordinated to Russia (Tsygankov, 2018). The former demand meant the creation of a kind of grey zone that would allow Russia’s possible further expansion. At that moment, it meant NATO’s withdrawal from the entire area, presumably to the east of the Oder.

NATO’s response drew upon an entirely different logic. The USA and other NATO member states proposed to Russia to strengthen cooperation, establish partnership relations, and thus increase security. Instead of retreating, the West offered Russia, according to the latter’s logic of imperial thinking, to become a part of it, subordinate by nature. The decision to treat NATO’s response as insufficient and unacceptable was, at the same time, a decision to start a war with Ukraine.

These observations motivate a research question about why Putin decided to start a war with Ukraine despite obvious factors against this decision. Accordingly, the study aims to determine the extent of the rationality of Putin’s decision to begin a war with Ukraine. Delving analytically into the aspects of rationality uncovers the rationale behind a decision-making process.

The remainder of the article consists of six sections. The first one introduces a research approach by formulating questions to sources, determining major arguments and proposed standpoints. This is followed by four sections discussing research findings. They are organized in clusters of answers to questions to sources. Their focus is on Putin’s misdiagnosis of the decision-making situation, the leader principle, the shape of autocracy in Russia, and widespread and deeply rooted imperial thinking as the factors informing a decision-making process before February 24, 2022. The paper finishes with conclusions and discussion on limitations, practical, scientific, and social implications.

## THE RESEARCH APPROACH

As stated, the paper aims to determine the extent of the rationality of Putin’s decision

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to begin a war with Ukraine. Its central argument is that this decision was irrational on three levels. Firstly, the Russian decision-making elites failed to foresee the ability of the Ukrainian army and people to resist efficiently. It might have resulted from the imperial superiority syndrome reinforced by the experiences of 2014. Secondly, the elites treated the reports on the Russian army's combat readiness as reliable and did not make an effort to verify them. Probably no one can determine the scale of the kleptocracy, and therefore no one has reliable data on the quality of the Russian army's combat preparation. Thirdly, the elites failed to envisage the scale of support for Ukraine from Western democracies. What is more, they did not take into account the democratic rationality of Western politicians. The same politicians who appeared to Putin to be weak and incapable of action, immediately after the mass social protests and condemnation of Russia's aggression by public opinion, acted following the clearly expressed will of the political nation.

The research reflects on the systemic reasons for such a poor definition of the decision-making situation and then tries to formulate the general relationship between the quality of the decision-making elite and the acceleration of the bifurcation processes of the Russian autocratic regime. The arguments result from answers to the questions to sources. They are organized into the following four clusters: Putin's misdiagnosis of the decision-making situation, the leader principle, the shape of autocracy in Russia, and widespread and deeply rooted imperial thinking as the factors informing a decision-making process before February 24, 2022.

The first set of questions is as follows: why did Putin fail to notice the transformation in Ukraine over the past eight years? Why did not he use the NGOs' reports, interviews, the accounts of witnesses, and media information to inform a decision-making process? Why did he fail to anticipate the West's reaction? Why Russian decision-making center could not diagnose the actual condition of the Russian army properly? Why is the second army of the world, with vast amounts of military equipment, unable to break the resistance of much weaker Ukrainian troops for many weeks? The second group of questions is: how did the leader principle influence Putin's decision-making process? How did Putin's personality traits fuel the conspiracy-driven evaluation of a decision-making situation? The third set of questions is: why was Putin, with his narcissistic and extremely egocentric paranoid borderline personality, able to force absolute obedience to his commands and sometimes only wishes or dreams? What essential features of the Russian authoritarian regime facilitated this ability and triggered its potential? The final questions are: how did widely shared imperial thinking inform a decision-making process? Why did the divide and rule policy (Latin: *divide et impera*) go beyond the existing scheme? Why was a "special operation" launched on February 24 to "demilitarize and de-Nazify" Ukraine? We used a method of sources analysis to address the questions. The corpus of sources included Putin's annual Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly given before February 24, 2022, and the Kremlin's official website. In addition to systematic analysis, we kept up-to-date with the Russian state and independent media to identify information leaks on decision-making processes at the state level.

## MISDIAGNOSIS OF THE DECISION-MAKING SITUATION

The invasion of Russian troops on the territory of Ukraine from the north, east, and south on the morning of February 24, 2022, was to start a short-term operation, a few days at most, without major bloodshed or perhaps even bloodless, ending with the complete collapse of the Ukrainian state and the quick recognition of the new geopolitical realities by the West. It was supposed to go smoothly.

Nevertheless, this scenario turned out to be completely unrealistic due to an incorrect diagnosis in all three analysis fields. First of all, Ukraine proved that it is not an imaginary entity. The Ukrainian state is operating efficiently, and the Ukrainian society has a high level of national consciousness. Additionally, the Ukrainian army is capable of successfully opposing the Russian troops. Among the many facts confirming the above arguments, we can point to the voluntary return from economic emigration of about a hundred thousand Ukrainians in the first days of the war just to fight the aggressor (Scislowska & Niedzielski, 2022).

Furthermore, the states of the broadly understood West, mainly Europe and North America, firmly opposed Russia's aggression, introduced tough sanctions against it on an unprecedented scale, and immediately provided Ukraine with previously unpredictable help, primarily humanitarian and military assistance. In a completely unexpected way for Putin, the Russian army turned out to be considerably weaker on the battlefield than all the data and experience had shown so far.

It is very likely that the Kremlin assumed that in 2022, Ukraine would act in the same way as in 2014. It begs the question of why did Putin fail to notice the transformation taking place in Ukraine over the past eight years? It was not because of a lack of information. One could learn about what happened in Ukraine over the past eight years from the NGOs' reports, interviews, the accounts of witnesses, and above all, from the media. Why did not Putin use them to inform a decision-making process?

The most likely answer comes from the Russian perception of the population living in the subordinated territories, i.e., the entire post-Soviet bloc, excluding the Baltic countries that are always treated differently. The sense of imperial superiority shaped the perception of the population of the post-Soviet area as the masses passively submitted to overwhelming power. Therefore, Russians could not treat the masses as empowered people. Instead, they defined the masses as a set of individuals caring only for their biological survival. At the same time, Ukraine's GDP per capita in 2020 was USD 12 400 (CIA, 2022), so it was more than two times lower than the corresponding rate for the population of Russia. Putin's claim in July 2019 that Ukrainians and Russians are one nation rested on historical stereotypes of dubious quality (Apnews, 2019). In fact, it was a testimony to the belief that the fate of the Ukrainian population is predetermined by the necessity to submit to the Kremlin. Thus, the fate is structurally exactly the same as the Russian population but undoubtedly inferior in social status. Every Russian will have the right not only to conquer and colonize ("to liberate") Ukraine but also to feel superior. Colonial thinking syndrome blotted out the possibility of comprehending what was happening in Ukraine.

Why did Putin fail to anticipate the West's reaction? He did so because an elemen-

tary analysis of the facts forced the conclusion that democratic politicians are weak, scared, and have no will to take effective anti-Russian action. Joe Biden, treated as an infirm older man, led to a chaotic and detrimental to the USA's public image withdrawal from Afghanistan. The leaders of the most important European countries were constantly visiting the Kremlin and calling Putin to maintain any contact since they could not expect any concessions. In addition, to a greater or lesser extent, all European countries were dependent on Russia in terms of supplies of raw materials, mainly oil and gas (Johannesson & Clowes, 2022). Although the West did not have the strength, capacity, and readiness to oppose Russia, it did so. It begs the question of why.

Putin did not foresee the existence of public opinion understood as the freely expressed collective will of a political nation. Such public opinion did not focus on Ukrainian problems for a long time before February 24, 2022. The last time when the Ukrainian issue was of public interest was the shooting of a Dutch plane over Donbas in 2014 (see, e.g., Davidson & Yuhas, 2014). Moreover, before February 24, 2022, public opinion did not act as a pressure group on the political scene. The situation changed on the morning of that day. The only news in the mass media was about Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine. A similar situation in the media last happened on September 11, 2001, and lasted a day or two. In the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war, other information in the prime-time agenda setting did not appear until a few days later. What is more, in terms of moral evaluation, the situation was utterly unequivocal. On the one hand, there is an aggressor, and on the other hand, there is a victim. It was public opinion that forced the politicians of democratic countries to react decisively to Russia's aggression. Any attempts to oppose public opinion where the political nation is the sovereign always end badly for the politicians. They have no choice but to do what the public wants them to do (e.g., Bowles, 1958). Thereby, public opinion forced politicians in the first days and weeks of the war to take decisive actions far exceeding any previously planned support for Ukraine.

This statement also applies to the policy of Joe Biden's team. Even before the Russian invasion, the USA began to support Ukraine through military equipment, training, intelligence information, and an unprecedented campaign of disclosing intelligence. Nevertheless, this aid was primarily aimed at discouraging or delaying Russia's aggression. It was not intended to repel the aggressor and significantly weaken Russia's imperial potential. The latter became the goal of the presidential administration only after the successful defence of Ukraine and the unprecedented consent of politicians from both American parties to the enormous multi-billion-dollar aid for Ukraine. Without an unequivocal position taken by the American public opinion, it would be impossible to achieve this goal.

Here, a series of further questions emerge. Why could not the Russian decision-making center properly diagnose the Russian army's actual condition? Why is the second army of the world, with huge amounts of military equipment, unable to break the resistance of much weaker Ukrainian troops for many weeks?

We cannot ignore low quality of command, lack of adequate battlefield reconnaissance, or logistical problems. However, we should pay attention to systemic issues, too. In Russia, the military is a mythical entity. There has been a stereotype of the

army and navy for two centuries as Russia's only allies. For over seventy years, the only holiday celebrated by all Russians was the day of victory over the Nazi Reich on May 9. The feast of the army on February 23 is regarded in Russia as equivalent to the feast of men and is mainly family-oriented. In turn, the holiday of airborne troops is a primitive form of carnival. The army is a myth that combines the most sacred values, i.e., defence of the homeland, the desired model of masculinity, national and family tradition, a sense of pride in oneself and superiority over "strangers" (Sherlock, 2016). The mythization of the military leads to the sacralization of the modern army and, at the same time, creates a social blockade to critical analysis (Fuller, 2014). This is due to the taboo that sanctity is not subject to criticism.

The military, like any other sphere of the state's functioning in Russia, is a corrupt institution. It is systemic corruption, in which the subordinate is obliged to pay the appropriate amount to their superior in return for a specific security. At the same time, absolute loyalty is the most important criterion for maintaining stable official relationships (Dawisha, 2015; Ledeneva, 2013). Thus, neither the quality of training and equipment nor the motivation of soldiers counts. Two aspects of the functioning of such an institution have to be considered. While the first is external and verifiable in terms of quantity, the second is an internal, corruption-clientelist system. The former creates the illusion of power, whereas the latter allows its participants to obtain benefits that make life more comfortable (in the case of senior officers and generals—relatively luxurious life) (Bukkvoll, 2008; Shlapentokh, 2003).

Corruption as a system, and not as a set of individual cases, creates a double world. On the one hand, it is an external and visible world of statistics, parades, and military exercises. On the other hand, it is an internal and invisible world of extreme dependence, hidden income, and enslavement of those taking and giving bribes, commanders benefiting from unlawful incomes, and soldiers deprived of elementary things necessary to fight and survive. This system and its consequences are also unrecognizable as a whole. It is only possible to capture individual cases, as was the case with the corruption of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdukov (Weiss, 2013; Beliakova & Perlo-Freeman, 2018). It means that no one can determine the real state of the military capability of the Russian army until it begins to fight a serious enemy on a long-term basis.

Meanwhile, the experience to date during Putin's rule, and thus in this century, did not allow for this type of test. The war in Georgia lasted several days, and the Georgian army did not resist seriously (Cohen & Hamilton, 2011). In 2014, Ukraine was unable to defend itself effectively (Westerlund & Norberg, 2016). In turn, expeditionary forces in Syria fought against lightly armed partisans (Maher & Pieper, 2021). In addition, one of the axioms adopted without any doubt was the conviction that the Ukrainian army was incapable and reluctant to any effective and long-lasting resistance.

The false diagnosis of the situation did not only concern these three most elemental planes. It is also possible to list unfulfilled hopes for support from China. Undoubtedly, it was hoped that at least Belarus, but also Central Asian states, especially Kazakhstan, would support the "special operation in Ukraine" (The Diplomat, 2022). However, the withdrawal of the allies from aid and distancing themselves from participation in the war were primarily caused by clear signs of Russia's weakness. The reason for the

latter was a misdiagnosis of (1) Ukraine's ability to defend itself, (2) the West's willingness to support the victim of aggression, and (3) the power of its own army. The misdiagnosis resulted from deeper, systemic reasons, which are essential features of the functioning of contemporary Russia.

### LEADER PRINCIPLE—*FÜHRERPRINZIP*

Boris Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin as his successor only after testing several other candidates. None of the predecessors was so decisive, able to solve problems, unscrupulous, and sufficiently loyal to the Yeltsin clan (Baker & Glasser, 2005). Initially, Putin was dependent on the Putin clan, oligarchs, and many different interest groups, especially regional ones (Hoffmann, 2011). Nonetheless, he eliminated all those who refused to come into line with him little by little. A unified state and economic structure completely subordinated to Putin were finally formed during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev from 2008 to 2012. It was then that Putin eliminated the autonomy of regional interest groups represented by the so-called heavyweight players, including the mayor of the city of Moscow and the president of Tatarstan.

Independent centers of social organization, the so-called anti-system opposition, were stigmatized, discriminated against, and eliminated, especially after the beginning of the conflict with Ukraine in 2014 (Roxburgh, 2021, pp. 128). The last signs of this process were the poisoning and then the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny, and after the commencement of the "special operation," the closure of the last independent media (*Novaya Gazeta*, *Echo of Moscow*).

Putin is becoming more and more the personal keystone of Russia's entire social, political, economic, and military system. It is he who takes the critical decisions regarding not only the staffing of the most important positions but also decides on key court judgments, military actions and, for example, the ruble exchange rate or economic contracts. Such an enormous scope of power must be coupled with a growing fear of losing it. The more power you have, the fewer power competencies others have. If one strives for power treated as the most important value, others are also accused of it. The absolute ruler must constantly take care that no one takes this power away from them (Laurinavičius, 2016). The only ones who can do it are the closest associates because only they have the appropriate possibilities.

Political psychologists viewed the personalities of tyrants as deeply disturbed. They often list the narcissistic (reparative or destructive), manic-depressive, and borderline personalities (Glad, 2002). The above distinctions and identifications are largely justified. However, it is also worth following the reflections of Elias Canetti (1984), who cited many examples of paranoia. The absolute ruler, constantly taking care to maintain their power, must carefully check whether their closest associates are entirely loyal to them. The slightest trace of disloyalty forces them to react because when it comes to a conspiracy, it may be too late. Delusional paranoia has become an increasingly visible trait of any absolute ruler in time, including the Russian president.

In Putin's case, it is not only the fear of a conspiracy on the part of his closest associates but also a genuine fear of "color revolutions" inspired by hostile "Western

partners.” The conspiracy-driven anxieties account for the appearance of a point in the Sino-Russian agreement concluded during the 2022 Winter Olympics on jointly combating “color revolutions” (Wright, 2022; Rajeswari, 2022).

Delusional paranoia is also combined with a very high level of intelligence that allows Putin to combine facts into one rather coherent whole. However, over time, the ability to verify the information provided fades, and the ruler begins to believe more and more in everything given to him, regardless of the degree of probability. But why are narcissistic and extremely egocentric paranoid borderline paranoid persons able to force absolute obedience to their commands and sometimes only wishes or dreams? How does it relate to Putin?

### AUTOCRATIC REGIME

The title of this subsection contains an answer to the above questions. The essence of the autocratic regime is the lack of sovereignty of the political nation and thus the existence of another sovereign, such as bureaucracy or functionaries of militarized institutions (*siloviki*). The reign of this type of group is possible and has an increasing scope thanks to the elimination of the empowerment of other social groups (Rak & Bäcker, 2020). At the same time, this type of sovereign is characterized by a hierarchical structure. The necessity to constantly eliminate enemies and the hierarchical structure are typical features of a monistic, one-subject regime. In such a system, the ruler must eliminate all the restrictions on them, all barriers that bind them, regardless of institutional or normative facets. The absolute ruler has an enormous range of power competencies that are not subject to any normative or institutional restrictions (Motyl, 2016).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rule of law was not introduced in Russia. It was a prerogative state with a greater or lesser scope of centralization of sovereign decisions. The institutions of the constitutional responsibility of the President of the Russian Federation were constructed in such a way that it would not be possible to subject the person in the position to the impeachment procedure (see, e.g., Henderson, 2011).

However, like any ruler, Putin had to take into account the interests of pressure groups. During his reign as president and prime minister, the set of interest groups changed significantly. The importance of those outside the ruling class considerably decreased. In addition, since Putin’s speech in Munich in 2008, the importance of Western interest groups dropped significantly, although anyway, as evidenced by the Magnitsky affair (e.g., Zhavoronkov, 2013; Weiss, 2011), they were not too strong before. However, when the aggression against Ukraine began in 2014, the influence of Western interest groups has become scant. The elimination of the faction of moderate pro-Occidentalists pragmatists after Medvedev’s departure from the presidency was combined with the growing domination of *siloviki*. From 2014, the latter began to take over the most important positions increasingly, and in 2022, they gained hegemony (Fomin, 2022). Putin has to look after the interests of the military-industrial complex to a great extent from 2014 and from 2022 only theirs. All the rest of the articulated or



non-articulated needs of interest groups are taken into account only when necessary to maintain political stability.

## EMPIRE

The articulation of the desire to revive the empire is a factor that significantly reduces the number of resources that must be allocated to maintaining political stability. Obviously, it is already very costly to make efforts to restore the idea of Greater Russia, the Eurasian Empire, or the revival of Soviet rule. This paradox can be explained quite simply. All Russian political thought in the first decade of the 21st century, except Valeria Nowodworska, was imperial (Bäcker, 2007). Talking about the rebirth of the empire was a way of finding oneself in the mainstream of Russian political thinking and a means of realizing the nostalgic dreams of returning to the status quo ante of the vast majority of Russians. Political programs of this type satisfied a sense of superiority over other nations and, at the same time, were a kind of implementation of Weimar-type nostalgia (Van Herpen, 2013).

Until 2014, the implementation of the idea of imperial Russia focused on supporting the existence of para-states. The latter entities were to keep post-Soviet states far away from the metropolis in a state of eternal conflict and high spending (not only military) while discouraging the involvement of other great powers in such problematic situations. The same model of the extended principle of *divide et impera* was used in Donbas in 2014.

Why, then, was a “special operation” launched on February 24 to “demilitarize and de-Nazify” Ukraine? After all, such terms mean an attempt to completely subjugate Ukraine, to make it an area where there would be no Western influence. Why did the divide and rule policy go beyond the existing scheme?

The answer can be found by analyzing Putin’s activity. Before the invasion, the Russian president did not talk to representatives of the Ukrainian state. The Kremlin made demands on NATO, not Kyiv. Before the unprovoked aggression, Ukraine was not treated as a political subject. For the Kremlin, the Ukrainian state was only the subject of a diplomatic game and then a “special operation.”

This peculiar way of thinking was visible much earlier, e.g., in Putin’s annual addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation and, more precisely, the entire political elite of Russia. In all speeches, starting from 2018, there was at least a paragraph, and very often a multi-page fragment, on Russia’s enormous war potential surpassing all other powers. At the same time, Putin did not mention the land forces and the navy. He was interested in almost completely new types of means of delivery of strategic weapons (*Posl’aniie*, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). Furthermore, Putin argued that invincible Russia had the ability to overcome all existing anti-missile defence systems and thus could destroy any country. He also suggested that these countries were unable to perform an effective counter-strike due to the inability to break through the Russian anti-missile systems. According to him, other countries had yet to create the weapons Russia already had at its disposal.

Putin led the above line of thought to a logical conclusion by formulating a pro-

posal to re-arrange the geopolitical order of the world. It is to consist in ending the unhampered expansion of NATO, especially the USA (Shiraev & Zubok, 2000). Powers, i.e., those with powerful nuclear weapons, should divide their spheres of influence among themselves and thus ensure the security and peace of the whole world (Cimbala, 2017). It was apparently worded in 2021. Putin suggested that the leaders of the five states that are permanent members of the Security Council meeting to discuss the most important tasks related to strategic nuclear weapons (*Posl'aniie*, 2021). Such a general statement was meant to open up the field for negotiations and information about new means of delivering nuclear weapons and was an incentive to resolve issues related to the new balance of powers peacefully.

In this sense, Ukraine becomes only an object. In the Kremlin's understanding, Ukraine is a stray territory the West wants to take over. Still, meanwhile, it belongs historically, geographically, culturally, religiously, linguistically, and, above all, geopolitically to Russia.

### CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In the case of research on decision-making processes in the Russian state structure, researchers always struggle with insufficient access to data necessary and sufficient to solve research problems. In addition, they have to deal with the analysis and interpretation of scattered, biased, and often contradictory data (Kalinin, 2016). A lot of information is distributed precisely in order to confuse public opinion, cause doubts about the interpretation of the situation or openly distort reality (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2021). The Russians seek to hide the facts that can be used to understand the mechanisms and the backstage of the functioning of the state structure. Individual events and information leaks make it possible to understand the dynamics of changes in Russia. What is more, this requires researchers to make extensive use of inductive reasoning, which can be seen as a limitation of research field exploration. Importantly, incomplete enumeration induction constitutes fallacious reasoning, that is, one in which the truth of the premises does not guarantee the validity of the conclusion (Sikora, 1959). On the one hand, this approach involves an inherent limitation since it precludes formulating generalizations or theorizing research findings. On the other hand, it is the only tool available today for understanding Russian international policy. Hence, when reading the conclusions of this study, readers should remember that it is based not only on deductive reasoning but also largely on inductive reasoning.

Despite the limitations, the study contributes empirically to the studies on Putin's decision-making processes and social understanding of Putin's decision to begin the war. It delivers empirical evidence to accept the following explanation. By starting an unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, Russia unleashed a genocidal war with unimaginable negative consequences. Simultaneously, intending to conquer Ukraine without much resistance, and within a few days, Putin made a terrible political mistake. This error resulted from a completely false diagnosis of the political situation in all three fields: (1) Ukraine's ability to defend and survive, (2) the West's reaction, and (3) the readiness of the Russian army to conduct hostilities.

To a large extent, the misdiagnosis drew upon the image of the situation created by military officials, desired by superiors. However, structural reasons were of crucial importance. They include the leader principle typical of all autocratic regimes. Regardless of who performs the political role of the “leader of the nation” or the head of the institution, subordinates, in order to keep their positions, must adapt to the expectations of their superior. Hierarchy, prerogative, and indefinite power ranges are the hallmarks of any autocracy. Another essential feature of Russian authoritarianism is its kleptocratic character.

Nevertheless, the most distinctive characteristic of Russia is its imperial aspirations on two levels, i.e., military and territorial power. Military power mainly concerns the development of nuclear weapons and their means of delivery. They are tools for realizing aspirations to become a world superpower. The second plane is a territorial expansion that includes having the status of a metropolis or being a key player, at least in the “near abroad,” understood as a post-Soviet area without the Baltic states.

The war, which started on February 24, 2022, marked the beginning of a stress test that verified all levels of stability in the Russian political regime in an extreme way. First, this war checks whether Russia’s resources allow it to make its imperial dreams come true. Second, it examines the quality of the functioning of the autocratic regime. Third, it tests the quality of political decisions and their implementation.

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#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Roman Bäcker is a professor at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. Head of the Department of Political Theory, president of the Polish Society of Political Sciences in 2010–2016, first dean of the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, author and co-author of books and articles on Russian and European political thought, totalitarianism, theory of politics and methodology of political science. He was the principal investigator of the research project *Contemporary Russia: Between Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism?* and he is an investigator in the research project *Contentious Politics and Neo-Militant Democracy* financed by the National Science Center. Co-editor with Joanna Rak of the book *Neo-militant Democracies in Post-Communist Member States of the European Union* (Routledge, London and New York 2022). Research interests: undemocratic political regimes, militant democracy, closed societies, Russian politics, political theory and methodology of political science.

Joanna Rak is an associate professor at the Department of Political Culture at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. In 2016–2018, she was a visiting researcher and professor at CEU San Pablo University in Madrid and in 2019 at the University Carlos III of Madrid. She is the principal investigator of the research projects *The Culture of Political Violence Dynamics of Anti-austerity Movements in Europe*, *Contentious Politics and Neo-Militant Democracy* and researcher in the *Contemporary Russia: Between Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism* project financed by the National Science Centre, Poland. The author of the book *Theorizing Cultures of Political Violence in Times of Austerity: Studying Social Movements in Comparative Perspective* (Routledge, London and New York 2018) and co-editor with Roman Bäcker of *Neo-militant Democracies in Post-communist Member States of the European Union* (Routledge, London and New York 2022).

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