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The concept of ontological security as an explanatory mechanism for the causes of Russian aggression against Ukraine

Koncepcja bezpieczeństwa ontologicznego jako mechanizm wyjaśniający przyczyny rosyjskiej agresji wobec Ukrainy

Abstract: The aim of this article is to recognise the extent to which research into Russian aggression against Ukraine has progressed using one school of international relations (IR) – ontological security. This approach is intended to refine the inference process in relation to the classical SM schools. The article draws on the first scholarly articles addressing the issue and critically evaluates them. Conclusions resulting from their critical reading allow pointing out the presence of a significant cognitive gap in relation to the analysed problem, prescribing to undertake empirical research on Russian autobiographical narratives of wartime using specialised interpretative tools.
Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, war, ontological security
Streszczenie: Celem tego artykułu jest rozpoznanie, w jakim stopniu badania nad rosyjską agresją wobec Ukrainy posunęły się naprzód, z wykorzystaniem jednej ze szkół stosunków międzynarodowych (SM) – bezpieczeństwa ontologicznego. Takie podejście ma na celu doprecyzowanie procesu wnioskowania w stosunku do klasycznych szkół SM. Artykuł opiera się na pierwszych artykułach naukowych dotyczących tego zagadnienia i krytycznie je ocenia. Wnioski płynące z ich krytycznej lektury pozwalają wskazać obecność istotnej luki poznawczej w odniesieniu do analizowanego problemu, co sugeruje potrzebę przeprowadzenia badań empirycznych nad rosyjskimi narracjami autobiograficznymi dotyczącymi czasu wojny, z wykorzystaniem specjalistycznych narzędzi interpretacyjnych.
Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, Ukraina, wojna, bezpieczeństwo ontologiczne

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Introduction – why ontological security?

In an attempt to understand Russia's reasons for its February 2022 aggression against Ukraine, reference was made to a broad set of theoretical tools from international relations and political science. One of these was the concept of ontological security, as defined by Jennifer Mizen, referring to earlier works of Ronald D. Laing and Anthony Giddens: "As the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realise a sense of agency"[1].

Why would the use of an ontological approach add value to attempts at explanation made using other approaches? It should be assumed that the concept of ontological security can support the process of inference regarding the reasons behind the Russian decision to start a war against Ukraine – not to replace other approaches but to fill the gaps in the inference process that appear[2]. This assumption is the result of previous findings that single interpretive paths have proved to be unsatisfactory in terms of the answers provided with regard to research on Russia's international activity[3]. Russia has been a frequent object of research prior to 2022 in respect of the concept of ontological security[4].

When discussing the reasons for the outbreak of war, theories around international relations naturally came to the fore. However, of the many theories available, none was able to comprehensively explain the reasons why Russia unleashed its war against Ukraine. This was primarily due to the fact that, as Stephen M. Walt noted: "All theo-

1   J. Mitzen, *Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma*, "European Journal of International Relations" 2006, vol. 12, no. 3, p. 342.

2   E. Götz, *Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited*, "International Studies Review" 2017, vol. 19, no. 2.

3   T. Narozhna, *Revisiting the Causes of Russian Foreign Policy Changes: Incoherent Biographical Narrative, Recognition and Russia's Ontological Security-Seeking*, "Central European Journal of International & Security Studies" 2021, vol. 15, no. 2; F.S. Hansen, *Russia's Relations with the West: Ontological Security through Conflict*, "Contemporary Politics" 2016, vol. 22, no. 3; A. Kazharski, *Civilizations as Ontological Security?: Stories of the Russian Trauma*, "Problems of Post-Communism" 2020, vol. 67, no. 1; H. von Essen, A. Danielson, *A Typology of Ontological Insecurity Mechanisms: Russia's Military Engagement in Syria*, "International Studies Review" 2023, vol. 25, no. 2; B. Chrzanowski, *An Episode of Existential Uncertainty: The Ontological Security Origins of the War in Donbas*, "Texas National Security Review" 2021, vol. 4, no. 3.

4   G. Sharafutdinova, *Red Mirror, The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

ries are largely simplifications and cannot cover all events and predict their development. Even the best social theories are crude and there will always be an exception to established patterns"[5].

However, some were undoubtedly less useful or even more harmful than others, despite gaining the most popularity. The most glaring example of this tendency was offensive realism and its creator John J. Mearsheimer. It was difficult to trust a concept whose creator publicly proclaimed in the first year of the war that: "There is no evidence in the public record that Putin was contemplating, much less intending to put an end to Ukraine as an independent state and make it part of a greater Russia when he sent his troops into Ukraine on February 24th"[6].

The value of the ontological approach is particularly revealed against the backdrop of the perceived awkwardness of the realist approach (primarily offensive realism) in relation to the interpretation of Russia's actions and its inability to explain phenomena that are irrational in international relations – those that are contrary to the national (material) interests of the state as well as those behaviours that exacerbate existing conflicts.

The concept of ontological security is ultimately – and this should not be forgotten – a form of intellectual-psychological experiment and requires the researcher to plunge into the internal logic of the concept in question – to accept the "rules of the game" characteristic of it. This means, among other things, having to disavow the fact that the content that constitutes Russia's autobiographical narrative can be used for purposes other than manifesting ontological insecurity (e.g., to weaponize information) and that the goals that guided Russian aggression against Ukraine may be far from ensuring Russia's emotional-psychological well-being and constitute, among others, a manifestation of retro-imperialism; an attempt to halt Ukrainian democratic aspirations and a European vocation, a form of revenge on the Ukrainian people

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5 S.E. Walt, *An International Relations Theory Guide to Ukraine's War*, Foreign Policy, 8 March 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/an-international-relations-theory-guide-to-ukraines-war/ [8.04.2024].
6 J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War*, CIRSD, 16 June 2022, https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-summer-2022-issue-no.21/the-causes-and-consequences-of-the-ukraine-war [8.04.2024].

for their attempted emancipation from Russia, or finally, the dismantling of Western and NATO unity[7].

This article is dedicated to a critical analysis of the findings made by researchers referring to Ontological Security Studies (OSS) in relation to the causes of Russian aggression against Ukraine. The specific aim of the article is to answer the following questions:

- How is the concept of ontological security adapted to the study of the causes of Russia's aggression against Ukraine?
- What are the main findings with regard to the causes of the outbreak of war in Ukraine using the theoretical approach in question?
- What should be the way forward for research into Russian aggression against Ukraine using the concept of ontological security?

The starting point for a discussion around the emerging findings on the causes of war obtained using the concept of ontological security, and the possibilities and limitations arising from its implementation, is an analysis of three major scientific texts that directly address this issue and fall within the OSS stream. These are: *War in Ukraine: The Clash of Norms and Ontologies*, by Andrej Krickovic and Richard Sakwa; Nicholas Ross Smith's and Grant Dawson's – *Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War,* and Katie Ryan's *Russia's search for ontological security and the Ukraine invasion.*

1. Ontological security – outline of the concept

In the discussion concerning the cognitive usefulness of the ontological security approach to the study of the causes of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, questions of the relationship between the material and immaterial security of the state occupy an important place. At

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7   V. Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, Kremlin.ru, 12 July 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 [8.04.2024]; K. Stepanenko, F.W. Kagan, N. Bugayova, *Weakness is Lethal: Why Putin Invaded Ukraine and How the War Must End*, Institute for the Study of War, 1 October 2023, https://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Weakness%20is%20Lethal%20Why%20Putin%20Invaded%20Ukraine%20and%20How%20the%20War%20Must%20End%20PDF.pdf [8.04.2024]; *Our experts decode the Putin speech that launched Russia's invasion of Ukraine*, Atlantic Council, 22 February 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/markup/putin-speech-ukraine-war/ [8.04.2024].

the core of this branch of research is the problem of the relevance of the non-material aspects of state functioning in opposition to security traditionally conceived – in material terms.

Jenifer Mitzen argues that: "Physical security is not the only kind of security that states seek. States also engage in ontological security seeking. Like the state's need for physical security, the need for ontological security is extrapolated from the individual level"[8]. She also writes that: "Individual identity is formed and sustained through relationships. Actors, therefore, achieve ontological security especially by routinizing their relations with significant others. Then, since continued agency requires the cognitive certainty these routines provide, actors get attached to these social relationships"[9].

What is equally important from the perspective of discussion concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine is: "Ontological security can conflict with physical security. Even a harmful or self-defeating relationship can provide ontological security, which means states can become attached to conflict. That is, states might actually come to prefer their ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty as to the other's and one's own identity"[10].

Mitzen and Larson also observe that: "There are cases where physical and ontological security are not divergent: no reconciliation between them is needed, as the threat to material security is equally a threat to ontological security. Yet the ontological component of the threat may provoke particular kinds of policy responses not predicted by a material threat alone or may enhance the perception of a material threat"[11].

2. Clash of norms and ontologies as a cause of the outbreak of war

One attempt to understand the causes of Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 is the normative conflict that has persisted since the early 1990s and deepened in the 2000s between Russia and

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8   J. Mitzen, *Ontological Security…*, pp. 341–342.
9   Ibid., p. 342.
10   Ibid., p. 342.
11   J. Mitzen, K. Larson, *Ontological Security and Foreign Policy*, Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.458 [8.04.2024].

the wider West, centring as Andrej Krickovic and Richard Sakwa note: "Between two normative principles enshrined in the post-1989 settlement – the free and sovereign right of states to choose their own security alignments, and the idea of indivisible security, the view that the security of one state should not be at the expense of another"[12].

Russia's war against Ukraine was said to be the result of a "deep ontological split with regard to the interpretation of concepts such as sovereignty and security"[13]. Russia is supposed to be a proponent of the concept that "sovereignty, principles of non-interference, balance of power must be respected, otherwise the world will plunge into conflict and chaos"[14]. On the other side of the "barricade" stood the West with its conviction that: "the expansion of the liberal community of states and their continued hegemony over world politics are considered necessary for the preservation of global peace and stability"[15]. Conflicting ontologies shaped a dichotomous division in understanding the logic of the development of international relations, including NATO's expansion to the East.

According to both authors, referring to the concept of ontological security makes it possible to understand the dynamics of the conflict, resulting from the fact that the two sides were operating in different – parallel – realities. Apart from geopolitics and the interests of the great powers, the clash of different normative interpretations of the world order played its role from the point of view of the outbreak of war[16].

Geopolitics and great power interests indubitably played their part, exacerbated by the clash of normative interpretations. The existence of two competing ontological models of politics ultimately generated a clash that, in the end, provoked war[17].

An opportunity was wasted in the post-Cold War period, as both authors write, to "build a mechanism for consensus and conflict prevention that could take the shape of a pan-European confederation

12 A. Krickovic, R. Sakwa, *War in Ukraine: The Clash of Norms and Ontologies*, "Journal of Military and Strategic Studies" 2022, vol. 22, no. 2, p. 90.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., pp. 90–91.
16 Ibid., p. 91.
17 Ibid., p. 107.

or a European security council within the OSCE"[18]. The blame lies with "the Cold War triumphant West, its ontology, and the institutions behind it"[19]. In Russia, "anxiety about traditional security has consequently taken on an extreme form, moreover, it has become intertwined with ontological anxiety about the sustainability of Russia as a distinct civilisation"[20].

While "Russia struggled to survive in the existential dimension", "the West, armed with a sense of certainty about its ontology, completely misunderstood the logic of Russia's actions, attributed to it bad intentions and guided by traditional imperialism. Meanwhile, the Russian ontology was quite different – it was based on the logic of sovereign equality, indivisibility of security and status"[21].

Last but not least – why did Russia declare war on Ukraine? To this fundamental question Krickovic and Sakwa answer that: "war appeared the lesser evil in comparison with what was perceived as an intensifying security and ontological dilemma that sooner or later had to be resolved"[22].

The approach proposed by both authors is certainly interesting and corresponds in some places with reality. Both Putin and his closest associates, such as Sergei Lavrov, have not spared any attention to the issue of indivisible security on the eve of the outbreak of war. Russia was consistent in its proposals for a security architecture in Europe and more broadly a normative vision of the international order. Since at least 2007 it has been one of the main leitmotifs of Kremlin discourse concerning world order. In Putin's 2007 Munich speech, which can be considered the symbolic start of the Second Cold War between Russia and the West, the concept of indivisible security appeared ten times[23]. An ultimatum to the US administration concerning NATO

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18   Ibid.
19   Ibid.
20   Ibid., p. 108.
21   Ibid.
22   Ibid.
23   *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy*, Kremlin.ru, 10.02.2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034 [8.04.2024].

withdrawal from Central Europe was a practical interpretation of how Putin understood the concept of indivisible security[24].

But reading Krickovic and Sakwa's article raises a number of questions and critical doubts. Above all, the proliferation of opinions that hold the West jointly responsible for the outbreak of war is worrying, leading to a dilution of Russia's culpability, which is morally doubtful.

In the dimension of explaining the causes of the outbreak of the war, one gets the impression that both authors consider it as a "side effect" of the normative and ontological confrontation between the West and Russia. Ukraine became a surrogate target, evidence of Russia's determination to defend the ontological world that was crumbling before its eyes, an uneasiness about accepting its vision of the system of international relations.

Moreover, Ukraine was an object rather than a subject of analysis – it finds no place for itself in the process of searching for the causes of Russian ontological anxiety. This should be resisted, given how much time and intellectual energy Putin (not to forget such emotions as anger and hate) has devoted to Ukraine as a "historical and political aberration"[25].

Their faith in Russia's willingness to engage in dialogue with the West is also puzzling – neither author questions the sincerity of Russia's intentions in this regard. Meanwhile, there are enough arguments for the thesis that Russia wanted this war. The West's rejection of Russian proposals was merely a favourable circumstance. The style and content in which the Kremlin negotiated with Washington left no doubt that Russia wanted these proposals to be rejected[26].

Both authors also seem to miss the fact that the beneficiary of indivisible security is to be Russia alone. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet republics in particular, can at most be, to paraphrase the words of Pyotr Stoylpin, "geopolitical fertiliser" on which Russia's sense of ontological security will flourish.

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24 *Russia's proposal to redraw European security "unacceptable," U.S. says*, Radio Free Europe. Radio Liberty, 17 December 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-russia-security-guarantees/31614168.html [8.04.2024].

25 *On the Historical Unity…*

26 *Александр Баунов – о российской дипломатии и итогах путинизма* [*Aleksandr Baunow – o rossijskoj dipłomatii i itogach putinizma*], Polit.ru, 19 December 2023, https://polit.ru/articles/konspekty/aleksandr-baunov-o-rossiyskoy-diplomatii-i-itogakh-putinizma/ [8.04.2024].

Symptomatic, too, is the unquestioned assumption that Russia communicates only a deeply rooted notion of the desired normative shape of the system of international relations through the idea of indivisible security and, at the same time, its ontological anxiety. Not only do they reject the assumption of the existence of the threat of a resurgence of Russian imperialism but they also fail to mention alternative explanations of the reasons for constructing a narrative concerning the desired vision of the global order[27].

The authors refer to the question of Russia's international status and its sense of civilisational distinctiveness (international identity) when analysing the causes of the outbreak of war. At the same time, they quite clearly marginalise, but do not ignore, geopolitical and security issues as causes of the outbreak of war, directing their attention towards emphasising the interplay between the material and non-material aspects of international security.

3. Ideational and psychological factors in Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Krickovic and Sakwa refer in their article to the findings of Grant Dawson and Nicholas Ross Smith. The aforementioned authors have written two texts – remaining within OSS – that raised the issue of the causes of Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The first was a scholarly text that made a critical reckoning with offensive realism and its explanatory power of Russia's war against Ukraine. The second, on the other hand, had the character of a political essay but focused directly on an ontological explanation of the causes of the war[28]. Above and beyond this, it contained an even more strongly articulated assumption of the inevitability of war than Krikovic and Sakva, bearing the title: "Putin's invasion of Ukraine had to happen"[29].

Both authors highlighted clear shortcomings in their inference using the concept of offensive realism, pointing out, however, that the problem of power distribution and, more broadly, issues of physical

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27 *Putin's new Ukraine essay reveals imperial ambitions*, Atlantic Council, 15 July 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-new-ukraine-essay-reflects-imperial-ambitions/.

28 G. Dawson, N.R. Smith, *Why Putin's invasion of Ukraine had to happen*, ECPR – The Loop, https://theloop.ecpr.eu/why-putins-invasion-of-ukraine-had-to-happen/ [8.04.2024].

29 Ibid.

security remain an important element of the conflict. Mearsheimer's criticism is quite explicit in both cases because "to add nuance and weight to his arguments he typically has to reach for additional variables, particularly domestic ones, that his theory explicitly disregards"[30].

However, it deserves even more serious criticism, for in the light of Mearsheimer's own findings: "Great powers are rational actors. They are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it. Moreover, states pay attention to the long term as well as the immediate consequences of their actions"[31].

The consequences of the protracted war with Ukraine, which are being felt by Russian society, energy, and transport infrastructure – even though the political regime and economy remain stable, give the impression that Russia is not acting rationally in its decision to go to war. The Kremlin ignored warnings from Russia itself about the negative consequences of aggression against Ukraine, issued by Ivan Timofeev, Programme Director of the Valdai Discussion Club[32].

Consistency in making foreign policy decisions that are irrational from the point of view of physical security seems to be a hallmark of Russian foreign policy – it is enough to mention the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War, or participation in the Great War. Brendan Chrzanowski was asking, studying Russia's invasion of Donbas in 2014: "Why did the Kremlin, facing the prospect of significant material and reputational consequences, decide not only to provide considerable support for local militants but to contribute active Russian service-members to the fight as well?"[33].

According to Dawson and Smith, offensive realism focuses excessively on the question of the survival of the state, while ignoring the "emotional and ontological" dimension of its functioning[34]. Meanwhile, Russia fears an aspiration on the part of the West to impose its social identity on Ukraine, which, by normative osmosis, will also

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30 N.R. Smith, G. Dawson, *Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War*, "Analyse & Kritik" 2022, vol. 44, no. 2, p. 181.

31 J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, London–New York, 2001, p. 31.

32 И. Тимофеев, *Война России и Украины: базовый сценарий?* [I. Timofiejew, *Wojna Rossii i Ukrainy: bazowyj scenarij?*], Valdai, 25 November 2021, https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/voyna-rossii-i-ukrainy-bazovyy-stsenariy/ [8.04.2024].

33 B. Chrzanowski, *An Episode…*, p. 12.

34 N.R. Smith, G. Dawson, *Mearsheimer…*, p. 182.

threaten the identity of Russia itself. The West not only poses a tangible and measurable security threat to Russia but also a deeper one – ontological. By its actions, it challenges Russia's sense of the unique value of its identity, which is supposed to be superior to the West's and should be perceived as such in the entire area of the near neighbourhood. Ukraine has become in relations with the West a "make-or-break national interest" for Russia[35]. This is what they believe explains Russia's lack of readiness or even willingness to respond to Western requests for dialogue to avoid war.

A number of other aggressive actions taken by Russia in recent years, including the annexation of Crimea or the intervention in Syria, could also, in their view, be seen through the prism of a concern to ensure Russia's ontological security, built on the assumption that "Russia as a great power and a great civilisation can act on its own, distinct from the control and aspirations of the West"[36].

In the second article, the issue of a particular self-image as "enduring great power and guardian of a unique civilisation" was additionally combined with a criticism of the West, which, according to both authors, by ignoring Russia's ontological anxieties and failing to see the core of the problem, which did not lie at all in the area of material security that Ukraine joining the EU and NATO was widely believed to exacerbate. Russia was engaged in "an almost existential struggle to assert its identity and will over the future of Ukraine"[37]. Consequently: "acute ontological insecurity tends to overtake material security as the most pressing national interest of the afflicted state"[38].

Like Krikovic and Sakwa, Smith and Dawson also took the position that the war in Ukraine was a product of the ontological conflict between Russia and the West and was, in their view, about: "which side will prevail in the international arena and impose their conception of what is right"[39].

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35 N.R. Smith, *Assessing the Trajectory of West-Russia Relations in Eastern Europe: Gauging Three Potential Scenarios*, "Global Policy" 2017, https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/84684/1/MPRA_paper_84684.pdf [8.04.2024].

36 N.R. Smith, G. Dawson, *Mearsheimer…*, p. 186.

37 G. Dawson, N.R. Smith, *Why Putin's…*

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

It is difficult to find the answer in the two texts analysed as to why the concept of Russia's civilisational uniqueness should be the reason for the confrontation with the West and, even if this was, in fact, the case, the answer to this question should be sought from other authors. For example, Khazarski, who wrote that: "The Russian world – even if it might have originally been envisioned as a kind of post-imperial cultural soft-power instrument – eventually became a staple of the discourse on irredentist imperial restoration that erupted during the 2014 Ukraine crisis"[40].

The argument that the war had to happen is also unconvincing. Even if Russia was moving towards a forceful solution to the "Ukrainian problem", the ontological approach – at least as implemented for this purpose – cannot provide a comprehensive answer to this question. Certainly not to why the aggression occurred in February 2022. Given also that Russian objectives regarding Ukraine have evolved politically and militarily, the assertion that the fate of Russian identity was being decided in Ukraine seems insufficiently justified. All the more, as Russia's social identity is indeed directly linked to Ukraine.

4. Why is Ukraine important?

The third article analysed, by Katie Ryan, was in direct dialogue with mainstream ontological security research[41]. Moreover, from her perspective, in contrast to the previously analysed texts:

1. The war in Ukraine was not as much about the relationship with the West as a key other as it is about Ukraine, through which Russia satisfies its emotional-psychological needs.

2. The full-scale war with Ukraine was not an accident or an unprecedented event – it was a continuation of a trend in Russian thinking about itself and Ukraine that had been present for many years.

Ryan formulates the symptomatic thought in the text: "Russia's search for ontological security enabled the invasion of Ukraine, as Russia sought to retain behavioural consistency and biographical nar-

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40 A. Kazharski, *Civilizations…*, p. 34.
41 K. Ryan, *Russia's search for ontological security and the Ukraine Invasion,* "Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies" 2023, vol. 15, no. 1.

ratives of Self"[42]. From which it would follow that the search for ontological security enabled the decision to invade. There is no doubt that through the war, Russia sought to solve its own emotional and psychological problems.

It is also worth highlighting the presence of other themes absent from the two earlier texts, which have been strongly present in the literature addressing Russia's search for ontological security. The Russian autobiographical narrative should, in Ryan's view, be considered in the context of gender studies, for to a large extent the war declared by Russia on Ukraine represented a physical clash of masculine and feminine identities in the international space, which in the Russian imaginarium was intertwined with notions of Russia as an empire rebuilding its position, an ongoing necessity to fight fascism – a sacralisation of the Great Patriotic War and mandate to fight with the "illegal fascist" government in Ukraine[43].

At the same time, Ryan writes about the continuation of certain behavioural patterns, affirming ontological security for Russian state actors and the population when it comes to war in Ukraine. According to her, aggression against Ukraine: "Was a continuation of the Russian state's behavioural patterns, providing ontological security through the reduction of uncertainty and the reaffirmation of a masculinist disposition towards conflict"[44].

In this view, the war that Russia unleashed in 2022 was a continuation of the aggressive policy that Russia had pursued towards Ukraine since at least 2014 as Brendan Chrzanowski suggests[45]. The roots of which ran even deeper and were directly related to the formation of Russian social identity under the traumatic conditions of the new socio-economic and political reality following the collapse of the Soviet empire.

If we want to understand the causes of the latest instalment of Russian aggression against Ukraine, by referring to the assumptions of the concept of ontological security, we must consider the following circumstances.

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42 Ibid., p. 91.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 B. Chrzanowski, *An Episode…*, pp. 12 and next.

Firstly – Ukraine is a region of key symbolic-emotional importance for Russia, without which its existence, its identity, comes into question – as Sakwa wrote at one time – "with the loss of Ukraine, Russia lost part of its soul" and "that loss affected Russia's core perception of itself"[46];

Secondly – maintaining control over Ukraine "is more than a foreign policy priority; it is an existential imperative"[47]. This premise has become a cornerstone of Russian policy towards Ukraine – not only in material terms but also in immaterial terms;

Thirdly – "Ukraine assumed the role of Russia's "other" in its internally perceived self-other relationship. Moscow was able to establish a relatively predictable practice of manipulating and controlling Ukrainian affairs. This routine reinforced Russia's ontological security, as the maintenance of influence over Ukraine represented a key characteristic of the Russian self-identity"[48].

In light of these findings, Maersheimer's statement regarding his unwavering belief in Putin's respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity, which was mentioned at the very beginning of the article, takes on a whole new dimension. Russia did not intend to incorporate part of its territory or destroy its statehood, but to subjugate the whole of Ukraine, to become its protector. For Russia, Ukraine represented value as an integral whole, either as: 1. an area ruled by a puppet government that puts it on a path of integration with Russia; 2. an area that, in the spirit of the 19th century "concert of powers", is divided into areas and spheres of influence.

Conclusions and further studies

Referring to the articles representing the first wave of research on Russian aggression against Ukraine with ontological security studies in mind, it is possible to make a preliminary reconstruction of the rea-

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46   R. Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society. Fifth Edition*, Routledge 2021, p. 307.

47   A. Bogomolov, O. Lytvynenko, *A Ghost in the Mirror: Russian Soft Power in Ukraine*, Chatham House, January 2012, p. 1, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263853878_A_Ghost_in_the_Mirror_Russian_Soft_Power_in_Ukraine_The_Aims_and_Means_of_Russian_Influence_Abroad_Series_A_Ghost_in_the_Mirror_Russian_Soft_Power_in_Ukraine [8.04.2024].

48   B. Chrzanowski, *An Episode…*

sons for the outbreak of the war. A war which is considered to be contrary to Russia's national interests – exacerbating the threat to its material security, which the special military operation was intended to reduce through the "demilitarisation" and "denazification" of Ukraine.

Assuming that the rational approach to the problem of war, e.g., using the concept of offensive realism, fails, the ontological approach fills this gap. This is because it places emphasis on the emotional-psychological dimension of Russia's sense of threat from the so-called "others" – key actors in terms of constructing and maintaining a coherent autobiographical narrative regarding one's social identity. The subjective sense of physical threat should not be marginalised (certainly not in the case of Russia), as overcoming it is an important element of the autobiographical narrative.

Russia – judging from the partial findings of the three articles analysed – suffers from ontological anxiety arising from the following circumstances: 1. the West denies it the right to have a say in the rules governing the world's security architecture, denying it the idea of its desired role in the modern world; 2. the West spreading its normative influence to Ukraine questions Russia's value as a separate civilisation and its right to act independently and spread its influence in regions considered to be its natural (historical) sphere of influence; 3. Russia's inability to keep Ukraine within its sphere of exclusive influence, recognised as an integral part of Russia, throws Russia out of its sense of routine and sows the seeds of doubt as to whether it will be possible to halt Ukraine's westward drift.

The source of ontological security for Russia is the conflict with the West and the fight against the phantom of fascism that is supposedly resurgent in Ukraine and supported by the West. The war represents a triumph of the will and readiness to stand up to the West, which is both evidence of overcoming a sense of shame at the weakness of the Russian state and the inability to stop the further expansion of NATO to the East and rebuilding the continuity of Russia's autobiographical narrative as a state of higher morality and honour.

Still, despite the interesting findings made so far regarding the causes of the outbreak of war, the conclusions are far from satisfactory, both from the point of view of the very concept of ontological secu-

rity and the ability to explain the reasons for the Kremlin's decision to start the war.

From the point of view of the explanatory power of the ontological approach, we still do not know: 1. Whose ontological anxiety we are dealing with; Putin, the elites gathered around him, or Russian society? 2. Is Russia (Putin, elites, Russian society) aware that they are suffering from ontological anxiety? 3. What event or events catalysed the rise of ontological anxiety in Russia? 4. Are we able to empirically prove the presence of ontological anxiety in Russia? 5. Are Russian autobiographical narratives – identified with ontological anxiety – used for information warfare? 6. How does the protracted war affect Russia's ontological security?

The aforementioned questions and doubts guide further research into the ontological security of wartime Russia. Awareness of the limitations of ontological security research should not be a reason to reject the concept but only to make greater efforts on the basis of empirical material and with the use of adequate tools, e.g., the mechanism of ontological anxiety, to vivisect Russia's emotional and psychological condition.

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