

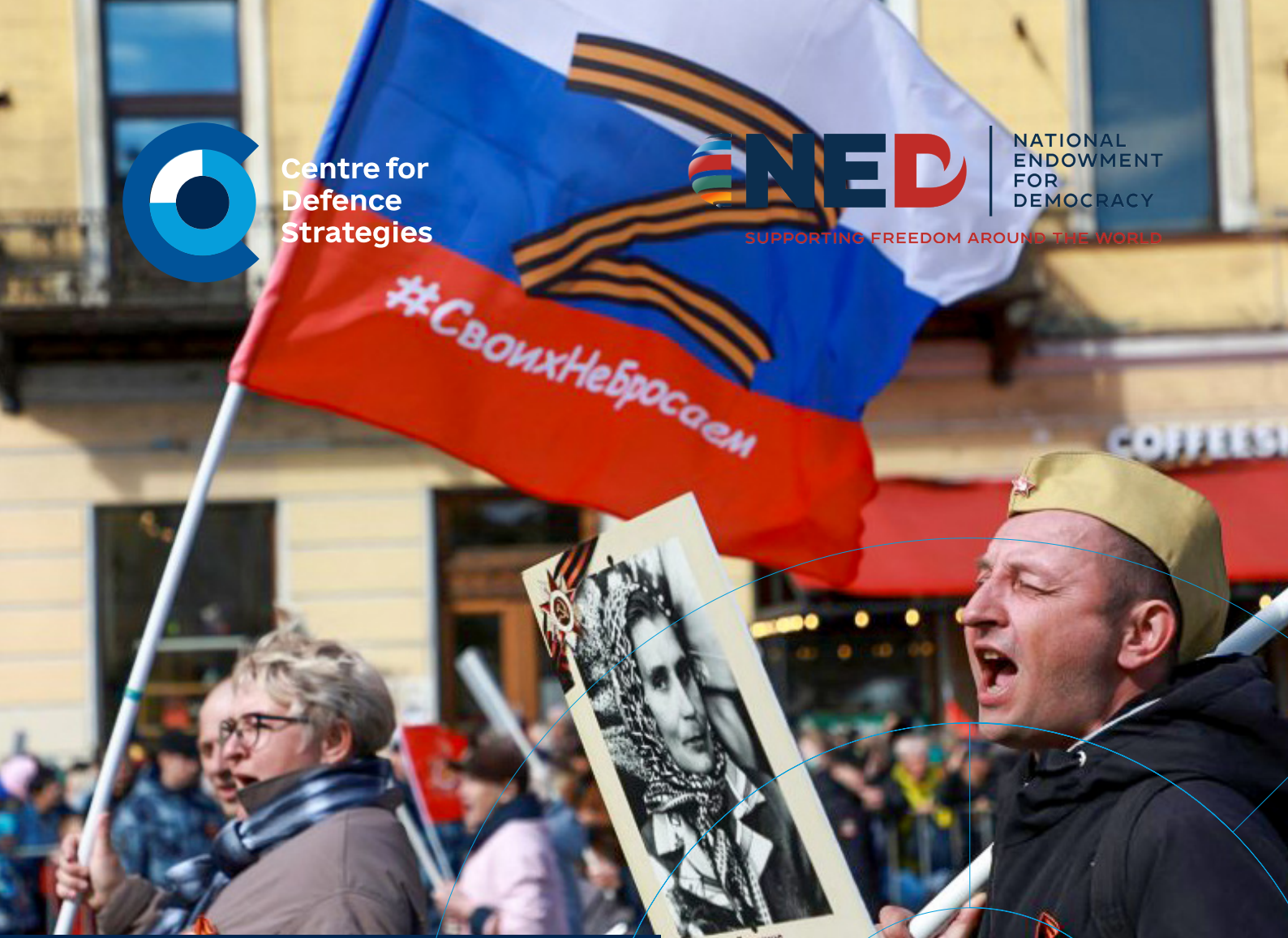


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Why it's not Putin's war: the collective responsibility of Russians

Analytical report

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Putin - a reflection and creation of Russia's society

Ever since Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine started, Western media were flooded with headlines labelling it 'Putin's war on Ukraine' referring to the leadership's personal responsibility only. The discussion whether or not Russia's society bears responsibility remains topical even a year since the all-out war broke out. Many Western observer discard any ideas of collective responsibility putting it down to Ukrainian exaggeration and emotions running high. This article is about why this is not only factually wrong but also poses a threat to international security.

One fundamental mistake many scholars do is treat the rule of Putin as a unique political phenomenon without deeply analyzing the worldview and political traditions of the Russian society and their state. By doing this it is almost certain one omits the fact that is, however, obvious to the so-called post-Soviet or socialist block, that is Putin as a reflection and creation of Russia's society, its mentality and popular beliefs; not vice-versa.

While this piece does not intend to analyze the Russian mentality, which in itself is an under-researched topic, the consequences of which were seen by the world's complete miscalculation of the situation before and after 24 February 2022, it argues that by failing to challenge the Russian imperial and chauvinistic mindset, embedded in its society, the West risks to freeze and postpone the settlement of the Russia-Ukraine war and the international stability at large. On the contrary, by facing the underlying causes of the invasion, including

the society's deeply rooted genocidal notion that Ukraine has no right to exist, it would demonstrate political maturity, farsightedness and global responsibility.

Fact is, Putin does not exist in a plain vacuum. He operates in a long-existing cultural context, and is a product thereof. The current ideology is grounded on the principle of Russia's messianism and spiritual superiority over the "decaying West", hence laying the foundation for its moral right to violate internationally agreed rules in case they do not serve the purpose. Russia's aggressive chauvinism coupled with imperialism and nationalism goes far beyond the present political landscape. It extends to the Eurasian and Slavophile narratives dominating Russian domestic geopolitical debates in the XIX-XX centuries. Moreover, the political tradition of repressive rule, people's subjection, anti-westernism and an ephemeral notion of a state-civilization, i.e. exclusivity and arbitrariness in both internal and foreign policy, can all be traced back to the Muscovy rulers. In plain, Russian society simply has no historical track record of an inclusive political culture, democratic rule, or its principles.

The ambition to eliminate reference to anything Ukrainian as separate, sovereign or different has been ever-present in Russian politics and society for centuries. Putin's essay about the "historical unity of the Ukrainian and Russian people" from 2021 is a repetition of just that, not a new assertion in the Russian society.

Russian state propaganda: building on popular sentiments

Throughout decades Kremlin's leaders mastered how to manipulate public opinion and exercise the bluntest propaganda. But it is under Putin's rule that perfection was reached, whereby key was to build on already existing popular beliefs and feed those narratives. As a result, the Russian domestic information product consumed by its society is a combination of its mindset coupled with state propaganda. According to a study¹, that conducted a complex content analysis of Russia's three biggest TV channels throughout 2014-2018 – by far the most influential media in Russia and primary source of news and opinion for the majority of its population – shows an astonishing 85% to 15% ratio of negative to positive news about Europe. In Ukraine's case, according to another study,² it climbs to even 90% to 10%, respectively. Just imagine, Europe is mentioned negatively on average 18 times a day on the researched channels. That study reveals that 88% of all negative news about Europe – the EU or individual countries – can be categorized into only six narratives, demonstrating a

very high level of disciplined messaging. Among them are narratives about the unsafety of living due to constant terrorist attacks which Europe deserves, the never-ending protests in Europe, its weak and unstable institutions, refugee crises and the suffering it brings to the continent. For Ukraine the narratives differ and exploit the fascism allegations, portray Ukraine as a failed state and convince of massive scale Russophobia across the country. However, for both cases the underlying conclusion on Russian TV is the overall decay of Europe, including Ukraine, and its erosion of moral values.

This content is aired with the sheer purpose of dehumanizing an average European. The European way of life is depicted as a threat to the extent that an average Russian feels compelled to “bring order” in Europe, which is currently being unfolded in front of the world's eyes. This message very smoothly entered the Russian mental space without meeting much resistance.

What the numbers say

Whether a result of mass propaganda or the mere reflection of the society's historic imperialistic mindset, the result is however indisputable: the Russian people support the war on Ukraine. Even though statistical data can be easily manipulated

by authoritarian regimes, numerous independent surveys, disguised as serving other purposes where citizens would feel more inclined to honestly share their opinion, demonstrate a very high level of popular support for the invasion, ranging

from 70% to 83 % in March and April 2022. A CNN poll³ conducted before the start of the full-scale war showed a 50% support of military actions against Ukraine. Going even further back in time, to the actual start of this war- the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the approval rate thereof, according to Levada Center⁴, the only Russian independent sociological organization, was 86%. Of note is the fact that since 2014 a total of 48 million Russians visited the peninsula demonstrating in action their attitude to international law and the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations.

Moreover, 10 months into the all-out war, 62% of Russia's population deems that things in the country are running in

the right direction, according to a more recent poll⁵. This study also reveals a 61% approval rate of the partial mobilization in autumn 2022 and a 63% support of Russia's military strikes on Ukraine's civilian energy infrastructure, constituting a violation of international humanitarian law.

Yet, such statistics of popular support remains for many observers not convincing or trustworthy, alluding to the restrictive political environment inside Russia. For those in doubt, another Russian poll⁶, not related to the assessment of the war, is at hand. When asked about Western values and the Western civilization, 60% of respondents stated they did not see any value therein, 26% called them ‘harmful’ and only 2% supported them.

Uncovering the ordinary Russian

Another plausible way to explain why this is not just Putin's war against Ukraine is to look at concrete examples of citizens' support of the aggression. Any conflict at such scale requires a large involvement of various parts of the society, economy, the cultural sector and other spheres of social life. Consider all the armed personnel – either professional or mobilized, who did not flee abroad or surrendered and who actively participate in the atrocities, war crimes and countless violations of IHL. As history teaches, according to the Nuremberg principles, following criminal orders that lead to war crimes is not an excuse for soldiers. Add to this all the

workers of Russia's extensive military-industrial complex and logistics, who actively provide supplies to the Russian armed forces. Then there are pseudo-journalists, or rather propagandists, serving the state machinery, as well as the actual bureaucratic apparatus that safeguards and implements decision making. Add to this various business communities, cultural figures and celebrities who openly salute the regime's actions and fundraise for the cause of war, and you end up having a quite solid picture of Russians who have no problem with invading another sovereign country.

¹Image of European countries on Russia TV", 2018, Hybrid warfare analytical group, UCMC, Estonian Center for Eastern Partnership
²Image of Ukraine on Russian TV", 2017, Hybrid warfare analytical group, UCMC, Estonian Center for Eastern Partnership

³<https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/02/europe/russia-ukraine-crisis-poll-intl/index.html>
⁴<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/26/most-russians-support-annexation-of-crimea-poll-a73741>
⁵Monitoring Russian society, Russia's mirror, Nov-Dec 2022, <https://ikar-thinktank.org/uk/explorations/13>
⁶all-russian center of public opinion research, August 2022.

One might argue that all listed above are one way or another serving the state or part of the regime itself and their worldview does not correspond that of a regular citizen. This would be the case if it hadn't been for the numerous telephone conversations intercepted by the Ukrainian and Western allies' intelligence showcasing encouragement by wives and mothers of Russian soldiers to rape, torture and murder civilians, especially women. The countless

Germany's case: drawing lessons from the past

Apart of the sociological and historical argument, there is also a philosophical side to this discussion. The most prominent analogy in world history frequently drawn by observers is the collective responsibility of Germans after the horrors of the Second World War. Within the denazification process Germans were divided into 5 categories on the responsibility scale: acquitted, sympathizers, insignificantly guilty, guilty and the main culprits. While respective legal processes were unfolding quickly (such guilt-qualification was performed by courts), a much more interesting and longer-lasting discussion was unfolding in the theological and philosophical domains. The debate was kicked off by prominent German evangelists who in 1945 shockingly argued that the whole German nation should be found guilty due to the people's inaction, silence, and evasion of responsibility (das Nichtstun, das Nichtreden, das Nicht-Verantwortlich-Fühlen). This argument was further elaborated by German philosopher K. Jasper who substantiates political and metaphysical guilt. The former essentially

cases of Russian women placing orders to loot private property of regular Ukrainians (such as kitchen equipment, clothing or jewelry) have been a source of many Ukrainian memes. A quick look at Russia's social media conversations full of joy and triumph after every massive airstrike on Ukrainian civilians demonstrate all just that: Putin's actions of such scale are impossible without popular support.

meaning to continue being a citizen of a country that commits crimes, the latter – to not actively resist such wrongdoings. Finally, it was the works of Anna Arendt in the later decades that finalized the principle of collective responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity that helped shape the policies of the West towards post-war Germany.

For many scholars, historical parallels do not hold ground as circumstances are barely comparable. This is correct, the political and societal situations are indeed very different. To take just the mere access to information. It is difficult to substantiate that the Russian society had no opportunity to access internet and quality western media, or at least Ukrainian media that in their vast majority have a Russian-language version. Resisting propaganda has always been a challenge but the technological advancement in the XXI century has made it undoubtedly easier now than it was in the 30-40-s of the last century. If Germans were found collectively guilty in political circumstances very conducive to obeisance

and mass control then why shouldn't Russians be – who were silently watching the regime strengthen and systemically

Criminal silence

A popular Russian argument that the society simply had no effective civic or legal remedy to oppose the state is a very disingenuous excuse that ignores the fact that Putin was not all that mighty when he came to power 22 years ago. It was precisely the society's silence or active support from the very beginning that made him grow in his confidence and consolidation of power. Putin inherited a relatively open political system where the society possessed quasi-democratic instruments to influence decision-making. Furthermore,

The response of the West

The attribution of the blame to only Putin leaves us with risks of the current horrors of war repeating in the future. A failure to understand the society's mentality and worldview invites future dictators to rise as they are merely an extension of the people, not vice versa. This will create new dictators threatening the world order and international law. To prevent this and to achieve meaningful accountability we must address the deeply rooted chauvinism and imperial superiority mindset of the Russian population.

This will not be an easy task, but the Western societies have already embarked

committing crimes in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria and many times in Ukraine?

those Russians who today hide behind statements of not having elected the current president or having no other choice have been making this entire time another choice – to remain apolitical. Not to have a civic position, stay away from political discussions, remain silent when crimes are committed, and rights deprived – all this is a position and a choice in itself. And as long as Russians regards Putin their legitimate leader, they essentially silently approve of the war and other international crimes.

on this road. The visa-issuance suspensions and other restrictions of immigration rules applied by most EU members and the European Union itself is a step in the right direction. Limiting the sale or completely suspending investor visas (known as golden visas) also serves as a good lesson that one cannot on the one hand support criminal wars and on the other hand enjoy a luxurious lifestyle on European coasts or buy citizenship of democratic countries. Some economic sanctions also had a holistic impact on the society, such as banning some Russian banks from SWIFT or blocking cross-border financial transactions of individuals. The

closure of airways to Russian flights by the EU, other European countries, the US and Canada as well as limitations of airlines' travel over Russia's airspace is also

Russia's re-invention needed

Yet, these measures do not suffice. Without reeducating Russians and reinventing Russia like Germany after the WWII the world risks to merely postpone the solution. It is paramount that the West starts elaborating its strategy towards future Russia already today. Such strategy should describe possible scenarios and blueprints of what the current Russian geographical space should look like post-war, what values it should carry, and which principles be built on. An indispensable part of this process should be an honest post-colonial discussion both inside Russia as well as in the West. Dozens of colonized and oppressed national minorities should be given the same right of self-determination that many nations world-wide have enjoyed to-date. Examining the opportunity (or rather necessity) of a joint international mechanism overseeing the development of Russia's post-war territories is also necessary. Only if managed properly and prepared for in advance can Russia's dissolution and reconstruction be of peaceful nature and be followed by the ambitious task to re-educate Russians.

Once this is accomplished a set of practical elements of such complex societal transformations shall be thought through. Examples thereof can be the change in the educational program, youth policies, civic education, media space reforms

a demonstration that the West partially shares the understanding of the collective guilt. Though without having the political courage to say it out loud.

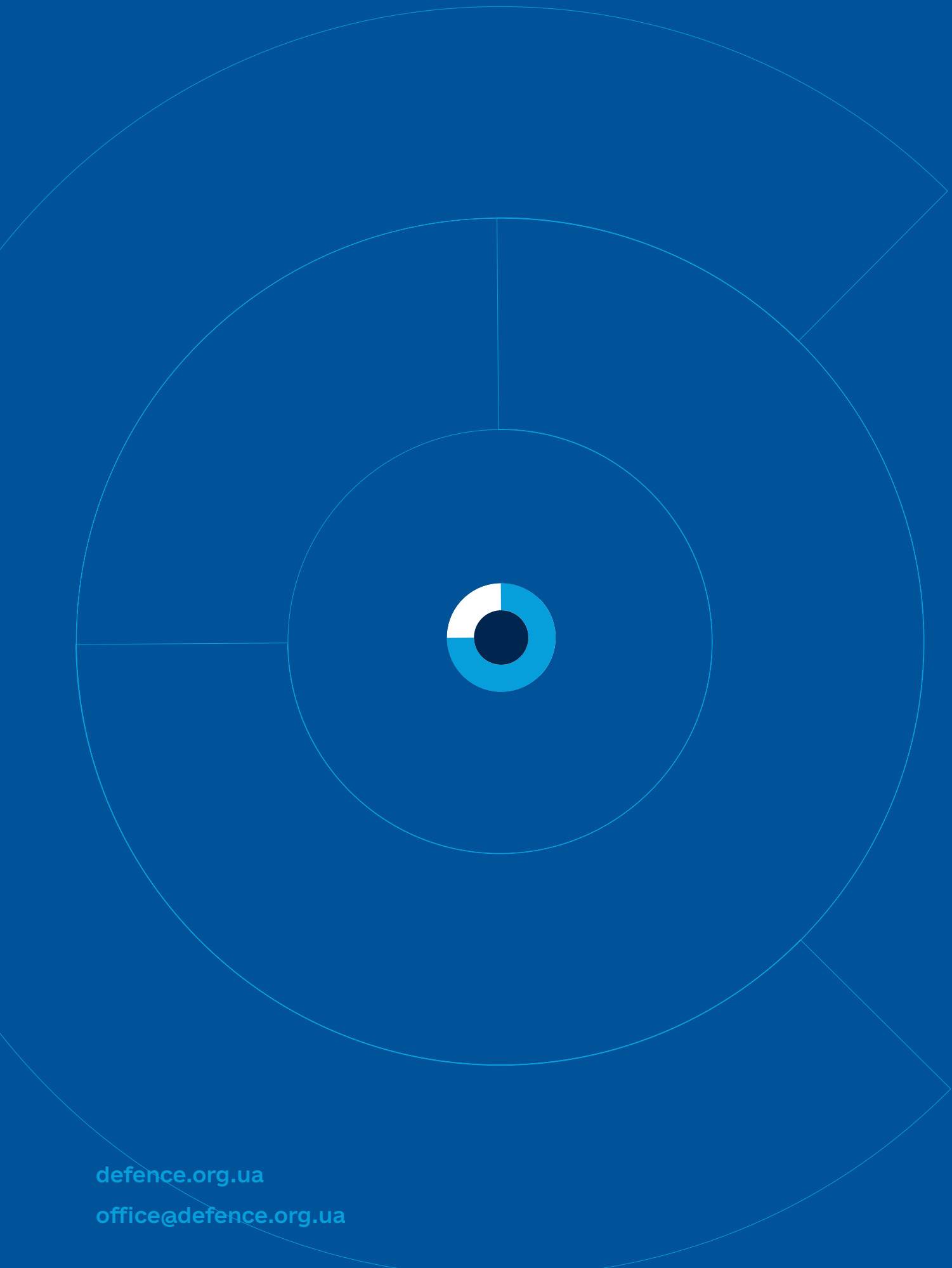
and media literacy, measures stipulating the resumption of responsibility for the atrocities, accountability for the victims and a functioning court system. Germany's example demonstrates that this will take generations and might not yield results for a while. By the mid 50-s a third of the German population deemed the killing of Jews justified. According to Tony Judt in his famous "Postwar", in the 50-s only 5% of West Germans felt guilty. Yet, this bore fruits in the long run.

In the meantime, there is much domestic homework in the West to be done too. There is a very long road ahead for Western policymakers and scholars to fundamentally transform the approaches how Russia should be studied and approached. The complete miscalculation of Russia's military potential, its political actions and its society's silence writ large should be a reminder to those who claim to understand the 'Russian soul'. A certain de-colonization also must happen in the mental space of western scholars, universities and think-tanks. Surprisingly, they continue assembling many countries previously under Russian rule and oppression in umbrella terms such Eurasia, Post-Soviet space or alike falling into the Russian trap and affiliating such nations with their 'big brother'. Approaching these independent countries withing 'Russian

studies' is a very dangerous framing practice that is to-date dominating the educational and scientific realms.

The good news is that there is a historic precedence to re-educating and transforming whole nations infected by imperialism and chauvinism as well as changing own mental mistakes. What the West needs right now is political will to imagine a world where the last empire falls and gives chance for its inhabitants

to become civilized responsible citizens who do not dehumanize its neighbors and the Western civilization at large. The time has come to answer the question: what Russia do we fancy in the future? Is it a XXI century epitome of imperial aggression or an area of peace and security? If it is the latter – then it is high time the West embarked on the road of co-designing and co-determining Russia's future and that of its people.



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