FOREWORD

When reflecting on Russia in general and before the 24 February 2022, sooner or later the perhaps most well-known in the West verse by "poet-philosopher" Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev comes to your mind:

You cannot grasp Russia with your mind Or judge her by any common measure, Russia is one of a special kind – You can only *believe* in her.

These lines that successfully contributed to a mythologisation of Russia are from 1866. Tyutchev spent almost half of his life in Germany as a diplomat, he was married first to a German countess, then, after her death, to a German baroness. He was a Russian patriot and believed in Russia's cultural and spiritual superiority. In his political essays, he fiercely opposed the European critics of the Russian absolutism and argued against the "Russophobic demagoguery" of the Western intellectuals and politicians.[1] His position sounds familiar still today, it appeared to have either survived one and a half centuries or it was successfully revived by Vladimir Putin and his demagogues.

Tyutchev's mystical description of Russia was a point of reference for countless discussions on and about Russia ever since and all over the world. But the perception has changed, gradually, not only with the "full-fledged" war that Russia started in 2022, but already with the de-facto war against Ukraine since 2014, the war against Georgia in 2008, and probably since the beginning of the 90s. When mid of 19th century Tyutchev saw himself as an apologist of a Russian "moral exceptionalism", 150 years later this exceptionalism is perceived as the opposite of what Tyutchev probably had in mind: After 24 February 2022, after Bucha, Mariupol and Izyum, Russia stands first of all for exceptional violence, sadism, cynicism, ruth- and recklessness.

While Russia seems to show its real face in Ukraine now, the destructive influence it had in particular in its immediate neighbourhood goes back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991: Be it the war between Georgia and Abkhazia, the war and the splitting of Transnistria from Moldova, the wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh, not to talk about the civil wars that were fought in Chechnya – Russia was always involved as a destructive force, trying to safeguard its influence, trying to make other countries or nations dependent on it or at least obedient.

For most of those who are closely following the war in Ukraine and trying to be as objective as possible, it is, indeed, "hard to grasp" what Russia is doing. And there is hardly anyone left, in front of whom the brutal behaviour of the Russians leadership and its army can be justified or defended, other than the International Tribunal to be set-up hopefully

1 Tsonchev, Tsoncho. 2018. Russia and the West, Fyodor Tyutchev on Russian Exceptionalism, at https://www.themontrealreview.com/2009/Russia-and-the-West-Fyodor-Tyutchev-on-Russian-Exceptionalism.php (23.01.2023)

in a near future. And yes, Russia still appears to be “of a special kind”, but definitely not in a positive way, and it is hard to imagine how one can still “believe in her”. At the same time, do we really understand why Russia started the largest war in Europe since 1945? Do we understand why inside Russia there was and is no significant resistance against the brutal invasion of Ukraine? And while we can imagine the effect of state propaganda in Russia and we are aware of the totalitarian character of Putin’s regime, still, one of the most disturbing phenomena in 2022 was the inability to find a language to speak with ordinary Russians about what their country is doing in Ukraine.

With this in mind, and acknowledging that we have to concentrate on supporting Ukraine, we need to – at the same time – try to understand what drives Russia. Who are the forces, what are the narratives in Russia and why hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers are doing what they are doing in Ukraine? How do Russians see their country? What are the patterns of and reasons for Russia’s behaviour in the region and in the world? And without pretending to have an answer, we need to think of what will be with Russia after the end of the war. As Ghia Nodia put it in his text, will Russia be able “to change its future behaviour in a substantive way”? And though he rightly states that this has to be found by the Russians themselves, it is important to ask questions, look for answers and – in a wider sense – to search for a language in which we can talk about Russia and Russians and at one point also with them again. This is probably the main purpose of this publication.

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