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**RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: THE WAY HOW THE "GRAY WAR"  
IN THE EAST OF UKRAINE TURNED INTO A LARGE-SCALE  
"BLACK" ONE**

**RĂZBOIUL RUSO-UCRAINEAN: MODALITATEA ÎN CARE  
„RĂZBOIUL GRI” DIN ESTUL UCRAINEI S-A TRANSFORMAT  
ÎNTR-UNUL „NEGRU”, DE AMPLOARE**

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**Rezumat:** După venirea lui Putin la putere, războiul hibrid împotriva Ucrainei a căpătat un pronunțat caracter existențial, întrucât poporul ucrainean a dat dovadă de independență în luarea deciziilor politice, în ciuda tuturor forțelor și mijloacelor impuse de „frația” totalitară rusă. În 2014, ca urmare a ocupării Crimeei și a anumitor teritorii ale regiunilor Donețk și Lugansk, agresiunea hibridă împotriva Ucrainei a fost de obicei luată în considerare în conceptele „războiului gri”. Ținând cont de natura convențională a acțiunilor autorităților ruse din Ucraina, autorii articolului operează cu conceptul de „război gri” și „zona gri” reală și condiționată creată artificial în Donbass ca instrument a unui război hibrid împotriva întregii Ucraine. Folosind factorul măsurilor de carantină în legătură cu pandemia de Covid-19, teritoriile ocupate temporar au fost izolate intenționat (fizic și psihic) de Ucraina liberă, ceea ce a făcut posibilă pregătirea „zonei cenușii” cu impunitate ca trambulină și pretext pentru o invazie pe scară largă a Ucrainei la 24 februarie 2022. Practicile, metodele și instrumentele pe care autoritățile ruse de ocupație le folosesc în teritoriile ucrainene ocupate după 24 februarie: pașaportizarea forțată, rusificarea, pregătirile pentru organizarea „referendumurilor” au fost testate în „zona gri”, care face actual studiul proceselor care au avut loc acolo în general, și nemijlocit înainte de izbucnirea unui război de amploare, pentru a învăța lecțiile și a le contracara.

**Cuvinte cheie:** război ruso-ucrainean, război hibrid, zonă gri, război gri, agresiune rusă, teritorii ale Ucrainei ocupate temporar

**Abstract:** After Putin came to power, the hybrid war against Ukraine acquired a

*pronounced existential character, as the Ukrainian people demonstrated independence in making political decisions, in spite of all forces and means imposed by the totalitarian Russian "brotherhood". In 2014, as a result of the occupation of Crimea and certain territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, hybrid aggression against Ukraine was usually considered in the concepts of the gray zone conflict. Taking into account the conventional nature of the actions of the Russian authorities in the East of Ukraine, the authors of the article operate with the concept of "gray war" and the artificially created real and conditional "gray zone" in the Donbass as an instrument of a hybrid war against the whole Ukraine. Using the factor of quarantine measures in connection with the Covid-19 Pandemic, the temporarily occupied territories were purposefully isolated (physically and mentally) from free Ukraine, which made it possible to prepare the "gray zone" with impunity as a springboard and pretext for a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The practices, methods and tools that the Russian occupation authorities use in the Ukrainian territories occupied after February 24: forced passportization, russification, preparations for holding "referendums" were tested in the "gray zone", which actualizes the study of the processes that took place there in general, and just before the outbreak of a large-scale war, in order to learn lessons and counter them.*

**Key words:** *Russian-Ukrainian war, hybrid war, gray zone, gray war, Russian aggression, temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine*

### **Summary**

The escalation of the gray zone conflict into a high-order war, according to Western experts, is an indication of the weakness of the Kremlin authorities in terms of the inability to control conflicts of this kind. At the same time, the unleashing of a large-scale war against Ukraine now poses a threat to the existence of not only our country, but also tends to develop into a global nuclear confrontation. The strategic miscalculations of Putin's government are still poorly predictable and contradictory prospects. The results of tactical actions - drawing Ukraine into a "gray war", creating a real and conditional gray zone as an instrument of a hybrid war and a springboard (physical and mental) for further large-scale aggression are already well-established practices of Russian imperial policy. Such tactics are, for empires in general, and for Putin's Russia in particular, a survival strategy. Ukraine in this case is a resource of viability for Russia. The exhaustibility of this resource, as happened with the gray zone in the East of Ukraine, is a real threat not only to the neighbors - the countries of Eastern Europe, but also to the entire democratic world as a whole. The authors of the article implicitly believe in the VICTORY of Ukraine, which has already won this war at an existential level, they believe in the strength of the liberal values of the collective West. Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!

### **Introduction**

During an official visit to Africa in early August 2022 to promote a new

US strategy - countering the influence of China and Russia on the continent, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said: "If we allow a big country to bully a smaller one, to simply invade it and take its territory, then it's going to be open season, not just in Europe but around the world". The invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine is not only an aggression against another country, it is an aggression against the transition and the fundamental principles of the international system (Blinken says allowing Russia to bully Ukraine would mean 'open season' worldwide, 2022).

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Blinken said the United States felt it was important to stand up to Russia because its aggression against Ukraine threatened the foundational principles of the international system.

Very accurate and powerful, however, according to the authors, a somewhat belated statement. Russia's "hunting season" for Ukraine was actually opened from the moment it declared its independence. After Putin came to power, the "hunting" acquired a pronounced existential character, as the Ukrainian people over and over again demonstrated independence in making political decisions, despite the totalitarian Russian "brotherhood" imposed by all means and forces. Timothy Snyder, in his speech at the Kyiv Security Forum in May 2022, called Putin's rejection of not just abstract democratic values as one of the main reasons for the Russian-Ukrainian war, namely those to which, despite all attempts to eliminate them, Ukraine remained loyal: "This war is being fought is that Ukraine is a democracy. Ukraine has that kind of unpredictable political system which throws up unpredictable combinations, unpredictable leaders. It's that unpredictability, it's that inability to know what's going to come next that I think is so intolerable for Mr. Putin and for this kind of Russian regime" (Dr. Timothy Snyder: Why the Ukrainian Victory is Important for the World?, 2022).

«One reason this war is being fought is that Ukraine is a democracy. Ukraine has that kind of unpredictable political system which throws up unpredictable combinations, unpredictable leaders. It's that unpredictability, it's that inability to know what's going to come next that I think is so intolerable for Mr. Putin and for this kind of Russian regime» (Dr. Timothy Snyder: Why the Ukrainian Victory is Important for the World?, 2022).

It was this existential fear of the dictator before the actual, and not fake, democracy in a state declared by Putin to be failed, the occupation of Crimea and certain territories of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions in 2014, that turned the "hunting season" in Ukraine into an undeclared "gray war". The "gray zone" war, or "grey war" (Bulyk, M. & Gridina, I., 2019) as defined by the authors of this article, lasted eight years, during which Russia had various practices of "hunting"

for democratic states represented by Ukraine, especially in the occupied territories. The “grey war” enabled the Russian leadership not only to seize part of the territory of a sovereign state, to occupy its most strategic regions – Crimea and Donbass, but also to create a “gray zone” of silence and information manipulations around Ukraine intended primarily for the international community. Years of statements of "deep concern" by world organizations, leading states that form the backbone of the system of collective international security, have created a comfortable zone of impunity for the aggressor, making him more and more arrogant and cynical. History knows no subjunctive moods, but now almost all citizens of Ukraine, including residents of the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, who succumbed to the promises of the delights of the “russkiy mir”, understand and declare: there would be no Crimea, there would be no Donbass, there would be no Crimea and Donbass, there would be no large-scale war in the heart of Europe with a real threat to develop into a global nuclear one.

At the same time, we must pay tribute to those states of Europe that know firsthand about the “fraternal embrace” of the Russian empire/USSR. The countries of Eastern Europe, their political leaders have become the most zealous defenders and lobbyists of Ukraine's interests since 2014, realizing what a real threat to them could and is a war in the gray zone against Ukraine. A worthy place among these political leaders was taken by the President of Moldova, Maia Sandu, solving the difficult task of preserving a young democracy in her state, fighting corruption, modernizing the economy, reorienting it to the European Union, and not to Russia, having at hand a time bomb - Transnistria, and helping Ukraine by taking in numerous Ukrainian refugees.

Now everyone is wondering why Russia launched a large-scale invasion, and did not wage an eight-year gray zone war or “gray war (Gannon, J. A. et al., 2022). In our opinion, it is difficult to seek a rational explanation for the actions of a country where political decisions are made by a single person who is far from an adequate perception of reality. As mentioned above, for Putin, the war with Ukraine lies in the existential plane of his ideas about the international order, led by the revived USSR, but also within the borders of the former Russian empire. Therefore, independent states, which at one time or another of their history were an integral part of them, are permanently at risk, as Western politicians and experts constantly declare (Cohen, R. S. & Radin A., 2019). Anything can be a reason for aggression: from an independent historical narrative that does not coincide with Putin's historical exercises to the oppression of Russian speakers, from accusations of creating ethnically selective biological weapons, to “saving Slavic brothers from Nazi Ukrainian forces” supported by Western states. The sheer absurdity of the ever-changing accusations once again proves that the militant existence of the Kremlin leaders is difficult to predict, and any other state

could take the place of Ukraine. Therefore, now, according to the authors, the following is relevant: firstly, all-round support for Ukraine in all areas - military, political, economic, diplomatic, since the war is not only for the independence of an individual state, but for the future of democratic civilization and civilization as a whole; exposing and preventing a "gray war" in relation to other states, which Russia considers a zone of its influence and can make a springboard for subsequent invasions (in this regard, the occupied territories, for example, Transnistria, can pose a danger) (Dr. Timothy Snyder: Why the Ukrainian Victory is Important for the World?, 2022).

To do this, it is necessary to carefully monitor, record and analyze the events that preceded the transformation of the "gray zone" / "grey war" war into "high order military actions" - a large-scale invasion. As the sad experience of the new stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war shows, the kremlin authorities are not particularly distinguished by their diversity in methods, but are actively using already proven practices in the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions occupied since 2014: upcoming referendums in Kherson and Zaporozhye regions, issuance of Russian passports in the territories seized after February 24, opening of fake universities (Mariupol), etc. The authors of this article, in continuation of their previous research on the problem of the "gray war" (Bulyk, M. & Gridina, I., 2019; Грідина, М. & Булик, М., 2019), propose to analyze the events immediately preceding the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, in order to try to identify various methods (or even triggers) in its preparation and implementation with the purpose of possible prevention and confrontation.

### **Theory and methods**

Despite the fact that the Russian-Ukrainian war on February 24 turned from a "gray" war into a large-scale "black war", or, as it is called in the expert community, a "war of a high order", the authors use the concept of "gray zone war" or "gray war". This is justified, on the one hand, by the purpose of this review - an analysis of the events preceding the large-scale invasion, which actually became the apogee of the "gray war", and on the other hand, the "black" war with its traditional methods not only did not exclude, but, according to the authors, strengthened gray methods. But given that they remain, as it were, in the shadows - the twilight of traditional warfare methods, they pose no less of a threat than conventional methods.

The concept of a "gray zone" conflict after 2014 attracted considerable attention not only of the researchers (Elkus, A., 2015; Mazarr M. J., 2015; Votel, J. L, Cleveland, Ch. T., Connett, Ch. T. & Irwin, W., 2016); Cohen, R. S. & Radin A. (2019), but also from the interested politicians, including the US government as a customer of strategic research (Connable, B et al., 2020). Summarizing the

various definitions of the real conflict of the "gray zone", applied by researchers as to the creeping expansionism of China in the South China Sea, sabotage and proxy wars of Iran in the Middle East, Russia in Eastern Europe, the authors updated it in relation to the events in Ukraine (and world) after 2014 (Brands, H., 2016).

Experts and politicians interpreted the conflicts of the "grey zone" as a kind of outlet to prevent the tension between their subjects from turning into a high-order war. Hal Brands and Mazarr believe that nuclear deterrence between great powers helps push violent challenges into a "gray zone", while global economic interdependence makes it less likely that even key revisionist powers will pursue their geopolitical goals through open interstate warfare (Brands, H., 2016). At the same time, the authors also appeal to the forces of the liberal international order - "strict international norms against direct aggression and territorial conquest, which, through various tools - from moral condemnation, economic sanctions to the potential for a military response, are obliged to restrain these states from gross violation of these norms" (Brands, H., 2016). As it turned out, neither global economic dependence, nor moral condemnation, nor military potential can serve as a deterrent from the escalation of a gray zone conflict into a high-order war if: 1) draw conclusions and forecasts based on the rational motivations of a revisionist state; 2) to underestimate the dangers of the conflict spreading in the "grey zone" far beyond the object/objects of aggression, which happened in the case of Ukraine. Hal Brands, analyzing the weaknesses of the international order in the event of a gray zone conflict, very precisely defined this process - "biting off at the edges", which can lead to erosion of key norms and the destruction of stable pillars of the world order (Brands, H., 2016). Ultimately, that is what happened. The well-known researcher of this problem, Raphael S. Cohen, Director of the RAND Project AIR FORCE Strategy and Doctrine, among the reasons for Russia's exit from the conflict of the "gray zone" to the level of large-scale aggression, names the weakness of Russians to wage a modern political war: "The very fact that Russia felt the need to resort to overt, large-scale conventional force in Ukraine—despite years of operating there in the gray zone—demonstrates that at least in Russian President Vladimir Putin's mind, these ambiguous uses of force in Ukraine failed to achieve their desired ends. And if Russian gray zone activity could not achieve success in Ukraine, despite the two states' common histories and cultures, one wonders how well it could succeed elsewhere. What's more, Russia's ability to conduct gray zone operations has surely suffered and will suffer in the years to come" (Cohen, R. S., 2022).

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The last statement of the respected Rafael S. Cohen looks quite optimistic from a strategic perspective, but, unfortunately, this will not help Ukraine effectively defend itself at the moment. Yes, and, as mentioned above, the kremlin leadership knows how to combine the methods of waging a traditional war with a “grey war”, reclassifying the “gray war” as a cover for a “black war”, throwing in an incredible amount of false information for the purpose of disinformation, manipulation, intimidation and blackmail, spudding international organizations (Amnesty, OSCE), individual states, their political leaders. RAND experts Christopher Paul , Miriam Matthews characterize the modern russian propaganda model as a “fire hose of lies” due to two of its distinguishing features: a large number of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to spread partial truth or outright fiction (Christopher, P. & Matthews, M., 2016). Angry Facebook post by Professor Robert van Voren of Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies at Vytautas Magnus University is the best evidence of the effectiveness of the methods of the “gray war” of russians against the backdrop of the “black” one: “For two days I was engaged in a Dutch discussion on the war in Ukraine . I am exhausted and distressed. I did not realize how successful Russian propaganda had been - defaitism, pacifism and absence of understanding how serious the current situation is. Very similar to the pre WW2 period. This is so scary I will have difficulty sleeping. Europe is heading for disaster unless a miracle happens. We have learned nothing» (Robert van Voren, 2022).

At present, it is too early and impossible to talk about any forecasts about the terms and conditions for the end of the Russian-Ukrainian war (the authors are unconditionally confident in the victory of Ukraine, since this is the only way to end this war), as well as to conduct fundamental research (and we are sure that there will be hundreds and thousands of them). Therefore, this review is "overturned" into the recent past and limited to the events that took place in the so-called real "gray zone" - the occupied territories of Donetsk and Lugansk regions. The puppet collaborationist regimes created here by the kremlin leadership, recognized on February 21, 2022 as “independent states of DNR-LNR” and the “gray war” policy pursued here, became first a tool, and then a pretext for committing an act of large-scale russian military aggression against Ukraine, an invasion of russian troops under the false cover of "protection" of the puppet "DNR-LNR" in order to seize Ukrainian territory by force and establish occupation control.

Considering that the authors are direct participants in the events that survived the occupation (Donetsk, Mariupol), invasion and hostilities, extreme

evacuation (Mariupol), being in the status of refugees, we consider it appropriate to indicate our research position. We are aware of the degree of influence of the subjective factor on the presentation of facts and their analysis, striving for the highest degree of objectivity, as researchers. Being ardent patriots of Ukraine, the authors defend the national interests of their country, which is fighting an aggressor who violated all norms of international law, sharing the liberal paradigm and democratic values.

The main method of this analysis is observation (including engaged one), work and analysis of documents, media, including in the occupied territories, methods of expert analysis.

### **Results: How “gray” turned into “black” one**

On February 24, 2022, a large-scale invasion of the Russian army began a new stage in the Russian-Ukrainian war. This is a people's war for the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine, which has been going on since 2014. It is also a war for a civilizational choice in the broadest sense: Ukraine defends its belonging to European civilization and at the same time defends those fundamental values, rights and freedoms that underlie the Western world. Nuclear blackmail by the aggressor state (direct threats to use nuclear weapons, mining and shelling of the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant without exaggeration and literally turns this confrontation into a war for the future (Попович, Т., 2022).

The authors of this article, being actually insiders of all events since 2014, who experienced the events of both occupation (Donetsk) and liberation (Mariupol) until February 24, 2022, were far from illusions about Russia's aggressive plans, including studying and analyzing the situation on temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions – the main instruments of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine. But we could not, and most likely did not want to, imagine even the remote scale of Russian military aggression. Therefore, in this part of our review, we will describe and analyze the events in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions - the “real gray zone” that prepared and created the pretext for a large-scale Russian invasion.

Until February 24, 2022, the real “gray zone” of the conflict in Donbas as an instrument of a hybrid war against Ukraine was a territory that was not under the control of Ukraine, but was not actually and formally captured following the example of Crimea. Its framework was outlined by Decree of the President of Ukraine 32/2019 as of February 7, 2019 (УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №32/2019 «Про межі та перелік районів, міст, селищ і сіл, частин їх територій, тимчасово окупованих у Донецькій та Луганській областях», 2019) and in the national legal field were qualified as temporarily occupied territories with a total area of 16,439 thousand square kilometers with the two



largest regional centers Donetsk and Lugansk, on which, according to data in 2017, about 3823 thousand people lived (Демографія ОРДЛО) (approximately half of the territory of Moldova and almost all of its population). But in fact, the actual "gray zone" went far beyond the officially outlined boundaries - the settlements that ended up on the line of demarcation of the "gray war" were left without authorities, without police, without social security, without work, existing at the expense of subsistence farming and petty smuggling from the territory of free Ukraine. In the "gray zone" of both the occupied and formally controlled territories of Ukraine, the population was forced to survive in the limited conditions of everyday life: security, health, rights, which launched mass syndromes of passivity, "delayed life", Stockholm syndrome. The survival strategy of the "gray zone" has no future in the socio-economic and demographic perspectives, which, however, does not make it safe - "it will resolve itself." With a tendency to subjectivization (consequences turn into causes), the "gray zone" is extremely dangerous in terms of the area of spread, virality. As the current practice of the "black war" shows, this is most clearly manifested in the neglect of traditional laws and norms, such as the value of life and property, the erosion of identity, the leveling of the individual. It was precisely such processes that Russia's occupation policy in the gray zone in Donbas was aimed at, and it is precisely such express practices that are now being implemented in the territories occupied since February 2022, the area of which has almost tripled after the invasion («Про внесення змін до наказу Міністерства з питань реінтеграції тимчасово окупованих територій України від 25 квітня 2022 року» Наказ № 188 від 17.08.2022. Міністерства з питань реінтеграції тимчасово окупованих територій України, 2022).

After the new team of President Zelensky came to power in 1919, who won the election largely due to promises to "stop the war," hopes for its minimization did not come true. The "simple decisions" of the new government, such as "simply stop shooting" or "see the world in Putin's eyes" turned out to be in vain. Urgent measures to stabilize the situation in the conflict zone following the results of the negotiations (on the eve of 2020, a personal meeting between Zelensky and Putin took place in Paris) were partially implemented and in violation of the established deadlines. The agreements on the establishment of a regime of silence ("stop shooting") were implemented only after seven months and were observed nominally, while other key urgent measures were the release of prisoners on the "everyone for everyone" principle, unhindered access to them by international organizations, unrestricted access by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission throughout the territory not controlled by Ukraine remained unfulfilled. The blocking of the negotiation process in the format of the Normandy Four and the work of the Trilateral Contact Group, the Kremlin's rhetoric and practical steps to strengthen control over the occupied territories and

isolate them from Ukraine have become another evidence that the kremlin is using negotiations for the sake of negotiations, continuing the tactics of the “gray war”. And the buildup of russian ground, air and sea military forces on the territory of the Crimean peninsula, the development of offensive actions during numerous exercises (landing, seizure of bridgeheads), the expansion of the presence of russian security forces in Belarus after attempts by the local opposition and the international democratic community to invalidate the results of the presidential elections, even then gave grounds for conclusions about the preparation of the russian bridgehead for a possible invasion (Ukraine 2019-2020: broad opportunities, contradictory results (assessments), 2020).

Since March 2020, to strengthen control over the occupied territories, the russian authorities have used quarantine measures due to the Covid-19 coronavirus epidemic, which has turned into another instrument of hybrid warfare and has significantly affected the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Before the introduction of quarantine restrictions, five official checkpoints operated on a permanent basis on the demarcation line with the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Lugansk regions, which was crossed by 1 to 2 million citizens from both sides per month (Ukraine Checkpoints people’s monthly crossing, 2021). Using the “threat of infection” with Covid-19 as a pretext, the occupation administrations unilaterally closed entry/exit checkpoints (EEC), leaving nominally one each in Donetsk (Elenovka) and Lugansk (Stanytsia Luhanska) regions. In order to cross the line of contact at these points, residents of the temporarily occupied territories had to have a special pass, which was issued by the occupation administration according to special lists, which were virtually impossible to get into (Приседьська, В., 2021). Since March 2020, the number of crossings on the line of contact by civilians has decreased by more than 90% (OSCE Topical Report. Crossing Points Along the Line of Contact: Challenges Civilians Face When Crossing (November 1, 2019 – November 15, 2020), 2020).

Thus, if the hostilities directly affected a limited number of people (combatants, residents of the frontline territories), then the closure of the checkpoints under the pretext of combating Covid-19 affected almost all residents of the region, both in the controlled and temporarily occupied territories. More than a million people of the region were deprived of the right to free movement, which in fact led to family breaks, loss of work or place of study, loss of business communications and resources, deprivation of the opportunity to receive social benefits, termination of various kinds of contacts, so important for maintaining the integrity of the state of Ukraine. Fulfilling the task of preventing the inhabitants of the occupied region from "voting on their feet", the russian authorities, through the hands of the occupation administration, isolated the inhabitants of the occupied territories from free Ukraine.

This isolation purposefully created an increased demand for canalization of

ties with Russia. The “covid instruments” of the hybrid war spurred residents of the occupied territories to illegally obtain Russian citizenship (Свыше 720 тысяч жителей республик Донбасса получили гражданство РФ в упрощенном порядке, 2022). This has especially affected the youth. On the eve of the introductory campaign, the occupying authorities restricted the exit of children over 14 years of age who did not have (and after seven years of war could not have) a passport of a citizen of Ukraine. In fact, the only way to enter and exit the territory controlled by Ukraine for children who have reached the age of 14, but did not have time to obtain a passport of a citizen of Ukraine, was the execution of a document of the Russian sample. Thus, the illegal military formations of the occupying country not only nullified the right of children to education in educational institutions of Ukraine, but raised a whole generation of citizens physically and mentally cut off from Ukraine (Окупанти не випускають з «ДНР» дітей, які їдуть в Україну – Денісова, 2021).

Given the critical economic situation in the occupied territories, aggravated by the pandemic, the opportunity to find a job in Russia has become virtually uncontested. The existing practices of survival - small business, trade, passenger transportation, tied for the most part with the territories controlled by Ukraine, were also forced to reorient themselves towards Russia.

Compulsory voluntary passportization and, as a result, participation in Russian elections, permission to supply goods from the occupied territories to the Russian market, the transfer of the entire educational space to Russian educational programs actually completed the isolation of the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, preparing for the so-called "recognition" by the Russian Federation (Грідіна, І., 2019).

On February 21, 2022, Putin signed decrees recognizing the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” (“DNR”) and “Luhansk People’s Republic” (“LNR”), which was another tool for turning the “gray war” into a “black war”: decrees “on recognition”, as well as urgently signed "treaties of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance" stipulated that the Russian armed forces would fulfill the calls of the "leaders" of the recognized "republics" "peacekeeping functions" in these regions. Proclaiming the goals of the so-called “special military operation”: “... protecting people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years,” Putin, in fact, according to Freud, shifted responsibility for the war he unleashed in Ukraine, on the one hand, morally and finally discrediting the population of the occupied territories, on the other hand, launching rocket attacks on Kyiv and Kharkov, destroying Ukrainian cities and villages, perpetrating genocide of the Ukrainian people in the name of “protection” of “civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation” in the Donbass.

Having a fanatical passion for legitimizing his criminal actions, Putin did

his best to replace international legal norms with personal historical assessments, while his team created provocative pretexts for an invasion on the spot (Mitzer, St., 2022). One of the most failed was the attempt to massively evacuate the inhabitants of the so-called "DNR" and "LNR" due to the offensive of the Ukrainian army, despite numerous statements by the Ukrainian government and personally the commander of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valeriy Zaluzhny, that the Ukrainian army is not going to "liberate the Donbass by military means". All calls for evacuation, supported by a faked explosion of the car of the head of the "People's Militia" of the "DNR" in the parking lot near the government building in Donetsk, had no effect on local residents. Firstly, the level of trust in the occupation administration affected, secondly, the inhabitants of the occupied territories, even during active hostilities, preferred not to leave their homes for fear of mass looting, and thirdly, there were fears of a double provocation - the shooting of evacuation routes with subsequent accusing of Ukrainian Military Forces. We dwelled on these provocations in such detail for two interrelated reasons: firstly, failures with falsifications in no way embarrass or stop the Russian authorities in carrying out their plans, and secondly, various practices are being worked out in this way for the future, which is already confirmed provocations taking place in Transnistria (Загострення у Придністров'ї. Яка роль Росії й чим це загрожує Україні та Молдові, 2022).

### **Lessons**

Regardless of what goals Putin proclaimed when announcing the so-called “special military operation” and how they changed in the future, we can assume the following goal-setting in his actions. Having actually created with impunity a real and conditional (zone of silence) “gray zone” in Donbas as a tool of a hybrid war against the whole of Ukraine, and having come to a dead end on its further control (according to Cohen), Putin decided to turn the same story within the framework of the whole state, getting rid of their existential fears at one fell swoop: 1) eliminating the threat of Ukraine joining NATO and its emergence directly at its borders; 2) eliminating an example of the resilience of democracy in the face of the Ukrainian state, which is no less dangerous for the Putin regime.

Planning to quickly seize Kyiv and crush the resistance of the Ukrainian army in a matter of days (at least, so his generals promised him), Putin counted on the expression of “deep concern” of the world community and the quiet agreement of the divided and frightened West with the solution of the “Ukrainian issue”. Thus, “biting off piece by piece from the world order” with impunity, Putin planned, as a result of large-scale aggression, to maximize the boundaries of his controlled “gray zone”, creating a buffer territory on the borders with NATO, the expansion of which he so zealously blamed on the West (Brands, H., 2016). The authors of the article suggest that Putin was not so far from

implementation of his plans. An article by Robert Kagan, husband of Victoria Nuland, published in the Washington Post under the heading "What we can expect after Putin's conquest of Ukraine" on February 21, 2022, seriously offered reflections on the geopolitical situation in the world, when Ukraine will likely cease to exist as an independent entity: "Let's assume for a moment that Vladimir Putin succeeds in gaining full control of Ukraine, as he shows every intention of doing. What are the strategic and geopolitical consequences? (Kagan, R., 2022). R. Kagan prophesied the expansion of the "gray zone" controlled by Russia as a result of the absorption of Belarus (in fact, this happened) and Moldova, which will come under Russian control as a result of "a land bridge formed from Crimea to the province of Transnistria, which broke away from Moldova." Moldova will likely be brought under Russian control, too, when Russian troops are able to form a land bridge from Crimea to Moldova's breakaway province of Transnistria.) Which, in turn, will create a direct threat to the Baltic countries and the whole of Eastern Europe. The editor of *Evropeyskaya Pravda*, S. Sidorenko, draws the attention of readers to the fact that the flow of weapons to Ukraine from the United States, Britain and other partners practically stopped a week before the invasion (with the appearance in Western capitals of information about Putin's decision to attack), as well as the fact that in the first two days of hostilities, the partners refrained from making specific promises to resume supplies (Sydorenko, S., 2022). That is, they expected in the West: if Ukrainians do not fight en masse for their country, and everything will be the same as with Crimea and Donbass, then why interfere in Putin's war for "his" territory. To refute such "expectations", Ukraine needed not only to prove its political will and desire to be a sovereign equal state in a civilized democratic society, but also to become a shield for Europe on the path of the aggressor.

On February 24, 2022, having committed a large-scale aggression against the whole of Ukraine, Russia once again showed that the protection of the Russian-speaking population of the fake state entities it created is only an excuse to seize everything that a Russian tank can reach and a Russian missile can reach. The goal of Putin's Russia is to return the former territories of the Russian/Soviet empire into the orbit of its influence. Neither in Finland, nor in Hungary, nor in Czechoslovakia, nor in Afghanistan did the Kremlin "protect the Russian speakers", and their population did not ask the Soviet leaders to "send in troops", with the exception of the client elite, bought or intimidated by Russia itself, raised and nurtured by Russia, which was needed precisely for such nominal applications, and after "use" was easily replaced. Ukraine's neighbors should understand that this is exactly the scenario played out by Russia in the East of Ukraine, and can be used more than once, if you try to "save Putin's face" and "appease the aggressor."

### Conclusions

On February 24, 2022, having committed a large-scale aggression against the whole of Ukraine, Russia once again showed that the protection of the russian-speaking population of the fake state entities it created is only an excuse to seize everything that a russian tank can reach and a russian missile can reach. Neither in Finland, nor in Hungary, nor in Czechoslovakia, nor in Afghanistan did the then soviet kremlin “protect the russian speakers”, and their population did not ask the soviet leaders to “send in troops”, with the exception of the client elite, bought and nurtured by Russia itself, nurtured and intimidated, which was needed precisely for such nominal statements, and after “use” was easily replaced. There were no russian-speaking regions in Georgia and Syria either. Russia is an empire headed by a person with an exclusively imperial way of thinking and perception of the world order. The viability of empires always directly depends on the capture, absorption, search for external enemies in order to subdue internal ones, assimilation and social experiments, which always ended in great shame, the slogans "never again" and the tragedies of the continents (Лягуша, А., 2022). Ukraine for Russia as an object of aggression is a resource of its viability, but one should always remember that having "digested" one resource, the empire cannot stop, it will always "repeat". And as the history of the old and new Cold War shows, russia's scenarios are not very diverse: the creation of a “gray zone” as a springboard for further aggression, the creation of puppet quasi-state formations as an instrument of manipulation, blackmail and provocation, their “recognition” and “protection”.

Thus, the goal of Putin's Russia is to return the former territories of the Russian/Soviet empire into the orbit of its influence. Ukraine's neighbors should understand that this is exactly the scenario played out by Russia in the East of Ukraine, and can be used more than once, if you try to "save putin's face" and "appease the aggressor."

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