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# MYTHS OF RUSSIA AS A TOOL OF SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSUASION

MITY NA TEMAT ROSJI JAKO NARZĘDZIE PERSWAZJI SOCJO-POLITYCZNEJ

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How the ideas of a specific nation or country can influence on its position in the world, or on the success of the action taken in the international area? How do contemporary mass media create public opinion in the desirable direction and how does this opinion influence on relationships not only between various institutional subjects, but also between ordinary people? Did polarized arrangement of international relations in the USSR period constitute an inherited phenomenon, which reflected constant opinion-forming tendencies of civilizations, which were intensified by a new ideology? Or did it belong to completely new mental and political reality? In order to answer these questions, it is worth taking an in-depth look, treating Russia as an example, into the essence of political myths, their role in contemporary politics, and consequences of such a phenomenon. A starting point of deliberations included in this dissertation is an assumption that a common political myth is treated as a tool used in various social and political spheres as well as international.

As opposed to an ideology, which is conceptually justified and comprises of a clear textual structure, the myth constitutes a specified informational statement, which shape and content might be changed. Marian Golka pays attention to the fact that myths are marked with subjectivity, however, there are restrictions concerning the possibility of verifying to what extent the content of myths is true<sup>1</sup>. Taking it into consideration, a political myth can be characterized as a phenomenon, which occurs while interpreting political reality, consisting of various archetypes functioning in collective or individual consciousness in a complex and hierarchized way. For the reason that archetypes constitute a basis of the myths, myths contain emotional character, which is connected with ingrained consciousness' needs that create myths' overvaluation. Myth scholars also

pay attention to the fact that most of myths have a primitive depictable semantical structure and they are directed to the mass audience.

Because of the way the content is organized within the political myth, two levels can be distinguished. On the first level myth is built by a set of archetypes, which Gustav Jung calls collective unconsciousness. The latter level is dependent on the historical reality, in which first-level archetypes are decoded and stereotypical knowledge is created consisting of the content, emotional attitudes and other forms of consciousness. The archetype, which is adapted to the present time, becomes a stereotype. Undoubtedly, rational factors dominate on that level. Group's consciousness 'adapts' a set of archetypes for the political reality and creates interpretive pretences. Such stereotypes, which were shaped by the set of archetypes, reflect human individuality, historical features and gravity of specific historical events. It should be emphasized that collective consciousness of most social groups is, practically always, confused and lacks critical intellectual restraints. For that fact, society is susceptible to manipulation, sudden changes of political beliefs or social attitudes, even to extreme extent<sup>2</sup>.

A classification of political myths can be made on the basis of various criteria. Because of the emotional meaning, political myths can be divided into positive, negative and neutral. Examples of using negative myths can be observed in the history of humankind. Such myths were usually used to create both inward, and outward enemy's image in order to encourage society. Currently, creation of political myths constitutes a main tool in election campaigns. The 'Irish economic miracle' can be provided as an example of such a Polish political myth. Due to, previously mentioned, overvaluative character of myths resulting from the archetypal basis, most of society 'buys' such myths and

transposes them into political attitudes. Gustave Le Bon introduces an element, which intensifies social persuasion, i.e. a mechanism of repetitiveness: ‘Thanks to repetition, expressed views may penetrate into crowd’s soul and, eventually, regardless of the fact whether they are understood or not, might be admitted that they are indisputably true. [...] Constantly reading in a daily paper that, even as if it was an impudent slander, A is an absolute bastard and B is a decent person, we will eventually believe that such statements are true. Of course, on condition that we do not read any other daily sharing an opposite view’<sup>3</sup>. Neutral myths are a combination of positive and negative myths. A slogan, which was popular in the USSR period, is an example of the neutral myth: ‘We will build socialist society on condition that we destroy all the enemies’.

Owing to the subject of mythologization, internal and external myths can be distinguished. Internal myths revolve around the specific nation, country, local community; i.e. they are not directed towards an internal recipient, but they concern domestic personalities, phenomena and socio-political news. External myths usually concern foreign phenomena and subjects, which belong to different cultural and civilizational field. The process of creation of external myths does not have to be accompanied by the usefulness of the social engineering action. For example, the interpretation of foreign local communities’ history is always exposed to the risk of mythologization. A wrong reception of phenomena occurring in a foreign culture might be a source of many political myths, which will permanently become a part of consciousness of community, which the recipient come from. In that case, a mechanism of infectiousness appears, which results from the need for life in accordance with accepted customs and social attitudes<sup>4</sup>. That case determines occurrence of new and old myths. Therefore, short-term and long-term myths can be distinguished with reference to durability.

Considering usefulness of the action a criterion of identity, constructive and destructive political myths can be mentioned. Constructive myths are used to justify existing situation or to assess the usefulness of actions taken by the authorities, while destructive myths are used to query current political situation in order to suggest changing system, government or president etc. Golka rightly noticed that ‘some myths maintain the image of allegedly ideal political reality, but others might help to query them’<sup>5</sup>.

Deliberations on political myths are crucial, because they allow to understand how mechanisms influence not only on the social consciousness, but also on the public opinion, which matters significantly in the process of creating international relations<sup>6</sup>. Most of scholars agree with the opinion that political myths, in accordance with previously

mentioned factors, play a significant role in social and political life. Irrationalism of the political myth does not cause its destruction in the period of the information society. On the contrary, by referring to subconscious, hidden stimuli of human psyche and its simplicity, the myth is easily adopted in collective consciousness of society. The ‘unfulfillment’ of the clairvoyant myth created by politicians for the purpose of the election campaign does not discourage anyone, due to the fact that its role was fulfilled at the moment of its creation. Elation caused by an idea of ‘a glowing future’ brings relief to social feelings. Identical situation can be observed with reference to the external myth – ‘we have an enemy, but we defeat it’ – on such a basis we create monolithic society and identify ourselves with high value<sup>7</sup>.

By referring to Russia, the process mythologization might have been noticed in the Middle Ages and its effects lasted until the present. Thanks to research concerning myths of Russia and Russians, Wladimir Medynski provides both reasons for their creation, and their origins<sup>8</sup>. In his opinion, myths of Russia have foreign origins and they were created at the beginning of the early modern period. Tradesmen’s and diplomats’ memories, especially the Dutch’s and Germans’, constitute the origin of myths of Russians’ trade unfairness and their tendencies to frauds. Such memories were provided by Siegmund Freiherr von Herberstein (1486–1566), Heinrich von Staden (1542–15??) and Koenraad van Klenk (1628–1691)<sup>9</sup>. All of them were neither righteous, nor fair in trade relations, which influenced on the creation of myths. Together with description of Russian unfairness, Siegmund Freiherr von Herberstein described how he had cheated three Russian traders and left Moscow with their property<sup>10</sup>. Mythologizational tendencies were intensified in the 19th century and they progressed over the course of history. In 1839 Astolphe-Louis-Léonor Marquis de Custine, who did not know much about Russia, said that it is a wild, almost Asian country, and ‘Siberia begins on east of the Vistula river’<sup>11</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that mythologizational processes concerning Russia can be observed in every historical period to the present day. Nowadays, we may observe unprecedented phenomenon: a mythologizational tendency meets with a demythologizational tendency. Latest books treating of Russia in historical and present contexts constitutes an example of such contradictory tendencies. As an example of a mythologizational tendency we can provide a book written by British journalist Edward Lucas *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces both Russia and West*<sup>12</sup>, which was firstly published in 2008 in London, and in the same year it was published in Poland<sup>13</sup>. Although it is not an academic publication, it deserves attention owing to the subject, which revolves around Russia’s role in the modern

world as well as chances and threats resulting from the position of Russia.

In the *Preface to corrected printing* the author expressed the main point of his book – political repressions occur in Russia, whereas Russia presents aggression towards the international community, which did not meet with an appropriate reaction from the West<sup>14</sup>. The Caucasian conflict was the reason for implementing corrections by Lucas. Therefore, he presented main points of his book and referred to events from August 2008 in the *Preface* and in the *Introduction* as well. Nowadays, most of his judgments are outdated, while some expressions turned out to be wrong, e.g. considering Russia an aggressor in the Caucasian conflict<sup>15</sup>. From the very beginning, it was very hard to find which side of the conflict is guilty. That region was under the influence of various civilizations and cultures for ages, and its history consists of many conflicts and internal tensions<sup>16</sup>. For these reasons, any attempts to find which side is right are doomed to fail.

Other arguments found by Lucas, which justify the main idea, are connected with the way Russian policy is pursued, i.e. ‘a policy which rejected Western values, such as: political freedom, rule of law, separation of powers, free press and individual rights’<sup>17</sup>. According to the author, such an idea does not stand in contradiction to the fact that ‘the Kremlin is a strong supporter of globalization’<sup>18</sup>. On the contrary, it shows that Russians’ attitude to politics has changed: they realized that money is the main value of the free world and, thanks to rules of the free market, it is the most successful political weapon. It is worth mentioning that despite attempts to distinguish such notions as ‘the Kremlin’, ‘Russia’, ‘Russians’, Lucas removes limits between them and he combines them in one semantic category. The disadvantage of the style of deliberations is the fact that the author is strongly attached to clamorous language of mass media, which consists of many pejorative expressions, such as hypocrisy, paranoia and the like. It makes it difficult to interpret author’s intentions in several fragments and sometimes it is hard to distinguish sarcasm from objective criticism.

The main point of Lucas’ book allows to express the statement that, after the resignation of Boris Yeltsin, the new Cold War between Russia and countries supporting Western values will come. In that war Russia looks for ‘their own way basen on controlled political system, strong presidency and a hard-line position on the matter of the outside world’<sup>19</sup>. Although, according to the author, the new Cold War is made with the help of financial instruments, especially in the field of fuels, Lucas also states that that war is made in the field of ideology. He specifies that ‘Ideological conflict of the new Cold War takes place between Russian nationalism, which is against the

law, and Western multilateralism, which is in accordance with law’<sup>20</sup>. A characteristic feature of British journalist’s attitude to conflicts is the fact that there is no division into West and East, the Warsaw Pact and NATO, the USSR and the USA. Therefore, the background of the conflict is ideological not political. The author consider following countries to be conscious or unconscious supporters of Russia: Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Turkey and Slovakia<sup>21</sup>. Lucas puts West on the opposite site of the conflict, defining in that category broad semantic scope, which consists of various semantic areas: philosophical, economical and socio-political. To some extent, it might be said that the USA is a heart of this system of values. Some expressions in that part of the book contain hyperbolic image of reality and they do not bear criticism such as comparison between the period of Putin and the period of Andropov.

Summing up Lucas’ deliberations, it should be mentioned that they are under the influence of mythology and, sometimes, they create myths, especially pejorative ones. Some of deliberations do not bear common-sense criticism and shows distance and prejudice of the author. Undoubtedly, this book might be considered an origin of mythologization, which has an effect on international relations.

Written by H el ene Carr ere d’Encausse, a French scholar focused on Russian issues, a professor of political science and a secretary of the French Academy, *La Russie entre deux* is an example of a book revolving around demythologization. In that book, the author not only depicts Russia as a country balancing between two worlds, Europe and Asia, but also shows its internal attitude to the surrounding world. The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 8th 1989 was the end of the communist period for former satellite states of the USSR and other countries of the Warsaw Pact and, in general, the end of the 20th century. As d’Encausse wrote that ‘for Russians the end of the 20th century was not so fast and it did not take place in 1989. The nation remembered two dates, which symbolize death of the old age: December 8th 1991, when, as if by magic, the dissolution of the USSR took place and December 31st 1999, when Boris Yeltsin voluntarily and peacefully resigned (Russia was a country, where power was seized by force), ending the «transitional» period’<sup>22</sup>.

Differences concerning defining the end of the specific historical period prove the presence of two different views on the history, which constitute grounds for a difference of opinion between Russia, which undergoes a painful post-Communist metamorphosis, and the rest of the world, which is convinced of the fact that ‘the disappearance of the system, which was created by Lenin, will be identical with elimination of all its consequences’<sup>23</sup>. Together with such

a conviction, international community 'received countries from the communist bloc with open arms as if they were absent prodigal sons, while Russia was treated with suspicion for a long time by them' – an analysts states<sup>24</sup>.

Should we be afraid of Russia? This question is, according to mythological tendencies, asked by a French academic. In her opinion, the answer is connected with understanding of Russia's position, which is based on geographical factors and attitudinal reasons. D'Encausse states that 'for most of Russians and for those, who rule them, Russia is not an Asian country, but an enormous European country, which is situated in Asia and due to that fact is entitled to be the part of the post-Eastern world. A state of being conscious of European identity has never been so strong in Russia as in the 21st century'<sup>25</sup>.

The French academic provides a very interesting statement concerning Caucasian crisis in 2008. What Lucas considers the new Cold War, H el ene d'Encausse treats it like an opposite fact: 'Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 constituted a turnabout. First of all, it was a resignation from everything, what Russia considered to be the continuation or the return to the Cold War. It was also a resignation from the concept of the international life, which was determined arbitrarily without Russia's participation. By taking part in the conflict, Russia clearly suggests that it is not a country with doubtful democracy, which international community might accuse of breaching rules and not allowing to do own business, but a fully self-sufficient democratic country. [...] By its actions, Russia opposes the USA its own indisputable status of a superpower and aspires to create a new world in post-Cold War conditions. Russia wants to put an end to the situation, in which it is

in danger of «colorful revolutions», enlargement of NATO, or localization of the PRO system near Russian borders'<sup>26</sup>. It should be noticed that such an assessment was made two years after the crisis, when the international investigation was closed.

The answer for that question can be found in d'Encausse conclusion concerning the position of Russia in the modern world: 'Russia's desire for being both developed, and ethical country is similar to Russian debates in the 19th century. Is not this a sign for us that we should not be afraid of Russia, but we should try to understand it and realize that Russia, which balances between two worlds, identifies itself with Europe and wants to share its fate with Europe'<sup>27</sup>.

Will the presence of bipolar tendencies to create images of Russia constructively influence on Western countries policies towards Russia? We will see in the near future. One thing can be taken for granted. If blind admiration of Russian society had earlier concerned all the fields of science and art, it would take a different direction now. Signs of such tendencies can be observed in the field of politics and philosophical theological ideas. Now matter how social and political life of internal Russia is assessed, everything shows that leaders of that country set development priorities and the way, it has to follow in order to achieve them. Good relations with Western countries together with respect for national independence and recognition of international authority of Russia are elements of this policy. Every political strategist cares about the fact that political myths and national stereotypes have to be successively eliminated with the use of appropriate scientific research and education programmes. Amelioration of international relations should be an overriding aim of such processes.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Golka M., *Mit jako zwrotnik kultury i polityki*, [in:] Drozdowicz Z. (eds.), *Mity. Historia i struktura mistyfikacji*, Poznań 1997, p. 9. Jolanta Jabłońska-Bonca also states that contemporary myths 'do not accept any inter-subjectively verifiable processes considered a tool of the courts' versification. They create their own authority beyond the scope of criteria of truth and falsehood.' (*Prawo w kręgu mitów*, Gdańsk 1995, p. 13).

<sup>2</sup> The very last example of such a situation might be a sudden change (its permanence will be visible in time) of Poles' attitude towards Russians after the Smolensk tragedy. An attitude and behavior of the authorities of the Russian Federation caused a wave of positive emotions, which got into the sphere of political views. It is reflected by an unexpected change in political attitude and an open manifestation of like and gratitude of Jarosław Kaczyński, the chairman of the Law and Justice party. Watch his appeal to Russians uploaded on: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjFUm6mbBv4). Available on the Internet: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjFUm6mbBv4>. [Retrieved: 24.06.2010].

<sup>3</sup> Le Bon G., *Psychologia tłumy*, transl. Kaprocki B., corrected printing, Kęty 2007, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Le Bon described it as follows: 'Infectiousness is such a powerful thing that not only it imposes some views, but also feelings. Views and beliefs

of the crowd are spread only by the infectiousness method, not by the reasoning method' (cf.: *Psychologia tłumy*, p. 62).

<sup>5</sup> Golka M., *Mit jako zwrotnik kultury i polityki*, [in:] Drozdowicz Z. (eds.), *Mity. Historia i struktura mistyfikacji*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Jabłońska-Bonca distinguishes social consciousness, which is expressed in personal opinions and public opinion, which constitutes manifestation of political views (cf.: *Prawo w kręgu mitów*, p. 5).

<sup>7</sup> Presented by the author classification of myths is not exhaustive. Various scholars in different periods have presented their own propositions of classification. Cf.: T. Biernat, *Mit polityczny*, Warszawa 1989.

<sup>8</sup> В. Мединский, *О русском воровстве, особом пути и долготерпении*, Москва 2008; idem, *О русской демократии, грязи и «тюрьме народов»*, Москва 2009; idem, *О русском пьянстве, лени и жестокости*, Москва 2008.

<sup>9</sup> В. Мединский, *О русском воровстве, особом пути и долготерпении*, p. 38–40.

<sup>10</sup> There.

<sup>11</sup> As cited in: H. Carrère d'Encausse, *La Russie entre deux mondes*, Paris 2010, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Lucas E., *The New Cold War. How the Kremlin Menaces both Russia and West*, London 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Idem, *Nowa Zimna Wojna. Jak Kreml zagraża Rosji i Zachodowi*, transl. Stawski J., Poznań 2008.

<sup>14</sup> There, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Analytical report Human Rights Watch (HRW) shows, that ‘the military conflict was caused by the invasion of Georgian military forces during the night of 7 to 8 August [of Tshkinvali – A.K.] and by Russia’s retaliation the following day, which lasted till 15 August’ (cf.: *Up In Flames Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims in the Conflict over South Ossetia*, New York 2009, p. 2–7).

<sup>16</sup> 19th-century Georgian historian, Platon Ioseliani, describes the history of that region: ‘A lot of pieces of poetry can be found in the history of the Caucasus. A Georgian reads it with tears in his eyes. They consist of eternal disasters, division of the kingdom into many kingdoms, battles between princes and kings, mutual invasions of tribes and families’

(as cited in: Семенов Д., *Отечественное. Кавказ и Урал*, v. III, Санкт-Петербург 1871, p. 5).

<sup>17</sup> Lucas E., *Nowa Zimna Wojna*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> There.

<sup>19</sup> There, p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> There, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> There, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> H. Carrère d’Encausse, *La Russie entre deux mondes*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> There.

<sup>24</sup> There, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> There, p. 311.

<sup>26</sup> There, p. 309.

<sup>27</sup> There, p. 314.

*Ks. Aleksy Kucy*

## Mity na temat Rosji jako narzędzie perswazji socjo-politycznej

### Streszczenie

Mitologizacja jako narzędzie w konstruowaniu polityki międzynarodowej wobec Rosji odegrała i nadal odgrywa kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu współczesnej opinii publicznej na świecie na temat tego kraju. Mitologizacja nie jest do końca narzędziem sterowanym centralnie. Pojawienie się mitów na temat Rosji i Rosjan niekiedy było spowodowane źródła społeczne, zaś ich wyniki zyskały wymiar polityczny. Źródła tych procesów sięgają czasów średniowiecznych a ich wpływ można odczuć w dobie współczesnej.

*Rev. Aleksy Kucy*

## Myths of Russia as a tool of socio-political persuasion

### Summary

Mythologization as a tool of engineering international policy towards Russia has played and still plays a pivotal role in modelling the public opinion. Mythologization is not entirely a centrally controlled tool. The emergence of myths about Russia and Russians has always followed a bottom-up pattern and its results have been invariably transferred into the political dimension. The sources of these processes date back to the medieval times and the onset of the modern era.

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