

## To Justify, Demonize, Normalize

### PUTIN'S LANGUAGE OF WAR AND CENTRAL ASIAN NEUTRALITY

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President Vladimir Putin has persisted in telling his tale of a righteous Russian war on Ukrainians, both to home audiences and to the outside world. Among the latter, of notable interest for Moscow, are the Central Asian states—five countries that have been Russia-aligned in complicated ways but have maintained neutrality toward the invasion. The Kremlin expected these countries to be among the small handful of states siding with Russia, and they became prime targets for its propaganda and other efforts to convince. Accepting Putin's rhetoric, not to mention echoing it, would be the Russian president's top wish. But arm-twisting and bullying have proven unable to [produce](#) meaningful support for the war in the region.

Looking at the Russian presidential speeches, three leitmotifs regarding the war can be discerned that make for a logical chain: a) to justify the war, b) to demonize the enemy, and c) to normalize Russia itself. It is only natural and fair that a normal, well-meaning, and strong political entity, when facing a conspiracy of dishonest, evil, and hateful policies, should open a preemptive, noble war of self-defense. Even though treated continually since February by pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives, none of the Central Asian states has dropped its neutrality. For countries like these, it has been urgent to find and express foreign policy balances within the Kremlin's self-serving narratives and effectively counter its conflict and battlefield representations with real stories and other views.

#### **Putin's Tall Tales of Entitlement**

Fighting a war with strong global repercussions can only be successful if broadcast appropriately to all audiences. Putin, a grand geek of geopolitics and storytelling, doubled

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down on the rectitude of his war.<sup>2</sup> When his “special operation” went far beyond the originally planned few days, his storytelling had the urgent task of imbuing his fatal adventure with meaning. To a quick glance or cursory hearing, Putin can seem to be saying bizarre and contradictory things day after day. Upon a closer look and trying to see a system, however, it is possible to notice the three general points that Putin has pushed. These points together should make logical sense, and each on its own—presenting the facts upside down—should help people overcome some deep-seated cultural and political attitudes.

First, Putin needed to justify his war. By now, especially in Europe, war has become a passe and morally repugnant mechanism globally and in Russia itself. A major country striking its smaller neighbors without provocation is difficult to swallow. Only very serious justifications might make such a war thinkable, if at all. Hence, Putin and his cronies commanded all their imagination and eloquence to paint a justified picture.

In a special address to Russian citizens before the invasion on February 21, Putin talked about NATO threats—tellingly, calling the alliance a “threat,” not an “enemy” — [offering](#) that “when” Ukraine becomes a member, NATO missiles would be able to strike Moscow within “7 minutes.” However, for decades, NATO has [reached](#) out to Moscow for peaceful paths. In his announcement of his cryptic “special military operation” that was aired in the early hours of February 24, Putin then spelled out with pathos two noble causes: the denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine. He also profusely [spoke](#) about the “Kiev regime’s” genocide against the people of Donbas, Russian speakers, and Russians. Later, in May, as the war dragged on, the Russian president [stressed](#) another line of justification, that Russia was somehow cornered: “Russia launched a preemptive attack against this aggression. It was necessary, timely, and the only choice.”

The Russian Security Council meeting days before the war was a theatrical performance by top officials competing in oratorical skills to demonize Ukraine. Kyiv-blaming was heavily mixed with West-blaming. Demonizing the other side is thus the second leitmotif. Making war on cultural kin cannot be easily justified. The Kremlin’s inventiveness bordered on craziness as it doubled down on the darkest terminology in modern political history as it tried to depict the Ukrainian government as fascist, Nazi, neo-Nazi, Banderite, genocidal, nationalist, drug-addicted, and so on, in the style of *reductio ad absurdum*.

For context, the word “nationalist,” a somewhat neutral concept in Western political science, has a distinctly negative, menacing air in the Russian political context—on a par with “racist.” Take, for example, Putin’s denigrating [reference](#) to the Ukrainian military as “nationalist formations” (“националистические формирования”). Words like fascist and Nazi are even more laden with Russian ideological fervor and nurtured by streams

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<sup>2</sup> See Peter Pomerantsev’s account of “surreal Russia” in [Nothing is True and Everything is Possible](#), PublicAffairs, November 2015.

of old Soviet-made war movies on television. Add in stories like that of Ukraine on the verge of making its own nuclear weapons to use against Russia, or Kyiv collaborating with Washington to [unleash](#) bio-weapon-carrying ducks, and an evil enemy starts to take shape, even if conspiracy theories lead the way.

Putin had earlier developed another line of delegitimizing Ukraine: that it was a thankless artificial state [created](#) by Vladimir Lenin and his successors by chopping up historical Russian lands. This point, possibly cheered at home, did not help win any Central Asian hearts. Social media users in these countries, especially Kazakhstan, took such revisionism as a sign of imperialism.

The last leg of the three-legged stool of Putin's war narrative was to paint a good, fair, strong, and respectable Russia—a normal country that needs to countervail global condemnation and suppression. This came in two threads: normality as opposed to insane, criminal, or aggressive, and normality as in “we are open for business.” In the former sense, depicting a normal Russia, even while its young men were often being killed on Ukrainian land, was part of the story distinguishing it from the demonized enemy. No less urgent was the second sense of normalcy: to persuade everyone that neither Putin's regime nor Russia was about to collapse. The more interesting engagements here have been Putin's entreaties to his Central Asian counterparts. He has engaged the region often this year, from his online appearance at the Eurasian Economic Forum in Bishkek in May to hosting the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June (attended by Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, among others) to his very first post-February 24<sup>th</sup> trip to Dushanbe and Ashkhabad in late June, and a half-dozen other occasions in Samarkand, Astana, Bishkek, and in Russia.

On all such occasions, the talk was of trade, integration, joint projects, and the new coming order in international affairs. Any mention of the war was only in passing, and even then, it was to impress on all the righteousness of Russia and the duplicity and faults of the collective West. Putin's [speech](#) at the first-ever summit of the “Central Asian Five +Russia” meeting in Astana in October was illustrative. It contained a lengthy account of positive indicators and achievements in cooperation and no mention of the war. It stressed threats from Afghanistan and implicated “Western secret services, primarily American and British,” for carrying out covert operations that posed great danger to Central Asian states.

### **Central Asian Neutrality Unfolded**

When Putin declared his “special military operation,” his Central Asian counterparts found a huge hot potato on their hands. Their earlier declarations of neutrality between the two sides would not suffice. As time went on, the trite positions of neutrality had to unfold into more substantive, less equivocal choices. It is worth looking beyond the label

of neutrality to see how these countries have had to sustain their positions in the face of Putin's propaganda.

No Central Asian leader has said that the war was justified or unjustified. No president, foreign minister, or other high-level officials in Central Asia has said that things in Donbas (or Ukraine) were so dire as to require violent military intervention, or that Russian speakers in Ukraine had been persecuted for their language. In their early statements, the [Kazakh](#), [Uzbek](#), and [Kyrgyz](#) governments called on Russia and Ukraine to return to peaceful ways of dispute resolution. The Central Asian governments – those that spoke on the matter – did not adopt any of the Kremlin language depicting the war. Over time, it was hinted to the Kremlin that alternative, non-military options had not been exhausted. When Kremlin press reports [stated inaccuracies](#) about Central Asian views, such as after phone calls between the Russian president and [Uzbek](#) and [Kyrgyz](#) leaders, the latter was quick to present their own accounts of the discussions, albeit falling short of openly calling the Kremlin reports false.

On occasion, the rhetoric and actions from Central Asia have been particularly pronounced contrary to the Kremlin's lines. The earliest statements by the three governments appealed to their equally close relations with Moscow and Kiyv as the main reason for their neutrality. This language of equal friendship with both sides was reiterated on multiple occasions. No element of Putin's language demonizing Kiyv, the United States, or the West has been replicated in Central Asian statements or actions. All Central Asian embassies in Kyiv remained, just as Ukrainian embassies did in the Central Asian capitals. Moreover, the Kazakh and Uzbek governments sponsored humanitarian aid to Ukraine, making them stand even further from Moscow.

The starkest non-compliance with Putin's boundary-redrawing involved the U.S.-sponsored joint military exercises in Tajikistan, where all except Turkmenistan were in [attendance](#), along with Mongolia and Pakistan. The annual exercise looked especially like a slap on Putin's face because it had not been held during the last few years due to COVID-19 and because Tajikistan, possibly the most loyal and dependent on Russia of all countries, was the host, and even it had held bilateral exercises with the Americans. All countries continued their bilateral engagements with both EU countries and the United States and reiterated their commitments to developing partnerships with them. Thus, none of the Central Asian governments in any way signed on to Putin's wholesale demonization and inculcation of either Ukraine or the West.

To some extent, Putin may find solace in that the Central Asian states emerged as somewhat enabling and cooperative counterparts, projecting normalcy about Russia, even if after February 2022, Putin was unwelcome almost everywhere except in Central Asia. But even on such visits, Putin had to endure multiple snubs. For example, Tokayev, one of the few leaders to attend the 2022 Economic Forum in St. Petersburg, said Kazakhstan would not recognize Russia's Ukrainian "quasi-states" – a term with a

distinct negative air in Russian. His words [became](#) among the most quoted from the Forum. And Putin's trip to Samarkand in September to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit was most [remembered](#) for his awkward waiting for several leaders, including for President Sadyr Japarov of Kyrgyzstan. During Putin's October meetings in Central Asia, President Emomali Rakhmon of Tajikistan stole the show with his 10-minute [rant](#) expressing disappointment with Russia's treatment of regional states. In December, when Putin confirmed his attendance at the summit of the Eurasian Economic Union in Bishkek, at the last minute, it was suddenly announced that the long-advertised inclusion of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, an observer in the Eurasian Economic Union, was [canceled](#) without explanation.

### **Conclusion: Monologues to Empty Chambers**

Millions of Russians have been swayed by Putin's narratives of war. For most of them, there has not been much of a public choice, thanks to Roskomnadzor and the Russian police state. What is noteworthy and evident, however, is that Putin's narratives have not swayed his counterparts in other (nearby) countries. The Central Asian neutral positions on the war have not been easy to state or maintain. The leaders of the five countries, which have generally been Moscow-aligned and -dependent, have steered clear of endorsing Putin's war language. While they entertained Putin numerous times this year as if in "normal" times for pragmatic reasons, they have neither accepted the war as justified and necessary nor joined in the demonization of the Ukrainian government or the West.

Putin has narrated his war—a diabolical exercise itself—to an essentially empty Central Asian chamber. Would-be audiences of Russian tall tales can find constant critical accounts of the war, its imperialist motivations, and its mounting costs. Such criticism, especially from world leaders and prominent figures, needs to be vocalized frequently to avoid Putin's "accept the war" persuasions. At a minimum, leaders maintaining neutrality should engage in narratives that decrease Putin's salesmanship. If geopolitics is waged and solidified through language, as geographer Martin Müller [writes](#), then the language of Putin's geopolitics must be dispelled, confronted, and voided. When Putin's supposedly closest partners refuse to speak his language of war, it is an encouraging sign. Such refusal, in Central Asia and anywhere, must be welcomed and reinforced and replaced by the language of openness, inclusiveness, and peacefulness.