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On the distorted structure of Russian guilt

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Abstract
This commentary offers a concise description of the structure revealed in the discourse about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but that also serves as a condition of the possibility for such events to happen. The points of view that this structure provides are relational, interdependent, and mutually constructed, and they are labeled as the Citizens, the Authorities, and the People. All these positions are structured in such a way that provides their subjects with a source of enjoyment. The positions can be described as follows: fetishism of the Citizens, who almost invent their guilt without being held responsible; sadism of the Authorities, whose urge to make more and more atrocious decisions demand to repeatedly dismiss or shift the blame; masochism of the People, who accept their responsibility for anything without having a clear idea about the contents of decisions that were made in their name. In regards to communal guilt, it is crucial to take this level of enjoyment into account, in order to refuse sinking into emotions and avoiding using the language of guilt and shame. However, to simply switch to the language of understanding and responsibility instead is not enough. The language we need to seek is the one that would allow us to directly address the inadequacy of this distorted political arrangement—not some kind of metalanguage, but, on the contrary, a common language.

Keywords Russia · Ukraine · Guilt · Shame · Responsibility · Political decision · Enjoyment · Discursive strategies · Democracy

On the distorted structure of Russian guilt

In this short commentary, I attempt to provide a concise description of the structure revealed in the discourse about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but that also serves as a condition of the possibility for such events to happen. Of course, as with any such topography, one cannot claim to present a full picture and take into account every important aspect of what is happening. Rather, the structural configuration described

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below is itself only an aspect—it cannot give us all the answers, but I would argue that it should be taken into account if we indeed search for answers and not just exercise our analytical capacities for therapeutic or self-validating purposes in the midst of a catastrophe.

Before I begin, there are a few things that should be clarified. My argument is concerned primarily with how narratives around collective guilt, shame, and responsibility for actions during the invasion of Ukraine are being developed in Russia, i.e., by those who live here or recently emigrated—narratives that can be encountered in different media, social network threads, or personal conversations.[1] By attributing different discursive strategies to a certain configuration, I assume that the points of view that this structure provides are *relational*, *interdependent*, and *mutually constructed*. They cannot be adequately characterized outside of these relations. Any given position or identification inscribed in a specific structure is in fact interreferential. Thus, we should focus not only on how different sides manifest themselves, but also on how they perceive and articulate representations of their Others. Also, while we tend to think about political processes and events using binary oppositions, I would suggest taking into account not two, but three major discursive positions surrounding the invasion. These positions I, with a certain degree of irony, will label as the Citizens, the Authorities, and the People.

Let me begin with the bearers of the new Russian collective guilt, the Citizens. After the invasion started, there was a wave of posts, comments, and articles expressing feelings of guilt, shame, and disgrace for the actions of the government, the country or the nation. Most attention was probably drawn by a sententious NYT op-ed by freshly emigrated manager Ilia Krasilshchik, who proclaimed: "We failed. We failed to prevent a catastrophe, and we failed to change the country for the better. And now we must bear that failure" (Krasilshchik 2022). As with many other remarks made from the Citizen's point of view, the author acknowledged that those Russians, who are opposed to Putin's regime, were deprived of the opportunity to influence decisions of the Authorities or even elect any trustworthy representatives. Yet, they are still part of the problem. They contributed to the creation of the monster named Putin's Russia and should bear a collective responsibility for what has happened. Journalist Natalia Kostiuchenko admitted it in a similar manner: "We are all to blame for the fact that the situation reached the point it has reached. Putin did not fall to us from Mars, he ruled Russia for more than twenty years. We did not use the time we had to change the government in our country" (Kostiuchenko 2022). Russian musician Ivan Dremin (Face) professed: "It seems to me, now is the situation where, if you are a normal person, you should be ashamed that you are Russian" (Face 2022). Further, some

[1]This internal focus means that certain opinions and points of view are inevitably reduced to somewhat of a background for those discursive positions that I consider much more significant. Namely, I will, for the most part, leave out the obviously problematic and one-dimensional portrayal of the invasion that was presented by many foreign politicians and Western media outlets. Also, I will not comment on countless discussions on social media between Ukranians and Russians, where the latter were being held accountable for the actions of their government by the former. Even though such sources also contributed to the development of narratives of Russian guilt, I believe that their importance is secondary, meaning that even in the event of a total informational blockade and inaccessibility of foreign media these narratives would still be developed in the same way, more or less.

speakers called out Russians to show repentance for what is happening in Ukraine, among them journalist Mitia Aleshkovskiy (Aleshkovskiy 2022).

It is important to add that while such remarks sometimes imply a strong distinction between guilt and responsibility (taken from Hanna Arendt, other thinkers or common sense) and even well-articulated denial of the *feeling* of guilt in favor of the *understanding* of personal or collective responsibility, they are expressed in a particular emotional and performative way. The affective complex of guilt, shame, and disgrace is what such remarks *convey*, not necessarily *enunciate*.[2] Their main message is of the enthusiastic acceptance of the blame: it has turned out that the whole world now hates Russians, and rightly so—and this acceptance is presented as a necessary act of moral heroism.

Yet, the same discursive position implies an obvious double bind. The Citizens condemn the war, proclaiming: "Not in my name!" They complain of not being heard by those in power for years. Or they insist that the country's leader has gone insane and ignores even his confidants. Most importantly, they express abhorrence towards the People—those, who *shamelessly* accepted the government's actions, who were brainwashed and zombified by propaganda and cannot even begin to understand why Russians should feel any guilt in the first place.

This position of the Citizens is by default a position of a heroic minority group, so any assertion of responsibility comes only with more or less explicit acknowledgment of *impossibility to be responsible*. In psychoanalytic terms, such a liminal discursive position can be characterized as *fetishist*, built on the act of *disavowal* (Freud 1961). Its formula is: "I know very well, but nevertheless". One can note that it is true not only for this discursive position, but for the whole civil society in Russia as well: during Putin's rule it was developing its institutions and initiatives *as if* the country was rich, advanced, pro-Western and so on. Barbarism of the People was tolerated (they will be civilized eventually), severity and dullness of the Authorities were assumed to be fading away (one day they will accept the demand for individual freedom). In exchange for economic gain and cultural prestige, the civil society also was tolerated by the Authorities (and humiliated—by the People). Now, the Citizens are distressed from their inability to be responsible for what has happened, and their attempts to take responsibility collapse into moral condemnations and emotional unwindings of guilt. It is no surprise, then, that these grievances were perceived by many as hypocritical overactions, which, in turn, hampered the attempts to organize a strong civic antiwar movement.

Next comes the Authorities—the discourse of state propaganda, of the regime's ideologists, of Russia's officials, and its leader himself. The most difficult task they encountered was the need to invert the usual rhetoric, the one that condemned any interventions and destabilization of other countries' regimes, into full-scale promotion of the war and aggression (therefore, even an abstract demand for "peace" became literally illegal, counted as discreditation of the army). Facing worldwide support for Ukraine and accusations of military aggression, war crimes, and bringing on a global

[2]For more details on this issue see an analysis of Arendt's distinction between collective guilt and collective responsibility offered by Iris Marion Young, who shows that the simplistic declaration of collective responsibility provides exactly the same effect of diffusion (if everyone is responsible, then no one is) as lamentations on the matter of collective guilt (Young 2011, pp. 75–94).

socioeconomic crisis, the Authorities actively deny any guilt being put on them. The guilty party is on the other side of the border, they say, while we are just the ones who were forced to make *a decision*. This was the message put out by Putin in his address to the nation in the lead-up to the invasion: "They did not leave us any other option for defending Russia and our people, other than the one we are forced to use today. In these circumstances, we have to take a bold and immediate action" (Putin 2022a). The only part of Russian society who should be blamed here is a small group of 'agents of our enemies', the fifth column (*piataia kolonna*) mentioned in the other Putin's speech as bearers of servile mentality (Putin 2022b) – namely, the Citizens.[3]

By saying that the war was inevitable, that Ukraine and the West were basically asking for it, the Authorities presented it as a necessity, as their *need*; thus, the deep *sadistic* desire for violence was articulated, and the fascination of the image of the violent resolution became all-absorbing. I am inclined to agree with Slavoj Žižek's description of the act being committed towards Ukraine as a rape (Žižek 2022). One should add, though, that from here the configuration of this rape[4] reveals itself to be threefold: it is not Russia who commits rape to Ukraine, but it is the Authorities and their army who commit it *for Russia* and *before her very eyes*. It is an act of rape used as demonstration of love; a *staged* rape, but only in a sense that it was committed for a particular audience.[5] According to Putin, Russians are the ones who are being saved by his "military operation": both the Russian-speaking population of Donbass and the People of his own country, and more than that—they are the ones who, in their hearts, purely emotionally sanction *his decision* and *actually bear responsibility for it*: "At the end of the day, the future of Russia is in the hands of its multi-ethnic people, as has always been the case in our history. This means that the decisions that I made will be executed, that we will achieve the goals we have set, and reliably guarantee the security of our Motherland. I believe in your support and the invincible force rooted in the love for our Fatherland" (Putin 2022a).

The aforementioned sadism that the position of the Authorities is rooted in explains why it is so important to articulate a perverse idea of the Russian army's innocence, to hypocritically deny any possible guilt (which makes acceptance of collective guilt by the Citizens that much more tempting) and to always accuse in return while continuing to methodically ravage a neighbor country and spill *even more*

[3] Which is why the guilt and shame that members of Russian opposition forces expressed were, for a large part, projected by the regime and beneficial solely to the Authorities.

[4] Incestuous rape, one might add, remembering that for Putin Ukraine is not a sovereign state, but a prodigal daughter, a part of a big slavic family, and Ukranians and Russians are the same nation.

[5] Two remarks can be made here. The first concerns the international forces as another type of audience for whom this invasion has been committed. Of course, this is very much the case, since at the end of the day we are talking about geopolitics. However, in regards to the structure I am describing here, this position is reserved for the Citizens—they are representatives of international spectators; but they are also, along with the People, part of Putin's Russia, the true audience. If we do not recognize the role of the People as spectators, we are remaining *only* on the surface level of geopolitics. The second remark concerns the word "staged". I think it is a crucial signifier if we want to understand why it is so easy for state propaganda to denounce any evidence of war crimes as fake. As sadists, the Authorities are so eager to properly and impressively stage the act of violence, to take into account everything from numerology to symbols and mottos, that at some point this organizational and aesthetic dimension becomes all that they can see and care about. The Real of violence fades away in the dense smog of the work of the Imaginary, and this is true for the observants as well.

blood. The sadist cannot help but identify with his victim, because in the end it is the victim's suffering that his desire depends on—the only language the sadist has access to is the language of victims. As Deleuze, following Bataille, famously put it: "His ego exists only in the external world: this is the fundamental significance of sadistic apathy. The sadist has no other ego than that of his victims" (Deleuze 1991, p. 124).

Finally, let us turn to the least articulated position, the one of the People. For the purposes of analysis it appears quite elusive—not easy to grasp or cite, almost impossible to present in a form of consistent narrative. Yet it is a discourse of Russia's daily life, the one we encounter while walking on the streets or using public transport, staying in markets' queues, calling distant relatives, watching sidewalk interviews or reading comment sections (remembering, of course, that infamous bot factories still do their everyday job). As always, it is, on the one hand, full of bitter humor, and, on the other, of constant interruptions of dialog: from neglectful and optimistic "Everything would be fine" and "We've seen worse" to anxious and abrupt "I don't wanna talk about it" and "I don't know what to believe". I do not think it would be unfair to say that the worsening economic situation concerns ordinary Russians more than events of the war. Furthermore, the discursive position of the People operates largely with the most abstract concepts that state propaganda provides the general public with. All the sophisticated elements of staging the invasion and casuistry of the regime's ideologists interest the Citizens and the Authorities themselves, while for the People they are reduced to the basics: there is "us" and our American enemies; there is Putin (who "knows better") and these clown politicians of the West; there are terrible nazis in Ukraine, but what exactly the word "nazi" means is not of major importance—simply, "we" used to fight against some evil, and that is a name for it; but because there is nothing good about the war, "we" hope it will end soon, because "we" always hope for the best (while preparing for the worst).

The most peculiar aspect of this position is the, so to speak, ahistorical attitude towards the events of the war. Again, its historic significance concerns the Citizens and the Authorities, while for the People it is a simple continuation of the existence of Russia as a country that was *always* hated and envied. The suffering of the country and its nation for the People is a matter of *habit*, not of crisis or exception. This is why the usual reaction to another piece of bad news (fall of the ruble, international sanctions, business shutdowns, etc.) is that of the aforementioned optimism: the People assert that they are ready (or even eager) to suffer, to tighten belts, to subordinate to the will of the Authorities ("if it has to be done, it has to be done")—because this is a part of who "we" are and have always been.

For many years this sort of *masochistic* reaction was exploited by the Authorities and provoked frustration among the Citizens. Both parties are convinced that it will never change, attributing it to an essential element of the People's mentality, i.e., either to fidelity or servility. I would argue, though, that this masochism of the People, their unconditional acceptance of their own passivity,[6] is not in any way essential (historically it derives from socialization practices of the USSR and the traumatic experiences of the 1990s), but structural. It is well documented that in Russia every

[6]It is important to note that, contrary to the fears of many commentators and propaganda's attempts, there is still no political mobilization of masses in Russia.

important political decision is made by the Authorities, but is presented as the expression of the will of the People, specifically through the usage of polls (Yudin 2020). The most striking example in recent Russian history is, of course, the 2020 constitutional referendum: organized in the midst of a pandemic and absolutely unnecessary from the legal point of view (so essentially being a Russia-wide poll), it was used as an acclamation for Putin's full empowerment. Considering that down the road of Putin's rule the realm of "politics" in Russia became more and more externally focused, meaning that in the minds of the People it concerns first and foremost a sphere of sovereign decisions of world leaders, the constant reference to the will of the People comes to be utterly idiosyncratic. However, what it fosters is not only common cynicism of a postmodern man, but also a masochistic complex of the People who have been *depoliticized* through constant *imitation of their political participation*. Thus, being totally unable to participate in the decision-making process, but (in contrast to the Citizens) being persistently invoked by the Authorities as participants, the People were left with one single option to check their admirable privilege—through negative consequences of these decisions that would directly affect their lives. To put it bluntly, in today's Russia one can feel responsible for what is happening to "us" *only through suffering*.[7]

What does this outline of three major discursive positions lead us to assume? Fetishism of the Citizens, who almost invent their guilt without being held responsible; sadism of the Authorities, whose urge to make more and more atrocious decisions demand to repeatedly dismiss or shift the blame; masochism of the People, who accept their responsibility for anything without having a clear idea about the contents of decisions that were made in their name? All these positions are structured in such a way that provide their subjects with a source of *enjoyment*. Found in the spreading of hate and violence as much as in the self-demeaning, this enjoyment holds the structure together, pinning every discursive position to a fixed place in relation to others, preventing from seeing the discrepancy and disjointedness of the whole structure, and limiting our ability to think outside of it. In regards to communal guilt, it is crucial to take this level of enjoyment into account, in order to refuse sinking into emotions and avoid using the language of guilt and shame. However, to simply use the language of understanding and responsibility instead is not enough. The language we need to seek is the one that allows us to directly address the inadequacy of this distorted positional (read: political) arrangement—not some kind of metalanguage, but, on the contrary, a *common language*.

One could object that this structural configuration is in no way unique, in fact, it can be detected not only in authoritarian regimes, but in liberal democracies as well, just not that explicitly. The truth is, "objectively" the invasion of another (independent) country is in no way unique as well. The historical importance of the invasion of Ukraine consists in the fact that it serves as yet another revelation of long-present

[7] Thus, guilt, shame, and disgrace of the Citizens, who, for the most part, enjoy a better lifestyle than the People, can be seen as effective substitutes for the truly hardening conditions of living of the latter. It becomes especially clear when someone, who prefers taking the role of the Citizens, indulges in speculations about the infinite sufferance of the People, tastefully describing all the obscene details of the lives of economically disadvantaged: old ladies picking food from trash bins, men drinking medical liquids as alcohol beverages, kids getting severe beatings from parents, etc.

contradictions, an exposure of violence behind the current order, anchored in public international law and the global economico-political system. Admittedly, particular qualities of Putin's regime help to uncover the major contradiction behind narratives of guilt, shame, and responsibility, because in modern Russia the aforementioned discursive positions present themselves in a very apparent way. It mostly comes from the fact that Putin's authoritarian government for many years successively repressed the public sphere and made it nearly impossible to express *collective* disagreement with the current state of affairs. Attempts to organize mass protests were suppressed by bureaucratic obstructions, aggressive propaganda, or by sheer police force. At the same time, *political* opposition itself was not so much repressed, but tolerated by the Authorities, however, within strict limits of *depoliticized* civil society. In response, Russian civil society developed its own culture around "liberal" media platforms, with its own discursive cliches and hackneyed narratives, articulated by local celebrities: opinion leaders, experts, artists, etc. In fact, the expression of dissension became a *personal* endeavor, something that one does as an individual, for oneself and one's own conscience, thus creating that inapt and divisive allure of moral heroism that marks the discursive position of the Citizens and presupposes the sense of separation from "all the rest", i.e., from the People.

Still, I want to stress that this case should give us an impulse to *reflect on political order as such*, and not on some mythical "Russian way" of feeling guilt or tolerating violence. That is why discussions and reactions around the invasion of Ukraine should remind us of the disjointedness of *any* political structure, where naive (poor, vulgar, stupid etc.) People are set against conscious Citizens and far-sighted Authorities. They should push us towards conceptualizations of a radically different configuration that necessarily presupposes a political turn, a disjointing of an already disjointed structure—a dislocation of the People's position in such a way that it will become impossible to oppose them to the Citizens and, just as importantly, to the Authorities, making the distinction itself obsolete.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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