

UDC 355.4(470:477)“20”:355.01
DOI 10.24919/2519-058X.27.281552

Vitalii TELVAK

PhD hab. (History), Full Professor, Professor of the Department of World History and Special Historical Disciplines, Ivan Franko Drohobych State Pedagogical University, 24 Ivan Franko Street, Drohobych, Ukraine, postal code 82100 (telvak1@yahoo.com)

ORCID: 0000-0002-2445-968X
Researcher ID: X-5320-2018

Vasyl ILNYTSKYI

PhD hab. (History), Full Professor, Head of the Department of History of Ukraine, Drohobych Ivan Franko State Pedagogical University, 24 Ivan Franko Street, Drohobych, Ukraine, postal code 82100; Associate Professor, Department of Mobilization, Personnel and Human Resources Management, Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi National Ground Forces Academy, 32 Heroyiv Maidana Street, Lviv, Ukraine, postal code 79026 (vilnickiy@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0000-0002-4969-052X
Researcher ID: H-4431-2017

Віталій ТЕЛЬВАК

доктор історичних наук, професор кафедри всесвітньої історії та спеціальних історичних дисциплін Дрогобицького державного педагогічного університету, вул. Івана Франка, 24, м. Дрогобич, Україна, 82100 (telvak1@yahoo.com)

Василь ІЛЬНИЦЬКИЙ

доктор історичних наук, професор, завідувач кафедри історії України Дрогобицького державного педагогічного університету імені Івана Франка, вул. Івана Франка, 24, м. Дрогобич, Україна, індекс 82100; доцент кафедри мобілізаційної, організаційно-штатної та кадрової роботи Національної академії сухопутних військ імені гетьмана Петра Сагайдачного, вул. Героїв Майдану, 32, м. Львів, Україна, індекс 79026 (vilnickiy@gmail.com)

Bibliographic Description of the Article: Telvak, V. & Ilnytskyi, V. (2023). A Year of Existential War in Analytical Reflections of the Warsaw Centre for Eastern Studies. *Skhidnoievropeiskyi Istorychnyi Visnyk [East European Historical Bulletin]*, 27, 249–258. doi: 10.24919/2519-058X.27.281552

**A YEAR OF EXISTENTIAL WAR IN ANALYTICAL REFLECTIONS
OF THE WARSAW CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES**

Abstract. *The purpose of the study is to clarify the peculiarities of interpreting the full-scale stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war by analysts of the Marek Karp Centre for Eastern Studies. The methodological basis of the work is an interdisciplinary approach with particular emphasis on the structural and functional systematic analysis of historiographical facts and the comparative and historical method based on the principles of objectivity and historicism. The scientific novelty of*

the article consists in clarifying the peculiarities of the modern stage of Russian aggression against Ukraine by the Centre for Eastern Studies employees. **The Conclusion.** The research proved that the Centre for Eastern Studies closely observed the events of the full-scale stage of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, defining it as an existential war. At the same time, not only notorious incidents of armed confrontation fell into the field of their expert discussion. The integrity of the analytical image is complemented by numerous texts about the socio-economic situation in Ukraine, the Kremlin's policy on the occupied territories and successful efforts to create and increase the anti-Putin coalition. Owing to this, the interested observer formed a complete and balanced picture of all the key aspects of the last year of the war. The Polish colleagues, in many respects, imitated the rhetoric of the Ukrainian mass media, placing clear accents when describing the genocidal practices of the Russian regime. This influenced the formation and maintenance of public opinion favourable to Ukraine in Poland and other European Union countries, where Polish Eastern studies have high academic prestige. As a result, this contributes to the neutralization of the efforts of Putin's propagandists in the information space of the states of our partners. Largely owing to this, our country maintains the unwavering support of its allies, despite changes in political cabinets in many countries of the continent. This is an essential prerequisite for the fact that the Ukrainians will not only endure but also win in their most crucial war.

Key words: existential war, Marek Karp Centre for Eastern Studies, Komentarze OSW, analytical reception.

РІК ЕКЗИСТЕНЦІЙНОЇ ВІЙНИ В АНАЛІТИЧНИХ РЕФЛЕКСІЯХ ВАРШАВСЬКОГО ЦЕНТРУ СХІДНИХ СТУДІЙ

Анотація. Мета дослідження полягає у з'ясуванні особливостей осмислення повномасштабного етапу російсько-української війни аналітиками Центру східних студій імені Марека Карпа. **Методологічне підґрунтя** роботи становить міждисциплінарний підхід. Особливий акцент зроблено на структурно-функціональному системному аналізі історіографічних фактів і порівняльно-історичному методі, виходячи з принципів об'єктивності та історизму. **Наукова новизна** статті полягає у спробі з'ясування особливостей презентації сучасного етапу російської агресії проти України співробітниками ЦСС. **Висновки.** Проведене дослідження довело, що співробітники ЦСС чимало уваги присвятили подіям повномасштабного етапу російсько-українського протистояння, назвавши його екзистенційною війною. При цьому, що важливо, у полі їхнього експертного обговорення потрапили не тільки голосні події збройного протистояння. Цілість аналітичного образу доповнюють численні тексти про соціально-економічну ситуацію в Україні, політику Кремля на окупованих землях, успішні намагання створити та збільшити антинутінську коаліцію й ін. Завдяки цьому зацікавлений обсерватор отримав можливість скласти доволі повне і збалансоване уявлення про всі ключові аспекти останнього року війни. Польські колеги багато в чому наслідували риторичку українських мас-медіа, розставляючи чіткі акценти при описі геноцидних практик російського режиму. Це вплинуло на формування й утримання прихильної до України громадської думки не тільки у Польщі, але й в інших країнах Євросоюзу, де польське сходознавство тішить високим академічним престижем. У підсумку це сприяє нейтралізації в інформаційному полі держав наших партнерів зусиль путінських пропагандистів. Значною мірою завдяки цьому, наша країна надалі зберігає неослабну підтримку союзників, незважаючи на зміни політичних кабінетів у багатьох країнах континенту. Це є важливою передумовою того, що українці не тільки виживуть, але й переможуть у своїй найголовнішій війні.

Ключові слова: екзистенційна війна, Центр східних студій імені Марека Карпа, "Komentarze OSW", аналітична рецензія.

The Statement of the Problem. The year of the large-scale Russian-Ukrainian war stimulated the publication of a considerable amount of literature of various genres, highlighting numerous aspects of the most brutal aggression in the post-war history of Europe. The lion's share of it belongs to the Ukrainian intellectuals who are trying to understand the origins and essence of the evil that crossed our border uninvited and are trying to predict at least

the near future. However, since the military actions do not slow down, and the Putin regime is constantly radicalizing the militant rhetoric, representatives of the Ukrainian academic environment are forced to respond promptly to the events of the troubled present without having the psycho-emotional distance necessary for deeper analysis. Therefore, we turn to our Western colleagues in search of stereoscopic reflection, which is so important for us. Our neighbours monitor closely the vicissitudes of the Russian aggression, and they unanimously attest that the Ukrainian resistance is an existential war. To draw attention of our colleagues to the little-known problem of the Polish academic reception of a full-scale stage of the Ukrainian-Russian confrontation, we will try to reproduce the interpretation of the researchers of the Marek Karp Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw (hereinafter – the CES), which is one of the most authoritative European analytical institutions.

The Analysis of Previous Research. The issues of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2014 – 2023) in general and its full-scale stage, in particular have already been analyzed in scientific and popular science studies. First of all, it is necessary to mention the research by O. Pokotylo, O. Nashyvochnikov, in which there are elucidated the origins of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, in particular the Black Sea Fleet factor and purposeful anti-Ukrainian policy of Moscow (Pokotylo & Nashyvochnikov, 2021). Militarization of an educational process (an active propaganda of service in the armed forces of the Russian Federation, education of potential bearers and defenders of the “Russian world”, the cult formation of war and violence) on the territory of the occupied Crimean Peninsula in 2014 – 2019 are analyzed by B. Demianenko, A. Demianenko (Demianenko & Demianenko, 2021). V. Ilnytskyi, V. Starka, and M. Haliv did research on the use of the main propaganda measures carried out by Russia in preparation for armed aggression against Ukraine (Ilnytskyi, Starka & Haliv, 2022). The information warfare issue as one of the aspects of hybrid warfare in Ukraine was also covered (Chobit, Boichenko, 2022). Borys Drohomiretskyi (Drohomiretskyi, 2022) made an attempt to analyze historiographic research papers on the modern Russian-Ukrainian war comprehensively. The issue of the Russian-Ukrainian war was widely covered in the columns of the newspaper “The New York Times”, Yuriy Ofitsynskyy did research on the Russian-Ukrainian war analysis (Ofitsynskyy, 2018). Actually, the opinions of scholars and former politicians concerning the war in Donbas (February 12, 2015 – April 30, 2018) are analyzed and elucidated in another article by the author (Ofitsynskyy, 2022).

The Western and Polish reception of the Russian-Ukrainian war remained in the focus of Ukrainian observers during 2014 – 2021 (Masnenko, Telvak, Yanyshyn & Telvak, 2021; Telvak & Werner, 2023). However, there have not been reflections on foreign academic evaluations of the last year’s events so far. This determines the relevance of our research.

The Purpose of the Article. The purpose of the article is to clarify the peculiarities of the interpretation of a full-scale stage of the Ukrainian-Russian war by the Centre for Eastern Studies analysts.

The Results of the Research. We want to start with the overall history and peculiarities of the activity of the CES itself. This institution was founded in 1990 as a budget institution of state administration. The creation of the CES was a response to the needs of the state apparatus of democratic Poland in monitoring and analysing the processes that took place in the Soviet Union and, therefore, in the countries that emerged after the collapse of the communist empire. At present, the sphere of interests of the CES covers Russia, Eastern and Central Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Balkans, Germany, the Baltic and Northern European countries, China, Turkey and Israel. Alongside this, CES staff research

energy policy in the European Union, transport, trade and digital communications in Central Europe, and European security issues. The main tasks of the CES are the preparation of analyses, expert opinions and prognostic studies; the provision of Polish state authorities with information about important political, social and economic events and processes in the international environment; inspiring, organizing and conducting research in the countries and regions covered by the attention of the CES; dissemination of knowledge about the state and trends of changes in the political, socio-economic situation and about the development of international relations in the spheres of the Centre's interests; popularization of Polish analytical thought abroad. The main activities of the CES are fully financed from state funds by the annual decision of the Polish Sejm. More than 40 analysts who are independent in their work are working full-time in the centre. The prime minister appoints its director from among the candidates presented by the seven-member CES Council. The leading media platform of the CES is the online edition "Komentarze OSW".

From the very beginning of the establishment of the Centre for Eastern Studies, the formation of an independent Ukrainian state increasingly interested its researchers. Over time, as relations between Poland and Ukraine deepened and reached the level of strategic partnership, the level of attention reached new heights. The aggression launched by Russia in 2014, especially its current large-scale phase, turned the Ukrainian issue into one of the main thematic trends for the Centre for Eastern Studies employees, who rightly qualified these events as the greatest threat to European security in the post-war period. Evidence of such meticulous attention is the fact that during the year of the full-scale war, more than 600 (!) diverse publications were devoted to Ukraine – from chronic information summaries from the battlefield to meaningful analytical studies on many aspects of the Ukrainian state functioning. Among the regular observers of the Ukrainian affairs, we would like to mention Andrzej Wilko, Piotr Zhochowski, Slawomir Matushak, Krzysztof Nechypor and Jadwiga Rogoza.

The majority of the mentioned publications are analytical summaries from the battlefield that use the Ukrainian news agency reports as a source. In the first days of the full-scale invasion, such reviews appeared even several times a day; later, they became daily, and after the stabilization of the front, only significant events of the military confrontation were covered. Instead, much more interesting for us are the attempts of our Polish colleagues to understand the many vicissitudes of the functioning of the Ukrainian state and society in the first year of the war. Such an interested and benevolent "view from the side" is extremely important both for the Ukrainians themselves, who are too immersed in the tragedy of their everyday life and do not have the opportunity to comprehend it properly, and for a better understanding of what exactly interests and worries our historical neighbour and fortitudinous friend.

Centre for Eastern Studies analysts paid the most attention to the problem of the influence of war events on the transformation of the Ukrainian society and all state structures. Using numerous examples, they informed the Polish reader that despite the occupier's expectations, the Ukrainian society revealed miracles of self-mobilization, which overturned the Kremlin's plans for blitzkrieg and disorganization of our citizens (Rogoża, 2022a). Already in the middle of March last year, while observing these processes, Ya. Rogoża rightly identified the trend of public opinion, which only deepened during the following months (Rogoża, 2022b). According to her, hostility towards Russia permeates Ukraine, uniting citizens of different nationalities and regions. Over the past 30 years, it became the most potent catalyst for the crystallization of the Ukrainian political nation, strengthening against Russian demands and creating the myth of the new Ukraine as anti-Russia. From the first days of the attack on the

country, President Zelenskyi began to call this national unity against the invader a “patriotic war”, in which all Ukrainians are fighting in solidarity against the invaders, who have come to be commonly called fascists. The researcher believes these processes to be irreversible and confirms the final failure of the so-called “Russian world” project in Ukraine.

Similar observations were expressed and reiterated by other colleagues of the author. In particular, P. Żochowski and S. Matuszak pointed to unprecedented growth in social solidarity, which eventually united the east and west of our country by understanding common existential challenges (Rogoża, Żochowski & Matuszak, 2022). Another noticeable phenomenon was the total de-Russification of the public space, which CES analysts tend to consider an organic continuation of the decommunization started under P. Poroshenko (Rogoża, 2022c). Polish colleagues attach considerable importance to this process, pointing to its long-term effects. According to their conviction, “In the coming years, Ukraine will develop and combine these two trends – the desire to strengthen its own national identity and expand ties with the West, an important element of which will be the deepening of cooperation with Poland, which is perceived as a key and proven ally” (Rogoża, 2022c, p. 5).

If Polish analysts evaluated the dynamics of public processes in Ukraine ambivalently (mass emigration / social solidarity), then the dangers of the economic plan were depicted in exceptionally dark colours. After all, high-intensity military operations, constant missile attacks on industrial and energy infrastructure, a significant outflow of human capital, galloping inflation, blockade of ports and a general disruption of logistics connections significantly undermined the Ukrainian economy, which has never been in good shape. Therefore, during the year, the Ukrainian state mainly functioned at the expense of the joint financial assistance of Western partners, which allowed it to stabilise the situation to a certain extent (Wilk & Żochowski, 2022a). In view of this, V. Matuszak rationally characterizes the economic condition of our country as a complex “struggle for survival” (Matuszak, 2023, p. 1). However, even in this situation, the Polish analysts note certain positive developments. Thus, depicting the financial losses of the Ukrainian state from blocking the Black Sea ports, they note at the same time that the consequence of economic “de-Russianisation” was the strengthening of the European Union as the leading trading partner of Kyiv in the sphere of exports and imports, and Poland, for the first time in history, became a leader in trade with its eastern neighbour (Matuszak, 2023, p. 1).

Another intensively discussed topic on the pages of “Komentarze OSW” was the diplomatic front of the Russian-Ukrainian war. CES observers unanimously praised the efforts of the Ukrainian diplomats to unite democratic countries around the idea of opposing Putin’s revanchism. This successful work resulted in the creation of a coalition of Western countries, which joined forces to arm the Ukrainian army within the framework of the Rammstein consultative platform. The CES analysts rightly emphasise that military assistance to Ukraine from the American ally has become especially important for Ukraine. Analysing the deepening of the Ukrainian-American cooperation, K. Niecypor and A. Wilk metaphorically characterized it as a “brotherhood of arms and values” (Niecypor & Wilk, 2022). A manifestation of these unique relations was the visit of the Ukrainian president to Washington and, especially, Joe Biden’s visit to the Ukrainian capital, which is subject to constant Russian missile attacks. At the same time, the CES employees note specific problems in the international military support of Ukraine. Thus, in their posts, the authors critically assess the German government’s wavering and inconsistency in arming the victim of the Kremlin’s aggression (Wilk & Żochowski, 2022b).

The additional notable aspect of the analysis devoted to Ukraine was the reaction of our Polish colleagues to the humanitarian policy of the Putin regime in the occupied territories. It should be noted that largely thanks to the information activity of the Polish intellectuals, the Western world learned about the true face of the “Russian world”. The first series of articles on this problem was titled “Terror, Pacification, Occupation” (Żochowski, 2022). The article was published after the liberation of Kyiv region and the discovery of the facts of the genocide committed by the Russians. Its author P. Zhokhovskiyi was the first in the Polish analytical community to draw attention to the fact that the aggression against Ukraine put the problem of Russia’s management of the occupied territories on the agenda. Despite the Kremlin’s hopes, the first stage of the ground operation did not lead to the capture of significant territories, nor the disintegration of the enemy’s army or the flight of the authorities from Kyiv and the suppression of public resistance, and therefore failed not only in the military but also in a political way. Putin’s plans to force residents of the occupied territories to support their actions and establish the so-called people’s republics for further division of the Ukrainian state also suffered a fiasco. Acting according to the *modus operandi* of 2014, the Kremlin failed to consider changes in the mood of Ukrainian society, which does not see Russia as a civilizational alternative. This was evidenced by the mass protests against the occupation, despite the associated security. Collaboration cases were sporadic, making full and unhindered control over the conquered territory impossible. Therefore, realizing the ineffectiveness of their actions, the invaders take revenge on the civilians – they use terror and pacification, thereby committing war crimes and systematically bringing the occupied settlements to a state of humanitarian disaster. The Polish analyst concludes that the current consequences of the Russian occupation indicate that its goal in the north was the destruction and mass deportation of the civilian population, and in the south – forceful coercion of the Ukrainians to cooperate and change their identity.

P. Zhokhovskiyi’s observations regarding the historical policy of the occupiers are also interesting. Operating with a limited evidence base, he rightly outlined the general logic according to which the occupiers, in cooperation with local collaborators, promote the Russian politics of memory, initiating a campaign to glorify the merits of the Red Army and, if possible, rebuild previously destroyed monuments in honour of the so-called “Great Patriotic War” and its personalities. There is also a violent propaganda campaign to return to general circulation the thesis that the events in Ukraine in 2014 were a “*coup d’état*” supported by the West. These phenomena are accompanied by blocking access to the Ukrainian mass media and mobile operators to plunge occupied Ukrainians into an information vacuum.

Despite the resistance of the majority of the Ukrainian population to the policies of the occupiers, the Russian regime proceeded to annex the occupied territories, falsifying several “expressions of people’s will”. Understanding these phenomena, the Centre for Eastern Studies experts were united in their conviction that the annexation pseudo-referendums were complete fiction and had the character of a political demonstration directed by the Russian security forces. The voting process itself was organized in such a way as to ensure predetermined “results” that have no relation to the reality and sentiments of the local population terrorized by the occupier. Given this, Polish analysts called the “referendums” a propaganda spectacle designed to convince Russian society that the residents of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine “sincerely want to join Russia” and that the “special military operation” was allegedly launched by Moscow for humanitarian reasons and continues successfully (Zespół OSW, 2022).

As CES analysts rightly predicted, the mentioned referendums turned out to be a banal cover for plans to annex part of Ukrainian territories, precisely the Putin regime's goal in its undeclared war. Reconstructing the annexation logic of the Kremlin, M. Menkishak, M. Domanska, and P. Zhokhovsky indicated that the short-term political goal of the annexation is to convey the message to the domestic audience that the so-called "special military operation" is successful and that Russia has not lost its ability to gain territory which it considers its own. Polish colleagues also regard annexing territories as an attempt to hide defeats at the front by political and propaganda means. After all, they stress, the annexations signal to the enemy that the armed conflict will not be "frozen" if Kyiv rejects Russia's policy of *fait accompli*. According to the forecasts of Polish experts, realizing the impossibility of changing President Zelenskyi's attitude on this issue, the Kremlin will try to use a nuclear scarecrow to reduce Western military support for Ukraine and limit the combat activity of the Ukrainian army. However, as the mentioned authors reasonably predicted, this game of Moscow will not bring the expected results, and Kyiv will not stop hostilities and will not succumb to nuclear blackmail. However, Polish observers conclude that territorial annexations, military mobilization in the Russian Federation and nuclear blackmail became elements of a new stage of the Kremlin's domestic policy (Menkiszak, Domańska & Żochowski, 2022).

Despite considerable sincere sympathy for the struggle of the Ukrainians for their right to independence and identity, the CES maintained the objectivity and detachment inherent in the analytical environment. This was most clearly manifested in the fact that the CES experts did not hide many unattractive moments of the life of the Ukrainian politicians during the year of the large-scale war. They noted with regret the return of corruption schemes to the offices of Kyiv officials, which contrasted with the self-devotion and sacrifice of the majority of the Ukrainians. The focus of their attention, among other things, was the media-hyped scandal with the purchase of food for the army at several times inflated prices and the subsequent arrests of officials who hid considerable sums of undeclared cash. According to analysts, the scandals in the highest echelons of power showed a return to the usual corrupt practices among officials after almost a year-long war. Instead, Polish colleagues believe that it is appropriate to regard the publicized resignation as an attempt by Zelensky to overcome the image crisis associated with the disclosure of numerous facts of corruption, conflicts of interest and the lifestyle of officials incompatible with the realities of war. These scandals compromised the ruling camp in the eyes of society, the army, and foreign partners. Thus, Zelensky realized that tolerating such behaviour, especially in his immediate environment, could lead to a decrease in electoral support and the risk of limiting Western financial and military aid. Thus, Y. Ber concludes that society's condescension to the authorities' actions, characteristic of the initial stage of the war, has ended, and corruption scandals will be covered in the mass media permanently (Ber, 2023). It should be noted that the public discussion of this problem in the Ukrainian society and subsequent journalistic investigations fully confirmed the prediction of the Polish analyst.

As expected, the employees of the CES responded with a meaningful analysis of the anniversary of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Emphasizing primarily the changes in consciousness in Ukrainian society, they optimistically stated that "on February 24, 2022, the Russian world ended in Ukraine". Ya. Rogozha, using many examples of sociological studies, argued that the Russian invasion of Ukraine completes the process of identity transformation and the formation of the Ukrainian political nation. The events of the war year,

accompanied by the comprehensive de-Russification of public space, accelerated the return of the Ukrainians to their native history, culture, language and symbols, inscribed in a broader European context. Both trends have progressed significantly since gaining independence in 1991. They intensified after the annexation of the Crimea and the subsequent war in Donbas in 2014 when the state clearly defined its memorial policy and initiated a comprehensive Ukrainization of a public life. However, if identity changes covered only a part of society back then, now they consolidate its vast majority, regardless of region, religious affiliation, age and language of daily communication. According to the researcher, the Ukrainians are going through an essential process of mental decolonization, losing faith in the supremacy of Russia and the importance of cultural ties between the two nations, as well as demonstrating civilizational superiority concerning the former hegemon, who turned out to be a brutal and miserable barbarian. However, the Ukrainians are paying the highest price in recent European history in the form of demographic catastrophe, economic ruin, general impoverishment and war trauma among a significant percentage of citizens. At the same time, the heroic struggle for sovereignty means that the citizens of Ukraine no longer perceive it as a second-class country. Criticism and self-irony prevalent before the war were replaced by pride and faith in the high development potential of one's own country (Rogoża, 2023).

The employees of the Centre for Eastern Studies are appropriately restrained in their predictions about the further course of events. Like other Western observers, they unanimously understand that the Kremlin regime has failed in all expectations. In an editorial addressed to readers on the anniversary of the full-scale invasion, the staff of *Komentarze OSW* magazine emphasized that in starting the war, "Putin intended to play a short game of poker, but it soon became the beginning of a long and destructive conflict". According to Polish analysts, the Russians made the classic mistake of underestimating the enemy. In the planning and conduct of military operations, their traditional superiority and underestimation of the Ukrainians were noticeable from the first hours. The Russian military machine faced fierce resistance from the Ukrainian armed forces and society. The massive mobilization of the Ukrainians in defence of independence, freedom and dignity, and at the same time, the absence of significant manifestations of collaboration with the aggressor, only confirmed that the Ukrainian statehood is a stable element on the political map of Europe and the Ukrainian identity is stronger than ever in history. After a year of the Russian aggression, it has become clear, as Polish colleagues claim, that the war will continue, although its intensity may change. They believe that today the prospect of peace talks or any concessions from both sides is unrealistic. The conflict surrounding the future of Ukraine and the new international system remains unresolved. However, the positive is that, as the CES employees emphasize, the dynamics of military activity over the last year prove that Putin has started a war that he will never be able to win (Zespól OSW, 2023).

The Conclusion. As our research showed, the Centre for Eastern Studies researchers closely observed events of the full-scale stage of the Ukrainian-Russian war. At the same time, the field of their expert discussion was not limited only to notorious events of armed conflict, as could be expected given the interest in the topic among the Polish audience. The integrity of the analytical image is complemented by the above-mentioned texts about the socio-economic situation in Ukraine, the Kremlin's policy on the occupied lands, successful efforts to create and increase the anti-Putin coalition, as well as numerous studies of the reaction of Russian society to the actions of its leaders, Kyiv's laborious attempts to obtain Western weapons, the attitude to the events of the leadership and citizens of Belarus, etc. Owing to this, the interested observer

got the opportunity to make a fairly complete and balanced picture of all the key aspects of the existential war. Despite the objectivity of the Polish colleagues, they largely followed the rhetoric of the Ukrainian mass media, placing clear accents when describing the genocidal practices of the Russian regime. This influenced the formation and maintenance of a public opinion favourable to Ukraine in Poland and other European Union countries, where Polish Eastern studies have high academic prestige. As a result, this contributes to the neutralization of Putin's propaganda in the information space of our partners. Owing to these efforts, our country maintains the unwavering support of its allies, despite changes in political cabinets in many countries of the continent. This is an important prerequisite for the fact that the Ukrainians will not only endure but also win in their most crucial war.

Acknowledgement. We express our sincere gratitude to all editorial board members for the consultations provided during the preparation of the article for printing.

Funding. The work was supported by the state funding programme "Resistance to historical policies of state-aggressor RF in the process of de-occupation of the Ukrainian territories" (number of state registration 0123U101598) and "The Russian-Ukrainian War: historical sources, challenges for national security, formation of foundations of memory policy" (number of state registration 0123U100588).

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*The article was received December 30, 2022.
Article recommended for publishing 14/06/2023.*