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RUSSIA AGAINST UKRAINE: RUSSIAN POLITICAL MYTHOLOGY AND THE WAR ON UKRAINIAN IDENTITY

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Welcome address

Dear editor, dear authors and guests, ladies and gentlemen,

it is my great pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, to the presentation of *Russia Against Ukraine: Russian Political Mythology and the War on Ukrainian Identity*, edited by Anton Shekhovtsov. Academy President Christoph Marksches cannot be here tonight and sends his warmest greetings.

My name is Roland Römhildt. I am, inter alia, the Academy's Officer for International Relations and Coordinator of the Young Network TransEurope. Especially through this latter role, I have been in close contact with Ukrainians over the past four and a half years. I still consider myself a beginner, but it has been an intense learning process – one on which I would like to reflect briefly tonight.

When Andreas Umland suggested presenting this book at the Academy, I was immediately enthusiastic. The phrase "timely publication" may be overused, but this book confronts us with something particularly timely: the ideas and ideologies behind this war, the traditions from which they draw, and the question of why so much was visible long before 2022 and nevertheless failed to register with so many of us here.

Let me begin with a picture that has burnt itself into the back of my head for more than twenty-five years. I was nine and a half years old, my sister was not yet seven, and we were watching the news with our parents. I remember this enormous vehicle carrying a Russian strategic missile. It was abstract for a child, but I understood enough to find it deeply unsettling.

On the 21st of April 2000, a new Military Doctrine was adopted by Russia. In the news report, the presenter said, after briefly stating that the Duma had ratified a nuclear test ban:

"At the same time, however, the Security Council adopted a new military doctrine. In it, Russia asserts its right to launch a nuclear first strike once all other means have been exhausted."

Then the report moved on to Chechnya. Aslan Maskhadov, the only ever democratically elected Chechen president, had called for a temporary ceasefire. Moscow rejected it and Putin appeared on screen with the usual message that there would be no negotiating with these "bandits".

Sounds familiar, right?

My sister was so impressed by all this – and we were so frightened – that she made an anti-Putin "canon" out of a large roll of paper at kindergarten. It became a family joke and that image stayed with me, more unconsciously. Since the 24th of February 2022, it has repeatedly resurfaced, and in preparing for tonight I checked whether I had remembered the report correctly. Turns out: mostly yes. At nine and a half, of course, I had understood something much simpler: Russia might use atomic bombs against countries to its west.

Since 2022, the Kremlin has repeatedly threatened with nuclear escalation, while these threats have repeatedly failed to materialise. That does not make the rhetoric irrelevant; on the contrary, its political purpose is to make others imagine the worst and adjust their own actions accordingly. This creates a

peculiar ideological blindness: the question suddenly becomes not what atrocities Russia is committing or why Ukrainians are entitled to defend themselves, but what we must refrain from doing because otherwise Russia might escalate. Parts of the German debate have readily accepted precisely this premise: peace, in this logic, means accommodating the aggressor because the alternative is imagined as nuclear catastrophe.

By the way, 25 years ago today, Putin held his infamous speech in the Bundestag, sheepishly declaring that "Russia is a friendly European country". This was hailed by one radio commentator back then with the words that the Russian president had been so charming and clever that one wanted to kneel down. Turns out: sentences like the one about Europe were ghostwritten by German authors, who projected their own wishes into this speech. The Putin of this speech was never real.

Still, recounting my anecdote, I cannot conclude that I "knew better" from childhood onwards. I am the grandson of people who fled the GDR, and in my family "the East" was generally viewed with a certain suspicion. Such inherited perceptions inevitably colour the way one sees the world. I never quite believed, however, that all the Russian authorities really wanted was peace and partnership and that conflict resulted mainly from misunderstandings or insufficient accommodation by others. 2008 and 2014 reinforced that unease. Yet it still took until 2022 for me really to engage with the countries between Germany and Russia, among them Ukraine.

And that is one reason why I am so pleased that we are presenting this book tonight. Its chapters examine, from very different angles, the long ideological shadow of imperial and colonial ideas and projects in Russia.

Alexey Levinson's *Through the Russian Gaze*, for instance: his subject is not Ukraine itself, but Ukraine as an object of Russian consciousness – an imagined Ukraine increasingly detached from the country in which Ukrainians actually live. Ukraine becomes almost anything except a society whose inhabitants might simply have political preferences and make choices of their own.

Three years ago, Christoph Marksches and I travelled to Lwiw. Among other things, we visited a hospital where people terribly wounded in the war were being treated, rehabilitated and helped back into life at enormous cost and with enormous effort. I remember crossing the hospital courtyard afterwards and thinking: here is a political community in which individual human lives matter, in which they are not simply written off as material for some supposedly greater historical purpose.

That experience has stayed with me because it points to something larger: Ukraine is a country arguing with itself, often fiercely, criticising itself and disagreeing about politics, language, culture and the future – a society of political subjects rather than the object of somebody else's projections. After four and a half years of full-scale war, there is, of course, exhaustion. Christoph Marksches and I will be in Lwiw again in ten days, and I am curious – and somewhat apprehensive – about what we will encounter this time. One thing is sure, however: Ukraine continues to inspire us, and will hopefully do so even more in the future.

In the final chapter, Anton Shekhovtsov writes of Putin's quest for "symbolic immortality": the attempt to correct history and force the present back into an imagined, "grander" past. There is something almost spectral about it – an imperial project returning as a political revenant, refusing to remain past and demanding living people as the price of its imagined immortality.

Perhaps we should therefore take some of the accusations made by the proponents of such undead ideas as compliments. If the ideology of the "Russian World" tells us that the alternative is decadent, individualistic, pluralistic, liberal and unwilling to submit to a single historical truth, then let us make good on those accusations: let us insist that the individual is not raw material for the state, the nation

or history and take seriously the right of societies to argue about their own future and make their own choices.

Let us be exactly the people they warn against!

Before I now leave the lectern, I would like to introduce this evening's moderator.

Gwendolyn Sasse is Director of the Centre for East European and International Studies, ZOIS, in Berlin and Einstein Professor for the Comparative Study of Democracy and Authoritarianism at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Previously, she was Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Oxford, where she remains a Senior Research Fellow at Nuffield College.

Her research focuses on post-communist transformation, democracy and authoritarianism, war and ethnic conflict, migration and protest, with a particular emphasis on Ukraine.

This year, Gwendolyn Sasse was elected as a Member of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities – an election that, I have to say, I was particularly thrilled about. While she has often been our guest before, it is now also, even more literally, *your* Academy, and so it is only fitting that I am now handing over the floor to you.

Once again, a very warm welcome!