

## **Collective image of the future in conditions of military conflict**

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The influence of a long-term military threat on the time perspective and image of the future of civilians is ambivalent: on the one hand, individual orientation towards the future decreases, the planning horizon is shortened, a feeling of unfulfillment and loss of meaning arises (Cohen-Chen et al., 2015; Lazurenko et al., 2023; Ryadinskaya et al., 2023; Nestik, 2023; Kočan, Zupančič, 2023), and on the other hand, the uncertainty of the future is overcome through hope (Brun, 2015), the significance and positive assessment of the collective future increase (Nestik, 2023).

The content of the image of the future constructed by combatants and civilians enduring the hardships of war indicates that its main function is psychological defense. In particular, an analysis of representations about the post-war future reflected in the letters and diaries of British infantrymen during the First World War shows that in 1914-1918, an overly optimistic, embellished peaceful future was contrasted with the depressive frontline present (Mayhew, 2019). The same effects manifested themselves during the Second World War. Thus, A.V. Golubev, examining the images of the future in Soviet society in 1941-1945, notes that in letters and diaries from the war years, as well as in information materials about the state of minds prepared by the NKVD-NKGB, there are arguments that those who survived the war will build their lives in such a way “so that the people can truly live”, that “it will be freer, easier, because you cannot live for so long under the burden of fear and need”, and “whoever remains alive after this war will be forever happy and free” (Golubev, 2021).

Indeed, in the context of a military conflict, the subjective significance of the collective future increases, which is clearly seen from its lexical markers in text corpora. Our analysis of the Russian-language Google Ngrams corpus using the Books Ngram Viewer service (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>) showed that the frequency of use of the phrase “our future” in 1941-1943 was sharply increased,

while the frequency of use of the phrase "my future" does not change during these fateful years for the country (see Fig. 1). In the corpora of texts from other countries involved in World War II, an increase in the frequency of use of the phrase "our future" is also noted (see Fig. 2), but it occurs at the end of the war (the USA and Great Britain, which opened the "second front" in 1944, France, which was liberated in 1944) or immediately after its completion (Germany and Italy, which lost the war). Apparently, the increase in the frequency of mentioning the collective future in texts reflects not only the growing importance of collective destiny, but also a rethinking of group identity, the inclusion of new components in it.

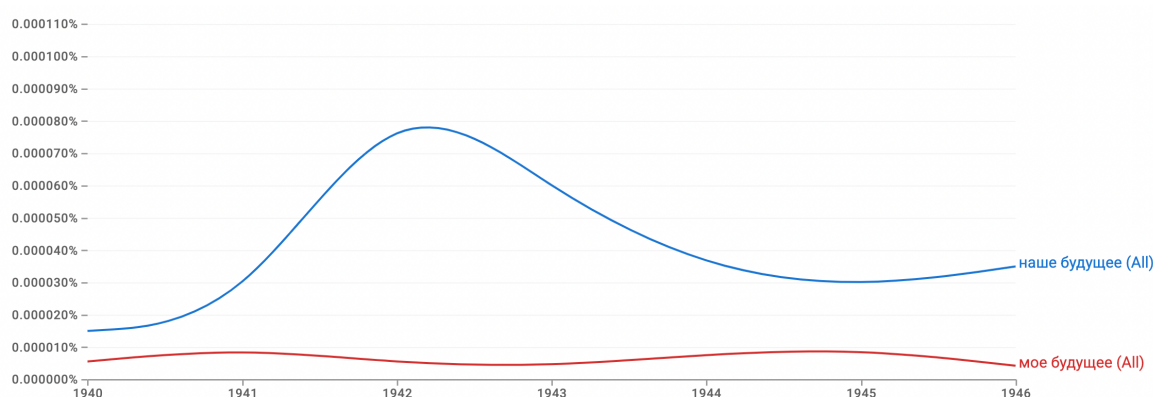


Fig. 1. Dynamics of the frequency of use of the phrases "my future" and "our future" in 1940-1946 (according to data from the Russian-language Google Ngrams corpus).

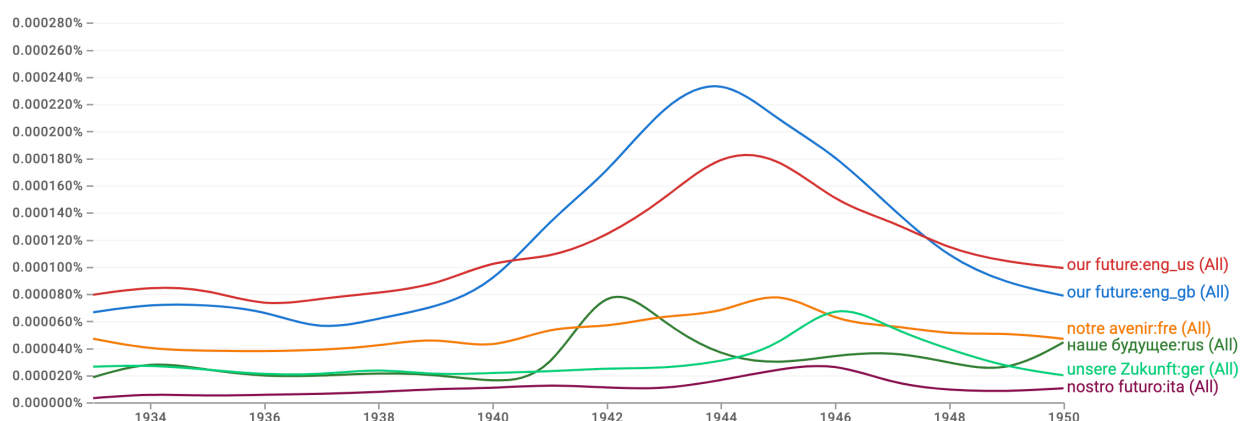


Fig. 2. Dynamics of the frequency of use of the phrase "our future" in 1933-1950 (according to the Russian, German, English, French and Italian Google Ngrams corpora).

The key feature of the collective image of the future in the context of interstate conflict is that it is constructed under the influence of psychological defense mechanisms that mobilize psychological resources for survival and victory, but narrow the range of scenarios under consideration and weaken the ability of the parties to the conflict to predict the long-term consequences of their own and others' actions. This affects all components of the image of the future: intergroup fears intensify, which mobilize joint efforts and cohesion, ideals and dreams begin to be discussed in the public space, supporting not only a positive group identity, but also a sense of group superiority or exclusivity. Finally, expectations, hopes and goals – that is, the components that support planning of behavior in the short and medium term – are constructed depending on the course of the conflict, which in the collective imagination temporarily displaces other social problems and scenarios for the development of events that are not related to the outcome of the confrontation.

Based on the theoretical propositions we put forward, we formulated hypotheses that were then tested in the course of an empirical study. First, we hypothesized that perceived intergroup threat and an ethos of conflict (Bar-Tal et al., 2012; Golynchik, 2020; Nestik, 2023) strengthen civic identity, which in turn increases a positive assessment of the collective future. Second, we hypothesized that perceived intergroup threat and an ethos of conflict increase the importance of one's country's ideal future as a great power. Third, we hypothesized that a positive collective image of the future compensates for the decrease in subjective control caused by perceived out-group threat, that is, social optimism and a positive assessment of one's country's future increase citizens' confidence in their ability to control their lives. According to our fourth hypothesis, perceived intergroup threat increases such mass fears that support citizens' sense of meaningfulness in their lives. Finally, we hypothesized that a positive image of the future supports loyalty to one's group, thereby facilitating the mobilization of collective efforts.

To test the hypotheses, we used data from an online survey conducted by us from June 1 to June 14, 2024, on the Anketolog platform using a quota sample representing the adult population of Russia by age, federal districts and size of the

settlement, while the sample was equalized by gender (N = 2644; 50% - men; 50% - women; after reweighting: 46% - men; 54% - women; from 18 to 90 years old; M age = 44.9; SD = 16.8).

All hypotheses we put forward were confirmed. As shown by the results of the path analysis (chi-square=99.819; df=26; CMIN/DF=3.839;  $p<0.001$ ; TLI=0.983; CFI=0.992; SRMR=0.019; RMSEA=0.033; 90% CI [0.026; 0.040];  $P_{close}=1$ ), the realistic and symbolic threat from Western countries, as well as the ethos of the conflict, increase the severity of civic identity, which in turn makes the most significant contribution to a positive assessment of Russia's future.

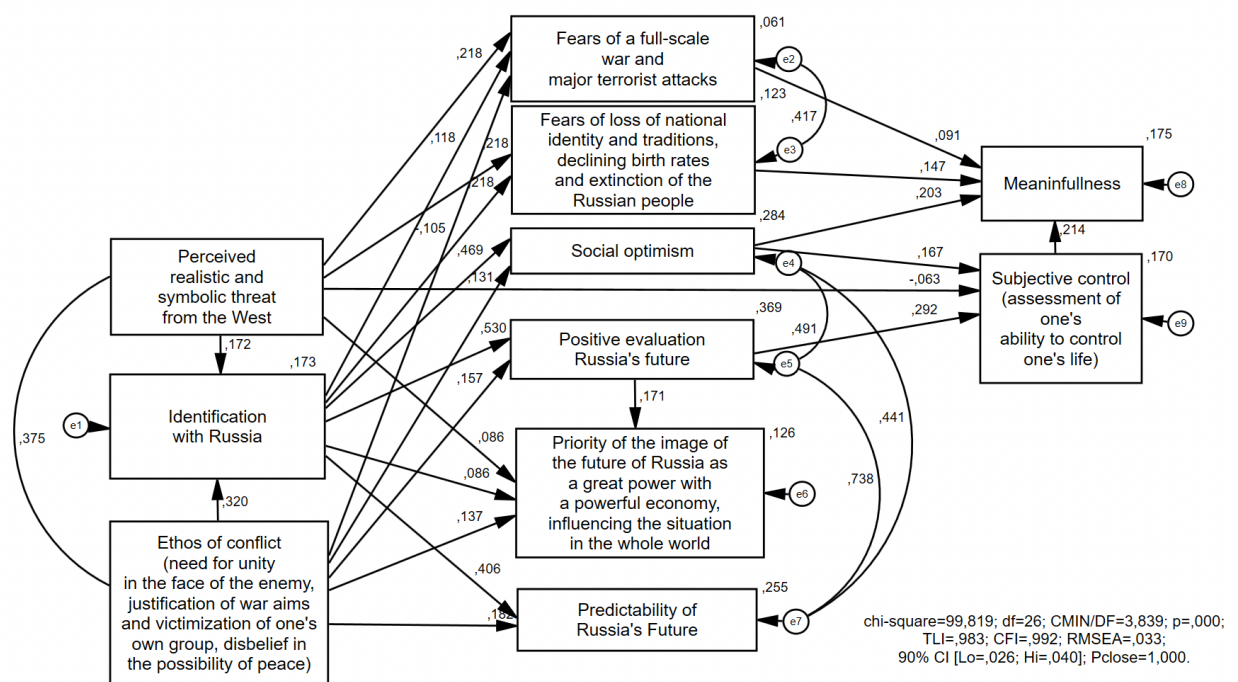


Fig. 3. Path model of predictors of the image of Russia's future in the context of a military conflict (standardized regression weights are given).

The perceived threat to Russian society from Western countries and the ethos of the conflict also increase the significance of the image of Russia's future as a great power. The perceived out-group threat reduces subjective control, while a positive assessment of Russia's future and social optimism increase it. Finally, the perceived threat from Western countries increases mass fears of a major war and loss of

national identity, which in turn support the meaning of life and the belief that it has a purpose.

The second path model confirmed our hypothesis about the relationship between a positive image of the collective future and group loyalty as a moral foundation (chi-square=99.819; df=26; CMIN/DF=3.839;  $p<0.001$ ; TLI=0.983; CFI=0.992; SRMR=0.012; RMSEA=0.033; 90% CI [0.026; 0.040];  $P_{close}=1$ ). The main contribution to loyalty to one's group in a conflict is made by civic identity, a positive assessment of Russia's future, and fears of losing national identity.

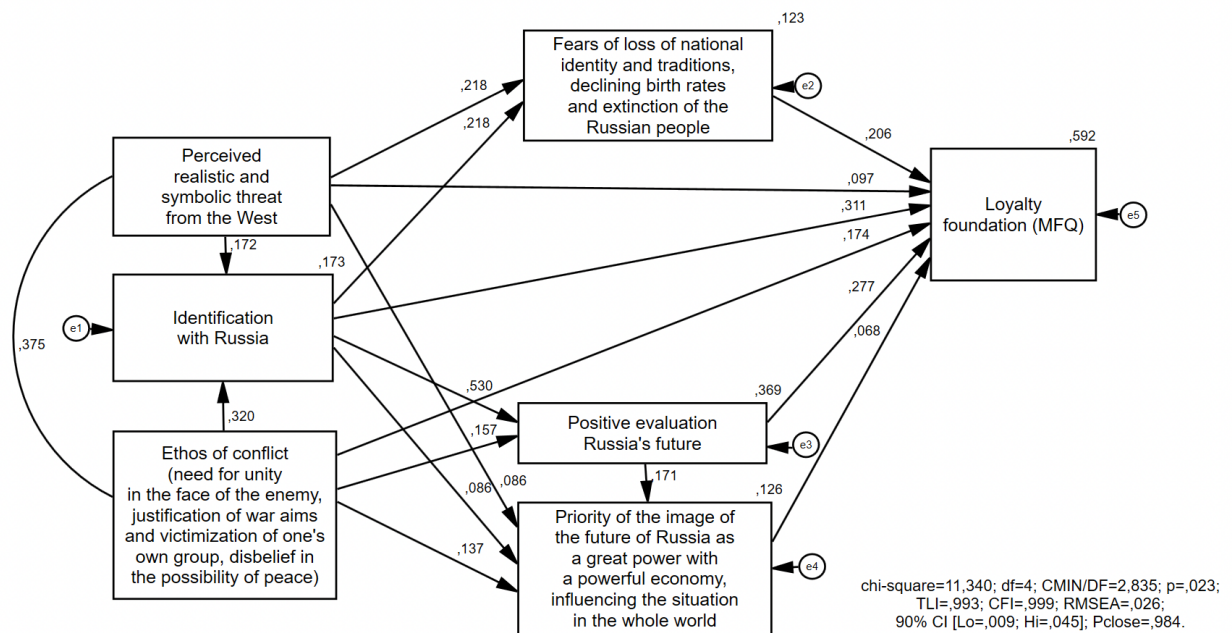


Fig. 4. Path model of predictors of loyalty to one's group (standardized regression weights are provided).

Since the severity of the effects we found may depend on an individual's attitude to a specific military conflict (Nevryuev, Sarieva, 2022), we analyzed the influence of the ethos of the conflict on the image of the future and perceived control among supporters and opponents of the SVO. The former included study participants who would cancel the decision to start the SVO ( $N=751$ ; 45% - men, 55% - women;  $M_v=41.1$ ;  $SD=14.7$ ), and the latter included respondents who would not cancel such a decision ( $N=829$ ; 66% - men, 34% - women;  $M_v=49$ ;  $SD=14.3$ ). Study participants

who chose the answer options "I find it difficult to answer" or "I would not like to answer this question" were excluded from the analysis.

Structural modeling confirmed the presence of a statistically significant relationship between the ethos of the conflict, civic identity, positive image of Russia's future and subjective control in both groups ("opponents" - respondents who would cancel the decision to start the military operation if there was such a chance: chi-square = 1165.099; df = 509; CMIN / DF = 2.289;  $p < 0.001$ ; TLI = 0.950; CFI = 0.958; SRMR = 0.049; RMSEA = 0.041; 90% CI [0.038; 0.045];  $P_{close} = 1$ ; "supporters" - respondents who would not cancel the decision to start the military operation: chi-square = 1240.506; df = 509; CMIN / DF = 2.437;  $p < 0.001$ ; TLI = 0.941; CFI=0.950; SRMR=0.046; RMSEA=0.042; 90% CI [0.039; 0.045];  $P_{close}=1$ ).

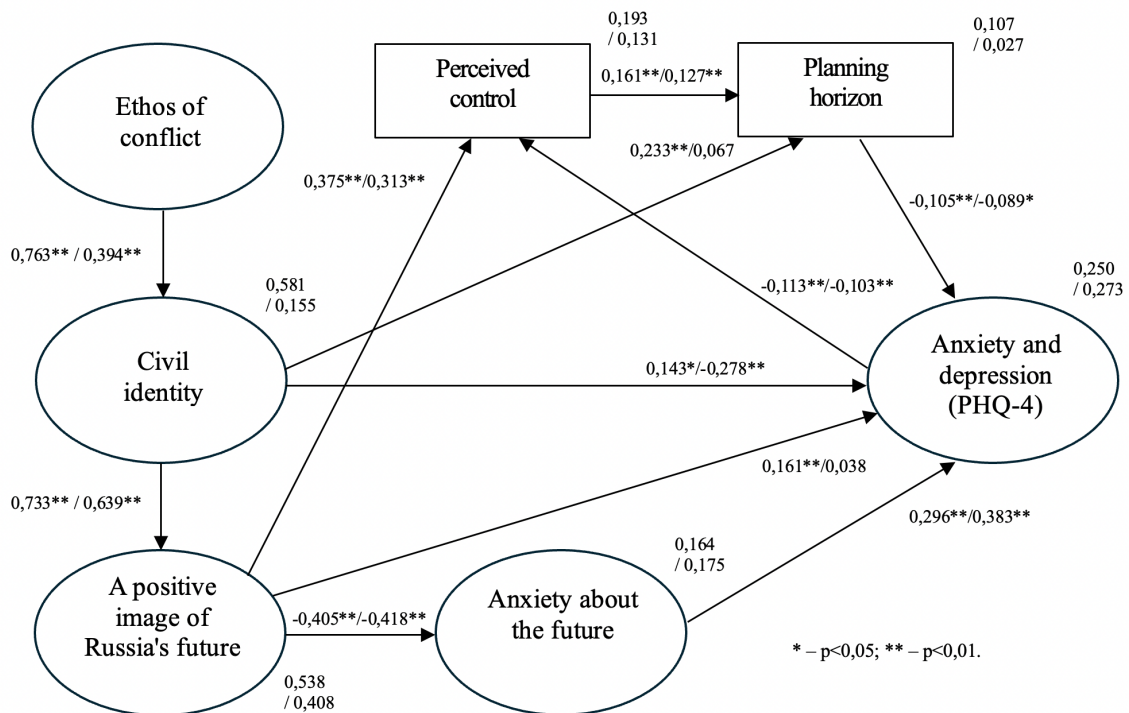


Fig. 5. Graphical display of the results of structural modeling of predictors and effects of a positive image of Russia's future (standardized regression weights and proportions of explained variance (R<sup>2</sup>) are given; residuals and their covariances are not given; the first figure reflects the indicators in the group of opponents of the SVO, and the second - the indicators in the group of supporters).

As can be seen from Fig. 5, a positive assessment of Russia's future reduces the anxiety of respondents in both groups about their own future and increases their assessment of their ability to control their own lives, thus increasing the planning horizon.

Thus, our study showed that in conditions of military conflict, the collective image of the future is influenced by defense mechanisms that support a positive group identity and belief in their ability to control their own lives. The stronger the perceived military threat and the more pronounced the ethos of the conflict - ideas about the world and society that are formed in conditions of a prolonged military conflict (Bar-Tal et al., 2012) - the more positive the citizens see the future of their country and the greater the tendency to choose an ideal future in which it is a powerful state determining the course of world events. Moreover, in combination with social optimism, existential fears of a major war and loss of cultural identity mobilize the psychological resources of the individual, making life more meaningful and increasing determination.