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THE OSTRICH EFFECT AND THE «STRATEGIC» DEFORMATION OF THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES

The article examines the phenomenon of cognitive avoidance of danger in the political thinking of European democracies in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, defined as the «ostrich effect». Based on Michael Lamport Commons's Model of Hierarchical Complexity (MHC), this effect is interpreted as the functioning of political systems at lower levels of cognitive integration, where reactive behavior prevails over strategic reasoning. A comparative analysis of European Union member states was conducted using the criterion of cognitive complexity in decision-making, distinguishing between states of high integration (the Baltic countries, Poland, the Czech Republic), low integration (Germany, France, Italy), and negative adaptation (Hungary, Slovakia). Historical parallels with the appeasement policy of the 1930s reveal the recurrence of denial mechanisms within democratic systems. The study argues that overcoming cognitive inertia requires raising the cognitive complexity of political thinking — through strategic communication, education, media literacy, and leadership capable of guiding societies toward an informed perception of threats. The scientific novelty lies in integrating cognitive psychology with political analysis of European security and adapting the MHC framework to the study of collective behavior in democratic systems.

Keywords: *cognitive inertia, political thinking, European democracies, Model of Hierarchical Complexity, Russian-Ukrainian war, political leadership, strategic communication.*

У статті досліджено феномен когнітивного уникання небезпеки в політичному світогляді європейських демократій у контексті російсько-української війни, визначений як «ефект страуса». На основі Моделі ієрархічної складності М.Л. Коммонса (Model of Hierarchical Complexity, МНС) інтерпретовано цей ефект як прояв функціонування політичних систем на нижчих рівнях когнітивної інтеграції, де реактивна поведінка переважає над стратегічним мисленням. Здійснено порівняльний аналіз окремих держав Європейського Союзу за

критерієм когнітивної складності політичних рішень: виокремлено держави високої інтеграції (Балтійські країни, Польща, Чехія), низької інтеграції (Німеччина, Франція, Італія) та негативної адаптації (Угорщина, Словаччина). Проведено історичні паралелі з політикою умиротворення міжвоєнної доби показують повторюваність механізмів заперечення загроз у демократичних системах. Визначено, що подолання когнітивної інерції можливе лише через підвищення пізнавальної складності політичного мислення — розвиток стратегічної комунікації, освіти, медіаграмотності та лідерства, здатного вести суспільство до усвідомленого сприйняття ризиків. Наукова новизна полягає у поєднанні когнітивно-психологічного підходу на основі теорії Моделі ієрархічної складності М. Л. Коммонса з політичним аналізом європейської безпеки та адаптації цієї Моделі до дослідження колективної поведінки демократичних систем.

Ключові слова: когнітивна інерція, політичне мислення, європейські демократії, Model of Hierarchical Complexity, російсько-українська війна, політичне лідерство, стратегічна комунікація.

Relevance of the study. The Russian-Ukrainian war has become not only a military and geopolitical challenge but also a significant cognitive challenge for European societies. It has called into question not so much the military capability of the West as the ability of Europe's political elites and civil societies to comprehend the threat posed by Russia as systemic, irreversible, and civilizational. Despite numerous statements of solidarity, in most EU countries the war is still perceived as Ukraine's war, rather than a war that determines the security future of the continent itself.

This cognitive gap between reality and its political perception manifests itself in a phenomenon defined in the study as the «ostrich effect» — a behavioral pattern of avoiding recognition of danger. European political elites, dependent on electoral support, are forced to take into account the growing sentiments of war fatigue, economic discontent, and the desire for «normalization» spreading in their societies. This has led to numerous compromise decisions — refusing to supply certain types of weapons to Ukraine, delaying the confiscation of frozen Russian assets, and seeking to maintain trade contacts with Russia in various forms.

The problem. The paradox of modern Europe is that consciously avoiding political decisions and fearing voters leads to cognitive degradation of strategic thinking. What appears to be an obvious necessity from a security perspective — recognizing Russia as an existential threat — is transformed into a problem that is more convenient to postpone in domestic political logic.

The hypothesis is that the «ostrich effect» in EU politics is a manifestation of the cognitive limitations of political systems operating at lower levels of hierarchical complexity.

This phenomenon can be described through the prism of the Model of Hierarchical Complexity (MHC) proposed by Michael L. Commons [7]. MHC allows measuring the cognitive complexity of behavioral and political decisions. According to this model, the higher the level of cognitive organiza-

tion, the more the system is able to integrate conflicting factors, predict consequences, and overcome short-term incentives.

In the context of European policy on the Russian-Ukrainian war, the «ostrich effect» can be interpreted as a manifestation of a low level of cognitive complexity — reactive rather than integrative behavior of the political system. Politicians, seeking to satisfy voters, reduce the level of strategic rationality to situational responses: «how to avoid losses» instead of «how to achieve goals».

In this study, the concept of the «ostrich effect» is used not in its literal or colloquial sense, but as an analytical metaphor denoting a behavioral pattern of avoidance of awareness of threats in political thinking. This pattern reflects the tendency of political actors and societies toward denial, cognitive dissonance, avoidance behavior, motivated reasoning, and psychological distancing in situations that evoke fear or contradict habitual notions of stability.

As M. L. Commons notes, human cognition tends to avoid complex or painful judgments, replacing systematic thinking with intuitive thinking: «When faced with threatening information, people do not process it analytically, but rather seek emotional relief by simplifying or ignoring it» [7]. Philip Tetlock, in his research on political accountability, emphasizes that political elites often demonstrate a «bias toward cognitive comfort» when rational arguments give way to the desire to avoid responsibility: «Political actors are motivated not by accuracy, but by the need to maintain cognitive consistency and social approval» [20]. Jonathan Haidt adds a dimension of moral psychology to this, arguing that people react emotionally first and then rationalize their position: «Intuition comes first, strategic thinking second» [13].

Taken together, these approaches allow us to view the «ostrich effect» as a manifestation of a collective cognitive avoidance mechanism, which becomes particularly noticeable in crisis situations when acknowledging reality requires moral courage and political will.

According to MHC, any form of behavior or thinking can be classified according to its degree of complexity — from the concrete-operational to the abstract-metasytemic level. The higher the level, the greater the subject's ability to integrate conflicting factors, consider events in broader temporal and causal contexts, and anticipate the consequences of their own actions. At lower levels of cognitive complexity, behavior is determined by reactivity, emotional immediacy, and a short time horizon, which is characteristic of political systems that make decisions under the pressure of public sentiment.

In this context, the «ostrich effect» in European politics can be interpreted as a manifestation of the political system functioning at an intermediate level of cognitive complexity — between the concrete-operational and the formal-abstract. Given the electoral risks, European elites often reproduce reactive decision-making models aimed at reducing tension in society rather than strategically addressing the challenge.

The transition to the metasytemic level, in M. L. Commons' terms, would mean a qualitatively different way of thinking — the realization that Ukraine's security is part of Europe's security, and therefore support for Ukraine is not an act of solidarity, but a form of self-preservation of the democratic space. Thus,

MHC allows us to explain why even developed democracies can demonstrate avoidance behavior patterns; they function within a cognitive complexity that does not correspond to the level of historical threat.

The purpose of this article is to explore the mechanisms of this effect in the political decisions of European elites regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war, to identify historical parallels of avoidance of reality, and to outline the conditions for transitioning to a higher level of cognitive integration — a policy capable of recognizing and acting in the face of danger.

Historiography of the issue. Studies of European policy toward Russia after 2014 focus primarily on the crisis of the EU's strategic autonomy and the growing emotional exhaustion of democratic societies. The works of K. Gill and M. Smith [14] and M. Leonard and J. Shapiro [15] emphasize that European political elites often react rather than take strategic initiative, resulting in a lack of a «metapolitical vision» of security. T. Snyder emphasizes that the inability to identify Russia as a revisionist actor was the result of a deep illusion of a peaceful order that formed after 1991 [17].

In turn, research in political psychology [7; 13; 20] and cognitive complexity theory [18; 20] has created an analytical framework for understanding the «ostrich effect» as a manifestation of political avoidance. The application of the hierarchical complexity model to political processes in modern science is rare. Individual attempts [7; 8] demonstrate the potential of this theory as a universal model for measuring levels of complexity in collective thinking and decision-making.

Thus, previous studies consider the cognitive limitations of European democracies but do not combine them with modeling political behavior through MHC. This determines the scientific novelty of this article, which offers an analytical combination of cognitive theory and European political studies in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Presentation of the main material. After 1945, European societies were raised in the paradigm of «eternal peace», which gave rise to a collective inability to think in terms of existential threats. War is seen not as a systemic reality, but as an anomaly that must be isolated. The result is half-hearted decisions, such as Germany's refusal to supply Taurus long-range missiles; delays in deciding on the use of frozen Russian assets; a partial return to trade with Russia through intermediaries (oil and chemical products), etc. Moscow fuels these sentiments by spreading narratives of «war fatigue», «Ukrainians don't want peace», and «sanctions hurt Europe more than Russia», effectively exploiting the same cognitive barriers that exist among European elites themselves.

The situation resembles the psychology of European societies in the interwar period, when fear and fatigue from violence prevailed after World War I. In the 1930s, the British and French political elites, seeking to «preserve peace at any cost», turned a blind eye to Hitler's aggression — from the remilitarization of the Rhine to the annexation of Austria. The policy of appeasement became a classic example of avoiding unpleasant reality in the name of the illusion of stability. British historian A. J. P. Taylor described the atmosphere in interwar Europe as a state of paralyzing fear of a new war, when the desire to preserve

peace at any cost prevailed over the awareness of the real threat [19]. At the political level, this led to the prevalence of emotional rationality when danger was perceived as something abstract or controllable. Political leaders — primarily in Great Britain and France — avoided direct conclusions about the aggressive nature of Nazism, hoping that diplomatic concessions would «appease» the aggressor. Responding to these sentiments, political elites reduced the level of strategic mobilization, demonstrating a typical example of behavioral adaptation to electoral pressure.

Interwar and contemporary Europe share a common cognitive structure of political and security behavior choices — a belief in the possibility of rationalizing the aggressor through dialogue. Just as Nazi Germany was presented in the 1930s as a state that could be «integrated into the system of international relations», Russia has long been viewed as a «partner with whom agreements can be reached». After 2014, this narrative has only partially transformed, leaving echoes in the form of calls for negotiations, compromises, or mutual concessions. These rhetorical practices serve the same function as the appeasement policy of the 1930s — they create a psychological barrier to recognizing the scale of the threat. Russian disinformation policy actively exploits this vulnerability. As in the interwar period, the key consequence of cognitive avoidance is a reduction in public sensitivity to danger. In the 1930s, newspapers rarely reported on the militarization of the Rhine or the annexation of Austria as a threat to Europe. Similarly, today, part of the European media perceives the war as a regional conflict, distant from its own security sphere. This creates a situation where a rational understanding of the threat does not translate into emotional awareness — the very boundary that M. L. Commons' model defines as the transition from the systemic to the metasytemic level of cognitive integration. Similarly, today, fear of war is transforming into a desire not to see its systemic nature, to reduce the problem to the «Ukrainian question», and to distance oneself from responsibility.

The application of a theoretical model allows us to examine how European political elites are attempting to reconcile the cognitively complex task of countering Russian aggression with pragmatic electoral survival. This balance between strategic necessity and voter expectations gives rise to numerous examples of double rhetoric, half-hearted decisions, and contradictory signals.

In February 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced *Zeitenwende* — a «turning point» that was supposed to symbolize a strategic change in German security policy. However, in practice, the governing coalition (SPD, Green Party, FDP) is demonstrating behavior that corresponds to the described model, in which recognition of the threat is combined with caution aimed at maintaining electoral support. Specifically, the refusal to transfer Taurus missiles to Ukraine is an example of avoiding an unpopular move that could provoke internal fears of escalation, while the decision to increase the defense budget is accompanied by rhetoric of «limited responsibility». During the 2023 – 2024 regional elections, the growth in support for the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), which uses anti-war slogans («Peace with Russia», «No war for America»), forced the government to soften its tone on military aid is-

sues [9; 10; 11]. Thus, the fear of losing voters reduces the cognitive complexity of decisions, and strategic logic is subordinated to the logic of political survival.

In turn, French President Emmanuel Macron positions himself as one of the main supporters of «European strategic autonomy». At the same time, his policy demonstrates the inconsistency characteristic of an electoral environment that does not perceive the war as its own. After all, his statements about the «need to avoid humiliating Russia» (2022) and subsequent attempts to establish «channels of dialogue with Moscow» were dictated not so much by geopolitical considerations as by domestic political considerations the fear of losing the support of the centrist electorate ahead of the 2022 parliamentary elections [2; 5]. At that time, social surveys showed that more than 50% of French people were against increasing military aid to Ukraine, and 40% believed that «Europe should seek a compromise with Russia». Therefore, the political elite acts within the framework of a «systemic cognitive compromise», recognizing the threat but at the same time trying to preserve the idea of a «controlled peace».

In Italy, the governments of M. Draghi and G. Meloni have consistently declared their support for Ukraine, but the electoral context imposes obvious limitations. The 2022 elections were marked by economic crisis, rising energy prices, and anti-war rhetoric from some parties (the League, the Five Star Movement). Giorgia Meloni, seeking to maintain support, is forced to balance between Euro-Atlantic commitments and the sentiments of her own electorate, which is dissatisfied with sanctions and aid to Ukraine [12]. It is telling that government comments often use the phrase «support for Ukraine — yes, but without escalating the conflict», which in fact means maintaining the emotional comfort of voters at the expense of strategic clarity.

In contrast to Germany or France, the governments of Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico have turned the «ostrich effect» into an element of political identity. The election campaigns in Budapest (2022) and Bratislava (2023) were openly based on the rhetoric of «protecting peace» and «not getting involved in someone else's war» [1; 6]. This strategy was successful; both leaders used fear of war as an electoral resource, fueling pro-Russian narratives about «Western provocations». In this case, the cognitive model of politics boils down to avoiding confrontation even at the cost of undermining the common European position.

The 2024 European Parliament campaign showed that the topic of the war in Ukraine has become electorally toxic in most EU countries. Populist parties across the spectrum, from right to left, actively use rhetoric about «conflict fatigue», «the need for peace», and «protecting domestic well-being» [16].

An analysis of European Union countries' policies on the Russian-Ukrainian war demonstrates varying levels of cognitive integration of political decisions, allowing for a conditional classification based on the depth of awareness of the threat and the ability to integrate security challenges into a strategic vision for development.

1) States with high cognitive integration. In our opinion, this group includes the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland. They demonstrate the highest level of cognitive maturity in political thinking, which in terms of the Hierarchical Complexity Model corresponds to the metasys-

temic level. The political elites of these states not only recognize the nature of Russian aggression as an existential threat but also institutionally integrate this awareness into national security policy and international communication. Their response to the events of 2022 was swift, strategically coordinated, and communicatively clear, demonstrating their ability to think ahead. Examples include the creation of defense cooperation initiatives (Joint Expeditionary Force, Baltic Defense Cooperation), strengthening information security, and actively supporting Ukraine at the bilateral and international levels.

2) Countries with low cognitive integration. This category includes Germany, France, and Italy, whose policies are characterized by reactive logic typical of the systemic level of cognitive complexity. These states are aware of the strategic danger posed by Russia, but their behavior remains too heavily dependent on domestic political and electoral constraints. Decision-making is often accompanied by internal contradictions and a desire to avoid radical steps that could affect public opinion or economic interests. A characteristic feature is the post-factum reaction, as caution initially dominates, followed by a gradual increase in aid to Ukraine, demonstrating the lag between strategic thinking and the real dynamics of threats. Examples include Berlin's prolonged delay in deciding whether to transfer Leopard 2 tanks or Taurus missiles, Paris's double rhetoric on dialogue with Moscow, and Rome's cautious position on sanctions policy.

3) States of negative adaptation. Hungary and Slovakia represent a model of cognitive regression of the image of Europe's political future, or negative adaptation, which corresponds to the concrete-operational level in M.L. Commons' model. Their political behavior is based on a conscious denial of the systemic nature of the existential threat and on the actual reproduction and promotion of Russian narratives in domestic political discourse. Viktor Orbán's government positions its policy of «neutrality» as «peacekeeping», effectively legitimizing Russian arguments of «non-resistance to evil with violence», i.e., force. Robert Fico demonstrates a similar strategy in Slovakia, using anti-war rhetoric to mobilize voters from impoverished groups of citizens affected by the side effects of Russia's aggression against Europe. Such short-sighted political models of voter mobilization reduce the level of cognitive complexity to emotionally defensive reactions, avoiding analytical assessment of the long-term consequences for regional security.

Comparative typology shows that the European political space functions at different cognitive levels of integration, which directly affects the effectiveness of strategic responses to aggression. Countries with high cognitive integration demonstrate realistic policies and strategic foresight. Countries with low levels of integration operate in a post-factum regulation mode, balancing between internal sentiments and external challenges. Models of negative adaptation create an environment of cognitive inertia that potentially undermines EU unity on security issues.

The problem of cognitive inertia and political avoidance cannot be overcome by institutional means alone. Its nature is cognitive and psychological, and therefore the path to a solution lies in raising the level of collective aware-

ness, in returning to the idea of democracy as a system capable of continuous learning.

Historical experience shows that social fears and passivity can be overcome through communication that combines truth, rationality, and participation. During the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt created a new form of political dialogue in which complex economic processes were explained in simple, human terms. This approach not only restored trust but also raised the level of cognitive participation of citizens in joint decision-making. During World War II, Winston Churchill chose a different but no less important path: honest recognition of danger as a condition for mobilizing the nation. His speeches transformed fear into will and doubt into determination. The contemporary example of Volodymyr Zelenskyy shows that in the era of digital publicity, political communication can combine emotion and rationality, creating new formats for interaction between the state and citizens. Therefore, overcoming public denial of danger requires politicians who are capable of conducting not a monologue of power, but a dialogue of knowledge that transforms society from a passive spectator into a co-creator of a security culture.

European democracies need to restore the educational role of scientists, clergy, cultural figures, and members of democratic political movements, which was once their core function. In the context of hybrid threats and information overload, this role takes on a strategic dimension. It is necessary to develop public education systems on information security, critical thinking, and media literacy, following the example of the Baltic states, which have created powerful educational programs to counter disinformation since 2014. Education is not only a tool for knowledge but also a mechanism for increasing the cognitive complexity of society. In terms of M. L. Commons' model, this is a transition from reactive to systemic thinking and then to metasystemic thinking, when a person is able to integrate conflicting factors rather than deny them.

Contemporary European politics often appeals to concepts such as «preserving peace» or «avoiding escalation». Such rhetoric, although humane in content, fixes society in a state of cognitive denial of the reality of an existential threat. A new language of public policy is needed, based on an awareness of interdependence: Russia's war against Ukraine is not an external conflict but a test of European democracy as a system of values for all social strata of a democratic country.

Instead of a «return to normality», a discourse of «active anticipation» must take hold, in which stability is defined not by calm, but by readiness for action.

Increasing the cognitive complexity of political decisions requires structural support. European institutions should 1. create analytical centers for strategic foresight within governments and parliaments, 2. introduce cognitive risk assessment in security policy (disinformation, radicalization, social apathy), and 3. develop uniform standards for crisis communication that reduce panic and increase trust in democratic institutions. Such steps foster a culture of foresight — the ability to act not only reactively but strategically, integrating complex knowledge into political practice.

In all eras when democracies overcame fear and indifference, the driving force behind change was the recognition of danger as a moral category. From

Roosevelt to Churchill, from the dissident movements of the 20th century to modern Ukraine, victory has been brought about not only by weapons but also by society's ability to face threats without closing its eyes.

Today, this ability is a criterion for the maturity of European democracy. Overcoming this effect means not only a change in policy but also the cultivation of a new type of political consciousness based on knowledge, empathy, and responsibility. Awareness is the path by which democracy learns to see again.

Conclusions. Understanding this, European elites are adapting their political messages, striving to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine while not losing the sympathy of voters. This creates a typical situation of cognitive duality: externally, support for Ukraine is declared a «moral duty», while internally, the narrative is «everything is under control» and «we are not at war».

Thus, the policies of most European countries demonstrate a meta-systemic tension between strategic security logic and electoral survival logic. In terms of the Hierarchical Complexity Model, this means a halt in the development of political thinking at the systemic level, states are aware of the structure of the threat but do not integrate it into their own cognitive model of the world. In other words, Europe sees war but thinks peace. This is precisely what constitutes the modern manifestation of the «ostrich effect» — not a complete denial of danger, but a rationalized avoidance of fully acknowledging it.

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