

Socio-philosophical insight into the role of elites in modern military escalation

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This article focuses on understanding both the nature of the current stage of international tension and security crisis, and their main triggers, the interdependence of all actors of the political process. To this end, the authors of the study consider the role of elites, and, above all, the phenomenon of the cult of the leader as an extreme form of a personalist political regime, which acquires new analytical relevance in the context of mentioned above destructive socio-political practices spread nationally and internationally. The conducted historical and comparative analysis of the preconditions and the institutionalization of the cult of the leader revealed a clear interdependence between the strengthening of the regime of sole power and the decline of the ruling class (political elite), the functions of which are narrowed to the primitive transmission of the leader's will and the constant forced demonstration of their total loyalty and absolute devotion to the leader. Thus, the cult of the leader, sanctioned by such toxic loyalty of the political elite, blocks any manifestations of initiatives dissonant with the leader's will, as well as the autonomy of thinking and subjectivity. As a result, the leader's will acquires the status of an absolute criterion of truth and legitimacy, and his/her decisions and actions are subordinated exclusively to the logic of personalized power, its self-preservation and reproduction regardless state demarcation which opens the way to arbitrariness and justification of any crimes.

Appealing to modern political practices of cults, the authors of the article argue that the loss of subjectivity by the national political elite, its servile nature are among the gravest challenges to international stability and security. The Russian-Ukrainian war vividly illustrates the catastrophic decline of the soft power mightiness and the need for equal use of hard power to control modern growing military trends. Aggressive foreign policy is a natural continuation of unstoppable leader's lawlessness in home affairs and the international order becomes the object of such leader's arbitrariness and encroachments. Thus, the cult of the leader is a separate and extremely dangerous outcome of the pathology of political elites which goes beyond the domestic political dimension and becomes a factor of global instability, growing conflict factor and has to be discussed by Academia.

KEYWORDS

*political elites,
cult of leader,
militarism,
Russian-Ukrainian
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Introduction

Russian-Ukrainian war clearly showed the formality of nowadays "casus belli" when the world order is being more and more often violated by autocrats and prompted us to investigate the reasons for such an unpunished arbitrariness. For better understanding of the contemporary social-political processes push-factors it's worth to address to the roots and follow the progress and derivations of analytical philosophical discourse on the examined issues. Just to avoid "lies between men", as well as prejudice and judgement and to be accurate in analysis and prognosis (*Arendt, 2007*). The approaches to conceptualize the political elites made by V. Pareto, G. Mosca, R. Michels are the most fundamental and at the same time rather controversial ones, causing

continuous socio-philosophical discussions and insights (J. S. Mill, J. Pakulski, N. Piano etc).

We link the global security crisis with the extreme form of the cult of leader, Führer principle (well defined by W. C. Langer, E. A. Rees, G. Gill and others) and destructive transformations of political elites and emphasize that they are serious latent threats to civilizational development, triggers for the arms race, lead to human destructiveness (E. Fromm), increased militarism, hybrid systemic and extra-systemic challenges. In particular, given that the most aggressive Führer principle prevails today in the most densely populated areas, in countries with nuclear arsenals, European countries have to revise methods and ways to suppress aggressive policies at national and supranational levels.



Thus, toxic loyalty of political elites goes beyond the simplified classification of "pathology of political power", and reinforced by the cult of leader at Sino-Asian-Russian-American axis, should cause global concern and comprehensive scholarly attention.

Research methods

In order to determine the grade of stability of elite theories, to establish the regularities of the modern elitogenesis and the influence of the top political establishment on the spread of the cult of the leader these days, we refer to the method of retrospective analysis of classical theories of elitism, their extrapolation to the current world political patterns and connotations. Due to the historical comparative analysis of different countries' cult practices, it has been convincingly verified that strengthening of the individual political supremacy correlates with the decline of elites demonstrating absolute loyalty and undisputable obedience. It facilitates the cult of leader institutionalization with the consequent cancelling of otherness and autonomy of thinking, further despotism and justification of any crimes, military including, in home and foreign policy.

Conducting research from the general to the specific, we substantiate that such key characteristics of modern ruling class as lack of initiative and servility weaken their ability to resist the leader's arbitrariness in all matters, war and peace including. Weak elites strengthen the position of the leader and aren't able to hinder the development of democracy, diplomacy and good-neighborly policy in the interstate relations. Situational analysis and case studies show that countries with an established or anticipated Führer principle are always distinguished by the toxic servility of political elites, with no alternatives to the unlimited power of the political leader, no obstacles to lawlessness and his absolute monopoly on decision-making (in particular, regarding military aggression). These attributes then freely metastasize into foreign policy gradually destabilizing neighboring, regional and world order and security architecture.

Results and Discussion

Well-known is the fact that the founders of the theory of elites (V. Pareto, G. Mosca, R. Michels) denied the possibility of egalitarian and fully democratic societies considering it an illusion and ideological dream. The representative of the Italian school of elitism V. Pareto was especially categorical, he condemned democracy as fraudulent "nonsense" (*Mosca, 1939: 11*) and treated mass political participation with great distrust and caution. In this context, a fragment of the discussion between V. Pareto and the British philosopher J. S. Mill is rather indicative, as the Italian points out the contradiction in Mill's desire to transfer political power to the "greatest number" and the simultaneous defense of "freedom", which is incompatible with the prejudices, feelings and interests of this "greatest number". Awareness of this contradiction, according to Pareto, would have allowed Mill to "predict that freedom, as he imagined it, would gradually decline, since it would contradict the driving motives of the class that was to become the ruling class" (*Pakulski, 2018: 194–195*).

As a result, there emerged a conventional academic idea representing the founders of elitist theory as extremely conservative, anti-democratic political theorists who advocated limiting the participation of the masses in politics. However, according to some modern scholars, elitological hypotheses of V. Pareto, G. Mosca and R. Michels were directed against plutocracy, aimed at

refuting the sense of elections as a manifestation of popular sovereignty promoting democracy. Each of them analyzed various aspects of representative politics to reveal how elections strengthen the dominance of the elite over the majority. Such procedures, in their opinion, ensure neither the interests of the majority nor an adequate limitation of the power of leaders.

V. Pareto emphasized the connection between the ruling and non-ruling elites, thereby demonstrating the dependence of politicians, conditioned by parliamentary elections, on financial and military elite circles.

G. Mosca analyzed in details the use of representative institutions by the ruling minority to expand its access to enrichment and, as a result, to consolidate its power and legitimate it with a "democratic" facade.

Instead, R. Michels studied thoroughly the structure of political parties and came to a well-founded conclusion that the organization must be of the plutocratic nature to be able to promote its political programs and platforms which makes it impossible to have an egalitarian distribution of resources and power (*Pareto, 1935: 7*).

Since the emergence of the theory of elites, the elite-centric understanding of politics and society has undergone noticeable changes and improvements. According to the observations of the Australian sociologist of Polish origin J. Pakulski, the concepts of elites have become more neutral, within which political elites are defined as a network of individuals, small, relatively close-knit and stable groups that have significant decision-making power. In addition, the main provisions of the classical theory of elites were generalized and summed up by the following theses: (1) in all large societies, especially in modern nation-states, power is concentrated at the top of the organizational hierarchy in the hands of elites; (2) in such societies, power is mainly transferred from top to bottom; (3) in all large societies, the main socio-political processes and their consequences, in particular the type of political regime, are determined by the characteristics and actions of the elites. Such a generalization, argues J. Pakulski, allows the theory of elites to get rid of a number of dubious conceptual assumptions and ideological coloring, which increases its persuasiveness (*Pakulski, 2018: 12–13*).

Meanwhile, despite the contemporary researchers' significant attention to the phenomenon of the political elite, the large scope of research problematics concerning various aspects of the elitogenesis, duties and the growth of dysfunctional phenomena, rotation, structure, key characteristics, issues leading to the degradation of the political elite and loss of subjectivity remain out of research interest. Thus, it is obvious that the studies of the issues of the destruction of the political elite caused by the excessive personalization of political power acquire special scientific relevance and practical significance nowadays. This elitological research umbrellas the issues of the influence of cult of leader and its as destructive impact on transformation of the political elite and the issues of world (dis)order caused by both, weak elites and cult practices.

Having disclosed quite relevant to a modern world order elitological postulates we anticipate to link it to the cult of the leader examination and prove the certain interdependence. A characteristic feature of the personalization of political power is the growth of the role and importance of an individual political actor compared to a collective political subject. The extreme manifestation of the personalization of political power is the cult of the leader, which is characteristic mostly of undemocratic

political regimes, although “embryonic cults exist even in relatively open, democratic political systems” (Rees, 2002: 7). For example, during the 2013 electoral campaign in Germany a huge poster depicting in close-up the distinctive gesture of the German Chancellor – the so-called “Merkel diamond” – with the inscription: “Germany is in safe hands” caused a serious public reaction. The opponents accused the ruling party and Merkel herself of creating a “cult of personality”. An SPD official said the poster reflected a “terrible cult of personality”. A German professor O. Niedermayer stressed that Merkel was turning into an icon, commenting on the CDU’s statement that the giant image of hands represented her “as the mother of the nation who takes Germany by the hand and leads it through the crisis” (*The Local*, 2013).

Cult practices are also of a regular practice in the political life of India. A modern Indian historian R. Guha notes that since May 2014, both the ruling party and the government have been captive to the desires and sometimes the whims of one person – Indian Prime Minister N. Modi (*Guha*, 2022). An extraordinary cult of personality created around him is manifested in state and party propaganda, in laudatory eulogies in the press, in the admiration for his reforms by Indian leading businessmen, celebrities and sports stars. In 2020 a judge of the Supreme Court of Justice A. Mishra stated that Modi is a recognized far-sighted leader, a “universal genius” who “thinks globally and acts locally” (*Kostiuk et al.*, 2025). During COVID-19 pandemics vaccinated Indian citizens got certificates with a photograph of the Prime Minister N. Modi. Thus, according to R. Guha, the cult of Modi has led to the weakening, if not the destruction, of five key public institutions designed to prevent the personalization of political power and the growth of authoritarianism (*Guha*, 2022).

Today, most analysts and experts believe that the current US President D. Trump exhibits the traits of a cult leader. In fact, Trump himself has repeatedly admitted this, for example, at one of his campaign rallies, when he stated that he could “stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot someone” without losing the support of voters (*CNN*, 2016).

Most often, the phenomenon of the “cult of the leader” is explained by the leader’s narcissism and megalomania. For example, social psychologist E. Fromm, referring to the person of J. Stalin as an example of

mental and physical sadism,” emphasized his “desire to show people that he has absolute power and control over them...has the power of God over life and death, the power of nature – to create and destroy, to inflict pain and to heal (*Fromm*, 1973: 288).

American professor of psychoanalysis V. Langer in his report “Psychological Analysis of A. Hitler” (1943), which was under the “top secret” stamp for thirty years, emphasized that Hitler believed in his own greatness, he was convinced that Providence had sent him to fulfill a certain mission (*Langer*, 1943).

At the same time, it should be highlighted that the political leader’s appropriate traits don’t characterize him/her as a potential cult leader, they are not the prerequisites for the cult of the leader emergence. The prime requirement for the cult development is loyalty – a distinct way of ruling class (elites) subordination and obedience in relation with a specific person – the leader. Therefore, it is exactly the loyalty of the leader’s political environment catalyzes the cult practices in form of excessive personalization of political power.

In politics, loyalty is often seen as a virtue demonstrating support, commonality of views, solidarity and consolidation. At the same time, loyalty can acquire a socially malignant character, generate negative consequences of the political conduct restriction to the primitive selfish interests and goals level, and contribute to political conformism, the transformation of a political competitor into the enemy, the formation of an atmosphere of distrust and fear. The motives of such loyalty of the political elite to a leader can obviously have different reasons – from mercantile considerations of personal gain, securing their status/position, intragroup competition to sincere ideological support or political sympathy.

The result of the absolute loyalty of the political elite to the leader is the strengthening of his sole power, the institutionalization of a personalist political regime, the specific features of which are the monopolization of decision-making, power-political arbitrariness, and the servility of the political elite. The latter, having fallen into the trap of its own absolute loyalty, in the conditions of a personalist political regime degrades from the level of the “ruling class” to the level of the “serving class”, the functional purpose of which is to legitimize the will of the leader, a means of spreading his cult.

Illustrating above mentioned postulates it’s worth to consider the cult of J. Stalin. The Australian political researcher G. Gill emphasizes that for leading soviet politicians at that time the promotion and glorification of the leader was a major part of their duties. And although this duty was not formally enshrined, such behavior was mandatory for those who tried not to fall into the disfavor of the “great leader” (*Gill*, 2021: 3). As a result, the main principle of the elitogenesis under J. Stalin regime supposed an absolute subservience (loyalty) to the leader.

In the 1950s-1960s the authoritative scholars, R. Aron, D. Bell, S. M. Lipset, E. Shils and some others, articulated the thesis of the “end of ideology” which emphasized that “great ideologies” had lost their mobilization potential, influence on political discourse and the definition of policy. Under such conditions, traditional ideological conflicts and fierce ideological struggle lose all meaning, because the political process is increasingly focused not on achieving a political ideal, a clash of doctrines, ideas, and values, but on solving specific socio-economic problems, which no longer requires strict adherence to so called “ideological purity.”

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist camp, which for decades positioned themselves primarily as an ideological alternative to the West, seemed to convincingly prove the rightness of the proclaimed decline of the “era of great ideologies.” However, the XXI century demonstrates the prematurity of conclusions about the “end of ideology”, providing us with a number of examples of ideologically committed political leaders who consistently use “grand ideological narratives”, appeal to ideological differences, provoking conflicts and wars. A distinctive example of such a leader is a galvanized J. Stalin in modern Russia – a dictator v. putin, whose outlook is formed mainly by pure fascist ideologists I. Ilyin and A. Dugin. Therefore, following J. Stalin’s political establishment subordination model, there was and still is no chance for Russian political elite to be independent and initiative, it is condemned to demonstrate a blind fearful servility not to lose a position or even life. Such loyalty, contrasting with the idea of the common well-being which political elites should strive, loses its moral and ethical justification, ignores social value imperatives and responsibility, and disregards the principles of

justice, freedom, and equality, replacing them with unconditional devotion to the object of loyalty – a war criminal v. putin.

Such loyalty is also an imperative in modern India, where the criterion for appointment to top state positions is loyalty to Prime Minister N. Modi, not competence (Guha, 2022).

The US President D. Trump also values loyalty the most (Kruse, 2018; Sarat, 2025). An American political scientist O. Sarat cites Trump's words said at the beginning of his first presidential term to that time FBI Director D. Comey: "I need loyalty, I expect loyalty". O. Sarat reminds also that once Trump had written: "I value loyalty above all else - more than intelligence, more than determination and more than energy". As well Trump praised attorney R. Cohn for his loyalty, noting: "Just compare that to all the hundreds of 'respectable' guys who build their careers bragging about their uncompromising integrity, but who have absolutely no loyalty" (Sarat, 2025).

Thus, it can be stated that the imperative of absolute loyalty, which dominates in personalist regimes, provokes a destructive transformation of the political elite, its moral and professional devastation. In such a way political elite finally gets distorted, with paralyzed political will, with no confidence and strategic thinking, and with the only value – total loyalty to the leader considering it exclusively as the transmitter of his will, influence and policy. The political elite becomes hostage to a deliberately constructed cult of the leader, whose traditional roles and meanings undergo a dramatic transformation in the context of strengthening the leader's power and establishing a personalist regime.

Another threatening fact is deriving from both, the weak servile elite and an extreme form of cult of leader, so called Führer principle, and comprises the uncontrolled spillover of the personalist regime's policy into an external environment. If to look retrospectively through the list of the most odious cult leaders in the world history we conclude they are all aggressors in national and international scales, even though we are considering only democracies not all political regimes and ruling class there. Nowadays realities insistingly demonstrate stability of this fact. With no doubts the global security crisis can be linked to the extreme form of the cult of leader, mentioned above the Führer principle, and destructive transformations of political elites. We are to emphasize that these are terrific latent threats to civilizational development, real triggers for the arms race, increased militarism, hybrid systemic and extra-systemic challenges, especially given that the most aggressive Führer principle prevails today in the most densely populated areas, in countries with nuclear arsenals and conscious slow but sure shift towards total autocracy. The overview of the XXI century wars and armed conflicts involving democratic countries highlights they are all either the reaction on democracy backslide, human rights violation or terrorism (war in Afghanistan (2001–2021), war in Iraq (2003–2011), Global Coalition war against Islamic State/ Daesh) or have been caused by an intervention into sovereign country (episodes of long-lasting Gaza–Israel conflict, Russian invasion of Georgia, 2008, and Ukraine, 2014). But they all are caused by acts of the cult leaders who has no resistance from totally loyal national elites and influencers and full ignorance to the international law, existing world order and good neighborhood policy. According to the 2025 Global Peace Index (GPI) report, there are over 120 armed conflicts ongoing in the world, the highest number in almost half a century, and the trends

are frightening for humanity (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025).

The Russian-Ukrainian full-scale war of aggression revealed a total vulnerability of seemed integrated and united Europe. It has clearly demonstrated that European countries are going to fail to cope with military menaces with a help of soft power and doubtfully effective economic sanctions. In our recent research focused on the evident disability of existing regional political and security policies to prevent and stop war(s) the alarmistic message concerning an urgent need to "finally dare to amend the norms and adopt changes in security and defense fields to be able to respond aptly to the demands of time" was formulated (Kostiuk, Puhach, 2025). It fully matches with the appeal of the former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission of the European Union J. Borrell that Europe "must learn quickly to speak the language of power", and not only rely on soft power as we used to do" and to abandon the primacy of "creative diplomacy and economic sanctions" to military force when dealing with an aggressor state" (Weiler, 2020).

Conclusion

Political elites are undoubtedly a powerful tool for the development of democracies, adhering to the principle of checks and balances in domestic politics to prevent total control and usurpation of power by one person, usually the leader of state. Without restrictions and stoppers within the state, such a leader rules the formation of political elites canceling the institution of elections, and the main criterion for selection into the ruling class is loyalty to the leader, which means a total lack of initiative, powerlessness and servility of the elites in expanding and maintaining the cult of the leader.

The most extreme form of the cult of the leader with no resistance at the national level grows to extraterritorial dimensions and spills over into the sphere of interstate relations, expecting not to meet resistance there either. Any resistance in international relations is suppressed with the use of force and leads to armed conflicts, wars, annexations, destruction and thousands of deaths. All the bloody aggressors in the history of mankind were cult leaders in their countries assisted by the tacit consent of the intimidated and subdued political elites.

It is factually proven that many modern democracies are headed by the cult leaders. These are either the most densely populated or the largest and most influential countries in the world and certain deviations in democratic principles of governance formulates a significant concern about the hard power factor progress, the arms race and the raise of global conflict index. In this context, the study of the causes of distorted elitogenesis and the degeneration of politically impartial ruling influencers is relevant, urgent and requires the attention of academics and researchers of political processes in the modern world.

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Соціально-філософське осмислення ролі еліт у зростанні мілітаризму

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У статті проведено дослідження природи сучасного етапу міжнародної напруги та безпекової кризи, їх основних тригерів, що впливають із взаємозалежних дій різних суб'єктів політичного процесу. З цією метою авторки звертаються до ролі еліт, і, перш за все, феномену вождизму як крайньої форми персоналістського політичного режиму, що набуває нової аналітичної актуальності за нинішніх умов зростання деструктивних соціально-політичних практик. На підставі історико-порівняльного аналізу процесу формування культу вождя виявлено взаємозв'язок між зміцненням режиму одноосібної влади та занепадом правлячого класу (політичної еліти), представники якого виступають лише в ролі персонажів, які транслиють волю лідера та змушені постійно демонструвати свою абсолютну лояльність і безумовну відданість вождю. Культ вождя, санкціонований політичною елітою, в свою чергу, блокує будь-які прояви активності, які дисонують з волею вождя, автономності мислення та суб'єктності. В результаті воля вождя набуває статусу абсолютного критерію істини та законності, а його рішення та дії підпорядковуються винятково логіці персоналізованої влади, її самозбереження та відтворення незалежно від територіальних обмежень, що відкриває шлях до свавілля та виправдання будь-яких злочинів.

Апелюючи до актуальних культових політичних практик, автори статті стверджують, що втрата національною політичною елітою своєї суб'єктності, її сервільний характер становить один з найбільш серйозних викликів міжнародній стабільності та безпеці. Кейс російсько-української війни яскраво ілюструє катастрофічність зниження дієвості м'якої сили та потребу паритетно застосовувати жорстку силу для контролю над сучасними зростаючими військовими тенденціями. Агресивна зовнішня політика є природним продовженням беззаконня дій лідера у внутрішній політиці, а міжнародний порядок стає об'єктом його посягань. Таким чином, культ лідера є окремим та надзвичайно небезпечним результатом патології розвитку політичних еліт, який виходить за межі внутрішньодержавного виміру та стає конфліктогенним фактором, призводить до глобальної нестабільності, а тому повинен стати предметом обговорення в академічних колах.

Ключові слова: політичні еліти, культ вождя, милітаризм, російсько-українська війна, міжнародна стабільність, безпека.

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