doi: 10.15678/PG.2025.71.1.02

Journal of Public Governance
No. 1(71)/2025
ISSN 2956–6061
e-ISSN 2956-6398

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Sovereignty and Necropolitics in the Ideas of the Reconstruction of the Russian World

Abstract

Objective: This article explores the confrontation between Russia and the Western world as a clash between two philosophical visions of sovereignty and international order.

Research Design & Methods: Using the qualitative approach based on critical discourse analysis, the article examines state propaganda narratives, public opinion data, and theoretical frameworks of necropolitics, biopower, and sovereign decisionism.

Findings: The study reveals that Russia's political model redefines sovereignty through necropolitical governance, promoting imperial ideology and undermining democratic values in Eastern Europe.

Implications / Recommendations: This shift has significant implications for regional governance, weakening democratic institutions and fostering authoritarianism.

Contribution / Value Added: The article provides a theoretical contribution to the understanding of sovereignty and power in post-Soviet space, linking propaganda, political philosophy, and systemic transformation.

Keywords: necropolitics, soft power, sovereign democracy, the Russian world

Article classification: theoretical paper

JEL classification: Y8, Z00

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Introduction

The confrontation between Russia and the Western world taking place since 24 February 2022 in Ukraine represents a clash of two visions of the world order and changes in the philosophical approach to the idea of the sovereignty. The first vision has been universally accepted and applied after World War II, while the second one is its contradiction, an attempt to make the myth of great Russia come true. It is a consequence of the state propaganda which has been spread for decades and which refers to the Soviet axiological and political symbolism and the unity of the Slavic community as a historical obligation to recognise the idea of pan-Slavism, defined as a geopolitical project serving the implementation of Russian imperialist interests. According to the Levada Analytical Centre (2004), an independent Russian research organisation, public approval of state policy has been rising since February 2022: 71% public satisfaction with 27% public dissatisfaction to 85% approval and 12% disapproval in 2024. In consequence, an idea emerges that the narrative strategy of Russia's propaganda forms part of the policy of the systemic reconstruction of the totalitarian regime based on the doctrine of the sovereignty of transgressively modelled necropolitics towards the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine, and the consequences of necropolitics in moving away from democracy in this region, where hostility becomes the way in which the authorities function, and which develops their subjectivity.

Research methodology

This study employs the qualitative research strategy rooted in critical discourse analysis. It focuses on the interpretation of political and media narratives produced by the Russian state, analysed through the theoretical frameworks of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), biopower (Foucault, 2003), and sovereign decisionism (Schmitt, 2005). The method includes the examination of symbolic language, ideological constructs, and state legitimation strategies. Empirical support is drawn from public opinion data collected by the Levada Centre (2024), which serves to illustrate how propaganda reshapes collective subjectivity under necropolitical governance.

Theory development: Sovereignty, violence, and power – the doctrine of necropolitics

Recent events in Central and Eastern Europe have revealed a clash between two approaches to sovereignty. The traditional (classical) one, defined as the sovereignty of a nation-state governed by institutions which strengthen its independence within international standards and the global system of organisation of cooperation (Jacson, 1999, p. 427), and the other, the symptoms of which are seen in Putin's Russia, and which we can find in the theoretical concept of Achille Mbembe (2019), who believes that sovereignty is also the power to decide who can live and who must die. Mbembe's concept of necropolitics refers to the relationship between the subjectivity of a state and death as sources of contemporary sovereignty. It is based on Carl Schmitt's critical approach to the state of emergency and Michel Foucault's political sociology in relation to the concept of sovereignty.

It is worth noting that the concept of a state of emergency is one of the most frequently cited elements of Carl Schmitt's thought (Schmitt, 2005). As Wojciech Engelking said about this German jurist and political theorist:

> The concept of a state of emergency, which Schmitt in 1924 in his legal commentaries on Article 48 of the Constitution of the Weimar Republic defined is often linked with the theory of the state of exception from Political Theology (1922) and Dictatorship (1921). (…) His works deal with the relationship of law and politics to the power of the sovereign, especially in crisis situations that require extraordinary measures when the sovereignty is not based on legal principles, but on decision-making (Engelking, 2019, pp. 17–19).

The sovereign is the one who ultimately decides about the existence or suspension of law, and his power comes into play in a crisis when a "state of exception" is created. Schmitt defines the sovereign as the one who "decides on the state of exception", thus emphasising that politics and law are dynamic and not static (Balakrishnan, 2000). A state of exception is the moment when the law is suspended so that measures can be taken to protect public order. It is the moment when the usual rules of the political game are broken, and the sovereign becomes the one who "decides on the exception". For Schmitt, this moment of decision is the purest manifestation of the sovereign's power (Meier, 1998). Politics is particularly intense in situations that require decisions about a state of exception, because the sovereign must identify the enemy and take measures to eliminate or stop it. As long as the law is in force, sovereignty is invisible. Therefore, the true nature of power is revealed in a state of exception. In the context of Schmitt's theory, the concept of the "state without a name" is also important – a state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*). It refers to moments that are clearly defined neither within normality nor within a state of exception. Such situations can lead to an unprecedented state in which neither the law nor the decision of the sovereign has full regulatory power (Engelking, 2019, p. 21). In these cases, according to Schmitt, new forms of power and decision-making structures must be sought. A state without a name is a situation in which the legal system has no clear instruments to deal with the crisis and sovereignty is called into question. Schmitt argues that such states are an expression of fundamental tensions between law and politics (Rysiewicz, 2010, pp. 78–80). On the one hand, there is the need to uphold the legal order and, on the other, there is the need to overcome this order in the face of extraordinary challenges. For Schmitt, the state of emergency is a central concept for understanding sovereignty. This is the moment when the sovereign's power manifests itself most clearly, when he decides to suspend the law in order to protect the political order. At the same time, Schmitt draws attention to the "states without a name" that emerge where traditional legal mechanisms fail and liberal structures prove inadequate.

Foucault's biopolitics is political rationality which aims to manage human lives and populations: "Biopower is the way biopolitics is implemented in the society and involves profound transformation [mechanisms] of power of classical Western democracies" (Foucault, 2003, p. 137).

Foucault described the positive impact of power on human life as "biopower", attempting to perceive mechanisms which optimise the management of populations through rationing and control. In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault wrote: "Power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimise, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault, 2003, p. 83). At the same time, the philosopher defined a second model of power, the "juridico-discursive" one, describing it as a repressive policy with negative influence: "The effects of which take the form of limitation and non-existence" (Foucault, 2003, p. 83).

When analysing this policy, Foucault states that the actions of decision-makers are in this case aimed at using power only to achieve an intended effect. Therefore, biopolitics is the domain of life

over which power exercises full control in relation to war, where: "To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes. To be sovereign is to exert one's control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power (Foucault, 2003, p. 84).

Foucault (2003) claimed that that biopower presupposes a web of material coercive measures rather than the physical existence of a sovereign. On the other hand, in *Necropolitics*, Mbembe redefined the above theory in relation to war, resistance, or the fight against terrorism. Mbembe inscribed biopolitics in the order of power, making it the highest priority defined by the postulate of the elimination of the enemy (Mbembe, 2003, p. 12). Thus, war as a form of politics has become an instrument of the sovereign in exercising the right to kill or let live. In *Necropolitics* he wrote that "[p]olitics is therefore a death that lives a human life" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 12) and, referring to Georges Bataille's (1988) concept, he added that the French author rooted the concept of death in the sphere of unproductivity: "The domain of sovereignty is life devoid of utility (…) death is a point where destruction, denial and sacrifice become an expense so irreversible that they cannot be treated negatively" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 13).

According to Mbembe, by treating death as the violation of prohibitions, Bataille opens up a discussion about the limits of politics. In his definitions, Mbembe claims that politics stands for the introduction of differences into the game and the creation of axiological dissonance by breaking taboos or standards, and in the case of necropolitics, it introduces the right to kill to the idea of sovereignty.

Following the era of totalitarianism, Europe adopted the traditional view of sovereignty. It seemed that the experiences of the 20th century, as well as the year 1989, would allow the states of Central and Eastern Europe to stabilise national subjectivity in the spirit of normative theories of democracy (Habermas, 1987; Visker, 1992, pp. 15–22). It turned out, however, that this is not facilitated by the historical heritage rich in instances of "imposing collective slavery", manifested in reflections about the instrumental treatment of the neighbours – the Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and the nations of the Baltic states, i.e. the Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians, regarded by Russia as representing a lower level of political opportunities (see: Snyder, 2018, 2020; Davies, 2007). What was typical of the 1990s was a silent, even hostile stance of the Russian elites towards the nations reborn after the Autumn of Nations[1] on the western frontiers of the Soviet Union. This attitude was based on the conviction that:

> The patience in maintaining cultural ties and economic subjugation to Russia of its former spheres of political influence will sooner or later lead to a situation in which the neighbouring countries will understand their mistake (…) and return to Russia like Belarus did (Solzhenitsyn, 1991, p. 7).

The proponents of the restoration of the Russian culture-forming power were supported by the reconstruction of the heavy-handed regime after Vladimir Putin took over in 1999, although it was rather feedback, as Anna Appelbaum said:

> Authoritarianism appeals, simply, to people who cannot tolerate complexity: there is nothing intrinsically "left-wing" or "right-wing" about this instinct at all. It is anti-pluralist. It is suspicious of people with different ideas. It is allergic to fierce debates. Whether those who have it ultimately derive their politics from Marxism or nationalism is irrelevant. It is a frame of mind, not a set of ideas (Appelbaum, 2020, p. 16).

[1] A revolutionary process of transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, which culminated in the autumn of 1989 and led to the fall of communism.

Discussion. From soft power to necropolitics – the reconstruction of the Russian world

Kremlin's necropolitics assumes the reconstruction of a common memory of the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir/Pax Sovietica*), which includes the mechanisms of exclusion and emphasises the weakness of the democratic order. It should be noted, however, that Pan-Slavism, *Russkiy Mir*, and *Pax Sovietica* are not ideologically identical. Putin's narrative is an eclectic fusion of prerevolutionary Slavophilism and Pan-Slavism with Soviet-era symbolism – a synthesis that contradicts earlier Soviet hostility towards nationalism, especially prior to the Great Patriotic War.

The elections in Belarus in 2020 and the bloody conflict in Ukraine which started in 2014, however, revealed an axiological dissonance which brought about a political result opposite to the one expected by the Kremlin. Instead of the theoretical unity of the neighbours, a dissonance emerged which proved axiological polarisation resonating with the centrifugal force in thinking about the universal context of the Slavic region in the sphere of Moscow's influence. Noticing geopolitical cracks, some former political satellites or allies distanced themselves from Russia, adopting a confrontational ideological retort in the face of these ideological resentments – a universalist vision of a paternalistic Europe. This move was successful, but it came too late. Kremlin's necropolitics, forming part of its imperialist attitude towards neighbouring countries, was used to tighten internal politics, and the seizure of Crimea became the catalyst for this process. State media intensified the language of propaganda about the need to defend the Russian minority against threats from Ukrainian nationalists. This rhetoric, relating to the need to protect the rights of the Russian-speaking minority, is one of their favourite methods of putting pressure on the post-Soviet countries (Tismăneanu, 2001, p. 19). However, after aggression in 2022, the doctrine of "a special military operation" was formulated, emphasising the political goal of the "demilitarisation" of Ukraine due to the need to protect the Russian-speaking population in Donetsk People's Republic and in Luhansk People's Republic, and to ensure Russia's national security. According to the Levada Centre:

> The rare respondents in Russia who oppose Kremlin's actions motivate their attitude by the fact that violence and death are unacceptable. The dominant opinion among the respondents supporting the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, however, is that Russia has launched "a special operation" to protect the "Russian-speaking population", "civilians" (43%), to "prevent an attack on Russia" (25%), "to get rid of nationalists", "to restore order" (21%) (Levada, 2024).

For years, the Kremlin media have been dominated by rhetoric promoting such notions as "demilitarisation", "denationalisation", and "denazification" – in reference to the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945). It is worth emphasising that nearly three-quarters of the population consider the defeat of the Nazis as the most important Soviet achievement during World War II (see: Davies, 2007). The concept of denazification related to this victory is the founding myth of Putin's political and legal doctrine. After 24 February 2022, it was strengthened, for example, by introducing into the curricula lessons on "a special military operation" in Ukraine against the fascist nationalist regime in Kiev. The media were also forbidden to use the terms "war" and "intervention", and in March this year, the penal code was amended by introducing a provision on sanctions for disseminating information about the Russian army other than from official sources (freedomhouse.org, 2023, D1)[2].

[2] In June 2022, the Russian Duma passed a law labelling anyone "under foreign influence" or receiving foreign support as a foreign agent. The federal media agency, Roskomnadzor, can block websites. As Russia's

For this reason, the few independent media such as the radio station Echo of Moscow, the Dozhd (a.k.a. TV Rain) independent Russian television channel, and *Novaya Gazeta*, managed by last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner Dmitry Muratov, have suspended their operations. The authorities have blocked access to Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

The propaganda language of denazification and denationalisation, which was used in the fight against Nazism, created for political use, has also become an element of Russian propaganda against some NATO countries, especially the former Eastern Bloc countries (Tismăneanu, 2001). The use of the term "nationalism" requires clarification, because in this context the source comes from the times of communism. In her analysis of linguistic practice, Tatiana Argounova-Low (2007) indicates that the term was used for the purpose of ideological manipulation, as a tool of coercion and control in the fight against "enemies of the people" (of the communist system). The accusation of "nationalism" included indicating opponents of the Soviet regime, dissidents, and even ordinary people who used their mother tongue in everyday life instead of the "international" language, i.e. Russian. Therefore, today, as Low said: "Ordinary obedient (post) Soviet people form part of the Russian civilization while subversive ones or 'nationalists' who do not recognise this continuity are referred to as the enemies" (Argonova-Low, 2007, p. 31). These premises constitute the pillars of the consistently developed Russian *soft power*. Its aim is to maintain or change the position from pro-European to pro-Kremlin, while at the same time strengthening the president's position. In March 2022, 83% of the citizens declared their confidence in the Russian leader, while in September 2024 – 87% (Levada, 2024). The support for the actions of the Russian armed forces also remains at a high level. Two-thirds of the respondents still hold the United States and NATO responsible for what is happening in Ukraine, and their conviction has grown over the year. Russia's military actions in Ukraine mainly cause Russians to be proud of Russia (48%) or fear it (33%); these feelings have prevailed among the respondents since the beginning of the conflict. Every third respondent believes that Russia's use of nuclear weapons during the conflict may be justified (Levada, 2024). Moreover, the Kremlin not only ruthlessly enforces loyalty from the president's immediate circle, but also uses the sanctions imposed by the West for propaganda purposes to strengthen anti-European attitudes and, consequently, to totalitarise Russia's systemic model.

Research on cultural issues treated as *symbolic capital* in political science was intensified by the Western world's fight against terrorism. Soft power has become a subject of analyses equivalent to the approach to the "economisation" of politics, which has been present for decades and is related to the performance of national economies in global competition. The term *soft power* was coined by Joseph S. Nye in the 1990s. In his definition, it is the relationship between culture and politics as an element of attractiveness in building the power of attraction. Ney wrote: "The soft power is the ability to achieve goals through attractiveness, not through compulsion or payment. Soft power results from the uniqueness of culture, political ideas and state policy" (Ney, 2004, p. 10).

The Kremlin's soft power is defined by necropolitics as culture-forming rooting in the heritage of the USSR, strengthened by the dogmatics of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is said that this concept has two dimensions: first, territorially, its impact covers all canonical territories where

war against Ukraine began, Roskomnadzor blocked 175 domestic and hundreds of foreign-based websites. New laws require social networks to remove "illegal" contents as well as fine websites that fail to comply, and impose prison sentences for online "libel." Criminal code revisions were introduced to punish the spread of "false news" about the Russian military with up to 15 years in prison (see: Freedom House, n.d.).

the Russian Orthodox Church has a dominant position, and second, symptomatically, anyone who is loyal to the language and traditions of the Russian culture can belong to it (Gatis, 2009, p. 37).

These are cumulative criteria, and failure to meet any of them becomes a determinant for the concept of "the enemy". Russia's soft power, built on the doctrine of necropolitics, aims to recreate Moscow's imperial influence, which has its source in the post-Soviet historical politics (Tismăneanu, 1998).

In recent decades, due to the resurgence of nationalisms, *historical politics* has become as popular a subject of research as soft power. This term, interpreted through the prism of political science, refers to the practice of using history to form specific views and attitudes consistent with the worldview of decision-makers or political doctrines recognised as right in specific countries at a given time, often becoming a knowledge surrogate devoid of any features of objectivity. Russian historian and expert in Slavic studies Alexander Lipatov defined it as follows:

> The same historical events get lit up from various perspectives which results in different conclusions being drawn simultaneously for each successive national present. Hence, also within each national culture, in subsequent reinterpretations of their own history. Each of them is used to draw new, currently needed conclusions to shape new patterns for the next contemporariness. (…) The practice of building up history to meet political needs, including reasons of state, political regime, party propaganda or foreign policy makes use of the Latin expression "*Historia est magistra vitae*". However, manipulated awareness has lower power of critical thinking and the broader perspective that is replaced by the spectrum of politics. (…) In this way, contemporary "historical politics" precludes drawing lessons from history, which, according to the wisdom of ancient ancestors of today's Europeanism, is to be *magistra* – Latin for teacher (Lipatov, 2000, p. 247).

Historical politics, which refers to stereotypes, takes societies into a blind alley of prejudices and past wrongs. It affects a change in social perception whenever the power that brings it to life changes. In the rhetoric of the Putin era, this policy prompted the rehabilitation of Soviet totalitarianism by interpreting the introduction of further restrictions on civil rights, media freedom, and democratic institutions, fusing social awareness with the goals of necropolitics. By rebuilding the system with historical politics, the Kremlin feeds the society with fear, causing a state of uncertainty among Russians and introducing a sense of danger which they face in the neighbouring countries. Proving it was the speech given by the Russian president at the stadium in Luzhniki on 18 March 2022 to about 90,000 people. Putin, quoting the Holy Scriptures, emphasised the "liberation" mission of the Russian army. The concert was entitled "The World Without Nazism" (Holodomor Museum, 2024). The Kremlin's attempts to implement historical politics to rebuild the myth of the "common past" are strengthened by diplomatic pressure where opposing capitals are threatened with responsibility for "falsifying history" (Wójcicki, Kowalska & Lelonek, 2017). The language of the political tools in this regard is the so-called *representational force*, which can be defined as a form of persuasion affecting external entities through the narrative representation of the speaker's reality. The representative power typically displays the threat of implementing a plan of a radical limitation of the possibility of presenting its own narrative by the subject it is trying to control (Mattern, 2005, p. 586). Russian policy in this regard expects the neighbouring countries to recognise the official interpretation of their past, otherwise they are said to have hostile intentions. This explains, among other things, why Moscow treats "Ukrainian independence" as a threat to its existence (Lytvynenko, 2012, pp. 1–6). Unfavourable attitudes towards a free Ukraine have been confirmed by research done by Lilia Shevtsova, an expert in Kremlinology,

according to which independent Ukraine has grown, in the perception of Russians, to stand for the end of the Soviet empire. This process implied the transformation of Russia itself into one of the post-Soviet countries. Unfortunately, the Russians have not managed to extricate themselves from this historical condition to this day. For the Russian leaders, the preservation of their former sphere of influence is the basis for staying in power. Ukraine plays a key role here. Russian traditionalists continue to call Ukraine "the cradle of Russian statehood" and treat it as a part of the Russian world. As early as 2008, Shevtsova emphasised that:

> Nevertheless, these foreign policy and geopolitical drivers are of secondary importance, because they arise from deeper systemic causes. They are but symptoms of the determination of Russia's ruling class to restore the traditional model of the Russian state: a state that cannot exist and maintain itself without spheres of influence, macho posturing and the search for an enemy. Such a state, based on highly centralized and personalized power with strong elements of coercion, can exist only as a besieged fortress. For this state's authorities, the aspirations of Russia's former 'little brothers' to seek NATO membership and the West's protection pose an existential threat. When it comes to Ukraine, still seen by the Kremlin as part of a "Greater Russia", the Russian elite has even more trouble digesting that country's turn towards the West (Shevtsova, 2008, p. 2).

The opponents of Ukrainian freedom point to the theories of Pan-Slavism and the concept referring to the geopolitical territory of Central and Eastern Europe as a buffer zone present in all Russian course books, which has not been refuted by European historians. According to these people, this indicates the approval of Western European science for the necropolitical law of Russian domination in this region. It is dangerous, because the project of democratising post-Soviet Russia turned to nothing when Putin came to power in 1999. The Kremlin chose the concept of necropolitics, sending the international community a signal that Russia would not give up restoring its sphere of influence in its bid to build a multipolar world order.

The establishment of the language and the priorities of a "sovereign" democracy occurred after Putin had taken over[3]. In terms of the political system, the term "sovereign democracy" emphasised the features that distinguish a political regime represented by the post-Soviet countries from the classical model of Western democracy. This regime typically displays the norms of social life and internal standards of governance that have little to do with Western liberal democracy. Established authoritarianism used mechanisms to restrict political and civil rights as well as human rights, to exert domination over the mass media sector, and to impose centralised filtering of the NGO sector. In the economic dimension, the political system was strengthened by an oligarchic network of influences, while the sphere of axiology was modelled by soft power and historical politics, which serve to petrify the Soviet model of power. The implementation of sovereign democracy is confirmed by the doctrine of necropolitics, corresponding to the political goals of the Russian government. With regard to Russia, necropolitics in the internal dimension camouflaged a regime that was gradually transforming into a totalitarian model, and which, under the cover of systemic structures imitating democratic institutions, was actually moving away from them. The concept of sovereign democracy in relations with neighbouring countries adopted the priority that the core of the system (Russia) is sovereign, while the position of the neighbouring countries is peripheral

[3] Doctrinally, the concept of "sovereign democracy" was established in 2005, when a debate was initiated on Russia's national priorities in reference to Putin's message in which he stated that "Russia's right to be a sovereign state should be strengthened, and the scope of freedom and democracy should be independently defined for itself". See: Mäkinen, 2011, pp. 143–165; Bowring, 2013.

and gradually more and more dependent on the Kremlin. In terms of political science, sovereign democracy adjusted the state regime to the political culture of the post-Soviet society, becoming an attribute of Putin's political reality. The common feature is so-called stability, which can be defined as extending and consolidating Russian political models referring to axiological and political Soviet symbolism, as well as international confrontation.

Conclusions

The history of the Putin era in Russia has proven that the power that shapes the state regime on the basis of the necropolitics relativises the axiological justification for the relationship between life and death in the processes of population management. At the same time, it rebuilds the totalitarian system in the systemic dimension, and ideologically it releases the formation postulates based on internal coercion and external terror through the symbolism of the profanation of the life of the "enemy". Pointing to the "enemy" leads to the affective tone that dominates the collective psyche, exacerbating antagonisms and evoking fear-inducing visions of societal and inter-state reactions. Studying the societies of post-Soviet countries, Stephen Shulman (2004) observed a parallel relationship between cultural and political identities. He pointed to a dichotomous division between people who are close to the Eastern Slavic identity and those who construct it on the basis of diversity and ethnicity. The first group believes in the similarity of their own national culture to the Russian culture; they are not ready to support democratic processes. In the second group, the native culture is seen as different from the Russian tradition. People from this group support democratic processes in their countries (Shulman, 2004). Shulman's analysis provides further confirmation of why nationalists in all neighbouring countries are seen by the Kremlin as "enemies" of the Russian world and sovereign democracy. On the other hand, the polarising attitude of the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe is used by the Kremlin's social engineering to implement the doctrine of necropolitics, which facilitates the reconstruction of Soviet models of power in a totalitarian manner in conjunction with the postulate of restoring Russia's sphere of influence.

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Funding
This research received no external funding.
Research Ethics Committee
Not applicable.
Conflicts of Interest
The author declare no conflict of interest.
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