

Weapons of mass deception Russian television propaganda in wartime

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Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not being delivered solely along military lines but also along information lines. The Kremlin's main weapon in this information battle is its elaborate propaganda apparatus which Vladimir Putin's regime is using to gain and maintain the support of millions of Russians, to justify the war and to provide explanations for the persecution and genocide of Ukrainians. The most important means of spreading war propaganda within Russia is state television, which reaches a large portion of the population and has a decisive influence on their views. In wartime, the Kremlin's propaganda has become total – the message communicated by the government-controlled media has been fully focused on the war and coordinated with the message endorsed by the state administration and major institutions such as the military and the Russian Orthodox Church. In Russia, the government-controlled media has been granted a monopoly on reporting on the events in Ukraine. When the invasion began, the few independent news outlets then operating in Russia were censored and either closed down or saw their operation in Russia suspended. The new restrictive regulations resulted in the freedom of expression on the Internet being limited. So far, using a variety of propaganda techniques and methods, the Kremlin has succeeded in achieving the goals it had set for propaganda activities carried out inside Russia. However, due to the absence of undisputed successes on the battlefield, combined with the growing number of killed and wounded Russian soldiers, along with the economic problems resulting from sanctions (which are having an adverse effect on society's standard of living), the propaganda machine is now facing a key challenge. It involves maintaining society's support for the government and acceptance of the war. The dictatorship's socio-political stability in Russia will depend on how effective this propaganda proves to be.

The main instruments, organisational aspects and funding of propaganda

State television is Russian propaganda's main tool and the principal source of information for more than 60% of Russians, mainly elderly people and non-urban residents.¹ The most watched

¹ 'Российский медиаландшафт – 2021', Левада Центр, 5 August 2021, levada.ru.



TV channels² Rossiya 1 and Rossiya 24, owned by the VGTRK holding (Russia's main radio and TV broadcaster), as well as the government-controlled Pervyy Kanal channel and NTV channel owned by the Gazprom Media company, are of particular importance when it comes to shaping public opinion. When the war with Ukraine began, the main channels modified their broadcast programming – the broadcasting of entertainment content and series was reduced and the duration of news and current affairs programmes was extended. Rossiya channels increased the duration of those programmes which serve to spread the main points of the Kremlin's propaganda message and are hosted by major Russian TV presenters. The duration of several shows was increased, including the "Vesti Nedeli" ("News of the Week")³ TV show which presents a weekly summary of current events with the commentary by the programme's host Dmitri Kiselyov – the head of the government-controlled Rossiya Segodnya news agency; the "60 Minut" ("60 Minutes") TV debate show hosted by Olga Skabeyeva and Yevgeni Popov (a married couple) aired twice daily on weekdays; and the "Vecher s Vadimirom Soloviovym" ("Evening with Vladimir Solovyov") socio-political talk show aired daily. Each episode of these shows can even be up to three hours long.

The guests invited to comment on the current situation include politicians associated with the Kremlin, Russian experts and academics, as well as representatives of other

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countries acting as so-called 'career foreigners' who most often embody a set of popular clichés regarding a specific nationality. This selection of participants is intended to create the appearance of pluralism and discussion objectivity with opinions of different sides being taken into account. The main principle of these programmes is that statements should be formulated in line with the Kremlin's narrative and that criticism of President Vladimir Putin is forbidden. Moderate criticism of the government or individual politicians is allowed under certain circumstances. In line with the above-mentioned principles, extremist, xenophobic and pseudo-scientific views are frequently presented in these programmes in order to broaden the scope of discussion and to divert attention from Russia's genuine problems. One typical feature of these debates is the high level of verbal aggression on the part of the speakers, who frequently shout their interlocutors down. There have also been instances of physical violence between participants during live shows.

In line with the decision of the federal service for supervision of the mass media Roskomnadzor, in its reports on the war in Ukraine, state television has exclusively relied on government-controlled sources of information.⁴ The most important sources include press releases published by the Ministry of Defence and statements by government representatives – President Vladimir Putin and his press secretary Dmitry Peskov in particular – and these are viewed as guidelines on the interpretation of the events. It should be noted that these statements not only shape propaganda, but also are an active element of it since they are a primary source of disinformation. The propaganda narrative is also backed by Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who has expressed his support for Russia's aggression against Ukraine and approved it as a religious conflict.

² According to the 2021 Mediascope ranking, Russia's most watched TV channels are Rossiya 1, Pervyy Kanal and NTV. 'Как изменились рейтинги десяти крупнейших телеканалов за 2021 год', AdIndex, 10 January 2022, adindex.ru.

³ According to TV audience ratings compiled by Mediascope in the first weeks of the war the "Vesti Nedeli" programme hosted by Dmitri Kiselyov were at the top of the list of Russia's most popular TV shows, and the popularity of the other two TV debate shows increased, which ranked them high on this list as well. 'Рейтинги', Mediascope, mediascope.net.

⁴ 'Новости Роскомнадзора', Роскомнадзор, 24 February 2022, rkn.gov.ru.

The Russian propaganda machine receives lavish funding from the Kremlin, and recent years have seen an increase in outlays on government-controlled media.

” **Russian propaganda motives involving the fight against fascism and the need to defend Russia from it are combined in the claim that it is Russians who are the victims of the war with the West.**

In 2022, a total of more than 115 billion roubles,⁵ or around US\$ 1.5 billion, from the state budget was earmarked for their operation. According to data compiled by the Ministry of Finance, in Q1 2022, real spending from the federal budget on state media increased by almost 200% compared with Q1 2021.⁶ While these sums are not the only source of funding for state television, it is difficult to determine the total extent of this funding and the channels through which it is offered due to the fact that media entities are exempt from the requirement to publish their financial statements. The amount of funding offered to Kremlin-controlled television can be guessed at judging by the huge assets amassed by its main propagandists – for example, according to media reports, Vladimir Solovyov owns three luxury villas in Italy. The estimated value of one of them, situated on Lake Como, is 8 million euros.⁷ Reports published by independent media outlets suggest that guests appearing on their TV debate shows also receive large payouts.

The propaganda’s main points and purposes

A few weeks before the invasion, the media began to increase its coverage of Russia’s relations with Ukraine and its language became more aggressive and virulent towards Ukraine and the West. Its aim was to prepare the Russian public for the planned attack. However, until the last moment, the media continued to spread the conviction that Russia was not seeking escalation and would not be the first to attack. Once the invasion began, television coverage began to focus on the war and to rely on several key messages. The first such message was that Russia was conducting a “special military operation” in Ukraine and the use of words such as “war” and “invasion” in the context of Ukraine was penalised. Another propaganda message attempted to persuade the public that Russia’s goal was to defend the Russian-speaking Donbas residents, who have allegedly been persecuted over the last eight years as a result of “genocide” unleashed by the government in Kyiv. According to yet another propaganda message, the West is Russia’s real enemy and is responsible for the escalation of the situation in Ukraine. The West is understood as NATO, led by the US, and is accused of attempting to make Russia bleed out and to bring about its demise, away from its own borders. According to the propaganda narrative, Russia seeks to break free from the influence of the West which treats the “global superpower” as a colony. This line of reasoning includes elements relating to the war of civilisations and a religious war in which Russia is presented as a defender of Christian values and an opponent of the “corrupt” West. The West’s alleged goal is to destroy the unity of the Russian nation which – as viewed by the Kremlin – also includes the Ukrainian nation.⁸ Apart from that, the official goals of the aggression include the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine which, in the Kremlin’s view, has seen a rebirth of fascism, (at the same time media emphasise that it was Russia who fought fascism during the Second World War). Due to the use of this historical parallel, Russia’s fight against Ukraine is presented as a continuation of the mission of Russians’ forebears, and as an existential fight against absolute evil.⁹ The Ukrainian state is presented as

⁵ *О федеральном бюджете на 2022 год и на плановый период 2023 и 2024 годов*, Министерство финансов Российской Федерации, p. 49, minfin.gov.ru.

⁶ *Экономическая Экспертная Группа, Обзор Экономических Показателей, EEG*, 18 April 2022, p. 20, eeg.ru.

⁷ *The villa was confiscated due to EU sanctions being imposed on Solovyov. ‘В Италии заявили об аресте виллы Соловьева на озере Комо’*, ПБК, 5 March 2022, rbc.ru.

⁸ According to the Kremlin, the so-called triune Russian nation includes Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians.

⁹ For more see J. Rogoża, M. Domańska, *Forward, into the past! Russia’s politics of memory in the service of ‘eternal’ authoritarianism*, OSW, Warsaw 2021, osw.waw.pl.

a historical anomaly, a failed state stripped of the right to exist, a “puppet of the West”, and Ukrainians are sometimes even referred to as “servants of Satan”. The key message is that, by launching the “operation”, Moscow pre-empted Ukraine’s attack on the Donbas, and that the Ukrainian government was involved in preparing a major war with Russia, developing biological weapons under the aegis of the US and seeking to rebuild their nuclear arsenal for this purpose. Therefore, the war is described as defensive and – as such – morally justified. The motive of the fight against fascism and the need to defend Russia against it are combined in the claim that it is Russians who are victims of the war with the West – they are the “modern-day Jews”. Moreover, Russophobia, which is being inflated by the Russian media, is compared to the Holocaust.

A certain evolution of the propaganda narrative is evident. In the first weeks of the war, a clear distinction was made between those individuals who were viewed as

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enemies in Ukraine (Russia claimed that the regime in Kyiv deserved to be overthrown) and the civilian population, which was considered culturally and linguistically close to Russia. The latter were expected to sympathise with Moscow and to wait for “liberation”.¹⁰ This is why the operation was presented as a series of activities performed “with surgical precision” so as to avoid putting innocent civilians at risk. As the fighting continued and failed to deliver Russia the expected quick victory, the prevailing message was that the entire population of Ukraine should be denazified, including by using the most brutal methods. Experts and journalists appearing on TV shows began to directly speak about the need to physically eliminate the “Nazis”, to “evacuate” selected civilians deep into Russia¹¹ and claimed that no peace agreement with the “fascist” government in Kyiv was possible. In this context, a statement by Margarita Simonyan, the head of the government-controlled RT news agency, was of particular importance. Speaking on the NTV channel, she said that there were more Nazis in Ukraine than Russians had expected.¹² When crimes against the civilian population perpetrated by the Russian military in Bucha, Borodyanka and Kramatorsk came to light, alongside the horrifying details of the offences committed by Russian soldiers, the Russian media blamed the Ukrainian army for these acts. TV shows presented “evidence” that the reports aired by the Ukrainian and Western media were fake and that their main purpose was to increase the sanctions against Russia. Other enemies identified by the propagandists include Russians who are critical of the Kremlin, individuals opposing the war and even those who refuse to openly support the invasion. Experts appearing on TV shows demanded tougher laws to punish “traitors” and the “fifth column”.

Ahead of the invasion, the aim of the propaganda campaign was to prepare society for the war and to create the appropriate public sentiment to encourage the majority of citizens to not only approve of the decision to launch the invasion but also to consolidate around Putin. At present, the goal of the war propaganda is to maintain the high level of support for the government and for the war itself. Another goal is to hold society as a whole accountable for war crimes. A large portion of Russian society is influenced by the aggressive rhetoric spread by the government and the media, it supports and justifies the brutal actions of the Russian military in Ukraine, and demands a clear victory (preferably in its extreme form, i.e. the forcible subjugation of the entirety of Ukraine to Russia).

¹⁰ In February 2021, 55% of Russians had a positive attitude towards Ukraine, while in March 2022 a positive attitude was declared by a mere 30% of the surveyed individuals. ‘Украина и Донбасс’, Левада Центр, 24 February 2022, levada.ru.

¹¹ In fact, this involves deporting selected civilians to filtration camps, where Ukrainians are interrogated and searched before being forcibly resettled to Russia.

¹² М. Погорилко, ‘Российская пропагандистка Симоньян сменила риторику на фоне провала армии РФ в Украине: ее высмеяли’, Obzrevatel, 26 March 2022, obzrevatel.com.

The global aim of the propaganda is to challenge the facts from the realm of international relations, to present a version of events that is favourable to Russia, and to make the audience believe that the truth is relative and that there is no objective version of it. Another task of propaganda activities involves keeping society convinced that it has no influence on Russia's socio-political reality. This is done in order to consolidate the attitudes of apathy and passivity typical of Russian society. Another important aim is to instil the conviction in people's minds that the frequently mentioned "majority" of the population supports the Kremlin, and that opposition views as marginal should not be expressed. This is how propaganda paralyses any signs of protest on the part of society and enables the present rulers to remain at the helm.

The propaganda techniques

To achieve its goals, Russian propaganda uses a number of techniques and methods. It mainly relies on half-truths, lies and disinformation, and uses generalisations and simplifications in order to present the reality in a manner that is favourable to the Kremlin. For example, bearing in mind Russian society's strong fear of war,¹³ the government decided to eliminate the word "war" from the public space and to replace it with the term "special military operation". This verbal manipulation has become a symbol of Russia and Russian society entering an alternative world which does not match reality and is built on false narratives. A key technique used by propagandists involves reversing the cause-and-effect relationship. They put the blame for the destruction and the crimes committed in Ukraine, which are no longer being concealed, on the Ukrainian army and NATO member states. For example, it was announced on TV shows that the bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol was in fact faked by Ukrainians in order to denigrate Russia. The victims of the attack, i.e. pregnant women (one of whom died tragically alongside her newborn baby) were told to be specially prepared models. Presidential press secretary Peskov, for his part, said that "Russia never attacked anyone first",¹⁴ which is not true. This simple statement was repeated in the media multiple times, which has fostered the belief that Russia not only has good intentions towards Ukraine, but has always played a positive role in history.

The featured messages and stories are intended to evoke emotions such as sympathy, fear, anger and frustration, and to disable a critical evaluation of the content. One way in which the propagandists achieve

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this is to present stories from Donbas residents allegedly persecuted by the "Kyiv regime", crying in front of TV cameras, describing the suffering inflicted on them by the Ukrainians and thanking Russians for "liberating" them. This is intended to boost the conviction that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is morally justified and necessary. Alongside this, fear of the enemy, i.e. Ukraine and the West, and the feeling of living in a "besieged fortress" are being stoked. The fight against "fascists" in Ukraine is shown as a battle between good and evil and as Russia's struggle for its right to exist in the spirit of the "it is either us or them" dichotomy. Using insults, mockery and false accusations (which equates to using hate speech) the reputation of President Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian government and the Armed Forces of Ukraine is being damaged. Propaganda instils the feeling of contempt and hatred for specific social groups and even the entire Ukrainian ethnos into the Russian public. Labelling is another propaganda technique: according to the narrative endorsed by the Kremlin, Ukrainians are "Nazis" and "minions of the West". Propaganda messages targeting the Ukrainians are generally well received in Russia because they fit in with the permanently high level of nationalist views within

¹³ In January 2022, as many as 56% of Russians were afraid of war. 'Страхи', Левада Центр, 12 January 2022, levada.ru.

¹⁴ 'Песков: Россия никогда ни на кого не нападала первой', Коммерсантъ, 25 December 2021, kommersant.ru.

Russian society (which is recorded in opinion polls) and with imperialist sentiment.¹⁵ As the fighting continues, the language of propaganda messages is becoming increasingly brutal – theories emerge that Ukrainians are “fascist animals”, “savage Nazis”, “beasts” and “satanists”. This language is being used in order to increase society’s acceptance of Russia’s brutal actions at the front and to justify their cruelty. Fear-mongering and dehumanisation of the enemy are intended to result in a situation in which any action by the Russian military against Ukrainians is permitted and approved of as an attempt to neutralise the threat – even against civilians, including women and children.¹⁶

In addition, the propaganda refers to universal values deeply ingrained in the human psyche, **» In the internal aspect Kremlin has thus far managed to achieve its propaganda goals.**

including the craving for acceptance, respect, and a sense of uniqueness. TV shows frequently feature messages, emphasised by the presenters, that Russians are an exceptional, privileged and good nation. Vladimir Solovyov frequently ends his show saying, “We are Russians, God is with us” or “Victory will be ours”. A conviction is being promoted that the world owes a lot to Russians because the Soviet Union defeated fascism in the Great Patriotic War (in 1941–1945). At present, this victory forms the foundation of Russian state identity, it is the source of pride and feeling of superiority over other nations. These arguments are frequently emphasised by Vladimir Putin who, over the last decade has striven to consolidate his social capital by repeatedly making references to history.¹⁷ Citing the victory over fascism, the Kremlin propaganda and its authors in the government claim the right to decide who are the present-day “fascists” – according to them, this category includes Ukrainians and all other states that support Ukraine during the war and oppose Russia.

Selectiveness is another feature of propaganda – only perfunctory comments are offered regarding the magnitude of human losses suffered during the war (e.g. the number of sailors killed on the sunken Moskva cruiser has not been revealed), the number of the wounded is not reported, while the heroism of individual fallen soldiers is emphasised. Similarly, there are no reports on Russian defeats, in particular in the context of Ukrainian society’s resistance to the occupiers (in the first weeks of fighting, Russia continued to spread the belief that the civilian population would welcome Russian soldiers with flowers) as well as problems with installing local pro-Russian government structures in the occupied territories. The media does not report or comment on certain developments in international politics that are unfavourable to Russia – for example, when presenting China as an alternative economic cooperation partner that could replace the West, the risks associated with Moscow’s excessive dependence on Beijing are not mentioned. Any information that is unfavourable to Russia is denied in an attempt to fight against the “fake news” spread by Ukraine and the West. A major portion of television coverage is devoted to this fight.¹⁸

The effectiveness of war propaganda in Russia

In the internal aspect, this propaganda is very effective as the Kremlin has thus far managed to achieve its propaganda goals. Opinion polls showed that public support for Putin’s actions as president increased significantly following the invasion – in March 2022 it was over 80% (while in January 2022, before the invasion, it was 69%).¹⁹ Similarly, the level of support for the actions carried out by

¹⁵ For more see J. Strzelecki, ‘Russian nationalism three years after the annexation of Crimea’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 246, 8 August 2017, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁶ TV shows present Russia’s brutal actions as “necessary” and comment on them using the words “war is war” which roughly means “the end justifies the means” but is also a reference to a popular Soviet-era movie.

¹⁷ See footnote 9.

¹⁸ In order to debunk so-called Ukrainian fake news the government has created special websites such as obyasnyajem.rf.

¹⁹ ‘Одобрение институтов, рейтинги партий и политиков’, *Левада Центр*, 30 March 2022, levada.ru.

the Russian armed forces in Ukraine is high – in March 2022 it was 81%, and in April 2022 it was 74%.²⁰ In wartime, polls should be taken with a grain of salt because due to censorship and the increased repression of society, and it is likely that their results do not fully reflect the respondents' views. However, it is certain that the majority of society supports or tacitly approves of Putin's rule and the war. The government's active opponents form a minority. The Kremlin's success owes a lot to propaganda which has prepared society for the conflict and has planted in people's minds the imperative to fiercely fight against a country which until recently Russians had viewed as close and friendly. As a result of the escalation in Russia's relations with Ukraine, there has been an increase in the proportion of Russians declaring a negative attitude towards Ukraine – in November 2021 43% of the respondents said that their attitude towards Ukraine was negative and in March 2022 this proportion increased to as much as 57%.²¹ The high level of anti-Western sentiment in Russian society provides indirect proof of society's approval of the "operation", as the Russian public blames the collective West, led by the US, for the conflict with Ukraine.²² This is also demonstrated by the insignificant scale of public protests against the Kremlin and the war. Since the beginning of the invasion, the government has brutally suppressed any such protests.²³ The community of propaganda journalists is largely consolidated; there have been only a handful of acts of protests against the spreading of distorted information. The most well-known protest of this kind was organised by the journalist Marina Ovsyannikova during a live news broadcast aired by Pervyy Kanal and has sparked controversy among opposition groups. Having gained publicity, Ovsyannikova spoke to foreign media and suggested that sanctions imposed on Russia should be eased, which was interpreted as lobbying in favour of the Kremlin's interests.

The propaganda's effectiveness inside Russia is determined by the fact that its content refers to the feelings and needs of the majority of Russians. As a result ordinary people begin to attach individual importance to propaganda messages, and repress any information that is unwelcome using psychological defence mechanisms. The power of Russian propaganda results also from the fact that it presents a relatively coherent, constantly improved picture of the world which is being instilled in the public consciousness. Whenever – despite censorship's activity – individual pieces of information that are inconsistent with the propaganda message leak to the public space, they are unable to undermine or refute the official narrative. Most Russians do not believe or do not want to believe these reports because accepting them as true would damage the world view with which they feel secure. This effect is boosted by the paralysing fear of repression and the passivity that is deeply rooted in society. The absence of the habit to verify information and a reluctance to become involved in the country's socio-political life also contribute to this effect. As a result of all this, the propaganda-dominated information prevails.

Challenges to war propaganda

In the future, Russian propaganda will face significant challenges which will depend on the development of the situation at the front. The propaganda's main task involves maintaining the high level of public support for the government and for the war in the long term and preventing the expected deterioration in public sentiment that may result from the mounting economic crisis caused by the sanctions.

²⁰ 'Конфликт с Украиной', Левада Центр, 28 April 2022, levada.ru. According to the FOM centre, 73% of Russians believe that the "operation" is justified: 'Украина. Опрос 20 марта. Представления о целях России на Украине', FOM, 28 March 2022, fom.ru.

²¹ 'Международные отношения', Левада Центр, 15 April 2022, levada.ru.

²² In February 2022, 60% of Russians blamed the US and NATO for the escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine. In April 2022, 57% of respondents claimed that the US and NATO are to blame for the death of civilians and for the damage inflicted on Ukraine, see footnote 20.

²³ For more see M. Domańska, K. Chawryło, 'War dictatorship: power and society in Russia', *OSW Commentary*, no. 433, 22 March 2022, osw.waw.pl.

In April 2022, Russia's annual inflation rate was 17%,²⁴ which is already equating to a major decline in society's income and is particularly dangerous to the least affluent groups of citizens and to those who are the most dependent on assistance offered by the state.²⁵ An increase in social discontent may become apparent in a few months, and its magnitude will mainly depend on the government's preventive measures and on the progress of the war.

From the point of view of propaganda, the growing number of killed and wounded Russian soldiers is an inconvenient topic which the Kremlin-controlled media have so far avoided. As the fighting continues, reports about the number of those killed will be increasingly difficult to conceal and, due to the magnitude of this number, will become an important social issue in Russia. The corresponding reports compiled by the Ukrainian side, claiming that the number of killed Russian soldiers already stands at 26,000, do reach the Russian public. The triumphant propaganda narrative regarding the Russian army successes will increasingly stand in contrast to what individual Russians go through, having lost their relatives in the war and being forced to mourn their death in an atmosphere of secrecy and fear.

Immediately following the attack, propagandists attempted to convince the public that the "operation" would be quick and Russia would win, thereby boosting society's expectations. TV show guests definitely rejected the possibility of signing any peace deal with Ukraine. They criticised the peace talks and demanded a full surrender from Kyiv, and even referred to the Russian delegates taking part in these talks as traitors. To prevent increasing disillusionment among the public, the propaganda will need to demonstrate what has successfully been achieved. It could be problematic in the absence of an undisputed victory on the battlefield and in the context of the failure of the planned denazification and demilitarisation of Ukraine.

Domestically, increased tolerance for aggression and violence among Russians, resulting from their exposure to brutal and false narratives, will be a major problem largely generated by propaganda. These attitudes may translate into society becoming increasingly morally corrupt and in Russia's socio-political problems escalating once the war ends (including, for example, an increase in crime and substance abuse). This in turn may result in the degradation of social ties and prevent effective governance of the country.

²⁴ 'Годовая инфляция в России ускорилась до 16,7%', *Ведомости*, 6 April 2022, [vedomosti.ru](https://www.vedomosti.ru).

²⁵ For more on Russia's economic situation see I. Wiśniewska, 'The economic consequences of the war: a profound crisis looming for Russia', *OSW Commentary*, no. 434, 23 March 2022, osw.waw.pl.