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This is the **accepted version** of the journal article:

Johansson-Nogués, Elisabeth; Simanschi, Elena. «Fabricating a war? : Russian (Dis)Information on Ukraine». *International Affairs*, Vol. 99, Num. 5 (September 2023), p. 2015-2036 DOI 10.1093/ia/iad179

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## Fabricating a war?

### Russian (dis)information on Ukraine

*Abstract: Propaganda has been an age-old part of warmongering. There is thus no surprise that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was preceded and continues to be fuelled by propaganda transmitted by state-controlled Russian media. What is more unusual about the Russian (dis)information campaigns is the sheer volume of distorted narratives or complete fictional accounts about the conflict. This article explores the content and technologies of Russian information manipulation of domestic audiences in the context of the invasion of Ukraine. We also examine the bases for the sustained robust public support for the war within Russia despite being based on mostly fabricated (dis)information. Relying on political psychology and communication theory we explain how emotions and associative memories have played an important role in the Russian public's sustained approval to the war. Our findings point to that in the absence of contrasted and independently-verified information, the volume, frequency, emotional intensity of slick, plug-and-play media packages on Ukraine have acted to displace and distort the average Russian's associative social monitoring processes.*

**Keywords:** (dis)information, Russia, Ukraine, emotions, memory, political psychology, and communication

*The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and de-nazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation.*

*Vladimir Putin, address on 24 February 2022*

Propaganda has been a part of warmongering since time immemorial. Propaganda or (dis)information are forms of mass communication that seek to generate a response in a target audience conducive to the propagandist's agenda.<sup>1</sup> Governmental (dis)information operations encourage a specific public opinion formation by selecting and framing certain facts, values, or ideas, while shaping, limiting, reducing, or withholding rivalling information.<sup>2</sup> Throughout history, wartime governments have been especially keenly aware of that at any moment a range of competing frames or opinions about the war effort is possible in the domestic realm. Hence, from the government's standpoint, public opinion needs to be 'managed' lest it turns against the authorities and their objectives. War propaganda and political spins serve an important

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<sup>1</sup> (Dis)information is defined here as a composite of different information typologies. The concept encompasses correct and factual information, political spins and the negatively slanted, as well as the outright false and deceitful information. The more sophisticated (dis)informers employ a mix of these at any given time. We use (dis)information as a synonym for propaganda in this article. We take 'disinformation' (without brackets) to exclusively refer to false or intentionally misleading information.

<sup>2</sup> Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and persuasion* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018).

function in terms of enticing the citizens to ‘rally around the flag’ in defence of national goals and keeping morale high even in the face of public sacrifice during the conflict.

The largescale Russian (dis)information campaign surrounding the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was in this sense far from unexpected. However, what is perhaps more unusual with the Russian propaganda, compared to other recent inter-state conflicts,<sup>3</sup> is that so much of its contents reflect unsubstantiated allegations or complete fictional accounts.<sup>4</sup> The spin-doctors linked to the country’s leadership have thus, in essence, been engaging in extensive information manipulation to ‘fabricate’ the war in the Russian national imaginary – albeit a war with very real and tragic consequences. The Russian public’s overwhelmingly affirmative response to the conflict, the armed forces action in Ukraine, and to the Russian political leadership, in the first year of the war is an indicator of that the (dis)information achieved its objective.<sup>5</sup> This is no small feat in a country in which state control of means of communications is of fairly recent date and, until prior to the invasion, far from absolute.

It is therefore of interest to explore the mechanisms by which the Russian authorities managed to gain and maintain public support for the war in Ukraine, despite largely relying on manufactured claims. This article explores the content and the technologies of Russian information manipulation of domestic audiences with a view to unpack the link between (dis)information and public consent. We also contribute to the literature by theorizing on the mechanisms which make the public more susceptible to fabricated realities. For this purpose, we have examined the Russian (dis)information frames produced on Ukraine and on the West in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. We have performed a frame analysis of the (dis)information output from 15 media companies and approximately 1000 pieces of (dis)information in the period spanning March 2021 – when the Russian troops began to gather on the Russian-Ukrainian border – until December 2022. This article proceeds as follows. Section 1 will lay out a literature review, provide a conceptual framework, as well as offer some methodological explanations. Section 2 will outline the Russian (dis)information frames on Ukraine and the West in the context of the military invasion. The final section provides analysis.

## **Propaganda and the mechanisms of Russian (dis)information**

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<sup>3</sup> We compare here with the amount of US (dis)information surrounding the intervention in Iraq in 2003, for example. Another comparable could be the volume of (dis)information in the context of global pandemics, see for example, Nicholas J. Cull, and Juan Luis Manfredi-Sánchez, ‘Virus Diplomacy: Leadership and Reputational Security in the Era of COVID 19’. *Journal of Public Diplomacy*, 2(2), pp.1-25.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of investigation to verify the Russian fictional accounts encompass Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Disinformation and Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine: Threats and governance responses, 3 November 2022; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Report on violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, war crimes, and crimes against humanity committed in Ukraine since 24 February 2022; Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights report no. ODIHR.GAL/26/22/Rev.1 (Warsaw, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Surveys by the Russian independent, non-governmental polling and sociological research institute, Levada Centre show that Russian public opinion’s support for the military intervention has consistently been above 70 percent until November 2022. President Vladimir Putin’s popularity rate, which has been above 60 percent in the last decade, rose to above 80 percent in the first six months after the Russian invasion. Levada Centre, *Conflict with Ukraine*, October 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/11/01/conflict-with-ukraine-october-2022/>, all web-based resources last consulted on 20 May 2023.

In the past century, the propaganda literature has tended to predominantly focus on the role of the ‘emitter’ of (dis)information in shaping the audience’s perceptions and attitudes, as well as directing behaviour. In terms of key (dis)information emitters, most authors identify the government and political elite as the most powerful influencers of public opinion during war or large-scale crisis.<sup>6</sup> In contexts of high uncertainty, the public tends to look to political leaders to provide cues on attitudes and aspirational goals. The leaders’ influence over ‘the marketplace of ideas’ is thus pivotal for the government’s ability to launch and sustain military interventions even in the face of public or elite opposition.<sup>7</sup> Another key actor in propaganda is the media. The literature tends, however, to be divided on the role of the media in (dis)information campaigns. Some scholars argue that media is simply a passive transmission tool of governmental propaganda.<sup>8</sup> This insight applies in particular to the rare cases of full-blown totalitarian countries where the governmental control of information is high. Other scholars, researching the role of media in mature democratic or mixed settings, tend to point to media as an active and frequently willing participant in either amplifying or diminishing the authorities’ claims, or even taking on the role of (dis)information producer in its own right.<sup>9</sup>

The relationship between (dis)information and the audience(s), in particular the mechanisms whereby propaganda has an effect on the targeted social groups, has been much less explored in propaganda studies.<sup>10</sup> Our research inserts itself in this void. Our starting point is Lasswell’s observation that the key to propaganda is the leader’s ability to conjure up an emotional response to (dis)information rather than a rational-logical one.<sup>11</sup> We argue here that emotions are indeed central to understanding the mechanisms which link emitter with audience, as well as the link between message and public support (or lack thereof). We draw upon the literature of political psychology and communication theory to situate our argument about how emotions trigger a determined public response.

Political psychology tells us that affect and emotions frame and influence our evaluations of the social world ‘setting the parameters for what we remember and plan’.<sup>12</sup> Emotions act as preconscious somatic markers to sort information based on associations as we move through our environment.<sup>13</sup> In turn, the emotionally-triggered associations stored in our memories channel our interpretations of reality and guide our attitudes and actions. In this way, emotions

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<sup>6</sup> Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda technique in the world war* (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 2013); Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The formation of men's attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> W.L. Bennett and D.L. Paletz, *Taken by storm: The media, public opinion, and US foreign policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2010); John Zaller and Dennis Chiu ‘Government’s little helper: U.S. press coverage of foreign policy crises, 1945–1991’, *Political Communication*, 13: 4, 1996, pp. 385–405.

<sup>8</sup> Zaller and Chiu, ‘Government’s little helper’; Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing consent*;

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Snow, *War, media, and propaganda: a global perspective* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Brian A. Patrick and Trevor Thrall, ‘Beyond Hegemony: Classical Propaganda Theory and Presidential Communication Strategy After the Invasion of Iraq’, *Mass Communication & Society* 10:1, 2007, pp. 95–118.

<sup>10</sup> Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and persuasion*.

<sup>11</sup> Lasswell, *Propaganda technique*.

<sup>12</sup> Erik Ringmar, ‘Eugene Gendlin and the feel of international politics’, in Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar, eds., *Researching emotions in International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 33–50.

<sup>13</sup> J.H. Kuklinski, *Citizens and politics: perspectives from political psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); J.T. Jost, ‘Ideological Asymmetries and the Essence of Political Psychology’, *Political Psychology* 38: 2, 2017, pp. 167–208; C. Duncombe, ‘The politics of Twitter: Emotions and the power of social media’. *International Political Sociology*, 13(4), 2019, pp. 409–429.

organize the cognitive process and shape behaviour. How emotions affect our cognition and conduct is nevertheless undetermined.<sup>14</sup> Theory holds that each individual normally associate to different events based on their current and past emotional experiences. The goal of propaganda thus becomes to manipulate the emotions and the cognitive associations they prompt in the individual and channel them in a way which befits the (dis)informer's agenda.

Political communication theory tells us that propagandists may instrumentalize positive (joy, pride) and negative (anger, fear) emotional dimensions to ensure public support for governmental action. For example, (dis)information may pander to positive emotions about shared values to conjure up collective feelings of national pride, while fear and anger prompt mobilization against perceived dangers and injustices.<sup>15</sup> (Dis)informers may also try to invoke a combination of different emotions – positive and negative – into a unique emotional mix.<sup>16</sup> The combination of emotions that the war propagandist may try to appeal to will differ according to the circumstances of the conflict (defensive or offensive), as well as naturally fluctuate throughout the war effort due to the successes or failures of the armed forces or of governmental strategy. For example, a defensive communicative influence strategy may want to appeal mostly to fear to activate the public's instinctive behaviour to pull back and protect itself.<sup>17</sup> An offensive (dis)information strategy may be employed to conjure up support for attacking an enemy, and it might rely on a mixed approach to evoke the public's national pride, fear, and anger to produce a more confident, aggressive collective response during crises.

Emotions, as we have seen, drive the audience(s) ability to sort and interpret information. Political communication that appeals to strong emotions may induce biases in an individual's somatic markers. Consequently, emotionally loaded political communication may impair an individual's ability to monitor social reality, leading to the distortion of associative processes.<sup>18</sup> In particular, this can occur when social facts are not directly observed by an individual, but instead are retransmitted via an intermediary (e.g. the media).<sup>19</sup> Distortion thus occurs because an individual is unable to distinguish whether his or her emotions are derived from real or fictional events. Since a retransmitted fictional event may have contextual similarities to a real event, it evokes similar emotional associations.<sup>20</sup> A distortion may also occur when long-term communication of fiction creates strong emotional associations within the public's memory, dislodging any earlier associations based on true and independently verified facts. A distortion of this sort is often further reinforced by the durable internal consistency of fictional messages, resulting in an individual's failure to conduct proper social monitoring.<sup>21</sup> Finally, fictional experiences may also be more emotionally appealing to an individual than (f)actual

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<sup>14</sup> As Ross well argues, "those exposed to emotion contagion do not somehow become affective carbon copies". A.G. Ross, *Mixed emotions: Beyond fear and hatred in international conflict*. (University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Lazarus, *Emotion and adaptation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> S.L. Holak and W.J. Havlena, 'Feelings, fantasies, and memories: An examination of the emotional components of nostalgia', *Journal of Business Research* 42:3, 1998, pp.217–226.

<sup>17</sup> See also J.N. Druckman and Rose McDermott, 'Emotion and the framing of risky choice', *Political Behavior*, 30:3, 2008, pp.297–321.

<sup>18</sup> Vian Bakir and Andrew McStay, 'Fake News and The Economy of Emotions', *Digital Journalism*, 6:2, 2021, pp.154-175.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hanitzsch, Arjen Van Dalen, and Nina Steindl. 'Caught in the nexus: A comparative and longitudinal analysis of public trust in the press'. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 23:1, 2018, pp.3-23.

<sup>20</sup> M.K. Johnson, et al., 'Fact and fantasy: The roles of accuracy and variability in confusing imaginations with perceptual experiences', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory* 5:3, 1979, pp.229-240.

<sup>21</sup> P.G. Zimbardo and M.R. Leippe, *The psychology of attitude change and social influence* (New York: Mcgraw-Hill Book Company, 1991).

experiences. This occurs, in particular, when the (dis)information fiction is packaged in a slick and attractive manner and/or presented to the public in a quick and readily graspable manner ('plug and play'). Under such circumstances, virtual reality or mediated events give the appearance of actual events, a 'mirage effect' which is frequently reinforced by new technologies and audio-visual stimuli.<sup>22</sup>

Russian (dis)information in the context of the military invasion into Ukraine 2022 is a rich case study onto which to apply our conceptual framework based on emotions and the distortive effects of mediated information on an individual's associative memory. The Russian government, keenly aware of the political impact information can have, announced control over the media as an objective in the two most recent National Security Strategies of the Russian Federation.<sup>23</sup> This has gradually led to greater control over the content, flow, and outlet of information.<sup>24</sup> For example, in 2022 new restrictive legislation has virtually eliminated all independent and foreign news sources under either the foreign agents' law or the new war censorship laws.<sup>25</sup> In the changing information landscape within Russia, the main actors are the state-sponsored public- as well as set of private media and information platforms owned by pro-regime magnates.<sup>26</sup> It is fair to say that the state and pro-regime media companies do not only act to simply convey official views fed to them by the government. They are also active (dis)information emitters or even entrepreneurs in the Russian emergent 'spin dictatorship' in their own right.<sup>27</sup> Aside from the state's official line, they create their own news content which is conducive to the state's overall (dis)information objective. Moreover, they call on partisan academics, specialists, or public persons, who allegedly 'possess[es] a certain expertise level and present versatile points of view on the problem and its aspects', to lend greater credibility to the (dis)information emitted.<sup>28</sup> For example, former Ukrainian, pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, who fled to Russia during the Euromaidan crisis in 2014, and members of his erstwhile government have been frequently called upon in Russian media to bear witness on different issues related to their country of origin.

In terms of methodology, we have conducted a frame analysis of Ukraine-related news pieces in 15 Russian mainstream media sources.<sup>29</sup> The scope of our frame analysis spanned March 2021, when Russian troops began assembling at the Ukrainian borders, until December 2022.

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<sup>22</sup> M.A. Shapiro and Annie Lang, 'Making Television Reality: Unconscious Processes in the Construction of Social Reality', *Communication Research*, 18:5, 1991, pp.685–705; James Der Derian, *Virtuous war: Mapping the military-industrial-media-entertainment-network* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, Order of the President of the Russian Federation from 31.12.2015 no. 400; *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, Order of the President of the Russian Federation from 02.07.2021 no. 400.

<sup>24</sup> For more a more in-depth account of the evolution of the post-Soviet Russian informational sphere and journalism, see P. Pomerantsev, *This is not propaganda. Adventures in the war against reality* (London: Faber and Faber, 2019) and G. Asmolov, 'The Effects of Participatory Propaganda: From Socialization to Internalization of Conflicts'. *Journal of Design and Science*, 6, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> All foreign media platforms, with the exception of YouTube, were banned as a consequence of the March 2022 legislation.

<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as OECD informs, Kremlin has a strong presence in social media as well. It runs coordinated campaigns with traditional media on several social media accounts, for example, 75 Russian government-linked Twitter accounts tweeted 1,157 times between 25 February and 3 March 2022, garnering 35.9 million retweets, 29.8 million likes and 4 million replies by their 7.3 million followers (see OECD, *Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine*).

<sup>27</sup> Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

<sup>28</sup> Petr Gulenko, 'Political discussion as a propaganda spectacle: propaganda talk shows on contemporary Russian television', *Media, Culture & Society* 43:5, 2021, pp.906–924.

<sup>29</sup> The translation of the cited news information was performed by the authors.

The sources that have been surveyed are Russian-language TV channels and news outlets with the widest possible circulation inside Russia.<sup>30</sup> We examined 1000 articles from such media as: Channel 1, Gazeta.ru, Fishki.net, Interfax, Izvestiya.ru, Lenta.ru, Life.ru, News.ru, NTV, REN.tv, RIA, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Rubaltic.ru Russia 1, and Vesti.ru. In our frame analysis we identified news pieces justifying the intervention or the continued war effort based on the search parameter ‘Ukraine’. We then performed a cluster analysis and sorted the most salient data into three main frames (see below). Several different stories overlap in one article in most cases and when they do, they are included in all the relevant clustered frames. The contextualization of the (dis)information is drawn from secondary literature.

## **Russian (dis)information justifying the war effort**

Ukraine began as a topic in Russian state propaganda already around the 2004 Orange Revolution, which brought an end to Leonid Kuchma’s dysfunctional regime.<sup>31</sup> Ukraine became subject of yet another wave of Russian (dis)information campaigns in and around the Euromaidan protests in 2013-2014. According to Tsekhanovska and Tsybulska, the anti-Ukrainian message inside Russia has since remained a relative constant.<sup>32</sup> The Russian media (dis)information about Ukraine would, however, reach new heights in the three months prior to the 2022 invasion. We have identified three main (dis)information frames in the period we have analysed: Donbas as a ‘victim’, Ukrainian political elite and nationalism as the ‘enemy’, and Ukraine as a symbol of Western aggression against Russia. These three frames were instrumentalized to justify the 2022 ‘special operation’ and to keep the Russian public emotionally engaged since.

### ***The Russian (dis)information frames on Donbas***

The Ukrainian region of Donbas was the focus on the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict and is at time of writing the main area of clashes after the Russian 2022 invasion. The primary (dis)information frames in this grouping of news includes the narration of the population in Donbas as victims of violence from the central government in Ukraine and in need of Russian protection.

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<sup>30</sup> Traditional media continue to constitute the most common means by which to acquire information in Russia. In October 2022, 64 percent of Russians surveyed stated that television was their preferred source of information. Broken down by age-groups, 57 percent of Russians in the ages 25-39 favor traditional media, 84 percent for ages 40-54 and above 90 percent for 55 and older. Levada Centre, ‘The Main Sources of Information of Russians’, 10 November, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/11/10/the-main-sources-of-information-of-russians/>.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Larrabee, ‘Ukraine at the Crossroads’, *The Washington Quarterly* 30:4, 2007, pp.45-61.

<sup>32</sup> Oleksandra Tsekhanovska and Liubov Tsybulska, *Evolution of Russian narratives about Ukraine and their export to Ukrainian media space*, Ukraine Crisis Media Center report (Kyiv, 2021); see also M, Audinet, ‘Rival public diplomacies in the Ukrainian crisis: RT and Ukraine Today’, *Revue d’etudes comparatives Est-Ouest*, 49:2, pp.171-204.

One of the predominant sub-frames in the Russian (dis)information is the allegations of the Ukrainian government being involved in continuous and longstanding violence against civilians in the Donbas.<sup>33</sup> The idea ‘Ukraine has been shelling Donbas for 8 years’ since the 2014 conflict has become a widespread reported ‘fact’ in almost every news regarding Ukraine inside Russia.<sup>34</sup> This particular (dis)information frame claims that the Ukrainian state has organized attacks to ‘deliberately exterminate Donbas residents: children, women, and the elderly’.<sup>35</sup> for the purposes of ethnic cleansing and genocide, drawing ungrounded parallels with the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia in 1995 because of purported ‘incitement of absolute hatred towards the population of the self-proclaimed republics of Donbas’.<sup>36</sup> News reports on ‘the funeral of schoolchildren killed in the shelling of the school’, or ‘teenagers killed in the streets of the city as a result of the Armed forces of Ukraine shelling’ are frequently accompanied and visually reinforced with TV footage of unclear or doctored origins of children in coffins, fragments of bodies, and crying mothers, as if to provide solid testimony for the allegation of genocide.<sup>37</sup>

In a distinct sub-frame of this grouping of news on Donbas as a victim, the Russian media would in late 2021 begin to issue claims that the Ukrainian central government was mobilizing its forces to take back control over the territories it lost control over in 2014.<sup>38</sup> It was alleged that ‘Kyiv is preparing to solve the ‘Donbas issue’ by force’.<sup>39</sup> The media pointed to a growing volume of reports about ‘unprecedentedly increased shelling’ in the Donbas region, even if such assertions have not been confirmed by independent sources.<sup>40</sup> To back up the claims behind this fictitious Ukrainian attack, the media referred to the self-proclaimed republics’ ‘intelligence service’ reports that ‘Ukraine may launch an offensive in the next two or three

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<sup>33</sup> Egbert Fortuin, ‘Ukraine commits genocide on Russians’: the term ‘genocide’ in Russian propaganda’, *Russian linguistics* 46: 3, 2022, pp. 313–347.

<sup>34</sup> Channel One, *More than 15,000 people have been killed in eight years of shelling and bombing in Donbas*, 24 February 2022, [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-02-24/421590-za\\_vosem\\_let\\_obstrelov\\_i\\_bombezhok\\_v\\_donbasse\\_byli\\_ubity\\_bolee\\_15\\_tysyach\\_chelovek?ysclid=l8is4490zs602876409](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-02-24/421590-za_vosem_let_obstrelov_i_bombezhok_v_donbasse_byli_ubity_bolee_15_tysyach_chelovek?ysclid=l8is4490zs602876409); REN TV, *Putin reminded Scholz that the West ignored the genocide in Donbas for 8 years*, 4 March 2022, <https://ren.tv/news/politika/947073-putin-napomnil-sholtsu-chto-zapad-8-let-ignoriroval-genotsid-v-donbasse>.

<sup>35</sup> Channel One, *More than 15,000 people have been killed*; RIA.ru, *Shootings, explosions, and evacuation of refugees. What's Happening in Donbas*, 19 February 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220219/donbass-1773779878.html?ysclid=l8irmn5ubs647922109>.

<sup>36</sup> Interfax.ru, *Kremlin pledges to protect residents of Donbas in case of renewed fighting*, 9 April 2022, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/760395>.

<sup>37</sup> RIA.ru, *Shootings, explosions, and evacuation of refugees*; NTV.ru, *In 8 years - 14 thousand dead: The West refuses to recognize the genocide of Donbas*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2685439/?ysclid=l8cxeptphr7986495155>. In their investigation of the allegations of widespread violence and genocide by Ukrainian authorities, the International Court of Justice and OSCE found that such claims by the Russian Federation were unfounded. See International Court of Justice, *Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation)*, 2022, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/182>; OSCE, *Daily and spot reports from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine*, undated, <https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports>.

<sup>38</sup> The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission has not found evidence for the presence of Ukrainian troops or mobilization prior to the outbreak of the war, as claimed in Russian media. They have, however, confirmed the presence of Russian regular troops, the deployment of Russian heavy weapons in Donbas, and a failure of the Russians to respect the line of contact, ceasefire, and repeatedly broke truces in this same time period (OSCE, *Daily and spot reports from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine*).

<sup>39</sup> Life.ru, *Zakharova: Kyiv seems to be preparing for a forceful solution to the ‘Donbas problem’*, 24 December 2021, <https://life.ru/p/1459380>.

<sup>40</sup> RIA.ru, *Genocide of the civilian population of Donbas. Teenagers*, 6 June 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220406/angelydonbassa-1780006629.html?ysclid=l8boxp4bk4312996518>.

days'.<sup>41</sup> To make this argument more convincing, the news shared a post from the social media page of the pro-Russian, former Ukrainian Prime Minister Nikolai Azarov who 'predicted' the exact date of the alleged offensive: 'the Ukrainian Army, led by the nationalist battalions, is preparing to launch a military operation in Donbas on 25 February 2022'.<sup>42</sup>

In view of the alleged 'looming attack' by Ukrainian military, the Russian President officially recognized 'the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic' as 'the situation in Donbas has reached a critical, acute stage'.<sup>43</sup> A final distinct sub-frame in the Russian (dis)information thus became the political spin given to the Russian invasion. The Russian military offensive in 2022 was characterized as 'a special military operation by the Russian Armed Forces' which – starting as it did on 24 February 2022, i.e. the day before Ukrainian authorities were claimed to prepare an attack against Donbas – 'pre-empted and thwarted a large-scale offensive by Ukrainian strike forces against the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics in March 2022'.<sup>44</sup> The Russian accusations against the Ukrainian central government of violence against the civilian population and crimes against humanity became and have remained among of the central frames to promote public support for the war effort. It also figured prominently as one of the central lines of Putin's address on and the news coverage surrounding the partial mobilization in September 2022.<sup>45</sup> The 'defence of Donbas' thus became one of the principal sub-frames to justify Russian military intervention, construed as an operation 'to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime'.<sup>46</sup> For this reason, the Russian media confidently alleged that 'Russia did not start this war', and that 'Russia has not attacked Ukraine'.<sup>47</sup> The Russian media have been adamant that the 'special operation' is a 'noble' mission 'conducted with several factors in mind - not to destroy civilian neighborhoods, not to harm the population, and not even to hit the Ukrainian military barracks'.<sup>48</sup> The Russian 2022 invasion has thus been construed in domestic media as a humanitarian act that has been 'unjustly' responded to by Ukrainian military aggression and misunderstood or slandered in the Western media space.

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<sup>41</sup> Life.ru, *Munich deal 2022: The West offers Russia war instead of dialogue*, 19 February 2022, <https://life.ru/p/1472749>.

<sup>42</sup> News.ru, *Former Ukrainian Prime Minister spoke about the Ukrainian Armed Forces' plans to attack Donbas on February 25*, 4 March 2022, <https://news.ru/world/eks-premer-ukrainy-rasskazal-o-planah-vsu-napast-na-donbass-25-fevralya/>.

<sup>43</sup> Channel One, *Yesterday and today Vladimir Putin gave a comprehensive explanation of the reasons for the decision to recognize the independence of the DNR and LNR*, 22 February 2022, <https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-02-22/421534->

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<sup>44</sup> Rossiiskaya Gazeta, *The Investigative Committee will analyse the documents of the AFU on the attack on Donbas, which were found by the Russian military*, 25 April 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/04/25/sk-proanaliziruet-dokumenty-vsu-o-napadenii-na-donbass-kotorye-nashli-voennye-rf.html>.

<sup>45</sup> NTV.ru, *Putin announced a partial mobilization in Russia*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2724682/>.

<sup>46</sup> Russia 1, *The address of the President to the nation*, 24 February 2022, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2386957>.

<sup>47</sup> Channel One, *The fifth day of a special operation conducted by the Russian military in Ukraine*, 28 February 2022, [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-02-28/422173-pyatyy\\_den\\_spetsialnoy\\_operatsii\\_kotoruyu\\_rossiyskie\\_voennye\\_provodyat\\_na\\_ukraine](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-02-28/422173-pyatyy-den-spetsialnoy-operatsii-kotoruyu-rossiyskie-voennye-provodyat-na-ukraine); NTV.ru, *Lavrov: Russia has not attacked Ukraine and has no plans to attack other countries*, 10 March 2022, <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2692263/?ysclid=18j2jor19d853782024>.

<sup>48</sup> REN TV, *What they say in the West about the special operation to protect Donbas*, 3 March 2022, <https://ren.tv/news/v-mire/946576-chto-govoriat-na-zapade-o-spetsoperatsii-po-zashchite-donbassa>.

## *The Russian (dis)information frames on Ukraine's political elite and nationalism*

The Russian invasion into Ukraine has also been justified by a (dis)information frame related to Ukraine's political leadership and certain political groups within Ukraine. Russian media sources argue that Ukraine's central government and determined political groups within the country are engaging in radical forms of nationalism and/or are hostile to Russia and its influence in Ukraine.

A particular predominant sub-frame in the Russian (dis)information has been focused on Ukrainian leaders elected after the Euromaidan protests in 2014.<sup>49</sup> The Russian (dis)information has used a number of pejorative terms against the democratically elected Ukrainian government. Most prominent is the use of chains of equivalences in Russian media whereby the legitimacy of the Ukrainian elected leaders is called into question by labelling it the 'Kyiv regime' (inferring that it is driven by radical nationalist ideology), the 'Kyiv junta' (drawing parallels with a dictatorship). This labelling is designed to politically delegitimize the current Ukrainian government as a leader for entire Ukraine in the eyes of the Russian population. Russian media also frequently refers to the Ukrainian leadership as the 'Successors of Bandera' (establishing associations with a controversial Nazi collaborator in Ukraine's past).<sup>50</sup> Before the 2022 invasion, many sources cited Putin who claimed to see a continuous Nazi ideology in Ukrainian state leadership: 'Zelensky came to power and fell, as previous leaders did, under the influence of radical elements, as they say in Ukraine: Nazis' (Nazi in Russian slang).<sup>51</sup> As if to illustrate the state of affairs, one news channel put out footage of Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky's Instagram page, which had been doctored to contain the SS division's logo on the Victory Day of World War II.<sup>52</sup> Media has thus made ample coverage of the government's line that the 'special operation' in Ukraine is a means to 'de-nazify' or to liberate the country from extreme ideologies such as fascism, and to purportedly topple the current government. Russian media has claimed that '[n]ow Russian troops have launched a special operation to free the people of Donbas and Ukraine from the admirers of Hitler and the swastika'.<sup>53</sup> In other media accounts it has been stated that '[i]deally, we need to liberate Ukraine, cleanse it of Nazis, of pro-Nazi people and their ideology'.<sup>54 55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Egbert Fortuin, 'Ukraine commits genocide on Russians'

<sup>50</sup> REN TV, *It has become known when the U.S. will stop supporting Ukraine*, 25 September 2022, <https://ren.tv/news/v-mire/1027804-wsj-stalo-izvestno-kogda-ssha-mogut-perestat-podderzivat-ukrainu?ysclid=l8j7phle1y831081171>; Lenta.ru, *The Council of Federation named the only possible topic for negotiations with Ukraine*, 23 May 2022, <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/05/23/demilit/?ysclid=l8j7sa6ztj860389902>.

<sup>51</sup> REN TV, *What they say in the West*.

<sup>52</sup> Channel One, *There was a photo with the SS division's military logo of the "Dead head" on the V. Zelensky's web page*, 09 May 2022, [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-05-09/428409-na\\_stranichke\\_vladimira\\_zelenskogo\\_bylo\\_foto\\_voennogo\\_s\\_emblemoy\\_divizii\\_ss\\_mertvaya\\_golova](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-05-09/428409-na_stranichke_vladimira_zelenskogo_bylo_foto_voennogo_s_emblemoy_divizii_ss_mertvaya_golova).

<sup>53</sup> Life.ru, *How Kyiv Legalized the Murder of Donbas Residents in 8 Years of War*, 13 April 2022, <https://life.ru/p/1486704?ysclid=l8boywmoh4276257174>.

<sup>54</sup> Gazeta.ru, *To liberate Ukraine, to clean it of Nazis'. Kremlin reveals goals of the Russian operation*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2022/02/24/14573251.shtml?ysclid=l8j8clq3zw718454919>; RIA.ru, *The Kremlin says Ukraine must be cleansed of Nazis*, 24 February 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220224/natsisty-1774759888.html?ysclid=l8j8yt1o98105598582>.

<sup>55</sup> The allegations of Nazi sympathizers among the Ukrainian political leadership have been disputed by many independent sources. For example, reports that in 2015 Ukraine has even issued a ban on Nazi and Communist

A different sub-frame is the alleged Russophobia in Ukraine, for which the Ukrainian government and nationalists are held responsible. Russian media has interchangeably depicted Ukraine as an ‘anti-Russian springboard’<sup>56</sup>, ‘anti-Russian project’<sup>57</sup>, or simply ‘anti-Russia’<sup>58</sup>. On this, Russian media has followed closely in the footsteps of Putin’s article ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’<sup>59</sup>. Putin finds Ukrainian nationalists the main source of this anti-Russian attitude, accusing them both in terms of turning the average Ukrainian away from their ‘natural focus’, the ‘Russian Motherland’ as well as instilling Russophobia in Ukraine. He blames the Ukrainian government and nationalists, who he labels ‘[r]adicals’ for being ‘more and more insolent about their ambitions’, as they ‘systematically and consistently pushed Ukraine to curtail and limit economic cooperation with Russia’ in favor of closer relations with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russian media has produced innumerable versions of the same narrative portraying Ukrainian nationalism as designed to turn Ukrainians away from Russia and have ‘systemically nurtured’ Russophobia over the past eight years.<sup>60</sup> The Russian media has also amplified the unsubstantiated claims that the Ukrainian nationalist alleged ambition is to delink the Ukraine from Russia completely. The media has engaged in lively theory debates surrounding the claims that the Ukrainian government wants to create an artificial separation between Ukraine and Russia.<sup>61</sup> There have also been unfounded accusations that ‘Kyiv’s policy is aimed at a complete ban on Russian culture’.<sup>62</sup>

The negative portrayal of the Ukrainian political elites and anti-Russian nationalism has prompted the surge of another important subordinate mediatic framing after the 24 February invasion. The narrative that it is the authority and ‘right’ of Russia to intervene to protect the Russophones in Ukraine and, in particular, the population in the Donbas territories. This sub-frame builds on the ‘Russian world’ concept invented by one of Putin’s ideologues, which entails an existence of an alleged ‘broad Russian civilization’ beyond the borders of Russia under the protection of the Russian state.<sup>63</sup> Frames of this type blur the sovereign borders

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ideologies in public life. Moreover, Ukrainian far-right groups tend to only be a marginal political force in Ukraine, as they ‘had a limited presence during the Euromaidan protests and have suffered defeats in every national election after that, with a united front of all radical right-wing parties in the 2019 parliamentary elections winning only 2.15% of the vote falling far short of the 5% minimum guaranteeing entry into parliament’ (see EUvsDisinfo, *The West is Nazi because it supports Nazism in Ukraine*, undated, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/card/?url=the-west-is-nazi-because-it-supports-nazism-in-ukraine>).

<sup>56</sup> News.ru, *Putin: Kyiv has publicly refused to implement the Minsk agreements*, 12 April 2022, <https://news.ru/vlast/putin-kiev-publichno-otkazalsya-vypolnyat-minskie-soglasheniya/?ysclid=18eq8u8kgu266912485>.

<sup>57</sup> Channel One, *The Anti-Russia Project? Time will tell*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/proekt-anti-rossiya-vremya-pokazhet-fragment-vypuska-ot-13-07-2021> (accessed 10 October 2022).

<sup>58</sup> REN TV, *Anti-Russia: Why was the conflict inevitable?*, 9 April 2022, <https://ren.tv/project/dokumentalnyispetsproekt/961841-proekt-anti-rossiia-pochemu-konflikt-byl-neizbezhen-09-04-2022?ysclid=18j3wvfm8i294481793>.

<sup>59</sup> Vladimir Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>60</sup> Rossiiskaya Gazeta, *How Russophobia and Nazism sprouted in Ukraine*, 30 April 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/04/27/kak-na-ukraine-prorastali-rusofobiia-s-nacizmom.html?ysclid=18j529vh8t421707981>

<sup>61</sup> RIA.ru, *As part of the Rada’s proposal, Ukraine was to be totally freed from its Soviet past*, 01 September 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220901/ukraina-1813764404.html?ysclid=18j790il4c183137341>.

<sup>62</sup> Rossiiskaya Gazeta, *Shvydkoi: Kyiv’s policy targets a total ban on Russian culture*, 25 January 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/01/25/shvydkoj-politika-kieva-napravlena-na-polnyj-zapret-russkoj-kultury.html?ysclid=18j6zrgqh5544323518>.

<sup>63</sup> Stefan Meister, *Russkiy Mir: ‘Russian World’. On the genesis of a geopolitical concept and its effects on Ukraine*, German Council on Foreign Relations, 3 May 2016, <https://dgap.org/en/events/russkiy-mir-russian-world>.

between nation states in the Russian ‘near-abroad’ and attempts to appeal to the common ethnic-linguistic-historical background between Russians living in Russia and beyond. This frame expresses the idea that Russia acts as a guardian of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, i.e. Russians have the right to intervene to ‘protect *our* people’ (emphasis added).<sup>64</sup>

### *The Russian (dis)information frames on the West*

A final frame which has received much attention from the Russian media in the context of the 2022 Russian invasion has been that which is clustered around Ukraine as a symbolic bridgehead for the West (US and EU) or as a figurative battleground for Russia power standoff with the West. An unwarranted, but predominant, pre-invasion (dis)information sub-frame was Russian media’s concern that Ukraine was about to accede to Western defense organizations. One media outlet held that ‘[t]he United States promotes Ukraine's accession to NATO’, which is portrayed as a clear breach of by Russia purported international agreements that NATO can extend into Eastern Europe.<sup>65</sup> In the aftermath of the 2022 invasion, the Russian media threw their weight behind the official state-condoned view that the invasion of Ukraine was purely defensive from the Russian side, as it was allegedly provoked by NATO and ‘[t]he conflict in Ukraine is a consequence of NATO's eastward expansion’.<sup>66</sup>

After the invasion, Russian (dis)information tried to shift the blame for the conflict even further onto the collective West. The Russian media portrays Russia as having been ‘provoked’ into the conflict by the West, as ‘NATO countries have pushed Ukraine towards armed confrontation with Russia for decades’.<sup>67</sup> The EU’s ‘Eastern Partnership’ policy is depicted as an instrument to force Ukraine ‘to develop relations with the EU without Russia, and instead of relations with Russia’, hence prompting Russian action.<sup>68</sup>

The Russian political spins on the Western military assistance sent to Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion depict the latter as a direct cause for the prolongation and escalation of violence in the war. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu has claimed that ‘[t]he US and the Western countries [...] do their best to protract the special military operation as much as possible’ through ‘the growing number of foreign arms shipments’ to allegedly inflame the conflict further.<sup>69</sup> The West is thus, according to the media, exacerbating the war as ‘Ukraine

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<sup>64</sup> Life.ru, *Zakharova*

<sup>65</sup> Channel One, *Ukraine's accession to NATO is promoted by the United States*, 20 October 2021, [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2021-10-20/415069-soedinennye\\_shtaty\\_prodvigayut\\_vstuplenie\\_ukrainy\\_v\\_nato](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2021-10-20/415069-soedinennye_shtaty_prodvigayut_vstuplenie_ukrainy_v_nato).

<sup>66</sup> Rossiiskaya Gazeta, *Milorad Dodik: The conflict in Ukraine is a consequence of NATO's eastward expansion*, 19 September 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/09/19/milorad-dodik-konflikt-na-ukraine-eto-sledstvie-rasshireniia-nato-na-vostok.html?ysclid=18jcsu3ovi369168543>. All relevant international organizations have, however, confirmed that no such agreements actually exist.

<sup>67</sup> Rubaltic.ru, *Special military provocation: how the West was pitting Russia and Ukraine against each other*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.rubaltic.ru/editorial/20220505-spetsialnaya-voennaya-provokatsiya-kak-zapad-stravlival-rossiyu-i-ukrainu/>.

<sup>68</sup> Rubaltic.ru, *Special military provocation*

<sup>69</sup> RBC.ru, *Shoigu accused the West of dragging out the operation ‘until the last Ukrainian’*, 12 April 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/625e9afb9a794722bcfe0244>.

hits peaceful civilians with NATO arms'.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the Russian (dis)information on NATO and EU military assistance exaggerate the size and contents of the donations. Allegations that '[t]he West is literally 'pumping' Ukraine with weapons and sending well-trained soldiers into the region' appear with regular frequency in the Russian media space.<sup>71</sup> The NATO and EU countries' delivery of armoury and vital supplies for the Ukrainian troops has been construed as an active engagement in the conflict by the Russian press, and reported as a 'direct involvement of Western countries in the Ukrainian conflict [which] makes them a party to it [...] We have no illusions that today the Russian Armed Forces and the [Donetsk] DNR and [Lugansk] LNR militias are confronted [...] by the military machines of the collective West'.<sup>72</sup> This shift in narrative of who the Russian military is confronting in Ukraine, has served to sell to the public on the lack of visible success of the 'special operation' in the past year and maintain the myth of the 'great Russian army' intact. To protect the reputation of Russia's military prowess, media has picked up on the fake victorious battles of Russian troops which have been disseminated in Tik-Tok.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, lush TV imagery have been put out to show the latest in technological warfare, such as, for example, novel Russian nuclear submarines, drones, anti-missile complexes, rockets capable of hitting advanced NATO arms, as well as innovations in body armour to protect Russian soldiers in battle.<sup>74</sup>

Russian allegations also involve supposed US biological weapons laboratories claimed to be located on the territory of Ukraine.<sup>75</sup> Such (dis)information sub-frames had already appeared before invasion, but became more widespread as the conflict began. One of the main TV channels alleged that 'Russian troops revealed over 30 US biolaboratories on the territory of Ukraine, when they came to protect Luhansk and Donetsk Peoples' Republics. These laboratories produce mass-destruction mutants: birds, bats, beetles and midges. Such mutants are produced to attack Russia'.<sup>76</sup> Another news outlet expanded this perceived threat to the global domain. It argued that 'the US build over 400 biolaboratories all over the world, which is a threat not only to Russia but to the whole world'.<sup>77</sup> Nuclear weapons also play an important role in this rhetoric. Media echo Putin's claim that Ukraine is endangering global and Russian security by rebuilding its nuclear capabilities with the help of the West: '[t]hey do not even

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<sup>70</sup> Channel One, *Donbas appeared under a heavy fire of Ukrainian Nazis*, 14 June 2022, <https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-06-14/431168-donbass-okazalsya-vnov-pod-plotnym-ognem-ukrainskih-natsistov>.

<sup>71</sup> Vesti.ru, *The West is pumping Ukraine with weapons, despite the protests of its citizens*, 14 April 2022, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/270404>; Izvestiya.ru, *The State Duma said that the West contributed to the escalation of the situation in Ukraine*, 17 June 2022, <https://iz.ru/1351199/2022-06-17/v-gosdume-zaiavili-0-sposobstvovanii-zapada-eskalatsii-situatsii-na-ukraine>.

<sup>72</sup> Lenta.ru, *It became known about the secret work of NATO special forces in Ukraine*, 25 June 2022, <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/06/25/secret/>.

<sup>73</sup> BBC Ukraine *How fake news about the war in Ukraine gathers millions of views on TikTok*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-61220423>.

<sup>74</sup> RIA.ru, *New Russian Weapons*, undated, <https://ria.ru/arms/>.

<sup>75</sup> These allegations have been deemed unfounded by OSCE (see OSCE, *Report on violations of international humanitarian and human rights law*; OSCE, *Daily and spot reports from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine*).

<sup>76</sup> Channel One, *Three dozen Pentagons' secret laboratories carrying out illegal experiments have been identified on the territory of Ukraine*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-03-13/423399-na-territorii-ukrainy-vyavleny-tri-desyatka-taynyh-laboratoriy-pentagona-provodyaschih-zapreschennye-opyty>.

<sup>77</sup> Fishki.net, *US biological laboratories in Ukraine attacked Russia: COVID-19, and smallpox are only a small part of released viruses*, 19 July 2022, <https://fishki.net/anti/4190097-biolaboratorii-ssha-na-ukraine-atakovali-rossiju-koronavirus-ospa--lishy-malaja-chasty-vypuwennyh-virusov.html>

hide their readiness to use weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, against us. The territory of Ukraine has been chosen as a bridgehead for this'.<sup>78</sup>

A final sub-frame is the narrative in the Russian press and social media of NATO as an existential threat to the Russian Federation and of Ukraine as a bridgehead from which a NATO/Western military assault on Russia might be launched. The Ukrainian military response to the Russian invasion is also attributed to Western designs against Russia. The outlets claim that '[t]he West and NATO uses the country as a breeding ground for tension at the Russian borders, which allows to speculate on the topic of Russian aggression and justify the anti-Russian policy'.<sup>79</sup> The media published extractions from Putin's September speech dedicated to a partial mobilization, the allegation is that 'the goal of the West is to weaken, divide, and ultimately destroy Russia'.<sup>80</sup> The accusation in Russian media is thus that Western countries are spreading anti-Russian (dis)information in Ukraine and somehow controlling Ukraine politically. Putin argues that an 'anti-Russian' project was invented by the US, and Ukraine was instrumentalized to develop this project in the region. Russian media rhetoric often focused on the fact that Ukraine is turning into anti-Russian stooge with the help of 'supervisors' from the EU and the U.S.: 'Ukraine is the puppet of the West'<sup>81</sup>; '[t]he U.S. has invested billions of dollars in an anti-Russian project in Ukraine [...] Washington was making similar investments even before the current escalation of the Ukrainian crisis'.<sup>82</sup> The theme of Western influence over Ukraine intensified after the invasion and peaked when partial mobilization is announced.

### **Fabricating a war through emotional appeal and displaced associations**

The Russian (dis)information on Ukraine has, as we have seen, been built largely, but not exclusively, on fictional accounts and information manipulation. This is a high-risk strategy for a state operating in a mixed media landscape and hence not in full control of the 'marketplace of ideas' inside of Russia, at least not prior to March 2022. However, the Russian propaganda transmitted by the media has clearly been effective in the sense that surveys show elevated public support for the 'special operation' in Ukraine and the Russian Armed Forces' action in Ukraine.<sup>83</sup> It is also worth noting that when Russians are asked whether they believe

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<sup>78</sup> Channel One, *In his address, the president explained in detail the reasons for the decision to partially mobilize Russia*, 21 September 2022, [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-09-21/438157-prezident\\_podrobno\\_ob\\_yasnil\\_v\\_svoem\\_obraschenii\\_prichiny\\_prinyatiya\\_resheniya\\_o\\_chastichnoy\\_mobilizatsii\\_v\\_rossii?ysclid=l8fyftqac616916513](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-09-21/438157-prezident_podrobno_ob_yasnil_v_svoem_obraschenii_prichiny_prinyatiya_resheniya_o_chastichnoy_mobilizatsii_v_rossii?ysclid=l8fyftqac616916513).

<sup>79</sup> Fishki.net, *Ukraine is a puppet of the West*, 31 May 2021, <https://fishki.net/anti/3777041-ukraina--marionetka-v-rukah-zapada.html>.

<sup>80</sup> NTV.ru, *Putin announced a partial mobilization in Russia*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2724682/>.

<sup>81</sup> Fishki.net, *US biological laboratories in Ukraine attacked Russia*.

<sup>82</sup> Gazeta.ru, *The Council of Federation calculated the U.S. contribution to the "anti-Russia" project in Ukraine*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/04/25/17631872.shtml>

<sup>83</sup> Public polls show that after public support peaked in April 2022 at 81%, over 70% of Russian's polled stated they support or strongly support the intervention since May 2022 (see Levada Centre, *Conflict with Ukraine*). Although we refer to specific percentages here, we hold that the best way of understanding a public opinion poll is to see broader tendencies (majority, minority etc.). For a more detailed discussion of the opportunities and shortcomings of doing surveys in Russia, see Denis Volkov, 'Are meaningful public opinion polls possible in today's Russia?' Comment, Levada Center, 24 March 2023, available at: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/04/24/are-meaningful-public-opinion-polls-possible-in-today-s-russia/> and

if Russia moving in the right direction or not, a majority find that in spite of the uncertainties of war and the hardship of months of economic sanctions they are more optimistic about the Russian future than they were prior to the invasion (64 percent in October 2022; in comparison to 48 percent in December 2021)<sup>84</sup>. It is thus fair to say that Russian (dis)informers have managed to successfully fabricate a war and produce credible justifications for the conflict in the eyes of their audience. We will argue that the Russian public's acceptance of the state's fictional accounts about the situation in Ukraine has relied on three principal factors. First, the key role played by the media as the emitter of fabricated realities. Second, the reliance on techniques to displace or distort real emotional associations. Third, the emotional gratification inherent to fictional accounts.

First, central to the Russian public's acceptance of the (dis)information about the war, Ukraine and the West is the active role played by the Russian state or pro-regime media companies. We posit that the media has exerted a larger influence in the information manipulation on Ukraine than the government itself and is the key emitter responsible for the emotional mobilization of the Russian audience. The media has not only transmitted the government's line, but also generated false or biased news content on their own accord. Examples of that are talk shows where pro-Russian former Ukrainian officials, alleged 'experts' or 'witnesses' intervene to give distorted or misleading views of the conflict. Furthermore, fabricated visual evidence is extremely important to enhance the credibility of the fictional mediatic reality. Tear-filled TV-footage of actual or claimed refugees are also common, not infrequently accompanied by harrowing imagery of suffering or dead children.<sup>85</sup> Another example of this is numerous fabricated slick 'live streams' from the 'battlefield' and fake videos of victorious Russian attacks.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, RIA.ru has disseminated pictures of the 'original secret documents' that allegedly demonstrated the Ukrainian army's intentions prior to February 2022 to resolve the Donbas conflict with armed violence.<sup>87</sup> The media in Russia has thus been crucial in 'flooding' the 'marketplace of ideas' with messages and visually stimulating content which have appealed to the Russian audiences emotionally as opposed to rationally-logically.<sup>88</sup> The fact that independent or foreign media has been restricted, and/or as of March 2022 effectively curtailed, has increased the possibility of the Russian state and pro-regime media to expose the Russian public to an even greater volume of uncorroborated news stories.

Second, another factor explaining the Russian public's openness to fabricated realities has been the (dis)informer's use of techniques of displacement or distortion of associative neural processes. As noted, emotional political communication may function to manipulate the individual's somatic markers and impair the individual's social reality monitoring. The Russian government and media's longstanding, low-key negative campaigns about Ukraine and its political elite, with its earliest roots traced back to the 2004 Orange Revolution, have worked to displace and distort emotionally-triggered associations about the neighbouring country in the Russian public's mindset. Many of the current media falsehoods or fictions about Ukraine have roots in distorted news frames communicated to Russians for an extended period of time,

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Maxim Alyukov 'In Russia, opinion polls are a political weapon' Open Democracy Analysis, 9 March 2022; available at < <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-opinion-polls-war-ukraine/>>.

<sup>84</sup> Levada Centre, *Conflict with Ukraine*

<sup>85</sup> RIA.ru, *Genocide of the civilian population of Donbas*.

<sup>86</sup> BBC Ukraine *How fake news about the war in Ukraine gathers millions of views on TikTok*

<sup>87</sup> RIA.ru, *Investigators found secret documents of the National Battalion Azov in Mariupol*, 16 May 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220523/mariupol-1790137975.html>

<sup>88</sup> It could be said that the Russian media has relied extensively the Nazi chief propagandist Josef Goebbels adage that lies should be told only about unverifiable facts (see Ellul, *Propaganda*). A fictional claim becomes easy to sustain if it is almost impossible to corroborate its veracity.

and thus become sedimented and ‘naturalized’ in the Russian collective associative memory. The constant anti-Ukrainian and, more recent, anti-Western media coverage from a multitude of domestic media sources have meant that the Russian public’s associations based on real and nuanced social monitoring processes about such topics has been displaced by fabricated associations. This process has been reinforced but the fact that the Russian state and pro-regime media has set an editorial line on Ukraine which has exhibited strong internal consistency over time. Moreover, our research also shows that as preparations for war began, the media began circulating well-established fictitious messages about Ukraine with greater frequency and emotional intensity from December 2021 onwards. The susceptibility of the average Russian to such displaced associations is evident from the fact a majority affirm that they can no longer discern Ukraine as a politically neutral, independent and/or pacific country. According to the Levada Center, across all age brackets, since early 2022 onwards more than 70 percent of the polled Russian public view Ukraine negatively.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, the Russian public’s openness to fabricated realities can also be explained as a consequence of that fictional experiences may be more emotionally appealing or gratifying to an individual than (f)actual experiences. The fictional characterization of Donbas as the clearcut ‘victim’ and the Ukrainian government-cum-the West, as the brutal ‘enemy’ produces a sense of black-and-white narrative of events which for most people is emotionally reassuring. The stark friend-enemy depictions impede messy moral dilemmas in the public’s mind of who is at fault and who is deserving of sympathy. Moreover, virtual reality or mediated events of the Russian military prowess in the field or attractive images of high technology weaponry has provided the Russian public with instant patriotic pride over what the country is capable of. Such emotions help buoy favourable Russian public expectations on the future of the conflict as well as the country itself. Finally, the ‘plug-and-play’ conspiracy theories of the West as trying to encroach on Russia, compromise its status as an independent state, exploit it for its natural resources and/or Western/NATO hegemony in Eastern Europe are popular within Russia. The Russian media’s narrative of Russian as standing up to the West, fighting for survival as a state and an alleged ‘fairer’ world order, thus provoke emotions such as dignity and a sense of justice in Russian audiences. Such findings go some way toward explaining that the emotion which most polled Russians identify with when it comes to their country’s actions in Ukraine is pride.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps there is something to Hannah Arendt observation that there is preference in the masses for fictional accounts and conspiracy theories to hard facts, as a consequence of that the former are usually easier to understand and more emotionally satisfying, despite (or perhaps due to) their ‘mysteriousness’.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusions

Propaganda has been a constant in both pre-modern and modern war making. The Russian (dis)information campaign to generate public consent and support for the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine can in this sense be seen as yet another example of use of (dis)information in times of war. However, what can be deemed as a more unusual feature is that the Russian

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<sup>89</sup> Levada Centre, *Conflict with Ukraine*

<sup>90</sup> Levada Centre, *Conflict with Ukraine*

<sup>91</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Harcourt, 1948), p.351

propaganda effort on Ukraine to such a large extent depends on very elaborate fabricated accounts of peoples, places, and events. Our argument has explored why the Russian public has not rejected the fictional and uncorroborated assertions used to frame the war effort. We posit that the public acceptance has been facilitated by the media's ability to manipulate emotional associations and provide emotional gratification.

Our conceptual framework helped us to tease out the mechanisms which link emitter with audience, as well as the link between message and public support. We thus make an original contribution to the propaganda literature as we show how (dis)information plays on emotions and associative prompters conducive to the (dis)informer's goals. In addition, our conceptual framework theorizes on why an audience would feel attracted to and internalize false or deceptive information. Our theory sheds light on how emotionally-loaded, mediated political communication may induce biases in an individual's somatic markers and act impair an individual's ability to monitor social reality. We find this to be a plausible explananda for why the audience(s) fall for fictional accounts even when on a rational-logical level 'they should know better'. Such theoretical insights can have useful applications outside the current case study on Russia. For example, in the academic debates on hybrid warfare, disinformation, 'fake news' or the 'weaponization of information' linked to either the controversial legacy of Donald Trump's White House communication strategies, or China's (dis)information campaigns within the country and beyond. We believe the concepts carry great explanatory potential whether in a democratic setting or a mixed one.

Our empirical findings point to the key role the Russian media has played in effectuating the emotional mobilization necessary for the broad public to support to the 'special operation'. Media has decided and operated on the precise instruments of (non-)verbal influence to increase the Russian public's susceptibility and strategies to increase exposure to tailored narratives. The Russian media has frequently combined different emotions in its (dis)information, such as pride, anger, injustice or fear. For example, tailored visualities (e.g. pictures of suffering children) or conspiracy theories (NATO or the Ukrainian political elite), evoking anger or injustice, can be paired in the same news message with Russian soldiers allegedly saving Ukrainian women and children, inducing pride. Another example is the emotion of glory and pride that is conjured up by references to victory over Nazi Germany in 1945 are layered on top of emotions of anger linked to fictitious accounts of a current-day Nazi-led Ukraine. We find this mix of emotions crucial in the (dis)information campaign. As the emotional triggers as well as associative memories will vary from individual to individual, the combination of different emotions in a single news item will ensure the broadest possible public following. Thus, the heavy pandering to pride, anger, injustice or fear have created the perfect 'storm' of emotions which explain not only the consent of the Russian public to the initial attack on Ukraine but also the continued public support. The strong emotions conjured up can also be seen as explananda for why even Russians who might not agree with the official assessments of Ukraine or the West, and/or know that they are exposed to disinformation, tend to support their country's action in the neighboring country. The Russian media has been key in terms of concertedly putting forward a determined depiction of events in Ukraine or in the West, creating a surround effect which few Russian media users have had the ability to resist. In sum, the mix of emotions have created the ideal conditions for an offensive (dis)information strategy dovetailing the Russian government's military strategy, and drafting in both the willing and unwilling public into not only consenting but also supporting the war.