

Oleksii Polegkyi\*

# Russian disinformation and propaganda before and after the invasion of Ukraine

Rosyjska dezinformacja i propaganda przed i po inwazji na Ukrainę

**Abstract:** Disinformation and propaganda are key aspects of Russia's war strategy as it uses the information environment to justify its actions in international politics, both domestically and abroad, and to coerce audiences into unwittingly supporting its actions. Russia, leading up to and throughout the conflict with Ukraine, brought the full scope of its propaganda apparatus to bear, leveraging overt and covert capabilities on both media and disinformation tools to justify the invasion and [attempt to] destroy international support for Ukraine. What kind of instruments, methods, and narratives has Russia used before and after its invasion of Ukraine?

The spread of disinformation by the Russian Federation prior to and after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 as well as the actions taken in response by Ukraine, allied governments, and civil and international organizations provide an important perspective as well as lessons on how to counteract disinformation and propagandistic narratives.

**Keywords:** Russia, Ukraine, disinformation, propaganda, war

**Streszczenie:** Dezinformacja i propaganda są kluczowymi aspektami strategii wojennej Rosji, ponieważ wykorzystuje ona środowisko informacyjne do uzasadniania swoich działań w polityce międzynarodowej, zarówno w kraju, jak i za granicą, oraz do zmuszania odbiorców do nieświadomego wspierania jej działań. Rosja, prowadząc do konfliktu z Ukrainą i przez cały ten czas, wykorzystwała cały swój aparat propagandowy, wykorzystując jawne i tajne możliwości zarówno mediów, jak i narzędzi dezinformacyjnych, aby usprawiedliwić inwazję i zniszczyć międzynarodowe poparcie dla Ukrainy. Jakich instrumentów, metod i narracji używała Rosja przed i po inwazji na Ukrainę?

Szerzenie dezinformacji przez Federację Rosyjską przed i po inwazji na Ukrainę w lutym 2022 r., a także działania podjęte w odpowiedzi przez Ukrainę, sojusznicze rządy, organizacje pozarządowe i międzynarodowe przedstawiają ważną perspektywę i lekcje, jak przeciwdziałać dezinformacji i narracjom propagandowym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Rosja, Ukraina, dezinformacja, propaganda, wojna

\* Oleksii Polegkyi, PhD, Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1025-551X>, e-mail: [polegkyi@gmail.com](mailto:polegkyi@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Since 2014, promoting Kremlin narratives outside the country and shaping public opinion about Russia and its actions has become a priority for the Russian propaganda machine in connection with its information warfare. Russia's efforts towards disinformation as part of its communication strategy are considered a form of hybrid warfare that adopts multiple instruments and is used throughout multiple channels<sup>1</sup>. "Supported by state-controlled media and a broader 'eco-system' of pro-Kremlin media, Russian authorities have made concerted efforts to denigrate Ukraine, portray it as a threat to global security, and attack the international community for supporting Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence within its internationally recognized borders"<sup>2</sup>.

The power of disinformation is strictly linked to the social impact it is able to articulate. Modern Russian propaganda focuses on disinformation campaigns that aim to fragment society and relativize information rather than promote a specific ideology. The goal is to undermine the foundations of rational perception and destroy social trust in the targeted countries. The Kremlin often exploits existing socio-political tensions to its advantage rather than creating new problems<sup>3</sup>.

Studies of Russian state-backed media platforms have shown that over 80% of Sputnik's and RT's coverage of European countries focuses on issues related to "conflict within politics and society, the failures of public bodies, or alienation within the democratic system"<sup>4</sup>. The migration crisis and terrorist attacks in Europe have been used by the Kremlin to criticize the "West" and incite hostility within EU countries, reinforcing the dichotomy of a "strong Russia" against a "weak, decadent West". For example, in Germany, public concern and inter-

- 1 L. Bennett, S. Livingston, *The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions*, "European Journal of Communication" 2018, no. 33(2), pp. 122-139.
- 2 *Disinformation about the current Russia-Ukraine conflict – seven myths debunked*, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/disinformation-about-current-russia-ukraine-conflict-seven-myths-debunked-2022-01-24\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/disinformation-about-current-russia-ukraine-conflict-seven-myths-debunked-2022-01-24_en) [20.03.2023].
- 3 P. Pomerantsev, M. Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*, Institute of Modern Russia, New York 2014.
- 4 G. Ramsay, S. Robertshaw, *Weaponizing News: RT, Sputnik and Targeted Disinformation*, London 2019.

est in hostile information operations was caused by the “Lisa case”<sup>5</sup>, in which Russia tried to increase anti-immigrant sentiments. Brexit also gave Russia a chance to take advantage of anti-European sentiments and strengthen its illiberal allies.

## 1. Russian instruments of influence

1. Russian military doctrine views information warfare as a constant “war in peace” and creating hybrid threats is a key strategy. An essential aspect of Russian information and psychological operations is reflexive control, which is similar to the Chinese concept of “stratagems” and the American concept of “perception management”.

Contemporary Russian propaganda uses techniques from the Cold War era, adapted to the new reality and exploiting the potential of technology and mass media in ways that would have been unthinkable in Soviet times<sup>6</sup>. Modern Russian disinformation strategy is very much about the cognitive dimension<sup>7</sup>. Russia has embraced the concept of perpetual competition in the information environment and has created an ecosystem of disinformation and propaganda based on the use of diverse and overlapping approaches.

There are several important elements in the strategy of the Russian Federation in conducting information warfare; firstly, it is holistic and integrates both digital-technological and cognitive-psychological attacks. While military and digital sabotage is aimed at disrupting and destroying the managerial capacity of the state, psychological sabotage is aimed at misleading the victim, discrediting the leadership, and disorienting and demoralizing the population and armed forces. Second, it is unified, synchronizing the information struggle with military and political actions, and involving state and non-state actors such

5 S. Meister, *The “Lisa case”: Germany as a target of Russian disinformation*, “NATO Review” 2016, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/07/25/the-lisa-case-germany-as-a-target-of-russian-disinformation/index.html> [20.03.2023].

6 Ch. Paul, M. Matthews, *The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*, Rand Corp., 2016, p. 1, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html> [20.02.2023].

7 C. Wagnsson, M. Lundström, *Ringing true? The persuasiveness of Russian strategic narratives*, “Media, War & Conflict”, 11 June 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17506352221101273> [20.03.2023].

as military, quasi-military, and non-military. Third, the information campaign is a continuous strategic effort, conducted in both “peacetime” and wartime, domestically and internationally, through various media and social networks<sup>8</sup>.

Russian disinformation and propaganda have some other distinctive features. Russian propaganda is produced in incredibly large volumes and is broadcast and distributed via a huge number of channels. According to some researchers, it is rapid, continuous, repetitive, and it lacks commitment to consistency<sup>9</sup>. Russian disinformation action is also very responsive to social and political events. Due to their lack of commitment to objective reality, Russian propagandists do not need to wait to check or verify facts, they just disseminate an interpretation of emergent events that appears to best favour their themes and objectives.

## 2. Russian disinformation attempts after February 2022

When writing about Russian propaganda, it is important to note that it has two main objectives: external and internal; used domestically to maintain support for Putin’s regime, build acceptance for war, and prepare the population for Western sanctions. After February 2022, the main focus of Kremlin propaganda within Russia was to present the invasion as a war with NATO, to rally support around Putin against the “existential threat to the Fatherland”, and to dehumanize Ukrainians.

One of the specific concerns regarding Russian propaganda and disinformation in Ukraine is that it is not always possible to distinguish propaganda targeted towards Russians in Russia, Russian speakers in Ukraine, or Ukrainians due to the use of the Russian language in both countries. Before 2022, Russian media, including cable TV and social media, were still influential in Ukraine.

The external use is to follow the Russian propaganda playbook of the four D’s: *dismissing, distorting, distracting, dismaying* the real image

8 See more O. Polegkyi, *Tackling Kremlin disinformation in the EU*, [in:] *Information wars against Ukraine and other European countries: Lithuania's experience in tackling propaganda*, Center for Public Diplomacy, Kyiv 2020, pp. 27-55.

9 Ch. Paul, M. Matthews, op. cit.

of the war and atrocities committed by the Russian army in Ukraine for foreign audiences<sup>10</sup>. With the first technique, *dismiss*, agents of disinformation seek to refute objective information that is unfavourable to them by using spurious arguments. For example, Russia's claims that Ukraine has committed atrocities against its own people in the Donbas region have no basis in fact. With the second technique, *distort*, agents of disinformation attempt to portray the facts in a different light. An example is Russia's description of the war in Ukraine as a "special operation". With the third technique, *distract*, Russia is using false information to try to shift the focus away from information unfavourable to itself. For example, the Russian government is portraying Ukraine as the aggressor or as an unjust state and claims that Ukraine is controlled by a neo-Nazi regime. Russia also claims that the international community's response to Russia's attack on Ukraine is motivated by "Russophobia". This is intended to distract attention from Russia's blatant violation of international law. The fourth technique, *dismay*, is used to create a climate of fear in the targeted countries and restrict their ability to counteract. As part of this technique, the Russian government is threatening further escalation, including a possible nuclear attack etc.

In the weeks and months leading up to Russia invading Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the Kremlin employed false and misleading narratives to justify military action against Ukraine, mask the Kremlin's operational planning, and deny any responsibility for the coming war<sup>11</sup>. Collectively, these narratives served as *casus belli* to engage in a war of aggression against Ukraine.

In order to justify this aggression, President Putin relied on long-standing concepts that had been propagated by the Kremlin for years<sup>12</sup>. These included claims that Ukraine was created by Lenin and that its

10 B. Nimmo, *Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It, Stop Fake*, 19 May 2015, <https://bit.ly/3Eraton> [3.04.2023].

11 A. Carvin (ed.), *Narrative Warfare. How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine*, Atlantic Council, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Narrative-Warfare-Final.pdf> [29.03.2023].

12 V. Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [20.03.2023].

present leadership consists of corrupt officials and Nazi sympathisers who have pushed the country towards ruin<sup>13</sup>.

From the beginning of the invasion, the Kremlin emphasized demoralizing Ukrainians and destroying their will to fight. The tactics used included so-called deepfake videos, forged documents to embarrass Ukrainian officials, and fake news suggesting that Ukraine would be conquered soon<sup>14</sup>. Pro-Kremlin narratives also used fear and intimidation tactics against Ukrainians, attempting to make them believe that Russia was unbeatable, and Ukraine's neighbours were untrustworthy. Ukraine's alleged use of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons, or a "dirty bomb"<sup>15</sup>, is often highlighted by Russia as a diversionary tactic meant to deflect attention from Russian actions. Pro-Kremlin media and Telegram channels also promoted a narrative claiming Ukraine resold weapons donated by Western countries for profit etc.

The Russian campaign has also directly targeted the role of the European Union and NATO, misportraying them as alleged aggressive threats against Russia's "legitimate security concerns"<sup>16</sup>. In attempting to justify the attack on Ukrainian sovereignty, Russian propaganda usually portrays Ukraine as an object rather than a subject of international law. Since 2014, the Kremlin has propagated the myth that the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity was a "coup d'état" that was not supported by the residents of Crimea or eastern and southern Ukraine, leading to a divide in Ukrainian society. These narratives are disseminated through all available tools, including top officials, TV channels, social networks, trolls, and bots.

The Russian government runs coordinated information campaigns on its own social media accounts. For example<sup>17</sup>, 75 Russian govern-

13 Idem, *Presidential Address to Federal Assembly*, Moscow, 21 February 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/70565> [20.03.2023].

14 A. Wahlstrom et al., *The IO Offensive: Information Operations Surrounding the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, 2022, <https://www.mandiant.com/resources/information-operations-surrounding-ukraine> [3.04.2023].

15 G. Sklariewska, *Brudna bomba shcho tse take i navishcho rosiya vygadala tsey fey*, Detector Media, 2022, <https://ms.detector.media/propaganda-ta-vplivi/post/30519/2022-10-26-brudna-bomba-shcho-tse-take-i-navishcho-rosiya-vygadala-tsey-feyk/> [29.03.2023].

16 *Disinformation about...*

17 J. Thompson, T. Graham, *Russian Government Accounts Are Using a Twitter Loophole to Spread Disinformation*, "The Conversation" 2022, <http://theconversation.com/russian-government-accounts-are-using-a-twitter-loophole-to-spread-disinformation-178001> [29.03.2023].

ment Twitter accounts, with 7.3 million followers garnering 35.9 million retweets, 29.8 million likes, and 4 million replies, tweeted 1,157 times between 25 February and 3 March 2022. Roughly 75% of the tweets covered Ukraine and many furthered disinformation narratives questioning Ukraine's status as a sovereign state, drawing attention to alleged war crimes by other countries, and spreading conspiracy theories. Russian government accounts have also been linked to "typosquatting" (registering websites with deliberately misspelt names of similarly named websites) of popular media containing false information.

At the same time, the means for spreading propaganda have changed. In 2014, the main channel of disinformation was Russian television, today it is social networks and websites. Yevhen Fedchenko (founder of STOPFAKE) believes that Ukrainian authorities did the right thing when they closed access to Russian TV and some Russian social platforms in Ukraine. He said "If Ukraine had not done this, then we would have the same situation as in 2014. This would mean that we would have complete information dominance of the enemy on Ukrainian territory"<sup>18</sup>.

To support and spread disinformation, Russia also used international organizations extensively, including the UN. Russian diplomatic missions began circulating some particularly fantastical lies. For example, that the United States was using Ukrainian laboratories to develop biological weapons<sup>19</sup>. In March and June 2022, Russia called for a meeting of the U.N. Security Council with its false allegations about Ukrainian laboratories developing biological weapons with the USA.

Another focus of the Kremlin's disinformation activities against Ukraine was co-opting fact-checking tropes to spread disinformation and distort the truth about its invasion of Ukraine, undermining the trustworthiness of fact-checking as an institution. The DFRLab<sup>20</sup> has

18 L. Shutyak, *Bytva za hromads ku dumku: yak Ukrayina voyuye z Rosiyeyu na informatsijnomu fronti*, explainer.ua, 23 May 2023, <https://explainer.ua/bitva-za-gromadsku-dumku-yak-ukrayina-voyuye-z-rosiyeyu-na-informatsijnomu-fronti/> [12.04.2023].

19 J. Parachini, *Debunking Russian Lies About Biolabs at Upcoming U.N. Meetings*, Rand Corp., 12 September 2022, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/09/debunking-russian-lies-about-biolabs-at-upcoming-un.html> [29.04.2023].

20 I. Dickinson, *How Russia employs fake fact-checking in its disinformation arsenal*, DFRLab, 4 May 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-russia-employs-fake-fact-checking-in-its-disinformation-arsenal-b1790d5f5442> [29.04.2023].

analysed this tactic as Russia has identified its effectiveness in suppressing information on topics ranging from anti-war protests to war crimes. This involves a combination of different types of fact-checks: (1) true or partially true fact-checks; (2) fake fact-checks of real news; and (3) debunks of “Ukrainian disinformation” that was never actually spread by Ukraine. Fake fact-checking organizations were created, framing themselves as apolitical or independent, and they began releasing “analytical” content that was mainly fake<sup>21</sup>.

Russian government-backed attackers ramped up cyber operations beginning in 2021 during the run-up to the invasion. In 2022, Russian government-backed attackers targeted users in Ukraine more than any other country, it increased by 250% compared to 2020 according to Google’s Threat Analysis Group report<sup>22</sup>. The targeting of users in NATO countries increased by over 300% in the same period.

### 3. Strategic and tactical narratives

Narrative is a major structural element of propaganda. A narrative can be understood as a story or as an interpretation of events that help form a desired perception or attitude toward an object. Moscow directs strategic and tactical narratives to different audiences, and four main audiences for Russian propaganda can be defined. First, it is the internal Russian audience. Second, there is the audience in Ukraine, where Russia is trying to undermine the will of Ukrainians to resist the Russian invasion. Third, it is the audience of the “collective West”, where Russia seeks to undermine support for Ukraine. And finally, this is the audience of countries which are trying to keep neutrality – the so-called “global South”.

It is worth distinguishing between strategic, tactical narratives and “stories” of Russian propaganda. Strategic narratives are the way in which countries construct and project their preferred image and vision

21 B. Strick, *Disinformation & Denial: Russia’s attempts to discredit open source evidence of Bucha*, The Centre for Information Resilience, April 2022, <https://www.info-res.org/post/disinformation-denial-russia-s-attempts-to-discredit-open-source-evidence-of-bucha> [21.04.2023].

22 S. Huntley, *Fog of war: how the Ukraine conflict transformed the cyber threat landscape*, Google’s Threat Analysis Group, 17 February 2023, <https://blog.google/threat-analysis-group/fog-of-war-how-the-ukraine-conflict-transformed-the-cyber-threat-landscape/> [29.03.2023].



of the world. “Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors”<sup>23</sup>. Strategic narratives reflect the long-term vision of the world order and international affairs shared by the Russian political elite. Very often, they reflect the Russian leadership’s deeply rooted views of Ukraine and the broader context of the aggression. Even if they are aimed at different audiences, strategic narratives show a certain internal logic and can be well structured and thought out. In the context of Russia’s strategic communication, the strategic narrative might refer to Russia’s ideas of a multipolar world order and its “privileged spheres of influence”, Russia’s status as a great country, and the exceptionalism of Russia as a separate civilization or the “Russian world” concept.

Tactical narratives act as supportive messages aimed at reinforcing the validity of strategic narratives. Unlike strategic narratives, tactical narratives are often illogical or contradictory, highly manipulative, and appeal to emotion.

Dissemination of strategic and tactical narratives is achieved by spreading “stories”; instruments and means to deliver narratives as if they are describing events and facts in a certain way.

Narratives are influential because they provide ordered and simplified frames of meaning that are easy to comprehend and remember, and also to associate with personal experiences<sup>24</sup>. The narrative battle plays itself out transnationally in the form of framing contests around individual events. In this context, disinformation is an element of a broader strategy, varying referred to as nonlinear or hybrid warfare. It involves the use of propaganda, the operation of influence, and state media to transnationally propagate frames and counter-frames fitted into strategic narratives.

Even before the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russian propaganda had already crafted a significant number of narratives that were subsequently used to justify the conflict.

23 A. Miskimmon, B. O’Loughlin, L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, New York 2013, Kindle Edition, p. 18.

24 A. Ventsel et al., *Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia’s Zapad war games*, “Media, War & Conflict” 2019, pp. 1-19.

The Ukraine Crisis Media Center<sup>25</sup> identified 5 main narratives about Ukraine that have been promoted by the Russian media since 2014 and still remain relevant:

- “There is a civil war in Ukraine”;
- “There is powerful Russophobia in Ukraine”;
- “Fascism is thriving in Ukraine”;
- “Ukraine is a failed state”;
- “Ukraine is a puppet of the West”.

These narratives form a logical semantic matrix that mutually reinforces and interconnects the main ideas. For instance, the idea of “Ukraine as a failed state” discredits the Ukrainian state and gives the impression that Russian influence is necessary to settle the chaos on Ukrainian territory, which the local population is allegedly incapable of doing. Related narratives of Russophobia, fascism, and civil war play a similar role in justifying Russian aggression<sup>26</sup>.

Russophobia is an artificial concept actively used by Russian officials and the media since 2014 to defend the annexation of Crimea and aggression against Ukraine. This rhetoric was important to Moscow because it helped portray the reason for the “civil war” in Ukraine as being the uprising of the Russian-speaking population in Crimea and the eastern regions and gave the Russian Federation a reason to intervene. “Protecting the Russian-speaking population in Donbas” has been the main justification for Russian aggression in 2022.

Closely related narratives of Russophobia, fascism, and civil war play a similar role. By their internal logic, the Revolution of Dignity, interpreted by Russian propaganda as a “coup d’état”, brought to power a radical nationalist government whose alleged Russophobic agenda is part of a broader “fascist” policy. Since 2014, the rhetoric about Ukraine’s internal conflict, which was supposed to take place between the fascist government and the rest of the population, has

25 O. Tsekhanovska, L. Tsybulska, *Evolution of Russian Narratives about Ukraine and Their Export to Ukrainian media-landscape*. Ukraine Crisis Media Center, May 2021, p. 8, [https://www.estdev.ee/wp-content/uploads/sites/73/2022/06/HWAG\\_report\\_Eng\\_online.pdf](https://www.estdev.ee/wp-content/uploads/sites/73/2022/06/HWAG_report_Eng_online.pdf) [12.03.2023].

26 Ibid.

continuously prevailed<sup>27</sup>. For instance, this study<sup>28</sup> of Russian narratives promoted in Ukraine shows that the largest number of analysed posts on social media contained a narrative of criminal activities of far-right organizations in Ukraine, mainly discussing groups such as Azov, Right Sector, etc.

The often-used claim that Ukraine and Russia are “one nation” is one of the oldest and most deeply ingrained myths used against Ukraine. The notion of an “all-Russian nation” with no political borders is an ideological construct dating back to imperial times and has been used as an instrument to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and national identity. The Russian government has cultivated this myth with renewed vigour in an attempt to rationalize and justify its military aggression against Ukraine<sup>29</sup>.

Russian propaganda employs various justifications for the war, falling into four categories: historical, political, military, and economic arguments, according to a study by Detector Media<sup>30</sup>. These narratives aim to legitimize Russia’s attempt to upend the world order and extend its influence in Ukraine. Historical arguments include claims that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, accusations of Ukrainian collaboration with Nazis in World War II, assertions that Crimea’s annexation was democratic, etc. Political arguments accuse the EU and NATO of undermining Russia, claim the 2014 Revolution of Dignity was a coup orchestrated by Ukrainian nationalists, and suggest that Ukraine’s government is controlled by fascists or Russophobes. Military arguments assert that Russia, as a nuclear power, won’t be challenged, accuse the Ukrainian military of targeting Russian speakers,

27 #PutinAtWar: How Russia Weaponized “Russophobia”, DFRLab, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/putinatwar-how-russia-weaponized-russophobia-40a3723d26d4> [20.04.2023].

28 A. Fivenson et al., *Shielding Democracy: Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine*, February 2023, [https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED\\_Forum-Shielding-Democracy-Adam-Fivenson.pdf](https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_Forum-Shielding-Democracy-Adam-Fivenson.pdf) [12.04.2023].

29 D. Allan et al., *Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia. How they affect Western policy, and what can be done*. Chatham House report, 13 May 2021, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/2021-05-13-myths-misconceptions-debate-russia-nixey-et-al\\_o.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/2021-05-13-myths-misconceptions-debate-russia-nixey-et-al_o.pdf) [10.03.2023].

30 *For the Glory of Grandfathers, Versus the Mosquitoes. How Russia Justified and Explained the Invasion of Ukraine During the Year of Full-Scale War*, Detector Media, 1 March 2023, <https://11nq.com/jkKc> [10.03.2023].

and claim that evidence of Russian war crimes is fabricated. Economic arguments contend that Europe as well as Ukraine depend on concessions from Russia and rely on Russian energy and resources. These narratives reflect Russia's ongoing efforts to justify its aggression in Ukraine while aiming to shape international perceptions.

In 2022, Russia propagated five primary strategic narratives to justify its actions in Ukraine<sup>31</sup>. These narratives were disseminated through Russian and Russian-speaking media channels, both within Ukraine and internationally. The narratives were: "Russia wants peace, and the West provokes it", "Russia is obliged to protect the inhabitants of Donbass", "Ukraine is the aggressor against Donbas", "The US and NATO create tension in the region", and "Ukraine is a puppet of the West".

The strategic narrative of "Ukrainian authority as Nazi, nationalistic, and criminal" was translated into tactical narratives such as "Ukrainian army committing crimes against civilians" etc. Examples of stories aligned with this narrative included claims that Ukrainian armed forces placed artillery systems in residential areas, or that the evacuation of residents in certain cities was prohibited.

The strategic narrative of "Ukraine is just a battlefield and puppet of the West" translated into tactical narratives like "Ukraine will be abandoned by the West" and "Ukraine will be divided by Western countries". Stories supporting this narrative included allegations of Poland and Hungary conspiring with Russia to seize parts of Ukraine, assertions that the EU and NATO countries refused to assist Ukraine or claims of European countries' citizens being outraged by the behaviour of Ukrainian refugees.

The strategic narrative of "Ukraine as a failed state" resulted in tactical narratives portraying the Ukrainian government as corrupt and against its people, and Ukraine as dysfunctional and unable to survive. Stories in line with this narrative included assertions that the Ukrainian army did not exist, or examples highlighting economic weaknesses.

The strategic narrative of "Ukraine is occupied by Nazis and radicals" transformed into tactical narratives depicting the Ukrainian army

31 Distinctions of strategic and tactical narratives were made based on disinformation chronicles (some of them weekly, some monthly) and analysis provided by those studies: <https://oporaua.org/en/category/viyina/antipropaganda>; <https://disinfo.detector.media/>; <https://uacrisis.org/en/hwag>; <https://texty.org.ua/tag/dezinformatsija/>; <https://voxukraine.org/category/voxcheck-uk>.

as predominantly composed of neo-Nazi and Ukrainian authorities supporting fascist ideologies. Stories promoting this narrative included allegations of crimes committed by Ukrainian volunteer battalions, claims of weapons of mass destruction being developed in Ukrainian bio laboratories, or accusations that nationalists sent teenagers to the frontlines in Mariupol and Chernihiv.

These narratives aimed to shape public opinion and legitimize Russia's actions in Ukraine, perpetuating a distorted view of the situation.

## 4. Free speech and information threats

Free speech is an extremely important element of the European architecture of democratic governance. However, in situations of external influence, free speech also becomes the “weak point” that the Kremlin uses for its influence.

RT (formerly Russia Today) is a good example of such use of mass media for the propaganda effort<sup>32</sup>. RT is a Russian media agency and political influence tool, designed to spread disinformation and undermine Western values around the world. The data points to a clear RT strategy to target non-Russian audiences with Kremlin messaging on Ukraine. This study<sup>33</sup> showed the majority of videos posted to RT's English-language YouTube channel were about Ukraine. Videos on Ukraine accounted for 27% of all RT videos. For RT Deutsch 43% of videos were focused on the conflict in Ukraine. About 40% of RT's French-language YouTube account's videos and views were also of videos on Ukraine.

RT clearly leads the way when it comes to media funding from the state budget in Russia. Over the past 12 years, the funds allocated to the agency almost tripled. More than 1.5 billion USD (115 billion RUB) was allocated from the state budget for mass media in 2021. According to the federal budget for 2022, RT received 25% of all funds

32 *Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, Global Engagement Center, Washington DC 2022, p. 4, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media\\_January\\_update-19.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf) [10.01.2023].

33 R. Orttung, E. Nelson, A. Livshen, *How Russia Today is using YouTube*, “Washington Post”, 23 March 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/23/how-russia-today-is-using-youtube/> [10.01.2023].

for mass media. Just before its invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin allocated a substantial budget, with government spending on “mass media” between February and March 2022 increasing by 433% to reach 17.4 billion Rubles<sup>34</sup>.

In March 2022, the EU imposed sanctions against RT and Sputnik. However, the German language editions, RT DE and SNA, have continued working and spreading their content on several websites under different domains. Days after the EU banned RT for its role in spreading propaganda about the war in Ukraine, it was back in the game. New sites quickly appeared that were a replica of the now-sanctioned RT. More than a hundred other websites – some of which were promoted by RT’s official social media accounts – also popped up to share Spanish, French, and English-language content from RT, according to research from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue<sup>35</sup>.

### **Summary: The effects of Russian propaganda**

Overall, the Russian disinformation campaign is a complex and sophisticated operation that utilizes various tactics, including hacking, spreading of false information, and influencing public opinion. The potential impact of Russian propaganda can be seen across Europe. Many citizens in Western Europe still believe that the conflict is far away from them and that it will not directly affect them. Some Europeans believe that Russia should not be irritated and that certain concessions can be made for the sake of peace, which may push Ukraine to capitulate and avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. In addition to pro-Russian politicians, a large number of pro-Russian voices are critics of militarism and anti-American, rebroadcasting Russian propaganda or criticizing American imperialism. For example, a survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in May

34 A. Michałowska-Kubś, *Coining lies. Kremlin spends 1.5 Billion per year to spread disinformation and propaganda*, Debunk.org, 8 August 2022, <https://www.debunk.org/coining-lies-state-budget-financing-of-russian-propaganda> [10.01.2023].

35 K. Balint et al., *RT Articles are Finding their Way to European Audiences – but how?*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 20 July 2022, [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/rt-articles-are-finding-their-way-to-european-audiences-but-how/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/rt-articles-are-finding-their-way-to-european-audiences-but-how/) [19.03.2023].

2022<sup>36</sup>, showed that even if most Germans (66%) and Italians (56%) mainly blame Russia for the war, 27% of them think that Ukraine, the EU, or the United States is to blame for it.

Another study made in April 2022<sup>37</sup> showed that, while 78% of European citizens agreed that Russian authorities are responsible first and foremost for the war in Ukraine, 17% did not clearly hold Russia responsible. This number also varies widely across EU countries, with much higher numbers in Cyprus (51%), Bulgaria (46%), Greece (45%), Slovenia (39%), the Slovak Republic (36%), and Hungary (34%).

The spread of disinformation and propaganda by the Russian government and aligned actors as well as the actions taken in response by Ukraine and civil and international organizations, provide an important perspective and lessons on how to counteract false and misleading content. Ukrainian resilience to Russian propaganda and disinformation, developed since 2014, has helped the country avoid information chaos in 2022. Ukrainian communicators have excelled in using Hollywood-style videos, catchy memes, and messaging full of up-to-date colloquialisms and humour to counter Russian propaganda.

Preparation, prevention, and resilience are possible in the face of a digital onslaught by a formidable adversary. Russia's persistent engagement with Ukrainian networks over the years has allowed the Ukrainians to practice defending against them. While the Russian propaganda machine continues to operate, the Ukrainian response has shown that a proactive approach can be effective in countering it.

## References

1. #PutinAtWar: How Russia Weaponized "Russophobia", DFRLab, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/putinatwar-how-russia-weaponized-russophobia-40a3723d26d4>.
2. Allan D. et al., *Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia. How they affect Western policy, and what can be done*. Chatham House report, 13 May 2021, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/2021-05-13-myths-misconceptions-debate-russia-nixey-et-al\\_o.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/2021-05-13-myths-misconceptions-debate-russia-nixey-et-al_o.pdf).
- 36 I. Krastev, M. Leonard, *Peace versus Justice: The coming European split over the war in Ukraine*, "Policy Brief", June 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/peace-versus-justice-the-coming-european-split-over-the-war-in-ukraine/> [10.01.2023].
- 37 European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 506: EU's response to the war in Ukraine*, 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2772> [10.01.2023].

3. Balint K. et al., *RT Articles are Finding their Way to European Audiences – but how?*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 20 July 2022, <https://www.isdglobal.org/digital-dispatches/rt-articles-are-finding-their-way-to-european-audiences-but-how/>.
4. Bennett L., Livingston S., *The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions*, "European Journal of Communication" 2018, no. 33(2), pp. 122-139.
5. Carvin A. (ed.), *Narrative Warfare. How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine*, Atlantic Council, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Narrative-Warfare-Final.pdf>.
6. Dickinson I., *How Russia employs fake fact-checking in its disinformation arsenal*, DFRLab, 4 May 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-russia-employs-fake-fact-checking-in-its-disinformation-arsenal-b1790d5f5442>.
7. *Disinformation about the current Russia-Ukraine conflict – seven myths debunked*, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/disinformation-about-current-russia-ukraine-conflict-seven-myths-debunked-2022-01-24\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/disinformation-about-current-russia-ukraine-conflict-seven-myths-debunked-2022-01-24_en).
8. Fivenson A. et al., *Shielding Democracy: Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine*, February 2023 [https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED\\_Forum-Shielding-Democracy-Adam-Fivenson.pdf](https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_Forum-Shielding-Democracy-Adam-Fivenson.pdf).
9. *For the Glory of Grandfathers, Versus the Mosquitoes. How Russia Justified and Explained the Invasion of Ukraine During the Year of Full-Scale War*, Detector Media, 1 March 2023, <https://lnq.com/jkKcF>.
10. Huntley S., *Fog of war: how the Ukraine conflict transformed the cyber threat landscape*, Google's Threat Analysis Group, 17 February 2023, <https://blog.google/threat-analysis-group/fog-of-war-how-the-ukraine-conflict-transformed-the-cyber-threat-landscape/>.
11. Krastev I., Leonard M., *Peace versus Justice: The coming European split over the war in Ukraine*, "Policy Brief", June 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/peace-versus-justice-the-coming-european-split-over-the-war-in-ukraine/>.
12. *Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, Global Engagement Center, Washington DC 2022, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media\\_January\\_update-19.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf).
13. Meister S., *The "Lisa case": Germany as a target of Russian disinformation*, "NATO Review" 2016, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/07/25/the-lisa-case-germany-as-a-target-of-russian-disinformation/index.html>.
14. Michałowska-Kubś A., *Coining lies. Kremlin spends 1.5 Billion per year to spread disinformation and propaganda*, Debunk.org, 8 August 2022, <https://www.debunk.org/coin-ing-lies-state-budget-financing-of-russian-propaganda>.
15. Miskimmon A., O'Loughlin B., Roselle L., *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, New York 2013, Kindle Edition.
16. Nimmo B., *Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It*, Stop Fake, 19 May 2015, <https://bit.ly/3Eraton>.
17. Orttung R., Nelson E., Livshen A., *How Russia Today is using YouTube*, "Washington Post", 23 March 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/23/how-russia-today-is-using-youtube/>.
18. Parachini J., *Debunking Russian Lies About Biolabs at Upcoming U.N. Meetings*, Rand Corp., 12 September 2022, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/09/debunking-russian-lies-about-biolabs-at-upcoming-un.html>.



19. Paul Ch., Matthews M., *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*, Rand Corp., 2016, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.
20. Polegkyi O., *Tackling Kremlin disinformation in the EU*, [in:] *Information wars against Ukraine and other European countries: Lithuania's experience in tackling propaganda*, Center for Public Diplomacy, Kyiv 2020, pp. 27-55.
21. Pomerantsev P., Weiss M., *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*, Institute of Modern Russia, New York 2014.
22. Putin V., *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.
23. Putin V., *Presidential Address to Federal Assembly*, Moscow, 21 February 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/70565>.
24. Ramsay G., Robertshaw S., *Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik and Targeted Disinformation*, London 2019.
25. Sklariewska G., *Brudna bomba shcho tse take i navishcho rosiya vygadala tsey fey*, Detector Media, <https://ms.detector.media/propaganda-ta-vplivi/post/30519/2022-10-26-brudna-bomba-shcho-tse-take-i-navishcho-rosiya-vy-gadala-tsey-feyk/>.
26. Strick B., *Disinformation & Denial: Russia's attempts to discredit open source evidence of Bucha*, The Centre for Information Resilience, April 2022, <https://www.info-res.org/post/disinformation-denial-russia-s-attempts-to-discredit-open-source-evidence-of-bucha>.
27. Shutyak L., *Bytva za hromads'ku dumku: yak Ukrayina voyuye z Rosiyeyu na informatsiynomu fronti*, explainer.ua, 23 May 2023, <https://explainer.ua/bitva-za-gromadsku-dumku-yak-ukrayina-voyuye-z-rosiyeyu-na-informatsiynomu-fronti/>.
28. Thompson J., Graham T., *Russian Government Accounts Are Using a Twitter Loophole to Spread Disinformation*, "The Conversation" 2022, <http://theconversation.com/russian-government-accounts-are-using-a-twitter-loophole-to-spread-disinformation-178001>.
29. Treyger E. et al., *Russian Disinformation Efforts on Social Media*, Rand Corp., 2022, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4373z2.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z2.html).
30. Tsekhanovska O., Tsybulska L., *Evolution of Russian Narratives about Ukraine and Their Export to Ukrainian media-landscape*, Ukraine Crisis Media Center, May 2021, [https://www.estdev.ee/wp-content/uploads/sites/73/2022/06/HWAG\\_report\\_Eng\\_online.pdf](https://www.estdev.ee/wp-content/uploads/sites/73/2022/06/HWAG_report_Eng_online.pdf).
31. Ventsel A. et al., *Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia's Zapad war games*, "Media, War & Conflict" 2019, pp. 1-19.
32. Wagnsson C., Lundström M., *Ringing true? The persuasiveness of Russian strategic narrative*, "Media, War & Conflict", 11 June 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17506352221101273>.
33. Wahlstrom A. et al., *The IO Offensive: Information Operations Surrounding the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, 2022, <https://www.mandiant.com/resources/information-operations-surrounding-ukraine>.