

Fabricating a war?

Russian (dis)information on Ukraine¹

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“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 denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation”⁴

Propaganda has been a part of warmongering since time immemorial. Propaganda and (dis)information are forms of mass communication that seek to generate a response in a target audience conducive to the propagandist’s agenda.⁵ Governmental (dis)information operations

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⁴ Vladimir Putin, ‘Address by the President of the Russian Federation’, video address, Presidential Administration, 24 Feb. 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 29 June 2023.)

⁵ (Dis)information is defined here as a composite of different information typologies. The concept encompasses correct and factual information, political spin and the negatively slanted, as well as 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.

encourage the formation of a specific public opinion by selecting and framing certain facts, values or ideas, while shaping, limiting, reducing or withholding rivalling information.⁶

Throughout history, wartime governments have been keenly aware that, at any given 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 turn against the authorities and their objectives. War propaganda and political spin serve an important function in terms of enticing a country's citizens to 'rally around the flag' in defence of national goals and in keeping morale high even in the face of public sacrifice during the conflict.

The large-scale Russian (dis)information campaign surrounding the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was in this sense far from unexpected. However, what is perhaps more unusual in this case—in comparison with other recent interstate conflicts⁷—is that so much of the content of the Russian propaganda reflects unsubstantiated allegations or completely fictional accounts.⁸ 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—even though it is a war with very real and tragic consequences. The Russian public's overwhelmingly affirmative response to the conflict, to the actions of the national armed forces in Ukraine and to the Russian political leadership in the first year of

⁶ Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and persuasion* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018).

⁷ We make the comparison here with the volume of US (dis)information surrounding the intervention in Iraq in 2003, for example. Also 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, https://www.journalofpd.com/_files/ugd/75feb6_0b07de9714a24643aa4bdeef3fa2c8d3.pdf (accessed 10 July 2023).

⁸ Examples of investigations to verify the Russian fictional accounts encompass OECD, 'Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: threats and governance responses', 3 Nov. 2022, <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde>; 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*, ODIHR.GAL/26/22/Rev.1 (Warsaw: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2022), <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/a/515868.pdf>.

the war is an indicator that the (dis)information has achieved its objective.⁹ This is no small feat in a country where state control of means of communications is of fairly recent date—and was far from absolute until the invasion.

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 of and the technologies behind Russian information manipulation of domestic audiences with a view to unpacking the links between (dis)information and public consent. We also contribute to the literature on propaganda and (dis)information 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 1,000 pieces of (dis)information in the period spanning March 2021—when Russian troops began to gather on the Russia–Ukraine border—until December 2022. This article proceeds as follows. The first section will lay out a literature review, provide a conceptual framework and offer some methodological explanations. The following section will outline the Russian (dis)information frames on Ukraine and the West in the context of the military invasion. The next section provides analysis, followed by Conclusions.

Propaganda and the mechanisms of Russian (dis)information

In the past century, the propaganda literature has tended to focus predominantly on the role of the ‘emitter’ of (dis)information in shaping the audience’s perceptions and attitudes, as well as directing its 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

⁹ Surveys by Levada Center, a Russian independent, non-governmental polling and sociological research institute, show that Russian public support for the military intervention had consistently been above 70 per cent as of November 2022. President Vladimir Putin’s popularity rate, which has been above 60 per cent in the last decade, rose to above 80 per cent in the first six months after the Russian invasion. Levada Center, ‘Conflict with Ukraine, October 2022’, 1 Nov. 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/11/01/conflict-with-ukraine-october-2022/> (last consulted on 20 May 2023).

periods of war or large-scale crisis.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ The media is another key actor in propaganda: however, the literature tends 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.¹² This insight applies in particular to the rare cases of fully totalitarian countries where 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.¹³

The relationship between (dis)information and the audience(s), in particular the mechanisms which enable propaganda to have an effect on the targeted social groups, has been relatively underexplored in propaganda studies.¹⁴ Our research inserts itself into 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.¹⁵ We argue that

¹⁰ Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda technique in the world war* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2013); Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: the formation of men's attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

¹¹ 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) [first edn published in 1988 by Pantheon Books]; John Zaller and Dennis Chiu, 'Government's little helper: US press coverage of foreign policy crises, 1945–1991', *Political Communication* 13: 4, 1996, pp. 385–405, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1996.9963127>.

¹² Zaller and Chiu, 'Government's little helper'; Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing consent*.

¹³ Nancy Snow, *War, media, and propaganda: a global perspective* (Lanham, MD: 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, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205430709337006>.

¹⁴ Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and persuasion*.

¹⁵ Lasswell, *Propaganda technique*.

emotions are indeed central to understanding the mechanisms which link emitter with audience, as well as the links 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’.¹⁶ Emotions act as preconscious somatic markers to sort information based on associations as we move through our environment.¹⁷ In turn, emotionally triggered associations stored in our memories channel our interpretations of reality and guide our attitudes and actions. In this way, emotions organize the cognitive process and shape behaviour. How emotions affect our cognition and conduct is nevertheless undetermined.¹⁸ Theory holds that each individual normally associates 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 to 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.¹⁹ (Dis)informers may also try to invoke a combination of different emotions—positive and negative—into a unique emotional

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ J. H. Kuklinski, *Citizens and politics: perspectives from political psychology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John T. Jost, ‘Ideological asymmetries and the essence of political psychology’, *Political Psychology* 38: 2, 2017, pp. 167–208, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12407>; Constance Duncombe, ‘The politics of Twitter: emotions and the power of social media’, *International Political Sociology* 13: 4, 2019, pp. 409–29, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olz013>.

¹⁸ As Ross argues effectively, ‘those exposed to emotional contagion do not somehow become affective carbon copies’. Andrew A. G. Ross, *Mixed emotions: beyond fear and hatred in international conflict* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 32.

¹⁹ Richard Lazarus, *Emotion and adaptation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

mix.²⁰ The combination of emotions to which the war propagandist may try to appeal will differ according to the circumstances of the conflict (defensive or offensive), and will 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.²¹ An offensive (dis)information strategy may be employed to conjure up support for attacking an enemy; it might rely on a mixed approach to evoke the public's national pride, fear and anger to produce a more confident and aggressive collective response during crises.

Emotions, as we have seen, drive the ability of an audience (or of multiple audiences) 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.²² 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).²³ 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.²⁴ A distortion may also occur when long-term communication of fiction creates strong emotional

²⁰ 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. 217–26, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963\(97\)00119-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(97)00119-7).

²¹ See also J. N. Druckman and Rose McDermott, 'Emotion and the framing of risky choice', *Political Behavior* vol. 30, 2008, pp. 297–321, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9056-y>.

²² Vian Bakir and Andrew McStay, 'Fake news and the economy of emotions', *Digital Journalism* 6: 2, 2018, pp. 154–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1345645>.

²³ 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, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1345645>.

²⁴ Marcia K. Johnson, Carol L. Raye, Alvin Y. Wang and Thomas H. Taylor, '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. 229–40, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.5.3.229>.

associations within the public's memory, dislodging any earlier associations based on true and independently verified facts. A distortion of this sort is often reinforced by the durable internal consistency of fictional messages, which can lead an individual to fail to conduct proper social monitoring.²⁵ Finally, fictional experiences may also be more emotionally appealing to an individual than (f)actual experiences. This occurs 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 audiovisual stimuli.²⁶

Russian (dis)information in the context of the military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 provides a rich case-study for the application of 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 which information can have, designated control over the media as an objective in the two most recent national security strategies of the Russian Federation.²⁷ This has gradually brought about increased state control over the content, flow and outlet of information.²⁸ For example, in 2022 the introduction of more restrictive legislation (including the expansion of the 'foreign agent' law, and new laws establishing war censorship) virtually eliminated all independent and

²⁵ P. G. Zimbardo and M. R. Leippe, *The psychology of attitude change and social influence* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1991).

²⁶ 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, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365091018005007>; James Der Derian, *Virtuous war: mapping the military-industrial-media-entertainment-network* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

²⁷ President of the Russian Federation, *National security strategy of the Russian Federation*, Order no. 683, 31 Dec. 2015; President of the Russian Federation, *National security strategy of the Russian Federation*, Order no. 400, 2 July 2021.

²⁸ For more a more in-depth account of the evolution of the post-Soviet Russian informational sphere and journalism, see Peter Pomerantsev, *This is not propaganda: adventures in the war against reality* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019) and Gregory Asmolov, 'The effects of participatory propaganda: from socialization to internalization of conflicts', *Journal of Design and Science*, issue 6, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.21428/7808da6b.833c9940>.

foreign news sources.²⁹ In the changing information landscape within Russia, the main actors are the state-sponsored public media and information platforms, as well as a set of private platforms owned by pro-regime magnates.³⁰ It is fair to say that the state and pro-regime media companies do not only act to 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.³¹ Aside from the state’s official line, these companies 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 personalities, who allegedly ‘possess 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.³² For example, the pro-Russian former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014), 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 across fifteen Russian mainstream media sources.³³ The scope of our frame analysis spanned from March 2021, when Russian troops began assembling at the Ukrainian borders, until December 2022. The sources surveyed are Russian-language TV channels and news outlets

²⁹ All foreign media platforms, with the exception of YouTube, were banned as a consequence of the March 2022 legislation.

³⁰ Moreover, as the OECD reports, the 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 from their 7.3 million followers (see OECD, ‘Disinformation and Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine’).

³¹ Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin dictators: the changing face of tyranny in the 21st century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

³² Petr Gulenko, ‘Political discussion as a propaganda spectacle: propaganda talk shows on contemporary Russian television’, *Media, Culture & Society* 43: 5, 2021, pp. 906–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720974230>.

³³ The translation of the cited news information was performed by the authors.

with the widest possible circulation inside Russia.³⁴ We examined 1,000 articles from Channel One, Gazeta.ru, Fishki.net, Interfax.ru, Izvestiya.ru, Lenta.ru, Life.ru, News.ru, NTV.ru, REN TV, RIA.ru, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Rubaltic.ru, Russia 1 and Vesti.ru.³⁵ 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 to be a topic in Russian state propaganda at the time of the 2004 Orange Revolution, which brought an end to the dysfunctional regime of Leonid Kuchma.³⁶ Ukraine became the subject of yet another wave of Russian (dis)information campaigns in and around the Euromaidan protests in 2013/14. According to Tsekhanovska and Tsybulska, the anti-Ukrainian message has since remained a relative constant inside Russia.³⁷ The Russian media (dis)information about Ukraine however, reached 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’; the Ukrainian political elite and nationalism as the ‘enemy’; and Ukraine as a symbol of western aggression against Russia. These three frames were

³⁴ Traditional media continues to constitute the most common means by which Russians acquire information. In October 2022, 64 per cent of Russians surveyed stated that television was their preferred source of information. Broken down by age groups, 57 per cent of Russians aged 25–39 favour traditional media, as do 84 per cent aged 40–54 and more than 90 per cent aged 55 and over. Levada Center, ‘The main sources of information of Russians’, 10 Nov. 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/11/10/the-main-sources-of-information-of-russians>.

³⁵ For an overview of our sources and samples of the content, please see Figure 1 and 2.

³⁶ Stephen Larrabee, ‘Ukraine at the crossroads’, *The Washington Quarterly* 30: 4, 2007, pp. 45–61, <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2007.30.4.45>.

³⁷ Oleksandra Tsekhanovska and Liubov Tsybulska, *Evolution of Russian narratives about Ukraine and their export to Ukrainian media space* (Kyiv: Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 2021), <https://uacrisis.org/en/russian-narratives-about-ukraine7>; see also Maxime Audinet, ‘Diplomaties publiques concurrentielles dans la crise ukrainienne. Le cas de RT et Ukraine Today’, [Rival public diplomacies in the Ukrainian crisis: the case of RT and Ukraine Today], *Revue d’études comparatives Est–Ouest* 2, pp. 171–204.

instrumentalized to justify the 2022 ‘special operation’ and to keep the Russian public emotionally engaged in the period which followed.³⁸

The Russian (dis)information frames on Donbas

The Ukrainian region of Donbas was the focus of the 2014 Russia–Ukraine conflict and was, at the time of writing, the main locus of fighting after the 2022 invasion by Russia. The primary (dis)information frames in this grouping of news articles include the narration of the population in Donbas as victims of violence on the part of the central government in Ukraine and as in need of Russian protection.

One of the predominant subframes in the Russian (dis)information is the allegation that the Ukrainian government has been involved in continuous and longstanding violence against civilians in the Donbas.³⁹ The idea that ‘Ukraine has been shelling Donbas for eight years’—i.e. since the 2014 conflict—has become a widespread reported ‘fact’ in almost every news article on Ukraine published inside Russia.⁴⁰ This particular (dis)information frame claims that the Ukrainian state has organized attacks to ‘deliberately exterminate Donbas residents: children, women, and the elderly’⁴¹ for the purposes of ethnic cleansing and genocide, drawing unfounded parallels with the 1995 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia because of purported ‘incitement of absolute hatred towards the population of the self-proclaimed

³⁸ For an overview of the frames, see Table 1.

³⁹ Egbert Fortuin, “‘Ukraine commits genocide on Russians’: the term “genocide” in Russian propaganda’, *Russian Linguistics* vol. 46, 2022, pp. 313–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185-022-09258-5>.

⁴⁰ Channel One, ‘Za vosem’ let obstrelov i bombezhek v Donbasse byli ubity boleye 15 tysyach chelovek [More than 15,000 people have been killed in eight years of shelling and bombing in Donbas]’, 24 Feb. 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-02-24/421590-za_vosem_let_obstrelov_i_bombezhek_v_donbasse_byli_ubity_bolee_15_tysyach_chelovek; REN TV, ‘Putin napomnil Shoigu chto Zapad 8 let ignoriroval genotsid v Donbasse [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-igniroval-genotsid-v-donbasse>.

⁴¹ Channel One, ‘Za vosem’ let obstrelov i bombezhek v Donbasse byli ubity boleye 15 tysyach chelovek [More than 15,000 people have been killed in eight years of shelling and bombing in Donbas]; RIA.ru, ‘Strel’ba, vzryvy i evakuatsiya bezhentssev. Chto proiskhodit v Donbasse [Shootings, explosions, and evacuation of refugees: what’s happening in Donbas]’, 19 Feb. 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220219/donbass-1773779878.html>.

republics of Donbas'.⁴² 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 [shelling by the] Armed Forces of Ukraine' are frequently accompanied and visually reinforced with TV footage of unclear or doctored origin of children in coffins, fragments of bodies, and crying mothers, as if to provide solid testimony for the allegation of genocide.⁴³

In a distinct subframe of this grouping of news on Donbas as a victim, in late 2021 the Russian media began to claim that the Ukrainian central government was mobilizing its forces to take back control over the territories it lost to Russian control in 2014.⁴⁴ It was alleged that 'Kyiv is preparing to solve the "Donbas issue" by force'.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ To back up the

⁴² Interfax.ru, 'Kreml' poobeshchal zashchitit' zhiteley Donbassa v sluchaye vozobnovleniya boyev [Kremlin pledges to protect residents of Donbas in case of renewed fighting]', 9 April 2022, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/760395>.

⁴³ RIA.ru, 'Strel'ba, vzryvy i evakuatsiya bezhentssev. Chto proiskhodit v Donbasse [Shootings, explosions, and evacuation of refugees: what's happening in Donbas]'; NTV.ru, 'Za 8 let — 14 tysyach pogibshikh: Zapad otkazyvayet-sya priznavat' genotsid Donbassa [In eight years—14 thousand dead: the West refuses to recognize the genocide of Donbas]', 27 Feb. 2022, <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2685439>. 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: 32 states intervening)', 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>.

⁴⁴ 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').

⁴⁵ Life.ru, 'Zakharova: Kiyev, pokhozhe, gotovit-sya k silovomu resheniyu "problemy Donbassa" [Zakharova: Kyiv seems to be preparing for a forceful solution to the "Donbas problem"]', 24 Dec. 2021, <https://life.ru/p/1459380>.

⁴⁶ RIA.ru, 'Genotsid mirnogo naseleniya Donbassa. Podrostki [Genocide of the civilian population of Donbas: teenagers]', 6 April 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220406/angelydonbassa-1780006629.html>.

claims behind this fictitious Ukrainian attack, the media referred to the ‘intelligence service’ reports of the self-proclaimed ‘People’s Republics’ of Donetsk and Luhansk that ‘Ukraine may launch an offensive in the next two or three days’.⁴⁷ To make this argument more convincing, the news media shared a post from the social media page of the pro-Russian former Ukrainian prime minister Nikolai Azarov (2010–2014) 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’.⁴⁸

In view of the alleged ‘looming attack’ by Ukrainian military, Russian President Vladimir Putin 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’.⁴⁹ A final distinct subframe 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 the Ukrainian authorities were purportedly to launch 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’.⁵⁰ The Russian accusations against the Ukrainian central government of violence against the civilian population and crimes against humanity became, and have remained,

⁴⁷ Life.ru, ‘Myunkhenskiy sgovor – 2022: Zapad predlagayet Rossii voynu vmesto dialoga [Munich deal 2022: the West offers Russia war instead of dialogue]’, 19 Feb.2022, <https://life.ru/p/1472749>.

⁴⁸ News.ru, ‘Eks-prem'yer Ukrainy rasskazal o planakh VSU napast' na Donbass 25 fevralya [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>.

⁴⁹ Channel One, ‘Vladimir Putin vchera i segodnya ischerpyvayushche ob"yasnil motivy resheniya priznat' nezavisimost' DNR i LNR [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 Feb. 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-02-22/421534-vladimir_putin_vchera_i_segodnya_ischerpyvayusche_ob_yasnil_motivy_resheniya_priznat_nezavisimost_dnr_i_lnr.

⁵⁰ *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, ‘SK proanaliziruyet dokumenty VSU o napadenii na Donbass, kotoryye nashli voyennyye RF [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-voennyye-rf.html>.

among the central frames used to encourage public support among the Russian population for the war effort. The claim of an imminent Ukrainian offensive also figured prominently as one of the central themes of an address by Putin in September 2022 on the partial mobilization of military reservists, as well as in the news coverage surrounding it.⁵¹ The ‘defence of Donbas’ thus became one of the principal subframes 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’.⁵² For this reason, the Russian media confidently alleged that ‘Russia did not start this war’, and that ‘Russia has not attacked Ukraine’,⁵³ and has remained adamant that the ‘special operation’ is a ‘noble’ mission ‘conducted with several factors in mind—not to destroy civilian neighbourhoods, not to harm the population, and not even to hit the Ukrainian military barracks’.⁵⁴ The Russian invasion of 2022 has thus been construed in domestic media as a humanitarian act that has ‘unjustly’ met with Ukrainian military aggression and has been misunderstood or maligned in the western media space.

The Russian (dis)information frames on Ukraine’s political elite and nationalism

The Russian invasion of 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

⁵¹ NTV.ru, ‘Putin zayavil o chastichnoy mobilizatsii v RF [Putin announced a partial mobilization in Russia]’, 21 Sept. 2022, <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2724682>.

⁵² Russia 1, ‘Prezident obratilsya k natsii [The President’s address to the nation]’, 24 Feb. 2022, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2386957>.

⁵³ Channel One, ‘Pyatyy den’ spetsial’noy operatsii, kotoruyu rossiyskiye voyennyye provodyat na Ukraine [The fifth day of a special operation conducted by the Russian military in Ukraine]’, 28 Feb. 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-02-28/422173-pyatyy_den_spetsialnoy_operatsii_kotoruyu_rossiyskiye_voennyye_provodyat_na_ukraine; NTV.ru, ‘Lavrov: Rossiya ne napadala na Ukrainu i ne planiruyet napadat’ na drugiye strany [Lavrov: Russia has not attacked Ukraine and has no plans to attack other countries]’, 10 March 2022, <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2692263/?ysclid=l8j2jor19d853782024>.

⁵⁴ REN TV, ‘Chto govoriat na Zapade o spetsoperatsii po zashchite-Donbassa [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>.

country are engaging in radical forms of nationalism and/or are hostile to Russia and its influence in Ukraine.

A particular predominant subframe in Russian (dis)information has been focused on Ukrainian leaders elected after the Euromaidan protests, from 2014.⁵⁵ The Russian (dis)information has used a number of pejorative terms against the democratically elected Ukrainian government. Most prominent among these 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) or the ‘Kyiv junta’ (drawing parallels with a dictatorship). This labelling is designed to politically delegitimize the current Ukrainian government at the helm of 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 Stepan Bandera, a controversial historical figure widely seen as a Ukrainian Nazi collaborator).⁵⁶ Before the 2022 invasion, many sources cited Putin’s claim that he saw a continuous Nazi ideology in Ukrainian state leadership: ‘[Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy] came to power and fell, as previous leaders did, under the influence of radical elements, as they say in Ukraine: *Naziks*’.⁵⁷ (*Naziks* meaning ‘Nazis’ in Russian slang.) As if to illustrate the state of affairs, one news channel put out footage of President Zelenskyy’s Instagram page, which had been edited to include the *Totenkopf*—the death’s head insignia used by a particular division of the German *Schutzstaffel* (SS) during the Second World War.⁵⁸ Media has thus made ample coverage of the Russian government’s argument that the ‘special operation’ in Ukraine is a means to

⁵⁵ Fortuin, “‘Ukraine commits genocide on Russians’”.

⁵⁶ REN TV, ‘Stalo izvestno, kogda SSHA perestanut podderzhivat' Ukrainu [It has become known when the US will stop supporting Ukraine]’, 25 Sept. 2022, <https://ren.tv/news/v-mire/1027804-wsj-stalo-izvestno-kogda-ssha-mogut-perestat-podderzhivat-ukrainu>; Lenta.ru, ‘V Sovfede nazvali yedinstvenno vozmozhnuyu temu peregovorov s Ukrainoy [The Federation Council named the only possible topic for negotiations with Ukraine]’, 23 May 2022, <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/05/23/demilit>.

⁵⁷ REN TV, ‘Chto govoriat na Zapade [What they say in the West]’.

⁵⁸ Channel One, ‘Na stranichke Vladimira Zelenskogo bylo foto voyennogo s emblemoy divizii SS “Mertvaya golova” [On Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s webpage, there was a photo with the SS division’s “death’s head” emblem]’, 9 May 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-05-09/428409-na_stranichke_vladimira_zelenskogo_bylo_foto_voennogo_s_emblemoy_divizii_ss_mertvaya_golova.

‘denazify’ the country, or to liberate it from extreme ideologies such as fascism, and purportedly to 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’.⁵⁹ Other media accounts have stated that ‘[i]deally, we need to liberate Ukraine, cleanse it of Nazis, of pro-Nazi people and their ideology’.^{60,61}

A different subframe 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’⁶², ‘anti-Russian project’⁶³, or simply ‘anti-Russia’⁶⁴. On this theme, Russian media has followed closely in the footsteps of Putin’s July

⁵⁹ Life.ru, ‘Kak Kiyev za 8 let voyny legalizoval ubiystvo zHITELEY Donbassa [How Kyiv legalized the murder of Donbas residents in 8 years of war]’, 13 April 2022, <https://life.ru/p/1486704>.

⁶⁰ Gazeta.ru, ‘«Osvobodit' Ukrainu, zachistit' yeye ot natsistov». V Kremle raskryli tseli operatsii Rossii [“To liberate Ukraine, to clean it of Nazis”: Kremlin reveals goals of the Russian operation]’, 24 Feb. 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2022/02/24/14573251.shtml>; RIA.ru, ‘V Kremle zayavili o neobkhdodnosti zachistit' Ukrainu ot natsistov [The Kremlin says Ukraine must be cleansed of Nazis]’, 24 Feb. 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220224/natsisty-1774759888.html>.

⁶¹ The allegations that there are Nazi sympathizers among the Ukrainian political leadership have been disputed by many independent sources. For example, there are reports that in 2015 Ukraine even issued a ban on Nazi and Communist ideologies in public life. Moreover, Ukrainian far-right groups tend to be only a marginal political force in Ukraine, as they ‘had a limited presence during the Euromaidan protests’ of 2013/14 and have suffered defeats in every national election since, with ‘a united front of all radical right-wing parties in the 2019 parliamentary elections winning only 2.15 per cent of the vote [and thus] falling far short of the 5 per cent minimum threshold for 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>).

⁶² News.ru, ‘Putin: Kiyev publichno otkazalsya vypolnyat' Minskiye soglasheniya [Putin: Kyiv has publicly refused to implement the Minsk agreements]’, 12 April 2022, <https://news.ru/vlast/putin-kiev-publichno-otkazalsya-vypolnyat-minskie-soglasheniya>.

⁶³ Channel One, ‘Proyekt “Anti-Rossiya”? Vremya pokazhet. Fragment vypuska ot 13.07.2021 [Project “Anti-Russia”? 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>.

⁶⁴ REN TV, ‘Proekt anti rossiia pochemu konflikt byl neizbezhen [Anti-Russia: why was the conflict inevitable?], 9 April 2022, <https://ren.tv/project/dokumentalny-spetsproekt/961841-proekt-anti-rossiia-pochemu-konflikt-byl-neizbezhen-09-04-2022>.

2021 article, ‘On the historical unity of the Russians and Ukrainians’.⁶⁵ Putin identifies Ukrainian nationalists as 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 favour of closer relations with the EU and NATO. Russian media has produced innumerable versions of the same narrative, portraying Ukrainian nationalism as designed to turn Ukrainians away from Russia and that the government has allegedly ‘systemically nurtured’ Russophobia over the past eight years.⁶⁶ The Russian media has also amplified the unsubstantiated claims that the ambition of the Ukrainian nationalist movement is to completely delink Ukraine from Russia. The media has engaged in lively theoretical debates surrounding the claims that the Ukrainian government wants to create an artificial separation between Ukraine and Russia.⁶⁷ There have also been unfounded accusations that ‘Kyiv’s policy is aimed at a complete ban on Russian culture’.⁶⁸ The negative portrayal of the Ukrainian political elites and anti-Russian nationalism has prompted the surge of another important subordinate media framing after the invasion of February 2022. This is the narrative that it is the authority and ‘right’ of Russia to intervene to protect the Russophone population of Ukraine and, in particular, the population in the Donbas territories. This subframe builds on the ‘Russian world’ concept invented by one of Putin’s ideologues, which entails an existence of an alleged ‘broad Russian civilization’

⁶⁵ Vladimir Putin, ‘On the historical unity of the Russians and Ukrainians’, Presidential Administration, 12 July 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁶⁶ *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, ‘Kak na Ukraine prorastali rusofobiya s natsizmom [How Russophobia and Nazism sprouted in Ukraine]’, 30 April 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/04/27/kak-na-ukraine-prorastali-rusofobiia-s-nacizmom.html>.

⁶⁷ RIA.ru, ‘V Rade predlozhili polnost'yu izbavit' Ukrainu ot “sovet-skogo simvolizma” [As part of the Rada’s proposal, Ukraine was to be totally freed from its Soviet past]’, 1 Sept. 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220901/ukraina-1813764404.html>.

⁶⁸ *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, ‘Shvydkoy: Politika Kiyeva napravlena na polnyy zapret russkoy kul'tury [Shvydkoi: Kyiv’s policy targets a total ban on Russian culture]’, 25 Jan. 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/01/25/shvydkoj-politika-kiyeva-napravlena-na-polnyj-zapret-russkoj-kultury.html>.

beyond the borders of Russia under the protection of the Russian state.⁶⁹ Frames of this type blur the sovereign borders 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. that Russians have the right to intervene to ‘protect *our* people’ (emphasis added).⁷⁰

The Russian (dis)information frames on the West

A final frame expressed in the Russian media in the context of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine is that which is clustered around Ukraine as a symbolic ‘bridgehead’ for the West (i.e. the US and EU) or as a figurative battleground for a power standoff between Russia and the West. An unwarranted, but predominant, pre-invasion (dis)information subframe was the Russian media’s concern that Ukraine was about to accede to western defence organizations. One media outlet held that ‘[t]he United States promotes Ukraine’s accession to NATO’, which is portrayed as a clear breach of the, by Russia purported international post-Cold War agreement, that the Alliance cannot extend into Eastern Europe.⁷¹ In the aftermath of the 2022 invasion, the Russian media threw their weight behind the official state-promoted view that the invasion of Ukraine was a purely defensive action on the part of Russia, as it was allegedly provoked by NATO and ‘[t]he conflict in Ukraine is a consequence of NATO’s eastward expansion’.⁷²

⁶⁹ 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>.

⁷⁰ Life.ru, ‘Zakharova: Kiyev, pokhozhe, gotovit-sya k silovomu resheniyu [Zakharova: Kyiv seems to be preparing for a forceful solution]’.

⁷¹ Channel One, ‘Soyedinennyye Shtaty prodvigayut vstupleniye Ukrainy v NATO [Ukraine’s accession to NATO is promoted by the United States]’, 20 Oct.2021, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2021-10-20/415069-soedinennyye_shtaty_prodvigayut_vstuplenie_ukrainy_v_nato.

⁷² Rossiyskaya Gazeta, ‘Milorad Dodik: Konflikt na Ukraine - eto sledstviye rasshireniya NATO na Vostok [Milorad Dodik: the conflict in Ukraine is a consequence of NATO’s eastward expansion]’, 19 Sept. 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/09/19/milorad-dodik-konflikt-na-ukraine-eto-sledstvie-rasshireniia-nato-na-vostok.html>. All relevant international organizations have, however, confirmed that no such agreements exist.

After the invasion, Russian (dis)information tried to shift the blame for the conflict even further on to 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’.⁷³ The EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative 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.⁷⁴

The Russian political spin around the western military assistance sent to Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion depicts the latter as a direct cause for the prolongation and escalation of violence in the war. Russian defence minister Sergey 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.⁷⁵ The West is thus, according to the media, exacerbating the war as ‘Ukraine hits peaceful civilians with NATO arms’.⁷⁶ Moreover, the Russian (dis)information on NATO and EU military assistance exaggerate the size and content 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

⁷³ Rubaltic.ru, ‘Spetsial’naya voyennaya provokatsiya: kak Zapad stravlival Rossiyu i Ukrainu [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>.

⁷⁴ Rubaltic.ru, ‘Spetsial’naya voyennaya provokatsiya [Special military provocation]’.

⁷⁵ RBC.ru, ‘Shoygu obvinil Zapad v zatyagivanii operatsii “do poslednego ukrainca” [Shoigu accused the West of dragging out the operation “until the last Ukrainian”]’, 12 April 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/625e9afb9a794722bcfe0244>.

⁷⁶ Channel One, ‘Donbass okazalsya vnov’ pod plotnym ognem ukrainskikh natsistov [Donbas appeared under heavy fire from Ukrainian Nazis]’, 14 June 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-06-14/431168-donbass-okazalsya_vnov_pod_plotnym_ognem_ukrainskih_natsistov.

media space.⁷⁷ The NATO and EU countries' delivering 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'.⁷⁸ This shift in narrative, around precisely who the Russian military is confronting in Ukraine, has served to 'sell' to the public the lack of visible success of the 'special operation' in the past year and to keep intact the myth of the 'great Russian army'. To protect the reputation of Russia's military prowess, the country's media has picked up on the dissemination on video-sharing platforms of faked video content favourable to the Russian war effort.⁷⁹ Moreover, lush TV imagery has been put out to show the latest innovations in military technology—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.⁸⁰

Russian allegations also involve supposed US biological weapons laboratories claimed to be located on the territory of Ukraine.⁸¹ Such (dis)information subframes had already appeared before the invasion, becoming more widespread as the conflict began. Channel One, one of the main TV channels, alleged in mid-March 2022 that 'Russian troops revealed over 30 US biolaboratories on the territory of Ukraine, when they came to protect Luhansk and Donetsk

⁷⁷ Vesti.ru, 'Zapad nakachivayet Ukrainu oruzhiyem, nesmotrya na protesty svoikh grazhdan [The West is pumping Ukraine with weapons, despite the protests of its citizens]', 14 April 2022, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2704041>; Izvestiya.ru, 'V Gosdume zayavili o sposobstvovanii Zapada eskalatsii situatsii na Ukraine [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-o-sposobstvovanii-zapada-eskalatsii-situatsii-na-ukraine>.

⁷⁸ Lenta.ru, 'Secret work of NATO special forces in Ukraine is revealed', 25 June 2022, <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/06/25/secret>.

⁷⁹ Shayan Sardarizade, 'How fake news about the war in Ukraine gathers millions of views on TikTok', BBC News Ukraine, 25 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-61220423>.

⁸⁰ RIA.ru, 'Novoye oruzhiye rossii [New Russian weapons]', undated, <https://ria.ru/arms>.

⁸¹ 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').

Peoples' Republics. These laboratories produce mass-destruction mutants: birds, bats, beetles and midges. Such mutants are produced to attack Russia'.⁸² Another news outlet expanded this perceived threat to the global domain. It argued that 'the US [is building] over 400 biolaboratories all over the world, which is a threat not only to Russia but to the whole world'.⁸³ Nuclear weapons also play an important role in this rhetoric. The Russian media echoes 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 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'.⁸⁴

Within the Russian (dis)information frames centring on the West, a final subframe is presented by the narrative in the Russian press and social media of NATO as an existential threat to the Russian Federation, and of Ukraine as a launching pad for a NATO/western military assault on Russia. The Ukrainian military response to the Russian invasion is also attributed to western designs against Russia. The outlets studied here claim that '[t]he West and NATO [use] the country as a breeding-ground for tension at the Russian borders, which allows for speculation on the topic of Russian aggression and justification of the anti-Russian policy'.⁸⁵ Russian media published extracts from Putin's September 2022 speech on the

⁸² Channel One, 'Na territorii Ukrainy vyyavleny tri desyatka taynykh laboratoriy Pentagona, provodyashchikh zapreshchennyye opyt [Three dozen secret Pentagon 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_vyyavleny_tri_desyatka_taynykh_laboratoriy_pentagona_provodyaschih_zapreshchennyye_opyty.

⁸³ Fishki.net, 'Biolaboratorii SSHA na Ukraine atakovali Rossiyu: koronavirus, ospa – lish' malaya chast' vpushchennykh virusov [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-vypuwennykh-virusov.html>.

⁸⁴ Channel One, 'Prezident podrobno ob'yasnil v svoem obrashchenii prichiny prinyatiya resheniya o chastichnoy mobilizatsii v Rosssii [In his address, the president explained in detail the reasons for the decision to partially mobilize Russia]', 21 Sept. 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.

⁸⁵ Fishki.net, 'Ukraina – marionetka v rukakh Zapada [Ukraine is a puppet of the West]', 31 May 2021, <https://fishki.net/anti/3777041-ukraina--marionetka-v-rukah-zapada.html>.

partial mobilization of military reservists, in which he alleged that ‘the goal of the West is to weaken, divide and ultimately destroy Russia.’⁸⁶ Thus, in the narrative propounded by Russian media outlets, 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 has often focused on the fact that Ukraine is turning into an anti-Russian subordinate or ‘stooge’ with the help of ‘supervisors’ from the EU and the US, with the following phrases being used: ‘Ukraine is the puppet of the West’⁸⁷; ‘[t]he US 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’.⁸⁸ In summary, the theme of western influence over Ukraine intensified in the Russian media after the invasion had begun, and peaked when partial mobilization was 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 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 both the ‘special operation’ in Ukraine and the Russian Armed

⁸⁶ NTV.ru, ‘Putin zayavil o chastichnoy mobilizatsii v RF [Putin announced a partial mobilization in Russia]’.

⁸⁷ Fishki.net, ‘Biolaboratorii SSHA na Ukraine atakovali Rossiyu [US biological laboratories in Ukraine attacked Russia]’.

⁸⁸ Gazeta.ru, ‘V Sovfede podschitali vklad SSHA v proyekt “anti-Rossiya” na Ukraine [The Federation Council calculated the US contribution to the “anti-Russia” project in Ukraine]’, 25 April 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/04/25/17631872.shtml>.

Forces' actions in Ukraine.⁸⁹ It is also worth noting that, when Russians are asked whether or not they believe that Russia is moving in the right direction, a majority (64 per cent in October 2022, in comparison to 48 per cent in December 2021)⁹⁰ state that they are more optimistic about the Russian future than they were prior to the invasion—in spite of the uncertainties of war and the hardship of months of economic sanctions. 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. These are: the key role played by the media as the emitter of fabricated realities; the reliance on techniques to displace or distort real emotional associations; and 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 official policy, but has also generated false or biased news content of its own accord. Examples of such content are found in the context of 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 reality created by the media. Tear-jerking TV footage of actual or claimed refugees is also common, and is not infrequently

⁸⁹ Public polls show that public support peaked in April 2022 at 81 per cent, and over 70 per cent of Russians polled since May 2022 stated that they support or strongly support the intervention (see Levada Center, '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, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/04/24/are-meaningful-public-opinion-polls-possible-in-today-s-russia>; and Maxim Alyukov 'In Russia, opinion polls are a political weapon', Open Democracy Analysis, 9 March 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-opinion-polls-war-ukraine>.

⁹⁰ Levada Center, 'Conflict with Ukraine'.

accompanied by harrowing imagery of suffering or dead children.⁹¹ As mentioned above, other examples of manufactured visual evidence exist in the form of numerous fabricated slick ‘live streams’ from the ‘battlefield’ and fake videos of victorious Russian attacks.⁹² 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 eight-year Donbas conflict by means of armed violence.⁹³ 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 or logically.⁹⁴ The fact that independent or foreign media have been restricted, and/or as of March 2022 effectively curtailed, has increased the possibilities available to the Russian state and pro-regime media for exposing the Russian public to an even greater volume of uncorroborated news stories.

The second 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 monitoring of social reality. The Russian government and media’s longstanding and low-key negative campaigns about Ukraine and its political elite—the earliest roots of which can be traced back to the 2004 Orange Revolution—have worked to displace and distort emotionally-triggered associations in the Russian public’s mindset about the neighbouring country. Many of the current media falsehoods or fictions about Ukraine have their roots in distorted news frames that have been communicated to Russians over an extended period of time, and that have thus become sedimented and ‘naturalized’ in the Russian collective associative memory. The constant anti-Ukrainian and, more recently, anti-western media coverage from a multitude of domestic

⁹¹ RIA.ru, ‘Genotsid mirnogo naseleniya Donbassa [Genocide of the civilian population of Donbas]’.

⁹² Shayan Sardarizade, ‘How fake news about the war in Ukraine gathers millions of views on TikTok’.

⁹³ RIA.ru, ‘Sledovateli obnaruzhili v Mariupole sekretnyye dokumenty natsbatal'ona Azov [Investigators found secret documents of the National Battalion Azov in Mariupol]’, 16 May 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220523/mariupol-1790137975.html>.

⁹⁴ It could be said that the Russian media has relied extensively on 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.

media sources has meant that the Russian public's associations based on real and nuanced social monitoring processes about such topics have been displaced by fabricated associations. This process has been reinforced by 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 commenced from December 2021 onwards, the media began to circulate well-established fictitious messages about Ukraine with greater frequency and emotional intensity. The susceptibility of the average Russian to such displaced associations is evident from the fact that a majority affirm that they can no longer discern Ukraine as a politically neutral, independent and/or pacific country. According to the Levada Center, since early 2022 more than 70 per cent of the polled Russian public across all age brackets has viewed Ukraine negatively.⁹⁵

Finally, the Russian public's openness to fabricated realities can also be explained by the theory that fictional experiences may be more emotionally appealing or gratifying to an individual than (f)actual experiences. The fictional characterization of Donbas as the clear-cut 'victim' and the Ukrainian government-cum-the West as the brutal 'enemy' produces a sense of a black-and-white narrative of events, which for most people is emotionally reassuring. In the public's mind, the stark friend/enemy depictions cut through messy moral dilemmas around who is at fault and who is deserving of sympathy. Moreover, virtual reality or mediated events of Russian military prowess in the field and attractive images of high-tech weaponry have 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 of the country itself. Finally, the 'plug-and-play' conspiracy theories which depict the West as trying to encroach on Russia, to compromise its status as an independent state or to exploit it for its natural resources, and/or which speak of western/NATO hegemony in eastern Europe are popular within Russia. The Russian media's narrative of Russia as standing up to the West, fighting for survival as a state and for a 'fairer' world order, provokes emotions such as dignity and a sense of justice in Russian audiences. Such findings go some way toward explaining that the emotion with which most Russians polled by the Levada Center identify, when it comes to their country's actions in

⁹⁵ Levada Center, 'Conflict with Ukraine'.

Ukraine, is pride.⁹⁶ Perhaps there is something to Hannah Arendt's observation that there is a preference among the masses for fictional accounts and conspiracy theories as opposed to hard facts, because the former are usually easier to understand and more emotionally satisfying, despite (or perhaps due to) their 'mysteriousness'.⁹⁷

Conclusions

Propaganda has been a constant in both pre-modern and modern warfare. In this sense, the Russian (dis)information campaign to generate public consent and support for the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine can be seen as yet another example of the use of (dis)information in times of war. However, one of the more unusual features of the Russian propaganda effort on Ukraine is that it depends to a large extent on highly 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 of this propaganda 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 which are 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 may act to impair an individual's ability to monitor social reality. We find this to be a plausible explanation for why 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

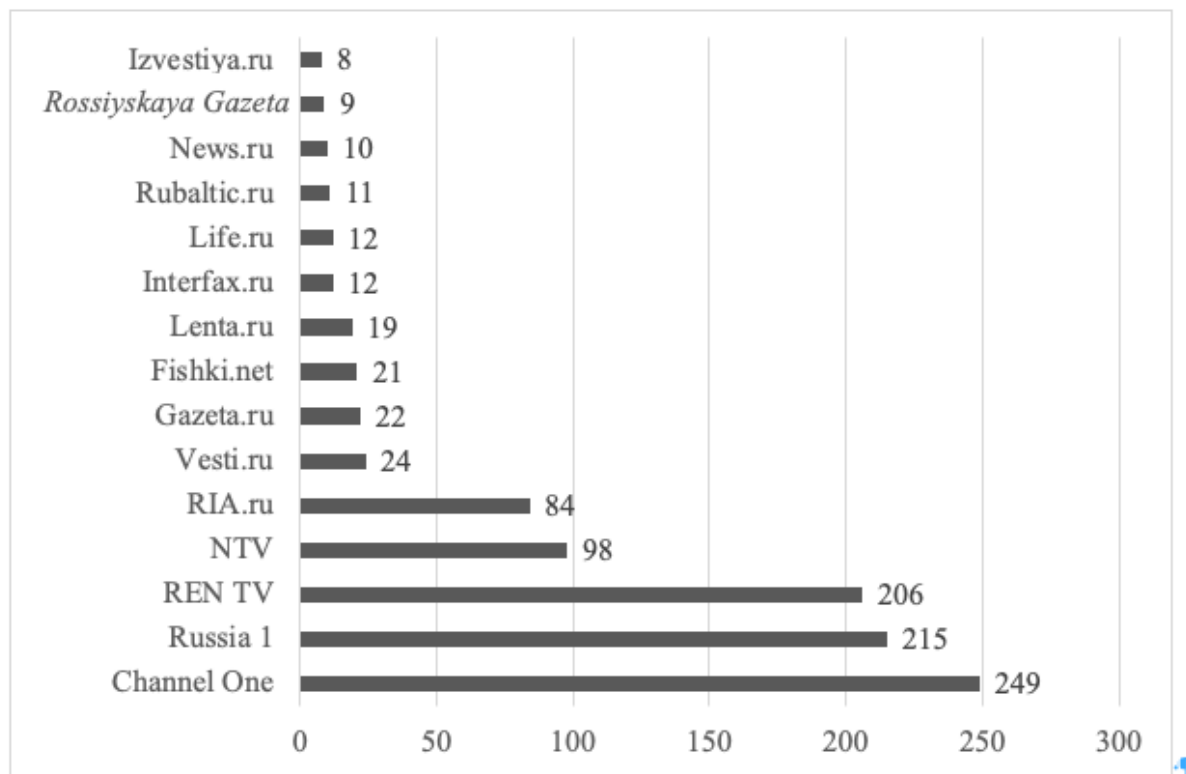
⁹⁶ Levada Center, 'Conflict with Ukraine'.

⁹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*, 2nd edn (New York: Harcourt, 1958), p. 351.

(dis)information campaigns both 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 played by the Russian media in effectuating the emotional mobilization necessary for the broad public to support to the ‘special operation’. Media has operated the instruments of (non-)verbal influence to increase the Russian public’s susceptibility to tailored narratives. The Russian media has, for these purposes, frequently combined within its (dis)information different emotions and stimulants of associative memories, 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. These are layered on top of emotions of anger linked to fictitious accounts of a present-day Nazi-led Ukraine. We find this mix of emotions and associative memories crucial to the (dis)information campaign. As the emotional triggers, as well as the 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, pandering heavily to pride, anger, injustice or fear has created a ‘perfect storm’ of emotions, which explains not only the consent of the Russian public to the initial attack on Ukraine, but also the continued public support for the actions of the armed forces in the war which followed. The strong emotions conjured up can also be seen as the explanation for why even Russians who might not agree with the official assessments of Ukraine or the West, and/or who know that they are exposed to disinformation, tend to support their country’s actions towards the neighbouring country. The Russian media has played a key role in the disinformation by propagating a concerted and determined depiction of events in Ukraine or in the West, creating a ‘surround effect’ which few Russian media users have been able to resist. In sum, the mix of emotions and associative memories has created the ideal conditions for an offensive media (dis)information strategy dovetailing with the Russian government’s military strategy, and drafting in both the willing and the unwilling public—first to consent to the war, and then also to support it.

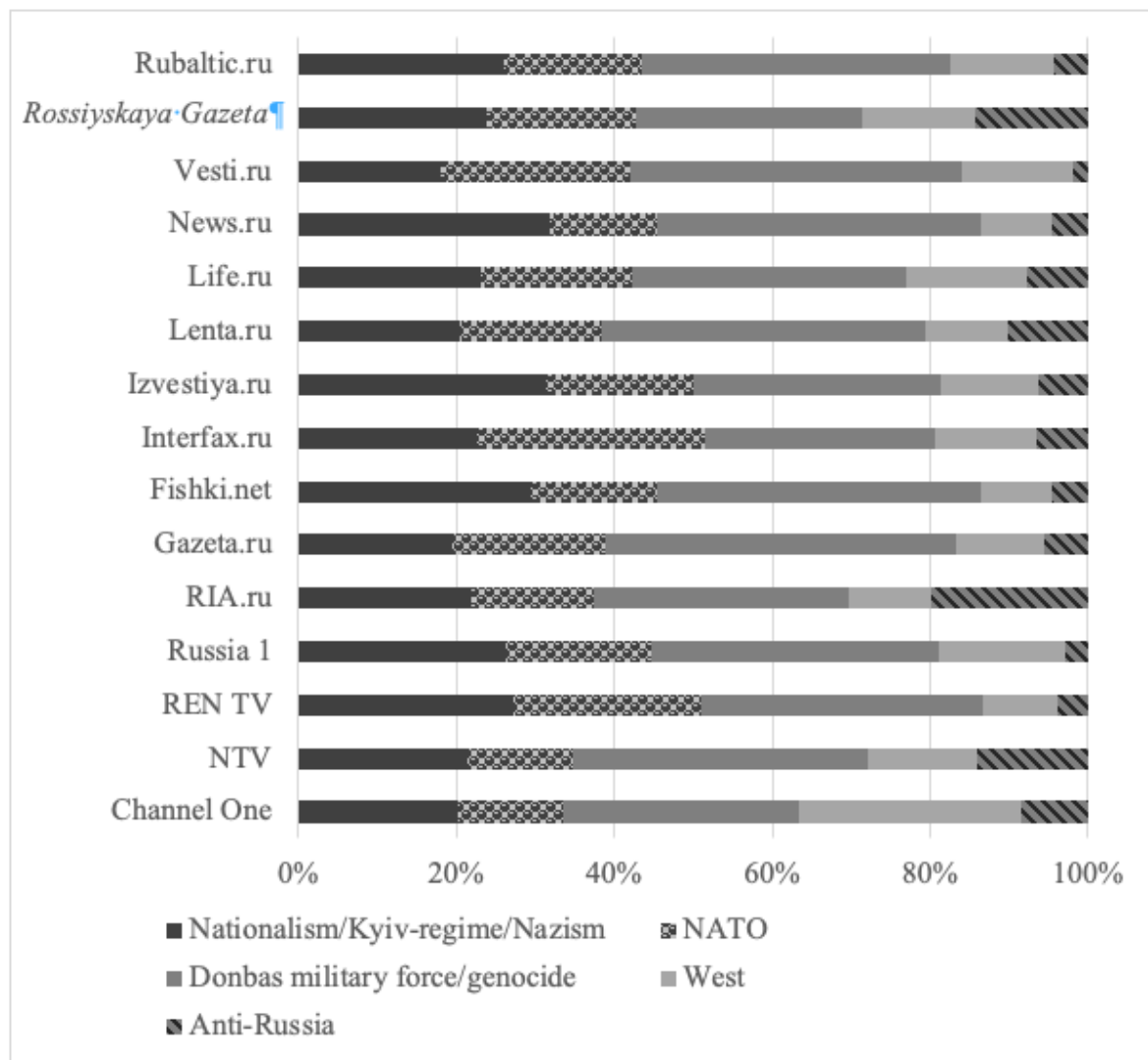
Figure 1. News items consulted by media outlet, March 2021–December 2022 (number of items)



Source: Authors' elaboration from own survey.

Note: Our selection of sources represents the most popular sources of information for the average Russian. Our choice of internet platforms was based on the popularity ranking at the time of writing according to the Medialogia real-time media monitoring and analysis service (see <https://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/>). To sort the content, we used the keyword 'Ukraine'.

Figure 2. Keyword frequency according to main semantic cluster in sources consulted, March 2021–December 2022 (percentage of total)



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Note: Using the search parameter 'Ukraine', we identified news items justifying the intervention or the continuation of the war effort. We identified five main semantic clusters: 1) Nationalism/Kyiv regime/Nazism; 2) NATO; 3) Donbas military force/genocide; 4) West, 5) Anti-Russian. Based on a cluster analysis, the most salient data were categorized into three main frames as outlined in the empirical section. The articles usually contain several different stories; when they do so, they are included in all the relevant clusters.

Table 1. Correlation of emotions and narratives in the Russian effort to justify a war in Ukraine (March 2021–December 2022)

Emotions	Narratives
Anger	• ‘Ukraina bombit mirnyh zhitelej natovskim oruzhiem’ [Ukraine hits peaceful civilians with NATO arms];¹ • ‘Ukraina bombila Donbass 8 let’ [Ukraine has been bombing Donbas for 8 years];² • ‘Donbass okazalsja pod plotnym ognem ukrainskih nacistov’ [Donbas appeared under heavy fire from Ukrainian Nazis];³ • ‘Ukraina namerenno unichtozhaet zhitelej Donbassa: detej, zhenshhin i starikov’ [Ukraine deliberately exterminates Donbas residents: children, women, and the elderly];⁴ • ‘Podrostki, pogibshie na ulicah goroda v rezul’tate obstrela so storony Vooruzhennyh sil Ukrainy’ [Teenagers killed in the streets of the city as a result of the shelling by the Armed Forces of Ukraine].⁵
Fear	• ‘Zapad bukval’no nakachivaet Ukrainu oruzhiem’ [The West is literally ‘pumping’ Ukraine with weapons];⁶ • ‘Amerikanske biologicheskie laboratorii na Ukraine atakujut Rossiju: COVID–19 i ospa daleko ne polnyh spisok vypushhennyh virusov’ [US biological laboratories in Ukraine attacked Russia: COVID–19 and smallpox are only a small part of released viruses];⁷ • ‘Stalo izvestno o sekretnoj sluzhbe NATO na Ukraine’ [It became known about the secret work of NATO special forces in Ukraine];⁸ • ‘Kiev gotovitsja k silovomu resheniju ‘donbasskogo voprosa’ [Kyiv is preparing to solve the ‘Donbas issue’ by force];⁹ • ‘Ukraina mozhet nachat’ nastuplenie v blizhajshie dva–tri dnja’ [Ukraine may launch an offensive in the next two or three days].¹⁰
Pride	• ‘Osvobodit’ Ukrainu, ochistit’ ee ot nacistkoj ideologii’ [To liberate Ukraine, to clean it of Nazi ideology];¹¹ • ‘Zashhitit’ <i>nashih</i> ljudej’ [Protect <i>our</i> people];¹² • ‘Zashhitit’ ljudej, kotorye uzhe vosem’ let stalkivajutsja s unizhenijami i genocidom, osushhestvljaemyi kievskim rezhimom’ [To protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime];¹³ • ‘Novye vidy rossijskogo vooruzhenija’ [New Russian weapons];¹⁴ • ‘Specoperacija provoditsja s uchetom neskol’kih faktorov—ne razrushat’ grazhdanske kvartaly, ne prichinjat’ vreda naseleniju i dazhe ne bit’ po kazarmam ukrainskih voennyh’ [The special operation is conducted with several factors in mind—not to destroy civilian neighbourhoods, not to harm the population, and not even to hit the Ukrainian military barracks’].¹⁵

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

¹ Channel One, ‘Donbass okazalsya vnov’ pod plotnym ognem ukrainskikh natsistov [Donbas appeared under heavy fire from Ukrainian Nazis]’.

² Channel One, ‘Byli ubity boleye 15 tysyach chelovek [More than 15,000 people have been killed]’.

³ Channel One, ‘Donbass okazalsya vnov’ pod plotnym ognem ukrainskikh natsistov [Donbas appeared under heavy fire from Ukrainian Nazis]’.

⁴ Channel One, ‘Byli ubity boleye 15 tysyach chelovek [More than 15,000 people have been killed]’; RIA.ru, ‘Shootings, explosions, and evacuation of refugees’.

⁵ RIA.ru, ‘Strel’ba, vzryvy i evakuatsiya bezhentsov [Shootings, explosions, and evacuation of refugees]’; NTV.ru, ‘Za 8 let — 14 tysyach pogibshikh: Zapad otkazyvayet·sya priznavat’ genotsid Donbassa [In eight years—14 thousand dead: the West refuses to recognize the genocide of Donbas]’.

⁶ Vesti.ru, ‘Zapad nakachivayet Ukrainu oruzhiyem [The West is pumping Ukraine with weapons]’.

⁷ Fishki.net, ‘US biological laboratories in Ukraine attacked Russia’.

⁸ Lenta.ru, ‘It became known about the secret work of NATO special forces in Ukraine’.

⁹ Life.ru, ‘Zakharova: Kiyev, pokhozhe, gotovit·sya k silovomu resheniyu “problemy Donbassa” [Zakharova: Kyiv seems to be preparing for a forceful solution]’.

¹⁰ Life.ru, ‘Myunkhenskiy sgovor – 2022: Zapad predlagayet Rossii voynu vmesto dialoga [Munich deal 2022: the West offers Russia war instead of dialogue]’.

¹¹ Gazeta.ru, ‘“Osvobodit’ Ukrainu, zachistit’ yeye ot natsistov” [“To liberate Ukraine, to clean it of Nazis”]’; RIA.ru, ‘V Kreml’e zayavili o neobkhodimosti zachistit’ Ukrainu ot natsistov [The Kremlin says Ukraine must be cleansed of Nazis]’.

¹² Life.ru, ‘Zakharova: Kiyev, pokhozhe, gotovit·sya k silovomu resheniyu “problemy Donbassa” [Zakharova: Kyiv seems to be preparing for a forceful solution]’.

¹³ Russia 1, ‘Prezident obratilsya k natsii [The President’s address to the nation]’.

¹⁴ RIA.ru, ‘Novoye oruzhiye rossii [New Russian weapons]’.

¹⁵ REN TV, ‘Chto govoriat na Zapade [What they say in the West]’.