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**THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN UKRAINE
SINCE THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA LEADING TO THE
RUSSIAN INVASION IN 2022**

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the paper independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors has been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading.

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ABSTRACT

The world was shocked when Russia invaded Ukraine in the early morning of 24th February 2022. Yet, this escalation cannot be called surprising as the author argues there have been clear signs of this event coming based on the evolution of Russian propaganda since its annexation of Crimea back in 2014. This paper describes the attributes of modern Russian propaganda, identifies the key narratives used in and against Ukraine in pro-Kremlin media as well as draws an evolution timeline of those narratives during the instigation, low-conflict and the conflict escalation phases identified by the author. Finally, the difference in the propaganda key messages is analyzed in the events of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and during the first month after the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022.

Keywords: propaganda, Russia, Ukraine, hybrid wars, information wars

INTRODUCTION

The world was shattered when Russia invaded Ukraine in the early morning of 24th February 2022. Yet, this devastating news cannot be called totally unexpected as the author argues there have been clear signs of this event coming based on the evolution of Russian propaganda since its annexation of Crimea back in 2014. Various prior research focused on the events of 2014-2015 years analyzing the annexation of Crimea which was unexpected and surprising for the Western world (Torichnyi *et al.* 2021, 356) followed by the studies of the rise of separatism in the Donbas region described as a way to pursue sinister and long-term objectives in Russia's "near abroad" and against NATO (Paul, Matthews 2016), yet the author sees a gap in the studies conducted to analyze and understand the evolution of Russian information campaigns, particularly the change in the narratives used by the Kremlin to justify its increasingly aggressive stance towards Ukraine and its government in the recent past. Hence, the author would like to expand the scope to more recent years and track the evolution of Russian propaganda as well as define critical key messages leading to the invasion by Russian forces in Ukraine. In addition, the change in the Russian information operations will be analyzed and compared to the narratives it has been using during the first month of conventional conflict since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The focus of this research is to analyze the evolution of the key narratives in the Kremlin propaganda machine aimed at Russians and the Russian speaking population of Ukraine and Russia's near abroad over the course of 8 years: starting with the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and ending with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The research objective is to identify, analyze, and describe in detail the components and characteristics of three phases of Russian information operations: the instigation phase from March 2014 until February 2015, the low-conflict phase that lasted from February 2015 until the Ukrainian elections in April 2019, and finally the conflict escalation phase since the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy that has led to full-scale military intervention in Ukraine in February

2022. The results of this paper will contribute to the future studies of Russian aggression in post-Soviet countries.

The research is driven by two research questions: first, how has the key messaging of Russian propaganda describing the events in Ukraine evolved from the annexation of Crimea to the escalation into the Russian invasion? Second, how have the narratives used by the Russian media changed since the invasion in February 2022? The author aims to identify the key differences and suggest recommendations to both NATO and the EU in their work of monitoring and tackling Russian aggression in the future.

First of all, Chapter 1 will describe the modern Russian propaganda machine and briefly detail the key characteristics and qualities of various misinformation and disinformation campaigns in order to provide enough context to comprehend the key messages of Russian propaganda and their further analysis. It will introduce the reader to the modern propaganda utilized by the Kremlin as well as explain the origins of its framework for a better understanding of its use in regard to Ukraine. Then, Chapter 2 will apply Bernay's war propaganda theory. This will help the reader understand and analyze the identified key messages used by the Kremlin information campaigns in Ukraine. In addition, it will characterize the information operations as propaganda by outlining the main narratives with regard to each of the six propaganda attributes. After that, Chapter 3 will focus on the first question of this paper, how has the key messaging of Russian propaganda describing the events in Ukraine evolved since the annexation of Crimea up until the escalation into the war, and draw an evolution timeline of Russian propaganda key messages. Each of the propaganda phases will be analyzed in detail. The major part of this research will be devoted to the political events in Ukraine that served as triggers for the changes in the Kremlin narratives and provide an understanding of their components and attributes in this chapter. Finally, Chapter 4 will discuss and attempt to draw logical conclusions between each of the phases of Russian propaganda. What is more, the difference between the key narratives used during the annexation of Crimea in the first identified phase of the propaganda campaign and after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine will be analyzed to answer the second question of

this research, namely how the narratives used by the Russian media changed since the invasion in February 2022.

This research drew on the analytical work of 32 research papers published by scientists over the years 2016-2022 in various scientific journals, and global think tank publications available online to comprehend the nature and content of Russian propaganda, as well as the specifics of its use in the Russian hybrid war in Ukraine (Pakhomenko, Tryma 2016, 42). Additionally, due to the lack of more present research into Russian information operations, various Russia-backed news media channels were reviewed and discussed in this paper. In order to qualify Russian information campaigns as propaganda, the author applies Bernays' propaganda model (Bernays 1946). Furthermore, the narrative inquiry of Polkinghorne's Chronological Organization (Polkinghorne 1988) is applied to analyze the identified patterns in the messages used by the Kremlin and to build their evolution. Finally, the comparison between the narratives during the Crimean annexation and the 2022 Russian invasion is conducted by applying John Stuart Mill's Method of Difference (Mill 2011) and further analyzed to identify the key differences in the messages.

1. POST-INTRODUCTION: CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

In order to understand the key narratives described in the following chapters of this paper and develop a logical link in their evolution, it is essential to look into the attributes of modern Russian propaganda. This chapter analyzes the Kremlin propaganda machine's origins, its key characteristics and channels as well as the variety and often uniqueness of campaigns that differ based on the target audience.

A portion of the information and propaganda component of modern wars and armed conflicts is becoming practically identical, and in some places, even dominant, to other forms and methods of military-political confrontation. Simultaneously, it is well established that the beneficial properties of information as a means of influence include its adaptability, ease of access, breadth of application, permeability, and purposefulness. G. Pocheptsov defines 'information wars' as a class of destabilizing technologies whose purpose is to “achieve dominance in the symbolic field because it is the field of interpretation of facts” (Pocheptsov 2001, 256). Even more advanced ideas can be found in the report “Principal Tendencies in the Development of the Forms and Methods of Employing Armed Forces and Current Tasks of Military Science Regarding Their Improvement,” published in 2013, a year prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea, by Valerii Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Contemporary conflicts do not necessarily entail a strict division of military and non-military efforts, nor do they entail the concentration of large forces by the warring parties. They are frequently not even officially announced. Rather than that, such confrontations are defined by the absence of a declaration of war, the use of hybrid operations that combine military and non-military actions, and the use of small forces to target the adversary's critical infrastructure (Torichnyi *et al.* 2021, 358). Simultaneously, modern warfare, according to Gerasimov, is centered on intelligence and information dominance. It is worth noting that in Gerasimov's model for modern Russian war, "The role of non-military methods in resolving interstate

conflicts," a lengthy information campaign serves as the foundation for forcibly implementing Russia's interests abroad, while the power resource serves only as a reinforcing, auxiliary role during certain stages of the war (Gerasimov 2013, 24-29). In addition, information superiority is considered critical for achieving victory on the physical battlefield in modern warfare (Sazonov, Kopõtin 2016, 67-68).

Moscow's hybrid warfare (Pakhomenko, Tryma 2016, 42; Mahda, Vodotyka 2021, 353) tactics are renowned for their variety and uniqueness. According to C. Paul and M. Matthews from RAND global policy think tank, the modern Russian propaganda model can be identified as "the firehose of falsehood" (Paul, Matthews 2016) due to two of its distinguishing attributes: a vast number of channels and messages, and an undisguised eagerness to spread half-truths or absolute fictions.

Russia lacks a distinct propaganda ideology. Rather than that, it takes a little from everything. Thus, the system generates a great number of "micro-propagandas," each of which is targeted at a certain audience. (Fedchenko 2016, 146) The greater the number of messages, the better, as this effectively increases confusion. When it comes to the variety of channels and messages, pro-Russian activists frequently make extensive use of social media (Mõlder, Sazonov 2019; Kelly, Paul 2020; Laruelle, Limonier 2021, 319). Independent news organizations, bloggers, and commentators give the Kremlin ample opportunity to deliver manipulative messages that do not require extensive fact-checking or journalistic ethics. Online opinion pages can also have a snowball effect on social media, causing targeted audiences to succumb to cognitive group bias. In addition, the Kremlin employs troll farms, also known as "patriotic hackers" (Grace *et al.* 2020, 184), to disseminate false and misleading information generated by Russian news organizations such as RT (previously Russia Today) and Sputnik News. The former is a leading provider of multimedia news in Russia which operates in English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and numerous Eastern European languages and has a budget of more than \$300 million each year (Paul, Matthews 2016). These news organizations follow the lead of state-controlled agencies and further spread specific narratives that the sponsor intended to circulate in the public

domain. Once the information has been disseminated via the Internet, intelligence officers prey on "useful idiots" (Ibid., 184), members of the public who have a predisposition to reinforce pro-Russian sentiment. At the same time, given that television still remains the primary source of information among the older population in modern Russia and Russian speaking nationals abroad, it has become the Kremlin's preferred medium for disseminating conspiratorial explanations of events, which are used to maintain social cohesion and garner public support for the Kremlin (Yablokov 2014, 622). Additionally, increased volume can provide other benefits that are important in the Russian propaganda environment. To begin with, high volume can attract potential viewers' attention and other available bandwidth, blocking out competing messages. Second, a flood of conflicting messages might drown them out. Thirdly, utilizing several channels increases the likelihood that the message will be seen by the intended audience (Belousov 2012, 60). Fourth, getting a message in numerous modalities and from multiple sources enhances the communication's perceived trustworthiness, especially if the source spreading the information is one with whom an audience member is familiar. This can be viewed in Russia's use of Internet Research Agency (Baggott Carter, Carter 2021, 57-58), the troll farm mentioned above, whose members impersonate the target audience in order to tackle the so-called "propagandist dilemma" when rational readers dismiss information they read if its author is also its major beneficiary. Russian propaganda employs two strategies to overcome it. On the one hand, "honest propaganda" happens when propaganda organizations gain credibility through the use of fact and fiction, gaining the ability to sway citizens' beliefs. On the other hand, "black propaganda" happens when authorship is masked, obviating customers' ability to discount it, which can be seen in the troll activities. (Ibid., 58) As a result, various channels and most importantly messages are employed to ensure Kremlin propaganda's effectiveness.

The second aspect of the "firehose of falsehood" paradigm (Paul, Matthews 2016), an overt desire to spread half-truths or absolute fictions, is particularly apparent in Russian propaganda's continual and intense reactivity to events. Due to their indifference to facts, Russian propagandists are not obligated to verify data or allegations; instead, they promote an interpretation of unfolding events that appears to support their themes and objectives as long as

they are aligned with the Kremlin narrative. This enables them to be extremely responsive and flexible, frequently being the first to report on happenings and, similarly, the first news of nonevents, or in other words fiction, the things that have not actually happened (Paul, Matthews 2016). To complete the cycle, the misinformation will be recycled through various channels described above which increases its effectiveness because the initial impressions are extremely durable, and repeated exposure to certain information, even if it is false, results in familiarity, and familiarity, in turn, results in acceptance. Along with fabricating facts, Russian propagandists frequently fabricate sources (Ibid.). Russian news networks such as RT and Sputnik News are more akin to a mix of infotainment and disinformation than to fact-checked journalism, despite the fact that their designs are designed to resemble traditional news programs. Additionally, Russian news networks and other forms of media misquote reliable sources or attribute a particular untruth to a more plausible source. Finally, Russian propaganda is often inconsistent in its narratives since different news sources often spread a variety of themes and messages. Their versions of disputed events differ and they are not reluctant to change their judgment. As Paul and Matthews argue, if deception or misrepresentation is exposed or is not well received, propagandists will abandon it in favor of a more convincing (though not necessarily more plausible) explanation.

Although Russian propaganda peaked during the Ukraine war, the evolution of which the author analyzes in this paper, it is important to remember that it is not a new phenomenon; rather, it is a continuation of Soviet propaganda that never truly vanished until the collapse of the Soviet Union (Fedchenko 2016, 167). Russian actions in Ukraine have a striking resemblance to Soviet-era agitprop and influence operations. They have been greatly updated in terms of complexity and have aspired to achieve a superficial resemblance to Western news agencies. (Murphy 2016) Therefore, sowing chaos is a component of what Russian military strategists refer to as the "first phase of conflict" — a term derived from Soviet military theory but applied to modern combat (Boulègue, Polyakova 2021). These notions obliterate the distinction between peace and war, merging politics and military conflict together which could be observed throughout the hybrid war in Ukraine and especially during the period this paper focuses on.

Historically, the Kremlin's propaganda campaign, both within and outside Russia, has been based on a postmodernist denial of everything (Fedchenko 2016, 146). Its objective is to completely destroy the liberal notion of western society, including democracy and its constituent aspects such as free media, fair elections, effective governance, and the freedom of individuals to self-determination and self-government. The messages used by Russian propaganda have had consistently aligned themes. The most widely used topic depicts and advocates against the Western (i.e. the US, NATO, and the EU) influences in the world in general and in Ukraine in particular. The bottom lines of this approach are the dangers inherent in democratic countries such as mass protests and non-governmental organizations with the former being outlawed by Putin and the latter getting branded as foreign agents in Russia (Gerber, Zavisca 2016, 88; Yablokov 2018, 361).

Along with general attacks on countries or organizations that do not support Russian interests and active promotion of those that do, much of the content produced by Russia's information efforts appears to center on the alleged threats to tradition and conservative social norms posed by those opposed to Russian interests and actions. There is an evident emphasis on traditional social norms and standards in messages used to promote Russian institutions and culture, appeal to targeted audiences' shared culture and history, and foster contentious attitudes. (Matthews *et al.* 2021, xx) Across each of these narratives, Russia and its operatives promote Russia and its followers as moral bulwarks by emphasizing the depravity of those who are not supportive of Russian goals. The Soviet period is often referred to as “glorious” (Sazonov, Kopõtin 2016, 73) and victorious in liberating Europe and the whole world from Fascists (Khaldarova, Pantti 2016, 896; Orttung, Nelson 2019, 84). In general, the nations opposing the Russian worldview end up being branded as Fascist, Nazist, neo-Nazist, or ultra-nationalist (Pakhomenko, Tryma 2016, 47; Fedchenko 2016, 157) by the Kremlin propaganda. Domestically, the story of fascist Ukrainians' crimes in the Donbas area has been tremendously effective in mobilizing popular support in Russia and in making it exceedingly difficult for Russians to criticize the Kremlin's activities without being branded as pro-fascist or pro-Nazi (Shandra, Seely 2019, 15).

Finally, the atrocities committed by those “Fascist states” are emphasized with the highlighted message of the importance and often urgency of Russia’s protection of Russian people living in those countries. The propaganda narratives would embrace the tensions between different local groups or, as in the case of Donbas, instigate them further to prepare the pretext of “protecting Russians abroad” (Wilson 2016, 117). Those Russian-speaking minorities are successfully shown as endangered and in need of protection despite the fact that popular support is often significantly lower than described. Research confirms that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's strategy in what it refers to as the "near abroad" has been characterized by exaggeration and exploitation of minority dissatisfaction (Murphy 2016). In the case of Ukraine, Russian protection was supported by the claims that local Russians were in fear of hostility by their own government characterized as “the coup regime in Kyiv” (Boyd-Barrett 2017, 1029). Those claims would later justify the Russian invasion.

2. KEY NARRATIVES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN UKRAINE

In order to define the key messages used in the Russian information operations as propaganda, the author has chosen Bernays' interpretation of the propaganda model (Bernays 1946). Edward Bernays, an American theorist of public relations, described war propaganda using 6 attributes that the author analyzes in this chapter:

1. Propaganda will attribute the war to the adversary.
2. Propaganda will preach unity and victory in the name of God and history.
3. The state will justify the war by stating that "we are fighting for security," "we are fighting for a more just social order," and so forth.
4. Convince citizens that conflict is the enemy's fault through propaganda about the enemy's evil.
5. Instill in residents the belief that unfavorable news is enemy propaganda.
6. Employ these blended approaches in conjunction with atrocity propaganda.

Propaganda will attribute the war to the adversary.

Historically, the West has been viewed by Russia (and previously by the Soviet Union) as an enemy and aggressor. The Kremlin attempts to divide NATO and undermine pro-Western governments by drawing on Soviet-era successes or by amplifying anti-NATO rhetoric through the use of the media. These tactics attempt to elicit an emotional response by releasing old war nationalistic media in order to instill a stronger sense of patriotism and nationalism consistent with the pro-Russian narrative. (Grace *et al.* 2020, 184) Since the Maidan uprising and Ukrainians' increasingly vocal pro-Western views including desired membership in both NATO and the EU, Ukraine has fallen under this category of the "others" versus "us" that had been at the core of the Soviet propaganda ideology. In Russian propaganda's rhetoric, a crucial component of the great-power-management language became an emotionally charged contrast

between Russia as a "genuine" great power and Ukraine as a "failed state." (Makarychev 2021, 54).

The key messages used by Russian propaganda portraying Ukrainian government and pro-Western population in Ukraine were identified as follows (Kelly, Paul 2020, 29-30):

- The Ukrainian government acts in the interests of the United States, NATO, and/or the European Union rather than its citizens (vedomosti.ru 2022a).
- The Ukrainian government has been taken over by violent ultranationalists.
- Ukraine's pro-European population is ideologically descended from Nazi sympathizers and fascists. (ria.ru 2021)
- Western countries, particularly the US, are primarily responsible for orchestrating events in Ukraine: from the Maidan uprising to the neo-nationalist atrocities (Interfax.ru, 2021).
- NATO expansion and containing Russia's capabilities are the primary motives for the majority of the EU and the US operations (vedomosti.ru 2022b).
- The US is urging European countries to maintain their anti-Russian sanctions policy.

Propaganda will preach unity and victory in the name of God and history.

Russia has a long history of utilizing the Orthodox Church as a propaganda tool, portraying "traditional" Russian characteristics as Christian ideals. Within Russia, the Kremlin has the church as an advocate and consequently a large backing audience (Grace *et al.* 2020, 185; Sazonov, Kopõtin 2016, 75). According to Yablokov, Orthodoxy's instrumental and populist use, widely portrayed as a necessary component of Russian national identity, enabled the propagation of conspiracy suspicions in society and elevated them to a key driver of both domestic and foreign politics (2014, 634).

Eastern and southern Ukraine, which used to be part of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, are viewed as the critical focus point for the restoration of the empire. This was the pivotal point for numerous Russian nation-building programs and a key battleground with the

West. When bargaining with the European Union and the United States, the Kremlin invoked this historical legacy to legitimize both Ukraine's federalization and Russia's resistance to Ukrainian authorities in the Donbas region. (Yablokov 2018, 368)

While emphasizing the importance of history and religion in Russian-Ukrainian relations, certain messages stood out in Russia's propaganda (Kelly, Paul 2020, 31; Veebel 2016, 49):

- Historically, Russia owned Crimea and its "loss" in 1954 was a historical mistake. "Return" of Crimea has been widely celebrated across Russia as a long-awaited reunification of Russian territory (rbc.ru 2014).
- The collapse of the Soviet Union was a global catastrophe that broke Soviet republics away from Russia's direct sphere of influence despite their cultural, religious, historical and often political connection to Russia (Gerber, Zavisca 2016, 79; Matthews *et al.* 2021).
- Russia is the primary opponent of fascism which is repeatedly justified by the Soviet Union's victorious war against Nazi Germany.
- Russia is the Slavic/Orthodox world's center and behaves in accordance with Christian beliefs. One of the main propagators of this message has been the Moscow Patriarchate with Patriarch Kirill himself (Sazonov, Kopõtin 2016, 75).

The state will justify the war by stating that "we are fighting for security," "we are fighting for a more just social order," and so forth.

In order to justify the intervention, the Russian propaganda apparatus tried to popularize two key concepts. To begin, it claimed the new administration in Kyiv's claimed mistreatment of Russians and Russian speakers. This issue was exacerbated by an inaccurate portrayal of far-right nationalists, "banderivtsi," and members of the "Right sector" conspiring to incite a "revolution" in order to install a "junta." The second aspect that heightened concern about the destiny of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine was the country's premature removal of Russian as an official language. This was ultimately demonstrated as "the annihilation and

prohibition of the Russian language in Ukraine" by Russian propagandists (Pakhomenko, Tryma 2016, 44-45). Thus, the preservation of Russians and Russian speakers was a fundamental justification for the annexation of Crimea, as well as a justification for supporting the insurgents in Donbas.

In promoting security of the Russian world and social order, the Kremlin information campaign focused on two key narratives:

- Ethnic Russians and all other Russian-speaking people in Crimea face serious threats from ultranationalists (Interfax, 2021). As a result, hundreds of thousands of Russians fled Ukraine afraid for their lives. Russia, in its turn, is responsible for the protection of the Russian diaspora worldwide (Kelly, Paul 2020, 29-31).
- Russia is a defender of truth and an opponent of the United States' global dominance and hegemony. Russia Today famously stated to stand for an alternative and often the true point of view in the world as opposed to the widely accepted Western media's narrative (Orttung, Nelson 2019, 79-80).

Convince citizens that conflict is the enemy's fault through propaganda about the enemy's evil.

The Russian position on the Ukraine war portrays it as a popular uprising against the US and its supposed Russophobic allies, whose overthrow of Russia-backed President Viktor Yanukovich during public protests in February 2014 constituted an illegal coup (Gerber, Zavisca 2016, 81). Throughout the conflict period, the alleged Russophobia in Ukraine has been consistently identified as genocide, and the information campaigns portrayed Russian speakers in Ukraine as under constant threat to their identity and their lives.

Official comments and documents make reference to biological weapons and the intentional spread of infectious disease agents in a direct manner (Roffey, Tunemalm 2017, 539-540). The US is particularly implicated in undercover biological weapons-related operations both within

the country and on Ukrainian territory. The proximity of those laboratories to the Russian border further exacerbates the imminent danger that not only Russian speakers in Ukraine face but also the whole population of Russia.

Instill in residents the belief that unfavorable news is enemy propaganda.

To tackle the pro-Western views among Ukrainian population, the Russian information campaigns applied in Ukraine focused on portraying the West as an aggressive adversary intent on advancing its interests in Ukraine and containing Russia in order to retain its world dominance. The Western propaganda supposedly accomplishes its goals through the internet and social media, as well as television, and with the assistance of the 'massively subsidized international NGO cohort.' Furthermore, by using anti-Russian propaganda, 'Western adversaries' and 'anti-Russian groups' in Ukraine launch an information war against Russia. Finally, the West inhibits Russian influence and attempts to maintain its predominance in the international arena through manipulation and discreditation. (Baumann 2020, 295) There were two main messages used. First, the Western narrative of events in Ukraine is inaccurate and warped by propaganda. Second, by demonizing the Soviet Union, the West and Ukraine promote a distorted view of history (Ibid., 296).

Employ these blended approaches in conjunction with atrocity propaganda.

The Kremlin's propaganda attempts to sway the entire Ukrainian populace by disseminating often divergent terror-, dread-, or hate-based misinformation and fakes (Sazonov, Kopõtin 2016, 69). Manufactured photos are used most commonly for this purpose. However, many of these photographs are clearly recognizable as forgeries due to bad editings, such as scale mismatches or the discovery of the original image. Russian propagandists have been caught employing actors to depict victims of fabricated tragedies or crimes in news coverage, as well as fabricating on-scene reportage. (Paul, Matthews 2016)

3. EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN IN UKRAINE SINCE THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

In Eastern Europe, the standard Russian information tactic has been to appeal to and message ultra-nationalist political views and ethnic affiliations. Pan-Slavic themes and a focus on Russian minorities abroad have been the primary media messages for pro-Kremlin sentiments. (Grace *et al.* 2020, 182) This particular information tactic has been observed in the Russian narrative targeting the civilian population in Ukraine while describing the events in Ukraine both before and right after the annexation of Crimea. Simultaneously, in the Russia's information campaigns against the Ukrainian state and army, Moscow propagandists have employed a variety of myths, ideas, and narratives, most of which have been connected to contemporary Russian and Soviet history – for example, the Second World War, Stepan Bandera, and "banderovitsi" – but also to Nazism and violence, genocide, Russophobia, and Chauvinism, among others (Sazonov, Kopõtin 2016, 73). All of these messages were used to undermine the Ukrainian government and its legitimacy, at the same time promoting the pro-Russian ideas and, most importantly, Russian identity among Ukrainian citizens. The term "nation," as well as its derivative idea – "national identity" – in the post-Soviet scientific linguistic tradition do not just refer to civil concepts (as in the Western tradition), but also have substantial "ethnic" overtones (Pakhomenko, Tryma 2016, 43). In this context, national identity is not confined to the political domain but it is also defined by ethnically diverse cultural groups residing in Ukraine, especially in the East and South. By analyzing the Kremlin's use of different narratives in its information operations in Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea, and applying the Polkinghorne's Chronological Organization while following the historical continuity to understand how certain events might have served as triggers to the narratives used, the author has identified 3 phases of Russian propaganda that deserve closer analysis:

- Instigation phase from March 2014 until February 2015.
- Low-conflict phase from February 2015 until April 2019.
- Conflict escalation phase from April 2019 until February 2022.

3.1. Instigation phase

The first period in the post-Crimean information campaign conducted by the Russian propaganda machine is attributed to both Crimea and especially Donbas. On the one hand, the historical mistake of losing Crimea was finally resolved while also being the conflict's peak, as it involved the most extensive involvement of Russian armed forces (Zarembo, Solodkyy 2021, 4). On the other hand, Russia had “identified” another region of Ukraine whose population was in danger. Between February and May 2014, not being able to control Donbas as it did with Crimea (Boulègue, Polyakova 2021), Russia fueled a political protest movement in Eastern Ukraine that swiftly devolved into a deadly conflict (Kelly 2020, 9) sustaining the low level of which would then obstruct Ukraine's incorporation into Western security frameworks. It is important to analyze the difference in the messages disseminated by the Russian propaganda depending on the target audience. For the populace living in the conflict zone, the appeal to identity was especially crucial in the conflict's earliest stages. Much of the discourse was filled with dread, threats, and the imminent cultural extermination of the Donbas' Russian-speaking people. At the same time, Russian propagandists attempted to provoke mutual hostility amongst the public in Ukraine's uncontested territories by fabricating torture episodes and broadcasting humiliations suffered by the Ukrainian military. These "special events," as well as several other carefully staged episodes, were aimed to incite Ukrainian patriotism and build mutual hatred and hostility among the Donbas people. Conversely, the Russian Federation's citizens were indoctrinated with the belief that the Russian people living in Eastern Ukraine faced serious tyranny and that assistance was necessary. This portrayal of events had a critical role in igniting the mass volunteer movement "to defend our brothers in Donbas" and became a de facto endorsement of the Ukrainian state's occupation. (Pakhomenko, Tryma 2016, 46-47) According to researchers Sazonov and Kopõtin, a similar phase has been identified as the period of extensive informational pressure (2016, 72).

Consequently, following the 2014 Ukrainian presidential elections, the Ukrainian government and army were labeled "fascist." Simultaneously, the Ukrainian army was dubbed "executioners." This was the name used during World War II to refer to the elite Nazi units that gained notoriety for their brutal violence against civilians (Khaldarova, Pantti 2016, 893-894). This narrative is crucial in the evolution of Russian propaganda as 8 years later the denazification would be stated among the reasons to start the "special military operation", as the invasion would be then branded by Putin. Russian propaganda portrays Ukraine as a de facto fascist state as a result of the alleged coup that overthrew the legitimate and lawful government of Yanukovich (Baumann 2020, 295). All of fascism's characteristics, i.e. anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia, are exploited by propaganda and form the basis for active measures against Ukraine (Fedchenko 2016, 163). The 'fascist narrative' is a critical subject because it once again links Ukrainian events to the World War II narrative, which is considered a glorious chapter in former Soviet, and now Russian, history (Sazonov, Kopõtin 2016, 73; Khaldarova, Pantti 2016, 895). World War II's significance has served as a symbolic resource for nation formation. The storyline is centered on Russia's triumph in the Great Patriotic War, which is regarded as the country's greatest achievement. As a result, labeling someone "fascist" is an effective approach to appeal to Russian ideals, which equate World War II with fascist atrocities and crimes.

The instigation phase should be characterized by the variety of narratives that differed based on the target audience. For the population within the conflict zone, the call to Russian identity was widely used with emphasis on the threat to the Russian-speaking population of the Donbas region. Simultaneously, the people in the rest of Ukraine were exposed to the sufferings by the Ukrainian military with the aim to incite both Ukrainian patriotism and develop mutual hostility with the Donbas people. At this stage the label of "fascism" was introduced which would later be capitalized on.

3.2. Low-conflict phase

The next period of Crimean propaganda began in February 2015, following the signing of the so-called Minsk II accords, when Russia increased its use of political, economic, social, and information efforts while reducing military actions (Zarembo, Solodkyy 2021). Russia shifted its focus to a low-intensity military struggle in the East, supplemented by hybrid strikes across the rest of Ukraine. Its actions aimed primarily at destabilizing Ukraine and discrediting the country's leaders in the eyes of their citizens and Western allies. Russia's foreign policy shifted in response to the imposition of EU and US sanctions and the signing of the Minsk agreements. Russia was interested in implementing them because they would effectively federalize Ukraine and legitimize Russia's puppets among the local elite and government. However, in regards to the goal of absolute peace and conflict cooldown, the Minsk accords were ineffective because, during the period from 2015 to 2019, Russia violated the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group's ceasefire more than 20 times, including in the first hours after it was declared (Idib.). Russia also began conducting military exercises near Ukrainian territory on a regular basis and amassed military formations along the Ukrainian border and in the seized Crimea, employing hybrid methods of aggression in conjunction with psychological pressure.

Historically, Russia deftly exploits the mistakes of other states to excuse or defend its own behavior (Värk 2016, 43) and so Moscow profited from various political missteps made by the Ukrainian government. It took advantage of the Ukrainian Parliament's vote to revoke the Russian language's official status. This allowed Russia to assert that the ethnic Russian community in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine faced imminent danger. The removal of Russian as an official regional language by the Ukraine Parliament was re-defined by propagandists as a threat to indigenous Russians (Kelly 2020, 13).

Simultaneously, in the absence of the Ukrainian government's political mistakes, there were several occasions when the Kremlin media was disseminating misinformation (Fedchenko 2016, 163-164). The narratives have been steadily connected to the previous phase of information

warfare: reflection on the glorious Soviet history, Ukrainian Nazism, and Russophobia. For instance, in September 2015 when the local municipality of Kharkiv was renovating the Soviet memorial plaques, the Russian media wrongly reported that unknown individuals had vandalized them which was accompanied by a YouTube video made by a member of the public (Ibid.).

While coverage of Ukraine began rather robust in 2015, it dwindled significantly during the year and into 2016 (Orttung, Nelson 2019, 84). This can be explained by Russia's aim to maintain the low-level conflict in Ukraine as a wider information campaign could instigate more separatist movements than Russia would be willing to support both materially and militarily. Since 1991, conspiracy theories have increasingly migrated from the periphery to the center of political debate (Yablokov 2018, 360). At this stage, Russia launched its information campaign focusing on biological weapons and bio laboratories located in Ukraine and supported by the West. As early as January 2016 there was a claim that 30 kilometers from Kharkiv there is a laboratory serving as a base for US military officials (Roffey, Tunemalm 2017, 536). According to Fisher, a growing portion of hybrid warfare entails disparaging foreign support for one's adversaries (2020, 282), and at this point, Kremlin propaganda's attention started shifting more toward including Western support in Ukraine. It is important to note the aim of such a shift. Although Russian propaganda may not help perceptions of Russia, it can have a detrimental effect on perceptions of Ukraine and its policies (Ibid.). In other words, propaganda has an impact on how individuals, i.e European and broader Western community, interpret the governance of another country. During this period, the Ukrainian government was repeatedly denounced for its actions and Ukraine was portrayed as a failed state while the situation in Donbas was preserved in the low-stage conflict.

Since the summer of 2017, Moscow has made it abundantly evident that it had no intention of establishing a quasi-independent state in eastern Ukraine. In July 2017, Moscow quickly rejected separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko's "Malorossiya" proposal. What is more, since September 2017, both Russia's diplomats and expert community had been considering the prospect of deploying a United Nations-led peacekeeping mission to eastern Ukraine. By

effectively internationalizing the conflict resolution process, Moscow hoped to accelerate the implementation of the Minsk Agreement and so achieve a favorable settlement that could also result in the easing of Western sanctions. (Rącz, Raik 2018) These events address both aims: maintaining the low-level conflict and legitimizing any potential intervention in the future with the aim of protecting the people and de-escalating the conflict. At this stage, Russia's major objective in military operations was to keep Ukrainians discouraged and stressed out by the constant fear of further aggression. By maintaining a low-key war, Russia fostered the dissatisfaction and hatred that it believed Ukrainians would gradually direct against their own leaders (Zarembo, Solodkyy 2021) and their Western supporters.

Concerning Western assistance to Ukraine, it has been rather low-level until Russia's November 2018 raid on and capture of three Ukrainian navy vessels in the Kerch Strait (Zarembo, Solodkyy 2021). According to EU security commissioner Julian King, Russia had launched a news campaign a year prior to the ship seizures (Euractiv, 2018). Four distinctive anti-Western narratives were identified among the messages by the Russian state-sponsored news sources: Ukraine was preparing to host a NATO fleet in the Azov Sea, the Azov Sea was infected with cholera, British and Ukrainian secret services had tried to ship a nuclear bomb to Crimea and that Western provocations were imminent. This incident caused the EU to establish a field office of its advisory mission (EUAM) in Mariupol, a move that EU member states had previously resisted as being too sensitive for EU policy on the crisis in Ukraine. It is unclear if seizing the vessels in the Kerch Strait had a covert goal of provoking the West and the EU in particular, yet having the EUAM in the administrative center of the Donetsk region in relative proximity to the separatist DNR was clearly viewed negatively in Russia.

The low-conflict phase brought the change in the narrative towards destabilizing Ukraine and disgracing the country leadership, especially in the view of the Western world. Political decisions made by the Ukrainian government would be distorted to support the Russian claims of the threats the Russian-speakers in the Donbas area face on a daily basis. The "fascist" narrative introduced in the instigation phase was accompanied by the references to the history: the Soviet

glorious victory in the World War 2, the Ukrainian Nazism during that period and, generally, Russophobia. At the same time, the use of psychological pressure became more apparent in the shape of military exercises conducted in the proximity with the Ukrainian border.

3.3. Conflict escalation phase

In 2019 the phase of the low-level conflict slowly began transforming into the escalation phase. This could be also identified in the Kremlin propaganda and officials' rhetoric. The description of Russia's ideological agenda started circulating emphasizing that Russia as a state will continue to exist and will take on a new form that the world had never seen before along with pursuing Russia's long-term strategic goals (Mölder, Sazonov 2019, 100; Laruelle, Limonier 2021, 325). One of the reasons might be Russia failing to bring a pro-Russian government to power in the 2019 elections. The presidential and parliamentary elections demonstrated widespread public support for politicians capable of resolving disputes peacefully with Russia. Nevertheless, Ukrainians were still unwilling to massively back pro-Russian candidates (Zarembo, Solodkyy 2021). With Zelenskyy becoming the president of Ukraine, Russia saw an opportunity and moved towards more active political propaganda.

The Kremlin's assessment of President Zelenskyy has shifted over time. Originally, Moscow expressed hope that he may provide the desired results (International Crisis Group 2021, 6). However, Russia's political interference in Ukraine was limited and dwindling, and Zelenskyy had been unwilling to bow to Moscow's demands. Given Russia's dread of any prospective Ukrainian-Western alliance, it's unsurprising that at first Moscow reacted carefully to Zelenskyy's election. Yet, Russia's reaction to his policies was rather hostile: Russia began issuing passports to citizens of Ukraine's Donbas region (International Crisis Group 2020, 6). In retrospect, this could also be viewed as a way to increase the number of Russian citizens who would later need Russia's protection from the "fascist" government of Ukraine with Zelenskyy viewed as an ultra-nationalist leader unwilling to cooperate with Russia in accordance with the Minsk accords.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy adopted Ukraine's new National Security Strategy in September 2020, which calls for the creation of a unique collaboration with NATO with the ultimate goal of membership (NATO 2022). While joining NATO could be viewed as a logical chain of events, outsiders have a tough time comprehending how critical it is to Russians' feeling of national identity. No area is more significant in this regard than Ukraine, which contains a large portion of the historic Russian heartland known as the Rus (Murphy 2016). From the viewpoint of a typical Russian nationalist who harbors anti-Western sentiments, the West which is often seen in the form of NATO seems like the ultimate and devious adversary bent on impeding the Russian nation's development toward a great future (Yablokov 2018, 361) and “losing” Ukraine to it is unacceptable.

In July 2021, Putin issued an article outlining his position on Ukraine. He accused Western powers of attempting to sway Ukraine toward an anti-Russian stance in it. He also emphasized the economic interdependence of the two countries, implying that Ukraine's independence is contingent on Russian friendship. This narrative was supported later, in October, when former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev commented on Russian-Ukrainian ties, claiming that communication with the current Ukrainian leadership is futile because they are incompetent, ignorant, faithless, and dishonest, and have rendered Ukraine totally reliant on the EU and the US. (International Crisis Group 2021, 5) Both these messages were further disseminated traditionally through Russian media channels and social media. This escalation in the narratives demonstrates how carefully the information campaign's progression was prepared. At first, the emphasis fell on the unity of the Russians and Ukrainians, further reiterated as “one people” (Putin 2021). Three months later, however, the narrative changed to demonstrate the impossibility of holding a dialogue between two countries, showing how Russia's stance on Ukraine had evolved.

The situation escalated quickly only a month later when Russia amassed troops on the Ukrainian border in November 2021. These maneuvers were reminiscent of the situation in March and

April of the same year (International Crisis Group 2021, 3), when Russia put over 100,000 military soldiers near the Ukrainian border, ostensibly for the purpose of conducting exercises. It finally relocated the majority of the soldiers to rear camps, proclaiming the exercises complete, but leaving behind much of the infrastructure. Despite the tension, Moscow rejected any intention to attack Ukraine and instead blamed Ukraine and Western governments for provocations. President Putin pointed out the stepped-up exercises and naval and aviation activities conducted in the Black Sea as part of NATO's Tailored Forward Presence program. Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, suggested that the increasing combat in Donbas between Russia-backed rebels and Ukrainian forces was Kyiv's fault, and that Kyiv was attempting to coerce Moscow into taking some form of military response. Dmitry Peskov, the Russian presidential spokesman, speculated that Ukraine was plotting a military attack in Donbas under cover of NATO drills, along with the region's growing number of American and British servicemen. (Idib., 4) This message was further disseminated inside the Donbas region.

The leaders of Russia's proxy republics in occupied Donbas repeatedly stated that Ukraine was violating the ceasefire conditions and was planning false-flag assaults or even invasions. The narratives of the proxy republics shifted abruptly following Kremlin Spokesman Dmitrii Peskov's startling comments on January 24, 2022, implying that a Ukrainian invasion of Donbas may be near. The next day, the proxy leaders began describing highly precise purported Ukrainian offensive preparations and identifying particular Ukrainian troops preparing for war throughout Ukraine, not only around Donbas. Both LNR and DNR officials began making frequent claims about the Ukrainian government's potential for sabotage and terrorist attacks as a result of its amassing weapons near the line of contact, and thus backed Secretary of United Russia General Council Andrey Turchak's proposal to supply Donbas with Russian military equipment to bolster its defensive capabilities. These assertions were continually bolstered by the Kremlin-backed TV networks. (Kagan *et al.* 2022, 25-25)

The week before the invasion was especially eventful. On 18 February, the leaders of DNR and LNR urged civilians to evacuate to Russia, explaining it with the increased threat of Ukrainian

invasion in the separatist territories (RIA Novosti 2022). It is important to note this as a critical sign of the escalation and treat the announcement as increased chances of Russian invasion instead. The narrative used focused on the imminent risk coming from Ukrainian forces amassing weapons and military personnel near the line of conflict. According to the message, president Zelenskyy was going to give an order to invade the territories which, according to the theoretical framework applied, repeatedly describes the Ukrainian government and its supporting Western democracies as aggressors. Shortly after, the military exercises in Belarus were continued on the pretext of the deterioration of the situation in Donbas (Gazeta.ru 2022). This narrative prepared the context to justify the war even before the formal invasion by stating the importance of security within and around the borders of both Russia and in this case Belarus. Additionally, on 21 February Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) stated that Ukrainian shelling had damaged an FSB border facility in Rostov Oblast, 150 meters from the Russia-Ukraine border (Tvzvezda.ru 2022). The threat not only in separatist republics in Ukraine but also in Russia was carefully presented and further disseminated through Russian media. This domestic danger was coupled with the requests coming from both DNR and LNR to recognize their sovereignty which with the defense minister Shoigu's endorsement Putin signed later that day (Kremlin 2022a). In his message, Putin reflected on both the common past Ukraine shares with Bolshevik Russia as well as the nuclear threat Ukraine poses (radiosputnik.ria.ru 2022) under assistance from its foreign allies. The nuclear threat's narrative should be treated as culminating because it constitutes a direct threat to Russia and all Russian people. As a result, Putin ordered additional troops to Donbas under the pretext of the "peacekeeping" mission (CNN 2022). The same troops would drive the invasion further onto the territory of Ukraine after president Putin announced the beginning of the "special military operation" with the aim to denazify Ukraine (Kremlin 2022b).

The conflict escalation phase can be described by the shift in the Russian officials' rhetoric toward Ukraine. Newly elected president Zelenskyy was referred to as ultra-nationalist leader at the head of the "fascist" government who is not interested in following the Minsk accords and resolving the conflict peacefully. Putin became a more frequent actor in the propaganda machine

by emphasizing various written and verbal narratives about the historical unity of the two countries, their people and their economic interdependence. In a matter of months, the narratives changed to more hostile, supported by mobilizing military at the border and calling on the Ukrainian and Western provocations and inability to hold a diplomatic dialogue. Finally, the speculations about the Ukrainian military imminent invasion in the Donbas and the threat to the Russian population there reached its limit that resulted in Russia's recognition of both separatist republics and the military intervention.

4. DISCUSSION: EVOLUTION OF THE KEY MESSAGES AND THEIR CULMINATION IN MILITARY INTERVENTION

Almost eight years since Russia's aggression against Ukraine began, the war in the Donbas continued unabated, despite diplomatic efforts to cease it. In spite of multiple ceasefires, occasional fighting occurred practically daily, with the majority of incidents initiated by Russian-led forces, with a death toll exceeding 14,000 (Åslund *et al.* 2021, 5). Zelenskyy, who ran as a peace candidate, made a concerted effort to push negotiations for a settlement based on the 2014-15 Minsk agreements but came up short just like his predecessor. The Russian-backed regimes in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics" served several objectives: to create a permanent zone of turbulence and instability within the country, to divert the country's government from pursuing broadly reformist and democratic agendas, and thus to obstruct the country's political, economic, and social development - and, more broadly, its movement toward the EU and the West (Shandra, Seely 2019, 25).

To analyze and compare the Russian propaganda campaign in Ukraine in the events of the Crimean annexation of 2014 and the Russian invasion of 2022, it is important to outline the two factors that define when the countries commit information attacks against other states (Baranovsky-Dewey 2019, 125):

1. Information attacks are possible only when there are information resources available. This is consistent with the logic of the security dilemma; endowment of information power resources is a variable that comprises know-how, institutions, and organizations capable of interacting with foreign recipients of the information. In the case of Russia, groups like the IRA, RT, and Sputnik drew on decades of expertise fabricating propaganda under the Soviet regime. Although the possession of information power resources is a basic requirement, it alone is insufficient for initiating an information attack.

2. Certain vulnerabilities exist in the target states. These vulnerabilities include a polarized political atmosphere, an open mass media environment that regularly provides a voice to minority viewpoints, a significant historical event that might be influenced by foreign involvement, and a lack of knowledge of or readiness for an information attack. These elements might occur alone or in combination. Their varied combinations have an effect on the calculated result for the attacking state, as well as the time and severity of the subsequent information attack. The success of the information operations prior to and during the Russian annexation of Crimea combined in it all of these attributes.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian invasion of 2022 are viable cases for analysis because they follow a well-accepted case selection method: John Stuart Mill's Method of Difference. When two situations are identical in every way but one, that one difference is likely to be decisive in determining the results. Both Crimea and Donbas have a majority Russian-speaking population, as evidenced by Russia's narrative of protecting Russians abroad from imminent genocide. Yet, while the takeover of Crimea came as a surprise due to Ukraine's unpreparedness to withstand Russian propaganda (Torichnyi *et al.* 2021, 356), the information campaign supporting the 2022 invasion was not novel. Ukraine's weakness, which differentiated the Crimean and Donbas crises, is the awareness of and preparedness for an information campaign. Russia has been more likely to coordinate an information assault, or to devote additional resources to one, in recent years, when it perceives the target state to be either uninformed of its vulnerabilities or unprepared for one (Baranovsky-Dewey 2019, 127).

The international support Ukraine obtained during these crises has been different as well. Following the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine lacked "an international voice or image" (Ibid. 2019, 130). However, the situation was completely the opposite after Russia's invasion in 2022 which resulted in military and economic support for Ukraine along with the extensive sanctions against Russia by both the EU and the US.

In both 2014 and 2022, the Kremlin asserted that it had no intention of intervening militarily in neither Crimea nor Donbas (Paul, Matthews 2016, 28; Baranovsky-Dewey 2019, 131). Yet, certain messages used in the Russian media could be viewed as an escalation of the situation. First of all, the accusations of genocide in eastern Ukraine that have become more frequent since Putin's speech on 9 December 2021 (rg.ru 2021) calling Russophobia he observes in Ukraine a first step towards genocide. The same message was reiterated on 15 February 2021 by Putin during a press conference after meeting with Olaf Scholz (iz.ru 2022). Additionally, there were claims of neo-Nazism directed at the Ukrainian government and its military forces as well as the pro-European population of Ukraine. Finally, the ideas of liberation began circulating in the media which made the Russia's course of action even more obvious since these messages focused on the threat Russian-speaking population of Ukraine faced and the urgency required to prevent the genocide. On the other hand, the propaganda's claims of Ukrainian attacks on the territory of Russia have validated the rhetoric used from the angle of domestic security. These two arguments combined further emphasized the danger Russian people not only in Ukraine but also in Russia faced, hence justifying the use of force by the Russian government to protect its people.

To promote this threat, Russian news outlets and government announcements have continued to raise biosecurity concerns about Ukraine's network of US-supported high-security bio labs. The first biological facility in Ukraine was established in 2010 as a component of the Mechnikov Anti-Plague Research Institute in Odessa, with support from the US, and was assigned a level permitting work with strains used in the development of biological weapons. (Roffey, Tunemalm 2017, 531) However, numerous accusations have been leveled in the news media in connection with recent outbreaks and situations involving biosecurity. Russian officials have recently linked the Ebola outbreak, the Zika virus epidemic, African swine fever, and ultimately the Covid pandemic to a lack of biosecurity controls and biological weapons threats (Ibid., 534). Allegations of Coronavirus being developed specifically in the Ukrainian biological laboratories have been circulating in Russian media since early 2022. These deliberate disinformation campaigns focus on both undermining the Ukrainian government's abilities to protect the

citizens and decreasing the popular interest in collaborating with the US and Western institutions. Later on, the imminent increasing biological and nuclear weapons threat against Russia would be used as a reason to intervene and demilitarize Ukraine in order to prevent catastrophe.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Russia's information operations in regards to its position on Ukraine can be classified as propaganda according to the applied theoretical framework based on Bernay's propaganda model. The Kremlin propaganda has been attributing the war to the Ukraine and its government, it has been referring to and preaching unity and victory in the name of God and history Russia shares with Ukraine, glorified its fight for security and safety of Russians as well as explained any shortcomings and unfavourable news by the enemy propaganda which does not have any substantial basis.

Built on the Soviet-era ideology, contemporary Moscow's propaganda is both diverse and unique: it disseminates its messages through a variety of channels and often uses half-truths and fabricated facts to appear to its audiences that are targeted by a great number of "micro-propagandas" via both traditional media channels and social media. Additionally, the infamous troll farms under the legitimate name of Internet Research Agency are commonly utilized to spread the propaganda messages and relate them to the target audiences.

Based on various political events in Ukraine, the three periods were identified as the instigation phase from March 2014 until February 2015, the low-conflict phase from February 2015 until April 2019, and the final conflict escalation phase since the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy until February 2022. Each of these stages was closely analyzed and further broken down into the propaganda's key narratives which were linked to Bernay's propaganda theory. During the first phase, the propaganda messages focused on portraying Ukraine as a fascist state posing constant threat to its Russian-speaking population. This narrative further evolved during the second, the low-conflict phase by carefully capitalizing on the Ukrainian government's policies that Russia viewed as russophobic. Despite the Minsk accords, Russia did not reduce its support in eastern Ukraine. Finally, the conflict escalation phase saw an increase in the power of rhetoric used by the Kremlin propaganda. While Ukraine was described as a brother nation, its government's fascist policies evolved into claim of genocide with the imminent risk of use of both biological

and nuclear weapons by the Ukrainian military. At the same time, the atrocities supposedly committed by the Ukrainian army spread further into Russian territory which justified the use of force by Russia to denazify and demilitarize Ukraine.

After analyzing how the key messaging of Russian propaganda describing the events in Ukraine evolved from the annexation of Crimea to the escalation into the Russian invasion, the author came to the conclusion that the main narratives have stayed the same. However, their frequency and depth had evolved. Russian propaganda machine aimed at attributing the reasons for an invasion on the Ukrainian government, which has been repeatedly referred to as ultranationalist and fascist. Additionally, its Western allies supporting Ukraine with military equipment and training, were continuously described as the forces responsible for the illegitimate uprising in Maidan that resulted in the abovementioned “fascist” government taking over the power in the country and committing atrocities against its own people. Similarly, the pro-European Ukrainian population has been labelled as Nazi sympathizers, often directly bringing up the glory of the Soviet era and reiterating the historical ties between Ukraine and Russia, at time using the term “brother nations”. The latter has been especially important to understand the escalation in the conflict and Russia’s invasion in Ukraine which core purpose was to denazify and liberate the Russians suffering in the Eastern Ukraine, namely in the self-proclaimed yet later recognized by Russia “people republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk.

While looking for an answer to the second research question of how have the narratives used by the Russian media changed since the invasion in February 2022, the author identified one key difference. Since the beginning of the declared “special military operation”, Russia faced strong resistance not only on the battlefield but also in the information environment. If Crimean annexation happened rather smoothly for Russia without effective international support for Ukraine, then the February invasion resulted in serious condemnation followed by strict economic sanctions from most of the Western world. As a result, Russian media found itself defending against unfavorable news by calling them fakes and Western propaganda, at the same

time redirecting the atrocities to Ukraine and its “fascist” army. Whether these accusations have been successful or not, is yet to be defined as the war in Ukraine still continues.

Taking into account that the war in Ukraine is ongoing at the moment of writing this paper, the author would like to recommend fellow researchers to analyze Russia’s strategy in defending itself during the war against the “fake” allegations from the Ukrainian and Western media. The research would need to answer the question of whether Russia lost this war in the information space despite the outcomes of the conventional warfare. The findings in combination with this paper would be essential in defining effective means of countering Russian propaganda in the future in order to timely identify the instigation phase and prevent possible low-conflict phases instigated by the Kremlin and defy Russia's threat on the international democracies in Europe and beyond.

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