



ANALYSIS

FROM ROME TO KYIV, PASSING THROUGH MOSCOW

RUSSIAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN THE ITALIAN PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON UKRAINE

| LORENZO CRIPPA |

APRIL 2022

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RAHVUSVAHELINE KAITSEUURINGUTE KESKUS
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
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Title: From Rome to Kyiv, Passing through Moscow: Russian Strategic Narratives in the Italian Public Discourse on Ukraine

Author: Crippa, Lorenzo

Publication date: April 2022

Category: Analysis

Cover page photo: Demonstration of the Ukrainian community against the invasion war by Russia (Photo by Gennaro Leonardi / Pacific Press / Scanpix)

Keywords: strategic narratives, disinformation, media, Italy, Ukraine, Russia

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ISSN 2228-2076

© International Centre for Defence and Security
63/4 Narva Rd., 10120 Tallinn, Estonia
info@icds.ee, www.icds.ee

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LORENZO CRIPPA

Lorenzo Crippa is an Italian graduate student currently pursuing a Master's degree in International Security at the Paris School of International Affairs (Sciences Po) with a concentration in Russian studies. He holds a Bachelor's degree in International and Diplomatic Sciences from the University of Trieste. His previous studies have focused on Russia's foreign, domestic and security policy, NATO-Russia relations, and Ukraine. In the second half of 2021, he was a research intern at ICDS working on Russia-related projects and assisting in the organisation of the Resilience League 2021. He is currently cooperating with the Washington D.C.-based U.S.-Ukraine Foundation (USUF).

INTRODUCTION

“This is not the behavior of someone who is disengaging and is ready for action. It is the behavior of someone who wants to explore all the possibilities of diplomacy to reach a balanced solution.”¹ Thus Italian prime minister Mario Draghi commented on Vladimir Putin’s moves in December 2021 as Russia massed over 100,000 troops around Ukraine. While the vast majority of Western leaders grew alarmed by the threat of a Russian military attack against Ukraine, Draghi downplayed the risk and called for a continuous dialogue with the Kremlin. A little more than two months later, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched an unjustified and unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Despite officially supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, Rome never really considered Russia a spoiler in international relations

Draghi’s quote testifies to the high level of naivete that has long characterised Italian foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia. Despite officially supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, Rome never really considered Russia a spoiler in international relations. Instead, Italy always pushed for dialogue and restraint, believing it could one day return to the “business as usual” approach that characterised the pre-2014 status quo. Rome’s ambiguity over Ukraine and Russia has been variously explained, pointing to historical,

political, economic and geographical reasons.² However, there is more to that.

For years the Kremlin has infiltrated Italian public debate on Ukraine with certain strategic narratives, enormously influencing Italy’s perception of Kyiv and Moscow. As explained by the European Values Think Tank, Italian authorities never regarded the Russian subversion and information war as a real threat, which has allowed pro-Russian narratives to shape Italy’s mainstream debate on Ukraine.³ A limited understanding and expertise on the region, as well as a good dose of naivete, have further contributed to the spreading of pro-Kremlin analysis and rhetoric

The Kremlin has attempted to impose the idea that firmly supporting Ukraine does not correspond to Italy’s real interests

within the country’s elites and wider public. These narratives have been promoted through numerous channels, including think tanks, academia, media, agents of influence, business, and official statements coming from Moscow.

First and foremost, the Kremlin has attempted to impose the idea that firmly supporting Ukraine does not correspond to Italy’s real interests. The promoters of this narrative have generally described Russia as a fundamental partner for Italy, notably in economic and security terms, and argued that Rome should work within the EU to restore good relations with Moscow. Cancelling sanctions and opening to concessions in Ukraine is deemed a necessary cost for good Italy-Russia

¹ Hannah Roberts, “[Draghi plays down risk of Putin invading Ukraine](#),” *Politico*, December 15, 2021.

² The large presence of pro-Russian politicians and parties (such as right-wing Lega and populist Five Star Movement) has often been described as one element contributing to Italy’s ambiguous policy towards Russia. Economic ties, notably in the energy sector, and geographical distance, have likely further shaped Italy’s perception of Russia as an opportunity, rather than a threat. History, however, has probably the greatest explanatory potential: during the Cold War, fascist movements and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) infiltrated large swathes and sectors of Italian society, establishing a “cultural hegemony” and spreading a strong anti-US sentiment. This created a fertile ground for pro-Russian narratives to spread. See: Massimiliano Di Pasquale & Luigi Sergio Germani, *L’influenza russa sulla cultura, sul mondo accademico e sui think tank italiani* [Russian Influence On Italian culture, Academia And Think Tanks] (Gino Germani Institute Of Social Sciences And Strategic Studies, 2021).

³ European Values Think Tank, “[Countries compared: Italy](#)”, Kremlin Watch, April 2021.

relations. A second set of narratives, directly supporting the first one, has aimed at discrediting the Ukrainian government and Ukraine's statehood.⁴

It is not clear how the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine will affect Italian public debate in the long term. Largely in denial prior to the invasion and hesitant about implementing heavy sanctions following it, the Italian government seems to have now fully aligned itself with the firm position of its allies in NATO and the European Union (EU). However, pro-Kremlin narratives are still popular and have the potential to regain large influence.

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This paper aims to explore the main pro-Kremlin narratives that have shaped Italy's mainstream debate on Ukraine over the past eight years and demonstrate their pervasiveness in the Italian public discourse. This will be done by mobilising numerous examples and a large and diverse collection of sources. First, this paper will briefly attempt to explore the concept of "strategic narrative" and show how it connects to the official Soviet/Russian doctrine on influence operations. Then, it will present the narratives that the Kremlin weaponised to shape Italy's position on Ukraine following the events of 2014. Finally, it will reflect on some of the new narratives that have emerged following Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and their potential impact on Italy's future stance.

1. STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AND ACTIVE MEASURES

The concept of "strategic narrative" is fundamental to understanding the content of this paper. A narrative aims at shaping the public

⁴ It is important to clarify that these are not the only narratives characterizing Italian debate on Ukraine and Russia. Narratives critical of the Kremlin are also present and enjoy large space in media, academia and society. However, the objective of this paper is to focus exclusively on pro-Kremlin narratives and their pervasiveness in the Italian public discourse on Ukraine.

perception of reality. In the field of international relations, political actors strategically forge and promote narratives corresponding to their interests. Strategic narratives are therefore meant to create a biased perception of reality

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in a way that benefits a given political actor. According to scholars Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, a strategic narrative is "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behaviour of actors at home and overseas".⁵

The Kremlin has made extensive use of strategic narratives in pursuing its goals. Russia has been largely following the Soviet blueprint of "active measures" (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*)—influence operations aimed at promoting the Kremlin's interests abroad. As KGB textbooks

The Kremlin has made extensive use of strategic narratives in pursuing its goals

read, active measures include disinformation, defined as "the covert promotion of fictitious information to the enemy [...] in order to mislead him and induce him to such decisions and actions that would be in the interests of the Soviet state". Active measures are implemented through several different channels, including "conversations of influence with prominent figures of foreign countries, on which the adoption of important decisions depends", the promotion of "targeted information and disinformation", "the publication of articles in the foreign press" and "of books" and the "organisation of radio and television programs [...] with prominent state, political and public figures, famous scholars and other influential foreigners" to spread the theses that benefit the Kremlin's interests.⁶

⁵ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin & Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 248.

⁶ *Politicheskaya razvedka s territorii SSSR* [Political Espionage From USSR Territory] (Moscow: Krasnoznamennyi institut KGB SSSR imeni YU. V. Andropova [Red Banner Institute Of The KGB Of The USSR Named After Yu. V. Andropov], 1989), 86-88.

These instruments have been used to flood the Italian public debate on Ukraine with pro-Kremlin strategic narratives. The spreading of pro-Russian narratives has aimed at shaping the perception of the Italian public community and policymakers, influencing the country's political discourse in a way that favours the Kremlin's interests. In the case of Ukraine, pro-Russian narratives have been constructed to project a distorted version of reality in which abandoning Kyiv and strengthening ties with Moscow would seem like a reasonable choice for Italy. In this sense, one of the central strategic narratives has aimed at persuading the public community that supporting Ukraine does not correspond to Italy's interests.

Pro-Russian narratives have been constructed to project a distorted version of reality in which abandoning Kyiv and strengthening ties with Moscow would seem like a reasonable choice for Italy

2. NARRATIVE: SUPPORTING UKRAINE IS NOT IN ITALY'S INTEREST

The idea that countering Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not in Italy's interest has been strongly promoted by Moscow, finding extensive space in the Italian academic,

Russia's actions are often presented as a mere reaction to Western "encirclement", in line with the Kremlin's rhetoric

media and business sectors. The debate that followed the events of 2014 largely testifies to this perception. The general premise of this narrative is that the West is no less responsible than Russia for the deterioration of relations. Instead, Russia's actions are often presented as a mere reaction to Western "encirclement", in line with the Kremlin's rhetoric. Ukrainian researchers have found this narrative to be dominant in Italy, being used as an argument to advocate for a softer policy towards

Moscow, whose point of view and violation of international law "deserve" understanding.⁷

Such narratives have been incredibly popular among some of the most renowned Italian

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pundits in the field of international affairs and Russian studies. Given their recognised competence on the subject matter, these experts have had access to a large set of channels, including national institutions and mass media.

Aldo Ferrari, head of the Russia, Caucasus and Central Asia Program at the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), one of Italy's most prestigious think tanks, and professor of Armenian culture and history of Russian culture at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, has frequently promoted this narrative. Back in March 2014, as Russia occupied the Crimean peninsula, he was heard by the Italian Chamber of Deputies Committee on Foreign Affairs to shed light on the situation. Explaining the origins of the conflict, professor Ferrari denounced the "expansionist tendency" of the EU which he also likened to that of Moscow's.⁸ He also claimed that the European Union had made a mistake in "picking a side" in Ukraine and that Italy, just like France and Germany, had passively conformed to the "position of anti-Russian countries", defined as the Baltic states, Poland, Sweden and the UK.⁹

⁷ Nadiia Koval, Volodymyr Kulyk, Mykola Riabchuk, Kateryna Zarembo & Marianna Fakhurdinova, *Morphological Analysis of Narratives of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict in Western Academia and Think-Tank Community* (Problems of Post-Communism, 2022), 7-8.

⁸ Chamber of Deputies. Foreign and European Community Affairs Committee, *Resoconto stenografico. Indagine conoscitiva sulla proiezione dell'Italia e dell'Europa nei nuovi scenari geopolitici. Priorità strategiche e di sicurezza* [Stenographic Report. Fact-finding Survey On The Projection Of Italy And Europe In The New Geopolitical Scenarios. Strategic And Security Priorities], March 11, 2014, 10.

⁹ *Ibid*, 9-10.

The rhetoric depicting “anti-Russian” countries (like the Baltic states, Poland, the US and others) as the main culprits for the emergence of the conflict has also been very present over the past eight years. According to the promoters of this narrative, “anti-Russian” states and organisations like NATO have prevented Italy from adopting a policy vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine better corresponding to its “real interests”.

Italian influential analyst Lucio Caracciolo, head of *Limes*, the most important Italian magazine on geopolitics, exemplifies this. In February 2015, invited to a popular political talk show on private TV channel *La7*, Caracciolo claimed that the war in Ukraine had “started almost by accident” and had been “stirred up under the table by some in NATO” and “the so-called New Europe” defined by Caracciolo as the Baltic states, Poland and Sweden, with the support of the UK and the US.¹⁰

Another expert that has further promoted this narrative is former Italian ambassador to Moscow Sergio Romano, generally regarded as an influential and experienced analyst of Russian affairs. Interviewed by ISPI in October 2018, he claimed that Russia had been “treated very unfairly” and that NATO needed Russia as an enemy to survive. Romano further claimed that NATO’s eastward enlargement was a mistake, as it brought into the alliance numerous countries that had a “strong dissent” towards Russia.¹¹

Italy’s core interest has been identified as cultivating good relations with Russia rather than supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity

Romano is also a columnist for popular Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, a position that has granted him even greater access to the wider public. In an article published in January 2019, Romano claimed that NATO, defined as “an alliance conceived to wage war”, is an obstacle preventing many EU countries from

adopting a policy towards Russia which would better correspond to their real interests.¹²

As Italy’s core interest has been identified as cultivating good relations with Russia rather than supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, several experts have called for concessions towards Moscow. It is not surprising, in this sense, that ambassador Romano has repeatedly promoted the idea of Ukraine’s neutrality on the pages of *Corriere della Sera*.¹³ The same can be said for professor Ferrari, who argued for Ukraine’s neutrality already back in the above-mentioned parliamentary hearing of March 2014.¹⁴

The idea that emerged throughout the years is that Ukraine should be somehow “sacrificed” for the sake of good relations with Russia which is presented as a fundamental partner for Italy and the EU

2.1. RESTORING ITALY-RUSSIA RELATIONS, WHATEVER IT TAKES

The idea that emerged throughout the years is that Ukraine should be somehow “sacrificed” for the sake of good relations with Russia which is presented as a fundamental partner for Italy and the EU. In particular, several experts argue that Russia’s cooperation would be particularly useful to deal with some of Italy’s most vivid concerns, such as terrorism, instability in the Middle East and North Africa and trade. Whether this cooperation is even possible or desirable and what it would concretely consist of is only rarely discussed.

¹⁰ Lucio Caracciolo. “Una guerra in Europa?” [A War In Europe?]. *Otto e mezzo*, La7, Rome, February 6, 2015.

¹¹ Sergio Romano. *Sopravviverà l’Europa al 2019?* [Will Europe Survive 2019?]. ISPI, uploaded October 7, 2018, YouTube video, 10:21.

¹² Sergio Romano, “[Russia e sanzioni, se la Nato diventa un ostacolo per l’Europa](#)” [Russia And Sanctions, If Nato Becomes An Obstacle For Europe], *Corriere della Sera*, January 19, 2019.

¹³ Sergio Romano, “[La strada guerra ignorata](#)” [The Strange Ignored War], *Corriere della Sera*, November 27, 2018; Sergio Romano, “[Una Ucraina Neutrale Aiuterebbe UE e Russia a Raffreddare le Tensioni](#)” [A Neutral Ukraine Would Help EU And Russia Chill Tensions], *Corriere della Sera*, September 19, 2021.

¹⁴ Chamber of Deputies. Foreign and European Community Affairs Committee, *Resoconto stenografico. Indagine conoscitiva sulla proiezione dell’Italia e dell’Europa nei nuovi scenari geopolitici. Priorità strategiche e di sicurezza* [Stenographic Report. Fact-finding Survey On The Projection Of Italy And Europe In The New Geopolitical Scenarios. Strategic And Security Priorities], March 11, 2014, 10.

In this sense, ISPI's report "Beyond Ukraine. EU and Russia in Search of a New Relation" of 2015 can be cited. In the final policy recommendations, outlined by the above-mentioned professor Ferrari, partnership with Russia is defined as "essential for the EU—and the whole West—to deal with many pressing issues, including the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan" and "the increasing terrorist threat".¹⁵

However, as the report reads, "a kind of unofficial coalition including not only Poland and the Baltic states, but also Russosceptics in Britain, Sweden, and other countries has influenced the EU's attitude toward Russia".¹⁶ The author argues that "a more balanced approach is probably needed to support the EU's economic and strategic interests", eventually concluding that "Ukrainian membership in NATO should be excluded or, at least, postponed", and that Ukraine might require "a process of federalisation".¹⁷

With this premise, Russian officials have encouraged Italy to activate itself for the restoration of good relations. Russian ambassador to Italy, Sergey Razov, for instance, has often emphasised Italy's role as a "key and priority partner" for Russia in Europe, insisting on the "privileged" character of Italy-Russia relations and appreciating Rome's openness to dialogue.¹⁸ In December 2021, Russian president Vladimir Putin, characterising Italy-Russia relations "if not as exemplary, [then] as good and stable", stated that Italy could play a role in the normalisation of EU-Russia relations and in the NATO-Russia talks concerning Ukraine.¹⁹

Geopolitics magazine *Limes* has further promoted the idea that Italy should work to restore Russia-West relations. An article of March 2019, for instance, reads that Italy, as a non-Russophobic country, could and should help Russia to be re-integrated into Europe.²⁰ The term "Russophobic", eagerly pushed by the Kremlin's propaganda machine, has found considerable space on the pages of *Limes*, which has adopted it to describe Northern and Eastern European countries.²¹ Italy, instead, is separated from its allies for being "one of the least Russophobic countries in Europe".²²

Representatives of the conservative mass media have also argued in favour of scaling down the support for Ukraine and restoring relations with Russia instead, notably with a view to cooperating in the fight against terrorism

Representatives of the conservative mass media have also argued in favour of scaling down the support for Ukraine and restoring relations with Russia instead, notably with a view to cooperating in the fight against terrorism. An example is the conservative newspaper *Il Giornale*, owned by the family of former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who has been a long-standing personal friend of Russian president Vladimir Putin. In September 2014, for instance, an article argued that the real security threat for the EU and Italy is Islamic terrorism, and not Vladimir Putin, praised on his part for "fighting Islamic fanaticism by all means".²³ The article accused the EU and Italy of "having picked the wrong enemy", claiming that the matter of Ukraine is actually not that relevant for the West's security.²⁴

¹⁵ Aldo Ferrari (ed.), *Beyond Ukraine. EU and Russia in Search of a New Relation*, (ISPI, 2015), 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 113.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 115.

¹⁸ Elena Kovalenko, "Ambasciatore Razov: l'Italia per la Russia è uno dei partner chiave a livello europeo" [Ambassador Razov: Italy Is One Of The Key Partners At European level For Russia], *Sputnik Italia*, July 16, 2018; "Ambasciatore russo: Italia è il nostro partner privilegiato" [Russian Ambassador: Italy Is Our Privileged Partner], *AskaneWS*, November 21, 2019; Sergey Razov, "L'ambasciatore Razov a Rainews24: Roma mantenga la linea del dialogo" [Ambassador Razov To Rainews24: Rome Should Keep The Line Of Dialogue], *Rai News 24*, April 2, 2021.

¹⁹ "Italy may play role in Russia-NATO, Russia-EU talks — Putin", *TASS*, December 23, 2021.

²⁰ Pietro Figuera, "L'Italia può e deve aiutare la Russia a rientrare in Europa" [Italy Can And Must Help Russia To Return To Europe], *Limes*, March 5, 2019.

²¹ Federico Petroni, Mirko Mussetti, "L'incorreggibile fragilità della nuova cortina di ferro" [The Incurable Fragility Of The New Iron Curtain], *Limes*, July 12, 2021; Nicolò Locatelli, "Russia-Ucraina, il fronte diplomatico", *Limes*, February 18, 2022.

²² "La Russia non è una Cina, il numero 5/20 di Limes" ["Russia Is Not A China, Issue 5/20 Of Limes], *Limes*, June 8, 2020.

²³ Alessandro Sallusti, "L'Islam taglia un'altra testa ma noi facciamo guerra a Putin" [Islam Cuts Off Another Head But We Wage War On Putin], *Il Giornale*, September 3, 2014.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

Similarly, director of TV channel *TgCom24* Paolo Liguori stated that Putin is an “ally in the fight against terrorism”, but that people have been “intoxicated by American and pro-American propaganda [...] that tells us that the enemy comes from the East”. Instead, according to Liguori, the real enemy is terrorism.²⁵

Fedele Confalonieri, head of Italian mass-media company *Mediaset*, founded by Berlusconi and operating four of Italy’s main TV channels (*Retequattro*, *Canale 5*, *Italia 1*, *TgCom24*), has also expressed similar views. Interviewed by *Il Giornale* in December 2015, Confalonieri claimed that Putin is the “most determined leader in the fight against terrorism” and defined sanctions as “unfair”.²⁶

Moscow’s official statements have further pushed the idea that the EU’s current approach in Ukraine, and in particular the adoption of sanctions against Russia, goes against Italy’s interests

Moscow’s official statements have further pushed the idea that the EU’s current approach in Ukraine, and in particular the adoption of sanctions against Russia, goes against Italy’s interests. For instance, publicly speaking at the Milan EXPO in 2015, Vladimir Putin stated that the continuation of the sanctions policy would result in Italian companies losing “billions of euros”.²⁷ Russia on its part, according to Putin, could simply find new economic partners.²⁸ More recently, in January 2022, as Russia massed troops around Ukraine, Vladimir Putin held a video meeting with sixteen high-profile Italian entrepreneurs. Addressing the businessmen, Putin claimed that Italy is “a core commercial partner for Russia”, further

stressing the importance of good economic relations between the two countries.²⁹

These assessments, however, are only partly accurate, as Russia’s relatively small economy does not represent a market of high potential for Italy, amounting to about 1.5% of overall Italian exports and thus being Italy’s 14th export destination as of January 2022.³⁰ As shown by Ukrainian researchers, the impact of sanctions and Russia’s counter-sanctions on the Italian economy has actually been rather limited, despite generally being exaggerated and perceived as much more significant in the public discourse.³¹

The matter of sanctions has also been widely debated among Italian entrepreneurs. Several influential individuals from Italian business, notably those with economic interests in Russia, have argued for removing sanctions and restoring economic relations with Russia.

One example is Ernesto Ferlenghi, senior adviser to Italian energy company *ENI* in Russia, as well as head of *Confindustria Russia*, the Association of Italian industrialists in Russia. In April 2018, interviewed by conservative newspaper *Libero*, he called upon Matteo Salvini, leader of Italian right-wing party *Lega*, to cancel sanctions against Russia.³²

²⁵ Paolo Liguori, “Liguori: Putin nostro alleato contro il terrorismo” [Liguori: Putin Is Our Ally Against Terrorism], *L’aria che tira*, La7, Rome, April 4, 2017.

²⁶ Alessandra Benignetti, “Confalonieri: Putin è il più coraggioso contro il terrorismo” [Confalonieri: Putin Is The Most Courageous Against Terrorism], *Il Giornale*, December 4, 2015.

²⁷ Alessandro Sala, “Putin: Via le sanzioni alla Russia, imprese italiane perdono 1 miliardo” [Putin: No Sanctions On Russia, Italian Companies Lose 1 Billion], *Corriere della Sera*, June 15, 2015.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Giuliana Ferraino, Fabrizio Massaro, “Putin-imprese italiane, ecco chi c’era: Eni, Snam e Saipem assenti” [Putin-Italian Companies, Here’s Who Was There: Eni, Snam And Saipem absent], *Corriere della Sera*, January 27, 2022.

³⁰ Lorenzo Borgia, “Putin: Italia grande partner. Ma la Russia vale solo l’1,5% dell’export italiano” [Putin: Italy Is A Great Partner. But Russia Is Worth Only 1.5% Of Italian Exports], *SkyTg24*, January 27, 2022.

³¹ Kateryna Zarembo, “Polityka «podviynoho treku»: italiys’ka ambivalentnist’ u kontseptualizatsiyi rosiys’ko-ukrayins’koho konfliktu” [The Policy Of The “Double Track”: Italian Ambivalence In The Conceptualization Of The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict] in *Interpretatsiyi rosiys’ko-ukrayins’koho konfliktu v zakhidnykh naukovykh i ekspertno-analitychnykh pratsyakh* [Interpretation Of The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict In Western Scientific And Expert-Analytical Works] V.Kulyka. ed. (Kyiv: IPIEND im. I. F. Kurasa NAN Ukrainy, 2020); Kateryna Zarembo, Serhiy Solodky & Tetyana Levonyuk, “Khto pershyy: Yaki krainy navazhat’sya porushyty vednist’ Yevropeys’koho Soyuzu shchodo sanktsiy proty Rosiyi?” [Who Is The First: Which Countries Dare To Violate The Unity Of The European Union On Sanctions Against Russia?], *New Europe Centre*, December 5, 2018.

³² “Salvini: Dal governo toglierò le sanzioni alla Russia. Danno a nostra economia” [Salvini: From The Government I Will Remove Sanctions On Russia. They Hurt Our Economy], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, April 2, 2018.

Antonio Fallico, head of the Italian bank *Intesa Sanpaolo*'s Russia branch, has also repeatedly called for the elimination of sanctions. Fallico is also the head of *Conoscere Eurasia* (Knowing Eurasia), an association that organises the yearly *Eurasian International Economic Forum* in Verona together with Roscongress and the St Petersburg International Economic Forum.³³ The Forum has hosted numerous Russian officials and business representatives, including Rosneft's CEO Igor Sechin, and generally begins with Fallico's appeals to cancel sanctions against Russia.³⁴

Another influential Italian businessman that has called for the removal of sanctions is Marco Tronchetti Provera, CEO of Milan-based tyre manufacturer giant *Pirelli*, who claimed that solving the issue of Ukraine was "easier than one could think".³⁵ Francesco Starace, CEO of Italy's main manufacturer and distributor of electricity and gas, *Enel*, has also lamented the sanctions' negative effects.³⁶

3. SUPPORTING NARRATIVE: DELEGITIMISING UKRAINE

Another set of narratives has aimed at delegitimising the Ukrainian government. Such rhetoric is complementary to the first narrative, attempting to convince the general public that not only does supporting Ukraine go against Italy's interests, but it is also morally wrong. Narratives describing Ukrainians as "nazis",

accusing the Ukrainian government of atrocities and generally spreading disinformation on the war in Ukraine, have been directly taken from the Kremlin's propaganda book and relaunched in Italy.

Spread notably on "alternative" information channels like *Sputnik Italia* and online blogs, these narratives have managed to largely infiltrate the mainstream debate in recent years. Several representatives of so-called "alternative" information have expressed their views through publications and TV channels.

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According to Oksana Pakhlyovksa, professor of Ukrainian studies at Rome-based University *La Sapienza*, over 35 books on Ukraine were published in Italy between 2014 and 2015. The vast majority of them held anti-Maidan views.³⁷

Journalist Giulietto Chiesa (now deceased) used mainstream channels to spread disinformation on Ukraine. During the Cold War, Chiesa was the Moscow correspondent for Italian communist newspaper *L'Unità* and, in the 90s, for *La Stampa*. In more recent times, he was the founder and chief editor of *PandoraTV*, an alternative information website that has the exclusive rights to *RT* (previously *Russia Today*) and *Ruply's* content in Italy.³⁸ The objective of *PandoraTV*, as the website reads, is "revealing backstories obscured by mainstream media".³⁹

As a fluent speaker of Russian with a reputation in the field of Russian and post-Soviet affairs, Chiesa had extensive access to Italian TV. The terminology that Chiesa spread in the mainstream debate fully resonated with the Kremlin's official rhetoric on Ukraine. For instance, speaking at a political talk show on

³³ Conoscere Eurasia. [Conoscere Eurasia brochure](#), Verona: 2022.

³⁴ "Interscambio Italia-Russia, bruciati -3,2 mld in 2014 con sanzioni -Fallico" [Italy-Russia Interchange, -3.2 Billion Burned In 2014 With Sanctions -Fallico], *Reuters*, October 23, 2014; "Forum Eurasiatico, Fallico: su sanzioni passare da parole ai fatti in Consiglio Europeo" [Eurasian Forum, Fallico: On Sanctions We Need to Pass From Words To Deeds At The European Council], *Sputnik Italia*, October 25, 2018; Conoscere Eurasia, [Programme for XIV Eurasian Economic Forum in Verona](#), October 2021.

³⁵ "Banche, Tronchetti Provera: I rischi per chi investe devono essere sulla prima pagina" [Banks, Tronchetti Provera: The Risks For Those Who Invest Must Be On The Front Page], *Il Sole 24 Ore*, December 22, 2015.

³⁶ [Russia: Starace, per Enel si riducono prospettive con sanzioni](#) [Russia: Starace, For Enel Prospects Are Reduced With Sanctions], *Corriere della Sera*, June 22, 2015.

³⁷ Massimiliano Di Pasquale & Luigi Sergio Germani, [L'influenza russa sulla cultura, sul mondo accademico e sui think tank italiani](#) [Russian Influence On Italian culture, Academia And Think Tanks] (Gino Germani Institute Of Social Sciences And Strategic Studies, 2021), 14.

³⁸ "Il Team" [The Team], *PandoraTV*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

La7 in February 2016, Chiesa defined the Euromaidan revolution as a “nazi golpe” and claimed that Ukraine had started a war against Ukrainian Russians.⁴⁰ Again, on a talk show on *Canale 5* in March 2019, Chiesa called Ukraine a country “full of nazis”, claiming it lacked basic democratic freedom.⁴¹ He also promoted the idea of Ukraine as controlled by outside forces: in his 2016 book named *Putinfobia* (Putinfobia), he claimed that Ukraine had been “conquered, although with the help of nazis, and used as a stick to hit Russia”.⁴²

Some of the heads of Italian national TV have also fully embraced pro-Kremlin narratives

Some of the heads of Italian national TV have also fully embraced pro-Kremlin narratives. One example is Marcello Foa, who was president of Italy’s public broadcasting company *Rai* from 2018 to 2021. Foa, a long-standing admirer of Russian president Vladimir Putin, is known for his opinions on the events of 2014. In March 2014, in an article titled *The Truth About Ukraine* on the blog of Beppe Grillo, founder of the populist Five Star Movement, Foa claimed that the Euromaidan protests were not spontaneous but rather “carefully planned” and “amplified by international media”.⁴³ Foa was also frequently featured as an expert commentator on Kremlin-controlled English-language news channel *RT*.⁴⁴

Carlo Freccero, who was one of the members of *Rai*’s board of directors from 2015 to 2019 and president of public TV channel *Rai 2* from 2018 to 2019, is another example. Freccero has repeatedly urged the media to give more space to “alternative” information sources. In an article published on *Corriere della Sera* in March 2019, for instance, he wrote that only the internet had the power to debunk hoaxes

and thus prove that Euromaidan was not a pro-European revolution but rather a coup d’état.⁴⁵ Speaking on *La7* in January 2017, Freccero mentioned an alternative internet blog accused of spreading pro-Russian propaganda as an example of good information.⁴⁶ *How Ukraine is Turning into a Nazi State*, for instance, is the title of an article published on the blog in June 2021.⁴⁷

Another example is Gennaro Sangiuliano, director of *Tg2*, *Rai 2*’s news broadcast. Sangiuliano, who wrote a biography on Vladimir Putin, has claimed that “Crimea has always been Russian”.⁴⁸

It is therefore not surprising that Italian media coverage of Ukraine has frequently raised criticism. Among mainstream Italian newspapers, according to Massimiliano Di Pasquale, journalist and independent scholar on Ukraine, and Luigi Sergio Germani, scientific director of the Gino Germani Institute for Social Sciences and Strategic Studies, only Turin-based *La Stampa* offered complete and balanced coverage of the events of 2014. Other newspapers like *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera* published balanced articles, but also included reports relaunching Russian disinformation. Both the right-wing *Il Giornale* and communist *Il Manifesto* described Euromaidan protesters as far-right nationalists.⁴⁹

Several TV reports on Ukraine have also relied completely on the Kremlin’s narratives without including Kyiv or anyone else’s point of view. *Tg1* correspondent Alessandro Cassieri, who had defined Ukraine, the Baltic states and Poland as “Russophobic countries” in the

⁴⁰ Giulietto Chiesa. “[Eurexit](#)”. *La gabbia*, La7, Rome, February 26, 2016.

⁴¹ Giulietto Chiesa. “[Ucraina, Giulietto Chiesa: Anche io nella stessa situazione di Cutugno e Al Bano](#)” [Ukraine, Giulietto Chiesa: “I Too Am In The Same Situation As Cutugno And Al Bano”]. *Mattino Cinque*, Canale 5, Cologno Monzese, March 18, 2019.

⁴² Giulietto Chiesa, *Putinfobia* [Putinfobia] (Milan: Edizioni Piemme, 2016), 75-76.

⁴³ Marcello Foa, “[La verità sull’Ucraina](#)” [The Truth About Ukraine], *Il Blog Di Beppe Grillo*, March 10, 2014.

⁴⁴ Manuela Perrone, “[Marcello Foa, l’orgoglio sovranista alla presidenza Rai](#)” [Marcello Foa, The Sovereignist Pride At The Rai Presidency], *Il Sole 24 Ore*, July 27, 2018.

⁴⁵ Carlo Freccero, “[Carlo Freccero: Datemi ascolto, solo il web smaschera le bufale](#)” [Carlo Freccero: Listen To Me, Only the Web Unmasks The Hoaxes], *Corriere della Sera*, March 12, 2019.

⁴⁶ “[Carlo Freccero cita l’Antidiplomatico come esempio di informazione](#)” [Carlo Freccero Cites L’Antidiplomatico As An Example Of Information], *StopFake*, January 9, 2019.

⁴⁷ “[Come l’Ucraina si sta trasformando in uno stato nazista](#)” [How Ukraine Is Turning Into A Nazi State], *L’Antidiplomatico*, June 3, 2021.

⁴⁸ Gennaro Sangiuliano. “[Gennaro Sangiuliano \(TG2\): la Crimea storicamente è russa](#)” [Gennaro Sangiuliano (TG2): Crimea Is Historically Russian]. *Omnibus*, La7, Rome, December 2, 2018.

⁴⁹ Massimiliano Di Pasquale & Luigi Sergio Germani, *L’influenza russa sulla cultura, sul mondo accademico e sui think tank italiani* [Russian Influence On Italian culture, Academia And Think Tanks] (Gino Germani Institute Of Social Sciences And Strategic Studies, 2021), 13.

past, recently authored a series of reports relaunching unfiltered Russian narratives.⁵⁰ Shot in Russia-occupied Donbas, the reports presented exclusively the pro-Russian fighters' perspective, and no voice was given to the Ukrainian side nor was basic fact-checking provided. Interviewed by Cassieri, pro-Russian officials claimed to be fighting against "a fascist aggressor like in 1942" and accused the Ukrainian armed forces of violating the ceasefire and shelling civilians.⁵¹ Cassieri also interviewed self-proclaimed DNR (*Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika*—Donetsk People's Republic) leader Denis Pushilin, who further spread disinformation on the downing of Malaysian jet MH17 in July 2014.⁵²

Representatives of conservative mass media have promoted the Kremlin's narratives even more actively. For instance, in November 2017 *Canale 5* ran a report named *Ucraina: le verità nascoste* (Ukraine: the hidden truths).⁵³ The report attempted to discredit Euromaidan by relaunching an old Kremlin narrative according to which hired Georgian snipers were behind the killings of both protesters and police officers during the demonstrations of 2014. The report was authored by Gian Micalessin, an Italian journalist for *Il Giornale* and frequent contributor to *Sputnik Italia*.⁵⁴ Micalessin's investigation, however, presented numerous inaccuracies and was based exclusively on the declarations of three men claiming to be Georgian snipers.⁵⁵ Despite this, it was presented on *Canale 5* as a ground-breaking discovery and was largely shared by numerous other conservative media and Russian outlets.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Halya Coynash, "[Italian public broadcaster pushes Russian lies about MH17 and war in Donbas](#)", *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, January 1, 2022; Alessandro Cassieri, "[Issue: 8 pm 9/11/2016](#)". *Tg1*, Rai 1, Rome, November 9, 2016.

⁵¹ Alessandro Cassieri, "[La minaccia](#)" [The Threat]. *Tv7*, Rai 1, Rome, January 14, 2022.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Gian Micalessin, "[Esclusivo: Guerra in Ucraina, le verità nascoste](#)" [Exclusive: War In Ukraine, The Hidden Truths]. *Matrix*, Canale 5, Cologno Monzese, November 15, 2017.

⁵⁴ Yuri Bershidsky, "[V Italii snviali dokumental'nyy fil'm o snayperakh Saakashvili, rasstrelivavshikh Yevromaydan. Pochemu eto feyk](#)" [A Documentary Film About Saakashvili's Snipers Shooting Euromaidan Was Filmed In Italy. Why It Is Fake], *The Insider*, November 22, 2017.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ "[A Matrix va in onda la disinformazione russa](#)" [Russian Misinformation Is On Air On Matrix], *StopFake*, November 23, 2017.

Again, in December 2015 *Rete 4* aired the documentary *Il presidente* (The President).⁵⁷ This 90-minute video product is the Italian edition of the documentary *Prezident* shot by Russian state channel *Rossiya 1* and authored by Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov. The documentary, essentially praise of Vladimir Putin, relaunched pro-Russian narratives on Italian TV practically with no filters. The topic of Ukraine was also touched upon: interviewed by Solovyov, Putin justified Russia's annexation of Crimea, claiming that Crimeans did not want to stay under the rule of Ukrainian neo-Nazis.⁵⁸

Several organisations disguised as cultural foundations have further contributed to spreading Russian narratives against the Ukrainian government

Several organisations disguised as cultural foundations have further contributed to spreading Russian narratives against the Ukrainian government. One example is the Russia-Veneto Cultural Association, founded in 2016 in Verona.⁵⁹ In February 2019 the Association supported the opening of a local "Donetsk People's Republic Representative Centre", of which Russia-Veneto's president Palmarino Zoccatelli became chairman.⁶⁰ Interviewed by TASS, Zoccatelli explained that one of the main goals of the centre was to "spread truthful information on what is going on in Donbas".⁶¹

The association has therefore not limited itself to strictly cultural initiatives but has also actively cooperated with said "DNR Representative Centre". In September 2018, for instance, the

⁵⁷ Anna Zafesova, "[La storia di Putin, raccontata da Putin](#)" [Putin's Story, Told By Putin], *La Stampa*, December 8, 2015.

⁵⁸ *Il Presidente* [The President], Alessandro Banfi, Carlo Gorla. Italy, 2015.

⁵⁹ Alexey Stovbun, "[Kuban' posetit delegatsiya ital'yanskoy Assotsiatsii Veneto — Rossiya](#)" [Kuban Will Be Visited By A Delegation Of The Italian Association Of Veneto - Russia], *RBC*, January 21, 2019.

⁶⁰ Associazione Culturale Veneto Russia. "[Inaugurazione dell'Ufficio di Rappresentanza Della Repubblica Popolare di Donetsk](#)" [Inauguration Of the Representative Office Of The Donetsk People's Republic]. *Facebook*. February 8, 2019; Eliseo Bertolasi, "[A Verona apre un Centro di Rappresentanza della DNR, il secondo in Italia](#)" [A DNR Representation Centre Opens In Verona, The Second In Italy], *Sputnik Italia*, February 9, 2019.

⁶¹ "[V Italii otkrylos' vtoroye predstavitelstvo DNR](#)" [The Second Representative Office Of The DPR Opened In Italy], *TASS*, February 9, 2019.

association co-organised an event “in memory of Alexander Zakharchenko”, self-proclaimed head of the DNR, who was killed in a cafe blast in August 2018.⁶² As reported by *Sputnik Italia*, the association also played an important role in lobbying for the revocation of the honorary citizenship that the city of Verona had awarded then Ukraine president Petro Poroshenko in 2016.⁶³

Similar foundations have emerged in other Italian regions. The Russia-Lombardy Cultural Association, founded in the city of Milan in 2014, made headlines in July 2019 when an Italian investigative TV show revealed that the foundation’s head, Gianluca Savoini, had held secret talks to provide right-wing party Lega with Russian covert finance worth tens of millions of dollars.⁶⁴ Savoini, close aid and Russia relations curator for Lega’s leader Matteo Salvini, is currently under investigation for international corruption.⁶⁵

Other narratives aim at undermining the legitimacy of Ukraine as an independent sovereign state. These narratives tend to present Ukraine as a fake country whose identity partly or fully coincides with Russia’s, in line with Putin’s distorted view of history

3.1. UNDERMINING UKRAINE’S STATEHOOD

Other narratives aim at undermining the legitimacy of Ukraine as an independent sovereign state. Generally, based on historical inaccuracies and fictions, these narratives tend to present Ukraine as a fake country whose identity partly or fully coincides with Russia’s, in line with Putin’s distorted view of history. The

people of Ukraine are described as divided into pro-West and pro-Russian, which, according to pundits, would make the country inherently unstable and in need of a large border revision or federalisation. The objective is to show that not only does supporting Kyiv not correspond to Italy’s interests and is morally wrong, but it is also useless, as Ukraine is a country with too many “contradictions” to survive.

Some experts have adopted these narratives, often drawing a simplistic identification between Ukraine’s Russian speakers and pro-Russian separatists. ISPI’s Aldo Ferrari is again a good example of this. In the above-mentioned parliamentary hearing of 2014, professor Ferrari claimed that Ukraine’s borders are historically wrong.⁶⁶ He further described Ukraine as “torn in two” between “pro-Russians and pro-Westerners”, thus being a “systematised political abnormality”.⁶⁷ The fact that Crimea is part of Ukraine, according to professor Ferrari, “makes no historical and political sense”.⁶⁸

Another expert, Marco Di Liddo, analyst of Africa, the former USSR and Balkan Affairs at Italian think tank Ce.S.I., made erroneous claims about the 1991 Ukrainian independence referendum in the same parliamentary hearing. Professor Di Liddo claimed that in 1991 “Ukraine decided to become independent only by a few hundred thousand votes”, which would demonstrate that “a huge component” of the Ukrainian people “feels part of the Russian family”.⁶⁹ However, as it is well known, in 1991 over 90% of voters supported Ukraine’s independence, with a voter turnout at a staggering 84%.⁷⁰

Italian media have further contributed to the idea of Ukraine as a country torn in two. Ukrainian journalist and analyst Olga Tokariuk

⁶² Associazione Culturale Veneto Russia. “[Incontro in memoria di Alexander Zakharchenko](#)” [Meeting In Memory Of Alexander Zakharchenko]. Facebook. September 5, 2018.

⁶³ Eliseo Bertolasi, “[Il comune di Verona potrebbe revocare la cittadinanza onoraria a Petro Poroshenko](#)” [The Municipality Of Verona Could Revoke The Honorary Citizenship Of Petro Poroshenko], *Sputnik Italia*, December 21, 2017.

⁶⁴ Alberto Nardelli, “[An Explosive Leaked Recording Reveals How Russia Secretly Tried To Funnel Millions to the European Trump](#)”, *BuzzFeed*, July 10, 2019.

⁶⁵ Monica Serra, “[Caso Moscopoli, va avanti il tira e molla sulla rogatoria: l’inchiesta rischia l’archiviazione](#)” [Moscopoli Case, The Back-and-forth Of The Letters Rogatory Goes On: The Investigation Risks Dismissal], *La Stampa*, March 1, 2022.

⁶⁶ Chamber of Deputies. Foreign and European Community Affairs Committee, [Resoconto stenografico. Indagine conoscitiva sulla proiezione dell’Italia e dell’Europa nei nuovi scenari geopolitici. Priorità strategiche e di sicurezza](#) [Stenographic Report. Fact-finding Survey On The Projection Of Italy And Europe In The New Geopolitical Scenarios. Strategic And Security Priorities], March 11, 2014, 9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁰ Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. [The December 1, 1991 Referendum/Presidential Election in Ukraine](#), 1992, 1.

stated that, in her experience as a frequent guest of Italian TV and radio shows, she often had to challenge widespread Kremlin narratives, including those describing the conflict in Ukraine as a civil war.⁷¹

Some experts have also insisted on the so-called “brotherhood” between Ukrainians and Russians

Some experts have also insisted on the so-called “brotherhood” between Ukrainians and Russians. This narrative, again, has been pushed strongly by the Kremlin and relaunched by some Italian pundits.

The above-mentioned ambassador Sergio Romano has often insisted on this element, calling Russians and Ukrainians “twin brothers”, which makes “the idea of Ukraine becoming a part of NATO unacceptable for Moscow”.⁷² More recently, in an article published in September 2021 on *Corriere della Sera*, Romano relaunched the idea of Ukraine’s neutrality, claiming that the country should abandon its “interminable and useless squabble with its older sister”.⁷³ The above-mentioned geopolitics magazine *Limes* can also be cited. The magazine published the Italian translation of president Putin’s article on the historical unity of Ukrainians and Russians of July 2021.⁷⁴ Other articles have also insisted on Ukraine as a state originating from the Soviet Union.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Olga Tokariuk, [Battle of narratives: Kremlin disinformation in the Vitaly Markiv case in Italy](#) (Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, 2021), 21.

⁷² Alessandro Ferruggia, [“Sergio Romano: L’Ucraina resti neutrale e fuori dalla Nato”](#) [Sergio Romano: Ukraine Should Stay Neutral and Outside Nato], *Quotidiano Nazionale*, February 7, 2022. Sergio

⁷³ Sergio Romano, [“Una Ucraina Neutrale Aiuterebbe UE e Russia a Raffreddare le Tensioni”](#) [A Neutral Ukraine Would Help EU and Russia Chill Tensions], *Corriere della Sera*, September 19, 2021.

⁷⁴ Vladimir Putin, [“Russi e ucraini sono un popolo solo”](#) [Russians And Ukrainians Are One People], *Limes*, July 29, 2021.

⁷⁵ Dmytro Tabačnyk, [“Tre idee di Ucraina”](#) [Three Ideas Of Ukraine], *Limes*, April 16, 2014; Adriano Rocucci, [“La matrice sovietica dello Stato ucraino”](#) [The Soviet Matrix Of The Ukrainian State], *Limes*, April 16, 2014.

4. NARRATIVES AFTER THE INVASION

The beginning of Russia’s further invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has inevitably influenced Italy’s policy towards Moscow. The Italian public debate condemns the invasion and Italy seems to be firmly supporting the West’s strong response against Russia’s aggression, despite some initial hesitations. However, pro-Russian narratives have not disappeared but are still incredibly popular and might influence Italy’s posture in the future.

The idea that NATO could have somehow avoided the war by giving in to Russia’s demands and imposing neutrality on Ukraine is still popular. This narrative potentially opens a policy of appeasement to Russia in any future settlement in Ukraine. Following the beginning of the (re)-invasion, for instance,

The idea that NATO could have somehow avoided the war by giving in to Russia’s demands and imposing neutrality on Ukraine is still popular

ISPI’s professor Ferrari still argued that Russia cannot be considered solely responsible for the “current crisis”.⁷⁶ Instead, he accused the West of having been completely deaf to Russia’s so-called security concerns and criticised Ukraine for having lacked political realism.⁷⁷

Rai Moscow correspondent Marc Innaro has also shifted the blame on NATO. Speaking on public news broadcast *Tg2* two days after the beginning of the invasion, Innaro claimed that the West lacked historical memory and an “understanding of the deeper dynamics that Russia has undergone in the last century and in the last thirty years”.⁷⁸ He then concluded that it is sufficient to “look at the geographical map

⁷⁶ Aldo Ferrari, [“Ucraina: da dove viene \(e dove porterà\) l’azzardo di Putin”](#) [Ukraine: Where Putin’s Gamble Comes From (And Where It Will Lead)], *ISPI*, February 24, 2022.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Valerio Valentini, [“Il Pd denuncia la propaganda pro Mosca in Rai”](#) [Pd Denounces pro-Moscow Propaganda On Rai], *Il Foglio*, February 27, 2022.

to realise that who has expanded in the last thirty years was not Russia, but NATO”.⁷⁹

Similar narratives have also been promoted by representatives of the Italian academia, such as Alessandro Orsini, professor at Rome-based LUISS university. In early March he claimed on a talk show on *La7* that, although Putin carried the military responsibility for the war, the political responsibility lay mainly with the European Union.⁸⁰ Professor Orsini compared Russia’s war against Ukraine to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, stating that “what Putin is doing to Ukraine today is exactly the same thing Kennedy did to Castro in 1962”.⁸¹

Popular newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* has also been at the centre of a debate on NATO. In late February 2022 an article titled *A War Born of Too Many Lies* accused the West of having failed to understand Putin’s reasons and prevent the invasion. The author claimed that the West had shown “blindness, deafness and an immense incapacity of self-criticism and memory”, arguing that the promise that NATO would not expand eastward was vital for Moscow.⁸² The article was even shared and praised by the Russian Embassy in Italy on Twitter.⁸³

This narrative has also been widely promoted by intellectuals from other sectors. For instance, historian Luciano Canfora, a frequent political commentator for Italian TV, who defined Euromaidan as a coup d’état, has claimed that Ukraine—and not Russia—is to be blamed for having set the conflict in motion by seeking NATO membership.⁸⁴

Strongly supporting Ukraine at this time has also been further described as not corresponding to the interests of Italy and the EU. Instead, the EU has been accused of passively following the

position of the United States, which is allegedly not interested in finding a peaceful solution in Ukraine. On *La7*, for instance, professor Orsini claimed that a continuation of the war would be beneficial for the White House, which would have the occasion to study the Russian military in action and further weaken Russia. According to Orsini, the European Union should, instead,

The EU has been accused of passively following the position of the United States, which is allegedly not interested in finding a peaceful solution in Ukraine

follow its interests, distancing itself from Washington’s approach, and negotiate with Putin.⁸⁵ Orsini has therefore argued that Europe should stop shipping weapons to Kyiv and rather recognise the defeat, realising that “there is no possibility that anyone can take Ukraine away from Putin”.⁸⁶

The idea that the United States has been immensely benefitting from the war has been promoted by other experts. In a report on *La7*, *Limes* analyst Germano Dottori said that the conflict has allowed the United States to attain its objective of separating the European Union from Russia, adding that seemingly Washington “did not do its best to prevent the outbreak of this war”. The report was then closed by an open question asking whether the conflict is only benefitting the United States.⁸⁷

Numerous other experts and intellectuals have insisted that attaining peace as soon as possible should be Europe’s absolute priority, which would entail letting Russia defeat Ukraine by stopping arms supplies and accepting the allegedly inevitable capitulation. Russia is considered set to win the war, regardless of the actual situation on the ground. Director of *Il Fatto Quotidiano* Marco Travaglio, for instance, has argued against sending weapons

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Alessandro Orsini. “[Ucraina, il prof. Orsini: Se il Messico si alleasse con Putin, gli Usa lo distruggerebbero](#)” [Ukraine, Prof. Orsini: If Mexico Allied Itself With Putin, The US Would Destroy It]. *Piazzapulita*, *La7*, March 3, 2022.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Barbara Spinelli, “[Una guerra nata dalle troppe bugie](#)” [A War Born Of Too Many Lies], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, February 26, 2022.

⁸³ Russian Embassy in Italy. [Twitter Post](#), February 27, 2022.

⁸⁴ Enrica Simonetti, “[Canfora: Salvini sbaglia ma l’Ucraina pure](#)” [Salvini Is Wrong But Ukraine Is Too], *La Gazzetta Del Mezzogiorno*, March 10, 2022.

⁸⁵ Alessandro Orsini. “[Scontro tra Nathalie Tocci e il prof. Orsini: L’Ucraina non è casa di Putin](#)” [Clash Between Nathalie Tocci And Prof. Orsini: Ukraine Is Not Putin’s Home]. *Piazzapulita*, *La7*, March 10, 2022.

⁸⁶ Alessandro Orsini. “[Botta e risposta tra il Prof. Orsini e il giornalista ucraino: Putin ha già vinto, ci ha sconfitti](#)” [Repartee Between Prof. Orsini And Ukrainian Journalist: “Putin Has Already Won, He Has Defeated Us”]. *Piazzapulita*, *La7*, March 10, 2022.

⁸⁷ Germano Dottori. “[Le scelte americane sull’Ucraina](#)” [The American Choices On Ukraine]. *Piazzapulita*, *La7*, March 10, 2022.

to Ukraine, saying that it would “only prolong the agony” of the Ukrainian people.⁸⁸ He also clarified that his position stands “neither with Putin nor with NATO”.⁸⁹ Director of *TgCom24*

Numerous experts and intellectuals have insisted that attaining peace as soon as possible should be Europe’s absolute priority, which would entail letting Russia defeat Ukraine by stopping arms supplies and accepting the allegedly inevitable capitulation

Paolo Liguori has described Zelensky’s behaviour as immoral and stated that the West should pressure the Ukrainian president to “surrender and immediately end a war that cannot achieve the goal for which it was started”.⁹⁰ Many other influential personalities have shared similar views on Italian TV and newspapers, often shifting the blame towards NATO and the United States for the outbreak of the war and towards Zelensky for its continuation.

Some of these arguments seem to have influenced at least part of Italian public opinion. According to most recent polls, around 39% of Italians oppose EU arms shipments to Ukraine, whereas 38% are in favour.⁹¹ (Some earlier surveys showed that around 55% of Italians opposed sending weapons to Ukraine, whereas just 33% were in favour⁹²).

Occasionally, some narratives have targeted sanctions, presenting them as useless or

unfair. For instance, *Limes’* Lucio Caracciolo has defined sanctions as a “weapon against ourselves” with no effect against Putin.⁹³ Marina Ovsyannikova, a Russian journalist that became

famous for showing an anti-war poster on Russian state-run Channel One, has also criticised sanctions on Italian TV. Interviewed by *Rai*, she claimed that 50% of Russians are against the war—although independent polls suggest otherwise—and stated that “the fact that the EU and the whole world have adopted these large-scale sanctions against Russia is scary”, lamenting

very high levels of Russophobia in the world and the sanctions’ negative effects on ordinary Russians.⁹⁴

Occasionally, some narratives have targeted sanctions, presenting them as useless or unfair

It is also relevant to notice that prior to 24 February 2022, many of the above-mentioned experts had downplayed—or even excluded—the risk of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. This testifies again to a failure to understand Putin’s foreign policy objectives and rationale, an element that contributes to the spreading of the Kremlin’s narratives. One day before the start of the war, Travaglio called the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine American fake news.⁹⁵ Similarly, in mid-February *Limes’* professor Caracciolo said that the Kremlin was not considering an invasion and that the risk of a general war was non-existent.⁹⁶

⁸⁸ Marco Travaglio. “[Ucraina, la stoccata di Marco Travaglio: quando gli amici di Putin si chiamavano Silvio Berlusconi nessuno si indignava eppure non era un uomo di pace](#)”

[Ukraine, Marco Travaglio’s Jibe: When Putin’s Friends Were Called Silvio Berlusconi, No One Was Outraged And Yet He Was Not A Man Of Peace]. *Otto e mezzo*, La7, March 8, 2022.

⁸⁹ Marco Travaglio. “[Guerra Ucraina, il dibattito tra Severgnini e Travaglio: In Afghanistan e Iraq noi occidentali buoni abbiamo fatto 1 milione di morti](#)” [Ukrainian War, Debate Between Severgnini And Travaglio: In Afghanistan And Iraq We Good Westerners Have Killed 1 Million People]. *Otto e mezzo*, La7, March 15, 2022.

⁹⁰ Paolo Liguori. “[Paolo Liguori: L’Ucraina, i leoni da tastiera e i guerrieri da scrivania](#)” [Paolo Liguori: Ukraine, The Keyboard And Desk Warriors]. *TgCom24*, Cologno Monzese, March 15, 2022.

⁹¹ “Guerra in Ucraina: cosa pensano gli italiani?” [War in Ukraine: What Do Italians Think?], ISPI, April 6, 2022.

⁹² “[Sondaggi, armi all’Ucraina dall’Italia? Il 55% è contrario. E il 62% boccia l’ipotesi di entrata in guerra della Nato contro la Russia](#)”, [Polls, Arms To Ukraine From Italy? 55% Are Against It. And 62% Rejected The Hypothesis Of NATO Entering The War Against Russia] *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, March 17, 2022.

⁹³ Lucio Caracciolo. “[Guerra Russia Ucraina, Lucio Caracciolo: Le sanzioni sono un’arma contro di noi. La NATO ad Est un problema per Putin](#)” [War Russia-Ukraine, Lucio Caracciolo: Sanctions Are A Weapon Against Us. NATO In The East Is A Problem For Putin]. *Otto e mezzo*, La7, Rome, February 24, 2022.

⁹⁴ Marina Ovsyannikova. “[Ovsyannikova: In Russia c’è il lavaggio del cervello della propaganda](#)” [Ovsyannikova: In Russia There Is Propaganda Brainwashing]. *Che tempo che fa*, Rai 3, Rome, March 27, 2022; “[Nezavisimyye sotsiologi: 71% rossiyan ispytyvayet gordost’ iz za voyny s Ukrainoy](#)” [Independent Sociologists 71% Of Russians Are Proud Of The War With Ukraine], *Radio Svoboda*, March 17, 2022; Andrey Poznyakov, “[«Khotyat li russkiye voyny?»: chto govoryat dannyye sotsoprosov](#)” [Do Russians Want War?: What Poll Data Say], *Euronews*, March 13, 2022.

⁹⁵ Marco Travaglio. [Twitter Post](#), February 23, 2022.

⁹⁶ Lucio Caracciolo. “[Ucraina, l’analisi geopolitica di Lucio Caracciolo \(Limes\): Putin ha vinto un round grazie agli USA. La guerra? Non esiste proprio, Biden ha destabilizzato l’Ucraina](#)” [Ukraine, Lucio Caracciolo (Limes)’s Geopolitical Analysis: Putin Won A Round Thanks To The US. The War? Non-existent, Biden Has Destabilized Ukraine]. *Otto e mezzo*, La7, February 15, 2022; Umberto De Giovannangeli, “[Intervista a Lucio Caracciolo: Figuraccia Usa: mostrano a Putin di essere deboli e confusi!](#)”, *Il Riformista*, February 17, 2022.

Professor Ferrari also stated he did not believe Putin was considering a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁹⁷ As Russia launched the offensive on 24 February 2022, Ferrari admitted: “Until yesterday I understood Putin’s rationale, now I do not follow him anymore”.⁹⁸

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that Italy’s public debate on Ukraine has been strongly infiltrated by narratives supporting the Kremlin’s agenda. The idea that Russia is an essential partner for Italy, in particular, has been used to pressure the Italian government to abandon Ukraine for the sake of good relations with Moscow.

Italy’s public debate on Ukraine has been strongly infiltrated by narratives supporting the Kremlin’s agenda

Messages targeting post-Maidan Ukraine have further supported this rhetoric. These narratives have likely contributed to shaping the contours of Italy’s traditionally softer stance towards Russia.

The promotion of such narratives responds to the Kremlin’s objective of dividing the West. By convincing Italy it has different interests to the rest of Europe, the Kremlin aims at undermining NATO and EU cohesion in their support for Ukraine. Shifting the blame for the deterioration of EU-Russia relations on “anti-Russian” countries aims to generate distrust among Western allies and set them against each other. Presenting Italy as a “special country”, alluding to privileged relations or its potentially important role in NATO-Russia negotiations, is a further attempt to distance Rome from its allies.

Despite having lost some influence following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, these narratives still enjoy great popularity in the Italian public

debate. The insistence of Italian analysts on NATO’s eastward expansion as the main cause of the war represents a dangerous simplification that could nonetheless soften Italy’s position vis-à-vis Russia in the future. If fighting in Ukraine lasts indefinitely, the Italian leadership could be eventually convinced that peace can be secured by imposing a neutral status on Kyiv and giving Moscow large concessions. This erroneous assumption would result in grave problems for the West and the end of Ukraine as a sovereign state. Rome could also be tempted to reduce its support for Kyiv, thereby undermining Euro-Atlantic cohesion.

In light of the above, it is necessary that more be done to improve the quality of Italian research and discussion on Ukraine and Russia. The above-described narratives stem from a superficial and generalist analysis of the region, which, with some exceptions, largely buys into Moscow’s narratives and official statements. Only a high-quality and regional-expertise-driven public debate can systematically challenge and refute the most common pro-Kremlin narratives.

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Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, demand for solid expertise on Ukraine and Russia has been inevitably growing in Italy. This is an important occasion that countries with a long tradition of research on the region (like the US, the Baltic states, Poland and others) should seize to engage with Italy’s public community and share knowledge and regional expertise. In light of their long-standing experience, these countries could also assist Rome to effectively counter the Kremlin’s information war. The quality of public debate will ultimately contribute to defining Italy’s stance towards Russia and Euro-Atlantic cohesion in general, inevitably affecting the future of Ukraine and the West.

⁹⁷ Federica Scotellaro, “[Mosca e Kiev: una guerra alle porte dell’Europa? Intervista ad Aldo Ferrari](#)” [Moscow And Kyiv: A War At The Gates Of Europe? Interview With Aldo Ferrari], *Cafoscarinews*, December 17, 2021.

⁹⁸ Elisabetta Burba, “[Ferrari: fino a ieri capivo la ratio di Putin, ora non lo seguo più](#)” [Ferrari: Until Yesterday I Understood Putin’s Rationale, Now I Don’t Follow Him Anymore], *Panorama*, February 24, 2022.

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63/4 NARVA RD., 10120 TALLINN, ESTONIA
INFO@ICDS.EE, EFPI@ICDS.EE

ISSN 2228-2076