

## BRIEF

## RUSSIA'S PROPAGANDA WAR

RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE  
SERIES NO. 9

| IGOR GRETSKIY |

**Vladimir Putin spent years preparing his invasion of Ukraine. Propaganda and disinformation were key elements of his plans. For these to succeed, he apparently depended on an extensive network of collaborators and informants among Ukraine's local authorities, and on the effectiveness of the Kremlin's propaganda among the Russian-speaking population of eastern Ukraine. When Russia's initial decapitation attack on Kyiv failed, the "special operation" quickly transformed into an horrific war, and the Kremlin adjusted its propaganda and disinformation campaigns accordingly. This brief describes how official narratives were used to pave the way for Russia's military incursion into Ukraine, and how Russia's propaganda has changed as the war has progressed.**

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After Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity, Russian propaganda pressure on the country increased significantly. Moscow claimed that the Euromaidan demonstrations ended in a violent *coup d'état* with the expulsion of Ukraine's legitimate president and the overthrow of the government. Russian state-controlled media and second-tier politicians maintained that Kyiv's new authorities, allegedly comprised of neo-Nazi and ultra-nationalist groups, oppressed Russian-speaking inhabitants and even threatened the "genocide of the Russian people".<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, until February 2022, no top Russian official explicitly called the Ukrainian government neo-Nazi.

Russia's information campaign during the illegal 2014 annexation of Crimea exposed numerous vulnerabilities in Ukraine's information space. It is no wonder that information security quickly became one of the government's top priorities. In this area, the Ukrainian leadership has managed to achieve two important goals. First, Russian TV channels have lost access to their Ukrainian audience. In March 2014, four Russian state TV channels were suspended from broadcasting on the territory of Ukraine; by 2016, the number of suspended channels had reached 73.<sup>2</sup> Second, despite the rapid growth in demand for alternative sources of news, Russian social networks have been successfully marginalised. In 2012, the Russian social media networks *Vkontakte* and *Odnoklassniki* dominated the Ukrainian market, but in 2014, they were overtaken by Facebook. After the government blocked them in 2017, the share of their users in Ukraine quickly declined, and by 2019 totalled less than 10%.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, through elections, the Ukrainian political elite has been significantly rejuvenated. In Ukraine, unlike in Russia, there are practically no representatives of the post-Second World War baby-boomer generation among the new cohort of politicians and top-level managers.<sup>4</sup>

After Vladimir Putin's re-election in 2018, Russian TV channels and electronic media became much more assertive and hostile towards Kyiv and started speculating on the possibility of an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Even Vladimir Putin's statements on Ukraine became more provocative. For example, he began to assert that eastern and southern Ukraine were "originally Russian".<sup>5</sup>

## PREPARING THE INVASION

Immediately after the Putin-Biden summit in Geneva, the Kremlin began to prepare Russian public opinion for the invasion of Ukraine. On 30 June 2021, during his annual televised call-in show, Putin accused NATO for the first time of the “military incorporation” (военное освоение) of Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> This soon became a leitmotif in Russian propaganda. Previously, such a term had occasionally been used by Putin’s military leadership and special services in relation to NATO expansion (and once even by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, who stated that the “expansion of NATO” to the central and eastern European countries would lead to “military incorporation by the Alliance of the territory of new states”) but it had never been used by top Russian officials in relation to Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

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In mid-July 2021, an article by Vladimir Putin about Russians and Ukrainians was published on the official website of the Kremlin.<sup>8</sup> This piece can be considered the beginning of the final phase of the information war against Ukraine before the military invasion. In his article, the Russian president laid out an arrogant and chauvinistic view of Ukraine’s history, essentially refusing to consider it a truly sovereign and independent state, and again accused NATO of the “active military incorporation of the territory of Ukraine”. Before the outbreak of hostilities in February 2022, Putin publicly used this expression at least six times, but never specified exactly what he meant. There was no serious talk, then or later, of Ukraine joining the Alliance or of NATO creating military bases on Ukrainian territory. Deliberately maintaining ambiguity on this issue, Putin left a huge space for the anti-Ukrainian interpretations and conspiracies that then proliferated in Russian state media.

The September parliamentary election pushed foreign policy news somewhat into the background. However, an 11 October article by former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev in the newspaper *Kommersant* resumed the fierce information attack on Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Putin, Medvedev focused his attention on the personality of Ukraine’s leader. Occasionally

resorting to obscene language, he described Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a weak, absolutely dependent and unprincipled person. The article ended with an ultimatum: Russia refused to negotiate with Kyiv until a “sane”—in other words, pro-Russian—leadership came to power.

Since mid-autumn 2021, the Kremlin has used all the information resources at its disposal to spread anti-NATO accusations of the “military incorporation of the territory of Ukraine”. This point has been regularly articulated by Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova at weekly press briefings.<sup>10</sup> Members of the Russian government and high-ranking politicians including Sergei Shoigu, Sergei Lavrov, Alexei Pushkov, Valentina Matvienko, Alexei Kosachev, Vyacheslav Nikonov and many others have also subscribed to this anti-Ukrainian propaganda narrative.<sup>11</sup> Russian MoD-affiliated media have

launched a series of publications and special TV programmes on NATO’s “military incorporation of Ukraine” and state-owned electronic media outlets have ended each news report

or expert commentary on Ukraine with a reference to Putin’s statements about “military incorporation”.<sup>12</sup> This propaganda campaign reached its peak on 30 November when, speaking at the Russia Calling! Investment Forum, President Putin for the first time referred to the Russian controlled territories in Donbass as “thus far unrecognised republics”, pointedly hinting that Moscow might soon recognise their independence.<sup>13</sup> This essentially meant that by then, Putin was ready to start his military assault on Ukraine.

## THE KREMLIN’S LANGUAGE OF WAR

Since the beginning of the invasion, the language of the Kremlin’s propaganda has become much more aggressive. Previously, Russian officials had avoided explicit characterisations of the political regime in Ukraine. However, once the war started, they began to call it “neo-Nazi” and “criminal”. In his 24 February address, Putin even used the word “junta” for the first time since 2014, when he had used it to suggest the illegitimacy of the Ukrainian government and to draw a contrast with the “fraternal” people of Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Such a juxtaposition has traditionally

been used to interfere in Ukraine's domestic affairs through a narrative proclaiming Russians and Ukrainians to be a "single people" with a common history and destiny.

Today, disinformation is directed against the Ukrainian state in many forms. Russian propaganda spreads fake news about Ukraine's intention to restore its nuclear arsenal, to create biological weapons capable of hitting certain ethnic groups, to intentionally "drown" Russia in synthetic drugs, and to ban the use of the Russian language in everyday life.<sup>15</sup> The main difference with the pre-war period is that the highest echelons of the Russian state, including Vladimir Putin, are much more active in disseminating false narratives and fake news.

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In addition, the Russian authorities have begun to resort more often to openly neo-imperial narratives. For instance, addressing young participants of the 2022 St Petersburg International Economic Forum, Putin said that since the era of Peter the Great, Russia's foreign policy task had remained unchanged—to reclaim and reinforce "originally" Russian territories.<sup>16</sup> He was echoed by Alexander Kuznetsov, permanent representative of the Russian Federation to UNESCO, who reminded his fellow citizens that many times in history, "the people of Russia... gathered together originally Russian lands and took fraternal peoples under its protection".<sup>17</sup>

Such rhetoric is not just aimed at the older generation of Russians and Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine, many of whom still remember the era of Soviet "stability and greatness" with nostalgia. Putin and his associates probably expect Moscow's military aggression against Ukraine to encourage other countries to resort to armed force. This would allow the Kremlin to maintain a high level of tension on the international arena and possibly cause Washington to overextend itself. In recent months, China has conducted air and sea manoeuvres near Taiwan, threatening to start a war if the island declares independence.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has escalated tensions with neighbouring Greece, accusing Athens of

discrimination against the Turkish minorities in Rhodes and Kos and warning Greece to demilitarise islands in the Aegean.<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Changes in Russia's official discourse indicate that Vladimir Putin most likely began to plot a war against Ukraine right after his re-election in 2018. The last, and most intensive, phase of the anti-Ukrainian propaganda offensive was launched after the 2021 Biden-Putin Geneva summit. Its premises and messages were based mostly on threadbare Soviet-style narratives about Nazism and anti-Russian conspiracies attributed to the West, to which the older generation of Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians are most susceptible.

Despite its vast range and resources, the Russian mainstream media was not able to provoke the population and local authorities in eastern Ukraine into mass defections to the Russian side. This was largely due to the counter-propaganda policies adopted and implemented by the 2014–2017 post-Euromaidan Ukrainian governments, which considerably increased Ukraine's resilience to Russia's disinformation. The Kremlin did nothing to respond to these measures and continued by inertia. Even today, the Russian authorities have not modified the form or essence of their information warfare to adapt to the new realities in Ukraine.

Perhaps the only major change has been the recent intensification of the neo-imperial narrative in Russia's official rhetoric, which tacitly indicates that Moscow recognises its defeat in the struggle for Ukrainians' hearts and minds. Another good indicator of this is the change in the Kremlin's rhetoric expressing compassion toward the Ukrainian population: such compassion was sometimes heard before Russian troops invaded Ukraine in February 2022, but never after.<sup>20</sup> Russian officials vehemently deny any responsibility for the death of Ukrainian civilians, and neither the Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor the Ministry of Defence nor the president has expressed a single word of sympathy to the relatives of victims—towards the people whom Putin and his associates used to call "fraternal".

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>5</sup> [“Vladimir Putin’s annual news conference”](#), President of Russia, 19 December 2019.
- <sup>6</sup> [“Direct Line with Vladimir Putin”](#), President of Russia, 30 June 2021.
- <sup>7</sup> [“Интервью Секретаря Совета Безопасности Российской Федерации Н.П.Патрушева: Армия у нас есть! Кто претендует на наши земли и как близко подошло НАТО?”](#) [Interview with the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev: We have an army! Who claims our lands and how close did NATO come?], Совет Безопасности РФ [Security Council of the Russian Federation], 17 February 2010; [“Стенограмма выступления Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова на пресс-конференции по итогам заседания совета Россия-НАТО, Стамбул, 28 июня 2004 года”](#) [Transcript of the speech of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Sergei Lavrov at a press conference following the meeting of the Russia-NATO Council, Istanbul, June 28, 2004], Министерство иностранных дел РФ [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation], 29 June 2004.
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- <sup>18</sup> Chris Buckley, Sui-Lee Wee, [“China Won’t Hesitate to Fight for Taiwan, Defense Minister Warns”](#), The New York Times, 12 June 2022.
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