

Russian Propaganda Narratives about Ukraine: Russian Sacrifices, Western Lies, and Heavy Censorship of the Russian Media - HENSOLDT Analytics

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Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, intelligence agencies all over the world began paying a much closer attention to the well-oiled propaganda apparatus managed by Kremlin. It is no doubt, that the Russian invasion on Ukraine demonstrated to the world a new frightening level of native propaganda that Russia is capable of creating.

In this article, we will look at some of the examples of the Russian propaganda on the topic of war in Ukraine, which had been bred in Russia and picked up by international media, including those owned by Russia's allies.

Russia's Propaganda ahead of the Invasion on Ukraine

Russia's information campaign on kinetic conflict with Ukraine began in early 2021 within its own borders.

From the initial days of the Russian military build-up near the Russo-Ukrainian border, Russia had actively and resolutely repeated the claims of not intending to begin any military action against Ukraine. This strategy stems directly from the 2014 annexation of Crimea Russian practice of denial despite tangible proof [\[1\]](#). In fact, the statement had been affirmed by prominent Russian governmental officials on numerous occasions in 2021 and in the beginning of 2022 during press appearances inside and outside of Russia. Russia has categorically denied engaging in "aggressive" politics – the wording had been exclusively attributed to Ukraine and its allies, the US in particular. One of such statements, which resounded across major media outlets in the West, was Maria Zakharova's, the Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, who was quoted by [Kommersant](#) to say, "The (United) States is conducting a special operation to aggravate the situation around Ukraine while shifting the responsibility onto Russia". [Zakharova](#) is one of the key female figures in the Russian propaganda apparatus.

Provocations, tensions, and not fulfilling promises given to Russia in the past (the topic of [Minsk agreements](#) is often quoted as a particularly relevant example of a betrayal towards Russia) **had been used as additional arguments meant to justify Putin's decision to send a "peacekeeping" mission into the eastern Ukraine on February 22.**

Russian Propaganda Narrative #1: Russia, the Betrayed Victim and Benevolent Hero

One of the most significant and telling moments of the **saviour narrative** the Russian government chose to strengthen internally in Russia was the televised speech aired hours before the military action in the Donbass region. In a 56 minutes-long address to Russians, Putin brought up the long history of Russia and Ukraine (already strongly emphasized in his article, "[On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians](#)" published on the 12th of July) , touching on the themes of past political decisions, which divided one nation into independent but malfunctioning entities. In Putin's own words, in contrast to post-communist states, which continue to struggle, Russia remained cooperative, financially supportive, as well as united in the spirit of one country with, most notably, fellow Ukrainians. (Source: [Vladimir Putin's Speech on Ukraine, and Recognition of Donbass – Feb 21 2022 – English Subtitles](#))

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In fact, Russian politicians will often refer to examples of Western disloyalties from the past in their communication to citizens to emphasize Russia's justified response. For example, the [Izvestia newspaper](#) published an article by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, which contains a thorough analysis of a string of historical events meant to demonstrate campaigns against Russia orchestrated by the West. "There is a distinctive pattern that betrays the provocations staged by the West and its henchmen. In fact, they started long before the Ukrainian events," reads the second paragraph of the "[Staged incidents as the Western approach to doing politics](#)" article. **The anti-West sentiments had been formalised in the revised [Russian National Security Strategy published on the 3 July 2021](#). In a thorough analysis of the document**, Julian Cooper at the NATO Defense College compared the new version of the decree with its previous 2015 edition, pointing out several additions and changes of direction that highlight Russia's worries of the increasing instability in the world. Some of the key elements of "safeguarding the People" (sberezhenie naroda) strategy rest on assuring "mutually advantageous international cooperation" and "the defence of traditional Russian spiritual-moral values, culture and historical memory"

Russian Propaganda Narrative #2: Highlighting Kiev' Incompetence and Talk Show Ridicule

Parallel to the messages of brotherhood with the "regular" citizen of Ukraine, Russian politicians target Ukrainian leaderships as incompetent and corrupt. On the 11th of October 2021, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev published an article in [Kommersant](#) titled "Why contact with the current Ukrainian leadership is meaningless: Five short polemical theses". On the day of the invasion on Ukraine, Putin addressed the nation to put forward the idea of Ukraine being governed by Nazis, which required Russia to launch military action with the end goal of "denazifying Ukraine" (Source: [transcript of Vladimir Putin's televised speech on the 24th of February, 2022](#)).

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The practice of discrediting Ukrainian government in traditional media, one of the most efficient ways of reaching Russian population, has increased since the annexation of Crimea. **One of the popular propaganda vehicles are [Russian talks shows](#)**. For example, [Mesto Vstrechi](#) ("Meeting Place"), which is hosted by Andrey Norikin, a known pro-Kremlin propagandist, and aired evenings Monday to Friday on state-controlled NTV, is infamous for presenting particularly bold examples of disinformation. Since the invasion on Ukraine, the discussions are primarily focused on criticising Ukraine and the West. Another talk-show, *Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'yovym* ("Evening with Vladimir Solovyov") on [Russia-1](#), hosted by a vocal supporter of Putin, Vladimir Solovyov, has been diligently amplifying official propaganda. *Vremya Pokazhet* ("[Time Will Show](#)") on [Channel One Russia](#), a socio-political talk show, provides platform for Putin and allied commentators to express their [anti-West views](#), while praising the Russian's government decisions in the war with Ukraine. (Source: [EU vs Disinfo](#)). The show launched on the [15th of September 2014](#), pointedly as Russia was suffering consequences of its action on Crimea, with the subject of the first episode being sanctions against Russia and the response taken by Russia's leadership.

On a backdrop of **Russia's decision to save Ukraine from its internal issues, as well as the negative influence of NATO and the US**, Putin recognised the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic to destabilise Ukraine.

Russian Propaganda Apparatus: Heavy Censorship of Russian Media and Alternative Storyline

The entirety of Russia's strategy of creating a convincing story amongst its citizens before launching the invasion on Ukraine relied on dominating native information sources with scripted pro-invasion messages, as well as alternative storylines. Russian Roskomnadzor (RKN), the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, is a

direct descendant of various federal censorship departments existing in its current form since 2007 after a merger of two separate organs for controlling electronic and mass communications[2]. While active ahead of the 2022 invasion in spreading messages aligned with Kremlin’s directives, Roskomnadzor’s became a rapid-response tool immediately after the 24th of February.

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The service has been targeting independent TV, radio, and media channels, as well as social media platforms and online communication tools (source: [Russian search engines will label TikTok, Telegram, Zoom, Discord and Pinterest as violators of the law \(roskomsvoboda.org\)](#)), to fight the spread of “disinformation”. On the 26th of February, RKN issued a warning to independent media outlets forbidding the use of word “war” in the context of Ukraine. The censorship apparatus continues to target major newspapers in a series of investigations, [recently filing a lawsuit against the Novaya Gazeta to invalidate its license](#). According to [Roskomsvoboda](#) (Роскомсвобода), a Russian NGO that supports open self-regulatory networks and protection of digital rights of Internet users, between the 24th of February and the 17th of April 2022, Roskomnadzor blocked access to around 2300 websites.

It’s being reported that the Russian population is receiving alternative versions of events discussed in the Western media. The recent assassination of [Darya Dugina has been promptly solved by Federal Security Service \(FSB\)](#) with an Ukrainian secret service agent being the alleged perpetrator. In a recent BBC Live Blog entry, [Vitaliy Shevchenko](#), Senior Monitoring Journalist at BBC Monitoring, reported that, “the underlying message of the **Kremlin controlled coverage is that Ukraine is a terrorist state, with terms like “monstrous” and “cynical” are being used all the time.**”

Russian Propaganda Playbook: A Multifaceted Kremlin-controlled Operation

In conclusion, the internal propaganda campaign of the Russian government introduced and amplified a homogenous message across key governmental channels, while at the same time curbing free speech and independent journalism through a dedicated federal agency. On the international affairs front, every official speaking on behalf of the government maintains the same Kremlin narrative: the West is the true aggressor.

The effectiveness of the Russian information campaign on its conflict with Ukraine among the regular citizens of Russia highlights Kremlin’s understanding of the importance of maintaining influence in the sphere of communication. The entire system carefully built over the years can be characterised as effective and coordinated.

It is easy to understand why: assuring the positive vote of the public is not only needed to neutralise opposition but also plays a crucial role in maintaining morale of the Russian soldiers.



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