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KEY NARRATIVES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: ANALYSIS OF AGGRESSOR'S MEDIA DISCOURSE

Started in 2014, active information war against Ukraine became a part of Russian hybrid warfare and included rigorous strategies of attacking broad domestic and international media audiences with propagandistic narratives. While in post-Soviet decades Ukraine's cultural space has been actively decolonized and decommunized from traumatic experiences Ukrainians received during centuries of fight for independence, Russian Federation transformed into autocratic state, where disinformation and propaganda became the overwhelming forms of public communication and means of maintaining political power of the state.

In this article, the propagandistic narratives that exist in Russian media are investigated, as well as those that are spread at the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and in the Western countries. The concepts of "propagandistic narrative", "memory war" and "memoricide" are defined and discussed in the context of Russian-Ukrainian war. The author conducts retrospective analysis of Russian state television discourse (based on the case of the "Channel One") as well as broader public discourse around revival of the Soviet nostalgia and narrative of Victory in Great Patriotic War and "Russkiy Mir" (Russian world). Using the methodology of discourse analysis the media content of the section "Donbass. Genocide 2014–2022" of Russian state-funded news website "RIA Novosti" for as of July 2022 is monitored and qualitatively analyzed to reveal the thematical patterns. Collected data is analyzed using keywords (tags) as units of analysis. The key categories of analysis are inductively formulated according to the topics of disinformation and propaganda posed against Ukrainians in Russian media: genocide, Nazism, fascism, occultism and satanism, lie, drug wars, fascist laboratories, suffering of veterans of the Great Patriotic War, infodiversionism, Nazification, sadism, militarization, NATO threat, Russophobia and split of Western and Eastern Ukraine.

The author argues that Russian state media form the public discourse of hatred against Ukrainians based on praising imperial Russian and Soviet historic pride while weaponizing Ukrainian national self-identification as justification of Russian military aggression in Ukraine.

Key words: propagandistic narratives, Russian propaganda, disinformation, Russian-Ukrainian war, memory war, media discourse.

Statement of the problem. The narratives of Russian propaganda during Russian-Ukrainian war have become one of the most discussed and viral issues across majority of disciplines in the areas of humanities and social sciences. In narrower circle of professional media and journalistic community, it has been topical for a long time, at least since 2014. Media scholars, journalists, fact-checkers have been collecting evidence of Russian disinformation campaigns and psychological operations for over a decade, already having answer in place for the propagandistic question "Where have you been all these 8 years?" that flooded public space in the first days after Russian full-scale invasion into Ukraine in February 2022.

However, it is important to stress that even though Russian disinformation and propaganda have been widely exposed and debunked by factcheckers and

media experts in Ukraine and European Union (e.g. by well-established NGOs like Ukrainian "Stop Fake" and governmental initiatives like EU's Strategic Task Force), one should not ignore its powerful influence on people's minds in Russia itself, worldwide and still in Ukraine – on temporarily occupied territories, as well as on the "mainland" Ukraine. There is permanent need in mindful and cautious countering Russian propaganda narratives and their transformations.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Russian propaganda and disinformation are widely studied internationally by researchers in various scientific fields. Among others, theoretical grounds for information disorder research are laid by H. Derakhshan, C. Ireton, J. Posetti, C. Wardle. Narratives of Soviet disinformation are investigated in the scholarly works of A. Bauch, M. Černá, Y. Fedchenko, and modern Russian propaganda is

researched by P. Pomerantsev, I. Polianska, H. Jahn and others.

Task statement. The purpose of the article is to retrospectively analyze the narratives of Russian propaganda produced by Russian state media and manifested in broad public discourse through revealing the key themes of these propagandistic narratives, the roots and ideas they are based on.

Outline of the main material of the study.

The amount of funds and resources put by Russian Federation in its propagandistic machine has been estimated in billions of dollars annually [15]. Likewise vast amount of efforts Russia puts into swiping out from Russian collective memory Stalin's Great terror and other crimes of totalitarian regimes by celebrating Stalin's legacy and commemorating it in various forms [6; 9]. As A. Balcer notes: "Putin's politics of memory constitutes a key pillar of the social legitimization of his authoritarian regime. The rehabilitation of Stalin is strongly correlated with the growth of the neo-imperialistic worldview in Russian society" [2]. The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine involves also *a memory war*. This term in general refers to a political conflict fueled by different perceptions of a shared history [13]. For past thirty years, Ukrainian nation has been moving towards democratic development and Europeanisation of its country. It has been trying to overcome national collective historic trauma received during the centuries of colonization by Russian empire and then Soviet Union. Ukrainians worked hard on decommunization [4; 10], revealing truth about Holodomor, massive deportations, collectivization etc.

On contrary, post-Soviet years in Russia were the time of the rise of the political regime that scholars call as authoritarianism, neo-totalitarianism or even hybrid totalitarianism [11; 12]. 1990s were the time for crisis of losing the status of the Great Power and search for national identity. Moreover, this tendency was also fueled by perception of Russia as a main winner in the World War II, downplaying the input of other Soviet republics. In fact, in many countries Russian Federation is still seen as a descendant on the Soviet Union and word "Russian" is used as a synonym to "Soviet". In this settings propaganda became the powerful tool for revival of imperial narrative of Great Russia ("Velikaya Rossiya"), Great Victory ("Velikaya Pobeda") in the World War II, which Russians still call the Great Patriotic War, as it used to be called in USSR.

The cult of the Great Patriotic War started in 1970s during Leonid Brezhnev's epoch as an overly celebration of collective pride about the Victory.

Single dominant narrative of the Great Patriotic War is still a central unifying event in Russia's national history after the USSR collapsed. From the very beginning it has been used to unite people and distract from Soviet and post-Soviet problems. During Soviet times such events as meetings with war veterans, marches and military parades, pioneers' and Komsomol's activities with children and youth were mandatory for celebrating a Victory Day in every educational establishment in every village and town. The manifestations of the Great Victory narrative have been numerous and appeared in the following forms: movies and documentaries, patriotic songs and musical compositions, literary art of poems, prose, and drama (e.g. works of Konstantin Simonov, Boris Vasiliev, Valentin Kataev etc.), concerts and performances. Putin's Russia inherited and reinforced the narrative with maniacal perseverance. As M. Černá pointed out: "It is clear that President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin has once again turned the victory over fascism not only into a source of collective pride and the fulcrum of national identity, but also into an important pillar of domestic and international politics. (...) The mass identification with the victorious campaign against the fascists finds its reflection in the Russian imaginary of the foreign world as either threatening or inferior" [5, p. 725].

Another narrative grown from the Soviet past is the brotherhood among Slavic nations of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus embodied in mythological "Russkiy Mir" – so called Russian World, which Russian invaders came to "defend" and "liberate" in Ukraine by restoring Novorossiia on the Eastern and Southern Ukrainian land [17]. The narrative of defending Russian language, culture and victorious history from allegedly massive movement of "Ukrainian neo-Nazi" [18] overwhelms Russian public discourse.

In 1990s in post-Soviet Russia, the media projects that glorified the Soviet past and Great Victory were the entertainment television shows and public performances. Among the first ones was the TV show "Wait for me" ("Zhdi menia", Channel One) that has been on air since 1998 and ongoing with over two dozens of seasons produced so far. The idea of the show is searching for relatives fallen during the World War II, lost friends, family members, often settled in different countries. Another highly rated by the audience was the television musical "Old songs about what matters" ("Starye pesni o glavnom", Channel One, four seasons, 1995–2000). Major showbusiness celebrities participated in it performing covers of Soviet songs, including war songs. All together these media products prompted the public to feel the

nostalgia for the Soviet past and admiration of the decades-long Great Victory myth.

According to A. Assman, the concept of “inhabited memory” [1] that refers to bridging the past and the present in modern Russia is seen as socialization in the spirit of the myth of the Great Patriotic War. It is manifested in such public actions as annual “Immortal Regiment” marches (“Bessmertnyi Polk”) being organized in many Russian cities since 2011 on Victory Day (May 9). Another example are large-scale concerts of war songs on Russian television. They were also broadcasted on pro-Russian Ukrainian TV channels like “Inter” before the full-scale invasion.

The same strategy is applied in the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic”. Pro-Russian authors create songs, music videos and performances and use in their compositions the tropes of the “Sacred war” and the “Great Victory”. Russian bloggers, singers, stand-up comics reinforce the narrative: for example, in Yaroslav Dronov’s (stage name Shaman) song “Let’s arise” (“Vstanem”).

In order to investigate the manifestations of the Russian propagandistic narratives in the public space we analyzed Russian leading mass media and prominent media projects that target mass audience in Russia and abroad. The media content of the Russian state-funded news agency “RIA Novosti” in the special section called “Donbass. Genocide. 2014–2022” was monitored during June–July 2022 and qualitatively analyzed to determine the key terms used to propagate the narratives associated with Russian-Ukrainian war.

Among other Kremlin-funded sources, Russian leading informational website “RIA Novosti” has been spreading propagandistic content since 2014. The analysis of the keywords on the monitored page (the webpage is no longer being updated – we analyzed the latest version of it as of July 2022) shows that the top-tree topics are tagged as “genocide” (N of mentions = 86), “Nazification, neo-Nazi” (N of mentions = 52), “war in Donbass” (N of mentions = 24). The latter tag specifically contains the word “war” to blame Ukraine as a source of this war (contrary to “special military operation”, which is used in pro-government Russian media to mark the

full-scale invasion after February 24, 2022). In this sections’ stories Ukrainians are blamed in genocide of their own nation, Nazism, fascism. The special troops of Ukrainian army “Azov” are called “punishers”, “Satanists”, “liars”. Any manifestations of Ukrainian national self-identification are seen as criminal and unlawful and later fighting against them is used as justification of Russian military aggression in Ukraine. Moreover, there are claims that Ukraine is involved in the drug war against Russia. All materials tend to be negative towards Ukrainians, the language used is heavy emotional, on the verge on slurring. These materials have thousands and dozens of thousands of views (up to 40–50+ thousand views on average for the top-stories). That means there is a vast, mainly Russian domestic audience, which consume this propaganda on a regular basis.

The most frequently used thematic categories of the keywords (tags) are summarized in the Table 1.

Looking at other key topics, one may also see the stories about presumably American bio-laboratories in Ukraine, sadism in Ukrainian army, stories about WWII veterans, who allegedly suffer from Ukrainians. There are also stories about militarization, information and psychological operations of Ukrainian army in Donbas, NATO threat, and a long-term narrative about a deep cultural and political split between Western and Eastern parts of Ukraine. Ukraine itself is considered as a failed state. Russian media continue to exploit the narrative of “liberating” Ukraine and returning it to the home of “Great Russia”. All analyzed narratives fruitfully exist in propagandistic media messages in Russia and now are being widely spread at the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine: Crimea, parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts that are called “new regions” or “liberated regions”.

Analyzed multiple examples of Russian narratives, which circulate in public discourse and are aimed both on domestic and international audiences, show that the implications of “Russkiy Mir” in Russian foreign policy consist of three key elements of Russian identity that M. Černá listed as follows: (a) collective historic memory, (b) Russian

Table 1

Keywords of the page “Donbass. Genocide. 2014–2022” at the website “RIA Novosti”, July, 2022

| Thematic categories of the publications | | |
|--|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Situation in Ukraine | Portrayal of Ukrainians | West-related topics |
| genocide [in Donbass] | neo-Nazi / fascists | militarization |
| split [of Western and Eastern Ukraine] | infodiversionists | NATO threat |
| drug wars / drug addicts [Ukrainians] | liars | bio-laboratories |
| Occultism / Satanism | sadists [Ukrainian army] | collective West |
| suffering of veterans [of the Great Patriotic War] | punishers [of people in Donbass] | |

language, and (c) Orthodoxy [5]. This vision partly corresponds with M. Laruelle's ideas that Russia's three main foreign policy agendas are (a) building a Eurasian Union, (b) deepening the partnership with China, and (c) promoting a conservative ideology in the West [14].

Aleksandr Dugin was among the first ideologists of the Eurasian direction of Russia's worldview and its exceptional role in rearranging the global order [19]. His book "The Foundations of Geopolitics" set a foundation for "Russkiy Mir" that include such concepts as "Russian spirit", "Russian truth", "Russian identity" within *Eurasianism*. According to Dugin [3; 22], Russian unique position in both Europe and Asia should be used to restore its "global power" by using *disinformation*, *destabilization*, and *annexation*. He also defined Russian conservative values and promoted idea of a "multipolar" world.

While Dugin's works are considered to be Putin's playbook, Dugin himself expresses wildly radical viewpoints about Putin's politics: "We [Russians] are living in the monarchy society from below. We demand from him [Putin] to be much more authoritarian than he is" [22]. His idea that "the truth is the matter of belief" [3] resonate with rhetoric of the Russian Orthodox Church that has become a mouthpiece of Kremlin's propaganda including the Soviet memory narratives. As M. Černá aptly noted: "A quasi-religious narrative has enclosed these memories within a sacred aura, and any rational efforts to revise the myth are denounced as representing a heretical distortion of the truth – the truth in this case being determined by state interests" [5, p. 726].

As observed in the media channels affiliated to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) of the Moscow Patriarchate (i.g. SPAS TV-channel and its account in the social network Telegram) the church positions itself as a key pillar of "Russkiy Mir". In terms of the Russian propagandistic narratives used against Ukraine in disinformation campaigns ROC reinforces the following claims:

- Russians fight against Satanism and occultism in Ukraine.
- Ukrainians provoked schism in the Orthodox Church.
- There is a fratricidal war in Ukraine.
- Western liberal values are immoral, thus persecution of LGBT+ people in Russian Federation is inevitable.

Patriarch Kirill as a spiritual leader of "Russkiy Mir" articulates the ideas that deaths of Russian soldiers in Ukraine "cleanse all their sins" because they liberate Ukrainians from "evil forces that have

always fought against the unity of Rus' and the Russian Church" [cited by: 8].

Russian colonial narratives of "Russia-Ukraine brotherhood" used by propagandists to justify the war are retransmitted in the foreign countries. One bright example if this was Vienna Chamber of Commerce's street advertising campaign that pictured Russian-Ukrainian family as a symbol of "unity". These messages are abusive and inappropriate for Ukrainians, because promote reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine that is seen as equating an aggressor and a victim [16].

While Ukrainian and international media community are collecting evidence to document the war crimes and genocide of Ukrainian nation committed by the Russian armed forces (see for instance, the Reckoning Project [21]), the information war in Russia also includes a *memoricide* – a genocide against national memory of Russians themselves. It is manifested in attempts to erase Russian collective memory by rewriting history books and giving people no choice to question anything [6; 20]. It appears that the same techniques that was used by the Soviet government are applied during current war – killing people physically and mentally. Consequently, since the beginning of full-scale invasion, Russians committed numerous actions that have been under criminal investigation in international courts. For instance, massive grain theft from Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine documented by Global Rights Compliance [7] appeared to be a threat of hunger that in memory of many Ukrainians certainly flashed back to Holodomor, the famine provoked by the Soviet regime in 1932–1933. Other current examples include running filtration camps for humiliating human rights, imprisoning and kidnapping people for their pro-Ukrainian position, kidnapping and deportation of children, destroying cultural objects like Skovoroda museum in Kharkiv oblast, Taras Shevchenko monument in Borodyanka, Kyiv oblast and Sviatohirsk Lavra in Donetsk oblast, burning history books in Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia oblast etc.

Conclusions. Thus, analyzed media discourse of the aggressor, Russian Federation's government-supported media channels, reveled that media messages reflect official political and cultural ideologies of Russian authorities, including Russian Orthodox Church. The key narratives embodied in so called "Russkiy Mir" refers to three predominant elements of Russian identity: collective historic memory of Russian imperialism and Soviet nostalgia, Russian language and Orthodoxy. Disinformation and propagandistic narratives reinforce and amplify these

elements of Russian identity by promoting unifying media themes discussed in this article that also should be continued in the further research.

History is repeating itself, however this war is different. Ukrainian journalists and media experts supported by the international partners are equipped with modern technologies to document Russian war crimes and face this reality. Media play key role in collecting evidence of Russian aggression in conventional war, as well as become a battlefield of the informational warfare with its inevitable part – the memory war.

Countering Russian disinformation and propaganda is possible by enhancing media literacy, spreading knowledge about propagandistic narratives,

producing and consuming high-quality media content created in accordance with professional standards, including those in realms of peace and solutions journalism.

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Сірінюк-Долгарьова К. Г. КЛЮЧОВІ НАРАТИВИ РОСІЙСЬКОЇ ПРОПАГАНДИ В РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКІЙ ВІЙНІ: АНАЛІЗ МЕДІЙНОГО ДИСКУРСУ АГРЕСОРА

Розпочата у 2014 році активна інформаційна війна проти України стала частиною російської гібридної війни і включає в себе жорсткі стратегічні атаки на широку внутрішню та міжнародну медійну аудиторію за допомогою пропагандистських наративів. У той час як у пострадянські десятиліття культурний простір України активно деколонізувався та декомунізувався від травматичного досвіду, отриманого українцями протягом століть боротьби за незалежність, Російська Федерація трансформувалася в авторитарну державу, де дезінформація та пропаганда стали домінуючою формою публічної комунікації та засобом підтримки політичної влади в державі.

У статті досліджуються пропагандистські наративи, що існують у російських ЗМІ, а також ті, що поширюються на тимчасово окупованих територіях України та транслюються на західну аудиторію. Охарактеризовано поняття «пропагандистський наратив», «війна пам'яті» та «меморіцид» у контексті російсько-української війни. Автор проводить ретроспективний аналіз російського державного телевізійного дискурсу (на прикладі «Першого каналу»), а також ширшого публічного дискурсу навколо відродження радянської ностальгії та наративу «Перемоги у Великій Вітчизняній війні» і «руського міра». За допомогою методології дискурс-аналізу проаналізовано медіаконтент розділу «Донбас. Геноцид 2014–2022» російського державного новинного сайту «РИА Новости» станом на липень 2022 року. Проведено якісний аналіз контенту з метою виявлення тематичних прерогатив. Зібрані дані проаналізовано з використанням ключових слів (тегів) як одиниць аналізу. Категорії аналізу індуктивно сформульовані відповідно до тем дезінформації та пропаганди, спрямованих проти українців у російських ЗМІ: геноцид, нацизм, фашизм, окультизм і сатанізм, брехня, нарковійни, фашистські лабораторії, страждання ветеранів Великої Вітчизняної війни, інфодиверсії, нацифікація, садизм, мілітаризація, загроза НАТО, русофобія, розкол Західної та Східної України.

Автор стверджує, що російські державні ЗМІ формують публічний дискурс ненависті до українців, вихваляючи імперську російську та радянську історичну пам'ять і водночас використовуючи боротьбу проти української національної самоідентифікації як виправдання російської військової агресії в Україні.

Ключові слова: пропагандистські наративи, російська пропаганда, дезінформація, російсько-українська війна, війна пам'яті, медійний дискурс.