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Propaganda and Disinformation of Russia's War against Ukraine in 2014–2024

Zarys treści: Artykuł analizuje wykorzystanie przez Rosję propagandy i dezinformacji przeciwko Ukrainie w latach 2014–2024. Pokazuje, w jaki sposób Rosja połączyła cywilne i wojskowe narzędzia informacyjne – zakorzenione w tradycjach radzieckich i nowoczesnych technikach – w celu kształtowania narracji, manipulowania opinią publiczną i usprawiedliwiania agresji. Wczesne działania Rosji okazały się skuteczne, ale ich wpływ zmniejszył się, gdy Ukraina rozwinęła silną odporność informacyjną poprzez reformy państwowe, komunikację strategiczną i inicjatywy społeczeństwa obywatelskiego. Badanie podkreśla zmieniające się tematy propagandowe przed i po inwazji w 2022 r. oraz porównuje ich wpływ na opinię publiczną w Rosji i na Ukrainie.

Outline of content: The article analyses Russia's use of propaganda and disinformation against Ukraine from 2014 to 2024. It shows how Russia combined civilian and military information tools – rooted in Soviet traditions and modern techniques – to shape narratives, manipulate public opinion, and justify aggression. Early Russian efforts proved effective, but their impact declined as Ukraine developed strong information resilience through state reforms, strategic communications, and civil-society initiatives. The study highlights shifting propaganda themes before and after the 2022 invasion and contrasts their influence on Russian and Ukrainian public opinion.

Słowa kluczowe: propaganda, dezinformacja, strategiczne komunikowanie, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, wojna informacyjna

Keywords: propaganda, disinformation, strategic communications, Russian-Ukrainian war, information warfare

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the informational aspects of Russia's war against Ukraine from 2014–2024, and the achievement of the Russian Federation's political goals through propaganda and disinformation. The adopted research assumptions guided the use of discourse analysis, enabling the determination

of the importance of informational aspects in the implementation of the policy objectives of the Russian Federation.

Russia's propaganda and disinformation as elements of 'information warfare' remain relatively underexplored, both academically and practically, especially in the context of counteracting and protecting one's own information space from hostile interference.

The analysis of the proposed research problem will verify several research assumptions formulated as questions. First, what factors determined the Russian propaganda narrative towards Ukraine between 2014 and 2024? Second, how Ukraine's approach to building the state's information resilience was shaped. Third, how does the Russian Federation's propaganda influence public opinion?

The study will employ realist and constructivist approaches to international relations, as well as William R. Thompson's concept of state rivalry, drawing on the psychosocial analysis of rivalry. In addition, the study of propaganda and disinformation requires reference to the propaganda theory of H.D. Lasswell and the disinformation theory of V. Volkoff.¹ The basic research method will be critical discourse analysis (Teun van Dijk). In the context of critical discourse analysis, political field theory (P. Bourdieu) may be helpful.

Referring to critical discourse analysis allows consideration of the social, political (domestic and international), and cultural contexts. This method is often used in interdisciplinary research, including the study of stereotypes, myths, prejudices, and the media's creation of reality that deviates from the facts. According to Teun van Dijk,² discourse in a broad sense consists of three dimensions: language use, the transmission of ideas (and information) and interaction in social situations. In our research, we will also draw on the theory of the political field, understood as a field of power and a field of struggle (P. Bourdieu), which was developed to conduct a critical analysis of discourse.

Russian researcher Valery Solovei, in his monograph *Absolute Weapon. Fundamentals of Psychological Warfare and Media Manipulation* writes about information war carried out to distort the opponent's psyche and deform his intellect. The main goal of waging such a war is to destroy the opponent's communication system. The definition of information war includes two fundamental aspects. First, it is cyber warfare (the information-technological aspect), and second, it is to influence the opponent's society, the consciousness and subconsciousness of its individuals, while protecting its own information space (the information-psychological aspect). In this case, they broadcast propaganda for the state's external use, or, in other words, manipulate the media and information flow broadly.³

¹ V. Volkoff, *Dezinformacja oręż wojny*, transl. A. Arciuch (Warszawa, 1991).

² *Dyskurs jako struktura i proces*, ed. T.A. Van Dijk et al. (Warszawa, 2001).

³ В. Солевей, *Абсолютное оружие. Основы психологической войны и медиаманипулирования* (Москва, 2015).

Propaganda is an independent component of political communication, including in the international context. It is typically defined as the dissemination of ideological and political views to shape attitudes, values, beliefs, and emotions, thereby influencing the behaviour of individuals or society. In contrast, manipulation is a deliberate, covert activity that imposes a false image of reality on an individual or group.⁴

Information warfare is very often defined as the latent influence of information on individual, group, and mass consciousness using methods of propaganda, disinformation, and manipulation to shape new attitudes and norms in the opponent's state, both at the individual and collective level. Information warfare is primarily conducted by states to weaken or destroy the opponent.⁵ Many experts believe that Russia is waging cognitive warfare against Ukraine. This type of warfare is described as “fighting for human consciousness and shaping the world by influencing perception and cognitive processes, i.e., affecting the enemy's consciousness to reduce their will to resist”. The cognitive effect involves manipulating information to alter thoughts and behaviour.⁶

Over the past ten years, the issue of information warfare has become the subject of research interest for many academic and expert centres in Poland and around the world. One of the main topics of research interest is the propaganda and disinformation of the Russian Federation towards Ukraine during the war.⁷

Russia's propaganda machine

Russia's propaganda machine comprises both a civilian and a military component. The civilian component has two departments: 1) Information security and 2) State policy in the field of mass media of the Ministry of Digitisation, Communications and Mass Communications of the Government of the Russian Federation. This department controls the state mass media. In addition, three units within the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation are

⁴ Ł. Olejnik, *Propaganda. Od dezinformacji i wpływu do operacji i wojny informacyjnej* (Warszawa, 2024), pp. 49–51.

⁵ Th. Rid, *Wojna informacyjna* (Warszawa, 2020); Ю. Когут, *Кібервійна та безпека об'єктів критичної інфраструктури* (Київ, 2021), p. 33.

⁶ A. Mitreğa, An. Mitreğa, 'Znaczenie wojny poznawczej w kształtowaniu postaw społecznych', *Ochrona Ludności i Dziedzictwa Kulturowego*, no. 4 (2024), p. 102; A. Olechowski, 'Dezinformacja i propaganda orężem wojny kognitywnej', *Media i Społeczeństwo*, no. 2 (2022), p. 25.

⁷ In Poland, several interesting works have been published on this topic by authors such as O. and S. Vasiuta, M. Orzechowski, J. Darczewska, M. Michał, A. Legucka, or A. Glapiak. Among foreign researchers publishing in English, one should note the works of authors such as O. Boyd-Barrett, K. Smaglyi, K. Giles, M. Ajir, B. Vaillant, M. Levin Jaitner, M. Snegovaya, J. Roozenbeek, M. Van Herpen, and P. Pomerantsev. In Ukraine, the above problems were discussed, among others, by H. Pocheptsov, Ye. Magda, O. Shevchenko, V. Horbulin, and D. Zolotukhin.

responsible for information policy, information technology development, and political communication. Also, at the Kremlin's service were media outlets associated with the Gazprom-Media holding company. The military component is linked to the operation of information operations troops, numbering more than 1,000 soldiers and costing more than \$300 million. The traditions of Soviet propaganda are connected to the Military Foreign Language Institute, which served as the basis for the establishment of the Military Information and Foreign Language Department of the Russian Defence Ministry in 2000. Additionally, there is an Academy of Cryptography, Communications and Informatics under the Federal Security Service.⁸

According to calculations by Vyacheslav Gusarov (Information Opposition/sprotyv.info), the annual maintenance of Russia's propaganda machine costs at least \$3.5 billion. It is worth noting that in 2014, *Russia Today's* yearly budget was about \$500 million, while RIA *Novosti's* and *Sputnik's* were \$4.5 million each. The above media outlets are part of the holding company of the International News Agency Russia Today, whose 2015 annual budget was \$650 million. The All-Russian State Television and Radio Company (including RTR *Planeta*) had the largest budget of \$1.3 billion. The media group associated with Russia's First Channel had funds of \$64 million and operated in the Baltic States. In turn, the Gazprom-Media holding (including NTV TV) had a budget of \$300 million. The National Media Group (including *Izvestia* newspaper, LifeNews.ru, and Russian News Service) had \$300 million in assets. The international project "Russian Gazeta" (Russia Beyond the Headlines) received \$10–12 million from the state budget. As part of the project, Russia financed the publication of special supplements in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Le Figaro*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *La Repubblica*, among others. The total value of funds received by Russian propaganda media was estimated at more than \$2.6 billion per year.⁹

In addition, Russian social media platforms (including VK and Odnoklassniki) controlled by the Mail.Ru Group received about \$50 million. Also, funding for hacker activities (\$100 million) and troll factories (\$32.4 million) should be factored in. The Kremlin also exerts its influence outside Russia through organisations such as Rossotrudnichestvo (\$36 million), Ruski Mir (\$15.2 million), the O. Gorchakov Foundation for Support of Public Diplomacy (\$1.1 million), and the Historical Perspective Foundation (\$3 million). In total, the estimated annual disbursements of this kind amounted to more than \$390 million.¹⁰ According to

⁸ W. Baluk, 'Propaganda i dezinformacja Rosji wobec Polski i Ukrainy po aneksji Krymu w 2014 roku. Wybrane zagadnienia', in *Myśl polityczna. Biografistyka. Komunikowanie*, ed. A. Szwed-Walczak, Ł. Jędrzejski, K. Mazurek (Lublin, 2022), pp. 645–646.

⁹ В. Гусаров, 'Скільки Росія витрачає на інформаційну війну в Україні', <https://informna-palm.org/ua/skilky-rosiya-vytrachaye-na-informatsijnu-vijnu-v-ukrayini-infografika/> (accessed: 20 June 2024).

¹⁰ Ibid.

the international non-governmental organisation InformNapalm, Russia's annual spending on its information campaign amounts to 3.5 billion USD, through which it has created an influential media support system for its policies.

During wartime, Russia spends considerable sums of money to shape its own narrative about the war. In 2022, the Kremlin spent USD 1.9 billion on propaganda, exceeding the original USD 1.5 billion budget. For 2023, the Russian state budget has allocated USD 1.6 billion to state media. The majority of media spending (over 51 per cent) was once again assigned to the three leading agencies: Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (RTR), RT (Russia Today), and Rossiya Segodnya. Russia has also budgeted \$987,000 for *de facto* bribery of foreign journalists, sponsoring subject matter 'objective' reporting on Russian affairs.¹¹

Preparations for conducting information operations against Ukraine by the Russian Federation authorities began in 2007–2008, when measures were taken to increase Russian information influence in traditional and new media. This included using social media (VK, Odnoklassniki), buying up Ukrainian print and electronic media through pro-Russian oligarchs, and directing Russian journalists and media experts to work in Ukraine.¹² Russian propaganda usually follows a specific scenario: first, it creates the impression of the problem's complexity and the multiplicity of versions of events (multiple truths), then it uses half-truths and fabricated evidence to impose its version of events. When this fails, it demonstratively ignores the facts and rational arguments of the opposing side.¹³

Russia used the following methods in its information warfare against Ukraine: (1) disinformation and manipulation; (2) propaganda; (3) diversification and manipulation of public opinion; (4) psychological pressure, and (5) spreading rumours.¹⁴

Drawing on Soviet propaganda traditions and modern communication methods across civilian and military components, the Russian Federation demonstrated exceptional effectiveness in the early stages of the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, as Ukraine built the state's information resilience, the effectiveness of Russian propaganda declined significantly.

Narratives of Russian propaganda in 2014–2021

During the destabilisation of the situation in Ukraine in 2013–2014, Russia used not only political, economic and cultural influence, but also informational influence. Ukraine was unprepared for an intense and hostile propaganda and disinformation

¹¹ 'How Much Does Russia Spend on Propaganda?', <https://filter.mkip.gov.ua/en/how-much-does-russia-spend-on-propaganda/> (accessed: 20 Nov. 2024).

¹² *Світова гібридна війна: український фронт*, ed. В. Горбулін (Харків, 2017), pp. 261–264.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Є. Магда, *Гібридна агресія Росії: уроки для Європи* (Київ, 2017), p. 120.

campaign by Russia. The Kremlin succeeded in imposing its narrative on the so-called Ukrainian crisis on the West, which believed the Russian version of events until the downing of the Boeing 777. According to Vyacheslav Gusarov, Russian propaganda was ultimately intended to affect citizens of the Russian Federation, the Russian diaspora, citizens of Ukraine (including those in occupied territories), citizens of Western countries, as well as citizens of the BRICS countries and the post-Soviet area.¹⁵

In a report by the US think tank Atlantic Council on Russian propaganda in 2014–2021, experts highlighted the most frequently used propaganda slogans:

- “the Ukrainian army and volunteer formations commit atrocities”;
- “Ukraine, imitating Europe, has turned into a failed state”;
- “Ukrainians are Nazis”;
- “Reforms in Ukraine are directed against the Russians”;
- “Russia is not the aggressor”;
- “Ukraine supports terrorism”.¹⁶

According to analysts, since 2016, Russian propaganda increasingly used slogans such as “Ukraine is a failed state” and “Ukraine is preparing for war”. Starting in 2019, the Kremlin began promoting the thesis of “Russians and Ukrainians as one nation”.¹⁷ With the publication of V. Putin’s article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” (2021), the campaign gained momentum and continued during Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, especially in Russia’s top propaganda media.¹⁸ The Kremlin, using its agents of influence in Ukraine (intellectuals, politicians, media, and the Russian Orthodox Church), attempted to propagate this narrative in Ukrainian society.

Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 was presented as a ‘civil war’ in the Donbas¹⁹ and the ‘self-determination’ and ‘annexation’ of Crimea through a referendum.²⁰ This narrative was designed to legitimise the Kremlin’s actions in the eyes of both its own and international public opinion.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 121–122.

¹⁶ P. Pomerantsev et al., ‘Pro-Kremlin Propaganda in Ukraine Changes Tone’, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/pro-kremlin-propaganda-in-ukraine-changes-tone/> (accessed: 2 Aug. 2024); ‘Jak propaganda przygotowywała Rosjan do inwazji na Ukrainę’, <https://www.rp.pl/konflikty-zbrojne/art38019691-jak-propaganda-przygotowywala-rosjan-do-inwazji-na-ukraine> (accessed: 26 July 2024).

¹⁷ ‘Интервью Оливеру Стоуну’, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61057> (accessed: 20 July 2024).

¹⁸ М. Архипов, ‘Один народ — общее будущее. Почему сегодня важно говорить об историческом единстве России и Украины’, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2022/07/12/join/> (accessed: 16 May 2024).

¹⁹ З. Виноградов, ‘Тысяча дней гражданской войны на Украине: продолжение следует’, <https://ria.ru/20170109/1485339771.html> (accessed: 23 July 2024).

²⁰ С. Васюк, ‘Проявления политического позиционирования российских интернет-СМИ по вопросу воссоединения Крыма с Россией’, *PolitBook*, no. 3, 2018, pp. 178–184.

In 2014–2021, Russia conducted actions against Ukraine below the threshold of war, with information warfare as one of the key elements of influence. Analysing the basic themes of the Russian propaganda narrative toward Ukraine during this period, we can observe the Kremlin's efforts to discredit the Ukrainian state internationally and destabilise the domestic situation. The legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood and the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian people were undermined. The goal of Russian propaganda during this period was to expand the *Russkiy mir* zone in Ukraine and prepare the ground for further military intervention.

Narratives of Russian propaganda in 2022–2024

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shifted the balance of the Kremlin's use of military and non-military means. Russia, clearly betting on armed confrontation not only with Ukraine but also with the West, continued to use information warfare measures. In contrast, these measures began to encounter strong resistance from democratic states.

Analysing the Russian information space, we can note that the term "Russia's aggression against Ukraine" does not appear there. On the other hand, it is mentioned only in a negative context, depicting a special information operation of the West against Russia,²¹ often in quotation marks.²² It is telling that leading Russian news outlets TASS and Gazeta.ru denied the fact of imminent Russian aggression in mid-February 2022. In contrast, they eagerly used the term "Western aggression against Russia" to describe the West's stance in the Russian-Ukrainian war.²³

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda promoted slogans that "Russia is a peace-loving state", "Russia is ready to negotiate with the West on security issues", "Russia is not a party to the conflict in Ukraine and does not intend to attack the Ukrainian state", "recognition of the Donbas republics will bring peace" or "the Russian army will bring peace".²⁴ While preparing for the large-scale use of its military forces in a so-called special military operation, Russia also planned intensive information support for its military actions both internally (mobilisation of Russian citizens) and externally (Western, African, Asian and Latin American countries). However, the Kremlin did not take into account Ukraine's informational preparedness for information warfare.

²¹ Д. Дубровин, "Агрессия России против Украины" как пример технологии фейковой политики', <https://tass.ru/opinions/13666719> (accessed: 14 June 2024).

²² А. Целищев, 'В США заявили, что "агрессия" России против Украины случится на этой неделе', <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/02/16/17296855.shtml> (accessed: 18 May 2024).

²³ А. Бартош, 'США и НАТО пошли по тропе войны. Саммит в Вильнюсе: не столько защита Украины, сколько агрессия против России', https://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2023-08-10/1_1248_usa.html (accessed: 22 Apr. 2024).

²⁴ Pomerantsev et al., 'Pro-Kremlin Propaganda'.

During the 2022 invasion, Russia's basic propaganda slogans were tailored to the needs of the information space of selected countries. Toward Ukraine, Russian propaganda built a narrative at the strategic and operational levels. Within the anti-Western narrative threads, claims were imposed that: (1) the conflict between Russia and Ukraine was provoked by the West/NATO, (2) Ukraine is a pawn in the hands of the West against Russia, (3) the West is profiting from the war in Ukraine, and (4) the West will fight to the last Ukrainian.²⁵

Discrediting the Ukrainian state is another group of narrative threads of Russian propaganda. In justifying the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, Russian propaganda has consistently repeated that Ukraine is ruled by Nazis and that the mission of the Russian state is to fight Nazism. Thus, the so-called special military operation is intended to denazify, demilitarise, and remove the 'Kyiv junta' from power. A key element of this narrative is the claim of alleged genocide committed by the Armed Forces of Ukraine against the Russian-speaking population.²⁶

A constant element of the Russian propaganda narrative is the claim that Ukraine is a failed state (*несостоявшееся государство*) under external (US) administration, which the West is using to fight against Russia.²⁷ In addition, the Ukrainian state is corrupt, and the incompetent elites are incapable of governing the state and have lost touch with society. Ukraine, without economic support from the West, will not be able to exist, and Western economic and humanitarian aid is being stolen and distributed on the black market. To weaken the morale of Ukrainians, Russian propaganda is promoting the thesis of a conflict between the president and the commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.²⁸

The situation on the battlefield is another group of narrative threads within which Russian propaganda presents the "special military operation" as its success and Ukraine's loss. Russia is "winning in Ukraine despite not fighting to its full potential", "successfully mobilising citizens to fight Nazism", "liberating more territories where the population voluntarily joined the Russian state", while "Russian war crimes are fake news of Western and Ukrainian propaganda".²⁹ In this context, a widespread cliché of Russian propaganda is the phrase "Western armaments

²⁵ Д. Самигін, 'Дев'ять головних тем російської пропаганди', <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2023/05/5/7400790/> (accessed: 28 July 2024).

²⁶ A. Legucka, F. Bryjka, 'Rozmowa z Martyną Bildziukiewicz – szefową unijnego zespołu ds. walki z rosyjską dezinformacją (EU East StratCom Task Force)', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, no. 2, 2022, p. 14.

²⁷ Л. Радеева, 'Украина – несостоявшееся государство, "затупившийся инструмент" против России и большая "прачечная"', <https://new.crimiz.ru/rubriki/85-politika/21553-ukraina-nesostoyavsheesya-gosudarstvo-zatupivshijsya-instrument-protiv-rossii-i-bolshaya-prachechnaya> (accessed: 27 July 2024).

²⁸ М. Шевчук, 'Як змінювалися наративи кремля в Європі впродовж 2022 року', <https://armyinform.com.ua/2023/01/03/yak-zminyuvalysya-naratyvy-kremlya-v-yevropi-vprodovzh-2022-roku/> (accessed: 30 July 2024).

²⁹ Д. Самигін, 'Дев'ять головних тем російської пропаганди', <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2023/05/5/7400790/> (accessed: 28 July 2024).

will not help Ukraine win this war”³⁰ or “the invincible Russian people and their army”.³¹ Among the constant slogans of Soviet and Russian propaganda is the claim that “Russian soldiers heroically perform their duty to the motherland”.³²

Humanitarian and economic issues are also on the radar of the Russian propaganda machine. A negative campaign is directed against war refugees from Ukraine, who are very often accused of being “ungrateful and picky”, “abusing aid and entitlement”, and receiving “superior treatment compared to the local population”. Russian propaganda generates the image of Ukrainian war refugees as a threat to the security of host countries. In this context, the narrative of Russian propaganda should also be considered in the context of the alleged persecution of the Russian and Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, which the Russian government portrays as a Russophobic state.³³ In addition, the issue of defending the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church, represented by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, becomes particularly important. Attempts by the Ukrainian state to dismantle the network of Russian secret service agents in this church have been met with an intense propaganda campaign about alleged violations of the rights of believers in Ukraine. The Russian media ran headlines like ‘No Sanctity. Why Are They Persecuting Orthodox Christians Again in Ukraine?’³⁴ Using former Ukrainian politicians (including Viktor Medvedchuk), Russian propaganda media are promoting the idea that Ukraine is a bankrupt state with huge debts and no development prospects ahead.³⁵ Headlines and chapters of press materials read as follows: ‘Ukraine Is Finding It Increasingly Difficult To Get Economic Aid From The West’, ‘Ukraine: How To Steal Humanitarian Aid’, ‘How To Survive On Someone Else’s Bill’, or ‘Corruption Scandals Are Not Silent’.³⁶

International policy issues are also an important part of the Russian propaganda narrative. In the Western information space, slogans have been promoted about the harmfulness of sanctions imposed on Russia on states and societies. Taking advantage of the anti-American attitude of some European elites and societies, the thesis was put forward that it was the US, with the help of Ukraine, that started

³⁰ ‘Захарова: Западное оружие не поможет Украине победить’, <https://rg.ru/2023/02/12/zaharova-zapadnoe-oruzhie-ne-pomozhet-ukraine-pobedit.html> (accessed: 25 July 2024).

³¹ ‘Путин назвал российский народ непобедимым’, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/news/2023/09/01/993071-putin-nazval-rossiiskii-narod-nepobedimim> (accessed: 23 July 2024).

³² ‘Путин: российские солдаты и офицеры мужественно исполняют свой долг, защищая страну в СВО’, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/17181395> (accessed: 23 July 2024).

³³ Е. Новоселова, ‘Как на Украине прорастали русофобия с нацизмом’, <https://rg.ru/2022/04/27/kak-na-ukraine-prorastali-rusofobiia-s-nacizmom.html> (accessed: 20 July 2024).

³⁴ М. Кирилов, ‘Ничего святого. Почему на Украине вновь начались гонения на православную церковь и ее прихожан?’, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2022/12/07/kanon/> (accessed: 9 July 2024)

³⁵ ‘Медведчук заявил, что команда Зеленского ведет Украину к гибели’, <https://tass.ru/mezh-dunarodnaya-panorama/19013877> (accessed: 25 July 2024)

³⁶ М. Семенов, ‘Украина получает миллиарды от США и Европы’, https://lenta.ru/articles/2023/09/07/help_ukr/ (accessed: 1 Aug. 2024).

the aggression against Russia. The United States is accused of warlike pressure against Europe, supporting the war by supplying weapons to Ukraine, and profiting geopolitically and financially from the war.³⁷ In addition, a thesis is being promoted that Ukraine's accession to NATO and the EU will destabilise the international order. According to Russian propaganda, international military aid to Ukraine is not effective because Russia will win the war anyway, and the Ukrainian state will be divided. Conspiracy theories are directly applicable to the example of Polish-Ukrainian relations, where Russia is trying by all means to drive a wedge between strategic partners. Russian media have repeatedly reported on Poland's alleged political and economic expansion in Ukraine to seize historic lands.³⁸ Russian propaganda scares the societies of Western countries with nuclear weapons and a third world war. Realising the influence of public opinion on the governments of these countries, it seeks to convince citizens to remain neutral in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Public opinion

Russian propaganda has consistently shaped a negative image of Ukrainians and the Ukrainian state in Russian public opinion. Russians' attitudes toward Ukrainians have shifted over time under the influence of propaganda, as reflected in public opinion surveys. In 2008–2009, negative attitudes toward Ukrainians were dominant among Russians (40–60 per cent) due to the Kremlin's propaganda campaign against Ukraine following the Orange Revolution and Ukraine's support for Georgia during Russian aggression. However, between 2010 and 2013, Russians' attitudes toward Ukraine shifted to predominantly positive (65–72 per cent), driven by the Kremlin's information policy in support of Viktor Yanukovych's pro-Russian government.

From 2014 to 2019, the attitudes of Russian citizens toward Ukraine became predominantly negative again (55–62 per cent) as a result of a media campaign against Ukraine. Conversely, after Volodymyr Zelensky won the presidential election, Russian propaganda softened its messaging about Ukraine during the Russian government's attempts to impose its interpretation of the Minsk agreements. This shift was reflected in improved poll results: between 2019 and 2021, positive attitudes toward Ukraine among Russians rose to 54–56 per cent. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022–2023, Russian public opinion shifted decisively negative, with 52–74 per cent of Russians expressing unfavourable views of Ukraine.³⁹

³⁷ С. Корсунський, 'Інформаційна складова війни: як Росія намагається послабити підтримку Заходу', <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/informatsiyna-viyna-rosiyskyy-vplyv/31811302.html> (accessed: 10 July 2024).

³⁸ А. Кузмак, 'Гонор донора: в чем состоит польская стратегия по разделу Украины', <https://iz.ru/1542636/andrei-kuzmak/gonor-donora-v-chem-sostoit-polskaia-strategiia-po-razdelu-ukrainy> (accessed: 22 July 2024).

³⁹ І. Сологуб, 'Ставлення українців до росії та росіян до України', <https://voxukraine.org/stavlennya-ukrayintsiv-do-rosiyi-ta-rosiyan-do-ukrayiny> (accessed: 27 May 2024).

The attitude of Ukrainians toward Russia between 2008 and 2013 was strongly positive, with approval ratings ranging from 80 per cent to 92 per cent. A significant deterioration in these indicators occurred after Russia's aggression, leading to a negative perception of 50 per cent by 2015.

In 2019–2021, there was a slight shift, with positive attitudes slightly outweighing negative ones (over 50 per cent positive). However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a dramatic shift, resulting in a decidedly negative perception of Russia. By 2022–2023, negative attitudes among Ukrainians toward Russia surged from 50 per cent to 92 per cent.⁴⁰

When analysing Russians' attitudes toward Ukraine and Ukrainians, several factors must be considered. First, Russian society is characterised by a collectivist-authoritarian identity. Second, a political regime known as Putinism has emerged in Russia, functioning as a dictatorship. By controlling mass media, Putinism has enforced the so-called traditional Russian value system – centred on authoritarianism, imperialism, and political orthodoxy – across society. Third, the social and political environment in Russia has facilitated the effectiveness of propaganda in legitimising the government, promoting the traditional value system, and fostering perceived support for the so-called 'special military operation'.

Countering Ukraine with Russian propaganda and disinformation

Russia's aggression and ongoing hybrid war against Ukraine from 2014 to 2024 has drawn particular attention to the importance of non-military components of warfare, including ideological and informational impact. Ukraine realised the urgent need to counter the threats coming from the Russian Federation in the information space.⁴¹ State and public efforts have focused on building information resilience and shaping strategic communications, both internally and externally. Shaping its own message and narrative became an important element of state policy during the Russian-Ukrainian war, especially after the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion.

From 2014 to 2024, Ukraine was subjected to constant information attacks from Russia, which fostered the development of a system of resilience to Russian disinformation, based on the cooperation of the public sector and civil society.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Wojna hybrydowa Rosji przeciwko Ukrainie w latach 2014–2016*, ed. W. Baluk, M. Doroszko (Lublin, 2017).

⁴² I. Albrecht et al., *Systemowa odporność państwa w cyfrowej erze* (Kraków, 2022), p. 19, <https://ik.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/raport-systemowa-odpornosc-panstwa-w-cyfrowej-erze.pdf>.

Table 1. The level of trust in the media in Ukraine in 2015 (%)

Source of Information Ukrainians		every day	several times a week	several times a month	once every few months	never	other
Ukrainian media	TV	61	26	4	1	6	2
	Internet	21	17	5	2	51	4
Russian media	TV	3	9	6	5	73	3
	Internet	5	11	7	5	68	3

Source: Research of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (20 V 2015), <https://ms.detector.media>

Building a system of resilience, Ukraine began with measures in the institutional-legal dimension. In 2015, the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine was established, which created a Council of Experts to Develop a New Doctrine of Information Security. The document was approved by presidential decree at the end of the following year.⁴³ Currently, there is a Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, which includes the Department of Information Policy and Information Security (mkip.gov.ua). The Centre for Countering Disinformation (cpd.gov.ua) was established by the National Security and Defence Council in March 2021. In addition, the Department of Information Policy in Defence and Strategic Communications was established within the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, subordinated to Deputy Minister Hanna Malar. Within the apparatus of the commander of the Armed Forces of Ukraine are the Information Projects Board and the Strategic Communications Board. Meanwhile, within the structure of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, there are the Departments for the Protection of State Secrets and Information and for Monitoring and Analysis of the Information Space (mil.gov.ua). In addition, within the Security Service of Ukraine, the Situational Centre for Cyber Security Assurance was established (ssu.gov.ua). Within the Office of the President of Ukraine, there are the Directorate for Information Policy, the Department for Information Technology, and the Department for Access to Public Information.⁴⁴

Parallel to state structures, various initiatives emerged within civil society. One of the first initiatives was the establishment of the “StopFake” organisation in March 2014, initiated by graduates and faculty of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Subsequently, new organisations and projects were created and operated: Ukrainian

⁴³ ‘Доктрина інформаційної безпеки України від 29 грудня 2016 року’, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/472017-21374> (accessed: 23 June 2024).

⁴⁴ ‘Указ Зеленського: замість Адміністрації – Офіс президента’, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-zelenskyi-ofis-prezydenta/30010333.html> (accessed: 25 July 2024).

Crisis Media Centre, InformNapalm, Information Opposition, LIKBEZ. Historical Front,⁴⁵ VoxCheck (on the analytical platform Vox Ukraine). The problem of Russian propaganda and disinformation appeared on the pages of well-known media studies portals Detektor Media and Telekrytyka. In addition, independent expert centres were created.⁴⁶

Compared to 2014, when Russia influenced the Ukrainian information space with the help of traditional media (TV), during the 2022 invasion, the Kremlin spread its propaganda and disinformation with the help of social media and the Internet. The Ukrainian side's trump card in the information battle was its effective system of strategic communication among the central authority, local government, and the public. In addition, the authorities decided to block access to the Ukrainian information space to traditional and new Russian media. As recently as February 2021, a 5-year ban was imposed on pro-Russian TV stations (112, NewsOne, and ZIK) affiliated with oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk. In 2017, by presidential decree, VK, Odnoklassniki, Yandex, Kaspersky Laboratory, Mail.ru, and Dr.Web were banned on Ukrainian territory for three years, and in 2020 President V. Zelensky extended these restrictions.⁴⁷

Public and non-state institutions first launched a campaign to educate state and local government officials and the public about information security, as well as to critically evaluate the information they obtain and counter disinformation. What was lacking was not only qualified personnel but also the means and resources to combat hostile propaganda and disinformation. Another problem to be solved was the issue of improving strategic communication between public authorities and the public.⁴⁸

According to Michal Marek, an expert at the Centre for Research on the Contemporary Security Environment, Ukraine has won the information battle with Russia for the minds of its citizens. The authorities and civil society have managed to decisively neutralise and significantly reduce the influence of the Russian Federation on the local infosphere. Ukraine's narrative also dominates the information space of EU and NATO countries, but is second to Russia's in Asian, African and Latin American countries.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ О. Чуранова, 'Протидіючи російській дезінформації: українські неурядові організації на передовій', *UA: Ukraine Analytica*, no. 1 (11) (2018), pp. 64–71.

⁴⁶ Український інститут медіа та комунікацій, <https://www.jta.com.ua/pro-ho-ukrainskyy-institut-media-ta-komunikatsii/> (accessed: 22 Nov. 2024).

⁴⁷ Л. Шутяк, 'Битва за громадську думку: як Україна воює з Росією на інформаційному фронті', <https://explainer.ua/bitva-za-gromadsku-dumku-yak-ukrayina-voyuє-z-rosiyeu-na-informatsijnomu-fronti/> (accessed: 30 July 2024); Я. Зубченко, 'Чому закриття каналів Медведчука – це не наступ на свободу слова', <https://detector.media/infospace/article/184529/2021-02-03-chomu-zakrytyta-kanaliv-medvedchuka-tse-ne-nastup-na-svobodu-slova/> (accessed: 22 July 2024).

⁴⁸ Указ Президента України від 27.09.2021р. 'Про запровадження національної системи стійкості', <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/479/2021#Text> (accessed: 30 May 2024).

⁴⁹ S. Paczewski, 'Rok inwazji na Ukrainę. Gdzie Rosja wygrywa wojnę informacyjną?', <https://cyberdefence24.pl/polityka-i-prawo/rok-inwazji-na-ukraine-gdzie-rosja-wygrywa-wojne-informacyjna> (accessed: 8 July 2024).

During the Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukraine belatedly but effectively began to oppose Russian informational influence, creating an appropriate normative base and institutional foundations. Civil society played a huge role in the information struggle against Russia. Working together in the difficult conditions of war, the state and society built Ukraine's information resilience.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Aside from the military forces and the energetic factor, Russia has gained an equally important tool for exerting influence in the form of propaganda and disinformation. Being aware of the influence of public opinion on democratic governments, Russia prepared itself well for an information war in the confrontation with the West and Ukraine.

The Kremlin applies various pro-Russia media centres (the so-called troll manufactures) to introduce propaganda and disinformation in societies, resulting in not persuasion and gaining credibility, but 'spreading confusion' by disseminating lies and various conspiracy theories. The Kremlin continues to increase the budget for the 'information weaponisation' process. The objective is to aggravate divisions and create echo chambers on the Internet to support the Kremlin. The strategic aim is to break the unity of the West and polarise societies.

The Russian-Ukrainian war is a natural, long-term phenomenon based on identity conflict. At the same time, the Kremlin's goals in this war go far beyond Russian-Ukrainian relations, as they pursue Russia's fundamental interests of restoring its status as a world power and its future existence as an imperial-type civilisation.

During the period under review, Russia has moved from hybrid warfare to the concept of conventional warfare. The change in the conditions of international armed conflict also affected the Russian propaganda narrative. Russia's aggression and hybrid war against Ukraine in 2014–2024 drew particular attention to the importance of non-military elements of warfare, including ideological influence (*russskiy mir*) and informational influence (*information warfare*). Propaganda and disinformation play an important role in Russia's information war against Ukraine. In countering Russian information operations, Ukraine was forced to build an effective information resilience system. During the period under review, there was a significant decrease in the effectiveness of Russian propaganda against Ukrainian society, while the level of indoctrination of Russian society significantly increased.

⁵⁰ W. Baluk, S. Danylenko, 'Budowanie odporności informacyjnej w ukraińskiej przestrzeni medialnej podczas wojny hybrydowej Rosji przeciwko Ukrainie w latach 2014–2022', in *Europa Środkowa i Wschodnia w cieniu wojny Rosji z Ukrainą: wyzwania geopolityczne i dylematy bezpieczeństwa*, ed. T. Stępniewski (Lublin, 2023).

Abstract

Russia's propaganda machine comprises both a civilian and a military component. The civilian component has two departments. In 2014–2021, Russia conducted actions against Ukraine below the threshold of war, with information warfare as one of the key elements of influence. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shifted the balance of the Kremlin's use of military and non-military means. Russia used the following methods in its information warfare against Ukraine: disinformation and manipulation, propaganda, diversification and manipulation of public opinion, psychological pressure, and spreading rumours. Drawing on Soviet propaganda traditions and modern communication methods and techniques across civilian and military components, the Russian Federation demonstrated exceptional effectiveness in the early stages of the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, as Ukraine built up the state's information resilience, the effectiveness of Russian propaganda's impact declined significantly.

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