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WHAT ARE KEY NARRATIVES IN PRO-RUSSIAN TELEGRAM CHANNELS DURING THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR OF 2022?

Examining the spread of pro-Russian narratives and Telegram's importance in the context of the Russian media landscape

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ABSTRACT

This study examines key narratives that are being spread on three pro-Russian Telegram channels with a significant following. Additionally, we examine Telegram's involvement in the spread of pro-Russian narratives as well as the intricacies of current Russian media landscape.

The aim of this study is to present readers with a comprehensive analysis of key narratives that dominate Telegram channels of three TV presenters that possess a significant level of influence in the Russian society and pose a threat to Europe's stability through the use of tools used in information warfare.

Results of our analysis show that when it comes to content of the messages observed we can clearly see that the overall sentiment of observed narratives is negative and can be interpreted as hostile. Narratives portraying Russia's offending army as liberators of the Ukrainian people and the defenders of Russian state from NATO are dominating Solovyov's, Simonyan's and Skabeeva's Telegram channels. Additionally, person-centred narratives have been observed involving Volodymyr Zelenskyy, president of Ukraine and Joe Biden, president of the United States of America.

Keywords: narratives, Russia, Ukraine, media, Telegram, information, war, Zelenskyy, Biden, propaganda

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1. INTRODUCTION

During a "list experiment" in Moscow the researchers asked respondents a straightforward, yes-or-no question: "Do you support the war?". The results showed that 68% of respondents stated that they personally supported the war (Chapovski, 2022). While it is widely known that sociological research does not do well under authoritarian political regimes as they hinder the true opinion of the public it is still troubling to see such high numbers of Russian citizens who are supporting Russia's military offence in Ukraine. This prompted us to try to understand as well as ask ourselves what is behind such dire result? Since the power of the media in warfare is overwhelming, we have decided to look at Telegram, its position in the Russian media landscape as well as content with hopes to understand where such widespread hostile opinion towards Ukraine comes from and what are key narratives that the Russian society is being told about the war.

The use of strategic narratives is especially significant in military conflicts since these conflicts more than often result in en masse suffering that ranges from millions of displaced individuals to thousands of deaths among civilian and military forces. Such implication inevitably leads to chronic stress and distress (Bar-Tal et al, 2014) and in cases where brutalities are unjustified by the offending party, such military ventures more than often result in revolutions and autocratic breakdowns. In these contexts, conflict-supporting narratives play a major role not only in the eruption of conflicts, but especially in their persistence – as well as in the use of violent means that often violate moral codes of conduct, and in the difficulty in resolving them peacefully (Bar-Tal et al, 2014, p. 662-663). For an offending country, such as Russia, it is crucial to keep a sense of confrontation on a domestic level as high as possible. Over the past eight years the Russian propaganda machine has been working tirelessly to create a demonised version of Ukraine in the psyche of as many Russian citizens as possible.

To accomplish this goal strategic narratives are used, often involving demonising storylines with hopes to discredit the victim and turn its status from the injured party to the offending party. Strategic storylines are deemed "strategic" not simply because they are important, but because they are the result of deliberations by key political actors. Such actors use narratives in order to achieve their political objectives, eventually appealing to emotions, metaphors, or historical analogies thus reshaping public opinion on a national scale (Céu Pinto Arena, 2021).

1.2 STUDY AIM

This paper will explore the discourse in pro-Russian Telegram channels during the Russo-Ukrainian war of 2022. Our goal is to examine contents of three publicly available Telegram channels and identify dominant narratives. Since the topic of the Russo-Ukrainian war is still a developing one, we hope that this paper will help to fill

in the existing research gap on anti-Ukrainian narratives during the Russo-Ukrainian war of 2022 as well as potentially provide a direction for future research on this topic.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

In order to continue its pursuit in spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda the Russian regime is continuously participating in the usage of instant messaging apps, such as Telegram. The use of such apps has allowed Russia's disinformation machine to bypass a series of sanctions and plug off's and consequently keep up the disinformation machine going. While Telegram may not be too well known in the Western political stage, in Russia it has become one of the primary communication channels for both government bodies and private citizens.

To sum up the general aim of the study, one specific research question has been formulated:

[Q1] What are key anti-Ukrainian narratives dominating pro-Russian Telegram channels?

BACKGROUND

2. WHAT IS TELEGRAM AND HOW SAFE IT TRULY IS?

When one thinks of an instant messaging service (IM) most often WhatsApp pops into mind. However, if we were to ask the question regarding popularity of an IM service in an authoritarian state, we most likely would receive Telegram for an answer. In fact, in most non-Western countries Telegram has become the main communications app surpassing popularity of Facebook's Messenger by a significantly larger margin and could be coined as one of the most successful IM services in recent years (Nobari, 2017). The cloud-based messaging platform Telegram was created in 2013 to protect its developer, Pavel Durov, from state surveillance in Russia. Durov, an entrepreneur whose successful Facebook-resembling VKontakte social network gave him the title of "Russia's Zuckerberg" (Hakim, 2014 in Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019, p. 223).

Conflicting with totalitarian and strategic surveillance systems, Telegram had entered the scene with a promise of freedom, privacy, and resistance; virtues that are engraved in the platform's design (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019). In Moscow, 28% of smartphone owners use Telegram, while most popular Telegram channels are those reporting on politics and delivering the news (Momri Institute, 2018 in Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019, p. 227). This diversity of Telegram publics has meant that in Russia Telegram now occupies an important space in the public sphere, hosting various channels sharing political commentary, leaks, and digital rights advice, and is equally popular with opposition activists, journalists, and Kremlin officials (Wiljemars & Lokot, 2022, p. 5). Over the years, Telegram's penetration of Russia social fabric

has been steadily increasing; it jumped from 3 million users in September 2016 to 10 million users in September 2017, with total monthly users of approximately 10 to 13 million active users (Telegram Region, 2018 in Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019, p. 227). With current events in mind, we expect that as of 2022 this number is much higher and might have doubled in numbers. It is, unfortunately, impossible to say what the exact number is as research on such data is rather limited for the time being.

Comparing with other available instant messaging services we could observe two main objectives that allow Telegram to remain a top-ranking messaging service in countries with a strong apparatus of government oppression. First, Telegram allows users to send text messages, photos, videos, stickers, and files of any type. A message sender or receiver in Telegram can be a user, group, or a channel. In addition to user-user messaging, channels and groups can be used to broadcast messages (Nobari, 2017). Moreover, Telegram has a variety of ways in which one's message could be blasted into the Internet abyss. Unlike Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, Telegram's interface allows users to use three types of interaction involving one-one (user to user communication which is not in the scope of our study), one-many (known as a channel in Telegram) and many-many (known as a group in Telegram) types of communication (Nobari, 2017). According to a study conducted by Nobari (2017), the latter way of communication happens to be the most popular among Telegram users, as more than 83% of all messages possess many-many conversation patterns. For this reason, our study will focus solely on the analysis of Telegram groups, where many-many conversation patterns can be observed and categorised into different narratives.

Second very important objective that allows Telegram to continuously grow its user demographics is security. Telegram has a 'secret chat' feature, which is Telegram's version of end-to-end encryption. The messages are destroyed after a time limit set by the user and are not recoverable. (Saribekyan & Margvelashvili, 2017, p. 2). Additionally, users in Telegram must create and authenticate their accounts using an authentication code received by text messages. After the initial authentication, the users can set handles and find each other using those. Telegram also has a two-step verification mechanism for which the user has to enter a password every time he or she authenticates (Saribekyan & Margvelashvili, 2017, p. 4). Also, the users use a Diffie-Hellman key exchange to generate a common key that is then used to pass messages. They communicate with the server using the server's public RSA key, which is hard coded in the Telegram clients and changes rarely (Saribekyan & Margvelashvili, 2017, p. 4). It is also very important to mention that unlike Facebook Messenger, Instagram or Signal, Telegram is using home-grown MTProto protocol, that circumvents many traditional approaches for messaging passing (Saribekyan & Margvelashvili, 2017, p. 4).

Research also shows that Telegram's security is directly influenced by external encryption professionals and is always under continuous development which allows to respond to new threats in a timely manner. For instance, a recent study conducted by

Albrecht et al. (2022) indicates that the use of symmetric encryption in Telegram's MTProto 2.0 can provide the basic security expected from a bidirectional channel if small modifications are made (Albrecht et al., 2022, n.p.). In response to this specific research Telegram developers have indicated that they implemented most of these changes. Thus, Albrecht's et al. work can give some assurance to those reliant on Telegram providing confidential and integrity-protected cloud chats – at a comparable level to chat protocols that run over TLS's record protocol (Albrecht et al., 2022, n.p.).

Real-life evidence shows that Telegram is a highly trusted instant messaging service since its functionality and stated values have proven to be especially popular with activists and dissidents, from Iran and Hong Kong to Russia and Belarus, who appreciate its relative anonymity and security, its efforts to remain accessible in the face of state censorship, and its lax approach to content moderation (Scollon, 2021, in Wiljemars & Lokot, 2022). However, this does not mean that the use of such apps comes with no cost to the user. On the contrary, certain studies show that users should remain vigilant and keep in mind the possibility that their conversations might still be subject to hacking despite Telegram's best efforts to stop second-party interference. For instance, most recent research conducted by Royal Holloway, University of London indicates that by default, Telegram only offers a basic level of protection by encrypting traffic between clients and servers. In contrast, end-to-end encryption, which would protect communication also from the prying eyes of Telegram employees or anyone who breaks into Telegram's servers, is only optional and not available for group chats.

2.1 HOW AND WHY DID TELEGRAM BECOME A KEY TOOL FOR PUBLIC OPINION CONTROL IN RUSSIA?

Those who understand Russia and its geopolitical goals know that disinformation plays an important role in the on-going success of expansionist foreign policy led by Vladimir Putin. Those who speak Russian also know that over the last decade Putin had managed to consolidate the power of the media into the hands of several people loyal to Russia's revisionist territorial ideals as well as the overall ideology of the "Russian world". Margarita Simonyan, Vladimir Solovyov and Dmitry Kiselyov are names of the people who over the last 12 years have been actively taking part in the colossal propaganda machine making millions of Russians believe in the superiority of the Russian people and the supremacy of the Russian Federation as well as its military power. Simonyan, editor-in-chief of RT, Solovyov, anchor of "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" on Russia-1 and Kiselyov, head of Russian government-owned international news agency "Rossiya Segodnya" have been taking part in an active disinformation campaign making viewers believe that NATO, the US and the EU was, remains and will continue to be the biggest threat to Russia's existence and that all external powers outside the country's borders have one goal in mind – to prevent Putin from serving the nation and subsequentially destroy the very foundation of Russia's traditional ways of life (Rebachi, 2022).

Fast forward to February 27, 2022, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission announces that in response to Russia's barbaric invasion of Ukraine, the European Union is banning Kremlin's media machine from spreading disinformation on the European soil. This resulted in Russia Today (RT), Sputnik and their respective subsidiaries being plugged from operating within the European Union. The Baltics have taken even tougher measures and have banned the broadcasts of the state-controlled Russian television for a five-year period for incitement to war and hatred. On March 3, 2022, Google, the direct owner of YouTube, has blocked Russian news channels RT and Sputnik in Europe, vacating the spread of Russian war propaganda. However, as Russia was left with almost no media influence in Europe, the spread of misinformation about the war in Ukraine did not simply disappear. It creeped into other channels that are as effective in making sure that external audiences, mainly those that live outside Russia and those who belong to the generation whose main source of news is not a television box, do get exposed and mislead by Russia's falsified image of the Russo-Ukrainian war. For Putin's propaganda machine it is crucial that it operates not just in Russia but in the so-called "Russia's periphery" as well as countries outside Europe, such as the U.S., Australia and even Latin America. Wide-reaching anti-Anglo-Saxon media propaganda machine is crucial for Russia's regime as it allows to consolidate power over public opinion and secure far reaching global appreciation of Russia's foreign policy. It is also crucial in influencing decision-makers as they are the ones that track and respond to public opinion in presenting their foreign policy choices (Olmastroni, 2014).

In order to continue its pursuit in spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda the Russian regime is actively participating in the usage of instant messaging apps, especially Telegram. 2016 was the turning point for Russia's elite when it came to adopting new ways of skewing the public's opinion on Russia's annexation of Crimea. It took almost two years for the Russian government to realise that fabricating a referendum and sending in troops is far from enough to secure the lack of resistance in both Russia, Ukraine, and the West. Information warfare was just as important in solidifying its military presence in the occupied region of Crimea. As Russia was slowly losing its informational war, the Russian ruling elite started to realize the importance of Telegram since it became increasingly harder not to notice the consequences of platform's ability to influence public opinion (Salikov, 2019, p. 95).

The lack of control over these channels of communication such as Telegram caused serious concerns in the Kremlin. This resulted in a two-year long blockage of the popular messaging app. To lose the informational control over 77 million Russian-speaking users was unacceptable for the Kremlin as it was a direct threat to the status-quo that the Russian government has been trying so hard to establish with its vast investments into Russia Today and Sputnik with hopes counterpoint the Anglo-American media dominance in the West and in Russia. While the company's small team of exceptional engineers managed to overcome an attempt by Russia's

telecommunications regulator Roskomnodzor to block the app in 2018 the company had to settle down an agreement with the Russian government in order to continue its operations (Loucaides, 2022). During Russia's 2021 parliamentary elections, Telegram banned content and channels offering campaign services, including tools pushed by the country's opposition leader Alexei Navalny (Loucaides, 2022).

Aware of the growing popularity and influence of Telegram channels, the Russian establishment began its expansion into the messaging media environment. While Twitter has long been known as a key platform for politicians and governments to communicate with the world, Telegram, however, was more oriented towards instantaneous messaging and did not initially fit into the media culture as a place for politicians to engage with potential voters and political enthusiasts. However, as Kremlin's understanding of the media changed, so did the habits of communications advisors of key Russian governmental bodies. Many Russian federal and regional government agencies had started their own official Telegram channels. For instance, the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Press Service of the President of Russia, the Investigative Committee, and the United Russia political party had created and used their own Telegram channels. In fact, news would sometimes break on the Telegram channels of these departments earlier than on their official sites (Salikov, 2019).

Russia's key political players have also subjected themselves to the sudden popularity of the platform and quickly mobilised to ensure their presence in the then uncharted media territory — Telegram users started seeing more personal channels pop up and channels of Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov, Russia Today's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, the Liberal Democratic Party[1] leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky and the well-known pro-Putin TV host and one of the earlier mentioned leading Russian propagandists Vladimir Solovyov started growing exponentially beginning to gain ground in the informational battlefield (Salikov, 2019).

2.3 RUSSIAN AUTHORITARIANISM, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND AUTOCRATIC LEGALISM

As a result of the Arab Spring, people in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and other authoritarian regimes have taken the matters into their own hands in order to get rid of corrupt and autocratic rulers. In Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) people demand regime change for freedom and democracy and social media is a key tool that plays an enormous part in success of such uprisings. Social media has already had significant effects on these countries; autocratic dictators such as Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, Gaddafi and Mubarak have been overthrown (Danju et al., 2012) and inability of these regimes to adapt to new media environments in which social media

[1] *When talking about party system in Russia it is worth keeping in mind the fact that the Liberal Democratic Party, just like any other party in the Russian Federation, acts as a coy to create a sense of political pluralism in the country and has no real political power within the governmental structures. A party of liberal leanings simply does not exist in Russia. Centre-right United Russia has complete*

plays a key role, have made a considerable contribution towards the end of their existence. It would be naive to think that Putin and a clique of his close associates do not fear a similar scenario in Russia. If a similar scenario were to be forced into existence by the Russian people themselves, this would certainly mean the end not only of Putin's political career but the end of his social and moral life resulting in an irreversibly grim existence. To prevent this, autocratic practices, such as autocratic legalism exist that make the governing apparatus almost impenetrable and protect the existing leader from losing power almost indefinitely.

Social media is a major catalyst for creating social and political change. Autocratic governments know this well enough and do everything in their power to, if not shut it down completely, then at least to obstruct its power to amplify anti-government sentiments. Unlike those of China, Syria or Yemen, Russian government control strategies tend to be more subtle and sophisticated as well as designed to shape and affect when and how information is received by users, rather than denying access outright. Unable to employ the blunt instruments of censorship available in tightly controlled societies like China, the Russian government has adopted a strategy that Rebecca MacKinnon calls digital bonapartism, or using "populist rhetoric, combined with control over private enterprise and the legal system, to marginalize the opposition and manipulate public opinion much more subtly than in the old days" (MacKinnon in Gunitsky, 2015, p. 46). To do that Russian government must have total control over the technical side of social media platforms and this can be done with the help of using laws, constitutional revision, and institutional reform as tools to create legal environment that serves the regime without appearing despotic and thus risking a social uprising. While it is impossible to gain total control over Western-made social media platforms, control over Russian-made one's was partially made possible by a government resolution introduced in 2018 which set in motion additional amendments to the rules of interaction between Russian-made "communication channels operating via the Internet" and FSB, a federal executive body with authority to implement government policy in the national security of the Russian Federation" (The Russian Government Portal, 2022; Official Portal of Legal Information, 2018). To put it simply, with these amendments Russian government aimed to force private enterprise companies, such as Telegram to relocate its servers to Russia and thus allow Roskomnodzor and the FSB to gain full control over user's data with an intent to monitor and eliminate content that threatens the legitimacy of the regime (PhysOrg, 2018).

Why this sudden and paranoid change in the way media platforms operate in Russia? The answer lies in regime's crippling ability to adapt to new media realities and changing demographics. Many studies analysing media consumption habits of the younger generation highlight a growing contrast between the use of mediums of information that Russians routinely use to access information. For example, surveys conducted by the Levada Centre (designated as a foreign agent in Russia) in the spring of 2021 showed that young people were half as likely to get most of their news from

television as Russians aged over fifty-five, and twice as likely to get most of their news online. Previously, Russians aged thirty to thirty-five were somewhere in the middle in their media consumption (using the internet with ease, but still watching television); today there is virtually no difference between the youngest segment and "older" young people (Kolesnikov & Volkov, 2022, para. 18). While Internet becoming key source of information is not detrimental to authoritarian regimes per se, it becomes a significant headache when it comes control of flows and content of information. Unlike television, Internet is not centralised and cannot be manipulated in terms of how, when and what information is distributed to its users. Such order makes authoritarian regimes vulnerable and subject them to ever-increasing pressure from better informed citizens. Social media acts as a facilitator of pro-democratic attitudes in Russia and with Kremlin's war against Ukraine media plurality has become even more dangerous not just to Putin's regime but to the outcome of the war. Legal approach is used to introduce or amend existing laws in a way that they would serve an existing regime to the best possible way. A previously mentioned example of how Russia's lower house of parliament has passed a law requiring internet companies to store Russian citizens' personal data inside the country is a perfect example of how changing media environment and demographic situation makes authoritarian regimes to adapt in order to maintain the monopoly overflows of information and its content.

Instead of employing blunt instruments of censorship Putin's regime is using autocratic legalism as a way to capitalize on the normative force of formal constitutional procedures with hopes to justify their actions (Scheppele, 2018). Putin's modus operandi seems to circle around political technologies designed to accomplish the goals of autocracy without its usual tell-tale signs (Scheppele, 2018). Autocrats of hybrid regimes, such as Putin, usurp power not with bullets but with laws. They attack the institutions of liberal constitutionalism with constitutional amendments. They carefully preserve the shell of the prior liberal state—the same institutions, the same ceremonies, an overall appearance of rights protection—but in the meantime they hollow out its moral core (Scheppele, 2018). As the new autocrats, such as Putin, get more and more clever, deploying law to kill off liberalism, access to social media in hybrid regimes like Russia acquires an additional level of urgency since it becomes a key tool in educating Russia's publics about liberal constitutionalism and the dangers of autocratic legalism. Certainly, there is the youth excess and the spread of new information technology such as Internet, e-mail, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and satellite TV like CNN, BBC and Euronews. Frustrated youths in Russia are rapidly moving to exploit these new resources to media – YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook – along with online bloggers and mobile phone, are all playing an important role in communicating, coordinating, and mobilising government opposition and mass revolt across Russia (Cattle, 2011 in Danju et al., 2012). However, as a result of previously mentioned government resolution such threat is almost eliminated without using blunt instruments of censorship through law making or autocratic legalism.

However, after an outwardly unsuccessful attempt to localise Meta's user data in Russian territory, Kremlin's regime was seemingly forced to take brutal censorship measures to preserve circulation of a desirable narrative across the feeds of everyday Russians. Consequently, Meta, Alphabet and Twitter-controlled social media and communications platforms were blocked in the Russian territory. While officially the reasoning behind such decision was said to be Meta's decision to allow social media users in Ukraine to post messages urging violence against Russian President Vladimir Putin the real reason is more likely to involve Meta's high levels of demographics and functionality to disseminate information working against the regime and the success of Putin's military operation in Ukraine.

The decision to block Instagram was made as a response to Meta Platforms, Inc.' decision to allow calls for violence against Russian nationals on Facebook and Instagram social networks in some countries (TASS, 2022). Roskomnodzor took a decision to complete the procedure of blocking access to Instagram at midnight on March 14, giving users 48 hours of a transition period (TASS, 2022). In addition, Russia's Investigative Committee opened a criminal case on charges of propaganda of terrorism and instigation of hatred with the threat of the use of violence (TASS, 2022). Instagram counted nearly 60 million users in Russia in 2021, according to the market data firm Statista, about 40 percent of the country's population (Dagenhard, 2021 in Sonne & Ilyushina, 2022). It is also worth mentioning that WhatsApp, a Meta-owned service, was left to operate without restrictions. According to Russia's court, WhatsApp is not a public platform and lacks functionality for the public dissemination of information (Reuters, 2022; RFE/RL, 2022). While true reasoning behind such decision will remain unknown at least for the time being, some theories are worth mentioning. First, it is important for the regime to create a sense of illusion that the Internet and social media are at best driving a slow and circuitous evolution of the political agenda. Second, platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram are helping both the Kremlin and Russian civilians communicate as well as develop a two-way relationship between the government and citizens. Third, the fear of political backlash since WhatsApp is now the only Western-made social media platform operating in Russia with around 84 million monthly users (Statista Research Department, 2022; Epifanova, 2022 as cited in Meaker, 2022).

For the time being it is impossible to tell if blocking of social media platforms that fall out of Kremlin scope of control will be long term and if other platforms will not go dark for the Russian people in the nearest future. Russian internet isolation is not a new phenomenon and Kremlin's steps in consolidating state control over the Russian internet were taken way before the war against Ukraine began taking its course. If Putin remains in power, the delusion that Russia is under information attack from Western powers will not go away and will gain an even aggressive form. This will most certainly result in an even harsher cyber behaviour, especially when it comes to the creation of domestic internet or RuNet. Technical isolation of the internet within Russia from the rest of the world will continue to materialise. Kremlin's perceptions of

a US-posed cyber threat are as genuine as ever and the focus on the bill to pursue total RuNet isolation (which was signed by Putin on May 1, 2019, and went into effect on November 1, 2019) will continue to remain a priority no matter how compliant Western-made social media platforms will be in the future. One thing, however, remains clear – isolating a country in the 21st century from global communications is a challenge few could accept. Current events show that decisions on what platforms can or cannot be censored are often dictated not by the regime but by the people. In Telegram's case the sheer number of users and platform's ability to spread into Russia's government structures has dictated the success of attempts to censor it and it is clear that Putin's regime failed to protect itself against a social media platform that has all necessary dimensions to end his reign just like it did in the Arab world.

2.4 "YAROVAYA LAW" AND RUSSIA'S UNSUCCESSFUL BATTLE WITH TELEGRAM

As we have seen in above-noted research, Telegram is one of the safest IM services available, and even though the architecture does have a few hurdles to jump over, Telegram seems to be able to provide hack-proof conversation sessions to all its users across the globe. However, what Telegram seems to be able to do even better is to offer its users a censorship-proof platform that manages to withstand even a government-induced censorship.

After its launch in 2013, Telegram quickly attracted users in Iran and Russia enticed by its ideology, outspoken commitment to internet privacy, and user data protection from third parties, namely the government, marketers, and advertisers (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019, p. 223). Another extremely attractive feature that helped Telegram to stand out among other Russian-made social media platforms is the fact that Telegram's servers are located outside of Russia and are not directly influenced by third-party operators or the Russian government itself. Such business model was recognized as a threat by the Russian government as its ability to track citizen's social media data was highly reliant on servers being physically present within the territory of Russia. Telegram's refusal to position its servers in the country of its origin left Russian government with zero tools that would allow authoritarian-like practices of media censorship being implemented both platform- and country-wide. As a result, Telegram fell under scrutiny of the Russian political police in the space of a few years: on 14 July 2017, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) requested decryption keys for all messages sent and received via Telegram, in accordance with the 2016-approved Yarovaya Law. This request concurred with another important event: a criminal case initiated against Durov in Iran, where Telegram had allegedly been used by terrorists (Ermoshina & Musiani, 2021).

To better understand why Telegram has become such a headache for the Russian government in the first place, we should understand what procedures does the Russian government (or FSB to be exact) must go through every time there is a need to access

user data. For example, to gain access to the users' personal data Western intelligence agencies need to provide a court warrant to a telecom or internet operator. Upon receiving such a document, the operator is obliged independently to convey the required information to the law enforcement agencies (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021, p. 5). However, the Russian special services operate differently. Each telecom or internet operator is obliged by law to install special software and hardware, called SORM or System for Operative Investigative Activities, which allows the FSB to gain access to users' personal data. In this case, information is accessed by special services without the knowledge of telecom or internet companies (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021, p. 5). However, to go through this type of procedure servers storing user data must be located in the Russian Federation and with Telegram's decision to base their servers across many different countries without internet censorship, such procedure has become impossible to conduct. To fix this, Russian government decided to implement the already mentioned "Yarovaya law package", which required platforms to "record and store all communications and activities of all users and make stored records available to authorized government bodies at their request" (ICNL, 2016 in Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019).

In 2016 Russian authorities have passed a series of laws and amendments which demonstrated their determination to significantly reinforce control over information flows in the Russian sector of the Internet (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021, p. 4). These efforts were mostly justified on the grounds of countering terrorism and promoting public safety. An illustrative example of such legislation is the Federal law of 6 July 2016 No. 374-F3 (also known as the 'Yarovaya' law) introducing amendments into the Federal law regulating counterterrorism and public safety measures. Specifically, Article 15 of this law incorporates changes in the Federal law of 27 July 2006 No. 149-F3 'Concerning information, information technologies and the protection of information', more specifically its Article 10.1. Article 10.1 of the amended law No. 149-F3 requires distributors of information, such as internet and telecom companies, messengers, email services, forums and other platforms that allow the exchange information on the internet, to store in the territory of the Russian Federation the following information (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021, p. 4):

- Information on the facts of reception, transmission, delivery and/or processing of voice information, written text, images, sounds, video or other electronic messages of internet users and information about these users for one year after the end of such actions (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021, p. 4);

- Text messages of internet users, voice information, images, sounds, video, and other electronic messages of internet users up to six months from the end of their reception, transmission, delivery and/or processing (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021, p. 4);

- Distributors of information on the internet are obliged to provide the information specified earlier to an authorized executive authority (such as the Federal Security Service) that conduct operational investigative activities or safeguard the security of the Russian Federation in the cases defined by the federal laws (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021, p. 4);

- Distributors of information on the internet network are obliged, when using additional encryption of electronic messages to receive, send, deliver and/or process electronic messages of internet users, and to provide internet users with additional encryption of electronic messages, to deliver to the federal executive authority in the field of security (such as the FSB) information necessary for decoding received, transmitted, delivered and/or processed electronic messages (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021, p. 4).

This law gave the Russian government legal tools to proceed with the crackdown of media platforms that do not comply with Russia's aggressive data mining practises with intent to hunt those that do not agree with Putin regime's policies. However, what the Russian government thought would be another successful censorship project packaged in a usually easily to swallow pill with a brand name "in the name of national security", turned out to be a tougher nut to crack. Telegram had already managed to become an integral part of daily communication practices of many Russians and its unexpected refusal to comply with this ill-conceived legislation and a harsh commitment to protect user's data resulted in a new type unexpected of chaos. Nobody among the Russian public believed that Telegram is a direct threat to the country's security. Rather, everyone understood that Putin's authoritarian regime in itself is the one that feels threatened by a democracy-enhancing social media platform.

A sudden blocking of the platform resulted in mass anti-government protests attracting over 10.000 people in Moscow alone. Telegram's logo, a white paper plane, had become a symbol of resistance against censorship. Durov, the key player of this whole story came into light with the following statement posted to his Telegram account:

"Telegram servers store private data and will never be relocated to countries with internet censorship and that internet providers and CDN's[2] operate all over the world and have no access to private data of Telegram" (Durov, 2017).

In his Telegram post Durov also reacted to media claims that Telegram will eventually give in to the demands and those leaders of authoritarian countries such as Russia and Iran have enough regulatory power and leverage to sway big-tech companies towards a country-specific and targeted censorship practices. However, as stated in the following post by Durov, Telegram was less than willing to collapse under FSB's and

[2]A content delivery network, or content distribution network (CDN), is a geographically distributed network of proxy servers and their data centers.

Roskomnodzor's pressure to provide Russian government with personal data of its users:

"First, countries such as Iran or Russia usually try to pass laws ordering Internet companies to store private data on their territory. Sometimes officials in those countries make loud claims that turn out to be false ("Apple agreed to host private data of their users Russia"). It is pretty obvious that Telegram cannot comply with any such demands due to our strict privacy policy. We will not be able to put the privacy of our users at risk, even if rejecting such demands means getting blocked in some countries. We would rather lose a big market (like we did in China) than compromise a single byte of private data of our users (Durov, 2017)."

Such rhetoric shows that Telegram, unlike other Russian-made social media platforms, such as VKontakte - or simply known as VK – does in fact believe in protecting user privacy and has no incentives to sacrifice user privacy over profit or bigger market share.

So why would one call Russia's battle with Telegram unsuccessful? There are many reasons that were at play during this masquerade, however, three key aspects could be singled out.

First, it was physically impossible to provide FSB with necessary keys to access user data. According to Telegram's lawyers "Taking into account the architecture of this messenger, the administrator has absolutely no possibility to access information necessary to decrypt messages that are sent, transmitted or received using Telegram" (Ermoshina & Musiani, 2021). To put it in short, it was simply cryptographically impossible because of the way in which encryption works in Telegram.
Second, by the time Russian government decided to start a crackdown on regime-threatening communications channels, Telegram had already become a symbol of free speech and circled a team of vigorous supporters from both user and developer perspectives. This phenomenon was perfectly illustrated in one of the Durov's Telegram posts written in response to an unsuccessful crackdown:

'In April 2018, Russia's telecom regulator Roskomnodzor blocked Telegram on the country's territory. We knew it was coming, so by the time the block went live, we had already upgraded the Telegram apps with support for rotating proxy servers, ways to hide traffic and other anti-censorship tools. We were joined by thousands of Russian engineers that set up their own proxies for Telegram users, forming a decentralised movement called Digital Resistance. As a result, Telegram's user base in Russia hasn't decreased – in fact, it has doubled since 2018. In May 2020, out of 400 million monthly active users of Telegram, at least 30 million were from Russia. It means that our growth in Russia has been in line with our growth in other countries. To put it simply, the ban didn't work... we have decided to direct our anti-censorship resources

into other places where Telegram is still banned by governments – places like Iran and China.'

Third, Telegram is entrenched into the fabric of government-to-citizen or in our case, regime-to-citizen communication that severing such channel of information would considerably decrease younger generation's exposure to government-related propaganda. Telegram remains among the top five most popular messengers in the country and, ironically, is used by Russia's state agencies and representatives as a platform for communicating with citizens. Even though after Durov's refusal to grant encryption keys to the FSB, the Kremlin promised to move its communications to another "convenient" platform (Vesti, 2017 in Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019) Kremlin's regime perfectly understands that such an option is not viable. Telegram is one of few communication platforms on which Russia's youngest spend most of their time sifting through regime-unfriendly channels. The regime simply cannot afford to lose Telegram as a platform for state-sponsored propaganda. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other Western-made media platforms are already holding a monopoly over young Russian's minds and if Putin's regime loses Telegram, a significant margin of the population will simply fall out of information control.

As Putin's regime began to understand that Telegram could potentially be used as a channel for state-sponsored propaganda and misinformation to further its chauvinist policies and goals, in June 2020 the Roskomnodzor announced that it would lift the ban on Telegram's operations in Russia. This is to greater extent due to the Roskomnodzor's failure to block Telegram in Russia and while Internet experts state that the only way Roskomnodzor (The Federal Service for the Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media) could have blocked Telegram is by "unplugging all the internet in the country" (RBC, 2018; Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019) such statement is slightly too bold, and it is more likely that a combination of above stated reasons contributed towards Telegram's continuity in Russia.

In a nutshell, Russia's battle with Telegram was highly unsuccessful and while many reasons were at play, three key reasons could be singled out: Telegram's great anti-censorship architecture, popularity among Russian citizens and favouritism of the platform among government bodies. It is also important to mention that the whole story of Telegram versus Putin's government exposed not only that pro-democratic civil society organisations do in fact exist and use IT sector as a platform through which its democratic aspirations can be furthered but it also showed that it is impossible for an autocratic regime to completely cut its citizens off global communications.

2.5 DEPLATFORMING THE WHOLE NATION: PUTIN'S ROAD TO SELF-INCRIMINATION?

It is important to take into consideration the Streisand effect when talking about Russia's attempts to limit variety of media sources available to its citizens. Roskomnodzor's efforts to deplatform regular Russians from Facebook and Instagram may backfire in the long run and with hasty consequences (Rogers, 2020). Past examples from government-induced censorship campaigns show that deplatforming usually draws attention to suppressed materials and thus an attempt to prevent Russians from using Meta services to using Russian-made alternatives might not be too good of an idea for the regime afterall. The reasoning behind is quite simple — while Instagram and Facebook may seem to possess a set of regime-threatening features, such as ability to share information quickly potentially resulting in an act of swift gathering of citizens near a government building, Meta-owned companies have a regime-friendly technical feature that Telegram lacks and surprisingly it is as simple as content moderation. Content moderation at companies as such is usually done either by artificial intelligence (AI) or human moderators who work slower yet are able to take notice of linguistic and graphic intricacies with more precision than a mystical set of code with a two-letter name. However, when it comes to visuals, artificial intelligence surpasses humans with a lack of basic sensitivity to gruesome imagery thus doing wonders to prevent daily users from being exposed to a plethora of unwanted information, ranging from nudity to explicit war images. The latter is crucial to Putin's regime as images of mutilated bodies of refuge-seeking Ukrainians or "Z" marked tanks with bodies of burnt soldiers still behind the wheel are automatically flagged if not by human moderators, then by artificial intelligence in a matter of minutes. In theory this should have been taken as an advantage by the regime as Facebook's and Instagram's community guidelines worked perfectly in favour of those who would want information incriminating of war-crimes to disappear from the feeds of millions with the help of information host itself. Yet, Russian government's decision to erase access to Western-controlled social media sites has allowed citizens of Russia to see a different side of the infamous special military operation[3] and end up getting exposed to incomprehensible visuals and audio snippets exposing the wrongdoings of Putin's flesh-fuelled war machine.

Telegram has become a breeding ground for uncensored visual and audio material showing the real cost of Putin's imperialist aspirations. Telegram's lack of moderating services within the platform has turned it into a communications service unlike any other on the market. While Facebook monitors and moderates content extensively even for small groups, aiming to combat hate speech, fake news, and disinformation. Telegram, on the other hand, adheres to anonymity, lack of moderation, and de facto unrestricted freedom of expression (The Fix, 2022). This, from the first sight, insignificant and relatively new feature may have contributed to Putin's loss not only

[3] A term coined by the Russian government to describe Moscow's assault on Ukraine. Its aim is to frame Russia's brutal assault on Ukraine as a quick military campaign in order to "demilitarize" and "denazify" the Ukrainian government rather than as a full-scale invasion into a sovereign country.

in a physical war but in the informational war as well. Putin's isolation in a bubble of his own making, which very little outside information penetrates, particularly any which might challenge what he thinks, might have played a crucial role in his inability to assess potency of social media platforms, such as Telegram, and its ability to affect both the process and the outcome of this gruesome war (Corera, 2022).

Telegrams superiority over Instagram and Facebook in the context of Russo-Ukrainian war becomes even more apparent when analysing the spread and long-term usefulness of images incriminating the Russian government of war crimes committed in Ukraine. The main problem that Facebook, Instagram and other similar services have in common is that such social media platforms have been taking down online content more often and more quickly, often in response to the demands of governments, but in a way that prevents the use of that content to investigate people suspected of involvement in serious crimes, including war crimes (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Social media content, particularly photographs and videos, posted by perpetrators, victims, and witnesses to abuses, as well as others has become increasingly central to some prosecutions of war crimes and other international crimes, including at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and in national proceedings in Europe (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Despite social media's major role during conflicts across the world social media companies have no existing mechanisms that would ensure that the content they take down is preserved, archived, and made available to international criminal investigators if needed. While it is true that Facebook and Twitter preserve its removed content for a set period time before it is deleted from its servers indefinitely, such policy is fundamentally flawed and should be reviewed in response to Russia's attack against Ukraine. The reason for this is time. In most cases, wars and then related criminal investigations begin years after the abuses were committed. It is likely that by the time investigations occur, social media content with evidentiary value will have been taken down long before, making the proper preservation of this content, in line with standards that would be accepted in court (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

One of the most useful examples of how significant long-term accessibility of content that goes against "community guidelines" is an investigation conducted by Bellingcat, a team of investigative journalists (Bellingcat Investigation, 2019). Bellingcat, an investigative journalism outlet that specializes in fact-checking and open-source intelligence, was the first to uncover the link between a Russian Buk missile launcher from Russia's 53rd air defence brigade and the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Much of their investigation was based on materials that had been posted online. According to Eliot Higgins, the founder of Bellingcat, on more than one occasion lawyers working on cases related to Flight MH17 asked the group to provide it with the results of Bellingcat's work. When trying to compile the material, Higgins realised that much of the content it had relied on had been taken offline. The content included videos and photographs, hosted on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the Russian social media platform Vkontakte. As a result, Bellingcat had to spend a significant amount of time finding alternative copies

of links and online archived copies of images and pages to substantiate its conclusions (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Fast forward to 2022 and Russia's war against Ukraine, Bellingcat has put a spotlight on Telegram and claims that this particular platform has become a vitally important platform for sharing information about the invasion of Ukraine (Bellingcat, 2022). With Facebook blocked and Twitter restricted in Russia, Telegram has become one of the last social network applications fully accessible to internet users in Russia. In recent weeks, it has been a vitally important tool for documenting the Russian invasion of Ukraine – ordinary Ukrainians regularly post videos and photos attesting to the scale of destruction caused by the war. The onslaught of videos and images from the conflict has also provided researchers and human rights groups access to a trove of potential evidence as they seek to document atrocities and war crimes (Perrett, 2022). This material has allowed the Bellingcat team to geolocate multiple attacks on civilians and establish the Russian military's use of cluster munitions (Bellingcat, 2022).

So, will an attempt to deplatform the whole nation from most Western-made social media platforms lead to Putin's self-incrimination? As a matter of fact, it already has. Telegram has provided the world with a plethora of gruesome images, ranging from civilian killings to torture and the stream of incriminating images does not stop here. According to the General Staff of the Armed Forces in Ukraine the country's Security Service has launched the bot so people can record and submit war crimes Russia is committing against Ukrainians (Lonas, 2022). This is crucial from both logistical and ethical perspectives. A centralised service through which analysts can gather, observe, and analyse images, video and audio calls among troops and other incriminating data is crucial for a swift criminal investigation. This type of evidence gathering also protects those, whose pictures of dead bodies would otherwise appear on public Telegram groups, visible to everyone without the right to be forgotten.

History shows that social media possesses a tremendous power in helping to expose war crimes and most importantly, to convict those responsible for it. For example, footage posted on social media has transformed international human rights investigations. Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden have all convicted people of war crimes in Iraq and Syria based on social media visuals in at least 10 cases, according to Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2020 in Goujard, 2022). Online content was also successfully used to prosecute criminals of extrajudicial killings in Libya and the destruction of World Heritage Sites in the International Criminal Court.

Circumstances under which footage of war crimes spreads is no different in the Russo-Ukrainian war and the criminal proceedings are gaining momentum. Back in February, the Lithuanian government approved an initiative by the justice and foreign ministries to request the International Criminal Court prosecutor in the Hague to open an investigation into the crimes of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus committed and being committed in Ukraine (LRT, 2022). In March, the hearing of the

UN's International Court of Justice (ICJ) on "allegations of genocide" brought against Russia under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide started in The Hague (Kenny, 2022). In the same month the Human Rights Council voted to set up an independent investigative commission on alleged human rights violations committed by Russia in Ukraine (Kenny, 2022). UK's Sajid Javid has pledged, saying the UK would help gather the necessary evidence and reassured that Vladimir Putin will be "held responsible" for war crimes in Ukraine at the international criminal court in The Hague (Walker, 2022). However, it is also important to mention that the process of criminal charges is going to be long, and it is unlikely that Vladimir Putin will be found standing behind a tribunal in the Hague. According to Alex Whiting, a Harvard Law School visiting professor and deputy specialist prosecutor at the Kosovo Specialist Prosecutor's Office in The Hague, for clear cases of war crimes, often the main challenges are determining who is responsible, and what evidence exists that can establish culpability. High-profile leaders often are not at the scene of alleged war crimes, making them harder to prosecute (Gottbrath, 2022). In Bucha, for example, where reports have emerged of a mass grave and bodies of civilians strewn in the city's streets, the main challenge for investigators is determining who is responsible and how high up the chain of command the responsibility goes (Gottbrath, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

3. PROPAGANDA AND ITS RELATION TO NARRATIVE THEORY

Since the year 2000 propaganda theory has slowly regained its place in the academic debate on communication (Tarín Sanz, 2018). Russia, gradually slipping into a new authoritarian reality, had forced academia as well as governments of the surrounding nations to revaluate their decade-long relationship with a nation which at the time was trying to rebuild itself on the carcass of the former USSR and exhibited alarming signs of former hostility and imperialist attitudes. While Stalinist-like propaganda was still a few years away from gaining ground in Putin's new Russia, country's media environment had gradually started to become a tool for propaganda rather than a tool for information.

According to Bernays (1928) modern propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea, or group. Propaganda takes account not merely of the individual, nor even of the mass mind lone, but also and especially of the anatomy of society, with its interlocking group formations and loyalties. It sees the individual not only as a cell in the social organism but as a cell organized into the social unit (Bernays, 1928, 27-28).

Putin's authoritarian regime and authoritarian media landscape agitated ethnic Russian nationalism, turning Russians against both the Ukraine state and Ukrainians as a people. In fact, Vladimir Putin's regime had "mobilised anti-Ukrainian hysteria among

Russians in the decade leading up to the Kremlin's 2014 aggression" (Kuzio, 2017). In part, this is the reason why Putin's regime has no problems flooding the frontlines with soldiers despite their military incompetence, lack of weaponry and enormous losses. Under the influence of a constant barrage of hate propaganda – which distributed the news of supposed Ukrainian atrocities against civilians and linked it to the barbarous nature of a dehumanized enemy– such experiences of rage and grief for fallen compatriots blended over into the impulse to defend the loved ones from the impending danger, which in turn gave way to a more generalized impulse to defend women and children, home and ultimately the idea of the "Russian world" (Geyer, 2016).

Narratives have become key in shaping regime-supporting collective attitudes by the manipulation of historic memory and geopolitical realities. With Putin's help Russia's authoritarian media environment had become a perfect ground for the deployment of narratives as a communication technique in Russian propaganda. In fact, this is where both narrative theory and propaganda theory interconnect and form a symbiotic relationship by reinforcing each other. As a result, narratives have both an expressive and a propagandist function in Russia's public life. In most cases, it involves the presentation of an object in a culture in such a manner that certain cultural attitudes are organized toward it (Lasswell, 1927). Looking at propaganda and the spread of narratives from cultural perspective, we may say that it involves an object toward which it is hoped to arouse hostility must be presented as a menace to as many of these values as possible (Lasswell, 1927). The perspective of the Russo-Ukrainian war shows clear parallels between Lasswell's definition of propaganda and the realities of this war. Russia's propagandistic media environment presents Ukraine, and its identity are in the most hostile way, often intertwined with the idea of radical nationalism and Nazism. Common values of the Russian people are presented to be in danger and that danger is coming from nowhere else but Ukraine.

It is also important to mention that in case of war propaganda objects in question must be chosen with extreme care. The primary objects are usually quite distinct. Thus, war propaganda involves the enemy, [the victim], the ally, and the neutral (Lasswell, 1927). Looking from the Kremlin's perspective role distribution in this war is quite straightforward and Russia's authoritarian media landscape has become key in cultivating the idea of who is what and whether the existence of the so-called threat does not pose an existential danger to the existence and continuation of the „Russian world" even after Putin. As a result of rather effective war propaganda the consensus among majority of Russians is more or less set in stone due to effective narrative spread and can be read this way: Ukraine is the key enemy, spreading fascist ideology and threatening the existence of Russia, while the West is the facilitator of fascist ideas and the supporter of the criminal Ukrainian government. The allies are India, China, Myanmar, Pakistan, Venezuela, and some authoritarian-leaning South American countries. The victim is one and the same - Russia, surrounded by European and American imperialists ready to invade Russia at any point. While such scenario might

seem rather ludicrous to an outsider, Russian war propaganda has been gradually gaining ground over people's minds for more than 20 years starting with the war in Chechnya in 1999 and ending with the war in Ukraine in 2022. Nevertheless, such sequence of ideas should not be surprising. Russia is an authoritarian state where power is absolute and in order to keep it that way propaganda is used as a gluing agent to keep the power structure defined by the vertical structural linkage that reflect power and subordination. Afterall, propaganda is a communication phenomenon with an ideological content and purpose through which either an individual or collective sender calculatingly and deliberately transmits a message to gain, retain or strengthen a position of power over the thoughts and behaviour of an individual or a collective recipient whose interests do not necessarily coincide with those of the former (Pineda Cachero, 2007a, p. 228 in Lasswell, 1927).

3.1 THE CONCEPT OF NARRATIVE AND POLITICAL MYTHS

Past and recent research on narratives suggests that what they do very well is to evoke the past to make sense of the present and rely on culturally significant symbols. For most, the letter "Z" or the Ribbon of Saint George would come to mind when thinking about the spread of grandiose narratives from the Russian perspective. However, we will delve deeper into the use of symbols and narrative building of the superiority of the Russian world and the "Ukraine-liberating" war in the following chapter, so more on that later. For now, what is important to mention first is that narratives, just like frames, have equal leverage and control when it comes to representations of events, actors, and actions with the intent to influence. Politicians use narratives and story-telling more often than one could think. It is a powerful tool that allows those in power to operate beyond national foreign-policymaking processes and transcend into the international realm. This is especially crucial for leaders of countries with imperialist aspirations. Without the approval of the populace any type of imperialist nation-building aspiration is doomed to fail.

Current events show that Russia's attempts to reshape Ukraine's nationhood on the memory of "brotherly Soviet nations" had failed and a venture to create a narrative of Ukraine being an inseparable part of the Russian world is now nothing but a product of political schizophrenia. Russia's soft power tools appeared to be too weak and fell short in competing with ever-increasing Europeanisation and Americanisation of Ukraine. Russia's "Russkiy Mir" became an intolerable and adverse concept for many Ukrainians, especially after the Maidan Uprising in 2013. Knowing that as a result of growing Westernisation of Ukrainian political landscape the Ukrainians have become encompassed by the attractiveness and benefits of Western democracy, freedoms and lifestyles, Kremlin's regime had quit the use of soft, yet very coercive soft power mechanisms, and moved towards hard military power. However, to understand how narratives go hand-in-hand with military offences in Ukraine we ought to understand the theory of narrative first.

In a very basic sense, a narrative is a piece of writing that tells a story, and it is one of four classical rhetorical modes or ways that writers use to present information (Nordquist, 2019). However, the concept of narrative has a long history and a wide applicability going beyond the process of writing and thus should not be oversimplified. The narrative turn has generated a host of competing definitions of 'narrative' but for most historians it is simply the practice of telling stories about connected sequences of human action. The aim of this storytelling activity is not only to explain the action in question but to enhance and extend understanding, comprehension, and experience (Roberts, 2006, p. 704). Literary critic Seymour Chatman (1978), for example, viewed narratives as having both content and expression that are manifested in different media, such as the novel, film, or painting. Narratives are composed of a story or fabula, comprised of actions, happenings, characters, settings, discourse, or plot — the way the story is communicated (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 162). Another literary scholar Roland Barthes (1982) noted the "prodigious variety of genres" constituting narratives that are present in language, image, gesture and myth, painting, and conversation. Narratives assume many forms. They are heard, seen, and read; they are told, performed, painted, sculpted, and written. They are international, trans-historical and trans-cultural: "simply there, like life itself" (Barthes, p. 252 in Sandelowski, 1991, p. 162).

Additionally, Suganami (1996) states that the concept of narrative should be looked at as a mode of comprehension with two characteristics: first, a structure of beginning, middle and end; and second, three key ingredients: volition, chance, and mechanism. All social explanation, he argues, display narrative structure as defined and provide some kind of account of the role of each of these three ingredients (Roberts, 2006, p. 709). Different types of narratives also exist; hence, one can find two different types of narrative: the causal narratives of political scientists which place mechanistic processes at the centre of social explanation and 'story of a subject' narratives of historians which emphasise the determining role of human action and contingency (Roberts, 2006, p. 709).

Yet, when it comes to defining the concept of narrative from the perspective of international relations, the concept becomes less ambiguous and acquires a clearer form. According to Miskimmon et al. the concept of narrative contains three crucial elements. The first is that narratives do not emerge naturally but, rather, are crafted by political actors with a specific intent in mind. Second, narratives have a temporal dimension – they invoke the past to understand the present and to predict the future. Third, narratives offer a shared meaning of the past and present as they define who 'we' are and what kind of world 'we' want (Miskimmon et al., 2014, in Manor & Crilley, 2018, p. 372). Thus, narratives help create a shared identity, often by referencing historical analogies and culturally significant images and phrases. (Miskimmon et al., 2014 in Manor & Crilley, 2018, p. 372). Also, narratives differ from frames as their primary characteristic lies in their sequencing and the ways in which they give "meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political

objectives" (Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 5, in Manor & Crilley, 2018, p. 372). Additionally, it is important to mention that images are employed in both frames and narratives for similar ends, namely in an attempt to appeal to a shared culture as manifest through stereotypes, historical analogies, and commonly used frames of reference (Barthes, 1977, in Manor & Crilley, 2018, p. 372).

When it comes to manifestation of narratives through country-specific stereotypes or historical analogies it is also important to mention that narratives are prone to be forgotten and disperse into an abyss of narratives. According to Krebs (1015) narratives lose their potency if displayed in a cultural vacuum (Krebs, 2015 in Schmitt, 2018). Hence, for a narrative to remain effective throughout a strategically important political event, they must resonate with local political myths. Myths matter because they provide significance to people and are a way for them to make sense of their conditions of existence (Schmitt, 2018, p. 5). The relevance, and importance, of a myth is then directly related to its potential for re-interpretation in order to fit the needs of a specific political community. In other words, myths serve the function of interpretative lenses. (Schmitt, 2018, p. 5). When considering the critical role of political myths in political communication as well as in international relations it is also ought to be said that they remain essential in connecting the unconscious with practical application through projecting old and familiar concrete scenarios and phenomena onto complex and abstract ones. Moreover, through them, one can communicate moral principles which have been stable throughout the centuries (Skrynnikova et al., 2017, p. 289). For instance, if we were to look at that from the Russian perspective, we would note that Russia's attack on Ukraine is far from being simply egregious and is rather of moral obligation than geopolitical necessity. Putin and his inner circles within the Kremlin truly believe that Russia as a country has a moral principle and a set of Soviet-era reaching obligations to help the Ukrainian nation to free its political scene from pro-European drug-addicted neo-Nazi leaders[4] through the process of denazification and demilitarization.

However, just like every concept, the theory of narrative has its flaws and is prone to criticism within the academic field. For instance, Hagström & Gustafsson (2019) claim that despite its booming popularity and seeming usefulness, the narrative concept has often been employed in IR at 'a very superficial level'. It has been used simply as a synonym for discourse, rhetoric, or anything 'said, written, viewed or heard' (Spencer, 2016, p. 2 in Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, p. 388). Moreover, some of the most comprehensive research to date on the role of narratives in IR has focused primarily on the links between domestic narratives and foreign policy (Browning, 2008; Krebs, 2015; Spencer, 2016 in Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, p. 388). Such research has argued that narratives matter to IR because they are performative and enable certain

[4] On February 25, 2022, in a video address Vladimir Putin referred to the current Ukrainian government as neo-Nazis and drug addicts. The current Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine is the Shmyhal Government that was formed on 4 March 2020, led by Denys Shmyhal. It is known for its harshly pro-European and anti-Kremlin stance.

foreign policies. While this suggests that narratives are indeed powerful, IR research has yet to conceptualize how and with what implications narrative power operates beyond national foreign-policymaking processes, that is, in the international realm (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, p. 388).

Yet, despite criticisms of the theory current events show that narratives work, and they work well in both international and domestic realms of relations. Russia's political landscape has always been built on grandiose narratives and myths. To this day it drives a part of Russia's society to do unfathomable things in the name of something or someone. Atrocities of all sorts are being committed by the Russian army in Ukraine in the name of Vladimir Putin, the Orthodox church, unity of Slavic nations or the idea of "liberation of Europe". Russian state television boasts about potential nuclear attack on U.S. in the name of world peace. Or Patriarch Kirill of the Russian orthodox church blesses armed aggression and conquest in the name of "Russkiy mir" and traditional Russian values. Even the most bizarre idea, with the help of the well-developed strategic narrative combined with the right myth becomes as natural as breathing and the idea of one Slavic nation killing another Slavic nation becomes nothing but a "moral obligation" in the name of "peace".

3.2 RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AS TOOLS FOR INFORMATION WARFARE AND SOCIETAL CONTROL

The use of strategic narratives is especially important in intractable conflicts because these conflicts involve human losses and suffering that lead unavoidably to chronic stress and distress (Bar-Tal et al, 2014). In these contexts, conflict-supporting narratives play a major role not only in the eruption of conflicts, but especially in their persistence – as well as in the use of violent means that often violate moral codes of conduct, and in the difficulty in resolving them peacefully (Bar-Tal et al, 2014, p. 662-663). For an offending country, such as Russia, it is crucial to keep a sense of confrontation on a domestic level as high as possible. Over the past eight years the Russian propaganda machine has been working tirelessly to create a demonised version of Ukraine in the psyche of most Russians. To do so strategic narratives are used most often involving demonising storylines in order to discredit the victim and turn its status from the injured party to the offending party. Strategic storylines are deemed "strategic" not simply because they are important, but because they are the result of deliberations by actors. Such actors use narratives in order to achieve their political objectives, eventually appealing to emotions, metaphors, or historical analogies thus reshaping public opinion on a national scale (Céu Pinto Arena, 2021).

In order to have an effect, an external strategic narrative must be able to resonate with local political myths. One of the best examples of this is Russia's myth of the Great Patriotic War which is more than often used as a tool of the Kremlin's great power policy. The messianic myth of saving the world from absolute evil is supposed to cover up the darker chapters of Soviet history and to legitimise all subsequent Soviet

or Russian wars and military interventions, starting with Hungary, through Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan and ending with Ukraine and Syria (Domańska, 2019, p 1-2). According to the current neo-Soviet interpretation, all these military actions were purely defensive and justified by external circumstances. The glorification of the "Yalta order" and the justification of the use of force in foreign policy is intended to legitimise Moscow's pursuit of its current strategic aims, first and foremost of these being hegemony in the post-Soviet area and revision of the European security architecture. The war mythology and Russia's great-power ambitions continue to resonate with the wider Russian public; thus, contributing to legitimisation of the authoritarian regime in the eyes of a large swathe of society and offsetting the effect of growing socio-economic problems (Domańska, 2019, p 1-2). Additionally, what is important to understand when talking about the creation and circulation of narratives in Russia is the fact that those are created artificially and cannot be deemed as a natural sociological phenomenon. Narratives in Russia travel vertically and go down from top levels of government and related actors to regular Russian citizens with state media in the middle which works as a government-controlled amplifier of pro-regime narratives and related storylines.

When talking about how strategic narratives appear it is also important to mention that Russia's strategic narratives are often created around one meta-narrative, that being the narrative of the Western enemy. One main meta-narrative created by the Kremlin is that of the 'Western Enemy', which asserts that Russia and the West are locked in hostilities and conflict that has transcended the Cold-War era. The meta-narrative of the 'Western Enemy' is circulated through several infra narratives created by the Kremlin which portray America as Russia's key enemy and label the United States as an hostile interventionist power that instigates problems in other countries.

These infra-narratives are outsourced from the same explanatory paradigm: every time Europe, Australia, Japan, Canada and other pro-Western regions or countries led by the US get involved in foreign affairs of a country, it "falls apart" thus resulting in the instalment of pro-US "puppet" government. In the context of post-Soviet sphere such process is usually coined a "colour revolution", which is essentially a series of anti-regime demonstrations that lead to change of rule in the country. Most notable are those of Ukraine (Orange Revolution of 2004) and that in Georgia (Rose Revolution of 2003). According to Russia such "revolutions" do not happen at will of the citizens. The primary narrative propagated by the Russian regime is that the West orchestrates such revolutions with a goal to destabilize Russia and dominate Russia's "near-abroad" region. According to which, it has inherited rights to dominate and control those nations that happen to be geographically close to Russia.

The Kremlin's goal is to accuse the West of causing unsteadiness across the globe. For example, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 provided a fitting moment for the Kremlin to propagate such infra-narratives in its disinformation operations against Ukraine (Mai, 2022). An identical situation has formed in 2022 when Russia attacked

Ukraine with a goal to overthrow Ukraine's "fascist" government through the already infamous "special military operation".

The Kremlin's primary aim is to influence its audience through the effect of cognitive resonance by outsourcing infra-narratives from a central meta-narrative (Mai, 2022). In this case, the infra-narratives that were disseminated about the West during the Ukrainian crisis served to harmonize with the already existing beliefs about the established meta-narrative that the West is the enemy. Hansen (2017) argues that 'if consumers accept the meta-narrative saying that "the West is locked in centuries-old conflict with Russia" as well as a smaller narrative claiming that "the regime change in Kyiv in February 2014 was a coup instigated by the West," then Russian disinformation about MH-17, blaming, for instance, the Ukrainian authorities or the West for the shoot-down, are also accepted more easily (Hansen, 2017 in Mai, 2022). In this way, the Kremlin's use of infra-narratives in disinformation campaigns serves two primary objectives: to add credibility and legitimacy to the existing meta-narrative, and to make all other infra-narratives connected to the central meta-narrative believable. The aim of the Kremlin is to make the existing meta-narrative of the 'Western Enemy' an unquestionable fact (Mai, 2022).

3.3 RUSSIA'S TOTALITARIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE: A PERFECT REALM FOR WEAPONIZED NARRATIVES OR A FAILING DIGITAL CAGE?

The period during which Russia's media had Western-like elements of plurality and freedom of speech lasted shorter than anyone could have expected. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia entered a new realm of free-press, pluralistic media landscape, fair elections and so on. During the period prior to Putin's ascendancy there was pluralism in print and on television, criticism of the government, particularly on issues such as corruption and Chechnya, and relatively little government control over the press, including media in which the state maintained a controlling financial interest (Becker, 2004, p. 148). Back in 2000 McNair (2000) described Russia's media landscape in a positive light and for the first time in history Russia's media acquired Western-style elements of governance:

There is in Russia today a real public sphere through which ordinary people can learn about and participate in political debate. The current generation of Russian politicians may be largely incompetent and hugely corrupt, but their activities are frequently exposed to critical scrutiny in the public domain where citizens can make their judgments – McNair (McNair, 2000, p. 93)

However, with Putin's arrival into power in the year 2000, such perks have ceased to exist ending a short-lived process of democratization in Russia. Ten years was far from enough for the formation of a strong and independent media system able to withstand totalitarian attempts to eradicate any type of press that showed signs of anti-loyalist attitudes toward then new Putin's government.

Crackdown of free press and the beginning of the cult of fear among journalists began with the government promptly turning the three major national TV networks into its own political resource, a one-way communication tube that it has since used effectively to shape public opinion. (Lipman, 2014, p. 181). Several key elements of the then new Kremlin policy towards media plurality can be identified. First, constraints on media freedom through the redistribution of media assets were put. Second, allowing a reasonable degree of freedom of expression in smaller-audience media yet turning it politically irrelevant through tight controls on the political realm (Lipman, 2014, p. 182).

Of course, non-federal media did not disappear completely from the public realm. With internet acting as a safe haven for dissident ideas most independent media outlets turned to blogs and forums. Lipman (2014) points out that non-government media of the mid-2000s and their audiences were often described as "ghettos" or "islands." And they were, for the most part, preaching to the transformed. The "transformed" – mostly the liberal constituency – may have appreciated listening to the critical voices, but, just like the rest of their compatriots, they submitted to ordered politics and to being deprived of political participation. (Lipman, 2014).

Fast forward to 2022, Russian media landscape entered a new kind of realm. A realm dominated by war-time rhetoric and harsh totalitarian measures. Blocking access to Facebook and major foreign news outlets and enacting a law to punish anyone spreading "fake news" about its Ukraine invasion with up to 15 years in prison became the new normal. With "Echo Moskvy's" symbolic closure and Meta's services blocked Russia has put itself on the other side of a newly erected digital "Iron Curtain" which to bypass is becoming much harder, especially for not-so tech savvy part of the population. And while Putin's attempts to cut Russia from the global Internet might be working to some extent, cutting down people from something they have been comfortably using for three decades will not be easy and according to some scholars – impossible.

For instance, as stated by Borogan and Soldatov (2022) Putin, unlike communist China, missed the initial opportunity to impose control over national Internet infrastructure. Additionally, they have outlined six challenges which prevent the Kremlin from controlling Russia's modern-day digital information space (Borogan and Soldatov. 2022). First, the biggest threat that challenges Kremlin's strategic narratives comes from inside the country, mainly dissident voices, and not from abroad. Second, content posted by ordinary Russians is more destabilising than content posted by activists, as every day voices have higher chances of being amplified due to their "relatability". Meaning that civil society has more chances of creating a wave of government-targeted protests rather than activists. Third, Russian-made communications apps have been slow at picking up the pace, population exhibits favouritism towards Western-made channels of communication and the latter's data

cannot be obtained by the FSB. Fourth, video material, which can easily spread through still available Telegram and WhatsApp. Fifth, the decentralized Internet allows events not just in Moscow or St. Petersburg but from anywhere in the vast country to be publicized and promoted. Sixth, Russian telecom companies are unwilling to pick up the bill for censorship and surveillance tools (Borogan and Soldatov. 2022).

In addition to Borogan and Soldatov's (2022) six challenges that Putin is unlikely to overcome we would like to add additional four ideas to their list. First, Russia's younger generation has grew up with the Internet at hand with all Western-style digital commodities available. Taking it away from already westernized generation of Russians will not be easy and if attempted will certainly result in mass protests once ideological war frenzy ceases down and while numbers of "siloviki" ready to use physical force against protesters in exchange for a more generous salary might appear to be limitless, financial resources are not. Second, modern-day media has no borders and even with government-supported internet censorship or even blackout information will seal through with the help of democracy-loving Big Tech companies and private individuals obtaining technological superiority (e.g., Roskomnodzor failure to block Telegram due to its insufficient technical capabilities and Andrei Soldatov's team of hacktivists). Third, Putin and his surroundings are clearly underestimating the power of modern-day communication channels and are not fully aware of its ability to have a major societal impact or even determine the future of a military operation (e.g. Ukraine's military has stepped up to the challenge with regular updates and clear, coherent messaging which has served as an informal information war army posting credible updates on military engagements and Russian atrocities on TikTok along with inventive memes and morale-boosting patriotic messages on Instagram (Åslund, 2022). Fourth, Russia is no North Korea or Iran. Its economy is highly reliant on digital openness; hence it is very unlikely that the idea of a "Sovereign Internet" or "RuNet" will be implemented in the nearest future (Epafinova, 2022 in Meyer, 2022).

While it impossible to definitively state if current media landscape in Russia is a perfect ground for spread of unchallengeable pro-Kremlin narratives one thing is clear – Kremlin is putting in a lot of financial resources to keep the propaganda machine going and making sure that media plurality is reduced to minimum. However, with many democracy-loving members civil society in Russia and abroad, Kremlin's media hegemony is being actively challenged and those "unchallengeable" narratives can be reduced to political ramblings of a dying totalitarian regime. Yet, to do so, Russia will need plenty of help from tech-savviers abroad and technologically equipped domestic civil society.

3.4 EXAMPLES OF PRO-RUSSIAN NARRATIVES FROM CHECHNYA, GEORGIA, AND UKRAINE FROM THE LITERATURE

3.4.1 Pro-Russian narratives during the second Russian-Chechen War (1999)

Narrative I. "Military offensive against Chechen rebels is not a war but an anti-terrorist operation"

The role of language and labels plays an immense role during geopolitical conflicts. Labels are often used by different fighting groups to legitimize their movements and delegitimize their opponents. Labels are also often hierarchically derived based on the social placements of the individuals and are weaponized against those who lack international support or have low levels of leverage in media control (Al-Thawr, 2021). If we were to look at this issue from a semiotic perspective, we would notice the word "war" and "anti-terrorist operation" as an expression can carry very different meanings. In most of our mind's the word "war" means brutality, injustice, and death. While "anti-terrorist operation" carries meanings of "defence", "bravery" and "security".

Such strategic labelling and creation of pro-war narratives can be observed during the onset of second Chechen campaign, launched in the fall of 1999, when the war was officially dubbed a counterterrorist operation soon after some 300 Russian civilians, many of them in Moscow, had perished in apartment house bombing that were blamed on Chechen-connected terrorists (Trenin, 2003). Additional terrorist plots such as the Moscow theatre hostage crisis and the bombing of the headquarters of the pro-Moscow government in Grozny have resulted in 24/7 media coverage of the conflict as a counter-terrorism operation thus solidifying Russia's military operation in Chechnya as a valid and fully justifiable "anti-terrorist" operation and not a war that was yet to be dubbed as the "forgotten war" resulting in about 300.000 civilian and military casualties combined (Al-Jazeera, 2005).

Additionally, it is important to mention that such strategic narrative creation was not just keeping Putin's political leverage afloat but made sure that international community saw the intervention not as a brutal war but as a global fight against terror that is ought to unify Russia and the West for a common strategic goal.

Narrative II. "Chechen rebels are a threat not just to Russia but the whole world"

Events during the second Chechnya war show narrative-building strategies meant tell a story that is favourable of the government, or their military operation are not always necessary and can easily be abandoned if events resulting in high emotional responsiveness take place. In some cases, such as currently discussed, certain events are even more effective in creating a narrative that is powerful enough to change rapidly shifting war attitudes of the nation or even better – solidify international support from major political players whose support means less political accountability and less scrutiny from international organisations.

While labelling a military offensive as an "anti-terrorist operation" must have been crucial at the begging of the war in order to gain popular support, such strategy lost is relevance in the long term. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the Chechen conflict was now seen in a different light. According to Evangelista, the tragic events have helped Russian officials to portray the Chechen conflict as part of the international war against terrorism, rather than as a civil conflict. (Evangelista, 2003). Evangelista also notes that Putin had attempted to use the hostage crisis as part of a larger policy of shifting the focus of the Chechen conflict, what was initially viewed as a move for greater autonomy, to part of the international war against terrorism (Evangelista, 2003).

While the brutal event in Moscow that had resulted in deaths of 171 people had certainly helped to gain international support, domestic attitudes were not working in Putin's favour. In fact, even with international support and a heightened emotional climate on a domestic level, the Russian public was not receptive enough to a narrative positioning the second Chechen war not as a domestic issue but as an international issue. Data shows that the Russian public expressed only limited support for massive military retaliation in Chechnya. For instance, in a survey of 500 Muscovites on October 24, 2002, by the ROMIR polling agency, only 10.9 percent of respondents favoured employing "tougher policy in Chechnya" (Alexseev, 2002, p. 5). Instead, respondents wanted to increase security in Moscow and other Russian cities (31.5 percent), deport from Moscow all members of ethnic groups of the Caucasus (24.8 percent), or withdraw troops and recognize Chechnya's independence (14.5 percent) (Alexseev, 2002, p. 5).

Sentiments hardened in a Russia-wide VTsIOM poll conducted from October 25 to 28, 2002, where 46 percent of respondents supported military operations in Chechnya while 44 percent still preferred peace negotiations (Alexseev, 2002, p. 5). Even in the midst of a horrific and dramatic crisis in Moscow, support for military action in Chechnya was way below the 70 percent mark of February 2002. The Russian public strongly supported forceful retaliation specifically against Chechen terrorist military bases (54 percent) (Alexseev, 2002, p. 5). Yet, with respect to the resolution of the Chechen conflict in general, most respondents (33 percent) favoured combining the use of force with peace negotiations (Alexseev, 2002, p. 5).

Narrative III. "Al-Qaeda and Chechen rebels are working together"

Another effective way to demonize Chechens was through the power of association. In most people's minds that live in the northern hemisphere the word "Islam" carries negative connotations. Islamophobia went through the roof after 9/11 and resulted in years of Islamophobia. Al-Qaeda became known as the pinnacle of evil and people of Muslim faith have invertedly become "collaborators" of terrorism in the Western world. Looking from a more recent perspective, we would notice that following the terrorist atrocity in Paris on 13 November 2015, media outlets such as Al

Jazeera, The Washington Post, The British Broadcasting Corporation and The Guardian reported that the number of hate crimes against perceived Muslims had skyrocketed, particularly in France and Britain. According to these media articles, the majority of victims were "visible" Muslim women, particularly those wearing the veil (Soltani, 2016). Events like this show that Islam-related negative associations are nearly impossible to dissolve and with the right narrative often result in public's violence towards those associated with highly emotional events.

Such attitudes can be easily used for strategic gains in the sphere of public support and international endorsement. The rhetoric and media coverage of the conflict as a counter-terrorism operation have proven particularly valuable after 9/11, and by 'playing the Islamic card' (Russell, 2005, p. 111 in Hawkes, 2011), Russia has been able to carry out the war without accountability. (Hawkes, 2011). The main feature of this has been the use of rhetorical association both at a governmental level and through the official media. It has proven to be a powerful instrument for Russia to designate the Chechens as Islamic terrorists 'immersed in the totalitarian ideology of global jihad' (Souleimanov, 2008, p. 1200) rather than as fighting for the freedom of their homeland (Hawkes, 2011).

3.6.2 Pro-Russian narratives during Russian-Georgian War (2008)

Narrative I. "Georgia commits genocide against Ossetians"

On August 10, 2008, Russia Today reported with a large banner across the screen that genocide is taking place in Georgia. The segment opened up with a Russian pensioner commenting on how terrible the pictures from South Ossetia were that she had seen on Russian television (McBrayer, 2009). Right after the interview, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov tells how a humanitarian convoy was bombed by Georgian planes. The voice over comes back to mention that the Georgian city of Tskhinvali was in ruins and that Ossetians had announced that Georgians were committing genocide (McBrayer, 2009).

Here are examples of some typical claims: "Georgian missile volleys destroy everything and leave no one alive in the target zone. Such a way to restore constitutional order is unacceptable" (Silina, 2008 in in Baysha, n.d.); "The fascist actions of Saakashvili and American hirelings are being taken against peaceful citizens" (Grach, 2008 in in Baysha, n.d.); or "Georgian Fuhrer Saakashvili is similar to Hitler, who also cried out about his 'striving for peace' before waging war" (Lozunko, 2008 in in Baysha, n.d.).

These are just some of many examples of narrative building using media with a strategic goal to gain enough public and political support. Such support is crucial if one is to continue offensive actions without triggering public outrage in both domestic and international public spheres. Further research shows that Russia particularly used

deception and disinformation when purposefully exaggerating the humanitarian disaster on the ground—in other words, by refereeing to it as a genocide—and by calling for protection of lives when it generally meant the protection of Russian nationals. (Baysha, n.d.). These examples also perfectly portray how the Kremlin accusatory campaign against Georgia of "aggression against South Ossetia," as well as the "genocide of thousands of its people"—claims that were later deemed gross exaggerations (Roudik, 2008 in Baysha, n.d.).

Narrative II. "Russia had no choice but to intervene"

"In this situation were we supposed to just wipe away bloody snot and hang our heads?" – Vladimir Putin (Associated Press, 2008).

These are the words of Vladimir Putin that demonstrate his earthy language meant to frame Russia's invasion into Georgian territory as a necessity rather than a personal mission. One of the main narratives that surround the Russo-Georgian war was that Russia had no choice but to invade Georgia as there was a direct threat from the Georgian authorities towards the Russian-speaking South Ossetians.

During the immediate aftermath of the conflict following the ceasefire on August 16, Russia continued accusing Georgia of violating international law, asserting that Russia had to intervene following the alleged atrocity crimes, and calling for a multilateral approach in resolving the conflict by referencing the OSCE involvement. On August 18, President Dmitry Medvedev referred to the Georgian leaders as "political monsters" who were "ready to kill the innocent and the defenceless in pursuit of their own interests" (PoR, 2008 in Pupcenoks & Seltzer, 2021, p. 765). In another statement that same day, Dmitry Medvedev contrasted the barbaric, uncivilized actions of Georgia with Russia, a "peace-loving country" that nonetheless was forced to give a "crushing response" to Georgia (PoR, 2008 in Pupcenoks & Seltzer, 2021, p. 765).

In addition it is important to mention that a major apparent reason for the intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was likely the so-called "Medvedev Doctrine," which declared that Russia has a privileged sphere of interest in its 'Near Abroad,' and that protecting the rights and dignity of Russian citizens abroad would be a major priority of Russian foreign policy and would warrant a military intervention if necessary (Larrabee, 2010, p. 37; Green, 2010 in Pupcenoks & Seltzer, 2021, p. 763).

Narrative III. "Motives for intervention were purely humanitarian and in accordance with international law"

What a lawful intervention to another country looks like? According to Russia naming it a "humanitarian mission" makes it legal and redeems Russia from all responsibility. Looking from a legal perspective cannot be deemed humanitarian intervention because no U.N. Security Council resolution preceded it, giving it legal authority. However, if

we were to look at the situation from the perspective of Russian authorities, we would notice that according to the Russian government fundamental international laws can be interpreted in a way that suits the offender.

The rationale for Russian intervention was first laid out by Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, in his letter of August 11, 2008, to the president of the U.N. Security Council. In it Churkin cites the scale of the attack on Russian peacekeeping forces and Russian citizens, as well as statements of aggressive intent by Georgian political and military leaders to "demonstrate that we are dealing with the illegal use of military force against the Russian Federation". In those circumstances, the Russian side had no choice but to use its inherent right to self-defence enshrined in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations" (Petro, 2008, p. 1525).

At his news conference of August 28, 2008, deputy chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Anatoly Nogovitsyn, referred to Article 3 of the 1994 JCC declaration on basic principles as the legal basis for all actions taken by the Russian peacekeepers, including their deployment in the security zone. Since these accords were binding on Georgia at the time, Russia argued that the response of the Russian forces to Georgia's attack was legal and reasoned by the importance of the protection of life, prevention of genocide, and, most notably, the security of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad (Petro, 2008, p. 1531; Pupcenoks & Seltzer, 2021).

3.6.3 Pro-Russian narratives during Crimean annexation (2014)

Narrative I. "Ukrainian authorities pose a threat to compatriots"

"I hereby appeal to the Council of Federation of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation to use the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine until the social and political situation in that country is normalized" – Vladimir Putin (Kremlin, 2014 in Strycharz, 2020, p. 7).

The annexation of Crimea started with these exact words addressed to both chambers of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation: the Federation Council and the State Duma. However, when it comes to narratives the main takeaway from that day's speech should be this:

"[…] in connection with the extraordinary situation that has developed in Ukraine and the threat to citizens of the Russian Federation, our compatriots, the personnel of the military contingent of the Russian Federation Armed Forces deployed on the territory of Ukraine (Autonomous Republic of Crimea) […] – Vladimir Putin (Kremlin, 2014 in Strycharz, 2020, p. 7).

What is important here is the part mentioning "compatriots". Russia's foreign policy pays an enormous amount of attention to this specific group of individuals. It allows

Russia to use this group of people for every geopolitical venture it desires. The "compatriot" narrative was used in both the Chechen war of 1999 and the Georgian war of 2008. It appears that Putin is using Russian diaspora abroad as a moral shield behind he can hide and vindicate his personal mission to rewrite parts of history and expand modern Russia's borders to those of old Russian Empire.

Russia, as the legal successor of the Soviet Union, claimed responsibility for compatriots of the former Soviet Union (not only ethnic Russians), many of whom became citizens (or non-citizens) of countries that regained their independence or were established as sovereign states after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Bērziņa, 2018, p. 32). These specific historical circumstances created a situation in which a large number of people that Russia considers compatriots reside outside its territorial borders. From the Kremlin's perspective this gives it the moral and legal grounds to intervene in the internal matters of other sovereign states when justified by the need to protect and defend the rights of Russia's (ex-Soviet) compatriots. (Bērziņa, 2018, p. 32).

Looking back to the annexation of Crimea we could notice that such narrative is echoing all throughout Russia's political elite. For instance, Lavrov justified the annexation of Crimea, stating that it was "all about the protection of our nationals and compatriots, defence of the most fundamental human right - the right to live" (Lavrov, 2014 in Strycharz, 2020, p. 7), thus clearly adopting the "threat to compatriots" narrative. At the same time member of State Duma Vladimir Zhirinovsky and the Russian Liberal Democrats have argued for the territorial expansion of Russia on the basis of returning the natural borders, but here natural borders were mainly conceived historically either in the extent of the Soviet Union or in the extent of dispersion of compatriots (Forsberg & Mäkinen, 2019).

Narrative II. "Crimea is occupied by Ukrainian Nazis"

The word Nazi in anti-Ukrainian rhetoric is not a new phenomenon. While we have been hearing it for quite some time since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In Russia's official narrative the phenomenon of "denazification" has now become a somewhat of a necessity and a strategic foreign policy goal. In fact, Ukraine is no longer the only country that Russia aims to "denazify" in the nearest future. For instance, Moscow city duma member Sergey Savostyanov suggested that Russia should "denazify" six more countries after Ukraine, including Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Moldova, and Kazakhstan (LRT, 2022).

While there is a small group of ultra-nationalists in Ukraine (just like in every country Russia not being an exception) who utilize Nazi symbols and the Hitler salute, they in no way represent the views of majority of Ukrainians or the current Ukrainian government (ALD, 2022 in Rodgers, 2022, p. 50-51). Additionally, it should be mentioned that ten million Ukrainians fought against the Nazis, and many Ukrainian

Jews were murdered by Nazis (ALD, 2022 in Rodgers, 2022, p. 50-51). Despite this, calling Ukrainians Nazis is a popular trope that is a sure-fire way to gain Russian people's attention. The word "Nazi" has a special place in every Russian's psyche as the word "Nazi" carries every negative connotation possible and automatically puts everyone who is called a "Nazi" in a direct confrontation with the individual. And while such negative connotation can be observed in almost every country across Europe, Russian's believe they have a special "role" in the fight against Nazism. Defeating Nazi Germany was one of Russia's greatest achievements, and many still have collective memory surrounding World War II (Rodgers, 2022, p. 50-51). Since the begging of Putin's reign, Europe and every other country expressing anti-Kremlin sentiments has become a target of such narrative and a major part of Russian population puts the sign of equality when talking about Europeans and Nazis. The reasoning behind it can be traced to the WWII. The importance of World War II as a symbolic resource of nation building has been noted by, for example, Malinova (2014). At the core of the narrative is the victory in the Great Patriotic War, which is seen as the most "sacred achievement" in Russia's history. Consequently, labelling somebody "fascist" is a powerful way of appealing to the values of Russians, who associate World War II with fascist horrors and crimes (Cottiero et al., 2015 in Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 3).

For instance, such sentiment can be observed in one of the statements by Vladimir Vinokurov, a professor at the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"The chauvinist and nationalist rubbish that has marked them out in the past has not disappeared. The West is not going to do anything about it, so Russia has to denazify these countries in order to save humanity from the repetition of a bloody world war" – Vladimir Vinokurov (LRT, 2022).

However, such rhetoric can be observed not just in the field of academia or in the realm of public opinion. Such interpretation of events comes down from upper levels of government structure. Right after the annexation of Crime, Moscow cited the alleged role of Ukrainian ultra-nationalism in the revolution, and the new government's hostility toward ethnic Russians, to justify its annexation of Crimea (Kirchick, 2014).

For instance, in an Interview by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to "Bloomberg TV" the "Nazi" narrative can be clearly observed:

"A few years ago we finalized the border treaty with Ukraine and we started demarcation of the land border with Ukraine without even thinking of challenging that outcome […] it's only the fact that the current regime, with the support of the United States and the European Union came to power, relying on neo-Nazis, extremists who tried to use force to impose their rules, anti-Russian policies, cancelling the rights of

the ethnic Russians in Ukraine and the rights of the Russian speakers, that brought the people of Crimea to revolt against this" – Sergey Lavrov (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, 2014).

While Lavrov was more careful with the wording, Vladimir Putin stated flatly in his speech to the Russian Federation Council on March 2014 that current Ukrainian government is part of the Nazi group:

"Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites executed this coup. They continue to set the tone in Ukraine to this day" – Vladimir Putin (Kirchick, 2014).

In fact, this harsher part of the narrative concerns the post-Yanukovych leadership in Ukraine. This argument's most extreme variation hods that 2014's Euromaidan protests were a Western-orchestrated coup that aimed to install a Russophobic, neo-Nazi government to subvert Putin's regime (Deliagin 2015, 8-9, p. 23 in Dragiev, 2020, p. 10). It is also crucial to mention another integral part of the narrative builds the moral argument. This is that the occupation of Crimea was a humanitarian mission launched to keep peace in the region and to protect Crimea's Russian population from neo-Nazi elements sanctioned by the new Kiev government (Deliagin 2015, p. 9-23).

Narrative III. "Fascist Ukrainian army commits atrocities towards children"

When creating a weaponized narrative meant to demoralize an adversary it is important to trigger an emotional response. Narratives containing an emotion-inducing subject have a much greater impact and chances of solidifying public opinion on a certain matter. In this case, it was important for the Russian propaganda machine to frame Ukrainian army not just as fascists but as brutal criminals, ready to commit atrocities not just against Russian soldiers but against innocent children. Minors are often used as subjects during information wars as they bring about an emotional response much stronger than that of anger. Wounded or otherwise traumatised children cause the majority of the population to feel a series of negative emotions, strongest of them being a sense disgust, revenge and in this case national hate towards Ukrainians as a nation. Titles such as "Ukrainians are killing Russian children" have an enormous impact on the success of solidifying the notion of "poor Russians" and "brutal Ukrainians". A narrative like this contains two important aspects. First, the aspect of nationality. Second, the aspect of victimhood. Combine it with a story of a suffering minor and you have got yourself an explosive narrative, spreading across war-torn societies like fire.

The most scandalous reportage of Channel One is often cited as an illustration of the Russian information war against Ukraine. It introduces a young woman as a refugee from the eastern Ukrainian town of Slavyansk from where she has fled with her four children from a Ukrainian army "atrocity". According to the eyewitness, the Ukrainian

soldiers gathered locals on Lenin Square and crucified a three-year-old boy on a bulletin board and left him to bleed out while his mother was forced to watch and then tied to a Ukrainian tank and dragged around the square until she died. Her story of the Ukrainian soldiers was filled with references to the Nazi past:

When they entered the town, there was not a single rebel there, but they shot, marauder. Even fascists did not do that. They are the great grandchildren of the SS-volunteers of "Galician" division. I am saying this because I am originally from Zakarpatye, and old people there say that fascists never did what those SS-volunteers from the "Galician" division did to people. They were local, they tortured other locals, raped women, killed children. Now these [Ukrainian soldiers] are their great grandchildren. They returned, rose from the ashes - Galina Pishnyak (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 3; Myth Detector, 2022).

Galina Pishnyak told Russian state media that after entering the city, the Ukrainian army executed a minor boy and his mother because her husband was fighting alongside the separatists. She claimed that the boy was crucified while his mother was tied to a tank and dragged to the central square. Despite the woman claiming that the case had numerous eyewitnesses, no one from the city of Sloviansk confirmed this fact. Notably, the husband of the woman who told the story is a former member of a separatist group. The woman's family told reporters that she may have told the story in exchange for money.

Focusing less on narratives built around emotional trigger, another narrative built around nationhood and fascism appears, overlapping with the previous narrative thus creating a two-tier or a dual narrative. The narrative of "Banderovtsy" is an important trope in the strategic Russian narratives on the Ukrainian crisis that involves the creation of the "Nazi" state. Banderovtsy are followers of Stepan Bandera, leader of the nationalist faction who strove to eliminate all ethnically non-Ukrainians from Ukraine and collaborated with Nazi Germany for this purpose. After EuroMaidan where some extremist movements did use Bandera's image as their symbol, the Russian media started developing a narrative that Ukrainian national unity could lead to human rights violations and the rebirth of fascism (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 4).

METHODS

4. METHODOLOGY

To better understand the scale and nature of the construction and spread of war supporting narratives on pro-Russian Telegram channels we have decided to conduct a monitoring of 3 Telegram channels that are well known in promoting neo-imperialist ideology of the "Russian world" and militarism.

We started our monitoring journey with 3 publicly available Telegram channels directly associated with well-known TV presenters and key mouthpieces of Russian propaganda: Vladimir Solovyov and his channel @SolovievLive, Margarita Simonyan and her channel @MargaritaSimonyan as well as Olga Skabeeva with a channel @Skabeeva. All three channels have 1.156.766, 300.397 and 143.650 subscribers respectively. Having in mind the fact that statistically number of Internet users in Russia is quite high with numbers being around 85% of the population we cannot make a clear and direct assumption that channels of our choosing are having a significant impact on the formation of the overall opinion of the Russian public. However, considering how influential these TV presenters are on federal television we would like to believe that the analysis of channels in control of these three individuals would significantly aid in understanding what kind of strategic narratives Russian public is conditioned to believe. Individuals and channels in their disposition were chosen as a result of their established position as key driving forces behind Kremlin's propaganda machine. All three individuals are in power to influence a significant amount of viewers thus transferring government's strategic narratives to both domestic and international public spheres. All three individuals are closely connected to Vladimir Putin's surroundings and are known supporters of Russia's neo-imperialist foreign policy.

Since all three channels analysed communicated in Russian with only a fraction of English content keywords as well as narrative-building messages had to be translated from Russian to English. Messages used to identify strategic narratives are outlined in the "Results" section together with translation indicated in brackets under each message. While word cloud could not be translated, meanings of words is presented in English under each word cloud. It is important to mention that translations are subject to minimal paraphrasing in order to avoid confusion when literal translation cannot be used in English. Slight paraphrasing is meant to help readers to understand meanings behind sentences without having to guess on grammatical intricacies, hidden meanings or have previous knowledge of the Russian language. All translations have been done with enhanced due diligence in order to prevent paraphrased parts of sentences from losing their true meaning. All translations were done manually by the author of this paper.

To gain a sense of the proportion of pro-Russian content that is being spread on channels of high popularity, we conducted a keyword-based analysis of the text-based content. To accomplish this goal, we extracted 139410 chat inputs from @SolovievLive, 7004 from @MargaritaSimonyan and 17888 from @Skabeeva) the above-indicated channels that we monitored between 24 February 2022 – 15 May 2022. The decision to choose such timeframe can be explained by two reasons. Even though military operation against Ukraine had started back in 2014, our goal was to have a look at narratives that gained momentum after the beginning of the full-scale invasion which started in the night of 24th of February 2022. Since the Russo-

Ukrainian war of 2022 is still an ongoing offence, the monitoring process had to be stopped on the 80th day of war due to time constraints that this paper is bound by.

To gather and analyse data several types of open-source software were used. To export channel's chat history we used Telegram Lite, which allowed us to simplify the data extraction process and instead of using code and other more sophisticated pieces of software such as Python, we managed to extract three months' worth of data with an in-built extractor. To process textual data more efficiently we have removed all visual data (e.g., photos, videos, emojis, GIF's, etc.) with an in-built tool. After unnecessary visuals were, we had to put our HTML data files through an HTML Converter which allowed us to convert our data files into plain TEXT type of files. Additionally, this made the process of importing data into Wordle possible.

To identify most common narrative-indicating keywords Wordle was used. It allowed us to save time on manual data elimination by automatically deleting most common Russian words (those include conjunctions, prepositions, particles, etc.). To visualise most frequent keywords, we have limited available words displayed to 150. Additionally, numbers, abbreviations, and most common Russian words have been removed with an in-built tool. Additional clean-up of unnecessary or repeating words was performed to remove words overlooked by the software. Dates, time stamps and signs were removed manually using an in-built elimination function. Later, based on visualised frequency of words, messages containing most frequent keywords were manually filtered out from our dataset. Subsequently, repeating themes were identified and consolidated into groups of three most repeating narratives for each channel.

During the process of narrative identification, we were able to identify posts that in exhibited repeating meanings and contained narrative-building keywords. Therefore, 9 strategic narratives were identified (3 strategic narratives per channel):

1. "Russia is a victorious country that cannot be fought with"
2. "Russian army is winning over criminal and inhumane Ukrainian army"
3. "NATO is an always-expanding and aggressive alliance that threatens Russia's existence"
4. "Ukraine belongs to Russia".
5. "Russian troops are saviours while Ukrainians are cruel killers"
6. "Ukrainian Nazi's are bombing Mariupol and Donbass themselves"
7. "Biden is incompetent and is not fit for the office"
8. "NATO is an aggressive alliance that supports Nazi's and is too weak to fight Russia"
9. "Zelenskyy is an aggressive leader and a war criminal"

This, however, does not mean that more narratives could not be identified during this process. We chose to outline a minimum of 3 narratives per channel as we think it is the most optimal number of narratives, enough to pinpoint a common line of narratives

and understand if there is a trend in type of narratives. The limit to 3 narratives per channel was also put in respect to word restrictions put for this paper. The aim was to include as many narrative-building messages as possible as well as to describe narrative as broadly as possible without going over the word limit.

Additionally, to give our analysis more structure and a clearer view of identified narratives we decided to group all 9 narratives into 3 thematic categories: heroic, adversarial and weaponized. This was done as a result of a repeating trend in themes of the above indicated narratives. During our research process it was noticed that all 9 narratives convey stories that overlap yet are distinct enough to be categorized into thematic narratives.

Table 4. Categorization of pro-Russian narratives

Narrative name:	**Category:**
“Russia is a victorious country that cannot be fought with.”	Heroic
“Russian army is winning over criminal and inhumane Ukrainian army.”	Heroic / Adversarial
“NATO is an always-expanding and aggressive alliance that threatens Russia’s existence.”	Weaponized
“Ukraine belongs to Russia.”	Heroic
“Russian troops are saviours while Ukrainians are cruel killers.”	Heroic / Adversarial
“Ukrainian Nazi’s are bombing Mariupol and Donbass themselves.”	Adversarial
“Biden is incompetent and is not fit for the office.”	Weaponized
“NATO is an aggressive alliance that supports Nazi’s and is too weak to fight Russia.”	Weaponized
“Zelenskyy is an aggressive leader and a war criminal.”	Adversarial

The choosing of messages to be analysed was motivated by volume of keywords indicated by the word cloud. Volume refers to the number of search queries for a specific keyword in word cloud as well as search engine. Messages including high volume keywords were then selected for further analysis and categorized into most prevailing narratives. If messages indicated by the volume of keywords did not show signs of a repeating storyline and a narrative could not be identified, the next keyword in line with the highest number of repetitions was chosen and put through the search

engine in order to identify messages with the specific keyword with hopes to identify a repeating narrative.

All messages indicated below were used to serve as an illustrative example to illustrate the content of the narratives. We limited the number of messages outlined as examples in order to respect word limit.

5. LIMITATIONS

Most analysing software is behind a paywall and requires pre-existing knowledge on how to analyse data input using code. As a result, more simpler versions of software had to be used for this analysis.

Data coming from word clouds is prone to slight errors, especially if it involves gathering data from a text written in a language that has many cases. Therefore, words with same meaning might appear in the final visualisation thus slightly skewing overall results visualised in the final rendering of word clouds.

Software used for producing word clouds does not indicate the exact number of word repetitions. Frequency is visualised by the layout algorithm which positions most frequent keywords in a bigger font. Meaning, the bigger the font the more repetitive a certain word is. To fix this, data sets had to be converted and put through additional text analysis software to count the exact number of narrative-relevant keywords in each channel.

Due to high volumes of data and format constraints not all narrative-building messages could be lined out in the “Findings” section. As a result, a full data set containing of three files HTML files is available for readers on request.

With EU imposing harsh sanctions on Russian-made media that prevents its operations in the territory of the European Union many pro-Russian websites could not be accessed. “Russia Today”, “Sputnik News” and other known regime-friendly news websites were no longer accessible during the period of our analysis. As a result, examples of past narratives had to be built around speeches of Russian politicians and Wester media news reports.

6. CONTENT ANALYSIS

Since we have already explained why content analysis was chosen as the primary method for the analysis of Telegram messages, it is still crucial to understand what content analysis is and what are its key features concerning aspects of generalization, validity and operationalization.

Bryman (2004) states that qualitative content analysis is "probably the most prevalent approach to the qualitative analysis of documents" and that it "comprises a searching-out of underlying themes in the materials being analysed" (Bryman, 2004 in

Kohlbacher, 2006). Being a little bit more specific he defines qualitative content analysis in the following way:

"An approach to documents that emphasizes the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts. There is an emphasis on allowing categories to emerge out of data and on recognizing the significance for understanding the meaning of the context in which an item being analysed (and the categories derived from it) appeared" (Bryman, 2004, p. 542 Kohlbacher, 2006).

The "word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.8 in Kohlbacher, 2006).

When it comes to generalization of the results, it is a common concern about case studies put forward by their critics is that they provide little basis for scientific generalization (Yin, 2003, p. 10 in Kohlbacher, 2006). Yin's (2003) answer to this:

"case studies [...] are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study [...] does not represent a 'sample', and in doing a case study, your goal will be to generalize theories (analytical generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)" Kohlbacher, 2006, p. 5).

Criticism of content analysis stems from its subjectivity. Researcher bias affects all stages of the technique from decisions on data collection methods to analysis and ultimately interpretation of results. Identification of the mechanism or coding scheme and categories are of prime importance since reliability is enhanced through validity of data (Kolbe and Burnett 1991 in Harwood and Garry, 2003, p. 485). It is also important to mention that content analysis is most commonly operationalised using manual recording techniques (Suen and Ary 1989; Carson et al. 2001 in Harwood and Garry, 2003). Based on the research design, having captured the data, the researcher categorises or codes it (Harwood and Garry, 2003, p. 488).

FINDINGS

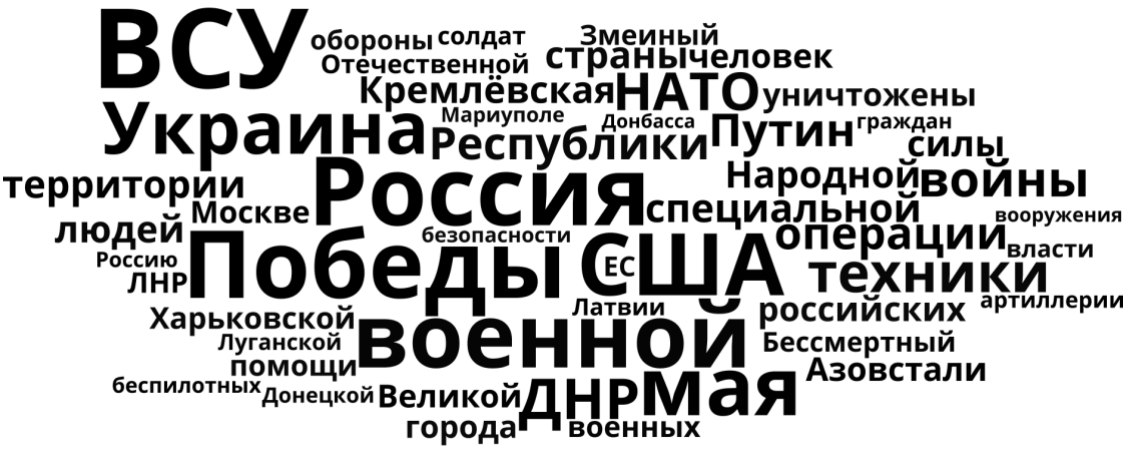
7. VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV

Vladimir Rudolfovich Solovyov is a Russian high-profile propagandist, TV and radio host. In 2003, he became a host on Gazprom-owned NTV — political talk show "On the Stand" and weekly news commentary programme "Sunday Night". In 2010 he started working for a government owned VGTRK TV holding (Database of Free Russia Forum, 2022). Later, he became a presenter of a TV talk show "Duel" on Rossiya 1, a host of a debate show "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" on Rossiya 1, and a host of a radio show "Total Contact", on Vesti FM. Solovyov, among other 300

pro-Kremlin propagandists, was awarded “for objective coverage of events in the Crimea” by Vladimir Putin in 2022 (Database of Free Russia Forum, 2022).

Telegram channel: “@SolovievLive” (1.156.766 subscribers). In Vladimir Solovyov’s channel 139410 chat inputs were detected (including forwarded and reposted messages) over the period February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022.

Visual 1. Word cloud showing most frequent keywords.



(Translation of most frequent keywords from Russian to English: “AFU [Armed Forces of Ukraine]”, “Ukraine”, “Russia”, “military”, “may”, “victory”, “DPR [Donetsk People’s Republic]”, “Azovstal”, “Kharkiv”, “cities”, “great”, “LPR [Luhansk People’s Republic]”, “immortal”, “territory”, “special”, “NATO”, “Latvia”, artillery”, “Kremlin”, “snake”, “Mariupol”, “Donbas”, operation”, “drone”, “government”, “republics”.

Table 1. Distribution and frequency of keywords among main narratives.

Volume of keywords in Narrative #1 (February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022)	
“Russia is a victorious country that cannot be fought with”	
#victory	281 hits
#Russia	1084 hits
Volume of keywords in Narrative #2 (February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022)	
“Russian army is winning over criminal and inhumane Ukrainian army”	
#AFU	214 hits
#Ukraine	1026 hits
Volume of keywords in Narrative #3 (February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022)	
“NATO is an always-expanding and aggressive alliance that threatens Russia’s existence”	

#USA	159 hits
#NATO	184 hits

7.1 Narrative #1. “Russia is a victorious country that cannot be fought with”

Our first identified narrative propagated on @SolovievLive was that Russia militarily Russia is one of the most powerful countries in the world. Key messages are constantly enacting a feeling of pride through braggatory language about the Russian military. When it comes to rhetoric about the Russo-Ukrainian war, we can observe that channel is full of grandiose displays of military firepower. Grandiose celebrations of triumph are mentioned on a reoccurring basis. This narrative is also meant to create a historic link between current events in Ukraine and USSR’s victory over Nazi Germany. Parallels are frequently drawn between Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine and the liberation of Europe from Nazism. Additionally, This narrative is supposed to evoke the memory of Soviet heroism thus boosting the morale of general public and distract from major man-power losses in Ukraine. Such narrative also positions Russia as a superpower and calls for the necessity of human sacrifice. It aims to create a sense of security among the Russian population by reminding them about past victories and current military power of the country.

Narrative-building messages:

«Победа будет Za нами!».
(Eng: "Victory will be ours!").

«Бессмертный полк — это сердце и душа Дня Победы.
Когда об этом говорит подрастающее поколение, есть вера в то, что правда о нашей Победе будет жить».

(Eng: “The Immortal Regiment is the heart and soul of Victory Day. When the younger generation talks about it, there is faith that the truth about our Victory will live on”).

«Один из мальчишек играет на баяне и поет "Катюшу", родные ему подпевают. Победить таких людей невозможно».

(Eng: “One of the boys plays the button accordion and sings Katyusha, his relatives sing along. You can't beat these people").

«Очередная победа наших ребят не обошлась без ценного трофейного вооружения и специальной военной техники».

(Eng: "Usual victory of our guys was not without valuable weapons and special military equipment").

«Я желаю бойцам удачи и скорой безусловной победы над националистической и бандеровской нечистью! Да здравствует наша великая Родина - Россия и Верховный Главнокомандующий Владимир Путин!».

(Eng: "I wish the fighters good luck and an early victory over the nationalists and Bandera-following scum! Long live our great Motherland - Russia and Supreme Commander-in-Chief Vladimir Putin!").

«Реально, когда я рядом с донецкими, всегда уверен - всех побьем. Они не отчаянные, они по натуре своей победители».

(Eng: "Really, when I'm next to Donetsk, I'm always sure that we will beat everyone. Our troops are not desperate, they are winners by nature").

«Жители Луганской Народной Республики и Донецкой Народной Республики получают дополнительный номер в коде российской системы нумерации +7 959 к своим мобильным номерам +38 072, это не просто смена цифр. Это смена систем, это выход из юрисдикции бесчеловечного режима, это ещё одно утверждение победы России».

(Eng: "Residents of the Lugansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic receive an additional number to the code of the Russian numbering system +7 959 to their mobile numbers +38 072, this is not just a change of numbers. This is a change of systems, this is a way out of the inhuman regime, this is another victory of Russia").

«Как и в 1945 году, победа будет за нами».

(Eng: "As in 1945, victory will again be ours").

«Победа для наших детей и внуков».

(Eng: "Victory for our children and grandchildren").

«Американцам и британцам никогда не победить Россию».

(Eng: "The Americans and the British will never defeat Russia").

«Сегодня вся наша страна и весь мир смотрит на то как празднуется день Великой Победы в Мариуполе».

(Eng: "Today our whole country and the whole world is watching how the Great Victory Day is celebrated in Mariupol").

7.2 Narrative #2. "Russian army is winning over criminal and inhumane Ukrainian army"

The second narrative that we have identified is concerned with the portrayal of heavily deceiving military gains and supposed victories in Ukraine. Such narrative is meant to give a sense of respect to both the Russian military forces and the Russian government.

It seeks to show that the Russian government is successfully using its military and human resources to obtain goals meant to ensure the safety of compatriots in Ukraine. It draws clear lines between Russians and Ukrainians. Also, it enacts hatred and fear not just towards the Ukrainian Armed Forces but towards the citizens of Ukraine as well.

Narrative-building messages:

«Оперативно-тактической и армейской авиацией в течение дня поражено 74 объекта в том числе два пункта управления двадцать районов сосредоточения живой силы и военной техники ВСУ а также два склада ракетно-артиллерийского вооружения».

(Eng: "Operationally-tactical army aviation hit 74 targets during the day, including two command posts, twenty areas of high concentration of manpower and military equipment of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as well as two depots of rocket and artillery weapons").

«Спецназ и танки прорвали оборону ВСУ у Кременной».

(Eng: "Special forces and tanks broke through the defence of the Armed Forces of Ukraine near Kremennaya").

«Спецы и танкисты разгромили оборону ВСУ и захватили позиции врага У наших бойцов в тот день был "хороший улов" из американских Javelin-ов».

(Eng: Specialists and tankers defeated the defence of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and captured enemy positions. Our soldiers had a "good catch" from American Javelins").

«Сдаваться в плен - это профессиональная фишка ВСУшников!»

(Eng: "Surrendering is a key feature of the Armed Forces of Ukraine!").

«Несколько дней назад подобная поездка закончилась для двоих гражданских крайне печально ВСУ накрыли кассетами трассу гражданский автомобиль был уничтожен а рядом с ним на асфальте остался лежать мужик из расколотого черепа которого вырывались язычки пламени».

(Eng: "A few days ago, a similar trip ended for two civilians, extremely sadly, the Armed Forces of Ukraine covered the track with cassettes, a civilian car was destroyed, and next to it on the pavement there was a man lying with his skull split in half from which tongues of fire were escaping").

«ВСУ по ночам прячут боеприпасы в жилых домах даже не ставя в известность жителей Это называется использованием людей в качестве щита».

(Eng: "The Armed Forces of Ukraine hide their ammunition in residential buildings at night without even informing the residents. This is called using people as a living shield").

«Потери ВСУ измеряются в десятки тысяч человек планомерно ликвидируются пункты управления и склады».

(Eng: "Losses of the Armed Forces of Ukraine are measured in tens of thousands of people; command posts and warehouses are being systematically liquidated").

«Политрук ВСУ изнасиловал женщину на глазах ее мужа а потом застрелил его: Направил пистолет достал половой орган Мужчина проявил недовольство стрелял целенаправленно».

(Eng: "A member of the Armed Forces of Ukraine raped a woman in front of her husband and then shot him: aimed the gun at him, exposed his genitals and shot him purposefully while showing dissatisfaction").

«Город обстреливают украинские националисты».

(Eng: "Ukrainian nationalists are shelling the city").

«Нацбаты находящиеся в составе ВСУ расстреливают и насилуют исходя из собственных прихотей».

(Eng: "The national battalions that are part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine shoot and rape women based on their instincts").

7.3 Narrative #3. "NATO is an always-expanding and aggressive alliance that threatens Russia's existence"

Third narrative that had emerged during our analysis was that NATO is not a defensive but an offensive alliance with a goal to destroy Russia's. Creating an artificial enemy is crucial in totalitarian regimes as those are usually built around another narrative which states that one special individual can and will defend the country from invaders. Similar images of "father of the nation" can be observed in other authoritarian regimes, such as North Korea, China, or Belarus. Such narrative also undermines Finland and Sweden in the eyes of regular Russians and presents these two nations as aggressive and hostile towards Russia. It also taps into the image of victim. Russia has long been portrayed on a domestic level as a country that is under attack from all sides. Often pictures of NATO bases around the world are used as a propagandistic tool to convince people that NATO is encircling Russia and is slowly creeping towards Russia's border from both East and West.

Narrative-building messages:

«Сегодня натовцы заявили, что они более не считают себя связанными им. Типа обстоятельства изменились, и их ничего не держит. Последствия этого шага простые: можно тащить ядерное оружие на территорию новых стран-членов (например, Швеции и Финляндии)».

(Eng: "Today, NATO members declared that they no longer consider themselves bound by Putin. Circumstances have changed, and nothing holds them. The consequences of this step are simple: they will drag nuclear weapons into the territory of new member countries, such as Sweden and Finland").

«НАТО вдвое нарастила силы в Восточной Европе, ударные группировки могут быть созданы у границ России и Белоруссии в кратчайшие сроки. Запад, по сути, ведет подготовку к ведению военных действий на восточном направлении».

(Eng: "NATO has doubled its forces in Eastern Europe, strike groups can be created near the borders with Russia and Belarus in the shortest possible time. The West, in fact, is preparing for the conduct of hostilities [towards Russia]").

«Мы освобождаем Украину от оккупации НАТО и отодвигаем злейшего врага от наших западных границ».

(Eng: "We are liberating Ukraine from NATO occupation and pushing our worst enemy away from our western borders").

«Это война за правду и право России существовать как единое и независимое государство. НАТО ведет против нас войну».

"This is a war for truth and the right of Russia to exist as a single and independent state. NATO is waging war against us."

«В ядерной войне страны НАТО будут нами уничтожены за полчаса».

(Eng: "In a nuclear war, NATO countries will be destroyed by us in half an hour").

«Россия разрушила их планы по расширению НАТО на восток».

(Eng: "Russia ruined NATO's plans to expand to the east").

«США создали худший из возможных вариантов существования для Украины — в качестве марионетки НАТО на пороге России, но без натовского зонтика безопасности».

(Eng: "The United States has created the worst possible existence for Ukraine — to exist as a puppet of NATO on the doorstep with Russia, but without a NATO security umbrella").

«Вступление Финляндии в НАТО станет угрозой для России».

(Eng: "Finland's accession into NATO will be a threat to Russia").

«Россия будет вынуждена принять ответные шаги военно-технического и иного характера для устранения угроз из-за вступления Финляндии и Швеции в НАТО».

(Eng: "Russia will be forced to take retaliatory steps to eliminate threats as a result of Finland's and Sweden's accession into NATO").

«НАТО с удовольствием воевала бы с Россией до последнего финского солдата».

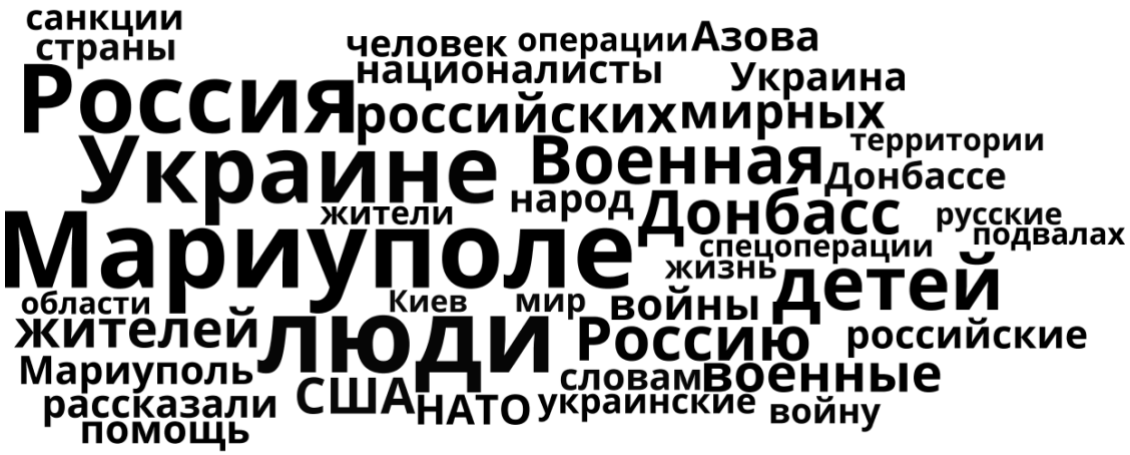
(Eng: "NATO would love to fight Russia to the very last Finnish soldier").

8. MARGARITA SIMONYAN

Margarita Simonovna Simonyan is a high-rank Russian propagandist and media manager. She is an editor-in-chief of the "Russia Today" (RT) TV, a state-owned "Rossiya Segodnya Agency" and "Sputnik Information Agency" (Database of Free Russia Forum, 2022). RT and Rossiya Segodnya, led by Simonyan, made a significant contribution to the advocacy of acts of international aggression by the Russian regime and crimes against humanity. These include the war with Georgia, the annexation of Crimea and Russian military operations in south-eastern Ukraine, the downing of MH-17, the poisoning of Litvinenko, the attempt to poison the Skripals, and other crimes (Database of Free Russia Forum, 2022).

Channel: "@MargaritaSimonyan" (300.397 subscribers). In Margarita Simonyan's channel 7004 chat inputs were detected (including forwarded and reposted messages) over the period February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022.

Visual 2. Word cloud showing most frequent keywords.



(Translation of most frequent keywords from Russian to English: "sanctions", "states", "Russia", "Ukraine", "troops", "lives", "help", "inhabitants", "population", "Donbas", "peaceful", "nationalists", "Azov", territory", "NATO", Kyiv", human", sanctions", "children").

Table 2. Distribution and frequency of keywords among main narratives.

Volume of keywords in Narrative #4 (February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022)

“Ukraine belongs to Russia”.	
#own	13 hits
#land	17 hits
#russian	106 hits
#region	8 hits
#homeland	9 hits
Volume of keywords in Narrative #5 (February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022)	
“Russian troops are saviours while Ukrainians are cruel killers”	
#cruel	7 hits
#ukrainian	261 hits
#soldiers	22 hits
#our	221 hits
#killers	27 hits
Volume of keywords in Narrative #6 (February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022)	
“Ukrainian Nazi’s are bombing Mariupol and Donbass themselves”	
#mariupol	31 hits
#nationalists	119 hits
#children	27 hits
#bombing	18 hits

8.1 Narrative #4. “Ukraine belongs to Russia”

The aim of this narrative is to interpret Ukraine as a society that has not “real history”, was created by the Soviet Union and now acts imply as a “puppet state” in the interests of NATO and the West. Additionally, this taps into a greater narrative that Russia and Ukraine, as well as Belarus are actually a one country that shares a common ancestry in Kievan Rus’, a loose federation of medieval city-states with its capital in Kyiv.

Narrative-building messages:

«Российские военные сражаются на СВОЕЙ земле. Главные слова сегодня, конечно».

(Eng: “Most important words today are that Russian troops are fighting on THEIR land”).

«А теперь еще по сто — за наших ребят, которые сейчас там, на НАШЕЙ земле».

(Eng: "Now let's cheer again – in the name of our troops who there now on OUR soil".

«Единственный вопрос, которым задаются беженцы: почему Украина, считая этот регион своим, по сути, уничтожала его?».

(Eng: "The key question which refugees ask why did Ukraine destroy this region if they are considering it theirs").

«Я тогда очень обрадовалась за наших людей, которые все эти годы хотели жить у себя на Родине».").

(Eng: "Then I got very happy for our people who all these years wanted to live in their motherland").

8.2 Narrative #5. "Russian troops are saviours while Ukrainians are cruel killers"

This narrative aims to create a positive image of Russian army in the eyes of citizens. In below indicated messages army personnel is often described as friendly, sensible, and ready to help those in need. At the same time this narrative aims to create a demonised image of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Such rhetoric is more likely to create an emotional response and fortify a clear image in the readers' psyche of Russian troops as those who "help" and Ukrainian troops as those who "destroy and kill". This is also likely to impose a sense of pride for the Russian army and through the use of children as key actors create a fatherly image that goes in hand with positive emotional response.

Narrative-building messages:

«Украина – за что они это с нами сделали? Прятались между домами, стреляли. Выгоняли всех, с гранатометами. Ни куска хлеба не дали! Дети голодные по подвалам! Русские пришли, спрашивают: «у вас есть дети?» - «Да, есть дети» Они говорят: нате, вот что есть, отдаем последнее! Русские военные последнее отдавали! Сухпайки свои - нашим детям. Украинские ни грамма не дали»: Эмоции беженцев на выезде из Мариуполя».

(Eng: "Why did Ukraine do this to us? They were shooting while hiding between houses. They scared away everyone with their grenade launchers. They did not even give a single piece of bread! Hungry children are hiding in basements! Russians came and asked everybody: "are there any hungry children here?" – "Yes, there are". Then they said: "here, have something to eat, we will give away our last bite!". Russian troops gave away their last food portions! They gave away their field rations to our children. Ukrainians did not give a single ounce. These are the emotions of refugees fleeing Mariupol".)

«Донесите до мирных граждан - к нашим бойцам можно обратиться с любым вопросом!!!».

(Eng: "Tell this to all civilians – they can go for help to our troops, they will help you with any issue!!!".)

«Солдат украинской армии, которые сдались без боя, отпаивают минералкой и предлагают закурить».

(Eng: "Ukrainian troops who surrendered are kindly given water and cigarettes [by the Russian soldiers]".)

«Подойдите к русскому солдату, он вам поможет».

(Eng: "Come to a Russian soldier, he will help you".)

«Там вам помогут эвакуироваться донецкие ребята, донецкие солдаты».

(Eng: "Over there our Donetsk boys, our soldiers will help you to evacuate").

«Российские солдаты оставили трогательное послание украинским школьникам, извинившись за беспорядок».

(Eng: "Russian troops have left a tearful message to Ukrainian school children, asking sorry for making things messy".)

«В письме солдаты пожелали школьникам выбрать профессию по душе, и стать теми, кто несет мир».

(Eng: "In the letter soldiers have wished school children to choose a profession based on their heart and become those who bring peace and not war").

«Моя армия не будет бомбить мирных людей».

(Eng: "My [Russian] army will not be bombing peaceful civilians".)

8.3 Narrative #6. "Ukrainian Nazi's are bombing Mariupol and Donbas themselves"

Sixth narrative in our analysis focuses on presenting events in Mariupol and Donbas. The goal of this narrative is to associate destruction of cities, buildings and infrastructure with Ukrainian Armed Forces thus shifting the blame from Russia. It also aims to present Ukrainian military in a demonised way, associating them with Nazi's and shifting the blame for thousands of deaths in Mariupol and Donbas to the Ukrainian side. To make the effect stronger emotion inducing actors are described, such as dogs playing in ruins and dirty-faced children.

Narrative-building messages:

«Азов» сказал: «Мы Мариуполь в руинах оставим».

(Eng: "Azov said: We will leave Mariupol in ruins".)

«Мариупольские дети с чумазыми лицами играют со щенком и с мячом под гром военных действий».

(Eng: "Dirty-faced chidren of Mariupol are playing with the dog and a ball under the thunder of military actions".)

«Мариуполь. Украинские националисты заставляют мирных граждан таскать им воду и боеприпасы».

(Eng: "Mariupol. Ukrainian nationalists are forcing civilians to bring them water and ammunition").

«Нацики продолжают прикрываться мирными жителями и удерживать их в качестве живого щита и, не смотря на все усилия наших солдат, мариупольцы гибнут и продолжают получать ранения».

(Eng: "Little Nazi's keep hiding behind civilian population and use them as living shields, despite best efforts of our troops, people of Mariupol keep dying and getting injured".)

« […] каждый день российские войска раздают мариупольцам продукты, лекарства и вещи первой необходимости».

(Eng: "[…] every day Russian soldiers are giving away food items, medications, and other necessary items for the people of Mariupol").

«[…] нацики расстреливали мирных граждан, которые старались уйти из города, и сжигали целые кварталы».

(Eng: "Little Nazi's have been shooting at peaceful civilians who tried to flee out of the city and kept burning whole suburban areas".)

«Ударили по городу. В середине дня. Кассетными бомбами. Запрещенными кассетными бомбами».

(Eng: "They bombed the city. In the middle of the day. With cluster bombs. Forbidden cluster bombs".)

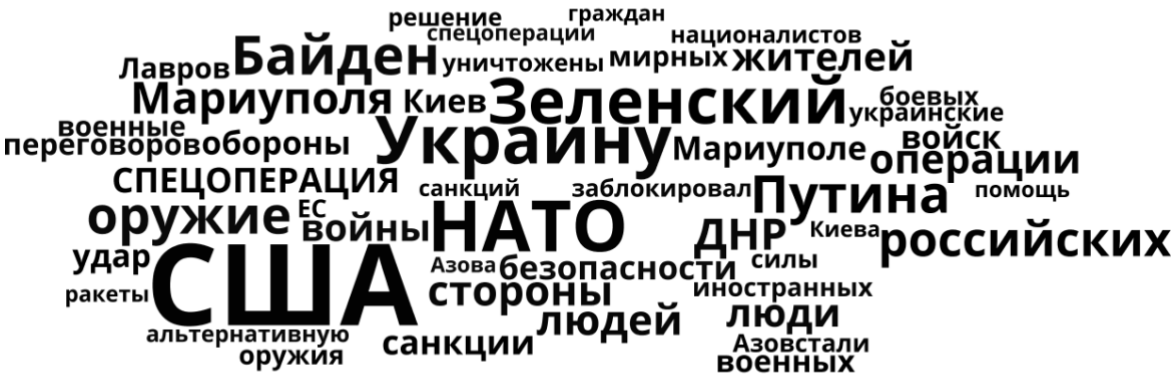
9. OLGA SKABEEVA

Olga Vladimirovna Skabeeva is a Russian propagandist and "60 Minutes" talk show host on the government-owned TV channel Rossiya-1. In 2015-2016, she hosted the Vesti.doc program on the "Rossiya-1" television channel. Since September 12, 2016, she has been hosting a "60 Minutes" socio-political propaganda talk show on the "Rossiya-1" television channel together with her husband Yevgeny Popov (Database of Free Russia Forum, 2022). Skabeeva is one of the most zealous participants of the information warfare against Ukraine. The authors and hosts of the "60 Minutes" talk

show have their distinctive style of representing the “enemies of Russia” in an openly caricatured and mocking manner (Database of Free Russia Forum, 2022).

Channel: “@Skabeeva” (143.650 subscribers). In Olga Skabeeva’s channel 17888 chat inputs were detected (including forwarded and reposted messages) over the period February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022.

Visual 3. Word cloud showing most frequent keywords.



(Translation of most frequent keywords from Russian to English: “Biden”, “Lavrov”, special operation”, “Putin”, “USA”, “Russians”, “NATO”, “people”, “sanctions”, “weapon”, “EU”, “Zelenskyy”, “Azov”, “DNR”, “Kyiv”, “blocked”, “forces”, annihilate”, “troops”, “war”, “Mariupol”, “nationalists”, “peaceful”.)

Table 3. Distribution and frequency of keywords among main narratives.

Volume of keywords in Narrative #7 (February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022):	
“Biden is incompetent and is not fit for the office”	
#USA	287 hits
#Biden	204 hits
Volume of keywords in Narrative #8 (February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022):	
“NATO is an aggressive alliance that supports Nazi’s and is too weak to fight Russia”	
#NATO	190 hits
Volume of keywords in Narrative #9 (February 24, 2022 – May 15, 2022):	
“Zelenskyy is an aggressive leader and a war criminal”	

#Zelenskyy	287 hits

9.1 Narrative #7 "Biden is incompetent and is not fit for the office"

Seventh narrative describes U.S. president Joe Biden as incompetent, emotional and potentially too old to be in the office. The focus is shifted to his physical and mental abilities by using irony, labelling and metaphorical devices. Such narrative is no news even to those who are not familiar with Russia's politics or its coercive diplomatic practices. This narrative stems from Republican-supported narrative that Joe Biden's mental abilities are questionable and that his victory over Donald Trump will bring the United States foreign policy to new lows.

Narrative-building messages:

«Байден молча удалился под крики журналистов о том, почему он прямо сейчас не ввёл санкции лично против президента России Путина».

(Eng: "Biden quietly left after journalists asked why he did not impose personal sanctions against Putin").

«Байден проигнорировав все вопросы о ситуации на Украине и в мире».

(Eng: "Biden has ignored all questions about the situation in Ukraine and the world").

«Байден назвал жителей Украины иранцами».

(Eng: "Biden called people of Ukraine Iranians").

«...обед по расписанию: Джо Байден решил отдохнуть».

(Eng: "Dinner according to schedule: Joe Biden decided to unwind").

«Очередная ошибка Байдена. Американский президент считает, что Путин ввёл войска… в Россию».

(Eng: Another Biden's mistake. America's president thinks that he sent his troops to… Russia").

«Нефть поставила Байдена на колени».

(Eng: "Crude oil left Biden on his knees").

«Байден своими оскорблениями в адрес Путина подталкивает США к разрыву дипотношений с Россией».

(Eng: "With his personal attacks on Putin, Biden will rip bilateral relations between Russia and USA into pieces").

9.2 Narrative #8. "NATO is an aggressive alliance that supports Nazi's yet is too weak to fight Russia".

This narrative is once again focusing on diminishing NATO's capabilities in front of Russian citizens while at the same time creating a false narrative that Russian forces are on high levels of readiness and if needed could strike back. Such narrative is especially crucial for the regime since the start of the war in Ukraine reports started flowing about underfunded, understaffed, and corrupted military forces in Russia. This narrative is set to compete with a contradictory narrative often propagated by the Russian opposition about extremely low morale of Russian troops and the use of Soviet-era weapons and combat vehicles that cannot compete with modern Ukrainian artillery.

Narrative-building messages:

«Но высшие должностные лица ведущих стран НАТО допускают и агрессивные высказывания в адрес нашей страны».

(Eng: "But the top officials of the leading NATO countries also allow aggressive statements against our country").

«Это невероятно аморально со стороны НАТО натаскивать Зеленского на войну с Россией до последнего украинца!».

(Eng: "It is simply immoral for NATO to train Zelensky for a war with Russia until the last Ukrainian drops!").

«Зеленский стремится спровоцировать конфликт между НАТО и Россией».

(Eng: "Zelensky seeks to provoke a conflict between NATO and Russia").

«Соединённые Штаты и НАТО не в том положении, чтобы судить о моральных принципах какой-либо страны, пока не принесут извинения и компенсацию за ущерб и страдания, которые они принесли народам Югославии, Ирака, Сирии и Афганистана».

(Eng: "The United States and NATO are not in a position to judge the moral principles of any country until they apologize and compensate for the damage and suffering, they have caused to the peoples of Yugoslavia, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan").

«Что отличает вооруженные силы США и НАТО — они избалованы».

(Eng: "What separates [from Russian military] the US and NATO military is that they are spoiled".)

«НАТО, вторглись в Сирию, с совестью обстоит не всё хорошо».

(Eng: "NATO, invaded Syria and they are not very keen to act on their conscience".)

«Папа Римский предположил, что именно действия НАТО спровоцировали конфликт на Украине».

(Eng: "The Pope suggested that it was NATO's actions that provoked the conflict in Ukraine").

«Страны НАТО мечтают 'надрать задницу России', но сами же Россию боятся».

(Eng: "NATO countries dream of "kicking Russia's ass'", but they themselves are afraid of Russia").

«Нам нужно другое. Чтобы американцы и в целом страны НАТО прекратили прямую военную помощь нацистам».

(Eng: "We need something else. So that the Americans and the NATO countries in general stop direct military assistance to the Nazis").

9.3 Narrative #9. "Zelenskyy is an aggressive leader and a war criminal"

The last narrative that we managed to identify focuses on Ukraine's war-time leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The goal is to present Zelenskyy as an aggressive Nazi-friendly political figure who is solely responsible for Russia's military actions. He is presented as key provocative figure that triggered Russia's "defensive" actions on Ukrainian territory in order to protect compatriots and "liberate" Ukrainian population from Nazi's.

Narrative-building messages:

«Зеленский загнал детей Донбасса в подвал. Где вы, ау! Выходите!»

(Eng: "Zelenskyy drove the children of Donbass into the basement. Where are you, hello! Come out!").

«Зеленский вылез из бункера, чтобы записать видеообращение к народу».

(Eng: "Zelenskyy crawled out of the bunker to record a video message to the people").

«Зеленского в какой-то момент ждёт трибунал».

(Eng: "Zelenskyy will face a tribunal at some point").

«Покажите Зеленскому, который 'хочет мир'».

(Eng: "Show it to Zelenskyy who supposedly wants peace").

«Зеленский решил угрожать; говорит, что если с ним не встретится Путин, то в России будут страдать несколько поколений».

(Eng: "Zelenskyy decided to threaten; says that if Putin does not meet with him, several generations of Russians will").

«Зеленский под шумок решил зачистить всю оппозицию на Украине».

(Eng: "Zelenskyy quietly decided to get rid of all the opposition in Ukraine").

«Не шутка. Зеленский планирует выступить на премии Оскар. Украинский актер пришёл к успеху».

(Eng: "Not a joke. Zelenskyy plans to perform at the Oscars. The Ukrainian actor has come to success").

«Зеленский делает вид, что забыл русский язык. Кривляка».

(Eng: "Zelensky pretends to have forgotten the Russian language. Mugger").

«Непонятно, что он пьет, что он курит».

(Eng: "It's not clear what he drinks and what he smokes").

«Но если следовать логике немцев о том, что Путин в этом противостоянии - Сталин, то Зеленский - получается Гитлер».

(Eng: "But if we follow the logic of the Germans that Putin is Stalin in this confrontation, then Zelenskyy is Hitler").

10. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Our analysis of messages, related-keywords and resulting narratives shows that narratives that can be observed in the above-mentioned chapter are of malevolent nature and while could be categorised under one umbrella term of "war narratives", we believe that these Telegram- and pro-Russian- specific narratives can be categorised into three groups: weaponized, adversarial, and heroic.

Weaponized narratives are meant to shift the blame to political actors that exhibit anti-Putinist sentiments. Those include countries as well as political and military unions such as NATO, AFU, U.S., and the EU. Weaponized narratives also target political actors on an individual level, such Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Joe Biden. Accusatory nature of such narratives is meant to create oppositional and defiant sentiments among the Russian-speaking audience. In general, weaponized narratives seek to undermine the opponent (the collective West) and create a demonised identity and a sense of otherness thus perpetuating a growing political, cultural, and civilizational divide between the "Russian world" and the West. Such narratives serve the regime well by solidifying an image of clear "threats" into the psyche of wider Russian population.

This is especially crucial in times of war when mobilizing the public to fight a common threat is necessary in order to justify loses among military personnel. It is also crucial in establishing a pro-war consensus and the possibility of anti-war rhetoric and protests spreading on a national level is minimised to the minimal possible level that would not threaten the stability of governmental institutions and consequentially - the regime itself.

Adversarial narratives aim to create a sense of urgency and strategically target Russian-speaking population not just on a domestic level but on an international level as well. Defensive narratives usually possess a feature of lack of chronology or sequence of content. They also seem to possess inflammatory language and supporting images aimed at enraging and dividing the reader. In our case, Ukrainian army was the main target of adversarial narratives. Our results show that those type of narratives employed comparative measures that put the AFU in the same category as Nazi's and put their actions in direct collation between Nazi Germany and modern-day Ukraine. Consequentially, this lack of differentiation enacts a strong emotional response in many Russians due to high historical relevance. Hence, it becomes crucial to form narratives that link the Russia's current adversary with a historic one. Telegram is an extremely favourable platform for the spread of such and similar adversarial narratives as textual information can be easily supported by manipulated videos and images that are supposed to be "proof" of criminal acts or brutalities towards civilian population. While image and video content analysis were not part of this paper, we could make a strong assumption that pre-orchestrated images and videos have been used to defamate the AFU thus supporting textual material in order to create a stronger narrative meant to illustrate the situation in a destructive manner and enact a plethora of negative emotions towards the Ukrainian government and its armed forces.

Heroic narratives focus on telling stories of heroism, endurance, and survival. Such narratives are crucial for the overall morale of the nation during times of war. In Russia's case narratives about liberation and decade long battle with supposed Ukrainian Nazi's taps into regular Russian's moral narrative of heroic superiority. It also builds a strong foundation of morale and ethics in the armed forces. However, the latter could not be said about the Russian army due to multiple reports of military personnel deliberately injuring themselves or destroying military equipment with hopes to put an end to the military offence. While such stories are common, they are purposefully framed as disinformation coming from the side of the adversaries or as acts of national traitors to enact a sense of fear and shame with hopes to extinguish morale destroying narratives before they solidify in the public opinion of regular Russians. Instead, narratives of military heroism, such as that "Russian troops are giving their last meal portions to Ukrainian children" or that "Russian troops treat Ukrainian war prisoners with utmost respect". Such stories add to the recognition of acts of collective heroism and heroic nature of one's nation. Additionally, heroic military narratives tap into nostalgia about national identity and patriotism (Skitka,

2005, Weinberg & Dawson, n.d.), sacrifice and heroism, and core stories that invoke the binary codes of civil society related to liberty and repression, sacred and profane, or good and evil (Alexander & Smith 1993; Smith 2010 in Weinberg & Dawson, n.d.).

It is also important to mention that certain narratives can be categorized under two or three different types of narratives. In fact, several narratives that have been observed during this analysis possess features that puts them under both "Heroic" and "Adversarial" categories and vice versa. This happens because narratives can be multidimensional and convey overlapping or closely related ideas, such as that "Russian troops are saviours" and that they are doing it because "Ukrainians are killing Russians in Ukraine". Looking from the Russian context such narrative is ought to enact both a sense of pride (towards Russian military) and adversary (towards Ukrainian military).

Multidimensionality and adaptability of narratives is crucial during times of war and are an integral part of information warfare. Narratives portraying the offending army as God-sent crusades doing the deed for the whole humanity are dominating Russia's federal media. It is not surprising that these TV presenters are transferring such narratives into the digital medium from television. In fact, narrative transfer is a common phenomenon and should be looked at as an inevitable process, at least in Russia. If modern digital mediums used to have a role of being complementary to television and radio, current situation dictates a different kind of reality. Over the last decade, television had become a merely a complementary part to social media platforms and Telegram together with WhatsApp have become key platforms used by the regime to successful spread regime-friendly strategic narratives.

When it comes to content of the messages, we can clearly see that the overall sentiment of observed narratives is negative and can be interpreted as hostile. Translated textual data outlined in the "Results" section indicates that messages are saturated with intensive usage of metaphors and anti-Ukrainian metaphorical ideas. Such messages are meant to create negative impression of those who Russia's regime is deeming to be hostile towards the "Russian world" and the regime itself. To boost the effectiveness of anti-Ukrainian and anti-West narratives methods of sarcasm, labelling and irony can be observed in all three channels. Words and phrases, such as нацики – "little Nazi's", кривляка – "mugger", украинский актёр – Ukrainian actor [when referring to Zelenskyy such phrase acquires a derogatory tone due to his swift shift from being an actor, to being a president], надрать задницу России – "to kick Russia's ass" are used throughout conversations and Telegram announcements. This shows that such use of derogatory metaphors, labelling and sarcasm is clearly intended to create an unfavourable narrative about anti-Kremlin politicians, leaders and institutions thus presenting them as incompetent and unreliable. Additionally, results show that correspondents are mostly targeting highly supported individuals, with high social media following, who possess some levels of power in both political and social fields of life.

We can also see that channels have different areas of focus. Especially, at the content from a geopolitical perspective. For instance, Olga Skabeeva‘s and Vladimir Solovyov‘s channels are both more focused on perpetrating narratives that involve outside actors, such as Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Joe Biden as well as political adversaries, such as NATO, EU and the U.S. thus giving their channels a more international approach. While Margarita Simonyan‘s channel is solely focused on spreading messages focused on Ukraine, its cities, and civilian casualties.

11. CONCLUSION

Overall, our study is an initial step in trying to understand why Russian’s attitudes on the war in Ukraine as hostile and possess elements of chauvinism and militarism. Results of this research paper conclude that Telegram is a perfect ground for the spread of unfounded claims and other messages of propagandistic nature. Such messages later form narratives that attract readers with their reinforcing and bold claims about the success of the “special military operation” or the brutalities of Ukrainian Armed Forces against compatriots. One thing is clear – the success of such narratives directly depends on the regimes ability to support the creation, transfer, distribution, and security of regime-friendly narratives. Regime loyalists are used to mouthpieces to distribute pro-war opinions on a wide scale affecting not only those living with the territory of Russia but all Russian-speaking population across the world. Unlike Russian federal television, Telegram has no borders and should not be look at as a mystical medium through which opposition in authoritarian countries such as Belarus, Russia or Afghanistan find a safe haven to mobilise and propagate democratic beliefs. Telegram is just as dangerous as any other platform that is widely available and can be used by anyone with a phone and an internet connection.

When it comes to Russia, we could claim that aggressive information warfare has become a signatory sign of the Russian regime. The spread of strategic narratives is one of the key tools that Kremlin employs in order to change the course of events to its liking as well as align its desirable narrative with every narrative that is told household of regular Russians. Additionally, we could claim that Russia employs the same narratives across different conflicts, being it in Chechnya, Georgia, or Ukraine. The implementation of KGB-like methods is not gone from Putin’s to-do list and it should not be surprising. Afterall, according to Putin the fall of the Soviet Union was one of the greatest geopolitical disasters of the 20th century. Understandably, Putin does not appear to accept that the European part of the “near-abroad” region is falling into the arms of the European Union thus threatening the stability of the regime and chances of surviving after Putin.

In addition to that, results of our analysis show that when it comes to content of the messages observed we can clearly see that the overall sentiment of observed narratives is negative and can be interpreted as hostile. Narratives portraying the offending army

as liberators doing the deed for "Nazi-occupied" Ukraine are dominating Solovyov's, Simonyan's and Skabeeva's Telegram channels.

12. FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that future research should continue with narrative analysis, especially in unmonitored media realms, such as Telegram. Russia is set to continue its aggressive information warfare and hostile narratives about Ukraine, the West and all who are not loyal to Putin's regime. We hope that in future research more sophisticated ways of monitoring and content analysis is employed as ever-increasing amounts of communications data is becoming impenetrable with the use of less-sophisticated and open-source data analysis tools.

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