

# Fog of Falsehood

*Russian Strategy of Deception and  
the Conflict in Ukraine*

Katri Pynnöniemi & András Rácz (eds.)



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI  
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET  
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



FIIA REPORT 45

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Editors

Katri Pynnöniemi and András Rácz

# Table of contents

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 7

## 1. INTRODUCTION 13

### PART I: BACKGROUND

- 2. THE CONCEPTUAL AND HISTORICAL ROOTS OF DECEPTION 27
  - 2.2. The Soviet Roots of Russian Influence Operations 33
  - 2.3. The Russian Strategic Deception Scheme: A Hypothesis 42
- 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 51
  - 3.2. Distinctive Vocabularies and Metanarratives 54
  - 3.3. Empirical Research Material 59

### PART II: NARRATIVES

- 4. THE METANARRATIVES OF RUSSIAN STRATEGIC DECEPTION 71
  - 4.2. Terms of Distraction: Provocation, Humanitarian Convoy, Russophobia 75
  - 4.3. Framing Russia as a Passive Outsider in the Conflict 79
  - 4.4. Making Ukraine Part of the Russian World 91

## 5. INTRODUCTION TO CASE STUDIES 125

### PART III: CASE STUDIES

- 6. RUSSIAN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION REFLECTED IN THE GERMAN MEDIA 131
  - 6.2. The Media Landscape in Germany and Attitudes Towards Russia 132
  - 6.3. Russian Metanarratives in the German Media 135
  - 6.4. Conclusion 142
- 7. THE CASE OF ESTONIA: DIFFERENT INFORMATION SPACES, BUT THE SAME NARRATIVES 149
  - 7.1. Introduction 149
  - 7.2. The Estonian Media Space and Public Trust Towards the Media 150
  - 7.3. Appearance of Russian Metanarratives in Estonian–Language Media 152
  - 7.4. Main Narratives in the Russian–language Media 155
  - 7.5. Conclusion 157
- 8. FINLAND AND RUSSIA'S METANARRATIVES ON THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE 165
  - 8.2. Scope of the Research 167
  - 8.3. The Variation of Terms used in Framing the Conflict 169
  - 8.4. The Crimean Operation 173
  - 8.5. The Burning of the Trade Union Building in Odessa 176
  - 8.6. The Shooting Down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 177
  - 8.7. The Humanitarian Catastrophe Narrative 179
  - 8.8. Conclusion 183



9.	RUSSIAN NARRATIVES AND THE SWEDISH DEBATE ON FOREIGN POLICY	193
9.2.	Crimea: Representation of Crimean People as Independent Actors	196
9.3.	Odessa: Destruction of the Positive Legacy of the Maidan Revolution	199
9.4.	Specific Propaganda and Disinformation Themes in the Swedish Context	201
9.5.	Conclusion	204
10.	HUNGARY: WHERE THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED MEDIA WAS THE MAIN ENTRY POINT FOR RUSSIAN METANARRATIVES	211
10.2.	The Media in Hungary and the Research Sample	212
10.3.	Annexation of Crimea	215
10.4.	The Burning of the Trade Union Building in Odessa	219
10.5.	The Shooting Down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17	223
10.6.	The "Humanitarian Disaster" Narrative and the Battle of Ilovaysk	229
10.7.	Disinformation Targeted at Hungary	234
10.8.	Conclusions	236
11.	THE RUSSIAN METANARRATIVES IN THE POLISH ONLINE MEDIA	247
11.2.	Description of Research Sample	248
11.2.	Analysis of the <i>Onet.pl</i> website	250
11.3.	Analysis of Kresy.pl Website	257
11.4.	Conclusions	263
12.	METANARRATIVES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN THE CZECH ONLINE MEDIA	277
12.2.	The Czech Media Space and Russian Influence	278
12.3.	The Annexation of the Crimea	283
12.4.	Burning of the Trade Union Building in Odessa	284
12.5.	The Downing of MH17	285
12.6.	The Emergence of the Humanitarian Catastrophe	286
12.7.	Concluding Remarks	288
13.	THE CHANNELS AND DISTINGUISHING ELEMENTS OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN SLOVAKIA	295
13.2.	The Research Framework and Data Set	296
13.3.	Analysis of the Selected Events	298
13.4.	Discussion	300

#### PART IV: CONCLUSION

14.	CONCLUSION	311
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PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED IN THE SERIES	316
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1



# 1. Introduction

Katri Pynnöniemi<sup>1</sup>

*It is not at all easy to be sure what this tremendous growth of propaganda in the contemporary world signifies, whether it is a passing phase or something deep and permanent. Sometimes it seems as if the august nations of the world have become for the time like little boys at school who make horrid faces at one another and shout resounding threats*

F.C. Bartlett, 1942<sup>2</sup>

It is remarkable how little the world has changed in hundred years when it comes to falsehood in wartime. The Great War, or the war currently known as the First World War, was fought in a “fog of falsehood” made of deliberate official lies, deliberate lies, mistranslations, forgeries, omissions, faked photographs and descriptions of atrocities that never took place. In an introduction to a study of lies, which had a significant impact on the course of the Great War, Arthur Ponsonby noted: “There must have been more deliberate lying in the world from 1914 to 1918 than in any other period of the world’s history”.<sup>3</sup> This has proved to be an understatement.

However, a sample collected by Ponsonby in 1928 shows that the forms of falsehood have changed only little since the Great War.

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2 Bartlett 1942, 2.

3 Ponsonby 1928, 19.

The story of a “crucified person” – sometimes a girl, sometimes an American, but most often a Canadian soldier, underwent many variations in 1915, and was used again in the context of the war in Ukraine in 2014.<sup>4</sup> The Allies of the Great War were able to convince the public of Germany’s “sole responsibility”<sup>5</sup> for the conflict and to personify the enemy in the image of “Criminal Kaiser”<sup>6</sup>. Currently, Russia is feeding its domestic public with stories of “the West sponsoring violence in Ukraine” or, in turn, “the West turning a blind eye” to what is happening in the country. The fact that these claims are mutually contradictory is a characteristic feature of Russian strategic deception and something that makes it different from Soviet propaganda campaigns. Soviet propaganda was anchored in ideological truth claims, whereas the contemporary Russian variant can be compared to a kaleidoscope: a light piercing through it is instantly transformed into multiple versions of reality.

One of the most infamous examples of WWI propaganda was the sinking of the passenger ship *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915, which inflamed popular indignation and brought the United States into the war. It destroyed German propaganda hopes in the U.S. but provided a valuable asset in the hands of British propagandists whose job was to demonize Germans.<sup>7</sup> Almost exactly hundred years later, the downing of the Malaysian airline MH17 on July 17, 2014, brought the conflict in Eastern Ukraine to the world’s attention. It was only after this tragic event that the existence of a warlike situation in the region was recognized officially by the US and the EU.<sup>8</sup> Immediately after the event, Russia sought to distract the public with several invented and often contradictory stories of the Ukrainian air defence having hit the MH17, or a Ukrainian ground attack airplane Sukhoi SU-25 having brought down the Boeing, or President Putin’s plane being

4 The Russian state-controlled Channel One TV aired a forged report of a witness claiming to have seen Ukrainian soldiers crucifying a three-year-old boy on a billboard. Channel One did not alter the story, although it was quickly exposed as a lie. A web project called “Stop Fake” has investigated and exposed many other examples of atrocities reported by the Russian media that actually never took place. Ennis 2015. See also [www.stopfake.org](http://www.stopfake.org).

5 Ponsonby 1928, 57–62.

6 Ponsonby 1928, 71–76.

7 Rankin 2008, 58.

8 The European Union reacted on July 25 by adding five members of the Russian Security Council to the sanctions list, including also other Russian officials and intelligence officers responsible for actions undermining Ukrainian sovereignty. The European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) gave a recommendation on July 18, 2014, to avoid using the airspace in Eastern Ukraine. EASA 2014.

in danger. The main propaganda line in this case was a combination of deliberate official lies and omission of critical information. Some Russian officials asserted that, indeed, the plane was downed by a BUK-M1 missile, as has been established convincingly by international and independent research groups.<sup>9</sup> However, according to the Russian official version, the BUK-M1 was operated by the Ukrainian army and not by Russian soldiers.<sup>10</sup> Parallel to this, other narratives were run by the Russian authorities, the one about the Ukrainian Sukhoi SU-25<sup>11</sup>, and another about Ukrainian fighter jets shooting down the airliner. These narratives even contradicted each other, not only the official Ukrainian government position.

Historical comparison should not be pushed too far, though. The forms of falsehood we identify in this report have their roots in the past, but they work in ways people living in 1914 could not imagine. Today social media has opened up new opportunities for the manipulation of public opinion, for example by making the circulation of faked photographs fast and easy. A sophisticated, carefully planned and professionally executed *disinformation campaign* may function as an “information weapon”<sup>12</sup>. This weapon takes advantage of rhizomatic networks of contemporary media space in creating “an alternative reality in which all truth is relative and no information can be trusted”.<sup>13</sup> However, social media and new communication technologies in general also provide means for tracing the authenticity of each photograph posted online, thus creating a forum for investigative journalism and development of new research methods.<sup>14</sup>

In this report we analyse Russian propaganda and disinformation – here collectively called *strategic deception* – concerning the conflict in Ukraine. Strategic deception is a generic term used, for example, with reference to British and Allied intelligence operations against Nazi Germany in WWII.<sup>15</sup> In the Russian context, strategic deception (in Russian *strategicheskaya maskirovka*) refers to measures undertaken to hide military objects or strategic information using different

9 Higgins 2015.

10 A report by the Russian Channel One on 16 July 2015 summarizes the Russian official version of the tragedy. Vernitskii 2015; also Stopfake.org, 18 July 2015.

11 A Russian Defence Ministry briefing for the media, 21 June 2014.

12 Lucas and Nimmo 2015; Nato Strategic Communications Center for Excellence 2014; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014.

13 Nimmo 2015, 1; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014.

14 Margetts et. all. 2016.

15 Howard 1996.

camouflage (*maskirovka*) techniques, including disinformation (*dezinformatsiya*). As explained in one Russian military encyclopedia, *strategic disinformation* is distributed via media (TV, radio, the press) and through diplomatic and other channels.<sup>16</sup> In Russia's information security doctrine, the term strategic camouflage is mentioned in the context of the Russian information security system in the sphere of defence, where its task is to "improve the ways and means of providing *strategic* and *operational* camouflage and conducting intelligence and electronic countermeasures, along with the betterment of methods and tools for actively countering propaganda, information and psychological operations by a likely adversary"<sup>17</sup>. An encyclopedia of information-psychological operations explains the difference between *standard* (in above operational) and *strategic* information war. Standard stands for measures undertaken to 'hide' an object, for example as Russia successfully did with the invention of 'little green men' during the Crimean operation. In this context, strategic means that perception(s) of reality based on actual facts on the ground are replaced with simulacra that look real but are artificially created and controlled.<sup>18</sup>

The Russian approach to the conflict can be described as a combination of tools perfected during the Soviet period and reactivated, first in the context of domestic power struggle and later in that of Russian foreign and security politics. Using a full spectrum of means from political, informational, economic, financial and military spheres, the adversary is put into a defensive posture and off balance, and thus, conditions are created for (military) surprise.<sup>19</sup> This is in essence what strategic deception is about.

However, the debate that has followed the Crimean operation has conceptualized the dual nature of Russian strategy – the combination of information-psychological measures with different forms of armed aggression – as a *hybrid war*. Most analysts agree that this concept has limited analytical value in explaining Russian actions leading to and during the conflict. Yet, after the concept was used in the official Western description of the events, it has become a politically

16 *The War and Peace* dictionary, <<http://voina-i-mir.ru/chapter/5>> [website], accessed 14 March 2016. For recent research on Russian military theory and the role of information war in it, see e.g. Franke 2015; Darczewska 2014; Jaitner and Mattson 2015; on countering strategic maskirovka see Lindley-French 2015.

17 Information Security Doctrine 2000.

18 Manoilo et al. 2011, 72.

19 See Jonsson and Seely for a description of Russian activities in the Ukraine conflict using the concept of full-spectrum conflict. Jonsson and Seely 2015.



convenient shorthand to explain the mixture of military and non-military measures used by Russia in Ukraine. Much of this discussion, however, is oriented to elaborate on the implications of the Russian aggression for Europe in general and for the countries in Russia's immediate neighbourhood in particular.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, we prefer the term *deception* because it can be traced to Russian military thinking and it captures an essential feature of the Russian strategy: alteration of the target audiences' perception of reality to secure strategic objective(s). Furthermore, our choice of this term, instead of the hybrid war or information war concepts, indicates the limits of our analysis. This is not a report about Russia's (hybrid) war against Ukraine in its entirety or a research into the role of "weaponization of information"<sup>21</sup> in the survival of the Russian political system. Neither does this report investigate how different forms of information-psychological influence have been used in different phases of the conflict (e.g. trolling) to support objectives of Russian foreign and security policy.

Rather, the main purpose of this research is to examine in detail the emergence and evolution of Russian metanarratives and the terms of distraction about the conflict in Ukraine, and on the basis of this analysis to ascertain the main policy objectives of Russian strategic deception inside Russia and in selected countries<sup>22</sup> of the European Union. Another research question to answer is: to what extent is Russian strategic deception tailored to the target countries, or is the narrative promoted in the West generally the same? And, how coherent is Russian strategic deception? If there are contradictions between certain elements of the Russian narrative, how are they handled? In this research, we will not study the impact of Russian propaganda and disinformation on the target countries abroad. However, the results of this research will help to better understand what Russian strategic deception is about and how it works.

Our preliminary assumption is that while inside Russia the main objective is to win public support for the government's actions in Ukraine, regarding the West the often openly false, rapidly varying Russian communication is aimed not at convincing the

20 Racz 2015; Franke 2015; for a critical review of the hybrid war concept, see Kofman 2016; Bartles 2016; Johnsson and Seely 2015; Reisinger and Golts 2014.

21 Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014; the Russian information security doctrine from 2000 refers to the "use of information weapon against Russian information infrastructure" as an increasing threat. Information Security Doctrine 2000.

22 Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic.

decision-makers, but at dazzling the public audience by providing numerous alternative narratives to the Western ones. As the main objective of these measures is to dazzle and disorient Western public, running several parallel narratives is not a deficiency, but an asset and important feature of Russian strategic deception.

Another assumption inherent in the research design is that we expect there to be a certain congruence between Soviet and contemporary Russian strategic deception. The Soviet ‘propaganda machine’ was centrally organized, and it had on its disposal significant resources and could carry out various types of activities from the distribution of forgeries and activation of *agents of influence* to the use of *front organizations* in furthering Soviet foreign policy objectives. Nothing was done haphazardly, although not always efficiently.<sup>23</sup> In the course of the research, we seek to ascertain whether there is a link between Soviet-era propaganda methods and the contemporary ones, or whether the evolution of Russian propaganda and disinformation should be evaluated against broader conceptual and technological changes. It should be noted that these are not incompatible hypotheses, but the question is rather about the relative weight between the general (overall societal and technological) and particular (political context specific) aspects of change.

This report has three parts. The first part provides an overview of the conceptual and historical evolution of propaganda and disinformation. We will briefly study the method and operation of Soviet propaganda, including the so-called active measures, which was a collective term used for disinformation, propaganda and special operations, all conducted in order to influence world politics. This part of analysis is based on previous literature on Soviet propaganda and disinformation campaigns as well as on contemporary analyses of Russian information influence operations, on the basis of which we build a hypothesis of the contemporary Russian deception scheme. The analytical framework of the research is described at the end of the first part of the report.

In the second part of the report, we present an analysis of Russian metanarratives about the conflict. The main body of research material for this part of analysis consists of official statements and texts and media reports about the conflict published by the Russian state media. As already noted, we do not study the role of social media in Russian propaganda but rely on already substantial previous research on this topic. The second part of the report provides a background

23 United States Department of State 1985, 17.

for the third part, which explores the emergence of pre-formulated metanarratives in selected case studies. This part of our research will be conducted together with researchers from each case study country. The main body of empirical material is from the period between February 2014 and late September 2014. In conclusion, we will provide an overview of the case studies and insights on how the Russian deception scheme worked in picturing the conflict and war in Ukraine.

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# **Part I**

# **BACKGROUND**





2



## 2. The Conceptual and Historical Roots of Deception

Katri Pynnöniemi<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1.

#### THE ELUSIVE CONCEPT OF PROPAGANDA

The etymology of the term propaganda has been traced to the establishment of “a society of cardinals” whose task was to oversee and facilitate foreign missions of the Catholic Church. This “College of propaganda” – *Sacra congregatio christiano nomini propagando* – was founded by Pope Urban VIII in 1622.<sup>2</sup> But the basic function of propaganda – influence on and/or manipulation of public sentiments in favour of specific action – has been present in conflicts and political thinking from ancient times. In Greek politics, the link between speech (rhetoric) and action (political decision) was carefully scrutinized as a practical problem of persuasion.<sup>3</sup>

The above definition of propaganda is close to the one offered by Harold D. Lasswell, who in his famous study on the language of politics defines propaganda as “the manipulation of symbols” with the aim of “influencing attitudes on controversial matters”.<sup>4</sup> Karen Dovring, writing in 1959, also defined propaganda as an attempt to convince “somebody of something – usually something controversial”, but declined to use the word propaganda. Instead she invented a “sophisticated term for propaganda”, calling it *biased communication*, because the word propaganda is “feared or avoided by all objective

1 András Rácz has contributed to the elaboration of the strategic deception scheme and the research hypothesis (chapter 2.3).

2 Bernays 1928, 21; Miettunen 1976, 11.

3 Lasswell 1968, 3.

4 Lasswell 1968, 177.

people and therefore a source of darkness and obscurity since nobody wants to talk about it but nevertheless everybody uses it”.<sup>5</sup>

A certain reluctance to use the term propaganda is also visible in a dictionary entry from 1988, which defines propaganda as a set of “statements which describe the policies or actions of a government in a way which persuades people to believe they are true and correct”. The dictionary instructs the reader that the noun “propaganda” is used “usually as criticism”, that is, in a sense that implies that the argument is *mere propaganda* and therefore should not be taken seriously. The same entry includes a definition of “propaganda war” as a “fight between two parties or governments, using radio, television, newspapers etc. to publicize their ideas and try to persuade people to believe in them”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, propaganda is described as a potentially aggressive (the reference to fight) or negative phenomenon, something that is forced upon people, but also something that can be used as a weapon in an argument.

This view on propaganda emerged after the Second World War and was linked to the perception of the Soviet threat to the West. The basic assumption shared in many studies on propaganda and Soviet propaganda in particular was that in the Western context, propaganda was present in the form of “pamphleteering” and modern advertising, whereas only Nazi and Communist leaders had turned it into a weapon to be used “for achieving national and international political goals”.<sup>7</sup> This view, as will be shown in more detail in the section on totalitarian propaganda, was not mistaken, but it was not balanced either. The idea that only totalitarian governments would opt for propaganda does not stand critical scrutiny.

In a book on propaganda published in 1928, Edward L. Bernays explains that “the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country”.<sup>8</sup> This view was typical of the time, however, there was wide-spread concern after the First World War for usage of propaganda in peace-time. Yet, Edward Bernays and many others saw propaganda as a perfect tool for controlling the masses.

5 Dovring 1959, 5.

6 *Dictionary of Government and Politics* 1988, 222.

7 Kirkpatrick 1956, xvi.

8 Bernays 1928, 9.

Bernays portrayed the ‘public mind’ as something readily amenable, “composed of inherited prejudices and symbols and clichés and verbal formulas supplied to [masses] by the leaders”.<sup>9</sup> In conclusion, Bernays argued that “propaganda will never die out. Intelligent men must realize that propaganda is the modern instrument by which they can fight for productive ends and help to bring order out of chaos”<sup>10</sup>. What he was in effect referring to is currently known as PR or political campaigning, which since 1928 has become an industry of its own. Implicitly, Bernays also identified the existence of the opposite type of propaganda: the manipulation of public sentiments with the aim to facilitate and create chaos instead of order. The difference between the two was first conceptualized as a matter of white versus black propaganda.

The concept of “black propaganda” was introduced in the context of the Second World War, and it has been traced to British propagandist Sefton Delmer, who first called the ‘research units’ – the secret German-speaking radio stations – ‘black’ stations.<sup>11</sup> In a detailed study of British deception tactics during the world wars, Nicholas Rankin explains the difference between white and black propaganda with a reference to Churchill’s words to Stalin: “in wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies”. Delmer “came to realise that deception work turned that maxim inside out. The big lie was so valuable that it needed a bodyguard of truth”.<sup>12</sup> Delmer and his ‘research units’ collected authentic stories and events from German newspapers, intelligence reports and other sources and used them for disinformation purposes.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of disinformation, however, appears much later and is used extensively in the 1980s to refer to written or oral communication “containing *intentionally* false, incomplete, or misleading information (frequently combined with true information), which seeks to deceive, misinform, and/or mislead the target”<sup>14</sup>. Thus, disinformation in comparison to misinformation is “incorrect by intent”<sup>15</sup> and not just

9 Bernays 1928, 92.

10 Bernays 1928, 159.

11 Miettunen 1976, 42; Rankin 2008, 431. See Rankin 2008 for details on Delmer and his role in British psychological warfare during WWII.

12 Rankin 2008, 436.

13 Rankin 2008, 437; Miettunen 1976, 43–46.

14 Shultz and Godson 1984, 194. Emphasis added; Shultz 1989.

15 A definition of disinformation in a research paper in *American Psychologist*, cited in Nimmo 2016, 1.

accidentally false. It is the public relations concept in reverse, as was observed by defected KGB propaganda officer Ladislav Bittman in 1985.<sup>16</sup>

All the above-mentioned definitions of propaganda and disinformation refer to the ‘cooking’ of information for targeted audiences with the purpose of influencing their perceptions, mood and actions. An important additional feature is pointed out by F.C. Bartlett, Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Cambridge, who defined propaganda in 1942 as:

An attempt to influence opinion and conduct – especially social opinion and conduct – in such a manner that the persons who adopt the opinions and behaviour indicated do so *without themselves making any definite search for reasons*.<sup>17</sup>

This, in effect, is the essence of the phenomenon that Hannah Arendt later coined as “totalitarian propaganda”. In Bartlett’s view, its fundamental mistake is an assumption, inherent in a totalitarian constellation of power, that “social stability depends upon uniformity of thought and action”. “This contention”, explains Bartlett, “is directly opposed to the very basis upon which the modern nation group is built. The integrity and power of every large contemporary social group are founded upon an increasing specialisation of function on the part of its members”.<sup>18</sup>

Arendt’s detailed study of totalitarianism shows how Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union took a step further from what Bartlett called a fundamental mistake. With the means of totalitarian propaganda, both systems claimed to offer the masses a “scientific” vision of the world. But the facts upon which this vision was crafted depended “entirely on the power of man who can fabricate them”.<sup>19</sup> The power of totalitarian propaganda rested upon the masses’ preference to “escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency”. Instead of real experiences and events, totalitarian propaganda relied upon fictitious explanations, myths and mysteries, and what is most

16 Bittman 1985, 113.

17 Bartlett 1942, 6 emphasis added; see Stanley 2015, 46–47 for discussion how “flawed ideologies” disrupt rational deliberation and discussion in contemporary democracies.

18 Bartlett 1942, 12.

19 Arendt 1962, 350.

important, was able to “shut the masses off from the real world”.<sup>20</sup> This requires, among other things, that “common sense” as a rough guide of general sentiments in society becomes dysfunctional, or ceases to exist. As explained by Arendt:

Totalitarian propaganda can outrageously insult common sense only where common sense has lost its validity. Before the alternative of facing the anarchic growth and total arbitrariness of decay or bowing down before the most rigid, fantastically fictitious consistence of an ideology, the masses probably will always choose the latter and be ready to pay for it with individual sacrifices – and this not because they are stupid or wicked, but because in the general disaster this escape grants them a minimum of self-respect.<sup>21</sup>

What makes totalitarian movements successful and differentiates them from political parties in general is “their unsurpassed capacity to establish and safeguard the fictitious world through consistent lying”.<sup>22</sup> Totalitarian propaganda lives off “mob mentality”, that is, the belief that “*everything was possible and that nothing was true*”.<sup>23</sup>

Later research on the Soviet era has emphasized the performative core of Soviet politics that produced a profound distortion of any sense of time, agency and cause and effect. Performance substituted for reality; performance was reality, as Jeffrey Brooks, among others, has argued. Moreover, it was impossible to predict *what* the performance was about, Brooks writes:

It was only after Stalin had decided on the existence of a Doctor’s plot (1952–53) or the Kirov Murder (1934) that foregoing events could be scripted and previous phenomenon defined as part of an unfolding pattern. Policy shifts were not initiated by public debates or even leadership pronouncements, but rather by the latest ‘affair’ signalling a new type of drama and a new class of enemies.<sup>24</sup>

20 Arendt 1962, 353.

21 Arendt 1962, 352.

22 Arendt 1962, 382.

23 Arendt 1962, 382. Emphasis added.

24 Brooks 2000, 8–9.

On the basis of his research on Soviet mass mobilization methods in 1917–1929, Peter Kenez has argued that the success of Soviet propaganda was cemented not by the Bolsheviks’ ability to get people to believe in their world view, but “to take it for granted”<sup>25</sup>. To achieve this result, the Bolsheviks established strict censorship and destroyed other political parties and organizations that could potentially have offered a counter-argument for the official truth. Genuine volunteer movements were replaced by pseudo-organizations that redirected people’s attention to goals preferred by the authorities, and genuine public debate was substituted by a ritualistic repetition of the new Bolshevik terminology geared to create a new Communist future.<sup>26</sup> Many of these methods have been reintroduced in present-day Russia (see Chapters 2.2 and 2.3).

Just as the term propaganda has been replaced with perhaps more neutral terminology, the term disinformation has been rebranded as “perception management” and defined as “actions to convey and (or) deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives and objective reasoning ... in various ways, perception management combines truth projection, operations security, cover, and deception, and psychological operations”.<sup>27</sup> The concept of strategic communications is a more recent variant of the general theme and refers to an active creation and communication of meaning that is “synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power”.<sup>28</sup> This term is used mostly in Western parlance, whereas Russian researchers and practitioners speak about information war, information-psychological influence and other terms described in more detail in the next chapter.

It should become clear from the discussion above that the definition of propaganda and disinformation is not static but has evolved in response to political and historical developments. Some definitions are omitted from the present-day discussion, whereas other concepts have been adapted to reflect changes in the technological and socio-political environment. This chapter has relied mostly on Western research on (war) propaganda and its understanding of the role of propaganda in Soviet politics. Against this background, the next chapter will focus on Soviet views of political warfare, or what

25 Kenez 1985, 253.

26 Kenez 1985, 254–256; Susiluoto 1982.

27 US Airforce Intelligence and Security Doctrine 1994. Cited in Rampton and Stauber 2003, 5–6.

28 *Strategic Communication*. Joint Integrating Concept 2009.



at the time was better known as active measures. The argument put forward is that Russian strategic deception is rooted in these Soviet methods. The purpose of the following discussion is to illuminate the similarities between Soviet and current Russian deception methods at the conceptual level. To this end, we will review previous literature on Soviet political warfare as well as present-day Russian research on the use of “political technologies” and other means of information-psychological influence *as a practical tool of foreign policy*. Therefore, what follows is not intended as a comprehensive review of Russian (military’s) thinking on these topics, but as a basis upon which we can build an analytical framework for the purposes of this research.

## 2.2.

### THE SOVIET ROOTS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS

The Soviet and subsequent Russian approach to strategic deception can be explained with three different but complementary concepts: organizational weapon, reflexive control and active measures. Although only the reflexive control concept is used as such in Russian discussion, taken together these concepts describe most accurately the Russian approach to conflict in general and with respect to the one currently unfolding in Ukraine.

The underlying idea expressed in one form or another by these concepts is derived from Lenin, who asserted that *propaganda should be a matter of action rather than words*.<sup>29</sup> In the Soviet propaganda campaigns that followed, this idea was interpreted to mean that all agitation should be tied to some concrete goal.<sup>30</sup> However, the basic idea goes further than that. Writing in 1906 in *On Guerrilla Warfare* Lenin emphasized:

Marxism ... positively does not reject any form of struggle. Under no circumstances does Marxism confine itself to the forms of struggle possible and in existence at the given moment only, recognizing as it does that new forms of struggle, unknown to

29 Paraphrased in Kenez 1985, 123. Emphasis added.

30 These include propaganda campaigns organized on the occasion of the October Revolution and other important anniversaries as well as campaigns for “World Peace” or the struggle against famine. Kenez 1985, 122.

participants of the given period, *inevitably* arise as the given social situation changes. In this respect Marxism *learns*, if we may so express it, from mass practice, and makes no claim whatever to *teach* the masses forms of struggle invented by ‘systemizers’ in the seclusion of their studies.<sup>31</sup>

This idea of working with material – interpreted in the widest possible sense from a situational context to human and material resources available at a given moment – comes across in Soviet thinking (e.g. Trotsky) and subsequent Russian analyses. It does not signify a call for just any spontaneous action. On the contrary, Lenin was adamant that “secret, casual, unorganized guerrilla actions” were a recipe for the disorganization of the party, and consequently, the party’s task was to “take such actions *under its control*”<sup>32</sup>. At this point of time, Lenin’s organizational weapon was aimed at two concrete goals: the assassination of political enemies and confiscation of monetary funds from both the government and private persons.<sup>33</sup> However, in his previous writing on the lessons of the Moscow Uprising (1905), Lenin argued that party activists should learn from this experience and help the masses by *stimulating their creative efforts*, and thus further the development of what Lenin called “new barricade tactics”.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, although Lenin relied on what has later become a trademark of the Russian approach to conflict, i.e. improvisation, he made it clear that the creativity of the masses should be controlled from above, that is, by the party functionaries.

Towards this end, a formal *Department of Agitation and Propaganda* was established under the Central Committee of the Communist party in August 1920. This department became known by its acronym *agitprop*, and its primary function was to coordinate the propaganda

31 Semmel 1981, 227. An excerpt from Lenin’s article *On Guerrilla Warfare* first published in *Prolety* on 30 September 1906. Translated as *Guerrilla Action* in Semmel and warfare at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/gw/>

32 Semmel 1981, 229. Already earlier, in his essay titled *What is to be done?*, Lenin fought against “spontaneity” and explained what the “organization of the revolutionaries” should look like. This was important because there could be no middle ground, and any sign of unprofessionalism would mean the strengthening of bourgeois ideas. Lenin 1902.

33 Semmel 1981, 228. Stalin is often mentioned in this context for he was in charge of the propaganda work in Baku financed by the proceeds from bank raids. Clews 1964, 14.

34 Semmel 1981, 211–212. An excerpt from “The lessons of the Moscow uprising”, first published in *Prolety* on August 29, 1906. In this article, Lenin called for the organization and control of mass terror as part of revolutionary tactics. Emphasis added.

work of different Soviet institutions.<sup>35</sup> Curiously, *A Dictionary of Scientific Communism* published in 1984 does not include the term propaganda, but does define what the stimulation of the creativity of the masses in the Soviet view meant. The idea was expressed with the concept of “political manoeuvring” defined as “the ability [of the party leadership] to direct the mass movement in the right way, depending on the objective situation”. Depending on the ‘ebb’ and ‘flow’ of the revolutionary moment, the manoeuvring could take the form of a political offensive, retreat, defence and mustering of forces.<sup>36</sup>

In the context of more theoretically oriented debates on warfare and information war in particular, political manoeuvring is known by another name. An *organizational weapon* is the creative energy of the masses organized and directed by the authorities to hit a specific target.<sup>37</sup> Writing on Soviet psychological warfare, Wilbur Schramm provides the following explanation for this concept:

The word does not typically stand alone in Soviet planning. From the very first, Communists were told by their leaders that words were not enough, that words had to merge with deeds, and both into organization ... When we try to describe Soviet psychological operations, therefore, we talk not so much about a word weapon as about an organization weapon.<sup>38</sup>

This concept is not used in current Russian military literature; for example, there is no such entry in the encyclopedia of information-psychological war from 2011.<sup>39</sup> In the framework of public and populist oriented debate, several different meanings are attached to this concept. Most often it is used as a synonym of the “colour revolutions”<sup>40</sup> or as a rough equivalent of “network-centric warfare”<sup>41</sup>. Other examples include the characterization of ISIS as an organizational weapon and the claim made by economist Sergei Glazyev that “strategic planning”

35 Kenez 1985, 123–126; Clews 1964, 12–14.

36 *A Dictionary of Scientific Communism* 1984, 183.

37 Shultz and Godson 1984, 19. Lenin’s essay *What is to be done?* is cited in this connection.

38 Cited in Shultz and Godson 1984, 19.

39 Manoilo et al. 2011; see also the *War and Peace* dictionary <http://voina-i-mir.ru/>; Russian military dictionaries <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary.htm>.

40 Serenko 2013; Nagornyh, Safronov and Tsernenko 2015.

41 Korovin 2014.

can be regarded as a powerful organizational weapon.<sup>42</sup> In fact, *Izborskii Klub*, a well-known community of conservative-patriotic thinkers, including the above-mentioned Glazyev, seems to have developed this concept further, or at least uses it systematically in its writings. In an essay titled “Organizational weapons: the functional emergence and system of a 21st-century technology” published in late 2013, the origins of the concept are traced to Aleksandr Bogdanov, a developer of universal organization theory, an early version of cybernetics.<sup>43</sup> The community’s interest towards Bogdanov has most likely been guided by his work on the “scientific systematization of humanity’s organizational experience in its entirety”<sup>44</sup>, which he called tectology but in which the authors of the above-mentioned essay saw the roots of the concept of organizational weapon.

The definition of this weapon provided in the essay leads us conveniently to another concept, that of *reflexive control*. The emergence and use of organizational weapons, as explained in the essay, signals a transformation of warfare. During the previous stage, war meant the physical destruction of the enemy, whereas in this new form of warfare, an attack is successful when it leads to the “self-disorganization” and “self-disorientation” of the adversary, and the subsequent capture of the enemy’s resource base and its usage to the benefit of the attacker.<sup>45</sup> The theory of reflexive control, intensively developed by Soviet military and civilian theorists since the early 1960s, explains and provides practical means for achieving the ‘self-disorganization’ of the enemy. According to V. A. Lefebvre, one of the thinkers behind the theory, reflexive control is “a process by which one enemy transmits the reasons or bases for making decisions to another”<sup>46</sup>. As explained by Tim Thomas, an expert on Russian information war:

Reflexive control occurs when the controlling organ conveys (to the objective system) motives and reasons that cause it to reach the desired decision, the nature of which is maintained in strict secrecy. A ‘reflex’ itself involves the specific process of imitating the enemy’s reasoning or imitating the enemy’s possible behavior

42 Glazyev 2013; Larina 2015.

43 Bogdanov was the Bolshevik movement’s “second-in-command” (1904–1908) and became a non-person in Soviet science during the Stalin era. Susiluoto 1982.

44 Susiluoto 1982, 50–51.

45 Ovtchinskii and Sundiev 2013, 1.

46 Cited in Thomas 2004, 2.

and causes him to make a decision unfavorable to himself.<sup>47</sup>

The task, so to speak, is to find a weak link in the enemy's "filter" and exploit it. The filter is "made up of concepts, knowledge, ideas and experience", and it can be targeted by an information weapon defined as a "specially selected piece of information capable of causing changes in the information processes of information systems in accordance with the intent of the entity using the weapon".<sup>48</sup> This is what in Soviet terminology was meant by *disinformation*. As described by Ladislav Bittman in an essay published in 1985, disinformation is "a carefully constructed, false message that is secretly introduced into the opponent's communication system to deceive either his decision-making elite or public opinion".<sup>49</sup> For this purpose, various channels were used, including rumours, forgeries, manipulative political actions, agents of influence, front organizations and other means.<sup>50</sup> As explained by Bittman, Soviet disinformation operations were:

Acts of opportunity reflecting the long-term interests of the Soviet Union. Their primary objective is to add another drop of venom to the opponents' internal system with the expectation that eventually, after a certain period of time, quantity will become quality and the patient will die.<sup>51</sup>

It should be emphasized that each of these concepts discussed in this chapter describes techniques that can be used both in the domestic context and as a foreign and security policy resource. The concept of active measures is predominantly used in Western literature on Soviet influence operations during the 1980s, and thus it reflects the Western understanding of the Soviet foreign policy toolbox. In fact, it can be argued that the current discussion on Russia's hybrid war reflects this earlier debate, at least when it comes to conceptualizing Russia's actions with terminology that is understandable to the Western expert community. However, the bottom line of this discussion then and now

47 Thomas 2004, 5. The encyclopedia of information-psychological war from 2011 includes the term *upravlenie refleksivnoe* (reflexive control). Manoilo et al. 2011, 446.

48 Thomas 2004, 11.

49 Bittman 1985, 113.

50 Shultz and Godson 1984, 195.

51 Bittman 1985, 119.

is that none of the techniques used for influencing others (abroad and at home) work in isolation.

John Clews, who studied Communist propaganda techniques in the mid-1960s, argued that propaganda is part of a general scheme, which “may involve military action, insurrection, espionage, sabotage and the deliberate fomenting of unrest in non-communist countries”.<sup>52</sup> The set of actions that Clews called a “general scheme” is what in the 1980s became termed as *active measures*. As defined in a study published in 1984, active measures are “certain overt and covert techniques for influencing events and behaviour in, and the actions of, foreign countries”<sup>53</sup>. Active measures may entail the following objectives:

- influencing the policies of another government
- undermining confidence in its leaders and institutions
- disrupting the relations between other nations
- discrediting and weakening governmental and non-governmental opponents.

The means of conducting these actions include:

- attempts to deceive the target
- attempts to distort the target’s perceptions of reality.

The research published in 1984 on Soviet active measures distinguishes between “overt propaganda” and “covert political techniques”<sup>54</sup>. Overt propaganda is defined as “written or oral information which deliberately seeks to influence and/or manipulate the opinions and attitudes of a given target grouping”. Characteristic features of Soviet overt propaganda, according to the study, were its continuity, flexibility and adaptability. Soviet propaganda was designed to work on the target for an extended period of time, and only the intensity of the campaign varied. Propaganda was flexible in the sense that the Soviets were able to adapt to changing circumstances rapidly and coordinate words with actions promptly. Furthermore, “intentional misrepresentation” of events and phenomena was utilized as one of the

52 Clews 1964, 23.

53 Shultz and Godson 1984, 193; see also United States Department of State 1989.

54 Also referred to as disinformation, covert propaganda aims to “lead the target to believe in the veracity of the message and consequently to act in the interests of the nation conducting the disinformation operation”. Shultz and Godson 1984, 195.

tools of deception.<sup>55</sup> There was nothing peculiar about these techniques in the Soviet view. Since propaganda in general was considered an integral part of the socialist system, the use of active measures was regarded as a legal and legitimate part of the country's foreign policy.<sup>56</sup>

After the Comintern was dissolved (1943), the Central Committee established a foreign affairs department (International Department of the CPSU Central Committee, ID), which became the coordinating agency of active measures abroad. It was estimated at the time that the ID was even more important than the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>57</sup> The system responsible for Soviet active measures abroad is described in Figure 1 drawn by the authors of this report on the basis of previous research literature.

The Soviet Union directed distinctively different active measures towards the domestic and foreign audience. The boundary between 'domestic' and 'foreign' was constituted by the Iron Curtain. Though there were also minor differences between the messages delivered to the Soviet population and the people of the Central and Eastern European satellite states, the main division line ran between East and West. However, prior to 1978, both activities were under the control of the *Agitprop* department of the Central Committee, founded in 1920.

For the Eastern Bloc audience, active measures, including both propaganda and disinformation, were directed by the above-mentioned International Department (ID) and executed through local Communist Party organizations, revolutionary movements and front organizations. The messages were transmitted to the societies via state-controlled media and the above-mentioned party and non-party information networks.<sup>58</sup> The Soviet international propaganda effort expanded during the 1960–1980 period. The weekly hours of external broadcasting expanded from approximately 1.047 in 1960 to 2.762 in 1980. These broadcasts were conducted in over 80 languages;

55 Shultz and Godson 1984, 34–36.

56 The five broad objectives of the Soviet foreign policy included the following: 1) to preserve, enhance and expand security in areas under the influence of the USSR; 2) to divide the Western opponents of the Soviet Union by driving wedges between them and disrupting alliance systems; 3) to retain the primary role of the USSR in the Communist world; 4) to promote "proletarian internationalism" and those "national liberation movements" that are under Communist control or serve Soviet interests and 5) to minimize risks and avoid serious involvements on more than one front at any given time. Shultz and Godson 1984, 10.

57 Shultz and Godson 1984, 23.

58 Shultz and Godson 1984, 23; Clews 1964.

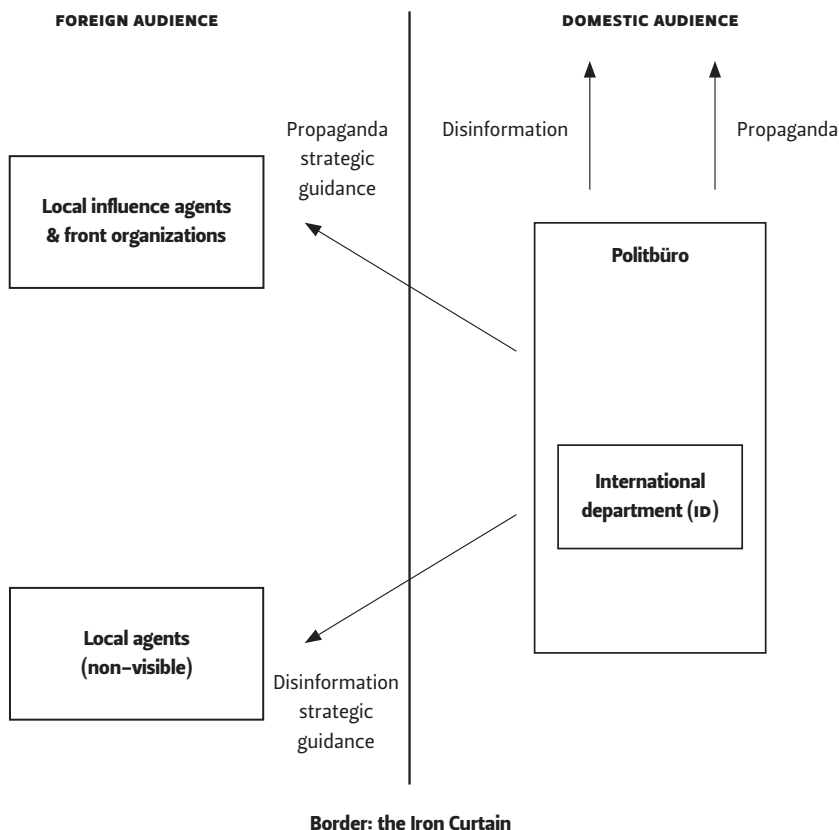
for comparison, the American international broadcasting stood at a total of 1.927 hours weekly in 46 languages.<sup>59</sup>

As for the West, the system was more complex and multifaceted. The Soviet Union operated both open and hidden channels to deliver its messages. Propaganda was mostly delivered via open influence agents, which were often so-called front organizations. Many of them operated internationally, such as the World Peace Council, World Federation of Teachers Unions and International Organization of Journalists.<sup>60</sup> Their work was supported by a wide network of local front organizations, ranging from press clubs to various Soviet friendship societies. Parallel to these overt activities, networks of covert local influence agents were used as well, mostly to spread disinformation, as well as to directly or indirectly strengthen the propaganda messages delivered by the overtly operating influence agents. It is important to note that, at the strategic level of active measures, the KGB was an executive agency of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. While the KGB had considerable autonomy in managing the operations of its local agents, strategic guidance was provided by the Politburo.

59 Shultz and Godson 1984, 27–28; see also Clews 1964.

60 The research from 1984 listed for example the following organizations as fronts: World Peace Council, World Federation of Trade Unions, World Federation of Democratic Youth, International Union of Students, International Organization of Journalists, Christian Peace Conference, Women's International Democratic Federation and International Association of Democratic Lawyers. For details on the role of the Western peace movement as a Soviet front organization, see e.g. US Department of State 1985.





In an article published in 1985, Herbert J. Ellison identifies reasons that helped the Soviets to create and mobilize a network of agencies responsible for Soviet propaganda abroad. According to Ellison, the most important advantage this system provided for the Soviet foreign policy was “the ability to develop broad support among sectors of public opinion in competitor countries”. Soviet propaganda campaigns were closely coordinated with concurrent Soviet foreign policy objectives and designed to conform with widely appealing themes and slogans: peace, democracy, national self-determination, land reform and social and racial equality. The purpose of these campaigns, according to Ellison, was “to malign and discredit the governments of competing states and to establish the issues and their formulation that will dominate international discourse” in line with issues of interest to the Soviet Union.<sup>61</sup>

Figure 2.1.  
The organization  
of Soviet active  
measures  
circa 1980.

61 Ellison 1985, 83; for a similar conclusion, see Shultz and Godson 1984; Clews 1966.

A general conclusion drawn from previous research is that the success of a disinformation operation “depends on the willingness of the audience to be deceived”. To achieve this outcome, “the perpetrator of the disinformation uses the language the audience *wants to hear*”.<sup>62</sup> Describing Western susceptibility to Soviet disinformation, Uri Ra’nan remarks that Western media adopted “language usage in the Soviet manner”, for example, by making reference to “Afghan terrorists” and “routinely describing almost any anti-Western guerrilla campaign as a resistance movement”.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, as noted by Maurice Tugwell at a conference organized back in 1985, “deception, both concealment and misrepresentation, aims at intellectual domination – at putting the West in a state of ignorance about Soviet activities and intentions that is linked to a sense of looming power. The desired psychological outcome is to displace faith in self-defence with faith in appeasement”.<sup>64</sup>

A similar conclusion has been drawn by scholars studying contemporary Russian disinformation. However, it cannot be emphasized enough that the context of the current propaganda and disinformation campaign differs significantly from that of the 1980s. Most importantly, Russia’s role in the world politics has changed and cannot be compared to the Soviet position in Cold War Europe. Additionally, today disinformation is circulated to further Russian interests in a specific conflict situation, which narrows it down to the developments of the conflict, although broader themes are also present at the metanarrative level (see Chapter 4). In the next chapter, we will present a hypothesis of how different propaganda and disinformation channels work in contemporary Russia.

### 2.3. THE RUSSIAN STRATEGIC DECEPTION SCHEME: A HYPOTHESIS

In the Russian debate, information war and influence operations are framed in terms of the correlation of forces, thus implying that information warfare is part of the geopolitical struggle between the

62 Bittman 1985, 115. Emphasis added.

63 Shultz and Godson 1984.

64 United States Department of State 1985, 51.

great powers.<sup>65</sup> Russian information operations in the Second Chechen War and in Georgia follow this pattern.<sup>66</sup> What is not problematized in this debate are the ways in which Russian authorities themselves use the organizational weapon, also referred to as “political technologies”<sup>67</sup> to manipulate domestic public perceptions. Instead, it is assumed that foreign countries try to undermine Russia’s political stability by ‘remote controlling’ groups that are critical towards the political leadership of the country.<sup>68</sup>

Against this background, it is ironic, but not at all surprising, that on the eve of the 100-year anniversary of the October Revolution, the Russian Security Council has commissioned a study on how to prevent the emergence of a “romantic revolutionary” stereotype and the formation of an “aggressive managed (*upravlyaemoi*) mob” in Russia. The research project is studying how Russia could take better advantage of the so-called “soft power” to protect its national interests.<sup>69</sup> This project should be viewed as a continuation of a trend, rather than a new phenomenon. Already in 2000 the information security doctrine set clear parameters on how the Russian state aspired to achieve “information superiority” in the domestic sphere. The National Security Strategy from 2009 identified “nationalist, separatist, radical religion and other agitation” as a danger to the Russian state. The new version of the strategy, accepted in late 2015, is more specific on these threats, and outlines what can be considered programmatic content for the protection of Russian spiritual and historical values.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, the aspiration to manipulate public perception of reality is clearly indicated at the level of strategic documents. However, the question is how it is implemented in practice. Is there a centralized, politburo type machine that controls the content of messages and coordinates their distribution via different channels, as some leaked

65 The term “correlation of forces” was used during the Cold War to describe the relative alignment of two opposing forces or groups of forces on a spectrum that includes various “cross-cutting and interacting variables” from social, political and revolutionary processes. Shultz and Godson 1984, 11; Ellison 1985.

66 Berger 2010; Giles 2016, 28–29.

67 Wilson 2005; Pavlovsky 2016.

68 Nagornyh, Safronov and Tsernenko 2015; Nagornyh and Safronov 2015. See also Panarin 2010; Franke 2015.

69 The concept of soft power is explained as part of geopolitical struggle, and, at least in public discussion, it is used as a synonym to information war, thus rendering it incomprehensible to debate based on the original conceptualization. Nagornyh 2016; Radchuk 2015.

70 National Security Strategy 2009; National Security Strategy 2015.

evidence<sup>71</sup> suggests? Or, perhaps there is no single controlling point but actions that from outside look coordinated are, in fact, the result of spontaneous and decentralized impulses, (re)actions and conformist behaviour?<sup>72</sup> It seems plausible to assume that the ‘Kremlin propaganda machine’ is a combination of these two variants.

An important factor that has contributed to this development is the strengthening of the role of the presidential administration in the Russian political system. In 2005, Andrew Wilson analysed famously “how the culture of political manipulation operates as a system”. According to Wilson, the Russian elite has “*found it useful* to maintain post-Bolshevik methods in order to disguise its venality”. The key to what Wilson labelled *virtual politics* is that authority is invented: political technologists stage the basic mythology of the state. To invent the opposition is as important as controlling it. The governing core of the system is not a traditional hegemonic party like the Mexican PRI, but is itself a series of virtual ‘projects’.<sup>73</sup> A document leaked to the media a week before Putin’s first presidential inauguration on 5 May 2000 provides a glimpse of the operation of this system.

The *Kommersant* newspaper published controversial yet plausible evidence, titled: “The Reform of the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation”.<sup>74</sup> The document spells out the main idea of the reform clearly: the administration should become an effective means of “creating ‘necessary’ political situations in Russia” and “manage social and political processes in the Russian Federation and in the countries of the near abroad”.<sup>75</sup> For these purposes, the document stipulates that a presidential “political directorate” should be created along with the “revitalization of activity of the presidential administration” in the regions “with the purpose of restricting the development of political situations in the regions that can result in dismemberment of the Russian Federation and the development of confederative relations”. Furthermore, the document argues that linking the Federal Security Service (FSB) and other special services to the activities of the new

71 Gilles 2016, 30. For more on Russia’s information warfare structure, see Thomas 1998.

72 Bachmann and Lyubashenko 2014, 366–367.

73 Wilson 2005.

74 Cited in Dawisha 2014, 273. An English translation of the document is available at the website of Dawisha’s book: [http://miamioh.edu/cas/\\_files/documents/havighurst/english-putin-reform-admin.pdf](http://miamioh.edu/cas/_files/documents/havighurst/english-putin-reform-admin.pdf). The original document is available at: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/16875>, accessed 22 May 2015. Subsequent citations to the document will be identified as *Kommersant* 9 May, 2000.

75 *Kommersant* 9 May 2000.

administration is a “strategic necessity” that will “allow to achieve very quick, competent, and productive results, which are needed to ‘jumpstart’ the Directorate’s work”.<sup>76</sup> Later, in relation to the principles of the formation of the political council of the President, it is explicated that the informational and political struggle in the informational field needs to be conducted aggressively in order to “partially or completely discredit the opposition”.<sup>77</sup>

The Directorate’s work is divided between open and secret sections. The open section will function as a “shield” that should distract public interest from the main, that is, secret activities. This is considered necessary because the “moral condition of the society” at the moment would reject direct suppression of opposition activities. Therefore, the task of the Directorate’s open activities is to convince the public that it “works for the purpose of helping political organizations, parties and movements”. At the same time, the “secret (main) section” will be tasked to influence all forms and agencies of political activity in Russia. The list of influence activities runs from active to passive measures targeting potential groups of resistance in Russia. The short- and long-term objectives of the Directorate include, for example, “the creation of an informational-political barrier between the President and the entire spectrum of oppositional powers in Russia, active propaganda in support of the President (and the Government when necessary), direct political counter-propaganda to discredit the opposition, organization of large-scale public events, organization of movements that undermine and suppress the regional elites”, and finally, “the creation of an informational database of political figures and organizations and of Russian mass media and journalists at all levels”.<sup>78</sup> With these tools in hand, the Directorate seeks to ensure control over all political processes from elections to the management of other socio-political processes in Russia, and to participate in and influence political processes in the countries of the near abroad.

The Russian armed forces’ capabilities for undertaking information operations have been developed parallel to this process. In response to the perceived weakness of Russian information operations during the Second Chechen War (1999) and the War with Georgia (2008), a need for special-branch “Information Troops” was publicly voiced. However, it seems that idea did not materialize, at least in the

<sup>76</sup> *Kommersant* 9 May 2000.

<sup>77</sup> *Kommersant* 9 May 2000, 34.

<sup>78</sup> *Kommersant* 9.5.2000, 15.

form of a specialized branch.<sup>79</sup> In general, it has been argued that Russia may encounter problems in its technical ability to fight the information war due to the lack of its own computer products, but it has advanced theoretical and operational capability to understand the “psychological impact of information technology on individuals”<sup>80</sup>. The latter is perceived in the Russian discussion as Russia’s strength to be developed at the strategic level. According to Russian authors S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, President Putin had noted in 2006 that “Russia’s responses [to threat to Russian military security] must be based on intellectual superiority, responses that are asymmetrical and less costly”<sup>81</sup>.

The described document and other documents on Kremlin instructions, together with the previous research on the Russian political system outlined above, do not perhaps provide sufficient grounds for ascertaining the existence of a “general scheme” that Clews referred to in 1964 and US scholars explored in the mid-1980s. However, we propose the following scheme (Figure 2) to be used as a research hypothesis that will be tested in the course of this research.

79 Gilles 2016, 29; Franke 2015, 13.

80 Thomas 1998, 170. In March 2016, Natalia Kasperskaya, a co-founder of Kaspersky Lab, announced the establishment of a “Center for Monitoring Propaganda and Disinformation Online” in Innopolis in Kazan, Tatarstan. In a report first published by the Russian newspaper *Vedomosti*, an expert working for the centre estimated that it uses sufficiently sophisticated technology that allows to “predict an information attack online as soon as it starts”. Lokot 2016.

81 Cited at Thomas 2014, 105.

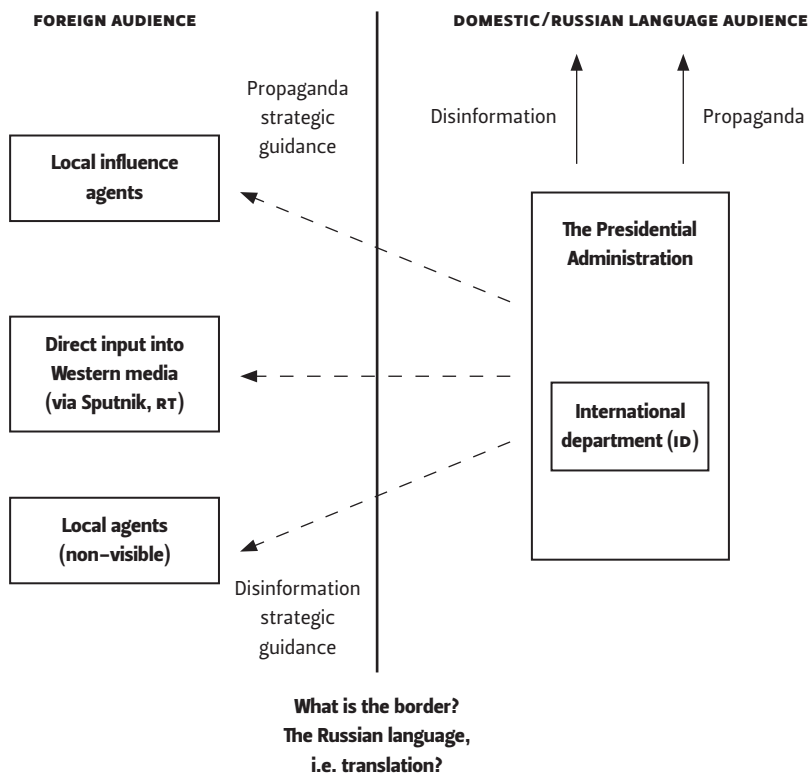


Figure 2.2.  
 A hypothesis  
 of the current  
 Russian  
 propaganda and  
 disinformation  
 channels.

The basic assumption in this scheme is that the presidential administration has retained the former responsibilities of the Politburo and Central Committee, including the coordination of information influence operations domestically and abroad. Thus, it is assumed that the overall strategic deception scheme has not changed decisively. Messages delivered to the domestic audience still differ considerably from the ones aimed at the West. However, as both the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc ceased to exist, the boundary between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ is no longer the Iron Curtain, but the Russian language. Russian speakers, who receive most of their information from the Russian media, get the same message regardless of where they actually physically live. The February 2016 demonstrations of Russian speakers in Germany over an alleged rape of an ethnic Russian girl – which later turned out to be completely fake – demonstrated well the mobilization capability of the Russian media even outside of the former Soviet Union. It is language and mainly culture that matter the most, not geography.

Currently, Russia is restoring the Soviet external broadcasting service aimed exclusively at the Western audience, operating in Western

languages and according to Western standards. The two most emblematic actors are RT and Sputnik, in addition to a wide network of information websites and groups on social media networks. The Soviet Union was never able to massively implant its own messages and narratives into mainstream Western media.<sup>82</sup> Contrary to the Soviet times, however, now Moscow can easily and steadily reach Western consumers, and thus deliver its propaganda and disinformation messages directly.

The purpose of this chapter has been to illuminate the conceptual roots of Russian strategic deception and to offer a hypothesis of the organizational resemblance between Soviet and contemporary Russian active measures based on previous and current research on this topic. Before we can proceed to an analysis of the research material, one last and crucial step needs to be taken: we must explain the research methodology we use to identify propaganda and disinformation with reasonable accuracy. This is the task of the next chapter.

82 The general view in the 1980s seems to have been that some Soviet campaigns were successful in influencing large numbers of people, while many active measures, in particular forgeries, led to failure. us State Department 1985, 47.



3



# 3. Research Methodology

Katri Pynnöniemi

## 3.1.

### IDENTIFICATION OF PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION

*Frame in news text is really the imprint of power.*<sup>1</sup>

The problem facing any inquiry on propaganda (creation of order in Bernays's terms) and disinformation (creation of chaos) is how to discern what can actually be *done* with certain words. The question is, under what circumstances does a certain communicative act work as propaganda or disinformation? Content analysis can be used in answering this question. This method has been described by C.E. Osgood as an "attempt to infer the characteristics and intentions of sources from inspection of the messages they produce"<sup>2</sup>. Content analysis has been used in literature studies and especially in the study of propaganda during WWII and after. The work of Harold D. Lasswell is of particular interest from the viewpoint of our research objectives.

In the mid-1960s, Lasswell elaborated methodological tools that would allow researchers to "detect" antidemocratic propaganda and the identity of persons distributing it in the United States. Coming into effect on August 7, 1939, the McCormack Act stipulated the registration of "foreign agents" with the State Department and in this way was "aimed to disclose the affiliations of all whose statements are disseminated in the press, radio and other channels of communication".<sup>3</sup> Lasswell's role in this endeavour was to provide

1 Entman 1993, 55.

2 Osgood, Luci and Tannenbaum 1975, 275.

3 Lasswell 1968, 173–174.

scientific evidence in cases where the legislation on foreign agents was violated. For this purpose, he developed an “eight-point” test that would provide analysts with “standards of propaganda detection”. The eight-point test<sup>4</sup> includes the following variables:

1. *The avowal test.*  
Explicit identification with one side of a controversy.
2. *The parallel test.*  
The content of a given channel is compared with the content of a known propaganda channel. The content is classified according to themes.
3. *The consistency test.*  
The consistency of a stream of communication with the declared propaganda aims of a party to a controversy. The aims may be official declarations or propaganda instructions.
4. *The presentation test.*  
The balance of favourable and unfavourable treatment given to each symbol (and statement) in a controversy.
5. *The source test.*  
Relatively heavy reliance upon one party to a controversy for material.
6. *The concealed source test.*  
The use of one party to a controversy as a source, without disclosure.
7. *The distinctiveness test.*  
The use of vocabulary peculiar to one side of a controversy.
8. *The distortion test.*  
Persistent modification of statements on a common topic in a direction favourable to one side of a controversy. Statements may be omitted, added or over- or under-emphasized.

4 Lasswell 1968, 177–178.

This eight-point test was targeted at differentiating intentionally false or inaccurate statements from those that were incorrect by accident (misinformation). It is not always easy to make this distinction, especially since a person making a statement rarely expresses his/her intention openly, and even that can be misleading.<sup>5</sup> This is less of a problem when research data is compiled from internet portals, blogs, books and specialized internet agencies already identified as channels for spreading pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation.<sup>6</sup> In those cases where official representatives of Russia use *terms of distraction* or other elements of metanarratives in official statements, these statements can be analysed as “disinformation” rather than misinformation.

However, the task of this research is not to ascertain the intention of a specific statement in each individual case, but rather to analyse the emergence and evolution of *metanarratives* about the conflict in Ukraine used by Russia for strategic deception purposes. To use Lasswell’s definition, the parallel, distinctiveness and distortion tests seem the most useful content analytical tools from the viewpoint of this research. The *distinctiveness* test will be used to identify “distinctive vocabularies” composed of catchwords, slogans and (original to each nation) metaphors used in specific metanarratives. The *distortion* test, in turn, will be used in analysing what is omitted from a particular statement and from the metanarrative as a whole. The *parallel* analysis means that the contents of statements and other types of texts will be compared with the pre-formulated metanarratives or themes that are being distributed through the main propaganda and disinformation channels. The analysis seeks to detect the frequency of appearance of certain propaganda/disinformation themes across the research material in the case country samples. In the following, we will describe in more detail what is meant here by distinctive vocabularies and metanarratives, and how these are combined in the research analysis.

5 See Nimmo 2016 for a discussion on how to distinguish between disinformation and misinformation.

6 Gilles 2016, 30, offers a good overview of the so-called “Kremlin troll army”; see also Aro 2015 on the manipulation of Finnish public discussion online. For a categorization of specific propaganda web portals, see Belousov 2012.

3.2.  
DISTINCTIVE VOCABULARIES AND METANARRATIVES

The presence of “distinctive vocabulary” constitutes the key link between Soviet and contemporary Russian methods. Soviet propaganda was characterized by its distinct vocabulary, in which language and morality were inseparable. Certain terms became practically linked with particular epithets, such as *zhivotvorny patriotism* (life-giving patriotism), or one may even mention the classic expression *Velikaya Otechestvennaya Voyna* (Great Patriotic War). Meanwhile, the adversaries were very often characterized by repeatedly used pejorative combinations, such as *vragi mira* (enemies of the peace)<sup>7</sup> or *fashistskiye zachvatchiki* (fascist land-grabbers). These specific terms were included in slogans published every year on the anniversary of the October Revolution and used in continuous agitation and propaganda campaigns in the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> At present, similar near-permanent word combinations and pejorative expressions are widely used in the Russian official parlance about the conflict in Ukraine. The legitimate Ukrainian government is regularly called *kievskaya hunta* (Kiev junta), and the Ukrainian armed forces are referred to as *ukrainskiye okkupanti* (Ukrainian occupants).

However, it should be noted that the emergence of this distinctive vocabulary is only one aspect, albeit a significant one, of a deeper change in Russian society and political life. First, Russian researchers have identified a link between the increase of aggressiveness in Russian society in general and the criminalization of language, i.e. the inclusion of criminal slang in everyday language use.<sup>9</sup> The official foreign policy parlance has changed after 2012 and can be best described as “Stalinist diplospeak”. The Stalinist style, according to Russian researcher Vasily Gatov, had four distinct features: self-questioning, the use of metonymy, proactive commentary and criminal vocabulary. Each of these features has made a comeback in the current Russian diplomatic language.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, “Russia’s information campaigns are

7 State Department 1985, 2.

8 For example for the anniversary held in 1985, *Pravda* published 44 slogans targeted to different groups inside the Soviet Union and abroad, including, for example, a slogan calling for “the peoples of Europe to struggle for lasting peace and cooperation in Europe and for the return of détente! Seek the elimination of chemical weapons on the continent!” Ebon 1987, 415–418.

9 Gatov 2015; Medvedev 2016.

10 Gatov 2015, 3.

turning into battles waged with the language of aggression, excluding any possibility of dialogue or compromise”<sup>11</sup>.

In the domestic realm, the arguments put forward by Russian officials and pro-Kremlin commentators are intended to strengthen the belief within Russia itself that there can be no alternative to the measures the authorities are taking. Russian information campaigns produce a “stigmatising effect”, which is “confirmed by the introduction into the Russian language of consistent political slogans, labels and clichés, which in essence constitute a model description of reality”.<sup>12</sup> This is, in effect, what Orwell meant by newspeak, defined in his novel *1984* as words “deliberately constructed for political purposes: words, that is to say, which not only had in every case a political implication, but were intended to impose a desirable mental attitude upon the person using them”.<sup>13</sup>

However, simply identifying terms included in the “distinctive vocabulary” is not enough, as this would necessarily give only a static picture. Instead, we seek to describe the process by which these terms have been put *into action*. For example, the Russian media has used the term “supporter of federalization” to frame pro-Russian locals, illegal military groups and local criminal organizations as one group protecting their political and legal rights. The right way of using this term is inscribed in a *metanarrative*, which provides explanations. As summarized by Miranda Holmstrom, a narrative “describes the past, justifies the present and presents a vision of the future. It offers a framework for the plot and the setting of a story. It provides context for raw information and facts, and helps to shape how we perceive ourselves and the world in which we live.”<sup>14</sup> The function of metanarratives can be analytically described in terms of “framing”.

The concept of framing, understood broadly, refers to selection and highlighting and “the use of highlighted elements [in our research “distinctive vocabulary”] to *construct an argument about problems and their causation, evaluation and/or solution*”.<sup>15</sup> Frames select and call attention to particular aspects of the reality described, and logically, direct attention away from other aspects. As put by Entman: “most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations,

11 Darczewska and Zochowski 2015, 13–14.

12 Darczewska and Zochowski 2015, 14.

13 Cited in Ramptom and Stauber 2003, 114.

14 Holmstrom 2015, 120.

15 Entman 1993, 53.

and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience”.<sup>16</sup> The frames contained in a text – as a single unit of analysis – are manifested in the “presence or absence of certain key words, stock phrases, stereotypical images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements”.<sup>17</sup>

News reports produced by RIA Novosti are examples of a framing technique that may be characterized as disinformation. A typical report by RIA Novosti consists of two sections. The first is the actual content of the news: a report on an event or a statement related to the conflict in Ukraine (in this case). The second section consists of one or two identical or almost identical paragraphs repeated in most of the news products. It is this latter part of the news report that is used in framing a particular instance (event or statement) as a part of a Russian metanarrative. This second part is here called a *disinformation element*. The analysis of this disinformation element will provide new knowledge about the evolvement of the metanarrative(s) over time, the intensity of the disinformation and the variations in the disinformation produced. A useful source for tracing change in the Russian narratives is the “chronology of the conflict in Ukraine” produced by RIA Novosti. The first version of chronology was published on 13 May, 2014. It was followed by two other chronologies titled the “main events in Ukraine in 10-year-period” and the “main events in the conflict”, published towards the end of 2014.<sup>18</sup>

We will apply Entman’s definition of frames to identify the metanarratives of Russia’s propaganda and disinformation about the conflict in Ukraine. Two general observations can be made on the basis of our preliminary analysis of the research material. First, multiple disinformation elements are used simultaneously. However, the appearance of distinctive vocabulary and/or specific disinformation elements varies, and it can be shown that certain elements predominate in specific phases of the conflict. Furthermore, as for the case studies, we presuppose that there is a thematic similarity between the metanarratives used in the Russian domestic context and those targeted at the foreign audience. This will be ascertained by our analysis of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements and comments during the conflict. However, there might exist additional,

<sup>16</sup> Entman 1993, 54; see also Kenez 1985, 253.

<sup>17</sup> Entman 1993, 52.

<sup>18</sup> RIA Novosti 13 May, 2014.



more country-specific metanarratives, too. Finding this out will be one of the main tasks of the present research.

In order to map out how the metanarratives and terms of distraction are used, we chose four key events of the conflict and decided to examine Russian strategic deception in relation to them. These events are:

- 1) the official annexation of the Crimea on 16 March 2014
- 2) the burning of the Trade Unions Building in Odessa on 2 May 2014
- 3) the downing of the MH17 flight on 17 July 2014
- 4) the emergence of the humanitarian catastrophe narrative in August 2014 and the massive involvement of Russian troops in the fighting from 22 August to 5 September 2014 when the first Minsk Agreement was signed.

The choice of the Crimean operation as one of the events does not require explanation here. However, the second major event, i.e. our choice of the burning of the Trade Unions Building in Odessa rather than the beginning of the fighting in the Donbass region, needs to be explained. According to our preliminary analysis, the tragic events in Odessa were framed as *genocide* at the outset, and this narrative has appeared regularly in the Russian official parlance since then. However, this event was overshadowed by the escalation of the conflict in the Donbass region, which we will analyse in depth in Chapter 4. For the case studies, we decided to choose an event that did not become a major turning point in the conflict in order to include in our analysis issues that seem not to have worked in the Russian disinformation campaign.

The third event, the downing of the MH17 flight on 17 July 2014, has already been widely covered elsewhere, and the main disinformation elements were described in the introduction (Chapter 1). The fourth event chosen for this analysis is the controversy over the Russian “humanitarian convoy”. According to the Russian official version, the Russian government sent a “humanitarian convoy” to the city of Luhansk on 12 August 2014 to help civilians in South-Eastern Ukraine

suffering from attacks on their cities by the Ukrainian army.<sup>19</sup> Russia claimed that the convoy's entry into Ukraine was coordinated with the International Red Cross and Ukrainian Government, although both denied that this was the case. Russia confirmed its readiness to help the separatist regions with humanitarian aid already in May 2014, but has consistently denied the supply of military equipment and participation of Russian regular armed forces in the conflict, notwithstanding consistent evidence of them.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding all four events, the Russian narratives will be analysed as delivered to each and every country studied. In order to have a manageable size of sample, the analysis will cover texts produced during and one week following each key event. We assume that this time period will be sufficient for tracing the appearance of the major narratives. The second phase will consist of the content analysis of the texts. Firstly, we will identify distinctive vocabulary used in specific metanarratives. Analysing the "key terminology" is particularly important because they are frequently used in both the Russian domestic discourse and the disinformation and propaganda activities conducted abroad, though their frequency varies. For example, the terms *banderovtsy*, *kievskaya hunta* or *Novorossiya* summarize the main direction (of argumentation) of a specific metanarrative. An analysis of the appearance of these terms across the sample, i.e. the frequency and variability of their use, will provide new information on the scale and intensity of Russian propaganda and disinformation in the target country and in the domestic sphere.

Thereafter, in the third phase of analysis, the samples will be categorized in accordance with the channels used in distributing messages. The main channels are categorized into three levels: first, statements by official Russian representatives that have appeared in the Russian media and have thereafter been reflected in the local media; second, the mainstream local media; and third, the local blogosphere.

19 Statement No. 1956-22-08-2014.

20 President Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated on 30 May 2014 that Russia would provide humanitarian aid to Eastern Ukraine. *ITAR-TASS* 30 May 2014; see also US Department of State, 14 July 2014, for a statement on Russia delivering military equipment to the separatists.

**Level 1.** Official statements of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID); the Kremlin statements; statements by the members of the Russian Duma, the Government and the representative of the RF in the UN (Churkin).

**Level 2.** The mainstream media of the target country. The three main local mass media producers; the main TV broadcasting company's website; the website of one or two main newspapers.

**Level 3.** The local blogosphere. Identification of the main sites for distributing pro- or anti-Russian messages; emphasis on the content of the articles published, not on the comments (.i.e. trolling will not be analysed).

We will analyse the empirical material consisting of official statements (the first level) and reports published by the Russian state media using the tools described above, and on this basis, we will describe Russian metanarratives about the conflict (Chapter 4). The pre-formulated metanarratives will provide a basis for the analysis of level 2 and level 3 data gathered from the country case studies (Chapter 5). However, in some cases, e.g. Poland, the focus will be on level 3 material, whereas e.g. in Finland, the empirical data will include reports published by the country's main newspaper. The reasons for these differences will be explained separately in each case study. The organization of the empirical research material in accordance with the three levels will be described in more detail below.

### 3.3.

#### EMPIRICAL RESEARCH MATERIAL

Our empirical research is organized in accordance with the three main channels identified above. The main body of empirical material in the first category (level) consists of official statements, speeches and other information that express the official Russian position on the conflict. This category includes speeches by President Putin and other key decision-makers, as well as statements by the members of the Russian Duma and the Government. Most often, President Putin's

statements have signalled a new turn in Russian policy, whereas the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been mostly used as a channel consolidating a specific metanarrative. Two categories of documents will be analysed from the Ministry: official *statements* “regarding the situation in Ukraine” and *comments* issued in response to specific events or statements by Western governments, most notably the US State Department. According to our calculations, during 2014 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued over 300 comments on the CIS theme, which is ten times more than in the previous year (38 comments). This is instructive of the scale and intensity with which this channel has been used during the conflict.

The second category (level) of empirical material includes TV, radio and press reports published on the four key events. In each case, we will use the Integrum search engine to extract a set of texts (media reports) in which a certain word or words are used based on a preliminary list of key words (a distinctive vocabulary). The Integrum does not include all Russian news agencies, but it contains a representative sample of central and local newspapers and news agencies, central and local TV and radio broadcasts, and the internet sites of central and local newspapers and TV and radio broadcasts. The search results will provide an overview of the scale of the usage of the words (each instance of a certain code word appearing in the Russian media) and the fluctuation in its use over time (variance that can be explained by specific events).

To understand the context in which specific narratives were designed to work for example in Crimea, it is important to note that Russia has created a situation where it has total information domination in the region. A Russian special operations team captured the Crimean critical communications infrastructure during the early stages of the operation, thus making it possible for Russia to control the information space in the region.<sup>21</sup> The state’s control of the media space is less complete elsewhere in Russia, but it still provides an effective basis for the manipulation of public perceptions about the conflict. Limitations on the freedom of expression in Russia and narrowing of the space for criticizing the Kremlin views are well documented in previous research.

21 For example Jaitner and Mattson (2014) provide a detailed description of the destruction of fibre-optic cables and the seizure of Urktelecom offices in the early phases of the operation. See also Rácz 2015. One of the propaganda books on the Crimean “return” contains an interview with D. Polonskii, the Crimean Minister of Internal Affairs, Information and Telecommunication, where he describes how the media landscape changed completely within a couple of days. Krigorev and Kovitidi 2014.

A study published in January 2016 by PEN American Center summarizes the situation: “the result of this campaign to control and confine the contours of free expression and to populate it with ‘approved’ ideas has been to limit thought and discourse, induce self-censorship, close avenues of public engagement, raise the risks of dissent, and attempt to subordinate universal norms such as the right to freedom of expression under newly constructed and state-imposed ‘Russian values’ that emphasize a strong state, conservative moral values, and traditional relationships over universal, individual rights”.<sup>22</sup>

Against this overall context, it is also important to note that according to previous research, the importance of internet (blogs, special-purpose news sites, fake news sites, twitter and other social media platforms) as a channel of propaganda and disinformation is growing and the influence of printed media declining.<sup>23</sup> The state TV (RT) remains the most important channel for influencing public perceptions in Russia and abroad. One important channel, which has not yet been widely studied, is book publishing, which has flourished during the conflict. Immediately after (and most likely already before) the Crimean operation, various books and pamphlets were published by known and previously unknown publishing companies. The propagandistic function of this material is clearly expressed in the titles of the books, such as *Genocide of Russians in Ukraine. Why the West is silent* (2014), *Banderovskaya Hunta* (2014), *A new Russia arising from the ashes* (2015) and *Igor Strelkov: The defence of Donbass* (2014).<sup>24</sup> This material would deserve a study of its own, but here we analyse the books and pamphlets in comparison with statements by Russian officials during the conflict (level 1).

22 PEN American Center 2016, 4.

23 Belousov 2012, 57–58.

24 Polikarpov 2014; Kochetkov 2015; Karaulov 2015; Plehanov 2014.

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# **Part II**

# **NARRATIVES**



4



## 4. The Metanarratives of Russian Strategic Deception

Katri Pynnöniemi

### 4.1.

#### CODE WORDS ROOTED IN SOVIET HISTORY AND PROPAGANDA

Political language, in contrast to everyday, common language is constitutive of the political system to which it is related. The Soviet power, for example, would have been unthinkable without the “Bolshevist words” created before and immediately after the October Revolution. The ingenuity of the Bolshevik *slovotvorchestvo*, creation of new words, was in the ritualization of political language. Indeed, the words *kolhoz*, “collective farm”, *narkom*, “minister”, *udarnik*, “shock worker”, evoked images that were independent of their real significance.<sup>1</sup> The power of propaganda in this case rests upon an arbitrary association between words and images whereby “any rationality is excluded from their mutual articulation”. Thus, “reason and arguments are incapable of combating certain words and formulas”.<sup>2</sup> This was especially the case during the Stalinist period, although these methods of indoctrination were also employed in later Soviet years.<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet methods of mass mobilization emerged not by design, but “followed from a peculiar combination of circumstances, from the mentality of the Bolsheviks and from the tasks that they had to face”, explains Peter Kenez<sup>4</sup>. The basic problem, and also an opportunity,

1 Susiluoto 1990, 71–73.

2 Gustave Le Bon, cited in Laclau 2005, 22.

3 Feldman 2015.

4 Kenez 1985, 14.

that the Bolsheviks had to encounter was the backwardness of the masses: the illiteracy of the proletariat and peasantry. The solution was found in indoctrination and the ritualization of political language. The case of “Pavlik Morozov” is instructive for understanding the depth and scale of the indoctrination. The myth of the hero-informer is a story of a boy who denounces his father and is killed by anti-Soviet traitors. Everything in this story is forged. Yet statues were erected for “Pavlik” and streets named after him. The story was recycled in Soviet agitation materials to support Soviet ethics as a separate class of human morality. Eventually, the myth outlives the Soviet Union, assuming a surreal form in subsequent investigations into the ‘real facts’ about the Soviet propaganda about “Pavlik”.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of the Ukraine conflict, the myth of Russia’s non-involvement in the conflict is created and sustained with a skilful manipulation of mythological, conspiratological and metaphorical *resources* that carry emotionally and historically loaded meanings and references. The most important narrative resource in this undertaking is the “Great Patriotic War lexicon”.<sup>6</sup> The code words borrowed from this lexicon include *karatel*, “fascism”, “Nazi”, *banderovtsy* and “partisan”.

The term *karatel* (punisher) activates the historical memory of Nazi atrocities against civilians on occupied territory.<sup>7</sup> A statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry on April 28, 2014, refers to rumours in the media about the construction of “fascist concentration camps” in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> Such direct references to the Nazi era are not used frequently, at least in official texts. The use of this word creates negative connotations towards Ukrainian authorities in general, and Ukrainian armed forces and different volunteer battalions in particular. For example, on May 4, 2014, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the Ukrainian armed forces of “ethnic cleansing”:

While Ukrainian punishers (*karateli*) are conducting their operation in Eastern Ukraine carrying out cleansing in some populated areas and blocking in

5 Druzhnikov 2001, 209–211.

6 Gaufman 2015, 153–154.

7 Gaufman 2015, 154

8 Statement No. 1030–28–04–2014.



other populated areas, there is an actual information blockade regarding the tragic events in this country in the West.<sup>9</sup>

Similar phraseology is used in propagandistic publications and reports that document the key events and phenomena in the conflict from the Russian viewpoint. A special “Library of Antimaidan” has been established for this purpose, and it claims to provide “documented evidence” of atrocities conducted by the “neo-Nazi junta”. In this context, the term *karatel* is used as a synonym of “occupation force”, meaning the Ukrainian armed forces. These kinds of texts aim to create an impression of ‘unity’ among the Eastern Ukrainian regions:

Donetsk, Harkov, Luhansk and other regions of the South-East of Ukraine rose in united front in defence of their Motherland (*Rodina*) and their relatives from *karateli-okkupanty*.<sup>10</sup>

The above text also refers to another code word – *banderovtsy*. This term is derived from Stepan Bandera, a controversial figure in Ukrainian history, who fought the Soviet Army during the Second World War. The Russian media began to use the word *banderovtsy* during the Maidan Uprising with reference to Ukrainians in general and pro-Ukrainian activists in particular. For example, Mihail Margelov, the head of the Federation Council’s International Relations Committee, stated on February 26 that the “situation in Ukraine is reminiscent of the Arab Spring – the demonstration is started by one person but soon extremists will take over”. Margelov emphasized that “Maidan” does not in fact represent the majority opinion in Ukraine, but is only a gathering of militant *banderovtsy*.<sup>11</sup>

9 Comment No. 1088-04-05-2014. A reference is here made to the tragic events in Odessa on May 2, 2014; for a similar wording, see also Statement No. 515-11-03-2014; Statement No. 565-15-03-2014; Statement No. 1851-04-08-2014; Statement No. 1956-22-08-2014; Comment No. 1093-05-05-2014 on “punitive actions of Ukrainian security forces” against “peaceful civilians”; Statement No. 2458-23-10-2014 on the “barbaric nature of the punitive operation undertaken by the Kiev authorities” vis-à-vis a Human Rights Watch report on the use of cluster munitions by Ukrainian armed forces in the Donetsk Region.

10 Kochetkov 2015.

11 *Channel One* 26 February 2014. On the same occasion, it was reported that a special committee on Ukraine was formed in the Council of Federation with the task of monitoring the situation in Crimea.

*Rossiiskaya Gazeta* reported on April 3, 2014, that 82 percent of respondents to a public opinion poll in Russia regard *banderovtsy* as a real danger to the Russian-speaking population, and 76 percent of respondents saw them as “protégés of Western politicians”. The majority of respondents (91%) defined *banderovtsy* as a semi-fascist movement terrorizing Russians, Jews and other nationalities.<sup>12</sup> However, in the context of the above-mentioned propaganda book, an explicit reference is made to Aleksei Balabanov’s famous film *Brother 2* from the early 2000s<sup>13</sup>. A phrase from the film – “You are not a brother to me, *svolots’ banderovskaya!*” – is cited as an example of “the right viewpoint to the conflict and what is at stake in it”. The pro-Ukrainian forces are fascists and Nazi collaborators, and thus create an existential threat to Russians living in Ukraine and to *Russian civilization* in general, the book asserts.<sup>14</sup>

The term “partisan” is mostly used to distinguish pro-Russian fighters from regular Russian (and Ukrainian) troops operating in the region. In a report published by RIA Novosti on April 14, 2014, a Russian journalist observes the clothing of local people and argues that they are “partisans” and not professional saboteurs (*diversanty*). This distinction is based on Soviet terminology whereby a partisan is a volunteer, a defender of people’s interests, and does not belong to the regular army.<sup>15</sup> The word partisan is important for it is used to sustain the myth of Russian non-involvement in the war. This myth rests upon the claim that while there are Russian “volunteers” (*dobrovoltsy*) fighting among pro-Russian fighters (*opolchentsy*, resistance fighters), there are no Russian regular armed forces in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> The fact that several groups of fighters are involved in the war has obviously helped to maintain the illusion of Russia’s non-involvement. These groups include ideologically motivated Russian nationalists, for example the radical right-wing Cossack organization “Wolves’ Company” that borrowed its name from the Cossacks fighting for the White cause during the Russian Civil War, as well as Orthodox activists, petty criminals and local disadvantaged young people.<sup>17</sup>

12 Novoselova 2014.

13 Literary critic and cultural historian Mark Lipovetsky argues that Balabanov’s film can be interpreted as a “straightforward manifestation of xenophobic ideology, yet leaves open the opportunity to perceive it as a mockery of post-Soviet nationalism”. Lipovetsky 2013, 32.

14 Kochetkov 2015, 2–3.

15 Feldman 2015, 456–457.

16 Putin 2014c; Putin 2015; Mitrokhin 2015, 221.

17 Mitrokhin 2015, 228–229.

In addition to the specific terminology extracted from the Great Patriotic War lexicon, the official rhetoric has instrumentalized the *memory* of the war in its interpretation of the current conflict. On several occasions, the Russian Foreign Ministry has issued explicit warnings to Ukrainian authorities stating that the “besmearing of historical monuments in Ukraine is a mockery of the memory of the warriors, who were the liberators of Ukraine”<sup>18</sup>. Such statements can be interpreted in the framework of contemporary Russian cultural-historical policy in which the purity of the memory of the Great Patriotic War has a central place.

#### 4.2.

##### TERMS OF DISTRACTION:

##### PROVOCATION, HUMANITARIAN CONVOY, RUSSOPHOBE

The repertoire of words and narratives that serve the purpose of distraction is almost endless. The three terms discussed here have proved particularly useful in the context of the Ukraine conflict. The term *provocation* belongs to the traditional repertoire of distraction. It works upon the assumption of a threat from outside that may manifest itself in a series of provocations targeted against the regime’s stability. The term is rooted in Soviet political language, which sought to denounce potential critical voices by framing them as *provocations* or instances of *sabotage* by foreign agents or fifth columnists. This type of narrative construction is particularly well suited to consolidating a narrative of an active West *provoking* a passive Russia to defend itself. Consequently, the dynamics of the conflict are turned upside down: the attacker becomes the victim and the victim is accused of starting the conflict. The term provocation has been explicitly used in arguments that the West is behind the conflict and in connection with the escalation of the fighting in the Donbass region in August 2014.

For example, on April 8, 2014, the Russian Foreign Ministry accused the Ukrainian internal troops and alleged foreign mercenaries of “forceful suppression of protests by the population” and called it a “provocation” possibly leading to a civil war.<sup>19</sup> Earlier, on March 7, 2014,

18 Comment No. 389-27-02-2014. In early April, the Ministry issued a statement condemning an “act of vandalism in Sumy” in Ukraine, which it characterized as “spitting in the face of veterans of the Great Patriotic War”. Statement No. 742-03-04-2014, 3 April 2014; see also Vernitskii 25 February 2014.

19 Statement No. 790-08-04-2014.

the Ministry accused the EU of its “provocative support of anti-government manifestations on Maidan”.<sup>20</sup> Towards the end of June, the Ministry issued several statements in which it identified alleged cross-border violations by the Ukrainian military as “provocative actions”<sup>21</sup> or “direct provocations” that aim to “prevent the implementation of the Geneva agreements and de-escalation of the internal Ukrainian conflict”<sup>22</sup>. The verbal threats materialized in late July when a supposed targeted bombardment of Russian territory was used as a pretext for “constant artillery and rocket fire from Russian territory” against the Ukrainian army.<sup>23</sup> The problem with the use of this term was that it is based on the assumption of two active participants in the conflict: an *agent provocateur* and the target that reacts to the provocation. Therefore, to conceal the presence of Russian armed forces in the region, a more subtle deception scheme was needed. The “humanitarian catastrophe” narrative provided a convenient cover for action: the delivery of humanitarian aid and Russian weaponry to the region.<sup>24</sup> Evidence of these imports was even noticed by Western officials at the time.<sup>25</sup>

On August 5, 2014, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that Russia was going to organize “an international humanitarian mission for the South-East of Ukraine”<sup>26</sup>. In subsequent commentaries, Russian official statements highlighted three aspects: the plight of civilians in the region, the cooperative and transparent nature of Russia’s intentions and that the aid would be delivered to civilians. Already earlier, in connection with the burning of the trade union house in Odessa on May 2, 2014, the Ministry had issued a comment arguing that “humanitarian disaster” was approaching in the “blocked cities”

20 Comment No. 485-07-03-2014.

21 Statement No. 1422-14-06-2014; Statement No. 1418-13-06-2014; Statement No. 1570-28-06-2014; Statement No. 1688-13-07-2014. It should be noted that the Russian military doctrine in force at the time (the 2010 version) defines “a show of military force with provocative objectives in the course of exercises on the territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation or its allies” as a military threat. The word “provocative” has been removed from the newest version of the doctrine, which was accepted in December 2014. Russian Military Doctrine 2010, paragraph 9 d; see Pynnöniemi and Mashiri 2015.

22 Statement No. 1489-20-06-2014; see *RT* 20 June 2014.

23 Mitrokhin 2015, 241; for reporting on cross-border shelling, see Borger and Higgins 17 February 2015, and a Bellingcat investigation released in February 2015, Bellingcat 2015; OSCE Monitoring Mission 7 Aug 2014.

24 Mitrokhin 2015, 245.

25 Kramer and Gordon 2014.

26 Comment No. 1862-05-08-2014.

of Eastern Ukraine.<sup>27</sup> On August 22, 2014, a final warning “against any attempts to thwart this purely humanitarian mission” was issued.<sup>28</sup> The next day, Russia accused Western countries of “hysteria” and “cock-and-bull stories” on account of their critical stand to Russia’s deployment of a “humanitarian convoy” to Ukraine, and suggested that Ukrainian politicians were committing a “war crime” for wilfully impeding relief supplies as provided under the Geneva Conventions.<sup>29</sup> Russia claimed that the entry of the convoy into Ukraine was coordinated with the International Red Cross and Ukrainian Government, although both deny that this was the case. By March 2016, altogether fifty convoys, consisting of over hundred trucks each, have crossed the border into Ukraine, allegedly delivering humanitarian assistance to the locals, but reportedly supplying illegal military groups and Russian regular troops with weapons and ammunition.<sup>30</sup>

The terms *anti-Russian* and *Russophobic* have become part of the official parlance. The Russian Foreign Ministry condemned the dismantling of war monuments in Ukraine and described it as “barbaric Russophobic action”<sup>31</sup>. In its reaction to a statement by US Secretary of State John Kerry, the Ministry stated that the “government of champions” (meaning the Ukrainian Government formed in the aftermath of the Maidan revolution) has announced a “war against the Russian language and everything associated with Russia”.<sup>32</sup> President Vladimir Putin has used the term Russophobia in his speeches, emphasizing that “the West’s stoking Russophobic sentiment in Ukraine could lead to disaster”<sup>33</sup>. Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on the other hand, has characterized Russophobia “as a feature of the foreign policy of certain countries”, which “can be cured” through dialogue.<sup>34</sup> The European Parliament resolution of April 17, 2014, on the third stage of sanctions against Russia sparked a sharp reaction from the Foreign Ministry’s press department. “There is nothing to comment here”, the spokesperson lamented, describing the resolution as a “collective Russophobic psychosis experienced

27 Comment No. 1093-05-05-2014.

28 Statement No. 1956-22-08-2014.

29 Statement No. 1966-23-08-2014; No. 1965-23-08-2014.

30 Luhn 2014.

31 Comment 364-25-02-2014.

32 Statement No. 426-03-03-2014; Statement 396-27-02-2014.

33 Putin in an interview to the German TV channel ARD on 17 Nov 2014, cited in Darczewska and Zochowski 2015, 15.

34 Cited at Darczewska and Zochowski 2015, 15.

by the outgoing European Parliament”<sup>35</sup>. Earlier, the Ministry had used similar language to describe the situation in the Ukrainian Parliament. A statement issued on April 11, 2014, argued that “the West demonstrates no reaction to the Russophobic, chauvinistic and extremist appeals in the Verkhovna Rada”<sup>36</sup>.

Ukrainian researcher Alexandr Osipian has earlier argued that the framing of Maidan activists as anti-Russian and Russophobic has been made on purpose to render “any attempt to carry out similar protests in Russia unthinkable” and to automatically classify anybody speaking in support of Ukrainian Maidan as a traitor.<sup>37</sup> Thus, in the Russian domestic context, a citizen who is critical towards the official line or expresses sympathy for countries in conflict with Russia is now deemed a ‘Russophobe’.<sup>38</sup> This is important, since the “stigmatizing effect” created by the constant use of political slogans, labels and clichés is extended from the purely domestic sphere to the outside world: “the term has become a key word explaining the political and psychological motives for the rejection of everything Russian”. Furthermore, “this stereotype stigmatises individuals who are ‘anti-state and ideologically alien’, and helps to ‘alienate’ them from the body politic”.<sup>39</sup>

Although not all the code words are used with similar intensity, our analysis of the research material shows that the key phrases are recycled and repeated in both official statements and other publications and commentaries. Furthermore, as was shown in the discussion above, the distinctive vocabulary is rooted in Soviet political language use modified to the present-day circumstances. The historical, mythical and fantastical narrative resources are combined in *metanarratives* that explain the meaning of the conflict for the Russian and foreign public. Each metanarrative has its unique features, but they are all structured along passive/active, unspoken/spoken, friend/foe dichotomies. The closer analysis of the metanarratives presented in the next section is organized to reflect the dichotomic nature of the Russian official rhetoric.

35 Comment No. 919-18-04-2014.

36 Comment No. 845-11-04-2014.

37 Osipian 2015, 114.

38 Darczewska and Zochowski 2015, 15.

39 Darczewska and Zochowski 2015, 15.

### 4.3. FRAMING RUSSIA AS A PASSIVE OUTSIDER IN THE CONFLICT

#### 4.3.1.

##### *The Coup d'état in Ukraine*

The dynamics of the conflict between the Maidan activists and government forces changed on February 18, 2014. On that day, the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) launched the so-called anti-terrorist operation against Maidan with the result that 16 activists and 11 police officers died. On February 20, the “self-defence forces” at Maidan attacked the police and 67 people were shot dead and many more injured. The next day, President Yanukovich signed an agreement with the opposition. The negotiations towards the agreement between the two parties were facilitated by the foreign ministers of Germany, Poland and France, as well as the Human Rights Commissioner of Russia, Vladimir Lukin, who abstained from signing the “February 21 Agreement”.

In the Russian media, the “February 21 Agreement” was framed as both a symbol of Western failure and inaction in preventing the conflict from escalating, and a blueprint for a peaceful settlement between the conflicting parties. The symbolic capital attached to the agreement remained unchanged in the subsequent stages of the conflict.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, abstaining from signing the agreement allowed Russia later to claim that it was used by its “external sponsors as a cover only to promote the scenario of change of Ukrainian power by force by creating ‘facts on the ground’”.<sup>41</sup> The claim that the West was creating facts on the ground was voiced in several official commentaries and statements during this phase of the conflict. For example, on February 17, 2014, the official representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Lukashevich, issued a comment “regarding the statement of the U.S. Department of State about events in Ukraine”. The comment started by arguing:

40 Statement 396-27-02-2014; for statements issued during the escalation of the conflict in the Donbass region, see e.g. Statement No. 1011-25-04-2014.

41 Statement No. 361-24-02-2014, 24 February 2014; according to the Russian representative in the negotiations, Vladimir Lukin, Russia's decision not to sign the document was due to questions and problems related to the political subjects whom the agreement concerns. *Channel One* 21 February 2014.

We again see that the United States, hiding behind appeals not to prevent the Ukrainian people of making a free choice, are in fact attempting to impose a ‘western vector’ on their development, dictating to the authorities of a sovereign country, what they should do.<sup>42</sup>

On February 18, when the SBU started the above-mentioned “anti-terrorist operation” against the Maidan activists, a Russian Foreign Ministry commentary framed the situation as a result of Western governments’ inaction and tacit support for radicals in Ukraine. The escalation was:

A direct result of the connivance policy by those Western politicians and European structures which have been turning a blind eye to aggressive actions of radical forces in Ukraine from the very beginning, thus stimulating the escalation and provocations against legitimate power.<sup>43</sup>

“The opposition is already out of control”, the comment continued, describing the activists’ behaviour as “a sincere desecration of the order of law, and common sense”. In conclusion, the Ministry addressed the opposition and appealed to it to “refrain from threats and ultimatums and to establish a substantial dialogue with authorities for purposes of stopping the big crisis in the country.”<sup>44</sup> The next day, on February 19, 2014, the Ministry reframed the situation by stating that “the criminal activities of radical forces and the opposition” provided “evidence of an attempt to seize power by force”.<sup>45</sup>

On the same day, on February 19, the metanarrative of state coup was officially formulated by Putin’s press secretary Dmitry Peskov in

42 Comment No. 296-17-02-2014; later, on March 28, the Ministry issued another statement in which it claimed that instead of shifting responsibility for the escalation of tensions to Russia, the crisis has been driven by “gross interference by several Western countries in Ukrainian affairs”, including the “anti-constitutional change of power in Kiev, breakdown of the system of state order, including at regional and local level, incapacity of law enforcement bodies, outrages by extremists and fascists, massive violations of human rights, and threats to national language minorities”. Comment No. 678-28-03-2014.

43 Comment No. 307-18-02-2014.

44 Comment No. 307-18-02-2014.

45 Statement No. 313-19-02-2014; in its reporting, RIA Novosti referred to the Maidan activists as an “aggressive crowd” and “radicals”. RIA Novosti 20 February 2014a.



a statement broadcasted by Channel One . Peskov stated that “Moscow considers that what is happening in Ukraine is an attempt to stage a state coup”.<sup>46</sup> In the same news report, the narrative about the state coup is combined with a suggestion that the West has indirectly supported radical opposition forces in Ukraine and is unable to see “that opposition is to blame for all violent deeds”<sup>47</sup> in the course of the conflict. A couple of days later, Channel One reported that as a result of the “violent change of power”, Ukraine now had two capitals: Kyiv and Kharkiv<sup>48</sup>. The regional leaders of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea were ready to “take responsibility for the defence of constitutional order of their territories”<sup>49</sup>. To support this narrative, former President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich was put in front of TV cameras on February 22, 2014, where he announced that the situation in Ukraine was “a state coup” (*gosudarstvennyi perevorot*) and that he was not going to resign.<sup>50</sup>

Factually, the Russian narrative about the anti-constitutional coup in Ukraine was not entirely without grounds. Article 111 of the Constitution of Ukraine contains detailed regulations on the impeachment of the president. However, the removal of President Yanukovich from office on February 22, 2014, was indeed not in line with the procedure prescribed in the Constitution. Hence, the legal legitimacy of his direct successor, Interim President Oleksandr Turchynov, was at least questionable. Moreover, the legitimacy of the Interim Government was not solid either. Even though it had been confirmed by the Parliament, the legitimacy of which was untouched by the crisis (i.e. the post-Euromaidan reshuffling of fractions did not change the fact that the Parliament had been elected legitimately back in 2012), its members were still appointed by the interim president, whose position was not fully legitimate. However, even taking all these caveats into account, the fact that Yanukovich fled the country created a situation where any formal procedures of impeachment became invalid. Since Yanukovich was not able to carry out his presidential duties, the establishment of a transitional interim authority could be

46 *Channel One* 19 February 2014.

47 *Channel One* 19 February 2014.

48 Ukrainian names used in the Report are transliterated to English according to their originals in Ukrainian. The sole exception is when Russian sources are quoted, where the Russian equivalents of Ukrainian names are used, thus they serve as basis for transliteration.

49 Emeljanov 22 February 2014.

50 RIA Novosti 22 February 2014b; *Channel One* aired Yanukovich's statement and linked it to the radical opposition, mistakes made by President Yanukovich and interference from the West, Botuhov 22 February 2014; Statement No. 361-24-02-2014; RIA Novosti 24 February 2014.

justified. This explanation is taken as a starting point in interpretations other than Russian ones. The legitimacy crisis was finally solved by the election of President Petro Poroshenko on May 25, 2014.

President Putin’s first press conference during the conflict was held on March 4, 2014. It was a turning point after which the state coup narrative was firmly anchored to the Russian mass media and public discourse (Figure 4.1). There was only one possible interpretation of the events in Kyiv, Putin argued: they constituted a violent “anti-constitutional coup”. During the interview, Putin emphasized that Ukraine did not have legitimate authorities and the country was in chaos:

The victory of radicals resulted in a bacchanalia (*razgul*) of banditism, neo-Nazism and repression of those who do not support Maidan.<sup>51</sup>

Figure 4.1.  
The number of times the term “anti-constitutional coup” was mentioned in the Russian central press, March 2014.  
Source: Integrum.

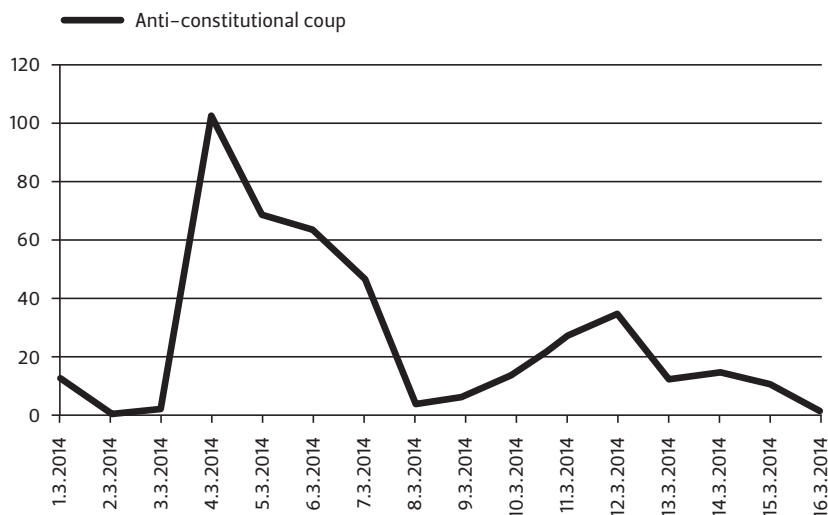


Figure 4.1 shows the effect of Putin’s statement as a peak in the use of the term “anti-constitutional coup” in the Russian media<sup>52</sup>. The Integrum search engine does not provide a complete picture of the

51 *Vesti.ru* 9 March 2014; see also *TASS* 22 July 2014.

52 The Integrum search engine includes articles from major federal newspapers, regional newspapers and the central TV and radio. Among the main news agencies included are RIA Novosti, ITAR-TASS and RBK, but for example Interfax, Channel One and RT are not included in the service.

Russian media space, but it does show that changes in the usage of key terminology are systematic rather than haphazard. The data compiled from Integrum (Figure 4.2) illustrate how specific terminology appears in the media (to support the policy line of state coup) and disappears when the intensity of the conflict subsides. This result is compatible with earlier research; for example Elizaveta Gaufman has noted that “the framing of the conflict was remarkably similar across different media, with the same discursive features present on federal state tv and in social media alike”<sup>53</sup>. However, an analysis of the data also shows that the metanarratives are not distributed evenly across the Russian media space. Some channels are used more intensely to recycle and distribute the chosen messages. The RIA Novosti news agency is clearly one of the most important and active channels used for consolidating the metanarratives and thus forming and manipulating the public opinion inside, and to some extent, outside Russia.

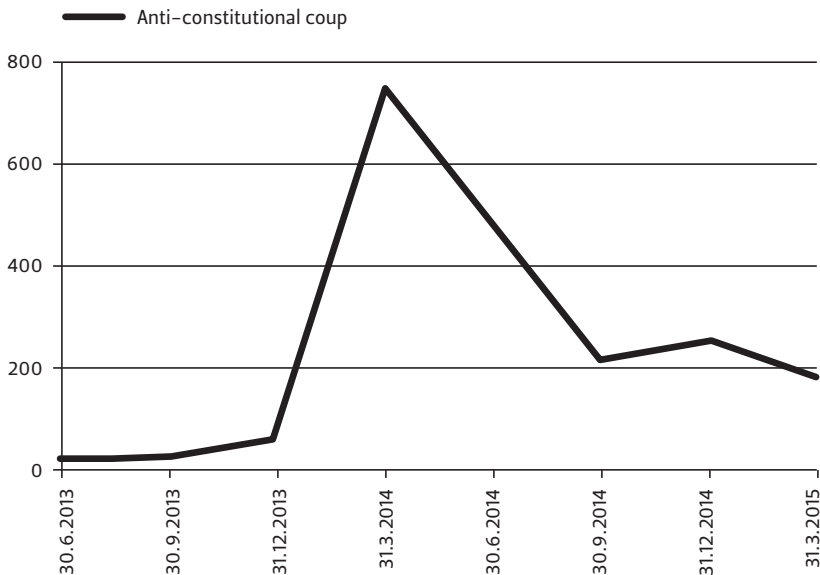


Figure 4.2. The number of times the term “anti-constitutional coup” was mentioned in the Russian central press. June 2013 – March 2015  
Source: Integrum.

On the basis of an analysis of RIA Novosti’s reporting during the most intense period of conflict at Maidan (February 17 to 22, 2014), two complementary disinformation elements can be distinguished. In the first instance, the situation is framed with reference to “major street riots” taking place at the centre of Kyiv. The Maidan activists

53 Gaufman 2015, 149.

are described as an “aggressive crowd” and “radicals”, who throw “Molotov cocktails at the police”.<sup>54</sup> However, at the same time, RIA Novosti’s reports mention the “opposition that demands change of constitution” and negotiates with President Yanukovich. Here reference is made to the agreement signed between the opposition and president on February 21 to “resolve the crisis”.<sup>55</sup> Both of these narratives carry approximately similar weight in the reporting and are compatible with the overall description of the events in the Russian media in general.

After Yanukovich had fled from Ukraine, RIA Novosti’s disinformation element took another turn. In the first phase, RIA Novosti’s reporting on Ukraine included a statement that “there has been a change of power in Ukraine during the previous weekend”<sup>56</sup>. This initial formulation did not frame the situation as a state coup, as Channel One’s report did.<sup>57</sup> An elaborated version of the RIA disinformation element appeared two days before Putin’s press conference. In this second phase, the situation was explicitly framed as a state coup: “there has been a change of power in Ukraine on February 22 that has features of a state coup”<sup>58</sup>. This formulation was used extensively until around August 2014 when it disappeared from RIA Novosti’s reports.

#### 4.3.2.

##### *Western Geopolitical Expansion to Russia’s Sphere of Influence*

*We should stop looking at the US and Europe.*

*They shamelessly spit in our face.*

*We should take care of ourselves!*<sup>59</sup>

The representation of the conflict follows a binary logic where the opposite sides are a *passive Russia* and an *active West*. While the passive Russia frame is a muted one – it is not expressed explicitly but can be traced in the silences and gaps in media reports and official statements – the active West frame is highlighted at every turn of events. The narrative construction of the active West is a story about indifference, inaction and self-interest. The metanarrative of the active

54 RIA Novosti 20 February 2014b.

55 RIA Novosti 22 February 2014a

56 RIA Novosti 26 February 2014.

57 Emelyanov 2014; also Botuhov 2014.

58 RIA Novosti 2 March, 2014; see also RIA Novosti 21 November 2014.

59 *Channel One* 6 March 2014.

West aims at producing and consolidating negative sentiments towards the situation in Ukraine and in particular Western actions during the conflict. A key term in this regard is *geopolitics*. The West is accused of *geopolitical expansion* and of prioritizing geopolitics over the interests of the Ukrainian people. The very notion of expansion includes the non-verbalized idea that the West is entering into an area that Russia perceives as belonging to its sphere of interest, and thus, it is suggested that Western support for Ukraine is an anti-Russian geopolitical act.

The term geopolitics is used in framing the conflict as a competition between the West and Russia. The mixture of fantastical story lines and more serious argumentation draw from the same source: the reinterpretation of the Soviet collapse as an illegal victory of the West. The symbol of this betrayal is the enlargement of NATO closer to Russia's borders. As a narrative resource, the 'illegal victory' is used flexibly to underline who is to blame for the crisis in Ukraine (the West), as Putin did in a major interview for the Russian Channel Rossiya24 on June 19, 2015. In this interview, Putin argued that after the bipolar international system ceased to exist, the US was overcome by euphoria and instead of "forming a good neighbourhood and partner relations, they started to cultivate (*osvaivat*) what seemed to them as empty (or virgin) geopolitical spaces."<sup>60</sup> Later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented on the publication of a NATO "fact sheet" by saying that it was evidence of:

The bloc's inability to analyse and admit the mistakes of its eastward policy, which it has been pursuing for the past two decades and which has largely led to the current crisis in the Euro-Atlantic security system.

This is also evidence of a desire to shift the blame onto Russia and to present it as a geopolitical adversary in order to justify the bloc's existence..."<sup>61</sup>

The anti-NATO, anti-US and anti-EU cards are used to show that one cannot trust the West in general, and NATO in particular. Tim Thomas has argued that the whole idea of the West betraying Russia is futile since no legal agreement has been signed between Moscow and Washington concerning NATO's enlargement, whereas Russia's operation in Crimea clearly violated the 1994 Budapest Memorandum,

60 *Vesti.ru* 19 June 2015.

61 Statement No. 2776-03-12-2014.

not to speak of international law in general.<sup>62</sup> In addition, it is noteworthy that Russian criticism on NATO's enlargement is focused on, and even determined by, that "broken promise", while the very mechanism of the enlargement process – the voluntary choice of the concerned countries to join the alliance – is never mentioned.

Furthermore, the Russian public is repeatedly reminded about "Western double standards" and the alleged unwillingness of the West to address the role of extreme right-wing parties in the conflict. On February 20, the Russian Channel One ran a report in which it quoted Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who accused the West of "double standards" in regard to "extremists" in Ukraine. Lavrov's statement was framed as a call to Russia's Western partners "to stop using Kiev as a coin in the geopolitical game"<sup>63</sup>. The problem, as described in the report, was that the West, while facilitating the negotiations between the opposition and President Yanukovich, pressured the latter with economic sanctions and thus, in the Russian view, took sides in the conflict. A few days later, the Foreign Ministry issued yet another statement that played with the same theme. It was argued that "we are forced to note that some of our western partners are not concerned about the fate of Ukraine, but rather their own unilateral geopolitical considerations"<sup>64</sup>.

Moreover, Russia, with the voice of the Foreign Ministry, has repeatedly accused Western politicians of putting their "personal geopolitical interests" before attempts to find a solution to the crisis in Ukraine and reminded the world how the "United States and their allies" *turned a blind eye to the atrocities of the militants at Maidan*.<sup>65</sup> In a comment issued on 18 March, 2014 – on the same day when the Crimean operation was officially announced as completed – the Ministry appealed to those "sober voices" in the West who tried to convince Western leaders that they should "stop the cooperation with Neo-Nazi actors". The argument was that those sober voices are in minority, and the decision-makers continue to "pretend that nothing worrying is taking place in Ukraine". The gist of the argument is put forward at the end of the text:

62 Thomas 2015, 448. See Black 2000 for Russian discussion on NATO's expansion in the 1990s.

63 *Channel One* 20 February 2014; see also Statement No. 426-03-03-2014.

64 Statement No. 361-24-02-2014. On February 20, a day before the signature of the agreement between Yanukovich and the opposition, Alexander Lukashevich, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argued that pressure towards Yanukovich was not helpful to settling the crisis and hinted that the West was putting "geopolitical plans" before the interests of the Ukrainian nation. Briefing No. 331-20-02-2014.

65 Statement No. 426-03-03-2014.

Such outrageous short-sightedness is hard to explain and is probably related to the continuing pursuit of anti-Russian geopolitical schemes. In the year when we celebrated 75 years since the start of the Second World War, we should remember the consequences, which are the result of playing with Nazis.<sup>66</sup>

As was already mentioned, the narrative about Western geopolitical interests in Ukraine has been used in framing the US and other Western governments as active participants in the conflict. On March 15, 2014, the Ministry issued a statement anticipating Western governments' negative reactions to the referendum in Crimea that would take place the next day, on March 16, 2014. The statement discredited the UN Security Council's draft resolution concerning the situation in Ukraine.

This initiative initially had no grounds: the events in Ukraine are not a threat to international peace and security, these being the specific areas of activity of the Security Council according to the UN Charter. This step of the United States can only be explained by an irresistible desire to politicise an already uneasy situation as much as possible, and continue the escalation of international hysteria around Ukraine for the benefit of personal geopolitical interests. Unfortunately, Washington does not care about the stability of this country, or the security and welfare of its population. They are still operating with (as it seemed to us) forgotten categories of the 'cold war' times, and attempting to impose their vision of political order in Ukraine.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, in reaction to the Western sanctions against Russia after the Crimean operation, Valentina Matvienko, a deputy speaker of the Russian Duma, explained that the US Government sought to "destabilize" the situation in Ukraine "in order to embroil Ukraine in the sphere of [US] geopolitical interests and for any price to tear [Ukraine] from Russia, to support a regime and people that are in the

66 Statement No. 586-18-03-2014.

67 Statement No. 565-15-03-2014.

interests of the US.”<sup>68</sup> Later, this narrative construction evolved from an abstract notion of ‘geopolitical interests’ pursued by the West to a more specific claim that “people’s lives in South-Eastern Ukraine are put in danger only because Ukraine wants to be part of the Western sphere of influence”.<sup>69</sup> Foreign Minister Lavrov outlined in late July 2014 that Russia would stand against interference in the internal affairs of other states. Russian policy, according to Lavrov, is oriented against the new “confrontational policy” and use of provocative methods, such as an “anti-constitutional coup” as an act of interference in the internal affairs of another state.<sup>70</sup>

By representing the political change in Ukraine as a state coup, Russian politicians and other commentators have been provided with an opportunity to suggest that the events were orchestrated from abroad, or in a milder version, made worse due to the active support of the West. “Do not blame us, blame the West”, is one of the generic arguments repeated in the Russian media. In late July, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement denying that Russia was providing weapons to militants in Donbass, and framing such accusations as a “new splash of anti-Russian rhetoric from the US administration”. Accordingly, the Ministry stated that

It is indisputable that the United States supported the anti-constitutional coup in Kiev, and then in fact pushed the regime there to organise a severe reprisal against the Russian-speaking population, which is strictly requesting the observation of their legal rights. This is another confirmation that Washington must fully share responsibility for this bloodshed.<sup>71</sup>

In the same interview already mentioned above, Putin famously stated:

We are not the initial cause for the crisis in Ukraine. [The West] did not have to support anti-state, anti-constitutional, military coup that in the end has resulted in emergence of rigid confrontation in the

68 RIA Novosti 17 March 2015.

69 TASS 30 July 2014.

70 TASS 30 July 2014.

71 Comment No. 1783–25–07–2014; see *Rossiia24* 25 July 2014.



territory of Ukraine, and has led to, in actual fact, to civil war.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, not only are Western governments inept to address problems created by the extreme right-wing parties in Ukraine, but the West is using the situation to its advantage in a geopolitical game against Russia. This view was further consolidated after the downing of the Malaysian flight MH17 over Ukraine on July 17, 2014.

The official interpretation of the meaning of this tragic event for Russia followed five days later, on July 22, 2014, at a Security Council meeting. In his comments published from the meeting, President Putin underlined that the “scale and intensity of operational and combat exercises of NATO troops is growing”.<sup>73</sup> The meeting was convened to discuss “the maintenance of Russia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity”, and given the subsequent adjustments to the Russian military doctrine, it can be argued that this meeting was a catalyst for a new phase in the redrafting process that had been started already in July 2013.<sup>74</sup> The adoption of the adjusted military doctrine in December 2014 signalled a heightened sense of internal and external dangers to the Russian regime. In his opening speech, President Putin underlined the link between outside intervention and “independent policy”, presumably referring to Russia’s position as a potential ‘next target’ after Ukraine:

[...] ever more frequently today we hear of ultimatums and sanctions. The very notion of state sovereignty is being washed out. Undesirable regimes, countries that conduct an independent policy or that simply stand in the way of somebody’s interests get destabilised. Tools used for this purpose are the so-called colour revolutions, or, in simple terms – takeovers instigated and financed from the outside.<sup>75</sup>

72 *Vesti.ru* 19 June 2015.

73 TASS 22 July 2014, 18:09.

74 On 5 July 2013, Secretary of the Security Council Sergei Patrushev announced that the adjustment of the military doctrine had been ordered. Little was published on this process in the Russian press until September 2014, when President Putin announced, just before the NATO Wales Summit, that Russia would need to make changes to its military doctrine “due to the changing security situation”. The adjusted doctrine was published on December 25, 2014, and includes several direct references to the Ukraine conflict. *Vzglyad* 5 Jul 2013; see Pynnöniemi and Mashiri 2015.

75 Putin 2014d.

The notion of “colour revolution”, although absent from the military doctrine, is used as a code word for nurturing anti-Russian sentiments and actions in Russia’s neighbourhood. At the same time, Russia’s policies in the same region are either not articulated at all or represented as constructive contributions to the international mediation of conflicts.

The metanarrative of *Western geopolitical expansion* is used tactically to manipulate public perception in Russia and among those parts of the foreign audience that are already susceptible to such explanations. In the Russian context, suspicion among the general population towards outside influences and anti-Americanism in particular have traditionally been instrumentalized in domestic politics.<sup>76</sup> However, during the conflict in Ukraine, the production of propagandistic literature has increased substantially. These publications disseminate conspiratological demagoguery about Russia being surrounded by enemies, which, in turn, contributes to the public perception of Russia being already at war with the West.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the framing of the conflict as a battle between Russia and the West undermines Ukraine’s international actorness. The “new Cold War” rhetoric and hints that resolving the crisis would require a new “Yalta Agreement” help to foster the image of Russia as a great power. Consequently, a new narrative horizon is activated with the sole function of consolidating Russia’s new room for manoeuvre in the post-Soviet space. However, even as such, these narratives are mainly used as a tool of distraction and can thus be characterized as examples of temporal (context-sensitive) disinformation elements. Their function is best understood when compared with what can be regarded as a constitutive element of Russian propaganda: the framing of Ukraine as part of *Russkii Mir* – the Russian world.

76 Shiraev and Zubok 2000.

77 Nosikov 2015; Mikryukov 2013; Prohanov et al. 2015.

#### 4.4. MAKING UKRAINE PART OF THE RUSSIAN WORLD

*Russia, Crimea and Ukraine are our Home and in our home newcomers do what they want. It's time to put our house in order!!!*<sup>78</sup>

##### 4.4.1.

##### *The Tale of One Nation*

Russia's position on Ukraine in general and the conflict in particular is described with reference to its historical-cultural connection with and friendly attitude towards Ukraine and Ukrainian people. Official statements articulate a special connection between Ukraine and Russia and reconstruct a narrative according to which Russia has the right to protect its citizens and compatriots living in Ukraine. Accordingly, it has been stated that "Ukraine is a friendly and fraternal state for Russia, its strategic partner and we will use all our influence to help this country live calmly and in peace"<sup>79</sup>. Later, during the Crimean operation, a difference was drawn between Russia's legitimate right to be concerned and the West's illegitimate and therefore harmful interference in Ukraine's affairs.

If Ukraine is just a territory for geopolitical games for individual western politicians, then for us it is a fraternal country, with which we have many ages of shared history.<sup>80</sup>

During the first phases of the conflict, several statements and commentaries referred to Russia's *responsibility* to protect Russians and compatriots living in Ukraine. For example on March 14, 2014, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on the "tragic events in Donetsk", concluding:

Russia is aware of its responsibility for the lives of its compatriots and nationals in Ukraine and reserves the right to defend these people.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Channel One 6 March 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Statement No. 313-19-02-2014.

<sup>80</sup> Statement No. 426-03-03-2014.

<sup>81</sup> Comment No. 551-14-03-2014.

On the basis of these ‘facts on the ground’, it was concluded that “Russia is receiving many requests to protect peaceful civilians. We will review these requests”.<sup>82</sup> Already earlier, the Russian Ambassador in the UN, Vitali Churkin, argued that the Ukrainian opposition had staged a violent anti-constitutional coup d’état<sup>83</sup>, which posed a “threat to human rights, security and the life of compatriots”<sup>84</sup> living in Ukraine. A similar formulation had been used already on March 1, when the Council of Federation gave the Russian president permission to use military force in Ukraine:

In connection with extraordinary circumstances, a decision has been made about a possibility to use Russian armed forces to protect millions of Russians and Russian-speakers in Ukraine.<sup>85</sup>

While Russia’s actions were legitimated with reference to international law (see the next chapter for details), Ukraine’s new authorities were framed as illegitimate and barely up to the task of managing the constitutional reform process. The tension between the alleged ineffectiveness of the Ukrainian political system and the importance of the task at hand was brought to focus in a statement issued by the Ministry on April 2, 2014. It argued:

Without exaggeration, [the topic of the constitutional reform] will affect the fate of the Ukrainian national identity, welfare and conflict-free development of the peoples who, by some quirk of fate, became part of Ukraine in different historical periods.<sup>86</sup>

The propaganda books published during the conflict have sought to portray Ukraine as “a failed state that has not been able to provide order and welfare for its population”<sup>87</sup>. Furthermore, it has been

82 Statement No. 564-15-03-2014.

83 Statement No. 440-04-03-2014.

84 RIA Novosti 1 March 2014, 19:29.

85 *Vesti.ru* 9 March 2014. The official decision made by the Russian Federation Council spoke about Russian citizens, compatriots and Russian armed forces located in Crimea. With this decision, President Putin was given the right to deploy Russian armed forces in Ukraine for the purpose of “normalization of the social-political situation in the country”. *Postanovlenie* 2014.

86 Comment No. 721-02-04-2014.

87 Tomsinov 2015, 98.

argued that “Ukraine has never had a proper state”<sup>88</sup>, and therefore the “revolutionary situation had developed for a long time, from the very beginning of Ukraine’s independence in 1991”<sup>89</sup>.

The narrative of Ukraine as part of *Russkii Mir* – the Russian world – is constructed on the basis of these claims. Ukrainians and Russians are identified as brothers who share language, history and traditions. This idea was clearly expressed in President Putin’s speech on March 18, 2014, in which he referred to the idea of Russia and Ukraine forming “one nation”:

I say this straightforwardly, our soul is hurt by all that is happening in Ukraine, how people suffer, and how they do not know how to cope today and what will happen tomorrow. Our anxiety is understandable because we are not just close neighbours, but in fact, as I already mentioned many times, we are one nation. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. The ancient Rus’ is our common heritage – we cannot cope without each other.<sup>90</sup>

In early December 2013, Putin made a similar remark while talking to Western journalists, implying that “logically speaking” there can be no Russian intervention to stop the protests at the centre of Kyiv. Historian Timothy Snyder suggested at the time that “Yanukovych might need Russian force to fend off what would then be not only an aggrieved population but also a hostile group of oligarchs. The Ukrainian president’s source of support would then be the people in Moscow who say that the Ukrainian nation does not exist”<sup>91</sup>.

The narrative of *one nation* mixes imperial mythology with a sense of betrayal (resentment) felt towards Ukraine for failing to follow Russia’s lead. The Russian language law that was passed by the Ukrainian Parliament *Verkhovna Rada* (but never entered into force) was interpreted as being “aimed at deprivation of humanitarian rights of Russians and other national minorities living in Ukraine”<sup>92</sup>. Religion and inter-church relations is another contested topic, but has not become a major theme in the official Russian rhetoric. However,

88 Ibid. 101.

89 Baburin 2014, 83.

90 Putin 2014b.

91 Snyder 2013.

92 Statement 361–24–02–2014.

on several occasions, the Foreign Ministry has warned that the “continuing atrocities by extremists in Ukraine” present a threat to the “fragile inter-church and intersectarian peace” in Ukraine.<sup>93</sup> Foreign Minister Lavrov has also drawn a link between the threat of religious extremism in Syria and in Ukraine.<sup>94</sup>

Overall, the story of one nation draws from a vision of the *Russian World* as a process of ‘gathering Russian lands’. In the context of the Crimean operation, Putin has explained that it is in Russia’s interests to protect those people with whom Russia has historical ties and shares a common culture.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Crimea has a special place in this new mythology-inspired world explanation. The annexation of Crimea *back to the homeland* marks the end of a 60-year-long period of *voluntarism* and *legal nihilism*, as suggested in one of the first propaganda books written on this topic.<sup>96</sup> In Dugin’s view, the return of Crimea is a beginning of a process whereby Russia will transform from “ordinary Russia” (*prostoye Rossii*) to “Great Russia” (*Bolshuyu Rossiyu*), from a Russia of corporations to a civilization Russia.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, it is underlined that Crimea is an integral part of Russian war history, a place of military glory, and therefore a strategic territory that must be protected.<sup>98</sup> The main function of these more or less coherent narratives is simple: to hide the fact that Russia has conducted a military operation in Crimea, in other words, attacked a neighbouring country.

#### 4.4.2.

##### *The Crimean Operation as ‘Legitimate Action’*

Russian researcher Alexei Yurchak has nicely summarized the essential point of the Crimean operation in his article published on March 31, 2014:

What we witnessed in Crimea is a curious new political technology – a military occupation that is staged as a non-occupation. These curious troops were designed to fulfil two contradictory things at once – to be anonymous and yet recognized by all, to be polite and yet frightening, to be identified as the Russian Army

93 Comment 381–26–02–2014; TASS 2 March 2015.

94 Lavrov 2015.

95 *Vesti.ru* 9 March 2014.

96 Baburin 2014.

97 Dugin 2014, 190.

98 Putin 2014b.

and yet, be different from the Russian Army. They were designed to be a *pure naked military force* – a force without a state, without a face, without identity, without a clearly articulated goal.<sup>99</sup>

On February 27, 2014, a group of armed men who called themselves a “self-defence force”<sup>100</sup> seized the Crimean Parliament and government buildings in Simferopol.<sup>101</sup> The Crimean Parliament held a session in the building occupied by the armed men, in which it dismissed the Crimean Government and appointed the leader of the Russian Unity Party, Sergey Aksyonov, to form a new government and to schedule a referendum for May 25 on the status of Crimea within Ukraine.<sup>102</sup>

In the morning of February 28, 2014, the main Russian propaganda channel – Channel One – reported that the situation near the Crimean Parliament was fundamentally different from Maidan. “There are no people in masks and with firearms, nobody is hiding their face. Instead of *Banderovskie* flags, there is the Russian tricolour”. The role of the self-defence forces, let alone the presence of the Russian special forces in the city, was omitted from the reporting. On the contrary, it was emphasized that the change of government was conducted in accordance with Ukrainian laws. The presence of members of the Russian Federation Council’s “committee on Ukraine” was used to create an impression of Russia being a “witness to the situation” that cares about the fate of compatriots in Ukraine, but does not interfere in the internal affairs of the neighbouring country.<sup>103</sup>

One day later, on March 1, Sergei Aksyonov, the newly elected leader of Crimea, appealed to Putin “to provide assistance in ensuring peace and tranquillity on Crimea’s territory”<sup>104</sup>. The Foreign Ministry helped to create confusion over the situation in Crimea by issuing a statement according to which “unknown armed people sent from Kiev” had attempted to occupy the building of the Ministry of Interior

99 Yurchak 2014.

100 Later it has been established that the “self-defence force” was fairly large and armed with military equipment only available for a “very professional special task force”. Shapovalova 2014, 254; Lavrov 2014, 163.

101 Shapovalova 2014, 254; Lavrov 2014, 163. The Russian Channel One reported that the buildings were occupied by a group of people in camouflage at four o’clock in the morning (27 February 2014). The situation was framed as a reaction to the state coup in Ukraine. *Channel One* 27 February 2014a.

102 Shapovalova 2014, 254–255.

103 *Channel One* 28 February 2014a.

104 Shapovalova 2014, 255.

in Crimea. Without giving any further details of what had happened, the Ministry called the alleged incident a “provocation” and argued that it “confirms the aspiration of known political circles in Kiev to destabilize the situation in the peninsula”<sup>105</sup>. However, in actual fact, in the morning of March 1, Russian soldiers were deployed at strategic points in central Simferopol, which reinforced Russia’s control over the administrative heart of the peninsula.<sup>106</sup> The Russian media naturally refrained from informing the public about these developments on the ground, and instead helped to construct a legitimating narrative for Russia’s actions.

Official appeals from the new Crimean leadership and former President of Ukraine Victor Yanukovich provided a legitimating cover for the Crimean operation. A “letter from Yanukovich” was presented as evidence that “Ukraine was on the brink of civil war, the country was in a state of anarchy and chaos and the security of the people in eastern Ukraine and Crimea was threatened”. Furthermore, Yanukovich appealed for help from Putin “to re-establish legal rights, peace and order, stability and security of Ukrainian people”.<sup>107</sup> Interestingly, while First Channel promptly reported about Aksyonov’s appeal<sup>108</sup> to Putin, it framed Yanukovich’s message as an “appeal to provide personal security” to the “legitimate leader of Ukraine”<sup>109</sup>. Yet on the basis of these official requests, it was argued that Russia is *doing the right thing* by intending to protect the citizens of Ukraine from lawlessness (*bespredel*).<sup>110</sup>

This legitimating narrative was finalized with the decision made by the Russian Federation Council on March 1 to allow President Putin to deploy Russian armed forces on the territory of Ukraine “until a normalization of the social and political situation in the country”.<sup>111</sup> The fact that Russia made its readiness to send troops to Ukraine officially known was overlooked in media reports. Instead, on April 1, 2014, the Foreign Ministry published a statement regarding

105 Statement 408-01-03-2014.

106 Lavrov 2014, 166; Shapovalova 2014, 256; Wilk 2014.

107 Statement No. 440-04-03-2014.

108 *Channel One* 1 March 2014a. The Kremlin answered to this appeal swiftly, announcing that “Russia will not leave the appeal by the premier minister of Crimea unattended”.  
*Channel One* 1 March 2014b.

109 *Channel One* 28 February 2014b.

110 Putin 2014a.

111 Postanovlenie 2014.



accusations that Russia was violating its obligations under the Budapest Memorandum. The statement underlined:

Ukraine's loss of its territorial integrity was a result of complicated internal process, with which neither Russia nor its obligations under the Budapest Memorandum have anything to do.<sup>112</sup>

Later, President Putin also argued that Russia is not bound by the Budapest Memorandum, since the new Ukrainian Government is not a signatory to that agreement.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, a statement issued on April 1, 2014, sought to deny allegations made about Russia, and at the same time, to distract the domestic and foreign audience by claiming that Western countries “openly neglected [Ukraine's] sovereignty during the events on the ‘Maidan’”.<sup>114</sup> In another statement made on the very same day, in which a reference was made to the “Weimar Triangle” meeting on March 31, 2014, the Russian Foreign Ministry also asserted that “it will be extremely complicated to significantly correct the situation [with regard to the state of Ukrainian economy] without interaction with Russia”<sup>115</sup>. The latter statement was meant to communicate to foreign audiences that Russia had been right all along: first, by insisting that Russia should be involved in the negotiations between Ukraine and the EU regarding association agreements, and second, by emphasizing the importance of the “February 21 Agreement” for settling the crisis in Ukraine.<sup>116</sup>

Official statements and other commentaries underlined that Russia is acting within the framework of international law: first, it is protecting the rights of minorities, and second, the ‘people of Crimea’ are exercising their right for self-determination when they vote on the *referendum* on the independence of the Crimean region, and later, on the accession of the region to the Russian Federation. Russia's position was made clear in a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on March 11, 2014, which referred to the UN charter and decision of the UN's International Court of Justice of 22 July 2010 on Kosovo.<sup>117</sup>

112 Statement No. 715-01-2014.

113 *Vesti.ru* 9 March 2014.

114 Statement No. 715-01-20144.

115 Statement No. 719-04-2014.

116 Statement No. 719-04-2014.

117 Statement No. 509-11-03-2014.

To emphasize that the question was about the right for self-determination, it was announced:

The Russian Federation will fully respect the results of the free will of the Crimean people at the referendum, to which (as is a known fact) the OSCE's and bilateral observers were invited.<sup>118</sup>

At the same time, Russian TV reproduced the “Crimea is ours” narrative that sought to portray Maidan as a threat to Crimea and the peninsula’s “return to Russia” as a historically righteous decision. People interviewed in the programme *Segodnya* stated that “Crimea, all the eastern regions of Ukraine and Odessa have to be taken to Russia as soon as possible”. Another person interviewed claimed that “we should not talk with the Maidan government, a time has come to achieve historical justice and fulfil the demands of Crimean people”.<sup>119</sup>

However, it seems that the “Crimea is ours” narrative was ‘muted’ in the official channels, and the campaign was run mainly through the legitimating narrative.<sup>120</sup> This is not to deny the importance of this slogan in social media, and it did capture the feeling of euphoria and pride experienced by the Russian public at the time. As shown by recent research on public opinion in Russia, these sentiments have played a crucial role in creating the so-called “Putin majority” upon which the legitimacy of the Russian political system currently relies.<sup>121</sup>

#### 4.4.3.

##### *Construction of Artificial Political Subjects in Eastern Ukraine*

Nikolai Mitrokhin has identified three phases in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, starting with the “armed uprising” in March–April 2014, which was followed by an entry of “fanatics, adventurers and soldiers” to the scene in mid-May and, finally, by the participation of Russian armed forces in the battles of August 2014.<sup>122</sup> According to Mitrokhin, the numerous small, non-influential and disparate groups (Cossacks, paratroopers, Orthodox activists, neo-Nazi-neo-pagans etc.) that comprised a loose network of people with separatist

118 Statement No. 509–11–03–2014.

119 *Vesti.ru* 6 March 2014.

120 This is based on our search through the Integrum search engine for the time period between February 27 and March 19.

121 Gudkov 2014.

122 Mitrokhin 2015, 221–246.

sentiments in Eastern Ukraine were pushed out of the scene well before the situation evolved into armed rebellion. The new actors appearing in Donbass had “no track record in politics and in public life more broadly”. The groups that seized power in several cities in the region between April 12 and 20 were “primarily made up of gangs of minor criminals who purchased support amongst the stratum of disaffected and disadvantaged young people”<sup>123</sup>.

Eventually, the local criminals and ideologically motivated fighter groups were pushed aside, and Russian officers from various branches of the special services and armed forces took over the management of the fighting in the region.<sup>124</sup> In coordination with these actions, the Russian mass media played on phobias and fears among the local population, using falsified ‘evidence’ to create a perception that the civil war *had already begun*. As put by Alexandr Osipian: “this false understanding shaped the actions of people in the Donbass, thus effectively serving to help drag the region into large-scale military conflict”<sup>125</sup>. A report of the International Crisis Group, published in February 2016, documents the further development of the situation, including the direct subordination of the so-called political figures in Donbass to Moscow’s tutelage.<sup>126</sup>

Thus, in the first phase, official Russian commentary sought to portray the situation in Eastern Ukraine as “ultra-nationalist anarchy”, thus legitimating Russia’s intervention on behalf of compatriots and Russian citizens living in Ukraine. On the eve of the referendum in Crimea, which took place on March 16, 2014, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported about continuing provocations against peaceful demonstrators in Ukraine.

We have received worrying information that a faction of armed contractors of the Right Sector is heading from Kharkov to Donetsk and Lugansk; its leaders have made announcements about the opening of

123 Mitrokhin 2015, 222.

124 A group led by Igor Girkin (“Strelkov”) seized Sloviansk and Kramatorsk on 12 April. See Osipian 2015 for a detailed description of these events.

125 Osipian 2015, 140.

126 International Crisis Group 2016; the German newspaper *Bild* reported in March 2016 on the extensive presence of Russian ministries in the governance of Ukraine’s Donbass region. Röpke 2016.

“Eastern Front”, while some clothing factories urgently sew uniforms of the Russian armed forces.<sup>127</sup>

Furthermore, it is also asserted in the text that “Russia is receiving many requests to protect peaceful civilians”, and that it “will review these requests”.<sup>128</sup> This particular statement was widely circulated in the Russian media as evidence of the fact that the Ukrainian Government was incapable to “control the situation in the country”<sup>129</sup>. A day before, on March 14, the Ministry reacted upon the “tragic events” in Donetsk (March 13, 2014) by urging Ukrainian authorities to disarm the militants and to ensure the security of the population and people’s legal right to hold meetings. In conclusion, the Ministry stated that the “Kiev authorities have no control over the situation in the country”, and thereby, “Russia is aware of its responsibility for the lives of its compatriots (*sootechestvenniki*) and nationals (*sograzhdan*) in Ukraine and reserves the right to defend these people”.<sup>130</sup>

All the main news reports repeated these two statements word for word, without adding any commentary or explanation to them.<sup>131</sup> One exception was NTV News Channel, which reported about the opening of the so-called “Eastern Front” as a matter of fact – rather than as a possibility as suggested in the above statement.<sup>132</sup> The headlines of the news reports emphasized that Russia is assessing many appeals made by “Ukrainians”<sup>133</sup>, “Russian citizens in Ukraine”<sup>134</sup> and “peaceful civilians”<sup>135</sup> for protection. It can be suggested that the two statements were meant to function both as pieces of disinformation – to convince the public that the situation was out of control in Ukraine – and as a thinly-veiled threat towards decision-makers in Ukraine, for if they would not protect those groups whom Russia considered *compatriots*, Russia would be obliged to do it.

Parallel to this war rhetoric, the Russian mass media helped to create an artificial political subject: a supporter of federalization

127 Statement No. 564-15-03-2014. The term *Eastern Front* appeared in 49 news pieces published in the Russian state media, mostly by the online news outlets and the news agencies. Search was conducted through Integrum.

128 Statement No. 564-15-03-2014.

129 Comment No. 551-14-03-2014.

130 Comment No. 551-14-03-2014.

131 *Vesti.ru* 15 March 2014.

132 *NTV-News* 15 March 2014.

133 *Polit.ru* 15 March 2014.

134 *TV-Tsentr* 16 March 2014.

135 *Mayak* 15 March 2014.

(*storonnik federalizatsii*). The main function of this new political subject was to provide legitimization for the next stage: the establishment of the so-called national republics through the ‘referendums’ organized in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions on May 11, 2014. Afterwards, the term practically disappeared from the Russian mass media. Our analysis of the overall fluctuation in the use of this term in the Russian media is presented below (Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5). RIA Novosti worked as one of the main disinformation channels reproducing and consolidating the narrative about peaceful citizens of Donetsk and Luhansk defending their constitutional rights against the ultra-nationalists from Kyiv. The result was clumsy, to say the least, as the term supporter of federalization was used as a synonym for pro-Russian fighters. For example, on May 10, 2014, RIA reported about a “killing of a supporter of federalization in the town of Bryansk in the Luhansk region”<sup>136</sup>, and two days earlier it had reported that “supporters of federalization had seized the control of the television company “Donbass” in Donetsk”<sup>137</sup>.

The topic of “federalization” itself was not a new item in Ukrainian politics. On the contrary, the problems of uneven regional development and political competition between different regional elites have been a constitutive feature of Ukrainian politics throughout the country’s independence. Furthermore, from the very beginning, Russia has framed the situation as a “constitutional crisis”<sup>138</sup> and offered “federalization” as a solution to it.<sup>139</sup> Building upon this background, a new element was added to the story, namely a “political subject” that represented the population of South-Eastern Ukraine and demanded “real constitutional changes in the Ukrainian community”<sup>140</sup>. For example, Speaker of Russian State Duma Sergei Naryshkin stated on May 6:

Those who did not disarm radicals continue to conduct punitive military operations against civilian population of South-East of Ukraine, demanding respect for their human rights and federalization as a guarantee against further crimes – said the parliamentarian.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>136</sup> RIA Novosti 26 May 2014, 18:54.

<sup>137</sup> RIA Novosti 26 May 2014, 18:54.

<sup>138</sup> Comment No. 186-03-02-2014.

<sup>139</sup> Channel One 27 February 2014b.

<sup>140</sup> Statement No. 1081-02-05-2014.

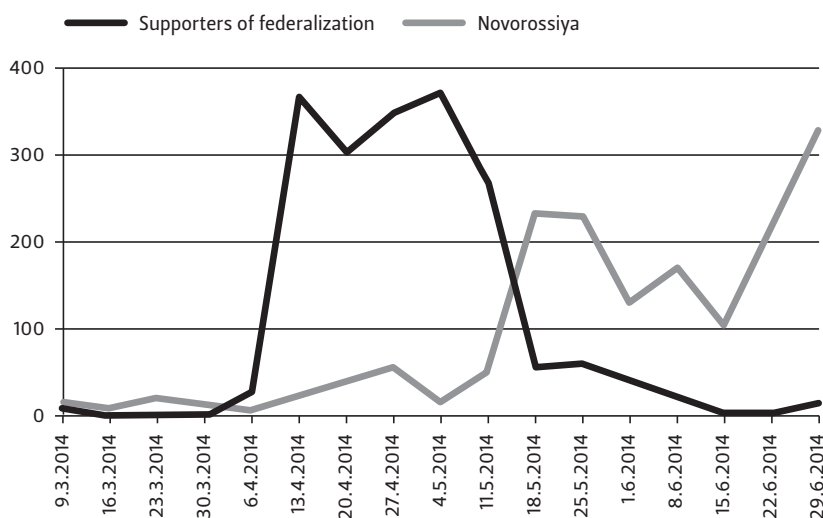
<sup>141</sup> RIA Novosti 6 May 2014, 15:15.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs carefully avoided making a direct reference to the People's Republics, but on the occasion of the referendums held in Donetsk and Luhansk, it issued the following statement:

Preliminary results of the voting convincingly show the real disposition of nationals of the Donetsk and Lugansk Regions to have the right to take independent decisions on the issues related to the vital problems for them. We believe that the implementation of the results of the referendum must take place within the framework of the dialogue between Kiev, Donetsk and Lugansk.<sup>142</sup>

Notwithstanding the unusually conservative wording, the statement stipulates that the “community leaders of the South-East Ukraine”<sup>143</sup> are on equal footing with the legitimate Government of Ukraine (Kyiv). A comparison between the terms “supporter of federalization” and “Novorossiia” shows that the balance between these two narrative constructions changed in favour of the Novorossiia narrative after the local referendums (Figures 4.3 and 4.5).

Figure 4.3.  
The use of the terms “supporter of federalization” and “Novorossiia” in the Russian central media between March 1 and June 30, 2014<sup>143</sup>



<sup>142</sup> Statement No. 1148-12-05-2014.

<sup>143</sup> Statement No. 1030-28-04-2014.

The same pattern can be observed in the regional media (Figure 4.4). Towards the end of the year 2014, the term supporter of federalization is used very rarely, if not at all in the Russian mass media, whereas the term Novorossiia continues to be used regularly (Figure 4.5).

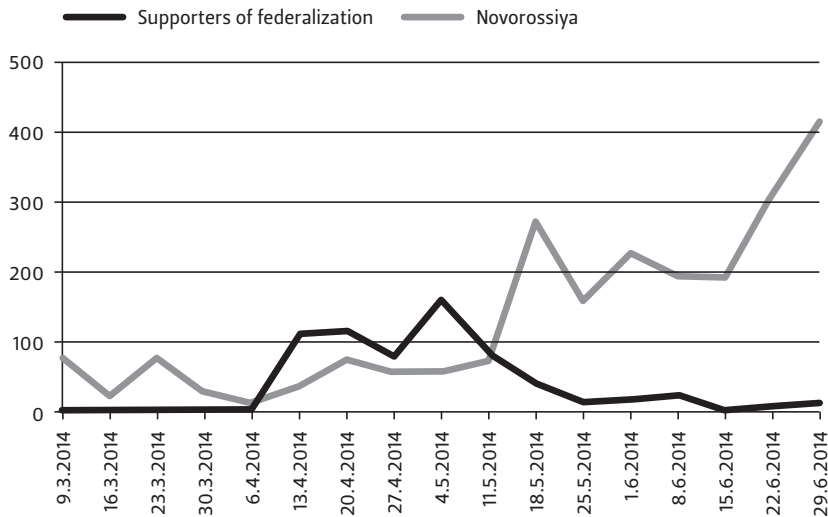


Figure 4.4.  
The use of the terms “supporter of federalization” and “Novorossiia” in the Russian regional media between March 1 and June 30, 2014.<sup>144</sup>

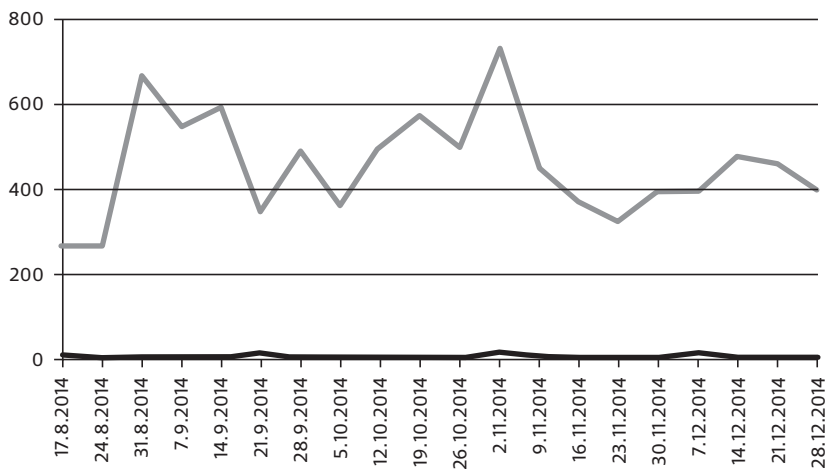


Figure 4.5.  
The use of the terms “supporter of federalization” and “Novorossiia” in the Russian central media between June 30 and December 31, 2014.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>144</sup> The central media includes central newspapers, news agencies and TV and radio, including altogether 319 different news sources.

<sup>145</sup> The regional media includes regional newspapers, news agencies, TV and radio, including altogether 1588 news sources.

<sup>146</sup> The central media includes central newspapers, news agencies and TV and radio, including altogether 319 different news sources.

A content analysis of RIA Novosti's reporting on "supporters of federalization" brings interesting results. The main terminology and phrases used in this connection are visualized in Figure 4.6.

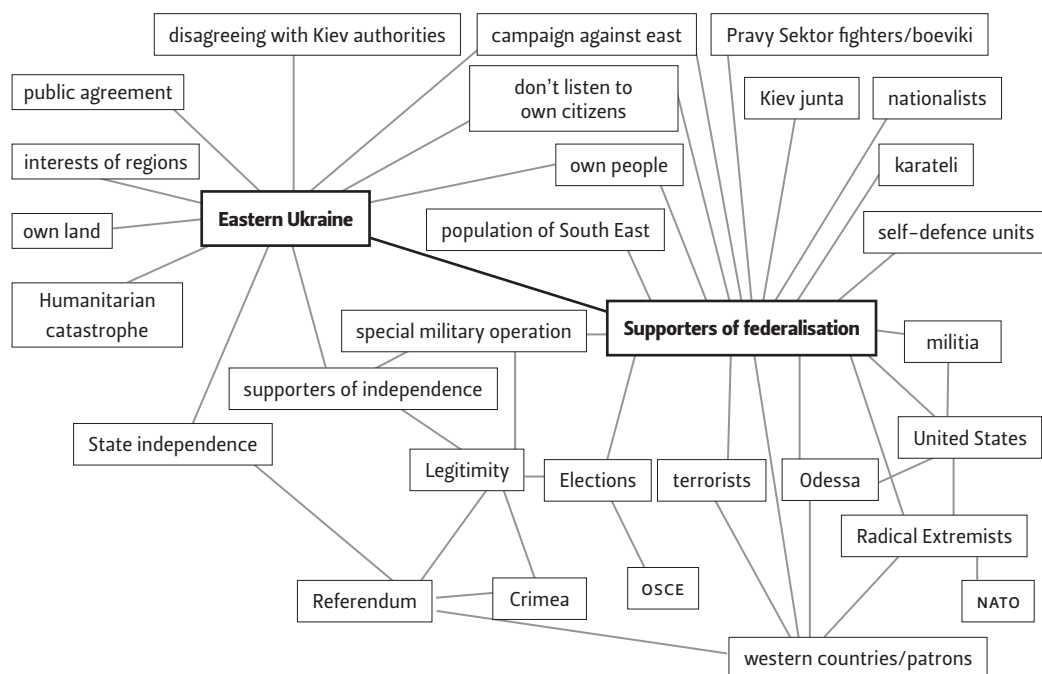


Figure 4.6.  
A visualization of the main words, slogans and phrases used in the context of the "supporters of federalization" narrative.

The artificial political subject is constructed employing the same elements already used in Crimea: the peaceful protestors represent the "people's will" and demand political rights. This is a narrative of political change within the framework of legal, constitutional institutions of the state. This means that references to ethnicity or Russian compatriots in general are missing from the narrative. Instead, the "supporter of federalization" can quite literally be anybody: a Cossack fighter, a Russian volunteer or a local gangster. In this sense, the simulacrum of the "Donetsk People's Republic" is flawless: it can mean anything to anybody and nothing to nobody at the same time.

The political narrative is constructed in opposition to the military threat presented by the "Kiev junta", the Right Sector and other volunteer battalions operating in the region, including of course the Ukrainian army. They are represented as an existential threat to the "supporters of federalization". The tragic events in Odessa on



May 2, 2014, prompted the Foreign Ministry to claim that national radicals “organize a physical terror campaign against those who support federalisation”<sup>147</sup>. Along these lines, Speaker of State Duma Sergei Naryshkin stated that the burning of the Trade Unions Building in Odessa on May 2, 2014 was an example of “genocide of Russian and Ukrainian people”<sup>148</sup>. Referring to this statement, Bachman and Lyubashenko argue that the use of the “g-word” by high-level officials can be interpreted as a co-ordinated campaign to discredit the Ukrainian Government in the eyes of the Western audience, for the term only appears in online media whose target is outside Russia.<sup>149</sup> Yet this tragic event did not initiate a new phase in the conflict. On the contrary, Nikolai Mitrokhin has argued that it “marked the definite end of the Novorossiia project”<sup>150</sup>, meaning the aim to capture of the whole South-East of Ukraine under Russia’s tutelage. Instead, what were formed were the so-called *Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics* with their ‘official representatives’, ‘central bank’ and ‘army’, and last but not least, the brand<sup>151</sup> *Novorossiia*.

#### 4.4.4.

##### *Novorossiia: an Underutilized Myth of a Nation-State*

The creation of “New Russia” (*Novorossiia*) is perhaps the most well-known metanarrative produced during the conflict. The myth of the rebirth or reinvention of the historical land of *Novorossiia* has functioned as a narrative resource for imagining the next stage in the formation of the Russian world. Pavel Gubarev, who was the first “national leader” of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic, stated in an interview on the day of the referendum that the creation of the “new political subjects [DNR and LNR] is only the first stage in the formation of great Novorossiia, the former South-East of Ukraine”.<sup>152</sup> This vision was officially confirmed by the declaration of the “union of two national republics” as Novorossiia in late May 2014.<sup>153</sup>

Furthermore, a party called “Novorossiia” was established in May 2014. Subsequent references to the term Novorossiia in the Russian media often relate to this party, rather than the union. In fact,

<sup>147</sup> Statement No. 1081-02-05-2014.

<sup>148</sup> *echo.msk.ru* 6 May 2014; Subbotina 2014.

<sup>149</sup> Bachmann and Lyubashenko 2015, 367–368.

<sup>150</sup> Mitrokhin 2015, 230.

<sup>151</sup> See also Berzina 2014 for an analysis of Novorossiia as a brand.

<sup>152</sup> *MK.ru* 11 May 2014.

<sup>153</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* 24 May 2014.

the occurrence of the term Novorossiia has remained rather low, and the term has rarely been used in relation to the state-building process or political subjects. Our analysis of news reports show that in general the term Novorossiia has been almost entirely absent from the reporting on the situation in Ukraine. For example, in RIA Novosti's "chronology of events in Ukraine", Novorossiia is mentioned only in connection with the establishment of the Novorossiia party. An alternative formulation has been used in RIA's reporting to refer to the union of the two so-called national republics.<sup>154</sup>

In the Russian media, the Novorossiia theme has usually appeared in political TV shows discussing the conflict in Ukraine. In this context, Novorossiia has been represented as one of the historical regions belonging to Imperial Russia. In a typical fashion, Gennadii Makarov, the representative of the Russian nationalist organization *Russkoye Vechе* from Kharkiv, argued:

The Kharkov region joined Russia in 1503, and Donetsk and Lugansk are territories of Voisko Donskoe. Kherson and Nikolaev are Novorossiia. Western Ukraine is Chervonnaya Rus, and Kiev is Malorossiia. What are we talking about, my friends? It is Russian land. It should be given the right for self-determination.<sup>155</sup>

In the propaganda material prepared for foreign audiences, the state of Novorossiia is represented as one entity with its own history, whereas a "united Ukraine" is perceived as a myth. The history of the Russian Empire is interpreted in a way that supports the argument that the nation-state "Novorossiia" *already exists*.<sup>156</sup> To further these claims, books and other propaganda material have been produced and distributed to domestic and foreign audiences.<sup>157</sup> The controversy following President Putin's address to the "Novorossiia militia" on August 31, 2014, is instructive of the difficulties encountered in actually using this label in political discourse. In his address, President Putin stated that Ukrainian authorities should start serious negotiations

<sup>154</sup> RIA Novosti 26 May 2014; see e.g. RIA Novosti 27 May 2014.

<sup>155</sup> *Channel One* 16 March 2014.

<sup>156</sup> Novorossian Herald 2014a; Novorossian Herald 2014b.

<sup>157</sup> See e.g. Plehanov 2014; Surnin et al. 2015; Dugin 2015.

with the leaders of the People's Republics in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. These negotiations, according to Putin, should be devoted to:

Political organization of the communities and statehood (*gosudarstvennosti*) in the South-East of Ukraine aimed to secure legitimate interests of the people living in these regions.<sup>158</sup>

Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov hurried to deny interpretations made afterwards that Putin had supported the sovereignty of Novorossiia.<sup>159</sup> The whole controversy around this topic seems completely artificial – perhaps it was a carefully planned diversion operation, for at the time it was already plainly clear to all observers that the Novorossiia project had failed.<sup>160</sup> On the other hand, it can be argued that, in fact, the narrative construction of Novorossiia presents a typical example of Soviet political language oriented to imagining the future potential rather than explaining the actual present-day reality.

By the end of the year 2014, the political (nation-building) connotation of the term Novorossiia was on the decline. The political meaning of this term has changed, and it is mostly used with reference to the political party Novorossiia. New connotations have also emerged, for the term is used in connection with the humanitarian crisis (the humanitarian foundation Novorossiia, the project “Christmas Tree for Novorossiia”) and military operations (the Army of Novorossiia).

<sup>158</sup> Putin 2014f.

<sup>159</sup> See Berzina 2014.

<sup>160</sup> Putin's statement was made in connection with an intense period of fighting. The battle of Ilovaisk started on August 7 and lasted until September 2, 2014. According to official Ukrainian data, 366 troops were killed while another 429 were wounded. *Unian.info* 26 Aug 2015.

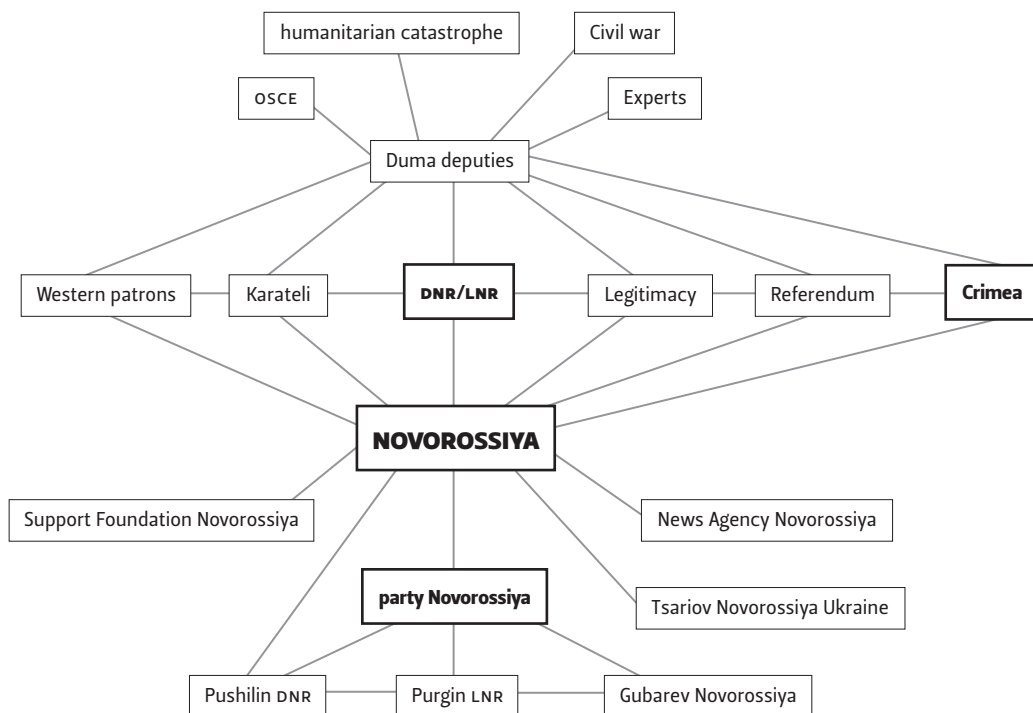


Figure 4.7.  
An analysis of  
the sample on  
the “Novorossiia”  
theme.

All in all, Russian propaganda and disinformation narratives in Eastern Ukraine have been oriented at creating flexible, yet legitimate-looking ‘political subjects’. The narrative of “supporters of federalization” fits this task better than the historically-oriented story about the formation of a nation (Novorossiia). Our analysis of the empirical data suggests that the simulacrum of “political subject” was vague and therefore did not provide a strong legitimating narrative for the conflict.

The previous research cited above indicates that much more important were the numerous fake reports, forgeries and other falsehoods that together with real events on the ground created a perception among the local population that the *civil war in Donbass* had already begun.<sup>161</sup> Against this background, the relatively marginal use of the term Novorossiia in official statements and regular news reports can be interpreted as an indication that Russia wanted to maintain maximum flexibility vis-à-vis events on the ground (to which the propaganda campaign swiftly reacted) and Russia’s negotiation position with the Ukrainian Government and the international community

<sup>161</sup> Osipian 2015.

as a whole. Indeed, by maintaining and consolidating a narrative of *political* confrontation between “Kiev junta” and “People’s Republics” Russia has been able in critical moments to distract attention away from its involvement in the conflict (August 2014 and February 2015) and, at the same time, represent itself as legitimate party in the negotiations over the future of Ukraine (the Minsk process).

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# **Part III**

## **CASE STUDIES**



5



## 5. Introduction to Case Studies

Katri Pynnöniemi & András Rácz

Since 2014, Russia's information war in the context of the Ukraine conflict has become a topical subject of research and policy analysis. One of the first analyses was published by the NATO Stratcom Center of Excellence (COE) in autumn 2014.<sup>1</sup> It highlighted the importance of social media and the Russian state media as channels of propaganda and disinformation. In turn, a report published by the Swedish Defence Agency in June 2014 provided a detailed analysis of one key factor in Russia's initial success: Russian soldiers captured Crimea's critical infrastructure and thereby created conditions for the total control of the information environment. This was crucial in securing the key objective: to break Ukraine's will to resist.<sup>2</sup> Since this initial period, studies exploring Russia's information warfare have multiplied, thus contributing to a better understanding of this phenomenon as a whole (see Chapter 2). Furthermore, several research groups have conducted empirically oriented research on Russian metanarratives, the use of social media in spreading disinformation and the systematic use of false media outlets or forgeries. This includes both more or less journalistic works and research conducted in the framework of media analysis, policy research and other types of academic research.<sup>3</sup>

The present research builds upon this background. It aims to contribute to the previous discussion by analysing the historical continuity between Soviet and present-day Russian propaganda and

1 NATO Strategic Communications Center for Excellence 2014.

2 Nordberg, Franke and Westerlund 2014, 43.

3 See e.g. Vicario et al. 2015; Hinck et al. 2016; Nimmo 2015; Spruds 2015; Osipian 2015; in Finland see Aro 2015; Juntunen 2015.

disinformation and presenting a detailed empirical analysis of the Russian metanarratives. The case studies presented in this section provide an in-depth view on how these metanarratives work or do not work in specific media environments. From a methodological perspective, it is important to note that the case studies are built on the decisions of the individual authors on which news channels or websites are analysed for a particular country. Hence, since the research analysis is limited to specific periods and selected media outlets, the conclusions drawn from it are not all-encompassing. However, the research offers insight into the extent to which Russian strategic deception is tailored to the target countries and how the metanarratives are present in each target country's media space.

To answer the research questions, the authors of the case studies have conducted qualitative content analyses of their respective research samples, using the methods of parallel analysis (comparison of the texts with pre-formulated metanarratives) and the distinctive test (identification of distinctive vocabulary used in specific metanarratives) (see Chapter 3.) To make the case studies as comparable as possible, the same pre-formulated metanarratives were used in each case study. The authors were given a list of metanarratives categorized in accordance with their *function*, including a description of what the narrative was designed to *do* and what elements the narrative was built upon. The following pre-formulated narratives (see Chapter 4 for a detailed description) were used in each case study. Narratives that framed Russia as a passive outsider in the conflict: *Russia does the right thing, people of Crimea are united and have will*. Narratives that framed Russia as a country threatened by the West: *Russia is for peace, Russia is reacting to Western aggression, Russia will prevail*. The latter two narrative constructions also helped to reinforce an interpretation that *the conflict is about the new European security order*. Furthermore, several multilayered narratives conveyed a message that Ukraine is part of the Russian World, most importantly, the metanarrative of *Ukraine and Russia forming one nation*, supported by the representation of *Ukraine as a failed state*, and the Euromaidan as an *illegal state coup*. In those cases when Russia's active participation was brought to the fore, it was framed as the *protection of the Russian-speaking population* in the context of *a civil war*.

The case studies are structured as follows. At the beginning the author presents a short description of the historical background and current relations between Russia and the country in question. This is followed by a brief description of the media space in general and the

political orientation of the analysed media outlets in particular. This is intended as a general background for the research analysis. However, it should be noted that there is some variation between the case studies. The analysis of the Visegrad countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) is based mainly on online media and social media sites, although in the Hungarian case the state news agency *MTI* is also included in the study due to the particularities of the highly centralized Hungarian media environment. However, the case studies of Finland, Sweden, Germany and Estonia rely mostly on the countries' main print or online newspapers. In the case of Finland, the online news reports of the country's main broadcasting company *YLE* are included in the research data. Consequently, the case studies are not fully comparable, but they provide a nuanced view of how Russian messages are present or absent in different types of media in different European countries.

The news articles were searched using the keyword "Ukraine" or a word from the distinctive vocabulary from the online archives<sup>4</sup> of each newspaper or other media outlet. The newspaper articles were searched covering a seven-day period after each particular event. The cases and periods studied were (the time frame is in parenthesis):

- The annexation of Crimea (21–28 March 2014)
- The burning of the trade union building in Odessa (2–8 May 2014)
- The shooting down of Flight MH17 (17–24 July 2014)
- The emergence of a "humanitarian catastrophe" narrative and the battle of Ilovaisk (24 August–5 September 2014). In this case, the research period is longer, as it includes the period during which the humanitarian catastrophe narrative was consolidated and the aftermath of the Ilovaisk battle took place.

When reporting the research results, the authors have structured their text either along the major events chosen to this study or along the metanarratives analysed. Although main emphasis is on the reporting of the empirical research results, in some cases the results are compared with previous research conducted on Russian information influence during the conflict. General conclusions from the case studies and the research analysis in general are provided in the concluding chapter.

4 In the case of Sweden, the Internet-based media monitoring service Retriever was used to identify the sample.

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6



## 6. Russian Strategic Communication Reflected in the German Media

Nicole Ahler<sup>1</sup>

### 6.1.

#### INTRODUCTION

Germany and Russia have a long common history and close economic relations that shape their relationship. Germany is not only highly dependent on Russian energy supply (gas and oil) but also relies on Russia as a fast-growing market for its export-oriented economy. Russia, on the other hand benefits from the foreign investments of major German companies such as Siemens, Bosch or Volkswagen.<sup>2</sup> Although economic ties are important, historical aspects of Russia-German relations should not be underestimated. The most profound event that characterizes Germany's policies towards Russia is its "historical guilt" due to the Second World War. This is combined with a sympathy for the *Ostpolitik* of the 1960s under the German Chancellor Willi Brandt that advocated an appeasement policy towards the Soviet Union and other Eastern European states in opposition to what was regarded as the confrontational bloc policy of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The reunification of Germany in 1989 changed the position of Germany as an European power, and subsequently, German-Russian

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2 See Chivvis and Rid 2009, 112–113.

3 Hillmann 2014.

relations. The former East Germany (GDR, German Democratic Republic) had long cultural, political and economic relations with the Soviet Union, and after reunification the emerging “new” unified Germany incorporated these ties. This special link between East Germany and Russia is still visible in the polls that discuss the image of Russia and its policies. While West Germans are mainly critical towards Putin’s Russia, in the former East Germany, people are rather positive and demand closer relations.<sup>4</sup>

For all these reasons, Germany prefers cooperation and compromise with Russia before confrontation. Although the conservative parties view Putin’s Russia more critically than their counterparts on the left, overall there is a consensus that well-functioning and close relations with Russia are highly relevant for Germany.<sup>5</sup>

## 6.2.

### THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN GERMANY AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS RUSSIA

The media landscape in Germany can be described as diverse and independent, with public as well as private media companies providing the German population with a diverse set of information via newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations as well as online offers. The newspaper and online news market reflects the political spectrum in Germany from national conservative (e.g. *Junge Freiheit*) to neo-conservative (Die Welt, Welt online) and liberal conservative (e.g. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) to liberal left (e.g. *Der Spiegel*, *Spiegel Online*) and socialist left (e.g. *Neues Deutschland*).<sup>6</sup>

The print and online media coverage of Russia over recent years has been critical and has focused on Putin’s person. Since the Ukraine conflict and the Crimea annexation, the media coverage of Russia has focused mainly on this single topic. In general, the German media views Russia as being responsible for the outbreak and escalation of the conflict, and Putin’s personal responsibility is particularly put forward.<sup>7</sup> This has led to criticism of the media coverage of the conflict. According to a survey conducted in late 2014, more than 50% of

4 Chivvis and Rid 2009, 106; Infratest Dimap 2014.

5 Chivvis and Rid 2009, 105–106.

6 Bayrische Landeszentrale für Neue Medien 2015.

7 Below 2015, 9; Bläser 2014.

respondents do not believe the media coverage of the Ukraine conflict in Germany. The reasons mentioned for this critical view include the feeling that reports are one-sided and not objective (31%) and that there is even disinformation.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, several elder statesmen such as the former chancellors Helmut Schmidt and Gerhard Schröder (both social democrats) and former foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher (a liberal) as well as several CEOs of German companies with strong ties to Russia have voiced their criticism towards media coverage of the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

In response to this criticism, the Federal Agency for Civic Education conducted a study analysing German talk shows for their bias towards either Russia or Ukraine. The research results do not support the general view of the anti-Russian bias of the German media: on the contrary, “Russian-friendly” participants supporting a policy of détente towards Russia were overall on the majority, while in several cases supporters of Ukraine were in a minority or not represented at all. A conclusion drawn in the report is that “the restricted press freedom and limited pluralism affect the German media coverage on Russia as much as it does in Russia itself. Editorial journalists like to invite their colleagues to their TV shows (38%). Due to the distortion of media competition in Russia, only state-owned and state-controlled media have the possibility to afford their own foreign correspondents in Berlin. Primarily they are invited onto TV shows”.<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to estimate the impact of Russian metanarratives on public perceptions abroad, but as argued by Bachmann and Lyubaschenko in a recently published article, distorted relations between Russian and Ukrainian participants and experts on Russia and Ukraine on German TV programmes in favour of Russia created an impression that the actual majority opinion (supporting the Maidan narrative) were in the minority, thus leading to a situation where “the initial Maidan narrative was slowly replaced by its counterpart”.<sup>11</sup>

Against this background, it is noteworthy that the German public is divided on the question of who is responsible for the conflict. Around half of the population think that Russia and Putin are responsible for the escalation of the confrontation, and around the same percentage are of the opinion that Russia is a threat to Germany. However,

8 Infratest Dimap 2014.

9 ARD Programmbeirat 2014.

10 Burkhardt 2014.

11 Bachmann and Lyubaschenko 2014.

around 20% to 30% of the population is convinced that the European Union and NATO have provoked Russia and thereby are responsible. Approximately one third (33%) of respondents see good reasons for the annexation of Crimea and 10% still think Russia is a reliable partner. The percentage of people “understanding Russia” is considerably higher in the eastern part of Germany (the former GDR) and among those people are many members of the parties “Die Linke” (The Left) and “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD, Alternative for Germany, a populist far right party).<sup>12</sup>

While the conflict in Ukraine is an important topic in the media and the reasons and possible solutions are discussed widely on TV, newspapers and Internet news sites, there is also recurrent coverage of the attempts and successes of Russia’s strategic communication aimed at influencing the German public. There are reports and commentaries on trolls “flooding” the commentaries of the main German Internet news pages (such as *Spiegel.de*, *Sueddeutsche.de*, *ARD.de*) and the establishment of news agencies and channels such as *Russland heute*, the German branch of *Russia Today*, *Sputnik.de* and the newly established office of *Rossiia Sovodnya*, a Russian state-owned news agency, in Berlin.<sup>13</sup>

The four online media platforms and newspapers analysed here include: first, a conservative right online news provider, *Die Welt Online*,<sup>14</sup> second, a moderate liberal left online news provider and weekly magazine: *Spiegel Online*<sup>15</sup> and *Der Spiegel*, third, a leftist green liberal newspaper, *die Tageszeitung Taz*,<sup>16</sup> and finally, a socialist left news platform and newspaper *Neues Deutschland*<sup>17</sup> which during the GDR was the party newspaper of the Socialist party and is mainly read in East Germany. Except for the *Neues Deutschland*, all of the newspapers are mainly critical towards Russia. The main body of empirical material consists of articles published on the days of selected events up until

12 See Steinsdorff 2015, 4; Bläser 2014, 2; Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 2014.

13 See for example *Sueddeutsche.de*, 2 September, 2015; *Sueddeutsche.de* 13 June 2014; *Spiegel.de* 4 August 2014; *Neue Züricher Zeitung* 18 June 2014.

14 Visits in millions: 65.29 in August 2015, source IVW – Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e.V., online <http://ausweisung.ivw-online.de/online/i.php?s=1&mz=201405&sall=1> (21.12.2015)

15 Visits in millions: 193.69 in August 2015, source IVW, online <http://ausweisung.ivw-online.de/online/i.php?s=1&mz=201405&sall=1> (21.12.2015)

16 Visits in millions: 4.32 in November 2015 IVW, online <http://ausweisung.ivw-online.de/index.php?i=116> (21.12.2015)

17 Visits in millions: 1.28 in August 2015, source Neues-Deutschland.de, online <http://www.neues-deutschland.de/kontakt/9> (21.12.2015)

one week after the event, searched for using the keyword “Ukraine” or a term from the distinctive vocabulary related to the key event in question. In the case of the “humanitarian disaster”, articles from 1–23 August 2014 are analysed.

### 6.3.

#### RUSSIAN METANARRATIVES IN THE GERMAN MEDIA

##### *The Crimean Operation*

The referendum in Crimea and the annexation are highly debated topics in all analysed media. Thereby the most frequently used metanarrative from Russian sources is the message that the conflict is about NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), the United States and/or the European Union (EU) aiming to create a new security order in Europe and to repel Russia and/or Russia’s influence in Europe. The most commonly presented subnarrative in this context is that Russia is only reacting to Western aggression, here especially NATO, but also the US and the EU.

The second most targeted metanarrative during the annexation was the portrayal of the events and demonstrations at Maidan as a negative, violent event, presenting the new government as illegal and the supporters as fascists (*Kiever Junta, Faschisten*), sometimes including the narrative of US and/or German direct support for the coup.<sup>18</sup> Another frequently used metanarrative was the message that Russia is not part of the conflict, but is confronted with a civil war next to its borders where Russians/Russian-speakers are discriminated against and where Russia demands the right for those people to decide their fate: the Crimean people especially as a united group should have a voice and their wish for unification with Russia should be taken seriously. The metanarrative of Crimea being a part of Russia historically was mentioned quite rarely, but another striking icon was targeted instead: the annexation of Crimea to Russia was compared to the reunification of Germany where the Crimean people were presented as Russians who were for a long time separated from their historical home country and were now “returning home”.<sup>19</sup>

Comparing the different news platforms, there are two major findings: Firstly, the moderate left or conservative news media

18 See for example *neues-deutschland.de* 14 March 2014.

19 *tagesspiegel.de* 19 March 2014.

presented narratives provided by Putin or Russian government officials directly, often in quotation marks. The statements were often placed at the end of the articles, thus, offering the audience the other side of the story in the form of a Russian official statement. Secondly, in the leftist news platform, emphasis was put on comments and reports of German supporters of Russian policies (such as politicians from the party “Die Linke”).

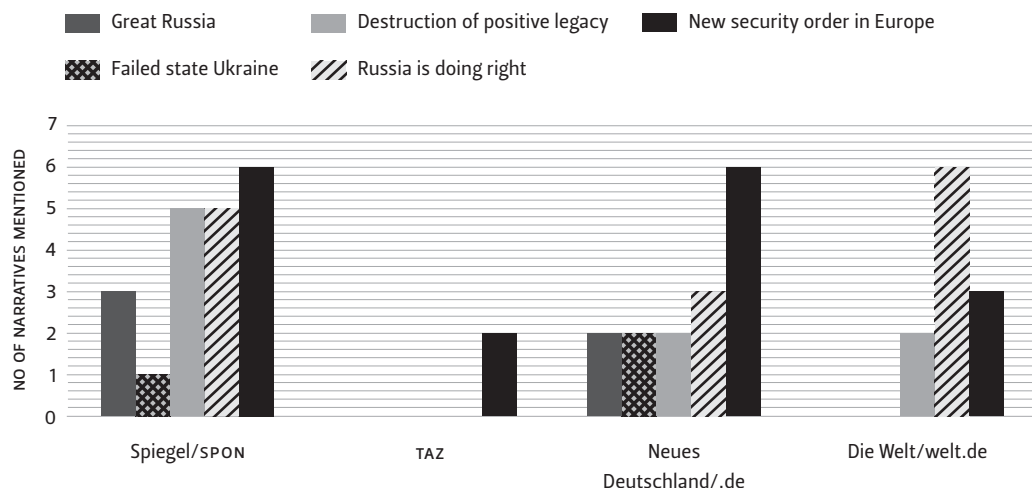


Figure 6.1.  
The number of metanarratives mentioned, Crimea.

#### *Burning of the Trade Union Building in Odessa on 2 May 2014*

The tragic event in Odessa on 2 May 2014 did not acquire substantial media coverage in Germany. Usually this event was mentioned in one sentence within articles describing the overall escalation of the conflict. Two main metanarratives were taken up in the German coverage of the event.

First, the metanarrative of the illegal state-coup was present in the German media in repeated accusations by the Russian officials and media that the new Ukrainian government was not legally elected but came into power by a coup during the Euromaidan and that this group consists of “terrorists” and “fascists”. Second, this negative image of the Ukrainian government and its supporters was combined with a metanarrative describing “people of South-East Ukraine” or “the Russian-speaking population of South-East-Ukraine” as being in danger and threatened by this “*Kievan Junta*”, thereby underlining that



Russia is not involved but instead there is an ongoing civil war in Ukraine. The most frequently used keywords in this context were “crime against the civil population” and “crime against its own people”, “bloodshed” and even “genocide”, which was quoted in *Die Welt* in two articles describing the sentiments and Russian propaganda in South-East Ukraine. “Since the tragedy of Odessa, where 40 people died, the Russian media speaks of ‘genocide’. The evening news is full of stories on Odessa. Here the myth of the Ukrainian secret service orchestrating the ‘massacre’ is spread”.<sup>20</sup>

When it comes to differences between the news platforms, one can say that overall the event was not covered in headlines or in great detail in any of the analysed newspapers, but as one incident in the overall escalation of the conflict from the annexation of Crimea by Russia to the spreading of the conflict to South-East Ukraine. Only the socialist, leftist news platforms wrote complete articles about this event, interviewed witnesses and searched for multiple viewpoints on it.

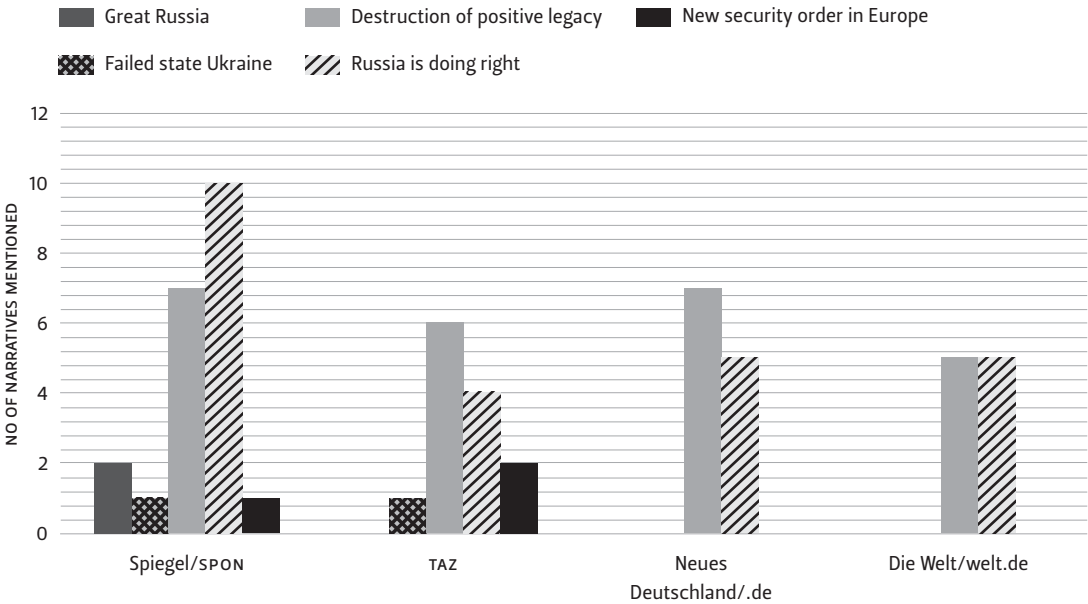


Figure 6.2.  
The number of metanarratives mentioned, Odessa.

<sup>20</sup> *Die Welt* 7 March 2014.

### *The Downing of the MH17 Flight on 17 July 2014*

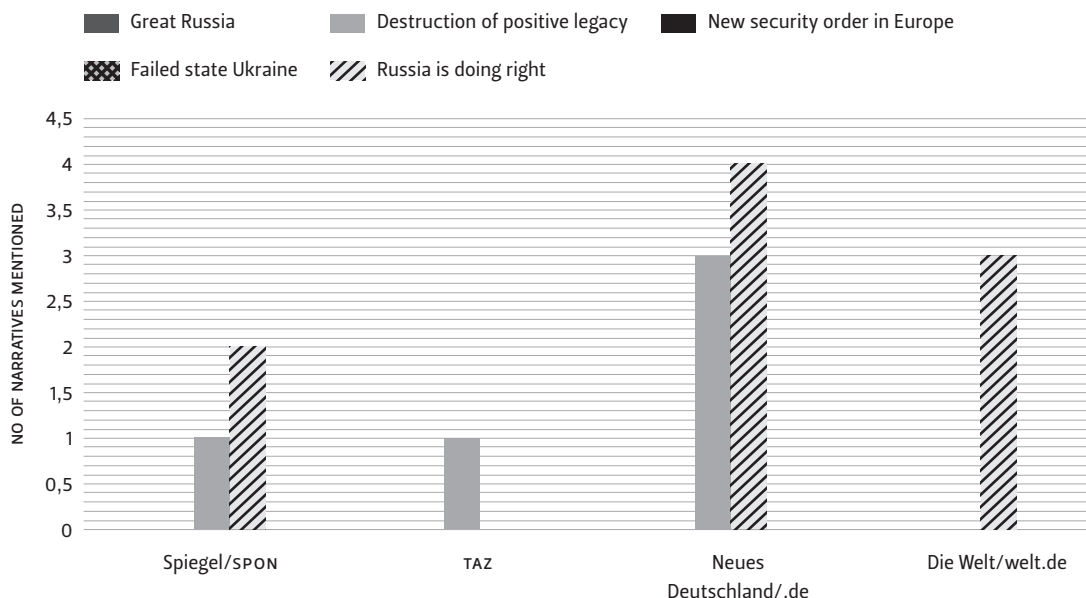
The main, and in fact, only statement by Russian officials published on the downing of Flight MH17 on the media platforms analysed here represented the event as Ukraine's fault. The explanation offered argued that Ukraine is responsible for the downing of the airplane irrespective of the suspects and causes of the act, since it happened on its territory. Furthermore, the conflict in the Eastern Ukraine was represented as being a civil war in which Russia is not involved but offers its support to investigate the event.

While *Welt.de* and *Spiegel.de/Spiegel* only covered the above-mentioned narrative and mainly named Putin as their source on the event, the leftist newspapers and online portals *TAZ* and *Neues Deutschland* did offer an additional narrative presented by German commentators, representatives of international civil society organizations and Russian newspapers: the source of instability in Ukraine was claimed to be the new Ukrainian government that came into power illegally, had been penetrated by fascists and was undermined and secretly supported by the US or US-sponsored groups.<sup>21</sup> The most striking keywords used in this connection included: "US supported/US sponsored" and "smear campaign against Russia", as well as "fascist" and "Kievan junta".

When it comes to the narratives surrounding the downing of MH17, some of the narratives presented in the Russian media were briefly described, but overall in a manner that made it clear that those narratives were not taken seriously, but were aimed at disconcerting the public e.g. that the attack originally aimed at downing Putin's aeroplane, that people in the plane were already dead and the downing was arranged to discredit Russia, and so on and so forth.<sup>22</sup>

21 See for example *Neues Deutschland* 22 July 2014; *Neues Deutschland* 23 July 2015.

22 See for example *Spiegel.de* 22 July 2014.



#### *The Humanitarian Catastrophe in August 2014*

The German media broadly covered the “humanitarian catastrophe” case. The main narrative put forward by Russian officials and media represented Russia as a caring brother nation interested in the fate of the people in South-Eastern Ukraine, asking for peace and offering humanitarian aid. The Ukrainian government, on the other hand, was depicted as an aggressor against its own people, while the separatists were said to protect civilians from the attacks by Ukrainian troops. Key words used to describe the situation included: “civil war”, “humanitarian aid”, “humanitarian protection”, “ending the bloodshed”, “war crimes”, and “crimes against humanity”.

The conservative and liberal left news platforms in Germany repeated this metanarrative disseminated by Russia, in accordance with which people in South-Eastern Ukraine were in danger and needed humanitarian aid and, most important, Russia was not involved in what was described as a civil war. The coverage of the events in the *Neues Deutschland* was again slightly different and relayed narratives including, for example, the narration of a fascist and illegal Ukrainian government and the claim that the US or the CIA were responsible for the Euromaidan. In this context, the narrative of the NATO provoking Russia and therefore being responsible for the civil war in Ukraine is frequent. Keywords used included “NATO aggressive behaviour”, “US sponsored uprising”, “fascists in Kiev”.

Figure 6.3.  
The number of  
metanarratives  
mentioned, MH17.

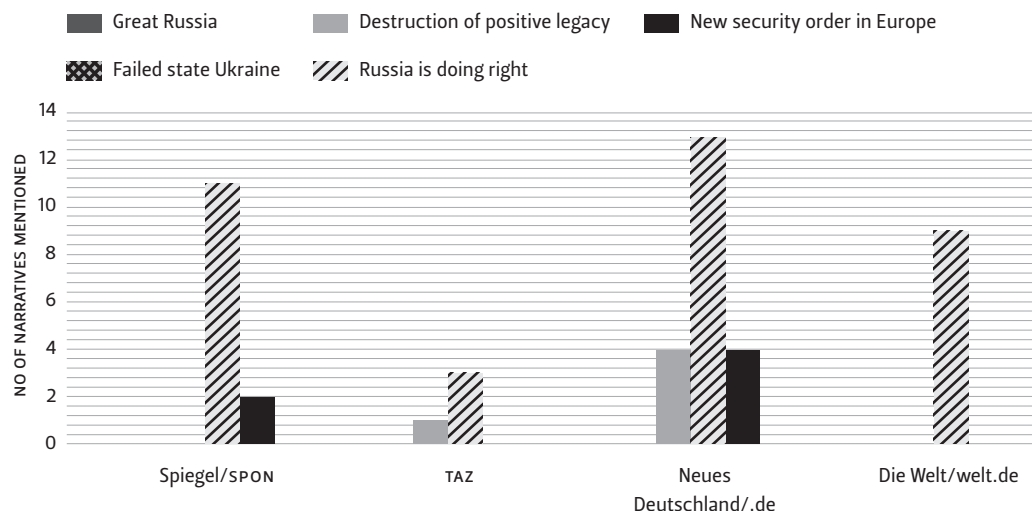


Figure 6.4.  
The number of  
metanarratives  
mentioned,  
*Humanitarian*.

### *The Battle of Ilovaïsk 24 August to 2 September 2014*

During the last week of August and the beginning of September 2014, the media coverage of the Russian narratives was still mainly characterized by the image of an aiding and caring Russia that was concerned about the people in South-Eastern Ukraine who were in danger and attacked by the Ukrainian government and army. Russia itself was claimed not to be involved in any kind of warfare, but was trying to provide humanitarian aid along with diplomatic pressure for a peaceful solution to the conflict. While accusations emerged about Russian troops detected on Ukrainian ground and Russian media reports popped up about secret funerals of killed Russian soldiers that the government was trying to conceal, three distinctively new frames appeared in the Russian narration.

Firstly, the metanarrative of the conflict as solely a civil war in Ukraine in which Russia has not played any military or other active role changed slightly from accusations against the Ukrainian government to putting more emphasis on the heroism of the separatists, who were said to protect the Russian-speaking population from the “deadly” Ukrainian attacks against civilians.<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, and in combination with the first change in narration, a historical aspect – the comparison with WWII and especially the siege of Leningrad and Stalingrad – was added to the narrative. Putin was quoted to compare the tactics of the Ukrainian army with those of

<sup>23</sup> Spiegel.de 29 August 2014.

the German troops in the Soviet Union during WWII when “big cities were closed in and destroyed by systematic bombing, including the inhabitants”,<sup>24</sup> calling Donetsk a “second Leningrad”.<sup>25</sup>

A third alteration in the narration of events was the introduction of the federalization<sup>26</sup> of the Ukrainian state as the most promising solution to the conflict. The narrative of “Novorossiya” was closely linked with this, suggesting that the eastern part of the Ukraine is its own historical entity whereas Ukraine as a whole is represented as a failed state.<sup>27</sup>

Comparing different newspapers and news web pages reveals a quite similar coverage by the conservative right and liberal left media, but a slightly different one from the socialist newspaper and web page *Neues Deutschland*. The coverage in *Neues Deutschland* and *TAZ* included comments, interviews and reports by German or Ukrainian representatives of a rather pro-Russian opinion, while the other news platforms only used official statements by Putin or other Russian official representatives. This is also visible when it comes to the narratives disposed. The above-mentioned narratives appeared in the conservative right and liberal left media, while *Neues Deutschland* also disseminated narrations that represented the conflict as the fault of NATO aggression and the regime change in Ukraine as an event that provoked the Russian behaviour.<sup>28</sup>

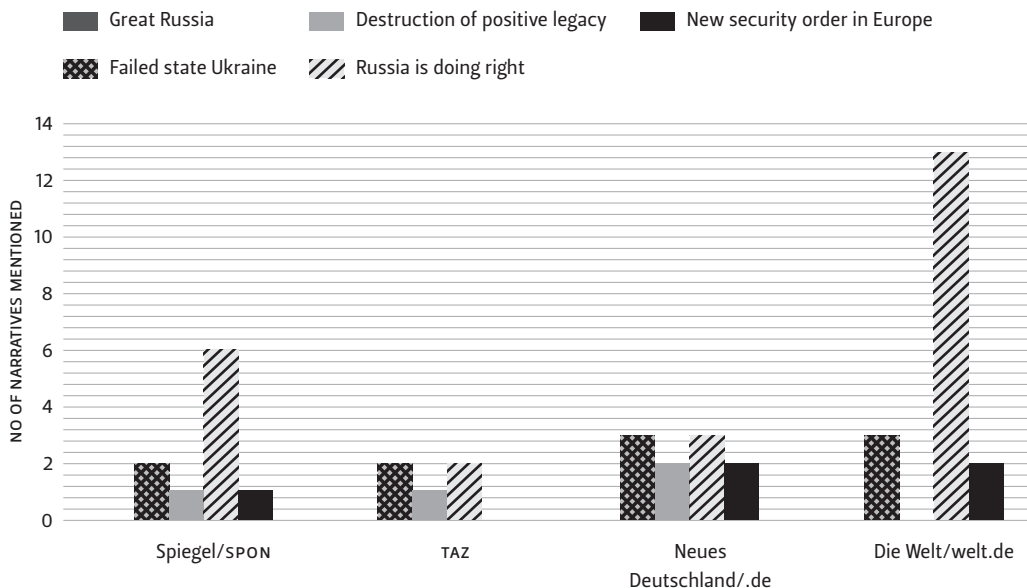
24 *Spiegel.de* 29 August 2014.

25 *Die Welt.de* 29 August 2014.

26 Within the sample, this argument of federalization as an option for peace was only mentioned once in March 2014 on *Spiegel.de*. After that it was not taken up again until the end of August where it showed up again in the context of the Novorossija narrative.

27 See for example *Spiegel.de* 29 August 2014; *Neues Deutschland* 1 September 2014.

28 See for example *Neues-deutschland.de* 30 August 2014; *neues-deutschland.de* 11 August 2014.



#### 6.4. CONCLUSION

Figure 6.5.  
The number of  
metanarratives  
mentioned,  
*Ilovaïsk.*

The above analysis shows that appearance of the Russian metanarratives in the German media followed a pattern where direct quotations of the official Russian view were included in the news reports to offer “another version” of events. In most of the analysed media – except for the socialist, far left news platform *Neues-Deutschland.de* – all of the news sites mainly just repeated statements made by Putin and other Russian officials in Russia or the Russian media, but very rarely published additional interviews or searched for other methods of direct contact.

With the annexation of Crimea, the metanarrative of a threat to a new security order and the subnarrative of Western aggression against Russia through NATO expansion into Eastern Europe and the EU association agreement with Ukraine was predominant. After the conflict escalated with violent clashes in Eastern and South-Eastern Ukraine, the metanarrative in the forefront turned out to be the negative image of the Euromaidan uprising and the new government in Kyiv. At the same time, Russian officials ensured that Russia was not involved in the conflict but only showed its concern about the discriminated against Russian minority in Eastern Ukraine and offer to contribute to a peaceful solution (Metanarrative IV: Russia does

the right thing). In August, the narration changed again and now stressed the image of the conflict as a humanitarian catastrophe for the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, where Russia supported the civilians with humanitarian aid. Russian officials spoke about a war against civilians, comparing it with the Nazi terror of WWII. In addition, the image of the separatists as heroes and guardians of the people was created, calling them representatives of “Novorossiya”, thereby claiming that Ukraine is not a united entity.

Only one specific narrative seems to have been tailored to a German and wider European audience. This is the comparison of the annexation of Crimea with the reunification of Germany in 1989. Putin presented this analogy in his speech given at the official annexation ceremony on 18 March 2014 held at the Kremlin. As reported by *Spiegel*, Putin “exclusively turned to the German citizens asking them to remember 1990. He pointed out that Russia had supported the German reunification at that time – in contrast to many other countries ‘that were allies of Germany’. Putin went on ‘I am sure that you did not forget and I am confident that German citizens will support the pursuit of the Russian world of reunification’.”<sup>29</sup> This analogy was mentioned in the German media and *der Spiegel online* labelled it as “the surprise” of Putin’s speech.<sup>30</sup> However, this narrative was not taken up for discussion by any of the analysed newspapers during the timeframe of the research.

In conclusion, the analysed sample of articles reflect a sceptical view towards Russian state media reports and information presented by officials from Russia irrespective of the general political orientation of the internet news sites and newspapers. The preformulated metanarratives appeared rarely in the German mainstream media and often only at the very end of articles as a short piece of information about Putin’s declarations. It can be argued that these quotations were already framed as narrations that were most probably not the truth. Thereby narratives tailored to the German audience did not even have a chance to reach their target, since direct interviews were missing where these could have been put across. Only in the case of socialist newspaper *Neues Deutschland* narratives used in the Russian context are presented as facts in some articles. There are, however, only a few of such articles, and they are mostly commentaries from politicians from the *Die Linke* party or political activists known to be socialist.

29 *Spiegel.de* 18 March 2014.

30 *Spiegel.de* 18 March 2014.

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7



## 7. The Case of Estonia: Different Information Spaces, but the Same Narratives

Madli Tikerpuu<sup>1</sup>

### 7.1.

#### INTRODUCTION

The Ukraine crisis was one of the most-covered foreign policy topics in the Estonian media in 2014. The Estonian media reported on the conflict daily with one or more topic-related news pieces. The abrupt emergence of the crisis (Russia's operation in Crimea) and the fact that the conflict was taking place in the neighbourhood, together with historical memories in the Baltic countries of the Soviet Union and Russia, were factors that shaped peoples' perceptions of Russia's involvement in the conflict.

The official Estonian position on the conflict was defined on 5 March 2014 when the Estonian Parliament approved a statement on "the support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity". According to this statement, the Estonian Parliament "condemns Russian Federation's anti-Ukraine activities, occupation of Crimea and Russia's attempts to divide the Ukrainian society".<sup>2</sup> In subsequent statements, the Estonian government expressed its concern about the effects of "Russia's military threats and activities in Ukraine" on peace and security in Europe, and has firmly condemned Crimea's illegal incorporation (*liitmine*) into Russia.<sup>3</sup> It ought to be taken into account as well that in the public discussion it is commonplace to refer to conflict and crisis in Ukraine, rather than to talk about war in Ukraine.

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2 Estonian Parliament 2014.

3 Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014.

## 7.2. THE ESTONIAN MEDIA SPACE AND PUBLIC TRUST TOWARDS THE MEDIA

The Estonian media landscape consists of two distinct spheres: Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking media, a fact that makes the Estonian case different from others presented in this research.<sup>4</sup> Although there has been some overlap of the information spaces in newspaper and Internet media outlets,<sup>5</sup> the absence of a national Russian-language television channel could be considered as one of the reasons for difference in information received, and thus, problematic from the viewpoint of the integration of the Russian-speaking and Estonian-speaking communities. The debate about the need for a national Russian-language TV channel emerged immediately after Estonia re-gained independence in 1991.<sup>6</sup> However, it was only on 27 September 2015 that national Russian-language television was launched.

The results of integration monitoring in 2015 revealed that 74% of the non-Estonian-speaking population consider Russian-origin TV channels to be very important information sources. More specifically, the report showed that 51% of non-Estonian-speaking respondents trust Russian media outlets rather than Estonian ones.<sup>7</sup> However, comparison with earlier results of the same research shows that trust among non-Estonian-speaking respondents towards Russian

4 Finland also has a bilingual media landscape, but the differences between the Finnish- and Swedish-speaking media cannot be compared with the Estonian case. Furthermore, the Finnish National Broadcasting Company, Yle, has provided news in Russian since 2013. According to the 2011 population census, 68.8% of the population are Estonians and the share of Russians is 25%. Estonia has the greatest number of Russian citizens out of the three Baltic countries, 7% (over 100,000 people). Kivirähk 2014, 4–8; Statistikaamet 2013.

5 The private enterprises Postimees Ltd, [www.postimees.ee](http://www.postimees.ee) and Ekspress Meedia Ltd, [www.delfi.ee](http://www.delfi.ee) are the largest media outlets which have both Estonian- and Russian-language versions.

6 Discussions have focused on TV channels coming under Estonian Public Broadcasting, ignoring the fact that there has been a local Russian-language TV channel TV3+, a subsidiary of private enterprise and entertainment channel TV3, since January 2005. Since 1993, Estonian Public Broadcasting has aired a Russian-language radio channel, Radio 4.

7 Seppel 2015, 88, 90.

media outlets has in fact declined from 70% in 2011.<sup>8</sup> Although non-Estonian speakers now follow Estonian-language media more, this has not brought automatic trust. According to the report, people who follow several different media spaces (Estonian-language, Estonian local Russian-language media outlets and Russian media) are rather critical of all the information sources.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, around 90% of Estonian-speaking respondents follow Estonian-language media and 81% of respondents trust Estonian telecasts.<sup>10</sup>

Taking this background into account, the appearance of Russian metanarratives in the Estonian media is analysed from the online news reports of the two largest Estonian-language media outlets: *Postimees*, *Delfi.ee* and the Russian-language newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda Northern Europe* (KPNE).<sup>11</sup> It is an online version of the *Komsomolskaya Pravda Baltiya*, which is the third-largest of the three Russian-language weekly (paper-print) newspapers in Estonia (10 000 paper newspaper readers). *МК-Estonia* has the largest circulation (12,500 paper newspaper readers),<sup>12</sup> whereas the second most-read newspaper *Den za Dnjom* (11,500 paper newspaper readers) is owned by Postimees Ltd, which has already been under study as an Estonian-language newspaper. For the purposes of this case study, online version of KPNE was analysed since it will give an overview of Russia's information influence in other Baltic and Northern European countries in addition to Estonia.

8 Vihalemm 2011, 162. In 2011, the question was formulated as follows: "Imagine a situation where all the media outlets discuss the situation and future developments of Estonian Russian-language schools. How much do you trust what different media outlets have to say about it?" Nearly 70% of respondents replied that they would rather trust РБК. In 2015, the question was formulated in the following way: "How much do you trust what different media outlets have to say about the Ukraine crisis?" and 51% of respondents expressed trust in Russian TV channels, 45% in РБК. The questions were the same for Estonian- and non-Estonian speaking respondents. Seppel 2015, 159.

9 Seppel 2015, 90.

10 In 2011, 95% of Estonian respondents considered Estonian TV channels to be important information sources, while in 2015, 86% of respondents considered the Estonian TV channel ETV to be an important information source, followed by other Estonian TV channels (76%) and radio channels (75%). The questions about trust were the same for Estonian- and non-Estonian-speaking respondents. Seppel 2015, 88; Vihalemm 2011, 159.

11 The newspaper is the third most-read Russian-language print newspaper in Estonia (10,000 paper newspaper readers). The paper version of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in Estonia (and for Northern Europe) is *Komsomolskaya Pravda Baltiya*, while the online version enables the reader to select *Komsomolskaya Pravda Northern Europe*.

12 Eesti Ajalehtede Liit 2015. МК-Estonia belongs to the Baltic Media Alliance (Baltijas Mediju Alianse) affiliated group that amongst others includes three versions of Pervõi Baltiiski Kanal, TV-channels based on Russian REN TV and Mir, etc. Baltijas Mediju Alianse 2012.

In contrast with the other case studies, this chapter is organized in accordance with the two main poles of the Estonian media space. The first part will present the main narratives identified in the Estonian-language medium. The second part will focus on the narratives presented in the Russian-language medium. The conclusion will present the main findings and briefly compare the coverage of the narratives.

### 7.3. APPEARANCE OF RUSSIAN METANARRATIVES IN ESTONIAN-LANGUAGE MEDIA

The main Russian metanarrative that appears in the Estonian-language media (*Postimees* and *delfi*) through the selected events portrays Russia as a passive outsider in the conflict. The metanarrative of “Russia does the right thing” purports to create an impression that Russia is not a participant in the conflict. It appeared especially in connection with the Crimean operation, the downing of Flight MH17 on 17 July 2014 and the “humanitarian catastrophe” narrative that emerged at the beginning of August 2014.

In the case of the Crimean operation, Russian officials who were quoted in the news reports framed the referendum as being legitimate; that is, in line with the international norms.<sup>13</sup> These statements provided a basis for the metanarrative about Russia “doing the right thing”. Parallel with this affirmative narrative, Russian officials and the Russian state media quoted in the news pieces sought to undermine the legacy of the Euromaidan. For example, the Ukrainian authorities were called “militaristic” and illegitimate.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, some opinion pieces, incorporated distinctive Russian vocabulary, making reference to the “Russophobic rhetoric of the Ukrainian authorities”.<sup>15</sup>

Another Russian metanarrative portrayed the Crimean operation as a peaceful transition that realised the “will of the Crimean people”. This is evident in Putin’s statement at the ceremony awarding Russian soldiers with medals. As reported by the *delfi.ee* news portal on 28 March 2014, “Russian president Vladimir Putin said to the soldiers, when thanking them for the operation in Crimea, that bloodshed and provocations were prevented by their precise and

<sup>13</sup> *Delfi* 2014b.

<sup>14</sup> *Postimees* 2014a.

<sup>15</sup> *Delfi* 2014a.



professional activity”.<sup>16</sup> As argued earlier, the word provocation is a term of distraction (see Chapter 4.2) that especially in the former Soviet Union countries is understood against the historical background. In the case of Estonia, the negative undertone of the word *provocation* (*provokatsioon*) derives from the Soviet period when deviation from mainstream (pro-government) opinion towards the government was punishable and interpreted as having an anti-state attitude.<sup>17</sup> The memory of suppression of any resistance towards the Soviet state and the role of arranged *provocations* – allegedly by the KGB – can be regarded as forming a historically sensitive framework for interpreting Putin’s words. However, this message was not targeted at Estonia especially; rather the question is about the actualization of a historically sensitive reading of the message in Estonia.

Another example of how history is present in the narratives, this time perhaps more specifically targeting the Baltic and Estonian audience, is an interview by the Russian TV host Vladimir Pozner on 21 March 2014 where he argued that, “What happened to Crimea is a result of the accumulated tensions between the USA and Russia”.<sup>18</sup> Although the interview was mainly trying to persuade the Baltic public about its unjustified fear of Russia, it carried a larger message that Russia is not dangerous. A similar message was communicated in a local opinion story undermining the USA and NATO’s right of intervention in the case of Kosovo.<sup>19</sup> In both cases, the persuasion was carried out through interpretations and references to events in history, thus using historical narratives.

In the case of Flight MH17, Russian narratives appeared in the Estonian media in the form of direct quotations<sup>20</sup> of statements by Russian officials that originated from the Russian news agency *Interfax* or the web portal *Lenta.ru*. For example, *Delfi.ee* published an article on 17 July reporting that “Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777 was shot down by Ukrainian soldiers, whose target was probably Russian President Vladimir Putin’s plane, claimed a source from Russian aviation offices Rosaviatsiya to Interfax. ‘It happened near Warsaw at the 330 altitude at a height of 10,100 meters. Plane number one was there at 16.21

16 Short summary at the beginning of the news. Delfi 2014b.

17 Kaasik 2011, 2013; Niitsoo 2005.

18 Postimees 2014a; Delfi 2014m.

19 Delfi 2014n.

20 As the news in the Estonian-language media is in the form of references and citations, it is assumed that it has been directly translated from Russian and the news staff have not modified the use of the words or the idea behind them.

Moscow time and the Malaysian plane at 15.44 Moscow time,’ reported a source via Lenta.ru”.<sup>21</sup>

At later stages as well, Russian metanarratives and disinformation appeared in the form of direct quotations from Russian officials who argued that Ukraine was responsible for the tragedy as the plane was in Ukrainian airspace, Ukrainian military bases were close enough to shoot the plane down and the accident would not have happened without the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Concerning disinformation, *Postimees* referred in its 17 July news piece to an alleged Iranian defence expert who claimed that the conflict was a result of misinformation and the incident was self-defence.<sup>23</sup> The news pieces published in the Estonian-language media reporting the situation referred both to the Russian offer for help in the investigation and dialogue with the separatists, and the Russian critique of information provided by the US government. Contradictions in the Russian narrative were exposed in the course of the reporting, but not particularly emphasized in the analysed sample. The articles relied on news pieces from international news agencies, Russian news agencies and other news producers (such as YLE), as well as direct citations from the Russian officials.<sup>24</sup>

In the aftermath of the burning of the trade union building in Odessa, high-level Russian officials were cited in the Estonian news media, calling the event ‘genocide’ and the Ukrainian government fascist, thus employing WWII mythology in its arguments.<sup>25</sup> The quotations underlined the Russian metanarrative of ‘Russia doing the right thing’, representing Russia as a “peace negotiator” who is calling on the Ukrainian government to stop the violence and to start a dialogue.<sup>26</sup>

The metanarrative of “Russia doing the right thing” also dominated in the case of the “humanitarian catastrophe” discourse in August 2014. The statements by Russian officials cited in the Estonian

21 With the purpose of demonstrating Estonian journalists’ way of communicating the message, the full citation was brought out. Delfi 17 July 2014.

22 Delfi 2014e, 2014f, 2014g, 2014h; *Postimees* 2014b, 2014c, 2014e.

23 *Postimees* 2014c; see also Delfi 2014g; *Postimees* 2014e, which quote information from Russian military experts according to which a Ukrainian military plane was near MH17.

24 Delfi 2014f, 2014g, 2014h; *Postimees* 2014b 2014c, 2014d, 2014e.

25 The spokesman for the Russian President, Dmitry Peskov held the Ukrainian government responsible for the deaths, *Postimees* 2014b. The speaker of the Russian Duma, Sergey Naryshkin claimed the happening to be “genocide”, *Postimees* 2014c. The Minister of Foreign Affairs compared this to “fascism” and “fascist ideology”, Delfi 2014d. The Russian Ambassador to Estonia, Yuri Merzlyakov claimed the “successors of Nazis” were emerging in Ukraine, Delfi 2014e.

26 Delfi 2014c, 2014d.

media purported to refute allegations that the humanitarian aid was functioning as a cover for sending armed forces to Ukraine.<sup>27</sup> To refute these claims, Russian officials claimed that the country was following international norms when providing humanitarian aid. This narrative was communicated directly and through statements by Russian high officials about holding dialogues with respective parties, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the UN and Ukraine, and emphasizing the importance of mutual agreements on the issue.<sup>28</sup> However, the direct quotations were placed in the news pieces as “the other side of the story”. Thus, although the Russian metanarratives were present in the reporting about the situation, the narratives themselves did not frame the news about the events.

#### 7.4.

#### MAIN NARRATIVES IN THE RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE MEDIA

When studying *Komsomolskaya Pravda Northern Europe* (KPNE), an interesting difference emerged in the form of presenting the news. In contrast to the Estonian-language newspapers, the news in KPNE was largely presented as if the journalists were in the field reflecting the ongoing events while also interviewing local people. In other words, the news reports were written in such a way as to provide readers with the ‘human dimension’. This practice has similarities with propagandistic framing, because people’s personal experiences have been connected to moral values and to emotions that people feel strongly about.<sup>29</sup> This has been particularly the case with reporting about burning of the trade union building in Odessa and the “humanitarian catastrophe” in August 2014.

During the week following the referendum in Crimea (16 March 2014), coverage of this theme was comparatively scarce in KPNE. Overall, the news pieces referred to the metanarrative of “Russia doing the right thing” and a sub-narrative that emphasized the unity and

27 Delfi 2014i; Postimees 2014i. Communicated by the spokesman for the Russian President, Dmitry Peskov.

28 For example, on the first day it claimed that mutual agreement was needed, in the next days it claimed that negotiations with the respective parties had been launched and called on the German Foreign Minister Walter Steinmeier to help accomplish the mission, (Postimees 2014j). continuing on to ask for a security corridor for the aid (Postimees 2014k.)

29 Cantril 1938, 218.

free will of the Crimean people. It is noteworthy that the news pieces did not use the word annexation, but instead referred to the re-joining (*prisoedinenie*) of Crimea with Russia.<sup>30</sup>

In the event of the downing of the Malaysian Airline MH17, direct and indirect quotations from Russian officials carried with them a narrative of Russia's non-involvement in the conflict. The disinformation spread in the Russian state media also appeared in the Russian-language media in Estonia. For instance, *KPNE* quoted the representative of the so-called "Donetsk National Republic" saying that they did not have an anti-aircraft missile complex that could shoot down a civilian airplane from 10km.<sup>31</sup> What is significant in this and other similar news pieces, is that the status "representative of the DNR" was used as a source of information without an indication that this entity was not a legitimate actor in the face of international law. An opinion piece published on 18 July in *KPNE* argued that Ukraine's attempts to "frame" Russia as responsible for the downing of MH17 were in order to get the US and NATO involved in the conflict.<sup>32</sup> It was, for example, suggested that such *provocations* (the downing of MH17) could function as a starting point of a war.<sup>33</sup> Typical of news pieces published on this event was that the main storyline was presented in the form of "possible scenarios" that offered different possibilities to refute Russia's participation in the conflict.<sup>34</sup>

In the case of the emergence of the humanitarian catastrophe, the news pieces emphasized the human dimension and framed the attacks by the Ukrainian armed forces as "terror towards peaceful residents"<sup>35</sup> and emphasised Russia's willingness to provide help that had allegedly been turned down by Ukraine, USA and Europe.<sup>36</sup> Ukraine was represented as responsible for the conflict and the West as Russia's adversary. Similar narrative framing was used in the reports about the burning of the trade union building, which was presented as "provocation organized in Kiev". The message was communicated through a distinctive use of words, the event "being a *provocation*

30 Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014q; Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014r.

31 Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014b.

32 Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014c; see also Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014d.

33 The news pieces referred to the Spanish-American War, WWII and the Vietnam War as examples of wars that were started by provocation. Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014c. .

34 Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014c, 2014d, 2014e, 2014f.

35 Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014h, 2014i.

36 Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014g, 2014h, 2014i, 2014j, 2014k.

organized in Kiev”.<sup>37</sup> As evidence for this claim, the news reports referred to information provided by Ukrainian officials and framed it as an attempt by Kyiv to “convince the world in ‘Russian print’”.<sup>38</sup> This case underlines what has been noted already before (Chapter 4.): namely, the Russian metanarratives are inter-active in a sense that they are recycled from different narrative resources (situational, historical, emotional, etc.) depending on what is needed in a specific context.

## 7.5. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the empirical research analysis, it can be concluded that the Russian metanarratives were present in the Estonian-language and Russian-language media in the form of direct quotations of Russian officials and news reports. These statements framed Russia as a peaceful actor that is willing to help the people in need, and, equally importantly, helped to create an impression according to which the conflict emerged as a result of Ukraine’s internal problems. This latter narrative was adopted in the news pieces published at the Russian-language newspaper *KPNE*, whereas in the Estonian-language media, it was present only in the form of direct quotations.

A certain overlap in the emergence of metanarratives could be expected: the differences relate to the ways in which direct quotations and news pieces originating from the Russian media were used. Even in this small sample, the use of distinctive vocabulary (words of distraction) in the Russian-language media could be observed. On the other hand, within the limits of this research analysis, special narratives targeting Estonia in particular were not identified, with the exception of argumentation that sought to persuade the target audience (in the Baltic countries) of Russia’s non-aggressive behaviour towards its neighbours. Concerning the targeted messages, the results would perhaps have been different if social media had been included in the research material.

37 Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d.

38 Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014b; Komsomolskaya Pravda 2014c, 2014d, 2014e, 2014f.

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8



## 8. Finland and Russia's Metanarratives on the Conflict in Ukraine

Eeva Innola<sup>1</sup> and Katri Pynnöniemi

### 8.1.

#### INTRODUCTION

Until the conflict in Ukraine, Finland, like most EU member states, had counted that mutual interdependency, albeit asymmetrical, would provide a basis for positive-sum interaction with Russia. By the early 2000s, the most optimistic scenarios for Russia's democratic transformation were replaced with a vision of Russia as a growing market for Finnish industrial products and companies. The underlying assumption was that Finland's traditional liability, the country's proximity to Russia, could be turned into something beneficial for both parties. To this end, Finland promoted active regional level cooperation with Russia both at the bilateral context and within the EU. As a result of these efforts, previously neglected topics, such as environmental cooperation and the development of inter-regional transport infrastructures, were addressed in wider regional forums (Baltic Sea Cooperation and Barents Cooperation).

The conflict in Ukraine brought to the fore the fact that the core assumptions that gave direction for Finnish policy on Russia had to be revisited. Even if the need for this revision has been more or less supported across political strata, it has not materialized into a substantial change in the Finnish foreign policy line. On the contrary, with the worsening of the conflict, the Finnish debate has become more muted (in contrast to Sweden). There are several factors

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contributing to this, most importantly, the country's political culture, which emphasizes consensus in foreign and security policy, and the historical memory of an era when open anti-Soviet actions were either avoided or strongly condemned. It can be argued the historical memory of so-called Finlandization can be both an asset and liability in confronting contemporary Russian strategic deception.

Against this background, it is significant that Finland has clearly condemned Russia's "military measures in Crimea"<sup>2</sup> and has stood behind the EU sanctions towards Russia. At the same time, Finland has emphasized the importance of a negotiated resolution of the conflict through continuing dialogue with Russia at a high political level. Furthermore, in December 2014, the Finnish Parliament approved Fennovoima's amendment to build a new nuclear power plant in Pyhäjoki with the Russian company Rosatom. This is in line with the traditional Finnish view that emphasizes the importance of everyday neighbourly relations.<sup>3</sup>

After the change of government in spring 2015, the official Finnish position on sanctions remained unchanged. The current Finnish Prime minister, Juha Sipilä, has not been very explicit in voicing his concern over the evolving security situation around Finland. However, in a speech to Parliament in October 2015, Sipilä outlined that the "Finnish foreign and security political environment has changed". He argued that Finnish-Russian relations were good, but acknowledged that prospects for cooperation were more difficult "due to Russian external actions and internal developments".<sup>4</sup> In March 2016, the bilateral economic commission restarted cooperation at the ministerial level (the work of its subcommittees had not been interrupted). Although this type of cooperation cannot substitute for the structural and institutional weaknesses of Russian economic environment, it may help the economic agents to deal with practical problems, especially since the Russian economy is not expected to recover any time soon.

2 Government Communications Department 2 March, 2014.

3 See e.g. Katainen 2014.

4 Sipilä 2015.

## 8.2. SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

Since the escalation of the events in Maidan square in Kyiv in February 2014, the Finnish media has covered the conflict substantially. Media coverage is an important factor in shaping public awareness and public opinion. The empirical research analysis of the news pieces on a selected set of events during the conflict in Ukraine aims to provide an understanding of the scale and evolvement of the pre-formulated Russian metanarratives in selected media outlets. Within these limitations, the research results do not allow us to make conclusions concerning the Finnish media space as a whole or the impact of Russia's metanarratives on public discussion in social media. Instead, with the comparative framework of a research analysis, even this limited sample can further our understanding on Russia's strategic deception. In the following we will describe the sample used in the research analysis in more detail.

Print media is only one type of mass media. Television and radio are important sources of news and information for a large proportion of the general public. Social media is also playing an increasingly important role in public debate and information spreading. However, in the Finnish media landscape, the printed news media has succeeded relatively well in retaining its status. Finland is one of the leading newspaper countries: in international comparisons of the circulation of daily newspapers per 1,000 inhabitants,<sup>5</sup> only Japan and Norway exceed Finland in circulation numbers.

The research sample of 258 news articles was gathered from three nationwide newspapers and their online portals and the public broadcasting company YLE's online news portal. The newspapers examined in this study were chosen for their circulation and geographical distribution. Papers with nationwide coverage which are read throughout Finland were selected. Regional newspapers were left out of this analysis, including the third largest newspaper, *Aamulehti*. The news channels examined were (circulation in 2014 in parentheses):

- *Helsingin Sanomat* (285,220)
- *Ilta-Sanomat* (110,220)
- *Ilta-lehti* (71,190)
- YLE (Public Broadcasting company's online news portal)

5 World Press Trends 2015.

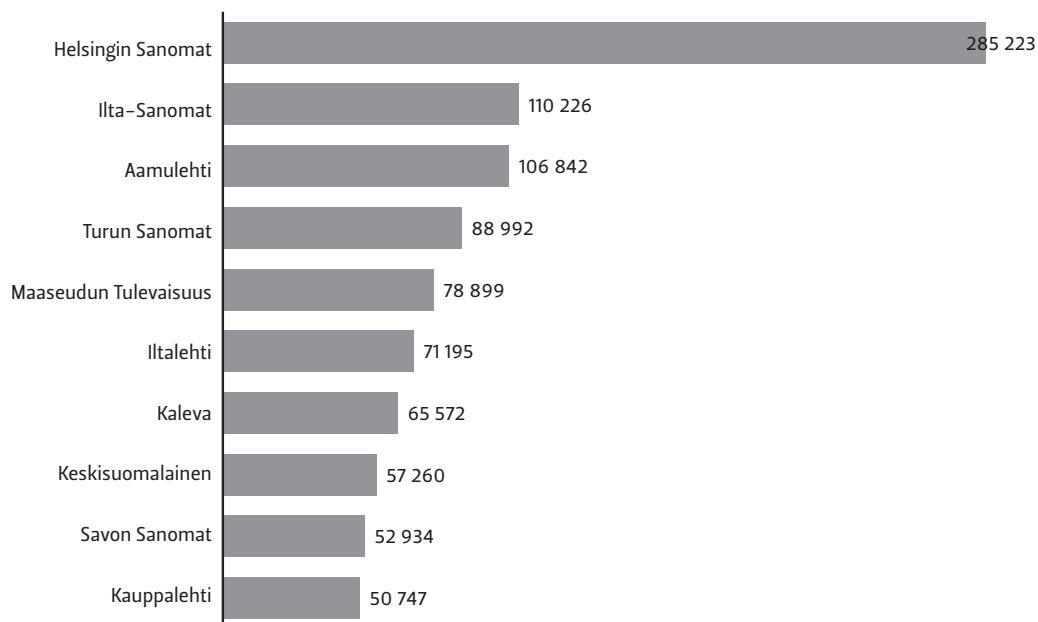


Table 8.1.  
Ten biggest  
newspapers in  
Finland according  
to circulation.  
Source: Media  
Audit Finland.<sup>6</sup>

The selected newspapers are all in the top six most circulated newspapers in Finland (see Table 8.1). *YLE* as a web news portal and the online pages of each of the selected newspapers are in the top five most visited web portals in Finland.<sup>6</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat* (*HS*) and *Ilta-Sanomat* (*IS*) are the two largest newspapers and *Ilta-lehti* (*IL*) is the sixth largest in Finland. *HS* is generally considered as the main daily print media publication in Finland and it is subscribed to nationwide. The two latter newspapers are so-called tabloids but are widely read and have news sections. It should be noted here that as an officially bilingual country, Finland also has newspapers in Swedish, but due to their small circulation numbers, these were not included in this data.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> TNS Gallup, <http://tnsmatrix.tns-gallup.fi/public/>.

<sup>7</sup> Finnish Newspaper Association, <[http://www.sanomalehdet.fi/sanomalehtitieto/levikki/suomen\\_10\\_suurinta\\_sanomalehtea\\_levikin\\_mukaan](http://www.sanomalehdet.fi/sanomalehtitieto/levikki/suomen_10_suurinta_sanomalehtea_levikin_mukaan)>.



### 8.3. THE VARIATION OF TERMS USED IN FRAMING THE CONFLICT

As was argued above (Chapter 4), contemporary Russian propaganda campaigns have features that can be traced to the Soviet era. In the Soviet Union *distinctive vocabulary* described the world in accordance with the ideological principles of Marxism–Leninism, whereas today, *terms of distraction* reflect the specific objectives and interests of Russia in a given situation. Thus, when objectives in a given situation change the terminology also changes. During the course of the conflict in Ukraine, some terms have been abandoned altogether (e.g. *supporter of federalization*) and replaced by new terms that are better fit to achieving the anticipated result.

Some terms of distraction, such as *Russophobia*, target foreign audiences directly (or are used in the domestic debate of a foreign country about Russia). In other cases, the meaning of the term is produced in the context of reporting. It is important to note, however, that sometimes the words omitted from the public debate are more meaningful in framing the situation than the use of specific terminology in a single news piece. For example, in the analysed sample, the *YLE* online news pieces consistently used the formulation annexation (*liittäminen*) of Crimea to Russia. The two short news pieces about the process of annexation published on 21 March 2014 stand out from the sample. These news pieces did not contextualize the situation but merely reported on the decision by the Russian Federation Council to “accept the annexation of Crimea to Russia”,<sup>8</sup> thus leaving out or omitting from the report the crucial fact that *annexation* was not a voluntary process. The overall situational context at the time in Crimea was described in the news pieces published separately. The news articles described the capturing of Ukrainian military bases, referring simultaneously to “Russian troops” and “pro-Russian troops”, thus creating confusion as to who was actually responsible for the assault.<sup>9</sup> This issue was brought to the fore a week later, when *YLE* reported Putin’s statement that the Crimean operation was an indication of the “new capabilities” of the Russian armed forces, thus acknowledging the use of Russian military force in Crimea.<sup>10</sup>

8 YLE 21 March 2014a; YLE 21 March 2014b.

9 YLE 22 March 2014a; YLE 22 March 2014c.

10 YLE 28 March 2014.

In general, we can identify multiple terms used in the analysed sample. The first table (Table 8.2) rounds up synonyms for the actors in the conflict and the second (Table 8.3) lists terms that are used for describing what was going on in the Eastern Ukraine.

Actors:	
Russian-minded	Fascists from Kiev
Russian-minded rebels	Federalists
Russian-minded separatists	Supporters of Kiev government, Kiev government
Russian-minded activists	Kiev Junta
Russian-minded gunmen	Ukrainian troops
Russian-minded groups	Illegal fascist click
Russian-minded protesters	Ukrainian-minded
Gunmen from Russia	East-Ukrainian defence groups
Russian armed saboteurs	Maidan self defence groups
Foreign professional soldiers	Radicals of Kiev government
Terrorist groups	

Table 8.2. Names used for the actors in the Ukrainian crisis as mentioned in the research sample

With a closer look, some interesting observations can be made. First, the term *Kiev junta* (Kiovan junta) is one of the key terms of the Russian metanarrative aimed at undermining the legitimacy of Ukraine’s new government. This term was mentioned in five articles published by *Helsingin Sanomat* in 2014, either as part of a direct quotation<sup>11</sup> or with reference to Russian propaganda about the conflict. The tabloid newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat* had one article where the term appeared, in an interview with Johan Bäckman as a citation from his blog writings.<sup>12</sup> Out of the four articles published by *Ilta-Sanomat*, three discussed Russian propaganda, and one (editorial) referred to *Kievan junta* as a term Russia uses about the Ukrainian government. Thus, all the

11 *Helsingin Sanomat* 25 March 2014.

12 *Ilta-Sanomat* 18 March 2014.

news pieces where the term appeared contextualized its use in the framework of Russian metanarratives and propaganda about the conflict. We cannot draw far-reaching conclusions on the basis of this sample, but it is reasonable to expect that this particular term was marginal in the Finnish news media.

The use of term *Kiev government* in the analysed news pieces is less clear-cut. The term appears in the direct quotations of the Russian authorities who used it systematically instead of referring to the government of Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> With this formulation Russia expressed that it did not recognize legitimacy of the new Ukrainian authorities. This background was explained in *Helsingin Sanomat* editorial, published in May 6.<sup>14</sup> However, if the news piece referred to information from RT news channel, this term was used in reporting.<sup>15</sup> Apart from these two cases, the term was also used in the news reports that described escalation of hostilities *between Kiev government and pro-Russian separatists*. In number of cases the context of using this term was not explained or the term was used as a substitute for government of Ukraine.<sup>16</sup>

From the words listed in Table 8.2. the terms *separatists* and *Russian-minded* were used regularly in the news reports. In *Ilta-lehti* the term *separatists* appeared in 61 news articles (during the whole 2014) and *Russia-minded* in 18 articles. *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat* published a total of 485 articles where the term *separatists* appeared and 110 articles mentioning *Russian-minded*<sup>17</sup> (groups, people, rebels etc.). In comparison, the term *Ukrainian-minded* (*Ukraina-mieliset*) appeared during the same period in nine articles published in *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat* and in one article<sup>18</sup> in *Ilta-lehti* that reported the situation in Crimea in late November 2014. The Finnish language term *venäläisjoukot* can be translated as Russian troops, but it leaves it open as to whether the question is about Russian regular armed forces or irregular militiamen. A news piece published in *Helsingin Sanomat*

13 *Ilta-lehti* 8 May, 2014; term is used in a quotation of local people in the context of so called 'referendum' in Donetsk and Lugansk regions *Ilta-lehti* 12 May 2014.

14 *Helsingin Sanomat* 6 May 2014a.

15 In the sample analysed, news pieces did not use RT or Sputnik regularly. A news piece published by *Ilta-Sanomat* referred to information from RT when reporting about burning of the trade union house in Odessa. *Ilta-Sanomat* 3 May, 2014.

16 *Helsingin Sanomat* 23 July 2014b; *Ilta-Sanomat* 6 May 2014b; *Helsingin Sanomat* 14 June 2014.

17 Searched with term *Venäjä-mieli\** for the whole period of 2014 from Sanoma media archive. The same search was conducted for the words *ukraina-miel\** and *separatist\** and *Ukraina*.

18 *Ilta-lehti* 18 Nov 2014.

on 19 March, three days after the referendum, exemplified how in the same report multiple terms were used in parallel, including Russian troops, Russian-minded self-defence force, unidentified militiamen, Russian-minded volunteer troops.<sup>19</sup>

Content analysis of these articles would be required to ascertain how these terms were used (in a positive, neutral or negative sense). However, the significant difference in scale in which these terms appear in the news pieces is indicative of *what is at issue* – the actions of the separatists and/or Russian-minded groups. Furthermore, it is most likely that the terms regularly used with reference to Ukrainian side of the conflict include Ukrainian armed forces and voluntary battalions.

As noted above, the use of different, sometimes incompatible, terms to describe the same events underlines that the situation is unclear as a whole. (Table 8.3.)

What is going on in Eastern Ukraine	
Military operation	Ukrainian split
Civil war	Military intervention
War	Separatist intervention
Real war	Divide and confuse –operation
Information war	Blockade operation
Anti-terrorism operation	Invasion
Chaos	East-Ukrainian uprising
Great theater	Unlinear war
Killing of own citizens	Indirect intervention
Propaganda war	Ukraine-show
State of war	

Table 8.3.  
Terms used to describe the events in Odessa and in Eastern Ukraine in general

The use of multiple terms at the same time also *creates* confusion among the public, especially when situation is described with words such as chaos, confusion, turmoil, show, Ukraine-show, Putin-show,

19 Helsingin Sanomat 19 March 2014.

theatre and great theatre. These wordings were most visible in the sample of *Ilta-lehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*. These are both considered tabloid newspapers and aim at more scandalous storytelling. Nevertheless, they are widely read throughout Finland and their impact on the public might be noteworthy. It is worth mentioning that on 22 August 2014, the *Finnish News Agency (STT)* announced that in forthcoming news reports they would refer to the conflict in Ukraine as a war or crisis. As early as the spring, several opinion pieces and analyses written by journalists had discussed what term(s) should be used in describing the situation. The propagandistic use of certain terms was clearly recognized in this connection.<sup>20</sup>

#### 8.4. THE CRIMEAN OPERATION

The analysed sample included 54 news pieces that were published during the time frame of one week after the official annexation of Crimea. The sample included analytical articles written by journalists and news pieces based on information acquired from international news agencies (*Reuters* and *AP*) and the Russian news agency *Itar-Tass* (in this sample only in news pieces published by *YLE*). *Ilta-lehti* and *Helsingin Sanomat* had sent a journalist to the region who had interviewed local people. The Russian metanarratives were present in the form of direct quotations. Putin's speech at the ceremony of the Crimean annexation (18 March 2014) was discussed in several news pieces that included direct quotations from the speech as well as commentary that sought to contextualize what was said and what it meant from the viewpoint of Ukraine and the European Union in general.<sup>21</sup>

The news pieces published in *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat* during this time frame focused on details of Putin's regime and the impact of sanctions on key personalities. However, interviews with local people brought to the fore the metanarratives of *Russia does the right thing* and *People of Eastern Ukraine* are discriminated against. For example, on 22 March 2014, *YLE* reported that:

20 Holopainen 2014; See also *Helsingin Sanomat* 3 September 2014a; *Ilta-lehti* 6 May 2014a.

21 This was especially the case with news reports published by *Helsingin Sanomat* between March 19 and 24.

They [Ukrainian government] are trying to separate us from Russia. But Donbass is ready to fight against this group. They have already lost the Crimean peninsula and they are going to lose Eastern Ukraine, said 59-year-old protester.<sup>22</sup>

In an interview with a Russian tourist in Helsinki, the *Crimea is ours* narrative was voiced:

The Crimean peninsula is really a part of Russia now. The Crimeans made their choice, said Leonid Gaas [man from St. Petersburg].<sup>23</sup>

The description of referendum implicitly reinforced the metanarrative *Crimean people have a will*, although in the majority of analysed news pieces the organization of the referendum was contextualized as an event dependent on Russia. Thus, the idea that Russia was a passive outsider (metanarrative of *Russia does the right thing*) did not come through the reporting. On the contrary, Russia's role in the events in Crimea was described with the terms to annex, to take, to join, take possession, occupy, to take over, the loss of Crimea, to colonize. As noted already, a content analysis of a larger sample would be required to arrive at definite understanding of *how* these different terms and narratives were used in the Finnish media.

The pre-formulated metanarrative *Destruction of the positive legacy of the Maidan* was present throughout the whole data set either in the form of direct quotations or in direct references to official Russian statements. For example, in an interview with Ukraine's Foreign Minister, Andrii Deshchytsia:

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseni Yatsenyuk is now one of the most asked for guests all over the world – except in Russia which does not recognize the Ukrainian temporary government as legal.<sup>24</sup>

22 YLE 22 March 2014b. All translations of the quotations were done by the authors of this chapter.

23 Helsingin Sanomat 22 March 2014.

24 Helsingin Sanomat 23 March 2014.

In the Russian media, the crisis was framed as evidence that the European order of security was in jeopardy. The metanarrative of *Western geopolitical expansion* into Russia's sphere of interest was provided as an explanation of this, as well as the crisis in Ukraine in general. With this, Russia was framed as a passive observer of the situation, and the West, in turn, as active participants in the events. Russian metanarratives were not present in this form in the analysed sample: on the contrary, Russia's military operation in Crimea was discussed as a factor that is changing the European security order. For example, *Ilta-lehti* quoted NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who:

Blamed Russia for tearing the international rulebook, for attempts to re-draw the European map and for causing the most serious crisis after the Cold War.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, news pieces sought to provide explanations for Russia's actions and cited Western officials, as well as international and local experts, who then provided different estimations of possible future scenarios. A possibility of further escalation of the situation due to Russia's actions was clearly present in the discussion.

Many quarters, like NATO and several representatives of the media have speculated that the next step will be Russia taking up East Ukraine.<sup>26</sup>

The Russian military force in the Ukrainian border is very very big and very very ready to act" said [NATO commander] Philip Breedlove in Brussels.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the metanarrative of *Russia doing the right thing*, was clearly rejected in the news pieces analysed.

25 *Ilta-lehti* 22 March 2014; Also *Ilta-Sanomat* 22 March 2014; *YLE* 22 March 2014d.

26 *Ilta-lehti* 25 March 2014b; also *Ilta-Sanomat* 24 March 2014; also *YLE* 22 March 2014.

27 *Helsingin Sanomat* 24 March 2014; *YLE* 24 March 2014.

As events started to escalate in Eastern Ukraine at the beginning of May, the narratives or ways of speaking also started to evolve or develop further. The analysed sample included 56 news pieces over a seven-day period. During this time frame, the situation was becoming tense, and the news articles covered the developments in Eastern Ukraine widely. The sample consisted of all news items referring to the Ukrainian crisis (not only articles about Odessa).

Generally, throughout the news coverage the rhetoric reflected the intensifying situation with words such as war, civil war, military operation, criminal activity, etc. appearing regularly. The Russian-Ukrainian juxtaposition and the clashing views on the situation appeared very evident. The sides accused each other of escalation and violence. The Russian position was presented in the form of direct quotations from official representatives, thus providing “the other view” on the conflict.

In the city, pro-Russians have founded the “Donetsk People’s Republic”. The separatists will organize later in May a referendum on the future of the area as was done in Crimea which was annexed to Russia.<sup>28</sup>

The subnarrative of *Civil war in Ukraine* appeared in this context. Russia started to blame the West, Europe and the US for causing a civil war-like situation in Ukraine. The rhetoric became more provocative and controversial: Russia accused Ukraine of attacking and killing its own citizens and ruining the hopes for a peace treaty. For example, as reported by *YLE* on 2 May 2014:

Russia, on the other hand, has blamed Ukraine for shooting civilians from the air and Russia has expressed its concerns about the fate of the Russians in Slovyansk.<sup>29</sup>

Russia demanded that Ukraine stop the violence towards its citizens, stating it to be unacceptable. Many news pieces quoted Russian

<sup>28</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat* 4 May 2014a.

<sup>29</sup> *YLE* 2 May 2014a; also *YLE* 2 May 2014b, 2014c, 2014d; *Iltä-Sanomat* 3 May 2014b.



officials who called the actions of the Ukrainian armed forces a “punishment expedition”<sup>30</sup> and therefore a “criminal act”<sup>31</sup> and a “serious mistake”.<sup>32</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry’s statements and *Itar-Tass* were used as sources for these quotations. The subnarrative of *Civil war in Ukraine* was interlinked with the metanarrative of *Russia doing the right thing*, in this case, supporting peace, unlike Ukraine. This narrative was often portrayed alongside framing the Ukrainian government in a negative way.

The spokesperson for Russian President Vladimir Putin, Dmitri Peskov, said earlier that the Ukrainian attack in the country’s south-east part wrecks the hopes for saving the Geneva peace treaty.<sup>33</sup>

According to President Vladimir Putin’s spokesperson “those who think the Kiev Junta is legal are involved in the crimes in Odessa”.<sup>34</sup>

The Ukrainian response was to highlight that *Ukraine has a right to defend*. With this, Ukraine was legitimizing its own actions in the conflict. The Ukrainian view and terminology was quoted as well, although in the majority of articles, the military groups fighting against the Ukrainian armed forces were called Russian-minded separatists or gunmen, rather than “terrorists”.<sup>35</sup>

## 8.6. THE SHOOTING DOWN OF MALAYSIAN AIRLINES FLIGHT MH17

The shooting down of Flight MH17 was widely covered in the news media in Finland. The news flow following the air crash intensified up to the level of 148 articles in the chosen four news outlets. Some

30 This is a translation of the Russian term *karatel* which has its roots in WWII. The meaning of this term was explained in more detail in Chapter 4 of this report. This background was not explained in the articles.

31 YLE 2 May 2014c, 2014d; also YLE 3 May 2014b.

32 *Ilta-Sanomat* 3 May 2014b.

33 YLE 2 May 2014c.

34 *Helsingin Sanomat* 4 May 2014b.

35 YLE 2 May 2014b; *Helsingin Sanomat* 6 May 2014b.

of the articles handled only the details of the air crash, while some were more broadly about the Ukrainian crisis. The majority of the news pieces were rather neutral in their content, describing the event, the number of casualties and nationalities on board, etc., or represented views and responses from the international community.

The articles presenting or referring to official Russian views, either as direct quotes or as described statements, were in the minority of the total sample of news articles. The sources for pro-Russian views were mostly unofficial or indirect, especially in the early days of the news coverage after the downing of the plane.

The Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko condemned the act as terrorism, suspects being Eastern Ukrainian separatists. The Ukrainian separatists instead blame that Ukraine shot down the aircraft, but they cannot prove the accusation in any way.<sup>36</sup>

The statements made by official Russian representatives that framed Ukraine as responsible for the downing of the plane were reported, but the same article referred to Ukrainian sources arguing that the opposite was the case.<sup>37</sup> The most common metanarrative that can be interpreted from this data was the subnarrative about *Civil war in Ukraine in which Russia is not taking part*. Thus, Putin was cited of saying that, “this tragedy would not have happened, if the country [Ukraine] had been at peace and the military operation had not been continued”.<sup>38</sup> The Russian commentators were also cited in the news pieces, for example, former Russian MP Sergei Markov, who argued, “this is a great tragedy and the continuing civil war in Ukraine has caused it. The biggest culprit in this lies in the political forces that encourage war”.<sup>39</sup> The quotation from separatist leader Aleksandr Hodakovsky, published in a news report by YLE on 23 July 2014 put the blame for downing the plane on the Ukrainian government:

[Separatist leader Aleksandr] Khodakovsky blames the Ukrainian government for misleading the separatists to shoot a civilian plane. [...] “They

36 YLE 17 July 2014a; see also YLE 17 July 2014b.

37 YLE 21 July 2014a; YLE 18 July 2014a; also *Helsingin Sanomat* 18 July 2014.

38 *Ilta-lehti* 18 July 2014.

39 *Ilta-lehti* 23 July 2014a.

[Ukrainian government] didn't do anything to protect the civilians, instead they provoked separatists to use this kind of weapon against peaceful civilians," said Khodakovsky.<sup>40</sup>

However, Khodakovsky's statement was contextualized (with a reference to who in fact separatists were), and the main issue in the report was Khodakovsky's statement to Reuters that the separatists actually had a BUK-1 missile that was most likely returned to Russia. The metanarratives targeted at the Russian domestic audience, namely that *Russia is under threat*, was present in the direct quotations, for example, reporting the meeting of the Russian Security Council that took place on 22 July 2014, Putin is quoted as saying,

Russia needs to strengthen its military capacity as a response to NATO's action in East-Europe. [...] Putin warns the West about interfering in Russia's domestic issues.<sup>41</sup>

In general, the analysed sample reflected the general understanding that the downing of the MH17 was a turning point in the conflict, making it a European and even a global issue. It has also been described as a turning point for Russia's role in the conflict. The statements by European leaders and international community at large quoted in the news pieces underline that *Russia is not a passive observer*. Thus, the situation was framed in a way that was in direct opposition to the Russian metanarratives.

## 8.7.

### THE HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE NARRATIVE

The Russian Foreign Ministry announced on 5 August 2014 that Russia was going to organize "an international humanitarian mission for the South-East of Ukraine".<sup>42</sup> This announcement came after Russia's suggestion of establishing "humanitarian corridors" had been rejected

<sup>40</sup> YLE 23 July 2014.

<sup>41</sup> *Ilta-lehti* 23 July 2014b; YLE 22 July 2014, 14:31; see also YLE 21 July 2014b; YLE 22 July 2014; *Helsingin Sanomat* 23 July 2014a.

<sup>42</sup> Comment No. 1862-05-08-2014.

in early June 2014.<sup>43</sup> In subsequent commentaries, Russian official statements highlighted three aspects: the plight of civilians in the region, the cooperative and transparent nature of Russia's intentions and the idea that the aid would be delivered to civilians. The convoy started its journey from Russia towards Ukraine on 12 August 2014 and was followed by the international media at every step on its way.

For this fourth period of study, the analysed sample includes 43 news pieces that were searched using the words "convoy", "humanit\*" and "Ukraine". The content analysis of these articles shows that the majority of articles (19) referred to an "aid convoy" (*avustussaattue*). The term Russian convoy (*venäläissaattue*) was also used, or it was otherwise clearly indicated that the article was about Russia's aid convoy. The second most often used term (in 9 articles) was "truck convoy" (*rekkasaattue*). Sometimes both terms were used in the same article. In this narrow sample, only four articles<sup>44</sup> reported on the humanitarian aid the government of Ukraine had already organized or was planning to send to the region.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the topic of humanitarian aid to civilians in Eastern Ukraine was discussed in the framework of Russia's aid convoy to the region.<sup>46</sup>

Two parallel narratives emerged from the reporting: the Russian metanarrative of the *Humanitarian aid convoy* and framing of the *Truck convoy as a provocation*. The main elements of the Russian metanarrative about the *Aid convoy* were repeated in the news pieces. Most importantly, the reports described in detail what type of aid was allegedly delivered during the first convoy's journey to the Russian-Ukrainian border. For example, on 13 August 2014, YLE reported that a "humanitarian aid convoy is on its way towards Ukraine. 280 trucks in the convoy have passed by the city of Voronezh, carrying medical aid, baby food, sleeping bags and generators".<sup>47</sup> Some commentary reproduced Russia's argumentation, explaining that "Russia is seriously worried about Ukraine's civil population".<sup>48</sup> Since Ukraine's efforts to

43 YLE 5 June 2014; Reuters 2 June 2014.

44 *Ilta-Sanomat* 14 August, 2014, 15 August 2014, 16 August, 2014; YLE 14 August 2014.

45 According to the News Release of the International Committee of the Red Cross, it had delivered aid together with the Ukrainian government to over 20,000 displaced people while the Russian aid convoy was being debated. ICRC 21 August, 2014.

46 See e.g. *Helsingin Sanomat* 13 August 2014; in comparison *Ilta-lehti* 11 July 2014; YLE 22 August 2014.

47 YLE 13 August 2014a, 18:42; See also YLE 14 August 2014, 08:42, 14 August 2014, 15:37; *Ilta-lehti* 16 August 2014.

48 *Ilta-lehti* 13 August 2014.

deliver aid to these same regions was not mentioned in this context,<sup>49</sup> one could get the impression that only Russia was *Actively taking care of civilians* caught at the middle of the fighting. Another interpretation, voiced in the first phase of this period, was that even if Russia's intention was unclear, the cause itself – delivering humanitarian aid to the civilian population, should be supported, given that it the aid was delivered in cooperation with the Ukrainian government and international organizations. This was the view expressed, for example, in an interview with the then Foreign Minister, Erkki Tuomioja.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, although the Russian metanarrative about the *Humanitarian aid convoy* was clearly present in the reporting, it was juxtaposed with the interpretation that the *Aid convoy* had an altogether different purpose. In the very beginning, Ukrainian authorities, local Finnish analysts and Western politicians were cited saying that the aid convoy was a *maskirovka* – deception, aimed to hide the delivery of military equipment to pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine.<sup>51</sup> Parallel with this narrative emerged another interpretation, according to which the *Aid convoy* itself was meant as a provocation. Ukraine's then interior Minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, was quoted as saying that Ukraine would not allow the convoy to enter the country, because it was a question of “cynical provocation”.<sup>52</sup> The tabloid newspaper *Ilta-lehti* expressed in its editorial doubt that Russia would try to deliver military equipment hidden inside the trucks, but suggested that the “operation could be used in some sort of provocation”.<sup>53</sup> The next day, in an interview with YLE, the Aleksanteri institute's research director, Markku Kangaspuro, suggested that “any of the parties in the conflict could use military measures to organize a provocation.”<sup>54</sup>

After the aid convoy had entered Ukrainian territory, a journalist wrote in *Helsingin Sanomat* that Ukraine had allowed this to happen in fear of provocations.<sup>55</sup> The logic was that if Ukraine had attacked the aid

49 Although it goes beyond the scope of this research, a preliminary search shows that between May and September 2014 only a few news pieces were published about humanitarian aid provided by Ukrainian volunteers and the government for displaced people inside the country and the regions affected by the fighting. See e.g. *Ilta-lehti* 11 July, 2014.

50 YLE 11 August 2014.

51 YLE 13 August 2014b; *Ilta-lehti* 16 August 2014; *Ilta-Sanomat* 13 August 2014, 16 August 2014; *Ilta-lehti* 13 August.

52 YLE 13 August 2014a.

53 *Ilta-lehti* 16 August 2014a.

54 YLE 17 August, 2014.

55 *Helsingin Sanomat* 23 August 2014c, 23 August 2014d.

convoy, it would have provided Russia with legitimate cause to openly attack Ukraine in turn.<sup>56</sup> Although there was no doubt that Russia's action was condemned, nevertheless, the possibility of Ukraine's self-defence was framed as a *provocation*.

However, soon the focus changed from the *Humanitarian convoy* per se, to interpretations of its entry to Ukraine, whether it was a question of "[military] attack against Ukraine"<sup>57</sup> or "intrusion".<sup>58</sup> As early as mid-August, both *Ilta-Sanomat* and *YLE* reported that Russian military vehicles had crossed the Ukrainian border.<sup>59</sup> By the end of August, the focus of the news pieces had shifted again. Although the news outlets were cautious in interpreting the direct and indirect evidence of the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine, the issue was not framed as a provocation or deception, but as a beginning of a new phase in the conflict: war.<sup>60</sup> On 29 August 2014, *Helsingin Sanomat* published an editorial where it clearly stated that "Russia is in war against Ukrainian armed forces in the Eastern Ukraine".<sup>61</sup> A few days later, on 3 September 2014, *Helsingin Sanomat* (together with *STT*) announced that in subsequent reporting these news outlets would refer to the "war in Ukraine".<sup>62</sup>

Even after this announcement, the news pieces continued to directly quote Russian authorities who denied the presence of Russian troops in the conflict:

Nearly a whole company of Russian soldiers have died in Ukraine, the Russian regional newspaper from Pskov wrote. [...] The Russian government authorities have repeatedly denied sending military troops to Ukraine.<sup>63</sup>

However, the Russian metanarrative of *Noninvolvement* was clearly challenged by various reflections on the meaning of the conflict for

56 *Ilta-Sanomat* 23 August 2014; *Ilta-lehti* 16 August 2014b; *Helsingin Sanomat* 23 August 2014b.

57 *Ilta-Sanomat* 14 August 2014; *Ilta-lehti* 23 August 2014.

58 *Helsingin Sanomat* 23 August 2014c.

59 *YLE* 16 August 2014, 00:08; *Ilta-Sanomat* 15 August 2014.

60 *Ilta-Sanomat* 28 August 2014; *Helsingin Sanomat* 29 August 2014a; *Helsingin Sanomat* 28 August 2014b; *YLE* 25 August 2014; see also Holopainen 2014.

61 *Helsingin Sanomat* 29 August 2014d.

62 *Helsingin Sanomat* 3 September 2014.

63 See for example *Helsingin Sanomat* 3 September 2014b; also *Helsingin Sanomat* 29 August 2014c, 29 August 2014b, 29 August 2014d.

European security as a whole. The fear of Russian expansion and the need for Western unity in solving the crisis were repeated in direct quotations of Western political leaders and opinion pieces and analyses written by journalists. The view of Ukrainian government representatives was included in the news pieces. For example, on 2 September 2014, Ukrainian Defence Minister, Valeriy Heletey, was quoted as saying that Russia was preparing to expand the fight deeper into Ukraine. “A great war has arrived at our doorstep, a war which Europe has not seen since the Second World War,” he wrote on his Facebook page.<sup>64</sup> On the eve of NATO meeting at Wales, *Helsingin Sanomat* wrote that:

The Trans-Atlantic relationship between the US and the European NATO members seems now exceptionally strong. The Ukrainian crisis has made the meaning of NATO more clear than before.<sup>65</sup>

The context in which further escalation of the conflict was interpreted in the Finnish media was the visit of President Niinistö to Sochi and his meeting with President Putin on 15 August 2014, and the meeting with the president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, the next day at Kyiv. The meeting with President Putin was interpreted as an “opening of dialogue”<sup>66</sup> that, in the best of circumstances, would help in finding a negotiated solution to the conflict. By the time that the word “war” was appearing in news reporting about Ukraine in the Finnish media, it had become clear that this attempt had not succeeded.

## 8.8. CONCLUSION

On the basis of empirical research analysis, it can be concluded that the majority of the analysed news pieces were neutral reports of events in Ukraine. The Russian metanarratives were present in the direct quotations from Russian government officials and the statements and commentary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This result is consistent

64 *Helsingin Sanomat* 2 September 2014a; on the possible escalation of the conflict to Transnistria, *Ilta-lehti* 25 March 2014a.

65 *Helsingin Sanomat* 3 September 2014c.

66 *Helsingin Sanomat* 16 August 2014.

with the other case studies analysed in the report. Furthermore, most of the pre-interpreted keywords (such as “Kiev junta” or “Donetsk People’s Republic”) were usually put in quotation marks or marked in another way to demonstrate that it was not the view of the news agency in question.

However, some key terms such as *Humanitarian aid convoy* and *Kiev Government* were used inconsistently, thus providing for the creation of confusion, albeit indirectly. A larger research sample would be required to ascertain clear differences between the news outlets. The choice of online news reports by YLE (instead of the evening news programme, for example) brought to the fore that single news pieces were published that did not contextualize the event or particular statement by Russia. Thus, a gap emerged between reports on “Russia accepting a law on Crimean annexation” and the fact that Russia’s military forces pressured the Ukrainian armed forces to abandon their bases on the peninsula. In general, the underlying issue, that is, the propagandistic use of the *terms of distraction* was discussed in all of the analysed media outlets.

More generally, it can be noted that, just like in Sweden, the conflict in Ukraine sparked a debate on Finland’s geopolitical position and the vulnerabilities linked to it. Due to the fact that discussions in social media were not included in the research sample, the results do not reflect the emergence of tensions in the Finnish debate on Russia in general and on the conflict in Ukraine in particular. This debate was anchored around the question of how Finland should pursue its relations with Russia and whether the conflict in Ukraine has direct implications for the security situation in Northern Europe or the Baltic Sea region. The official statements by Finnish politicians underlined that there was no direct military threat towards Finland, although it was also acknowledged that the situation had changed. The need for dialogue with Russia was emphasized in the official commentary as one major element of Finland’s national security.

Thus, deriving from the analysis of Russia’s strategic deception scheme, it can be argued that in the case of Finland, potential vulnerabilities relate to this general constellation of bilateral relations, rather than to the functioning of the media as such. In regard to this, it is important to pay attention to the appearance of Russian metanarratives in the Finnish debate, but perhaps even more importantly, to the representation of the Finnish debate and political decisions in the



Russian state media and official commentary.<sup>67</sup> However, this does not mean that consistent use of Russian metanarratives in the Finnish internal debate or disturbance of the public debate in the social media would not be cause for concern. They should be seen as pieces of a bigger puzzle that can be explained with reference to Russia's strategic deception scheme.

67 Jantunen and Puistola 2015; Mikkola and Pynnöniemi 2016.

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9





## 9. Russian Narratives and the Swedish Debate on Foreign Policy

Aino Huxley<sup>1</sup> and Jakob Ljungman<sup>2</sup>

### 9.1.

#### INTRODUCTION

The current political relationship between Russia and Sweden is highly coloured by the *de jure* Swedish neutrality during the Cold War. Having attempted to form a “Northern European Alliance” in the aftermath of WWII, Sweden eventually found itself between the NATO members Norway and Denmark on the one side, and neutral Finland, constrained in its independence by the 1948 Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (FCM) with Russia, on the other. Despite many highly secret exercises, agreements and other cooperative measures with NATO – especially Denmark, Norway and the US – Swedish overt policy was based on neutrality.<sup>3</sup> The policy of “abstention from alliances in peacetime aimed at neutrality in war”<sup>4</sup> has influenced public opinion for many decades, and continues to do so. This is especially visible in public opinion on Sweden’s potential NATO membership, which has only recently taken a turn towards a more favourable view.

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3 Holmström 2011.

4 In Swedish: “alliansfrihet i fred syftande till neutralitet i krig”. This phrase is still used by policymakers and people sympathising with the notion of Swedish neutrality, and should be considered the theme of Swedish defence policy during the Cold War.

Swedish-Russian relations are currently coloured to a large extent by the slow and long-term Swedish movement from isolation towards integration with the European Community and perhaps more importantly, the US. Neutrality and isolationism was largely abolished by the 1994 popular vote on Sweden joining the EU. The more liberal foreign policy was coupled with a long-term decline in military prowess, starting with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. Hard power politics aside, Sweden has on numerous occasions been depicted as a country completely lacking traditional values – the opposite of Russian society. Tolerance towards homosexuality and other minorities has been a popular topic of propaganda aimed at Russia's home audience against Sweden. However, the popular opinion of Sweden within Russia does not seem to have been very successful in inciting a general negative sentiment towards the former. For example, IKEA, liberalism and similar phenomena are mainly associated with Sweden and Swedish society.

The Swedish news media landscape is characterized by stability. One important factor for this is Press Support, a governmental programme providing funds for any newspaper with a certain penetration and circulation. This means that everything from small, highly niche papers to the giants of the morning press are entitled to state subsidies. Of the three papers studied in this research, *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD), *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) and *Aftonbladet* (AB), all receive governmental financial support.

The Stockholm-based *Svenska Dagbladet* can be characterized as right wing or independent moderate.<sup>5</sup> Positioning itself as independent liberal, DN is the most widely circulated morning paper in Sweden. Like SvD, it is Stockholm-based and has an outline similar to SvD. *Aftonbladet* is the highest-circulation evening paper in Sweden and represents the left wing of the Swedish media. It defines itself as social democratic, but features many extreme left-wing writers,

The purpose of this empirical media analysis is to study the appearance of pre-formulated narratives of Russian strategic communication in the Swedish news media. This chapter will discuss how the pre-formulated narratives have been transferred into the

5 The term "moderate" here refers to the name of the major centre right party in Swedish politics, the New Moderates (formerly simply called "The Moderates"), rather than a mid-range ideological position. Essentially, the ideology refers to what in an international setting would be close to liberal conservatism, although the party made a decisive move towards the centre of the Swedish political landscape in 2003, when Fredrik Reinfeldt, Sweden's Prime Minister (PM) from 2006 to 2014, was elected party leader.

local context: what channels were used (quotations from Russian officials, references to Russian news agencies and local informants). Furthermore, some examples of propaganda and disinformation targeting Sweden in particular will be discussed, as well as examples of distinctive vocabulary adopted in the reporting.

The articles were collected through each newspaper's web archive as well as using the Internet-based media monitoring service Retriever,<sup>6</sup> which is a member of the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC). Retriever collects material from a vast variety of different media, including daily press, radio, tv and social media. The service can be considered reliable, as the availability of articles does not depend on their online availability on the website of the source, since both the articles are stored in plain text on the Retriever site itself, and also a digital copy of the page in the physical paper on which the article first appeared is available. Thus, the potential "risk" of articles being edited or altogether deleted is eliminated.

The data set was compiled on specific events (time periods) using the words *Ukraine*, *Krim*, *Odessa*, *MH17* and if applicable, words from the distinctive vocabulary (e.g. *DNR/LNR*) that can be traced to Russian disinformation themes. Concerning the scale of the data set, it should be noted that all three studied newspapers covered the events with 3–11 pieces per day. All in all, *DN* covered all of the set periods the most, while *Aftonbladet* covered them the least. This can probably be explained by the fact that *AB* is mostly a tabloid newspaper and focuses on entertainment somewhat more than the other two. This is showcased rather clearly in the coverage of the case of the burning of the trade union in Odessa. *SvD* and *DN* covered the events a little, but *AB* covered mostly Ukraine and Russia in the Eurovision Song contest.<sup>7</sup> The creation of *DNR*<sup>8</sup> and *LNR* in Donbass were not covered as such, but the title *DNR* started occurring regularly after the downing of Flight *MH17*.

6 Retriever, 'Om Oss', *Retriever*, accessed 21 January 2016.

7 *Aftonbladet* 7 May 2014.

8 The Swedish term for *DNR* Donetsks folkrepublik was used in data collection.

9.2.  
CRIMEA: REPRESENTATION OF CRIMEAN  
PEOPLE AS INDEPENDENT ACTORS

The dramatic events surrounding the illegitimate referendum in and annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014 was widely covered in the Swedish media. The editorial pieces, as well as most of the articles and columns, written in each newspaper took a rather straightforward tone towards Russia's actions.<sup>9</sup> However, two of the pre-formulated narratives, namely the narrative of "Russia doing the right thing" and the perception that "Crimean people have their own will", were present in fast news pieces pieced together from many news sources which appeared online. Also, these narratives appeared in the Swedish media in the form of direct quotations of Russian officials (taken especially from their social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook) and interviews with local people.

The main message inscribed in the two above-mentioned narratives was to deny that Russia was militarily involved in the operation: instead, people were persuaded to believe that Crimea itself asked to join Russia.<sup>10</sup> The latter message came through in texts that referred to unanimous voting at the Crimean parliament; for example on 6 March 2014, *Aftonbladet* quoted RIA Novosti (via Reuters) that "at the same time the Crimean local parliament voted unanimously to become part of Russia, reports the news agency RIA according to Reuters."<sup>11</sup> An impression of the legitimacy of the new government in Crimea and of the upcoming referendum<sup>12</sup> was also reproduced in the following quote from *DN* from February 28, 2014.

9 *Aftonbladet* 27 February 2014; *Dagens Nyheter* 30 August 2014.

10 *Aftonbladet* 6 March 2014a, 8 March, 2014; *Svenska Dagbladet* 10 March 2014; *Svenska Dagbladet* 4 March 2014; *Dagens Nyheter* 28 February 2014.

11 *Aftonbladet* 6 March 2014a.

12 In the Swedish media referred to as *folkomröstning*

Last night news came that Parliament during the day conducted an extraordinary session of which 55 of 64 possible votes decided to dismiss the local government, including Anatoliy Mohiljov. According to another decision, a referendum for increased autonomy for Crimea will be held in May.<sup>13</sup>

The coverage of the referendum held on 16 March and after can be characterized as a mixture of messages from interviews with local people celebrating the event and texts questioning the legitimacy of the referendum. For example, *DN* used many local interviews to express and describe what was happening on the peninsula: “We do not know exactly what is happening but I am glad that they have hoisted the Russian flag, says Sasha, a young man in camouflage clothes to *DN*”.<sup>14</sup> A piece *DN* published on 7 March brought forth that most people on Crimea were keen on joining Russia:

Many of the residents *DN* has met on the Crimean Peninsula in the last ten days are for the Russian accession. The decision made by the new government in Kiev on amendments that threaten the Russian language’s status, low pensions, unemployment and suspicions of corruption among those in power in Kiev are some of the reasons people list as reasons for joining Russia. Also, Vladimir Putin is seen by many as a strong and orderly leader.<sup>15</sup>

*SvD*’s journalists also used interviews with locals to report on the situation which creates a view where the Crimean locals were rather indifferent about joining Russia, but from the two options they would choose Russia.<sup>16</sup> Some of the commentaries published elevated, through a realist lens, Cold War memories of peaceful co-existence, for example the well-known professor of history, Kristian Gerner, called for the Finlandization of Ukraine and argued for recognition of the situation as a *fait accompli*:

<sup>13</sup> *Dagens Nyheter* 28 February 2014.

<sup>14</sup> *Dagens Nyheter* 27 February 2014a.

<sup>15</sup> *Dagens Nyheter* 7 March 2014.

<sup>16</sup> *Svenska Dagbladet* 13 March 2014, 7 March 2014, 16 March 2014.

But one must realise that the annexation is a fait accompli. Sweden's and the EU's policies must be based on the fact that Ukraine has lost Crimea for the foreseeable future.<sup>17</sup>

The very point of Gerner's article was formulated as:

The West, Sweden included, should focus its policies on saving Ukraine's future as a close partner to the EU. Therefore it is vital to reach an agreement with Russia on the Finlandization of Ukraine.<sup>18</sup>

The pre-formulated narrative of Ukraine being part of the "Russian world" appeared in connection with news reports describing the majority of the people in Crimea as Russian-speakers and ethnic Russian.<sup>19</sup> Often the exact composition of the population (percentages of ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Tatar population) was not provided. The narrative of the Russian world was also present in interviews with local people and the official commentary. In an article published in SvD, two soldiers identified as Ukrainian state that:

There will be no war. How could we shoot at each other, they are our brothers. We are all Slavs – Russians, Ukrainian, Belarussians – we are one people.<sup>20</sup>

It can be seen that the connection to Russia is constructed as natural in these statements. It should not be left unnoticed though that these comments were taken from pieces where the journalists tried to show a balanced view of what the people in Crimea think. Hence, the official Russian representation of Ukraine as one people with Russia, and thus, not a real nation (see Chapter 4 in this report), was reproduced by the locals, and was not a frame added later into news piece.

17 *Dagens Nyheter* 27 March 2014.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Svenska Dagbladet* 4 March 2014; *Dagens Nyheter* 27 February 2014.

20 *Svenska Dagbladet* 15 March 2014; also *Svenska Dagbladet* 16 March 2014.

### 9.3. ODESSA: DESTRUCTION OF THE POSITIVE LEGACY OF THE MAIDAN REVOLUTION

The burning of the trade union building in Odessa on 2 May 2014 was not reported as intensively as the Crimean events or the shooting down of Flight MH17. On the next day, 3 May 2014, *DN* published an article using *Russia Today* (*RT*) as one of its main sources. The article was about the nature of the protests, the actions of each side and what led up to the resulting fire in the trade union building, killing a large number of people.

According to Russia Today the demonstrators manifesting for Ukrainian unity consisted of nationalists and football fans, while the opposing side consisted of Russia-friendly activists demonstrating for increased regional autonomy.<sup>21</sup>

The narrative of the right to increased regional autonomy was closely linked to the right to self-determination – a fundamental building block of narratives aimed at legitimizing the Crimean referendum. Thus it brought forth the notion that Russian-speakers or ethnic Russians are in real danger: where the one side is portrayed as a large, nationalistic, mob of football fans targeting a Russian-friendly activist demonstration propagating a certain value, which appeals in the West, namely subsidiarity.

On the same day, another article was published linking Odessa to the violence in Donetsk. While highly critical of the Russian involvement in the region, it portrayed the Ukrainian state as inherently flawed and “an empty shell”:

The Ukrainian state, which on paper is the legal authority of the country, has shown itself to be an empty shell. The government in Kiev has no functioning police force. The State’s monopoly of violence is suspended when local police does not obey orders.<sup>22</sup>

21 *Dagens Nyheter* 1 May 2014a.

22 *Dagens Nyheter* 1 May 2014b, 9.

While aware of Russian involvement – the article specifically mentioned the Russian intelligence agencies and Spetsnaz – the narrative of Ukrainian disunity can be observed. The representation of “Ukraine as a failed state” was directly linked to messages undermining any positive interpretation of the Euromaidan revolution, instead, representing this event as a source of disruption, violence and chaos.

It could also be argued that the metanarrative of the destruction of the positive legacy of the Maidan revolution was the only one partially adopted into the Swedish media and reproduced and adjusted to the Swedish context. The news reports covering the tragedy in Odessa, cited Russian officials pointing fingers at the Ukrainian government for not keeping extremists under control and not caring about the extremists’ and fascists’ actions. Both *DN* and *SvD* published articles expressing the Russian official view: “Moscow stated after the fire that the government in Kiev was ‘criminally irresponsible’”.<sup>23</sup>

The metanarrative of the destruction of the positive legacy of the Maidan revolution was reproduced in another subtle way. At the early stage of the conflict, the Swedish media adopted the usage of terms such as the Kyiv government, the government in Kyiv or the Kyiv regime.<sup>24</sup> The normal usage in Swedish would be the government in Ukraine. Sometimes a country’s government is referred to by the capital of the country, predominantly in these cases the government of the United States, which is referred to as Washington, and the government in Russia, which is referred to as Moscow. In this case, though, the referral to the government of Kyiv may point to the unconscious adoption of Russia’s distinctive vocabulary, which emphasises the division of Ukraine between the government in Kyiv and the pro-Russian fighters. An example of this could be found in a short article in *AB* on 17 August: “The attack comes after a tense atmosphere between Kyiv and rebels in Eastern Ukraine”.<sup>25</sup> In this example, reducing the Ukrainian government to Kyiv positions the rebels in Eastern Ukraine and the government as similarly valid authorities. Furthermore, using the terms Kyiv and rebels in Eastern Ukraine creates a vivid picture of a strong geographical divide within the country. It can be argued that this creation of a divided country emphasized the Russian subnarrative of Ukraine’s crisis being a civil war instead of a war between two nations.

23 *Svenska Dagbladet* 3 May 2015; also *Svenska Dagbladet* 5 May 2014.

24 *Dagens Nyheter* 19 July 2014, 20 July 2014; *Svenska Dagbladet* 16 August 2014; *Dagens Nyheter* 27 February 2014b.

25 *Aftonbladet* 17 August 2014.



Furthermore, despite the fact that none of the three newspapers covered the formation of DNR/LNR during its creation (the period studied in the research was 11–18 May), the newspapers, especially *Svenska Dagbladet*, named the rebels DNR during the coverage of the downing of Flight MH17. The news coverage called them the so-called *Donetsk Peoples Republic*, the self-proclaimed *Donetsk Peoples Republic*, “*Donetsk Peoples Republic*” either in quotation marks or, on a few occasions, without quotation marks.<sup>26</sup> The following quotation shows how on 17 May in one of the first articles SvD published about the downing of Flight MH17, the rebels were referred to as the Donetsk Peoples Republic: “The Donetsk People’s Republic denies any involvement in the crash and promises to agree to international experts undertaking an investigation, according to Interfax”.<sup>27</sup>

#### 9.4.

#### SPECIFIC PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION THEMES IN THE SWEDISH CONTEXT

The conflict in Ukraine led to the activation of a foreign and security political debate in Sweden. The conflict was viewed as a change maker that, on the one hand, led to the conclusion that Swedish security policy should be renewed, and on the other hand, accusations that Sweden had become too active in the conflict, thus failing its neutral security political orientation. The latter interpretation has long roots in Swedish foreign policy debate, yet it has become a minority viewpoint, whereas a consensus has emerged on the need to upgrade the armed forces and strengthen the country’s bilateral and multilateral contacts in the security sphere.<sup>28</sup> This brief description of the background is relevant when we take a look at themes that have had a polarizing effect in the Swedish debate on the Ukraine conflict.

This analysis does not explain all the factors that have led to the emergence of a consensus in the Swedish debate on conflict in Ukraine. However, in the framework of this research, we can identify the source of a minority position that has consistently argued for a different interpretation of the events. This source is *Aftonbladet*’s

<sup>26</sup> *Svenska Dagbladet* 20 July 2014, 17 July 2014a, 18 July 2014, 21 July 2014.

<sup>27</sup> *Svenska Dagbladet* 17 July 2014b.

<sup>28</sup> Regeringskansliet Försvarsdepartementet 2014; Gell and Stenbäck 2015; T. Källemark, ‘Bildts förbindelser med Kiev är farliga’, *Aftonbladet* 7 May 2014.

culture section, which differed significantly from overall reporting on the conflict in the selected cases and media. The culture section is known for being what makes *Aftonbladet* a left-wing paper, and the opinions and interpretations expressed there even differ from the rest of *Aftonbladet*'s coverage. The analysis conducted in the framework of this research shows that the debate in the culture section was focused on two themes: criticism of the Swedish official policy on Ukraine, a theme that culminated in a campaign against the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Carl Bildt, and an elaboration of the pre-formulated Russian narrative on fascists in Ukraine, a particularly sensitive topic in Sweden.<sup>29</sup>

What emerged from the analysis was a subnarrative in the Swedish debate that focused on the extreme right-wing party, Svoboda. All three newspapers gave plenty of coverage to Svoboda's views and its connection to extremist groups in Sweden.<sup>30</sup> For example, during Carl Bildt's visit to Ukraine in March 2014, *DN* noted that Carl Bildt did not want to criticize the new government in Kyiv in any way. He had not expressed criticism on the fact that Svoboda, a small, anti-Russian party with its roots in Nazism, was given ministerial posts.<sup>31</sup> Similar arguments on the silence of European politicians or the EU as a whole on the "problem of fascism" in Ukraine have been regularly expressed by Russian officials and pro-Russian European politicians.

For example, on 4 March 2014, the editor of *Aftonbladet*'s culture section, criticized in an article titled "Monstrous Hypocrisy about Ukraine"<sup>32</sup> the way in which events in Ukraine had been framed in the Swedish debate. In the editors view, descriptions in the Swedish media had been blinded by Russophobia and Russia was depicted as the "root of all evil". The editor pointed out that the Swedish media did not describe the Maidan protests in a realistic way, referring to Ukraine's Svoboda party in particular.

29 The Parliament in Sweden is known for shunning the nationalist party Sweden Democrats, seeing them as rooted in neo-Nazi ideas. This party is not, however, the most far-right group in Sweden. At least two extreme groups were named to have been in Kyiv the Nordic Youth and Party of the Swedes. According to the Swedish Security Police, up to 30 Swedes travelled to Ukraine and of those five to ten took part in the fighting. There are also indications that neo-Nazi groups in Sweden have provided financial support to the Ukrainian Svoboda party in recent years. *Financial Times* 21 September 2015; *Sveriges Radio* 22 November 2014; *Dagens Nyheter* 1 March 2014.

30 *Dagens Nyheter* 8 March 2014; *Svenska Dagbladet* 27 February 2014.

31 *Dagens Nyheter* 16 April 2014.

32 *Aftonbladet* 4 March 2014.

The next day, *Aftonbladet*'s culture section published an article titled "Where is the war? Show me the war!".<sup>33</sup> This text took part in the framing of the Crimean operation as peaceful demonstration by normal people who wanted to protect themselves from the "fascists in Kiev" with no Russian troops in sight. Later, it was pointed out that Putin was right to refer to Svoboda in the Ukrainian government as fascist hooligans, as they were clearly "right-wing extremists".<sup>34</sup> Thus, these articles did not just mention the Russian narrative as "The other side of the story," as had been the case in the majority of the cases discussed above, but took it for granted.

This was perhaps the starting point for criticism expressed in the pages of *Aftonbladet*'s culture section towards Swedish foreign policy during the conflict and in particular towards the then Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt. In a commentary published in the culture section on 20 August 2014 the commentators<sup>35</sup> wrote:

The crisis in Ukraine threatens to degenerate into more than a local war. We now need a cohesive Swedish foreign policy that fosters peace, human rights, neighbourliness and Swedish safety. Instead, the government's foreign policy has degenerated into Carl Bildt's incoherent Twitter feed that does not benefit anyone's interests.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, several articles published in *Aftonbladet*'s culture section criticized perceived Western – especially Swedish – involvement in the conflict. While admitting the presence of Russian propaganda, the author of one of the articles criticized Western involvement as equally or even more lethal than the Russian equivalent:

Anyone who during the past months has followed the Ukrainian propaganda and read the one-sided portrayals of the separatists motives has been able to see this hatred (in milder cases an ancient Russophobia) expand.<sup>37</sup>

33 *Aftonbladet* 5 March 2014.

34 *Aftonbladet* 6 March 2014b.

35 The debate article was written by six people, most from different NGOs.

36 *Aftonbladet* 20 August 2014.

37 *Aftonbladet* 7 May 2014, 2 April 2014.

This signalled the notion that in the end, Russia's actions, as well as those of its proxies and sympathizers, had a certain amount of legitimacy, as can be seen in the further remarks of the article:

The Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski tweets that it is "foreign involvement" that caused the tragedy in Odessa. Implicitly: The dead have only themselves to blame and it is Russia's fault that the opponents of the government were burned alive. That he himself (as well as American politicians and the head of the CIA) has been part of this foreign involvement seems to have been forgotten.<sup>38</sup>

As we have described earlier (see Section II in this report), the accusation that the US is behind the "state coup" in Ukraine has been one of the Russia's main disinformation narratives about the conflict. The Russian state media's campaign to discredit Carl Bildt had already started in December 2013 and it intensified during the conflict.<sup>39</sup> Thus, it can be said that arguments presented in AB's culture section on these occasions imitated Russian metanarratives and disinformation themes.

## 9.5. CONCLUSION

Doubt and lack of clarity were the prominent features, which surfaced from the research material. As such, the three Russian metanarratives did not become strongly prevalent in the research data analysed in this chapter. However, the use of Russian news sources such as *RT*, *Interfax* and *RIA Novosti*, as well as direct quotations of Russian authorities, especially in the so-called fast news pieces, channelled not just a Russian view on the conflict, but most often a specific disinformation theme for a particular event. A study published in October 2015 by the Swedish media institute Timbro provides a more detailed analysis of the use of the Russian state agencies *RT*, *Tass* and *Sputnik* by the Swedish media.<sup>40</sup>

38 *Aftonbladet* 7 May 2014, 2 April 2014.

39 Franke 2015, 43.

40 *Timbro Medieinstitut*, accessed 24 January 2016; *Svenska Dagbladet* 1 October 2015.

The most dominant metanarratives that came through this analysis were the destruction of the positive legacy of the Maidan revolution, which appeared as a subnarrative of Ukrainian government being criminally incapable of taking control of the extreme right wing and their dangerous activity. Furthermore, the subnarrative of there being extreme right-wing politicians in the Ukrainian government was prevalent in the Swedish media. The other strongly present narrative was “Russia does the right thing”. This became visible through the news pieces as well as interviews with locals in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, mostly during the events leading to the annexation of Crimea and during the emergence of the “humanitarian catastrophe”.

However, taken as a whole, most of the lead articles and columns did not adopt the Russian narratives. Instead they were rather critical of Russia’s moves. The only published pieces which heavily contained the Russian narratives and adapted them to the Swedish context were *Aftonbladet*’s culture section’s articles, columns and reader comments. It could be concluded that the kernel of good journalism, namely presenting a balanced view of all sides, shows itself to be extremely difficult and vulnerable.

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10



# 10. Hungary: Where the Government-Controlled Media was the Main Entry Point for Russian Metanarratives

András Rácz<sup>1</sup>

## 10.1. INTRODUCTION

Ukraine and the situation there have always been strategically important for Hungary, mainly due to the geographic proximity, and also in connection with the ethnic Hungarian minority living in the Zakarpattya region of Ukraine. Hence, when the mass demonstrations started in Ukraine in the end of 2013, Hungarian diplomacy as well as the media paid high attention to the situation.

However, the context and the focus of this attention are important particularities. First, unlike Poland, ties to the East, which includes Ukraine, are not an integral part of Hungarian foreign policy identity.<sup>2</sup> Hungarian foreign policy has always been much more focused on the Balkans than on Eastern Europe. Hence, relations with Ukraine are perceived in Budapest mostly from a minority-focused point of view.

The second particularity is related to Russia. Ever since the democratic transition in 1989, all Hungarian governments have strived to maintain good, pragmatic relations with Russia, motivated mostly by interests related to energy security as well as foreign trade ambitions. The second government of Viktor Orbán that came to power

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<sup>2</sup> Rácz 2012.

in 2010 made foreign trade the main task of Hungarian diplomacy, and relations with Russia were declared to be a key priority, as laid down in the government's "Eastern opening" strategy.<sup>3</sup> This resulted in the fact that ties to Ukraine were often perceived through the lens of Hungary–Russia relations.

The third element that has shaped the context was domestic politics. The breakout of the conflict in Crimea and thereafter the first moments of the war in Eastern Ukraine overlapped with the April 2014 parliamentary elections in Hungary, as well as with the preceding campaign period.

Hence, these three factors – lack of close historical ties, the importance of Russia and the domestic political context – indeed shaped how the mainstream Hungarian media has covered the crisis and war in Ukraine.

## 10.2.

### THE MEDIA IN HUNGARY AND THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

According to a data on Hungarian web traffic and visits to news websites, the two most popular news websites are *origo.hu* and *index.hu*. Both have well over 400,000 daily visitors.<sup>4</sup> This exceeds by more than ten times the number of readers of the most popular printed daily newspapers.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the coverage of the Ukraine crisis by these two major news sites will constitute part of the sample analysed. Concerning their profiles, *Origo* is mainly a news portal, oriented at objective reporting, while *index.hu* has the ambitions to be both a news and entertainment site, which includes a great deal of less mainstream, creative, sometimes more subjective and not necessarily news-oriented content as well. Besides this, *Index* is significantly less formal in terms of language and style than *Origo*, which contributes to its popularity.

Another part of the sample was the state news agency, the *MTI*. To gain a comprehensive view of the Hungarian media discourse on Ukraine, it is crucial to analyse the content provided by this public service news agency, for two reasons. First, in Hungary the

3 Kálan 2014.

4 Szuhi 2014. Although according to the list *startlap.hu* ranks in second place, in fact *startlap* does not produce its own content, but only collects articles of interest from other websites.

5 *Kecskemét Online* 23 May 2015.

public service news agency as well as public television channels were centralized into one large conglomerate in 2011. Hence, news reported by the *MTI* serves as the main basis for the news reports of the public media channels as well, thus reaching large segments of the population. Second, *MTI* news is also widely taken up and republished by smaller, regional print and online journals, both state and private ones. Particularly on matters of foreign policy, *MTI* news functions as a main source of information for them, as these smaller newspapers do not have foreign correspondents, in contrast to the wide correspondent network of the state news agency.

When assessing the role and place of *MTI*, one needs to be aware of the widespread domestic and international criticism towards Hungary's present media regulation, and particularly towards the strong government control over public service media outlets that are supposed to be independent.<sup>6</sup> Hungary is the only country among the ones researched in this report where freedom of the press is rated only Partly Free by Freedom House.<sup>7</sup> According to the *Country Report 2015*, "The accuracy and objectivity of *MTI* reporting has come under criticism since the Fidesz government came to power in 2010". The government has a strong majority in the body that supervises the functioning of the *MTI*.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth news source analysed was the daily *Magyar Nemzet*, a rightist conservative newspaper and website. *Magyar Nemzet* works in very close cooperation<sup>9</sup> with a TV channel, *Hír TV* (literally "News TV"). The reason for choosing *Magyar Nemzet* is that in 2014 it still very closely represented the position of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party and of the government. The date 2014 is important though: *Magyar Nemzet* and *Hír TV* have long been controlled by a well-known oligarch, Lajos Simicska, who was a close ally of Viktor Orbán as well as of his government. In early 2015, the two had a turbulent breakup, and since then both *Magyar Nemzet* and *Hír TV* have become independent from, and often openly opposed to, the government.

However, as the present research focuses on the year 2014, *Magyar Nemzet* and *Hír TV* constituted a good sample representing the position of the government and the ruling party. Their relationship to the government was well illustrated by an interview given by deputy

6 Bajomi-Lázár 2015, 60.

7 Freedom House 2015.

8 CEU Centre for Media and Communication Studies 2012.

9 The closeness of the cooperation is demonstrated by the fact that the search engine of *Magyar Nemzet*'s website also gives hits from *Hír TV* news and reports.

CEO of *Hír TV* Péter Tarr on 7 October 2015, already six months after Simicska's conflict with the government. In his strongly self-critical interview, Tarr described in detail that in the previous period, the communication managers of the government instructed the editorial staff of *Hír TV* on a weekly basis about what news to prioritize, whom to invite, whom not to invite, etc.<sup>10</sup> The same was true for *Magyar Nemzet*, which dozens of journalists left after the breakup to establish a rival, proudly pro-governmental newspaper. All in all, both *Hír TV* and *Magyar Nemzet* were under very strong governmental influence in the examined period.

Regarding the ownership structure and political affiliation of the other two researched news sites, *Origo* has been owned by the New Wave Media Group since December 2015.<sup>11</sup> However, in the focus period of the present study, in 2014, it was still owned by Magyar Telekom, a sister company of Deutsche Telekom. This meant that *Origo* was largely independent from governmental influence. *Index* can also be considered free of daily political influence. All in all, the sample used in this research consisted of two independent news websites, *Index* and *Origo*, one pro-governmental newspaper and website, *Magyar Nemzet* and of the public service media agency *MTI*, over which the government also has strong influence.

During the research, the following number of articles was found when researching the keyword "Ukraine" in the periods prescribed in the introduction of Chapter 5:<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *444.hu* 7 October 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *Origo* 18 December 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Hence: for Crimea the period of 22–28 March 2014, for Odessa 2–8 May 2014, 17–24 July 2014 for MH17, for the humanitarian catastrophe discourse and the Battle of Ilovaysk, 24 August–5 September 2014.

News source	Case studies				Total
	Annexation of the Crimea	Odessa trade union building fire	Shooting down of MH17	“Humanitarian crisis” discourse and the Battle of Ilovaysk	
<b>MTI</b>	139	100	115	172	526
<b>Index</b>	38	39	121	84	282
<b>Origo</b>	31	32	41	62	126
<b>Magyar Nemzet</b> <sup>13</sup>	68	65	71	139	343
<b>Total</b>	256	216	348	457	

Articles were obtained by using the search engines of the four websites. The high number of Ukraine-related articles published by *MTI* is the results of its practice to also report the publications of major foreign media agencies.

Table 10.1.  
The empirical research sample.

### 10.3. ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

In line with the overall high importance of Ukraine for Hungary, the illegal referendum in Crimea followed by the forceful annexation of the peninsula by Russia was closely followed by the Hungarian media. Particular attention was paid to the military situation in Crimea, as well as to the events in Zakarpattya, both understandable if one takes into consideration Hungary’s geographical position as well as the presence of its minority in Zakarpattya. Prime Minister Orbán declared openly on 26 March that for Hungary the most important question was the security of the Hungarian minority in Zakarpattya.<sup>14</sup>

In the analysed period by far the most news about Ukraine was published by *MTI*, the Hungarian state news agency, namely 139 articles. None of the distinctive keywords of the Russian metanarratives were present in their reports, thus Ukraine was not characterized as “junta”, or “fascist regime”. This does not mean, however, that Russian metanarratives were not present at all.

<sup>13</sup> Together with reports from Hír TV which belongs to the same conglomerate.

<sup>14</sup> *MTI* 26 March 2014.

First and foremost, in accord with its general operational principles, *MTI* very often quoted Russian state news from *TASS* and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* without commenting on them in any way, which resulted in the direct influx of the Russian metanarratives into the news flow of the Hungarian news agency.

Second, the news flow of *MTI* news often starts with tags, making it easier for the reader to select the region or topic they are interested in. News about Ukraine in the studied period had the tag “Ukrainian crisis” (“*ukrán válság*”), which implicitly implied that the crisis was a Ukrainian domestic issue, thus implying the noninvolvement of Moscow. One needs to note that the politically more neutral tag “Crisis in Ukraine” (“*ukrajnai válság*”) would have not been much longer in Hungarian. It cannot be decided whether this tagging was a result of a deliberate move, or just a lack of clear understanding of the situation. Anyways, this way of tagging the news implicitly supported Russia’s *noninvolvement* narrative.

Moreover, following the illegal referendum on “independence”, news from Crimea started to have the separate tag “Crimea” (“*Krím*”) instead of the standard “Ukrainian crisis” used in Ukraine-related articles.<sup>15</sup> The first case when the separate “Crimea” tag was used happened on 19 March,<sup>16</sup> three days after the referendum. From then on, *MTI* started to label Crimea as a geographical unit different from Ukraine. This points towards an open bias of the *MTI* in favour of the Russian metanarrative of Crimea no longer being part of Ukraine.

As early as 3 March 2014 there were many cases when *MTI* started to refer to the institutions of Crimea taken over by separatists as if they were fully legitimate ones. In an article, *MTI* quoted an interview given by Sergey Aksyonov, non-recognized “Prime Minister” of Crimea given to the Russian newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. In this report, *MTI* referred to Aksyonov as Prime Minister of Crimea, without using even quotation marks or referring to the Crimean independence referendum as non-recognized.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the views of Aksyonov about the “people of Crimea taking power into their hands” and about organizing a legitimate referendum were directly repeated by the Hungarian state news agency. This was a case when the *People in Crimea are united and have a will* narrative was directly transposed into Hungarian. Another case was when *MTI* quoted Aksyonov’s deputy, Rustem Temirgaliyev,

<sup>15</sup> *MTI* 21 March 2014a.

<sup>16</sup> *MTI* 19 March 2014.

<sup>17</sup> *MTI* 3 March 2014.



as if he was a fully legitimate actor, again without mentioning the unrecognized status of his “Deputy Prime Minister” position.<sup>18</sup> This all contributed to the spreading of the “*Russia does the right thing*” metanarrative by picturing the annexation act and its consequences as legitimate.

Interestingly enough though, in reports sent from the Crimea the Russian metanarratives of Crimea belonging to Russia and People in Crimea are united were much less present. An MTI reporter visited the peninsula in the studied period. Most opinions he reported from Simferopol – obtained from local people, by mentioning only their first names – were cheerful, happy and supportive ones, as people were reported to celebrate the “return” of the peninsula to Russia.<sup>19</sup> Hence, this part of the MTI reporting reflected the mentioned Russian metanarratives to a certain extent; which, of course, does not mean that reality on the ground was any different. However, the journalist visited the Crimean Tatar community from 28 March on, thus right after the period selected for analysis, and from there he reported about very critical opinions too. An interesting parallel to the MTI reports was offered by Index, as one of its reporters also visited Crimea nearly in the same time. The opinions Index reported about were much more diverse, including particularly the ones from Simferopol, than the ones in the MTI news.<sup>20</sup>

There was even one case when *MTI* engaged in open manipulation on the level of the text of its news. This happened on 21 March, when the *MTI* reported the release of a few Ukrainian activists, who had been kidnapped by separatists in Crimea.<sup>21</sup> The *MTI* report was based on a translated article from the Ukrainian *UNIAN* news agency<sup>22</sup>. However, while *UNIAN* referred to the referendum in Crimea as “illegal” (“*nezakonni referendum*”), in the *MTI* report, the same referendum was labelled as a “referendum on independence” (“*függetlenségi népszavazás*”). The wording used by the *MTI* implied both that the referendum was legal and that the independence of the peninsula was based on a legitimate legal act, thus again strengthening the *Russia does the right thing*, as well as the *People of Crimea are united* metanarratives. As all other parts of the article were based on the exact and proper translation of the original *UNIAN* news piece, it is highly unlikely that

18 MTI 21 March 2014b.

19 MTI 27 March 2014a, 27 March 2014b.

20 Index 25 March 2014.

21 MTI 21 March 2014c.

22 UNIAN 21 March 2014.

the changed adjective was result of a translation mistake, taking into account particularly the very political meaning of the expression. Instead, this article fit well into the above-described attitude of the *MTI* to not blatantly, but consistently promote the Russian metanarrative about Crimea legitimately belonging to the Russian Federation.

In contrast to the *MTI*, the other three studied news channels reported on Crimea in a mostly balanced, neutral way. In the studied period, *Index* published 14 articles about Ukraine, while *Origo* published 11 and *Magyar Nemzet* a total of 68, with *HírTV* news included. In line with the general foreign policy priorities and interests of the Hungarian public, high attention was paid to the military situation, as well as to the minority question.<sup>23</sup> The terms of distraction described in Chapter 4 were not present at all. None of the three channels republished the *MTI* news quoting Crimean officials, either.

Reports on the Russian position were always quotes from high-ranking Russian politicians, such as President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev or Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov. Besides this, in most cases they were contrasted with the positions of Western or Ukrainian officials.<sup>24</sup> Hence, even if Russian metanarratives were mentioned, this was always done in the form of quotes which were always contrasted with other opinions. Kosovo, as a precedent used by Russia was reported, but was contrasted with other international examples, and differences between Kosovo and Crimea were also pointed out.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of terminology, though, one could observe certain lack of coherence. In Crimea the studied period of 21–28 March was the time when the remaining Ukrainian military bases were taken over by Russia. When reporting these events, the Hungarian news used the terms “pro-Russian demonstrators”,<sup>26</sup> “pro-Russian armed people in the Crimea” and “pro-Russian rebels” very often as synonyms, and often together with “Russian troops” or “members of the Russian armed forces”. However, neither *Index*, *Origo* nor *Magyar Nemzet* spoke about “Crimean self-defence forces” in the examined period, thus the Russian metanarrative of *noninvolvement* was not adopted by them.

23 Consequently, news about the mobilization of Ukrainian armed forces were of high interest for the Hungarian public, as it also affected the ethnic Hungarians living in the Zakarpattia region. For example, see: *Hír TV* 23 March 2014.

24 *Origo* 21 March 2014; *MNO* 21 March 2014; *Index* 28 March 2014.

25 *Index* 21 March 2014.

26 *Index* 22 March 2014.

Only *MTI* published one piece about the Crimean self-defence groups, called *druzhinas* on 27 March.<sup>27</sup> Although the text pointed out once that *druzhinas* were not legitimate, the reporter quoted in detail an unnamed armed person, who spoke about “provocateurs coming from Western Ukraine”, labelled the referendum as legitimate, and mentioned Ukrainian radicals “who wanted to make a second Kiev here”. Hence, one could argue that in this piece the Russian metanarrative about the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum was adopted, as well as partially the one that pictured Ukraine as dominated by radicals. Meanwhile, the noninvolvement narrative was present in this case only indirectly: this particular news piece mentioned the presence of Russian troops only very briefly, while providing a long description of the policing role of the *druzhinas*, thus the reader might have gained the impression that the Crimean secession was done mostly by these “self-defence groups”, but not by Russia.

#### 10.4.

##### THE BURNING OF THE TRADE UNION BUILDING IN ODESSA

The studied period that followed the burning of the trade union building in Odessa on 2 May 2014 was the time of escalation of the conflict, not only in Odessa itself, but also in Eastern Ukraine. The researched Hungarian media channels reported in detail both about the events of the escalation and about the international reactions, including those of Russia.

The latter resulted in the emergence of two completely different and mutually exclusive narratives of the conflict in the Hungarian media. On the one hand, quoted Western officials were mostly supportive of the Ukrainian interim government. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk<sup>28</sup> called the events in Eastern Ukraine a war and accused Russia of waging an undeclared war in Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> This was very much in line with the remarks of Ukrainian politicians, as Interim Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk also described the conflict as undeclared war.<sup>30</sup> He accused Russia of crossing Ukraine’s border, violating its territorial integrity and sending terrorist and diversion groups into the country.

27 *MTI* 27 March 2014c.

28 *MNO* 3 May 2014.

29 *MTI* 8 May 2014a.

30 *MTI* 8 May 2014b.

Interim President Oleksandr Turchynov rejected negotiating with separatists in Eastern Ukraine by calling them “armed bandits”<sup>31</sup> and also “terrorists” and “saboteurs”.<sup>32</sup>

Slightly in contrast with the belligerent rhetoric of Ukrainian leaders, German Chancellor Angela Merkel<sup>33</sup> excluded a military solution to the conflict, and called for maintaining the unity of the EU even if the sanctions to be introduced against Russia would hit member states differently. Maja Kocijancic’s spokesperson Catherine Ashton labelled the planned referendum in Eastern Ukraine illegitimate, because it violated the constitution of Ukraine, and also called for a peaceful solution.<sup>34</sup> The spokesperson of the Pentagon, Rear Admiral John Kirby said that Russia’s steps were mostly responsible for the destabilization of Eastern Ukraine.<sup>35</sup>

Contrary to the positions of Ukrainian and Western leaders, the statements of Russian officials and the Russian media news republished in Hungary created a completely different narrative. As quoted by the MTI,<sup>36</sup> Lavrov labelled the 2 May events in Odessa as “pure fascism” and accused Ukraine of hiding the real details of the tragedy. In Vienna at the meeting of the Council of Europe, Lavrov suggested that representatives of Eastern Ukraine should also be included in the negotiations.<sup>37</sup> Prime Minister Medvedev was quoted as saying on his Facebook page that Ukraine must stop the “punishing” military operations against its own people,<sup>38</sup> and put the blame for the events in Eastern Ukraine on the “impotent” Kyiv government. Dmitry Peskov was quoted saying the Odessa fire was the “last nail” in the coffin of the Geneva agreements aimed at a peaceful solution, because thereafter even Moscow lost its influence over the people of Eastern Ukraine, who were now fighting for their lives.<sup>39</sup> This was another case of Russia’s *noninvolvement* narrative appearing in the Hungarian media, but again, only as a quotes from Russian officials.

A demonstrative example of the conflicting narratives was how the fights in Mariupol and the actions of Ukraine’s Anti-Terror Operation

31 MTI 8 May 2014c.

32 MNO 2 May 2014.

33 MTI 6 May 2014

34 MTI 8 May 2014d.

35 Index 3 May 2014.

36 MTI 7 May 2014.

37 Origo 6 May 2014.

38 MNO 2 May 2014.

39 Origo 3 May 2014.

(ATO) were pictured in the Hungarian media. On the one hand, Ukrainian leaders were quoted as describing the operations as anti-terror operations or liberation of the occupied territories. They also stressed that the ATO tried to limit the damage to civilian population and infrastructure.<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, as the fights began in Mariupol, *Hír TV* quoted an unnamed local separatist, who said “Everybody knows that besides Ukrainian soldiers, they [the Kyiv government] bring here also the neo-Nazis of the Right Sector. There will be a big fight”.<sup>41</sup> Concerning the ATO operations in Eastern Ukraine, it was also *Hír TV* that quoted another unnamed separatist from Donetsk, who called the Kyiv government a “junta”.<sup>42</sup> Another two, similarly anonymous separatists from Slovyansk were quoted as they accused the Ukrainian army of firing at peaceful demonstrators, and also when they stressed the massive public support behind the separatist.<sup>43</sup> It is unclear however where *HírTV* sourced these witnesses and their testimonies, because no outside source was indicated in the report, and there were no *HírTV* journalists that time in Slovyansk either.

Moreover, on 3 May *HírTV* published an interview<sup>44</sup> with a popular, although academically not well-established<sup>45</sup> Hungarian security policy expert about the situation in Ukraine. This so-called expert described the conflict as “civil war”, spoke about “self-defence forces in Eastern Ukraine” and accused Kyiv of using the army against the civilian population, which was “not usual in a normal democracy”. Hence, he repeated several distinctive keywords of the Russian metanarratives about Ukraine, including the *destruction of the positive legacy of the Maidan*, the *civil war* as well as *Russia’s noninvolvement*. In addition to all these, he described the situation as a proxy war between great powers, between the US and Russia, thus basically questioning the ability of Ukraine to act independently and function as a state.

This did not mean however that the *Magyar Nemzet-HírTV* conglomerate did not publish any neutral, unbiased articles. For example, they reported in a very professional way about Putin’s

40 *ibid.* and *Origo* 5 May 2014.

41 *Hír Tv* 4 May 2014a .

42 *Hír Tv* 4 May 2014b.

43 *Hír Tv* 3 May 2014.

44 *ibid.*

45 As pointed out by *Index*, this expert has no meaningful academic publications, claimed to be the deputy-rector of a non-existent university and openly prioritizes media appearances over academic work. For more detail, see: *Index* 21 October 2010.

proposal to the separatists to postpone their planned referendum, pointing out that this was probably intended by Moscow to strengthen its own *noninvolvement* narrative.<sup>46</sup>

All in all, as demonstrated above, three out of four of the studied Hungarian media channels, namely *MTI*, *Index* and *Origo* reported on the events of 2–8 May 2014 in a content-wise neutral, balanced way. When they quoted Western, Ukrainian or Russian officials, it was clear in all the studied articles that the opinions belonged to the interview subjects, and were not those of the editorial boards. In this way, of course, to a certain extent they also contributed to the presence of the Russian metanarratives in the Hungarian public debate, however, this did not result in any detectable, pro-Russian bias in the reporting.

Quite to the contrary, in an analytical article written by the staff of *Origo*, journalists pointed out that the fact that separatists were able to shoot down Ukrainian combat helicopters indicated Russian support behind them.<sup>47</sup> Thus implicitly *Origo* was actually critical of the Russian narrative of noninvolvement. In addition, *Index* published an article in which the Russian narrative of a “civil war” in Ukraine, as well as Moscow’s arguments about protecting the rights of ethnic Russians were deconstructed by the well-known professor of international law, László Valki.<sup>48</sup> The professor also pointed out that the Russian argument on ethnic Russians being discriminated against was not legitimate, because the often-criticized draft law on banning the use of Russian language actually never came into force, thanks to Turchynov’s veto. Even *MTI*, in contrast to its reporting practice about Crimea, used an objective, neutral approach in this 2–8 May 2014 period, with the sole exception of maintaining the slightly biased “Ukrainian conflict” tag for its news.

The *Magyar Nemzet–Hír* TV conglomerate was different, though. As demonstrated above, it was *Hír* TV that directly channelled into the Hungarian public discourse the Russian narrative of a “civil war” and the distinctive expressions “Nazis” and “junta” to describe the new Ukrainian government.

Moreover, it was *Magyar Nemzet* that published an openly biased and one-sided article in which practically the whole set of Russian metanarratives and distinctive keywords on the conflict were

46 *MNO* 8 May 2014.

47 *Origo* 7 May 2014.

48 *Index* 6 May 2014.

represented.<sup>49</sup> This article was written by a journalist of *Magyar Nemzet* as an opinion piece on 5 May. The title “Demons unleashed” (“*Elszabadult démonok*”) already indicated that a very emotional piece was to follow. The author first mentioned the events of first Maidan in 2004 as the “rampage of the so-called orange revolution” (“*az úgynevezett narancsos forradalom tombolása*”), thereafter describing the Euromaidan as “downtown of Kiev set on fire by aggressive nationalism that overlaid the protests” (“*agresszív nacionalizmus lángba borította Kijev belvárosát*”). About the interim Ukrainian government he said, “nothing is sacred any more for the temporary power conceived in blood” (“*A vérben fogant ideiglenes hatalom előtt már semmi sem szent*”). He described the events in Eastern Ukraine as similar to those of the Euromaidan, thus characterizing – actually quite poetically – the ATO as “tanks are rolling against the Maidan of the East, the cities of the Donbass are in flames, and the army is supported by the Pravy Sektor, strengthened by the National Guard. Hatred is raging, berserking radicals are charging on each other” (“*Tankok vonulnak a Kelet Majdanja ellen, égne a Donbassz városai, a hadsereget pedig a Pravij szektorral megerősített Nemzeti Gárda támogatja. Tombol a gyűlölet, megvadult radikálisok rontanak egymásra*”). He blamed the European Union for being too weak to rule, but strong enough to “summon the demons of Ukraine”, and described the strategic background of the conflict as the United States trying to discredit Moscow, “forcing” Moscow to use similar methods. All in all, in this news piece all the main Russian metanarratives were voiced, including the *destruction of the positive legacy of the Maidan* and the *civil war*, and strengthening the *Russia does the right thing* narrative by claiming *discrimination against the people of Eastern Ukraine*.

#### 10.5. THE SHOOTING DOWN OF MALAYSIAN AIRLINES FLIGHT MH17

Shooting down Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 was indeed a shock for the Hungarian population. Although the crash had no Hungarian victims, for many the disaster brought the Ukraine conflict much closer than ever before. In connection with MH17, the television, the Internet and print newspapers were full of pictures and reports from Eastern

49 MNO 5 May 2014.

Ukraine, through which even the average uninformed reader could get an even deeper insight than ever before into the war in Ukraine.

As early as the very first day of the disaster, the four researched Hungarian media channels published very detailed reports on international reactions. The reports by *MTI*, *Index* and *Origo* were in line with the mainstream Western narratives, for example the preliminary analysis of Mark Galeotti<sup>50</sup> that put the blame on the separatists, accusing them of shooting down the aeroplane, although accidentally, due to mixing it up with a Ukrainian military plane. Already on 17 July, *MTI* interviewed the well-known, respected security policy expert, Péter Tálas, Director of the Strategic Defence Studies Centre, who gave a similar assessment, blaming the separatists and pointing out that the downing may have a serious effect on Moscow.<sup>51</sup> His argument implicitly negated the Russian subnarrative of *noninvolvement*.

In another piece, *MTI* already went further in countering the separatist narratives about the crash. In an article titled “Kiev and the separatists are blaming each other”) (“*Kijev és a szakadárok egymást vádolják*”), *MTI* quoted first the Ukrainian official position blaming the separatists, then the Ukrainian website *sensor.net*, which argued that there was an Il-76 Ukrainian military transport in the airspace in the same time and the separatists may have intended to shoot that down. The third opinion quoted was the press service of the Luhansk separatists, who blamed a Ukrainian Su-25 attack plane for downing Flight MH17, and the fourth element of the article quoted separatist commander Igor Girkin under his nom de guerre Strelkov, who boasted on the Internet<sup>52</sup> about his people shooting down a Ukrainian An-26 military transport aeroplane. *MTI* added that this happened at approximately the same time as Flight MH17 disappeared from the radar screen.<sup>53</sup> Hence, this way of reporting the conflicting opinions demonstrated that *MTI* was actually very critical of the separatist/Russian narrative. They reported it, but contrasted it with other opinions and also facts.

The high public interest was well reflected in the fact that *Origo* covered the events of 17–18 July in a continuous news flow.<sup>54</sup> The

50 Galeotti, 2014.

51 *MTI* 17 July 2014a.

52 Here *MTI* most probably referred to the famous post of Girkin on the Russian social network website *V kontakte* in Russian. For an English translation, see: *Business Insider* 17 July 2014.

53 *MTI* 17 July 2014b.

54 *Origo* 18 July 2014a.



title of the whole news flow was “The Game of the Russians ended up badly” (“Az oroszok játéka rossz véget ért”), which indicated that the editorial board of the journal implicitly took a position that both blamed Russia for the crash, and also countered the Russian subnarrative of *noninvolvement*. The same general assessment was given by an editorial article<sup>55</sup> in which *Origo* argued that the death of 298 innocent passengers would corner Vladimir Putin in the sense that the Russia would be blamed for providing the separatists with weapon systems capable of downing an international airliner. The editorial article also pointed out that the modern weapon systems possessed by the separatists seriously questioned Moscow’s official position of *noninvolvement*. In its news flow, *Origo* also pointed out the contradictions between the public statements of the separatist leaders “Prime Minister” Alexandr Boroday and warlord Igor Girkin aka. Strelkov: while Boroday denied that the separatists had any of the black boxes from MH17, Strelkov said that the black boxes had already been found and transferred to Russia. Contrary to both statements, *Origo* also quoted Sergey Lavrov saying that Russia was not going to investigate the black boxes, as the inquiry had to be conducted by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).<sup>56</sup> In addition to all these, uniquely out of the four examined news channels, *Origo* published a detailed technology-centred article about the functioning of the Buk air defence missile system and the physical background of the crash of Flight MH17.<sup>57</sup> Although the author took no open position, his assumption that the MH17 was downed by a Buk ground-to-air missile implicitly negated the Russian and separatist narratives about Ukrainian combat jets shooting down the airliner.

*Index* also covered events of the first two days in a near-live news flow,<sup>58</sup> also quoting Galeotti,<sup>59</sup> as well as various US air defence experts.<sup>60</sup> An editorial article published on 19 July titled “Malaysian airlines: Putin in trouble” assessed the events from the viewpoint that the downing of MH17 was primarily Russia’s responsibility, and the consequences were likely to fall on Russia.<sup>61</sup> Hence, *Index* had basically the same

55 *Origo* 18 July 2014b.

56 *Origo* 18 July 2014a.

57 *Origo* 19 July 2014.

58 *Index* 18 July 2014a.

59 *Index* 18 July 2014b.

60 *Index* 18 July 2014c.

61 *Index* 19 July 2014a.

general position as *Origo* and *MTI*, and assumed that Russian-backed separatists, thus implicitly Russia, were behind the crash.

*Index* remained very critical of the Russian position during the whole period examined. *Index* reported in detail on the statement of the Ukrainian government about an intercepted phone conversation between separatist forces, in which they (including separatist warlord Kozytsin) admitted that a passenger airliner was accidentally shot down.<sup>62</sup> They also reported on a Russian effort to change the Wikipedia article about the air crash.<sup>63</sup>

This does not mean, of course, that the Russian position was not reported. *MTI*, *Index* and *Origo* all reported the Russian opinions in detail as well. The initial reaction of Putin, blaming Ukraine because MH17 was downed over Ukrainian territory, was quoted,<sup>64</sup> as well as his call to the fighting parties to cease hostilities and allow an impartial investigation. This statement represented the *noninvolvement* and *civil war* narratives, because it implied that Russia was not part of the conflict. The statement of Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, was also reported, in which he blamed Ukraine for letting MH17 fly on the course it did.<sup>65</sup>

On 18 July, *MTI* surveyed in detail the initial reaction of the Russian press,<sup>66</sup> including both official and expert opinions. While an official of the Russian aviation authority blamed Ukraine for not closing the airspace over the conflict zone, in their assessments both *Kommersant* and *Vedomosti* pointed out the contradictions in the communication of the separatists about whether they possessed heavy air defence missiles, as reported by the *MTI*. Interesting enough, the original *Vedomosti* article<sup>67</sup> ended by reminding the reader of a 2001 case when a Tu-154 airliner of the Russian company "Sibir" was accidentally shot down by Ukrainian air defence forces who were exercising in Crimea. By finishing the article in this way, the *Vedomosti* authors may have intended to implicitly contribute to the official blaming of Ukraine by drawing a possible parallel. However, *MTI* did not report this particular part of the *Vedomosti* news.

Generally speaking, *Index*, *Origo* and also *MTI* turned out to be highly resistant to the Russian metanarratives. Although the Russian

62 *Index* 17 July 2014.

63 *Index* 19 July 2014b.

64 *Index* 18 July 2014d.

65 *Index* 18 July 2014e.

66 *MTI* 18 July 2014.

67 *Vedomosti* 18 July 2014.

position was reported in detail, it was always reported as quotes from top officials, and in most cases was also compared to other opinions, such as those of US or EU officials. In comparison to the other case studies, the Russian views regarding Flight MH17 were much less represented and were mentioned comparatively less.

The *Magyar Nemzet*–*HírTV* conglomerate was partially, although not completely different. On the one hand, they also reported the main events that followed the downing of Flight MH17 in an impartial, objective way, similarly to the other three news channels, giving room to Ukrainian, Western and Russian opinions.<sup>68</sup> A Hungarian security policy expert, Ferenc Kaiser, gave a similar assessment to the mainstream Western opinions, giving improper target identification – i.e. that the separatists accidentally mixed up the MH17 with a military aircraft – as the reason behind the tragedy.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, however, both *Magyar Nemzet* and *HírTV* also gave room to opinions coming from Hungarian authors that openly and completely reflected the Russian metanarratives about the situation. *HírTV* interviewed the same security expert mentioned in the previous chapter in the evening of the day of the tragedy.<sup>70</sup> He still questioned whether MH17 had been lost due to an attack or technical malfunction. Among the reasons for the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, he said that “strategy of the West is to push Russia back to the East” (“*A Nyugatnak az a stratégiája, hogy Oroszországot vissza kell nyomni keletre*”), thus voicing the *geopolitical conflict* / *new security order* metanarrative.

Three days later, *HírTV* published a detailed report on the situation around the MH17.<sup>71</sup> Without quoting either officials or experts, the reporter said that the separatists needed air defence missiles because Ukraine attacked them with aeroplanes, thus “they were forced to borrow air defence missiles from the Big Brother”, although without naming Russia directly. Besides this, he called the conflict an asymmetrical war between Ukraine and the separatists. This argumentation fostered the *civil war* subnarrative as well as the subnarrative of *The people of Eastern Ukraine being in danger* because of the attacks of Kiev’s air force. Russia and the separatists were described as if they were just forced to resist, which led to the subnarrative of *Russia is only reacting*. Moreover, the narrative of *Russia not being*

68 MNO, 19 July 2014a; *Hír TV* 18 July 2014.

69 *Hír TV* 19 July 2014.

70 *Hír TV* 17 July 2014.

71 *Hír TV* 20 July 2014.

*directly part of the conflict* was also partially promoted, because Russia and the separatists were pictured as two different actors. In addition to all this, the reporter blamed the pilots and Malaysian Airlines for not flying on a different route (the fact that the airspace was properly closed below 7,200 metres, thus MH17 was flying on a not closed, normally operational flight path was not mentioned.) He added in a very emotional way that “the Malaysian government chose money instead of security” by not redirecting Flight MH17.

On 19 July, *Magyar Nemzet* published another opinion piece from the same journalist quoted in the previous chapter, titled “Over the Rubicon” (“*Túl a Rubiconon*”).<sup>72</sup> The author called the conflict in Ukraine a “classic civil war”, blamed the Ukrainian armed forces for killing civilians “in the so-called anti-terror operation” and concluded that the United States was going to profit the most from the events, because the downing of Flight MH17 would be a strong argument in the debate about sanctions. Similarly to his article quoted in the previous chapter, he described the conflict as a geopolitical one between the United States and Russia. He questioned, whether the US was able to maintain its control over the Ukrainians and whether Russia was able to maintain its control over the rebels. Thereafter, he tried to blur the responsibility by stating – absolutely unprecedentedly in the Hungarian press – that, “From now on it does not even matter any more, who is, who are to blame to the death of nearly 300 [...] civilians, the consequences of the tragedy are inconceivable” (“*S innentől már szinte mindegy, hogy ki, kik a felelősek közel 300 [...] civil haláláért, a tragédia következményei beláthatatlanok*”). In this short article the author enumerated nearly the complete compendium of Russian metanarratives and narratives on the conflict, from *Destroying the positive heritage of the Maidan* to the one about *Civil war*, including the perception of the conflict as *A geopolitical struggle between the US and Russia* as well as picturing *Russia as not involved directly*.

72 MNO, 19 July 2014b.

10.6.  
THE “HUMANITARIAN DISASTER” NARRATIVE  
AND THE BATTLE OF ILOVAYSK

In line with Hungary’s geographical proximity, the military events of the examined period received very high attention in the Hungarian mainstream media. In the *MTI* news flow there were 30 reports on military developments in Eastern Ukraine. This means that out of the total of 172 Ukraine-related *MTI* news pieces of the examined period, nearly a sixth dealt with the situation on the front line. The Wales NATO summit also received high attention, obviously connected to Hungary’s NATO membership. *MTI* reports on the Wales meeting were collected under a separate tag “NATO Summit” (“*NATO csúcs*”).

Among such circumstances, the Russian narrative about the humanitarian situation in Eastern Ukraine was present in the reports of the *MTI* only to a moderate extent, and clearly not in a dominant way. The humanitarian situation was mentioned in a total of nine articles in the examined period. On the one hand, *MTI* quoted Peskov and Lavrov twice,<sup>73</sup> declaring that Russia was continuing humanitarian assistance in Ukraine, as well as Putin,<sup>74</sup> who claimed to have an agreement with Poroshenko about the humanitarian situation in the East. The separatist leader Alexandr Zakharchenko was also quoted on 29 August, when he promised to follow Putin’s request to open a humanitarian corridor for the Ukrainian troops encircled in Ilovaysk.<sup>75</sup> These statements reflected the main metanarrative of *Russia doing the right thing*, including the narratives about *Russia’s direct noninvolvement*, as well as *The people in Eastern Ukraine need help*.

On the other hand, however, *MTI* also referred to an article in *Vedomosti* in which Russian experts deconstructed the Kremlin’s humanitarian intervention argument from a legal point of view. Even the title of the report was a statement in itself, although *MTI* precisely referred to the Russian newspaper: “Vedomosti: Russia interprets international law according to its own preferences” (“*Vedomosztí: Moszkva saját tetszése szerint értelmezi a nemzetközi jogot*”).<sup>76</sup> When the escalation was ongoing, on 28 August *MTI* quoted a London-based financial capital company, CMA Group, which assessed the situation

73 *MTI* 24 August 2014.

74 *MTI*, 27 August 2014a.

75 *MTI*, 29 August 2014.

76 *MTI*, 26 August 2014.

in Eastern Ukraine as highly volatile. CMA labelled the Russian humanitarian convoys as tools to slow down the advance of Ukrainian government forces.<sup>77</sup>

Besides this, an official of the UNHCR was also quoted, who said that although there were serious problems in Eastern Ukraine, the situation was still far from a fully fledged humanitarian disaster, where people die because of starvation or cold, as in Sudan, Iraq or Syria. The UN official said about the latter that, “This is what we call a humanitarian disaster”.<sup>78</sup> In the last paragraph of the report, *MTI* added a reminder that Putin said of the situation in Eastern Ukraine that it could not be called anything else than a humanitarian disaster, and used this as a legitimacy to send a convoy of 260–280 trucks to Ukraine, without the approval of the Ukrainian authorities. In this piece of news *MTI* was indeed critical of the Russian position.

A statement of Francois Hollande was also reported, in which he declared that the “presence of Russian soldiers in Eastern Ukraine would be unacceptable”.<sup>79</sup> A few days later, *MTI* reported a NATO statement from the Newport summit on 4 September, in which NATO demanded that Moscow refrain from any unilateral military steps, or acts of destabilization in Ukraine, even if they were done under a humanitarian pretext.<sup>80</sup> All in all, although *MTI* reported the Russian narrative, it counter-balanced it with a nearly equal number of assessments opposed to the narrative of the Kremlin.

The Russian humanitarian argument was also very critically reported by *Index*. The news site quoted Spokesperson of the National Security Committee of Ukraine, Colonel Andriy Lisenko, who accused Russia of using the humanitarian argument as only a cover story. According to Lisenko, returning Russian trucks illegally transported industrial equipment from two disassembled Ukrainian factories, thus basically stealing the whole factories.<sup>81</sup>

Although *Index* reported the statements of Russian officials who denied Russia’s involvement in Ukraine – referring either to “Russian soldiers being on holiday” or to “Russian volunteers” – the news portal contrasted this with several statements from Ukrainian and Western officials, as well as independent news reports from the

77 *MTI*, 28 August 2014a.

78 *MTI* 27 August 2014b.

79 *MTI* 28 August 2014b.

80 *MTI* 4 September 2014.

81 *Index* 25 August 2014.

front line.<sup>82</sup> Hence, *Index* did not internalize the Russian subnarrative of *noninvolvement* at all. Quite to the contrary, *Index* again interviewed Professor László Valki, who reminded them that according to a UN decision from 1974, if a country sends “armed bands, groups, irregular formations or mercenaries” to the territory of another country, it counts as aggression.<sup>83</sup> Besides this, in a separate article written by a member of the editorial board,<sup>84</sup> the website deconstructed the Russian arguments about only Russian volunteers fighting in Ukraine, bringing in historical examples when great powers concealed their involvement by claiming that only their volunteers were fighting in the given conflict. Examples included the German Condor Legion in the Spanish Civil War, the Chinese volunteer army in the Korean War, and the US advisors at the beginning of the Vietnam War.

Although *Index* reported Putin’s seven-point, handwritten “peace plan” of 3 September 2014,<sup>85</sup> which included the idea of a humanitarian corridor for the free movement of refugees and humanitarian convoys, the plan was again contrasted with critical Ukrainian, American and other Western opinions. The Russian humanitarian argumentation was otherwise not present in the news flow of *Index* in the examined period. Meanwhile, similarly to the *MTI*, a great deal of attention was paid to the military situation.<sup>86</sup>

*Origo*’s reporting followed a pattern largely similar to that of *Index*. Although elements of Russian metanarratives were occasionally present, they were always contrasted with other, opposite opinions. Meanwhile, much attention was paid to the military situation in Eastern Ukraine, including both the battle of Ilovaysk<sup>87</sup> and the Mariupol fight.<sup>88</sup> In a long article written by a journalist from the portal, *Origo* summarized opinions about the root causes of the war.<sup>89</sup> This article wrote about the massive Russian aggression and military involvement as a fact, proving that the Russian metanarratives of *Russia doing the right thing* and the subnarrative of *Russian noninvolvement* had not had much effect on *Origo*.

82 *Index* 28 August 2014.

83 *Index* 29 August 2014.

84 *Index* 30 August 2014a.

85 *Index* 3 September 2014.

86 *Index*, 30 August 2014b.

87 *Origo* 28 August 2014.

88 *Origo* 4 September 2014.

89 *Origo* 5 September 2014.

Contrary to the reporting practices of *MTI*, *Origo* and *Index*, the Russian metanarratives were represented much more strongly in the reports of *Magyar Nemzet* and *Hír TV*. Russian opinions were quoted much more often than on the other channels, and in most cases they were only weakly contrasted with opposite positions.

When the Russian offensive began on 25 August, *Magyar Nemzet* published an article titled “Did Russian tanks break into Ukraine?” (“*Orosz harckocsik törtek be Ukrajnába?*”).<sup>90</sup> The question mark at the end was already a significant difference compared to the reports of *Origo*, *Index* and *MTI*, which placed no question marks in the titles of the reports about the same event. The journalist mentioned Ukrainian reports of the intrusion of Russian tanks, then contrasted them to Lavrov’s statement labelling this news as disinformation. Meanwhile, the header of the article was: “Lavrov: disinformation”. In the same article, *Magyar Nemzet* quoted Sergey Narishkin, Speaker of the Russian Duma, who criticized Ukraine over its Independence Day parade. His quoted speech described Ukraine’s operations in the East as a “punishment expedition.” The article added shortly that “these are called in Kiev an anti-terror operation,” basically picturing the Russian and Ukrainian positions as equally justified. One also needs to note that the Narishkin quote did not actually have much to do with the original topic of the article (i.e. Russian tanks entering Ukraine), however, it was still put there, thus the article had one more critical opinion on Ukraine.

On the same day, *Hír TV* published a report on the same Russian offensive under the title “Kiev and the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs are saying different things” (“*Mást mond Kijev és mást az orosz külügyminiszter*”),<sup>91</sup> thus again portraying the two positions as equally legitimate. The report also quoted in detail Sergey Lavrov, who denied that Russia would have sent tanks to Ukraine, and announced the launch of a new humanitarian convoy instead. Besides this, although again it did not have much to do with the original topic, Yatseniuk was also quoted, admitting that Ukraine was strongly dependent on Russia in terms of gas supplies.

An editorial article which included a news report from *Hír TV* on 29 August was another demonstrative example. Here the Russian offensive on Mariupol was reported as a fact as “separatists opened a new front”, while the NATO’s opinion about Russia’s involvement

<sup>90</sup> *MNO* 25 August 2014.

<sup>91</sup> *Hír TV* 25 August 2014.



was mentioned only as “allegedly”. The article included a lengthy quote from the separatist “news agency” *Novorossiya*, in which the attempted encirclement of Mariupol and its Ukrainian defenders was reported as, “It is highly probable that the executioners are already going to be encircled in the Mariupol cauldron during this day” (“*Nagy a valószínűsége annak, hogy a hóhérok már a nap folyamán végleg be lesznek kerítve a mariupoli katlanban*”). The expression “cauldron” is particularly interesting, because its Russian equivalent, “kotel” (“котел”) was very frequently used in the Russian media during the August–September battles in Eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile, in the embedded news report from *Hír TV* the statement of Putin accusing Ukrainian troops of behaving in Eastern Ukraine like fascist was repeated twice, and in addition, the speech of the Russian president with the same content was also broadcasted.<sup>92</sup> Hence, in a single news piece the Russian subnarrative about *Fascists in Kiev* was repeated three times. Altogether, in this single piece from 29 August the *Russia is doing the right thing* narrative was promoted very strongly, as well as the *noninvolvement* subnarrative, together with the *Destruction of the positive legacy of the Maidan*, by labelling Ukrainian government forces as “fascist” and “executioners”.

This quoting of the separatist leaders, thus implicitly strengthening their legitimacy, and thus also Russia’s noninvolvement narrative, was not a unique case. A *Magyar Nemzet* article from 28 August quoted Aleksandr Zakharchenko four times,<sup>93</sup> while in a report about the signing of the Minsk ceasefire<sup>94</sup> on 5 September, both Zakharchenko and Igor Plotnitskiy were quoted word by word, at similar length to the quotes from Poroshenko and Yatseniuk.

In the same 5 September article, the already-mentioned Hungarian security expert was quoted as saying the “Ukrainian army is unable to do anything” (“*az ukrán hadsereg mindenre alkalmatlan*”) and that Poroshenko should “get rid of the blindly pro-Western members of his government” in order to form a compromise-ready government in the October elections. Demonstratively enough, the expert labelled NATO as divided on the very day when the Alliance published its joint declaration in Wales. His remarks were in line with the Russian metanarrative of *Ukraine is a failed state*.

92 MNO 29 August 2014.

93 MNO 28 August 2014.

94 MNO 5 September 2014.

Meanwhile, the already twice-quoted staff member of *Magyar Nemzet* published another opinion piece on 30 August, in which he word for word described the conflict as a “struggle for a new world order” (“új világrendért folyó küzdelem”),<sup>95</sup> thus exactly repeating the Russian *New security order* metanarrative. Besides this, he discussed in detail the chaos and destruction in Ukraine, thus also contributing to the *Ukraine is a failed state* metanarrative.

All in all, in the studied period there were several cases when *Magyar Nemzet* and *Hír TV* either clearly preferred the Russian metanarratives about the conflict, or gave significantly more room and coverage to them than *MTI*, *Index* and *Origo* did. Besides this, there was not a single article that contained a systematic effort to deconstruct the Russian narratives like the ones published by *Index* and *Origo*.

#### 10.7.

#### DISINFORMATION TARGETED AT HUNGARY

In the examined periods two cases can be identified when Russia used disinformation targeted against Hungary. The first happened following the annexation of Crimea, and was connected to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, while the second took place in August 2014, thus partially fell into the period of the Battle of Ilovaysk.

On 24 March, *MTI* reported in detail about a letter sent by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Deputy Speaker of the Russian Duma and President of the Liberal Democratic Party, to the governments of Poland, Hungary and Romania. The news was quickly republished by *Index*,<sup>96</sup> *Origo*<sup>97</sup> and also *Magyar Nemzet*.<sup>98</sup> In his informal letter, Zhirinovskiy proposed that referenda similar to the one in Crimea should be held in the Western and South-Western districts of Ukraine, where the local populations should decide whether they would prefer to leave Ukraine and join the neighbouring countries. Zhirinovskiy's suggestion was that the Volyn, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil and Rivne regions should vote about joining Poland, Zakarpattya should decide about joining Hungary, while the Chernivtsi region would be given the possibility of joining Romania.

95 *MNO* 30 August 2014.

96 *Index* 24 March 2014.

97 *Origo* 24 March 2014.

98 *MNO* 24 March 2014a.

The Hungarian government refused even to officially react to the proposal and labelled it “absurd”. In an interview,<sup>99</sup> the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gábor Kaleta, pointed out that the Zhirinovsky proposal questioned the territorial integrity of Ukraine, of which Budapest has been consistently supportive, hence no other reaction could be given than firmly refusing the idea.

Kaleta repeated this statement when interviewed by *Hír tv*<sup>100</sup> in the evening of 24 March. This second interview, though, was interesting from the point of view that the title of the report on it was “Visszatérhet Kárpátalja Magyarországhoz?”, meaning “*May Zakarpattya return to Hungary?*”. This wording clearly played on nationalist, revisionist sentiments, even though the content of the interview was the opposite. The news editors choosing such a title indicated that such news was indeed of interest for the Hungarian audience.

The Zhirinovsky letter itself can be interpreted as an effort clearly tailored to the Polish, Hungarian and Romanian public, in two separate ways. First, it intended to play on nationalist sentiments, not completely unsuccessfully, as the title of the *Hír tv* report illustrated and as was demonstrated also by the wide media coverage of the letter. Second, and probably more importantly, the proposal fully fit into the Kremlin narrative of picturing Ukraine as part of the Russian world. By proposing similar referenda to the Crimean one, the letter implied that the Crimean referendum was a legitimate act, and so were its consequences, namely the annexation of the peninsula by Russia.

The second case of the Russian information war effort against Hungary happened in August, and was covered by *Origo*. On 13 August 2014, the obscure Hungarian pro-Russian website *hidfo.net* accused Hungary of delivering T-72 tanks to Ukraine via an intermediary company. The article even contained pictures of T-72s being transported on railway carriages.<sup>101</sup> After the website published this information, on 15 August the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs attacked Hungary in an official communiqué and accused Budapest of transporting arms to Ukraine, thus violating a 2008 EU Common Position on the rules of arms exports.<sup>102</sup> The accusation of transporting arms to Ukraine was categorically rejected both by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign

99 *MNO* 24 March 2014b.

100 *Hír tv* 24 March 2014.

101 While the original site is no longer available, Index reported it in detail: *Index* 25 August 2014.

102 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014.

Affairs and Trade<sup>103</sup> and the Ministry of Defence. The latter said that the photographed tanks were being transported from one army depot to another, and never left the territory of the country.<sup>104</sup> However, it soon turned out that Budapest was indeed planning to sell first 58, and thereafter another 22 decommissioned T-72 tanks to a Czech company named Excalibur.

In the examined period, these accusations resurfaced two times, both covered in detail by *Origo*. First, on 27 August, *Vice* magazine published an article in which it was written as a fact that Budapest, encouraged by the US, was supplying T-72 tanks to Ukraine via a Czech intermediary. The reporting pointed out that as Budapest was not delivering the tanks directly, the Hungarian government could deny the accusations of supplying weapons to Ukraine.<sup>105</sup> Second, on 2 September, *Origo* reported that for on CNN Vyacheslav Nikonov, advisor of Putin and member of the Russian Duma, accused Hungary of delivering T-72 tanks to Ukraine because the US had requested Budapest to do so.<sup>106</sup> Both reports fit very well into the Russian metanarrative of *A geopolitical struggle going on over Ukraine between the US and Russia*. Both times, the Hungarian authorities denied the accusations that the delivered T-72s would have been intended for Ukraine. As since then no evidence has been presented anywhere about ex-Hungarian T-72s being present in Ukraine, and no Hungarian (nor Czech) T-72s are listed in the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database among the weapons delivered to Ukraine in 2014–2015,<sup>107</sup> one could well conclude that this was a tailored information operation aimed specifically against Hungary.

#### 10.8. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis of the coverage of four selected events during limited time periods, two cases could be identified when Russia used tools of deception tailored to Hungary. The first was the Zhirinovsky letter in March 2014, and the second was the disinformation about Hungary allegedly delivering tanks to Ukraine. None of these efforts,

103 Government of Hungary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2015.

104 *vs.hu* 2 September 2014.

105 *Origo* 29 August 2014, and the original *Vice* News report: *Vice News* 27 August 2014.

106 *Origo* 2 September 2014.

107 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2016.

however, resulted in any change in the policies of the Hungarian government.

Regarding the presence of Russian metanarratives on the conflict in Ukraine, the Hungarian mainstream media showed a highly diverse picture in the examined period. The two independent news sites, *Index* and *Origo*, demonstrated a consistently high level of resilience to the Russian metanarratives. They reported Russian opinions in detail, but in most cases contrasted them with other, opposite positions. Moreover, in certain cases they put significant effort into negating and deconstructing the Russian arguments.

Concerning the news outlets under government influence, the picture was much more complex. While covering the Crimea events, the state news agency *MTI* appeared to be much more in favour of the Russian narrative than the other three analysed news channels. There was even a case of open manipulation, when *MTI* reported news published in the Ukrainian media, but distorted its wording in a politically sensitive way. However, this changed in the Odessa, MH17 and Ilovaysk cases. *MTI* reported these three cases in such a way that the presence of the Russian metanarrative and distinctive vocabulary decreased significantly.

The *Magyar Nemzet-Hír TV* news sources demonstrated an opposite trajectory. While they reported the Crimea annexation in a way largely similar to *Index* and *Origo*, a U-turn was taken thereafter. On the Odessa, MH17 and Ilovaysk cases, their reports were far more in favour of the Russian narratives than were the other three channels. There were several cases when they published editorial articles or opinion pieces which directly reflected the Russian metanarratives and also the distinctive vocabulary of the Russian strategic communication.

It was not among the objectives of the current research to define the reasons why the government-influenced media was so open to Russian metanarratives or why the change took place in the reporting of *MTI* and *Magyar Nemzet-Hír TV* following the Crimea. One may thus only note that between the Crimea and Odessa, parliamentary elections took place in Hungary, again won by Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, again by a two-thirds majority. From May onwards, *Magyar Nemzet* and *Hír TV* became much more open to the Russian metanarratives than they were before the parliamentary election, while *MTI* showed an opposite trajectory. The reasons behind these changes were not in the focus of the present research, either. But the trend is clear: in the examined period, the government-influenced media was by far the most open to the Russian metanarratives.

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**11**



# 11. The Russian Metanarratives in the Polish Online Media

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## 11.1. INTRODUCTION

The Polish media landscape, at least as far as the daily press is concerned, can be divided into two segments. The first consists of low-brow titles (the so-called “gutter press”), concentrating on sensational coverage, social scandals and celebrities while being largely non-political. The second segment consists of so-called “serious titles” which aim to reach and shape the views and opinions of political, business and social elites, which concentrate on political coverage, offering some in-depth analysis of current events. In the first segment there are two titles: *Fakt* (owned by Axel Springer) with monthly sales of 300,000–320,000 copies and *Super Express* (owned by Polish company ZPR Media), with sales of 140,000–147,000.

In the second segment there are four titles with sales above the threshold of 10,000 copies per month: *Rzeczpospolita* (sales 55,000–57,000), *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* (44,000–45,000), *Gazeta Polska* (18,000–20,000) and *Puls Biznesu* (10,000–11,000). Except for *Puls Biznesu*, which has Swedish owners, the remaining titles belong to Polish-owned companies. *Puls Biznesu*, as indicated by the title, concentrates on business and financial issues, *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* on legal and business issues. Hence, only *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta*

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*Polska* focus on general political coverage and they also have more of an interest in foreign policy issues. *Gazeta Wyborcza* is in a category of its own due to its historical origin (it was founded in 1989 as the first legal opposition daily representing the *Solidarity* movement, with leading Polish dissident Adam Michnik serving as its editor-in-chief). It combines a “high-brow” profile with a mass circulation (150,000–168,000 copies).<sup>3</sup>

The non-specialized “serious titles” (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Polska*) have distinctive political-ideological profiles. *Gazeta Wyborcza* represents a liberal left, with strong Europhile sympathies, a progressive position on social issues and a pro-market position on economic issues. *Rzeczpospolita* is centrist liberal-conservative, rather conservative on social issues; its principally pro-European position is combined with “constructive criticism” towards the EU. *Gazeta Polska* is socially and politically conservative, nationalist daily, strongly critical of the EU (but without advocating Polish exit). Neither title displays any sympathy or understanding for the current Russian regime or its foreign or domestic policies. All are highly critical, although for different reasons. *Gazeta Wyborcza* emphasizes in its criticism the illiberal, conservative and authoritarian tendencies of the Putin regime, while demonstrating its sympathy for the Russian political opposition and its positive attitude towards Russian culture. *Gazeta Polska* criticizes Putin’s Russia from a more traditional, nationalist and anti-Communist perspective (emphasizing the continuities between the Soviet Union and present-day Russia). *Rzeczpospolita*’s coverage falls somewhere in between. All of the titles are however strongly critical of the neo-imperial aspects of Russian foreign policy and generally consider Putin’s Russia to be the most serious security threat for Poland.

## 11.2.

### DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH SAMPLE

The goal of this article is to determine to what extent Russian metanarratives are present in the Polish media space and to what extent these narratives are tailored to the sensitivities and concerns of Polish society. The research analysis was conducted on news pieces

3 See the data for February 2015, February 2016 cited in *Virtualnemedio* 2015 and Kalinska 2015.



extracted from the online media outlet *onet.pl* that represents the mainstream and another online media outlet, *kresy.pl* that although marginal in terms of its popularity could be expected (because of its negative attitude to Ukraine) to be receptive to Russian strategic communication narratives.

The choice of these online media outlets is justified by this comparative element and the observation that in general, public perception in Poland is not receptive of Russian metanarratives. Hence, it is assumed that an analysis limited only to the mainstream news channels (e.g. *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*) would not provide any new information. The preliminary analysis of the mainstream news media in Poland showed that Russian metanarratives were present in the Polish mainstream media only to the extent that the media outlets quoted or summarized the statements of Russian officials or commentators. The Russian metanarrative failed however to penetrate and affect the interpretation and assessment of the events in Ukraine as presented in opinion pieces or editorials.

*Onet.pl* is the most frequented news website in Poland.<sup>4</sup> It is jointly owned by a German–Swiss media company Ringier Axel Springer (75%) and the Polish–owned TVN S.A. media company. The latter also owns the TVN television channel which in the 3rd quarter of 2015 had the third largest share of the TV market in Poland (10.39%). Therefore *onet.pl* can be described as a mainstream media outlet, with a significant impact on shaping public opinion in Poland. Its political and ideological profile can be described as centrist and is generally associated with the views of the Civic Platform, the political party that played a predominant role in governing Poland between 2007 and 2015.

The *kresy.pl* website can be treated as an example of the so-called “alternative information flow”, the popularity of which seems to have increased since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014. The editors of the website declare that their objective is to “fight for [the preservation of] Kresy in the consciousness of Poles”.<sup>5</sup> Kresy is a historical term that refers to the Eastern territories of the Polish state as it was reconstituted after WWI and which were annexed by the Soviet Union during WWII. The term is often imbued with nostalgic feelings. The editors of the site claim to defend the rights of Polish minorities abroad (primarily those in Ukraine and Lithuania) and agitate for the preservation of Polish cultural heritage in the territories that formed part of the Polish

4 ‘Top cites in Poland’, *Alexa.com* 25 October 2015.

5 *KRESY.PL Facebook* [website].

state before WWI. The content of the site is permeated by nostalgic feelings about the “lost” Eastern territories of the pre-war Polish Republic. The site pursues a distinct anti-Ukrainian agenda. It voices views that politically are close to the National Movement and the new populist grouping Kukiz-15, which in the last parliamentary elections received 8.81% of the national vote. The site is financed by Marek Jakubiak, a businessman who owns the Ciechan brewery and is an MP elected on the Kukiz-15 ticket.<sup>6</sup> Among Polish Internet sites, *kresy.pl* is ranked 437 by popularity.<sup>7</sup> Before visiting the website, the majority of users visit the *Kresy.pl* Facebook page, where *Kresy.pl* has an account with almost 85,000 followers.<sup>8</sup>

The article is divided into three parts. The first two are each devoted to an analysis of one specific Internet site. They provide a description of the Russian metanarratives and keywords which appeared on it as well as the frequency with which they appeared. The analysis also identifies, if possible, the source of the metanarratives. Special attention is paid to those cases when the website reports the use of Russian metanarratives by Polish actors (i.e. politicians, journalists, etc.). Finally, analysis identifies those issues that were launched by the Russian official propaganda specifically with the aim of disrupting the Polish metanarrative about the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and then make the Russian metanarrative more palatable to the Polish public. Finally, the third part is devoted to a comparative analysis of the *onet.pl* and *kresy.pl* websites.

## 11.2.

### ANALYSIS OF THE *ONET.PL* WEBSITE

#### *The Annexation of Crimea*

During the crisis over the Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea, Russian metanarratives appeared on the *onet.pl* website only in connection with direct citations of Russian officials President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu, presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov, ambassador to the EU Vladimir Chizhov, or summaries of their statements. Two metanarratives dominated these statements, namely *Crimea is ours*

6 'Grupa BJR', *Browary Regionalne Jakubiak* [website].

7 'Top cites in Poland', *Alexa.com* 25 October 2015.

8 *KRESY.PL Facebook* [website].

(“*Krim nash!*”) and the second, developed in response to the Western sanctions imposed on Russia on 20–21 March 2014: *Russia will prevail*.

The metanarrative *Crimea is ours* appeared as early as 21 March in excerpts from speeches given in the higher and lower chambers of the Russian parliament, respectively by Valentina Matvienko and Sergei Naryshkin, which were cited by reports about the signing of the treaty providing for the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation.<sup>9</sup> This particular metanarrative reappeared again in the statements by President Putin and Minister of Defence Shoigu on 23 and 24 March, when Russia captured the last military bases that were still held by the Ukrainian armed forces.

Simultaneously with these developments, another metanarrative could be observed in the statements of Russian officials reported by *onet.pl*: *Russia is impervious to Western sanctions and will prevail in the confrontation with the West over Crimea*. Between 22–27 March this theme appeared in statements by President Putin (twice), Prime Minister Medvedev, Minister of Finance Siluanov and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>10</sup> Both metanarratives – *Crimea is ours* and *Russia will prevail* – also appeared in an interview with Nikita Khrushchev’s son (who could claim the status of a Russian and an international celebrity) which appeared in a Russian mass circulation daily and was quoted by the website *onet.pl*.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Russian officials quoted on *onet.pl* constructed an image of *Ukraine as a failed state* and consequently, the conflict being an intra-Ukrainian crisis”.<sup>12</sup> Similar quotations appeared, for example, in the Finnish media at the time.

Finally, *onet.pl* reported one metanarrative that was clearly invented specifically for a Polish audience and can be described as *Partition of Ukraine*. It originated with a letter, sent on 23 March by the leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia and the Deputy Speaker of the Lower House of the Russian parliament Vladimir Zhirinovskii to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The letter suggested that the Polish government should demand a referendum in the five Western districts of Ukraine that had been within the borders of the Polish state before 1939 to give their population an opportunity to vote to return these districts to the Polish state.<sup>13</sup>

9 *Onet.pl* 21 March 2014a.

10 *Onet.pl* 27 March 2014.

11 *Onet.p*, 21 March 2014a.

12 *Onet.pl* 21 March 2014b, 21 March 2014c, 22 March 2014, 24 March 2014.

13 *Onet.pl* 23 March 2014.

### *The Burning of the Trade Union Building in Odessa*

Between 2 and 8 May, i.e. following the burning of the trade union building in Odessa, Russia concentrated mainly on spreading one metanarrative: *The people of Eastern Ukraine are in danger*. The spreading of this metanarrative was accompanied by the emergence of a keyword: “humanitarian catastrophe”. Although both themes were based on the claims of separatists in Eastern Ukraine, the *onet.pl* website reported them relying on statements made by the Russian authorities.

On the day that the trade union building in Odessa was burnt, the metanarrative *The people of Eastern Ukraine are in danger* was repeated eight times on *onet.pl*. It appeared first in a statement by the Kremlin’s spokesman Dmitrii Peskov a few hours before the tragedy even happened.<sup>14</sup> Then, right after the tragedy in Odessa, it was reinforced by Russian Prime Minister Medvedev, who accused the Ukrainian authorities of the “murder of [their] own country”.<sup>15</sup> Similar statements appeared on 3 May (by Valeryi Kaurov – leader of the self-proclaimed Odessa Republic)<sup>16</sup> and on 5 May (again by the Russian MFA).<sup>17</sup> The message about an endangered population in Ukraine was further complemented by a report citing the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, exhorting, vainly, the Security Council that “violence on Eastern Ukraine must be stopped”.<sup>18</sup> The message that the population in Eastern Ukraine was in danger was further dramatized by suggestions that indicated that it was the US that stood behind the threat: the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ statement spoke about English-speakers fighting near Sloviansk, alleging that they could be members of an American security firm financially connected with the US Department of State.<sup>19</sup>

The above-mentioned metanarrative about the looming danger to the population of Eastern Ukraine was combined with another, claiming that *Russia is not involved* in the conflict in Ukraine. For instance, the statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry on 5 May 2014 included both these metanarratives. The theme of Russian noninvolvement and of the internal nature of the conflict also appeared in the statement made by Vladimir Putin on 8 May when he blamed the Kiev authorities for the violence in Eastern Ukraine. This message

14 *Onet.pl* 2 May 2014a.

15 *Onet.pl* 2 May 2014b.

16 *Onet.pl* 3 May 2014a.

17 *Onet.pl* 3 May 2014a.

18 *Onet.pl* 2 May 2014c.

19 *Onet.pl* 2 May 2014d.

was reinforced by reports from the *Interfax* news agency that attributed plans to carve out of six Southern and Eastern Ukrainian provinces a new political entity called Novorossiiia to local leaders.<sup>20</sup> Similarly a report about a Russian official, Vladimir Lukin's (Russia's Human Rights Ombudsman, 2009–2014) role in releasing OSCE observers from the hands of separatists was meant to create the impression that Moscow could act as a mediator in the internal Ukrainian conflict.<sup>21</sup>

The fire in Odessa was thus used by Russian officials as proof that people of Eastern Ukraine were in danger. In combination with assertions about the lack of direct participation by Moscow in this conflict, this was intended to make Russia appear as an indispensable and credible mediator. It is also noteworthy that the keyword "humanitarian catastrophe", which would be widely used in Russian propaganda in August, appeared in the Russian Foreign Ministry's communiqué as early as 5 May.<sup>22</sup> This might indicate that the Kremlin was already preparing the ground for creating an image of a humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine.

#### *The Downing of Flight MH17*

Between 17 and 23 July, the Russian propaganda was dominated by three themes. It continued the theme *Russia will prevail* which had emerged in the week following the annexation of Crimea. This was connected with the issue of Western sanctions against Russia. The second theme concerned Ukraine's exclusive responsibility for the shooting down of the Malaysian Boeing 777. In the Polish public space, this Russian claim was supported by a marginal extreme-right Polish politician, Janusz Korwin-Mikke.<sup>23</sup> And, finally, the third metanarrative that emerged towards the end of the week following

20 *Onet.pl* 7 May 2014.

21 *Onet.pl* 8 May 2014, 3 May 2014b.

22 Comment No. 1093–05–05–2014.

23 Janusz Korwin-Mikke is founder and leader of the political party The Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic – Liberty and Hope (*Koalicja Odnowy Rzeczypospolitej Wolność i Nadzieja – KORWIN*). His political views are libertarian-conservative. Since 2014, Korwin-Mikke has been a member of the European Parliament. In the last parliamentary elections on 25 October 2015 his party received 4.74% of the vote and thus failed to cross the 5% threshold required for winning parliamentary seats. Korwin-Mikke is notorious for his eccentric and scandalous statements. For example, on 8 September 2015 he said in the European Parliament that Europe was flooded by "human garbage". See: *Unian.net* 9 September 2015. Korwin-Mikke is very popular on social media – his Facebook account has almost 800,000 followers: *Janusz Korwin-Mikke, Facebook* [website], <https://www.facebook.com/janusz.korwin.mikke/?fref=ts>, accessed 8 October 2015.

the shooting down of the MH17 flight presented Russia as an object of Western aggressive activities.

In the first phase, Russian communication concentrated to denounce the new round of sanctions which had been introduced by the US on 16 July 2014. The *onet.pl* website reported the criticism voiced by both the president and the prime minister of Russia, the head of the Rosneft state corporation and one of the closest collaborators of the president, Igor Sechin, as well as by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Riabkov. President Putin claimed that sanctions would harm both US–Russian relations and US firms.<sup>24</sup> Others dismissed them as “ineffective and illegal”, reinforcing the metanarrative *Russia will prevail*.<sup>25</sup> In the following days, however, Russian changed the emphasis and concentrated on demonstrating that it was the Ukrainian authorities that were responsible for the tragedy of Flight MH17.

As soon as the evening of 17 July, *onet.pl* reported, citing Russian TV channel *Rossiya 24*, a statement by the prime minister of the self-proclaimed Donbass People’s Republic who blamed the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner on the Ukrainians.<sup>26</sup> The next day, President Putin laid the responsibility for the tragedy squarely on the shoulders of the Ukrainian government, pointing to the fact that it occurred on Ukrainian territory and was the result of military operations conducted by government forces<sup>27</sup>. The latter argument was repeated by the President of Russia on 2 July – according to him the incident would not have happened if the Ukrainian government forces had not resumed fighting on 29 June.<sup>28</sup> The message was strengthened by a Russian General Staff representative, General Andrei Kartoplov, who denied that Russia had delivered BUK SAM systems to the pro-Russian rebels while asserting that the Ukrainian army had both deployed such missile systems in the vicinity of the incident and flown fighter aircraft armed with air-to-air missiles close to the Malaysian Boeing.<sup>29</sup> A similar argument was produced earlier in the Russian Ministry of Defence statement on 18 July.<sup>30</sup>

*Onet.pl* also reported the support for the Russian version of the downing of Flight MH17 expressed by the above-mentioned Polish

24 *Onet.pl* 17 July 2014a.

25 *Onet.pl* 17 July 2014b, 17 July 2014c.

26 *Onet.pl* 17 July 2014d.

27 *Onet.pl* 18 July 2014a.

28 *Onet.pl* 21 July 2014a.

29 *Onet.pl* 21 July 2014b.

30 *Onet.pl* 18 July 2014b.

politician, Janusz Korwin-Mikke. In his opinion, the most likely version was that the Ukrainian forces shot down the plane because they thought that Russian President Putin was on board.<sup>31</sup> This in fact was a hypothesis that had been voiced by *Russia Today* a few hours prior to Korwin-Mikke's interview.<sup>32</sup>

Towards the end of the week a new metanarrative appeared in the Russian media and was faithfully reported by *onet.pl*: *Russia is reacting to Western aggression*. On 22 July, President Putin explained that Russia must react to the deployment of NATO troops in Eastern Europe (i.e. Central Europe).<sup>33</sup> On the next day this reasoning was repeated by the Russian Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu and the commander of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, Admiral Aleksandr Vitka.<sup>34</sup>

To conclude, Russia launched a coordinated media campaign to prevent the negative effects of the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner. The metanarrative *Russia will prevail* disappeared right after the news about the fall of the airliner. The Kremlin used different channels to spread and reinforce its message: statements by high officials and media channels (*Russia Today*, *Voice of Russia in Poland*). And for the first time a Polish voice joined the chorus of Russian propaganda. Interestingly, his opinion seemed to have been directly influenced by the *RT* broadcast, or at least the situational context speaks towards this conclusion. The second theme that emerged in the Russian propaganda at the time was the alleged aggressive behaviour of NATO. It is tempting to see in this the beginning of a propaganda "cover" for the active engagement of Russian military units in combat operations in Eastern Ukraine.

#### *The "Humanitarian Catastrophe/Intervention" Narratives*

In the first week of August 2014, the keyword *humanitarian catastrophe*, with its implication that the fighting in Ukraine was a civil war, did not appear very frequently in the Russian propaganda. Instead it was dominated by the metanarrative *Russia will prevail*. This was in response to the EU's imposition of economic sanctions on 31 July and was probably meant to create the right atmosphere for the introduction of a Russian retaliatory ban on food imports.

The Russian message on sanctions was articulated by top Russian officials and was constructed around two themes: *Sanctions are a*

31 *Onet.pl* 18 July 2014c.

32 *Onet.pl* 18 July 2014d.

33 *Onet.p*, 22 July 2014.

34 *Onet.p*, 23 July 2014a, 23 July 2014b.

*two-edged weapon* and *Sanctions harm the West more than Russia*.<sup>35</sup> This was reinforced by reports on the Russian ban on food imports from specific countries and on the possibility of a Russian ban on transit overflights by European airlines over Siberia.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast, the metanarrative *The people of Eastern Ukraine are in danger* was at first articulated by local officials from the rebel-held areas in Eastern Ukraine. On 2 August, *onet.pl* cited the warning about a danger of humanitarian catastrophe in Luhansk voiced by the town's mayor, and three days later cited another warning to that effect by another municipal official there.<sup>37</sup> The keyword *humanitarian catastrophe* also appeared in a report quoting the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, who invoked the term when calling for a meeting of the Security Council to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, two news items about the planned Russian military manoeuvres close to the Ukrainian borders, which were repeated by the *onet.pl* site at the beginning of August, can be seen as part of a propaganda effort intended to mask the participation of Russian army combat units in fighting Ukrainian forces in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>39</sup>

When the Russian military units took part in operations inside Ukraine that led to a battle near Ilovaysk, Russia engaged in efforts to convince public opinion at home and abroad that the conflict in Eastern Ukraine remained a civil war and Russia was interested primarily in a peaceful solution to the conflict, based on reasonable principles of regional self-rule and ethnic minority rights. Therefore in its coverage of the conflict it emphasized the theme of a humanitarian catastrophe while insisting that Russian policy was striving merely to restore peace and establish dialogue between the Kyiv authorities and the representatives of Donetsk and Luhansk communities.

On 25 August, *onet.pl* cited the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov. His statement framed the Russian propaganda narratives for the following days. Lavrov's statements invoked two metanarratives: *Russia is not involved in the conflict* and *The population of Eastern Ukraine is in danger and needs help*. In the days that followed, *onet.pl* reported a series of statements by President Putin, presidential spokesman Dmitrii Peskov, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the Donbas

35 *Onet.pl* 5 August 2014a.

36 *Onet.pl* 6 August 2014, 7 August 2014.

37 *Onet.pl* 5 August 2014b.

38 *Onet.pl* 5 August 2014c.

39 *Onet.pl* 1 August 2014, 4 August 2014.



separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko and the Ministry of Defence that all stuck to those metanarratives.<sup>40</sup> On 31 August, *onet.pl* provided further quotes and summaries from an interview by President Putin for the First Channel of *Russian state TV*, subsequent comments by the presidential spokesman Dmitri Peskov and Minister Lavrov's speech to students at the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO). They all repeated the same narrative about the absence of Russian military involvement and the need for a peaceful solution to the conflict on the basis of a political accommodation between the Kyiv government and Novorossiia.<sup>41</sup>

In comparison with the previous cases, the Russian propaganda campaign during 24 August to 2 September, involving Russian high-ranking officials, can be assessed as very effective. It managed to dominate the media by frequent repetition of the metanarratives *Russia is not involved* and *The people of Eastern Ukraine are in danger*.

### 11.3.

#### ANALYSIS OF KRESY.PL WEBSITE

##### *The Annexation of Crimea*

News about the situation in Crimea posted by *kresy.pl* between 21 and 28 March was overwhelmingly based on Ukrainian sources. Therefore, it was hardly possible to find any traces of Russian metanarratives reflected in its coverage. For example, *kresy.pl* did not use the key terms peculiar to the Russian propaganda narrative such as *Crimea is ours*, *Back to the homeland*, *Crimea was illegally separated from Russia*. Instead it simply spoke of the "annexation" to describe the situation of the peninsula. Similarly, when referring to the military personnel involved in taking over Crimea, it did not use terms like "little green man" or "polite man" but spoke directly about the "Russian forces".<sup>42</sup> Neither did it follow the Russian metanarratives in describing members of the Ukrainian "Right Sector" "banderovtsy" or "fascists", but referred to them instead as "activists".<sup>43</sup>

On 23 March, *Kresy.pl* did publish a news item that reflected a Russian propaganda imitative tailored specifically to Polish society.

40 *Onet.pl* 26 August 2014, 27 August 2014a, 27 August 2014b, 28 August 2014a, 28 August 2014b, 28 August 2014c, 29 August 2014.

41 *Onet.pl* 31 August 2014, 1 September 2014.

42 *Kresy.pl* 21 March 2014, 22 March 2014, 23 March 2014a, 25 March 2014a.

43 *Kresy.pl* 23 March 2014b.

This concerned an official note sent by the Vice-President of the Russian Parliament, Vladimir Zhirinovski, to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a suggestion that Poland press claims to the Ukrainian territories that before WWII had formed part of the Polish state.<sup>44</sup> However, it reported this only once and did not pursue the topic later.<sup>45</sup> Having said that, on the same day, the website published on its Facebook account a doctored photograph of a demonstration in support of Ukraine that took place in Wrocław. The doctoring involved a replacement of the slogan “Without free Ukraine there is no free Poland” with “Stepan Bandera – A Cursed Soldier”<sup>46</sup>. After the discovery of the forgery by another media outlet, the item was deleted.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, this incident is illustrative of *kresy.pl*’s negative attitude towards the strengthening of national discourse in Ukraine and Polish attitudes supporting it.

Summing up, during the first week following the official annexation of Crimea, Russian metanarratives were absent from the *kresy.pl* site. In spite of its anti-Ukrainian bias, the site turned out to be impervious to the Russian attempt to exploit the nostalgia for the Polish interwar borders that was a defining feature of the site.

#### *The Burning of the Trade Union Building in Odessa*

On *kresy.pl*, the clashes in Odessa were described as a conflict between “Maidan-supporters” and “Maidan-opponents” or “supporters of the pro-Russian option”.<sup>48</sup> Most of the reporting on the site was based on Ukrainian sources, but Russian and Polish sources were also used.

However, on the day following the tragedy, the site reported statements by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, who described it as an example of “pure fascism” and exhorted

44 *Kresy.pl* 23 March 2014c.

45 *Kresy.pl* 26 March 2014. The site published a text which described as “anti-Polish hysteria” a Lithuanian TV “Lietuvos rytas TV” report claiming that the Polish minority in Lithuania wanted to create a Polish autonomous territorial jurisdiction in the Vilnius region.

46 The term “A Cursed Soldier” refers to fighters of the underground resistance against the communist regime in Poland in the first years after WWII. Their history was a taboo subject during Communist rule in Poland. The term was invented by those who strove to ensure a prominent place in public memory for them after the fall of Communism. The application of the term, with its implication of heroic status, to the leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which carried out the mass murder of the Polish population in Western Ukraine in 1943–1944, would be seen as sacrilegious in Poland.

47 See for instance: *Kresy.pl* 25 March 2014, 26 March 2014.

48 *Kresy.pl* 2 May 2014a, 2 May 2014b.

Europe not to remain indifferent. He also demanded an investigation, suggesting at the same time that the Kyiv government's actions in Eastern Ukraine were criminal.<sup>49</sup> *Kresy.pl* also re-posted a video by the Polish opinion leader, Max-Kolonko, who claimed that the burning of pro-Russian activists in Odessa was done intentionally by Ukrainians. However, he did not use any of the keywords characteristic of Russian strategic communications such as "banderovtsy killed Odessa people", "slaughter in Odessa" or even "Novorossia".<sup>50</sup>

Besides covering the situation in Odessa between 2 and 9 May, the authors of *kresy.pl* also reported on events in Eastern Ukraine. On 2 May, they posted a statement by a Russian politician, Vladimir Zhirinovskii, in which he described the Kyiv government as a "Nazi regime" and demanded that Russia should guarantee safety for people in South-Eastern Ukraine.<sup>51</sup> It also quoted Dmitri Peskov, the spokesman of the Russian president, who implied that the Ukrainian military operation in Eastern Ukraine was a crime.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, it cited reports about the alleged growth of separatist tendencies in Eastern Ukraine, which were originally published on Russian websites (*rabkor.ru*).<sup>53</sup>

To sum up, events in Odessa were used by Russian propaganda to persuade Western opinion that the Kyiv government's actions in Eastern part of Ukraine were a crime. The metanarrative *The people of Eastern Ukraine are discriminated against* was repeatedly featured in statements made by prominent Russian officials and politicians such as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party Vladimir Zhirinovskii, presidential spokesman Dmitrii Peskov and Ambassador to the UN, Vitalii Churkin<sup>54</sup>. Simultaneously, using the metanarrative *Conflict in Eastern Ukraine is a civil war*, Moscow strove to create an impression that Donbas separatists were acting independently from Moscow and that the latter exercised little influence over them. This was an aim of Vladimir Putin's statement

49 *Kresy.pl* 7 May 2014.

50 He is a former television journalist who worked both for the state-owned TVP 1 as well as for a major private channel TVN) and now runs his own TV channel on YouTube. His Facebook account is followed by 500,000 people. Mariusz Max Kolonko, Facebook [website], <https://www.facebook.com/M.Max.Kolonko?fref=ts>, accessed 8 October 2015. *Kresy.pl* 6 May 2014.

51 *Kresy.pl* 2 May 2014c.

52 *Kresy.pl* 2 May 2014d.

53 *Kresy.pl* 7 May 2014b, 8 May 2014b.

54 *Kresy.pl* 2 May 2014.

on 7 May 2014 in which he asked the separatists to reschedule a referendum on Donbas' independence.<sup>55</sup>

### *The Downing of Flight MH17*

In a strange coincidence, on the day of Flight MH17's crash, *kresy.pl* reported, following Russian website *centerkor-ua.org* (which is no longer accessible), about alleged deliveries to Odessa of Polish military equipment for the Ukrainian armed forces.<sup>56</sup> Presumably, this false information was meant to undermine the credibility of the Polish government and to "prove" that Ukraine's military action against armed rebels in Eastern Ukraine was backed by foreign, Western states.

It is striking that in contrast to the Polish mainstream news outlets, *kresy.pl* persistently published interpretations of the crash that cleared Russia and the rebels of any responsibility while putting the blame on the Ukrainian side. So, on 18 July, it reported the statement by Polish politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke, who argued that shooting down the aeroplane would have been harmful to Russia's interests and – following the Russian media – speculated that it was shot down by mistake by Kyiv forces which mistook the plane for the Russian presidential airliner coming back from a BRICS summit in Brazil.<sup>57</sup> Next day, the site published another version, this time following Russian site *voicesevas.ru*, according to which the Kyiv authorities intentionally directed the Malaysian airline to take a route across the Donbas People's Republic and shot it down using a SU-25 ground attack airplane in order to compromise the "insurgents".<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, the site also posted a video by Polish freelance journalist Mariusz Max-Kolonko, who also supported this Russian version of events.<sup>59</sup> Three days later, on 21 July, *kresy.pl* quoted a representative of the Russian General Staff who claimed that it was the Ukrainian armed forces that deployed BUK anti-aircraft missile systems near the place where Flight MH17 was shot down.<sup>60</sup> On 23 July, it quoted yet another version of the crash, this time following the Russian state TV *Channel One*. It claimed that the crash was prepared by the CIA in order to damage Russia's image and its position in the world.<sup>61</sup>

55 *Kresy.pl* 7 May 2014, 7 May 2014c.

56 *Kresy.pl* 17 July 2014.

57 *Kresy.pl* 18 July 2014.

58 *Kresy.pl* 19 July 2014.

59 *Kresy.pl* 23 July 2014a.

60 *Kresy.pl* 21 July 2014.

61 *Kresy.pl* 23 July 2014b.

As was already noted above, following the crash of Flight MH17, Russian propaganda and disinformation efforts were more intensive than before. Within seven days after the crash, Russia had put forward three different versions of what had happened. They all contained detailed description of the event with relevant keywords such as “SU-25” and “BUK-M1”. Moreover, *kresy.pl* used a local voice, Mr. Korwin-Mikke, to reinforce the Russian claim that the airliner was shot down by the Ukrainian side.

#### *The “Humanitarian Catastrophe/Intervention” Narrative*

Between 1 and 7 August 2014, Russia’s metanarratives managed unambiguously to dominate the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the *kresy.pl* site. The site based its coverage on numerous Russian sources (*vesti.ru*, *ria.ru*, *luhansk24*, *cxid.info*, and *itar-tass*) and therefore imported from them the keywords that reflected the Russian definition of the situation in Eastern Ukraine, such as, “*genocide in Eastern Ukraine*”, “*humanitarian catastrophe*”, “*humanitarian aid convoy*”, “*military manoeuvres*”, “*sanctions are a two-edged weapon*”.

On 1 August, *kresy.pl* cited Yuri Chaika, the General Prosecutor of Russia, who said that genocide of Ukraine people was being carried out in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>62</sup> The site also carried a report, originally launched by a Russian site, *Lifenews.ru*, which distorted a statement of a Ukrainian journalist in order to accuse him of calling for killing 1.5 million people of Donbass. It then posted an analysis that strove to undermine an attempt by a Ukrainian site, *StopFake.com*, to demonstrate that the Ukrainian journalist’s statement was distorted by *Lifenews.ru*.<sup>63</sup>

The keyword “*Genocide in Eastern Ukraine*” was accompanied by another keyword strongly connected with it: “*humanitarian catastrophe*”. In the first week of August, this appeared in numerous new items published on *kresy.pl*. The vast majority were taken from the website *cxid.info* which focused in the situation in Luhansk. On 2 August it publicized the words of the Luhansk mayor, who claimed that his city was in a critical situation and was facing the beginning of a humanitarian catastrophe.<sup>64</sup> In the next few days the keyword “*humanitarian catastrophe*” appeared repeatedly on *kresy.pl*, when it quoted statements by Russian and Luhansk officials: the Russian Foreign

62 *Kresy.pl* 1 August 2014.

63 *Kresy.pl* 2 August 2014a; 2 August 2014.

64 *Kresy.pl* 2 August 2014b.

Minister Sergei Lavrov (4 August), the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitalii Churkin and the municipal authorities of Luhansk (6 August).<sup>65</sup>

Simultaneously, the site was following Russian media in providing repeated reports about Russian “*military manoeuvres*” in the regions bordering on Ukraine. In this way it played the Russian propaganda game, which strove to cover up the sending of regular Russian troops to Donbas and refute any accusations about Russian involvement in the fighting in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>66</sup> This last point was reinforced by the news reported on *kresy.pl* about the Donbass separatist plans for a counterattack, which was intended to present the pro-Russian rebellion in Donbas as a spontaneous, fully independent phenomenon.

During the first week of August, the narrative *Russia will prevail* reappeared as Russia apparently tried to reap propaganda benefits from the introduction of countersanctions against the EU on 7 August 2014. The message that the Kremlin wanted to impress on the West was that economic sanctions were a double-edged weapon and that they would harm the West much more than they would Russia.<sup>67</sup>

Between 1 and 7 August, the Russian propaganda machine, acting through different channels, very effectively filled the information space with its metanarratives, preparing the information background for the upcoming involvement of the Russian Army in the Battle of Ilovaysk. Coverage of the battle on *kresy.pl* was also dominated by Russian strategic communications, although not to the extent that it managed to do at the beginning of August, when the leading theme was the humanitarian catastrophe in Donbass. This time, the main aim of the Russian propaganda was to impress that the counterattack against the Ukrainian forces in Eastern Ukraine was planned and carried out by separatists without any external help. Thus, *kresy.pl* reported statements by self-nominated Donbass officials (Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Purgin and a spokesman of the separatist information centre) about an offensive by the separatists and plans to encircle the Ukrainian army near Ilovaysk.<sup>68</sup>

Simultaneously, the site quoted President Putin saying that the crisis in Ukraine was not Russia’s business (27 August)<sup>69</sup> and the Russian

65 *Kresy.pl* 6 August 2014; 6 August 2014.

66 *Kresy.pl* 1 August 2014, 4 August 2014; *Kresy.pl* 7 August 2014a, 7 August 2014b

67 *Kresy.pl* 5 August 2014, 6 August 2014a.

68 *Kresy.pl* 25 August 2014a, 25 August 2014b.

69 *Kresy.pl* 27 August 2014.

government's declaration about sending another "humanitarian aid convoy" to Donbas (25 August).<sup>70</sup>

To sum up, the Kremlin made a strong effort to convince Western public opinion that the separatists were a force independent from Russia and that the conflict in Eastern Ukraine was a civil war. This was combined with a message about an alleged humanitarian catastrophe in Donbas and with continuing efforts to discredit the Ukrainian government by the use of such "traditional" keywords as "*fascists in Kiev*".<sup>71</sup>

#### 11.4. CONCLUSIONS

A comparison of the two media Polish websites, the mainstream *onet.pl* and "special interest" *kresy.pl*, has demonstrated some interesting differences in the impact of the Russian metanarratives on the Polish media. On the mainstream news site, this impact was due merely to the fact that the site cited Russian official sources and Russian news agencies. In combination with what we would call a "pure news" approach (i.e. providing "news" without any commentary) adopted by *onet.pl*, this actually facilitated the spread of Russian metanarratives simply by replicating the metanarratives present in the Russian media. On the other hand, one might argue that an average reader of *onet.pl* was aware of, and largely shared, the interpretative framework of events surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict which predominated in the mainstream Polish media (the main television channels and the press); hence they were largely impregnable to the Russian propaganda message.

The impact of Russian metanarratives was more visible on the *kresy.pl* site. This can be attributed to two reasons. First, unlike *onet.pl* whose use of Russian sources was almost entirely limited to quotations from Russian officials drawn from Russian official mainstream media (*Rossiia-24*, *Pervyi kanal*), *kresy.pl* relied to a much greater extent on sites that specialized in spreading Russian propaganda (*voicesevas.ru*, *lifenevs.ru*, *rusvesna.su*, the YouTube channel *Lugansk24*, *cxid.info*). As a result, the frequency of the Kremlin's metanarratives was much higher than on *onet.pl*. Second, unlike *onet.pl*, *kresy.pl* did not simply cite

<sup>70</sup> *Kresy.pl* 25 August 2014.

<sup>71</sup> *Kresy.pl* 24 August 2014.

Russian officials but used various news items from Russian propaganda sources in a way that suggested that these were objective facts, hence fostering a perception of the situation in Eastern Ukraine that was much closer to the picture promoted by the Russian propaganda than the perception fostered by *onet.pl*.

However, it must be mentioned that both *onet.pl* and *kresy.pl* also used Ukrainian sources for the news they reported, e.g. *lb.ua*, *unian.net*, *Pravda.com.ua*, the press office of the ATO operation, the Facebook account of prominent Ukrainian analyst and blogger, Dmytro Tymchuk, etc.<sup>72</sup>. Hence, on neither site did the Russian point of view predominate.

While universal metanarratives promoted by the Kremlin (*Crimea is ours*, *The people of Eastern Ukraine are in danger*, *The conflict in Eastern Ukraine is a civil war*, *Russia will prevail*), did appear on both websites, there was no message that could be regarded as tailored for a specific Polish audience. The theme of the possible partition of Ukraine, which was triggered by Vladimir Zhirinovskii's letter to the Polish parliament, appeared only once and was not pursued any further. Zhirinovskii's proposal about Ukraine's partition had no continuation. Although *kresy.pl* continued to publish texts addressing the topic of the massacres of the Polish population in Western Ukraine by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) during the Second World War, which have always been on its agenda, it avoided the use of specific key terms of Kremlin propaganda such as "Kiev junta", "putsch", "Ruskii mir", "anti-fascist movement in Russia", "Nazism" and "banderovtsy". One can assume that the avoidance of those terms was a consequence of pressure by the local media environment. The case of the retraction by *kresy.pl*, after its use of a doctored photo was exposed and denounced by other media outlets is a good example of such pressure. Hence, even when relying heavily on Russian propaganda outlets, the editors of *kresy.pl* refrained from borrowing from them those terms that were most patently false or abusive. If they had not done, so they would have encountered massive criticism and would have risked their credibility.<sup>73</sup>

72 Dmytro Tymchuk is the head of the NGO Centre for Military–Political Studies. He related events on his blog *Information Resistance* (<http://sprotyv.info/en>) and on his Facebook account during the takeover of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine. In October 2014, he was elected to the Ukrainian Parliament.

73 An account called "The Russian Fifth Column in Poland" (*Rosyjska V kolumna w Polsce*) was created on Facebook, tracking Russian propaganda in Polish media and politics. It often features *kresy.pl*. See: *Rosyjska V kolumna w Polsce*, Facebook [website], <https://www.facebook.com/Rosyjska-V-kolumna-w-Polsce-218251225011751/?fref=ts>, accessed 11 December 2015.



To conclude, in Poland the Russian metanarratives studied in the framework of this research were only marginally effective in influencing the reporting of the five events investigated in this study. It can be argued that in Poland it had neither an influential and popular channel that would spread its message nor a media outlet that would spontaneously produce pro-Russian metanarratives. The role of Korwin-Mikke and *kresy.pl* was marginal, and even the latter could not or would not fully follow the Russian propaganda line. Nevertheless the entry to the Polish parliament of a few radical nationalists (who espouse views similar to Korwin-Mikke) during the last general election in October 2015, could change this situation.

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12



## 12. Metanarratives of Russian Propaganda in the Czech Online Media

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### 12.1. INTRODUCTION

The Czech centre-left government coalition, like other EU member states, has stood behind the EU sanctions against Russia and has provided political support to the new government of Ukraine. The Czech policy towards Ukraine is shaped by a transformation legacy that emphasizes the need to provide assistance to countries such as Ukraine. In other words, the government supports the reform process in Ukraine as well as the country's efforts to gain an independent foreign policy towards Russia. At the same time, some political figures, such as current president Miloš Zeman, have tended to support the Russian perspective on the conflict. This has created tensions within Czech foreign policy that from outside look slightly cacophonous.

The current upsurge in Russian strategic deception activity is not unprecedented. The previous intensive period was linked with the installation of the US missile defence radar system in the Czech Republic. When this issue was on the political agenda (2006–2009), resistance against it was framed within anti-Western and nationalistic narratives. This debate was driven by the left-wing parties, the Czech Social Democratic Party (*Česká strana sociálně demokratická, ČSSD*), *Green Party (Strana Zelených, SZ)* and Communist party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM*), as well as by targeted activity by NGO organizations that had been founded for that purpose.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Russia was one of the funders of the election

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2 *Hlidacipes.org*, 16 September 2015, and *neviditelnypes.cz*, 28 January 2015.

campaign of President Miloš Zeman in 2013 and contributed to the unsuccessful campaign of the Party of Peoples' Rights – Zemanovci (Strana práv občanů – Zemanovci – SPOZ) enjoying credit of 1.4 million EUR in support for its election campaign.<sup>3</sup> Despite this substantial financial support, the party gained only 1.5% of votes.<sup>4</sup>

The common denominator of these parties (to a lesser extent in the case of ČSSD) is that they have all taken advantage of national identity politics in order to stress nationalistic and anti-Western feelings. This element has also been visible in the case of the migrant crisis, when these movements have actively participated in the raising of policies enhancing national identity, traditional (Christian) values and conspiracy theories as well as blaming the EU for social disorder and the erosion of values.<sup>5</sup>

## 12.2.

### THE CZECH MEDIA SPACE AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Two major trends can be observed in the Czech media space. First, the media space has become more diffuse with the emergence of many so-called independent media channels during the conflict in Ukraine. This development has been driven by allegations made by some of the above-mentioned politicians that the mainstream Czech media have lacked objectivity about the conflict. The new online media outlets can be used, theoretically as in practice, for spreading pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation. In October 2015, the web magazine *echo24.cz*<sup>6</sup> published a list of 42 Czech and Slovak news portals spreading Russian propaganda. These web portals have been established hand-in-hand with the escalation of the Russian-Ukraine conflict in late 2013 and 2014. According to the data on traffic of individual news web pages, none of these reach the top 25 of the most-accessed news web pages.<sup>7</sup> Despite this fact, the traffic of selected web pages disseminating Russian metanarratives is rising. The second trend that can be observed is the polarization of the public debate. This is linked to the emergence of new online “independent” media outlets that spread conspiracy

3 Mařík – Pšenica, 2013.

4 *volby.cz*, 2013.

5 *ceeidentity.eu* 2016b.

6 *echo24.cz* 27 February 2015.

7 *mediaguru.cz* 18 November 2015.

theories and thereby undermine public trust in the media and the public authorities in general.

Taken together, these two trends are complementary: the diffusion of the media space contributes to its polarization. On the other hand, the main media outlets such as *Economia* (*Hospodářské noviny*, *ihned.cz*) and *Mafra* (*Mladá fronta dnes*; *idnes.cz* a *Lidové noviny*; *lidovky.cz*) operate along a commercial, profit-based logic and can uphold good journalistic practices in their reporting. However, they can also reflect the foreign policy orientation of their owners; for example the Czech billionaire Zdeněk Bakala profiled himself as an opponent of Russian antidemocratic activities, and this consequently corresponds with the profile of the *Economia* media house.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, one can divide the Czech media scene into four parts regarding its relationship to Russian influence:

- I traditional media houses founded during the post-communist transformation phase, including the media houses covered by this analysis (*Economia* and *Mafra*) as well as the state TV and radio broadcaster. Media belonging to this group prove an ability to resist Russian propaganda in terms of not adopting metanarratives such as in the case of the Russian-Ukraine conflict. However, Czech Television is under long-term pressure from Russian propaganda, according to information provided by Marek Wollner, the editor of its news service.<sup>9</sup>
- II newly founded web pages that emerged mainly in the period 2012–2014 as a reaction to the acquisition of media house *Mafra* by Andrej Babiš. These media outlets, such as *echo24.cz*, *reportermagazine.cz*, or *svobodneforum.cz* strictly oppose the incursion of Russian propaganda into the Czech mainstream media.

8 Critics of Zdeněk Bakala claim that he uses the ownership of *Hospodářské noviny*, which belongs to the media house *Economia*, for his own political purposes. This criticism reappeared after the acquisition of the media house *Mafra* by the Slovak billionaire Andrej Babiš in 2013. Currently Babiš is Czech Minister of Finance and leader of the Alliance of Unsatisfied Citizens (Aliance nespokojených občanů – ANO) movement.

9 *echo24.cz* 4 August 2014.

III web media outlets founded after 2010 claiming to serve as an arena for non-mainstream views on political and social development. However, this also means accepting Russian propaganda narratives and presenting them as “alternative views”. In this category belong the news portals *parlamentnilisty.cz* and *svobodnymonitor.cz*. Both media channels achieve significant traffic comparable with traditional media houses.<sup>10</sup>

IV quasi-alternative web magazines claiming to serve as a space for alternative and uncensored world views, often mixed with conspiracy theories. In this regard, the web magazines try to set up an agenda following “the right to an opinion” and claiming that the state media do not represent them. This method of argument is often used when spreading metanarratives of Russian propaganda. Despite the fact that these media reach only limited numbers of readers, they are often legitimized by representatives of the left-wing parties among the above-mentioned political parties.<sup>11</sup>

The research analysis aims to discover to what extent pre-formulated metanarratives are present in the news reports of major Czech media outlets (Category I) during the selected events. The empirical material was extracted from three major media outlets: *idnes.cz*, *lidovky.cz*, and *ihned.cz*. These are media web portals owned by the Czech billionaires Andrej Babiš (*idnes.cz*, *lidovky.cz*) and Zdeněk Bakala (*ihned.cz*). All of them represent the centre and centre-right part of the political spectrum; however, they target different readerships. *Idnes.cz* aims to produce quality journalism and to reach as wide a readership as possible. The web portal *idnes.cz* has its own editorial office independent of *Mladá fronta dnes*. *Lidovky.cz* and *idnes.cz* both belong to the *Mafra* media house. In contrast to *idnes.cz*, *lidovky.cz* has a rather right-wing conservative profile with a smaller readership, achieving 28 million page visits per month. Again in contrast to *idnes*.

<sup>10</sup> *mediaguru.cz* 18 November 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



cz, *lidovky.cz* does not produce its own unique content and publishes online selected articles from the printed *Lidové noviny*. *Ihned.cz*, which belongs to the *Economia* media house targets a liberal and business oriented readership. Thanks to this narrow readership, *ihned.cz* has 5 million page visits per month, according to data from October 2015. Within the *Economia* media house, *ihned.cz* produces its own content and extensively takes over content produced by other divisions of *Economia*. A limited scope of content is produced uniquely for *ihned.cz* through an editorial office partly shared with *Hospodářské Noviny*.

Although the above-mentioned media do not represent the full set of web magazines in the Czech Republic, each of the media targets a different readership – according to its ideological preferences – and therefore also employs a different style of language in its articles. *Lidovky.cz* gives more space to voices that try to “balance the Western-friendly attitudes” of the Czech media. In all three cases, the editorial offices of the web news portals widely republish news from the state news agency, and therefore the content of individual articles published may overlap. The empirical research material included 267 articles in total. The articles were selected according to a search for key words in the full text of every media web page. The exact number of articles analysed and corresponding metanarratives is presented in Table 12.1.

<b>Lidovky.cz</b>	<b>No. articles</b>	<b>No. narratives</b>
The annexation of the Crimea	28	9
Burning of the trade unions building in Odessa	30	10
Downing of MH17	11	0
The emergence of humanitarian catastrophe	12	1
Battle of Ilovaysk	23	10

<b>Idnes.cz</b>	<b>No. articles</b>	<b>No. narratives</b>
The annexation of the Crimea	26	1
Burning of the trade unions building in Odessa	31	13
Downing of MH17	25	8
The emergence of humanitarian catastrophe	12	0
Battle of Ilovaysk	18	10

<b>lhned.cz</b>	<b>No. articles</b>	<b>No. narratives</b>
The annexation of the Crimea	14	0
Burning of the trade unions building in Odessa	12	1
Downing of MH17	8	2
The emergence of humanitarian catastrophe	9	1
Battle of Ilovaysk	8	0

Table 12.1.  
Number of pages analysed and number of  
articles containing metanarratives

### 12.3. THE ANNEXATION OF THE CRIMEA

On *idnes.cz*, this issue was discussed in the week after the event in 26 articles published on the *idnes.cz* web page. Most articles referred to Russian activities in a neutral way or as a violation of international law, meaning the sovereignty of the neighbouring country. This was done using quotations from representatives of the EU as such and EU member states and lastly US representatives. The use of a Russian metanarrative might be visible in only one article when referring to public support in Russia to return Crimea to the Russian Federation. This might be a misleading claim bearing in mind the manipulative way of reporting this in Russia. The same article referred to the protection of ethnic Russians living there. Given the context of the article, this was referring to Russian positions and public opinion on the annexation, and therefore references to the narratives used should correspond to the language used by the Russian authorities. Therefore, the metanarrative of the historical myth of the Great Russia was used in the case of the annexation of the Crimea, but only once, while most of the reporting remained objective.

The online news outlet *Lidovky.cz* published 28 articles on this issue during the period under study. In these articles, metanarratives were mentioned nine times with relatively high variations. There were three mentions of discrimination against people living in Eastern Ukraine, three mentions of fascist revolution in Kyiv, and four mentions of Ukraine as a failed state. Despite referring to the Russian point of view, several articles touched on the point of so-called discrimination against Russian-speaking people in Ukraine followed by claims that Russia was demanding the right to protect ethnic Russians. Another narrative was that because problems with the language law occurred in 2014, Russia was “forced” to implement policies to protect “its people”. In addition to this, the imagination of disputed history was employed, picturing Stepan Bandera as a personality followed by fascists in Kyiv. In this sense, the revolution was driven by neo-fascist forces. Therefore, ethnic Russians had the right to self-determination. Although these mentions were present when reporting the position of the Russian Federation, they were used within a colourful spectrum of narratives. Nevertheless, the narratives of propaganda did not appear when the article was assigned to a concrete name.

In a certain contrast to the previous two ones, none of the 14 articles on *ihned.cz* relating to this issue contained any metanarrative of Russian

propaganda. Unlike both of the online media analysed above, all of the articles had direct affiliation to their authors rather than being reprinted from news agencies and not just republished news from other sources.

#### 12.4.

##### BURNING OF THE TRADE UNION BUILDING IN ODESSA

The online media portal *idnes.cz* published 31 articles that had originally appeared in *Mladá fronta dnes* or from the state news agency *Czech Press Agency* (Česká tisková kancelář, ČTK) about the burning of the trade union building in Odessa. In these articles, the listed metanarratives were used thirteen times, referring four times to the fascist and right-wing nationalists of the Euromaidan and nine times to Ukraine as a failed state. When referring to the responsibility for clashes between supporters of a united Ukraine and supporters of Russian separatists, the narrative of the violence of extreme nationalists of the Right Sector movement was often used. In addition, picturing the insignia of the members of Right Sector was used to strengthen the idea of it belonging to the armed movement and its responsibility for the violence. This metanarrative of extremists driving the revolution in Kyiv was used in regard to using information sources from Russian news agencies to balance the Ukrainian sources. However, such balancing was not applied in case of the annexation of Crimea. The second way of using the metanarrative was used when reporting directly from Odessa on the burning of the union building. These metanarratives appeared when quoting local people's views about who was responsible for the burning, such as referring to Nazi and Bandera crimes during the German occupation of Ukraine.

When referring to the metanarrative of Ukraine as a failed state that was not able to secure the security of its citizens and the dominance of use of violence, the terms DNR, LNR, and Novorossiia were referred to nine times as “self-proclaimed” republics, or Novorossiia was given the label of an artificial project. Despite this context, these terms were used extensively, thus to some extent even seeming to legitimize the seizing of Ukrainian territory. In this regard, a clear refusal of the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity is missing. On the other hand, articles named Russian troops as being directly involved in anti-Ukrainian activities in the territory of South-Eastern Ukraine. When referring to Novorossiia, the historical connotation was stressed, putting the Russian activities in this regard into the proper mythological context

of the Tsarist era. Again, this imagination of the Tsarist times enabled them to use Novorossiia as a political project.

On *lidovky.cz* more than 30 news articles were devoted to this issue, with ten mentions of different metanarratives. Similarly to the previous case, different metanarratives were used when reporting the position of Russia. In addition, quotations from local people living in Eastern Ukraine are less often used in the articles. Therefore, one should pay attention to this shift in the spreading of metanarratives. Despite the use of parenthesis when referring to the Kiev junta or representatives of both republics, the meaning of the metanarratives was more believable and effective. Even if the articles mentioned the DNR and LNR as being self-proclaimed, the legitimization went beyond the meaning of fact. This was the case when the South-Eastern Army was mentioned as legitimate armed forces of the DNR and LNR. In this case the metanarratives had more layers that developed the image of the legitimacy of both republics. Finally, the articles also contained mention of full-scale civil war, which was not the case with the other two researched web news resources.

Out of the 12 articles on *ihned.cz*, only one referred to the metanarrative of Russian propaganda, namely mentioning representatives of both republics. However, texts refer to self-proclaimed republics of DNR and LNR sometimes using quotation marks, sometimes without.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, even mentioning gives a certain level of legitimacy to them as quasi state formations.

#### 12.5. THE DOWNING OF MH17

In total 25 articles on *idnes.cz* dealt with the downing of Flight MH17 above the territory of Ukraine. In these articles, there were eight mentions of metanarratives related to Russian propaganda. The articles referred more to Western authorities and sources than they accepted Russian metanarratives and conspiracy theories. The clear purpose of the articles published was to ensure independent investigation of the responsibility for downing the airliner. In addition, the articles mentioned the possible responsibility of the authorities of the self-proclaimed republics or the responsibility of the Russian troops. Therefore, on the one hand, the metanarratives belonging

<sup>12</sup> Soukup, 7 May 2014.

to the category of Ukraine as a failed state created an image of the legitimization of the republic's leadership. On the other hand, none of the articles researched the issue of Ukrainian responsibility or even mentioned the conspiracy theories.

Surprisingly, *lidovky.cz* did not contain any metanarrative of Russian propaganda. The articles reported the concrete development and named individual personalities without their affiliations. This was the case also with representatives of both separatist entities. Out of eight related articles on *ihned.cz*, only two made use of Russia's distinctive vocabulary, namely mentioning the representatives of the DNR and LNR and referring to these entities as quasi-state formations.

#### 12.6.

##### THE EMERGENCE OF THE HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE

The metanarratives were not observed in any of the 12 articles collected from *idnes.cz* for the purpose of this issue. Despite reporting on areas that were hit by heavy fighting, no mention of the humanitarian disaster aspect occurred in the articles. The articles aimed to follow the battle over Eastern Ukraine, not mixed with the justification of one side of the attacks.

Out of 12 articles on *lidovky.cz* referring to the humanitarian catastrophe, only one directly is contained metanarrative, namely speaking about humanitarian aid to people living in Eastern Ukraine. This was in the case of a report about the Russian humanitarian convoy heading to Donetsk. The same article proved the legitimization of the regimes of Eastern Ukraine. In both narratives, the quantity of use of metanarratives is much smaller than with the two previous issues.

On *idnes.cz* the 18 articles related to the battle contained a high number of metanarratives, a total of 10, covering historical myth of Great Russia, Ukraine as a failed state, and the deconstruction of the Maidan revolution. In the case of the historical myth of Great Russia, the issue of the dominance of the Ukrainian language and identity was heavily stressed. In addition, the illegality the transfer of Crimea to Ukrainian jurisdiction was underlined. Despite the appearance of the metanarrative, it must be mentioned that it was a case of quoting President Putin<sup>13</sup> and explaining the Russian position as such.

<sup>13</sup> *Idnes.cz* 26 August 2014.

Nevertheless, there was no mention of the violation of international law relating to the violation of the state sovereignty of Ukraine.

The second metanarrative, i.e. picturing Ukraine as a failed state, followed the logic of the previously described issues, namely using mentions of both republics to legitimize the quasi-state structures in Eastern Ukraine. However, there is evidence of less of an emphasis on the state-building structures of both republics, using mentions of the federalization of Ukraine or solving the institutional setting of Ukraine instead of aiming to separate both “republics” from Ukraine and establish independent states. Although the imagination of Novorossiia was also used in the narrative, even quoting Putin showed the softened language in terms of the independence of both republics.

The metanarrative aimed at deconstructing the Maidan revolution targeted the US and other Western countries in terms of being responsible for the armed conflict in Ukraine and decreasing predictability in the global context. This metanarrative appeared here for the first time in the analysis, and did so only once. As in previous issues, the metanarrative emerged in the form of direct quotation of representatives of the Kremlin, instead of being an authentic article written by a member of the editorial board. The article containing the metanarrative of the deconstruction of the Maidan revolution, written by John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago for *Foreign Affairs*<sup>14</sup> and reprinted by ČTK aimed to picture the Maidan revolution as a fascist one and orchestrated by Washington.

On *lidovky.cz*, the battle of Ilovaisk was covered by 23 articles, containing a high number of metanarratives, a total of ten. The issue consisted of the following narratives: humanitarian catastrophe, Ukraine as a failed state, the deconstruction of the Maidan revolution and claiming US and Western states provoked the conflict in Ukraine.

The high number of metanarratives is surprising if it is compared to the previous case. The narrative that appeared most often related to Russia’s humanitarian aid to people living in Eastern Ukraine. Despite the fact that this was related to the fact of the so-called humanitarian convoy from Russia to Ukraine, there were no disputes about the meanings and purpose of the humanitarian convoys or humanitarian aid as such. Similarly to other cases, when the article quoted local people from Eastern Ukraine, narratives of propaganda occurred. This was also the case on this issue when speaking about the humanitarian situation in the Eastern parts of Ukraine. In the case of other issues,

14 Mearsheimer 2014.

one can find similar ways of reporting when local people were quoted. This is the case when the mentions of a fascist putsch as well as US intervention appeared when reporting on the position of Russia. At the same time, mentioning the federalization of Ukraine was done to get a feeling of the legitimate actions of representatives of both republics. These narratives were used to describe and also support the Russian position, when the articles were not assigned to a concrete person and published only as joint articles of the editorial board. Regarding *ihned.cz*, the battle of Ilovaysk was covered in eight articles; however they did not mention any metanarratives of Russian propaganda.

#### 12.7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The common point of the individual media outlets that have been analysed is the rather low level of penetration of Russian propaganda. Only in few cases have the metanarratives been spread directly without quoting the local people of Eastern Ukraine. On the other hand, quoting local people offers a significant space for misleading and the spreading of metanarratives. What is surprising is the fact that the appearance of metanarratives often happens when the articles have been reprinted from other sources such as the *Czech Press Agency* (ČTK) or *DPA* (*German Press Agency*) and not by the editorial office.

To summarize the types of narratives that appear in the articles, one can count the proof of legitimization of the DNR and LNR followed by claiming the revolution as a fascist putsch and lastly accusing the US and Western states of provoking the revolution. A closer look at individual media shows that the highest ratio between the number of articles and appearance of narratives is found in *lidovky.cz*. In this case, the online media shows the highest variety of Russian narratives. Even more surprising is the fact that they appear mostly when the article is republished and no direct personal authorship is mentioned. On the other side, the case of the rather liberal online media outlet *ihned.cz* shows that in case of publishing its own editorial content, the appearance of Russian narratives is low. It has to be also mentioned that *ihned.cz* proved to be the outlet that was least penetrated by Russian propaganda.

One of the reasons for this might be the fact that the owner of the *Economia* publishing house, Zdeněk Bakala, is a paid-up supporter of former president Havel's foreign policy based on values such as



human rights. The role of the editor-in-chief of all three of these media outlets has not been the focus of this analysis. Therefore, one can only generally conclude that none of the three prove any strong shift towards any specific interest of the owner of the media house. In the case of *idnes.cz* and *lidovky.cz*, as belonging to the *Mafra* publishing house, this might be caused by the fact that foreign policy has long been of no interest to Andrej Babiš, the current Minister of Finance.

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13



# 13. The Channels and Distinguishing Elements of Russian Propaganda in Slovakia

Dušan Fischer<sup>1</sup>

## 13.1.

### INTRODUCTION

The relations between Slovakia and Russia could be defined as a combination of pragmatic business cooperation and advocacy of historically sensitive special relations. In general, Slovak foreign policy emphasizes strong transatlantic orientation, close cooperation with neighbouring countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) and business-led cooperation with Germany. Relations with Russia are managed in parallel with this core “triangle” of Slovak foreign policy, leading sometimes to decisions that can be perceived as more in favour of Russia.

The first reason behind a certain reluctance in Slovak approach to Russia has to do with energy. In 2012, oil and natural gas represented 20% and 36%, respectively, of Slovakia’s total primary energy supply. In both cases, Slovakia relies almost entirely on imports from Russia. The gas crisis in 2009 when the Russian Federation stopped the flow of gas to Ukraine exposed Slovakia’s vulnerability in the face of Russia’s energy politics.<sup>2</sup> The second reason has to do with public perceptions and sentiments towards the Soviet era. According to data from the 2014 public poll, 33% of Slovaks regard the fall of Communism as a

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2 *Visegrad.info* 3 May 2010; IAE Energy Supply Security 2014.

negative phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Slovakia's current government has been in power for most of the post-NATO and EU accession period.<sup>4</sup> The core voters for Prime Minister Robert Fico's party are in favour of a strong central independent government in Slovakia, of leaving EU and NATO, and of a stronger relationship with Russia. Consequently, the Slovak government has voiced its critique towards EU policies (e.g. sanctions against Russia), but has not abstained from implementing the EU policy line on Russia. Finally, it should be noted that both Russia and Slovakia strongly oppose the independence of Kosovo.

Slovak relations with Ukraine have not been particularly strong, with the exception of cooperation at grassroots level between NGOs and think-tanks focusing on cross-border cooperation. The situation changed when Slovakia became a Schengen country in 2007. Since then, the two countries have established cooperation aimed at strengthening the security of the border area. However, the highest number of illegal workers in Slovakia come from Ukraine. Furthermore, it has been estimated that there are up to 100,000 Slovaks of Ukrainian descent living in Slovakia.

Right after the Crimea annexation, the Slovak government was hesitant to call upon Russia and to address the matter. Since then, bilateral relations have improved and Slovakia has contributed to the strengthening of regional cooperation platforms such as the EU's Eastern Partnership and the Visegrad4 cooperation. These forums have been used to address Ukraine's integration in the EU, regional energy security, and economic and social reforms in Ukraine.

### 13.2.

#### THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND DATA SET

The Slovak case study provides an analysis of how the Russian metanarratives appear in the selected online media sites during the selected periods of time. Represented in the data set are both mainstream and the so-called alternative online media outlets. *SME daily (WE ARE)* is a country-wide centre-right media platform that has no political affiliation but is known for strong criticism towards

<sup>3</sup> *Pluska.sk* 19 March 2014.

<sup>4</sup> The current government has been in power since 2006 (with the exception of 2010–2012) and the polls show that the current Prime Minister Robert Fico will win the 2016 parliamentary elections as well.



the current centre-left government of Prime Minister Robert Fico. *Hospodarske noviny* (*Economic Newspaper*) is a centre daily newspaper focused on economic issues. It does not have declared political affiliation.<sup>5</sup> *Topky.sk* (*Best.sk*) is a tabloid and sensational newspaper. It is the most popular website in Slovakia, but the quality of its articles and journalism is very low. The website is an online version of the printed newspaper *Nový čas* (*New Time*), the most popular printed media outlet in Slovakia.<sup>6</sup>

The website of magazine *Zem a Vek* (*Earth and Age*) is also included in the data set. This is a nationalistic, anti-EU, anti-NATO printed magazine issued monthly. The magazine's editor-in-chief, Tibor E. Rostas, presents himself as a friend of Russia, and the journalists of *Zem a Vek* often travel to Russia for media briefings. Articles published in the magazine have first appeared in the Russian foreign media outlets *RT.com* or *Sputnik*, or use them as sources. In addition, articles and commentary first published on the left-wing activist site *Axis of Logic* are frequently translated and copied and appear on the *Zemavek.sk* site. Reports on Ukraine use "local witnesses", since they do not have reporters on the ground in Ukraine.

Considering the channels of propaganda and disinformation, it should be noted that the most frequent and perhaps efficient means is to influence public perception through social media. Active participation in online discussions, including so-called trolling, is used extensively; however, this phenomenon is not analysed here. The other caveat that needs to be made is the fact that the selected events were covered to a very limited extent even by the mainstream media. Consequently, the "response" from the propaganda-spreading websites and magazines was also very sporadic. The two main events that caused more discussion in Slovakia were the annexation of Crimea and the shooting down of Flight MH17.

5 The newspaper is published by *Ecopress*, which in turn is led by a Czech politician with Slovak roots, Andrej Babiš.

6 Audit Bureau of Circulation 2015.

### *The Annexation of Crimea*

On March 21 2014, in the midst of the events and “successful” annexation of Crimea by Russian forces, *SME Daily* issued an article taken from the *Slovak Press Agency (TASR)* titled “Crimea is finally Russian; Putin’s signature confirmed the annexation of the peninsula” (“*Krym je definitívne ruský; Putin podpisom potvrdil anexiu polostrova*”).<sup>7</sup> The report was written in accordance with normal journalistic practice, citing foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev as well as Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov. News reports published in *Hospodarske noviny*, a daily economic newspaper, were not very different from other mainstream media.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, although sourcing *RT.com* from time to time since March 2014, the *topky.sk* website called the troops in Ukraine “Russian” and referred to “the Russian occupation of Crimea”.<sup>9</sup> After March 21, 2014, the online portal *Zem a Vek* published several articles related to various separatist movements across Europe and to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. All these articles were aimed at disrupting the discussion on Crimea and diverting attention from the issue.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17*

On July 17 2014, the *SME Daily* reported that the Ukrainian government in Kyiv blamed the separatists fighting in the Donetsk Oblast.<sup>11</sup> They cited both sides – Anton Heraschenko from the Ministry of Interior of Ukraine and Aleksandr Boroday, the Prime Minister of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic. Both sides denied responsibility for shooting down the aeroplane. The report was impartial and did not blame any of the interested parties. On the same day, the *SME Daily* issued a report that the Boeing MH17 could have been shot down by both sides, claiming that both parties had the capabilities to do so.<sup>12</sup>

Right after the downing of Flight MH17, the portal *Zemavek.sk* published several opinion pieces by Slovak authors without any reference or source to other media. The blogs cited Russian officials

7 *SME* 21 March 2015.

8 Procházková 2015a; *Hospodárske noviny* 10 March 2014.

9 *Topky.sk* 8 March 2014.

10 *Zem a vek* March 26 2014.

11 Lipták 2014.

12 Vasilko 2014.

without sources and distributed the Russian metanarrative of *Ukraine as a failed state*. The key word used in this connection was *Novorossiia*.<sup>13</sup> In the same article, it was argued that the United States was actually responsible for shooting down the aeroplane. Later in July, the same portal promoted the Russian metanarrative *The people of Eastern Ukraine are discriminated against* in an article that brought up Russia's role in protecting the Russian-speaking population of the Donbass.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Burning of the Trade Union Building in Odessa on 2 May 2014*

The first reports about the burning of the Trade Union building in Odessa on 2 May 2014 claimed that the fire was not intentional, but it was used for propaganda and provocation by the both sides.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, it was argued that the events in Odessa might lead the country into a civil war. Thus, the text repeated one of the Russian metanarratives.

The portal *Zemavek.sk* repeated the Russian metanarrative on *Russia doing the right thing*. In this occasion, the article was copied from *RT.com* and translated into Slovak with some additional remarks by the author. The idea behind the article was to show that Russia was the only international player on the field who was truly concerned about the situation in Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> The article also referred to other Russian metanarratives, claiming that the "Kiev government" was run by extremists (metanarrative of *The destruction of the positive legacy of the Maidan*) and the "state coup" was supported by the US. The same portal also published articles suggesting that the CIA and FBI were intervening in the process of governance in Kyiv, thus adopting the Russian metanarrative about the conflict being the fault of the West.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Emergence of the "Humanitarian Catastrophe" and the Battle of Ilovaisk in August 2014*

In August, when the situation deteriorated in Eastern Ukraine, the Slovak media covered the events with the help of international news agencies, e.g. *Reuters*. Most of the analysed articles were neutral in content, focusing mainly on the civilian casualties of the fighting. The Slovak media's reports on the Russian convoy cited the Ukrainian

13 *Zem a vek* July 18 2014.

14 *Zem a vek* February 29 2014.

15 Procházková 2014a.

16 *Zem a vek* May 3 2014.

17 Gašo 2014.

authorities and called the event an invasion.<sup>18</sup> A few articles in the media spread pro-Russian propaganda. Two articles published on the website *Zemavek.sk* focused on disinformation and their main narrative was the disunity of Ukraine and the unity, legality and legitimacy of Crimea. One directly quoted Russian foreign minister Lavrov talking about Russian interests in Ukraine<sup>19</sup> and the other aimed at the Ukrainian effort to ban TV channels in Russian.<sup>20</sup>

The *SME Daily* reported on the event no earlier than at the end of August. Two articles suggested that the Russian separatists had surrounded Ukrainian soldiers in the city of Ilovaisk and reported the move forward for creating a humanitarian corridor. Another article reported on letting go the Ukrainian defence minister Valeri Heletey.<sup>21</sup> The second article mentioned referred to the group fighting against the Ukrainian soldiers as “Russian soldiers”. *Topky.sk* described the anti-terrorist operation conducted by the Ukrainian government (ATO) and described the Battle of Ilovaisk as a battle between pro-Russian separatists in cooperation with Russian troops against Ukrainian soldiers. The article quoted both the *Associated Press* agency and the Russian press agency *ITAR-TASS*.<sup>22</sup> *Hospodárske noviny* issued an article titled “The West Does Not Understand Us, We Need Weapons, Says Turchynov” (“*Západ nás nechápe, potrebujeme zbrane, vyhlásil Turčínov*”).<sup>23</sup> There were no articles in the alternative media focusing on Ilovaisk.

#### 13.4. DISCUSSION

The Russian propaganda targeted at the Central European region has had certain specific themes and priorities. First, the narratives targeted especially at this region have taken advantage of shared understandings and historical myths of Panslavism and Slavic unity as a special bond in a time of crisis which could be based on the 19th century book written by national leader Ľudovít Štúr and titled *Slavism and the World of the Future* (*Slovanstvo a svet budúcnosti*). In the book, Štúr argues in favour

18 *Hospodárske noviny* 22 August 2014; *Topky.sk* 22 August 2014; Procházková 2014b.

19 *Zem a vek* August 28 2014.

20 *Zem a vek* August 26 2014.

21 Procházková 2014c.

22 *Topky.sk* 27 August 2014.

23 *Hospodárske noviny* 18 August 2014.

of closer unity for all Slavs and for building stronger ties with Russia. In 2008, a civic association called *Panslovanská únia* (the Panslavic Union) was established. It no longer exists in its original form and the website of the association collects blogs and other information on Panslavism and other themes linked with Russia, e.g. “Unknown Russian Aid to Slovaks”.<sup>24</sup>

This narrative construction does not, however, include Ukrainian people. Thus, in the Russian foreign propaganda, the idea of “one nation” (between Russia and Ukraine) is marginalized and instead, narratives of “fascist Ukraine” are spread. The propagandists have been taking advantage of the historic nostalgia still prevailing among their targeted groups. They have promoted sentiments that view the communist era as a positive and, actually, a better time than Western capitalism. The notion of Panslavism is also linked to Kosovo and the feeling that the Slovaks should be sticking with the Serbs in this issue.

In the case of Slovakia, most of the articles and posts on social media that can be labelled as propaganda have several characteristic notions. The propaganda pieces are paradoxically often comprised of partially correct or verified information. The purpose of these propaganda articles is to put down several facts and then reach a conclusion that fits the narrative. The “What” part is often true. What is complicated is the “Why” part. Articles with headlines such as “United States is Pushing Europe Into a War with Russia”<sup>25</sup> suggest a new Cold War dimension in thinking, while the article itself may be about multilateral agreement between six European nations and the US to deploy troops to protect the eastern flank of the NATO and EU border. Keywords often include words such as *secret* or *pushing*, despite the fact that concrete deals are often debated in the mainstream media and published on official websites. In addition the propaganda articles usually end with the extensive use of exclamation marks. Another example was an article called “Russian Offensive Scared the US Into a Corner” (“*Razantná ruská ofenzíva zahнала USA do kúta*”),<sup>26</sup> which suggested that the Russian invasion of Syria scared the US armed forces off while the actual article quotes only two statements from US officials about sending special forces into Syria and says nothing about the US being “scared off”.

The main conclusion drawn from the analysis is that the Russian metanarratives have been rather marginally present in the mainstream

24 Tkáč 2015.

25 Pokorný 2016.

26 Pokorný 2015.

media. They appeared in the form of direct quotations from the Russian authorities, thus, as part of normal journalistic work. However, those mediums, such as the news portal *Zemavek.sk*, that use news reports translated directly from the Russian state media (*RT.com* and *Sputnik*) have integrated the metanarratives into their reporting. In addition to this, there are several active websites and Facebook groups that spread false news. Although these were not included in the present research, it can be noted that most of these sites make use of popular perceptions and positive sentiments towards Panslavist ideas, Soviet nostalgia and Russia and President Putin in particular. Furthermore, the content of these sites is flooded with conspiracy theories that degrade the media (traditional journalistic practices), undermine critical thinking, and focus on blaming the West for the conflicts in the world.

The mainstream media in Slovakia does not seem to have a common strategy on how to react to the Russian narrative about the conflict in Ukraine. What they are trying to achieve is to report on many issues regarding Ukraine and try to debunk myths spread by the pro-Kremlin propaganda. One of the flagship projects implemented in Slovakia was produced by *SME Daily*, called “What do you need to know about Ukraine. 30 questions and answers” (“Čo musíte vedieť o Ukrajine. 30 otázok a odpovedí”).<sup>27</sup> The *SME Daily* invited Alexander Duleba, a prominent expert on the topic, to answer 30 direct and simple questions about Ukraine, Russia and the conflict.

All in all, one cannot state that the Slovak mainstream media is completely immune to Russian metanarratives. They are present in the direct quotations of Russian officials in the daily reporting but also in opinion pieces and interviews that promote the Russia official view on the conflict. However, the influence of the latter on policymaking in Slovakia is very limited. There has not been a single case in which the occasional criticism towards the EU, NATO or US would have led to a significant change in Slovak foreign and security policy legislation, or would have caused Slovakia to abandon its international duties and commitments.

27 Duleba 2014.

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# **Part IV**

## **CONCLUSION**



14



## 14. Conclusion

Katri Pynnöniemi and András Rácz

This report started with reflection on continuity – certain forms of falsehood that were first encountered during World War I have appeared again, this time in the framework of the conflict in Ukraine. This resemblance is hardly a coincidence. Although the technological development and sociopolitical changes have contributed to the emergence of new channels for the distribution of propaganda and disinformation, the fog of falsehood is a product of human imagination. The language of propaganda seeks to manipulate public perceptions and fears, and creates stereotypes that help to demonize the adversary or romanticize heroes. Referring to historical myths and legends makes the narrative stronger, whereas the key terminology helps to adapt it to specific circumstances.

We have argued in this report that to understand Russia's strategic deception the analysis should take into account the Soviet background. Soviet propaganda and disinformation worked as a centrally organized machinery that had at its disposal significant resources and a network of front organizations, media outlets and so-called influence agents. Some elements of this scheme have been activated in Russia during the recent years. Previous research on Russia's domestic politics has demonstrated how the new rulers of Kremlin have undermined the development of democratic institutions in Russia. Here again we can observe a certain congruence between the creation of pseudo-political movements by political technologists in Russia and the formation of pseudo-republics in the neighbouring countries. In both cases, public political space is understood as a battlefield that has to be controlled by the rulers – that is, by the Kremlin. Furthermore, civil society actors

do not have an autonomous status in this scheme, but are themselves an object of manipulation.

The fact that Russia still has independent media outlets and vibrant social media makes a difference, and thus, a simple comparison between Soviet propaganda and current Russian strategic deception scheme would be misleading. Lenin's dictum that propaganda should be about action rather than words has acquired a new meaning. A key variable in the scheme is still action, but more often than not it is only simulacra of action that produces a web of artificial entities. Even then, the fog of falsehood is still real and the terms of distraction can directly or indirectly cause suffering.

Based on the results of both the analysis of Russian metanarratives about the conflict in Ukraine and the case studies, six main conclusions can be drawn. First, what became clear from the eight case studies is that the influence of Russian metanarratives on the mainstream media remains largely limited. With few exceptions, the analysed European news media *quotes but does not adopt* the Russian metanarratives. In each case, Russian metanarratives are present in the media space as direct quotations from Russian official representatives framed as *the other side of the story*. It is usually also made clear that this does not present the view of the news agency in question. Besides, there were a lot of cases where the mainstream media even put significant effort into deconstructing the Russian metanarratives of events, particularly in the cases of Crimea and the downing of the MH17 Malaysian Airlines flight.

On the basis of the case studies, one of the most frequently quoted Russian metanarratives was *the destruction of the positive legacy of the Maidan revolution*; not independently, of course, of the mistakes and dysfunctionalities of the post-Maidan government of Ukraine. Another remarkably visible metanarrative was *Russia is doing the right thing*, concerning particularly the subnarrative about *the people of Crimea having their own will*, as well as about *Russia's non-involvement*. However, again, the visibility of even these metanarratives very rarely passed the level of being quoted.

Estonia constitutes a partial exception due to the presence of the Russian-speaking minority and Russian-language media in the country. Although there is substantial overlap in narratives present in both the Estonian- and Russian-language media, the latter frames the narratives as reports from the field, for example, by emphasizing the human dimension of the conflict, thus implicitly blaming the Ukrainian Government for the suffering.



Furthermore, in some cases the research could establish a connection between political affiliation and receptivity to Russian metanarratives. In this regard, significant differences could be observed between newspapers representing strong leftist views and media representing conservative-right and liberal-left thinking. In Germany, the socialist newspaper and website *Neues Deutschland* included comments, interviews and reports from unknown or relatively known experts with pro-Russian views in its news coverage, and not only official quotations from Russian official representatives. The Hungarian case is largely similar to the German one in the sense that the news channels' political affiliation constitutes a key variable. While the independent mainstream news channels are highly resistant to Russian metanarratives, the ones under the control of Russia-friendly political forces are more open to the Russian interpretation of events, meaning that in many cases they do not only *quote*, but also *adopt* the Russian narratives.

This leads to the second main observation, namely that the presence and visibility of Russian narratives depended on the already existing political affiliations of the media actors. When the Russian position was represented beyond the level of being quoted, this happened due to the already established political preferences of the given news channel, and not because the Russian metanarratives were strong enough to transform the views of the media. In other words, the representation of the Russian position was only a *consequence* of certain political affiliations, not the *cause* of them.

However, we also need to draw a third conclusion, namely that while most journalists and editors of the examined mainstream media channels were generally conscious about keeping Russian metanarratives at bay (except, of course, those working for media sympathetic to Russia), they were much less aware of the importance of the distinctive vocabulary and terms used. Some of the Russian distinctive terms invented for disinformation purposes (e.g. "Kiev government", "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR), "referendum in Crimea") indeed found their way into the media of the countries studied, and even into channels that were highly critical of the Russian position in general. However, the blatantly manipulative terms, such as calling the Donetsk separatists "freedom fighters" or accusing Ukrainian forces of committing genocide, did not gain much penetration.

Still, many of the less obvious distinctive terms indeed permeated the media. This was especially the case with the so-called fast news pieces based on information extracted from the Russian news agencies (RIA Novosti or TASS) or Russia's English-language media

(Sputnik and RT), which are designed to work largely as disinformation channels. Thus, even if reporting in general was balanced, these channels disseminated terms of distraction that, again, helped to create and maintain a dissonance of interpretations about the conflict. Probably the most spectacular example of this was related to Crimea: throughout the examined period, the so-called referendum was referred to in every surveyed media channel as a referendum, without even quotation marks, as if the whole procedure would have been legal, legitimate or representative to any extent.

This leads to the fourth conclusion about the overall strategic deception scheme. Based on the results of the present research, the most effective channel of propaganda and disinformation were the Russian official state representatives themselves. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was active in disseminating words of distraction and metanarratives portraying Russia as a *passive outsider* to the conflict but, at the same time, a *legitimate protector of the Russian-speaking population* in Ukraine. The Russian state media simply reported these remarks, repeating and sometimes developing them further. This actually constitutes a strong continuity with Soviet practices of strategic deception. The systematic use of metanarratives in Russia's public diplomacy and the rapid pace with which Russia was able to react to the downing of the Malaysian Airline are indicators of the professionalism with which strategic deception is carried out in present-day Russia.

The fifth general conclusion could be that, similarly to their Soviet predecessors, Russian measures of strategic deception indeed have their limits. We did not find a single case of Russian information measures resulting in any meaningful changes in the policies of the countries examined. This does not mean, of course, that lowering awareness of the dangers of information warfare would be advisable. On the contrary, there is no reason to underestimate Russia's strategic deception capabilities, but it is good to remember that their success is dependent on the targets' vulnerability to self-deception.

This leads us to the sixth, final conclusion: the best defence against strategic deception, let it be conducted by Russia or other actors, is well-grounded, fact-based knowledge and the willingness to invest into gathering it. The main reason why the less obvious elements of Russian strategic deception could make it into the mainstream media has been the generally low level of knowledge among journalists, opinion-leaders, politicians and also non-specialized experts about Ukraine. Hence, Russia did not have to conduct its deception measures against

solid public knowledge; instead, it insisted on filling the gaps and holes in the Western public knowledge about Ukraine with deliberately false information, thus distorting the overall perception of the conflict. A higher level of public knowledge, as well as the readiness of the decision-makers to listen to those ones, who possessed the needed knowledge could have prevented a series of mistakes and missed opportunities. No fog of falsehood is able to penetrate the solid walls of well-grounded knowledge and firm commitment to one's values.

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# Fog of Falsehood

## *Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine*

Katri Pynnöniemi & András Rácz (eds.)

This report analyses Russian propaganda and disinformation – here collectively called strategic deception – concerning the conflict in Ukraine. The strategic deception is not exclusively a Russian term, but it does capture what we think is an essential feature of the current Russian foreign and security policy. It is driven by attempts to put the adversary into a defensive posture and off balance, and thus, to create conditions for surprise.

The methods utilized in contemporary Russian strategic deception are partly the same that were already used in Soviet propaganda. But where Soviet propaganda was anchored in ideological truth claims, the contemporary Russian variant can be compared to a kaleidoscope: a light piercing through it is instantly transformed into multiple versions of reality.

The main purpose of this report is to examine in detail the emergence and evolution of Russian metanarratives and the terms of distraction about the conflict in Ukraine, and on the basis of this analysis to ascertain the main policy objectives of Russian strategic deception inside Russia and in selected countries of the European Union.

It is concluded that the best defence against strategic deception is well-grounded, fact-based knowledge and the willingness to invest into gathering it. No fog of falsehood is able to penetrate the solid walls of well-grounded knowledge and firm commitment to one's values.