

The influence of pre-war Russian narratives on public opinion about Ukraine in the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war.

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ABSTRACT

This study is dedicated to the analysis of psychological operations (PSYOP) in the digital environment on the YouTube and Facebook platforms, using the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2021–2022 as a case study. The aim of our research is to track which specific strategic narratives were used during the conflict, as well as how such narratives influence the formation of public opinion and the perception of the course of military actions.

METHODS

The empirical basis of this study consists of posts and video materials from the YouTube and Facebook platforms, published between March 2021 and February 2022. The selection of materials was based on monitoring changes in the narrative surrounding the conflict and keyword searches. The collected data were processed using comparative and qualitative content analysis methods. Each video or text post was classified according to its primary plotlines, vocabulary, visual imagery, and overall message. To identify recurring themes, thematic analysis was employed, based on the Braun and Clarke model. During the evaluation process, recurring themes, keywords, and constructed narratives were extracted from the videos, subsequently grouped into separate categories of stable narratives, and systematized according to their functions and intended purposes within psychological operations.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2021, at a briefing in Brussels, a new type of conflict was officially designated - cognitive warfare ¹. According to NATO's definition, this is the struggle for cognitive superiority and systemic influence on people's behavior and perception, with the aim of altering decision-making processes at the level of individuals, social groups, and entire nations ². Its emergence as a distinct phenomenon in international relations became a natural consequence of digital transformation and the subsequent need to find more substantial mechanisms of influence on geopolitical institutions than military force.

Cognitive warfare has become a key component of modern warfare. Its strategic objective is to serve the national interests of states through methods of psychological influence, which include the creation of

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hostile narratives, the dissemination of disinformation, emotional manipulation of populations, or the promotion of certain ideas. As a result of influencing individual and collective consciousness, the adversary is able to undermine trust in authorities and cause division among the people - something we can actively observe in contemporary conflicts.³

It should be noted that a key factor amplifying the threat of cognitive warfare is the transfer of information-psychological operations into the virtual space. A 2024 article titled "Malicious Use of AI and Challenges to Information and Psychological Security in BRICS Countries" demonstrates that social networks currently play a central role in modern psychological and cognitive warfare⁴. This is not only because social platforms enable rapid content dissemination, ensure source anonymity, involve low costs, and allow for a massive volume of messages, but also because psychological operations leverage data analytics, profiling, and behavioral tracking for micro-targeting specific audiences. This significantly enhances persuasiveness and emotional resonance, as such personalization strengthens the connection between the operation and the user's personality, beliefs, or grievances, making narratives more memorable and complicating fact-checking - leading to a substantial increase in the destructive impact of psychological operations.

The combination of these factors places modern states in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis psychological operations and cognitive warfare. Narratives disseminated through social platforms acquire the power of a cognitive influence tool capable of altering an individual's perception of the causes and consequences of conflicts, the legitimacy of the parties involved, and acceptable patterns of state behavior.

The aim of this study is to examine the use of narratives to shape public opinion regarding key events or figures, as well as to trace how states employ narratives to manipulate perceptions of conflict, discredit opponents, legitimize their own actions, and impose a favorable interpretation of events. In particular, the study focuses on a chronological analysis of narrative development in order to determine their impact on public opinion, as well as their subsequent categorization according to key functions within psychological operations (PsyOps). In this way, the findings can help identify patterns of narrative influence used by states as tools of strategic communication and informational influence.

The empirical basis of the study is the example of the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022–2026. The choice of this particular conflict is due to its exceptional significance as a striking example of the large-scale use of psychological operations in the 21st century. It has been officially documented and confirmed that even before the start of the full-scale invasion, Russia employed contradictory narratives and false-flag operations to destabilize the situation and influence decision-making². Between 2014 and 2022, more than 350 fabricated facts used by Russia to promote its position were recorded, and 10,000 examples of false and misleading narratives were collected. This confirms that this conflict can be regarded as a unique testing ground for studying modern information warfare and the mechanisms of shaping public opinion.⁵

It is important to note that the escalation of the conflict coincided with the post-COVID period. The COVID-19 pandemic radically changed the model of political information dissemination, shifting it online due to restrictions on physical contact and the accelerated digitalization of public life.⁶ By the onset of the conflict, this had created an environment in which a significant portion of the population of the countries involved, as well as the international community, was fully integrated into the digital space and accustomed to receiving information through social platforms. Consequently, political information and narrative formation became concentrated within the social media environment, creating optimal conditions for researchers to track the processes of narrative creation and dissemination. The intensity of information exchange makes this conflict the most "documented" in history, providing researchers with a vast volume of data. This makes the Russian-Ukrainian conflict one of the most suitable cases for understanding how strategic narratives are employed in contemporary international conflicts.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the contemporary era of digital globalization, the ability to shape the global agenda and control information flows often yields more substantial political and diplomatic dividends than the use of military force. The management of public opinion in military conflicts has evolved from an auxiliary means of supporting national interests into an independent sphere of confrontation, where the focus shifts from direct physical destruction to undermining cognitive sovereignty and the very will to resist. According to a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), information operations have become a primary weapon in 21st-century conflicts. Drawing on examples from the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and the war in Ukraine, experts demonstrate that, by influencing public opinion through social media, information-psychological operations can often determine the strategic outcome of a confrontation.⁷

The importance of studying psychological warfare and the artificially constructed strategic narratives it conveys is driven by the unprecedented threat they pose to the stability of democratic states. The potential impact of cognitive and psychological warfare spans all levels of interaction - from bilateral relations between states or individual groups of people to global information confrontation, the scale of which continues to grow as modern technologies advance. Cognitive warfare blurs the boundaries between peace and war, influencing elections, political courses, and diplomacy. This makes its study essential for preventing threats to modern democratic states.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic articles and military analytical reviews trace the formal academic and doctrinal development of the study of psychological and information operations methods within cognitive warfare over decades, as evidenced by numerous research works⁹. However, the study of cognitive warfare and its methods requires continuous rethinking and evolution due to the ongoing transformations occurring in parallel with societal changes and new technologies. Contemporary development is characterized by the integration of fundamentally new tools into psychological operations: artificial intelligence, including content generation and deepfakes, predictive analytics, big data-based micro-targeting, and automated bot

networks ¹⁰ . The relative novelty of these technologies creates a gap between the current practice of psychological operations and their academic conceptualization, compelling researchers to continually contribute to the overall progress in this field in order to remain relevant.

Currently, the study of strategic narratives in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war is one of the most pressing research areas, given the destructive potential of hostile narratives for the political stability of states. Existing works in this field can be divided into two categories. The first is oriented toward analyzing a limited set of narratives, typically focused on a specific topic and their influence on a particular audience. An example of this approach is the study "Decoding Manipulative Narratives in Cognitive Warfare: The Case of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict", which examines nuclear rhetoric and its impact on the international audience on the eve of the NATO summit ¹¹. The second category of research focuses on confirming the use of psychological operations in specific situations and developing countermeasures, as exemplified by the work "Domestic and Foreign Practices of Countering Hostile Information-Psychological Operations in 2022–2024" ¹². However, there remains a need for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of cognitive warfare. In particular, the research field lacks sufficient works that combine both approaches and present a broader spectrum of narratives in their evolutionary dynamics throughout the entire military conflict.

Another significant gap in the literature on narrative influence in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is the chronological focus on the period beginning February 24, 2022. Most studies are aimed at examining the influence and creation of narratives only from the moment of the full-scale escalation. An example is the work "Conceptualizing Russia's Strategic Narratives in the Full-Scale Russian-Ukrainian War", which focuses on analyzing narratives from the start of the full-scale invasion and delves into constructs such as the "great power" narrative and the concept of the "aggressive West." ¹³

However, to understand how narratives actually function in this conflict, it is necessary to trace their preparation and implementation in the pre-war period. That such work was conducted long before February 2022 is confirmed by research from other authors. In particular, the work of P. L. Lisyansky, A. R. Salikhov, and V. A. Yastrebov confirms the presence of psychological operations and narrative activity on the territory of Ukraine starting from 2014 ¹⁴. This indicates systematic efforts to shape strategic narratives around Russian-Ukrainian relations over an extended period preceding the 2022 escalation.

In this regard, it appears that for a more complete understanding of the mechanisms of narrative influence, existing research could be supplemented by an analysis of the period preceding February 2022. If works focused on the post-February stage capture already established narrative constructs and their influence in the active phase of the conflict, then turning to the earlier period allows one to trace the origins of the formation of these constructs. Supplementing the analysis with the pre-war period of 2021 makes it possible to reconstruct the logic of preparation and gradual implementation of those meanings that, during the full-scale war, became the basis for explaining and justifying unfolding events.

Our aim is to analyze the period of pre-war narrative preparation in 2021 and the development of narrative storytelling in 2022, since such an analysis is methodologically necessary for studying the nature of contemporary narrative creation techniques. It was during this time that the semantic constructs were formed that prepared the ground for the subsequent scaling of narratives during the course of military actions.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The empirical basis of the study consisted of video materials published on the YouTube platform during the period from March 2021 to February 2022. An array of materials for analysis was compiled, including two categories: 1) recordings of official speeches by key Russian political figures; 2) video content from state information channels, characterized by high view counts and broad public resonance. The selection of materials was based on keyword searches and monitoring of trends in the narrative surrounding the conflict. An important criterion was the resonance of the content, determined by the number of views and the activity of discussions on social media.

3.2 Data Processing and Evaluation Methods

The processing of the collected data was carried out using qualitative content analysis and comparative analysis methods. Each video material was systematized in terms of its main storylines, vocabulary, visual imagery, and overall message. Basic metadata for each video was also recorded: date of publication, title, view count, and number of comments. The analysis was aimed not at statistical calculation but at identifying semantic patterns and the logic of narrative construction. To assess the resonance of the material, available platform metrics were used, which made it possible to identify the most significant content units in terms of agenda-setting.

3.3 Identification of Recurring Themes

To identify recurring themes, the thematic analysis method based on the Braun and Clarke model was applied. During the analysis of video materials, recurring themes, keywords, and constructed narratives were identified, which were subsequently grouped into separate categories of stable narratives across 4 groups: construction of the enemy image, construction of one's own image, positioning of the conflict from a historical perspective, and positioning of the conflict from a geopolitical perspective.

The criterion for identifying a narrative was its stable recurrence across materials from various categories of sources (official, expert, popular) within each time period. A narrative was considered significant if it was consistently reproduced in the rhetoric of official Russian channels on YouTube and Facebook, being recorded in various types of content (news reports, analytical programs, authorial posts) throughout the

entire time period. To verify the identified narratives, a cross-checking method using several independent content units within the sample was applied.

3.4 Tracking Emotional Tone Over Time

Tracking changes in the emotional tone of the narrative was carried out by observing shifts in vocabulary, rhetorical devices, and the overall tone of video materials across different time periods. The emphasis was placed on qualitative interpretation: it was noted whether the tone became more aggressive, justifying, triumphalist, or portraying victimhood. The key task was to correlate these changes with the course of actual geopolitical and military events. As a result of the analysis, a direct link was identified between changes in the emotional register of video content and such events as the beginning of the special military operation, NATO summits, the announcement of partial mobilization, or the surrender of key populated areas.

4. RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Chronology of Narrative Emergence and Conflict Escalation (March – December 2021)

One of the first and most widespread narratives was the thesis of the threat posed by Ukraine and NATO to Russia and its national security. This narrative was not new: official Russian rhetoric had portrayed NATO expansion as an existential threat since the mid-1990s. Putin directly stated at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Ukraine's NATO membership was questionable, viewing it as an encroachment on Russia's sphere of influence ¹⁵. However, after February 21, 2021, when the Russian Ministry of Defense announced large-scale military exercises involving tens of thousands of troops near the border with Ukraine, the subsequent sharp escalation of tensions with Ukraine and international actors led to a significant intensification of such rhetoric from the Russian side.

The initial scenario for the military exercises was to practice defense against invasions and practice a naval blockade in Crimea with the active participation of about 10,000 servicemen. Although the exercises were publicly presented as routine and were supposed to end in March, military forces remained near the borders of Crimea, dangerously close to Ukraine. According to Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby, the spring deployment of Russian troops near Ukraine's border was the largest since 2014 ¹⁶. This prompted the U.S. European Command in late March to revise its assessments: the threat level was raised from a "potential crisis" to a "crisis whose approach is considered inevitable."

Following this, official rhetoric and narratives of Russian media began to systematically disseminate the theme of escalation of the conflict in Donbas at the fault of Ukraine, as well as the thesis of its allegedly planned attack. A key argument in the information campaign was the incident in the village of Aleksandrovskoye in Donetsk region, where, according to the Russian side, a child died.

The Russian side claimed that a child born in 2016 died as a result of an explosion of an improvised explosive device dropped from a Ukrainian drone. A woman was also reported wounded. The fact of the child's death was confirmed in the report of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission dated April 6, 2021. However, the document lacked any indication of the involvement of a Ukrainian drone ¹⁷.

The Ukrainian side categorically rejected the accusations. In the Joint Center for Control and Coordination (JCCC), the Ukrainian delegation requested evidence from the Russian side: coordinates, photo or video materials, fragments of the UAV, but they were never provided. Kyiv also pointed out that Ukrainian Armed Forces drones had not been airborne that day, and the technical characteristics of Ukrainian drones and the operation of electronic warfare (EW) systems made it virtually impossible to strike from a distance of 14–30 km from the front line, where the village of Aleksandrovs koye is located. Despite the lack of evidence, the incident received widespread coverage in Russian media, becoming a tool for intensifying the propaganda backdrop. A number of independent organizations, including StopFake, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the Center for Strategic Communications, qualified this report as fake and disinformation aimed at justifying the escalation of the conflict ¹⁸. This situation can be considered the beginning of the active promotion of narratives about Ukrainian aggression against the DPR and LPR. During the first 120 days, approximately 385 cases of Russian disinformation related to Ukraine were identified, which can be described as an average of about 3.2 units per day. The list of examples directly includes the report of April 3, 2021, that "a Ukrainian drone killed a child in Donbas"¹⁹.

Later, another major flashpoint of tension was the Zapad-2021 exercises ²⁰. These maneuvers surpassed in scale the exercises conducted earlier that year. According to official data, up to 200,000 servicemen, 760 units of armored vehicles, more than 80 aircraft and helicopters, and 15 ships were involved in the active phase, practicing tasks at 14 training grounds. A suspicious fact was the official scenario of the exercises, which was supposed to simulate Russia and Belarus's response to a NATO invasion that allegedly decided to use force after failing to destabilize Belarus through the 2020 protests. Also of concern was the fact that even after the exercises ended, the redeployment of Russian troops did not cease.²¹

The documented buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine's border in October–November 2021 caused concern both in Kyiv and among Western partners, who viewed these actions as a threat of regional escalation. The concentration of forces in close proximity to Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states became a key trigger for an emergency NATO summit in Brussels on June 14, 2021, chaired by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. The summit agenda included issues of Russian military buildup in Crimea, Rostov region, and Belarus, risk assessment for Euro-Atlantic security, and preparation of the Alliance's new Strategic Concept until 2030 ²². Moscow rejected the claims set out in the final communiqué, qualifying them as provocative and escalatory, and accused the Alliance of Russophobia used to justify its own military activity ²³.

Following this, rhetoric in the public and narrative space began to intensify regarding the growing military and nuclear threat emanating from Ukraine toward Russia. The key argument was the thesis of the possible deployment of NATO missile systems on Ukrainian territory. This position was most clearly

articulated by Russian President Vladimir Putin: "If some strike systems appear on the territory of Ukraine, the flight time to Moscow will be 7–10 minutes, and in the case of hypersonic weapons — five minutes. <...> Then we will be forced to create something similar in relation to those who threaten us in this way." ²⁴. The impact of these narratives on the Russian audience can be reflected in data from a Levada Center poll. In April 2021, 48% of respondents blamed the US and NATO for the escalation in Donbas; only 20% named Kyiv as the instigator, and 4% named Russia. At the same time, 43% believed that Russia should intervene on the side of the "DPR/LPR" in the event of a large-scale conflict, and 65% would support their annexation to Russia. The connection with media consumption was also noticeable: the US and NATO were named as culprits of the escalation by 57% of TV viewers, 39% of online media readers, 39% of social media users, and 26% of Telegram channel readers ²⁵.

Subsequently, the narrative of the "threat from the Ukrainian direction" to Russia's national security was further developed. In addition to the theme of "deployment of NATO missile systems on Ukrainian territory," the thesis of Ukraine's development of chemical weapons with US support was actively promoted. A striking example of this propaganda campaign was the speech of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu at an expanded meeting of the military department's board in Moscow ²⁶. He stated the presence of 120 employees of American private military companies (PMCs) in Avdiivka and the Azov region of Donetsk region for the purpose of equipping firing positions and preparing a provocation using an "unidentified chemical component" in Avdiivka and Krasnyi Lyman.

The Ukrainian side and Pentagon spokesman John Kirby immediately denied these accusations, calling them false ²⁷. Monitoring missions, including the UN and OPCW, did not record any traces of the use of chemical substances in these areas. Moscow, in turn, did not provide documentary evidence of its claims in response to relevant requests. Despite the lack of evidence, Russian media continued to spread rhetoric constructing the image of Ukraine as a state potentially capable of using nuclear or chemical weapons against Donbas and Russia as a whole, including official speeches of senior politicians on social media.

The presented chronology of narratives demonstrates the consistent preparation of an information foothold for constructing the image of Ukraine as a source of existential threat to Russia. It is fundamentally important to emphasize that none of the events on which this rhetoric was based received documentary confirmation. The alleged UAV attack on the village of Oleksandrivske in the Donetsk region, which was blamed on Ukraine, turned out to lack credible evidence and was later dismissed as unreliable by independent observers ¹⁸. The theses about the development of chemical weapons with US support, as well as about real military plans to attack Donbas or Russian territory, not only remained unsubstantiated but also did not initiate any international investigations that could confirm their veracity.

The systematic dissemination of theses about threats from the Ukrainian direction shaped among the target audience - including the population of Russia, Ukraine, and the international audience - the perception of Ukraine as a source of aggression requiring a preventive response. These narratives could particularly influence the perception of the conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as they directly concerned their population. The lack of evidence for each of the accusations put forward did not reduce

the effectiveness of this campaign, since its task was not persuasion but the creation of an emotional backdrop against which military invasion began to be perceived as the only possible solution. The foundation laid in this way subsequently easily transformed into theses about "Ukraine's planning of an attack on the DPR and LPR" or about "Ukrainians and the Ukrainian government being Nazis," observed in later periods, and finally cemented in the public consciousness the image of an enemy not subject to negotiation. This also contributed to the legitimization of the conflict and the subsequent conviction in the "peacekeeping" role of Russian troops on Ukrainian territory, as well as accusing the Ukrainian side of starting the conflict.

4.2 Narrative Escalation and Construction (January – February 2022)

The key period for the formation of the narrative framework was January–February 2022, which opened with the submission to the State Duma of a draft resolution on Russia's recognition of the self-proclaimed republics of Donbas.

On January 19, 2022, the Communist Party faction submitted for consideration draft resolution No. 58243-8 with an appeal to the President of the Russian Federation on the recognition of the "DPR" and "LPR" as sovereign states²⁸. The document contained an appeal to Russia's participation in the "peaceful settlement" of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the provision of "humanitarian assistance" to the republics since 2014. The main arguments put forward were the theses of oppression of the Russian-speaking population, aggression from Ukraine, and Kyiv's systematic failure to implement the Minsk agreements. However, the adoption of the draft resolution was not automatic. A period of public hesitation ensued, during which Vladimir Putin avoided an immediate decision, citing ongoing negotiations on security guarantees and the risk of unilateral breach of the Minsk agreements signed on September 5, 2014.

The narratives formed during this period had a dual position. On the one hand, Russia positioned itself as a country striving for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, complying with the Minsk agreements, and acting as a bona fide subject of international law, disseminating narratives such as: "Russia refuses to violate the Minsk agreements" and "Russia is the guarantor of the Minsk agreements." On the other hand, the thesis that Ukraine and Western partners had "deceived Russia" by failing to fulfill their obligations under the 2014 agreements was simultaneously promoted. The scale of dissemination of this narrative is confirmed by monitoring conducted by the Institute of Mass Information of Ukraine: in 2021, an average of 305 messages containing pro-Russian manipulations were recorded weekly in the Ukrainian media landscape, which is 59% more than in 2020, when the average was 206.5 messages. The category asserting that "the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war is Ukraine's doing" accounted for 14.15% of all recorded manipulative content; this included, in particular, accusations that Kyiv had failed to implement the Minsk agreements. Thus, this thematic cluster was present in approximately every seventh identified message²⁹.

This rhetoric gradually and systematically created the foundation for the future justification of the direct violation of the Minsk agreements and fundamental norms of international law through encroachment on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It allowed Russia to annul its obligations under the Minsk agreements, presenting their non-fulfillment not as a violation of international law but as a reaction to "unfair" actions toward Russia.

The culmination of the stage of political discourse on granting independence to the DPR and LPR on the international stage was Putin's statement on February 15, 2022, at a joint press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz ³⁰. The Russian President for the first time at an official level characterized the situation in Donbas as "genocide" and "systematic terror against the Russian-speaking population," stating: "what is happening today in Donbas is genocide." This significantly heightened the intensity of rhetoric and prepared the ground for further Russian actions. The introduction of the "genocide" narrative fulfilled a key function of shifting the conflict from the political plane to the moral one. Whereas previously the discussion concerned territorial disputes and the implementation of agreements regarding territories not directly connected to the territory of the Russian Federation, the situation was now presented as a matter of the physical survival of the population, which automatically required not diplomatic but forceful methods of "protection."

In the period immediately preceding the recognition of the DPR and LPR, and then the start of the military invasion, an unprecedented concentration of escalatory narratives was recorded, disseminated in urgent news reports of Russian and pro-Russian videos. Most of these information dumps were later debunked by several independent investigations; however, at the moment of key political decisions, they served as the main arguments in support of government decisions, and also strongly resonated with people's emotional involvement, contributing to sharp public support. Although in a different context, such a successful combination of emotional charge and political benefit for Russia's purposes might seem coincidental. But given the artificial origin of this information and the chronological precision of its appearance to provide direct arguments for legitimizing certain Russian actions, such events should be considered within the framework of possible planning of information-psychological operations.

The beginning of the stream of events was February 17, 2022, when an artillery shell hit the "Skazka" kindergarten in the city of Stanitsa Luhanska, controlled by the Ukrainian government. There were about 20 children aged 2 to 5 in the building; however, there were no casualties due to rapid evacuation ³¹. The Ukrainian side and President Zelensky placed responsibility on pro-Russian LPR forces, qualifying the incident as a violation of the ceasefire regime. Subsequently, investigations by independent organizations, in particular Bellingcat experts, supported the version of the separatist origin of the shelling. Analysis of the crater and radial fragmentation pattern indicated that fire came from the southern direction — from positions controlled by the LPR. The nature of the damage corresponded to the use of 82-mm or 120-mm mortars, typical of the armament of LPR forces and supporting Russian units ³². The Kremlin, however, presented the incident in a different light. Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov stated: "We have repeatedly warned that the excessive concentration of Ukrainian forces at the line of contact, together

with possible provocations, could pose a terrible danger," implicitly placing responsibility on the Ukrainian side ³³. The Russian side immediately used this incident as direct confirmation of the thesis of "continuous shelling" of civilians, which fit into the broader rhetoric of the need to "protect" Donbas.

The next day, February 18, 2022, a statement was published that Ukrainian saboteurs had attempted to blow up chlorine tanks in Russian-occupied Horlivka ³⁴. This was presented from the Russian point of view as a deliberate escalation of the conflict using chemical weapons. As confirmation, a video was published by representatives of the "DPR People's Militia," showing an attempt by saboteurs speaking Polish to blow up containers ³⁵. However, metadata verification showed that the video had been filmed several days before the stated date, and the audio track was completely copied from a YouTube video showing Finnish military exercises. Moreover, this event was broadcast in most media and on platforms even after the video was confirmed as a complete fake ³⁶.

The culmination of the information campaign to shape the image of Ukraine as a threat was the events of February 18, 2022. On this day, DPR head Denis Pushilin announced a mass evacuation of residents of the republics to the Rostov region of the Russian Federation. In his address, he spoke of an allegedly planned order from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to invade, citing the buildup of Ukrainian troops at the line of contact and the shelling of DPR territory that had intensified since February 17. The evacuation of women, children, and the elderly, according to Pushilin, was necessary for their protection, and it was planned to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people ³⁷.

The evacuation campaign created grounds for the recognition of the independence of the DPR and LPR, while simultaneously reinforcing the narrative of the failure of the Minsk agreements and the West's inability to guarantee security. In parallel, a campaign unfolded around the incident in Horlivka, where DPR representatives announced the prevention of a sabotage with chlorine tanks. Combined with the shelling of the kindergarten in Stanitsa Luhanska, these events shaped the image of Ukraine as a party using prohibited methods of warfare and threatening civilians. Denis Pushilin repeatedly spoke of "Ukrainian aggression" and "the danger that Ukraine poses to the DPR." ³⁸.

The final step before the decision to grant independence to the DPR and LPR was a meeting of the Russian Security Council on February 21, 2022 ³⁹. Following this, a video was published on the official channel of the Russian Government showing the signing of documents on the recognition of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic ⁴⁰.

Taking into account the artificial origin of the situations described subsequently and the narratives created with their help, as well as the extremely telling chronological precision of their appearance on official platforms, which provided the necessary information cover for the signing of fateful documents in such a short time frame, it is logical to assume that their generation was a pre-planned operation aimed at legitimizing subsequent steps in the shortest historical terms

Analysis of Putin's pre-war video

The most powerful and influential video resource for tracking Russia's narrative position and shaping the general discourse is the video published on February 24, 2022, by Vladimir Putin half an hour before the invasion of Ukraine ⁴¹. Throughout the video, we recorded the majority of the narratives that had been disseminated during the course of the conflict.

We consider the analysis of narratives in this video necessary for understanding how state propaganda constructs reality, legitimizes the use of force, and creates a sustainable worldview. Presenting the narratives of the speech in their chronological sequence, it can be noted that the first thing mentioned in the video is a reference to Russia's patience regarding the situation in the region: "It is well known that for thirty years we have persistently and patiently sought to reach agreement with the leading NATO countries on the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe." ⁴². From the very beginning, the tone of a "victim of circumstances" that has exhausted all diplomatic methods is set. This is immediately followed by accusations against NATO and, indirectly, Ukraine of dishonor, deceit, and disregard for Russia: "In response to our proposals, we constantly encountered either cynical deception and lies, or attempts at pressure and blackmail... <...> Where does this dismissive, contemptuous attitude toward our interests and absolutely legitimate demands come from?" Here, the conflict shifts from the geopolitical plane to the moral-ethical one, allowing the speaker to appeal to universal categories of justice: "such chicanery and behavior contradict not only the principles of international relations but above all the universally recognized norms of morality and ethics. Where is justice and truth here? Nothing but lies and hypocrisy." ⁴¹.

The reason why Russia - great, and according to official rhetoric, the leading power in the region - allowed such an attitude toward itself is cited as the moment of weakness after the collapse of the USSR. The weakening of the Soviet Union destroyed the balance of power, which gave rise to disregard for Russia on the part of the US and NATO. This disrespect, according to the logic of the speech, became the cause of the violation of promises regarding NATO non-expansion and the Minsk agreements. As stated in the speech: "As soon as we lost our confidence for a time, that was it – the balance of power in the world was disrupted. <...> Everything that does not suit the hegemon is declared outdated, while everything that is beneficial is presented as the ultimate truth. Those who disagree are broken over the knee." ⁴¹.

In this context, the "image of the enemy" is formed. The United States of America was mentioned several times in the speech as the "Empire of Lies." This term – "empire of lies" – becomes a key label attached to the entire collective West. To reinforce this image, the speech repeatedly mentions the "mistakes" and crimes of America and NATO in their dealings with other countries – Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yugoslavia. A comprehensive narrative of the destructive nature of Western intervention is created: "Overall, one gets the impression that almost everywhere, in many regions of the world where the West comes to impose its own order, bloody, festering wounds remain, as well as the ulcer of international terrorism and extremism." ⁴¹.

Later in the speech, the narratives become even denser and more interconnected, moving from global geopolitics to the situation surrounding Ukraine. Here, the narratives of Russia's greatness and nuclear might - which, despite temporary weakness in the past, has restored its potential and is ready to defend it - ring out in full force. The threat of NATO expansion is concretized: it is no longer about an abstract alliance but about the creation of a hostile "anti-Russia" on "our historical territories." From this stems the narrative of the illegitimacy of the authorities in Ukraine, which is described as the "Kyiv regime," a "junta," and "Nazis." Ukraine is deprived of a voice, presented not as a subject but as an object, a puppet of the West. The central element of the second part becomes the narrative of the security of Donbas and genocide. Russia positions itself as a patient peacekeeper that for eight years unsuccessfully tried to resolve the issue peacefully but was forced to intervene due to Kyiv's unwillingness to implement the agreements and due to the direct threat to people's lives.

The culmination of the rhetoric becomes the narrative of the inevitability and compulsion of intervention. Putin intensifies the sense of fatal threat, asserting that a clash with the forces that have taken Ukraine hostage is inevitable, and the question is only a matter of time. Russia, according to this logic, is delivering a preemptive strike to prevent an even greater tragedy. At the same time, the absence of any intentions to occupy Ukraine or impose anything by force is repeatedly emphasized—the goal is declared to be purely noble: demilitarization and denazification, that is, the destruction of the very essence of the "hostile regime." The seizure of power by neo-Nazis in Ukraine is presented as a fact requiring no proof, and it is against this internal threat, not against the people, that the operation is directed.

Ultimately, all these narratives - from the image of the US as an "empire of evil" to the image of the "saved Donbas" - close into a single system. It is designed to convince the viewer that Russia, a great power, guardian of traditional values and justice, once again, as in 1941, is forced to repel absolute evil in order to ensure its own survival. Analysis of this system shows how skillfully the speech interweaves historical analogies, moral categories, and geopolitical conspiracy theories to create a compelling, albeit completely distorting, picture of events.

4.3 Systematization and Functional Typology of Narratives

By the time of the invasion on February 24, the set of propaganda constructs used had finally taken shape; they were demonstrated in a particularly expanded form during the period three days before the invasion, at the Security Council meeting on February 21, 2022, and in Putin's address on February 24, 2022. Throughout subsequent events, the formed narratives and rhetoric were reproduced in various variations on an ongoing basis, yet their fundamental theses remained unchanged.

Based on the analysis of publications on YouTube and Facebook platforms, over 150+ systematically recurring narratives were identified, consistently used in official political rhetoric. To understand their role in the conflict, we turned to a functional typology developed on the basis of psychological operations (PSYOP) doctrines and research in the field of information-psychological operations. This allowed us to

distribute the identified narratives into five categories according to their target purpose: demoralizing, legitimizing, disorienting, mobilizing, and dividing.

The conducted analysis also allows for the classification of the identified narratives not only by their functional affiliation but also by the themes they carry within the overall structure of political rhetoric. The categorization of narratives presented below is divided into 4 groups.

Groups 1 and 2 describe the formation of a vision of the conflict oriented primarily toward the construction of the subjects of war; they shape the image of the "Other" (the enemy) and the image of "Self" (Russia) in the eyes of the people, as well as on the political arena. Groups 3 and 4 are more involved in shaping the narrative history of the conflict; they are designed to explain and justify Russia's actions to various categories of audience: Group 3 appeals to historical and moral justifications, while Group 4 turns to arguments in the sphere of international security and geopolitics.

4.4 Construction of the Enemy Image

Category "Creating the Image of the Enemy" unites narratives aimed at forming a sustained negative perception of Ukraine, its government, army, and population among target audiences. The theoretical foundation of this category is the concept of the "image of the enemy," according to which the construction of clear negative stereotypes about an opponent heightens the perception of threat, reduces empathy, and legitimizes the conflict in the eyes of one's own population, removing moral constraints on the use of force — a tool often used to shape state agendas in conflicts.⁴³ Within the category "Creating the Image of the Enemy," the primary objective of the narratives is delegitimization, which is achieved through two complementary mechanisms — dehumanization and denial of sovereignty. Dehumanization creates an emotional basis for rejecting the enemy, stripping it of its human image; denial of sovereignty adds legal and political justification, presenting the enemy as an illegitimate actor.

Dehumanization narratives portray Ukraine, its government, and its population as bearers of unacceptable qualities that place them outside the moral realm. This group includes narratives about Ukraine as a "terrorist state" committing "genocide against the Russian population"; about the government as a corrupt "puppet of the West"; and about the population as "Nazis" and "Banderites." The rhetoric of "Nazis" and "genocide" was not limited to Vladimir Putin's specific address; it became one of the fundamental methods of dehumanization employed by numerous officials. For instance, Sergei Lavrov stated that the goal of the "special military operation" was to protect the residents of Donbas from the "Kyiv neo-Nazi regime." ⁴⁴ Meanwhile, a report by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Human Rights Situation in Ukraine," accuses Ukrainian authorities of "glorifying Nazism" and "Nazi collaborators," as well as promoting these interpretations through literature, educational materials, schools, and "patriotic education" programs. The document claims that Ukrainian schools and textbooks promote a "Russophobic and nationalist version of history," although this assertion is largely unsupported by sufficient evidence ⁴⁵.

This narrative strategy exerts a strong influence on the population. In Russian state-controlled media, the daily number of mentions related to the word "Nazis" increased more than fourfold — from fewer than 60 mentions on February 17, 2022, to over 240 on February 24. In a broader dataset comprising nearly 8 million articles about Ukraine published on more than 8,000 Russian websites since 2014, references to Nazism appeared in 10–20% of publications about Ukraine after February 24 ⁴⁶.

An additional dimension of dehumanization is the denial of Ukraine's sovereignty. Such narratives create a negative perception not only among the Russian population but also on the international stage. This occurs because depriving a state of its status as a sovereign actor undermines its ability to claim international protection, military assistance, and diplomatic support, as research in the field of information warfare suggests ⁴⁷.

Narratives denying sovereignty are linked to the category of "historical-moral justification," described later in this section, as they are primarily built on the idea of portraying Ukraine as an "artificially created state" that is a "historical part of Russia."

The foundation for narratives in the sovereignty denial category is the positioning of Ukraine as a state dependent on multiple external forces. This manifests in its perceived lack of autonomy and dependence on NATO countries, encapsulated in labels such as "Ukraine — a puppet of the West" or "Ukraine — a project created by external forces." Between January and November 2022, approximately 200,000 posts were published on Facebook across 26 official pages. Of these, 40,000 publications systematically depicted Ukraine as a country controlled by Western governments, directly corresponding to narratives of dependency and sovereignty denial. The combined audience of these pages exceeded 64.3 million followers, with total interactions reaching 86 million — underscoring the massive reach of such campaigns and the fact that this position was actively promoted through official sources ⁴⁸.

Within the broader strategy of constructing the enemy image, the formation of a negative portrayal of the Ukrainian government should also be highlighted. Ukrainian authorities are described as corrupt, incompetent, and leading the country toward economic collapse and social chaos. Politicians are depicted as mired in corruption and indifferent to the needs of the population. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is portrayed as an incompetent figure lacking real authority and education, controlled from abroad and dependent on Western curators — further reinforcing the image of the government as puppet-like and devoid of agency.

A central motif in describing Ukrainian authorities is the accusation of Russophobia. According to official rhetoric, the country's leadership deliberately pursues a policy aimed at eradicating everything Russian: banning the Russian language, rewriting history, and oppressing Russian-speaking populations and those who remain loyal to Russia. Although the widespread use of the Ukrainian language and the strengthening of Ukrainian cultural identity intensified after the war began as a reaction to aggression, in Russian narratives this process is presented not as a consequence of the conflict but as its cause — a deliberate policy of the "Kyiv regime." This image is designed to justify Russia's right to intervene under

the pretext of protecting compatriots, creating a moral rationale for actions that might otherwise be classified as aggression.

Thus, the construction of the enemy image in Russian propaganda constitutes a deliberate strategy that integrates dehumanization and sovereignty denial to fully delegitimize Ukraine as a subject of international law and a moral actor. This category of narratives not only mobilizes the domestic Russian audience, strengthening cohesion around the official agenda and removing psychological barriers to conflict escalation but also seeks to undermine external support for Kyiv by framing its actions as manifestations of an existential threat to the "Russian world." These narratives are particularly impactful because, in addition to delegitimizing the authorities for the Russian-speaking population, they undermine unity within Ukraine, reinforcing pro-Russian sentiments and discrediting government support. Sovereignty denial, in turn, demoralizes the affected population by portraying resistance as futile.

The key function of this category is the transformation of the perception of war from an interstate confrontation into an existential struggle between good and evil, where Russia acts as the defender and Ukraine as the source of threat to be neutralized. Collectively, these narratives form a cognitive frame in which the war is perceived as forced, just, and necessary, while the enemy is seen as absolute evil — undeserving of mercy, dialogue, or the right to exist as a sovereign state.

4.6 Constructing the Image of "Self"

No matter how convincingly the image of the enemy is constructed, it cannot, by itself, sustain a society in a state of mobilization for an extended period. Fear and hatred are powerful but finite resources. For a conflict to be perceived as just and necessary, and its costs as justified, something more is required: a positive image of one's own group, its mission, and its moral superiority ⁴⁹.

If the narratives in the "enemy image" category answer the question "against whom are we fighting?" by establishing a negative pole of identity, then the "Self-image" category forms the positive pole. It defines "who we are," "what values we defend," and "in the name of what we make sacrifices." In the psychological tradition rooted in Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, this mechanism works as follows: the demonization of "others" necessitates a compensatory glorification of "one's own." Without this, a sense of threat may generate only anxiety and frustration, not sustained loyalty and a willingness for self-sacrifice ⁵⁰.

It is important to note that the construction of the "Self-image" in Russian rhetoric operates on the principle of mirror reflection of the enemy. Qualities attributed to Ukraine and the West are inverted: aggression is countered with peacefulness, cruelty with humanism, and dependency with sovereignty and strength. Such binary opposition creates a simple and internally consistent worldview that is effectively absorbed by the audience and resistant to criticism.

Based on the analysis of empirical material, three key strategic objectives have been identified, implemented through interconnected groups of narratives.

First Objective: Legitimization of One's Own Actions

This objective consists of proving that Russia's actions are forced, defensive, and morally justified. It is realized through narratives that deny the aggressive nature of the war and present Russia as a defender and peacemaker. Examples of core assertions:

- "Russia is not an aggressor; it is a victim of aggression from the West."
- "Russia is the defender of the Russian population living under occupation by the Ukrainian government."
- "Russia does not want war; we stand for peace and good-neighborly relations."
- "Russia patiently and persistently engaged in dialogue with the West, offering security guarantees, but we were simply ignored, leaving us no other choice."

The effectiveness of these narratives is clearly illustrated by survey data from March 24–30, 2022. When asked about support for Russian military actions, 81% of respondents answered positively: 53% expressed "definite support," and 28% expressed "rather support." Only 14% of respondents did not support the actions of the Russian Armed Forces. Even more striking are the responses regarding possible reasons for international condemnation: 36% of respondents believe that countries condemned Russia because "they obey the US and NATO"; 29% — because "they were misinformed by Western media"; and 27% — because "the world has always been against Russia." Meanwhile, 15% said it was because "they fear Russia will treat them the same way as Ukraine"; 16% — because "they believe Russia violated international law and Ukraine's rights"; and 12% — because "they are outraged by Russia's actions." ⁵¹.

As propaganda researchers note, narratives of "forced defense" are among the most effective mechanisms for mobilizing society, as they appeal to basic instincts of self-preservation and do not provoke cognitive dissonance when confronted with the costs of conflict ⁵².

Second Objective: Exaltation of One's Own Significance

This objective is aimed at maintaining Russia's image as a great power, a regional leader, and an independent center of power that cannot be ignored. It compensates for the sense of international isolation and creates foundations for national pride. In a conflict situation, it is critically important to maintain public belief in the strength and rightness of one's own side, as this belief ensures readiness to endure hardships. Core narratives:

- "Russia is a great power and regional leader whose interests cannot be disregarded."
- "Russia is not afraid of the West and is prepared to defend its national interests by all available means."

The effectiveness of this rhetoric can be traced through sociological survey data. According to VTsIOM measurements, over two years, the share of citizens perceiving Russia as a "great power" increased noticeably. In 2020, this figure stood at 37%; by 2022, it reached 51%, an increase of 14 percentage points. Notably, as early as March 2022, amid the first months of the conflict, an interim value of 46% was recorded, indicating a steady upward trend in these sentiments.⁵³

Third Objective: Sacralization of the Leader and Consolidation Around the Government

This objective is realized through the construction of the president's image as the sole guarantor of sovereignty and defender of national interests. It ensures domestic political stability and ties Russia's image to a specific figure, sharply increasing mobilization potential in times of conflict, as criticism of the government begins to be perceived as treason against national interests. An example of the narratives disseminated can be summarized as: "Vladimir Putin is a strong and responsible leader, the only one capable of protecting Russia from collapse and standing up to the hypocritical West."

This point is crucial for understanding how the war was justified domestically. However, it is also the most difficult to verify: we cannot trust survey data directly, because the rise in Putin's support may have resulted not only from genuine public sentiment but also from censorship, repression, respondents' fear, and the rally-around-the-flag effect⁵⁴. In this category, data from the independent Levada Center can be cited with caution, as they record a significant increase in declared presidential support during the early months of the war. According to their data, approval of Vladimir Putin's performance rose from 63% at the end of 2021 to 83% in March 2022, a 20-percentage-point increase and remained at 83% as of August 2022⁵⁵.

Collectively, these "Self-image" narratives construct a stable identity in which Russia appears as a peace-loving power forced to defend itself; as a great power that cannot be ignored; as a power that assists those in need and respects international law; as a leading power led by a strong and responsible leader. This construct performs a key function in the psychological support of the conflict: it allows citizens to perceive themselves not as part of an aggressor nation but as representatives of a besieged yet righteous and great civilization — preserving their moral self-respect and willingness to continue participating in the conflict, even at the cost of significant losses.

4.7 Constructing the Conflict: Historical-Moral Legitimization of the Invasion

The category of historical-moral justifications unites narratives that present Russia's invasion of Ukraine through the lens of shared history and moral obligations. These narratives reinterpret Ukraine's past, shaping a specific interpretation of the current conflict. Their goal is to transform the perception of war from an act of aggression into an act of just reunification, appealing to feelings of historical loss and

fraternal responsibility. Such an interpretation is designed to remove moral barriers to supporting military action and to shape the perception of war as a historical necessity.

A key source for reconstructing Russia's official position is Vladimir Putin's essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" ⁵⁶, published in July 2021, as well as his public addresses, including the speech preceding the military action on February 24, 2022 ⁵⁷. These texts formulated a version of history intended to justify Russia's right to decisive influence in the region and to legitimize military intervention. Analysis of these sources reveals a coherent system of narratives constructed by Russian rhetoric.

The central thesis of the essay and subsequent statements is the assertion of a common origin and primordial unity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. According to this logic, all three peoples are direct heirs of Kyivan Rus, bound by a shared faith, language, and culture, and therefore constitute a single people. This creates an emotional foundation for perceiving Ukraine as an inseparable part of the "Russian world," whose separation is unnatural; within this narrative, the war is merely a consequence of "reuniting the peoples." A CNN poll shows that Russians and Ukrainians hold fundamentally different views on how their identities relate to each other. Two-thirds of Russians (64%) agree that they and Ukrainians are "one people," reflecting the Soviet-era line on Ukraine. Ukrainians express the opposite view: two-thirds of Ukrainians (66%) disagree that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people." ⁵⁸.

Official rhetoric denies the autonomy of Ukrainian history and Ukrainian nationality apart from Russia. The idea of a separate Ukrainian people and the creation of a sovereign state, according to this version, has no foundation. The essay explicitly states: "There were no historical grounds for this, nor could there have been" ⁵⁹. The Ukrainian language is simultaneously interpreted as "a dialect formed as a result of territorial isolation but lacking independent value." Such an interpretation undermines the legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood as such, presenting it as an artificial construct.

Modern Ukraine is described as an artificial formation whose territories appear as "gifts" granted by Soviet power. The essay formulates this as follows: "Modern Ukraine is entirely and fully a product of the Soviet era. We know and remember that it was created to a significant extent at the expense of historical Russia. It is enough to compare which lands reunited with the Russian state in the 17th century and with which territories the Ukrainian SSR left the Soviet Union" ⁵⁶.

A special place in the rhetoric is devoted to describing economic unity. The period of the 1990s, when Ukraine and Russia maintained close cooperative ties, is presented as a model of mutually beneficial cooperation that, according to the author, "European countries could have envied." The economies of the two states are described as "natural, complementing each other," implicitly denying the necessity of Ukrainian economic independence. In contrast to this "golden age" of cooperation, the current state of Ukraine is depicted exclusively in negative terms: economic decline, destroyed infrastructure, and the status of Europe's poorest country.

The rhetoric insists that Russia "did a great deal to help Ukraine become an independent country." This thesis reinforces Russia's image as a benefactor whose efforts were betrayed by ungrateful recipients, strengthening the moral justification for subsequent intervention.

As a result, the constructed narrative structure shifts the explanation of Ukraine's problems from internal causes to external ones, while simultaneously prescribing a single possible solution. If prosperity was possible only in connection with Moscow, and independence brought only ruin, then returning to Russia's orbit becomes not a political choice but an economic and existential necessity. Alignment with Russia is presented not as imperial expansion but as the natural restoration of lost harmony.

The blame for the situation is assigned to Ukrainian governments, which, according to this logic, step by step turned the country into an "anti-Russia" with the support of NATO countries. The text states: "Step by step, Ukraine was drawn into a dangerous geopolitical game, the goal of which is to turn Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, into a springboard against Russia" ⁵⁹. In December 2021, amid the buildup of Russian troops along the border, the share of Russians holding the US and NATO responsible for the crisis rose to 50%. Another 16% believed Ukraine was the instigator. Meanwhile, only 4% named Russia, and 3% cited the unrecognized Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR) in eastern Ukraine ⁶⁰.

Here, Ukraine is definitively stripped of agency: it appears not as an actor in its own history but as an object of external manipulation, a battleground between Russia and the West. Accordingly, the conflict ceases to be a confrontation between two states — it becomes a confrontation between Russia and the forces using Ukrainian territory as an instrument. Ukraine is removed from the list of conflict actors and appears merely as an arena and victim of someone else's game, while Russia is positioned as the force countering the real enemy — the West. Putin's text expresses this with ultimate candor: "The time inevitably came when the concept of 'Ukraine is not Russia' no longer sufficed. What was needed was an 'anti-Russia,' and we will never reconcile ourselves to that" ⁵⁶. This phrase reveals the true function of the entire constructed narrative structure. If Ukraine is first declared artificial, then unviable, then externally controlled, the final step — declaring its very existence as "anti-Russia" unacceptable — becomes logically inevitable. The conflict, thus, appears not as a decision made at a specific moment but as a long-overdue and inevitable clash with a force that has usurped Ukrainian statehood for purposes hostile to Russia.

Ultimately, the entire narrative construct works to absolve Russia of responsibility for starting the war. If Ukraine is "artificial, unviable, and moreover transformed by external forces into a hostile springboard", then military action appears not as aggression but as forced self-defense and the restoration of historical justice. The victim is declared the aggressor, the aggressor the defender, and war is peace. The constructed narrative structure thus shapes a particular understanding of Ukraine, the conflict, and Russia's role in it. By depicting Ukraine as an artificial entity whose statehood lacks historical legitimacy and whose independence is the result of external intervention, it creates a perspective that fundamentally alters the perception of the conflict. If one thinks within this rhetoric, then Ukraine — being an artificial formation

"taken away" from Russia by external forces — makes an attempt to "return" it closer to Russia seem logical.

Finally, in a broader perspective, such a narrative strategy undermines the very principle of the post-war world order, based on the inviolability of borders and the right of peoples to self-determination. If Ukraine can be declared "artificial," this label is potentially applicable to any state whose existence, for whatever reason, does not suit a more powerful neighbor. Thus, the conflict ceases to be a local dispute between two countries and becomes a challenge to the entire system of international relations, where history can be rewritten to serve current political objectives.

4.8 Constructing the Conflict: Political Justification

The fourth group of narratives provides political and strategic justification for military action by constructing the image of external threats presented as existential challenges to Russia's national security. This category focuses on themes of NATO expansion, nuclear and biological threats from Ukraine, Ukraine's role as a US proxy force, as well as violations of the Minsk agreements and Kyiv's alleged plans to retake Crimea and Donbas by force. The aim of these narratives is to legitimize preemptive military measures, demonize Ukraine as a revisionist of the international order, and mobilize domestic support by positioning Russia as a victim of aggression forced into responsive action.

Within the system of information-psychological influence, this category performs a key strategic function, reinforcing the demonizing narratives of the "enemy image" and the positive identity of the "Self-image." The image of an impending threat justifies the heroic portrayal of one's own actions, forming a cognitive frame of "inevitable war" in the audience's mind, which blocks doubts about the ethics of escalation.

The internal structure of the fourth group includes two levels of narratives. Central narratives — such as the "threat of NATO expansion," "violation of the Minsk agreements," "plans to attack Crimea and Donbas," and "nuclear and biological escalation" (with theses about "restoration of Ukraine's nuclear potential" and "Pentagon biolaboratories") — carry the main semantic load. They position Russia as facing a choice: strike preemptively or be destroyed — appealing to the basic survival instinct and creating an effect of existential urgency. Supporting narratives give the threats a geopolitical context by linking Ukraine with the United States, portraying Kyiv as a "puppet of Washington," and interpreting the current confrontation as a new phase of the Cold War — a continuation of the USSR-US conflict.

The interplay between central and supporting narratives forms a system in which: NATO expansion generates urgency and forced action; nuclear-biological rhetoric evokes strategic and emotional horror; and the historical frame of "Cold War 2.0" legitimizes escalation as a historical inevitability and morally justifies the struggle against "Nazis." This enhances the cognitive effect, blocks counterarguments, and forms a monolithic frame of the "besieged superpower," in which passivity on Russia's part is equivalent to capitulation.

Analyzing the narrative of the NATO expansion threat, we observe that its content and key theses assert that Ukraine's accession to the alliance creates an existential military threat to Russia. According to this logic, missile systems capable of striking key Russian facilities within minutes would be immediately deployed on Ukrainian territory, making NATO expansion a "red line" and a direct threat to the state's survival⁵⁶. Simultaneously, Kyiv allegedly seeks NATO membership only to "cover up its own aggression against Crimea and Donbas", while violations of the Minsk agreements merely confirm these plans, making Russia's preemptive action inevitable. The psychological objectives here fulfill classic tasks of mobilization and legitimization of force: the image of an inevitable threat is an effective tool for justifying escalation, suppressing internal dissent, and demoralizing the enemy by demonstrating resolve.

The mechanism of influence exploits fear of existential vulnerability. According to prospect theory, people tend to overestimate loss-related threats and take riskier decisions to prevent them. In this case, fear provokes panic and anger, activating the survival instinct and emotionally blocking rational analysis of alternatives — passivity begins to be perceived as suicide⁶¹. This narrative is systematically reproduced in Vladimir Putin's speeches and Russian Ministry of Defense reports. Its impact is reflected in sociological data, where support for military action in Russia remains consistently high, while simultaneously demotivating the Ukrainian audience through fear of uncontrolled escalation and neutralizing Western critics by providing them with the "preemptive defense" argument. Thus, the narrative ensures operational legitimization of military strikes, framing the conflict as defensive and strengthening public consolidation through the image of a "besieged fortress."

Turning to the nuclear rhetoric regarding Ukraine, this narrative constructs a "threat of Ukraine restoring its nuclear arsenal based on Soviet-era developments" — which, according to the rhetoric, "surpasses the capabilities of Iran or North Korea."⁵⁶ Crucially, Russian rhetoric was built not on confirmed possession of nuclear weapons by Ukraine but on assumptions about possible future creation of a nuclear device. It is claimed that Kyiv regrets its renunciation of nuclear weapons under the Budapest Memorandum and seeks to acquire them to blackmail both Russia and the West, thereby radically disrupting the balance of power and justifying any responsive measures by Russia. At present, there is no evidence to substantiate these claims; most of them appear to have been artificially constructed. The psychological objectives here correspond to deterrence and intimidation tasks, as mentioning weapons of mass destruction establishes an escalation threshold — fear of mutual annihilation demoralizes the adversary and its allies, blocking their readiness to support Ukraine.

The mechanism of influence builds on the archetypal horror of nuclear apocalypse. The image of an "enemy with a bomb" triggers dehumanization processes, making any casualties on one's own side acceptable as the price of survival. Emotional priming provokes paranoia while simultaneously increasing loyalty to one's own government as the "protector." This narrative is systematically reproduced in official state statements — for example, when on March 8, 2022, the Russian Foreign Ministry claimed that Ukrainian special services and Azov fighters had mined a reactor near Kharkiv as a provocation. Russian state media also disseminated the thesis that the US had transferred plutonium to Ukraine to create a

"dirty" nuclear device. The impact of this narrative sparked debates in Western capitals about the real risks of escalation, while inside Russia it contributed to rising militarist sentiments. For Ukrainian audiences, the narrative serves as a factor of demoralization. Consequently, it raises the perceived level of threat while simultaneously positioning Russia as a guarantor of global stability against Kyiv's "nuclear revanchism." ⁶².

Regarding the biological threat narrative, its content and key theses assert that biolaboratories funded by the Pentagon operate on Ukrainian territory, developing biological weapons components and testing them on the local population. This creates vulnerability for Russia and poses a threat to the entire world, requiring immediate neutralization to restore security. The psychological objectives here fulfill tasks of discreditation and deception, as portraying the opponent as a bioterrorist justifies any preemptive strikes or inspections, framing them as a humanitarian mission. The mechanism of influence relies on instinctive disgust and fear of pandemics — evolutionarily conditioned mechanisms.

The intensity of this narrative's dissemination is captured by a comparative study of news streams during the first month of the full-scale invasion, from February 24 to March 24, 2022. Four analyzed Russian media outlets published 160% more materials about "Ukrainian biolaboratories" than the examined American media outlets, despite the American sample containing more sources. In 40% of Russian materials, at least one key conspiratorial thesis was present: about biological weapons, secret laboratories, preparation for a biological attack, or concealment of evidence ⁶³. This narrative is systematically reproduced in Russian Ministry of Defense reports. In the global information space, it generates persistent conspiracy theories, and according to surveys in Global South countries, skepticism toward the official positions of Ukraine and the US on this issue has increased. For Russia, the narrative legitimizes strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure facilities, concretizing the threat of weapons of mass destruction, strengthening the moral imperative of preemptive action, and neutralizing humanitarian criticism directed at Russia.

Finally, the narrative of Ukraine's connection with America and the continuation of the USSR-US conflict portrays Ukraine as a US proxy force in a renewed Cold War. Kyiv appears as a puppet of Washington, which uses the Ukrainian crisis to violate the Minsk agreements and strategically weaken Russia. The entire conflict is interpreted as a continuation of Soviet-American confrontation, where NATO seeks global domination through escalation on the Ukrainian front. The psychological objectives here address tasks of information dominance and coalition-building, as reframing a local conflict into a global confrontation demotivates Western audiences while simultaneously strengthening pro-Russian narratives abroad.

The mechanism of influence uses historical analogy, activating the familiar frame of the "Cold War" to simplify perception of a complex conflict. The image of Ukraine as a "puppet" dehumanizes it, attributing all casualties and destruction to American imperialism and absolving direct participants of responsibility. This narrative dominates propaganda programs, while in the West it polarizes audiences, and in Global South countries it increases support for the Russian position. Within Russia, citizens view the US as the

main aggressor in the conflict. Thus, the narrative adds a geopolitical dimension, linking disparate threats into a unified global frame — legitimizing Russia's actions in the eyes of the international audience and isolating the opponent.

Collectively, these narratives of the fourth group form an integrated system of political justification, in which each element performs a specific function: the NATO expansion narrative provides operational urgency; nuclear-biological rhetoric creates strategic horror; and the geopolitical proxy-war context lends the conflict historical inevitability. Together, they legitimize preemptive actions as the only path to Russia's survival. This structure reinforces the demonization of the opponent from the first group, transforming external threats into an existential imperative, while simultaneously complementing the positive identity from the second group, positioning Russia as a rational defender confronting an irrational revisionist adversary.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Impact of Narratives Within Russia

The effectiveness of the disseminated narratives can be assessed through an analysis of survey data collected at different stages of the conflict. These data allow us to trace the dynamics of public support and the integration of narratives into both Russian public opinion and international discourse.

According to sociological survey data, approval ratings for state institutions and Russian policies increased as rhetorical escalation and the conflict developed. With the onset of military action, public support for the authorities surged sharply. In March 2022, it rose from 71% to 83%. This momentum positively affected all state institutions, including increased support for the ruling party ⁶⁴. It is important to note that at the initial stage of the conflict, support for the "special military operation" was justified by the population using narratives that had been introduced as early as 2021. For example, in June 2022, 75% of Russia's population supported the military action and the authorities' decision. Of these, 47% "definitely supported" the decision and 28% "rather supported" it ⁶⁵.

Those in the "definitely support" category explained their position using phrases that directly mirrored official rhetoric: the conflict was a defensive measure against NATO, a "preemptive strike," and a "forced measure." Theses about "liberating Ukraine from Nazis and fascists" were also mentioned, along with references to the leader's authority: "Vladimir Putin said so, and I trust him." This indicates successful assimilation by society of the narratives that had been promoted throughout 2021 ⁶⁵. The group that defined their attitude as "rather supporting" demonstrated less aggressive rhetoric. They most frequently justified their support by citing Russia's moral obligations to protect the DPR and LPR. According to surveys, for them, the "special military operation" was motivated primarily by a desire to protect the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine.

Based on the key reasons for supporting the war, it can be argued that narratives from all categories actively participated in shaping public opinion. The majority of supporters of the "special military operation" explain their position by the need to protect the Russian-speaking population of Donbas. References to a mortal threat to "our people," "compatriots," "brothers," and "Russian-speakers" constitute sufficient justification in the eyes of the majority. Another key source of support for the Russian military was the conviction that the US and NATO bear responsibility for the escalation of the conflict. As early as mid-February 2022, 60% of respondents held this view — 10 percentage points higher than in November 2021 ⁶⁶. The influence of narratives about the threat from NATO, the EU, and the US also affected perceptions of specific countries. According to Levada Center statistics, between January 2021 and March 2022, there was a sharp deterioration in attitudes toward European Union countries and the United States. Negative opinions about the US rose from 43% to 73%, while positive perceptions of the EU fell from 43% to 16% by the start of the conflict ⁶⁷.

5.2 Impact at the International Level

The primary danger of these narratives lies in their dissemination at the international level. According to the Debunk disinformation analysis center, the Kremlin spent \$1.9 billion on Russian propaganda in 2023 ⁶⁸. Research shows that narratives previously promoted by Russia have begun to appear in news programs and official speeches abroad. In Western countries, Russian propaganda faces stricter controls and institutional resistance, but its goal remains the same: to legitimize its right to wage war, undermine support for Ukraine, and exploit political divisions ⁶⁹. The effectiveness of such efforts varies depending on the degree of political polarization and the level of media literacy in each country.

There is evidence that Russia is achieving significant success in the global information war, particularly beyond Western democracies. Russian propaganda proves more effective in Global South countries due to factors such as historical anti-colonial sentiments, skepticism toward Western institutions, limited fact-checking infrastructure, and the exploitation of local political and social divisions ⁷⁰. This success manifests in the neutral or pro-Russian positions of many countries, limited international isolation of Russia, and the preservation of economic partnerships despite sanctions.

China has become the most consistent state-level transmitter of Russian narratives. The CCTV News program (Xinwen Lianbo), as the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party, has integrated Russian narratives into its own anti-Western rhetoric. Chinese media employed theses about "Pentagon biolaboratories" and Ukraine's connection to chemical weapons, broadcast the narrative that "sanctions harm everyone and do not help peace" — reinforcing it with expert interviews — and emphasized the "threat of NATO expansion" and "alliance provocations" as causes of the war ⁷¹.

Even countries that formally maintain neutrality, such as India, have created conditions within their information space for the legitimization of Russian narratives. The state channel DD India, in its coverage of the war, was forced to balance between strategic partnership with Russia and pressure from the West. Its broadcasts featured narratives that "Russia is ready for negotiations, but the West is provoking it," as

well as a "nuclear threat from the West" in the context of coverage of sanctions and US policy. Research shows that in reports on sanctions, the Russian viewpoint occupied 19% of airtime ⁷².

South Africa, a trading partner of Russia and a target audience for the dissemination of its narratives, provides a revealing example of the penetration of Russian narratives into official discourse. Here, there was not merely citation but direct borrowing of terminology. For example, South African media replaced the words "war" and "invasion" to soften the framing of the conflict. The state broadcaster SABC, when publishing a Reuters article, edited the headline, replacing the word "war" with "conflict." This policy directly correlates with the Kremlin's positioning. Additionally, SABC News reported that "Russia ultimately invaded Ukraine to protect Russians who, according to Russia, were vulnerable in the face of genocide." At the same time, the position that "Russia is a source of instability" was not used. Even in reports where Russia was presented as a threat, researchers found that SABC did not assign direct blame to Russia but merely stated the fact of the invasion. This creates a more neutral frame than the overtly accusatory rhetoric of the West ⁷¹.

Thus, the research data demonstrate that narratives constructed by the Kremlin for the domestic audience — from accusations against NATO and the "genocide in Donbas" to the redefinition of the conflict's nature by avoiding the word "war" — have crossed national borders. They have found reflection in China's official media, become part of information balancing in India, and penetrated the official language and editorial policy of South Africa's state broadcaster. This list does not encompass the full spectrum of influence on the international audience; however, the examples provided clearly show that narratives created in Russia proved to be in demand beyond its borders and were adapted to local political contexts. At present, the internationalization of originally Russian narratives represents a key challenge for Western information policy, as it erodes the unity of the international community's position and creates cognitive frameworks in which Russia's actions may not be justified but can at least be "explained" — and potentially gain support from non-Western democracies.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this research, we collected and systematically analyzed over 200 independent narrative constructs that operated in the digital space of YouTube and Facebook platforms in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict during the period 2021–2022. Such an extensive empirical base allowed us to comprehend the process of how Russian strategic narratives influenced the understanding of the conflict and its perception by public opinion throughout the war in Ukraine.

As a result of the analysis, we were able to identify consistent patterns indicating that modern psychological operations (PSYOP) within the framework of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict have evolved into an independent strategic domain of confrontation. Of particular note is the fact that most of the escalation events that served as material for narrative development in the pre-war period were subsequently identified as unreliable. Repeatedly debunked facts nevertheless continued to circulate in the

information space and gradually became embedded in mass consciousness. This circumstance allows us to assert with a high degree of confidence the existence of a systematic information-psychological operation conducted in the pre-war period of 2021, aimed at preparing the cognitive foundation for subsequent conflict escalation.

The four main groups of narratives we identified — demonization of the enemy image, construction of positive identity and heroization, victimization and propagation of suffering, and political justification through existential threats — demonstrated their stability and complementarity throughout the entire research period. We found that each of these groups performs a strictly defined psychological function: the first lowers the moral threshold of violence through dehumanization of the opponent, making their destruction ethically acceptable; the second ensures internal mobilization by forming the image of a defender of civilizational values; the third generates the emotional resource of compassion and anger necessary to maintain a high level of confrontation; and the fourth lends the conflict the status of historical inevitability, blocking any possibility of doubt regarding the ethics of decisions made by appealing to existential threats to the very existence of the state.

The identification and systematization of these mechanisms represents not only an academic task but also a necessary condition for developing cognitive defense strategies capable of countering the new challenges of the information age. Understanding the architecture of narrative influence allows states not only to recognize information-psychological operations being waged against them but also to build effective systems for protecting their own cognitive sovereignty. In an era when information attacks can undermine the legitimacy of power, destroy social solidarity, and discredit state institutions without the use of traditional weapons, the ability to identify and neutralize hostile narratives becomes a matter of national security. Thus, the presented research contributes not only to the theoretical understanding of cognitive warfare but also to the formation of practical tools for protecting state sovereignty in the digital era.

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