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Stopping Russian Propaganda

Putin Against NATO   Image Credit: The Atlantic Council

Daniil Miroshnichenko
The America-Eurasia Center
America-Ukraine Program
https://www.eurasiacenter.org/

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Introduction

The narratives disseminated by Russian media and officials regarding the conflict with Ukraine are multifaceted, deeply rooted in historical context, and designed to resonate with a broad audience both within Russia and abroad. These narratives not only justify Russia's actions but also aim to influence public opinion, undermine the Ukrainian government, and discredit opposition to Russian policies. Propaganda has always been an important key to dominating public opinion to consolidate power and create favorable conditions for establishing an authoritarian system within a country. As we can see, Russian propaganda is quite successful in building support for the Kremlin's actions among the Russian people. The majority of the population of the largest country in the world supports the actions of the authorities or is silent out of fear.

Putin Against NATO   Image Credit: The Atlantic Council

Key Narratives

One of the most prominent narratives put forward by the Russian government is the portrayal of the Ukrainian government and society as "neo-Nazis." This claim is especially ironic given that Ukraine's president and former prime minister are both Jewish, a fact that stands in stark contrast to

accusations of neo-Nazism.[1] Russian President Vladimir Putin has declared the "denazification of Ukraine" as one of his goals. The focus was on the deep-seated aversion to Nazism among the peoples of the former Soviet Union, who suffered greatly during the Nazi invasion in World War II. This narrative is not only historically inaccurate but also serves to use the emotional and historical scars of the past to justify the Putin's regime's current aggression. Thus, memories of the horrors that Nazism brought to the countries of the USSR became a significant factor in the success of brainwashing the Russian people. [2] [3]

The Russian government has also accused Ukraine of genocide against Russian-speaking citizens, especially in the Donbas. This claim is part of a broader narrative that the Ukrainian regime is systematically attacking the Russian language and culture within the country.[4] Despite any lack of evidence to support these claims, they have proven effective in mobilizing support for Russian actions in the region under the guise of protecting Russian-speaking minorities.

Another serious allegation from Russia is that Ukraine is developing nuclear and biological weapons, with some of the allegations suggesting the United States was involved in these efforts. The Russian Ministry of Defense has gone so far as to make unsubstantiated accusations of biological weapons production in Ukraine, including bizarre claims about "biobirds" and combat drones equipped with "combat mosquitoes" that spread dangerous viruses.[5] [6] These statements are aimed at portraying Ukraine as a serious threat not only to Russia but also to global community despite the lack of credible evidence.

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[1] Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe & Bastiaan Willems (2022) Putin's Abuse of History: Ukrainian 'Nazis', 'Genocide', and a Fake Threat Scenario, The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 35:1, 1-10, DOI: 10.1080/13518046.2022.2058179

[2] Berger, Miriam (25 February 2022). "Putin says he will 'denazify' Ukraine. Here's the history behind that claim". Washington Post. Archived from the original on 3 March 2022.

[3] 'It's a reference to the USSR — to its return' Why is the Kremlin incorporating Soviet symbols into its war propaganda?". Meduza. 5 May 2022.

[4] Hinton, Alexander (25 February 2022). "Putin's claims that Ukraine is committing genocide are baseless, but not unprecedented". The Conversation

[5] Wong, Edward (11 March 2022). "U.S. Fights Bioweapons Disinformation Pushed by Russia and China". The New York Times.

[6] "Combat mosquitoes" follow "dirty bomb": Russian representative to UN tells more frenzy lies". Yahoo! News. 28 October 2022.

The push-pull for Ukraine between NATO and CSTO   Image Credit: Radio Free Europe

Another falsehood that Russia perpetuates is that Ukraine carries out NATO plans. This is juxtaposed with the idea that NATO and Western countries control Ukraine and provoke conflict with Russia, which is another significant aspect of Russian propaganda. After the invasion began, Russian state media falsely claimed that some Ukrainian military units were under NATO command, and thousands of NATO soldiers had been killed.[7] These include claims that NATO expansion into Eastern Europe have broken promises made at the end of the Cold War and that the West has complete control over Ukraine, posing a security threat to Russia.[8] Such narratives are deeply rooted in Cold War-era propaganda, which portrayed the United States and its allies as an existential threat to the Soviet Union and vice versa.

Key Tools

The landscape of modern conflict is as much about narrative control as it is about territorial disputes or ideological differences. Putin's propaganda, especially in the context of its actions in Ukraine, uses a complex set of tools designed to manipulate public opinion and thus justify its policies.

[7] "War in Ukraine: Fact-checking Russian claims that NATO troops are fighting in Ukraine". BBC News. 21 September 2022.

[8] "Fact check: Russia's disinformation campaign targets NATO". Deutsche Welle.

The entire line of disinformation began with the Maidan Revolution of 2014, which was a turning point in the modern history of Ukraine. The government of Viktor Yanukovych fled to Russia after Yanukovych refused to sign an agreement at the last moment in November 2013, a few days before the Vilnius Eastern Partnership summit, where the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU was planned. These events are portrayed entirely differently in the Russian political and social environment. Russian versions claim that the Maidan was organized by right-wing radical groups with support from the West, presenting it not as a popular revolution but as a coup that illegally overthrew President Yanukovych.[9] This narrative serves to delegitimize the subsequent Ukrainian government and justify Russia's actions in the region and the annexation of Crimea.

Since 2014, Russian propaganda has specifically targeted Western Ukrainians, who are often portrayed as ultra-nationalists bent on suppressing Russian language and culture. This narrative exaggerates the influence of far-right movements in Ukrainian society, describing them as a widespread threat to peace and stability. A particular target of the propaganda machine was and is the Azov Battalion, originally formed as a volunteer militia to defend Mariupol in 2014 and then incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine,[10] The battalion was called a neo-Nazi organization, despite the fact that the leaders of the organization were not Nazis, but only some participants who did not have control of the organization were seen with Nazi symbols and slogans,[11] The purpose of this image is to demonize the Ukrainian resistance and portray Russian military intervention as a fight against extremism.

In addition, Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of Russia's Security Council, has been consistently demanding that the historical parts of Russia be returned home, including most of Ukraine. He rejects peace talks with Zelenskyy and accuses NATO of waging a war with Russia. Medvedev constantly uses nuclear threats and fears of a wider war to scare NATO from continuing to support Ukraine in the long war. Now that Republicans in the US Congress are delaying Ukrainian aid, the Putin regime is becoming increasingly embolden to launch offensives in Ukraine against Ukrainian positions that have to ration ammunition. The situation is forcing Europe to take a second look at effectiveness US leadership abroad.

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[9] Putin on Ukraine crisis: 'It is an unconstitutional coup', BBC News (4 March 2014)

[10] "Azov Regiment takes center stage in Ukraine propaganda war". France 24. 25 March 2022.

[11] McCallum, Alasdair (19 August 2022). "Much Azov about nothing: How the 'Ukrainian neo-Nazis' canard fooled the world"

Right Wing Movement March in Kyiv, Ukraine Photo Credit: MSNBC

A vital tool of Russian propaganda is the denial of Ukrainian identity as opposed to Russian. Putin himself has stated that the Ukrainian nation has no historical basis and even claimed that the concept of Ukraine was Lenin's invention. This narrative aims not only to undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state but also to assert historical claims to Ukrainian territory, erasing the differences between Russian and Ukrainian identities. Recently, in an interview with Tucker Carlson, Putin once again told the "true story" of Ukraine for two hours, answering the question of why Russia invaded Ukraine. The Russian regime pursues to convince the masses that there are no borders between Russians and Ukrainians, as Ukrainians are "part of the supreme Russian nation."[12]

Countering Russian Propaganda

To counter the "neo-Nazi state" narrative, it is worth reiterating the Jewish identity of President Volodymyr Zelensky and other members of Ukraine's leadership, which directly contradicts the unsubstantiated claims of neo-Nazism.[13] One of the main elements of the ideology of Nazism is

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[12] The Vladimir Putin Interview, Tucker Carlson, February 8th, 2024

[13] Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe & Bastiaan Willems (2022) Putin's Abuse of History: Ukrainian 'Nazis', 'Genocide', and a Fake Threat Scenario, The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 35:1, 1-10, DOI: 10.1080/13518046.2022.2058179

anti-Semitism directed against Jews and, accordingly, a society that democratically elected a Jewish leader by a majority vote, and the presence of Jews in high government positions fundamentally challenges the portrayal of Ukraine as a neo-Nazi state. Apart from Russia, no other country supports claims of Nazism in Ukraine, and this demonstrates the isolated nature of this narrative, as even Ukrainian Jews likewise rejected claims of Ukraine being a neo-Nazi state.[14] The international community's rejection of this image and the absurdity of its use to justify military aggression can be highlighted as undermining the credibility of these claims.
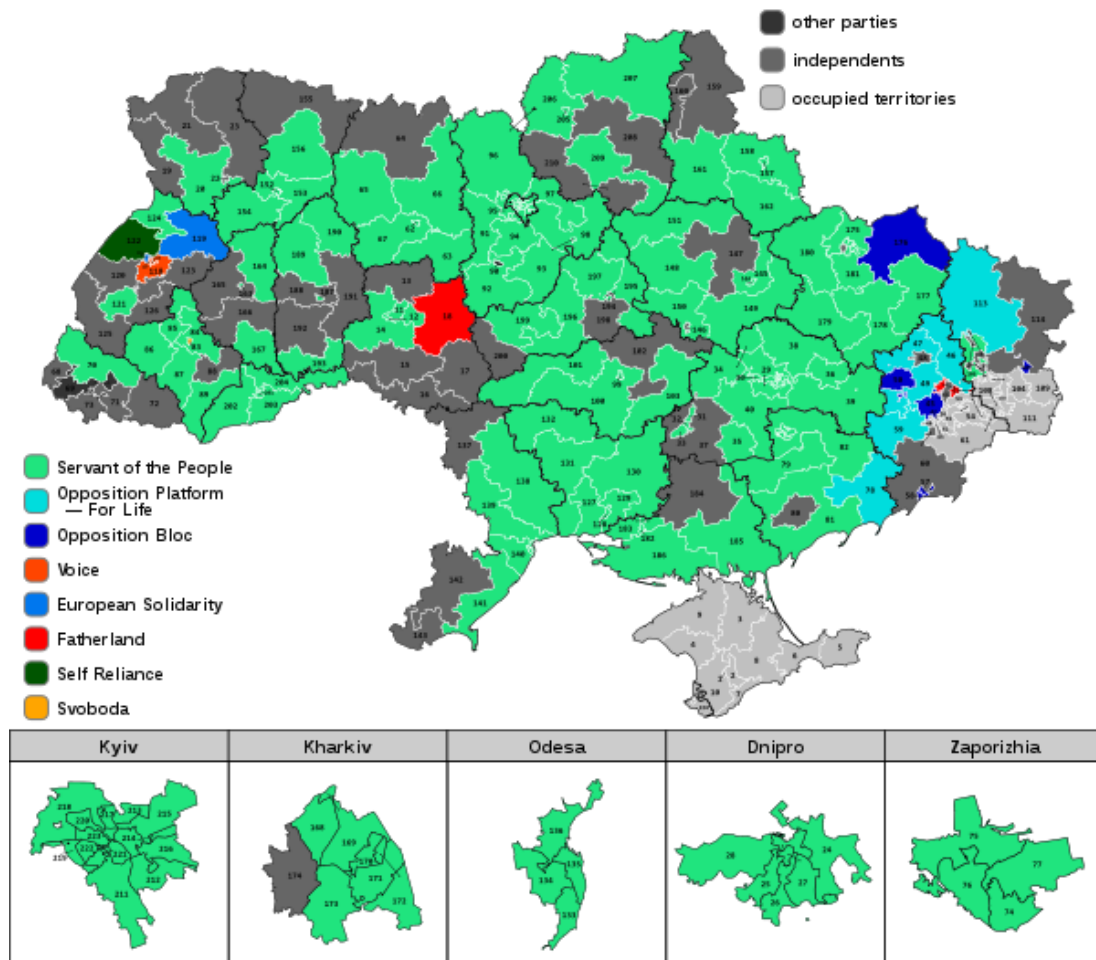
Referring to the consensus among scholars and experts that although far-right elements exist in Ukraine, as in any other country, their influence is greatly exaggerated by Russian propaganda. This can be confirmed by Ukraine's election results showing minimal support for far-right parties, debunking the idea that such ideologies have significant power in Ukraine. In the last parliamentary elections of 2019, the political alliance Svoboda "Liberty" (which united all radical right-wing parties and movements) got only 2.16% of the votes, which didn't let them pass the necessary border to get to the 9th convocation of the Ukrainian Parliament.[15] Moreover, some Russian units who took part in occupation of the Donbas/Crimea and the February invasion are themselves linked to neo-Nazism, such as the Rusich Group and Wagner Group.[16]

[14] Sheftalovich, Zoya (25 April 2022). "Putin wants to de-Nazify Ukraine — that's ludicrous, say the country's Jews". Politico.

[15] Arredondas, Margarita (5 April 2022). "Azov Battalion key to Russian propaganda justifying invasion of Ukraine"

[16] Townsend, Mark (20 March 2022). "Russian mercenaries in Ukraine linked to far-right extremists". The Guardian

Constituency Results of the Ukrainian Parliamentary Election in 2019 (Wikipedia, Parliamentary Election 2019)

There is no pressure on the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, as the Russian information field says. Research by the European Commission and scientists, as well as the rulings of the International Court of Justice, does not find evidence of genocide of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, and this completely discredits accusations of systemic violence.[17] [18] Accordingly, demonstrating aggression under the guise of this defense is absurd and not supported by facts from the point of view of world law.

Regarding the denial of Ukrainian statehood, the presentation of historical documentation and references, such as the Hypatian Codex in reference to a part of the territory of Kievan Rus, which was the country primarily based on the current lands of Ukraine, shows that Ukraine's history goes

[17] "Disinformation About the Current Russia-Ukraine Conflict – Seven Myths Debunked". Directorate-General for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (Press release). 24 January 2022.

[18] "UN international court of justice orders Russia to halt invasion of Ukraine". The Guardian.

far back in the 9th century. Moreover, the word "Ukraine" was first mentioned back in the year 1187, which demonstrates the deep roots of Ukrainian culture and language.[19] There is international recognition of Ukraine's sovereign identity, including the United Nations, compared to Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), which claim to be independent states but are not recognized by any country besides Russia, Syria and North Korea. [20]

There are no military bases, laboratories, or armed forces of NATO in Ukraine. It is worth clarifying that the official presence of NATO in countries that are not NATO members is limited and based strictly on the requests of these countries, and it must also be emphasized that the absence of NATO forces in Ukraine before the invasion is an official fact. The only countries that are not NATO members but have a NATO military presence in them are Kosovo and Iraq.[21] Moreover, the demonstration of the expansion of NATO's borders are a result of Russian aggression, as evidenced by Finland's entry into NATO (which expanded border twice between NATO and Russia), directly contradicts Russia's claims of protection against NATO expansion.[22] Moreover, NATO's enlargement to the east took place even before 2022, and the Kremlin's statements that a "special operation" was being carried out to contain NATO are contradictory and have no factual relevance.
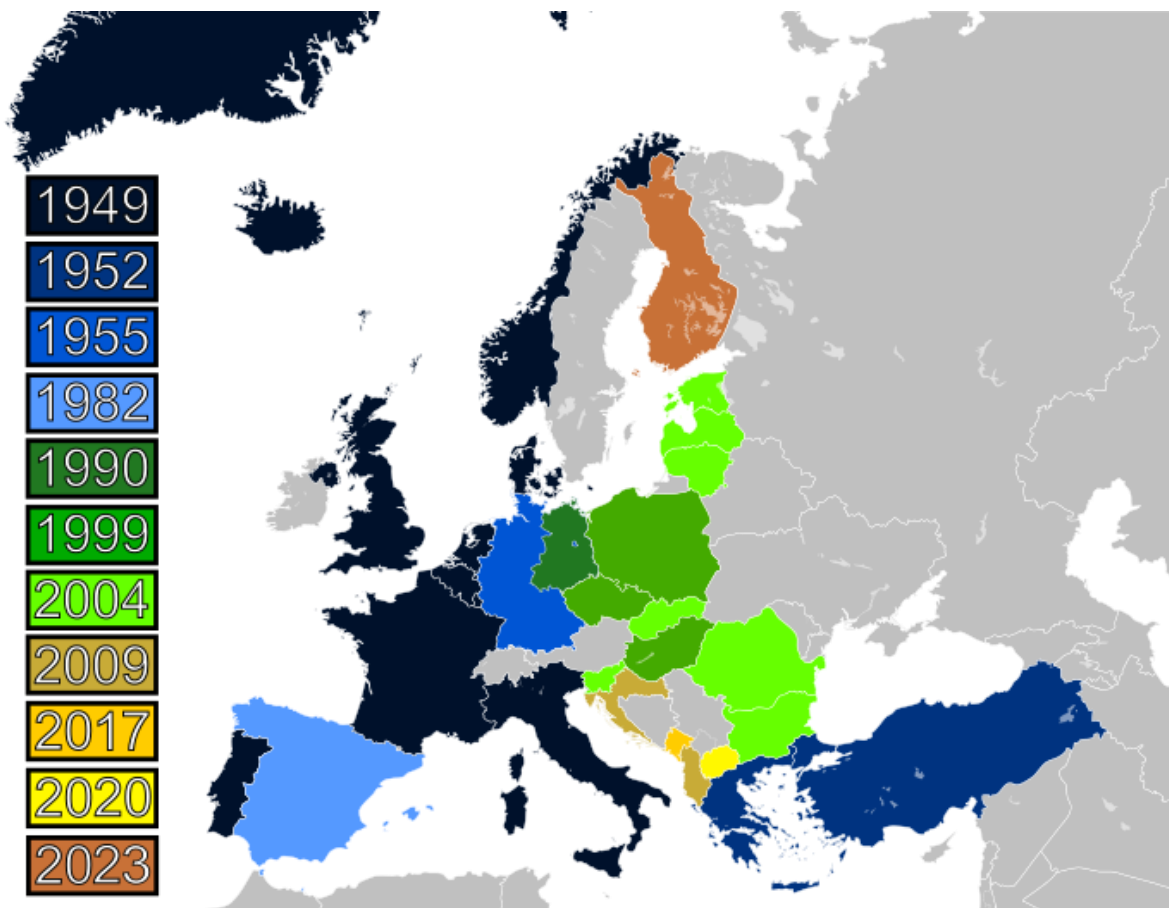
[19] Стлб. 653:8, 663:31-33. // ПСРЛ. — Т. 2. Ипатьевская летопись. — СПб., 1908. — Стлб. 652—673

[20] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_the_Donetsk_People%27s_Republic_and_the_Luhansk_People%27s_Republic

[21] NATO-Russia: Setting the record straight". NATO.

[22] "Finland doubling NATO's border with Russia in blow to Putin". Associated Press. 3 April 2023.

1949
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History of the Enlargement of NATO Image Credit: Wikipedia

Conclusion

The critical narratives of Russian propaganda regarding the war with Ukraine are attempts to justify Russia's actions, the desire to undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government and attempts to influence global opinion. The use of such narratives shows the importance of the information war in modern conflicts, and understanding these narratives are critical to analyzing the dynamics of the conflict and the broader geopolitical consequences it entails. The tools of Russian propaganda in the context of the Ukrainian conflict are varied and multifaceted, from historical revisionism to the manipulation of media narratives. They are aimed at creating discord among Ukrainians and undermining international support for Ukraine. The battle for truth is as important as any military battle because it can shape perceptions, influence outcomes, and change the course of history. Countering Russian propaganda must be based on factual accuracy, historical context, and rational analysis of consequences. By systematically examining and debunking key narratives, one must create an approach that not only exposes the lies underlying these narratives but also maintains the integrity of public discourse, helping to create a more informed and resilient global community.

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