

# Chapter 3: Russia's Narratives and Disinformation in the War on Ukraine

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## Abstract

The Russian media are an important pillar in Russia's war against Ukraine. It paved the way for the "special military operation", as the Russian war of aggression is called there, and justifies the ongoing war daily. The narratives on Ukraine are meant to legitimize the fight against the supposedly "aggressive West" and to discredit Ukraine as a fascist or (neo-)Nazi<sup>1</sup> state. In doing so, state media at home and abroad pursue diverse goals and send different messages: in Russia, patriotism as well as the imperial consciousness of the people is nourished. Abroad, for example, in Germany, the foreign media stir up people's fears and resentment and mobilize them to protest. This article is based on the evaluation of the reporting of the foreign media *RT DE* and *Sputnik/SNA* as well as the domestic channels *Rossia 1*, *Rossia 24*, *Perviy Kanal* (First Channel), and *TV Center*.

## Keywords

Ukraine, Russia, Germany, media, disinformation, war, patriotism, protests, information policy

## 1 Introduction

Publications and broadcasts of the Russian media in the period from February to October 2022 serve as primary sources. The main thematic focal points concerning the war against Ukraine were examined. According to

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1 In modern Russia, these terms are used synonymously and to label political opponents. In the process, they have become detached from their original meaning.

the method of linguistic media discourse analysis by Ekkehard Felder,<sup>2</sup> the discourse topic “Russian Narratives” was divided into various sub-topics. Among others, the fight against fascism/(neo-)Nazism in Ukraine, considered from the Russian perspective as essential, was identified as one such topic. The aim of the analysis is to demonstrate how Russia tries to influence public opinion in Russia and Germany.

## 2 *Russia's State Media Circumvent EU Sanctions*

In response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the European Union (EU) banned the distribution of content from Russian foreign media *Sputnik* and *RT*, including its subsidiaries, in early March 2022. In Germany, the German-language TV channel *RT DE* and the news platform *SNA* (previously *Sputnik*) have been present since 2014. Both media are state-funded and controlled by the Russian presidential administration, as are the nationwide domestic broadcasters.<sup>3</sup> This was followed in June 2022 by the blocking of Russian-language channels *Rossia RTR/RTR Planeta*, *Rossia 24*, and *TV Center-International*. “Russia uses all these state-owned media outlets to disseminate targeted propaganda and conduct disinformation campaigns, including about its military aggression against Ukraine”, it says in justification.<sup>4</sup> *Rossia 24* and *Rossia RTR* belong to the state media holding company *VGTRK*.<sup>5</sup> *Rossia RTR/RTR Planeta* is a foreign channel broadcast via cable TV and satellite; its content is largely identical to the domestic channel *Rossia 1*.<sup>6</sup> The *Rossia 24* news channel broadcasts both

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2 Felder, Ekkehard: Pragma-semiotische Textarbeit und der hermeneutische Nutzen von Korpusanalysen für die linguistische Mediendiskursanalyse. In: Felder, Ekkehard/Müller, Marcus/Vogel, Friedemann (Eds.): Korpus-pragmatik. Thematische Korpora als Basis diskurslinguistischer Analysen, De Gruyter: Berlin-Boston 2012, pp. 115–174.

3 Spahn, Susanne: Russische Medien in Deutschland. Die Bundestagswahlen 2021 – Zwischen Einflussnahme und Disinformation. Friedrich Naumann Foundation: Potsdam 2022, pp. 4–6.

4 Prohibited are *all transmission and dissemination methods used in or directed to EU Member States*, including cable, satellite, IP-TV, platforms, websites, and applications. See Council of the European Union: EU Sanctions against Russia: An Overview, 16 August 2022.

5 VGTRK stands for All-Russian State Television and Radio Company, see: ВГТРК. ТЕЛЕВИДЕНИЕ, РАДИО, ИНТЕРНЕТ, <https://vgtrk.ru/about>.

6 In Germany, *Rossia RTR* is, among others, part of *Vodafone Kabel Deutschland's* paid TV services, which was discontinued in June 2022 due to the sanctions. See

in Russia and internationally. *VGTRK* says it is the “No. 1 industry-forming media holding in the country, reaching 99 percent of Russia’s population”.<sup>7</sup> The *TV Center* channel is financed by the Moscow administration and is thus also state-owned; the version intended for foreign countries runs under the *TVCI* (TV Center International) label.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the sanctions, this media is still accessible on the Internet. *RT DE* has created a whole series of websites under new domains, where the TV program can also be viewed in a live stream with a VPN. *RT* videos can be accessed on the *odysee.com* platform.<sup>9</sup> *SNA* has also moved to the *odysee.com* platform and is available there under two names simultaneously: *SNA* and *Satellit* (the German translation of Sputnik). The last one is also active on *Telegram* and *YouTube*.<sup>10</sup> The channels *RTR Planeta* and *Rossia 24*, which belong to *VGTRK*, were apparently not blocked on the Internet, because they are available on the in-house online platform “*smotrim.ru*”.<sup>11</sup>

However, the non-EU-listed state-affiliated channels *Perviy Kanal* (First Channel) and *NTV* can also be watched live on the Internet and programs can be accessed in the media library.<sup>12</sup> *Perviy Kanal*, *NTV*, and *Rossia 1* are the three channels that have a significant influence on the formation of opinion in Russia. The Russian government holds the controlling package of *Perviy Kanal* with 51 percent of the shares, the remaining shares are owned by shareholders close to the state.<sup>13</sup> *Perviy Kanal* also recently became known in Germany when its then-employee Marina Ovsyannikova

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Vodafone: Info: Discontinuation of the distribution of RTR Planeta at Vodafone, 3 June 2022.

7 Overview of *VGTRK* stations and web portals, <https://vgtrk.ru/about>, 29.10.2022.

8 About TV Center, see *Kommersant*: “Что такое канал ТВЦ” [What is the TVC channel], 22 December 2005.

9 See, for example, <https://pressefreiheit.rtde.live>, where the TV program also runs. Videos can be seen on the platform <https://odysee.com/@RTDE:e>.

10 *SNA* is usable at <https://odysee.com/@SNA:a> as well as under the label “*Satellit*” at Twitter [https://t.me/satellit\\_de](https://t.me/satellit_de), YouTube [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT4S XUzme7FrqXfU1\\_9H8cw/featured](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT4S XUzme7FrqXfU1_9H8cw/featured) and Odysee <https://odysee.com/@Satellite:1>.

11 On the platform *Smotrim.ru* you can see the live stream of *RTR Planeta* (<https://smotrim.ru/channel/1>) and *Rossia 24* (<https://smotrim.ru/channel/3>).

12 See about *Perviy Kanal*, <https://www.itv.ru> – *NTV*, <https://www.ntv.ru/air/>.

13 Kutscher, Tamina/Himmelspach, Anton: Die russische Medienlandschaft. Alles Propaganda? Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 8 March 2018.

displayed a protest poster “Stop the war. Do not believe the propaganda. You are being lied to here” to the camera in the live news program.<sup>14</sup>

The target audience is the general audience addressed by *RT DE* and *SNA* in German. The German *RT* offshoot had a total reach of 1.4 million subscribers on the most important social media platforms in September 2021. *SNA* had 327,000 subscribers.<sup>15</sup> Russian-language channels are popular among the Russian-speaking community of about three million people. According to the “Integration Barometer 2020” of the German Expert Council on Integration and Migration, around a quarter of late repatriates from the former Soviet Union – the largest group of Russian speakers in Germany – trust the media of their former homeland.<sup>16</sup>

### 3 Narrative 1: *The Fight against Fascists*

Sunday evening, the “News of the Week” is broadcast on the TV channel *Rossia 1*. The famous journalist Dmitry Kiselyov moderates the topic “Satanism as an ideology of the Ukrainian Nazis”.<sup>17</sup> Kiselyov is on the EU sanctions list as a “central figure in government propaganda for the deployment of Russian forces in Ukraine”, as the Council Regulation puts it.<sup>18</sup> The Russian (sic!) city of Mariupol has become a nest of Ukrainian Nazis, Kiselyov claims about the Ukrainian port city, with Azov fighters taking the population of the entire city hostage. An expert explains, “The official religion of the Azov Regiment is a mixture of pagan and mystical ideologies.

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14 RND: “Nach Protestaktion im TV: Russische Journalistin arbeitet künftig für ‘Welt’”, 12 April 2022.

15 The user figures of *Facebook*, *Youtube*, *Twitter*, *Telegram*, *Instagram* and direct access to the website (Easy Counter) were evaluated, see: Spahn, Susanne: *Russische Medien in Deutschland*, 2022, p. 9.

16 Friedrichs, Nils/Graf, Johannes: *Integration gelungen? Lebenswelten und gesellschaftliche Teilhabe von (Spät-)Aussiedlerinnen und (Spät-)Aussiedler*. In: *SWR-Studie 2022–1*, Berlin, p. 69.

17 *Rossia 1*: “Вести недели” [News of the Week], 24 July 2022, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2448950>, 05.09.2022.

18 Council of the European Union: Regulation (EU) No. 269/2014, 17 March 2014, p. 22.

For those who embrace this demonic doctrine, it is natural to torture and torment people”.<sup>19</sup>

Figure 1: A report on Ukrainian neo-Nazis in the “News of the Week”.  
Screenshot: *Rossia 1*.<sup>20</sup>



The fight with Ukrainian fascists is the focus of political broadcasts, like in the mentioned “News of the Week”. Bald-headed, bare-chested men are shown having Nazi symbols such as the “Wolfsangel” tattooed on their skin. Their alleged torture methods are then described in detail.<sup>21</sup>

The war in Ukraine – called a “special operation” in Russia – is the dominant topic in the news and talk shows. No broadcast is complete without a detailed report on the alleged atrocities committed by Ukrainian Nazis, who are often compared to the German Nazis and the SS. The narrative of nationalist or fascist Ukraine is one of the most frequently repeated misrepresentations. Ever since the Maidan and the annexation of Crimea in 2013/14, the state media has claimed that fascists or nationalists rule Ukraine. This is despite the fact that nationalists have not had a party in the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada) since May 2014, nor are

19 Maksim Fomin: In “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

they part of the government.<sup>22</sup> There are nationalist groups such as the Azov Regiment, but they are not a political force dominating the whole country,<sup>23</sup> as *RT DE*, for example, regularly broadcasts to the audience in Germany.<sup>24</sup> The strategy is to anchor the stereotype of Ukrainian Nazis into public perception through constant repetition.<sup>25</sup>

On the one hand, the narrative has the function of blaming the opponent for the military aggression; on the other hand, it serves as a legitimization for Russia's war and the discrediting of Ukraine – in Russia and abroad. *RT DE* and *SNA* spread the accusation of genocide by “the Kiev regime”, for which, however, there was no evidence.<sup>26</sup> Russia sees itself as a protective power of Russian speakers and Russians abroad. However, Russia has itself created those in alleged need of protection when it granted Russian citizenship to more than 800,000 residents in the separatist areas of the Donbas – a practice that continues in the newly conquered areas in eastern Ukraine.<sup>27</sup>

Addressed to the domestic audience in Russia, the Nazi narrative has the function of mobilizing the population in the spirit of patriotism and uniting them behind the “national leader” Vladimir Putin.<sup>28</sup> The parallel to World War II is often drawn. For example, during a report from the front, a *Rossia I* correspondent asks a historian who is now fighting as a soldier in Ukraine if he sees parallels with the Great Patriotic War. “Very clear parallels,” the

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22 Spahn, Susanne: *Das Ukraine-Bild in Deutschland: Die Rolle der russischen Medien. Wie Russland die deutsche Öffentlichkeit beeinflusst.* Verlag Dr. Kovač: Hamburg 2016, pp. 96–98.

23 The Azov Regiment currently comprises between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters and is integrated into the Ukrainian National Guard. According to Anna Colin Lebedev of the University of Paris-Nanterre and other experts, the extreme right plays only a marginal role in Ukraine's political landscape. Cf. *Deutschlandfunk*: “Asow-Regiment, Stepan Bandera & Co. Rechtsextremisten in der Ukraine und ihr Einfluss im Land”, 1 July 2022.

24 Exemplary: On the occasion of a demonstration by right-wing extremists in Kyiv, *RT DE* claimed that power was being seized by Nazis. See *RT DE*: “Nazis and Neo-Nazis Demonstrate in Kyiv: March in Honor of Ukrainian Waffen SS Division”, 30 April 2021.

25 Exemplary: *RT DE*: “‘Sie haben sich wie Faschisten verhalten’ – Ukrainische Truppen verwüsteten das Dorf Sinezki”, 22 August 2022.

26 *SNA*: “Russlands Außenministerium: EU unterstützt Völkermord durch Waffenlieferungen an die Ukraine”, 28 February 2022; *RT DE*: “Putin: Russland hat keine Pläne, die Ukraine zu besetzen”, 24 February 2022 (currently blocked, screenshot available).

27 *NTV*: “Russland verteilt Pässe an Ukrainer”, 11 June 2022.

28 On the leader cult around Vladimir Putin, see Ennker, Benno: *Analyse: Wladimir Putin – Führer, Diktator, Kriegsherr.* In: *Russland-Analyse* No. 421, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 20 June 2022.

latter replied. "The enemy is the same: fascism, only in this case Ukrainian fascism. [...] The truth is on our side. We are defending our country."<sup>29</sup> The memory of the victory in World War II feeds the notion that "Russians are invincible," as another soldier proudly said in the report from the front.<sup>30</sup>

*Figure 2: The Russian leadership reacts to German arms deliveries with incomprehension. Screenshot: RT DE.<sup>31</sup>*

## **Panzerhaubitzen am 22. Juni: Warum Medwedew die Deutschen an die Leningrader Blockade erinnert**

25 Juni 2022 15:09 Uhr

Es knirscht gewaltig zwischen Deutschen und Russen. Die Russen haben sich daran gewöhnt, russophobe Signale aus Warschau, London oder Washington zu empfangen und dementsprechend zu reagieren. Für Berlin galten in Moskau noch andere Maßstäbe – bis vor kurzem.



Furthermore, states and politicians who support Ukraine in the war against Russia are confronted with the accusation of fascism. This also applies to Germany. Criticism of Russia is taken as an opportunity to remind Germans of their National Socialist past. As an illustration, *RT DE* published a tweet by former President Dmitry Medvedev with the following content: "German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said that Russia 'uses hunger as a weapon'. It is of course astonishing to hear such a thing from officials whose country sealed off Leningrad for 900 days in a blockade where nearly 700,000 people died of hunger."<sup>32</sup>

29 Andrey Smirnov, historian, quoted on *Rossia 1*: "Вести недели", 24 July 2022.

30 *Rossia 1*, "Вести недели", 24 July 2022.

31 Sankin, Vladislav: "Panzerhaubitzen am 22. Juni: Warum Medwedew die Deutschen an die Leningrader Blockade erinnert", *RT DE*, 25 June 2022.

32 *Ibid.*

Figure 3: *The memory of the victory over the German fascists in World War II is omnipresent on Russian television. Screenshot: Perviy Kanal.*<sup>33</sup>



The memory of World War II is meant to mobilize for renewed battle, but it also serves to present Russia as a renewed victim of fascism. On the talk show “*Vremya Vspomnit*” (Time to Remember) on *Perviy Kanal*, Russia’s largest TV channel, the host Aleksandr Gordon showed a video of the 1945 victory celebration in defeated Berlin. “It seemed that they will never forget it,” he says, but then presents Latvia’s reactions to the war in Ukraine, such as classifying Russia as a “state that supports terror”.<sup>34</sup> Latvia’s restrictions on the entry of Russian citizens and the use of the Russian language are also discussed. Gordon sees Russians as victims of a new fascism when he asks: “In the 21st century Russians have taken over the role of Jews, is it so or not?” In the course of the program, Gordon himself answers: “What has

33 Gordon, Aleksandr: “ВРЕМЯ ВСПОМНИТЬ” [Time to Remember], *Perviy Kanal*, 17 August 2022. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the Latvian Parliament (Saeima) classified the violence against Ukraine emanating from Russia as state terrorism, see: LSM.lv, “Saeima committee names Russia terrorist state”, 2 August 2022.

34 Ibid.



changed in the consciousness of the Latvians who are now performing a *de facto* form of genocide according to ethnic criteria?"<sup>35</sup>

These examples illustrate that Ukraine and the states supporting it are discredited as fascists or face accusations of Nazi methods, while Russia considers itself a victim of this fascism. According to this logic, Russia is waging war because it needs to defend itself against enemies in Ukraine and other states.

#### 4 Narrative 2: Ukraine is Not a Separate Nation with Its Own History

Figure 4: RT DE reports claim that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Screenshot: RT DE.<sup>36</sup>

## Staatswissenschaftlerin zur Vorgeschichte des Ukraine-Krieges: "Russen und Ukrainer sind ein Volk!"

7 Sep. 2022 20:51 Uhr

Während von ukrainischer Seite die Abgrenzungsbemühungen vom allem Russischen seit 2014 immer heftiger wurden, versucht Moskau bis heute, die ethnische Ebene aus dem Konflikt herauszuhalten. Eine neue Publikation widmet sich nun dem vermeintlichen Gegensatz zwischen Ukrainern und Russen.



35 Gordon, "Время вспомнить", 17 August 2022.

36 Exemplary: RT DE: "Staatswissenschaftlerin zur Vorgeschichte des Ukraine-Krieges: 'Russen und Ukrainer sind ein Volk!'", 7 September 2022.

In the portrayal of the Russian media, Ukraine is not a separate nation with its own history and, consequently, it has no right to state independence. This is accompanied by the view that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people”.<sup>37</sup> However, this interpretation is contrasted with Ukrainian historiography and the process of decolonization from the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup>

The Russian narrative goes back to the dominant idea in the Russian Empire that the Russians and Ukrainians, then called Little Russians, formed a larger, all-Russian nation with Belarusians.<sup>39</sup> Ukraine’s state independence touches Russia’s national identity: the Ukrainians received their first permanent independent state in 1991, while Russians lost their empire. Independence ended centuries of shared history in “Kievan Rus”, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The view of Russians as the state-bearing ethnic group of a multinational empire was shattered. Even more, the independence of Ukraine ended the role of Russians as a kind of leading nation among the Eastern Slavs, as it had found expression in the all-Russian identity.<sup>40</sup> This explains why Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine has been much more vehement and extensive than in other Western-oriented post-Soviet states such as Georgia and Moldova. “Denazification” therefore means the “liberation” of Ukraine not from fascism, as claimed, but from its own history and state, independent of Russia – in other words, the *de facto* destruction of its independence. The return to the Russian-dominated sphere of rule is enforced by the war.

### 5 Narrative 3: Ukrainians Must Be Liberated from Nazis

The studied media show in detail the successes in the struggle with fascism, the so-called “denazification”, which takes place not only on a military level

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37 RT DE: “Staatswissenschaftlerin zur Vorgeschichte des Ukraine-Krieges: ‘Russen und Ukrainer sind ein Volk!’”, 7 September 2022.

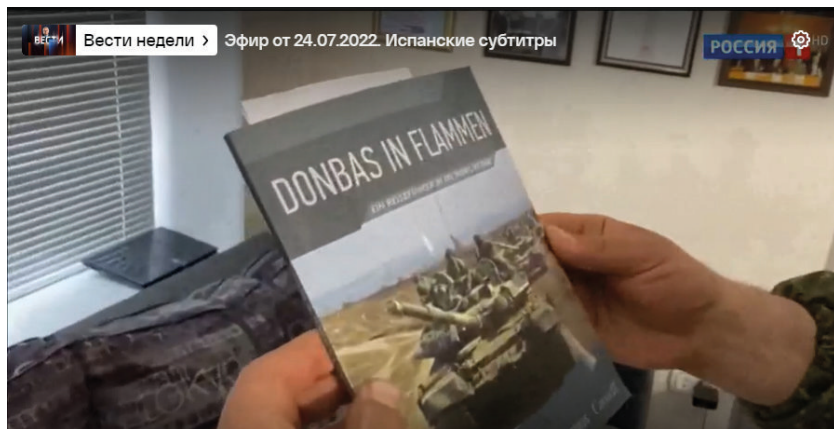
38 Simon, Gerhard: War die Ukraine eine Kolonie? In: Beck, Marieluise (Ed.): Ukraine verstehen. Auf den Spuren von Terror und Gewalt, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2020, pp. 114–116.

39 In the Soviet Union this idea survived in the form of the three socialist brother nations, see: Spahn, Susanne: Staatliche Unabhängigkeit – das Ende der ostslawischen Gemeinschaft? Die Außenpolitik Russlands gegenüber der Ukraine und Belarus seit 1991. Verlag Dr. Kovač: Hamburg 2011, pp. 21–29.

40 Ibid.

but also on a cultural and linguistic ones. For example, in the “News of the Week” a soldier shows books that he says were used in schools: “Look, a book in English” (sic), while showing the German-language title “Donbas in Flammen”,<sup>41</sup>

Figure 5: Russian state TV shows soldiers destroying literature on Ukraine during the “denazification”. Screenshot: *Rossia 1*.<sup>42</sup>



Then the soldier picks up another book: “Ukraine – History of a Great State, History of the Civilization of Ukraine”, he says with a sneer and reads a sentence in Ukrainian. Then he says in Russian: “We are now busy with denazification and will destroy this literature everywhere and nowhere on Ukrainian soil will people read such crap anymore.”<sup>43</sup>

Another soldier says threateningly: “You have betrayed your own roots, you have erased your own history. The history of your great Ukraine is already gone, *вже вмерла* (it is already dead),” he says in Ukrainian.<sup>44</sup> In that way, he twists the national anthem of Ukraine, in which the first line reads: “The glory and freedom of Ukraine has not yet perished.”<sup>45</sup>

41 *Rossia 1*, “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

45 The first line of the poem written by Pavlo Chubynskyi in 1862 reads “Ще не вмерла України і слава, і воля”, for the lyrics of the anthem of Ukraine see <https://www.pisni.org.ua/songs/24717.html>, 29.11.2022.

In their reporting, Ukrainians are compatriots confused by the West. Russia, in this logic, must defend itself from Western expansion. Moderator Dmitry Kiselyov stylizes this as a “clash of civilizations”:<sup>46</sup> “Russia is defending itself, defending its thousand-year-old multinational culture on this earth”, the moderator says emphatically. Russia’s Muslims are showing their support, he elaborates, quoting Chechnya’s ruler Ramzan Kadyrov: “Today, there is no one in the world who is taking action against this hellish abomination that the West is spreading, except Russia. I am [...] very grateful that we can participate in this holy war against Satanism.”<sup>47</sup>

#### 6 Narrative 4: *The West Wages War against Russia*

In the broadcasts, Ukraine appears merely as a puppet of the USA. In reality, it is the U.S. and NATO that are waging a war against Russia, with Ukraine simply being the instrument, according to the portrayal. In this thinking, Ukraine is not an independent actor on the international stage, but merely a geopolitical object of the great powers. The Americans and British (the collective term “the Anglo-Saxons”) forced Ukraine to wage this senseless war against Russia, host Dmitry Kulikov argues in the episode titled “The Fall of American Hegemony”. His program “Formula Smysla” is aired on television on the channel *Solovyov live*.<sup>48</sup>

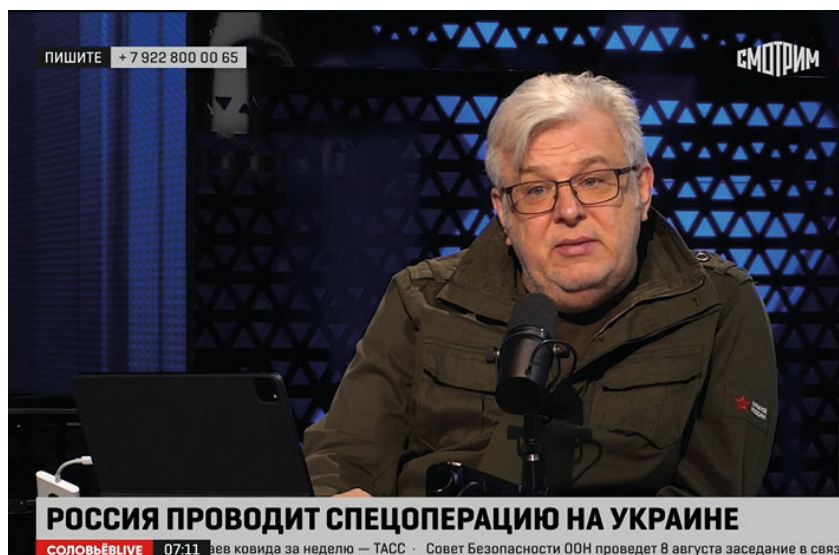
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46 Kiselyov, Dmitry: In “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

47 Kadyrov, Ramzan: In “Вести недели”, 24 July 2022.

48 Kulikov, Dmitry: “Падение американской гегемонии” [The fall of American hegemony], Formula Smysla, 8 August 2022.

Figure 6: Russia sees itself in a war against the West. Screenshot: Solovyov live.<sup>49</sup>



The presenter Dmitry Kulikov is sitting in the studio in an olive green military uniform with the patch “Army of Russia”. President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy wants to conduct negotiations from the position of strength, this is not real, the presenter says. “Mr. Zelenskyy, now there is a reassessment of the situation on the battlefield, where you sent your transatlantic masters.” He thinks Ukraine will not succeed and will be forced to negotiate on Russian terms. “The conditions for Ukraine are getting worse, worse, [...] and Ukraine will be helped [...] not by Borrell, not by Stoltenberg, this whole gang that is waging war against Russia with the bodies and lives of Ukrainians.” Ukrainians would have to “pay for the American provocation against Russia.”<sup>50</sup>

49 Kulikov, “Падение американской гегемонии”, 8 August 2022.

50 Ibid.

7 Narrative 5: *The West is Decadent and Weak*

In Germany, *RT DE* traditionally portrays Western democracy as dysfunctional, creating a supposed opposition between the people and the “system”. The government is portrayed as helpless and unable to cope with crises. Society appears decadent and morally decayed. Russia’s authoritarian system, on the other hand, is portrayed as effective, with President Putin staged as a successful crisis manager. In Germany, this is aimed at weakening people’s trust in their government and democracy and, conversely, strengthening Russia’s influence. The reporting is characterized by bipolarity: supposed enemies like the German government and especially parties with a Russia-critical stance such as the Greens (“*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*”) are portrayed negatively. Advocates of the Russian leadership, such as politicians from Alternative for Germany (“*Alternative für Deutschland*”) and the Left (“*Die Linke*”) and other actors with a pro-Russian agenda, are described positively and are given a stage in interviews.<sup>51</sup>

This description corresponds to the strategy that *RT* editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan described in an interview: the foreign channel *RT* is an “information weapon”. The goal, according to Simonyan, is to create an alternative counter-public sphere to the mainstream abroad and thus to gain users, these being leftists and other “fighters against the system”. Russia could then use them as a resource “in the next information war”.<sup>52</sup>

In Russia, the West is also portrayed as decadent, morally depraved and shaken by crises, offering an unrealistic image through selective choice of facts and exaggeration. Russia, by contrast, appears as a fortress of stability and order, with the Putin leadership staging itself as the preserver of traditional values and religion. Putin appears as a caring father of the country who selflessly serves the interests of the homeland.<sup>53</sup> In this way, the media fall back on the communication strategy that had already proven itself in the Soviet Union, namely to nourish the citizens’ pride in living in what is

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51 Kulikov, “Падение американской гегемонии”, 8 August 2022.

52 Spahn, *Russische Medien in Deutschland*, 2022, p. 5.

53 This can be seen, for example, in the structure of the news. Example: *Perviy Kanal*, 19 August 2022, 12:00 Moscow time, <https://www.ltv.com/live>: Russia’s successes in the fight against fascism in Ukraine with honoring the heroes. Putin’s speech on the interests of the homeland. Report from a weapons exhibition. Disasters in Europe: storm and flooding. Young artists for Donbas: fundraising campaign.

supposedly the best country in the world. This is linked to the claim to be a world power again, as the USSR once was.<sup>54</sup>

#### 8 Narrative 6: Russia Is an Empire in Eurasia

Distancing from the West, however, is also historically justified. The Eurasian movement emerged in the 1920s, founded by Russian intellectuals in European exile. They promoted the idea of Russia as a Eurasian “great power” by referring to its common history with the steppe peoples of Asia, especially the Mongols. They also founded “Eurasianism” as a political theory, seeing Russia as a separate continent of Eurasia, defined in opposition to the West.<sup>55</sup>

Eurasianism strongly shapes today's political debates in Russia and is taken up by political scientists who speak on talk shows and other venues. A prominent example is Sergey Karaganov, Honorary Chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy. In his view, China is wrestling with the U.S. for global dominance, and he sees Russia alongside China as the future winner of this struggle. “There is a *de facto* strategic alliance between Russia and China. It is good that we are together, this weakens their forces [...], America will undoubtedly suffer a great defeat in such a war on two fronts (meaning Russia and China, author's note),” Karaganov said on TV Center's talk show “*Pravo Znat*”.<sup>56</sup> Europe is no longer of interest to Russia, says Karaganov: “Europe has lost its role as a source of modernization, which it played for almost 300 years. [...] Intellectually and economically, we should get away from Eurocentrism.” Karaganov sees Russia's future in the East: “We are Eurasians [...] we are returning home.”<sup>57</sup>

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54 Simon, Gerhard: Russlands Griff nach der Weltmacht. In: Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik, Vol. 15, 2022, pp. 139–149.

55 In the late Soviet Union and Russia of the 1990s, historian Lev Gumilyov revived *Eurasianism* with his popular writings such as “Древняя Русь и Великая степь” [Ancient Rus' and the Great Steppe], Moscow 1993. An overview of the content and development of *Eurasianism* is given in the volume “Пути Евразии” [Paths of Eurasia], Moscow 1992.

56 Karaganov, Sergey: “Право знать” [Right to Know], TVC, 25 June 2022.

57 Ibid.

Figure 7: Foreign policy expert Karaganov sees China and Russia as winners in the global power struggle. Screenshot: TV Center.<sup>58</sup>



The geopolitical mastermind nurtures imperial self-confidence: “We are a unique empire. That’s what we can offer humanity: true multiculturalism and openness. We are the civilization of civilizations.”<sup>59</sup> Karaganov interprets the Ukraine war as “the last desperate counterattack of the West”, which refuses to give up its global hegemony. Russia’s goal is to break the West’s resistance. This is to be expected in ten to fifteen years, and for that Russia must win the war, the foreign policy expert said.<sup>60</sup>

### 9 Narrative 7: Supporting Ukraine Leads the West to Its Downfall

In Germany, too, the aim is to break the resistance of the German government, to agitate against sanctions and arms deliveries, and to question solidarity with Ukraine. This is clearly shown by the reporting: *RT DE* deliberately picks up on people’s fears of economic problems or a military confrontation with Russia in order to instrumentalize them politically. *RT DE* warned several times that the German government was risking a nucle-

58 Karaganov, “Право знать”, 25 June 2022.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.



ar war with Russia with its policy.<sup>61</sup> Economic collapse is also predicted: the German government wants the “complete destruction of the German economy”, it was claimed.<sup>62</sup>

However, it is not Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine that is seen as the cause of the crisis, but the sanctions against Russia. The sanctions are blamed across the board for the rise in energy prices, even though gas is not one of the sanctioned goods.<sup>63</sup> *RT DE*-author Gert Ewen Ungar, for example, wrote: “Due to the Western sanctions regime against Russia, energy prices are rising. The sanctions have failed. They hurt the German economy and citizens in Germany far more than Russia.”<sup>64</sup>

In this context, misrepresentations are used, for example when it says: “These (the sanctions, author's note) are backfiring like a boomerang: there is a threat of an energy crisis due to a gas shortage.”<sup>65</sup> However, the gas shortage is not a consequence of the sanctions, but was deliberately created by the Russian energy company Gazprom with the backing of the Putin leadership. There is no mention of Gazprom's role, which cut gas supplies until the end of August 2022 and then stopped them completely.<sup>66</sup> Numerous articles now describe “energy poverty in Germany” and fuel people's discontent.<sup>67</sup>

In autumn 2022, *RT DE* reported favorably on the demonstrations against the sanctions and government in numerous cities in Germany. The reports were aimed at directing people's anger at the sanctions and attacking the political system. Russia's role as the perpetrator of the war and the aggressor was once again omitted. “A system based on fear is doomed to fail”, *RT DE*

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61 Exemplary: *RT DE*: “‘Ball absurd’ für die Ukraine – Der Tanz am Abgrund”, 2 May 2022.

62 *RT DE*: Interview with the economist Eike Hamer, 6 September 2022.

63 “The EU sanctions contain explicit exemption rules to prevent the EU's gas supply from being affected. (...) If Russia wanted to supply more, it could do so at any time and in many ways. Gazprom could pump more gas through Ukraine, for example. Here, the company has booked capacities that it even pays for but does not use. So the tense situation on the European gas market is something Russia is deliberately causing.” See: Die Bundesregierung: Interview mit Janis Kluge. Russland wird technologisch rückständiger werden, 17 August 2022.

64 Ungar, Gert Ewen: “Deutschland rutscht in die Rezession – Wie lange, hängt von der Politik ab, die sie verursacht hat”, *RT DE*, 7 September 2022.

65 *RT DE*: “Energiekrise”.

66 Austel, Nadja/Lothar, Sophia: “Nord Stream 1 ‘komplett’ gestoppt – Unabhängigkeit von russischem Gas in Arbeit”, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2 September 2022.

67 Exemplary: *RT DE*: “Energiearmut in Deutschland nimmt weiter zu”, 22 October 2022.

headlined, referring to the social and political fabric. Social cohesion and this very system would “continue to gradually evaporate into thin air”. Author Tom Wellbrock elaborated: “Something is emerging in eastern Germany that has the potential for great, widespread resistance”. He saw the “end of an affluent society” coming. The reason for this was “fatal political decisions”, by which he meant above all “supposed solidarity with Ukraine”.<sup>68</sup>

Figure 8: Well-known presenter Vladimir Solovyov mocks energy-saving measures in Germany. Screenshot: *Rossia 1*.<sup>69</sup>



In the domestic media, propagandists are also convinced that the Germans are harming themselves the most with the sanctions. In the talk show “Evening with Vladimir Solovyov” on *Rossia 1*, the well-known presenter Solovyov expressed open joy that Germans were only allowed to heat public buildings up to 19 degrees in winter. “So what, just walk around inside in your coat. Germans will be easily recognized. Let them walk around the apartment in their coats all the time, back and forth [...]”<sup>70</sup>

Then he laughed and clapped his hands. “There will be no gas.” (Then partly German, partly Russian): “*keine Gas, ne budet gasen.*” (sic) “But that’s not bad, you’ll get used to it”, he says to Germany’s address.<sup>71</sup> After-

68 Wellbrock, Tom: “Ein System, das auf Angst basiert, ist zum Scheitern verurteilt”, RT DE, 23 October 2022.

69 *Rossia 1*: “Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым” [Evening with Vladimir Solovyov], 4 August 2022, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2455304>, 14.09.2022.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

wards, an expert claimed that Russia allegedly benefits from economic isolation.<sup>72</sup> This account is controversial. Statistics show that the Russian economy shrank by 6.5 percent from February to June 2022, while Germany was still on a growth path in the summer of 2022.<sup>73</sup>

## 10 Conclusion

The campaign against Ukraine started already in late 2013/early 2014 with the Maidan and the annexation of Crimea, and since the 2022 attack it has been the dominant topic in Russian state and state-related media. *RT, Russia 1* and *Co.* create an alternative reality in which the attacker becomes the victim and the victim the perpetrator. For this purpose, the national memory of the fight against fascism in World War II is skillfully instrumentalized and projected onto alleged fascists in Ukraine and abroad. Likewise, the recourse to propaganda stereotypes from the Soviet era can be seen: the staged culture war and isolation from the West, as well as imperial ambitions, are reminiscent of a new edition of Stalin's "socialism in one country" – now in the guise of the Russian-Eurasian empire. In the short term, the propagandists seem to be achieving their goals, i.e. legitimizing the war in particular. In Russia, a majority of 76 percent of respondents support the war against Ukraine, according to an August 2022 poll by the Levada Center.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, the Putin system with its state media is threatened, despite the eternal mantra of stability in Russia. A policy of isolation cannot work in the age of the Internet. Public support is unstable, as the mass exodus after the partial mobilization clearly demonstrated. There is a difference between supporting the "special operation" and taking up arms oneself and dying for the fatherland in Ukraine. In terms of foreign policy, the Russian Federation has the problem that it cannot offer its post-Soviet neighbors an attractive integration model. Russia prevents Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova from being bound to the West through war and occupation. It is questionable whether such policy of oppression has a future.

The Russian state media seethes hatred and glorifies violence against Ukrainians and other "fascists", by which all political opponents are meant. The broadcasts are often extremely repulsive because of their brutality. A

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72 Shaende, Jonas: In "Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым", 4 August 2022.

73 Die Bundesregierung, Interview mit Janis Kluge, 17 August 2022.

74 Levada Center: Survey on the conflict with Ukraine of July 2022, 1 August 2022.

broadcast by the Russian-language edition of *RT* made its way into the German media. There, the presenter called for children to be either drowned in a river or set on fire in a hut if they believed that Ukraine had been occupied by Russia.<sup>75</sup> This is just the tip of the iceberg. The war and the media that glorifies it poison Ukraine's relations with Russia for a long time. Putin achieves the opposite of what he intends: the separation of the East Slavic "brother state" from Russia is irreversible.

In Germany, the notion of the Russian media is to use crises to attack and destabilize democracy. This is clearly demonstrated by the energy crisis triggered by the war. The foreign broadcaster *RT DE* specifically targets dissatisfied people and mobilizes them to protest. The "rage winter" organized by right-wing extremists and the "Querdenker" movement is fueled by *RT DE* in the media. In Germany, the political agenda of *RT* is particularly well demonstrated: while the Russian leadership is creating problems – be it by cutting off gas supplies, the war, or the waves of refugees that come with it – *RT DE* is fueling the mood of catastrophe and turning the population against its government. Putin's weapons in the information war serve only one goal: the preservation of his own power.

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