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# Russian information war: the activities of the Russian propaganda apparatus in the context of the war in Ukraine (as of the first half of March 2022)

As Russia launched a full-scale offensive against Ukraine, there was a parallel launch of new activities in the directions of information warfare. In its activities, the Russian propaganda apparatus focused on developing the narratives of previous years, relatively limiting the appearance of completely new plots.

The course of the first days of the war influenced a reduction in Russian disinformation activities (the Russians lost the initiative on the information warfare front). Russia was clearly unprepared to perform propaganda and disinformation activities in the absence of a quick victory. However, the situation began to change around day 7/8 of the war. By then, the Russians were ready to conduct new activities which took into account the unfavourable turn of cases from their perspective. The heavy losses suffered by the forces of the Russian Federation and the inability to launch an effective attack on key Ukrainian regional cities meant that the Russians had to change not only their military tactics, but also their tactics regarding information warfare activities.

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Having encountered strong resistance from Ukraine, the Russian propaganda apparatus was forced to revise its tactics and produce messages in response to the protracted military action. As part of its activities, Russia focused on producing messages for the needs of the internal information market. It seems that the Russians, aware of the fact that their messages were not credible, limited their efforts to influence Western audiences' opinion. They continued to broadcast messages whitewashing Russia's image, but the number of messages, their content and the degree of broadcasting were definitely lower than it could be expected. This assumption is confirmed, among other things, by the Kremlin's method of argumentation, which referred to the reason for starting the war. The immediate goal of the operation was supposed to be the liberation of Ukraine from "Nazi rule" and the neutralization of the threat Ukraine allegedly posed to Russia. These messages could not be considered credible by the West. They are clearly aimed at the internal audience (the citizens of the Russian Federation, Belarus and the occupied territories – the Crimea and a part of Donbass) and referring to the myths and propaganda narratives popularized after 2014. It is also worth noting that the Russian offensive was not preceded by a major provocation that would be a direct reason for war, which could be presented in the West as a factor independent of Russia that forced the Russian Federation to act. It may seem that the Kremlin considered this unnecessary, assuming that the Western world would interpret the Russian operation as a full-scale war anyway. It should also be noted here that in Russian nomenclature, the current war is called an "operation" to liberate Ukraine from unspecified "Nazis". The word "war" practically does not appear in Russian propaganda messages, which also has a serious significance from the perspective of shaping the minds of Russian citizens. According to the leading narrative, the Russians are providing "assistance" to the Ukrainians, which is supposed not only to serve the liberation of Ukraine from the rule of the "Bandera regime," but also to ensure peace and security for the entire region and the Russian Federation. The word "war" would contradict these assumptions.

The key directions for the development of the activities of the Russian propaganda apparatus have become: 1) an attempt to whitewash the image of the Russian Federation; 2) an attempt to present Ukraine and the West as subjects threatening the security of the Federation; 3) an attempt to shift responsibility for the suffering of Ukrainian civilians onto the Ukrainian authorities and the West; and 4) an attempt to consolidate Russian society around a strong leader.

The first of the mentioned directions refers to the construction of messages about the necessity for Russia to launch a so-called "peace operation" ("denazification") in Ukraine. Messages on this subject are to convince the citizens of the Russian Federation that the Kremlin's actions are worthy of approval, and even necessary. This direction is mainly being developed in order to reach Western audiences. It is inseparably connected with the second direction, within which Russia is trying to build a message

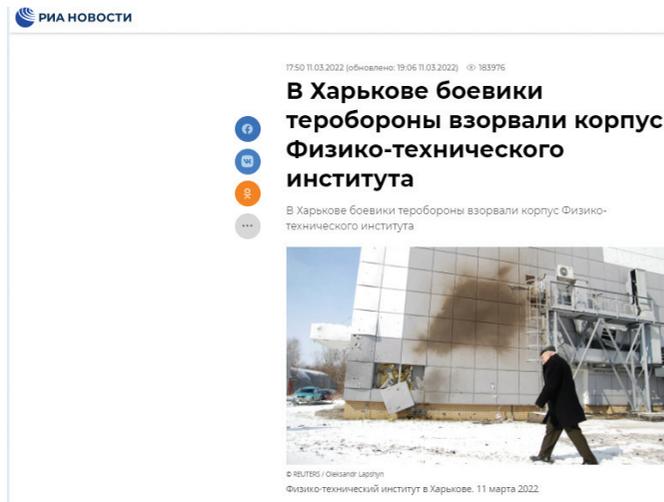
that the Kremlin could not have acted otherwise, since Ukraine posed a direct threat to the security of the citizens of the Russian Federation. Within the approach, messages are being developed about the alleged presence of secret American biological-chemical laboratories in Ukraine, which were supposed to conduct research on a pathogen devastating “ethnic Russians”. A similar role is played by messages about Ukraine’s alleged nuclear programme, whose development has been halted as a result of the Russian “peace operation”. It is worth noting that, in order to lend credibility to this narrative, on 10 March 2022, the Russians shelled the building of the Kharkiv Institute of Physics and Technology, which houses a reactor used for research purposes. The next day, the Russian media (including the Ria Novosti portal) reported on the alleged attack by Ukrainian nationalists on the building in question, which resulted in “concealing” the evidence of the alleged work of Ukrainian researchers on the atomic bomb. Messages about the threat posed to Russia by Ukraine’s aspirations to join NATO are also developed along this line. The main message for Russians boils down to the narrative that “the operation in Ukraine was a necessary thing to ensure the security of Russia and the Russians”.

Figure 1. One of the Telegram channels used by the Kremlin to carry out disinformation activities – part of the message reads: “The Great Russian Army. We will defeat the Nazis!”



Source: WarDonbass Telegram channel, 11 March 2022.

Figure 2. RIA Novosti, “Ukraine’s territorial defence forces blew up the building of the Institute of Physics and Technology in Kharkiv”



Source: <https://ria.ru/20220311/vzryv-1777722018.html> [accessed: 11 March 2022].

This direction, in turn, is connected with yet another one – creating the image of Ukraine and the West as the party responsible for the suffering of civilians. Within this direction, it is emphasized that Russia was forced to attack the Ukrainian state because of Western activities stimulating Ukraine to fight with Russia (alleged militarization of Ukraine by NATO). In order to lend credibility to the narratives regarding this direction, the Russians broadcast messages about the support the West is giving to Ukraine. The conclusions for the citizens of the Russian Federation are clear: 1) had it not been for the West, Ukraine would have quickly capitulated; 2) had Ukraine capitulated, Ukrainian civilians would not have suffered; 3) the West – not Russia – is therefore responsible for the suffering of civilians. The fourth direction ties together the Russian Federation’s activities aimed at influencing its own society. More and more messages are reaching Russians about the losses suffered (including the deaths of Russian soldiers). Russians may begin to ask themselves why their soldiers are dying. The answers to this question are being prepared by the Russian disinformation apparatus. The fundamental answer is: “it had to be so” / “it was necessary”. Other answers refer to the belief that “they are fighting for the freedom of a brotherly nation” (however, this message is now marginalised) and that “they are fighting in the defence of Russia” (defence against a mythical Western enemy). At the same time, Russia carries on activities of heroization of the fallen soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Messages about heroic deaths in the fight against the “Nazis” or sacrifice for the “defence of the state” are being built. Videos showing bombings of Ukrainian cities and footage revealing the deaths of Russian soldiers are not reproduced by the Russian media, neither are they “properly” commented

on (e.g., footage showing Kharkiv being bombed is presented as an “attack by Bander forces” on Donetsk). A disturbing trend is taking place, indicating that in addition to consolidating society around a “strong leader who will defend Russians from Western aggression,” measures are being taken to radicalize Russian society. As a result of constructing an image of reality in which Russian soldiers are dying in the “defence of peace” at the hands of “Nazis” supported by the West, the possibility of an outbreak of a popular anti-war sentiment in Russia is not only being limited, but it is leading to a state in which average citizens of the Russian Federation will gradually become more and more hateful of Ukrainians (whom they will accuse of the death of their loved ones or the deaths of “heroic Russian soldiers”). This trend could prove extremely dangerous as the Kremlin is beginning to settle ethnic Russians in the occupied areas – as it did in the Crimea after 2014. Then, the newly arrived population, with the support of the occupation structures, may take an active part in terrorizing the local people with the aim of crushing the resistance of the conquered population.

Figure 3. RIA Novosti, “In the DPR, it was announced that Kiev was preparing a provocation involving humanitarian corridors”

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## В ДНР заявили о подготовке Киевом провокации с гумкоридорами

Штаб обороны ДНР: Киев готовит провокации с гумкоридорами в Мариуполе и Волновехе

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**ДОНЕЦК, 9 мар — РИА Новости.** Украина готовит провокации с гуманитарными коридорами в Донецкой народной республике, [заявили](#) в местном штабе территориальной обороны.

“Киевский режим готовит очередные провокации с гуманитарными коридорами в [Мариуполе](#) и [Волновехе](#)”, — говорится в сообщении в [Телеграм-канале](#)

Source: <https://ria.ru/20220309/ukraina-1777253358.html> [accessed: 11 March 2022].

The Russian Federation is clearly focused on the internal direction of disinformation and propaganda activities. The Kremlin is trying to explain the current situation

to Russians from the perspective of rivalry between Russia – the “force of good”, and the West – the “force of evil”. Not only does this picture of reality arouse in Russians resentment towards Ukrainians and the West, but it also stimulates readiness for further unreflective support of the Kremlin policy.

Russia side is using all the tools at its disposal to carry out these actions – television and the radio, the press, the so-called “troll factories,” Telegram channels, and authorities such as influencers and politicians. Parallel to its intensive disinformation activities, the Kremlin conducts actions aimed at isolating the Russian information space. The introduction of criminal liability for speaking about losses suffered by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation or for informing citizens about the real course of the war is a form of definitive gag on the media remaining outside the Kremlin’s control. Currently, Russia is seeking to neutralize social effects of the imposed sanctions and to consolidate the society. This is a form of preparation for a prolonged war and international isolation. At the same time, the Russian Federation is getting ready to conduct information activities in an outward direction, which will probably take place once the internal information front has solidified. One potential direction in which Moscow will actively operate concerns the stimulation of an anti-Ukrainian sentiment in Poland, and the stimulation of fears in Poland and the West regarding the risk of Russia’s attack NATO. These actions will be aimed at limiting the level of support given to Ukraine and Ukrainians by Poles, Polish state structures, and the West in general.