

THE EVOLUTION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S OFFICIAL ANTI-UKRAINE DISCOURSE (2014-2022)

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Abstract. *The article focuses on the evolution of the Russian Federation's official discourse concerning Ukraine, from the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 to the official decision to invade the Ukrainian state on February 24, 2022. During this period, various official messages were launched in the public sphere to prepare Russian society for the next phases of the hybrid war or were designed to shape a series of social attitudes on the territories of other states that would favour political leaders in Moscow. The Kremlin resorted to a plethora of specific communication tactics: the launch of several official narratives at the same time, some of which were subsequently discarded; challenging the legitimacy of Kyiv authorities; fostering the idea that Ukraine was an artificial state created by Russia; launching certain debates in the public sphere regarding the historical unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples as well as the build-up of neo-Nazi tendencies on Ukrainian territory. Official narratives endorsed by the Russian Federation were a special mix of international law and historiography topics. Russian media outlets disseminated them as part of disinformation and fake news campaigns. This paper is an analytical effort to organize official Russian narratives about Ukraine promoted over 2014-2022, before the large-scale invasion.*

Keywords: *Russia, Ukraine, hybrid warfare, disinformation, fake news, narratives.*

Rezumat. Evoluția discursului oficial anti-Ucraina în Federația Rusă (2014-2022). *Articolul se concentrează asupra evoluțiilor narațiunilor oficiale din Federația Rusă privind Ucraina de la anexarea peninsulei Crimeea în 2014 până la anunțarea deciziei de a invada statul ucrainean pe 24 februarie 2022. În această perioadă, diverse mesaje oficiale au pregătit societatea rusă pentru noi faze ale războiului hibrid sau au încercat să forneze*

o serie de atitudini sociale prielnice liderilor politici de la Moscova pe teritoriul altor state. Kremlinul a recurs la diverse tehnici comunicaționale specifice: lansarea mai multor narațiuni oficiale concomitent, la unele dintre care s-a renunțat ulterior, punerea sub semnul întrebării a legitimității autorităților de la Kiev, promovarea ideii că Ucraina ca stat a fost artificial creată de Rusia, lansarea unor dezbateri în spațiul public despre unitatea istorică a popoarelor rus și ucrainean, cât și despre consolidarea tendințelor neonaziste pe teritoriul Ucrainei. Narațiunile oficiale din Federația Rusă reprezentau un amestec selectiv de subiecte din domeniul dreptului internațional și istoriei. Acestea au fost distribuite de rețeaua de presă guvernamentală rusă în cadrul campaniilor de dezinformare și diseminare de fake news. Articolul reprezintă un efort analitic de sistematizare a narațiunilor oficiale ruse privind Ucraina în anii 2014-2022 care au precedat invazia la scară largă.

INTRODUCTION

Following the Cold War, world politics underwent groundbreaking transformations. The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered an abrupt shift from a bipolar to a unipolar system of governance. As its regional influence grew, the Russian Federation attempted to implement a general overhaul in its political system patterned upon Western politics. Instead, a series of overlapping economic, social, and political crises ensued. In the early 2000s, Soviet nostalgia gained momentum in Russian society,¹ which was longing for Moscow's long-forgotten superpower status. Following the election of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia, local elites began to emphasize the need for Russia to reclaim its position as a global power.

In his 2005 address to the Russian Federation's Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin referred to the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century, stating that millions of Russians suddenly found themselves outside their country's borders.² Two years later, on the verge of the Munich Security Conference, the Russian president criticized the United States' domination in international relations. The Kremlin leader pointed out that a unipolar system of global order does not serve the best interests of world states, while NATO expansion poses a major threat to the Russian

¹ Levada-Center, *Nostalgia po SSSR* [Nostalgia for the USSR], in <https://www.levada.ru/2021/12/24/nostalgia-po-sssr-3/> (Accessed on 20.02.2023).

² *Poslanie Federalnomu Sobraniuu – 2005* [Message to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation – 2005], in <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> (Accessed on 20.02.2023).

Federation's national interests.³

The 2013 *Foreign Policy Concept* reflected Russia's dissatisfaction with its regional power status. According to this official document, international relations have shifted from a unipolar system towards a multipolar global structure. At the same time, the concept outlined a new alternative Russian understanding of international relations. Russian foreign policy founding document referred to Ukraine as a "priority partner within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)". Moscow's goal in Ukraine was stated as contributing to this country's "participation in extended integration processes" launched by the Russian Federation in the context of growing challenges to the unipolar system of international politics.⁴

As American political scientist, Zbigniew Brzezinski suggested in his influential volume *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, the Kremlin's ambition of restoring its global power status cannot happen without turning Ukraine into a territory under Russia's control. "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire",⁵ Brzezinski wrote, highlighting the existence of an independent Ukrainian state.

In this context, the hybrid Russian-Ukrainian war launched in 2014 resorted to an array of information and psychological warfare narratives and operations. From the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 to President Vladimir Putin's declaration of a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation's leadership promoted various official narratives.⁶ In his book, *Russia's Hybrid Aggression. Lessons for Europe*,⁷ Ukrainian political theorist Yevhen Mahda analysed the discourse of political leaders of the Russian Federation concerning Ukraine, arguing that Moscow-based decision-makers have studied the reactions and expectations of their peers in Kyiv and Western states. In the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war, the Kremlin kept a close eye on the reactions of Western leaders and

³ *Speech and the following discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy*, in <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034> (Accessed on 20.02.2023).

⁴ *Kontseptsiiia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii – 2013* [The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation – 2013], in <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d447a0ce9f5a96bdc3.pdf> (Accessed on 03.03.2023).

⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York, Basic Books, 1997, p. 45.

⁶ Anastasia Lejepekova, *Putin obyavil o provedenii specoperacii po zashchite Donbassa* [Putin announced a special operation to protect Donbas], in <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/02/24/17336791.shtml> (Accessed on 03.04.2023).

⁷ Yevhen Mahda, *Hibrydna ahresiiia Rosii. Uroky dlia Yevropy* [Russia's Hybrid Aggression. Lessons for Europe], Kyiv, Kalamar, 2017, p. 8.

specific information processes in ex-Soviet space. Examining narratives publicized by Russian media as well as by political leaders in Moscow, Marian Voicu's *Matryoshka of Liars: Fake News, Manipulation, Populism* outlines the anti-Western character of the Kremlin's information policies, starting with the so-called "Euromaidan"⁸ pro-European protests in Ukraine (2013-2014). According to the author, Russia's narratives operated with a limited number of themes and approaches systematically promoted at several levels of Russian official media.

Political scientist Joanna Szostek of the University of Glasgow points to a rivalry between "pro-Western and anti-Russian" narratives projected by Kyiv, on the one hand, and "pro-Russian and anti-Western" narratives endorsed by Moscow, on the other.⁹ Andreas Kappeler of the University of Vienna also investigates narratives fostered by the political class in the Russian Federation through the lens of political history and the imperial legacy in Russian-Ukrainian relations. According to the author, these relations are characterized by an asymmetry of narrative discourse, which reflects Russia's hegemony over Ukraine.¹⁰ Researcher Eva Claessen of The Leuven Center for Global Governance Studies examines how official narratives popularized by the Russian Federation regarding Ukraine took on an increasingly aggressive tone after Kyiv shifted towards European integration as the defining element of its foreign policy.¹¹

It is worth mentioning that research in recent years has provided a comprehensive picture of particular connections between Russian official discourse and media narratives. This paper examines these connections in the wider context of the hybrid war when conventional military actions are accompanied by non-military initiatives¹². It was additionally necessary to structure official Russian narratives about Ukraine from the 2014-2022 period while keeping disinformation and *fake news* campaigns¹³ in view. In this study, the

⁸ Marian Voicu, *Matrioșka mincinoșilor: fake news, manipulare, populism* [Matryoshka of Liars: Fake News, Manipulation, Populism], Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2018, p. 87.

⁹ Joanna Szostek, *The Power and Limits of Russia's Strategic Narrative in Ukraine. The Role of Linkage*, in "Perspectives on Politics", Vol. 15, 2017, No. 2, pp. 379-395.

¹⁰ Andreas Kappeler, *Ukraine and Russia. Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories*, in "Journal of Eurasian Studies", Vol. 5, 2014, No. 2, pp. 107-115.

¹¹ Eva Claessen, *The making of a narrative: The use of geopolitical othering in Russian strategic narratives during the Ukraine crisis*, in "Media, War and Conflict", Vol. 14, 2021, No. 1, pp. 1-18.

¹² Marian Voicu, *Matryoshka of Liars...*, p. 12.

¹³ Marin Gherman, *Narațiuni ale dezinformării și fake news utilizate de Rusia până la invadarea Ucrainei* [Narratives of disinformation and fake news used by Russia prior to the

term “official narrative” refers to the narrative structures represented by statements, discourses, documents, and articles published by Russian political leaders in state-controlled media and on various websites. It also investigates the statements of political leaders who dictate the foreign policy of the Russian Federation according to the Constitution,¹⁴ as well as presidential decrees.¹⁵ The analysis focused on the president of the Russian Federation, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, their spokespersons, and the Russian government media channels that helped disseminate official messages about Ukraine. These official narratives were researched using a set of methods and tools specific to the field of political communication¹⁶ and language analysis.¹⁷

OFFICIAL NARRATIVES ABOUT THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

After the pro-European protests in Ukraine, known as “Euromaidan”, and the flight to Russia of President Viktor Yanukovich, on March 4, 2014, Vladimir Putin said Ukraine witnessed “an anti-constitutional coup and a military takeover”. The Kremlin leader said Viktor Yanukovich “surrendered the power”, although he remains Ukraine’s legitimate president. Vladimir Putin pointed out that the new regime in Ukraine does not represent the people, simply adding that only the Supreme Rada (the Parliament of Ukraine), which also included a pro-Russian majority parliamentary group, was a “partially legitimate” entity.¹⁸ It was the first official sign of Moscow’s unwillingness to recognize the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian authorities after Viktor Yanukovich stepped down following his

invasion of Ukraine], in “Polis: Revistă de Științe Politice”, X, 2022, nr. 2, p. 106.

¹⁴ *The Constitution of the Russian Federation*, in <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm> (Accessed on 27.01.2023).

¹⁵ *Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 11.07.2004 g. N. 865. Voprosy Ministerstva inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of July 11, 2004, No. 865. Issues of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation], in <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/21107> (Accessed on 27.05.2023).

¹⁶ André Gosselin, *La communication politique. Cartographie d'un champ de recherche et d'activités*, in “Hermès”, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 1995, No. 3, pp. 17-33.

¹⁷ Michael Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (2nd Edition), London, Routledge, 2001, 276 p.

¹⁸ Serghei Smirnov, *Putin: My ne rassmatrivaem variant prisoedineniya Kryma* [Putin: We are not considering the annexation of Crimea], in “Vedomosti”, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2014/03/04/putin-nachal-press-konferenciyu> (Accessed on 03.04.2023).

refusal to sign the EU Association Agreement in Vilnius in the autumn of 2013.¹⁹

When referring to the events in Ukraine as a “coup”, Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted the fact that the only legitimate entity on the territory of Ukraine is the Parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. The Kremlin leader gave assurances that Moscow is not considering the possibility of “annexing” the peninsula to Russia. “The situation is tense in Crimea, and the possible use of armed force is simply out of the question”,²⁰ the Russian president went on to say.

It is worth mentioning that in 1996, Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov wrote for “Izvestia”²¹ that the Crimean Peninsula must be returned to Russia, and that Sevastopol is historically a Russian city. What followed was a series of statements from the mayor of Moscow and the supporters of this idea, which were criticized by the Ukrainian authorities at the time. The idea of Russia annexing Crimea did not become the official rhetoric of Moscow, but various Russian nationalist leaders now and then reiterated it in the public sphere.

On March 18, 2014, two weeks after the Russian president had announced Crimea would not be annexed to the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin signed an agreement with the self-proclaimed leaders of the peninsula. A new subject of the Russian Federation thus emerged – the Republic of Crimea.²² Moscow annexed Crimea despite protests from the Ukrainian authorities and the international community. Vladimir Putin’s statement on March 4, 2022, when he promised Russia would not occupy Crimea, also included an out-of-character acknowledgement of the Crimean Parliament’s legitimacy amidst ongoing talks about the “coup” in Ukraine. Two weeks later, the narrative was used to justify Russia’s illegal annexation of the Ukrainian region. The March 18, 2014, agreement was at its core based on the principle of legitimacy of political institutions in Crimea, which had allegedly decided on its own to join the Russian Federation.

Breaking the verbal promise not to annex Crimea was dismissed as a topic for

¹⁹ *Ukraine Protests After Yanukovich EU Deal Rejection*, in <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25162563> (Accessed on 11.04.2023).

²⁰ Serghei Smirnov, *Putin: My ne rassmatrivaem....*

²¹ Yury Luzhkov, *Sevastopol rossiiskii gorod na krymskom poluostrove* [Sevastopol is a Russian city on the Crimean Peninsula], in “Izvestia”, 1996, Nov. 1, p. 3.

²² *Dogovor mezhdru Rossijskoj Federaciej i Respublikoj Krym o prinyatii v Rossijskuyu Federaciju Respubliki Krym i obrazovanii v sostave Rossijskoj Federacii novyh subjektov* [Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Crimea on the Admission of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation and the formation of new subjects within the Russian Federation], in <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20605> (Accessed on 04.04.2023).

debate in the Russian public sphere and was subsequently used by Vladimir Putin as a smokescreen. A year after the annexation of Crimea, the Russian TV channel Rossiya 1 broadcast the documentary *Crimea. The Way Home*,²³ in which the Russian president described the occupation of the peninsula as a planned operation. The annexation of the Ukrainian territory was presented as a “historical necessity”. Vladimir Putin argued he had issued a secret decree to annex the peninsula, ordering a group of servicemen to take control of the administrative buildings. The Russian president confirmed that every action aimed at capturing Crimea had been planned, claiming that the peninsula is “historically a Russian territory”.

Official Russian narratives concerning Crimea are both interrelated and divergent. At the start of the crisis in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin claimed that a military intervention on the peninsula was out of the question. Two weeks later, the Russian president and the self-proclaimed leaders of Crimea signed an agreement on the annexation of this territory. A year later, Vladimir Putin went public to provide a more detailed explanation, saying that he had coordinated a secret military operation to annex the Ukrainian region over the course of several months. Concerning the Russian president’s statements about Crimea, the scenarios that did not play out or the political promises that remained unfulfilled were ignored in official communications as if they had never existed in the first place.

The pattern behind the evolution of the Russian president’s statements regarding Crimea reveals a certain ambiguity as well as some hidden messages. The official narrative launched on March 4, 2014, was meant to convey a message that might have seemed of secondary importance at the time. Vladimir Putin tried to convince the public that only the Crimean Parliament was legitimate so that he could subsequently justify the annexation of the peninsula. The 2015 official narrative, addressed to all Russian citizens, was designed to consolidate popular support for the Russian Federation’s foreign policy. The authorities continued to refer to the annexation of Crimea as a historical act of reunification of this peninsula with Russia.

THE LEGITIMACY OF UKRAINIAN AUTHORITIES IN OFFICIAL NARRATIVES IN RUSSIA

After the annexation of Crimea, Moscow launched an official narrative portraying Ukraine as a state “artificially created” by Russia, to cast additional

²³ Krym. Put na Rodinu. Dokumentalniy film [Crimea. The Way Home], in <https://smotrim.ru/video/1188898> (Accessed on 04.04.2023).

doubt on the legitimacy of Ukrainian authorities. In his address to the Federal Assembly on December 4, 2014, Vladimir Putin stated that Prince Vladimir the Great, who converted to Christianity in the land of Crimea, christened the Russian people in 988. "Crimea is where our people live, and the peninsula is of strategic importance for Russia as the spiritual source of development of a multifaceted but solid Russian nation and a centralized Russian state. It was in Crimea, in the ancient city of the Chersonesus or Korsun, as ancient Russian chroniclers called it, that Grand Prince Vladimir was baptized before bringing Christianity to Rus."²⁴

With support from the Russian state media, Russian officials engaged in various discussions in the public sphere about Russia's "historical regions" which were passed on to Ukraine by Soviet leaders. Aside from Crimea, the discussions invoked various Ukrainian regions, which Vladimir Putin described as part of Novorossiia (New Russia). "I would like to remind you that what was called Novorossiia back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev, and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows", Vladimir Putin said on April 17, 2014.²⁵ He added that Russia's "historical territories" remained under Ukraine's control, although Russian people continue to live here. Challenging the legitimacy of authorities in eastern and southern Ukraine, the Kremlin leader launched the idea of federalizing the Ukrainian state.²⁶

Drawing on arguments of historical origin, Vladimir Putin pointed out that Ukrainian authorities have no historical right over territories "given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government". According to the logic of this narrative, Ukraine is supposed to become a federation where regions populated by Russians should gain broad political self-governance.

After the signing of the Minsk peace agreements²⁷ by representatives of Russia, Ukraine, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the leaders of the self-proclaimed Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk designed to settle the conflict in Donbas, the issue of Ukrainian authorities' legitimacy was

²⁴ *Poslanie Prezidenta Federalnomu Sobraniuu – 2014* [Address of the President of Russia to the Federal Assembly – 2014], in <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173> (Accessed on 08.02.2023).

²⁵ *Priamaia liniia s Vladimirom Putinyim* [Direct line with Vladimir Putin], in <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796> (Accessed on 08.02.2023).

²⁶ *Priamaia liniia s Vladimirom Putinyim...*

²⁷ OSCE, *Memorandum of 19 September 2014 outlining the parameters for the implementation of commitments of the Minsk Protocol of 5 September 2014*, in <https://www.osce.org/home/123806> (Accessed on 07.03.2023).

not abandoned by official Russian rhetoric. In February 2015, the Federation Council and the State Duma in Moscow described Viktor Yanukovich's dismissal as president of Ukraine by the Supreme Rada in Kyiv as an unconstitutional move. According to Leonid Slutsky, the chairman of the CIS State Duma Committee, Viktor Yanukovich was illegally deposed. "Yanukovich is no longer president after a military coup actively supported by the West a year ago", the Russian official said. Slutsky also argued that the Federation Council believes Viktor Yanukovich was forced to flee Ukraine in February 2014, when his life was threatened by "mobs of nationalists."²⁸ Andrey Klishas, the Chair of the Federation Council Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Construction said that by robbing Viktor Yanukovich of the Ukrainian presidency, the Supreme Rada thus confirmed that an unconstitutional coup had taken place in Ukraine. "He was invested with both the office and the title of president by the Ukrainian people, in the wake of general democratic elections",²⁹ Klishas said.

In an article published in the journal "Russia in Global Affairs" in March 2016, Sergey Lavrov, the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, wrote that Moscow grounds its foreign policy on the observance of international law: "We are trying to do our best to overcome obstacles on this way, including the implementation of the Minsk accords to settle the Ukraine crisis provoked by the coup in Kiev in February 2014."³⁰ In the 2014-2022 period, the head of Russian diplomacy repeatedly stated that Ukraine was at the stage of a civil war. The Russian Foreign Minister called on Kyiv to sit down for talks with separatist leaders from Donbas and discuss peace terms as well as plans to federalize Ukraine. In April 2015, Sergey Lavrov called on Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko live on the public TV broadcaster "Russia Today" to "annihilate the

²⁸ *V Sovete Federatsii i v Gosdume nazvali nelegitimnym lishenie Viktora Ianukovicha zvaniia prezidenta Ukrainy* [The Federation Council and the State Duma called Viktor Yanukovich's deprivation of the title of President of Ukraine an illegitimate move], in <https://www.pnp.ru/in-world/2015/02/04/v-sovete-federacii-i-vgosdume-nazvali-nelegitimnym-lishenie-viktora-yanukovicha-zvaniya-prezidenta-ukrainy.html> (Accessed on 07.02.2023).

²⁹ *Sovfed: Rada priznala antikonstitutsionnyi perevorot* [Federation Council: Rada recognized anti-constitutional coup], in <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1740665.html> (Accessed on 09.01.2023).

³⁰ Sergey Lavrov, *Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective. Musings at a New Stage of International Development*, in "Russia in Global Affairs", 2016, No. 2, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russias-foreign-policy-in-a-historical-perspective/>.

parties engaged in the civil war in Ukraine if he wants to prove he is truly a president of peace, as he professes to be.”³¹

Despite several rounds of talks held as part of the peace-making process in Minsk and the signing of several agreements for the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Donbas, Russia chose to use double standards in terms of legitimacy and the international recognition of Ukrainian authorities after the Euromaidan protests. On the one hand, Russia does not recognize the full legitimacy of the new Ukrainian authorities. On the other hand, Russia had addressed political leaders in Kyiv several requests, which was an indirect recognition of their full international legitimacy. According to official narratives Russia promoted over 2014-2022, Eastern Ukraine is at the stage of a “civil war” involving the new authorities in Kyiv and Russian speakers in Donbas. Moscow never admitted to being a belligerent party in this conflict. It was only in February 2022 that Russia posed as a saviour of the local population oppressed by “Kyiv’s hostile policies”.

In November 2016, the Russian Federation introduced a new foreign policy doctrine, institutionalizing the viewpoints previously endorsed by Russian political leaders in connection with the war in Donbas. According to Article 56 of this new document, the Russian Federation was interested in building mutually beneficial political, economic, cultural and spiritual relations with Ukraine. “Russia will take the necessary actions, along with all interested governments and international organizations, to reach a political and diplomatic resolution to Ukraine’s internal conflict.”³² The document does not refer to the conflict in Donbas as a “civil war”, while Moscow describes it as an “internal conflict”. Russia’s foreign policy doctrine mentions nothing of the illegitimacy of Ukrainian authorities. This thesis gradually lost importance in official communications and was gradually adopted by Russian government media.

At the end of December 2021, two months before the launch of Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Sergey Lavrov told the RIA Novosti national news agency that “the eight-year civil war on the territory of Ukraine is far from over.”³³ Following

³¹ *Lavrov: Poroshenko nado neutralizovat tekh kto khochet grazhdanskoj voiny* [Lavrov: Poroshenko must neutralize those who want a civil war], in <https://crimea.ria.ru/20150412/283671.html> (Accessed on 14.02.2023).

³² *Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii (utv. Ukazom Prezidenta RF ot 30 noyabrya 2016 g. N 640)* [Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation (Approval of the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of November 30, 2016, N 640), in <https://base.garant.ru/71552062> (Accessed on 14.02.2023).

³³ *Sergey Lavrov: grazhdanskaia voina na Ukraine daleka ot zaversheniia* [Sergey Lavrov: the civil war in Ukraine is far from over], in <https://ria.ru/20211231/lavrov->

Kyiv's firm refusal to negotiate agreements with separatist leaders in Donbas, significant shifts occurred in official narratives conveyed by Russian political elites. Both Ukrainian and anti-Western discourses started to surface progressively.

THE "NEO-NAZISM" IN UKRAINE IN OFFICIAL RUSSIAN FEDERATION NARRATIVES

Starting in 2021, high-ranking politicians in Moscow abandoned several typical narratives Russia employed around the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas. Instead, Russian officials began to increasingly accuse Ukrainian authorities of neo-Nazism and radicalism. The first claims of neo-Nazi support made against Ukrainian authorities occurred in 2014. After the removal of Ukraine's president, Viktor Yanukovich, Russian political leaders accused Ukrainian authorities of relying on various neo-Nazi movements, whereas TV stations in Moscow broadcast images of young men protesting on the streets of Ukrainian cities wearing Nazi insignia. In 2014, Sergey Lavrov repeatedly accused Ukraine of being led by radical leaders who had derailed the traditional pro-Russian orientation of Ukrainian lawmakers. "To Russia, Ukraine is a brotherly people, not the Nazis marching in Kyiv",³⁴ the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation said.

By mid-2021, narratives about "neo-Nazism" in Ukraine and the West's "aggressive policies" towards Russia were integrated into a unified political discourse. At the same time, government media narratives gradually lined up with those promoted by high-ranking politicians. Politicians, in turn, picked up themes spread by media outlets as part of the hybrid Russian-Ukrainian war. Much like in 2014, when Crimea was annexed, Vladimir Putin himself took on the role of opinion leader. On June 13, 2021, the Russian president spoke live on the "Russia 1" TV station, arguing that Ukraine is a neo-Nazi state, used by the West as a tool against Russia. The Russian leader added that Ukrainians do not want any real rapprochement to NATO. "At least 50% of Ukraine's inhabitants do not want their country to join NATO. Smart people. And I'm not being ironic at all. These people who stand against NATO accession do not want to end up in the line of fire, do not want to be used as a bargaining chip and cannon fodder"³⁵, Vladimir Putin said. In

1766234596.html (Accessed on 14.02.2023).

³⁴ Maksim Nikitin, *Lavrov: dlia Rossii Ukraina - eto bratskii narod, a ne marshiruiushchie v Kieve natsisty* [Lavrov: for Russia, Ukraine is a fraternal people, not Nazis marching in Kyiv], in "TASS", <https://tass.ru/politika/1517687> (Accessed on 22.01.2023).

³⁵ *Interviu Putina po Ukraine. Efir ot 13.06.2021* [Putin's interview about Ukraine. Air from

fact, according to a survey conducted in spring 2021, the idea that 50% of the population opposed Ukraine's NATO accession was by no means factual. A study carried out by the International Republican Institute at the time Vladimir Putin made this statement showed that 48% of Ukrainian citizens wanted Ukraine to accede to NATO, whereas only 28% opposed the idea of NATO accession.³⁶

Vladimir Putin accused Kyiv of ignoring the real will of Ukrainians in Donbas, just as it had disregarded the Crimeans' civic will back in 2014. "Ukraine is now shaping up to counterbalance Russia, which is why no one notices a thing, not even the swastika neo-Nazis display on the streets of Ukraine", the Russian leader pointed out. Russian diplomats also developed Neo-Nazism as a topic of Moscow's official rhetoric. In November 2021, Sergey Lavrov praised the Republic of Belarus for complying with the standards of international law in the context of the refugee crisis outside its borders with the EU, while criticizing Ukraine. "To accuse us of attacking the territorial integrity of Ukraine is immoral and incorrect. It is actually ruined by those trying to create a super unitarian state, with no minority languages, Russian in particular, with no education in Russian and other languages. It is a neo-Nazi concept of organizing society",³⁷ the head of Russian diplomacy said.

It is also worth mentioning that in the context of decreasing the Russian Federation's linguistic and cultural influence in Ukrainian society by diminishing the role of the Russian language in Ukraine, the political class in Kyiv introduced certain restrictive pieces of legislation that went too far. This was highlighted by Democracy through Law experts of the European Commission.³⁸ Non-compliance with international and European legislation in the field of national minorities'

06/13/2021], in <https://smotrim.ru/video/2307998> (Accessed on 14.01.2023).

³⁶ *Opytuvannia MRI v Ukraini svidchyt pro nezminnu pidtrymku yevropeiskoi intehratsii na tli pandemii COVID-19* [The MPI survey in Ukraine shows the unchanged support for European integration against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic], in <https://iri.org.ua/survey/opytuvannya-mri-v-ukrayini-svidchyt-pro-nezminnu-pidtrymku-yevropeyskoyi-intehratsiyi-na-tli> (Accessed on 14.01.2023).

³⁷ *Interviu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii S. V. Lavrova telekanalu Rossiia 24, Moskva* [Interview of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov to the Rossiya 24 TV Channel, Moscow], in https://archive.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4921162 (Accessed on 09.11.2021)

³⁸ European Commission for Democracy through Law, *Opinion on the provisions of the Law on Education of 5 September 2017 which concern the use of the state language and minority and other languages in education*, in [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=cdl-ad\(2017\)030-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=cdl-ad(2017)030-e) (Accessed on 15.02.2023)

rights to education in the mother language was widely speculated by Russian political elites, who accused Ukraine of endorsing neo-Nazism. This theme as well as other fissures in Ukrainian society were used by the Kremlin to construct other anti-Ukrainian narratives as part of the hybrid war.

Russian politicians claimed that the “Azov” regiment, which fought independently against separatist groups in Donbas, was a neo-Nazi military unit. Russian government media featured several articles about the mass actions of “Ukrainian Nazis”. In August 2021, the Moscow-based “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” wondered how neo-Nazis could march freely on the streets of Kyiv, chanting “Glory to Ukraine.”³⁹ According to the aforementioned source, Ukraine has become a neo-Nazi state, and the extremist ideology of the “Azov” regiment has become increasingly widespread in the ex-Soviet republic.

It is equally worth noting that in 2015 Ukraine banned the Nazi and communist ideologies in addition to symbols of totalitarian regimes from the past.⁴⁰ Ukrainian authorities also introduced measures to integrate the “Azov” regiment into the Ukrainian Armed Forces. According to Israeli researcher Vyacheslav Likhachev, there is no scientific basis for calling “Azov” a neo-Nazi regiment. The Israeli expert examined contacts “Azov” representatives had with communities of Jews and Muslims in Mariupol, arguing he had not identified any misunderstanding or any other source of conflict.⁴¹

Concurrently, a study carried out by the Center for International Security and Cooperation of Stanford University concludes that, unlike the regiment bearing the same name, the “Azov” movement is bound by an extremist and nationalist ideology.⁴² Some Western political analysts have warned against the

³⁹ Pavel Dulman, *Po ulitsam ukrainskikh gorodov marshiruiut natsisty* [Nazis march through the streets of Ukrainian cities] in <https://rg.ru/2021/08/23/po-ulicam-ukrainskikh-gorodov-marshiruiut-nacisty.html> (Accessed on 14.02.2023).

⁴⁰ *Zakon Ukrainy pro zasudzhennia komunistychnoho ta natsional-sotsialistychnoho (natsyystskoho) totalitarnykh rezhymiv v Ukraini ta zaboronu propahandy yikhnoi symboliky (Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady), 2015, № 26, st. 219* [The law of Ukraine on the condemnation of the communist and national socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in Ukraine and the prohibition of propaganda of their symbols (Information of the Verkhovna Rada), 2015, No. 26, Art. 219]] in <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/317-19> (Accessed on 16.01.2023).

⁴¹ Vyacheslav Likhachev, *Polk „Azov” ne ye neonatsyystskym: vidpovidi na naiposhyrenishi zapytannia* [The “Azov” regiment is not neo-Nazi: answers to the most common questions], in <https://zmina.info/columns/polk-azov-ne-ye-neonaczystyskym-vidpovidi-na-najposhyrenishi-zapytannya> (Accessed on 15.02.2023).

⁴² Center for International Security and Cooperation, *Azov Movement*, in

risk of hate speech expanding to target various vulnerable social categories, including national minorities.⁴³ Hate speech has become an issue, particularly against the backdrop of military campaigns in Donbas and the consolidation of nationalist ideologies across Ukraine. Russian politicians took full advantage of that, proving to the public back home that neo-Nazism and radicalism are widespread phenomena in Ukraine. They also claimed that a military intervention was warranted in Eastern Ukraine to protect the local population.

In February 2022, shortly before Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Sergey Lavrov expressed dismay at Kyiv's refusal to discuss directly with separatists in Donbas, saying that the statements of Ukrainian leaders were echoes of Nazi propaganda. "This is Goebbels' school of thought, or perhaps a case exceeding the skill of the greatest propagandist of the Third Reich",⁴⁴ Lavrov said. Russian political elites accused Kyiv of refusing to talk to separatists in Donbas based on the Minsk peace agreements and UN requests, describing these political actions as neo-Nazi. Kyiv and Moscow had different interpretations of the Minsk agreements, which did not describe the sequence of steps that needed to be taken to ensure sustainable peace in Donbas. The parties did sign a general agreement, which included a schedule for talks about the future of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as part of the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine, which included Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE.⁴⁵ The absence of direct contact between Kyiv and separatists provided a good opportunity to disseminate fake news about the neo-Nazi ideology of political leaders in Kyiv. Ukrainian authorities refused to discuss with the leaders of the self-proclaimed republics the developments in Eastern Ukraine, saying they would not legitimize the Russian aggression.

Official Russian narratives about Ukraine grew in aggressiveness in the context of Moscow recognizing the independence of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in February 2022. In Vladimir Putin's message to Russian citizens, the Russian president spoke about nationalism, Russophobia and neo-Nazism in Ukrainian society, tendencies encouraged by the West and targeted

<https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/azov-battalion> (Accessed on 15.02.2023).

⁴³ Josh Cohen, *Commentary: Ukraine's neo-Nazi problem*, in "Reuters", <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cohen-ukraine-commentary-idUSKBN1GV2TY> (Accessed on 15.02.2023).

⁴⁴ *Lavrov sravnil zaiavleniia Kieva o dialoge s Donbassom s propagandoi Gebbelsa* [Lavrov compared Kyiv's statements about dialogue with Donbas with Goebbels' propaganda], in TASS, <https://tass.ru/politika/13669219> (Accessed on 16.02.2023).

⁴⁵ OSCE, *Package of Measures for the Implementation...*

against the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. “Ukrainian authorities started shaping their statehood by denying the very thing that unites us. They sought to distort the conscience and historical memory of millions of people, whole generations living in Ukraine. It is not surprising therefore that Ukrainian society was faced with a surge of extremism and nationalism, which swiftly escalated into an aggressive strand of Russophobia and neo-Nazism”,⁴⁶ Vladimir Putin said. The Russian president underscored the need to recognize the independence of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in Eastern Ukraine to support Russian speakers in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin said Ukrainian politicians were nationalists, radicals, and neo-Nazis who “organized a campaign of terror against those who opposed anti-constitutional actions.”⁴⁷ Vladimir Putin said that “following the 2014 coup”, a civil war broke out in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian state is deeply divided by the illegitimate authorities in Kyiv.

From mid-2021 to the announcement of the decision to invade Ukraine, Russia turned up the aggression of its official narratives, presenting Ukraine as a state swept by total chaos, with pogroms and acts of physical violence committed by “extremist nationalists” against the civilian population that Russia needs to protect. At the same time, anti-European and anti-American rhetoric gained increased momentum.

THE CONCEPT OF “ANTI-RUSSIA” IN KREMLIN-BACKED NARRATIVES

On July 12, 2021, the Kremlin’s website published the article *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*,⁴⁸ written by President Vladimir Putin. Narratives launched by Russian politicians and government media after the publication of this article were quick to reflect the Kremlin leader’s political theses. To Vladimir Putin, a Europeanized Ukraine is an “anti-Russia” force that the Russian president seeks to combat. Vladimir Putin’s article raised a series of new elements in the context of the hybrid war, justifying the upcoming large-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Russian president outlined the history of the Ukrainian people from the

⁴⁶ *Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 21 fevralia 2022* [Address of the President of the Russian Federation, February 21, 2022], in <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> (Accessed on 17.01.2023).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Vladimir Putin, *Ob istoricheskoy edinstve russkikh i ukrainsev* [On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians], in <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (Accessed on 17.01.2023).

official viewpoint of Russian historiography, claiming Ukraine is a “periphery” of Russia, and that Zaporizhzhian Cossacks were fervent Orthodox Russians. Vladimir Putin challenged the very existence of Ukrainians as a nation, calling them “Little Russians”, who as such do not have a historical claim to a state outside Russia. The Russian president also says Ukraine in its entirety is a Soviet product, created by historical Russia. “Suffice it to compare which lands had been reunited with the Russian state in the XVII century and which territories the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic withdrew from the Soviet Union”, Vladimir Putin wrote. Vladimir Putin accused Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin of offering national republics the right to leave the USSR. “But in 1991, all those territories, and, more importantly, people, found themselves abroad overnight, taken away, this time indeed, from their historical motherland”,⁴⁹ Vladimir Putin pointed out. The Russian president argues that Moscow has a political and historical right to participate in international negotiations regarding Ukraine's borders.

Vladimir Putin again accused the West of directly interfering in Ukraine’s domestic affairs and supporting a “coup” with the help of radical nationalist groups, which have turned Russophobia into a state policy. Kyiv was accused of destroying Russian Orthodoxy, which acted as a major bond between Russia and Ukraine. “Even extensive autonomy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church while maintaining spiritual unity with the Moscow Patriarchate strongly displeases them. They must destroy this prominent and centuries-old symbol of our kinship at all costs”⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin pointed out.

The Kremlin leader lashed out at the West, accusing it of turning Ukraine into an “anti-Russia” territory and creating a climate of terror, “a neo-Nazi, aggressive rhetoric”. Vladimir Putin wrote that “foreign advisers who supervise Ukrainian authorities, special services and the armed forces” lead Ukraine, and that NATO infrastructure has drawn too close to Russian borders. “Step by step, Ukraine was dragged into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a springboard against Russia. Inevitably, there came a time when the concept of ‘Ukraine is not Russia’ was no longer an option. There was a need for the ‘anti-Russia’ concept which we will never accept”,⁵¹ the Russian president further wrote.

Following the publication of this article in Russian and Ukrainian, Russia’s official rhetoric regarding Ukraine underwent several structural changes. The

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Ukrainian state described by Vladimir Putin as an “anti-Russia” posed a threat to the Kremlin, so anti-Ukrainian narratives were intertwined with narratives about the West (anti-European, anti-American, anti-NATO, etc.). It should also be noted that Vladimir Putin published the article in Ukrainian, stressing the linguistic and historical similarity between Russians and Ukrainians. From the very outset, this confirms we are referring to a linguistic community other than Russian. To justify the need for Russia’s direct intervention in the conflict in Donbas, the Russian president avoids using arguments of international law but instead refers to the history of the Russian people. Vladimir Putin’s theses represent a personal political vision of Russia’s national history. They however ignore tragic chapters from this country’s past, such as the persecution of the Ukrainian people under the Russian Empire, the Holodomor of 1932-1933 in Soviet Ukraine, Ukrainians’ contribution to the victory against Nazism, and so on.

Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian Federation's deputy chairman of the Security Council, published an article in "Kommersant" in October 2021 in which he advanced official narratives about Ukraine becoming an "anti-Russia" state. “The United States want nothing else from Ukraine except a confrontation with Russia, total containment of our country and the creation of what has been rightfully called ‘anti-Russia’. This means that such an alliance is extremely fragile and, at some point, will crumble to dust. Hopes for NATO and European Union membership are also short-lived for obvious reasons”,⁵² Dmitry Medvedev wrote. The Russian official argued Kyiv politicians are puppets used by the USA and NATO to destroy Russia. The Kremlin-linked media further developed this official narrative around the launch of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine. In January-February 2022, while the Russian Federation was building up an army on the Ukrainian border, the Russian government media wrote that the political leadership in Kyiv might launch a conflict in Donbas with support from the West. Government-controlled publications tried to persuade the public that Russia would have no choice but to defend Russian speakers.⁵³

Vladimir Putin’s address in the early hours of February 24, 2022, when he

⁵² Dmitry Medvedev, *Pochemu bessmyslenny kontakty s nyneshnim ukrainskim rukovodstvom* [Why contacts with the current Ukrainian leadership are meaningless], in “Kommersant”, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300> (Accessed on 18.01.2023).

⁵³ Vasilii Stoiakin, *Kto smenit Zelenskogo na postu prezidenta. Rol Ukrainy v bolshoi sdelke Rossii i SSHA* [Who will replace Zelensky as President. The role of Ukraine in the “big deal” between Russia and the United States], in “Ukraina.ru”, <https://ukraina.ru/20220131/1033179042.html> (Accessed on 17.02.2023).

announced the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, observed the same narrative line and political logic of his article published in July 2021. The Kremlin leader criticized NATO expansion towards Eastern Europe, highlighting that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is “a tool of US foreign policy”. The Russian leader compared the geopolitical context of 2022 to World War II. Vladimir Putin said Ukrainian nationalists “will undoubtedly try to bring war to Crimea just as they have done in Donbas, to kill innocent people just as members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and Hitler’s accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War”.⁵⁴ According to Vladimir Putin, Russia’s goal is to defend the people of Ukraine against the “genocide organized by Kyiv”. The Kremlin leader gave assurances Russia would not occupy Ukrainian territories and would not use force against the civilian population.

The reasons behind the “special military operation” on the territory of Ukraine included a series of official narratives, promoted and developed in the 2014-2022 period, which intertwined anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. Additionally, the question of “Ukrainian Nazism” was also tied to NATO expansion. Ukraine described as an “anti-Russia”, which is supported and armed by the West, was the last narrative construct Russian authorities launched in the public sphere around the large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

CONCLUSIONS

Official narratives permeating the public sphere in the Russian Federation over 2014-2022 concerning Ukraine are a constituent of the hybrid war Moscow launched in the context of the illegal annexation of Crimea and its support for separatist movements in Donbas. The Kremlin’s favourite topics concerning Ukraine were the illegitimate character of Ukrainian authorities; the West’s support for a “coup” in Kyiv, which the Russian-speaking population of Crimea and Donbas did not endorse; Ukraine’s refusal to comply with the Minsk peace agreements; Kyiv’s unwarranted refusal to talk to the political leaders of Donbas; the start of a civil war in Eastern Ukraine; a surge in radicalism, extremism and neo-Nazism on the territory of Ukraine; the organization of genocide against the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine; the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate; the unity of the

⁵⁴ *Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 24 fevralia 2022 goda* [Address of the President of the Russian Federation of February 24, 2022] in <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> (Accessed on 18.02.2023).

Russia and Ukrainian people; Russia's right to negotiate the borders of Ukraine; the emergence of the Ukrainian state in the wake of reckless decisions taken by Soviet leaders.

During these years, Vladimir Putin took it upon himself to influence public opinion with support from various high-ranking Russian politicians, such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the chairman of the Federation Council and other MPs. More often than not, Moscow-backed narratives were an eclectic mix of international law and historiography topics, which were reinterpreted to fit the Kremlin's geopolitical interests.

In the early stages of the hybrid war of 2014-2022, official Russian narratives described Ukraine as an independent state captured by a group of radicals. Ukraine's Western rapprochement, Kyiv's refusal to talk to pro-Russian separatists in Donbas so as not to officially recognize their legitimacy and the implementation of certain measures designed to mitigate Moscow's influence in Ukrainian society generated a series of changes in the Russian Federation's official discourse. According to the Kremlin's official narratives, Ukraine is an independent state led by illegitimate authorities, which the West turned into a tool to combat Russia around the large-scale invasion. In mid-2021, Vladimir Putin coined the term "anti-Russia", claiming the West supports Ukraine to destroy the Russian state. At the same time, the Russian government media amplified this rhetoric, disseminating *fake news* and disinformation discourses with a view to intoxicating public opinion.

The official narratives regarding the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine also underwent major changes. From 2014 to 2018, Crimea was described as a historical territory of Russia, and the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk as "people's republics" that needed to be reintegrated into Ukraine and granted extended autonomy. The conflicting interpretation of the Minsk peace agreements by Russian and Ukrainian leaders and Kyiv's rejection of Moscow's plans to federalize Ukraine also prompted certain modifications in official Kremlin rhetoric. By 2020-2021, the official narratives promoted by the Russian Federation had stopped depicting Donbas as a Ukrainian territory with a Russian-speaking population, but rather as a historical Russian region illegally controlled by Ukraine.

In mid-2021, a new series of changes occurred at the level of official discourse targeting both the public at home as well as the international community ahead of the large-scale invasion. In early 2022, high-ranking Russian politicians launched more aggressive narratives blaming the West for supporting Nazi ideology in Ukrainian society and planning to destroy Russia. As Russia progressively

built a new myth of the citadel under assault, anti-Ukrainian narratives were combined with official discourse against NATO and the European Union.

At the same time, the narratives disseminated by Russian government media gradually fell in line with those spread by the political elites. Press articles in the early stages of the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war were picked up by the Kremlin's official discourse. Starting January-February 2022, media narratives completely overlapped with the statements of high-ranking politicians. By announcing the "special military operation" on the territory of Ukraine on the morning of February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin finalized the process of integrating anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric into a single narrative construct. His discourse tied the "Ukrainian Nazism" issue to "the illegal NATO expansion" and the Kremlin's need to defend itself.

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