

# Why is Russian Domestic War Propaganda so Effective?

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**Abstract:** This article provides a review of possible causes of the effectiveness of the Russian domestic propaganda campaigns launched in connection with the war in Ukraine and aimed at the domestic consumer, as well as their discussion in academic research and analytical publications. Currently, this phenomenon is much discussed in the oppositional Russian-speaking, Ukrainian, and world media. Nevertheless, the number of short journalistic pieces devoted to specific aspects of this effectiveness significantly prevails over detailed analytical articles or holistic academic studies. The present research aims to partially fill this gap.

The article defines the main groups of reasons for the effectiveness of Russian domestic propaganda, identified both in modern studies and in earlier works, and also traces the relationship between these groups. It discusses the organizational and technical prerequisites (the possibility of total control of the media, including access to information via the Internet), cultural issues (the unique situation in Russia, which has developed as a result of its transgenerational traumas), and "political technology" (political manipulation and persuasion) methods.

In conclusion, the author makes some suggestions (and assumptions) about further possibilities for studying the phenomenon of Russian domestic propaganda and discusses its social significance.

**Keywords:** Russian Propaganda, Russo-Ukrainian War, War Propaganda, Domestic Propaganda, Political Technology, Transgenerational Trauma.

## “HYPODERMIC NEEDLE” OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

The Russo-Ukrainian war has been going on for eight months, and both the media and academic writings have been asking from the very beginning why this war is being supported so actively by the Russian population. Many experts – both foreign political scientists and analysts at home – were initially surprised by the high degree of approval of this war. Now that the Russian army is suffering defeat after defeat, the economy is falling apart under sanctions, and forced mobilization has affected many Russians, this support is even more surprising. According to the Yuri Levada Analytical Center (recognized as a foreign agent in Russia; that is, not a direct mouthpiece of the Putin regime and perhaps one of the most reliable sources of sociological information currently available from Russia), support for military operations in Ukraine (the sum of those surveyed individuals who responded with "fully supporting" or "partially supporting" the actions of the Russian military) was over 80% in February 2022, and 72% in September, declining only very slightly [1]<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Even in November 2022, when, as it seems from the outside, Russia's problems associated with the war in Ukraine (military defeats, political impotence, sanctions, forced mobilization, huge losses of troops...) should already be obvious to everyone, according to another independent agency, Russian Field, 61% of the population support the war (believes that the decision to start it was correct), and 51% of Russians consider it successful for Russia (see: "Special operation" and mobilization: the attitude of Muscovites (November 4-5). Russian Field Research. 2022 November 5; [cited: 2022 November 12]; available from: <https://russianfield.com/moskvastolitsa>).

This phenomenon can be explained, among other reasons, by the extraordinary effectiveness of Russian propaganda, the analysis of whose methods, as well as the determination of the reasons for their exceptional efficiency, is the subject of this article. Perhaps we are facing now in Russia an unprecedented situation when propaganda has gained much more power over people than was possible before. This is facilitated by several factors.

Firstly, it is important to mention the absolute state control over the media, both traditional (print media, radio, and television) and the Internet. More than 600,000 sites, including LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and other social media, as well as the BBC, New York Times, and other news sites, are currently banned in Russia by the Federal Supervision Service [2], access to them is impossible without a VPN.

Secondly, the availability of propaganda aimed at the internal consumer is determined by increased media consumption, which has significantly grown in recent years (according to the research of Global Web Index [3], in 2019 Russians spent about 7 hours a day watching TV and browsing the Internet; and according to Neklyudov, Blyuss, Cheng, *et al.*, [4], media consumption has risen even more during the covid lockdown). This ensures the incredible (and not possible until nowadays) presence of propaganda in the life of every Russian.

Thirdly, the level of anxiety, which has increased during the covid period [ibid.] and even more during the

war, according to the Yuri Levada Analytical Center [5], has formed an addiction to watching the news filled with propaganda and greater exposure to its influence, which, again, works to increase the anxiety, forming a kind of vicious circle.

And fourthly, we are talking about carefully crafted methods of “political technology”, a euphemism largely unfamiliar in the West and commonly used in the former Soviet states for what is by now a highly developed industry of political manipulation. In this context, the capacity of the Russian authorities to combine different methods of political technology, coordinating at the same time the messages of different controlled media (in other words, in all the media available in the country) is also an unprecedented situation. The variability of possible influences allows, on the one hand, to provide different channels of communication: written, verbal, visual, and acoustic, making all the messages more effective. On the other hand, it creates the illusion of a variety of sources of information and a pluralism of opinions.

It is described very well in the interview by Natalia Sindeyeva, founder and general director of Dozhd, the last independent television channel in Russia that survived until the beginning of the war and stopped broadcasting as of March 1, 2022, by order of the Russian Government:

They have been saying for eight years that there are enemies around us, that the whole world wants to defeat Russia, and that in Ukraine there are only Benderovists and fascists... (...) After spending four hours (watching Russian state television) even I think to myself: “Maybe we live in a wrong world? Here is an expert, there is evidence, there are maps... (...)”. They have learned to do it so professionally that one simply gets lost. Especially when you have a channel that uses one type of media language and you go to a different channel and it tells the same thing (...). Even I, who know reality, at some point start to think: “Maybe this is true? Maybe we don’t know something, we don’t understand something? Maybe we don’t have enough information?” [6], 26:15.

Analyzing the academic and analytical literature on the topic of Russian domestic propaganda, we can single out several major groups of reasons for its success.

## Traditional Techniques of “Political Technology” in Domestic Russian War Propaganda

This group of methods is associated, on the one hand, with traditional propaganda techniques, well studied and perfectly visible when they are used by the Russian media. There are many classifications and attempts to create a complete list of these techniques, ranging from the classic work of Julius Yourman, who explored them in Nazi Germany [7], to more modern review works and manuals, among which stands out Robert Cole’s *Encyclopaedia of propaganda*, which has become no less classic [8].

It is not possible to list all the cases of using these methods in Russian domestic propaganda, but it seems to be important to dwell on the most frequently used ones at present and in this military campaign.

### Appeal to Fear and Black-and-White Fallacy

As Marshall Soules [9] points out in his book, in the case of war people “will only make sacrifices when moved by such motives as fear, pride, and duty.” In Russian military propaganda, the emotion of fear is used very actively. Thus, a big number of materials links the outbreak of war with a threat to the integrity or even a nuclear threat to Russia from the outside (google search in the Russian part of the Internet for the joint finding of the keywords “CBO” (SMO, Special Military Operation, a euphemism used in Russia to describe military operations in Ukraine) and “Предотвратить ядерную войну» (“to prevent Nuclear War”) produces over 1,900 news and analytical articles) [10].

The use of this argumentation by the leaders of the country is also frequent. Dmitri Peskov, the press secretary of the President of the Russian Federation, states in his speech that “the special military operation in Ukraine is designed to prevent the Third World War” [11]. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation [12] also calls on Western countries to reduce their ambitions, and stop the arms race to prevent a nuclear war, accusing them of creating a dangerous situation and “forgetting” that Putin, Medvedev, and Peskov themselves have repeatedly threatened the world with a nuclear war. In this context, any criticism or doubts about the decisions being made are seen as a betrayal, a desire to harm and destroy Russia (which also automatically means the use of such techniques as Black-And-White Fallacy, Bandwagon, and False Dilemma (principle of friend or foe), among others.

## Labeling, Loaded Language, and Name Calling

The war in Ukraine has created in Russian media a kind of newspeak with extensive terminology.

The Russian media uses newspeak words such as *украи́нцы* / "Ukrainians" (the word already occurs over 170,000 times in Google search, and has also been defined in several online dictionaries) [13]; *жест доброй воли* / "goodwill gesture" (concerning the retreat of Russian troops); *негативный рост* / "negative growth" (of the economy); *параллельный импорт* / "parallel import" (smuggling bypassing sanctions), or *хлопок* / "slam" (explosion). The usage of some "normal" words is prohibited. Thus, using the word "war" in relation to military operations in Ukraine until the start of mobilization was considered a criminal act; instead, the term "special military operation" was used [14].

As Gasan Huseynov, a well-known Russian philologist, says in his interview with Radio Liberty, "A person is deprived of the right to freely use his native language. (...) The power which has managed to cut this membrane between "Me" and "My language" through the media, becomes total (...) The point of Newspeak is not that people cannot say something like that, but that they are paralyzed in their actions. [15]

## Demonizing, Dehumanizing, and Ridiculing the Enemy

As Angela Thurstaince states, "The fear of what will happen if a demonized enemy is not overcome—or at least pushed back or contained—becomes a tool to justify why continuing conflict is necessary" and then adds: "dehumanizing an enemy creates an environment in which atrocities can occur [16: 467]. This instrument is widely used in Russian domestic propaganda; According to BBC journalist Stephen Ennis, Russian state television "appears to employ techniques of psychological conditioning designed to excite extreme emotions of aggression and hatred in the viewer" [17]. There are quite a few examples of such rhetoric: Ukrainians are called "Nazis," Russian authorities constantly talk about their "atrocities" and the need to stop them [18], fabricated videos about the cruelty of Ukrainians are distributed in state media [19]

On the other hand, ridiculing the enemy is also actively used in domestic Russian propaganda. As Michael Waller says, "Ridicule erodes the enemy's claim to justice." [20], and it is especially important in the case of Ukraine, where Russia has to justify the

need for military aggression and deprive Ukrainian media and politicians of the right to defend themselves.

Although Ukrainians are actively ridiculed (especially Zelensky personally - he is often called a clown in the mainstream Russian media [21]; the search of the words *клоун Зеленский* / "Zelensky the clown" returns 10.000 pages in Google) [22], the greatest activity is devoted to ridiculing the collective enemy, Western countries that support Ukraine. So, in the Russian media, they joke in different ways about Europeans who are supposedly forced to stop washing and walk around dirty and smelly due to high gas prices and the lack of hot water [23], and any missteps by Joe Biden (falls from a bicycle, etc.) become the subject of ironic discussion even in analytical media [24].

## Typical War Propaganda Information Biases

Anne Morelli in her book "The basic principles of war propaganda" (*Principes élémentaires de propagande de guerre*) [25], based on the work of Arthur Ponsonby [26], formulates (as the names of the chapters of the book) the 10 most important topics of (domestic) war propaganda. Among them there are techniques based on information biases that happen when informing about the events at the front:

1. "The enemy commits atrocities on purpose; our mishaps are involuntary" ([25], p. 48)
2. "The enemy uses forbidden weapons" ([25], p. 54)
3. "We suffer small losses, those of the enemy are enormous" ([25], p. 57).

All these three principles (as, indeed, the rest of Morelli's principles to one degree or another) are actively used by Russian propaganda.

Thus, as an illustration of the first principle, Putin has repeatedly spoken about the "atrocities of the Ukrainian Nazis", while calling the Russian crimes in Bucha "fake" [27, 28].

The second principle is realized in the rumors about the use by Ukraine of various types of prohibited weapons, that are constantly spread and widely exaggerated in the Russian media, from absurd ones, such as biologically infected "combat mosquitoes" [29], to accusations of creating a "dirty" bomb.

As for the third principle, Russian losses are underestimated in the media (and as a rule, they are not even talked about at all), and Ukrainian losses are exaggerated. So, for example, according to the UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, in September Russian losses amounted to about 25,000 [30], and the estimation of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation at the end of the same month is of about only 5937 victims - which, according to the BBC, is less than just the known names of dead and buried soldiers [31]. A similar discrepancy (but, of course, in the opposite direction) is observed between international data on the number of deaths among Ukrainian soldiers and the Russian estimation [32].

### **Ericksonian Hypnosis**

In addition to all the above, Russian domestic propaganda also actively uses other techniques normally not listed in propaganda manuals, such as elements of Ericksonian hypnosis. Erik Erickson's model, among other methods, describes the linguistic patterns that cause moments of hypnotic trance in the listener and make him more susceptible to persuasion [33].

Many news headlines in Russia contain so-called Indirect Suggestions or Embedded Direct Suggestions (sentences that implicitly take something for granted, that are perceived by the subconscious as indirect commands), and evoke in the reader what Erickson called Transderivational Search (TDS) [34: 123-35]

TDS includes words and associations that make us search through our memories and mental representations, ambiguities (words, phrases, or structures that can give rise to multiple interpretations), and derived meanings.

For example, the headline "The Europeans ran out of money and patience for refugees" from the official RIA Novosti news channel [35] contains many derived meanings perceived at a subconscious level: refugees from Ukraine require a lot of patience and money; Europeans do not have them, they are bad and poor; do not go to Europe because there is nothing good there.

In the same way, the headline "The Kremlin assessed the need for a new stage of military mobilization in Russia" [36], although it refers to an article that states that there is no need for further mobilization of military personnel, according to its very grammatical structure implies its possible necessity,

preparing the population for the next stage of the military call-up.

### **Global Strategies: Innovations in Domestic Russian Military Propaganda**

It should be noted that all the above techniques have been present to varying degrees in the military propaganda of different countries at least since the beginning of the 20th century. But it is in Russia, during the war with Ukraine, that they are combined into several strategic lines, which, taken together, form perhaps quite an innovative approach.

The innovative (and, as it seems, very successful) strategy of Russian "Political Technology" supposes the joint use of the following strategic principles:

- Firehose of Falsehood and The Big Lie
- White noise, informational overload, and formation of passivity
- The usage of historical memory and transgenerational trauma.

Combining them, Russian propaganda affects the deep structures of the human psyche, reducing the criticality of thinking and at the same time creating passivity, emotional biases, and learned helplessness.

### **Firehose of Falsehood and The Big Lie**

According to many researchers (for example, [37-39]), Russian propaganda is based on an unceasing stream of disinformation and lies. They are often exposed even within the country, but correctly and repetitively presented falsehoods can persuade even if somebody subsequently proves that disinformation took place.

The most important tenet of Russian propaganda is that everyone lies, especially in the media space (the usage of this postulate is perfectly described in Peter Pomerantsev's article, [40]). According to Russian propaganda, any news can be false and this is normal, but the deception of the Russian media is less deceitful than the deception of the «West».

Alexander Artamonov, the military expert at the Pravda.ru media holding company ("pravda" means "truth" in Russian), said a day before the war [41]:

The military process in Donbas has started and it is difficult to stop it. It is also

hard to stop because in this situation everyone is fooling pretty much everyone. Westerners who provide weapons to Ukraine create the impression among Ukrainians that they are fighting for Ukraine to become part of Europe (...). NATO members have their own approach, they believe that we are all idiots and we will die for them, and they continue to push the Ukrainians to slaughter.

This same method is used to discredit any information coming from foreign media (for example, about the massacres of Mariupol and Bucha [42]). And if there is evidence that the data provided by the Russians themselves are also false, it can always be said that it is less false than the alternative information.

Why is deliberately distorted information still convincing? There are several reasons for this. According to Pornpitakpan [43] and to Paul and Matthews [38], "In a phenomenon known as the ' sleeper effect,' (...) while people make initial assessments of the credibility of a source, in remembering, information is often dissociated from its source. Thus, information from a questionable source may be remembered as true, with the source forgotten." On the other hand, people suffer from the "confirmation bias": they are inclined to defend an already formed point of view even after receiving information that it is incorrect. And, finally, "cognitive economy" plays a significant role when people apply different heuristics and shortcuts to determine whether new information is trustworthy; thus, they use peripheral cues, trusting information just because of some external surface signs like presentation in the news program and from the mouth of an «expert»).

Of course, the lack of access to alternative sources of information in Russia also significantly affects this process.

### **Historical Memory and Transgenerational Trauma**

Perhaps even all the above would not have had such an effect if it had not been superimposed on the successful exploitation of the transgenerational historical collective trauma, that exists in Russian society and is associated with the Second World War and Stalinist repressions [44]. As Elena Cherepanov, a researcher of Russian transgenerational trauma, writes [45: 19], "The social psychology of trauma can offer deeper insights into the interconnectedness of stress and social-psychological phenomena such as social

influence, obedience, conformity, groupthink, and bystander apathy that carry direct relevance to understanding social dynamics during totalitarian regimes". This is the sphere of social representations, whose exploitation reduces the criticality of perception, connects huge emotional layers, and significantly increases suggestibility."

It is for this reason that this historical transgenerational trauma is quite effectively used in Russian domestic propaganda. So, according to Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager [46], "Identifications with the GPW and the cult of the war have become the decisive identifying element in state ideology and public consciousness.". She states that propaganda actively constructs a civic identity with the help of "active reconstruction of historical memory (collage) and the cult of the Second World War (in Russian terminology - the Great Patriotic War)" [ibid.].

Naturally, the context of the "War" requires the presence of an external enemy. And this figure of the enemy is represented by both a certain collective "West" as a whole and by those who, having lived through the same milestones of history, reconstruct it in the collective memory in a different way: Ukrainians, who tend to overcome this trauma like a part of a Soviet past left behind; as a result, in the Russian propaganda Ukrainians are identified with the fascists, aggressors of 1941.

As a Ukrainian journalist Mariana Pyetsukh stated before the war [47], "Russia is trying to create an illusion that those armed fighters in Ukraine are fascist villains, just like the unforgettable characters from the famous Soviet films, glorifying the myth of the Great Patriotic War at any cost." In the mass consciousness, the Russo-Ukrainian War is mixed with the traumatic transgenerational experience up to the point that in the polls conducted by journalists many Russian citizens state that they consider "Ukronazis" to be the initiators of the war and aggressors. For them, Russia acts as a defending side [48].

### **White Noise, Informational Overload, and Formation of Passivity**

Another factor that significantly and massively reduces the ability for critical thinking and oppose the influence of propaganda in Russian society is information overload.

The term "information overload" popularized by Alvin Toffler in his bestselling 1970 book "Future

Shock" [49], in the last decade has been increasingly discussed in the context of propaganda. This phenomenon is very related to fake news and disinformation since they help to significantly increase the density of information flow (due to the news itself, as well as their discussions and denials).

The Russian media also seem to be consciously seeking to increase informational "white noise". There are a huge number of political talk shows and analytical programs on central television channels that have a significant impact on public opinion [50]. In addition, during the war, so-called "pro-war bloggers" acquired great importance [51]. Normally they are analysts related to the Russian government or the army, leading blogs and vlogs about the war; they are also very productive, numerous, and often radical and categorical in their statements. This gives rise to active discussions, which significantly increases the overload.

Many pieces of research show that information overload (or "infobesity") may lead to social herding [52], the reduction of decision quality [53], growth of passiveness, avoidance behaviors [54], and informational learned helplessness [55].

The article by Shuo Tang, Lars Willnat, *et al.* [56] also discusses the impact of information overload and fake news (in this case, using the example of Chinese society) on the formation of the third-person effect, which consists of individual overestimation of the effect of a mass communicated message on the generalized other, or an underestimation of its effect on themselves; that is, in creating in every individual of an illusion that propaganda is not dangerous for him personally and he is not subject to it.

Why is such a state of society (passive, incapable of critical thinking, in illusions) beneficial to certain types of states? It would seem that propaganda should encourage action, and not paralyze and form passiveness, but in the case of Russia and its "petrocratic"<sup>2</sup> social order it "aims not to persuade but to silence dissent" [57]. When the authoritarian elite lives consuming some relatively easy-to-get resource (like oil, gas, and other natural resources in the case of Russia), it does not need citizens and their efforts; on the contrary, people interfere with such a state, as they can begin to express their dissatisfaction.

Ekaterina Shulman, an opposition Russian analyst, and researcher, beautifully stated this in her interview ([58], since 37:05)

The basic, fundamental property of authoritarian propaganda (this distinguishes it from both democratic and totalitarian ones) is that it is a kind of demobilizing propaganda. (...) An authoritarian political regime (...) does not need citizens at all. Authoritarian propaganda always demobilizes. It says, "Sit down, my friend, I will tell you a story about good us and bad enemies. You listen, and sit at home, and do nothing."

Apparently, Russian military propaganda "inherited" this model; it still contains more elements aimed at forming blind faith and passivity in the population than at inciting action.

Of course, the repression of any political opposition or people taking part in the protests is also related to this formation of passivity [59]. Although repression and terror are not directly part of the propaganda, and information about them in the official media is quite scarce, they are certainly discussed and covered in the opposition media (based abroad) and private blogs. The fear factor (largely justified) additionally extinguishes possible protests even of those who are not influenced by mainstream propaganda.

Thanks to this consciously formed civic passivity, it also becomes possible to purposefully shift the Overton window [60] in the most unimaginable directions, up to the acceptance of the admissibility of one's physical destruction by a nuclear explosion.

Putin's words that the Russians "will go to paradise" by destroying the world [61] were at first shocking to the entire population, but then they were repeated frequently, gradually replacing rejection with forced acceptance. Lately, they are quoted routinely and without causing significant protest in listeners [62].

## CONCLUSION

Apparently, Russian domestic propaganda of the Putin era in general and the war propaganda of the last months, in particular, is currently a social phenomenon unprecedented in scale, sophistication, and coordination. Based on the foregoing, it can be argued that a kind of experiment took place across the country to create a new citizen: passive, incapable of critical

<sup>2</sup>Petrocracy: state that is backed by and exists for the purpose of petroleum. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Petrocracy>

thinking, easily submissive to suggestion, which will in no way interfere with the aggressive policy of the petrocratic state. Perhaps for the first time in history, the main line of military propaganda was not incitement to action and mobilization, but, on the contrary, the formation of passivity and the ability to obey orders.

When combining and analyzing the data of researchers who explore various aspects of Russian propaganda, one has to conclude that, unfortunately, this experiment, which led to disastrous results in terms of foreign politics and military operations, turned out to be “successful” in terms of impact on society. The reaction of the Russian population to what is happening is based on humility, blind faith in the theses broadcast by propaganda, and, at best, avoidance (waves of emigration after the declaration of war [63] and mobilization [64]). And it shows that the system somehow achieved set goals.

Naturally, many aspects remain unclear. For example, both for the whole world and Russia is now extremely important the question of whether any mass forms of protest behavior of the Russian population are still possible, at least in the context of increasing losses at the front and an economic catastrophe. And apparently, such protests are unlikely, at all events in the near future.

But perhaps the most important question for Russia (and for the whole world, which has the opportunity to observe this unique and cruel experiment and draw conclusions) is what impact this phenomenon will have in the medium and long term, how such significant massive changes in the psyche of people can affect the social structure, the economy, the individual resilience, and the very possibility of returning to the democratic principles in the coming decades. And there is also a very important question for the entire world: how to prevent the repetition of such use of "political technologies" in other countries.

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