Narratives of Russia's "Information Wars"¹

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Abstract: *Information warfare became a topic of a heated discussion with the advancement of the Russian state on the territory of the neighbouring Ukraine. Already forgotten since the collapse of the Soviet Union discourse about the Cold War made a rapid comeback into the media and public discourse creating confusion among readers. Hence, this article aims to clarify the relevant terminology when it comes to the use of information operations in Russia as well as to point out the importance of mediated narratives. By relying on Russian military thought, the article sheds some light on the importance of narratives such as: Russia-West confrontation and hybrid wars, Russian history and identity, and Russian patriotism.*

Keywords: *Russia, information activities, patriotism, identity, modern warfare.*

Introduction

Russia has a long history of agitation and propaganda for mass mobilization and popular support (Berkhoff 2012; Glantz 1988; Kenetz 1985). Hence, it comes with little surprise that Russia has been making use of similar information strategies during the Ukrainian crisis. Conversion of the physical, political and informational activities in Ukraine in 2014–2015 have shown sophistication in Russia's adaptation to the modern networked communication environment. As Ukraine has been part of the extended Russian cultural and informational space for a long time, a sharp rise in information operations was identifiable with the start of the Euromaidan demonstrations. These operations were continuously intensified and extended to target globally (Jaitner 2014). It is difficult to measure the effect of these operations, as they run parallel to other, more "traditional", political and military operations. Nevertheless, it is possible to state that information operations complement other military actions in modern warfare and can often play a leading role (Checkinov – Bogdanov 2011; 2015). That is why in today's Russia a lot of resources are put into modernisation of

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information operations, creation and maintenance of long lasting universal narratives, which call for mobilization and can be used on different fronts (Jaitner 2014). Carefully constructed narratives have legitimising and mobilising effect and create social reality for people who live in the information landscapes where these narratives are being mediated. Hence, in this article I will focus on the intersection of modern Russian information operation strategies and Russian patriotic narratives as an important component of these strategies. The aim of this article is to discuss narratives common in Russian media and the public sphere since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, based on available media sources and secondary literature. The overview of the narratives is carried out within the context of information activities, which are often called “information wars”. Thus, first, I am going to discuss the theoretical framework of information operations in the context of modern warfare and then proceed with the analysis of the narratives.

Importance of information

Russian official documents reveal that a lot of emphasis is put on information: ‘information superiority’ is one of the key elements of the new military doctrine. Authors of the National Security Strategy 2020 stress the intensification of global information operations and identify them as a possible threat. In order to withstand this information threat, this document emphasises the importance of the army’s modernisation through “informatisation” and development of various technological systems, which would be able to stop the spread of “wrong” messages (Russian Federation Security Council 2009).

In order to understand how Russian “information war” is being conducted, one has to take into consideration that the Russian military thought has a specific understanding of what information is and how it can be used. Margarita Jaitner, researcher at the Swedish National Defence University, stresses a rather holistic view on information, where the wholeness of technological systems and the wholeness of cognitive information are parts of overall information security. Hence, there is a principal difference to the western approach of treating cyber security as a standalone concern. She points out that this is visible from the terminology, as Russian strategies, doctrines or academic and professional discourses refer to information security rather than cyber security (Jaitner 2014). This means that defence of the technological system combines with defence of the information landscape. In this light, information becomes a weapon, which is not only combined with other military means, but can also be one of the most important strategic resources (Vorobjev – Kiseljev 2013; Chekinov – Bogdanov 2011). Therefore, the fact what is being mediated is just as important as by what means it is being mediated.

Terminology: hybrid warfare, the 6th generation war and reflexive control

Media often include information operations, which are usually referred to as “information wars”, among the so-called “hybrid wars”. In fact, using “hybrid war” as a term with regard to Russia’s information operations and military actions in Ukraine can be misleading, as “hybrid warfare” is not a well-defined concept. The US Navy researcher Franc Hoffman writes about hybrid warfare: “Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations; terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. Hybrid wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battle space to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict. The effects can be gained at all levels of war” (Hoffman 2007: 8).

The military experts explain that “the combination of irregular and conventional force capabilities, either operationally or tactically integrated [...], is not necessarily a unique phenomenon” and history has seen many examples (Hoffman 2009: 36). In such conflicts, the sides exploit “[a]ccess to modern military capabilities, including encrypted command systems, man-portable air-to-surface missiles, and other modern lethal systems, as well as promote protracted insurgencies that employ ambushes, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and coercive assassinations. This could include states blending high-tech capabilities such as anti-satellite weapons with terrorism and cyber warfare directed against financial targets” (Hoffman 2009: 37).

I would like to point out that what is understood under “information operations” is not included in this definition. What is referred to is use of information technologies for precision weapons and more advanced military strategies. Information confrontation or “informatsionnoe protivoborstvo”, which is “a strategic form of struggle, in which the sides use special means and tactics, which influence information environment of the enemy and protect its own in order to achieve the strategic goals of the war”, is considered by the Russian military expert Vladimir Slipchenko as one of the essential elements of the new generation of warfare: remote contactless war or the 6th generation war, and one of the central elements of the future 7th generation warfare, when information operations would have a decisive influence on the warfare (Slipchenko 2002: 46–48). He points out that “information war”, in fact, is an incorrect term as it refers to more complex social-political phenomenon and hence should not be applied to the 6th generation warfare.

The goal of information confrontation is to surpass the enemy's/ies' ability to analyse, acquire and use information as well as regarding its quality and quantity (Slipchenko 2002: 46). Among the strategies of information confrontation Slipchenko names: maskirovka (deception), disinformation, radio-electronic confrontation, physical destruction of the information infrastructure, "attacks" on computer networks, "information impact", "information invasion", and "information aggression", which could be used in a broad spectrum of specially developed levers, such as computer viruses, "logical bombing", psychological attacks or aggression (Slipchenko 2002). He points out that the use of information confrontation in warfare is not a new phenomenon, as the conflicting sides have always aimed at controlling information of the enemy not only during war time, but also during peacetime (Slipchenko 2002: 48). In the future, an information weapon will be, in his view, "a combination of specially organised information, information technologies providing information dominance and allowing to purposefully change (destroy, deface), copy, block information, to overcome protection systems, to restrict the admission of legitimate users, to carry out disinformation, to disrupt the work of technical equipment, computer systems and information networks" (Slipchenko 2002: 48).

The military expert Peter Mattsson (2014) also includes information operation, as non-military means with military power, to the 6th generation war. He points out that in the 6th generation warfare, the boundaries between war and peace are blurred, and information operations penetrate several stages of military strategies. The 6th generation warfare is divided into eight different phases, with the first four phases containing non-military, asymmetric, information, moral, psychological, ideological, diplomatic and economic influences and attacks. Phase four is the launch of a heavy propaganda campaign directed towards the whole society. The basic aim of information operations is to obliterate the opponent's/ts' basis for national identity, lifestyle and set of values, if it is directed outwards; and to legitimize the proponent's actions while discrediting the oppositional forces, as well as disarmed masses, if it is directed inwards. Mobilization and popular support is another goal of such an information campaign, which is ascribed to "agitation propaganda" (Ellul 1973). It can be used to influence the decision-making process by destabilizing information flows.

One of the central elements of the Russian information operation strategy is the so-called reflexive control. "Reflexive control is defined as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action" (Thomas 2004: 237). The meaning of the concept of reflexive control is close to the American perception management, with the difference that the mechanism of reflexive control is aimed more at controlling rather than managing the subject (Thomas 2004: 237). The aim of reflexive control is to interfere

with the opponent's decision-making process. It is employed by the Russians on the strategic level both in external and internal politics (Thomas 2004).

One of the examples of reflexive control directed inwards is Russian media reporting about American soldiers "who feel like the masters in Ukraine" and a little boy crucified by the Ukrainian military forces (Slutskiy: Voenniye is... 2015; Bezhenka iz Slavjanska vspominaet... 2014). When it became evident that the events reported by a television channel had never taken place, the channel's representatives did not consider apologizing for disinformation. It had already penetrated online space leaving an enormous effect on the perception of the Ukrainian crisis by Russian audiences. In the meantime, investigations undertaken by journalists of the Russian opposition-minded newspaper Novaya Gazeta showed that men fighting in Ukraine on the side of the pro-Russian rebels had reproduced the mediated narratives about molested population and, hence, justified their participation in the armed conflict by the will to protect children and women (Kostjuchenko 2015).

It is important to mention that these narratives are being spread not only by the official media, but also by the so-called "trolls" (people employed to favourably engage in online conversations) and those who believe such narratives and multiply them based on conviction or ideology (Jaitner 2015).² Russian online communities in one of the biggest Social Networking Sites V Kontakte host many who share "important information no one else dares to post" and "information you will never find in western media".

Understanding the subject's decision-process and knowing their cultural specifics helps to plant information that would trigger the desired response. "The reflexive control occurs when the controlling organ conveys (to the objective system) motives and reasons that cause it to reach the desired decision, the nature of which is maintained in strict secrecy. The decision itself must be made independently. A 'reflex' itself involves the specific process of imitating the enemy's reasoning or imitating the enemy's possible behaviour and causes him to make a decision unfavourable to himself" (Thomas 2004: 241).

In this case, the authors of these media campaigns were pulling the strings of "Russian identity" and "Russian patriotism" expecting a certain reaction. One of the examples of RC directed inwards are reports by the Russian media that Right Sector and the National Guard of Ukraine were "instructed to prosecute those who express any sentiment or support for pro-Russian rebels". Narrations about molested women and children, humiliated elderly people together with calls for protection from the "fascists" function like a red rag to a bull. Narrations about violence towards civilians mixed with references to right-wing Ukrain-

2 Cambridge Dictionary gives the following definition of trolls: someone who leaves an intentionally annoying message on the internet, in order to get attention or cause trouble.

ian nationalists are pulling the right strings because the ground for them has already been prepared (Galochka 2014).

Hence, as experts point out, the content of information flows is as important as information technologies and is one of the essential elements of modern warfare. In this regard, one should be more attentive to the mediated narratives, as they contribute to or even create reality. Peter Pomerantsev, a TV producer based in London working on Russia's weaponization of the information culture, wrote that mediated narratives are one of the main weapons of Russia's information attacks: "The new Russia doesn't just deal in the petty disinformation, forgeries, lies, leaks, and cyber-sabotage usually associated with information warfare. It reinvents reality, creating mass hallucinations that then translate into political action" (Pomerantsev 2014: online). Many of these narratives become intertwined with conspiracy theories creating a complex web of stories, which aim to disrupt and contradict western narratives and world views.

Looking at Russian media over the last two years, one notices several important narratives: Russia-West confrontation and hybrid wars, Russian history and identity, and Russian patriotism. Some of these narratives mirror General Valery Gerasimov's idea about mechanisms of protection against information attacks carried out against Russia (Gerasimov 2014). He singled out three groups of such mechanisms: a) patriotic upbringing of the youth; b) historical education and presentation of Russian history in a positive light, with a specific focus to be put on the positive portrayal of the Soviet history; c) construction of a unifying national idea and strong identity.

Russian versus Western narrative

Starting point for these protection strategies is the establishment of a specific narrative about the ongoing confrontation between the West and Russia, which is sometimes referred to as the "new Cold War" by the media and in the academic discourse (De Neshnera 2014; Ivanov 2015). The confrontation is explained by inherent civilizational differences: Russia and the West have antagonistic worldviews (Inosmi 2014). The West is presented as willing to "destroy" Russia by using a so-called "Yugoslavian scenario" and strongly supporting "separatism" from abroad (Putin 2014). The West (the EU and the USA) are presented as aggressive forces who expand their influence over Ukraine knowing that this region lies within the sphere of political interest of the Russian Federation, and who try to dictate their will to the Kremlin. Hence, Ukraine is becoming the main battlefield of this on-going conflict, the war for world dominance where there are no "open mobilizations" (Putin at Valdaj 2014). Considering the fact that Ukraine and Georgia are in the sphere of geopolitical interests of Russia, these countries should, according to V. Putin, never become NATO members. Thus, Russia is "forced to act" in order

to respond to the “aggressive politics” of NATO and to use all possible means to win this confrontation. As a result, Russians have to use similar tactics in order to reach the set goals. In this conflict, Moscow is using the full spectrum of possible methods to achieve its aim: from political and economic pressure to open and covert symmetric and asymmetric military operations, as well as psychological, information and cyber warfare.

By describing Russia’s military actions in Ukraine as “partisan war”, the Russian media create a positive image of Russian military actions: partisan war is a war citizens lead on their own territory, which is occupied by (or has a vast presence of) the enemy’s military forces. This implies that Russia sees Ukraine as “its own territory” or as an area of its geopolitical interests, which is under external threat and therefore calls on its citizens to protect it. This threat has been real for the last twenty-five years and became more acute after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when, according to some Russian media, external (Western) and internal (Soviet elites in agreement with the USA) forces united to bring down the Soviet Empire (Anonymous 2014). This narrative is one of the basic premises for the construction of Russian modern identity and the patriotic upbringing in today’s Russia.

Narrative about hybrid wars

Some analysts consider Russia’s actions in Ukraine in 2014 as a form of “hybrid warfare” (The Military Balance 2015). The Institute of International and Security Studies, a leading British think tank, released the 2015 version of *The Military Balance* – an annual assessment of global military trends and capabilities. In this document, the concept of hybrid warfare – broadly defined as situations where the adversary uses a combination of conventional and irregular warfare – is described as a prominent feature of modern warfare. Media quickly picked up this term often using it to describe the sophisticated combinations of conventional and unconventional means of warfare as well as information and psychological operations deployed by Russia (Laganovskis 2015; Bender 2015; Mineev 2015; Kostikov 2015). In the Russian media discourse, information wars and propaganda are considered a part of hybrid warfare (Pukhov 2015; Mineev 2015; Kostikov 2015). The Russian media point out that this type of war originated in the West and, according to the narrative, Russia is forced to respond to these threats by applying strategies that could potentially minimize the damaging effect for the country (Ivanov 2015; Sidorov 2015). Hence, Russia’s actions, both on the ground and in the information space, are portrayed as defence against the threats to Russia’s sovereignty and political interests.

While in the Western media coverage, journalists usually use this term to describe Russia’s actions in Ukraine as well as such actions supporting far-right

parties in Germany, France and Greece, Russian media suggest that Russia has to undertake necessary activities in order to counterbalance the hybrid war started by the West against Russia. Russian media acknowledge that Russia is striving to gain support abroad – at times operating covertly, however, at the same time, it argues that the West had been using similar techniques a long time ago in Columbia, Mexico and Libya, thus making the point that Russia is not doing anything the West would not have done before. By making this argument, Russian media are stressing the double standards of the Western media and politicians. This, in turn, falls on fertile ground amongst euro-sceptics in the international arena, successfully justifying their own actions domestically, and undermining the ideals of Western democracy.

Discredit of the Western notion of democracy intensifies when the media portray the “colour revolutions” and support for democratic developments in Russia’s neighbouring countries as part of a hybrid war against Russia (Belsky – Klimenko 2014). Consequently, the media and politicians in Russia claim that the West attempts to influence these countries despite being aware of Russian geopolitical and security interests. This is further explained as an ongoing Western contest against Russia’s strength or even existence. At the same time, the media point out that there is no evidence that Russia has used similar strategies or established non-governmental organisations in other countries in order to destabilise current political regimes in other sovereign countries. This is an important narrative laying the basis for construction of other narratives of Russia’s information war, including patriotism and national identity narratives.

National identity narrative

The national identity discourses changed dramatically with Valdimir Putin’s comeback to power in 2012. If the first two presidential terms were signified with a rather affirmative liberal narratives and aspirations to be considered a part of the common European family, then the third term in office was marked by noteworthy ideological changes.

The notion of “sovereign democracy” introduced into the Russian discourse by Vladislav Surkov, First Deputy Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration from 1999 to 2011, which reflected Russia’s priorities in the international area, had a significant impact on Russian national identity discourse. Being actively used during Vladimir Putin’s second presidential term, the concept contained a strong message about “Russia’s intention to be regarded as a ‘normal’ country, a full-fledged member of the international community”, and referred to its European historical experience accentuating Russia’s belonging to the Western political and cultural tradition (Makarychev 2008: 50). At the same time, it also reflected Putin’s opposition to NATO’s military infrastructure and

the EU neighbouring policy expansion towards Russia's western borders that he allegedly proclaimed in Munich in 2007.³

The identity rhetoric has radically changed with Putin's third term in office, "turning toward a normative, moralizing discourse promoting Russian 'traditional values' as opposed to the 'moral decay' of the West, which is portrayed as a haven for homosexuality and paedophilia" (Makarychev – Medvedev 2015: 45). Aspirations for European liberal ideals were substituted by conservative family values, which were "proclaimed to be the national idea and spiritual bond of the Russians, and grounds for opposing the West" (Makarychev – Medvedev 2015: 45).

Since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, the national identity narrative intensified and became one of the steadiest in the public and media discourses. Building a strong national identity was again pronounced as one of the priorities and a defence strategy. According to Valery Gerasimov, a Russian general, incumbent Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, and first Deputy Defence Minister, the construction of a unified national identity is one of the key instruments constituting a strong national defence (Gerasimov 2014). Gerasimov's views resound the words of Vladimir Putin who often stresses the need for a strong national idea based on shared cultural values and history (Putin 2014). Positive outlook on history and respect to cultural roots is what Gerasimov sees as one of the most important elements for constructing a coherent national identity (Gerasimov 2014).

The claim that one should be proud of its origins became almost an axiom. However, the complexity of Russia's history presents obvious challenges to the creation of an "objectified" positive assessment of Russian history. In such constellation, mythologisation of history and nostalgia for the Soviet period, which originated from in the longing for personal life-worlds and hence had positive and light-hearted components, served as fruitful ground for political manipulations. People who experienced nostalgia for the Soviet Union during the 1990 s were mostly nostalgic for their childhood and youth, while they were critical towards the Soviet regime and its politics (Kalinina 2014). As a result of Yeltsin's reforms some started to long for the times of "prosperity" and "security", and a better quality of life. In their fantasies, it was the time of Brezhnev's stagnation. They also strived for a unifying national idea that they believed was irreversibly lost with the collapse of the Union. Gradually, that critical attitude towards the Soviet past was substituted by its commercial exploitation. During the 2000 s, the Soviet Union developed into a powerful brand that could be sold in the form of various consumer products and services

3 Sovereignty can be defined "as an ever-continuing process in which a state or a nation constructs socially and politically the boundaries between 'us' and 'them', between the internal and the external" (Lehti, *Sovereignty Redefined*, quoted in Makarychev 2008: 49).

(fashion design, interior design, travels and entertainment). To be able to sell the products with Soviet symbols, those symbols had to be emptied of their negative connotations not to frighten the potential consumers. When this happened, the political forces were able to take over and start manipulating history and nostalgia to make it a new state ideology (Kalinina 2014). The Soviet past became an emotional currency and a ground for strong patriotic feelings. The state started using Soviet myths to mobilise a new type of patriotic Russian-Soviet identity (Etkind 2009; Scherrer 2007: 192).

Against this background, the disapproving evaluation of the 1990s and the fall of the Soviet Union turns out to be one of the key elements of Russian national identity. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the revolution of 1991 are cloaked in conspiracy theories and seen as the events, which led to an era of chaos and anarchy (Oushakine 2009). Undoubtedly, Vladimir Putin's evaluation of the end of the Soviet Union as "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe" has officially framed the popular discourse and set the trajectory of conceptualisation of post-perestroika's Russia as a period of loss, trauma and humiliation (Putin 2005). History textbooks usually describe the epoch of the 1990s as controversial, often giving negative evaluations. In comparison to the rule of Yeltsin, Putin's period is assessed in positive terms as a time of stability and prosperity (Levintova – Butter 2010). Taking into consideration that the Russians value economic and political stability more than democratic freedoms (Levada center 2014), it comes with little surprise that Putin's period of stability is valued higher than Gorbachev's or Yeltsin's "democratisation".

History and memory debates occupied the central role in creating the new Russian national identity to suit best the Kremlin's political agenda and to justify the military actions in Ukraine. But history debates did not start with the Ukrainian crisis. For example, debates about the "falsification" of history started during Dmitry Medvedev's presidential term, when in 2009, Medvedev set up the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests in order to "defend Russia against falsifiers of history and those who would deny Soviet contribution to the victory in World War II" (The Presidential Decree N 549 of 15 May 2009). The vague formulations of this bill make one suggest that it would do lot more harm to the historians researching the war events than actually serve the right purpose. In May 2014, the Russian State Duma adopted a new law against "public rehabilitation of Nazism", the essence of which is to ensure that a revision of the international criminal tribunals (notably the ones of Nuremberg and Tokyo) is a criminal offence. This law raises similar doubts about its possible application, especially with regard to the events in Ukraine.

Patriotic narrative

Patriotism became the new banner of Vladimir Putin's politics of national revival and one of the central narratives in the Ukrainian conflict. The work on patriotic upbringing started long ago. The government launched several programmes of "patriotic education for the citizens of the Russian Federation", which were aimed at promoting and glorifying the country's power (Pravitel'stvo 2001, Pravitel'stvo 2005, Pravitel'stvo, 2010). Official institutions such as the Ministries of Defence and Education, the Russian Orthodox Church, political parties and pro-presidential youth movements – all contributed to the implementation of this governmental policy. Television and cinema as well as online communities have joined the setting of the new patriotic agenda and revival of the unified national idea. "Reference to the fatherland is used as a means of mobilising a detached public around the state and giving renewed prestige to a country whose international status has been questioned" (Laruelle 2015: 1). During the last ten years, scholars have been studying various discursive and symbolic manifestations of patriotism (Zvereva 2005; Gillespie 2005; Roberts 2008; Laruelle 2009; Norris 2012, Laruelle 2015; Omelchenko – Pilkington 2012), pointing out at a visible gap existing between the official discourses and directive and complex alternate social practices.

According to the recent research on patriotism in Russia, the state "has defined categories of patriotic actions in three governmental programmes of 'patriotic education for the citizens of the Russian Federation' that have run from 2001 to 2015, as well as a framework text entitled 'Concept for Patriotic Education for the Citizens of the Russian Federation', which was adopted in 2003" (Daucé et al 2015: 2). In the first document, patriotism was defined as "love for motherland (rodina), devotion to fatherland (otechestvo), willingness to serve its interests and defend it, up to and including self-sacrifice (samopozhertvovanie)" (Pravitel'stvo 2001). The stated objective of patriotic education programmes was thus to give a "new impetus to the spiritual rebirth of the people of Russia" in order to "maintain social stability, restore the national economy, and strengthen the defensive capability of the country" (Pravitel'stvo 2001). Each federal subject is supposed to implement the patriotic programme, its ultimate practical aim being three-fold: to prepare citizens for military service, to revive the spiritual values of the country, and "to weaken ideological opposition to the state" (Pravitel'stvo 2001). In line with several publications of Russian scholars attempting to draw attention to the problems of the youth, the document stresses the lost sense of solidarity, development of negative characteristics such as selfishness, cynicism, lack of respect to authorities, individualism as well as growing nationalism (Pravitel'stvo 2001). The following two documents complemented its predecessor by adding that family values and "appropriate reproductive behaviour" should be promoted among young people,

by praising encouragement of commemorative practices and participation in historical re-enactment clubs, by endorsing Cossak traditions and worshipping the dead, as well as by stressing the mobilization of media and internet and campaigning for economic patriotism (Pravitel'stvo 2005; Pravitelstvo 2010). The researchers stressed an “all-catching” nature of patriotism as defined in the official documents, which in reality covers much more than the state-orchestrated or/and supported activities (Daucé et al. 2015). The researchers showed that individual and corporate actors in Russia, in fact, promoted a very extensive use of patriotism (Kalinina 2013). “The patriotic label is often instrumentalised for non-political ends, and motivations to engage in so-called patriotic activities may have little to do with what the state or an external actor would qualify as patriotism” (Daucé et al. 2015: 4). The scholars concluded that: “The development of patriotism in Russia allows for the renewal of many collective and professional practices. More than an application by society of state commands, it appears as a bottom-up instrument for reconstructing solidarities that were badly undermined during the post-Soviet transition. As such, it helps legitimise practices inherited from the Soviet period, incorporate activities authorised by the market economy, and invent new principles for communal action, transcending the ruptures that came from the reforms of the 1990 s” (Daucé et al. 2015: 4).

The scholars pointed out that patriotism exercised by individuals or communities in Russia did not necessarily lead to increased support of the authorities or “weakening the ideological opposition to the state” (Daucé et al. 2015). Strongly believing that the state produces nothing but empty discourses, many activities and perceptions were, in fact, very different from state directives and the Kremlin's narratives. “While the state claims to be the conductor of a patriotic orchestra, it frequently finds itself devalued by those who [...], define themselves as patriots, and who see in it only a synonym for bureaucracy, red tape, and corruption” (Daucé et al. 2015: 5).

The situation changed in 2012 with Vladimir Putin's return to presidency. The official patriotic line hardened ‘restoring the old cliché's of Soviet propaganda such as anti-Americanism’ as well as the idea of the clash of Western liberal and Russian values. “Official patriotism transformed itself into a more coercive tool that tries to disarm all forms of criticism, whether this means fighting against associations and civil society with the ‘foreign agents’ law, controlling media and internet blogs, or developing stigmatisation discourse toward migrants and sexual minorities” (Daucé et al. 2015: 6).

The 2014 Ukrainian crisis has given rise to an unprecedented patriotic advance, which seems to unite both the state-driven components and bottom-up patriotic activities of Russia's citizens. New patriotic discourses set classical ideas about Russia's moral duty to defend those who belong to the sphere of the so-called Russian World [Russkiy Mir].

The official film broadcast on Russian television channels *Crimea. Road to Motherland* (“Krim. Put’ na Rodinu”, Alexander Kondrashev, 2015, Channel Russia 24) could serve as an illustration. The film opens with panoramic views of Crimea and its churches presenting the region as the cradle of Christianity, the very last “citadel” that has to be “freed” from the “enemy’s aggression”. The frame changes turn into the image of Vladimir Putin setting the atmosphere of the narration as well as the main narrative: Russia had no choice but to act forcefully in order to save what is left from Ukraine and defend the Russian-speaking population from Ukrainian nationalists who came to power as a result of an unconstitutional revolution, which in its turn was initiated and supported by the United States. The film presents the only Russian version of the events excluding alternate narrations. The events are told from the perspective of “average people”, “participants”, “witnesses” and “military experts”. The language of the narration is biased and full of negatively charged words and expressions when it comes to describing the adversary. The film presents a collective image of the enemy including the Right Sector [Pravij sektor], the Tatars, the official Kiev administration, Maidan participants and everyone who seems to express critical attitudes towards Russia’s actions in Ukraine. The Russian-speaking actors in this film (mainly participants of the events, Russian soldiers, politicians, military experts and members of their families) are presented as holy defenders of their endangered home country and real patriots. Their patriotism rests upon the idea of obligatory military action and self-sacrifice demanded by their fatherland in danger.

Other propaganda videos widely circulated on Youtube *I am tired of apologizing for being Russian* (“Ya ustal izvinjatsja za to, shto ja Russkij”) and *I am Russian occupant* (“Ya Russkij okkupant”) present people dressed in military uniforms who are “wrongly accused as occupants and aggressive conquerors”. By using “historical references” the makers of the videos present Russians as people who are “tired of apologizing” for having the mission to “save Europe” from external aggressive forces and afterwards being blamed of “occupation”, or for bringing “peace, modernisation and prosperity” and then being accused of “colonisation” of other ethnic groups.

These ideas have found a positive response in the online environment, especially in patriotic communities in V Kontakte (such as *Patrioti Rossii*). Surveys by several online communities reveal that patriotism does not function as a catch-all category any longer, but has a specified definition. The frequenters of these communities often describe patriotism as an obligatory positive attitude and love to one’s home country. They understand patriotism as an emotional connection, love, which does not have to be explained or questioned:

User 1:

I understand patriotism as the readiness to kill anyone who dares to say even one bad word about Russia. Of course, patriotism is impossible without knowledge of Russian history and culture.

26. 05. 2014.

User 2:

For me, patriotism is one of the elements of my life: loyal love to motherland, to its people. It means to sacrifice oneself for the fatherland during harsh moments, as well as to preserve traditions...

11. 07. 2014.

User 3:

In my understanding, patriotism is the wish to make one's motherland strong [...]. It is to stand up with weapon in your arms and defend it till the last breath.

22. 07. 2014.

User 4:

It is to love your motherland and defend it till you die.

16. 08. 2014.

User 5:

Patriotism is when you do not think whether to defend your motherland or not, but you know that you have no other choice.

18. 08. 2014.⁴

For these people patriotism also means non-conditional sacrifice of people's lives when "the motherland needs it". This support is expressed not only in the form of discursive practices but also by an active call for actions – mobilization for war and call to fight enemies. This military angle is present in online discussions in the form of shared images of Russian military forces and equipment as well as discussions about tactical and strategic weapons.

The military component is also seen in the discussions of various historical battles and especially the role of the Red Army in the WWII. Young Russians see their history as a narrative of uninterrupted heroic battles and campaigns against enemies with the Russians on the mission to save its neighbours from the enemies at the gates – the main narrative used in propaganda campaigns. By referring to historical events, both official and popular discourses introduce narratives about fascists and nationalists whose aim is to start a new genocide of Russian people. The Ukrainians are here presented both as brothers to be saved

4 The names of the users are anonymous in order to keep their identity secret.

and enemies, who are under the influence of fascists and started a fratricidal war against the people of Russia.

Concluding remarks

During the Ukrainian crisis, Russia has shown how well it is accustomed to the modern communication environment as well as strategies of modern warfare. Information activities intensified and extended globally making it very difficult for Russia's opponents to develop a coherent defence against them. The funds and vigour invested in these information campaigns mediated via any available channel lead to Russia's almost indisputable superiority within the information landscape. Even though it is difficult to measure the effect of these undertakings, as they are run parallel to other, more "traditional", political and military activities, it is evident that the content of the mediated information has a significant impact. Carefully constructed narratives have legitimising and mobilising effect and create social reality for people living within the information landscapes where these narratives are being communicated.

The strength of these narratives is in their long-term articulation: they did not appear out of the blue but, on the contrary, they have a sound base in discourses of Russian identity and world-view. The identity debates started with the collapse of the Soviet Union going back to centuries-long philosophical discussions on whether Russia belongs to the European civilization or presents a geopolitical entity of its own. If Russia presented itself as an ambitious European civilization with some unique characteristics during the 1990 s and the first half of the 2000 s, then, starting from the second half of the 2000 s, it appeared to the world as a matchless state-civilization with its own set of distinctive values. Values of the new Russia are articulated as incompatible with the Western set of democratic ideals and norms. Russia is pictured as the only country loyal to Christian traditions and the so-called traditional family values. Its conservative outlook on family, gender relations and sexuality makes Russia a state of exclusion where not everyone can fit in. Conservatism and wholehearted devotion to one's fatherland have become the foundation of patriotism ideally leading to an unquestionable will to sacrifice one's life for the sake of the country and the Russian-speaking community and civilization built on Russian culture and values. This idea of patriotism consistently articulates fears of a constant threat both from outside and within, and hence is profoundly based in the narratives of confrontation or even war between Russia and the West. The idea of Russia conducting a defensive war against its enemies becomes in itself a fruitful ground for intensification of militant patriotism and mobilisation.

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