Fake Healing and Popular Biopolitics: Pro-Russian Narratives in Occupied Mariupol[1]

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Abstract. This article seeks to conceptualise the nexus of vernacular narratives and biopolitics and unpack it using the empirical material of pro-Russian video bloggers operating in the occupied territories of Ukraine, namely in the city of Mariupol. Our theoretical focus is a combination of biopolitics and critical media studies. Our main research question is: how – through what semantic tools – does the occupier propagate narratives and imageries supportive of the new regime as a biopolitical construct? Our methodology is grounded in visual analysis of several dozen videos, mainly produced by vloggers who position themselves as local (citizens of Mariupol), but whose content can be qualified as explicitly pro-Moscow, Russia-friendly and Ukraine-sceptic.

Keywords: trauma; biopolitics; Russo-Ukraine war; occupied territories

Introduction

The phenomenon of Russian and pro-Russian narratives is one of the sharpest themes in such disciplines as security studies (Kuczyńska-Zonik 2016), media and communication (Geissler et al., 2023), and political sociology (Oleinik and Paniotto 2024). The scope of scholarly publications in these research fields is widening, but there is at least one academic domain where matters of manipulative information remain only tangentially reflected upon, namely biopolitics. This article seeks to partly fill this gap through conceptualisation of the nexus of biopolitics and vernacular narratives, unpacking the subject through the empirical material of pro-Russian video blogs from the occupied territories of Ukraine, and more specifically in the city of Mariupol.

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The research field of biopolitics predominantly focuses on studying institutional, ideological, legal and managerial mechanisms of controlling, disciplining and administering human lives through different practices of care and abandonment. The existent academic literature on biopower is mainly interested in finding out how our bodies can be constrained through mechanisms of punishment, bans and prohibitions, and incentivised through moral encouragement and material benefits. Much less is known about biopolitical effects of different forms of manipulative mis-/dis- and mal-information.

As a working definition, in this article biopolitics will be treated as an assemblage (*dispositif*) of discursive and policy practices aimed at securing a population's loyalty to and acceptance of an occupying regime of biopower, which includes the mass displacement of people and integration of the local population into the collective body of the occupying nation. The authors seek to find out how these practices are constructed, narrated and communicated by means of a peculiar genre of visual narrative comprising non-elite, grassroots or vernacular narratives circulating among the general public. Our main analytical point is the contribution of biopolitically framed narratives to the transformation of victimised populations, what Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 1998) calls "bare lives", into normalised and at the same time depoliticised objects of care and protection, immunised – in Roberto Esposito's sense (Esposito and Campbell 2006) – against malign external interference.

Our theoretical focus is therefore a combination of biopolitics and critical media studies. Seen through this lens, the concept of biopolitical media (Meek 2015) was coined to understand how media controls and disciplines human bodies, particularly through discourses of victimhood and survival during crises. Bodily vulnerability is seen through this prism as a catalyst for disseminating political narratives by means of the media because it can insulate people from stressful and disturbing memories, narratives and imageries and create multiple zones of silence and information suppression.

Our main research question is: how – through what semantic tools – does the occupier propagate narratives and imageries supportive of the new regime as a biopolitical construct? Our main argument is that manipulated information flows oscillate between two biopolitical poles, abandonment and care, which might be conceptualised through Agamben's academic metaphors of (respectively) "bare life" and "happy life". Both depoliticise public narratives by visually portraying and representing local populations traumatised by insecurities as victims of atrocities devoid of their subjectivity and agency.

Our methodology borrows some useful approaches from netnography, a developing research field aimed at studying social and political relations on the basis of online sources and through digital data collection (Kozinets 2015). Our

visual database contains several dozen videos, mainly produced by vloggers who position themselves as local (citizens of Mariupol), but whose content we qualify as explicitly pro-Moscow, Russia-friendly and Ukraine-sceptic. We included in our database publicly available Russian-language visuals of a relatively long duration (the average time of each vlog is approximately 20 minutes, which makes the total time of the analysed material about 20 hours) and containing both bloggers' narratives and shorter fragments of informal interviews with city dwellers. These vlogs play multiple roles. They are used as an instrument of communication with subscribers and followers, as a means to inform viewers about the vloggers' vision of the situation on the ground, as forms of appeal to a political audience, and as tools for fundraising through YouTube channels.

Visual Biopolitics at War: Theory and Methodology

The methodological specificity of biopolitical research boils down to its grounding in political philosophy, which largely explains the metaphorical nature of such key biopolitical concepts as happy life, bare life, *homo sacer*, "the kingdom and the glory" (Agamben 2011), the camp, "the global civil war" (in Giorgio Agamben's vocabulary), "the two bodies of the king" (Ernst Kantorowicz), the appeal "to cut off the king's head" (Michel Foucault), and others. These philosophical metaphors and allegories inherent to the language of biopolitics require a semiotic translation of concepts into the vocabulary of political science, international relations, and security studies. For this, inter-textuality as an interpretative method with its semiotic underpinning can be a helpful research instrument, to be used to figure out how concepts can transcend disciplinary borders and spill over from one discursive genre to another.

Biopolitics as a concept is deeply rooted in philosophical theories of power from where it gradually migrated to other scholarly domains. It does not seem incidental that the two 'founding fathers' of biopolitics, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, are also known for building their theories on their deep and nuanced explorations of such discursive phenomena as language, voice and narrative. Foucault's political philosophy is particularly attentive to and inclusive of a variety of discourses as inherent parts of power institutions. This explains the predisposition of biopolitical scholarship to the adaptation of literary tropes (Marling and Pajevic 2023), and justifies and even necessitates the broadening of biopolitical knowledge to include texts as falling into the thematic category of 'popular biopolitics' (Makarychev 2022). Thus, Antigone is often referred to as a prototype of *homo sacer* who exists in "states of exception", "both alive and not, dispossessed of political βίος in an

authoritarian Thebes whose ruler's sovereignty extends over biological life" (Weiner 2015). As another author puts it, "this is like Agamben's detention camp, where an individual turns into a *homo sacer* who can be sacrificed without being killed" (Tripathy 2013).

Popular biopolitics looks at relations between the state and the body as cultural, performative and artistic phenomena, and discovers the origins of biopolitical reasoning in the domains of fictional literature, poetry, cinema and other popular genres. This is why the conceptual language of popular biopolitics, functioning at a metaphorical level, leaves much space for allusions, interpretations, and imagination. The two dominant versions of biopolitics – Foucauldian and Agambenian – can be seen as two philosophical narratives based on their authors' individual and largely subjective presumptions about politics and power projected into the future. The distinction between these two biopolitical platforms might be seen as correlative with liberal utopian and illiberal dystopian narratives in literature.

The academic genealogy of popular biopolitics is largely rooted in the conceptualisation of vernacular security as an approach aimed at "understanding how citizens (sometimes not unproblematically referred to as 'ordinary people') construct and describe experiences of security and insecurity in their own vocabularies, cultural repertoires of knowledge" (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017: 22). Many authors deem that "the starting point for all research on security should be the everyday experiences of "poor, excluded and vulnerable people" (Benzing 2020: 99). In line with this reasoning, in academic literature vernacular security functions as both an analytical category and a discursively defined practice. Vernacular security offers a "bottom-up" approach to studying risks, threats and dangers (Jarvis 2023: 3), and often situates "popular" versions of security in opposition to the dominant discourses (Jarvis, Lister and Oyawale 2025). Vernacular security narratives are not usually "generalised, uniform or universal; … not formal, codified, or sanctioned by authoritative officials, practices, or norms" (Jarvis, Lister and Oyawale 2025); they can be characterised as "ontologically unsettled rather than fixed … whose political potentialities are open rather than predetermined; and that are marked by contextual heterogeneity" (Jarvis, Lister and Oyawale 2025). Vernacular security explores such questions as "what security means; how security feels; what conditions, objects, experiences, or relationships create security and insecurity; with which values security is associated (for instance: order, freedom, equality, or justice)" (Jarvis 2019: 116).

From a methodological perspective, studies in vernacular security presuppose the uncovering and identifying of personal narratives helpful for understanding "how practices of security governance are experienced by

different people and groups 'on the ground' … and how they are implicated in, forged through and find expression via quotidian aspects of social life" (Löfflmann and Vaughan-Williams 2017). On the one hand, vernacular security discourses can also "meme and satirize security" (Downing 2021: 3), which shows the "disruptive capacity of certain forms of non-elite knowledge to challenge the dominant framework" (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016: 42). On the other hand, the case of the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia confirms a different conclusion, known from literature: "structurally advantaged actors speak 'local' security concerns in language presumed familiar to non-elites for deliberately disruptive purposes" (Jarvis, Lister and Oyawale 2025); therefore, vernacular narratives can be instrumentalised by power holders and state authorities, and thus "reflect dominant security framings" (Jarvis, Lister and Oyawale 2025).

The nexus of human bodies and media was in the limelight of attention of some authors (Dittmer and Gray 2010: 1670), but biopolitical dimensions of media narratives remain a relatively new research perspective that is "interested in the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of everyday life expressed in media" (Burkart and Christensen 2012). In political anthropology, media consumption can engage "with the human body as an artistic and communication instrument" (Downing 2013: 9). Since "biopower has become informational" (Dillon and Reid 2001), the concept of biopolitical media was recently coined to understand how media controls and disciplines human bodies, particularly through discourses of victimhood and survival during crisis. Bodily vulnerability is therefore seen as a catalyst for disseminating biopolitical narratives via the media (Knudsen and Stage 2015). Biopolitical media can play an immunising role, insulating people from stressful memories, narratives and imageries, thus reducing "human experience to mere biological existence" and switching attention from war "to the figure of survivor" (Meek 2015: 3). Biopolitical media "functions as the nervous system of society. National state media outlets serve as the spinal cord and the main nerves, while local media outlets … serve as the peripheral nerves. As the doctor, the propaganda system categorizes all public opinion using general and often floating criteria, such as the distinctions between positive and negative" (Wang 2024: 693). By the same token, the mutually reinforcing ideas of 'media *life*' (Deuze 2011) and the "*biomediated body*" (Clough 2008) argue that the broadly understood media are inseparable from the idea of *bios* (the political functioning of human bodies) as a key feature of post-industrial society. Another meaningful concept of "*biopolitical screens*" (Valiaho 2014) claims that the distribution and circulation of visual images are inherent to Western biopower as a mode of governance and as part of the "biopolitical visual economy of images".

Biopolitical aspects of media propaganda were discussed regarding ISIS visuals exploiting vulnerabilities of human bodies (Calchi-Novati 2017) as a crucial component of the controlling and disciplining functions of power. In the context of wars many authors prefer to substitute biopolitics with necropolitics (Siu 2022), a concept attributing a key role to death and physical harm in strategies of power. As seen from this perspective, visual techniques can justify and legitimise military occupation and control over populations of annexed territories: "Not only does colonial occupation use visual violence, but it cannot be sustained without it" (Deprez 2023).

However, the case of pro-Russian narratives in eastern Ukraine does not fully support this argument. This type of narrative is more biopolitical than necropolitical, and is designed to publicise a policy of normalisation, mental healing and care as a life-centric strategy. Within this biopolitical narrative, the multiple casualties of the Russian attack can be categorised as "ungrievable lives" (Borradori 2011) whose deaths are meant to be forgotten. This raises the question of how can human minds and bodies be objects of manipulative techniques? Our approach to this matter is based on several interconnected concepts: bare life, *homo sacer*, regime of care, de-subjectification, immunisation, victimhood and normalisation. Each of them acquires new interpretations when applied to the study of biopolitical narratives in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

Another methodological peculiarity of our study is the approach to visuality as a form of biopolitical control: "discursive practices are actually created, reproduced, and upheld through visible citation and repetition of their normative fiats. Conversely, if a discursive practice ceases to be articulated by constant repetition, it loses its power and may eventually disappear. Thus, the practice maintains its power only insofar as it is visible" (Gordon 2002: 132). In the existent security literatures visual analysis is often used as a method that expands scholars' empirical materials. This is an expedient approach, particularly because the growing number of politically relevant narratives are produced in a visual form and don't have direct textual analogues. However, we propose to reach beyond the mechanistic integration of visuals into scholars' primary sources, and argue that the sphere of the visual is an intrinsic component of biopolitical relations. In other words, the object of our analysis is the visual construction of the biopolitical in the sense that "the visual is used as the basis for belonging and expelling … for recognizing who or what is alien, who or what is unusual, who or what is outside" (Amoore 2007). This claim is largely built on Roland Bleiker's distinction between mimetic (as close to reality as possible) and aesthetic (always based on subjective interpretations and imageries) representations as the locus of relations of power. Our approach

is an extension of Bleiker's idea: visualised and aestheticised imagery is not just an engine for political relations, but also a constitutive source of biopower. Along these lines, bio- and necro-politics can be approached from the vantage point of different regimes of visibility that co-produce such key concepts as power, sovereignty, and security (Callahan 2020). In other words, visuality is an ontological category pertaining to the domain of biopolitics, rather than a variable that is useful for fostering the explanatory potential of other concepts (Kirkpatrick 2015).

We methodologically differentiate between visuality as a) a modality of representation through signs, codes and visual rituals, b) as a communicative practice framing issues, enacting spectators and viewers' positions, and therefore constructing power relations, and c) as a method of investigating securities and insecurities (Vuori and Andersen 2018). Our method implies several layers of visual analysis. First, it starts with watching the visual material from the viewpoint of its composition: who speaks, in what capacity, how and with whom. This level of research corresponds to what is known in literature as behaviourist visual observation. Second, we look into the content of the analysed pieces, paying attention to their plots or scenarios, role distribution, atmosphere, biopolitical connotations and symbolic components of the narrative, which might be dubbed performative visual observation (Austin and Bramsen 2024). Third, we deploy the interpreted content in a broader set of (bio)politically relevant issues looking at what ideas are contested, promoted and supported, and what (bio)political reverberations these ideas evoke (Freistein and Gadinger 2022).

The Popular Biopolitics of (pro-)Russian Narratives in Ukraine

Pro-Russian narratives in occupied and annexed Mariupol oscillate between two biopolitical poles, abandonment and care. According to Agamben's interpretation, abandonment becomes a biopolitical category (Selmeczi 2012) when applied to extraordinary situations: "the position of being in abandonment correlates to the structural relation of the exception." (Mills 2004: 45) According to this logic, the most radical form of abandonment is "bare life" "stripped of all individuating legal and political status and protection." (Weber 2012: 12) In the analysis below we explain how key biopolitical concepts work as analytical instruments helpful for a better understanding of the circulation and functioning of local narratives repetitive of and compatible with Russian mainstream discourses.

Bare Life and Homines Sacri

The concept of bare life was coined by Giorgio Agamben as an academic metaphor signifying unprotected human existence beyond institutional and legal norms. In biopolitical literature bare lives characterise groups that are intentionally reduced to the state of physical survival, and whose lives are biological (*zoe*), but not political (*bios*). This precarious status chimes with the adjacent metaphor of *homo sacer* (Agamben 2017): the outcast, the "killable body" oscillating between life and death and lacking a well-articulated identity. Under occupation, bare lives who, in their own emotive words, "lost everything" (Kozhevnikova 2023a), are the easy objects of targeted manipulation.

Originally, bare life is a product of sovereign power that functions as a mechanism of exclusion, marginalisation and ostracising, thus creating zones of indistinction between belonging and non-belonging, integration and expulsion. What the case of Mariupol adds to this reasoning is that the sovereign power that produces bare life is external to Ukraine. Using its information resources, this foreign power legitimised the unpunishable use of physical force against bare lives, and secured the acceptance of acts of violence that "do not count as a crime" (Plonowska Ziarek 2012).

The transformation of citizens of Mariupol into "bare lives" was largely based on the creation of an information vacuum as "a peculiar type of torture, because you don't know whether someone is aware of what is going on" (Vot Tak 2022). According to an eyewitness, there were people around who after the Russian invasion provocatively spread gossip that Kharkiv had been taken by Russia (GO Pixel. Volontery dlia VSU 2022). As soon as Mariupol was disconnected from the internet, disorientation rose dramatically, since the shortage of information created a psychologically depressing sense of a deficit of knowledge about the state of affairs and ways out.

Russia-loyal narratives aim to disengage people from the reality of the war and prevent proper assessment, and to focus on everyday routine, for example, food prices (Kozhevnikova 2022e). People whose lives are reduced to physical survival are unwilling to produce politically explicit narratives, and speak about war as a natural disaster with no clear authorship, which leaves no space to blame Russia. Some would prefer neutral language that refuses to attribute guilt to Russia and leaves the reality of war unproblematised: "It was hot here. These buildings had back luck … They were all destroyed" (Khalpakhchy 2022). "Everybody shoots everybody" (Azov Digger 2022) is another example of this sort. Others would more directly accuse Ukraine of atrocities: "Ukrainians from Azov executed us because we were nobodies to them – separatists and drug addicts. Now if I move to Ukraine, I will be sentenced to ten years in prison" (Shariy 2022a). In both cases the protagonists of the stories speak

as bare lives who managed to survive and found themselves in a position of *homines sacri*.

Victimhood

In biopolitical scholarship victimhood is referred to as "a group identity in which traumatic memory is politicized to justify action, including violence, against those accused of being responsible for victimizing the group" (Nagle 2020: 407). As Ukrainian scholars convincingly argued, traumatised victimhood is a media construct and product of information technologies of emotion management with strong biopolitical underpinnings (Meliakova et al. 2024). In pro-Russian narratives, the war is not silenced, but the responsibility for its disastrous effects is relegated to the Ukrainian government: "We start lining up for water at 3 am…. It is all because Poroshenko and Timoshenko, who wanted this war" (Mariupol – Moskva 2022). In pro-Russian video blogs residents of Mariupol are portrayed as being abandoned and neglected by the Ukrainian government: "they didn't care about us and did not protect us" (Shariy 2022a). This narrative created a type of victimhood that is not only tolerant towards Russian invaders, but accepts their right to do harm in order to 'liberate' Russophone territories from the Ukrainian regime: "I don't support war, many people indeed died, but it was unavoidable…. Naturally, since the war is going on, Russians used the air force" (Dobriy Mariupol 2022).

Evidently, pro-Russian bloggers and the interlocutors they interview accuse the Ukrainian authorities of the demolition of Mariupol and the subsequent huge death toll. Against this background, the Kremlin's propaganda described Russia's mission in Mariupol as humanitarian providing medical assistance to a victimised population. LNR and DNR units are particularly visualised as moving into Mariupol with food and construction materials for damaged houses, thus establishing a new regime of care, to be discussed below.

Regime of Care

In the traditions of Foucault, the concept of care connotes practices of freedom "to produce a beautiful and dignified life." (Gallo 2017: 700) From a biopolitical perspective, care needs to be "recognised as a political relation that defines life itself…. (T)he body-in-need lies in the very origin of all care relations…. Since all bodies are vulnerable to decay and disease and no body can exist without the aid of other bodies, the vulnerable body belongs to each and every one of us. This is, indeed, an existential fact of human life." (Hoppania

and Vaittinen 2015: 73–74) In this version, the politics of care stimulates what Agamben called the "happy life".

The application of these concepts to our case requires some caution for at least two reasons. First, in the context of war care loses its liberal associations and ceases to be an inward-oriented and individualised practice of self-management and responsibility; rather, it becomes an intrinsic part of the narratives of invaders who need to legitimise their attack. Concomitantly, the "happy life" of survivors is not detached from relations of sovereignty and domination, as Agamben proposed; on the contrary, it is inscribed into the hegemonic logic of biopower.

Second, in this specific case we are talking about the interpretation of Russian narratives through biopolitical concepts and the manipulative instrumentalisation of their meanings by the invading power. Therefore, these concepts function as clustered narratives and imageries of 'bareness' and 'happiness' that are not necessarily opposed to each other. In other words, pro-Russian vloggers and social media producers do not deny or hide the casualties and deadly atrocities of the battle for Mariupol; they interweave violence, suffering and death into their stories to underscore the fragility and vulnerability of human life and how survivors need to value and appreciate this beyond (geo)political divides and disagreements. Within this (pro-)Russian biopolitical reasoning, care and the promised "happy life" follow and therefore are impossible without the narrative of previous abandonment by the Ukrainian authorities. However, the biopolitical "happiness" *à la Russe* provided by the newly established authorities is the direct opposite to Agamben's understanding of a form-of-life beyond the reach of sovereignty.

The case of Mariupol exemplifies the imposition of a regime of care and protection effectuated by Russian authorities. It includes free food (Goida Studio 2022) disbursed to hungry people, and visualised charity from such organisations as the Kind People Fund which helps the most vulnerable groups – physically impaired and sick people, the elderly, children, and single mothers – to survive. Public gratitude for assistance is an indispensable part of the new regime of care: "Russians don't let down our people. Thank God it is calm here nowadays" (Vremya dobrykh 2022a).

Visualised caretaking includes compensation for material damage and medical assistance by the state, but also what is portrayed as volunteering. The scenes of distribution of humanitarian aid played an important biopolitical role of symbolically subjugating the local population to the authority of care takers and creating new loyalties and political hierarchies on this basis. Biopolitics in this case serves the purpose of erasing the traumatic experience of the recent

past and replacing war memories with a vernacular agenda of life improvement and healing of war trauma.

Noteworthy in this regard is a series of vlogs in which the main protagonists were children who survived the Russian capture and demolition of Mariupol and who were interviewed by a female military journalist. The very fact of talking to underaged adolescents about war is a biopolitical gesture that amplifies the emotionality of the stories about the war and seeks to justify morally the attribution of guilt to the defending side. The journalist's manipulative strategy of encouraging children to talk about the cruelty of the war was meant to underscore their vulnerability and innocence, and therefore to visualise them as perfect objects of a new post-war policy of care taking and lifesaving. Within this imagery, an indispensable element of the story is a gesture of gift giving: each conversation with children was accompanied by a video-recorded philanthropic scene of distributing humanitarian assistance, which only enhanced the biopolitical framing of the (pro-)Russian propaganda.

Immunity

As Roberto Esposito explained, the biopolitics of

> immunity constitutes a way to construct such barriers in a defensive and offensive shape, against any threatening external element. This may apply both to the individuals and to the communities … as immunized against any foreign element that seems to threaten them from the outside… [As a result] it forces the life itself into a sort of cage where we end up losing not only our freedom, but also the very sense of our existence (Esposito 2012).

It is in this sense that pro-Russian speakers play an immunising role by creating a controllable information space and reducing the circulation of alternative narratives that might question the validity of the Russia-sympathetic narrative. Here is a typical speech act of immunisation from those who are considered as "non-locals" and "outsiders": "It is the Azov battalion that has to be blamed for everything. We don't need them here. We were always friends with Russia and Belarus. Why do we need America, their bombs, and the entire West, which supplies all the weapons." (Shariy 2022b) Moreover, the dehumanisation of the Azov fighters included accusations of rape and torture: "Azov are not people, they should be killed like dogs…. All Ukraine hates us" (Vova Ivanov 2023).

This understanding of immunisation drastically differs from the interpretation of "media as part of the immune system of the democratic body politic, whose survival depends on free and informed participation in the public

sphere" (Borradori 2011: 462). Pro-Russian narratives aim to reduce people's sensitivity to emotions caused by the war, and to tranquilise "occupied bodies" (Enns 2004: 3) by immersing them in the depoliticised and desecuritised sphere of everyday routine.

De-subjectification

In the Foucauldian version of biopolitics, the notion of subjectivity is correlative with "a technique of the self", a form of "self-knowledge", "self-examination" (Stypinska 2024) and self-reflection. In this respect care is linked with the idea of responsibilisation as key to self-governing and autonomous agency. However, the direct outcome of the "bareness of life" in the occupied territories is the de-subjectification of the population. The narratives constitutive of "bare lives" are produced on behalf of "simple and ordinary people" and imply a self-denial of political agency, including the ability to make political choices: "My mother is Ukrainian, and father is Russian. Who am I? I don't know" (Shariy 2022b). Here is another example: "I have two motherlands. I am not against Ukraine, but neither I am against Russia. I am against war, and I am for peace. I want our two countries to be friends again" (Kak zhivu ya 2022a).

The heavy emphasis placed on deprivation and both material and human losses during the so-called special military operation is a discursive tool used by (pro-)Russian vloggers to strengthen and encourage the feelings of powerlessness and despondency among the population who remained in Mariupol. "Everything is God's will; nobody can change anything" (Kak zhivu ya 2023). This type of narrative was typical for this purpose. These messages, justifying social and political passivity and inaction, created fertile ground for depicting the local population as happy receivers of free food and basic hygienic products (Vremya dobrykh 2022c). Those who have been temporarily evacuated from Mariupol to nearby Russian towns were portrayed as feeling safe in Russia, thus victims justified the strict measures of medical quarantine applied to them, including their removal to an isolated place with daily medical checks that was under the ubiquitous supervision of security services. Talking about her mother, a local vlogger mentioned how "she spent half-a-year in a camp in Russia and wanted to stay longer: it was so great there" (Kozhevnikova 2023d). These gestures of voluntary submission and self-desubjectification were among the major components of the (pro-)Russian narratives.

"This is our destiny" (Kozhevnikova 2022), a young vlogger says about burned cars and houses in one of her videos. Another protagonist followed suit: "yes, I adjust to the situation, and I don't see anything wrong in this" (Kak zhivu ya 2022b). De-subjectification is largely built on de-politicisation

and the concomitant preference to remain silent: "we did not leave, and this is not because of political reasons. People are crazy about politics" (Kak zhivu ya 2022c). The locals are visualised in numerous video blogs as recipients of free gifts from "good people" who are given bread and thank their saviours (Khoroshie Liudi 2022) from the United Russia party and the Russian Ministry for Extraordinary Situations. The following utterance of a local teenager is indicative of the new normal in Mariupol: "My neighbours said there will be a concert and humanitarian packages. We immediately dashed to the place…. It was a Chechen guy who shared his chocolate with me" (Kapkap 2022).

Post-Traumatic Normalisation

As for the coverage of life in Mariupol itself after spring 2022, pro-Russian narratives consistently and systematically promoted the idea of a post-traumatic healing and normalisation, with its strong biopolitical content. The city was visualised and narrated as becoming safer, more convenient for life (from the restored internet connection to new streetlights) (Kozhevnikova 2024a) and massively celebrating Moscow-patronised patriotic events such as Victory Day on 9 May. (Kozhevnikova 2024b)

In the analysed narratives the war is psychologically displaced and substituted by the new biopolitical mythology of a normalised and even "happy life" allegedly blossoming in the destroyed city. War is largely seen as an event that does not need a rational explanation and is detached from the logic of everyday life, decoupled from moral judgements and dissociated from economic or financial calculations. This shift from past suffering to mundane routine de-actualises memories of recent deaths through self-immersion in biopolitical localism: "I am at home here" (Kak zhivu ya 2022c). This is how pro-Russian narratives normalise mass-scale violence and justify atrocities: "All buildings are destroyed, sheds burned, cars and bicycles stolen, but there is the first strawberry in the garden" (Kozhevnikova 2022b).

The core of pro-Russian biopolitical narratives is the portrayal of the city as being alive, and normal life returning. Local Russia-loyalists and collaborationists visualise and narrate the alleged return to normality through references to people's everyday lives:

> Flowers are everywhere, water supply is functioning, people are relaxed, music in the car, children go to school, volunteers are around. Nice weather, clear sky, grapes are growing. Of course, this is a post- war period, but all sensible people believe in the future. Yes, many lost husbands, and this is enormous pain. But we have kids, and this stimulates us to keep living (Kak zhivu ya 2022d).

As a follow-up to this vernacular narrative, a blogger admires monuments to Soviet military heroes and the Soviet-style children's playground in her neighbourhood (Kozhevnikova 2022c). Here is another illustrative statement of a similar sort: "People are peaceful and gradually return to normal life" (Kozhevnikova 2022a).

A typical object of biopolitical visualisation is new construction works in the city (Dima i Lilia. Eto interesno 2024) displaying local residents cleaning and taking away the remnants of the destroyed buildings against the background of an enthusiastic music, as a symbol of riddance from the Ukrainian legacy and erasure of the "old" Mariupol (Mariupol Video 2022). These scenes are complemented by the faces of happy children (Vremya dobrykh 2022b) and scenes of a healthy urban lifestyle (Kolya pokazyvaet 2023), which underscores the biopolitical crux of pro-Russian narratives. Construction work in Mariupol is gladly covered in pro-Russian media, not only as the material rebuilding of the city, but also from the viewpoint of constructing a new urban identity for Mariupol as a part of the biopolitical community of the "Russian world", with its regime of belonging and politics of care.

This technique of fake healing under the aegis of normalisation evidently has its underside, silencing the very fact of occupation. Silence has to be seen as a "deliberate political practice" (Grayson 2010: 1013) and is inextricably tied up with relations of power (Smith 2001: 66): "Silencing is a powerful mechanism that can be used to eliminate participation in public discourse" (Herzog 2018: 16). Locutionary silencing happens when no speech is uttered at all, either because the speaker is physically impeded from talking, for instance by being gagged, or threatened with violence if they speak (Bertrand 2018: 284). Silence "does not just exclude [certain] experiences, but, rather, it denies their existence, making them inadmissible for consideration" (Dingli 2015: 726). Silencing can ultimately lead to the "We didn't know" effect that forms part of German debates on the concentration camps (Thoams 2016: 493).

The extant literature in this realm is replete with examples from marginalised groups, although this could imply "the deliberate withholding of information by state authorities and other elite actors" through ambiguities, or the explicit refusal to address certain issues (Schweiger 2022: 113). However, silence is not only an attribute of marginalised groups: state-sponsored silence can help "to conceal the underlying processes associated with domination, rendering it an effective tool for power maintenance" (Sue 2015: 116). Therefore, silence can mask certain intentions, privilege some actors and ultimately contribute to the production of hegemony. This argument fully applies to the case of Russia, which builds its post-Crimea discourse on

…silencing the main contestant in the international arena. By silencing we understand the action of inhibiting the contestant's voices by 'normalising' or legitimising certain events…. Its silencing strategy implies the construction of legitimisation arguments by mimicking the West's rhetoric and behaviour. Mimicking is understood not in a metaphorical way but as conscious copying of efforts, or to adapt Bhabha's definition – "a complex strategy" "which 'appropriates' the Other" … The Kremlin is trying to deprive the West of the right to voice concerns about the annexation of Crimea by framing Russia's actions into the West's narratives and practices. (Rotaru 2020: 97)

Remaking the Empire

Biopolitical theorising sees empire as a "paradigmatic form of biopower … as a way to control human bodies and order life and death" (Gualtieri 2014). A peculiar trend in Russia's mal- and misinformation policies on the occupied territories is a sense of re-discovery of – and fascination with – Empire, and acceptance of advantages and aesthetics of what might be called imperial life. Illustrative in this respect are the visualised trips of vloggers from Mariupol to Moscow and across Russia in which they show clear admiration for the country's imperial expanse (Kozhevnikova 2023b). Several videos show local children sent to a sanatorium near St Petersburg and their parents expressing gratitude to the Russian government for this (Kozhevnikova 2022d). The empire of the 'Russian world' features in these vlogs not as a mechanism of colonisation, but as an emancipatory space of new opportunities for residents of what the vlogs call the "newly acquired territories".

The new regime of care exemplified by Russia includes, as its aesthetic element, the glorification of empire as a borderless Russian world. In video blogs by Anastasia Kozhevnikova, a young resident of Mariupol, the discovery of imperial Russia is performed as practices of travel (from Mariupol to the Russian Far East) (Kozhevnikova 2023c) and exploration of new places through communicative, cultural and gastronomic consumption. Within this imperial imagination, Moscow features as the hotbed of political power (Red Square, the Duma), while Vladivostok is portrayed as an outpost of Russian civilisation in Asia. Kozhevnikova's visualised parallels between Mariupol and the city of Grozny, which was destroyed by the Russian army during its assault on Chechnya in the late 1990s, not only drew comparative lines between two margins of the Russian empire, but also acknowledged the right of the imperial centre to impose its will and violently subjugate these margins (Kozhevnikova 2024c). Kozhevnikova openly admired the rule of Ramzan Kadyrov and

sympathetically accepted elements of the Islamic regime of care, such as the ban on alcohol consumption, polygamy, and hegemonic masculinity.

Conclusion

This paper's endeavour was to connect two fields of research: studies in information manipulation, and biopolitical scholarship. Our analysis has shown that vernacular biopolitics in occupied territories has two interconnected aspects: it can imply the semiotic interpretation of the content of pro-Russian messages from a biopolitical viewpoint, and it can be approached as a mechanism of biopolitical control and discipline that comes in many different yet interconnected forms.

Vernacular narratives from the residents of Mariupol under Russian occupation is a new discursive genre that is available for research through hundreds of self-made visuals posted online, including in YouTube. These videos create a unique channel for understanding state of mind among those local supporters of Russia who go public with their storytelling. At the same time, the narratives under study here are meeting points of local grievances about the 'bareness of life' and Kremlin-controlled propaganda, particularly when it comes to the promotion and advertising of care taking practices. The natural desire of the local population to normalise their lives correlates and overlaps with the occupying biopower which aims to divert attention away from the traumatic consequences of war to more positive issues of survival and immersion in everyday routine.

The core characteristic of these narratives, which add a lot to the nexus between biopolitics and security, is the grass-roots legitimation of the exceptional. Since the war is largely seen as a game changing event that does not need a logical or rational explanation, Russia's agency is imagined as a reflection of structural factors beyond anyone's reach. Within this visualised imagination, the war and its repercussions are detached from the logic of everyday life, decoupled from ethical reasoning, and dissociated from economic or financial considerations. These narratives presuppose a direct and immediate shift from the necropolitics of war to the biopolitics of everyday life, which de-actualises memories of recent deaths through self-immersion in what might be dubbed biopolitical localism.

Analysis of visuals produced by the residents of occupied Mariupol exposes a previously unnoticed facet of biopolitics as a depoliticising *dispositif* serving the purpose of distancing people from engagement with the (geo)political reality on the ground, stopping them from properly assessing it and forcing

them to become immersed in the plethora of quotidian issues: shopping in street bazaars, procuring potable water, cooking with firewood, rebuilding almost destroyed houses. People brought to a state of bare living are incapable of producing politically explicit narratives and speak about the war as a natural disaster of sorts, something that has no clear agency and therefore leaves no space for anyone to be blamed. They are happy to share their positive feelings about the small signs of any relative normalisation of their existence. Biopolitics therefore becomes an important policy tool legitimising war and securing the loyalty of occupied populations.

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