DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES OF HATE AS A TOOL OF ESCALATING RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE (BASED ON STOPFAKE FACT-CHECKING PROJECT MATERIALS)

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Abstract. Since 2014, Russian propaganda has been aggressively using narratives of hate as a tool to deprive Ukrainians of their human qualities, denying their right to self-determination and sovereignty. Following the Soviet tradition of discrediting Ukrainian culture and history, Russian propaganda is trying to create an image of Ukraine as a global evil to justify the war and killings of Ukrainians.

Based on the archives of StopFake, a Ukrainian fact-checking organization, this article analyses Russian disinformation narratives intended to dehumanise Ukrainians.

The article illustrates this narrative framework analysis through cases spotted and debunked by Ukrainian fact-checkers during the period of 2014–2022. As well as dehumanising Ukrainians, we also examined how Russian disinformation has manipulated and distorted the concepts of fascism and genocide to form a negative image of Ukrainians and justify a war of aggression as a 'humanitarian intervention'. The report also examines the key arguments of Russian disinformation used to intimidate the audience. Among the main theoretical concepts we refer to in this research are dehumanisation and genocide.

Keywords: StopFake, disinformation, fact-checking, genocide, Russian propaganda, dehumanisation.

1. Introduction

With the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, aggressive Kremlin propaganda became a fully-fledged tool of war. In fact, Ukraine has been at the center of the information war since 2014 when the Russian occupation of Crimea and Donbass began. One of the characteristics of Russian propaganda has been the construction and systematic promotion of disinformation narratives aimed at different target audiences and, among other things, presented in the form of fake news. The struggle against disinformation through the use of fact-checking has also intensified since 2014. The StopFake project has become one of the leaders of fact-checking in

Ukraine which identifies cases of fake information about events in Ukraine.[1] The organisation does not only fact-check stories disseminated by Russian media, but has also created an enormous archive of Russian disinformation which is used for this research.

Based on the StopFake archive, media researcher and StopFake co-founder Yevhen Fedchenko identified the main Russian disinformation narratives in 2016 in his article 'Kremlin Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures by Other Means'. He identified 18 main Russian propaganda narratives during the period of 2014–2016, including a coup d'état in Ukraine; Ukraine as a 'fascist state'; Ukraine as a 'failed' state, Russia is not a part of the occupation/war; 'territorial claims' to Ukraine from neighbouring EU countries; war in Ukraine is actually being conducted by the US, NATO or private contractors; narratives discrediting the Ukrainian army and volunteer battalions. Over time, the range of narratives has expanded considerably to include predominantly 'secret' biological laboratories in Ukraine allegedly sponsored by the US, Ukraine perpetrating 'genocide' in Donbas against the local population, and the dangers of the Ukrainian nuclear energy complex.[2]

The narrative framework of Russian propaganda contains themes that not only promote the Kremlin's ideological messages, but are also linked to the building of extremely negative attitudes towards Ukraine and Ukrainians. Emotional messages that have for years created threatening images of Ukrainians have become part of Russia's narrative propaganda strategy.

In order to better understand the processes of aggressive rhetoric, let us look at some basic concepts—hate speech, dehumanisation, demonisation, and genocide.

First of all, when defining hate speech it is important to point out that hate is a human emotion that is triggered or increased through exposure to particular types of information. Babak Bahador in his study notes that "Hate speech often emerges from an 'us vs. them' conceptual framework, in which individuals differentiate the group they believe they belong to, or the 'in-group' from the 'out-group'." In this sense he identifies three major categories of hate speech—*Dehumanisation and Demonisation*, *Violence and Incitement*, *Early Warning*.[3]

1   **StopFake.org**. https://www.stopfake.org/en/main/.

2   **Fedchenko, Y**. 2016. Kremlin Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures by Other Means. – Sõjateadlane. The Estonian Journal of Military Studies, Vol. 2, pp. 141–170. [**Fedchenko** 2016]

3   **Bahador, B**. 2020. Classifying and Identifying the Intensity of Hate Speech. – Items. Insights from the Social Sciences, 17 November. https://items.ssrc.org/disinformation-democracy-and-conflict-prevention/classifying-and-identifying-the-intensity-of-hate-speech/. [**Bahador** 2020]

As defined by The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives,

> *Dehumanising the enemy involves denying the enemy's humanity by negating in the enemy the characteristics normally associated with human beings, such as morality and compassion, and instead associating the enemy with acts of evil and depravity that merit forceful action and retaliation.*[4]

During war, the dehumanisation of the enemy is quite a typical phenomenon; it occurs because the soldier sees the enemy as evil and this encourages him to participate in hostilities and to some extent justifies his aggression and desire to kill another person. Also, the dehumanisation of the enemy ensures the support of the aggressor among their own civilian population, and in a certain way weakens psychological trauma from losses in war.

Returning to the analysis of Barak Bahador, he mentions that demonisation and dehumanisation are an extreme typology of negative group characterisation and a well-established tool for justifying political violence; thus, they merit their own category beyond more standard negative characterisations[5].

While dehumanisation and demonisation characterise groups of people in extremely negative ways, they do not outright call for violence against them.

Defining the characteristics of the Early Warning category, Babak Bahador notes that "the starting point of group-based hate speech is rarely dehumanisation or incitement but rather usually more subtle and measured. Recognising these early signs, however, can be helpful for preventing escalation toward more intense language. To this end, a very early precursor to hate speech is simply creating an in-group ('us') versus an out-group ('them') dynamic, and distinguishing 'them' as a separate group with different ideas and beliefs." [6]

The concept of genocide is of particular interest in this context. Herbert G. Kelman, in his research 'Violence without moral restraint: Reflections on the dehumanisation of victims and victimisers', wrote that "dehumanisation has been studied as one of several processes thought to contribute to genocide and wartime atrocities."[7]

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[4]   **Thurstance, A. J**. 2016. Dehumanizing the Enemy. – The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives. Chapter DOI: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483359878.

[5]   **Bahador** 2020.

[6]   Ibid.

[7]   **Kelman, H. G**. 1974. Violence without moral restraint: Reflections on the dehumanization of victims and victimizers. – Journal of Social Issues, Vol. 29(4), pp. 25–61.

Gregory H. Stanton, President of Genocide Watch, developed the 10 stages of genocide which explains the different stages which lead to genocide. Among the key stages, he notes: Discrimination—The dominant group denies civil rights or even citizenship to identified groups; Dehumanisation—Those perceived as 'different' are treated with no form of human rights or personal dignity; Organisation—Genocides are always planned; Preparation—Perpetrators plan the genocide. They often use euphemisms such as the Nazi phrase 'The Final Solution' to cloak their intentions. They create fear of the victim group, building up armies and weapons; Denial – The perpetrators or later generations deny the existence of any crime.[8]

As part of its disinformation campaign, Russia has chosen this strategy. Since 2014, Russian disinformation has manipulatively used the concept of genocide to dehumanise Ukrainians. Fictitious, unsubstantiated stories of alleged mass casualties in the Donbas and aggression by Ukrainian authorities against residents of the occupied territories have become one of the key themes allegedly motivating Russians to go to war.

The Kremlin not only denies its crimes, but Russia has also chosen the tactic of 'turning the criminal into the victim' in its propaganda and has manipulatively used the concept of genocide to dehumanise Ukrainians, allowing it to commit brutal war crimes in the war in Ukraine, crimes that have been documented by international human rights organisations.

On 24 February 2022, in his address the President of the Russian Federation stated that:

> *We can see that those forces who carried out a coup d'état in Ukraine in 2014, seized power and retained it by means of essentially decorative electoral procedures, have definitively refused to resolve the conflict peacefully. For eight years, for an infinitely long eight years, we have done everything possible to resolve the situation by peaceful, political means. All in vain. As I said in my previous address, one cannot look at what is happening there without compassion. It was simply impossible to bear it any longer. This nightmare, the genocide against millions of people living there, who rely only on Russia, had to be stopped immediately.*[9]

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8   The Ten Stages of Genocide. – Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/what-is-genocide/the-ten-stages-of-genocide/.

9   Обращение Президента Российской Федерации. – Kremlin.ru, 24 February 2022. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843.

Broadcasting aggressive rhetoric in the information space as a way to dehumanise and demonise Ukrainians is a long-term process aimed at destroying any national, human and moral manifestations of Ukrainians in Russian public rhetoric. It has become a substantial part of the Kremlin's ideological program. Even before the open confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, the Russian authorities have viewed Ukrainians as Khokhols for many decades (a pejorative term for Ukrainians widely used in Russia) or as Malorosy (little Russians), rather than as a nation. These negative stereotypes were a political tool that eventually became part of the general Russian perception of Ukrainians. Domestic chauvinism, under the influence of media and ideology, became the reason for Russian citizens supporting the war in Ukraine.

The line between dehumanisation, demonisation and genocidal rhetoric is blurred in Russian disinformation narratives. The massive spread of hybrid forms of hate speech that do not directly contain violent content fosters hatred in general and is ultimately used to justify aggression and war.

2. Research Methodology

This study is based on Ukrainian StopFake fact-checking project materials in which fact-checkers debunk Russian fake news. Since 2014, StopFake has regularly monitored the Russian media and has created a unique archive of false Russian propaganda stories. This archive contains 28,946 links to fake Russian media content pieces on social media pages, as well as 3,066 StopFake articles debunking these fake reports. StopFake fact-checkers have debunked 850 Russian propaganda fakes published since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The research analysed material selected between 2014 and 24 February 24 2022.

The goal of this research is to investigate StopFake archive material between 2014 and 24 February 2022 (the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion) and identify false narratives related to the dehumanisation of Ukrainian society. The research material consists of photos, videos and textual fakes from the Russian media. StopFake fact-checkers have labelled the different types of messages as fake, photo-fake, video-fake and manipulation.

According to StopFake's methodology, the stories that had the widest coverage and significance for Ukrainian society were chosen for refutation. Fakes that were refuted had usually been spread by Russian mainstream media and social networks.

In order to investigate the use of the concept of genocide in Russian propaganda rhetoric, 477 Russian media publications, 299 pro-Russian (Russian-created) media and 178 occupied Donbas media were additionally analysed.

This research applied the method of qualitative (thematic) content and narrative analysis that identifies the Russian disinformation main thematic fake news frame, which allows us to determine the motivation behind the dissemination of disinformation messages.

2.1. Results

The study of StopFake archive materials related to Narratives of hate to Ukrainians revealed the following themes:

1. Fascism in Ukraine.
2. Genocide against the people of Donbas.
3. Discrimination against the Russian language/Russophobia.
4. Child abuse.

Since StopFake's monitoring did not include numerous Russian TV talk shows which are also heavily used by Russian disinformation to promote hate narratives, their content is not reflected in the results of this study. However, they were the main platforms for spreading hate narratives through hosts like Skabeeva or Solovyov and so-called 'guest experts'.

3. Narrative 1. Fascism/Nazism in Ukraine

The threat of 'Nazism in Ukraine' was used by Russia as one of the main prerequisites for its full-scale invasion. Initially, the main goals proclaimed by the Kremlin were 'demilitarisation' and 'denazification' and, later, other absurd explanations were added to the long list of reasons for this invasion. In Russian propaganda, the image of the fascist is associated with absolute evil whose defeat has become the main ideological aim for the Kremlin.

According to the results of the content analysis, the biggest Russian media narrative regarding Ukraine in the context of dehumanisation is that Ukrainian pro-European protesters, who toppled the regime of Viktor Yanukovych back in 2014, were 'ultra-nationalists' or even 'fascists'. It was the most frequently repeated—at least 130 times in the StopFake archive. The terms frequently used in Russian news were 'radicals', 'ultra-radicals', 'fascist youngsters', 'militants', etc. According to the official Russian narrative, these

people were trying to spread the 'fascist plague' of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

The 'fascist narrative' is one of the most important themes as it connects Ukrainian events (Revolution of Dignity and the events that led to it) to the World War II (or rather the Great Patriotic war, which remains Russia's official name for WWII) narrative which has been perceived by Soviet and then Russian ideologues as a heroic chapter in history.[10]

The presence of Nazi symbols and ritual practices was actively mentioned in such materials. Moreover, Russian propaganda also identifies national Ukrainian symbols as Nazi symbols. For example, we can find these comparisons in disinformation stories where the Ukrainian coat of arms, anthem and greeting 'Glory to Ukraine' are described as 'fascist' symbols. The website of the main Russian propaganda channel RT published a story claiming that the popular Ukrainian greeting – Glory to Ukraine! – is "a well-known slogan used by World War II Nazi collaborators". This greeting in fact came into use well before WWII and it became popular again in Ukraine after the 2013–2014 Maidan protests[11].

Reports about fascists or Nazis in Ukraine are accompanied by descriptions of aggression towards Soviet-era cultural monuments, or against national minorities, and racial discrimination. One such false story reported that "Nationalists and their sympathisers" destroyed an orthodox church of the Moscow Patriarchate[12]. Russia's official state Channel One reported: "urged on by an approving crowd, radicals smashed the church walls and dismantled the roof. Pleased with their work, they sang the Ukrainian anthem on the church ruins."

These articles lack a balance of opinions, references to sources of information, objectivity, accuracy, and use emotional vocabulary to project a sense of total threat and danger.

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[10] **Fedchenko** 2016.

[11] Fake: Glory to Ukraine is a Nazi Greeting. – StopFake.org, 30 August 2017. https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-glory-to-ukraine-is-a-nazi-greeting/.

[12] Fake: Radical Ukrainian Nationalists Destroy Moscow Patriarchate Churches. – StopFake.org, 22 September 2016. https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-radical-ukrainian-nationalists-destroy-moscow-patriarchate-churches/.

The key Russian propaganda argument in this topic is:

- Ukraine as a fascist state is dangerous for Russia and the international order.
- The entire system of Ukrainian statehood, including the government and the army, is penetrated and influenced by radical nationalist tendencies.
- The aim of nationalist forces in Ukraine is to destroy the legacy of the Soviet past, the Russian language and to practice and spread Russophobia.
- 'Fascist forces' in Ukraine are usually localised in the western part of the country and the city of Lviv where there is a long tradition of anti-Soviet struggle by organisations like OUN-UPA.
- Anti-Semitism is widespread in Ukraine.

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4. Narrative 2. Ukraine's Genocide against the people of Donbas

The main argument that Russia has been pushing for eight years since 2014 is that the actions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces are aimed at "destroying the Donbas population" rather than fighting for territorial integrity of Ukraine.

In the StopFake archive, this narrative can be found at least 113 times. Content analysis was used to study 477 publications in the Russian media (299) and the Russian-controlled media of occupied Donbas (178).

In his official address announcing the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24 2022, Vladimir Putin said:

> *I have decided to conduct a special military operation. Its purpose is to protect people who have been subjected to abuse and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years.*[13]

Speaking to Russian airline representatives on 6 March 2022 and justifying the invasion of Ukraine, Putin said that "people in Donbas are not stray dogs... 13,000 to 14,000 have been killed over the years, over 500 children have been killed or maimed."[14]

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[13] Обращение Президента Российской Федерации. – Kremlin.ru, 24 February 2022. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843.

[14] Ibid.

But official UN data suggests that the 14,000 figure Putin uses does not just refer to civilians. During Russia's military action against Ukraine from 2014 to 2021, some 14,500 people actually died in Donbas. Among them, 3,404 were civilian casualties, 4,400 were Ukrainian military and 6,500 were members of Russian-controlled proxy forces. In other words, the figure that Putin uses is the total number of civilian and military casualties on both sides[15].

The key Russian propaganda argument in this topic is:

- Ukraine is committing genocide against the Russian-speaking population in the south and east of the country ('cultural genocide', 'linguistic genocide').
- Ukraine commits genocide by blocking the water supply to Crimea.
- Ukrainian military commits brutal crimes against civilians (elderly, women and children).

Reports of alleged mass atrocities and casualties in Donbas were simultaneously circulated by both Russian government officials and the media. Russia has been building up the case about the alleged threat from the Ukrainian army by falsifying stories of alleged 'thousands' of civilian deaths.

On 12 May 2015 leading disinformation channel Sputnik News reported that Ukraine introduced a law that could send "millions of Russians" in the country to special internment camps. "If the bill is approved, millions of Russians residing in Ukraine will be interned in special camps as war prisoners", the article states. According to SputnikNews, the bill "provides for the compulsory internment in special camps of foreign nationals residing in Ukraine who pose a threat to its security."[16] There have also been fake stories such as 'Ukrainian Minister of Defense Called for a New Counterinsurgency Operation' or 'Ukrainian Military Shelled Bus Stop in Donetsk' and countless false reports that the Ukrainian army is shelling Donetsk with forbidden phosphorus munitions. The propagandists also tried to build a connection between alleged Ukrainian 'war crimes' in Donbas with the Americans and Europeans. One of the lines of Russian propaganda in this context was that the EU and the US were helping Ukraine to "commit genocide".

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[15] Фейк: Украина совершала геноцид против жителей Донбасса. – StopFake.org, 20 March 2022. https://www.stopfake.org/ru/fejk-ukraina-sovershala-genotsid-protiv-zhitelej-donbassa/.

[16] Fake: Millions of Russian Citizens in Ukraine to Be Interned. – StopFake.org, 22 May 2015. https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-millions-of-russian-citizens-in-ukraine-to-be-interned/.

Fake reports of genocide were accompanied by emotionally charged images of murdered children or elderly people, and edited videos. Often, the propaganda repurposed old images from the war in Syria, from Israel and Chechnya, devoid of context.

On 25 September 2014, 'Rossiyskaya Gazeta' journalists published an article 'Genocide. Thousands of Donbas residents brutally killed by punitive forces'[17]. This article is full of fakes. In it, the head of the Presidential Council on Human Rights Mikhail Fedotov does not "rule out" the possibility of discovering new graves, reminding the reader that massacres are "the realities of modern warfare" and similar crimes had taken place in the former Yugoslavia.

That is, back in 2014, the Kremlin tried to compare the Balkan wars and Ukraine and act as the international community acted against the Serbs in the 1990s.[18]

Occupied Donetsk and Russian Federation propaganda channels and publications systematically reported about the new graves and solemn reburials of local residents killed in 2014–2015, as well as about the search for new "mass graves".

Searching activities intensified during summer of 2021 when, on 22 July, Russia filed a lawsuit against Ukraine with the European Court of Human Rights. Among the claims made were "war crimes by the Ukrainian army and nationalist battalions in Donbas".

However, Russia did not provide any evidence of the Ukrainian army's involvement and did not allow international observers and investigators into this process[19]. In fact, in this way, Russia tried to create a false evidence base for alleged Ukrainian criminal actions, which should have strengthened the Russians' belief in their 'dangerousness'.

5. Narrative 3. Discriminating against the Russian language/Russophobia

The Russia-controlled Novorosiya website published a lengthy article entitled 'Zelensky is carrying out a genocide of Russians. What is he afraid of?' In this

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[17] Украинские каратели зверски уничтожали жителей Донбасса – Rg.ru, 24 September 2014. https://rg.ru/2014/09/24/karateli-site.html.

[18] The excavated graves of the Donbas: An imitation of Srebrenica. – StopFake.org, 15 November 2021. https://www.stopfake.org/en/the-excavated-graves-of-the-donbas-an-imitation-of-srebrenica/.

[19] Ibid.

article, the propagandists aggressively accuse Ukrainian President Zerensky of 'linguistic genocide' – linguocide:

> *While earlier authorities in Kyiv tried to disguise their Russophobia as support of the Ukrainian language or the fight against 'Russian aggression', now the Kyiv comedian Vladimir Zelensky and his 'Sprechenfuhrer' have spoken out directly, not hiding their hatred for Russians and the Russian language in particular.*[20]

The topic of the Russian language which, according to propagandists, is allegedly oppressed in Ukraine is closely related to the topic of genocide and the dehumanisation of Ukrainians in general. The Russian government manipulatively uses the Russian language issue for justifying its aggression. Protection of the Russian-speaking population in Donbas has been proclaimed as one of the main reasons for military action against Ukraine since 2014. In the StopFake archive, this narrative can be found at least 70 times.

Among the key points of Russian disinformation:

- Russia is protecting the 'oppressed' Russian-speaking population in Ukraine.
- Ukraine is introducing discriminatory language legislation ('Language law')
- The Ukrainian language is an 'artificial' language that, according to agitprop, never existed before.

In 2014, StopFake debunked false stories claiming that Ukraine was planning to ban the study of the Russian language, or that the Ukrainian language would switch to the Latin alphabet, and that children would be forced to learn German instead of Russian.

Since 2014, the Ukrainian government has implemented many legislative changes to protect the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian-language content in the information space as part of the fight against Russian information threats. All these actions taken by the Ukrainian authorities were immediately echoed in Russian propaganda as fakes to mount a major disinformation campaign.

Russian propaganda paid special attention to the so-called 'Language Law' which was passed by the Ukrainian Parliament on 25 April 2019. The following publications appeared in the Russian media: 'Language Policemen and Sprechenführer revive the period of the Great Terror in Ukraine', 'Ukraine

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[20] Зеленский проводит геноцид русских. Чего он боится? – Novorosinform.org, 09 August 2023. https://novorosinform.org/zelenskij-provodit-genocid-russkih-chego-on-boitsya-76807.html.

exterminates Russians legally', 'Ukraine's Toughest Language Law', 'Russians Banned', 'Language law will leave tens of thousands of people unemployed', 'On Bandera's birthday an AFU soldier killed a fellow soldier for speaking Russian', etc.

On 1 March 2019 the Russian edition of RT published an article with this headline: 'Ukrainian – an Artificial Language Created in USSR'. RT cites Russian philologist Pavel Borodin who claims that the Ukrainian language was a completely artificial Soviet construct. Borodin declared for agitprop:

> *They lumped it together and started using it, as every republic in the USSR had to have a literature. Even if they say that Ukrainian exists today as a literary language, this is the legacy of the Soviet Union.*[21]

This article clearly demonstrates the attitude of the Russian government to the language issue. On the one hand, it contains accusations against the Ukrainian government which allegedly tries to divide the 'fraternal peoples' and increase enmity between the countries with its language policy, and on the other hand it tries to deny the very historical existence of the Ukrainian language. In this way, the Kremlin not only formed a negative attitude towards the Ukrainian language and national identity among the Russian society, but also denied the existence of Ukrainians as a nation.

6. Narrative 4. Child abuse

Each of the narratives promoted by Russian disinformation is adapted to the needs and expectations of the target audience. The emotional factor and psychological influence are extremely important in order to strengthen the audience's belief in fakes and false information. The most common propaganda technique is to use false, shocking stories related to children and the elderly in order to dehumanise Ukrainians. In the StopFake archive this topic can be found at least 35 times.

In July 2014, Russian television aired an interview with a woman claiming to be a refugee from the eastern Ukrainian city of Slovyansk. Galina Pyshniak told the Kremlin's official Channel One that, after liberating Slovyansk (occupied by Russian militants in April 2014), Ukrainian armed forces allegedly herded city residents into the central square and publicly executed a

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[21]   Fake: Ukrainian – an Artificial Language Created in USSR. – StopFake.org, 05 March 2019. https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-ukrainian-an-artificial-language-created-in-ussr/.

small boy by crucifying him and his mother, whose husband was a member of the separatist militia[22]. This story was the first big attempt to exploit emotional topics by Russian propaganda. Since 2014, StopFake fact-checkers have regularly recorded such manipulations. On 27 May 2014 Ermina Kotandzhyan, a journalist from LifeNews, posted a photo of an eight-year-old boy on her Twitter page who had allegedly been wounded in a shootout at Donetsk airport[23]. But, in reality, this photo was taken in April 2013 in the Syrian city of Aleppo after it had been fired upon by Syrian government forces supported by Russia[24]. Another example is a picture of a girl published on social media accompanied by a poem dedicated to "a five-year old girl who was killed (by Ukrainians) in Slovyansk". In reality, this was a photo of 8-year old Russian girl Anastasiia Lutsishina, killed by a taxi driver in 2013 in Ussuriysk, Russia, and her death had nothing to do with the combat operations.

Even after all those stories were successfully debunked, Russia continued to use this technique to intimidate audiences with 'horror' stories about children killed, not only by Ukrainian armed forces but also by Ukraine's western allies.

In the summer of 2018, pro-Kremlin media were spreading reports of an incident during NATO's Sabre Strike 2018 exercises held in Lithuania. Allegedly, a child on a bicycle was hit by an armored personnel carrier carrying US military personnel. The hoax was quickly exposed by journalists and the Lithuanian defense authorities. It turned out that a traffic accident really did happen during the exercises; four American 'Stryker' vehicles had an accident and 13 American soldiers were injured. But there was no child killed in the accident[25].

In 2016, a false story about a Russian girl raped by migrants in Germany was widely published[26] in Russian media. In April 2021, when Russia first amassed troops on Ukraine's borders, Gazeta.RU, Kommersant, RBC, Fontanka.RU, RIA Novosti, Lenta.ru, Svobodnaya Pressa, Interfax and others

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[22] Fake: Crucifixion in Slovyansk. – StopFake.org, 15 July 2014. https://www.stopfake.org/en/lies-crucifixion-on-channel-one/.

[23] Fake Photos Appeared on the Internet, of Children who were Supposedly Killed in Eastern Ukraine. – StopFake.org, 28 May 2014. https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-photos-appeared-on-the-internet-of-children-who-were-supposedly-killed-in-eastern-ukraine/.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Baltic Brutality? – EU vs Disinfo, 14 June 2018. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/baltic-brutality/.

[26] Meister, S. 2016. «Дело Лизы»: Германия как объект российской дезинформации. – NATO Review, 25 July. https://www.nato.int/docu/review/ru/articles/2016/07/25/delo-lizy-germaniya-kak-ob-ekt-rossijskoj-dezinformatsii/index.html.

spread disinformation that an alleged Ukrainian drone attack on a non-government-controlled part of Donbas had caused the death of a child[27]. It was not possible to prove liability on the Ukrainian side. Russian presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov said, "I have no verified information regarding the death of this child. At the same time, I have no reason to doubt the veracity of the data provided by the self-proclaimed republics on this matter."

The key Russian disinformation point in this topic is:

- The Ukrainian army massacres children in Donbas.
- Ukraine trains children in special camps for warfare.
- The suffering of children in Ukraine in general – due to "Ukraine's war"

Propaganda used shocking video and photo content, emotional interviews from fake witnesses, and social media to spread fakes with intimidating content in order to achieve the maximum impact on the audience.

Disinformation has been used to create different categories of media content:

- Staged photographs and video.
- Visual materials taken out of context (photos from Chechnya or Syria were used for production of fakes in the context of Ukraine).
- Resorting to highly emotional, shocking stories and descriptions.

7. Conclusion

The spread of hate narratives is a systematic process of portraying Ukrainians as a global threat at a national and personal level. Denial of the existence of the Ukrainian state, of Ukrainians as a national unit, and regular publications about threats allegedly posed by Ukrainians became a background for war preparation and committing war crimes after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Victory in World War II, the heroic past and Russia's alleged struggle against the 'evil of the fascism' in Ukraine have become the main ideological messages in information warfare tactics.

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[27] Fake: A child died in Donbas as a result of a Ukrainian drone attack (Update). – StopFake. org, 05 April 2021. https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-a-child-died-in-donbas-as-a-result-of-a-ukrainian-drone-attack/.

Accordingly, the narrative framework of disinformation includes the following semantic model: Ukraine is an artificial fascist state, financed by Western countries, with no history of its own and no sovereignty. Its leaders and population pose a danger to the Russian-speaking population because they allegedly destroy Russian culture. The far-right and fascists in Ukraine are conducting genocide against the people of Donbas, discriminating against the Russian language and spreading Russophobia. To maximize the emotional impact on the audiences, false narratives about child abuse in Ukraine are pushed.

Modern information technologies have allowed Russian propaganda to flood the information space with aggressive content that discredits Ukrainians. Horrific, shocking photos and videos, allegedly depicting victims of genocide committed by Ukrainians and the Ukrainian army, eventually turned into calls for the genocide of the Ukrainian people.

However, the Kremlin's repetition of the idea that Ukrainians as a nation do not exist and that the Ukrainian language and culture do not have agency have backfired, instead thrusting Ukrainians into an even greater internal consolidation.

In this context, it is extremely important to note the work of fact-finding organisations such as StopFake. By analysing the information space over a period of eight years, they have not only influenced the formation of resilience and resistance against Russian disinformation, but have also been able to compile an archive that allows us to explore the evolution and approaches of Russian disinformation.

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