

SOME NOTES ABOUT THE NATURE OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY INVASION OF UKRAINE 2022–2023

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Abstract. In this article the authors look at Russia’s information influence activities in the context of the first two years of the Russian military invasion in Ukraine (2022–2023). The specific focus of this study is on analysing some examples of Russian strategic narratives created and disseminated by the Russian Federation, pro-Russian media outlets and social media channels (e.g. *Telegram*) in 2022–2023, targeting Western audiences, including examples of Russian influence activities targeting Estonian, Ukrainian and more generally Western audiences.

Keywords: influence activity, nature, strategic narratives, reflexive control, Russian military invasion, Russo-Ukrainian war, information war, Russia, Ukraine, NATO, EU, West, Estonia

1. Introduction¹

In recent decades Russia has invested heavily in information warfare, its capabilities and its information security environment. This has been reflected at several levels, including in the Russian Federation’s strategic documents which show that for Moscow information warfare is a very important tool in their confrontation with the West. Russia’s authoritarian President Vladimir Putin has increasingly called the security of the country’s information space, including cyberspace, a vital priority. To a greater or lesser extent, this concern has been reflected in *The Russian Federation Military Doctrine* 2014²,

¹ This article is written in the framework of the research project and published with the support of project O-006 “Strategic communication in the context of the war in Ukraine: lessons learned for Estonia”, Estonian Military Academy.

² **RG.ru** 2014. Военная доктрина Российской Федерации. Российская газета № 298 (6570), 30.12.2014. <https://rg.ru/documents/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>. See also **Pietkiewicz, M.** 2018. The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation. – Polish Political Science Yearbook, Vol. 47(3), pp. 505–520.

the 2021 *National Security Strategy*³, the 2016 *Information Security Doctrine*⁴ and *Foreign Policy Concept* (2023)⁵. We are seeing a rise of activity in Russian information influence overall in the world, especially since 2014 when Russia attacked Crimea and also after February 2022 when Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. The war launched against the Ukraine on 24 February 2022 is a consequence of the gradual escalation of long-term Russian influence. To justify the war and war crimes against Ukraine, Russia continues to use various propaganda narratives and messages in its influence activities. Russian information war narratives are largely based on Russia's opposition to Ukraine and more broadly the Western world (United States, Europe) and its institutions (EU, NATO, etc.)⁶.

We should note here that Moscow is trying to account for the characteristics of countries in the Western world and, even more broadly, is striving to damage the democratic and liberal system as a whole⁷ with several different types of manipulative and harmful disinformation by trying to harm the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

³ **Strategy of national security of the Russian Federation.** Moscow, Kremlin, 2 July 2021. https://paulofilho.net.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Russia.pdf (accessed on 22 December 2022). For more on Russian National Security doctrine 2016 see **Galeotti, M.** 2016. Russia's New National Security Strategy: Familiar Themes, Gaudy Rhetoric. – War on Rocks, 4 January 2016. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/01/russias-new-national-security-strategy-familiar-themes-gaudy-rhetoric/> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁴ **Sukhankin, S.** 2016. Russia's New Information Security Doctrine: Fencing Russia from the "Outside World"? – Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 13, Issue 198, 16 December, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5864c6b24.html> [accessed 22 December 2023]; **Decree of the President of the Russian Federation** No. 646 On Adopting the Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation dated 5 December 2016. <https://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/53418>.

⁵ **The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.** – The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (Mid.ru), 31 March 2023. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁶ **Ventsel, A.; Hansson, S.; Madisson, M.-L.; Sazonov, V.** 2021. Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia's Zapad war games. – Media War & Conflict, Vol. 14(1), pp. 21–39; **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Chochia, A.; Kerikmäe, T.** (eds.) 2021. The Russian Federation in the Global Knowledge Warfare: Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighborhood. Cham: Springer Verlag. [Mölder, Sazonov, Chochia, Kerikmäe 2021]

⁷ **Karlsen, G. H.** 2019. Divide and rule: ten lessons about Russian political influence activities in Europe. – Palgrave Communication, Vol. 5, article 19, pp. 1–14.

1.1. Aims of research

Considering the above, the aim of this paper is to study the nature of Russian information influence activities (information war) in the context of the Russia's war against Ukraine. We will also focus on Russian strategic narratives which were created and disseminated by Russia and pro-Russian forces against the West (particularly Estonia) and Ukraine in 2022–2023 during the Russian military invasion of Ukraine.

1.2. Methodological approach and empirical data

As for the methodology, first for collecting empirical data, several important strategic documents (e.g. Russian military doctrine, etc.) were collected and analysed in a qualitative fashion, including articles published in Russian and pro-Russian media outlets (*Inosmi.ru*, *Sputniknews*, *Rg.ru*, *News.ru*, *VPK Novosti*, *TV Zvezda*, *Baltnews*, etc.) and posts in several social media (*Telegram*) pro-Russian channels, e.g. *Donbas reshayet* (Donbas decided).⁸ In this article we analyse Russian information warfare, including Russia's strategic narratives in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022–2023. We also focus on Russian war theorists who, among other things, dealt with information warfare issues, examining their texts and speeches from a historical perspective.

2. Information influence activity in understandings of Russian military theorists: from the Soviet period until Gerasimov

In this subchapter we will briefly look at how Soviet and Russian war theorists understand information warfare and its role in wars, military conflicts and hybrid wars⁹.

⁸ **Kracauer, S.** 1953. The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis. – *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 631–642; **Kuckartz, U.** 2014. *Qualitative Text Analysis: A Guide to Methods. Practice & Using Software*. London, Sage Publications.

⁹ **Брычков, А. С.; Дорохов, В. Л.; Никоноров, Г. А.** 2019. О гибридном характере войн и вооруженных конфликтов будущего. – *Военная мысль*, 2, с. 15–28; **Kofman, M.; Rojansky, M.** 2015. A Closer look at Russia's "Hybrid War". Kennan Institute, Wilson Centre, Kennan Cable 7. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no7-closer-look-russias-hybrid-war> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

From the point of view of Russia's information warfare and hybrid warfare arsenals, General Valery Gerasimov's text (2013) can also be considered an important text which represents the Russian understanding of hybrid warfare, particularly information influence activities.¹⁰ We should note that Gerasimov is one of the main initiators or preparers and military leaders responsible for planning and launching the war against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. It was his so-called concept or vision of contemporary war in general that formed the basis of Russia's hybrid war and aggression against Ukraine back in 2014 when Russian troops in the form of "green men" in uniform without military insignia seized and occupied Crimea in early 2014, which was then illegally annexed by Putin's regime. With regard to Gerasimov's text, we must mention that Gerasimov does not say much that is new and uses ideas expressed by both Western and Russian (and Soviet) theorists. It should be pointed out that information influence activities has long been known in Russia as an effective method and has deep historical roots¹¹. Therefore, information influence activities have always played a major role in warfare; Russia is no exception, being in many ways a pioneer in this field alongside the British and others. As early as during the tsarist period several Russian military theorists began to deal with the issue of information warfare. It is worth recalling here that Russian military theorists and generals of the tsarist and Soviet periods, V. K. Triandafillov (1894–1931) and A. A. A. Svechin (1878–1938), extensively dealt with aspects of information-psychological influence.¹²

Russia's military theorist Y. E. Messner's (1891-1974) contribution to the development of hybrid and information warfare ideas has also had a major impact. This non-traditional view divides war into four categories: war for

¹⁰ **Герасимов, В.** 2013. Ценность науки в предвидении. – Военно-промышленный курьер, № 8 (476), с. 1–3. [Герасимов 2013]

¹¹ See e.g. **Medyakov, A.** 2017. Propaganda at Home (Russian Empire). – 1914–1918 Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War. Ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin. Last updated 08 October 2014. https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/propaganda_at_home_russian_empire (accessed on 22 December 2022); **Асташов, А.** 2012. Пропанганда на Русском фронте в годы Первой мировой войны, Москва: Спецкнига. See also **Корôtin, I.; Sazonov, V.** 2023. The Russian Military's Use of History to Create a Post-Soviet Identity: The Development of Conceptual Understandings from the 1990s to the Mid-2000s. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 36/4(in press) [Корôtin, Sazonov 2023]

¹² See e.g. **Триандафиллов В.К.** 1926. Размах операций современных армий. Военный вестник, Москва; **Свечин, А.** 1927. Стратегия. Военный вестник, Москва. [Свечин 1927]

the unconscious, war of rebellion (in Russian: *mjatezhvoina*)¹³, war from a distance or non-contact war, and cyber war. Even when physical violence is used, the decisive factor here is still the effect of war on the national psychology and values. Thus, the aim is to crush and change the values of the opposing population¹⁴. One important aspect of such warfare is information warfare.¹⁵

The importance of information in asymmetric conflicts has been emphasised by several contemporary Russian military scholars: S. G. Chekinov, S. A. Bogdanov¹⁶ and the long-time head of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences General M. A. Gareyev who constantly emphasised the role of information in modern warfare. It is also worth mentioning that Mahmud Gareyev was the chairman of the scientific board of the important Russian-language scientific journal *Informatsionnye Voiny*. As far back as in 2003 Gareyev wrote:

*As far as the means of warfare are concerned, the distinction between direct and indirect actions in strategy is changing. Indirect (non-linear) actions, which are related to the political, economic and moral and psychological influence on the opponent, his disinformation and undermining from within, have always played a major role.*¹⁷

Gareyev has often argued that modern wars must be fought not only by military means but also by cybernetic, informational and other means.¹⁸ Two years after the publication of Gerasimov's article in 2015, Gareyev came up with the idea that it is important to develop new tools related to soft power—that is, wars should be fought not only with military means but also with cybernetic and informational means, etc. According to Gareyev it makes sense to start a war with large-scale economic sanctions, information

¹³ Месснер, Е. 1960. Мятаж – имя третьей всемирной. Буэнос-Айрес; Месснер, Е. 2005. Хочешь мира, победи мятежвойну! Творческое наследие Е. Э. Месснера. Москва: Военный Университет, Русский путь.

¹⁴ Jonsson, O. 2019. The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, p. 77.

¹⁵ Mölder, Sazonov, Chochia, Kerikmäe 2021.

¹⁶ Чекинов, С. Г.; Богданов, С. А. 2011. Влияние непрямых действий на характер современной войны. – Военная мысль, № 6, с. 3–13.

¹⁷ Гареев, М. 2003. Характер будущих войн. – Право и безопасность, № 1–2 (6–7). https://dpr.ru/pravo/pravo_5_4.htm (accessed on 22 December 2022).

¹⁸ Нарсисян, Л. 2015. «Махмут Гареев: Важно готовить весь народ к защите Отечества и возродить идею Отечества». – Regnum, 16.02.2015. <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1895775.html> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

operations and other non-military means.¹⁹ Other arsenals of soft power can also be considered as instruments of hybrid warfare.²⁰

The well-known Russian and Soviet strategist and military theoretician Svechin, whom Gerasimov also quotes in his text (2013), was still paying special attention to the role of strategic aspects of info-psychological influencing of the enemy's target groups. As Gerasimov declares, "The information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy".²¹ Svechin argued that "war is not only an arena of armed forces"²² and in his classic work *Strategy* in 1927 he accentuated the role of information and psychological influence in Soviet warfare:

It is necessary to be a psychologist, to know the opponents. It is necessary to be a psychologist, to know the ethnographic peculiarities of the opponent's people, all their social groupings and orientations. It is necessary to be a psychologist, to be aware of all its social groups, to be able to assess even the smallest details, and not to lose sight of the bigger picture – only then can one adapt the decision to the behaviour of the enemy.

In his text Gerasimov accentuates that asymmetric actions are widely used to level the playing field in armed combat. These include the use of special operations and internal opposition to create a permanent front line on the territory of the adversary, as well as informational influence, the forms and methods of which continue to evolve. In the same text Gerasimov discusses the role of *information influence* in today's wars and military conflicts: the emphasis of methods of confrontation is shifting towards political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military methods, which are realised through the involvement of the people's protest potential against their governments, etc. All this is complemented by covert military measures, including information influence and special operations.²³

¹⁹ **Гареев, М.** 2015. Война без срока давности. Опыт Великой Отечественной помог в возвращении Крыма. – Военно-промышленный курьер, 12.05.2015. <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/25172> (accessed on 22 December 2022). See also **Коро́тин, Sazonov** 2024.

²⁰ See e.g. **Бочарников, И. В.** (ред.) 2016. Роль технологий «мягкой силы» в информационном, ценностно-мировоззренческом и цивилизационном противоборстве. Академия военных наук. М.: «Экон-Информ». <https://nic-pnb.ru/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/rol-tehnologij-myagkoj-sily.pdf> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

²¹ **Герасимов** 2013.

²² **Свечин** 1927, p. 36.

²³ **Герасимов** 2013; see also **Galeotti, M.** 2018a. I'm Sorry for Creating the 'Gerasimov Doctrine'. – Foreign Policy, 5 March. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-cre->

As we can conclude, for Russia information influence activities have been one of the priority activities for decades, including in the military sphere. This is illustrated by the opinions, articles and speeches of many Soviet and Russian military theorists in which they highlight the role of information warfare.

3. Nature of Russian information influence activities and concept of strategic narratives

In the subchapter presented below the authors provide a short overview of the nature of Russia's information war and also introduce the concept of strategic narratives.

The *nature of Russian information influence activities* could be well described by the biological term “mimicry” where the information campaign is a flexible, constantly evolving and fast-adjusting organism. Therefore, for a better understanding of the *nature of Russian information warfare* we should accentuate that the Kremlin is waging a hybrid war against the Western world on all levels through the use of disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, organised crime, political blackmail, money-laundering, espionage, energy dependence, facilitated migration, etc.²⁴ Moscow also uses economic and political pressure in an attempt to influence the Western political and economic environments. Over the last decade, or even longer, Russia has increased its aggressive rhetoric and imperialist ambitions. Finnish researcher Antti Vasara explains that, even if the majority of citizens are aware of Russia's real intentions, the systematic use of information packets may already create uncertainty and erode citizens' trust in the government and other public authorities.²⁵

But in the context of our article, we are not talking about the above-listed aspects of Russia's hybrid warfare, we are focusing only on Russia's information influence activities in 2022–2023, which are often grouped under the

ating-the-gerasimov-doctrine (accessed on 22 December 2022); Galeotti, M. 2018b. The mythical 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and the language of threat. – *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 7(2), pp. 157–161; McKew, M. 2017. The Gerasimov Doctrine. It's Russia's new chaos theory of political warfare. And it's probably being used on you. – *Politico*, September–October 2017. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538/> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

²⁴ Radin, A. 2017. *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation; Mölder, Sazonov, Chochia, Kerikmäe 2021

²⁵ Vasara, A. 2020. *Theory of Reflexive Control; Origins, Evolution and Application in the Framework of Contemporary Russian Military Strategy*. – *Finnish Defense Studies*, Vol. 22. Finnish National Defence University, p. 86. [Vasara 2020]

term ‘information war’. So, one core dimension of Russia’s hybrid warfare is Russian information activities which could be designated as Russian Global Knowledge Warfare. As Eric Shiraev and Holger Mölder correctly point out:

*Global Knowledge Warfare (GKW) – is the purposeful use and the management of knowledge in pursuit of a competitive advantage over foreign opponents. Knowledge is information that has a purpose or use and requires the awareness or a form of understanding of the subject. Knowledge warfare is about what people know, how they interpret this knowledge, and how they use it in their actions.*²⁶

3.1. Strategic narratives as one of the tools of Russian information influence activities

Strategic narratives which are the most crucial and existential tools in *Global Knowledge Warfare* are, according Mölder and Shiraev, built on effectively visualised images and can influence wide target audiences; they can influence the decision-making process of political or economic elites or shape public opinion.²⁷ One characteristic feature of Russian strategic narratives is that they are destructive. Their aim is to destroy their potential adversary and, besides the Russophone communities outside Russia, the Kremlin very often targets various populist movements and groups in Europe from left to right, etc. Interestingly, Russia claims to protect and promote worship against democracy and tries to promote the idea that Russia is protecting conservative and family values.

What are *strategic narratives*? Why they are such powerful tools of influence? The concept of strategic narratives has been actively adopted in international relations and also used in political communication.²⁸ *Strategic narratives* consider stories that exist in the collective memory of people and also other factors which frame interpretation, including political agendas and

²⁶ Shiraev, E.; Mölder, H. 2020. Global Knowledge Warfare: Using Strategic Imagination to Harness Uncertainty and Fear. – The Cipher Brief, 31 August. <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/china/global-knowledge-warfare-using-strategicimagination-to-harness-uncertainty-and-fear> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

²⁷ Mölder, H.; Shiraev, E. 2021. Global Knowledge Warfare, Strategic Imagination, Uncertainty and Fear. – Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Kerikmäe, T.; Chochia, A. (ed.). The Russian Federation in the Global Information Warfare. Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood. Cham: Springer Verlag, p. 16.

²⁸ Roselle, L.; Miskimmon, A.; O’Loughlin, B. 2013. Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order. Routledge. [Roselle, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin 2013]

ideological views.²⁹ As Roselle et al. (2021) rightly argue, our era's soft power is a *strategic narrative*. The *strategic narrative* began with a starting point similar to Nye's idea, based on an understanding of fundamental change in the international system and the question of how to influence international relations.³⁰ *Strategic narratives* are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative means by which the political elite seeks to give a meaningful significance to the past, present, and future in order to achieve political goals.³¹

Strategic narratives can affect the following areas:

- an *international system* that expresses how political actors shape perceptions of the organisation of international relations;
- *identity*, meaning how political actors want to project their identity in international relations;
- *policies*, for example the desire of political actors to influence international negotiations.³²

Thus, if political actors are able to align narratives of the international system, politics and identity with their own strategic orientations and goals, the greater the opportunity becomes for them to increase their influence in the international arena.³³ *Strategic narratives* created by Russia are aimed at various target groups. Creating narratives exploits several populist political movements as well as politicians. To this end, various strategic narratives were created that amplify or shape perceptions of the world in line with the goals of Russia.³⁴

²⁹ **Ventsel, A.; Hansson, S.; Madisson, M.-L.; Sazonov, V.** 2021. Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia's Zapad war games. – *Media War & Conflict*, Vol. 14(1), pp. 21–39.

³⁰ **Roselle, L. et al.** 2021. Strateegiline narratiiv: pehme jõu uus käsitus. – *Sõjateadlane*, Vol. 17, pp. 13–32.

³¹ **Antoniades, A. et al.** 2010. *Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives*. Global Political Economy. Centre for Global Political Economy University of Sussex Brighton, UK, p. 5.

³² **Roselle, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin** 2013.

³³ **Miskimmon, A. et al.** 2018. *Forging the World. Strategic Narratives and International Relations*. University of Michigan Press, p. 3.

³⁴ **Sazonov, V.** 2022. The Concept of Pax Russica, Russian Strategic Narratives and their Possible Impact on Populist Movements and the Russophone Community in Estonia. – *The International Scientific Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 1. <https://doi.org/10.55804/TSU-ti-1/Sazonov>.

Russia's *strategic narratives* against the West can be summarised as follows. Russia seeks to shape opinion in the West. Different strategic narratives are created to reinforce or shape perceptions of the world and policy preferences in line with the foreign policy objectives of the Kremlin. Russia has been purposely conveying its own narrative and views through a large number of different channels with the aim that at least some Western media seize them³⁵.

Russia's strategic narratives are often shaped by the potential target groups and audiences for advocacy and their interests. Target groups include various anti-establishment groups, e.g. Euroscepticism, anti-US, anti-immigration and anti-globalisation movements from both the right and left of the political spectrum.³⁶ Russia's strategic narratives are brought to target groups through public and covert methods. Russia's influence outside the post-Soviet space produces strategic narratives that amplify or shape perceptions of the world

³⁵ Vasara 2020, p. 89.

³⁶ In order to talk about the aims of Russia's information we need to explain at which audiences this Russian influence is aimed. Russia's information influence has two strands: *internal* and *external*. The *internal* strand can be described as influencing and keeping its own (Russian) target audience in the information space the Kremlin needs. The *external* strand is the information influence directed at foreign audiences which, in turn, is divided into several subspheres: Western audiences, Asian audiences, African audiences, American audiences. In this context, we are talking specifically about Ukrainian and EU/U.S. audiences, broadly Western audiences. The main aim of the Kremlin's information war against the Western world and its democratic system and values is to create fear, instability, and to divide the West. One of Russia's goals is to convince the Western audience not to support the Ukraine war effort and reduce support for Ukraine. Russian information operations were conducted in Ukraine in 2022–2023, the main aim being to disrupt civil society and thereby reduce support for the armed forces. Information operations were used to support their long-standing objectives: creating fear and weakening societal resistance to fight the aggressor; disrupting the functioning of the state; creating information noise to make it difficult to distinguish reality from fake information; undermining citizens' trust in the state's leadership. The most important thing was to ensure the psychological protection of both the population and the army in the event of information attacks (Безсонов, Д. В. 2023. Методы информационно-психологического влияния, применяемые Украинскими подразделениями информационно-психологических операций против участников СВО, их родственников и других граждан, p. 5. <https://rusexpert.ru/news/vvdim-v-ch-pktichkij-bt-i-kmdm-ktl-illyutiv-pbi-d-v-bzv-mtd-ifmci-pilgichkg-vliyaiya>; <https://booktracker.org/viewtopic.php?t=100274> (accessed on 22 December 2022); **Russia continues to look for a weak link in Ukrainian cyberspace.** – International Security and Estonia, 2023. Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 08.02.23, p. 12.) Under Bezsonov the focus of the attacks was on the morale of the soldiers, trying to show the soldiers that their sacrifice was meaningless and to incapacitate the units. At the tactical level, combined information operations were often used, synchronising psychological influence methods with simultaneous kinetic artillery fire and subsequent infantry attacks. The enemy used previously established information channels, perceived by the so-called local population as credible, to disseminate disinformation aimed at creating panic, increasing social tensions, and intimidating or discrediting local authorities and security forces (Безсонов 2023, p. 14).

and political preferences in line with Russia's foreign policy goals. Strategic narratives on the international system that Russia is spreading describe West, along with this institution, predominantly as a vanishing and diminishing force suffering from democratic values equated with weakness. Russia's narrative describes Western institutions primarily as corrupt and in need of reform, which is why Russia supports alternative formats of cooperation with the West. Ukraine is described as a failed state, Russophobic, a Nazi state and a poor periphery of the West, abandoned by their new hosts (U.S.) and facing difficulties such as economic and social decline.³⁷

3.2. Reflexive control as one of the tools of the Russian information war

Here, of course, we have to bear in mind that *strategic narratives* are not the only means of influence from Russia; there are others and it would take a lot of time to list and analyse them here, but let us mention perhaps one more and a very important one: *reflexive control*, which also illustrates the nature of the Russian information war.

As is well known, in information-psychological war *reflexive control* plays an essential role. Therefore we need to speak about *reflexive control* and the role it plays in information influence activity. What is *reflexive control*? Reflexive control can be defined as the means of communicating specially prepared information to an adversary that should be known to induce him to take the desired decisions voluntarily. Timothy Thomas highlighted that reflexive control is information and psychological effects against persons on the opposing side who are making decisions. It is “a set of measures, interconnected with respect to goal, place, and time, aimed at...forcing the enemy to reject his initial plan and accept knowingly a decision that is disadvantageous for him...”.³⁸ Annie Kowalewski highlights that

³⁷ Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V. 2020a. Kremlin Information Campaign in the Baltic states During COVID19 Pandemic Escalation of Spring. – Modern Management Review, Vol. XXV, 27(4), pp. 83–97.

³⁸ Thomas, T. 2019. Russia's Reflexive Control Theory: Manipulating an Opponent to One's Advantage. The MITRE Corporation. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1157096.pdf> (accessed on 22 December 2022) [Thomas 2019]; see also Ermak, S.; Raskin, A. 2002. Точка зрения. В сражении все способы хороши. – Armeyskiy Sbornik, № 7, p. 44.

reflexive control is a “uniquely Russian” concept based on maskirovka³⁹, an old Soviet notion in which one “conveys to an opponent specifically prepared information to incline him/her to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.”⁴⁰

In the late 1990s the theory of reflective control became more a part of psychological-social warfare. From the Russian theory of reflexive control (RC), Ionov’s principles for gaining control over the adversary can be highlighted⁴¹:

1. Visualise the opponent’s potential reaction to a situation that is to be created.
2. Keep in mind at all times that the adversary may detect action against him and take countermeasures.
3. Constantly take into account the technical level of the opponent’s forces and the intelligence capabilities which may significantly increase the risk of operational failure.
4. The methods of retaliation used must take account of the social element and the intellectual, psychological, ethical and ideological factors.

Reflexive control (RC) could be seen as reflexive “guidance” as a nonlinear and complex adaptive systems approach to the interaction between perception, influence and behaviour, with reflexive control and the aim of changing the other’s perceptions about their utility sets at its core—making (influence) the other misperceive what options they have (perception) and what their best choices are (behaviour).⁴² In other words, one can say that by modelling the adversary’s decision-making process it is possible to create a situation where

³⁹ deception

⁴⁰ **Kowalewski, A.** 2017. Disinformation and Reflexive Control: The New Cold War. – Georgetown Security Studies Review. <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2017/02/01/disinformation-and-reflexive-control-the-new-cold-war/> (accessed on 22 December 2022). For more on Russian reflexive control see **Mateski, M.** 2016. Russia, Reflexive Control, and the Subtle Art of Red Teaming. – Red Team Journal, 13 October. <http://redteamjournal.com/2016/10/reflexive-control/> (accessed on 22 December 2022); **Thomas** 2019.

⁴¹ **Thomas, T.** 2004. Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military. – The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, Vol. 17(2), p. 246.

⁴² **De Goeij, M. W. R.** 2023. Reflexive Control: Influencing Strategic Behavior. – The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters, Vol. 53 No. 4, Winter Demi-Issue 2023–24 Contemporary Strategy & Landpower, p. 98–110. <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3262&context=parameters> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

the other party to the conflict can gain an advantage if it knows the adversary's situational picture and is aware how the adversary applies it to its own doctrine to solve the problem⁴³.

The use of reflexive control was apparent in shaping the cognitive dimension on the eve and during the first weeks of the Russian military aggression (2022), using RC mechanisms of suggestion, division, deterrence and pressure. According to Soviet-originated Deep Operations Theory, Special Forces and specifically designed Operational Manoeuvre Groups had to achieve effects at the enemy's rear. In the Russian aggression against Ukraine the physical component had been augmented by other mechanisms such as reflexive control.⁴⁴ The activities were directed at altering the individual and collective knowledge, perceptions and understanding of the situation in order to create a welcoming attitude towards Russian troops and weaken support for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Throughout 2021 the Russian state sponsored media channels and local outlets to spread incorrect information about Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky and the government in Kyiv. The narratives centred on Zelensky, portraying him as Nazi, Russophobe and possibly a war criminal trying to use chemical weapons against Russian-speaking people. They also aimed to create hatred of the government in Kyiv, especially among the Russian-speaking population in the south of Ukraine.⁴⁵

4. Some examples of Russian [strategic] narratives disseminated by Russia in 2022–2023

This subchapter focuses on some examples of Russian strategic narratives disseminated by Russia and pro-Russian channels (media and social media) in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war 2022–2023. First we should note that, during the war in Ukraine which Russia launched in 2022, the Kremlin did not change its strategy much on information influence activities, except

⁴³ Vasara 2020, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Kamphuis, C. 2018. Reflexive Control: The relevance of a 50-year-old Russian theory regarding perception control. – *Militaire Spectator*, Jaargang 187, Nummer 6, p. 329. <https://militairespectator.nl/sites/default/files/teksten/bestanden/Militaire%20Spectator%206-2018%20Kamphuis.pdf> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁴⁵ De Kievit, J. 2023. Reflexive Control in the Russo-Ukraine war. – *Militaire Spectator*, Jaargang 192, Nummer 9, pp. 394–403. https://militairespectator.nl/sites/default/files/bestanden/artikelen/militaire_spectator_9_2023_de_kievit.pdf (accessed on 22 December 2022).

for some details and messages from the strategic narratives. Just as before 2022, Russia is still trying to influence the Western world and undermine Euro-Atlantic security.⁴⁶ To this end, pro-Kremlin forces have created different strategic narratives that shape world perceptions and policy preferences based on the objectives and imperialist policies of Russia. The Kremlin has recently placed a particularly strong emphasis on Russophobia and Nazism. The propaganda of the terrorist puppet republics, the People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk, consistently tries to claim that Ukraine is carrying out genocide in the Donbas and that Ukrainians are bombing kindergartens in the process. This is being spread, for example, by the Telegram group *Donbas reshayet*. Other narratives are also being spread on pro-Russian propaganda channels on Telegram, such as "Ukraine is becoming the main springboard for armed confrontation between Russia and Europe" and "Russia's denazification mission is becoming International". The same propagandist group claims that there have been British troops in the Donbas for years who are now taking part in the war on Kyiv's side. Another narrative circulated on Telegram was that 150 civilians in Mariupol were used as human shields by Ukrainian nationalists.⁴⁷

One of the main strategic narratives disseminated by Russia is that Russia's actions in Ukraine were no different from the U.S. attack on Iraq in 2003 that was created and disseminated through diplomatic activities and channels. Strategic communication was also used to try to make plausible seemingly similar causes, such as the threat of WMD⁴⁸, genocide, containment of terrorism, inadequate governance, etc. In turn, the narrative spread by Russian diplomats and the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) was amplified by Western TV channels. All the Western leaders who spoke to Putin felt the need to present summaries to the press. The messages conveyed by influence agents and 'useful idiots' were no less important.⁴⁹

We should also list some of the main topics of Russian information campaigns targeting West audiences:

⁴⁶ **Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.** 2020b. The Kremlin's strategic narratives on the Baltic states during the COVID-19 crisis. – *Kwartalnik Bellona*, Vol. 703(4), pp. 36–37.

⁴⁷ **Telegram** 2022. «Донбасс решает». <https://t.me/s/donbassr/9268> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁴⁸ Weapons of mass destruction

⁴⁹ **Brzozowski, A.** 2022. Stop calling Putin, Estonia's prime minister says. – *Euractiv*, May 16 (updated 24 May 2022). <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/interview/stop-calling-putin-estonia-s-prime-minister-says/> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

- crisis of the West, both EU and NATO structures;
- discrediting of Ukrainian refugees (creating negative images of Ukrainian refugees);
- development of the topic of energy crisis in Europe;
- the thesis “Ukraine is losing the war”;
- Ukraine is Nazi state and ruled by Nazis;
- Biological weapon in Ukraine is created by U.S.;
- Ukraine is a corrupt failed state which is ruled by two deep states – U.S. deep state and Ukrainian deep state;
- Ukrainian states are under control of Satanists: many Ukrainian soldiers and Western people are Satanists and Satanism is promoted by U.S.⁵⁰

We do not deal with all of these (strategic) narratives in our article, but we have made a selection of themes that the Russian propaganda machine has been spreading from 2022 to 2023. We chose the following strategic narratives because they seem to be the most frequently disseminated narratives which target not only the Russian domestic audience, but the Western audience as well.

4.1. Strategic narrative *Ukraine is Nazi state and ruled by Nazis*

For decades (several years before 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea) Russia has been peddling the strategic narrative of the Ukrainian government as fascist junta, the Ukrainian army and Ukrainians as fascists and Nazis, and the same narrative will be propagated in Russian channels in 2022 and 2023 as well. The following is one example of this strategic narrative which has been disseminated by, among others, TV Zvezda which is an outlet of the Russian Ministry of Defence. On 16 December 2022 TV Zvezda published an article in which Ukrainians were called “the new Nazi crusaders” (in Russian *Новые крестоносцы*) where the author poses the question “What is the difference and what do Hitler’s Nazis and Zelensky’s neo-Nazis have in common?” and answers him or herself that Ukrainian Nazism is a strange version of German Nazism. Ukrainian Nazism, according this statement,

⁵⁰ Sazonov, V.; Karin, J. 2023. Venemaa mõjutustegevus Ukraina sõjas, – Sõdur, No. 6, pp. 31–40. [Sazonov, Karin 2023]

is a movement of Untermenschen⁵¹ who are always looking for a master and complaining to him about evil neighbours and evil fate, which has deprived them of all possible benefits, begging for assistance, and asking to punish their offenders. Ukrainian Nazism is dull, bawdy, and cruel.⁵²

4.2. Strategic narrative *Ukrainians [and people from the West] are Satanists from the Satanist Church*

During the war several Russian channels claimed that there are a lot of Satanists in Ukraine; there were some in Mariupol⁵³ (the town that Russian Armed Forces destroyed), but also in other parts of Ukraine. This narrative became popular on Russian propaganda channels. For example, TV Zvezda, a propaganda channel run by the Russian Ministry of Defence, has claimed that there is a conflict in Ukraine and that it is not a war, but that this conflict is being fuelled by the U.S., U.K., Poland, Canada, the Baltic states and Germany, and that it has become a laboratory for right-wing extremist terrorism where thousands of Nazi-backed Satanists from 35 countries are preparing for a global war “for the triumph of the new world order”.⁵⁴

According to TV Zvezda, on 22 November 2022 dozens of armed men in camouflage stormed the Orthodox monastery Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra in Kyiv. Thus,

the SBU⁵⁵, the National Police and the National Guard carried out counterintelligence measures on the territory of the Lavra as part of the SBU’s systematic work to counter the explosive activities of Russian special services in Ukraine.

The law enforcers searched 850 buildings belonging to the Orthodox Church and subjected 350 residents and parishioners to

⁵¹ *Untermensch* (plural: *Untermenschen*) is a German word literally meaning “subhuman”, was used by the Nazis in Third Reich to refer to non-Aryans whom Nazis considered inferior.

⁵² **TV Zvezda** 2022. Украина. Сатана там правит бал. – TV Zvezda, 16.12.2023. <https://zvezdaweb.ru/news/202212131824-x7oAW.html> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁵³ This narrative appeared already in 2007 – see e.g. **Новый День** 2007. Донбасс: в Мариуполе сатанисты осквернили 666 могил. – РИА «Новый День», 05.04.2007. <https://newdaynews.ru/donbass/117559.html> (accessed on 22 December 2022); see later fake narratives about Satanists in Mariupol: **News.ru** 2022. РИА Новости нашли на базе «Азова» предметы языческого и сатанинского культа. – News.ru, 19.05.2022. <https://news.ru/world/na-baze-azova-v-mariupole-nashli-predmety-yazycheskogo-i-sataninskogo-kulta/> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁵⁴ **TV Zvezda** 2022.

⁵⁵ SBU is the Security Service of Ukraine

in-depth counterintelligence questioning, including polygraphs. The Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra's vicar Pavlo Lebed was included in the database of the Ukrainian nationalists website 'Peacemaker'.⁵⁶

According to the TV Zvezda narrative, on 25 November 2022 SBU officers broke down the doors of the diocesan office of the Chernivtsi-Bukovyna diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, lifted diocesan staff out of bed, and searched the St. Nicholas Cathedral. From the morning of 10 December 2022 raids and searches began at 14 sites of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the Kharkiv region. The author of this article highlighted:

If the robbers and crusaders of ancient times attacked monasteries and churches for the purpose of robbery, the current Bandera members are searching for "pro-Russian and religious subversive literature"⁵⁷

The author of the article asked: "Why do they have so much hatred for the Church of Christ, its ministers and parishioners?" And the answer was the following where the author blamed the U.S. in promoting Satanism:

In the U.S. there is officially a "Satanic temple". The first organisation, the "Church of Satan of LaVey", was established back in 1966. And here is what is remarkable: just a year after the opening of the second Satanic church in America, in 2014, the same "temple of Satan" is opened now in Ukraine, namely in Cherkasy region, in the central part of Ukraine.⁵⁸

4.3. Strategic narrative Biological weapon in Ukraine was created by the U.S.

In pro-Kremlin propaganda several conspiracy narratives were spread (by Sputnik⁵⁹ and other Russian channels⁶⁰) that the U.S. had created a programme of building bio-laboratories in Ukraine and is expanding the format of training Ukrainian biologists. Pro-Kremlin propagandists claimed

⁵⁶ TV Zvezda 2022.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Sputniknews 2023. Moscow Warns About US Biolabs in Central Asia Capable of Creating 'Race-Specific' Viruses. – Sputniknews, 23.6.2023. <https://sputniknews.in/20230623/wests-seeks-to-plunge-eurasia-into-flames-of-upheaval-warns-russian-security-chief-2639886.html> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁶⁰ Гаврилов, Ю. 2023. На Украине продолжают работать биологические лаборатории США. – Российская газета, 12.03.2023. <https://rg.ru/2023/03/12/biolaboratorii-ssha-prodolzhaiut-rabotat-na-ukraine.html>; <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/02/01/laby/> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

that this was confirmed by Igor Kirillov, head of the Radiological, Chemical and Biological Protection Unit of the Russian Armed Forces, who said:

*Despite an enforced pause due to a special military operation, the programme has now resumed. At this stage, the main tasks are the continuation of the construction of bio-laboratories in Ukraine and the expansion of the training format for Ukrainian biologists.*⁶¹

This conclusion was arrived at based on an analysis of the 20 October 2022 meeting of the U.S.-Ukraine Specialist Working Group, chaired by representatives of the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency, on plans for the implementation of the Biological Threat Reduction Program in Ukraine. According to Igor Kirillov, the facts about the military-biological activities of U.S. disclosed by the Defense Ministry of Russian Federation show that the U.S. is trying to conceal the real nature of the work. Washington changed the name of the joint biological research programme, while its real purpose is to develop components for bioweapons.⁶²

The same narrative was actively spread by Russian media outlets and social media one year later, in 2023. Like in 2022, they accuse the U.S. of developing a biological weapon. Russian propaganda claims: On 31 January 2023, the fact of “the implementation of a number of American scientific programs” was confirmed by the coordinator of the US National Security Council, John Kirby. At the same time, in his interpretation, the laboratories located in the former Soviet republic were allegedly “deactivated” and abandoned by staff in early 2022. Narratives promoted following “proof”. As a result of a special military operation, Russian specialists gained access to a number of biological facilities in Ukraine, in particular to (bio)laboratories in the following cities: Kherson, Rubezhnoye and Severodonetsk.

*Analysis confirmed the dangerous nature of the Pentagon’s experiments to assess the susceptibility of the Ukrainian population to zoonotic infections, the facts of testing pharmaceuticals on the local population and the export of biological samples to the U.S. for their possible use in offensive biological programs.*⁶³

⁶¹ **Al Mayadeen English Source** 2023. US resumes construction of biolabs in Ukraine: Russian MoD, April 7. <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/us-resumes-construction-of-biolabs-in-ukraine:-russian-mod/> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁶² **Sazonov, Karin** 2023.

⁶³ **VPK** 2023. Igor Kirillov held a briefing on the analysis of documents related to US military biological activities. – VPK Novosti, 12.12.2023. https://vpk.name/en/803837_igor-kirillov-held-a-briefing-on-the-analysis-of-documents-related-to-us-military-biological-activities.html (accessed on 22 December 2022).

The same article concludes:

*As the Ukrainian armed forces failed to make progress during the so-called counter-insurgency, we expect their activities to shift towards non-standard warfare methods, including the use of chemical and biological agents.*⁶⁴

4.4. Strategic narrative *Ukraine is selling weapons to HAMAS*

The terrorist radical Sunni Islamist group HAMAS attacked Israel and war started on 7 October 2023. This benefits Russia because the Kremlin's aim is:

- 1) to divert Western attention from Ukraine to another war of conflict, like in the HAMAS-Israel war which started in October 2022;
- 2) to force the West (including especially the U.S.) to reduce its (financial, military and humanitarian) support for Ukraine and if the West now has to support Israel in their conflict with HAMAS, the Kremlin hopes that support for Ukraine will suddenly decrease;
- 3) to increase chaos, instability, refugee flows and the threat of terrorism in the whole of the Mediterranean region.

It is worth mentioning that it was only in March 2023 that Hamas leaders visited Moscow to discuss cooperation with the Kremlin. Hamas's previous official visit to Moscow was six months earlier in the autumn of 2022 when Ismail Haniyeh and other senior HAMAS leaders met Lavrov.⁶⁵

In addition to the above, the Hamas attack also provides the Kremlin with ample material for information operations against Israel, the West and, of course, Ukraine. Ukrainian military intelligence has warned of a planned Russian information operation aimed at damaging Ukraine's image, i.e. spreading false information about Ukrainians transferring Western weapons from Ukraine to HAMAS. Allegedly, the Russian Federation has been providing Hamas with Western weapons from Ukraine and the Kremlin is preparing a flood of fake news claiming that Ukraine is selling Western weapons to various terrorists. This has even been claimed by Putin himself, that Ukraine is supporting Hamas terrorists with weapons from the West,

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ **TOI 2022.** Russia's Lavrov meets with Hamas politburo chief Haniyeh in Moscow. – The Times of Israel, 13.9.2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/russias-lavrov-meets-with-hamas-politburo-chief-haniyeh-in-moscow/> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

as claimed by a Russian propaganda channel on Telegram, for example: “Kyiv allowed weapons to leak abroad because of the country’s high level of corruption”.⁶⁶

4.5. Strategic narrative *Ukrainian has two masters— Ukrainian deep state and U.S. deep state*

Lyudmila Gundarova, a propagandist affiliated with TV Zvezda, promoted the narrative that the Ukrainian people have two masters at once: their own ‘deep state’ in Ukraine and the American ‘deep state’; and one is no better than the other.⁶⁷ According to Gundarova:

For more than 30 years, official Kyiv has demonstrated the failure of its foreign and domestic policies, in which dysfunction of power and party deadlock have become the norm. And how subjective is Ukraine’s deep state itself? The violation of the country’s constitution is just one example of interference in the country’s affairs by another deep state – the deep state of the United States. The “Revolution of Hidnosti” of 2013/14, as well as the “Orange Revolution” of 2004/05 were started by young activists from formal and informal public associations, existing on the means of non-profit organizations financed by American and European funds. And it was finished by experienced managers from nationalist extremist organizations. The young people on Maidan stood for a week or two and were already going home to celebrate Christmas, but the deep state found a use for them – redistribution of power in its favour. That’s when the first blood was shed. It is no longer a secret that the Maidan was financed by Ukrainian oligarchs with the support of the deep state USA.⁶⁸

As we see here, Ukraine is being shown as a failed state⁶⁹ ruled by two deep state systems—Ukraine’s own deep state and the American deep state—which

⁶⁶ See **Telegram channel Readovka**. https://t.me/readovkanews/67738?fbclid=IwAR2qwDdlhNr6K8miSjdq23LB6z4TbloIaVRdzuSqbe_4JCPdkn3GfbPqQ3M (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁶⁷ **Гундарова, Л.** 2023. Обратная сторона Украины. – TV Zvezda, 13.12.2023. <https://zvezdaweekly.ru/news/20231241717-4zZaY.html> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Failed state – this is the old Russian propaganda narrative that Russian and pro-Russian channels have been spreading about Ukraine for decades. Their desire is to portray Ukraine as a non-independent, non-manageable state, a country that as a project has failed in every sense of the word. See: **Українська правда** 2010. Украина – несостоявшееся недогосударство? Бомба российско-украинской дружбы от фонда Глеба Павловского. – Українська правда, 04.02.2010. https://blogs.pravda.com.ua/authors/okara/4b6a8e4d7cc97/page_5/ (accessed on 22 December 2022).

interfere in Ukraine's internal affairs and runs them as it wishes. Once again, the troops are barking up the wrong tree that Ukraine is not really a country in its own right, but a puppet of the U.S. and the West.

Another article published recently in the Russian propaganda outlet *Krymskie Izvestiya* highlights the same topic that Ukraine is a failed state and also presents reasons why Ukraine is a failed state. According to this article, the beginning of the degradation of the Ukrainian state occurred in 2004 when

an unconstitutional third round of presidential elections was scheduled and the tradition of "Maidan right" appeared, when people who came out to protest are used as a battering ram capable of sweeping away any politician. The apotheosis was the events of 2014, when the "Euromaidan" took place, after which the processes taking place in Ukraine became irreversible.⁷⁰

The same article highlights the ideas of Alexander Bedritsky (director of the Tavricheskiy Information and Analytical Center) who declares that, until that time, nationalist organisations in Ukraine had a certain place there, but they were insignificant in number—only 4–5% of the population of Ukraine. However, after 2014 nationalism became the official ideology of Ukraine and the worst thing is that children who were ten years old at the time are now fighting against Russia. According to Bedritsky, this new generation of people have become victims of the "Maidan law". Bedritsky continued to disparage Ukraine, accentuating that Ukraine falls under the definition of "failed state" by all characteristics, and this is a reason why the West is interested in Ukraine; Ukraine is only a tool against Russia. Another "expert" Aleksandr Lazarev (called in text an opposition Ukrainian politician, political scientist) added that Ukraine is a big "laundry" for the Western countries because huge sums of money are written off there from the military-industrial complex and loans, which supposedly "come" here, but in reality remain in the U.S. According to this Ukrainian political scientist Lazarev, the country of Ukraine will soon cease to be of interest to the West. Plans to transfer some territories to Poland have already been made public, while Poland is a vassal of the U.S. and cannot exist without subsidies; it is completely dependent on the U.S.

⁷⁰ Радева, Л. 2023. Украина — несостоявшееся государство, «затупившийся инструмент» против России и большая «прачечная». – Крымские известия, 29.08.2023. <https://new.crimiz.ru/rubriki/85-politika/21553-ukraina-nesostoyavsheesya-gosudarstvo-zatupivshijshysya-instrument-protiv-rossii-i-bolshaya-prachechnaya> (accessed on 22 December 2022). [Радева 2023]

“So why should we maintain two dependent states if we can unite them?!” In Lazarev’s opinion, the U.S. will give up Ukraine.⁷¹

As can be seen in this article, the author brought in the opinions of various so-called experts (obviously to make the article more credible and to give it weight), i.e. created a debate and tried to prove that Ukraine is a failed state. This narrative claiming that the Ukrainian state is a failed state and it is vassal of U.S. has appeared in thousands (if not more) of articles since 2004, especially after 2014 when Russia first attacked Ukraine.⁷²

4.6. Strategic narrative *Zelensky’s visit to Washington will not help*

In 2023 Russia’s propaganda channels began to churn out a new strategic narrative which claimed that Ukrainian President Zelensky’s visit to the United States will neither help nor save Ukraine, while Russian troops have gone on the offensive, and that the U.S. no longer has the hubris to support Ukraine or to support it sufficiently for it to withstand Russian military attacks.

As recently as December 2023, the President of Ukraine began a visit to the U.S. to lobby Congress and the U.S. government to strongly support Ukraine with military aid and financial assistance in the Russia-Ukraine war. According this narrative, Zelensky’s visit to Washington is another attempt by U.S. president Joe Biden to secure funding for Ukraine. The author of this article believes that U.S. president Joe Biden is pushing hard for additional funding for Ukraine and fiercely resisting Republican demands for tighter border security in return for their support. However, even if Kyiv is allocated several billion dollars from the U.S., it will not change the course of the war. The author is keen to point out the idea that Russian troops are advancing and strengthening, while it is much harder for the Armed Forces of Ukraine to achieve this even with the help of the United States.⁷³

⁷¹ Радева 2023.

⁷² See e.g. Барабанов, О. 2016. Украина – неудавшееся государство. – МГИМО Университет МИД России, 14.09.2016. https://mgimo.ru/about/news/experts/ukraina-neudavsheesyagodarstvo/?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com (accessed on 22 December 2022).

⁷³ Брайен, С. 2023. Деньги для Украины: не в коня корм? – Inosmi, 13.12.2023. <https://inosmi.ru/20231213/finansirovanie-267040252.html> (accessed on 22 December 2022).

4. Summary

It can be concluded that one of the main objectives of Russian information influence activities (of which one crucial part is the strategic narratives that Russia is spreading) is to cause as much damage as possible to the European Union, NATO, the United States and the whole Western world. In this way, it is seeking to create a rift between the EU and the U.S., while sowing confusion, panic, mistrust, fear and tension. The Kremlin's greatest aim in 2022–2023, as previously (before the war), is to undermine Western democracy, its institutions and values.

Russia's influence operations outside the post-Soviet space are focusing on disseminating strategic narratives that amplify or shape perceptions of the world and political preferences in line with the Kremlin's foreign policy goals. Strategic narratives about the international system spread by Russia describe the West, along with its institutions (EU, NATO), predominantly as a vanishing and diminishing force suffering from democratic values equated with weakness. Russia's narratives about NATO and the U.S., which are involved in the war in Ukraine, say that Ukraine is a Western puppet and Russia is fighting with NATO and the West.

The aim of strategic narratives about Ukraine is to create the picture that Ukraine is failed state, that the Ukrainian government are Nazi, Russophobic people, and that Ukrainian people are Satanists. This satanic narrative is more for Russia's own internal audience as it suggests a right-wing struggle against evil. It is an antagonistic narrative that Russia is good and Christianity and the West are bad, satanic, pure evil. Additionally, pro-Kremlin forces are still promoting the old narrative that Russia is helping and protecting Russian-speaking people in Ukraine. Ukraine is being shown as a failed state ruled by two deep state systems: Ukraine's own deep state and the American deep state which interferes in Ukraine's internal affairs and runs them as it wishes.

Also recently, in December 2023, Russia's propaganda channels launched a massive information campaign which claims that Ukrainian President Zelensky's visit to the United States will neither help nor save Ukraine and it is useless for several reasons:

- 1) Russian troops have gone on the offensive;
- 2) the U.S. no longer has any big interest in supporting Ukraine, in the U.S. there is no consensus to support Ukraine, or U.S. support will be not sufficient for Ukraine to withstand Russian military attacks;

- 3) among other “freshly” disseminated strategic narratives should be mentioned: Russian information influence activities try convince target audiences in the West and are aimed at damaging Ukraine’s image by spreading fake news about how Ukrainians are sending Western weapons from Ukraine to HAMAS.

Last but not least, it should be noted here that one essential element of Russian information warfare is the creation of a narrative, or ‘values-based story’, of what the war is about. Alas, all Russian attempts to create a story that blames Ukraine for starting the war have failed to ring true. As a result, there have been difficulties in gaining support and understanding abroad. Russia was more successful at home, especially in the regions. There is a belief in Western superiority, hence the narrative that Russia is at war with the West as a whole and not with Ukraine, hence the honour of fighting a worthy opponent and there being no shame in sustaining losses.⁷⁴

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⁷⁴ **European Commission** 2022. Twelve myths about Russia’s War in Ukraine exposed. – European Commission Representation in Cyprus. News article, 8 March 2023. https://cyprus.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/twelve-myths-about-russias-war-ukraine-exposed-2023-03-08_en (accessed on 22 December 2022).