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DECONSTRUCTORS of TRUTH

How the Russian opposition media covers
Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

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**HOW THE RUSSIAN OPPOSITION
MEDIA COVERS RUSSIA'S
FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE**

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Ukrainians are often asked: “Why don't you like Russian opposition media? Why do you criticize international organizations that give awards to Russian journalists? After all, they're against the war and against Putin.”

If you don't do a deep dive into what Russian opposition media outlets and opinion leaders are saying and writing, then this attitude would indeed seem odd. As the full-scale invasion began, the authors of this book closely followed the Russian liberal media environment, including the most prominent media outlets and opinion leaders. We agree that some of the work of Russian independent journalists from TV Rain, Meduza, Novaya Gazeta, and others is of high quality, and that some Russian journalists continue their work under a threat to their lives. However, some of the work produced by these media outlets is in perfect harmony with Kremlin propaganda and Russian imperialism. This is not journalism. It violates the profession's values and norms. The purpose of this book is to analyze whether Russian opposition media outlets are complying with professional standards in covering Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine or whether they are spreading propaganda narratives of the so-called “Russian world.”

The project was implemented by the Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy.

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RUSSIAN OPPOSITION MEDIA: WHOSE SIDE ARE THEY ON IN THE KREMLIN'S INFORMATION WAR?

Ukrainians are often asked: “Why don’t you see the Russian opposition as allies? Why don’t you want to join forces with them? After all, they’re against the war and against Putin.”

If you don’t do a deep dive into what Russian oppositionists are saying and writing, then this attitude, rejecting standing side by side with the Russian opposition, would indeed seem odd.

However, what happens if you immerse yourself in their content? What if we ask ourselves: How do Russian oppositionists understand being “against the war” and “against Putin”?

“Just stop the war,” they often say. However, if you simply “stop shooting,” it’s not as if peace will magically propagate throughout Ukraine, Europe, or the world. Nor will the world order, which Russia has so egregiously violated, suddenly be restored.

One of Russia’s most prominent opposition figures, Alexei Navalny, wrote a post about “stopping the war” at the very beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In it, he stated the following:

“One shot from a Javelin costs \$230,000. For the same money, we would get 200 million ad views in different formats and provide at least 300,000 link clicks or at least 8 million views on a video with the truth about what is happening in Ukraine.”

Was this an “anti-war” post? It was! Would such actions (buying ads aimed at Russians instead of providing weapons for Ukrainians to defend themselves in the face of the Russian onslaught) bring peace and justice? No.

Navalny’s example, like that of many other anti-Kremlin Russians, proves that they have a twisted worldview. It’s their unconscious, unatoned, and therefore still uncorrected Russian imperial, colonial perception of the world around them. Unfortunately, this unites not only Putin’s supporters, but also many of his opponents.

Russian colonialism is also felt in the so-called liberal media environment. We agree that some of the work of Russian independent journalists from TV Rain, Meduza, Novaya Gazeta, etc., can be of a high quality. Some Russian media professionals work under a constant threat to their lives and safety. However, some of the work produced by these media outlets is in perfect harmony with Kremlin propaganda and Russian imperialism. This is not journalism. It violates the profession’s values and norms.

The purpose of this book is to identify these cases. Clarifying them was important because few in the West want to hear about the violations of standards by Russian independent journalism, even though these violations exist.

As the full-scale invasion began, the authors of this book closely followed the Russian liberal media environment, including the most prominent media outlets and opinion leaders. We have highlighted several characteristics that make it impossible for Russian opposition journalism to be of high enough quality to either lead its audiences to condemn the war unequivocally, or to facilitate a democratization process for Russia.

- Russian independent journalism is sending conflicting messages about the fate of the Russian-occupied territories in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, etc. The question is whether the occupied territories should be returned. A clear “yes” is not always heard. Some Russian media outlets justify the occupation and the war of aggression, on air and in print. These territories end up being defined in different ways, for example, as “attached” or “new.” This proves that no independent Russian media has been able to develop editorial guidelines on this fundamental issue. Why is it imperative for Russian opposition journalism to convey a message of total condemnation of Russia’s aggressive policies? Because otherwise, the aggressor country will never become a democracy. It will never respect human rights. This includes the rights of its own citizens and journalists.
- Similarly, Russian independent journalism has no clear stance on the Russian occupiers — the military that invaded the territory of a sovereign state. They are often pitied and excused on air. The occupiers say they have no other means of making money and providing for their families, so getting paid to enlist and go to war was the only possible solution. Can being broke be an excuse for a murderer to murder? Would rapists be able to justify their actions by saying that women reject them? Meanwhile, when it comes to the Russians fighting alongside Ukraine, who have declared their intention to liberate their homeland from Putin’s dictatorship by armed means, “opposition” journalists are unequivocal in their stance. They usually label these Russian fighters “Ukrainian saboteurs.” So, the question is: do Russian liberal journalists want Russia liberated from Putin or not?
- As for the name of this war itself, we often hear the term “Putin’s war” from Russian journalists. This is another misleading message suggesting that Russian “opposition” journalists either don’t see, or don’t want to see, the popular Russian support for Putin and this war. This blindness distances them from being able to help build a “beautiful Russia of the future” if that is indeed their goal.
- There is a striking absence of any narrative about the illegitimacy of Putin himself or his regime in general. Russian independent journalists, on the contrary, often talk about

the illegitimacy of other leaders, including repeating the same Kremlin narrative about the illegitimacy of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy. There are enough facts that would allow us to consider Putin to be an illegitimate, self-proclaimed president, besides being a war criminal and an enemy of Russia. On the contrary, we found plenty of examples of Russian independent journalism legitimizing him. They give him a great deal of coverage, including coverage of staged events that he and his supporters are involved in. They also legitimize the various fake entities (such as the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk “People’s Republics”) that have emerged since the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Western politicians and opinion leaders are adamant that Russia must be weakened so that it can no longer fight. But why stop at hard power? The international Western institutions must also consider the soft power actions that can be achieved using the media. It’s a sad fact that Russian independent journalism, with the characteristics mentioned above, cannot be such a force. Why not help to change it? Russian independent media outlets are provided with resources, broadcasts, and awards — often without anyone actually being familiar with their content. They are simply rewarded for declaring that they are “against Putin.” That doesn’t help anybody move forward; it maintains the status quo. An essential area of soft power is not working. We must remember that it was soft power — the broadcasts of Radio Liberty, the BBC, and the Voice of America — on the territory of the former USSR that was one of the forces that contributed to its disintegration. Those who believe that modern Russian liberal journalism in its current state can be a similar driving force are sorely mistaken.

We must critically examine the content of Russian independent journalism if we want it to exist in reality and not just in the statements of those behind it. This is the only way to ensure that it contributes to the democratization of Russia. We see violations both at the level of their narratives and professional journalistic standards. The team of the Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy constantly records these violations. It is unfortunate but true that even well-known Russian liberal media outlets are not always capable of simple fact-checking. They, like the Russian propaganda media, simply present different versions of events, leaving their audiences confused and left to make up their own minds about what might have really happened:

- Did the mass killings of civilians by the Russian military in Bucha really happen, or were they staged? Did the Russians do it, or was it Britain, NATO, or the United States?
- October 7 in Israel — was it staged or not? Was it Hamas or American Special Forces?

-
- Was the Kakhovka HPP dam blown up by Russia or Ukraine, or did it just collapse by itself?
 - Are the rocket and drone shelling of hospitals and residential buildings in Ukraine, which are killing civilians, being done by the Russian military, the result of Ukraine's efforts to defend itself, or are both sides to blame?

The so-called “liberal” Russian media, which has a responsibility to inform its audience truthfully, objectively, and thoroughly about what is happening in Russia, Ukraine, and the world, presents these all as questions, promoting ambiguity. This is not information. It is part of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign being joined by Russian independent media that claim to oppose Putin, the dictatorship, and the war.

It is imperative that the public be made aware of the numerous instances in which Russian independent media violate professional standards and promote Kremlin narratives. These so-called “liberal” Russian media outlets must be held accountable, just like any other professional media around the world that have made these kinds of mistakes and ignored journalistic values.

We must not tolerate such mistakes. We must not ignore them. Otherwise, we will never achieve our goal: the collapse of entrenched dictatorships that feed on our indifference. These wars will continue forever.

PART 1

RUSSIAN INDEPENDENT MASS MEDIA – OVERVIEW

TV RAIN: DOES STATING THAT THEY OPPOSE THE WAR AUTOMATICALLY MAKE A RUSSIAN MEDIA OUTLET ‘GOOD’?

The Russian TV channel TV Rain, like many other media outlets that claim to be in opposition to the Kremlin, began operating abroad after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. First in Latvia, and then in the Netherlands, where the National Council of Latvia canceled their license due to a threat to national security.¹ However, is TV Rain a quality Russian media outlet, or is it a threat to the security of European countries because it broadcasts Kremlin narratives?

A few days before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, I taught a class on modern Russian propaganda for Ukrainian journalism students. I told them they should evaluate the TV Rain broadcast alongside the output of Russia Today, Sputnik, and other pro-Kremlin media outlets.

They were surprised:

“This is an opposition Russian media outlet. They are against Putin, so why is it propaganda?”

Well, let’s figure it out. We watched a “pre-war” broadcast² dated February 19, 2022. At that time, everyone was talking about the possible invasion of the Russian army into Ukraine. On the program “Zdes i Seichas” (“Here and Now”), my students and I saw an example of typical Russian “oppositional journalism.”

“The self-proclaimed Republics are reporting relentless shelling from the Ukrainian side throughout the day,” stated the presenter. He then proceeded to list the areas that the Ukrainian troops had allegedly shelled: Donetsk, Luhansk, and Horlivka. He summed it up with the phrase: *“Kyiv denies involvement in the escalation.”*

Then, the following was broadcast on air:

“It is extremely challenging to verify these messages. There is much information from different sources and on different Telegram channels. It’s very difficult to distinguish between fake news and real, true news. We will need to figure this out later. We must, therefore, see the full picture of the day based on the facts. These are the messages that are coming in. We’re showing them to you. Nobody claims that these shellings actually took place. Therefore, it is still necessary to verify this information,” they stated on air. That is why journalists are here: to check the facts and to distinguish fake messages from genuine news! And find out what really happened. Otherwise, such journalism is pointless.

The argument in defense of Russian liberal media is that they must adapt to the realities of the dictatorship because they are threatened with imprisonment or death. Perhaps moving to Western countries allowed the channel to feel freer and speak the truth? Or did the full-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine finally open journalists' eyes to their own government, country and society?

To find out, I watched twenty-two episodes of "Zdes i Seichas," which the channel's journalists call "the main news show of the day." I watched episodes from August 22-26, September 5-9, 2022, and June 3-14, 2024.

There's no doubt that TV Rain covers some important and interesting stories. Journalists discussed the harrowing experiences of Russian captivity endured by Ukrainian women, participated in a marathon in support of political prisoners, produced stories about Ukrainian refugees in Europe, child volunteers, and more. Another big plus is the regular participation of speakers from Ukraine, including experts, journalists, and officials. As a result, the narrative of "the parties blame each other, but we cannot quickly verify the information during the war" does not occur frequently on air. For example, when discussing the Russian missile attack on Chaplyne in the Dnipropetrovsk region in 2022, they included a Ukrainian journalist in the broadcast. She was present at the scene and provided a comprehensive account of what she saw.

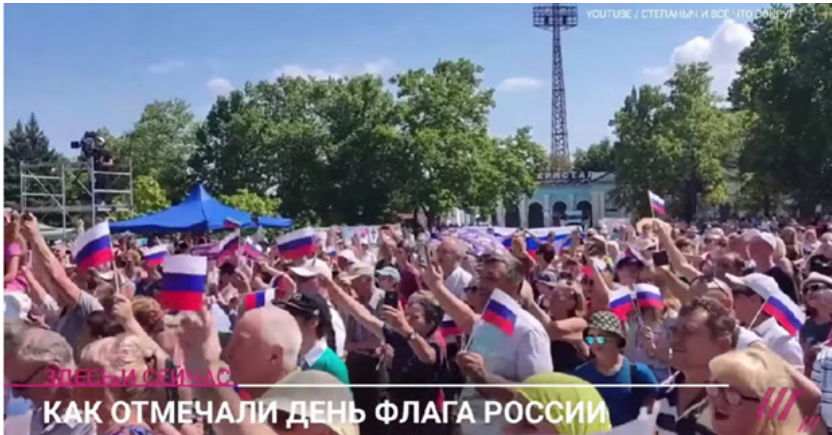
The journalists at TV Rain consistently oppose the war and Putin's government. They condemn the war crimes of the Russian army. But is this all that a liberal Russian TV channel can do to provide quality information about events in Ukraine?

From minor to major violations, it's clear that some TV Rain employees are still influenced by the so-called "Russkiy Mir,"* whether knowingly or unknowingly. Some are afraid to challenge a guest who is spreading disinformation about the Russian military in Bucha. Some justify Russian athletes who support aggression against Ukraine. Some make news stories about the happy welcome of invaders in occupied territories. Some broadcast anti-Ukrainian statements by Kremlin officials as if they are normal.

However, I will start with two stories that definitively show that TV Rain has failed to live up to its claims of being a genuinely independent and high-quality channel.

In the broadcast dated August 22, 2022, the TV Rain journalists decided to focus on the celebration of Russia's National Flag Day in the occupied Ukrainian territories. It's a baffling decision, given the channel's consistent stance against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The video sequence was also strange. They showed videos borrowed from pro-Kremlin Telegram channels. These included raising the Russian flag over Kherson and "celebrations" in parts of the Zaporizhzhia region, Melitopol, and Mariupol. They showed people with Russian flags and clips of concerts, including those with Russian artists. The audience was informed

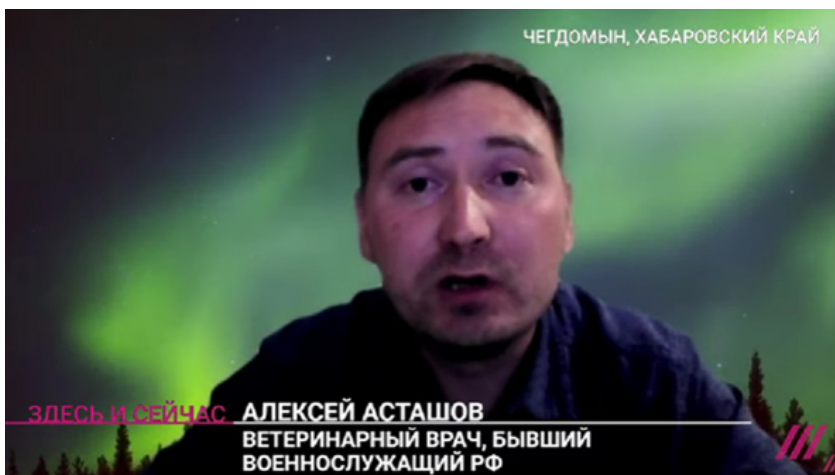
* "Russkiy mir" — from Russian, it means both "Russian peace" and "Russian world" — is a Russian quasi-ideology aimed at the expansion of influence abroad and uniting the countries considered by the Kremlin as its backyard. Using as a basis the use of the Russian language, and in the perception of Moscow and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), a common history. <https://uacrisis.org/en/russkiy-mir-as-the-kremlin-s-quasi-ideology>



Above: TV Rain's broadcast on the celebration of Russian Flag Day (Video still)

that Russian flags were being distributed on the streets of the conquered cities. The journalist commented, *“From the photos and videos, it’s clear that there were people willing to take them, but not in large numbers.”* They also used the direct speech of a collaborator, who proudly stated that they had been eagerly awaiting this day for a long time, *“particularly after the 2014 coup”* when *“the Nazis seized power [in Kyiv].”*

Next, they showed the celebration of the National Flag Day in Russia. They made it clear that state employees were forced by their bosses to attend the concert. They also discussed the detention of activists who were against the regime’s celebrations. These reports side by side present a curious picture — while there are some people in Russia that do protest against the regime, the Ukrainians in the occupied territories are made to look like they are genuinely siding with Russia?! The journalists failed to consider the representativeness of the image taken from propagandistic Russian sources. Their coverage served to confirm the Kremlin’s assertion that “Russia is here forever.”



Above: Aleksey Astashov, a former soldier of the Russian 64th Brigade, interviewed on TV Rain (Video still)

On August 25, 2022, TV Rain aired a former soldier Aleksei Astashov, of the infamous Russian 64th brigade from Khabarovsk Krai. A brigade that participated in the atrocities in Bucha in March 2022. In his introduction, presenter Tikhon Dzyadko stated that the man had informed other Russian journalists that he was ashamed of serving in this brigade. The journalists were clearly hoping to hear remorse on air, but it turned out to be an embarrassing failure. Astashov did not admit to being guilty of anything, supported Putin and Russian aggression, and claimed that his words about shame were twisted. He also outright denied that there were any Russian troops in Bucha.

"I still don't understand why Russian troops did not enter Ukraine together with Crimea back in 2014. Large civilian and military casualties on both sides could have been avoided. These are people, after all. These are Slavs, brothers. People suffered for eight years from injustice and lawlessness in Donbas. This is a fact," Astashov stated at the beginning of the interview.

His statement is false. Crimea is Ukraine. Russian troops invaded the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014. There is plenty of evidence of their participation in battles at the time. He is also repeating the propaganda cliché about "bombing Donbas for eight years." However, the presenter did not comment or object in any way. Instead, he asked the following question: *"Yes, and you signed the contract, as far as I understand, after watching Putin's address, didn't you? And went to Ukraine."* The guest followed up by saying, *"I was certain there were no Russian soldiers in Bucha, and I remain certain of it."*

Dzyadko: "Well, there weren't any of them there? Who occupied Bucha then?"

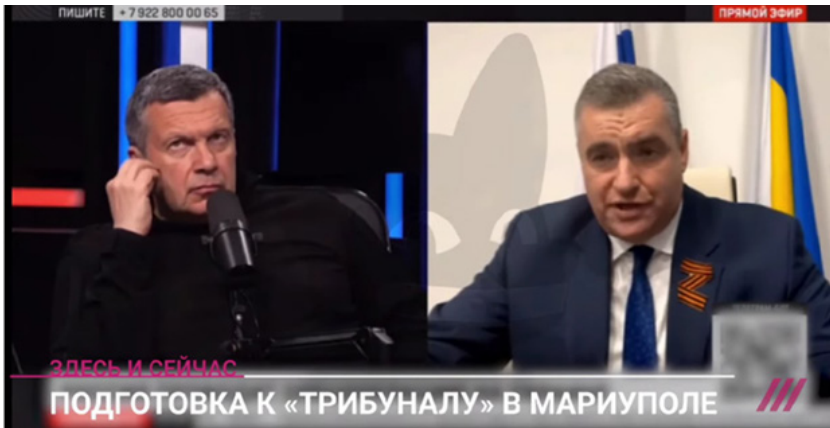
Astashov: "I can't discuss any facts about their presence in Bucha. I don't know a single person who has been there."

Dzyadko: "Wait, but in the interview with Novaya Gazeta Europe, you said, and I quote: 'I am ashamed to be a soldier in this brigade.' You didn't say that phrase?"

Astashov: "I said it. I was angry. I said it a little differently. I am sometimes ashamed. I stand by my stance. I said it. I was angry. I am proud to have served in this brigade, only thanks to the fact that there were wonderful people who, unfortunately, died. I have the utmost respect for the people currently serving there."

Tikhon Dzyadko did not comment on the denial of the presence of Russian troops in Bucha any further. At the end of the interview, he decided to find out what Astashov thought about killing civilians. He got a confession from Astashov: *"Such cases happen. I'm afraid the Armed Forces of Ukraine are not unique in hurting civilians. I am afraid this happens in the context of a special operation and hostilities. It happens, I think, in any other conflict."*

The presenter failed to recognize a blatant manipulation: Astashov's whataboutism regarding the Ukrainian army. Then the conversation continued:



Above: Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov (left) interviewing Leonid Slutsky (right) as covered by TV Rain (Video still)

Dzyadko: “But would you agree that if there were no special military operation, this would not have happened either, right? Your 64th brigade would not be there.”

Astashov: “We carried out special tasks on the denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine because it was necessary. There was still oppression of the Russian-speaking population, who were forced to “razmovlyat” (meaning speak Ukrainian). They imposed some of their ideological principles, Ukrainianness. Either way, this is a fact. And it had to end.”

Dzyadko: “I understood you. In conclusion, I will say that this is not a fact. That’s all.”

The host made no rebuttals or objections during the interview with a guest spreading misinformation. The only short comment he made was at the end. After the interview, the editors did not comment either.

Airing such conversations plays into the hands of those who want to form a skeptical attitude in the audience and foster distrust of the facts of Russia’s war crimes. It occurring on TV Rain is specifically targeted, as its audience consists primarily of individuals critical of the current Russian regime. Thus, TV Rain becomes a convenient and effective tool for these purposes.

Phobias regarding Ukraine and the West

From time to time, TV Rain broadcasts Ukrainian-phobic statements, as well as various fake news about life in Western countries, without any comments or debunking.

In a news story covering Germany’s support for Ukraine on August 26, 2022, quotes from Belarusian ruler Aleksandr Lukashenko and TV propagandist Vladimir Solovyov are cited for no apparent reason. Both contained hate speech directed at Chancellor Olaf Scholz and/or towards Ukraine. “Banderite bastard,” “little Führer.” It is perplexing why journalists choose to focus on these statements. They provided a lengthy excerpt from Solovyov’s program, in which he resorted to a multitude of insults and called for an attack on Germany. Host Anna Mongait offered

her take on this with the words of one of the contributors: *“It’s a circus in a madhouse.”* It’s clear that for TV Rain journalists, Solovyov’s Ukrainophobia and his threats to the West are just entertainment. This is not something that requires condemnation or any more serious reaction.

The broadcast also addressed the statement made by Russian filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov regarding the Ukrainian language. In the video, he stated that the Ukrainian language is a manifestation of Russophobia. He went on to say that the phrases he heard in Ukrainian are, in fact, expressions of hatred for Russia. Therefore, the director concluded that teaching in the Ukrainian language is a “catastrophe.” The host did not comment on Mikhalkov’s words. Instead, she stated, *“The alleged attempt to support Russian speakers in Ukraine led to a conscious rejection of the Russian language even in those regions of the country and by those people who always spoke Russian before that.”* However, Mikhalkov did not support any Russian speakers. He directly expressed his hatred for the Ukrainian language!

The broadcast from August 23, 2022, featured a story about the “tribunal” that the occupying authorities of Donetsk were going to organize against the defenders of Mariupol. This included hate speech that was heard on air without any reaction, which is entirely unacceptable. The Ukrainian military was called “Nazi criminals” and “non-humans in human form.” State Duma Deputy Slutsky demanded the execution of Azov fighters for their “terrible crimes.” Again, the presenters and journalists did not offer any commentary on these statements.

Similar cases occurred almost two years later as well.

In a daytime broadcast from June 7, 2024, they stated that Russian occupiers from Dagestan had recorded a video message stating that there was no water in their native village. In a video aired by journalists, the Russians made several statements, including: *“We are fighting on the SMO’s battlefields, defending our Motherland from fascists.”*

They also broadcast a steady stream of disinformation from Russian propagandists about Western countries.

In a broadcast dated June 5, 2024, they inexplicably included a lengthy quote from Deputy Liudmila Stebenkova. She stated that in the 90s, the United States began *“forcibly introducing drugs into the country [Russia] under the guise of fighting AIDS.”* The following day, the Russian fascist Aleksandr Dugin said, *“The West once conquered all of humanity. It is our task now to liberate ourselves and the West.”*

In the same broadcast, we hear Russian presenter Margarita Simonyan state the following:

“In Canada, a man was imprisoned simply for being unable to call his daughter a daughter. Because she was convinced that she is not a daughter, but a son... In Germany, gay porn is shown to three-year-old children in kindergartens.” Only at this point did presenter Ekaterina Kotrikadze refute the misinformation. The rest of the propaganda narratives were left unchallenged.

TV Rain’s editorial policy is clear: there will be no reaction to hate speech or attempt to avoid it when it comes to Ukraine. Furthermore, there is no need to refute the various invented horrors about life in Western countries. Perhaps journalists assume all viewers are aware of the



Above: Ekaterina Kotrikadze (left) talks to Mykhailo Podolyak (right) about the Russian “referendum” in the occupied Kherson region of Ukraine on TV Rain (Video still)

falsehood of these statements? We can be confident that if this were the case, we would not have witnessed such a surge in support for Putin and his decision to invade Ukraine, not to mention the overtly hostile attitudes towards Western countries that we have seen in Russia.

‘In Perm, Kazan, Crimea, and other cities...’

TV Rain is against war and Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, at the level of the rhetorics used, some nuances call into question the integrity of this position.

Most of the time, they recognize Crimea as a part of Ukraine occupied by Russians. However, the September 6, 2022, broadcast refers to searches conducted by the Federal Security Service “all over Russia.” The text says: *“All over the world, including in Russia, students in Perm, Kazan, Crimea, and other cities were called Columbineers. In Russia, the ‘Columbine’ movement was labeled a terrorist organization.”* So subtly, Crimea is recognized as part of Russia.

Regarding pseudo-referendums planned by the occupiers to legitimize the seizure of Ukrainian lands, they are sometimes called “referendums” in skepticism quotation marks, and sometimes without. The broadcast dated September 7, 2022, had a title without quotation marks, but the video description had them.

There is also confusion with the so-called “Republics” that the Russians and their henchmen proclaimed in the occupied parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. They are sometimes called “self-proclaimed Republics,” and sometimes simply “Republics.”

In a broadcast dated September 5, 2022, Petro Andryushchenko, advisor to the mayor of Mariupol, commented on the warning Iryna Vereshchuk, the Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine, had made regarding criminal liability for participation in the so-called “referendum.” They asked him: *“What should men do who are forcibly mobilized, people*

that are being caught like rabid dogs?” Andryushchenko demanded to know precisely where. “In the DPR, LPR,” Anna Mongait stated. However, it is essential to note that both the “DPR” and “LPR” are not territories, but rather terrorist organizations³. Referring to them as territories would be a mistake, as it would legitimize them. When guests on the show use the names of pseudo-republics or the abbreviations “DPR” and “LPR” similarly, they are not clarified or corrected.

The names of the positions held by the self-appointed representatives of the occupation authorities are the source of the majority of the problems: the “mayor of the city of Donetsk” (August 23), the “governor of Sevastopol” (August 22), and the “head of the Kirovsky district of Donetsk” (September 5). In fact, there have been no legitimate mayoral elections in Donetsk since 2010. Oleksandr Lukyanchenko is still officially the mayor. Alexey Kulemzin, who they were referring to, is not an elected mayor of Donetsk. He is an appointed head of the Russian occupation administration of Donetsk and, therefore, cannot be considered a lawful mayor. This also applies to other representatives appointed by the occupiers.

Let’s not forget “Special Military Operation,” the term they use in Russia to describe their war of aggression against Ukraine. We have found multiple instances of this term or the corresponding abbreviation, “SMO” (Special Military Operation), being used in 2022 without quotation marks or any clarifications.⁴ In 2024, there were also cases of the abbreviation “SMO” being used by channel host Anna Mongait. She used the expression “SMO participants” on air without any explanation on June 7, 2024. On June 4, 2024, journalist Polina Milushkova, while talking about the case against the Russian blogger Elena Blinovskaya, first used the expression “the so-called SMO” (for some reason, not Russia’s war against Ukraine). She then refused to elaborate on the terminology altogether.

On the part of journalists, it would be professional in such cases to emphasize that the Russian authorities use this propaganda term to cover a real full-scale war of aggression against another state.

‘Parties are making contradictory statements’

TV Rain journalists also covered the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant throughout the specified period of 2022. In their coverage of the IAEA report on September 6, they addressed the damage at the station, including damaged tanks, roofs of buildings, and the educational complex. They then stated that information about shelling was coming in. They noted that the parties (representatives of the Russian-appointed administration and the Ukrainian city authorities) were, as usual, blaming each other. The mayor of Enerhodar then gave an interview, simply stating that there had been shellings and that the situation was extremely dangerous, given that the ZNPP is Europe’s largest nuclear power plant.

Curiously, journalists have chosen only to focus on specifically the damage to the station as described in the IAEA report. They failed to mention that the same report also describes the presence of Russian troops at the station. Furthermore, it states that the Ukrainian personnel at the station are under constant pressure from the Russian military,

which could eventually lead to errors during the station's operation. They also failed to mention that Ukraine is insisting on the demilitarization of the territory around the ZNPP with the help of the IAEA. The viewer must be aware of these facts to understand what is happening at the station. However, TV Rain's priority is to present the usual narrative: the parties are blaming each other, and it is impossible to determine who is responsible for the shelling.

Their story about the situation at the ZNPP on August 25 is much better. The report clearly states that Russian military equipment was found 60 meters from the station, citing British intelligence data. Furthermore, they also pointed out a contradiction: the Russians detained the station employees who reported on the Russian military equipment. However, the occupiers had previously denied the presence of the said military equipment.

In 2024, they made baseless claims that Ukraine was shelling the peaceful people of Donbas. For some reason, they used only one data point as a basis for this: official statements from Russian sources.

"On June 7, the Ministry of Emergency Situations [Russia] reported the collapse of the entrance of an apartment building in Luhansk as a result of a missile attack by the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The Russian Defense Ministry has confirmed that air defenses shot down four of the five ATACMS missiles launched. The Ukrainian side has yet to comment on the reports about the shelling of occupied Luhansk," they stated in a broadcast on June 8. To determine who exactly carried out the strike, it is necessary to verify the information. Furthermore, the appearance of ATACMS missiles in the fake reports of the Russian Ministry of Defense is no coincidence. They want to show that the Ukrainians are allegedly using Western weapons in these purported attacks. However, before helping their own Ministry of Defense spread messages that could justify war, journalists must ask themselves a few questions. What evidence is there other than the statements of sources who constantly compromise themselves with lies? If there is no other evidence, why air it?

'The war started by Putin...'

TV Rain uses a great deal of anti-war rhetoric. Some broadcasts in 2022 ended with anti-war poems by modern Russian poets. However, they interpret the reasons for this war extremely narrowly: Putin is responsible for everything. Some broadcasts began like this: today is such and such a day of the war, which *"Vladimir Putin unleashed and is waging against Ukraine"* (September 6). Or *"the war, declared and organized by Vladimir Putin"* (August 23), or *"the war, started by Putin"* (August 25).

This approach clearly aligns with a common stance among Russian opposition politicians. Navalny's supporters, Lyubov Sobol and Ruslan Shaveddinov, also state on TV Rain broadcasts: "Putin's terrible crimes," "Putin's crimes," "crimes of Putin's army in Bucha."

In 2024, when it is already clear that the majority of Russian society approves of the war in Ukraine, this interpretation persists. "It is necessary to reduce Putin's ability to wage a long-term bloody war," stated Kirill Martynov, guest editor of Novaya Gazeta Europe, in a broadcast on June 14.

It is clear that in these cases, both journalists and politicians are pointing the finger solely at Putin.⁵ They refuse to report the “inconvenient” truth.

Russian society unequivocally supports this war.⁶ Putin is not the only one who is guilty of crimes. The Russian military and civilians also share the blame. Take, for example, the teachers who came to sow the seeds of the “Russian world” in the occupied territories of Ukraine. The question of the responsibility of the Russian people, or at least the part of it that supported Putin and the aggression against Ukraine, is being ignored.

They’re also trying to justify Russian athletes who approve of the full-scale Russian invasion. In the morning broadcast on June 14, hosts Anna Mongait and Mikhail Polenov were outraged that Ukrainians are demanding the exclusion of Russian wrestler Dinara Kudayeva from the Olympic Games. She published a post on her Instagram, attaching a photo of her father, who went to fight in Ukraine, and wrote, “You are my hero.” Both hosts expressed sympathy for the athlete, stating that she used the term “hero” in a general sense, and not that he is a “hero” because he went to kill Ukrainians. However, this is mere conjecture on the part of the hosts, as there is no factual evidence to support it. If we are going to look for evidence, the statements made by the president of the Russian Wrestling Federation, Mikhail Mamiashvili, make it clear that this organization “fully supports the policy of the President of Russia.” The wrestler in question has never made any statements condemning the war or the Russian occupiers who invaded someone else’s land. If she did, there would be no suspicions about her. The same applies to her athlete friends who liked and commented on her post (the Ukrainian side also demanded that they be suspended).

The American Pulitzer Prize winner, journalist Walter Lippmann, wrote: *“The quality of the news about modern society is an index of its social organization. The better the institutions, the more all interests concerned are formally represented, the more issues are disentangled, the more objective criteria are introduced, the more perfectly an affair can be presented as news.”* A society’s nature is reflected in the nature of the news. TV Rain is clearly focused on Putin’s society and sees no alternative to it. In modern Russia, it is common practice to label Ukrainians as Nazis, to scare the average viewer with images of Azov fighters, and to deny Ukraine’s right to its own territory. From time to time, TV Rain also airs such pro-Kremlin narratives.

It is unacceptable for democratic countries where human rights and freedoms are sacred to accept what is the norm in modern Russia. It would probably be easier for Russian journalists to understand why they shouldn’t broadcast outright Ukrainophobia and pro-Kremlin narratives about Ukraine if they tried to put themselves in the shoes of people who are mocked or outright bullied on air because of their nationality. Let’s imagine that, in Ukraine or any other country, there was a program where the host shouted about Russians as “Putin’s bastards.” Or if he said that under no circumstances should textbooks be published in the Russian language in Russia because that would be Nazism. It is essential for journalists to be able to put themselves in another person’s place and empathize with their experiences.

In addition to TV Rain's journalists' coverage of events related to Ukraine, I want to highlight one more sad point.

The channel's programs conspicuously avoid discussing the future of Russia, even a dream of building a civilized state that will be able to live according to the norms of international law, respecting the rights and freedoms of both its citizens and citizens of other countries. This crucial topic is utterly absent from the discussion. Some broadcasts simply repeat the agenda set by Russian federal channels. TV Rain's broadcasts began with lengthy news stories about the "St. Petersburg International Economic Forum" for three days in a row, from June 5 to June 7, 2024. Despite the occasional jibe at this event during broadcasts, the fact that these stories are placed at the beginning and that they quote Putin and Russian propagandists demonstrates that TV Rain journalists are not fully able to break away from the Kremlin's information menu.

This is also confirmed by the constant quoting of Ukrainophobic statements, the repetition of "horror stories" about life in Western countries, and the spread of news bites such as "Syutkin removed the word 'Kyiv' from his song." Quality journalism is essential for a quality democracy. It's time for the journalists of TV Rain and other Russian liberal media outlets to finally take up this important point. Provided, of course, that they believe that Russia has a future that is not bloody or totalitarian.

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IS MEDUZA BROADCASTING RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES?

"Ukraine betrayed the residents of Donbas," "the West will replace Zelenskyy in the first half of the next year," "peaceful residents suffer from the shelling by the Armed Forces of Ukraine," "the leadership of Ukraine... staged a well-known provocation in Bucha," "the drama theater in Mariupol was blown up from the inside." These messages are occasionally published by Meduza, which positions itself as an international publication released in Russian and English and based in Latvia. It's considered by many in the world, as well as in some parts of Ukraine, to be trustworthy and independent from the Kremlin

This publication calls the war a war, condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine in most of its articles, and conducts journalistic investigations with disappointing results for the Kremlin. However, Kremlin narratives are allowed to appear freely in Meduza articles. They do not entertain more obviously absurd narratives about, for example, biolaboratories,¹ where Ukraine is supposedly preparing bioweapons. However, the editorial office does frequently present the claims made by the Kremlin propaganda machine as credible versions of events, and sometimes as facts, thus enabling Russia to justify its war crimes. Sometimes, the authors of the publication themselves add fuel to the fire, for example, by saying that the residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Ukraine are "second-class people," or claiming that it is "impossible to quickly check" who is firing missiles at civilian targets in Ukraine.

We analyzed the content of the Russian-language Meduza for six weeks to examine how it spreads anti-war content interspersed with Kremlin narratives. We conducted our analysis from July 1 to 21, 2022, and June 10 to 30, 2024. We identified pro-Russian narratives and grouped them by topic.

Which is it: Facts or 'versions'?

From the perspective of Russian propaganda, facts are juxtaposed with "alternative versions" that persuade the audience that "not everything is so clear-cut."² In the propagandistic reality of the Russian federal media, messages that contradict each other coexist harmoniously. For example:

- Russia destroyed Western weapons warehouses with accurate missile strikes on the port in Odesa.
- Ukrainians bartered for missiles with Russians and then fired at themselves.
- There were no missile attacks. This was all staged by the "Kyiv regime."

It's evident that these conflicting reports can't all be true. Some of them are undoubtedly lies. The Russians justify spreading such lies by presenting a "point of view" or a "version" without any attempt to verify it. A media outlet independent of the Kremlin must debunk fake news and establish what actually happened. Unfortunately, however, Meduza exists within the paradigm of Kremlin propaganda. The photos of the war in Ukraine published by the outlet daily make this abundantly clear. Take this, for example:



Above: Meduza published a photo with the following caption: "Children on the staircase of a house in Nova Kakhovka. TASS and RIA sources report that a market, a hospital, and residential buildings in the city were damaged as a result of shelling by the Ukrainian Armed Forces"

The photo was taken by a photographer for the Russian state news agency TASS, which is entirely under the control of the Russian authorities. What are the chances that the photo is not staged, and it is really Ukrainian children who are hiding from the shelling of the Ukrainian army? The caption to the photo references another state propaganda outlet, RIA Novosti, which claims that the Ukrainian army damaged "a market, a hospital and residential buildings." The Ukrainian military did shell Nova Kakhovka in July 2022, but the targets were ammunition depots. The description suggests that the Ukrainian army strikes at civilian targets.

The next photo seems to represent both sides. However, the statements of the opposing sides cannot be true simultaneously — they are mutually exclusive. Meduza washes its hands of such cases and leaves it to readers to decide who to believe.

It is important to note that they do not offer readers any facts; instead, they offer "versions." A Russian report on the shelling of the "workshops of the factory where rockets were produced" and a report from Ukrainian official sources that residential buildings and schools were damaged during the Russian shelling are presented as equally trustworthy.



Above: Meduza published a photo with the following caption: “Ukrainian military inspect a sinkhole formed as a result of a Russian missile strike. On July 15, Russian troops shelled Dnipro with missiles, killing 3 people and wounding 15. According to the version from the Russian side, the target was the workshops of the plant where missiles were produced. According to Ukraine, residential buildings, as well as a school and a college were damaged”

Let’s imagine that residents of Russia or Russian emigrants are trying to understand what is happening in Ukraine by reading Meduza. They will conclude that “both sides are equally guilty because both kill peaceful people.” This makes the Russian attack on Ukraine and the war crimes of the Russian army — like shelling shopping centers, universities, hospitals, and residential buildings — look more casual and less horrific.

Verifying information during wartime is undeniably challenging, particularly in a war zone or occupied territories. However, journalists must not limit their reporting to simply presenting some “versions of the two sides of the conflict.” They must also consider that one of the sides is an aggressor and invader on foreign soil, as well as a champion of propaganda and lies.

Right: Meduza’s article

Headline: “The Ukrainian authorities intend to seek the imposition of sanctions against relatives of Russians involved in the war”

Highlighted text: “In times of war, one should be especially careful about information disseminated by official representatives of the conflicting parties”

Власти Украины намерены добиваться введения санкций в отношении родственников россиян, участвующих в войне

23:42, 19 июля 2022 - Источник: [Новое время](#)

Украина будет добиваться, чтобы под санкции попали родственники россиян, участвующих в войне. Об этом заявил в интервью «Новому времени» глава Офиса президента Украины Андрей Ермак.

Я хочу, чтобы сегодня каждый солдат, ступивший на нашу землю, его родственники, его дети, его семья тоже были в списках на санкции. Они должны знать, что если ты пришел убивать украинцев, твои дети не должны ехать учиться в цивилизованные страны.

Ермак признал, что добиться введения таких ограничительных мер «тяжело с юридической точки зрения». «Но мы работаем над тем, чтобы семьи этих солдат даже не могли уехать отдыхать в Турцию. Сегодня это еще сложно, но в будущем мы точно этого добьемся», — подчеркнул он.

Во время войны нужно особенно осторожно относиться к информации, которую распространяют официальные представители сторон конфликта.

There's an example from 2024. In a photo selection dated June 13, 2024, Meduza uses photos from the same propaganda publication, TASS, to show how the temporarily occupied territories celebrate... Russia Day! They present the photographs together with images of the Ukrainian military in the Kherson and Donetsk regions, military medics in the south of Ukraine, and harvesting in the Russian-occupied parts of the Kherson region.

What does it all look like in the end? Like this: look how diverse Ukraine is: there are those who fight, but also those who love Russia, celebrate an important Russian holiday, and grow grain for Russia.

Meduza also uses this approach in some news items, in addition to photo selections. For example, they inform us that Ukraine is demanding that the relatives of Russian occupiers be sanctioned.

The text quotes Andriy Yermak, Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine. Right below it, they warn that one should be careful with the information disseminated by the official representatives of the parties to the conflict.

The story is about the Ukrainian authorities' intentions, as stated by their official representative. At the same time, he acknowledges that achieving this goal would be challenging. What exactly should readers doubt here?

The same warning accompanied the news of the Ukrainian troops shelling a position of Russian occupiers in Kherson in July 2022, the attack on the ammunition warehouse in Nova Kakhovka, and the statements by leaders of the terrorist organization "Luhansk People's Republic" about the alleged capture of Siversk. The warning was also displayed alongside statements from the UK Ministry of Defense, despite the UK not being a party to the conflict. In June 2024, Meduza marked all statements from the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine about the course of hostilities in the same way.

A warning that information should be treated cautiously during the war seems essential and would encourage critical thinking. However, when it is added to verifiable or unquestionable facts or statements, it encourages readers not to believe anything or anyone. It becomes easy to feed "versions" about Ukrainians shooting at themselves to people who don't believe in the existence of facts. That's what Meduza is doing. They're blurring the truth, just like Russian propaganda has been doing for decades. And they're avoiding their responsibility for fact-checking.

'If only they didn't shoot' and 'We want to kill': The voices of the victims and the voices of the executioners

Meduza journalists work in both the free and occupied territories of Ukraine. In July 2022, the media outlet published conversations with residents of the newly occupied Mariupol and long-occupied Donetsk. What do they tell us?

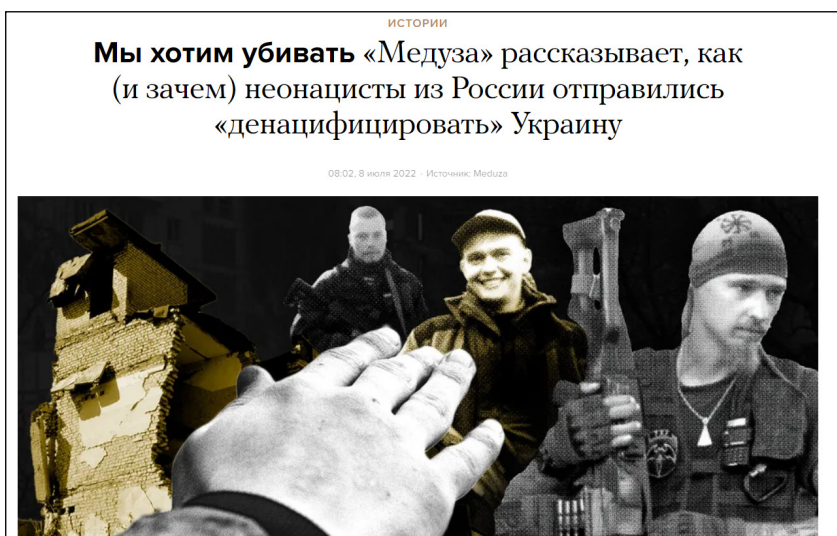
First and foremost, they have come to terms with the occupation. In an article titled "'If such a war happens again, we will either leave or die; there is no third option.'" Russia announced the capture of Mariupol

at the end of May. This is how the city that's been almost destroyed lives now — Meduza,” one of Mariupol’s residents states: *“The decision was made for us by those in power. We are simply adapting to new conditions. We want to live peacefully, work, and raise children.”* Another interviewee adds: *“I do care which government it is, but now I don’t care who will be in Mariupol — as long as they don’t shoot.”*

Another article, titled “‘What is the point in thinking about who is pulling the trigger?’ Prior to the Russian invasion, hostilities in Donbas had effectively ceased. Now, Donetsk is under constant fire. This is what its residents are saying,” is broadcasting a similar message about the residents of Donetsk.

“We realized that people in Ukraine are tiered. And if you live in the occupied territory, you are the second tier,” stated one of the residents. *“The residents of Donbas were betrayed by both Ukraine and Russia,”* said the second interlocutor of the publication. *“There’s no point in thinking about who’s pulling the trigger when everyone’s hands are covered in blood,”* she added.

Once again, Meduza remains within the paradigm of Kremlin propaganda, according to which the story of a participant in the event is also “one of the truths,” because propagandists don’t believe in objective truth. If someone in Donetsk says that Ukraine “betrayed” the residents of the region, then that is one version of the truth. There are undoubtedly people in the occupied territories who think this way. There are also those who think otherwise or have no position at all but are just trying to survive. However, in almost every article, the Russian journalists of Meduza spread sentiments about “Ukraine’s betrayal of the residents of Donbas,” “if only there were no war,” as if this were a typical position of the residents of the occupied territories. This also affects how they are perceived globally and in the free part of Ukraine.



Above: Meduza’s article containing hate speech, titled: “‘We want to kill.’ Meduza tells how (and why) neo-Nazis from Russia went to ‘denazify’ Ukraine”

Meduza didn't just report on the victims. They also published the stories of the occupiers. In July 2022, they published two articles about mercenaries from Russian private military companies and Russian neo-Nazis fighting in Ukraine. Meduza poses essential questions:

How are these people recruited into the Russian PMCs, who is behind it, etc? However, they immediately quote the invaders who justify the war or express their views with hate speech (which, again, is prohibited by professional standards of journalism).

"When you kill a person, you feel the thrill of the hunt. If you haven't been hunting, you should try it. It's interesting." states one of the protagonists. Another interviewee in the same article calls people to "beat Ukrainian-Bolshevik scum" and "kill Ukrainians." The publication doesn't just inform us about these calls to action. It interviews the occupier, giving him a platform to justify his views and talk about the "mission of the Russian people in the world" and other nonsense. There is no pushback. There is no critical commentary on what is being said. It is important to write about neo-Nazis fighting in the Russian army, which is allegedly engaged in the "denazification" of Ukraine. However, at the same time, if the publication has any quality, it should not become a platform for Russian neo-Nazi propaganda.

Legitimization of the pseudo-republics

The "Donetsk People's Republic" and the "Luhansk People's Republic" are organizations that exist in the parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions occupied by Russia in 2014-2015. The Russian authorities consider them to be states. They also claim that these "states" territories are the entire territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, respectively. Meduza consistently refers to these self-proclaimed "republics" or



Above: Meduza published a photo with the following caption: "Consequences of the shelling of Alchevsk in the self-proclaimed LPR. The authorities of the unrecognized republic said that the city was shelled on July 16 by the AFU with an American HIMARS multiple rocket launcher; a trolleybus depot was destroyed, several residential buildings were damaged, and at least two residents were killed"

encloses the word “republic” in quotation marks, though it occasionally omits the quotation marks entirely. Furthermore, as we have already seen, the leaders of these organizations are given the floor as “official” representatives of the government, which they are not. The publication refers to the manipulative statements made by representatives of the “DPR” and “LPR” regarding the alleged Ukrainian shelling of hospitals, schools, kindergartens, etc. This makes it seem as though these people are equal participants in political processes, even though they are only heads of fictitious occupation authorities appointed by Russia. Their words are presented as trustworthy. For example, the caption under the photo of the Alchevsk shelling, taken from TASS, only presented the version of the representatives of the so-called “LPR.”

Meduza announced that the “LPR” will allegedly “liberate” certain territories soon. Collaborators from the Kherson region confirm that Ukrainian shelling damaged a hospital. The most cynical thing was that they published the “version” of the so-called “head of the investigative department of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the self-proclaimed DPR” that the drama theater in Mariupol was destroyed by an explosion coming from the inside.

At the same time, the headline is not focused on refuting these statements. Instead, it is focused on the number of victims announced

В ДНР заявили, что драмтеатр в Мариуполе был «взорван изнутри», а при разборе его завалов «обнаружены 14 тел». Украина ранее сообщала о 300 погибших

10:47, 19 июля 2022 · Источник: [РИА Новости](#)

Начальник следственного управления генеральной прокуратуры самопровозглашенной ДНР Алексей Кудурбенко заявил РИА Новости, что Драматический театр в Мариуполе был взорван изнутри, а при разборе его завалов нашли останки 14 погибших.

«При проведении следственных действий, осмотра здания драмтеатра Мариуполя нами обнаружены 14 тел. Других останков не обнаружено. В связи с чем говорить о том, что там погибли 300 человек, является надуманным тезисом и фейком», — заявил Кудурбенко, добавив, что разбор завалов и осмотр помещений театра завершен.

По его словам, следствие пришло к выводу, что драмтеатр был взорван не в результате авиаудара, а из-за детонации «безоболочного взрывного устройства», заложенного внутри здания. «При разборе завалов не было обнаружено ни одного поражающего элемента, ни одной части или элемента авиабомбы либо каких-либо других боеприпасов», — утверждает представитель прокуратуры ДНР.

В материалах уголовного дела, по его словам, имеются свидетельские показания о том, что за несколько дней до взрыва неизвестные люди в военной форме занесли в театр какие-то ящики. «Мы предполагаем, что, возможно, именно эти ящики и детонировали», — заявил Кудурбенко.

Во время войны не всегда возможно проверить информацию, которую распространяют представители конфликтующих сторон.

Above: Meduza’s article titled: “The DPR said the Mariupol drama theater had been ‘blown up from within’ and ‘14 bodies were found’ when the rubble was removed. Ukraine previously reported 300 dead”

by the Ukrainian side. The text presents the lies of the “chief of the DPR” in a rambling manner, with citations. The news piece concludes with a backstory presented in list form. The first item on the list presents two “versions.” The first “version” uses interesting wording regarding Ukraine: *“The Ukrainian authorities have called what happened a Russian airstrike.”* Second “version” — a statement from the Ministry of Defense of Russia has stated that the soldiers of the “Azov” regiment planted mines and blew up a theater with civilians. Again, there are two “truths” here; you can choose to believe either. The comments on what actually happened from OSCE and Amnesty International were also quoted: Russia dropped aerial bombs on the theater.

However, in this context, these statements also look like merely another “version.”

The same approach has been used since 2024 to legitimize the so-called “D/LPR.” For example, when reporting on the “shelling of Donetsk,” they identify “the city administration of Donetsk, which is under the control of the DPR,” and “the head of the Donetsk administration” as the sources. But we are talking about illegal entities and officials illegally installed by Russia!

The same is true of Crimea. In 2024, the so-called “Governor” of Sevastopol, which the Russians are temporarily occupying, is quoted as saying that shelters will be built in the city. Meduza refers to him as “the Russian Governor of Sevastopol.” That is, there are some Russian officials, and then there are Ukrainian ones. The editorial office has no intention of specifying which officials are legal and which are not and are, in fact, violating international law.

The text dated June 12 simply refers to Ravozyaev as “governor of Sevastopol.” In the June 23 article about the use of American weapons in Crimea, there is the following statement: *“The ban does not apply to territories that the United States does not recognize as Russian, for example, Crimea.”* Is it only the USA that does not recognize Crimea as Russian? Again, does international law mean nothing to Meduza?

Dependence on the Russian official discourse

The Meduza editors urge readers to treat information from official sources of states involved in the conflict with caution. However, they do not practice what they preach when it comes to statements by Russian politicians and war criminals. The Meduza editors present the lies of the Russians, the conclusions of Western experts, and the statements of officials of the European Union and the Ukrainian authorities as equal points of view.

For example, look at the announcement of the “destruction” of the HIMARS rocket launcher systems. In July 2022, Russia regularly claimed that it had destroyed another launcher. Ukraine and the West immediately denied this, and there was no evidence to support the claim. There is no reason to spread this claim, but Meduza has a different approach.

Meduza published two unconfirmed statements from the Russian Ministry of Defense about the alleged destruction of the HIMARS systems.

Минобороны РФ утверждает, что уничтожило в Украине ракетную систему залпового огня HIMARS — третью с начала месяца

14:24, 17 июля 2022 - Источник: [Министерство обороны РФ](#)

Российские военные уничтожили ракетную систему залпового огня HIMARS в Донецкой области Украины, утверждает министерство обороны РФ.

В сообщении Минобороны сказано, что возле города [Покровск](#) «высокоточным оружием наземного базирования уничтожены пусковая установка и транспортно-заряжающая машина реактивной системы залпового огня HIMARS производства США».

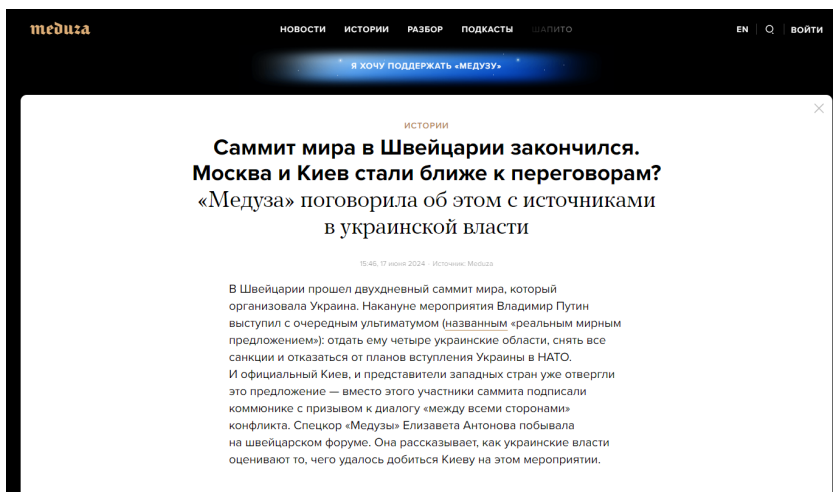
Above: Meduza's article titled: "The Russian Defense Ministry claims to have destroyed a HIMARS multiple launch rocket system in Ukraine — the third since the beginning of the month"

The first was on July 6, 2022, and the second was on July 17, 2022. The texts are structured identically. First, there is a statement from the Ministry of Defense of Russia about the destruction of the HIMARS multiple rocket launcher in Ukraine. Then, the editors state that this information cannot be verified. Then, the backstory references information on HIMARS and a quote from Putin that supplying Ukraine with MLRS "doesn't change anything." Meduza quoted this statement of the Russian president four times during July 2022. Meanwhile, both Ukrainian and foreign sources have repeatedly written that the use of HIMARS has had a significant impact on the course of the war, forcing the Russians to change the logistics of supplying their troops to a much more complicated system. However, these facts, unlike Putin's quote, did not make it into the news piece about the "destruction of the HIMARS system."

Meduza publishes statements from Russian politicians using the same template. Sometimes, they are not balanced by Ukrainian or other points of view, and sometimes, Russia's position is given much more space than the reactions from Ukraine or the world community.

In 2024, Meduza's dependency on broadcasting Russia's official statements was repeatedly seen in its coverage of the Peace Summit in Switzerland on June 15-16. In each article, the media outlet paid attention to which countries did not attend the summit, as well as Putin's "peace proposals," which he announced in a carefully timed move before the summit.

For example, turn to an article on June 17 titled, "The peace summit in Switzerland has concluded. Are Moscow and Kyiv closer to negotiations?" The article begins by stating that Ukraine organized the summit and that it took place. However, the second sentence goes on to describe Putin's "peace proposals" in great detail. It does not mention the results that were achieved or the number of countries that signed on. It also states that more than 160 countries and international organizations were invited, but "only (!) a hundred" came. As if a hundred representatives — is somehow small.



Above: Meduza's article titled: "The Summit on Peace in Switzerland is over. Have Moscow and Kyiv gotten closer to negotiations?"

On the same day, Putin's press secretary, Peskov, published a statement saying the summit's effectiveness was "zero." This quote was placed in the headline to clarify its importance to the audience.

The text for June 15 is the same: the first sentence states that the summit is taking place in Switzerland, and the second is that "some influential countries that maintain relations with Russia have refused to participate in the event."

In an article dated June 16, which was also dedicated to the summit, the Russian Ambassador to Canada was quoted regarding Justin Trudeau's salute "Glory to Ukraine!":

"Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov accused Trudeau of disrespecting the memory of Canadian sons and daughters who fought as part of the anti-Hitler coalition. In Russia, greetings 'Glory to Ukraine! — Glory to the heroes!' are declared to be Nazi and are banned."

Why does Meduza include this quote in the story about the Peace Summit in Switzerland? To emphasize that there are Nazis in Ukraine and Russia is fighting them? And are the representatives of Western countries, particularly Canada, ignoring it? A classic Kremlin approach!

It is crucial to highlight that Meduza frequently cites Putin and other Kremlin officials, including their misleading statements, without providing any commentary or context. In June 2024, there were several such articles. One of them was titled, "'Why should we be afraid, isn't it better to go to the end?' After his trips to the DPRK and Vietnam, Putin spoke again about the war in Ukraine (and predicted Zelenskyy's resignation)." The text included the following words: *"The West will replace Zelenskyy in the first half of next year."* The Kremlin's narrative about the Ukrainian government, which it claims is a puppet of the West, was repeated without comment.

The same is true of the text titled "As soon as Ukraine begins the withdrawal of troops, there will be an immediate cease-fire order." Putin's

speech before the conference in Switzerland. A brief retelling.” In addition to accusing NATO and the “Kyiv regime” of “launching a full-scale war,” it notes that Russia withdrew troops from the Kyiv region in 2022 to “stop the bloodshed.” But “the next day, the Ukrainian leadership ... staged a well-known provocation in Bucha... This was done on the instructions of Western curators.”

The editors have not commented. Should we believe this? They repeat the same fake news in another article: “Putin: Russia did not plan to storm Kyiv, it was an operation ‘to force the Ukrainian regime to make peace.’” The editors have not commented — again.

During the specified period in June 2024, they also included the text of the director of the Russian FSB, who accused Ukraine and NATO’s special services of “*recruiting migrants to carry out terrorist attacks in Russia.*” The Russian edition considered this quote so vital that it placed it in the headline.

Furthermore, several texts reiterated the Kremlin’s accusation that Ukraine orchestrated the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall, accompanied by denials from the Ukrainian side. Again, why are they repeating this? Do they want readers to remember this Kremlin “version,” which is baseless?

While having an opportunity to be a genuinely independent media outlet, the Latvian Meduza still depends on Russian official discourse. It gives much more importance to what is said in the Kremlin and highlights the Kremlin’s position and misinformation about Bucha, Zelenskyy’s legitimacy, etc.

The media outlet also publishes complete nonsense from the world of Russian propaganda, such as a clip of an actor dressed up as Zelenskyy capitulating. Meanwhile, the statements of official sources are not verified. Instead, they are labeled “it’s difficult or impossible to verify.” Sometimes, they don’t provide any comment, even when publishing outright lies or denials of Russian war crimes. As a result, liberal audiences receive the same narratives of Russian propaganda as the audiences of Russian state media outlets, only packaged slightly “better.”

Is true independent and high-quality Russian journalism possible? — The case of Meduza

Russia has long been gradually renouncing human rights and freedoms, particularly freedom of speech and free and quality journalism. The Russian mass media, which claimed to be independent, made increasingly more concessions to the regime. This did not save most of them from closure or emigration, but at the same time, they imperceptibly found themselves in the same paradigm as Russian propagandists. They also seemed to have forgotten how to distinguish a fact from a “version.”

Devotion to the facts is the essence of journalism. In situations where many parties are interested in confusing a journalist and using them for propaganda and disinformation, or hiding the truth from them, facts are especially critical. A journalist should do everything to get closer to the truth. The leading American journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel

wrote a lot about this in their book entitled “The Elements of Journalism”: “‘Journalistic truth’ is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Then journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, valid for now, subject to further investigation.”

Instead, Meduza journalists limit themselves to gathering information — not even facts, but statements and versions. They report that these claims and versions are “difficult or impossible” to verify, but whether they even tried is unclear.

Being outside of Russia, Meduza journalists have access to all possible global resources and can communicate with experts, activists, and politicians without fear of reprisals from the Russian authorities. However, that does not prevent them from presenting the statements of Putin, Lavrov, Shoigu, and other Russian politicians as if this is an “official version of the truth.” In this way, they — wittingly or unwittingly — are helping war criminals to justify their crimes. From the perspective of the liberal audience, Russian aggression is perceived as “a war where both sides are guilty.”

If Russian journalists, finding themselves outside of Russia, can overcome the hypnosis of the Russian post-truth, start looking for and reporting the truth, and stop calling lies and manipulations “versions,” then maybe independent and high-quality Russian journalism has a chance. If they do, Russians may have an opportunity for a future in a truly democratic state.

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NO ONE LEFT BEHIND: A ‘GOOD’ RUSSIAN MEDIA OUTLET, MEDIAZONA, IS COVERTLY PROMOTING KREMLIN PROPAGANDA

The Russian opposition project, Mediazona, positions itself as an independent media outlet that is “against the war.” Like other “liberal” or “good” Russian media outlets, this publication is blocked in the Russian Federation. However, does this mean that the content offered by Mediazona is of a high quality?

Some Russian media outlets, despite claiming to condemn the war and Putin, published pro-Kremlin narratives, and even encouraged their audiences to help Russian mobilized soldiers. Media experts have recorded all of this as evidence. So, just because a Russian media outlet declares an anti-war position, it does not always mean that it will provide truthful information about the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and will not manipulate its audiences to serve the Kremlin's interests.

We analyzed Mediazona's coverage of the war in more detail to determine whether it meets the professional standards of journalism and condemns the war.

The general conclusions are as follows: the content of this media outlet regarding the full-scale invasion is not of a high quality. First and foremost, the editorial office never shows a clear position. It fails to clearly identify the aggressor and the victim. The “anti-war position” is expressed in the fact that Mediazona admits that there is indeed a war in Ukraine, not a “special military operation,” and that people are suffering from aggression. However, they always add the caveat that it's happening “on both sides.”

This “anti-war” media outlet is playing the fool when faced with a direct question — who unleashed the bloodshed, and who should be held responsible for massive war crimes? The articles' protagonists argue that “it's not only Putin who is to blame, but all world leaders,” “all ordinary people are suffering,” “there are wars everywhere because the world has gone mad,” and so on. This publication's favorite narrative is that Russians are Putin's hostages.

It is unlikely that an average reader would suspect that the opposition outlet Mediazona is promoting Kremlin narratives. All messages that would expose this (as was the case with TV Rain) are expressed by Mediazona's interlocutors, while the statements by the editorial office itself are incredibly neutral and dry.

Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the authors of this publication are reluctant to acknowledge the truth. In their pursuit of euphemisms, they exhibit a striking resemblance to classic Russian propaganda outlets. For example, we have observed that the war crimes of the Russian Federation in the Mediazona articles are deliberately obscured under vague and general phrases, such as “tragedy,” “humanitarian catastrophe,” “ecological catastrophe,” etc. Ukrainian territories temporarily occupied by Russia are often not appropriately marked, which makes their status unclear to the readers.

Furthermore, our research will separately focus on Mediazona’s attempts to victim-wash the Russian people. They are attempting to present the Russian people not as the aggressor, but as the sufferer. This media outlet even views the Z-volunteers, who knowingly take up arms and bring death to another country, as victims of war because they are also dying. The relatives of the invaders also deserve sympathy. They did not expect the occupation of a neighboring country to take so long, and they did not expect to bury their husband or brother. We must also sympathize with those who fled the mobilization (even in cars labeled with the letter “Z”), as they were forced to leave their homeland for an indefinite period of time.

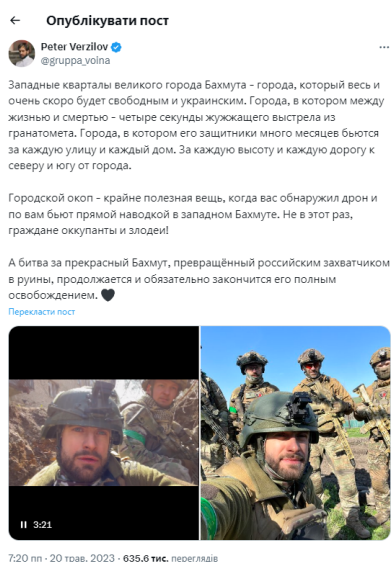
Mediazona’s format and background

It would be easy to blame the Mediazona authors’ mistakes on a lack of terminological expertise. However, we’re talking about specialists who have been working with court cases for many years and perfectly understand the importance of correct wording.

Mediazona has been at the forefront of investigating the lawlessness in the Russian judicial process and penitentiary system since its inception in 2014. The project was born out of a significant legal scandal involving two members of the punk band Pussy Riot, Maria Alekhina and Nadya Tolokonnikova. They organized a punk prayer in a Russian church, and the result was a loud, public uproar. As a result of this action, they were sentenced to a year and a half in a Russian prison. After their release, these victims of the regime were invited on trips abroad, where they fundraised. They used the funds collected during these business trips to create the Mediazona publication and the non-governmental organization Zona Prava.

Alla Konstantinova’s investigation into the rape of women and children by Russian soldiers in occupied Ukrainian territories is one of the articles in this media outlet that really deserves attention. The journalist even received¹ the European Press Prize for this article. The editorial office is also closely monitoring the fate of Russian activists who have suffered for their anti-war stance.

However, Mediazona’s content is primarily comprised of press releases, reports from official institutions, and front-line summaries from both sides. This format also allows the media to give the floor to the press services of the FSB, the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, the administration of the President of Russia, and so on — all on a daily basis. They also regularly quote pro-government publications such as Zvezda, TASS, and RIA NOVOSTI, as well as Russian “military journalists.”



Above:
Verzilov's
X (ex-Twitter)
post

This so-called “journalism of facts” is nothing more than a smokescreen, creating an even playing field for executioners and their victims. It leaves the average reader in the dark about who is telling the truth.

Mediazona had the exclusive opportunity to publish quality articles from the frontlines. One of its founders and former publisher, Petr Verzilov, was in Bakhmut during the intense fighting. However, these reports were primarily published on Verzilov’s social media accounts.

In September 2023, in an interview with Yury Dud, Petr Verzilov announced that he had joined the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. As a result, his name was removed from the Mediazona website entirely. He made sure to write a post² about his resignation to put an end to any doubt about the publication’s impartiality.

«Well done, of course, on Verzilov's part, but I'll have to unsubscribe from Mediazona now, because I don't read state propaganda news agencies,» commented³ Russian oppositionist Yaroslav Conway on Verzilov’s resignation, underscoring that without Verzilov’s voice, Mediazona is just another Russian state media propaganda outlet.

Mediazona’s lexicon as a mirror of imperial policies

Our analysis of Mediazona’s vocabulary revealed a deliberate distortion of the truth of the war through the use of incorrect terminology and euphemisms.

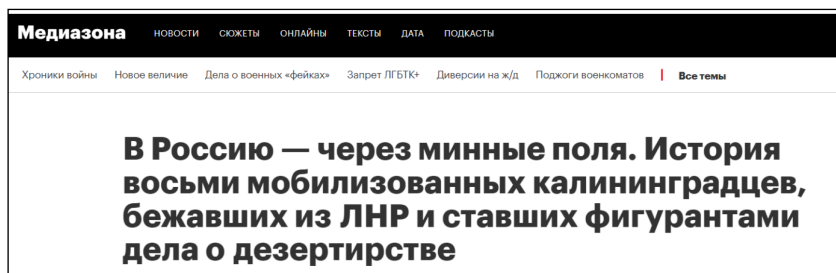
The website’s “War in Ukraine” section⁴ title is a clear example of this.

Researchers of the information space⁵ have repeatedly stated that the expressions “war in Ukraine,” “special operation,” and “crisis in Ukraine” are used by propagandists of the Russian Federation to obfuscate the reality on the ground. Such wording is a deliberate attempt to shift the emphasis and make it seem as if the war in Ukraine started on its own. It is imperative that we use expressions such as “Russian-Ukrainian war” (the first word, “Russian,” indicates that it was Russia that attacked), “Russian invasion of Ukraine,” “Russian war in Ukraine,” etc.

Mediazona uses the term “War in Ukraine” as both a section title and a regular feature in their articles. The failure of Mediazona’s authors to correctly label the Ukrainian territories temporarily occupied by Russia raises serious questions. The Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine are always mentioned as “the so-called ‘DPR’ and ‘LPR.’” However, in this case as well, quotation marks or clarifying characteristics such as “self-proclaimed” or “temporarily occupied” are not always present.

The situation with the temporarily occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea is essentially the same. Whenever Mediazona’s journalists add a clarifying characteristic, it’s never a “temporarily occupied” territory, but “annexed.”

“The only country that calls Crimea and Sevastopol ‘annexed’ is the Russian Federation. The entire international community uses the wording ‘temporarily occupied territories’ for both the peninsula and the Donbas. It is also allowed to use the term ‘attempted annexation’ in relation to Crimea, but not ‘annexation.’ This is extremely important for us as well. This emphasizes the relevant obligations of the Russian Federation under international humanitarian law,” said Ihor Yaremenko, Deputy Minister for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, as quoted by Detector Media⁶.



Above: Mediazona’s article titled: “To Russia — through minefields. The story of eight mobilized Kaliningrad residents who escaped from the LPR and became defendants in a desertion case”

It is also noteworthy that the word “military journalist” is not always used with quotation marks by Mediazona concerning Russians who report on the war. This could equate Z-propagandists to professional journalists in the eyes of an inexperienced reader. For example, ardent supporters of the war, propagandists Yuriy Kotenok, Aleksandr Kots, and Boris Rozhyn are called military journalists and military analysts⁷. The Ukrainophobe Andrey Karaulov is presented as a journalist⁸ and TV presenter⁹. The propagandist Daria Dugina, who advocated the genocide of the Ukrainian people, was presented as a “publicist.”¹⁰

Voices of the Russian world

The traditional Kremlin propaganda narrative, “one people, one history,” as interpreted by liberal Mediazona, is nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt to portray war as a shared tragedy, with both Ukrainians and Russians suffering equally.

The “Texts” section talks about the victims of the “war in Ukraine” through a storytelling format. Here we see the tragedies of people¹¹ who suffered from the Russian troops, and a sad confession from a militant of the PMC Wagner¹², and the pitiful stories of the relatives¹³ of the Russian mobilized soldiers. All of them — both the murderers and the victims — have their own truth, according to Mediazona.

This publication does not make the same mistakes as another “opposition” media, TV Rain, whose employees prompted a scandal¹⁴ by declaring that they were worried about the fate of Russian conscripts. All the phrases about feeling sorry for Putin’s invaders are quoted from the protagonists of the articles, not from the staff of the publication itself. Here, for example, is how the widows of those who were mobilized talk

about their “boys”¹⁵: *“After Makiivka, the boys gathered the others there, on the ruins, with their bare hands in sacks for eight days,”* says Inna Usachova. *“Contused themselves, with a damaged psyche. A finger, an ear, a nose — they put the pieces into bags. Would they need some rehabilitation after that? No, they were immediately thrown to the front lines in that condition, without anything.”*

A Wagner PMC fighter justifies his participation in war crimes with... saving people: *“Just as you kill some people, you save other people. You do not allow peaceful people to be killed and cities and monuments to be destroyed. You simply do not allow it to be done. Yes, it’s because you’re killing other people,”* says the occupier.¹⁶

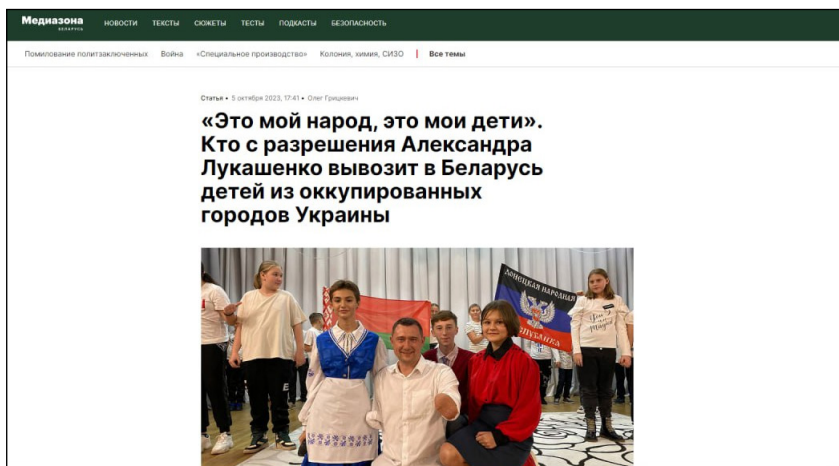
The constant protagonists of this publication are Russian oppositionists, who are, of course, also “victims.” For example, political prisoner Ilya Yashin emphasizes¹⁷ that this is “Putin’s war.”

“I appeal to Western politicians from the pages of the world’s media, repeating a simple idea over and over again: the Russian people are Putin’s hostages, it is wrong to divide the responsibility for a crime between the terrorist and his hostage. There is no need to punish ordinary people for the crimes committed by the Kremlin junta,” Yashin urges.

The next “sufferers” are Russian oligarchs. Billionaire Andrey Melnichenko¹⁸ regrets that *“Russia’s war in Ukraine made him an ‘exile.’ Because of the sanctions, he was forced to leave his villa in the Swiss city of St. Moritz and move to the UAE, where he became a citizen in 2021.”*

When asked if Melnichenko *“feels any guilt for the fact that a full-scale war was started,”* he answered, *“I absolutely do not believe that I am personally responsible for the tragedies that have taken place.”*

Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska also uses the same rhetoric, stating¹⁹ that the war must be stopped “on both sides.” The billionaire is clearly annoyed by the sanctions: *“The belief that the sanctions will stop [the war — MZ] would lead to regime change or somehow bring us closer to ending the conflict... No. We need another solution.”*



Above: Mediazona’s article titled: “These are my people, these are my children. Who is taking children from the occupied cities of Ukraine to Belarus with Aleksandr Lukashenko’s permission?”

The most cynical example is an article on Mediazona's subsidiary website — Mediazona Belarus. In an article covering the fact that Belarus helped Russia kidnap Ukrainian children, we are told that we must also consider the perspective of the kidnappers, since we are “one people.”

It is clear that all the “voices of the Russian world” are speaking with one voice on the subject of “common suffering.” Meanwhile, not a single media representative, oppositionist, or oligarch has the courage to mention the studies that show²⁰ that the vast majority of Russians support the war started by the Russian dictator! The Levada Center,²¹ a Russian research organization, has reached precisely this conclusion based on a public opinion survey.

Is everyone to blame for the war?

“Everyone is to blame for the war, it doesn't matter who started it”: this traditional narrative of Russian propaganda is also reflected in the “opposition” media.

On Mediazona, for example, the oligarch mentioned above, Melnichenko, expresses the following opinion: *“Trying to find out who is guilty and who is innocent is very dangerous... War brings to the surface many despicable people from both sides. There are definitely war crimes on both sides. This happens in every war. It is natural. It doesn't matter who started it.”*

According to Mediazona, the Ukrainian military is no less guilty than the Russian military, which is bombing peaceful Ukrainian cities. After all, the Russians aren't doing this for no reason; it's in response to Ukrainian “disobedience.”



Above: Mediazona's article titled: “Russia subjected Odesa to the largest attack in the entire war. This happened after the withdrawal from the ‘grain deal’ and the explosion on the Crimean bridge”

The same trend persists in highlighting the risks of a potential disaster at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. After the Russian military captured it, the plant poses a nuclear threat to the entire world.

However, in the article titled “Prepare a first aid kit and keep calm. Is it possible to blow up the Zaporizhzhya NPP and will it lead to a catastrophe?”²² we see the same narrative: everyone is guilty, and everything is confusing and convoluted.

ФСБ: в Липецкой области задержали трех сторонников «Правого сектора», планировавших взрыв в людном месте

ФСБ отчиталась о задержании трех граждан Украины в Липецкой области по подозрению в приготовлении к теракту, участии в экстремистской организации и незаконном хранении взрывчатки. Об этом **сообщает** РИА «Новости» со ссылкой на пресс-службу ведомства.

Above: Mediazona's article titled: "FSB: Three Right Sector supporters were detained in the Lipetsk region, planning an explosion in a crowded place"

"Russia and Ukraine accuse each other of preparing a provocation at the Zaporizhzhia NPP again," — the article begins.

The same "handwriting" is seen in the coverage of the tragedy in Kostyantynivka,²³ when, on September 6, 2023, a Russian missile killed 16 Ukrainians. Mediazona assumes that the military of Ukraine could have committed this crime.

The data of the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) organization is cited as evidence for this "version" (the organization's name is included in the title). The reader may get the impression that this is an international organization. However, if one were to read the article, we'd discover that the CIT is not, in fact, an international organization, but was founded by the Russian oppositionist Ruslan Leviev.

The same approach was taken in reporting on the Russian military destroying the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant and flooding the area around the city of Kherson. The Mediazona's authors do not rule out²⁴ that the tragedy could be the fault of both parties, or even the forces of nature:

Below: Mediazona's Telegram post titled: "Ukrainian SS veteran Yaroslav Hunko, who was invited to the Canadian Parliament during Zelensky's visit, has been put on the wanted list"

Mediazona 186.9K subscribers

Forwarded message
From Mediazona. Эксклюзив

Дата рождения 13.4.1925

Основание для розыска: разыскивается по стат

Установочные данные:
пол: МУЖ,
национальность: ПОЛЯК,
дата рождения: 13.4.1925,
место рождения: ПОЛЬША, ., СУРМАНИ,
особые приметы:

Контактная информация: 8-495-694-73-33

Украинского ветерана СС Ярослава Гунько, которого позвали в парламент Канады во время визита Зеленского, объявили в розыск

"Both sides blame each other for the destruction of the plant, while OSINT researchers suggest that it may have been destroyed due to previous damage, as well as the fact that the occupying power, which controls the hydroelectric plant, did not release the water in time."

By "OSINT researchers," they mean Ruslan Leviev from the aforementioned CIT again. Another fact-checker mentioned is a foreign journalist, Aric Toler, whom even the Russian propaganda media called "the most Russophile investigator."²⁵

The Kremlin's favorite fairy tale about "Nazis" and "nationalists" is another baseless argument for blaming Ukrainians for the war. Mediazona reports that the

national-patriotic movement Right Sector, which has no political influence in Ukraine, is systematically harming Russians. The FSB claims that the Right Sector has a robust agent network in the Russian Federation.

We are also told that the Ukrainian president “honors a Nazi.”

We are referring to the scandal that broke out in Canada in September 2023. Parliamentarians invited a veteran of the 14th Grenadier Division, Sichovi Striltsi “Halychyna” (SS “Galizien”) to Parliament during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s visit to Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promptly issued an apology for the incident and also separately apologized²⁶ to the Ukrainian delegation.

Historians were clear that the Nuremberg trial and the Deschene commission did not confirm²⁷ the involvement of this division in any war crimes. Yet, their arguments were ignored. Russian propaganda immediately exploited this incident to justify the war against Ukraine. Putin’s numerous channels²⁸ and the so-called “independent” mass media outlets, such as Mediazona, were quick to exploit the topic.

Conclusions

If you examine Mediazona through the lens of courtroom procedure — a topic it frequently covers — it’s clear that this publication is more of a defense attorney for Russia and Russians than a prosecutor of criminal authorities. This media outlet is in formal opposition to Putin, and it publicly criticizes Russia’s repressive and punitive system. However, it does not oppose the imperial essence of its country. In fact, it works to its advantage by broadcasting narratives that delay the collapse of the dictatorship as much as possible.

The informational “fog” that they create both in their country and abroad shows that these “journalists,” as well as Russian society in general, are not ready to be treated for Great Power chauvinism, hoping that it will be possible to hide the symptoms of this severe “disease” behind a delusion.

Unfortunately, we have to state that Mediazona is an organic part of Putin’s comprehensive propaganda system, developed specifically to target liberal and international audiences.

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ZHIVOI GVOZD: A LIBERAL-IMPERIAL VINAIGRETTE WITH KREMLIN SAUCE

"I am very sorry for Ukraine and Ukrainians, but they have become the object of the superpowers' struggle on their territory"; "for the last two years, the Main Directorate of Intelligence of Ukraine ... has adopted extrajudicial killings of civilians", "October 7 [in Israel] is all fiction" — such statements are broadcast on the air of the Russian Zhivoi Gvozhd channel, the former Echo of Moscow.

In order to understand the editorial policy of the media regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, the terrorist attack in the Crocus City Hall, as well as other current world events, we analyzed Zhivoi Gvozhd morning broadcasts for two weeks from March 11 to 24, 2024 (the program "Utrennii razvorot").

Zhivoi Gvozhd is the successor to the Russian radio station Echo of Moscow. Created in the early 1990s, Echo of Moscow was taken off the air "for fake news" after Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

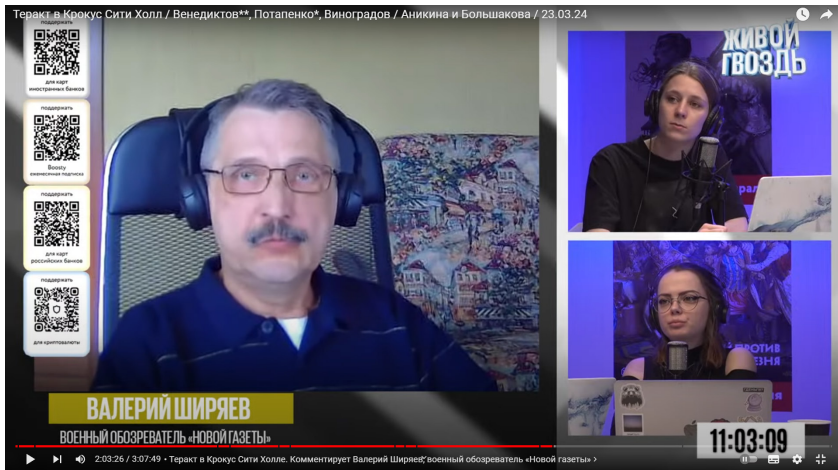
The Zhivoi Gvozhd broadcasts clearly show that this media outlet is trying to promote the same position as many other so-called "liberal" Russian media outlets: "Not everything is straightforward." They synthesize this position by combining anti-war views with those that justify the war. This media outlet does feature speeches by those who support Ukraine and condemn the Kremlin's policy. However, it also includes various propagandistic elements that allow Putin's narratives to be presented to a liberal audience.

Some texts justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine and denying the war crimes of its occupying army are not at all an attempt to give a platform to both sides and adhere to true freedom of speech, as is often the justification given by the staff of Zhivoi Gvozhd. Justifying war and broadcasting hate speech is an abuse of freedom of speech. However, the editors of Zhivoi Gvozhd simply do not understand this. Or are they pretending that they don't?

Let's look at some examples of such abuse.

Ukrainian and Central Asian diasporas — 'A potential recruiting ground for future terrorists'

Novaya Gazeta military columnist Valery Shiryayev said in a program dedicated to the terrorist attack in Crocus City Hall that there are two "huge bottomless diasporas" in Russia today, referring to Ukrainians and "gastarbeiters (!) from the territory of the Central Asian republics," which are "a potential recruiting ground for future terrorists." In other words, they negatively stereotyped multiple nationalities at the same time. The hosts, Liza Anikina and Yevgenia Bolshakova, did not react to this in any way.



Above: Novaya Gazeta military columnist, Valery Shiryayev (left), interviewed on Zhivoi Gvozd (Video still)

A terrorist attack took place, and Russian law enforcement officers detained suspects — citizens of Tajikistan — while the Russian FSB saw a “Ukrainian trace.” Russian journalists failed to adhere to the standards that should apply in such cases and instead went with the flow.

The ethical guidelines for reporting on terrorist acts recommend moderation¹ of opinions broadcast, with a focus on journalistic ethics and international law, so that “*freedom of expression and diversity of opinion do not become grounds for incitement to discrimination and violence.*” The EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) warns² against detailing terrorist profiles or focusing in particular on characteristics such as nationality, religion, age, or place of birth.

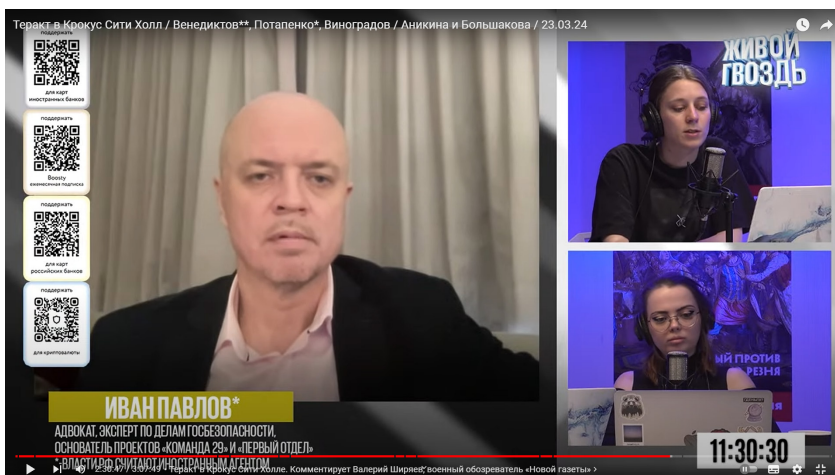
So, if some kind of generalization is heard on air (for example, all representatives of a particular nation are potential terrorists), the hosts should not remain silent. We’d expect that if someone on their show said that the Russian diaspora in any of the countries is a terrorist threat, they would probably react.

In the March 24 broadcast, in which the terrorist attack was also discussed, the hosts proposed to hold a vote “*on whether we allow the use of torture against terrorists.*” Here, we would like to remind you of the UN Convention Against Torture and, of course, the presumption of innocence.

It’s worth remembering that shortly after the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall, the Russian media began speculating about the “Ukrainian trace.”³ This was later discussed by Putin and the former Security Secretary of the Russian Federation, Patrushev. In the broadcasts of Zhivoi Gvozd, this version was consistently labeled “marginal” (interestingly, this was also the assessment of the Novaya Gazeta expert, Shiryayev).

The level of discussion about the terrorist attack was so professionally low that the audience could hardly get a complete picture of what happened. That includes the fact that Ukraine had nothing to do with it.

For example, “expert” Ivan Pavlov said the following on the March 23 broadcast: “*It seems to me that it is logical to assume that there may be forces in Ukraine that could be interested in bringing the war to the*



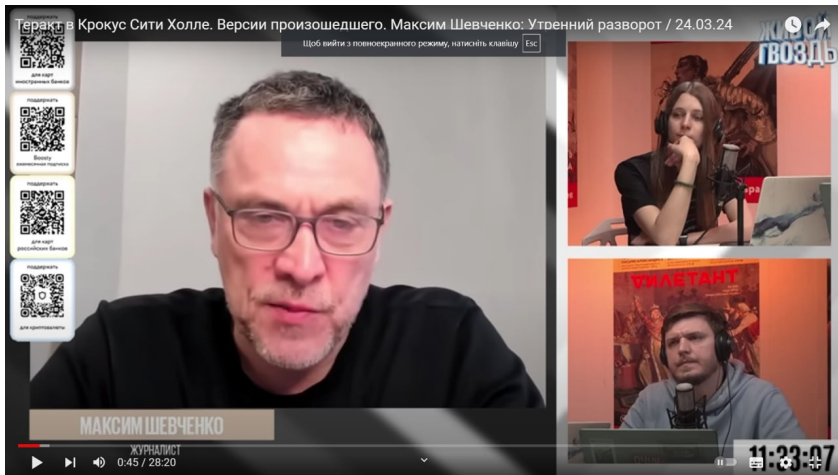
Above: “Expert” Ivan Pavlov (left), interviewed on Zhivoi Gvozd (Video still)

territory of Russia. Moreover, it is generally on the territory of Russia because Belgorod is being bombed. Yes, to bring the war to the center, to the capital of the country that attacked their country. Here, it is generally logical to allegedly turn the attention to the Ukrainian side and look for interest there. I wouldn't want to rush ahead like this, because here it is really necessary to ... investigate. The easiest thing to do is to say that the Ukrainians are to blame for everything. To warm up ... the war mood in the country [Russia]. I wouldn't want to do that. I am in favor of a professional investigation, but unfortunately, I doubt that law enforcement in Russia in its current state is capable of such a thing.”

There is another generalization: The Ukrainians are guilty or maybe not. It is unclear.

The aforementioned expert, Valery Shiryayev, reflecting on the role of Ukraine, said that the Main Directorate of Intelligence (MDI)⁴ of Ukraine is on the borderline between a special service and a terrorist organization: “Over the past two years, the MDI has adopted, in general, not only sabotage ... well, the implementation of sabotage on the territory of Russia, carrying out actions that are no longer sabotage, i.e., extrajudicial killings of civilians who are not military or administrative ... not those who hold administrative positions that influence the conduct of a special military operation. According to all canons, these are acts of terrorism.” So, on the one hand, the version of Ukraine's involvement is marginal, but on the other hand, there is alleged evidence that the MDI has resorted to terrorist attacks in the past. However, since this evidence is not presented, it is difficult to understand what to believe.

In addition to discussing the “Ukrainian” version, the Zhivoi Gvozd program — in the best traditions of Russian propaganda — blamed the United States for the terrorist attack. For example, the invited “expert,” Maksim Shevchenko, said the following: “The ISIS version [i.e., the involvement of this organization in the terrorist attack] in no way refutes the version that the Americans are behind it, since this insane terrorist monster structure was created by American and partly Israeli special services.”



Above: Maksim Shevchenko interviewed on the Zhivoi Gvozdi Youtube channel: "The involvement of US intelligence cannot be ruled out" (Video still)

The discussion about who is to blame for the terrorist attack can best be summarized by quoting Elena Milashina, a journalist for Novaya Gazeta. She denies the version of Ukraine's involvement. Still, she says the following: *"It is necessary to set the priorities straight: what is really threatening, who has been attacking Russia all these years, who is really attacking?"* Indeed, who has been attacking Russia all these years? Can you at least name someone?

So, as a result of the two days of broadcasts examined for the purposes of this review, one thing is clear: Russia has been "attacked" again. But it is not clear by whom exactly. Just in case, it is necessary to look for enemies in all possible directions. In the tradition of Stalinist Russia: "the forest is being chopped down; the wood chips are flying."

'We have not verified this information, but we are sharing it with you anyway'

One of the topics before and during the Russian presidential election in March 2024 was the situation in Russia's border regions: the Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC) and other armed groups were infiltrating Russian territory and calling on Russians to join them in liberating themselves from Putin.

It's clear that conflicting information came in from different sources, but instead of actually attempting to find out what was going on, the hosts sometimes asked the commenters in the chat to do that work for them.

In the March 13 broadcast, Aidar Ahmadiyev says: *"I know that many people from there [Kursk, Belgorod regions] are watching us. Report, as they say, about the situation."* In the March 14 broadcast, they also offer to write in the chat: *"Tell us about your situation."* On March 20, they said that all their sources from these areas had left, *"So please, if we have Belgorod residents who are currently in the city, write to us in the chat about it and, in fact, what the situation is in the city."*



Above: Zhivoi Gvozd hosts Aidar Ahmadiyev (bottom right) and Masha Mayers (top right) interview a former resident of Belgorod (Video still)

It should go without saying that gathering information about military operations from listeners who can write anything in the chat is not the best way to find out what is actually happening. Hosts have no way of verifying whether these commentators are actually on the ground or whether the information is remotely accurate. They have no way of knowing whether they are bots or real people.

In the two weeks we examined, the newsroom made no attempt to send its own correspondent to the scene or to find a person on the ground. They did, however, invite a resident of Belgorod, who turned out to have not been in the city for several months (broadcast on March 14).

Zhivoi Gvozd's editors have yet to find out what exactly happened during the battles between Russian volunteer formations and the Russian army. Additionally, there were instances when it was unclear who was involved in these battles, even though they were reported as having taken place. For instance, the following was heard on air:

- “Belgorod has been under active aerial attack for several days in a row, meaning drones and some subversive intelligence groups. But the truth is that the story there, is completely unclear: whether they came, whether they were on the territory of Russia or whether they were not on the territory of Russia” (broadcast on March 14).
- “The information is not verified, but we share it with you anyway. The Lozova Rudka border of the Belgorod region is completely under the control of the liberation forces, as Ponomaryov [former deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, now a citizen of Ukraine] calls them” (broadcast March 12).

- “This is where the clashes took place ... RVC or not RVC. There they somehow broke into the territory and fighting broke out” (March 15 broadcast).
- “The Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation reported the failure of yesterday’s attempt to break through the units of the armed forces of the Belgorod region. According to the agency, the enemy has lost control over the border areas... In turn, Ukrainian intelligence claims that subversive groups have turned the Kursk and Belgorod regions into a zone of active hostilities” (broadcast March 15).

In general, as far as the information about the course of the hostilities is concerned, the editors simply followed the flow of news and summarized all the sources reporting on what was happening without trying to investigate the actual situation in cases where the reports of the parties contradicted each other. This is certainly not professional work.

Another example of how some Zhivoi Gvozd hosts lack basic fact-checking skills is a passage on another topic. It refers to when the Russian opposition’s “At noon against Putin” action scheduled for March 17 should begin. One of the hosts says: *“Many people ask in the chat if it is at 12 o’clock Moscow time or local time...I was sure it was Moscow time. You stumped me ... with that question. Well, probably Moscow time. Let’s ask Nadezhdin [a studio guest who has nothing to do with organizing the action]. People write that it is local.”*

The most straightforward way to verify information is to contact the primary sources, namely, the organizers of the event in question. The host failed to consider this first step in the information verification process, which is taught in first-year journalism school.

‘Attached / New’ territories of Russia

Using the example of Zhivoi Gvozd, we note the lack of a clear policy on how to refer to the territories of Ukraine occupied by Russia.

This is the dialog between Irina Babloyan and Marfa Smirnova that we heard on the March 16 broadcast:

IB: You have several regions. I am not talking about the annexed territories. I am talking about the territories that belong to Russia by right.

MC: According to the Constitution.

IB: No, according to the Constitution, those are now also [the territory of Russia], unfortunately...

MS: We can go deep now ... and we can say that we have questions about the Constitution.

IB: Many questions. We really do. But the official territories that we consider Russian...

This dialogue demonstrates that there is no definitive stance or guidance for presenters on the terms to use in this case. However, the definition you choose will shape how the audience perceives the events. The Kremlin



Above: Zhivoi Gvozd hosts Marfa Smirnova (left) and Irina Babloyan (right) discuss how the occupied territories of Ukraine should be called (Video still)

phrase “new regions / territories” is also being broadcast on air. Moreover, it can be used with or without the qualifier of being “so-called.”

On air on March 16, they stated: *“UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, criticized the voting process in the ‘elections’ for the President of Russia in the new regions. He is certain that the annexation of Ukrainian territories is not legal from the point of view of international law.”*

On March 17: *“British Consul General in Ekaterinburg, Ameer Kotecha, published a post on social networks stating that Russia has no reason to hold ‘elections’ in the new territories and in Crimea, since they belong to Ukraine.”*

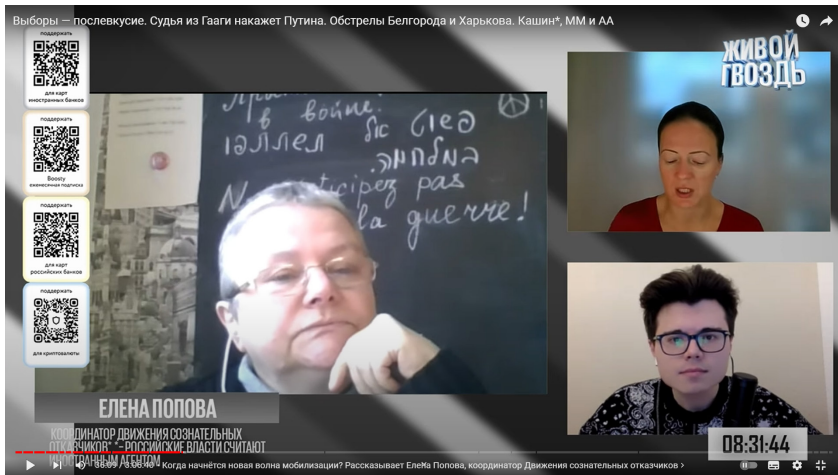
In both cases, one gets the impression that only certain people — officials or diplomats — hold this view.

Several times on the show, they use another term — “attached” territories. On the March 19 broadcast, a comment was voiced on the results of the “elections”: *“As far as I understand, the votes of the attached territories are also considered.”* The invited “expert,” Oreshkin, uses the same definition.

The “expert” Popova uses another expression in the March 21 program: *“Because what is happening, as we say, on the ‘mainland of Russia’ is somehow better known to us from the inside.”* That is, it’s less known to Russians what is happening in the occupied parts of the Donetsk region!

It must be emphasized that neither the phrases “new territories” nor “attached,” and even less “mainland or non-mainland,” can be used to interpret what actually happened. We are talking about the occupation and a war of aggression, during which there was no “accession,” but rather the seizure of foreign territories by Russia. The lack of a clear policy on naming these territories in Zhivoi Gvozd further proves that the editors are not committed to accuracy. They are unwilling to call a spade a spade. Instead, they use the propaganda definitions of “new / attached territories,” which play into the Kremlin’s propaganda.

We firmly believe that Zhivoi Gvozd did not sufficiently address the issue of the illegality of holding fake “elections” in the occupied Ukrainian



Above: “Expert” Elena Popova (left) speaks about the “non-mainland territories” of Russia on Zhivoi Gvozd (Video still)

territories in March 2024. The overwhelming topic of discussion was the number of votes that would be cast for Putin. However, the conditions in which these so-called “elections” took place were only mentioned a few times. For example, there was a video in which a resident of the occupied territory was forced to “vote” in the presence of a Russian soldier with a machine gun. However, the presenters stated the following regarding another video in which a policeman looks into a booth during “voting” (broadcast on March 18):

Lisa Anikina: “I just haven’t seen if anyone has verified it or if there’s any information about it...”

Vasiliy Polonskyi: “Unfortunately, I haven’t seen the verification of this video either... But there is a verified video where Russians come to the grandmother in the so-called new territories ... they come to the woman’s house to make her vote ... a policeman with a machine gun comes to her... But, it is necessary to check such content because it is very important. Because, as you understand, it is very easy to fake such a video.”

Again, a video that no one has verified was discussed on air.

In connection with the Russian “elections,” the issue of fraud (alleged bribery of Russian citizens who spoiled the ballots by pouring green paint into the ballot boxes or setting them on fire) is also mentioned. The host, Polonskyi, concludes that the Ukrainians should be blamed for this: *“Now there is a big fight against fraudsters. All the more, it is included in the political doctrine, so to speak, because all fraudsters are mainly Ukrainians. Somehow, this is related to that. Yes, connected. If it is not Ukrainians, then it is connected to various Ukrainian servers [?!].”*

Once more, a sweeping generalization is made about all Ukrainians (they are called fraudsters) without any objective evidence and, of course, in a way that discriminates against them.



Above: “Zhivoi Gvozd hosts Lisa Anikina (left) and Vasily Polonskyi (right) (Video still)

**‘October 7 is a complete fabrication,’
and ‘A significant portion of the Ukrainian people are ...
supporters of Putinism’**

Zhivoi Gvozd regularly invites guests onto its broadcasts who spread outright lies or promote the most aggressive Kremlin narratives. Maksim Shevchenko, who is titled “journalist, politician,” is a prime example. The editorial office ignores the norm of professional standards, stating that a journalist cannot be a politician because they will not be able to interpret events objectively. He was on air every week.

Here are some of his statements to give you an idea of what they subject listeners to:

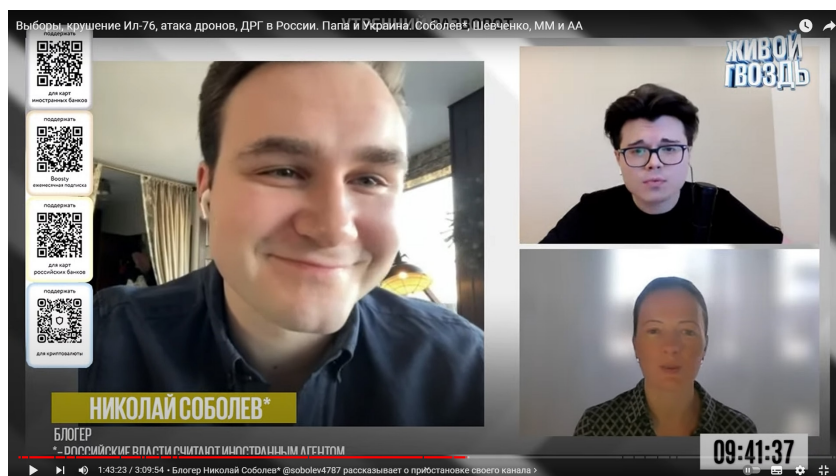
- “One part of the Ukrainian people definitely holds those views that allow and even compel them to organize a mobilization in the Ukrainian army, to put up a sufficiently principled, serious resistance... But another part of the Ukrainian people has different views. Another part of the Ukrainian people are supporters of Putinism. Supporters of Putinism. And this is true. And the third part, perhaps, misses Nestor Ivanovich Makhno*.”
- “Let us remember what happened in Ukraine 10 years ago. Here, you had a legally elected bad president, Viktor Yanukovich. Here you had a bad president, Donald Trump. Why can’t Trump be overthrown in America like Yanukovich? Why can’t the battles be fought in the center of Washington?”

* Nestor Makhno was a Ukrainian anarchist revolutionary and commander of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine during the Ukrainian War of Independence between 1917 and 1921.

- “Why is Western-style democracy a universal source of legitimacy? I don’t understand it at all. I am against democratic elections in general.”
- “Russia can pass whatever laws it wants. One law today, another tomorrow. A sovereign is someone who can say that he is the authority. And can prove it.”
- “October 7 [2023 in Israel] is all a lie.”
- “I am very sorry for Ukraine and Ukrainians, but they have become the object of the superpowers’ struggle. A superpower war is being waged on their territory. The same war was waged on the Syrian territory, where almost 1 million people were killed.”

Some hosts try to argue with him during the broadcasts, but it resembles the traditional meaningless Russian propaganda talk shows, when everyone speaks simultaneously. The essence of such talk shows is also clear — to confuse and disorient the viewer as much as possible. The editors of Zhivoi Gvozd likely have the same goal. In addition to Shevchenko, it is worth mentioning another speaker — blogger Nikolai Sobolev, who stated on air that those who want to “maximize likes” and “increase the views of their channel” are talking about the dictatorship and repression in Russia.

On March 15, Alexei Venediktov, former editor-in-chief of the “Echo of Moscow” station, spoke with the hosts of the “Utrenii razvorot” program. He informed them of his trip to Moldova: *“[There is] a fugitive oligarch, Ilan Shor. His party has been banned by the [Moldovan] Constitutional Court. So, he has Israeli citizenship. He has been named a pro-Russian politician. Interpol is supposedly looking for him. Well,*



Above: Blogger Nikolai Sobolev (left) interviewed on Zhivoi Gvozd (Video still)

maybe it is the national office of Interpol. And they can't find him and [don't know] what to do with him. And he is not visible at all. I found him in two days. And tomorrow he will give an interview."

Let's clarify: Ilan Shor is not "being named a pro-Russian politician." He is one. In Moldova, the Constitutional Court banned⁵ his political party because of funding from Russia. Despite this, they still tried to give him a platform on Zhivoi Gvozd. Perhaps they wanted to hear how Moldova wants to join Russia?

During Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Venediktov denied⁶ that the Russian attack on the shopping center in Kremenchuk was a war crime. In an interview with the Russian publication Meduza on March 3, 2022, he stated: *"I want to make it clear to my journalists and the president that I have no intention of defecting anywhere. This [Russia] is my country."*

When the organizers of the Palm Foundation Award for Freedom of Speech wanted to jointly honor⁷ the Ukrainian journalist Oksana Romaniuk along with Venediktov, Romaniuk refused, saying, *"I can't imagine how I could physically stand on the same stage and share the same award with Venediktov. With an official Kremlin 'liberal,' a political technologist who more than once promoted Kremlin propaganda, publicly called Putin his 'only boss,' boasted of his connections with Lavrov, Peskov and other officials, and so on."*

The study "Criticism of Putin" also confirms⁸ that Venediktov spreads pro-Kremlin narratives. Even the Russian Anti-Corruption Fund confirmed in one of its investigations that the editor of Zhivoi Gvozd received funding from Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin. He defended himself by saying he "did not benefit financially from this project." However, he confirmed that his company had received funding from Moscow City Hall.

Oleh Kudrin⁹ writes about it this way: *"In the Venediktov school of journalism, it is not necessary to bring the reader-viewer-listener closer to understanding, but first of all to be able to skillfully manipulate events, facts, examples, comparisons."*

Therefore, the modern Zhivoi Gvozd is not an independent Russian media outlet. Nor is it professional journalism. It is a propaganda project for a specific Russian "liberal" audience that does not seem to like Putin, but also does not want to give up Ukraine. This audience is fed a liberal-imperial Zhivoi Gvozd with a vinaigrette with Kremlin sauce.

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PART 2

CASE STUDIES:

KAKHOVKA DAM

“NAZIS” IN UKRAINE

MISSILE ATTACKS

MOBILIZATION IN RUSSIA

WAS IT UKRAINE? WAS IT RUSSIA? MAYBE IT COLLAPSED ON ITS OWN? – THE RUSSIAN MEDIA OUTLETS MEDUZA AND NOVAYA GAZETA EUROPE REPORTING ON THE BLOWING UP OF THE KAKHOVKA HPP

*With a great moral issue involved, neutrality
does not serve righteousness; for to be neutral
between right and wrong is to serve wrong.*
Theodore Roosevelt

On June 6, 2023, the dam of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, which was then under occupation by Russian troops, was destroyed. This led to ecocide — a catastrophe that caused extreme damage to the environment and agriculture, as well as many casualties.

The Russian media immediately began blaming Ukraine for what happened at the dam, even though it was under their control. As is typical when the Russians are covering their tracks, the versions differed. They even claimed that the Ukrainians hit the dam with HIMARS or Vilkha rocket artillery. Then, they absurdly suggested that a Ukrainian “Rambo” had somehow managed to get into the hydroelectric power plant and plant explosives. The most comical reaction to the dam’s collapse came from the Russian collaborator Saldo, the so-called “governor” of the occupied parts of the Kherson region. He released a video saying that people are “continuing their normal lives” near the Kakhovka HPP, all the while a flooded street and a half-flooded cultural center were clearly visible in the background.

The Ukrainian government has stated that the Russian military blew up the dam. A year later, Ukrainian prosecutors accused Russian Colonel General Oleg Makarevich, the former commander of the Dnipro occupation group, of ordering the collapse of the dam. The International Criminal Court has launched an investigation into the incident.

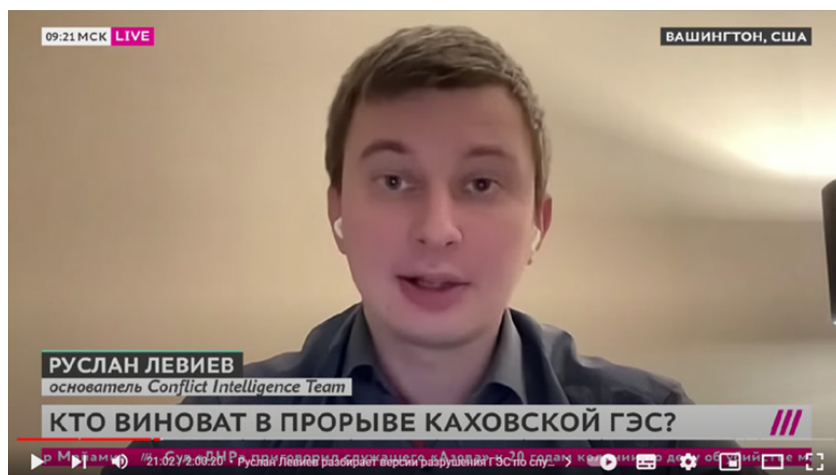
The Ukrainian media immediately identified a “Russian trail” that pinpointed the cause of the tragedy since it was not possible to destroy the dam with missiles. It was built to withstand such attacks. Furthermore, both Ukrainian and foreign experts have confirmed that the dam was most likely blown up from within.

International media initially reported that the parties were blaming each other, but later confirmed that it was an inside attack. They cited satellite images, seismologists’ data that recorded powerful explosions in the area of the hydroelectric power station, and the Truth Hounds (human rights organization) report,¹ which also proved that the Russian occupation forces deliberately destroyed the dam.

How did the Russian independent media cover this, yet another, war crime by the Russian army? We analyzed the publications of Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe over a period of two weeks. The period covered was from June 6 to June 20, 2023. We selected the articles according to the following keywords: “HPP,” “Kakhovka,” “dam,” and “levee.” The search yielded 19 results on Meduza and 40 on Novaya Gazeta Europe. We used the “Kralya” media monitoring automation software² of the Odesa media outlet, Intent, to select articles from the Meduza website. We used Python, specifically the RE module for regular expressions to process the texts for computer analysis (searching for vocabulary matches).

There was no explosion?!

Russian publications also presented the positions of the Ukrainian and Russian authorities regarding the explosion of the Kakhovka HPP, using the classic wording “the parties blame each other.” As we have already noted, some foreign media did this initially, for which they faced criticism³ from Ukrainian colleagues and Dmytro Kuleba, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. However, as this study shows, a third version — that there was no detonation — was also prominent in the Russian mass media.



Above: Ruslan Leviev, founder of the Conflict Intelligence Team, providing commentary on TV Rain (Video still)

Ruslan Leviev, the founder of the Conflict Intelligence Team and a popular commentator in the Russian media, was one of the primary sources of this strange narrative. Immediately after the explosion, on the TV Rain channel, he outright denied that there was an explosion at the hydroelectric power plant. And that the dam collapsed due to improper maintenance. Later, after foreign media outlets, including the New York Times and the Associated Press, published evidence that the Russians blew up the dam, he doubled down on his “version.”

Let’s see whether other Russian publications promoted the same “version.” For this analysis, the computer program collected all mentions

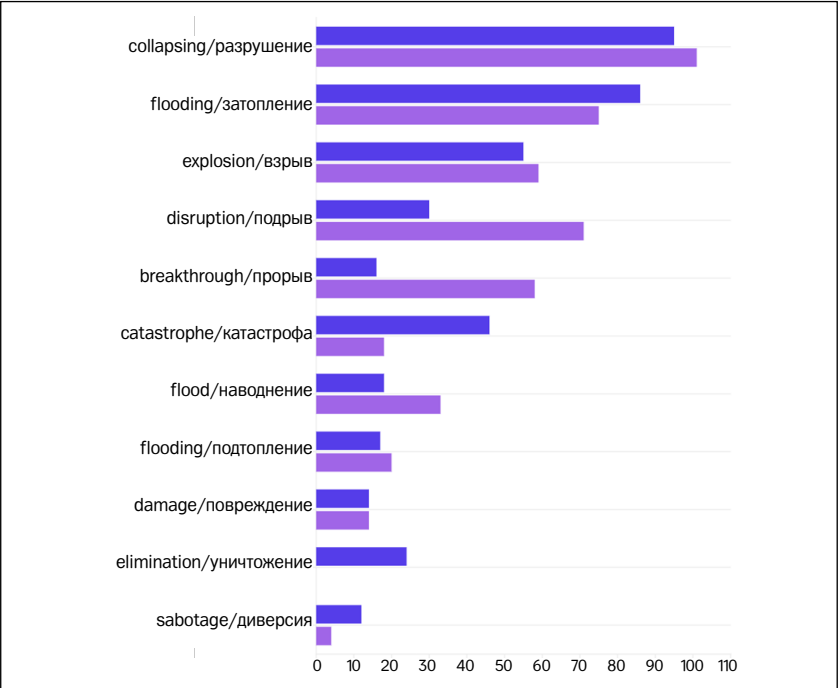


Figure 1: Most popular terms used by Meduza ■ and Novaya Gazeta Europe ■ in relation to the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP

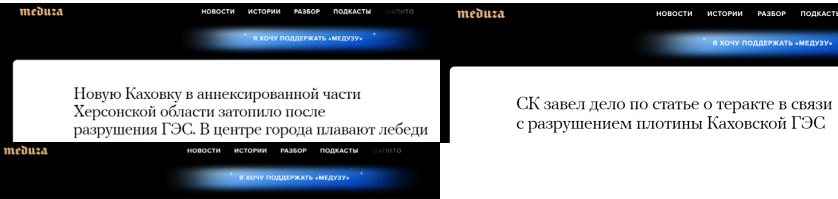
of the most popular definitions of the event used in Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe. These included “catastrophe,” “collapsing,” “explosion,” “sabotage,” and so on. The results were striking and illuminating.

‘Collapsing’

The Russian mass media mostly used the word “collapsing” to support the above narrative that somehow the dam collapsed by itself. That there was no explosion.

Meduza, for example, used this very terminology in its headlines on the first day after the event. They used the same wording in the articles.

For example, Meduza reported⁴ on evacuating civilians in the lead. They state, “After the collapsing of the Kakhovka HPP dam, which led to the flooding of settlements on both banks of the Dnieper, thousands



Зеленский заявил, что подаст иск против России в Международный уголовный суд из-за разрушения Каховской ГЭС

Above: Meduza’s headlines using the term “collapsing” in relation to the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP

of people still remain in the catastrophe areas.” However, the text does not explain how the dam came to collapse.

In another text discussing the reaction of Western leaders, Meduza also emphasizes⁵ the “collapse”:

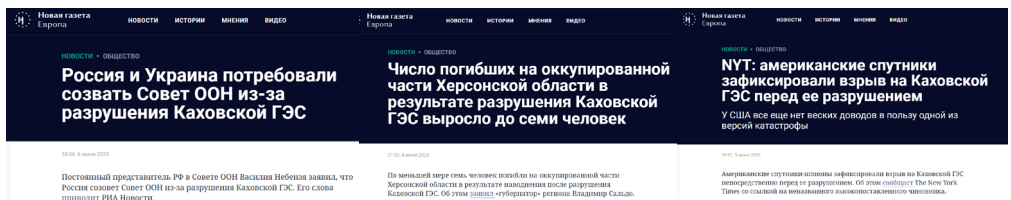
“Western allies of Ukraine were unequivocal in their condemnation of the collapsing of the Kakhovka HPP. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted that the collapsing of the dam put thousands of civilians at risk and caused serious damage to the surrounding environment. ‘This is an outrageous act that once again demonstrates the cruelty of Russia’s war in Ukraine,’ he stated. European Council President Charles Michel said he was ‘shocked by the unprecedented attack’ and vowed to hold Russia accountable for the destruction of civilian infrastructure. Council of Europe Secretary General Maria Pejchynovych-Burych called the collapsing of the dam ‘criminal and shameless.’”

It is evident that the relentless repetition of this word and the deliberate avoidance of context are designed to imprint this version in the audience’s mind: the dam collapsed by itself, while Ukraine and Russia blamed each other for the catastrophe.

Novaya Gazeta also mostly used the word “collapsing,” but not in the first few days and rarely in its headlines.

The logic behind using this definition of an event in the articles is the same: to shift the audience’s attention from the cause to the consequences.

For example, in an article⁶ about Putin creating a commission to *“eliminate the consequences of the flood,”* it is said that the Russian president decided to create the commission three days after the “collapsing” of the hydroelectric plant. They also mention Zelenskyy, who



Above: Novaya Gazeta using the term “collapsing” in headlines in relation to the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP

visited, in the hospital, the victims of “the flood caused by the collapsing of the Kakhovka HPP.”

Over time, however, Novaya Gazeta Europe gave its readers a broader range of interpretations. Words like “collapsing” and “flooding” are most often used by Meduza. At the same time, Novaya Gazeta Europe also wrote about a “breakthrough” [water breaking through] (here, the meaning is the same as with “collapsing”: the dam collapsed, but what caused it isn’t clear) and “blowing it up.”

‘Flooding’

This is the second most popular word used by Russian journalists. They also wrote about “minor flooding” and “inundation.”

Both Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe have published extensively on the evacuation of residents and the suffering of civilians as a result

of what happened. They have also highlighted the particular characteristics of the evacuation on the right and left banks of the Dnipro River and the Russian occupation authorities' attempts to hide information about the "collapsing."

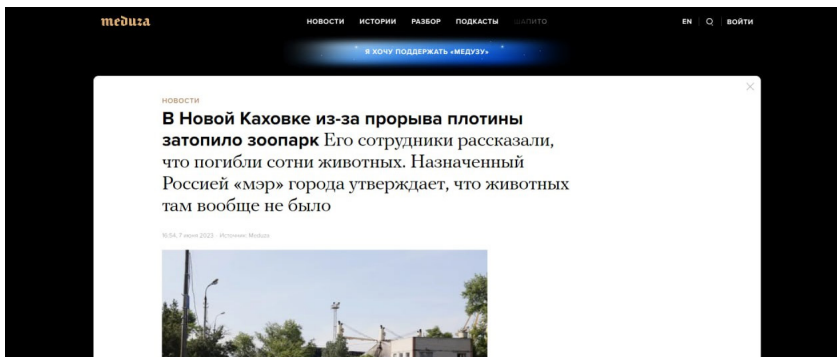
For example, Meduza's headline is: "The head of the annexed Kherson region said that in the flooded Nova Kakhovka 'people are calmly moving through the streets.' At that time the first floor of the local cultural center was under water behind him."

Novaya Gazeta Europe also repeatedly emphasized that the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations evacuated only those who had Russian passports. This is an essential clarification for understanding the nature of this war, as well as the attitude of the occupiers toward the Ukrainian civilian population.

However, the flood coverage was yet another example of the traditional Russian approach to journalism: present conflicting versions and leave the reader to decide. There was no attempt to clarify anything.

For example, the news on the flooding of the zoo in Nova Kakhovka came out on the day of the hydroelectric power plant explosion. While Ukrainian media reported that animals died because of the HPP explosion, Russian journalists were quick to spread the version of events put out by the Russian occupation authorities, namely that there were no animals at all in the zoo!

In its article, Meduza devoted approximately the same amount of space to the "version" from the zoo workers, who claimed that the animals died, and TASS / RIA Novosti / occupation "authorities," who said that there was no zoo in Nova Kakhovka at all. They then declared that there, in fact, was one, but there were no animals in it. Meduza readers were left in the dark about what really happened. The title and the version presented in the article are both misleading.

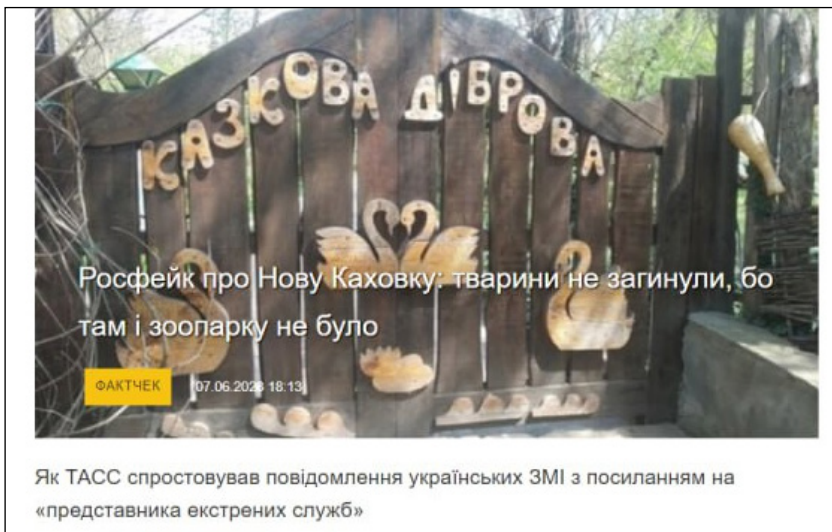


Above: Article by Meduza covering the Nova Khakhovka Zoo

Novaya Gazeta Europe took a different approach. They stated that there is no zoo, citing only TASS as their source.

When we talk about quality journalism, it's not about versions. It's about getting to the bottom of what really happened. We must call fake news fake.

For example, this is how the Ukrainian media reacted to the Russian fake news.



Above: Article by Ukrainian media outlet Ukrinform covering the situation in the Nova Kakhovka Zoo following the Kakhovka HPP destruction

Ukrinform (Ukrainian National News Agency) outright refuted the TASS report that this zoo didn't exist, citing links to Facebook pages and Google Maps as evidence.

The "Crimea. Realities"* program published a comment from the founder of the Crimea safari park, who stated that he had not taken the animals out of the zoo. This is another basic journalistic requirement — to exercise caution when dealing with individuals, organizations, or governments that have a history of providing unreliable information. It is essential to seek corroboration or refutation of the statements in question.

If a journalist genuinely wants to do their job accurately and report on the facts, there are established professional processes related to information validation and fact-checking that allow them to get to the bottom of what actually happened in any given story.

'Explosion' and 'blowing up'

These two words are the third most popular ones used by both Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe.

Almost half of the instances of Meduza using the word "explosion" appeared in its article⁷ covering the historical background of the Kakhovka HPP: "Kakhovka HPP is not the first [dam] on the Dnipro to become a victim of a war." Meduza uses it a few more times in its nostalgic article: "Kakhovka HPP was one of the "great construction projects of communism."

The rest of the uses of the word are, as a rule, combined with other "versions." The most illustrative example of how Meduza does it is the news about an article by The Associated Press (AP). The AP "version" is a photo of a car containing explosives next to the Kakhovka HPP, taken

* "Crimea. Realities" is a regional news outlet of RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service

Ассоциативная пресса показала фото автомобиля на Каховской ГЭС, сделанное за неделю до разрушения плотины. В этой машине, по версии агентства, был груз взрывчатки. Основатель СИТ Руслан Левиев рассказал, что машина не была взорвана



Above: Meduza's article titled: "The Associated Press showed a photo of a car at the Kakhovka HPP, taken a week before the dam collapsed. According to the agency's version, the car contained a cargo of explosives. Ruslan Leviev, the founder of CIT, said that the car was not blown up"

a week prior to the explosion. Right under it, they mention that Leviev stated that the vehicle had not exploded.

While Meduza was either silent on the detonation of the hydroelectric station or disseminating the three "possible versions," Novaya Gazeta Europe wrote about it more often. It included an expanded background to its articles:

"The Kakhovka HPP dam collapsed on the morning of June 6. The Ukrainian and Russian authorities directly accused each other of blowing it up. Researchers from the Norwegian institute NORSAR at the Kakhovka HPP recorded seismic signals confirming the explosion. The NYT stated that the dam likely collapsed due to an explosion in a technical tunnel at its base, which the Russian military had access to."

Once more, Novaya Gazeta Europe's approach is better quality than Meduza's.

'Catastrophe,' 'Damage,' 'Destruction'

For Meduza, the word "catastrophe" is also popular, especially for headlines. But, quite predictably, when talking about the "catastrophe," Russian journalists just as often don't mention the real culprits or try to blur the real picture, sketching out as many versions as possible.

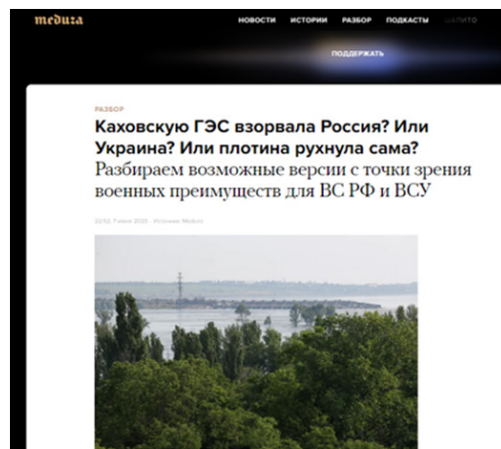
For example, in the Meduza article "Kherson region after the hydroelectric power plant catastrophe," V. Zelenskyy's words about the HPP explosion are called⁸ a "version," and the statements of the Russian occupation authorities are given more space.

The statements by the relevant parties are sometimes presented without context. This was the case in the article, "Was Kakhovka HPP blown up by Russia? Was it Ukraine? Or did the dam collapse by itself?"

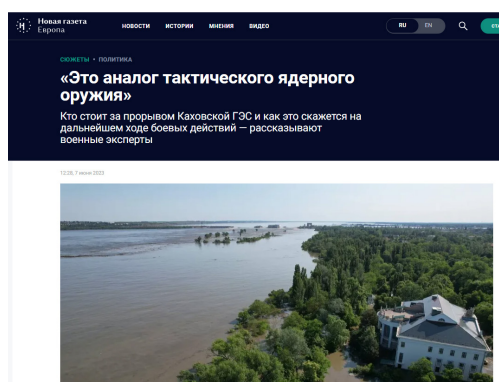
We analyze possible versions through the prism of who would benefit most militarily — the Russian Federation or the Armed Forces of Ukraine?” This article analyzed the various “versions” of what happened. The Ukrainian “version,” the Russian “version,” and the “neutral version,” the idea that “the dam collapsed by itself.”

Here is a fragment of the text, which is deliberately (it seems) designed to confuse the reader:

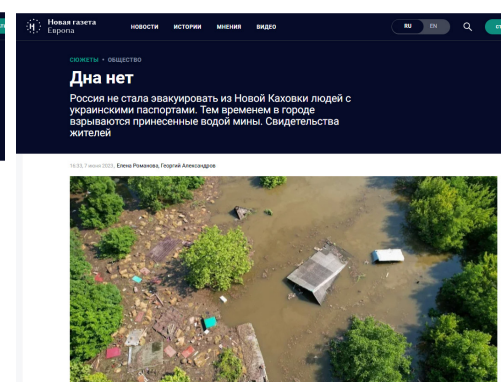
“Ukraine and the Kremlin accused each other of blowing up the Kakhovka HPP dam, which caused flooding in the lower reaches of the Dnipro River. At the same time, no evidence was presented that the dam had been intentionally destroyed. The U.S. authorities, through anonymous representatives, promised to declassify documents testifying to the involvement of Russian troops in this catastrophe, but later officially declared that they had no solid evidence. Video evidence of the detonation, which could be used to identify the perpetrators of the collapsing of the dam, has not yet appeared. Under these conditions, we are left only able to weigh the probabilities of three versions of the causes of the catastrophe: the blowing up by one of the two parties, as well as the involuntary collapsing of the dam. For now, the only analytical tool available is to determine who benefits more from a flood in the lower reaches of the Dnipro. It should be remembered that this does not allow for a clear identification of the guilty party, since the existence of motives does not in itself prove guilt.”



Above: Meduza’s article titled: “Did Russia blow up the Kakhovka HPP? Or Ukraine? Or did the dam collapse by itself? We analyze the possible versions from the point of view of military advantages for the Russian Armed Forces and the Armed Forces of Ukraine”



Novaya Gazeta articles. Above left: “This is an analog of tactical nuclear weapons.’ Military experts tell us who is behind the explosion of the Kakhovka HPP and how it will affect the further course of hostilities”



Above right: “There is no rock bottom. Russia has not evacuated people with Ukrainian passports from Nova Kakhovka. Meanwhile, mines carried by water explode in the city. Testimonies of residents”

It is a simple fact that the majority of so-called independent Russian publications are characterized by a strange and disturbing style of writing. They present information in a way that ultimately suggests that everyone is lying and no one can be trusted. They fall entirely into the tone of the Russian federal channels, whose task is to confuse the audience and encourage them to switch off any critical thinking. Peter Pomerantsev addresses this in great detail in his works, such as the book “Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible.”

Yes, of course, you can invent many versions of why the Earth is flat, but that does not mean you should broadcast them. In the case of Russian journalism, it seems that the main objective is to present as many assumptions as possible while maintaining the pretense that it is impossible to “unequivocally determine the culprit.” Furthermore, it is unclear what “hard evidence” is and what “video evidence” Meduza journalists require. Would it be a live interview with some Russian military while they are planting explosives?

Novaya Gazeta Europe does not use the word “catastrophe” often. They usually use it to emphasize the magnitude of what happened:

“Even the most callous and unsympathetic person can imagine all the horrors of the catastrophe that happened and the horrors that the inhabitants of the Kherson region had to face.”

“The catastrophe that occurred is, in its entirety, one of the greatest (if not the greatest) since the beginning of the war.”

To emphasize the scale, the authors of Novaya Gazeta Europe directly compare the explosion of the Kakhovka HPP with a “tsunami”⁹ (saying that it collapsed due to natural causes, and nobody is to blame) and the use of “tactical nuclear weapons.” The name of one of the articles, “There is no rock bottom,”¹⁰ is also a good illustration of this emphasis. They directly condemn the Russian authorities for not rescuing people from the flood unless they had Russian passports.

But Novaya Gazeta Europe is also characterized by presenting different versions: “What caused the breakthrough and the large-scale humanitarian and ecological catastrophe affecting the lives of tens of thousands of people is not known with certainty,” they write. And then, like Meduza, they give “versions” of what happened.

As for the words “destruction,” “damage,” the handling is the same. They write that the HPP was destroyed, but it is not clear what happened. Or they present different “versions”:

- *“As a result of the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP, the losses to the fishing industry due to the death of only adult [fish] may reach 95 thousand tons (Meduza).”*
- *“The destruction of the Kakhovka HPP is in itself a huge technological and humanitarian catastrophe (Meduza).”*
- *“The destruction of the Kakhovka HPP is a deliberate and demonstrative action. Whatever was in the minds of those who gave this order, it is perceived as a manifestation of anger,*

cruelty, rejection of any norms...” (Novaya Gazeta Europe — the article names Russia as the guilty party).”

- *“There are three main versions: detonation by the Russian army, detonation by the Ukrainian side, and its destruction due to previous damage” (Novaya Gazeta Europe).”*
- *“Engineer Ihor Strelets of the Water Resources Agency of Ukraine believes that the dam could not have received such damage from the outside” (Meduza).”*

‘Sabotage’

The Kremlin’s version of events is that the dam collapsed due to “sabotage” by Ukraine. The Russian mass media has also printed this information. Meduza talked about this version as part of the constant repetition of “three main versions”:

“Russia denies involvement in the blowing up of the Kakhovka HPP and claims that Ukraine is behind the sabotage. OSINT analysts believe that the Kakhovka HPP dam collapsed out of its own accord.”

Novaya Gazeta Europe also mentioned “sabotage” several times — in the context of presenting the Kremlin’s position. But there was also an ironic use,¹¹ a mockery of this position:

“Taking into account the fact that the station cannot be destroyed by shelling from the outside, in order to believe in Ukraine’s responsibility, it is necessary to endow its military with absolutely fantastic power, and its sabotage groups with the capabilities of Batman or, in the worst case, James Bond. They, therefore, secretly entered the carefully guarded object, brought explosives, planted them (in complete silence, of course, so as not to alarm the guards), and quietly left to commit further Banderite evil.”

Is there professional Russian journalism? Instead of conclusions

Many Russian media exiles are still perceived by many in the West, as serving the likely future democratization of Russia. For example, these media outlets spoke out against Putin and the war, were banned in Russia, and suffered repression, so their supporters say they should be listened to and protected. Any criticism is blocked harshly: they claim that criticizing TV Rain or Meduza is to play into Putin’s hands, and such criticism benefits the Kremlin.

However, it is evident that the Russian authoritarian media space is reflected not only in the Kremlin-affiliated media, but also in those that are supposedly independent of it. The analysis of articles reporting on the explosion of the Kakhovka HPP clearly shows that some Russian journalists simply do not know how to distinguish between facts and “versions” or how to verify official statements. These basic journalistic skills distinguish a professional media piece from an amateur one.

Both media outlets promoted the narrative of the dam’s allegedly accidental “collapsing.” Meduza covered it more extensively, while Novaya

Gazeta Europe did less so. However, the latter provided its readers with a broader context over time, quoting experts and foreign media. Unlike Meduza, Novaya Gazeta Europe's authors sometimes blamed Russia for what happened and stated that all Russians would be held responsible for destroying the HPP.

It is noteworthy that the same wording ("collapsing") also appears in the report of the Investigative Committee of Russia, which explicitly blames Ukraine for the events. "The Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant was destroyed as a result of the criminal actions of the Ukrainian military." Therefore, both the Kremlin and Russian mass media outlets have taken a similar approach, as demonstrated by this analysis.

There was an obvious attempt to minimize the Russian military's responsibility for the crime. This attempt was carried out with the help of several parties, including the Russian mass media analyzed here.

Some world leaders, particularly Olaf Scholz, are convinced¹² that the "defeat of Putin" will pave the way for forming a democratic Russia. Until then, it is vital to maintain contact with "representatives of the other Russia." However, it must be added that a democratic Russia is impossible without the recognition of its own war crimes.

Modern Russia has led the whole world back to the realities of genocide, the Gulag, and a possible Third World War, especially with the help, complicity, or silence of its own journalists. It is, therefore, clear that any conversation about the future of Russia or its democratization is pointless until their "independent" media learn to write professionally about Russian war crimes without embellishments or flimsy hunts for "neutral versions."

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7. The Kakhovka HPP is not the first one on the Dnipro River to fall victim to wars. In 1941, the Soviet command ordered the collapsing of the Dnipro HPP and tried to blame it on the Germans. Thousands of civilians died / Каховская ГЭС — не первая на Днепре, которая стала жертвой войн В 1941-м советское командование приказало уничтожить Днепрогэс и попыталось обвинить в этом немцев. Погибли тысячи мирных жителей
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8. Kherson region after the catastrophe at the HPP. This is what is happening on the left bank of the Dnipro river (there are territories occupied by Russia) — and on its right bank (which is under the control of Ukraine). Four hundred and sixty-eight days of the war. See photos / Херсонская область после катастрофы на ГЭС. Вот что происходит на левом берегу Днепра (там территории, оккупированные Россией) — и на его правом берегу (он под контролем Украины) Четыреста шестьдесят восьмой день войны. Фотографии
<https://meduza.io/feature/2023/06/07/hersonskaya-oblast-posle-katastrofy-na-ges-vot-cto-proishodit-na-levom-beregu-dnepra-tam-territorii-okkupirovannye-rossiye-i-na-ego-pravom-beregu-on-pod-kontrolem-ukrainy>
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‘ANY NAZIS HERE? WE’LL MAKE SURE TO FIND SOME!’: ‘GOOD’ RUSSIAN MEDIA ARE DESPERATELY LOOKING FOR RIGHT-WING RADICALS IN UKRAINE

Russia’s informational aggression against Ukraine began long before they came here with their weapons. Propagandists know that the best way to incite hatred towards a neighboring country is to accuse it of Nazism. After all, Nazism is an ideology based on the belief in the superiority of the Aryan race. It is associated with the terrible crimes of Hitler’s Germany.

This narrative was a perfect fit¹ for Russian nationals. In 2022, nearly half of all Russians were convinced that the objective of the war was to “put the Ukrainian Nazis on trial.”

Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov boldly declared, “We are at war with the Germans again.”² He effectively linked the “Great Patriotic War” with the “Special Military Operation,” uniting them as one “anti-Nazi” campaign spanning time.

The so-called “independent” Russian media outlets also played along with the Kremlin in a more inconspicuous and cunning way. They were constantly looking for “Nazis” in the neighboring country.

Why would they do that?

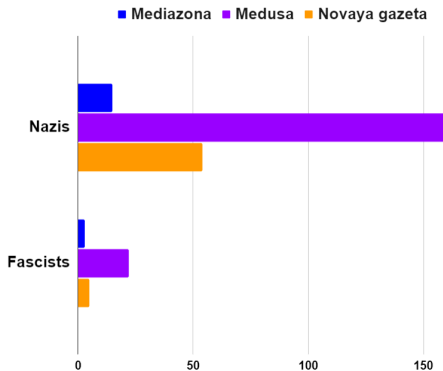


Figure 1.

The number of times the terms “Nazis” and “fascists” were mentioned in connection with Ukraine in the Telegram channels of the “opposition” media outlets, Meduza, Mediazona, and Novaya Gazeta Europe between June 1, 2022, and January 1, 2024

It’s simple. When we remember that the “good” Russian media outlets like to project the vices of their own aggressor country onto Ukraine and promote stories about how “Ukrainians and Russians are one people,” and also about how “everyone is to blame for the war,” everything falls into place.

Russian liberal propagandists are searching for Nazis by rummaging through Ukraine’s history and poking their noses into its modern times.

They also use researchers who are easily led to the desired conclusions by propaganda professionals.

Pre-prepared messages about Ukrainian “Nazis” are aimed first and foremost at international audiences. They are carefully crafted to leave people confused and unsure who the offender is, since both sides blame each other.

Secondly, this makes it much easier to influence the liberal Russian audience. After all, educated Russian liberal readers do not want to consume propaganda at the “Solovyov-Skabeyeva” level. This is why they are being served an “elite” propaganda meal, a combination of truth and lies.

Searching for ‘Nazis’ in the past

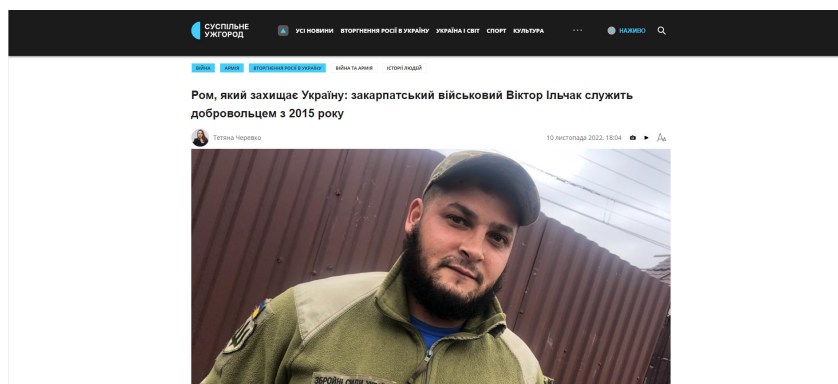
Where would one look for Nazis if the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is a Jew, there are synagogues all over the country, a vast cultural and spiritual center, “Menorah,” stands in Dnipro, and thousands of Israeli pilgrims go to Uman every year. Furthermore, numerous Jews, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and ethnic Russians are defending their native Ukraine against Russia. There’s even the famous incident of the Romani capturing a Russian tank³ for the Ukrainian Armed Forces!

Also, let’s not forget: Ukraine has no right-wing radical party in power. They started by hunting for “Nazis” in Ukrainian history.

While Putin’s state media outlets are openly demonizing Stepan Bandera, the so-called “liberal” media are doing so in a more subtle way. They invite historians to interviews and then ask them to talk about the “crimes of nationalists.”

For example, the Meduza website published a lengthy interview with the Ukrainian historian, Professor Yaroslav Hrytsak entitled “When did the Ukrainian people come to existence? Was Ukraine a colony of Russia? What do Ukrainians think about Bandera?”⁴ On the Kholod website, we find an interview with a lesser-known Ukrainian historian, Oleksandr Babich, entitled “*Thanks to the KGB — if they didn’t murder Bandera in Munich, no one would ever remember him at all.*”⁵

Both conversations address Ukraine’s national liberation movement within the context of the 20th century. At that time,



Above: Ukrainian media outlet Suspilne Uzhgorod tells the story of a Romani soldier fighting in the Ukrainian Armed Forces

the only way to protect the Ukrainian identity was through a fierce struggle. Unsurprisingly, the fighters for independence at the time were not “ideal” from the point of view of modern political and social ethics.

When discussing the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), Yaroslav Hrytsak complains about “fascist influence,” and Oleksandr Babich uses the word “fascists.” However, they were discussing a period when the term “fascism” — the ideology of militant ultra-nationalism — had not yet acquired the negative connotations that would emerge after the Second World War. Many European countries were home to similar political movements and parties that shared this ideology.

Influential historians, including an associate professor at the University of Latvia, Eriks Jekabsons, are clear in their disagreement⁶ with the use of this offensive word in connection with the Ukrainian liberation movement. Historians assert that “nationalism,” the ideology that considers nations the highest form of social unity, is a more appropriate term.

The unfortunate reality is that the intricacies of this terminology are almost unknown to the general public. Most people think “fascism,” “Nazism,” and “nationalism” are synonyms and mean an ominous evil. After reading such articles, readers are left with no doubt that the “Banderites were fascists.”

A Ukrainian historian and co-author of the article collection “Underground Operations of the OUN in the East of Ukraine,” Pavlo Khobot, currently serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, asserts that this is the objective of “good” Russian media.

“This is also a PSYOP, but a more sophisticated one, aimed at the ‘always doubting’ intelligentsia, as well as at the Western public. We also observe the involvement of Ukrainian ‘researchers’ in PSYOPs.⁷ As a result, the involvement of foreign and local experts produces supposedly ‘objective’ material, i.e.: ‘We, Russians, did not imagine this. This is what competent people say, including your own, Ukrainian, experts.’”

“Against the backdrop of modern Russian crimes against humanity, even if the Ukrainian nationalists of more than 80 years ago were really as bad as they are described, what would it change, and what would it imply? Does it justify the idea that Ukrainians can be murdered?” asks Pavlo Khobot.

According to Mr. Khobot, it is also extremely absurd to look for similarities between the OUN and the German Nazis or the Ustaše (Croatian groups that carried out the genocide of Serbs): *“Even during the period of expected efforts to find a common language with the common enemy, the Soviet Union, the OUN was critical of Nazism in its internal documents. They considered the possibility of opposing the Germans if they didn’t support Ukrainian statehood, which, in fact, happened.”*

As a result, many members of the OUN suffered German repression.

“At the world-famous Babyn Yar, the place of mass executions of Jews, more than 600 nationalists were killed, including a leading actor of the OUN,

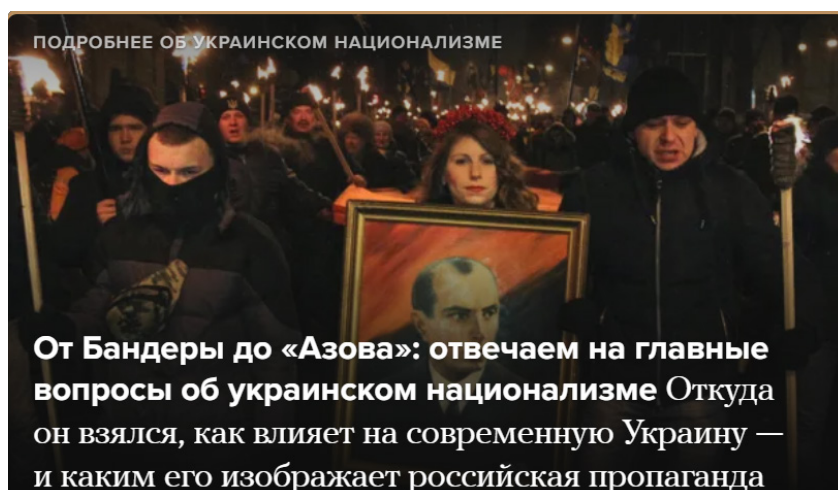
the poet Olena Teliha and her husband. That is, those who, according to the lies of our enemies, would kill Jews themselves,” Pavlo Khobot reminds us.

‘Key questions’ and false conclusions

The Kremlin’s propaganda narratives seep through a Meduza article that fits their typical agenda.

The title is: “From Bandera to ‘Azov’: we answer the key questions about Ukrainian nationalism.”⁸

To the untrained reader, Konstantin Skorkin’s article may appear objective. After all, the author refers to the research of international historians, adds photos, and agrees that “‘Ukrainian fascism’ is a tool of Russian propaganda.”



Above: Meduza’s article titled: “From Bandera to ‘Azov’: we answer the key questions about Ukrainian nationalism. Where it came from, how it affects modern Ukraine — and how it is portrayed in Russian propaganda”

But sometimes, Skorkin includes overt manipulation. For example, when it comes to the alleged extermination of Jews by Ukrainian nationalists:

“There is no recorded evidence of direct orders from the OUN leadership to exterminate Jews. However, the author of a critical biography⁹ of OUN leader Stepan Bandera, Grzegorz Rossolinskikh-Liebe, believes that the organization was also politically responsible for mass violence against Jews in Ukraine. In particular, militia units formed under the auspices of the OUN took part in the 1941 pogrom¹⁰ in Lviv,” Skorkin said.

As we can undoubtedly see in the text, the guilt of the Ukrainians not being proven does not prevent the author from illustrating his article with horrifying photos of Jewish pogroms.

“This is an example of semantic manipulation, when words like ‘ethnic cleansing,’ ‘Holocaust,’ and ‘slaughter’ are used in headlines and texts, and ‘nationalists,’ ‘OUN,’ photos of Jewish pogroms in Lviv are placed next to photos of OUN members. Thus, despite the fact that the article

itself claims that there are no sources about the OUN's involvement in the pogroms, a connection is subconsciously made, implying that the OUN is probably involved somehow," Pavlo Khobot commented on the techniques of Russian propaganda.

According to Pavlo Khobot, we are dealing with "pseudo-objectivism":

"This happens when articles are based on pseudo-scientific published works of notorious historians of the Western world — who look for anti-Semitism and Nazism in Ukrainian nationalism. As an example, we can mention a Polish-German Ukrainophobe, Rossolinsky-Liebe, who is hardly a historian due to his low qualifications¹¹... In reality, members of the OUN, including its leaders — for example, Fedir Vovk — head of the OUN in the Nikopol region, saved Jews from the actual Nazis¹². As a result, he was awarded the title of 'Righteous Among the Nations' after the war."

Looking for 'Nazis' in modern times

According to the "good" Russian media, the danger of nationalist-Nazis also exists in modern Ukraine:

"For example, there are known cases of ultra-right groups attacking¹³ Roma settlements, gay parades, and left-wing events, or cases of anti-Semitic and racist attacks," said Skorkin.

As an example, he points to a news story about attacks on Roma in 2018. There was a spontaneous wave of attacks on Roma camps in different cities of Ukraine. Unfortunately, a young Roma man was killed in one of the attacks. This came as a shock to all Ukrainians, as the Roma have lived peacefully with the local population for many centuries.

However, most of the experts who analyzed the tragedy at the time believed that many things indicated that the attackers' activity was "instigated by individuals within the Russian Federation."¹⁴

In particular, the then head of the SBU, Vasyl Hrytsak,¹⁵ said that this was not the first time that Russia had tried to play the ethnic tensions card:

"You probably know that in Kharkiv, we prevented a terrorist attack when a resident of Kharkiv was going to blow up a monument to URA soldiers. She said that the people from Russia who ordered these actions also suggested throwing pigs' heads into synagogues," Mr. Hrytsak said.

In 2016, unknown young people brought a pig's head to a synagogue in the city of Uman. In this case, law enforcement officers detained members of the "Torpeda" gang, who, according to the investigation, carried out similar actions at the behest of their handlers from Russia.¹⁶ This activity continued.¹⁷

One could assume that Ukrainian law enforcement agencies are trying to justify local "Nazis" in this way. However, foreign media also published several articles about Russia's creation and financing of extremist organizations around the world.

In addition, the 2016 summit of EU leaders in Brussels included a discussion of intelligence data that Russia was secretly funding far-right and fringe parties in Europe.¹⁸ The US special services also confirmed¹⁹ the threat.

According to journalists,²⁰ Russia continues to spend large amounts of money to finance far-right movements and parties.

Медиазона
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Убийство Владлена Татарского
Запрет концертов
Запрет ЛГБТК+
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Суд приговорил к четырем годам колонии украинского неонациста по делу «Правого сектора»

Второй западный окружной военный суд приговорил к четырем годам колонии участника запрещенной в России организации «Правый сектор» Игоря Пирожка. Об этом [сообщает](#) РИА «Новости» со ссылкой на пресс-службу ФСБ.

Пирожка обвиняли в организации деятельности экстремистской организации (статья 282.2 УК). Он частично признавал вину.

Above: An article on Mediazona titled: "Court sentences Ukrainian neo-Nazi in Right Sector case to four years in prison"

The "good" Russian media are also looking for "neo-Nazis" in the ranks of the modern Ukrainian army. The discrediting campaign began on the first day of the war.

In December 2014, Mediazona published an article titled "Around Azov."²¹ Despite the title, the article has nothing to do with the regiment. It focuses on a member of the Battle Organization of Russian Nationalists (Russian: Боевая организация русских националистов), the Russian national, Aleksandr Parinov, alias "Rumyn," who Mediazona keeps referring to as a "neo-Nazi." The list of his crimes is followed by the statement that *"according to sources ... he is somewhere in Ukraine ... communicating with the Azov regiment."*

In 2015, there was another article with the vague title "‘Azov’ in Lublino. Supporters arrested."²² In it, Mediazona quotes the incomprehensible delusions of the Russian Interior Ministry about the arrest of arms dealers in Lublino, who, for some reason, are also suspected of having connections with "Azov."

All these years, "Azov" and "Right Sector" remained one of the leading "horror stories" used by the Russian propaganda machine.

While "Azov" had been at the center of the "neo-Nazi" threat narrative, this changed with the start of the full-scale Russian invasion and the subsequent formation of a new paramilitary unit of Russian citizens, the Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC), in August 2022. The RVC was now presented by the Russian "opposition" media as the centerpiece of the "neo-Nazi" narrative, relegating "Azov" to second place.

Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC) is the new target of Russian propaganda

Both pro-government and "liberal" Russian mass media rushed to demonize those Russians who joined the Ukrainian resistance.

The propagandists were more than happy to look into the past of the unit's commander, a Russian of Jewish origin, Denis Nikitin. It turned out that in his youth, he had been a soccer hooligan with right-wing views.²³

Along with Nikitin, the propagandists stigmatized all participants in the corps, even though the RVC has repeatedly stated that its ranks include people with diverse political views.

"Everything that is published in Wikipedia about the nationalist views of the corps leaders should be viewed with humor and skepticism. It is 100% a narrative of Russian propaganda, according to which every serviceman of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is a 'Banderite,' a 'Nazi' and a fascist," says Alexander (call sign Fortuna),²⁴ a member of the RVC.

Nikitin himself denies accusations of neo-Nazism. *"My attitude to any form of genocide, extrajudicial killings, shootings, and executions has always been negative,"* he says.²⁵

"Russians are not the only ones serving in the Corps. There are Cossacks, Karelians, and representatives of other peoples of Russia. They don't do anthropometry at the time of enlistment," Roman Kuban, an RVC soldier, says ironically.²⁶

The soldiers have their own version of why the Russian opposition media play along with the Kremlin: *"For the current opposition, which emigrated quickly but failed to create a diaspora, we are a red rag. We have succeeded, and that's why they are trying to slander us, calling us Nazis and traitors, which is not true,"* Vladimir (call sign Cardinal)²⁷ says confidently.

Anyone in Russia who is willing to challenge Putin's criminal regime automatically becomes a "neo-Nazi" without any convincing evidence.

'Good' Russian bloggers are also 'actively looking'

Let's be clear: the Russian media, whether in opposition or not, are looking for Ukrainian "Nazis." The so-called "good" Russian bloggers also throw accusations regularly.

Take, for instance, the well-known writer Viktor Shenderovich, who has declared that he has observed "outbreaks of Nazism"²⁸ in Ukraine.

For Shenderovich, this manifests as Ukrainians' desire to radically reform modern Russia, a country marred by a history of violence and support for war. He has gone as far as to claim that the Russian people are Putin's hostages.

One could agree with his beliefs if one ignores recent opinion polls.²⁹ According to the polls, Putin's support in Russian society steadily grew during the second year of the bloody war. Currently, more than 80% of Russians approve of the policy of their leadership.

Russian opposition media player Ksenia Sobchak has a habit of throwing tantrums over so-called Ukrainian Nazism. She recently had a fit over Ukrainians who said representatives of the aggressor country should not feel comfortable at global cultural events. *"... The main thing to oppose is that Russians do not advertise anything, do not shoot films for Cannes, do not leave Russia, etc.? This is Nazism in general,"* Sobchak wrote.³⁰

Sobchak does not disagree³¹ with Putin's media about the "bad Banderites": *"The Banderites did terrible things. It's true. And the 'Azov' Battalion are typical Nazis. Who would deny that?"* the puppet oppositionist explains in her Instagram post.

Russian opposition activist and writer Dmitry Bykov and famous Russian musician Boris Grebenshchikov complained about “Ukrainian nationalism”³² during a recorded discussion. According to him, present-day Ukrainians are obsessed with a “plague of dislike” for Russians.

Bykov sees no difference at all between nationalism and Nazism, thus calling people who want to preserve their nation and culture “sick.”³³

A top Russian blogger, Ilya Varlamov, also sees “Nazis” everywhere: “Yes, indeed, there are neo-Nazis in Ukraine. Yes, indeed, there are fascists in Ukraine, these are absolutely disgusting people. You and I, we saw everything clearly. We saw all these swastikas and so on,” the blogger said.³⁴

The implication that Ukrainians are displaying “Nazi” symbols is a favorite “trick” of Russian propaganda.

In this regard, the Deutsche Welle fact-checker investigated³⁵ three instances of the most egregious recorded cases. The investigation showed that all cases were fabricated by the Russian propaganda machine.

However, probably the loudest “Nazi” scandal broke out in May 2023, when Ukrainian writers Artem Chapai and Artem Chekh refused to be presenters along with Russian counterparts at the PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature.

One Russian observer, Masha Gessen, accused Ukrainian colleagues of “blackmail” and “cruelty.”³⁶ A Ukrainian writer, Victoria Amelina, responded with irony, posing for a photo in a “Cruel Ukrainian Writer!” T-shirt.

Russian opposition writer Mikhail Berg saw a manifestation of “Nazism”³⁷ in her protest. *“I don’t know if this is already Nazism or just an extremely neglected case of zoological nationalism...”* he wrote on his blog.

A month later, Victoria Amelina (in the photo) — winner of the National Coronation of the Word Award and the Joseph Conrad Award — would die from severe wounds sustained in a Russian rocket attack on a cafe in Kramatorsk. At the time, the Russians burned 21 people alive.



Above: Deceased Ukrainian writer, Victoria Amelina, wearing the “Cruel Ukrainian Writer” T-shirt.

'Nazi' is someone who is against Russian Nazism

We need to admit that “good Russian” bloggers and “good Russian” media aren’t pushing for real change in their country. Together with state-sponsored Russian propaganda, they play a charade of “good cop, bad cop” to the whole world.

While the state-owned media slander and insult directly, the “good guys” resort to tricks. They say they are “trying to figure things out” because Russia is also “full of Nazis” since, according to them, Ukrainians and Russians are the same — “one people.” However, they have one goal in common: they want to prevent the disappearance of their “evil empire,” which, unfortunately, is the Russian Federation today.

American historian Timothy Snyder³⁸ explains, *“For the President of Russia, a ‘fascist’ or ‘Nazi’ is simply someone who opposes him or his plan to destroy Ukraine. And the Ukrainians are ‘Nazis’ because they do not consider themselves Russians and resist.”*

The views of the so-called Russian opposition are not that different from the narratives of Putin’s propagandists. They call anyone who refuses to negotiate with representatives of the aggressor country a “Nazi.”

Understandably, Ukrainians will keep refusing to negotiate as long as Russia keeps taking Ukrainian territories, committing war crimes, killing people, and burning cities to the ground.

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THE KREMLIN HAS NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT: EXAMINING THE COVERAGE BY MEDUZA AND NOVAYA GAZETA EUROPE OF THE MOST HEINOUS TERRORIST ATTACKS CARRIED OUT BY THE RUSSIAN ARMY IN UKRAINE

There is no room for ambiguity on this issue. Civilized people must stand together in unanimous condemnation of terrorism. However, when it comes to Russia, there is no doubt that terrorism is an integral tool of its warfare. The country has always practiced it and used its propaganda to shift responsibility onto others. Namely, blaming the victims of Russia's terrorist actions.

We must also consider how the so-called “good” Russian media outlets, which oppose the war and call themselves the opposition, view and cover the Russian army and their attacks on residential buildings, theaters, markets, and other civilian targets in Ukraine. Are they becoming a part of the Russian propaganda machine, helping the Kremlin to turn victims into terrorists, and vice versa, terrorists into victims?

We answered these questions by analyzing articles from two popular Russian media outlets that allegedly oppose the Kremlin — Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe — covering the most prominent terrorist attacks by the Russian Federation in 2023; including the Russian missile attack on a high-rise building in Dnipro on January 14 and the attack on the village of Hroza, Kharkiv region, on October 5.

Since 2022, the Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy has published a series of articles exposing the true nature of the so-called Russian liberal media outlets — those that declare their anti-war stance. The Institute's experts rigorously analyzed the articles for adherence to professional journalism standards and potential promotion of pro-Kremlin narratives.

It must be acknowledged that both media outlets have already been criticized for their coverage of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Kremlin narratives were found¹ in Meduza. It presented contradictory information, blurring reliable facts with the Kremlin's false versions, legitimized pro-Russia pseudo-republics, presented fake news from Russian official sources without refuting them, etc. We also subjected Novaya Gazeta Europe to scrutiny. In particular, its coverage of the detonation of the Kakhovka HPP dam by the Russians was highly questionable (this is addressed in part 2, chapter 1 of this book).

Like Meduza, it manipulated the information, suggesting that the dam collapsed by itself.

However, maybe when it comes to the large-scale Russian terrorist attacks, both media outlets change their policy and present objective information?

The main sources of information are from Ukraine

For this study, we selected eight of the largest Russian terrorist attacks of 2023 explicitly targeting civilian objects. We found 54 articles on the topic in Meduza, and seventy were published in Novaya Gazeta Europe. We identified the texts using keywords, namely the geographical names of the places where the terrorist attacks happened.

The majority of articles focused on the terrorist attacks in Dnipro (covered by both media outlets), Kramatorsk (covered by Novaya Gazeta Europe), and the village of Hroza (covered by Meduza).

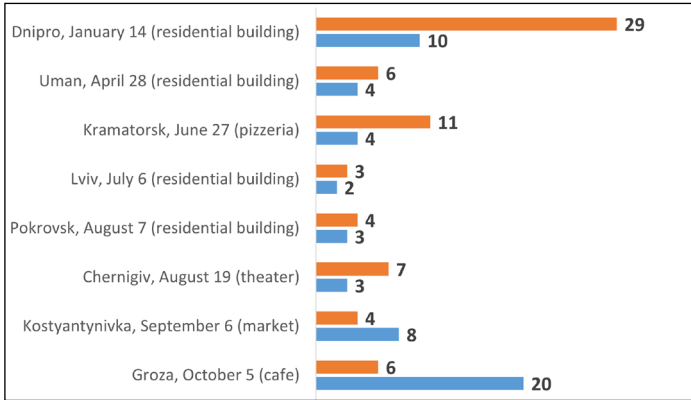


Figure 1.
The number of articles about Russian terrorist attacks — Novaya Gazeta Europe and Meduza

Now, let's look at which sources of information Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe referred to most often in these articles (Figure 2).

In both cases, Ukrainian sources of information are the most prevalent. Meduza favored Ukrainian media sources, while Novaya Gazeta Europe relied on Ukrainian law enforcement and defense agencies. However, they also quoted Russian official sources, which, of course, denied Russian attacks on civilian objects in Ukraine and disseminated various nonsensical theories.

Further analysis demonstrated that even though Ukrainian sources of information were used more often, manipulations were still present in these cases as well. Let's examine the primary propaganda narratives of Russian media outlets that claim to oppose the Kremlin.

Russian troops shelled Lviv, and Ukrainian troops shelled the 'annexed DPR'

We conclude that Meduza's coverage of the topic was the most manipulative and, therefore, pro-Kremlin. Not only did it quote the Russian government's lies, namely that rabid nationalists were hiding

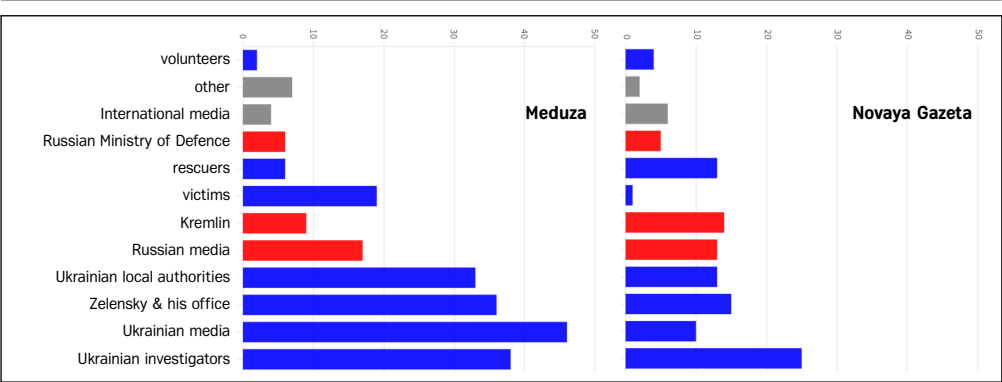


Figure 2. Main sources of information in the articles about the Russian terrorist attacks in the shelled Ukrainian apartment building, but it also promoted the narrative that Ukraine is “bombing Donbas.” It works like this. Meduza mentions the Russian terrorist attacks and adds information about the alleged Ukrainian shelling of the self-proclaimed “DPR” and “LPR.” So, it looks like both sides are attacking civilian objects.

A typical example from Meduza:

The headline: *“Russian military fired missiles at Lviv; Ukrainian [military] — at Yasynuvata in the annexed DPR. See the consequences of the shelling.”* One gets the impression that both sides are shelling Ukrainian cities. Thus, the Russian war crime — hitting a residential building and civilian infrastructure, resulting in 10 dead² people and 42 injured — is placed alongside the shelling of Yasynuvata as reported by the “authorities of the annexed DPR.” Mayor Sadovy and other official sources comment on the situation in Lviv, including the State Emergency Service, and in Yasynuvata by the so-called Joint Center for Control and Coordination on ceasefire and stabilization in the so-called “DPR.” Meduza is perfectly fine with this. They are both treated as official representatives who can be trusted equally.

Thus, the media is pushing the Kremlin’s narrative that Ukraine is “bombing the peaceful citizens of Donbas.” Russia is forced to respond.



Above: Meduza published a photo illustrating the consequences of the shelling of Donetsk. In the description, Meduza cites the “authorities of the annexed DPR”

Similarly, Meduza confirms that the Russians shelled Uman and Dnipro.

In the first case, they published photos of a residential building in the Cherkasy region being hit. The next article was entitled “Consequences of shelling of Donetsk.” Once more, they were referring to the so-called head of the self-proclaimed “DPR,” Pushilin. Meduza claims this is a reliable source of information. Why? They also mention the “mayor of the annexed city” of Donetsk. If the article refers to the “mayor” without quotation marks, it must mean that Meduza also considers him a legitimate and democratically elected official.

Разрушенный торговый центр в Донецке

Утром 16 января ВСУ обстреляли Калининский район в восточной части оккупированного Донецка. По данным пророссийской администрации города, пострадали трое мирных жителей, а также разрушены супермаркет и аптека на остановке напротив мясocomбината.



Above: Meduza published a photo illustrating the “destroyed shopping center” in Donetsk. In the description, Meduza cites the “pro-Russian administration of the city”

In the second case, they report on the rescue mission in Dnipro after a Russian attack on a high-rise building. They followed up with a story about a “destroyed shopping center in Donetsk.” Furthermore, this text claims that Donetsk was shelled by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, despite the absence of any official Ukrainian statements to corroborate this claim. They quote the “pro-Russian administration of the city.”

As for Novaya Gazeta Europe, such an approach is less common. Instead, the “two sides” are often juxtaposed in the background. For example, the paper ran articles about the missile attack on a high-rise building in Uman and about the missile attacks on the cities of Pokrovsk and Kramatorsk. Ukrainian official sources and Russian ones say the exact opposite. The newspaper did not attempt to verify what happened, nor did it distinguish between fact and fiction.

The most illustrative example is the article³ entitled “Those Who Bring Death,” which was published in the wake of the Russian terrorist attack in the village of Hroza. The article begins with the following statement: “Novaya Gazeta Europe has gathered evidence of other heinous Russian attacks on civilian targets in Ukraine.” The article then presents photos with brief descriptions of the events in question. However, in nearly every instance, they include objections from Russian officials for unclear reasons.



Фото: Олег Петренко / EFE / EPN

14 января ВС РФ нанесли ракетный удар по 9-этажному жилому дому в Донецке. В результате атаки погибли 46 человек, в том числе шесть детей.

Удар по Донецку стал одной из самых кровопролитных атак после атаки на школу в городе Часов Яр в 2022 году. В российских городах начали массово появляться стилизованные мемориалы в память о погибших: один из них — нацистский Лес Харкова в Москве, куда в последующие атаки уже начали приносить детей.

Во время атаки выжила 23-летняя Анастасия Шевц, которая несколько часов прождала на седьмом этаже разрушенного дома. За несколько месяцев до удара погиб ее молодой человек. Она рассказала в соцсетях, что во время атаки лежала на кровати, где ее накроют детскими.

«Я не знаю, где родители. Говорят, что их выжили жывыми, а в уверения, что они были на кухне, которой уже нет», — написала она.

Через несколько дней стало известно, что ее родители и домашней кот Речад погибли.

Пресс-секретарь президента РФ Дмитрий Песков заявил, что дом получил повреждения в результате работы украинской ПВО. В Минобороны утверждают, что 14 января ракетный удар был по объектам военного управления Украины и связанным с ней объектам энергетиков.

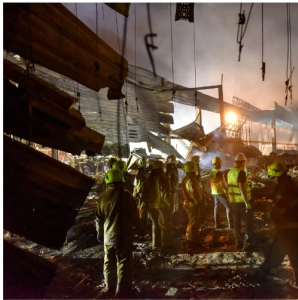


Фото: Олег Петренко / EFE / EPN

Вечером 27 июля 2022 года российская армия нанесла ракетный удар по торговому центру «Амстор» в Краматорске. Погибли 21 человек, еще около 60 обратились за помощью.

Одна ракета упала в непосредственной близости от ТЦ, другая — по расположенному рядом Краматорскому наводу аэромобильных машин. Пожары, возникшие в результате атаки, охватили более десятка тысяч квадратных метров. В здании обрушилась крыша.

Минобороны РФ подтвердило удар «высокоточными оружием» по Краматорску, однако отрицает попадания по самому ТЦ. Ведомство утверждало, что удар был нанесен по объектам ВСУ с заложниками, расположенным на территории Краматорского завода дорожных машин.



Фото: ТНМК, Украина

Вечером 9 июля 2022 года российская армия нанесла ракетный удар по двум жилым домам в городе Часов Яр. В результате атаки было частично разрушено пятиэтажное общежитие — в нем полностью обрушились два подъезда, другой пятиэтажный жилой дом был сильно поврежден. Погибли 48 человек, в том числе ребенок.

Минобороны РФ подтвердило удар по городу. По версии российского ведомства, в районе города Часов Яр «уничтожены пункт временной дислокации 118-й бригады территориальной обороны ВСУ». Также ведомство заявило об «уничтожении трехсот националистов» в результате удара.

По данным The New York Times, за два дня до атаки в общежитии произошла украинская военная операция. На момент самого удара, как пишет издание, в здании жили как минимум 10 гражданских, в основном пожилые женщины.



Мария Шабалина / The Washington Post / Getty Images

Утром 8 апреля 2022 года российская армия запустила ракету с надписью «За детей» — вокзал в Краматорске, где на тот момент в ожидании эвакуации собрались не менее 500 мирных жителей. В результате удара погибли 61 человек, в том числе 7 детей.

Под удар попали сам железнодорожный перрон, частично заполненный топливом и автомобильная парковка рядом с вокзалом, где после удара начался пожар.

В Минобороны РФ заявили, что 8 апреля в Краматорске у российских войск «никаких боевых задач не было и не планировалось», а удар по вокзалу был нанесен «ракетными дивизионами украинских вооруженных сил на районе населенного пункта Добрыполь».



Фото: Роман Гасинский / EFE / EPN

Утром 14 июля ВС РФ нанесли ракетный удар по центральной части Винницы. В результате удара погибли 27 человек.

Как писали местные СМИ, во время удара в центре города было много людей — там в расположении на площади офисным центром находились клиника, кафе, аптека, почта, сбербанк и детские учреждения. До этого удара Винница считалась одним из самых безопасных городов Украины, туда приехало много беженцев.

Среди погибших — четырнадцатилетняя девочка Лиза с синдромом Дауна, которая вместе с мамой Ириной Дмитриевной приехала из Киева в Винницу из соображений безопасности. В день удара они шли в центр для детей со специальными нуждами, который находился в квартале от центра города. Лиза Дмитриевна погибла.

Минобороны РФ признало нанесение удара, объяснив попадание по центру города «артиллерийским пунктом размещения минометов», который якобы там находился.



Мария Шабалина / EFE / EPN

Утром 14 марта российская армия нанесла удары по плавательному бассейну «Игуана» и Драматическому театру Мариуполя, где в тот момент укрылись, по разным данным, от 600-1500 мирных жителей.

До сих пор сложно установить точное количество погибших. В городском управлении Мариуполя заявили, что погибли около 300 человек. Информационное агентство Associated Press провело собственное расследование и пришло к выводу, что в результате удара могло погибнуть до 600 мирных жителей.

По данным Amnesty International, бомбы пробили крышу в восточной части театра и сдетонировали в зрительном зале, куда потоки обвалились несущие конструкции крыши.

В Минобороны РФ заявили, что здание Драмтеатра не рассматривалось в качестве цели, поскольку там не было законных. По версии ведомства, здание было захвачено и возвращено членами полка «Азов».

Above: Novaya Gazeta Europe article titled “Those Who Bring Death” containing justifications for missile attacks from Russian officials (highlighted in blue)

The newspaper repeated the lies of the Russian Ministry of Defense about the drama theater in Mariupol being blown up by the “Azov,” about “hangars of the Armed Forces of Ukraine” being hit in Kramenchuk rather than a shopping center, and about the “temporary location of the Nazis” attacked in Vinnytsia and not the downtown of the city. The text made no mention of the fact that the statements made by the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation are, in fact, misinformation. Therefore, they present the Russian official information as being as reliable as Ukrainian and international sources. This is manipulation, plain and simple. When discussing terrorist attacks, the culprits are given a platform, and their comments are taken at face value.

A defining feature of Russian media outlets is that they present mutually contradictory versions of events. This approach is evident on the channel TV Rain (addressed in part 1, chapter 1 of this book) and in

Meduza (part 1, chapter 2), which present “both sides” in its photo section on shelling, as well as photos from state Russian agencies such as TASS and RIA Novosti, with their reports about the Armed Forces of Ukraine shelling civilians in Donbas.

We conclude that there is a common trend among the exiled Russian media — they are spreading information about Russian terrorist attacks wrapped in the context of official Kremlin propaganda.

Therefore, the Russian media can claim as much as they want that they are telling the truth about the war, the repressions, and everything that the Prosecutor General’s Office and the Kremlin dislike. They are not. This kind of coverage is precisely what the Kremlin wants. This approach will continue to influence readers of Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe to believe that “both sides are to blame” for this war, that “Ukraine is shelling Donbas and therefore the war is justified,” and that “the targets hit by the Russian troops were not really civilian.”

Ukraine shells its own people

The Russian media is also pushing this narrative. They’re relying on former Presidential Office advisor Oleksiy Arestovych, “military analyst” Ruslan Leviev, and some Western outlets to spread their version of events in Dnipro and Kostiantynivka.

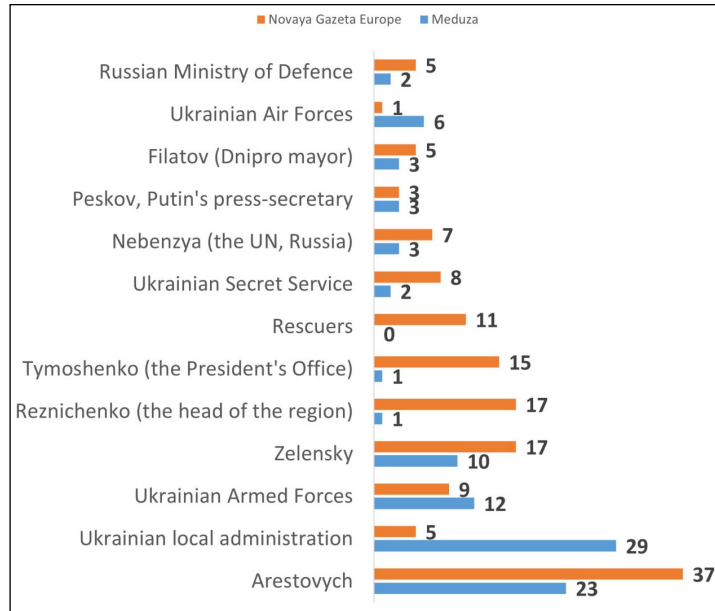
Both media outlets make Arestovych the focal point of their articles about the Russian terrorist attack in Dnipro, mentioning him 37 times in Novaya Gazeta Europe and 23 times in Meduza. However, Novaya Gazeta Europe also gives significant coverage to other official Ukrainian sources, including Zelenskyy, Reznichenko, the head of the Dnipro Regional Military Administration, Tymoshenko, and the Deputy Head of the Presidential Office. In comparison, Meduza quotes Arestovych far more often than Zelenskyy and the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Arestovych was a key source for Meduza. Along with the Kremlin’s statements that their missile followed the correct trajectory for its intended target and “if the Ukrainians had not resisted, everything would be fine,” Meduza repeatedly emphasized Arestovych’s first statement regarding the Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile, which allegedly caused the explosion. Furthermore, they repeated it several times, even after Arestovych apologized and admitted his mistake, noting that it was a Russian missile and Ukrainian forces simply had nothing to intercept it with.

For example, let’s review an excerpt from the photo selection⁴ “In Dnipro, they say goodbye to those who died from the missile attack and continue to look for survivors in the wreckage”:

“Russian troops shelled the city of Dnipro on January 14. One of the rockets hit a high-rise building, destroying two blocks of apartments. According to Ukrainian authorities, 45 people were killed, including six children. A total of 120 Dnipro residents were injured. Oleksiy Arestovych, an advisor to the Presidential Office, admitted that the Russian missile was shot down by Ukrainian air defense forces. After an outpouring of criticism in Ukraine, he apologized for his words and resigned. His version was then echoed by Russian officials...”

Figure 3. News sources used by Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe



We consider this passage to be manipulative. The sequence of events as presented is as follows: Arestovych expressed his assumption about the Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile, then he was criticized, and then he resigned, but his “version” of events was revived through the statements of Russian officials.

However, that is not the case. Meduza failed to mention that Arestovych had corrected his initial statements about the attack. He stated definitively that a Russian X-22 missile destroyed the building, and only then did he resign. Meduza misleads readers by combining unsubstantiated claims with factual information.

For Novaya Gazeta Europe, Arestovych is popular not only as a speaker, but also as a journalistic personality (Y. Latynina’s article titled “Arestovych will be employed as Arestovych,” where the author expresses indignation at the “*cannibals for whom it is more important to discredit Arestovych than to use the strike on Dnipro to procure ATACMS or superior air defense for Ukraine’s Armed Forces*”). They also devote more attention to his resignation. Novaya Gazeta Europe is quick to point out that he apologized for broadcasting unverified information, which was a significant improvement over Meduza.

While Meduza repeatedly included Arestovych in the chorus of Kremlin propaganda that reiterated the version about Ukrainian anti-aircraft missiles, Novaya Gazeta Europe promoted the same “version” without mentioning Arestovych but referring to Russia’s UN representative V. Nebenzia and the Kremlin’s spokesperson D. Peskov.

In the case of the Russian attack on the market in the city of Kostyantynivka, both Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe persistently reported that it was a Ukrainian missile, referring to various sources. To every objection from the Ukrainian side, the media responded with references to various “experts” who held opposing views. It seems that promoting

these contradictory assessments was more important for Russian journalists than reporting on the victims and the consequences of the strike. Their articles were primarily dedicated to analyzing whose missile it was.

Both media outlets employed strikingly similar approaches:

- The Russian analyst Ruslan Leviev was quoted frequently, with 10 mentions in Meduza and 15 in Novaya Gazeta Europe. He absurdly claimed that it was Ukraine that shelled itself. For a detailed breakdown of the flaws⁵ in this author's "analysis," including the Kostyantynivka case, see the Toronto TV YouTube channel.
- They also detailed an article in the New York Times, which is essentially the same as Leviev's "analysis."
- They quoted the German tabloid Bild, particularly an article by their columnist Julian Röpke, who said that the missile came from the Ukrainian side.

Novaya Gazeta Europe added Yulia Latynina to this chorus of "experts." While the above authors at least watched some videos and observed missile shadows on cars, this "analyst" boldly claimed⁶ that she received information from people (anonymous, of course) who had a good understanding of the situation at the front and were "close to the Ukrainian side's battlefield." She stated that the incident at the market in Kostyantynivka was "an accidental missile attack by the Armed Forces of Ukraine on civilians." Furthermore, Latynina develops a conspiracy theory:

"I was told that two Ukrainian helicopters from Kyiv hastily collected all the missile's parts and took them away."

She seems to suggest that they wanted to remove the evidence. The Russian blogger concludes her analysis by calling on the Ukrainian authorities to recognize that it was a friendly fire incident. She believes this will set them apart from the Russian state propaganda and allow them to report "actual facts." Sure, the Ukrainian authorities must trust anonymous "experts close to the battlefield" and reject the information of the competent investigative agencies!

The Russian media considers such "experts," who were either not present at the location, used information from "anonymous sources," or produced "analytical" articles without any competence, as reliable sources. It is also clear that any reliable fact can be dismissed using this method of the "choir of experts."

This is precisely what Kremlin propaganda does. We recall their discussion of the Bucha video, in which they claimed to see a corpse moving a hand. It has been revealed that Kremlin propaganda and the Russian opposition media employ the same methods from time to time. They find some irrelevant detail in a video or a photo, make a fuss about it, amplify it, and conclude that Ukraine is shelling its territory, concocting

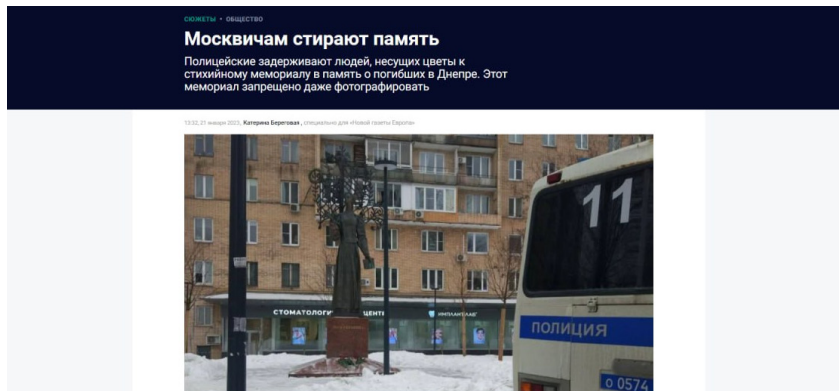
dangerous poisons in its biolabs, or assembling nuclear weapons in basements. This is a propaganda tactic aimed mainly at Russian-speaking people.

The monument to Lesya Ukrainka is 'drowning in flowers'

Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe use Russian war crimes as a pretext to discuss the myth of Russia-wide condemnation of the war. They regularly publish reports about Russians bringing flowers to various monuments. One is the “Solidarity” monument, erected to honor the unity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. While outside the scope of this analysis, that is problematic in its own right.

After the strike on the city of Dnipro, several similar texts were published in the analyzed media. They reported that residents of different cities in the Russian Federation brought flowers to monuments. As a rule, they refer to various Telegram channels with photos of a monument with bouquets of flowers.

The text about the Russian shelling of a high-rise building in Uman presents the act of bringing flowers as a “third side.” First, they report information from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine and Minister Ihor Klymenko. Then, they discuss the “spontaneous memorials” that have taken place in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yoshkar-Ola, Vologda, Kirov, and Izhevsk. They conclude by quoting the Russian Federation Ministry of Defense, which stated that the strike was targeted at “places of temporary deployment of Ukrainian Armed Forces’ reserves.” The report ends with this statement.



Above: An article in Novaya Gazeta Europe titled “Muscovites are getting their memory erased,” which misrepresents the level of support for Ukraine in Moscow

Thus, they say that the Russian military is targeting something there (it is impossible to say what exactly), and ordinary Russians are bringing flowers to the monuments to honor the victims of this war.

It is not possible to establish whether these are singular expressions of sympathy for Ukraine or part of a larger, more widespread phenomenon. However, some journalists portray these events as evidence of overwhelming support for Ukraine in Russian cities.

In Katerina Berehovaya's article⁷ titled "Muscovites are getting their memory erased," published after the Russian shelling of a high-rise building in Dnipro, she states the following:

- *"The monument to Lesya Ukrainka on the Ukrainian Boulevard in Moscow has been drowning in flowers for a week now"* — the word "drowning" here is questionable and misleading. In particular, it's interesting if it is misleading readers, because reporters also say that people who bring flowers are detained and the flowers removed.
- *"The reaction of Muscovites to the tragedy was not protests and marches, but the silent laying of flowers"* — this text generalizes, implying that all Muscovites responded in precisely the same way, which, again, is misleading.

We strongly believe that this language does not reflect the real picture. It ignores numerous manifestations of support for the full-scale invasion by Russian society. This includes "Muscovites." Yes, of course, it is necessary to express gratitude to all of those who were not afraid to speak out about Russia's bloody war crimes. However, this behavior seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

And yet, what is happening?

The coverage of the largest Russian terrorist attacks in Ukraine in 2023 makes it clear that the shelling of civilians provides the Russian "opposition" media with a reason to constantly promote the Kremlin's official versions. The websites of Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe are full of the same Kremlin media scavengers' accounts of the strikes: "the funeral of a high-ranking nationalist" in Hroza, "foreign mercenaries" in a pizzeria in Kramatorsk, "temporary staging areas of the Ukrainian Armed Forces" in high-rise buildings in Lviv. Some of these justifications are even featured in the headlines, which gives the Russian opposition media outlets a platform to propagate these claims further. Ukraine's statements are consistently presented as just one of the versions, while Meduza also publishes a narrative about Ukraine's armed forces "bombing Donbas" in response to Russian war crimes.

Furthermore, the Russian media are relentless in their claims that Ukraine is shelling its own territory. They conveniently ignore the fact that some of the commentators pushing this narrative are not competent and use "anonymous sources" or manipulative arguments.

The idea that Russian society does not support the war and condemns Russian strikes on civilians is another widespread and misleading narrative.

In conclusion, we assert that when covering the major Russian terrorist attacks, the Russian opposition media remain faithful to the traditions of modern Russian journalism: they do not attempt to discern the truth, identify who is telling the truth, or expose who is lying. They simply relay information from different sources, carefully labeling it as a version.

There is no distinction made between terrorists and victims in such reports. After all, according to the terrorist's version, a victim who resists terror is also a terrorist.

Finally, only one question remains. Why do we still believe that these so-called “good” Russian media outlets are opposed to the Kremlin? They seem to be successfully enforcing all the narratives created by Putin and his cronies to justify the destruction of Ukraine.

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FEELING SORRY FOR RUSSIAN MOBILIZED SOLDIERS IN UKRAINE? TV RAIN IS TO BLAME!

A few months after the start of the so-called “partial mobilization” in Russia, on the air of the “opposition” TV Rain channel, host Alexey Korostelev stated outright that the channel was trying to “help” Russian military personnel “with equipment and basic necessities at the front.” This statement caused confusion because, at that time, this channel was seen as opposing the war. In the wake of the backlash, the editors of TV Rain apologized and denied that their channel was somehow helping the Russian military. The host was fired.

Nevertheless, the Latvian National Council for Electronic Mass Media revoked the channel’s license. It turned out that this was not the first violation recorded by the authorities. The channel’s broadcasts were also suspended in Estonia and Lithuania. However, Reporters Without Borders condemned the decision, calling it “censorship.”¹ The organization’s statement made several arguments supporting this definition. The host explained that he misspoke, the editors apologized, and TV Rain repeatedly and clearly stated that it was against the war.

This incident on TV Rain is an excellent opportunity to understand their actual position and how exactly they report on what is happening. We must ask whether a media outlet that has clearly declared an anti-war position can still support the war at an editorial policy level. Or can they just say one thing and do another?

To understand this, we must look at the TV channel’s history before this incident of “misspeaking”: from October 31 to November 5.

‘Thermal underwear is out of season’

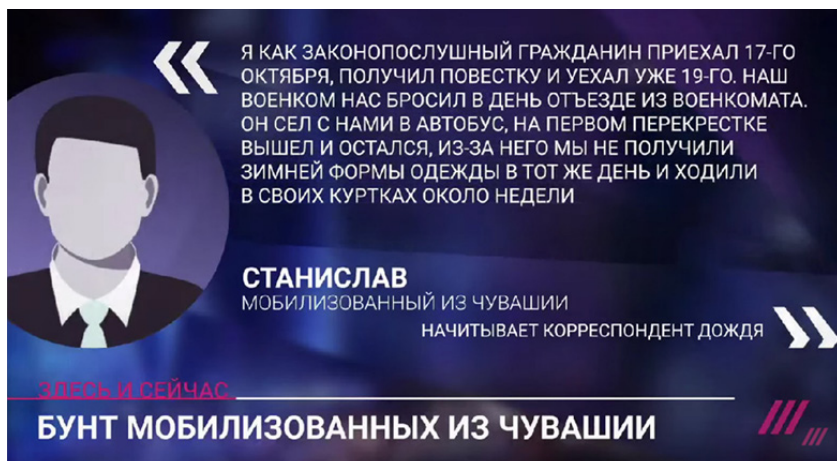
In most stories about the Russian mobilized troops Russian journalists focused on their uncomfortable lives. They took information on this topic from Telegram channels, friends, and relatives, or the mobilized themselves. For example, in the program of November 5, a friend of a mobilized soldier, Alina, talked about the lousy quality of uniforms, thermal clothes out of season, and bad boots. She concluded: *“People are very frustrated ... people do not understand what is going to happen, will they have clothes and shoes, when will they be trained and if they will be trained at all? As far as I know, there have been only a few shooting practice sessions and, let’s say, they were not very effective. To sum up, the mobilized do not understand what awaits them, and no one tells them anything. Nobody gives them anything useful, let’s say, and they practically have not trained them at all.”*

Based on this narrative, the Russian mobilized want normal clothes, functioning equipment, and quality training. From program to program, TV Rain recounted more and more details of “their sufferings” due to the lack of underwear, clothes, food, and the lack of skills and training on how to kill Ukrainians.

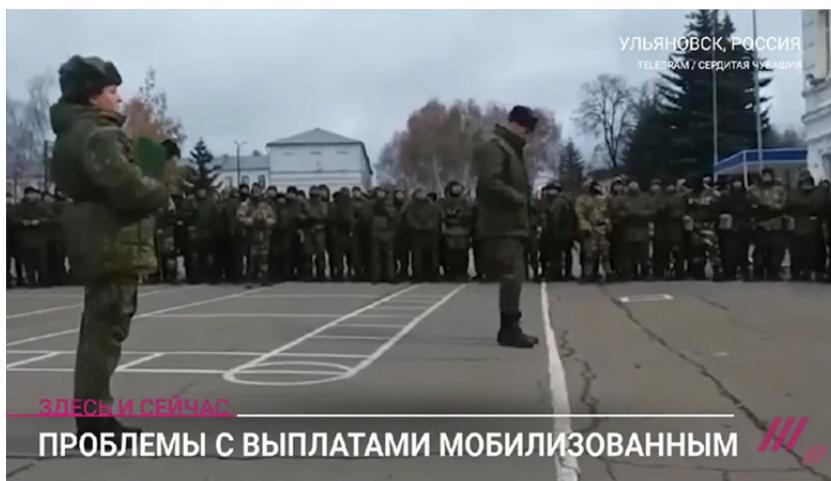
The media set up a dedicated mailbox for the mobilized individuals and their relatives to file complaints. Maybe this was the same mailbox that Korostelev had in mind when he spoke of “help” for the mobilized. Some of the stories were based on the contents of the mailbox. But the real question is: how did the station try to help the mobilized? Did the journalists try to improve the conditions at the front and in the training centers? Or did they encourage the mobilized to avoid mobilization, and if that failed, to lay down their arms and refuse to participate in the Russian aggression?

‘We wore our jackets for about a week’

Another story from November 4: Here, the guest of TV Rain is a Russian mobilized man named Stanislav. He emphasized that he was a law-abiding citizen and had come from afar to a military commissariat to fulfill his duty. That is, going to Ukraine as an occupier for him is natural because Putin asked him to. However, Stanislav was not satisfied that he was not given a winter uniform: *“I was outside Chuvashia when I got a call from the military commissariat. They said I had to come with documents. I told them: let me wrap up everything at my current place of work; I should leave some money for my family. Then the military commissar called. He said that if I didn’t come, they would ask the prosecutor’s office to pick me up. As a law-abiding citizen, I arrived on October 17 and received a notice. And on October 19, I was deployed. Our military commissar abandoned us on the day of our departure. He got on the bus with us and got off at the first stop. Because of him, we didn’t get the winter uniforms that day. And we wore our own jackets for about a week.”*



Above: TV Rain citing a Russian mobilized, Stanislav, sharing his grievances about his deployment (Video still)



Above: TV Rain's news piece on how the Russian mobilized soldiers are not receiving their promised payments (Video still)

The situation here is the same. People are outraged not by the fact that there is mobilization, not by Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine, but by the fact that they did not get winter uniforms. And TV Rain is ready to broadcast it. Perhaps so that the Ministry of Defense of Russia would hear this and help with the uniforms?

'Our state refuses to pay ... 195,000 rubles that our president promised us... So why should we go to war?'

TV Rain also talked about the riots done by mobilized men. The first one was in Chuvashia. Do you think that the riot was against mobilization in general or against the fact that they would soon be sent to Ukraine? No! They were simply not paid.

"Our state refuses to pay us the 195,000 rubles promised to us by our president, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. So why should we fight for this state, leaving our families without support?" — says one of the mobilized in a video from a Telegram channel.

Instead of condemning such an attempt to profit from the war and the deaths of Ukrainians, journalists picked up the topic of the lack of payments. They talked to a human rights defender and an expert about how the promise of Russian officials to pay mobilized soldiers would affect the Russian budget. So, they want to help with payments so that the soldiers have something to fight for?

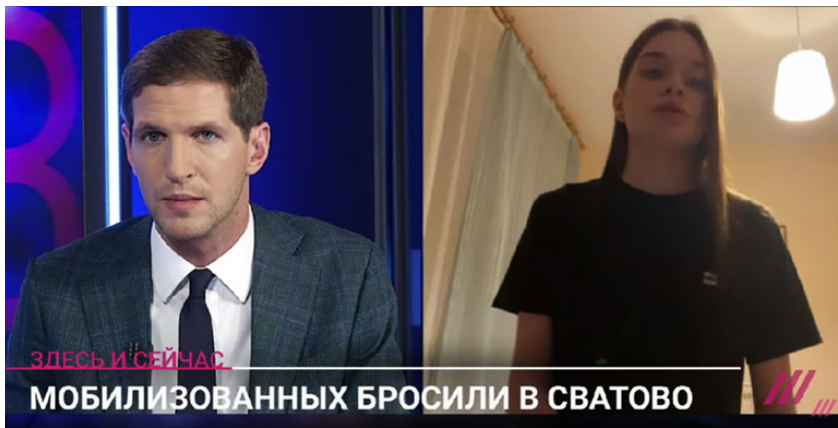
Another riot was reported in Tatarstan:

"The mobilized came out with a demand to improve living conditions, complaining about rusty machine guns, poor supply of food, firewood ... lack of any training. Later, it became known that the head of the training center, Deputy Prime Minister of Tatarstan Rustam Nigmatullin, visited them. And now all the problems of the servicemen have been resolved."

It's the same here as in the previous report: the officials gave food and firewood to the mobilized and assured them that everything was fine now. The journalists felt there was nothing else left to report.

**'They are not criminals, they are not deserters,
they do not refuse to help the Fatherland'**

The stories about the stay of the mobilized in Russia emphasized the lack of clothing, food, and training. In contrast, when discussing the stay of the Russian mobilized in Ukraine, the interlocutors of the journalists from TV Rain begged for help from the Ministry of Defense of Russia. They demanded that the command address their problems. Therefore, the goal was not to convince mobilized men to lay down their weapons and refuse to fight or surrender. Interestingly, such stories avoid the topic of the conscripts going on to take part in the aggression against Ukraine. In all cases, TV Rain presents defenseless Russian mobilized, armed only with machine guns and shovels, who are being shot at by Ukrainians armed to the teeth.



Above: Host Tikhon Dzyadko (left) interviews the wife of a Russian mobilized soldier (right) on TV Rain (Video still)

For instance, the wife of a Russian mobilized man in the occupied Luhansk region said on air on November 2: *"He and about 300 other people were left without commanders, without food, other necessities, and medicine. They themselves do not know their exact location; they have been sitting in the forest for a week, completely abandoned..."*

Later, during the interview, the host, Tikhon Dzyadko, tried to find out what the wife had done to save her husband. She told him that she had appealed to various authorities, who had done nothing. The journalist dared to ask the following interesting question:

Dzyadko: "If the hotline of the Ministry of Defense does not answer, if representatives of the prosecutor's office come to the location, look at the mobilized and, as you said, go away, what other options are there? To flee? Surrender? Do something else?"

Interviewee: “Well, our guys are definitely not considering those options. They hope that at least with our help, they will be heard.”

Dzyadko: “But what if no one listens?”

Interviewee: “We will fight to the last for our men. They are not criminals, they are not deserters, they do not refuse to help the Fatherland, if the Fatherland will help them at least by providing some standard help in the form of medicine, other necessities...”

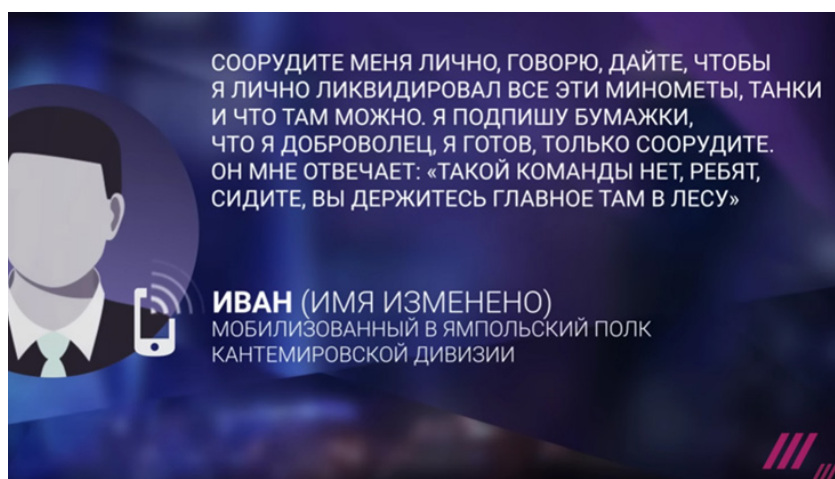
Tikhon Dzyadko's suggestion to flee or surrender was a positive aspect of this broadcast. At the same time, however, TV Rain was used as a platform to influence the Russian Ministry of Defense: Come and help the mobilized. They want to fight. They are loyal to Putin and Russia!

‘We gave ourselves an order to go on reconnaissance, we observed, but we had no weapons to eliminate the Ukrainian military’

In the same program, the journalists played a recording of a conversation with one of the mobilized, Ivan (name changed) from the Yampol regiment. He made it clear that he wanted to fight and was ready to take the initiative, but he had no appropriate weapons.

The story begins with the typical hardships endured during military training. They wore “ankle boots, as if they were made of concrete,” military training consisted of one day, and people were sent out like “cannon fodder.” However, this attitude of the superiors did not affect the mobilized’s resolve to “eliminate the khokhly” (“Khokhly” is a derogatory, ethnic slur used by Russians to refer to Ukrainians).

Ivan stated: “We personally gave ourselves the order to go on reconnaissance, observe, and so on, but we did not have weapons to eliminate them... I went to the commander, I said, c’mon, give me everything in full: give me night-vision goggles, a silent machine gun... Let me personally



Above: TV Rain citing a Russian mobilized soldier, Ivan sharing that he is ready to fight, but doesn't have good enough equipment to do so (Video still)

eliminate all these mortars, tanks, and whatever else is possible. I will sign the paper that I am a volunteer, I am ready. Just provide everything.' He answered: 'There is no such order, guys, sit down; the main thing is to stay there, in the forest.'"

TV Rain broadcast all of this without any commentary. There was no reaction to what was said, neither before nor after. Apparently, we should feel sorry for the occupier, who, if he had the support, would gladly assist Putin in seizing other people's territories, other people's property, and taking the lives of Ukrainians.

'Our president ... sends our boys ... to certain death, without supplying anything'

Some of the stories in TV Rain focus on the mobilized Russian soldiers who, after fighting on the front lines, decided to desert and return home. This is a definite plus. But for some reason, it doesn't go beyond discussing it superficially. The TV channel's producers could, for example, invite an expert to give step-by-step instructions on how to do it. How can they return home without becoming accomplices to Russian aggression?

The wife of one of the soldiers, Alyona, was invited to the program on November 5. One of the hosts, Anna Mongait, told a story about the Russian occupiers in the Luhansk region who were dropped off in a forest strip, forced to dig a shelter, and left there without any orders. The soldiers came under fire, then abandoned their positions and reached the Belgorod region. There, they were met by the military authorities who confiscated their weapons, took their fingerprints, and pressured them to return to the front.

Alyona said: *"It has been said — Zelenskyy is sending his boys, his people, to hell... And what is our president doing on our side? Where does he send our boys, our sons, our fathers? To certain death. Without supplying anything. The guys had to use machine guns to hold the defense when the enemy was much better equipped. They also have thermal imagers; they have drones. Unfortunately, our guys didn't even have walkie-talkies. They couldn't contact the commanders from there; they couldn't contact anybody."*

In this story, they again present the participation of mobilized men in the war as natural. They also mention Zelenskyy "sending his people to hell." What?! They do not condemn Putin and his generals for starting and waging the war and committing numerous war crimes, but rather for not providing invading soldiers with weapons. Here is an excerpt from the interview:

Mongait: "It's not completely clear what exactly your husband is doing at the front line where he was sent. Are you trying to get him back somehow, and is he trying to refuse to take part in this war campaign?"

Alyona: "Yes. Going forward, it's not only my husband who refuses to participate. So, of course, I am trying, I am trying to get him back so that we, the women, can be seen and heard, because I am not the only one [in this situation]."

Mongait: "Who are you appealing to? What are you doing?"



Above: TV Rain broadcasts an appeal by Russian mobilized soldiers asking, among other things, to provide legal assistance (Video still)

Alyona: “In the beginning, we appealed. We called the Ministry of Defense, and they calmed us down. They said, ‘Calm down. We will take some measures, and everything will be fine.’ After that, none of the women, or rather I, could reach the Ministry.”

Mongait: “Well, everything is clear. Thank you, Alyona. We will follow your story. Let’s hope that your husband can come home alive now.”

The broadcast moves on to the next story.

Why not help Alyona and the other wives who finally realized that they did not want their husbands-occupiers to die in Ukraine? The only solution mentioned in the interview was to contact the Russian Ministry of Defense. Seriously?

Things get even worse later in the program. Right after the interview, the journalists say that “people who refuse” to fight are kept in basements and are being “tortured.” Again, what to do about it? The story doesn’t say. Once more, Alyona, her husband, and the other occupiers who finally came to their senses are left with nothing.

‘They have two ways out — go back and face death or go to prison’

TV Rain presented Information about those who declared their intention to refuse to fight in the same way on air on November 3. They showed the appeals of the mobilized, who *“found themselves without food, ammunition, drinking from puddles, there were no commanders and no communication with the commanders, our only weapons were automatic weapons and grenades.”* These occupiers also left their positions, reached the nearest military unit, and began to ask to be sent back to Russia. In the video message, they say that they want to return to Russia. They wrote statements, but no one heard them. The appeal ends with a plea: “Please provide us with legal assistance.”

Next, the host, Vladimir Romensky, said: *“The military prosecutor’s office is dealing with this case; they are threatening with charges of desertion. I would like to quote the wife of one of the mobilized with whom I spoke today: ‘They have two ways out — to go back and face death, or to go to prison.’”* So even here, after the mobilized directly asked for legal assistance, the program emphasized the dead end: either death or prison.

In the case of the Russian mobilized and TV Rain, it is another Chornobaivka all over again: the mobilized escaped the shelling, went back to their lines, and were rewarded for their efforts by being sent back under the shelling. Maybe something should be changed to break this vicious cycle? Maybe such activities are not effective, and it is necessary to discuss other approaches to find a way out.

Some advice for Russian journalists who are ‘against the war’

The problem of the TV Rain channel is the same as that of most Russian liberals and “independent” journalists. They are blind to the fact that Putin is not the only one fighting with Ukraine. The majority of Russia wants this as well. These stories make this evident. Some conscripts directly declared that they were ready to fight; the Russian state just needed to train them and give them weapons. Yet, journalists consistently failed to notice this. It’s a form of psychological displacement, a desire to hear and see only what you want, not what’s actually happening. This is why monologues about supporting Putin, eliminating Ukrainians, and fighting for Russia are presented on air without any reaction.

If you are against the war, you should be reacting! Otherwise, you are simply broadcasting calls for violence, terror, occupation, and killing Ukrainians. By uncritically platforming these statements, you become an instrument of aggression.

TV Rain’s primary objective is to evoke pity for the Russian mobilized among its viewers. Let’s be honest: if Russia had the opportunity to arm and train them all properly, we would have fully motivated occupiers who would go forward with joy and pride. We would have new Bucha’s and Mariupol’s in more of Ukraine. Rape. Looting. Torture. Death.

The journalists of TV Rain are lulling themselves and their audience with numerous stories about poor soldiers drinking from puddles and sitting in the trenches under fire, as if the mobilized did not want to fight. This is an illusion. It’s time to open your eyes and see that it is not only Putin who has blood on his hands, but Russian society as a whole. It also wants to conquer Ukraine and destroy the Ukrainians as a people. Mobilized Russian soldiers and their relatives say so on their own programs!

So, dear Russian journalists, if you’re genuinely “against the war,” you must finally open your eyes and acknowledge your war-loving society. Then use all your skills and talents to change it:

- Don’t get tired of repeating that Russia’s war against Ukraine is evil, and anyone who fights on Russia’s side is complicit in a crime.

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- Emphasize that the only correct course of action for a Russian soldier is to lay down their weapons and refuse to fight.
 - Help the families of the mobilized — but not with getting compensation for the “breadwinner” who went to kill Ukrainians. Help them get their loved ones back home. Give them step-by-step instructions on how to do this.
 - Do not intimidate mobilized soldiers who refuse to fight with Russian basements and tortures. Document these and other crimes committed by Russia against its own citizens. Invite human rights defenders to explain how the mobilized can take action in such cases.
 - Unite Russians against the war! Call on them to protest — even abroad. Especially abroad. If you’re Russian and you’re against the war, show it! Let the whole world see!
 - Look for leaders who are willing to lead the anti-war movement and eventually form the opposition Russian government.
 - Tell the stories of Russians fighting on the side of Ukraine. Tell them about the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment and the famous Belarusians giving the Russian army a hard time.
 - Call on those Russians — who are able to — to donate money to the Ukrainian army. In this war, the Ukrainian military is their ticket to the future. Make sure your audience knows that Russia, its current regime, and its armed forces are working against their own people.
 - After each story about the war in Ukraine, you must ask yourself: has it helped to bring us a step closer to ending this war?

Do all this, but only if you are against the war and want to stop it. If not, the Latvian regulator’s accusation is justified. You are a threat to the national security of Europe and the entire civilized world.

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PART 3

OPINION LEADERS

FOREIGN AGENTS OF THE KREMLIN: WHAT ORDERS DO ‘GOOD RUSSIAN’ INTERVIEWERS FOLLOW?

In an information war, as in any other, all means are fair game. One of the most effective tools of Russian propaganda is the interview.

The interview as a weapon: Preface

The interview format makes it possible to show the world a gallery of “victims of the Putin regime” and the “heartless West” that imposes sanctions on the already unfortunate Russians.

We have analyzed the content of the most popular interviewers on Russian YouTube. These projects are designed for different age categories. Some examples are Yury Dud’s extremely popular program “vDud” (“вДудь”), Ekaterina Gordeeva’s show “Skazhi Gordeevoi” (“Скажи Гордеевой” meaning “Tell Gordeeva” in Russian), Irina Shikhman’s program “A pogovorit?” (“А поговорить?” means “How about we talk?” in Russian) Mikhail Kozyrev’s talk shows (on TV Rain), and the lesser-known channels of Galina Yuzefovich, Nikolai Solodnikov, and other projects.

Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the guests on these shows have been overwhelmingly Russian intelligentsia, cultural figures, and public intellectuals. All of them constantly complain that their financial and spiritual lives have deteriorated significantly due to the war.

What is the main goal of all these projects?

First and foremost, these programs are designed to win the hearts and minds of international audiences (that’s why the most popular programs have English subtitles). They wish to make Westerners sympathize with Russians — the bearers of “great culture” who are “hostages” to autocracy.

If Westerners feel sorry for the Russians, they may try, at the bare minimum, to get them to ease the sanctions. Their utmost goal is to get the viewer to form an opinion that there is no need to help Ukraine resist because the “good” Russians will make peace with their “Ukrainian brothers” as soon as everything is over (read — as soon as Russians conquer Ukraine).

Above all, their goal is to prevent the disintegration of the “Great Russian Empire,” which is still a source of arrogance for Russians, regardless of their level of intelligence, education, and “opposition” stance.

We can unhesitatingly attribute all these shows to one of the wide varieties of Russian propaganda. They are even more dangerous, more insidious than the more blunt “official” indoctrination. After all, this

propaganda is promoted by intellectuals, humanists, and opinion leaders, does not contain hate speech, and successfully imitates high-quality cultural content.

Some experts cite another, less obvious purpose of these projects: to get the guests to talk so that the special services can determine their “loyalty index.”

No Sobchak left

Until recently, the pinnacle of Russian YouTube was two well-known “opposition” interviewers: Yury Dud (“vDud” show, 10 million subscribers) and Ksenia Sobchak (“Ostorozhno: Sobchak” meaning “Beware, it’s Sobchak” in Russian, 3.5 million subscribers).

However, with the start of the full-scale invasion, Sobchak finally threw off her liberal mask.



Above: Ksenia Sobchak (left) and Yury Dud (right) (Video still)

During the so-called “Wagner’s Rebellion,” the blogger condemned the riot of the mercenaries because it “plays into the hands of the other side [Ukraine].” In other words, she made it clear that she was rooting for Putin’s occupiers.

“I am angry, I don’t make decisions, and I see tragic mistakes. But I love my country, and I would never wish it defeat and disintegration,” Sobchak writes,¹ calling the mass war crimes of Russians “mistakes” and Putin’s regime “my country.”

Now that Sobchak has proven that she’s not really in the opposition, let’s focus on another star interviewer. Yury Dud is known not only in Russia, but also abroad. Many people, especially in the post-Soviet space, believe that he is a model of modern journalism. He is young, charismatic, and knows how to ask sharp questions, which makes his videos compelling.

Because of his oppositional views, the Putin authorities declared Dud a foreign agent and forced him and his family to emigrate to Spain.

However, many researchers of the information space also have doubts about his opposition stance.

For example, in 2018, the famous media personality and psychologist Larisa Voloshina called² Dud — “Kiselyov for the advanced” (Dmitry Kiselyov is a well-known Putin propagandist). *“There is no Dud. Just as there is no Kiselyov. There are different channels of influence on the minds of Russian, Ukrainian, and Western citizens. Each group has its own,”* the journalist wrote.

So, what’s wrong with Mr. Yury?

What is ‘strength’?

The host of the program “vDud” emphasizes that he is an “ethnic Ukrainian.” However, many Russian soldiers who fire upon Ukrainian towns and villages have roots in Ukraine.

While Dud publicly mentions his heritage, he rarely talks about the environment he grew up in. His father, Aleksandr Petrovich Dud,³ is a professor of the Military Department No. 3 of the Faculty of Military Education at the Bauman Moscow State Technical University Military Institute.

According to Russian media, he is the co-creator of 12 inventions for the Russian military industry. One was patented⁴ on the eve of the full-scale invasion and is probably already being used in the war against Ukraine. It is a device that improves the mobility of tanks.

They say a person should not be judged by their parents, but by their words and deeds. Let’s look at what those are. The star interviewer has repeatedly spread Kremlin narratives. In 2018, when Russia had already occupied Crimea and Donbas, Dud broadcast the Kremlin’s central thesis about “fraternal nations.” *“I understand how many things are complicated between us, but I will remind you anyway: Russians and Ukrainians are brothers forever,”* the blogger wrote,⁵ replacing the word “war” with the vague expression “many things.”



Above: “Strength is in truth,” “What is ‘strength’, brother?” — Some of the slogans of the Russian war against Ukraine originating from the “Brat” duology

In one of the programs, he emotionally asks⁶ writer Boris Akunin: “Why the hell is NATO expanding to the East?” repeating the Kremlin’s familiar “war with NATO” narrative. He argues with the Ukrainian journalist Dmytro Gordon that *“it’s not only Russia that’s to blame for the war, but also the authorities of Ukraine”* [41:55],⁷ repeating the favorite message of Russian propaganda that “not everything is straightforward.”

Journalist Petr Verzilov, who joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine to secure a better future for Russia, was asked by Dud what it was like to fight against the “Fatherland.”

Dud’s “brand” question⁸ is “What is ‘strength’?”

This is a quote from Aleksei Balabanov’s film “Brat,” (English: “Brother”) a cult classic in Russia from the end of the 1990s. It features the main character, gangster Danila Bagrov, a veteran of the Russian-Chechen war, carrying out vigilante justice, punishing people he deems evil. While in the first part, the gangster “restores order” in Russia, in the second part he believes that he has the right to “establish” justice in the United States.

Is it a coincidence that expressions from this duology (“Brat” and “Brat-2”) are the main slogans of Putin’s war against Ukraine (“Strength is in truth,” “We do not abandon our own”)?

Russian mass media write that Dud also likes this story of the “people’s avenger” and even named his son Danila in honor of the main character. The media personality also produced documentaries: “Balabanov. Genius Russian Director” and “Sergei Bodrov — the quintessential Russian superhero.”

The recently deceased Russian oppositionist Alexei Navalny, who Putin killed, was also a fan of the “Brat” films. In 2021, when he and his wife were returning to Russia from Germany (where he was being treated after the Russian special services poisoned him with Novichok), he recorded a short video⁹ on the plane. Yulia Navalnaya quoted from the film “Brat” to the camera: *“Boy, bring us some vodochka. We are flying home...”*

The question must be asked: why in Russia are there so many similarities between the ideologues of war and those who seem to oppose them?

Why do both sides admire the character of Danyla Bagrov, who was exterminating the Chechen people as part of the Russian army? Who started a bloody vendetta just because he thought he was right?

Above: Article on BBC Ukraine titled: “Boy, bring us some vodochka. We’re flying home.’ Why Ukrainians shuddered at Navalny’s phrase”

Is it a coincidence that the hero of this duology is hunting the “banderovtsi”? “You bastards, you will answer for Sevastopol!” says the character of Danila Bagrov (a phrase from the film “Brat-2,” which shows Russians’ true feelings about Ukrainian Crimea more than 20 years ago).

Yury Dud’s attitude to Ukrainian history is similar. The conversation with the famous Ukrainian gamer Ivan Rudskiy (aka Ivangai or EeOneGuy) clearly indicates this. Ivan said¹⁰ in an interview that his great-grandmother was a victim of the Holodomor, and his grandfather suffered at the hands of the NKVD, but Dud didn’t empathize with the tragedy. Instead, he asks, “How right am I that you’ve recently begun to ‘consume’ something on the subject of politics?” (implying that the only reason Ivan was talking about his family’s tragic past was because he had begun to become politicized). Dud also added that the current Russian authorities should not be blamed for the tragic past because Russians suffered just as much as Ukrainians.

Dud ignores the indisputable fact that the Soviet government directly targeted the Holodomor against the Ukrainian peasantry. He also ignores the fact that Putin dreams of reviving the USSR.

The most interesting thing is that the segment about the Holodomor completely disappeared from the finished interview. Only after a scandal¹¹ did Dud publish it on his Telegram channel (where the audience is much smaller than on YouTube).

‘Is Putin a krasavchik?’

Dud asked many of his subjects if the President of Russia was a “krasavchik”? A krasavchik is a slang expression in Russian that means someone who has done well, so Dud has been asking his guests whether Putin “has done well” in their opinion. “Is someone a krasavchik?” thus became a meme that is useful for Russian propaganda. It is no longer so important what and how the guests answered. “Putin — krasavchik” (i.e., Putin has done really well), repeated many times, sinks into the audience’s minds.



Above: Ilya Yashin (left) in conversation with Yuri Dud (right) (Video still)

The guests also had to answer another of Dud's "brand" questions¹²: "What would you say to Putin if you were standing before him?" This paraphrases the "crown" question of Yury's "comrade in business," the famous Soviet journalist Vladimir Pozner. He liked to ask people: "*What would you say to God if you were standing before him?*" But instead of God, Dud uses "Putin."

With the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the blogger slightly changed the question about the president of the Russian Federation. So, Dud asked Russian politician Ilya Yashin [35:51]¹³: "*Which of the world's politicians were more competent when dealing with Putin?*"

Therefore, having a functioning, mutually beneficial relationship is not enough, as is common among politicians worldwide. "Good Russians" believe that their president is exceptional, and the onus is on the other politicians to find ways to "handle" him.

These questions play suspiciously well to the Kremlin slogan "Putin is the president of the world," which propaganda bots have been actively spreading on social networks since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine.

'The Russians are not to blame,' it's all Putin, the West, and Ukraine

The content of all these "good Russian interviewers" is united by the common messages they send to their audience.

It is clear from the outset that the overwhelming majority of hosts and their guests are vehemently opposed to the notion of collective responsibility for the crimes of the Russian army. In almost every conversation, we hear that this is "Putin's war." The Russian people are marching into another country with weapons only because the authorities misled them. "*First we say that citizens under an autocracy have no rights, and then we blame the population for the decisions made by this autocracy,*" complained¹⁴ opposition activist Ekaterina Shulman in an interview with Mumin Shakirov (a journalist of the Russian Service of Radio Liberty).

"Putin isn't the only one to blame for the war. The West is just as responsible." This is the same rhetoric we've heard from Russian propaganda, which calls Western countries the main enemies of Russia.

In an interview with Mikhail Kozyrev, an oppositionist in exile, singer Vasya Oblomov forcefully criticized the West for waiting for resistance¹⁵ from the Russians, without understanding how difficult it is to live under an authoritarian regime.

Is it likely that the Russian intelligentsia, lacking the strength to fight, turned inward instead?

Unfortunately, no. Another well-known oppositionist, Nobel laureate Dmitry Muratov, stated in an interview with Yury Dud that he attended Putin's press conferences and had contact with him just one year before the full-scale invasion. Furthermore, he was satisfied with the president's "pragmatic position" on the so-called "L/DPR." Putin made it clear that he would not have these territories join the Russian Federation.

Muratov sincerely wondered¹⁶ what triggered the events of February 24, 2022. We must remember that at that time, Russia had already been occupying Ukrainian lands for eight years, and Putin had a history of making false statements.

In an interview with Ekaterina Gordeeva, the volunteer priest Gregory Mikhnov-Vaytenko, dressed in a cassock (wearing a traditional priest robe is a way to manipulate the audience), accused¹⁷ the West of failing to force the parties to negotiate and of supplying Ukraine with weapons for defense. *“Evil has been given additional powers,”* he stated, expressing his sadness [35:49].

In an interview with Marianna Minsker on the show “Vy derzhites” (“Вы держитесь” meaning “You Hold On” in Russian), opposition leader Mikhail Veller made it clear that he is unhappy with Ukraine’s partners. *“I said from the very beginning that it is beneficial for the West for this war to be long,”* the writer spread¹⁸ the classic Kremlin narrative.

According to the “good Russians,” what is Ukraine guilty of?

“If the government in Ukraine was as cunning and, let’s be honest, as smart as ours, nothing would happen,” singer Vasya Oblomov told¹⁹ Mikhail Kozyrev [44:49].

He defends the Russian authorities, who are hostile towards Maidan, on the grounds that he believes the Revolution of Dignity was not a widespread movement (despite the fact that up to one million people gathered in Kyiv and similar gatherings took place across the country).

“This is a classic quarrel, when both sides are to blame,” Yuri Dud states²⁰ to Ukrainian journalist Dmytro Gordon [41:59], broadcasting the Kremlin’s main propaganda message for his “liberal audience.”

‘We are all victims. Everyone has their own truth’

Famous interviewer Ekaterina Gordeeva was the most successful person in promoting this manipulation, which was invented by Kremlin propagandists. Her videos are aimed at a more mature audience than Dud’s. In each interview, she shows various victims of the war, treating each story with empathy, and selling it very well. She focuses her attention on refugees from Ukraine with different political positions, Russian mothers who lost their sons in the war, volunteers, and representatives of the Russian intelligentsia. Everyone has “their own truth,” their pain, and their losses. What could be wrong with this humanistic approach?

The fact is that, as a rule, the show does not offer any solutions. The people interviewed are merely props to be exploited for misery and sympathy. Not one of these interviewees calls on the Russian authorities to stop the slaughter, to return the stolen Ukrainian territories, or to call back the “sufferers” who went with weapons in hand to occupy foreign land.

On the contrary, the mothers of mobilized and contract Russian soldiers insist, through their tears, that their sons are “defending the Fatherland.” If everything [the war] is to be ended, then why did it have to start in the first place? Their complaints are primarily directed at the military-political leadership for poorly equipping the troops and not caring enough about the “boys.”



Above: Article on Radio Liberty Russia titled: "Pyotr Verzilov resigned as publisher of Mediazona after his interview with Dud"

"The children of Christ are on both sides," the priest wearing a cassock, Mikhnov-Vaytenko, preaches on the program "Скажи Гордеевой" ("Skazi Gordeevoy" meaning "Tell Gordeeva" in Russian).

"It's as if one of my hands is crippling my other hand," film director Lyubov Arkus tells²¹ Gordeeva [55:26], suggesting that Russia and Ukraine are part of one whole.

The guests of another well-known interviewer, Irina Shikhman (of the program "A pogovorit?" with 1.4 million subscribers), utilize similar rhetoric. *"Your phrase that there is no truth in war,"* Shikhman turns²² to Mikhail Kozhukhov. *"The first bullet hits this truth and shatters it. Like a mirror into many fragments,"* he replies. He adds that each "fragment" has its own truth, especially since "there is propaganda on both sides."

Do these words mean that the Russian military, which committed terrible crimes in Bucha, Irpin, Izyum, and other Ukrainian cities, also have "their own truth"?

The interviewers also push another narrative: a cease-fire. At first glance, it's a tempting offer; who doesn't want peace? But here's the catch: the Kremlin is also strongly hinting at freezing the conflict under the condition of appropriating the territories stolen from Ukraine. The guests on all the shows discuss the prospects of restoring relations between Russia and Ukraine. But they don't talk about the prospects of restoring the borders, which would end the war.

Went for an interview — became an 'enemy of the people'

All of these projects serve another terrible purpose, whether we are aware of it or not. After frank discussions with the show's hosts, numerous guests began to face challenges from the authorities. (It is worth noting that Ksenia Sobchak was repeatedly accused²³ of putting her guests in this position even during her "opposition" activities.) For example, after an interview with Dud, the Russian opposition journalist and AFU fighter Petr Verzilov was compelled to leave his role as the publisher²⁴ of Mediazona media outlet.

The popular Tatar band “Aigiel” also suffered repression after communicating with Dud: the band’s name was removed from the credits²⁵ of the TV series “The Boy’s Word.”

The renowned poet Vera Polozkova faced backlash following her interviews with Dud and Mikhail Kozyrev. Campaigns to remove her poems from the shelves²⁶ of Russian bookstores gained traction.

After an interview with Dud, actress Yana Troyanova learned that films and TV shows with her participation disappeared²⁷ from the libraries of Russian online cinema platforms and the TNT channel. These included the TV series “Olga,” the comedy “The End,” and the TV show “Last Hero. Actors vs. Psychics.”

We have to admit that there are TV shows, but there is no resistance

Considering all the above, we are forced to state sadly: Russian opposition journalism, much like the Russian opposition in general, is not a force capable of challenging the criminal regime today. Unfortunately, they often do not even set such a goal for themselves.

“I am not calling anyone to go to the square!” stresses²⁸ the priest Mikhnov-Vaytenko, who, although he does not support the war, does not advise fighting against the regime either. These words are the quintessence of the civic position of almost all “good Russians.”

However, it should be recognized that these interviews are crucial historical documents from Putin’s dictatorship era. They provide invaluable insight into the mindset of the regime’s passive accomplices, as seen in the case of the mothers of the mobilized. They also reveal the extent of the Russian people’s support for the war.

Interviewers provide us with a unique opportunity to analyze the thought processes of the Russian intelligentsia. Most guests, despite their apparent opposition, feel at home in the cultural and historical paradigm created by Kremlin propagandists.

Finally, this provides us with a clear picture of what “oppositional” Russian journalism is all about. It also gives us a good indication of whether we should listen to those whose “strength and truth” are in line with the values of the occupiers.

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DMITRY BYKOV – MESSENGER OF THE APOCALYPSE AND ETERNAL CITIZEN OF THE USSR

Why aren't Russians protesting against the war? Against Navalny's murder? Why do they still respect the Soviet Union? Why do they feel nostalgic for the past? We are confident that many people have asked themselves similar questions at some point.

There could be many explanations: a repressive regime, a revanchist mood in the society, and their propagandistic television. We have decided to seek out answers. We will look to the pool of modern Russian opinion leaders who judge the war harshly and declare their stance against it.

What are the so-called Russian liberal "opinion leaders" saying about Ukraine and Russia? Are they calling on Russians to protest or oppose the regime in other ways? How do they explain what happened to Russia? What do they say about its future?

If you have ever paid attention to the so-called Russian liberal "opinion leaders," you know that they are well-represented in the media. For example, before the full-scale invasion, the radio station Echo of Moscow was one of the platforms where many of them were regulars — Dmitry Bykov, Yulia Latynina, Viktor Shenderovich, Aleksandr Nevzorov, Stanislav Belkovsky, and others. After the station was banned, some of these commentators started or continued to grow their own YouTube channels and gave interviews to other "opposition" media. Some continued to work with the Zhivoi Gvozd channel, which is the successor to the Echo of Moscow.

We've decided to study the activities of one of these "liberals" and "oppositionists," the writer Dmitry Bykov, to identify the narratives he promotes and his comments on current events. He was a weekly fixture on opposition channels during the winter of 2023-2024, appearing on "Honest Word with Dmitry Bykov" on the Popular Politics ("Популярная политика") channel, the program "Classic News with Dmitry Bykov" on the Aleksandr Plyushchev channel, and "Navigator" ("Навигатор") on the Khodorkovsky Live ("Ходорковский Live") channel. He also does a lot of interviews and interviews others himself. In August 2023, he interviewed the former Advisor to the Office of the President of Ukraine, Oleksiy Arestovych. In November of the same year, he was interviewed by a Russian journalist, Mikhail Kozyrev. Dmitry Bykov is also sometimes invited to Ukrainian programs. In addition, he hosts programs about literature.

This analysis is based on six randomly selected programs on specified YouTube channels that appeared between December 2023 and February 2024. It also includes an interview with Dmitry Bykov by Mikhail Kozyrev. To reconstruct this Russian writer's position on the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Russian regime, and society, we focused on the repeated theses — leitmotifs he voiced in various programs regardless of channels or events he commented on.

'The collapse of the USSR triggered a large-scale regression in the world'

Putin called¹ the collapse of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” For Dmitry Bykov, the collapse of the “prison of nations” was also bad, because “*instead of freedom and development, we got an explosion of nationalism*,”² as he stated in an interview to Kozyrev. This Russian writer often said that for him, nationalism and Nazism are the same thing: “I really don't see the difference in these suffixes.”³ In his opinion, back in the day, Gorbachev should have issued a decree “forbidding nationalism” and should have “arrested and demonstratively tried the adepts.”



Above: Mikhail Kozyrev (left) interviews Dmitry Bykov (right; video still)

Bykov is also unhappy that the protests in modern Russia are fueled by patriotism, which he calls “nationalism.” Commenting on the recent riots in Bashkortostan, he says, “*The Bashkir protest must shift from a national [tone] to a social one.*”⁴ Furthermore, the entire January 21, 2024, program is dedicated to commenting on Lenin's quotes (!). Host Aleksandr Plyushchev asks Bykov questions about current events, and Bykov answers, as he himself says, with “golden” or “great words” of the former “leader of the proletariat.” With the help of Lenin's quotes, Bykov develops the theme of the “positive influence” of the Soviet Union on the nationalities living in it:

*“The only victory of the revolution in Russia was achieved thanks to the unity of all nationalities. Lenin was extremely skeptical of any nationalism — Jewish, Ukrainian, Polish. And he was right. I am absolutely sure that the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the wild archaization of, for example, Central Asia.”*⁵

Thus, Bykov is spreading two colonial myths. The first myth is that everyone lived peacefully during colonial times (the Soviet Union), and

the quarrels and wars began only after the system collapsed. The writer ignores the communists' policies regarding nationalities. He is blind to the fact that this policy of constant deportations, resettlements, and the mixing of peoples led to wars.

Bykov is fond of repeating the second colonial myth, which claims that the countries of Central Asia descended into "barbarism" and "savagery"⁶ after the collapse of the USSR. He claims that the Soviet Union tried to civilize them and that the "positive" influence was stopped, which led to a "large-scale regression."⁷ Bykov is clearly declaring the inequality between the colonizer (the USSR) and the "small, wild" natives. These peoples, however, had their own traditions of state building before being absorbed by the USSR, as well as their own cultures and languages, which the USSR successfully suppressed.

It would be false to claim that Bykov's attitude toward the Soviet Union is entirely positive. He states, for example, that the Soviet Union was "disgusting, no one denies that."⁸ But Bykov's inability to see the USSR's aggressive nature towards the nationalities that inhabited it, his attempt to rehabilitate the bloody dictator Lenin in the eyes of his audience (Bykov even recommends studying Lenin's works "on nationalism" in schools⁹), indicates that this Russian writer belongs alongside the other Russian "writers" who formed, supported, and glorified Russian colonial stereotypes.

'Ukrainians are my fellow citizens'

Bykov does not directly propagate the "Russians and Ukrainians are one nation" narrative. He admits that this is not the case: *"I have never proclaimed, as Vladimir Putin has, that Russians and Ukrainians are one nation. They are different peoples: ethnically, culturally, philosophically, and so on,"* he stated on the Khodorkovsky Live channel. He then went on to say: "But these are parts of one great country [the USSR]."¹⁰

Some more quotes by Bykov on the subject:

- "Ukrainians are also [like Russians] my compatriots ... because I was born in the USSR and swore an oath to the USSR."¹¹
- "Kyiv is one of the best cities in my homeland."¹²
- "The residents of Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Lviv are my compatriots. The People of Odesa are my compatriots. I grew up in this huge country [USSR]. I went to Kyiv to visit my grandfather's fellow soldiers, his friends. Every summer, we went to Tbilisi to see his comrades. I grew up with the feeling that all these people were my compatriots. And they still are, and not because we are one people. 'One people' is a speculative term, rooted in fascist propaganda: 'One people, one leader, one nation.' But we used to live in the same country."¹³

Bykov is not the only Russian opinion leader who finds it acceptable to talk about a common homeland for Ukrainians and Russians during the



Above: Renat Davletgildeev (right) in conversation with Dmitry Bykov (left) on the program "Navigator" on the Khodorkovsky Live Youtube channel (Video still)

full-scale Russian invasion aimed at eradicating all features of Ukrainian identity and replacing it with a Russian one.

He is entitled to his opinion, but several questions should be answered.

First, we must address an ethical question. Given the true nature of this war and the fascist nature of the modern Russian regime (Bykov repeatedly calls it precisely that), how correct is it to talk about a common homeland, a common nationality of Russians, Ukrainians, and, by the way, Georgians, too?

Secondly, if Ukrainians, Georgians, and Russians are not "one nation," but they share one homeland only because they were forced to live in one state, how does this position differ from the concept of "Russkyi Mir"¹⁴ which also has "no borders"?

'Arestovych is my idol'

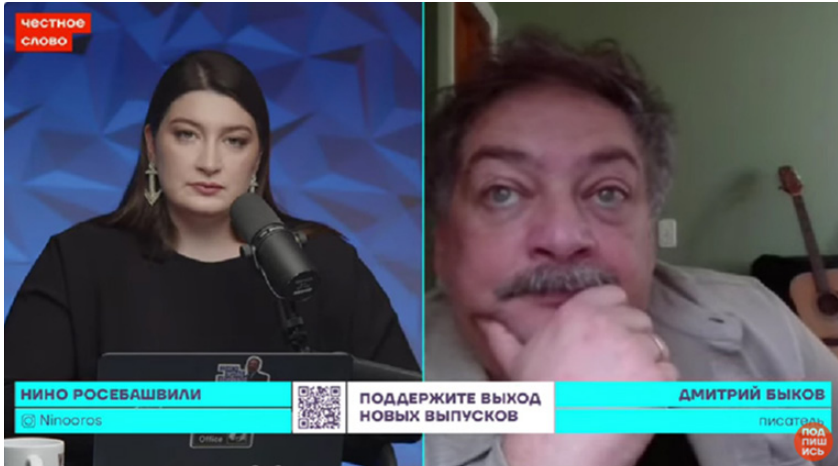
Dmitry Bykov is regularly asked to comment on Ukrainian politics. Some Russian commentators, like Aleksandr Nevzorov, refuse to do so, claiming it is a matter for the Ukrainians alone. Bykov, however, has no such reservations.

He often refers to Oleksiy Arestovych,¹⁵ former advisor to the Office of the President of Ukraine. In the program "Honest Word with Dmitry Bykov," he calls Arestovych a "barometer,"¹⁶ to whom it's important to listen. He also calls Arestovych his "idol,"¹⁷ a "hero" of 2023,¹⁸ along with Navalny and Zelenskyy. In an interview with Mikhail Kozyrev, he confidently stated that Arestovych could be "the leader of the opposition."

Who is Arestovych? At the outset of the full-scale invasion, he was a well-known figure to all those who followed the news from official Ukrainian sources. He informed the public about the developments at the front and reassured the Ukrainians as well as he could. His most memorable statement was in March 2022 when he confidently asserted that the war would end in "2-3 weeks."¹⁹ However, in January 2023, the advisor to the Presidential Office made a fatal mistake. He stated that the

missile that the Russians aimed at a residential building in Dnipro was a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile. We addressed this case in detail in part 2, chapter 3. He was forced to resign after facing fierce criticism and losing popular support. However, over time, he began to make the same talking points as Kremlin propaganda. He even had the nerve to say that Ukraine should negotiate with Putin because Western leaders are allegedly interested in continuing the war. *“The guys from the regional committees of Washington and Brussels ... are standing around us and applauding, watching as two monkeys [Russia and Ukraine] with knives jump on each other?”*²⁰ Furthermore, he labeled this war, in which Ukrainians are striving to liberate their lands, a “slaughterhouse with no real prospects for either side.”²¹

Such statements were met with criticism in Ukraine, resulting in Arestovych losing significant popularity. Nevertheless, numerous Russian liberal speakers, including Dmitry Bykov, persisted in disseminating some of his statements. Perhaps because they liked what they were hearing?



Above: Nino Rosebashvili (right) in conversation with Dmitry Bykov (left; video still)

Talking to host Nino Rosebashvili about the results of 2023, Bykov says that he disagrees with Arestovych in many respects. In particular, that Ukraine should start negotiations with the aggressor. However, at the same time, he rebroadcasts Arestovych's ideas in great detail. Specifically, the fact that it will be difficult for Ukraine to win, and the West does not want this to happen:

“It doesn't look like the West will allow Ukraine to be defeated. Even though they are not supporting it too eagerly or are not proactive enough. It doesn't look like Ukraine could win and regain the borders of last year either.”

He also said several times that Zelenskyy wants to continue the war, that Ukrainian society is supposedly tired of his “stubbornness”: *“Probably another six months of war will cause a serious internal political crisis in Ukraine, and there we will have to see who can ... change Zelenskyy;*

it is clear that the time of his political success, the time of his popularity is coming to an end."²² In the same interview Bykov stated that *"the Americans are promoting Yermak for the presidency [instead of Zelenskyy]..."* Is this an allusion to the idea that Ukraine is being externally managed? Putin always talks about it, so what is the difference between him and Bykov?

Bykov comments that he doesn't fully understand Ukrainian politics. However, of course, to comment on it on various channels, he doesn't need to. The channels don't care. For instance, in one of the interviews, he said, for some reason, that there are currently no reliable polls about whether or not Ukrainians are ready for negotiations. There absolutely are.²³ There are also polls on Ukrainians' attitudes towards Arestovych. According to KMIS²⁴ (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology) data, 76% do not trust him. On the other hand, 77% trust Zelenskyy.

'Russia is in the clutches of the devil... The whole world can't do anything'

What has been going on with modern Russia? Bykov had a mystical answer to this question in an interview with Mikhail Kozyrev on November 27 last year, stating that it has been captured by the devil, universal evil, "the darkest force in the world." Here's how it went:

*"Putin let the devil inside himself, and this devil inflated him from within... He's now bursting with the evil that is overwhelming him. It consists of antisemitism, hatred for knowledge, and misogyny. It consists of primitive forces. We're no longer observing Putin... We see Putin's shell being inflated from the inside by global evil. When they ask if Putin can push the button [deploy the nukes], of course he can. Because Putin right now is a glove on the hoof of a very scary puppet master."*²⁵

He said almost the same thing about Putin, who is "bursting from a power of unhuman nature," in an interview with Aleksandr Plyushchev on January 14 while commenting on the Russian dictator's trip to Chukotka:

*"There was not a single shaman at the meeting with him [Putin]. Shamans sense these things really well. A meeting with a shaman would be dangerous for Vladimir Putin. A shaman could feel some otherworldly spirit's presence in him and start expelling it."*²⁶

Bykov had another conversation about Putin, who was penetrated by the "darkest power in the world," with the host of "Popular Politics," Nino Rosebashvili, on the day Alexei Navalny's death was announced.²⁷

Mystical thinking is a way of interpreting events that removes responsibility from the individual. What can we do with the devil? With absolute evil? It is impossible to resist it. In addition, Bykov supplements his ideas about Putin's infernal masters with his reflections on the "divine design," or "divine plan": *"If Russia has to sacrifice itself, its very existence, in order to prove the perniciousness of the devil's teachings ... this is the price for destroying the devil."*²⁸

There's no arguing with religious consciousness. The elevation of the dictator to the status of an Antichrist will undoubtedly contribute to the fact that the already passive Russian society will find an additional argument for doing nothing. The last quote that Russia is sacrificing itself, that the devil is devouring it and thus Russia is being destroyed, is a reference to the "god-bearing nation"* narrative, which is nothing more than Ruscism (Russian fascism).

So, everyone's only option is to wait for Russia or its current regime:

- "Will take the next step and commit suicide; it'll happen any second now."²⁹
- Will enter "the phase of active autoimmune self-destruction, and all that remains to do is to continue living until the moment when it becomes uncontrollable."³⁰
- "... Will kill itself against its own wall."³¹
- "If good cannot defeat evil, then evil will devour itself. This is also one of the laws of physics... This does not require mass support of any opposition forces; it does not even require conscious opposition forces; a system that would dig a hole for itself is enough for this to happen."³²

Of course, one really wants to believe in scenarios where the Russian "opposition" (aware of it or not) will sit on top of a proverbial stove like the typical Russian fairy tale character Yemelia, who lazes around and while everything around him still manages to resolve itself: God's plan gets fulfilled, evil devours itself, digs a hole for itself, the devil is defeated, etc.

The modern evil — the Putin regime and the Russian society that supports it — is the result of the indifference and inability of liberal, democratic forces to oppose it. Democracy itself, as we understand it in Ukraine, thanks to a series of revolutions and now a war, is the daily responsibility of every citizen. It includes the control and criticism of the authorities, the struggle for human rights, quality media, etc.

In our opinion, Bykov's mystical interpretations will not help the Russian or Ukrainian people or, ultimately, the rest of the world. As a result — even if the described scenario comes true — we will get the same Russia, unable to handle itself and waiting for democracy to happen by itself.

'There will be bloody chaos'

Bykov does not have any step-by-step solutions for transforming Russia. Commenting on the future of Russia, he refers to Khodorkovsky, who promised that initially everything will get much worse — the Russian writer uses the phrase "bloody chaos" — but then it will get "much better."³³ He says the same thing in an interview with Nino Rosebashvili, commenting on Navalny's death:

* Originally from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Demons*: "Only one nation is 'god-bearing,' that's the Russian people..."

*“There will be large-scale chaos, none of his [Putin’s] supporters will survive in this chaos. Anyone who opened their mouths today to say something despicable about Navalny has signed their own condemnation... This will end in a very bloody, very big, very serious, speaking in Russian, ‘Bucha.’ * They always call a great turmoil a ‘Bucha.’ There will definitely be our own Bucha... Your own audience will tear you apart. You have trained this audience to have no limits; they don’t know how to stop. The viewers of today’s Sunday talk shows will tear their teeth out on the participants of modern talk shows.”³⁴*

In addition to the fact that this is generally similar to astrological forecasts and the predictions of so-called “wizards” and “fortune tellers,” what role does the Russian “opposition” play in this “chaos?” None. Obviously, they will be waiting until the day their competitors — those who support the Putin regime, i.e., communists, chauvinists, Nazis, Russian fascists — disappear on their own.

In the same interview with the Popular Politics channel, Bykov goes on to say that Navalny’s death has unleashed three forces that are now at work. First, there is the world community, which is supposed to become more active. Second, the Russian people must take to the streets: *“They’ll be arrested, but they can’t arrest everyone.”* Third is the Russian “opposition” that has left Russia. But he fails to specify what they are supposed to do.

Instead of conclusions

It is unreasonable to expect a writer to devise a comprehensive political program for the entire Russian opposition and society. However, in all these shows, Bykov acts as an opinion leader, listened to by Russians who do not support Putin’s regime. He does not use his platform to tell his audience how to be citizens of their country. Instead, he helps them to continue nostalgically remembering the “good old” Soviet times. At the same time, he popularizes colonial myths, interprets the desire of the formerly oppressed to regain their national identity as “nationalism-Nazism,” and also includes some magical thinking and semi-religious mantras.

It is inevitable that as the former Soviet republics move further away from Russia and embrace their own languages and cultures, they will inevitably turn their backs on Russian culture, and Bykov in particular. Let’s imagine Bykov’s hypothetical visit to Ukraine after the war ends or even now — with all his “views.” Would it be possible at all?

There is no doubt that one of the reasons modern Russia has descended into dictatorship and war is because its people have either approved or remained neutral towards authoritarian regimes. It is crucial to call a criminal a criminal. Bykov, however, sees Lenin as a positive character. While remembering Lenin’s “golden words,” the writer remains silent about his numerous crimes, especially those against the Russian people.

In Bykov’s own words, the second reason is the inability to offer your nation a particular narrative. In the Russian case, a narrative of resistance

* “Буча” meaning “noisy uproar, commotion” in Russian

to dictatorship will lead to real change. Yes, there are political prisoners who risked their lives to protest against the regime in modern Russia. These protests, however, achieved nothing. Yes, they were ready, based on Bykov's opinion, to fight against the wall. The wall still won. Unfortunately, neither Bykov's interpretations of the current state of Russia (everything will soon end with "the regime devouring itself") nor his predictions for the future ("bloody chaos that will lead to improvement") allow us to claim that this Russian writer can offer anything concrete and effective beyond catchy apocalyptic metaphors.

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BORIS AKUNIN: A RUSSIAN IMPERIALIST OR A PRO-UKRAINIAN DEMOCRAT?

Russian writer Boris Akunin is one of the most radical spokesmen for his country on the subject of the full-scale Russian invasion. He recently threw his support¹ behind the Freedom of Russia Legion, a group of Russians taking up arms against Putin. The writer admits his guilt for what modern Russia has become and talks about its imperial nature, which harms both its neighbors and itself.

It is evident that the Putin regime is not pleased with Akunin. In Russia, the regime accuses him of spreading lies about the Russian army and justifying terrorism. In February 2024, he was arrested in absentia.² Furthermore, his books are no longer published³ in Russia, and his name is removed from theater posters advertising performances of his works. He is also denied⁴ authorship.

In interviews given after the full-scale invasion, Akunin repeats that he left Russia in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea. He also condemned the annexation. However, his other statements about Crimea at that time were somewhat ambiguous.

In the same year, speaking at a literary festival in Krakow, he said⁵ that he saw the solution to the problem as follows: *“I would hold a referendum with long preparation and under strict international supervision. And let the Crimeans themselves decide where they want to go — there, here, or on their own. I was in Crimea before all this happened. I got the impression that many people do not want to live in Ukraine.”* This is a typical stance among Russian liberals who condemn Putin but still hold imperial views. They believe that Ukraine and other former Russian colonies should be part of Russia — politically and culturally.

It is worth noting that at the same festival, Akunin openly declared himself an imperialist:

“I may frighten you, but I am also a Russian imperialist. It’s just that my idea of a real empire is simply not the same as Vladimir Putin’s. It is an empire that is not feared but loved.”

Ukrainian readers of Boris Akunin have identified some imperial narratives in his work. You can learn more about this in the initiative “How Not to Become a Vegetable” (“Як не стати овочем” in original Ukrainian), where they addressed⁶ the manipulations in his texts.

In this article, we will analyze Boris Akunin’s words from interviews, speeches, and posts on his Facebook page. Is he a Russian imperialist or a pro-Ukrainian democrat?

‘The United States of Eurasia’

Let’s start by examining Boris Akunin’s views on Empire and its structure. In 2014, he declared himself a Russian imperialist. After 2022, he constantly emphasizes that the imperial essence, on the contrary, harms Russia. He proposes to revert to a proper federal system. The current one, he believes, is not functioning properly due to excessive centralization⁷ or the same “imperial framework of the state.”⁸ Thus, a kind of “United States of Eurasia” or “United States of Russia”⁹ should be formed on the territory of modern Russia, where nobody will be held within it by force.



Above: Nino Rosebashvili (right) in conversation with Boris Akunin (left) on the Popular Politics channel (Video still)

According to the writer, Russia is a kind of hostage to itself. If it continues to adhere to these very principles of “super centralism,” even under democratic leaders, it will be doomed to become an authoritarian state. *“This state, even if it is democratic, will have no choice but to abandon democracy, as it happened in the nineties, because during the weakening, during the democratization, separatist movements will start again, disputes between the parliament and the executive. There will be a temptation to use force again,”* he states in an interview with the Popular Politics (“Популярная политика”) YouTube channel.

What is wrong with this statement? It completely ignores the colonial nature of modern Russia, the numerous cases of discrimination against the peoples who inhabit it, and the attempts to suppress national identities. Only once, but without any details, does he state that the course of national development in Russia has “failed.” But what does that mean?

Researchers of Russian colonialism state that a typical Russian writer is able to see the unjust social system of the state and describe the suffering of people under it, but remains blind and deaf to cases of oppression of other, colonized, nationalities. In her book, “The Troubadours of the Empire: Russian Literature and Colonialism,” Eva Thompson writes that Russian writers tend to overlook the “other,” defined as a non-Russian individual with a distinct language, culture, and national tradition¹⁰. As we will see below, this description fits Boris Akunin quite well.

One of the defining characteristics of an imperialist is not only ignoring the problems of other, colonized peoples but also their hierarchical perception. The colonizers are at the top, without question. They are the bearers of civilization. Everyone else is at the bottom. For Akunin, a similar hierarchy is constructed in relation to such binaries as “democratic” vs. “undemocratic,” “European” vs. “Asian,” and “civilized” vs. “less inclined to be civilized.”

According to Akunin, *“Russia itself is very much divided by regions ... by the degree of readiness for a civilized common life.”* He doesn’t specify which regions are civilized or not, but he says that the European part of Russia will become a normal European country. By this logic, the non-European parts are not ready for “civilized” coexistence with European Russia.

In one of his posts on Facebook in April this year, he wrote¹¹ the following about modern Russia: *“In the ancient, two-hundred-year-old struggle between an Asian state and European culture, the Horde has once again won, it will try to thoroughly Asianize culture (there is nothing wrong with Asia and its culture, I, an Orientalist, know this; it is about political Asia — the one in which the state is everything and the individual is nothing).”*

His post went viral, and some accused¹² the author of bias. After all, the verb “Asianize” here certainly discriminates. It turns out that Russian culture is supposedly European, of a high level. This contrasts with Asian countries, even though there is “nothing wrong” with them? Moreover, it turns out that the influence of Asia can somehow “spoil” Russian culture — for some reason, in a political sense? Why not just say “Russians” instead of “Asians”? For the Russian state over the centuries, it was and is like this: the state is everything, and the individual is nothing. However, there are democratic Asian states that respect human rights.

In his interview with Elizaveta Osetinskaya, Akunin also spreads¹³ the colonial Russian myth that Russia introduced writing to some peoples, without specifying which countries. *“In the republics that did not have writing, writing was introduced.”* This myth is typically associated with the Central Asian republics of the former USSR. But they did have writing. The form in which it existed simply did not suit the colonizers. So, upon arriving in those territories, the colonizers had to negatively label these lands as “wild fields” or “deserts” where “savages” lived and where Russia came and brought civilization.

Akunin’s example shows that it is possible to oppose the empire and the imperial system while still holding imperial prejudices. Some nations are seen as better than others. If the so-called Russian liberals (writers and opinion leaders) do not get rid of these prejudices, any new state-building on Russia’s territory will turn it into a colonial state yet again.

‘As if one people were divided into three groups’

What about Ukraine? How does the author see it — as part of the empire or an independent state? Once more, nothing is straightforward.

In an interview with Russian blogger Yury Dud,¹⁴ he states:

“How do I understand the problem of Ukraine from the point of view of Putin? So, there are three states that are very close to each other, yes. As if one people is divided into three groups: Russia, Belarus, Ukraine... the rest of the republics supposedly have some serious national characteristics. But the first three are generally one nation, right? And if in Russia...” “For Putin?” — Yury Dud clarifies. “Well, in general, so to speak. Well, objectively, I don’t know. I have relatives in Kyiv. Well, we all have relatives... It was like we were all the same. We were all living in the same country. In general, we are all very similar to each other.”

It turns out that Akunin and Putin share the same narrative about “one people.” They are all the same, devoid of any “serious national characteristics.” Once more, there is no recognition of the other because there are “relatives in Kyiv,” “lived in the same country...”

From time to time, Akunin speaks¹⁵ of people of “Russian culture” who live in other countries, “like Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Israel, and so on.” And he feels sorry¹⁶ for Ukrainian writers who used to write in Russian. There are many of them, he says, and they are suffering now. So, the concept of a “Russkiy Mir”¹⁷ is also present in his narratives.



Above: Elizaveta Osetinskaya (left) in conversation with Boris Akunin (right; video still)

The perception of Ukrainians as not much different from Belarusians and Russians leads Akunin to believe¹⁸ that the war between Russia and Ukraine should not be interpreted as a war between Russians and Ukrainians.

“The Ukrainian leadership has made a big mistake, that it is waging a war between two nations, Ukrainians and Russians, and not a war of two ideologies, two value systems, like a war of democracy against dictatorship, which also helped Putin.”

Because of this mistake, Akunin continues, the war will be long.

We wonder how it would sound in the news: “Representatives of a system that worships dictatorial values shot at a school and kindergarten of representatives of a system that worships democratic values”? Well, in all



Above: Boris Akunin (left) interviewed by Yuri Dud (right; video still)

seriousness, it is pretty evident from the quote above that Akunin did not understand the true — genocidal — nature of this war. After all, it was not Putin individually who sought to bring an end to Ukraine, or who took part in the attack. It was the Russians, among whom there may well be representatives of both dictatorial and democratic value systems, who attacked because they don't want Ukraine to exist.

Boris Akunin's perception of Ukraine is also somewhat contemptuous in some places, as expressed before February 24, 2022. In an interview with the Real Russia ("Настоящая Россия") YouTube channel, he stated¹⁹ that *"Ukraine has finally realized itself as a real nation"* after February 24, 2022. This *"was recognized by the whole world ... it seriously finally appeared on the map as a big and important country."* In another interview, he describes Ukraine before the full-scale invasion:

"A poorly organized country, a country where there is a lot of corruption, where democracy does not work well; and for me, of course, it was a great and joyful surprise when I saw that this was not the case, that when they were tested, Ukrainians showed solidarity and courage..." Then he reiterates²⁰ that Ukraine appeared on the map after February 24: *"No matter how difficult the fate of this country is, this country exists; a big, important and interesting country appeared on the map, and it is very important for Eastern Europe and Russia."*

Notably, the terms "big" and "important" are used concerning Ukraine on both occasions. This is yet another example of the hierarchy of countries at work. Some are big and important, while others are small and unimportant. Ukraine has demonstrated its resilience and has earned Akunin's respect. Is it not enough that Ukraine has become an independent state and its people have decided to separate from Russia and live independently? Do Ukrainians really need the Russians' recognition and approval?

'The majority of any country's population does not live by public political interests. It's simply unnatural'

As previously stated, Akunin admitted his guilt for not being interested in politics and, therefore, being unable to influence or prevent the transformation of Russia into a monster. He said this in an interview with the Russian BBC service.²¹ However, his statements about the Russian people revealed that he believed the nation was not guilty of anything. In general, according to Akunin, the Russian people, for some reason, have no agency at all. They are objects influenced by the state, their leader, or society.

So, he says several times²² that the majority of any country's population is preoccupied with their own affairs and has no interest in politics, because it is unnatural. *"It is a feature of most people to deal with ... their complex life problems, everyone has a difficult life, everyone has a family, everyone has their own problems, and it is natural for a person to be dealing with that, until this external big life starts to break in through their doors, knock on their windows, people try not to pay attention to it, even to fence themselves off. That is a natural human reaction."* He reiterates²³ this point in his interview with Yuri Dud at the outset of the full-scale invasion. Apparently, people acquire agency only in the case of a revolution: the political elites push them to a point, and people organize themselves and rebel. Boom! An instant democratic paradise.

Boris Akunin also rates people's mental abilities as low. In one of the interviews, he says²⁴ that "in most people, the mind is not very involved in life." In another, he compares people to frogs: *"They are determined, so to speak, by the temperature of the body of water. They become whatever the living conditions around them are. Therefore, if the living conditions in Russia change tomorrow, we will not recognize our own nation. It will behave completely differently."*

So, these are the writer's personal opinions. Why do they matter? Well, he thinks that most people are not very intelligent and are easily influenced by the "body of water" in which they live. What's the problem with that? This approach allows Boris Akunin to say that Russians should not be judged²⁵ — which is a problem. It turns out that Russians, like most people in general, were not interested in politics, but their state was worse than others. Somehow it happened that they found themselves living in "Putin's Russia." Therefore, Russians must not be "told off," but one must find a common language with them.

According to Akunin, the conditions of life in society and the state must change for Russians to change. *"The state in general, it seems to me, is needed, first of all, to set the tone for the behavior,"* he says. He believes that the head of the state has a similar role: "to set an example of decent behavior," the country should look up to him and follow.

It is perplexing how Russia can change when there is so much "innocence" surrounding Russians. If they are not "told off," how will they ever understand the magnitude of what their country, their army, their fathers, and their brothers have done in Ukraine and in other countries that Russia has attacked? If the Russians do not realize this, how will their



Above: Yevgeny Kiselyov (left) and Boris Akunin (right) on the Freedom UATV channel (Video still)

country ever start a revolution? According to Boris Akunin,²⁶ the revolution should help Russia “rehabilitate and restore its reputation.”

It logically follows that Akunin, like the majority of Russian “liberal” speakers and media, presents this war as Putin’s war. For the Ukrainian audience, he says²⁷ the same thing. He says that the enemy is Putin, not the Russians — as stated in an interview with Yevgeny Kiselyov in a marathon broadcast of the Freedom UATV channel.

Thus, the author tries to show²⁸ the existence of two Russias: Putin’s and the “Russia of culture.” “Putin’s Russia” is supposedly unreal and fake, but there is a real Russia that is against the war.

‘The only hope for Ukraine and the whole world to get rid of Putin’s dictatorship is ... the Russian people’

In several interviews, Akunin says that Ukrainians often write to him on Facebook. Some express hatred, while others believe that all Russians are the same. The writer acknowledges that the sentiment of hatred is entirely understandable to him, but from his perspective, it can be exploited by Russian propaganda to further unite Russians around Putin. This is bad because *“the only hope of Ukraine and the whole world to get rid of Putin’s dictatorship is, strangely enough, the Russian people themselves [Akunin says “Russkiy people” — i.e., ethnically Russian, not “Rosiyskiy” — i.e., belonging to Rossia, the state, a term that includes all the peoples that are part of Russia].”*

There’s no point in arguing with Boris Akunin’s conviction. It perfectly characterizes his surprisingly selective (for a writer) views on modern Russia, its history, and Russians in general.

- Yes, Boris Akunin understands that something is wrong with Russia and its system. He is able to see a modern dictatorship, but not a modern colonial empire.

- He strongly condemns the full-scale invasion of Ukraine but does not understand that it is driven by pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian agendas. He also condemned the annexation of Crimea in 2014, but only listened to those Crimeans who wanted to live in Russia.
- Akunin perceives the Russian people as deceived victims, but he ignores the fact that there are Russian torturers who deliberately and consciously torture, rape, and murder Ukrainians.
- He still does not see Ukrainians as a separate people, despite the genocidal nature of the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine. He also regularly reduces Ukraine to the status of being a part of “Russian culture.”
- Speaking about his heroes, such as Pushkin²⁹ and Dostoevsky,³⁰ he downplays or keeps silent about their imperialism and discriminatory statements against representatives of other peoples oppressed by Russia. He recommends paying attention to this, but to their “genius” works. Should we assume that we will be expected to perceive him similarly?

So, in general, yes, Akunin condemns Putin, but he remains a Russian imperialist in many respects.

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‘GOOD’ RUSSIAN CULTURE: WHY COLONIAL LITERATURE AND ART CANNOT BE CONSIDERED ‘GREAT’

Introduction: Geniuses and Villains

The civilized world has two pillars on which it rests its belief in Russia's ability to change: “good” Russian liberals and “good” Russian culture.

However, neither one nor the other has ever prevented Russia from waging endless colonial¹ wars.

These include the conquest of Siberia, which saw the complete destruction of local tribes in pursuit of fur; the Caucasian Wars, which saw the genocide of the Circassian people; the slaughter of Western Turkestan,² where thousands of locals were killed; and many other wars.

The Soviet Union, a direct descendant of the Empire, was no less aggressive. We must not forget the military interventions in China, Egypt, Angola, Laos, the invasion of Afghanistan, and a host of countless other military conflicts, large and small.

Modern Russia also wages colonial wars. Georgia, Moldova, Syria, Chechnya, Ukraine — this is not an exhaustive list of countries that have become victims of Russian aggression.

To justify war crimes, a powerful propaganda machine is indispensable, because it is necessary to throw dust in the eyes of the world by creating the myth that Russia is a “liberator” as opposed to a predatory country.

The cultural community has always been at the forefront of propagandists, both in the past and present.

That is why the “great Russian culture” that is revered all over the world is, first and foremost, the legacy of those who praised Russia's criminal governments. We are talking about writers, musicians, artists, and other creative people.

We will try to prove that the so-called “great Russian culture” is not wholly Russian in the first place. In fact, most of the creative people were “stolen” from enslaved nations. Secondly, it is not as “humanistic” as it seems. It would only look that way to those unfamiliar with the history of “Mother Russia” and what it is today.

‘Great Russian literature’ in the service of the regimes

Russian literature originated as “courtier literature.” Its progenitors (Lomonosov, Sumarokov, Trediakovsky) became famous for their solemn odes dedicated to the invading sovereigns. See, for example, an excerpt



Above: An Internet meme, comparing Russian TV propagandist, Vladimir Solovyov and Alexander Pushkin

from Alexander Sumarokov's "Ode to the Empress Catherine the Second on the Occasion of the Capture of Khotyn and the Subjugation of Moldavia." (These events took place during Russia's war against Turkey (1768-1774)):

"The great lands / of which the whole East is proud, / the Egyptian coast of the hot south / where the streams of the Euphrates flow / they will be conquered by the Russian sword, / their villages will be devastated."

However, the most respected representatives of Russian literature worldwide are Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

The "sun of Russian poetry" Alexander Pushkin was, as they would say today, a "public relations officer" for Tsar Nicholas I.

If you replace the word "tsar" with "president" in his poem "To Friends," you might think that it was written by one of the Z-poets (modern Russian poets glorifying Russia's war against Ukraine).

*No, I am not a flatterer when
I sing praise to the Tsar:
I boldly express my feelings,
I speak in the language of my heart.
I simply fell in love with him:
He cheerfully and honestly rules us;
He suddenly revived Russia
With war, hopes, and labor.*

Pushkin wrote this about the war against Persia in 1826-1828.

In letters to his friends during the Polish anti-Russian uprising of 1830-1831, Pushkin demands³ to "strangle" the Poles. He expects that this "war will be a war of extermination." And it even seems that the country "is fighting against NATO," as he claims that "the uprising of the Poles was prepared in Paris."

Had Pushkin been alive today, he would undoubtedly have been able to compete with Vladimir Solovyov, one of the chief Russian propagandists.

The stars of Russian literature, Mikhail Lermontov and Leo Tolstoy, were officers in the occupation forces in the Caucasus.

As for Leo Tolstoy, who had gained a reputation as a pacifist in his later years, he was not much different from today's Z-war journalists in his

earlier era (Russian military “journalists” who praise the “feats” of modern Russian occupants).

In his diary, he wrote:

“The constant attraction of danger, the observations of the soldiers with whom I live, the sailors, and the progress of the war itself, are so pleasant that I do not want to leave here, especially since I would like to be here during the attack, if one occurs” (an entry dated April 13, 1855).

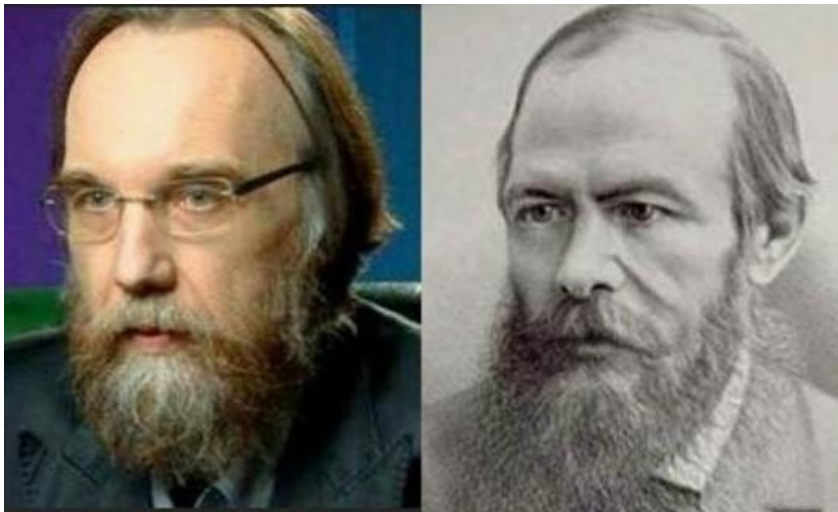
We read about these “attacks” in his short story “The Raid”:

“In a minute, dragoons, Cossacks, and infantrymen scattered along the crooked lanes with visible joy, and the empty aul instantly came to life. There, a roof collapses, an axe hits a strong tree, and a wooden door is broken; out there, a stack of hay, a fence, and a shack catch fire, and thick smoke rises, forming a column in the clear air. A Cossack carries a sack of flour and a carpet; a soldier with a joyful face brings a tin basin and some kind of rag from a hut; another one stretches out his arms and tries to catch two clucking fighting chickens near the fence; a third one found somewhere a huge jar of milk, drinks from it and then throws it to the ground with a loud laugh.”

Russian soldiers in Ukraine are doing much the same thing these days. Local residents have repeatedly accused them of looting.⁴

Tolstoy also took part in the Crimean War, which Russia lost. That is why this “war journalist” hastily created propaganda stories⁵ wherein Russian soldiers were depicted as heroes.

The writer Fyodor Dostoevsky promoted the idea of the “God-bearing” Russians being the “core” of the empire. Today, he is often compared to the modern ideologist of the “Russkiy Mir,” Putin’s friend Aleksandr Dugin. After all, the fascist idea of the exceptionalism of the Russian people can be found in both of their works.



Above: The modern ideologist of the “Russkiy Mir,” Aleksandr Dugin (left) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (right)

Dostoyevsky's attitude to other nationalities can be learned from his acquaintances:

"Dostoyevsky's intolerance of controversies was even more evident when they somehow inadvertently shifted to nationalities: he considered Serbs, Ukrainians, etc., who sympathized with their native language, their native literature, to be definitely harmful members of society. They would slow down the general education, the Great Russian literature, in which all salvation and all hope lies. They would slow down the progress of civilization, which was created by the Great Russian people, who created the most magnificent state."

"How is it possible to live with the last name Ferdyschenko?" — complains an unlikable character, a Ukrainian Ferdyschenko, addressing the Russian Myshkin in the novel *"The Idiot."*

The process of forced Russification of Ukrainian last names took place in the Soviet Union⁶ as well.

Dostoevsky still has his followers today: there is evidence that in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, the invaders are forcing Ukrainians to change their last names to "normal" ones.

During the Soviet period, even those writers who managed to leave the "evil empire" did not get rid of the virus of imperialism.⁷ Famous anti-communists Joseph Brodsky and Alexander Solzhenitsyn did not like many things in the USSR. However, they didn't dislike the concept of a Russian empire.

We still observe the imperial "disease" in contemporary opposition writers in modern times. Boris Akunin (who we discussed in part 3, chapter 3 of this book, and whose protagonist of a series of historical detective novels, Fandorin, faithfully serves the sovereign) admits⁸ that he is a loyal subject not only in his novels: *"I may frighten you, but I am also [like Putin] a Russian imperialist. It's just that I see the empire differently from Vladimir Putin."*

Writer Dmitry Bykov condemns the Kremlin's aggression, but he does not hide that he misses the Soviet empire (details about the ideas of this "oppositionist" can be found in part 3, chapter 2).

Unfortunately, even these kinds of regime opponents are few among the Russian literati. All the others sing Putin's praises in unison.

The star of modern Russian literature, Zakhar Prilepin, was actively involved in the terrorist organization "DPR" in Donbas. He has been especially visible in this capacity. Prilepin reported that his subordinates killed many people and committed "heinous crimes"⁹ in Ukraine.

Musicians, Performers, Actors, and Artists in the Service of Regimes

Many people around the world try to separate Russian classical music, ballet, and artists from Russian dictators. They say these masterpieces and these artists are "out of politics."



Above: The premier ballet dancer of the Bolshoi Theater, Nikolay Tsiskaridze (right) receives the Order of Friendship from Vladimir Putin (left)

But are these artists really free of ties to the criminal government? Let's take Pyotr Tchaikovsky's world-famous ballet "Swan Lake."

As soon as the script was finished, Tchaikovsky added a "Russian Dance" to it, following the government's instructions. This was when another Russo-Turkish war had begun, and it was a kind of tribute to bloody "patriotism." Russian propaganda claimed that the goal of the military campaign was to liberate the Balkans from Ottoman oppression. In reality, the two empires were competing for influence over the countries of the Danube basin and the Balkan Peninsula.

The famous Soviet composer Sergei Prokofiev regularly fulfilled ideological orders. He created a cantata dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the "The Great October" based on the texts of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, as well as "Zdravitsa" (A Toast!) in honor of Stalin's 60th birthday.

The eminent composer Dmitri Shostakovich wrote his Suite during the Russian aggression against Finland. Stalin commissioned the work, based on Finnish folk melodies, as the anthem of the future socialist Finland after its conquest.

Russia's modern cultural elites also faithfully serve the government.

Thus, the stars of the Russian stage — the director of the Bolshoi Theater, the conductor Valery Gergiev, the premier ballet dancer of the Bolshoi Theater Nikolay Tsiskaridze, the opera diva Lyubov Kazarnovskaya, the superstar of the Soviet and Russian ballet Ilse Liepa, and the opera singer Sergey Moskalov have openly declared their support for the war.

Recently, Putin even awarded Nikolay Tsiskaridze with the order "For Merits to the Fatherland" of the 4th degree.

Doubtless, ballet remains a powerful means of Russian propaganda even today.

Victoria Zvarych, a soloist with the Lviv Opera Ballet, has revealed that Austrian media recently conducted research into how the Russian authorities paid for Tchaikovsky's performances after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.



Above: Letter “Z” placed on the facade of the Oleg Tabakov Moscow Theater building in support of the “Special Military Operation”

“This is done so that the whole world is supposed to be fascinated by their culture, and when you see the ballet ‘Swan Lake,’ and you see swans, you think: well, could this swan be from a terrorist country? So, it changes your opinion of the country in general. That’s what they did all the time. They didn’t just show the performance; they invested money to make it their propaganda,” Zvarych¹⁰ said.

It should be mentioned that there are people in Russia’s creative circles who do not support Russian aggression. But simultaneously, they can’t be called members of the Russian opposition. For example, the famous Russian actor Kiril Serebrennikov emigrated from Russia in protest and got an opportunity to work abroad. However, this “good Russian” does not oppose the criminal regime so much as he tries to exonerate its henchmen.

He speaks out on various platforms against the cancellation of Russian culture. He stresses the need to sympathize¹¹ with and help the Russians because they are losing their breadwinners in the war.

However, even those like Serebrennikov are few. The attitude of the artists’ community to the war can be judged by the letter “Z,” which appeared on the facade of the Oleg Tabakov Moscow Theater. The theater’s director, Vladimir Mashkov, proudly informed the journalists that it was his idea.

Mikhail Piotrovsky, the director of the famous Hermitage Museum, also believes that the war is nothing to be ashamed of.

“On the one hand, war is blood and murder. On the other hand, it is the self-affirmation of the nation. Every man wants to assert himself. In his position regarding the war, he definitely asserts himself. And all of us were brought up in the imperial tradition after all, and the empire unites many nations, unites people, finding some common and important things for everyone.”

Recently, Piotrovsky organized a free visit to the Hermitage for the “families of the participants in the special military operation.” This illustrates well what the “Great Russian Culture” really stands for.

Where did the concept of 'greatness' of Russian culture come from?

It is pointless to deny Russia's significant contribution to world culture. But how did this greatness develop?

First, they appropriated talented people from among the enslaved nations who were forced to work "for the glory of the empire."

For example, the "Russian" writers Nikolai Gogol, Anton Chekhov, Vladimir Nemyrovych-Danchenko, Ivan Bunin, Ilya Ilf, and Yevheny Petrov were of Ukrainian origin. The writer Fyodor Dostoevsky also had Ukrainian roots on his father's side.

The artists that Russia "stole" from Ukraine were Ilya Repin, Ivan Aivazovsky, David Burliuk, Arkhip Kuindzhi, Nikolai Ge, Maria Raevska-Ivanova, Vladimir Borykovsky, and Kazimir Malevich.

Ukrainian composers Semen Hulak-Artemovsky, Dmitry Bortniansky, and Maksym Berezovsky worked to promote the "glory of the empire."

Even the pride of Russian culture, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, came from the Cossack family of Tshaika on his father's side.

The Russian appropriation of the cultural heritage of other nations continues to this day.

Recently, Russians claimed the legendary Ukrainian film "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" was Russian. They included it in the Russian Film Festival in France, which was held in March 2024. The film screened under a different title, "Horses of Fire."

The Embassy of Ukraine¹² was compelled to raise its concerns with the French Ministry of Culture.

Another egregious case: after the Ukrainian documentary "20 Days in Mariupol" won the Oscar nomination for "Best Documentary Feature Film," the Russian Wikipedia page listed the nationality¹³ of the Ukrainian director Mstislav Chernov as... Russian.

Secondly, their "greatness" was cultivated by eliminating competition.

The artists who stubbornly persisted in engaging with the development of their national culture were either killed or denied the opportunity to continue their work. In 1863, the Minister of Internal Affairs of Russia, Pyotr Valuev, issued a decree prohibiting the publishing and use of the Ukrainian language in literature.* In 1876, Emperor Alexander II of Russia issued the Emsk Decree, which aimed to eliminate the Ukrainian language from cultural life. In 1921, Russians killed the author of the famous Ukrainian carol "Schedryk," which is renowned throughout the world as the Christmas song "Carol of the Bells." He was killed by the secret police, known as Cheka (VChK).

In this context, it is also essential to mention the Executed Renaissance, an entire generation of Ukrainian creators who were tortured and murdered in the 1920s and 1930s. These people created highly artistic works in the fields of literature, painting, music, and theater.

* It also banned the Ukrainian language from school, church, and from most spheres of state and social life for at least two generations.

In 1985, the brilliant poet Vasyl Stus was murdered in a concentration camp. This is far from a complete list of victims of the Russian criminal regime. Russia continues to exterminate Ukrainian artists to this day.

Victims of Russia's war against Ukraine

At the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, the Ukrainian opera singer Vasyl Slipak was murdered by the invaders.

Rostyslav Yanchishen, a soloist of the Odesa Opera Ballet, died on the battlefield.

The honored artist of Ukraine, the outstanding dancer Oleksandr Shapoval, was killed on the frontline.

Vadim Khlupianets, an artist of the Kyiv National Academic Operetta Theater, fell in the fight against the occupiers.

Artem Datsyshyn, a ballet dancer of the National Opera of Ukraine, was killed by Russian shelling.

Serhiy Shkvarchenko, the honored artist of Ukraine and member of the Ukrainian National Folk Dance Ensemble of Virsky, was killed on the battlefield.

Russia murdered the Ukrainian poet Maksym Kryvtsov.

The Russians also killed the famous film director Oleh Bobalo and many other representatives of contemporary Ukrainian culture.

Andriy Kasyanov, an actor of the Taras Shevchenko Dnipro Academic Ukrainian Music and Drama Theater, was killed in a battle with the enemy.

This is far from a complete list as that would be impossible. At this very moment, more names are being added as Russia continues to kill Ukrainian artists.

Russia is also continuously destroying Ukrainian cultural institutions. The whole world should know about the Mariupol Drama Theater, which was hit by an aerial bomb while civilians, mostly children, were taking



Above: The Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum in the Kharkiv region, destroyed by the Russian occupiers



Above: Propaganda billboard installed in occupied Kherson, quoting Pushkin about Kherson being a city “with Russian history”

shelter there. The Museum of Ukrainian Antiquities in the Chernihiv Region, the Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum in the Kharkiv Region, the Kherson Art Museum, the Transfiguration Cathedral in Odesa, and many other beautiful historical buildings have also been destroyed.

In total, about 2,000 objects of Ukraine’s cultural heritage have been damaged or destroyed by now.

The occupiers have been setting up propaganda billboards on some of their ruins. They feature representatives of the so-called “great Russian culture,” like Pushkin.

Afterword: It’s time to ditch the myths

One of the propaganda narratives of modern Russia is that the “bad” West wants to ban “good” Russian culture. It is time to debunk all these myths and narratives. As we can see, this “great Russian culture” is not entirely Russian, and not at all as “good” and humanistic as it is commonly believed to be. Therefore, it is high time to rethink the attitude towards the cultural heritage that was born from the blood of other nations.

We believe that all of Russian culture should be decolonized. It is necessary to carefully research and explain under what circumstances and under whose direction particular works of Russian artists were created. It is imperative to explain this in Western countries, using various tools and platforms.

After all, Russian culture has never been a separate phenomenon from the murderous politics of that nation.

As long as the myth of “greatness” exists, the Russians will peddle its importance and throw dust in the eyes of the world, pretending to be “pacifists,” “humanists,” and “liberators!” They wield their culture as another arm in their propaganda arsenal.

Until the next “special military operation.”

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Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy

The Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy (POID) is a non-governmental think tank in Ukraine. Founded in Kyiv in 1991 at the initiative of the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation (USUF), its mission was to conduct political research and provide young democratic forces, newly represented in the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) of the Ukrainian SSR, with up-to-date information on strengthening democracy and developing a market economy. POID was officially registered in 1993.

Since then, it has successfully implemented numerous projects aimed at reforming the government and parliament of Ukraine, increasing citizen participation, particularly among young people, in elections, developing civil society and local governance, addressing the issues faced by the indigenous peoples of Crimea, strengthening independent media and freedom of speech, and supporting refugees and volunteers.

Over the past 10 years, the Institute has successfully assembled a highly professional team of like-minded individuals, including regional experts. The Institute has eight expert groups in different regions of Ukraine.

In 2013, the Institute's experts were the first among media organizations to begin researching regional media in order to improve the quality of their content. Over the past decade, the Institute's experts have studied the authoritative and influential media in almost all regions of Ukraine. Monitoring of denationalized regional media was carried out separately. The Institute's experts have identified and addressed the challenges these media face, ensuring the quality of information they provide to citizens during the transition period. They have also helped these media outlets become stronger and more effective. Over the past decade, the POID experts have published hundreds of reports and analytical articles based on the results of the monitoring, which are available on the POID website and on the platforms of partner organizations.

The Institute's experts have conducted over 300 training sessions on professional journalistic standards, journalistic ethics, fundraising, building government-public-media cooperation, and media literacy. Since the beginning of the war, the POID has



In Dnipro, students mastered the skills to counter the hidden influences of Russian propaganda (2024)



Officials trained in media literacy (2017)

held over 70 training sessions on countering disinformation for teachers, librarians, judges, prosecutors, journalists, students, and government officials.

The Institute is committed to enhancing citizens' media literacy and critical thinking skills. Experts travel to small towns and cities where there are few civil society organizations and where people are particularly in desperate need of new knowledge in times of war. Over 1,500 individuals from diverse age groups, backgrounds, activities, and interests have participated in POID trainings.

In the four years preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy published four books in print and online, as well as an analytical report. Two collections of essays, entitled "Unfortunate? Undefeated! Successful Stories of Internally Displaced Persons" (2016 and 2017); "Local Press. A guide for the media. How regional journalists can work in times of change and democratic crisis" (2019); "Crimean Tatars as an Indigenous People" (2016). Natalia Belitser, one of the most experienced experts on the problems of the indigenous peoples of Crimea, contributed to the analytical report "Rethinking Ukraine's de-occupation policy in the framework of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine."

The Institute introduced the POID Externship Program (coordinated by Olena Samoilenko and Tetyana Stroy), which aims to increase the sustainability of regional media, improve the quality of information and the visual design of publications, and expand information delivery platforms. Over the past two years, 15 newsrooms and 45 journalists have graduated from the POID Externship Program. The top 10 have received financial support.

In response to Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, the Institute took the initiative to launch a new training program for fixers. Over the course of two years, the POID conducted 16 workshops, reaching over 200 participants.

The Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy organized a series of national round tables on regional media issues, as well as conferences in support of internally displaced persons from the occupied territories and annexed Crimea. The events were attended by government officials, leading experts, regional editors and journalists, and partner NGOs.

The Institute's experts held more than 30 media discussions in the regions of Ukraine on journalism, protection of the information space, and countering Russian propaganda. These discussions were attended by government officials, editors, journalists, and civil society leaders.

Popular research publication

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