Oleg MEDVEDYEV[1]
The National Defense University of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine
ORCID: 0009-0007-2513-2092

Vitalii FEDORIIENKO
The National Defense University of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine
ORCID: 0000-0002-0921-3390

Kseniia YERHIDZEI
The National Defense University of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine
ORCID: 0000-0003-4634-133X

RUSSIAN INFORMATION-PSYCHOLOGICAL NARRATIVE ON UKRAINE'S NATO ACCESSION AS A "JUSTIFICATION OF THE WAR"

INTRODUCTION

Information operations, which had had merely an auxiliary role in conventional warfare, have now evolved into an independent form of combat. In some cases, efforts of the armed forces no longer lead but rather support the informational impact. In this context, one may hypothetically consider the Kursk Operation conducted by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2024–2025. The Global Risks Report 2024, based on a survey of 1,500 experts and presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2024, identifies disinformation as the most significant short-term risk (World Economic Forum, 2024).

Recently, information-psychological operations, disinformation, and fake news have increasingly been classified as foreign manipulation and interference in internal affairs. Thus, these are seen as a more sophisticated and expanding form of influence – Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference, FIMI (EUvsDisinfo, 2024). Ukraine is currently the subject of the most aggressive and large-scale information attacks, in which cutting-edge FIMI technologies are being tested in real-time. "When we are confronted with real information warfare, ... we are dealing with a particular form of conflict that is no less dangerous than conventional armed conflict. In this conflict, psychological operations are conducted not by individual citizens, but exclusively by state institutions, primarily intelligence agencies" (VCIOM, 2023). This approach is part of the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine – named after the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, which outlines a model of new-

---

generation hybrid warfare, where information and other non-military measures are no less important than classical military actions (Gerasimov, 2016).

The scale of Russian psychological operations between 2022 and 2025 is comparable to the military propaganda campaigns of World War I and II (Kholokh, et al. 2024). While the conventional war on land, air, and sea is limited to Russia and Ukraine's territory, the Russian information war is global in its nature. Russia strikes in all directions, using not only military units. In effect, this constitutes a global war.

The narrative concerning NATO eastward expansion in general, and Ukrainian potential accession to the Alliance as a justification for the so-called "special military operation," is a continuation of a long-standing Soviet narrative depicting NATO as an "aggressive block." This notion was implanted into the minds of Soviet citizens since the late 1940s, with only a brief pause during the period when Presidents Yeltsin and early Putin entertained the idea of Russia joining NATO. Ultimately, however, they became trapped in a cycle of propaganda, leading to a sharp public backlash against NATO expansion. Over the decades, the USA and NATO have come to be portrayed as an "absolute enemy" (Darczewska, 2024). In Soviet propaganda, the confrontation between NATO and the countries of the Warsaw Pact was depicted in terms of a Manichaean dualism: good versus evil, light versus darkness, and divine versus demonic. Russian political elite's persistent opposition to NATO's eastward expansion – especially into former Soviet countries – thus reflects deep-rooted social archetypes and stereotypes. George Kennan, in his famous "Long Telegram," wrote that "at the root of the Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs is the traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity" (Kennan, 1947). Soviet-Russian historian Mikhail Gefter once remarked that "without threats, the mechanisms of distribution of power in Russia cannot function. It must generate threats for itself to respond to them on an ever-increasing scale" (Giefter, 2015).

The rationale behind this was later explained by Gefter's student, Gleb Pavlovsky, a Russian political technologist and one of the architects of the Putin regime, who later became a dissident. "When the survival of the people is perceived as being at risk," he said, "the authorities gain legitimacy as saviors… In an atmosphere of mass despair, there emerged an idea of statehood, which further led to the development of the modern system – a system that always treats the nation's condition as extraordinary, while promising to resolve it through sheer will" (Pawłowski, 2019: 24). And this means an apology for the use of coercion by the authorities against their own citizens and force against neighboring countries. "This rhetoric does not emerge spontaneously – it has been cultivated over many years, even centuries, drawing upon the nation's mentality, identity, historical and cultural traditions" (Darczewska, 2024).

Making use of the above, the main goals of such propaganda include uniting society around a common idea, mobilizing it for war, boosting the morale of soldiers, shaping the image of the enemy as a threat or evil force, legitimizing territorial claims, gaining international support, and influencing the population of the adversary state – whether the conflict is kinetic, conventional, or hybrid in nature. The object of this study is Russian psychological operations conducted during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, their analysis within the broader context of the Russia-Ukraine war, which began in 2014. However, the subject of the research is the anti-NATO narratives pro-

moted by Russian propaganda, which, starting in 2022, have been widely disseminated as justification for the so-called "special military operation." These narratives argue that Ukraine's potential NATO accession and the Alliance's eastward expansion forced Russia to undertake preemptive actions. This chronological framework was chosen because the anti-NATO narrative had become one of the primary narratives in Russian propaganda, and Russian information and psychological operations had intensified significantly.

The authors aim to assess the effectiveness of the propaganda war, analyze the narratives of Russian propaganda (specifically, anti-NATO narratives), demonstrate the evolution of Russian propaganda, and evaluate the effectiveness of the propaganda war waged by Russia.

To consistently and logically approach such an assessment, the first section systematizes the main propaganda narratives in the Russian Federation's information and psychological operations, including the portrayal of NATO as an alleged existential threat to Russians. It then examines the evolution of the anti-NATO narrative from 2022 to 2024, its flexibility, and the transformation of messages in response to changing political and military contexts. The third section fact-checks the narrative, and the fourth describes the tools of information influence employed by the Russian propaganda machine, ranging from modern artificial intelligence technologies and the role of Telegram and TikTok to the traditional role of television in shaping the domestic Russian audience. This leads to an analysis of how propaganda messages are targeted at three distinct audiences: Russian, Western, and Ukrainian. The final chapters are devoted to assessing the effectiveness of these influences. The change in public sentiment in different countries is considered, and a favorable environment for anti-NATO narratives is revealed in Central European countries with the presence of pro-Russian political forces. In return, Ukraine's resistance is demonstrated by its ability to counter this narrative effectively. Special attention is paid to the rhetoric of Donald Trump and members of his team as a telling example of the deep penetration of Russian narratives into the discourse of Western political elites. This suggests the effectiveness of Russian propaganda, including its influence on key individuals who make strategic decisions.

KEY NARRATIVES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA DURING THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

Based on a three-year monitoring of the information space, it is possible to systematize the key narratives consistently employed by Russian propaganda between 2022 and 2025 as part of its information-psychological operations against Ukraine. These narratives typically revolve around several key themes and are targeted at both Russia's domestic audience and external target groups.

Russian propaganda depicts Ukraine as a failed state, which is entirely dependent on external funding of the so-called "collective West." The Ukrainian government is portrayed as a puppet regime, and Kyiv as a Nazi stronghold. A central role is given to the narrative of "total corruption," which ranges from the alleged embezzlement of humanitarian aid to accusations of selling Western weapons on the black market (e.g.,

to Hamas). Russian propaganda actively seeks to demoralize Ukrainian society: mobilization is described as purely coercive, Ukrainians are depicted as unwilling to fight, and the Armed Forces of Ukraine are depicted as using soldiers as mere "cannon fodder." Ukrainian troops are accused of committing war crimes against the population of Donbas, allegedly since 2014. Additional emphasis is placed on economic hardships, the "collapse" of the social sphere, and depopulation – all intended to reinforce the perception of an overall failure of Ukrainian statehood. According to Russian propaganda, Russia is not attacking but rather "liberating" its "brothers," as Ukrainians and Russians are portrayed as "one nation" (Putin, 2021). The residents of the "newly annexed territories" are said to welcome the "return to the motherland." The image of Russia reinforces these narratives as a strong, stable, and invincible state conducting a fair "defensive" operation rather than an act of aggression. Slogans such as "Russia is winning" and "the special military operation is going according to the plan" are actively promoted.

Religious and ideological motifs also play a role: the West is portrayed as morally degenerated, dominated by perversions and "satanism," while NATO is labeled the "structure of the Antichrist" (Detector Media, Let's Data, 2024). In April 2025, in response to criticism of Russia's refusal to agree to a ceasefire or peace negotiations, a new narrative emerged, claiming that the Ukrainian government has no control over its military formations. Naturally, the Ukrainian government itself is deemed "illegitimate" by President Putin.

It is important to note that Russian psychological operations were not only aimed at a nationwide Ukrainian audience but also tailored to specific regional contexts – particularly in the south and east of Ukraine, where Russian influence has historically been stronger. In these areas, narratives of the "one nation," "Russian world," and "discrimination against Russian-speaking people" have been actively promoted since 2014.

The dominant narrative is that Russia wages the war not against Ukraine per se, instead it's the West that maintains war against Russia, while allegedly using Ukraine merely as a tool or a "testing ground" for military confrontation – fighting "to the last Ukrainian." For nearly two decades, Russia has been conducting a large-scale anti-NATO campaign in Ukraine – not solely through its own efforts, but also by relying on its powerful "fifth column," represented by the Party of Regions and the Communist Party of Ukraine. The effectiveness of this campaign was significantly enhanced by the fact that before Russia's war against Ukraine, the latter remained within a common information space with Russia, as previously noted. Under such circumstances, supporters of Euro-Atlantic integration in Ukraine were unable to shift public opinion significantly before 2014. The majority of Ukrainians opposed NATO membership; focus groups and quantitative studies revealed a deep entrenchment of Soviet-era propaganda stereotypes about NATO as an "aggressive block," which is why public support for NATO accession hovered around 20%. Only after the annexation of Crimea and the onset of Russian hostilities in Donbas did public opinion begin to shift in favor of NATO. With the launch of the full-scale invasion in 2022, support for NATO membership increased to nearly three-quarters of respondents, but this shift came too late. However, the period during which NATO enlargement could proceed without taking

Russia's position into account ended in the early 2000s, as rising oil prices and Russia's economic recovery strengthened the country's geopolitical assertiveness.

Russian propaganda relied not only on rational or political arguments but also heavily exploited emotional triggers: fear, confusion, despair, and hopelessness. Thus, the propaganda discourse serves multiple functions: mobilization (within Russia), legitimization (justifying the war), demoralization (targeting Ukrainian society), and disruption (undermining international support for Ukraine). It is flexible and adapts to changes in the external situation, but it always remains grounded in familiar paradigms of fear, threat, and the mentality of the "besieged fortress."

EVOLUTION OF ANTI-NATO NARRATIVE IN 2022–2024 AND KEY MANIPULATIVE TECHNIQUES

One of the core elements in constructing the image of Ukraine as a hostile entity has been – and continues to be – the theme of Ukraine's potential NATO membership and Russia's reaction to the Alliance's enlargement more broadly. This logic underpinned the ultimatum that Moscow issued to Washington in December 2021. The messages of the proposed security agreement, published by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, demanded not only that the West reject the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO, but also that NATO limit its operational scope to the boundaries of the Alliance as of 1997 (*Tekst rossiiskikh proektov dokumentov...*, 2021). The proposal envisioned a cessation of all NATO activity in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Russia subsequently cited the West's refusal to accept this ultimatum as one of the justifications for launching the so-called "special military operation." During the military parade held on May 9, 2022, in Moscow – shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – President Putin claimed that "NATO and Ukraine were preparing a punitive operation in Donbas, an invasion of Russian historical lands, including Crimea" (*Putin na paradí...*, 2022).

To keep the anti-NATO narrative relevant and emotionally charged, Russia employed various informational triggers, including the accession of Finland (2023) and Sweden (2024) to NATO; NATO summits in Madrid, Vilnius (Siedin, 2023) and Washington (Bidochko, 2024b), which covered provision of aid to Ukraine and reiteration of NATO's open-door policy – i.e., statements that, though largely declarative, served to fuel Russian propaganda; several high-profile decisions by NATO countries to transfer powerful weapons systems to Ukraine, such as HIMARS, Leopard tanks, Patriot systems, F-16 fighter jets, and ATACMS missiles; NATO military exercises near Russia's borders e.g., Defender Europe, Steadfast Defender, Air Defender (Bidochko, 2024a); statements by NATO leaders and officials; and incidents involving strikes on Russian territory with high-precision Western-manufactured weapons or Ukrainian weapons guided by Western intelligence.

While Russian audiences were subjected to fear-based messaging about an imminent NATO attack – necessitating Putin's so-called preemptive response – the propaganda aimed at Ukrainians in mid-2023. Later, it began emphasizing a different message: i.e., Ukraine is not welcome to join NATO. The results of NATO summits were

framed as diplomatic failures for Kyiv. At first glance, such headlines appeared to contradict the initial claim of Russian propaganda stating that the threat of Ukraine's NATO membership triggered the war. However, this shift from portraying NATO as a threat to portraying it as indifferent should not be perceived as a rejection of the narrative, but rather its adaptation to changing circumstances.

To reiterate the narrative that NATO is waging war against Russia alongside Ukraine, Russian propaganda repeatedly disseminates false information about the course of military operations throughout the observation period. In September 2022, claims such as "NATO troops have entered Vovchansk" appeared to justify the failures and retreat of Russian forces in the Kharkiv region after a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive. Russian and pro-Russian media channels featured so-called "eyewitnesses" who allegedly saw Black mercenaries near Izium, English-speaking NATO soldiers in Kozacha Lopan (*Yakby ne viiska NATO...*, 2022).

In early 2023, Russian sources reported the alleged mass transfer of foreign mercenaries to Kharkiv. In March 2023, it falsely claimed that Russia had launched Kinzhal missile strikes on a base housing NATO troops allegedly commanding the Ukrainian General Staff. In September 2023, Russia's Aerospace Forces purportedly struck another "NATO headquarters," this time in Dnipro, resulting in the alleged death of an American general. In June 2024, propagandists claimed to have "eliminated" a group of NATO officers at the Yavoriv training ground in the Lviv region, and in November, another group of foreign officers in the Mykolaiv region. In early 2025, Russian sources claimed that hospitals were allegedly filled with high-ranking NATO officers, citing "Mykolaiv underground" as the source.

Reports of hospitals in Dnipro overcrowded with NATO servicemen were spread in January 2025, referencing a Polish Telegram channel famous for regular disinformation about the war in Ukraine (Mikhajliv, 2025). Finally, the Russian missile strike on Kryvyi Rih in early April 2025 killed at least 20 civilians, half of whom were children. It was reported by Russian propaganda as a legitimate attack on a site where a meeting between Ukrainian military personnel and NATO instructors was allegedly taking place.

At various points, the anti-NATO narrative was closely related to Russia's nuclear blackmail campaign. President Putin resorted to this tactic immediately after Ukraine's successful counteroffensive in the autumn of 2022, when Russian forces were compelled to withdraw from Kherson and previously occupied territories in the Kharkiv region. There is no evidence – at least from open sources – that the Kremlin seriously considered the actual use of nuclear weapons. Therefore, there are strong grounds to consider it one of the most successful Russian psychological operations to date.

On the other hand, both U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken (*Blinken's influence on nuclear deterrence*, 2025) and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan admitted they took the Kremlin's threats seriously, as did President Biden himself (*Biden's stance on nuclear deterrence*, 2022). Remarkably, this was one of the rare instances of alignment between Biden and Trump supporters: by late March 2025 U.S. intelligence continued to warn that "Russia's failure to achieve rapid and decisive victories on the battlefield, combined with Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory, continues to raise concerns that Putin might resort to nuclear weapons" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025).

At the height of the Kremlin's nuclear bluff, when Russia acted as though it were the sole possessor of nuclear capabilities, Russian bloggers and Telegram channels spread a false claim that President Volodymyr Zelensky had appealed to NATO to carry out a preemptive nuclear strike on Russia (*Ukraina poprosyla NATO...*, 2022). In parallel, disinformation circulated alleging that the Alliance, operating under a false flag to place blame on Russia, was planning to attack a European city using a so-called "dirty bomb" (*NATO planuie ataku...*, 2024).

Putin's nuclear threats had a noticeable deterring effect on the West. They led to a reduction in military support for Ukraine and a decision to refrain from supplying more advanced, powerful, and long-range weapons systems, which bought Putin time to regroup. This effect was explicitly acknowledged by Gabrielius Landsbergis, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania: "The biggest issue – and I have no other word but 'mistake' – was giving in to Russia's nuclear blackmail. There was a particular moment when we can say that everything started heading in the wrong direction… as if someone had 'turned down the volume' on assistance to Ukraine" (Landsbergis, 2024).

When genuine informational events were lacking, Russian propaganda manufactured outright falsehoods, appealed to conspiracy theories, and spread some of the most absurd rumors – often incompatible with logic but seemingly digestible by the so-called "mysterious Russian soul." For instance, the hostage-taking incident in Dresden in December 2022 was falsely attributed to a Ukrainian person, who was allegedly demanding Ukraine's accession to NATO. Accusation of NATO of supplying Ukraine with donor blood contaminated with HIV and hepatitis. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had reportedly been seen walking naked through the streets of London. In July 2023, a fake NATO social media page was used to intimidate protestors in France, warning them that the Alliance would deploy the Azov and Kraken battalions to quell the unrest. To reinforce NATO's negative image, propaganda often fused it with other stigmatized symbols in the eyes of the average Russian citizen, such as the "LGBT movement." In the summer of 2024, Russian media widely circulated a video allegedly showing a high-ranking NATO officer in a skirt and heels, who was later identified as a well-known model and influencer.

In May 2022, Russian media outlets claimed that former U.S. President George W. Bush had admitted that NATO had promised Gorbachev not to expand eastward. Upon fact-checking, it was revealed that the source of this misinformation was a prank phone call staged by the notorious Russian pranksters Lexus and Vovan, later integrated into the ecosystem of official Russian propaganda (*Eksprezydent SSHA...*, 2022). In September 2023, disinformation claimed that Stoltenberg himself had acknowledged that NATO was to blame for provoking Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russian propaganda either relies on pro-Russian politicians, journalists, and experts who repeat Kremlin-aligned narratives or systematically distorts, rephrases, and take out of context the statements of authoritative Western leaders. Stoltenberg has been frequently used in this technique, even "confirming" NATO involvement in Ukrainian strikes on the Russian Black Sea Fleet. The perceived credibility of such falsifications increases because the names of well-known officials are misused to influence audiences. For example, in February 2024, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba was falsely attributed to a supposed initiative to rename the town of Avdiivka in the Donetsk re-

gion to Prague – allegedly in an attempt to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty on collective defense.

Russian propaganda has also perfected another technique: leveraging the statements of Western politicians or experts perceived as sympathetic to Russia's statements, such as Tucker Carlson. These individuals are not necessarily aligned with Russian interests; in fact, their statements are often used without their acknowledgement or consent. One of such cases is the conspiracy theory pledging that NATO planned a false flag attack using a "dirty nuclear bomb" in Europe, the source was Andrew Bridgen, a British MP known for promoting conspiracy theories (*NATO planuje ataku pid falshyvym praporom...*, 2024).

The anti-NATO narrative in Russian propaganda is not carved in stone. It is constantly adapted to changes on the battlefield and in the international context. This flexibility is both its main strength and clear evidence that the narrative is not based on objective reality, but rather serves as a tool of strategic influence. From portraying NATO as a threat to describing it as ineffective or indifferent, from claims of "strikes on NATO headquarters" to fabricated stories about "officers in skirts" – all of this is part of a multilayered campaign aimed to undermine Ukrainian resilience, demoralize Western societies, and legitimize Russian aggression in the eyes of the international community.

The temporary softening of Russia's rhetoric towards the US in the early months following Donald Trump's inauguration, amid renewed US-Russia talks, did not lead to any weakening of the anti-NATO narrative. Researchers analyzed nearly 150 public statements produced by senior Russian officials during the first quarter of 2025 and found that 93% of them contained negative assessments of NATO (Open Minds Institute, 2025). Russia's disinformation arsenal includes fabrications, blunt absurdities, manipulated quotations of Western politicians, and conspiracy theories. Collectively, these methods do not pursue the truth, but rather, they justify aggression, weaken international support for Ukraine, and distort NATO's image as a cornerstone of modern global security.

FACT-CHECKING THE ANTI-NATO NARRATIVE: CAUSE AND EFFECT REVERSED

The most compelling evidence that Russia's war against Ukraine was not triggered by the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO is the fact that, at the time of its initiation – namely, the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in Donbas in the spring of 2014 – Ukraine was a non-aligned country that had largely suspended its cooperation with the Alliance.

Granting Ukraine's NATO membership had never advanced beyond political declarations, as it had never entered the realm of concise policy planning. At the Bucharest Summit held in April 2008, NATO refused to grant Ukraine and Georgia a Membership Action Plan. Just four months later, in August 2008, Moscow launched an invasion of Georgia. In 2010, after Viktor Yanukovych was elected President, Ukraine amended its legislation to enshrine a status of non-alignment.

This status was revoked only in 2014 after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, an ostensibly neutral state at that time.

Only after the full-scale invasion in 2022 did Ukraine formally submit its application to NATO membership. It happened in September of that year. As of now, the government hasn't progressed any further.

Likewise, before 2022, there were no practical discussions about Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO. Their decision to join the Alliance was a direct consequence of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The significant military reinforcement of NATO's North-Eastern flank was not the cause of the so-called "special military operation," but rather its direct result. The same applies to the forward deployment of NATO infrastructure closer to Russia's borders and the scale of military exercises. Exercises such as Steadfast Defender 2024 were the largest of their kind since 1988 (Bidochko, 2024a).

As demonstrated, even basic fact-checking is sufficient to dismantle the core narrative of Russian propaganda. The evolution of the anti-NATO narrative is a testament to the adaptability of Russian disinformation. Although detached from reality, it serves a clear purpose: legitimizing the war, mobilizing the domestic population, and influencing foreign societies. It does not require logical consistency – nothing but repetition, emotional resonance, and fear. For this reason, fabrications, distortions, manipulations, and absurd conspiracy theories are employed continually and with equal intensity. Even superficial scrutiny reveals the falsehood of the Kremlin's central claim that NATO was the cause of the war. On the contrary, it was the absence of NATO membership and the corresponding security guarantees that encouraged the Kremlin1s decision to pursue aggression. The Russian anti-NATO narrative is not based on verifiable facts. Rather, it is a flexible instrument of wartime legitimization, internal mobilization, and strategic influence over international public opinion.

MODERN TECHNOLOGIES OF GLOBAL INFLUENCE AND THE CENTRAL ROLE OF TELEVISION WITHIN RUSSIA

Sanctions, blocking Russian international broadcasting media, and restrictions on access to Russian websites from Western countries have not prevented Russia from reaching foreign audiences. Circumventing the bans and limitations imposed by the European Union on traditional Russian media outlets operating within EU territory, Russian actors have employed cutting-edge technologies. Between 2022 and 2025, Russian propaganda underwent a fundamental shift, transitioning from traditional media to artificial intelligence. It became a multilayered, self-reinforcing system that not only spreads narratives but simulates their "organic" emergence – through messengers, bots, influencers, contaminated large language model (LLM) platforms, and viral videos.

Russia is actively employing artificial intelligence to create sophisticated deepfakes used for disinformation campaigns, malicious influence operations, and to incite further fear (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025). As early as 2022, there were documented cases of Russia using generative neural networks to produce fake photos and videos depicting bombed-out churches, "NATO military

burials," and "mass strikes in Germany due to support for Ukraine." These visuals often mimic journalistic styles and are widely shared on messaging platforms. According to a study conducted by NewsGuard (Sadeghi, Blachez, 2025), popular Western chatbots have been "infected" with Kremlin propaganda. Experts analyzed a dozen AI-powered applications, including ChatGPT-4, Smart Assistant, Grok, Copilot, Meta AI, Google Gemini, and Perplexity. They demonstrated that all of them disseminated misinformation crafted by a Moscow-based network called Pravda, founded in April 2022. This network does not generate original content but repurposes materials from Russian state-controlled media and pro-government bloggers, translating them into approximately 40 languages. The chatbots above were shown to reproduce falsehoods promoted by Pravda and, in some cases, even recommend it as a reliable source.

The NewsGuard offered the bots 15 topics used by Russian propaganda and found that in 33% of cases, they reproduced Kremlin narratives. In 48% of cases, they attempted to refute these narratives, yet still included links to Pravda as a reference (Sadeghi, Blachez, 2025). This propaganda network is capable of producing more than three million messages per year.

Search engine algorithms are not designed to prioritize accurate or verified information. Instead, they are optimized to display content that aligns with technical criteria or the emotional expectations of users. As a result, additional online searches may actually reinforce users' existing biases. In a series of experiments, a team of researchers from the United States found that the participants were 19% more likely to believe fake news after conducting online searches to verify the truth (Vetter, 2023).

Russian disinformation campaigns are frequently disseminated through unverified media outlets, low-credibility information platforms, and various tabloids that publish content regardless of its accuracy. Researchers identified around twenty such outlets operating in Germany alone, and thirty-five in Italy. At this, Russia exploits the principle of free speech to present narratives from pro-Russian and conspiratorial sources as supposed "alternatives" to mainstream reporting (Berezienko, Tsarenko, 2024).

Telegram has become the primary platform for spreading Russian propaganda. Although its founder, Pavel Durov, had conflicts with the Russian government and now resides abroad, questions remain regarding the influence of Russian security services over the messenger and its use in favor of the Kremlin. In early April 2025, Telegram's administration blocked several anti-war Russian channels, further fueling suspicions about covert ties to Russian intelligence agencies.

The social network X, formerly Twitter, also plays a significant role in the dissemination of disinformation. According to the European Commission, "Russian propaganda about Ukraine has reached more people than before the war began" (Belton, Mekhennet, 2023). In Ukraine, however, X remains relatively unpopular.

To target Ukrainian audiences, Russia has turned to the Chinese platform TikTok, which is especially popular among younger users and accounts for up to 25% of all social media traffic in Ukraine. On TikTok, Russian propagandists distribute a wide range of false narratives – some produced using artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies. For instance, in early March 2022, they circulated a fabricated video of "President Zelensky" urging Ukrainians to surrender. Russian propaganda on TikTok is particularly effective due to its combination of emotional imagery, "humor,"

and musical framing. Short clips show staged footage of alleged Ukrainian military defeats, "successes" of the Russian "special military operation," dramatic captions, and aggressive music. This type of content easily enters recommendation algorithms, accumulates millions of views, and influences younger audiences who tend to be less critical of the origin and credibility of the information they consume.

In 2024, the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security (CS-CIS), in collaboration with the Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law (CEDEM), investigated the dissemination of destructive Russian narratives through Facebook advertisements. Based on the analysis of nearly 600 ads targeting Ukrainian users between March and November 2023, the study identified 12 key thematic categories through which such narratives were promoted (EUvsDisinfo, 2024).

Despite the evolution of technology – from leaflets to large language models (LLMs) – the objective of Russia's information apparatus remains unchanged: to distort reality, sow confusion, and paralyze society's capacity for resistance. In the twenty-first century, war is fought not only on the battlefield, but in every smartphone. At the same time, it is worth noting that television remains the dominant medium among Russian media consumers in domestic communications. Two-thirds of Russians watch television daily, and not just for entertainment: 64% consider it their main source of news, while 50% regard TV as the most trustworthy medium. Among those aged 55 and older, daily television consumption reaches up to five hours, with two of those hours devoted to news and political talk shows (Levada Center, 2024).

ADDRESSES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA: RUSSIANS, UKRAINIANS, AND THE WORLD

Let us examine the goals and methods of how Russian propaganda, through its anti-NATO narrative, seeks to influence various target audiences. When it comes to communication between the Russian authorities and the domestic audience, the negative portrayal of NATO serves a dual purpose.

First, by framing NATO as an existential threat to Russia, the narrative is used to justify and sustain public support for the war against Ukraine. According to available sociological data – bearing in mind the questionable reliability of polling under an authoritarian regime – the majority of Russians appear to support the war. It is not regarded as an unpopular conflict, unlike, for example, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, which contributed to the outbreak of the first Russian revolution due to public discontent.

Following the removal of President Yanukovych during the Revolution of Dignity – which Moscow framed as a "coup d'état" – the annexation of Crimea, and the failed attempt to implement the "Novorossiya" project in 2014, the Kremlin spent eight years reengineering Ukraine's image in the Russian public consciousness. The aim was to shift perceptions from seeing Ukraine as a "brotherly republic," a legacy of the Soviet worldview, to viewing it as a hostile state that poses a threat to the very existence of the Russian Federation. However, this directly contradicts Putin's own narrative about Russians and Ukrainians being "one people" (Putin, 2021). After the start of the full-

scale invasion, Putin himself seemed to recognize the logical inconsistencies in his theory and occasionally described the so-called "special military operation" as bearing features of a civil war. Nevertheless, the key terminology used in his July 2021 article reflected Russia's rejection of Ukraine's sovereignty and its disregard for international law: "They were preparing public opinion and their armed forces for continuing aggression against Ukraine" (Poroshenko, 2021).

From 2012 to August 2024, there were 4,263 references to 56010715844kraine as a "Nazi state" on the three largest nationwide Russian television channels (Makukhin et al., 2025). This campaign was aimed at preparing Russian society for war against Ukraine – something that could have been predicted even without access to classified intelligence, purely through analysis of Russia's disinformation campaigns. This transformation of Ukraine's image from "brother nation" to "enemy state" clearly illustrates the mechanism known as the "Overton window." According to this concept, ideas that were once considered unthinkable or marginal can, through gradual shifts in discourse, become acceptable, desirable, and eventually politically necessary. Over the eight years following 2014, Kremlin-controlled media managed to shift the boundaries of acceptable public thought to the point where war against Ukraine was not only imaginable, but increasingly perceived as desirable by a significant segment of the Russian population.

Instead of the promised blitzkrieg – "Kyiv (could be captured) in three days" – the so-called "special military operation" turned into a protracted war approaching the duration of the Soviet-German war of 1941–1945 (1,418 days). Russian losses have far exceeded those sustained in the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan and the two Chechen wars. "Ukraine in no way fits the image of a 'great enemy" (Berezienko, Tsarenko, 2024). The situation, in which the "second most powerful army in the world" could not defeat a country significantly inferior in military and demographic potential, demanded explanations. The narrative that Russia was not actually fighting relatively small Ukraine, but a vast military bloc of more than 30 countries, came in handy.

In summer 2022, the Crimean Tatar Resource Center studied the specifics of Russia's anti-NATO campaign in occupied Crimea – a territory that Russia considers its own, yet where the national-level narrative is locally adjusted. In the initial months following the full-scale invasion, the justification of the "special military operation" to residents of Crimea focused on claims that Ukraine's potential NATO membership would lead Kyiv to attempt a military recapture of the peninsula. However, by July 2022 – when it became clear that the war would be prolonged – propagandists shifted the narrative to emphasize that Russia was not actually fighting Ukraine, but NATO itself (*Krymskyi resursnyi...*, 2024).

The Kremlin's notably restrained reaction to Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO – which expanded Russia's land border with the Alliance by thousands of kilometers and effectively turned the Baltic Sea into a "NATO lake" (Stavridis, 2024) – raises doubts about whether President Putin himself perceives NATO as a real threat. What Putin required was not strategic deterrence, but a myth to justify, in the eyes of the Russian public, both an expansionist war aimed at eliminating a neighboring state and the fact that this war, contrary to initial expectations, had dragged on.

Beyond the domestic Russian audience, the anti-NATO narrative is targeted at various foreign groups, with adaptations tailored to each. Among the major targets are

both the "Global South" (beyond the scope of this study) and the so-called "collective West" – a term rooted in Russian political vocabulary that refers to the Euro-Atlantic community. In some cases, individual countries are targeted – such as Finland and Sweden during their accelerated accession to NATO; Moldova during presidential or parliamentary campaigns in 2024–2025; and Hungary, Serbia, or Slovakia, where ruling political forces often amplify Russian propaganda by directly retransmitting its narratives. The Ukrainian media analysis outlet Detector Media, in collaboration with LestData and as part of the EU Disinformation Situation Center, conducted a targeted study on Russian propaganda narratives about NATO across Central and Eastern Europe (Detector Media, LestData, 2024). The study encompassed media content from Bulgaria, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic – analyzing over 3,600 social media posts from February to March 2024. The findings show that Russian propaganda actively promotes the image of NATO as an aggressive bloc threatening regional security, provoking Russia, and interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

Anti-NATO propaganda waves have occasionally reached as far as New Zealand, where Russia employed its known tactic of using "useful idiots." One such case was former Foreign Minister Matt Robson, who publicly claimed that NATO had always sought to "encircle Russia and China" (*NATO zavzhdy...*, 2022). The use of such figures – or the promotion of pro-Russian narratives by political forces in Hungary or Slovakia – is a textbook example of third-party validation, a technique in which propaganda messages are delivered not directly, but via seemingly independent external voices, thereby enhancing their credibility among target audiences. These "borrowed megaphones" lend legitimacy to Russian messaging and help spread Kremlin narratives on the international stage, cloaking them in the appearance of local expertise or political opinion. It is both evident and, to some extent, natural that, within the broader strategy aimed at preventing Ukraine's accession to NATO, Russia has devoted particular attention to influencing Ukraine. The Russian Federation has a long-standing history of conducting information and psychological operations (psyops) against Ukraine, especially during critical moments when Ukraine sought to shift its geopolitical orientation.

The historical roots of such activities run deep, tracing back to a famous 1708 decree issued by Peter I, in which, seeking to discredit the rebellious Hetman Ivan Mazepa, the Tsar propagated the false claim that Mazepa planned to convert Orthodox churches into Uniate temples and Lutheran churches. Although Russia formally recognized Ukraine's independence in 1991, it never fully came to terms with the loss. For decades, Moscow waged an intense information war against Ukraine – one that ultimately proved to be merely "artillery preparation" for a military invasion. During the first 23 years of Ukraine's independence, Russian psyops – and more broadly, the application of soft power – benefited from a highly favorable operational environment, particularly during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovych, widely regarded as a classical figure of the pro-Kremlin "fifth column." Until 2014, Ukraine remained part of Russia's broader information space. Russian television channels enjoyed premium placement in Ukrainian cable packages and were only banned after the annexation of Crimea. It was not until 2017 that the Ukrainian government blocked access to the Russian social media platforms VKontakte and Odnoklassniki.

This trajectory highlights the evolution of Russia's information expansionism: from "soft power," public (cultural) diplomacy, and influence through religion and media, to open information aggression accompanying military force. In this sense, propaganda ceased being a mere accompaniment to war and became one of its central tools. Thus, the anti-NATO narrative in Russian propaganda is not merely a tool for justifying external aggression or mobilizing domestic support. It constitutes a core component of a multi-layered cognitive campaign aimed at systematically reconstructing reality for both domestic and foreign audiences. As a result, an epistemologically engineered alternative reality emerges – one in which NATO is no longer seen as a defensive alliance, but as an existential threat. It is this constructed reality that enables the justification of a prolonged war, massive casualties, and international isolation.

EFFECTIVENESS OF INFLUENCE: RUSSIA SUCCEEDED IN CONVINCING TRUMP

The effectiveness of anti-NATO narratives is best assessed by examining public opinion. Regarding the Russian domestic audience, the results are relatively modest when measured against the scale of the propaganda effort. A survey conducted in early 2025 by the Ukrainian Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia revealed that 57% of Russians do not believe that NATO countries pose a threat of attack against Russia, while only 40% feel such a threat exists (Instytut Krytyky ta Analizu Rosii, 2025). While 43% expressed indifference, only 49% responded negatively to Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, despite Finland having once been part of the Russian Empire (until 1917) and its sovereignty being heavily constrained by Moscow during the Soviet era. Moreover, 71% of respondents stated that the accession of these two countries did not affect their personal sense of security, while only 22% believed it hurt their safety. Finally, only one in five Russians still believes that they are fighting NATO troops in the so-called "special military operation" – a figure that has declined from 40% to 21% in two years. Instead, 56% continue to recognize the reality: they are fighting against the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which are supported with weapons from NATO countries (Instytut Krytyky ta Analizu Rosii, 2025). This assessment is consistent with the findings of the Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, which states that Russia continues to view its war with Ukraine as a "proxy conflict" with the West, rather than a direct military clash with NATO (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025).

In Ukraine, by contrast, public opinion regarding NATO shifted dramatically after 2014. The full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 gave further momentum for this shift. According to a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in September 2024, 84% of Ukrainians want their country to join NATO. If a referendum were held, 68% of all respondents would vote in favor of membership, with 17% abstaining (including many opponents). The projected result: nearly 87% support with a turnout of 68% (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2024). This is the opposite effect of what Russian propaganda sought to achieve. Despite the aggressiveness and scale of anti-NATO and anti-Ukrainian psyops, their effective-

ness in Ukraine has declined over time. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian society has developed an immunity to Russian disinformation, reinforced by personal experiences of the war, strong trust in the Armed Forces, and a proactive state communication strategy.

As for the impact of Russian propaganda on European audiences, a 2024 survey showed that the lowest levels of support for Ukraine's accession to NATO and the EU were recorded in Hungary and Slovakia (at 36% and 30%, respectively). Nearly one-third of Slovaks believe NATO is to blame for the war (GLOBSEC, 2024). Analysts from Globsec Trends 2024, who conducted the study, attributed this trend directly to the influence of Russian disinformation campaigns. However, they also noted that other factors may have contributed – such as domestic political movements, pro-Russian government positions in Slovakia and Hungary, and internal media ecosystems. In general, the analysis of public opinion demonstrates that the effectiveness of anti-national narratives is fragmented. They have limited impact in Russia, are largely ineffective in Ukraine, but find fertile ground in countries where the domestic political landscape resonates with Kremlin rhetoric. However, it should be noted that pro-Russian sympathies in individual countries are not a direct result of Russian propaganda actions; they have deep historical roots and can effectively support and reinforce this propaganda.

Russian information-psychological operations (psyops) targeting Western audiences are aimed at two primary groups: the general public and political elites. In the first case, the focus is on mass disinformation, emotional manipulation, and the construction of negative images of NATO and Ukraine. In the second case, the effort centers on targeted attempts to influence opinion leaders and policymakers whose decisions shape the international agenda. As noted in the Information Warfare Training Manual published by the National Defense University of Ukraine, "the primary target of influence – either directly or indirectly – during information operations is the cognitive activity of individuals responsible for making key decisions" (Natsionalnyi universytet oborony Ukrainy, 2021). Former Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis articulated the danger of such an approach clearly in January 2025: "Putin is fighting two battles. One is the war in Ukraine, and the other is the battle for the minds of Western leaders. And in that battle, he is currently winning" (Landsbergis, 2024).

The team of former President Donald Trump, speaking through Republican vice-presidential candidate J. D. Vance in the summer of 2024, declared that a future administration's approach to resolving the conflict should include not only Ukraine's acceptance of the loss of part of its territory but also a renunciation of NATO membership. Trump went even further, publicly endorsing a key Russian narrative by claiming that the question of Ukraine's NATO membership was likely the cause of the war. "The war probably happened because Biden said Ukraine could join NATO," Trump stated (*Trump stated that Ukraine's...*, 2025).

Equally controversial were the remarks made by Trump's special envoy to negotiations with Russia, Steve Witkoff. In March 2025, he acknowledged the legitimacy of the sham referendums Russia conducted in the occupied territories in the fall of 2022: "I think the biggest issue in this conflict lies in those so-called four regions: Donbas, Crimea, and two others. These are Russian-speaking regions where referendums were held, and a vast majority of people expressed a desire to be under Russian

control" (*Witkoff nazvav...*, 2024). In various interviews, Witkoff shared insights into how Putin manipulated both him and Trump. He recounted praying for Trump before an assassination attempt and gifting him a portrait. These examples underscore how subtle the mechanisms of influence can be – how propaganda takes the form of "personal sympathy" – and how emotions, faith, and symbolic gestures can become tools in information-psychological operations. As Congressman Adam Schiff noted: "Putin sees Trump as a child who is easy to manipulate (Haltiwanger, 2025). It is also worth mentioning that similar admiration for Putin has been openly expressed by Elon Musk, an influential figure in the new U.S. administration: "It would be foolish not to admire Putin" (*"It would be foolish not to admire Putin"...*, 2025).

In July 2024, The Guardian published an open letter signed by 61 experts from universities across Europe and the United States, urging NATO not to grant Ukraine membership (*The NATO alliance...*, 2024). The signatories argued that Ukraine's accession to the Alliance would not deter Russia from a renewed invasion. On the contrary, they claimed, it could provoke a direct war between NATO and Russia or even lead to the collapse of the Alliance itself.

These cases illustrate the effectiveness of Russian anti-NATO propaganda in influencing the opinions of Western experts and academics. The Russian information strategy is aimed at spreading narratives about the risks of escalation and instability that could follow NATO enlargement. A content analysis of the letter reveals that its authors appear to have internalized key elements of Russian disinformation, including the assertion that Ukraine's NATO membership would not serve as a deterrent to Russian aggression. The publication of the open letter by the 61 experts calling for Ukraine to be excluded from NATO is a telling example of the influence of Russian anti-NATO propaganda on segments of the Western expert community. To its credit, The Guardian later published a counterstatement signed by one hundred academics advocating for Ukraine's accession to NATO (*Should Ukraine...*, 2024).

Such developments demonstrate the Russian strategic nature of "targeted psyops against elites" – a deliberate propaganda tactic aimed at undermining Western unity and influencing policy outcomes by shaping perceptions rather than presenting facts. The danger of this method lies in its subtlety, persuasiveness, and frequent pre-emptiveness. The statements made by figures in Trump's circle reveal how anti-NATO narratives originating from Russia are not only entering Western political discourse but are becoming foundational to the rhetoric of influential players. Thus, the "battle for minds" is not merely a rhetorical phrase – it is a real and decisive component of contemporary warfare. In the 21st century, this battle is waged not only on the frontlines but also in ministerial offices, G7 summits, NATO headquarters, and – most crucially – in the minds of those who hold the power to make strategic decisions.

Earlier, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel had already come under the influence of similar narratives, serving as a textbook example of a Putinversteher – a German political neologism meaning "someone who understands Putin." In her memoirs, published in late 2024, Merkel candidly recalls how, in 2008, together with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, she blocked the granting of a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Ukraine at the Alliance's Bucharest Summit (Merkel, Baumann, 2024: 446–462). She does not conceal that Vladimir Putin influenced her position at

the time. On April 3, 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky commented on that decision: "I invited Ms. Merkel and Mr. Sarkozy to visit Bucha and saw what 14 years of concessions to Russia had led to" (*Prezident zaprosyv...*, 2022).

The outcome of the Bucharest Summit – to deny Ukraine a MAP while affirming its theoretical right to join NATO – was intended by its participants as a compromise. In reality, it proved unacceptable to both sides. Merkel acknowledges this in her memoirs: "The fact that Georgia and Ukraine were not granted MAP status was a rejection of their aspirations. The fact that the Alliance simultaneously promised them led Putin to interpret eventual membership as an unequivocal 'yes' to NATO membership for both countries, and as a declaration of war" (Merkel, Baumann, 2024: 459). Merkel justifies her stance, insisting that she was right, arguing that a positive NATO decision for Ukraine in 2008 would have provoked the dictator at that time. In reality, however, the opposite occurred. It was the failure to grant Ukraine and Georgia a MAP that provoked Putin, who interpreted it as tacit recognition of these countries as falling within the Russian sphere of influence. Just months after the Bucharest Summit, Russia invaded Georgia. In 2014, it annexed Crimea and launched a war in the Donbas. In 2022, it escalated its aggression into a full-scale invasion of Ukraine – the bloodiest war in Europe since World War II – and issued direct nuclear threats. By 2024–2025, Russia had effectively reasserted control over Georgia by relying on a domestic "fifth column" – an operation that may now serve as a textbook case in the study of hybrid warfare.

In her memoirs, Merkel also notes that then-U.S. President George W. Bush and several Central and Eastern European leaders believed that denying Ukraine a MAP amounted to granting Russia de facto veto power (Merkel, Baumann, 2024: 453). Merkel's strategy toward Russia, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's "reset" policy, and the tepid response of major Western countries to Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 provide ample grounds for drawing at least tentative parallels with the policy of appeasement pursued toward Nazi Germany in 1938. Viewed from this perspective, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit, and President Obama's unwillingness to respond decisively to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 appear as components of a single strategic pattern of accommodation toward Russian aggression. The dotted line becomes bold when analyzing the contours of Trump's proposed peace plan – at least in the form it took by the first quarter of 2025. As is well known, this plan envisioned peace in exchange for Ukraine's renunciation of NATO membership and territorial concessions to Russia. This closely resembles the appeasement policy pursued by Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier, who pressured Czechoslovakia into ceding the Sudetenland to the Third Reich in hopes of halting its expansion. That is why the question of security guarantees for Ukraine has taken on such critical importance – it is the only potential element that could distinguish a future peace agreement from the one at Munich in 1938.

Contemporary studies paint a consistent picture: the anti-NATO narrative in Russian propaganda is not merely an ideological construct but a highly technological tool of strategic influence. Its evolution does not reflect changes in the actual security environment, but rather the shifting needs of political and military manipulation. For this reason, anti-NATO rhetoric remains one of the primary directions of Russian information-psychological operations (PSYOPs) during the ongoing full-scale war against Ukraine.

Analysis of the narrative's influence on both elites and the general public reveals its selective effectiveness. It has a limited impact inside Russia, is largely ineffective in Ukraine, but can be successful under favorable political conditions in certain EU countries and in the United States. The most dangerous dimension, however, is its targeted influence on elites – through "precision PSYOPs" that appeal to fears, symbols, and personal sympathies or antipathies.

CONCLUSION

The study of the Russian anti-NATO narrative's influence explicitly confirms the undeniable significance of the informational dimension in modern warfare. While kinetic combat operations take place between two states, the information front of this war is truly global. Russia has waged an aggressive psychological operations campaign targeting the transatlantic community, the countries of the Global South, and its own domestic audience.

The anti-NATO narrative is one of the core elements in Russian IPSOs (psychological operations), serving multiple purposes: mobilizing domestic support, legitimizing the war, demoralizing the enemy, and disrupting unity among Ukraine's international backers. Its overall goal is to legitimize aggression in the eyes of the Russian population, secure public support for the war, demoralize Ukrainians, and weaken international support for Kyiv.

Before the full-scale invasion, Russia spent nearly a decade reconfiguring the image of the "brotherly Ukrainian people" into that of "Nazis" who pose a threat to Russia. In this way, official propaganda prepared Russian public opinion for war and, to a significant extent, secured societal endorsement. Equally critical to the Kremlin was the narrative claiming that NATO's eastward expansion and Ukraine's aspirations to join the Alliance were the root causes of the war. This message evolved organically from the image of an "aggressive NATO block" that was constructed during the Cold War. Its deeper roots lie in longstanding Russian perceptions of their country as a fortress surrounded by external enemies. Russia's information war against Ukrainian independence – or even the mere idea of it – has centuries-old origins.

Following the failure of its blitzkrieg strategy in 2022, the Kremlin's need for the anti-NATO narrative intensified. The longer the war dragged on, the greater the necessity to convince Russian society that Putin was not fighting a "small Ukraine," but a powerful alliance of over 30 countries.

Besides, Russia has swiftly adopted cutting-edge information technologies in pursuit of its archaic imperial objectives. Its propaganda machine actively uses artificial intelligence, deepfake technology, digital imagery manipulation, and automated content generation to create the illusion of "organic" disinformation. These tools enhance the scalability of influence, obscure sources, enable precise targeting, and circumvent bans on traditional media.

In its outcome, Russia's anti-NATO narrative prompted the opposite result in Ukraine: support for NATO membership rose dramatically – from 20% in 2013 to over 70% in 2024. This impressive result has been possible, in part, because over the past decade, Ukraine has mastered the technologies to counter Russian propaganda

effectively. This was impossible before 2013, as Ukraine, in general, remained within a single information space with Russia.

But in the meantime, Russian propaganda has been having the greatest effect internally within Russia, even there less than half of the population perceives NATO as a real threat. In the EU, the Russian anti-NATO narrative proved most effective in some Central European states.

Psychological operations directed at the political elites of Western countries were hazardous. The facts are clear: at the outset of Russia's aggression in 2014, Ukraine maintained a neutral status – adopted under President Yanukovych upon Moscow's resoluteness – and cooperation with NATO was nearly frozen. The 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit merely offered a symbolic promise of future membership, falling short of granting a Membership Action Plan. Ukraine's application for a NATO invitation, submitted by President Zelenskyy in 2022, was left unprocessed by both sides. NATO infrastructural expansion toward Russia's borders was not a cause of the war – it was a consequence of it.

Yet despite all rational arguments, Russia succeeded in influencing the commitments of the 47th President of the United States, Donald Trump, who repeatedly claimed that NATO's intention to admit Ukraine triggered the war. Other members of his administration repeated similar Russian propaganda narratives. This demonstrates the narrative's effectiveness, especially when it affects decision-making, as political authorities targeted by the Kremlin's most powerful geopolitical adversary.

Following Trump's return to the presidency in 2025, the risks associated with NATO's fragmentation have shifted from potential to actual. Washington's new political course is accompanied by rhetoric echoing key anti-NATO subjects from Russian propaganda: futility of supporting Ukraine," "unnecessary expansion of NATO," and "burden of collective defense for the United States."

Russia's information war poses a threat not only to Ukraine but to NATO as a whole. Without a systematic response, the Alliance may soon face not only a military defeat but also an internal political crisis of trust – a strategic threat to transatlantic security.

The Russian anti-NATO narrative is not merely an attack on the Alliance1s image; it is a deliberate attempt to reshape the 21st-century security architecture and delegitimize the very concept of collective defense. If NATO fails to adapt its communication strategy in time, the risks may become existential.

The future of NATO depends not only on its capacity to address military threats, but also on its ability to prevail in the cognitive domain – to sustain trust, persuade audiences, and demonstrate its effectiveness. If the Alliance fails to modernize its communication strategy, an information defeat may precede a geopolitical one.

REFERENCES

Andrushchenko T. V., Zelenin V. V. (2022), *Psykholohiia politychnoi propahandy*, Vydavnytstvo Hnozis, Kyiv.

Belton C., Mekhennet S. (2023), *Musk's Twitter takeover boosts Russian propaganda, EU study finds*, "The Washington Post", www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/09/01/musk-twitter-x-russia-propaganda/ (12.04.2025).

Berezienko V., Tsarenko D. (2024), *Maisternia brekhni. Mekhanizmy kremlivs "koi dezinformatsii"*, Yakaboo Publishing, Kyiv.

Bernays E. L. (1928), *Propaganda*, Horace Liveright, New York.

Biden pro iadernyi shantazh Putina (2022), https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-biden-putin-yad-erna-zbroya/32069616.html (10.04.2025).

Bidochko L. (2024a), *Labeling NATO Military Exercises as a Rehearsal for the Third World: How Russian Propaganda Responds to Steadfast Defender*, https://en.detector.media/post/labe-ling-nato-military-exercises-as-a-rehearsal-for-the-third-world-how-russian-propaganda-responds-to-steadfast-defender-2024 (12.04.2025).

Bidochko L. (2024b), *Russia Shifts Rhetoric on Ukraine After Washington NATO Summit*, Detec-tor Media, https://en.detector.media/post/russia-shifts-rhetoric-on-ukraine-after-washington-nato-summit (12.04.2025).

Blinken pro vplyv iadernoho shantazhu (2025), https://www.holosameryky.com/a/blinken-pro-ukra-jinu-ta-rosiju/7924526.html (10.04.2025).

Blinken vvazhaie, shcho Putin rozhliadav mozhlyvist iadernoho udaru, ale tse ne spodobalosia Kytaiu (2025), https://hromadske.ua/svit/237291-blinken-vvazaye-shcho-putin-rozhliadav-mozlyvist-iadernoho-udaru-ale-tse-ne-spodobalosia-kytaiu (10.04.2025).

Bobrov A. (2023), *Propahanda 2023: informatsiini viiny pidchas rosiiskoi ahresii*, Folio, Kharkiv.

Charap S. (2024), *The path to peace in Ukraine. Foreign Affairs*, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/pathway-peace-ukraine (10.04.2025).

Darczewska J. (2024), *Zawładnąć umysłami i urządzić świat. Rosyjska strategia dywersji i dezinfor-macji*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, Warszawa.

Detector Media, Lets Data (2024), *Sluhi Antykhrysta, yaki dopomahaiut ukronatsystam. Yak rosi-iska propahanda zobrazhaie NATO u krainakh Tsentralno-Skhidnoi Yevropy*, https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/225753/2024-04-22-slugy-antykhrysta-yaki-dopomagay-ut-ukronatsystam-yak-rosiyska-propaganda-zobrazhaie-nato-u-krainakh-tsentralno-skhidnoi--ievropy/ (12.04.2025).

Eksprezydent SSHA pidtverdyv, shcho NATO poobitsialo Rosii ne prostuvatysia na skhid (2022), https://disinfo.detector.media/post/eksprezydent-ssha-pidtverdyv-shcho-nato-poobitsialo-rosii-ne-prostuvatysia-na-skhid (12.04.2025).

European Commission (2023), *Study on the Reach and Influence of Kremlin-Backed Accounts in Europe*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/09/01/musk-twitter-x-russia-propaganda/ (12.04.2025).

European External Action Service – East StratCom Task Force (2024), *What we have learnt about FIMI after three years of full-scale war in Ukraine*, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/what-we-have-learnt-about-fimi-after-three-years-of-full-scale-war-in-ukraine/ (10.04.2025).

EUvsDisinfo (2024), *What we have learnt about FIMI after three years of full-scale war in Ukraine*, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/what-we-have-learnt-about-fimi-after-three-years-of-full-scale-war-in-ukraine/ (12.04.2025).

Gerasimov V. (2019), *Vektory razvitiia voennoi strategii*, https://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voen-noj-strategii (10.04.2025).

Giefter M. (2015), *Tret'ego tysiachiletiia ne budet. Rossiiskaia istoriia igry s chelovechestvom. Razgovory s Glebom Pavlovskim*, Izdatel'stvo Evropa, Moskva, https://readli.net/tretego-tyisyacheletiya-ne-budet-russkaya-istoriya-igryi-s-chelovechestvom (12.04.2025).

GLOBSEC (2024), *GLOBSEC Trends 2024 – Central and Eastern Europe under the spotlight*, https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/GLOBSEC%20TRENDS%202024.pdf (10.04.2025).

Haltiwanger J. (2025), *Adam Schiff: Putin Sees Trump as a "Child" Who Can Be Easily Manipulated,* https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/04/02/adam-schiff-putin-trump-ukraine-signalgate-witkoff/ (12.04.2025).

Instytut Krytyky ta Analizu Rosii (2024), *Narratyv pro "natsi-zahrozu" yak mekhanizm lehitimizatsii rosiiskoi ahresii [Research brief]*, https://ikar-thinktank.org/explorations/128 (10.04.2025).

"It would be foolish not to admire Putin" – Elon Musk's father, Errol, swoons over Russian President (2024), https://kyivindependent.com/it-would-be-foolish-not-to-admire-putin-elon-musks-father-errol-swoons-over-russian-president/ (10.04.2025).

Kennan G. F. (1947), *The sources of Soviet conduct, Foreign Affairs*, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct (10.04.2025).

Kholokh O. I., Topalskyi V. L., Skriabin O. L., Maraiev V. R., et al. (2024), *Obraz voroha u viinakh ta voienno-politychnykh konfliktakh XX–XXI st.,* V. M. Moroz (ed.), Tsentr uchbovoi literatury, Kyiv.

Krymskyi resursnyi tsentr proviv prezentatsiiu na temu: fejky pro NATO v okupovanomu Krymu (2024), https://upmp.news/post_blog/krts-proviv-prezentatsiyu-na-temu-fejki-pro-nato-v-okupovanomu-krimu (10.04.2025).

Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (2024), *Stavlennia ukraintsiv do NATO: dynamika pidtrymky ta ochikuvannia*, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1468&page=19 (10.04.2025).

Landsbergis G. (2024), *Pro vplyv Rosii na mizky zakhidnykh lideriv [Interview]*, https://www.holosameryky.com/a/gabrielius-landsbergis-interview/7940040.html (10.04.2025).

Lehkodukh V. (2024), *Rosiiska propahanda viiny yak zahroza demokratychnym tsinnostiam*, https://www.academia.edu/121556745 (10.04.2025).

Levada Center (2024), *The role of television and the Internet as the main sources of news and the TOP most popular Russian journalists*, https://www.levada.ru/en/2024/06/07/the-role-of-television-and-the-internet-as-the-main-sources-of-news-and-the-top-most-popular-russian-journalists (12.04.2025).

Linebarger P. M. A. (1948), *Psychological Warfare, Duell, Sloan and Pearce,* New York.

Lytvynenko, O. V. (2003), *Informatsiini vplyvy ta operatsii. Teoretyko-analitychni narysy*, Natsionalnyi Instytut Stratehichnykh Doslidzhen, Kyiv.

Mackinnon A. (2025), *Adam Schiff: Putin sees Trump as a "child" who can be easily manipulated*, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/04/02/adam-schiff-putin-trump-ukraine-signalgate-witkoff (10.04.2025).

Makukhin O., Ivchenko Y., Sokolov D. (2025), *Nazism as a Strategic Propaganda Narrative on Russian State-Controlled Television*, https://ukrainetoday.org/nazism-as-a-strategic-propaganda-narrative-on-russian-state-controlled-television/ (10.04.2025).

Merkel A., Baumann B. (2024), *Freiheit: Erinnerungen 1954–2021*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln.

Mikhajliv V. (2025), *Brekhnia pro te, shcho likarni v Dnipri perepovneni heneralamy NATO*, https://disinfo.detector.media/post/brekhnia-pro-te-shcho-likarni-v-dnipri-perepovneni-heneralamy-nato (12.04.2025).

NATO planuie ataku pid falshyvym praporom na ievropeiske misto z vykorystanniam brudnoi bomby, aby zvynuvatyty Rosiiu (2024), https://disinfo.detector.media/post/stalo-vidomo-shcho-nato-planuie-ataku-pid-falshyvym-praporom-na-ievropeiske-misto-z-vykorystanniam-brudnoi-bomby-aby-zvynuvatyty-rosiiu (12.04.2025).

NATO zavzhdy khotilo otochyty Rosiiu ta Kytai (2022), https://disinfo.detector.media/post/nato-zavzhdy-khotilo-otochyty-rosiiu-ta-kytai (12.04.2025).

Natsionalnyi universytet oborony Ukrainy (2021), *Informatsiini ta psykholohichni operatsii yak element stratehichnykh komunikatsii: dosvid NATO*, Navchalnyi posibnyk, Kyiv.

Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2025), *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf (10.04.2025).

Open Minds Institute (2025), *Fake thaw: Kremlin warms to Trump but still rejects peace talks*, https://www.openminds.ltd/reports/fake-thaw-kremlin-warms-to-trump-but-still-rejects-peace-talks (10.04.2025).

Pawłowski G. (2019), *Ironiczeskaja imperija. Risk, szans i dogmy Sistemy RF*, Wydawnictwo Europa, Moskwa.

Pomerantsev P. (2019), *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War against Reality,* Faber & Faber Limited, London.

Poroshenko P. (2021), *Ukraincy nie pretendują do rosyjskich ziem – rozmowa z byłym prezydentem Ukrainy [Interview]*, „Gazeta Wyborcza", https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,27384029,petro-poroszenko-dla-wyborczej-ukraincy-nie-pretenduja-do.html (10.04.2025).

Potasova B. (2023), *Zusyllia NATO z protydii dezinformatsii ta okhoplennia rosiiskomovnoi audytorii*, in: *Rekomendatsii ta krashchi keisy realizatsii stratehichnykh komunikatsii v umovakh viiny: praktychnyi dovidnyk*, (eds.) V. Azarova et al., Natsionalna akademiia SBU, Kyiv.

Prezident zaprosyv Merkel i Sarkozi v Buchu podyvytysia na rezultaty postupok Rosii (2022), https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-polytics/3447793-prezident-zaprosiv-merkel-i-sarkozi-v-bucu-podivitisa-na-rezultati-postupok-rosii.html (10.04.2025).

Putin na paradí v Moskvì zâvìv, ščo vtorgnennâ v Ukraïnu bulo zapobìžnym udarom (2022), https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-putin-9-travnia/31840869.html (10.04.2025).

Putin V. (2021), *O historycznej jedności Rosjan i Ukraińców*, https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,27388209,wladimir-putin-o-historycznej-jednosci-rosjan-i-ukraincow.html (10.04.2025).

Rubel K. V., Chaplinskyi R. O. (2024), *Porivnialnyi analiz pidkhodiv SShA ta RF do planuvannia informatsiinykh operatsii: tekhnolohiia vs provokatsiia*, in: *Hrany ahresii: deiaki uzahalnennia dosvidu rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny 2014–2024 rokiv*, (eds.) P. V. Myronenko, S. P. Mokliak, Politiia, Kyiv.

Sadeghi M., Blachez I. (2025), *A well-funded, Moscow-based global "news" network has infected Western artificial intelligence tools worldwide with Russian propaganda: NewsGuard's Reality Check*, https://www.newsguardrealitycheck.com/p/a-well-funded-moscow-based-global (12.04.2025).

Should Ukraine join NATO? Open letter (2024), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/27/ukraine-nato-membership (10.04.2025).

Siedin O. (2023), *Weak, insane, and cynical NATO: the controversial image of the main antagonist of Russian propaganda*, https://en.detector.media/post/weak-insane-and-cynical-nato-the-controversial-image-of-the-main-antagonist-of-russian-propaganda (12.04.2025).

Stavridis J. (2024), *Putin's next target after Ukraine may be NATO's Baltic members*, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-04-02/putin-s-next-target-after-ukraine-may-be-nato-s-baltic-members (09.04.2025).

Tekst rossiiskikh proektov dokumentov po obespecheniiu pravovykh garantiĭ bezopasnosti so storony SShA i NATO (2021), https://www.ng.ru/world/2021-12-17/100_docs17122021.html (10.04.2025).

The NATO alliance should not invite Ukraine to become a member (2024), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/08/nato-alliance-ukraine-member (12.04.2025).

Trump on NATO, Ukraine, and Biden's role in Russia's invasion [Video], (2025), https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/13/world/video/trump-nato-ukraine-russia-war-ac360-paton-walsh-digvid (10.04.2025).

Trump stated that Ukraine's aspiration to join NATO could be the cause of a Russian war, as reported by CNN (2025), https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/1060332.htm (10.04.2025).

Ukraina poprosyla NATO zavdaty po Rosii preventyvnyi iadernyi udar (2022), https://disinfo.detector.media/post/ukraina-poprosyla-nato-zavdaty-po-rosii-preventyvnyi-iadernyi-udar (12.04.2025).

VCIOM (2023), *Na voine vse feiki khoroshi?*, https://wciom.ru/expertise/na-voine-vse-feiki-khoroshi (12.04.2025).

Vetter D. R. (2023), *Why Doing Your Own Research May Make You Believe Fake News*, https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidrvetter/2023/12/20/why-doing-your-own-research-may-make-you-believe-fake-news/ (12.04.2025).

Witkoff nazvav okupovani terytorii Ukrainy rosiyskomovnymy ta prygadav referendumy (2024), https://news.liga.net/ua/politics/news/vitkoff-nazvav-okupovani-terytorii-ukrainy-rosiysko-movnymy-ta-pryhadav-referendumy (12.04.2025).

World Economic Forum (2024), *The Global Risks Report 2024*, https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/ (10.04.2025).

Yakby ne viiska NATO, rosiiany b tochno peremohly na Kharkivshchyni (2022), https://disinfo.detector.media/post/yakby-ne-viiska-nato-rosiiany-b-tochno-peremohly-na-kharkivshchyni (12.04.2025).

Ye ryzyk toho, shcho Putin mozhe zastosuvaty iadernu zbroiu – rozvidka SShA (2024), https://news.liga.net/ua/politics/news/ye-ryzyk-toho-shcho-putin-mozhe-zastosuvaty-iadernu-zbroiu-rozvidka-ssha (10.04.2025).

Zelenskyi rozkrytykuvav Witkoffa cherez kremlivski naratyvy (2024), https://www.unian.ua/politics/zelenskiy-rozkritikuvav-vitkoffa-cherez-kremlivski-narativi-12958014.html (10.04.2025).

Zelenskyi zaklykav svitovu spilnotu zavdaty preventyvnoho iadernoho udaru po Rosii (2023), https://disinfo.detector.media/post/zelenskyi-zaklykav-svitovu-spilnotu-zavdaty-preventyvnoho-iadernoho-udaru-po-rosii (12.04.2025).

ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary study, situated at the intersection of strategic communications and international relations, examines the Russian information-psychological narrative that portrays Ukraine's potential accession to NATO as the cause of the so-called "special military operation." The research identifies the key themes and messages that comprise this narrative and analyzes their impact on Western, Ukrainian, and Russian mass audiences, as well as on political actors involved in strategic decision-making. One significant consequence of this influence was the stance taken by the Trump administration, which effectively denied Ukraine's accession to the Alliance – at least within a foreseeable historical timeframe.

The year 2025 thus marked a critical threshold, effectively closing a historical chapter spanning a quarter of a century during which Ukraine, albeit inconsistently and with interruptions, pursued the goal of NATO membership – first officially declared by the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine in 2002 as a strategic objective of national policy.

Keywords: Strategic communication, social communication, psyops, NATO, propaganda, international relations, security, FIMI

ROSYJSKA NARRACJA INFORMACYJNO-PSYCHOLOGICZNA O PRZYSTĄPIENIU UKRAINY DO NATO JAKO „UZASADNIENIE WOJNY"

STRESZCZENIE

W badaniu interdyscyplinarnym, które prowadzono na przecięciu komunikacji strategicznej (społecznej) i stosunków międzynarodowych, przeanalizowano rosyjską narrację informacyjno-psychologiczną o tym, że przystąpienie Ukrainy do NATO stanowi przyczynę tzw. „specjalnej operacji wojskowej" (SOW).

Zidentyfikowano tematy i przekazy wykorzystywane w tej narracji. Przeanalizowano jej wpływ na odbiorców na Zachodzie, w Ukrainie i Rosji – szerokie kręgi społeczne oraz aktorów politycznych, którzy podejmują decyzje strategiczne. Jednym z efektów tego wpływu stało się przyjęcie takiego właśnie stanowiska przez administrację Donalda Trumpa, która *de facto* odmówiła Ukrainie przystąpienia do Sojuszu. Przynajmniej w dającej się przewidzieć przyszłości.

Rok 2025 zakończył ćwierćwiecze, w czasie którego Ukraina – pomimo pauz i braku konsekwencji – dążyła do integracji z NATO. Proces ten zapoczątkowano w 2002 roku, gdy Rada Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego i Obrony Ukrainy podjęła pierwszą decyzję w sprawie członkostwa w tym sojuszu wojskowo-politycznym, uznając je za strategiczny cel polityki państwa.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja strategiczna, komunikacja społeczna, operacje informacyjno-psychologiczne, NATO, propaganda, stosunki międzynarodowe, bezpieczeństwo, FIMI