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**Faces of Truth: Analyzing Russian Hybrid
Warfare Narratives in News Front**

Master Thesis

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

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3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

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Abstract

This study explores the intricacies of Russian hybrid warfare narratives disseminated through the News Front platform. By conducting a systematic content analysis of articles in Slovak, Serbian, English and Russian, the research identifies both common and tailored narratives used to influence public opinion and destabilise target nations. The study identifies themes aimed at destabilising target nations and undermining democratic institutions. It reveals a sophisticated propaganda strategy that adapts to each audience's historical, cultural, and political landscape, highlighting Russian disinformation efforts' persistent and evolving nature. The findings emphasise the strategic role of tailored narratives in eroding trust in Western alliances and deepening societal divisions, demonstrating the Kremlin's adeptness at leveraging media for geopolitical gains.

Keywords

News Front, hybrid warfare, Russia, Slovakia, Serbia, the US, manipulative information, disinformation, West, Ukraine, Zelenskyj

Title

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Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of the 21st century has been profoundly influenced by the resurgence of Russia as a formidable player, not only through traditional means of power but also via innovative strategies such as hybrid warfare. One of the approaches to hybrid warfare is using manipulative information to achieve strategic objectives without direct military confrontation (Moldovanu, 2022). This thesis examines the narratives disseminated by the Russian news outlet News Front in various languages, each adapted to the specific context of different countries.

The study of hybrid warfare, particularly in the context of Russian geopolitical strategies, has become crucial due to the increasing use of information warfare and propaganda. Hybrid warfare blurs the lines between conventional and unconventional warfare, leveraging a mix of military, economic, diplomatic, and informational tactics (Mattis and Hoffman, 2005). The annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a significant turning point in the understanding and application of hybrid warfare, highlighting the role of information operations in achieving geopolitical aims (Vandiver, 2014). Russia's approach, often termed the “Gerasimov Doctrine” (Moldovanu, 2022), emphasises the integration of non-military means to destabilise adversaries and influence public opinion globally.

Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, involving propaganda and information warfare, aim to destabilise and manipulate public opinion (Herman, 2019). Alternative sources often deliberately spread inaccurate or misleading information to confuse or manipulate people, mixing propaganda with disinformation, misinformation, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories (Gregor & Vejvodová, 2018; Herman, 2019). Russia uses such websites to spread its narratives, with many platforms directly linked to the Russian state (U.S. Department of State, 2022b).

Current research on Russian hybrid warfare emphasises the complexity and evolving nature of this conflict strategy, which combines conventional and unconventional methods, including non-state actors and information technology, to achieve strategic goals without direct military confrontation. Experts such as Jaroslav Kurfürst, Om Nath Mehrotra, and Andrei P. Tsygankov have extensively studied Russia's geopolitical evolution and strategic motivations, highlighting the shift towards conservative nationalism and Eurasian geopolitical ideas following the Soviet Union's dissolution (Kurfürst, 2014; Mehrotra, 1999; Tsygankov, 2010). Hybrid warfare, particularly since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, has become a focal point of modern

security studies. It involves blending military and non-military tactics to exploit target states' political, economic, and social vulnerabilities. Researchers like Arsalan Bilal and Veronica Moldovanu have detailed the use of propaganda, disinformation, and cyber operations as central components of Russia's hybrid warfare, emphasising the blurred lines between war and peace (Bilal, 2021; Moldovanu, 2022). The literature also underscores the importance of building resilience and trust between state institutions and the public to counter these multifaceted threats effectively.

Despite extensive research on hybrid warfare, there remains a gap in understanding the specific narratives propagated through disinformation channels like News Front. This study aims to analyse the specific narratives propagated by News Front in the context of Russian hybrid warfare and understand how these narratives are tailored for different linguistic and cultural audiences. The research addresses the following questions: Do the narratives through which News Front interprets the news in Slovakia, Serbia, the US, and Russia differ? If so, what are these narratives for each country? The methods of investigation involve systematic content analysis of News Front articles, using open and axial coding techniques to categorise and synthesise the data. The study covers articles published from June 4, 2023, to December 31, 2023, providing a snapshot of narratives during this period.

News Front, an allegedly independent news organisation, disseminates narratives aligned with Kremlin interests. Its multilingual platforms target audiences worldwide, tailoring its content to exploit specific societal vulnerabilities and historical grievances (VSquare, 2023). By examining the content and themes in News Front's articles, this thesis seeks to uncover the underlying strategies of Russian hybrid warfare, which the Kremlin tailors to each analysed country.

The study begins by situating Russia's geopolitical strategy within the broader context of its post-Soviet evolution, emphasising the strategic shifts under Vladimir Putin's leadership. It starts with examining the Ukrainian-Russian war and the concept of hybrid warfare, followed by exploring alternative sources of information and the phenomenon of tailor-made news. The study then provides historical and geopolitical context for Slovakia, Serbia, and the US, detailing Russia's use of manipulative information in these regions and the situation within the Russian Federation itself. The second part of the research focuses on the practical context of News Front, involving a detailed analysis of News Front articles to understand the specific narratives and strategies employed in Russian hybrid warfare.

1. Literature Review

It is crucial to consider the context of Russia's geopolitical situation to understand the Russian hybrid war better. These sources are essential for my thesis as they comprehensively overview Russia's geopolitical evolution and strategic motivations. The text “Eastern Europe between Value Vision and Power Revision” from the Institute of International Relations Prague, written by Jaroslav Kurfürst, explores Russia's geopolitical evolution post-Soviet Union. It discusses Russia's initial attempts to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic security framework, which eventually shifted towards establishing a unique civilisational space with its own values, emphasising conservative nationalism and Eurasian geopolitical ideas. The text outlines Russia's critical discourse on losing Soviet-era certainties and power, leading to a revised military doctrine 1993 highlighting Western threats. It also details the strategic changes under Putin, including energy leverage and the army actions, culminating in the annexation of Crimea. Finally, it contrasts the motivations and dynamics of Eurasian integration with those of European integration, noting Russia's use of power to maintain influence over its neighbours.

In his text “NATO Eastward Expansion and Russian Security”, Om Nath Mehrotra focuses on NATO's eastward expansion and its impact on Russian security. Despite mechanisms for consultation, NATO's expansion raised significant concerns in Russia about its national security and created tensions between Russia and the West. Under President Yeltsin, the Russian government expressed disapproval, citing the expansion as a threat to national security and a potential cause for new European divisions. Russia's opposition was rooted in a desire to maintain influence in Europe and prevent the perceived encroachment of Western military power near its borders. Despite objections, NATO expanded to include Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic in 1999, further straining Russia's relations with NATO and the US.

Text “Russia's Power and Alliances in the 21st Century” by Andrei P. Tsygankov discusses Russia's resurgence as a regional power in the 21st century, leveraging its strengths in energy and military affairs. Historically, Russia aimed to dominate Eurasia and continues to strive for regional great power status despite lacking the global economic reach of powers like China and India. To sustain this status, Russia engages globally, forming strategic alliances and exploiting its comparative advantages. The text highlights Russia's increased assertiveness and challenges in maintaining influence amidst internal weaknesses and the rapid development of other

nations. Russia remains focused on securing its regional dominance through economic integration and strategic partnerships.

This text “From “Greater Europe” to “Greater Eurasia”: Status Concerns and the Evolution of Russia’s Approach to Alignment and Regional Integration” by Andrej Krickovic and Igor Pellicciari outlines the evolution of Russia's approach to regional alignment and integration from the post-Soviet era to the present. Initially, Russia focused on integrating with Europe, neglecting post-Soviet states, but shifted to reintegrating the post-Soviet space under its leadership from 2009 to 2014. This effort failed, particularly highlighted by the crisis in Ukraine. According to the text, Russia has expanded its focus to form a “Greater Eurasia,” including China and other non-Western powers like Turkey, India, and Iran, to gain status and counter Western influence. The text emphasises the importance of status concerns in driving these shifts in Russia's foreign policy.

After learning about Russia’s geopolitical position and intentions, it is also important to know its strategies, particularly hybrid warfare. These sources collectively highlight the importance of hybrid warfare in modern security studies and provide critical insights into the strategies and tactics that define this conflict. This understanding is crucial for my thesis as it offers a comprehensive view of the multifaceted threats posed by hybrid warfare.

In their discussions on hybrid warfare, both Arsalan Bilal in “Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and ‘Trust’ as the Antidote” and Reichborn-Kjennerud and Patrick Cullen in “What is Hybrid Warfare?” highlight the evolution of this conflict strategy. Hybrid warfare utilises conventional and unconventional methods, including non-state actors and information technology, to achieve strategic goals without direct military confrontation. This concept, which gained prominence with U.S. military discussions in 2005 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, blurs the lines between war and peace, complicating threat identification and response due to its inherent ambiguity and covert tactics. It exploits political, economic, and social vulnerabilities to undermine state legitimacy and effectiveness. Despite criticisms for its conceptual vagueness, hybrid warfare remains crucial for understanding modern security threats. The coordinated use of various power instruments against opponents’ weaknesses underscores the importance of building trust between state institutions and the public to counter these threats and maintain resilience.

Lieutenant General James Mattis and Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hoffman's article discusses the evolving nature of warfare, emphasising the concept of hybrid wars. Highlighting lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq, it argues that future conflicts will involve a mix of conventional and unconventional tactics, requiring adaptable and culturally aware military forces. The authors introduce the "Four Block War" concept, where military operations must simultaneously address combat, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and information warfare.

In the article "The Kremlin's Hybrid Warfare Techniques in a Fading World Order," Veronica Moldovanu explores specifically Russia's use of hybrid warfare, highlighted by Vladimir Putin during the annexation of several Ukrainian regions. Combining conventional and unconventional methods, hybrid warfare is central to the current geopolitical landscape and significantly impacts European and global security. This strategy, rooted in asymmetric tactics and enhanced by the "Gerasimov Doctrine," involves propaganda, disinformation, and cyber operations to undermine adversaries without confrontation. Russia's hybrid warfare tactics have evolved during the Ukrainian conflict, targeting both Ukrainian legitimacy and Western stability through misinformation and cyberattacks. Moldovanu emphasises the need for NATO and European countries to strengthen cooperation, intelligence sharing, and resilience to counter these multifaceted threats.

The alternative sources of information and manipulative information detailed in these texts are critical for understanding the broader context of modern disinformation campaigns and their impact on public opinion and political landscapes. "The Best Book about Fake News, Disinformation, and Manipulation" by Miloš Gregor and Petra Vejvodová explores the influence of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation on public opinion and politics. It analyses disinformation campaigns through various case studies to educate readers on recognising and understanding these threats.

Vanessa Cuevas Herman highlights the strained EU-Russia relations since 2014, focusing on Russia's annexation of Crimea and disinformation campaigns. Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, involving propaganda and information warfare, aim to destabilise and manipulate public opinion. The EU has countered these threats with sanctions and support for democratic institutions and Ukrainian sovereignty.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Telegram, launched by Pavel Durov in 2013, has become essential for understanding the Russian perspective on the war. In 2024, the DFRLab analysed influential Russian Telegram channels, including military bloggers, private military companies, and hacktivist groups, to comprehend their operations and impact (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2024).

Dubois and Blank (2018) and GCFGlobal (n.d.) describe echo chambers as environments reinforcing pre-existing views, contributing to misinformation spread. Kopecký (2022) and other sources, such as Smith (2019) and Lewandowsky et al. (2017), define terms related to manipulative information, including fake news, propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theories.

The studies and analyses underscore Russia's propaganda machine's highly tailored and adaptive nature, particularly in Eastern Europe and globally. Russian propaganda is designed to influence diverse audiences by addressing particular events and societal issues. This targeted approach enables Russia to effectively shape international perceptions and policies, necessitating a multifaceted and strategic response to counter these influence operations.

The RAND Corporation study “Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe” (2018) by Helmus et al. explores Russia's extensive social media campaigns in former Soviet states. It highlights Russia's use of multilingual TV networks, pro-Kremlin news websites, and sophisticated social media tactics like bots and trolls to spread propaganda. In nearby states, Russia aims to divide ethnic Russians from their governments and NATO, while globally, it seeks to create policy confusion. The study found active pro-Russia and pro-Ukraine communities on Twitter and identified challenges in countering propaganda due to the dominance of Russian media. Recommendations include media literacy programs, creating alternative content, and better Western narrative communication.

Robert Ortung examines the sophisticated nature of Russia's propaganda machine, which remains effective. Key figures like Alexei Gromov and Margarita Simonyan oversee state-funded outlets such as RT and Russia Beyond the Headlines, which distribute targeted messages globally. RT rebranded to obscure its state sponsorship, while Russia Beyond the Headlines places pro-Russian content in international newspapers. Russia Direct targets elite

audiences with in-depth reports, subtly promoting Russian views without revealing state backing. These strategies enable Russia to influence international perceptions and policy through customised and covert messaging.

According to Dardenne and Bird (1987), journalists employ narratives to make news relatable and understandable for readers, a technique also utilised in crafting “tailor-made news.” The U.S. Department of State (2020) describes how Russia's misinformation ecosystem operates by tailoring narratives to various target audiences to destabilise Europe and erode trust in democratic institutions. Yeliseyeu and Laputka (2023) further explain that pro-Kremlin actors use established narrative templates adapted to current events, like the pandemic or the conflict in Ukraine, to influence different audiences. Chivvis (2017) provides case studies showing Russia's strategy of creating country-specific narratives to manipulate political outcomes and exploit societal tensions across Europe. These sources highlight Russian propaganda's sophisticated and adaptive nature, designed to resonate with diverse audiences by addressing specific contexts and events.

2. Russia – Geopolitical Situation

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was not able to find its place in the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic structure for a long time. Russia made an effort to elevate itself from the position of a peripheral European power to that of a major one in the post-Soviet era. Russia's approach to alignment and regional integration in post-Soviet Russia has mostly mirrored its status concerns regarding foreign policy. After 1991, the Kremlin realised that geopolitical, security and socio-economical changes were needed (Kurfürst, 2014). At first, the Kremlin focused more on reunifying with the “common European home” and integrating into “Greater Europe” than on integrating with the Eurasian region. It also neglected its ties with the former Soviet States. Russia's demand for finance and technology and Europe's reliance on its energy supplies would catalyse further collaboration and potential interdependence (Kuzemko, 2013). But the direction changed quickly. NATO did end up being the threat. In 1993, Kreml released the revised version of Russia's military doctrine, highlighting the threat from the West based on expanding military alliances and conflicts near Russian borders (Yeltsin, 1993). Then, Russia launched intensive efforts to reunite the post-Soviet area from 2009 to 2014. (Krickovic and Pellicciari, 2021). This act marked a turning point in Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy. It heightened tensions with the West, the United States, and the European Union imposed economic sanctions. The balance between asserting regional dominance and managing relationships with global powers continues to challenge Russian foreign policy (Tsygankov, 2010).

Today's geopolitical disputes reflect certain states' ambition - including Russia - to gradually but fundamentally alter the regional or global alliance structure and international standards to an extent not even witnessed during the Cold War (Carment and Belo, 2018). Post-Cold War conflicts that aren't usually violent are called grey-zone conflicts. Combat in the grey zone, when governments engage in activities that sporadically cross the line from hostilities. Hoffman (2016) stated that identifying war is the most significant difficulty of our day as we are unsure of what constitutes and does not constitute war. The lines separating conflict from peace have become increasingly unclear. States that function in the grey area know tracking their actions is difficult. While plausible claims can be adequately refuted, their actions disturb the initial condition of events or the status quo ante. While individual acts like aiding the opposition, imposing economic pressure, or launching cyberattacks can not start a conflict, their combined effects can eventually tip the scales in favour of one side (Baqués-Quesada and Colom-Piella,

2021). The best way to characterise grey zone conflict is as hostile and coercive behaviour that is purposefully kept below the levels of open interstate and conventional warfare. Instead of gaining territory, the goal of winning a conflict is to influence public opinion using planned narratives or coercive tactics (Carment and Belo, 2019).

Before escalating to overt military engagement in Ukraine in 2022, Moscow employed subtler strategies to advance its goals. In the Russian view, existing rules of international law reduce room for manoeuvre. According to Liekis and Rusinaitė (2019), Russia turned to violence because it was unable to meet the objectives of great power dominance and lacked the means to do so, not because of what the “West” was doing in Europe (Belo, 2020; Liekis and Rusinaitė, 2019).

Russia has been operating in a grey zone to dominate Russia’s Near Abroad and drive wedges between U.S.-led alliances. This behaviour was evident before the Ukraine conflict in the case of Georgia or Estonia. (Mazarr, 2015). Among Moscow's most valuable instruments are Russian think tanks and non-governmental organisations, frequently employed to project soft power beyond international borders. Their activity is targeted, directed and precise. The Russian think tanks exclusively propose and promote security notions that would be most advantageous to the Russian state interests while trying to emulate a model of purported free speech and open discussion (Liekis and Rusinaitė, 2019).

The phrase Near Abroad, which refers to the former USSR's member states, is unique to Russia and was brought to Moscow following the fall of the Soviet Union. The “Near Abroad” is not an objective physical or geopolitical region but a discursive construction (Kasapovic, 2023). Russia has actively sought to maintain a sphere of influence over these countries through various means. These efforts include economic pressure, energy diplomacy, direct military intervention, and political influence campaigns (Kasapovic, 2023).

Many new hot zones of conflict and tensions between Russia and the West surfaced shortly after the Cold War era. The expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance towards the east and the European Union's integration initiatives started to impact Russia's borders and interests when the nations of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states were admitted into NATO (Jankowski and Bouvery, 2023).

Andrew Cottey states Russia can still be considered a great power or pole in modern-day Europe. In this way, modified bipolarity is the best approach to describe modern Europe. At the same time, the stark division of the continent into two alliances and the rough East-West parity of the Cold War are long gone; the West and Russia still define Europe as its two centres of power (Cottey, 2021).

Relations between Russia and Western institutions such as NATO and the European Union have experienced significant tension and fluctuation since the early 1990s. The expansion of NATO eastward, incorporating many former Eastern bloc countries and Soviet republics, has been a particular point of contention. Russia never accepted losing its sphere of influence, especially in the area that was formerly the Soviet Union. Russia views NATO expansion as a direct threat to its security and sphere of influence. The increasing influence of the U.S. in Eastern Europe also emerged as a significant source of tension. The Russian President signed off on the National Security Blueprint of the Russian Federation on December 17, 1997, stating that Russia does not favour NATO expansion to the east as it threatens national security (Mehrotra, 1999). This position has become even more inflexible in the years that have passed, especially when the Baltic nations joined NATO. Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, initially voiced concerns about NATO expansion in a 2007 address that rocked the Munich Security Conference (President of Russia, 2007). The Kremlin sees these developments as a breach of early promises made after the Cold War that NATO would not increase its territory (Banka, 2019). This has influenced Russian foreign policy, resulting in aggressive actions perceived as defensive manoeuvres, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ongoing support for separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine. These actions have prompted a series of Western sanctions, further straining relationships and contributing to a new era of geopolitical competition reminiscent of Cold War dynamics.

In the post-Cold War era, ties explicitly to Serbia have evolved into a complex blend of diplomacy and strategic alignment, primarily against European geopolitical shifts and NATO's eastward expansion (Szpala, 2014). Russia views the Western Balkans as a crucial area for implementing its foreign policy strategies, which primarily centre on opposing NATO and EU membership as well as Kosovo's independence to simultaneously sow discord and anti-Western sentiment and fortify its status as a great power (Miholjevic-Ivkovic, 2024).

In an environment when communication with the West had been disrupted, and the European Union no longer saw Russia as a vital ally, the Russian ruling class emphasised the Greater Eurasian Partnership. The Russian government presents their nation as a powerful, large, northern Eurasian state with a distinct geopolitical orientation that is both European and Asian. It also portrays Russia as an independent Eurasian power pole in a multicentered world (Glaser (Kukartseva) and Thomann, 2021). The Russian “Greater Eurasia” concept is a geopolitical strategy to enhance economic, political, and security cooperation across the Eurasian continent. This initiative reflects Russia’s ambition to establish a broad partnership involving Eurasian and global powers such as China, India, and potentially European countries to reduce Western influence in regional affairs (Malle, Cooper and Connolly, 2020).

3. Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Because the empirical part of this diploma thesis is analysing articles about the Russo-Ukrainian War, this part of the paper focuses on Russian relations with Ukraine.

“Russia has deep cultural, economic, and political bonds with Ukraine, and in many ways, Ukraine is central to Russia’s identity and vision for itself in the world.”(Masters, 2020). Russia has been determined to maintain its influence in politics in Ukraine, especially since its preferred candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, was defeated by a reformist rival in the 2004 Orange Revolution presidential election (Stepan Andriyovich Kryzhanivsky and Oleksa Eliseyovich Zasenka, 2019). The shock in Ukraine followed the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, a comparable election loss for the Kremlin, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (Tucker, 2007). Later, in 2010, Yanukovich was elected president of Ukraine amid dissatisfaction among the electorate over the Orange administration (Dickinson, 2020). Another interest has been Crimea as such. It was moved from Russia to Ukraine in 1954 to strengthen the ties between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples. But many Russian nationalists, in Crimea as well as in Russia, have been waiting for the peninsula to be returned since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Black Sea Fleet of Russia, the most powerful marine force in the area, is based in Sevastopol (Kramer, 2014).

The well-being of the eight million ethnic Russians who, according to a 2001 census (Masters, 2020), live mainly in the south and east of Ukraine is one of Russia's main priorities as well. Moscow justified its actions in Ukraine by claiming it had a duty to safeguard these people (Masters, 2020). Many Russian leaders saw the breakup with Ukraine as a mistake in history and a danger to Russia's status as a great power following the fall of the Soviet Union. Many people considered it a severe setback to Russia's international standing because the country had lost control of Ukraine and allowed it to drift under Western influence (Tefft, n.d.).

Ukraine's leading trade partner is Russia, despite a decline in recent years. Before it invaded Crimea, Russia wanted to integrate Ukraine into its single market, the Eurasian Economic Union, which now consists of Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Armenia (Masters, 2020). Most of Ukraine's gas supply came from Russia before the Crimean incursion; shipments gradually decreased and eventually stopped in 2016. To get its gas to consumers in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia still depends on Ukrainian pipelines (Butt, 2024).

Because Ukraine was essential to the Soviet Union, the country's 1991 decision to break relations was a significant setback for the faltering superpower. Following its declaration of independence, Ukraine has worked to become more closely aligned with Western organisations, such as the European Union and NATO, while also trying to figure out its course as an independent nation. However, opinions on foreign affairs were not shared by the entire populace. A more nationalist Ukrainian-speaking population in the country's west has favoured closer ties with Europe. Meanwhile, a group in the east that speaks Russian as their first language has advocated stronger connections with Russia (Masters, 2020).

When Russia annexed Crimea and started supporting rebels in the southeast of the nation in the Donbas area (Oliphant and Sabur, 2015), Ukraine became a battlefield of war in 2014. Many experts believed the battle signalled a clear transition from an era of U.S. dominance in a unipolar world to one in which significant powers were again engaged in rivalry (Congressional Research Service, 2024). Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation on March 21, 2014, by the Municipal Legislation Act (President of Russia Press Release, 2014). This action came after armed intervention by Russian Federation forces, a referendum, and a proclamation of independence in Crimea (Grant, 2015). Russia has established control over a vital foothold on the Black Sea by annexation. Putin's constant objective was to restore Russia to its standing as a great power in northern Eurasia. Russia could project influence farther into the geopolitical key zones if it had a military presence there (Masters, 2020; Grajewski, 2017).

On February 24, 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine, continuing from its invasion in 2014. Russian propaganda makes several historical, ideological, and geopolitical claims to defend the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Putin asserted that the operation's goals were to denazify and demilitarise Ukraine and put a stop to the purported Russian genocide on Ukrainian land (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Ukrainian forces initially faced severe setbacks due to the overwhelming scale of the Russian offensive. However, they have displayed resilience and adaptability, managing to recapture key territories in counteroffensives (Brown, 2022). United Nations Commission concludes that Russia has been committing war crimes in Ukraine (UN Commission, 2022; Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, 2023).

There are many opinions on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the academic sphere. According to John J. Mearsheimer, Putin and other Russian officials view the United States' position

towards Ukraine as an existential danger (Mearsheimer, 2022). Particularly the tendency to include Ukraine in NATO and position it as a Western defence along Russia's border. Alexander Likhotal claims that this conflict has to be viewed as a significant battle in the growing strategic race to define the future structure of the European security system and the global order. When considering the regime's assessment of the worldwide situation, most of the actions implemented by the Kremlin appear to be somewhat logical (Likhotal, 2022). Teraz Kuzio asserts that no facts support the argument that the West is to blame (Kuzio, 2022). He argues that Putin saw Ukraine - the Little Russian part of the Pan-Russian country- as a state created artificially. The Kremlin believes that Ukraine is a puppet state of the United States that is keeping Little Russians from realising their destiny of joining the Russian people. Putin thus thought the Little Russians would embrace Russian forces as liberators (Kuzio, 2022). Jokull Johannesson and David Clowes argue that Ukraine's strategic importance in terms of energy routes and economic links has made it a significant point of interest for Russia. The fear of losing influence over Ukraine to Western interests has been a critical factor in Russian calculations (Johannesson and Clowes, 2020).

4. Russo-Ukrainian War – The Analysed Period

Understanding the period in which the analysed articles were written is crucial for this thesis because it provides a contextual foundation for understanding the narratives. This period, particularly marked by the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive and the subsequent Russian military response, offers a concentrated view of the conflict's dynamics. By focusing on this timeframe, the thesis can highlight the direct impact of battlefield events on creating and spreading disinformation tailored to influence international and domestic audiences. This approach helps to highlight how strategic military operations and underscores the importance of media narratives in modern warfare.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive that began in early June 2023 represents a critical phase in the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia. It was initially intended to be launched in the spring. But because it had not been considered safe to proceed, several variables, including weather, the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant dam and subsequent flooding postponed these plans (Chernov and Hinnant, 2023) and delayed weapon delivery to Ukraine, caused it to be postponed until summer (Copp and Press, 2023). Central to the Ukrainian counteroffensive was the Zaporizhzhia front, which military observers saw as the most straightforward route to divide the area of Ukraine under Russian control (Zafra et al., 2023). Cutting the line that connected Crimea to the Russian mainland was the primary goal of the counteroffensive. Russia depends on this route to send soldiers and munitions to the Axis line (Adams, 2023).

Following many months of setbacks, Russia began a heavy assault on Ukraine's energy infrastructure in the winter of 2022. After that, the fighting descended into a slow-moving trench war, with fierce fighting between Russian mercenaries and Ukrainian troops in Bakhmut (Zafra et al., 2023). Russia's main effort in Eastern Ukraine was focused on two objectives. The first was to capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast, push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast, and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast. The second objective was to capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, aiming for complete control over this strategic region (ISW Press, 2023). Russia constructed an 800-kilometre defensive line by April 2023 in anticipation of a Ukrainian counteroffensive (Catalán, 2023). These...” *fortifications in Ukraine are the most extensive defensive works in Europe since World War II*” (Jones, Palmer and Bermudez Jr., 2023). During

offensive operations, the Russian military has built minefields, trenches, dragon teeth, and other obstacles to slow down Ukrainian soldiers (Jones, Palmer and Bermudez Jr., 2023).

Before the launch of the counter-offensive, Ukraine used the time and prepared itself. Ukrainian forces conducted “shaping operations” to test Russian defences and undermine supply and logistical networks deep into Russian-occupied territory (Pietralunga, 2023). NATO was providing military training to Ukrainian forces, and they were expecting Western weapons. In early 2023, Ukraine also established many new formations (The Kyiv Independent News Desk, 2023). Media reported that Ukrainian troops had amassed between 50,000 and 60,000 men in preparation for the counteroffensive and divided them into twelve brigades (Sabbagh, 2023).

The central focus of the Ukrainian counteroffensive was the Zaporizhzhia front, which military strategists believed to be the most direct route to sever the portion of Ukraine under Russian control (Zafra et al., 2023). President Volodymyr Zelenskiy made it clear in August that Ukraine would continue its battle until the Russian annexation of Crimea was ended (Zinets, 2022). In the end, Ukraine's forces were distributed among three offensive axes, one of which extended as far north as Bakhmut in Donetsk, where Ukraine had to strengthen its fortifications following Russia's invasion in October (Reuters, 2023; Zafra et al., 2023).

The considerable concentration of fortifications in the area and the available resources account for the Ukrainian army's meagre advance. Even after six months of fierce battle, Ukraine only advanced 7.5 km to the hamlet of Robotyne. Although there have been limited advances, Ukraine's counteroffensive has achieved a degree of success (Zafra et al., 2023).

Shortly after the intensity of the Ukrainian counteroffensive started to wane in September, Russia launched limited offensive operations in October (Clark et al., 2023). After the summer 2023 counteroffensive fell short of expectations, Russian troops sought to immediately retake the initiative to cast doubt on Ukraine's capacity to reclaim territory in the eyes of the West (ISW Press, 2023). Putin attempted to sustain this campaign and make tactical advances to persuade the Russian people that the war effort was moving forward significantly ahead of the March 2024 presidential election. Although initiating offensives later in the winter of 2023–2024 would have produced comparable informational effects, the immediate goals were to strengthen strategic positioning and domestic support (Hird et al., 2023) Russian forces launched localised offensives in eastern Ukraine during the fall-winter season, despite

unfavourable muddy conditions for mechanised manoeuvre. Rather than preparing for a broader offensive in better winter conditions, they acted quickly to expedite the culmination of Ukrainian counteroffensives and seize the initiative on their terms. On December 12, US intelligence informed Congress that, rather than pursuing immediate military objectives, Russian offensives in eastern Ukraine in the autumn of 2023 and the winter to come were intended to undermine Western support for Ukraine (ISW Press, 2023).

West, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and European Union nation members, have been crucial in supporting Ukraine through military aid, economic sanctions on Russia, and humanitarian assistance. This support includes advanced weapon systems and various defence equipment, which have been critical in bolstering Ukraine's defences (Office, 2024; NATO, 2024; House of Commons, 2024) The conflict is seen as a pivotal moment for European and global security. A Ukrainian victory is essential to prevent the spread of autocratic regimes and ensure a stable and secure Europe (Andor and Optenhögel, 2023).

5. Russia's Hybrid War

Hybrid warfare lacks a universally accepted definition. It is essential to recognise that hybrid warfare may not be entirely new, as many experts argue it has been a part of warfare throughout history (Bilal, 2021). Peter R. Mansoor (2012) notes that hybrid threats can be traced back to the Peloponnesian War of the 5th century BC. While these ideas are not new, the methods and strategies of conducting war and managing organised violence have evolved significantly in the modern era (Marcuzzi, 2018).

The perception of hybrid warfare has been partly shaped by American war studies and theories developed since 9/11, reflecting the increasing complexity of international conflicts due to belligerents' growing number, variety, and capabilities (Carment and Belo, 2018). A significant moment in the discourse on hybrid warfare was when US military officials first introduced the term in 2005, focusing on the psychological and information-related aspects of contemporary conflicts and the integration of conventional and unconventional strategies, methods, and tactics (Mattis and Hoffman, 2005). This concept initially described non-state actors on battlefields like Chechnya and Lebanon and was later applied to Afghanistan and Iraq. Hybrid warfare, thus, blurred the lines between traditional Western conventional and irregular warfare categories (Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen, 2016).

The Russian annexation of Crimea brought renewed attention to the characteristics of non-state hybrid warfare. The term's meaning and usage have evolved, particularly following Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, which marked a significant development in defining hybrid warfare. The use of non-military means and the asymmetric relationship to Western conventional warfighting are key elements in describing Russian actions as hybrid warfare (Vandiver, 2014).

State actors effectively combine military and non-military means to achieve political goals, with the use or threat of force playing a central role. Highly centralised state actors like Russia benefit from various instruments, including government, economy, and media. For instance, the Gerasimov Doctrine outlines a modern form of warfare that includes various non-military tactics (Moldovanu, 2022). Western-style liberal democratic societies face challenges in responding to such strategies, lacking a coordinated concept of warfare that spans the full spectrum of civilian and military domains (Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen, 2016).

Hybrid warfare involves a broad spectrum of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian means in a highly integrated design, combining conventional and non-conventional methods of subversion and power (Boucher, 2017). The nature of warfare is changing, and the overall security situation is shifting dramatically. Hybrid warfare often occurs outside open conflict or overt hostility, being simpler, less expensive, and less risky than kinetic operations (Bilal, 2021). A hallmark of hybrid assaults is a high level of ambiguity, making it difficult for the targeted state to identify or attribute the attack to a specific actor (Mumford, 2020). Hybrid warfare exploits weaknesses in the targeted state's infrastructure, information, politics, military, economy, and society to undermine its security and legitimacy (Bilal, 2021). Undermining state legitimacy involves eroding trust between the people and state institutions, thus making the state less legitimate (Wither, 2016).

Since the early 1990s, cyber warfare has been viewed as a revolutionary military development. Russia's engagement in cyber warfare began in the early 2000s, recognising cyberspace's strategic importance and investing in its cyber infrastructure and capabilities (Wolff, 2021). Despite numerous entities conducting cyber operations, Russia lacks a cohesive cyber command, with significant roles played at the Presidential Administration level (Soldatov and Borogan, 2022). The Kremlin's substantial cyber warfare capability is evident from its attempts to interfere in the 2016 U.S. election. These operations aim to steal sensitive information and potentially disrupt Western information systems, although there is no concrete evidence that Russia can manipulate these systems directly (Melnychuk and Hakala, 2021). Russia employs proxies like the Night Wolves motorcycle club to further its geopolitical interests and disrupt societal norms in Europe. This includes supporting anti-EU movements and complicating energy policies in countries reliant on Russian resources (Boichak, 2023).

Additionally, Russia leverages its control over energy supplies and infrastructure projects to exert political and economic influence across Europe, often through non-transparent agreements that challenge free-market and democratic principles (Korteweg, 2018). Historically, Russia has used its energy supplies as a diplomatic tool, influencing other countries' policies by adjusting energy exports. Russia's vast oil and natural gas reserves are crucial to its economy and foreign policy, with energy exports as leverage in international relations (Korteweg, 2018). The strategic use of energy exports has supported President Putin's efforts to project Russia as an influential global player (Skalamera, 2023). The Russian State

Atomic Energy Corporation, Rosatom, has played a significant role in international nuclear agreements (Szulecki and Overland, 2023).

The energy relationship between Russia and Europe, once a bridge during the Cold War, has become a source of conflict since the Soviet Union's collapse. Tensions have peaked with the invasion of Ukraine and subsequent Western sanctions, significantly impacting EU reliance on Russian energy imports (Shagina, 2022; Szabo, 2021). In response, Russia is accelerating its pivot towards Asia to find new markets and mitigate the impact of Western sanctions, with China becoming increasingly important to Moscow (Shagina, 2022).

6. Alternative Sources of Information and Manipulative Information

Information warfare, a critical component of hybrid warfare, involves the strategic use of propaganda, disinformation, and other manipulative techniques to influence public perception and destabilise adversaries without direct military confrontation (Herman, 2019). Alternative sources are non-mainstream media that often present information contradicting mainstream news. They intentionally spread inaccurate or misleading information to confuse or manipulate people, combining propaganda with disinformation, misinformation, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories. These sources typically do not provide traceable authorship, using the “editor” or website name instead. They present themselves as legitimate alternatives rather than labelling themselves as disinformation (Gregor, Vejvodová, 2018, pp.58–61; Herman, 2019). Russia uses disinformation websites to spread its narratives, with many platforms directly linked to the Russian state (The research focuses more on this specific Russian tactic below in other chapters).

Telegram is one of the most important platforms for spreading manipulative information fabricated by the Kremlin (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2024). It is a messaging app that offers end-to-end encrypted chat, video calling, file sharing, and several other features. Telegram was launched in 2013. It allows users to send messages, photos, videos, and files of any type and create groups for up to 200,000 people or channels for broadcasting to unlimited audiences (Telegram, n.d.).

Although Telegram was not intended for hybrid warfare, it has become an important weapon in Russia's operations. Russia uses Telegram to organise communities that support its goals and disseminate propaganda and false information. According to Digital Forensic Research Lab (2024), these are Telegram's primary involvement methods in Russia's hybrid war:

- **Disinformation Spreading:** Telegram is used to disseminate fake news, photoshopped photographs, videos, and misinterpreted accounts of events to influence public opinion and alter perceptions.
- **Creating Propaganda Channels:** Russian agents set up and manage channels that disseminate anti-Western and pro-Kremlin discourse while targeting opposition figures and organisations.

- **Use of Bots and Anonymous Accounts:** Bots and anonymous accounts can be used to promote propaganda, manipulate opinion, and create the appearance of broad support for particular views.
- **Assistance for Destructive Organisations:** Telegram assists extreme or destructive organisations that may take part in provocative acts or assaults against the interests of other nations.

(Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2024)

Manipulative information links the phenomenon of echo chambers. Echo chambers form when people with similar interests communicate mainly within their group, sharing information that aligns with their beliefs and reinforcing them. This occurs due to the natural tendency to seek to confirm information and avoid challenges, leading to confirmation bias (Dubois and Blank, 2018; GCFGlobal, n.d.). When society fragments into many echo chambers, misinformation, conspiracy theories, and hoaxes can spread more quickly. This increases vulnerability to external influences, as foreign powers can exploit these dynamics to disseminate targeted misinformation and propaganda.

In recent years, terms such as propaganda, disinformation, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories have become more common in public conversation. These concepts are often mixed or lumped under fake news (Kopecký, 2022). However, each has its own distinct meaning, even though they all aim to distort reality and manipulate information, thereby undermining the objectivity and credibility of the media. This discussion uses “manipulative information” as a broad term to include fake news, propaganda, disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories.

Propaganda is disseminating information (facts or lies) to influence public opinion (Smith, 2019). The term originates from the Vatican's commission for propagating the Roman Catholic faith. Over time, particularly during the Protestant Reformation and the World Wars, propaganda acquired a negative connotation. It is often associated with political persuasion and psychological warfare in contemporary society, aiming to break opponents' spirits or sway them to the “correct” side. Propaganda employs strong symbols, slogans, and simplified messages to evoke fear, hope, pride, or hatred (MVČR, n.d.).

Misinformation is incorrect or misleading information spread without malicious intent. Despite lacking a systematic or intentional drive to influence, misinformation can still lead to the same consequences as disinformation by affecting opinions based on false information (*MVČR, n.d.*).

Malinformation involves truthful information used to harm or intimidate. It often involves private, sensitive, or unlawfully obtained details intended to impact public perception negatively. The term combines “malicious” and “information”, emphasising the harmful intent behind its dissemination (Rotterdamuas, 2022).

Disinformation refers to deliberately false information spread to influence decision-making or public opinion (*MVČR, n.d.*). This form of propaganda involves intentionally spreading false information to deceive. Disinformation often originates from governmental structures but can also come from organisations or individuals (Taylor&Francis Insights, n.d.). The term first appeared in a Soviet military journal in the 1930s, denoting false information secretly transmitted to an enemy (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

A hoax is a message designed to spread panic by warning of nonexistent dangers, aiming to cause widespread stress and chaos. Hoaxes often appeal for further dissemination, creating a chain reaction to reach a broad audience (Policie České Republiky, n.d.).

Conspiracy theories interpret events through the lens of a divided society controlled by an elite, malevolent group that conceals information and manipulates the world. These theories operate on three principles: nothing happens by chance, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. Conspiracy theories often start with suspicion and grow increasingly complex as supposed evidence is woven into an intricate narrative (Atlas Konspirací, 2018).

Different types of manipulative information often overlap. They all influence decision-making processes. In an overloaded information environment, navigating becomes difficult, leading to a “post-truth world” (Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook, 2017) where emotions and beliefs outweigh objective facts. This confusion benefits those engaging in hybrid warfare, enabling them to sway public opinion and disrupt democratic processes more effectively.

7. Tailor-Made News

In the context of Russian disinformation and influence operations, “tailor-made news” refers to carefully crafted narratives and false information designed to exploit different countries' unique political, social, and cultural contexts. These customised messages aim to deepen existing divisions, create confusion, and manipulate public opinion in ways that align with Russian geopolitical interests (Helmus et al., 2018). This strategy could be a part of hybrid warfare, where a hybrid actor tries to undermine trust between the people and the state institution. According to Dardenne and Bird (1987), by integrating people and their points of view, objects, and abstract concepts into a cohesive news tale, journalists may employ narratives as organising principles to help readers understand and relate to the subject matter. This principle is used in tailor-made news.

Many different parts and divisions of the Russian propaganda apparatus are intended to sway various target populations. The outlet creates content for the Internet and television that may be viewed outside of Russia via YouTube and a number of international cable systems. Russia uses both new and classic media outlets in this way. The network creates programming that multiple global audiences may consume without viewers necessarily realising that the Russian state sponsors the source of the information they are watching. This is made possible by the network's decision to rebrand from Russia Today to the more ambiguous RT (Orttung, 2015).

Russian propaganda introduces several iterations of the same misleading narratives. Because there is no requirement for consistency, as with credited official communications, the many pillars of the ecosystem may adjust their propaganda narratives to suit various target audiences (U.S. Department of State, 2020). All European nations follow a common strategy: to destabilise the continent, fragment society, undermine public trust in democratic institutions, and cultivate scepticism towards Western alliances such as the EU and NATO. This narrative is tailored to each country to align with its historical, cultural, and socioeconomic context (Yelisseyeu and Laputska, 2023).

For example, the text *Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare” And What Can Be Done About It* (2017) by Christopher S. Chivvis highlights that Russia used the strategy of creating specific narratives tailored to different countries and contexts to influence political outcomes and exploit societal tensions. The narratives are designed to resonate with the unique audience. In

the text, Chivvis describes examples: To undermine Merkel's pro-immigrant stance, it created a fake story about a Russian girl being raped by immigrants in Germany. It also backed pro-Moscow candidate François Fillon and the far-right National Front in France. In the Netherlands, it supported the far-right Dutch Party for Freedom. In the Balkans, it tried to establish a covert operations base in Serbia and was suspected of masterminding a coup in Montenegro. Finally, it backed the Harmony Party in Latvia, which was connected to Putin's United Russia Party (Chivvis, 2017b).

The same strategy is described in the text “Major pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives and their transmitters in Poland, Czechia and Slovakia” (2023) by Andrei Yeliseyeu and Veronica Laputka. They explain that “*pro-Kremlin actors use certain pre-established narratives as templates for specific stories, which can be tailored to suit a specific target audience.*” (Yeliseyeu and Laputka, 2023). These strategic narratives are adjusted to fit the current situation, be it the pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, the energy crisis, or another problem (Yeliseyeu and Laputka, 2023).

8. The Russian Federation in Context

The Putin regime offers little for Russia's future, with increasing social inequalities and wealth concentration among elites. The government's limited social programs are purely populist, and they stifle the educated middle class to maintain control. Consequently, the regime glorifies the past to promote national cohesion and justify its authoritarian measures (Koposov, 2021).

Stalin's narrative about the victory in the Second World War became, even after 1991, one of the most important sources of confidence in the state. History textbooks, historiography, and propaganda from the Soviet Union fostered the notion that the USSR was a superpower and the heir to the Russian Empire. As a result of the Kremlin's triumph in the Second World War - the victory over fascism, a growing war mythology emerged, predicated on the propaganda narrative of a benign Russia that Hitler cunningly targeted (Schuler, 202; Koposov, 2021).

Putin became president for the first time in 2000. He built the cult based on the past - the war cult. The worship of the state encompasses its continuity from the pre-revolutionary era through the Soviet era to Putin's efforts to “make Russia great again”, which was actively promoted alongside the establishment of Putin's authoritarian administration (Choudary, Saleem and Pakistan, 2023). With the start of Putin's third term as president and the violent dismantling of the democratic protest movement against the rigged 2011 elections, the political landscape drastically shifted in 2012 (RANE, 2012). The regime established radical conservatism as its cultural policy, fortified its alliance with the Orthodox Church, took an assertive stance in international relations towards the West, and enacted several oppressive laws that outlawed “the denial of traditional family values” (Reid, 2023) and “insults to religious sentiments” (Weiss, 2016), as well as internet censorship (Maida, 2017). The ideology of Putin presents the West as fundamentally and progressively anti-Russian. They assert that it is terrified of Russia's might and moral principles. In line with a Soviet propaganda cliché, the West is likewise shown as being extremely fascist (Koposov, 2021).

Another important factor gluing Russia's population together is Putin himself. The personality cult started to emerge in the 2000s. Combined with other institutional mechanisms, the Russian president holds a powerful position and has significant personal authority over the country's central government machinery (Svenonius, 2022). In recent years, Russia has introduced several restrictive laws that further tighten government control over various aspects of society.

For example, amendments to the Foreign Agents Law in 2020 and 2022 broadened the definition to include any individual or organisation receiving foreign funding and engaging in political activity (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The LGBTQ+ Propaganda Law was expanded in 2022 to ban any positive depiction of LGBTQ+ relationships across all media (Human Rights Watch, 2022a). Internet and media censorship laws, strengthened in 2019, require internet service providers to install government surveillance equipment and mandate local data storage for social media platforms (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Additionally, expanded anti-extremism legislation in 2016 and 2020 targets political opposition, journalists, and activists, labelling their activities as extremist and subjecting them to harsh penalties (U.S. Department of State, 2023). These laws illustrate the regime's ongoing efforts to consolidate power and suppress dissent.

Since the invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, almost all independent media outlets in Russia have closed, been forced to close, or fled the nation to operate from exile (BBC, 2023). In addition to actively managing state media, the Russian government uses official and informal channels to exert significant influence over private media while attempting to gain more control over media that reach a wider audience (Zakem et al., 2018). Most of Russia's media is owned by the country's wealthy corporate class (oligarchs). According to analysis, President Putin is connected to most media-owning oligarchs. This is one of the informal mechanisms that Putin uses to influence the media - through the structure of media owned by oligarchs. According to Vera Zakem, Paul Saunders, Umida Hashimova and P. Kathleen Frier (2017), Putin is the system's focal point; thus, any potential change in Russia might significantly impact the country's media policy and narrative.

The Russian government owns and operates several major media outlets, including television networks, radio stations, and newspapers. Channels like Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik are examples of state-controlled media that broadcast within Russia and have significant international reach (Finanční analytický úřad, 2022). The state-run media channels are the primary sources of official propaganda for the Russian people. For a long time, state-run media outlets like TV-Novosti, Gazprom Media, and VGTRK have been disseminating political propaganda (Svenonius, 2022). For Russians, television is the most popular source of information - the average person watches about 3.5 hours of TV daily (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023). The internet, radio, and print media are next popular (Zakem et al., 2018).

The Federal Service may block websites designated as foreign agents for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor), the federal media and telecoms regulator, upon request from the Justice Ministry. In addition, some additional regulations provide for prison terms for anyone accused of internet libel, mandate that social media companies delete “illegal” information, and punish websites that do not restrict it (Freedom House, 2024)

State-run television has aired stories supporting the Kremlin’s goals for many years. It uses manipulative information to influence people outside and inside Russia. The media organisation described above is the perfect structure for spreading this information. Campaigns of disinformation are used to sway public opinion and mould views. In the past, these initiatives have successfully formed narratives that support a reexamination of the events (Szostek, 2017). Russia views the information space via a geopolitical lens, seeing its internal information space as an extension of state boundaries consistently breached by outside interference (Melnychuk and Hakala, 2021). Platforms like Telegram have become crucial in the Kremlin’s media strategy, especially after the restrictions on Western social media platforms. There was a marked increase in Kremlin-aligned media activity around the time of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This included a significant increase in the volume of posts on platforms like Telegram, where pro-Kremlin channels saw a dramatic increase in activity (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023).

The Kremlin's propaganda towards Russians heavily relies on specific narratives. One prominent narrative depicts the West as morally decadent and in decline, characterised by the erosion of traditional family values and societal fragmentation, contrasted with Russia’s upholding of traditional values and social cohesion (Constantin, 2023). Additionally, the Kremlin portrays the West as aggressive and expansionist forces intent on encircling and undermining Russia, thus justifying its own militaristic and defensive postures (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The hypocrisy of Western democracies is another key theme, where the West is accused of masking its oligarchic and corrupt nature under a veneer of democratic principles, highlighting issues like political corruption and social inequality (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The narrative of Russophobia is employed to explain Western criticism and sanctions as irrational hatred and fear of Russia, portraying Russia as a victim of Western hostility (Aleksejeva and Carvin, 2023).

To support its policies and sway public opinion, the Kremlin has developed several distinct narratives around the war in Ukraine. One of the main storylines holds that Russia is carrying out a specific military operation in Ukraine to denazify the country, depicting the Ukrainian government as being governed by radicals and neo-Nazis who pose a threat to ethnic Russians living in Ukraine and those who speak Russian (Putin, 2023). The narrative of historical unity and the illegitimacy of Ukrainian statehood is also prevalent. The Kremlin often asserts that Ukraine is an artificial state with no historical legitimacy, emphasising historical ties and cultural unity between Russia and Ukraine to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and justify its territorial ambitions (TASS, 2024). Economic narratives also play a role, with the Kremlin arguing that the West is using Ukraine as a pawn to destabilise Russia through economic sanctions and political pressure (Aleksejeva and Carvin, 2023).

According to the work of Bradshaw et al., Russian state-backed media has strategically crafted various narratives to shape public perception of the Ukraine conflict. Key narratives include “identity narratives”, which frame Russia as a heroic and powerful protector against Western hypocrisy and portray Ukraine as evil and incompetent. “System narratives” emphasise the decline of Western hegemony and the emergence of a new world order led by Russia and its allies. “Issue narratives” highlight the negative impact of Western sanctions on global economic security and depict Russia's role as a stabilising force in international affairs. These narratives are tailored to resonate with different audiences, leveraging historical grievances and geopolitical alliances to legitimise Russia's actions and counter Western influence (Bradshaw et al., 2024).

9. The Slovak Republic in Context

From the end of World War II, Slovakia, as part of Czechoslovakia, came under Soviet influence and became a communist state in 1948, fostering strong political and economic ties with the Soviet Union (Kft, 2006). The 1968 Prague Spring, a reform movement within Czechoslovakia, was crushed by a Warsaw Pact invasion led by Soviet forces, which strained relations. However, the overall alliance persisted until the fall of communism in 1989 (Kft, 2006). After the Velvet Divorce in 1993, Slovakia emerged as an independent nation. It began integrating into Western institutions, joining NATO in 2004 as well as the EU, which shifted its focus away from Russia (Ministerstvo Obrany Slovenskej Republiky, 2015). Despite this, Slovakia maintained pragmatic economic relations with Russia, particularly in the energy sector, while navigating its new Western-aligned foreign policy (Oravcová, 2022).

The Slovak political scene is divided into pro-Russian and pro-West-oriented parties. The pro-Russian politician Robert Fico returned to power after the parliament election 2023 (Politico, 2023). He became more radical and enraged at what he described as an “attempt to overturn a democratic election,” which he said was orchestrated by billionaire George Soros and the American Embassy in Bratislava (Kern, 2018; Demková, 2021). Since then, the Slovak government has stopped helping Ukraine and has taken a sharp turn towards Russia. In April 2024, Peter Pellegrini won the presidential election. Part of his strategy during the presidential campaign was a Moscow-friendly language, which accused his opponent Korčok of being a warrior who would send Slovak soldiers to fight in Ukraine even though this decision is not in the president’s power under the Constitution (Cameron, 2024).

The newly elected government started to legitimise anti-Western sentiment by discrediting liberal media and institutions while legitimising pro-Russian perspectives through the support of disinformation media. Government politicians use language and narratives that align with pro-Russian sentiments, often echoing Kremlin talking points and criticising Western policies. When a government promotes narratives such as the “false demonisation of President Putin” or claims that the EU’s only plan is to “encourage the mutual killing of Slavs”, it engages in strategic use of disinformation and propaganda that helps Russia attempt to polarise citizens (Novák, 2024, Grim, 2024). Politicians also support narratives about Russia and its positive image, and they are criticising any negative portrayals of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Also, the government has halted military support for Ukraine, framing the conflict as a proxy

war instigated by the West. This is aimed at appealing to nationalist voters wary of Slovakia being drawn into foreign conflicts (Ondráčková, 2024).

Up until 2020, Slovakia paid little attention to the problem of disinformation and hybrid threats. The COVID-19 pandemic and the following infodemic, which is still going strong about the conflict in Ukraine, served as a wake-up call for Slovakia. The subject started to gain traction in the society (Dubóczi and Ružičková, 2023).

Slovakia has seen a disinformation scene rise since 2014, and its landscape has changed significantly. These days, it affects not just fringe and alternative websites but also different social media users, particularly on Facebook, the most popular platform in Slovakia (Similarweb, 2024). Politicians are currently particularly obvious disinformation spreaders because of their status, ability to engage the public, and influence conversations about social issues. Disinformation narratives get into the mainstream of information through politicians (Dubóczi and Ružičková, 2023).

The number of people who believe that misinformation threatens the security of the Slovak Republic is increasing, reaching 76%. According to 39% of respondents, disinformation has been presented to them (IPSOS, 2024). Only 27% of Slovaks trust the media, indicating significant media distrust within the country (Hečková and Smith, 2023). According to the Central European Digital Media Observatory, in the first quarter of 2024, disinformation narratives reached 58% of the Slovak population (Balcová, 2024b). The credibility of disinformation narratives among Slovaks ranged from 10% to 55%, indicating varying degrees of belief in different false narratives (Balcová, 2024b). False reports about the conflict in Ukraine reached 58% of Slovaks, with 37% finding them credible. These narratives often included claims that the conflict was limited to the east of Ukraine and did not affect Kyiv and allegations that Slovak troops would be deployed to Ukraine by the EU and NATO (Balcová, 2024b).

Disinformation narratives in Slovakia often target Euro-Atlantic structures like NATO and the EU to undermine Slovakia's membership and question its Western alignment. These narratives exploit Slovakia's conservative nature, portraying Western integration as eroding traditional values and national sovereignty while positioning Russia as a protector (Balcová, 2024). Common themes include the Brussels dictatorship, EU corruption, NATO's offensive nature,

and accusations that NATO serves American interests, fueling anti-Western sentiment and supporting Russian propaganda about the Ukraine conflict. The pro-Russian sentiment is rooted in shared history with the USSR and pan-Slavism. The Russian Embassy and local allies promote Russia as a strong protector of traditional values and an eternal fighter against fascism. They use historical revisionism and anti-fascist rhetoric to bolster this image, dismissing criticism as Russophobia and glorifying the Kremlin (Dubóczy and Ružičková, 2023). Since 2014, Ukraine has been demonised in the Slovak information space, with narratives accusing its elite and population of fascism to justify the Russian invasion in 2022. These narratives question Ukraine's statehood, label it as fascist, and claim a Ukrainian genocide against Russian speakers in Donbas. They absolve Russia of responsibility for civilian casualties and involvement in the Crimean Referendum and the Donbas War. Disinformation also targets President Zelenskyj and pro-Ukrainian Slovak politicians while promoting fears about Slovakia's defence capabilities and potential participation in the war. False claims about citizen mobilisation and NATO membership further discredit Ukraine and justify Russia's aggression (Dubóczy and Ružičková, 2023).

Vox Ukraine—Yelyzaveta Chekhovska (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023, Chekhovska and Tropynina, 2023) researched Russian narratives in Slovak media from June to October 2023. This time period targets the era after the Ukrainian counter-offensive. There were eight main narratives based on Russian propaganda.

- **The West using Ukraine:** This narrative suggests that Western countries, particularly the U.S. and EU, control Ukraine and use it as a proxy to weaken Russia. It portrays Ukraine as a victim of Western manipulation rather than an independent actor.
- **Ukrainian army committing war crimes:** This narrative accuses the Ukrainian military of committing war crimes, often reflecting accusations onto Ukraine for crimes committed by Russia. It includes claims of sabotage and genocide against Russian-speaking populations.
- **Ukraine is a terrorist state:** This narrative labels Ukraine as a terrorist state, alleging attacks on civilians and attempts to assassinate Russian figures. It portrays Ukraine as a dangerous and illegitimate state.
- **Discrediting of Ukrainian government officials:** This narrative aims to undermine the credibility of Ukrainian leaders, particularly President Volodymyr Zelenskyj, by

accusing them of corruption, incompetence, and drug addiction. It suggests that the West will eventually replace Zelenskyj with another puppet leader.

- **Nazism in Ukraine:** This narrative claims that Ukraine is dominated by Nazi ideology, citing historical references and current events to label Ukrainian groups and leaders as Nazis. It includes accusations that the U.S. supports neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine.
- **Ukraine's victory in the war is impossible:** This narrative insists that Ukraine cannot win the war against Russia, highlighting alleged Ukrainian military failures and predicting Russian victories. It includes claims that the war has already ended in Russia's favour, but Western disinformation keeps it ongoing.
- **The actions of Ukraine and the West provoked Russia to start a full-scale war:** This narrative argues that NATO expansion and Ukrainian actions forced Russia to initiate the war. It claims that Western aggression and Ukraine's aspirations for NATO membership posed a security threat to Russia, justifying the invasion.
- **The weapons provided to Ukraine by Western partners are ineffective:** This narrative contends that Western military aid to Ukraine is futile, as Ukrainian forces lack the skills to use the equipment effectively. It also alleges that provided weapons are sold on the black market, further indicating their ineffectiveness.

(Chekhovska 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023, Chekhovska and Tropynina, 2023)

10. The Republic of Serbia in Context

During World War II, Serbia, then part of Yugoslavia, received substantial support from the Soviet Union in its resistance against Axis occupation. However, in 1948, the Tito-Stalin split marked a significant divergence as Yugoslavia, under Josip Broz Tito, was expelled from the Cominform, leading to strained relations with the Soviet Union (Embassy of the Republic of Serbia, Prague Czech Republic, n.d.). This split defined Yugoslavia's independent socialist path and non-aligned stance during the Cold War, maintaining a balance between East and West despite occasional tensions with the Soviet Union (Perović, 2007).

Following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Serbia relied heavily on Russian support during the Bosnian War and the Kosovo conflict, especially against NATO interventions (Bowker, 1998). In the 21st century, Serbia and Russia have strengthened political, military, and economic ties, with Russia backing Serbia's stance on Kosovo and becoming a key energy supplier (Jovanović, 2024). While Serbia aspires to membership in the EU, it maintains strong strategic relations with Russia, highlighting their enduring alliance (Bechev, 2023).

Serbia's current relationship with Russia is characterised by pragmatic policies. While Serbia officially remains a friend of Russia by refusing to support EU sanctions amid the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (Stojanovic, 2022), this stance is driven more by economic benefits than genuine allegiance. Serbia secures advantageous gas deals from Russia and benefits from increased economic activity with Russian businesses relocating to Serbia. A January 2023 poll showed that 46 per cent of Serbs believe their country should stay neutral in the Russia-Ukraine war (Vuksanovic and Samorukov, 2023). On the other hand, officially, Serbia does not fully support Russia's actions, as evidenced by its condemnation of Russian aggression in Ukraine (Belgrade, 2022). This ambivalence allows Serbian leaders to leverage pro-Russian sentiments domestically while balancing relations with the West, and Russia opposes the Balkans' efforts to join the European Union and NATO. To counter these efforts, it exploits existing ethnic and religious divisions (Miholjevic-Ivkovic, 2024).

Although pro-Russian propaganda has always been influential in Serbia, the conflict in Ukraine has made the tendency more pronounced. The Serbian government is not acting to combat Russian propaganda by promoting more trustworthy news sources (Reporters without Borders, 2023). Most Serbs consider Russia their "greatest friend" (Vuksanovic and Samorukov, 2023).

Due to their shared Eastern Orthodox and Slavic identities, Russia and Serbia have a striking cultural similarity that makes them unwavering allies and advocates of one another. There is a consensus, at least in Serbia, that Russians and Serbs have enduring cultural and historical ties that are emphasised more during times of crisis (Miholjic-Ivkovic, 2024).

Based on Statista data (Zandt, 2024), in a poll conducted between April 2023 and March 2024, 41% of Serbian respondents stated they didn't trust the media. According to the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (2023), the major conclusions demonstrate that disinformation outnumbers the news in numbers. More specifically, the study found 559 distinct kinds of disinformation incidents in 494 news stories published by 14 (out of the 15 Serbian news outlets examined). A study shows that two types of people spread misinformation: sources (politicians, experts, officials, etc.) who make claims tainted with disinformation and journalists who either don't verify these claims or actively produce disinformation themselves. Public funds are provided in significant quantities to the media, a well-known disinformation source (Research, Transparency and Accountability, 2023).

Russian media operating in Serbia are Sputnik and RT Balkans. Numerous important storylines are promoted by Serbian pro-Russian media. They support the Russian viewpoint on world affairs, contending that Western initiatives in the Balkans put geostrategic concerns ahead of democratic ideals to lessen Russian influence. They paint events such as the revolution in Ukraine in 2013–2014 as being planned by the US and characterise Russia's actions as a defence against NATO expansionism. Due in large part to the success of this narrative, many Serbians now believe that NATO forced Russia into war (European Western Balkans, 2024; Sára Gregová, 2024.; Drost, Henry and Zweers, 2023). Serbian media sources claim that NATO and the EU pose a danger to Serbia's sovereignty; hence, they work to weaken these organisations. They spread lies, such as the idea that the EU supports separatists in Vojvodina, and they forecast negative economic effects from EU entrance, which works to sway public opinion against EU membership (European Western Balkans, 2024; Sára Gregová, 2024.; Drost, Henry and Zweers, 2023). They also emphasise the historical and cultural connections between Russia and Serbia and Russian investments, notably those made through businesses like Gazprom in the energy industry. This story overstates Russia's economic influence even though the EU is Serbia's main investor. There is significant emphasis on military cooperation between Russia and Serbia, even though NATO has more broad and diversified contacts with Serbia (European Western Balkans, 2024; Sára Gregová, 2024; Drost, Henry and Zweers,

2023). To position the Russian government as a strong rival to Western liberalism, media outlets glorify Vladimir Putin and depict him as the ultimate leader who embodies Russia. The ultimate goal of this propaganda operation is to portray Putin's system as a more successful template than Western philosophies (European Western Balkans, 2024; Sára Gregová, 2024.; Drost, Henry and Zweers, 2023).

According to the researcher Olga Brusylovska in Serbia, the media framed conflict in Ukraine as a “special operation” aimed at protecting the civilian population in Donbas, thus justifying Russian military actions as humanitarian intervention. The Serbian press also emphasised a dichotomy between the West and Russia, portraying the conflict as a struggle against Western aggression and interference. Western sanctions were depicted as ineffective and illegal, with narratives suggesting that Russia was successfully mitigating their impact through partnerships with countries like China and India. Furthermore, the Ukrainian military was often presented negatively, with reports focusing on alleged crimes and violations by Ukrainian forces, reinforcing a pro-Russian perspective (Brusylovska, 2024).

11. The United States of America in Context

After World War II, Russian-American relations transitioned from wartime allies to Cold War adversaries, marked by ideological conflict and a nuclear arms race. The Cold War saw periods of intense rivalry, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and détente, as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, relations briefly improved as the U.S. supported Russia's market reforms and democratisation. However, tensions resurfaced in the 2000s due to disagreements over NATO expansion, U.S. military interventions, and Russia's actions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. The 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia further strained relations. Ties hit a low point after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, prompting U.S. sanctions. Allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election deepened the mistrust between the two nations (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

“With the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s actions have driven its relationship with the United States to a new post-Cold War low.” (American Security Project, n.d.) After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian-American relations deteriorated sharply. The U.S. condemned the invasion, leading a coalition of Western nations to impose severe economic sanctions on Russia and provide substantial military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Diplomatic ties were strained further as both countries expelled each other's diplomats. The conflict intensified geopolitical tensions, with the U.S. and its allies strengthening NATO's presence in Eastern Europe, while Russia viewed these actions as direct threats to its security. The invasion marked one of the lowest points in post-Cold War Russian-American relations, with little prospect for reconciliation soon (Congressional Research Servis, 2024).

There is a marked lack of faith in the mass media in the United States. According to a 2023 study, just 32% of adult Americans believe that the media will convey news in a “fully, accurately, and fairly” manner (Fu and Aguiar, 2023). Leger, a marketing research and polling company, carried out a survey on disinformation in the US in 2023. The analysis found that compared to 2021, many Americans still regard misinformation (61% vs. 69% in 2021) and disinformation (60% vs. 69% in 2021) as major issues. These forms of false information continue to erode trust in the election process and society overall. Many Americans believe that disinformation undermines the election process (75%), poses a threat to democracy (74%), heightens political polarisation (73%), and infringes on human rights (61%). Additionally, over

half (55%) of Americans think that artificial intelligence platforms will increase the spread of disinformation in society. Facebook (73%), TikTok (65%), and X (formerly Twitter) (62%) are seen as the top social media platforms contributing to the spread of disinformation. As a result, 40% of Americans avoid watching or listening to the news due to the prevalence of disinformation (The Institute for Public Relations and Leger, 2023).

According to a 2023 analysis by The Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, Russia spreads several key propaganda narratives in the US:

- **Russia is pure:** this narrative defends Russian values against liberal ideologies by appealing to tradition. It justifies Russian actions as responses to Western aggression through whataboutism¹ promotes Russian pride, and smears Ukraine. Labeling and scapegoating are used to highlight Russia's purity and others' corruption.
- **Russophobia is Rampant in the West:** this narrative portrays Russia as a victim to gain sympathy and justify its actions. It uses ad hominem attacks to deflect criticism, demonises the West for unfair persecution, and spreads alternative accounts through dubious authorities. It also shifts blame for events like the downing of MH17 and the Skripal poisoning, positioning Russia as a reluctant defender.
- **Ukraine is an Illegitimate State:** narrative aims to destroy Ukraine's reputation through character assassination, projection, and trolling. It portrays Ukrainian democracy as a farce, creates confusion with false equivalency and red herrings, and frames Ukraine's democratic actions as NATO-led coups. This implies that Ukraine is a puppet state aligned with the EU.
- **Ukraine is Weak/Hostile:** narrative depicts Ukraine as corrupt and dangerous. It uses character assassination and demonisation, framing Ukraine as a threat through the Big Lie and reversal of reality. It highlights issues related to ethnic Russians while ignoring broader rights. Sub-narratives claim Ukraine violates human rights, especially against ethnic Russians, and paints Ukraine as a Nazi state, exploiting Russia's WWII history.
- **Don't Trust the Source (The Truth F**k*):** this narrative erodes trust in information sources by creating fake content to debunk later, fostering distrust. It claims real events are staged, using techniques like muddying the waters and poisoning the well to create

¹ “The act or practice of responding to an accusation of wrongdoing by claiming that an offense committed by another is similar or worse.” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

confusion. Red herrings and reflexive control exploit political dysfunction to manipulate perceptions, making truth a tool for shaping feelings regardless of facts (Amanatullah et al., 2023).

Neil Hauer (2024) highlights several narratives throughout the Russo-Ukrainian War. Initially, Russian propaganda emphasised the might of its military, suggesting a swift and decisive victory over Ukraine, which fostered a sense of inevitable Russian dominance. As Ukrainian resistance proved stronger than anticipated, the narrative shifted to highlight the supposed futility of Ukrainian efforts against Russia's superior artillery in the Donbas region. Following Ukraine's unexpected successes, Russian propaganda pivoted again, focusing on Ukraine's internal struggles, political infighting, and dwindling Western support to paint a picture of imminent Ukrainian collapse. Additionally, by amplifying stories of Western nations pressuring Kyiv for negotiations, Russian narratives aimed to sow doubt about the West's commitment to Ukraine (Hauer, 2024).

The influence of Russian propaganda and disinformation during the 2016 U.S. presidential election is one of the most significant moments in recent history. During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Russian influence operations were extensive and multifaceted, targeting various aspects of American society to sow discord and influence voter perceptions. The Internet Research Agency (IRA), a Russian organisation, created thousands of fake social media accounts to disseminate divisive content and manipulate public opinion, particularly targeting African American communities to suppress voter turnout. Concurrently, Russian military intelligence (GRU) hackers infiltrated the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the email account of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, releasing sensitive information through WikiLeaks to damage Clinton's campaign. Russian state-funded media outlets like RT and Sputnik further spread disinformation, promoting narratives favourable to Donald Trump. These efforts, combined with automated bots and trolls, significantly undermined trust in democratic institutions and exacerbated social and political divisions in the U.S., illustrating the profound impact of foreign disinformation on democratic processes (Mueller, III, 2019).

12. Methodology and Data

The research question was: Do the narratives through which News Front interprets the news in Slovakia, Serbia, Russia, and the US differ? If so, what are these narratives for each country? This study aimed to analyse the specific narratives for each country (language). The goal was to contribute to a greater understanding of the Kremlin's key narratives for each country examined. The work examines how narratives are structured and differ between countries, utilising in-depth systematic content analysis. The sample was divided into four groups according to the languages. Each group contains articles from 4.6.2023 to 31.12.2023, with the number of articles varying due to the absence of published articles in some languages on certain days. The starting date was chosen because Ukraine launched a wider counteroffensive operation on 4.6.2023, according to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW Press, 2023b).

The analysed sample is created from articles published on the online news agency News Front. News Front is a Crimea-based disinformation and propaganda outlet that spreads pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation. It has been sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the Council of the European Union for its role in influencing public opinion and distributing false information (The chapter News Front is focused on more details about his news agency.). News Front is a great source where to study Kremlin's narratives because there is evidence of direct links to the Russian authorities (VSquare, 2022) According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, "it.. works with FSB officers to coordinate a narrative that undermined the credibility of a news website..." (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022).

The research examines content in four languages: Slovak, English, Serbian, and Russian. Upon accessing the News Front homepage, visitors can select from several flags representing the target country for the articles, regardless of the chosen language. For this study, English-language articles were selected from those available under the US flag. These specific countries were picked because of several factors. Russia and the US were included in the sample because of their significant geopolitical influence (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). Russia no longer functions as a democracy (Freedom House, 2023), unlike the United States, which is widely regarded as the most powerful democratic nation (Freedom House, 2023b). Slovakia was selected for this study due to its membership in both NATO and the European Union, alongside the significant proportion of its population—39%—that perceives itself as vulnerable to disinformation (CEDMO Trends SK, 2024). Furthermore, the Slovak edition of the News

Front website is notably among the most active compared to its versions in other languages (VSquare, 2022). Serbia was chosen because it is not a member of NATO but has committed to joining the European Union. However, the process has been slow and challenging because of its relationship with the Russian Federation (European Commission, n.d. Euronews, 2024). The inclusion of Serbia in the sample is further justified by the Serbian government's established connections with Russia (Miholjic-Ivkovic, 2024).

In each language, articles were chosen from the news category about Ukraine. News Front consistently publishes multiple articles daily in each of its supported languages. The platform is most prolific in Russian, with up to 30 articles published daily. In contrast, there are periods lasting from one to three days, during which no new articles are published on the English version of News Front. The final number of analysed articles between 4.6.2023 and 31.12.2023 is 791 (Slovakia 205, Serbia 203, the US 172, Russia 211). Each day's analysis focused on the first published article.

The beginning date was chosen because Ukraine launched a wider counteroffensive operation on 4. 6. 2023, according to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW Press, 2023b). The end of the year was chosen as a logical point to close the analysed period, which represents a time frame of approximately half a year, assuming that theoretical saturation is reached. The theoretical saturation occurs when no new information is gained from sample enlargement (Glaser, 2017). After the analysis and articles from December were completed, the assumption of saturation in each category, i.e. in each language, was fulfilled. The period was determined in advance because articles in four languages were analysed, and there was a need for the same time frame for all analysed articles.

The coding was done by one coder, and the unit of analysis is the article (Harcourt et al., 2020; Lück et al., 2016). Individual articles were analysed using open coding (Ninan and Sergeeva, 2023). This method, part of the initial data analysis stage, focuses on categorising phenomena by assigning specific terms. The researcher observes and assigns codes to phenomena, single words, sentences, or paragraphs. These codes must accurately reflect the phenomena in the analysed unit. The research employed axial coding to organise and synthesise the data gathered during open coding. Axial coding helps identify and link categories and subcategories, revealing relationships and patterns that clarify how different aspects of the data interact (Hendl, 2005, pp. 251–252).

13. Limitations

While this research analyses articles in four languages (Slovak, Serbian, English, and Russian), my proficiency is limited to Slovak and English. I used Google Translate to interpret Serbian and Russian articles to overcome this barrier. Despite this effort, certain nuances and contextual subtleties in the original texts might not have been fully captured or accurately interpreted. Approximately 200 articles in each language were analysed to mitigate this, reducing the likelihood of missing significant nuances.

Furthermore, there is a suspicion that News Front editors may use translation tools from Russian, potentially altering nuances at the outset of the research. This assumption is supported by an article in which Boris Gaborov, one of the individuals involved in publishing content on the Serbian News Front, discusses his work for News Front (VSquare, 2023a). As a native Slovak speaker, I also encountered occasional difficulties in understanding the text in Slovak on the first attempt, substantiating this suspicion.

The study covers articles published between June 4, 2023, and December 31, 2023. Although this time frame provides a snapshot of the narratives during this period, it may not reflect longer-term trends or shifts since the end of the research period. However, the identified common narratives across the four languages are consistent with those found in previous studies (U.S. Department of State, 2020; Yeliseyeu and Laputka, 2023), suggesting stability in these narrative frameworks over time.

The analysis primarily relies on articles from the News Front website, recognised for its direct links to the Kremlin (VSquare, 2022) and its role in disseminating pro-Russian propaganda (Sólymos et al., 2022). While this makes News Front a relevant source for studying Kremlin-driven narratives, the inherent biases and potential manipulations within these articles could limit the objectivity of the findings. Nonetheless, the direct connection to the Kremlin provides substantial justification for the relevance of these narratives beyond News Front.

14. News Front

“Since the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, News Front, long described as one of the largest Russian disinformation factories, has been actively expanding.” (VSquare, 2023)

After the annexation of Crimea, a group of militants seized the Crimean Center for Investigative Journalism and created the disinformation channel News Front. This channel became a key tool of Russian propaganda (Sólymos et al., 2022). In June 2015, Roskomnadzor, the Russian state body that regulates mass media, registered the Crimean-based News Front information agency. News Front operates as a multilingual website, providing information in several languages, including Slovak, Georgian, Hungarian, French, Serbian, Spanish, German, Bulgarian, English, and Russian. It asserts that it has editorial branches in Bulgaria, Serbia, Germany, France, the UK, Georgia, and Hungary (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

News Front claims to offer objective coverage and is an alternative source of information for Europe and the U.S. At first glance, it looks like a credible news website, but it mainly features disinformation, hoaxes and conspiracy theories. It has also been noted for using photoshopped images. News Front's multilingual website has documented many examples of disinformation and propaganda (U.S. Department of State, 2020; Sólymos et al., 2022). According to Ján Kuciak Investigative Center, News Front's initial objective is to provide modified content to domestic disinformation outlets rather than to attract many visitors (Sólymos et al., 2022). Based on information provided by journalists, News Front has been run by at least 70 individuals, including self-described journalists, independent contractors, regional and local editors in Russia and around Europe, and Knyrik (VSquare, 2023).

News Front is directly connected to Russian state sources. In April 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department identified News Front as being controlled by Russian intelligence. They stated that the FSB operates disinformation channels directly, with News Front coordinating its content with FSB officers and acting on behalf of Russian intelligence (Seal of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021). In 2023, the European Union imposed sanctions on Konstantin Knyrik, the owner of News Front (Official Journal of the European Union, 2023).

Social media companies are not abiding by the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU. The platform continues to appear in search results and social media due to its adaptive tactics, like

creating new domains and mirror sites, inconsistent enforcement by major platforms, and the challenges of comprehensive geoblocking. The platform recruits local individuals to enhance its reach, and varying enforcement of digital sanctions across countries and platforms further complicates the complete removal of its content from the internet (VSquare, 2023).

In 2015, Serbian News Front was created to counteract Western media influence in Serbia and prevent Montenegro from joining NATO. The site, managed by Russian journalist Oksana Sazonova, actively campaigned against pro-NATO Prime Minister Milo Đukanović and supported the pro-Russian Democratic Front. In 2016, Sazonova was linked to a failed coup attempt in Montenegro. She was later deported from Kosovo for illegal entry. Boris Gaborov, the current editor, continues to publish nationalist content but denies any intelligence ties. Despite efforts, News Front Serbia has limited online influence (VSquare, 2023).

Despite being part of a broader Central and Eastern European presence, the Slovak version of News Front has become one of Slovakia's most visited disinformation portals and successful Telegram channels. Although it started in mid-2020 without much attention, it became a significant source of conspiracy content. Iveta Kupkova, Director of the Situation Centre of the Office of the Security Council in Slovakia, identifies News Front as a key entry point for Kremlin propaganda, spreading disinformation narratives quickly across the region (VSquare, 2023).

The News Front homepage looks almost the same in all four languages. Depending on the language, there are a few news categories to choose from, but "Ukraine" is used in all of them. Each category contains an archive of articles so that a reader can upload older articles with the "show more." Under articles in Serbian and English, there was an alert window: "Due to censorship and blocking of all media and alternative opinions, subscribe to our TELEGRAM CHANNEL." The Serbian telegram channel has 2727 subscribers, and it is still active (Србија, n.d.). The window with the English articles last appeared on 21.9.2023. It is still functioning, but I have only 426 subscribers, whereas the Serbian Telegram channel has 2727 subscribers. (FrontNews ENGLISH, n.d.). Articles in Slovak do not have any telegram link. Russian articles do not have an alert window about censorship. Still, on the other hand, there are links for sharing the articles through social media (even Telegram) as part of all articles. Russian and Serbian News Fronts offer to click on the link to their official Telegram account on their homepages.

But when I want to use them from the Czech Republic, it is blocked, and the text appears: “The channel can't be displayed because it violated local laws.”

15. Common Narratives

In this part of the analysis, the focus is on common narratives shared across all four languages. Russia employs tailored narratives for each country, but there are also universally applicable narratives relevant to hybrid warfare. The Kremlin disseminates information using a consistent overarching framework. These narratives are also common in other research, forming the main framework for Russian propaganda within which the Kremlin operates (Chekhovska, 2023a; Dubóczy & Ružičková, 2023; Brusylovska, 2024; Amanatullah et al., 2023; Hauer, 2024; Bradshaw et al., 2024; Aleksejeva & Carvin, 2023).

a. **Even if Ukraine Fights against Russia, the Collective West will be the Holder of the Power. Specifically, the USA is a Manipulative Actor.**

Across all four languages, there is a recurring theme that the West, particularly the United States, is deeply involved in the conflict in Ukraine, manipulating events to serve its geopolitical interests. The US and Europe do not care about the number of deaths of Ukrainians and Russians in general because their main goal is selfish. They are focused on a geopolitical level, so their main goal is not to win Ukraine but to weaken Russia (Vedran, News Front 06.07.2023 10:04, 2023). The US will use Ukraine as a pawn in its unethical schemes, and Ukraine will be exploited. The United States involvement started “...in 2014, after the US-backed “colour revolution” and the seizure of power by political elites subordinate to Washington, the destruction of all Ukrainian institutions began.” (Aleksa Gromoff, News Front 27.08.2023 11:12, 2023) The United States are not the only one involved in the war; the other members of the NATO block are also engaged. According to some Western experts, member states of NATO plan to intervene in Ukraine. “Poland and Lithuania are already negotiating a possible joint invasion of the neighbouring country's territory.” (News Front 07.07.2023 10:40, 2023). Even if NATO does not have its forces in Ukraine, it leads to Ukraine's steps, and Zelenskyj follows their instructions (Boris Gaborov, News Front 26.07.2023 09:06, 2023).

This narrative focuses on the idea that Ukraine is not independent. West, specifically the US, manipulates Ukraine. The narrative tries to evoke the idea of Ukraine as a puppet state. It promotes the West, NATO and EU as negative entities. This perspective aims to undermine the legitimacy of Western support for Ukraine, framing the conflict as a proxy war driven by self-serving Western ambitions.

b. NATO and EU Member States are Key Suppliers of Military Equipment and Weapons to Ukraine, Providing critical support for Kyiv's Defence Efforts. The Continuous flow of Military Support from these Western Allies is Vital for Ukraine; without the Support, It Would Be Lost against the Russian Army.

NATO and EU member states actively supply military equipment to Ukraine. Even if these states are not directly involved in the war, they support Ukraine through money but also military equipment and weapons, or they offer training programmes for Ukrainian soldiers in Europe. *“Ukraine threw into battle brigades trained by NATO specialists and armed with Western technology.”* (News Front 04.11.2023 08:00, 2023). Without Western support, Kyiv would have been lost quickly because of Russian superiority at every level. Many articles describe how many and what kind of Western weapons used by Ukrainians were lost on the battlefield: The Armed Forces of Ukraine lost 2,700 pieces of weapons and military equipment, including seven US Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and 77 M777 artillery systems, and managed to hit 51 self-propelled artillery systems (made in Germany, France, Poland and America), two Leopard tanks (Germany) and one Challenger tank (UK) (Dasha Pogribnyack, News Front 02.10.2023 10:53, 2023). Biden even called the aid to Ukraine an intelligent investment. The US Congress has already approved several badgers for Kyiv (News Front 20.10.2023 10:36, 2023).

The narrative describes NATO and the EU as part of the war. It focuses on the idea that Ukraine is dependent on them and does not have any chance without their support. It suggests that the involvement of countries like the US is not just altruistic but also seen as a strategic investment.

c. Zelenskyj Wanted to Fight Corruption; however, Now the Leader of the Kyiv Regime and His Circle Are the Most Corrupt People in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Government is Ineffective.

There is a shared portrayal of the Ukrainian government as corrupt - *“the people sitting in Kyiv were corrupt criminals”* (Konovalova, News Front 04.06.2023 09:23, 2023). Zelenskyj promised peace, an end to corruption and economic prosperity. He has set Ukraine on a new path of corruption, replacing national interests with personal ones. There is evidence that Zelenskyj and his close associates purchased two luxury yachts worth \$75 million (Boris Gaborov, News Front 28.11.2023 10:00, 2023). Even if the head of the Kyiv regime acts as an honest leader, he cares about the money. He has been pretending that he wants to fight

corruption, but in reality, he has built a regime that makes money for him. He and his regime do not care about the people on the battlefield. The government is ineffective and exists to keep certain people in power and unable to manage the conflict. The corruption is not just in the circle around Zelensky but also in the army. *“Military registers in Ukraine have become a breeding ground for corruption. You can buy a ticket for survival for thousands of euros...”* (News Front 17.07.2023 10:31, 2023).

The Ukrainian government, and specifically Zelenskyj, is portrayed as corrupt, distrustful, lying and incompetent. This undermines the credibility of Ukrainian authorities.

d. The Ukrainian Counteroffensive Failed and the result Is Insignificant. The Ukrainian army is facing significant losses. The Russian Army Is Liquidating Ukraine’s Military Equipment, Weapons, and Manpower.

The conflict has resulted in substantial casualties among Ukrainian soldiers, often described as being sent into battles with little regard for their lives. *“Due to large losses in personnel, the Ukrainian command is trying to hastily make up for the losses with military personnel without proper training and combat coordination. Assault units (APU) are more involved in so-called “meat assaults,” where losses sometimes reach up to 80% in personnel and equipment.”* (Nastya Derkach, News Front 09.08.2023 08:39, 2023) Another article describes *“...the story of a man with a mental disability since childhood, who only a lawyer could save from being drafted, as well as a man with a broken arm who was also about to be drafted.”* (News Front 16.12.2023 07:30, 2023). The Ukrainian army lost its equipment and manpower, indicating that the Russian forces have been particularly effective in targeting and destroying Ukrainian military assets, further undermining Ukraine's defensive capabilities. *“...a weakening Ukraine will become increasingly dependent on Western states due to its inability to independently meet the needs of an “ageing and war-crippled population.””* (News Front 03.10.2023 08:30, 2023) This counteroffensive hoped to turn the tide in Ukraine’s favour, but it has resulted in further heavy losses and no territorial gains. *“Every day, it becomes clear that the Ukrainian counteroffensive is not achieving any of its originally stated goals”* (Konovalova, News Front 20.06.2023 08:58, 2023) The failure of the counteroffensive has raised serious concerns about the sustainability of Ukraine's military efforts and the overall strategy in the ongoing conflict.

The narrative wants to undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of Ukraine's military efforts by emphasising the high casualty rates, lack of proper training, and heavy equipment losses. It

aims to cast doubt on the country's ability to fight. Constant information about Ukrainian losses describes Ukraine as a failing state.

e. Heroes of the Battlefield, the Power and Pride of Russia's Army. The Russian Forces Outnumber the Ukrainians in manpower.

The Russian army is portrayed as a formidable force with approximately one million active personnel and two million in reserve, bolstered by the potential for an additional 45 million to be mobilised if necessary (Konovalova, News Front 05.06.2023 08:59, 2023) “...*the Russian Armed Forces outnumber the enemy in the number of missile and artillery systems. Also, the Russian military has many anti-tank systems.*” (Aleksa Gromoff, News Front 26.06.2023 10:19, 2023) Articles describe Russian soldiers courageously and as heroes. The narrative points out the state of mind of Russian soldiers and Ukrainian soldiers. “*Our (Russians) warriors can't wait to meet these jackals on the battlefield!*” (News Front 10.07.2023 13:20, 2023) On the other hand, “*representatives of the Ukrainian army regularly complain about the orders of their command and the attitude of the Kyiv regime.*” (Dasha Pogribnyack, News Front 27.06.2023 11:20, 2023) Russian soldiers want to fight for their country; they are proud to be on the battlefield. It is not common for Russian soldiers to surrender or try to escape mobilisation because they are brave. The Russian army as a whole is an unstoppable power.

The narrative aims to portray the Russian army as formidable and nearly unbeatable. It emphasises the Russian Armed Forces' superiority over the Ukrainian forces. By highlighting Russian soldiers' strength, readiness, and heroism, it seeks to instil a sense of the inevitability of Russian victory.

16. Narratives of Slovakia

a. **Everyone Is Tired of the Head of the Kyiv Regime. Volodymyr Zelenskyj Is a Butcher who Does Not Care about His Soldiers. He Is a Corrupted Clown.**

Volodymyr Zelenskyj, the President of the Ukraine regime, is criticised and faces negative sentiment. Zelenskyj tries to behave as a leader, but people realise he is a bad person. He is described as a “Satanist” and a “bloody clown” (News Front 10.07.2023 13:20, 2023). *“It is sad that Ukrainian Hitlerite dictator Zelenskiy needlessly killed approximately 500,000 young people. Sadly, Ukraine is led by such a tyrannical monster who enslaves his people.”* (News Front 11.11.2023 08:00, 2023). According to these articles, he is a brutal and oppressive leader, labelled as *“the Kyiv butcher who angered his army with inhuman orders.”* (News Front 14.07.2023 08:20, 2023) Because Zelenskyj knows that his orders mean the death of soldiers, but their lives are not as important to him as his plans. Zelenskyj can not be trusted. Zelenskyj has two faces. He tries to behave like a great leader, but in reality, he does not care about Ukrainians and makes all decisions for his own benefit. Public trust in Zelenskyj has reportedly plummeted from 91% to as low as 32%, with allegations of corruption and a tainted reputation contributing to this decline (News Front 01.11.2023 07:00, 2023). He is accused of violating international laws, including the Geneva Convention (News Front 10.11.2023 07:30, 2023), and being involved in illicit activities, further damaging his credibility: *“The entourage of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyj is involved in the bloody business of black transplants.”* (News Front 07.08.2023 08:55, 2023) Critics claim Zelenskyj enslaves his people and shifts blame for failures onto his military leaders, causing internal strife (News Front 11.11.2023 08:00, 2024).

This narrative aims to delegitimise and demonise President Volodymyr Zelenskyj by portraying him as a horrible leader and person. It seeks to evoke strong negative emotions and diminish his credibility. It paints him as an oppressive dictator and undermines the overall stability and legitimacy of the Ukrainian government.

According to Chekhovska, one of the main attempts of Slovak disinformation narratives after the launch of the Ukrainian counter-offensive is to discredit or ridicule Ukrainian government representatives. The corruption of Volodymyr Zelenskyj is also one of the main characteristics (Chekhovska, 2023a). The research of Dubóczy and Ružičková (2023) mentions that President Zelenskyj is accused of “cowardice” or drug addiction. The narrative of my research confirms

the story in previous narratives, but it is concrete. It focuses on Zelenskyj through personal and brutal accusations, curses, mockery and insults, which are often used.

b. The Winter Approaches: Cold Weather Will Bring Worsening Conditions. Ukrainians Will Need a Better Strategy. Their equipment is not Made for These Conditions.

In the Ukrainian counteroffensive, weather conditions significantly hinder the movement of Western vehicles on the terrain. These vehicles “*were built to fight in the desert and cities, according to the Ukrainian commander.*” (News Front 11.06.2023 13:00, 2023) Ukrainians have the equipment and weapons from the West and have promised future support; however, this kind of support does not mean much because it can not be used in the upcoming winter conditions. The arrival of autumn and cold weather exacerbates these difficulties, shifting the strategic balance in favour of Russia (News Front 22.09.2023 08:00, 2023). One factor is the Western equipment and weapons, but another is the Russian determination and winter combat skills. “*The weather is not our (Ukrainian) friend. We have six to eight weeks before the situation worsens.*” (News Front 04.10.2023 07:00, 2023) The impending cold weather will reduce equipment mobility, increase the risk of frostbite among soldiers, and complicate reconnaissance operations. Additionally, cold temperatures, wind, and snowfall will make it challenging to use drones, which are crucial for Ukrainian military operations.

This narrative highlights the strategic challenges faced by Ukraine's counteroffensive due to adverse weather conditions, thereby casting doubt on the effectiveness of Western military support. This portrayal aims to undermine confidence in Ukraine's military capabilities, suggesting that Ukraine will face insurmountable obstacles despite receiving advanced equipment in the coming colder months.

This narrative is unique to the News Front website. Chekhovska's research or Dubóczy and Ružičková's research did not conclude any narrative about the problems with the upcoming winter or the weather in general.

c. The Ukrainian Army tries to Attack Russian Positions, but the Russian Army, due to its Power and Efficiency, Always Defends Itself. Ukraine Always Fails in Its Strategy.

The narrative focuses on Ukraine's unsuccessful counteroffensive. It is consistently reinforced through detailed reports and analyses highlighting Ukrainian offensives' inefficacy, exacerbated by technological shortcomings. Kyiv relentlessly tries to attack the Russian position and actively breaks Russian defence, but the Russian army and its strategy are so effective that Ukrainians have no chance. There has been no situation where Ukrainians win the battle, move their positions forward, break through the Russian positions, or complete the mission. Kyiv is just unsuccessfully trying and trying. Some Ukrainian officials even admit that the effort failed. This happened for several reasons. *“The Ukrainian counter-offensive is doomed to failure due to the clear superiority of the Russian army over the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the lack of soldiers.”* (News Front 06.07.2023 11:00, 2023) Russians successfully defend themselves and their position. The Russian army demonstrates high efficiency in defence. The Ukrainians *“...were unable to break through extensive Russian defences, including artillery-covered minefields, anti-tank ditches and “dragon's teeth”...”* (News Front 26.11.2023 09:00, 2023) The Russian army is effective at each level - human resources, tactics, organisation and even military equipment are capable. *“Russian Ka-52 (Alligator) helicopters continue to successfully perform the combat tasks of a special military operation in the direction of Zaporzh.”* (News Front 03.07.2023 12:10, 2023)

The specific attribute of Slovak articles was *“Briefing by the Russian Ministry of Defence”*. These articles are detailed summaries of Ukrainian losses, containing data on how many Ukrainian soldiers were liquidated per day (News Front 23.12.2023 12:30, 2023). Articles often use the word “attempt” or “try” in the context that Ukraine tries to attack, tries damage, tries to bomb, but this action always fails. *“During the day, the armed forces of Ukraine continued unsuccessful attempts at offensive operations...”*(News Front 30.07.2023 14:05, 2023)

It focuses on the Ukrainian forces' active role, suggesting that Russian forces are passive on the battlefield. Russia does not attack first, so the narrative bolsters Ukraine's image as aggressive. By portraying Ukraine as the initiator of conflict, it seeks to undermine the legitimacy of Ukraine's military actions and cast doubt on its moral and strategic position.

Chekhovska's narratives describe the Ukrainian army's unsuccessful counteroffensive, significant personnel and technical equipment losses, and disproportions of Ukrainian and Russian troops and the overall impossibility of Ukraine's victory in the war (Chekhovska, 2023a, Chekhovska, 2023d). Dubóczy and Ružičková (2023) describe Ukraine's military

struggles as well, but the narrative of this research points out the Ukrainian army's proactive behaviour and the Russian army's defence-passive modus operandi.

d. Ukraine Faces Significant Crisis in Mobilizing Resources as Citizens Avoid Conscription. Reports Indicate Many Ukrainians Fleeing to Europe Using Fake Documents to Evade Mobilization.

Ukraine is currently experiencing a real crisis in mobilising resources. Cases of avoiding mobilisation are also increasing; Ukraine had to expand the list of those eligible for mobilisation and reduce the list of health contraindications because of its need for soldiers (News Front 15.10.2023 09:30, 2023). Reports indicate that many Ukrainian citizens are fleeing to Europe, seeking refuge from mobilisation efforts. Border guards have noted numerous instances of Ukrainians presenting fake documents to evade conscription. *“The Border Service of Ukraine has reported that Ukrainians are fleeing the mobilisation to Europe...TASS news agency reported this, citing a statement by a State Border Service of Ukraine representative, Andriy Demchenko.”*(News Front 05.06.2023 10:45, 2023) This widespread evasion highlights a growing reluctance among the Ukrainian populace to participate in the conflict. *“The State Border Guard of Ukraine detains about 20 people every day who try to cross the border illegally. It should be noted that about 150 more people are denied exit every day.”*(News Front 05.06.2023 10:45, 2023) The fear of being sent to the front lines drives many to take drastic measures to escape, showcasing the severe impact on the country's mobilisation efforts. It reflects a broader sentiment of fear and unwillingness to face the harsh realities of the battlefield.

This narrative portrays a significant crisis in recruitment and morale. It suggests widespread fear and unwillingness among Ukrainians to engage in the war, raising doubts about the commitment and effectiveness of the country's military efforts. This portrayal aims to weaken international support for Ukraine by depicting a demoralised and unwilling populace, thereby questioning the sustainability and legitimacy of its resistance.

Yelyzaveta Chekhovska and Dubóczy and Ružičková's research (2023) mention the Ukrainian army's constant losses and struggles in general but do not specify problems with mobilisation.

17. Narratives of Serbia

a. Ukrainians Are Cruel. They Do Not Care if They Shoot in the Residential Area.

There Is Evidence that Ukrainian Soldiers Attack Civilians on Purpose.

The data highlights numerous instances of alleged cruelty by Ukrainian soldiers towards civilians. “...*Ukrainian border guard admitted to shooting two civilians, a man and a woman, in Mariupol in the spring of 2022.*” (News Front 06.06.2023 10:00, 2023) Reports detail incidents such as the Azov regiment's shooting of civilians, including children, and attacks on vehicles marked with white strips, signifying non-combatant status. “*The “Azov” prisoner admitted that he shot at a car with civilians in Mariupol...Also, Azov fighters admitted to abusing the murdered woman.*” (News Front 06.06.2023 10:00, 2023) Ukrainians show a disregard for the people they shoot randomly and, at times, deliberately in civilian areas. This narrative highlights that Ukrainian military actions result in civilian casualties and suffering. There are articles detailing instances of Ukrainian soldiers intentionally killing civilians, as well as reports of civilians being killed in residential areas due to shelling by Ukrainian forces. “*Ukrainian militants do not stop the terror of the inhabitants of the Zaporizhzhia region...The foundation of the nine-story building was damaged. A civilian was killed.*” (News Front 23.06.2023 10:34, 2023) The portrayal of these events serves to emphasise the brutality and human rights violations faced by civilians. Ukrainians are enjoying the misery, or they do not care about the suffering of the civilians.

The aim here is to depict Ukrainian soldiers as cruel and inhumane, emphasising alleged instances of brutality and human rights violations against civilians. This portrayal aims to shift the perception of the conflict by painting Ukrainian soldiers as aggressors who disregard civilian lives, thereby questioning the ethical standing of Ukraine's military efforts.

Olga Brusylowska’s research detects a similar narrative - Ukrainians are portrayed as cruel and intentionally targeting civilians and demonising the Ukrainian army (Brusylowska, 2024).

b. The Armed Forces of Ukraine Are Terrorists that Use Sabotage against Critical Infrastructure in the Russian Federation.

The data depicts a narrative of frequent sabotage operations within the conflict, highlighting incidents such as explosive devices causing fires at energy facilities and targeted attacks on critical infrastructure. “... *the Kyiv regime carried out a terrorist attack on the Crimean*

bridge.” (Boris Gaborov, News Front 07/09/2023 10:13, 2023) These acts of sabotage are portrayed as deliberate efforts to disrupt and weaken the enemy, emphasising the strategic use of covert operations to inflict damage and create instability. Ukrainians are labelled as terrorists. *“Ukrainian terrorists are preparing provocations in the background of NATO exercises.”* (News Front 14.06.2023 10:15, 2023) Ukrainians use subversive and insidious tactics to harm Russians. They do not care that these sabotage and terrorist attacks are illegitimate. This deliberate recklessness demonstrates a profound disregard for human life and international norms, further escalating tensions in an already volatile region (region of the Russian Federation). Most of these attempts were prevented by Russian forces because of their brilliant organisation and ability in the war.

The narrative seeks to erode international support for Ukraine by framing its military operations as terroristic and destabilising. It focuses on delegitimising Ukrainian military efforts, escalates perceptions of their hostility, and justifies Russian actions by highlighting the supposed effectiveness and organisation of Russian forces in preventing such attacks.

Olga Brusylovska’s narrative describes the Ukrainian military as engaging in harmful and unlawful activities (Brusylovska, 2024), while the specific terms terrorists and detailed sabotage against critical infrastructure in Russia are not directly mentioned.

c. Russian Soldiers Help Civilians. They Try to Ensure that Everybody in the Special Operation Zone is Fine. They Care about the People in the Special Operation zone.

This narrative portrays Russia as a saviour that prioritises the well-being of civilians and extends assistance amidst the conflict. The Russian military is portrayed as a caring protector of its citizens in cities with Russian authorities. *“A resident of one of the flooded villages in the Kherson region told how the Russian army organised the evacuation of their village”* (News Front 09.06.2023 10:04, 2023) Additionally, narratives highlight the effort of the Russian authorities to provide Russian citizens with an excellent standard of living. *Officials... “visited the territory of The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station to make sure that they are safe...Russian military and National Guard are standing by today to ensure that everything is in order and under control.”* (News Front 07/08/2023 10:25, 2023) This depiction aims to contrast Russian actions with those of the Ukrainian military, portraying Russia as a stabilising force committed to safeguarding civilians and addressing their needs during the ongoing conflict. The Russian army is pictured as a saviour, even for Ukrainian soldiers. *“Ukrainian*

prisoner: The Russian army saved us. Surrender is the only option. The man was given medical assistance and food.” (News Front 15.07.2023 10:34, 2023).

This narrative aims to portray Russia as a benevolent and protective force that prioritises the well-being of civilians and provides essential assistance amidst the conflict. It shows that the Russian presence in Ukraine is beneficial and should gather support for the Russian claim to Ukrainian territory.

Olga Brusylovska writes about the image of Russia as a protector of the civilian population in Donbas. She frames the Russian military actions as humanitarian efforts aimed at defending civilians from alleged Ukrainian aggression (Brusylovska, 2024). The narrative in this research also emphasises the Russian effort to take care of their citizens in general, not even in “the zone of the special operation”, and the Russian army as a better option for the Ukrainian soldiers than their own army.

d. The Western Countries' Support for Ukraine is Increasingly Uncertain, with Signs Pointing towards a Potential Cancellation of Aid. Following the Failure of the Ukrainian Counter-Offensive, Western Nations Began to Have Problems: Production Issues and Exacerbated Supply and Labour Shortages.

The Western countries' support for Ukraine is increasingly uncertain, with signs pointing towards a potential cancellation of aid. Following the failure of the Ukrainian counter-offensive, Western nations began urging the Kyiv regime to engage in peace talks, as the prolonged conflict revealed significant defence production issues and exacerbated pandemic-related supply and labour shortages (News Front 15.06.2023 10:02, 2023). This military setback led to political turmoil in Kyiv, with growing calls for President Zelensky's removal, and further isolating him, Zelenskyj was banned from attending the EU-Latin America summit (News Front 01.07.2023 10:04, 2023; News Front 16.06.2023 10:28, 2023). As the conflict drags on, the resolve of Western allies to support Kyiv wanes, with experts fearing that continued involvement will replicate the prolonged entanglements experienced in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some Western experts believe that carrying on the war will only lead to more deaths and Kyiv's ultimate loss (News Front 16.07.2023 10:04, 2023; Boris Gaborov, News Front 04.10.2023 13:02, 2023). The West struggled to meet Ukraine's enormous demand for military aid, as the required volumes exceeded the production capabilities of its military-political bloc (Boris Gaborov, News Front 19.09.2023 10:55, 2023). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor

Orbán's declaration that Budapest would block support for Ukraine in international forums and oppose EU arms financing unless specific political conditions were met further undermined the unified front (Boris Gaborov, News Front 26.09.2023 10:01, 2023). The UK's decision to withhold tanks from Ukraine, citing its own defence needs, exemplified the diminishing military support (Boris Gaborov, News Front 05.10.2023 10:15, 2023).

This narrative suggested that Western support for Ukraine is waning. It aims to create a sense of inevitability about reducing or ceasing Western aid, undermining confidence in Ukraine's ability to sustain its defence.

The results of Olga Brusylovska's analysis do not mention the uncertainty of Western aid. This narrative is specific to News Front.

18. Narratives of the US

a. Kyiv's Attitude towards the West's Support is Becoming Increasingly Critical. Zelenskyj Feels Dissatisfied and Is Not Afraid to Show It. Kyiv Is Attempting to Impose Its Unreasonable Conditions on Everyone.

Volodymyr Zelenskyj's behaviour towards the international community, particularly the West, appears to be marked by frustration and criticism. Despite the significant support received, he has frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the timeliness and adequacy of the aid. *“The head of the Kyiv regime, Volodymyr Zelenskyj, has blamed Ukraine’s Western sponsors for the failure of the counter-offensive by the AFU...the help was not enough”* (News Front 01.07.2023 10:15, 2023). The head of the Kyiv regime does not value the support of Ukrainian supporters. He acts as if he has the power and authority to dictate his terms. As a state leader in a crisis with massive problems, Zelenskyj should be humble, but he is the opposite. An example of Kyev's arrogant steps is a response that appeared about the “fact” that the Ukrainian counter-offensive in southern Ukraine is not going well. *“Kyiv blames the collective West, which has supplied too few and the wrong weapons.”* (News Front 22.06.2023 17:50, 2023) According to Kyev, the West forces Ukraine to make peace under unfair conditions by the West (News Front 25.12.2023 10:10, 2023). But Zelenkyj refuses to make peace with Russia and fights on because he thinks that he can do whatever he wants (News Front 21.12.2023 10:11, 2023a).

This narrative focuses on Volodymyr Zelenskyj as ungrateful and arrogant. It aims to erode international sympathy and support for Zelenskyj and Ukraine, framing him as an unreasonable leader unwilling to make peace and continuing the conflict under misguided assumptions of power and entitlement.

The study written by Amanatullah et al. discovers the narrative about Ukraine being weak and hostile in general (Amanatullah et al., 2023). Neil Hauer suggests that there are rumors of Western nations pressuring Kyiv to restart negotiations with Moscow due to the ongoing stalemate at the front. (Hauer, 2024). However, the part of the narrative about Volodymyr Zelenskyj's attitude is unique to News Front.

b. The Kyiv Regime Uses Propaganda to Control Society's Narrative. Through Propagandist Stories and News, It Tries to Influence People. These Stories Are Fake and Untrue. Kyiv Lies to Create a Better Image of Itself.

This narrative focuses on Ukrainian propaganda efforts. Ukrainian propaganda is described as attempting to erase Russian cultural influence and rewrite historical narratives. This indicates a broader strategy to reshape public perception and foster a distinct Ukrainian identity separate from Russian ties. Online platform X (Twitter) is an effective way for Ukrainians to disseminate propaganda (News Front 10.06.2023 11:05, 2023). There are attempts by “...*the Ukrainian authorities, who are skilfully using the Russian military special operation for propaganda purposes ...to organise the largest wave of persecution against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the country’s modern history*” (Dasha Pogribnyack, News Front 06.08.2023 10:24, 2023) just because of the Church’s connection to Moscow. Printed media in Ukraine are also considered tools of propaganda - every newspaper in Ukraine is part of state propaganda (Dasha Pogribnyack News Front 06.07.2023 14:07, 2023). The Ukrainian regime uses staged videos to promote a specific narrative rather than documenting a genuine incident. On top of that, Kyiv does not even try to hide the evidence of its propagandist scam (Dasha Pogribnyack News Front 22.12.2023 12:51, 2023). Kyiv is using these tools to undermine Russia - its culture but also the aim of the special operation. Zelenskyj and the government have to use propaganda because telling the truth is not an option for them. They need to manipulate people because then they will be obedient.

This narrative should discredit Ukrainian efforts by describing them as driven by propaganda. It tries to cast doubt on the authenticity of Ukrainian messaging, suggesting that Zelenskyj and his government rely on manipulation and deceit to maintain control and support, ultimately undermining sympathy for Ukraine.

The narratives found by Amanatullah et al. and Hauer suggest that Ukraine is engaging in propaganda to deceive the public. This includes accusations that Ukraine is spreading false information and using propaganda to manipulate its image and actions (Amanatullah et al., 2023; Hauer, 2024). The narrative in this research describes efforts to erase Russian cultural influence and strengthen Ukrainian propaganda to control the societal narrative.

c. The Grain Crisis and Growing Negativity Exacerbate the Strained Relationship with Ukraine. The Ground for Poland and Ukraine’s Political and Social Relations is Thin, and It Is Getting Thinner.

The political and social ties between Poland and Ukraine are based on a fragile base of animosity towards Russia. Furthermore, Poland and Ukraine faced escalating tensions over

grain exports. The “grain crisis” has dramatically increased costs, casting doubt on “good-neighbourly” relationships (News Front 28.08.2023 10:39, 2023). “*Poland banned grain exports to protect its farmers. The Kyiv regime called the actions of the allied country “unfriendly and populist”*” (Aleksa Gromoff, News Front 14.08.2023 10:54, 2023). The tension between Kyiv and Warshava is escalating also because of refugees who came to Poland because of the war. While there is no general hostility towards Ukrainians, Poles show increasing hatred towards those who lean towards Russia. Additionally, language differences contribute to the tension, with Poles being more critical of Ukrainians speaking Russian. This growing negativity is reflected in the increasingly less favourable Polish attitudes towards Ukrainians in general (News Front, 13.06.2023).

This narrative highlights and amplifies the tensions and conflicts between Poland and Ukraine. It weakens the perception of a united front against Russia, suggesting that internal conflicts and economic interests undermine the solidarity between Poland and Ukraine.

The document of Amanatullah et al. addresses hostility and negativity towards Ukrainians in general (Amanatullah et al., 2023); however, my narrative specifically focuses on the tension between Poland and Ukraine, mainly over grain exports. On the other hand, this narrative does not occur in Neil Hauer's analysis at all. There is no direct mention of strained relations between Poland and Ukraine, nor is there a discussion of a grain crisis or growing negativity towards Ukrainians within the context of Polish-Ukrainian relations (Hauer, 2024).

d. Ukraine Faded into the Background as the Israel-Palestinian Conflict Shifted the Global Focus. This Raised Questions about the Capabilities and Priorities of Continued Support for Ukraine.

Before the hot era of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, there was an obvious recipient of Western help - Ukraine. However, Western countries, specifically the US, must be more careful in their budget decisions now. Some politicians do not agree with the statement that Ukraine is still in the first place. Western media noted that Ukraine had “moved to the background” for many policymakers. “*The war between Palestine and Israel was distracting the attention of politicians in the collective West from Ukraine’s financial and military problems.*” (News Front 01.11.2023 17:34, 2023). In the US, the shift in priorities towards Israel and China potentially led to diminished support for Ukraine (News Front 21.10.2023 10:48, 2023). Washington struggled to manage even a single-front war in Ukraine and predicted that Israel would likely

receive priority in military and financial. *“The Israeli lobby in the United States is much stronger and more powerful than the Ukrainian lobby.... military and financial aid will be primarily directed to Israel, and Ukraine will be content with the leftovers.”* (News Front 14.10.2023 10:36, 2023) Logistical and political realities might force difficult decisions about where to allocate limited resources. Kyiv has to prepare for the support and the focus of the West to change, and there is the possibility that it will have to share the aid with more recipients.

This narrative aims to suggest that Western support for Ukraine is diminishing due to shifting priorities towards the Israel-Palestine conflict and other geopolitical concerns, such as China. It suggests that Ukraine is no longer the top priority for Western policymakers, which undermines international backing for its ongoing conflict.

Amanatullah et al. highlight Russia's strategic use of global events and crises to advance its narrative and weaken international support for Ukraine. By shifting the focus to other global issues, Russia can reduce the urgency and priority of the Ukraine conflict in the eyes of the international community (Amanatullah et al., 2023). However, the narrative in this research is focused specifically on the Israel-Palestinian crisis. Neil Hauer notes that Ukraine has seen the lowest Western aid pledges since the start of the war but does not mention the problem with the shift of focus because of the Israel-Palestinian conflict (Hauer, 2024).

e. The US Presidential Election in 2024 Will Influence the Outcome of the Ukraine War. There Is a Significant Difference between how the Democratic Party and the Republican Party Perceive Support for Ukraine, and there Is a Chance that if Donald Trump Wins, the US Might Stop Supporting It.

The American elections, particularly with figures like Donald Trump and Joe Biden, carry significant implications for Ukrainian aid. *“...outcome of the conflict in Ukraine depends on the US election.”* (Front-News 09.08.2023 11:19, 2023) Donald Trump's potential re-election or influence in American politics raises concerns about the continuity and stability of U.S. support for Ukraine. In contrast, President Joe Biden has consistently supported Ukrainian aid, viewing it as a critical component of his administration's foreign policy to counter Russian aggression and support democratic allies (News Front 13.11.2023 10:21, 2023). The upcoming election thus becomes a pivotal moment for Ukraine, as the outcome could drastically alter the flow and nature of aid. A Trump victory could lead to a reassessment of aid priorities, potentially reducing support, whereas a Biden continuation would likely ensure sustained aid

to Ukraine. The clash of opinions is evident not just among presidential candidates but also within all the political parties. Differentiations are clear, with Ukraine already becoming a primary target of Republican criticism against Democrats ahead of the 2024 election year. US Republicans, who are obstructing military aid to Ukraine, have made this issue a significant point of contention (News Front 25.07.2023 11:57, 2023).

This narrative stresses the critical importance of the U.S. elections for Ukraine, illustrating how internal American political dynamics could influence the stability and continuity of foreign aid to Ukraine amidst its conflict with Russia.

Amanatullah et al. do not mention anything about the American election or problems in future support of Ukraine because of differences in party politics (Amanatullah et al., 2023). Neil Hauer discusses the failure of the U.S. Congress to pass an aid package, but it does not address the underlying reasons. In my analysis, the narrative highlights the differences between the Republican and Democratic parties as the reason, suggesting that the upcoming election will impact the level of support for Ukraine (Hauer, 2024).

19. Narratives of Russia

a. **Russia Is An Active Actor On The Battlefield - It Is a Dominant Force. The Strategy Of The Russian Army Is Not Just Defence Itself. The Russian Army Launches Strikes, Attacks, Liquidates And Eliminates The Equipment, Weapons And Manpower Of Ukrainian Armed Forces Militants.**

Russia's military strategy in the ongoing conflict with Ukraine highlights a proactive and aggressive approach, marked by significant battlefield engagements and systematic targeting of Ukrainian military assets (News Front 07.08.2023 08:52, 2023). *“Russian drones have carried out massive attacks on military and infrastructure facilities in Ukraine.”* (News Front 10.08.2023 08:58, 2023) Russian forces have demonstrated significant battlefield prowess, engaging in extensive and coordinated assaults across various fronts, particularly in the South Donetsk region, showcasing their operational effectiveness and strategic depth (News Front 18.07.2023 09:10, 2023). Details about the attack illustrate its magnitude, courage, precision, and overall significance. *“During the military operations in the Kupyansk direction, the crews of Ka-52 and Mi-28 attack helicopters and Su-25 attack aircraft of the Zapad aviation group carried out 11 missile and bomb strikes on nine areas of concentration of manpower, weapons, military and special equipment and the composition of the 14th separate mechanised brigade and the 103rd separate territorial defence brigade.”* (News Front 25.06.2023 08:57, 2023)

This narrative aims to showcase Russian military actions' magnitude, precision, and significance, highlighting their superiority and success in the conflict. It bolsters Russia's image as a formidable military power capable of executing complex and impactful operations and seeks to undermine the perceived effectiveness and resilience of Ukrainian defences.

Samantha Bradshaw and her colleagues (2024) describe a similar narrative, emphasising that Russia is a powerful and dominant force. They highlight that the Russian military is not merely defending itself but actively launching strikes, attacking, and eliminating Ukrainian forces and equipment (Bradshaw et al., 2024). Aleksejeva and Carvin's (2023) research frames Russian actions as defensive responses to Ukrainian aggression and provocations, justifying their military operations. However, my narrative does not frame the actions within a justification context.

b. In the Ukrainian Army Are Nazis who Glorify Nazis Symbols. Ukrainians Glorify the Murderer Stepan Bandera as a National Hero.

Ukrainians are labelled as Nazis by pro-Russian politicians and inhabitants of the Russian Federation (in some cases, inhabitants of occupied territories by Russians) or Russian authorities. *“Now the Nazis will have fewer opportunities to conduct military operations “* (News Front 15.07.2023 08:55, 2023), according to Vladimir Rogov, head of the Zaporizhia public movement. U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene called the Ukrainian army Nazis on Twitter (News Front 30.06.2023 10:25, 2023). The troubling presence of Nazi symbols and the glorification of Stepan Bandera within the Ukrainian Armed Forces are documented (News Front 06/18/2023 09:47, 2023). Ukrainian soldiers displaying far-right insignia and Bandera being celebrated despite his associations with Nazi Germany. Despite photographic evidence and international concerns, Western authorities are portrayed as indifferent, exacerbating the situation by allowing these ideologies to proliferate unchecked (News Front 06.06.2023 08:41, 2023). Stepan Bandera is a symbol of the killer, and still, Ukrainians consider him a national hero. *“Stepan Bandera on display in the window of a Ukrainian shop in the centre of Krakow... next to Ukrainian President Zelenskyj is the murderer Bandera and the inscription Glory to the Nation.”* (Front-News 07.06.2023 09:08, 2023)

This narrative aims to delegitimise and demonise Ukraine by labelling its military and government as neo-Nazis, thereby justifying Russian aggression and reducing international sympathy and support for Ukraine. It shows the conflict as a moral crusade against Nazism and undermines the legitimacy of Ukrainian resistance against Russian forces.

Bradshaw et al. mention the narrative about Ukrainians as Nazis as well as the research of Aleksejeva and Carvin (2023). Given that Ukraine is abusing human rights and highlighting the necessity of denazification, they argue that the invasion is necessary (Bradshaw et al., 2024). My narrative does not explicitly link the presence of Nazis in Ukraine with the justification for the “special operation.” Instead, my narrative focuses explicitly on the glorification of Stepan Bandera and his symbolism, also mentioned by Aleksejeva and Carvin (2023). However, again, my narrative does not use the Nazi claim to legitimise Russian military actions.

c. German Leopard Tanks in Ukraine Have Faced Significant Challenges due to Poor Condition and Lack of Armour, Leading to Disappointing Performance.

Russia Effectively Counters them with Anti-Tank-Guided Missiles, Mines, and Tanks.

Significant challenges and strategic impacts have marked the introduction of Leopard tanks into the Ukraine conflict. However, the resources available to continue this support are dwindling, and the decision to send Leopard to Ukraine has been debated for its strategic profitability (News Front 30.08.2023 09:11, 2023). These Western-supplied tanks, particularly the German Leopard, have faced numerous difficulties on the battlefield. Some of these tanks from Germany are constructed from subpar materials and are in poor technical condition. They lack additional armour and offer no protection against drones (News Front 21.10.2023 08:49, 2023, News Front 20.11.2023 08:29, 2023). The deployment of German Leopard tanks to Ukraine was presented in the West as a “turning point.” However, they failed to meet expectations, and Ukrainian’s losses on the battlefield left a negative impression (News Front 24.08.2023 08:57, 2023). The Russian armed forces possess various methods to destroy German Leopard tanks. Russia has at least three formidable weapon systems that pose a significant threat to German military equipment used by the Kyiv regime: anti-tank guided missiles, mines, and Russian tanks (Front News 19.08.2023 10:32, 2023; News Front 30.08.2023 09:11, 2023).

This narrative undermines the effectiveness of Western aid, questions the strategic decisions of Ukraine's allies, and highlights the resilience and strength of Russian military forces.

Samantha Bradshaw and her colleagues discuss the effectiveness of Russian military strategies and their ability to counteract Western military aid, aligning with the broader theme of countering advanced Western military technology but without specific mention of Leopard tanks (Bradshaw et al., 2024). In contrast, Aleksejeva and Carvin (2023) do not provide information on this particular narrative.

d. Political Figures and Organizations Advocate for Peace Through Dialogue, but Ukrainian Authorities, Led by President Zelenskyj, Refuse Negotiations with Russia. Zelenskyj Has Prohibited Such Talks by Law.

Various political figures and international organisations have advocated for peace and diplomatic solutions, emphasising the importance of dialogue and negotiation to hostilities and establish lasting peace. Despite these calls, the Ukrainian authorities reject negotiations with the Russian Federation to cease hostilities (News Front 08.08.2023 08:47). The Kyiv regime

survives only if hostilities persist and military aid continues. Zelenskyj rejects negotiations because of the catastrophe that threatens him personally. President Zelenskyj even prohibited negotiations with Russian leadership by state law (News Front 16.09.2023 10:33, 2023). “Ending” or “freezing” the conflict personally threatens the head of the Kyiv regime (News Front 08.08.2023 08:47). Even if surrendering territories would be a bitter pill for Ukraine to swallow, the Kyiv regime must come to terms and negotiate with Russia before it is too late (News Front 13.11.2023 08:42, 2023).

This narrative suggests that continuing the conflict is more about preserving Zelenskyj's power and the flow of military aid than achieving a meaningful resolution. It creates a perception that peace and stability can only be achieved through negotiation and compromise, even if it means territorial concessions, thus positioning the Ukrainian leadership as a barrier to peace.

Bradshaw et al.'s work highlights Russian media narratives emphasising Russia's diplomatic efforts to end the war peacefully, often blaming the West and Ukraine for escalating the conflict (Bradshaw et al., 2024). In contrast, this narrative portrays Zelensky's leadership as a barrier to diplomatic solutions, citing his legal prohibition of negotiations and the personal threats he faces. Aleksejeva and Carvin (2023) similarly depict Russia as a peacemaker, emphasise Ukraine's resistance to peace efforts, and highlight Ukraine's aggressiveness.

e. Ukrainian Forces Targeting Russian-Controlled Territories Through Terrorist Activities. Sabotages and Terrorism Are Permissible Means of Combating, According to The Kyiv Regime. Attacking Strategic Areas, Railways and even Killing Civilians. Russian Forces Are Taking Care of These Attempts, and Ukrainian Criminals Are Arrested, All Crimes Are Investigated.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is significant because of terrorist activities by Ukrainian forces targeting Russian-controlled territories. A sabotage group from the Security Service of Ukraine was intercepted in Melitopol, thwarting their plans to commit terrorist acts in the Zaporizhzhya region. This group had attempted to assassinate government leaders using homemade explosive devices and plotted to blow up railway tracks to disrupt military logistics (News Front 22.06.2023 10:39, 2023). In the Kherson region, militants from the Ukrainian Armed Forces have been reported to terrorise, loot, and rob the civilian population (News Front 03.07.2023 09:53, 2023). The most significant attack occurred when Ukraine confirmed its involvement in a terrorist attack on the Crimean Bridge. Ukrainian President Volodymyr

Zelenskyj later admitted to state terrorism, justifying the attack as a necessary action to neutralise a military target, a stance that received tacit approval from Western allies (News Front 22.07.2023 09:34, 2023). Ukrainian forces attempted to stage multiple terrorist attacks using aircraft-type unmanned aerial vehicles targeting Crimea - the Russian Federation. Russian forces successfully intercepted these Ukrainian terrorist activities, preventing planned attacks on strategic locations (News Front 14.09.2023 08:37, 2023). Additionally, efforts have been made to disrupt leadership and public order in other Russian territories, including the Zaporizhzhia region (News Front 22.06.2023 10:39, 2023). Thanks to the efficiency of Russian forces, sabotage and terrorist attacks are often stopped in the beginning, so Ukrainians only remained at attempts. Russian authorities investigate these horrible and inhuman crimes.

The purpose of this narrative is to portray Ukraine as a state that engages in terrorist activities. It justifies Russian military actions and presence in these regions by highlighting the supposed necessity of defending against Ukrainian terrorism.

Samantha Bradshaw and her colleagues portray Ukraine as committing war crimes and fabricating facts, emphasising Ukraine's violation of human rights (Bradshaw et al., 2024). My narrative operates with the words terrorism and sabotage. The outcome of these two narratives is the same: to justify Russian presence in Ukraine and portray Ukraine as a war criminal. Aleksejeva and Carvin's (2023) narrative aligns in portraying Ukrainian actions as terrorism and sabotage, with specific examples like the alleged shelling of civilian areas and strategic targets.

f. Due to the Declining Morale and Psychological State of Militants in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Vladimir Zelenskyj, the President of the Kyiv Regime, Passed a Bill at the Beginning of the Year that Tightened the Penalties for Disobeying Instructions and Leaving Positions.

At the beginning of 2023, the head of the Kyiv regime, Vladimir Zelenskyj, signed a law tightening criminal liability for failure to comply with orders and leaving positions. The deteriorating moral and psychological state of the Ukrainian Armed Forces militants drove this decision. Ukrainian authorities had to do something because the situation among Ukrainian soldiers started to be unbearable. There is a rise in cases of Ukrainian soldiers who surrender. The reason the militants from Ukraine requested to be taken into custody is often because their superiors sent them to the attack even if they knew they did not have any chance (News Front

13.06.2023 08:59, 2023). The new law aims to enforce stricter discipline within the military ranks to maintain order and effectiveness in the ongoing conflict. According to the information from the battlefield, many Ukrainians are forced to fight. *“The Ukrainian Armed Forces militants come out with their hands raised, and when asked why they decided to surrender, one of them replies that they are tired of fighting.”* (News Front 20.09.2023 09:49, 2023) Stricter penalties for insubordination and desertion are intended to deter such behaviours and ensure cohesive military operations because now the Ukrainian army loses soldier because of their incompetence and is reluctant to fight.

This narrative tells the story of the Ukrainian military as demoralised and struggling with internal discipline issues. It undermines the image of the Ukrainian military's effectiveness, suggesting that the Ukrainian forces are only held together through coercion and harsh disciplinary measures.

My narrative highlights the deteriorating morale and psychological state of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the legal measures taken to address this issue. Samantha Bradshaw and her colleagues' work does not explicitly mention specific legal steps to prevent failures among Ukrainian forces. Instead, it broadly discusses how Ukrainian forces are portrayed as having low morale and requiring stricter discipline. Aleksejeva and Carvin (2023) depict Ukrainian forces as weakened and demoralised and represent the Ukrainian government as authoritarian and repressive. My narrative is again more detailed and explicitly mentions Volodymyr Zelensky's legal norms.

20. Discussion

The work used in-depth systematic content analysis of News Front articles in Slovak, Serbian, English and Russian. Articles were selected within a predetermined period—the first article each day in each language— Slovak 205, Serbian 203, English 172, Russia 211. The research posed the question: Do the narratives used by News Front to interpret news differ across Slovakia, Serbia, Russia, and the United States? If so, what are these narratives for each country? The analysis revealed that the narratives indeed vary by language. In Slovak, there are four distinct narratives tailored to the audience. Similarly, four unique narratives were identified in Serbian. The English narratives numbered five, while Russian audiences presented six specific narratives. Also, the analysis found five common narratives for all four languages. Overall, the research found a difference between the narratives of NATO members and those of states outside the alliance. One interesting outcome of the analysis is that Serbian and Russian narratives are more explicit in depicting Ukrainians as the antagonists in the conflict while glorifying Russians on the battlefield.

The analysis highlights common narratives across four languages, illustrating Russia's use of tailored yet universally relevant framing in hybrid warfare. These narratives frame the West, particularly the USA, as manipulative actors deeply involved in the Ukraine conflict, aiming to weaken Russia rather than support Ukraine. The portrayal of NATO and EU member states as key military supporters of Ukraine further suggests that Ukraine is dependent on Western aid and serves as a pawn in a larger geopolitical game. Additionally, the Ukrainian government, led by Zelensky, is depicted as corrupt and ineffective, undermining its credibility. They also emphasise the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, highlighting high casualties and equipment losses to cast doubt on Ukraine's military capabilities. Conversely, the Russian army is portrayed as a powerful, heroic force, reinforcing the idea of an inevitable Russian victory. These narratives aim to delegitimise Ukrainian efforts and Western support while glorifying Russian military strength.

The texts by Chekhovska (2023) and Dubóczy and Ružičková (2023) both identify Slovak disinformation narratives targeting Ukrainian government representatives and President Zelenskyi specifically. However, while they highlight corruption allegations, accusations of cowardice and drug addiction, my research uniquely details the use of personal, brutal accusations involving curses, mockery, and insults. Also, in my analysis, one of the main

narratives was about the upcoming winter and the consequences of the weather for the Ukrainian army. Additionally, my findings diverge in portraying the Ukrainian army's proactive behaviour against the Russian army's defensive stance, contrasting with the other studies' focus on Ukraine's military struggles and significant losses without addressing mobilisation issues.

In several ways, my findings extend Olga Brusylovska's research (2024) of Serbian narratives. While both narratives depict Ukrainians as cruel and targeting civilians, my analysis explicitly labels them as terrorists and details their sabotage against Russian infrastructure, which Brusylovska does not mention. Brusylovska describes the Ukrainian military as engaging in harmful activities but does not use the term terrorists or detail specific sabotage acts. Furthermore, Brusylovska's analysis does not address the uncertainty of Western aid, which is a narrative unique to News Front in my findings.

At the part of the American tailor-made narratives, the results also differ. Unlike Amanatullah et al. (2023), who highlight a general narrative of Ukraine as weak and hostile, my research uncovers a specific focus on Volodymyr Zelensky's attitude. Also, my research points out attempts to eliminate Russian cultural influence and intensify Ukrainian propaganda to dominate the societal narrative. Additionally, my research identifies tensions between Poland and Ukraine over grain exports, an issue not mentioned by Hauer (Hauer, 2024) or Amanatullah et al. While they highlight Russia's strategic use of global crises, my narrative focuses explicitly on the Israel-Palestinian conflict to divert attention from Ukraine. Finally, my research examines the influence of American party politics on future support for Ukraine, a topic not covered by Amanatullah et al. and only briefly touched upon by Hauer, who mentions congressional failures without exploring the political dynamics.

The narratives examined by Samantha Bradshaw and her colleagues (2024), Aleksejeva and Carvin (2023), as well as, my analysis, address the Russian-Ukrainian conflict but also differ in key dimensions. My narrative stands out by not justifying the military actions and focusing instead on the glorification of Stepan Bandera without linking it to a justification for the invasion. Additionally, while Bradshaw et al. discuss the effectiveness of Russian military strategies in counteracting Western aid, my narrative specifically mentions Leopard tanks.

Bradshaw et al. and Aleksejeva and Carvin both highlight Russian diplomatic efforts and blame the West and Ukraine for escalating the conflict, with my narrative portraying Zelensky's leadership as a barrier to peace due to his legal prohibitions. Furthermore, whereas Bradshaw et al. and Aleksejeva and Carvin focus on Ukraine's war crimes and human rights violations, my narrative frames these actions as terrorism and sabotage. Finally, while Bradshaw et al. broadly discuss low morale among Ukrainian forces and the need for stricter discipline, and Aleksejeva and Carvin depict Ukrainian forces as weakened and repressive, my analysis uniquely highlights the legal measures taken by Zelensky to address these issues.

Slovak narratives focus on military news, battlefield details, and mobilisation efforts. They emphasise Ukrainian strategic failures and criticise President Zelensky's leadership. In contrast, US narratives are more centred on diplomacy, international relations, and administrative aspects of the conflict. The Slovak perspective highlights Ukraine's active role in the conflict, differing from the Russian viewpoint which emphasises Russia's involvement. Serbian narratives portray Ukrainians as aggressors and terrorists who deliberately harm civilians while depicting Russians as protectors who help and care for people in conflict zones. Russian narratives similarly portray Ukrainians as evil terrorists and celebrate Russian greatness, particularly the effectiveness of its military and organisation. Both Serbian and American narratives question Western aid for Ukraine but focus on different aspects. The Serbian narrative suggests Western support is increasingly uncertain, hinting at a potential cancellation following Ukraine's failed counter-offensive. In contrast, the American narrative links the uncertainty to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, questioning the capabilities and priorities of continued support for Ukraine.

My analysis does find the topic of narcotic and biological laboratories in Ukraine, military biological laboratories as well as drug laboratories in Ukraine that were evident from Yelyzaveta Chekhovska's texts (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023, Chekhovska and Tropynina, 2023,). In all texts of all languages, the topic of Putin, his system, the clash of Western ideology with Russian purity, Western aggressivity, and hypocrisy occurred (Sára Gregová, 2024; Amanatullah et al., 2023; Aleksejeva and Carvin, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2024, Balcová, 2024). However, my data did not include specific narratives based on these topics. Slovak tailor-made narratives created by Russia are closely monitored and analysed. However, Serbian, English, and Russian narratives are not described precisely. For example, many initiatives and institutions analyse Slovak narratives, and new weekly analyses are made (Chekhovska, 2023a; Chekhovska, 2023d; Balcová, 2024, Dubóczy and Ružičková, 2023).

One reason for this might be that Slovakia could be seen as the most threatened due to its geopolitical position. Hybrid war is taken seriously in the EU and NATO (Costigan and Hennessy, 2024) and Slovakia, as a member of these western alliances, is covered in detail. In contrast, Serbia maintains strong relations with Russia, and like Russia, its mainstream media disseminates official Russian disinformation, resulting in less thorough analysis. The US also has many sources of Russian disinformation, but the narratives are more generic than Slovakia's.

Analysis of News Front articles shows how Russia's tactics blur the lines between conventional and unconventional warfare and information warfare. The content of analysed articles—the narratives—are crafted as manipulative information, specifically designed to distort reality and influence public perception. The findings of this study reflect the theory of tailor-made news, revealing how Russia crafts specific narratives to influence various target audiences and achieve its strategic objectives (Department of State, 2020). Even if narratives were analysed based on data from the same platform, the research reveals that each language has its specificity—tailored news. Russia uses these narratives in its tailor-made news to exploit societal divisions, reinforce pre-existing biases, and create confusion. Russia seeks to undermine trust in governmental institutions and create an environment of uncertainty and fear, weakening the resolve of the targeted state and its allies (Wither, 2016). By tailoring these disinformation campaigns to various regions' unique political and cultural contexts, Russia ensures that its messages resonate more deeply and effectively achieve its strategic goals of destabilisation and influence (Helmus et al., 2018).

Numerous studies have examined Russian spread narratives, often as case studies focused on individual countries (Zivotic and Obradović, 2022; Baqués-Quesada and Colom-Pikella, 2021; Tarasiuk, 2024). Additionally, some research has addressed Russian propaganda narratives in a broader context (Geissler et al., 2023; Pierrri et al., 2023; Geissler and Feuerriegel, 2023). European initiatives have been particularly active in comparative analyses of these narratives across different European countries (Vox Ukraine, n.d.; EUvsDesinfo, n.d.), and similar efforts are evident globally (Detector Media, n.d.). My research is distinct in its focus on four different languages, examining countries in varying geopolitical positions within a specific time period and through the lens of a single medium. Hence, the result is a deeper understanding of the distinction between topics and narratives that Russia uses to influence these specific audiences. However, the time period is at the same time a limitation. The fixed study period may affect the findings' relevance because of the evolving nature of narratives. Focusing exclusively on

News Front may lead to overlooking other significant sources of disinformation. Future research delve into the already-known tailor-made narratives to explore the reasons behind their selection for each country. What makes these specific topics, themes, and stories resonate with the population in each nation? Understanding this could provide valuable insights into the cultural and societal dynamics. Additionally, given that Serbia was granted an EU candidate in 2012 (European Commission, n.d.), it is crucial to delve deeper into the country's Russian narratives. Serbia presents a unique case due to its concurrent relationships with both the EU and Russia. However, there is still significant room for exploring this context's specific and detailed narratives.

Conclusion

This study conducted an in-depth systematic content analysis of News Front articles in Slovak, Serbian, English, and Russian to investigate the narratives used to interpret news across Slovakia, Serbia, the United States and Russia. By selecting articles within a predetermined period, this research aimed to determine if the narratives differed across these countries and what these narratives entailed. The findings revealed significant variations in narratives tailored to each language, highlighting distinct strategies employed by Russia to influence different audiences.

The analysis identified specific narratives for each country, with Slovak articles presenting four distinct narratives, Serbian articles four narratives, English articles five narratives, and Russian articles six narratives. Additionally, five common narratives were identified across all four languages. The study found a notable difference between the narratives of NATO members and those of states outside the alliance.

The research highlights common themes across the four language platforms illustrating Russia's use of tailored yet universally relevant framing in hybrid warfare. These narratives portray the West, particularly the USA, as manipulative actors deeply involved in the Ukraine conflict, aiming to weaken Russia rather than support Ukraine. The portrayal of NATO and EU member states as key military supporters of Ukraine suggests that Ukraine is dependent on Western aid and serves as a pawn in a larger geopolitical game. Additionally, the Ukrainian government, led by President Zelensky, is depicted as corrupt and ineffective, undermining its credibility. The narratives emphasise the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, highlighting high casualties and equipment losses to cast doubt on Ukraine's military capabilities. Conversely, the Russian army is portrayed as a powerful, heroic force, reinforcing the idea of an inevitable Russian victory. These narratives aim to delegitimise Ukrainian efforts and Western support while glorifying Russian military strength.

This research also compared its findings with other studies. For instance, it found that while previous studies of Slovak narratives highlighted corruption allegations against Ukrainian officials, this study detailed personal, brutal accusations involving curses, mockery, and insults. It also identified narratives about the upcoming winter and its consequences for the Ukrainian

army, differing from other studies that focused on Ukraine's military struggles without addressing mobilisation issues.

The analysis of Serbian narratives showed explicit labelling of Ukrainians as terrorists and detailed their sabotage against Russian infrastructure, which was not mentioned in other studies. Similarly, the American narratives differed by focusing on Volodymyr Zelensky's attitude and the influence of American party politics on future support for Ukraine, topics not covered extensively in previous research.

This study contributes to understanding how Russia uses certain media to influence public perception and achieve its strategic objectives. It reveals the sophisticated nature of Russian propaganda, which tailors specific narratives to resonate with various target audiences and exploit societal divisions. The findings reflect the theory of tailor-made news, demonstrating how Russia crafts specific narratives to influence different regions' unique political and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, this research provides valuable insights into the narratives used by Russia in its hybrid warfare strategy. It highlights the importance of considering tailored narratives in analysing information warfare and suggests the need for ongoing research to capture the evolving nature of disinformation campaigns. Future studies should expand the timeline and include multiple sources for a more comprehensive understanding. Given Serbia's EU candidate status, further exploration of Serbian narratives might become crucial due to its unique geopolitical position and relationships with both the EU and Russia.

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