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Propaganda at Play: A Thematic Analysis of Belarusian Media Narratives in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the narratives employed by Belarusian propaganda during the Russo-Ukrainian War, examining 1,750 news items from Belarusian state media sources and the pro-government *Telegram* channels from September 1st to November 30th, 2022. The research employs the Looqme methodology, a robust content analysis approach that involves systematically coding and categorizing textual data to identify key thematic blocks and subthemes. The findings reveal a carefully crafted narrative aimed at demonizing Ukraine, promoting alternative realities, and glorifying military service. By portraying the West as a source of instability and danger, the propaganda fosters public support for Belarus's stance on the conflict. Additionally, the study exposes the use of historical manipulation and reinforcement of negative portrayals through quoting Russian authorities. The study highlights the role of language manipulation and selective presentation of events in shaping public opinion, providing valuable insights for countering disinformation and fostering objective reporting in times of conflict.

KEY WORDS

Belarus. Belarusian Propaganda. Information Warfare. Media Narratives. Russo-Ukrainian War.

1 Introduction

“If you’re not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.”

Malcolm X

“The propagandist’s purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human.”

Aldous Huxley, 1937 *“The Olive Tree”*

The Russo-Ukrainian War has not only intensified the geopolitical tensions within the region, but has also led to the proliferation of state-sponsored propaganda, shaping public opinion and fostering division.¹ In this context, Belarus has emerged as a significant player, with its media landscape reflecting the country’s complex political and social dynamics.² The Belarusian media landscape has been dominated by state-controlled outlets, allowing the government to wield significant influence over public opinion.³ Belarus, situated to the west of Russia along Ukraine’s extensive northern border, is one of Moscow’s staunchest allies. It facilitated Russia’s initial invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 by enabling Kremlin forces to enter from the north.⁴ Concerns persist that Belarus may once again serve as a launchpad for offensives or that its military will join the conflict.⁵

Belarusian social cohesion is vulnerable to Russian influence in the information space and information warfare. With 60% of Belarusian TV content produced in Russia, citizens are exposed to the same messages as Russians, increasing their sense of belonging to the “Russian world”.⁶ Russian media is generally trusted more than Belarusian media, both official and independent.⁷ Specifically, the media promotes narratives that amplify the government’s achievements while undermining its opponents.⁸ Belarus is dominated by state-controlled media, with limited freedom of speech and press under Alexander Lukashenko’s leadership.⁹ The country ranks 153rd (Russia 155th) out of 180 in the *World Press Freedom Index* (2022).¹⁰ Regional media in Belarus face challenges adapting to online formats, and the state-owned company *Beltelecom* maintains an internet monopoly, blocking anti-regime information.¹¹ The Belarusian KGB monitors online communications, with most internet users in Minsk. After the

¹ HANLEY, H., KUMAR, D., DURUMERIC, Z.: *A Special Operation: A Quantitative Approach to Dissecting and Comparing Different Media Ecosystems’ Coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War*. [online]. [2023-02-26]. Available at: <https://www.hanshanley.com/files/ICWSM_Eluosi.pdf>.

² See: KOROSTELEVA, E., PETROVA, I.: Power, People, and the Political: Understanding the Many Crises in Belarus. In *Nationalities Papers*, 2022, p. 1-13. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.77>>.

³ See: GREENE, S.: You Are What You Read: Media, Identity, and Community in the 2020 Belarusian Uprising. In *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2022, Vol. 38, No. 1-2, p. 88-106.

⁴ See: MARPLES, D.: Russia’s War Goals in Ukraine. In *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Vol. 64, No. 2-3, p. 207-219.

⁵ GLOD, K.: *The War in Ukraine One Year on: Will Belarus Join the Battlefield?* [online]. [2023-03-11]. Available at: <<https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-war-in-ukraine-one-year-on-will-belarus-join-the-battlefield/>>.

⁶ BOULÈGUE, M., LUTSEVYCH, O., MARIN, A.: *Civil Society Under Russia’s Threat: Building Resilience in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova*. [online]. [2023-03-22]. Available at: <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-11-08-civil-society-russia-threat-ukraine-belarus-moldova-boulegue-lutsevych-marin.pdf>>.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ See: STEBLYNA, N., DVORAK, J.: Reflections on the Independent Mass Media of Post-Soviet Countries and Political Competitiveness. In *Politics in Central Europe*, 2021, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 565-588.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 570.

¹⁰ *RSF’s 2022 World Press Freedom Index: A New Era of Polarisation*. [online]. [2023-03-11]. Available at: <<https://rsf.org/en/rsf-s-2022-world-press-freedom-index-new-era-polarisation/>>.

¹¹ DVORAK, J.: Belarus. In MERSKIN, D. (ed.): *The Sage International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA : SAGE Publications, 2019, p. 160-162.

August 2020 elections, the regime targeted both foreign and local journalists, detaining and withdrawing accreditations.¹² Additionally, state-controlled outlets tend to portray Western countries as hostile forces that threaten Belarusian national identity and sovereignty.¹³

Media freedom in Belarus has been suppressed since President Lukashenko's election in 1994, with laws limiting journalists' rights and with media restrictions.¹⁴ In order to maintain power, Lukashenko's administration has manipulated elections, detained presidential contenders to weaken the political opposition, and enacted strict internet regulations to quell public and civil society demonstrations.¹⁵ In February 2022, amid escalating tensions in Ukraine, Lukashenko solidified his control by passing a constitutional referendum. This granted him lifelong immunity from prosecution, extended his time in office, and allowed the permanent stationing of Russian troops and nuclear weapons in Belarus.¹⁶ In March 2023, President Putin announced Russia's plan to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. A storage facility will be completed by July, with an Iskander short-range missile system already transferred. Russia has also helped Belarus modify 10 aircraft for nuclear warhead capabilities and will begin pilot training soon. Belarus has had no nuclear weapons on its territory since the early 1990s.¹⁷

Belarusian authorities maintain tight control over media, with independent journalists and bloggers facing harassment and detentions. The state actively targets media outlets and individuals, blocking websites and tightening digital media control through legislation. As independent news sources dwindle, more Belarusians turn to social networks.¹⁸ In 2019, Belarus was listed among the 10 most censored countries by the Committee to Protect Journalists.¹⁹ The situation worsened after the August 2020 election, leading to increased harassment and imprisonment of journalists.²⁰ The government also oversees ISPs, information security standards, digital surveillance, and top-level domains, according to *Freedom House's Freedom on the Net report*.²¹ Amid the political crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the government escalated arbitrary arrests of media workers, bloggers, activists, and users, imposing harsh sentences on detainees. Security forces used raids, torture, and forced confession videos to suppress critical speech.²² The war and international sanctions led the government to intensify its propaganda and manipulation of the information landscape. IREX's *Media Sustainability Index* also deemed Belarusian media as unsustainable and anti-free due to government obstruction.²³ Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko fully supported Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, permitting Russian forces to use Belarusian infrastructure and territory.

¹² DVORAK, J.: Belarus. In MERSKIN, D. (ed.): *The Sage International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA : SAGE Publications, 2019, p. 160-162.

¹³ See: DOVBYSH, O., LEHTISAARI, K.: Local Media of Post-Soviet Countries: Evidence from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. In *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 2020, Vol. 28, No. 3, p. 335-343. [online]. [2023-03-11]. Available at: <<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/762318>>.

¹⁴ See: RYNG, J., GUICHERD, G., SAMAN, J. A. et al.: Internet Shutdowns. In *The RUSI Journal*, 2023, Vol. 167, No. 4-5, p. 50-63.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ LJUNGGREN, D.: *Putin Says Moscow to Place Nuclear Weapons in Belarus, US Reacts Cautiously*. [online]. [2023-03-27]. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-moscow-has-deal-with-belarus-station-nuclear-weapons-there-tass-2023-03-25/>>.

¹⁸ *10 Most Censored Countries*. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://cpj.org/reports/2019/09/10-most-censored-eritrea-north-korea-turkmenistan-journalist/#9/>>.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ See: MUDROV, S.: "We Did Not Unleash This War. Our Conscience Is Clear". The Russia-Ukraine Military Conflict and Its Perception in Belarus. In *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 2022, Vol. 30, No. 3, p. 273-284.

²¹ *Freedom on the Net 2022, Belarus*. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2022/>>.

²² Ibidem.

²³ *Media Sustainability Index 2019, Belarus*. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-belarus.pdf/>>.

The state-controlled media justified the invasion with various reasons, while opposition media showed pro-Ukraine sentiments.²⁴ Russian and Belarusian state-sponsored propaganda evolved before and after the 2020 presidential election, with significant changes in mechanisms and influence. The ongoing geopolitical struggle for influence in the post-Soviet space played a major role in shaping these changes.²⁵

The presented study seeks to contribute to the literature by conducting a comprehensive content analysis of news items published by Belarusian state information resources and pro-government channels between September 1st and November 30th, 2022. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks provided by propaganda studies²⁶ and media manipulation research²⁷, our analysis will explore the credibility, reliability, and manipulative techniques employed in these news items, as well as their use of hate speech and disinformation.

The purpose of this article is to investigate and analyze the primary narratives employed by Belarusian propaganda during the Russian-Ukrainian War. The article aims to uncover the underlying patterns and strategies used by Belarusian state and pro-government media to shape public opinion and advance their political objectives.

Three research questions derived from the article are:

RQ1. How does the Belarusian state media portray Ukraine and its people in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian War, and what strategies are used?

RQ2. In what ways does the Belarusian state media present the Western countries, and how does this narrative contribute to shaping public opinion and supporting the Belarusian government's stance on the conflict?

RQ3. How does the Belarusian state media's coverage of military successes and losses in the Russian-Ukrainian War impact public perception and support for the government's position in the conflict?

1.1 From Denial to Demonization: The Shift in Belarusian State Media's Coverage of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Belarus has two main national identity projects – the Belarusian national-romantic and the Soviet project, represented by the Conscious and Soviet segments respectively.²⁸ The Belarusian project is pro-European, promoting the Belarusian language and identity, while the Soviet project is nostalgic for the Soviet era and friendly towards Belarusian culture. Additionally, there is a modern Russian project supported by the Russified segment, which opposes Belarusian identity and promotes integration with Russia.²⁹ The pro-European segments tend to be protest-oriented, while the pro-Russian segments support union with Russia and view the US and the EU negatively. Support for the pro-Russian vector has increased by 10% over the past year due to the war and has intensified pro-Russian propaganda, but the choice is not always based on rational factors.³⁰ Integration supporters lack clear understanding and decisive support for state merger.

²⁴ *Media Sustainability Index 2019, Belarus*. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-belarus.pdf>>.

²⁵ See: MANAEV, O., RICE, N., TAYLOR, M.: The Evolution and Influence of Russian and Belarusian Propaganda During the Belarus Presidential Election and Ensuing Protests in 2020. In *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 2021, Vol. 63, No. 3-4, p. 371-402.

²⁶ See: JOWETT, G., O'DONNELL, V.: *Propaganda & Persuasion*. Los Angeles, CA : SAGE Publications, 2019.

²⁷ See: TANDOC, E., LIM, Z., LING, R.: Defining "Fake News" a Typology of Scholarly Definitions. In *Digital Journalism*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 137-153.

²⁸ BIKANAU, P.: *Belarusian Identity in 2022: A Quantitative Study*. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19777.pdf>>.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem.

During the Russia-Belarus negotiations on “further integration” from December 2018 to April 2019, a surge of disinformation emerged. Utilizing framing theory, researchers uncovered how Russian media outlets masqueraded as “objective” regional sources, disseminating pro-integration discourse and advancing their agenda among Belarusian citizens.³¹ The analysis revealed that Russia strategically targeted local levels and leveraged social media to distribute disinformation, filling gaps left by Belarusian authorities. This approach aimed to increase Russia’s popularity within Belarusian regions and challenge the dominant narrative presented by state-owned media.³²

Integration between Russia and Belarus has been heavily promoted by bloggers, rather than pro-Russian journalists.³³ These narratives describe integration as a natural progression in the historical relationship between the two nations, presenting it as advantageous and risk-free for Belarus.³⁴ Benefits are cited across various spheres, including economic, political, military, cultural, and ideological ones. Bloggers argue that integration would bolster Belarusian sovereignty, strengthen its national identity, and replace the ambiguous Belarusian ideology with the concept of the “Russian world”.³⁵

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, surveys by *Chatham House* and other organizations have sought Belarusians’ opinions on Russia’s actions and Belarus’s potential complicity. From March to September 2022, a concerning trend showed a consistently high percentage of Belarusians approving of Russia’s actions, despite most not supporting the “special operation”. For example, a *Chatham House* survey in March found that 28% supported the invasion but didn’t want to participate, while in June, 33% effectively approved of the intervention. Meanwhile, 35% opposed Russia’s actions, and another 8% expressed some disapproval.³⁶ In August, the percentage of Belarusians who fully supported Russia’s military actions in Ukraine increased to 18%, while those who expressed support but with less confidence decreased to 12%. Those who categorically opposed Russia’s military actions remained unchanged at 35%, and those who were unsupportive of the Russian army increased to 10%. Some respondents chose not to answer.³⁷ However, a survey conducted by the Belarusian *Analytical Workshop* in September revealed that 41.3% of Belarusians approved of Russia’s actions against Ukraine, while 47.3% were against them.³⁸

Between January 24th and February 3rd, 2023, a survey was conducted by *Chatham House* with 813 participants. The sample size was adjusted using RIM weighting to reflect the demographic characteristics of the urban population of Belarus, including gender, age, settlement size, and education level. The survey shows that in Belarus, state TV channels remain dominant among urban populations (35%), with higher trust compared to other sources.³⁹ Non-state media have a 20% audience share, while 26% use both types. State and non-state media form two distinct information echo chambers in Belarusian society, with mutual distrust. This

³¹ See: NAVUMAU, V.: Integration or Absorption? Analyzing the Propagandist Narratives Generated by Russia-Backed Online Regional Media in Belarus. In *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 2020, Vol. 28, No. 3, p. 461-484. [online]. [2023-03-03]. Available at: <<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/762317>>.

³² Ibidem.

³³ NAVUMAU, V., ILYINA, A., SHMATSINA, K.: The Stalemate of Deepened Integration: Analysis of the Russian Anti-Belarus Disinformation Campaign in 2019. In *Democracies in a Digital Era: Legal, Political and Security Challenges*, 2020. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://www.weasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WEASA-2019-publication.pdf#page=3/>>.

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ *Eight Survey Wave*. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://belaruspolls.org/wave-8/>>.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ *Belarusians Are Increasingly Hesitant on the Issue of War and Sympathize with Russia? Results of a New Survey and the Opinion of a Sociologist*. [online]. [2023-03-15]. Available at: <<https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/23189.html/>>.

³⁹ *Fourteenth Survey Wave*. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-14/>>.

distrust is more pronounced among non-state media audiences, who largely distrust television and have reduced trust in “new neutral media” since November 2022.⁴⁰

It's worth considering that many Belarusians may be hesitant to express their true opinions due to fear of repercussions if their views deviate from the official narrative. Additionally, a significant proportion of people (ranging from 5.8% to 24% at different times) may be hesitant to answer politically sensitive questions for various reasons.⁴¹ As a result, even with data from independent institutions, it is challenging to determine how accurately these surveys reflect the views of Belarusians, particularly regarding their stance on Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine and whether they approve of the destruction caused. It is uncertain whether a significant number of Belarusians are unaware of the catastrophe's full extent or whether they actively support it.

In April 2022, during the third month of Russia's brutal full-scale war against Ukraine, even as the world was exposed to shocking photos and videos of the Russian army atrocities in the towns of Kyiv Oblast, 41% of Belarusians remained confident that Russian soldiers were not using weapons against Ukrainian civilians.⁴² More notably, by August, this percentage remained unchanged, as evidenced by the *Chatham House* survey results.⁴³ This detachment from reality could be considered paradoxical if it were not for the systematic efforts of Russian and Belarusian propaganda, aimed at denying Russia's war crimes, among other things. Propaganda has a significant impact on Belarusians, and the reasons for believing in it may vary. Some factors contributing to the influence of propaganda include: limited access to alternative sources of information, historical and cultural ties with Russia, fear and insecurity.

2 Methodology

This research employs a comprehensive methodology to investigate the narratives in Belarusian propaganda by analyzing 1,750 news items from Belarusian state media and the pro-government *Telegram* channels between September 1st and November 30th, 2022. The research included analyses of news and publications from three Belarusian state information resources (*ONT* and *STV* television channels and the *BelTA* news agency) and two pro-government telegram channels (*Yellow Plums (Zheltye Slivy)* and *ATN News*).

The *LOOQME Mention Monitoring and Analysis Service* monitored the messages using a two-step algorithm, enabling analysis from both official media sources and *Telegram*. Technical information and simplified tone were provided for each publication. The platform's analysis view was customized for the research period and search parameters. The qualitative content analysis, as described by Krippendorff⁴⁴, was utilized to examine textual material in-depth, particularly from the perspective of the context in which the chosen categories were presented. The selection of texts for analysis was facilitated by the *LOOQME* platform for media analysis and media ecosystems. Factors taken into account included reliability, presence of credible or non-credible sources of information, manipulative headlines, manipulation of emotions in news items, existence of hostile language, and the presence of fake information in the news. This study adhered to established methodologies for content analysis and best practices for identifying propaganda in media content, as outlined by Jowett & O'Donnell.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Fourteenth Survey Wave*. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-14/>>.

⁴¹ *Belarusians Are Increasingly Hesitant on the Issue of War and Sympathize with Russia? Results of a New Survey and the Opinion of a Sociologist*. [online]. [2023-03-15]. Available at: <<https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/23189.html/>>.

⁴² *Eight Survey Wave*. [online]. [2023-03-25]. Available at: <<https://belaruspolls.org/wave-8/>>.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ See: KRIPPENDORFF, K.: *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA : SAGE Publications, 2018.

⁴⁵ See: JOWETT, G., O'DONNELL, V.: *Propaganda & Persuasion*. Los Angeles, CA : SAGE Publications, 2019.

The quantitative analysis examined the number of mentions and their dynamics, while the qualitative analysis focused on the indicators of mentions by tone, role, topic, and media visibility. On the basis of the results of the analyses (between September 1st and November 30th, 2022) – based on titles, keywords and thematic connotations – all the analyzed content (n=1750) has been segmented into four thematic blocks, namely Portrayal of Ukraine (n=731), Western Threat (n=269), Belarus as a Peaceful Country (n=255), and Military Successes and Losses (n=495). This segmentation allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the various narratives actively employed by Belarusian propaganda during the monitoring period.

Figure 1 shows the main propaganda narratives from the content analysis. They are grouped into the 4 key themes that we identify in the analysis (per period).

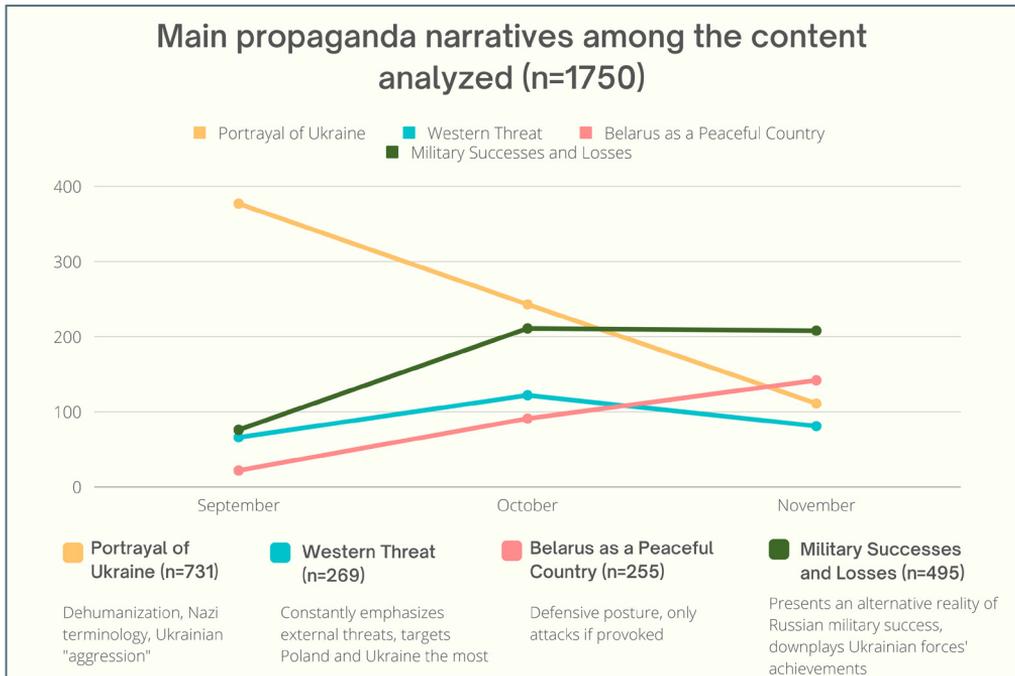


FIGURE 1: Main propaganda narratives among the content analyzed (n=1750)

Source: own processing, 2023

3 Results

3.1 The Portrayal of Ukraine

Belarusian state media present a carefully crafted portrayal of Ukraine that demonizes and dehumanizes its people, while legitimizing Belarus's stance on the conflict. The content analysis identified 731 materials within this narrative theme, encompassing news reports and articles in the media, as well as news reports on the *Telegram* channels. The main subthemes include:

1. Dehumanization of the Ukrainian Government and Some Ukrainians (n=202, except for the categories related to Nazi terminology, which are quite extensive and are presented in a separate topic group): Belarusian state media systematically dehumanizes Ukrainians by employing Russian "newspeak" terms like "terrorists", and "punishers". They utilize disinformation and manipulation to reinforce this hostile language. For instance, Belarusian

propaganda frequently spreads hoaxes about Ukraine’s alleged intention to use a “dirty bomb”⁴⁶ despite being a non-nuclear state.

2. Use of Nazi Terminology (n=58): State media draws parallels between the Ukrainian government, certain Ukrainians, and far-right extremist ideologies, using Nazi terminology to create a negative image of Ukraine in the minds of the Belarusian audience.
3. Ukraine as the “Aggressor” (n=92): Belarusian state media portrays Ukraine as an aggressive, hostile nation by emphasizing alleged acts of aggression, particularly towards Belarus and its allies. It focuses on incidents of violence or unrest in Ukraine, presenting them as evidence of the country’s inherent instability.
4. Incompetent and Corrupt Ukrainian Government (n=145): Media sources emphasize the perceived incompetence or corruption of the Ukrainian government, arguing that they are incapable of governing effectively. This narrative serves to justify intervention or support for separatist movements.
5. Victimhood (n=234): Belarusian media portrays Ukraine as a victim of Western manipulation or geopolitical games, undermining its sovereignty and autonomy in decision-making.

Belarusian state-controlled media also reinforces these narratives by quoting Russian authorities and experts who support these negative portrayals. For example, during the monitoring period, a Belarusian television channel *ONT* quoted the speaker of the Russian State Duma, Volodin, comparing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to the terrorist Osama bin Laden due to the supposed “nuclear terror”.⁴⁷

A quantitative content analysis of this narrative theme on the platforms analyzed by month is shown in Figure 2.

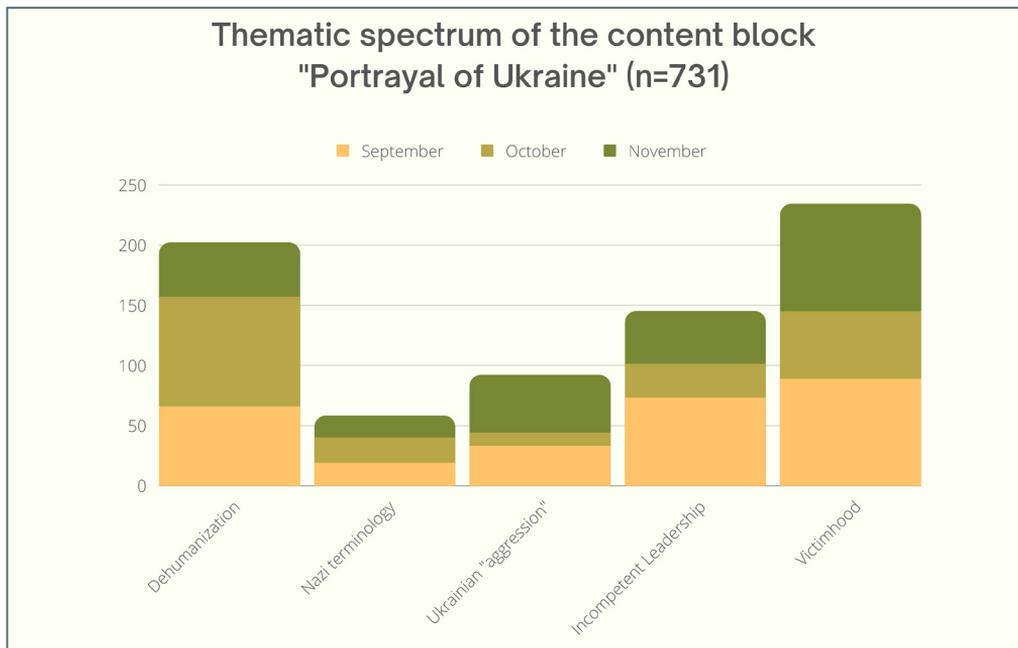


FIGURE 2: *Thematic spectrum of the narrative theme “Portrayal of Ukraine” (n=731)*

Source: own processing, 2023

⁴⁶ *The Russian Defense Ministry Revealed Details of a “Dirty Bomb” Provocation Being Prepared by Kyiv.* [online]. [2023-03-12]. Available at: <<https://ont.by/news/v-minoborony-rossii-rasskazali-detali-o-gotovyashejsya-provokacii-kieva-s-podryvom-gryaznoj-bomby/>>.

⁴⁷ *Volodin Compared Zelensky to the Terrorist Bin Laden.* [online]. [2023-03-24]. Available at: <<https://ont.by/news/volodin-sravnil-zelenskogo-i-terrorista-ben-ladenu/>>.

3.2 The Western Threat

The Western threat narrative is a critical component of Belarusian state media's coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Through this narrative, the media seeks to shape public opinion by portraying the West as a source of instability and danger. The content analysis identified 269 materials within this theme, which can be divided into five key subthemes:

1. External Threats (n=62): Belarusian state media emphasizes external threats to the country's sovereignty and security, often targeting Poland and Ukraine as the primary sources of danger. This narrative aims to justify the Belarusian government's actions and instill a sense of urgency in defending the nation against perceived foreign adversaries.
2. NATO Expansion (n=19): The media highlights the expansion of NATO and its military activities near Belarus's borders, portraying it as a direct threat to the country's security and stability. This narrative serves to rationalize the Belarusian government's efforts to strengthen its military capabilities and forge closer ties with Russia, a fellow opponent of NATO expansion.
3. US Influence (n=66): Belarusian state media frequently focuses on the alleged nefarious influence of the United States in the region, accusing it of orchestrating regime change attempts and supporting opposition movements in Belarus and other countries. This narrative seeks to delegitimize pro-democracy movements and justify the government's crackdown on dissent.
4. EU Interference (n=33): The media emphasizes the alleged meddling of the European Union in the internal affairs of Belarus and its neighbors, accusing it of promoting instability and division in the region. This narrative aims to discredit the EU's policies and interventions, portraying them as harmful to the interests of Belarus and its people.
5. Western Manipulation of Ukraine (n=89): Belarusian state media portrays Ukraine as a victim of Western manipulation or geopolitical games, further undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and autonomy in decision-making. This narrative serves to justify Belarus's support for Russia in the conflict and discredit the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government.

Belarusian propaganda perpetuates the notion of being “surrounded by enemies”, instilling fear in its citizens regarding external threats.⁴⁸ The most aggressive attacks are directed at Poland and Ukraine, followed by the Baltic countries, the United Kingdom, and the United States. For example, Belarusian media published articles alleging Poland's intention to deploy US nuclear weapons on its territory.⁴⁹ To vilify Poland, Belarusian propagandists frequently distort historical events, alleging that the Polish Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) deliberately perpetrated a genocide against Belarusians during World War II.⁵⁰

The Western threat narrative in Belarusian state media encompasses various subthemes that collectively portray the West as a source of instability and danger in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. This narrative aims to shape public opinion, justify the government's actions, and emphasize the need to “protect” Belarus's interests in the face of perceived external threats.

A quantitative content analysis of this narrative theme on the platforms analyzed by month is shown in Figure 3.

⁴⁸ *The Special Services Will Never Let This Happen. Poland Sought to Seize Power in Belarus, Now It Is Awaiting a Summons to an International Court.* [online]. [2023-03-10]. Available at: <<https://ctv.by/specsluzhby-etogo-nikogda-ne-dopustyat-polsha-stremilas-zahvatit-vlast-v-belarusi-teper-eyo-zhdyot/>>.

⁴⁹ *Lavrov Said That Poland's Desire to Host U.S. Nuclear Weapons Is Alarming.* [online]. [2023-03-10]. Available at: <<https://ont.by/news/lavrov-zayavil-chto-zhelanie-polshi-razmestit-u-sebya-yadernoe-oruzhie-sshavyzyvaet-trevogu/>>.

⁵⁰ *The Grodno Region Is Not Only Germans, It Is Also the Armia Krajowa. An Expert on the Genocide Case.* [online]. [2023-03-10]. Available at: <<https://www.belta.by/regions/view/grodnenskiy-region-eto-ne-tolkonemtsy-eto-i-armija-krajova-spetsialist-o-dele-po-genotsidu-532267-2022/>>.

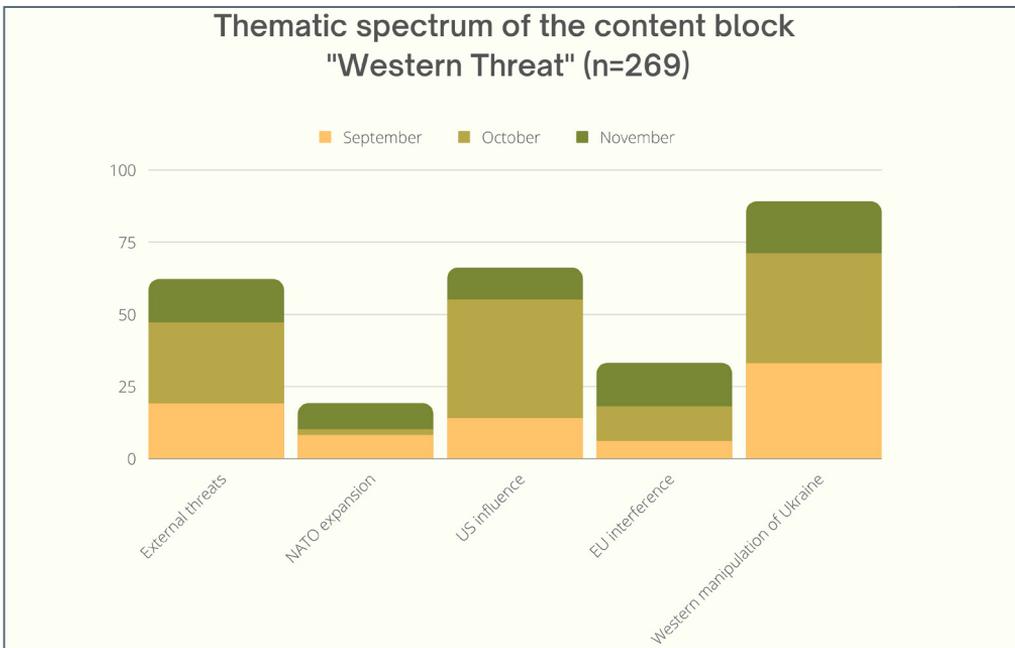


FIGURE 3: Thematic spectrum of the narrative theme "Western Threat" (n=269)

Source: own processing, 2023

3.3 Belarus as a Peaceful Country

This narrative portrays Belarus as a responsible, non-aggressive actor in the conflict, aiming to shape public opinion and justify the government's stance. The content analysis identified 255 materials within this theme, which can be divided into five key subthemes:

1. **Defensive Posture (n=66):** Belarusian state media emphasizes the country's defensive posture, asserting that it only resorts to military action when provoked or threatened. This portrayal presents Belarus as a responsible and restrained actor on the international stage, focused on preserving regional peace and stability.
2. **Mediator Role (n=51):** The media highlights Belarus's role as a mediator in peace talks and negotiations between conflicting parties, such as the *Minsk Protocol*. This emphasis on diplomacy underscores the country's commitment to resolving disputes and conflicts peacefully.
3. **Cooperation with International Organizations (n=34):** Belarusian state media underlines the country's willingness to work with international organizations, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), to address regional security concerns and promote peace and stability.
4. **Promotion of Regional Peace Initiatives (n=38):** The media frequently covers Belarusian-led or supported peace initiatives, such as the Eastern Partnership, which fosters closer ties between the European Union and its Eastern neighbors, including Belarus, Ukraine, and other countries in the region. This narrative highlights Belarus's commitment to maintaining a peaceful and cooperative regional environment.
5. **Emphasizing the Human Cost of Conflict (n=66):** Belarusian state media regularly report on the negative impact of war on civilian populations, including the plight of refugees and displaced persons, as well as the destruction of infrastructure and cultural heritage. This coverage underscores the importance of pursuing peaceful solutions to conflicts and avoiding unnecessary violence and suffering.

Belarusian state media continually reassures its citizens that the country will not engage in military aggression unless provoked. However, this reassurance is not without manipulation, as Belarusian officials and media dismiss the possibility of military aggression in the absence of “provocations”⁵¹, which are, in fact, staged by the republic itself.⁵² The narrative theme of “Belarus as a Peaceful Country” in Belarusian state media encompasses various subthemes that collectively portray Belarus as a responsible and peace-loving actor in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

A quantitative content analysis of this narrative theme on the platforms analyzed by month is shown in Figure 4.

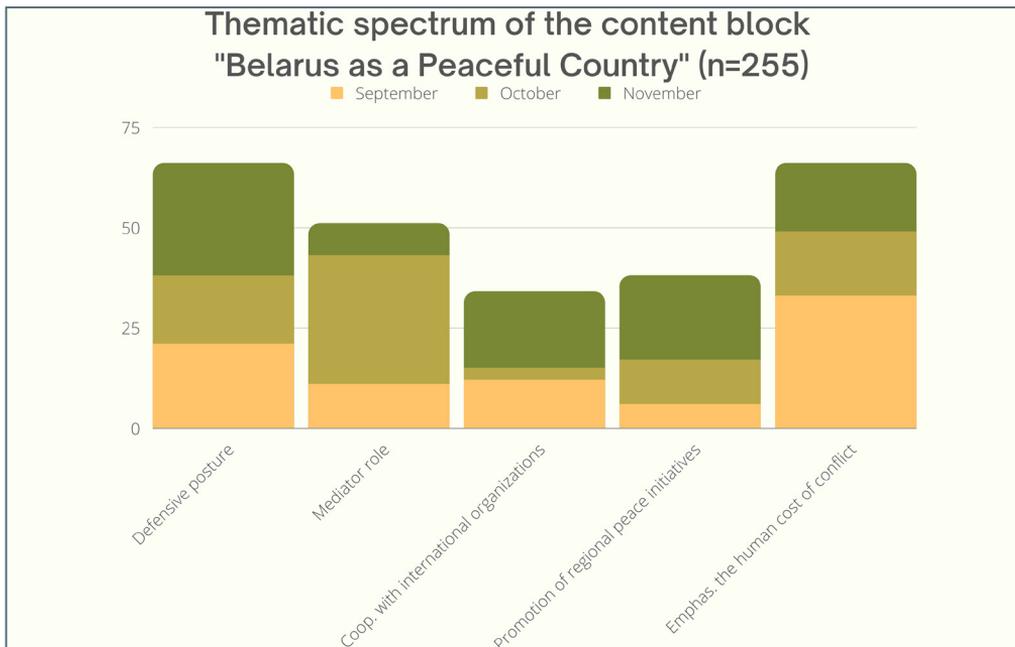


FIGURE 4: Thematic spectrum of the narrative theme “Belarus as a Peaceful Country” (n=255)

Source: own processing, 2023

3.4 Military Successes and Losses

The narrative theme of military successes and losses in the Belarusian state media focuses on the Russo-Ukrainian War and plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and supporting the Belarusian government’s stance on the conflict. The content analysis identified 495 materials within this theme, which can be divided into five key subthemes:

1. Alternative Reality of Russian Military Success (n=77): Belarusian state media presents an alternative reality where Russian forces achieve significant successes against Ukraine, downplaying or ignoring the achievements of Ukrainian forces. This narrative aims to legitimize Russia’s actions and maintain public support for Belarus’s backing of Russia.

⁵¹ Lappo About the Situation on the Ukrainian Border: Any Provocation in Our Direction Will Be Adequately Responded to. [online]. [2023-03-10]. Available at: <<https://www.belta.by/society/view/lappo-o-situatsii-na-ukrainskoj-granitse-na-ljubuju-provokatsiju-v-nashu-storonu-budet-adekvatnyj-otvet-532292-2022/>>.

⁵² Dzermant: We’re Not Preparing for Any Attack, We’re Preparing so We Won’t Be Caught off Guard and We Can Fight Back. [online]. [2023-03-10]. Available at: <<https://ctv.by/dzermant-my-ne-gotovimsya-ni-kakomu-napadeniyu-gotovimsya-chtoby-nas-ne-zastigli-vrasplohi-my/>>.

2. Downplaying Ukrainian Forces' Achievements (n=101): The media tends to minimize the successes of the Ukrainian military and exaggerate the setbacks they experience. This narrative serves to demoralize the Ukrainian side and reinforce the perception that the conflict is unwinnable for Ukraine.
3. Emphasizing Russian Military Might (n=55): Belarusian state media frequently highlights the strength and capabilities of the Russian military, portraying it as an unstoppable force destined to prevail in the conflict. This narrative seeks to bolster public confidence in the Russian-led military campaign and justify Belarus's continued support for it.
4. Underreporting Losses and Setbacks (n=204): The media downplays the losses and setbacks experienced by Russian and Belarusian forces, avoiding reporting on the full extent of casualties and difficulties faced on the battlefield. This narrative aims to maintain public support for the war effort and prevent the emergence of anti-war sentiment.
5. Heroism and Sacrifice (n=58): Belarusian state media emphasizes the heroism and sacrifice of Russian and Belarusian soldiers fighting in the conflict, portraying them as valiant defenders of their homeland and the Slavic brotherhood. This narrative serves to rally public support for the war effort and create a sense of national pride and unity.

A quantitative content analysis of this narrative theme on the platforms analyzed by month is shown in Figure 5.

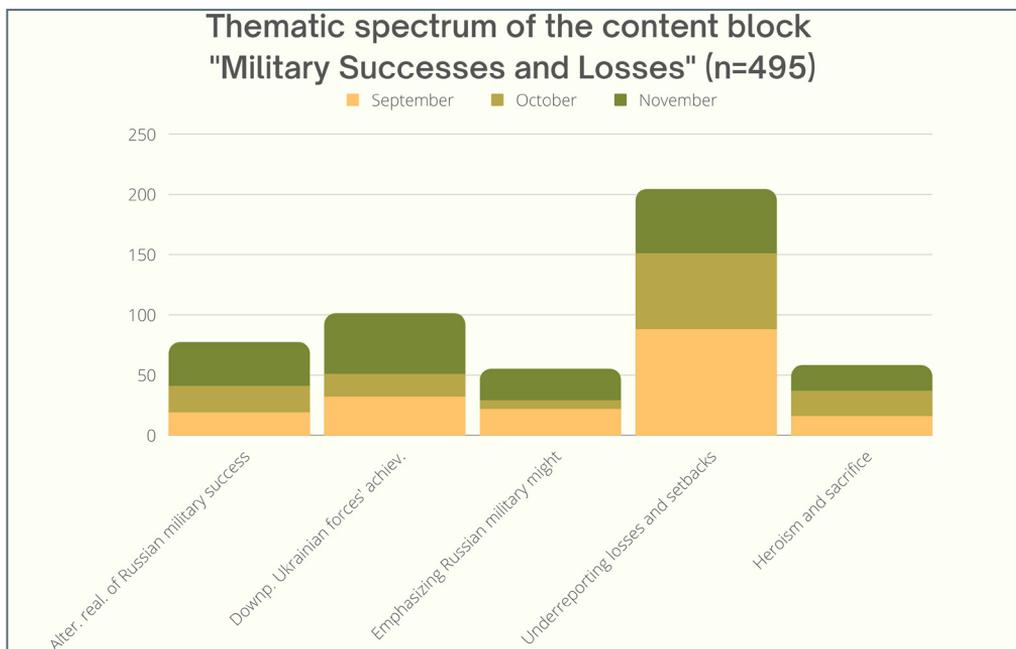


FIGURE 5: Thematic spectrum of the narrative theme "Military Successes and Losses" (n=495)

Source: own processing, 2023

The narrative theme of "Military Successes and Losses" in Belarusian state media encompasses various subthemes that collectively seek to shape public opinion about the Russo-Ukrainian War and its implications for Belarus. This narrative aims to legitimize the conflict, maintain public support for Belarus's backing of Russia, and rally the nation around the war effort. By selectively emphasizing Russian victories⁵³ and minimizing Ukrainian

⁵³ Russian Defense Ministry: Four Ukrainian Ammunition Depots Destroyed in One Day. [online]. [2023-03-10]. Available at: <<https://ont.by/news/minoborony-rossii-za-sutki-unichozhenno-chetyre-ukrainskih-sklada-boepripasov/>>.

achievements⁵⁴, the media supports the Belarusian government's position⁵⁵, and reinforces the notion of Russia as a powerful ally in the face of the regional conflict.

4 Discussion

This study aimed to explore the primary narratives employed by Belarusian state and pro-government media during the Russo-Ukrainian War and understand the underlying patterns and strategies used to shape public opinion and advance their political objectives. Our analysis led to the identification of several key themes in the Belarusian media landscape. In this discussion section, we delve deeper into these themes, reflecting on their implications for the understanding of the Belarusian propaganda apparatus.

The portrayal of Ukraine in Belarusian state media is characterized by demonization and dehumanization, achieved through the strategic use of language, selective presentation of events, and reinforcement of negative portrayals by quoting Russian authorities and experts. By presenting Ukraine as a nation filled with "Nazis", "terrorists", and "punishers", Belarusian propaganda seeks to legitimize its own stance in the conflict and shape public opinion. This portrayal is not only detrimental to Ukraine's international image, but also serves to foster animosity between the two nations, potentially exacerbating the ongoing conflict (RQ1).

The Western threat narrative is a critical component of Belarusian state media's coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War. By portraying the West as a source of instability and danger, the media aims to shape public opinion in favor of the Belarusian government's actions. This narrative encompasses several subthemes, including external threats, NATO expansion, US influence, EU interference, and Western manipulation of Ukraine. By perpetuating the notion of being "surrounded by enemies", Belarusian propaganda instills fear in its citizens, further justifying the government's actions and policies (RQ2).

The narrative theme of Belarus as a peaceful country portrays the nation as a responsible, non-aggressive actor in the conflict. This theme aims to shape public opinion and justify the government's stance by emphasizing the country's defensive posture, its role as a mediator, cooperation with international organizations, promotion of regional peace initiatives, and the human cost of the conflict. However, the reassurance provided by this narrative is not without manipulation, as the Belarusian government stages "provocations" to justify its military actions.

In the context of military successes and losses, the Belarusian state media selectively emphasizes Russian victories, while minimizing Ukrainian achievements, aiming to legitimize the conflict and maintain public support for Belarus's backing of Russia. The media often downplays the losses and setbacks experienced by Russian and Belarusian forces, avoiding reporting on the full extent of casualties and difficulties faced on the battlefield. This selective coverage serves to rally public support for the war effort, create a sense of national pride and unity, and reinforce the notion of Russia as a powerful ally in the face of the regional conflict (RQ3).

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the intricate narratives and tactics used by Belarusian state media during the Russo-Ukrainian War, offering a comprehensive understanding of how disinformation is spread during times of conflict. By revealing four key thematic blocks, namely

⁵⁴ NATO Officer: A "Logistical Nightmare" for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. [online]. [2023-03-10]. Available at: <<https://ont.by/news/officer-nato-dlya-vs-u-nastupil-logisticheskij-koshmar/>>.

⁵⁵ Matvienko: The Main Priorities of the Presidents of Belarus and Russia Are National Interests. [online]. [2023-03-10]. Available at: <<https://www.belta.by/politics/view/matvienko-glavnye-priority-prezidentov-belarusi-i-rossii-natsionalnye-interesy-531928-2022/>>.

The Portrayal of Ukraine, Western Threat, Belarus as a Peaceful Country, and Military Successes and Losses, our research helps to uncover the underlying patterns and strategies employed to shape public opinion and advance political objectives.

The demonization and dehumanization of Ukraine, along with the emphasis on the Western threat, serve to legitimize Belarus's stance in the conflict and rally public support for its policies. The portrayal of Belarus as a peaceful, responsible actor serves to justify the government's actions and reassure the public of the country's commitment to regional stability. Selective coverage of military successes and losses, on the other hand, aims to maintain public support for Belarus's support of Russia and to bolster Russia's image as a powerful ally in the face of the regional conflict.

As we continue to navigate an increasingly polarized media environment, it is crucial to understand and address the tactics used by state-controlled media to manipulate public opinion, and foster a more accurate and nuanced understanding of complex geopolitical issues. By recognizing and confronting these manipulative narratives, we can empower ourselves to make informed decisions and contribute to a more transparent, balanced media landscape.

5.1 Limitations and Further Research

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. Initially, the study concentrated on a particular timeframe (September 1st to November 30th, 2022), which might not comprehensively represent the development of narratives used by Belarusian state media over the entire course of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Additionally, the analysis was limited to three Belarusian state information resources and two pro-government *Telegram* channels, potentially excluding other sources that may also disseminate disinformation and propaganda. Further research could expand the scope of the study by examining a broader range of media sources and analyzing a more extended time frame, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the narratives and strategies used by Belarusian propaganda. Additionally, comparative research could explore the similarities and differences in propaganda tactics employed by various state actors involved in the conflict, illuminating the ways in which different countries utilize media manipulation to advance their political objectives. Finally, future research could also investigate the impact of these propaganda narratives on public opinion and behavior, providing insights into the effectiveness of these tactics in shaping the beliefs and actions of the target audience. This information would be valuable in informing strategies for countering disinformation and promoting objective, fact-based reporting in times of conflict.

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