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Russian Disinformation and Propaganda Campaign Justifying the Annexing of Crimea in 2014

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Abstract

On February 26, 2014, the Russian Federation annexed the Crimean Peninsula. Russia's unlawful actions have been condemned in the international arena, but this has in no way changed the decision of the authorities in the Kremlin. In order to prove the legitimacy of the occupation of Crimea, the Russian Federation launched a disinformation and propaganda campaign aimed primarily at the internal arena, i.e. at the Russians. The aim of the article is to analyze selected statements by Vladimir Putin regarding the annexation of Crimea and to try to answer the question of whether disinformation and internal propaganda were effective in convincing Russians that the occupation of Crimea was an act of restoring historical justice. For the purposes of the article, research methods appropriate for international relations were used.

Keywords: propaganda, disinformation, Crimea, Russian Federation, Ukraine, annexation

Российская дезинформационно-пропагандистская кампания по оправданию аннексии Крыма в 2014 году

Аннотация

26 февраля 2014 г. Российская Федерация аннексировала Крымский полуостров. Противоправные действия России осудило международное сообщество, что никоим образом не изменило решения властей в Кремле. Чтобы доказать легитимность оккупации Крыма, Российская Федерация начала дезинформационно-пропагандистскую кампанию, направленную, прежде всего, на внутреннюю арену, то есть непосредственно к россиянам. Цель статьи — проанализировать отдельные высказывания президента Владимира Путина по поводу аннексии Крыма и попытаться ответить на вопрос, была ли эффективна дезинформация и внутренняя пропаганда, чтобы убедить россиян в том, что оккупация Крыма была актом восстановления исторической справедливости. Для целей статьи использованы методы исследования, соответствующие наукам о международных отношениях.

Ключевые слова: пропаганда, дезинформация, Крым, Российская Федерация, Украина, аннексия

Introduction

Every ideology, to be successful, must have a wide audience. The Crimean Peninsula is a place around which Russia creates ideology, history, and myths, especially after its annexation in 2014. By using propaganda referring to its history or roots, the Russian Federation (hereafter – the Russian Federation) not only wanted to justify the annexation of the peninsula but also to demonstrate its own power, role, and importance in the international arena. Therefore, in the context of perpetuating the myth that Crimea is “Russian land”, the most appropriate argumentation is to go back to historical roots, referring to historical events, but in a manipulated way, leaving out those that are not desired by the Russian power (e.g. the history of the Crimean Khanate).

The main purpose of creating such an ideology is to justify Russia’s occupation of the peninsula. As part of the disinformation campaign, manipulated information was disseminated among the Russian public. The information was given in such a way that the occupation of the peninsula looked not

like an annexation, but the establishment/restoration of historical justice, and as a great historical event that the Russian people had been striving for many years. Moreover, the Russian society was encouraged to participate in events that had a propaganda character, which helped to check the effects of the campaign.

The purpose of this article is to analyse selected statements made by Vladimir Putin in the context of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and to attempt to assess how strongly Kremlin propaganda influenced Russian public opinion. Thus, for the purposes of this article, Vladimir Putin's most important statements were analysed, which included speeches made before the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on 18 March 2014 (Обращение Президента Российской Федерации, 2014), at a press conference on 17 April 2014 (Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным, 2014) and at a meeting with ambassadors on 1 July 2014 (Выступление В. В. Путина на Совещании послов и постоянных представителей, 2014). The *article* focuses only on the historical aspect, as it is very important, due to the fact that *historical* facts are the easiest to manipulate. The article omits geopolitical, economic and social themes, which were also included in the Russian president's statements and interviews, as they require separate attention and in-depth analysis. For the purposes of the article, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

- Vladimir Putin and his entourage are the main promoters of imperialist ideas.
- Vladimir Putin's statements have a key influence on the formation of public opinion among the country's own citizens.
- By means of the manipulation of historical facts, the authorities of the Russian Federation are disinforming their own society.
- In order to achieve their goals, Vladimir Putin, his entourage, and the media are using tried and tested methods and techniques known back in Soviet times in order to maximise the credibility of what they proclaim.

The methodological framework of the research conducted is provided by methods appropriate to the international relations. The following research methods were used during the writing of the article: analysis and synthesis, the observational and the comparative methods.

Analysis of the literature

The literature on the subject is very extensive. After 2014, a large number of monographs, academic articles, analyses, and reports have appeared both in Ukraine and abroad relating to propaganda in general and to Russian propaganda regarding the annexation of Crimea. In 2020, the US State Department issued a report entitled “Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem” (2020). This is an extremely important document in terms of deepening our understanding of Russian propaganda and disinformation. It builds on other publicly available reports and provides an overview of Russia’s disinformation and propaganda system. The report concludes that the Russian disinformation and propaganda system is a set of official, intermediary, and unassigned communication channels, and platforms that Russia uses to create and reinforce false narratives. The system consists of five main pillars: official government communications, state-sponsored global news, cultivation of proxy sources, social media weaponization, and disinformation using cyberspace.

In the context of the issue of the annexation of Crimea, the following works are noteworthy: “Як працює путінська пропаганда” by Mykola Davydyuk. In his work, the author considers who Putin’s propaganda is aimed at and how it works, who is responsible for propaganda on a technical level and how exactly propaganda journalism works, who is Russia’s allies in ideological matters. The author seeks answers to the question of whether the information war can be resisted and what are the best methods to fight Kremlin propaganda (Давидюк, 2016). Georgiy Pochepcov is the author of several monographs on hybrid information warfare and propaganda. The work “Сучасні інформаційні війни” (Почепцов, 2016b) systematically outlines the history of the origins and development of information warfare methodology and reveals the difference between the US, British and Russian models. In the monograph “Від покемонів до гібридних війн: нові комунікативні технології XXI століття” (Почепцов, 2017), the author focuses on modern technologies of hybrid information warfare, especially the Internet. In his work, the author’s thesis is that old technologies built the vertical of power or religion, where the voice from below was not heard from above, it is modern technologies that make it possible for everyone to be

heard. The monograph “Смисли і війни: Україна і Росія в інформаційній і смисловій війнах” (Почепцов, 2016а). It was devoted to information and information-sense wars. In his monograph, the author develops the thesis that information warfare operates with facts, as a result of which unreliable facts reach us. And sensory warfare operates with interpretations, based on an existing model of the world, and facts can change at the level of interpretation. The author analyses these two phenomena using the example of Russia’s information-sense war against Ukraine after 2014.

Among English-language sources, the work of Marcel H. Van Herpen – “Putin’s Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy” (Van Herpen, 2016) – is noteworthy. Marcel H. Van Herpen argues that the Kremlin’s propaganda offensive is a carefully crafted strategy, implemented and tested over the past decade. Initially conceived as a tool to strengthen Russia’s soft power, it has quickly become one of the main instruments of Russia’s new imperialism, reminiscent of the apogee of the Cold War. Van Herpen shows that the Kremlin’s propaganda machine not only plays a key role in its ‘hybrid war’ in Ukraine but also has broader international objectives, targeting, in particular, Europe’s two leading countries, France and Germany, to create a geopolitical triangle, consisting of the Moscow-Berlin-Paris axis, aimed at reducing the influence of NATO and the United States in Europe. Van Herpen shows how the Kremlin has built up a range of soft power instruments and turned them into effective weapons in its new information war against the West. Another of his no less important works is “Putin’s wars” (Van Herpen, 2015). Van Herpen argues that while the leaders of the European Union countries had been practicing wishful thinking for years, strenuously trying to see Russia as a democratic state and Vladimir Putin as a European politician, Russian imperialism was growing in strength.

In the monograph, “Russian Hybrid Warfare’ and the Annexation of Crimea The Modern Application of Soviet Political Warfare” (DeBenedictis 2022), its author Kent DeBenedictis argues that despite claims that Russia’s actions in Crimea in 2014 have been labeled ‘hybrid warfare’ in the West, the annexation of Crimea should be seen as the Russian Federation’s modern application of historic Soviet warfare practices – overt and covert informational, political and military tools used to influence the actions of foreign governments and societies. DeBenedictis compares the use of Soviet

practices, such as the use of propaganda, disinformation, front organizations, and rigged political processes, in Crimea in 2014 with the 'Prague Spring' of 1968 and the earliest stages of the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The book shows that the operation that has inspired discussions of Russian "hybrid warfare" is in fact a modern adaptation of Soviet political warfare tools, rather than the invention of a new type of war.

Unfortunately, this is not the entire body of literature depicting Russian propaganda, its instruments and tools, and its effects. The literature on the subject is so broad and includes not only scholarly monographs but also various types of analyses and reports. In this context, noteworthy are reported by the Centre for Eastern Studies and the Polish Institute of International Affairs, as well as articles by OKO.press, Politico, and others. It can certainly be said that most of the publications referring to the 2014 events in Crimea also address, to a greater or lesser extent, the issue of Russian propaganda and disinformation.

Putin's main arguments justifying the annexation of Crimea

In February 2014, the Russian Federation, in order to prove the legitimacy of its appropriation of the Crimean peninsula, began and in fact intensified its information and propaganda campaign. The main source of propaganda and disinformation in the context of the annexation of Crimea was the President of the Russian Federation, the State Duma, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and senior politicians, but also the media, which provide information mainly from the Kremlin and not from objective sources of information. And the target group chosen by the propaganda for its potential effectiveness was the entire Russian society. No less important was the targeting of certain statements and appeals to the pro-Russian part of Ukrainian society; to a lesser extent, the propaganda concerned the world community.

On March 1, 2014, the Federation Council authorized Russian President Vladimir Putin to use troops on Ukrainian territory to protect Russian citizens. In his speech to the senators, the president asked for the right to use armed forces in Ukraine until the socio-political situation in that country normalized (Владимир Путин внёс обращение в Совет Федерации, 2014). A few hours earlier, both houses of parliament had proposed the president

take such an initiative, and even earlier, the Crimean authorities had asked the Russian president with a similar request (Ключкин, Дмитриев, 2014).

On March 18, 2014, the political elite of the Russian Federation gathered in Georgiyevski hall, in the great Kremlin palace, to listen to the President's special statement. Vladimir Putin entered to the sounds of fanfare (Urzędowska, 2014). Russian President wandered around the history of his country, which gave a fascinating insight into his way of thinking and politics (Kalb, 2015, p. 40, 42). The statement was interrupted several times with thunderous applause, which gave this event a very emotional tone. The speech was broadcast all over the world and introduced the diplomacy of uncertainty on the international arena (Kalb, 2015, p. 40).

It was the first significant statement by Putin after the occupation of Crimea. It was clear from this speech that the annexation of the peninsula in the historical context was completely justified, because Russia and Crimea are united by common history and a common pride:

In the Crimea, everything is literally permeated with our common history and pride [...]. In the Crimea – there are graves of Russian soldiers, thanks to the courage which the Crimea in 1783 took over the Russian state. Crimea is Sevastopol, a city-legend, a city of great destiny, city-fortress and the home of the Russian navy on the Black Sea. Crimea is Balaklava and Kerch, Malakhov Kurgan and Sapun Mountain. Each of these places is sacred for us; these are symbols of Russian military glory and unprecedented valor (*Обращение Президента Российской Федерации*, 2014).

In Putin's speeches one can see the selective treatment of history, which consists in such a selection of historical facts that prove the correctness of the propaganda thesis that Crimea is Russian, and Ukraine has always been an integral part of Russia. In his statements, the Russian president often refers to the times of Peter the Great. During the reign of this tsar, the fortress Azov was conquered for the first time, which allowed the Russians to get to the Azov and Black Seas, which were of strategic importance for Russia (Serczyk, 2003; Брикнер, 1903). Emphasizing attention on the conquest of the Azov fortress shows Russia's strength and power, its greatness, and national pride. However, in the Russian propaganda media and statements by the Russian

president, we will not find any mention of the Crimean Khanate – the state of the Crimean Tatars, which was established in 1443 on the northern coast of the Black Sea and on the Crimean peninsula and existed until 1783 (Андреев, 2002; Возгрин, 1992, 2013; Гайворонський, 2007; Крисаченко, 2000; Тунманн, 1991). For years, first tsarist Russia, then the Soviet Union, and after 2014 the Russian Federation ignored or diminished (depending on the historical period) the role of the Crimean Tatars, their contribution to the development of the Crimean peninsula, remained silent about their history, culture, traditions, and their own language. The history of Russians in Crimea began with Peter the Great, after the Russo-Turkish wars, and with his first annexation in 1783. In fact, the whole world learned about the tragic fate of this nation after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the Ukrainians learned the real truth about the inhabitants of Crimea and not the hypocritical history that was given in textbooks of the Soviet period.

Confirmation of the selective treatment of history by the Russian authorities and the media can be found on an educational project website titled “Re-unifying Crimea with Russia” which lists among its main goals to popularize the history of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol since 1783 to nowadays (*О проекте «Москва-Крым-Территория талантов»*, 2022). Putin’s message to the people was heard, and afterwards there were numerous opinions in the media expressed by Russian politicians and experts who continued the president’s rhetoric, very often giving Russia’s policy an authoritarian tone. According to the well-known Russian politician, the chairman of a Liberal Democratic Party Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, joining Crimea to Russia began the unification of the divided Russian nation. On March 15, 2019, Zhirinovskiy said:

It is necessary to release all of south-eastern Ukraine, all of Ukraine. [...] Crimea is the beginning of the reunification of the Russian nation. It is necessary to make strategic decisions. [...] The return of Crimea has historical justification, and Lugansk and Donetsk were, unfortunately, part of Ukraine following the decision of 1917. We must think that we should not take it with piecemeal and extend it for a hundred years, apparently this should happen in the next 10 years, when the Russian people will be reunited (*Жириновский: Крым – начало воссоединения русского народа*, 2019).

Very often, similar statements can be heard in the Russian propaganda media RTR-planet, ORT, and Russia Today during various events in the Crimea or in Moscow. Yuriy Baranchik, the executive director of the Institute of Information Wars, PhD, in an interview for the information-analytical portal “Alternative” on 16 March 2014, said that “Crimea is only the first stage of the operation of the unification of the Russian nation. [...]. The legitimate introduction by the Russian Federation of a contingent of «polite people» [green men – O.V.] helped quickly move the peninsula under operational control of Russia” (Баранчик, 2014). Further in this interview, calling the eastern areas of Ukraine as being within the outskirts (in Ukrainian borderland), he claims that a similar operation could not be carried out in the Donbass, because in this region the policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation in the field of supporting compatriots failed. According to Y. Baranchik, “it is [...] a lesson for the future, also in relation to other post-Soviet states, which means that Russia will not stop” (Баранчик, 2014). Such statements are proof of the weight of the Russian president’s words on the Russian media and society. This shows how quickly one president’s sentence can expand into successive statements of different experts in this way forming a myth, being introduced to the Russian society as a true story.

Often, among the reasons given for the annexation of Crimea the President of Russia President, expresses the sentiment that the takeover of Crimea is the restoration of historical justice. While visiting the construction site of the Kerch Bridge in 2016, the Russian president said that “the unification of Crimea and Sevastopol with Russia was the restoration of historical justice that millions of people were waiting for” (*Путин: воссоединение Крыма с Россией...*, 2016). “At heart, in people’s minds, Crimea has always been and remains an integral part of Russia. This conviction, based on truth and justice, was unshakable, passed down from generation to generation, both time and circumstances were powerless before him, all the dramatic changes that we experienced and our country throughout the 20th century are powerless” (*Обращение Президента Российской Федерации*, 2014). Such statements concern 1954, when the Crimean Peninsula, by the decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, was transferred to the Ukrainian SSR. The decision was justified by the fact that the Crimean

region was in territorial proximity to the Ukrainian SSR (Закон СССР от 26 апреля 1954 года о передаче Крымской области из состава РСФСР в состав Украинской ССР; Стенограмма, 1954). From the southern steppes of Ukraine it was divided only by the Perekop isthmus. In addition, the Ukrainian SSR and the Crimea were united by economic ties: providing water from Dnipro, electricity, food, and a railway system (Смолий, 2014; Чумак, 2014). According to high-ranking politicians of that time, not only economic interests were the cause of the transfer of the Soviet Ukraine peninsula, but it was also a symbolic gesture, pointing to close ties between the RSFSR and the Ukrainian SSR (Задорожний, 2015). In the Russian propaganda media it is very common to hear that handing Crimea to the USSR in 1954 was illegal or that it was a gift from Nikita Khrushchev in a gesture of the 300th anniversary of the Pereyaslavsk Rada (Voytyuk, 2018, p. 202).

In 2014, in the interview for Voice of America, the son of Nikita Khrushchov, Sergiy Khrushchov said:

As the Dnieper and the hydro-electric dam [is] on Ukrainian territory, let's transfer the rest of the territory of Crimea under the Ukrainian supervision so they will be responsible for everything. [...] And they did it. It was not a political move, it was not an ideological move – it was just business. [...] And now we have this speculation that my father wanted to satisfy Ukrainian democracy, that he even made a gift to his wife, my mother, because she was Ukrainian – all this has nothing to do with reality. It was just an economic issue, and not a political one (Nesnera, 2014).

The Russian propaganda media never reveals the obvious reason for the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine – that is, the total destruction of the peninsula's economy caused by the Second World War and the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944 to Central Asia. In place of the displaced nations, were resettled Russians from Siberia or Ukrainians. In the beginning they had a very difficult time to coping with the existing reality, because they had no idea how to cultivate and manage the Crimean lands. Ukrainian historian Sergiy Gromenko, believes that the leaders of the USSR intentionally mixed

the population in the allied republics in order to have more control over these republics (Громенко, 2014).

In 2014, Vladimir Putin made it clear in his Address in 18 of March that the Crimean Peninsula can only be Russian, stressing that on the peninsula, the rights of the Russian-speaking population and Russians were restricted, read violated.

Crimea is our common heritage and the most important factor of stability in the region. This strategic territory should be subject to strong, stable sovereignty, which can only actually be Russian today. However, the situation began to change. Time and time again attempts were made to deprive Russians of their historical memory, and sometimes of their mother tongue, in order to make them an object of forced assimilation (Обращение Президента Российской Федерации, 2014).

Another justification for the annexation of Crimea, according to Vladimir Putin, is its ethnic composition. In his speech on March 18, 2014, he said:

Crimea is a unique combination of cultures and traditions of different nations. And in this way it is similar to the great Russia, which for centuries has not witnesses the disappearance or disintegration of any ethnic group. Russians and Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars and representatives of other nations lived and worked side by side in the Crimean land, preserving their identity, traditions, language and faith. Currently, there are almost 1,5 million Russians out of 2 million 200 thousand inhabitants of the Crimean Peninsula, 350 thousand Ukrainians, who mostly consider Russian as their native language, and about 290–300 thousand Crimean Tatars, a large number of which, as the referendum showed, are also concentrated in Russia (Обращение Президента Российской Федерации, 2022).

The last census in Ukraine was carried out in 2001, then the population of the peninsula amounted to 2 024 000 people, of which 1 180 400 were Russians, 492 200 were Ukrainians and 243 400 were Crimean Tatars (Всеукраїнський перепис населення 2001. Національний склад населення – Автономна Республіка Крим, 2001; Всеукраїнський перепис

населення, 2001; Загальний національний склад населення, 2001). In 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, the Russian Federation carried out its own census, according to which the population of the peninsula was 2 293 673, of which the number of Crimean Tatars living on the peninsula was 229 526 people, the number of Russians 1 188 978 people, the number of Ukrainians 291 603 people (Федеральная служба государственной статистики, 2016). Both common censuses show that the Russians in the Crimea are the dominant ethnicities.

The Russians who began arriving in Crimea after its first annexation in 1783 can be divided into three groups in terms of the settlement. The first group arrived after the annexation of Crimea in 1783, the second – the most numerous – after the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in May 1944, the third group is made up of former employees of the party apparatus who moved to Crimea at retirement age, and retired military officers who first served on the peninsula in the Black Sea Fleet of the USSR, later of the Russian Federation, and after retirement stayed in Crimea and brought their families. In Soviet times, Crimea was also a resting place for high-ranking politicians (the party elite), most of whom owned property on the peninsula. In addition, after 1991, the Russian Federation issued passports to residents of the peninsula, causing some residents to hold dual citizenship, which is illegal according to the Ukrainian Constitution. How large a number of Russian passport holders were in Crimea at the time of its annexation is also difficult, if not impossible, to estimate due to the illegality of such actions. It is possible to identify the fourth group of Russians who moved to Crimea after the 2014 annexation, but no reliable data could be found either on the Ukrainian or the Russian side as to their number, which may reflect propaganda on the subject, and from both sides (Громенко, 2018; Кривошев, 2018). Information about this group, from time to time, appears in Russian propaganda media, especially before important anniversaries related to Crimea. The domination of the peninsula by Russians, however, does not mean that the Russian Federation had the right to seize it illegally. The Russian Federation has violated the borders of a sovereign country, thus breaking all international rules and agreements.

The defence of the Russian-speaking population and Russians living in the Crimea is another justification for the annexation of Crimea. In his speech on March 18, 2014, Vladimir Putin said:

Millions of Russians, Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine live and will be living in Ukraine. The Russian Federation will always be defending their interests in a diplomatic, political and legal manner. [...]. About 95 percent of citizens believe that Russia should protect the interests of Russians and representatives of other nationalities living in the Crimea (*Обращение Президента Российской Федерации*, 2014).

Putin in his statements also tried to discredit Ukraine as an independent state, justifying it as follows:

Ruling [Ukrainian auth. – O.V] were not interested in how ordinary people live and why millions of Ukrainian citizens do not see prospects for themselves in their homeland and are forced to go abroad to earn money in other countries every day. I would like to point out that not to some Silicon Valley ... In Russia alone, in 2013, almost 3 million people worked. According to some estimates, their earnings in Russia in 2013 amounted to over \$ 20 billion, which is about 12% of Ukraine's GDP (*Обращение Президента Российской Федерации*, 2014).

Referring to the events on the Maidan of Independence in 2013, he does not mention the aspirations of Ukrainians to integrate with the European Union, but refers to the bad situation in the country, which caused protests due to corruption, the ineffectiveness of public administration and widespread poverty, thus convincing Russian citizens about the rightness of the annexation of Crimea.

Distribution channels of the Russian propaganda

The propaganda and disinformation campaign in the context of the Crimea annexation was considered to be effective because it came from the strong, centralized decision-making body – the administration of the President of

the Russian Federation. Russian society's trust in Putin in February-March 2014 increased from 69% to 80%, according to the Levada-Center data (*Одобрение органов власти*, 2014). The presence of one strong leader was enough to set the tone of the propaganda campaign.

Modern propaganda uses all available tools – media, press, radio, television (Russia Today, RTR-Planeta, Sputnik, Pervyi Kanal, Ria Novosti, Russia 24 and many others), films (Крым. Между прошлым и будущим, 2014; Крым. Путь на Родину, 2015), Internet, emails, phone calls, direct mail, posters, murals (Степанов, 2018), meetings (President and Prime Minister with visits to Crimea, talks with residents), rallies, door-to-door activism, leaflets, billboards, speeches, flags, street names (Lenin, Pushkin, etc.), monuments – e.g. Catherine II and “polite people” in Simferopol, coins for the 5th anniversary of the reunification of Crimea with Russia, stamps, books (Баранец, 2019; Широкоград, 2014), plays, comics, poetry, music (the most famous song – *Crimean Bridge* by Oleg Gazmanov, 2017), museum exhibitions, sporting events, cultural events, corporate reports, libraries and awards and prizes (Шойгу раздал медали “За возвращение Крыма”, 2014).

Speaking of special techniques of influencing society, it is important to mention “polite people” (green men), brigades of self-defence in the Crimea, FSB secret services and their actions in relation to the Crimean Tatars (arrests under the pretext of accusation in extremism, participation in terrorist organizations), the use of repressive psychiatry against people accused of separatism (Ilmi Umerov case, Ahtem Chyigoz case) or extremism (the members of Hizb-ut Tahrir case) (Voytyuk, 2017). These units used special techniques to intimidate a society that did not accept the annexation of the Crimea and had their own civil position. Their goal is to show that dissenting views can be punishable (Voytyuk, 2018). After that, taking into account that the Crimean Tatars were one of the largest groups that did not support the Crimea's unification with the FR, the segregation of the nation into “bad” and “good” citizens commenced. The “good” Crimean Tatars were those who agreed to cooperate with the occupation authorities. The leaders of Mejlis¹, members of Mejlis, social activists and all other people who did

¹ The representative body of the Crimean Tatars.

not support the annexation of the peninsula were considered to be “bad” (*Путин пытается дискредитировать крымскотатарское движение – политолог, 2015*).

Public reaction to the annexation of Crimea

Evidence of successful propaganda should be sought in the behaviour of the public. Following the occupation of Crimea, there were a number of public actions in Russia in support of the annexation. Russian media reported on various trips to Crimea by representatives of Russian nationalist circles, e.g. Russian politician Dmitriy Rogozin’s visit, the “Night Wolves” motorbike rally, or as they were called in Ukraine, “Putin’s Wolves”. Most of the events at the time were organised and coordinated top-down by the authorities. Very often such events were merely staged. After the annexation of the peninsula, a number of political-analytical programmes were created on Russian federal TV channels, inviting politicians, and experts and discussing mainly the situation in Ukraine or Crimea in a negative context, the government TV channels, *Perviy*, *RTR*, and *Russia Today* (“60 минут”; “Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым”; “Время покажет. Первый канал”) were particularly active in this direction.

Most often the support of President Putin’s actions and statements can be seen in the symbolism – t-shirts, key rings, flags, other trinkets, which the population carries with them not only on holidays, but every day. Such symbolic support was also evident in the media. All this indicates that the Kremlin has used all available channels of social mobilisation to legitimise the annexation of the peninsula in the eyes of its own population.

Counter-propaganda probably can only exist in a free society in which the media are competitive. In RF, the media are completely controlled, and counter-propaganda can be found mostly underground.

As an example of counter-propaganda, two important elements can be considered in Crimea that, until 2014, were not noticeable among the Crimean Tatar community remaining on the peninsula, but also beyond its borders. Firstly, the fact that Crimean Tatars began to actively learn the Ukrainian language, use it in everyday life, and abandoned or reduced to the maximum the use of Russian. Secondly, the well-known Crimean Tatar

journalist Osman Pashayev, on his Facebook page, shared a video of Crimean Tatars dancing and singing to a well-known Ukrainian song 'Smereka' at a wedding. In his post, he wrote:

Then when the collaborators assure that Crimea is under reliable protection from the Ukrainian Nazis. The Crimean Tatars in response sing and dance demonstratively in Ukrainian, one wants to cry, believe, and live on. Although we are conservatives with regard to music, and even towards Caucasian Lezginka there is a lot of criticism. However, Ukrainian music is now in a political position. I fear for those who sing, dance, and wait for Ukraine, and it's almost nine years is an incredibly long time (Pashayev, 2022).

This kind of activity can indeed be dangerous under the conditions of the occupation of Crimea, due to the fact that anything Ukrainian in Crimea arouses suspicion and people can be considered extremists without any reason. Conducting counter-propaganda is very dangerous on the Crimean peninsula, the events of the first few years after the annexation of Crimea confirm this. Any statement differing from the opinion voiced by V. Putin and Russian propagandists was treated as extremism, a threat to the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, or religious fanaticism. The techniques used against counter-propaganda are arrests, intimidation, and forced deportation, in the worst case, such people disappear without a trace or not infrequently their bodies are found after some time with traces of torture.

Underground counter-propaganda can take as many forms as propaganda. Some forms of underground counter-propaganda, such as leaflets and graffiti, are obvious, but there are other important forms of counter-propaganda like events, literature, music, film and websites. Examples of counter-propaganda include placing photos in the colours of the Ukrainian flag - yellow and blue, or, for example, taking photos in sunflowers, which are Ukrainian national symbols, or wearing clothes that refer to Ukrainian colours, or so-called embroidered shirts. Counter-propaganda can become as active as propaganda. The largest contingent of counter-propagandists of the annexation of Crimea are the Crimean Tatars. Because they are persecuted for their activities in the Crimea, and the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar Nation was

considered a terrorist organization, most of their activities are carried out in the underground or on the territory of mainland Ukraine (*Минюст признал Меджлис крымскотатарского народа экстремистской организацией*, 2016).

Conclusions

Crimea has been of interest to Tsarist Russia, then the USSR, and later the Russian Federation since ancient times. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 provoked a fierce international reaction, resulting in sanctions against the Russian Federation, which proved ineffective from the perspective of 2022. The UN, the European Union, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and NATO did not recognize the results of the referendum on 14 March 2014 and the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation on 18 March 2014. By annexing Crimea and invading the territory of Ukraine, the Russian Federation has violated the existing security system in Europe and created a dangerous precedent for the transformation of state borders in the 21st century. The tightening of the authoritarian regime, revanchist sentiments among the ruling elite, and forceful attempts to restore Russia's influence in the former USSR states have become a threat to the security of the entire world (Osavoliyk, 2014).

The unlawful actions of the Russian Federation required it to justify its own actions, first of all, in front of its own society and the international community². Vladimir Putin's statements, made in the first months after the annexation of the peninsula, show that he was personally the main source of disinformation in society and that he set the tone for propaganda about how, what, where, and when the Russian media should speak, show.

President Putin's speeches reverberate with his selective treatment of history, which consists of choosing historical facts in such a way as to confirm the proclaimed thesis that Crimea is Russian and Ukraine is an integral

² From statements of Vladimir Putin to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on March 18, 2014, during a press conference on April 17, 2014 and during the meeting with ambassadors on July 1, 2014, the President was more interested in his own favorability rating and support of his actions and decisions inside the country.

part of Russia. In his statements (as well as those of many other Russian politicians) he often refers to the time of Peter the Great. He operates with certain historical facts, takes them out of their wider context, distorts them, and creates a history that suits Russian ideology, his own vision of the future of the Russian state.

Defending the Russian-speaking population and the Russians living in Crimea is another manipulated argument. Russians have never been threatened, neither in Crimea nor in Ukraine, and their rights have never been restricted, on the contrary, they have had wider rights than other national minorities and ethnic groups living in the peninsula or other parts of Ukraine.

The annexation of Crimea is a huge propaganda success for intra-Russian use and translates into real support for Vladimir Putin in society and within the Russian elite. The annexation is a confirmation that imperial sentiments and the myth of a great Russia, which has been reinforced for years, are still alive in Russian society (Olszański, Sarna, Wierzbowska-Miazga, 2014).

By annexing Crimea, the Russian Federation has violated the existing security system in Europe and set a dangerous precedent for the transformation of national borders in the 21st century. The tightening of the authoritarian regime, revanchist sentiments among the ruling elite, and forceful attempts to restore Russia's influence in the former USSR states have become a threat to the security of the entire world (Osavoliyk, 2014). Russian propaganda is a very complex and effective tool for influencing primarily Russian society, but also certain layers of society and beyond Russia's borders. In 2014, it allowed the annexation of Crimea without massive public opposition. The world expressed its concern and actually 'accepted' the annexation of Crimea, and this opened the way (on a symbolic, emotional, spiritual, and psychological level) for other such actions in other countries. The same reasoning can be applied to Belarus and the Baltic States, Moldova.

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