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How Russian propaganda works, what vision of reality it tries to impose, and why its isolated successes cannot mask the many vulnerabilities

Tuesday 25 October 2022, by [Feminist Anti-War Resistance/FAS \(Russia\)](#) (Date first published: 18 October 2022).

To better understand the connection between Kremlin propaganda and the mass sentiments of Russians, [Project Riddle](#) collected an array of messages in Russian media and social media related to the war in Ukraine in one way or another.

The aim was to trace both the frequency of use of individual terms and phrases used by propaganda and their resonance with discussions on social media. The results demonstrate that the successes of the propaganda machine in some areas are offset by failures in others.

Conclusions:

The expressions “protection of Donbas residents” and “protection of the Russian language” were consistently used - this reflects the belief that these ideas find greater resonance with the public. These expressions became more prominent before public holidays (Victory Day on 9 May and Russia Day on 12 June) and after the Russian army’s advance at the end of June.

Propaganda continues to have difficulties in justifying the goals of the “special operation” and promoting them in the media. Problems arose with the use of key terms (“denazification” and “demilitarisation”): the frequency of their use on Russian TV increased sharply after the start of the war, but dropped after two weeks, and by June these words had practically disappeared from the vocabulary of TV presenters.

All four words/phrases (“protection of Donbas residents”, “protection of the Russian language”, “denazification” and “demilitarisation”) are used many times less frequently by social media users than by official media staff. Considering that there are a large number of bots among the former, in reality the public response is likely to be even lower.

The propaganda uses already established patterns and connects the need for the “special operation” with the response to the “threat from NATO”: the volume of messages about NATO was quite high even before February 24. The number of stories about confrontation between Russia and NATO in the context of the war in Ukraine remained quite high and increased on the eve of the milestone events.

Another frequent propaganda technique was the appropriation of the language used to describe the events. For example, the term “war” is often used in TV programmes, only not in relation to the war in Ukraine, but to describe Russia’s situation. It is claimed that there is an “information” or “sanctions” war against it and the threat of a “world war” due to the actions of the Ukrainian

leadership and Western countries is emphasised.

According to Meduza's sources), the propaganda methodology prepared to cover the mobilisation instructs the media to rely on arguments about NATO and the residents of Donbas, topics that resonate more with public opinion. At the same time, the aims of the "special operation" - concepts like "denazification", which did not resonate and were abandoned - are excluded from it altogether. (<https://meduza.io/feature/2022/09/26/meduza-vyyasnila-kak-propagandisty-budut-ob-yasnyat-rossiya-nam-chto-mobilizatsiya-eto-normalno>) The authors of the study conclude that, on the one hand, eight years of Kremlin propaganda preparation for the war has not gone in vain: aggressive anti-Western rhetoric and the long-term information campaign against Ukraine have become an important aid in justifying the need to start the war. On the other hand, the new terms and meanings that the Kremlin tried to put into the "special operation" apparently did not provide any meaningful increase in support. The mass repression in the immediate aftermath of the war shows that the Kremlin did not particularly rely on persuasion. The main aim was to suppress any critical voices, and if this strategy was successful, no further efforts to justify the war would be necessary. (<https://ridl.io/ru/lquo-gidrant-lzhi-raquo-kremlevskaya-propaganda-i-nbsp-ee-nbsp-otrazhenie-v-nbsp-sotsialnyh-media/>)

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