

## RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AS A 'CASUS BELLI' FOR MILITARY INVASIONS IN UKRAINE AND GEORGIA



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**D**ISINFORMATION has always been a key pillar of Putin's bid to maximise public support for the Kremlin's military adventures. The full-scale military invasions of Georgia and Ukraine have clearly demonstrated that the Kremlin fights on two different fronts: on the ground and in the information space. When Russia launched a military assault on Ukraine, it also simultaneously increased its efforts to feed Russian citizens with lies about the Kremlin's intentions and 'noble' goals of fighting against the Ukrainian 'nazis' and 'liberating' Ukraine by [denazifying and demilitarising it](#).

The Kremlin's current information warfare in Ukraine is largely a continuation of the same playbook that Moscow used 14 years ago in Georgia. The 2008 invasion of Georgia was greatly supported by the Russian population and boosted Putin's approval ratings. In light of economic hardships and a wave of protests caused by the poisoning of the opposition leader [Alexei Navalny](#), Russian President Vladimir Putin is attempting to increase his popularity by using similar tools. The key aim is to meet Russia's imperial ambitions and make sanctions look like a price worth paying for the sake of Russia restoring 'historical justice'. Three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Putin still does not recognise the sovereignty of its neighbouring post-Soviet states. The methods of twisting reality and brainwashing the Russian public echo the old Soviet tactics. However, Russia is also taking advantage



"THE METHODS OF TWISTING REALITY AND BRAINWASHING THE RUSSIAN PUBLIC ECHO THE OLD SOVIET TACTICS."

of the contemporary post-truth information environment by weaponising social media. This *Briefing* analyses the key trends and narratives that Russia is using as part of its information warfare. Some of the identified patterns from the August war of 2008 have been re-applied to Ukraine 14 years later.

### RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES DURING THE AUGUST WAR OF 2008

When Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was still trying to keep a facade of democracy by calling Russia a "managed democracy". Five months prior to the invasion, Putin had nominally swapped his position with Dmitry Medvedev. At the time, Putin, who had already served two consecutive presidential terms, did not risk changing the Russian Constitution to keep his position. Although hardly

anyone argued that Medvedev held a real mandate, Putin's risky decision to swap the seats indicated that he still cared about Russia's international image under his rule. This served as an important factor while designing the information campaign for the August war of 2008.

The information warfare around the Russian-Georgian war largely focused on purifying Russia's image by accusing Georgia of committing aggression on its [own territory](#). Even though Russian rhetoric has become more assertive since Georgia and Ukraine started to develop closer relations with the West and aspire to join NATO, following the fulfilment of his plans in Georgia, Putin still wanted to do business as usual with the West. At the same time, Georgia has been largely unprepared to counter Russian disinformation efforts. Russian media served as a support

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mechanism for the Kremlin's military operation. Russian troops were accompanied by journalists from state-sponsored media. They were specifically tasked to report on Georgian "war crimes" and interview Russian Army spokesman General Anatoly Nogovitsyn on a daily basis in order to control the information flow. The disinformation that was disseminated by Russia's largest media organisations targeted both the West and Russian citizens. Russian disinformation focused on three key topics: minimising reputational damage by portraying Georgia as an aggressor, portraying Russia as a mediator and discrediting the West.

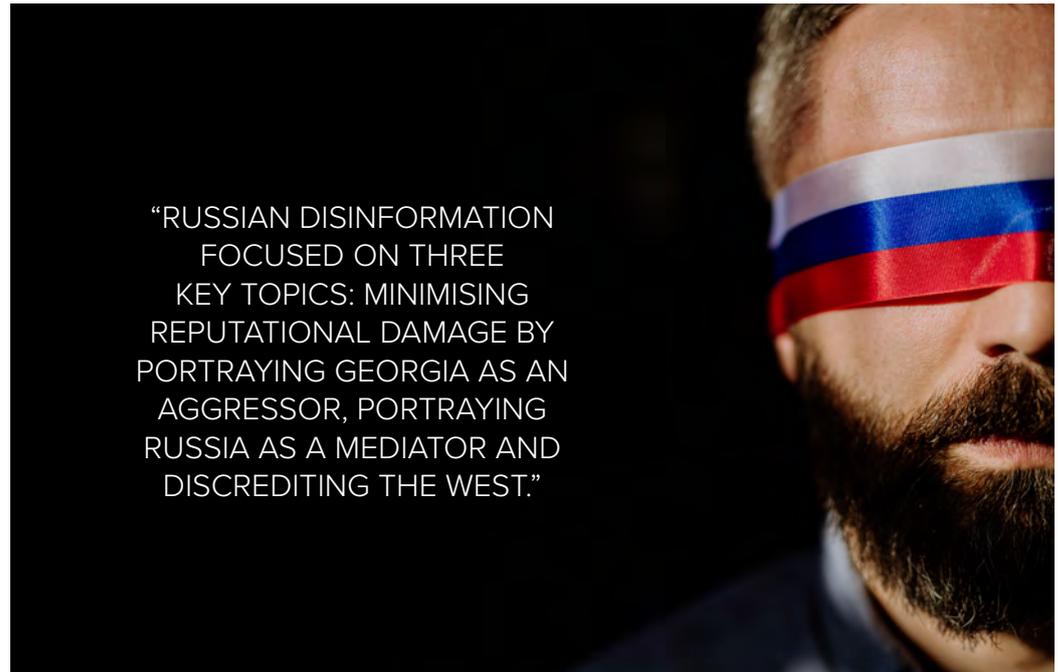
**Genocide claims**

From the beginning of the war, the Russian media immediately echoed the Kremlin's claims and accused the Georgian government of starting the war, claiming that Georgia had shelled sleepy [Tskhinvali](#) (the so-called South Ossetia) region in bid to retake its occupied regions by force. Russian officials accused Georgia of committing genocide. During the war propagandist channel *Russia Today* regularly used a caption "GENOCIDE" while reporting the news, which was then followed with another banner: ["DEVASTATION"](#).

The former Russian Ambassador to Georgia Vyacheslav Kovalenko stated that Georgians were committing ["the real vandalism"](#). This narrative was heavily pushed by the Russian media. By portraying itself as a humanitarian, peaceful actor, Russia wanted to be perceived as a peacekeeper and an impartial broker. To a certain extent, Russian disinformation was successful in terms of blurring the truth about which side started the war.

**Responsibility to protect**

The Moscow-backed separatist forces started the evacuation process of the local civilian



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population in the so-called South Ossetia prior to the beginning of the hostilities. This directly indicated that Russia intended to launch a military offensive in Georgia and was looking for a pretext to justify it. The state media in Russia had coordinated, pre-planned messages about Georgia committing genocide and ethnic cleansing. Russian media falsely claimed that the Georgian military had killed 2,000 residents of South Ossetia, with 1,400 people being killed in the [first day of fighting](#). This was used as a major justification for Russia's military intervention on Georgian soil.

Prior to the conflict, Russia led an illegal passportization policy by distributing thousands of Russian passports and then using this as another pretext by claiming to protect its citizens during the war. The former Chairman of The Investigative Committee of the Prosecutor General's Office, Alexander Batrikin, claimed that Georgians attacked not only Tskhinvali but also many villages where 'the aggressors' (Georgians) wiped out peaceful populations so that there would be no investigation of these [crimes](#). Russian disinformation stressed Moscow's role as a mediator, not

as a party to the conflict. When Russia recognised Georgia's territories – Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia – as independent states, the decision was justified by Dmitry Medvedev as a preventative measure to avoid the destruction of these ["republics"](#). Many years later, the Russian media still perpetuates the same propaganda messages. In 2018, the Russian talk show host on state-controlled channel *Rossiya-1* claimed that the August war of 2008 was an ["operation for the enforcement of peace."](#)

**Attacking the West**

Demonising the West has been one of the primary goals of Russian propaganda. Attacking NATO and the US are the most popular themes on Russian talk shows. The Russian media and government officials blamed the West for fuelling the war by arming Georgia and trying to create a democracy in the country that, according to them, eventually became a tyranny. Georgia was portrayed as an aggressive US puppet.

At the same time, Russian propaganda focused on Western unwillingness to help Georgia, portraying the NATO allies – and particularly the US – as

unreliable partners, with the intent of decreasing pro-Western sentiments. The Russian media also stressed the divisions and weaknesses of the West, whilst building an image of Russia as a strong and assertive power, driven by its state interests.

Such an aggressive anti-Western campaign in conjunction with a military operation was intended as a lesson for Ukraine and to discourage the forging of closer links with the West in the future. By punishing Georgia for its European and Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations, the Kremlin attempted to eliminate any precedents of post-Soviet states escaping from the Russian orbit.

**RUSSIA'S WAR PROPAGANDA IN UKRAINE (2022)**

Russia has long been investing in destabilising Ukraine internally and discrediting its reputation externally by portraying it as a corrupt, failed state. The current military offensive in Ukraine is being accompanied by unprecedented lies and fabricated stories. Despite replicating some of the narratives from the Georgian offensive and reapplying them to Ukraine,

Russia has employed much more multifaceted disinformation, including completely twisting Ukraine's history and claiming that Ukraine is not even a sovereign state.

Putin's speech on 24 February 2022 – that served as an official declaration of war – echoed some of the long-standing claims that the Kremlin has been planting in the minds of ordinary Russians. However, as the war goes on the scale and absurdity of the Kremlin's false narratives increase. Unlike Georgia, the current invasion of Ukraine does not intend to purify Russia's international image. As a result of massive domestic repressions and Russia's lack of willingness to engage in diplomacy, Putin has lost all interest in keeping a facade of democracy. Invasion of Ukraine is seen as a legacy-defining historic mission that has been in the making for years. The completion of this mission outweighs the costs of global reputational damage for Putin.

This approach has been also reflected in the way Russia is leading its information warfare. This time, Russian propaganda heavily focuses on the internal audience. Putin's staged rally held in Moscow stadium on 18 March 2022 was a manifestation of the key Kremlin propaganda narratives by portraying Ukrainians as nazis and Putin's Russia as a fighter against the evil. The event was accompanied by patriotic and nationalist slogans, flags with the letter Z – which has become a symbol of public support for Russia's invasion – as well as nostalgic songs praising the old days of Soviet [greatness](#). Fuelling nationalist sentiments is seen as a powerful tool to strengthen the regime. This way, and by using extreme repressions, Putin tries to deprive Russians of any sense of reality.

Russian disinformation around Ukraine has been crafted based



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on false historic claims about the origins of Ukraine. One of the key elements is accusing Ukraine of genocide and aggression, framing the invasion as a “denazification” and “demilitarization” as well as blaming the West and particularly NATO for the conflict's escalation.

#### *Twisting history*

In June 2021, Putin published a 5,000-word essay – *On the historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. The essay serves as a guide to the Kremlin's propaganda on [Ukraine](#). Yet, at that time hardly anyone imagined that those troubling statements would soon turn into a war manifesto. Putin once again repeated that Ukrainians and Russians are one people and the true sovereignty of Ukraine is only possible in partnership with Russia.

Historical accuracy has never been Putin's trademark. He has often falsified and twisted facts. Back in 2008, he claimed that Ukraine is not even a state and a considerable part of its territory has been gifted to Kyiv by Russia. Prior to launching a full-scale military aggression, he went as far as to claim that Ukraine was entirely created by Russia. Deeply frustrated by

President Volodymyr Zelensky's pro-western stance, Putin tries to normalise his twisted version of history for Russians and portray the invasion of Ukraine as a restoration of a historic justice. On a smaller scale, this was successfully fulfilled in 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea.

The propaganda on shared history has been widely promoted by Russian media. The Kremlin has even targeted children by introducing virtual lessons at schools to brainwash them with the Kremlin's version of events. The topics include: the roots of the war, the shared historic past with Ukraine, the aims of the “liberation” and the threats posed by [NATO](#).

According to Putin, the aim of his so-called special military operation is ‘denazification’ and ‘demilitarisation’ of Ukraine. The Kremlin has been trying to portray Ukraine's democratically elected President Zelensky, who is of Jewish heritage, as a fascist. At the same time, they are deliberately reviving deep feelings of patriotism and pride in ordinary Russians by reminding them of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany. The recent article [What Russia should do with Ukraine](#), published by

state-controlled media, RIA Novosti, claims that in addition to the government, large numbers of the Ukrainian population are either passive nazis or nazi enablers; calling for ideological repression and re-education of the population.

#### *Ukraine as an aggressor*

When Vladimir Putin started accusing Ukraine of organising genocide in the Donbass region, it was a clear indication that Russia was preparing a pretext for an escalation of the conflict. These claims not only echoed the disinformation strategy used against Georgia in 2008, but also Russian claims in 2014, when they justified a military offensive by spreading disinformation about ethnic Russians being under attack in eastern Ukraine.

Just like in 2008, Russia portrayed its so-called “special military operation” as a preventive measure to save the residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions from extinction. According to the Secretary of Russia's Security Council, Nikolay Patrushev, during the military operation, they have obtained evidence that proves Ukraine had a plan to take the Russian-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk regions and Crimea by [force](#).

In the age of social media, the current war in Ukraine has perhaps become the most well-documented military aggression in history. In light of a wealth of live footage depicting Russian war crimes in Ukraine, logically Russia must find it harder to deny the reality. Yet, the Kremlin is still following the same old line by portraying Ukraine as an aggressor and accusing Kyiv of killing its own citizens.

On April 8, 2022 a Russian missile attack on a train station in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk killed more than [50 peaceful citizens](#). The state-controlled media RIA Novosti

accused Ukraine of organising this attack. Similarly, the massacre of Bucha that lately shook the world, was depicted by the Kremlin and its media as a staged scene with fake dead bodies. Even though satellite images show that the bodies of killed Ukrainian residents of Bucha had been lying in the streets for almost two weeks before the Russian troops retreated from the town, Russian media pointed at Ukrainian “nazis” and accused them of war crimes.

**Blaming the West**

Prior to launching a military offensive, Putin repeatedly blamed the West for trying to drag Russia into a war with Ukraine. The Kremlin needs an external enemy to unite Russians behind their leader. NATO has been playing this role the best, particularly since the Bucharest summit of 2008, where Ukraine and Georgia were promised an eventual membership into the Alliance. Even though NATO has never attacked Russia and out of 14 countries bordering Russia, only five are NATO members, the Kremlin still claims that it is a victim of NATO’s expansionist policies. While Ukraine’s prospects for joining the alliance were extremely distant, the Kremlin built its propaganda on an alleged NATO threat, using it as another pretext for an invasion.

Following the genocide in Bucha, during an interview on Rossiya-1 channel, the Spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, claimed that the staged “provocation” had been ordered by the US. Russians have also revived an old propaganda about the Americans developing dirty bombs and biological weapons in US-funded biological laboratories across Ukraine. The Kremlin has often highlighted that it is the US’ intention to use Ukraine as a tool against Russia. As sanctions hit the Russian economy hard, the Kremlin strategy relies on pushing people towards accusing the West for the imposition of tough sanctions instead of questioning Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine.

**MIXED RESULTS OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION**

Both in Georgia and Ukraine, information-psychological operations have been an integral part of Russia’s warfare. In Georgia’s case, Putin wanted to maximise the public support and make sure that Russians would rally around the flag despite the economic hardships caused by the global financial crisis. While Russian propaganda achieved modest international success, at home Russian citizens were receptive to the Kremlin narrative. During the active

hostilities in Georgia, Putin’s personal rating rose to 88% and even after the ceasefire agreement remained [stable](#).

On the international level, Russia made a lot of efforts to avoid being labelled as an aggressor. At the time, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had a reputation of being a more moderate liberal-leaning politician. According to a CNN poll conducted in 2008, an overwhelming majority of respondents – [92% – believed Russian actions were justified](#). Overall, internationally Russia has been unable to gain support towards the recognition policy of Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia. However, soon after the Russian aggression in Georgia, Moscow was rewarded by a “reset” policy from President Barack Obama’s administration. Despite its support for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the West did not impose any sanctions in response to Russia’s war in Georgia. The impunity further emboldened Russia to set more ambitious goals in Ukraine.

As the Russian military invasion of Ukraine is still ongoing, measuring the success or failure of Russian information warfare is premature. In contrast to Russia’s war in Georgia, this time the

Kremlin has set a more specific goal of targeting the internal audience rather than wasting time convincing the West that Russia has simply been provoked by Ukraine’s genocide in the Donbass region. A highly efficient and successful information campaign from the government of Ukraine has further prompted the Kremlin to introduce massive repressions on independent media and civil society and deprive Russians from access to critical voices.

Just like in Georgia, Russia has been portraying Ukraine as an aggressor, accusing it of genocide and laying responsibility on the West for fuelling the conflict. Compared to 2008, Russia has been using traditional media in conjunction with social media platforms and influential figures to spread its narrative. The ban on critical media as well as the main social media platforms makes it impossible to debunk Russian lies. However, according to the recent polls conducted by Levada Center [Putin’s approval rose to 83%](#).

Given Putin’s ambitious plans have so far failed in Ukraine, the propaganda success will depend on what kind of gains Russia can achieve and, most importantly, how convincingly Putin can justify these gains (if any) to the Russian citizens.

FAKE NEWS

