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POLICY BRIEF

Insights from the EUI–JRC "Science for Policy" workshop panel on narratives and conflict in the post-truth information environment (26–27 May 2025)

Addressing disinformation, foreign information interference, and strategic narrative deployment is crucial for safeguarding the ontological security of states and societies. This panel brings together three interconnected themes that illustrate the complexity of the challenges facing policymakers, while highlighting opportunities for researchers to explore how information operations are crafted to influence public perceptions of the past and present, and to shape collective visions of the future.

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Media narratives on Russia and Ukraine 2013-2024[1]

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Summary

February 2022 marked a new phase in Russia's war against Ukraine, amplifying media narratives that had been gradually constructed since 2013. From Euromaidan to the annexation of Crimea and the Minsk Agreements, the information space has been shaped by fluctuating coverage, evolving narratives, and deliberate disinformation campaigns.

This brief draws on **a dataset of over 22 million media articles (2013–2024)** to identify the most persistent narratives about Russia's aggression against Ukraine in international media. By combining automated clustering with expert analysis, it highlights how media coverage over time has been defined by recurring themes such as geopolitical tensions, energy politics, humanitarian crises, and disinformation strategies.

It also highlights how media attention evolved across key turning points—from Crimea in 2014 to the full-scale invasion between 2022 and 2024—and how Kremlin-aligned outlets sought to influence international audiences through foreign-language articles at pivotal geopolitical moments.

Key messages

Coverage peaks aligned with geopolitical shocks. Media coverage intensified during pivotal events such as the Euromaidan protests, Crimea's annexation, the military build-up at the Russia-Ukraine border, and the full-scale invasion, illustrating how spikes in media attention corresponded with significant escalations in the conflict.

Five dominant themes shaped discourse.

- Geopolitical tensions: media narratives framing Ukraine as a battleground between Western democracy and Russian authoritarianism.
- Energy politics: coverage highlighting Ukraine's dependency on Russian gas and the broader implications for European energy security, especially concerning projects like Nord Stream 2.
- Disinformation and information warfare: narratives exposing Russian efforts to shape global perceptions and legitimise its actions, including the spread of false or misleading information and cyberattacks on Ukrainian infrastructure.
- Humanitarian impact: coverage emphasising the humanitarian crisis, including displacement, civilian casualties, and limited access to aid.
- Ukrainian governance and internal challenges: narratives addressing corruption, political repression, and oligarchic influence in the context of Ukraine's geopolitical alignment with the European Union.

Narratives shifted notably across key periods. Early coverage (2013–2014) centred on Ukraine's geopolitical choices, gas disputes, and sanctions post-Crimea annexation, while 2022–2024 media focus shifted to the full-scale invasion and evolving international responses.

Key figures shaped the media discourse. Vladimir Putin was portrayed consistently as an aggressive leader, Volodymyr Zelenskyy emerged post-2019 as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance, and Donald Trump's coverage highlighted US political debates over support for Ukraine.

Language targeting revealed strategic intent. While 86.5% of Russian-state media outputs remained in Russian, foreign-language messaging (English, Spanish, French, Arabic, German) intensified around key geopolitical moments, indicating tailored efforts to influence global audiences.

1 Based on the manuscript "Tracking the Narrative: A Data-Driven Analysis of Media Coverage of Russia and Ukraine 2013-2024". Author list: Irene Vianini, Sopho Kharazi, Bonka Kotseva, Kristina Kovacikova, Nicolò Faggiani, Nikolaos Nikolaidis, Kristina Potapova, Olena Snigyr, Jens P. Linge

Policy relevance

Understanding how media narratives evolve over time is crucial for improving Europe's information integrity and cognitive resilience.

This research shows that:

– Russian disinformation and information warfare were persistently covered in mainstream media. Their sustained visibility over more than a decade highlights how deeply they have shaped international debates about Russia's aggression against Ukraine and hybrid threats more broadly.

– Foreign-language content from Kremlin-linked outlets must be treated as targeted influence operations. These campaigns intensify during major crises — when international audiences are actively seeking information and are therefore more susceptible to manipulative messaging.

– Media literacy and resilience must consider temporal dynamics. Peaks in narrative intensity coincide with moments of geopolitical uncertainty, requiring real-time monitoring and rapid policy responses.

In the context of hybrid threats, policymakers need to address both the immediate flow of disinformation and the deeper, more structural narrative strategies that shape public understanding over years.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen narrative monitoring and forecasting**

   Develop narrative intelligence tools that combine machine learning with expert contextualisation to anticipate shifts in messaging before key geopolitical events.

2. **Support independent and local media**

   Ensure sustainable funding for Ukrainian and regional outlets, as they provide first-hand counter-narratives grounded in local legitimacy.

3. **Target language-specific vulnerabilities**

   Expand multilingual communication strategies to counter Kremlin narratives in English, Spanish, Arabic, and French, especially during crisis peaks.

4. **Invest in cognitive resilience**

   Move beyond reactive fact-checking: support media literacy programs that teach citizens how narratives evolve and why they are emotionally persuasive.

5. **Coordinate international response**

   Foster cross-border cooperation on narrative mapping, ensuring that EU, NATO, and partner countries share real-time insights into how Russian messaging spreads globally.

Conclusions

The evolution of Russia-Ukraine media narratives over more than a decade demonstrates that information warfare is not episodic but continuous, adapting to geopolitical realities and leveraging emotional resonance.

This analysis confirms that Kremlin-aligned messaging is systematic, multilingual, and strategically timed, with the ability to influence not only perceptions of Ukraine but broader debates on sovereignty, security, and the legitimacy of democratic governance.

For policymakers, this means that countering disinformation cannot rely on ad-hoc responses. It requires long-term narrative awareness, sustained investment in independent journalism, and cognitive resilience strategies tailored to different linguistic and cultural contexts.

As hybrid threats evolve, future research should extend this methodology to other critical domains such as climate change, migration, and public health, where strategic narratives could similarly shape policy debates and public attitudes.

Narrative siege: Russia's global south playbook[2]

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Summary

Russia's war narratives form an integral part of its broader system of strategic narratives and are systematically tailored not only for domestic and Western audiences, but also for the Global South. These top-down, coordinated information operations advance Russia's foreign policy objectives by disseminating emotionally charged, ideologically driven messages across all available channels, regardless of their scale. Digital platforms, in particular, play a central role in this effort. The overarching goal is to shape a broader consensus on interpretations of past and present events, to project specific visions of the future, and to reinforce international alliances.

We examine how these narratives are structured and disseminated, assess their strategic purpose, and offer recommendations to counter their influence. Effectively addressing Russia's narrative campaigns requires a holistic, evidence-based, and locally grounded response that integrates monitoring, media literacy, and credible alternatives.

Key findings

- Russia employs a systematic, comprehensive, and adaptable strategy aimed at securing favorable international regulatory conditions and establishing a strong presence in foreign information ecosystems, including within the educational sphere.
- The primary objective of Russian information operations—including educational and outreach activities—is not merely to spread disinformation, but to shape belief systems. These operations seek dominance not only in the informational space but also in the cognitive realms of foreign societies.
- Russia systematically deploys war narratives in Global South countries to legitimize its aggression in Ukraine and undermine Western influence.
- Russia's war discourse is rooted in the memory of World War II, particularly in the Russian mythologisation of it. Through its information operations, Russia aims to construct a shared historical narrative with countries of the Global South—framing the current war against Ukraine and Russia-West contestation as a continuation of the fight against fascism and nazism. By drawing symbolic parallels between the present conflict and World War II, Russia seeks to legitimise its aggression and evoke emotional resonance that reinforces its geopolitical agenda.
- These narratives are articulated primarily by high-ranking officials (Putin, Lavrov etc.) and distributed via state media channels like Sputnik, RT.
- The messaging aligns closely with historical anti-colonial and anti-Western themes, framing Russia as a civilizational defender.
- The narratives are emotionally intense and consistent, showing minimal regional variation across Global South audiences.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings highlight the importance of understanding Russian information operations as more than disinformation. These campaigns aim to reshape cognitive spheres and belief systems, and create long-term influence in foreign societies. In the context of geopolitical competition and hybrid threats, understanding how strategic narratives function is essential for improving digital resilience, media literacy, and cognitive security.

To address these challenges effectively, policymakers should prioritize the following measures:

1. **Strengthen monitoring and analysis**: Invest in narrative intelligence (NARRINT) and hybrid OSINT methods to track official-to-digital dissemination paths.

2 Based on the manuscript "Russian War Narratives And Digital Influence In The Global South". Author: Olena Snigyr

2. **Amplify alternative narratives**: Invest in the promotion of independent, locally rooted historical narratives in the Global South and expand media literacy initiatives to directly challenge Russia's manipulative use of WWII memory, thereby undermining the credibility and impact of its war propaganda.
3. **Support local media ecosystems**: Provide support for independent media and fact-checkers in the Global South to offer alternative narratives rooted in local legitimacy.
4. **Foster strategic communication capacities**: Assist partner governments and civil society actors in developing counter-narratives grounded in democratic values and regional solidarity.
5. **Enhance digital education and literacy**: Fund programs that increase awareness about propaganda strategies and promote critical digital media consumption.
6. **Advocate for transparent digital governance**: Collaborate on international standards to address foreign information manipulation while safeguarding free expression.

Research and policy: hand in hand in the public interest – focus on disinformation

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Dealing with disinformation means accepting complexity; simplification would risk creating harm. Accepting complexity does not mean renouncing clarity and clear understanding. On the contrary, these are key to both understanding and responding to the phenomenon.

Understanding disinformation

Understanding disinformation requires a multi-disciplinary approach. From an academic point of view, it is a precious opportunity to act beyond silos and to work on research agendas which cross different disciplines. Experts in law, economics, political sciences, neurosciences, data sciences, psychology, anthropology, communication, history, computer sciences and others are invited to ensure that the research they carry out in their fields is acting within a framework which allows for inserting into and collaborating with the researchers in the respective other fields. Joint cross-disciplinary researchers are also needed.

Understanding disinformation also means ensuring the involvement of stakeholders from different sectors. A few examples easily explain why. If researchers are to work on disinformation narratives, they need collaboration with independent fact-checkers who debunk content. On another note, once civil society organisations have identified clear patterns and actors behind disinformation narratives, political scientists, anthropologists and historians can use these findings to explain why certain patterns may occur.

While in recent years, a lot of progress has been made in understanding the disinformation phenomenon and in looking at its impact on the information integrity, there is still a lot which has to be understood with access to the data of the online platforms on which disinformation content is spread. Some platforms are, in a rather inconsistent way, already providing some access to public data to few researchers. The Digital Services Act (EU Regulation) states in its Article 40, that Very Large Online Platforms and Search Engines (VLOPSEs)[3] must provide researchers with access to publicly accessible and private data which contribute to the detection, identification and understanding of systemic risks[4] which disinformation poses in the EU. Such access is currently not really provided also because, at the time of writing, the delegated act related to the implementation of Article 40 is still not yet published by the European Commission.

On top of allowing for the monitoring and compliance assessment of the VLOPSEs against the regulatory framework, systematic and streamlined data access will ensure a huge step towards a concrete understanding of the phenomenon. In this regard, it is key to ensure investment in research infrastructures and human resources. In particular, systematically carrying out such research means having sufficient research funds and counting on an infrastructure capable of dealing with that data. We should avoid ending up in a situation in which only sufficiently funded academic institutions and civil society organisations are in a position to produce such research outputs.

Tackling disinformation

Tackling disinformation involves again a number of stakeholders: media literacy experts, researchers, fact-checkers, civil society organisations, journalists, media institutions, policy experts and makers, etc. We must respect freedom of expression, and a Ministry of Truth is to be avoided. As such, investing in a multifaceted resilience building approach is the way forward.

3 Ideally, such access should be made mandatory also for small platforms. As a matter of example, that would allow understanding and accountability over what happens on Telegram.

4 Such as risks of negative effects for the exercise of fundamental rights, on civic discourse and electoral processes, on public security in relation to gender-based violence, the protection of public health and minors and serious negative consequences to the person's physical and mental well-being.

When it comes to researchers, the more properly funded and tailored research, the more evidence for an effective policy response. In fact, as mentioned, research is included within an EU regulatory framework as a tool to understand and monitor. This is related to the above-mentioned Article 40 and also to the Code of Conduct on Disinformation, which is now a co-regulatory tool under the Digital Services Act., and where support to the research community is foreseen.

The dialogue between independent researchers and policy makers can be very valuable for both, but it is also often not easy. It should be reminded that both categories have public interest as their aim (which also justifies the public expenditure in their actions). Their way of working is, however, different, with one classical example being that policy makers look for immediate answers, while researchers need time to produce reliable independent findings. However, it should also be acknowledged that findings of researchers may also foresee upcoming scenarios and as such be very useful to policy, including for building preparedness. Research institutions do also offer the opportunity to independently test policy responses (e.g. in sandboxes), while on the other hand their dialogue with policy makers can help research in taking into account real scenarios.

Once researchers are properly granted data access, their dialogue with all stakeholders involved will be even more key. Their findings will likely need to be put in context with information coming from the other stakeholders in the sector. A clear example in this regard is the implementation of structural indicators. The latter, if regularly applied, are supposed to give a picture of the status of the information environment in a given moment in a given country. Compared over the years it would allow for an understanding of the developments in the information sector and for an assessment of the policies in place to ensure information integrity. Such structural indicators are to be implemented by national multi-disciplinary research groups, which in some instances need to collaborate with other stakeholders (e.g. fact-checkers, CSOs, etc.) both for data gathering and contextualization.

Conclusions

Any given decision we make is based on the information we have. Hence, information integrity is key for a democratic process. Many actors and incentives, both public and private, are involved in the information environment and ensuring its integrity needs a multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary approach and must respect fundamental rights.

Within this multi-layered picture, the dialogue between independent researchers and policy makers is a very pivotal one. The policy-making agenda is informed by politics, but this should not exclude a dialogue between the two categories. On the contrary, independent research may represent strong independent evidence supporting policy measures or in other cases, on the contrary, act as independent accountability evidence against non-effective policy measures. As so much remains to be understood in relation to the disinformation phenomenon and as data access is the key to open that door, independent researchers have a decisive role to play.

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

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