

УДК 32.019.51(477.52/.6):316.776.23(470+571)

FRAMING OF RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE BY RUSSIAN MEDIA IN EARLY 2015

ФОРМУВАННЯ СПРИЙНЯТТЯ АГРЕСІЇ РОСІЙСЬКОЇ ФЕДЕРАЦІЇ В УКРАЇНІ РОСІЙСЬКИМИ ЗМІ НА ПОЧАТКУ 2015 РОКУ

ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ВОСПРИЯТИЯ АГРЕССИИ РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ В УКРАИНЕ РОССИЙСКИМИ СМИ В НАЧАЛЕ 2015 ГОДА

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Abstract. *The article examines Russian propaganda over the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The research is based on the news stories of Russian TV channel "Pervij Kanal" during January-March 2015. The key topics of news stories were as follows: shelling of residential areas in Donbas by Ukrainian troops; humanity of rebels and their military successes; belligerence and hypocrisy of Ukrainian government; the US influence on Ukrainian government; failed military draft in Ukraine; Russia's humanitarian aid for residents of the Donbas region. Russian propaganda was intended to discredit Ukrainian authorities and undermine the legitimacy of their actions in Eastern Ukraine. For this purpose Russian media used a set of manipulative techniques that made possible to distort the reality and to mislead the public about the situation in Ukraine.*

Key words: *information warfare, Russian propaganda, Ukraine, Donbas conflict.*

Анотація. *У статті досліджено російську пропаганду щодо збройного конфлікту на Сході України на прикладі повідомлень телеканалу "Первый канал" за січень-березень 2015 року. Основними темами повідомлень у цей період були: обстріли населених пунктів Донбасу українською армією, гуманність ополченців та їхні військові успіхи, мілітаристська і лицемірна політика українського уряду, вплив США на політику українського уряду, проблеми з військовою мобілізацією в Україні, а також гуманітарна допомога РФ жителям Східної України. Мета пропаганди – дискредитація української влади і делегітимізація її дій щодо врегулювання конфлікту на Сході України. Для цього російськими ЗМІ використано низку маніпулятивних методів, які дали змогу спотворити дійсність і впродовж тривалого часу вводити громадськість в оману щодо реального перебігу подій в Україні.*

Ключові слова: інформаційна війна, російська пропаганда, Україна, конфлікт на Донбасі.

Аннотация. В статье представлен анализ российской пропаганды касательно вооруженного конфликта в восточном регионе Украины на примере сообщений телеканала “Первый канал” за январь-март 2015 года. Основными темами сообщений в этот период были: обстрелы населенных пунктов Донбасса украинской армией; гуманность ополченцев и их военные успехи; милитаристская и лицемерная политика украинского правительства; влияние США на политику украинского правительства; проблемы с военной мобилизацией в Украине; гуманитарная помощь РФ жителям Восточной Украины. Цель пропаганды – дискредитация украинской власти и делегитимизация ее действий по урегулированию конфликта на Донбассе. Для этого российскими СМИ использованы манипулятивные методы, которые позволили исказить действительность и в течение длительного времени вводить общественность в заблуждение относительно реального хода событий в Украине.

Ключевые слова: информационная война, российская пропаганда, Украина, конфликт на Донбассе.

The current problem. Since 2014 Russia has been waging hybrid war against Ukraine. This war relies heavily on information warfare. The most powerful instruments are Russian state-run media that use the variety of manipulative techniques to shape public perceptions of ongoing armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The distorted perception of the situation has strong impact on relations between two countries as well as on Ukraine’s international image.

Analysis of the latest publications. Over the last two years Russia’s information warfare against Ukraine has been a topical issue that attracts attention of different researchers, such as J. Darczewska [1], U. Franke [2], P. Pomerantsev [3], M. Snegovaya [4], G. Pocheptsov and others. This topic is also discussed in the analytical reports of the National Institute of Strategic Studies (Ukraine), of NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence as well as in the monitoring reports published by experts of Ukrainian NGO “Telekritika” [5, 6].

The aim of this paper is to examine how Russian propaganda depicts the current conflict in Eastern Ukraine (the Donbas region).

The research is based on the news stories of one of the leading state-run TV channel “Channel One” (Pervij Kanal) during January-March 2015.

The important research results. Russian propaganda presented events in the Donbas region as civil war. Russian authorities denied the presence of Russian troops in Eastern Ukraine and accused Ukrainian authorities in levying war against their own citizens. Thus, Russia dissociated itself from the conflict in Eastern Ukraine pretending to be an outside observer and mediator rather than a party in the conflict. During all period of confrontation in the Donbas region Russia emphasized its support to the diplomatic settlement of the conflict.

From January to March, 2015 Russian media focused on the following topics:

- Shelling of residential areas in Donbas by Ukrainian troops;
- Humanity of rebels of Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR);
- Belligerence and hypocrisy of Ukrainian government;
- The US influence on Ukrainian government;
- Failed military draft in Ukraine;
- Military successes of the Donbas rebels;
- Russia’s humanitarian aid for residents of the Donbas region.

Shelling of residential areas in Donbas by Ukrainian troops. First of all, Russian media accused Ukrainian armed forces for violation of ceasefire and for shelling residential areas in the

Donbas region, using heavy artillery, multiple rocket launch systems and even prohibited weapons (phosphorus and cluster bombs). Ukrainian soldiers were portrayed as cruel, merciless and inhuman.

According to Russian TV channel, Ukrainian troops shelled cities and villages without distinction. To emphasize the atrocities of Ukrainian armed forces, Russian journalists used such phrases as “Ukrainian soldiers don’t stint themselves of the choice of ammunition; everything that is the most mighty and deadly is falling on residential areas” [7].

The statistics on civilian casualties, ruined buildings and abandoned cities was used to instill the idea that due to Ukrainian army the whole families had been killed and residential areas had turned into “cities of the dead” [8].

Russian TV channel broadcasted real life heart-breaking stories about children who lost their parents, about young couple who saw the horrible death of their little son, etc.

Moreover, Russian propaganda cited the reports of Russian NGOs to accuse Ukrainian soldiers for brutal treatment and putting war prisoners to torture [9].

Media coverage of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine was very biased and one-sided. Russian media cited mainly the statements of separatists while withholding or questioning the accuracy of information from Ukrainian official sources. For example, Ukrainian army was held responsible for the Volnovakha bus attack and for shelling a bus stop in Donetsk that resulted in dozens of civilian injuries and deaths. Russian media quoted separatists, eyewitnesses and experts to deny any involvement of Donbas militants in such incidents [10]. Russian journalists also referred to hackers from CyberBerkut group who published the compromised documents of Security Service of Ukraine on their official website. According to the documents, the bus shelling incident in Volnovakha could have been planned and carried out by the Office of Security Service of Ukraine in Donetsk region for political purposes [11].

After Minsk ceasefire agreement had been signed on February 12, 2015 Russian media focused on its violation by Ukrainian armed forces. Russian TV channel repeatedly reported that Ukrainian troops continued fighting and delayed the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the frontline. These facts were allegedly documented by OSCE Mission.

Humanity of the rebels of Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR). Unlike Ukrainian soldiers, Donbas separatists were portrayed as good guys that didn’t want to be at war with anyone and looked for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Russian TV channel used facts selection and favorable interpretations to present the separatists as defenders of their land and compatriots.

Russian propaganda claimed that the Donbas rebels were willing to negotiate with Ukrainian authorities and made every effort to force Ukrainian army back and minimize civilian casualties. One of the media stories contained the following quote of rebels’ representative: “For us Minsk talks are about people’s lives and for Kyiv it is a cover operation” [12].

There were a number of news stories about Donbas rebels helping civilians to leave the combat area by organizing so called “humanitarian corridor”. Thus, Donbas residents were not left to the mercy of fate and had the chance to save their lives. The rebels also took advantage of ceasefire periods to restore houses and other infrastructure facilities in the Donbas region [13].

Russian propaganda also attributed to the DPR’s militants such features as generosity and compassion to their enemy. These features were accentuated in the news stories about Battle of Debaltseve. When thousands of Ukrainian soldiers were surrounded by the Donbas militants near Debaltseve city, the separatists gave Ukrainian soldiers the chance to save their lives and to return home safe and sound [14].

Following Minsk summit on February 11, 2015 and the agreement on a new package of peacemaking measures for the Donbas region, Russian media focused on the efforts of the separatists to implement these agreements. The main topics of news stories were the respect for the ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the frontline by Donbas rebels. By the end of the month the separatists reported the full withdrawal of heavy weapons from the frontline. According to Russian media, all actions of the rebels were monitored and documented by OSCE Mission [15].

Belligerence and hypocrisy of Ukrainian government. The key message of Russian propaganda was that Ukrainian authorities are not interested in peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Donbas region.

Ukrainian government was labelled “party of war”. Russian journalists stated that Ukrainian authorities were not willing to negotiate with the representatives of Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics [20].

Russian journalists also emphasized the inconsistency between words and deeds of Ukrainian president. In his speeches Ukrainian leader stood for diplomatic resolution of the Donbas conflict. In practice he gave orders to supply Ukrainian army with new weapons and declared next wave of military draft. One of the media reports revealed the plans of Ukrainian authorities to call up for military service more than 100 thousand of citizens [16]. Moreover, despite peaceful negotiations Ukrainian leadership repeated attempts to get lethal arms from USA [17].

Ukrainian authorities were also accused for violating Minsk agreements. Russian media reported that Ukrainian officials were trying to postpone the implementation of Minsk agreements, in particular the clauses on local elections in rebel-held regions as well as constitutional reform granting special status to the separatist-controlled regions in Eastern Ukraine [18].

When Ukrainian parliament finally passed the law on special status of the Donbas region, Russian journalists rushed to label it as “not complying with Minsk agreements”. The representatives of DPR and LPR were quoted to say that Ukrainian authorities tried to impose unacceptable terms and didn’t want to negotiate with them. Thus, the law adopted by Ukrainian parliament just confirmed belligerent plans of Ukrainian authorities [19].

The US influence on Ukrainian government. Russian propaganda claimed that the United States had significant influence on Ukrainian policy. Ukrainian authorities were called “American puppets”.

Russian media stated that after every visit of American high-ranking military officials to Kyiv Ukrainian troops intensified combat operation in the Donbas region.

Russian TV channel also quoted several experts to argue that USA took advantage of the situation in Eastern Ukraine to put pressure on Russia and drive a wedge between Russia and European Union [20].

Russian TV channel quoted the separatists and the experts to argue that foreign mercenaries were involved in military operations of Ukrainian armed forces. To prove these allegations Russian media reported that the Donbas rebels had found the fragments of US-made shells in the ruins of houses and the guidelines in English language for Ukrainian soldiers [17].

Russian TV channel also referred to the report of hacker group CyberBerkut to assert that the United States would use Western private military contractors to deliver weapons to Ukraine [21].

Failed military draft in Ukraine. Russian propaganda claimed that Ukrainian authorities had serious difficulties in mobilizing Ukrainian citizens to fight against rebels in the Donbas region. According to Russian media reports, a growing number of Ukrainian citizens were evading military service. The men eligible for conscription as well as Ukrainian soldiers already

fighting in the Donbas region sought ways to leave the country. This information was endorsed by concrete examples and statistics from Russian and Ukrainian sources [22].

Desperately trying to solve the problem Ukraine's parliament passed a law which authorized commanding officers to use physical force against army defectors. Ukrainian government also offered a significant increase of salary payments for soldiers fighting in Donbas. But, according to Russian news stories, all these efforts were unlikely to change the situation because Ukrainian soldiers were not eager to defend and die for their motherland.

Military successes of the Donbas rebels. Russian TV channel reported that the separatists of DPR and LPR forced Ukrainian army back from several cities of Donbas, occupied Donetsk airport and encircled thousands of Ukrainian soldiers in the area around Debaltseve. The "final (ultimate)" and "total" encirclement of Ukrainian troops near Debaltseve by the separatists was at the top of media agenda during the first half of February. When reporting the ultimate victory of DPR militants over Ukrainian army in Debaltseve city Russian media emphasized the joy of local residents to whom the separatists gave hope for peace. Russian media also reported the hasty retreat of Ukrainian troops and the surrender of hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers [23, 24].

Russia' humanitarian aid for residents of the Donbas region. While Ukrainian authorities fought against their own citizens, Russian government sent trucks with humanitarian aid to war-torn eastern Ukraine. Russian humanitarian aid included food, medicine, building materials and textbooks for educational institutions. According to Russian TV channel, more than 15,000 tons of humanitarian aid had been delivered to the Donbas region over the past six months [25].

Russian media stated that Donbas residents were very grateful for this aid because Ukrainian government had left them to the mercy of fate. The people of Donbas hadn't got salaries and pensions for a long time. They found themselves in a sort of economic blockade. And Russian humanitarian aid helped them to survive [26]. Thus, Russia appeared to be more caring about Ukrainians than their own government.

Russia also took care of refugees from Eastern Ukraine, providing them with temporary housing, food and medical treatment. Russian media reported that more than 40 thousand of Ukrainian citizens had already fled to Russia and the flow of refugees had been increasing each day [27]. Moreover, Russian government organized evacuation of sick and injured children from the warzone and sent them to the best hospitals in Moscow [28].

Conclusions. Russian propaganda is intended to discredit Ukrainian authorities and undermine the legitimacy of their actions in the Donbas region. To achieve this purpose Russian media heavily distorted the reality, using manipulation techniques. The strong psychological effect was obtained due to the combination of appeals to emotions with statistical evidence and expertise, facts selection (card stacking), repetition of certain information, labelling, simplification as well as the mixture of truth and lie. The abundance of such information made it possible to weaken the critical thinking of the target audience and totally immerse it in alternative reality.

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