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PROPAGANDA, CRITICISM, AND WAR:
A STUDY OF REGIME CRITICISM BY PROPAGANDISTS IN WAR

by

JACK C. SEAY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Political Science
in the College of Sciences
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Thomas Dolan, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates when propagandists criticize their country's war effort, examining instances where propagandists openly criticize the regimes they are expected to support during an armed conflict. This is a unique and relatively unexplored angle on propaganda, differing from widespread research on the range of effects that propaganda has on a target population, the reasons behind using propaganda on a target population, and the methods propagandists use to raise support for a political authority. Understanding when propagandists criticize their country's war effort can mitigate their influence by helping audiences identify when and how propagandists use criticism to their advantage. The paper hypothesizes that propagandists criticize their country's war effort when a military failure is too apparent to ignore or deny and that they acknowledge smaller failures more often as war goes on to maintain credibility. These hypotheses were tested by measuring TV propagandist's responses to several cases in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. The results are that more apparent failures garnered increased amounts of criticism from propagandists, and that the passage of time didn't increase criticism of smaller failures unless they affected the Russian public.

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I want to thank my friends and family for their unwavering support as I progressed through my research, writing, and defense. There were certainly periods of difficulty where I was motivated to continue because of the interest of those around me in my thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

When do propagandists criticize their country's war effort? This question is puzzling in and of itself because propagandists are meant to manipulate or fabricate information in support of political authorities. On paper, no rational propagandist is supposed to act in a way that diminishes the powers that guide them. Criticizing their country's war effort goes against this principle in every way, creating a unique angle of propaganda studies that hasn't been examined. A propagandist and regime require an audience that buys into what they're trying to sell, making the findings of this study important in understanding how propagandists sell the message of war to a population. Previous studies have explained what propaganda is, its relationship with public diplomacy, and psychology in great depth; however, the trinity of propaganda, criticism, and war have yet to be studied in a way that examines criticism from the propagandist up during times of war. Russia's current propaganda machine is used to help answer this question and understand other relationships, patterns, and trends in the war propaganda domain. With the dependent variable being criticism by Russian propagandists, this thesis involves cases where the country's internal information space is secure, meaning the government has more leeway in avoiding criticism because foreign sources are virtually inaccessible.

In a broad sense, this thesis expands the existing literature on propaganda studies while simultaneously entering a new frontier due to the absence of literature on the topic. Past outcomes of different conflicts did not contribute to testing the hypotheses and evaluating the research question. Today, Russia is commonly

associated with propaganda because of its Soviet past and contemporary attempts to influence foreign affairs through the firehose of falsehoods model. Russia's apparent association with the use of propaganda, and the cases offered by the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War presented a logical way to conduct this thesis. The cases and environment also helped identify dissemination strategies that can be used outside of war to maintain the balance of getting and retaining viewership to push regime messaging.

After close examination of Russian propaganda and the selected cases, it was found that there was a positive relationship between apparency and criticism, likely because the event was too obvious to ignore or deny. Doing so would decrease credibility, hurting the propagandist and regime more than small doses of criticism directed at the war effort or peripheral military figures. When assessing the effects of time on criticism, there were two opposing results, indicating that certain smaller failures are increasingly criticized, but not all the time. This could be down to the geography of the cases, as the drone attacks have presented a real threat to the Russian people, whereas the attacks on Russian vessels occurred far away from Russia's borders. It was also found that propagandists attempted to engage the audience in the war by alerting them to threats through criticism or general reporting. To eliminate the risk of their criticism getting out of control propagandists quickly justify or downplay their statements, often reassuring the audience that Russia's strength makes victory inevitable. Criticism also has its limits. Propagandists never criticized Vladimir Putin or Sergei Shiogu; instead, they praised them after successes and even failures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Propaganda

To fully understand the role of propagandists in Russia's current war effort, it is essential to define propaganda and assess how it has been used in history. Propaganda has taken on a variety of definitions over the course of the last century, with it often differing across disciplines. In the 16th century, the origins of the term 'propaganda' were seen in the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Congregation for the Propagation of Faith), which was a Catholic committee aimed at fighting the Reformation (Walton, 1997, p. 383). One of the earliest definitions of contemporary propaganda comes from Walter Lippmann (1922), who describes propagandists as "A group of men, who can prevent independent access to the event, arrange the news of it to suit their purpose" (p. 28). This is propaganda in its most basic form. A tool used by states, non-states, groups, and individuals to influence information. It is also the easiest definition to attribute to the propaganda seen during the Russo-Ukraine War, as Russia has secured its national information space, enabling its propagandists to control what is shown and how it is discussed. For example, the Russian public got most if not all their information on Yevgeny Prigozhin's plane crash from state television, meaning they were essentially forced to trust the findings of Russia's investigation.

In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann (1922) observes how French generals presided over editorial conferences in WW1. In these conferences, they added reassuring qualities, only presented specific facts, and used a tone most likely to "steady the people" (p. 25). The example he gives is news of the losses suffered by the French during the Battle of

Verdun. The papers explained that the losses didn't surprise the French Command when they really weren't prepared for the German offensive. Similarly to current Russian propaganda the event was presented as serious but not strange, leaving the French public reasonably scared and soldiers concerned, possibly to further engage them in France's war effort by presenting a significant threat.

Like Lippmann, Harold Lasswell offers an early definition of propaganda centered on the attitudes that an object invokes. According to Lasswell (1927), propaganda is the "management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" (p. 627). In his explanation, Lasswell (1927) states that the object or symbol must be presented as something that "protects your values, champions your dreams, and is a model of virtue" to receive positive attitudes (p. 630). This is apparent in Russian propaganda as propagandists are quick to praise Putin's leadership and decision-making or defend him if he is questioned by the odd propagandist or the West.¹ Lasswell adds that war propaganda involves the enemy, the ally, and the neutral, with social revolutionists being a part of the enemy because they could redirect negative community attitudes from the enemy to the government (p. 630). Parallels can be seen in Russia's current war propaganda and Lasswell's writing as propagandists identify the West and dissidents as the enemy, Russian leadership and aligned countries as the ally, and the Russian military as a mix of the two depending on its performance.

¹ State Duma member Andrey Gurulyov quickly shifted his tone after the Wagner coup, praising Putin, and denying that Sergei Shiogu or Valery Gerasimov would be replaced (Davis, 2023a).

Propaganda vs Public Diplomacy

Some question the difference between propaganda and public diplomacy as both involve the flow of information. Mull and Wallin (2013) describe propaganda as a sub-set of public diplomacy, breaking it into three forms: white, grey, and black. The most prevalent forms seen in Russian propaganda are black and white propaganda. Black propaganda describes the use of disinformation while concealing to the audience that it is being propagandized with false attribution to its source, and white propaganda typically uses facts and truthful messages in a biased and persuasive manner with attribution to its source (Mull & Wallin, 2013). Mull (2013) describes propaganda as more of a sub-set of public diplomacy than an equivalent entity. In the decades since the fall of the Soviet Union this description seems to be less true in Russia's context as its propaganda machine continues to grow and be relied upon by those in the Kremlin.

Table 1: Propaganda vs. Public Diplomacy

Propaganda	Public Diplomacy
Selective of truth	Based on truth
Rarely two-way	Often two-way
Listens in order to target	Listens in order to learn
Intended only to influence target	Can influence the originator
Tight agenda	Flexible agenda
Assumes others are wrong	Tends to be respectful of others
Closed	Open

Note. From “Propaganda: A tool of Strategic Influence,” by Christian Mull and Matthew Wallin, 2013, p. 3 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06038>).

Table 1 presents Dr. Nicholas J. Cull’s comparisons between propaganda and public diplomacy (Cull, 2013, as cited in Mull & Wallin, 2013). Russian propaganda has shown to be selective of truth, as propagandists have been reserved in reporting bad news during the war. This connection between propagandists and criticism, typically based on truth, is what this thesis hopes to examine in more detail. Another notable comparison is that propaganda assumes others are wrong, whereas public diplomacy tends to be respectful of others (Cull, 2023, as cited in Mull & Wallin, 2013). While this has shown to be mostly true, it should be mentioned that Russian propagandists are deeply respectful of others, but only if these others are Vladimir Putin and his close allies.

Others like Douglas Walton (1997) believe that propaganda and public diplomacy are more closely linked than Mull and Wallin suggest, pointing to the fact that politicians and bureaucrats avoided attaching the term to their public activities during both world wars, instead using it when discussing the public relations and promotional activities of their opponents (p. 384). Walton (1997) attributes this to the negative connotation that has developed since the 16th century, with a focal point being when the Allies claimed that the enemy’s opinion-forming activities were propaganda, which was only comprised of lies. Today, the term’s negative connotation appears to be stronger than ever, with attempts to reassociate propaganda with a more neutral tone being dismissed (Marlin 1989, as cited in Walton, 1997). While Russia’s propaganda machine is undoubtedly

negative and is one of the first examples one mentions when discussing propaganda, Walton's point is accurate as the United States and Western-aligned states have engaged in campaigns to influence public opinion in many major conflicts. This is especially true in recent decades as civil-military relations become more important in war.

In agreement with Walton, Alexander Laskin's 2019 study extensively discusses how propaganda has become a negative term often attributed to the other opposition. According to Laskin (2019), earlier definitions don't separate propaganda from more common activities like marketing, advertising, public relations, and other forms of mass communication, advancing the argument that propaganda and public diplomacy are closely linked. Again, since the First World War, public officials have shied away from associating their activities with propaganda because of the growing negativity attached to the term. A prime example would be Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information established shortly after the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917. The goal of this committee was to sell the idea of war, "America's crusade," to the public and American values to the world (Laskin, 2019, p. 307). Like many other state communication bodies, there is no mention of propaganda in the name when its mission was to propagate America domestically and abroad.

Propaganda and the Mind

Propaganda is a mental game above anything else. It seeks to persuade, or at a minimum, evokes emotion in the audience. Laskin (2019) writes that positive and negative emotions must be present to make propaganda more successful (p. 312).

During the war Russian propagandists have often structured their messages to invoke angry reactions because it can mobilize emotion that diverts focus away from failures or bad news. An example would be propagandists raging at the Ukrainians for their drone attacks instead of pointing at failures in Russia's air defenses. Laskin (2019) looks at propaganda through a psychoanalytical perspective focused on symbiotic relations. He says propaganda seeks to "make people sacrifice their personal wishes and lives for something bigger and presumably more important" (Laskin, 2019, p. 309). In his view, propagandists seek to capitalize on human dependency, where people would rather be a part of a greater power than alone with their own thoughts. Although the Russian people know they must sacrifice something, such as their preferences or wants to join the common narratives of the war, they also know the only other option is to be isolated, which deprives them of the symbiotic relationships that human nature desires.

From his findings, Laskin (2019) defines propaganda as a "persuasive communication activity that establishes symbiotic relations between an individual and a larger entity into which the individual is being dissolved" (p. 313). This raises the question: does self-criticism by Russian propagandists hurt their symbiotic relationships with the regime in the short run for symbiotic gains in the long run between propaganda and the Russian population? If so, it may be the cost that propagandists are willing to pay; however, it may not even be a cost if the regime sanctions occasional criticism for the propagandists to retain credibility. Looking at propaganda through this perspective of symbiotic relationships can help identify several examples of propaganda like the Soviet Union's agitprop which pursued the social above private message, the Reich

Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda which pushed the responsibility to community message, and even Kennedy's famous "ask not what your country can do for you..." line which essentially asked people to consider pursuing a symbiotic relationship with their country.

Using citizens' reception of regime propaganda surrounding Ukraine in 2016-17, Maxim Alyukov (2023) assesses how citizens in authoritarian regimes evaluate the credibility of communication from their regime. He names three heuristics people use when perceiving information to support his study. The authority heuristic says state media organizations or organizations controlled by professional journalists are likelier to report credible information (Alyukov, 2023, p. 531). The authenticity heuristic says if the information presented doesn't contain political ideas or politicians, it isn't aiming to manipulate the viewer and should be trusted (Alyukov, 2023, p. 531). The persuasive intent heuristic says that if the story attempts to influence opinion, it shouldn't be trusted (Alyukov, 2023, p. 531). Alyukov (2023) found that his participants were more distrustful of regime propaganda when relying on personal experience and wisdom but that the credibility of all propaganda wasn't negatively affected while also observing an increased reliance on the authenticity heuristic and decreased reliance on the authority heuristic.

When comparing different sides of the political spectrum, Alyukov (2023) found that regime supporters relied more on personal experience and the authenticity heuristic, whereas the anti-regime audience relied more on the persuasive intent heuristic due to their skepticism of regime dissemination. Alyukov's findings draw

parallels to the current war propaganda in Russia. Because there are few options for the Russian public other than state media, the population's lack of personal experience isn't enough to denounce the credibility of Russian propagandists, meaning they typically must accept the propaganda shown to them while knowing it may not be credible. This has led to an overreliance on the authority heuristic because state media organizations dominate, and their shows are filled with "professional journalists" and "military experts."

There is also a debate between which propaganda is more effective: hard or soft propaganda. Hard propaganda puts a regime on a pedestal without much reliance on emotion. Soft propaganda on the other hand uses entertaining media and literature to invoke emotion in a manner that makes propagandists seem more credible. Soft propaganda is the primary method used by current Russian propagandists to justify and garner domestic support for Russia's war against Ukraine. Daniel Mattingly and Elaine Yao studied the two forms by exposing Chinese respondents to nationalist messages featured in television dramas, state newscasts, and state-backed social media posts (2022). Several of the messages involved anti-Japanese drama, which allowed Yao and Mattingly to investigate the emotional response to a foreign adversary, like how Russian propagandists are using Ukraine and Western nations to arouse emotion. Mattingly and Yao's (2022) findings suggest that a mixture of soft and hard propaganda is most effective because they saw that soft propaganda was mostly effective at communicating nationalist messages but not as effective at building lasting regime support. The complex blend of hard and soft propaganda suggested by their study supports the Kremlin's nationalistic rhetoric and displays of military power at their occasional military

parade, along with the soft propaganda pushed through state television and other forms of media.

In a similar study, Carlo Horz (2021) focuses on how the actions of the propagandists influence skepticism, relying on Bayes' Theorem to measure the risk-return trade-off that comes with the delivery and content of propaganda. Essentially, the trade-off he measured is the relationship between extremeness and effectiveness. What are the most extreme things you can say without losing the most people? This is essentially the balance between credibility and self-criticism. Propagandists need to gain viewership while supporting their regimes and retaining viewership simultaneously. If they aren't extreme enough, their message may not stick decreasing effectiveness. If they are too extreme, they lose credibility and viewership which could be more costly than being too passive. Horz (2021) found that more extreme statements motivated more active responses if the statement is accepted, but general acceptance decreases with more extremeness. The effects of the extreme statements observed by Horz are difficult to measure in the current Russian population because the regime has worked to limit access to external interaction by monitoring communication and censorship. Still, propagandists have shown little restraint in their speech as they frequently suggest using atomic weapons in Ukraine and on Western countries.

Egregious statements may be a way to identify and recruit highly chauvinistic followers. A 2022 study on the impact of ISIS propaganda found that the group's most extreme followers were even more supportive after seeing violent content, but more moderate viewers weren't as enthusiastic (Mitts et al., 2022). This echoed the trade-off

discussed in Horz's study. It should be noted that the cost of losing a moderate base is more significant in Mitts et al. (2022) study because they aren't solely restricted to ISIS propaganda on the internet. In contrast the Russian population must go out of their way to avoid Russian propaganda. This gives the Kremlin and other authoritarian regimes the ability to target both the extreme and moderate bases because their state-sponsored propaganda is typically the primary and only source of information, giving the population the choice to consume information with the knowledge it could be false or consume nothing at all and be unaware.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Propagandists criticize their country's war effort to maintain credibility. Credibility engages and grows their audience, increasing exposure and support for their regime. Propagandists risk their credibility by completely omitting bad news because people know nothing is perfect. Even if the internal information space is secured, as is usually the case in authoritarian regimes, low credibility can increase skepticism, hindering both the domestic and international goals of the regime. This makes criticism and acknowledgment of bad news a small price to pay for long term regime support. However, propagandists can minimize this cost by reversing or downplaying criticism.

H1: Propagandists criticize their country's war effort when a military failure is too apparent to ignore or deny.

H2: As war goes on propagandists acknowledge smaller failures more often to maintain credibility.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Cases

The research question and hypotheses are tested using a series of cases in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. One case that is apparent and one that isn't as apparent are compared to test the first hypothesis. The more apparent case is the fall of Kherson which ended the Kherson counteroffensive. The less apparent case is the broader Kharkiv offensive. Three cases that involve similar events earlier and later in the war are used to test the second hypothesis. The sinking of the Moskva near the beginning of the war and recent Ukrainian strikes on Russia's Black Sea vessels are compared to analyze the early vs late dynamic with the earlier event being a major failure and the later event being a minor one. The final case is the recurring drone strikes on Russian soil. The progression of coverage of the strikes will be analyzed to test the second hypothesis.

The fall of Kherson was selected because it was expected to garner criticism from propagandists due to its significance. It was the first major city taken by the Russians early in the war and was the first to be retaken by the Ukrainians. This happened weeks after Kherson was unlawfully annexed in a ceremony headed by Putin. Apparentness is measured using Russian media coverage. If Russian sources covered the event then it is apparent and if they didn't it isn't apparent. Russia 1 and RIA Novosti are used because they are primarily domestic focused, whereas TASS and RT have more of an international focus. The Kharkiv counteroffensive was selected because it wasn't expected to garner much criticism or media coverage. It was a very

fast counteroffensive in a less important region than Kherson and no major city such as Kharkiv changed hands. Comparing the two cases measures the effects of apparentness on propagandist's criticism, testing hypothesis one.

The testing of the second hypothesis only involved propagandists. The sinking of the Moskva is considered a major failure because it was the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet and happened just two months after the war started. The strikes against the Black Sea Fleet vessels in September 2023, are considered minor failures because the vessels don't hold the same significance and possess the same capabilities of the Moskva. Comparing propagandist's coverage of the two offers a good picture of whether they increasingly criticize smaller failures as the war goes on. While confined to a single case, the reasoning behind selecting Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian soil is the same. Drone strikes are considered a minor failure because while they can certainly cause damage, they don't have the ability to drastically alter the course of the war. Therefore propagandist's coverage, or lack thereof, of Ukrainian drone strikes over time allows for the testing of hypothesis two.

Data Collection

Clips of propagandist shows and panels are used to complete this thesis. They primarily come from the Russian Media Monitor YouTube and X accounts run by Julia Davis. The clips feature English subtitles, simplifying the collection process and making it easier for English speakers to watch the clips. Other sources identified by X's algorithm are also included. To test hypothesis one, Russia 1 and RIA Novosti's sites are used to find articles that could indicate apparentness of the cases. The Google

Translate extension makes it possible to search the archives and look for articles published during the time frame of the cases.

FINDINGS

After reviewing the related literature, news articles, case studies, and statements from Russian propagandists, several observations can be made concerning the hypotheses and the broader propaganda landscape. In their attempt to influence the populace, propagandists could be seen indirectly and directly criticizing the war effort. In most messages, criticism or not, propagandists sought to make the audience feel somewhat afraid of the threat before reassuring them that everything would be fine due to Russia's immense military strength. This is likely an effort to make the Russian people feel as if there's little cost to supporting or joining the war because they would be joining a winning side, supporting Laskin's (2019) idea that the goal of propaganda aims to establish symbiotic relationships. It is also worth mentioning that larger powers such as America, Britain, the West, or NATO are commonly attached to this threat because Ukraine alone isn't compelling enough to garner interest in Russia's war effort. The lack of seriousness around Ukraine as a threat likely comes from the hubris among Russians as they have always been told they're superior to their Soviet neighbors, giving propagandists little reason to hold Ukraine in high regard.

General Observations about Russia's War Propaganda

The Combination of Threats and Reassurance: Spring 2023

This pattern can be seen during propagandist shows on various occasions. On February 11th, 2023, Vladimir Solovyov angrily questioned the lackadaisical attitude towards Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory, asking why Russia can't do the same before calling for less restraint to "whack" the Ukrainians

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCoY2cGlc4w>). In a panel on May 30th, 2023, “military expert” Konstantin Sivkov called the drone attacks on Moscow “very positive” because they’ll motivate Russians to support the war and hold animosity towards Ukraine and the West (Scarr, 2023b). That same day, Solovyov passive-aggressively goes at Russia’s urban populations, saying that the sooner they recognize there is a war with NATO and ask themselves what they are doing, the sooner it will be over before saying Ukrainian cities should be dismantled (Scarr, 2023c). In another example, journalist and “military expert” Mikhail Khodaryonok tapped into the awareness and fear aspect of the Belgorod incursions in early June, saying that Ukraine will continue trying to spread Russian forces along the border before the other panelists called for the start of another Great Patriotic War (Samuel Ramani, 2023). In these instances, the propagandist is directly and indirectly using the sociopolitical impact of the strikes and incursions to influence the public, with Solovyov taking it a step further by constantly implying that Russia has the power to dismantle Ukrainian cities, following the narrative that they want to engage the populace while simultaneously reassuring them.

The Combination of Threats and Reassurance: Summer 2023

This two-pronged strategy has changed over the last seven months, with propagandists increasingly focusing on purporting Russia’s strength through rash rhetoric as a means of reassurance and less rhetoric focused on raising support among the public through apparent recruitment and motivating language. From early June to August 30th, there were no observed examples of propagandists connecting Ukraine, the West, or NATO to direct calls for support from the public. A change to a more subtle

strategy where propagandists engage the public solely by reporting on those “threats” could explain why this is the case, as the absence of political ideas or signs of persuasion opens the door for the authenticity and persuasive intent heuristics to be used.

There were two instances where the original pattern reemerged in late August. In an August 30th rant following a series of Ukrainian drone attacks, Solovyov admitted that the strike on Peskov was very bad, questioning how the attack was possible and responding to viewers in his chat, telling them to be quiet and “defend your motherland” by showing how it’s done on the front lines (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWx-8PTRdSM>). A few days after Solovyov’s response to the attacks, a panel discusses a poll revealing that the attacks from Ukraine were the most important event of the week. In response, host Roman Babayan admits that everyone is tired of the attacks but understands that they will continue (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jldfJ5HZSu8>). Following Babayan’s response, former politician Spiridon Kilinkarov advocated for “fear over love” to gain respect (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jldfJ5HZSu8>). While Solovyov didn’t explicitly follow up his acknowledgment of the strikes with a desire to destroy the enemy, he did imply that it’s time for Russia to do what it’s always been capable of and wage war. The panel’s coverage and responses are a more direct example of the return to the awareness and reassurance model.

The Combination of Threats and Reassurance: Fall 2023

From September to November, propagandists could be seen using the awareness and reassurance model regularly but in a different form. In her summer

review, Margarita Simonyan presented a vivid and grim example of the combination but with weaker rhetoric at the back end. While confident that Russia would eventually win over the West, she admitted it is Russia's most difficult war in history because Russia is essentially on its own and that the Russian people wake up expecting news of drone strikes in Crimea, the Black Sea, and Russian cities because it is the "new reality" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvrLN__p2bs). On September 13th, Solovyov reported on Ukraine's strikes on Sevastopol in a dejected manner, quoting the Russian Defense Ministry's one-sided report and advocating for retaliatory strikes against Western cities and decision-making centers (Davis, 2023h). Like Simonyan's summer review, the enthusiasm in propagandist's attempts to engage the public in the war effort was noticeably different. Instead of trying to motivate or scare they were simply reporting what happened, albeit with the same level of bias. While this could still be a way to develop symbiotic relationships between the population and Russia's war propaganda machine, it draws different reactions which could signify war fatigue from the top down.

A continuation of this trend can be seen in Solovyov's September 16th broadcast. After Kim Jong Un visited Russia, Solovyov offered a more general assessment of the war, saying he's not happy about military performance because Russia hasn't used its "entire and most destructive arsenal" to respond to Ukrainian strikes or hold Britain, Germany, and France accountable for destroying the Nord Stream pipeline (Davis, 2023d). Again, because Russia's propagandists don't see Ukraine as a compelling enough threat, they must include Western countries in their message while also

mentioning some aspect of Russian power that has yet to be used. Here, it's implied that the three nations are responsible for blowing up a critical gas pipeline. Solovyov is likely trying to paint a narrative that they collaborated on destroying Russia's pipeline, i.e., "they attacked us." Solovyov fails to mention that the pipeline is significant to those in Western Europe, and there are no signs that they sabotaged the pipelines. Due to Russia's control over its national information space, it is highly likely that Russians don't realize there isn't evidence to support this claim, meaning they must take what they get from propagandists like Solovyov.

Following another round of Ukrainian strikes on Sevastopol in late September, show host Yuliya Vityazera took a different approach that's both similar and different to the sociopolitical connections used by propagandists in May. She approached it as if she was trying to relate to people, telling them to calm down but that their initial panic and anger was justified because she was also angry and called for retaliation (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYvP9KYhrz0>). It differs because she proscribed anger as an emotional response, explaining that while it's understandable, it doesn't change anything. To justify her calls for calmness which some may see as a lack of action, she said Ukraine would get what's coming, and Russia would win no matter what. Vityazera also adds that continuing "helping our guys" is important, making this the closest example to the pattern seen in late spring (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYvP9KYhrz0>).

From September 26th through November, there was an even mix of calls for strong retaliation and acknowledgment of Ukrainian threats and Russian failures, with

the mood noticeably different than observed in the spring and summer. Without pointing blame at anyone specifically, former politician Igor Markov spoke with a sense of urgency as he criticized the unclear goals and tasks of the war, adding that assessments need to be more honest. As an example, Markov said assessments of Ukraine's acquisition of cluster munitions must include the fact that there will be losses while also saying that they won't significantly affect the whole operation (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nzC5SDfYIA>). To top it off, Markov shouts, "Are we idiots or what?" for being complacent and not dealing a final blow, mirroring other propagandists who imply that Russia could quickly end the war (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nzC5SDfYIA>). This is a continuation of the pattern but in a different form, admitting that losses will occur while implying that the special military operation will be successful. A difference here is that it seems more like an effort to normalize losses and less so an attempt to entice support from the public.

Simonyan, Solovyov, Sergey Mardan, and Pavel Gubarev's appearances during this period lacked much energy. Of the propagandists, Simonyan and Solovyov's frustration and sense of dejection were increasing the most. The propagandists also continued to normalize failures and losses while still justifying them. In a September 29th interview, Gubarev, who previously proclaimed himself as governor of Donetsk Oblast, discussed the faults of the Russian offensive on Kyiv, praised the Ukrainian army, and said that Russia has to genocide or reeducate the anti-Russian Ukrainians following Russia's victory. Gubarev justified the failure to take Kyiv and credited Ukraine's strength by saying that the decision to withdraw was logical and it makes sense that the

Ukrainians are fighting well because they are the same as Russians, just with an anti-Russian sentiment (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkc9QQQ0NWK>). He showed little emotion in the interview and didn't seem frustrated, possibly to display a sense of calmness to the public.

During a panel on October 1st, Solovyov couldn't understand why an article in The Economist called the Russian Army weak. The reaction itself isn't surprising, but what follows is. Solovyov gives credit to the Ukrainian military saying that no NATO army has fought a force comparable to Ukraine's Army with its level of support in the last forty years (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3i0pVDMz3I>). Mentioning Ukraine's level of support was likely his way of diminishing the credit he had just given the Ukrainian Army, as he said it following acknowledgment from the other panelists. Still, this is significant because Solovyov never gives Ukraine any credit as he usually only directs his frustration at them or the Russian military. Because of this his statement continues the recent trend of normalizing Ukrainian success set by Gubarev, likely in effort to justify the length of the war to the Russian public. It also presents the Ukrainian military as a threat in the most direct way possible, signaling that propagandists are again trying to engage the public because they might sense decreasing military and moral support for the war.

In another self-recorded monologue, Simonyan appears deflated as she admits achieving peace will be very difficult because the war is with the West as Ukraine was defeated in the first few days (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OM_kHWKzI5Y). This represents a deviation from what was observed in the two examples above because

Simonyan doesn't give any credit to the Ukrainians, only bringing back the narrative that the West is the opponent, which suggests a disconnect between propagandists. It raises the question, are people supposed to suddenly realize that Ukraine is putting up a good fight or continue believing the war is so difficult because it is against NATO and the West? Based on the patterns observed over the last few months the most likely answer is that it was originally the latter but is now becoming the former or a mix of the two where Ukraine is a worthy opponent with the full support of the West.

Like Solovyov and Gubarev, Mardan conveyed a sense of normalcy following Ukrainian's drone and missile attacks on October 12th, calling the barrage a "routine daily shelling" and "routine attack" on Belgorod which is the price for not ending the war in three days or months (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5UgTk7_hN8). Mardan goes on to say that the Russian army is fighting well and calls for Russia to level Ukraine like Israel is leveling Hamas or Ukraine will try and level Russia, combining the fear and reassurance through strength aspects of propagandist speech seen throughout the war (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5UgTk7_hN8). While not as direct in crediting Ukraine's army, the second part implies that Ukraine has the desire and maybe even the ability to destroy Russia to convince the audience that Russia must do it first. On November 26th, Solovyov's show took a strange turn, offering several outliers to the patterns seen throughout the past year. Solovyov first asks viewers to support Russian troops through a QR code. While Solovyov mentions this like it's typical for his show, it resembles past calls to support Russian soldiers. More importantly, Solovyov admits that interest in the war has declined, criticizing Russians by saying they are

“psychologically tired” and seeking some “holiday escapism”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1AGyq7AbEI>). The criticism of Russian attitudes is unsurprising considering it's been seen before; however openly admitting a lack of interest doesn't seem to have any benefits, likely signaling Solovyov's frustration in failing to garner support for the war.

Concluding Remarks on the Awareness and Reassurance Model

From February through October of this year, the awareness and reassurance model appeared in different forms, with earlier broadcasts and panels generally more energetic and interested in driving support and recruitment for Russian forces. During the spring and summer, there were several instances where propagandists directly asked viewers to support Russian troops or the war effort. Around August and September, a shift in attitude was apparent, with propagandists mostly forgoing direct calls for support, instead turning to more dejected coverage of what happened while still flaunting Russia's ability to end the war quickly. This has continued throughout the fall as frustration grows among propagandists. This frustration is shown in their tone and attitude. It should be noted that the occasional outbursts cannot be solely attributed to this increasing frustration, as outbursts of varying degrees have occurred over the last 7 months.

The outbursts do seem different now because before, anger was used more as a motivating tool, and now it is becoming closely linked to reporting on Russian failures in Ukraine and Russia. For example, propagandists have been calling for strong retaliation since April 2022 at the earliest. These calls weren't as critical of Russia's approach like

those seen more recently. During the fall, propagandists began normalizing and even crediting the Ukrainian Army for its success while remaining frustrated or monotone. To not give them too much respect, any form of credit was followed with something justifying why they were fighting so well and hadn't been defeated yet. Solovyov's program on November 29th saw the reemergence of criticism directed at the Russian people and calls to support Russian forces. It remains to be seen if propagandists will return to these methods as the war approaches its second year.

An Emphasis on Mass Retaliation

This idea of reducing places and cities to rubble through nuclear weapons or other means is another common theme of Russian propaganda. While the average viewer may find this outlandish, Russia is certainly capable of deploying nukes, meaning propagandists throw the nuclear word around as a show of strength. On May 23rd, 2023, State Duma deputy Andrey Gurulyov said that nuclear weapons would "paralyze" the Ukrainians and that Alaska could be nuked as a deterrence to America (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgbvxQbWVaw>). Three days later, Solovyov argued that Russia should send a Poseidon torpedo at England to send a message to America (Scarr, 2023a). His proposal was criticized by panelist Andrei Sidorov, who shared similar reactions to people outside of Russia.

This created an interesting dynamic where the two propagandists went back and forth with Sidorov instead proposing to hit the USS Gerald Ford in the North Sea. Either Sidorov genuinely thought that Solovyov was deluded, which would be telling if true, or this was a planned move to give the audience a voice of reason that still advocated for

action against the US. In a more subtle example, Solovyov justified his criticism of Russia's lack of equipment at its Victory Day parade by saying that the equipment is all the West needs to see because it will be flying in their direction (Davis, 2023e). All three show that propagandists are not at all afraid of Western media labeling them as crazy or ridiculous. When considering Russia's firehose of falsehood model and the rash rhetoric of propagandists, their goal is likely to be mentioned by these sources because it keeps Russia relevant, even if the relevance centers around a willingness to use nuclear weapons.

Mardan, who is typically emotionless during his broadcasts, offered an interesting take on September 23rd when he said Russia could only lose through internal problems because they would "just hit the red button" if its conventional forces are defeated (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wT6TAHvdZw>). While he was referring to the deployment of nuclear weapons, it was surprising to see a propagandist admit that Russia could be defeated. He later explained that these internal issues like food shortages and rising inflation are impossible because Putin and the Kremlin have it under control, again showing that Putin is immune to criticism. Mardan's explanation contains two forms of reassurance, following the patterns observed in previous paragraphs. Mardan first implied that Russia will launch nukes if other means fail and then said Russian leadership makes it impossible for internal issues to destroy Russia.

In one of the most notable instances, Simonyan called for a nuclear ultimatum against the West and proposed a nuclear detonation over Siberia, surprising everyone including Russian propagandists. In the same October 12th monologue, Simonyan

discussed a hypothetical scenario where it wouldn't affect humans on land but would serve as an electromagnetic pulse to knock out radio electronics and digital technologies like satellites, "sending Russia back to 1993" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OM_kHWKzI5Y). When considering the frequency at which propagandists mention and call for the deployment of nuclear weapons, this shouldn't be a surprise. However, it was odd and alarming to Russian figures because Simonyan's explanation offered little on how it would advance Russia's war effort. It merely served as an idea to send a message to the West, but its extreme nature overshadowed this.

The statement also led to the only observed rift between media and government propagandists during the collection period. Several State Duma members, Siberian-based scientists, and Russian news outlets criticized and reacted to Simonyan's statements (Cole, 2023). The agencies retracted their publications to mend this rift, and most apologized to Simonyan. A few days after the statement, Solovyov strongly defended Simonyan and ironically asked viewers if people could not voice their opinions in the democratic country that Russia is (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5tkx56REaq>). While the statement is more of an outlier regarding the observed patterns in Russian propaganda, its reactions could point to a regional disconnect between those in Russia's western cities and Siberia.

Drawing parallels to the discussion between Sidorov and Solovyov was another panel featuring Solovyov where he says that nuclear wars are inevitable but not necessarily world-ending (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkfTY_aGmE0). This was

met with disagreement from the Dean of Moscow State University's School of Television, Vitaly Tretyakov, and slight amusement from another panelist. Tretyakov either genuinely disagrees with Solovyov or is acting as the moderate voice in the room. If it's the latter, Solovyov does a good job making himself look good by not letting Tretyakov get a word out, essentially leading him to give up. Using Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Chernobyl, and Fukushima as examples, Solovyov says that humanity won't collapse when nukes are used against a non-nuclear nation or when there are large amounts of radiation. This explanation ignores that no one could retaliate against the US in World War Two like countries could do now if Russia deployed nuclear weapons, and that the Soviets undertook costly measures to prevent much of Europe from being affected by the Chernobyl disaster. The omission of these details is no surprise because it would've hindered Solovyov's effort to justify and desensitize the public to the use of nuclear weapons.

Cross-Referencing Propagandists and Russian Media

The findings below corroborate the first hypothesis. Coverage of both failures by Russian sources indicated they were apparent but to varying degrees. Propagandists also engaged in criticism for both events, with some examples simply acknowledging and others directly criticizing. The loss of Kherson was heavily reported on by Russian sources, earning more media coverage and criticism than the loss of ground in the Kharkiv region, meaning the assumption that one was more apparent than the other was correct. In doing so, it showed a positive relationship between apparentness and criticism, corroborating hypothesis one.

The Fall of Kherson According to Propagandists

The loss of Kherson was expected to garner criticism because it involved the loss of the first major city occupied by Russia. A month before the withdrawal, Mardan and Gurulyov discussed the “troubling news” that Ukrainian forces were mounting their offensive near Kherson, with Gurulyov saying that Russia was well prepared to defend it (Davis, 2022b). Several days later, on October 19th, 2022, a Russia 1 panel was more critical and honest in its assessment of Ukraine’s counteroffensive. Military correspondent Alexander Kots tells the panel there won’t be any good news in November or December, with severe territorial losses likely to occur (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAdmz1Ho8tg>). Following patterns observed in propagandist’s speech, Kots downplays the developments by saying losing one battle doesn’t lose the war and that he thinks Russia will prevail in the end (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAdmz1Ho8tg>). Both Vadim Gigin and Olga Skabeyeva offer doses of criticism, with Gigin calling the situation a crisis for the Russian military and Skabeyeva questioning why Russia wasn’t prepared for future counteroffensives, the possibility of NATO support, and Zelenskyy’s will to stay (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAdmz1Ho8tg>).

As the last Russian soldiers were leaving Kherson, Solovyov was not only angry but critical of Russia’s defeat and the state of the war. He claims that Russia retreated from Kyiv and the surrounding region as a goodwill gesture but then criticized those who told him it was a maneuver to encircle Ukrainian troops in the Donbas, asking why this plan wasn’t executed and calling for those responsible to be punished

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT9GdWRW_1E). Solovyov also claims that he's been calling for strikes on infrastructure and decisive points since February, only to be disregarded presumably by military officials who argue that destroying critical infrastructure like bridges would disrupt the movement of logistics

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT9GdWRW_1E). His criticism continues as he implies that civilians must step up to the failures of the "ugly gents in well-fitting suits," who he attributes to the insufficient production of drones and quadcopters

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT9GdWRW_1E). Solovyov's animated presence offers a stark contrast to his appearances in mid to late 2023, where he is angry but in a more dejected manner.

Following the withdrawal from Kherson, Tigran Keosayan offered a fair amount of criticism while describing himself as a professional citizen dressed less formally than the other panelists. He first questioned the political objective of the war, highlighting the disconnect between the situation on the front line and the peaceful reality in Russia. He implies that different levels of government aren't waging war, meaning not everyone is on the same page. Without saying society has deteriorated in Russia, Keosayan says the troops would be insulted if they knew the situation here, implying that their work hasn't significantly improved Russian life

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36Pvf_h9H4Y). Keosayan also expresses frustration at the government for pushing a pro-war message while simultaneously being open to peace talks. In a Solovyov-type manner, Keosayan questions why Kyiv hasn't been bombed in four or five days, especially after suffering a defeat like Kherson.

To the panel's surprise, Keosayan credits Ukraine for their ability to wage war, calling their offense and defense strong, marking the earliest observed praise for Ukraine's war effort (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36Pvf_h9H4Y). Keosayan continued to alarm panelists when he said the special military operation didn't work out and called for transparency regarding Russia's failures, explaining that mistakes happen and it's easier to fix mistakes after admitting what didn't work.

The scars of Kherson still haunt Russia's propagandists today. In her infamous monologue where she proposes nuking Siberia, Simonyan described the loss of Kherson as an "unquenchable pain and unquenchable shame" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OM_kHWKzI5Y). Referring to the Baby Yaga character from Russian folklore, Simonyan uses Russian culture to try and engage viewers by saying Kherson is back in the hands of the evil stepmother (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OM_kHWKzI5Y). While not a direct form of criticism, her admittance of the difficulty attached to retaking Kherson and feelings of bitterness, regret, and shame seem more directed at the war effort than her headspace, possibly signaling widespread feelings among Russian propagandists about the withdrawal. Still, the acknowledgment alone goes against the role of a propagandist, making it a form of criticism.

The Fall of Kherson According to the Russian Media

Russia's withdrawal of Kherson was covered extensively by Russia 1 and RIA Novosti and discussed on Radio Sputnik, three of Russia's largest state media companies, making it an apparent failure. The coverage framed the withdrawal as a

logical but difficult decision to support the special military operation and several articles made it clear that there were no losses of equipment or soldiers. When comparing the two, both unsurprisingly had a high degree of bias, but RIA Novosti's coverage was much more rigid and direct. In contrast, Russia 1 was more open in its acknowledgment of the situation and the feelings around it. This is shown in an article that quotes Vladimir Saldo, the acting governor of Kherson. Saldo called it a difficult decision that won't deter Russia from restoring justice to Kherson's residents (Смотрим, 2022a). Saldo's words echo the sentiment shared by propagandists that it was a significant but justifiable loss. In another article, Russia's press secretary Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the withdrawal is not humiliating, making it seem like some viewed it as such (Смотрим, 2022b). In typical propagandist fashion, Peskov says the region is still a subject of Russia by law, downplaying concerns about the withdrawal.

RIA Novosti's coverage closely follows the Ministry of Defense's rhetoric and statements, often overlapping with coverage seen on Russia 1. However, RIA Novosti used more loaded language, emphasizing Russia's lack of losses and Ukraine's alleged strikes on evacuating civilians and the Kakhovka dam to try and further justify the withdrawal and increase anti-Ukrainian sentiments. For example, one article wrote, "as a result of effective management and coordinated actions of Russian units, not a single piece of military and equipment was left on the right bank" (РИА Новости, 2022a). It was written as if the Ministry of Defense emphasized this, but they attribute it to "the military department," making it possible that it was RIA's inclusion. The discussion on Radio Sputnik describes the withdrawal as an "abandonment" (Надана Фридрихсон,

2022). This came as a surprise because the terminology has a more negative tone, implying that the decision was forced and not voluntary like a withdrawal, confirming the apparentness of the fall of Kherson.

The Kharkiv Counteroffensive According to Propagandists

Ukraine's counteroffensive on the Kharkiv region was expected to garner less criticism than the fall of Kherson because it happened much quicker, and no major city switched hands as Kharkiv remained with Ukraine. Still, the amount of territory reclaimed by Ukraine makes the counteroffensive a definite failure for the Russian military. The offensive was only mentioned on three occasions. On a June 4th panel propagandists discussed Medvedev's harsh rhetoric against Ukraine. Belarusian television host Vadim Gigin agreed with his comment that Ukrainians need to be exterminated but said they weren't acted on in the Kharkiv region. Gigin goes on to say that the Russian Federation often uses this rhetoric by issuing harsh statements but doesn't act on it with retaliatory action (Davis, 2023c). This criticism creates an argument between Gigin and political analyst Viktor Olevich, who viewed Gigin's words as an attack on Putin. Olevich essentially scapegoats Medvedev and anyone who isn't Putin, saying they don't determine much in Russia before journalist Vladimir Karpov defends Medvedev by saying that harsh rhetoric still makes things happen even if there is no action (Davis, 2023c). The debate appeared to serve as a credibility booster for Putin while taking it away from other Russian officials and justifying harsh rhetoric towards Ukrainians.

The second mention came in Gubarev's interview on September 29th. When discussing and justifying the Kyiv withdrawal, Gubarev said "it seemed logical unlike the Kharkiv catastrophe which was just a catastrophe" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkc9QQQ0NWk>). While brief, it is a clear criticism of Russia's approach to the Kharkiv region. The third and final reference to the counteroffensive came from a panel discussing negative comments about the Russian military. Here, "military expert" Evgeny Buzhinsky and Solovyov couldn't understand why the RAND Corporation calls the Russian Army weak by consistently mentioning military failures like the Kharkiv counteroffensive while ignoring Russia's increase in territory and population (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3i0pVDMz3I>). This isn't direct criticism, but just stating RAND's opinion that Russia retreated from the Kharkiv region in shame is acknowledgment, which is a form of criticism.

The Kharkiv Counteroffensive According to the Russian Media

Russia's withdrawal from the Kharkiv region was covered by Russia 1 and RIA Novosti but not to the same extent as the withdrawal from Kherson, making it apparent, but only enough to garner a small amount of criticism. Only one article on RIA Novosti covered the retreat from Liman. It included statements by the Ministry of Defense, which admitted Ukraine had formed a semi-ring around the city, putting Russian forces at risk of encirclement, adding that Russian units fell to more advantageous positions (PIA Новости, 2022b). There was also less coverage of the Kharkiv counteroffensive on Russia 1 than the situation in Kherson. One article was a near replica of the RIA article, as both revolved around statements from the Ministry of Defense. Additional coverage

of the Kharkiv counteroffensive focused on Ramzan Kadyrov's comments blaming Colonel General Alexander Lapin for the retreat and Prigozhin's support for Kadyrov's openness. This paled in comparison to media coverage following the withdrawal from Kherson.

The Effects of Time on Propagandists

The findings below corroborate the second hypothesis to some extent. The sinking of the Moskva did lead to anger and criticism from propagandists, but this criticism was minimal. Low amounts of criticism weren't surprising, considering this was in the early stages of the war. What was surprising was the similar nature and quantity of criticism following the September strikes on Russian vessels. It showed that a year and a half wasn't enough time to see propagandists criticize smaller failures, or that time has less of an effect on criticism than was initially thought. The other case study did show some support for the second hypothesis, as criticism and frustration at Ukrainian drone strikes increased since the start of the war. In 2022, drone strikes on Russian soil weren't even acknowledged by propagandists. In 2023, acknowledgment increased, especially following attacks on Moscow and other major Russian cities. While the criticism was more general than specific, it did represent increased criticism over time for Ukrainian drone attacks, which this study defines as more minor failures because the strikes can't suddenly turn the tide of the war. Because the first two cases weren't consistent with the hypothesis, like the third case, hypothesis two can't be fully corroborated.

The Sinking of the Moskva

Due to the Moskva's status as Russia's flagship, Russian propagandists unsurprisingly mentioned its sinking on three notable occasions. On the day of the sinking a Russia 1 panel was furious, with one pundit saying that an attack on the flagship was enough to shift the conflict from a special military operation to full-fledged war and required a strong response such as bombing Kyiv or Ukraine's railways (Davis, 2022a). Five months later, in October, Solovyov said that Ukraine must be held responsible for the sinking of the Moskva, only referring to it as "one of our ships" and not by name (Davis, 2022d). Here, Solovyov appeared energetic and was surprised that Russia hadn't struck back on a similar scale, although he expresses this generally and not at the Russian military. A month later, Andrey Kartapolov states that Ukraine is striking Russian symbols like the Crimean Bridge and Moskva to bring Russia down (Davis, 2022c). In this case, Kartapolov isn't critical, only mentioning the Moskva to argue Putin should have the full support of the Russian people because he is Russia's most significant symbol.

Ukrainian Attacks on Black Sea Fleet Vessels

From September 13th to 15th, 2023, five Russian vessels were attacked with two confirmed to have significant damage, yet only the Rostov-na-Donu was mentioned, and this was on one occasion. Acknowledgment of Ukraine's strikes on the Minsk, Rostov-na-Donu, Sergei Kotov, Vasily Bykov, Askold, and Samun² weren't as expected

² While the Samun, Askold, Sergei Kotov, and Vasily Bykov were attacked, there are conflicting reports over whether they successfully repelled the attacks or were

because they're smaller and less significant vessels than the Moskva, which itself wasn't discussed in great detail. The Minsk is a landing vessel, the Rostov-na-Donu is a kilo-class submarine, the Samun is a small warship, and the other three are patrol ships. Solovyov did discuss the September 13th attack on the Ordzhonikidze shipyard in Sevastopol that damaged the Minsk and Rostov-na-Donu, failing to name either vessel, quoting the Ministry of Defense's statement that also didn't specify the extent of the damage (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQjPd4s9lhA>). In the broadcast, Solovyov appears dejected and exhausted, a stark contrast to his energetic and angry discussion involving the Moskva last year.

Interestingly, Solovyov quotes the Ministry of Defense's claim that ten cruise missiles were launched and seven were intercepted, making it the first time he mentioned Russia's air defenses when voicing his frustrations at Ukrainian attacks (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQjPd4s9lhA>). Solovyov links the attack to the West, calling for retaliation against several European and American cities and telling his audience that Russia is fighting a "universal evil" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQjPd4s9lhA>). He then describes the war as extremely difficult and unpleasant before criticizing Russia's approach, saying "the war can't go on with our hands tied" and that its time to strike Ukraine's decision-making centers like Shoigu said would happen if Ukraine launched missiles (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQjPd4s9lhA>).

damaged. Al Jazeera does mention that photographs show the Samun being towed (Balmforth, 2023); (Sutton, 2023); (Psaropoulos, 2023).

Unlike Solovyov's references to the damages on the Rostov-na-Donu and Minsk, there is no direct mention or reference to the September 14th and 15th attacks on the Samun, Sergei Kotov, Vasily Bykov, or Askold. The Vasily Bykov is mentioned in the last example, but only because it reportedly destroyed all the unmanned sea drones launched on the 13th. On the 16th, Solovyov again discusses what happened in Sevastopol, admitting that it is taking his focus away from Kim Jong Un's visit. Here, Solovyov again appeared dejected and frustrated as he criticized Russia's approach, asking "Can we finally fight the way our Army is capable of" and use our entire and most destructive arsenal besides strategic nuclear weapons because they aren't necessary (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRkiughRh2g>). His judgment on strategic nuclear weapons was likely used to calm the public by conveying that Russia could win with what it's been using to this point.

Yuliya Vityazera also spoke about Sevastopol on September 23rd, but she was likely referencing the attack on the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet that happened the day before. Vityazera does say she observed reactions over the past week in her plea for calmness, but like Solovyov she never references any specific event (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYvP9KYhrz0>). The only other mention of the strikes came on September 25th when Buzhinsky downplayed the damage to the Rostov-na-Donu, saying that its scheduled maintenance has just been moved up and that it will be operational again (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jK4vVthy_c). This assessment contradicts a Tweet from the UK Ministry of Defense claiming that the sub has suffered catastrophic damage and cannot be returned to service until after the war

at the earliest (Ministry of Defence, 2023). Despite not being critical, the panel specifically mentions the submarine unlike other coverage of the strikes. Given it was one of four cruise-missile capable submarines in the Black Sea Fleet, the Rostov-na-Donu is more significant than the other vessels, making it too big of a loss to ignore even though it's not on par with failures like the Moskva sinking.

Drone Strikes on Russian Soil: 2022

While Ukrainian drones are undoubtedly capable of causing damage on Russian soil, they can't to drastically alter the course of the war, making successful strikes smaller failures. Aside from a failed attack on Russia's border regions in April, Ukraine only launched drone strikes on Russian forces or equipment in Ukraine throughout the spring. A drone strike on a major Russian oil refinery near Novoshakhtinsk was the first successful attack on Russian soil that strictly involved drones; however, no clips were found of propagandists discussing the attack (Reuters, 2022a). While not on Russian soil, Ukraine carried out its largest drone attack to date, striking the Black Sea Fleet Headquarters on July 31st. The attack resulted in five injuries and the cancellation of Navy Day celebrations in Crimea (Reuters, 2022b). This attack also failed to draw reactions from propagandists. Three separate drone attacks on airbases deep in Russian territory continued this trend as there were no observed reactions from propagandists despite there being reported damages to three strategic bombers and the death of three Russian soldiers (Polityuk & Chalyi, 2022); (Roth & Borger, 2022). Another drone attack on the Engels-2 airbase occurred on December 26th. It was confirmed that three staff members were killed, and there were unverified reports from

social media that bombers had been damaged in the attack, but again there was no acknowledgment (Kelly & Osborn, 2022). When looking at future acknowledgments, uncertainty surrounding the degree of damage gives a way out for propagandists if they even considered covering the attack.

Drone Strikes on Russian Soil: Spring 2023

Following a few minor attacks by Ukraine in early January, the cracks started to show on propagandist channels as they began discussing the threat of Ukrainian drones. In front of a live audience, Aleksandr Mikhailov explained that everyone is overlooking the danger posed by Ukraine's vast arsenal of drones, saying "God forbid all Ukrainian drones fly at us" (Gerashchenko, 2023b). While not tied to any specific attack, Mikhailov's response showed that the drone attacks were starting to have a psychological impact as they flew deeper into Russia. On May 3rd, two Ukrainian drones allegedly attacked the Kremlin. This created questions because the drones would've evaded Russia's strongest air defenses, with US intelligence eventually stating that they believed the drone attack was conducted by Ukraine (Reuters, 2023). Due to the nature of the attack, there were several reactions from propagandists. In what could be criticism directed at the Russian government, Solovyov says, "They're trying to attack the Kremlin and we give them a grain deal" (Davis, 2023f). It seems more like a way to push for an exit from the deal than frustration at the government but the acknowledgment alone is a form of criticism. The next day, Solovyov and his fellow panelists were quick to blame America for the attack and call for the elimination of the

Ukrainian parliament and Zelenskyy, proposing Russia deploy the Sarmat or Poseidon (Davis, 2023g).

After several minor attacks took place during the middle of May there were no notable statements by propagandists. A second attack on Moscow took place on May 30th, with drones causing minimal damage in an affluent Russian neighborhood and the famous Leninsky Prospekt street (Greenall, 2023). There were two opposing reactions to the attacks. On his show, Solovyov ranted about commentators who said the attacks are great because they've alerted Moscow residents to the war, blaming them for Russia's divisions. (Gerashchenko, 2023a). Sivkov made himself look like the people Solovyov directed his rant at as he called the attacks "very positive" in mobilizing the public against Ukraine and the West (Scarr, 2023b). Solovyov contradicts himself the day after, saying Russia will win the sooner people in cities realize there is a war; however, he didn't express signs of positivity around the strikes (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oPEt_t7IxY). Further into this broadcast, Solovyov and "military expert" Andrey Klintsevich downplay the drones by calling them mosquitos and asking people to stop spreading panic (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oPEt_t7IxY).

To this point, the biggest reactions have only followed drone attacks on Moscow, signaling that propagandists are feeling the threat more but not enough to speak on every attack. This quickly changed when Gurulyov criticized people for being too relaxed and filming drone attacks. He specifically mentions the Moscow attacks and an attack on May 31st, where a drone attacked the Afipsky oil refinery, marking the first

acknowledgment of a drone attack outside Moscow, indicating that drones are becoming more prevalent in Russian lives. Gurulyov believes that spies are launching drones from within Russia, leading him to emphasize that Russians must be prepared and the enemy must be eliminated (Davis, 2023b). Mardan who is typically more blunt in his assessments admitted that drone attacks were increasing while also making excuses for Russia's air defense system saying it works perfectly fine, but every system has limits, especially on a border as massive as Russia's (Gerashchenko, 2023d).

Drone Attacks on Russian Soil: Summer - Fall 2023

Throughout the summer, there was an uptick in drone attacks on Russian soil. Yet, none were explicitly referenced by propagandists who have started to acknowledge the threat posed by drones. There was no mention of an August 27th attack that reportedly destroyed four Su-30 aircraft, a MIG-29, a radar system, and two Pantsir missile systems (The Kyiv Independent, 2023). On August 30th, Ukraine launched a massive drone attack on several regions in Russia, including the Pskov Airbase, resulting in damage to several Ilyushin transport planes (Adams, 2023). According to Anton Gerashchenko (2023), Russia 1 ignored the attack in its morning broadcast. Solovyov reacted angrily and directed a fair amount of criticism at Russia's approach, calling it "lackadaisical." Solovyov was so frustrated that he opened his program, saying there was nothing good about the morning and that the attack was "very bad" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWx-8PTRdSM>).

Following several-smaller scale drone attacks in early September, there were only two observed reactions. A panel discusses a poll where people overwhelmingly

voted Ukrainian drone attacks as the most important event of the week, with one panelist saying “We’re sick of these drones. People understand that they will continue” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jldfJ5HZSu8>). Simonyan also references Ukrainian drone attacks in her summer review. Still, like the example above, no specific attack is mentioned as she says that the new reality is waking up to reports of drone attacks on Russia’s cities (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvrLN__p2bs). A September 7th attack on the headquarters of the Southern Military District and attacks on other regions netted no reactions from propagandists. It wasn’t until the drone attacks on the Sevastopol shipyard on September 13th that a propagandist was seen discussing Ukraine’s drone strikes however, it wasn’t an attack on Russian soil.

This trend continued into late September. There was a response to the missile strikes on the Black Sea Headquarters, but this also didn’t take place on Russian soil, and it strictly involved cruise missiles. On September 25th, Buzhinsky briefly mentioned Ukrainian drone attacks, but he did so generally, stating that “Ukrainian strikes are getting more brazen” before downplaying the attack on the shipyard and praising Russia’s improved air defenses in the Kursk and Belgorod regions (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jK4vVthy_c_). The next and final mention of Ukrainian drone attacks was on October 13th, when Mardan mentioned that Ukraine launched 65 missiles and 20 drones at Belgorod Oblast in 24 hours, calling it “routine” and the “price for not ending the war in 3 days or months” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5UgTk7_hN8). In Mardan’s eyes, drone and

missile strikes shouldn't be routine and uninteresting to the Russian people, indicating that more minor failures like drone attacks aren't being discussed enough by the public

CONCLUSION

Propagandists must balance the need to acquire viewers, retain them, and convince them of whatever is being pushed because it is directed by a guiding hand. This is usually done subtly with propagandists choosing to sprinkle insignificant levels of criticism into their programs to appear as independent voices. This criticism likely follows military failures that can't be ignored or denied without risking credibility. Criticism of smaller failures will likely increase over the course of a war, but only if the failures threaten the lives of the audience and propagandist. To keep it from significantly affecting their regime, criticism is quickly justified or downplayed. Both criticism and the subsequent justification were part of a pattern where propagandists notified the audience of the threat or failure before reassuring them that everything would be fine because of Russia's strength.

The inclusion of Russian military bloggers was considered for this thesis but not acted on. These bloggers or "war correspondents" are propagandists who are much more open in their criticism, often creating rifts between them and the pundits observed. Future studies on this topic would benefit from including the thoughts of these bloggers and expanding to other places where the internal information space is more open. Expanding the area of study would indicate the extent to which the awareness and reassurance model is used by propagandists, making strategies on countering propaganda applicable to a wider array of environments.

Based on the findings and observations of Russian propaganda during the war, frustration and criticism will continue to mount. The question is, will Russia's domestic news cycle reach a breaking point where Putin's regime is at risk? The evidence indicates it will stagnate. Medvedev aside, Russian propagandists have never come close to criticizing senior officials, which makes sense because they have no reason to do so. They receive high salaries and live in Moscow's most affluent neighborhoods. Turning on Putin or his close allies would place their lives at risk as lengthy sentences are handed to dissidents engaging in the same forms of criticism that they get away with on TV. When looking at the bigger picture, strong leadership may deter propagandists from collapsing a domestic information space and their regime during times of war. With the situation in Russia unlikely to reach this point it, where this could occur remains to be seen.

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