

Magdalena Kaltseis*

War Discourse on TV: A Glimpse into Russian Political Talk Shows (2014 and 2022)

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Abstract: This article examines the war discourse on Russian television, particularly in political talk show broadcasts aired after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The question of how the two conflicting parties, Russia and Ukraine, are portrayed verbally and visually in these shows is specifically emphasized. While the quantitative analysis traces a massive increase in Russian talk show broadcasts since the beginning of the war, the Critical Discourse Analysis demonstrates which strategies are utilized to demonise and defame the Ukrainian side and to legitimise the war. By comparing the current war discourse with the Ukraine discourse in 2014, this study shows that talk shows have undertaken a significant role in supporting the war and have become a puissant didactic tool to influence and manipulate public opinion by perennially repeating key governmental messages and efficiently orchestrating all visual, verbal, and non-verbal means at their disposal.

Keywords: talk shows, war, propaganda, Ukraine, Russia, television, disinformation

1 Introduction

In the morning hours of February 24, 2022, Russia launched a massive military attack against Ukraine, and since then events have unfolded daily. This ongoing war caused one of the biggest refugee crises of the last decades, massive human suffering, and a global economic crisis concerning finances, food, and fuel. Furthermore, the threat of a nuclear war has become a reality, and the possibility of launching nuclear weapons is regularly discussed on Russian state TV channels. In fact, Russian state-controlled media, especially television, plays a crucial role in the war as it has become one of the most important tools “for the dissemination and legitimizing of official government narrative” (Hutchings 2022: 21). Thus, the media substantially influences which information is spread and how the events are reported. The cur-

*Corresponding author: Dr. Magdalena Kaltseis, Universität Innsbruck, Institut für Slawistik, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria, E-Mail: magdalena.kaltseis@uibk.ac.at

rent article takes a closer look at these forms of media, notably TV talk shows, and their war discourse, i.e., how they portray the two main participants in the war – Russia and Ukraine.

2 Current state of research

With regard to the political upheavals in Ukraine, starting with the Euromaidan in 2013/14, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in Eastern Ukraine, scholars have drawn more attention to this country in recent years, focusing in particular on the media coverage of these events (cf. e.g., Belov 2016; Pantti 2016; Reuther 2016; Pasitselska 2017; Makukhin et al. 2018; Kuße 2019; Binder & Kaltseis 2020; Makhortykh & Bastian 2020; Scharlaj 2020; Kaltseis 2022a, 2022b; Sasse 2022). As will be shown in the current article, the media in general – and Russian television in particular – played and still plays a tremendous role in the current war in Ukraine. Previous research on the role of television during the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 was mainly concerned with news broadcasts (cf. e.g., Hansen 2015; Khaldarova 2016; Pasitselska 2017) or the influence of television on social media (e.g., Cottiero et al. 2015; Khaldarova & Pantti 2016). However, the popular and widespread TV talk show received only nominal attention. The only exceptions to this are the comparative linguistic research project by Weiss (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b) and the study by Lichtenstein et al. (2018) which focused on the Ukraine crisis of 2014. The current article, in contrast, examines talk show broadcasts aired since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and answers questions about whether talk shows have changed since 2014 and how Ukraine and Russia are portrayed in these shows.

3 The war in Ukraine 2014–2022: A brief overview

At the end of November 2013, the former president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, failed to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union (EU). This resulted in demonstrations and civil unrest in the Independent Square in Kyiv (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti*) and in other parts of Ukraine. This so-called “Maidan Revolution” ended in late February 2014, after Viktor Yanukovych had escaped to Russia and the Ukrainian parliament (*Rada*) had signed the Association Agreement with the EU.

Almost immediately after these events, unidentified armed men who were referred to by international media as “Little Green Men” or “Polite People”, occupied key facilities on the Crimean Peninsula (cf. Kappeler 2014: 353; Hutchings 2022: 35–39). Although the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, first denied that these men

were Russian soldiers, he admitted on April 17, 2014, during his annual press conference *Priamaia liniia* that they were, in fact, Russian soldiers who were to guarantee an “open and honest referendum” [*po-drugomu provesti referendum otkryto, chestno i dostoino [...] bylo prosto nevozmozhno*] (*Priamaia liniia s Vladimirom Putinyem*, 17.04.2014).

On March 16, 2014, a referendum on the peninsula took place offering only two options: join Russia or return to the republic’s constitution of 1992. However, the option of Crimea remaining part of Ukraine did not exist on the ballot. Officially, over 80% of Crimea’s population participated in the referendum, of which 97% voted in favor of the peninsula joining Russia—a result which was not verifiable as credible international observers were denied access.¹

Following the official referendum’s results, on March 21, 2014, Vladimir Putin ratified the Treaty of Accession of the Republic of Crimea to Russia. Today, the peninsula belongs to Ukraine, but since 2014 has been de facto part of the Russian Federation.

In April 2014, pro-Russian separatists occupied regional administration buildings in Eastern Ukraine and proclaimed the sovereign People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. In response, the interim Ukrainian government in Kyiv launched an “Anti-Terrorist Operation” (ATO), which in April 2018 was renamed the “Joint Forces Operation” (JFO) (cf. Kuše 2019: 115), to regain authority over the separatist areas. As a result, however, the conflict and fighting intensified in Eastern Ukraine, and the events were, especially in Western media, soon characterised as war. In August 2014, unmarked Russian military forces joined this war, and since then, Ukrainian forces have been fighting against separatists supported by and intermingled with Russian troops.

On September 5, 2014, a peace treaty calling for an immediate cease-fire was signed in Minsk by the then-leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics and the so-called Trilateral Contact Group, including Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Yet this first agreement, known as the Minsk Protocol (Minsk I), failed because the cease-fire was consistently broken. This situation was not changed by an updated agreement (Minsk II) on February 12, 2015, which, apart from the cease-fire, also required the withdrawal of heavy weapons and the release of war prisoners (cf. Peace Agreements Database 2015). Notwithstanding this second peace agreement, the fighting never stopped completely. Similarly, other cease-fires implemented in recent years were repeat-

¹ Although the turnout was subsequently corrected to only 30–50% (Die Zeit 2014), it is likely that the majority of the population was in favour of Crimea’s accession to Russia (Kappeler 2014: 354).

edly violated by both parties. Given the conflict's violent characteristics, Grossman (2018: 58) called the events in Donbas a "low intensity civil war."

This "low intensity" war, however, turned into a full-scale war on February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine after officially recognizing the independence of the two self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Despite international condemnation, repeated sanctions against Russia, and international protests, this war has continued until the time of writing of this article.

4 Russian television and TV talk shows

The media in general, and Russian television in particular, plays a central role in the war in Ukraine, as its reporting significantly influences how the public perceives events. One recent and blatant example of this influence is that the current war is officially referred to as a "special operation" [*spetsial'naiia operatsiia*] in Russian media in order to camouflage its aggressive actions and the killing of civilians.

In Russia, television remains the most important mass medium. For example, opinion polls by the famous Levada Center repeatedly confirm that it is the primary source of information for many people in Russia (Levada 2022), with the two most important state channels being *Pervyi kanal* and *Rossiiia-1*.

In the last two decades, television has undergone a tremendous change: Since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, TV has continuously been brought back under the control of the Kremlin and, consequently, political influence on this medium is very high. Even though the government completely controls television in Russia, the Russian people have a high degree of trust in the information they receive via this medium, and this trust has even grown with Russia's war against Ukraine (cf. Levada 2022).

One of the most important genres on Russian state television is the talk show. Since the beginning of the war in late February 2022, talk shows, particularly political ones, are being broadcasted daily from late morning until midnight on *Pervyi kanal* and *Rossiiia-1*, only alternating with news broadcasts (cf. Kaltseis 2022b). Together, talk shows and news programs form a continuum – a phenomenon that Anna Kachkaeva, a researcher at the Moscow Higher School of Economics, described as follows: "While policymakers and straight news shows define the agenda, the political talk shows provide emotional support [...] They just support the atmosphere that exists and heat it up" (The Washington Post 2015).

Talk shows elicit emotions by using bawdy and vulgar language (Petrovskaiia 2017), presenting atrocity narratives (Binder & Kaltseis 2020), or attacking guests verbally and physically. For instance, in the first broadcast of *Vremia pokazhet* on November 8, 2021, a Ukrainian expert was thrown out of the show and insulted by

the host, who called him “fascist scum” [*gnida fashistskaia*], because the former had stated that the Red Army had shamefully run away from Ukraine in 1941.

This example illustrates that talk shows are a central tool for shaping and manipulating public opinion – they determine what is to be judged “good” or “bad” (cf. Zvereva 2012: 95). This didactic and manipulative function of talk shows is best summarized by Makukhin et al.: “For [the] Kremlin, TV is the main medium that helps to shape and disseminate narratives. [The] Kremlin has two main instruments: news programs and talk-shows, both controlled from one center. Television talk-shows became a real godsend for the Russian disinformation machine.” (2018: 31)

As a matter of fact, talk shows can be seen as an ideal propaganda instrument (cf. Kaltseis 2022a). Unlike news programs, which should at least aspire to report as objectively as possible, talk shows are not limited to facts, and their guests can make any claims and disseminate a variety of information, including conspiracy theories (cf. Binder & Kaltseis 2020).

In media science, talk shows are related to so-called “infotainment” because they provide a mixture of information and entertainment. Additionally, talk shows serve as a platform for discussing and verbalizing problems and are thus considered therapeutic (Lerner & Zbenovich 2017: 296). Furthermore, as a place where people gather and discuss different topics, talk shows create a sense of community and sociability, which is why Hutchings & Rulyova (2009: 90) call them a “mediator” between the studio audience² and the television viewers at home.

5 Quantitative analysis of talk shows: 2014 and 2022

As stated in Section 4, talk shows fill the daily television programming of the two popular channels, *Pervyi kanal* and *Rossiiia-1*. Since 2014, the main topic discussed on talk shows has been the events in Ukraine. To demonstrate how often talk show broadcasts were dedicated to Ukraine in general and the conflict in particular, Kaltseis (2022a: Ch. 8) conducted a keyword analysis of the talk shows’ content descriptions, which can be accessed on the TV channels’ official websites. The first step was classifying the talk shows on *Pervyi kanal* and *Rossiiia-1* according to their guests and the topics discussed. Once this classification was completed, four main talk show series were identified in 2014: celebrity talk (nine series), political talk (seven

² Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemics, studio audiences have disappeared from most shows.

series), trivial talk (six series), and special talk (three series). Then, talk shows' content descriptions were carefully studied by searching for keywords related to the events in Ukraine, such as Ukrainian toponyms, terms used for the participants in the conflict, Western sanctions, Russia's reactions to the sanctions, and terms in Ukrainian language.³ This keyword analysis revealed that 283 out of 1849 (i.e., 15 %) of all talk show broadcasts aired on the two TV channels in 2014 discussed a topic related to Ukraine. As regards the distribution of Ukraine-related topics on the four talk show series, political talk shows discussed the events in Ukraine in 87 % of their broadcasts, celebrity and trivial talks in 4 %, and special talks only in 1 % (Kaltseis 2022a: 134). These quantitative results indicate that political talk show series were the most significant for the discussion of events in Ukraine. In the autumn of 2014, *Pervyi kanal* launched three new political talk show series, and on *Rossiiia-1*, some existing political talk shows series, such as *Večer s Vladimirom Solov'ëvym* ['Evening with Vladimir Solov'ëv'], changed from weekly to daily broadcasting. Consequently, the number of Ukraine-related political talk show transmissions on both channels increased dramatically in 2014, with the highest number being 46 broadcasts in October, which can be interpreted as a direct reaction of Russian television to the war in Eastern Ukraine (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: 135; see also Dolgova 2015, 2017a, 2017b; Lichtenstein et al. 2018).

In 2022, however, TV's reaction to the events in Ukraine was even more apparent: Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, television has changed markedly, and this development mainly concerns talk shows. In fact, celebrity, trivial and special talk show series have disappeared;⁴ today, predominantly political talk show series persist – *Vremia pokazhet* ['Time Will Tell'], *Bol'shaia igra* ['The Big Game'] and *AntiFeik* on *Pervyi kanal*, and *60 Minut, Kto protiv?* ['Who is against it?'] and *Večer s Vladimirom Solov'ëvym* on *Rossiiia-1*, which also airs *Moskva. Kreml'. Putin* on Sunday evenings.

Among these political talk show series, *Vremia pokazhet* is particularly interesting. Having existed since autumn 2014 on *Pervyi kanal*, *Vremia pokazhet* was the first political talk show to be broadcasted in the afternoon, which is why Irina Petrovskaja, a famous television critic, labeled it “politics for housewives”.⁵ Since February 24, 2022, *Vremia pokazhet* started producing several broadcasts with an average transmission time of six hours per day. Notwithstanding its shift in focus to al-

³ For a thorough methodological description, see Kaltseis (2022a: 119–133).

⁴ Since the beginning of the war in 2022, only three celebrity talk series are broadcasted on *Pervyi kanal* and *Rossiiia-1* (*Segodnia večerom, Kogda vse doma* and *Privet, Andrei!*), which are only aired on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings.

⁵ Cf. *Chelovek iz televizora*, 20 September 2014. Unfortunately, the archive of *Écho Moskvy* is no longer accessible since the closure of the famous radio station in March 2022.

most exclusively political talk shows and, consequently, the reduction of non-political talk show series, Russian TV is currently distributing more talk show broadcasts than ever before. To illustrate this point, a keyword analysis for Ukraine-related topics on three political talk show series currently running on *Pervyi kanal* from November 2021 to May 2022 was conducted, in a manner similar to Kaltseis (2022a). This timeframe of seven months, including the month of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the three months before and after this attack, was chosen to explore the quantitative change in the number of talk show broadcasts and TV's reaction to the events. Figure 1 presents the results of this analysis.

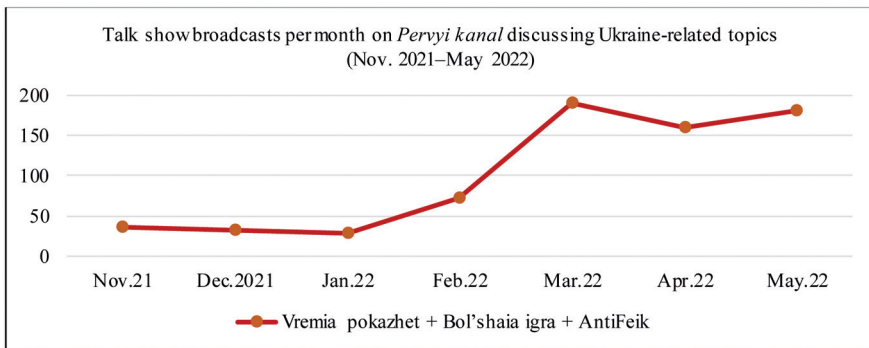


Figure 1: Talk show broadcasts on Pervyi kanal discussing Ukraine-related topics (Nov 2021–May 2022)

It is apparent from this figure that Russian television has significantly increased the number of political talk show broadcasts since February 2022. In March, the three political talk show series *Vremia pokazhet*, *Bol'shaia igra* and *AntiFeik*, transmitted 190 broadcasts about the events in Ukraine. In other words, in 2022, three talk show series on one single channel (*Pervyi kanal*) aired four times as many broadcasts as all the talk show series on both TV channels (*Pervyi kanal* and *Rossia-1*) together in 2014.

The results of this quantitative analysis allow us to conclude that the current talk show broadcasts on Russian state television are a massive and permanent attempt to influence viewers' opinions, since, following Van Dijk (2015: 470), the topics selected and presented already evidence the exercise of power: "[T]hose groups who control most influential discourse also have more chances to indirectly control the minds and actions of others."

After this quantitative analysis, a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis was conducted to find out how Ukraine and the Ukrainian side on the one hand, and pro-Russian separatists and Russia on the other hand are portrayed in these shows.

6 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

To answer the question of how the conflicting parties have been represented visually and verbally in Russian TV talk shows in 2022, it is crucial to look at discourse as “language use” and as a “form of social practice” (Fairclough 2013: 92; Reisigl 2014: 93). Discourse is, as Hodges (2015: 1) points out, essential when it comes to waging war: “[W]ar depends upon the organizational capacity of discourse to create unity and mobilize support among an in-group, to construct an out-group enemy and direct actions against that enemy, and to legitimate the (actual or potential) use of lethal force in the eyes of domestic and international audiences.”

One of the most influential theories for investigating war discourse is the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is one of the reasons why this theory was chosen for the current analysis.

6.1 *Description of the method*

CDA is particularly useful in criticizing and challenging “hegemonic discourses, text and genres that re/produce inequalities, injustices, mystification and oppression in contemporary societies” (Wodak 2013: xxv). As shown in Section 4, broadcasting on Russian television can be seen as an example of hegemonic discourse because it is completely controlled by the government and thus it can be assumed that reporting on the events and the war in Ukraine has been relatively homogenous on this medium (cf. Jäger & Jäger 2007: 29).

Although CDA focuses on the analysis of language, it also aims to consider other semiotic practices (Fairclough 2013: 92; Wodak 2013: xxiii; Jäger 2015: 95; Van Leeuwen 2015: 4; Wodak 2019: 8), such as images and videos, which are pivotal when analyzing audiovisual media such as TV talk shows. Another reason for choosing CDA is that it is concerned with “hot” (political) topics (Jäger 2015: 92) and aims at the deconstruction of power and ideologies. The current analysis adopts CDA as elaborated by Jäger (2015), which is based on the work of Michel Foucault. This method is described as an “open concept” (Jäger 2015: 8) and can, therefore, be adapted according to the needs of the specific research interests.

For the current analysis of talk shows, it is also helpful to consider media strategies utilized in ideological media discourse, in particular the legitimation and justification of one’s own actions, as well as positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (cf. Van Dijk 2005: 65; Hodges 2015: 2; Pasitselska 2017: 595).

6.2 Sample

Given the vast number of political talk shows on Russian TV (see Section 5), the current study focuses on a small sample of eight broadcasts. However, this sample is representative of Russian state media coverage of the events in Ukraine because discourse is based on repetition and recurrence of symbols, content, and strategies over time, and thereby achieves a lasting impact (Fairclough 2013: 460; Jäger 2015: 52). Consequently, the analysis considers political talk shows transmitted in the first four months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In particular, the following broadcasts are included in the study: *AntiFeik* (03.05.2022), *Bol'shaia igra* (24.02.2022), *Večer s Vladimirom Solov'ëvym* (24.02.2022), and *Vremia pokazhet* (24.02.2022, 02.03.2022, 04.03.2022, 18.03.2022, 28.04.2022).⁶ To better contextualize the current study, it is contrasted with the results of the talk show analysis of 2014, presented in Kaltseis (2022a: Ch. 10).

7 Examples from Russian talk shows

This Section presents the results of the CDA of eight Russian TV talk shows broadcast in 2022 and compares them with the analysis of talk shows in 2014 (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: Ch. 10). First, the other-presentation, i.e., the portrayal of Ukraine and the Ukrainian side, is analysed. Second, the study explores Russian self-presentation in these shows, particularly the ways in which the Russian side is represented.

7.1 Representation of Ukraine and its armed forces

Both in 2014 and 2022, the overall portrayal of Ukraine as a country and the Ukrainian armed forces on Russian TV talk shows has been negative. In the following, I will present four of their central representations, in particular the denigration of the state and the denial of its existence, the demonization of the Ukrainian army, the portrayal of the Ukrainian army as weak and unsuccessful, and the accusation against the Ukrainian side for spreading false information.

⁶ The talk show broadcasts are available on the official websites of *Pervyi kanal* and *Rossia-1*.

7.1.1 *A non-existent and occupied country*

In the analysed talk show broadcasts, Ukraine is portrayed as an inhomogeneous and divided country, and its existence as a sovereign state is repeatedly questioned and even denied. In this respect, talk show guests claim that Ukraine is a puppet of the USA (cf. Weiss 2017: 481; Weiss 2020b: 27), which should prove that Ukraine is a country without a real statehood (1), “a nonentity” (*gosudarstvo pustyshka*):

- (1) Украина – это государство пустышка, в нем ничего нет кроме вице-президента, даже не президент, а США, сидящего в кресле президента Украины.

[Ukraine is a nonentity, it has nothing but a vice president, not even a president, but the United States are sitting in the presidential chair of Ukraine.] (*Večer s Vladimirom Solov'ëvym*, 24.02.2022)

According to the talk show guests, Ukraine is not able to speak for itself because it is occupied, allegedly by the United States, and used as a weapon against Russia (*Vremia pokazhet*, 24.02.2022). Therefore, it can be stated that this repeated denial of Ukraine's statehood is, as Kuše says (2019: 7), “probably the most aggressive assumption” in this conflict and, as a result, everything associated with the state's sovereignty, such as having a native language and culture, is equally contested.

7.1.2 *Atrocious and evil*

Another defamation strategy is to discredit the Ukrainian government. It is well known that the Russian government has not approved the people who came to power in Ukraine after the Euromaidan, specifically the two legally-elected presidents, Petro Poroshenko (2014–2019) and Volodymyr Zelensky (2019–present). For example, in 2014, Petro Poroshenko was frequently called a liar who had no control over the Ukrainian forces and could not win the war (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: 340–341). Likewise, in 2022, Volodymyr Zelensky is depicted as a “failed president” [*neudavshisia president*] whose “era is coming to an end” [*épochá Zelenskogo prichodit k kontsu*] and with whom Russia can neither “come to an understanding” [*Zelenskim nikakoi kashi svarit*]⁷ nor undertake negotiations (*Bol'shaia igra*, 24.02.2022).

In addition, hate speech is used to depict the Ukrainian side as intrinsically evil, a strategy used to legitimise Russia's activities in Ukraine. For instance, the Ukrai-

7 The use of colloquial phraseology is very common in political talk shows in Russia as it intensifies the utterance and creates closeness to the viewers (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: 348).

nian government and its members are called, among other epithets, “fascists” [*fashisty*], “Nazis” [*natsiki/natsisty*], “evil creatures” [*nechisti*], and “bastards” [*urody*] by the guests and moderators of the analysed talk show broadcasts. In this context, even terms from the supernatural sphere are utilised, particularly by the host Ar-tëm Sheinin, who calls people fighting on the Ukrainian side “scum” [*vyrodki*], “devils” [*cherti*], and “demons” [*besy*] (*Vremia pokazhet*, 28.04.2022). This strategy of dehumanising the enemy is a popular propaganda tool, which justifies the actions against these “non-humans” [*neliudi*] (*Vremia pokazhet*, 28.04.2022). Steuter & Wills (2009: 38) summarise this phenomenon as follows: “The less human the enemy, the more insidious and pervasive it appears, the louder the call to extermination.”

Another strategy used to demonise the opponent are atrocity narratives, which are “a highly effective means of attracting and stimulating the viewers’ attention” (Binder & Kaltseis 2020: 210). Atrocity narratives are commonplace in Russian TV talk shows and serve to describe the verbally the visually unrepresentable. Visual and verbal information complement one another as highly pixelated and blurred images are shown while a talk show guest describes what allegedly happened in the pictures. This combination of blurred pictures with atrocity narratives simultaneously heightens the viewers’ involvement as they must use their senses and imagination to complement the gaps created by the pixelation. An example is the story of the so-called “Madonna from Gorlovka” [*Gorlovskaiia Madonna*] in the Donetsk Oblast’. On the first day of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Margarita Simon’ian, a journalist and the editor-in-chief of *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), described in *Vecher s Vladimirom Solov’ëvym* the atrocity story (2) of a 23-year-old woman, to whom she refers as the “Madonna from Gorlovka”. Simon’ian claims that this woman was taking a walk with her 10-month-old baby daughter in her arms when suddenly the housing area was bombed by the Ukrainian army:

- (2) И ей оторвало ноги. И она упала вместе с этой доченькой своей в лужу крови. И еще какое-то время жила. И только говорила: «Кирочка, Кирочка, доченька». А Кирочка умерла сразу. И она с этой десятимесячной Кирочкой мертвой, лежала и умирала в луже крови без ног. И есть фотография, как она там лежит, и ее поэтому называют «Горловская Мадонна». Она как мадонна с Христом лежит вот с этим ребенком. А рассказывают все это, как она умерла, очевидцы, которые чудом выжили и остались инвалидами.

[And [the explosion] tore off her feet. She fell into a puddle of blood with her little daughter. For a while, she was still alive and only said: “Kirochka, Kirochka, my little daughter.” But Kirochka died immediately. And with her dead baby Kirochka, the woman lay there and died without feet in a pool of blood. And there is a photo of her lying there, which is why she is called “Gorlovskaiia Madonna”. She is like a Madonna with Christ lying there with her baby. The eyewitnesses, who miraculously survived and remained invalids [after this incident], told the story of how she died.] (*Vecher s Vladimirom Solov’ëvym*, 24.02.2022)

This example illustrates how Russia's actions are justified based on an individual's fate, which aims to stir the viewers' emotions. The detailed description (the young woman's feet were bombed off, she lies in a pool of blood) intensifies the perception of the story; drama and emotion are also added by Simon'ian using emotionally charged diminutives (*Kirochka*, *dochenka*) when she quotes the alleged last words of the woman. Moreover, the story is set in a spiritual-religious context because the young mother is referred to as "Madonna", the Mother of God, holding her child, Christ, in her arms. In this regard, the Ukrainian army did not simply kill a woman with her baby but the Mother of God with Christ, alluding to one of the most important icons of Orthodox Christianity, the so-called *Bogoroditsa*. Therefore, given the fact that the Mother of God with Christ is sacred and inviolable, any counter-argument is impossible as her desecration justifies any action against the desecrators, i.e., the Ukrainian side, and confers the "special operation" an absolute legitimacy (cf. Kuße 2019). This spiritual-religious context also underpins what Hodges (2015: 3) calls "the war as a moral imperative" and what Van Leeuwen (2007) and Reyes (2011) refer to as "rationalization" or "rationality" because, with this, the war against the deicides becomes inevitably the "right thing to do".

7.1.3 *Weak and unsuccessful deserters*

Apart from direct name-calling, hate speech, and atrocity narratives which portray the Ukrainian side as evil, another defamation strategy depicts the Ukrainian army as weak, absent, and unsuccessful. In 2014, the alleged absence and weakness of Russia's opponent was expressed by claims that the Ukrainian troops were "surrounded and suffered losses" or that they "dropped their weapons and left" (Kaltseis 2022a: 330). The latter also served the pro-Russian separatists by providing explanation for how they got their weapons. Additionally, the Ukrainian army's weaknesses and difficulties were also reinforced by negative references to the Second World War – in particular, by comparisons with the defeat of the German Wehrmacht, which put the Ukrainian forces on a par with the Nazis (Kaltseis 2022a: 308–309). The Ukrainian army's defeat was also illustrated visually by showing destroyed war equipment lying on the ground, a metonymic for the beaten and ruined Ukrainian army (Kaltseis 2022a: 297–298).

In 2022, on the first day of Russia's invasion, it was repeatedly claimed that Ukrainian soldiers were "leaving their positions" [*mnogie prosto ostaviat boevye positsii*], "deserting" [*dezertiruiut*], and "refusing to carry out the orders of their commanders and dropping down their weapons" [*otkazvaiutsia vypolniat' prikaz svoego komandovaniia i skladivaiut oruzhie*] (*Vremia pokazhet*, 24.02.2022). Moreover, a video extract of Vladimir Putin's speech in which he directly calls on Ukrai-

nian soldiers to “immediately drop their weapons and go home” [*nedmedlenno slozhit' oruzhie i idti domoi*] was played on the studio screen. These examples show that Russian talk shows aim to demoralise people fighting for Ukraine against Russia – a strategy identified by Sazonov & Kopõtin (2016: 101) as one of the main goals of Russian propaganda and which has now been readopted in the current war.

7.1.4 Spreading fake information

Since Russia's war against Ukraine began in February 2022, the Russian information campaign on state media has been challenged by videos and photos on social networks, depicting destroyed Ukrainian cities and detailing alleged war crimes committed by the Russian army. Subsequently, the State Duma passed a law criminalising the dissemination of “fake news” about the military operation or the Russian army, or any information that does not directly come from official state sources. Thus, critical voices who oppose the war are reviled; for example, Margarita Simon'ian called those who feel ashamed for Russia's actions “scumbags” [*podletsy*] (*Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'ëvym*, 24.02.2022). In the same broadcast, one of the guests threatens intellectuals working at universities and putting “very dangerous things into the minds of immature people” [*oni vkladyvaiut v mozgi neokrepshikh liudei ochen' opasnye veshchi*]. According to him, they should not be given the right to teach at the university anymore.

As a matter of fact, the guiding principle of not criticizing Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been spread in Russian media, including in talk shows, by repeatedly showing an interview from 2001 with the famous actor Sergei Bodrov. In this interview extract (3), the star from the famous movie *Brat* (“Brother”) states the following:

- (3) Во время войны нельзя говорить плохо о своих. Никогда. Даже если они не правы. [...] Мне кажется, это очень такой старый принцип.

[In times of war, you cannot speak badly of your own people. Never. Even if they are wrong. [...]. It seems to me that this is a very old principle.] (*Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'ëvym*, 24.02.2022)

Alternative news, which is not in line with the official narrative, and so-called “fake information” are thus severely criminalised in Russia. As a result, non-governmental media outlets had to leave the country or stop broadcasting because of increased pressure relating to the new law. The state channels, in return, launched new programs in support of the law. Accordingly, shortly after the law's approval in March 2022, *Pervyi kanal* started a new talk show called *AntiFeik*, which aims to help view-

ers “distinguish lies from the truth” [*otlichit’ lozh’ ot pravdy*]⁸ and demonstrates that everything reported by Ukraine or the West is false. Also, *AntiFeik* tries to cast doubt on the atrocities committed by the Russian army in Ukraine and accuses the West of an “unprecedented emotionalisation” based on fake information, thereby turning compassion for the victims in Ukraine into a “hostile, Western feeling” (Sasse 2022). In the same way as shown in the examples from 2014 (see Section 7.1.3), *Anti-Feik* tries to depict any success of the Ukrainian army as fake. To illustrate, in one talk show, the moderator suggests (4) that the Ukrainian armed forces would take extracts from computer games and present them as their victories since, in reality, they would have no real victories to proclaim:

- (4) Использование компьютерной графики в том, чтобы показать всевозможные мнимые победы ВСУ [...] Выглядит довольно эффектно. [...] Давайте вспомним, это [эти кадры] выдают нам как победы ВСУ под Харьковом, но [...] это действительно кадры компьютерной симуляции. Как всегда, если ничего нет, никаких реальных достижений, к счастью, их нет, берут компьютерные кадры, выдают за какие-то победы.

[Using computer graphics to show all kinds of imaginary victories of the AFU [Armed Forces of Ukraine] [...] This looks very spectacular. [...] Let’s remember that they pass us off these images as victories of the AFU at Kharkov, but [...], in fact, are computer-simulated images. As always, if there are no real achievements, and fortunately, there are none, they take computer images and pass them off as their victories.] (*AntiFeik*, 03.05.2022)

In this extract, the Ukrainian forces are portrayed as mendacious and unsuccessful. Furthermore, it is suggested that all (visual) information can be modified with the help of computer technologies, leading to the perception that reality is fake (cf. Sasse 2022). The show communicates to the audience that, apart from Russian state media, no information, be it from social media or other information channels, can be trusted. In a manner similar to *AntiFeik*, the host of *Vremia pokazhet* claims that the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian people are living in a “cocoon of fakes” [*kokon feika*], which “they invented themselves” [*kotoryi sami sebe pridumali*] (*Vremia pokazhet*, 02.03.2022), a metaphor repeated from 2014 (Kaltseis 2022a: 338) which depicts the opponent as living in his own fake world without any connection to reality.

⁸ <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/antifeik/o-proekte> (accessed 19 March 2023).

7.2 Representation of the Russian side

Given the imperative not to speak badly of your own people and the criminalisation and revilement of, respectively threats against those who nonetheless do so, the portrayal of the Russian side, including the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region, is exclusively positive in the analysed talk shows. Accordingly, Russia's activities in Ukraine are claimed to be self-defense, and the pro-Russian separatists and the Russian side are portrayed as saviors and liberators who guarantee peace, security, and victory. These different strategies of positive self-representations are analysed in greater detail in the following sections.

7.2.1 Self-defense

In 2014, the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas were referred to and heroised by the positive term *opolchentsy* ['people's militia' or 'defenders of the fatherland']. They were portrayed as defenders of their homeland, families, and the so-called "Russian World" [*Russkii mir*], consequently depicting the Ukrainian side as aggressors (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: 343–347). Likewise, in 2022, one of Russia's main legitimations for its "special operation" in Ukraine is the claim that the country needs to defend and protect itself. This claim is best verbalised by Vladimir Putin (5), who justified the invasion at the outset with the following statement, aired in *Vremia pokazhet*:

- (5) Сегодняшние события связаны не с желанием ущемить интересы Украины и украинского народа. Они связаны с защитой самой России от тех, кто взял Украину в заложники и пытается использовать её против нашей страны и её народа. Повторю, наши действия – это самозащита от создаваемых нам угроз и от ещё большей беды, чем та, что происходит сегодня.

[What is happening today does not come out of a desire to infringe on the interests of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. It is related to the protection of Russia itself from those who took Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it against our country and its people. I repeat, our actions are self-defense against the threats posed to us and against an even greater disaster than what is happening today.] (*Vremia pokazhet*, 24.02.2022)

The talk show guests and hosts in this broadcast support Putin's statement by accusing the Ukrainian side of repeatedly contravening the Minsk Agreements and breaking the ceasefire "177 times in the last 24 hours" [*za sutki narushali rezhim tishiny v respublike 177 raz*] (*Vremia pokazhet*, 24.02.2022).

While proclaiming these assumptions, a video depicting piles of barrels is played on the studio screen, and Anatolii Kuzichev, one of the moderators, asserts

that Ukraine is trying to “threaten” [*pugat'*] Russia with these barrels. A little later in this show, one of the guests points out that the “operation” which, he stresses, is “not a war” [*éto ne voïna*], will only end if the West reaches an agreement to stop Ukraine being a threat to Russia:

- (6) Запад должен будет [...] договориться о том, чтобы Украина перестала быть угрозой, перестала быть токсичной, перестала быть плацдармом против России, перестала быть анти-Россией.

[The West will have to reach an agreement [...] that Ukraine is no longer a threat, no longer toxic, no longer a beachhead against Russia, no longer anti-Russia.] (*Vremia pokazhet*, 24.02.2022)

In this statement, the guest clearly accuses Ukraine of being the aggressor, of being “toxic,” a “beachhead,” and “anti-Russia,” thus depicting Russia as the victim defending itself from the Ukrainian threat. In this respect, the blame for the war is squarely placed on the enemy – the Ukrainian side. This is in line with another claim in Vladimir Putin’s speech on February 24, 2022, namely that there was no other option than starting this military operation, a statement reiterated by the talk show host Anatolii Kuzichev. Cynically, one of the guests stresses that Russia is a “peace-loving country” [*miroliubivaia strana*], which contradicts his conclusion that there was “no other way” [*drugogo puti ne bylo*] than to invade Ukraine (*Vremia pokazhet*, 24.02.2022).

7.2.2 *Saviors and liberators*

In 2014, the pro-Russian separatists were portrayed as saviors in the Donbas region by helping people to return to their normal lives and access humanitarian aid (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: 347–349). In 2022, this narrative is taken up again. For instance, in *Vremia pokazhet* aired on March 4, 2022, Russia’s “special operation” is called a “liberation operation” [*osvoboditel'naia operatsiia*], which fits the narrative that Ukraine is an occupied country (see Section 7.1.1). Furthermore, the talk show guests and moderators claim that the operation has “a humanitarian character” [*nosit gumanitarnyi kharakter*] because Russia is providing “humanitarian aid” [*gumanitarnaia pomoshch'*] in the Donbas. To support this claim, video extracts are shown, which depict, according to the host Artëm Sheinin, “217 tons of humanitarian aid from Russia” [*217 tonn razlichnykh gumanitarnykh gruzov*] to help the Ukrainian people.

In the talk shows, Russia is both liberator and savior of the people in the Donbas. As one of the guests in another broadcast states, the war is “withdrawing from

the people in Donbas” [*voina otodvigaetsia ot zhitelei Donetska i Luganska*] thanks to Russia’s military operation (*Vremia pokazhet*, 24.02.2022). Although this statement sounds paradoxical considering the bombing of schools and residential areas or the atrocities committed in Bucha, it is completely consistent with Russia’s war motto “if you want peace, prepare for war”, which was already articulated in 2014 (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: 350). Following the guest’s argumentation, people in the Donbas can now return to normal life, which is why he calls the arrival of the Russian army a “celebration” [*prazdnik*]. The moderator agrees, adding the one detail that it is a “celebration of peace” [*prazdnik mira*].

7.2.3 Restoring peace and security

The narrative that Russia is restoring peace in Ukraine is not new as it was already articulated in 2014. In this regard, as well as being saviors and liberators, pro-Russian separatists were said to guarantee freedom and security in the Donbas region (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: 349–351) because by fighting the Ukrainian armed forces, they would protect the people from Ukrainian aggression and atrocities. This was also one of the arguments of Russian politicians, who appeared on the talk shows and repeatedly called for an active military support of the *opolchentsy*.

In the talk shows from 2014, both Russia and the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, were portrayed as peacemakers: On the one hand, because they did not interfere in Ukraine and called for restraint and on the other hand, because they supported the separatists, i.e., the “saviors and liberators” of the Donbas people (see Section 7.2.2). Russia’s portrayal as a peacemaker in the Donbas is a good example of contradictory statements in official discourse, which are widespread and commonly used as an effective propaganda tool (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: 400).

Eight years later, the self-proclaimed People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk asked Russia for help and military support, after the latter had officially recognised them. According to state-controlled media, Russia invaded Ukraine to assist the two People’s Republics and to “immediately stop” [*prekrashchat’ nemedlenno*] the attacks emanating from the Ukrainian military (*Vremia pokazhet*, 24.02.2022). Thus, on February 24, 2022, one of the guests on *Vremia pokazhet* oxymoronically characterises the demilitarisation of Ukraine as “peace enforcement” [*prinuzhdenie k miru*]. One week later, the show’s moderator asserts that Russian soldiers are “bringing peace and tranquility” to the people in Ukraine [*éti rebjata prishli tuda, chtoby vam prinesti mir i pokoi*] (*Vremia pokazhet*, 04.03.2022). Interestingly, the host directly addresses the people of Ukraine by welcoming them in Ukrainian at the beginning of his explanations and addressing them as “dear friends” [*vitaiu vas, shanovni druzi*]. As this is the only time the host speaks Ukrainian in the

show, and it can be assumed that he is primarily addressing the Russian public, engaging them in the deception that Ukrainians are watching Russian talk shows and thereby adding credibility and objectivity to their way of reporting events.

7.2.4 *Slogans and symbols ensuring victory*

In the talk shows, verbal and visual information complement one another (see Section 7.1.2). Furthermore, visual elements and pictures create their own semiotic meaning and are used to support Russia's activities in and aggression against Ukraine. For example, during the annexation of Crimea, talk show guests and hosts appeared in the studio wearing the orange and black Saint George ribbon as a brooch or bow tie. This bicolored ribbon is considered a symbol of the Red Army's victory in World War II and the victory over fascism. Likewise, talk show guests and hosts in 2022 have frequently pinned the Saint George ribbon to their chests, alluding thereby to the parallel between Russia's war against Ukraine and the war against fascism in World War II.

Since February 2022, new symbols have been utilised in the talk shows, specifically two letters written in the Latin alphabet – “Z” and “V” – expressing support for the current war. These victory or militarist symbols figure alternately as white letters on the black T-shirts of *Vremia pokazhet*'s host Artëm Sheinin. Furthermore, the letter “Z” was projected on the studio screen in the broadcast celebrating Crimea joining Russia, thereby connecting the current war to the “victory”,⁹ i.e., the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (*Vremia pokazhet*, 18.03.2022). The victory slogan “Za pobedu!” [‘For Victory’] can also be found in children's drawings presented in late April 2022 in the talk show's studio to give moral support to Russian soldiers (*Vremia pokazhet*, 28.04.2022). This victory appeal is particularly important as it “equates troop support with military triumph, defeating the enemy, and supporting the cause for war” (Oddo 2018: 205).

There are various interpretations of the meaning of the two letters. “Z,” which is also sometimes colored in black and orange like the Saint George ribbon, is frequently associated with the slogan *Za pobedu* [‘For Victory’] while “V” stands for either *Zadacha budet vpolnena* [‘The task will be completed’] or *Sila v pravde* [‘Strength is in the truth’/‘Strength is in the right belief’].¹⁰ The latter is reminiscent of Aleksandr Nevskii's famous saying *Ne v sile Bog, a v pravde* [‘God is not in power,

⁹ As shown in Kaltseis (2022a: 255–258), the annexation of Crimea was depicted as “victory” (*pobeda*) in Russian talk shows.

¹⁰ Other interpretations of the letters include “Z” for *Zapad* [‘West’], designating “west-bound infantry”, and “V” for *Vostok* [‘East’] (cf. Teh 2022). Apart from Russian terms, “Z” is also associated with the

but in truth’] which was cited by talk show guests during the annexation of Crimea (cf. Kaltseis 2022a: 259). The basic idea of this slogan is that the right faith or true belief will lead to victory (cf. Semenov 2014: 188–189).

A similar statement is pronounced by Viacheslav Nikonov, a Russian Duma deputy from the presidential party *Edinaia Rossiia* and host of *Bol'shaia igra*. At the end of each broadcast, he repeats the following sentence: *Nashe delo pravoe – Pobeda budet za nami!* [‘Our cause is right. Victory will be ours!']. This appeal is a clear and well-known war slogan launched over 80 years ago by the host’s grandfather, Viacheslav Molotov, used to mobilise soldiers at the beginning of the Second World War in the Soviet Union (cf. Roberts 2006: 91).

Notwithstanding the constant conjuration of victory, it is admitted in the talk shows that the road to getting there might be long and difficult. To illustrate, Artëm Sheinin (7) uses the metaphor of “sprouts of fascism”, which have developed deep and rotten roots in Ukraine:

- (7) К сожалению, вот этот вот путь к победе и путь домой – он будет очень нелегким, он будет очень непростым, потому что те самые проросшие снова ростки того самого фашизма, про которые здесь говорится, они пустили очень глубокие, очень гнилые корни, иногда даже не верится, что такое могло произойти на земле Украины. В это трудно поверить, но вот эти нелюди, они убеждают нас в этом снова и снова.

[Unfortunately, this road to victory and the road home will not be very easy, it will be difficult because the newly sprouted sprouts of fascism we are talking about, have put very deep, very rotten roots, sometimes you cannot even believe that this could happen in Ukraine. It’s hard to believe, but these non-humans convince us of this again and again.] (*Vremia pokazhet*, 28.04.2022)

With these words, Sheinin uses imagery and metaphor to explain why the “military operation” still endures two months after it began. In fact, to speak of “sprouts of fascism” is a very compelling metaphor because these tiny plants are only at the beginning of their growth phase and must be eradicated before they grow bigger. Similarly, the “cleansing” of Nazis, i.e., Russia’s mission of Ukraine’s “denazification” is a kind of preemptive strike because, according to the metaphor’s logic, Nazism can only be eliminated while it is still small. Once it has grown and spread, this endeavor becomes much more difficult. With this metaphor, the host simultaneously legitimizes the war and prepares the audience for an expansion of the “military operation”, since the sprouts have already put “very deep roots”.

“z” in the American English words “denazification” and “demilitarization” (cf. Finnis 2022), which are the two official aims of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

8 Conclusion

The current analysis illustrates how positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation are orchestrated on Russian TV talk shows. Ukraine is denied its statehood, its soldiers are portrayed as defeated and weak deserters, and the Ukrainian side is generally blamed for the current war and for spreading disinformation and fake news. By contrast, Russia is seen exclusively in a positive light in the shows, notably as the country ending the war, bringing peace to Ukraine, and liberating its people. These dichotomic representation strategies are reminiscent of what Lakoff (1991: 26–27) calls “the fairy tale of the just war”, in which the hero (Russia) is “moral and courageous”, while the villain (Ukraine) “is immoral [...] and vicious”. This constant creation of two sides can be associated with the key function of war discourse, i.e., legitimizing “the actions associated with war, making those actions appear appropriate, reasonable, and justifiable” (Hodges 2015: 4).

Although these dichotomic representations were articulated in 2014 and viewers have constantly been targeted by that messaging for eight years, the current analysis shows some radical changes in the talk shows in 2022. For instance, the quantity of talk show broadcasts has massively increased since the outbreak of the war. In fact, Russian television consists almost exclusively of political talk shows and news programs – all entertainment programs, such as movies, series, or trivial and celebrity talk shows have either been completely removed from the schedule or are only being broadcasted on the weekends. Not only has the number of talk show broadcasts grown exponentially but so has the nature of the discussions in these shows: For example, after 2014, guests on the talk shows who do not support the official government position have been verbally discredited and physically attacked. Moreover, the TV audience is directly addressed and insulted if they try to criticise or shame Russia’s actions in Ukraine. What is more, atrocity narratives are framed in a spiritual-religious context, which confers absolute legitimacy on Russia’s war in Ukraine. The symbols and slogans conjuring victory express visual support for the war and aim to strengthen national unity.

In conclusion, apart from emotionally escalating the atmosphere created by news programs, Russian talk shows in 2022 have taken on an essential function in strengthening national cohesion, supporting the Russian government, and legitimizing the war in Ukraine. Finally, the talk shows have a powerful didactic function as they form and manipulate public opinion by constantly repeating official opinions, slogans, and symbols and staging them with all the visual, verbal, and non-verbal means at their disposal.

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