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“Ukraine commits genocide on Russians”: the term “genocide” in Russian propaganda

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Abstract

According to Russia, the main reason for starting the war with Ukraine on February 24, 2022 was the genocide of the Russian-speaking population by the Nazi government of Volodymyr Zelenskyy. In this paper I investigate the Russian claims about genocide. These claims are shown to be part of the rhetorical frame *Russophobic Nazi Ukraine government commits genocide on Russians*, an aspect of Russian propaganda which builds on the Second World War. I demonstrated that this frame is itself an aspect of a more abstract frame, where any perceived enemy of Russia, is portrayed as a fascist or Nazi force that aims to destroy Russia and Russian culture. I investigate how this frame emerged and developed over time in five stages, starting in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine, and in Russia after the Orange and Maidan revolutions in Ukraine. Russia tries to provide argumentation for the validity of the frame by referring to a number of objectively established facts relating to the situation in the Donbas, Ukraine’s language laws, and the presence of right-extremists in Ukraine. In doing so, some ideas are made more salient than others (the language laws that diminish the official status of Russian in Ukraine and the hostilities in the Donbas region), while other ideas are suppressed altogether (e.g. the juridical meaning of genocide, the actual status of right-wing extremism in Ukraine, the role of Russia in the hostilities in the Donbas, and the actual status of the language laws in Ukraine). In all of these cases, the arguments used by Russia are not valid, being based on exaggerations, hyperbolic use of terminology, and lies. The main goal of this frame is to acquire and retain support for Russia’s policy toward Ukraine, as well as to deflect any potential criticism on Russia itself. Ultimately, the Russian propaganda is part of the concept *Russkij Mir* ‘Russian World’, where Russian language and culture are a means to restore President Vladimir Putin’s Russian sphere of influence from Soviet times or earlier.

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1 Introduction¹

For Russia, one of the main arguments for starting the war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022 was the alleged oppression and genocide of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine by the Ukrainian government, portrayed as a Nazi government by Russia. In the words of Vladimir Putin (March 5, 2022), the goal of the *voennaja operacija* (literally ‘war operation’, also referred to as *specoperacija* ‘special operation’) is the “protection of people who for eight years have been subjected to abuse, genocide by the Kyiv [Kiev] regime”. To achieve this, Russia wants to realize a “demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine” and bring to court all the war criminals who are responsible for “bloody crimes against civilians, including civilians of the Russian Federation” (*Interfaks*, February 24, 2022). Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, also argued in March 2022, referring to Russian-speaking people in Ukraine, that “it is not uncommon that you have to pay for the right to speak your native language with your work and health, but also with your life.” (*TASS*, March 1, 2022). This clearly illustrates that the perceived oppression of the Russian language plays a central role in Russia’s conception of the war. Ukraine lodged an urgent case at the International Court of Justice in The Hague on February 26, stating:

[T]he Russian Federation has falsely claimed that acts of genocide have occurred in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts of Ukraine, and on that basis recognized the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic,” and then declared and implemented a “special military operation” against Ukraine with the express purpose of preventing and punishing purported acts of genocide that have no basis in fact. On the basis of this false allegation, Russia is now engaged in a military invasion of Ukraine involving grave and widespread violations of the human rights of the Ukrainian people.” (International Court of Justice Application Instituting Proceedings filed in the Registry of the Court on 26 February 2022)

In this paper I want to answer the following questions:

- a) How and why is the term “genocide” used in Russian propaganda?
- b) How true are the Russian state’s claims that Russian speakers are being oppressed in Ukraine and that there is genocide of Russian-speaking Ukrainians?

I use the term “propaganda” to mean a form of communication intended to influence public opinion and thus gain support for certain political views or positions. Propaganda is characterized by the systematic provision of one-sided information, which may or may not be (partly) false, with certain facts being selectively emphasized and others deliberately left out (Smith, 2016; for a discussion and definition of the term propaganda, see e.g. Cunningham, 2002).

This paper has the following structure. First, in Sect. 2, I will discuss the methodology and two topics that are important as background for this research: (i) the official 1948 UN definition of the term “genocide”, and (ii) the language situation and language laws in Ukraine. In Sect. 3, I will provide an overview of how Russia uses the term “genocide” and related

¹For the names of people and media, such as newspapers, I use the popular English transliteration of Russian and Ukrainian in the running text. In other cases, I use the standard scientific transliteration. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. The cited works are listed in the References section, except for the Russian media and some Ukrainian media, which are the object of study (the use of propaganda); the full references for these are given in the Appendix (see supplementary information file). I would like to thank the reviewers, Viktoriia Ryhovanova and Juris Pucenoks for their valuable comments, which all helped to improve the paper. All remaining errors are, of course, my own.

terms, and describe how this use developed over time. In Sect. 4, I will evaluate the data in relation to the research questions, and in Sect. 5 present my conclusion.

2 Background

2.1 Methodology

2.1.1 Frame analysis and previous research

To my knowledge, there is no previous research on the use of the term “genocide” in Russian propaganda, but there have been various studies of Russian propaganda, which also look at the use of particular words, narratives, and frames, including the use of metaphors. Scharlaj (2018) discusses various terms that are associated with the enemy in Russia, and Karpenko-Seccombe (2020) uses a combination of corpus analysis and discourse analysis to investigate how the same events are framed differently in the Ukrainian and Russian parliaments. Kaltseis (2021) uses critical discourse analysis and metaphor analysis to study the use of metaphors in Russian TV talk shows during the annexation of Crimea, and a similar approach using metaphor analysis can be found in Weiss (2020). Finally, Binder and Kaltseis (2020) provide an analysis of media techniques in covering the events in Odessa in 2014. Pupcenoks and Seltzer (2021) conducted an exhaustive search of statements on the website of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations and on the official homepage of the President of Russia for the time periods covering the conflict in Georgia and the beginning of the conflicts in Ukraine, and looked at Russia’s rhetoric in these conflicts. They conclude that Russia uses language selectively to promote its self-interest and that its rhetoric changes depending on whether the given situation leads to loss or gain of territory or influence. This study also shows how accusations of Nazism abroad have been successfully promoted by Vladimir Putin and his team within Russia. Pupcenoks et al. (2022) analyzed 20,000 statements of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, showing how sentiment analysis and a strategic narratives framework can be used to analyze developments in international relations longitudinally (cf. Fisher et al., 2022). In this paper, I will use the insights provided in the studies mentioned above. As I will show, to understand the use of the term “genocide”, it is important to analyze it as part of a larger rhetorical frame. In this case, the larger rhetorical frame is *Russophobic Nazi Ukraine government commits genocide on Russians*, which involves the perception and presentation of a democratically elected and democratically acting government as a Nazi government that aims to destroy Russians, out of hate for Russians.² To study this frame, I will apply insights from frame analysis (Lakoff, 2004; Kuypers, 2010). Rhetorical frames consist of key words, metaphors, and visual images, which appear consistently within a narrative and together convey a coherent meaning across time (Entman, 1991). The use of the term “genocide” in Russian propaganda is a clear example of how specific words are chosen to provide a particular perspective on events and convey a particular world view.

In this paper, I will show how the rhetorical frame *Russophobic Nazi Ukraine government commits genocide on Russians* emerged over time, how it is used and abused by Russia, and why it is successful. It is important to emphasize here that in the frame used by Russia the terms do not have a metaphorical meaning, but are intended to signify their literal meaning

²For an overview of such Russian propagandistic narratives about Ukraine, see Yermolenko (2019) and Kuzio (2020, December).

and, as I will show, there is sometimes even deliberate confusion between the literal and non-literal meaning; that is, a term is used as a hyperbole. The framing is intended to provide the perspective of Ukraine as a Nazi state, associated with fascists who are adherents of the Ukrainian nationalist politician Stepan Bandera (1909–1959), by creating the idea that the Ukrainian government commits genocide on Russians. In doing so, some ideas are made more salient than others (the language laws that diminish the official status of Russian in Ukraine and the hostilities in the Donbas region), while other ideas are suppressed altogether (e.g. the juridical meaning of genocide, the actual status of right-wing extremism in Ukraine, the role of Russia in the hostilities in the Donbas, and the actual status of the language laws in Ukraine). As I will show, the use of the term “genocide” with respect to the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine has a longer history, having emerged in post-Soviet Russia and in Ukraine itself. After the Maidan Revolution of 2014, it was actively picked up by the Russian government, probably inspired by pro-Russian Russian-speaking Ukrainians. The development of the frame reveals that it builds on more enduring sentiments in Russia and Ukraine, and that it was changed and adapted on each occasion to make it more effective for the Russian home audience.

2.1.2 Data analysis

To study the “genocide” frame, I examined how instances of words like *genocid* ‘genocide’ are used in Russian political discourse and propaganda. I provide a qualitative analysis of such uses in the Russian media and in the discourse of Russian politicians, based on a systematic analysis of various Russian media. These data can be seen as illustrative of the way terms like “genocide” are used in the Russian propaganda (cf. the method used in Pupcenoks & Seltzer, 2021). During recent decades, the Russian media landscape was not entirely controlled by the Russian state, and various media took an independent and critical stance toward the Russian government (e.g. *Novaya Gazeta*, *TV Dozhd*, *Ekho Moskvy*), even when in 2019 laws were introduced which prevent the spreading of fake news or disrespect to the authorities. In this paper I focus on the media outlets that directly or indirectly reflect the Russian government’s position on Ukraine, specifically with respect to the term “genocide” as a propaganda tool: *RIA Novosti*, *TASS*, and *Kremlin.ru*. *RIA Novosti* is part of the media group *Rossiya Segodnya*, which also includes the propaganda channel *Sputnik* and is owned and operated by the Russian government. It can be seen as an important channel for Russian state propaganda. The state-owned news agency *TASS* can likewise be regarded as a channel that provides an exclusively government stance. Finally, I also looked at speeches and written publications of President Vladimir Putin himself, which are published on his official website *Kremlin.ru*, providing direct insight into what the head of the Russian government expresses on political affairs. To gain more insight into the use of the term *genocid* ‘genocide’, I systematically searched the term *genocid* ‘genocide’ on the websites of these media. They all have a good search function, giving access to all the news items from past decades (from the period 2000 till 2022). In addition to the word “genocide” itself, I also searched terms that often co-occurred with relevant use of the term *genocid*, such as *nacist* ‘nazi’, *fašist* ‘fascist’, terms associated with *Bandera*, and *rusofobija* ‘russophobia’. Scrutiny of each example revealed whether it referred to Ukraine and what message was conveyed in the news item. See the appendix for the news items that were incorporated in this study.

Together with the media listed above, I also looked at the state-controlled television channel *Pervyj kanal* (‘Channel One’), which plays an important part in the Russian state’s attempts to spread a particular message to the Russian home audience (see Pomerantsev, 2014). The *Channel One* website does not offer the option of searching through the text of all programs, but the titles or headings of television programs can be searched. Although it was

therefore not possible to obtain a complete overview of how the term "genocide" and similar terms were used, I could gain some interesting insights into how the state television framed particular events in terms of genocide. Where relevant, I also used other Russian media outlets that often refer to the Russian government's position, such as those reporting press conferences (e.g. the independent news agency *Interfaks*), or that provide a particular opinion on events, such as newspapers like *Komsomolskaya Pravda* or *Izvestiya*. The Russian media sources used in this paper to illustrate framing in the Russian media are given in the Appendix, as are similar Ukrainian media sources. The Appendix lists about 100 news items.

2.2 International legal definition of the term "genocide"

In view of my focus on the term "genocide", it is important to look at the official legal definition of this term, which was agreed in 1948 and is still accepted by many countries, including Russia. When the Russian government speaks of genocide, this is the definition to which they adhere, even if previous studies show that Russians use their references to international laws and concepts widely embraced by the West selectively, as a smokescreen to advance their interest (for example, Allison, 2020).

In 1948, after World War II, there was consensus in the world that the atrocities of the Nazis, the extermination of Jews and Roma people, should not happen again. The UN agreed on a Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The Convention entered into force on January 12, 1951 and defined genocide as follows (the official documents listing the various negotiations are published by Abtahi & Webb, 2008; the definition is given on p. 2087):

Article II: In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a) Killing members of the group;
- b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

During the negotiations about the definition of genocide, the United States proposed that there should also be a reference to political groups, with the argument that the Nazis had also tried to exterminate political groups, such as communists. However, the Soviet and Polish delegations were against this, because it would be "contrary to the fundamental conception of genocide as recognized by science" (Abtahi & Webb, 2008, p. 1123). In addition, it was remarked that "the inclusion of political groups would have the effect of making the Convention unacceptable [sic] to certain governments. Such governments might fear that the Convention would hamper their action against domestic subversive movements by possibly exposing these governments to unjustified accusations" (Abtahi & Webb, 2008, p. 1123). Russia was in fact afraid it would be accused or convicted of genocide itself, for example for the deliberate killing by starvation of millions of Ukrainian peasants during the thirties in the Soviet Union, the so-called *holodomor* (Applebaum, 2017; for the Holodomor, see also Conquest et al., 1987). Another term that was not included in the final version was "linguistic" groups, since the United States delegate argued that "it is not believed that genocide would be practiced upon them because of their linguistic, as distinguished from their racial, national

or religious, characteristics” (Abtahi & Webb, 2008, p. 373). As such, isolated measures with the aim of reducing or even eradicating a particular language cannot be seen as genocide in the strict juridical sense. The broader concept of “cultural genocide” was eliminated from the 1948 text (see Kuper, 1981, p. 23; O’Neill, 2010, p. 193), and the UN General Assembly voted to exclude it, although it may be covered by Article IIe (Schabas, 2010, pp. 134–135). Nevertheless, if we accept the concept of “cultural genocide”, it is clear that the Ukrainian language laws introduced after the Maidan Revolution do not aim to eradicate the Russian language from every sphere of life in Ukraine, but rather to establish the use of Ukrainian as the state language and to strengthen its position in culture and public life in some cases at the expense of Russian.

Since 1948–1951 there has been a definition of the concept of genocide, although various authors, starting with Raphael Lemkin, have written about its definition, application, and typology (see e.g. *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* edited by Bloxham & Moses, 2010; and Weiss-Wendt, 2008, for a critical reflection). For the use of the term in Russian propaganda, however, the official 1948–1951 definition is a good starting point. After the term “genocide” was established in 1948, it was both used and abused by politicians and scholars in the Soviet Union (Kupfer & De Waal, 2014), but it did not play a key role in Soviet propaganda. The extensive use of the term by the Russian government that we see today developed much later, during the reign of President Vladimir Putin. As I will show below, the use of the term “genocide” in Russian propaganda has evolved gradually over time, developing out of the main ingredients for its use that were already present earlier. The present-day use of the term “genocide” cannot be studied in isolation and must be seen as part of a larger frame used in Russian propaganda, which portrays the Ukrainian government as consisting of Nazis who hate Russia and aim to exterminate both the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine and Russians from Russia. In the next section I will look in detail at how this frame evolved over time, culminating in the war against Ukraine in 2022.

2.3 Language situation in Ukraine and language policy

In Sect. 1, I cited Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov who argued that “it is not uncommon that you have to pay for the right to speak your native language with your work and health, but also with your life”. This fragment clearly illustrates how language is central to the term “genocide” in Russian propaganda. In Russia’s portrayal of events, the goal of the Ukrainian government is to exterminate the Russian language from Ukraine. Because of the central role that is played by language, it is important to provide a background for the linguistic situation in Ukraine, and its language politics. In Sect. 3, I will illustrate how language became associated with the rhetorical frame of *Russophobic Nazi Ukraine government commits genocide on Russians*.

2.3.1 Language situation

The official language in Ukraine is Ukrainian. In present-day Ukraine, both Russian and Ukrainian are widely used (see e.g. Kulyk, 2017). Russian and Ukrainian are closely related East Slavic languages, with reasonable mutual intelligibility (see e.g. Rehbein & Romaniuk, 2014; Del Gaudio, 2010). In Russian propaganda, the existence of Ukrainian as a separate language form Russian has been contested. A good example is Vladimir Putin’s 2021 Essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, in which he emphasizes that in the beginning of the 17th century the language of Ukrainians and Russians was “absolutely identical, and differences in the vernacular were insignificant”, suggesting that Ukrainian cannot

Table 1 Data on languages spoken in Ukraine (Aref'ev, 2012)

Native language (L1)	1989		2001		2011	
	Number (millions)	percentage	Number (millions)	percentage	Number (millions)	percentage
Ukrainian	33.3	64.7	32.6	67.8	32.4	71.1
Russian	16.9	32.8	14.3	29.6	12.0	26.3
Other languages	1.3	2.5	1.3	2.9	1.2	2.6
Total	51.5	100	48.2	100	45.6	100

really be seen as an independent language (Vladimir Putin, *Kremlin.ru*, July 12, 2021) Even though it is true that Russian and Ukrainian are two closely related languages, Vladimir Putin's take on language is not shared by linguists.

Besides Ukrainian and Russian, there is also a mixed or intermediate language, called Surzhyk, which shows the fluidity of the two languages. Some Ukrainian studies do not classify Surzhyk as a language, but rather as a way of speaking or intermediate sublanguage, playing the role of the transition stage in the assimilative process of replacing Ukrainian with Russian (for Surzhyk, see e.g. Romanova et al., 2007; Del Gaudio, 2010; Hentschel and Taranenko 2015, 2021). In addition, there are also some other small minority languages, including Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian (for data, see e.g. Eberhard et al., 2022). For an overview of the history of Ukrainian in Ukraine, see Moser (2013) and Danylenko and Naienko (2019); for a history of Russian in Ukraine, see Zeller and Sitchinava (2020). Ukrainian is more dominant in the west of the country, whereas Russian is more dominant in Crimea and the east of the country, including the Donbas region. Russian is also dominant in many cities, such as Odessa, Kharkiv, and Kyiv. Crimea and eastern Ukraine historically had a large percentage of Russian speakers. The presence of Russian-speaking people is therefore not a very recent phenomenon, as is the case for many migrant populations in Europe, although some Russian-speaking areas, such as the Donbas, were populated relatively late; this occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, when people were brought in to work in mining or other industries (Siegelbaum & Walkowitz, 1995).

Aref'ev (2012, p. 49) provides the data given in Table 1 for 1989–2011, based on data of the all-Russian population census of 1989 and the population census of Ukraine of 2001. The figures for 2011 are estimated.

These data suggest that approximately 70% of the population had Ukrainian as their mother tongue in 2011, which concurs with the data given by the Ukrainian government State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2022, population census 2001. If the areas not controlled by Ukraine are excluded, the percentage of Ukrainian speakers in the controlled areas is higher.³ Russian is given as the native language of 30% of the population of Ukraine and is used and understood by most of the remaining 70%. In the census of 2001, people were asked to indicate their mother tongue. For some people, this was not necessarily the language that they spoke the most, but rather the language with which they most identified or wanted to identify (Arel, 2002). Data from a survey in 2019 as given in Table 2 show a different picture, and suggest that a larger percentage of people speak both Russian and Ukrainian:

³Ethnologue (Eberhard et al.) provides the following information on Ukrainian: All users in Ukraine: 30,800,000 (2016); L1 users in Ukraine: 25,000,000 (2016); ethnic population: 34,400,000 (2016). For Russian it states: Widespread, particularly in east and south; all users in Ukraine: 39,100,000; L1 users in Ukraine: 14,300,000 (2003; UNSD); L2 users in Ukraine: 24,800,000 (Arefyev, 2012).

Table 2 Data from survey by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (2019, March 15)

Language use	Percentage
Mostly Ukrainian with closest relatives	46%
Mostly or only Russian	28.1% (of which 15.8% only Russian)
Both Russian and Ukrainian in equal proportion	24.9%
Other languages	0.2%
Undecided or no response	0.7%

2.3.2 Language policy

There is a long tradition of “deukrainization” in Ukraine, dating back to Czarist and Soviet times (Moser, 2013; Danylenko & Naienko, 2019). During the Soviet Union, Russian was *de facto* the only official language: the language of government, (most) education, and communication between the Soviet republics. Although Ukrainian was spoken by most Ukrainians, it largely remained a spoken language. The state’s attitude toward Ukrainian was not constant but fluctuated from a certain tolerance to variously severe degrees of repression. However, Ukrainian became the official language in Ukraine in 1989 and was the official language at the time of Ukraine’s independence in 1991. Russian and other minority languages (e.g. Hungarian) became protected in 1996 (Kulyk, 2017, p. 292).

For the new Ukrainian state, using Ukrainian as the official state language had an important symbolic value, reflecting the idea of Ukraine as a separate identity; Russian had been the state language for most of the territories of Ukraine for centuries (Azhniuk, 2018). The promotion of Ukrainian to the sole official language therefore played an important part in Ukraine’s nation-building process and can only be understood in the context of the long-standing oppression of the Ukrainian language and culture by the Russians (see also Bilaniuk, 2005; Bilaniuk & Melnyk, 2008). Yet after the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych became president in 2010, and a language law promoting Russian to an official government language in many regions was implemented in 2012, this did justice to the fact that in some regions, such as Crimea and the Donbas, Russian was in fact the dominant language. According to Moser (2013), however, the pro-Russian Party of Regions misused the Council of Europe’s minority rights legislation to make Russian the privileged language vis-à-vis Ukrainian. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is intended to protect languages that are in danger of eventual extinction, thus contributing to the maintenance and development of Europe’s cultural wealth and traditions. In this sense, of course, Russian is not a minority language in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the law was presented as conforming to this Charter. Moser observed that implementation of the new law could lead to a scenario as in Belarus, where the use of Belarusian has been declining since 1995 (for a comparison between the language situation in Ukraine and Belarus, see Zeller & Sitchinava, 2020). Furthermore, the Venice Commission, which advises the Council of Europe (an important European organization which aims to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law across Europe) on constitutional matters, noted in 2011 that “by protecting and promoting the Russian language on almost the same level as the Ukrainian language, which is the sole official language of Ukraine, the Draft Law threatens to diminish the integrative force of this language. Especially in important areas of public life such as public administration, the educational system and the

media, the draft law clearly diminishes the position of the State language" (Venice Commission, 2011, p. 21). As such, the abolition of this new law by the Ukrainian parliament in 2014 immediately after Yanukovych was ousted, and the introduction of new language laws from 2015 to 2020 (Law of Ukraine, 2015, On condemning the communist and National Socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes and prohibiting propaganda of their symbols; laws on television and radio broadcasting and Ukrainian language quotas, see Reznik, 2018; Law of Ukraine, 2017, on Education; Law of Ukraine, 2019, on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language), which promoted the use of Ukrainian at the expense of Russian, could be seen as a step back or a step forward, depending on the perspective taken.

The Law on Education (2017) and the Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language (2019) had the most impact as language policy measures. The 2017 law declared the state language, Ukrainian, to be the language of all education. Education in the other languages of Ukraine, such as Russian or Hungarian, is possible only in preschool and general secondary education (alongside education in Ukrainian), which means that Ukrainian is the required language of study from the fifth grade on, except when the language is a separate subject. The Venice Commission argued that the less favorable treatment of the Russian language and other non-EU languages in the Law on Education was difficult to justify and raised issues of discrimination (Venice Commission, 2017, section 124). Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court of Ukraine declared on 16 July 2019 that the Law on Education was non-discriminatory, and hence constitutional (Makarchuk et al., 2020). It was also pointed out by Ukraine that many other European countries have the state language as the sole language of education (Toronchuk & Markovskiy, 2018).

In 2019 the Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language was introduced. This law regulates the Ukrainian language in the media, education, public transport, healthcare, advertising, consumer services, and the workplace, aiming to strengthen its position in society, in practice at the expense of Russian. The law requires all Ukrainian citizens to be proficient in Ukrainian (Article 16, 1) and all employers are entitled to speak Ukrainian in the workplace if they so wish (Article 20, 1). The law also provided for the phased introduction of various other measures, such as the requirements that print and online publications are either exclusively in Ukrainian or have a Ukrainian translation; that films produced in Ukraine are in Ukrainian; that 50% of books are printed in Ukrainian and 50% of the books sold are in Ukrainian; and that many cultural, artistic, recreational, and entertainment events are in Ukrainian or have a Ukrainian translation. Ukrainian was even the required language in shops and restaurants, unless clients indicated that they preferred to speak another language, such as Russian (Article 30, 1 and 3). The Venice Commission expressed the opinion that "member states have to strike a fair balance between the preservation and promotion of the state language as a tool for integration within society, on the one hand, and the protection of the linguistic rights of persons belonging to national minorities, on the other hand" (Venice Commission, 2019, Sect. 31). According to the Commission, the law failed to do this. While the Commission accepted that the historical oppression of Ukrainian may lead to the adoption of positive measures aimed at promoting Ukrainian, it also noted that "this cannot justify depriving the Russian language and its speakers living in Ukraine, of the protection granted to other languages and their speakers..." (Venice Commission, 2019, Sect. 44). The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (which advises the Council of Europe) was also highly critical of the language laws, and asked for solid legal protection of minority languages (Fourth Opinion on Ukraine, 2018). Ukraine subsequently submitted a report to answer the criticism of this Advisory Committee (Fifth Report submitted by Ukraine, 2022), although this report should be read as a further argument for Ukraine's language policy.

Table 3 Mother tongue of respondents and attitude to Russian propaganda

	Russian Propaganda Efficiency (RPE) Index
Ukrainian	15
Mixture of Ukrainian and Russian (Surzhyk)	27
Russian	38
Average value for total Ukraine population	26

At the same time, the new laws were understandable from the perspective of the new Ukrainian government after the Maidan Revolution. It was precisely because of the extremely violent anti-Ukrainian Russian propaganda in Russia and Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and Russian support for the rebels in the Donbas region that Ukraine started to implement language laws diminishing the use of Russian as an official state language and a language of public life (see also Uffelmann, 2019, p. 208). The more Russia pushed to discredit Ukraine and Ukrainian language and culture, the more Ukraine tried to underline its own unique cultural and linguistic identity. Some of the displaced persons from Crimea or the so-called self-declared “People’s Republics” in the Donbas region, who fled their Russian speaking homeland in 2014, switched to Ukrainian because they identified with Ukraine as a country.⁴ Meanwhile, in Crimea and these republics, the use of Ukrainian was suppressed from public life (Coynash, 2020). In Ukraine there were serious concerns about Russian propaganda.

A good illustration is the survey on Russian propaganda conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in February 2015, which measured Russian propaganda so that counterpropaganda actions could be taken. The results are reported in Table 3. To quantify susceptibility to Russian propaganda, the Institute introduced the Russian Propaganda Efficiency (RPE) Index. The score on this index is determined by the respondent’s level of agreement with a number of Russian propaganda statements, for example that the Maidan Revolution was organized by Americans along with nationalists; that nationalists seized power illegally and started a war against their own people; that Ukraine-Crimea and eastern Ukraine were in danger but Crimea managed to defend itself by becoming part of Russia; and that eastern Ukraine has risen against its oppression and demands autonomy and security guarantees. Among the conclusions of this survey was that Ukrainian-speaking citizens have a much lower than average level of trust in Russian propaganda, and Russian-speaking citizens a much higher than average level of trust.

The Institute’s survey and its results probably reflect the influence of the Russian state media in Ukraine and the self-identification of Russian-speaking people. However, this survey also clearly reflects the anxiety of Ukrainians in 2015 about the influence of Russia in their country. Russian propaganda via television is actually quite an aggressive phenomenon, often regarded as part of an information war (Osnač, 2015). Russia speakers receive much of their information from the Russian state-owned channels, which explains why these were blocked during the war with Ukraine. The Ukrainian government’s response is to see language as an element of the information war:

“Language quotas on the radio are a protection of the information space, and part of the state policy of the country. The Ukrainian language also protects us, because language

⁴Viktoriiia Ryhovanova (pc).

has become an element of hybrid warfare. The law assumes that at this stage 30% of the volume of songs on the air per day would be in Ukrainian. The average this year is 51%. Last year it was 4% less. That is, we are seeing a trend toward an increase in Ukrainian songs on the radio," Nechiporenko stressed. (*Ukrinform, Mul'timedijnaja platforma inoveščanija Ukrainy*, December 14, 2018)

The symbolic use of the language policy as an element of war is also clearly reflected in the ban of Russian-language cultural products (movies, books) until the full cessation of the occupation of Ukraine's territory, which was declared by the Lviv oblast in September 2018 (Lviv Regional Council, 2018). This ban was largely symbolic, as Lviv is an almost entirely Ukrainian-speaking oblast. Other measures were less symbolic. On February 2, 2021, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed off on a decision taken the same day by the National Security and Defense Council to impose sanctions on three Russian speaking TV news channels owned by the pro-Russian parliamentary deputy Taras Kozak, and long-time Putin confidant, the oligarch and politician Viktor Medvedchuk (Matuszak, 2021; see also National Commission for the State Regulation of electronic communications, radiofrequency spectrum and the provision of postal services, February 22, 2021). In this case, the reason for banning these Russian speaking channels was that they were perceived to be under the control of "foreign legal entities", in other words, Russia.

The language laws and language measures show how language policy has become highly politicized. For Russian speakers, all these measures are obviously a complicated issue. Russian-speaking does not mean pro-Russia or against one's own state (Azhniuk, 2018, p. 323). Kulyk's (2017) study of three surveys shows a large discrepancy between the ethnic and linguistic dimensions of identity on the one hand, and language identity and language practice on the other (see also Khmelko, 2004). Hence, Russian speakers may feel strongly Ukrainian. Eastern Ukrainians, outside of core Donbas, prefer to speak Russian but are not antagonistic to Ukrainian. They accept that their children attend Ukrainian schools, that signs in their towns are in Ukrainian, and Ukrainian predominates in central state institutions (Arel, 2017–2018). However, the new language laws certainly also led to dissatisfaction with the reduction of the Russian language in public life, especially among older Russian-speaking people and in traditionally Russian-speaking cities, such as Kharkiv and Odessa. Some also criticized the laws in relation to minority languages, such as Romanian (Pohrebniak, 2019). At the same time, however, many scholars do not feel that promoting Russian to the second state language would be instrumental in unifying the country (Azhniuk, 2018, p. 323).

3 The emergence and use of the "Nazi-genocide-Russophobia" frame in five stages

Having now elucidated some of the background to this issue, I will proceed to explain how the term "genocide" is construed and used as part of the larger frame *Russophobic Nazi Ukraine government commits genocide on Russians*, showing how this frame developed over time in five stages:

1. Embryonic stage in post-Soviet Russia and the Donbas in Ukraine;
2. Emergence of the "Nazi-genocide" frame in Ukraine (2003–2014);
3. Lessons learned by Russia from the colored revolutions (2003–2014);
4. Full-blown development and Russian use of the entire "Nazi-genocide-Russophobia" frame for Ukraine (2014–2022);
5. Final stage: war against Ukraine (2022) and encouragement of the Russian army to commit atrocities against Ukrainian civilians.

3.1 Stage 1: embryonic stage in post-Soviet Russia and the Donbas in Ukraine

When Ukraine became an independent nation after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it followed a largely pro-Russian political course. During the 1991 Ukrainian independence referendum, there were pro-Russian groups in the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine who were fiercely against Ukrainian independence. A central figure in this movement was Dmitry Kornilov, who used the slogan “Donbas says “no” to Banderism, Donbas says “no” to the dominance by the corrupt nomenclature, Donbas says “no” to nationalism” (*Novorossija*, August 3, 2015).⁵ Similar terms were also used in Russia. The following fragment is from a 2001 article by the post-Soviet Russian nationalist political ideologists Konstantin Zatulin and Aleksandr Sevastyanov in the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. It was written in the context of ratification of the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation:

By having handed over millions of Russian people to the full disposal of successive Ukrainian ethnocrats who have established themselves in Kyiv, we are betraying and dooming our people to ethnocide – outwardly bloodless cultural genocide, gradually depriving our compatriots of their national identity. (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 1, 2001)

Aleksandr Sevastyanov, a prominent thinker in post-Soviet nationalism, wrote a pamphlet in 1998 titled *The Russian Project*, calling for recognition of the right to unify the Russians living divided in different nations (Likhachev, 2016). The use of terms like “ethnocide” and “cultural genocide” to refer to the policy of the Ukrainian government led by Leonid Kuchma must be seen in relation to this. The goal of using these terms was to convince public opinion to keep Ukraine within Russia’s sphere of influence. As I noted above, the term “cultural genocide” does not fall under the strict definition of the term “genocide”, although some scholars argue that it can be seen as part of the more abstract term “genocide” (see also Bilsky & Klagsbrun, 2018). For Konstantin Zatulin and Aleksandr Sevastyanov, however, merely promoting the Ukrainian language or culture was an attempt to deprive the Russian-speaking people of Ukraine of their Russian identity. Around 2001, this point of view was not uncommon among Russian politicians, along with the use of terms like “ethnocide” and “genocide”, and *ukrainizacija* ‘ukrainization’ and *derusifikacija* ‘derussification’. The use of such loaded terms was even criticized in Russia (e.g. Okara, 1999; but for an opposite Russian view on this topic, see Martynov, 2016). This terminology was not, however, part of the Russian government’s discourse, and not yet part of a single, coherent frame that was used consistently over time.

3.2 Stage 2: emergence of the “Nazi-genocide” frame in Ukraine (2003–2014)

In this subsection I will show that the first coherent use of the “Nazi-genocide” frame emerged in Ukraine as early as 2003, when the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko was portrayed by his opponents as a Nazi who wanted to purify the Donbas region. The development of this frame was internal to Ukraine, promoted by pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians in the Donbas with the assistance of people from Russia that were hired as campaign advisors. The aim was to retain a pro-Russian government in Ukraine. In the presidential election of

⁵The term used in the slogan is *banderovščina* ‘Banderovism’ (the suffix *-ščina* typically indicates a negative evaluation).

2004, the main candidates were the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych of the *Party of Regions*⁶ and the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko of *Our Ukraine Bloc*. Yanukovich was initially declared the winner but protests broke out against alleged corruption and electoral fraud, often referred to as the Orange Revolution. A re-run ballot was then won by Viktor Yushchenko.

It was just before the Orange Revolution, in 2003, that journalists first reported Viktor Yushchenko's (presidential candidate) portrayal as a Nazi wishing to purify the nation in the Donetsk region, the power base of his pro-Russian rival Viktor Yanukovich, and to remove Russian elements. According to the press, anti-Yushchenko demonstrators waved Russian flags and shouted insults about the Ukrainian language (*The Ukrainian Weekly*, November 6, 2003). The idea of pro-Russian inhabitants of Donetsk accusing Viktor Yushchenko of purifying the nation from Russian elements clearly suggests the concept of genocide. In addition, Viktor Yushchenko was portrayed as a spy for the USA, being married to an American woman of Ukrainian descent who had previously worked in the White House (Kuzio, 2020, April). Various Ukrainian sources report that during the 2004 election campaign, the Party of Regions distributed a poster suggesting that Viktor Yushchenko wanted to split the country into three parts, based on language, with first, second, and third grade inhabitants (Skorkin, 2016; Ośnač, 2015; see Fig. 1). Whether Russia helped to create this PR campaign is not known, although it has been said that Russians were involved (Skorkin, 2016). The map was also shown on television and led, according to some sources, to hysteria in the Donbas region, even if the sentiments expressed by the map, were initially probably only shared by few people, for example people that were associated with the Donetsk based pro-Russian Slavic Party.⁷

In response to the way he was depicted, Viktor Yushchenko actually used the term "political genocide" himself, to refer to his portrayal and treatment in the Donbas; he suspected that the protests against him were organized by the regional deputies of the Donbas region and supported by Leonid Kuchma, who was still president at the time.⁸ The misuse of the term "genocide" thus clearly led to its devaluation on both sides.⁹ It is evident that the idea of "genocide" was part of a larger rhetorical frame intended to frighten the Russian-speaking population and make them elect the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych.

⁶The relationship between the Party of Regions and Russia has a longer and more complex history, dating back to the 1990s, when businessmen gained special positions in the Donbas region. They often had business relations with Russia and later (in 2004) became associated with the Party of Regions, which was founded by the mayor of Donetsk. The Party of Regions was a continuation of the political power of President Leonid Kuchma, and was known for an authoritarian style of ruling and communication (see Skorkin, 2018). For an analysis of corruption in the Donbas and Viktor Yanukovych see Kuzio, 2015, and Van Diepen, 2021. Another interesting fact is that the American Paul J. Manafort, a consultant to Donald Trump, advised the Party of Regions and Viktor Yanukovych from 2005 (Pastukhova & Grushenko, 2009). In 2005 Viktor Yanukovych led the opposition against President Viktor Yushchenko and his Party of Regions signed a collaboration agreement with the Russian political party of Vladimir Putin "United Russia" (*RBC*, 2005, July 03).

⁷*Ukrains'ka Pravda*, September 20, 2004, reported that the identity of the author is not clear. On a Livejournal blog from 2011, the then head of the *Slavjanskaja Partija* (Slavic Party), Aleksandr Luzan, is mentioned as the person who was responsible for the distribution of the posters (*Livejournal*, myslivie, February 19, 2011). A newspaper article from December 2003 (*Podrobyci*, December 04, 2003), states that leader of the *Slavjanskaja Partija* during the elections, Aleksandr Baziljuk (Oleksandr Bazyljuk), was responsible for the billboard of Viktor Yushchenko in a Nazi uniform. The article quoted him saying that he was not willing to tell who the sponsors for making the billboards were.

⁸*Ukrainskaja Pravda*, February 12, 2003, reported that President Leonid Kuchma was very surprised about this allegation.

⁹Viktor Yushchenko himself demanded apologies from the departmental heads responsible (*Ukrains'ka Pravda*, February 10, 2005).

Fig. 1 Poster with the text in Ukrainian: THIS is what THEIR Ukraine looks like! Ukraine, open your eyes



The “Nazi-genocide” frame was not, however, used actively by the Russian government or state media. After Viktor Yushchenko was elected, the Russian state-owned news agency *RIA Novosti* published the following statement by Viktor Yushchenko, mitigating the tensions between him and the Russian-speaking population in the Donbas:

Yushchenko also addressed the residents of the eastern regions of Ukraine. “The time will come when people there will know that I was born in the east of the country, they will know that I am not a Nazi, but the son of a prisoner of Dachau and Buchenwald, they will know that my wife is Ukrainian, that I stand for the free development of the Russian language,” the politician said. (*RIA Novosti*, December 10, 2004)

It appeared that Ukraine was becoming a more Western-oriented country, although the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich also retained some power and was prime minister from 2006 to 2007. The Russian state-owned media made some references to Nazism or fascism, for example when President Viktor Yushchenko signed a decree recognizing the soldiers of the OUN-UPA (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists-Ukrainian Insurgent Army; the Ukrainian nationalist paramilitary and later partisan formation, called *banderovcy* by the Russians) as veterans of World War II (*RIA Novosti*, October 17, 2006). In 2008, we also see the term “cultural genocide” occur in the Russian media in relation to the Donetsk area, the power base of pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich. During Viktor Yushchenko’s presidency, measures were introduced in 2008 to stop the influence of foreign, particularly Russian state channels (*Delo*, March 25, 2010). This was also picked up in the Russian media. In the fragment below, the banning of Russian television channels, such as the Russian state television (*Perviy kanal*), is described in terms of “cultural genocide”:

The National Council for Television and Radio Broadcasting’s ban on broadcasting a number of Russian TV channels over cable networks in Ukraine is cultural genocide of the Russian-speaking population, Mykola Levchenko, secretary of the Donetsk City Council, said at a round table meeting on the topic “Banning Russian-language channels. How can we protect the interests of the population?” in Donetsk on Monday evening. (*RIA Novosti*, November 11, 2008)

In this case, the Russian state-owned news agency merely states what some people in the Donbas region are saying, but without asking any critical questions. In Ukraine itself, the closing of Russian channels was downplayed in some media with the argument that the measures only affected channels that were not broadcast from the European Union and were not

ratified by the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (*Ukrainskaja Pravda*, October 21, 2008).

Within Ukraine, the term "genocide" also became part of the discourse of pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians, such as Vadym Kolesnichenko, who regarded the fact that he could not find a russophone preschool for his child as sufficient cause to use the term "genocide" in 2011 (Moser, 2013, p. 305). We also see the use of the term *xunta* 'junta' to refer to the Ukrainian government. By using a term meaning a military or political group that rules a country after taking power by force, the Ukrainian government was presented as illegitimate and reminiscent of dictatorial regimes in South America. This term was used by pro-Russian Russian-speaking Ukrainians, such as Vladimir Kornilov,¹⁰ director of the Ukrainian branch of the Institute of CIS Countries at that time. He played an important role in the pro-Russian movement in the Donbas, and promoted the idea that Ukraine only existed because Russia existed (Kornilov, 2009). Nevertheless, this use of the term remained a relatively isolated phenomenon in the Russian media, even though Ukrainian-Russian relations deteriorated, as evidenced by the letter to Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko posted by the then Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev on his website in August 2009, blaming Viktor Yushchenko for anti-Russian policies. Among Dmitriy Medvedev's many concerns and reproaches were the issues of the Ukrainian government's recognition of the Holodomor as genocide, the "revision of the common history, glorification of Nazi accomplices, and exaltation of the role of radical nationalists", and the continuing "displacement of the Russian language from public life, science, education, culture, mass media, and legal proceedings" (*Interfaks*, November 8, 2009).

In Ukraine, the political situation changed drastically when pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich rose to power again and became president from 2010 to 2014. In 2010 the Russian media reported that the ban on Russian channels might be lifted (*RIA Novosti*, March 25, 2010). During this period, we also find warnings about the still immanent dangers of neo-Nazism and followers of Stepan Bandera among the Ukrainian nationalists, clearly aimed at associating a non-Russian orientation of Ukraine with neo-Nazis, for example by emphasizing that in Western Ukraine many people are adherents of Stepan Bandera, who collaborated with the Nazi's.¹¹ During the Yanukovich presidency, measures were taken to promote the position of Russian. In 2012 a new language law was passed, granting regional status to as many as 18 languages in territories of their widespread use, although Russian benefited from this norm much more than any other language (Kulyk, 2017). The law made a local language official if spoken by at least 10% of the population, so Russian became official in many places. This resulted in the displacement of Ukrainian from public life in much of the country (Olszański, 2012; Moser, 2013). In Russia, the creators of the law received a Pushkin medal from Vladimir Putin in 2013. At the same time, the new language law probably also resulted in the rise of Ukrainian nationalist parties and contributed to the success of the ultra-nationalist party *Svoboda*, led by Oleh Tyahnybok, in the October 2012 parliamentary election, where it received 10% of the vote and entered the legislature for the first time (Stern, 2008).

For the topic of this paper, the period from 2003 till 2014 is important since it was the first time the "Nazi-genocide" frame was actively used in politics by pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians. Furthermore, it was also the first time that Russian propaganda actively pointed at the dangers of Neo-Nazism in Ukraine, with the aim to demonize and discredit all those who did not follow a pro-Russian political course.

¹⁰The brother of Dmitry Kornilov, mentioned in Sect. 3.1.

¹¹Some examples are: *RIA Novosti*, February 8, 2010; July 6, 2010; January 12, 2011; December 27, 2012; *TASS*, June 12, 2012.

3.3 Stage 3: lessons learned by Russia from the colored revolutions (2003–2014)

In this subsection, I will argue that although the Russian government did not actively employ the “Nazi-genocide” frame with respect to Ukraine after the Orange Revolution of 2004/2005, the Orange Revolution together with the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 (the so-called *cvetnye revoljucii* ‘colored revolutions’) led to use of the term “fascist” as an integral part of the Russian propaganda machine, and misuse of the term “genocide” in foreign affairs.¹²

The Rose and Orange revolutions and the association of Georgia and Ukraine with the West, specifically with NATO, immediately led to a clear anti-Western sentiment within the Russian government. There was a fear that Western, especially American, involvement would result in a regime change in Russia, as clearly stated by Vladimir Putin himself in this speech to parliament in 2007:

Global network structures of influence have been created [by the USA] that are capable of solving very serious tasks: from propaganda to tasks of regime change and the organization of various kinds of “color revolutions”. (Vladimir Putin, Kremlin.ru, May 16, 2007)

In the anti-Western Russian propaganda, World War II terminology played an important role. A good example is the foundation in 2005 of the youth movement *Molodežnoe demokratičeskoe antifašistskoe dvizhenie* “*Naši*” ‘Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement “Ours!”’, in short *Naši* (*Nashi*) ‘ours’, which was indirectly linked to the Kremlin and positioned itself close to the Kremlin.¹³ The official goal of this organization was to fight against fascism within Russia, and articles about neo-Nazis appeared in the Russian press.¹⁴ In reality, however, the term “fascist” referred to any politicians in Russia – mostly liberal – who opposed Putin, but also to the Western world as such, and was inspired by the fear of a repetition of the Rose and Orange revolutions in Russia, promoted by people from the West. As examples of fascists, the movement itself identified besides the National Bolshevik Party mainly liberal politicians who opposed Putin, such as politician Irina Khamada, leader of the youth organization “Yabloko”, Ilya Yashin, deputy Vladimir Ryzhkov, political activist Garry Gasparov, and Leonid Nevzlin, co-owner of Yukos (*RIA Novosti*, May 11, 2005). Vasily Yakemenko, the leader of *Nashi*, also explicitly stated that one of the reasons for setting up *Nashi* was the involvement of the American businessman and philanthropist George Soros and Russian oligarch Boris Berezkovsky in Russia and Ukraine, and the youth movement *Pora* in Ukraine (*Pravda.ru*, March 5, 2005).

The term “fascist” was chosen because it is the most effective possible term within Russia, where the history of the Soviet Union means that it immediately triggers ideas of external, dangerous, and undermining forces (see Scharlaj, 2018 on enemies within and outside Russia, including the use of terms like *pjataja kolonna* ‘fifth column’). In reality, the movement itself clearly had fascist characteristics and was compared to the Hitler Jugend (Matthews, 2007). As such, the Russian state propaganda had effectively switched the terms “liberal, democratic” and “fascist”. The term “fascist” was not, and still is not, however, openly used for the West. With respect to the West, Russia followed a more covert and hybrid course. On

¹²The term “fascist” to refer to the West was something that previously had mostly been part of the discourse of other more nationalist groups, such as the Communist Party, led by Gennady Zyuganov. For a good example, see Gennady Zyuganov in *Sovetskaja Rossija*, August 23, 2003.

¹³For example, *RIA Novosti*, May 11, 2005.

¹⁴For example, *RIA Novosti*, October 13, 2005.

the one hand, it founded *Russia Today* (RT) in April 2005, both to improve Russia's image abroad and to provide a Russian perspective on international news; at the same time, it started to focus more explicitly on Russians outside of Ukraine. In 2005, after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, in a message to the Russian Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin expressed a clear motive for interference in the affairs of neighboring independent states:

We must recognize that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian people, it became a real drama. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and compatriots have found themselves outside Russian territory. (Vladimir Putin, Kremlin.ru, Message to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, April 25, 2005)

In 2007 Vladimir Putin issued a decree creating the *Russkij Mir* (*Russkij Mir*, 'Russian World') *Foundation*, aimed at promoting the Russian language and Russian culture worldwide. It targeted both non-Russian-speaking people and the global Russian diaspora (for the use of the concept of *Russkij Mir*, see Zabirko, 2015, and Gorham, 2019). Within Russia, the Western world was increasingly portrayed as a weak and perverted civilization, whereas Putin was presented as the masculine, powerful protector of the civilized Christian world (see e.g. Riabov & Riabova, 2014; Scheller-Boltz & Althaler, 2015). This also led to political measures to promote values that were presented as Russian as opposed to Western, such as the anti-homosexuality law of 2013, titled the Law for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values. This law labeled homosexuality, associated with the West, as non-traditional and foreign to Russia, and also put it in the same category as pedophilia, thus demonizing it. A good example of how this frame of the West as perverted became part of Russian propaganda is the documentary *Sodom* from 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, made by the Russian celebrity journalist and film director Arkady Mamontov, which was shown on Russian state television *Pervyj kanal* (Patin, 2016). This documentary equates homosexuality with pedophilia and portrays the Western political establishment as evil and morally degraded. The underlying message was that a revolution or political change in Russia would only lead to degradation of society. At the same time, Russia pointed out to the Western world the lessons of World War II, and what it saw as the dangers of emerging neo-Nazism, for example with respect to the Baltic states (e.g. *RIA Novosti*, August 8, 2004).

Another lesson that Russia learned between 2003 and 2014 was that the term "genocide" could be used to discredit foreign governments and serve as justification for Russian involvement in war. After the Rose Revolution of 2003, Georgia wanted to turn to the West and become a member of NATO, much to the dismay of Russia. The first time Russia started to actively use the terms *genocid* 'genocide' and *ètničestkie čistki* 'ethnic cleansing' was in 2008, when it invaded Georgia and annexed two of its territories: the autonomous republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia followed a similar scenario to the one it would later use in Ukraine in 2014. It backed the local populations of Abkhazia and Ossetia to rise against Georgia. The idea of genocide played an important part in the justification of the war. Russia accused Georgia of committing genocide in South Ossetia (Osborn & Whalen, *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2018). Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov used the term "ethnic cleansing" at a press conference in August 2008, which was then taken up in the Russian media (*RBC*, August 8, 2008). At the same time, it was argued that the Russian military prevented ethnic cleansing (*RIA Novosti*, August 12, 2008).¹⁵

¹⁵ Similarly, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov speaks in 2009 about saving the Abkhaz and Ossetian people from the Georgian aggression (*RIA Novosti*, August 5, 2009), and in 2013 about ensuring the security

Russia started an investigation into genocide of the Ossetian population by the Georgian army, but in 2009 the Investigative Committee of the Russian Prosecutor General (*Sledstvennyj Komitet pri Prokurature Rossijskoj Federacii*) reported that the investigation would be stopped, not because there was no proof but because Georgia was not cooperating (*Sledcom.ru*, referring to *Kommersant*, July 4, 2009). On March 4, 2010 the Investigative Committee reported again on its website *sledcom.ru* that there was indeed proof that the Georgians committed war crimes, massacres, and violations of international law against Russians and South Ossetians. By referring to Russians, the Committee was probably trying to make the message more suitable for the Russian audience and trigger their anger. There is, however, no evidence to back up the Russian Investigative Committee's statement. In fact, on January 21, 2021 the European Court of Human Rights found the Russian and South Ossetian forces guilty of preventing the return of thousands of forcibly displaced Georgians to their territory in South Ossetia (*Reuters*, January 21, 2021). Nevertheless, for internal use, the term "genocide" had been successfully employed by the Russians. It was a lesson they could apply in 2014 with respect to Ukraine. This accords with Pupcenoks and Seltzer (2021), who assessed Russian strategic narratives regarding its interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014–2016) and also conclude that Russia employed deception and disinformation in its strategic narratives, using what they call "Responsibility to Protect language", while mostly justifying its own interventions through references to other sources of international law.

3.4 Stage 4: full-blown development and Russian use of the entire "Nazi-genocide-Russophobia" frame for Ukraine (2014–2022)

The "Nazi-genocide-Russophobia" frame emerged in all its glory in 2014 and 2015 during and directly after the Maidan Revolution in Kiev, and was immediately used in the annexation of Crimea. The goal was to retain the support of the Russian population in Russia and Ukraine, and to influence political groups in the West, mainly right-wing extremist and populist groups. It was also used to influence the Ukrainian government, by making them aware of the possible consequences of their actions. The concept of genocide was initially used by Russian state organs to refer to war crimes of the Ukrainian army, including the Azov battalion, in the Donbas region. In this case, the term "genocide" was used in its regular juridical sense, that is, when using it, they referred to the original 1948 definition. Although the UN report (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016) on the human rights situation in Ukraine lists individual war crimes by the Azov battalion, such as torture and rape, no evidence was found for systematic war crimes by the Azov battalion. Later, the term "genocide" was broadened in the Russian state-owned media and by Russian state officials to refer to language laws introduced in Ukraine that diminished the importance of the Russian language, reaching a peak in 2021. In the same vein, while the term "Nazi" was first used for right-wing extremist groups in Ukraine, in 2014 it also became associated with Ukraine's democratically elected government.

In November 2013, large-scale protests had broken out on the Maidan square in Kyiv in response to President Viktor Yanukovich's sudden decision not to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union. He instead strengthened ties with Russia

and survival of the people (*Interfaks-Azerbajdzan*, April 11, 2013). In the same year, the Russian state-owned news agency *TASS* refers to an official from the capital of South Ossetia who says that Russia recognized South Ossetia as an independent state from Georgia in 2008 because of the genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Ossetians by the Georgians (*TASS*, August 26, 2013).

and the Eurasian Economic Union. The outcome was that President Yanukovych was ousted by the Ukrainian parliament and the Ukrainian government was overthrown; this is known as the Maidan Revolution or Revolution of Dignity. Viktor Yanukovych fled to Russia. In June 2014, pro-Western Petro Poroshenko became the new president. Since 2014, a constant factor in the Russian media is the use of words like *xunta* 'junta' (in other words, an authoritarian military dictatorship), *nacist* 'nazi', *fašist* 'fascist', *banderovcy* 'followers of Bandera' when referring to the democratically elected Ukrainian government or to the people who support this government. The following fragment from a press conference by Vladimir Putin on March 4, 2014 illustrates this. In this fragment Putin refers to the governor of the Volyn region, Alexander Bashkalenko, who was cuffed, kidnapped, and exhibited to the crowd in Lutsk. No evidence has been found for Vladimir Putin's statement about torture, suggesting that he either made it up or was misinformed:¹⁶

What worries us the most? We see the rampage of neo-Nazis, nationalists, anti-Semites, which is now happening in some parts of Ukraine, including in Kyiv [Kiev]. You, representatives of the media, must have seen how one of the current governors was chained, handcuffed in the square to some structures there, in winter, in cold weather, and was doused with water. After that, by the way, he was imprisoned in the basement and tortured there. What is that? What is this – democracy? Is this a manifestation of democracy? By the way, he was appointed quite recently, in December, I think. Even if we assume that all the authorities there are corrupt, I think he did not even manage to steal anything. (Vladimir Putin, *Kremlin.ru*, March 4, 2014)

In this fragment Vladimir Putin uses the term "neo-Nazis" to refer to nationalist and extremist groups within Ukrainian society that he perceived as non-democratic. In many instances, terms like *rusofobija* 'russophobia' or 'hate for Russians' and *antirusskaja ksenofobija* 'anti-Russian xenophobia' are used to describe the attitude of such Ukrainians (for a thorough analysis of how the concept of "russophone russophobia" is used, see Uffelman, 2019).¹⁷ Although right-wing extremists also participated in the Maidan protests, they were only a small minority and not an important factor, as the Russian media suggested (Ishchenko, 2016). On various occasions in 2014 and 2015, the Russian government expressed grave concerns about nationalist and extremist right-wing groups in Ukraine. During the same period (2014–2015), however, words and symbols for Nazis were used by the Russians to refer to the country Ukraine and its democratically elected government. The Russian media published polls stating that Russians believed the new Ukrainian government consisted of anti-Russian Nazis, which then served as proof that this standpoint was factual and fully objective (see e.g. *Izvestija*, March 31, 2014).

In his speech on March 18, 2014, two days after the Crimean referendum, Vladimir Putin expressed the opinion that the Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine should be seen as essentially Russian, suggesting that an infringement on the Russian-speaking population was a matter for Russia:

¹⁶ Various sources report that the governor was indeed cuffed, kidnapped, and exhibited to the crowd in Lutsk (*BBC News*, February 20, 2014; *Ruptly*, February 19, 2014; *Truth News From Ukraine*, February 19, 2014). Vladimir Putin's statement about torture has not been confirmed by the Western media. The leaders of the protest denied that he was taken to the basement and tortured (*Volyns'ki Novyny*, February 20, 2014). The captivity in the basement and torture were also not mentioned by Russian news agencies in February (*RIA Novosti*, February 19, 2014); also note that a Russian website where people can ask and answer questions mentioned that he was freed from the square and taken to hospital (*Bol'soj Vopros*, 2014).

¹⁷ As an illustration, the following articles from *RIA Novosti* contain the term 'russophobia' or 'russophobic' in the title: *RIA Novosti*, November 8, 2007; September 2, 2008; August 11, 2009; September 11, 2014; August 17, 2015; August 22, 2015; October 13, 2015; November 10, 2015; May 12, 2016.

After the revolution, the Bolsheviks, for a number of reasons – may God be their judge – added large sections of the historical South of Russia to the Republic of Ukraine. This was done without consideration for the ethnic make-up of the population, and today these areas form the South-East of Ukraine. (*OTR Online*, March 18, 2014)

In Russia, a film was shown called *Украина.ру (Ukraine.ru)*, which basically states that Ukraine does not exist as a nation separate from Russia and should be seen as a project of the West, formulated as follows by a news item of *RIA Novosti*:¹⁸

The Kyiv [Kiev] Maidan has centuries of roots, after all its true goal is to split a single people. It was precisely this strategy that Austria-Hungary adhered to during the First World War, inciting the nationalist feelings of Ukrainians. Fascist Germany also relied on traitors from among the Ukrainian nationalists. The West managed to achieve its goal in 2014, when people in Ukraine laid their hands against their brothers. (*RIA Novosti*, May 7, 2014)

Thus, the idea of the Ukraine government as a Nazi government backed by the West was born, expressed in combination with the idea of Ukraine as an inherent part of Russia. In 2015 we also see the first use of the term “denazification” by Russian-speaking Ukrainian politicians from the annexed area of Crimea and from the former pro-Russian Ukrainian government.¹⁹ An example is the following quote from the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, by then residing in Russia, Vitaly Zakharchenko:

Therefore, one of the first acts should of course be the act of denazification, that is, no one who imposed on the country the national unification in the spirit of Ukrainian nationalism, can be allowed to enter power, the media, or primary and higher education. (*RIA Novosti*, June 3, 2015)

Similarly, the head of the State Council of Crimea, Vladimir Konstantinov, argued that modern-day Ukraine needs what took place after World War II in Germany, namely demilitarization, denazification, decentralization, and democratization (*RIA Novosti*, February 5, 2015). Clearly, at this time, these politicians still expected that Ukraine could take a pro-Russian course. The use of terms like “Nazi” to refer to the Ukrainian government co-occurred with use of the term “genocide”, as already hinted in the 2014 speech by Vladimir Putin quoted above, where he discusses the Ukrainian government’s intention to have an ethnically clean Ukraine. During that time, the Russian propaganda used the term “genocide” to refer both to the acts of the Ukrainian military in the Donbas region and to the Ukrainian government’s policy, specifically with respect to language laws. The measures of the new pro-Western government in Ukraine in 2014 included restoration of the 2004 amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine that had been cancelled by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine in 2010 under the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, and abolition of the 2012 laws regulating the official language of Ukraine.²⁰ Other new language measures were discussed but not put into effect. Vladimir Putin immediately commented on this in a special message, framing the issue as an instance of ethnic cleansing by Nazi forces:

¹⁸The film was directed by the Ukrainian journalist Alena Berezovskaya, who was close to ex-president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich. After the Maidan Revolution she settled in Russia. The film was part of a larger project, namely the launch of a new propaganda channel to provide a Russian perspective on the situation in Ukraine, called *Ukraina.ru* (<https://ukraina.ru>). See, for example, *RIA Novosti* October 29, 2014.

¹⁹Another term that arose in this period is Nuremberg. A vivid example is the numerous propaganda articles written for the state news agency *RIA Novosti* by Njura N. Berg, a pseudonym of the Russian-speaking Ukrainian journalist Elena Priven.

²⁰For a critical report on the cancellation of these amendments, see Kramer et al. (2011).

The first act of the new so-called "authorities" was the introduction of a scandalous bill to revise the language policy, which directly infringed on the rights of national minorities. True, the foreign sponsors of these "politicians" of today, the curators of today's "authorities", immediately called to order the initiators of this venture. They are smart people, we must give them their due, and they understand to what the attempts to build an ethnically pure Ukrainian state will lead. The bill was postponed, shelved, but clearly to be used again later. The very fact of its existence is now hushed up, apparently, taking into account the short human memory. But it has already become very clear to everyone exactly what the Ukrainian ideological heirs of Bandera, Hitler's henchman during World War II, intend to do in the future. (Vladimir Putin, *Kremlin.ru*, March 18, 2014)

Although Vladimir Putin refers to a new language law that has not even been put into effect, Russia had now invented the frame of the new Ukrainian government as a Nazi government that intends to ethnically cleanse Ukraine. Such statements were probably partly based on information from pro-Russian Ukrainians, but in turn also led to further reinforcement of emotionally loaded terminology by pro-Russian Ukrainians. To give an example, in December 2014 the term "ethnocide" was used by an anti-Orange, Russian-speaking journalist Olga Kievskaya to refer to the same draft law (Kupfer & De Waal, 2014). Even though the bill in question was rejected by the Ukrainian parliament, the author believed it was highly likely that it would be passed in the future. If that happened, she predicted, as a worst-case scenario, that there would be assault and murder of speakers of Russian.

In March 2014, pro-Russian protests started to arise in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine, the so-called Donbas region. The pro-Russian groups, backed by Russia with arms, seized government buildings and declared the Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics", which were recognized by Russia. A military conflict began between these Russian-backed pro-Russian groups and Ukraine. On September 5, 2014 the Minsk Agreement was signed between the two parties, aimed at preserving the peace as much as possible, although fighting between the two parties started again in 2016. However, as of 2014, Russian state officials and the Russian media stated that genocide was being committed on the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. An early example in May 2014 comes from Sergey Naryshkin, a Russian statesman who played an important role in the invasion of Ukraine as director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation. He spoke about genocide of both Russians and Ukrainians in Ukraine, specifically referring to the Donbas region and Odessa, where pro-Ukrainian militants set fire to a Trade Union House containing pro-Russian militants who had been forced inside, resulting in the death of 48 people (*RIA Novosti*, May 6, 2014; for an analysis of the portrayal in the Russian media, see Binder & Kaltseis, 2020).²¹ On September 29, 2014, that is, after the Minsk Agreement was signed, the Russian media gave information about the Investigative Committee of Russia (*Sledstvennyj komitet Rossijskoj Federacii*; Russia's main federal investigating authority), which opened a criminal case into the (alleged) genocide of the Russian-speaking population of Donbas. According to the Investigative Committee, "unidentified persons" in the top leadership of Ukraine sought the complete destruction of the Russian-speaking residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (*Interfaks*, September 29, 2014). The term "genocide" was used in its legal meaning,²² referring to the alleged deliberate killing of Russian-speaking people in the Donbas by the

²¹ See also Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 February to 15 May 2016.

²² In its various investigations, the Investigative Committee referred to Art. 357 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which deals with genocide. The definition given there is identical to the 1948 definition.

Ukrainian army, something for which no proof has yet been found.²³ After this, the Investigative Committee opened several more such cases, for example in 2015 concerning the alleged mass shooting in the period from December 1, 2014 to January 12, 2015. According to the Committee, the war crimes of the top political and military leadership of Ukraine, as well as the commanders of the Ukrainian battalions “Aidar”, “Azov”, and “Dnestr” under their control, were aimed at the destruction of the Russian-speaking population, hence the characterization “genocide” (*Interfaks*, January 13, 2015). In 2020 the Investigative Committee started another investigation into genocide in the Donbas region by the right-wing Ukrainian organization *Pravyi sektor* ‘Right sector’ (*Radio Sputnik*, November 21, 2020). As in the other cases, the conclusion of genocide was already drawn before the investigation was conducted: at the time when the investigation was announced, the Investigative Committee’s deputy chair Aleksandr Fyodorov stated that the Ukrainian army’s attacks on the peaceful population of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics should be seen as genocide (*RIA Novosti*, November 21, 2020).

The juridical use of the term “genocide” went hand in hand with the deliberate misuse of the term in the Russian (state owned) media, and also in the pro-Russian Ukrainian media. A good example is the remark made in 2015 by the president of the pro-Russian organization *Ukrainian Choice* in the Russian media, that the general attitude toward Russian-speaking people in Ukraine is growing more negative, and that people in the occupied Donbas region are not allowed to receive their wages, pensions, and social security, which she says has features of genocide (*Kommersant*, January 13, 2015). Clearly, in this case, the term genocide is misused and no longer has any real connection with its juridical meaning. Since 2014 the Russian media and the Russian state officials have also been using the term “genocide” more loosely to refer to any measures that are perceived to be anti-Russian, specifically measures relating to language. As such, the term genocide is used to refer not just to the occupied Donbas region but to Ukraine as a whole. Whenever language laws were implemented or the official use of Russian was reduced, the term “genocide” appeared. The Russian state media enthusiastically spread the genocide frame, often by referring to other people who used it, such as leaders from the self-declared republics in the Donbas region or so-called “experts”, without asking any critical questions about the validity of the terminology or the argumentation of the experts.²⁴ In 2015, so-called experts and political figures appeared on the Russian state television *Pervyy Kanal* ‘Channel One’ to explain why the abolition of the older language law of 2012, which declared Russian an official state language in many regions, should in fact be seen as an instance of genocide, and why the Ukrainian government was a fascist government, committing genocide and intending to kill many more innocent civilians. The program *Vremya pokazhet* (*Vremya pokazhet* ‘Time will tell’) invited political analysts with extreme nationalist ideas to explain the issue of genocide in Ukraine. According to journalist and political analyst Pavel Svyatenkov, the language laws – which he said would force people to speak Ukrainian – were genocide under international law (*Vremya pokazhet*, December 22, 2015). An even more extreme position was taken by the political figure Sergey Kurginyan (*Vremya pokazhet*, July 2, 2015). Without giving any evidence, he argued that the “fascist regime” of Poroshenko was committing genocide and planning to kill many more innocent people. He demanded that Ukraine should be brought before the international court immediately. On *Channel One*, the emotionality and immediacy of the broadcasts was often

²³ The idea that an actual genocide of the Donbas region was taking place was also actively promoted by ousted president Viktor Yanukovich, who had fled to Russia (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, June 24, 2015).

²⁴ See, for example: *Radio Sputnik*, August 26, 2019; October 25, 2019; November 16, 2019; *RIA Novosti*, September 21, 2020.

reinforced by vivid imagery, which further sustained the effectiveness of the propaganda (see also Binder & Kaltseis, 2020). The law that formulated quotas for Ukrainian songs on the television and radio from 2016–2017 also led to sharp criticism (e.g. *Gazeta.ru*, June 2017), and the 2017 Law on Education was criticized by politicians from Crimea, using phrases like “the beginning of an ideological war of the Ukrainian elite with the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine” (*RIA Novosti*, September 25, 2017). Nevertheless, these laws were not actually described as “genocide”, which illustrates both the lesser impact of these measures and the fact that news about the perceived oppression of Russian speakers often appeared as background for other news, such as the situation in the Donbas or political measures like the US sanctions relating to North Stream in 2021.

An example of the broader use of the term “genocide” after 2015 is provided by the following fragment from the Russian website *REN TV* from 2018. Here the term “language genocide of Russians”, tolerated by the “Kiev junta”, is used to describe the ban on Russian and Russian cultural products (until Russia stops the war in the Donbas) in Lviv in western Ukraine, a stronghold of the Ukrainian language. This fragment is from Igor Druz, a Donbas-based journalist from the Donbas region, who also played a role in the self-declared Donetsk People’s Republic and moved to Russia to work as an advisor to Igor Strelkov, a former Federal Security Service officer who played a key role in the annexation of the Crimea and the war in the Donbas (*Relihiya v Ukrainy*, October 6, 2014):²⁵

The linguistic genocide of Russians occurs with the tacit approval of the Western curators of Ukraine

The regional council of Lviv [Lvov] established a moratorium on the public use of any Russian-language works. The decision notes that the ban will remain in force until “the moment of full cessation of the occupation of Ukraine’s territory.” Of course, this ban was introduced with the tacit approval of the central government. With this step, the Maidan regime once again proved that for them freedom means the freedom to ban everything Russian. Democracy, in its understanding, is the right of the authorities to oppress the indigenous Russian inhabitants of Ukraine. And human rights are the right of the Kyiv [Kiev] junta to humiliate the dignity of any Russian. (*REN TV*, September 24, 2018)

In 2019, when the language law that promoted the use of Ukrainian at the expense of Russian was introduced, we again find the use of the term “language genocide” by Russian politicians, such as Sergey Zheleznyak, a member of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs. The state news agency *RIA Novosti* remarked: “He emphasized that Ukraine continues its course of language genocide with respect to the Russian-speaking population of the country and introduces forced Ukrainization” (*RIA Novosti*, October 4, 2019). Vladimir Putin also implicitly commented on this law in 2019, during a meeting of the Council for the Russian Language, framing it as a declaration of war against the Russian language:

Today we are dealing with attempts to artificially, rudely, and sometimes unceremoniously reduce the space of the Russian language in the world, to push it to the periphery. War is being declared on the Russian language not just by primitive russophobes, but we also observe that, this is not a secret, different types of marginals are actively and aggressively taking action, as are aggressive nationalists; unfortunately, in some countries that has become the sole state politics. (Vladimir Putin, *Kremlin.ru*, November 5, 2019)

²⁵ The Ukrainian pro-Russian politician, oligarch and confidant to Vladimir Putin, Viktor Medvedchuk, also appeared in the Russian media but used less loaded terms and described the ban as unconstitutional (*RIA Novosti*, September 22, 2018).

By suggesting that the Ukrainian government has declared war on the Russian language, Vladimir Putin also suggested the idea of war against Russian-speaking people in general. In December of the same year, Vladimir Putin also warned that the genocide that occurred in Srebrenica might occur in the Donbas as well (*RIA Novosti*, December 10, 2019). Around the same time, in 2020 Vladimir Putin also commented on the danger of rehabilitating the crimes of the Nazis and the importance of the Nuremberg trials, further referring to genocide on the Russian people by the Nazis in the town of Zhestnaya Gorka in Russia.²⁶ According to Vladimir Putin, the West was deliberately framing Russia as the aggressor and perpetrator of genocide, as in the case of the *holodomor*, when in fact it was the other way around. It was clear that Vladimir Putin was inverting not only terms like Nazi and genocide, but also history. At the beginning of 2021 a law was proposed and passed by the Russian parliament, prohibiting any comparison of the acts of the Soviet Union to those of the Nazi regime, and thus implicitly making clear that the term “Nazi” should be reserved for Ukraine.²⁷ At the same time, the Russian media condemned Ukraine’s official recognition of the Holodomor in Ukraine, describing it as an anti-Russian act. Ukraine (Donbas)-born propagandist Vladimir Kornilov, already mentioned above, who later became Russian, remarked in 2019 that the term “genocide” as used by the West and Ukraine has for a long time been an instrument of foreign policy games, and has nothing to do with history (*RIA Novosti*, November 23, 2019).²⁸ No reference was made, of course, to use of the term by Russia itself.

From July 2021 the anti-Ukrainian propaganda increased in Russia. Two symbolic articles appeared. On July 12, 2021 Vladimir Putin published a long essay on his official webpage (*Kremlin.ru*), explaining his idea of the Russian World and the relation between Ukraine and Russia, probably anticipating the Ukrainian Constitutional Court’s ruling on July 14, 2021 that the language law of 2019 was constitutional (Constitutional Court of Ukraine, 2021, July 15). In his essay, Vladimir Putin presented a rather fragmented and selective portrayal of the history of Ukraine, his main argument being that all the East Slavic nations, Ukraine, and Belarus are essentially Russian. He argues that the West has been dragging Ukraine into an anti-Russian position, which Russia will never accept. Again, Putin’s main arguments relate to Ukraine’s language laws:

All the things that united us and brought us together so far came under attack. First and foremost, the Russian language. Let me remind you that the new “Maidan” authorities first tried to repeal the law on state language policy. Then there was the law on the “purification of power”, the Law on Education that virtually cut the Russian language out of the educational process.

Lastly, as early as May of this year, the current president introduced a bill on “indigenous peoples” to the Rada. Only those who constitute an ethnic minority and do not have their own state entity outside Ukraine are recognized as indigenous. (Vladimir Putin, *Kremlin.ru*, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, July 12, 2021)

²⁶See, for example: *Radio Sputnik*, November 20, 2020; *RIA Novosti*, November 20, 2020. An international Forum was held about the lessons of the Nuremberg trials, hosting Vladimir Putin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, who commented that some European countries show reduced immunity to Nazism (*Regnum*, November 20, 2020).

²⁷The law was submitted to parliament in 2021 (*TASS*, May 5, 2021) and passed on April 5, 2022 (*Interfaks*, April 5, 2022).

²⁸As the director of the Ukrainian branch of the Institute of CIS Countries, he appeared in the Russian state media to warn about the dangers of recognizing the Holodomor as a genocide before the Maidan Revolution (e.g. *RIA Novosti*, April 29, 2010).



Fig. 2 A still from the television show *Vremya pokazhet* of July 21, 2021. The text reads: On a juridical level, Russians are not indigenous people, and therefore they cannot enjoy all the human rights of basic freedom, as defined by international law and laid down by the Ukrainian constitution and laws

In July 2021 Deputy Kremlin Chief of Staff, and chief negotiator of the Minsk agreements, Dmitry Kozak gave an interview with journalist Natalia Routkevitch for the journal *Politique internationale* (2021, number 172), which was also published in Russian on the website of the Russian Embassy in Paris. The introduction mentions that some experts claim that Moscow is preparing to invade the part of the Donbas that is controlled by the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. In this interview Kozak stated that if the Ukrainians committed genocide in the Donbas region, Russia would come to the rescue, as was also stated by the Russian news agencies:

Kozak has stated that in the event of genocide of the Russian-speaking population in the Donbas, the Russian Federation will come to their defense

Moscow will not remain indifferent to the problems of Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine if radical nationalists stage a genocide there, said Dmitry Kozak, deputy head of the presidential administration of the Russian Federation. (*Interfaks*, July 20, 2021)

Dmitry Kozak's statement was immediately picked up by the media in Russia, clearly suggesting that it was a carefully orchestrated interview, which was meant to give a clear warning to Ukraine and the West. On Russian state television, Dmitry Kozak's statement was in fact discussed in the program *Vremya pokazhet* 'Time will tell', which also focused on Ukraine's language laws and the Law on the Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine (Law of Ukraine, 2021). These laws were framed on Russian state television as Nazi ukrainification tolerated by the hypocritical West (*Vremya pokazhet*, July 21, 2021). As such, this shows the close interrelation between the use of the term "genocide" with respect to the Donbas and with respect to Ukraine's language policy. In fact, the same confusion is also present in the interpretation of Dmitry Kozak's interview by the Russian media. It is not entirely clear whether Kozak is speaking about the possible genocide of all Russian speakers in Ukraine or only those in the Donbas region, where the Russian-backed organizations are fighting against the Ukrainians (*Interfaks*, July 20, 2021).

Figure 2 shows a still from the television show *Vremya pokazhet*, displaying a Facebook post of Oleg Seminsky, a member of the Ukrainian parliament and the ruling party, who

caused a scandal with his incorrect interpretation of the Law on the Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine, which parliament had adopted the day before. The Law guarantees support for national minorities, such as protection from discrimination and the right of education in their own language. However, only three peoples of Ukraine, mostly not living on the territory under Kyiv's control, were declared indigenous. The largest minority, Russian speakers, but also other minorities such as Hungarians, were not declared indigenous, and are therefore not entitled to rights like education in their own language. Russian, Hungarian or Romanian speakers were not considered indigenous people because they have a state outside the borders of Ukraine. This does not mean, however, that they do not enjoy all human rights of basic freedom. Oleg Seminsky deleted his post the next day, but this was too late to prevent it being used by the Russian propaganda (*Polityka*, July 2, 2021). In fact, Putin again commented explicitly on the same law in December 2021 and argued that Russians and Russian-speaking people are being driven away from their historical territory, and that the 2019 law divides the population into indigenous and non-indigenous Ukrainians, echoing the state television propaganda (*TASS*, December 23, 2021). As such, his words at least suggested the idea of ethnic cleansing without using that specific terminology. In December 2021 Vladimir Putin also played with the term genocide during a meeting with the Council for Human Rights, linking russophobia to genocide:

Russophobia must be seen as the first step toward genocide. We all know what is happening right now in the Donbas, we can all see it clearly. And this is, of course, very reminiscent of the genocide you just mentioned. But here we must act very carefully so as not to devalue these concepts. But they must reflect the realities of current events. Let's think about it. (*RIA Novosti*, December 9, 2021)

On Russian state television, propagandists like Ukraine-born Yury Kot kept on calling for immediate action of Russia toward Ukraine because of the situation in the Donbas. First deputy chairman of the committee of the State Duma for the CIS and relations with Russian nationals abroad, the hard-liner Konstantin Zatulin, already mentioned in Sect. 3.1, called Ukraine an enemy of Russia, which needed to be destroyed.²⁹ At the same time, Moscow demanded from its Western partners legal guarantees that the NATO would not expand eastwards, that Ukraine would join NATO, and that it would not establish military bases in post-Soviet countries (for example *RIA Novosti*, December 23, 2021). This illustrates how geopolitics and Russia's sphere of influence were at the core of the frame *Russophobic Nazi Ukraine government commits genocide on Russians*.

3.5 Stage 5: final stage: war against Ukraine (2022) and encouragement of the Russian army to commit atrocities against Ukrainian civilians

Since the war began on February 24, 2022, the Russian propaganda machine has stepped up, with an extreme low point being an article on the Russian state news agency *RIA Novosti* titled "What Russia should do with Ukraine" by the Russian Timofej Sergejtsev, who previously worked as a campaign leader for former presidents of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma in 1999 and Viktor Yanukovich in 2004 (*Kommersant*, July 19, 2011). He is close to the Russian political establishment and may therefore have been responsible for the actual occurrence of

²⁹See *Glavcom.ua*, September 4, 2021. The interview was given on *Ukraina.ru*, a Russian propaganda website dedicated to Ukraine and part of MIA Rossiya Segodnya, a media group owned and operated by the Russian government. For the original interview, see *Ukraina.ru*, August 27, 2021 (at the time of writing this article, the interview was not available anymore in The Netherlands).

the "Nazi-genocide" frame that appeared in Ukraine in 2013. In his 2022 article we see the rhetorical frame where the denazification of Germany after World War II is taken as the model for the deukrainization of Ukraine, including liquidation of the ideologists of Ukrainian nationalism (to be equated with Nazism), tribunals for those who support the Ukrainian government with the punishment of forced labor, education for the population, and deukrainization of most of the country, a process that will probably take 25 years (*RIA Novosti*, April 3, 2022). Although this article did not cite Russian state officials, it was published by a state-owned news agency and was not contradicted by state officials. The message of this article is clear: Ukraine as a nation, culture, and language has to be destroyed by Russia. According to president of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, this article was proof of the planned extermination of Ukrainians as a people (*Interfaks Ukraine*, April 4, 2022). It is indeed a dangerously short step from this message to the actual killing of Ukrainians merely on the basis of their ethnicity, which means that we are seeing the reversal of aspects that we have seen before: the rhetorical frame used by Russia, that Ukrainians commit genocide on Russians, has become an argument to wipe out Ukraine as a country, culture, and language; in other words: the rhetorical frame has become a justification and motivation for genocide.

4 Evaluation

As I have shown, in Russia's propaganda the term "genocide" is part of the larger frame *Russophobic Nazi Ukraine government commits genocide on Russians*. I demonstrated that this frame is itself an aspect of a more abstract frame, where any perceived enemy of Russia, including NATO, is portrayed as a fascist or Nazi force that aims to destroy Russia and Russian culture. The frame builds on World War II, associating the Nazis with the West and drawing upon deep emotions in Russian society related to World War II. At the same time, Vladimir Putin has managed to rework the Russian national identity so that the deep emotions in Russian society related to World War II were further strengthened and brought to the forefront. In this frame, the Russian state needs to act as the liberators of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, by freeing them and denazifying the country. At the same time, any criticism of Russia's past, such as Ukraine's description of the *Holodomor* as genocide, is immediately framed as an attack by undermining fascist or Nazi influences that aim to weaken Russia. Thus, the *Russophobic Nazi Ukraine government commits genocide on Russians* frame is an effective way to distract from any criticism of Russia's politics, and its own fascist and non-democratic characteristics and problematic past. It must be noted that the Nazi-frame is used primarily with respect to Ukraine. The portrayal of the West (Western Europe, the USA, and NATO) as something associated with fascism or Nazism, is usually presented in a more covert manner, and explicit reference to Nazism is usually reserved for the former Soviet republics such as the Baltic states and sometimes Eastern European countries. An example is a statement from 2018 by Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, in which he suggests that Europe, especially the new member states, is turning into a Nazi-Union because they do not recognize the important role of the Soviet Union as liberators from the Nazi's in the second world war (*RIA Novosti*, December 26, 2018). In this case, the recognition of the role of Russia in the second world war is a metaphor for the current recognition of Russia as an important political factor, and the perceived lack of recognition of Russia in these countries is equated with "Nazi" behavior.

Russia tries to provide argumentation for the validity of the *Russophobic Nazi Ukraine government commits genocide on Russians* frame by referring to a number of objectively established facts:

- i. The presence of neo-Nazis in Ukraine, who are inspired by fascists (Stepan Bandera) who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. These groups are not only incorrectly described but also overgeneralized to refer to the Ukrainian government or even everyone who supports the government.
- ii. The language laws of Ukraine, which diminish the role of Russian. The effect of these laws is exaggerated and misrepresented, to give the impression that speaking Russian is forbidden or can even cost your life.
- iii. Ukraine's hostilities against the Russian-backed Donbas region, which is a primarily Russian-speaking area. These hostilities are exaggerated and misrepresented, also leaving out the role of Russia in these hostilities.

In all of these cases, the arguments are not valid, being based on exaggerations, hyperbolic use of terminology, and sometimes lies. As such, arguments like these can be seen as fallacies.

First, it should be noted that right-wing extremism in Ukraine does indeed exist, but in 2014 the main goal of the protests and the new government was democratization and orientation to the West: not the installation of a fascist regime. It is also true that Stepan Bandera (1909–1959) was and still is seen by some Ukrainians, especially in western Ukraine, as an important historical figure and inspiration, who fought for the independence of Ukraine (Katchanovski, 2015). Stepan Bandera was a Ukrainian politician and leader of the far-right Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in western Ukraine. He was involved in terrorist activities and collaboration with the Nazis (Marples, 2006; Rudling 2011, 2013). This does not mean, however, that his admirers necessarily share his fascist or anti-Semitic or anti-Polish ideas (Mierzejewski-Voznyak, 2018) or that they are more anti-Semitic than people from other European countries (Masci, 2018). In fact, Viktor Yushchenko actively tried to present the OUN and UPA as pluralistic and inclusive organizations, which not only rescued Jews during the Holocaust, but invited them into their ranks to fight shoulder to shoulder against Hitler and Stalin (Rudling, 2011). Furthermore, in 2015 the Ukrainian parliament passed the Law of Ukraine on the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and the Prohibition of Propaganda of Their Symbols. In the Russian state media, however, the banning of Nazi symbols was ignored or downplayed, and outrage was expressed about the banning of Soviet symbols (TASS, April 23, 2015). In the 2019 presidential elections, when Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected president, the right-wing parties actually failed to reach the electoral threshold. Although the extreme-right groups in Ukraine are associated with xenophobia, sexism, racism, and homophobia (Mierzejewski-Voznyak, 2018), the main targets of these groups are progressive people, feminists, LBHTIQ+, and people of non-Slavic descent, such as Roma – and not Russian-speaking people (Hachev, 2018). Again, we see the same paradox as in the case of switching the terms “fascist” and “liberal politician” in the Russian propaganda: Russian state propaganda points to the alleged dangers of Nazism, fascism, and right-wing extremism in Ukraine on the one hand, while on the other hand the liberal values of Europe (sometimes portrayed as *gejropa* in the Russian propaganda) to which Ukraine aspires are portrayed in the state media as depraved, morally inferior, and dangerous. At the same time, Russia itself takes a right-wing extremist position when it comes to the civil rights of, for example, sexual minorities and feminists. Russia has also actively and covertly helped far-right parties in Europe, which share many opinions with far-right parties in Ukraine. Therefore any real concerns that Russia might have about neo-Nazis or far-right movements in Ukraine were clearly overshadowed by their own political and propaganda goals.

Second, Russian state officials or people working in the Russian-controlled media switch between using terms like “genocide” in a metaphorical way (“features of genocide”) – sometimes by adapting the terminology without explaining whether it must be interpreted in a ju-

ridical way or not (“cultural genocide”, “linguistic genocide”) – and in other instances using the term literally, i.e. in the most strict juridical sense, in some cases explicitly referring to the legal definition. Broadening the use of the term “genocide” and using it loosely is obviously problematic. When the term is used merely in reference to language laws, it also suggests a juridical meaning of genocide. This results in so much exaggeration that it is difficult if not impossible to have a serious conversation about the topic of language laws. Russia has not provided any convincing or credible evidence for genocide committed in the context of Ukraine’s military actions in the Donbas, which leaves the language laws introduced by the Ukrainian parliament as the only “argument” that has been put forward. Yet it is immediately clear that the Ukrainian language laws cannot be seen as examples of genocide. It is indeed true that since 2014 Ukraine has done much to promote Ukrainian and make it the sole state language, and that this was at the expense of Russian. This was painful for some Russian speakers. However, Russia’s aggressive attitude to Ukraine (annexation of Crimea, support of the self-declared “People’s Republics” in eastern Ukraine, and aggressive propaganda) reinforced the Ukrainian government’s tendency to further promote Ukrainian at the expense of Russian. If Russia had really cared about the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, it should have used other means to achieve its goal. The situation in Ukraine also displays a dilemma. To remove the undermining Russian influence, it is necessary to take measures such as blocking Russian television and promoting the official language, sometimes framed in the Russian propaganda as “cultural genocide”. At the same time, these less democratic measures undermine the idea of Russian-speaking people as equals within the state. As such, the loaded and exaggerated Russian terminology, and the emphasis on the *Russkij Mir*, comprising all Russian speakers, has in fact contributed to the imposition of measures opposed by Russia.

5 Conclusion

As I have shown, in Russian propaganda the term “genocide” cannot be studied in isolation but is part of the larger rhetorical frame *Russophobic Nazi Ukrainian government commits genocide on Russians*. This rhetorical frame developed in stages, originating in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine after 1991, and becoming a more consistent frame during the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005, when it was still mainly used within Ukraine itself. It was only after the Maidan Revolution of 2014 that the frame started to become fully integrated in Russian propaganda, probably influenced by pro-Russian Ukrainians who went to Russia or were in close contact with Russia. Precisely because it builds on more enduring sentiments in Ukraine and Russia, and because it appeals to deep sentiments relating to World War II, its use is highly effective. In addition, its effectiveness is also due to the use of emotionally loaded words, which refer to objectively established facts that are presented in an exaggerated and hyperbolic way. Especially in Russia, where there is no remaining free press, people are unable to check whether the information provided in the media is correct, and many of them accept the frame at face value.

I showed that the term “genocide” is used in two ways, which often overlap: First for the alleged killing of Russian-speaking people in the Donbas region, and second for the effects of Ukraine’s language policy. Even though Russia probably had genuine concerns about the promotion of Ukrainian at the expense of Russian in the public sphere, these concerns were immediately absorbed in the inflammatory rhetoric of the “genocide” frame, which diminished the effectiveness of the Russian criticism. As such, the main goal of this frame is to acquire and retain support for Russia’s policy toward Ukraine, for example the annexation

of Crimea, support for the self-declared “People’s Republics” in eastern Ukraine, and from 2022, support for the war in and against Ukraine. Ultimately, the Russian propaganda is part of the concept *Russkij Mir* ‘Russian World’, where Russian language and culture are a means to restore Putin’s Russian sphere of influence from Soviet times or earlier. This culminated in the war that started in 2022. The war in Ukraine is not about language, but the status of Russian in Ukraine has been abused as a weapon, one of the factors leading up to the actual war crimes by the Russians against Ukrainians, both Ukrainian speaking and Russian speaking, that can be witnessed today. Whether these war crimes should be classed as genocide or not has still to be investigated. However, it is clear that the dehumanization of Ukrainians in the Russian propaganda, including the use of the terms “Nazi”, “fascist” and “genocide” by the Russians, has contributed to the atrocities that the Russians have committed and are still committing in Ukraine.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The corresponding author states that there are no competing interests.

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