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Propaganda in Russian Media Coverage of the War in Ukraine *Emotion vs. reason*

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ABSTRACT: Generally accepted definitions of propaganda feature a prominent role that emotional appeal plays in making communication propagandistic. This paper is an attempt to explain how Russian propaganda works, and why it is so effective, by looking at media content through the prism of interaction between emotion and reason in Russian media discourse. A logico-pragmatic-stylistic analysis is applied to the coverage of the Ukraine war by the influential Russian daily *Izvestiia*.

KEYWORDS: emotion, emotional appeal, logico-pragmatic-stylistic analysis, media discourse, propaganda, rational appeal, reason, Russian media, speech acts, Ukraine war

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine propaganda in Russian media coverage of the war in Ukraine. The study is aimed at revealing the nature of propaganda as a pervasive use of emotions that supplant rational arguments or obscure their flaws. We believe one can use emotions as a yard stick by which to ‘measure’ propaganda. By looking at media content through the prism of interaction between emotion and reason in media discourse, one can explain how propaganda works and why it is so effective in achieving its goals.

In 1931, American social scientist William W. Biddle published an extensive study of propaganda used during the First World War in the *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology*. His paper, “A psychological definition of propaganda,” concluded that “propaganda, as a means of social control, is relying less upon techniques which help the individual to come into intelligent control of his conduct, [and] is relying more on techniques which induce the individual to follow non-rational emotional drives.” (Tattrie, 2021) According to Biddle, four main principles that successful propaganda adheres to include: “1) rely on emotions, never argue; 2) cast propaganda into the pattern of ‘we’ versus an ‘enemy’; 3) reach groups as well as individuals; 4) hide the propagandist as much as possible.” (Biddle, 1931, p. 294)

According to Richard Alan Nelson:

Propaganda is neutrally defined as a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels. (Nelson, 1996, pp. 232-233)

Rebecca Curnalia offers the following definition:

Propaganda is a series of targeted, systematic messages disseminated through multiple channels for a prolonged period of time that offer biased opinions or perspectives through the selective use of specific, emotionally arousing, comprehensible, and aesthetically appealing techniques that circumvent scrutiny of the message to influence attitudes and beliefs. (Curnalia, 2005, p. 240)

While these definitions may differ in some respects, all three of them stress a larger role of emotional and aesthetic appeals and a lesser role of rational appeal. Importantly, the third definition states that propaganda uses not only emotionally arousing but also aesthetically appealing techniques that circumvent scrutiny of the message. As we will see in our case study of the Ukraine-related content from the Russian newspaper *Izvestiia*, Russian media propaganda uses well-known and respected cultural figures, youth ensembles, and members of show business to deliver its message about the war in Ukraine in an aesthetically appealing way. The fact that Russian audiences appreciate talented performance is an important extra factor in making the message itself persuasive and propaganda effective.

2. MODERN RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA: TWENTY YEARS IN FORMATION

In Volume 1 of their trilogy *The rhetorical rise and demise of “democracy” in Russian political discourse* David Cratis Williams, Marilyn J. Young, and Michael K. Launer describe the ambivalent attitude people have towards evidence. They argue that

we all have something of an approach–avoidance relationship with evidence in human affairs. We like the trappings of reasoned decision-making and tend to produce ‘reasons’ to support the decisions we make, giving the appearance of induction (adducing evidence, constructing arguments, trying to show we ‘arrived at a conclusion’ based on evidence). But all too often these reasons are developed after the fact rather than before, and are usually reached deductively or unthinkingly, often based on the opinion of a perceived leader. (Williams, Young, & Launer, 2021, p. xxxii)

Taking American society as an example, they explain that “it might be that our society no longer engages in public argument—as that term is ideally conceived—at all. Even using the broadest possible definition of argument—a claim backed by evidence—there is little in the public realm to contravene this notion.” (Williams, Young, & Launer, 2021, p. xxxii)

This is especially true of Russian propaganda, which over the past two decades has encouraged Russians to give up trying to critically assess the facts at hand—delegating this function to media and politicians. Therefore, once argument was banned in the public domain, facts started to play solely the role of validator in the decision-making process, rather than its generator.

In 2014, in my paper *Western and Russian media coverage of the Ukrainian crisis: an emotional commitment or bias?* I explained that the Russian annexation of Crimea was presented by the Russian mainstream media as liberation—the reunification of the Russians living there with their homeland, akin to their return from captivity. According to this line of thinking, it was a legitimate restoration of historical truth: an act of saving Sevastopol, a city of Russian naval glory, for which so much Russian blood had been spilt, and keeping it from becoming a NATO naval base. Russian media showed Crimeans dancing in the street with tears of joy in their eyes. (Golubev, 2014)

In 2022, the situation was different. Instead of the blitzkrieg of 2014, Russian troops encountered fierce resistance from Ukrainian society and the Ukrainian army from the very beginning of the invasion. As the war dragged on, propaganda needed a new approach to ensure that the Russian society supported the war effort. As political commentator Maria Domańska observes, the Kremlin has attempted

to carry out an unprecedented social experiment in the midst of armed conflict. After two decades of discouraging Russians from engaging in state affairs and “big politics” (an approach typical of an authoritarian model of rule), 2022 saw top-down efforts to mobilise them around the government’s aggressive goals (a shift to a totalitarian model). The citizens were pushed to “patriotically” support the Kremlin, and the ground for this push was prepared through stepped-up repression, censorship and mass indoctrination. (Domańska, 2023)

This approach has worked well in silencing the opposition within Russia, but it has been less effective in convincing Russian society of the rightness of the cause. To counteract this, the audience was pushed into the sea of emotion ranging from love for their homeland and pride of the nation’s hard, but glorious, history rooted in endurance and sacrifice, to solidarity in the face of a common enemy, and a faithful unity in carrying on God’s mission to the world. With the Ukrainian army inflicting heavy casualties on the Russian army in its own territory and causing havoc in many parts of Russia itself, this sea of emotions has become the reason why the families of killed or maimed Russian soldiers still believe that their sacrifice was not in vain.

To back this assessment, I will examine the Ukrainian war-related content published on the website of the Russian national daily *Izvestiia*. I will provide a close English translation of the Russian-language content.

3. METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive logico-pragma-stylistic analysis of media content will be applied. It consists of three parts, each with its own jurisdiction, yet only in combination do they contribute to the final research findings.

Logical analysis will primarily deal with the rational appeal of the message to be examined, i.e., the logical validity, relevance, and reasonableness of the argumentation employed.

Pragmatic analysis will mainly address the emotional appeal of the message through the prism of communicative intentions expressed by its author. To this end, pragmatic analysis will first focus on what speech acts the author of the message performs, in terms of the speech classes they belong to—e.g., assertives, commissives, directives, expressives or declaratives—and in terms of their illocutionary force. The latter is defined by the degree of confidence the author expresses in the truth of the proposition (assertives); by the strength of commitment the author expresses that he or she performs the act contained in the proposition (commissives); by the degree of freedom the author allows the recipient of his or her directive to refuse to comply with the proposition (directives); by the degree of sincerity the author shows in expressing his or her emotions (expressives); and finally, by how much the utterance brings about reality change (declaratives). Secondly, pragmatic analysis takes stock of word connotations, i.e., how much of the vocabulary used

in the message has a positive or negative connotation, which affects the emotional charge of the message.

Stylistic analysis deals with the aesthetic appeal of the message, i.e., what stylistic or rhetorical techniques—such as repetition, parallelism, rhetorical questions, and the like—the author uses to make the message aesthetically appealing to an audience. Repetition is a figure of speech where a word or phrase is repeated more than one time for emphasis. It attracts the attention of the readers or listeners to a specific phrase. Parallelism repeats grammatical elements; a parallel construction can enhance readability and make it easier to convey an idea effectively. As a figure of speech, it can emphasize and create memorable phrases.

The approach is based on, but is not limited to, Aristotle's rhetorical triad of *logos-ethos-pathos*, (Bartlett, 2019) the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992) speech act theory, (Austin, 1962) a taxonomy of illocutionary acts, (Searle, 1975) pragmatics, (Grice, 1989) and illocutionary logic. (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985)

4. RUSSIAN MEDIA PROPAGANDA CASE STUDY

On Victory Day in Russia—May 9, 2023—*Izvestiia* ran the story *Mashkov visits veterans of the special operation at a Moscow hospital*. Vladimir Mashkov is a famous Russian stage and film actor and director. The keywords for the story included *Vladimir Mashkov*, *servicemen*, *actors*, *veterans* (of), *the Special Operation*. The last two terms clearly form a single unit, which is manifested in Russian by the genitive case of the second term, and yet these two terms are presented as two individual links. This is an important nuance as the term *veterans* used on its own becomes vital for connecting the current war with WWII. The keywords designate the main characters (*Vladimir Mashkov* and *servicemen*), their identities (*actor* and *veterans of the Special Operation*) and the setting (*the Special Operation*).

The heading is followed by a photograph of Mashkov wearing a conspicuously plain sweatshirt with a Z sign, the symbol of the Special Military Operation. The text under that picture, which sets the stage for the video report of the visit, says:

People's Artist of Russia Vladimir Mashkov visited veterans of the special operation to protect Donbass who are being treated at P.V. Mandryka Hospital. This became known on May 8th.

The wording has no mention of Ukraine as a country; instead, it suggests that Russia is conducting a defensive military operation to protect Donbass.

The video that follows contains Mashkov's speech to the veterans and a selection of short clips from the Victory Day concert that followed. The caption in the upper left-hand corner of the video reads, *Vladimir Mashkov, People's Artist of the Russian Federation*. Mashkov's purposefully plain attire, which contrasts with his honors, is meant to manifest his humble dignity. Making the speaker appealing and credible increases the aesthetic appeal of the message.

In order to apply a logico-pragma-stylistic analysis to Mashkov's speech, we divided it into three segments, according to the ideational structure of the discourse. Italicised words are those that the speaker stresses.

4.1 Segment 1

I want to say *thank you* for your <pause> *hard work in service*. <pause> You have gone through incredible trials <pause> *that* <pause> only our *fathers* have gone through. You were the *first* to feel the *pain* of our *land* and the *first* <pause> to *respond* to that pain. That is why *you* <pause> are the *ones* <pause> who are connected <pause> *by blood* to our native land.

4.1.1 The logico-pragmatic-stylistic analysis of Segment 1

In terms of rational appeal, this segment presents a logically valid argument structure consisting of three premises and a conclusion: the veterans have gone through incredible trials; they were the first to feel the pain of their land; they were the first to respond to that pain; therefore, they were connected by blood to their native land. The weakness of the argumentation lies in the fact that the notion of *our/native land* is not defined; therefore, it remains unclear what links the concept of *responding to the pain of our/native land* to Russia's special military operation in the neighboring state of Ukraine. The audience is left with a choice of several very different options to answer this question, at various times supplied by Russian propaganda:

- a. Ukraine and Russia are but one country, Ukraine's independence is a historical mistake;
- b. Russia is defending itself by fighting its enemies (Nazis, the collective West, NATO) in Ukraine to stop them from attacking Russia;
- c. Russia is defending itself by defending Donbass, since it is a new province of Russia;
- d. Russia is defending the Ukrainian Russian-speaking people of Donbass from being attacked by the Ukrainian Nazis (the Ukrainian Nazi Government);
- e. I don't want to think about it; or
- f. I don't care.

Neither Mashkov nor his audience seem keen to dispel this ambiguity.

The speaker builds his emotional appeal as follows. Starting his presentation with an expressive speech act thanking the veterans for their hard work and heroism and directly addressing the audience with the pronoun *you*, Mashkov establishes rapport with his audience. He then performs a series of assertive speech acts to establish bridges between the present and the past, between today's veterans and their fathers and between today's veterans and their native land. To do this, he puts a strong emphasis on hardship and sacrifice that special operation veterans share with their fathers, veterans of WWII through the use of emotionally charged words and expressions such as *hard work in service*, *incredible trials*, *pain*, *our/native land*, *blood*.

To make his message aesthetically appealing, the experienced theater actor masterfully uses pauses before the key words he intends to stress—and then verbally and using his body-language puts a clear emphasis on these words and expressions, most of which are emotionally charged, as we saw above (these words are italicised in the segment). To identify with his audience, Mashkov switches between addressing the veterans as *you* and using the pronoun *our*. The speaker uses repetition, a figure of speech used to attract the attention of the audience to a specific word or phrase. He repeats *you/your* 5 times, *have gone through* 2 times, *first* 2 times, *pain* 2 times and *our/native land* 2 times. He also uses the literary device of parallelism to provide his audience with a sense of balance or rhythm and to enhance message readability and ease of processing. Parallelism goes beyond simple

word repetition, it repeats grammatical elements, or sentence structure. In a short segment Vladimir Mashkov uses parallelism in two sentences in succession: a. *You have gone through incredible trials that only our fathers have gone through* and b. *You were the first to feel the pain of our land and the first to respond to that pain*. All of the above makes the message aesthetically appealing to its audience.

4.2 Segment 2

From our birth we've got a sense of *fear*, <pause> a sense of *pain*; <pause> even a sense of *loneliness* we've got! <pause> The sense of love for one's *motherland* <pause> *it's not there*! It must be <pause> *told*. <pause> The sense of *comradery* – it also needs... <pause> The sense of *patriotism*, <pause> the sense of *conscience*.

4.2.1 The logico-pragmatic-stylistic analysis of Segment 2

From the point of view of rational appeal, this segment is a case of moral argumentation based in scientific fact. Valid, relevant, and reasonable by itself, the argument fails to add much clarity as to how the love for one's motherland relates to the war in Ukraine.

To appeal to his audience emotionally, the author first performs assertive speech acts to point to natural human weaknesses using nouns with negative connotations, e.g., *fear*, *pain*, *loneliness*, and *[lack of] love for the motherland*. Following that, Mashkov performs directive speech acts to urge that nobler qualities of character be talked about and developed through the use of nouns with positive connotations such as *love*, *comradery*, *patriotism*, and *conscience*.

When building aesthetic appeal, the author again makes a masterful use of pauses to draw attention to important words and expressions, then putting an intonational and body-language stress on these elements. He not only repeats the most important term *sense* six times in this segment but uses parallelism of construction, inverted sentence structure, and concise 'bullet-like' incomplete sentences. His upward rhetorical climb in the first *sense* sequence culminates in the emphatic use of the qualifier *event*.

4.3 Segment 3

<Cut> *You will be the mirror of our great country and the mirror of its feelings*. Happy upcoming holiday to you! <pause> *Recover*. Victory will be *ours*! Thank you.

4.3.1 The logico-pragmatic-stylistic analysis of Segment 3

The rational appeal of the segment is based on the claim, *You will be the mirror of our great country, the mirror of its feelings*, which, taking into account the fact that clearly some part of the speech was edited out, can be considered to logically follow from the preceding discourse, and the implicit argument, *Russia is a great country; therefore, victory will be ours*. The strength of the latter argumentation is in its valid structure and relevance to the main aim of the discourse to uplift the veterans' spirits, whereas its weakness is that the premise is an opinion rather than fact, whose validity a critical mind in the audience would easily question.

To arouse emotions in his audience, Vladimir Mashkov starts this segment with an assertive speech act with an illocutionary force of predicting, *You will be the mirror of our great country and the mirror of its feelings*. His intentions are clearly to make the veterans proud of their service to Russia and to build confidence in them that their sacrifice was not in vain. By projecting the proposition into the future, Mashkov gives it a perspective beyond the bounds of the present moment. In fact, this utterance may even be regarded as a commissive speech act of promising so much confidence the speaker expresses in the likelihood of the proposition. He further strengthens the same message by another assertive speech act with an illocutionary force of predicting, *Victory will be ours!* that can also be regarded as an indirect speech act of promising. Since it is a conclusion to his speech, Mashkov also performs two expressive speech acts that fit the occasion: he wishes his audience a good holiday, expressing as much sincerity as possible, and thanks them for listening to him speak. His directive speech act calling on them to recover can also be read as an expressive speech act of wishing them good health or even an assertive speech act of predicting that they will definitely recover. The speaker's foremost communicative intentions in this concluding passage are to reassure his listeners and to infuse them with his enthusiasm about the future.

Rhetorically, Vladimir Mashkov's message is impeccable: he finishes his speech the way he started it: directly addressing the audience with the pronoun *you* to reestablish his contact with them and emphasizing their emotional connection with Russia by using the word *feelings*. As in the first segment, he identifies himself with his audience by using the pronouns *our* and *ours*. By repeating the word *mirror* when referring to the veterans, he pictures them as an example of national greatness and individual purity. In this segment as well, the actor effectively uses gestures to aid his pauses and intonation to stress key words.

To summarize the logico-pragma-stylistic analysis of Mashkov's speech, I would like to conclude that Mashkov's discourse projects a powerful emotional appeal while the rational appeal is much weaker, as it is hard to be sure what Mashkov's underlying arguments are. Aesthetically, Vladimir Mashkov delivers a forceful yet gracious speech from the stage.

4.4 The concert clips

The impact of Mashkov's speech is further strengthened by several clips from a concert featuring a youth ensemble performing patriotic war songs. The lyrics of the songs heard on the video can be rendered in English as follows:

Song 1

The red rocket flies, the machine gun beats – unquenchable!
And so, we need one victory,
One for all, we'll pay any price,
One for all, we'll pay any price.

Song 2

We didn't have time to look back,
We didn't have time to look back,
And the sons, and the sons
Are going into battle.

Song 3

And that night the samurai decided
To cross the border over the river.

A shot to the audience: some girls in the audience are seen enjoying the concert, filming it with their phones and singing along.

Song 4

Sprawling, green maple, a leaf carved,
I am in love and shy before you.
A green maple, a curly maple,
A fuzzy, curly, carved maple.

4.4.1 The logico-pragmatic-stylistic analysis of the concert clips

To build an argument, the lyrics contained the following messages: *we all just need one victory, and we are willing to pay any price for it; the sons are going into battle, just like their fathers did before them; the samurai attacked us at night; we must protect our beautiful land and those we love*. The argument again points to the conclusion that now, as then, Russia is defending itself having been left with no other option than to fight back.

The emotional charge of the concert is evident in the choice of words denoting such notions as life and death, self-sacrifice, battle, victory, covert enemy attack, love for a girl and one's native land, and the beauty of one's native land. Visually, the video projects a good holiday atmosphere. It only contains images of positive emotions. The shot of the girls in the audience, who are shown filming and singing along, attests to their appreciation of what they see on stage. There is no sign of sadness or any other unpleasant emotions. The faces of wounded veterans are blurred. Never do we see any shots of their injuries or crutches.

Aesthetically, the youth ensemble is meant to signify the continuity of Russian history across generations. The clips are arranged craftily to form a circle: from a full ensemble performance to the boys' performance to the girls' performance and again to a full ensemble performance. The lyrics fit well with who is singing. The performance is aesthetically appealing.

4.5 Two more stories

The *Izvestiia* page continues with two more stories about cultural figures supporting the war.

4.5.1 *The first story*

The title of the first one is *Russia's fate is decided in Donbass*. The title, which one can click on to read the story, is accompanied by a picture of the interviewee and a summary:

Eduard Boyakov, the Artistic Director of the New Theatre, talks about historical values, poisonous cookies, and the secret of the popularity of the singer Shaman.

This interview with a respected theater director serves as another justification for the claim that Russia has no choice but fight for Donbass. The summary contains all the important propaganda references: to the true cultural values of Russia; to the cookies that Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs in the Obama administration, handed out to the protesters in Kiev at the end of 2013—which became an instant meme on Russian social media, and later among millions of Putin supporters around the world; and to the rising star of singer Shaman, whose song *Let's Rise* about Russian war heroes who gave their lives for the living, became a major propaganda symbol of the war in Ukraine.

4.5.2 *The second story*

What follows is a paragraph that introduces the second story featuring a member of Russian show business who supports the war. The text says:

Earlier, on April 24, it was reported that the singer Yuta (Anna Osipova), an honored artist of Russia, performed at a military hospital in Severomorsk in front of servicemen, among whom were participants of special operations. She thanked all the soldiers for their courage and bravery and wished them a speedy recovery.

The *Izvestiia* page ends with a paragraph striving to explain the purpose of the Special Military Operation. It is perhaps the only attempt at using argumentation explicitly. In the passage, the war is framed as a protective effort on the part of Russia that concerns solely the annexed Donbass region of Ukraine, with all the blame put squarely at the feet of the Ukrainian government.

Russia continues a special operation to protect Donbass, whose residents have refused to recognize the results of the 2014 *coup d'état* in Ukraine. The decision to begin it was made on February 24, 2022, amid a worsening situation in the region due to the shelling by Ukrainian troops.

From the point of view of emotional appeal, the message is intended to arouse in the reader feelings of incomprehension at the unwillingness of the Ukrainian government to accept the legitimate decision of Donbass residents to refuse to accept the events in the rest of Ukraine, of pity for the people of Donbass, and of indignation at the actions of Ukrainian troops. The author chooses the term *coup d'état*, which has an expressly negative connotation, to refer to the events that are elsewhere known as the Revolution of Dignity. Stylistically, the paragraph is an example of using a compact form to express such a wide range of ideas and incite such a wide gamut of emotions.

The last paragraph on the page again restricts the setting to the Donbass region with no mention of Ukraine:

See more current videos and details about the situation in Donbass on the *Izvestiia* TV channel.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the logico-pragmatic-stylistic analysis can be used as an instrument to ‘measure’ propaganda, producing verifiable and reproducible results.

The logico-pragmatic-stylistic analysis of the Ukrainian war-related content published on the website of the Russian national daily *Izvestiia* on May 9, 2023, demonstrates an example of the effective use of propaganda by Russian media. The *Izvestiia* case study demonstrates that reliance on emotion rather than on reason is indeed one of the key assets that propaganda employs to achieve its ends and to do so effectively. It also demonstrates that a major extra factor that contributes to the effectiveness of propaganda is a masterful use of aesthetic appeal.

By likening Russia’s Special Operation in defense of Donbass to the Soviet sacrificial struggle during WWII, Russian propaganda implicitly uses the same emotionally charged defensive-war argument in its coverage of the war in Ukraine. Just as in 2014—when Russian media justifying the annexation of Crimea celebrated the event by likening Crimea to a stranded ship coming back to a peaceful home harbor—Russian media today continue to immerse the audience in the sea of emotion ranging from fear to anger to pride to love in order to compensate for the weaknesses of reasoned argumentation. Using talented, easily recognized, professional speakers, the Russian propaganda machine successfully creates an Orwellian narrative in which war is peace, offense is defense, and Ukraine is Russia.

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