

Utilization of Russian Propaganda Narratives about Ukraine in American and Czech Politics¹

April 2023

Petr Jurek, University of West Bohemia (CZ)

Joseph Robbins, Valdosta State University

Abstract

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda tries to justify its actions by presenting number of narratives about Ukraine as a country, Ukrainian history, politicians, people, army etc. The reach of these narratives is not limited to Russian territory or audience. On the contrary, narratives about Ukraine originating in Russia have been used since the start of the invasion on February 24 2022 by various political actors outside Russia for their own political purposes. The paper presents the results of research of utilization of relevant Russian narratives about Ukraine within American and Czech Politics. The core questions answered by the paper are: Which Russian narratives about Ukraine are most commonly disseminated in American and Czech politics? Which types of American resp. Czech political actors are involved in spreading and utilization of Russian narratives about Ukraine? What is the purpose of such utilization? The research design is based on comparison of two dissimilar cases, the cases of American and Czech politics.

Keywords: Russian propaganda, American politics, Czech politics, propaganda narratives, disinformation, Russian invasion of Ukraine

¹ This work was supported by the E-ADAPT Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence under Grant No. 620971-EPP-1-2020-1-CZ-EPPJMO-CoE co-funded by the European Union.

1. Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine started on February 24nd 2022. Large-scale military operation of Russian forces came as a surprise to societies all around the world. Even though Western politicians warned against such scenario, majority of the people didn't consider it as a real one. However, the above-mentioned date is not a starting point of Russian propaganda activities related to Ukraine. Russian narratives explaining the causes of full-scale invasion as well as its inevitability started to be produced and proliferated much earlier, especially following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia openly acknowledges that it aims at influencing the public perception of its actions through mass communication outside of its borders, besides other things by developing "its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad" [Foreign Policy Concept of Russian federation, cited by Hutchings – Szostek 2016].

The paper focuses on the utilization of Russian narratives about Ukraine within "the West". Specifically, it focuses on two very dissimilar cases. The USA is considered to be the core of the West by Russia and currently an arch-enemy of Russia and even some Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine reflect that. The Czech case is specific: The Czech Republic (formerly as a part of Czechoslovakia) belonged into the sphere of influence of the USSR between 1948 and 1989. After the so-called Velvet Revolution and subsequent democratic transition, it became part of the West, which is currently institutionalized in the form of membership in the European Union and NATO. Interestingly, the Czech Republic was initially the only country together with the USA on the official list of unfriendly nations of Russian Federation in 2021 [TASS 2021]. Based on very different contexts of these two cases, we can expect that also utilization of Russian propaganda narratives will differ within American and Czech politics respectively.

There have been reports about Russian propaganda activities influencing American and Czech politics in the past. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the main target were democratic elections in both countries, specifically involvement in electoral campaigns aimed at influencing the outcome of elections. The Russian invasion of Ukraine presented a new challenge for Russian propaganda. Its main aim was to counter generally negative attitudes of public towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine by producing and proliferating narratives which challenge the interpretation of Russian invasion of Ukraine as an unnecessary, unilateral, unprovoked and unreasonable act.

The ultimate goal of our research is to identify the patterns of Russian propaganda narratives utilization in the politics of the West. This paper sums up the results of the first explorative stage of our research which focuses on answering several questions related to cases of Czech and American politics: Which political actors within American and Czech politics are involved in spreading and utilization of Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine? Which Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine are most commonly disseminated in American and Czech politics? What is the purpose of such utilization of Russian propaganda narratives?

We focus primarily on the period between February 24th, 2022 and end of February 2023. Our research has three main cornerstones: political actors, narratives and political actor's intentions. The first step in our research was to identify relevant political actors within American and Czech politics. Our intention is not to cover all relevant political actors utilizing Russian propaganda narratives, we are focusing on those who are able to reach out to a wider audience.

After identifying relevant actors, we conducted an analysis of their social media posts related to Russian invasion of Ukraine and Ukraine as a country. The aim of the analysis is to identify the core elements of Russian propaganda narratives within the communication of actors through social media. The social media content is a largely unfiltered form of communication of actors which are usually linked to certain specific issues (in domestic or international politics) and thus represent a suitable data corpus to be analyzed. This contextualized dataset allows us also to interpret the purpose of utilization of specific narratives.

The paper consists of three main parts. In the first part, we describe and briefly discuss main Russian propaganda narratives. The second and third part present the results of analysis of utilization of these narratives in Czech and American politics respectively. In the conclusion, we summarize our findings in comparative perspective.

2. Russian Propaganda Narratives about Ukraine

For the purpose of tracking the Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine in American and Czech politics, we first need to identify the core elements of those narratives. That is the purpose of this chapter.

Narrative can be defined as a more or less coherent story aiming at understanding or explaining certain event or phenomena. Propaganda narratives' purpose is to influence the opinion and/or behavior of certain target audience [Tsekhanovska – Tsybul'ska 2021: 8]. Propaganda narratives doesn't equal disinformation or fakes, although disinformation are often the crucial parts of Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine. Due to the potentially damaging effects of disinformation, the proliferation of Russian propaganda narratives became an issue for Western governments and societies, especially after full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 [see f.e. Boucher 2022, Cabada 2022, OECD 2022].

Since the start of Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian propaganda have been very active in presenting number of narratives related to Ukraine as a state, Ukrainians as a nation, politicians of Ukraine etc. It would not be reasonable to try to capture all the narratives, instead of that we are going to focus on those most commonly presented. There are several studies discussing Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine [Claessen 2023; Götz – Staun 2022; HENSOLDT Analytics 2022; Zakharchenko 2022] and many others reflecting the Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine after invasion of Crimea in 2014 [f.e. Hutchings – Szostek 2016; Tsekhanovska – Tsybul'ska 2021; Zayarnyuk 2022]. Most of these studies identify similar set of crucial Russian narratives about Ukraine, although approaches of individual scholars differ considerably in two aspects: 1) the level of abstraction and/or simplification in presenting the narratives and 2) the approach of how scholars identify the most relevant narratives.

Scholars have been also trying to sort or even classify Russian narratives about Ukraine. From our point of view, probably the most comprehensive and inclusive classification up to this date was offered by Anton Shekhovtsov [2023], who distinguishes between strategic and tactical narratives. He defines strategic narratives as reflections of “the long-term vision of Russia's political and kinetic warfare. They frequently reflect the genuine, deeply held views of the Russian leadership on Ukraine, and offer broader context to the aggression”. Compared to that, the tactical narratives can be defined as “stand-alone messages that help validate certain strategic narratives. Unlike strategic narratives, this type of messaging is less consistent due to its highly manipulative nature and tendency to appeal to emotions” [Shekhovtsov 2023].

Shekhovtsov therefore suggest that there are certain interconnections between different types of narratives, specifically that tactical narratives are linked to specific strategic narrative. Although the distinction between strategic and tactical narratives is perhaps not as sharp and clear as it should be and will be hopefully clarified by future research, we still see that such distinction as a useful analytical tool for our analysis.

Moreover, Shekhovtsov suggests that Russian propaganda creates and communicates different narratives to different audiences. He distinguishes between narratives targeting Russian population, Ukrainian population, the West and Global South, while some narratives can be directed towards more than one audience. Russian strategic and tactical narratives are briefly described in following tables:

Table 1: Russian propaganda strategic narratives about Ukraine and its primary audience
 Source: Shekhovtsov 2023

Audience	Strategic narrative
Russia	The Ukrainian nation does not exist, and so-called Ukrainians are simply confused Russians.
Russia	Ukraine only received its right to exist as a country from Russia.
Russia	Sovereign Ukraine is ‘anti-Russia’.
Russia	Russia's main confrontation is with NATO, not Ukraine.
Ukraine	Russia and Ukraine are brotherly nations.
Ukraine	Ukraine is part of the Russian world.
Ukraine	Ukraine can only be successful together with Russia.
West	Russia is a global power that is entitled to its sphere of influence, and Ukraine belongs within that sphere.
West	Ukraine as part of the West poses an existential threat to Russia.
West	The West is using NATO to encircle Russia.
Global South	Russia is the leader of a global anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movement.
Global South	The West is using the war in Ukraine to reclaim global dominance.
Global South	Ukraine is part of Russia's legitimate sphere of influence.

Table 2: Russian propaganda tactical narratives about Ukraine and its primary audience

Source: Shekhovtsov 2023

Audience	Tactical Narrative
Russia	Russia's war against Ukraine is not a war, but a 'special military operation'.
Russia	Ukrainians who oppose Russian authorities are Nazis (and thus the 'denazification' of Ukraine is the goal of the 'operation').
Russia	Ukraine's military successes are not because of the morale of Ukrainians, but as a result of NATO support.
Russia	Russia has never lost a war: 'We will definitely win'.
Russia	Ukraine is committing genocide against ethnic Russians in Donbas and other regions of Ukraine.
Russia	Ukraine's territory belongs to Russia: 'We are not occupying Ukrainian land, we are simply taking back what is rightfully ours'.
Russia	Ukrainian leaders are Satanists.
Ukraine	Ukraine's leadership is betraying the interests of ordinary Ukrainians.
Ukraine	The West will fight Russia 'until the last Ukrainian'.
Ukraine	'Gayrope': The West is degraded, and Ukraine should not join it.
West	The West is attacking Russia because of the West's inherent 'Russophobia'.
West	Ukraine is governed by Nazis; or at the very least Ukraine has a serious Nazism problem.
West	Western sanctions harm European businesses and families.
West	Ukraine is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and can therefore not become an integrated part of the West.
West	Russians and Ukrainians are one people.
West	Russia is interested in peace talks, but Ukraine and the West do not want peace.
West	European support for Ukraine will lead to the geopolitical decline of Europe.
West	The US is using the war in Ukraine as a means to consolidate its position as the global hegemon.
West	Western weapons sent to Ukraine will eventually find their way into the hands of international terrorists.
West	'Nuclear threat': The West should avoid confrontation with Russia because it has nuclear weapons, while Ukraine on the other hand is making a 'dirty bomb'.
Global South	Western support for Ukraine is driven by anti-Russian racism.
Global South	Ukraine, with Western support, is a threat to global food security.
Global South	Ukraine is developing biological weapons in secret US-funded biolaboratories.

It is reasonable that Russian propaganda will likely adjust the narratives based on how effectively they can influence certain audience. It is nevertheless controversial if we can really identify set of narratives directed towards the West as one unitary audience. The cases we are following in this paper represent very dissimilar examples of countries belonging to the West. From this point of view, subsequent chapters dealing with utilization of Russian propaganda narratives in Czech and American politics will put Shekhovtsov's aforementioned assumptions to the test.

Important remark needs to be made in relation to actors participating on production and proliferation of propaganda narratives. Russian propaganda narratives are usually articulated

by Russian leadership (president, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, Russian armed forces) and broadcasted and proliferated by Russian media, agencies and proxies (Russia Today, Sputnik, Internet Research Agency) [see f.e. Tsekhanovska – Tsybulska 2021: 19–29]. As for the West, the role of official Russian media and Western mass media in proliferation of Russian propaganda narratives is limited. The main channels used for propaganda narratives proliferation are social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, VKontakte, Telegram, Youtube, TikTok). Important role in propaganda narratives proliferation is played by actors with large number of followers on social media platforms.

In this paper, we are focusing on individual political actors who can be considered as an opinion leaders. The cases of Czech and American politics differ significantly when it comes to actors involved in information distribution. The Czech case is much more centralized, especially due to concentrated mass media sphere and prevailing orientation on nation-wide topics in policy debate (given by the simple fact that the Czech Republic is rather small country with 10.5 mil. inhabitants). The American case is much more complex with its much more decentralized mass media sphere and multiple public arenas where political debates are taking place (national/federal, state, regional, local). We also have to consider principal differences between the Czech and American case in the nature of political partisanship and the role of political parties as political actors within political debate. These differences constitute the Czech and American politics as significantly dissimilar cases which seriously affects the process of selection of specific political actors included into our analysis which is briefly described at the beginning of next two chapters.

3. Czech Politics and Russian Narratives about Ukraine

3.1. Russian leaning actors in Czech politics

In the Czech politics, political parties can be considered as a main political actor involved in national political debate. Since Czech political parties are usually highly centralized organizations, this gives leaders of political parties privileged position in the center of any political debate and situation in Ukraine has is not an exception. Nevertheless, after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the political debate started to be influenced more and more by information from “alternative sources”, which were spread by individuals not linked to existing political parties through social media. As a result, the political debate on Russian invasion became more and more fragmented. It is reflected in this study by including not only Russian leaning actors currently possessing actual formal political power (f. e. seat in national parliament), but also influential political outsiders (with the ambition of gaining formal political power).

Since the Velvet Revolution in 1989, relations with Russia have always been sensitive and polarizing topic for Czech society and politics. Although the majority of society and relevant political actors preferred pro-Western orientation of the country, there have always been minority favoring close relations with Russia. Traditionally, this minority was represented by Communist Party of Czechia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čecha Moravy*, KSČM). Over the time and especially after Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, other political actors started to be more active in promoting more pro-Eastern foreign policy orientation of the Czech Republic. Among these, Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, SPD) became the most important anti-Western and thus implicitly pro-Russian political party. After the parliamentary elections in 2021, SPD has been the only political party exhibiting pro-Russian attitudes represented in House of Deputies, since KSČM was not able to reach 5% threshold required to win parliamentary seats.

Several individual politicians stand out in terms of their active role in amplifying pro-Russian narratives: Tomio Okamura (SPD leader), Radim Fiala (SPD MP) and Jaroslav Foldyna (SPD MP). In the House of Deputies, we can also find other politicians who are occasionally active in spreading pro-Russian narratives. Apart from other SPD MPs, two MPs from ANO 2011 Movement have to be mentioned: Radek Vondráček and Andrej Babiš. The case of former Czech prime minister Babiš is especially significant, because he utilized some anti-war narratives in his presidential campaign in late 2022, so these narratives received wide public

attention. Moreover, former Czech president Miloš Zeman was well-known for his pro-Russian political orientation, but it changed completely after full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Zeman condemned invasion and even stated “I was wrong, the madman must be isolated”, pointing at Vladimir Putin [Seznam zprávy 2022].

There are also some other influential individuals with political ambitions who are utilizing pro-Russian narratives. Lubomír Volný, former SPD member and MP, currently the leader of his own extra-parliamentary party *Volný blok*, is very active in promoting pro-Russian propaganda narratives, usually in form very similar to their original “Kremlin-made” version. Jindřich Rajchl is another extra-parliamentary promoter of pro-Russian narratives. He established new political party called Order, Respect, Expertise (*Právo, respect, odbornost*, PRO) in 2022. He became well known as a vocal opponent of governmental measures aimed at containing Covid-19 pandemic. Ladislav Vrabel, another vocal promoter of pro-Russian narratives, have a similar history as Rajchl. He achieved notoriety during Covid-19 pandemic by spreading disinformation related to the disease (its nonexistence, its origin, the vaccination etc.).

In our analysis, we focus on the content of social media profiles of following politicians and activists:

- Tomio Okamura
- Radim Fiala
- Jaroslav Foldyna
- Lubomír Volný
- Andrej Babiš
- Jindřich Rajchl
- Ladislav Vrabel

We cover the social media account/profiles of political actors which can be considered a primary, based on two factors: 1) the most intensive activity (number of posts per day, original content), 2) the highest number of followers. Most of abovementioned individuals use Facebook as their primary social media platform: Okamura [2023], Fiala [2023], Foldyna [2023], Rajchl [2023] and Vrabel [2023]. Babiš and Volný are primarily active and have the biggest following on Twitter [Babiš 2023; Volný 2023].

3.2. Presence of Narratives in Social Media content

In following tables, we sum up the presence of Russian propaganda narratives in social media content of Czech political actors subjected to analysis.

Table 3: The presence of Russian strategic propaganda narratives in social media content of Czech political actors subjected to analysis

Audience	Strategic narrative	Presence of narratives
Russia	Ukraine only received its right to exist as a country from Russia.	Volný
Russia	Russia's main confrontation is with NATO, not Ukraine.	Volný Okamura Vrabel
Ukraine	Russia and Ukraine are brotherly nations.	Fiala Foldyna
Ukraine	Ukraine can only be successful together with Russia.	Vrabel
West	Russia is a global power that is entitled to its sphere of influence, and Ukraine belongs within that sphere.	Volný Okamura
West	Ukraine as part of the West poses an existential threat to Russia.	Volný Fiala
West	The West is using NATO to encircle Russia.	Volný Okamura Vrabel
Global South	Ukraine is part of Russia's legitimate sphere of influence.	Volný Okamura

Table 4: The presence of Russian tactical propaganda narratives in social media content of Czech political actors subjected to analysis

Audience	Tactical Narrative	Presence of narratives
Russia	Russia's war against Ukraine is not a war, but a 'special military operation'.	Volný Vrabel
Russia	Ukrainians who oppose Russian authorities are Nazis (and thus the 'denazification' of Ukraine is the goal of the 'operation').	Volný Vrabel
Russia	Ukraine's military successes are not because of the morale of Ukrainians, but as a result of NATO support.	Volný Fiala Okamura
Russia	Ukraine is committing genocide against ethnic Russians in Donbas and other regions of Ukraine.	Volný Fiala Vrabel
Ukraine	The West will fight Russia 'until the last Ukrainian'.	Volný Vrabel
Ukraine	'Gayrope': The West is degraded, and Ukraine should not join it.	Volný Vrabel Rajchl

West	Ukraine is governed by Nazis; or at the very least Ukraine has a serious Nazism problem.	Volný Fiala Vrabel
West	Western sanctions harm European businesses and families.	Okamura Fiala Foldyna Rajchl Babiš
West	Ukraine is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and can therefore not become an integrated part of the West.	Volný Okamura Foldyna
West	Russia is interested in peace talks, but Ukraine and the West do not want peace.	Volný Okamura Rajchl Babiš
West	The US is using the war in Ukraine as a means to consolidate its position as the global hegemon.	Volný Okamura Fiala Rajchl
West	Western weapons sent to Ukraine will eventually find their way into the hands of international terrorists.	Volný Okamura
West	'Nuclear threat': The West should avoid confrontation with Russia because it has nuclear weapons, while Ukraine on the other hand is making a 'dirty bomb'.	Volný
Global South	Ukraine is developing biological weapons in secret US-funded biolaboratories.	Volný

3.3. Purpose of Narratives Utilization

The purpose of the Russian propaganda narratives utilization can be interpreted through its contextualization. Based on intensity and consistency of Russian propaganda narratives, Lubomír Volný can be considered as a politician spreading those narratives mainly for their ultimate goal (promote Russian war effort, justify Russian invasion of Ukraine). He doesn't work with narratives on tactical level to promote his own political goals, or it is not clear what these goals could be. It is clear by the fact that he often doesn't link the social media posts containing the Russian propaganda narratives to domestic (Czech) political issues.

SPD leader Okamura and MPs Fiala and Foldyna have been using more sophisticated approach. They use Russian propaganda narratives to support crucial points of their political platform. They believe that the Czech Republic shouldn't be part of the West (specifically EU and NATO) since they are promoters of "full national sovereignty". SPD use Russian propaganda narratives to support their claims about evil, non-effective West, led by self-centered USA. USA and

NATO are blamed to provoking Russia to invade Ukraine and endangering security of Czech citizen as a result. This is also linked to their anti-establishment and anti-government position. Since Czech government strongly supports Ukraine, SPD is trying to present Ukraine as a country, which is not worth of supporting. SPD has also a long history of anti-immigration policy orientation, which was revived together with significant influx of refugees from Ukraine to the Czech Republic. The tactical utilization of Russian propaganda narratives can be seen in fluctuating level of interest in the topic and strong focus on connecting issues related to Russian invasion of Ukraine to domestic (Czech) political issues.

Jindřich Rajchl and Ladislav Vrabec have very similar tactics as members of SPD. Since Rajchl is a leader of extra-parliamentary party, he is even more focused on anti-establishment narratives compared to SPD members. His major intention is to create a pool of supporters and increase and mobilize his electoral potential and to achieve this, he seems to be potentially more open to work with narratives which are considered to be more controversial and divisive. He also seems to be partially driven into anti-Ukrainian direction by his followers, but will likely try to capitalize on such a policy orientation.

Andrej Babiš is generally well-known for his policy orientation not being based on general values or ideologies. That is why he was willing to include narratives practically challenging the role of NATO into his presidential campaign when he and his team felt that it can mobilize additional electoral. Since he was a leader of parliamentary opposition at the time, he used some Russian narratives to attack strongly supportive policy of government towards Ukraine. This was expressed by his calls for the peace talks “at any cost”, by his criticism of economic sanctions directed at Russia (which “harm ordinary Czech people more than Russia”) and by challenging the commitment of common defense defined by Article 5 of North Atlantic Treaty.

In general, we can identify three main goals of utilization of Russian propaganda narratives by political actors: 1) to weaken Czech support of Ukraine within the conflict; 2) to challenge pro-Western orientation of the Czech Republic, institutionalized by membership in NATO and EU; 3) to undermine the legitimacy of current government or even “traditional authorities” in general (including traditional mass media). It should be noted that these goals are consistent with a long-term goals of Russian propaganda proxies spreading disinformation in the Czech Republic [Čeští Elfové 2022]. The first goal can be interpreted as mostly tactical one – it stems from the actual situation. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is seen as an opportunity which can be used to strengthen own political position. Second and third goal are long-term and strategic ones, although it is questionable how far elected politicians would go in fulfilling these goals.

The rest of this section interprets some of the most important themes related to Ukrainian crisis present within the analyzed content of social media.

War as a next step after Covid-19

In February and March 2022, Vrabel [2023] and Volný [2023] shared extensively the posts suggesting that Russian invasion of Ukraine is in fact orchestrated effort to distract the societies of Western countries and will be used to further strip societies of their freedom (as was allegedly the case with Covid-19 pandemic). This created a necessary “thematic bridge” and allow Vrabel and Volný to attract the attention of followers who followed them because of their attitudes to Covid-19 pandemic.

Panslavism and nationalism

Since April 2022, the narratives portraying the West as evil, corrupted, self-centered and based on inferior set of values are utilized to contrast the West with brotherly Pan Slavic world based on common values (although these are never specifically mentioned) led by Russia [Foldyna 2023; Fiala 2023; Okamura 2023; Volný 2023]. The Russian actions are defended as the only response available to face the Western threat. Czech society is considered to be in similar danger and the only way how to defend itself is to immediately leave the NATO, EU and cooperate with Russia. These posts often use examples of LGBTQ+ rights and green transition of economy as examples of “Western madness devastating the future of Czech society”. Significantly strong presence of posts related to Pan Slavism was reported at the end of April and beginning of May 2022 and was connected to the celebrations of the end of World War II, with adoration of Soviet Union’s bravery and sacrifice.

The Czech Republic is dragged into the war

Since April 2022, the consistent criticism of Czech government for its military support of Ukraine is omnipresent. Some criticism is based on argument that government is neglecting issues of Czech society and focuses on the support of Ukraine instead [Okamura 2023, Fiala 2023]. Babiš [2023] used this theme to show his pro-peace orientation during presidential campaign, not completely denying the military support of Ukraine, but contrasting it with the

lack of effort to push for the peace talks. Another critical interpretation of military support of Ukraine links directly supplying the weapons to prolonging the war [Rajchl 2023, Vrabel 2023] and suggest that the best way how to stop the war is to stop the supplies of weapons to Ukraine (not commenting on the outcome of that solution).

Ukrainian refugees are ungrateful people

Since the very beginning of refugee crisis in spring 2022, the common theme has been that refugees are not grateful for the help they are receiving from Czech people. Fabricated stories of wasting the donated food and destroying the accomodation provided by Czech citizens were frequently shared [Vrabel 2023; Volný 2023, Okamura 2023]. After the program of financial support for Ukrainian refugees was launched in the Czech Republic, stories about Ukrainians driving expensive cars and misusing the governmental support became dominant [Volný 2023; Vrabel 2023]. Ukrainian refugees were labeled as economic immigrants [Okamura 2023; Fiala 2023]. After the inflation spike during the summer of 2022, the focus changed to contrasting the direct support for Ukrainian refugees with alleged lack of support for struggling segments of Czech society (seniors, young families and single mothers) [Okamura 2023; Fiala 2023; Foldyna 2023; Rajchl 2023; Babiš 2023].

Nazism, AZOV Battalion, Bandera

From the beginning of the invasion, high number of posts focused on “Nazi issue” in Ukraine. References to Nazis in Ukrainian army (not only in AZOV Battalion) were widely shared, including a lot of real or altered photographs [Volný 2023, Vrabel 2023]. Claims that the destiny of Russian people is to fight Nazism combined with historical remarks related to World War II (“Czechoslovaks were saved from Nazism by Soviet brothers”) were commonly posted in the period of celebration of the end of World War II [Foldyna 2023; Volný 2023]. Labelling of Ukrainian soldiers and politicians as Banderites is consistently present in social media content, given the notoriety of Stepan Bandera in the Czech Republic, since he was commonly presented as an arch-enemy of communists by Czechoslovak communist propaganda (even in a pop culture of the time).

4. US Politics and Russian Narratives about Ukraine

4.1. Russian Leaning Actors in American Politics

The ensuing analysis considers a number of actors and how their messaging aligns with Kremlin narratives. Before identifying the actors in question, some clarification is in order. The discussion in this section is based on statements made by these actors and then we elaborate on why these messages promote Russian rhetoric. With this in mind, it is worth noting that we do not consider all statements uttered by these figures as necessarily pro-Russian rhetoric. There are times when their positions do track with typical GOP positions on matters like (excessive) government spending. However, for years the GOP viewed Russia with great skepticism and scrutiny and for this to change in short order—such as it did between Romney and Trump’s candidacies—warrants additional study. This is especially true when messaging strategies change. Republican talking points in opposition to interventions would ordinarily base their claims on fiscal conservatism, opposing campaigns or projects deemed excessively costly. This is even the case with some of the actors examined in this study if one looks at their stance on Russia and Putin several years ago (this is less the case with those far-right individuals newer to the national stage, such as Marjorie Taylor Green, Matt Gaetz, etc).

The present study examines the rhetoric of a small segment of far-right officials. Naturally, with an approach like this, there is an inherent potential for selection bias and we do not take this lightly. In future work an alternative specification that captures, codes, and systematically analyzes all political figures’ rhetoric (or even just all GOP members’ rhetoric) may have some methodological leverage over the current approach. We contend that such an approach is not necessary for our current study. Given that we are interested in the promotion of pro-Russian messages, an approach that analyzes the actual statements and the messengers is necessary and more useful than methodological techniques that systematically produce counts of certain key words or phrases. Though useful, such an approach is not the most effective way to understand how various far-right individuals advance the Kremlin’s agenda surreptitiously. Thus, paying close attention to the individuals and what the talking points made is vitally important for studying disinformation propagation.

With this in mind, the core figures reviewed in this section include both politicians and far right journalists. We focus on programs run by former Trump adviser, Steve Bannon, and Fox News host Tucker Carlson. These individuals and their programs not only spend considerable time

raising putative questions about America’s support of Ukraine and Americans’ consternation over Putin, they are also promoted within Russia. The main actors considered are:

- Lauren Boebert
- Donald Trump
- Tulsi Gabbard (formerly of the Democratic Party)
- Matt Gaetz
- Paul Gosar
- Marjorie Taylor Green
- Thomas Massie
- Matt Rosendale
- Steve Bannon
- Tucker Carlson
- Dinesh D’Souza
- Mike Flynn
- Nick Fuentes
- Charlie Kirk
- Peter Navarro
- Roger Stone

4.2. Presence of Narratives in Social Media content

In following tables, we sum up the presence of Russian propaganda narratives in social media content of American political actors subjected to analysis.

Table 5 The presence of Russian strategic propaganda narratives in social media content of American political actors subjected to analysis

Audience	Strategic narrative	Presence of narratives
Russia	Ukraine only received its right to exist as a country from Russia.	Carlson Navarro
Ukraine	Russia and Ukraine are brotherly nations.	Bannon Peters
West	Russia is a global power that is entitled to its sphere of influence, and Ukraine belongs within that sphere.	Carlson Flynn Fuentes Gabbard D’Souza

		Trump
West	Ukraine as part of the West poses an existential threat to Russia.	Fuentes
West	The West is using NATO to encircle Russia.	Flynn Gabbard Massie
Global South	Ukraine is part of Russia's legitimate sphere of influence.	Kirk Navarro

Table 6: The presence of Russian tactical propaganda narratives in social media content of American political actors subjected to analysis

Audience	Tactical Narrative	Presence of narratives
Russia	Russia's war against Ukraine is not a war, but a 'special military operation'.	Boebert Carlson Gabbard
Russia	Ukrainians who oppose Russian authorities are Nazis (and thus the 'denazification' of Ukraine is the goal of the 'operation').	Green
Ukraine	The West will fight Russia 'until the last Ukrainian'.	Gabbard
Ukraine	'Gayrope': The West is degraded, and Ukraine should not join it.	Bannon Gosar Jones
West	Ukraine is governed by Nazis; or at the very least Ukraine has a serious Nazism problem.	Green
West	Western sanctions harm European businesses and families.	Gabbard Trump
West	Ukraine is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and can therefore not become an integrated part of the West.	Gaetz Green Gosar Jordan Rosendale
West	Russia is interested in peace talks, but Ukraine and the West do not want peace.	Gosar Perry Trump
West	'Nuclear threat': The West should avoid confrontation with Russia because it has nuclear weapons, while Ukraine on the other hand is making a 'dirty bomb'.	Bannon Carlson Trump
Global South	Ukraine is developing biological weapons in secret US-funded biolaboratories.	Kirk Massie Stone

4.3. Purpose of Narratives Utilization

In 2012, GOP Presidential nominee Mitt Romney stated that Russia is America's "number 1 geopolitical foe." Four years later, when Donald Trump ran for president he held a dramatically different view of Russia. In fact, it is well-known by now that he and his team were responsible for revising the GOP's national policy platform to remove explicit support calling for the delivery of lethal defensive weapons to "appropriate assistance." This move was a chilling signal of what was to come with both Trump and some of his far-right contemporaries. It was a notable departure from Romney's 2012 statement and one that was even out of step with much of the 2016 Republican leadership. In fact, even today, there is much bipartisan support, even among national politicians, to help Ukraine fend off the Russian invasion. That bipartisan support, however, is not universal.

In the early days of the invasion, most US politicians either indicated their solidarity to President Zelensky and Ukrainians or remained quiet about their stance. Over the course of first year of the war, things began to change. Some of the remarks made in the latter part of 2022 and into 2023 are notable for their dramatic departure from earlier supportive stances. The comments mostly conform with Shekhovtsov's (2023) typology of tactical narratives as the comments from those on the American far-right challenge America's support of Ukraine on the grounds that Zelensky and/or Ukraine is (allegedly) "corrupt," a "Nazi (state)," and that this fight is not America's to wage as it is a struggle between two nations who are the same people. Furthermore, other statements regularly cast aspersions on U.S. involvement in the conflict because it is unnecessary and expensive (particularly in the face of rising inflation).

These narratives or counter-narratives are notable for multiple reasons. First, they echo Russian disinformation strategies meant to sow division, undermine Western support, and discourage Ukrainians in their existential fight. Those making these claims, while perhaps not directly linked to, or orchestrated by the Kremlin, are most certainly carrying water for the regime. Second, these statements have been picked up by Russian news sources and shared among Russian audiences. This shows that these remarks made by American politicians and purported journalists are being used to galvanize support for the "special military operation" among Russians themselves. Indeed, sharing such sentiments from Russia's arch-foe is likely to be an effective way to buttress Russian support for this grueling, devastating, and catastrophic war. The rest of this section breaks down some of the common themes present in the messaging among various right-wing American politicians.

America (or Russia?) First

One of the first, and most expected, anti-Ukraine talking points concerns claims that the American Government needs to take care of Americans first. While this is an easily defensible, albeit faux patriotic, line, the basis for this statement concerns contentions that American should withdraw their support and focus on our domestic problems. Thus, when politicians say that President Biden should focus more on our border problem than Ukraine's, it directly supports this tactic [Gaetz 2022]. Similarly, an oft-repeated claim is that Congress should be a "blank check" for Ukraine at a time when Americans are struggling with inflation—which is justifiably true. Green (in 2022), Bannon (2022), and Gosar (2022) are all individuals who have made such claims [Stone 2022]. Furthermore, Gosar (2022) has gone on to state that this fight is not our fight and that the US has no business being in Ukraine.

Vilifying Ukraine, Rehabilitating Russia

Stone [2022] noted that inflammatory far-right personality Nick Fuentes is one of whom labels Ukrainians Neo-Nazis. Gosar states that Ukraine is not our friend. Furthermore, Gosar is on record as criticizing Ukraine's "authoritarian government" and for being home to "Nazi regimens" [TASS 2023]. In a 2022 Fox News segment, Carlson went as far as saying that America was "supporting war-mongers" through its aid to Ukraine, which he criticized for, among other reasons, supporting a country that has "never been a democracy" [Mackey 2022]. Describing Ukraine as a Nazi, authoritarian state is consistent with Kremlin messaging on the subject and seeks to de-humanize Ukraine and Ukrainians to further justify the ongoing war.

Humanizing Putin...Tucker says he never called him racist; Gosar repeatedly stated that Putin and Russia are not our enemy. Bannon has lauded the former KGB chief for not being "woke" [Gabbett 2022].

Russian Promotion of America's Far-Right Personalities

Pengelly [2022] and Stone [2022] are some of the many to report that Russian sources have steadily increased the promotion of Tucker Carlson and others and their coverage of the War in Ukraine. These have appeared on Russia 1 (*Rossiya-1*) and RT [Gabbett 2022].

An Unpopular Peace?

Ordinarily, many involved with a conflict would welcome peace. Calls for peace, or flirtations with peace talks, by Russia and Ukraine have varied at different points in the war. Various outside actors have made calls for peace and, in most cases, these calls have been offered in good faith. Recently, though, Rep. Gosar has been among those calling for peace and his intentions are less clear. Indeed, as mentioned throughout this section, Gosar has consistently and repeatedly been an outspoken critic of supporting President Zelensky and Ukraine while concomitantly seeking to humanize Putin. Thus, the calls by the Arizona Representative Gosar [“Congressman Paul Gosar” 2023] to host peace talks in his home state of Arizona appear to be motivated by subterfuge rather than halting further humanitarian disaster.

5. Conclusions

We can conclude that number of Russian propaganda narratives presented in social media content of political actors in both cases is high (see Tables 3–6). Taken from comparative perspective, the overall number of narratives utilized by political actors is higher in the Czech case. It can be explained by utilization of certain narratives to challenge the incorporation of the Czech Republic to the West, while anything similar naturally cannot be found in American case.

The actors involved in utilization of Russian propaganda narratives belong mainly to the political far-right in both cases. Certain narratives were utilized also by populist political actors. Nationalism and anti-establishment attitudes can be considered as the most significant common denominators, although the specific political orientations of individual political actors differ considerably. It shows an extensive potential which Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine have in terms of their utilization for different goals promoted by different actors.

We can confirm the assumption that Russian propaganda narratives were most frequently utilized to enhance and support the domestic agenda of political actors. Excessive public spending, issues caused by inflation spike and government lack of focus on the issues of ordinary citizens are the most common ones. In both cases, the utilization of Russian propaganda narratives has divisive and polarizing effect on society and thus represents the significant issue for affected societies.

Based on results of our analysis, we can challenge the division of Russian propaganda narratives based on audience. Although the presence of narratives targeting the West prevails in both cases, the strong presence of narratives targeting different audiences can be seen as well.

Interestingly, there is no significant difference between utilization of tactical and strategic narratives, since both types are usually carefully linked to relevant domestic political issues. We didn't discover any significant simultaneous utilization of strategic narratives and tactical narratives related to them. It is not surprising that tactical narratives are more frequently represented in analyzed social media content, since they more effectively affect emotions of audience.

As was noted earlier, this paper represents the first and mainly explorative step of our research. Our future research is going to add a quantitative dimension into the presence of narratives and

it should lead to our ultimate goal – to outline the patterns of utilization of Russian propaganda narratives outside the borders of the Russian Federation.

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