Russian Propaganda and Subjectivity Positions Following the 2022 Escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the current Russian propaganda and the subjectivities adopted by Russian citizens in response. The aim is to address two main questions: (a) Why and how does Russian propaganda appear to be particularly effective in indoctrinating Russian citizens living in Russia? (b) What are the impacts of Russian propaganda on the subjectivity of Russians living in Russia and how these impacts are manifested? The theoretical approach that informs the development of the dissertation is critical discursive psychology (CDP), applied in combination with encoding and decoding positions. Interpretative repertoires, intertextuality and assumptions, post-truth and fake news, and lived ideology are the key concepts that further inform the theoretical framework. I develop the steps of analysis, informed by a variety of literary sources and in accordance with the needs of this dissertation. I provide a relevant theory-driven historiography and analyse Putin's speeches through the CDP tools of analysis. The subject positions are theorized according to the encoding and decoding positions with further, more nuanced, subcategorization. The goal of this dissertation is to examine how the different subjectivities are produced and enacted in response to the state propaganda. I aim to contribute further to the literature discussing the influence of propaganda by providing a more nuanced understanding of the subjectivities.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian War, propaganda, subjectivity, critical discursive psychology (CDP), encoding/decoding

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Introduction

This project emerged in reaction to the current geopolitical event – Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Being born in Ukraine, and having lived there for a number of years, I believe that my positionality needs to be discussed before proceeding further. I come from the southern part of Ukraine, from a small town in the Odesa region, where the most commonly spoken language in day-to-day activities used to be Russian (I am told that, following the Russian invasion, this is no longer the case) or a local mix of Russian and Ukrainian. Personally, Russian is my mother tongue – this is the language I still use in communication with family members, although I am a fluent speaker of Ukrainian as well. To a speaker of Russian language, living in a part of Ukraine that mostly speaks Russian (in cities and towns, that is), the Russian claims of Russian-speakers being oppressed in Ukraine did not just come as a surprise, it simply sounded absurd. Yet even more absurd seemed to be the claims that Russians and Ukrainians are essentially the same people. When one learns one's history, one may develop difficulties with the narratives presented by Russia. For instance, if Russians and Ukrainians are the same people, then how come there was Holodomor[1]? Not that I blamed contemporary Russia for the hardships endured by Ukrainians at the time, but the narrative of being one and the same people, sharing a common past, simply did not land in light of the history (taught from Ukrainian perspective) and literature I was exposed to. Speaking one language does not make one people.

At the same time, I would like to point out that I do not see all Russians as being at fault for the war – in my mind, there is a very clear distinction between the Russian state and the Russian people, who do not have much of a say in what their leadership is doing. It is

[1] A genocide of 1932-1933 inflicted upon Ukraine by the Soviet regime, which, through starvation, took the lives of millions of Ukrainians (Andriewsky, 2015; Bezo & Maggi, 2015).

understandable when those living in Ukraine now see all Russians as bad or even as evil, as 'orcs coming from Mordor' (Lastovyria, 2024). The fact of their lives is that, if they do encounter a Russian coming from Russia these days, it carries a deadly threat, making seeing Russians as bad essential for survival. However, I am physically removed from the war. As much as I would like it to end as soon as possible, in the meantime I see my job, as of someone who is safe on the outside, to keep a more balanced perspective. It is easy to criticize and blame all Russians. And it is not impossible that, had Russian citizens been more proactively involved in their politics, we would not be in this situation today. Yet here we are and, therefore, have to deal with what is in front of us – a repressive authoritarian regime. From where I am standing, I can see that Ukrainians, by far outweighing any other group, are nonetheless not the only victims of this regime. There are other foreign states that have to fend of Russian influence (e.g., Moldova and Georgia) and there are Russian citizens themselves, especially those who disagree with the actions of their government. Thus, to sum up my position, I am of a Ukrainian descent, but a Russian speaker, who does not identify as Russian by any means. At the same time, being Ukrainian does not mean that I am categorically viewing all Russians as bad – I see many to have fallen prey to the authoritarian nature of the regime they have to live under.

Brief Overview of the War and Topics of Concern for this Dissertation

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, attacking from multiple directions, including from another neighbouring country – Belarus. This invasion marked a significant escalation in the Russo-Ukrainian War that began with the Russian annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements in the Eastern region of Ukraine since 2014. The war was initiated by Russia as a result of the revolution in Ukraine. Yanukovych, then president of Ukraine, did not sign the associate agreement with European

Union in November 2013. Failure to sign the agreement was recognized as emanating from the pressure exerted by Putin (Ostrovsky, 2015; Snyder, 2018) and was perceived by Russians as an improvement in Russia's status as a global power (Forsberg, 2014; Kolesnikov, 2015). Ukrainian people, on the other hand, perceived Russian influence as interference with Ukrainian self-governance and turned to the streets in protests, escalating to a full revolution by February 2014. Yanukovych had fled the country (to Russia). In the meantime, Putin's narrative on the situation in Ukraine, widely circulated by Russian state media, portrayed the revolution in Ukraine as staged by the United States, aiming to weaken the Russian influence (Ostrovsky, 2015). The political instability was used to promote the idea that neo-Nazis in Ukraine were attacking those speaking Russian and that Russia had no choice but to defend them, starting with Crimea (Carroll, 2017). While the annexation of Crimea with the "Little Green Men", as Russian soldiers in anonymized uniforms were referred to (Carroll, 2017), went relatively smoothly, the Eastern region – Donbas – entered into an armed conflict. The separatist movement was receiving money, weapons and media support from Russia (Snyder, 2018). Whenever the separatists gained control, the local news sources (such as newspapers) were quickly turned into another source of Russian propaganda (Roozenbeek, 2024). However, by summer 2015 the active fighting in the region was scaling down significantly, to the point where the conflict was considered to be frozen, although occasional fire still continued (Ostrovksy, 2015).

Although the Russian escalation of war in Ukraine in 2022 has many implications, of specific concern for this dissertation is analysis of discourses that emerged as a result of and in response to Russian propaganda and its apparent effectiveness in forming and shifting public attitudes within Russia towards the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. First, it is important to expand contemporary knowledge on the functioning of propaganda within the current authoritarian

context. Although there is prominent research in the field, there are many indications that the nature of propaganda has shifted significantly due to contemporary media influences and the increasing prominence of information warfare (Helmus et al., 2018; Pomerantsev, 2019; Snyder, 2018). Second, the analysis of discourses and their influences on subjectivity will contribute to the understanding of emergent subjectivities in adverse circumstances, such as limited access to independent and oppositional media sources.

One of the main areas of interest for this project is the analysis of the ways in which Russian citizens engage with the propaganda presented by the Russian state. I am interested both in the context that enabled Russian propaganda and in the responses of individuals to this propaganda, especially in terms of the subjectivities enacted. Although the Russian media emphasize the unity of Russian people on the situation in Ukraine (Grobman, 2022; Lazareva, 2022), this apparent unity needs to be understood in the context of Russian propaganda as well as the various actions taken to undermine alternative interpretations and voices, such as closing down the media sources that contradict the state information (Meduza, 2022). In this regard, the statistics generated both by the Russian state agencies and by independent pollsters (e.g., Levada Centre) are important for understanding the overall level of support the Russian government assumes it has. Thus, I discuss the importance of generating the perception of widespread support as well (e.g., Buckley et al., 2022).

Propaganda and media influences have been discussed extensively and covered by a variety of academic disciplines, such as anthropology, media studies, psychology, and sociology (Helmus et al., 2018; Kamalipour & Snow, 2004; Sanovich, 2018). Discussion and analysis of subjectivities, however, remains limited. Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to study the current Russian subjectivities in terms of percentages and prevalence, in line with Weber's ideal

types (Swedberg, 2018), it is possible to map out the forms of subjectivities Russian citizens develop in response to the propaganda. This is the task of this dissertation: Investigate how the Russian state, through the use of propaganda, managed to elicit conformity from its citizens and how the citizens adjust to this new reality.

Therefore, the two main questions of this dissertation are: (a) Why and how does Russian propaganda appear to be particularly effective in indoctrinating Russian citizens living in Russia? In order to address this question, I address a set of relevant sub-questions, such as: What are the historical underpinnings at play? What are the cultural narratives? How do social relations between Russians help to co-construct the reality? What is the role of terminology in this propaganda (e.g., special military operation, Nazi, fascist)? What is the role of media, both traditional and social? What form has patriotism taken in Russia and what is its role? (b) What are the impacts of Russian propaganda on the subjectivity of Russians living in Russia and how are these impacts are manifested?

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, I begin with a general discussion of propaganda, from a brief tracing of the historical roots of the concept to contemporary uses, specifying which definition of the propaganda is used for the purposes of this dissertation. Further, I delve into some of the typologies of the propaganda, discussing their applicability to the current work. I highlight the importance of mythmaking to the ability of propaganda to be influential. From the general overview, I continue by discussing the general interrelationship between propaganda and subjectivity, especially from the perspective of constructing an enemy. In the latter part of the chapter, the Russian propaganda aimed at those living in Russia is discussed. I provide a brief

historical context as well as outline the recent institutional changes implemented in Russia to further support the propaganda messaging.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the discussion of targeted historiography, aiming to provide an outline of some of the main historical, cultural, social, and political influences that are utilized by the propaganda machine in Russia today. I start by an overview of the historical relationship between Russia and the West and a discussion of how history can be employed by the state. Next, I focus on the most significant (from the perspective of the current regime) figure and time period – the rule of Stalin in the Soviet Union – and the way his legacy is presented in Russia today. I outline the portrayal of other Soviet leaders, who receive much less attention, as well. Finally, the 1990's and early 2000's and their depiction are discussed. This historical overview leads to the outline of some of the contemporary topics, such as the presence of oligarchy and the role of media. Finally, I address the question of reliance on philosophical discourses (namely, that advanced by Ilyin) in Putin's rhetoric.

The next chapter – Chapter 3 – is dedicated to a thorough discussion of the theoretical framework adopted for the analysis of Putin's (2022a; 2022b) speeches. Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) approach is chosen for this work as it allows for the critical analysis of the context while focusing on the impacts for subjectivities. I provide an outline of the specific tools of analysis and concepts that inform the approach, including interpretative repertoires, subject positions, encoding/decoding, intertextuality, assumptions, post-truth, and fake news. The methodology employed is outlined in detail before proceeding to the discussion of the main findings, which focus on the analysis of the language use by the propaganda machine generally and Putin specifically as well as the core interpretative repertoires that have been identified in the speeches, roughly categorized as 'no such country as Ukraine', 'foreign interference' and

'Ukraine as a threat'. The chapter is concluded with a discussion of the function of interpretative repertoires.

Chapter 4 is focused on analyzing the mechanisms employed by the propaganda and on theorizing subjectivity positions that emerge as a result. I begin by discussing the theoretical models and key concepts that informed the analysis of propaganda, including the Dual-Process Motivational (DPM) model, conformity and lived ideology. Further, I discuss the specifics of Russian propaganda today and the main techniques that are employed in attempts to shape the narrative. Next, I look at the subjectivity positions espoused by those living in Russia in response to the propaganda messaging. I extend Hall's (1980) theorization by proposing that a more nuanced understanding of the reactions to state messaging is needed as simple categorization into dominant, negotiated and oppositional subjectivity does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of the subjectivity forms adopted in Russia – there are substantial and meaningful differences within this categorization that have specific implications, as discussed in this chapter.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I reflect on the findings of this dissertation from a number of perspectives, starting with a discussion of the benefits of focusing on theorizing subjectivities influenced by the propaganda. I also further elaborate on the framework developed in the course of my work and its potential adoptability to other contexts, including other authoritarian regimes as well as the democratic and totalitarian ones. One of the main implications of this dissertation, namely, the possibility of developing counter-propaganda narratives informed by my analysis, is also addressed. Another reflection that is considered in this chapter is the broader role of critical psychology and the psychological humanities more generally within the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war and the propaganda being circulated in Russia. The limitations of my work are addressed in this chapter as well.

Chapter 1: Propaganda Overview and Contextualization

Propaganda, an influential communication tool employed by governments, organizations, and various interest groups, has played a significant role throughout history in shaping public opinion, reinforcing ideologies, and mobilizing populations (Chandler & Munday, 2020; Fellows, 1959). In this chapter, I provide an overview and contextualization of different aspects of propaganda as they relate to the key questions explored in this dissertation: (a) Why and how does Russian propaganda appear to be particularly effective in indoctrinating Russian citizens living in Russia? and (b) What are the impacts of Russian propaganda on the subjectivity of Russians living in Russia and how are these impacts manifested?

Thus, here I provide the definition of propaganda as it is used in this work as well as outline some key propaganda types. Identifying distinct propaganda types and the different ways in which they operate in a society allows gaining further insights into the intricacies of information manipulation and its effects on public opinion. Next, I also look into the relationship of propaganda to exploitation and creation of myths. Propaganda operates in a symbiotic relationship with myths by leveraging pre-existing mythologies to reinforce desired ideas and to foster social divisions (Karim, 2001). By weaving narratives into the fabric of existing myths, propaganda can create emotional connections and resonate with deeply-held values to shape public opinion effectively. Mythmaking is implicated in the integral element of propaganda – construction of the enemy (Vuorinen, 2012). The enemy is an essential component in fueling nationalist sentiment, mobilizing populations, and promoting a sense of unity and identity.

Further, I turn specifically to Russian propaganda targeting its own citizens residing within the country. To provide the necessary context for analyses described in the following chapters, a brief outline of Russia's propaganda messaging and the corresponding changes in

opinion polls are presented. I also discuss key institutional changes that occurred following the start of the active phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Next, I introduce the theoretical framework that is used to explore the messages sent by Russian propaganda and their impact on individual subjectivity. This framework is based on Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) and integrates key concepts such as encoding/decoding, intertextuality and assumptions, post-truth, fake news, and lived ideology. By adopting this critical lens, I aim to investigate the underlying discursive strategies employed by Russian propaganda, identify the assumptions and ideologies embedded within the messages, and explore the resulting implications on individuals' subjective experiences and belief systems.

Propaganda

Definition

The term propaganda has a rather long history, with multiple changes in its meaning, from propagation as a biological concept referring to reproduction, used in this way until the sixteenth century, at which point it started being used as a term referring to the spread of religious – Catholic – doctrines (Fellows, 1959). For the most part of its history, invoking the term 'propaganda' carried a neutral (biological) or positive (spread of religious doctrines) action for the speaker. However, with First World War begins a new chapter in the history of propaganda as a concept – one we are familiar with today (Marquis, 1978). The increasingly negative connotation of propaganda within democratic states can be traced to the 1920s and 1930s, when the propaganda used in the war was reflected upon (Fellows, 1959). Moreover, the fascination with and increasing reliance on propaganda both by fascist (e.g., Germany) and communist (e.g., Soviet Union) states has also contributed to the negative perception in democratic states (Moloney, 2006). This shift can be seen within American education system, for

example, where positive regard of fascism by the educators (for "collectivist ambitions and spirit of experimentation") was displaced by 1935 with the need to educate students on recognizing and combatting totalitarian propaganda indoctrination (Fallace, 2107).

The way the term is used currently also varies, although it mostly contains similar connotations. For the purposes of this work, the following definition of propaganda is adopted:

> Persuasive mass communication that filters and frames the issues of the day in a way that strongly favours particular interests; usually those of a government or corporation. Also, the intentional manipulation of public opinion through lies, half-truths, and the selective re-telling of history. (Chandler & Munday, 2020)

Essentially, propaganda is the "smokescreen". However, the context in which propaganda emerges and is spread is important for understanding how the messages sent are being received. Specifically, Ellul (1965) argues that the most crucial aspect for propaganda to be effective is its totality, meaning that the propagandists must employ all of the available means, the propaganda must be pervasive and inevitable, and the propaganda messages must exclude messages that contradict it. Thus, even though none of the societies are devoid of propaganda, its effectiveness in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes tends to be greater as these regimes have more opportunities to monopolize the propaganda machine. Further, to be successful, propaganda must also be current and relevant, which means that it must be able to create threats when needed, so that it can provide solutions (Shakrai, 2015). For example, the leader will always claim to be for peace, ensuring that there can be no accusations of warmongering. At the same time, when the leader does start the war, "he can always say that the others forced it on him, that events proved stronger than his intentions" (Ellul, 1965, p. 57). Concurrently, the propagandists accuse the enemy of provocations, of doing exactly what the intentions of the state are. Here, it is important

to shift away from the facts and into emotional and moral grounds (Mattingly & Yao, 2022). Finally, it is important to note that propaganda does not reveal the true plans and projects as that would open these plans and projects for public discussion as well as allow the enemy to make use of the information.

Propaganda Types and Variations

Propaganda is a form of persuasive communication (Manzoor et al., 2019). While other forms of persuasive communication, such as public relations (PR) and promotional culture, can share in some characteristics to a greater (PR) or lesser (promotional culture) extent, there is a fundamental difference. Propaganda, by definition, constitutes a non-consensual form of persuasive communication, whereby a person is deceived, incentivized, or coerced into certain beliefs or actions (Bakir et al., 2019). Another distinction is that PR campaigns by authoritarian regimes are frequently aimed outward, focusing on international image-building (Marshall, 2011). They can strengthen the image of the country without necessarily having any implications for the day-to-day lives of individuals, unlike the propaganda that is aimed inwardly.

Although propaganda can be found in societies with any type of political systems, there are important differences in the way propaganda functions in democratic states (e.g., Bernays 1928/2005; Stanley, 2015) and the authoritarian ones (Huang, 2018; Shields, 2021). I will be focusing on the latter as the Russian political system is characteristic of an authoritarian state (Shields, 2021). The focus on a non-democratic political system carries some connotations in terms of the theoretical and research work on propaganda that I will rely on in the course of this dissertation. Specifically, while this work is deeply concerned with the psychological implications of propaganda (with the focus on impacts for subjectivities), it does not draw extensively on the traditional social psychological research on persuasion, influence or attitude

change (e.g., Albarracin & Shavitt, 2018; Cialdini, 2007; Forgas et al., 2011; Maio & Haddock, 2007; Paulus, 2015; Pligt & Vliek, 2016; Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001; Vogel & Wanke, 2016). This decision is intentional and stems from the recognition that these works are primarily developed within and for democratic contexts, where persuasive messaging – whether in the form of advertising, political campaigning or public health communication – is situated within a pluralistic discursive environment. In contrast, the Russian regime, being authoritarian in nature, does not rely on persuasion in the same sense. Rather than seeking to shift opinions through rational or emotional appeals, authoritarian propaganda functions more as a regulatory mechanism (frequently substantiated by rapidly changing laws) – it signals what is acceptable and what is forbidden (McCarthy et al., 2023). Furthermore, the practical and ethical challenges of conducting empirical psychological research in repressive settings have historically limited the development of psychologically grounded propaganda studies in these contexts. Thus, I have instead drawn on research and theory that address propaganda as a sociopolitical instrument of power – often developed outside of the purview of psychology – and have integrated it with critical discursive psychological approach to more fully examine how subjectivity is shaped under the conditions of constraint and limited discursive freedom.

Authoritarian regimes have been known to impose "hard" propaganda, such as blatant misinformation and rigorous censorship, as opposed to "soft" propaganda, which does attempt to construe credible messaging, although the line between the two types of propaganda is not always clear-cut (Huang, 2018). Hard propaganda, despite being less persuasive, often signals to the citizens the high level of control the regime exerts, which has been linked to decreased likelihood of protests (Huang, 2018). This type of propaganda, rather than providing compelling reasons for adopting a specific point of view, is aimed at coercing citizens into compliance.

Shields (2021) further argues that hard propaganda is also beneficial to authoritarian regimes as it instills political cynicism, whereby all things political are viewed in a negative light and are mistrusted. Such circumstances create a fertile ground for mass withdrawal from politics due to the general disbelief in a possibility of change through political means. At the same time, the hard propaganda provides clear expectations for the citizens of the opinions that should be supported in order to avoid confrontation with the state. Similarly, the citizens are performing their support when participating in parades or state-organized concerts (Shields, 2021). However, increasingly, authoritarian governments are relying on the combination of hard and soft propaganda (Mattingly & Yao, 2022). The soft propaganda can include TV shows or social media content. What differentiates this type of propaganda is its greater appeal to emotions, often through entertainment, and deliberate attempts to produce believable messages (Mattingly & Yao, 2022).

Another, albeit similar, differentiation of propaganda is proposed by Ellul (1965), who distinguishes between direct or active propaganda and sociological propaganda, which is described as pre- or sub-propaganda as well. Direct propaganda is also frequently referred to as political propaganda (Tal & Gordon, 2016). Political propaganda is aimed at inciting behaviour and tends to be rather crude. To the onlooker, this crudeness is puzzling, as it seems odd that such messaging could produce an effect on anyone. However, in order for political propaganda to work, the ground must be prepared by softer and longer-lasting forces. Here, the sociological propaganda plays the key role. It aims not at changing opinions or attitudes, but at preparing the overall social climate to the possibility by producing "a progressive adaptation to a certain order of things, a certain concept of human relations" (Ellul, 1965, p. 64). Ultimately, the aim of sociological propaganda is to sell the belief in a particular way of life. Once that belief is socially

accepted *en masse*, it acquires the attributes of being right and just, which concurrently means that a different way of life is wrong and bad. This propaganda tends to be non-specific and requires time. Sociological propaganda essentially prepares the ground by repeating the same ideas in different variations over and over, thus making people ready to receive more aggressive messaging produced by political propaganda. Applying an Ellulian perspective to analyze China's propaganda, Zhang and Cameron (2004), for example, illustrate that Chinese propaganda heavily utilized sociological propaganda starting in the late 1990s to cultivate a sense of nationalism. This is evidenced by greater reliance on media and other imagery to produce a general sense or mood rather than direct and forced indoctrination practiced earlier. At the same time, when the opportunity presented itself, this mood allowed for acceptance of nationalist messaging formulated by political propaganda (Yang, 2005; Zhang & Cameron, 2004). A more recent (and radical) example of the way these propaganda types are interrelated can be seen in its use by the Islamic State. The sociological component is the 'virtual caliphate' that promotes the ideas of the 'caliphate brand', which range from offering a sense of belonging to the belief in justified reliance on violence to achieve Islamic State goals (Winter, 2015). Familiarity with and eventual acceptance of these ideas can be eventually transformed into action through political propaganda, which offers a specific way to put these ideas into practice – by joining the Islamic State (Issaev & Shishkina, 2019).

Although the distinction between hard and soft propaganda can be useful, as well as some other propaganda typologies, Ellul's (1965) differentiation between political and sociological propaganda allows for a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between propaganda types and their influences (Marlin, 2013). Specifically, it allows tracing the development of propaganda messaging and its intended influences on the audiences. Consequently, in this

dissertation, Ellul's typology of political and sociological propaganda is adopted. Addressing other propaganda types and variations is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Propaganda and Myths

The analysis of creation and use of myths in contemporary societies remains relevant (Karim, 2001), especially from the standpoint of understanding the symbolic constructions utilized in propaganda. Here, the myth is not referring to something that is not true or that is purely an imaginative story. Rather, myth is "the story a culture tells about itself to perpetuate itself – the sound of a culture's internal dialogue" (O'Shaughnessy, 2004, p. 88). From this perspective, mythmaking is essential to the self-understanding of a given society. This is the force that establishes and transforms the cultural and social norms. One of the central aims of propaganda, thus, is not to provide a point of view or an interpretation of events, but to revive the old myths and to create new ones (O'Shaughnessy, 2004). If successful, the myth aids in individual feeling of exclusivity, while at the same time subscribing to one-sided interpretation of the surroundings, which feeds the myth (Ellul, 1965). The stereotypes on which the propaganda relies heavily further play into the creation of myths. Stereotypes function as a framework through which the self and others are seen. Adopting a certain stereotype can both reconstruct the past and construct the future (Snyder, 1981). Reconstruction of the past in essence means recalling previous instances that can be reinterpreted through the framework provided by the stereotypes. Similarly, stereotypes help to construct a specific image of future instances. As a result, the repeated and engrained stereotypes help to perpetuate the myths chosen by propaganda. Thus, the signs and symbols repeated by the propaganda through the stereotypes and myths are aimed at eliciting responses that are more a reflex rather than thought-out ideas, or as Bernays (1942) referred to it, the "short cut". Consequently, the myths provide a

story, the stereotypes reinforce the story, and the signs and symbols help to elicit the emotions associated with the story without much reflection. For instance, continuously presenting the images of 'glorious past' can elicit and strengthen a sense of inferiority and injustice, creating a destructive force fueled by the need to restore the glory of the nation (O'Shaughnessy, 2004). The emotional reactions also help to establish a sense of community and belonging (Schopflin, 1997).

Propaganda, Subjectivity and the Enemy

The concept of subjectivity refers to the totality of individual life, including one's mental life and physical body, social relations, and the sociohistorical and cultural context, both from the perspective of exerting influence on the individual as well as being created and recreated by individual participation in day-to-day activities (Holzkamp, 2013; Teo, 2023). Subjectivity is a prominent term in psychological theorization (González Rey, 2015; Klempe, 2016; Parker, 2010; Teo, 2017), yet it is not one easily defined. In fact, Lundberg et al. (2023) found that there is little convergence in the way different scholars define subjectivity, with points of intersection mainly being that subjectivity is associated with interiority and that its structure may be characterized as mutable and complex, while the divergence of opinion appears to focus on "the possibility to observe and measure subjectivity, and the degree to which subjectivity depends on the environment or on the individual" (p. 4522). Within the present work, while the interiority of subjectivity is not disputed, I do argue that its mutability and complexity stem in part from the environmental and in part from individual characteristics. It is the external influences on the subjectivity that are of primary importance for my theorization as it is the influence of propaganda, which is an external factor, that is of interest. Therefore, I use the term subjectivity in line with Holzkamp's (1991) conceptualization of it "as the possibility of conscious control

over one's own life conditions" (p. 58). Within this framework, subjectivity can be understood as a position in constant negotiation, being influenced by – but also capable of exerting influence on – the external circumstances. Thus, subjectivity can be seen as shaped by changes in language, shifting cultural norms and the roles one assumes in response to the social contexts one is exposed to. While the external influences are not the only components of subjectivity, they do influence the inner experiences of the self as one's experiences are embedded within the social, cultural and political circumstances.

For propaganda to have the intended influence, it must be pertinent to individuals. Thus, individual subjectivity must be reinterpreted in opposition to the other, where the self is good because it belongs to a certain group, whereas the other, who does not belong to the group, is bad (Vuorinen, 2012). In this way, propaganda creates the space where the 'authentic' self can be expressed only in specifically defined ways. Those who are non-compliant, who think and especially behave differently, are censored either through self-censorship or through socially (pressures from family and friends, workplace, etc.) and legally (pressures from the state) enforced censorship (Finlay, 2007). Further, one of the core methods in targeting individual subjectivity is by evoking ideas of group consciousness. Group consciousness is alluded to through religious, cultural and historical discourses, often for the purposes of advancing political aims (Tsoukalas, 2007). It is not defined in clear-cut terms, but mostly through identifying with the majority. While the propagandists purport to present the views of the majority, they are in fact trying to shape them, instigating specific actions or inactions of the group (Asmolov, 2019). Consequently, only those who share in this group consciousness and identify with the group are expressing themselves authentically. The identification with group consciousness must become superior to the other basis for self-identification, such as through family (Finlay, 2007). The

group is above all and, it is argued, the group requires support for its survival as there is the enemy who is threatening the group.

The enemy is portrayed as an outsider, fostering the "us versus them" dichotomy (Laskin, 2021). The outsider, however, does not have to be physically located in a different country. It is simply someone who does not belong to "us", whichever way "us" is defined. In Hitler's Germany, for instance, this would be those identified as Jewish as opposed to the "true" Aryan race of Germans (Burke, 1939). The role of propaganda is to simultaneously present "us" as strong – even undefeatable – and pure, while also being threatened by the enemy. For these purposes, it is typical to invoke the duty to protect the most vulnerable members of the society – women and children – from the atrocities the enemy will perpetrate against them if "we" do not fight back (e.g., Finlay, 2007; Pavlovska & Hrytsiuk, 2019; Stone, 2012). In this sense, fighting back can be easily implemented against the enemy which did not actually engage in any attacks. Unsurprisingly, these ideas are not easily engrained in the population as many have lived experience of communicating with those designated as the enemy now. These experiences contradict the images portrayed by the propaganda.

Consequently, one of the most important jobs of propagandists can be seen as ensuring that those who do not support the messages disseminated by the propaganda are discredited and silenced. The discrediting occurs by maintaining that those opposing the state propaganda are the "Fifth Column": trying to destabilize the internal cohesion with the state for the benefit of the enemy (Papalia, 2020). The citizens of the state are thus encouraged to dismiss the counterarguments to the state propaganda on the basis that they are being produced by the Fifth Column, who are either on the enemy's payroll or just brainwashed. In any case, anyone who is 'authentically' one of 'us' could never be against what 'we' are saying. Therefore, they must be

agents of the enemy (Finlay, 2007). Next, in order to protect 'us', the state can do its part by silencing the enemy. This means inability for people to express any oppositional ideas – state censorship (Bell, 1996). Further, because they are associating with the enemy, these people are not truly part of 'us.' Therefore, whatever 'they' say must be false by definition.

Propaganda thus, in a sense, provides a worldview, a framework to evaluate the self and others: are you 'us' or 'them'[2]? This framework, then, frequently extends from the issue at hand into other spheres of life. For example, Asmolov (2019) notes that following the annexation of Crimea, there was a notable shift of self-presentation among the Russian users of Tinder, with many including "Crimea is ours" or "Crimea is not ours" in their profiles. As such, one of the consequences of propaganda is not just change in conduct towards or opinion on a given matter, it is a change in subjectivity (Wimberly, 2017). In fact, propagandists are aiming to create the subjects that the state needs at the moment. The thinking of the subjects must be in terms of 'us' vs 'them', which then shapes their behaviours.

Propaganda also frequently aims to influence subjectivity by igniting specific emotional responses. Of course, there is a number of diverse emotional responses propaganda attempts to generate. However, to exemplify, I will focus on one emotional response – *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment* is a term borrowed from Nietzsche, and expanded upon by Scheler, denoting a specific form of resentment or hatred that is more durable (can be even seen as chronic) and without an outlet for the feeling (Meltzer & Musolf, 2002). The history of *ressentiment* in Russia

[2] The creation of in- and out-groups has received considerable attention in social psychology as part of the social behaviour of individuals in groups (e.g., Robbins & Krueger, 2005; Ostrom et al., 1993; Tajfel, 1979). Propaganda, thus, does not create this worldview, but provides it a directionality and emphasis – naming the groups that should be considered 'us' and 'them', while also ensuring strong negative images and associations to be tied to the out-group (Finlay, 2007; Hossain, 2024).

towards the 'West' predates Soviet Union, with the USSR further exploiting and amplifying the messaging aimed at developing the Soviet identity in opposition to the 'West' (Malinova, 2014). Here, the 'us' versus 'them' rhetoric is built upon the idea that, similarly to the Soviet Union previously, Russia is not treated as an equal by the 'West', thereby denying Russia the status it deserves (Forsberg, 2014). Russians are consequently invited to feel anger towards the 'West' for not recognizing them as citizens of a 'Great Country'. Although the post-Soviet *ressentiment* has figured prominently as an identity-building element (Polegkyi, 2016), propaganda attempts to further amplify it.

Internal Russian Propaganda

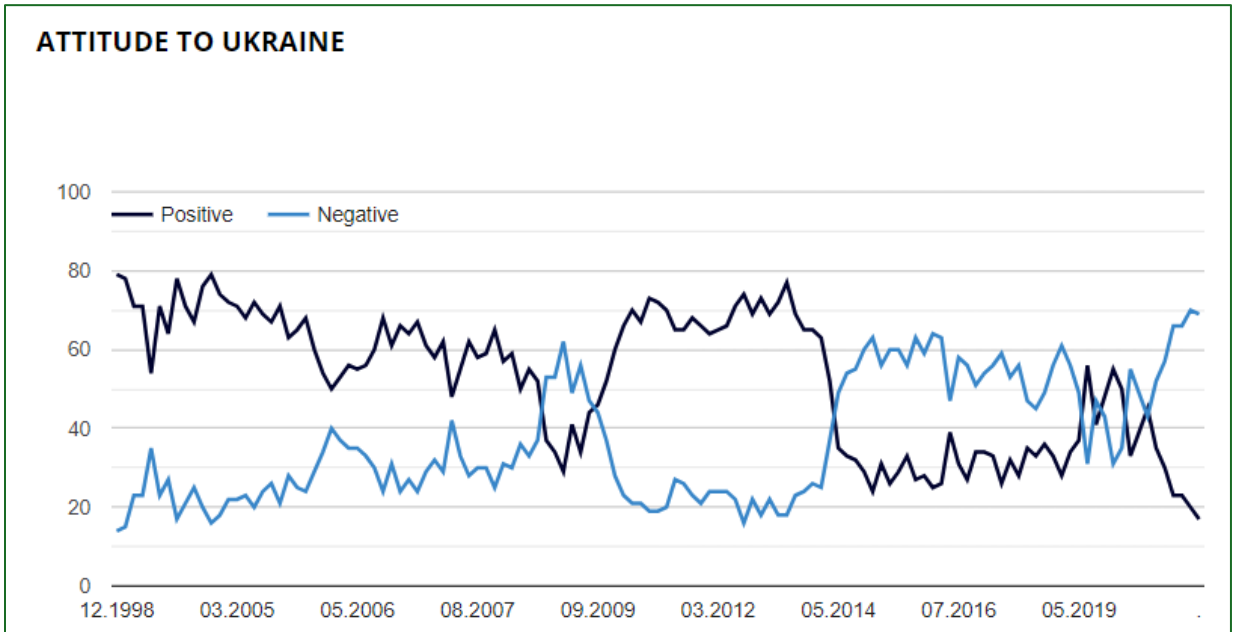
Recent Historical Context

When it comes to Russian propaganda aimed at internal audiences as it relates to Ukraine, there have been multiple shifts. The first period, following the Soviet Union collapse and up until early 2014, can be characterized as largely positive. While the media representation of Ukraine remains positive or neutral for the most part, so do the opinions of Russians living in Russia, as is evident, for instance, from public opinion polls conducted within the country (see Fig. 1). However, a few months prior to Euromaidan in 2013, there is a very sharp and sudden turn in Russian description of Ukraine and Ukrainians, which continues up until the 2022 invasion, and marks the second period (Marchenko et al., 2021). This turn was instigated by Ukraine's political aspirations, namely the intention of signing an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), which was seen by Russia is impinging upon its interests (Pasitselska, 2017; Snyder, 2018). Opinion polls (Fig. 1) indicate that Russians follow the cues provided by the government propaganda, at least in terms of expressing the new expected attitudes. Finally, within a span of a few months before the invasion, there is another shift. Here, the rhetoric about

Ukraine changes from negative to outright hostile – for example, by indicating that such a country does not exist – with corresponding attempt to vilify Ukrainians by using such terminology as “Nazi” (Kuzio, 2023). This shift is further exacerbated by elimination of many independent media outlets that do not follow the Russian propaganda (Pomeranz, 2022). In essence, the Russian government is going to great lengths to eliminate any views that are not regurgitating the official narrative.

Figure 1

Public Opinion Polls Conducted by Levada-Center



	02.2022	03.2022	05.2022	08.2022	11.2022	02.2023
Positive	35	30	23	23	20	17
Negative	52	57	66	66	70	69
Difficult to answer	13	13	11	11	10	14

Source: *https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/attitudes-towards-countries/*

Russian Propaganda and Institutional Changes

From a social perspective, in authoritarian regimes, a few key institutions have to support, follow and model their activities based on propaganda. First, the education system needs to indoctrinate students, especially of younger ages, into the propaganda presented by the state (Ellul, 1965). Russia is attempting to do this through several means, including rewriting the history textbooks to exclude allusions to Kyiv when discussing the Kyivan Rus (Meduza, 2023a), for example, and introducing a new subject for all grades – "Important Conversations" (Разговоры о Главном) – which, among other things, are aimed at explaining the current military and political reality in a patriotic fashion (Akhalaya, 2023). Second, in authoritarian regimes, religious institutions can be co-opted, repressed or both by the state, with Russia falling into the latter category (Schleutker, 2021). However, when the state transitions to actions against the declared external enemy, the religious institutions, especially of the religion that is considered to be dominant in a given society, must support the propaganda messages and indicate to the followers that the propaganda messaging of the state must be followed. Thus, with the start of the war, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow (born 1946), the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, has openly supported Russia's "holy war" in Ukraine (The Economist, 2022). Third, the legal system must adopt to the situation as well by implementing and upholding laws relating to state propaganda messaging. While these practices are not new for Russia (e.g., the 2013 federal law targeting "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships", which is in violation of the international human rights framework (De Kerf, 2017), they do take on a more extreme position with the start of the war (Olimpieva, 2023). At this point, the judicial system is meant to teach a lesson on disobedience to the ruling system. This has resulted in over 5,800 court cases dealing with "discrediting the military" in the first year of the war (McCarthy et al., 2023). All of these

changes are necessary as they legitimate the propaganda produced by the state (religious institutions and the judicial system) as well as ensure that the next generations are indoctrinated through the education system. At the same time, given that individual subjectivity is in part shaped by the context, the institutional changes observed in Russia since the 2022 invasion must have a considerable impact. Therefore, the analyses of propaganda in this dissertation in terms of its impact on subjectivity incorporates not just the materials produced by the propaganda, but also the context within which these materials are distributed.

Horizontal Propaganda in Russia

Horizontal propaganda, that is, propaganda produced and reproduced by ordinary citizens, public figures, educators, and professionals (Vlăduțescu, 2014), in Russia operates as a complement to the state's vertical messaging. It is not necessarily an echo of the official discourse, but a social practice through which historically sedimented beliefs are activated, normalized and circulated within everyday interactions. Russia's long imperial history provides fertile ground for this phenomenon, igniting powerful nationalist feelings that, at their extreme, are exemplified by the Russian Imperial Movement, a white supremacist organization (Kruglova, 2024). It can be argued that centuries of Russian expansionist policies, domination and colonial rule over neighbouring regions, including Ukraine, have cultivated a culturally embedded sense of Russian civilizational exceptionalism (Oskanian, 2021). Thus, when the state uses familiar tropes, such a Russia's 'special path' or its portrayal as a perpetual victim of Western aggression (see Chapter 2) – horizontal propaganda amplifies this through interpersonal channels as, in many cases, horizontal propaganda functions through repetition by trusted community members rather than coercion. For example, the notion of Ukrainian inferiority, central to Russian colonial discourse since the imperial and Soviet periods, re-emerges as self-evident in the context of the

ongoing Russian military aggression: Ukrainians are framed as ‘led astray by the sinister West’ and in need of ‘liberation’ (Oksamytna, 2023). These claims gain traction because they align with long-standing hierarchical understanding of the Russo-Ukrainian relationship. Russian citizens thus become agents in the propagation of a historically situated worldview used strategically by the propaganda.

Further, psychologists in Russia, as part of the professional group, have also participated in this process, sometimes intentionally but often through uncritical alignment with state discourses by, for example, undertaking a ‘neutral’ position (Khitrov, 2024). Moreover, some psychologists contribute to horizontal propaganda by producing ‘expert’ commentary that pathologizes Ukrainian resistance while simultaneously endorsing Russian aggression in Ukraine (Yakushko, n.d.). These psychological accounts often present themselves as objective analyses, which makes them especially powerful: the veneer of scientific authority helps legitimate state narratives and lends emotional and intellectual coherence to prejudicial beliefs circulating among the public. The demonization of Ukrainians – a key component of Russian wartime propaganda – is thus reinforced through a multilayered discursive ecology in which psychologists, media commentators, educators, and ordinary citizens all participate (Krylova-Grek, 2022). Horizontal propaganda naturalizes the very hierarchies and hostilities that state propaganda relies upon, embedding them in the fabric of everyday meaning-making. In this way, the social reproduction of imperial and colonial assumptions becomes essential to sustaining the broader propaganda system. Without such bottom-up circulation, state messages would remain abstract or exclusively externally imposed. With it, they acquire the status of shared common sense.

Conclusion

The study of propaganda and its impact on individual subjectivity is an ongoing endeavor that requires interdisciplinary approaches and critical analysis. This overview of propaganda is crucial for understanding the complexities of information manipulation, ideological control, and the shaping of public opinion, which are explored in the following chapters. The case of contemporary Russian propaganda targeting its own citizens within the country exemplifies the enduring relevance of propaganda in the modern era, especially for understanding its functioning within authoritarian regimes. By critically analyzing the messages disseminated by Russian propaganda, employing the lens of Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP), the discursive strategies, underlying assumptions, and lived ideologies that shape individual subjectivity within the Russian context can be analysed. For instance, by unpacking the discursive strategies employed by Russian propaganda and examining their impact on individuals, the broader implications for society, including the erosion of trust, the polarization of public discourse, and the manipulation of shared narratives, can be studied.

Chapter 2: Historiography

In order to gain a better understanding of the current Russian propaganda and its role in the shaping of the Russian citizens' subjectivities, I use CDP principles and apply analytical tools to a variety of texts. I begin by outlining a brief historiography of the changes in official rhetoric and in public attitudes towards the Soviet Union in general as well as in the different periods within it. A historical lens is particularly important at this stage as Putin (2022a; 2022b) repeatedly relies on historical justifications when discussing the invasion of Ukraine. Thus, the historiography outlined here serves as the general context, with more specific cultural, social, and political aspects building upon this foundation during the analyses of texts. Next, I describe the specific data and tools of analysis used.

To contextualize the contemporary situation in Russia, I focus on roughly the last 100 years of Russia's history, starting with the Soviet Union times because Soviet legacy remains prominent in shaping internal affairs as well as foreign policy (Kramer, 2019; Reese, 2018; Snegovaya & Petrov, 2022). I concentrate on the representation of historical events and figures in Russia by Putin and/or through state-approved channels (e.g., history textbooks allowed in schools) and why this representation carries contemporary relevance (e.g., Ostrovsky, 2015; Snyder, 2018). This historiography begins with a discussion of the relationship between Russia and the West and how Russia's perspective on this relationship shapes its policies and practices (Felkay, 2002; Forsberg, 2014). Next, I discuss the ideology produced and promoted by the government during Stalin's rule (1922-1953) and the continuities into contemporary Russian society (David-Fox, 2015; Kolesnikov, 2015; Suslov, 2018). I concentrate heavily on Stalinism as a lot of effort has been put by Putin's government into reviving the image of Stalin as a positive historical figure, with much more limited attention being paid to other Soviet figures

(Polegkyi, 2016). The period of the 1990's, following the fall of the Soviet Union and until Putin steps into power is also discussed (Kort, 2019; Malinova, 2018), as well as the early 2000's, when there was still much hope for Putin's presidency to improve the economic situation and to advance democratic values, namely freedom and justice (Aalto & Forsberg, 2016; Sakwa, 2014). Finally, I conclude this section by presenting a brief overview of the importance of philosophical thinkers in Putin's discourse, concentrating on the example of Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954) (Langdon & Tismaneanu, 2020; Snyder, 2018).

Russia and the West

Before I proceed, the question of what constitutes "the West" must be considered as it can help contextualize the historiography provided. While there is no agreement of what exactly constitutes the West, the concept nonetheless is not meaningless, especially as it is employed in Russia. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is less about how the West itself would identify member states and their interrelationships and more about what Russian figures, mostly Putin and the propagandists, mean when they use the term. Rather than defining the West explicitly, Russia frequently defines itself and tries to build its national identity in opposition to this somewhat ambiguous West (Bavaj, 2011). The West, thus, is characterized as an oppositional force – the perpetual enemy, while being portrayed as the antagonizing force[3].

When referring to foreign policy, Putin increasingly uses the rhetoric of "security" (Frear & Mazepus, 2021). However, in fact, it is rather an issue of status for Russia vis-à-vis the West, whereby the West should undisputedly acknowledge Russia's position as a great power

[3] For example, at the Valday Discussion Club meeting in October 2023, Putin has proclaimed that "the West always needs an enemy, the fight with whom can explain away many things" and that "the West has provoked the conflict in Ukraine to contain Russia's development" (Maksimova, 2023)

(Forsberg, 2014). Putin's regime accepts the idea of status loss following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was seen as a great power. At the same time, Putin does not accept that any of the actions undertaken by his regime have led to a loss of status. As a result, the lack of perceived acknowledgement drives Russia to aggressively reassert itself (Krickovic & Zhang, 2020). One way Russia tries to do this is by using the military, which leads to international loss of status, while the perception within Russia is that it is increasing. For example, the 2008 war in Georgia, from Russia's perspective, was fast and successful, with the independence recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the ultimate show of Russia's power to the West (Forsberg, 2014). At the same time, the international community perceived this as a rather clear example of Russia's weakness (Averko, 2012). Similarly, the invasion of Ukraine now is also portrayed in Russia as a show of strength to the West[4].

Aside from the questions of status, the West is also featured prominently in the Russian discourse on political affairs in nearby countries, including Ukraine. Some trace the fundamental shift in Putin's policy towards Ukraine (and to the West) to the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004 (e.g., Polegkyi, 2016; Umland, 2012). The prevailing understanding in Ukraine, as well as in other democratic countries, is that this revolution was a showcase of grassroots democracy (Goldstein, 2007; Kuzio, 2005). For Russia, on the other hand, this was seen as a Western operation led by the USA to "manufacture democracy" in Ukraine (Herd, 2005). Umland (2012) describes the change in Putin's regime as radical anti-Westernism and authoritarianism with paratotalitarian features. In practice, at this stage, this meant change in the discourse to more hostile references to the West, as is seen, for example, in the well-known Putin's Munich speech

[4] For instance, in the 2023 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin stated: "I want to repeat this: It is them [the West] who have started the war, and we used strength, and we will use it to stop it." (Kremlin, 2023)

in 2007 (Dannreuther, 2014; Laqueur, 2010). As to paratotalitarian features, they are seen in the transition to the mono-party rule (United Russia), while maintaining the appearance of a multi-party system (Umland, 2012). Further, there is also an attempt to build a personality cult around Putin, which appears to escalate in times of increased tensions, such as in the mid-2000's (Sperling, 2016). These changes were aimed at changing the public perceptions: less pro-Western values (including democracy), more pro-Putin, to the point where there would be no or few objections to him remaining in power. Consequently, these changes, I theorize, have been significant in instilling the attitudes that continue shaping Russian subjectivities today.

Although the changes outlined above were significant, the political and social atmosphere maintained the appearance of relative stability. Between 2011-2013, however, a series of protests occurred, originally ignited by the suspected fraud in the Russian parliamentary election results (Hinsey, 2013; Riabov, 2015). The height of the protests fell on 2012, gathering one of the biggest protests on May 6 at Bolotnaya Square in Moscow. The scale of the protests ignited fears of revolution in the Kremlin (Polegkyi, 2016). The aftermath, therefore, was further tightening authoritarianism. It involved the implementation of a number of laws, such as stricter regulations on the internet and recriminalization of defamation (Hinsey, 2013). The *Law on Foreign Agents* was also implemented and originally applied to NGOs that receive any foreign funding (including from such organizations as UNICEF, for example) and introduced stricter reporting for these organizations (Flikke, 2016). However, the law has been amended to expand its scope and practices, especially following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Further, it is around the time of Bolotnaya protests that the official discourse changes regarding the urban population, particularly the liberally inclining young adults. Rather than seeking to incorporate some of the agenda items that appeal to this population, which was done at the start of Putin's presidency,

they are instead cast as a "fifth column" now (Burrett, 2019). That is, those who agree with Western liberal democratic values are just repeating what Russia's foreign enemies – read the "West" – want them to.

Finally, the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine were once again described as the West trying to sabotage Russia's dominance in the post-Soviet space. The Russian state media were proclaiming that it is the American influence that sends Ukrainians to protests, with the ultimate aim of weakening Russia (Ostrovsky, 2015). In general, such views can be attributed to the Soviet legacy, which makes indoctrinating anti-Western attitudes easy. After all, the tendency to blame the West is a continuation of the Soviet tradition, where the West was accused of anti-Sovietism whenever Soviet Union was criticized or portrayed in anything but a flattering light (Ostrovsky, 2015; Snyder, 2018).

Of History

Polegkyi (2016) argues that history – meaning the dominant version of history, supported by the government, taught in schools, etc. – is merely a tool used by the government to advance certain political goals, including justifications for specific lines of action within domestic and foreign affairs. Here, historical myths (whether based on supported facts or not) become part of the shared national identity, thus partaking in shaping subjectivities. While this position on the role of history may be strong, it is defendable when it comes to contemporary Russia, where history has been, in a sense, weaponized to justify the invasion of Ukraine. For instance, as Maxwell's (2022) analysis indicates, Putin created a historical narrative that relies on primordialism to argue that Ukraine, as a country separate from Russia, simply does not exist. Indeed, these countries have a long, intertwined, and frequently overlapping history, yet this history is full of contentions (Plokhy, 2008; Rywkin, 2014).

While Putin frequently uses historical events to justify his foreign policy, many point to Putin's utter lack of knowledge of Russian history (Maxwell, 2022). However, it is quite likely that the lack of knowledge is not to be blamed. It is rather a calculated political ploy – history as a means to make the striving for a specific end proposed by Putin seem inevitable. For Putin now, exerting influence on neighbouring countries is fundamental for the self-understanding of Russia as a great power (Polegkyi, 2016). To solidify his position, Putin is appealing to the notion of Russia's *Sonderweg* - "special path" (Cherepanova, 2010; Pliskevitch, 2019; Umland, 2012), which is evidenced in an 'alternative' to the West, mixing up Soviet (mainly Stalinist) ideology and orthodoxy to proclaim Russian historical ethnic exclusivity (Polegkyi, 2016). In this search to propose an alternative to the West, Russia attempted to popularize the concept of Eurasianism (not very successfully) and the idea of *Russkyi Mir* ("Russian World"), which had better luck (Meienberger, 2023). The idea of *Russkyi Mir* is used to justify interference and direct invasion of neighbouring countries (e.g., invasion of Georgia in 2008; Ostrovsky, 2015), with a premise that Russia needs to protect Russian citizens living in these countries from being discriminated against as well as generally protecting Russian geopolitical interests (Polegkyi, 2016).

Stalin and Stalinism (1927-1953)

As history is seen as a tool by Putin, he relies on representing specific versions of historical events and figures to justify his decisions (Maxwell, 2022). Therefore, in the historiography presented here, I relay the recent history from the perspective of Putin's regime. Currently, the scope of the promotion of Soviet Union as an ideal past and of Stalin as a revered ruler are difficult to overestimate. For Putin, the fall of the Soviet Union is "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century" (as cited in Malinova, 2017, p. 57). So much so

that the new history textbook – mandatory for students in the final year of high school – now starts with this quote (Zotova, 2023). The Soviet Union, then, of course is seen as being at its best during Stalin's rule with the victory during World War II portrayed as Stalin's achievement (Wood, 2011). This also serves another goal. By presenting the dehumanizing totalitarian regime of Stalin as a positive part of Russian history, Putin's draconian laws that violate human rights are legitimated and normalized.

From the start of his rule, when Putin was still seen as a liberal force in Russia, he already sympathized with Stalin. As Ostrovsky (2015) notes, Putin restored the Soviet national anthem early on. This anthem was composed in 1938, while the Great Terror was in full force. Throughout Putin's rule, efforts were put into changing opinions regarding the Soviet Union and its fall, as well as Stalin and his regime, with notable results. For example, currently, the knowledge of the Great Terror and other repressions conducted during Stalin's rule is diminishing, while the opinions regarding Stalin are becoming more positive, as is reflected in the public opinion polls in Russia. Specifically, in 1992, 29% of respondents either "completely agreed" or "rather agreed" with a statement that Stalin was a great ruler (Zorkaya, 2022). By 2021, the combined agreement in the two categories rose to 56%. Given the lack of discourse on the mass killings of the Soviet people perpetrated under Stalin's orders and the perpetual defense and glorification of Stalin's regime, the result is not surprising. Putin himself variously endorsed Stalin and Stalinism within the domestic sphere. One of the forms this takes is installing numerous monuments to Stalin (Yakovleva, 2018) as well as building a Stalin Centre (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 2023). At the same time, the organizations that aim to preserve the documentation and other archival materials (e.g., International Memorial, Sakharov Centre) to make the discussion of the history of the repressions and the repressed possible have been forced

to shut their operations within Russia (Masih, 2023; Smith, 2022). When it comes to international audiences, Putin is more cautious with his endorsements, calling for a less radical evaluations of Stalin's legacy rather than outright indicating his approval of the regime. For example, as late as in the 2017, in Oliver Stone's documentary *The Putin Interviews*, Putin makes a rather mild, comparatively speaking, call to "not demonize Stalin" (Stone, 2017).

The fall of the Soviet Union meant numerous difficulties and uncertainties in life that prompted many Russians to long for the relative stability of the preceding period (Nelson, 2019). The resultant nostalgia was used by some political elites to create a historical narrative emphasizing the benefits of living in Soviet times (e.g., greater certainty, common goals), while neglecting the downsides. Here, Stalin becomes portrayed as a strong leader capable of bringing order, which in turn allows Soviet Union to achieve greatness (Shearer, 2009). More and more emphasis is placed on the positive associations with Stalin and, by extension, Russia is also capable of achieving greatness – under a strong ruler. In many ways, Russia of today is presented as a successor to Stalinist USSR and its greatest victory – defeating the Nazi forces in World War II (Kolesnikov, 2015). Consequently, some of the Soviet narratives used continue being employed. For instance, Putin's Russia effectively associates itself with the Stalinist strong state that had to sacrifice a lot (of people) for greatness, impinged upon by foreign intruders. The theme of the importance of sacrifice is prominent both during Stalin's rule and under Putin now (Polegkyi, 2016). Similarly, the idea that anything disliked by the state (aka by the ruler) must be the result of foreign interference. No truly patriotic Soviet person could ever oppose the USSR. No truly patriotic Russian can oppose Putin. After all, to paraphrase Vyacheslav Volodin, first deputy head of the presidential administration, there can be no Russia without Putin (Monaghan, 2016).

At the same time, it was important to downplay Stalin's responsibility for policies that led to the deaths of millions of Soviet citizens, including collectivization, mass sentencing and executions during the Great Terror, and the rapid industrialization achieved in part through forced labour. Under Stalin, the GULAG system, enabling the repressions, reached horrific scales. Specifically, it is estimated that between 1930 and 1941 about 20,000,000 people were sentenced to GULAG, with many dying in transit or during the harsh imprisonment and forced labour (Nelson, 2019). Other than the imprisoned themselves, their families who stayed behind often fell prey to blame for being "anti-Soviet". Harassment of these families, including children, was prominent (MacKinnon, 2012). The silence in the official discourses regarding this issue propels numerous speculations about the impacts of repressions on the subjectivity. However, in the absence of attempts to process this part of history, to hold those accountable to justice, and to discuss the implications for individuals, families, communities, and the society at large, these tend to be repressed. This is also one of the explanations as to how it is possible that Stalin's crimes are forgotten, and his rule is seen in a positive light. If crimes are never called as such and if one only ever hears Stalin's rule portrayed in a positive light (Nelson, 2019), one is bound to at least come to the issue with caution.

Historical accounts published in Russia are restricted in the way they portray the past, especially in the history textbooks used in schools. This became even more prominent following the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, with a new textbook for 11-graders (final grade in Russia) becoming available and obligatory for the 2023-2024 school year. The textbook has been variously criticized by Russian foreign agents for its portrayal of the Soviet Union and Stalin in particular (Novaya Gazeta Europe, 2023a). Essentially, the previous messages (Stalin is a great

leader, sacrifice is needed, everything bad comes from foreign influence) have been further emphasized.

Other Soviet Leaders

Although the rule of all of the Soviet historical figures is distinct in most respects, there is one common factor – the attitude of Putin towards them, which dictates the contemporary attitude of Russia. All are seen to have committed acts unfitting of a true Russian leader, and therefore are mostly forgotten, with occasional reminders of the specific reasons for their unfitness. One of Lenin's (1870-1924) main crimes, in the eyes of Putin, for example, is recognizing Ukraine as a separate state that freely joined the Soviet Union (Paić, 2022). It is following this logic that Putin reinterprets the history of Ukraine to portray it as an "artificial state" and a "Western puppet" (Kuzio, 2018). Next heresy was committed by Khruschev (1894-1971), who "gifted" Crimea to Ukraine (Siegelbaum, 2021). Again, this is set up as an illegitimate action performed by a weak leader who did not know better. This rhetoric, among others, was used as an explanation for the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Biersack & O'Lear, 2014).

Brezhnev (1906-1982) does not receive as much attention in Putin's rhetoric. When he is mentioned, it is in the role of someone whose actions have led to the possibility of the Soviet Union collapse (Ria Novosti, 2019). As follows, Gorbachev's (1931-2022) crime is the dissipation of the Soviet Union and the ensuing loss of status experienced by Russia, which is one of the most significant elements for Putin (Forsberg, 2014). In addition, Putin also frequently mentions the "broken promise" of non-expansion of NATO, whereby Gorbachev failed to get the promise in writing (Mirra, 2022). As such, all of these figures tend to be reduced to small episodes of their shortcomings. This ensures that, is speaking of history, the attention is to be

paid to the great historical figures, as imagined by Putin. That is, to Stalin. Finally, those who Soviet leaders who receive virtually no attention – Malenkov (1901-1988), Andropov (1914-1984) and Chernenko (1911-1985) – are almost entirely forgotten, possibly due to the short terms they have been at the head to the state. Consequently, none of the Soviet leaders discussed in this section have a prominent place in the shaping of Russian subjectivity today.

1990's

The nostalgia for the Soviet Union seen in Russian people today has been associated with disappointments with the early stages of the transition to an entirely different system – a democratic one, which spurred mass banditism, food shortages, and a general sense of instability in the country (Kort, 2019). This period, immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, is frequently referred to as *лихие девяностые* (dashing nineties) and is almost ubiquitously recollected as one of the toughest times, not in small part due to Putin's efforts at highlighting the feeling that, prior to his rule, the country was in chaos (Malinova, 2018). Thus, the 1990's are consistently presented as the time of turbulence, devoid of the rule of law, where everyone fended for themselves by any means possible. While the 1990's were indeed a difficult time in Russia, the rampant criminal activities tend to be presented as the defining characteristic of the period, achieved in part by the repetition of this message in the TV dramas[5] in the 2000's (Ostrovsky, 2015). This portrayal of the 1990's is necessary for Putin to look like the saviour, the grand stabilizing force that allowed Russia to overcome these difficult times.

At the same time, the suddenness of the Soviet Union collapse and the lack of national processes that would allow to engage with the understanding of that past in a meaningful way

[5] Including such movies as *Brother* (1997) and *Bimmer* (2003) and TV series *Brigada*, which is also translated as *Law of the Lawless,* (2002) and *Bandit Petersburg* (2000-2007)

meant that many Russians experienced a "national identity crisis", whereby the thinking of oneself as of a Soviet person, with many encompassing traits, has been replaced with a Russian person, which did not carry any certain and easily-identifiable meaning (Nelson, 2019). It is this lack of identity and nostalgia for the past that allow for Russian subjectivity today to be shaped by ideas of the Soviet Union. In part driven by Glasnost of the Perestroika, Stalin's crimes against the Soviet people were well-known and angered many (Dejevsky, 1989). Thus, Yeltsin tried to move away from the Soviet symbolism as, at the time, many people rejected communist ideas and did not want to see any association with the USSR (Brudny, 1997). However, this approach was not continued by Putin. He, instead, made every effort to incorporate the Soviet past – and its main villain – into the story of Russian inherent greatness as a nation. Further, as the glory days of the Soviet Union are consistently associated with Stalin, Russians are being nudged towards adopting at least some aspects consistent with Soviet subjectivity at the time. On the surface, this may look contradictory as, after all, Soviet Union was promoting the idea of internationalism, while Putin's Russia is highly nationalist-oriented. However, this would be a false contradiction considering that Soviet Union itself was quite nationalist, with certain groups of people not deemed primarily Russian experiencing the brunt. For example, antisemitism was widespread, including downplaying the Holocaust abroad and applying discriminatory practices (e.g., not hiring Jewish Soviet people for positions in "sensitive" areas) at home (Feferman, 2021).

2000's

In contrast to the highlighted hardships of the 1990's, early 2000's are presented as *тучные нулевые* (fat decade) by the state, aligning the period of early Putin's rule with the idea of not just stability, but prosperity (Zygar, 2016). This period, despite substantial variabilities at

times, lasted until the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of territories in the Donbas region in 2014. Despite Putin's attempts to present the situation as a win for Russia and its international position, the internal economic situation has changed, in part due to the economic sanctions imposed (Aalto & Forsberg, 2016). Nevertheless, while the early 2000's lasted, Russians had lots of hope in their newly elected president – continuously presenting as a youthful macho – an appealing contrast to Yeltsin (Treisman, 2011). Putin also had great talking points, emphasizing the strength and unity of the country, while at the same time addressing clearly identifiable issues. For one, he was determined to fight the oligarchy, to allow for equal opportunities for people and to prevent those with money from unduly influencing the state (Sakwa, 2014). As appealing as it sounded, in practice it meant attacks on the select few oligarchs, most notably Gusinsky and Khodorkovsky (Sakwa, 2014). The attack on Gusinsky was one of the first attacks on the freedom of media in Russia, while the takeover of Khodorkovsky's Yukos oil company was a show of state's power (Ostrovsky, 2015). These attacks cumulatively rearranged the state of internal affairs, whereby the state was the main deciding power of who is to be an oligarch, and who is not.

Putin and Oligarchy Today

Siegel (2022) argues that oligarchs in Russia should not be considered as individuals, but rather as a social class (oligarchy), loosely united by the desire to defend their wealth. Putin promises to provide this defense – from the interference of foreigners who are aiming to strip the oligarchy of their wealth through sanctions. Thus, at a modest personal cost, the oligarchy may maintain their status and wealth in Russia if they support Putin or "swallow the dust" in Western court rooms, fighting for access to their funds (Kriukov, 2023). Considering that there are real-life examples, such as Mikhail Fridman (Tobin, 2023), where going abroad meant giving up

wealth and extensive legal battles, whilst returning to Russia meant renewed access to money, it stands to reason that Russia's oligarchy does not have incentives to leave or to show disapproval of Putin's actions in any other manner.

Putin and the Media

While Yeltsin's attempts at limiting the free press were sporadic in nature, Putin undertook consistent and controlled measures to ensure that his rule would not be interrupted by media influence (Jackson, 2016). During the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), we can already see the limitations faced by journalists, with the newly implemented laws targeting free media and essentially blocking the flow of any information inconsistent with official statements (Askerov, 2015). This is in stark contrast with the First Chechen War (1994-1996), which was covered by numerous independent media journalists. It is this coverage that has been largely seen to put an end to the war at a disadvantage for Russia (Askerov, 2015; Ostrovky, 2015). Thus, Putin made sure to target the independent media sources. One of the early notable cases is the fight with NTV, which was owned by Gusinsky and was the first to offer an alternative to state TV in the 1990's. Although Gusinsky put up a fight originally, eventually he had to cave in and sell out (Lipman & McFaul, 2001).

Nonetheless, prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, some independent media sources remained functioning. Most prominent included a TV channel *TV Rain (Телеканал «Дождь»)*, radio station *Echo of Moscow (Эхо Москвы)*, and newspaper *Novaya Gazeta (Новая Газета)*. All of these, and many other independent sources, were quickly shut down and denounced as 'foreign agents' for presenting ideas inconsistent with Putin's discourse, with 'foreign agent' designations being mounted on the media sources as well as on individual journalists (e.g., Novaya Gazeta Europe, 2023b). Consequently, the media is set within the parameters of where it

either reproduces the messages approved by the state or it does not exist. There is no mass exodus from the media outlets as, for many people, this would mean joblessness in the current Russian regime. The rare instances of insubordination are punished severely. For example, for Ovsyannikova, who stood with an oppositional message during a news show airing, the consequences are dire: she has been stripped of parental rights (Meduza, 2023b). Not many parents would agree to express opposition to the state with such consequences.

Philosophy in Putin's Discourse: Example of Ilyin

A few thinkers have been thought to influence Putin's perspectives on history and on the interpretations of contemporary affairs. Some of the more notable names include Ilyin, Dugin, and Surkov (Bendle, 2014; Mäkinen, 2011; Welfens, 2022). However, it is also plausible that rather than being influenced, Putin simply incorporates into his narrative references to the parts of works that he considers to be aligning well with his goals (e.g., Laurelle, 2022). At the end, for all the talk regarding Russia's glory, historical missions, and *Sonderweg* (Cherepanova, 2010; Pliskevitch, 2019), Putin's aim is simply that of remaining in power. One indication that this might be the case is, in fact, the very selective adaptation of Ilyin's ideas. After all, Ilyin was vigorously against the Soviet Union and considered Soviet patriotic feelings to be 'perversions' (Lipman, 2015).

Nonetheless, Ilyin's viewpoint on Russia aligns closely with the current outlook of the Russian state and its relationship with Ukraine and the world at large, with some indication that, if his work is not influencing the Russian politics, at the very least, it is used as a historical justification (Snyder, 2018). In Ilyin's work, Russia is presented as a righteous nation by definition, aside from anything Russia actually does, which is the ideology that is currently promoted by Putin (Lipman, 2015). At the same time, Ilyin believed that there is no such entity

as Ukraine, separate from Russia. For him, the idea of Ukraine as a country is nothing less than a Western conspiracy to instill divisions among the "one people" – Russians and Ukrainians (Kuzio, 2022). Moreover, Russia was portrayed by Ilyin as a country that only defends itself, from the Western aggression (Snyder, 2018). Following this logic, Russia is incapable of committing any wrongdoing, but wrongs can be done to Russia. It is thus unsurprising that these specific passages of Ilyin's work are appealing to Putin and are integrated into his pseudo-historical accounts of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine.

Further, the figure of one strong, i.e., authoritarian, leader for Russia is also prominent in Ilyin's discourse and aligns closely with practices implemented by Putin (Langdon & Tismaneanu, 2020). To this end, for example, different political parties are needed only as much as they ritualize the elections of the one leader. The spectacle of elections is ensured by preventing any threatening oppositional figures from participating in the elections, exemplified by the shooting of Nemtsov linked to the Kremlin (Kara-Murza, 2017) and the unsuccessful poisoning with subsequent imprisonment of Navalny (Black, 2023). Finally, in his works, Ilyin portrays the West not just as an enemy, but as a spiritual threat to the divinity of Russia (Snyder, 2018). The Russian spiritual superiority is supposedly frustrating to the West, prompting it to attempt destroying Russia, not in the least through Western values. The main goal for Russia, consequently, is to preserve its stance independent from Western influences, which become viewed as attacks on Russian spirituality, elevated to the status of national security threats (Østbø, 2017).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to provide a targeted historiographical analysis that highlights the selective and strategic use of history in contemporary Russian propaganda. Rather than

attempting to offer an exhaustive account, the focus has been on tracing key historical, cultural and political reference points that are actively mobilized by the current regime to construct a particular narrative of national identity and continuity. From the portrayal of Russia's fraught relationship with the West to the glorification of Stalin's rule and the marginalization of other Soviet leaders, it becomes evident that history in this context is not a neutral recounting of the past (it hardly ever is) but a carefully curated set of interpretations favouring the Putin's preferred narrative. The treatment of the 1990's as a period of humiliation and loss further underscores the regime's strategy of invoking collective memory to legitimate present-day policies and silence the dissent. By situating these historical references within the broader discursive environment – shaped by the consolidation of oligarchic power, control over the media and appeals to suitable ideologies (such as those presented by Ilyin) – this chapter has emphasized the embeddedness of propaganda in the historical context. Understanding the historical threads that are repeatedly drawn upon in Putin's (2022a; 2022b) speeches and utilized within the broader propaganda narratives is necessary for analyzing how subjectivities are shaped. Ultimately, this historiographical lens helps to demonstrate the power of history as both a discursive and psychological tool in the production of political reality in an authoritarian regime.

Chapter 3: CDP Analysis of Putin's Speeches

Within this dissertation, I aim to address multiple perspectives, from state propaganda and ideology to subjectivities. From the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, information warfare, and especially the Russian propaganda, has been singled out as a distinctive and impactful characteristic (Carroll, 2017; Pomerantsev, 2019; Snyder, 2018). This type of warfare, by definition, relies on text and image to deliver specific messages. My aim is to both analyze the messages sent in order to investigate the propaganda and ideology and also to investigate the influence of these messages on Russian subjectivities. Therefore, the approach that I develop is situated within critical discursive psychology (CDP) framework, but combines additional analytical tools not typically associated with CDP. Such an approach enables me to expand the lenses used within the dissertation for a more comprehensive analysis of the propaganda, the emergent subjectivities, and the contextual situation. This chapter serves as a critical examination of the current propaganda constructions that have come to define contemporary Russian political rhetoric as it relates to the war in Ukraine, while Chapter 4 is dedicated to investigating the influences of this propaganda on subjectivities.

The CDP framework is well-suited for the goals of the dissertation as it allows for contextual analysis (McMullen, 2021). First, there is the general context within which propaganda is possible to begin with and, more than just possible, it appears to be effective. These conditions within which the propaganda is thriving in Russia as well as the historical underpinnings of the main propaganda tropes have been analyzed in Chapters 1 and 2. Here, the propaganda messaging itself is at the centre of analysis. It is presented in the form of media content, which needs to be analyzed from the perspective of individuals perceiving the media. Thus, Hall's (1980) proposition on encoding/decoding processes is used in order to make the

step from individual position towards the media presented to the understanding of the subjectivities adopted and enacted as a result. Two more interrelated concepts enhance the analysis: intertextuality and assumptions (Fairclough, 2003). These concepts emphasize the importance of taking into consideration various influences that come to shape the text at hand, including considering what is taken for granted and not explicitly addressed. Further, the concept of post-truth, as it is discussed by McIntyre (2018), is used to gain some insights into the workings of the Russian state propaganda machine.

Methodology

Considering that the research questions focus on the influences of Russian propaganda, the propaganda itself needs to be analyzed prior to engaging in the analysis of its impacts on subjectivity positions. Although fundamentally psychological in nature, the scope of the questions I am attempting to answer requires drawing more on psychological humanities (Freeman, 2024) rather than the more traditional approaches in psychology. Therefore, while I do try to follow the methodological approaches relevant for qualitative psychological work (e.g., Levitt et al., 2018), these approaches are modified to accommodate the needs of this dissertation.

Research Design Overview

Russian propaganda involves multiple aspects, such as creation of new meanings and concepts and reinterpretation of historical events. Investigating these issues means investigating the language used, including the contexts in which this language is developed, which is the explicit goal of discourse analysis (Wetherell et al., 2001). Discursive psychology, as a form of discourse analysis, offers simultaneously theoretical framing as well as methodological guidance to psychological research (Wiggins, 2017). Discursive psychology can be applied to a variety of data sources, such as interviews, media outputs, or official documents. However, there is no one

unified approach to discursive psychology as multiple strands exist (Potter, 2012). Given the openness of the research questions and objectives of this dissertation, the CDP is the most appropriate approach. CDP examines the relationship between the discourse and those engaged in and by the discourse. As Edley (2001) indicates, what differentiates CDP is that it "aims to examine not only how identities are produced on and for particular occasions, but also how history or culture both impinge upon and are transformed by those performances" (pp. 190-1). Thus, both the understanding of individuals and the context are central within the CDP framework. As it is also central for addressing the research questions, the CDP approach is the preferred theoretical and methodological tool for this dissertation.

The ontological position adopted for CDP can be relativist or critical realist (Locke & Budds, 2020). Following Parker's (2002) argumentation, the critical realist position is more suitable for this dissertation. Considering that relativist position can be seen as an apolitical approach to individualism, while critical realist position involves examination of the sociohistorical, cultural, and political context (Parker, 2002), the critical realist position is better suited to pursuing the goals of this dissertation. Next, the epistemological framework typically adopted within CDP is social constructionism (Locke & Budds, 2020). The social constructionism position is particularly useful in trying to understand how the same events may be interpreted differently and why such interpretations co-exist in the world, even when they are contradictory. Further, from the social constructionism perspective, language is not a tool that objectively reflects the reality. Rather, it relies on shared meanings that are co-created and thus are intelligible within a specific context (Gergen, 2001). However, while social constructionism provides valuable insights into the plurality of meaning-making and the role of context in shaping discourse, it is not entirely sufficient for the purposes of this dissertation. The main

limitation lies in its tendency towards a deterministic approach to subjectivity, whereby it is seen as shaped by the context to the exclusion of other factors, such as the differential ways in which one's experiences and interpretations of cultural meanings may be evidenced in a variety of ways – or be entirely ignored by a given individual (Zahavi, 2022). Furthermore, in the context of authoritarian propaganda, such as that observed in contemporary Russia, certain interpretations are not simply co-constructed alongside others – they are institutionally enforced, while alternative narratives are actively suppressed through censorship, intimidation and legal repression. As such, there is a need for an epistemological approach that accounts not only for the multiplicity of meanings but also for the asymmetric power relations that shape which meanings are allowed to circulate and which are excluded. My work thus requires a more critical epistemological stance – one that retains the emphasis on discourse and subjectivity but is also attentive to the operation of ideological state apparatuses and the broader sociopolitical constraints under which meaning is produced.

Therefore, for the purposes of this dissertation, the critical realist epistemological framework is more suitable. Critical realism assumes independent existence of reality, at the same time accepting limited possibility of objectively investigating this reality when it comes to social systems (Easton, 2010). In this sense, critical realist position is in part congruent with social constructionism but assumes a "construe rather than construct" position (Easton, 2010, p. 122), highlighting both the existence of reality and its mediation through the social systems. In this sense, critical realism focuses not just on the language and meanings, but also on the practices, which differentiates it from the social constructivist framework and is fundamental for this dissertation. In other words, social constructivism focuses on experiences as the ultimate tools for understanding reality, while critical realism focuses on identifying causal mechanisms

that give rise to different phenomena (Yucel, 2018). By applying the critical realist framework, one aims "to see the intrinsic and mutual relation between concept/knowledge, the practices that we as human beings are involved in, and the world our practice is dealing with" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 30). This will allow for a more nuanced positioning of the phenomena investigated in this dissertation. The critical realist approach is therefore well-suited for analyzing the layered and complex nature of propaganda within authoritarian regimes, where discursive representations are embedded within broader institutional, historical and cultural contexts. It allows for investigating the generative mechanisms behind the emergence of specific subjectivity forms and their endurance under conditions of political coercion, informational asymmetry and constrained agency. Finally, the theoretical framework most suitable for addressing the research questions is also interpretivist, which allows for "a focus on understanding and interpreting meaning within the data" (Locke & Budds, 2020, p. 238) and is consistent with the critical realist positioning.

CDP Tools of Analysis

There are many conceptual and analytical tools that have been used by various scholars engaged in discourse analysis. Within the communicative context, discourse typically involves three areas of study: use of language (e.g., how certain language is used and why), beliefs being communicated (e.g., what ideas are expressed), and the overall interaction (e.g., does certain use of language influence beliefs?), with the discourse analysis aiming to provide an integrated perspective on the communication (van Dijk, 1997). In this dissertation, the specific chosen tools of analysis are the interpretative repertoires and subject positions. These concepts are typical within the CDP methodology as they allow to identify a variety of subjectivities that may be

enacted, while examining the role of ideology and context (Edley, 2001; McCullough & Lester, 2021).

Interpretative Repertoires. Interpretative repertoires are what "speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena" (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172). Thus, interpretative repertoires, by definition, rely on the terms developed and used by groups of people, which means that understanding interpretative repertoires involves the analysis of sociohistorical, cultural, and political meanings on which the text relies. Identifying interpretative repertoires does not typically follow predetermined steps but rather relies on familiarization with data which leads to the ability to recognize repetitions or patterns within the text, such as "particular images, metaphors or figures of speech" (Edley, 2001, p. 199).

Subject Positions. Subject positions is a "concept that connects the wider notions of discourses and interpretative repertoires to the social construction of particular selves" (Edley, 2001, p. 210). Subject positions are essentially the subjectivities that one can take on within a particular context. The available discourses typically limit the availability of subject positions, yet the individuals may adopt a variety of adjustments to the available subject positions (Locke & Budds, 2020). The available subject positions are drawn from Hall's (1980) description of the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional positions. These will be explored in Chapter 4.

Additional Tools of Analysis

Encoding/Decoding. In order to analyze the propaganda and its perception by Russians, I also rely on Hall's (1980) description of the encoding and decoding processes. The encoding/decoding as an analytical tool supplements the CDP framework. One of the primary sources of data analyzed is Putin's speeches. These speeches are meant to explain to the Russian citizens (and the world) why the attack on Ukraine is inevitable and necessary, but also should

not be considered as an attack. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding enhances the discourse analysis by focusing attention not only on what message is being sent and its contextual framing (Chapter 3), but also on considering how this message is being perceived and used by the intended audience (Chapter 4). The processes of message perception and meaning production are directly related to subjectivity. The encoded messages attempt to produce specific kinds of subjectivity, but the subjectivities constructed as a result depend largely on the meanings decoded by the individuals and thus may significantly vary from those intended during encoding (Buckingham, 1987). Consequently, analysis of the encoded messages and of the way they are decoded allow for analyzing the varying forms of subjectivity. Although the theoretical underpinnings developed by Hall (1980) relate to the television, this work has been adopted and successfully applied in other areas as well, such as to the analysis of social media (Lindgren & Johansson, 2021; Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020; Shaw, 2017). Therefore, all media relevant for this dissertation can be analyzed using encoding/decoding principles.

Intertextuality and Assumptions. Following Fairclough (2003), two interrelated concepts are also used when analysing texts: intertextuality and assumptions. Intertextuality, or "how texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize and dialogue with other texts" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 15), is of particular importance for this dissertation as one of the primary goals is to understand the contextual development of propaganda presented in Putin's speeches and how it influences the subjectivities taken on in Russia. From this perspective, 'texts' are not limited to written and oral texts, although the written and oral texts will be prominent, but also incorporate the understanding of how these texts came into being. In other words, the underlying assumptions that are not explicitly addressed in the texts but are necessary for understanding the meanings encoded by the texts are also important. The assumptions, "taken as a given"

(Fairclough, 2003, p. 31), rest on the background of assumed shared knowledge. Here, the discussion of sociohistorical, cultural, and political influences is needed to address how certain knowledges are treated as a given within Russia and when these givens became such. Specifically, there is significant attention paid to the historical narratives (seen in the school program, film and theatre productions, books, etc.), wrought with myths and symbolisms aiming to create a particular version of Russian national identity (Mosiichuk, 2023). One of the most relevant myths is that of the Great Patriotic War (as World War II was referred to in the Soviet Union), which cultivated the perception that it is great Russia who won the war against the threat of Nazism (Polegkyi, 2016). Of course, at the time, it was the Soviet Union, but the two are frequently equated in contemporary Russia.

Post-Truth and Fake News. One of the key concepts that informs the analysis in this dissertation is the concept of post-truth, which is defined as "relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This concept is important for the study of subjectivity because affects and their management in different daily contexts are entangled with subjectivity (Zembylas, 2020). Although the notion of 'facts' can be seen as problematic, I would like to note that I am not necessarily making claims to the effect of objectivity of the arguments presented in this dissertation, recognizing the social context within which objective reality is perceived and interpreted. Rather, the concept of post-truth is used as a tool of analysis that allows to understand some of the ways enabling the propaganda produced in Russia to be successful. Post-truth in this sense allows for the Russian state to indicate that facts are bent according to the political view one follows (Czerep, 2021; McIntyre, 2018). McIntyre (2018) traces the emergence of the concept of post-truth to postmodernist ideas and specifically to

deconstruction. In the process of deconstruction, it is not only possible, but almost inevitable, to arrive at multiple equally valid truths. Although postmodernism has been extensively blamed for the development of post-truth (Kakutani, 2018; McIntyre, 2018), with some vigorous refutations of the arguments proposed by others (e.g., Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2019; Wesolowski, 2021), this debate is outside of the scope of this dissertation as, whether or not post-truth can be effectively attributed to postmodernism, it is a *fait accompli*. In practice, the notion of post-truth resonates with the themes explored by the journalist Peter Pomerantsev (2015) in his book aptly titled *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, where the 'nothing is true' part refers to the cynical attitude of the Russian state towards the truth and the perpetual indoctrination of this attitude through the media.

I recognize that the concept of post-truth, outside of its origins, is anything but noncontroversial (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2019; Jasanoff & Simmet, 2017). Jasanoff and Simmet (2017), for example, provide a good overview of some of the issues that are associated with the idea of post-truth. Therefore, a further explanation of why this term is particularly important and relevant in the discussion of Russian state propaganda and in the way this propaganda is perceived by Russian citizens is warranted. The notion of post-truth is important in the discussion of proliferation and successful application of the concept of 'fake news'. As Burkhardt (2017) notes, faking news is not new. In fact, examples can be traced to as early as sixth century AD and these examples would fit the contemporary definition of fake news – a "deliberate, publicly published fabrication/disinformation/hoax/lie purported to be real news" (Farmer, 2021, p. 1). What differentiates the use of fake news within the post-truth age is the perpetual creation of doubt where one would no longer be able to discern whether they have a capacity to recognize what is true or to even form a cohesive opinion on a subject. As McIntyre

(2018) puts it, the point is in "getting someone to believe what one is saying, even if one knows that it is not true" (p. 112). These deliberate attempts to create confusion, which have been enacted by the Russian state media, may appear to simply make no sense. Analyzing these attempts, among other relevant factors, from the perspective of post-truth and fake news allows to develop a comprehensible account of the mass communication tools used by the Russian state, an account that moves beyond claims to it being delusional or dismissive of public opinion. In fact, I argue that it is quite the contrary. Continuous bombardment of people with contradictory and exaggerated messaging must have real consequences for subjectivity.

Data – Putin's Speeches

I begin by providing an in-depth description of the analysis of Putin's speeches on February 21, 2022 (Putin, 2022a) and February 24, 2022 (Putin, 2022b). Both of the speeches were first televised by the federal TV channel "Russia 24", followed by other federally funded channels (Luchkova, 2022; Mediazona, 2022). Soon after, the speeches and excerpts from them were circulated on other media outlets as well, including on social media and in online newspapers, both those supportive and critical of the Russian government (Interfax, 2022; Kropman, 2022; Pushkarskaya, 2022; Savenkova, 2022). The availability of the speeches (in video and text format) on various outlets makes it difficult to assess the total viewership in Russia. However, the February 21 speech, despite being Putin's longest speech to date at 55 minutes (Byrkin, 2024), was among the top 10 most watched TV programmes in Russia in 2022 (RBC, 2023). This speech is typically described as being dedicated to the official recognition by Russia of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine as independent from Ukraine, titled Donetsk National Republic (DNR) and Lugansk National Republic (LNR) (Interfax, 2022). The February 24 speech received fewer views at the time of its televising, which can, at least in part,

be attributed to the early hours of running the video – 5:30 am Moscow time (BBC, 2022). This speech officially declared the start of the invasion of Ukraine (Savenkova, 2022).

I focus on these two speeches specifically as they provide the basis from which the new language associated with the war in Ukraine was built as well as the overarching narratives that continue to be employed by both Putin and the propaganda machine in Russia. There have not been substantial changes in the rhetoric since the start of the war, making the two selected speeches most relevant for the purposes of this dissertation. As to the language introduced in the speeches, it should be noted that parts of the new vocabulary have been in use since the Ukrainian revolution in 2014, when Russian propaganda began redefining attitudes towards Ukraine as a country and Ukrainians as people (Radchenko & Arkhipova, 2018) and it is important to note both the continuities and the new developments. For the analysis of the language used, intertextuality and assumptions are particularly relevant as they allow for contextualizing the emergence of the new vocabulary.

Next, I focus on the encoding of the messages through the identification and discussion of the interpretative repertoires evident within the texts, also paying attention to the context. Specifically, I draw on the analyses of the previous military conflicts Russia engaged in in the post-Soviet region: the Second Chechen War (1999-2000) and the Russo-Georgian War (2008). Further, I consider the influence of the sociocultural context, paying particular attention to the mass media and the way its relationship with the state has developed since Putin came to power in Russia (e.g., Isaev, 2016; Ostrovsky, 2015; Pomerantsev, 2015). Finally, I provide examples of how the messages are taken up by the state propaganda, including by such notable propagandists as Vladimir Solovyov.

CDP: Analytic Steps

CDP provides a theoretical basis and methodological guidance, but not step-by-step instructions on how to conduct analysis (Locke & Budds, 2020). Therefore, drawing on different methodologies developed for a variety of CDP studies (e.g., Edley, 2001; Locke & Budds, 2020; Parker, 2002) and taking into account the goal of this chapter – identifying key messages encoded that should be easily decoded by Russians, I thoroughly examined the relevant material in 3 stages. The flexibility inherent in CDP allows for adaptation to the particularities of the research context, especially when working with ideological political texts, such as Putin's (2022a; 2022b) speeches. Thus, I use a layered and iterative approach, sensitive to the rhetorical structure of the texts, their intertextual references and the ideological functions they are designed to serve. In this way, the CDP approach serves as a critical lens through which meaning, power and messages designed to shape subjectivity positions are made visible.

First, both of the Putin's speeches were obtained from the official Russian government website – Kremlin.ru, where the full-length videos of the speeches are hosted, along with full-length transcripts in Russian and in English. For the text analysis, the Russian versions of the speeches were used for two reasons. One, Russian is the original language of the speeches. Thus, using this version avoids misinterpretation due to translations. Even with the most accurate translations, there is an issue of different connotations of the same words within different languages and cultures (Saule & Aisulu, 2014). Two, my first language is Russian, and I remain fluent in its use, allowing me to avoid the issues inherent in relying on translations. For the quotations of the two speeches presented in this chapter, I rely on the transcribed and translated versions of the speeches provided on the Kremlin website, as the English translation represents the content of the Russian text fairly.

The first stage consisted of familiarisation and reflexive engagement with the data. During this stage, the transcripts of the selected speeches were thoroughly read, focusing on considering the content and its implications, but without coding. Getting acquainted with the data was one of the primary goals. Throughout the reading, I also evaluated my positioning in relation to the information presented in the texts and my approaches to engaging with the texts, following Parker's (2002) guidance on reflexive engagement. First, I acknowledge that this dissertation is focussed on the subject with which I am engaged personally: I am Ukrainian Canadian, born and having lived in Ukraine, and remaining in continuous contact with family and friends who have stayed in Ukraine following the 2022 Russian invasion and with those who have fled as a result of it. While following Ukrainian and, to lesser extent, Russian cultural and social discourses prior to the 2022 invasion, I have remained thoroughly de-politicized, with brief episodes of greater political immersion during peak events of Ukrainian political life, such as the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Euromaidan (2013-14). Prior the invasion, although I have heard of discussions of such a possibility, I have dismissed them. After all, similar discussions were around the previous year as well, when Russia had also pulled its military force to the borders with Ukraine (e.g., Bielieskov, 2021). The start of the war meant immediate emerging into the politics of the region and later extension to broader world political contexts as well.

Most importantly, at this stage, I thoroughly reflected on my political positioning and its implications for my work. I was thinking about such question as: What does it mean to be on the side of Ukraine in this conflict for me? Why are my research questions focused on Russia rather than Ukraine? Can I meaningfully engage in work focused on Russian subjectivities? Why do I believe that my work on this subject is important? How do I feel about engaging in this work? What is my motivation? What is the hoped-for outcome? How should I approach this work?

To begin answering some of these questions, I relied on Parker's (2002) discussion of researcher subjectivities, especially as they are enacted by psychologists: uncomplicated, blank, and complex. When the researcher takes on uncomplicated subjectivity, it is assumed that the data come from reflexive agents, therefore, one only needs to observe and report on the observation. This approach is blatantly contradictory to the critical approach of this dissertation as the analysis of the data is key. When the blank subjectivity is taken on, the researcher, in a sense, dismisses the individual and only considers it from the perspective of representation of the larger social structures that inform the individual behaviours. It follows that this perspective is built on the social constructionism to the exclusion of any other possible interpretations, landing it also inappropriate for the purposes of this dissertation. Finally, from the complex subjectivity perspective, in which the researcher maintains the possibility of individual actions being representative of agency while at the same time recognizing the contexts within which this agency is enacted. This is the form of subjectivity that I, as a researcher in this project, strive to maintain, attempting to gain insights of how the propaganda messages work within Russia. In other words, I attempt not to simplify and not to fall into thinking that everyone who follows the propaganda is brainwashed, for example.

The second stage consisted of rereading the texts for manual line-by-line coding and identification of main areas discussed in the texts as they relate to the current Russo-Ukrainian War: historical narratives, portrayal of Russia, Ukraine, the USA, and NATO, and their interrelationships. Since the two selected speeches serve as the justification for the start of the 2022 invasion, most of the material present in the speeches informed the analysis, with the only exception of the lengthy praise of the Soviet Union, with numerous listings of achievements of the period. While it is important to acknowledge the attitude of Putin towards the Soviet Union –

including the criticisms mounted – I do not go into details of each situation elicited, providing instead a more overarching analysis.

The third stage consisted of identifying preliminary discursive constructions, whereby an analysis of text is focused on understanding what various constructions within the text are trying to elicit (e.g., behaviours, emotions), rather than providing descriptions of key areas, distinguishing this step from thematic analysis (Locke & Budds, 2020). Situating the discursive constructions within the main areas of interest allowed for identifying the interpretative repertoires (Edley, 2001). This approach enabled me to work within the critical ethos of CDP – contextual understanding of power and its influence – while also developing a systematic method of analysis suited to the complexity of the material and the questions guiding this research. By grounding the analysis in these stages, I was able to trace how propaganda works not only through what is said, but also through what is left unsaid, assumed and how the emotionally charged narratives are employed, thus shaping the subjectivity positions in ways that extend beyond persuasion.

Findings

I start by examining the some of the current terms that are specific to the war in Ukraine and have been purposefully selected to deliver specific messages, aiming to shape public discourse and perceptions in Russia. In particular, I pay attention to the euphemistic 'special military operation' designed to replace the word 'war'[6], as this semantic maneuvering not only

[6] The term 'war' did slip into Putin's and Peskov's statements made in reference to Ukraine, making headlines and inviting speculative interpretations on the meaning of these slippages for the development of the conflict (Solmaz, 2024). However, it should be noted that, outside of such rare examples, the 'special military operation' remains the official term used in reference to the war in Ukraine (Interfax, 2024) and the laws that have criminalized the use of the word 'war' are still in place, with people being persecuted according to these laws (Lebedeva, 2024).

serves to downplay the gravity of military actions but also plays a crucial role in framing public sentiment. Furthermore, I look into the charged narratives surrounding identifying Ukrainian 'neo-Nazi' ideologies and the corresponding concept of 'denazification' that has been introduced by Putin. These terms, while historically rooted, are wielded in a manner that extends beyond their literal meanings, serving as rhetorical tools to justify actions and garner support from the public. I aim to uncover the layers of meaning and symbolic power embedded within these terms, shedding light on their implications for political discourse and public opinion.

Next, I discuss the interpretative repertoires that permeate Putin's discourse. Of particular focus are themes such as the denial of Ukraine's sovereignty ("no such country as Ukraine"), allegations of "foreign interference", and the construction of Ukraine as an existential "threat" to Russian and its interests. These themes, accompanied by their respective subthemes and discursive strategies, form the backbone of Putin's propaganda machinery, shaping narratives and perceptions on the national scale.

Use of Language: Newspeak

Prior to analysing Putin's speeches, it is necessary to take into account the newspeak prevalent in Russia today, including the specific terms developed after the invasion of Ukraine. Newspeak, a thoroughly Orwellian term (Doboş, 2022), both in origin and meaning, is the new language, in terms of new words and new meanings attached to words, that is developed for ideological purposes. Russian president and the propaganda produced by the state media have been frequently implicated in the use of newspeak, with various analysis unfolding (e.g., Kamusella, 2022; Kolomiyets, 2023). The newspeak is designed to instill divisions and, frequently, to create subgroups, such as 'neo-Nazis' or the 'Kyiv regime', that imply that different behaviour towards these groups is not only acceptable, it is, in fact, desirable and

expected of the 'true patriots' of Russia (Šekrst & Skansi, 2024). It is language that carries specific connotations which one must understand and which continue repeating the message. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will focus here on the newspeak used by Putin and by state media as well as on the purposes these terms are designed to serve.

Newspeak in Russia: Brief Overview

First, it should be noted that newspeak is not something Russia engages in just for the sake of the conflict in Ukraine. It is a practice regularly invoked to support the existing power structures through state propaganda that has a long history, starting in the Soviet times and extending into contemporary Putin's rule (Hyun, 2017). Thus, in the most recent, post-Soviet military conflicts Russia engaged in, newspeak was developed to present a specific picture to Russians and the world about the ongoing events and Russia's role in them. The First Chechen War (1994-1996) was called a "counterterrorist operation", while the Second Chechen War (1999-2009) was referred to as "reinstatement of the constitutional order" (Hyun, 2017) – both implying the legitimacy of Russian actions to secure its safety and unity of the federation. Similarly, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War was termed the "Ossetia-Georgian conflict" in the Russian news, and, commemorating the 15-year anniversary in the summer of 2023, Russian state media has gone further to name it the "operation to force Georgia to peace" (Kirillov, 2023).

The naming of the Russo-Georgian War as the Ossetia-Georgian conflict was strategic as, linguistically, Russia removed itself from the picture, portraying it as an event in which Russia's involvement extends only in the form of Ossetia independently making a choice and simply calling on Russia for support in its fight against the genocide perpetrated by Georgia against the Russians living in Ossetia (Allison, 2009). This argument resonates with the tactics Russia

employed with the annexation of Crimea and incursion in the Donbas region in Ukraine as well, in both instances claiming to be protecting Russian minorities from the genocide perpetrated by Ukrainians. Furthermore, in 2011, a few years after the Russo-Georgian War, the then-president Medvedev indicated that the military measures against Georgia were necessary to swart the expansion of NATO (Dessein & Tchantouridzé, 2012). Again, an argument that is relevant for the understanding of Russian ways of justifying its aggression against Ukraine (see section "Ukraine as a Threat" for further discussion of claims of genocide and NATO expansion).

Newspeak in the Russo-Ukrainian War

Propaganda relies on language structures to produce thought-terminating cliches, a process whereby "far-reaching and complex human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed" (Lifton, 1961, p. 429). The key newspeak term, of course, is the 'special military operation', which was created to replace such terms as 'war' or 'invasion' and is the only term that is allowable in Russia to describe what is happening in Ukraine. Putin (2022b) introduces this term in his February 24, 2022 speech:

> In this context, in accordance with Article 51 (Chapter VII) of the UN Charter, with permission of Russia's Federation Council, and in execution of the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic, ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22, I made a decision to carry out a special military operation.

The term special military operation and its derivatives (e.g., 'SVO', spec.operation) quickly becomes the dominant way of describing the situation in Ukraine within Russian propaganda

machine while the independent media sources still operating in Russia were notified by early March 2022 that referring to ‘war’, ‘aggression’ or ‘invasion’ instead of special military operation will lead to large fines (Ponomarev, 2022). The evocation of this new term can serve to minimize the situation in Ukraine, as the association with the term ‘war’ are worrisome for many (Šekrst & Skansi, 2024). This is useful internationally (as in Russia is not breaking any international laws) and internally – to send the message that the citizens of Russia have nothing to worry about and can go about their business as usual. In addition, calling war a ‘special military operation’ can make it sound more pragmatic, implying that Russia has its goals and is achieving them (Bafana, 2022). In fact, the word ‘war’ now is reserved only in terms of the West waging a war on Russia (Šekrst & Skansi, 2024).

Next, Ukrainians resisting the Russian army invasion of Ukraine are referred to as either ‘neo-Nazis’ or simply ‘Nazis’, from which the calls for ‘denazification’ and ‘demilitarization’ of Ukraine emerge. Referring to resisting Ukrainians as Nazis serves to immediately form them into one undesirable group that needs to be fought against. These associations have been formed during World War II with the fight against Nazi Germany. That war was seen to be existential. Generations have been raised on the notions of the evil Nazism (Isaev, 2016; Krawatzek & Frieß, 2023), with the only solution to it being a lethal one. Thus, evoking the term Nazi capitalizes on these notions and produces the effect of the thought-terminating cliches as the term Nazi explains everything one needs to know about the opponent. Evoking the term Nazi introduces a parallel between the struggles endured and victory made possible by the Soviet Union and the current situation in Ukraine (Jovanović, 2023).

At the same time, adding the ‘neo’ differentiates Ukrainian ‘Nazi’ from the historically used term to designate the Nazis of Germany and allows new aspects of the definition to be

introduced. Specifically, when it relates to Ukraine, it is the resistance to Russia that is portrayed as a particularly vile action that should be punishable. Consequently, the call for 'denazification', while resonating as a noble goal for many Russians, in practice calls for extermination of opposition to Putin in Ukraine, by escalating the violence when needed as all methods should be acceptable when one fights Nazism (Rossoliński-Liebe & Willems, 2022). Similarly, as the Ukrainian government is supported by the military, the call is also for 'demilitarization' – meaning no army capable of action and no weapons. This call in particular portrays Ukraine as a second-order country that should be subservient to Russian needs. In order for Russia to feel safe, Ukraine should commit to inability to defend itself. At the same time, it is Russia who has invaded Ukraine and, if anyone, it should be Ukraine calling on demilitarization of Russia.

Interpretative Repertoires

No such Country as Ukraine

Ukraine as a Historical Mistake. In the two addresses analyzed, Putin's discussion regarding Ukraine largely consists of framing it as lacking statehood and sovereignty. This framing can be seen in the overarching narratives presented by Putin, including a dedicated historical revision (Paić, 2022) that emphases the absence of such country as Ukraine and its 'artificial' creation leading to a discussion of contemporary Ukraine as an entity that cannot be seen as an independent state. Concerning the historical narrative presented, the creation of Ukraine is largely attributed to Lenin:

> It is a historical fact. Actually, as I have already said, Soviet Ukraine is the result of the Bolsheviks' policy and can be rightfully called "Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine." He was its creator and architect. This is fully and comprehensively corroborated by archival

> documents, including Lenin's harsh instructions regarding Donbass, which was actually shoved into Ukraine. (Putin, 2022a)

Thus, Putin reduces the history of Ukraine to a specific and fairly recent time, paying attention to specific territories that, from his perspective, do not belong in Ukraine. This confinement of Ukrainian history to mere 100 years as compared to centuries of Russian history contributes to the notion that one must be taken more seriously than the other. If Ukraine was created recently, it should not have the same rights as Russia which has been there since times unknown to Ukrainians. It amounts to the differentiation between the rights of Ukraine to exist as a country and the rights of Russia to exercise its power. As Backer & Rak (2022) put it, from Putin's perspective, Ukraine "belongs historically, geographically, culturally, religiously, linguistically, and, above all, geopolitically to Russia" (p. 66). Thus, Ukraine's right to sovereignty is acceptable only so long as it does not interfere with Russia's goals.

Further, it is within this explanation of the history of Ukraine that the notion of nationalism – used in a negative sense – also appears. The Bolshevik policy that Putin refers to is one of appeasement of the nationalists, who saw the eagerness of the Bolsheviks to remain in control following the Russian Revolution (1917) and exploited it. As Putin puts it, "After the revolution, the Bolsheviks' main goal was to stay in power at all costs, absolutely at all costs" (Putin, 2022a). This explanation evidences that Putin is not oblivious of the differing views on the history of Ukraine. In fact, he is proactively trying to provide a viewpoint whereby the history of Ukraine – as brief as it is according to his account – is shaped by "ardent nationalists" who were not representative of the majority of the Ukrainian population. This account, of course, omits the forced russification of Soviet Ukraine (and other territories that were not primarily inhabited by ethnic Russians), thus contributing to the picture created that

Ukrainian territories have always been Russian-speaking and culturally similar to, if not the same as, Russia (Sidorov, 2023).

Certainly, the version of history presented by Putin is rather designed to encode the message to the Russians that, if the territories are not really Ukrainian, but Russian, it follows that Russia can engage in whatever acts it sees as necessary and fight off anyone who is resisting. This reinvention of history by Putin is a recent phenomenon designed for the purposes of waging war rather than being grounded in facts. Prior to this reinvention, Ukraine's sovereignty was not questioned and any discussions of a potential invasion of Ukraine were vigorously denied. Specifically, following the Russo-Georgian War, there were some fears raised regarding Russia's invasion into foreign territories, as well as considering who might the next target be. Ukraine was on the list of such potential targets. In response, Russian media produced scathing denials. For example, the following excerpt has been widely circulated at the early stages of the 2022 invasion, featuring a video clip with Vladimir Solovyov from 2008 in which he ridicules the idea of a war between Russia and Ukraine:

> There will never be any war between Russia and Ukraine because any person who, in all seriousness, tries to carry out this kind of action is a criminal, and I cannot imagine of what magnitude. In Ukraine live people who are absolutely brotherly to us in spirit, in blood, in common history, war against whom is the most terrible crime that one can imagine. (Svoboda.fm, 2022; my transl.)

Similarly, Putin himself, a prime minister of Russia at the time (in 2008), gave an interview to the German channel ARD Television in which he was asked whether the next target of Russia would be Ukraine, and specifically Crimea (Radio Svoboda, 2015). Putin's response was straightforward:

> You said the next target. We did not have any targets here [in Georgia] either. So I think talking about some kind of next target is inappropriate… Crimea is not a disputed territory. There has been no ethnic conflict there, unlike the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia. Russia has long recognized the borders of modern-day Ukraine. On the whole, we have completed our talks on borders. The issue of demarcations still stands, but this is just a technicality. I think questions about such goals for Russia have provocative undertones. (Radio Svoboda, 2015)

At the same time, Putin clearly indicates here the Russian intention of interfering into what he refers to as 'ethnic conflict'. While, at the time of the interview, it appeared that this answer is very reassuring for Ukraine and for Europe, in fact, the later actions of Russia in 2014 were justified precisely in accordance with this statement – ethnic relation. At the time of incursion into Crimea and its annexation in 2014, Putin had already switched his rhetoric to claiming that ethnic tensions are ongoing in Crimea, whereby Russian minorities need to be protected from Ukraine (Green, 2014). As blatant a lie as it was for those familiar with the Crimean situation at the time, for the rest of the world – this was a possibility to be contended. By the time contending was done, Crimea was proclaimed to be Russian. Russia had won the information war at this time – mostly through strategic use of language and imagery (Carroll, 2017) and through advancing claims that Crimea is of utmost historical significance to Russia (Biersack & O'Lear, 2014). Thus, history has been used as a tool to suit the political needs of Putin.

The reimagining of Crimea as of a historical ground necessary for Russia's identity and the subsequent annexation has led to what is called "Crimean consensus" or "Crimean euphoria". Crimean consensus refers to the drastic increase in Putin's approval ratings following the

annexation of Crimea, with an accompanying increased trust in state media, which lasted approximately until the 2018 elections (Nikolskaya & Dmitriev, 2020). This has been explained, at least in part, by the successful positioning of the annexation as a justified action, which reasserted Russia's power in the world and led to substantial increases in pride for their country among Russians. By various measures, the pride went up from around 55% to between 70-78% of respondents (Byzov, 2019). If one is to draw parallels here, it is plausible that the reimagining of Ukraine's history in 2022 was designed for similar purposes – to prepare the ground for the emotional uprise following the quick and easy capture of Ukraine's capital, with subsequent acquiescence to all Russia's demands. Had this happened within a short span of time, as it was originally planned according to some accounts (Novoborskiy, 2024), it is reasonable to suppose that it would have led to similar emotional rise for many Russians, which could have again translated to Putin's increased approval and increased sense of Russia as a powerful state.

Ukraine Lacks Statehood. Further, Putin denies Ukraine's capacity for self-governance. This is accomplished through a number of separate lines of reasoning, including (1) lack of a unique Ukrainian way of establishing statehood and (2) corruption of the Ukrainian government. The lack of statehood is attributed to trying to emulate the Western ways: " It should be noted that Ukraine actually never had stable traditions of real statehood. And, therefore, in 1991 it opted for mindlessly emulating foreign models, which have no relation to history or Ukrainian realities" (Putin, 2022a). Although Putin here refers to 'others', not 'Western', the later critique of the influence on Ukraine of the West in general, and the USA in particular, signals that the 'others' are none other than the West. The portrayal of Ukrainian ways of building statehood as separated from the Ukrainian history denotes Putin's idea that Ukrainian and Russian people are

one, meaning that Ukrainian statehood makes no sense if it brings the nation away from Russia (Duben, 2023).

The Ukrainian government is painted in altogether negative terms, starting with the 1990's, when, as Putin sees it, Ukrainian government was abusing Russia's goodwill, and intensifying following the 2014 Euromaidan, which is always presented as a coup d'état. Along with the coup, delegitimizing the current government, the admittedly notorious corruption at various levels in the government and other Ukrainian institutions serves as further proof of lack of statehood in Ukraine: " A stable statehood has never developed in Ukraine; its electoral and other political procedures just serve as a cover, a screen for the redistribution of power and property between various oligarchic clans" (Putin, 2022a). The weight given to the political procedures, and especially elections, is not coincidental. At the backdrop of Ukrainian illegitimacy is the presented picture of the legitimacy of the power in Russia. While not claiming that the elections are not democratic or that they have been somehow compromised, Putin instead relies on instilling division between Ukrainian people and the elected government. To this end, all of the arguments presented serve another purpose – they are aimed at showing that the Ukrainian government is not representative of the people of Ukraine. In fact, this government is pursuing its own selfish goals at the expense of ordinary Ukrainian citizens, who are simply too used to trusting the authorities and, unlike the radicalized nationalists, are not ready to resort to aggression, even when the government does not deliver on its promises. The attack specifically on the Ukrainian government suggests that the invasion of Ukraine has less to do with the articulated objectives and more with the desire of control of Ukraine. This control is to be exerted not through direct occupation of all territories, even though that can be a step on the way, but through Russian control of the Ukrainian government, thus ensuring that the elected

government no longer has power in Ukraine and the government that is decidedly pro-Russian does (Knott, 2022; Shuhei, 2022). This semantic separation of the Ukrainian government from the people of Ukraine encodes the message to Russians that one should not only see them as separate, but as contradictory. If one adopts such thinking, then whatever the Ukrainian government states or does must be contrary to what the Ukrainian people actually want. This way of viewing the situation again serves to legitimize Putin's actions as they are supposedly pursuing the greater good for Ukrainians – unlike their own government.

Foreign Interference

Euromaidan. Euromaidan is never framed as anything but a coup d'état. In part, this is a continuation of the long-standing assumption that anything that Putin interprets to be against his goals (that is, pro-Western rather than pro-Russian) is a result of foreign, and more often than not – US, interference, especially if this happens on territories that are supposed to be under the Russian sphere of influence, such as in the post-Soviet countries. This assumption arises as a result of continuous messaging by Russian president, with support of state media resources, from the early 2000's onwards. The three big examples of this have been seen during the Colour Revolutions, which have occurred within a short span, in three formerly Soviet republics and had a definitive pro-Western program – the Georgian Rose Revolution in 2003, Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution in 2005 (Chatterji, 2023). These revolutions have put Putin on the defense from, what he perceived to be, Western intervention into his business. This is evident in the meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which occurred shortly prior to the invasion of Ukraine, and where Putin indicated that "[t]he measures taken by the CSTO have clearly shown we will not allow the situation to be

rocked at home and will not allow so-called 'color revolutions' to take place" (as cited in Dettmer, 2022).

Similarly, the Euromaidan Revolution has been immediately assumed to be the direct result of Western interference, plunging Ukraine in a state of socio-economic crisis (Zhekova, 2023). The usurpers of the power (including the current Ukrainian government, which is seen as the inheritor of the Euromaidan coup) are portrayed as corrupt individuals who have aggravated and abused the people's dissatisfaction with their government. Of course, this was only possible as a result of full support from the West, with the USA paying the corrupt leaders of the coup: "…the US Embassy provided $1 million a day to support the so-called protest camp on Independence Square in Kiev. In addition, large amounts were impudently transferred directly to the opposition leaders' bank accounts, tens of millions of dollars" (Putin, 2022a). Such funding from the USA serves to prove that it is not the Ukrainian people who were dissatisfied with the government, but the foreign influence that acted to subvert cooperation between Ukraine and Russia. This narrative is prominent within the Russian media discourse and falls within the framework of post-truth as it reflects more Russian political interests than factual reality (Miazhevich, 2014). At the time of writing this dissertation, more than 10 years have passed since the Euromaidan. There have been numerous studies into the subject, including who were the organizers and the participants, what were the driving ideologies, how the Euromaidan was evolving, how it was covered by different media sources, and what the aftermath was, both politically and in terms of Ukrainian understanding of national identity, resulting in volumes of articles, reports, book chapters and books (Diuk, 2014; Marples & Mills, 2014; Open Dialogue Foundation, 2014; Shevsky, 2022; Szostek, 2014). By and large, Euromaidan is seen as a movement originated by the people of Ukraine frustrated by the government promises of making

steps towards the European Union (EU) by signing the European Union Association Agreement that were retracted immediately following a conversation between the then-president of Ukraine Yanukovich and Putin (Shevsky, 2022; Shveda & Park, 2016). Although maintaining close ties with Russia was believed to be good for Ukraine by many and the signing of the agreement was not, by any means, a non-controversial topic, even if that meant hitting pause on closer relationship with the EU, the sharp turn in the decision to sign the papers was seen to be influenced by Putin, which was interpreted as an infringement by Russia on Ukrainian independence (Saryusz-Wolski, 2014).

At the same time, the Russian propaganda machine has been creating and spreading the narrative of Euromaidan being done under the influences of foreign forces supporting radical nationalists, referred to as 'neo-fascists' at the time and later called extremists (Carroll, 2017; Miazhevich, 2014). The Russian information warfare relied heavily on producing fake news, such as spreading the ideas that people going to Euromaidan are being made into drug addicts via the tea distributed at the Euromaidan or that Western Ukraine is sending buses full of "banderovtsy"[7] to Eastern Ukraine, which caused mass panic (Petrenko, 2014). From the distance of time that has passed since, it is clear that no such buses came and Ukraine is not dealing with a drug epidemic created at the Euromaidan, but these messages at the time were aiming to promote the assumption that there is no authentic support for the pro-European stance in Ukraine.

[7] This term is used in a derogatory sense by the Russian media to refer to Ukrainians who are presumed to be ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi, after the controversial historical figure of Stepan Bandera (1909-1959), a radical Ukrainian nationalist, leading a group of followers in the fight for independent Ukraine and making various alliances, including with Soviet Union and with Nazi Germany (Zaitsev, 2015).

The reference to Euromaidan in the speeches and the insistence, despite lack of any credible proof, on the foreign influence behind it encodes the message that the only reason there is any discussion of Ukraine aligning with the West is because of the financial influence from the West. This message is aimed at establishing the West as the enemy, eliciting corresponding emotional reactions – distrust and disillusionment with Western values and anger as a result of 'their' infringement on 'our' ways. In this case, the important part is to evoke a negative reaction – no matter what feelings substantiate this negativity. As was discussed in Chapter 2, such portrayal builds on existing historical narratives of the antagonism between the Soviet Union and the West (Snyder, 2018). Moreover, this narrative suggests that the West is using Ukraine for their own purposes – to weaken Russia (Brusylovska & Maxymenko, 2023), which should elicit the need to act as protectors of the homeland for Russian citizens.

Western Influence on Current Ukrainian Government. Western influence is portrayed by Putin as having significant impacts on the Ukrainian government. This influence is negative and is exerted only as a result of the oligarchs who are pro-Western. In fact, the issues that are identified by Putin can be traced to the extensive Western influence that runs counter to Russia's interests (Minesashvili, 2022). Further, from Putin's perspective, the collusion of the Ukrainian government with the West leads to a subservient situation for Ukraine as a country:

> Essentially, the so-called pro-Western civilisational choice made by the oligarchic Ukrainian authorities was not and is not aimed at creating better conditions in the interests of people's well-being but at keeping the billions of dollars that the oligarchs have stolen from the Ukrainians and are holding in their accounts in Western banks, while reverently accommodating the geopolitical rivals of Russia. (Putin, 2022a)

Consequently, the West supports the corruption in Ukraine while simultaneously claiming to be fighting it and is making all of the important decisions, leading to 'de-sovereignization' of Ukraine. This simultaneously serves to further the questionable state of Ukrainian statehood and also implicate the West as the malignant force behind Ukraine's state of affairs. Further, beyond the generalized West, the USA is singled out as the prominent force behind Ukrainian governance, directly (mis)handling the anti-corruption institutions in Ukraine. In general, Putin describes the economic situation in Ukraine as dire and attributes it entirely to the pro-Western policies of the Ukrainian government. This is in line with a longstanding rhetoric of "rotten" West that is morally deprived (e.g., the ongoing Russian fight against the Western 'propaganda' of LGBTQ+) and that wants to corrupt into this depravity everyone else (Kravchenko, 2022). The foreign influence is seen to be present not only directly, but also through NGOs funded by the West and aimed at further influencing the decisions made by the Ukrainian government.

Although Putin does not directly refer to *Sonderweg* here, the rhetoric he is using is meant to encode the message that there is a Western way of being with its own set of values and morals – a deprived one – and a unique Russian set, which is fundamentally different and should be protected from the West from trying to change it. The war in Ukraine is thus portrayed as a morally justified act, a necessary step to preserve the Russian traditional values. Indeed, the idea of preserving traditional values became very prevalent within Russian propaganda (Edenborg, 2023) – which is a typical development for authoritarian propaganda (Engelhardt et al., 2023). The aim here is create a sense of fear of the 'other' who is different and worse than 'us' and is trying to force 'us' into their way of being. In this sense, arguing that it is the West behind Ukrainian government is necessary to portray this negative influence from outside, whereas

Ukrainian people are portrayed as confused Russians who are in need of saving from the Kyiv regime, fully under control of the West (Brusylovska & Maxymenko, 2023). Thus, Russia is simultaneously threatened (eliciting fear in Russians) and portrayed as the protector (eliciting pride).

Ukraine as a Threat

2014-2022: Crimea, Donbas and DNR/LNR. As to Crimea, NATO is seen as having had plans to position its military bases in Crimea, which would have been a threat to Russia (Bukkvoll, 2018). These malignant NATO plans have been thwarted. However, Crimea is only mentioned briefly and portrayed as people of Crimea making their free choice, which Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis cannot stand for. Consequently, allowing Ukrainian control of the territory would mean going against the will of the majority of the population that, as Putin argues, identifies as Russian.

The discourse surrounding Donbas is much more intense. First and foremost, the language used leaves no in-between spaces within the 'us vs. them' rhetoric, with 'us' trying to protect Russian speakers, who are being oppressed and killed in Ukraine, and 'them' as neo-Nazis committing genocide. Again, the West is seen as supporting the atrocities committed by Ukraine, while Russia is portrayed as having strode for peace, albeit unsuccessfully. Although the spreading of these messages was meant to bring both Ukrainian and Russian citizens on board with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it appears that they backfired in most of Ukraine, were successful in Russia and had some success among Ukrainians living in the Donbas region where Russians could take over the control of media sources (Roozenbeek, 2024). Here, relying on the historical reconstructions and present events, as well as using 'we' and 'our' ubiquitously, Putin is trying to instill solidarity with his position, clearly signalling that agreeing with him means

being part of ‘us’ while not supporting Putin’s position, consequently, indicates being with ‘them’ (Ignatenko & Dorofeeva, 2022). Further, the events in the Donbas region are described as tragic and critical, further threatening Russian security. This is where the famous ‘eight years’ doctrine, endlessly repeated across all channels in the beginning months of the war, has started:

> For eight years, for eight endless years we have been doing everything possible to settle the situation by peaceful political means. Everything was in vain. As I said in my previous address, you cannot look without compassion at what is happening there. It became impossible to tolerate it. We had to stop that atrocity, that genocide of the millions of people who live there and who pinned their hopes on Russia, on all of us. (Putin, 2022b)

Here, Putin is trying to elicit emotional reactions, evidenced with the language of ‘eight long years’ and, especially, ‘genocide’. Of course, no one in their right mind can be supportive of genocide, only the neo-Nazis of Ukraine, who must be defeated in order for the people of the Donbas region to live in peace. This is in line with the post-truth politics, very much active in Russia (Morini, 2020), whereby the Russian involvement in the creation of an armed conflict is obscured, while the situation is turned on its head. Had there been no Russian involvement in the region, there would not be an armed conflict, described as a ‘civil’ war by Putin. However, the language used is only relevant in as much as it allows Putin to achieve his goals – provide a believable explanation for invading Ukraine. It also creates very specific and clear delineation of “us vs. them”, where ‘we’ are Russian and fighting for good side against the evil ‘others’ – Ukrainian Nazis, NATO, and the USA (Jovanović, 2023).

Further, this language is building upon the years of vilifying Ukrainians, making them into the inhumane ‘other’. A prime and widely cited example of this practice, originating

following the Euromaidan, can be seen in the early stages of the incursion into the Donbas region – the 'crucified boy' story – fake news aired on one of the prominent state TV channels and picked up by other media outlets (Horbyk, 2015; Riabchuk, 2016). The story featured an eyewitness who recounts seeing Ukrainian soldiers crucifying a small boy on the main square of Sloviansk. This story was debunked fairly quickly, with evidence pointing to the eyewitness being a hired actress (Riabchuk, 2016) and the story itself originating in a Facebook post of Aleksandr Dugin (Horbyk, 2015). This story, although the most sensational, is not an isolated incident. To counteract the spread of fake news, some activists and journalists are tracing the information presented by the Russian media as news and are fact-checking it, with most notable example in Ukraine being stopfake.org and Fake News YouTube channel (part of the TV Rain). Such fake news, of course, are designed to elicit an emotional response in the viewers, to elicit an understanding that military incursion into Ukraine is a necessity. This is not a new tactic, however. As Cook (2011) points out, a crucifixion myth has been actively spread among the Canadian soldiers in World War I. Even though the story of a Canadian soldier being crucified by Germans was debunked fast, the sentiment remained – the idea that the enemy is capable of doing this, even if it has not happened yet, persisted and has been associated with increased aggression against the enemy, including prisoners of war. Thus, even knowing that a sensational story is a lie is not enough to stop the emotional response that has already been elicited. Similarly, in the contemporary war, knowing that something is a lie does not automatically lead to a different opinion on it. As Pomerantsev (2015) reflects on the experience of watching Russian state media:

> But even when you know the whole justification for the President's war is fabricated, even when you fathom that the reason is to create a new political technology to keep the

> President all-powerful and forget about the melting economy, even when you know and understand this the lies are told so often on Ostankino that after a while you find yourself nodding because it's hard to get your head around the idea that they are lying quite so much and quite so brazenly and all the time and at some level you feel that if Ostankino can lie so much and get away with it doesn't that mean they have real power, a power to define what is true and what isn't, and wouldn't you do better just to nod anyway? (pp. 271-2)

The resolution Putin presents is recognition of DNR/LNR as independent states, forming an alliance with Russia which is promising to protect them. On February 21, 2024, Putin has indicated that Ukraine must stop all aggressive acts towards the newly formed DNR/LNR. On February 24, 2024, since the newly formed Donbas republics have called on Russia to help, Putin declares that Russia must answer that call. Therefore, there is no choice for Russia but to start the war with Ukraine. As part of legitimizing the 'special military operation' announced, Putin is claiming that this war is carried out "in accordance with Article 51 (Chapter VII) of the UN Charter" (Putin, 2022b). Article 51 refers to the right to self-defence, and, as Starski and Arndt (2022) explain, cannot be invoked pre-emptively. Rather, an armed attack, as outlined in the UN Charter, must occur first, permitting self-defence then as a response. Of course, Putin is trying to simultaneously argue that the military action against Ukraine is only meant to 'demilitarize' and 'denazify' to ensure the safety of the DNR/LNR and Russia. However, it is Russia itself claiming self-defence, rather than DNR/LNR.

Declaration of 'Special Military Operation' on February 24, 2022: Defending Russia from NATO. Framing Ukraine as a threat is largely built upon the discussion of Western influence, with the USA as the primary force. It is the USA that sees Russia as its rival and

threat. The USA is influential in the West, with NATO being its instrument of aggression against Russia through, for example, expansion. The expansion of NATO is assumed to provide proof of aggressive behaviour towards Russia and its interests in the speech. However, as the tracing of the NATO expansion issue conducted by Person and McFaul (2022) indicates, Putin takes issue with the expansion not when the expansion occurs, but when some pro-Western events happen within Russia's assumed spheres on influence. However, since this has been a recurring theme, the blaming of NATO expansion is a convenient argument that can be safely assumed to be known within Russia.

Further, compounding the threat of NATO, the Ukrainian government, being subservient to the West in general and to the USA in particular, is framing Russia as the enemy while at the same time planning a war against Russia. Western support is seen in all parts of these plans, including helping Ukraine develop nuclear weapons – a justification for invasion that was widely used at the early stages (Bollfrass & Herzog, 2023). NATO figures prominently in these arguments, from claims of Ukrainian army being fully under its control to definitive information of Ukraine joining NATO to NATO using Ukraine to monitor Russia and funneling weapons to and growing military presence in Ukraine.

All of these actions are threats to Russia. They indicate that there is a real plan to attack Russia if not now, then in the future, making the war in Ukraine inevitable. While Ukraine is continuously framed as a real and serious threat, it is also portrayed as lacking agency, all decisions regarding this being made by the West. Putin goes as far as claiming that Ukraine is being turned into 'anti-Russia', which could be seen as his fear of an 'anti-Putin' conspiracy (Yudin, 2022):

> Any further expansion of the North Atlantic alliance's infrastructure or the ongoing efforts to gain a military foothold of the Ukrainian territory are unacceptable for us. Of course, the question is not about NATO itself. It merely serves as a tool of US foreign policy. The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile "anti-Russia" is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons. (Putin, 2022b)

The sentiment of Ukraine becoming 'anti-Russia' is further seen in the shift in Ukraine towards greater use of Ukrainian language in various spheres of life, which Putin sees as discriminatory and threatening the Russian-speaking populations of Ukraine. The same logic has been applied in the Crimea and Donbas affairs, which all were elicited by the events of Maidan. Along with the invasion of Ukraine, all of these affronts regarding the use of Ukrainian language and the dismissive attitude towards Ukrainian history and culture, as something inseparable from Russia, have led to a much more solidified position of Ukrainians, who, feeling the threat, consolidated to protect their identities, leading to exactly the opposite effect from the aims outlined by Putin (Duben, 2023).

The argument that NATO expansion is to be blamed, if not fully then at least in part, for the Russian invasion of Ukraine is part of a lively discussion as it appears to be a sound concern, one that Russia must contend with for its own security (Doris & Graham, 2022; Person & McFaul, 2022; Zubok, 2023). However, there are a couple of fundamental problems with this. For one, Russia is claiming that the invasion of Ukraine is legitimate on the basis of feeling threatened – as opposed to direct actions of aggression. However, while this claim may be reflective of the general attitude towards NATO in Russia, it remains unclear why the balance

was tipped towards invasion of Ukraine while these fears were relatively low. As per Levada-Center (2022), when asked "Do you think Russia has reasons to fear the Western countries that are part of NATO?", about 60% of respondents in Russia answered 'yes' since 1999, when this poll started being conducted, with a notable dip in 2021 – last time the respondents were asked prior to the 2022 invasion – when 48% answered 'yes'.

Soon after the start of the invasion in 2022, Russia made claims that Ukraine was planning to attack Russia and that the invasion was a preventative measure (e.g., Bobylev, 2022; Izvestiya, 2022). However, these claims have not been substantiated by anything that could withstand even cursory scrutiny. For instance, on this topic, much attention from the fact checkers was devoted to the inadequacy of the purported maps seized by Russian troops from Ukraine (VoxCheck, 2022). These maps were frequently outdated – using the old names of villages and cities that have been changed in recent years. They also employed incorrect spelling and/or a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian spelling. This leaves the question of Ukraine planning to attack Russia to be ambiguous at best. At the same time, it is highly probable that Russia has been guilty of what it accuses Ukraine of – Russia has, indeed, been preparing plans to invade Ukraine – and acted upon these plans – as it is difficult to imagine that the coordinated attack from multiple directions, including from a territory of a third country, has been done in a spur of the moment. Moreover, legitimating one's claim on the basis of feelings is a road to nowhere in international politics. Right now, many countries in proximity to Russia feel threatened by it – on the basis of both historical precedents and current threats regularly uttered by the Russian politicians and propagandists. For example, head of the State Duma Committee, Oleg Morozov, indicated that Poland is the next target for Russia after Ukraine (Regnum, 2022). For Solovyov, the next target of Russia should be the Baltic countries – with Latvia particularly singled out to

be next in line for denazification (Neschetnaya, 2023). Thus, if feeling threatened is enough of a justification for attacking another country, there are many countries now that would be justified in attacking Russia to prevent future aggression against themselves.

The second fundamental problem in arguing that NATO expansion is to be blamed for Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the fact that Putin appears to be concerned less with the number of countries joining NATO or their proximity to Russia and more with losing his perceived sphere of influence. This position assumes that Putin has a right to exert influence in certain sovereign countries (e.g., Baltic countries and Georgia) and that this right is being infringed upon by NATO. Within this account, the will of the countries joining NATO or aiming to do so is not taken into consideration at all. For example, it is after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine that two previously neutral countries, Finland and Sweden, have joined NATO. Putin's actions do not correspond to the actions one would anticipate of a person who is afraid of the NATO expansion in this instance. Indeed, troops have been withdrawn from the border with Finland – a NATO country (Dickinson, 2023).

The Function of Interpretative Repertoires

The aim of the messaging produced by Russian propaganda, guided by Putin's speeches, is to produce a specific dominant subjectivity. While I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4 the practical implications for the different subjectivities, here I provide a structure of what an 'ideal' subjectivity of a Russian citizen looks like from the perspective of the propaganda disseminated. One of the key aspects to keep in mind is that propaganda needs to be pervasive – it has to be widely available, exclude messaging that does not align with the propaganda and repeat the messaging continuously. While I have provided limited excerpts to highlight some of the key

points, they cannot portray the scale of the propaganda in Russia and its ubiquity in everyday life. As Ellul (1965) put it:

> When one reads this [propaganda message] once, one smiles. If one reads it a thousand times, and no longer reads anything else, one must undergo a change. (p. 14)

This change is prompted by a few interconnected factors. First, the two speeches of Putin analyzed here provide the basis on which all propaganda is built. While some extension and exaggeration of the ideas expressed by Putin is present, especially in TV shows, like the one hosted by Solovyov, and social media (mostly blogs and Telegram channels). These are nonetheless policed to ensure that they stay within the general scope. As discussed in Chapter 2, those who express more radical ideas tend to experience similar consequences to those who oppose the state. Therefore, the interpretative repertoires identified here provide an overview of the general aims of the state in terms of shaping the dominant subjectivity of Russians. First, there is a clear emotional appeal, even within the relatively dispassionate speeches given by Putin. By portraying NATO and Ukraine as threats and by evoking loaded language of Nazism, Putin is aiming to evoke fear. Emotional appeals are necessary as they help to "mask the fact that the audience is being persuaded to believe or act in ways that serve not their interests, but those of the propagandist" (Quaranto & Stanley, 2021, p. 134), with stereotypes about out-groups being particularly effective.

At the same time as evoking emotional reactions, Putin aims to normalize his actions that supposedly serve to respond to the identified threats. The process of normalization works by both introducing norms that previously did not exist as well as by blurring the boundaries – by, for example, referring to the war as a special military operation (Krzyzanowski, 2020). In fact, most of the interpretative repertoires are aimed exactly at establishing the new norm of invading

Ukraine. Specifically, the "No such country as Ukraine" and "Foreign Interference" repertoires directly serve this aim. Both of these repertoires indicate that the actions taken against Ukraine are legitimate and to be expected, given the circumstances. If Ukraine is not really a sovereign country, then Russia is not really violating its international obligations by invading it. If foreign states are already interfering with Ukraine, then Russia has a right to do so as well. In fact, the historical account provided by Putin is trying to establish that Russia has more right to interfere with Ukrainian affairs than any other state.

Conclusion: Encoded Messages and Subjectivity

The interpretative repertoires are less important as individual encoded messages and more important in terms of the overall encoded narrative that is being presented. This narrative differs from the ordinary way of life in Russia, and yet is presented in a way to be a continuation of that way of life. In essence, Putin and his propaganda machine are trying to sell the message that whatever is happening has always been happening, it is simply in a more visible state now than previously. The 'us' vs 'them' rhetoric is one of the primary messages being delivered, with a clear delineation of who 'we' are – the Russians fighting for freedom and to preserve our traditional values and ways of life, which are being threatened by 'them' – the West that is trying to impinge on our rights and to impose its value system. Upon receiving these messages, Russians are expected to fear the enemy, which should prompt acceptance of the need for war. At the same time, after momentary anxiety, they should feel relieved that Putin, with a strong and assured hand, is dealing with the situation in the best manner possible. This discourse, therefore, simultaneously changes the previous narratives while presenting itself as a new norm – one which has always been there but was not sufficiently exposed. Thus, all Russians are expected to support the war effort, even if that simply means not calling it such.

Chapter 4: Propaganda Mechanisms and Theorizing Subjectivity Positions

Following the analysis of Putin's (2022a, b) speeches and the propaganda messages produced, in this chapter, I return to the two research questions guiding this dissertation: (a) Why and how does Russian propaganda appear to be particularly effective in indoctrinating Russian citizens living in Russia? and (b) What are the impacts of Russian propaganda on the subjectivity of Russians living in Russia and how these impacts are manifested? In line with the critical realist position taken within this work and drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of propaganda in authoritarian regimes (Chapter 1), key historical events and their representations (Chapter 2), and analysis of specific propaganda messages through the identified newspeak and interpretative repertoires (Chapter 3), I turn to the interpretation of the mechanisms by which propaganda appears to be effective and to the impacts on subjectivity. My approach in this chapter shifts from the critical discursive psychology to psychological theorization, whereby psychology is understood broadly as psychological humanities, integrating relevant knowledge from a variety of disciplines, including history, social and political theories, and media studies (Freeman, 2024; Kirschner, 2020; Teo, 2017).

One of the key reasons for this shift is that the current possibilities for research in Russia, when it comes to the objectives of this dissertation, are limited. Due to the current legal situation in Russia, whereby expressing opinions against the war may lead to being charged and convicted with 'discrediting the Russian army', it is difficult to access people who are not staunch supporters of the war and who live in Russia (McCarthy et al., 2023). Although some such studies do exist (e.g., Belokrysova et al., 2022; Chronicle Project, 2024; Public Sociology Laboratory, 2024) and I will be relying on the information collected through them, they are quite limited in number. Thus, the exact extent of the effectiveness of the propaganda cannot be

gauged at the moment as there are no possible techniques to arrive at a conclusive decision backed by empirical data collected in a rigorously designed study. However, there are indirect indications that can be used and, relying on psychological theoretical analysis and its application to the practices that we can witness in Russia can give an impression of the possible answers to the research questions posed.

Theoretical Models and Key Concepts

Following the World War II, there has been an increased interest in studying and theorizing the conditions that allowed for the war to happen (Fussell, 1989; Goldberg, 2011; Nelson, 2015; Shull, 2005; Tugwell, 1981). Aside from the burgeoning field of propaganda studies that investigated the sociopolitical context and its influence (key tenets discussed in Chapter 1), many studies in psychology were devoted to examining the drivers for individual responses (Bouchat et al., 2020; Paez et al., 2008; Reis, 2019). Of key importance for understanding the subjectivity positions in Russia now are the concepts of authoritarianism, as it forms a significant part of the sociopolitical context within Russia (Alyukov, 2022; Lewis, 2020), and conformity, as it is the response that the current authoritarian regime aims to elicit and relies upon for its continued functioning (Blackburn, 2020; Sharafutdinova, 2020). Therefore, analyzing the mechanisms via which the authoritarianism and conformity are evidencing themselves in Russia will help to gain a better understanding of the propaganda impacts on subjectivity. In addition, I also rely on the concept of lived ideology for the analysis as it focuses less on the description of the ideological basis of the propaganda and more on how and whether the ideology is entering the everyday lives (Miller, 2018; Tileagă, 2012).

Authoritarianism: Dual-Process Motivational (DPM) Model

To theorize the implications for the subjectivity positions in Russia as a result of exposure to propaganda, I rely on the dual-process motivational (DPM) model for understanding authoritarianism (Asbrock et al., 2012; Duckitt, 2009; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) as authoritarianism is a fundamental part of the contemporary sociopolitical context within Russia, impacting the worldviews and value systems of those living under the influence of the regime (Buckley et al., 2024; Grigoryev et al., 2022).

Although there has been significant research into authoritarianism as a personality trait with multiple measures developed (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1981; Fromm, 1941; Pratto et al., 1994), considering it from the perspective of the DPM model – as being enabled by prevalent social values and attitudes, rather than as a stable personality characteristic – is more appropriate as it allows for consideration of "the role of situational factors in influencing authoritarian attitudes and in moderating and mediating their impact" (Duckitt, 2009, p. 299). In essence, within the DPM model, authoritarianism is considered to be less about individual personal characteristics that lead to espousing the authoritarian ideas, but rather the social, political and cultural influences that create fertile conditions for considering authoritarian values as acceptable and desirable within this context. Authoritarian ideas in Russia, as expressed by the propaganda and represented by the dominant subjectivity, can thus, at least in part, be explained by their normalization through the propaganda messaging.

The DPM model proposes that there are two main dimensions via which authoritarian attitudes can be expressed. The first dimension includes personality factors enabled by worldviews that prioritize security and stability (Duckitt, 2009). Those espousing this dimension view the world as threatening and are conducive to valuing conformity as a way of ensuring

security and stability. Those who prioritize security and stability are shown the threat of the 'other' who is coming to destroy them. The second dimension includes the belief that, fundamentally, the world is a ruthless place where the stronger wins and enjoys all the benefits at the expense of the weaker (Duckitt, 2009). Therefore, the core values here are those of exerting power and dominance, leading to a very high tolerance towards inequality. Those who prioritize power are shown that there is lots to be proud of, feeding the sense of superiority, which feeds into the sense of entitlement to mistreating those who they do not see as equals.

Conformity

Before diving into the exploration of conformity, I would like to note a few key points. First, I do not view nor intend to convey a sense that conformity is either a positive or a negative practice. Pressures to conform, and the corresponding modification of one's expressed beliefs or behaviours to comply with the norms, are widespread (Michaeli & Spiro, 2015). Social norms are necessary for the society to function. Therefore, without conformity there is no bases upon which a society can be built and can remain functional. It does have its drawback as it tends to favour preserving the status quo, whatever that may be. Thus, it is neither a good nor a bad thing, but rather a condition of human existence in groups. Second, conformity is not uniform. There are many aspects of a society and one need not agree with every single point to be part of the conforming group. In fact, it is more likely that all of us have points in which we conform to and points in which we deviate from the norms of our society (Di Palma & McClosky, 1970).

There is a number of motivations leading one to conform, ranging from simply agreeing with the set course of action as the best for achieving the outlined goals to feeling pressured to do so under threats to one's health or even life. Thus, conformity is heavily dependent on individual reasons as well as on the sociopolitical contexts within which individuals need to make these

decisions. Moreover, there are multiple social influences that can lead to conformity, including social pressure and socialization, with many decisions to conform to social norms without necessarily spending time and effort reflecting upon them (Di Palma & McClosky, 1970) as conformity is a simple and safe way to act, while deviating from the norm, depending on circumstances, can be quite costly and, therefore, requires reflection.

Many psychological studies evidence that when pressure is exerted, some will conform to it (e.g., Bică, 2023; Laursen & Veenstra, 2023; Milgram, 1963; Tesser et al., 1983). There have also been studies indicating that certain personality characteristics, such as creativity, dogmatism, and self-esteem, correlate with increased or decreased likelihood to conform (Elder & Paul, 2012; Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 2003; Juan et al., 1974). Thus, personality characteristics are individual variables that may influence individual reactions and responses to social changes. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, I am interested in the shift in the sociopolitical and cultural norms that signals acceptance of certain responses and how this shift impacts the traits, the subjectivities. Therefore, the focus in on fluctuations in expressed conformity depending on the sociopolitical context (Kneuer & Demmelhuber, 2016; Maynard, 2022). Specifically, there is some suggestion that events that produce elevated levels of stress and that are unpredictable, prompt elevated levels of conformity (Di Palma & McClosky, 1970).

Finally, it should be noted that for authoritarian regimes, a lot of the time it is sufficient if a person remains, in a sense, neutral – that is, does not express an opinion either way on a given subject. It is enough as it is does not challenge the prevailing narratives presented by the state propaganda – this does not necessarily signal conformity in the strictest sense but is equated to be such (Di Palma & McClosky, 1970).

Lived Ideology

Next, as the propaganda does not provide random statements to believe and follow, it is important to look at the ideological basis. From this perspective, the concept of lived ideology, as defined and explored by Billig et al. (1988), is most useful. The concept of lived ideology attends to the everyday practices and, thus, is useful not only for analyzing the current workings of the Russian propaganda, but also for tracing the historical continuities and differences. Through lived ideology, it is possible to look into the current sociopolitical situation, while also considering the historical context in which this situation emerged.

As the concept of ideology is inextricably linked to the discussions and understandings of propaganda (Selucky, 1982; Stanley, 2015), I first outline the way this concept is used throughout the dissertation. There are multiple (sometimes contradictory) definitions and subcategories entailed within the idea of ideology. In a broad sense, it is defined by the *Dictionary of Marxist Thought* as "a distortion of thought which stems from, and conceals, social contradictions" (Larrain, 1991, p. 248). Although this understanding of ideology provides a broad understanding of the term, it needs to be qualified further in order to be the most useful explanatory tool in the specific circumstances created and enacted by the Russian propaganda, especially in relation to the influence on individual subjectivities. Billig et al. (1988) make a distinction between the intellectual ideology and the lived ideology. While intellectual ideology is, as the name would suggest, a result of intellectual work that underpins a specific system of thought, lived ideology reflects the way of life adopted within a society and "includes what passes for common sense within a society" (Billig et al., 1988., p. 27). In this sense, the ideology experienced at the everyday level by the citizens of a particular society may be considered part of the cultural ways of the given society, rather than considered to be a product of the state

ideological apparatus. This form of ideology provides a more nuanced understanding of the current relationship between the state and the people in Russia and, therefore, is used in this chapter.

Russian Propaganda

In order to evaluate why and how the propaganda in Russia appears effective in indoctrinating Russian citizens, we need to go back to the two subtypes of propaganda identified by Ellul (1965) – sociological and political propaganda. To quickly reiterate, sociological propaganda is also referred to as pre-propaganda as its main function is to set the stage for the upcoming political propaganda (Ellul, 1965). In other words, sociological propaganda is concerned with shifting the public narratives to create emotional reactions conducive to political propaganda. The purpose of political propaganda, according to Ellul (1965), is to incite behaviours. Consequently, political propaganda tends to be more direct as it is necessary to ensure that the expected behaviours are not lost in the coding of the propaganda messages. Based on the analysis of the Putin's (2022a, b) speeches, it is evident that both of the speeches are part of the sociological propaganda as they are directed at prescribing certain attitudes towards the events – through the interpretative repertoires offered and reiterated by the propaganda machine – without indicating how one could engage. There is no call for action, with the second speech (Putin, 2022b), for instance, ending with expression of 'belief in the support' for the decisions that have already been made:

> At the end of the day, the future of Russia is in the hands of its multi-ethnic people, as has always been the case in our history. This means that the decisions that I made will be executed, that we will achieve the goals we have set, and reliably guarantee

> the security of our Motherland. I believe in your support and the invincible force rooted in the love for our Fatherland.

Furthermore, it is the sociological propaganda that is targeted at creating specific appearances. Therefore, I focus on the sociological propaganda.

Sociological Propaganda

The assumed readiness of Russians to receive and to support the messages presented in Putin's (2022a, b) speeches relies on the prolonged exposure to the sociological propaganda, with Russia being described as particularly effective in information war at the start of the war against Ukraine in 2014 (Oates, 2016; Snyder, 2018; Tkach, 2016). Thus, in this section I discuss some of the mechanisms via which the sociological propaganda prepared the stage for the invasion and how it is still being employed to continue shaping subjectivities in Russia. While in the previous chapter I have provided the analysis of key propaganda messages that shape the interpretative repertoires through which the narrative about Ukraine is created by Putin and the propagandists, here I concentrate on other efforts undertaken by the propaganda machine in Russia to make sure that these messages are continuously delivered to Russians, to the exclusion of all other messages.

Creating Public Opinions. One of the most prominent ways for ensuring that the interpretative repertoires offered are accepted is in creating the appearance that all members of the public share this opinion. There are two main mechanisms via which this is achieved. First, spreading the message that this is so. Second, removing alternative sources of information. Given that Putin's authoritarian regime hinges on him being the only reasonable leader of the country[8], it is of

[8] For instance, ahead of the 2024 presidential elections in Russia, Dmitriy Peskov, press-secretary of the state, notably argued that Putin will be "re-elected with a huge margin and the

utmost importance that this is reflected in the public support. To this end, the presidential election results had to have unprecedented turnout and victory results, at 77% and 87.2% respectively (Komin, 2024). Not unlike the previous presidential election, this one has been heavily criticized, indicating that it reflects more Putin's ability to suppress opposition and exert control over the elections process rather than the public support (Edwards, 2024; Komin, 2024; Sauer, 2024). Such a victory signals to Putin's supporters that he is universally liked and, therefore, irreplaceable. To all others it sends the message that like it or not, Putin has an unbreakable grip on power and, therefore, is irreplaceable.

The general expected attitudes towards Putin and his power are also translated into expressed attitudes towards the war in Ukraine. These are accomplished by creating a sense of support through public opinion surveys. Specifically, the federally sponsored Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM) produces regular public opinion poll results that are widely circulated in Russian media and that evidence overwhelming support for Putin (e.g., Dorofeeva, 2024; Zamahina, 2022) and for the "special military operation" (Koshechkina, 2024; Sborov, 2024). VCIOM is not the only organization engaged in conducting public opinion polls. Other notable agencies include Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), Levada-Center and Russian Field. FOM is a non-commercial organization that receives many project requests and funding from the Russian government. The results of public opinion polls conducted by this organization mimic

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elections – theoretically – are just extra expenses" (Nikolaev, 2023; my trans.). This statement, originally made to New York Times, created an uproar in Russia due to its blatant disregard to even maintaining the semblance of democracy in Russia, which led Peskov to trying to soften his position by stating that this sentiment is his personal belief rather than expression of the official Kremlin position on the matter, blaming the New York Times for misrepresenting his words (Nikolaev, 2023). In either case, Peskov's position in Russia places even his personal belief at the centre of public understanding of the situation in Russia – solidifying Putin as the only possible candidate, although the expensive elections are held to maintain pretences at democracy.

closely those published by VCIOM and are also widely circulated in Russian media (Novoseltseva, 2022; Tchernov, 2022; Yemelyanenko, 2024). Both VCIOM and FOM polling results are being continuously reported and re-reported by Russian media as they are a large part of creating a sense that Putin is widely supported, and that the vast majority of Russians support the war, while the other sources are ignored.

Levada-Center (foreign agent since 2016) and Russian Field are independent organizations conducting polling and sociological research. Levada-Center's reporting on the percentages supporting Putin (Levada-Center, 2024a) and the war (Levada-Center, 2024b) are quite similar to the numbers produced by state pollsters. This has been interpreted in various ways. First, of course, there is a possibility that it reflects the attitudes in Russia. However, there are few independent polling experts that consider this interpretation to be accurate. Second, and deemed to be more likely, is that these numbers reflect more the realities of polling in authoritarian regimes, where many refuse to answer polling questions once they concern sensitive subjects (Buckley et al., 2024; O'Shaughnessy, 2017). Given that being opposed to the war is a legal offense in Russia, the phrasing of the questions must be done very carefully. In fact, Levada Centre has been receiving some criticism for doing the Russian state's bidding by not adjusting their polling methodology following the rapid changes in Russian legal sphere after the escalation of the war with Ukraine (e.g., Pachikova & Kolobaeva, 2023).

Russian Field, on the other hand, went to great length to try to gauge Russian's opinions following the war in Ukraine. For example, one of the questions asked is: "In your opinion, should Russia continue the military operation on the territory of Ukraine now or should it go for negotiations?" (Russian Field, 2024, p. 56, my trans.) When phrased as a personal opinion, the answers to this question, as of February 2024, break down into 40% for continuing the war and

49% for negotiations. However, another question is formulated as: “If Vladimir Putin tomorrow signs a peace agreement and stops the military operation, will you support this decision?” (Russian Field, 2024, p. 61, my trans.) The breakdown of answers to this question is 75% ‘will support’ or ‘will likely support’ versus only 17% who “will definitely not support’ or ‘will likely not support’. Thus, it appears that being in line with Putin’s decisions is valued higher than personal opinion on the matter. Another curious result that emerges in this polling is that the majority of respondents (56%) evaluate the war as going successfully for Russia (Russian Field, 2024, p. 18), yet, for 71% of respondents, the complaint is that it is taking too long (Russian Field, 2024, p. 24). The war appears to be confusing, as even among those who believe that the war is going successfully for Russia, about one third (32%) have difficulty articulating which objectives have been achieved thus far (Russian Field, 2024, p. 40).

Importance of Public Polls. One of the reasons for the popularity of public opinion polls in Russia is that it is a mechanism by which the Russian state is trying to induce conformity (Yudin, 2020). By showing that the majority of Russians support Putin and the war in Ukraine, the propaganda establishes this as a social norm, one that is derived from the interpretative repertoires offered by Putin (2022a, b) in his speeches and reinforced through continuous repetition in different propaganda channels, including the state TV and the social media (Alyukov, 2024; Kiforchuk, 2023). Another formidable contributing factor to the establishment of the new social norms is the removal of alternative sources of information. In Russia, the attack on alternative sources of information is quite vigorous and includes closing public sources of information, including TV and radio stations, newspapers, journals (e.g., Miazhevich, 2022; Popkova, 2023; Sloane, 2022; Tikhonyuk, 2023); banning or limiting access to cultural productions, including books, plays, and other artistic productions (e.g., Anghel & Zbuchea,

2023; Bolotov & Karev, 2023; Curtis, 2023); and designating a number of organizations, journalists and public figures as undesirable, foreign agents or as extremist and terrorist organizations (Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk, 2023; Mahon & Walker, 2023; Schlauffer et al., 2022). This ensures that there is no challenge to the information disseminated by propaganda, at least not openly in the public sphere.

Once the newly established norms take hold, refusing to follow them becomes quite challenging, especially in authoritarian regimes as they tend to respond with aggression towards those deviating from the norms imposed (Kessler & Cohrs, 2008). Thus, for the onlooker, it may appear that the norms advanced are highly controversial. However, for those living in authoritarian states, following the norms is not simply a question of belonging to the group versus being considered an outsider. As unpleasant and consequential as it may be in democratic societies, in authoritarian regimes the scale tends to be larger. Specifically, in Russia now, the new norms are being enforced by the power of the law, which makes the status of an outsider dangerous to one's freedom, employment, property ownership, and, in extreme cases, even parenthood[9] (Lindstaedt, 2024). That is, the interpretative repertoires provided by Putin in his speeches and enhanced by the propaganda, as well as through institutions, serve to create a sense of the new reality and that this new reality is accepted and adopted by the majority. This is what creates an appearance of support of Putin and the war.

[9] For example, at the request of her ex-husband, Ovsyannikova, the former editor of the Russian most prominent TV channel – First Channel – who came out with a poster condemning the war in Ukraine in the middle of the evening news segment, has been deprived of parental rights (Lebedeva, 2023).

Subjectivity Positions

From the perspective of the critical discursive psychology (CDP) framework, it is important to look at subject positions (Edley, 2001; Locke & Budds, 2020). Typically, this involves analysis of discourses that reveal the discursive positions taken on by subjects, which illuminate the subject positions. This approach has been modified in my dissertation for two primary reasons. First, CDP assumes ability to acquire text materials that reflect all parts of the discourse. However, the context in Russia now prevents those living there from expressing their positions freely. Thus, relying exclusively on discourse analysis would not yield a possibility for an accurate reflection of subject positions. Second, I am interested in the impacts of Russian propaganda on the subjectivities of Russians living in Russia. Therefore, my analysis must extend beyond a position one undertakes in response to the war in Ukraine to examining the impacts of propaganda through the behaviours exhibited.

Drawing on the analysis performed in Chapter 3, I develop a theoretical framework for understanding the influence of propaganda on subjectivity positions of people living in Russia. I then apply this framework to gain a deeper understanding of the functioning of these subjectivity positions through practices. By looking at specific behaviours in response to events that occurred following the start of the war, I explore the lived ideologies at play. Thus, I start with a theoretical framework developed by Hall (1980) to describe positions undertaken by a viewer of the television and extend this framework to the subjectivity positions more broadly.

Theory and Practice

Essentially, Hall (1980) proposed three positions, also referred to as “codes”, that a viewer of the television can take in the process of decoding the messaging presented through the televisual discourses. These positions are outlined as they function when individuals are

presented with the dominant views. First, there is a dominant-hegemonic position. Here, the decoding of the encoded message is straightforward. The viewer is able to understand what it is that the television program is trying to communicate and is accepting this viewpoint. Second, there is a negotiated position, whereby the viewer does decode the message from a dominant standpoint presented, however, makes adjustments according to their experiences. In other words, within the negotiated position, the viewer tends to agree with the dominant viewpoint, but also accords some exceptions from this general viewpoint. Consequently, the dominant ideology filtered through the negotiated position is "shot through with contradictions" (Hall, 1980, p. 127). Finally, the viewer adapting the third code has an oppositional position towards the messaging presented. Such viewer recognizes the dominant viewpoint presented but decodes it in an alternative, contradictory way.

Drawing on this framework, I concentrate on the subjectivity positions adopted by Russian citizens in response to the changed situation. For each subjectivity position (dominant, negotiated, and oppositional), I outline how the subjectivity position adopted relates to the ideology presented in Putin's (2022a, b) speeches. However, given that Hall's framework can be applied to any messaging within any context – i.e., whatever the encoded messages are, there will always be those who decode them from a dominant, negotiated or oppositional subjectivity position, whether one lives in a democratic or authoritarian political system – I extend the framework, drawing on psychological theorization, to provide a more nuanced analysis of the subjectivity positions specifically as they are adopted by Russian citizens in the context of the extensive state propaganda messaging. In particular, drawing on Teo's (2018) conceptualization of forms of subjectivity, whereby "society, culture, and history provide forms (molds) of subjectivity, whereby (developing) individuals have the agency to sometimes choose, expand, or

change forms" (p. 583), I broaden the analysis of the subjectivity positions. Although the driving process behind the original subjectivity positions derived from Hall's (1980) conceptualization is the same, they might evidence themselves differently depending on various factors. I also draw on examples to demonstrate the influences exerted and the subjectivity positions enacted in response. These examples are drawn for illustrative purposes. I do not claim ultimate truth to the interpretations I propose, only plausibility, informed by analytical tools and contextual understanding.

Thus, I provide the analyses of the different subjectivity positions enacted in response to the propaganda. The focus here is specifically on the behavioural manifestations of the different subjectivity positions. I extend Hall's (1980) theoretical categorization beyond understanding the relationship between the ideology produced through encoding and the audience decoding of the ideology presented. By analyzing not only the messaging itself, but also the diverse engagement that Russian citizens have with the messaging, I discuss the subjectivity positions that are enacted by the citizens in response to the government propaganda. Here, the lived ideology becomes an important contributing tool that allows to incorporate the meanings decoded as well as the interpretation of the everyday experiences. It is as a result of this more nuanced approach that the new positions of enacted subjectivities are developed to provide a more detailed understanding of the engagement with Russian propaganda.

Subjectivity Positions and Propaganda Influence

Another dimension that needs to be considered is the interrelationship between propaganda influence through the DPM model and conformity and subjectivity positions derived from Hall's (1980) subject positions. Specifically, the dominant subjectivity can be theorized to correspond to authoritarian and conforming personality; the negotiated subjectivity to non-

authoritarian, but conforming; and the oppositional subjectivity to non-authoritarian and non-conforming. Although these distinctions are useful, they have variety within them and are not necessarily absolutely clear-cut.

Dominant Subjectivity

In line with Hall's (1980) proposed positions, dominant subjectivity implies full acceptance of the ideas presented by the state. Those espousing dominant subjectivity readily reproduce the messages that they decode as intended by the propaganda. This subjectivity also implies authoritarian and conforming tendencies.

Both of the authoritarian dimensions within the DPM model have been very clearly expressed by Putin (2022a, b) in his speeches. Specifically, the interpretative repertoire of 'Ukraine as a threat' is built around creating a sense of threat to the Russian security and presenting Ukrainians fighting against Russian invasion as the embodiment of the (mostly Western) 'other' determined to destroy Russia. This interpretative repertoire is, therefore, appealing to those with authoritarian dimension focused on security and stability. Likewise, the interpretative repertoire identified as 'foreign influence' is mostly concerned with the geopolitical power struggles between Russia and the West, in which Russia needs to win in order to assert its dominance within what it considers to be its sphere of influence. Thus, the interpretative repertoire presented here is designed to appeal to those for whom power and influence are the more prevalent authoritarian dimension. The dimensions of the DPM model are, of course, not mutually exclusive – one can simultaneously believe in the superiority of one's nation and feel threatened by the enemy. Most importantly, for both dimensions, there is a strong sense of the ingroup – those who are in support of the current government (as one

bringing security and stability and/or as one bringing international recognition as a superpower) – and the outgroup – all those who oppose this, both within Russia and outside of it.

Consequently, the dominant subjectivity should feel national pride, while at the same time believing that Russia is under threat from an enemy – the US, which controls NATO and the West and uses Ukraine to attack Russia. Therefore, although the US is the framed as the primary enemy, Ukrainians who are presented as doing the US bidding (i.e., fighting against Russian invasion) are enemies by extension. They are the neo-Nazis – a term used widely and frequently to incite a sense of the 'other' who is threatening the 'us' – Russians. Thus, the feelings propaganda aims to produce are pride and fear. In fact, much of the cultural production funded by the Russian state has been specifically aimed at these two emotions (Dolin, 2024; Isaev, 2016). Ultimately, these discourses should produce a sense that Russia needs protection, and the true patriots should engage in whatever action they can to help. This discourse appears to have been fairly successful in creating the feelings, at least in part due to creating a sense that majority of people in Russia are for the war and for Putin.

Further, for the dominant subjectivity, conformity is an inherent response to the messaging decoded. By definition, this group is in agreement with the messaging produced by the state, accepting the interpretative repertoires presented without scrutiny. It follows than that those with dominant subjectivity behave in ways that conform to the ideology presented by the propaganda.

Security-Oriented Dominant Subjectivity. Within Russian context today, I believe there are two main routes via which dominant subjectivity is engrained and these routes are informed by the two main dimensions within the DPM model. First, there are those who, as originally intended in Hall's (1980) description, simply take the government messages at face

value, believe in them, and are participating in the society accordingly. This group is driven by the security dimension and, consequently, fears the external and internal threats. It is in the name of security and stability that they are willing to support the decisions announced by Putin in his speeches – as long as these decisions are framed as necessary security measures. I refer to this subjectivity position as the 'security-oriented dominant subjectivity'. This subjectivity position can be exemplified by the following quote: "We are not at war! Military actions are taking place as part of a special operation for liberation. If our troops hadn't entered, then their [troops] would have entered [our territory]!" (Burtin, 2022, p.14; my transl.). The quote comes from a conversation of the Russian journalist Shura Burtin with two women working at the Kaluga regional administration, shortly following the start of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This statement evidences the belief in state propaganda – incursion into a neighbouring country is portrayed in the terms offered by the government ('special operation') and it affirms such an action as one done out of fear of the enemy entering Russian territory had Russia not attacked first.

In terms of practices, the security-oriented dominant subjectivity is evidenced in actions driven by the fear of Ukrainians, the West, and those inside Russia who, by opposing the war, are enabling the enemy. For instance, some of those who have volunteered to join the Russian army following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine would adopt this subjectivity position, especially those who have done so prior to the monetary incentives announced by the Russian government. However, given the lack of reliable information pertaining to military personnel during the ongoing war, the analysis of this behaviour is limited to stating that it occurred as it is unclear how many people volunteered at this stage. Therefore, I focus more in-depth on the behaviours that have been exhibited by the civilian population. One prime example of such a behaviour is

denunciations. Denunciations, written by regular citizens to inform the state about misbehaviours of other citizens, are not unique to Russia or to authoritarian states, even if they do tend to be more prevalent in such regimes (Bergemann, 2017; Fitzpatrick & Gellately, 1996). However, there is a notable rise in denunciations following the introduction of the new laws in Russia, especially laws pertaining to expressing opinions that contradict the interpretative repertoires provided by Putin and circulated by the propaganda (Semenov, 2023). It should be noted that there are different motivations that can lead to one filing a denunciation. However, as Russian social anthropologist Aleksandra Arkhipova explains, there is a substantial group of 'moral entrepreneurs' who are engaging in policing of the conformity to new norms lest there be threats to existing stability and security (Zheyanov, 2024). These actions exemplify the security-oriented dominant subjectivity as the driving force for many of within this group is ensuring that the voices opposing the state are quenched. Of course, not everyone with the security-oriented dominant subjectivity engages in denunciations, but it is a type of behaviour that one might consider. In fact, the rise in the number of denunciations itself signals that for those espousing the security-oriented dominant subjectivity this is one of the outlets for action.

Further, the driving emotion of fear associated with the security-oriented dominant subjectivity makes those espousing this subjectivity position particularly vulnerable to conspiracy theories. The Existential Threat Model of conspiracy theories indicates that in times of crises that can be seen as an existential threat (such as a war), the elevated levels of fear and uncertainty drive the need for sense-making processes, which conspiracy theories satisfy "by providing perceivers with the idea that they understand the root causes of feelings of existential threat" (van Prooijen, 2020, p. 18). For a successful indoctrination into conspiracy theories, one more ingredient is needed – a clearly identifiable outgroup (van Prooijen, 2020). Thus, the

interpretative repertoires provided in Putin's (2022a, b) speeches provide all the components identified as necessary by the Existential Threat Model to cultivate conspiratorial thinking. In fact, there is a notable rise in conspiracy theories in Russia following the 2022 invasion (Bogatyreva, 2024; Šrol & Čavojová, 2024). Of particular interest is that the conspiracy theories circulated tend to be pro-state. It is typical for conspiratorial thinkers to be suspicious of their own governments, not to align their beliefs with the state propaganda (Bogatyreva, 2024). The tendency to support the government in this case may be attributed to the Russian state media, which is actively involved in the creation and circulation of pro-state propaganda that centres on the clearly identifiable enemy – the West (Šrol & Čavojová, 2024). For those espousing the security-oriented dominant subjectivity and believing in the conspiracy theories propagated by the state there is an easy way to get involved – by promoting the circulation of these theories online. In fact, there has been a notable increase in the spread of conspiracy theories on social media platforms following the start of the war (Babacan & Tam, 2022). While some of it can be attributed to the Russian state itself, the information warfare launched by Kremlin is actively supported by Russian citizens as well, especially on X (formerly Twitter) platform (Babacan & Tam, 2022). Being driven by fear and given the tendency of the security-oriented dominant subjectivity towards unwavering support of the government makes this subjectivity position the most likely to engage in the spread of conspiracy theories online.

Power-Oriented Dominant Subjectivity. Second, there are those who underscore their allegiance to Putin or to Russia as represented by the current government no matter which decisions are made or which actions are taken. It is not a belief in a particular cause that drives this variation of dominant subjectivity, but rather the belief that the decisions taken by those in power must be the right decisions and should, therefore, be followed. This group falls within the

second dimension of the DPM model as it is driven by the unwavering belief in the power of Putin and of Russia – Russia is stronger, better, larger and, therefore, is right. I refer to this subjectivity position as the 'power-oriented dominant subjectivity'. This subjectivity position is more susceptible to the interpretative repertoires that emphasize Russia as a global superpower, as a strong country capable of enforcing its will on others should that be necessary. Therefore, the status of Russia as a power to be reckoned with is highlighted as one of the positive outcomes expected from engaging in the war in Ukraine: "Essentially, Russia, when it brings the special military operation to its logical conclusion, will secure the position we and our descendants need in the new world order" (Belokrysova et al., 2022, p. 91). Consequently, the support for the war emerges because, for this group, it is evident that Russia is the stronger party and, thus, is entitled to dictate its will, punishing those who are unwilling to accept this version of reality.

Unlike the security-oriented dominant subjectivity, which is driven by fear, the power-oriented dominant subjectivity is espoused by those who are driven by pride. For this subjectivity position, national pride is associated with national symbolism and leads to attachment to the nation as an abstract social entity (Schatz & Lavine, 2007). In other words, for the power-oriented dominant subjectivity, there is an idea of the nation that they are proud to be a part of and, as it is a social entity, they believe that those who are patriots of their country should share their feelings. The propaganda that focuses on the mythologization of the past and the celebration of historical figures is targeting this subjectivity position, as it is through the myths and key figure representations that the pride in the past and present national achievements is cultivated (Barash, 2018). The notable shift towards glorification of the WWII along with Stalin's regime and the feeling of pride as the predominant reaction to WWII (Yakovleva, 2018;

see Chapter 2 for a more detailed historiography) is one of the examples via which the propaganda machine in Russia has tried to engrain this subjectivity position.

In practice, this is particularly visible with the youth military patriotic clubs. The youth who join these organizations do so voluntarily (Laruelle, 2015). However, the administrative and organizational components of these clubs tend to be associated with the government, especially following the announcement of *Yunarmiya* (Young Army Cadets National Movement) in 2015 – a movement that is to inspire national pride in youth and is endorsed both by the Ministry of Defense and Putin (Goldsmith, 2015). Some military patriotic clubs that have been independent previously became subsumed under this initiative (Bækken, 2023). The importance of these clubs lies in the fact that the youth joining is being cultivated with a view to instill militaristic national pride, leading to incorporating power-oriented dominant subjectivity. Specifically, one of the practices used in the youth military patriotic clubs for these purposes is 'war merging' – a "*tool of manipulation that blurs the boundaries between contemporary wars and prevailing political myths about wars of the past*" (Bækken, 2023, p. 7). For the youth military patriotic clubs, the war merging is done between the WWII and the ongoing war in Ukraine. In a sense, the reliance on the symbolism and myths associated with WWII are being reused in relation to the war in Ukraine. For example, the St. George ribbon (*георгиевская лента*), although a symbol tracing its roots to Russia's imperial history, has been strongly associated with WWII victory in the Soviet culture (Kolstø, 2016). The St. George ribbon became ubiquitous as a symbol of the current war in Ukraine and is used extensively in the youth military patriotic clubs to instill a sense of continuation between the WWII fight with fascism and the current war (Bækken, 2023). By linking the two wars, not through comparison but by building a sense of continuation, there is an attempt to merge the enemy and the necessity of fighting this enemy,

while simultaneously linking the sense of past victory and pride for that with the current war efforts. When successful, the war merging can lead to cultivating the power-oriented dominant subjectivity in youth.

Outside of the attempts at bringing up youth with a specific mindset, the power-oriented dominant subjectivity can be seen in the initiatives undertaken to boost the pride and show support publicly, such as the Z-symbolism that became prevalent since the start of the 2022 invasion (Charykova, 2023). The 'Z' symbol, seen on Russian military equipment in Ukraine, has been taken to represent the Russian invasion. Although the Russian military uses multiple symbols, the 'Z' is by far the most ubiquitous as a symbol of support of the war in Ukraine, exemplified with replacement of the Russian Cyrillic letter "З" with Latin letter "Z" in certain words or new word derivatives, such as 'z-patriot' (discussed in more detail below) or 'z-activist' (Kozlovskaya, 2024)[10]. The practices of showcasing one's support through Z-symbolism are varied, including placing a 'Z' on vehicles, buying T-shirts with the symbol or with words containing the symbol, or, as some instructors have done in schools and even kindergartens, arranging children in a 'Z' shape and posting the photographs on social media (Aleksandrovich, 2022). These actions demonstrate the behaviours that can be linked to the power-oriented dominant subjectivity as they are designed to demonstrate one's pride in the actions of Russia's military to others. None of these actions have been sponsored or enforced by the government – they are individual initiatives undertaken by those who believe in the state propaganda and interested in promoting the ideas further, doing what they can to support the cause.

[10] For some time at the start of the invasion, the 'V' symbol also used on Russian military vehicles was popular (Panchenkov, 2022). However, its popularity waned, with Z-symbolism firmly establishing itself as the primary signifier of support for the Russian military in this war (Kozlovskaya, 2024).

Extended Dominant Subjectivity. It should be noted that there are those who do not just adopt the interpretative repertoires advanced by Putin, but also extend them rather than repeating the messages produced by the propaganda. For example, at the start of the 2022 escalation, many military bloggers (milbloggers) in Russia were fully supportive of the war, but discontent with the way it was reported in Russian media (overly positive) and were of opinion that the Russian forces were being held back in Ukraine – through the incompetent commands of their superiors (Spansvoll, 2024). Therefore, those who adopt this subjectivity position can be seen as espousing the 'extended dominant subjectivity', for they accept the propaganda messages and are looking for ways to improve the outcomes in line with the interpretative repertoires presented. For instance, milbloggers can offer their criticism that is aimed at highlighting the issues that do not allow the Russian army to win as easily and effortlessly as has been expected at the start of the 2022 invasion:

> If other issues were also resolved, perhaps the reaction would not be so sharp. But when a soldier from Laos, for various reasons, does not receive combat pay, wages, or has to find his own generator or boards for a trench – while still managing to destroy enemy personnel – and then sees a logistics officer or HR worker or financial officer awarded for excellent troop provisioning, it does not exactly boost his motivation. (Two Majors, 2023)

The mentioning of 'Laos' here is not a typo – the milbloggers in Russia have adopted their language as a result of prosecutions under the 'discrediting the Russian army' law that many of them faced for voicing their concerns (Arkhipova, 2024). Thus, while they do adopt the dominant subjectivity position, they are nonetheless regarded with caution by the state. What differentiates this subjectivity position from the other dominant subjectivity positions is their

willingness to criticize certain actions taken by the Russian state or by some key figures. In practice, one of the ways this subjectivity position is evidenced is through the actions of the so-called 'turbo-patriots' or 'z-patriots' (terms widely used by Russian opposition figures and, to some extent, entering the Western media as well (e.g., Galeotti, 2023). As the names suggest, this form of patriotism refers to relentless support for the decisions taken by the government. At the same time, however, they are unsatisfied with the way the decisions are being executed.

As the state was busy trying to shut down open opposition at the start of the 2022 invasion, those with extended dominant subjectivity have been left to their own devices. This negligence from the state, coupled with the perception that the turbo-patriots are expressing the views that largely align with the state discourse, has created a false sense of security for those adopting this subjectivity position. However, as Putin achieved the internal order he was aiming for, calls that largely supported his ideas, but indicated that he was not achieving them in the right way (such as, having wrong commanding figures instilled or not using the weapons he should be) became, to their disdain, targets of the suppression machine as well. The most notable case, perhaps, was the arrest of Igor Strelkov-Girkin (Roth, 2023). Even his instrumental role in the diversions and land occupation in the Donbas region in 2014 (Ostrovsky, 2015) did not save him from being targeted by the state that wants nothing short of complete support and compliance.

On a larger scale, milbloggers, in general, constitute the example of the suppressions experienced by those espousing the extended dominant subjectivity. While most of the milbloggers oblige with the government requirements relating to the content and language used during coverage, some do go beyond these requirements in their reporting. The Russian state paid particular attention to messaging posted on Telegram channels and, early on, threatened

milbloggers with arrests for discrediting the army if any of the messaging posted would run contrary to the official position taken by the Kremlin on the events being reported (Farbman, 2023). In some instances, the direct and unambiguous state threats have led to notable self-censorship of the milblogers (ISW Press, 2023). Indeed, those who have not changed their course and continued criticizing the military and the leadership in charge of the decision-making have been arrested, tried and convicted on charges of discrediting the army and spreading false news (e.g., Okun, 2024; Trevelyan, 2024). Thus, it is not enough to only decode the messages sent by the state as is intended by the propaganda – one also has to abide by the practices called for by the state in order to be in favour. The individual initiatives undertaken by those with extended dominant subjectivity are to be suppressed, much like the initiatives undertaken by those espousing the oppositional subjectivity.

Negotiated Subjectivity

Negotiated subjectivity, aligning with Hall's (1980) negotiated position, means agreeing with or acquiescing to the dominant ideas but expressing a different stance through everyday lived experiences. In other words, someone espousing negotiated subjectivity either explicitly accepts the state propaganda or, at the very least, does not express opinions to the contrary. The support is, therefore, expressed not for patriotic reasons or the feelings of righteousness, but rather as a form of resignation or desire to be part of the majority, whatever the majority decides. In no small part the performative presentation of the majority view through the sociological propaganda is targeting this audience – those with negotiated subjectivity – as this group does not tend to overtly contradict what it believes to be accepted by the majority. Along with the opinion polling, the sociological propaganda is directed at the negotiated subjectivity via the interpretative repertoire of 'no such country as Ukraine' presented by Putin (2022a, b) in his

speeches. This interpretative repertoire is the most salient for the negotiated subjectivity as for those not driven by authoritarian inclinations, fear and pride may not be acceptable reasons for aggression towards a neighbouring country. However, if the neighbouring country is not really a country separate from Russia, these actions can be tolerated – just as the incursions of Russian government on rights and freedoms of Russian citizens are tolerated (Etkind, 2023; Pomeranz, 2021) – especially if the majority seems to support these actions. Thus, for this subjectivity, conformity is the driving force for supporting the regime. Indeed, the drive to belong to a group can be quite strong, with many being influenced as a result of the social pressure to express opinions that conform with the perceived majority (Asch, 1955; Theriault et al., 2021). The agreement with majority is seen in contexts where the worst that can happen is being ostracized. In Russia, however, the price for expressing contrarian opinions is much higher, further incentivizing being part of the perceived majority.

For the negotiated subjectivity, 'us' refers to the 'ordinary' people just trying to live their lives in the circumstances provided. Within the current Russian context, this can refer to anyone who considers themselves to be apolitical as this attitude towards politics has been purposefully cultivated through the Russian propaganda machine (Dobrohotov, 2023). Consequently, for the negotiated subjectivity, 'them' are both those 'poking the bear' (opposition) and the 'bear' (the state) as both of these groups are engaged in political actions. Those espousing negotiated subjectivity do not protest against the government but also do not support the government willingly if the support required extends beyond nominal agreement with government actions. The negotiated subjectivity does not see the government as part of 'us' – only as someone powerful enough to enforce its will, which is reflected in continuously (from early 2000's onwards) low levels of trust in the government and the media in Russia (Denisova et al., 2010;

Nazarov et al., 2019; White, 2002). The ultimate reaction to propaganda, therefore, is to learn what needs to be said (e.g., get acquainted with the newspeak and with the new limitations on speech) as this is what allows one to keep on with the everyday life. The state here is not considered to be a trusted source, but rather a powerful political entity that should not be interfered with (Dobrohotov, 2023). Therefore, if the state decides that military involvement is needed for its functioning, so be it. Especially if that involvement is needed on essentially Russian territory and to protect essentially Russian people – which is what the interpretative repertoire of 'no such country as Ukraine' is trying to instill.

Reluctant Negotiated Subjectivity. Within the Russian context today, some are driven by the desire to simply live their lives, distancing themselves from the ongoing events and the news about them (Alyukov, 2022). They do not want to interfere with the government decisions, irrespective of their personal opinions on the decisions taken by Putin. For this subjectivity position, there is a prevalent notion that there is nothing one can do to change the course of the events set out by the government – in a sense, it is learned helplessness cultivated by the state (Holzer, 2024). Therefore, it is best to stay away from politics. I refer to this subjectivity position as the 'reluctant negotiated subjectivity' as the compliance with the changing situation stems from the belief that conformity is the only approach. This position can be exemplified by the following statement provided by a participant in a focus-group conducted by the Chronicle Project (2024) in Russia in 2023:

> I think this was just decided at the top, that's all. They didn't ask you, and they didn't ask me either. I spoke with a young woman from Donetsk. She said they didn't really ask her either. And they didn't ask much when they were annexing [the Donetsk region], either. That's what the locals are saying. (p. 52, my transl.)

There is a sense of resignation in this statement, whereby the government makes the decisions without taking into consideration the opinions of the people – not regarding the start of the war, not regarding the decision to 'reunite' the Donetsk region with Russia. Even though these decisions have a significant impact on the lives of people, there is nothing one can do to influence the decision-making process – just accept it as is.

For the reluctant negotiated subjectivity, the propaganda does not appear to be persuasive. Rather, it is informative – it describes what the government expects one to say. Thus, if the propaganda discusses cohesion and unity in Russians' support for Putin and for the war – this is the message one needs to repeat in order to stay out of trouble[11]. All of these efforts are not in vain – Russian people know that expressing opinions that are not favoured by the government are punishable and, therefore, they avoid expressing such opinions (Kizilova & Norris, 2022). This silence, in turn, is presented as full support of Putin and the war, forming a closed circle, whereby the state propaganda professes overwhelming support, which induces people to not oppose the views, which is taken to represent the support. Most notably, someone espousing the reluctant negotiated subjectivity is willing to repeat the propaganda messages but is not willing to act upon them. Thus, the lived ideology is evidenced more often than not through the absences in practices rather than through active behaviours.

When it does come to practice, the actions of those espousing the reluctant negotiated subjectivity appear to be counter to ones one would expect to see if the state propaganda was indeed believed and accepted. One of the prime examples of the disconnect between words and

[11] As some of the opposition figures joke, the state is asking people: "Do you support the special military operation? Or would you like to go to prison for 15 years?" (Shakirov, 2023). In essence, propaganda is trying to impose the sense that the only way one can safely proceed with their everyday business is if one does not oppose the government agenda.

actions here is the large number of people who are presumably supporting the war (at least according to the state-produced opinion polls) and the comparatively few who volunteered to sing up for the army throughout the summer of 2022, when it became clear that the situation in Ukraine will be prolonged and the existing force needs to be replenished to continue (Massicot, 2024). In fact, this paucity of volunteers is what forced the 'partial' mobilization in Russia in September 2022, which disproportionately targeted Indigenous populations of Russia in resource-poor settings (Zmyvalova, 2023) and led to a mass exodus of men into the neighbouring countries (Mukhina, 2023). While those fleeing from Russia do often indicate their unwillingness to participate in the war, I argue that this is an example of reluctant negotiated subjectivity rather than oppositional subjectivity as the opposition was not evident prior to leaving Russia and leaving Russia was prompted by personal reasons (i.e., not wanting to be personally involved in the war) rather than by political reasons. In other words, had the mobilization not been announced, those espousing this negotiated subjectivity position would have continued living in Russia and pretending that nothing is happening, as long as they get to continue on with their lives. It is only the inability to continue business as usual that forced them to leave, evidencing the reluctant negotiated subjectivity.

Another noteworthy event where reluctant negotiated subjectivity is evidenced is the 2024 Russian presidential election. As previously noted, this election had a historically high turnout at 77% (Komin, 2024). However, this turnout has not been achieved by inspiring voters to come out, but rather through diverse tactics of coercion of the eligible voters to cast their votes, with reports of coercion being recorded in more than 60 different regions of Russia[12]

[12] Additional boosting of voter turnout has been also achieved by 'encouraging' Ukrainians in occupied territories to vote – at gunpoint (Karmanau & Borrows, 2024; Shevchenko, 2024).

(Golos, 2024). For example, the employees working in many organizations operating under state budget, and in some commercial organizations, were told that they must vote, that they should present evidence of their voting (e.g., show a selfie at the polling station), and, occasionally, were told that their vote should be cast for Putin (Rustamova, 2024). In regions where it was possible (about one third of Russia's regions), employees were aggressively encouraged to register for and vote through the electronic voting system with some, again, being told to send proof to the employer, such as a screenshot of online registration (Zotova et al., 2024). The widespread insistence of employers that their employees must vote spurred the spread of news articles explaining to employees their voting rights and providing suggestions as to what can be done if their employer is trying to coerce them (e.g., Cherdantseva, 2024; Oblomov, 2024). Nonetheless, as the elections turnout showed, the coercion to vote has produced the results the Russian government wanted to see. Yet the need to rely on such tactics clearly indicates reluctant negotiated subjectivity – the willingness to agree with the state, but unwillingness to engage in activities required by the state, unless one is forced to do so.

Yet perhaps the most striking example of the reluctant negotiated subjectivity in Russia was evidenced during Prigozhin's march on Moscow in June of 2023 (Ilyin, 2023). The march itself was not excessively speedy, thus giving ample opportunity for Russians to react. While it is true that they have had supporters come out (not in astonishing numbers, but quite visible), for the most part, Russians were quietly waiting to see who wins, with no intention to provide reactions either in favour of or against Prigozhin's march as he was progressing further towards Moscow (Foht et al., 2023). Of course, coming out to the streets to object could have been dangerous – but objecting online was certainly not. And yet there were very few commentaries either way, mostly expressing confusion (Foht et al., 2023). This can be seen as quite telling. It is

hard to imagine that people who are supposedly overwhelmingly in support of Putin do not have any objections to a person trying to overthrow his government. Thus, this quiet acquiescence towards an attempted rebellion is indicative of the reluctant negotiated subjectivity – nominally supporting the government, but unwilling to act on its behalf.

Deflecting Negotiated Subjectivity. For this subjectivity position, conformity is the chosen way of action not because of belief in the state propaganda nor is it because of disbelief in one's ability to influence the politics. This negotiated subjectivity position is situated within the post-truth discourse, whereby conformity is arrived at due to the confusion created through post-truth messaging, aimed at convincing those receiving the messaging that the truth cannot be known (Espigares, 2022). The most prominent idea here is that the Russian government lies – cultivating mistrust in the government messaging, but so do all other governments along with any non-government information sources. Therefore, there is no tenable way of obtaining information that is true (Espigares, 2022). It should be noted, however, that the post-truth rhetoric is not applied universally for those espousing this negotiated subjectivity position. Rather, it can be said that it is used as a way of avoiding engagement with the Russian state decision to invade Ukraine. In this way, by claiming that the truth cannot be known, there is open room for debating whether Putin's actions are warranted and, therefore, no need to object those actions since one can never definitively know that they are not justifiable. At the same time, this does not mean that those located within this subjectivity position believe that no truth exists on any subject.

This negotiated subjectivity position, then, tends towards holding a more cynical position. I refer to this subjectivity position as 'deflecting negotiated subjectivity', as those espousing this subjectivity position are trying to shift the focus of the discussion from considerations of whether

the war is warranted on any grounds (political, moral, etc.) to debating whether one could ever know enough to draw any conclusions. For this subjectivity position, the reluctance to engage in political discussions thus stems from the perceived inability to ever know enough truth to be able to form an opinion, which leads to the conclusion that the focus of their attention should remain on their personal lives. An illustrative example of this position is the following quote from a conversation with a retiree from Krasnodar: "I am trying to be apolitical, not to accept either one or the other side, and to live within the circumstances as they are" (Public Sociology Laboratory, 2024, p. 169, my transl.). Here, the explicitly proclaimed apolitical stance is purposeful and deliberate. What follows in practice, however, is the absence of action as there is no reason to contradict one's government and endanger oneself if one cannot be sure that what the government is doing is wrong. Thus, for the deflecting negotiated subjectivity conformity stems from a derived apolitical position. In other words, the apolitical nature of this position is related to the proclaimed inability to arrive at definitive conclusions on their own and the inability to have trust in any of the information sources available. In the absence of ability to make sound decisions, the best decision is not to oppose the government as, perhaps, it knows what it is doing. And even if it does not, those with the deflecting negotiated subjectivity are not ready to intervene, preferring to withdraw into the comfort of focusing exclusively on their personal lives.

For this subjectivity position, the 'us' are all those who share their position that truth cannot be known and, therefore, the best action is to withdraw from the political sphere and concentrate on one's own life. Everyone else is seen as 'them' – being duped by different ideologies into doing the biddings of the respective pro-government or oppositional power groups. The propaganda messages mostly fall flat here – they are neither accepted nor opposed. In fact, the messaging is mostly experienced cynically, with disdain towards those who buy into

the propaganda or any other ideological belief as, from the perspective of deflecting negotiated subjectivity, self-interest is the only reasonable way to evaluate the situation and act in the given circumstances (Schindler, 2024). The attitude of the deflecting negotiated subjectivity is captured by a phrase encouraging incessant doubts – "*не всё так однозначно*" ("not everything is so unequivocal" (my transl.), which became a well-known signal phrase, with Semen Slepakov (a popular Russian figure) even dedicating a song to this phrase (Shnitman-Mcmillin, 2023). This proclaimed equivocal nature of the war, however, combined with the cynicism, produces a stance that takes one outside of reflecting upon one's position on the conflict (as achieving such a position is deemed impossible) into assuming absolute indifference towards all sides involved (Khomyakov, 2023), almost as if the war existed outside of reality.

By definition then, the behaviours of those who adopt this subjectivity position, which tries to refrain from behaving in ways that would signal a clear political stance, are more difficult to observe. However, some of those signing the military contracts can be seen as espousing deflecting negotiated subjectivity. For this group, considering that the government might have a reason for what it is doing, combined with the many benefits of joining the army, can be sufficient reasons to participate in the war. After all, the military service in Russia now offers unprecedented financial payouts as well as health benefits and educational opportunities for the children of those serving in the military, among the many other benefits (State Duma, 2024; Yevloyeva, 2023), which are all designed as incentives for those considering self-serving reasons for signing up, rather than patriotic feelings. Perhaps a more evident but less massive example can be seen in the pressures exerted on public figures to state their position on the war. For instance, Nurlan Saburov, a well-known Russian stand-up comedian, in the course of altercations with his US audience on his American tour following the Russian invasion is forced to divulge

his position (Parody Club, 2022). Many have tried to avoid expressing an overt opinion through phrases to the account of "well, we all understand everything" – a noteworthy contrast whereby the claim that everyone understands everything is actually meant in a sense that nothing can be known definitively – you just have to play along with the government statements to live your life, a sentiment described by one journalist as follows:

> For many years, "everyone understands everything" is the phrase that characterizes best the political system in Russia. "Everyone understands" where the decision to sentence Navalny and to poison him was made. "Everyone understands" who is behind the murders of Anna Politkovskaya and Boris Nemtsov, behind the elimination of other opposition politicians and journalists, as well as overly active patriots. After the murder of Prigozhin, it became clear that the laws of struggle within the power elite would now have to be "understood" as well. (Trudolyubov, 2023, para. 1, my transl.)

What Trudolyubov (2023) describes as 'understanding' within this context is accepting that the government has a monopoly on truth that one must take into account, while knowing that the government is lying. Invoking the idea of "everyone understands everything" then signals not claims to understanding what is happening, but understanding that it is the game played by the powers that be with which one should not be interfering.

On a day-to-day basis, the daily lives in larger cities in Russia have mostly returned to normal within a few months of the war – even the symbols of the war, such as the "Z", are now hard to spot (Babich, 2023). Such trends are similarly noted in the more rural locations in Russia. For instance, an ethnographic study in three regions (Sverdlovsk region, Republic of Buryatia, and Krasnodar region) indicate that the war symbolism is disappearing from the streets and so do the conversations about the war (Public Sociology Laboratory, 2024). The ethnographers'

observations and in-depth interviews indicate that an apolitical stance is quite common and, in relation to the war, this stance can be summarized as towards "bad weather or natural disaster that you would really like to avoid, but if it did happen, you can only come to terms with it" (Public Sociology Laboratory, 2024, p. 177, my transl.). There is resistance towards having any discussions about the war, with the shift of focus towards daily tasks and local affairs. The apolitical stance also means refusal to follow the news, trying to live the lives as if nothing is happening and deflecting responsibility for everything that is happening to the authorities who must know what they are doing (Public Sociology Laboratory, 2024). Thus, the deflecting negotiated subjectivity evidences itself in the desire to withdraw from the public sphere and trying to return to 'normal lives' while the government does what it does, irrespective of the actions that may involve.

Oppositional Subjectivity

The oppositional subjectivity coincides with Hall's (1980) oppositional position as it rejects the ideas presented by the dominant messaging. For this subjectivity, the interpretative repertoires presented in Putin's (2022a, b) speeches are neither believed (as they are by the dominant subjectivity) nor instructive (as they are for the negotiated subjectivity). Those espousing oppositional subjectivity refuse to repeat the messaging produced by the propaganda. It should be noted that the oppositional subjectivity does not mean an oppositional stance in the political sense. In fact, it can be argued that all current opposition in Russia is outside of the political sphere as there is no legal recourse for political opposition to participate in political activities due to the criminalization of such acts (Vereshchagin, 2022). The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 caught many by surprise, eliciting a wide range of negative emotions, which have resulted in increased depression and anxiety (Nestik, 2023).

For the oppositional subjectivity, ‘us’ are all those who oppose the state propaganda generally and the war in Ukraine specifically. The state and those espousing the dominant subjectivity are seen as “them” due to the diametrically opposing viewpoints. However, when it comes to negotiated subjectivity, there is no unified reaction among those with oppositional subjectivity. Some consider the situation to be ‘black and white’, whereby either one opposes the war and flees Russia and, therefore, is one of ‘”us”, or stays inside and by not protesting supports the regime, thereby being part of “them” (Grigoryeva, 2022). Others consider the negotiated subjectivity to be part of “us” even if people did not leave Russia and do not openly oppose the war. Absence of behaviours indicating opposition is not viewed as support for the state, but rather as a reflection of the political situation in which openly opposing the war is punishable by the law (Sherstoboeva, 2024). Thus, should the situation change, the expressed opinions on the war will change as well.

Passive Oppositional Subjectivity. This oppositional subjectivity position can be difficult to distinguish from a reluctant negotiated subjectivity as in both cases there is a tendency for those espousing these subjectivity positions not to express their opinions on the war publicly. Moreover, the subjectivity positions identified here are not set in stone, with some people falling in-between the subjectivity positions and some, perhaps, migrating back and forth. After all, opinions on the ongoing war in Ukraine can change as can one’s determination to express or not to express them. However, those espousing what I refer to as ‘passive oppositional subjectivity’ can engage in symbolic resistance, such as making political jokes with friends or coming up with alternative (not yet prohibited) expressions for what is going on (Arkhipova et al., 2016). After all, as the Russian journalist Anna Narinskaya (2024) puts it, “What can one do in a situation where simply having an opinion, a thought, or a judgment is punishable – and often

not just by some protocol, but by outright imprisonment?" (para. 4). Her answer is 'to be silent against' – that is what Russians can do now – not to engage in reproducing the propaganda spread by the regime. Of course, tracing passive oppositional activities can be challenging due to the effort taken to hide their opinions from public view. However, passive oppositional subjectivity can also be manifested through actions that are still legal in Russia yet do indicate a belief that the war should be stopped and that Putin should no longer be in power.

Perhaps, some of the clearer examples of behaviours someone espousing the passive oppositional subjectivity engages in can be seen in the reactions to Boris Nadezhdin's presidential candidacy for the 2024 elections in Russia and Alexei Navalny's funeral held in Moscow on March 1, 2024. As to Nadezhdin's candidacy, according to Russia's elections laws, in order to become a presidential candidate, he and his team needed to collect 100,000 signatures of Russian citizens testifying that they would like to see him as a candidate (Nechepurenko, 2023). Once the collection of signatures started, multitude of videos were spread online of Russians in various regions standing in long lines to sign on for Nadezhdin (Olimpieva, 2024). This can be seen as part of passive oppositional subjectivity as the action itself falls within the boundaries of Russian laws, yet, in a sense, is subversive considering that, should Nadezhdin become a presidential candidate, he may be a challenger to Putin's continued presidency. Thus, signing on for Nadezhdin clearly signals the desire for change, especially taking into account that Nadezhdin openly opposed Russia's war with Ukraine during his campaign (Dylan et al., 2024).

Similarly, although more localized to Moscow, Navalny's funeral can also be seen as an indicator of the presence of passive oppositional subjectivity. I consider attending Navalny's funeral to be passive oppositional as it falls within the legal scope of activities and is not a direct confrontation with the Russian state. At the same time, indirectly, it is a confrontation with the

Russian government as multiple efforts were put into preventing the funeral from being public in the first place and, when that failed, into limiting the ability of people to attend (Troianovski & Nechepurenko, 2024). Initially, there were attempts made to essentially extort compliance from Navalny's mother – by making the release of Navalny's body to the mother conditional upon her singing an agreement to make the funeral private and quiet (Hopkins, 2024; Troianovski & Nechepurenko, 2024), similar to what was done to Prigozhin's funeral (Margolin, 2024). Then, there were multiple rumours spread that all those of the public who come to the funeral will be targeted by the police after. During the event itself, restrictions were applied for entering the church where the final service was held, with tight police presence ensuring compliance (Hopkins, 2024), and police tried to prevent people from entering the cemetery (Lundblad-Janjić, 2024). However, the amount of people who came to the funeral led to overcrowding (Lindstaedt, 2024), making it very difficult for the state to monitor and police the regulations they tried to set out. This can be seen as part of the passive oppositional subjectivity as Navalny was recognized as a leading figure within Russian opposition to Putin (Lundblad-Janjić, 2024). Within the contemporary sociopolitical context in Russia, those who came to pay their final respects should be considered as part of the opposition. After all, from the perspective of Russian government, Navalny was not a politician – he was a founder and leader of a designated extremist organization – Anti-Corruption Foundation, known as FBK (Snyder, 2022) – imprisoned on a number of charges, with most serious being that of extremism (Litvinova, 2024). Therefore, similarly to the situation with Nadezhdin's signatures, coming to Navalny's funeral cannot be seen as anything but support for opposition, but from the safety of performing an action that, at least at the time of occurrence, was not punishable by Russian law.

One further example of practices in which those espousing the passive oppositional subjectivity could engage in is the laying of flowers to monuments. The practice is traced back to January 14, 2023, when a Russian missile hit an apartment building in Dnipro, resulting in the death of at least 46 people (Tenisheva, 2023). While the Russian propaganda was variously denying culpability (StopFake, 2023), Russians all over the country have started bringing flowers, children's toys (as some children have been killed in the attack as well), and candles to different monuments, mostly those affiliated with Ukraine (e.g., monuments to Ukrainian figures) or those symbolizing political repressions (Liffey, 2023). This spontaneous silent expression of sorrow for the lost civilian lives in Ukraine became known as "flower protests" (Tenisheva, 2023). The practice is ongoing, reemerging in reaction to events or specific dates, such as the commemoration of two years since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Chiknaeva, 2024). This practice is also of interest as the state has responded with repression towards it (Dergacheva, 2023; Liffey, 2023), which led to displacement of the practice rather than its end, with flowers now being left in spontaneous spots rather than being brough to specific monuments which are being monitored by the authorities (The Insider, 2023). While, for the most part, this practice is still relatively safe to engage in, there have been cases of people being detained and fined (Dergacheva, 2023; Tenisheva, 2023), but not prosecuted on criminal charges as of yet. Thus, some of the practices those espousing passive oppositional subjectivity can engage in, while technically legal (it is not against the law in Russia to lay flowers to monuments), may nonetheless be not completely safe from state regulation.

Active Oppositional Subjectivity. Another way the oppositional subjectivity evidences itself is those who clearly articulate their position of opposition to the war in Ukraine, which I identify as 'active oppositional subjectivity'. From the active oppositional subjectivity

perspective, Putin's regime is illegitimate – and has been so for a number of years – and is acting contrary to the best interests of the majority of Russian population, failing to improve the conditions of life and opportunities for the citizens (Laryš, 2024). For the active oppositional subjectivity, the propaganda messages are, therefore, seen simply as that – propaganda aiming to coalesce people into compliance with the government that is exploiting them (Litvinenko, 2022). For instance, in an anonymous interview, one young woman explained her position towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine and towards propaganda as follows:

> I am outraged, first and foremost, by the sheer senselessness of it all. I see no meaning in it; I don't understand the reasons why Putin decided to attack Ukraine. All this propaganda they're broadcasting – it's so absurd, really! I'm outraged that people are dying there. And overall, this entire situation is horrifying because it is absolutely pointless bloodshed. (Belokrysova et al., 2022, p. 196)

It should be noted, however, that although there is a shared understanding within active oppositional subjectivity in terms of not recognizing Putin as a legitimate president of Russia and opposing the war in Ukraine (Laryš, 2024), those espousing active oppositional subjectivity are by no means untied. For many, Navalny was seen as a potential leader who could have unified the opposition outside of Russia, had he been alive and free. Other than Navalny, it appears that there is currently no one figure or a group of figures around whom the oppositional activities can concentrate. Thus, the practices engaged in by those espousing active oppositional subjectivity are aimed at stopping the war in Ukraine, but often lack coherence and structure.

Consequently, there is significant variety of ways in which oppositional activities have been expressed, from group protests and lonely pickets, mostly evident at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Johnson, 2022), to open letters and other public statements on

social media (Wise, 2022), resolution to stay in Russia balancing on the edge of being criminally charged and, for some, being imprisoned (Kizilova & Norris, 2024), or choosing to leave the country and continue one's activities from the outside (Henry et al., 2024). At the start of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, oppositional actions have been widespread but so was the suppression of such actions by the government (Johnson, 2022). Very quickly, new regulations have been enforced throughout the media, such as not calling the war in Ukraine a 'war', which later turned into laws (Lebedeva, 2024). People who voice opinions that oppose the war in Ukraine – or simply name it as such – end up fined or imprisoned, on charges of 'discrediting the Russian army' (McCarthy et al., 2023). By some accounts, Russian police forces detained 20,040 people as of May 2024 for expressing anti-war opinions (OVD-Info, 2024), all of which can be considered as espousing the active oppositional subjectivity.

While many have been finding previously the propaganda messaging to be ridiculous and not deserving attention, other than perhaps a laugh (Slovinskaya, 2022), the power of seeing the same repeated messages day in and day out – no matter how ludicrous – became evident following the start of the 2022 invasion. Thus, some practices engaged in by those espousing active oppositional subjectivity include identifying the propaganda messaging, debunking the fake stories and interpretations offered by it and trying to provide an alternative view on the situation – fact-checking, which prompted a response from the Russian state, claiming that fact-checking is nothing more than Western propaganda aimed against Russia (Danilin, 2024). Nonetheless, those espousing the active oppositional subjectivity aim to disrupt the propaganda discourses on the war, which could help shift the public attitudes in Russia.

In all probability, the most visible and direct examples of the behaviours associated with active oppositional subjectivity are the subversive actions undertaken to disrupt the activities of

the state. Specifically, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, some Russian citizens try to resist the government by acts of sabotage, with the most well-known examples being the 'railway partisans', who try to derail the trains, and the attacks on military enlistment offices (Aizman, 2023). The railway sabotage carries a more organized element, mostly being claimed by antiwar groups that formed following the invasion, such as Stop the Wagons and Freedom of Russia Legion. In addition to the derailment activities, such groups are also attempting to provide alternative discourses on the current war and on the historical events the propaganda relies upon. For instance, on their social media accounts, Stop the Wagons indicates that the tactics they use have been employed by Soviet partisans when fighting the nazis in World War II (Aizman, 2023). Meanwhile, the arson attacks on the military enlistment offices tend to be individual actions. While most of these attacks do not result in significant damages, they do interfere with the overall picture of the overwhelming support for the war. Thus, the Russian government reclassified these attacks in the summer of 2022, changing their status from property damage to acts of terrorism, thereby increasing the maximum prison sentence from 5 to 15 years (Zakharova, 2023). Of course, such subversive actions have not stopped the war, but they do provide an opportunity for those espousing active oppositional subjectivity to demonstrate their willingness to resist the state.

Conclusion

This analysis of the subjectivity positions enacted in response to the state propaganda messaging yields a number of points for consideration. I argue that it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the current situation within Russia. While Hall's (1980) conceptualization provides a framework that is universally applicable (i.e., any messaging in any context can be expected to elicit dominant, negotiated and oppositional positions), it does not

allow for a sufficiently nuanced understanding of the sociohistorical context or the specific influences on the subjectivities exerted by propaganda within this context. Consequently, employing a broadly psychological perspective (i.e., extending beyond the boundaries of psychology into psychological humanities) is necessary to gain an insight not only into the particular subjectivity positions enacted but also via which mechanisms. That is, psychological theorizing, drawing on Teo (2018), provides an opportunity to analyze the processes behind interpreting the messaging, with the understanding that subjectivity cannot be examined and analyzed if one focuses only on the interiority of the individual experiences. This theorization and analysis evidence that Hall's (1980) original conceptualization on its own maybe be insufficient to understand the variety of ways in which the propaganda messages can be interpreted, which is apparent in the behaviours engaged in by those espousing different subjectivity positions identified here. Thus, a diversified set of subjectivity positions is needed to provide a contextualized understanding of the influence of the propaganda messaging.

The expanded perspective on the subjectivity positions can be useful when interpreting the actions undertaken by Russian government towards the citizens. For example, when relying only on Hall's (1980) original conceptualization, it would appear that the Russian state is supressing both the voices of those espousing the oppositional and the dominant subjectivity positions. While it is true that anyone who espouses the oppositional subjectivity position (be it active or passive) can become a target for the government, the same cannot be said for those espousing the dominant subjectivity position. For now, it is evident that only those espousing the extended dominant subjectivity position are targeted by the state. This signals to the Russian population that the propaganda messaging is not up for interpretation – there is a specific way the government expects people to decode the messaging. Those who fall out of line, whichever their

intention may be, are therefore prosecuted. Thus, the psychological theorization of subjectivity positions allows for a more nuanced framework by distinguishing between a range of subjectivity positions within Hall's (1980) original conceptualization.

Chapter 5: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In this chapter, I begin by once again returning to the main questions that guided this work: (a) Why and how does Russian propaganda appear to be particularly effective in indoctrinating Russian citizens living in Russia? and (b) What are the impacts of Russian propaganda on the subjectivity of Russians living in Russia and how these impacts are manifested? In answering the first question, the main argument has been the emphasis of the Russian state on creating an appearance of support – irrespective of what Russian citizens may think or feel on the subject of war with Ukraine. To this end, the propaganda machine employs a number of techniques, many of which are only possible due to the authoritarian nature of the regime (e.g., introducing laws that prohibit use of specific words, such as 'war' or 'invasion' in relation to Russia's actions in Ukraine; see Lebedeva, 2024). In answering the second question, I extended Hall's (1980) theorization of positions that can be adopted in response to messaging and looked at the subjectivity positions that emerged in Russia as a result of the propaganda.

As these questions have been thoroughly examined in the previous chapters, here I focus on evaluating the theorizations that emerged as a result of my analysis from the perspective of their implications. Some of the questions that I will try to address as part of this reflection are as follows: Is the framework that I have developed a useful tool for analyzing how propaganda is shaping subjectivities in Russia (i.e., does it help us understand the situation)? If so, is this framework adaptable? Is it transferrable to contexts outside of Russia? What are the implications? In discussing the implications, what are some broader considerations for the critical theory of subjectivity, for critical psychology, for psychological humanities? In considering these questions, I will also be reflecting on the role of psychology in providing an

informed perspective on large-scale events via theorizing and, in particular, the importance of relying on critical psychology, in combination with other disciplines, to develop relevant conceptualizations.

My hope is that this work contributes to a deeper, alternative understanding of how propaganda emerges and exerts its influence in political contexts where democratic structures are still claimed to exist in form[13], but where democratic principles and practices are increasingly undermined (Stanley, 2015), to the point of backsliding into authoritarianism. Thus, the aim of this study was to offer a complementary perspective to the existing approaches investigating propaganda, including those relying on discourse analysis when analysing the situation specific to the Russo-Ukrainian War (e.g., Alieva et al., 2024; Jovanović, 2023; Oleinik, 2024). The choice to approach the questions guiding this work through the lens of the Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) is a deliberate methodological and epistemological decision grounded in the unique contributions this perspective offers, especially for considering the implications for subjectivities – one of the primary concerns for this dissertation. While discourse analysis in general offers valuable tools for unpacking meaning, power and language, CPD adds a vital psychological dimension that is central to understanding how individuals become positioned by (and position themselves within) the propaganda. What sets CDP apart is its focus on the interaction between discourse (understood to be shaped historically and culturally) and the psychological life: not only how meaning is mediated within the public sphere, but how this

[13] Russian state likes to point out that they regularly hold elections, even though, as discussed elsewhere, the election results tend to be known in advance. To reconsolidate these and other non-democratic practices with the idea that Russia is nonetheless a democracy, the term 'hybrid democracy' is frequently employed – implying that the non-democratic practices are Russian special way of implementing democratic principles rather than admitting that these principles are being undermined (e.g., Bright, 2024; Samorodov, 2023)

meaning is internalized, negotiated and lived (Edley, 2001). Therefore, in contrast to general discourse analysis, which may prioritize sociolinguistic or rhetorical structures (Huckin et al., 2013; Jaspers, 2023; Kaplan, 2014), CDP is oriented toward subjectivity, taking into account the sociohistorical context. It interrogates how people become certain kinds of subjects – not just how language works in public and political texts, but how it infiltrates thoughts, emotions and actions. This is particularly important when studying propaganda, which operates not merely through the transmission of information but is aimed at eliciting specific responses by structuring perceptions, experiences and self-understanding (Hall, 1980; Ellul, 1965), with interpretative repertoires being one of the key mechanisms through which propaganda aims to achieve this (Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

Importantly, this work does not aim to replicate the functions of quantitative or traditional qualitative approaches. Quantitative research on propaganda often examines measurable outcomes – such as shifts in opinions through polls or the voting behaviours (and this dissertation does draw on the information that these methods have to offer) – but struggles to capture the psychological texture of the ideological life under sustained authoritarian regimes, where polls and voting can be forms of propaganda in their own right, which is the case in Russia today (Rustamova, 2024; Yudin, 2020). Even qualitative approaches, while more sensitive to context, may treat participants' accounts at face value without attending to the discursive constructions and the historically situated ideological formations they draw on. Moreover, qualitative research, similarly to the quantitative approaches, is restrained in the context where people do not feel free to speak or otherwise express their mind (Acar et al., 2025). CDP, in contrast, reveals the productive role of the discourse produced by the propaganda in shaping what it is possible to think, feel or do in the given circumstances, enabling the

analysis of how propaganda becomes normalized within the interpretative repertoires that not only provide information on how one is to think about the events, but also on how one is supposed to feel about them.

The psychological focus is also critical in understanding why resistance (at least in the most commonly expected forms) is often absent in authoritarian contexts. Rather than attributing passivity to apathy or cultural determinism, CDP allows for an alternative explanation: the analysis indicates that, in Russia (and, perhaps, in other authoritarian regimes as well), compliance is produced and maintained via multiple channels, eliciting the idea that compliance is reasonable, moral, desirable, or is simply a way of survival in the given context. This is essential in making sense of subjectivities that might appear contradictory or perplexing from an external point of view – subjectivities that may appear to have something very unique about them, rather than about the circumstances into which they are thrown.

Finally, this work's predominantly theoretical orientation (supplemented by targeted empirical engagement) reflects an understanding that the impact of propaganda is not always available through direct empirical capture. Therefore, theorization becomes a critical tool to connect the production of macro-level interpretative repertoires with micro-level psychological responses, leading to the development of corresponding subjectivities. In this regard, drawing on earlier work, namely that of Hall (1980), is a recognition of its continued relevance for unpacking contemporary interpretative repertoires transmitted and reinforced through the media. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model remains instructive in demonstrating the non-linear and contested nature of meaning-making – something especially pertinent when analyzing how people live with, through and, sometimes, against propaganda. At the same time, in reflection of the changes in the media structure and dissemination since the development of Hall's (1980)

conceptualizations, such as the introduction of social media and the saturation of the public sphere with news, this work has extended his approach by focusing on more nuanced forms of subjectivity that emerge in response to the contemporary propaganda.

In sum, CDP offers a distinct and powerful way of understanding effects of the propaganda – not merely as messages to be accepted or rejected, but as discursive structures that organize how people come to see themselves, others and the world. It is precisely this orientation toward the discursive construction of the psychological that allows the present work to contribute to both critical psychology and propaganda studies in a way that more traditional methodologies might overlook. The propaganda adapts and thrives under conditions that are hostile to open discourse, dissent, and pluralism. Thus, in addition to mapping the functions and strategies of propaganda in such environments, I also explored how individuals respond to these influences – specifically, how different subjectivity positions are constructed, challenged, and negotiated in the face of state-imposed narratives. Through detailed analysis of these subjectivities, this dissertation aimed to advance theoretical understandings of how people position themselves and are positioned by the propaganda discourses in contexts of political manipulation and attempts at control. While existing literature in social sciences and mainstream psychology has examined mechanisms of influence such as persuasion (Bohner & Wänke, 2013; Douglas et al., 2010) and conformity (Claidière & Whiten, 2012; Morgan & Laland, 2012; Song et al., 2012), my work offers a more integrated and context-sensitive approach. It draws on the specific cases within Russia to highlight the intricate interplay between propaganda discourses, power, and their impacts on personal experiences of individuals exposed to the influences of Russian state media in Russia, ultimately offering a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on subjectivity and propaganda within the broader landscape of the authoritarian regime.

Propaganda and its Impacts on Subjectivities: The Framework

The framework developed in this dissertation offers a critical psychological approach for analysis of propaganda under authoritarian regimes (specifically in the context of Russia post the 2022 invasion of Ukraine) and its capacity to shape subjectivities. It is grounded in the CDP approach and is informed by insights from psychological humanities. The core components of the framework and the specific methodological strategy are addressed in Chapter 3. However, the framework is designed to guide the theoretical inquiry into the mechanisms by which individuals are positioned within and respond to the messaging produced by the state. As such, it is a principle-based and not a rule-based approach, whereby guidance (main principles) is provided to develop and implement the steps needed in a particular situation rather than a rigid step-by-step approach (Spielthenner, 2017; Wells, 2013). Such an approach is consistent with the CDP framework more generally, which can and should be adopted to the needs of the specific context (Locke & Budds, 2020).

Thus, the foundational principles of the framework can be seen as the following. First, subjectivity is socially and discursively constructed. Within this work, individualist explanations are rejected in favour of understanding how subjectivities are shaped through the discursive techniques implemented by the propaganda. Second, it follows from the first principle that propaganda is seen as a structuring force. In this work, propaganda is not considered to be simply misinformation or one of the multitude of sources of information. It is treated as a complex and sustained discursive system that is aimed at influencing perception, identity, beliefs, and actions. This is an essential component and is specifically attributable to the authoritarian conditions. Third, propaganda relies on and reinforces the existing power structure that is also embedded in the historical and cultural context. Therefore, understanding subjectivities requires examining

how power operates through the discourses that are historically rooted and culturally legitimized. Fourth, as personal as one's subjectivity is, it is not apolitical. The emotions elicited by the propaganda, the moral positionings that are available and taken on and the patterns of compliance with the changing government demands are all part of one's subjectivity and they are shaped with the help of the politicized interpretative repertoires provided by the propaganda.

Reflections on the Developed Framework

The framework I developed and used in this dissertation helps us understand, at least, in part, why the propaganda machine relies on a wide variety of tools, especially as it concerns the messaging. It has been noted time and again that the Russian propaganda is inconsistent and self-contradictory, that it offers many interpretations of the same events (Bulanova, 2023; Litvinenko, 2022; Shirikov, 2024; Tolz & Hutchings, 2023). While this appears to be confusing and counter-productive in terms of creating consistent ideological grounds on which the worldview of the Russian citizens should be built, the framework developed can serve to explain the need for such inconsistent messaging. The primary goal achieved is the possibility for a wide variety of interpretations of event readily available to the Russian media consumers within Russia. Instead of having one coherent state narrative that competes with the narratives presented by other media producers (e.g., Russian opposition figures as well as Ukrainian and other state media), the Russian state media presents multiple possible interpretations of events that may appeal to different people – if they are not satisfied with one interpretation, another one is readily available, they do not have to seek information outside of the Russia state media. Thus, Russian propaganda, instead of trying to indoctrinate or mold citizens into a particular version of the dominant subjectivity that would be most suitable to its purposes, is trying to achieve a much humbler goal – the aim is to ensure that the citizens do not decide to interfere with what the

government is doing. Interestingly, even those Russians who adapt oppositional forms of subjectivity and, therefore, are rejecting the propaganda emitted by the state, for the most part refrain from interfering with the government messaging if they remain in Russia. Thus, the state demands not specific actions, but inaction from its citizens and this inaction is strictly enforced.

So, why does it matter if we understand the situation within Russia better? Much has been said to the effect of humanitarian values and reduction of violence (Pinker, 2011). However, overall reduction does not equal to eradication of violence, neither by individuals nor by the states. Although this work was designed to look at a very specific conjunction of historical, political, social, and cultural points within a somewhat less specific geographic region, the point was not, in fact, to highlight the uniqueness of Russian subjectivities. Contrary to all the Russian state claims to *Sonderweg* – "special path" (Cherepanova, 2010; Pliskevitch, 2019; Umland, 2012), the main objective here was to discuss how citizens of a country can be convinced by the state propaganda that they need to support whatever their state decides to do, even if that means attacking a neighbouring country. In other words, I explored how a point is reached in which individuals appear to *en masse* agree to unrelenting support that opposes some of the strongest values they may hold. Such an understanding is needed as it is a step in many directions. It is a step to understanding that people in general, not just specific cultural groups, can be susceptible to propaganda. This can be seen through historical and current examples of propaganda success elsewhere, both within authoritarian and democratic political contexts (Doob, 1966; Ellull, 1965; Kamalipour & Snow, 2004; Lee & Lee, 1939; Lock & Ludolph, 2020; Selucky, 1982; Stanley, 2015; Wanless & Berk, 2020; Yilmaz & Erturk, 2023; Zou, 2023). It is a step to understanding the importance of media as a vehicle of influence, which, thus, must be protected from exclusive state influence. It is a step to understanding that differentiating and

othering can be instigated even concurrently with spreading the belief that certain groups do not exist. It is also yet another example of dehumanization that can be elicited through othering.

Fundamentally, this work was thus guided by the recognition that no one is inherently immune to the influence of propaganda. The objective, therefore, is not to pathologize the experiences of individuals in a particular sociopolitical context. To put it differently, I am not trying to highlight here something specific or unique to Russians that separates them from other nations. In fact, the opposite is true – any nation thrown into similar circumstances is likely to respond similarly. As long as those producing the propaganda messaging are aware of the historical and cultural tropes prevalent within a given society, they may use them effectively to their advantage. Thus, the central argument is that human subjectivity, across contexts and cultures, may be universally vulnerable to discursive and ideological manipulation. Propaganda, as seen within different examples discussed in this dissertation, frequently operates through subtle and insidious means – by infiltrating everyday language, reshaping what is taken for common sense, and embedding itself into routine social practices (also see Balatska, 2022; Fortuin, 2022; Libman & Obydenkova, 2024; Lokot, 2023). This susceptibility in not unique to any one population. While some external observers viewing the situation in contemporary Russia may consider that there must be something peculiar about Russian people that makes them susceptible to the propaganda (e.g., Krishnarajan & Tolstrup, 2023; Soares et al., 2023), such a view is both reductive and misleading. In contrast, my work contends that the Russian case illustrates a broader, more troubling possibility – authoritarian regimes can generate and sustain widespread voluntary compliance through the normalization of specific interpretative repertoires and practices. Over time, these interpretative repertoires do not merely influence behaviours, they become internalized, gradually structuring how individuals think, feel and relate to the

world around them. In this way, compliance becomes not just an external act but a deeply embedded feature of the subjectivity itself. The Russian example thus serves as a powerful case study for understanding the broader mechanisms through which propaganda can shape subjectivity positions.

Implications of the Developed Framework – Possibilities for Countering the Propaganda Narratives

One of the conclusions arrived at in this work is that the Russian propaganda appears to be effective in indoctrinating Russian citizens living in Russia, in part, because it interprets non-resistance to the propaganda as full support. This is achieved via two main measures. First, there is a clear messaging in terms of what the state is expecting – for the citizens to state their support for Putin and for the 'special military operation' when asked about it (Yudin, 2022). Second, the propaganda is not trying to entice people to action. Quite the opposite, it is trying to tell people that nothing is happening, that the state is dealing with external political issues to which citizens should have no interest and that Russians living in Russia should simply occupy themselves with their day-to-day tasks instead – the depoliticization trend that has been noticeable prior to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and intensified since then (Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, 2022; Libman, 2023; Vlasova, 2024).

In addition to the contextual understanding of the spread of the propaganda in Russia, effective engagement with individuals whose subjectivity positions are shaped by propaganda requires careful consideration of the particular subjectivity positions espoused. Specifically, one cannot adopt a uniform approach when interacting with individuals espousing a deflecting negotiated subjectivity position and with those espousing a power-oriented dominant subjectivity position. Different subjectivity positions reflect different relationships to the interpretative

repertoires provided by the propaganda. Consequently, any meaningful attempt to counter the propaganda must begin with a thorough understanding of what propaganda is, how it functions, and how it manifests in the interpretative repertoires provided as well as in the everyday lives of the people. By identifying which interpretative repertoires are more appealing to specific subjectivity positions and through which mechanisms, it may become possible to develop more targeted and context-sensitive strategies for engagement and resistance. Rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all response, this approach acknowledges the complexity of subjectivity position formation and advocates for the development of interventions that are attuned to the diverse ways in which individuals negotiate and internalize the interpretative repertoires provided by the propaganda. After all, since Russian propaganda provides multiple interpretations of the same events, targeted approaches need to take that into consideration and work within those parameters, rather than trying to dismiss them.

This information can be useful in developing the counter-messaging targeting Russian citizens living in Russia. Currently, one of the prevalent and easily available strategies is fact checking (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024; Konstankevych et al., 2022). While this activity is important for exposing the extent of the propaganda messaging and the various forms it can take on (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024), it may not be a particularly effective measure for a substantial part of the population. For instance, for those espousing any form of dominant subjectivity any messaging contrary to the prevalent beliefs is rejected as propaganda coming from the enemy side, irrespective of who is behind the fact-checking (Konstankevych et al., 2022). For those espousing any form of oppositional subjectivity, such messaging can be reaffirming, but it is a form of ‘preaching to the choir’. Thus, the main audience for fact checkers is those espousing negotiated subjectivity. While the fact-checking efforts can be persuasive and are necessary,

based on my analysis, I argue that it is not particularly effective for those living inside Russia. For example, for the reluctant negotiated subjectivity, there is no belief in what the propaganda is saying – those espousing this form of subjectivity are simply trying to stay out of trouble with the government. For the deflecting negotiated subjectivity, the proof that the state is lying is not news – those espousing this form of subjectivity believe that everyone is. Perhaps, in order to counter the Russian state propaganda narratives prevalent within Russia, other types of messaging (not fact-checking) could be more effective. For example, a more useful form of counter-messaging for the reluctant negotiated subjectivity could focus more on evidencing the importance of civic engagement and the possibilities to do so that are not prosecuted by the state, thus first targeting the idea that individual actions aimed at bringing about political changes are possible. With this shift in perspective, it may be more likely that the state propaganda messages fall flat.

Considering Different Political Contexts

Another point for consideration is whether the framework I developed is unique to the current situation in Russia or it may be applied to other contexts. While the dominant, negotiated and oppositional subjectivity positions remain the primary response forms to any kind of messaging (Hall, 1980), the specificity of the positions adopted within these broad categories can be different – as is evidenced by the framework developed in this dissertation. Specifically, there is a clear connection between the propaganda messaging and the positions espoused. Thus, if the messaging is different, so will be the enacted subjectivities. Thus, Hall's (1980) conceptualization, as he predicted, can remain the same in response to any messaging. While the identification of the dominant, negotiated and oppositional subjectivity positions can be informative, I argue that, on its own, without the more nuanced approach within these broad

categories, it is insufficient to gain understanding of the situation that would be enough to leverage effective responses. Thus, the benefit of the framework I provide is less about the specific subjectivity positions identified (although some, I suspect, may be very consistent across different situations), it is more about the need to conceptualize the variations within the main subjectivity positions in order to gain a better understanding of the situation within a particular context.

Therefore, while the framework I developed is not universal, it may be useful for studying subjectivity positions in different contexts. Specifically, I argue that it can be applied to authoritarian regimes, or at least to the authoritarian regimes centred around a personality, which makes the political context within a given society similar to that in Russia in some respects (Baturo et al., 2024). While the personalist regimes, of course, have their differences, especially in terms of what is acceptable to do in their respective countries[14], they do try to build support around one specific personality and target those who try to dissent from this trajectory (Baturo et al., 2024). Nonetheless, as the development of the framework relied on studying the Russian historiography as well as delving into some particularities of the cultural and social background, it is unlikely that the developed framework would be translatable to other contexts without the corresponding adjustments. In contexts such as Lukashenko's rule in Belarus, the adjustments would be relatively minor due to the many overlaps in the political, historical and cultural background (Winns, 2024). While in other parts of the world, the adjustments would have to be much more substantial.

[14] For example, while Russia's regime has no difficulty in falsifying the results of elections (as previously discussed), same manipulations cannot be done in Türkiye. Erdogan's regime has to rely on other tactics, mainly ensuring that popular figures that oppose him do not make it onto the election ballots (Saglam, 2024).

In terms of other types of state regimes, namely the democratic and totalitarian ones, the application of the framework would require substantial reworking in such contexts. For the democratic regimes, it may be applicable with significant changes in a number of aspects. First, the dominant subjectivity in democratic states is not necessarily tied to authoritarian personality traits (and it certainly does not apply to everyone who espouses the dominant subjectivity position), rendering the Dual-Process Motivational model for understanding authoritarianism and the derived subjectivity forms largely useless. I would like to note that it does not mean that those espousing authoritarian traits do not exist in democratic states – they most certainly do (Erhardt, 2025; Kim-Leffingwell, 2023). However, without the enabling force of the state-sponsored pervasive propaganda, they tend to be a separate group within the dominant subjectivity position or even within the oppositional subjectivity position. They may be part of the oppositional subjectivity position within democratic states precisely because the democratic states allow for open opposition to its norms.

Further, in democratic states, free speech is protected, acknowledging that there are nonetheless limitations to it that can be enforced by the state, for instance, due to concerns of national security or public morals (Gunatilleke, 2021), or monitored through public channels, such as, cancel culture (Dershowitz, 2020). Consequently, the negotiated subjectivity position will most likely look different in democratic states as well. For instance, I believe that reluctant negotiated subjectivity position may be virtually non-existent in such contexts, or it may look substantially different and carry a more individualized character rather than a pervasive response strategy (e.g., one may espouse reluctant negotiated subjectivity if one's family or circle of friends or employment circumstances appear to demand it, rather than in response to state propaganda). With the deflecting negotiated subjectivity, however, I believe that it will persist as

it is derived more from the post-truth rhetoric, which is prevalent in many democratic societies as well. Thus, while there may be some applications for the developed framework within the democratic states, it would require significant modifications according to this context.

Moreover, in democratic contexts, the role of social media as a key site of discursive construction cannot be overlooked (Jennings et al., 2021; Persily & Tucker, 2020). Social media platforms are increasingly recognized as powerful vehicles for shaping public opinion (Ausat, 2023). Unlike in authoritarian regimes, where circulating ideas contrary to state-approved messaging can result in a variety of state-enforced punishments, including imprisonment (as is the case in Russia; see McCarthy et al., 2023), in democracies, social media platforms can be the vehicles for openly circulating competing ideas. However, at the same time, engaging in social media online can amplify the post-truth rhetoric and foster echo chambers, contributing to the creation of silos rather than fostering engagement in meaningful discussions (Cosentino, 2020; Terren & Borge, 2021). The speed and scale of digital communication, which is moreover frequently short and unverified, also create pressures for immediate reaction, which may further discourage nuanced or critically engaged subject positions, relying on emotional responses instead (Al-Rawi, 2020). In fact, as some research into social media use and spread of fake messaging indicates, for users that have been engaged on social media for a while, there is an expectation that the news spread are lies – this is a normalized part of social media engagement (Aïmeur et al., 2023; Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2023). Thus, while the social media messaging in democratic contexts is diversified, it does not have straightforward impacts on subjectivity forms and would require separate and careful consideration.

In addition, the devolution of power, whereby the power is transferred from the centralized source (e.g., from the federal level) to local/regional authorities, is a notable tendency

in some democratic states (Ayres et al., 2018), as opposed to high degree of centralization evidenced in authoritarian states, including in Russia (Beazer & Reuter, 2019). This tendency creates a more fragmented political and discursive landscape in which individuals are subject to multiple, sometimes conflicting, sources of authority[15]. The resultant multiplicity may diffuse the perception of a singular dominant discourse produced by the government, resulting in a less uniform or systemic impact on subjectivity. As such, the very nature of power relations in democratic societies requires an adopted understanding of how different forms of subjectivities emerge and function in relation to the messaging people are choosing to be exposed to.

When it comes to the totalitarian regimes, the conceptual framework developed in this work is not directly applicable to such regimes as they operate through fundamentally different mechanisms of control and, especially, coercion (Desmet, 2022; Druker, 2020). Totalitarian systems are typically characterized by the systematic use of physical violence and pervasive surveillance to eliminate perceived threats and enforce absolute conformity (Druker, 2020). Unlike the authoritarian regimes, which often rely on strategic ambiguity, selective repression, and a degree of political disengagement among the citizens, totalitarian regimes aim to exert comprehensive control over all aspects of life – public and private alike (Desmet, 2022). In the Russian context, while there have been well-documented instances of state violence and political persecution (e.g., Alexei Navalny's case (Trudolyubov, 2023), these actions tend to be episodic and targeted rather than constituting a consistent, all-encompassing system of repression. In fact, Russian regime relies on spreading the news of the persecuted cases as a scare tactic – no one

[15] For instance, in Canada, a notable difference can be seen between the climate change policies at the federal level and the provincial discourses around the implementation of these policies, with Alberta, where many people rely on the oil and gas industry, producing notably different perspectives (favouring continued support of these industries even if that means not meeting the climate change-related targets) than most of the other provinces (Boyd, 2019).

knows who will be next – rather than actually following up on each case of minor insubordination to the regime (Reisinger et al., 2023). For example, although Russians who openly opposed the war in Ukraine have faced various forms of intimidation and punishment, many were nonetheless able to leave the country without interference (McCarthy et al., 2023). This degree of mobility and the relative selectivity of repression mark a key distinction from the totalitarian regimes, where dissent in not only suppressed but is systematically eradicated, and exit is rarely a viable option (Killingsworth, 2024; Primus, 1996).

Moreover, while propaganda is a central tool of control in both authoritarian and totalitarian contexts, its function and structure differ significantly. In totalitarian regimes, propaganda is typically anchored in a singular pervasive ideology that demands active participation and ideological commitment from the citizens (Cassinelli, 1960; Unger, 1974). The state ideology is not merely communicated but is enforced through the educational systems, cultural production (and limited to no access to the cultural productions from elsewhere in the world) and the expectation of ritualistic public affirmation (Unger, 1974). In contrast, the authoritarian regimes often adopt a more pragmatic approach, using propaganda to manage perceptions and maintain social order without requiring ideological fervor. Citizens in such contexts are often encouraged – or at least permitted – to retreat into their private lives, provided they do not challenge the authority of the state (Libman, 2023). As a result, contextual environments and the corresponding modes of subjectivity position formation diverge significantly between these two types of regimes. Therefore, the developed framework that is appropriate for authoritarian contexts, such as contemporary Russia, would require substantial modification to account for the qualitatively different dynamics present in totalitarian regimes, in addition to accounting for other contextual differences (e.g., historical and cultural).

Critical Psychology and Beyond: Reflections on the Role of Psychology and the Psychological Humanities

Unlike the mainstream psychology that tries to withdraw to exclusive study of the individual, critical theoretical psychology focuses on exploring the sociohistorical context and its impacts on individuals, thus providing insights about larger political, social, historical, and cultural influences from a psychological perspective (Parker, 2007). In line with the larger concerns of critical theory, however, the role of critical psychology is not limited to the individual per se (Holzman, 2013). Rather, this role is in exposing the existing power structures that engrain certain perceptions of one's context as given, immutable, normative (typically referred to as the 'status quo' (Parker, 2007). The power structures frequently normalize inequalities present in societies, drawing attention away from these issues into the realm of individualized responsibility for one's life, irrespective of the social and structural forces shaping it (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2017; Teo, 2015). It is worth noting that there is an inherent contradiction in the presentation of the inequalities as a given – there are no two countries where the marginalized groups subjected to unequal treatment are exactly the same. Consequently, when one takes a broader global perspective, the conclusion is that there is nothing natural or immutable in the inequalities present within any specific context, which means that it must be possible to ameliorate the situation. The way those in power overcome this obstacle is typically through the creation of narratives, myths, symbols, etc. that portray the specific context of their country/nation/ethnicity/religious group as fundamentally different from all others, something certainly evident within the contemporary Russian discourses (Tsygankov, 2023), but by no means limited to them (Koschmann, 1997; Lipset, 1990; Rios & Mackey, 2022). This otherness is simultaneously presented as superiority compared to other groups and serves as an explanation

of why certain groups are to be treated unequally – it is a traditional way of life, it is a question of value, identity, self-understanding of group, etc. (Rios & Mackey, 2022). From this perspective, therefore, those being marginalized should come to terms with their natural inferior status instead of fighting it.

Critical psychology, therefore, is tasked with theorizing and analyzing how these larger power structures impact individual subjectivity and how they can be challenged (Parker, 2007). This rather large task cannot have a unified approach – it requires developing new frameworks depending on the context within which they are to be applied. Moreover, these frameworks must be malleable and adaptable as the contexts change (e.g., Russia prior to the February 2022 invasion and after it are two different Russias). Thus, the framework I developed in this dissertation, although drawing on critical psychology generally, and even more so on psychological humanities, is very specific to the context it was designed to be applied to. That is not to say that each situation will require the development of unique tools and conceptualizations – just like I have done here, it is possible to draw on existing works, but to adapt them according to the needs of the situation. As discussed in Chapter 4, for instance, while Hall's (1980) conceptualizations provide an overarching way of analysing subject positions to the messaging, they are not nuanced enough if one would like to gain a deeper understanding of their impact on subjectivities.

In the following sections, I focus on broader implications of my work in relation to critical psychology by examining how the ideas and concepts explored in my dissertation contribute to the development of a critical theory of the subject, drawing specifically on the conceptual outline proposed by Teo (2020):

> (a) the society-individual nexus; (b) the power-infused historicity of concepts, theories, methods, and practices; (c) the ethics of traditional and critical action (including the nexus between theories and praxis); and, or course, (d) a critique of the shortcomings of traditional approaches while proposing alternatives." (p. 64)

The framework I developed does not engage with each of these dimensions to the same degree. Instead, it places particular emphasis on the first two elements – (a) and (b) – which serve as the necessary foundation for any meaningful articulation of (c), the ethics of action, and for a grounded critique of (d), the shortcomings of mainstream psychological paradigms. Specifically, the analysis centres on how subjectivity is discursively constituted at the intersection of sociopolitical structures and individual agency, highlighting the ways in which propaganda mediated this relationship in the context of the authoritarian regime. This focus directly addresses the society-individual nexus, not as a static binary but as a dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship. In doing so, it also confronts the historicity of psychological and social-scientific knowledge, highlighting how concepts, practices and institutional norms are shaped by and implicated within broader power relations.

Although the ethics of action (c) are addressed to a more limited degree, the theoretical groundwork laid through the exploration of (a) and (b) enables a preliminary discussion of the responsibilities of critical scholars and practitioners in contexts where subjectivity is being shaped through ideological manipulation. Moreover, the critique of traditional psychological approaches (d) – particularly those in mainstream psychology that neglect the sociopolitical embeddedness of the subject – is a recurrent and integrative theme throughout this work. This critique, therefore, is not confined to a particular section but is woven into the analysis of each of the other dimensions. By challenging the ahistorical and individualistic assumptions of

traditional psychological models, and by illustrating the necessity of a more situated, reflexive, and discursively positioned perspective, the framework developed here seeks to contribute to the ongoing projects of critical psychology and psychological humanities.

Society-Individual Nexus

One of the most significant contributions of critical approaches to psychology lies in their emphasis on situating individuals within the broader sociohistorical and political contexts (Teo, 2020). This represents a fundamental shift from the assumptions underpinning many mainstream psychological theories and conceptualizations, which often seek to identify universal patterns of behaviour, cognition, or emotion, frequently abstracted from the particularities of time, place and power relations (Jones, 2004; Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). Such mainstream approaches tend to treat psychological phenomena as decontextualized, thereby obscuring the extent to which subjectivity is shaped by cultural, discursive, institutional, and other forces. In contrast, critical perspectives emphasize that individuals do not exist in isolation but are continuously constituted through their participation in – and negotiation with – the surrounding social world (Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013).

In the context of my work, this critical orientation has led to two primary reflections. First, the role of propaganda must be understood as a powerful structuring force that has deeply influenced the Russian social context, particularly following the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022. The intensification of propagandistic discourse during this period has not only shaped public opinion but has also permeated everyday life (explored in particular through the manifestations of lived ideology), contributing to the production and normalization of specific subjectivity positions. Understanding the impact of this discursive environment requires moving beyond simplistic explanations that reduce individuals' responses to personal failings or

deficiencies and instead recognizing how subjectivities are cultivated within particular ideological conditions shaped by the propaganda.

Thus, it is evident that people's subjectivities adapt to the situations into which they are thrown. As much as some of the approaches within mainstream psychology like to put the emphasis on individual development, it cannot be decontextualized from the society one is living in. Certainly, this is not a new reflection – starting with the classical experiments conducted by Milgram (1963) or the Zimbardo (1973), as problematic as these experiments were, we can nonetheless see that there is a strong tendency among many participants to behave according to the perceived norms of the situation, rather than according to one's own moral or ethical standards. The need to be a part of the society, to belong, for those who cannot or do not want to leave a given setting is strong (Allen et al., 2022; Gere & MacDonald, 2010). This need to belong resulted in fairly quick adjustment in subjectivity positions in Russia in response to the new reality. What this tells us is that it is not the individuals whose subjectivities changed, which led to the war (as Russian propaganda would have it), but rather that once the war happens, people change their subjectivities to fit into their new reality. Consequently, there can be no psychological approaches that can target individuals to 'open their eyes' to the situation and make them demand change – at least not in the context of a repressive authoritarian regime. Within the situation Russians are in, it is unreasonable to consider that they, as individuals, can impact the government decisions. Considering how many politically motivated imprisonments there are today, this much is clear.

Second, while the situation in Russia is undoubtedly unique in its historical and geopolitical specificity, it would be a mistake to interpret the apparent susceptibility of Russian citizens to propaganda as a reflection of some essential or culturally ingrained trait of "Russian

subjectivity". Such an interpretation risks reproducing culturalist and essentialists narratives (so much favoured by the Russian propaganda itself) that obscure the broader applicability of the mechanisms at play. The Russian case, rather than being treated as an exception, serves to illustrate how any population – given the right combination of discursive techniques, institutional control and social pressures – may come to internalize and reproduce dominant ideological frameworks (or, at the very least, adapt one or another negotiated subjectivity position that would not interfere with the government decisions). The implication here, therefore, is not that Russia is uniquely prone to such dynamics, but rather that similar process could unfold in other contexts (especially the authoritarian ones) under comparable conditions. Thus, this analysis underscores the importance of maintaining a critical and contextualized approach to subjectivity, resisting the temptation to naturalize or localize the subjectivity positions adopted by Russian citizens in response to the propaganda.

As a result, while the situation in Russia is by no means universal, it would nonetheless be erroneous to attribute it to the uniqueness of Russians as individuals. Understandably, for many Ukrainians, the silence of Russian people in the wake of their government launching a war at a neighbouring country was unacceptable – both from a moral position and from the practical perspective (i.e., in comparison to how politics is done in Ukraine, with vigorous protests when the leader of the country does something deemed unacceptable by large numbers in the population (Khodunov, 2022; Terzyan, 2020). These considerations led some in Ukraine and elsewhere to believe that there is something inherent in the Russian mindset that makes them unable to stand up to the power, prompting many news agencies to attempt to provide answers as to why Russians cannot protest the war in Ukraine (e.g., Archagov, 2024; Đokić, 2023; Kuleshova, 2023). Perhaps, this can be seen as a sort of psychological defense mechanism

(Silverman & Doorn, 2023) – blaming all Russian people for the war, even though they have no say in whether this war should be started, how it should be lead and when it should be finished. Given that Russian propaganda, from the outside, does not appear to be particularly convincing, it is easy to see how one would assume that they would not fall pray to something like it. However, this is precisely the point – the propaganda disseminated in Russia is contextually-driven. It is geared towards the people living in this particular society in this particular moment. Thus, the question is not whether this specific form of propaganda would work elsewhere – we know that it would not work in the exact same form in which it is presented to the Russian people. The art of propaganda is in packaging it according to the society in which it is disseminated in order to target individuals who are part of that society.

Although the subjectivity of individuals is impacted by the society in which they live, it is by no means determined by it (Teo, 2020). As the framework I developed indicates, all of the subjectivity positions adopted by Russians are in one way or another reactions to the changed political and social situation within Russia. However, there are multiple ways in which one can adjust to the situation, even when that situation is radically different from the preceding times. Thus, when dealing with complex situations, I see the task of critical psychology to be in trying to identify and understand how and why individuals adapt to the society in which they live in their specific ways. It is not an easy task as some of the subjectivities enacted by individuals may be, from a critical standpoint, very far from where they need to be in order to challenge the power structures producing the social situation. However, by acknowledging that this is happening – in this case, that in response to the propaganda, some will embrace it fully (or even extend it further) – critical psychologists can help us see that the individuals are simply adjusting to the situation that is given to them and, should that situation change, most of them will likely

change their subjectivity again as well. Recognizing these processes is the first necessary step in considering what some potential ways for interfering with the process may be.

This is where the work of critical psychologists is – in remaining within the negotiation boundaries, whereby the existing theories must be mediated and adjusted according to what is happening on the ground. As Teo (2020) indicates, if there is no overarching theory from which one is working, the developed ideas become a 'patchwork'. However, if one develops completely new theories exclusively for the circumstances seen, then some larger driving forces can be overlooked, despite their persistent presence. For example, when it comes to the subjectivities I described here, the overarching theme is the importance of the authoritarian use of power when yielding propaganda onto the people – there are definitive similarities with other contexts where people have had little to no impact on their political leaders. At the same time, it is impossible to understand what is happening in Russia now by drawing exclusively on the knowledge generated in other authoritarian contexts – that would ignore the specific current circumstances and their impacts. Thus, the one of the roles of critical psychologists is to identify both the general principles (contributing to the critical theory of subjectivity, for example) as well as the particular conceptualizations and frameworks that help to address specific questions we are trying to investigate.

Historicity of Concepts, Theories, Methods, and Practices

Within critical psychological approaches, historicity – the recognition that knowledge is situated in and shaped by the historical processes – is foundational (Gomes et al., 2024). It challenges the ahistorical tendencies of mainstream psychology, which often treat concepts, methods and, as a result, subjectivities as universal and timeless rather than as contingent, culturally embedded and politically situated (Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). Critical psychology

instead works under the assumption that psychological knowledge, including its core concepts, theories, methods, and practices, is the product of specific historical trajectories and intellectual traditions. These traditions are not limited to psychology alone, but emerge from interdisciplinary intersections, drawing from philosophy, sociology, anthropology, history, and political theory, among others – combining into psychological humanities (Freeman, 2023). As such, any rigorous critical analysis of subjectivity must attend to the sociohistorical formations within which that subjectivity is positioned.

While the scope of this dissertation did not permit an exhaustive engagement with all relevant historical developments, I adopted a targeted historiographic approach to establish the key precedents shaping the contemporary political, social and cultural contexts in Russia. This historical grounding is not merely supplementary – it is essential for understanding the discursive formations surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian War, particularly in relation to the state-sponsored narratives disseminated through the official speeches and propaganda. Specifically, the analysis of Putin's (2022a, 2022b) speeches and the interpretative repertoires that emerged as a result, as well as their use in the state media, is inseparable from the broader historical narratives used to justify present actions of the Russian state. Without this historical context, the ideological power of the interpretative repertoires – their resonance with many beliefs held by Russians – would be far more difficult to capture and explain.

My aim has been to theorize subjectivity positions in response to the conditions presented, with attention to the subjectivity position formation under the influence of specific power structures. At the same time, I have sought to resist the reduction of subjectivity to individual traits, dispositions or cognition. Instead, the focus is on the role of historical developments (as presented by the state) and the discursive power structures in shaping how

subjectivities are lived, perceived and performed. By examining the narratives that are constructed and imposed through appeals to history, I showed how state power seeks to legitimize its present actions as the natural, even inevitable, extension of a selectively organized and presented past. This tendency is especially pronounced in the Russian context, where the state's invocation of historical memory functions as a key mechanism for attempting to present a unified national response to an existential threat of Nazism (just as such unified response was reached in the previous historical period). From Putin's (2022a; 2022b) public addresses to state-aligned media narratives (Litvinenko, 2022; Reading & Tirosh, 2023) to the symbolic universe embedded in cultural products, such as films, television series and literature (Khrebtan-Hörhager & Pyatovskaya, 2022; Krasnodemska et al., 2024; Privalov, 2022), there is persistent effort to create a seamless continuity between past and present. This manufactured continuity does not merely serve as a historical background – it seeks to actively shape the conditions within which subjectivity positions are formed.

Thus, by situating contemporary propaganda within its historical context, this work contributes to a critical psychology that recognizes the temporal and ideological embeddedness of subjectivity. It underscores that subjectivity positions cannot be separated from the institutionalized narratives and memory practices that define what is deemed intelligible, legitimate and possible within a given sociopolitical state. Subjectivity, then, is always both personal and political, shaped at the intersection of lived experience and the historically engrained discourses that give meaning to that experience. Historicity also means relying on different fields of knowledge that are relevant to the questions studied, making the inquiry part of the broader investigations within the psychological humanities. The interdisciplinary nature of complex problems, such as understanding the impacts of propaganda on subjectivities, requires

reliance on existent theories and practices that may lay outside of one's usual field of expertise. Therefore, inquiries into complex problems should be seen by critical psychologists as opportunities to expand the psychological theorization by considering what has been done in other fields when looking at such problems.

Ethical Considerations

One of the goals of critical approaches is, through providing critical perspectives on various aspects of the society, to contribute to the identification of inequalities, ultimately hoping to achieve more equitable conditions for all (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2017). By looking at the existing issues within the society and identifying the key drivers, critical approaches allow for the development of strategies to ameliorate the situation. Of course, there is often much resistance from those who adapt the dominant point of view, which seeks to preserve the *status quo*, to the articulated problems (e.g., by arguing that such problems do not exist), their key drivers (e.g., by misplacing the blame onto those who are most disadvantaged), and the proposed solutions (e.g., even if the problems are acknowledged, the solutions called for are frequently individualized rather than systemic) (Blanchar et al., 2024; Eidelman & Crandall, 2012). This tends to be even more so in the case of authoritarian regimes, which hold on strongly to the narratives of their superiority against all other alternatives and consider any identification of problems as viable threats that need to be eliminated (Chen & Xu, 2017; Koesel, 2018). More often than not, authoritarian regimes tend to present the articulated problems as either attacks sponsored by foreign forces or, if it is acknowledged that the critique is coming from within the country, then it must be something wrong with the person[16] identifying the issues (Koesel, 2018).

[16] In contemporary Russia, one of the used techniques – referred to as "punitive psychiatry" – is borrowed from the Soviet times. It involves declaring the person who is challenging the regime

In such circumstances, then, the question is not merely how this research can contribute to a broader theoretical understanding of the impacts of propaganda – although that remains an important and meaningful objective, especially for those observing the situation from outside Russia. Rather, the more urgent and ethically fraught question is whether, and how, this work might hold any relevance or be of any use for the specific situation within Russia today. Given a number of limiting factors – including my positionality as an outsider, the repressive nature of the regime in power, and the broader constraints on the freedom of expression within authoritarian states – it would be neither realistic nor ethically sound to claim that this research can directly support or instigate more equitable or democratic conditions within Russia. The reach of my work is, by necessity, more modest. Its most immediate and realistic contribution lies in offering those outside of Russia – particularly the observers who may struggle to comprehend the absence of widespread resistance or mass mobilization against the regime – a more nuanced understanding of the sociopolitical and psychological dynamics at play and how these dynamics combine to shape the subjectivity positions adopted in Russia, which in turn shape the response strategies engaged in by the Russian citizens. Thus, the aim was to illuminate how particular subjectivity positions have been cultivated under sustained conditions of exposure to the interpretative repertoires provided by Putin and the propaganda machine.

This, in turn, raises a broader normative question: is propaganda inherently bad? As discussed in Chapter 1, propaganda was a neutral concept until about World War I, following which the term became typically associated with intentional manipulation, coercion and authoritarian or totalitarian control – as is consistent with the current Russian context (Marquis,

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to be mentally ill and, as a result, requiring forced hospitalization in a psychiatric ward, where the 'treatment' frequently consists of degrading practices designed to break the resistance (Trevelyan & Papachristou, 2025).

1978; Kuzio, 2023). Of course, democratic societies are not immune to targeted messaging and manipulation. However, what differentiates various forms of persuasive messaging employed in democratic societies from the propaganda as is defined in this work are the means by which it operates (e.g., are alternative messages also disseminated?) and the conditions under which individuals can engage with or resist it (e.g., what happens if one openly expresses dissent to the messaging?). In the Russian case, the concern lies in the systematic use of propaganda to suppress dissent, distort reality and limit the scope of individual and collective agency. It is this context-specific use of propaganda, with its asymmetrical power dynamics and foreclosure of democratic dialogue, that this work sought to better understand – and, by understanding, to ethically interrogate.

Although this objective may appear limited in scope, it should not be underestimated in significance. In an era when individuals inside the authoritarian regimes are systematically silenced, denied recognition, and rendered politically invisible, the act if situating their experiences and subjectivities within an analytical framework can be, in itself, a form of acknowledgment and offer a viable counter-narrative. While this work cannot directly intervene in the internal affairs of the Russian state, it can at least contribute to a more accurate, empathetic and politically informed understanding of the conditions under which compliance, conformity or apparent apathy might arise – not as signs of moral failure, but as the outcomes of deliberate and powerful propaganda messaging. In this way, to be considered, may serve as a modest yet meaningful way of highlighting the struggles inside Russia for the people living there at a time when their government is actively working to erase dissenting voices and to isolate its citizens from the rest of the world.

At the same time, while neither the people inside Russia nor the variety of critics outside of it (Russian citizens or otherwise) can meaningfully contribute to challenging the Russian government and its practices today, it is not to say that no one can. In fact, governments of other countries are already doing so, and such capacities may also lie with some larger international organizations (e.g., the United Nations). The responses to the Russo-Ukrainian War by other states and organizations were outside of the scope of this work. Nonetheless, it is clear that when the people within a country are incapable of influencing their government (i.e., in non-democratic societies), there is a strong need for international response (Chubb & Wang, 2023; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). The mechanisms that are in existence today have evidently failed to prevent the start and the escalation of this war. Thus, there are larger questions of political and ethical considerations that need to be taken up at the international scale. If we generally agree that engaging in a military conflict whereby one country invades another is not an acceptable practice, there must be consequences for the countries that do not abide by this principle. Most certainly many nations and international organizations around the world have argued for and have implemented certain actions aimed at curbing Russian invasion of Ukraine, such as introducing a variety of sanctions against Russia generally and some specific individuals (Hosoe, 2023; Klose, 2024). As we have entered into the third year of the war, these responses have clearly not measured up to the task. Thus, there is an urgent need for reevaluating the structures that were designed with the purpose of war prevention in Europe.

Limitations

While, in this work, I aimed to offer a robust and contextually grounded account of how propaganda works within contemporary Russia and what its implications for subjectivities are, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. Although a variety of contextual influences,

including social, historical, cultural, and political, have been examined, this work does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of the situation. In fact, the contextual analysis could have been extended to include a longer historical perspective, especially as it concerns the engrained cultural beliefs held in Russia about Ukraine, Ukrainians and the power dynamics between Russia and Ukraine resulting from Russia's imperial and colonial past. Further, the methodological orientation adopted – critical discursive psychology (CDP) – emphasizes discourse, subjectivity and the ideological positioning of individuals within communicative practices. As such, it inherently deprioritizes certain forms of analysis, especially those that concern material and economic dimensions of power as they relate to larger social structures.

Specifically, in my inquiry, I did not pay extensive attention to the changing material conditions underpinning the functioning of the Russia state, including the financial mechanisms that support the regime and the broader economic consequences of the sanctions imposed on Russia. In particular, the role of the international sanctions – both those affecting the general economy and those targeting specific oligarchs and state officials – remain outside the scope of this work. Likewise, fluctuations in the global oil and gas prices, which play a significant role in sustaining the state revenue and enabling certain strategic choices by the Kremlin (Gamso et al., 2024; Lawrence, 2022), are not directly analyzed here. These economic factors undoubtedly contribute to the broader landscape within which subjectivity and discourses are formed – it is by no coincidence that the Russian state media actively tried to promote the idea that for Russian citizens nothing has changed, leading to a state crackdown on dissenting voices at the start of the 2022 war escalation (Black, 2024). At the same time, some regions and industries in Russia have significantly benefited financially from the war, making the situation for the citizens employed in relevant spheres much better from the economic standpoint (Kurbangaleeva, 2024). While some

economic considerations at the individual level have been discussed in this work, the larger social shifts due to the changed economic situation have not been covered.

Recognizing these limitations is intended to clarify the focus and the boundaries of this dissertation. A more comprehensive account would benefit from interdisciplinary engagement with political economy, energy geopolitics and the sociology of financial systems in order to situate discursive and psychological formations within the wider structures of material power. Nonetheless, by concentrating on discourse and subject positions, this dissertation contributes to an important aspect of the broader picture – namely, how propaganda messaging becomes meaningful, persuasive and, in some cases, actionable, at the level of subjectivities.

Another limitation of this work is the lack of consideration of interiority. It is atypical to discuss subjectivities without attending to the interior worlds of people. While such focus would provide a more in-depth understanding of the impacts of propaganda for individuals, it was not the goal of this dissertation to investigate propaganda at this level. Rather, I focused on the broad implications of propaganda for subjectivities, trying to identify overarching theoretical framework that could be applied to the current context in Russia. I believe that future psychological studies into this topic would benefit from moving towards the individual-level impacts, relying on the results of this dissertation as a theoretical background.

In terms of the propaganda analysis, the focus of the dissertation has been on the textual dissemination of propaganda and some of the institutional changes that occurred to support it. However, propaganda is not limited to textual discourses and, thus, a variety of propaganda formats, such as visual propaganda, could have been included in the analysis to make this work more robust.

Finally, as previously indicated, as research conducted from the outside, this work cannot claim to intervene directly in the realities of life within Russia, nor can it serve as a guide for local resistance for change. However, by offering an analysis that refuses national essentialism and avoids simplistic moral binaries, it aims to cultivate a deeper understanding among external observers – particularly those struggling with the absence of visible dissent in Russia. Through the lens of subjectivity positions, this work reframes the absence not necessarily as passive complicity but as a product of complex ideological, psychological and historical forces. In this way, it contributes to a more comprehensive and politically aware conversation about the conditions under which people live, adopt and make meaning – even in profoundly constrained circumstances.

Final Thoughts

In this dissertation, I set out to examine how propaganda operates in Russia and its impacts on subjectivities following the 2022 escalation of the war in Ukraine. By relying on a targeted historiography, analysis of Putin's (2022a; 2022b) speeches and the interpretative repertoires that have been derived from those speeches and used by the state propaganda, and by theorizing the impacts on subjectivity positions, I developed a framework for understanding how individuals within Russia are impacted by the exposure to propaganda. In the process, I hope that my work contributed to the articulation of a critical theory of the subject by addressing the relationship between individuals and social structures, the historical embeddedness of knowledge within the broader field of psychological humanities and the ethical and practical considerations of theorizing subjectivity in politically fraught contexts, especially within the authoritarian regimes centred around a personality.

I believe that my work emphasized that propaganda is not only a matter of content but also of form – of repetition, framing, integration with the past – and that its power lies in shaping what seems possible, thinkable, sayable – things that were not possible, thinkable, sayable just a short while prior to the propaganda messaging making it so. This is evident especially with those who, like me, were not following the news and developments closely prior to the 2022 war escalation and did not believe that a full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine was possible (Belokrysova et al., 2022) – for us, it was not possible, while for those who watched the Russian state propaganda, it quickly became the norm. Thus, I tried to demonstrate how certain subjectivity positions are made available or desirable under authoritarian rule through the propaganda messaging, and how subjectivity itself can become a site of compliance or quiet resistance.

Undertaking this work from outside the context it analyzes posed both epistemological and ethical challenges. These challenges were met not by attempting to speak on behalf of those inside Russia, but by developing an analysis that centers context, historicity, and the discursive production of subjectivity. Rather than asking why Russian citizens do or do not act in particular ways – questions that risk reproducing moralizing narratives – this work asked what conditions make certain forms of engagement possible or impossible, and how those conditions are structured and maintained. Methodologically, the project relied on critical discursive psychology, informed by concepts such as interpretative repertoires, lived ideology, intertextuality, and conformity, among others. This allowed for the mapping of strategies used in Putin's (2022a; 2022b) speeches and how these strategies were employed by the state media in producing the propaganda narratives, while also highlighting how these strategies were taken up, resisted or internalized to produce certain subjectivity positions.

Therefore, in this dissertation, I have sought to navigate the complex terrain of subjectivity under conditions of authoritarianism, where propaganda operates not only as a tool of persuasion but as a structuring force shaping lived experience, social relations, and the boundaries of what can be thought, felt and enacted. Drawing on critical psychological approaches and psychological humanities more broadly, this work highlights the historicity and contextual embeddedness of subjectivity, challenging individualistic and decontextualized accounts that dominate much of mainstream psychological thinking and theorizing. In doing so, it affirms the importance of understanding how individuals are constituted within systems of power – systems that are discursive, material, and deeply historical.

Ultimately, one of the main conclusions that emerge from my work and that I would like to emphasize is that no subjectivity is immune. The mechanisms of propaganda, ideological shaping, and discursive structuring are not exclusive to any one country, regime, or people. While the Russian context provides a stark and urgent example, the processes examined here are possible within any national borders, given the right (or rather the wrong) circumstances, raising important questions about how democratic backsliding, media manipulation, and state power are shaping subjectivities around the world. If there is a lesson to be drawn, it is that vigilance, critical awareness, and historical consciousness are essential – not just for understanding others, but for examining the forces that shape our own ways of seeing and being in the world.

In this spirit, the hope is that this work serves not only as an academic inquiry, but also as a gesture of compassion for those struggling to navigate life under authoritarian rule. It is a reminder that the struggle over meaning, truth, and subjectivity is ongoing – and that critical psychological scholarship has a vital role to play in this struggle.

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