

# Research exposes long-term failure of Russian propaganda in Ukraine's Donbas region

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A study of thousands of stories from media outlets churning out propaganda in Ukraine's Donbas in the years after Russia's first invasion

suggests that the Kremlin's disinformation campaign has long neglected any coherent or convincing messaging to foster support for Russia in the war-torn region.

After 2014, when [news media](#) in the so-called "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk that make up much of Donbas were forcibly taken over by Russian-backed insurgents, efforts to instill a pro-Russian "identity" were lazy and half-baked, and dwindled to nothing within months.

This is according to University of Cambridge researcher Dr. Jon Roozenbeek, who says that—based on his analysis of over four years of media content—such limited efforts likely had little effect on the consciousness of Russian-speaking Ukrainians in Donbas.

For example, Vladimir Putin has long trumpeted the idea of "Novorossiya", or 'New Russia', in an attempt to resurrect terminology once used to describe Donbas during the reign of Catherine the Great, when it temporarily sat within the Russian Empire, and claim the region belongs in Russia.

While waves of [propaganda](#) demonized Ukraine's government, the study shows that "Novorossiya" was hardly mentioned, and Russian disinformation lacked any real "in-group" story, the 'us' to oppose a 'them'—a fundamental flaw in any attempt to generate lasting division, says Roozenbeek.

Instead of identity-building, almost the entire Russian propaganda effort relied on portraying the leadership in Kyiv as fascistic—the basis of outlandish "denazification" claims—to create what psychologists call an "outgroup" on which to focus hostility.

However, as Russia shifts its war onto Donbas, Roozenbeek cautions that

it may turn to spreading Novorossiia-style propaganda narratives in the region and far beyond to justify land seizure and war atrocities, and claim that these actions are supported by [local populations](#).

He calls for a pre-emptive global debunking—or 'pre-bunking'—of the notion that ideological projects such as 'Novorossiia' have deep roots in the region, and that the people of Donbas have ever bought into these myths.

Otherwise, he says, we risk such falsehoods taking hold in the West via pundits and politicians who tow the Kremlin line. Roozenbeek's findings are publicly available for the first time today on the University of Cambridge website.

"Eight years of Russian propaganda have failed to provide a convincing alternative to Ukrainian nationhood in eastern Ukraine," said Roozenbeek.

"The Kremlin's decision to favor outgroup animosity over in-group identity building, and its vast overestimation of the extent to which its lies about non-existent Ukrainian 'fascists' promoted pro-Russian sentiment, are key reasons why the invasion has been a strategic and logistical disaster."

"If the nonsense of Novorossiia or other half-baked ideological narratives start to spread in the West, it could end up being used to pressure Ukraine into relinquishing large swathes of its territory, as a drawn-out war in the Donbas causes the global community's nerves to fray," he said.

For his Ph.D. research, Roozenbeek used '[natural language processing](#)' to algorithmically comb through over 85,000 print and online articles from 30 local and regional [media outlets](#) across Luhansk and Donetsk between

2014 and 2017, charting the patterns of content through use of key words and phrases in the wake of the first Russian invasion of Ukraine.

While half the coverage in print media remained "business as usual"—sport, entertainment, etc—some 36% was dedicated to the "shaping of identity" via propaganda. Much of this was done through parallels to World War II: the Donbas war as an attack by Ukrainian "neo-Nazis".

Only one newspaper paid any attention to Putin's adopted concept of "Novorossiia". Obvious opportunities to leverage history for identity-building propaganda were missed, such the fact that part of Donbas declared itself a Soviet republic in 1918, or indeed any mention of the Soviet Union.

"Description of an in-group identity that situated Donbas as part of the 'Russian World' were almost entirely absent from the region's print media," said Roozenbeek.

This pattern was largely replicated in online news media, which were arguably more ferocious in attempts to demonize the "outgroup" Kyiv government—including using English language to try and spread propaganda internationally—while ignoring a pro-Russian "this is us" identity.

Roozenbeek found a handful of stories covering "patriotic" cultural events organized by the Kremlin-owned leadership in Luhansk, but even here the in-group identity was "lazily assumed", he says, rather than established.

All this despite the fact that a "blueprint" strategy for propaganda in Donbas explicitly called for the image of a benevolent Russia to be cultivated by emphasizing the "Russian World" philosophy.

This strategy, leaked to German newspapers in 2016, is widely believed to be the work of Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's former propagandist-in-chief, often dubbed Putin's puppet master. It describes the need to construct and promote an ideology of "cultural sovereignty" in Russian-occupied Donbas, one that can act as a stepping stone to statehood.

"Despite the importance given to constructing identity and ideology after the Russian-backed takeover in Luhansk and Donetsk, including as directed by the Kremlin, very little in-[group identity](#) was promoted," said Roozenbeek.

"What identity-building propaganda I could find in Donbas after 2014 was vague, poorly conceived, and quickly forgotten. Political attempts to invoke Novorossiia were cast aside by the summer of 2015, but such weak propaganda suggests they didn't stand much chance anyway."

"Putin has severely underestimated the strength of Ukrainian national identity, even in Donbas, and overestimated the power of his propaganda machine on the occupied areas of Ukraine."

Roozenbeek's research was conducted for his Ph.D. between 2016 and 2020, and will feature in his forthcoming book 'Influence, Information and War in Ukraine', due out next year as part of the Society for the Psychology Study of Social Issues book series Contemporary Social Issues, published by Cambridge University Press.

**More information:** Roozenbeek, J. (2019). Media and Identity in Wartime Donbas, 2014-2017 (Doctoral thesis).

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