Introduction

In the early hours of February 24, 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin ordered his armies to 'demilitarise and denazify' Ukraine, and Europe was changed. Within minutes, Russian missiles struck most major Ukrainian cities, and scores of military units began pouring in from Crimea in the south, Donetsk in the east, and Belarus in the north. Their goal was to encircle Kyiv, Ukraine's capital located in the country's north, and overthrow the government. Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, who had addressed the Russian people that same night in his native Russian pleading with them to oppose the invasion, declared martial law and ordered the Ukrainian Armed Forces to fire at will.

This 'special operation' did not go as Putin expected. Russia sent its elite paratrooper division, the VDV (*vozdushno-desantnye voiska*), to take over Hostomel airport ten kilometres north of Kyiv and establish air superiority. The plan was to provide a forward operating base for the planned assault on Kyiv, which failed almost completely. The VDV managed to briefly capture Hostomel on February 24, but were met with fierce resistance from the inexperienced Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers stationed there. Recognising the airport's strategic importance, Ukrainian general Valery Zaluzhnyi ordered a large-scale counterattack by both ground troops and the Air Force. By evening, his forces had pushed back the VDV and re-established control of Hostomel. Failing to adapt to a changing situation, Russia's plans for a lightning war quickly became unrealistic. With large numbers of military vehicles bogged down in a forty-mile traffic jam, frustrated Russian forces resorted to cruelty. Images of civilians tortured to death in Bucha and Irpin, two towns north of Kyiv briefly occupied by Russia, shocked the world. Ukraine, meanwhile, proved adept at military strategy and made effective use of Western weaponry.

Russia's assault on Kyiv was a disaster. By April, Russian troops had withdrawn entirely from northern Ukraine, and redirected their attention towards the east and south. The goal of the invasion became the 'liberation of

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Donbas' rather than the 'demilitarisation and denazification' of all of Ukraine (BBC News, 2022b). Donbas refers to the Donets Basin, the catchment area of the Donets River, which flows through southwest Russia and eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian part of Donbas consists mainly of the *oblasts*, or provinces, of Donetsk and Luhansk. The region has a long and storied history, being a former part of the Russian Empire as well as independent Ukraine. Its (waning) preference for the Russian language over Ukrainian, however, shouldn't prompt the assumption that the people of Donbas are Ukrainian in name only. The matter of Donbas identity is one of the questions at the heart of this book.

Nonetheless, Russia's eastern and southern offensives were, at least in a military sense, more successful than its botched assault on Kyiv. Large parts of Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts fell under Russian occupation, and the key cities of Kherson and Mariupol were captured, the latter after a months-long, bloody battle. In September 2022, Russian authorities organised 'referendums' in the occupied parts of these four oblasts, to formalise their incorporation into the Russian Federation. Between 87 and 99 per cent of referendum participants supposedly voted in favour of this proposition (Minzagov, 2022). Russia announced the 'annexation' of these territories shortly after, although there was confusion over whether it claimed to have incorporated all four oblasts in their entirety, or merely the parts that it actually controlled.

Meanwhile, fighting continued unabated. Ukraine staged a successful counteroffensive, retaking large parts of Kharkiv oblast and the strategically important southern city of Kherson during the autumn of 2022. After a lull during the winter of 2022–2023, Ukraine renewed its efforts to retake its territories in the spring. This second counteroffensive yielded diminishing returns, with limited territorial gains on both the Russian and the Ukrainian side. Although both Russia and Ukraine have been on the initiative at various moments throughout 2023 and 2024, major momentum shifts have become increasingly rare.

The outcome of the war is as yet unclear, and can range from all-out victory for Ukraine and the collapse of Russia to a prolonged territorial stalemate or a limited, Pyrrhic Russian victory (Plokhy, 2023). But whatever happens, it's clear that Russia has failed to achieve its initial objectives, namely, to seize Kyiv, oust Zelensky, and install a puppet government. More than two years into the war, it's increasingly unlikely that this will pan out even if Russia's fortunes reverse.

But Russia's invasion isn't a failure only in the military sense. In this book, I examine the impotence of the propaganda campaign that preceded it. Despite enormous efforts to set up a sprawling media machine at home and abroad, and eight years of propaganda aimed at legitimising Russia's presence in eastern Ukraine, Russia never managed to vocalise a convincing alternative

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to Ukrainian identity and nationhood. Instead, Russia's efforts backfired: Ukraine is now more united than ever before. Russian-speaking Ukrainians, at times sceptical of Ukrainian nationalism and western Ukrainians' desire for integration with the EU, are now almost unanimously siding with Zelensky against Russia. If ever there was a chance to lure Donbas and southern Ukraine into the Russian fold, it is now gone forever, not only because of Russia's military aggression but also thanks to its inability to understand, or take seriously, Ukrainian and Donbas identity.

To understand why, we must go back to the start of the Russian-Ukrainian War, eight years before the 2022 full-scale invasion. On February 21, 2014, months of pro-European demonstrations on Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) resulted in the flight of Ukraine's then-president Viktor Yanukovych from office. This event, locally referred to as the 'revolution of dignity' but known in the West as the Euromaidan Revolution, led to fundamental changes in Ukraine's political, societal and geographical make-up. Soon after Yanukovych's cabinet was deposed by parliament and a new, pro-Western government was sworn in, groups of masked men in unmarked uniforms began to appear in strategic locations throughout Crimea, a peninsula in the country's south. These armed men captured local administration buildings and army bases, and took over the Crimean parliament building and installed a new, pro-Russian local government. After a 'referendum' was held on March 16, the new Crimean parliament issued a declaration of independence from Ukraine. Russia formally annexed Crimea two days later, in contravention of international law (Grant, 2015). Crimea became de facto if not de jure Russian territory, despite widespread international condemnation and unresolved legal disputes.

Around the same time, pro-Russian and anti-Euromaidan demonstrations began to pop up throughout southern and eastern Ukraine. Donbas became a hotbed of protest, with demonstrations escalating into violent clashes between (local and non-local) protesters, law enforcement, and pro-Ukrainian activist groups. In Donetsk, the capital of Donetsk oblast, pro-Russian activists occupied the city's Regional State Administration building between March 1 and March 6, until they were removed by the Ukrainian security services. One month later, on April 6, some 1,000–2,000 people gathered in front of the same building once again, this time demanding a status referendum similar to the one held in Crimea and threatening to capture the regional government by 'people's mandate' (BBC News, 2014a). When their demands were not met, the protesters again occupied the building. Inside, a meeting was held in which the attendants voted to declare independence from Ukraine and to proclaim the 'Donetsk People's Republic' (*Donetskaia Narodnaia Respublika*; DNR). In the weeks that followed, armed groups took over various administration buildings and infrastructure in other towns and cities in Donetsk oblast. Then-acting

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Ukrainian president Oleksandr Turchynov launched a large-scale 'anti-terrorist operation' (ATO) against the DNR. Russia sent equipment and military personnel across the border to support the insurgency (Bellingcat, 2018). The Russian–Ukrainian War started right here, and not, as is sometimes assumed, in 2022 (Hauter, 2021, 2023).

Also on April 6, pro-Russian protesters in Luhansk, the capital of Luhansk oblast (which borders Donetsk as well as Russia), seized the office of the local Security Service of Ukraine (*Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukraïny*; SBU). Security forces were quickly able to recapture the building, but around 2,000 protesters gathered outside for a 'people's assembly' to demand federalisation or outright independence. Clashes continued, and on April 27, the protesters, now in control of various regional administration offices, proclaimed the 'Luhansk People's Republic' (*Luganskaia Narodnaia Respublika*; LNR) and announced that they would fight alongside the DNR (RFE/RL, 2014).

A violent confrontation with the Ukrainian army followed. For much of 2014 and part of 2015, swaths of territory in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts changed hands multiple times between ATO forces and the insurgents, who shared the same enemy but not always the same goals. Conflicts between rivalling militias within the DNR and LNR would erupt with regularity, and power in the region was divided between various armed groups (Mitrokhin, 2015). Although it's not correct to refer to the conflict as a 'civil war' due to Russia's direct involvement, the new DNR and LNR authorities remained in control of parts of Donbas between 2014 and 2022, and sought to build legitimacy and popular support for their unrecognised breakaway from Ukraine.

A core component of these efforts was the mass media. Right from the start of their insurgency, the DNR and LNR set up a large and well-funded propaganda machine of TV channels, websites, and newspapers. Their purpose was to bring their story to the masses, both internally (i.e., the people living in DNR and LNR territory) and externally (mainly Ukrainians living in Donbas, but also Russians and even Western audiences). This provided a huge opportunity to promote the DNR's and LNR's ideology, and to try to build support for the idea that Donbas doesn't belong with Ukraine.

In this book, I argue that this opportunity was never seized. In a series of diatribes, including a much-publicised interview with the American conservative activist Tucker Carlson in February 2024, Vladimir Putin has argued that the root causes of his war can be found in the histories and identities of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, but the data presented here shows that this is false. Despite a vast reservoir of ideological and historical referents to draw from, neither the DNR/LNR nor Russia cared much for ideology or history at all, and to their peril. All attempts to build a collective identity (an 'ingroup') were short-lived, vocalised rarely and inconsistently on the pages of local newspapers and websites. Meanwhile, the outgroup, or the 'they' that opposes the 'we', was subject to a highly detailed and rich discursive construction. Internally (addressing the local population), this outgroup-focused discourse

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hearkened back to past conflicts, primarily World War II, and projected a sense of guilt on the part of Ukraine towards Donbas. Externally (addressing audiences outside the DNR and LNR, primarily Russian-speaking Ukrainians), this discourse ignored history altogether, and instead projected a sense of shame rather than guilt, seeking to discredit the Ukrainian government without reference to a shared connection that was lost.

The result of this propaganda campaign was that many Russians came to view Ukraine and Ukrainians in a much more negative light, to the point where many continue to feel that the 2022 invasion was a justified course of action against an illegitimate, 'fascist' regime. In occupied Donbas, few were convinced by the ideological propositions of the DNR and LNR, although the idea of unification with Russia became somewhat more popular. In Kyiv-controlled Donbas and everywhere else in Ukraine, however, the events of Euromaidan and the war that followed served as a catalyst for Ukrainian identity, building on developments set in motion by the Orange Revolution of 2004, Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and the preceding centuries of Ukrainian nation building. Instead of directing their discontent at Kyiv, Russian-speaking Ukrainians settled into a civic yet explicitly nationalist Ukrainian identity.

SCOPE AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

Based on extensive research drawing on tens of thousands of news articles and hundreds of pages of legal documents and internal correspondence, this book offers the first comprehensive analysis of the role of propaganda, ideology, and identity in wartime Ukraine. It's helpful to first explain what I mean by these terms. Propaganda refers to 'the more or less systematic effort to manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions by means of symbols', which includes all forms of media output (B. L. Smith, 2023). By ideology I here specifically mean *political* ideology, or 'a set of ideas, beliefs, values, and opinions, exhibiting a recurring pattern, that competes deliberately as well as unintentionally over providing plans of action for public policy making in an attempt to justify, explain, contest, or change the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community' (Freeden, 2001). And finally, this book focuses on *group* identity in the tradition of social identity theory, which relates to how people see themselves in relation to their membership of social groups, both 'ingroups', or groups that an individual experiences kinship with, and 'outgroups', groups with which an individual does not identify (Tajfel, 1982).

This book is based in large part on research I conducted between 2016 and 2020 as part of my PhD dissertation (Roozenbeek, 2020b), which served as a preprint for this publication. It is made up of six chapters. Chapter 1 provides a backdrop to the current conflict, detailing Russian–Ukrainian relations and the emergence of Ukrainian identity from the ninth century until today. Chapter 2 looks at political developments inside the DNR

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and LNR between 2014 and 2022, focusing especially on the role of ideological projects. Chapter 3 examines the development of the DNR and LNR media landscapes, and how the authorities took control over local media to set up a powerful propaganda machine.

Chapters 4–6 are empirical, drawing on large volumes of data obtained from local DNR and LNR newspapers and websites to identify the most prevalent narratives aimed at local and external audiences. To do so, I make use of a variety of automated content analysis methods, primarily topic modelling. For an explanation of how these methodologies work, I refer to Appendix A at the back of this book. Chapter 4 explores the content of twenty-six DNR and LNR newspapers, to see what stories and narratives residents inside the DNR/LNR were subjected to during the period of occupation. Chapter 5 looks at DNR and LNR internet media, and the differences between media content that is exclusively aimed at locals (i.e., local newspapers) and content that is also intended for external consumption (news sites). Finally, Chapter 6 explores the consequences of this years-long propaganda campaign in terms of how it affected people's attitudes and sense of collective identity in Russia, Donbas, and the rest of Ukraine. I examine the content of two local newspapers from Kramatorsk, a city that was under DNR occupation for a brief period in 2014, as well as social media and survey data from Ukraine collected between 2016 and 2022. My focus is thus on media discourse produced by Russia and its proxies; I do not discuss media content production by Ukrainian media, or the efforts by the Ukrainian government to persuade and inform audiences domestically and abroad. For this, I refer to work by other scholars such as Olga Onuch (2018), Taras Fedirko (2020, 2021), Volodymyr Kulyk (2006), Dariya Orlova (2016), and Marta Dyczok (2016).

The empirical nature of this book, which relies in large part on data collected over the course of seven years of research, prohibits me from providing all information necessary to replicate my analyses in written form. I have therefore created an online appendix on the Open Science Foundation's public repository: https://osf.io/3846a/. Here, readers can find my original data sets (primarily the contents of DNR and LNR newspapers and news sites and summaries of legal documents), analysis scripts (written in Python) and resulting topic models, data scraping permissions, and additional background information that I could not include in this book or the appendices. I will refer to this online appendix in footnotes where relevant.

Finally, it is difficult if not impossible to write about historical events as they are unfolding. By the time you read this, some information (for example, about territorial control) is likely to be outdated. Nonetheless, I have done my best to ensure that this book provides as comprehensive an analysis as possible of the Russian–Ukrainian War, and the role (or lack thereof) that propaganda and ideology have played in Europe's foremost theatre of conflict.

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