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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Identity under narrative pressure: How Russian citizens navigate strategic war narratives

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Abstract

This article looks at the understudied process of strategic narratives' reception in authoritarian states at times of military crisis. Using the Russia–Ukraine war as a case study, the article conceptualises the reception of strategic narratives as identity work and as a reaction to the government's attempt to weaponise Russians' national identity and its important element, patriotism, to mobilise support for the war. Relying on interviews with Russians living in the country when the invasion started, triangulated with Public Sociology Laboratory (PSL) data, the article develops a model that shows three modes of reception shaping Russians' engagement with and interpretation of patriotic narratives through the prism of identity – alignment, separation, and ambivalence – and two mechanisms of management of perceived identity threat – compartmentalisation and withdrawal. This model shows that Russians' understanding and evaluation of the war goes beyond a simplistic typology of supporting/rejecting and is not conditioned by the type of media they consume. More broadly, the article shows that even in authoritarian states, reception is still conditioned by narratives' resonance with audience identity and the emotional load they impose. Moreover, in a time of crisis, repetitive and highly emotional messages may cause a wear-out effect and decrease narratives' effectiveness.

Keywords: identity; media; reception; Russia; strategic narratives; Ukraine; war

Introduction

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine shocked the entire world. Generally condemned by the international community, one may have expected that Russians themselves would protest at such a meaningless war.[1] However, this did not happen. While some took to the streets, these initiatives were quickly suppressed and new laws with long prison sentences for dissent were introduced.[2] Overwhelmingly, Russians voiced no disagreement with the war. Surveys conducted by researchers able to access the Russian public early in the war show 50–60 per cent supporting it – even higher (65–68 per cent) according to local pollster Levada Center.[3] The Russian government has long worked to create a series of narratives to describe the country's political vision, and to ensure that

[1]K. Kizilova and P. Norris, 'Assessing Russian public opinion on the Ukraine war', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 281 (2022), pp. 1–5.

[2]Ibid.

[3]M. Elinder, O. Erixson, and O. Hammar, 'How has the war in Ukraine affected Russian sentiments?', IZA Discussion Paper No. 17457 (2024); J. McGlynn, *Russia's War* (Polity Press, 2023); NORC CATI Russia Poll, University of Chicago (2023), available at: {chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.norc.org/content/dam/norc-org/pdf2023/russia-poll-november-2023-topline.pdf}; Levada Center, 'Conflict with Ukraine: November 2022' (2022), available at: {https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/12/12/conflict-with-ukraine-november-2022/}, accessed 14 May 2024.

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its voice is the only one citizens hear. Alternative narratives have been made more inaccessible, as the government prosecutes independent journalists, media outlets, public figures, or citizens who contradict the official narrative.[4] One explanation for Russians' silence, and apparent overwhelming support for the war, is that most do indeed believe the government's narrative, while others are probably scared to reveal their views.

Yet this may be too simplistic. Morris argued against claiming knowledge about Russian society based on limited field research, emphasising that some oversimplify Russian society as a dichotomy (anti- or pro-war).[5] Russia, he suggests, is experiencing severe inter-societal conflict over attitudes to the war. Researchers trying to understand this situation face challenges around data – the crackdown on freedom of speech, travel restrictions, lack of safe communications, and a lack of experts with sufficient linguistic abilities all limit access to and analysis of data. Thus, even four years later, we have little idea how Russians process and interpret information about the war and what affects their attitudes. While the aforementioned surveys provided data, they have flaws. Quantitative surveys cannot fully present the context in which the respondent is embedded.[6] Further, given Russia's political context, the surveys may not always reflect people's true feelings.[7] Finally, limiting Russians' reactions to the invasion of Ukraine to just two options (support the war or afraid to speak up) appears to deprive Russian society of any agency in their engagement with narratives. The audiences, however, 'are not a blank slate for narratives to be projected onto' and indeed interpret narratives through their political and cultural backgrounds.[8] Personal factors like emotions, social relations, or psychology can also affect reception of narratives, and this needs to be considered while attempting to understand this process.[9]

This article aims to answer the following research question: how does Russian identity affect reception of strategic narratives over the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Specifically, it will look at the government's attempt to link national identity and patriotism to support of the war. To answer this question, the study relies on the author's interviews with twenty-four Russians who lived in Russia in 2022–3, the first year of invasion, as well as 213 Public Sociology Laboratory (PSL) interviews conducted in the same period. The paper shows how people with different understandings of patriotism interpret the state's narratives in a very different manner, from alignment to ambivalence or even full rejection, and how other factors – media repertoires, emotions, and personal characteristics – contribute to reception. Simultaneously, all respondents with different attitudes towards the war appear to perceive the government's weaponisation of patriotism as a threat to their identity and develop two defence mechanisms – compartmentalising their assessment of the war and their patriotism to avoid conflict and/or withdrawing from channels of narratives dissemination completely – to avoid any contact with discomforting messages.

Strategic narratives' reception: Effectiveness and the role of the audience

Strategic narratives are a powerful concept in international relations.[10] They are 'stories with a political purpose … used by political actors to affect the behaviour of others'.[11] They explain 'events in

[4]R. Picheta, '"It's all a lie": Russians are trapped in Putin's parallel universe. But some want out', *CNN* (27 February 2023), available at: {https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/27/europe/russia-propaganda-information-ukraine-anniversary-cmd-intl/index.html}, accessed 27 February 2023.

[5]J. Morris, 'Russians in wartime and defensive consolidation', *Current History*, 121:837 (2022), pp. 258–63.

[6]M. Baker, 'Reframing conflict in translation', *Social Semiotics*, 17:2 (2007), pp. 151–69.

[7]Morris, 'Russians in wartime'.

[8]A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, and L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Routledge, 2013), p. 18; A. P. Kavoori, 'Between narrative and reception', *Journal of International Communication*, 4:1 (1997), pp. 99–114.

[9]Szostek, J. 'News media repertoires and strategic narrative reception: A paradox of dis/belief in authoritarian Russia. '*New Media & Society*, 20:1 (2018), pp. 68–87.

[10]Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*; A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin and L. Roselle (eds), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (University of Michigan Press, 2017).

[11]M. Levinger and L. Roselle, 'Narrating global order and disorder', *Politics and Governance*, 5:3 (2017), pp. 94–8 (p. 94).

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line with an ideology, theory, or belief … Narratives make sense of the world, put things in their place according to our experience, and then tell us what to do.'[12] While researchers understand narratives' formation and projection, their reception process by audiences in authoritarian states is less known.[13] Some understanding can be gleaned through related literature on media effects or opinion polling, but usually within a narrow context.[14] Not covered is how audiences make sense of the narratives, what emotional impact they have, and how audiences' emotions affect reception. The latter is particularly important with scholars, emphasising the increased role of emotions in politics.[15]

For this study, reception is understood as 'a semiotic process through which audiences differentially read and make sense of messages that have been transmitted, and act on those meanings within the context of the rest of their situation and experience'.[16] The process of reception appears to be less studied than other stages as it often requires unpacking people's psychological, emotional, and cognitive processes.[17] This may be why it is often studied through narratives' persuasiveness. Such persuasiveness may depend on factors including resonating with audience's identities and political myths;[18] cultural and historical backgrounds;[19] relation to people's personal experiences;[20] and resonating with the narratives circulating in a local community. The 'persuasiveness' approach, however, appears to reduce an audience's agency. However, 'audiencisation' – taking audience experience and logic into account – is crucial to understanding the reception of strategic narratives. The audience does not passively absorb narratives (i.e., accept or reject them) – it tries to make sense of them. Audience, according to Shroeder, is 'the people who, in their capacity as social actors, are attending to, negotiating the meaning of, and sometimes participating in the multimodal processes initiated or carried out by institutional media'.[21] Shroeder argues that it is important to understand not just how narratives relate to an audience's personal experience and background but also how those experiences shape the perception of, interaction with, and interpretation of the narratives.

Media repertoires appear to be an important factor in narrative reception.[22] However, there is no consensus on the media's role in opinion formation. Some researchers claim that media

[12]M. Laity, 'NATO and the power of narrative', in *Information at War: From China's Three Warfares to NATO's Narratives* (Transitions Forum, 2015), pp. 22–28 (p. 24), available at: {https://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/arena/archives/information-at-war-from-china-s-three-warfares-to-nato-s-narratives-pdf.pdf}, accessed 6 June 2024.

[13]Levinger and Roselle, 'Narrating global order'; Miskimmon et al., *Forging the World*; Szostek, J. 'Nothing Is True? The Credibility of News and Conflicting Narratives during "Information War" in Ukraine. '*The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23:1 (2018), pp.116–135.

[14]D. McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (SAGE, 2010), p. 458; J. R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[15]J. J. Pierce, 'Emotions and the policy process: Enthusiasm, anger and fear', *Policy & Politics*, 49:4 (2021), pp. 595–614.

[16]D. Morley, *Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding* (BFI, 1980), p. 11.

[17]Szostek, 2018, 'News media repertoires', p. 73.

[18]V. Hudson, '"Forced to friendship"? Russian (mis-)understandings of soft power and the implications for audience attraction in Ukraine', *Politics*, 35:3/4 (2015), pp. 330–46; I. Khaldarova, 'Brother or "other"? Transformation of strategic narratives in Russian television news during the Ukrainian crisis', *Media, War & Conflict*, 14:1 (2021), pp. 3–20; O. Schmitt, 'When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39:4 (2018), pp. 487–511.

[19]A. Kokalari and T. Y. C. Yeung, 'Selective reception of external strategic narratives: Vaccine diplomacy in the Western Balkans during the COVID-19 pandemic', *European Politics and Society*, 26:4 (2024), pp. 899–917.

[20]T. Colley, 'Is Britain a force for good? Investigating British citizens' narrative understanding of war', *Defence Studies*, 17:1 (2017), pp. 1–22; J. Szostek, 'Defence and promotion of desired state identity in Russia's strategic narrative', *Geopolitics*, 22:3 (2017), pp. 571–93; J. Szostek, 'The power and limits of Russia's strategic narrative in Ukraine: The role of linkage', *Perspectives on Politics*, 15:2 (2017), pp. 379–95.

[21]K. C. Schrøder, 'Towards the "audiencization" of mediatization research? Audience dynamics as co-constitutive of mediatization processes', in O. Driessens, G. Bolin, A. Hepp, and S. Hjarvard (eds), *Dynamics of Mediatization: Institutional Change and Everyday Transformations in a Digital Age* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 85–115 (p. 160).

[22]E. Rönngren, 'Making sense of Russian strategic narratives: Affect and reception among young Russian speakers in Latvia' (PhD diss.., Uppsala University, 2025), p. 183.

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effects on the audience may be exaggerated, while others argue that, for example, individual media repertoires may affect how people engage with and make sense of information and strategic narratives.[23] The 'media repertoires' concept reflects the entirety of the media a person uses.[24] On the one hand, it represents the complexity of individual communicative practices, where a user may consume different types of media (TV, social media, etc.) reflecting different ideological stances, which then may affect their reception of different narratives.[25] Simultaneously, the choice of media and the manner of engagement are affected by a person's individual background, experience, values, and ambitions[26] as well as the political and social context they live in, and their media choices are often made on these evaluations.[27] One aspect related to personal experiences, emotions, seems to be particularly understudied, yet it is important.[28] Emotions seem to be particularly relevant in understanding the Russian audience, as not only does Russia tend to exploit emotive topics in its narratives but the war itself also represents an extremely emotionally charged event.[29] According to Marcus, 'unconscious evaluations are far more active and hence far more important than conscious cognitive processing'.[30] Several researchers specifically highlighted the connection between media and emotions. Media can provoke empathy, excitation, fear and anxiety, and even physical reactions.[31] Regarding persuasion and motivation for action, fear may play a particularly important role, yet if it is used to an excessive degree, it may have an opposite, demoralising effect, while anxiety may affect attention and information seeking.[32] Emotions have an ability to form new beliefs and change existing ones, can serve as a direct catalyst for action or source of division, and play a direct role in information processing as people rely on them when they form a judgement.[33]

[23]P. Riddell, 'Media manipulation much exaggerated', *British Journalism Review*, 3:2 (1992), pp. 11–16; T. P. Gerber and J. Zavisca, 'Does Russian propaganda work?', *The Washington Quarterly*, 39:2 (2016), pp. 79–98; A. Lanoszka, 'Disinformation in international politics', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:2 (2019), pp. 227–48.

[24]U. Hasebrink and H. Domeyer, 'Media repertoires as patterns of behaviour and as meaningful practices: A multimethod approach to media use in converging media environments', *Participations*, 9:2 (2012), pp. 757–79.

[25]Hasebrink and Domeyer, 'Media repertoires'; Rönngren, 'Making sense', p. 53.

[26]Szostek, 'Defence and promotion'; Szostek, 'The power and limits'; C. Archetti, 'Terrorism, communication and new media: Explaining radicalization in the digital age', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9:1 (2015), pp. 49–59; Kavoori, 'Between narrative and reception'; Rönngren, 'Making sense'; U. Hasebrink and A. Hepp, 'How to research cross-media practices? Investigating media repertoires and media ensembles', *Convergence*, 23:4 (2017), pp. 362–77 (p. 369).

[27]S. Flaxman, S. Goel, and J. M. Rao, 'Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and online news consumption', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80:S1 (2016), pp. 298–320; D. Frey, 'Recent research on selective exposure to information', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 19 (1986), pp. 41–80; T. Vihalemm and J. Juzefovičs, '"They say we are all zombies": Rethinking the role of audiences in a mediatized international conflict', *Global Media and Communication*, 19:1 (2023), pp. 3–28.

[28]Rönngren, 'Making sense', p. 64; Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*.

[29]A. Ventsel, S. Hansson, M. L. Madisson, and V. Sazonov, 'Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia's Zapad war games', *Media, War & Conflict*, 14:1 (2021), pp. 21–39.

[30]G. E. Marcus, 'Emotions in politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3 (2000), p. 231.

[31]A. I. Nathanson and M. S. Yang, 'The effects of mediation content and form on children's responses to violent television', *Human Communication Research*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 111–34; D. Zillmann, 'Excitation transfer in communication-mediated aggressive behavior', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 7:4 (1971), pp. 419–34; G. Gerbner, L. Gross, N. Signorielli, and M. Morgan, 'Television violence, victimization, and power', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 23:5 (1980), pp. 705–16; B. Massumi, *Shock to Thought* (Routledge, 2002).

[32]R. E. Petty, J. T. Cacioppo, and R. Goldman, 'Personal involvement as a determinant of argument-based persuasion', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 41:5 (1981), pp. 847–55; T. Brader and G. E. Marcus, 'Emotion and political psychology', in L. Huddy, D. O. Sears, and J. S. Levy (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 165–204.

[33]E. R. Smith and D. M. Mackie, 'Dynamics of group-based emotions: Insights from intergroup emotions theory', *Emotion Review*, 7:4 (2015), pp. 349–54; B. Romano, 'The epistemic value of emotions in politics', *Philosophia*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 589–608; M. Clément, *Collective Emotions and Political Violence* (Manchester University Press, 2023); N. Schwarz and G. L. Clore, 'Mood, misattribution, and judgments of well-being: Informative and directive functions of affective states', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45 (1983), pp. 513–23.

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Reception in authoritarian states: The case of Russian aggression against Ukraine

The challenge of studying reception becomes even greater when the context is within authoritarian states, given limited access to data and questions about data reliability due to potential survey manipulation or respondents' self-censoring, along with personal security issues for researchers themselves. Thus, when studying reception of strategic narratives, researchers know much more about external audiences than domestic ones, for example, in the case of China and Iran.[34] Regarding domestic audience, researchers mostly look at how states (e.g., China) create and disseminate strategic narratives to ensure audience support and trust.[35]

Russia draws particular attention due to its aggressive involvement in information wars abroad and the increased role of censorship and propaganda domestically.[36] The invasion of Ukraine further demonstrated the scale to which the state propaganda operates.

Even before the full-scale invasion, Russia has been undertaking measures to create a new image of Ukraine in the eyes of its citizens.[37] If before the 2014 Donbas crisis Ukraine's dominant image in Russian messaging was as a brother nation,[38] after that, Ukrainians' desire to join the EU was presented as a 'brother's betrayal' with the narrative of an enemy gradually being formed. Ukrainians became 'neo-Nazis' committing atrocities against the Russian-speaking population and the 'pawn' of the West.[39] This strategy worked – after the 2014 Euromaidan crisis, 59 per cent of Russians reported having negative views about Ukrainians (17 per cent before 2014), seeing Ukrainians as 'hypocritical, cunning, furtive, envious, arrogant, avaricious, cruel'.[40] With the invasion, this narrative acquired more layers.

Russia's efforts also successfully target the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine and the Baltic states. Szostek shows how a Ukrainian audience may be supportive of the Russian narratives, even if they practice cross-media checking, use multiple sources, and even openly admit that they do not trust the Russian government.[41] Domestically, the government has acquired an almost total monopoly over narrative formation and projection by creating a singular media landscape, backed by new laws threatening consequences for those propagating different views.[42] With

[34]J. Gurol, 'The authoritarian narrator: China's power projection and its reception in the Gulf', *International Affairs*, 99:2 (2023), pp. 687–705; P. Rivetti, 'The reception of Iran's state propaganda by the Italian far right: Recasting the diffusion of authoritarian discourse and narratives', *Italian Political Science Review*, 54 (2024), pp. 36–53.

[35]L. Lams, 'Examining strategic narratives in Chinese official discourse under Xi Jinping', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 23 (2018), pp. 387–411; J. Cachenweiss and A. Dafoe, 'Authoritarian audiences, rhetoric, and propaganda in international crises: Evidence from China', *International Studies Quarterly*, 63 (2019), pp. 963–73.

[36]J. Szostek, 'What happens to public diplomacy during information war? Critical reflections on the conceptual framing of international communication', *International Journal of Communication*, 14 (2020), pp. 2728–48; S. Bradshaw and P. N. Howard, *The Global Disinformation Disorder: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Media Manipulation* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2019); K. Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* (NATO Defence College, 2016); T. C. Helmus, J. V. Marrone, M. N. Posard, and D. Schlang, *Russian Propaganda Hits Its Mark: Experimentally Testing the Impact of Russian Propaganda and Counter-Interventions* (RAND Corporation, 2020).

[37]Szostek, 'Defence and Promotion'.

[38]Khaldarova, 'Brother or "other"?', pp. 13–14.

[39]O. Snigyr, 'Russian strategic narratives', *Orbis*, 68:1 (2023), pp. 3–23; P. Zavershinskaia, 'State's legitimisation of violence through strategic narration: How the Kremlin justified the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *The International Spectator*, 59 (2024), pp. 1–19; S. Oates, 'Nothing is true, but it turns out not everything is possible: Putin's failed attempt to turn strategic narratives into military success in the Ukrainian invasion', paper presented at BASEES Annual Conference, 2 April 2023.

[40]Levada Center, 'Russian–Ukrainian relationship' (2017), available at: {https://www.levada.ru/2017/06/23/rossijsko-ukrainskie-otnosheniya/}; L. Gudkov, 'The technology of negative mobilisation: Russian public opinion and Vladimir Putin's "Ukrainian policy"', Eurozine (2014), available at: {https://www.eurozine.com/the-technology-of-negative-mobilization/}, accessed 1 July 2025.

[41]Szostek, 'Defence and promotion'; Szostek, 'The power and limits'.

[42]Gudkov, 'The technology of negative mobilisation'; C. Paul and M. Matthews, *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It* (RAND Corporation, 2018), p. 2.; S. Oates, 'Russian media in the digital age: Propaganda rewired', *Russian Politics*, 1 (2016), pp. 398–417 (p. 416); A. Litvinenko, 'Propaganda on demand: Russia's media environment during the war in Ukraine', *Global Media Journal*, 12:2 (2022), pp. 1–14; J. V. Pavlik, 'The Russian war in Ukraine and the implications for the news media', *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications*, 8 (2022), pp. 1–17.

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the increased government control over the internet, public access to alternative information has also become more difficult.[43] Moreover, the government encourages digital vigilantism – citizens' surveillance over each other in digital space – which foments caution in expression among those not supporting government positions.[44] Yet, Russians are not naïve nor lack access to alternative sources: researchers report a strong level of distrust towards Russian media (or media in general) and a tendency to read several sources, including oppositional views.[45]

As shown, the Russian state has undertaken considerable effort before and during the invasion to build strategic narratives around its relationship with Ukraine that present the country in a completely different light – from being a brother nation to a dangerous enemy and the proxy of the West. However, the full-scale invasion demanded further effort to ensure popular support for and loyalty to the initiators of the 'special military operation'. Oates argues that during war, states (especially autocracies) tend to rely on the patriotic model of media, with news sources tending to prioritise emotional reporting over objectivity to shape feelings of unity and patriotism and ensure support for the government line.[46] Indeed, at the beginning of the invasion, the government introduced a new narrative to ensure people's compliance: it attempted to weaponise Russians' national identity and the feeling of patriotism, drawing a direct parallel between supporting the war and being a 'true' patriot.

This article explores the Russian public's reception of this strategic narrative through the lens of identity. It also develops a conceptual model that helps us better understand people's overall interpretation of the new, life-altering reality mediated by the authoritarian context.

Patriotism and state weaponisation of identity

Patriotism is important to Russians' national identity and general cultural code.[47] According to a 2015 Levada Center poll, 78 per cent of Russians considered themselves patriots.[48] In a more recent poll from Levada with *Novaya Gazeta* (independent newspaper), this sentiment remained largely the same: when asked if they felt more or less patriotic at the moment of the poll (2025) than five years ago (pre-war), 44 per cent answered 'more', 42 percent 'as patriotic as before', 7 per cent less, and 6 per cent refused to answer (with 1 per cent being lost in the round up).[49]

Love and pride for the country and for the people is an integral part of how Russian people define themselves.[50] Therefore, one may presume that during a fully-fledged war, a strategic narrative of support for war-as-patriotism would play a particularly important role in getting the audience to accept and support the new reality.

Patriotism, however familiar to Russian society, is also a state policy that has been developing over recent decades, with the government sponsoring various programmes aiming to cultivate patriotism among young people – through education, sports events, volunteering programmes,

[43]M. Alyukov, 'Harnessing distrust: News, credibility heuristics, and war in an authoritarian regime', *Political Communication*, 40:5 (2023), pp. 527–54 (p. 273).

[44]Alyukov, M. 'Online Patriots and Traitors: The War, Authoritarianism, And State-Sponsored Digital Vigilantism in Russia'. *Mediapolis* (13 June 2022), available at: {https://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2022/06/online-patriots-and-traitors/}, accessed 4 June 2025.

[45]E. Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Alyukov, 'Harnessing distrust'; Vihalemm and Juzefovičs, 'Recent research on selective exposure'; T. Vihalemm and J. Juzefovičs, 'Sense-making of conflicting political news among Baltic Russian-speaking audiences', *National Identities*, 23:3 (2021), pp. 253–75.

[46]S. Oates, 'War propaganda and the patriotic model of the news in the 21st century', *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 23:4 (2021), pp. 329–34.

[47]A.G. Sanina, 'Patriotism and patriotic education in contemporary Russia', *Sociological Research*, 56:1 (2017), pp. 38–52.

[48]Sanina, 'Patriotism and patriotic education', p. 45.

[49]А.Левинсон, 'У кого растет патриотизм', *Новая Газета*, available at: {https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2025/06/11/u-kogo-rastet-patriotizm}, accessed 11 June 2025.

[50]Sanina, 'Patriotism and patriotic education'.

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and so on.[51] These measures intensified after the annexation of Crimea. A significant proportion of the population supported this development, and when Western sanctions impacted the Russian economy, the government used patriotism as 'a unifying force that would see it through the troubled times'.[52] Furthermore, patriotism was reinterpreted through loyalty to Putin's government and rejection of Western values.[53] Yet, despite the government's effort to shape Russian patriotism through the prism of an external threat, the revival of Russia's 'great power' status has certain limitations.[54] One reason is that Russians arguably place a higher value on 'safeguarding personal interests' as opposed to national interests.[55] Another reason is that people have low trust in state-controlled media channels, which inevitably affects the government's ability to form a desired version of patriotism.[56]

In some Russians' interpretations of patriotism, the ethnic element seems prominent, as people would define patriotism as not just love for the motherland but also belonging to a 'single group's history and culture', which would often be interpreted through ethnic lenses, that is, belonging specifically to the Russian nation.[57] However, Russians reject ethno-nationalism, seeing Russia as a welcoming and harmonious ethnic space, where different nations live in peace, united by language and culture.[58]

Alexeev and Pyle found that compared to other nations, Russian patriotism has a 'starkly blind and militant character'.[59] Unlike the common belief that this is a product of Putin's regime, evidence suggests that it existed long before and is common also among young people.[60] Oppositely, however, young people are believed to feel more cosmopolitan than older generations and interpret patriotism through the lenses of not military heroism but rather good deeds, kindness, and helping their co-patriots.[61]

Since the invasion began, it has undertaken several practical measures to promote and impose a version of patriotism that aims to shape popular support. Thus, the government introduced further patriotic educational initiatives at schools, for example, sessions called 'Conversations about important matters' that aim to teach children from a young age the Russian version of the rationale behind invasion, creating loyal citizens in the future.[62]

Russian officials and state media also often compare the invasion to the Second World War.[63] As the 'Great Patriotic War' plays a very important role in Russians' patriotic upbringing, the parallels between the fight of the Soviet Union against the Nazis in 1941–5 and Russia's current fight against the 'Nazis' in Ukraine also aim to strengthen and invoke stronger feelings of patriotism and national

[51] E. Khodzhaeva, I. Meyer, S. Barsukova, and I. Yasaveev, 'Mobilising patriotism in Russia', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 207 (2022), pp. 1–16.

[52] J. P. Goode, 'Everyday patriotism and ethnicity in today's Russia', in P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds), *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–17* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 258–81 (p. 265).

[53] Ibid., p. 265.

[54] T. Sherlock, 'Russian society and foreign policy: Mass and elite orientations after Crimea', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 67:1 (2020), pp. 1–23 (p. 10).

[55] Ibid., p. 10.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Goode, 'Everyday patriotism', p. 271.

[58] M. Blackburn, 'Mainstream Russian nationalism and the "state-civilization" identity: Perspectives from below', *Nationalities Papers*, 49:1 (2021), pp. 89–107 (p. 89).

[59] M. Alexeev and W. Pyle, 'A blind and militant attachment: Russian patriotism in comparative perspective', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39:5 (2023), pp. 309–28 (p. 324).

[60] Ibid., p. 324.

[61] D. Omelchenko, S. Maximova, O. Noyanzina, N. Goncharova, and G. Avdeeva, 'National identity and patriotism among Russian youth: Representations, feelings and actions', *Asian Social Science*, 11:6 (2015), pp. 27–36 (p. 33).

[62] I. Fominykh, V. Kozlov, D. Romanov, and D. Rosenberg, 'Patriotic education in Russia: Will it achieve loyalty?' *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 42:2 (2026), pp. 1–32; A. Edwards and J. G. Mathers, 'Anyone can be a hero: The militarization of children in Putin's Russia', *International Affairs*, 2 (2025), pp. 399–417.

[63] S. Griffin, 'Putin's holy war of the Fatherland: Sacred memory and the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *The Russian Review*, 83 (2023), pp. 79–92; A. Edwards, 'Designing the "good Russian patriot": Indoctrination, education, and youth in Russia', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 309 (2024), pp. 1–6.

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self-identification.[64] The state also appeals both to national pride and ambitions (e.g., the idea of 'Great Russia', a vast territory of Slavic nations that also includes Ukraine and Belarus) and equally to victimhood, that is, as being 'wronged' by the West, which does everything in its power to harm Russia.[65]

Overall, the government has been trying to construct a strategic narrative that weaponises feelings of patriotism, love, and pride for the country and Russian national identity to generate support for the war. The message that official sources are sending out to people is that of a rigid, dichotomous choice: you are either a patriot and support the war, or you are a traitor and don't deserve to call yourself Russian.

Data collection and methods

Gathering survey and interview-based data from Russia is currently difficult. Nevertheless, provided data and technique triangulation is in place, tackling the research question is still possible.[66] This study's main dataset is twenty-four semi-structured interviews with Russians conducted by the author. The respondents are 25–75, live in Russia, experienced the beginning of the full-scale invasion (February 2022), and are still living through it. Recruitment was based on snowball purposive sampling – the author contacting personal connections and asking them to advertise participation among associates. This data collection method is believed to work best for a 'hard to reach population'.[67] As the Russian state exercises strict control over the population's freedom of speech, people (often regardless of their attitudes to the war and the government) would be wary in talking to a stranger. For this reason, snowball sampling creates an atmosphere of trust, as participants are connected to the researcher through a secure personal network. Before launching, the project went through the risk assessment and institutional ethical approval procedure (see Appendix 1).

The selection criteria were: aged 18–75; resident in Russia at the time of war; and some engagement with either state or alternative media. Safety criteria were also considered – if an interviewee's well-being was at risk (e.g., they could be fired from work) or interacting with that individual was a risk for the researcher (e.g., reported to authorities), these individuals were excluded (see Appendix 1). The author attempted to ensure demographic diversity by providing further selection criteria to associates (e.g., asking them to invite more women or representatives of different education levels or geographical regions). (Russia's two capitals, Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and 'the rest of the country' differ significantly. The 'capitals' are believed to be the most progressive/liberal in their political and social views while the 'provinces' tend to be more conservative and government-aligned.[68]) Interviews spanned March 2022–August 2023. Participation was voluntary and participants received an information sheet and consent form. They could withdraw at any point. All interviews were conducted in the Russian language online via Telegram or Microsoft Teams (see Appendix 1 for interview procedure and ethics and Appendix 3 for interview questions) and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Based on participants' preferences, some interviews were conducted via video call and some via audio. The sample comprised seven people supportive of the war, thirteen against it, and four neither supporting nor condemning it. During data collection, the

[64] A. Preen, 'Putin's retelling of the Great Patriotic War myth and the construction of Russian national identity', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies*, 15:3 (2023), pp. 52–9; M. Shevtsova, 'Looking for Stepan Bandera: The myth of Ukrainian nationalism and the Russian "special operation"', *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 16:3 (2022), pp. 132–50.

[65] T. Kuzio, 'Historical preparation and ideological legitimisation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: A critical discourse', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 32:3 (2024), pp. 850–69; D. A. Fusiek, 'Putin's Great Patriotic War: Russia's securitization of the West and humiliation narratives surrounding the 2022 invasion of Ukraine', *HAPS Policy Brief Series*, 3:1 (2022), pp. 105–13.

[66] B. Rosenfeld, 'Survey research in Russia: In the shadow of war', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39:1–2 (2023), pp. 38–48.

[67] J. Faugier and M. Sargeant, 'Sampling hard to reach populations', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 24:4 (1997), pp. 790–97 (p. 790).

[68] M. Dmitriev, 'Lost in transition? The geography of protests and attitude change in Russia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67:2 (2015), pp. 224–43.

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author approached thirty people; however, four refused to speak due to fear and two due to their strong support for the invasion, perceiving the author as a hostile actor. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and then self-transcribed from Russian. Quotes used were later translated into English by the author. DeepL translator was also used to ensure accuracy.

The author used Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. This method appears to be the most suitable for this type of study due to its theoretical flexibility and an opportunity to narrate people's personal experiences and emotions, which was key to understand the role of people's identity in reception of narratives.[69]

The author firstly read through the transcripts to gain a preliminary feeling for the data, prospective codes, and themes. The author then coded the data by identifying specific units of meaning such as words, phrases, actions, or emotions. During the coding process, the author aimed to capture: 1) people's understanding of patriotism and how it is linked to their identity; 2) whether they see the government's attempts to weaponise patriotism in the context of the Ukraine invasion; 3) how this resonated with their personal identity; 5) what (if any) their response was to weaponisation; 4) general audience-related factors affecting reception and identified previously – media repertoires, emotions over the war, general social and political background and attitudes, and so on. Overall, the purpose of coding is to capture audience engagement with the government's reframing of patriotism and national identity in the context of support for the invasion.

During analysis, the codes were repeatedly compared, and the narratives across the transcripts and the findings then were further corroborated with data triangulation from the PSL dataset and the polls. The author focused on the most prominent themes (repeated in over 50 per cent of interviews). For coding process details see Appendix 2. With the limited availability of language specialists and the sensitive nature, the author was sole coder, which raises the potential issue of bias. However, thematic analysis by its nature does not seek to produce objective knowledge.[70] Nevertheless, to increase the reliability of findings, the author triangulated their data with a report from Public Sociology Laboratory – an independent collective of Russian sociologists created in 2011 after mass protests on Bolotnaya square. The collective consists of several Russian researchers affiliated with various Russian and European universities who proclaim their adherence to reflexivity and publicity in their research work.[71] The report explored the attitudes of 213 Russians (interviewed February–June 2022) towards the war, the types of media they receive their information from, and changes in their personal lives after the invasion (see Appendix 1 for respondent details). The report focused more on the general attitudes of Russians towards the war and the influence of their media consumption on those attitudes, and thus it was coded differently than the interview conducted by the author of this article. It also did not have the full transcripts of the interviews, only quotes from the respondents, which does limit the scale in which this report can be used. However, many questions that the PSL researchers asked are similar to the questions in this study, and the researchers provided the percentage of respondents giving a certain type of answer, which allowed their use for data triangulation, that is, providing evidence that the patterns observed in the researcher's interviews were also observed across a larger sample of Russian respondents. Another data triangulation source were surveys from the Levada Center (2022) and MediaScope (2022) measuring Russian attitudes and behaviours after the war began.

The author also maintained reflexivity over their own bias while engaging with the data as a Russian person living abroad for over ten years and having very strong pro-Western views. This could have potentially affected their engagement with war and/or government supporters, forming a more negative judgement of them and, conversely, a more positive judgement of oppositionists. The author tried to minimise free discussion with the respondents to avoid ideological conversations. The author also attempted to maintain neutrality, that is, not underplaying the level of

[69] V. Braun and V. Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:2 (2006), pp. 77–101; S. Buetow, 'Emotionally sensitive thematic analysis', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 22:4 (2025), pp. 775–92 (p. 2).

[70] Oats, 'Nothing is true?', p. 122.

[71] Public Sociology Laboratory (PSL), 'About', available at: {https://publicsociologylab.com/}, accessed 5 June 2026.

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support for the war and not over-representing the opposition, trying to accurately reflect and register every opinion without judgement. They also made several rounds of transcript reading to ensure that codes accurately depicted people's accounts.

Results

This section discusses themes and trends related to Russians' engagement with the government's strategic narrative of weaponised patriotism and national identity delivered through the different types of media – official (i.e., promoting this narrative) and opposing (i.e., arguing against the narrative) – that the research participants were either deliberately using to obtain information about the war or unwillingly exposed to (e.g., through their family members).

Making sense of war narratives through identity

Initially, people were asked about whether they consider themselves patriots and how they define patriotism. Most respondents either self-identified as patriots or used a different way to express their feelings (e.g., love and pride for the country). (This was also the case for PSL's interviewees.[72]) They would also give quite similar definitions of patriotism, which the following quote exemplifies:

> This means for me to love my country; people respect our ancestors (fathers and grandfathers) who did a lot to live in the world we live in now. … Russia is a great country, it is known for its writers, scientists, composers, artists. This makes me proud and make me feel love for my country, achievements of my co-patriots, nature, my home and everything Russian.

They were also asked if they feel like the concept of patriotism is being used in strong conjunction with the war. Most respondents (75 per cent) confirmed that they do see the attempt to connect patriotism with the war:

> Media supports the operation as an idea of national security, try to promote patriotism among the Russians, linked to the operation. … There are posters with pictures of 'heroes of Russia' and every day media reports Russian successes in Ukraine.

Based on these conversations, the author identified three identity-related modes of strategic narrative reception: 1) identity alignment; 2) identity separation; 3) identity ambivalence; and two mechanisms through which Russians cope with perceived identity threat: 1) identity compartmentalisation; 2) withdrawal from strategic narratives' dissemination channels.

Identity-based modes of the war narrative's reception

Identity alignment

This mechanism describes the process where narratives fit well with a person's identity.[73] Often, these people genuinely see the war as a way to protect Russia, its people, and language and the state's actions as justified and correct. Some respondents even noted that the war 'woke up' their feeling of patriotism and a desire to defend their country:

> I've never considered myself a patriot, I've never asked myself what it means to be a patriot, but the situation of the last five months brought me to the conclusion that I am a patriot. In

[72]Public Sociology Laboratory (PSL), 'The war near and far: How Russians perceive the military invasion of Ukraine' (2022). Edited by S. Erpyleva and N. Savelyeva, available at {https://publicsociologylab.com/reports/far-war.html}, accessed 5 June 2024, p. 280.

[73]Crossman, J. 'Alignment and Misalignment in Personal and Organizational Spiritual Identities. *Identity*, 16:3 (2016), pp. 154–168; Lane, Daniel, Melody Chen, Yifei Wang, 'An "Identity Turn" in political communication?: testing the relationship between media use and identity alignment in the United States', *Journal of Communication*, (2025), pp. 1–13.'

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> the light of current event, it means that I support my government's policy in this very specific situation when it comes to relations with other countries.

Some people would connect this 'awakening' with negative reporting by alternative/Western media that they perceived as attacking Russia and Russians:

> As this feeling only emerged recently, I would say mass media, both Russian and foreign, as well as local, influenced it. I think negative comments about Russia made me want to protect my motherland, my nationality, and revived in me this feeling.

These people would generally reproduce government rhetoric when discussing the situation in Ukraine. They present an idea that the war was unavoidable given the Ukrainian government's politics after 2014, particularly the alleged violations of the Minsk agreement and abuse of the Russian-speaking population. More broadly they see the West as escalating the situation:

> I think SMO [special military operation] is rooted in 2014, when there was a constitutional coup, followed by Maidan, when the legitimate president was overthrown with the American support. Then Crimea decided to get separated during the referendum, and then Donetsk and Luhansk also didn't want to stay – all this is coming from those times.

For people whose identity is aligned with support of the war, this is a logical and necessary development; they believe that the Russian government was forced to act to protect the Russian-speaking population of Eastern Ukraine. Indeed, very often, one encounters the mention of eight years or 'waiting for eight years', referring to the idea that people in this region have been abused for all this time – a time in which the Russian government had not interfered. However, its patience ran out. Some respondents even expressed regret that the government did not act sooner.

One may expect that people with identity alignment would be the main consumers of pro-state media and just blindly reproduce narratives they hear on TV or via other pro-Kremlin information sources. This does not appear to be the case – also confirmed by PSL data.[74] While they would choose government sources as their main channels, almost all also reported using alternative channels to compare different points of view and positions, including Ukrainian ones:

> Sometimes I use Freedom [Ukrainian channel], to compare the narratives. And that channel presents a completely different narrative from the one presented by the Russian government. So, I am trying to get objective information, and it's interesting to see how they present things. It may not necessarily be Russian channels, I also use Ukrainian ones, and if I knew the language I would have used foreign channels as well – German, American, British.

Despite a popular idea that one could often hear in both the media and household conversations in the West about Russians being 'brainwashed' with propaganda, this may not necessarily be true. Most respondents with identity alignment (with rare exceptions) demonstrated awareness of the fact that pro-government sources are not truthful and they would openly admit to not believing the television-spread narratives.

When asked why they chose such media, some (older) respondents mentioned their Soviet past, where 'official' journalists are perceived professional and truthful by definition:

> It's just, you know, some non-federal channels have hosts who can't pronounce half of the letters, or don't look presentable and I can't understand that. I value both sound and visual effects accompanying information. If I don't like the host, I won't watch the programme … My generation was brought up with the image of classical journalist school, when people who couldn't talk properly wouldn't be allowed on air.

[74] PSL, 'The war near and far', pp. 65, 214–15.

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This comment may reflect some further identity expression – for many older respondents, the Soviet past was the time of their personality development and thus 'the Soviet way' has become part of their self-image. Nostalgia is a strong factor there, with an idea of the 'Soviet way' being the best, most professional and efficient. Thus, the pro-government sources are seen as the legacy of the Soviet system and thus, by definition, good (i.e., if it is government approved, it must be good). Consequently, the rational position of distrusting the sources is overpowered by loyalty towards the government as a guardian of the great Soviet past and also the great contemporary Russia's future.

Yet, despite most people with this type of reception reporting a strengthening level of patriotism, they also felt like there is an expectation from them 'as patriots' to behave in a certain way, such as going to fight or being very supportive of everything the government does. As one noted:

> People think if you criticise the government, you are an oppositionist, and if you support the government you are a patriot. I, for example, can criticise the government. And I have a mate, who is strongly in opposition, and when I text him criticising something in the country, his response is always: 'But you are a patriot!' And I'm like: 'So what? If I am a patriot, it doesn't mean I can't criticise the government.'

So, to many within this group, it felt like they are not 'patriotic enough' and they needed to express their support more actively, which not everyone was necessarily prepared to do.

Despite a general positive perception of the war, participants with identity alignment also reported being emotionally affected by the excessive presence of war-related narratives. While they tended to describe their emotions in a neutral manner, arguing that the event simply felt like a logical development, the more they engaged with media, the more panicked they felt. One said:

> At first [I felt] nothing … but then I faced a lot of emotionally charged information. It wasn't facts but someone's thoughts and feelings and that's when I felt scared and sad, I was afraid for my life, as the comments about the operation from those sources, including foreign ones, were really negative about this situation.

For these people, the feeling that they are not doing enough is mixed with fear and anxiety for the future and security of themselves and their loved ones. According to Levada,[75] approximately 70 per cent of respondents reported anxiety about the situation.

Respondents were also asked about their attitudes towards people with other opinions. The general feeling was that such people are not as patriotic as they are, that they are 'brainwashed' by the West, or at the very least, they do not understand the threats Russia faces.[76] As one participant noted:

> They [anti-war people] aren't patriots, they should be sent away from the country. Our president is too soft with them, I would send them to cut woods [i.e., to prison].

Nevertheless, supporters of the war often find themselves isolated – they can be blamed by war opponents and feel isolated and alone.[77] Sometimes, different attitudes cause their old social connections to break, and these connections are not replaced by new ones.[78] This leads to a feeling of discomfort to discuss war-related matters with others.

[75]Levada Center. Conflict with Ukraine: November 2022 (2022), available at: {https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/12/12/conflict-with-ukraine-november-2022/}, accessed 14 May 2024.

[76]PSL, 'The war near and far', pp. 76–82.

[77]PSL, 'The war near and far', p. 75.

[78]PSL, "The war near and far', p. 75.

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Identity separation

This mechanism describes how people may disengage from a certain type of identity.[79] In the Russia–Ukraine case, one can see a strong gap between people's patriotism and national identity and the war – they reject any idea that the Ukraine invasion may have anything in common with patriotism. One respondent stated:

> Ukrainians were deprived of a land but not the motherland, and for Russia it's the opposite.

One can see here that a person may have felt that their patriotism, national pride, and belonging were stolen from them. Some reported that after the war began, they felt ashamed of being Russians or expressing love for their country:

> I think now if you say you are a patriot, this would automatically imply you are in favour of the war … so the only solution is not to love your country and not to support it and only that way you can signal you are against. Before that I would say that I am a patriot of my region and love it, but now I wouldn't say it publicly.

Another respondent shared their perceptions of attitudes foreigners may have towards Russians abroad:

> Even if you consider their [government] actions bad, you are viewed as a Russian citizen in another country, your image is damaged already. You won't feel comfortable in another country, as people would say 'Oh, you are Russian, you are from a bad country', and that's bad too.

While the question of attitudes was not asked directly, opponents seemed keen to express their aversion to the war. Expressing these attitudes and distancing themselves from the Russian government seemed extremely important for them.

When asked about their media repertoires, respondents tended to rely more on independent sources. Interestingly, this category also reported distrust towards the media in general, though they tended to say that they trust the sources they were using. The PSL's interviews confirmed this.[80] This group seemed to be much more opposed to the idea of using government sources even for balancing information:

> I feel nauseous about state channels because they constantly and meaninglessly wind you up. I don't know how other people cope with it – either they let it pass through themselves or accumulate these negative emotions inside.

On the reasons for making specific choices, most anti-war respondents named objectivity and impartiality. This appears to be a further expression of their political and patriotic identity. As one respondent jokingly commented on their source choices: 'If they are forbidden in Russia, it means they are good.' Moreover, they tended to consider those consuming pro-government content as backward and stupid.

Yet, some people reported that they became disappointed in some preferred independent sources due to emotional reporting. They perceive these sources to be less trustworthy as they feel they are trying to impose a particular opinion on them. This may even make them abandon some of their preferred sources:

> As for Meduza [a Russian independent source, now banned in Russia], I started reading it more rarely, because its news is alarming. They always present information in a way that makes

[79] C. von Hippel, A. M. Walsh, and A. Zouroudis, 'Identity separation in response to stereotype threat', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2:3 (2011), pp. 317–24.

[80] PSL, pp. 65, 214–15.

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> you super-anxious. I am not saying the things they are saying are not true, but I feel like since the beginning of the 'operation', Meduza adopted an approach where all the Ukrainians without no exception are the best, the most creative, kindest etc. and all the Russians are just no one. This country that doesn't deserve anything attacked the country that deserves everything. So, I feel like there's devaluation of Russia and grotesque love for Ukraine.

While the respondent explains their aversion to their hitherto preferred choice of media through subjective reporting, this may be an indication of identity threat management, as the person's decision to disengage seems to be related to an extremely negative portrayal of Russians, which some participants reportedly perceived as very hurtful. This may be because by choosing independent sources, the respondents saw themselves as better people and better Russians than those using state channels. Thus, they would expect their sources' content to align with their thoughts and feelings. Instead, they received another identity blow by being collectively blamed for a decision they never supported.

Respondents also reported strong feelings of fear and anxiety as well as feeling 'helpless', 'depressed', 'shocked', 'disappointed', and 'hysterical'; many said they were crying for days. One said:

> I saw the news and since then I felt complete emptiness and as if I fell in a dark hole. We went to bed that night, but I wasn't sleeping, I was just lying in bed and crying.

For this group, the war felt like they lost an integral part of themselves and betrayal of their patriotic feelings, depriving them of an ability to be nationally proud.

Asked about their perception of people with opposing views, participants with identity separation saw them as 'brainwashed', 'stupid', 'crazy', and not really understanding what is happening in the country. Remarkably, both groups with identity alignment and separation see each other in exactly the same way. Some also feel that war alignment is a much simpler choice. Thus, one participant said:

> Yeah, sometimes you hear these people talk and you think, 'How come? They are smart people; they can't say this nonsense!' But at the same time, I try to approach this with understanding, and I feel like supporting is actually an easier position to be in. They go with the flow.

They also say they are often afraid of expressing their opinions in public as they are unsure if they might be reported:

> It's scary to express my opinion in a public place around the people I don't know. Maybe I exaggerate the danger, but … You have this self-censorship, you just remain silent, especially around the people wearing Z letters on a T-shirt because you don't expect anything good from them.

Like those whose identity aligned with the war, they often have no opportunity to discuss it in a safe way as this might mean the breakage of relationships if another person had a different opinion.[81] This leaves them feeling alone and isolated, which also means no further channel to support or restore their identity.

Identity ambivalence

The final identity-based mode of reception is identity ambivalence, that is, holding conflicting feelings and beliefs in the context of identity.[82] These respondents had a more cautious approach towards describing their reception of the state patriotic war narrative. This mode might be a result of respondents' wariness of directly answering the questions the researcher asked given their fear

[81] PSL, 'The war near and far", pp. 227–34.

[82] A. Ghaziani and A. Holmes, 'Distinguishing but not defining: How ambivalence affects contemporary identity disclosures', *Theory and Society*, 52 (2023), pp. 913–45.

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to speak openly. Yet, these answers – regardless of what really motivates them – have been encountered often enough, with some distinct common characteristics, to single them out in a separate group, which is also evidenced by PSL's data.[83] Specifically, unlike people with identity alignment or separation, who do have some opinions about politics in general, these respondents would often make a disclaimer of 'not knowing all the details' or 'not being a specialist in politics' or not having any interest in it. In addition, unlike the two other groups, they did seem to have a less defined relationship between their identity and the state patriotic narrative around the war, indicating that they were possibly still processing the events – which is also important to capture in the analysis of narrative reception.[84]

If they reference their attitudes towards the war, they describe it neutrally:

> I can't say I support or condemn the operation, to me it's a matter of fact. If it is presented as a way to protect Russia, then yes, I would like Russia to be protected.

They also tend to use a variety of sources, though with an emphasis on digital ones. Often, they will not name specific sources, saying rather 'I get news from Telegram, YouTube and bloggers' or 'I get news from the Internet and TV'.

For people with identity ambivalence, the war is just matter of fact. What matters to them is its direct effect on them and Russia; thus, they assess it from a more practical perspective than a moral or legal one. This is possibly why, when asked about their feelings of patriotism, they would say that this did not change, as to them, the war exists separately from their identity:

> I can't say I became less or more patriot after the operation began. It's more important to see when it is going to be over and whether there will be arguments confirming the absence of alternative solutions. But I am not ashamed to be Russian. People who support or do not support the operation is not all of Russia.

However, even this group reports an array of negative feelings, noting that 'it was impossible to explain it, why and with what purpose this was happening, and it was unclear what would happen next'. Like the two previous groups, most interviewees also felt fear and anxiety, sadness, and a lack of understanding of the causes and consequences. However, these participants tend to more often report acceptance of the situation due to inability to impact it. They also tend to express a higher tolerance towards people with different opinions.[85] As one stated: 'I don't care, everyone has right to believe what they want.'

However, they also report feeling alienation and loneliness or even 'invisibility', where the narrative space seems to be controlled by those with either identity alignment or identity separation. Consequently, 'ambivalent' participants feel like they belong to neither group – their patriotic identity challengeable by everyone.[86]

They also feel discomfort in discussing this topic, fearing conflict with people of opposing views or legal prosecutions, which are very likely in wartime Russia.[87]

Mechanisms of identity threat management

As shown in the first section, for all three groups of Russians, processing the war narratives negatively impacted their patriotic identity. These two mechanisms describe the methods that Russians appear to use to mitigate the perceived identity threat.

[83] PSL, 'The war near and far', pp. 130–1.
[84] PSL, 'The war near and far', pp. 130–1.
[85] PSL, The war near and far', pp. 162–5.
[86] PSL, 'The war near and far', pp. 158–60.
[87] R. Dixon, 'Russians snitch on Russians who oppose war with Soviet-style denunciations', *Washington Post* (30 May 2023), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/27/russia-denunciations-arrests-informants-war/}, accessed 20 May 2023.

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Identity compartmentalisation

This mechanism refers to an attempt to reconcile the war narratives with key elements of identity.[88] This shows in responses from people who may, for example, argue that they have a lot of questions towards the government yet would express some understanding for the war's necessity and/or argue that in times of hardship, turning away from the government is not good:

> I think a real patriot should support the country (or even the government) during the times of hardship; it may not necessarily be fanatical patriotism, but one should not criticise it or turn away from it.

Some even noted that although they support the war in general, as a necessary development, they nevertheless criticise the government's approach as potentially leading to more economic and social problems:

> … As for SMO [special military operation], I am supportive of it, I think something needed to be done with Ukraine, so current policy is right. … I think our economy is almost gone, say in our region, many industries say, machine building, is all gone. Not sure about other regions, but it's definitely the case for our region. And it doesn't seem like the government is gonna do anything about it, everyone is focused on SMO atm.

Others would indicate that they do not support the war, yet they would note that the government has achieved a lot of positive things over time and that possibly they do have a solid reason to engage in it:

> Domestic politics has recently become good, for example, pensions were increased, there is support for families with kids, mortgage and one can see that the government becomes more oriented towards the well-being of its citizens. … As for foreign policy, until 24.02.2022 was ok overall. … I don't approve foreign policy, including special military operation. I think the conflict could have been resolved diplomatically.

The researcher also asked respondents if and how their attitude towards Russia/their patriotic feeling has changed. Many answers to this question displayed another example of identity compartmentalisation, as participants would argue that despite their deep disapproval of the war, their attitude towards Russia has not changed and they still consider themselves patriots:

> No, it [the war] didn't affect it. It's not the country – it's the state that does it.

In the case of identity compartmentalisation, one can see how people deconstruct the notion of patriotism into several elements and process the war in relation to each, finding for it a specific place, for example, 'I am a patriot but I hate the government and the war is an action of the government and, therefore, I reject it' or 'I don't approve of the war, but I also see good initiatives of the government for Russia's future, so as a patriot I accept that this may also be done in its favour'. It also shows how, despite giving relatively similar answers about their personal patriotic feelings, on a deeper, emotional, and cognitive level, people's interpretation of it becomes much more complex and versatile.

Withdrawal from strategic narratives' dissemination channels

The second mechanism that Russians appeared to have chosen to mitigate identity threat and the emotional distress caused by it is withdrawal from the channels of narrative dissemination, that is, from media channels and from discussions of the war within their circles.

[88] J. S. Thomas, C. P. Ditzfeld, and C. J. Showers, 'Compartmentalization: A window on the defensive self', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 7 (2013), pp. 719–31.

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As one respondent noted, 'I sometimes tell myself "Okay, I'm not gonna watch or listen to anything, as I can't cope". I understand that I am sinking in it', which reflects their attempt to protect their mental health – also confirmed by the polls of the Levada Center. Most people, regardless of their ways to receive narratives about the war, eventually find themselves trying to reduce or cut off their media engagement:

> … I calmed down a little bit, as I started limiting my information consumption. When you can [hear] it constantly, it's very hard. I know some people cannot but follow the news. I know one literary critic who publishes her thoughts about it – this was the only source I left. I understand that probably I should try to keep myself informed, but I don't want to.

Russians also seem to withdraw from the realm of responsibility.[89] Quite a lot, if not the majority, argue that personally (or as Russian society in general) they are unable to change the situation, and it is only politicians who can stop the war:

> How can we help as citizens? I don't know. Personally, I can't help. I think for the conflict to end, Western countries should stop helping Ukraine with weapons, finances.

This shows how Russians manage the discrepancy between the feeling of patriotism and love for Russia and the more practical aspect of patriotism, where a person, as a patriot, is expected to take concrete actions. They engage in rationalisation, which possibly allows them to feel a bit better about themselves and their place in the war.

Russians also withdraw from interpersonal discussions about the war. As mentioned earlier, people may face not only social sanctions (the risk of conflict with important contacts who may have a different opinion) but also potentially legal ones. To mitigate threat, many respondents avoid any conversations about the war with anyone:[90]

> I can't say we discuss these things much. My parents watch TV, but we don't really discuss things. When I go home … thankfully we have a large flat, so I can be far away not to hear that news. I know my dad watches TV constantly … I don't know his attitude towards the war, but I know that he never voted for the current government in 20 years. My mum isn't focusing on this too much too, she is focusing on domestic problems. I think their generation tends not to focus much on these things. As for friends, we also don't talk about it much.

This is done to preserve relationships and protect themselves, but also it may likely be a form of protecting identity from further attack, as with withdrawal from media, the only other channel where Russians could be exposed to a different narrative is among friends and family. These narratives, however, may contradict those they would normally see in their preferred sources and thus disrupt their narrative coherence, which could cause further distress.[91]

Conclusion

This article explored the reception of strategic narratives around the war in Ukraine from an identity perspective. As shown, the Russian government engaged in the weaponisation of Russians' patriotic identity. The government limited the options of identity construction for people – 'you can only be patriot if you support the war'. This is a rather typical approach of malicious actors' propaganda – creating an illusion of the absence of choice and making identity rigid.[92]

[89] PSL, 'Such distant yet such a close war'.

[90] PSL, 'Such distant yet such a close war'.

[91] Szostek, 'Nothing is True?'.

[92] D. Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism* (Routledge, 2017); OICD, *The OICD Unified Framework for Identity-Based Conflict: A Terminology Guide and Theoretical Foundation* (Working Paper 2025–01) (OICD, 2025).

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Thus, reception of these narratives inevitably also became an identity work – Russians' engagement with and making sense of strategic narratives depended on their perceptions of themselves as patriots and how the circulated narrative of 'patriotism equals support for the war' fitted into their 'story of self'. Some felt it fitted very well, and their identity fully aligned with this narrative. Others felt the war disrupted and ruined their identity as patriots, and they separated it from this narrative. Finally, there are people with identity ambivalence, who felt more neutral in relation to the narrative.

Interviews with these three groups showed an important finding: unlike a popular general belief, Russians are not really brainwashed in a classical sense. All three groups reported a tendency to have versatile media repertoires, to cross-check information, and to hold a general distrust of media.[93] Yet, the reason for choosing a certain media source and relying on it does not seem to be necessarily a desire to get objective information. Rather, it is also an expression of identity and desire to signal a certain image of self. This resonates with the argument of Szostek, who shows that the audiences for narratives are not vulnerable and passive, readily absorbing narratives that are imposed on them.[94] Instead, even in the context of an authoritarian state, they consciously construct media repertoires that fit with not just their political and social attitudes but also their self-perception and self-image. This may mean that for facilitating effective narrative reception, that is, prompting the audience to accept the narratives of the actor (in this case, the government), one needs to tailor to specific groups with their unique identities, rather than trying to use the one-size-fits-all 'collective identity' approach on which previous research has focused.[95]

Regardless of the mode of reception, all three groups felt the threat towards their identity – for all three of them, narratives that are circulated by the government, independent sources, or even their social circles would attack their patriotic feelings, make them feel like they either do not do enough, or have lost their right to love and feel proud of their country, or that they do not belong to any group at all. To mitigate these threats, respondents resorted to two mechanisms – identity compartmentalisation and withdrawal from strategic narrative dissemination channels.

The first mechanism shows how Russians reconstruct and reconcile their identity by often separating some of the seemingly conflicting ideas and beliefs (e.g., 'I am a patriot of my country, but the government is not representative of a country, thus I don't support the war' or 'I am a patriot, I support the war and the decision of the government, however, I do not support all decisions of the government'). Thus, one can see that narratives, even along with identity alignment, are not received and accepted in full; instead, they become reconstructed and reinterpreted to fit a person's self-image. This questions the notion of narrative effectiveness – when exactly can we say that a narrative does or does not work? This coping mechanism also exposes a weakness of the government's strategic narratives – they attempt to make people's identity rigid and bound to a certain set of attitudes and behaviours. Instead, it appears that even the most devoted respondents, consciously or subconsciously, attempt to expand their identity.[96] This offers potentially new opportunities for developing effective counter-strategies to deal with malicious actors' propaganda.

The second mechanism is withdrawal. The fact that most Russians interviewed reported either full or significant cutting off of news consumption challenges the argument that repeating narratives is important to ensure that an audience adopts them.[97] It appears that excessive repetition of narratives eventually causes the 'wear-out' effect, that is, it makes people less susceptible to

[93]Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public*; Alyukov, 'Harnessing distrust'; Vihalemm and Juzefovičs, 'Sense-making'; Vihalemm and Juzefovičs 'They say we are all zombies'.

[94]Szostek, 'Defence and promotion' and 'the power and limits'.

[95]V. Hudson, 'Forced to friendship'; Khaldarova, 'Brother or "other"?'; Schmitt, 'When are strategic narratives effective?'

[96]OICD, *A New Strategy Against Disinformation: Explore Positive Identity Expansion with OICD* (OICD, 2025), available at: {https://oicd.net/post?slug=a-new-strategy-against-disinformation-explore-positive-identity-expansion-with-oicd}, accessed 3 September 2025.

[97]Paul and Matthews, *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model*.

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the message.[98] This seems particularly the case with highly emotional narratives such as in the Russia–Ukraine war. Moreover, people try to find a way to rationalise their withdrawal by giving up responsibility, that is, they cannot change the situation, and therefore, there is no point in talking or keeping themselves updated about it. This phenomenon reflects on further peculiarities of narratives' reception within autocracies. Over the years, the Russian public has been severely depoliticised and has a tendency to delegate to the government the monopoly on political decisions, as citizens generally do not believe they can influence any change.[99] While this is to the government's benefit, as it supresses possible dissent, it may also be a double-edged sword, as people are equally apathetic in taking action in support of the 'special military operation', which then obliges the state to resort to more forceful measures, like conscription.

Finally, people also withdraw from discussing the topic within their social circles. From a reception perspective, in the circumstances when people deliberately cut themselves off from media – the main strategic narratives' channels – personal connections could have been the second-best alternative. Withdrawing from personal discussions could mean that people would be completely unsusceptible (or rather, unaware) of any further strategic narratives emerging in the communication space, and thus they find themselves in a form of echo-chamber. This may benefit the state, if it wants a silent and apathetic audience; however, it can also be a disadvantage, as it needs to mobilise the masses. It also shows the key role identity plays in reception – people are prepared not only to limit their communication (or at times even completely break relationships) about certain topics to avoid conflict but also to maintain their sense of who they are.

It is important to highlight the data collection limitations here. Firstly, snowball sampling is small and non-random, which precludes generalisation to the Russian population. However, this limitation is offset by the study's contribution of a theoretical framework for understanding reception as identity work – a framework that larger-scale studies can subsequently test. Additionally, as mentioned in the data collection section, to increase reliability, the author used data triangulation to support the interview findings through relevant open-access data and research.[100]

Another limitation comes from the reality of doing research in the context of an authoritarian state. While the research project was granted institutional ethical approval, the work's planning and execution required a series of security considerations that came in addition to standard ethical concerns such as anonymity of respondents or communication through encrypted messages. Thus, while all the communications were conducted through the encrypted app, there is still a serious fear among Russians that the FSB can overhear people's conversations. To account for this, the researcher had to make sure that they never directly asked the participants about their attitudes towards the war, instead inferring their attitudes through their answers or through the people who made the initial referral. The researcher also asked the participants to delete all the related documentation (information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, and emails) after the interviews were completed.

While this study comes with limitations related to data access and sample size, and consequently an awareness that these findings may not reflect the experiences of the entire Russian population, it has nevertheless attempted to provide readers with a better understanding of Russians' reception of the state narrative of weaponised patriotism and national identity. Consequently, it provides further understanding of narratives' reception within the context of an authoritarian state. Further studies, with a larger sample or across several cases, are needed to see if the same patterns can be observed with other narratives and in other authoritarian states as well as how different the process of reception is there in comparison to democratic states.

[98] D. M. Keating and D. Totzkay, 'Theorizing about persuasive message repetition in communication research: A systematic review', *Review of Communication*, 25:1 (2024), pp. 14–31.

[99] V. Ischenko and O. Zhuravlev, 'Imperialist ideology or depoliticization? Why Russian citizens support the invasion of Ukraine', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 12:3 (2022), pp. 668–76.

[100] J. M. Morse, 'Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry', *Qualitative Health Research*, 25:9 (2015), pp. 1212–22; Rosenfeld, 'Survey research in Russia'.

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