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## Value-based framing in Russian propaganda on the example of the war against Ukraine and its consequences

**Abstract:** The paper discusses the issue of Russian propaganda and common value's place in it. According to theoretical framework, the article is focused on framing in Kremlin's rhetoric as a whole, since Kremlin is controlling the media. Value manipulation in 20st century is briefly discussed and follows by analysis of Kremlin rhetoric on the example of the war in Ukraine, defining a number of value-based frames used to shape the public opinion and examining them. The paper also addresses the possible consequences of such rhetoric and the analysis leads to the conclusion that Russia are appealing to common values in its propaganda and is hereby threatening these values both domestically and internationally, and hiding unlawful nature of its politics.

**Key words:** propaganda, Russian federation, framing, Ukraine, manipulation of public opinion

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### Introduction

During the last ten years, Russian propaganda has been trying to promote different ideas to international and domestic audiences. By speaking of defense of Russian-speaking Ukrainians in Donbas, denying the war itself etc., Kremlin managed to build an "ideal" image of itself, which often did not correspondent to the reality and hid numerous violation of international law. Given Russian full-scale invasion into Ukraine and the geopolitical changes it caused, review of the tools of Russian propaganda can bring new knowledge. Media and news-makers remain their gate-keeping position in communications, and there are numerous studies of usage of framing in the news in different countries, but frames used in Kremlin's rhetoric as a whole had never been deeply researched. This approach seems more appropriate while researching Russia, since

Kremlin controls all main Russian media and information sources directly or indirectly. Therefore, this topic remains actual today and arose following questions: How does Kremlin use values in its propaganda? Is it possible to define value frames in Kremlin's rhetoric, and what they are appealing to? Which consequences such framing could have? Thus, the research objective is to analyze role of the values in Kremlin propaganda by looking into frames used by Moscow. Moreover, given the active phase of the war in Ukraine and development of Russian propaganda such research can predict future trends in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes with state controlled media, identify interdependencies, and understand prerequisites. In addition, understanding these tools allows to avoid being influenced by such propaganda. Taken into account the conflict potential of the territories bordering Russia, this knowledge will contribute to the fight against propaganda and general awareness among the population of possible risks. The article is therefore divided into four parts: first part examines theoretical background of framing, the second part looks shortly into value framing in 20st century, the third part analyzes how Russia have been using value based frames in its prodaganda and the last part provides the analysis of potential consequences of such framing and mentions practical recomdations.

### **Frames, framing, value-based framing and public opinion**

While conducting studies of mass public opinion in the 1950s and 1960s researchers encountered a phenomenon known as "framing effects." These occur when changes (even small ones) in the presentation of an issue or an event produce different changes of opinion (Chong, Druckman, 2007, p. 104). An example of the following can be found in Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer's experiment (Loftus, Palmer, 1974). By investigating the distortion of perception caused by the usage of different terms E. F. Loftus and J. C. Palmer tried to prove that different presentations (namely linguistic changes) could influence the perception of certain events. They asked respondents to determine the speed of the crashing cars by asking one question with different verbs: "About how fast were the cars going when they (smashed/collided/bumped/hit/contacted) each other?" It was found, that respondents determined the speed of the car differently with different verbs. Thus, answering the question with the verb "contacted," the respondents on average believed that the car was moving

at a speed of 51.2 km/h, and with the verb “smashed” – 65.2 km/h.<sup>1</sup> Thus, scientists have concluded that language (in this case, euphemization or hyperbolization) does affect different perceptions of events. One can state that E. F. Loftus and J. C. Palmer framed the issue to measure public opinion and got distorted results.

The framing effect, however, can occur not just through semantic changes in wording, but also through the use of logically equivalent but different words or phrases. For instance, people reject a policy program when told it will result in 5% unemployment but prefer it when told it will result in 95% employment (Druckman, 2004, p. 1). Thus, one can manipulate public opinion with wording and it can happen by substitution of concepts.

The term “framing” refers to how an event is portrayed and interpreted based on a particular set of values and assumptions about the world. This means that not all aspects of an event are necessarily emphasized equally, and some may be highlighted more or less than others depending on the framing used (Allan, 2010, p. 74–75).

Robert Entman states: “Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. [...] Frames, then, define problems – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes-identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments-evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies-offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects. A single sentence may perform more than one of these four framing functions, although many sentences in a text may perform none of them. And a frame in any particular text may not necessarily include all four functions” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Politicians often adopt communication frames used by other politicians, the media, or citizens. Likewise, media frames sometimes mimic those used by politicians, social activists, other media outlets, or citizens and, not surprisingly, citizens regularly adopt frames they learn in discussions with other citizens. The bulk of attention in the political science and communications literature, however, has been on how frames in the com-

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<sup>1</sup> Original study contains mph’s. Metric system is used for convenience.

munications of elites influence citizens' frames and attitudes. This process is typically called a framing effect (Chong, Druckman, 2007, p. 109).

Thus, appealing to common values such as peace, security, and national pride in framing can be referred to as "value framing" or "value-based framing." This technique can be utilized as a form of propaganda to present a situation or an issue in a way that emphasizes certain values and beliefs to shape a particular interpretation or meaning of the situation. By framing an issue around specific values, propagandists can influence how people perceive and respond to it. This type of propaganda can be highly effective as it appeals to individuals' deeply held beliefs and emotions. However, it can also be manipulative, often oversimplifying complex issues and presenting a one-sided perspective.

In politics, value-based frames can also be used to gain support. The case of Iraq War could be a great example of the following, where George W. Bush's administration framed the issue regarding the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in terms of national security emphasizing the threat which comes from Iran's possession of the weapons. This case highlights how framing can shape public perception and generate support for political actions, even when the information presented is later proven to be false or misleading.

Proposed or imposed frames can therefore have an impact on one's opinion. Politicians herewith are seeking support and competing with each other not only on the domestic level using the news frames but also on the international level. Since most people encounter international affairs through media, one can assume that authoritarian regimes, while controlling the media, tend to use framing in their propaganda to affect public opinion internationally, and seek political, economic, or military support.

### **Value framing in the 20st century**

It is impossible to say that usage of value framing in propaganda is an invention of the 21st century. Both Nazi Germany and the USSR used common values to gain support domestically. In the Nazi's case, purity of blood was a core value and National Socialists often appealed to it when legalizing its own chauvinism towards the Jews. In the USSR's case, the core value was socialism as an ideally equal order. Therefore social problems that seemed unequal to the regime as sicknesses and crimes were

silenced. The regime publicly denied all these phenomena, and declared all those who disagreed with it as dissidents. So, for instance, Soviet historiography deliberately silences the subject of soldiers who lost limbs during the war through framing (Кременовська, 2017) as it opposed the core values and made the USSR look unideal.

Fortunately, the Hitler's were defeated. Shortly after the Second World War, Western nations, led by the United States, managed to push a contrasting worldview, based on the principles of equality among all states and collaboration. It was embodied in the foundation of the United Nations Organization, the World Bank, and various other international organizations, along with the establishment of the Bretton-Woods system and the beginning of the decolonization of African nations. In 1948, the United Nations adopted the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," representing a significant political and ideological triumph for Western nations, particularly the United States. This example of value framing was prosperous and could be also seen through the doctrine of liberal internationalism.

The Cold War, which commenced soon after the fall of Germany, can be characterized as a clash of not just two rival ideologies but also two divergent sets of values. It is noteworthy that states do not only seek to frame their values at the international level but also domestically. Throughout the Cold War, distinct frames, which were sympathetic to either the USSR or the US, manifested themselves across diverse domains of public life, communication, and propaganda. These frames garnered support from various nations and culminated in the formation of two antagonistic blocs within a short span of time.

It can be said with certainty that at least one society suffered from value framing in propaganda, namely the Germans during the Nazi period. Due to the widespread propaganda and framing which consisted in the silencing of crimes against humanity and hyperbolizing the Aryan race, ordinary Germans turned a blind eye to the atrocities of the regime and blindly obeyed Hitler. It was inaction or indifference, according to H. Arendt, that caused tragedies during the Second World War. Thus, in *The Banality of Evil*, Arendt writes about A. Eichmann – the responsible one for the "final solution" of the "Jewish question," and claims that he was a completely ordinary person, an ordinary official. However, the trouble with him was that he simply obeyed orders and did not even try to sabotage them (which many other Germans did (Арендт, 2021, p. 325–326, 337–338)). Here lies the "banality of evil" according to

Arendt. It was through the influence of propaganda and the framing that “what which should never have happened” happened, as Arendt writes (i.e. the Holocaust).

The Soviet Union, creating an ideal state, set itself the task of eliminating the *kulaks* as a class (Шторпін, 2020).<sup>2</sup> Struggling with wealthy peasants who did not succumb to the manipulative slogans of the Bolsheviks, the communists began repressions, from which Ukrainians in particular suffered significantly. In fact, Soviet propaganda framed these events in such way that the word *kulak* meant “Ukrainian.” Thus, the framing of the USSR led to one of the tragedies in the history of Ukraine in the 20th century – the Holodomor, the Great Famine, which the official Russian authorities still deny (Марькова, 2018).

### **Value framing as a part of Russian propaganda in 21st century**

Today we can observe a similar process, namely the humiliation of one nation (Ukrainians) by another (Russians) which is taking place with the unconditional support of its citizens (75%, according to the Ukrainian Main Directorate of Intelligence (UNIAN, 2022), 74% according to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW, 2022)). Obviously, this level of support can not be explained only by framing, but given its role in the war, propaganda and opinion-making, it should not be underestimated.

In the Russian-Ukrainian war, value framing plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and justifying Russia’s actions. Since the conflict began in 2014, Russia has used framing techniques to appeal to common values and legitimize its aggression. Moscow’s officials claimed that they “protects” the population of Donbas, pursued “denazification,” which involves the “liberation of Ukraine from Nazi elements” and, in general, simply ensured its own security. This resonates with the Soviet propaganda regarding war against Finland, which, according to the Communist Party, was motivated by the need for “protection” and “preventive measures.” Such framing could be called value-based since it substitutes the concepts linguistically and it is the shifting of the focus from aggression to the protection which is morally better. In the same spirit, Nazi-related terms are used to undermine Ukraine’s government’s legitimacy and show it as amoral and having an authoritarian character. Such linguis-

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<sup>2</sup> Kulak, also kurkul, was the term used by Soviet to describe wealthy peasants.

tical transformations can evoke strong emotions since both Russians and the international community consider the Nazi regime as the embodiment of evil.

In the Russian communication paradigm, war is a scurvy phenomenon used only by aggressive states, so in Russia they substitute this concept with “military operations,” which was used even during the Georgian (Interfax, 2008) and Chechen campaigns, where the latter was referred as “counterterroristic operation” (Vesti.ru, 2009), as well as shortly before the collapse of the USSR it allegedly “provided brotherly aid” to Afghanistan. Such wording obviously shifts the focus from actual aggression and illegal interventions. Moreover, it is often claimed that Ukrainians and Russians are “brothers” who didn’t get along because of the Ukrainian “authorities” (with various epithets, it doesn’t matter if it is “illegitimate” or “fascist” or “Nazi”). The use of such statements has serious consequences for Ukrainian and Russian society. Hereby “brotherly” implies a high level of kinship and a number of associations (in which Russia is obviously an older brother who should help). Thus, “brotherly aid” is subconsciously perceived as something desirable by Ukraine or the Ukrainian people, although this does not correspond to reality.

According to Katri Pynnöniemi (Pynnöniemi, 2022), one can identify four frames in Kremlin’s rhetoric used to shape public perception. Namely: (1) Ukraine’s artificial sovereignty-frame or failed-state frame, (2) Ukraine as a West’s vassal-frame, (3) Nazi government-frame, (4) Defending good-frame. These frames can also be defined as value-based, since they are appealing to common values. First two are appealing to good governance, legitimacy and independence as state’s fundament. The 3rd one is based on Nazi’s image as evil’s embodiment, where Russian as a power of the good, and the 4th one idealizes Russia as a whole appealing to morality.

In such context “peaceful” Russia is often portrayed opposed to “aggressive collective west.” Such frame can be defined as peace-loving-frame. Whenever it is not overlapping directly with defending the good, this frame can also include appealing to peacemaking actions in Ukraine and Russian willingness to extend Black Sea Grain Initiative, which is often being portrayed by Kremlin as Russian goodwill.

Yet, it is possible to name more value-based frames. For instance, Kremlin in its rhetoric while dehumanizing and undermining Ukrainian government often calls it for “Anti-Semitic” (see e.g. DOS, 2022). This frame appealing to chauvinism as evil and makes Ukraine alike Nazi Ger-

many which often perceives negatively worldwide. In the context of imaging Ukraine as something bad it is also worth to mention corruption-frame which consists of imaging Ukraine as corrupted and inefficient and is often aid towards Western audience where corruptions perceives as a huge defect. Another value-based frame could be *pacta sunt servanda*-frame which consists of defending the Minsk agreements and broadcasting the message about Ukraine's violation of it. In such way Russia appeals to fundamental principle of law and shifting focus from its own violations.

Therefore, the Russian state idealizes itself domestically and internationally via framing, distorting the reality and hiding violations of international law. It could be stated that these frames has different aims, namely they either idealizing Russia (e. g. peace-loving-frame) or denigrate Ukraine (e.g. corruption-frame). However, these aims can be combined in one frame (e.g. deprecating-frame, where Russia denigrating Ukraine and simultaneously portraying itself as power who cope with Nazism). Such systematic propaganda completely distorted the reality of every Russian. It, speaking in Jean Baudrillard's terms, created simulations in which the average Russian is incapable of critical thinking and rarely of opposition. Hence comes (controversially) such a low standard of living, tolerance of corruption and general submission to the regime (Russia silences or euphemizing the existence of internal corruption and socioeconomic problems, which can also be defined as separate frame). This is due, obviously, not only to Putin's tradition of propaganda and control of the opposition but also to the Soviet era, which suppressed dissidents.

### **Potentials risks and consequences on the international community**

Russian-imposed frames have already influenced the international community. Only the appropriation of a significant part of early Ukrainian history, which dates back to Soviet times, has a significant scientific influence. Russian-framed messages that contain substituted concepts and euphemisms can potentially split Europe (which is basically one of the unspoken goals of Russian propaganda), and sow mistrust between countries.

Thus, at the official level, Russia uses the terms "Ukrainian crisis," "situation in Ukraine," etc., depersonalizing the conflict in this way and disassociating its involvement in it. Currently, Russia only supports such rhetoric in foreign media, because it has a significant impact on the audience. Any Western taxpayer, having heard about the "situation in



Ukraine” on TV, will not support the government’s aid policy to Ukraine as likely compared to hearing about “Russian illegal war.” Therefore, it is important how foreign media operate with concepts. The usage of the term “Russian-Ukrainian war” will shift the focus to the aggressor and potentially increase aid to Ukraine. Other Russian frames can also be demolished in such way.

The notion about cyclical history is a commonly held belief. While it is challenging to confirm that empirically on global scale, this and other studies have illustrated that Russian propaganda frequently employs techniques used in Soviet and German propaganda, particularly concerning the legitimization of the annexation of other nations’ territories. Had the issue of substitution of concepts and Russian value framing been researched earlier, it is possible that the Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine, Chechnya, Moldova, and Georgia could have been prevented, delayed, or at the very least, better anticipated.

Simultaneously, it is acknowledgeworthy that Russia is not the sole nation employing such techniques in its propaganda. The international community must comprehend the nature of these tools, identify them, and take measures to counter them to in order to minimize the risks of impact on its citizens. One can assume that the value framing on the global level may threaten the international law, democratic principles, the entire international system in general, and defined countries in particular.

There is a distinct possibility that right-wing extremist groups in Europe, inspired by Russian value frames, may manipulate public opinion to interfere the electoral process. This could lead to societal and political chaos, bring unbalance to political institutions, and and provoke institutional distrust. This challenge is relevant not only for Europe alone but also for the United States, where the substitution of concepts has increasingly infiltrated political discourse. The alarming prospect of a prominent opinion leader falling prey to propaganda and broadcasting a framed message to a big audience can have potential catastrophic consequences.

To effectively oppose value based framing, it is necessary to focus not only on specific steps, but also on ways to implement them. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account not only the quality of counter-propaganda messages, but also the channels of communication to target audiences, especially in Russia. In order to really change the attitudes of most Russians, it is necessary to have access to the central TV channels, since the main propaganda comes from there, as evidenced by a study of media consumption in Russia (Ачкасова, 2022).

However, the following steps could be effective: (1) educational activities aimed at teaching citizens to clearly identify value based frames in public discourse; (2) involvement of internally displaced persons, associations and NGOs, associations and communities abroad, diplomatic missions and other stakeholders to the centralized educational activities; (3) combating Russian value based frames in the international arena, in particular, the fight against Russian-imposed terms in foreign media; (4) combating the legacy of Soviet historiography, popularizing Ukrainian historiography, holding joint historiography, holding joint bilateral exhibitions dedicated to common pages of history; (5) raising general awareness of the methods of Russian propaganda, demonstrating its parallels with Nazi and Soviet propaganda; (6) further study of value-based frames in the academic environment, discussion of research results, organization roundtables, conferences, etc; (6) Conducting public lectures and open events on the issue; (7) coverage of the issue in the media, creation of audio and video materials, for both domestic and foreign audiences; (8) Consolidation of efforts to counter Russian value-based framing.

Thus, the implementation of these steps can significantly weaken the propaganda potential of the Russian Federation.

## **Conclusions**

Since the beginning of information war against the West in general and Ukraine in particular, Russia has been appealing to values to legitimize its aggression, such as peace, brotherhood, good governance, zero tolerance towards corruption, democracy etc. Kremlin' use of value-based framed has two, sometimes overlapping, goals: idealizing Russia and/or denigrating Ukraine. On domestic level such frames are expected to increase support of the Kremlin's actions.

This study has proved that it is possible to define such frames in Kremlin's rhetoric and that they usually are appealing to the greater good. The most significant value-based frames have been discussed above. However due to the active changes in Russian propaganda during the last year one should consider that one frames can fade while the others can glow up and vice versa. Providing more detailed analysis and using other frameworks it is possible to define other, minor frames.

Overall, the impact of such value-based framing is far-reaching and often destructive. It can be stated with certainty that while building its

ideal and innocent image, Russia created a number of images of external enemies, in particular the “enemy of the Ukrainian” (Levada-Center, 2020).<sup>3</sup> The future neighborhood with such a society, in which this image of the enemy has been developed for more than one decade by various means and propaganda techniques, requires a reaction to it from the Ukrainian side. Therefore, the issue of counteracting this factor and developing an appropriate policy is urgent, even at the current stage – in the late spring of 2023, when hostilities are still ongoing.

Ukraine needs to be prepared for potential riots in Russia and possible threats to national security arising from it. Russian propaganda in general and value-based framing in particular, can teach Ukrainian society an important lesson. Thus, in the medium-term perspective, Ukraine can play a leading role in countering disinformation and propaganda from the Russian side. In the long run, and in the case of conducting appropriate research and acquiring appropriate experience, Ukraine can lead the fight against disinformation from totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, especially given the rich experience in conducting information and hybrid warfare. Such an experience may be helpful given the background of the West’s potential confrontation with China, which also uses value-based framing in different ways by denying genocide, human rights violations, etc.

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<sup>3</sup> See also K. Parppe (2021), *Enemy images in the Russian national narrative*, in: *Nexus of patriotism and militarism in Russia: A quest for internal cohesion*, ed. K. Pynnöniemi, Helsinki University Press, Helsinki, <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-9-2>.

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## Ramowanie propagandy opartej na wartościach na przykładzie wojny przeciwko Ukrainie i jej konsekwencji

### Streszczenie

Artykuł odpowiada na pytanie dotyczące propagandy rosyjskiej i miejsca w niej wspólnych wartości. Zgodnie z ramami teoretycznymi, artykuł koncentruje się na

ramowaniu w retoryki Kremla jako całości, ponieważ Kreml kontroluje media. Omówiono manipulację wartościami w XX wieku, a następnie została poddana analizie retoryka kremlowska na przykładzie wojny na Ukrainie, definiując oraz zbadając frejmy wartościowe, które formują opinią publiczną. Artykuł opowiada również o możliwych konsekwencjach takiej retoryki, a analiza prowadzi do wniosku, że Rosja odwołuje się w swojej propagandzie do wspólnych wartości i tym samym zagraża wartościom zarówno w kraju, jak i za granicą, ukrywając bezprawny charakter swojej polityki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** propaganda, Federacja Rosyjska, framing, Ukraina, manipulacja opinią publiczną

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