

Through Putin’s looking glass: How the Russians are seeing — or not seeing — the war in Ukraine - Anthony Faiola

In the parallel information universe where many Russians now reside, the Kremlin is fighting its “special military action” in Ukraine for the likes of “Semyon Vasilievich.”

Amid a post-invasion crackdown on speech in Russia, news that does flow freely comes from pro-Kremlin outlets including the Komsomolskaya Pravda, [which brought its countrymen the tale of Vasilievich over the weekend](#). Described by the tabloid as an elderly, disabled man living in an eastern Ukrainian village, Vasilievich is said to have leaned on his “crutch” and wept “joyous tears” at the sight of approaching Russian forces.

Vasilievich, the outlet continues, had suffered two strokes. But that wasn’t enough to stay the hand of Ukrainian nationalist “beasts” who hit not only him — but also his even more elderly mother. Vasilievich then goes on to reveal a secret to Russian readers: Villages across eastern Ukraine had taken a covert vote in 2014 and overwhelming opted for secession from Kyiv.

The yarn continues. The more than 2,000 ballots, the tabloid writes, were long buried in his garden, inside old “Soviet enamel pots.” Until last week, when Vasilievich dramatically grabbed a shovel with “his good arm” and proudly unearthed the results for the Russian outlet.

“It is easier to breathe” after the Russian “liberators” arrived, the Moscow-based tabloid quotes him as saying.

To read or view the manipulative domestic coverage of the assault on Ukraine is to walk through a looking glass into a propagandist world of Russian heroes and Ukrainian nationalist villains. The cast of characters seems to serve one purpose: Creating a single narrative of the war for Russians built on Putin’s preferred — if false — narrative.

There are some signs it may be working. Government-backed [polls](#) showing high public approval of the war in Ukraine may be untrustworthy, to say the least. But anecdotally, [Ukrainians have recounted stories of relatives](#) in Russia expressing profound disbelief of the truth on the ground, saying instead that there is no shelling in Kyiv or that Russian forces “are there helping people.”

Still, a telephone survey taken last week by [a group of independent survey research organizations](#) showed unusually modest backing for Putin’s war among the 1,640 asked, with 58 percent supporting it strongly or somewhat, and 23 percent opposing it. The rest were noncommittal or offered no opinion. Support among younger Russians was especially weak.

That’s a far cry from the 91 percent public backing for his annexation of Crimea, and suggests potential trouble for the Kremlin as sanctions bite and if the war drags on.

But it also isn’t a resounding rejection — yet.

As [the New Yorker pointed out](#), the vast majority of Russians consume their news through official media, especially television, which is downplaying the conflict’s violence and casualties. At the same time, Russian TV is serving up an Orwellian diet of Moscow’s efforts to “restore peace” in a brother nation, and feeding the Russian persecution complex over Western aggression. The nature of Russia’s relatively older and poorer population limits access to — and interest in — Internet-based news. Because of worsening state censorship and blocking of foreign sites, Russians are unlikely to find vastly different web-based narratives anyway.

In Russia, truth is getting harder to find as the penalties for speaking it grow harsher. A draconian “fake news” law signed by Putin last Friday criminalizes contradiction of the official Kremlin line on a war that Putin insists is not even a war — and merely describing it as such in Russia could now earn you a 15-year jail sentence. The tightening restrictions

force some of the few remaining independent news outlets in Russia to shut down or suspend operation, even as the Kremlin moved to restrict access to foreign-based websites and social media including Facebook.

Russian parents have received [notices from schools](#), warning them to watch their children on social media, especially where they may be tempted to show anti-government sentiment. [In grades 7 to 11 in schools across Russia](#), children are receiving special sessions reinforcing the official government line on the Ukraine “special operation.”

It happens as a great segment of the Russian people, observers say, have become willful participants in their own indoctrination, choosing to inform themselves through state media despite access in recent years to independent and critical journalism.

Why? Anton Shirikov, a misinformation researcher at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, [argues in The Washington Post](#) that it’s partly because Russian propagandists are so good — understanding their audience and knowing how to make their tales appeal through “dramatic and entertaining” detail. . . . Putin sympathizers are a particularly easy sell — eager to consume information, or misinformation, that reinforces their world view. The Russians have also received substantial help from right-wing America. Russian television has [repeatedly played translated clips from Fox News host Tucker Carlson](#) saying Ukraine “is not a democracy” and calling it a “client state of the Biden administration.”

“There are big cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg, with lots of students, intellectuals and people connected with the outside world. But even there, so many people are accepting the government’s narrative. Even young people will say, ‘We don’t like the war, but it’s something we have to do,’” Lukas Andriukaitis, an expert on Russian propaganda and misinformation at the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, told me.

He continued: “And those are the more liberal places in Russia. In smaller towns where the Internet is not common, and people have heard nothing besides Putin’s propaganda for years, the situation is worse.”

Antiwar [protests](#) have erupted in major Russian cities. But they have not reached critical mass. That may change if Russian casualties run high, and as sanctions further upend the economy. But if playbooks in places like Venezuela — which also suffered harsh U.S. sanctions — are any guide, the answer will be more official repression and a more impoverished populace that, after a fleeting period of civil disobedience, stays mostly in check.

Meanwhile, the war could end up strengthening Putin’s grip on information. [Russia’s Internet censorship technology is becoming increasingly advanced](#), and the Kremlin’s moves to block international sites, coupled with a pullout of the country by some foreign technology companies, could create a less globally connected Russian population.

Russia stands as a testament to how authoritarians can stage-manage a narrative. The Ukrainian city of Mariupol is suffering a horrific siege by Russian forces, who Ukrainian officials say have stymied attempts to establish a humanitarian corridor. But read the pro-Putin [daily Izvestia](#), and you’ll be told it was Ukrainian nationalists who shot at civilians trying to flee the city.

Stoking the Kremlin’s theory of Kyiv as a security threat, the outlet also quotes a “military expert” as warning about the ease with which Ukraine could “soon get its own nuclear weapons.”

Russian troops last week occupied Ukraine’s largest nuclear power plant after their assault sparked a fire that ignited fears of a new Chernobyl-like disaster. But [Russia’s state-owned Rossiya 1](#) quotes Putin unfiltered, confirming for the public that the unfortunate fire was set by reckless “Ukrainian saboteurs.”

“What you would see on Russian television right now is a focus on how the mission is going according to plan, the Ukrainian armed forces are laying down arms and willfully leaving the battlefield, and that Russian forces have liberated certain cities,” Andrew Lohsen, a Russia expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told me. “Information is very tightly controlled.”

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