War on Screens: The Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine in Russian State Media

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Propaganda, one of the Kremlin's key tools in peacetime, has become even more aggressive since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Recent analyses have documented both foreign information campaigns and domestic media narratives, shedding light on how propaganda may have contributed to Russians' acquiescence to the war. Still, we lack a systematic understanding of how the Kremlin has used media messaging to guide public opinion during the war.

This memo offers a large-scale analysis of Russian television propaganda in 2022–2025, tracing its evolution via advanced machine learning techniques. As state-controlled media has doubled down on covering the war and the purported victories of the Russian army, these messages are strategically embedded in familiar narratives and combined with conventional TV news reporting. Tweaking—rather than overhauling—the prewar model of media coverage has helped Putin's regime to normalize the invasion and retain its core audience.

Propaganda Targets the Kremlin's Core Audience

This analysis is based on my book manuscript, which explores the model of Russian state media reporting under Putin. In this model, the main content of propaganda is not outright disinformation but rather selective reporting and reframing of current events to appeal to the Kremlin's core audience—Russians who coalesce around Putin and the state. I call this "reaffirming propaganda," as it spotlights Russia's achievements, advertises its alleged contributions to the world, and celebrates Russian culture and the Russian people. For example, viewers can revel in the mastery of Russian athletes: "The two best figure skaters in the world are both ours: Alina Zagitova and Evgenia Medvedeva… Evgenia, surpassing her own record, set a new one. Following Evgenia, Alina took the ice and set a new one! That's two world records in five minutes, and both are ours!" Elsewhere, viewers are presented a victory of Russian weapons and industry: "An incredible performance of the Russian MiG-29 fighter jet at the renowned Le Bourget air show in France! The plane appears to fly contrary to all the laws of nature. Thanks to its special

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engine, the MiG-29 can perform aerobatic maneuvers that are beyond the capabilities of combat aircraft from other countries."

Such cheerleading in state media is designed to reinforce the positive sentiment that pro-Putin Russians already feel toward themselves and their country, as well as their sense of pride and national community. Importantly, the content is presented not just as the Kremlin's successes but also as collective triumphs of the whole country.

Another tactic in making news attractive to consumers of state media is mimicking real journalism through moderately informative reporting on a variety of politically acceptable developments. While biased, such coverage contains enough superficial elements of journalism—expert commentary, live footage, and explicit signals of newsworthiness—to be considered legitimate by ordinary news consumers.

Such tactics were widespread in the Kremlin's propaganda before the 2022 invasion. For example, most news broadcasts from Channel One, Russia's flagship TV channel, in 2000–2001 featured a decent variety of topics, while 28 percent of segments contained explicit signals of newsworthiness, and a sixth reaffirmed pride in Russia and its achievements. My survey research shows that such features of propaganda news coverage have boosted pro-Putin Russians' trust in state media and made them eschew independent outlets.

Changes in Reporting Topics

To examine how Russia's war against Ukraine has reshaped its propaganda, I relied on structural topic modeling—a machine learning algorithm that discovers latent themes in a collection of texts and estimates the proportion of each theme. I applied it to all prime-time news segments aired by Channel One during Putin's rule. Channel One's reporting is directly dictated by the Kremlin, revealing the regime's preferred narratives on current events. The figures below focus on January 2016–July 2025 to highlight recent dynamics.

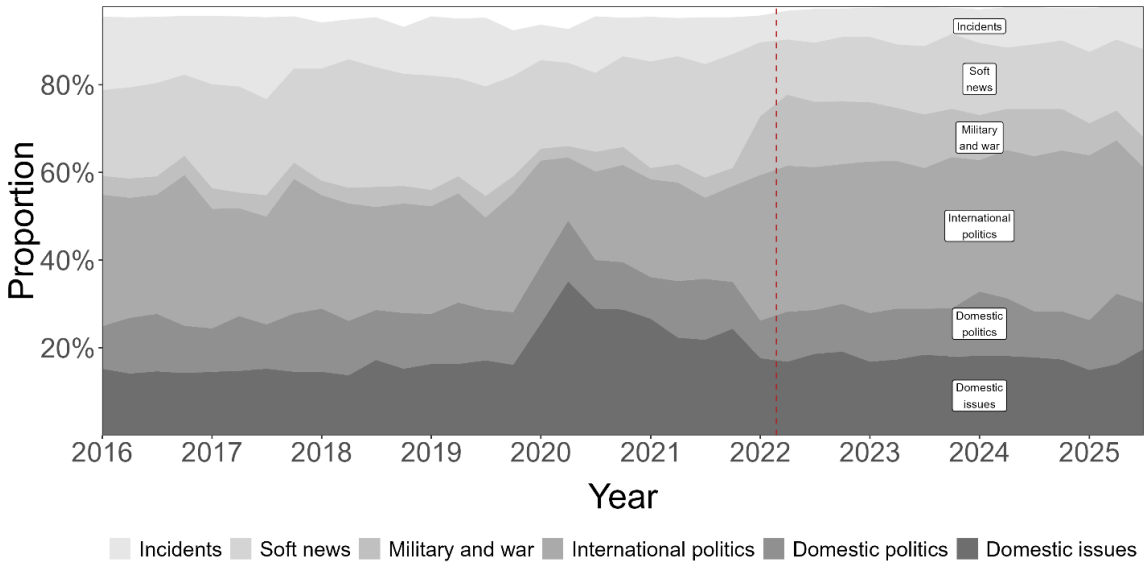

Figure 1: War coverage has replaced a large share of "entertaining" news

Note: This shows the proportions of six major news topics in Channel One's evening coverage, averaged by quarter. "Incidents" are various accidents and natural disasters; "soft news" sports, culture, science, and human-interest stories; "domestic politics" elections, appointments, and programmatic statements by Putin; and "domestic issues" socioeconomic issues and government policies. The red dashed line indicates the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
Source: Author

Figure 1 demonstrates that before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Channel One served Russians a steady diet mixing political news—international coverage and rosy reports on government policies—with stories on domestic issues such as health care, major events, sports, celebrities, and other topics of general interest.

During the full-scale war, the regime's political agenda took on a more central role. Reporting on the army and the war emerged and came to predominate as the Kremlin attempted to justify its aggression and persuade the audience of its effectiveness. Meanwhile, coverage of international politics jumped, with the invasion of Ukraine presented as part of the standoff between Russia and the West. In addition, the regime has tried to make the case that Russia is still a key player in world politics.

There was a cost to this: To free up airtime for war propaganda, Channel One had to reduce coverage of soft news and domestic issues. The number of segments that highlighted Channel One's newsworthiness and "journalistic" credentials also went down: Since 2022, only 18 percent of prime-time stories featured keywords such as "incident" or "details," compared to 28 percent before, and terms like "breaking news" or "investigation" appeared a third as often as before.

As a result, Channel One's coverage became less informative and detailed, less diverse, and, ultimately, less relevant to an ordinary news consumer. Some entertaining or soothing stories were sacrificed in favor of outright propaganda. Such sacrifices may undermine the attractiveness of state reporting, even among news consumers sympathetic to the Kremlin.

At the same time, despite the changes, the overall composition of news topics remained diverse, and almost every broadcast still features nonpolitical stories, including sports and major events. The spotlight on domestic issues and politics remained substantial. While such coverage decreased after February 2022, this was due partly to a natural correction after a previous uptick in domestic reporting during COVID-19. The wartime coverage of these issues has been, notably, more extensive than in 2016–2019. It is also used to underscore the Kremlin's domestic policy competence (for example, by showing payments being made to soldiers or housing being provided for their families).

Another element of prewar "normality"—the emphasis on international news—has continued. Segments on global politics, as Figure 1 illustrates, have always been a staple of Russian domestic propaganda, inflating Russia's global importance and touting Vladimir Putin's credentials as a foreign policy mastermind. The coverage of world affairs dwarfed that of the war even early in the invasion. While the tone of these reports has become much more antagonistic, their prevalence conveys to Russians that the war is just an extension of normal politics and that eventually Putin will solve it as a political problem, in line with Russians' perceptions of him as a dealmaker.

As the war has dragged on, the Kremlin's propagandists have had to make further adjustments. The share of consumer-oriented soft news has been partially restored, while reporting on the war has gradually been deemphasized. This likely reflects the audience's fatigue and its demand for "normal," everyday topics. Overall, although state media has faced important tradeoffs since the Russia-Ukraine war started, its model still strongly resembles the prewar approach, which news consumers valued.

Cheerleading and Reassuring

Russian state media has compensated for the lack of familiar, informative news segments with cheerleading and reassuring messages. I trace such "reaffirming" propaganda using a machine learning classifier trained to recognize messages related to national identity and pride in Russia's past and present. Advances in large language models allowed me to detect such politically targeted messages with very high accuracy, substantially above 90 percent.

Figure 2 demonstrates that the share of "reaffirming" segments started growing steadily from 2021, well before the invasion. The surge in 2021 may be seen as a tactic preparing public opinion for drastic measures, priming pro-regime audiences with pride and cementing their alignment with the Kremlin. As I discuss in other work, this has a

downside: alienating more critically minded citizens. However, given the substantial public support in Russia for Putin and his policies, the Kremlin likely paid little heed to such risks.

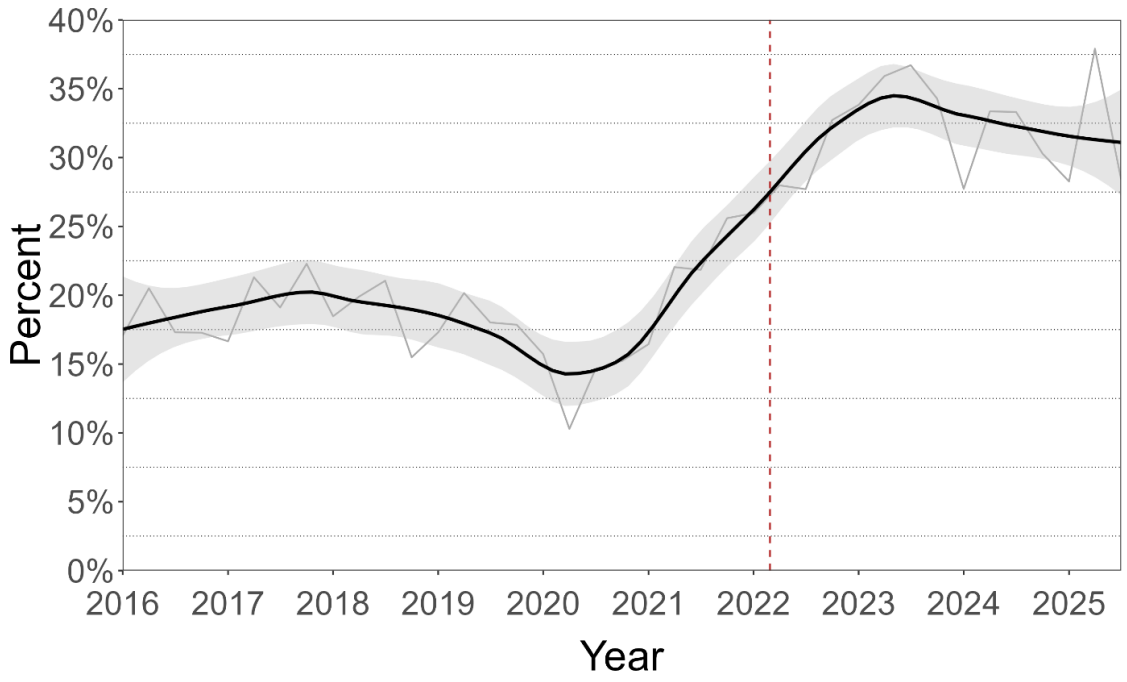

Figure 2: "Reaffirming" propaganda spiked after the invasion

Note: This shows the share of "reaffirming" propaganda segments in Channel One's evening coverage, averaged by quarter. The red dashed line indicates the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
Source: Author

Figure 3 highlights that "reaffirming" coverage has expanded primarily thanks to reports on the war. It shows the intensity of cheerleading and "reaffirming" propaganda along several important dimensions: Russia's international prestige and prominence on the global stage; national achievements in sports and space; Russian culture; the country's military glory; and major historical events—mainly the memory of World War II, which is sacralized in Russia. Since 2022, a majority of "reaffirming" messages have been incorporated into stories about the Russia-Ukraine war.

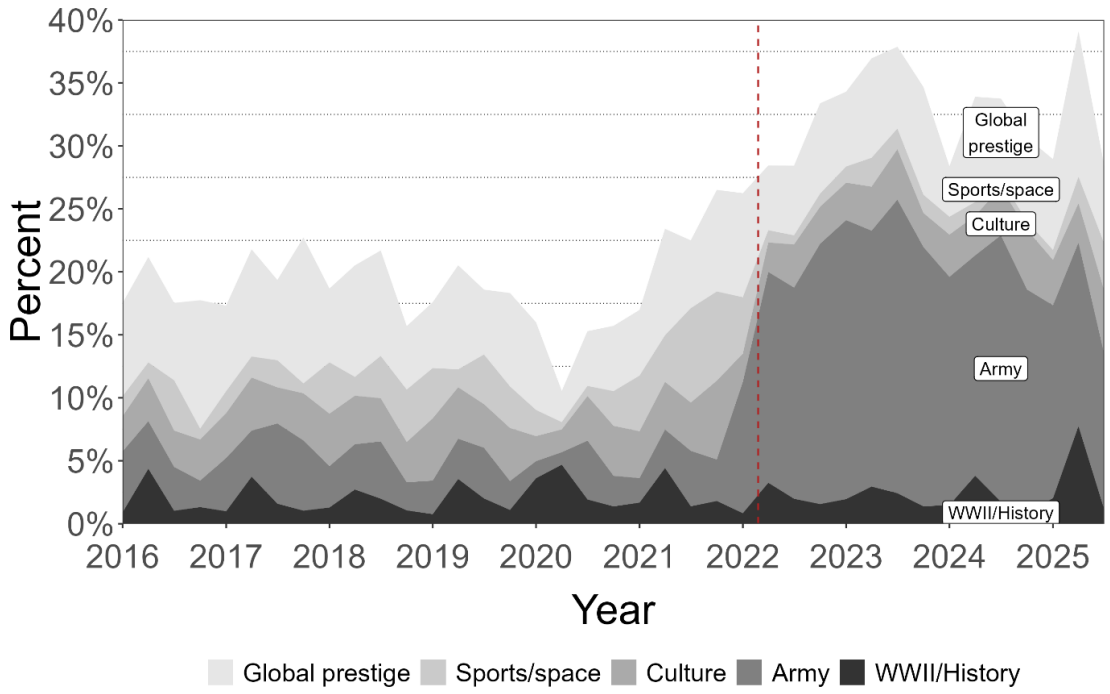

Figure 3: News reports about the war are extensively used for cheerleading

Note: This shows the share of "reaffirming" propaganda segments in Channel One's evening coverage by topical dimension, averaged by quarter. The red dashed line indicates the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
Source: Author

Many Channel One's segments praised soldiers as heroes and effectively placed them in scenes from action blockbusters. In a March 2022 story, for example, a lieutenant whose platoon was "surrounded by [Ukrainian] nationalists" ordered his subordinates to retreat to safety while he single-handedly destroyed two Ukrainian military vehicles, killed 10 enemy combatants, and then commanded a counterstrike. Other cheerleading segments fused war reporting with the memory of World War II or combined praise for fighters with human-interest elements, like the following broadcast from April 2023: "There is a place for miracles in this life. After two complicated surgeries, Polina was able to stand on her feet again. It's almost as if she refused to let down the soldier known as 'Saratov,' who had risked his life for her, carrying her to safety amid the shelling by Ukrainian troops."

The tradeoff outlined earlier emerges again: The emphasis on the war has led propaganda to forego some reporting of potentially higher relevance to the public, such as stories about sports and culture. (Still, Channel One has continued to promote Russia's global prestige and the memory of World War II.) The changes in "reaffirming" propaganda come with risks too, mainly that cheerleading about the invasion may appeal to jingoistic and nationalist groups within the Putin coalition, but they can turn away moderate pro-regime Russians.

Conclusion

Russian state media created a comfortable echo chamber for pro-regime Russians many years before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Since the invasion, as the Kremlin has sought to preserve its news audience, messaging about the war and imperialist narratives have been embedded into the earlier model. It has largely worked: Polling shows that the consumption of and trust in television have remained relatively stable since at least 2021. My surveys demonstrate that, even if some Russians started reading more online and social media once the war began, they were still consuming mostly pro-state content, steering clear of independent journalism.

The Kremlin's propaganda model, therefore, has proved to be robust, and it is quite challenging to counteract state narratives with more critical messages or sway Russians toward independent media. Still, more prowar messaging may make state outlets less competitive in the longer run, especially if war fatigue intensifies. At the same time, the Kremlin's propagandists have shown willingness to adapt their narratives while maintaining at least some coverage relevant to their audience.