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Russia's Strategic Narratives in Telegram: The Case of Coronavirus
Propaganda in Ukraine

Master's Thesis

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Needless to say that the war in Ukraine that started in 2014 and unimaginably continued in 2022 is a daunting challenge and terrifying experience for all humanity, especially for Ukrainians.

When the full-scale phase of the war started in February, the topic of this research (as many other issues) first seemed of low importance to me. However, since the work is not about coronavirus misinformation but Russia's strategies of invading spaces of other states and aiming to rule there, I truly believe that this research will be in aid for scholars, journalists and organisations fighting for real freedom of Ukraine since this was my main goal of conducting this study.

One of the main reasons that empowered me to continue working on the thesis is the support of the University of Tartu and the Estonian community. When I came to Tartu to finish the thesis, I felt that I had a true second home that is caring even in the most brutal periods as a dear friend and family.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the world already witnessed the results of successful war acts implemented in different spaces – physical and informational – by Russia in Ukraine. Thus, Crimea was annexed, and a part of the territory in the East of Ukraine was occupied. In 2022, Russia continued applying war tactics in multiple spaces. Politically, Moscow legitimises its military actions on the territory of a foreign sovereign country by recognising quasi-states in the East of Ukraine. Diplomatically, President Putin declares that Ukraine is a never-existing state invented by Lenin (Путин напомнил, кто...2021). In cyberspace, Russia continues carrying out DDoS attacks on Ukrainian banks, websites of state institutions, and official media. On the land, it is a full-scale war with the Russian armed forces. On Feb 24, 2022, after Russia invaded the sovereign state, the whole Western world faced a security threat that they had not witnessed for dozens of years before. These are only the most visible effects of the Russian hybrid war tactics.

Informational space is not the exception and has by no means a weaker effect. The informational front has special importance in modern Russian warfare. Realising its military limitations, Russia accumulates considerable efforts and sources on informational operations to weaken the enemy (Snegovaya 2015). The international forecasts of the course of events in Ukraine after Russia invades its territory suggested quite pessimistic scenarios, which resulted in a respective preparation. Apart from the military equipment and weapon that can be calculated and compared, the image construction of the Russian army through the informational campaigns can not be neglected. This demonstrates how efficient the Kremlin operations may be. It points us to the assumption that in this respect, success in the informational space is even more crucial for Russia or at least not less crucial than attacks on the ground. From one side, it works to disorient the enemy and

deceive about its real intentions (Snegovaya 2015). On the other side, it destabilises the situation and, to some extent, makes people act in a Russian desired way or remain inactive when needed.

Although the actions in all the spaces are vigorous, Russia's actions in the informational space are the focus of this research. Until the mind is occupied, the other influences can still be resisted. As Keir Giles (2016: 64) formulates it, Russia can assail what is not yet controlled. Therefore, analysis of Russian strategic communication impacts other spaces and the course of action chosen by Russia. It remains crucial even in case the war on the physical battlefield is over. The efficient ways of combating this are in great demand for Ukraine to defend its sovereignty in various spaces.

An anti-vaccination campaign in Ukraine is one of the most potent informational campaigns before the serious escalation of Russian aggression in 2022 (Антивакцинна пропаганда – інформаційна...2021; Keegan 2022). Since Ukrainians do not tend to believe Russia's media (Динаміка довіри соціальним...2022) and is a hostile audience to the Kremlin (Keegan 2022), Russia widely uses Ukrainian media and channels of communication as its voice. In this work, I focus on the coronavirus topic based on content spread through the Telegram agent network in Ukraine which is, in fact, curated by the Kremlin as it was exposed by the Security Service of Ukraine in 2021 (SBU exposes Russian...2021).

Actuality of the topic

The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU exposes Russian...2021) has justified the danger of the analysed Telegram channels Резидент (Resident), Легитимный (Legitimnyi), Картель (Kartel), Сплетница (Spletnitsa), and Черный квартал (Chornyi kvartal). Although some Ukrainian organisations and media outlined how the network is functioning, these contributions first and foremost only confirm a strong presence of Russia in the Ukrainian Telegram infospace. Some of them also generally outline how these narratives become popular, why they appeal to a Ukrainian reader and describe the potential of using Telegram to impact society. They do not, however, research profoundly a meaning-making

process of the channels that could be of high value for compelling strategies of confronting Russian propaganda.

In October 2021, when I was already working on the research, the Center for Countering Disinformation at the NSDC¹ of Ukraine (Антивакцинна пропаганда – інформаційна...2021) published a report on the informational anti-vaccination campaign through the same Telegram channels in Ukraine. There was an account of harmful narratives with examples and some brief analyses. The aims of the campaign were also mentioned. According to NSDC (*Ibid*...2021), this is preventing Ukrainians from vaccination and increasing the death rate due to COVID-19 in Ukraine. This report, alongside the Security Service of Ukraine's exposure, is another official recognition of these specific Telegram channels as dangerous and curated by Russia. However, except for the recognition, a deeper analysis of *how* the harmful meanings are created and function in the Ukrainian infospace is needed. This need drives my interest as a researcher and as a Ukrainian, as these findings can be valuable for providing efficient ways for combating Russia's strategic narratives in the Ukrainian infospace specifically.

Additionally, special attention is dedicated to Telegram which unlocks great potential for political influence due to its functionalities and features different from other social media and messaging services. Being created as an instant messaging application (FAQ 2022), Telegram is of a hybrid type since it also has components of social media (Rogers 2020). Due to its low level of moderation (Herasimenka *et al.* 2022), it is also regarded as one of the alternative social media which is often hosting 'dangerous individuals' banned on other media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, etc.) (Rogers 2020; Yayla, Speckhard 2017; Clifford, Powell 2019). Telegram has been profoundly studied in the context of extreme and radical activity (Clifford, Powell 2019; Walther, McCoy 2021; Yayla, Speckhard 2017; Rogers 2020; Urman, Katz 2020). The application was also researched as a promising means for increasing engagement in misinformation compared to the official news (Herasimenka *et al.* 2022; Knuutila *et al.* 2020) and specifically for spreading misinformation on coronavirus (Alimardnai, Elswah 2020).

Although Telegram has already become one of the main resources for receiving news in Ukraine, especially during the war (Bengergruen 2022; Медіаспоживання українців в умовах...2022), the application usage in political communication in Ukraine

¹ National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine

covered rather generally. The functioning of Telegram public channels (Від “корони” до Шарія...2021; Gurzhiy 2021; Here`s How Telegram...2020) and Russia`s narratives on coronavirus through Telegram (Антивакцинна пропаганда – інформаційна...2021) were generally outlined. Thus, such widespread usage of the application in Ukraine, chiefly in the context of Russia`s hybrid warfare, still needs special academic attention.

Research objectives

The objective of the work is to study how Russia constructs and transmits its strategic narratives for impacting society with a low level of trust in the Russian voice. This analysis is based on one of the topics used by Russia to construct its desired meanings in a foreign society as an example of the Kremlin`s information campaigns. Although the paper covers mostly the anti-vaccination campaign, the whole topic of coronavirus is taken into consideration. In the context of the research objectives, the critical part of the paper is coverage of how the Telegram application is an efficient tool for political communication. Thus, posts on both vaccination and COVID-19 that are conveyed by the Telegram channels network in the defined (for this study) period are analysed in this work.

With this research, I strive to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What strategic narratives about the Ukrainian government are spread in the Kremlin`s agent network in Telegram on the basis of the coronavirus topic?
2. How are these strategic narratives constructed?
3. What instruments are used by the Kremlin to hide the strategic aims for the audience highly critical of the Russian voice?

To answer the questions, I use strategic narrative theory, cultural semiotics, narrative semiotics and transmedial storytelling. Strategic narrative theory aids in defining the key narratives of the Kremlin`s strategic communication that aims to weaken Ukraine. With cultural semiotic instruments (predominantly the Tartu-Moscow School approach), I study how the Kremlin shapes the image of the Ukrainian government as a dangerous enemy and Ukraine, in general, as a weak state. I also seek to explain what strategies and methods Russia uses to make it look more trustworthy to the hostile audience and neutralise its aggressive rhetoric.

The novelty of the thesis

The novelty of this paper is empirical, theoretical and practical.

As an empirical contribution, it covers the topic of Russia's political communication with the Ukrainian audience through public Telegram channels. The theme has been justified to be crucial and threatening for the Ukrainian infospace (Gurzhiy 2021; Here's How Telegram...2020; Антивакцинна пропаганда – інформаційна...2021) but outlined chiefly in terms of functionality of the application (Gurzhiy 2021) and tendencies of popular content and channels (Від “корони” до Шарія...2021). This paper provides a systematic analysis of strategic communication transmitted by Russia on Telegram, analysing the instruments for creating meanings and spreading them to the hostile audience.

In terms of a theoretical novelty, this work is different from other studies on communication in Telegram in its approach – a combination of the framework of the strategic narrative (chiefly Miskimmon et al.), cultural semiotics (predominantly the Tartu-Moscow School and Roland Barthes), narrative semiotics (Algirdas Julien Greimas) and transmedial storytelling (basing on framework conceptualised by Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel).

The practical value of the work is that this paper can be used for further academic works on Russia's information warfare and specifically in the context of Ukraine. Although the work covers one of the agent networks and the topic of coronavirus as examples, it can be applied to similar networks in Telegram as well as other topics and to dealing with Kremlin's strategic communication in general. Thus, this paper can also be valuable for journalists and governmental and non-governmental organisations seeking to encounter Russia's misinformation strategies.

The thesis structure

The thesis consists of five main parts after the *Introduction* part. The second chapter on *Literature review* provides a summary of how scholars approached the topic of coronavirus misinformation and Telegram as a means for various political aims.

In the third chapter, *Theoretical framework*, I explain the central theories used in this work which is divided into three sections: 3.1. *Strategic narratives* explains the framework for analysing Russia's communication in this work, where the sub-chapter 3.1.1. *Narrative modal utterances for generating a meaning of a 'subordinated'* explains how narrative semiotics will be applied to certain narratives analysed to show how Ukraine is depicted as a failed and dependent state. Part 3.2. *Culture and anticulture as a basic semiotic mechanism for conflict construction* covers a semiotic approach of the Tartu-Moscow School that is used in this work to explain how an image of the Ukrainian government as an enemy is created. The sub-chapter 3.2.1. *The concept of "betrayal vs victory" as anticulture and culture opposition* explains a concept from the Ukrainian political context that is fruitful for creating the above-mentioned images. 3.3. *Reality effect as a mechanism for constructing the trustworthiness of a message* outlines the concept suggested by Roland Barthes that is used in this work to analyse how Russia balances its aggressive rhetoric. The last part of chapter 3.4. *Transmedial storytelling* provides an overview of strategies and meaning-making mechanisms of instruments for creating a coherent trustworthy storyworld and engaging an interpreter missing logical overlaps in misinformation spread.

In the fourth chapter, *Telegram in political communication*, I describe how Telegram is exploited for reaching multiple political aims as well as for secure communication and coordination of movements within civil society. In 4.3. *Telegram in the Ukrainian media context*, I focus on the use of Telegram in Ukraine specifically and in 4.4. *Specifics of the analysed Telegram channels*, I outline the functioning of the Telegram agent network analysed in this paper.

Chapter five, *COVID-19 and vaccination in information warfare*, covers how the topic of coronavirus is exploited in political communication generally and in Russia's campaigns specifically.

The final chapter is dedicated to analysis. It starts with *6.1. Data collection* where I explain how the empirical data was collected and analysed. In the following sub-chapters, I start by describing how the agent Telegram network constructs its storyworld and explain the toolkit for coherent and trustworthy meaning-making. Then, I identify strategic narratives on coronavirus and vaccination spread by Russia in the Telegram channels and analyse them with different approaches in the respective sub-chapters – *6.4. Ukraine in the position of an object*, *6.5. Antithetical opposition “betrayal vs victory” for constructing the image of the Ukrainian government as anticulture* and *6.6. Misinformation on vaccination is a strategy for confusing and polarising society*. The concluding part of chapter *6.7. Balancing the aggressive position* explains how Russian makes its positions look more balanced and not look as pro-Russian, which is crucial for influencing the hostile audience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this part, I provide an overview of how Russia's misinformation on coronavirus and vaccination is studied by academics and how the phenomenon of the Telegram application is covered by scholars and organisations (both governmental and non-governmental). I also provide an understanding of some key concepts by other researchers and explain how they are comprehended in this work.

Russian misinformation as a decisive part of its hybrid warfare is extensively studied by scholars (Snegovaya 2015; Szostek 2018; Giles 2016; Hoffman 2014), as well as a more narrow topic of the Kremlin informational campaigns based on coronavirus theme (Sukhankin 2020; Veriter *et al.* 2020; Madisson, Ventsel 2022; Patel 2020).

In the thesis, hybrid warfare is considered as military practices both traditional, i.e. the use of Armed Forces, and non-traditional, i.e. informational warfare, economic sanctions, etc. in the warfare against another state (Giles 2016). When writing on criticism of the term 'hybrid warfare', Keir Giles (2016) points out different aspects, but two of them are especially crucial for this work. First, the techniques and practices Russia uses in Ukraine are not new and lead back to the Soviet traditions (Giles 2016; Snegovaya 2015; Hoffman 2014). Secondly, referring to Frank Hoffman (2014), Keir Giles argues that the term warfare refers to violent acts and misses non-violent components such as informational warfare campaigns, which are considered to be decisive in Russia's warfare in modern wars and Ukraine specifically (Giles 2016; Snegovaya 2015; Hoffman 2014). In this work, I focus on Russian misinformation as a 'non-violent' part of Russia's hybrid warfare. I use misinformation successively in work as a term that refers to all types of misleading information produced both deliberately, i.e. misinformation, fake news, and with no strive to deceive. However, most of the cases studied in my work were produced to manipulate deliberately. In a similar way, information warfare is also understood in the

context of hybrid warfare as an activity aiming to harm the state through the informational space.

Kremlin propaganda related to the coronavirus has been studied by multiple scholars (Sukhankin 2020; Veriter *et al.* 2020; Madisson, Ventsel 2022; Patel *et al.* 2020) and also researched in the context of geopolitical battles with the West (Kosmehl 2020). In this context, Ukraine is seen in an especially vulnerable position due to political issues and war with Russia (Patel *et al.* 2020; Keegan 2022; Hyde 2021). The Ukrainian case is also special due to its hostile attitude to Russia which drives a need for a particular approach to vaccination campaigns. Certain specifics with the Ukrainian audience and ways to counter Russian narratives on vaccination were covered by Katrina Keegan (2022). However, there is a need for a more structured analysis of meaning-making mechanisms and strategies used by Russia for an audience with a low level of trust. This analysis aids in covering this gap.

The topic of Telegram is also critical for this work. Although the application has attracted scientific interest in recent years, it still needs to contribute to the Ukrainian political context. Below is the account of findings on the topic of Telegram for political purposes in general and Ukraine specifically.

The application is studied as a means for secure communication (Salikov 2019); an instrument for promoting and recruitment into terroristic activity (Yayla, Speckhard 2017; Tan 2017; Clifford, Powell 2019; Walther, McCoy 2021) and stimulating radical movements (Walter, McCoy 2021; Guhl, Davey 2020; Urman, Katz 2020; Owen 2019); a key channel for transmitting misinformation (Herasimenka *et al.* 2022; Knuutila *et al.* 2020). Ahmet Yayla and Anne Speckhard provide an overview of how certain specifics and functions of Telegram as a social media and messaging application provide wide possibilities for operating and promoting terroristic organisations such as ISIS (Yayla, Speckhard 2017; Clifford, Powell 2019). Alexey Salikov explains how and why Telegram is exploited and forbidden by the Russian authorities and explains what possibilities are provided by Telegram for countries with authoritarian regimes or semi-democracies (Salikov 2019). Due to its hybrid nature (Rogers 2020) and the focus of this research on Telegram as a means for political communication, we treat it not only as an instant messaging application but first and foremost as a social media platform. Thus, an “instant messaging application”, “social media platform”, “application”, and “messaging

application” are used in work to mention Telegram, although “social media platform” references Telegram highlighting its specifics that are used in other social media as well (e.g. public communities, commentaries, sharing, etc.). Important to note that “Telegram agent network” and “agent network” refer to a coordinated set of Telegram public channels as it was defined by the Security Services of Ukraine (SBU exposes Russian...2021).

In Ukraine, Telegram is explored as a threat to spreading Russia's narratives in the Ukrainian infospace (Gurzhiy 2021; Here`s How Telegram...2020). Some analyses also cover what type of content becomes highly viewed and shared in the Ukrainian Telegram infospace (Від “корони” до Шарія...2021; Gurzhiy 2021). The Center for Countering Disinformation outlines some basic narratives on vaccination spread by the Kremlin in the Telegram channels in Ukraine (Антивакцинна пропаганда – інформаційна...2021). All these contributions provide an analysis of the functionality of Telegram that makes it a potential application for achieving political aims. According to the above-mentioned papers as well as the exposure of the Security Services of Ukraine, Telegram is definitely perceived as one of the instruments for Russia's influence on the Ukrainian informational space. However, there is a small amount of academic research on informational campaigns through Telegram in Ukraine in general and on the anti-vaccination campaign specifically. This paper is aimed at filling this gap as well.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, concepts and their use of them in the analysis are described. The strategic narratives framework is anchored chiefly in the approach of Miskimmon et al. For explaining how meaning is created through the narrative structure, I use narrative semiotics which is based on Algirdas Julien Greimas' contribution. As a mechanism of creating a friend-enemy opposition in political communication, cultural semiotics is used (predominantly culture and anticulture opposition conceptualised by Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenski) in the context of "betrayal vs victory" opposition from the Ukrainian socio-political context. The concept of reality effect (Roland Barthes) and transmediality storytelling approach (conceptualised by Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel) are applied to this analysis to explain how the Kremlin misinformation is created as a trustworthy, balanced position and how interpretation is engaged in the storyworld.

3.1. Strategic narratives

Narratives are the form through which certain meanings are actualised, and thus, the desired meanings and perceptions are transmitted through concrete stories. All of this may form an attractive or, on the contrary, powerless image of a country (Nye 1990).

Alister Miskimmon et al. (2013: 47) specified identity as a foremost concept for the analysis of international relations and argued that state identities are constructed through communication and narratives implied. So prolonged work with opinions, memory, and beliefs may potentially be the basis for concrete decisions and actions. Otherwise, the state's actions are doomed without the proper ground. Since narrative can be a power source, certain narratives are transmitted strategically by states. By analysing not only the

meaning but also the aims behind them, one can get an understanding of the state's meaning aimed to transmit (Roselle *et al.* 2014: 74).

Strategic narratives provide a framework for understanding the reality and events in it, for interpreting them in a certain way, defined by a narrator (Freedman 2016). They fill an informational space with a set of meanings, beliefs, and values that are actualised in certain situations, depending on the course of events at that moment. Miskimmon *et al.* define strategic narratives as “representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives” (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013: 7).

Since the states nowadays are not divided by physical borders only but lie within a multilayered system of sovereign spaces, strategic activity proceeds in all of them. Political scientists mention the ‘battle for hearts and minds’, a ‘cognitive domain’, information space (Freedman 2016; Nye 1990; Beatrice De Graaf 2015; Giles 2016), alongside a battle for physical land. Strategic communication “bridges the gap between hard and soft power concepts” (Roselle *et al.* 2014: 75), activity in physical and cyber, diplomatic, and informational spaces. Strategic narratives also link the causes and results in different spaces. Thus, to be fit to govern a country, one needs to govern all its spaces. A state can influence the policymaking of a foreign state without a physical invasion or even not sharing a common land border (Russian interference in the US elections in 2016 is a vivid example).

Russia, indeed, is one of the book examples and most successful users of a hybrid approach for establishing control over another state,

The Armed Forces, and the capacity for intensive information warfare or subversion of the adversary, are simply two of the most important long-standing but reinvigorated instruments of this [Russian state] power (Giles 2016: 12).

The competent use of hybrid techniques (“communications, organisational and institutional skills, and manipulation of interdependence” along with military force (Nye 1990: 157-158) that have an impact on multiple spaces – physical, informational, economic, etc.) is seen as one of the reasons for Russian success (Freedman 2014: 21; Snegovaya 2015).

Miskimmon *et al.* (2013) define three levels of strategic narrating: International System Narratives, National Narratives, and Issue Narratives. International system

narratives are focused on describing how the world is structured, defining the states' place in the world, as well as the role of other players; national narratives define a state with its story of the past, foreseeable future, characteristics and identities; issue narratives define the course for a state explaining why certain actions are needed to be made. The levels are interconnected and may have an impact on each other (*Ibid*, 2013).

In this paper, all of the narrative levels are covered based on the Telegram channels' COVID-19-related content; however, two are central – international system narratives and issue narratives. In short, these two levels concentrate on the outside perception of Ukraine and the inside respectively. For analysing the outer view, I use modal utterances described by Algirdas Julien Greimas in the context of narrative structures. The inner view of the state leads to the concept of culture within it.

3.1.1. Narrative modal utterances for generating a meaning of a 'subordinated'

Algirdas Julien Greimas claims that for a narrative to be meaningful, it has to imply three types of structure – deep structure, surface, and manifestation (Greimas 1976). According to Greimas' understanding of narrative semiotics, meaning is generated in the process of representation through narrative structures that “produce meaningful discourse articulated in utterances” (*Ibid*, 1976: 65).

To understand the narrative structures, one needs to analyse its deep grammar which produces the system. This system implies the position of actants (structural units in a narrative). By understanding these positions and the deep structure, one realises which distinctions are potentially meaningful in a narrative, in other words, how signification is organised and manifested. A model of a narrative is defined by the type of relationship of the actants, and the typology of a narrative utterance (function fulfilled by an actant in a narrative) implies how actants are constituted within these narrative utterances. In other words, how narrative elements are structured and relate to each other is critical for generating meaning.

To analyse deep grammar, one must consider its two components – morphology and syntax. While morphology corresponds to actants of a narrative, syntax leads to the correlation of the elements within the surface narrative grammar. Recognising how one (in

our case, the Russian misinformation) forms the outline of elements within the narrative system leads to a deeper understanding of the meaning generated by the narratives. Thus, it can be investigated not only how the Telegram channels create a perception of certain actors through language but also through organisation within the narratives. For the analyses of Russian misinformation in the Telegram agent network, morphological elements within a strategic narrative are defined first, e.g. the Ukrainian government, the Minister of Healthcare, the US government, the Kremlin, and vaccinators, etc. Then I look at how these elements are organised (related to each other) in narrative utterances that construct a narrative. This aids in defining a type of utterances used by the narrator and thus, meanings aimed to be created by narrators of the Russian agent network.

Greimas (*Ibid*, 1976) defines an opposition between subject and object (subject-, and object-actants) that describes one of the basic patterns in a narrative – desire/aim, which is relevant for this work. One of the types of narrative utterances directed by subject-object relation is modal utterance. This type of utterance is characterised by a ‘desire of realisation’ and by an outline where an object-actant is subordinated by a ‘restrictive class’ – subject-actant (*Ibid*, 1976: 72).

3.2. Culture and anticulture as a basic semiotic mechanism for conflict construction

Narratives aid in fulfilling the main task of culture – “structurally organising the world around man” (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 213). Culture as a system of signs contributes to the structuring process. To define a culture, the opposite has to be present as well. In other words, to understand one’s self and values, one needs to distinguish them from what these values and self are not (*Ibid*, 1978). In the context of the study of Russia’s strategic communication about Ukraine, this dualism is central. In political speech, the negative ‘othering’ of an opponent is based on the ‘them versus us’ dichotomy (Khaldarova 2021: 6). Such opposition can be described as a mirror projection which presupposes that anticulture is seen as an identical “culture with a negative sign” (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 220). In this logic, the Ukrainian government is described as oppression the freedom, and the anti-vaccinators as fighters for freedom as well as the channels themselves. An

antithetical enemy is perceived as malevolence to the ‘self’, and it may win if the ‘self’ remains inactive (Khaldarova 2021: 6).

For instance, to construct an image of Ukraine as a dangerous state and a threatening ‘other’, the Kremlin used the rhetoric of a ‘fascist’ threat (*Ibid* 2021: 7). A similar division was prompted by Russia’s communication within the Ukrainian society, dividing the society into a safe ‘we’ and dangerous ‘other’.

The construction of antagonism may be based on various aspects. For the communication of the Telegram channels, the opposition of self and ‘the Other’ is based on the difference in behaviour, way of living, morality and values. To contrast this antagonism, the antithetical model is used where the two centres are divided by the binary opposition and exclude anything in between (Madisson, Ventsel 2016). As a translation mechanism between the two different spaces, there lies a boundary that belongs to both spheres simultaneously (Lotman 2005). This function as a filter that “represents the division of self and other” translating external language that lies outside a border into its own, or in the context of this paper, from the language of non-culture to culture and *visa versa* (Lotman 2005: 210).

Concerning culture, Lotman and Uspensky define nonculture and anticulture as the contrasting entity, where the latter is “an aggregate of normative texts” and characterised by the opposition of “correct-incorrect” (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 219). In the Telegram channels, this opposition is present in the issue narratives most vividly. With the logic of antithesis, I analyse how the Kremlin constructs a perception of the Ukrainian government as anticulture with immoral and dangerous values.

3.2.1. The concept of “betrayal vs victory” as anticulture and culture opposition

The concept of ‘betrayal and victory’ that arose at the end of 2013 during the Euromaidan is most relevant for defining the opposition of culture and anticulture that is cultivated by the Kremlin for destabilisation of the country from the inside.

The important aspect of the lexemes that are the basis of the concept is that they do not bear any opposition to each other on their own. The antonym to betrayal is devotion/faithfulness when victory is the opposite of failure. Thus, the opposition between

the lexemes is set up by a conjunction “or” used to connect different possibilities², not by the words’ meaning. The antonymic nature of the concept arises within a socio-political context in Ukraine and is used to evaluate and thus control governmental decisions and actions. The opposition stems from the times of combating the criminal authorities represented by the Yanukovich regime; however, this is still used for controlling the actions of the government (Yavorska 2016: 46; Kalyta 2018). An important characteristic of this opposition is that the evaluation criterion is established for finding friends and enemies within Ukraine (mostly within political elites). Notable is that the concept of “betrayal vs victory” lies in the position of observing from the outside and thus, may even mean detachment (Sinitsa 2017: 168). This is justified by striving to control the authorities but does not mean an action; when observations and evaluation with the concept of “betrayal vs victory” may create an illusion of being a critical mass and participation (*Ibid*, 2017). Furthermore, the opposition is based on the extremes of meanings, while betrayal does not always have a negative connotation and victory does not always lead to positive results (*Ibid*, 2017).

As this opposition roots back in the Euromaidan revolution and overthrowing the dictator regime, this binary opposition is seen predominantly as the opposition between people and authority. And although the concept “betrayal vs. victory” as a signifier has been attributed the ironic connotation within some contexts (Yavorska 2016: 46), the signified components are still of the antithesis are still present in the Ukrainian political infospace. Thus, any signs of criminal behaviour, corrupted authority or values that do not correspond to the ones established during the Euromaidan are perceived as dangerous to the sovereignty and independence of the state. So the logic of the antithetical model of betrayal and victory is still present with its primary functions.

All the mentioned aspects of the concept make it a fruitful ground for developing a culture-anticulture opposition and thus, to be exploited by the opponent. In this respect, this binary opposition can be effectively used in hybrid warfare. First, for constructing a (hyperbolised) image of a friend and enemy. Secondly, to polarise society which is allowed by the concept’s direction inside the country (the inner enemy is searched). Additionally, the critical point is that the concept bears a reference to Ukraine’s struggle for its independence and precisely, to the Revolution of Dignity. And as mentioned above, this

² Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/or> (13.08.2022)

presupposes participation (even illusory) in the political life of the country. Even if the concept is not mentioned literally, but its logic is present in the content, it may well be (and is) used by the Kremlin.

3.3. Reality effect as a mechanism for constructing the trustworthiness of a message

Hiding the real aims of strategic narratives is critical for success (Nye 1990; Roselle *et al.* 2014). In the case of the topic, it is crucial to hide the Russian voice since the audience is critical of it. Otherwise, the goals are not going to be reached, or this would be a hard power with force. Thus, apart from understanding how strategic narratives are constructed and transmitted, it is also crucial to analyse the means of making these narratives look real and in such a way, hiding their real intentions.

As Russian media have no credit to the Ukrainian audience (Динаміка довіри соціальним...2022), one's position against Ukraine may be perceived as a pro-Russian. Thus, one of the main challenges for the Kremlin narrators is not to look pro-Russian when criticising Ukraine and the government. In the content of the Telegram agent network, it is noticeable that there are messages (e.g. critics of Russia) which contradict the idea that the channels are coordinated by the Kremlin and loyal to Russia. Being aware of the real aims of the channels, one may see such messages as redundant. With Roland Barthes' concept of reality effect, I analyse the functionality of these "redundant" elements in the narrative and show how they serve as means to hide the strategic aims of Russia from the Ukrainian audience.

Roland Barthes (1989: 141-148) considers some elements of a narrative as not bearing any significance, even the indirect functionality, and examines what the significance of this 'insignificance' is. The semiotician claims that even though there is no function of a detail mentioned in the text, this serves "to *denote* the real directly" (*Ibid*, 148). The semiotic mechanism of the reality effect is where the signified is absent from the sign model, and thus, a signifier mentioned in a text denotes the real directly. In other words, the 'insignificant' details signify "the real" as a category without saying so (*Ibid*, 148).

In the context of strategic narratives, I define parts or messages that do not bear any significance to what is transmitted by the agent network (and/or are contradictory to the ideas of Russia's strategic narratives). When these elements are defined, I analyse which component of the Ukrainian reality (e.g. phenomenon, belief, value) the narrator tries to reproduce with this element and in such a way to convince the Ukrainian audience that the reality the Telegram channels convey is indeed real.

The concept of the reality effect proposed by Roland Barthes aids in analysing how Russia neutralises the critical and aggressive rhetoric towards Ukraine and presents its misinformation as a balanced position. With this approach, I study which narrative elements the Kremlin uses to shape an illusion of reality and thus, present this reality not as a biased pro-Russian but as an 'alternative' view that may well exist in the Ukrainian infospace.

3.4. Transmedial storytelling

The current media environment leads to a need for a closer study of the media system, the ways messages are linked on different platforms, and how people interact with this content, contributing to the meaning-making. Although strategic narratives can be analysed apart from the media where they are spread, a deeper understanding of this system enriches the results on how narratives become viral, trusted and the platform – engaging. Moreover, the narratives spread through social networking sites are often multimodal, which drives a need to analyse how content pieces are dispersed and how they make a coherent whole.

Strategic transmedia storytelling suggests an approach that provides a toolkit for researching cohesion and devices for immersing the reader by, from the first glance, separate and not related parts or whole stories (Madisson, Ventsel 2021). Transmedial storytelling can be understood as formulated by Henry Jenkins,

a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins 2011).

Another definition of “cross-media communication” that is used in parallel to transmediality highlights the connection between media and their coordination, formulating it as “the communication of an overall story, production, or event, using a coordinated inter-linked combination of platforms” (Nissen 2015: 48). In this paper, I understand a platform generally as a social media site or application (i.e. YouTube, Facebook, Telegram etc.) and more specifically as separate channels of the coordinated network based on this main platform – Telegram. However, the latter understanding is central in this work as Telegram channels operate like different un-linked media and their network is constructed in such a way that they are presupposed to spread the same narratives in various ways, although the medium they use is the same. Thus, actors, key topics, and narratives are transmitted in different forms depending on each channel's specifics. a channel from the chain is a part of the whole combination that brings its own component to the same story and thus, contributes to it.

In the context of the Telegram channels' network, the analysis of how they are linked, coordinated as a whole and engage a perceiver is especially crucial since the channels do not operate separately and are not aiming for independent voicing. On the contrary, the channels provide direct and indirect links to each other, not stating that they are indeed connected and act coordinately. This form of working contributes to the meaning they produce.

Thus, special attention is needed to how the narrators constructed a story-world through its network of channels that are not officially connected but which, in fact, contribute to narrating the same storyline. Approaching them with a strategic transmedia storytelling approach may explain more profoundly how the channels not only complement each other and shape a more efficient narrative but also engage a reader and let him immerse in their media environment. Analysing transmediality in the context of the analysed Telegram channels network, I am especially interested in how they function as a system, avoiding logic laps but on the contrary, contributing to each other; how they make a recipient be immersed into the network of different channels when, in fact, spreading the same strategic narratives; how Russia's strategic narratives are made look like a credible content. Thus, finding out the tools and techniques of cohesion and engagement of a reader seems to be the focus of the part of transmedial storytelling.

Dominant textual strategies used by the narrator and semantic triggers are among the elements and instruments that provide this cohesion and engagement (Madisson, Ventsel 2021). Below, I recount and characterise more in detail the elements and strategies that are relevant for the analysis of the Telegram application.

3.4.1. Repetition for cohesion and increasing meaningfulness

Repetition is argued to be the core element of transmedial storytelling (Ojamaa, Torop 2015). It is important that this repetition is not limited to circulating of same text through different media. First, “[r]epetition is a process and an entity that simultaneously underlines sameness and difference between the new text and the previous one” (*Ibid*, 2015: 63), which presupposes the element of difference. Secondly, transmedial storytelling may circulate within the same medium that may also be called a “radical intertextuality” (Jenkins 2015). This means that elements of the same medium may be related so that they provide different new perspectives to the same event or story. Thus, repeating as a process includes both telling the same story fragments (plot elements, actors, etc.) differently depending on a medium and distribution through one media or multiple.

By adding new elements and/or perspectives to the same story, a narrator makes it more meaningful or as Henry Jenkins formulates this functionality, “the purpose of additive comprehension” (Jenkins 2015). Because of the specifics of social media (read more on this in the following chapter “The role of social networking sites in the contemporary wars”), repetition may be done not only by a narrator but also by the audience when users share (repeat) the content often adding their commentaries, which brings new components to the storyline.

Also, the same narrative should be repeated over multiple channels to create an echo chamber. This increases the reliability of a narrative, as the same story is repeated by different interconnected media or actors (Nissen 2015; Madisson, Ventsel 2021). Thus, it is not one’s opinion that the audience believes, but a story circulated and told from different perspectives, with new details. By connecting the pieces of content and by tracing the same story in not-connected sources, a perceiver gets a feeling of making up his own conclusion.

The key function of repetitiveness in the context of transmedial storytelling is creating cohesion between different story components covered in multiple media or platforms (Ojamaa, Torop 2015: 62). Besides the explicit repetition of story elements, this may also be a more implicit tone of voice and rhetoric. Repetition also includes hyperlinking between different platforms to connect the story pieces and guide a reader (Nissen 2015).

3.4.2. Vocabulary and intertextual references for cohesion

The function of coherence is also fulfilled by sticking to the common vocabulary and intertextual references within different narratives (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 103). Consistent usage of keywords may guide a reader through various content pieces covering different narratives within one platform or different platforms through different time periods and situations. The keywords make different fragments more structured and coherent, categorising topics and even characterising actors (*Ibit*, 2015: 103). Thus, one actor may be surrounded by a set of certain keywords or vocabulary that gives characteristics and constructs a needed perception by a narrator.

A common vocabulary serves as a reference for known narratives by a perceiver. When a recipient is familiar with a framework of certain narratives, keywords may actualise the knowledge on them, and thus, a person may apply this knowledge for decoding other narratives as well.

3.4.3. Semantic gaps for an immersive experience

A highly important component of transmedial storytelling is engaging a recipient, so he is eager to surf the Internet and navigate through the different pieces poured by a narrator. Ideally, the story is divided into separate fragments that support each other and bring different knowledge to the same narrative. “An aggregation of the methods can also involve that the content is distributed across many platforms nonlinearly and is producer,

or sender, ‘hands-off! (Letting the audience connect the dots themselves)’ (Nissen 2015: 45). In such a manner, a recipient may not only look for the story pieces, and be guided to the conclusion but a story can offer an open interpretation. All of this contributes to the game experience, which not only holds the attention of a reader but also “directs the interpreters away from pondering about the reliability of the bits of information” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 101), which is extremely important, especially in a context of spreading deliberate misinformation.

To stimulate the interest in interpretation, semantic triggers are used in a text. According to Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel, these are “textual constructions that guide the interpreters towards creating meaning relationships that are not explicitly presented in the text” (*Ibid*, 2021: 101). Thus, other texts known to an interpreter may be evoked in memory and guide interpretation (*Ibid*, 2021). As the basis of transmedial storytelling is spreading different parts of the story through different platforms or media, there is always a semantic gap. They stimulate the interpretant’s desire to search to fill these gaps. Analysing transmedial storytelling, Madisson and Ventsel argue that “[semantic] triggers guide the interpreter towards filling the semantic gaps in the storyworld through hints received with the help of intertextual references, which makes meaning transfer and the additive comprehension of the narrative possible” (*Ibid*, 2021: 101).

Using the strategy or repetition (both story elements and rhetoric) and the system of keywords and common vocabulary make an interpreter perceive the storyline as a coherent whole. Engaging experience provided by filling semantic gaps captures a recipient's attention and makes logic overlaps be missed or omitted.

4. TELEGRAM IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In this chapter, I describe how Telegram can be used for achieving political aims with special attention to political communication. I also provide an overview (mostly based on other scholars' works) of the features and specifics of the application that make it a critical means for extremists, political actors and civil activists. The place of the application in Ukrainian media is explained, and the structure and specifics of the Telegram agent network analysed in the paper are conveyed.

4.1. The role of social media platforms in the contemporary wars

The role of media in a crisis, especially in warfare, is crucial. It has become even more potent with the emergence of social media channels and groups where their members can participate in discussions, contribute with their posts, etc. This new media environment is often on the verge of a public and private position and thus on the reader's public and private spheres. This shapes one of the specifics and difficulties of a new media environment – the boundaries are more diffused and abstract. Firstly, the form of the new media environment presupposes a weaved set of messages from the official channels, personal stories, commentaries and so forth (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013). This redraws lines between the public and private spheres in a receiver's perception.

The border between these two spheres in the role of participants is also diffuse. A person may create an image of a political expert with no expertise. Posts on a private social media account may become viral and, thus, influential. Such a personal approach with references to a personal experience and feelings may be considered more valid than a piece

of official information (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013; Freedman 2006). Thus, a regular civilian with access to social media sites and the Internet becomes a potential soldier in a conflict or a “citizen journalist” (Nissen 2015: 44). A commentator of a situation may be involved in the discussion that may go beyond the boundaries of a small community and become public or/and widespread. A video posted with a commentary from a regular civilian may seem more persuasive rather than an official statement or a journalistic report, making it more difficult for the government to control the info- or cyberspace.

Thomas Nissen defines cyberspace as a “strategic high ground” (Nissen 2015: 97) and claims that all actors of a conflict actively exploit this warfare space. Precisely, “(...) social network media are being used (...) for targeting processes, intelligence gathering, psychological warfare, both offensive and defensive operations as well as for command and control activities” (Nissen 2015: 97). Since all the dimensions of warfare are interconnected, one`s victory or advantage in one space may result in a positive shift in other spaces as well and vice versa. In a conflict, the strengths and weaknesses of opponents are present simultaneously in both spaces – offline and online (Nissen 2015: 97; Snegovaya 2015). This outlines the importance of analysis and combat in all spaces. However, the diffused borders between the dimensions and people's participation in them as well as limited control over cyberspace make this process challenging.

Another difficulty with diffused boundaries is that, compared to a regular war on the ground, it`s more complicated to evaluate and measure the outcomes of the actions in the irregular war as well as to track the causal links. When on the ground, moves and their outcomes are rather “visible” and measurable, it is more difficult to analyse how a certain post/media/influencer etc. affects people and their decision-making. In the case of irregular war, a decision and choice of behaviour lie on the private side (there is no need to be a regular soldier to participate in a war). Because of this, it is also more complicated not only to measure but also to prove the influence (i.e. danger) of a media or a narrative spreading, especially when a source is anonymous. Additionally, the decision in a private sphere may take much less time than in an official military sphere (Freedman 2006; Nissen 2015). It seems that this type of war needs fewer actions to affect.

Speed of content creation and spreading, as well as the perception of time in the social media environment, also defines its role in the media space. Being instantaneous, social media also enables posting and sharing information in a fast way, thus functioning in

real-time. This differs from traditional media and can serve more sufficiently for certain roles, for instance, as a tool for mobilisation, coordinating events and creating media hype. Such instancy also makes it more difficult to influence, control and react to social media content in a sense that it sometimes requires other tools than for traditional media. This specificity also crosses the aspect of dynamics that also requires approaches other than in traditional media; furthermore, to be effective for operational purposes, these methods should be revised and altered on a regular basis accordingly to the current events (Nissen 2015: 44).

A terrorist expert Beatrice De Graaf et al. (2015) mention asymmetric war as a compelling reason for significant attention and usage of an informational war component. Nissen states that “[i]nfluencing through social network media is probably one of the central issues when it comes to “weaponization”” (Nissen 2015: 91), where “weaponization” is understood as “the adaptation (something existent or developed for other purposes) in such a way that it can be used as a weapon (platform/system) in order to achieve “military” effect(s)” (*Ibid*, 96). Key actors for influence in the informational dimension are policy-makers that have “the ability to mobilize and preserve popular backing for overseas military missions (...) by crafting stories that help domestic and international audiences make sense of the actions taking place before, during, and after conflict” (De Graaf *et al.* 2015: 4). In such a way, through social networking sites, policymakers persuade, mobilise and can even recruit people for a terroristic activity, as, for instance, ISIS does (Yayla, Speckhard 2017; Clifford, Powell 2019; Walther, McCoy 2021; Tan 2017). Through media, Russia hyperbolises and/or provokes problems within Ukraine to construct an enemy and a conflict that needs to be handled. In such a way, Russia can create tension out of unexistent or not prominent problems thought the informational space, resulting in actions in the physical space. In the same manner, the Kremlin also uses media to substantiate its actions in Ukraine.

The problem of blurred boundaries, influence on spaces through the other spaces, a shorter and faster way to an effect, the diffused responsibility and level of influence are not the only dangers of warfare through the social networking sites. However, they are essential for understanding the role of a social media platform which is the focus of this work – Telegram.

4.2. Phenomenon of Telegram in a political communication

Due to technical specifics and a wide range of possibilities with minimal limitations, Telegram is an efficient platform for the voice of non-official institutions, public figures, influencers, individuals that offer some sort of expertise, and anonymous or forbidden societies. Thus, Telegram is a mean for secure communication and a source of alternative non-censored information in countries where the regime is trying to forbid it (Salikov 2019); a tool for the radicalisation of extremist activities (Walther, McCoy 2021); a platform for recruitment into a terroristic organisation (Yayla, Speckhard 2017); an instrument for misinformation (Gurzhiy 2021; Herasimenka *et al.* 2022).

In some way, the application appeared to respond to the government's control over information in the digital space, including personal data. Telegram was launched in 2013 by the Durov brothers³; not long before, in 2014, Pavel Durov was dismissed from VKontakte (Russian equivalent to Facebook), whose founder he was. The initial idea behind the Telegram instant messaging application was a secure and transparent application that any state could not regulate.

There are three main ways Telegram is used in the political context: 1) as a secure messenger; 2) as a tool for recruitment and coordinating political movements; 3) as a resource of alternative information. In this research, the most attention is dedicated to the third aspect, but I find it crucial to provide a brief outline of the other two layers to provide a broader context and a more accurate picture of the role of Telegram.

Telegram as a secure messenger. Although the platform was just a messenger at first, security was already at the core of it. A set of technical and legal actions were taken to ensure the safety of personal data and conversations of its users. Telegram states that they have taken these measures to provide a solid ground for refusing the state's request to disclose data to them without breaking the law (Meet Telegram, A Secure...2013). When the presented idea of security could be understood mainly as a plain fact, also features aid in practising and, thus, perceiving this security while using the application. For instance, apart from end-to-end encryption, self-destructing messages⁴ and secret chats⁵ were the

³ Nikolai Durov is a Russian mathematician and IT-specialist; Pavel Durov is well-known Russian entrepreneur

⁴ a message that can disappear from both devices in a set time by a sender

⁵ a chat where messages can be read only by a sender and a receiver due to end-to-end encryption

features concurring with other messengers at that time. A set of these possibilities contribute to the feeling of being out of control; and the fact that one's identity and communication hardly can be traced by a state explains the app's popularity mostly in countries with the authoritarian regime and semi-democratic countries where citizens can be arrested for an adverse repost social media (Salikov 2019: 86).

Further development of a messenger into social media has kept the image of an application with security as a priority. Thus, as an application obtaining some characteristics of a social media platform, Telegram allows the creation of communities – groups and channels. Both these options open a range of possibilities that drive our attention to the other two ways of using Telegram in a political context.

Telegram as a tool for recruitment and coordinating political movements. Telegram has an option of creating groups which are in fact chats where many people can communicate, and this would be visible to all the group members. Groups together with Telegram channels (which will be referred to later on in the paper) play an essential role in recruiting extremist and terrorist organisations. One of the textbook examples of this practice is ISIS which actively involves new incomers with the aid of Telegram (Yayla, Speckhard 2017; Clifford, Powell 2019; Walther, McCoy 2021). A common chat where one can communicate with people with the same interests, share information on the topic, take part in discussions contributes to engagement in the movement and the feeling of one community. This form of involvement supports not only the activities that imply direct participation, such as organisations but also prompts belonging to a group by ideologies, such as extremist movements (Walther, McCoy 2021) that later can result in actions.

From one side, Telegram groups complement informational channels that shape the ideological side of movements by making people involved in it. Conversely, groups play a significant role in coordinating a movement, especially on the local scale. Thus, when the protests in Belarus were predominantly driven by the Telegram channel NEXTA⁶ on the national level (How one Telegram...2020), the street protests were organised and curated in groups by cities where participants could exchange information relevant to their locality (How Telegram Shaped...2020).

Telegram was the critical instrument for organising protests in Iran in 2018 and Hong Kong in 2019 (Plakhta 2020: 90) as well. In the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022,

⁶ Belarusian media distributed through Telegram which is supposed to be the core channels of information to the Belarusian protest (2020)

Telegram groups aid in coordinating volunteering by a city in Ukraine, evacuation, and at the same time, host collaborationist activity of Ukrainians serving the Russian troops.

Telegram as a resource of alternative information. In terms of a political context, the third aspect of Telegram's influence outlined in this paper may be claimed to be most influential due to the academic attention to the informational side of the application (Walther, McCoy 2021; Gurzhiy 2021; Salikov 2019; Yayla, Speckhard 2017). Apart from groups as an efficient means for mobilising, Telegram also offers an opportunity of creating public channels. Groups are mostly closed, which means one cannot find any group by searching with keywords; to access a specific group, one has to be invited by another user or join through the invitation link. On the contrary to this, Telegram channels are open (unless the admin restricts access to it) and can be found in an application search.

Most official media news agencies use Telegram along with Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Thus, they use these channels parallel to their primary platform, e.g. TV broadcasts, websites, etc. However, for some media, organisations and individuals, Telegram is the only means of communication and transmitting their messages. These are, for example, the anonymous network of Telegram channels curated by Russia (Gurzhiy 2021) and extremists banned on other social media platforms (Rogers 2020).

Below I provide a brief overview of Telegram channels as a communicational instrument together with its form and features for outlining its set of possibilities. This is needed for understanding the meaning-making paradigm through the app.

4.2.1. The specifics of Telegram channels for meaning-making

Telegram channels are similar to a news feed⁷ but have a different form compared to other social media.

Firstly, the feed is still similar to a conversation flow – posts are in the form of messages like in a private chat. This presupposes that text is rather of medium length due to formatting limitations and the platform's layout. Apart from text form, Telegram also supports audio and visual media. Additionally, there is a possibility to attach documents. What is specific to the app, the admin of a channel can record audio or video in real-time.

⁷ a list of posts and news in a social media platform or a website

These messages look differently from regular audio and video files, they have a different shape, and a receiver can speed them up. In such a way, if a channel's manager uses these functions, a feeling of one-to-one communication is created. A famous, influential person with a large audience may transform communication with someone unreachable into a sense of one-to-one chatting.

Secondly, posts appear by time, not algorithms for ranking publications. Additionally, there are no Telegram advertisements. One may assume that such ranging also leads to an impression of something more natural rather than a platform closely monitored and artificially ranged and regulated. Moreover, each Telegram channel looks like a separate chat among the other chats with friends, not an endless news feed with different channels.

Thirdly, when channels appeared in 2015, they did not presuppose any reaction or response from a reader – thus, one could not reply, comment, or put a reaction on a post but only read it. Later on, in 2020, Telegram added the possibility to add a comment section (Search Filters, Anonymous...2020), and in late 2021 – a function of reactions (joy, laugh, anger, love, etc.) on posts (Reactions, Spoilers, Translations...2021). However, both these options are completely managed by a channel administrator, meaning that these are possibilities only and are not necessarily used in channels. The administrator decides the type of communication in a channel – as an open community with reactions and commentaries for two-way communication or a closed community that presupposes messages transmission from an addresser to an addressee only. For instance, a person who aims to seem closer to the audience and make an image of a good acquaintance would choose an option of an open community with discussions, reactions and video recordings like in a one-to-one chat. The same for organisations willing to create a sense of community. On the contrary, a media may choose to make a 'closed' channel with a factual account with no reaction, response, or critics in return.

The only objective and non-managed criterion of how one can evaluate a Telegram channel is the number of subscribers and views on posts. Due to non-ranged posts, the number of views on posts is several times larger on Telegram compared to other social media, such as Facebook and Telegram.

Anonymity is probably the application's most critical and most-discussed specificity of Telegram when it is used for political purposes. Channel managers and

subscribers are not visible to users, so channels are completely anonymous if admins do not disclose their identities. Anonymity is developed even further by the social media, and in one of Telegram's updates (anonymity of administrators in open discussions under channel's posts), Telegram itself reminded us once again what is their purpose for maintaining freedom of speech, "These groups [and channels] are used for everything from defending democracy to chatting with fans [...]" (Protected Content, Delete...2021). Considering the problem of difficulty in measuring or defining the real influence of social media, anonymity makes it even more difficult – when it is complicated or not possible at all to detect one's identity, it is challenging to assign false messaging on social media (Nissen 2015: 94).

Another critical difference that is not related to a form of media but is very noticeable and prominent is that posts and channels are rarely banned or deleted if community policies are violated, compared to other media. Thanks to this, in Telegram, some official media or persons post content that is quickly restricted on other platforms, not in parallel to other media but exclusively. For others, though, Telegram is the only platform for transmitting messages because of this very reason. The telegram states that taking down any public content within Telegram is done due to legitimate requests of countries and critical application store platforms. Hence, the limitations cover mainly the content of pornography and violence, which is public (FAQ 2022). Telegram includes terrorist organisations activity like ISIS to the list of bans (*Ibid*). However, in fact, in their contribution "Telegram: the Mighty Application that ISIS Loves", Ahmet S. Yayla and Anne Speckhard define Telegram as the central application for ISIS activity predominantly because their channels and groups are rarely banned (in months or never) compared to other social networking sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, that take down their accounts in a few days or hours (Yayla, Speckhard 2017).

With all its features, Telegram provides options for creating environments of two extremes – familiar that otherwise would not be or hardly possible and objectivity and credibility of never-existing media whose trace can be hardly proven even by the government. Thus, to analyse how a particular meaning is created and transmitted by a communicational channel, one needs to study not a plain text (in a broad sense) but understand the environment and its possibilities. All of the platform's specifics shape a paradigm of choices that determine a form of a channel and, thus, influence the perception

of a receiver in the desired way. In the next parts, I describe a Ukrainian Telegram context and illustrate how the analysed Telegram channels present themselves as well as what Telegram tools they use for their aims.

4.3. Telegram in the Ukrainian media context

According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) poll conducted in late 2021 (Динаміка довіри соціальним...2022), 32% of Ukrainians from different regions trust Ukrainian media, while Russian resources are trusted by only 3%. Compared to December 2020, the level of trust in the domestic media increased by 7% and the attitude to the Russian one – stayed the same. However, distrust of the Ukrainian sources is higher than trust – 39%; and at the bottom of the institutions that Ukrainians do not tend to believe just after the Russian voice are governmental institutions, i.e. The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the government and the President. This draws attention to two crucial conclusions for understanding the Ukrainian media context. First – Ukrainians do not treat Russian media as credible sources for at least the last year; second – Ukrainians do not tend to trust Ukrainian governmental institutions and not much Ukrainian media due to the great part of oligarchic owning of the official media channels. While the latter claim is positive and the former is negative for Russia, both lead to the same conclusion – seizing power in the Ukrainian infospace is only possible through alternative sources and with information alternative to the governmental position.

Telegram is a reasonable alternative to traditional social media platforms due to the characteristics described above, and statistics on Ukrainian users on Telegram prove this as well. There is a lack of a profound analysis of Telegram users from Ukraine, and most of the analytics are either not representative enough to generalise about most users or focus on a specific aspect of the app. The reason for it is security and confidentiality already mentioned above. There is no access to channels' subscribers, and Telegram does not provide a possibility to export users' data, so all data and statistics can be based on surveys only. However, the available analyses (Исследование аудитории Telegram 2019; Исследование аудитории Telegram 2021; Соцмережі як джерело...2021; Від “корони”

до Шарія...2021) are enough to detect the same tendencies which are crucial for the topic of this research.

Firstly, Telegram is among the first most used social media platforms in Ukraine; and the number of Ukrainian users and channels is increasing considerably over the past years (Protsenko 2019, Соцмережі як джерело...2021; Top Communication Apps...2022). The approximate number of all Telegram users in the world is approximately 500 million (Herasimenkla *et al.* 2021). Secondly, for people, the primary reason to use Telegram is as a news source (75%), and only 46% of users consider this application to be their main messenger (Исследование аудитории Telegram 2021). It is especially indicative that 89% of responders read the news channels and the next large parts are shared by political and entertainment channels (59% each).

The analytical platform of Telegram statistics TGStat provides the most extensive data on Telegram users from all sources available. According to them (*Ibid*), in 2021, the Ukrainian audience of the application is mostly of age 25-34 (30.6%) and the other large parts that have almost 22% each refer to users aged between 18-24 and 35-44. Most of them live in big cities of Ukraine – Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, and Dnipro share the first four positions. Slightly less than of a quarter (22,5%) of respondents work in IT, which forms the biggest share of Telegram users and is typical for Telegram data of different years. The other significant parts are shaped by production (10,6%), sales (8,9%), marketing and PR (7,2%). Additionally, 70,3% of users obtained or currently obtaining higher education. Although TGStat focuses mostly on Russian users and Russian-speaking users in Ukraine and Belarus, the statistics of these countries are similar, and when it differs, the platform provides the results by each country. When analysing the Russian audience, researcher Alexey Salikov concludes, “Telegram’s audience is politicised, active, young, and educated” (Salikoiv 2019: 93). This statement is relevant to the Ukrainian audience as well since this conclusion was based on data that is similar in both Ukraine and Russia.

The Ukrainian NGO ‘Institute of Mass Information’ published their qualitative analysis based on statistics provided by TGStat (Від “корони” до Шарія...2021). The platform defined Ukrainian 10 Telegram channels with the largest number of subscribers (38.7 million in total) and the ten most viewed posts in Ukraine as of August 2021 (one of which is analysed in this paper channel Легитимный (The Legitimate) and another one gained its views through shares in the channel network studied in this work). The Institute

of Mass Information concludes that 7 out of 10 largest channels are in the “News and Media” section, although none of them is related to a real media agency. Only 2 out of 10 are non-anonymous, one of which belongs to a prominent pro-Russian propagandist Anatoliy Shariy⁸ who was served a suspicious notice from the Security Service of Ukraine for his activity (SSU Serves Suspicion...2021). After taking a closer look at the widespread channels’ content and the most viewed posts in the Ukrainian Telegram infospace, the organisation concluded that the most popular content has any of or most often a solution of the following components: conspiracy theories, anonymity (a source of information or an author is hidden), populism and “a little credibility”. Most of the posts on political topics do not refer to any source, and the only references are to the media Strana (The country) which was imposed sanctions (Від “корони” до Шарія...2021).

To see the popularity of such doubtful resources in Ukraine, it is important to compare their audience with the Telegram audience of the largest official media in Ukraine. For instance, the Telegram channel of one of the major media and TV channels TSN had only 64200 subscribers. In May 2022, during the war, the Office of the President of Ukraine channel had slightly more than 420 thousand subscribers, almost as many as the fourth most popular anonymous channel during relative peacetime.

To highlight the importance of the role of social networking media in politics and conflicts, Thomas Nissen mentions that it is a common practice for intelligence in such countries as Syria to ask for access to one’s private accounts and check them under interrogation (Nissen 2015: 97). The same checkups are done both under interrogations and even on streets in Ukraine. Gaining access to private accounts, chats, followed media and search history may provide an understanding of one’s views and whether a person is engaged in any illegal activity. Private accounts and telephones are also checked by Russian police on the streets of Russia and by Russian soldiers in the so-called ‘filtration’ camps on the occupied territories of Ukraine (Ukrainians must endure...2022). In both cases, destiny and even life can be defined by what is found on personal accounts in messengers and social media. Telegram is revised closely since this is one of the key and many people's primary social media to get information on the Russian-Ukrainian war (How Telegram Became...2022).

⁸ Ukrainian blogger, politician

These findings reconfirm the potential efficiency of Telegram as a political means in Ukraine and showcase that Ukrainians consume questionable information when coming to the application for news and political insights.

4.4. Specifics of the analysed Telegram channels

Since the trust rate in the Russian media is low and Russian social media networks and some websites are forbidden in Ukraine (Порошенко підписав наказ...2017; Зеленський продовжив заборону...2020), the Kremlin uses other channels of transmitting its messages. This role usually belongs to experts and channels presented as Ukrainian but with an ‘alternative’ opposite to the government views. Transmitting Russian narratives through the Ukrainian communication channels is another type of denial of their presence on the Ukrainian space. This can be compared to Russia rejecting the presence of the Russian troops in the territory of Ukraine in 2014.

This channels are Резидент (Resident), Легитимный (Legitimny), Картель (Kartel), Сплетница (Spletnitsa), and Черный квартал (Chornyi kvartal) which communicate to the Ukrainian audience in Russian language.

Citing and covering the Russian perspective, the Telegram channels do not openly support Russia and do not stand for its close ties with Ukraine. They rather describe the Western role and work on their image, as well as the position of Ukraine and its government. The Telegram channels play a role of an attacker who questions the state decisions presenting this as critical thinking.

In July 2020, Teksty.org (independent analytical Ukrainian media), together with Liga.net (Ukrainian independent media) and the NGO “Institute of Mass Information”, presented a report (Here`s How Telegram...2020) on how a network of Ukrainian Telegram channels (the channels researched in the paper) popular even among deputies impacted their decisions and speeches. Authors also found out how the narratives in these channels went along with the Russian narratives and assumed this network to be curated from Russia. In February 2021, the Security Service of Ukraine exposed (SBU exposes Russian...2021) an agent network that received orders from the Kremlin and indeed managed this network of Telegram channels. The group of channels was managed from the

Russia-controlled Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic by an organiser of “Anti-Maidan” activities in Odesa during the Revolution of Dignity.

The network exposed by SBU is similar in structure to the one analysed by the Institute of Mass Information in the context of Ukrainian ten most popular channels in Telegram. Although the networks are not connected (this is not at least defined by any organisation, media or researcher), their similarity in approaches and form can be explained. In his research on Telegram networks that operate in Ukraine, Gurzhiy (2021: 164) points out that there are teams that build a channel web from scratch that is based on similar principles but may cover any topic, depending on the order. Since the structure is similar, the findings from profound research on a specific network may be applied to various networks of this structure. Taking into consideration the possibilities mentioned in a previous subchapter, below I describe the Telegram network curated by Russia (and thus, of a similar type).

The network has a closed type of channel similar to an analytical media sharing “insights” and leaks from the Ukrainian government and providing an analysis of events. The channels are not focused on the coverage of all events but rather on the analysis of key events and situations. The content is mainly based on the ‘insights’ from anonymous sources – ‘experts’ and ‘insiders’ from the Office of the President of Ukraine or someone close to the government. Thus, the anonymity of the sources is understood as a necessity to receive gossip and insights from the officials. The identities of the channel administrators are not presented as well.

The channels presuppose a one-way communication only and no reaction in response. Thereby, there is no comment section and even reactions. The channels transmit messages mostly in a visual form with text, images, and video. Although the tone of voice is informal, emotional and ironic, the information is still based on analyses, facts, and statistics. The analysed channels communicate through the visual text in a similar manner – the primary mass of visuals consists of video cutting (e.g. new reportage, interviews, etc.) and formal neutral photos mixed with “insiders” photos and rarely political memes. The combination of both formal and informal communicational elements, as well as the form of Telegram application as a messenger, allows them to balance between an objective presentation as in an analytical media and bold communication as with an acquaintance in a messenger.

5. COVID-19 AND VACCINATION IN INFORMATION WARFARE

This chapter covers how the topic of coronavirus and vaccination are exploited to influence political communication and thus, reach political goals. It also covers how Russia conducted its strategic communication at home and abroad with a focus on informational campaigns in Ukraine.

5.1. Topics of coronavirus and vaccination in political communication

For the last two years, the topic of healthcare has become political for all the countries in the world because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Decisions and results in this sphere are closely monitored and are pretty vulnerable. Thus, misinformation on the topics of the disease itself and vaccination is a part of information campaigns as a part of hybrid warfare. Although the anti-vaccination rhetoric is not new and appeared with the presentation of the very first vaccine (Gregory *et al.* 2011), its influence on society cannot be neglected and marginalised. Misinformation is not believed by a large part of societies but the presence of the population segment that considers it credible causes a potential danger to the health of others (Roozenbeek *et al.* 2020: 13). Especially taking into account that the efficiency of limiting the coronavirus spread is low when one state is attacked informationally by another one (Patel *et al.* 2020: 9).

The topic of COVID-19 is fruitful ground for manipulations and opinion-making as it relates to a few spheres of human life and state – health, economy, security, etc. In the context of Ukraine, the topic is also often exploited by Russia in the framework of political

issues (Keegan 2022). Even apart from the pandemic, healthcare is one of the domains that very much determines the human perception of security and well-being within a country and hence, influences the contentment with the government (Altheide 2018; Furedi 2018). As for a state, the COVID-19 pandemic is barely a problem of health; it is a complicated issue that combines vulnerable biological, governmental, and political dimensions at the same time. In a coronavirus misinformation analysis (Brennen *et al.* 2020), it is stated that the range of topics covered on the basis of the disease is very wide and does not necessarily refer to the medical side of the issue which is pure and primary nature of the pandemic. This brings the researchers to the conclusion that almost any suitable subject for any actor may be highlighted on the basis of COVID-19.

Furthermore, this becomes especially demonstrative since the same problem challenges the whole world, so this shapes favourable circumstances for proving the effectiveness of one state and actions in comparison to others. In this respect, these conditions are precious for such powers as Russia since it is already constructed in the way of competition where the propaganda needs to provide certain accents to show its superiority and the failure of the opponents. According to the analysis of COVID-19 misinformation, “[...] the most common claims within pieces of misinformation concern the actions or policies that public authorities are taking to address COVID-19 [...]” (Brennen *et al.* 2020: 6), which means that the government is indeed the main target for the coronavirus manipulations and the topic of health is used for exercising power.

The analysis of factors that potentially determine one’s vulnerability to misinformation on the coronavirus indicates that “[...] being exposed to information about the virus on social media is associated with higher susceptibility to misinformation [...]”. (Rozenbeek *et al.* 2020: 8) This tendency is revealed in different analysed countries. Studies and policy briefs on the COVID-19 misinformation (Veriter *et al.* 2020; Kosmehl 2020; Patel *et al.* 2020; Sukhankin 2020) suggest that the pandemic is exploited in geopolitics by such key players are China and Russia, and the risks for European countries are intensified. Realising the risks, the European Commission released a statement (The European Commission 2020) on the COVID-19 misinformation; however, compared to how other great international actors presented their role in managing the crisis, some indicate (Kosmehl 2020) that strategic communication of the EU should be of higher emphasis among its current priorities. Especially for promoting democratic European

values to the Eastern partners. Academics also point to how certain EU initiatives aimed at revealing and refuting misinformation cause a risk of transmitting misinformation themselves (Hutchings, Tolz 2020).

Thus, according to the studies and policy reports, COVID-19 is used mostly for geopolitical competition, lifting sanctions, promoting a powerful image of a state, challenging autocracy and democracy, lowering the level of distrust in other countries, and health crises. These are the most shared and global uses, while this topic may be applied on a local scale or in more specific situations as well. In the next part, I describe how Russia uses the pandemic globally and with respect to more specific relationships with Ukraine.

5.2. Russian informational campaign in the world and Ukraine

A great number of papers on COVID-19 misinformation are focused on or at least mention the Kremlin's strategies for influence in the informational space (Sukhankin 2020; Patel *et al.* 2020; Veriter *et al.* 2020; Madisson, Ventsel 2022).

In their article on COVID-19 misinformation effects, Veriter *et al.* (2020: 575) define that for a state, the topic is exploited to gain a dual aim – internal (“the toxic effect of conspiracy theories on the EU public sphere”) and external (“public diplomacy campaigns of competing geopolitical actors”). This is a fitting frame for analysing the Kremlin's strategy since Russia has a multidimensional approach to establishing its role in pandemic management.

Although Russia first started spreading disinformation through the pro-state media at home (Jozwiak 2020), later on, when the vaccination period started, they took an opposite position for internal communication (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020b). With media campaigns, Russia actively promoted vaccination and other measures aimed at lowering the risk within the state (Jozwiak 2020). The pro-governmental media have even turned from crafting and transmitting conspiracy theories to revealing and criticising them (Madisson, Ventsel 2022).

Contrary to the domestic strategy, Russia was accused of several anti-vaccination campaigns (Антивакцинна пропаганда – інформаційна...2021; Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020b; Sukhankin 2020) outside the country. On different branches of

the same governmental channel, the opposite messages are transmitted simultaneously. Thus, it was noticed how Russia humiliated anti-vaccinators at home and supported them abroad, strengthening their position with unscientific evidence (The two faces...2021). Taking in consideration that those who believe misinformation and conspiracy theories display a lower willingness to get vaccinated and comply with the health recommendations (Roozenbeek *et al.* 2020). The Russian tactics in terms of health are clear but certainly not limited to the medical layer only.

Referencing the other spheres apart from health, Russia used the pandemic for both its domestic and international political aims (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020b). On the global scale, Russia tries to weaken the West and establish a new world order with its leadership, accusing the US of ‘immoral sanctions’ for Russia, polarising societies. (Sukhankin 2020, Patel *et al.* 2020, Veriter *et al.* 2020)

When analysing Russian propaganda on the coronavirus topic, Sergey Sukhankin (2020) determines three types of narrative paths most efficiently in different communication channels and targets different audiences each. The first one is the most plain for least informed people and operates mostly on biased channels and programmes (both TV and the Internet). The second approach “[...] rests on elaborate conspiracy theories that aim to create so-called alternative reality and seek to foster distrust among Russians, and, potentially, even a foreign audience” (*Ibid*, 3-4). Interestingly, this method is also relevant for the international recipient, whereas with the other streams, Sergey Sukhankin is mostly focused on the analysis of the Russian domestic voicing. Although the form of this path differs from the first one, the information is still similar – manmade virus in American laboratories, accusations of the Western leaders and so on. The third approach is the most tricky and as the scholar defines the space where it operates “designed for very narrow circles outside Russia” (*Ibid*, 4). Its cunning character of it is determined by how it hides the misinformation under the constant references to Russian and Western scientists. Considering the methods described, the content of the Telegram channels of our research interest belongs to the second and third approaches. They indeed present themselves as sources of ‘alternative’ knowledge; however, they rarely transmit conspiracies (i.e. artificial nature of the virus), except by referencing the destructive role of the West. The links to the scientific explorations (mostly foreign) are used to enhance credibility. Based on Telegram statistics, it has already been stated that due to its specifics, Telegram attracts

an audience that is hardly reached but plays a decisive role in society (Salikov 2019). The paths (second and third) aid in approaching this audience. Thus, by using such media as Telegram with a proper approach, Russian propaganda is indeed potentially dangerous in its influence.

While Ukraine is one of the key targets for Russia, it is even more vulnerable than other countries or is even ‘a particularly unique case’ (Patel *et al.* 2020: 2). Apart from any economic and political weak points, Ukraine has been in a state of war since 2014. This expands ‘the front’ of the hybrid war and disperses the Ukrainian forces over a wider list of problems and makes it tougher to get a positive result. Furthermore, misinformation success in the informational space may result in victories on the other layers as well, which is extremely beneficial for the enemy.

In regard to Ukraine, the Kremlin aims to raise doubts, polarise the society, create a public distrust the governmental decisions, depict the state as weak and dependent, and present a more prosperous life in the quasi-republics. Katrina Keegan admits (Keegan 2022) that Russia has particularly aggressive rhetoric regarding vaccination to spreading narratives in Ukraine, which differs from the countries where the audience tolerates Russia’s voice (e.g. Serbia). This is done mostly for polarisation within society. For this aim, Russia often muddles narratives of vaccination with geopolitical issues, as well as domestic problems of Ukraine (Keegan 2022).

For Russia, coronavirus is the perfect circumstance for reaching its goals on the international battlefield since the situation has and lacks the traits of war in a classical sense – on the physical ground – simultaneously. “Nevertheless, while for democratic states pandemic is a crisis that demands facing many new challenges at once, autocracies perceive it as an opportunity to solidify further their power” (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020a). This is a world competition with vaccines as an arms race and real-life threats to humans. Results and one’s efficiency determine a ‘winner’ and ‘failure’, while, on the other hand, the enemy is not among the participants. Thus, one cannot be accused of the losses and failure of the other. Moreover, at the time of social media, it is even more problematic to trace and prove one’s influence on the outcomes.

6. ANALYSIS OF RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN TELEGRAM

In this chapter, I first describe how Telegram channels operate as a network composing a coherent storyworld where an interpreter can easily navigate and get immersed, surf through the channels and perceive it as one environment, even though they are not officially connected. With a transmedial storytelling approach, I also analyse the instruments and strategies used to make the narratives look trustworthy for a Ukrainian receiver. I also define the strategic narratives Russia transmits and divide them into layers according to different aims.

Most narratives are aimed at shaping public opinion on policies (issue narrative layer) that also affect the understanding of the state course (national narratives) and explain its place in the world's political system (system narratives) (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013). Russia tries to shape Ukraine as an object contrary to active actors, which stems from the need 1) to show that the state is dependent on other actors; 2) to shape Ukraine as a non-efficient actor on its own. I use multiple approaches to describe how the Kremlin creates desired meanings. With Greimas' theory of narrative semiotics, I explain how Ukraine is depicted as a dependent state; with the antithetical modelling (anchoring on the Tartu-Moscow School understanding), I describe how an image of an enemy is built out of the Ukrainian government.

The practices of how Russia makes its messages look more like an alternative position rather than pro-Russian (which is crucial when speaking to a hostile audience), is explained by applying the reality effect concept proposed by Roland Barthes.

6.1. Data collection and methodology

In the paper, five Telegram channels of the agent network are analysed – Резидент (Resident), Легитимный (Legitimny), Картель (Kartel), Сплетница (Spletnitsa), and Черный квартал (Chornyi kvartal). The network of channels with news and analytics that de jure are Ukrainian channels but de facto curated by the Kremlin is larger – this could be noticed by a similar format and the ways they are linked (see more in the following subchapter). Although I believe that there are a lot more channels of this type, I choose the mentioned five because of two reasons – they are officially proven to be curated by Russia (SBU exposes Russian...2021), and they have the largest number of subscribers compared to other channels of the network (see more on this in 4.4. Specifics of the analysed Telegram channels). Both of these reasons make them highly potential as a security threat for Ukraine.

From these five Telegram channels, I have chosen posts from 1 June to 31 November 2021. There are several arguments for this. First, the period covers reactions to the vaccination process in Ukraine that started on 29 May 2021. Considering this, this period is most fruitful in seeking and analysing the samples of the anti-vaccination campaign. Secondly, the period also includes the time when NSDC published the report (Антивакцинна пропаганда – інформаційна...2021) on the Russian anti-vaccination campaign transmitted through the very same Telegram channels. Thus, the second reason is crucial for analysing what strategies the channels used to refuse the accusation of being pro-Kremlin.

For collecting and exporting data from the five channels, an appropriate application was created and used – API⁹. Thus, I exported posts from the Telegram channels within the chosen period that contained specified keywords – ковид (the Russian word for COVID-19), коронавирус (the Russian word for COVID-19), covid, вакцина (vaccine), укол (the Russian word for injection), прививка (the Russian word for the vaccine). As there are declensions for nouns in Russian, I looked for the root words instead of the full terms. The root words are ковид, корон, covid, вакцин, укол, приви respectively. I picked up texts that include at least one of the above-mentioned root words. After a close reading, I excluded the texts that contained one of the root words but did not correspond to the

⁹ Application Programming Interface

aimed keyword. Thus, in the excerpts, there are only covid/vaccination-related posts from the channels, and their amount is 391.

A great majority of the channels' posts on coronavirus are filled in with negative emotions – fear, anxiety, and anger (I have witnessed no posts with relatively positive news and a small percentage of neutral posts). Almost every post is relative to the study of the paper; however, I do not mention all of the posts in the work. I read all of the 391 texts and selected only the most vivid representatives of the tendencies I see and cover in this work.

Among the texts, some samples do not concentrate on the topic but mention coronavirus indirectly (in this context, the topic of COVID-19 is not significant). Although I do not analyse such posts precisely, I leave them for a better understanding in which contexts the topic is covered in general, how often, and what is the proportion of neutral, positive and negative mentions of coronavirus in the Telegram channels. I also account for the posts from third-party channels reposted to the news feed of the five channels I analyse, even if there is no comment from these five. In the same manner, as the channels incorporate these third-party texts into their own feed, I consider these posts to be equal representatives of the narrator's ideas if the opposite is not stated by the authors. Thus, I perceive all content in the Telegram channels – their own or reposted from other sources – as equivalent carriers of the Kremlin's strategic narratives that they are aiming to spread.

Since the practice of referring to the posts on social media is not well established, especially when it comes to anonymous channels, I decided to make references in the form that I see as most practical and understandable in the case of the Telegram channels. In the reference, I indicate the channel's name and the post date, e.g. Legitimny 23.08.2021. Thus, the post can be easily found by the channel's name in search by the period. In the body of the text, I provide translated posts from Russian into English and put the original text in footnotes. All original 391 posts from the five channels can be found under the link in the Appendix section.

After the corpus of empirical material was gathered, I read the posts and identified the narratives with the content analysis method. For this, I considered the frequency of repeating the same ideas, actors, and topics. Thus, I chose the most often used statements that framed a list of strategic narratives. I noticed that multiple stories often transmit the same statement, so I organised these stories as strategic sub-narratives framed by the main idea – strategic narrative. With content analysis, I also looked at the morphological context

of mentioning certain actors and events (which phrases and lexemes frame an actor or event) and thus, I formulated how narrators describe them. The cultural semiotic approach aided in analysing these images deeper. Content analysis was also used to identify the specialisation of each channel. Thus, I considered what actors are covered by specific channels, what actors are omitted, what topics are covered most often, and which language is used to describe certain phenomena.

With narrative analysis, I identified how Telegram channels aim to structure a story, not with words but their organisation – syntax. With this approach, I examined what position described actors have in sentences and utterances – subject or object; active or passive, etc.

6.2. Transmedial storytelling: Constructing a storyworld through the Telegram channels

In the following parts, I analyse how the agent channels` network functions and how they construct and spread the strategic narratives cultivating interest in interpretation and building trust in their messages. The transmedial storytelling approach is used for this research.

6.2.1. Cohesion within the network: vocabulary, tone of voice, linking, and repeating

The Security Services of Ukraine exposed the connection between the Telegram channels of the agent network (SBU exposes Russian...2021) – Резидент (Resident), Легитимный (Legitimnyi), Картель (Kartel), Сплетница (Spletnitsa), and Черный квартал (Chornyi kvartal). However, the channels do not state that they are connected or are a part of any collaborative group. They interact like ‘colleagues’ (that is how they call and treat each other), providing independent analyses and insights from different insiders. Even apart

from the official exposure, a connection between the channels is traced by their common tone of voice, rhetoric, vocabulary, and similar or identical narratives.

As it was explained in part 3.4. Transmedial storytelling, the function of common rhetoric and keywords is to provide cohesion between separate pieces of the same story and non-connected voices. Thus, if users subscribed to one Telegram channel are exposed to another channel that spreads the same narratives, even from a different angle, they are prepared to perceive and interpret the narratives. The rhetoric and tone of voice make it feel like a familiar source of information and keywords guide interpretation.

In the above-mentioned Telegram channels, the following words are used for describing vaccination and for surrounding this process: вакцинация (vaccination), вакцина (vaccine), вакцинирован (vaccinated), инъекция (injection), укол (injection, shot), прививка (the Russian word for vaccination), прививать/прививаться (the Russian word for to vaccinate/to get vaccinated), привитый (the Russian word for vaccinated), вакцинный кейс (case of vaccination). The words with a foreign origin (вакцинация, вакцина) are mostly used in a neutral context of the channels and are widely used at the official level of Ukraine. Although the latter words of Russian origin carry the same denotations and may be used in a neutral context, they also acquire a connotation in some contexts, affecting perception. First, it references the Russian media space or/and memory from the Soviet times. Secondly, as a lexeme to incorporate Ukrainians and Russians into the collective space. In one of their analyses, Resident covered the topic of the terms вакцинация (vaccination) and прививка (the Russian word for vaccination). The channel provided results of a poll conducted in Russia to demonstrate how different lexemes influence attitudes towards the same problems (Resident 01.11.2022). According to them, Ukrainians would have had a better attitude towards the process of vaccination if the Russian term прививка was used instead of the term вакцинация in the governmental campaign,

Using the word "прививка" (the Russian word for vaccination) instead of "вакцина" (vaccine) improves the opinion of a medical procedure by 15-20 percentage points. Why is there such a difference in semantics? The answer is straightforward and lies in the people's subconscious – there is more confidence in "прививка" because of the past of the country when vaccination is a wild

term. (...) A rebranding of the vaccination campaign is needed, which Ukrainians do not trust, and on Bankovaya¹⁰, they are used to looking for who to blame.¹¹ (Resident 01.11.2022)

Noteworthy is that there is its lexeme for defining vaccination in the Ukrainian language – щеплення, which is also widely used at the official level in Ukraine. Still, it is omitted in the analyses as if it does not exist. By referencing the country's history, the narrator does not differentiate between Ukrainian and Russian histories and their infospaces. On the contrary, when a Russian investigation is provided as an argument to the Ukrainian context, it means that the narrator aims to incorporate the Ukrainian infospace into the Russian one. Furthermore, the use of Russian vaccination keywords not only provides links for Russian narratives within the Ukrainian infospace but also prepares an interpreter for perceiving Russian media as something familiar.

The vaccination is surrounded by phrases that describe the character of the process as negative, obligated by force and needless. For example, strong emotional phrases, e.g. насильственная, принудительная вакцинация (forcible vaccination), этим колят (pricked with it), агрессивные ограничения (aggressive restrictions); colloquialisms, e.g. принудиловка (a bold meaning of enforcement) and советская принудиловка (Soviet methods of coercion referencing to the negative experience of the Soviet times); and neologisms ошприцевали (a neologism meaning to be pricked with a syringe, presumably by force; literally “syringed”), перевакцинированный (over-vaccinated).

On the contrary, posts on anti-vaccination contain descriptions that present this process as a fight for rights with protesting rhetoric. Thus, anti-vaccination is described as антипрививочное движение (anti-vaccination movement), антипрививочное настроение (anti-vaccination mood), протестная активность антивакцинаторов (protest activity of anti-vaccinators) and surrounded by phrases such as акция протеста против нарушения прав человека (protest action against the violation of human rights).

The tone of voice of the Telegram channels is bold, sometimes aggressive, and the authors lead communication in a non-official, friendly manner. The communication style is defined by the type of content and the channels that share it. Although political news and

¹⁰ by Bankova str. the channels refer to the governmental elite. Office of the President of Ukraine as well as official residences are located on the street.

¹¹ Использование слова "прививка" вместо "вакцина" улучшает мнение о медицинской процедуре на 15-20 процентных пунктов. Почему такая разница в семантике? Ответ элементарный и кроется в подсознание людей, к прививке больше доверия из-за прошлого страны, а вакцинация дикий термин. (...) Необходим ребрендинг кампании вакцинации, которой не доверяют украинцы, а на Банковой привыкли искать кто виноват.

analyses are the focus of the channels' content, it is transmitted in the form of gossip and insider information from the political elite. The tone of voice is also presented as of an omniscient author who knows the truth and anticipates the future very accurately. Thus, the content looks like an analysis based on the 'real truth' from the elite hidden from the 'common people'. This is a type of information that one can only get from a friend or acquaintance.

Aware of the system of keywords on topics of coronavirus and vaccination, a subscriber of one channel may navigate through the content of different periods, as well as other resources that share the same or similar narratives using keywords that a perceiver understands as familiar. This way, different stories and resources are linked into the one storyworld, and an interpreter can navigate there as a coherent whole.

Linking different story pieces and resources is also built up by hyperlinking within one and multiple Telegram channels from the network. Stories are connected with hyperlinks within one platform to make one story divided into several pieces (for example, when an event or news is updated), look coherent and be navigated easily. Stories are better navigated and linked with hashtags. They are #Слухи (Gossip), #ВакцинныйКейс (The case of vaccination), #Раскладка (informal language: explanation of how something is organised), #Анализ (Analysis), #ДонбасскийКейс (The case of Donbas), #ХарьковскийКейс (the case of Kharkiv), #Срочно (Urgent), #Разоблачение (Disclosure), etc.

To mark media contributions with hashtags is a common practice and not new in media; however, the channels developed their system of hashtags with increased functionality. First, the hashtags are placed at the beginning of a text and represent the form and content of a post. Thus, a hashtag serves as a section name and/or a headline that represent a condensed idea of a contribution. In such a way, different posts are well organised within one channel, and when a reader is curious about a specific topic (i.e. vaccination, local news, politics, Donbas, etc.) or a type of text (i.e. insight, analysis, etc.), he/she may easily find the content of interest. Second, the hashtags form a system of keywords that function the same way the keywords within the texts link and provide coherence within a channel. These keywords are also some sort of repetition of familiar elements. Third, when used in different channels, the hashtags also serve as familiar and

linking components of other sources in the same storyworld. Thus, hashtags may navigate and engage an interpreter within one as well as various platforms.

Concerning the latter two functions, references to previous posts or contributions of other channels of the network, or ‘colleagues’ how they call each other, also aid considerably in repeating the same narratives and providing links between different pieces of the same story (both in the same channel and different). References that link content inside the channel are formulated in the form “as we already gave insights on¹²” or “as we already wrote about earlier¹³”. When referencing to contributions of other platforms, the channels usually start their posts with an appeal to ‘colleagues’ and supplement their text with new information. The platforms only increase and promote each other and never criticise. They also highlight that with their ‘colleagues’ they already anticipated the events which came true, “[o]ur colleagues from the Kartel Telegram channel and we already wrote about this back on September 5, 2020”¹⁴ (Legitimnyi, 16.08.2021). Both references and hashtags are semantic triggers that guide an interpreter within different pieces of transmedial content in the desire to feel the semantic gaps (the functionality of semantic triggers and gaps were described in more detail in part 3.4. Transmedial storytelling). This is not the only function of references, and its other aspects will be discussed in the following parts of the chapter.

6.2.2. Engaging experience

In the article on transmediality, Maarja Ojamaa and Peeter Torop mention that “[e]very new segment of the whole essentially repeats a certain invariant of the whole and – in accordance with the specificity of a given medium – creatively varies the rest” (Ojamaa, Torop 2015: 62). The authors mean specifics of different media that to some extent define a form of content and thus, bring new elements to the story. This may be applied to analysing the network of channels as a combination of different media platforms since each

¹² как мы уже инсайдили

¹³ как мы писали ранее

¹⁴ Мы и коллеги из телеграм канала Картель, писали об этом еще 5 сентября 2020 года

of them bears its specifics even though they are based on the same platform – Telegram and spread the same or similar narratives.

As was already explained, the role of repetition in transmedial storytelling is crucial; thus, it cannot be omitted. However, when reading the channels' posts, I wondered how a subscriber is curious about reading the same narratives and how the channels maintain interest among their readers. In other words, I wondered how repetition does not lower the audience's engagement. As it is not allowed in Telegram to get information on the subscribers of a channel, it is not possible to check the ratio of unique and shared audiences among the network. However, I assume that a part of the audience follows multiple channels from the network. The channels use certain strategies to immerse a reader, even though the elements and narratives are repeated.

The first and foremost aspect that makes these people read the same narratives in different resources is that stories are divided into pieces, meaning they complement each other even in the frame of the same storyline. In a search to fill the semantic gaps, an interpreter is eager to search for the missing pieces and is guided through the references as described in the previous part. When the story is divided, “we tend to connect those dispersed pieces of information together to form a story” (Jenkins 2015). Each part of this transmedial content has one of the following functions, according to Jenkins – provides a backstory, maps the World, offers other character's perspectives on the action, and deepens audience engagement (*Ibid*, 2015). Pieces with different content or form bring an “addictive comprehension” to the whole story (*Ibid*, 2015). In such a manner, Kartel Telegram channel reposted a text from the Resident about the system of QR-codes that was being developed and complements it with their own commentary,

Colleagues, you are right, but they also want to submit a bill to parliament on mandatory vaccination for employment or getting into educational institutions (the Western lobby is pumping the case of vaccinating children against coronavirus).

By the way, we were the first to provide insider information on September 5 according to which there will be certificates against coronavirus in paper and electronic form and on the ДИА platform.

¹⁵(Kartel 12.10.2021)

¹⁵ Коллеги вы правы, но ещё хотят вынести в парламент законопроект про обязательную вакцинацию, для трудоустройства на работу или попадания в учебные заведения (западное лобби прокачивает кейс вакцинации детей от коронавируса).

Кстати, мы первые инсайдили 5 сентября, что будут сертификаты от коронавируса в бумажной и электронной форме и на платформе ДИЯ.

Both the original post in Resident and the repost with a commentary spread the same strategic narrative – the Ukrainian government is too strict in combating the pandemic and limits the rights of citizens. Still, these two pieces convey different elements of the idea – Resident writes on limitations for public and local transport, referencing the internal decision of the Office of the President and the Minister of Healthcare; and Kartel speaks about employment and studies, mentioning the involvement of the “western lobby”.

Apart from this, the supplement quoted above performs multiple other functions. First, by adding different components to the story, they increase the meaningfulness of the narrative. Moreover, a form of a repost is shortened, so if one is interested, he/she needs to follow the link and read the full version on a different channel. This brings to another function – engaging in a search for other pieces, which reminds interest provoked by seriality. According to Jenkins, seriality presupposes chunking and dispersal, as well as the creation of a storyhook or cliffhanger (Jenkins 2015). With two references in the post, a motivated interpreter has two options – to follow the storyline by checking another aspect of the story (in an outside resource) or follow the story over time by moving to an earlier post inside the same source. Last but not least, Kartel increases credibility by highlighting the accuracy of their insight and demonstrating that various resources speak of the same narrative.

Content in Telegram channels also varies because of different perspectives provided by the sources. When reading the channels closely, one may notice that there is a sort of specialisation (e.g. political, social, etc.) for each platform from the agent network. This specialisation defines how and what part of the story is presented. Thus, all channels cover the same narrative but from different angles, which reminds us of looking at the same story from the perspective of different characters. For example, Legitimnyi, Resident, Chernyi kvartal, and Kartel focus on political aspects, while Spletmitsa looks at the same topics orienting at social aspects. And even the political bias has its specifics within the channels. Thus, Legitimnyi speaks more on the problem of COVID-19 as a responsible citizen caring for his (Constitutional and human) rights. Kartel focuses more on criticising the government elite – precisely, President Zelenskiy and his entourage. Stories of Chernyi kvartal are centred mostly on the local corruption scandals and local politicians when the topic of coronavirus is secondary and mentioned as a background. Resident focuses

significantly on the subject of coronavirus and lockdown and criticises the government through the prism of this topic.

A channel's specialisation defines actors, central strategic narratives and word usage. Thus, for instance, being focused on social topics, Spletnitsa appeals to feelings of fear for life and health and for this, spreads mostly narratives that question the efficiency of vaccines and governmental decisions on the pandemic that may impact human life. To stimulate the fear, the channel often appeals to a failed vaccination experience in foreign countries and foreign investigations (often fakes). Political questions are mostly omitted, so among the actors, only the Minister of Healthcare of Ukraine appears as a face responsible for the vaccination process in Ukraine. Political issues were mostly raised in November, though, when the agent network was accused of working for the Kremlin and transmitting anti-vaccination misinformation in Ukraine. Spletnitsa uses extensively emotional language and aggressive rhetoric in its texts – most of the colloquialisms and bold words mentioned earlier were cited from this channel.

When writing on connecting pieces within transmedial experience, Jenkins mentions that “there are architects who seek to coordinate and construct the range of meanings which get attached to that story” (*Ibid*, 2015). In such a manner, the channels construct particular meanings out of the same story, building separate parts and coordinating the path of an interpreter. The same issue is presented from different perspectives and with diverse accents, depending on the channel's specialisation, but all of them support the main narratives.

Thus, with all the described toolkit of Spletnitsa, the channel guides its interpreters towards looking at vaccination as an inefficient, too strict and even dangerous process. Below is one of the examples of how the same story (Ukraine bought a significant amount of vaccine with a limited shelf life) is presented differently, and the parts do not contradict each other but support and complement the story. Spletnitsa approached the situation in the following way,

Is it clear why Ukraine is so hurried to carry out compulsory vaccination? Back in the summer, Telegram channels wrote that 5 million doses were expiring, and we are being pricked with this, and no one questioned the expiration date! Forty thousand quantities were disposed of in the Lviv region and throughout the country, about 500 thousand. (Spletnitsa 06.11.2021)¹⁶

¹⁶ Теперь всем понятно почему в Украине так торопятся провести принудительную вакцинацию? Ещё летом телеграм каналы писали, что у 5 миллионов доз заканчивается срок годности, а нас этим колят

On the contrary, in the politically oriented channels, the same problem is described from a perspective of corruption, the government's deception, and adverse economic outcomes. For example, in Resident,

Ukraine has destroyed 500 thousand doses of the vaccine, which has expired. Our insider provided an #Insider that Liashko personally gave the order to buy a vaccine with a limited shelf life, on which his firms earned millions. One of the reasons for the forceful vaccination of Ukrainians is the fact that another 3 million COVID-19 shots need to be used till the end of the year.¹⁷ (Resident, 10.11.2021)

Legitimnyi mentioned the situation with 'expired vaccines' from a similar perspective,

#Gossip #Analysis The rate of coronavirus cases has increased, and there are no more people who want to be vaccinated. It is already known that from September 23, Ukraine will enter the "yellow" quarantine zone. They will close everything where staff, employees or students are not vaccinated by more than 70%. The authorities "kill two birds with one stone by such an action." The first is to provoke another wave of people who want to receive the vaccine because of the need. The second is to have time to use the vaccine purchased from "friends", where the expiration date is short. The third is to play ahead of the curve in the protest case. With a growing negative protest wave, a sharp lockdown will be introduced. Allegedly due to a surge in cases.¹⁸ (Legitimnyi, 21.09.2021)

Compared to the channels focused on social topics, politically-oriented sources use more discreet language, which, however, leads to the same conclusions. Thus, a common practice is to use *обязательная/принудительная вакцинация* (sic!) which means "mandatory/forceful vaccination" instead of *принудилровка* (a colloquialism with a bold meaning of enforcement). Both bear the meaning of vaccination done by force or because of no choice but to target different audiences. The actors of stories covered by the channels also vary – in the sources that cover political aspects, the political elite form the central

и никто не задаёт вопрос о сроках годности! Только в Львовской области уничтожили 40 тысяч доз, а по всей стране порядка 500 тысяч.

¹⁷ Украина уничтожила 500 тысяч доз вакцины, у которой закончился срок годности. Наш источник давал #Инсайд, что Ляшко лично отдал приказ покупать вакцину с ограниченным сроком, на которой его фирмы заработали миллионы. Одной из причин принудительной вакцинации украинцев, является тот факт, что нужно до конца года израсходовать ещё 3 миллиона препаратов от COVID-19.

¹⁸ #Сплетни #Анализ Коэффициент заболевших коронавирусом увеличился, а людей, которые хотят вакцинироваться больше не стало. Уже известно, что с 23 сентября Украина переходит в "желтую" карантинную зону. Закроют всё, где персонал, сотрудники или учащиеся не вакцинированы на более, чем 70%. Власть таким действием «убивает сразу двух зайцев». Первое – провоцирует очередную волну желающих получить вакцину из-за необходимости. Второе – успеть использовать вакцину, которую закупили у «друзей», где срок годности короткий. Третий – сыграть на опережение в протестном кейсе. При нарастающей негативной протестной волне, введут резко локдаун. Якобы из-за всплеска заболевших.

actors of stories. Thus, President Zelensky, his entourage, ministers and mayors of Ukrainian cities are the main actors in the Ukrainian context, and other countries appear mainly in the role of political players.

The channels avoid excessive repetition by covering different aspects of the same narrative through separate sources. Although the platforms cover the same stories, they approach them differently and analyse them from diverse perspectives. This is also similar to different genres that cover the same story differently and complement the whole storyworld. Thus, a perceiver may choose the compelling ‘genre’ for approaching the same story. With such a comprehensive and diverse use of strategic narratives the senders “offer answers to the fundamental why, what, and how questions of a given conflict and allows individuals and groups to identify success and failure” (De Graff *et al.* 2015: 8).

I assume that the content strategy with ‘specialisation’ for each source was developed in both directions – to attract dissimilar audiences through different channels and to convey the topic as completely as possible for those who follow multiple channels of the network. For any of these two purposes, this is an efficient strategy.

6.2.3. Multivocality of the agent network

By repeating the narratives and referencing each other, the network achieves another crucial objective – to look trustworthy. As mentioned above, the channels link their content with the previous posts. In most cases, this is done to demonstrate that any of their insider information is confirmed. Thus, the channels not only lead an interpreter to other pieces of the story but also showcase their accuracy even though the insider information may be ambiguous or offer multiple outcomes of an event.

Similarly, the authors publish various gossip or presumptions during a period of time. When one of them is confirmed, they draw attention to it, ignoring the course of events of the other versions. Moreover, there is no comment section in the channels of the analysed network, which means that other subscribers may not write about manipulations and logic overlaps in commentaries to draw the attention of others in such a way. It is especially tough for a reader to see manipulations when he/she is eager to link parts of the

story into one storyworld. Semioticians Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel mention that,

[s]enders of strategic narratives have to create messages perceived as sufficiently exciting, intriguing and urgent for the receivers to develop an enthusiasm for interpretation that might motivate them to move between platforms and elaborate the mental map of their storyworld in the light of additional information.” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021: 100)

The channels` use of secret knowledge, references to anonymous insiders, non-official and confidential information presupposes the essence and form of messages that provoke a strong desire to move through the bits of information to learn more of the whole story. This interest can make a reader omit contradictions.

Madisson and Ventsel also state that sometimes the resonance may be so excessive that people complement the story with their commentaries when sharing the narratives on their social media, which is the authors' aim (*Ibid*, 2021). As Telegram is primary a messenger, a function of sharing content publically (like on Facebook or Twitter) is not available. Thus, a user cannot make reposts to the feed but can share it privately. Although the perception of a narrative is not a focus of this paper and analyses imply the formation and projection of content, I assume that the channels create their messages in a manner to make them viral and spoken of. As a result, their posts are among the most viewed in the Ukrainian Telegram media space (Від “корони” до Шарія...2021), and the narratives from the channels are repeated publicly by Ukrainian deputies (Here's how Telegram...2020). All of this aids in legitimising and increasing trust in the sources and ideas spread by them.

References to external sources that support the ideas spread by a specific channel also create an illusion of multivocality and thus, increase the legitimacy of their narratives. This echo chamber makes readers think of the transmitted strategic narratives as collective rather than an individual opinion. The analysed channels position themselves as independent media (read more on this in part 6.7.2. Distancing from the image of Russia) and mention each other not only as ‘colleagues’ but also as independent media platforms. By these platforms, they refer to any media on Telegram that opposes the official statements of Ukraine. Thus, they create an image of plenty of separate media platforms, not connected with each other (except for their opposition and desire to declare the truth) instead of one coordinated network.

Such multivocality also contributes to the feeling of “critical mass” that Thomas Nissen mentions in his book on social media (Nissen 2015). By seeing ideas massively shared and supported through various sources (especially when they form a great deal of all the sources followed by a user), a perceiver may get a “sense of security” and in this way, social media “provide “social proof” for individuals to join a movement or participate in an event” (*Ibid* 2015: 89). When a coherent storyworld is created within the agent network, an interpretant does not only perceive it as an extensive structure, and thus, as the reality, but also may be encouraged to support and tackle part in movements they are promoting. Although the channels do not agitate for participating in anti-vaccination protests in Ukraine, their coverage of the topic still may stimulate if not participate physically in an event, then, at least, ignore the safety coronavirus measures.

To put all the instruments and strategies described above, the transmedial storytelling approach allows for analyse how the Telegram channels operate, get trusted and engage their readers even by speaking of the same stories. The network functions as a set of separate media platforms, complementing and referring to each other. They disperse stories into different bits of information through multiple platforms and guide an interpreter in collecting all these parts as a puzzle into a coherent whole. Although the channels position themselves as non-linked independent sources, they use a common vocabulary, similar tone of voice and rhetoric repeating the same stories and narratives, which make them understandable for readers familiar with their storytelling. The channels' engaging experience involves their interpreters in the storyworld and misses logical clashes.

6.3. Strategic narratives in the Telegram channels curated by the Kremlin

Russia tries to reach different aims on different scales by using a coronavirus topic – to construct an image of Ukraine at the domestic level and in the international arena. A different scale implies a different approach to meaning-making through the narratives. In this paper, to describe the image of Ukraine from different perspectives, I use three levels

of strategic narratives proposed by Miskimmon et al. (2013): International System Narratives, National Narratives, and Issue Narratives.

International System Narratives provide an explanation of the world's structure, defining the places of the actors and their roles (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013). Russia sees itself as one of the world's leaders and after the USSR's collapse as a weak point in their story, Russia "is determined to show the international community that Russia is no longer the weak creature" (Sukhankin 2020). With the aid of International System Narratives, the Kremlin demonstrates the supremacy of Russia over the West in general and Ukraine specifically as an indicator of its geopolitical influence. The Kremlin also attacks the solidarity of the West and tries to lift sanctions. In this respect, the coronavirus is an especially fruitful basis for manipulating democracy as a non-efficient and weak system of government which is not ready to solve the challenges of the current times, contrary to authoritarian governance.

Speaking precisely on the strategic narratives of this type in the analysed Telegram channels, the following International System Narratives can be distinguished:

- Russia has a stronger position over the occupied territories rather than Ukraine (Patel 2020, Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020a);
- The West uses the vaccine topic for its political aims (Sukhankin 2020).

National Narratives focus on explaining a state's history, future, characteristics and identities (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013). That is how a state defines itself. By intervening in the Ukrainian informational space, Russia aims to influence the identity shaping of Ukraine. The Kremlin tries to do it from the Ukrainian side. Thus, through the Telegram application, Russia argues that Ukraine is a failed state, not independent and curated by the West. Additionally, the Kremlin is provoking distrust in the state management as one of the main state representatives. Russia also tries to shape an opinion of not-vaccinated citizens as excluded by the government from the 'civilised' 'normal' world, which contributes to the image of the state management as a despotic regime.

Russia is spreading the following National Narratives:

- Ukraine is a failed state with an inefficient, weak and corrupted government (Patel 2020);
- Ukraine is a puppet of the West.

Issue Narratives define the course for a state explaining policies and the relevance of actions (Miskimmon *et al.* 2013). They also provide context for dangers and problems and formulate how the state decisions will help to resolve them. Russia actively uses this type of narrative to question governmental decisions and to polarise society by provoking doubts and the efficiency of its actions. In the COVID-19 context, the Kremlin undermines the healthcare system of Ukraine and solutions made by the state management.

Here is how Russia formulates its Issue Narratives on specific policy decisions and shapes speculations over Ukraine in the Telegram channels:

- The governmental decisions on combating the pandemic are inefficient and too strict; (Patel 2020, Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020a)
- The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are highly damaging and will be even more catastrophic for Ukraine (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020a);
- Vaccines efficiency is in question (Patel 2020, Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020a; Антивакцинна пропаганда – інформаційна...2021) (especially the ones provided in Ukraine).

The two levels of strategic narratives, according to the classification, are most crucial for Telegram channels analysed – the narrative of identities and the international system narrative. First, they shape the understanding of Ukrainians of who they are, who is Other and how the international world surrounding Ukraine is structured, who the main players are there and what their roles and positions are. Strategic communication on these levels shapes the basic visions, beliefs and values as well as prepares sufficient ground for the success of the issue narratives. Although a narrative can be produced at one level or a scholar may analyse a narrative on one level, the levels cannot be isolated (they also form a context by themselves for other narrative levels) and they influence each other (Roselle *et al.* 2014: 77; Irina Khaldarova 2021).

A great number of narratives transmitted through the Telegram posts imply multiple or all levels at the same time. Thus, such messages have multiple functions and combine a few approaches for influence. This can be traced in the following example:

Putin promised to supply even more coronavirus vaccines to the LDNR. With such steps, Russia is strengthening its “connection” with the inhabitants of the LDNR, but we look negative against this background, and most importantly, no one in the Office of the President of Ukraine and the Foreign

Ministry is even trying to really solve this issue, but only create the illusion of work.¹⁹ (Legitimny 30.06.2021)

This post is a carrier of a strategic narrative “Russia has a stronger position over the occupied territories rather than Ukraine”, which first, characterises the role of Russia as a strong and influential state in both spaces – the geopolitical and local Ukrainian. Secondly, it showcases Ukrainian governance as weak. And lastly, the message refers to a specific topic of the COVID-19 and Ukrainian choice of inactivity regarding the occupied territories (according to the Kremlin).

Although most of the strategic narratives implied by the Kremlin through the Telegram channels may be divided by short-term and long-term goals, some of the aid of the narrative in achieving both. For instance, in the following example, a few several narratives may be distinguished that meet broad lasting aims and are more situational:

The source adds that the task of the authorities is to force Ukrainians to vaccinate themselves in order to give up the inconvenience. For example, whoever makes the vaccine can go without a mask, travel abroad, visit cinemas, cafes, restaurants, visit kindergartens, schools, universities. It will come to the point that the unvaccinated will be banned from traveling in public transport. The reason is banal, the authorities cannot force people to get vaccinated, and all because the people do not trust their authorities. If something happens to a person due to a “vaccine mistake”, then the state and authorities will not help him, even any hryvnia will not be given for his treatment and salvation.²⁰ (Legitimny, 29.06.2021)

The first part of the message inputs the idea of mandatory vaccination, strengthening it with a description of how non-vaccinated citizens will be excluded from the city life and even its basic components – educational institutions and transport. The idea of mandatory vaccination in such a formulation meets a strategic aim to present the Ukrainian government as a dictatorial regime which, according to the second part, does not have the trust of society and leaves them with the problems alone. This meets the second strategic goal of showcasing that the government is inefficient and untrusted. Both of the aims are

¹⁹ Путин обещал поставить в ЛДНР еще большее количество вакцин от коронавируса. Такими шагами Россия укрепляет свою «связь» с жителями ЛДНР, а вот мы на этом фоне выглядим негативно, а главное, что никто в ОП и МИДе не пытается реально даже решить этот вопрос, а только создают иллюзию работы.

²⁰ Источник дополняет, что задача властей сделать так, чтобы вынудить украинцев делать себе прививку, чтобы отказаться от неудобств. К примеру, кто сделает вакцину, тот может ходить без маски, выезжать за границу, посещать кинотеатры, кафе, рестораны, посещать садики, школы, университеты. Дойдет до того, что непривитым запретят поездки в общественном транспорте. Причина банальная, власть не может заставить людей идти делать прививку, а все потому что, народ не доверяет своей власти. Если с человеком что-то случится из-за «вакциновой ошибки», то ему государство и власть не поможет, даже гривны не даст на его лечение и спасение.

long-term and pursue to form an opinion on the government as an actor – to increase distrust in the state management and polarise the society. The message is also pursuing a short-term, situational goal at the same time – to make people question vaccination, which, as a result, leads to lowering vaccination rates in perspective. Although there is no critics of the vaccines in this message, the phrases ‘прививка’ (the Russian word for the vaccine) and ‘«вакцинная ошибка»’ (“vaccine mistake”) serve as anchors to the contexts of negative attitude to vaccination. The narratives of vaccination critics are covered in other posts, and the anchors actualise them in the current one without repeating the stories.

A similar dual approach is used for the opinion-creation of the Ukrainian government image. On the one hand, this messages often target concrete figures (sometimes systematically and on purpose), and on the other hand, these people have a symbolic meaning through the prism of which a receiver perceives a system or the whole government. For example, “[e]veryone knows already that it will not be possible to vaccinate 10 million people until the end of summer, the Minister of Healthcare Viktor Lyashko lied when he promised this from the podium of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine”²¹ (Legitimny 15.07.2021). Viktor Liashko is targeted in each channel of the network as he holds both a representative meaning as one of the officials and symbolic power as a representative of the whole healthcare system.

6.4. Ukraine in the position of an object

After reading Telegram channels curated by the Kremlin, one gets a strong feeling of Ukraine as a weak state strictly dependent on its partners and extremely vulnerable in front of its enemies, at the same time, not capable of responding the serious challenges, whether it is the pandemic crisis or a need for reform. Additionally, the state is also betrayed and its citizens deceived.

Obviously, Ukraine is rarely depicted with lexemes that describe the state literally as powerless or failed (although such cases are also present, “First, we are just an

²¹ Уже все знают, что вакцинировать 10 миллионов не выйдет до конца лета, министр здравоохранения Виктор Ляшко лгал, когда обещал это с трибуны ВР.

instrument in this game, and the players here are Germany, Britain and the USA”²² (Kartel 13. 09. 2021)). A deeper analysis of how the meaning of failure and dependency can be discovered with Greimas’ approach to deep narrative grammar. For studying the role of Ukraine in the Kremlin strategic narratives transmitted in the Ukrainian infospace, syntax that consists of a set of operational rules or ways of manipulating the terms provided by the morphology” (Greimas 1976: 67) appears crucial since, in most of the cases, the channels hide the desirable meanings on the morphological level.

The Kremlin aims to convince Ukrainians that their state relates only as an object to the key players in geopolitics and use the state as “an instrument to pump its rating” or for other selfish purposes. This image is constructed mostly on the system narrative level where the role of Ukraine in the world’s picture is being defined, and the rules of the geopolitical system are explained. In the stories that explain how the world is structured, Ukraine is mostly mentioned as an object-actant subordinated by the subject-actants – the active players. Such an image of Ukraine is also significantly forced through the issue narratives where Ukraine or the Ukrainian government is either inactive or harmful. This shaping is based and altered further on the ground of beliefs and feelings that are actual for a cluster of the Ukrainian society. This ground was established in the Soviet times and is actualised in the current times by the Russian Federation with respect to the post-Soviet space. The ground has roots in the ‘family structure’ of the Soviet republics and Russian dominance over the other nations. Although the analysed Telegram channels do not engage in the brotherhood rhetoric (where Russia is a wise elder brother, and Ukraine – is a foolish little brother) and close ties with Russia, they extensively maintain and elaborate Ukrainian objectivity, which is an eminent component of this rhetoric. Still, even in the imaginary structure of the Soviet republics as ‘brothering nations’, the position of all nations was inferior to Russia (Khaldarova 2021; Ventsel 2010).

To fuel this belief, Ukraine is mostly depicted in a passive position of an object when a world’s political event or decision is described in the channels. On the contrary, the big players such as the EU, the USA, Russia and China are depicted as those who are “the key players in this game”, “use” and “get the official Kyiv hooked on the financial needle”. Thus, Ukraine in the role of an object-actant is in a subordinate position towards its partners and big players, such as Russia and China that are subject-actants in the narrative

²² Во-первых, мы всего лишь инструмент в этой игре, а игроки тут Германия, Британия и США

structure. The subordinate role of Ukraine is also enforced with phrases such as ‘the Western lobby’ defining the West and ‘instrument’ defining Ukraine. Below is one of the vivid examples of the objective rhetoric toward Ukraine:

Zelensky's speech at the UN passed without much interest. The reason for this is the loss of interest in the Ukrainian case. [...] Therefore, Zelensky had to criticize the UN, but as you know, Western functionaries do not like being criticized by “weak countries”. Therefore, we will continue to be overlooked, and the Office of the President of Ukraine will have to spend more and more effort to draw attention to himself. The reason is banal, they are tired of us and have already taken almost everything they could from us, now they are trying to bypass us, and they remember us only when it is beneficial for them for their geopolitical games.²³ (Legitimny 23.09.2021)

The last sentence illustrates the role of Ukraine among the world’s key players, according to the Kremlin propaganda. The state is dependent on the needs and plans of the West or completely ignored. In this post, however, Ukraine is literally mentioned as a weak state, which is rare in the Telegram channels, but the quotation marks imply that it is the opinion of the West. With no additional commentary on this statement, this role lies naturally in the international system. Together with the dependent position on the stronger partners and lack of their interest, this additionally contributes to the feeling of betrayal and insult towards the West.

In the first part of the post, there is a hint about the action of Zelensky as a representative of the state management and the country in general. However, this is still described as a failure and even humiliating attempt, which equates to zero results.

The only scenarios when Kyiv is depicted as an active player itself are when the government fails, according to the Telegram channels, and when the future is speculated with negative outcomes. The post below is a good example of Ukraine as an object-actant and a subject-actant that both lead to the perception of inferiority and weakness of the country.

Our source comments from inside the Office of the President on the entire strategy associated with Ukraine's sharp turn to the East. The first opinion that everyone noticed is an attempt to blackmail Western partners who do not give money, but only promise. [...] According to the source, China also wants to use the Ukrainian case for trading with Russia, as the United States does, and therefore, it is necessary to strengthen its positions and "get hooked" the official Kyiv on a financial needle and

²³ Выступление Зеленского в ООН прошло без особого интереса. Причина этому, потеря интереса к украинскому кейсу. (...) Поэтому Зеленскому пришлось критиковать ООН, но как известно, западные функционеры не любят, когда их критикуют «слабые страны». Поэтому нас продолжают не замечать, а ОП придётся все больше тратить усилий, чтобы привлекать внимания к себе. Причина банальна, от нас устали и с нас уже взяли почти все что могли, теперь пытаются обходить нас стороной, а вспоминают про нас, только тогда, когда им выгодно это для своих геополитических игр.

feed the political elite. This is already the second serious entry of the Celestial Empire, the first was when we were dragged from China at the time of the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic masks out of turn, there was talk about a loan from China, and we provided insights about this in March 2020, etc. Now China is re-entering, but the source indicates that the MotorSich case was not closed but put on pause by the Chinese (the axe hung over the neck of the Ukrainian economy), if ours are thrown again, then this case will be reopened, and they will be “chopped”. The source adds that such a game of our Office of the President is very risky and can lead to uncertain alignments within the country. The Western lobby does not like to be dictated to and create problems, but if Zelensky manages to hold his own in a moment of turbulence when he raises rates, then the rewards will be high.²⁴ (Легитимный 16.07.2021)

The main idea of the Ukrainian status is again framed by the exploited position towards the big players, subordinate standing in the vertical hierarchy, and fragility of financing. At the same time, Ukraine is not inert here – it changes the political vector and is a participant in the geopolitical games. However, the depiction of the political decisions as a game attributes a meaning of a not serious attitude of a low morality that may lead to fatal outcomes, which is indeed predicted at the end of the message. Moreover, the lexeme ‘game’ and the reference to its gambling character (‘betting’) hold a connotation of a dose of luck instead of complex calculation and planning.

The status of Ukraine as an object is also maintained morphologically. The Telegram channels mention Ukraine as ‘the Ukrainian case’ when talking on the geopolitical scale and its cities as ‘the Kyiv/Kharkiv/Odesa case’ when depicting a local situation. This phrase may be substituted with a proper name of the state or city as the usage of ‘case’ is not common outside the constructed meta-world of these Telegram channels. This term seems to be a novelty of the authors and may not be grasped or look weird to outsiders. For the channels, however, such naming serves, first, as a component of transmediality (see subchapter 6.2. Transmedial storytelling: Constructing a storyworld in the Telegram channels), and, secondly, it influences the perception of Ukraine.

²⁴ Наш источник комментирует изнутри Офиса Президента всю стратегию, связанную с резким разворотом Украины на Восток. Первое мнение, которое заметили все – это попытка шантажа западных партнеров, которые не дают денег, а только обещают. (...) По данным источника, Китай также хочет использовать украинский кейс для торгов с Россией, как это делает США, а следовательно, надо укреплять свои позиции и «садить» официальный Киев на финансовую иглу и подкормить политическую элиту. Это уже второй серьёзный заход Поднебесной, первый был, когда нам с Китая в момент начала эпидемии коронавируса тащили вне очереди маски, шли разговоры о кредите с Китая, мы инсайдили об этом в марте 2020 года и т.д.. Теперь повторный заход Китая, но источник указывает, что кейс МоторСич не закрыт, а поставлен китайцами на паузу (топор висит над шеей украинской экономики), если наши снова кинут, то этот кейс расконсервируют и будут «рубить». Источник дополняет, что такая игра нашего Офиса Президента очень рискованная и может привести к неопределённым раскладам внутри страны. Западное лобби не любит, когда им диктуют условия и создают проблемы, но если Зеленскому удастся удержаться в момент турбулентности, когда он повышает ставки, то вознаграждение будет высокими.

Morphologically, the usage of the lexeme ‘case’ presupposes the meaning of a problem/issue with a side responsible for solving it or managed; it makes Ukraine lose the meaning of activity. On the level of syntax, such substitution makes a ‘case’ be an object in the text. On both levels, this deprives the activity of an apparatus and leads to the perception of Ukraine or the city just as a managed (by someone) project. Without an active role of a subject, the role of a ‘responsible’ (of Ukraine as a case) entity is created, which is highly important for the Russian desired perception of Ukraine. Thus, even if the state’s dependency is not mentioned in a message literally by an appropriate lexical description or a contextual situation, the meaning of Ukraine as an object is still generated in the mind of a reader. A vivid example of the ‘case’ usage is presented below – this is the part of the post regarding Zelensky’s speech at the UN conference where was “the loss of interest in the Ukrainian case” as mentioned above,

The world is now interested in the Afghan case, the Pacific crisis associated with Taiwan, as well as the coronavirus. For Biden, in general, the LGBT case is more important than Nord Stream 2 and the Ukrainian case, since they are considered toxic to him.²⁵ (Legitimny 23.09.2021)

Ukraine as a ‘case’ among Nord Stream 2, the coronavirus pandemic, LGBT is equalled to mere subjects that have to be managed which are, moreover, problematic and somewhat ‘uncomfortable’. Thus, for instance, on the geopolitical map of actors, Ukraine is excluded from the range of actors.

Positioning Ukraine as an object-actant, Russia constructs a perception of the country as dependent on other active players on the system narrative layer. When it comes to the active role and policymaking of Ukraine, political decisions and their outcomes are presented as negative. This image shaping is briefly mentioned in the current subchapter. A more precise look at the mechanism of creating the negative perception of the Ukrainian government is provided in the following part.

²⁵ В мире сейчас интересны афганский кейс, Тихоокеанский кризис связанный с Тайванем, а также коронавирус. Для Байдена вообще важен кейс ЛГБТ больше, чем СП-2 и украинский кейс, так как они считаются для него токсичными.

6.5. Antithetical opposition “betrayal vs victory” for constructing the image of the Ukrainian government as anticulture

The strategic narrative layers are interconnected and influence each other. The image of Ukraine as a non-important/equal participant in the geopolitical space or even not an actor at all is largely supported by the image of a failed actor on the domestic scale. Although the latter one has to do more with the perception of a nation and country with its past experience and future perspectives, it is mostly constructed through the issue narratives in the Telegram channels.

Since the Telegram channels target Ukrainian citizens as those who observe and analyse the situation within the country, this layer of narratives seems to be the main focus for the narrators (with the potential of penetrating and affecting national and system layers as well). Important to mention that Ukraine and the Ukrainian situation are the focus of the Telegram communication, so Russia as an actor is not often present or discussed. Thus, for internal aims, the Kremlin uses the coronavirus context to construct a negative attitude towards the policy decisions in Ukraine, first and foremost, and sow doubts about vaccination in general. Both lead to the polarisation of society through “inconsistency and contradictions”, which is “a well-documented Russian technique” (Keegan 2022), which is the main focus. Additionally, they lead to a more positive attitude towards Russia when it is mentioned (even in a negative account) – contrary to all the problems and catastrophic outcomes forecasted for Ukraine, according to the Telegram channels, the Russian situation does not seem so tough.

Concerning the culture-anticulture opposition (Lotman, Uspensky 1978), issue narratives shape the opinion of what behaviour/policies we may accept and which we may not, and what is right and wrong. As already mentioned, the antagonism in the concept of “betrayal vs victory” is directed toward the internal political situation (Yavorska 2016). In other words, towards detecting and countering the friends and enemy inside. Thus, issue narratives that are constructed with a logic of the antithesis based on the concept “betrayal/victory” direct an interpretant to searching for friends and (foremost) enemies within the society. With this logic, Telegram channels try to connect any fact or gossip on vaccination to the description of the government as dangerous and not acceptable by society.

Telegram channels spread the following narratives to construct the image of the government as criminal and authoritative:

- the government bought a huge supply of vaccines that is about to expire, which is the real reason for a forceful approach to vaccination;
- the procedure of a fake COVID-19 vaccination certificate is highly popular in Ukraine and supported by the security services;
- the officials avoid vaccination, and some even forge vaccination certificates;
- (although the measures are strict in the country) lockdown is not issued to omit the public dissatisfaction with the government, which is close to another “Maidan” (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020b);
- the authorities steal the state budget allocated for combating coronavirus or use it inappropriately;
- the government uses the situation for its political aims – threatening freedom of speech in Ukraine
- the government bought medicine equipment at exorbitant prices from the partners;
- the government has not paid the payouts to medical workers as promised.

When evaluating the policies applied as quarantine measures, the Telegram channels explain them as extremely strict – violating constitutional rights and excluding citizens from normal life. The vaccination is described as compulsory by force or even as a “house arrest” for the whole country. All this contradicts the democratic values distinguishing for the ‘victory’ nucleus and leads to the perception of the government as authoritarian, immoral, and thus, considering the historical experience, dangerous.

Apart from the image of the enemy as a criminal, the fact of something hidden by the government depicts the enemy as a liar, which is also a constrain of a ‘betrayal’ nucleus and the opposite of transparency as in democratic countries. The representatives of the government or its institutions are literally labelled as liars.

The antithesis to the authoritarian regime is “protesters for rights” that stand for anti-vaccination. The people-authority opposition is also highlighted in the references to EU practices, as in the following extract,

Italians in Rome are fighting the Covid restrictions beautifully. [...] Currently, there have been protests in Rome for two months. This time, several thousand people gathered at the Grand Circus – it was the place that local officials allowed the protest to be held.²⁶ (Spletnitsa 21.11.2021)

In this post, Russian propaganda points out the protest moods of anti-vaccinators in Europe and, at the same time, the attitude of the officials who do not respect the people's free choice and literally laugh at it. On the one hand, this example showcases that people in the EU (which is a role model for democratic values) are against vaccination and publicly demonstrate it. On the other hand, the part with the circus present that democracy 'does not work' and increases the people-authority tension. In such a way, the narrator highlights more vividly the image of the authorities that do not correspond to the values of freedom and independence.

In the Ukrainian context, the face of the 'regime' is attributed to more signs of Yanukovich's regime. This is vividly seen in the post about the arrest of the extremist who is also a leader of the anti-vaccination "March for the Rights",

The top of insanity and dictatorship is demonstrated by the state apparatus headed by Zelensky. Now any protest action against the violation of human rights will be classified as an encroachment on territorial integrity.²⁷ (Spletnitsa 16.11.2021)

The government is depicted as a symbolic enemy of freedom, while it is also attributed with the concrete face representing this danger – President Volodymyr Zelensky. This regime is, as Schmitt defined an enemy in a political distinction, "[...] in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien [...]" (Schmitt 1996: 27). Apart from allusions on the 'despotic regime', there are also direct references to the image of Yanukovich, as in the following excerpt, "[i]nterestingly, what the Office of the President is willing to do to discredit the protest of people who went out to fight for their rights. Stop, Zelensky!" (Сплетница 21.1.2021), where the exclamation refers to the famous Yanukovich` quote "Остановитесь!" (Stop/Pull over!). The phrase has already become a meme and is mostly used as irony, which highlights the absurdity of the governmental actions in the context of the message.

²⁶ Итальянцы в Риме красиво борются с ковидными ограничениями. (...) Теперь в Риме уже два месяца идут протесты. На этот раз несколько тысяч человек собрались у Большого цирка - именно тут местные чиновники разрешили проводить митинг.

²⁷ Верх маразма и диктатуры демонстрирует государственный аппарат, который возглавляет Зеленский. Теперь любая акция протеста против нарушения прав человека будет классифицироваться как посягательство на территориальную целостность.

The image of the government as harmful and dangerous is supported by the narratives for catastrophising the situation with COVID-19 (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020b) and presents the ineffectiveness of the policies:

- the authorities forge the COVID-19 cases rates and the real number of deaths is much higher;
- the pandemic has disastrous outcomes for the Ukrainian economy;
- the country is not ready for a new wave of COVID-19 – no free places at hospitals, no equipment, etc.

The feeling of fear cultivated by these narratives increases the scale of danger within national security. Moreover, the Telegram channels omit the narratives that would support the victory nucleus of the opposition. In this case, the victory pole is shaped by opposing the dangerous enemy of the betrayal nucleus.

With the issue narratives mentioned above, the Kremlin actualises the historical experience of the Revolution of Dignity and the opposition between people and authorities. It constructs the enemy as an anticulture dangerous for the country with its set of values and beliefs. Russia directs the negative feelings inside Ukraine – to the internal enemy. Shaping an internal enemy as a corrupted, oppressive authority in Ukrainian political discourse first breaks the public trust regarding the current political decision. Furthermore, it also affects the national layer and influences the vision of the state's goals. Thus, it is a conducive background for manipulation later on, as the public is already suspicious of the government and the chosen political national direction.

6.6. Misinformation on vaccination as a strategy for confusing and polarising society

Apart from spreading the narratives that question the actions and policymaking of authorities, Russia disseminates dubious and fake information on coronavirus vaccination itself. This also leads to confusion and polarisation within the society as well as to decreasing the vaccination rates (Patel 2020, Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020b). Below are the main narratives aimed at sowing doubts on the topic:

- vaccinated people get infected (sometimes even easier than the non-vaccinated) and may die from COVID-19;

- questioning the health measures by comparison with other countries – EU countries have light measures or no quarantine at all, while the vaccinated countries are more vulnerable to the new COVID-19 waves (Israel experiences a surge of the COVID-19 cases, even though 100% of their population was vaccinated with Pfizer);
- denial of the necessity of wearing masks and other preventive measures.

While the issue narratives addressing loyalty to the government used the antithetical logic for opposing people and the authority, the narratives on vaccination itself are based on the binary opposition that confronts the different poles within the society. The openly aggressive rhetoric, however, is not so much directed at people who support vaccination but again at the government calling Zelensky an “idiot” who “drives people for a shot by any means”.

Still, the rhetoric on vaccination divides people into two camps – the vaccination deniers are depicted as active citizens who rebel against authorities and fight for their rights. The channels insert democratic values into constructing the protagonistic image of ‘fighters for rights’. For this, the Kremlin propaganda refers to the EU practises as a role model. For instance,

Switzerland remains true to its tradition of direct democracy and is holding a referendum tomorrow to abolish the Covid certificates. Despite the low percentage of the vaccinated population, restrictions on citizens without such certificates sparked protests, prompting the authorities to hold a plebiscite. It is terrible to imagine what would happen to Ukraine under such rules of permanent expression of the will of citizens.²⁸ (Spletnitsa, 28.11.2021)

The channel presents democracy and freedom of choice in a positive way, which corresponds to the values of both their image of anti-vaccinators and Ukraine as a nation. At the same time, they conclude with the idea that real democracy is not possible in Ukraine and point out the public disappointment with policy-making in Ukraine in the form of an undeniable self-evident fact.

On the contrary, vaccination supporters are described through the image of vaccination as antagonistic to the above-mentioned values and characteristics. In the channels, a vaccine is mostly substituted with ‘shot’, ‘injection’, and vaccination is defined

²⁸ Швейцария остается верна своим традициям прямой демократии и завтра проводит референдум по отмене ковид-сертификатов. Несмотря на низкий процент вакцинированного населения, ограничения для граждан без таких сертификатов вызвали протесты, что побудило власти к плебисциту. Страшно представить, что стало бы с Украиной при таких правилах постоянного волеизъявления граждан.

as ‘forced’, ‘eternal’ and ‘pointless’. To put it even further, phrases such as ‘to shoot up’, ‘to over vaccinate and ‘the era of insane vaccination’ are used. The topic of vaccination that the channels mentioned in the form of a hashtag for most of their posts were even called “#vaccinodemic” in one of the channels attributing the meaning of craziness and irrationality to the vaccination theme.

Apart from the aggressive rhetoric, the fake news and deliberately distorted versions of scientific research on the topic were spread through the channels. The messages and information, however, are not always coherent and sometimes even contradict each other; however, the main aim is not to convince but to sow doubts and make people question and be confused. As one of the channels sums up a doubtful analysis, “[s]o read by yourself and make your decision wisely. You know more – you analyse better – you choose more consciously”²⁹ (Spletnitsa 29.11.2021).

Promotion of alternative information consumption for a ‘deeper analysis’ of the issue and critical thinking is manipulative and corresponds to the image of Russian governmental channels RT and Sputnik with their respective slogans *Question more* and *Telling the Untold* (Madisson, Ventsel 2022). Thus, the strategy of narratives aimed at questioning vaccination itself does not only address the credibility of the government and the relevance of measures taken but also questions the accuracy of official messages (Patel 2020). Dubious information and manipulated analysis lead to decreasing vaccination rates and neglecting hygiene rules (Brennen *et al.* 2020), and also polarise the society, making people suspicious of national security and the government.

6.7. Balancing the aggressive position

Since Ukrainians are most critical of Russian sources or pro-Russian positions, the Kremlin continues using its practice of ‘maskirovka’ on the informational front. For this reason, Russia tries to convince its readers that the ideas they transmit are an ‘alternative’ view from ‘alternative’ Ukrainian sources. They also neutralise the rhetoric accordingly, making it look more balanced and less aggressive. In this subchapter, I analyse the

²⁹ Так что читайте вы и принимайте решение обдуманно. Больше знаешь - лучше анализируешь - осознаннее выбираешь

instruments that Russia uses to make this ‘maskirovka’ work and convince them that ‘it is not them’.

6.7.1. Creating the effect of realism

The image of Ukraine is central in the strategic narratives spread through the Telegram agent network. Therefore, the authors are mostly focused on stories about Ukraine as the main character. This also explains little presence of Russia in these narratives, especially in a positive light. Usually, Russia is present to outline the position of Ukraine (e.g. as already described in parts 6.4. Ukraine in the position of an object).

However, a reader may still find references to Russia. These could be criticism of Russia as a state or some realm related to this country. Below here is an example of how the Kremlin is criticised in one of the channels,

If something happens to a person due to a “vaccination mistake”, then the state and authorities will not help him, even any hryvnia will not be given for his treatment and salvation. It is true how the Resident noted that our functionaries, who are as dumb as Russian officials, decided not to invent anything new, but simply “break people over the knee,” but this will only lead to even greater resistance and distrust.³⁰ (Legitimny 29.06.2021)

At first glance, the phrase “as dumb as Russian officials” does not align with the strategic narrative about the Ukrainian government as harmful and dangerous and mentions the Kremlin officials with aggressive rhetoric. Both the Ukrainian and Russian officials seem to be called dumb without masking or softening their rhetoric by the Telegram channel. However, my assumption is that the above-mentioned phrase that is addressed to the Kremlin does not bear a meaning of criticism of Russia and has any function other than the following two – as a denotation of a real and to neutralise aggressive rhetoric toward Ukraine.

The first function is fulfilled by articulating the belief that is common for the Ukrainian infospace – the Russian political sphere is problematic. Even by mentioning the

³⁰ Если с человеком что-то случится из-за «вакциной ошибки», то ему государство и власть не поможет, даже гривны не даст на его лечение и спасение. Верно Резидент подметил, что наши функционеры, такие же тупые, как и русские чиновники и ничего нового решили не выдумывать, а просто «ломать людей через колени», но это приведет только к еще большему сопротивлению и недоверию.

negative aspect of the Kremlin in language, the image of Russia is not affected in any sense: there is no criticism of any concrete actions or decisions of the government, no direct references to any political actors, just a general belief is repeated. Even though the Russian political system is perceived as unjust and problematic and the authorities as corrupted, it does not necessarily lead to perception in opposition as effective-ineffective, weak-strong. When the first statement is self-evident for Ukrainians, the characteristics such as effective-ineffective have to be established. The stories mentioned above neither establish any of these characteristics to the Russian politics or government nor contribute to its meaning but only repeat the fact of its problems as self-evident. The phrase “as dumb as Russian officials” can even be omitted with no loss of meaning of the message. Similarly, the image of Russia is not affected by both the presence and the absence of the phrase. This way, statements such as the dumbness of Russia “finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*” (Barthes 1989: 148) as in non-fictional examples provided by Barthes. This is “the very signifier of realism” (*Ibid*, 148).

It is important that Russia is not the main character in this entry. The real meaning of ‘dumb’ is still attributed exclusively to Ukraine. The phrase of Russia’s critics functions as a comparison that neutralises the position of Ukraine’s image by articulating that the state is not the only one with such problems. In other words, the critics in the post do not criticise Russia but balance the real meaning of dumbness attributed to Ukrainian officials and make the message look less aggressive and more legitimate. Additionally, the phrase also aids in distancing oneself from the criticism of Ukraine and thus, looks more as an alternative opinion rather than bias.

Apart from references directly to the Kremlin, there are also references to a negative experience in the context of Russia. For example, one of the strong colloquialisms mentioned earlier – советская принудиловка (Soviet methods of coercion referencing to the negative experience of the Soviet times). Even though the Soviet Union is not criticised by the Telegram channels (however, there are neutral mentions of it), certain beliefs regarding this can not be denied. *Принудиловка* refers to one of such experiences from the Soviet times that bears a negative perception in Ukrainian memory. However, as with the previous example, this phrase is also used to denote ‘the real’ for Ukrainians by articulating the self-evident truth in the Ukrainian infospace because it does not contribute new information and does not signify the hostile experience of the Soviet Union. This is

more vividly presented in the context of the message where the phrase was used, “Due to the mistake of media technologists in power, we have got Soviet coercion and administrative resources, and not a natural motivation to stop the epidemic”³¹ (Resident 03.11.2021). Thus, in this post, the phrase “the Soviet coercion” belongs to the signification of the Ukrainian government. In such a way, the phrase functions in both ways – to describe the Ukrainian authorities and to neutralise hostile rhetoric by acknowledging the previous historical experience in the context of Russia as adverse.

Certain elements of narratives as described above are used for creating an impression of reality as it is for a Ukrainian citizen where Russia possesses negative traits as a self-evident truth. By repeating what is already known and accepted, the elements do not signify the meaning of these traits but neutralise the aggressive rhetoric of the narrative. A balanced position makes it more difficult to mark the channels as pro-Russian as an interpretant sees the signs of the opposite, even though these elements are present there to create this feeling of a real and true.

6.7.2. Distancing from the image of Russia

After the Telegram channels were first exposed by the Security Services of Ukraine (SBU exposes Russian...2021) and then accused of spreading the Kremlin’s anti-vaccination campaigns (Антивакцинна пропаганда – інформаційна...2021), distancing from the image of Russia became a critical need for preserving its reputation and trustworthiness. The agent network uses the rhetoric of victimhood – an approach actively exploited by Russia (Ventsel *et al.* 2019: 11-12).

Below are a few examples of messages transmitted by the channels, especially actively after the report of NSDC,

Vaccination will be eternal, and those against it are the hand of the Kremlin!³² (Сплетница 23.11.2021)

³¹ Из-за ошибки медиатекологов власти мы получили советскую принудилровку и админресурс, а не естественную мотивацию к остановке эпидемии.

³² Вакцинация будет вечной, а кто против - рука Кремля!

The best message is that the Kremlin is to blame for everything.³³ (Картель 29.10.2021)

We advise all the colleagues on Telegram to simply realise that for the authorities, all the independent media platforms are “ENEMIES”, you either sing praises to them that they are the best, or you are agents of the Kremlin or oligarchic media. Just keep on producing the high-quality content, ignoring the criticism of the authorities.³⁴ (Картель, 25.10.2021)

Similarly, the channels regularly mentioned that the Ukrainian government avoids responsibility for failures in the vaccination campaign by accusing the network of spreading harmful narratives. With the victimhood rhetoric, the channels actualise the antithetical opposition of the malicious, oppressive authorities and trustful media. The latter is described as actors with an active position fighting for the rights and the truth (in the same manner as anti-vaccinators) – the image highly evaluated by the Ukrainian society. The Telegram channels present themselves through a mirror projection. According to this projection, one`s problems are attributed to the opponent (*Ibid*, 2019: 9). Through the network, the narrators say that they are not guilty of the vaccination process in Ukraine, but the opponent – the government – is; they are not harmful and dangerous, but the opponent is; they are democratic and transmit the truth when the opponent tries to restrict it. The channels construct an image of the Ukrainian authorities identical to what they are accused of and how Russia is depicted in the official Ukrainian infospace. Thus, according to the channels, in Ukraine, the vaccination campaigns are failed, and society demonstrates a low trust level in the vaccines. They also state that only the intentions of the Ukrainian government resulted in it, not the participation of Russia itself or through the agent network.

To contrast the antithetical opposition, the channels present themselves as victims of the rigid Ukrainian regime that tries to restrain them as sources of the opponent information. Highlighting the government`s accusations that the channels are Kremlin agents, the network, on the one hand, tries to whiten its image of a moral actor and, on the other hand, hides the link with Russia. Thus, multiple functions of the rhetoric of victimhood and the antithetical opposition can be defined:

- distancing from the image of Russia;

³³ Лучше всего подходит месседж, что во всем виноват Кремль.

³⁴ Всем коллегам в телеграме советуем просто понять, что для власти все независимые медиа площадки – «ВРАГИ», вы либо поёте им дифирамбы, что они самые лучшие, либо вы агенты Кремля или олигархические СМИ. Просто и дальше делайте качественный контент, не обращая внимания на критику власти

- presenting oneself as an independent media, an active protester for the rights and freedom of speech that does not have any negative impact on the vaccination process in Ukraine;
- depicting the Ukrainian government not only as a malicious actor but also as an oppressive one that restricts its moral opponent.

Distancing themselves from the image of Russia, the channels make their image look more balanced. Thus, they present themselves as a source of alternative knowledge, not dangerous as pro-Russian voices are depicted in the official rhetoric.

DISCUSSION

The research of strategic communication in the Telegram agent network provides multiple important findings in the context of Russian informational warfare in Ukraine.

An important contribution is an explanation of how the Kremlin builds a storyworld for an audience critical of its voice and transmits the desired messages making them look trustworthy. The paper elaborated on the outlined Telegram features covered by Gurzhiy (2021) and [Тексти.org.ua](https://texty.org.ua) (Here's how Telegram...2020) and with an approach of transmedial storytelling shows that the channels worked as independent media platforms, creating an illusion of multivocality. The multiplicity of voices aids in making a message look trustworthy rather than a particular position (Nissen 2015). The paper analysed this multivocality further. In the context of the studied Telegram network, notable is not just the multiplicity of “independent voices” but their division by specialisation. Each channel of the network has the topic it is specialised in (social, political, etc.) and thus, the choice of themes covered, actors mentioned, and style of news coverage depends on this specialisation. Such division has two functions: to cover the same narrative from different angles and to reach the broader audience presuming that a subscriber chooses the channel’s specialisation according to its interest.

With a reality effect concept, I describe how criticism of Russia serves as another means for constructing an illusion of a trustworthy, balanced position. Precisely, critical mentions of the Kremlin and the Soviet Union do not imply the significance of objection but function as a component that 1) reproduces the reality as it is for a Ukrainian interpreter (where Russia is perceived negatively); 2) distances from the image of the Kremlin. To strengthen the latter position, the channels used victimhood rhetoric to tell their readers that they are accused of being Russian agents because of their alternative position. The Russian-Ukrainian full-scale war, on the one hand, makes it even more

crucial for Russia to pretend to be a Ukrainian voice and distance from the image of the Kremlin to influence the Ukrainian infospace, and on the other hand, drives a need for Ukrainians to develop a framework of detecting Russia's misinformation. Therefore, a further study of a toolkit for hiding the Russian voice is crucial.

The concept of "betrayal vs victory" appears in many studies of the Ukrainian socio-political context; however, it seems that it can still be elaborated on and discussed. Some researchers focus more on the ironic connotation of this opposition (Yavorska 2016), meaning that it is no longer used for the purpose it was constructed – to control the authorities. I assume that the functionality of the opposition is still present and may be exploited by the opponent against Ukraine. The analysis of the Telegram channels shows that even if the opposition is not mentioned in content (indeed, currently, the direct mentioning is used ironically), the Kremlin builds a friend-enemy opposition on the evaluation criteria of a betrayer and a victory. Thus, the Ukrainian government is depicted as corrupted, oppressing, immoral and of high danger to democracy in the state (meaning attributed to a betrayer in a Ukrainian political context). Victory is described as preserving human rights and freedom of speech. Both are attributed to anti-vaccinators and the channels themselves and are not possible due to the despotic regime in Ukraine, as depicted through Telegram.

Moreover, some scholars (Sinitsa 2017) find the concept harmful for internal use in Ukrainian society due to the narrator's position as an observer from the outside. This state is thus passive but with an illusion of active participation. I find it crucial to investigate whether the Kremlin exploits this specificity of the narrative (perception of an active position when staying passive in the socio-political space). I assume that the logic of this concept is extensively fruitful for exploiting by Russia during the active phase of the war in Ukraine in 2022 to depict the government as a betrayal. Thus, strategies for combating and preventing the effects of Kremlin misinformation are in high demand.

CONCLUSION

In the thesis, I used a case of Russia's coronavirus misinformation spread through the Telegram agent network in Ukraine to explore how strategic narratives are constructed by Russia and how they are transmitted to the audience critical of the Russian voice.

With a cultural semiotic approach and the antithetical model, I describe that Russia presents the Ukrainian government as corrupt, immoral and authoritative. To outline a situation on the domestic level, the channels also spread a strategic narrative that the government is too strict in measure, however, not efficient, which is also used to strengthen the anti-vaccination movement and frustrated mood in the society. The latter is presented with protest rhetoric to show it as a fight for human rights and democracy in Ukraine. The antithesis of both images (the government and anti-vaccination supporters) can be well grasped in the logic of the "betrayal vs victory" concept.

On the scale of international politics, Ukraine is depicted as a non-independent state exploited by the big political players. To explain this, I use Greimas' narrative semiotics which aids in showing that Ukraine is presented as a subordinated actor (object) by geopolitical players (subjects). Although the Telegram channels usually do not articulate it and present themselves as supporters of Ukraine, the narratives are constructed in a way to highlight the supremacy of the West and Russia over Ukraine.

Important to note that this research is focused on the levels of construction and transmission of strategic narratives and does not study the real effect on the audience. The major limitation of this paper is conditioned by the security measures of the Telegram application that prohibits extracting information on its users. Thus, some statements (e.g. the part of the audience is subscribed to multiple channels from the network) are hypothetical and can be justified through social surveys only. Examination of people's

reactions would be a critical contribution to understanding the effect of their constructed storyworld and thus, to ways of combating Russia's strategies.

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RESÜMEE

Venemaa strateegilised narratiivid Telegram platvormil: koroonaviiruse propaganda Ukrainas

Käesoleva töö eesmärgiks on uurida, kuidas Venemaa konstrueerib ja edastab oma strateegilisi narratiive, et mõjutada ühiskonda, kus usaldus “vene hääle” vastu on madal. Antud analüüs põhineb ühel teemal, mida Venemaa kasutab Kremli teabekampaaniate näitena oma soovitud tähenduste konstrueerimiseks võõras ühiskonnas. Töö kriitilises osas käsitletakse, kuidas Telegrami rakendus on tõhus vahend poliitiliseks kommunikatsiooniks. Uuring annab vastused järgmistele küsimustele:

1. Milliseid strateegilisi narratiive Ukraina valitsuse kohta, mis baseeruvad koroonaviiruse temaatikal, levitatakse Telegrami Kremli agentide võrgustikus?
2. Kuidas need strateegilised narratiivid üles ehitatakse?
3. Milliseid vahendeid kasutab Kreml, et varjata oma strateegilisi eesmärke Venemaa hääle suhtes ülikriitilise publiku eest?

Küsimustele vastamiseks kasutatakse erinevate teooriate kombinatsiooni: strateegilise narratiivi teooria, kultuurisemiootika, narratiivi semiootika ja transmediaalne jutustus. Strateegilise narratiivi teooria aitab määratleda Kremli strateegilise kommunikatsiooni põhinnarratiive, mille eesmärk on Ukrainat nõrgestada. Kultuurisemiootika vahenditega (valdavalt Tartu-Moskva koolkonna lähenemine) uuritakse, kuidas Kreml kujundab kuvandi Ukraina valitsuses kui ohtlikust vaenlasest ja Ukrainast kui nõrgast riigist üldiselt. Samuti püüab antud töö selgitada, milliseid strateegiaid ja meetodeid Venemaa kasutab, et

muuta oma sõnumid vaenuliku publiku silmis usaldusväärsemaks ja neutraliseerida oma agressiivset retoorikat.

Empiirilise panusena analüüsitakse süstemaatiliselt Venemaa poolt Telegramis edastatavat strateegilist kommunikatsiooni, analüüsides tähenduste loomist ja vahendeid, millega vaenuliku publikuni jõutakse. Töö praktiline väärtus seisneb selles, et seda saab kasutada edasisteks akadeemilisteks töödeks seoses Venemaa infosõjaga, seda eriti Ukraina kontekstis.

APPENDIX

The appendix that includes the original posts of five analysed Telegram channels can be found here: <https://owncloud.ut.ee/owncloud/s/WJ6D2MmjD2t4qa5>

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