

FROM PACIFICATION TO THE MANIPULATION OF HOPE: RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA'S STRATEGIC TURN AFTER THE TRUMP-PUTIN CALL

Olga VLASOVA

King's College London, United Kingdom

olga.vlasova@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract: Russian propaganda remains one of the most compelling subjects for analysis in the context of the war in Ukraine. For a significant period following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin primarily relied on a “politics of pacification” directed at the previously depoliticized Russian population. However, following intensified drone attacks on Moscow and the authorization for the use of long-range weapons deep within Russian territory, rising societal anxiety could no longer be contained through pacification alone - new rhetorical strategies were needed. The victory of Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election, his phone call with Vladimir Putin, and the initiation of negotiations in Riyadh triggered a major shift in Russian propaganda. We now observe the amplification of exaggerated hope within Kremlin narratives, despite an absence of meaningful changes in military discourse. This article analyses these recent propaganda shifts to uncover the Kremlin's underlying intentions in the emerging peace negotiations. The core argument of this article is that this shift marks a strategic turn from the politics of pacification to the manipulation of hope, revealing the Kremlin's attempt to maintain emotional control over the public - an effort not necessarily aligned with any genuine intention to end the war.

Keywords: propaganda, politics of pacification, authoritarianism, emotional governance, Russia's war in Ukraine

1. Introduction

Three years into the war, Russian propaganda remains adaptive, shifting narratives as needed. Following Trump's call to Putin on February 12, 2025, a marked change in rhetoric emerged. That shift has been so obvious and sharp that we can't help but ask:

- What were the reasons for the change?
- What are the aims behind it?
- What can the analysis of this shift reveal about the Kremlin's real intentions in the peace negotiations?

Even during periods of economic hardship or ongoing war, some authoritarian leaders continue to enjoy strong public support.

Emotional appeals are central to sustaining this loyalty [1]. In Russia's case, understanding how the Kremlin cultivates emotional resilience among citizens is essential to explaining the persistence of approval amid a prolonged and costly war.

2. War Fatigue and Societal Anxiety

One can easily observe a correlation between ongoing events in Russia and the level of social anxiety during the war, as well as how respondents in Russia evaluate the situation. The lowest levels of public satisfaction with the state of the country during the war were recorded during the announcement of partial mobilization

(September–November 2022) and after the U.S. granted permission to use long-range weapons for strikes deep into Russian territory (Figure 1).

The latest indicators show that the level of anxiety and dissatisfaction following this permission remains low in Russian society and does not rise as it usually does after a decline. This suggests that previous methods of using the politics of fear [3] and pacification [4] toward the Russian population are no longer effective, and the Kremlin needed to change its strategy of conveying the situation to society.

Additionally, the overall war fatigue has become more and more apparent in recent times. More and more people have come to realize that the war will be prolonged and that sanctions are unlikely to be lifted [5]. This has deprived people of any vision for the future and diminished their hope of overcoming isolation [6]. The Kremlin had to introduce something new to continue manipulating societal emotions and beliefs - providing positive emotions to the people, despite there being no real plan or intention behind this manipulation.

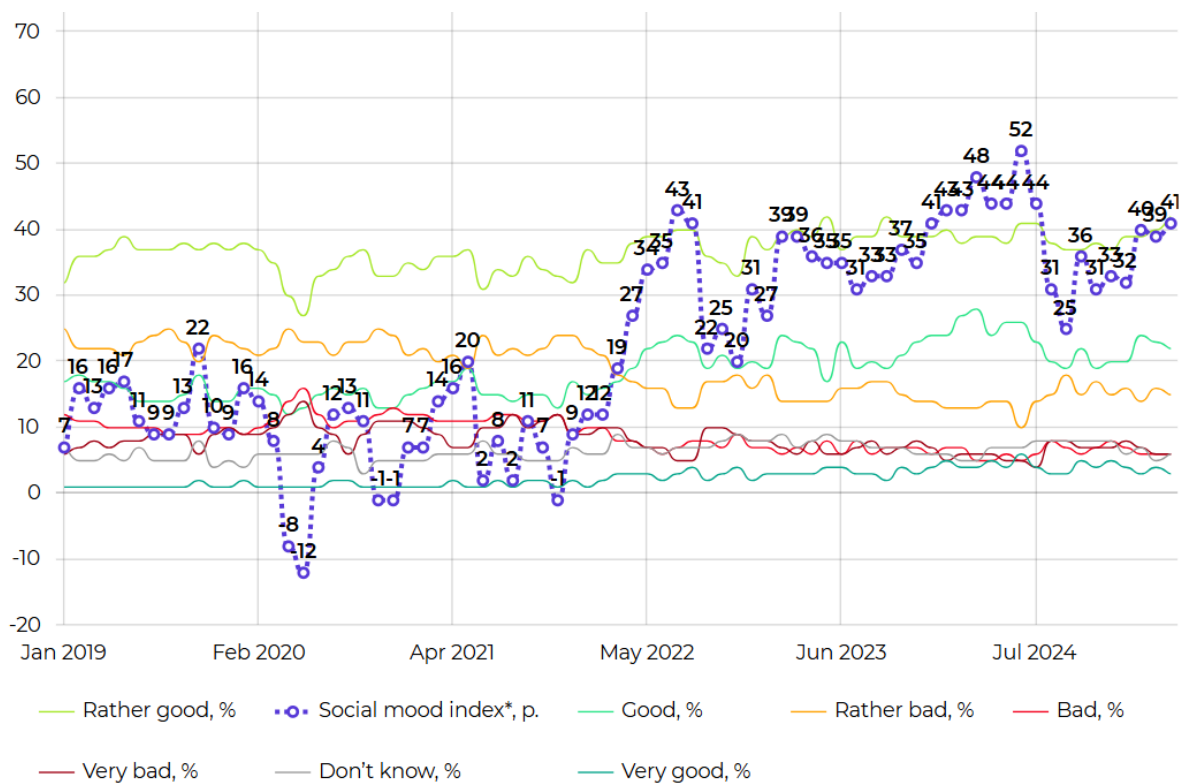


Figure 1: Social mood indices: situation in Russia [2]. Question: How would you assess the situation in Russia, in general?

Source: Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM). Social Mood Indices. 2024. Available from: <https://wciom.com/our-news/ratings/social-mood-indices#>. Figure 1, Social mood indices: situation in Russia; [accessed May 27, 2025].

3. Politics of Pacification

Russian propaganda was clearly recognized as complex and multidimensional [7]. It tailored its messages to different audiences by using various channels and narratives, providing frameworks for interpreting existing grievances [8].

The government's strategy varied depending on the target group: dissidents, regime supporters, elites, and the previously depoliticized majority of the population. Dissidents and elites as well as regime supporters were mostly subjected to the politics of fear [3]. However, the majority

of the population, which had been depoliticized for over the last 20 years, was deliberately excluded from any kind of political involvement or mobilisation and became subject to the politics of pacification.

The main feature of this politics is to create a façade of stability in everyday life amidst the war, with the primary aim of enforcing societal inaction and preventing any unrest.

Three main pillars on which the politics of pacification have been built in Russia include: economic measures, propaganda, and silencing (Figure 2). Unlike traditional wartime authoritarian tactics based on fear and repression, these strategies collectively created an illusion of stability, diverting the attention of a depoliticized society from the war's impact [4].

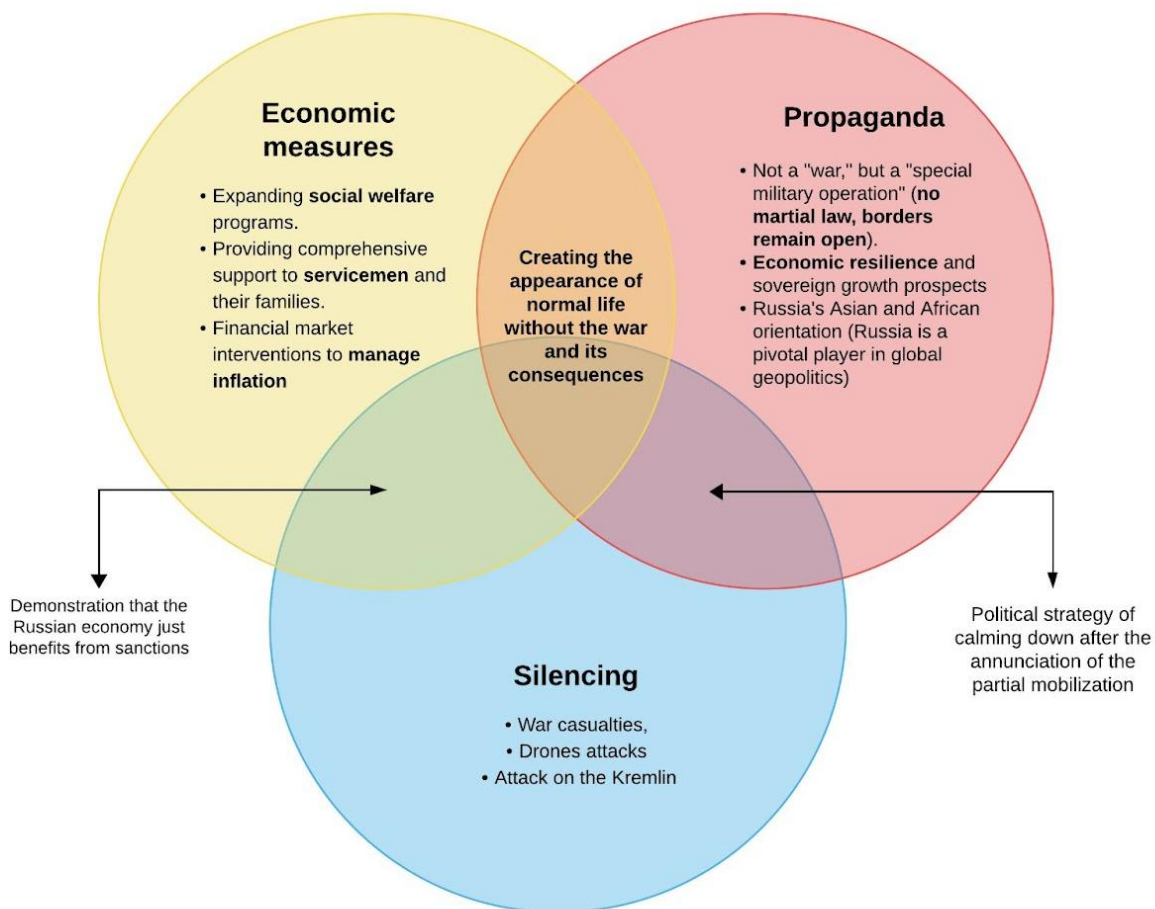


Figure 2: Politics of Pacification in Russia [4]

4. Shifts in Russian Propaganda

4.1. Reasons for the Shift

For the first years of the war, the appearance of normal life was largely maintained, keeping the majority of society disengaged from politics - even as the war, a profoundly political event, continued. The politics of pacification was key to this. It

kept daily life stable enough that people cared less about politics or getting involved. However, as drone attacks intensified and, more significantly, after the U.S. authorized the use of long-range weapons deep within Russian territory, sustaining this illusion of normality was no longer possible [9]. Simultaneously, a series of key events - the

victory of Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election, his phone call with Vladimir Putin, and the start of negotiations in Riyadh - triggered a major change in Russian propaganda.

4.2. Methodology

To track these changes, we analysed 2,600 news articles from key relevant publications in Russia. The data was collected using the Scan Interfax system and included content from federal TV, radio, newspapers, journals, and news agencies. Hansen's framework was used to guide source selection [10].

The data collected focused on three main topics: negotiations, sanctions, and the special military operation. To find relevant articles, we used keyword searches for each category.

The time frame for the study was January 12 to February 18, 2025. This period was chosen to see how Russian propaganda shifted after Donald Trump's phone call with Vladimir Putin on February 12. We used NVivo software to carry out the content analysis and categorize key narratives [11].

4.3. Changes in the Coverage of Potential Negotiations

There was a major change in how Russian propaganda highlighted the possibility of negotiations on the war in Ukraine. Before February 12, the main emphasis was placed on Europe as one of the main actors in possible negotiations, the U.S. not having a clear plan for this, and Ukraine losing Western support. The possibility of negotiations was portrayed as a difficult one, but Russia was always the one offering them, while pursuing its own aims and defending its positions.

After February 12, these narratives changed significantly. The focus shifted to the fact that Europe was excluded from any process and had no influence. At the same time, the U.S. was portrayed as a country softening its position and willing to make a deal directly with Russia. Russia's positioning also changed: it was now presented as a strong country that would lead any negotiations from a position of force. Negotiations were now framed as a method of achieving Russia's goals, not as a compromise of any kind. These changes present Russia as a dominant force dictating the terms of the international order (Table 1).

Table: Changes in Narratives on Negotiations

Narrative	Before February 12, 2025	After February 12, 2025
The role of Europe	The EU should inevitably take part in negotiations	Europe is concerned about being excluded
The role and position of the U.S.	The U.S. is indecisive and doesn't have a clear plan	The U.S. may soften its position, there are clear signs of this
Ukraine and its role	Kyiv is losing Western support	Ukraine is not an actor in possible negotiations
Position of Russia	Russia demonstrates goodwill	Russia negotiates from a position of strength and force

4.4. Shifts in Sanctions Coverage

Before February 12, Russian propaganda was focused on the idea that Western

sanctions weren't having any real impact on the economy (Figure 3). But after the Trump-Putin call the focus moved to ways

of working around sanctions, instead of denying the effects of them. Talk of alternative payment systems, parallel imports, and new trade markets became more prominent.

Previously, the U.S. was portrayed as the main force behind the sanctions, with Europe seen as a supportive ally. After February 12, however, the conversation

changed (Figure 4). More attention was given to the idea of lifting the sanctions and using negotiations as a way to achieve this, while Europe was increasingly framed as the biggest obstacle to their removal. At the same time, propaganda began to present sanctions as a potential bargaining chip in negotiations, reinforcing the image of Russia as economically resilient.

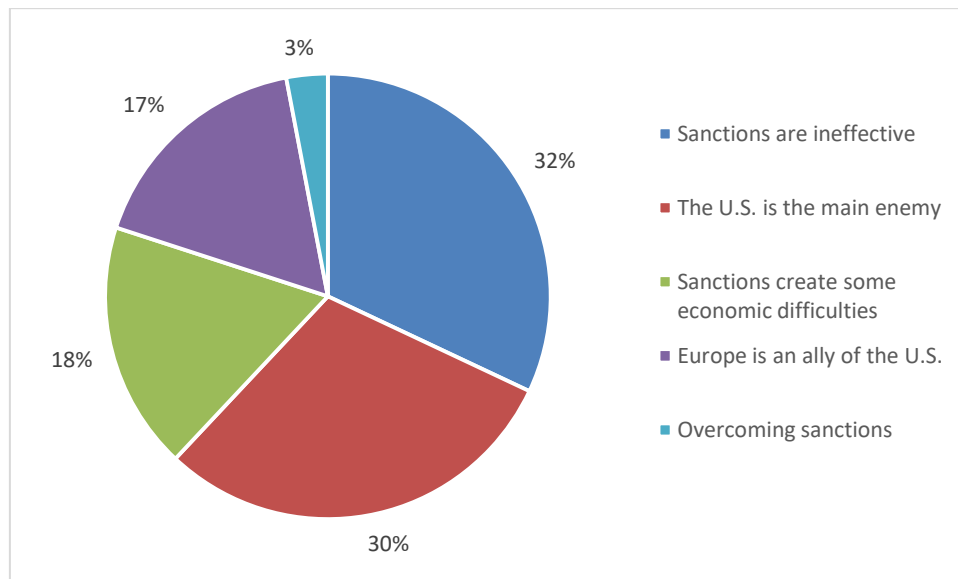


Figure 3: Sanctions Coverage before Trump's Phone Call to Putin.
Source: Author O. Vlasova, developed for this article.

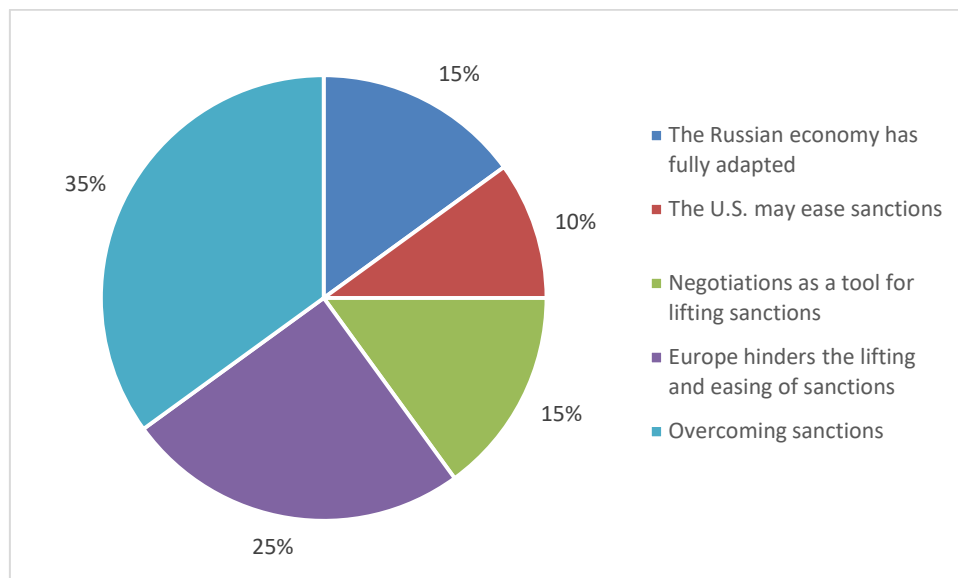


Figure 4: Sanctions Coverage after Trump's Phone Call to Putin.
Source: Author O. Vlasova, developed for this article.

4.5. Shifts in Special Military Operation Coverage

There have been no major changes in how

the special military operation is covered, even after Trump's phone call with Putin. The main focus remains on heroizing

soldiers and supporting their families, with a bit more emphasis on their stability and well-being. After February 12, we can observe a slight increase in the amount of news about war victories, shifting the focus from Ukraine's weaknesses to Russia's strengths. There are no mentions of negotiations in news related to the special military operation, which leads us to believe that, for the ongoing war, these diplomatic efforts are not seen as important.

This aspect is also crucial for understanding the different mechanisms used by Russian propaganda toward different societal sectors: civilians are made to believe that soon success in negotiations will bring economic stability and sanctions relief, while soldiers, their families, and those who care about the situation on the battlefield are conditioned to perceive the war as a long-term and necessary effort.

5. Conclusions

The shifts in propaganda that we have managed to unveil show that their aim might not be in achieving a peace agreement as such, but in taking advantage of the moment to cheer up Russian society and give it hope, which has been missing for almost three years. Such a facade of progress and the promise of a better life can help maintain high morale in society, which is crucial during a long-lasting war, especially when any previously deployed pacification practices no longer work. Even if these hopes and promises do not become reality, this sentiment at least buys more time for the government and postpones societal disappointment, which could potentially lead to protests or unrest.

The key question that remains understudied is what consequences the manipulation of hope may have after the collapse of societal hope, and whether such manipulation can be sustained at all.

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