

# Information warfare, propaganda and the manipulation of opinion in times of conflict : the case of the Russia-Ukraine war

**Philippe IBITOWA**

Teacher-Researcher

UFR Information, Communication and Arts (UFRICA)

Félix Houphouët-Boigny University of Cocody

Laboratory of Communication Sciences, Arts and Culture (LCSAC), Ivory Coast

## **Abstract**

The Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict, which has bloodied Europe since February 2022, gives the main protagonists of the crisis the opportunity to experiment with an old recipe for war: propaganda. This article, which draws on the theory of argumentation, as defended by Breton (2015), attempts to show how and about what Russians and Westerners engage in a campaign of reciprocal demonization, often to the chagrin of public opinion trapped in the whirlwind of disinformation spread by the agencies and propaganda experts of each camp.

**Keywords** : war, propaganda, disinformation, argumentation, Russia, Ukraine, Westerners.

## **Introduction**

Throughout human history, propaganda has always accompanied war campaigns. From the Trojan War (13th and 12th century BC) to the Gulf War (August 2, 1990 to February 28, 1991) through the two great world wars (1914-1919 and 1939-1945), the manipulation of opinion presented itself as a sneaky and pernicious weapon of destruction, used to destroy the enemy. This truth of yesterday remains today, through the Russian-Ukrainian war which began in February 2022. This conflict, which is taking place in the heart of Europe, with its thousands of dead, displaced, refugees and disaster victims, also presents itself as a communication battlefield where the information war between Russia and the West is raging, in a constant operation of reciprocal demonization. In fact, how does this war of opinion operate? About what and with arguments do the two camps fight each other in the field of propaganda? Based on the theory of argumentation, this article attempts to answer these main questions by showing how the main protagonists try to persuade public opinion of their reason to wage war or defend themselves at all costs. After highlighting the theoretical and methodological approach that supports this study, we show how each party demonizes the other while pretending to be the victim. But beyond that, we present the limits of such argumentative postures by separating the truth from the chaff.

## I. Theoretical and methodological approach

From the theoretical point of view, we summon the theories of propaganda and argumentation to enlighten our study.

“Propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the propagandist's desired intent” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2014: 7). For Legrand and Reniers (2017), propaganda is presented as an action aimed at disseminating, propagating a doctrine, an idea or a way of relating to the object. Its aim is to modify the representations of individuals concerning an event, a product, an idea, with a view to unifying behavior towards them.

Propaganda is defined by particular characteristics, which distinguish it from simple information and generally reveal hidden or devious motives:

- the appeal to the emotions (pathos) rather than to the intellect
- information that is loaded with values and accesses the judgments, prejudices and sense of ethics (ethos) of the public
- the use of selective and unbalanced information
- the importance of intentions or motives with a specific objective for the information (Littlehale, n.d.).

The theory of argumentation is “the study of discursive techniques aimed at provoking or increasing the adherence of minds to the theses that are presented for their assent” (Perelman, 1989: 242). It is based on three (3) main levers or movements according to Breton (2015):

- highlighting the main opinion (thesis) presented by each side in its speeches
- the points of support (axes, guiding ideas) requested to convey this opinion
- the arguments mobilized (evidence) to support these points of support.

In terms of methodology, we mainly rely on documentary research based on books, articles and videos available on the Internet, related to our subject. The corpus is made up of two main texts (the speeches of the Russian and American presidents at the start of the conflict), which help to understand the arguments mobilized by each side for or against the war. These documents are complemented by other texts that shed light on the communication of each side in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. With regard to data processing and analysis, we opted for thematic content analysis in order to identify, in the speeches of the protagonists and the documents studied, the elements of language that evoke the rhetoric of war and the propaganda.

Thematic analysis, or more exactly the thematic content analysis (TCA), is a method of analysis consisting “to identify in verbal or textual expressions recurring general themes which appear under various more concrete contents” (Mucchielli, 1996 : 259); in other words, thematic analysis consists of “systematically proceeding to the identification, grouping and, alternatively, discursive examination of the themes addressed in a corpus” (Mucchielli & Paillé, 2008: 162).

## 2. Results : the devil is the other or the desire for reciprocal stigmatization

In the information war between Russians and Westerners, there is no concession or room for compromise, self-questioning or admitting the truth of the adversary. The devil is simply the other. War is the other. The massive destruction, the thousands of deaths, the famine, the numerous refugees, it is still and always the other. In this media game of ping-pong, the actors pass the ball to each other. Some see themselves as defenders of democracy against dictatorship, while others see those opposite as imperialists guided by their own selfish interests.

## 2.1. Russia or the negation of democracy

The two main opinions mobilized by Westerners against Russia revolve around the autocratic character of Putin's regime and its anti-values. The points of support mobilized are the negation of democracy, the violation of international rules, violence and the threat to world peace. Westerners try to corroborate these theses with the examples below.

In his very first speech after the outbreak of the conflict, given to Congress on March 1, 2022, US President Joe Biden pitted the democratic West against dictatorial Russia: "Putin is now more isolated than ever from the rest of the world", because in the battle against "autocracy", "the democracies are there", he added, listing the unprecedented sanctions that have fallen on Russia, before concluding that "when the history of this period will be written, Putin's war on Ukraine will have left Russia weaker and the rest of the world stronger" (Gugnier, 2022).

It should be noted here that the use, by the American president, of the epithets and groups of words "more isolated", "rest of the world", "Putin's war", "weaker" is not insignificant. These puns are intended to stigmatize the Russian President, to show that the war he is waging against Ukraine is not legitimate, is not unanimous and that the reasons put forward are unfounded and that he is ultimately alone against all in this battle. Likewise, by pitting the "autocracy" embodied by Russia against the "democracies" represented by the Western bloc, Biden is simply pitting bad against good.

This rhetorical posture is supported by the majority of Western leaders. This is the case of French President Emmanuel Macron who, during his speech on the conflict delivered at the Elysee Palace on February 24, 2022, affirmed that "Russia has launched a massive military attack against Ukraine. This deliberate choice, which contravenes all the commitments made by the Russian authorities, is a violation of the Charter of the United Nations and of the founding principles of the European and international order (...). By breaking his word, by refusing the diplomatic route, by choosing war, President Putin has not only attacked Ukraine, he has decided to flout Ukraine's sovereignty. He has decided to carry out the most serious attack on peace, on stability in our Europe for decades" (Macron, 2022).

In this speech excerpt, Russia appears as a country without faith or law, which does not keep its word, does not respect international law or the basic principles of democracy.

This view was also championed by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during his speech to the European Parliament on March 23, 2022. Mr. Trudeau "argued that democracies face a new threat, coming from President Russian Vladimir Putin and his invasion of Ukraine. He called the invasion a violation of international law, with the targeting and killing of civilians in hospitals and residential buildings. Mr. Trudeau has declared that this war in Ukraine poses a threat not only to the security of Europe, but also to that of Western democracies and of the entire world" (La Presse, 2022).

It should be noted here how much the author wants to draw attention to "Russian cruelty", which attacks civilians by targeting places supposedly excluded from the battlefield such as 'hospitals' and residential buildings. It is in the same vein that the US President called Putin a "butcher" to Ukrainian refugees during his visit to Poland in March 2022. "US President Joe Biden violently attacked his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, the calling him a "butcher" for the crimes committed according to him by the Russian army in Ukraine" (latribune.fr, 2022). All things contrary to international law (Hague Convention or Geneva Convention) which prohibits acts of torture or cruelty in times of armed conflict.

Other war images, broadcast in Western media, tend to show only the damage caused by Russian strikes while ignoring those caused by Ukraine, giving the impression that the evil empire is Russia, with his dictator Putin.

Image 1: The damage of the war in Ukraine in pictures, in a before/after.



Source : Le Télégramme (<https://www.letelegramme.fr/ guerre-ukraine-russie/les-degats- impressionnants-en-ukraine-apres-un-mois-de-guerre-avant-apres-24-03-2022-12958493.pfh>)

The stigmatization of the Russian camp by the Western bloc has often gone so far as the expression of morbid ideas about President Putin being described as dying. A sick man who wouldn't last long. Indeed, rumors, which were later denied by the first person in charge of the American counterintelligence (CIA), Williams Burns, epilogized on an alleged fragility of the health of Vladimir Putin. The Newsweek newspaper attributed to him a dazzling cancer treated two months ago. The Russian relays of the Western media in Russia attributed to Putin a cancer of the thyroid (...). Media have relayed that in fact Vladimir Poutine would be dead and that it was a look-alike who had taken his place (Bernabe, 2022).

But how do we perceive the war from Moscow's point of view?

## 2.2. The imperialist, arrogant and lying West

On the side of Moscow, the main opinion mobilized is that of an imperialist West which does not skimp on any means to satisfy its expansionist thirst. The points of support highlighted by Putin are linked to the non-respect of commitments by the Western camp and the use of its military instrument (NATO) to destabilize Russia. In short, seen from Moscow, the invasion of Ukraine responds to an instinct for survival as well as a vital need for protection of the Russian people.

It is well known that for 30 years we have constantly and patiently tried to agree with the main NATO countries on the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we have constantly been confronted either with deceptions and cynical lies, or with attempts at pressure and blackmail, and the North Atlantic Alliance, meanwhile, despite all our protests and concerns, continues to grow. The military machine is moving and, I repeat, is coming very close to our borders (Putin, 2022).

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You don't have to look far to find examples. First of all, without any authorization from the UN Security Council, they carried out a bloody military operation against Belgrade, used aviation, missiles right in the heart of Europe. Several weeks of continuous bombardments of peaceful cities, on vital infrastructures. We must remind you of these facts, otherwise some Western colleagues do not like to remember these events, and when we talk about them, they prefer to point not to the norms of international law, but to the circumstances which they interpret as they see fit. Then it was the turn of Iraq, Libya, Syria. The illegitimate use of military force against Libya, the perversion of all the decisions of the UN Security Council on the Libyan issue have led to the complete destruction of the state, to the fact that a huge hotbed of terrorism international arose, to the fact that the country plunged into a humanitarian catastrophe, into the abyss of long-term civil war which has not yet ceased (Putin, Op. cit.).

The speech of the Russian president is a real indictment against the West which, according to him, despite the angelic face it presents to the world, reveals itself to be a real cold monster which sows desolation wherever it goes and "leaves bloody wounds, non-healing wounds of international terrorism and extremism (...). Moreover, he adds, as if to close the debate, "American politicians, political analysts and journalists themselves write and say that a veritable "empire of lies" has been created within the States States in recent years" (Ibidem).

In addition, as part of the security argument, Moscow took as a pretext the threats of supposed bacteriological weapons being manufactured in American laboratories installed in Ukraine to attack this country.

On several occasions, Russia has accused the United States and Ukraine of developing biological weapons near its borders. In 2021, while discussing the World Health Organization's inability to establish the origin of the Covid-19 virus, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev told the Kommersant reporter that Russia believed that the United States was developing biological weapons near its borders (...). These labs are co-run by Fauci's "EcoHealth Alliance" and rumor has it that Russia's entire military operation currently unofficially consists of either securing and/or destroying these labs and collecting evidence (Josephson, 2022).

But in fact, faced with this abundance of contradictory information, arguments and counter-arguments, how can we distinguish the true from the false?

### **3. Discussion: separating the truth from the chaff**

One of the characteristics of propaganda is that it has the art of containing both apparent truth and a dose of falsehood. Even if, most often, the lie largely dominates over the truth for the purpose of nourishing the intention and the hidden agenda of the speaker. For Hitler (1934) propaganda "does not have to objectively seek the truth (...) but to pursue only that which is favorable to it". In other words, the end justifies the means.

#### **3.1. The truth**

The United States does indeed run biological laboratories in Ukraine, as confirmed by the website of the United States Embassy in Ukraine at [ua.usembassy.gov/embassy/kyiv/sections-offices/defense-threat-reduction-office/biological-threat-reduction-program/](http://ua.usembassy.gov/embassy/kyiv/sections-offices/defense-threat-reduction-office/biological-threat-reduction-program/), although their use for war or military purposes remains to be proven.

According to information provided by the US government on the website of its Embassy in Ukraine, the US Department of Defense's Biological Threat Reduction Program works with partner nations to "counter

the threat of disease outbreaks (deliberate, accidental or natural) of the most dangerous infectious diseases in the world". In Ukraine, recipients include the Ukrainian Ministry of Health and the Ukrainian State Veterinary and Phytosanitary Service. Laboratories are located in Zakarpatska, Vinnytsia, Ternopil, Lviv, Luhansk, Kherson, Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk. In total, the United States finances 12 biological laboratories directly via the Pentagon through companies controlled by the American government (ac-jurisconsulte.fr, 2022).

Likewise, the Russian president's remarks aimed at American imperialism are plausible. The United States effectively dominates the world and, like all the established (China, Russia) or emerging (Brazil, Turkey, South Africa) powers, strive to impose their hegemony and extend their influence across the world.

Moreover, the fact that Westerners affirm that "Russia is not a model of democracy and that freedom of expression is not guaranteed there" is not completely unfounded, if one sticks to the canons of Western democracy. In this continental country, freedom of expression as we live and practice it in the West is not appropriate. The most indomitable opponents are often imprisoned or forced into exile.

In October 2006, Anna Politkovskaya, an (...) influential critic of Putin and Kadyrov, was shot dead in the lobby of her building in Moscow. This journalist at Novaya Gazeta, the country's main independent media, had documented and denounced the crimes of the Russian army in Chechnya for years. Other critics narrowly avoided death and ended up in jail. Alexei Navalny, a 46-year-old anti-corruption activist, was the victim of serious poisoning in Siberia in 2020, which he attributes to the Kremlin, which the latter denies. The vast majority of opposition figures who remained in Russia are imprisoned. The others fled. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former oil magnate, spent ten years in prison after opposing Mr. Putin in the early 2000s. Since his release in 2013, Mr. Khodorkovsky has taken refuge in London from where he finances platforms of opposition (AFP, 2022).

In fact, the success of Vladimir Putin and the United Russia party in the legislative elections of December 2003 led to many debates on the democratic or authoritarian character of the Russian political system. When they seek to define it, observers resort to singular qualifications which illustrate their perplexity: "directed democracy", "bureaucratic authoritarianism", "liberal militocracy"... All however agree in recognizing the pre-eminence of the executive power and, in the first place, of the President of the Russian Federation in the Russian political game. Since his first election in 2000, Vladimir Putin has exploited this advantage in order to monopolize political power and restore state authority. Although he undeniably dominates the other federal political institutions, the president seems on the other hand to experience more difficulty in imposing new rules on the business community, regional and administrative elites. (Favarel-Garrigues, 2004).

Putin's accusations against the United States regarding Iraq, Libya and Syria are also plausible (cf. section 3.2.2.).

Despite these truths, Russian-Western rhetoric in the context of the war in Ukraine carries the seeds of manipulation.

### **3.2. The manipulation of opinion**

On both sides are often brandished arguments that do not withstand criticism, as was the case with the missiles which in November 2022 caused two deaths in Poland and falsely attributed to Russia.

### 3.2.1. Fake Russian missiles in Poland

On Tuesday, November 15, 2022, missiles which fell in the village of Przewodow, in Poland, six kilometers from the Ukrainian border, killed 2 people who immediately provoked the reaction of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky who, without providing proof, accused the Russia. He then calls for a strong reaction from the West. He was initially supported by some Western leaders, who then changed their minds.

However, Russia denies being the author of these shots. She will be joined in veiled terms, initially, by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who said the firing was likely caused by a missile from Ukraine's anti-aircraft defense system, fired to defend the Ukrainian territory against Russian cruise missiles (latribune.fr, 2022), then by US President Joe Biden. The drama raises fears that NATO is drawn into the conflict in Ukraine, Poland being protected by a collective defense commitment of the Atlantic Alliance. But after a period of questioning, Warsaw and Washington exonerate Moscow (lexpress.fr, 2022).

Examples of this type, aimed at deliberately misleading public opinion, in order to justify an action, are apparently not rare in contemporary history.

### 3.2.2. The other lies of the West

In a report published by NBC News, we discover how through several facts, the Biden administration is trying to manipulate public opinion in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. "In a break from the past, the United States uses intelligence to wage information warfare with Russia, even when the intelligence is not rock solid." Officials say the Biden administration has been quick to release 'intelligence' about Russia's plans in Ukraine that is 'unreliable' or 'based more on analysis than hard evidence', or even just plain wrong, to wage an information war against Putin. The report says that to this end, the US government deliberately circulated false or ill-substantiated allegations of impending chemical weapons attacks, Russian plans to orchestrate a false flag attack in Donbass to justify an invasion, on Putin's advisers misinforming him, and on Russia seeking to source arms from China (Johnstone, 2022).

In this operation of media manipulation, Russia does not seem to remain on the sidelines?

### 3.2.3. Russia is also in the dance

The NewsGuard, the American organization that fights disinformation, has given denials to some Russian allegations. This is the case of the supposed omnipresence of Nazism in Ukrainian politics and society, under the benevolent gaze of the Ukrainian authorities. This body reports that radical far-right groups do exist in Ukraine, but they have weak political representation and have no plausible path to power. Similarly, with regard to the alleged genocide of the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Donbass, the International Criminal Court, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have all declared found no evidence there. Also, the reunification of Crimea with Russia was deemed illegitimate by the General Assembly of the United Nations, contrary to the words of President Putin (la presse, 2022).

Image 2: Clash between police and nationalist demonstrators – including activists from the far-right party Svoboda – at a rally near the Kyiv parliament in October 2014.



Source : Photo Gleb Garanich, archives Reuters

So many elements that show that in this information war, there is little room for scruple. However, this method, which has been tried out on other occasions, is widely proven.

### **3.3. Propaganda: an old recipe more harmful than bombs**

The power of images and the weight of words weigh more than a shell and can do more damage than a missile. Thus, in times of peace as in times of war, the one who masters information governs the country/world or wins the war. Bernays (1928) said in this regard that “the conscious, intelligent manipulation of the organized opinions and habits of the masses plays an important role in a democratic society. Those who manipulate this imperceptible social mechanism form an invisible government that truly rules the country. We are largely governed by men of whom we know nothing, who mold our minds, forge our tastes, give us our ideas.

The manipulations of journalists in theaters of war are numerous and, more prosaically, one could multiply the examples of information disseminated too quickly (Guaaybess, 2018). The case of the false mass graves of Timisoara is a textbook case.

#### **3.3.1. The shameful manipulation of Timisoara**

In December 1989, the whole world discovered with amazement the images of naked corpses, lined up in the mud of a cemetery in Timisoara: the city where the Romanian revolution began. This “false mass grave”, falsely attributed to the regime of Romanian President Nicolae Ceaușescu, is the symbol of disinformation, an archetype of media frenzy in times of conflict, thirty years before the era of fake news. These images have been looped on television channels and have made the front page of the foreign press, whose special envoys have arrived by the dozens in the country hitherto closed to the world by the regime. It was in the cemetery of the indigents of Timisoara that they discovered these remains lined up on the ground, presented as proof of the bloody repression of the uprising. The Romanian revolution caused a thousand deaths in the country, including a hundred in Timisoara. But at the end of 1989, the figure of 4,630 victims for the city of Timisoara alone was taken up by the international press, which also mentioned the existence of multiple mass graves. It will be necessary to wait until January for the assessment to become clearer and for the deception of the cemetery to be brought to light: the corpses were those of people who died before the events, then emerged from the ground (AFP, 2019).

#### **3.3.2. Other cases throughout history: from the two world wars to the fall of Gaddafi**



Upon observation, contemporary history teaches us that the process is the same, from the two world wars to Syria via Libya and the Gulf. This reality of the manipulation of information, in the service of the interests of the powerful of this world, is reminded to us below by Jean-Michel Hauteville.

On the night of August 31 to September 1, 1939, fighting pitted alleged Polish soldiers against the occupants of a German radio station in Silesia, on the border between the two countries. This supposed aggression of Poland is the pretext that Adolf Hitler will use to attack the neighboring nation. The Führer's speech in response to the so-called "Gleiwitz Incident" formalizes the German invasion of Poland. Adolf Hitler, on September 1, 1939, declared: "Last night, Poland opened fire on our territory, with soldiers of the regular troops. Since 5:45 a.m., we have been fighting back. And from now on, we return bomb for bomb. ". In fact, when one country attacks another, it needs a justification, however tenuous. Adolf Hitler himself could not deviate from this principle and therefore carved out a tailor-made casus belli. Even as he planned to invade Poland as soon as he came to power in March 1933.

Throughout the history of conflicts in the world, this principle has always held true. Thus, in 1827, the Dey of Algiers, Hussein Pasha, struck the French consul Deval in the face with his fan. The King of France will then find the pretext he has been waiting for for a long time to invade Algeria, three years later.

#### Staging in Iraq

Closer to home, in the spring of 2003, the American government justified its invasion of Iraq by the supposed presence of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein. In his ultimatum to the Iraqi dictator, on March 17, 2003, George W. Bush launched accusations that proved to be completely unfounded (Hauteville, 2014).

#### Conclusion

The analysis of the speeches of the main protagonists of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis has shown us that beyond bombs and machine guns, the war is also won and, no doubt, above all in the field of information / disinformation. This is certainly what justifies the battle of opinion that Russians and Westerners are fighting fiercely. On this basis, each side does not hesitate to use subterfuge or to exaggerate reality to "smear" the other, while giving itself the beautiful role. This reciprocal demonization game is very often done to the detriment of the public, drowned in a frantic media frenzy. Questions of morale and ethics of communication in times of war then arise. What is public opinion doing in all of this? How can she manage to distinguish real information from manipulation? What independent organizations, equidistant from the interests and actors in conflict, and whose voice carries to unravel the traps of propaganda agencies? Not so simple questions to answer. It remains that it is up to the public itself to vary its sources and gain perspective, in order to better appreciate the reality of the facts. It is undoubtedly at this price that the merchants with false information will prosper less and less.

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