

# THE LOSS OF TRUTH:

Russian Propaganda and First-Generation  
Human Rights Violations in Donetsk,  
Luhansk, and Crimea Before the 2022 Full-  
Scale Invasion

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## **Introduction**

Propaganda is a way of promoting or disseminating particular ideas.<sup>1</sup> It is an intentional and organized way of promoting an ideology or a worldview to make it appear normal or inevitable.<sup>2</sup> Propaganda can operate through direct or more insidious forms, and be targeted against different age or socio-economic groups. As a powerful tool of exercising power, it has been historically employed by governments to influence public opinion, secure citizen support, and enhance the appeal of their policies.<sup>3</sup> The Russian government has used propaganda as a key tool to manipulate public perception and justify military action in the Russia-Ukraine war that began in 2014.<sup>4</sup>

This article will assess the extent to which the use of propaganda as a soft power has allowed for the violations of three types of first-generation human rights (HR): right to non-discrimination, freedom of thought and speech, and right to participate in democratic political processes and citizenship. First-generation HR are mainly “negative”, which means that they require governments to refrain from interfering.

According to the United Nations, “Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status”. They are universal, interdependent (rights reinforce each other), inalienable, indivisible (cannot be separated), and protected by law. HR can be divided into three categories: liberty, equality, and fraternity. One of the first articulations of liberty can be found in the Magna Carta in 1215 and further protected by the 1966 International Covenant

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<sup>1</sup> (Jowett and O’Donnell 2018)

<sup>2</sup> (Márquez 2017)

<sup>3</sup> (Van Herpen 2016)

<sup>4</sup> (Homeriki 2023)

on Civil and Political Rights.<sup>5</sup> Liberty is a first-generation HR that was established in the 17th and 18th centuries, and is defined as having freedom and autonomy.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Nye divides political power into hard and soft<sup>7</sup>. Hard power is a direct way of using coercion and force to exercise influence, while soft power is a more insidious way of using attraction and persuasion to influence behaviours of states. Propaganda is a tool for achieving soft power, as it operates on an often invisible or lightly visible level and promotes values, ideas and beliefs of the state.

Researching propaganda's influence on HR is vital for modern politics, especially in the context of modern hybrid wars, whether working alone or together with hard power, as in the case of Russia's military aggression towards Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>

### **Methodology**

This research was conducted using academic journal articles, research reports, dissertations, book chapters, and news articles. A holistic view was taken regarding the news that was used, examining Ukrainian, Russian, and Western reports. Analyzing news articles was crucial as it provided local context and allowed to draw connections between international perceptions and insider views.

The main resource for this essay was a book by Marcel H. Van Herpen "Putin's Propaganda Machine". While the book focuses on Russian propaganda aimed at Western audiences, many unique insights were found about its local uses. Critical evaluations of the main outlets of Russian propaganda and their impacts on the population were drawn from Olena Homeriki's dissertation "Russian Propaganda as a Political Instrument" and a journal

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<sup>5</sup> (United Nations 1966)

<sup>6</sup> (Sackler 2015)

<sup>7</sup> (Nye 2004)

<sup>8</sup> (Homeriki 2023)

post by Kandrik Matei and Alexandra Shmidova “Propaganda of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in Cyberspace”.

### **Historical Context of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict**

The historic relationship between Russia and Ukraine is deeply entangled and often conflicting. Both countries trace their origins to the Kyivan Rus’, one of Europe’s most powerful entities from the 9th to 13th centuries. After the Mongol invasions, most lands came under Polish or Lithuanian rule and were populated by Ruthenians, while a branch of the Rus’ people migrated eastward and established the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, centered in what is now Moscow. Over the years, Cossacks (runaway peasants) in the South of Ukraine have created a distinct social group that became known as Ukraine. In 1654, the leader of Cossacks recognized the Russian Tsar, formalizing it in the Treaty of Pereiaslav, which arguably became the root to the close relationship between the two territorial entities and served as an establishment of Ukraine’s lands and partial autonomy within the Russian Empire. Catherine II in the 1780s abolished this autonomy and established direct rule of Ukraine’s territory, breaking the original agreement and starting the cycle of oppression.<sup>9</sup> The Ems Ukaz of 1876 prohibited the use of Ukrainian language, along with numerous other laws prohibiting the teaching and learning of Ukrainian language.<sup>10</sup>

The Soviet relationship between Ukraine and Russia was also deeply unequal. One of its clear consequences was Holodomor – a Soviet-organized genocide in Ukraine from 1932-1933 killing between 3.5 million and 7 million Ukrainians through a man-made famine aimed to erase the population of Ukraine and proceed with Russian settling into the

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<sup>9</sup> (Popova and Shevel 2023)

<sup>10</sup> (Kryzhanivsky, Zasenka, and Stebelsky 2019)

territories.<sup>11</sup> It is also a clear example of propaganda used against Ukrainians. Moscow attributed the starvation of Ukrainians to environmental changes and unsuccessful harvests, which was believed by Ukrainians from the western and central parts that were not affected by the famine. Journalists as well as foreigners were not allowed to enter the affected regions and the genocide was exposed only after British Journalist Gareth Jones went to the targeted territories undercover and was the first to publish about it.

While propaganda was used earlier, the 1950s and 1960 mark a high point with “KGB” (Committee for State Security) forces of the Soviet Union with a center in Moscow being in control of official propaganda offices spreading posters, news, and music promoting the USSR as a peace-loving state with prosperity of all nations inside.<sup>12</sup> Fueled by the Cold War, in which the USA had more advanced military equipment and better reputation in the West, the Soviet population was manipulated to believe the West lived in poverty, disease, and anarchy.<sup>13</sup>

Today Russia continues to use the USSR's propaganda strategies. Moreover, Russia effectively develops new strategies for the modern political context to target all groups of the population and actively uses it to violate the HR of Ukrainians living in the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea.<sup>14</sup>

### **1. Propaganda Violating Rights to Non-discrimination**

Russian propaganda is part of the larger Russian discrimination campaign. In the USSR, despite being composed of many nations, Russia was always framed to be central, with Russian language and culture being the base of Soviet life, and all other nationalities

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<sup>11</sup> (University of Minnesota 2018)

<sup>12</sup> (Santa Clara University Digital Exhibits, n.d.)

<sup>13</sup> (Van Herpen 2016)

<sup>14</sup> (Van Herpen 2016)

being suppressed or silenced. This discrimination, along with other Soviet legacies, has translated into the modern Russian reality, and propaganda became key for achieving the goals of the government to establish the Russian ethnicity as the supreme one. Such practices do not exist in a vacuum – they directly violate international HR norms. The 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination forbids any discrimination based on race in various areas, including employment, education, and access to public services.<sup>15</sup> The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights outlines freedom of religion and assembly.<sup>16</sup> Russian propaganda plays a crucial role in suppressing the right to non-discrimination, which is seen through the “Novorossiya” ideology, the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church and the discrimination of indigenous people of Crimea. These mechanisms serve as tools for reinforcing Russian control over the occupied territories by shaping public perception and solidifying the state's ability to violate first-generation HR.

### **1.1 Narrative of “Novorossiya”**

Novorossiya is a concept first introduced and popularized in 2014 when Vladimir Putin began referring to the South and East of Ukraine as “the New Russia”, essentially twisting the history and claiming that the region historically belongs to Russia. A Novorossiya political party was established, with its members evidently being far-right Russian politicians who support imperialism and European conquest, fascism, and genocide of Ukrainians.<sup>17</sup> This ideology was picked up by media and politicians who organized rallies for separation of certain South and East Ukrainian territories, even beyond the

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<sup>15</sup> (United Nations 1965)

<sup>16</sup> (United Nations 1966)

<sup>17</sup> (Babiak 2014)

currently occupied Luhansk, Donetsk and Crimea, known as the separatist rallies. The Novorossiia ideology was used to popularize the ideas of Russian expansion into Ukraine and create an idea of unity and belonging, linked by shared history.<sup>18</sup>

In 2014, Russia-backed separatists illegally seized control of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine and renamed them to Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). The Cabinet of Agitation and Propaganda of the DPR became the main body responsible for filtering information, regulating media resources and ensuring a unified information space across the regions. Although this body is legally affiliated only with DPR, its goal is to present and spread the Novorossiia concept, so it is equally involved in the propaganda strategy of both territorial units of DPR and LPR.<sup>19</sup> Beyond the government officials, other responsible parties for the spread of Novorossiia propaganda are journalists, local self-elected separatist governments, and fake witnesses paid to be used in the media by Russia-backed authorities, who call for Russia-Ukraine unity.

The narrative of Novorossiia can be understood as an outgrowth of the neo-colonialism dimension. As introduced by Kwame Nkrumah in 1965, neocolonialism is a tool to maintain economic and political control over former colonies in subtle ways.<sup>20</sup> Russian president Vladimir Putin in his speeches said "South, the south of Ukraine, completely, there are only Russians"<sup>21</sup>; "What is Ukraine? A part of its territory is [in] Eastern Europe, but [another] part, a considerable one, was a gift from us!"<sup>22</sup>. He repeatedly

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<sup>18</sup> (Dzherdzh 2014)

<sup>19</sup> (Kandrik and Shmidova 2018)

<sup>20</sup> (Halperin 2023)

<sup>21</sup> (Unian 2018 as cited in Babiak 2014)

<sup>22</sup> (Allenova, Geda, Novikov 2008 as cited in Babiak 2014)

calls Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians “a single people”<sup>23</sup> and substitutes occupation of Ukrainian territories with “reunification”.<sup>24</sup> This manipulation of history and identity enables Russia to maintain control under the guise of cultural and historical restoration, reflecting the essence of neo-colonialism. Understanding the Novorossiia ideology is key to understanding Russia’s propaganda, as it is mainly based on neo-colonialism and directly violates key first-generation HR – such as rights to nationality and religion.

### **1.2 Russian Orthodox Church**

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has historically worked closely with the Russian government since the times of Tsarist Russia, helping them support the narratives pushed by the government by backing it with religious support. During Putin’s regime this close relationship has only gained new unique dimensions. The Church is often one of the main channels for the government's use of soft power for the implementation of their beliefs.

Since the 1990s, there has been a long-lasting connection between the ROC and Russian Strategic Missile forces. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow (head of the ROC) repeated in his speeches that he did all that is in his spiritual power to strengthen the Russian nuclear defense capabilities through Christian values. Ultimately, this is a violation of religious rights as militaristic propaganda was used in the religious speeches, diffusing military progress into religious values. Moreover, he and many smaller priests expressed their support for Russia’s military activities, blessing the missiles targeting Ukrainian civilians, and visiting soldiers on supportive tours. They also pushed Russian narratives of Novorossiia and brotherly nations during church services in ROCs across Ukraine

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<sup>23</sup> ( The Kremlin 2013 as cited in Babiak 2014)

<sup>24</sup> ( The Kremlin 2021 as cited in Babiak 2014)

including its annexed regions.<sup>25</sup>

In 2009, five years before the annexation of Crimea, Patriarch Kirill visited all parts of Ukraine with a self-initiated missionary-style tour. His rhetoric was more political than religious and the trip's primary goal was to spread propaganda about the "common heritage" and "common destination" of Ukraine and Russia.<sup>26</sup> It reflects the vision of the ROC which opposes Ukraine having its independent church, thereby violating the HR to freedom of choice of religion, and institutional discrimination.

In 2021 there were 473 Russian Orthodox Churches in the Region of Donetsk, 179 in Luhansk, and around 300 in Crimea.<sup>27</sup> It is the main religious organization in the regions with the most worshippers, and all other religious institutions including Kyiv Patriarchate have been banned.<sup>28</sup> Being the only church available, Christian believers have no choice but to go to the ROC, where except for religious worshipping, they are exposed to a wide political discourse during service, which violates their religious freedom.<sup>29</sup> The ROC's actions blur the line between spirituality and state-driven propaganda, leading to HR violations and institutional discrimination for those who do not align with its views.

### **1.3 Discrimination of Crimean Tatars**

Russian Propaganda is also key in violating the rights of Crimean Tatars – indigenous people of Ukraine who live in the Crimea Peninsula in the South of Ukraine by promoting the narrative that they are secondary to the Russian residents of the region. Crimean Tatar identity was formed in the 14th century, and they became the first

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<sup>25</sup> (Van Herpen 2016)

<sup>26</sup> (Van Herpen 2016)

<sup>27</sup> (Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchy 2021)

<sup>28</sup> (Kumkova 2015)

<sup>29</sup> (Van Herpen 2016)

semi-independent democratic Muslim state in the world in 1917 before falling to the Bolshevik army along with the Ukrainian People's Republic. In 1944 the Soviet government officially called Crimeans “traitors” and subjected them to deportation to Central Asia (mainly Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan). Over 183,000 were deported, and 8,000 more died in transit due to inhumane transport conditions, marking yet another tragic genocide for Ukraine.<sup>30</sup>

Seeking to reunite with their native land, by 1991, about 150,000 Crimean Tatars had come back to Crimea.<sup>31</sup> The survivors of the genocide and their descendants had founded the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people - “the only higher authorized representative and executive body of the Crimean Tatar people” to advocate for indigenous rights and manage the consequences of the genocide Crimean people had to face during the Soviet rule.<sup>32</sup> Russian Propaganda has contributed to this by spreading the idea that Russian populations in Crimea are oppressed.

In 2014, Russia illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula using Ukraine’s internal weaknesses. Since then, Russia has failed to protect the rights of Crimean Tatars and equality before the law based on their identity, banning the Mejlis.<sup>33</sup> The propaganda framed it as an elimination of nationalism and threats to the Russian Communities of Crimea. This is a clear example of how Russia uses propaganda to justify HR abuses and suppression of indigenous people’s cultural and political rights. It also represents a case of systemic oppression based on ethnicity. Crimean Tatars in Crimea now are considered the minority, and the needs and rights of Russian Citizens and ethnic Russians are seen as

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<sup>30</sup> (Gendler 2023)

<sup>31</sup> (Gendler 2023)

<sup>32</sup> (The Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people, n.d.)

<sup>33</sup> (Kriachok 2024)

central, while people native to the land are seen as the “other”.

In the 1970s, Henry Tajfel developed the Social Identity Theory, which explains how people in the society consider themselves as parts of either the “in-group” or the “out-group”. While Crimeans are historically indigenous, they now became the “out-group” in the region, compared to the Russian illegal settlers, with this social categorization influencing who the policies are oriented towards. With the Russian government banning the Mejlis, it stripped native Crimeans of the right to democratic processes. The wide-spread propaganda of Russian supremacy in Crimea has consistently shaped the discrimination of Crimean Tatars.

## **2. Propaganda Violating Freedom of Thought and Speech**

Russian propaganda has a significant role in enabling the Russian government to undermine freedom of thought and speech, fundamental human rights. Its structural elements include freedom to:

- a. express and defend one’s own opinion freely
- b. seek, receive, impart, and communicate information and ideas
- c. change one's views .<sup>34</sup>

Since the 2014 annexations, Russian propaganda has been tailored to target every age group of people living in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea by using different narrowly-oriented channels, which will be outlined in this chapter analyzing different types of propaganda aimed at children and adults.

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<sup>34</sup> (Kucher 2021)

According to Antonio Gramsci, propaganda functions as a manifestation of cultural hegemony – a belief in the domination of a diverse society by the ruling class.<sup>35</sup> In this case, Russian authorities – the hegemon – use propaganda in institutions such as schools, children’s militarization camps and media outlets to impose a direction on the social life of citizens. The power imbalance between the government and the citizens who have few rights in a non-democratic setting, allows the government to manipulatively persuade them to follow certain beliefs defined by the ruling society. Through propaganda in education, state-sponsored television and social media, the Russian government is exercising insidious soft power, violating the freedom of thought and speech of residents of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea.

## **2.1 Militarization and Indoctrination of Children**

Propaganda is a large part of Russian modifications to the functioning of schools and extracurricular institutions, allowing them to violate rights to free thought and speech since early ages. Since the occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014, Russian authorities have modified academic curricula from first grades until university with the goal of securing children's support for the Russian government and raising them as firm believers in Russia’s glory and peaceful intentions towards Ukraine.<sup>36</sup> For example, history books and all books written in Ukrainian were removed from the curricula, and replaced with Russian books that support the narrative of Novorossiia.<sup>37</sup> In the rare cases, Ukrainian classes were reduced to one hour per week and studied through a prism of a dialect of

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<sup>35</sup> (Jackson Lears 1985)

<sup>36</sup> (Esveld 2024)

<sup>37</sup> (Van Herpen 2016)

Russian language rather than an independent language, but in most cases the classes were not offered at all.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, a newly-developed course on national identity was developed to teach children the national anthems of DPR and LPR and their symbols. This is a direct product and channel for Russian propaganda that aims to teach a universal identity, which at its very basis violates HR. Students learn about “national heroes”, such as Alexander Zakharchenko, who was awarded with the “DPR star” medal for liberating the land from Ukrainian occupation and became the first Russia-installed leader of the DPR.<sup>39</sup> This example is a classic DPR propaganda trope, glorifying those who came with war and destruction and reframing them as heroes. Moreover, children are forced to participate in school-based extracurricular activities – militaristic movements such as “Zakharovtsy” (named after A. Zakharchenko) for schoolchildren aged ten to eighteen and “Small Eagles” for those aged six to nine. In these organizations, children are taught to respect the republics they live in, participate in military parades for Victory Day, and use weapons (for high schoolers). Zakharovtsy's emblem has a red star and the face profile of a DPR leader which was directly copied from Soviet pioneer groups, making clear historic propaganda parallels between Soviet indoctrination children's camps and modern-day Russia's tactics, that specifically in this regard have not changed much, even keeping the same symbols. Within DPR and LPR, the USSR acronym and symbols are highly respected, and many organizations such as “Zakharavotsy” use the Soviet slogan “freedom, conscience, justice, and equality” to promote and create a new place in the modern world for Soviet ideology.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> (Donbas. Realities 2018)

<sup>39</sup> (Yurkova 2016)

<sup>40</sup> (Yurkova 2016)

This is a direct continuation of the Soviet propaganda that violates first-generation HR of children.

In Crimea, children wear Russian nationalist symbols and use real weapons during summer camps. In Sevastopol, a “House of the Junarmy” was created in 2019 as a chapter of the wide network of Russian Junior Military Forces, the main tool for child militarization in Russia.<sup>41</sup> These groups promote nationalist values and unification Russia and Ukraine, promoting Russian supremacy which violates the rights to identity without government interference.

The Russian government controls the educational system in occupied regions – it has hegemony over views and opinions from youth. By controlling educational institutions, the government also controls the rest of society, as it is the basis for identities and opinions.<sup>42</sup> These cases directly violate the right to freedom of thought and expression through targeting a vulnerable group – children in schools – and by forcing them to participate in mandatory activities, they do not have freedom for thoughts that differ from the views of the government.

## **2.2 Television**

Television has been one of the classical paths of exercising soft power of the government. When buying a TV in an occupied Ukrainian territory, 32 Russian channels will be programmed into it automatically. In most places within the annexed regions, Ukrainian TV signals are too weak to reach, as the local TV towers were intentionally destroyed by the Russian army. Therefore, the only accessible channels in Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea are Russian state and local channels, such as Union, Novorossiya TV, Oplot TV, Oplot-2, 1st

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<sup>41</sup> (Burtyk 2021)

<sup>42</sup> (Jackson Lears 1985)

## The Loss of Truth: Russian Propaganda and First-Generation Human Rights Violations in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea Before the 2022 Full-Scale Invasion – Antonina Student

Republican, Russia 1, Luhansk 24, and NTV, which produce a wide range of content, including news, films, reality shows and cartoons.<sup>38</sup>

Propaganda is most effective when the cultural linkages between the propagandists and their audience are clear and consistent, allowing the propaganda to amplify preexisting beliefs and attitudes.<sup>43</sup> Most TV propaganda targets the middle-aged population by providing them with easy answers on the causes of the war they face daily and using their exhaustion from the constant shelling and economic devastation to convert them to the pro-Russian views. One of the main narratives claims that Ukraine is responsible for the conflict and that peace can only be achieved if the Ukrainian government cedes the territories to Russia as that will provide peace for all.<sup>44</sup>

Russian TV often uses USSR nostalgia in shows like “Remember Everything” by Leonid Mlechin, where the main idea is the glorification of the USSR. Older populations remember life in the USSR, and Russian television disseminates selective historical narratives to provoke grief and nostalgia for times of peace that no longer exist, framing it as a fault of the Ukrainian government, while ignoring the issues of poverty, resource shortages and isolation the country faced.<sup>45</sup> Destroying TV towers and only providing access to Russian-controlled TV that pushes the same narratives is a direct violation of all types of freedom of speech and thought rights. This clearly links Russian propaganda to violations of freedom of speech and thought, as television is limited to certain programmes channeling the same opinions.

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<sup>43</sup> (Márquez 2017)

<sup>44</sup> (Van Herpen 2016)

<sup>45</sup> (Van Herpen 2016)

### 2.3 Modern Technology: Russian Web Brigades

In addition to inheriting the USSR's methods of propaganda, Russia also uses modern technology to amplify it, such as the web brigades or "Bot Farms" – large reserves of bots that flood social media with pro-Russian views. The government hires specialists to professionally create accounts designed to impersonate real users on social media, including Facebook, Telegram, TikTok and others used by residents of the occupied Ukrainian territories.<sup>46</sup>

The purpose of the bots is to undermine the situation in Ukraine by pushing Russian narratives through an illusion of real people's perspectives. They are trained to react to posts and support the Russian ideas by presenting themselves as people living in the occupied regions who are tired of conflict and asking for Ukrainian soldiers to leave the area. They start discussions in comments and attack real users, but do not reply to any messages, which often causes real users to start fighting among themselves.<sup>47</sup> With millions of bots under Russian control, they silence oppositional opinions and firsthand war experiences by flooding social media with their messages. By creating a hostile environment in neighborhood chats, these bots discourage real people from speaking up due to cautiousness towards attacks and online abuse.

Moreover, in 2014, during the Anti-Terrorist Operation, Ukrainian soldiers reported receiving messages from unknown numbers saying "Get out, Ukraine is doomed...Support the side of DPR, choose life and future"<sup>48</sup>. The bots also made posts and comments in Telegram groups, giving people false information about the course of the war, blaming the Ukrainian side for missiles and explosions, and even giving wrong directions to civilians

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<sup>46</sup>(Chayko 2021)

<sup>47</sup>(Chayko 2021)

<sup>48</sup>(Chayko 2021)

during evacuation, posing a serious threat to human rights.<sup>49</sup> By using bots to spread propaganda, Russia violates the right to freedom of speech, as it weakens individual opinion by altering the public perception of reality and preventing access to reliable news.<sup>50</sup>

By systematically blocking access to alternative information, controlling media outlets and education, Russian authorities violate one of the most fundamental HR, freedom of thought and expression, erasing opposition and suppressing disagreement. These findings illustrate how deeply embedded propaganda has become in the everyday lives of citizens in these regions, fueling the broader Russian political and military objectives in the ongoing conflict.

### **3. Violations of Rights to Participate in Democratic Political Processes and Citizenship**

Russian propaganda has a substantial impact on the right to democratic political processes and nationality, ranging from voter suppression to unfair taxation, jury duty, and lack of access to petitioning and protesting.<sup>51</sup> Article 15 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of HR states: "Everyone has the right to a nationality. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality".<sup>52</sup> Propaganda enables Russian leaders to achieve their goals of russifying the occupied regions and creating lawful grounds for occupation, such as referendums and passportization.

#### **3.1 The Referendum in Crimea**

After the occupation of Crimea in February 2014, Russia initiated a referendum to determine whether to join Russia or to restore the 1992 Crimean constitution to have

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<sup>49</sup> (Chayko 2021)

<sup>50</sup> (UF J-School 2020)

<sup>51</sup> (Soken-Huberty 2020)

<sup>52</sup> (United Nations 1948)

greater autonomy within Ukraine. Propaganda has been one of the main ways the results of the referendum were reached. The vote on March 16, 2014 confirmed that 96.8% in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea wished to join Russia.<sup>53</sup> The referendum was recognized as illegal and illegitimate by the US, EU, and most countries, who follow both the international law prohibiting invasions of sovereign countries and the Ukrainian Constitution that states that changes to the territorial borders of Ukraine can be made only by a whole-country vote and not a regional referendum.<sup>54</sup>

Propaganda significantly affected the referendum's results and their presentation. First, no pro-Ukrainian parties were allowed to campaign, and all billboards, news and parades were only promoting the pro-Russian views, villainizing Ukraine and portraying it as a traitor. The billboards in Crimea used vivid imagery which made Crimeans feel fear toward Ukraine and pushed voters towards joining Russia. Some billboards referred to Ukraine using Nazi and Fascist symbols.<sup>55</sup>

Second, Russian propaganda used the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to justify the annexation of Crimea. R2P was implemented by the UN in 2005 to protect people from “war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity when a nation fails in its responsibility to protect its citizens”.<sup>56</sup> Russia claimed it has a responsibility to protect the Russian-speaking people of Crimea who were undergoing oppression. Crimea had a large Russian-speaking population due to the history of deportation and illegal Russian settlements. Propaganda claimed that their rights were not protected in Ukraine and that they are always facing discrimination, which it used to justify Russian occupation.

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<sup>53</sup> (Charron 2016)

<sup>54</sup> (Charron 2016)

<sup>55</sup> (Lovin and Simmons 2014)

<sup>56</sup> (Ashby 2022)

However, Crimeans did not face discrimination while Crimea was part of Ukraine, but under the influence of propaganda - many started to believe they would if they voted to remain within Ukraine.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, judging by the reportage of results of Russian domestic election citing almost uniform support of Putin, it is clear that the published results of 95-98% voting to join Russia can be a part of the broader propaganda campaign as well, as those results are not realistic nor cited. Many outside experts suggest that Russian authorities are responsible for falsifying the results of Crimea's elections, questioning the transparency of the Crimean Referendum.<sup>58</sup>

The case of the Crimean referendum is a direct violation of the right to democratic processes due to the suppression of opposition voices, manipulative campaigning using propaganda, and vote manipulation.

### **3.2 Rights to Nationality**

Since the occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014, Russia has started passportization – a policy aimed at giving Russian passports to as many residents as possible. Its pace increased significantly after Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on a simplified procedure for issuing passports in April 2019. As of January 2021, about 400,000 residents of the occupied territories of Ukraine received Russian passports, totaling 600,000 Ukrainians from the uncontrolled DPR and LPR having Russian passports.<sup>59</sup>

Isaiah Berlin separates liberty into negative and positive. Negative liberty is visible,

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<sup>57</sup> (Desai, Balraj 2014)

<sup>58</sup> (Charron 2016)

<sup>59</sup> (Hor 2021)

it examines the degree to which the government restricts one's decisions by legislation and visible barriers, while positive liberty is much more insidious, it is about the degree to which one's decisions are influenced by other factors, to which one is free to achieve goals.<sup>60</sup> What forces Ukrainian citizens to violate the Ukrainian law of prohibition of dual citizenship is not specific legislation from the Russian side, but an infringement on positive liberty. Propaganda is one of the means through which the government undermines positive liberty. Residents of the occupied regions are not legally forced to switch passports, but through propaganda they were told that without Russian passports, their lives would become impossible - they would not be able to access public services, such as healthcare, enroll in universities, vote in local elections, receive maternity and pension payments, freely enter the territory of Russia, work, and reside there. However, Maria Kucherenko, an analyst at the Centre for Civil Society Studies of Ukraine states "These passports do not give anything from a social point of view. It is a certificate of protection from local security forces in the occupied territory. But [passport holders] cannot receive Russian pensions, or any other social benefits, or maternity capital without registering in the territory of the Russian Federation".<sup>61</sup> Hence, it shows how Russian propaganda infringes on people's positive liberty and violates their right to nationality through manipulated passportization.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that Russian propaganda in the occupied regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea has a significant impact on the violations of first-generation HR, which shows how Russia uses soft power strategies to violate fundamental HR along with

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<sup>60</sup> (Carter 2021)

<sup>61</sup> (Zhukova 2021)

the visible use of hard power.

This study has identified that propaganda violates the right to freedom of speech and thought, beginning in schools where children are exposed to distorted historical narratives and the erasure of Ukrainian culture. For adults, state-controlled media and social platforms become tools of suppression of thought, isolating entire populations from alternative viewpoints.

Moreover, the results of this investigation show that propaganda serves as a weapon of discrimination. The narrative of “Novorossiia” diminishes Ukrainian identity, while the erasure of indigenous Crimean Tatar rights undercuts religious and cultural freedoms. The systematic pressure to acquire Russian passports further erodes the right to nationality, manipulating the population into rejecting their Ukrainian citizenship.

The article has also shown that by undermining democratic processes, particularly in the case of the Crimean referendum, and reshaping the identity of entire communities, Russian propaganda became an extension of the occupation. It justifies the war’s devastation with narratives of blame and nostalgia for a Soviet past, providing a false sense of security to those living in isolation from the outside world in the unrecognized republics of DPR and LPR.

Ultimately, the greatest danger of Russian propaganda is its ability to reshape reality in the minds of those it targets, making the truth an ever-distant memory. As long as information can be weaponized this way, the fight for human rights in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea will remain. Russian propaganda has been successful in backing up the Russian military invasions not only to third parties, but even to people suffering from it due to its professional techniques, timing and targeting of vulnerable people. In a world where

information is power, the loss of truth may be the most profound violation of all.

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## The Loss of Truth: Russian Propaganda and First-Generation Human Rights Violations in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea Before the 2022 Full-Scale Invasion – Antonina Student

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