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The Engineered Consensus: How the Russian State Normalizes War Through Society

Вот скажи мне, американец, в чём сила? Разве в деньгах? Вот и брат говорит, что в деньгах. У тебя много денег, и чего? Я вот думаю, что сила в правде: у кого правда, тот и сильней! (Danila Bodrov.¹ A quote from the iconic Russian movie “Брат 2” (Brother 2))

Introduction

War is a form of conflict characterized by the use of armed force, violence, and destruction. As such, it represents an abnormal phenomenon that poses significant moral and ethical challenges. In general, human beings instinctively avoid risk, danger, and threat, which makes societal acceptance of war inherently difficult. Paradoxically, however, the frequency of armed conflicts has increased since the end of World War II, even as the number of casualties per conflict has significantly decreased, as depicted in Figure 1.

¹ A. Balabanov (Writer), A. Balabanov (Director) (2000). *Брат 2! Данила возвращается!* [Motion Picture].

This paradox suggests a striking development: while armed conflicts have become more common, they are, on average, less deadly than those in the past. It appears that humanity possesses a certain threshold of tolerance for conflict, but a large-scale war involving extensive casualties and destruction will certainly exceed this threshold. The war in Ukraine exemplifies this cognitive dissonance, particularly for the European continent, which – until recently – had been among the most stable and peaceful regions in the post-World War II era. Historically, major armed conflicts of the 20th century occurred primarily in Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Middle East, with the Korean, Vietnam, and Afghan wars among the most significant. However, in 2023, the war in Ukraine accounted for over half of all global conflict-related casualties, making Europe the deadliest continent in terms of war fatalities for the first time since 1939–1945.

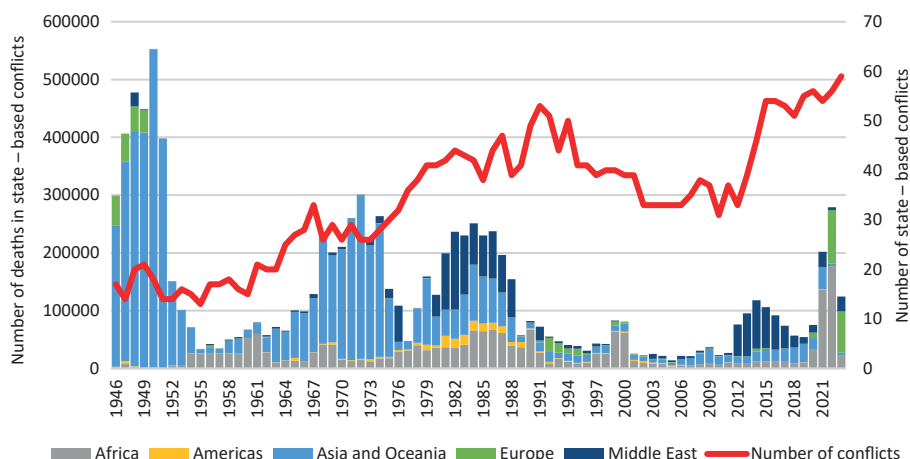


Figure 1: The Paradox: more conflicts but fewer deaths

The illustration is produced by combining two sets of data: “Number of deaths in state-based conflicts” and “Number of state-based conflicts”.

The data “Number of deaths in state-based conflicts” is available at Our World in Data: *Deaths in state-based conflicts by region* (2024, August 26). <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/deaths-in-state-based-conflicts-by-region> [accessed: 1.12.2024].

The data “Number of state-based conflicts” is available at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research of Uppsala University: *UCDP Dataset Download Center*. <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/index.html#armedconflict> [accessed: 1.12.2024].

It has been prepared by: Gleditsch, N., Wallensteen, P., Eriksson, M., Sollenberg, M., & Strand, H. (2002). *Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset*. “Journal of Peace Research”, 39(5), 615–637. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343302039005007>; Davies, S., Engström, G., Öberg, M., & Pettersson, T. (2024). *Organized violence 1989–2023, and the prevalence of organized crime groups*. “Journal of Peace Research”, 61(4), 673–693. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433241262912>.

Since Europe is not a homogeneous political entity but a mosaic of nation-states, proximity to Russia appears to influence threat perception differently in each state. Countries such as Finland and Poland, sharing borders or close proximity to Russia, have prioritized national security and preparedness for potential escalation. In contrast, public opinion in France, Germany, and Italy ranked Russia only sixth, seventh, and twelfth, respectively, among perceived security threats.² Given the detrimental impact of warfare on both security and welfare, it is logical that average European public sentiment remains predominantly anti-war. However, the degree of societal concern is not uniform across the continent and correlates strongly with geographic, historical, and political variables.

On the other hand, Russia has been exhibiting remarkable ingenuity in social conditioning by constructing an alternative reality to maintain public support for its pro-war policies, despite the war's evident toll on civilian life. In the early stages of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Russian military – across its land, air, and naval forces – was widely perceived as a formidable power. The now-infamous slogan “Kyiv in three days” was taken seriously not only by the Russian public but by international actors, some of whom evacuated diplomatic staff, while others offered to evacuate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. However, the anticipated *blitzkrieg* quickly collapsed, culminating in a strategic withdrawal of Russian forces from the outskirts of Kyiv.

This military miscalculation posed a serious challenge to regime legitimacy and narrative control. The contrast with previous successful operations – such as the war in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – has further complicated the regime's task of justifying the ongoing war. Since 2022, the Russian military has visibly deteriorated in terms of weaponry, logistics, manpower, and operational capacity, while the Ukrainian side has been significantly strengthened by Western-supplied arms. For instance, the arrival of HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems) in the summer of 2022 proved to be a turning point, contributing decisively to Ukrainian counter-offensives.³

Nevertheless, despite prolonged setbacks, a costly war of attrition, and enormous casualties, the Russian government has been able to maintain tight control over domestic opinion and continues to enjoy a substantial degree of popular support. According to a 2025 Levada Center survey, 49%

² Public opinion on Russia's war against Ukraine (2024, February 23). European Parliament. Eurobarometer: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine> [accessed: 1.04.2025].

³ J. Psaropoulos (2022, July 26). ‘The Russians have nothing equivalent’: How HIMARS help Ukraine. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/26/the-russians-have-nothing-equivalent-how-himars-help-ukraine> [accessed: 1.04.2025].

of respondents “definitely” support the Russian military’s actions in Ukraine, while an additional 30% say they “rather” support them.⁴ This apparent contradiction invites a critical question: how has the Russian state succeeded in normalizing war within its own society?

Methodology

This article investigates the central question: How and by what means does the Russian state construct social conditioning to normalize war within society? In answering this, it introduces a modified Common Sense, a conceptual model inspired by Antonio Gramsci’s notion of *Cultural Hegemony*, yet developed specifically to analyze war normalization in modern Russia.

Social conditioning is a regular tool of state regimes, particularly those with authoritarian tendencies. It carries populist characteristics and aims to render society less resistant to government policies. In authoritarian states, where regime survival is often equated with state survival, this manipulation becomes more deliberate and profound. The regime systematically blurs the line between these two concepts – treating any threat to itself as a threat to the state. Within such a system, the regime shapes the entire cognitive framework through which society perceives reality, security, morality, and legitimacy.

Gramsci’s theory provides a philosophical foundation for understanding these mechanisms. At the core of his idea of *Cultural Hegemony* lies the assertion that the ruling class maintains its dominance not solely through coercion but through the engineering of *consent*, embedding a particular worldview into society as *common sense*. This common sense, as Gramsci clarifies, is not merely “good sense” but a set of beliefs, dogmas, and assumptions that seem natural and unquestionable to the average individual.⁵

Gramsci’s Marxism, unlike its economics-centered traditions, delves into the social, cultural, and national dimensions of class struggle. However, Gramsci’s work remains philosophical and unstructured in form, making it insufficient for empirical analysis of modern regimes. This article, therefore, introduces Gramscian theory in a more practical model – the modified Common Sense – which can also be used as a standalone analytical tool.

The model also resonates with constructivist theory in international relations, particularly in how it views identity, narrative, and perception

⁴ Конфликт с Украиной в марте 2025 года: внимание и главные события, поддержка военных, отношение к переговорам и предложению о тридцатидневном перемирии (2025, April 1). Левада-Центр. <https://www.levada.ru/2025/04/01/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-v-marte-2025-goda-vnimanie-i-glavnye-sobytiya-podderzhka-voennyh-otnoshenie-k-peregovoram-i-predlozheniyu-o-tridsatidnevnom-peremirii/> [accessed: 2.04.2025].

⁵ S. Jones (2006). *Antonio Gramsci*. Routledge. London, New York, pp. 53–56.

as socially constructed. Scholars such as Gearóid Ó Tuathail have criticized classical geopolitics for treating spatial structures – e.g., Heartland/Rimland and East/West – as natural and fixed.⁶ From a constructivist lens, such categories are artificial and ideologically motivated. Similarly, the Russian regime constructs geopolitical identity by embedding narratives that serve its strategic needs, often under the guise of natural historical destiny or national survival.

There are four distinguishable elements that make up a national identity: *Fear, Sentiments, Historical Justice, and a Sense of Exceptionalism*. A nation generally thinks of itself as unique, feels sentimental for compatriots, appeals for historical justice, and fears powers that jeopardize its well-being or even existence. These elements, if manipulated skillfully, provide fertile ground for the regime to construct specific dogmas – strong narratives that reorient the public perception of war, sovereignty, and justice. These dogmas can be easily embedded into the common sense of a society. By cultivating convenient, unquestionable ‘truths’, a ruling class eventually controls the *national common sense*. In the case of Russia, the ruling regime has adopted four specific dogmas: NATO expansion, Protection of Russians abroad, Unipolar world order, and Traditional values.

These dogmas are designed as interconnected engines of the narrative ecosystem that produces acceptance – and even internalization – of war as normal. In other words, they can give a ‘rational’ explanation to any state policies and decisions. The Modified Common Sense, illustrated in Figure 2, visualizes the interaction between elements and dogmas that finally produces societal consent of war as just, necessary, and even moral.

This article employs qualitative research methodology, focusing on the period from 2000 to the present, which encompasses the evolution of the current Russian regime. While the War in Ukraine is the central case for observing the process of war normalization, the Modified Gramscian Common Sense model is not limited to wartime propaganda or recent developments. Rather, it studies a broad range of narratives that significantly predate the outbreak of conflict in 2014 or the full-scale invasion in 2022. These earlier narratives – rooted in post-Soviet identity crises, geopolitical grievances, and the reimagining of history – form the essential foundation upon which current justifications for war are built.

⁶ G. Ó Tuathail (1999). *Understanding Critical Geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Society*. In: C.S. Gray, G. Sloan (Eds.). *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy* (pp. 107–124). London, Portland. Frank Cass Publishers. https://criticalgeopolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/toal_understandingcriticalgeopolitics1999.pdf [accessed: 28.10.2025].



Figure 2: Modified Gramscian Common Sense

Analyzing these earlier narratives is crucial for understanding the long-term engineering of war normalization. They reveal how the regime has gradually assembled a comprehensive worldview that portrays Russia as a besieged yet exceptional power, surrounded by hostile forces and burdened with a historical mission. This worldview functions as a connecting point between the ongoing war and the broader ideological architecture of the Russian state. Through this lens, war is not an aberration, but the culmination of a long-term effort to shape societal consciousness and redefine Russia's place in the world.

Primary sources for this research include official speeches, state media, essays, public rituals, memorial practices, and symbolic artifacts. Some of this material is not available in English or is limited in comprehension for non-Russian speakers. Therefore, the author will handle translation, transliteration, and interpretation to the best of his expertise.

Vladimir Putin's speeches and essays

2007 Munich speech, Unipolar world order and NATO expansion

Vladimir Putin's address at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2007 marked a bold and confrontational moment in post-Cold War international relations. In the speech, Putin delivered a direct and audacious critique of the unipolar world order and the perceived Western dominance

embedded in the post-World War II international system. Framing the global order as one designed to serve the interests of the West – particularly the United States and its allies – Putin positioned Russia as a challenger to this hegemonic structure. While the primary audience of his remarks was the international community, the speech also carried a significant implicit message for the domestic Russian audience: that Russia, under his leadership, would assert its demand for respect and equal status on the global stage.⁷

A central theme of the speech was Putin's criticism of NATO's eastward expansion, which he depicted as a direct threat to Russia's security. He also expressed discontent with the unilateral actions of both the United States and the European Union, questioned the legitimacy of the existing security architecture, and referenced alternative international formations such as BRIC (prior to the inclusion of South Africa in what would later become BRICS).

Notably, during the post-speech Q&A session, a journalist pointed out the voluntary nature of NATO membership. Putin responded by asserting that any eastward movement of the alliance could logically only be interpreted as being directed against Russia. This interpretation, while simplistic, is a powerful narrative – easily absorbed into the worldview of the average Russian citizen. It provides a clear and emotionally resonant explanation for Russia's strategic posture and sense of encirclement, thereby reinforcing domestic legitimacy for a more assertive foreign policy. Surely, the dogma "NATO expansion" is derivable from the "Unipolar world", but it is such a strong narrative by itself that NATO has had to react and tackle it by dedicating a subsection on the official website, which debunks several myths about eastward expansion.⁸

Putin's Munich speech has since come to be viewed as a foundational text in Russia's advocacy for a multipolar world order. In stark contrast, Charles Krauthammer, in his article "The Unipolar Moment", argued that a multipolar world would not lead to greater stability but rather to disorder and insecurity, especially for the United States. Krauthammer warned that such a system would likely give rise to numerous "weapon states" hostile to the West.⁹

⁷ *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy* (2007, February 10). The Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034> [accessed: 3.03.2025].

⁸ *De-bunking Russian disinformation on NATO* (last updated 2024, October 24). North Atlantic Treaty Organization. <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/115204.htm> [accessed: 3.03.2025].

⁹ C. Krauthammer (1990/1991). *The Unipolar Moment*. "Foreign Affairs", 70(1, America and the World), pp. 23–33.

Federal Assembly speech and the protection of Russians abroad

Before the speech in Munich, Vladimir Putin gave another famous speech in Russia in front of the Federal Assembly in 2005. The main topic of his speech was the development challenges of Russia in general; however, there are four sentences that have been quoted by many:

Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself. (Vladimir Putin¹⁰)

Interpreting the end of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical disaster has a strong effect on the sentiments and nostalgia of the people who actually lived through the disintegration and the difficult '90s period. Defining it as a *geopolitical* disaster gives the phrase a certain metaphorical charm; nevertheless, Putin would later define it as a *humanitarian* disaster in an interview with Radio Europe 1 – Jean-Pierre Elkabbach – and TF1 TV channel – Gilles Bouleau.¹¹ It is hard to decipher if it was Putin's intention to build solidarity among Russians in Russia with Russians abroad, but this speech has become one of the integral pillars of the dogma "Protection of Russians abroad".

Putin's essay: historical justice and Russification of Ukrainian identity

The speeches delivered in Munich and at the Federal Assembly addressed recent developments and current world affairs. However, the 2021 essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* by Vladimir Putin turns to historical annals to construct and reinforce ideologically convenient labels.¹² These labels serve to justify the claim that Ukraine is an artificial entity. Putin employs the pejorative term *okraina* ("border", "periphery" in Russian) to explain the etymology of the word *Ukraine*. The essay also encapsulates the Russian neorealist worldview, according to which Russia is never the

¹⁰ V. Putin (2005, April 25). *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*. The Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> [accessed: 24.12.2024].

¹¹ Vladimir Putin's interview with Radio Europe 1 and TF1 TV channel (2014, June 4). The Kremlin: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/45832> [accessed: 12.12.2024].

¹² V. Putin (2021, July 12). *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. The Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [accessed: 3.03.2025].

aggressor but is constantly provoked by its neighbors and rivals into defensive responses. Much of modern Ukraine, the essay argues, consists of historically Russian lands such as Crimea, Malorossiia, and Novorossiia. While these terms have long existed in Russian academic discourse, Putin's essay rebrands and weaponizes them against Ukrainian identity. Interestingly, although Putin generally expresses demonstrative respect for Russian history, he openly criticizes the Bolsheviks and the Soviet government for having "gifted" territories to Ukraine. He writes that "... modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era" and explicitly claims that the Ukrainian government is controlled by the West and driven by Russophobia. The essay has deeply penetrated Russian public consciousness and laid the ideological groundwork for the 2022 full-scale invasion. All four major dogmas are present in the text, with the strongest emphasis placed on the narrative of protecting Russians abroad.

Soviet propaganda, similarly, was quick and cynical in shifting narratives. For example, in the early 1930s, the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* portrayed Germany as a threat, only to reverse this after the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939. Between 1939 and 1941, Germany was depicted as an ally; however, the narrative tone shifted again, portraying Germany as the primary enemy in 1941.¹³

Putin's announcement of the Special Military Operation

On 24 February 2022, Putin aired live on the state TV channel to announce his decision to start a special military operation.¹⁴ He deliberately avoided calling it a "war" because it resonates with negative connotations. A war is associated with tragedy and suffering, and declaring war implicitly means accepting the role of an aggressor. Furthermore, war and the use of armed force are prohibited by the UN Charter, so technically, war is illegal according to international law. However, there are two loopholes in the UN Charter: (1) Article 42, Chapter VII, and (2) Article 51, Chapter VII. Article 42 allows collective military intervention authorized by the UN Security Council, provided that the resolution receives nine affirmative votes out of 15 UN SC members and no veto from the permanent members. Article 51 is essentially less complex; it recognizes a state's right to self-defense. For instance, in the case of the Georgian War in 2008, both Georgia and Russia directly referred to Article

¹³ О. Григорьева (2008). *Формирование образа Германии советской пропагандой в 1933–1941 гг.* Московский Государственный Университет. Moscow. Российская Государственная Библиотека. <https://viewer.rsl.ru/ru/rsl01003451802?page=1&rota te=0&theme=white> [accessed: 28.10.2025].

¹⁴ V. Putin (2022, February 24). *Address by the President of the Russian Federation.* The Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> [accessed: 1.12.2024].

51 in their speeches during three emergency meetings with the UN SC on 8 and 10 August, 2008.¹⁵ Similarly, in 2022, the permanent representative of the Russian Federation to the UN, Vassily Nebenzia, informed the Security Council that the invasion was in accordance with Article 51.¹⁶ The interesting part is that Nebenzia attached a full text of Putin's speech as an explanatory clause. In its essence, the Special Military Operation announcement speech is a quintessence and a final form of the Russian regime to normalize and necessitate the war.

War normalizing symbols

ZOV

The invasion of Ukraine quickly acquired a symbol: the letters Z, O, and V, initially painted on Russian armored vehicles during the assault. These markings were likely left over from Allied Resolve 2022 – joint military exercises with Belarus held near the Ukrainian border just weeks before the war began.¹⁷ In military practice, such symbols typically designate unit direction or purpose – in the case of the Russian invasion, Z might have stood for *Zapad* (West), V for *Vostok* (East), and O possibly for special operations. Russia, anticipating a swift victory, did not pre-plan visual propaganda. Nonetheless, as early as 2 March 2022, these letters began appearing across social media platforms, embraced by war supporters.¹⁸ They have since evolved into arch-symbols

¹⁵ *Press Release SC/9417* (2008, August 8). Security Council. United Nations, Meetings Coverage and Press Releases. <https://press.un.org/en/2008/sc9417.doc.htm> [accessed: 10.12.2024]; *Press Release SC/9418* (2008, August 8). Security Council. United Nations, Meetings Coverage and Press Releases. <https://press.un.org/en/2008/sc9418.doc.htm> [accessed: 10.12.2024]; *Press Release SC/9419* (2008, August 10). Security Council. United Nations, Meetings Coverage and Press Releases. <https://press.un.org/en/2008/sc9419.doc.htm> [accessed: 10.12.2024].

¹⁶ The Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, Vassily Nebenzia (2022, February 24). *Letter dated 24 February 2022 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General*. United Nations Digital Library. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959647?ln=en&v=pdf> [accessed: 1.03.2025].

¹⁷ R. McDermott (2022). *Allied Resolve 2022: Moscow's Maskirovka Operation*. "Eurasia Daily Monitor", 19(12). <https://jamestown.org/program/allied-resolve-2022-moscows-maskirovka-operation/> [accessed: 7.03.2025].

¹⁸ I. Marandici (2023, January 30). *Z-Propaganda and Semiotic Resistance: Contesting Russia's War Symbols in Moldova and Beyond*. "Comparative Southeast European Studies", 71(4), 585–616. <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2023-0024>.

of war loyalty, featured in public murals, rallies, and clothing. Interestingly, most post-Soviet countries formally or informally ban these symbols.¹⁹

Парад 9 мая и Бессмертный полк
(The 9 May Parade and Immortal Regiment)

The 9 May parade is a monumental event celebrating the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. It usually consists of a military display, a ceremonial soldier march, and the Immortal Regiment procession. Since 9 May represents the most significant date in Russia, it offers an ideal occasion for foreign leaders wishing to express alignment with Moscow to demonstrate their solidarity. This year, the European visitors were the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. According to the Kremlin, the military parade on Red Square featured “55 ceremonial units of over 11,500 service personnel, including over 1,500 personnel involved in the special military operation”.²⁰

The Immortal Regiment is a relatively recent addition to Victory Day commemorations, originating as a civil initiative in Tyumen in 2007 and gaining its current name in 2012.²¹ Originally, the initiative aimed solely to honor those who died during World War II, with annual marches held on 9 May. However, beginning in 2014, the emphasis gradually shifted from a victory over Nazi Germany to a triumph over Nazism and fascism. Over time, such rhetoric enabled the ongoing war in Ukraine to be integrated into the narrative as a continuation of Russia’s historical struggle against Nazism. Notably, the official website of the Immortal Regiment states that in 2022 and 2023, the procession was held “in liberated from Nazis Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions”, explicitly labeling Ukrainians as Nazis.

This transformation of national memory and a civic initiative into an instrument of state ideology reflects a deliberate project by the Russian regime. These two events are perfect examples of not only post-truth, but also skillful attachment of national tragedy to the current war in Ukraine.

Аллея Ангелов (Alley of Angels)

The death of children is an emotionally powerful event in any society; however, the Russian regime has strategically constructed a potent narrative

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 597–598.

²⁰ *Parade marking the 80th anniversary of the Great Victory* (2025, May 9). The Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76879> [accessed: 10.05.2025].

²¹ Бессмертный полк России (2024–2025). *История Движения Бессмертный полк России*. Бессмертный полк России. <https://polkrf.ru/about/o-dvizhenii/istoriya-dvizheniya> [accessed: 28.03.2025].

around this tragedy. The “Alley of Angels” is a memorial complex located in occupied Donetsk, established to commemorate children who allegedly died as a result of Ukrainian aggression. The first element of the memorial – a plaque bearing the names of deceased children – was installed in 2015, and in 2017, it was complemented by a statue depicting two children. Furthermore, 27 July has been designated as a day of remembrance for children who, according to the Russian narrative, have died due to Ukrainian military actions since 2014.²² In addition to the physical memorial, a digital platform under the same name provides a list of the deceased children and receives support from the Presidential Fund for Cultural Initiatives.²³ This combination of physical monuments, commemorative dates, and state-supported digital projects forms a powerful tool that appeals to emotions over critical thinking, thereby framing the war as a struggle for justice and survival.

Gas pipeline installations

In March 2025, Russian forces carried out a covert military operation code-named *Поток* (“Stream”), which involved infiltrating Ukrainian positions through a 12–15 km gas pipeline to reclaim Sudzha, a town in Russia’s Kursk region. Russian state media celebrated the operation as a triumph of ingenuity and bravery.²⁴ However, Ukrainian sources reported that the operation had been anticipated, and Russian troops were targeted by artillery and drones.²⁵ Allegedly, due to spending several days inside the pipeline, many Russian soldiers died from suffocation, while others suffered permanent lung damage from methane.²⁶ The episode culminated in the unveiling of symbolic installations: a 16-meter pipeline replica was erected near a church in Ekaterinburg and near a cathedral in the Omsk region, while a smaller 1-meter version appeared in Kursk.²⁷ Despite potentially high casualties and

²² Музей истории города Мончегорска (n.d.). *Ангелы Донбасса*. Музей истории города Мончегорска. <https://mig.org.ru/angelyi-donbassa/> [accessed: 2.04.2025].

²³ *Посвящение ангелам*. Аллея Ангелов. <https://alleyaangelov.ru/> [accessed: 3.03.2025].

²⁴ А. Хлевнюк, В. Стурит, А. Кувшинова (2025, March 15). *„Труба” врагу: участники легендарной операции в Судже рассказывают о своем подвиге*. ТАСС. <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/23404523> [accessed: 10.04.2025].

²⁵ К. Denisova (2025, March 9). *Ukraine releases video of Russian attack via gas pipeline in Kursk Oblast*. The Kyiv Independent. <https://kyivindependent.com/ukraines-military-releases-video-of-russian-gas-pipeline-attack-in-kursk-oblast/> [accessed: 1.04.2025].

²⁶ *Легенда о трубе* (2025, April 19). Новая газета Европа. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/04/19/legenda-o-trube> [accessed: 10.05.2025].

²⁷ *В Омской области возле кафедрального собора установили копию трубы, по которой российские военные проникли в Суджу* (2025, May 2). Вёрстка. <https://verstka.>

operational failure, the Russian state seeks to mythologize the event, using the gas pipeline as a heroic symbol.

Парты героев (The desks of heroes)

As casualties mounted to levels difficult to conceal, the Russian regime launched an initiative to glorify those who died in the war. Its method is to attach a photo of a fallen soldier to a school desk in the school they once attended. The initiative quickly spread nationwide, with participation from ruling parliamentary parties. For example, *Единая Россия* (United Russia) party sponsored the distribution of such desks in several regions.²⁸ Notably, the project pairs images of those killed in Ukraine with those from the Great Patriotic War, deliberately blending two events into a single memory reflex. Moreover, exposing children to war propaganda has always proved to be an effective instrument of war normalization.

Monuments. “*Не сдаюсь!*” monument glorifying suicide

The government has installed dozens of monuments and memorials across Russia, predominantly in poor, underdeveloped regions from which most soldiers are recruited, while cities like Moscow and Saint Petersburg remain largely untouched.²⁹ Through such installations, regional governments signal solidarity with the central government’s agenda. One particularly striking monument, “*Не сдаюсь!*” (“I will not surrender!”) in the Moscow region, depicts a severely wounded Russian soldier holding a grenade – implying suicide over capture. While the statue may appear tragic or stoic, its underlying message is the glorification of death over surrender. It promotes a culture of martyrdom that elevates sacrifice as a unique traditional value of Russian identity. Suicide on the battlefield is not uncommon; according to OSINT analyst Cloooud, from June 2024 to March 2025, the rate in the

media/v-omskoi-oblasti-voze-kafedralnogo-sobora-ustanovili-kopiyu-truby [accessed: 10.05.2025]; *Легенда о трубе*. Ibid.

²⁸ «Единая Россия» установила новые Парты Героя в честь участников СВО в регионах (2025, March 7). Единая Россия. <https://er.ru/activity/news/edinaya-rossiya-ustanovila-novye-party-geroya-v-chest-uchastnikov-svo-v-regionah> [accessed: 3.05.2025].

²⁹ “Памятник безысходности”. В Сибири потратили не менее полумиллиарда на мемориалы войне в Украине (2025, February 28). Сибирь.Реалии. <https://www.sibreal.org/a/v-sibiri-potratili-ne-menee-polumilliarda-na-memorialy-voyne-v-ukraine/33317909.html> [accessed: 30.04.2025].

Russian army was roughly one per day, with grenades as the second most common method.³⁰

War propaganda rhetoric

Подлетное время (Time-to-target)

A highly effective rhetorical device repeatedly employed by Putin is the emphasis on the time it would take for a NATO missile to reach Moscow or any other city in Russia. While an actual NATO strike against Russia is highly improbable, framing the threat in technical terms – such as a “7–10 minute” time-to-target from Ukraine, as he did in 2021 – creates a sense of urgency and credibility.³¹ This catchy rhetoric can be even further reinforced by drawing historical parallels to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Ultimately, this rhetoric operates the “NATO expansion” dogma to justify the war in Ukraine.

“Мы – русские, с нами Бог” (“We are Russians, God is with us”)

Traditional values and a sense of exceptionalism are clearly embedded in this commonly cited Russian phrase. Its origins likely trace back to Field Marshal Alexander Suvorov, a prominent military leader of the Russian Empire. The phrase appears in a speech he delivered to motivate his troops when they were encircled by French forces in Switzerland in 1799, and Austrian allies were late.³² While Suvorov’s original invocation was framed in a religious context, contemporary usage of the phrase carries a nationalistic character. The phrase has become deeply ingrained in Russian national identity, and the regime has evidently capitalized on its resonance by featuring it in war propaganda materials, including posters, bumper stickers, and patriotic songs. It mostly triggers the “Traditional values” dogma as the glorious military history of Russia, but nowadays it also resonates with the “NATO expansion” dogma, labeling it as Western systemic provocation.

³⁰ *Russian Suicides, June 2024–March 2025* (2025, April 3). X. <https://x.com/GloOuD/status/1907878533856149934> [accessed: 30.04.2025].

³¹ *Путин назвал время подлета ракет НАТО к Москве при размещении на Украине* (2021, December 21). РБК. <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/61c1cba09a79477c83bc4773> [accessed: 19.12.2024].

³² А. Замостьянов (2024, September 18). «Мы – русские. С нами Бог!». Литературная Газета. <https://lgz.ru/article/my-russkie-s-nami-bog/> [accessed: 13.03.2025].

Song “Я русский” (“I am Russian”)

Since its release, the song has functioned as a kind of unifying force for the Russian population. Its performer, Shaman, experienced a rapid rise from a relatively unknown artist to a national pop icon. He was awarded the title of “Honored Artist of Russia” in a Kremlin ceremony and served as an official representative for Vladimir Putin during the 2024 presidential election campaign.³³ While the song is clearly intended to evoke patriotic sentiment, it has also sparked controversy, particularly in ethnically diverse regions. For instance, in a school in Tatarstan, a teacher allegedly forced students to raise their hands during the performance of the song. She further absurdly commented that the gesture was not only an act of patriotism but also an acknowledgement and pride in being a Russian citizen.³⁴ Thus, the song has become associated not only with Russian patriotism but also with Russian chauvinism.

“Можем повторить!” (“We can do it again!”)

The phrase implies a decisive victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany and has gained popularity since the annexation of Crimea. The transformation from the Soviet-era slogan “Лишь бы не было войны” (“As long as there is no war”) to “Можем повторить!” (“We can do it again!”) illustrates a generational shift: those who experienced the horrors and hardships of war value peace, while the younger generation tends to frame the past through the lens of historical justice and revanchism. This shift may also reflect the stagnant and depressive reality of everyday life for many Russians, which fosters feelings of grievance – emotions that the state has successfully exploited to normalize war.³⁵

War notions and myths

Распятый мальчик (Crucified boy)

In the summer of 2014, the Ukrainian army liberated Sloviansk from Russian-backed separatists. Following the retreat, many separatists and

³³ Путин присвоил певцу Шаман звание заслуженного артиста России (2024, July 22). РБК. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/22/07/2024/669eb33b9a794708abcae0e3> [accessed: 20.03.2025].

³⁴ «Что, у нас мало так патриотов?» (2023, March 17). Коммерсантъ. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5876307> [accessed: 10.03.2025].

³⁵ Кто и зачем придумал лозунг «Можем повторить»? (2022, May 9). Meduza. <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/09/kto-i-zachem-pridumal-lozung-mozhem-povto-rit> [accessed: 2.05.2025].

pro-Russian sympathizers fled to Russia's Rostov region. Russian state television visited a refugee camp there and interviewed a woman named *Галина Пышняк* (Galina Pyshnyak), who recounted an extremely disturbing story. She claimed to have personally witnessed Ukrainian soldiers crucify a young boy in front of his mother and a crowd of civilians. This emotionally charged account, however, could not be independently verified. Later, Pyshnyak declined to confirm the authenticity of her story and expressed regret for telling it.³⁶ Despite its likely fabricated nature, the story has effectively triggered the “Protection of Russians abroad” narrative promoted by the Russian state.

Русская Весна (Russian Spring)

Traditional values and the civilizational mission have long been integral to Russian political consciousness. The post-Soviet period marked a painful era of identity reconstruction, during which Russia sought an alternative to the unipolar world order dominated by the collective West. The rise of the pro-Russian population in parts of Ukraine in 2014 is often referred to as the “Russian Spring” by pro-Kremlin intellectuals such as Alexander Dugin. Drawing a parallel to the Arab Spring, this phenomenon reflects a shift from a nation-centric to a civilization-centric worldview.³⁷ This transformation underscores a pronounced sense of exceptionalism and triggers key dogmas, especially the “unipolar world”, “protection of Russians abroad”, and “NATO expansion”. The concept of the Russian Spring is relatively dormant but may be revitalized in the states with significant Russian populations, such as Kazakhstan, Moldova, Georgia, Estonia, and Latvia.

Гробовые и Белая Лада (Coffin money and White Lada)

In the summer of 2022, the state television channel *Russia-1* aired a news segment that generated significant public resonance. The short story featured the parents of a deceased soldier, *Алексей Малов* (Aleksey Malov), who had purchased a new white Lada with the “coffin money” – a state compensation given to the families of deceased soldiers. While the report appeared cynical to many viewers, it carried a subtle yet powerful message: for impoverished communities in Russia's regions, war could serve as a viable source of income,

³⁶ М. Борзунова (2021). *История «распятого мальчика»: мы нашли героиню главного фейка войны в Донбассе* [Motion Picture]. Fake News. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8LY1dtSWFk> [accessed: 11.04.2025].

³⁷ Б. Межуев (2024, January/February). *Оглядываясь на «Русскую весну»*. *Россия в глобальной политике*, 1(22), pp. 8–20. Doi:10.31278/1810-6439-2024-22-1-8-20.

and death was portrayed as an ordinary and normalized occurrence.³⁸ In this way, this amoral mini-narrative functioned not only as a war normalization tool but also as a portrayal of war's economic utility. The report concluded by noting that the parents now participate in the Immortal Regiment marches, carrying a portrait of their son.

Regime stratagems

Войну войной не называть (Don't call it a war)

Avoiding the term “war” is more than a semantic preference – it is a deliberate strategy by the Russian regime to frame the conflict on its own terms. The designation “special military operation” sidesteps not only the moral weight of war but also its legal implications under international law. War implies aggression, tragedy, and illegality, while a “special operation” evokes necessity and justification. The regime has already introduced laws that ban the use of the word *war* if it can be interpreted as discrediting the Russian military. Moreover, as *ВВС Русская Служба* reports, declaring war is prohibited by the Russian Constitution and several other state laws.³⁹ Interestingly, the phrase “Россия войны не начинает – она их заканчивает” (“Russia doesn't start wars; she ends them”) includes the word *war* but is not banned since it serves to justify the conflict. Notably, Putin used a similar phrase during his speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club in 2023.⁴⁰ This illustrates the regime's selective use of language: war is acceptable when framed as righteous or defensive. It becomes convenient, then, for the state to construct narratives that emphasize Russia's peace-oriented role, aligning with its self-image as an exceptional and traditionally moral power.

На Украине или В Украине (On Ukraine or In Ukraine)

The subtle debate between “на Украине” and “в Украине” may seem minor to non-native speakers, but it has become deeply political since the Russian invasion in 2022. “На Украине” (“on Ukraine”) frames Ukraine as a geographic

³⁸ И. Шепелин (2022). *Умереть за «гробовую Ладу»* [Motion Picture]. Популярная Политика. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OGitohnPC0> [accessed: 11.04.2025].

³⁹ Прокуратура объяснила, почему в России запрещено слово „война”. Это убедительно? (2022, July 21). *ВВС Русская Служба*: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-62248490> [accessed: 1.05.2025].

⁴⁰ Путин заявил, что Россия не начинала события на Украине, а пытается закончить их (2023, October 5). ТАСС: <https://tass.ru/politika/18920297> [accessed: 1.05.2025].

periphery or territory – consistent with imperial and Soviet usage. In contrast, “в Украине” (“in Ukraine”) affirms Ukraine’s status as a sovereign state. The Russian regime’s insistence on “на Украине” is no linguistic accident; it reflects a refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood. This lexical choice reinforces the ideological foundation of Putin’s historical narrative – Ukraine as an accidental, artificial construct within the Russian civilizational space.

Голая вечеринка Ивлеевой (Ivleeva’s Naked party)

This incident offers a clear illustration of how the state regime selectively responds to social events that receive significant public attention. The so-called “naked party” hosted by Anastasia Ivleeva in December 2023 was not exceptional in nature; however, it gained substantial traction on social media, where it was widely condemned by the public and labeled as “a feast in a time of plague”. Despite the attendance of prominent celebrities – including artists, singers, and influencers – the regime sided with public sentiment. Notably, well-known personalities such as singer Filip Kirkorov and media figure Ksenia Sobchak – a regime-tolerated opposition voice – posted public apologies via their social media platforms.⁴¹ The state capitalized on this moment to reaffirm its commitment to the “traditional values” dogma and to express solidarity with the general public, who are the primary source of manpower for the war.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the Russian state has systematically normalized war within its own society. At the heart of this process lies a deliberate, multidimensional strategy that fuses cultural, legal, historical, linguistic, and symbolic tools into a coherent framework of social conditioning. This normalization is neither incidental nor spontaneous – it is the result of a carefully engineered consensus.

By applying a modified version of Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “common sense”, this paper has attempted to demonstrate how the regime embeds war-supporting narratives into the national consciousness. Through the four emotional elements – Fear, Sentiment, Historical Justice, and Exceptionalism – the state constructs ideological dogmas such as NATO expansion, protection of Russians abroad, traditional values, and resistance to a unipolar

⁴¹ Э. Юсупов (2023, December 28). *Последствия голой вечеринки Ивлеевой*. Lenta.ru. <https://lenta.ru/articles/2023/12/28/posledstviya-goloy-vecherinki-ivleevoy/> [accessed: 16.03.2025].

world. These dogmas serve as the triggers or explanatory mechanisms of war-normalizing symbols, narratives, and stratagems.

Importantly, the analysis shows that the normalization of war is not achieved solely through propaganda in the narrow sense. It operates through an ecosystem of messages and symbols: the lexicon of state speeches, historical revisionism, semiotic manipulation, institutional rituals like the Immortal Regiment, and emotionally potent devices like the Alley of Angels and the “Desks of Heroes”. Even absurd or morally ambiguous narratives – such as purchasing a Lada with “coffin money” – become normalized within this engineered framework, offering utility, continuity, and emotional coherence to a prolonged conflict.

Equally significant is the role of linguistic coding and selective legality. The refusal to call the war a “war”, the reassertion of imperial prepositions like “на Украине”, and the criminalization of dissenting terminology all point to a regime that controls not just the message but the very cognitive grammar through which society processes reality. Language, in this context, is not a medium but a weapon – capable of shaping what can be thought, said, and ultimately believed.

The regime’s success in maintaining domestic support for the war, despite military failures and economic strain, is a testament to the resilience of this system. However, this success also reveals the degree to which perception can be engineered and consent manufactured. The Russian case serves as a powerful reminder that truth in politics is rarely about evidence alone; it is also about the narratives that societies are conditioned to accept as true.

By dissecting this engineered consensus, the article has provided a methodological and conceptual toolset for understanding war normalization in authoritarian regimes. It underscores the need to move beyond simplistic binaries of coercion and consent and instead investigate the mechanisms through which conflict becomes culturally and psychologically embedded. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of how contemporary regimes do not merely justify war – they make it feel normal.

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Abstract

More than three years into the full-scale war in Ukraine, what initially provoked shock and resistance within Russian society has gradually been internalized and normalized, transforming war into an accepted aspect of everyday life. This normalization process serves the strategic objectives of the Russian regime, which seeks to minimize public dissent and sustain the war effort over time. This article explores the mechanisms by which the state has engineered this shift – ranging from propaganda and economic incentives to cultural assimilation and the militarization of daily life. Central to this strategy is the construction of a Gramscian “common sense”, designed to secure social consent and consolidate power, particularly in times of conflict. Through an analysis of key cases of state-driven social conditioning, this study demonstrates how prolonged war is systematically embedded into national identity. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how states manufacture consent for war, ensuring its continuation not solely through coercion, but through the deliberate transformation of societal perception.

Inżynieryjna zgoda: jak rosyjskie państwo normalizuje wojnę poprzez społeczeństwo

Abstrakt

Ponad trzy lata od rozpoczęcia pełnoskalowej wojny w Ukrainie to, co początkowo wywoływało w rosyjskim społeczeństwie szok i opór, zostało stopniowo uwewnętrznione i znormalizowane, przekształcając wojnę w akceptowany element codziennego życia. Proces tej normalizacji służy strategicznym celom rosyjskiego reżimu, który dąży do minimalizowania sprzeciwu społecznego i utrzymania wysiłku wojennego w dłuższej perspektywie. Artykuł analizuje mechanizmy, za pomocą których państwo zaprojektowało tę zmianę – od propagandy i zachęt ekonomicznych po asymilację kulturową i militaryzację życia codziennego. Kluczowym elementem tej strategii jest konstruowanie gramscjańskiego „zdrowego rozsądku”, mającego na celu zabezpieczenie społecznej zgody i konsolidację władzy, zwłaszcza w czasach konfliktu. Poprzez analizę wybranych przypadków sterowanego przez państwo kształtowania postaw społecznych, artykuł ukazuje, w jaki sposób przewlekła wojna jest systematycznie wbudowywana w tożsamość narodową. Ostatecznie badanie to pogłębia zrozumienie, w jaki sposób państwa wytwarzają społeczną zgodę na prowadzenie wojny – zapewniając jej kontynuację nie tylko poprzez przymus, lecz także poprzez celową transformację społecznego postrzegania rzeczywistości.

Keywords: war propaganda, war rhetoric, war narrative, common sense, war normalization

Słowa kluczowe: propaganda wojenna, retoryka wojenna, narracja wojenna, zdrowy rozsądek, normalizacja wojny

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