

Propaganda Messages in Social Media in Latvia's Information Space: Analysis of the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract. The goal of the thesis is to explore propaganda messages in the Latvia's information space in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, focusing on how the “we”–“you” discourse has evolved over time. The theoretical foundation of the thesis consists of theoretical approaches to propaganda, information warfare, and the impact of social media on warfare. For the empirical part of the master's thesis, 270 social media post from January, February, and March of 2022, 2023, and 2024 were analysed using quantitative content analysis. The research results indicate a pronounced “we”–“you” distinction in propaganda messages, which has evolved over time from a negative to a construction of a positive self-portrayal. However, the tendency to separate and polarize two societal groups remains unchanged. The main propaganda messages include attempts to reduce support for Ukraine, undermine trust in the government and international organizations, and aggressive action rationalization.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, propaganda, discourse analysis, information warfare, social media

Introduction

Contemporary military conflicts significantly transform the information space – there is increasing discussion about information warfare, which is conducted through various means such as spreading disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and propaganda. Propaganda can achieve what cannot be accomplished in the physical world – it can emphasize victory even when there is a loss in reality. Information warfare is no longer just an auxiliary strategy but a parallel operation. Recent conflicts have demonstrated that the battle for hearts and minds is just as crucial as physical battles, and social media plays a key role in this process. Both state and non-state actors effectively use social media to gain public support, mislead, and intimidate opponents, and even for

traditional military activities such as intelligence gathering. Political scientist Andis Kudors, in an article about information warfare, poses the question: “The media controlled by Russian authorities today are tools of information warfare. The same goes for those bloggers who, either for pay or voluntarily, fight on the side of the aggressor state – Russia – they remain a part of the aggression. Are we going to try to amicably negotiate with the aggressors to stop waging war against us?” (Kudors 2024). Later, referring to freedom of speech and censorship restrictions, he acknowledges that in a wartime situation, national security must be protected, and messages and media used as tools of information warfare must be restricted. It is worth noting that comprehensive and strong censorship helps the spread of propaganda in society (Ma 2016, 47); therefore, it is important to understand how to limit the dissemination of these propaganda messages. The new information environment has changed not only the nature of warfare but also how communication experts view the information space, leading to a greater focus on promoting media literacy and critical thinking. For example, there are various educational materials available on information warfare: The Latvian National Library has created a lecture titled “Information Warfare in the Media: How Not to Become a Victim” and “War and Public Relations: Can One Exist Without the Other Today?” (Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, Peipiņa 2022; Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, Šķestre 2022). Researchers discuss critical thinking and the public's ability to recognize false information or manipulation in broadcasts (Tomsons, Unāma 2022). These issues have gained prominence since the war began in 2014, but especially after 24 February 2022, as the techniques used in information warfare are an effective means of manipulating people. Therefore, it is important to study what the current messages are, how they have changed over time, and how these messages are constructed. Within this study, propaganda messages disseminated in the Latvian information space are analysed, focusing on messages in the Latvian language. The aim of the study is to investigate propaganda messages in the Latvian information space in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, focusing on how the construction of the “we” vs “you” discourse has changed over time. Two research questions have been formulated:

1. What are the main propaganda messages in the Latvian information space from 2022 to 2024, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war?
2. How is the “we” vs “you” discourse distinction defined in propaganda messages?

Methodology

The study employs content analysis, discourse analysis, and interviews. Content analysis is used to categorize the data. Discourse analysis is applied to analyse the categorized data from the content analysis more deeply and

to understand its underlying meanings. Interviews are conducted to provide more precise explanations of the obtained data, with experts in communication and military public relations being interviewed. Expert interviews are used in the master's thesis because the concept of information warfare is relatively new in the military field in Latvia and has not been extensively studied. However, there are experts whose work is directly related to researching this phenomenon and who specialize in analysing and evaluating the information space.

The analysis was conducted for the years 2022, 2023, and 2024, focusing on three-month periods (January, February, March). The main messages disseminated on social media were identified, and interviews were conducted with experts to help explain the obtained data. Overall, during the quantitative content analysis, 270 various types of social media post (news, posts, comments, images, and videos) from *Facebook*, *X*, *TikTok*, *Telegram*, and *Reddit* were collected and analysed. Some of the reviewed material was not included in the content analysis table as they did not prominently display propaganda messages, but they were still considered to understand the context of the analysed period and the resonance of different topics on social media. The analysed time frame includes January 2022 (58 publications), February 2022 (41 publications), March 2022 (34 publications), January 2023 (33 publications), February 2023 (18 publications), March 2023 (22 publications), January 2024 (19 publications), February 2024 (21 publications), and March 2024 (19 publications). The examined publications are in Latvian. The analysis included both social media posts and comments under these posts to better understand public opinions. The analysed materials were selectively chosen, with the content analysis table including only those publications where propaganda messages were prominently observed.

Ruth Wodak's discourse historical approach was used to analyse the data. Wodak offers an analytical framework for analysing the "we" vs "you" discourse. The adapted framework for this study was derived from the doctoral thesis of researcher Laura Ardava-Āboliņa, in which the discourse of social memory and commemoration during Latvia's Third Awakening was analysed in the media (Ardava 2015). The framework was adapted for the study of propaganda and includes aspects of analysis relevant to the investigation of propaganda messages. The framework consists of four stages: (1) identifying argumentation strategies/techniques, (2) forms of linguistic realization, (3) propaganda objectives, based on the theory of Jowett and O'Donnell (2006), and (4) included messages derived from the key Russian messages defined in the research by NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. The included messages were supplemented during the analysis. In the empirical part of the master's thesis, 270 posts, comments, articles, images, and video materials from social media and news portals were collected, systematized, and analysed using quantitative content analysis. Two expert interviews were conducted – one with Rihards

Bambals, the head of StratCom at the State Chancellery and a political scientist, and the other with Colonel Māris Tūtins, the head of the Information and Analysis Department of the National Armed Forces of Latvia. The interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform, with each interview lasting 30 minutes.

Content analysis is a research method widely used in various academic disciplines, including communication studies, sociology, psychology, and political science. Klaus Krippendorff provides a foundational overview of the principles of content analysis, emphasizing its versatility and applicability in various research contexts. The primary goal of content analysis is to uncover latent meanings, societal norms, and cultural representations embedded within texts or media artifacts (Krippendorff 2018, 10). In this thesis quantitative content analysis was used to analyse and structure data that was obtained from social media – this method allows researcher structure big amount of data and see patterns within analysed data. Content analysis is typically used in conjunction with other methods that allow researchers to uncover deeper meanings. In this study, two additional methods were used – expert interviews and discourse analysis – to analyse the obtained data more comprehensively.

In this study, a semi-structured expert interview was used, which is one of the types of interviews. A semi-structured interview includes both structured questions (usually for obtaining factual information) and more general open-ended questions that allow the interviewee to provide broader insights into the specific issue (Kallio *et al.* 2016). The actual function of expert interviews in the development of individual research, their form, and the methods used to analyse results can vary in each case. Conducting expert interviews can help streamline the time-consuming data collection processes, especially when experts are considered “crystallization points” of practical internal knowledge and are interviewed as participants in a broader group of experts. Expert interviews are also suitable for situations where accessing a specific social field might be difficult or impossible (such as with taboo subjects). In addition to the direct benefits, it is clear that expert interviews offer researchers an efficient means to quickly obtain results (Bogner *et al.* 2009, 12).

To analyse deeper meanings discourse analysis was conducted. Discourse analysis is deeply grounded in various theories – those of society and power, as well as sociology and linguistics. Norman Fairclough's framework for discourse analysis is divided into three dimensions, as discourse is simultaneously considered to be: (1) text (spoken or written, including visual images), (2) discursive practice – the production, consumption, and distribution of texts, and (3) socio-cultural practice. In this thesis discourse historical approach was used. Ruth Wodak is one of the discourse theorists who has developed the discourse historical method (Amoussou, Allagbe 2018, 1–9). The historical method involves integrating as broad a historical context as possible when analysing specific

discursive events. This method views ideology as (often) a one-sided perspective or worldview composed of related mental representations, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and evaluations that are collectively shared by members of a specific social group. Ideologies serve as important tools for creating and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse, such as by constructing hegemonic identity narratives or controlling access to specific discourses or public information (gatekeeping) (Reisigl, Wodak 2009, 88). In the context of propaganda, the power relations between the creators of propaganda and those who can be influenced by it can be analysed using Wodak's "we" vs "you" analytical framework. The division specified in the framework – content, argumentation, and linguistic forms analysis – allows the researcher to differentiate each level and view them as distinct units when analysing texts. Wodak discusses various strategies used in the "we" vs "you" discourse: (1) referential or nomination strategies: aimed at constructing and representing social actors. This is done in several ways: categorizing by affiliation using metaphors and metonymies, and in synecdoche form, where a part represents the whole or the whole represents a part; (2) social actors as individuals, group members, or entire groups: linguistically characterized through predications (generalizations). Predication strategies can be applied, for example, as linguistic forms of positive and negative evaluations of attributes; (3) argumentation strategies and methods of argument development (topoi): used to justify positive and negative statements (Wodak 2010, 17–60).

Results

The results were compiled by analysing the data on a yearly basis, looking for patterns and included propaganda messages, as well as searching for "we" vs "you" discourses.

1. Year 2022: "We" – humbled impoverished people, "you" – corrupt criminal government

The period before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 began with unrest in Kazakhstan, NATO talks with Russia, US talks with Russia, and a statement during an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) meeting about the increased likelihood of war in Europe, the highest in 30 years. These events had an impact on social media publications, but the theme of COVID-19 remained prominent in the informational environment, as well as discussions about the Latvian government and its actions. The Latvian government is frequently disparaged in posts, with various comparisons and metaphors used.

In most publications, the "we" vs "you" dichotomy is presented as a comparison between the people and the government. Analysing the "we" vs "you"

discourse, it is observed that the Latvian people are defined as being oppressed, impoverished, and dissatisfied in contrast to the Latvian government, which is defined as a mafia, junta, or coup plotters. Overall, in the publications, the definition of “we” is observed as negative; there is no constructed positive self-image. Instead, a group definition strategy is used – defining “we” as victims, oppressed, and impoverished due to “you”, where “you” are the Latvian government.

After the full-scale invasion, in the analysed publications, a “we” and “you” discourse is observed, which is related to the opposition between the people (“we”), who are either on Russia’s side or neutral in the war, and those (“you”) who condemn Russia’s invasion. Additionally, there is a dominance of strategies for rationalizing aggressive actions. In the analysed publications, there is a tendency to define “you” as supporters of “war propaganda” or “war hysteria”, referring to Russia’s invasion as a special operation, a liberation operation or a conflict, as well as indicating that “war is a reaction” and a logical outcome. Analysing the publications, it is possible to conclude that after Russia’s full-scale invasion, the main messages are “there is paranoia in Latvia,” “NATO/USA are at war in Ukraine,” and “Latvia’s support for Ukraine is exaggerated,” which overall contribute to the rationalization of aggressive actions.

2. Year 2023: “We” – those who know the truth/critics, “you” – sheep/supporters

The year 2023 began with floods in Jēkabpils, and in February, a draft law supporting the establishment of the National Defense Service was conceptually endorsed. There was also preparation for the Latvian presidential elections, which took place in May, and on 24 February 2023, it marked one year since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These events have influenced social media publications; however, ongoing topics include Latvia’s support for Ukraine, the Latvian government, media, and war. The publications reflect the theme of Russophobia, as well as discussions about the Latvian military.

In the analysed publications, a “we” vs “you” dichotomy is observed where “we” refers to a segment of society that (1) does not express support for Ukraine; (2) criticizes the government’s work/requests the dismissal of the *Saeima*; (3) supports political parties that are in opposition or not in government; (4) advocates for the preservation of the Russian language in the Latvian information space; (5) defines themselves as defenders of the “ordinary” people; and (6) does not consume Latvian media. In contrast, “you” are (1) the Latvian government and its supporters; (2) members of society who express support for Ukraine; (3) those who oppose the preservation of the Russian language in the Latvian information space; (4) the US/NATO/EU; and (5) Latvian media.

Overall, the publications from 2023 show a pronounced “we” vs “you” division. Since 2022, this division has become much more pronounced and frequently

mentioned in the analysed publications, consistently highlighting differences between groups of people, the government versus the public, and those who condemn *versus* those who do not condemn Russian occupation. There is a visible creation of a positive self-image, defining “we” as more intelligent, attributing critical thinking to “we” in contrast to “sheep” and “disinformation” consumers who “do not see the real situation”, which is suggested to be visible outside Latvian media, such as in Russian media. There is also evidence of support for Russia and Belarus, as well as distrust and criticism of Latvian media, pointing to its alleged bias and disinformation. Overall, these publications reflect a dichotomy and societal division between supporters and critics on various issues, ranging from government performance to attitudes towards Russia and Belarus.

In 2023, political figures also utilized the message that Latvia is Russophobic and reinforced it. For example, Ainārs Šlesers, Aldis Gobzems, Valentins Jermejevs, and Nils Ušakovs have made social media posts inciting hatred or dividing society. These posts are met with both support and condemnation directed at the Latvian government and parts of society engaged in this “incitement of hatred”. Overall, the main disseminated messages contribute to undermining trust (in NATO, the EU, and the government), as well as rationalizing aggressive actions – asserting that support for Ukraine is exaggerated, that the Latvian government/media are incompetent, and that there is widespread Russophobia in Latvia.

3. Year 2024: “We” – misunderstood Russia’s supporters, “you” – brainwashed hate inciters

In 2024, the year began with several significant events in Latvia: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s visit, changes were made to the Law on Public Electronic Media and Its governance, which will result in the merger of Latvia’s public media, resignation of the former Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš to issues related to the use of special flights, preparation for the European Parliament elections and Tucker Carlson’s interview with Vladimir Putin that gained significant media attention.

Analysing the definitions of “we” and “you” in the publications, a clear dichotomy emerges between supporters of Russia and those who support Ukraine. The contrast between “you” (the government) and the people (“we”) is still apparent, with the latter being characterized as declining, impoverished, and suffering from the government’s decisions and actions. The publications show a distinct division between individuals who align with Western/European values (“you”) and those who do not support these values (“we”), with the latter group associating themselves with Russian culture and romanticizing the USSR. The publications emphasize a desire to align with Russian values and standards, while Western society is depicted as “deadly”. Comparisons are used to

differentiate between the two cultures and attitudes. “We” are often portrayed as opposing “hate speech” against Russians and Russian speakers perpetrated by “you” (the government). Overall, these publications reinforce societal divisions, promote nostalgia for the Soviet era, and foster support for Russian culture and values, in contrast to Western values.

According to the analysed publications, in the first three months of 2024, various propaganda messages are observed that use different argumentation and propaganda techniques to influence public opinion about the Latvian government, media, NATO, and relations with Russia. The publications spread unwarranted criticism and accusations against the Latvian government and media, labelling them as incompetent and corrupt. NATO is discredited by questioning its reliability and ability to protect Latvia in the event of an invasion. Accusations of Russophobia are employed, indicating that Latvia is dominated by an anti-Russian sentiment.

4. Expert interviews

Overall, the responses from experts confirmed the data obtained in the research section – there is a clear tendency in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war to spread propaganda messages that question the necessity of supporting Ukraine and demonize Ukrainians. These messages are coordinated and disseminated not only within Latvia. Long-term propaganda messages, which have been distributed since the restoration of Latvia's independence, remain unchanged – such as the distrust towards the Latvian government, the control of Latvia by the West, and other narratives that reinforce public scepticism towards the government and media. It is significant to note colonel Māris Tūtins observation that there is a segment of society in Latvia living in an alternative reality, with little connection to Latvia and its values. A clear division between two segments of society is evident. To mitigate the impact of propaganda, there is a need to educate society at all levels – starting with media literacy in the education system, beginning from preschool. Additionally, the responsibility of the European Union and decision-making institutions should be emphasized in reducing the spread of propaganda on social media, highlighting the need for stricter regulations for social media platforms controlled by actors from unfriendly countries.

Conclusions

In the contemporary world, information warfare has become an effective tool for geopolitical influence, combining elements of psychology, technology, and strategy to impact public opinion and political processes. In the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, the impact of information warfare extends beyond

national borders, with Russia actively seeking to influence public opinion outside of Russia. One of the methods of information warfare today is the dissemination of propaganda through social media. The essence of the propaganda spread by Russia, both domestically and internationally, is a rejection of post-Soviet postmodernism. It aims at the complete destruction of the liberal concepts characteristic of Western societies – this includes democracy and its components, such as free media, fair elections, effective governance, and human rights to self-determination and self-governance. An increasing trend in Russian propaganda, also noted in this study, is the dissemination of messages that include real problems faced by Ukrainians, such as corruption.

In 2023 and 2024, the distinction between “we” and “you” is increasingly evident in discourse. The division has become more pronounced, continually highlighting differences between groups – between the government and the people, those who do not condemn the Russian occupation and those who do. A positive self-image is evident, with “we” being portrayed as more informed and critical, in contrast to the “sheep” and “consumers of misinformation” who “cannot see the real situation,” which is supposedly visible outside Latvian media, such as in Russian media. “You” are often depicted as proponents of Western/European values, while “we” are associated with Russian culture, frequently romanticizing the Soviet era and openly expressing sympathies towards the Russian regime or Vladimir Putin.

Overall, these messages reinforce societal division and promote nostalgia for the Soviet era, as well as support for Russian culture and values in opposition to Western values. Russian actions are justified with the need for “denazification,” pointing to the presence of Nazism in Latvia and Ukraine. Blame is sought, and individuals or groups are identified as responsible for the current situation. The theoretical literature also highlights that the hero/criminal and culprit/victim narrative is a massive manipulation that expands the aggressor’s goals.

These messages and strategies foster a negative perception of the Latvian government, NATO, and relations with Russia, while promoting polarization in society and diminishing trust in national institutions and international organizations with which Latvia cooperates. The most frequently observed propaganda goal is to manage public opinion regarding the work and competence of the Latvian government, NATO support, and international organizations, as well as attempts to manipulate behaviour by encouraging the avoidance of Latvian media, learning Russian, and continuing to obtain information from Russian-language media.

Experts also point out that in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, there is a clear trend of spreading propaganda messages that question the need for support for Ukraine. There is mention of a segment of society that lives in an alternative reality, physically in Latvia but mentally in Russia.

To mitigate the impact of propaganda, comprehensive media literacy education is needed at all levels, including media literacy training from preschool. Additionally, stricter control and oversight by the European Union over social media platforms controlled by actors from unfriendly countries is necessary. Smaller-scale projects for combating disinformation should be designed to reach a broad audience, utilizing opinion leaders, influencers, and celebrities to convey simple messages across different audiences in non-traditional media.

In an era where anyone can become an “internet warrior”, it is crucial to protect the information space just as Latvia safeguards its national borders – manipulation of public consciousness and opinions can have significant consequences for the country during critical events such as elections or referendums. Therefore, it is necessary to educate the public and for policymakers to adopt and implement laws and regulations that protect the country from attacks on our information space.

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