
Symbols of the full-scale Russian federation invasion of Ukraine: public relations tools of mythologization of the military aggression

Daria Kashperska * 1 A

*Corresponding author: ¹ PhD student, e-mail: dkashperska@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-8554-9235

^A Military-Diplomatic Academy named after Yevgeny Bereznyak, Kyiv, Ukraine

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the case study of the Russian Federation's "consciential war"^{*}, aimed at influencing both the Ukrainian target audience and the international community. In particular, the new stage of Russia's war against Ukraine, namely the full-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and its informational and suggestive support tracking is being covered. The article provides analysis of political brands principle of operational establishment within the scope of the "special military operation" by means of PR technologies. It also examines the features of the symbols adopted by the Russian Federation military army-level components within the framework of the consciential war from the perspective of mythologization. The concept of political myth and regressive mythologization as a tool of Kremlin's data manipulation at the geopolitical level is also defined. The spiral of the political brands life cycle as well as the structure of the political brand "Z" is described. The objective of the article is to conduct analysis of the political brand operational establishment principle by means of artificial mythologization throughout the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Key words: brand, myth, symbols, conscientious war, consciential weapon.

Introduction

The full-scale invasion of the sovereign territory of Ukraine by the Russian Federation ("RF") took place on February 24, 2022. This open military attack conducted with the support of the Republic of Belarus, is another stage in the Russian-Ukrainian war unleashed by Russia since 2014. After Vladimir Putin announced the so-called military operation on February 24, 2022, missile strikes were launched on the territory of Ukraine in accordance with the Russian troops advancing from the territory of Russia, Belarus and the temporary occupied by the Russian Federation, including Crimea peninsula.

At the same time, the Kremlin started a new phase of information warfare and consciential war whose means influence were aimed at three target audiences as follows: internal/domestic (RF), external/foreign (including EU countries and the USA), as well as Ukrainian targeted audiences. To justify the full-scale war of aggression on the territory of the sovereign state, the Russian Federation chose the strategic narrative of "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine" as a main aim of the assigned military campaign for the internal and external audiences. However, the narrative that was selected, eventually turned out to be quite groundless and difficult to perceive

^{*} The notion of a "consciential wars" is derived from the Latin noun conscientia (consciousness), by which the author means a war for consciousness or a semantic war.

and reproduce. The average recipient found it difficult to restate it or choose justifications and arguments to confirm or support it.

Information campaigns of hybrid operations of this type should contain consciential information. The information of that sort appeals to the sensory and emotional intelligence of the individual verbally or nonverbally, forming or erasing its identity by the plurality of narratives of a single discourse. Meaning being as simple as possible for perception, to combine a set of images and so-called triggers for the consciousness of the audience, which should show their support in rapid and massive manner and spread the idea of “military operation”, and even promote it. The Russian Federation failed to articulate and present such a comprehensible and publicly available idea in advance. Only in a few weeks an information campaign was launched to mythologize the “Z” and “V” symbols depicted on Russian military equipment in Ukraine on the political brand (“PB”) establishment principle. Political PR campaigns of such type are a tool that strengthen ideological, informational, psychological and propaganda impact, therefore understanding the mythologization of the political brand, which has a consciential component, is an extremely important factor in ensuring national security of Ukraine, as well as the basis for building a system of informational and consciential operations.

Material and methods

Zborovska K. B. conducted researches of the “Russian world (russkiy mir)” narrative and doctrine in terms of ontological approach [1], at the same time Okorokov V.B. [8] generalized the theory of the structure and form of mythological thinking, which is based on narratives; political branding and its impact on the political space of Russia through the lens of constant phrases considered in his scientific works Volodenkov S.V. [11]; Bennet A. M. [12] studied the mechanisms by which political brand affects the consciousness of the voter by means of PR technologies. Nevertheless, the principle of operational political brand establishment in the framework of the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as the peculiarities of the regressive mythology usage within the consciential war of Russia against Ukraine have yet to be studied thoroughly.

Results and discussion

The political system can be considered as a set of political stances, interrelation between them, specific ways to respond to the challenges of the external and internal environment so to say. Optimization of the political system functioning, as well as information support of military and political projects is stipulated by the need to use social and communicative technologies aimed at establishing bilateral communications between political actors and civil society, which will contribute to succeed in achieving political results based on partnership and high level of credibility. The modern hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation is based on the ideology of conquest and aggression, consciential concepts such as grand narrative and sub-narrative that transform consciousness and form the basis of political myths as well as the political system of the state. The creation of state hybrid in which power, faith and people appear as an inseparable unity that justifies itself, or rather ontologizes itself is an important aspect of “Russian world (russkiy mir)” ideological doctrine establishment [1].

Large-scale military campaigns similar to the one launched by the Russian Federation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, must be ideologically justified primarily for the domestic target audience of the aggressor country. In the President’s address, Vladimir Putin has verbalized the aim of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine with the following quote: “In accordance with the article 51 of the UN Charter, following the sanctions of the Federation Council<.> I have decided to conduct *a special military operation* <.> We will strive for the demilitarization and *denazification* of Ukraine. <.> It is not our plan to occupy Ukraine” [2]. Given the aforementioned theses of the statement,

we can note that the Kremlin yet again avoids using the lexeme *war* replacing it with a phrase *special military operation*, which allegedly changes the status of these actions and diminishes the level of responsibility of the aggressor for those actions within the scope of the international legal field. Russia, at the same time, is manipulating the concepts of demilitarization and denazification, thus presenting to the international community the aim of the so-called military operation. Manipulation of this kind may be considered as a confirmation of Russia's long-standing narrative rhetorical strategy about the existence of ultra-nationalist and Nazi movements in Ukraine, which, eventually, led to the formation of corresponding armed groups that threatened Russia's national security. In addition, according to the Kremlin military formations as such keep developing due to the assistance of NATO, which has been expanding its influence on the Eastern European countries.

Leading world expert and researchers on history of World War II, the Holocaust, genocide and Nazism, including Jared McBride, Francine Hirsch, Timothy Snyder, Omer Bartov, Christoph Dickman and others, have published a statement in the weekly newsletter "Jewish Journal", addressing and indicating the misleading and ill-coordinated neo-Nazi rhetoric. In the statement, Vladimir Putin's actions are called "cynical abuse of entrusted power", the term "genocide", the memory and recollection of World War II and the Holocaust, designed to compare Ukraine to Nazi regime and justify Russia's aggression against it [3]. Since the narrative of the fight against Nazism is one of the grand narratives of the Russian consciential war, as well as the "Russian world", the main subject of which is the consciousness of the individual [4], it did not require additional explanations or interpretation for Russian citizens, and therefore it didn't raise any questions or doubts as a reason for the war that's been started. The topic of creating an image of Ukraine that promotes neo-Nazism and neo-Nazi political formations in the Russian information space has been developed since the time of the public protest movement, namely "Ukraine without Kuchma", when one of the political subjects of these rallies was political organization, Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian People's Self-Defense political party(UNA-UNSO). At the same time, according to O. V. Tsukanov, Russian propaganda defined the entire political organization as "extremist" [5] and was later mentioned in the context of neo-Nazi groups, as well as the Azov military component, which has been involved in the Russian-Ukrainian war since 2014. As stated in the "The Washington Post" publication, "The rhetoric of the fight against fascism resonates deeply within Russia, as it brought enormous sacrifices in the battle against Nazi Germany during World War II" [6].

Since grand narratives mostly contain a large pool of different mythologies, they are rather static constructs and cannot easily become markers of a political idea, phenomenon or strategy and actively spread among ordinary citizens, forming a positive impression of government action. Instead, a political brand, often expressed by a combination of verbal and nonverbal means that are as simple as possible to perceive and reproduce consciousness, becomes the most effective continental weapon of a certain information campaign that accompanies certain actions of the authorities. Thus, in 2014, after the annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Russia turned euphemisms and internet memes of "polite people" and "green men" into political brands by means of PR technologies, affirming for its citizens a positive image of the Russian military wearing uniforms without insignia during the annexation of the peninsula.

The full-scale invasion of Russian troops on February 24, 2022 also provoked the emergence of new military and political brands within Russian Federation. Therefore, images of Russian military equipment with Latin letters "Z" and "V" began to appear on social networks and other media resources. One of the official versions of the marks decoding was that these letters determine the territorial affiliation of the troops: the letter "Z", engraved or painted on military equipment means the Western Military District, and "V" means the Eastern Military District. At the same time discussion on the topic audience have started on various social networks. They were provoked by

both the artificial insertion of information and the natural appearance of reflections in the target audience. Among the main versions of the meaning were the ones implying that:

“V” and “Z” are references to the initials of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy;

The marking was designed specifically for military exercises (however, version like this is highly improbable and is far-fetched, as the alleged training took place only in Belarus, and the equipment was painted everywhere, along the entire border with Ukraine);

“V” and “Z” have no special connotations, but only need to be understood by both Russian citizens and foreigners.

The Center for Countering Disinformation at the National Security and Defense Council confirms that a large-scale PR campaign has been launched in Russia in regards to the letter “Z”. It was aimed at reinforcing in minds of ordinary Russians the idea belief in the correctness of the military invasion and the inevitability of victory. Following the intensification of the large-scale war against Ukraine, the Russian authorities launched a consensual information operation aimed primarily at domestic and foreign audiences, in order to create a fake media picture of the European community’s support for Russia’s war.

The political myths origin comes down to the two main ways of emergence, namely: mythologization of political phenomena by the mass daily consciousness and myth-making as an artificial construction of myths. To establish a political brand around this letter-symbol, the Kremlin uses the technique of artificial regressive mythologizing as a technological factor in political processes. Such mythologization is a process of purposeful influence of an active political subject on the mass consciousness through the production of new political interpretations, values, guidelines, often expressed extralingually, symbolically and emphatically. Claude Levi-Strauss states: “The purpose of the myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction. (which is impossible if the contradiction is real), we will have an infinite number of layers, and each will be slightly different from the previous one. The myth will develop in a spiral until the intellectual impulse that caused it is depleted” [8].

The regressive nature of the mythological construction of the Russian Federation is the use of previously formed narratives about the great victory of the USSR in the “Great Patriotic War”, and at the same time the mythologist associated with the victory over fascism and Nazism. Returning the consciousness of the individual to the old ideas that justified themselves during previous crises, the myth forces to perceive and understand reality, based solely on sensory-image perception, depriving people of the opportunity to use the mechanisms of conceptual-logical thinking. Thus, the most popular political myth of the Russian Federation about the Second World War, which symbolizes and exaggerates the events and phenomena of socio-historical life, in its phenomenological nature is perceived as a reality that should not be thought about. Therefore, the political myth that underlies the political brand is an instrument of consensual influence. It is an appeal to the artificial historical consciousness of Russian citizens, which makes it possible to “legitimize” the goals of Russia’s war against Ukraine and promote them.

For the most simple perception of mythologists related to Russia’s military aggression throughout Ukraine, the political brand “Z” was constructed, based on the symbolic visual-verbal construct “ЗаПобеду” (for the victory), as well as their derivatives “ЗаРоссию” (for Russia), “ЗаПравду” (for the truth), which appeals to the Soviet poster slogans “ЗаРодину, ЗаСталина”, (for the Family, for Stalin), “Спасибо деду за победу” (Thank you grandfather for the victory). In addition, an additional visual and emotional trigger is the St. George’s ribbon, which is laid out in the shape of the letter “Z”, which is a classic symbol of the Victory Day celebrated in Russian Federation on May 9.

Therefore, the phase of active artificial mythologizing of the military and political phenomenon by means of the political brand (PB) establishment began. The transfer of marketing

analysis and methods to the study of political processes was carried out by defining the “brand” D. Gregory, who in “Leveraging the Corporate Brand” describes it as a “mental construction” [9]. Australian political scientist Alex Merland in the work “The Branding of a Prime Minister” through empirical research introduced the following definition: “A political brands how a government; political organization or political person is perceived by the public” [10]. He also concluded that the life cycle of PB depends on the goals set before him, the relevance of time and expectations of the target audience.

Thus, a political brand can be defined as a constructed image of a political entity (or political phenomenon) that contains a set of stable ideas or a system of values relevant to public demands and expectations, based on which the loyalty of the target audience (s) is formed. social groups to participate in the political process. The political brand becomes the center of attraction of all artificially created myths and begins to influence public mood in such a way that it becomes part of mass culture.

Political brand as any phenomenon has the following functions: communications; manipulation, political socialization, identification, integration. Manipulation is one of the main functions of modern PB. In the political sphere this feature is manifested in two components: formation of public opinion (transformation of consciousness in the framework of the consensual war against the internal audience, if it is a brand “Z”) and the creation of a certain model of decision-making or lifestyle. Manipulation reduces the creative potential of the people and information hygiene, blocks the process of democratization of society, which we can observe in the Russian Federation. The means of specialized influence of political manipulation on the masses use artificially created and imposed on the mass’s images, language formulas, stereotypes, stereotypes of behavior, as well as myths, which become the basis for the formation of a political brand.

Researcher S. V. Volodenkov notes, that the PB not only affects real political life, but also actively shapes the political space [11]. Russia once again confirms the antithetical nature of its society, contrasting it with the world community, not united by this brand, and hence the grand and sub-narratives of the aggressor state. Identity is one of the main characteristics of a social group that is united by a certain brand. A. M. Bennet notes that the establishment of identity is a continuous process that involves the extrapolation of basic values, semantic orientations of the PB on the behavior and communication of the political entity with society [12].

The life cycle of a political brand depends on its position in the political market, so the brand “Z” is strategic and serves the information background of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and structurally combines all necessary components for functioning in the media space and consciousness of the target audience, as shown in Figure 1.

The ways in which a brand is marketed are no less important than the ways in which it is created. Integrated marketing communication is the key to solving the problem of rapid product distribution, in our case – the military-political idea If the communication of the classic Russian propaganda media takes place in a one-way direction “propagandist-recipient”, which does not allow feedback, the communication of the propagandist with the recipient through a political brand is in a spiral as long as the brand fulfills its aim or goal (figure 2).

During the communication of different recipients, countless interpretations and psycho-emotional reflections of the political brand are generated, which are transmitted through the means and channels of communication, and the political brand is a stable unit in a spiral chain, and the information product generated by it can change. The information product in this case should be understood as messages, offline and SMM flash mobs, disparate information messages and initiatives, which are a natural reflection of the brand’s consumers, and not artificially created information drives by the political entity itself.

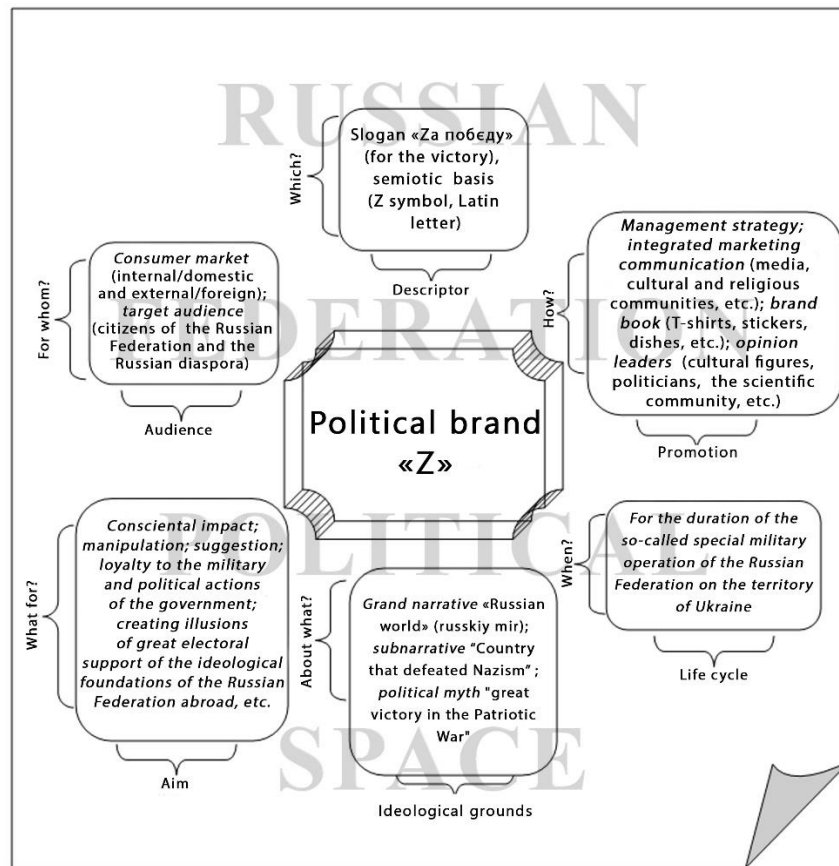


Figure 1 – Structure of the political brand “Z”

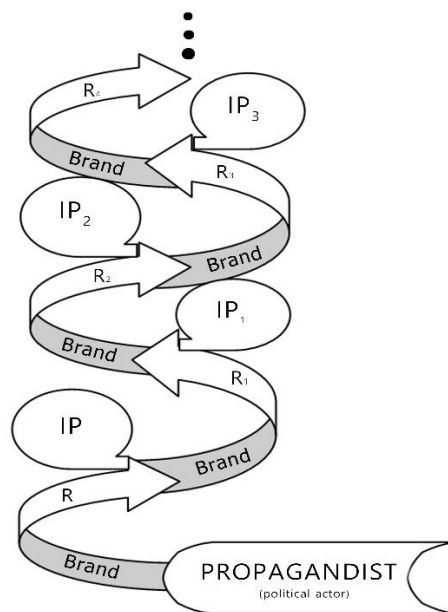


Figure 2 – The spiral of the political brand life cycle, where R... R4 stand for different recipients and IP... IP3 refer to information product and its varieties

The system of integrated marketing communications is a concept of common usage of all types of marketing communications in terms of the desired goals. It is created by a political entity and involves a two-way process in which on the one hand there is an impact on the target and other

audiences, and on the other – to obtain information about the reaction of these. At the same time communications complement each other. The synergy effect emerges, which makes it possible to reach efficiency that is impossible with the usage of certain types of marketing communications or any other types of communications. Therefore, brand promotion “Z” to spread and consolidate the ideas of Russia’s war in Ukraine as quickly as possible, it is mostly through various channels of communication and mechanisms for disseminating artificially created information, such as [7]:

Traditional mass media assets: The Russian state TV channel RT began to call the war in Ukraine “Special Operation Z”.

SMM communications: Slogans that utilize these letters began to appear on the official public page of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation: “Замир” (for peace), “Заправду” (for truth), “Заканчиваемвойны” (ending wars), “ЗаПацаноV” (for guys) and others. Various social networks using the slogans as their base and began to create corresponding hashtags and means of astroturfing to spread the news with them, thus raising the rating of these information messages. It should be noted that under the new article on discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation, a resident of Surgut city was fined 40 thousand rubles. He left a comment on “Vkontakte” that decipher the meaning of the “Z” political brand in abusive and insulting manner. The authorities of the Kemerovo region have developed a manual for public opinion leaders with recommendations on how to properly support the Russian military on social networks. In their publications, bloggers are required to use the hashtags such as #ЗаРоссию (for Russia), #ЗаНаших (for ours), #ЗаПутина (for Putin).

Creating brandbook and consumer goods; The above-mentioned Russian channel RT started producing T-shirts with the symbols, later similar T-shirts and car stickers also appeared in one of the largest online stores in Russia Wildberries; The Yakut poultry farm places the hash-tag #ЗаРоссию on eggs; in the city of Shadrinsk in the Kurgan region, Easter bread cakes with the letter “Z” were sold.

Offline flash mobs as a type of social activity: in Kazan, the event was organized by a hospice. The letter “Z” was used to line up pediatric patients, their parents and the organization’s staff, who were forced to hold leaflets with the flags of “ORDLO”, Russia and Tatarstan. A quadcopter was involved in recording the filming, and journalists from the federal channel also filmed it. Representatives of various social groups in other cities of the Russian Federation later began to organize similar flash mobs.

Opinion leaders: representatives of various public professions were involved in spreading the symbols of the political brand, in particular the artistic director of the Moscow Theater Oleg Tabakov and popular actor Vladimir Mashkov decorated the facade of the theater building with a huge letter “Z” that was assembled on the facade with the traditional St. George’s ribbon.

Official government initiatives (central and regional): March 18 marked the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea in Russia, and the occasion was celebrated in the alleged “Z” style. Zabaikallia region in the information materials of the region's leadership is called “Забайкалля” (Zabaikallia) using fusion of Latin and Cyrillic letters. The governor of the Kemerovo region SerhiyTsyvylev ordered to rename the region “KuZbas” in official documents as “the sign of support for our fighters and a symbol of social solidarity”, etc.

Conclusions

Political brand and its mythologization is a “soft power” of influence on the consciousness of the target audience, which strengthens the position of the political actor in the political space. As part of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the political brand “Z” was created by means of PR technologies based on regressive myth-making.

Thus, any political brand, in particular “Z”, contains the following characteristics:

It has a set of external characteristics (symbolic, sociocultural, functional, etc.), which are selected during its development in accordance with existing social demands.

The brand in the political sphere gives the political subject additional value, promoting the formation of a positive impression.

Brand development is purposefully indirectly (in the media, through opinion leaders, social networks) and directly through contacts with the target audience.

PB is meant to activate the strong emotions of the consumer, which form a long-term and “trusting” relationship with the object of interaction.

The political brand acts as a tool for manipulating target audiences.

PB as a tool of symbolic influence constructs the social and political reality.

The identification of a participant in a political process takes place through a political brand, determining to which social group / political force or value system the object of influence belongs.

PB allows to involve the target audience in the political process, giving it an imitative opportunity to influence the way of political life of the country.

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