



The Kremlin's Propaganda Watch

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Executive Summary

Currently the Kremlin's major propagandist and disinformation campaigns are aimed at several key objectives. On the issue of foreign policy, the main objective is undoubtedly the promotion of the so-called "multipolar world" that President Putin has been declaring for many years, but now these statements are eventually starting to take institutionalized forms. The BRICS summit held in October in Russia was attended by the leaders of many countries, including China, India and Turkey, which applied to join BRICS this September, and undoubtedly was a propagandist success for the Kremlin, even though the participants avoided radical statements and have a lot of inner contradictions of their own.

The Kremlin promotes the BRICS summit through all possible formats – from constant official statements on the importance of this format as a counterweight to the "aggressive West" and ongoing contacts with the BRICS countries, to the massive work of trolls in Russian social networks, who emphasize the success of the Russian president and Russia's actions in general using the BRICS example. Massive information campaigns related to BRICS, as well as applications for membership from Turkey and Azerbaijan submitted in September, may suggest that it is BRICS that the Kremlin would like to see as a counterweight to the West after the war with Ukraine is over. On the eve of the summit, Chinese leadership also mentioned this topic in exactly the same terms.

Diverting Russians' attention from various consequences of the war with Ukraine, such as economic issues, rising crime rate due to the return of ex-combatants, the loss of lives etc, remains one of the major propagandist objectives of the Kremlin when it comes to domestic audiences. In order to redirect Russians' discontent away from the real problems and the authorities responsible for them, for months the Kremlin has been conducting an anti-migrant propaganda campaign, exaggerating any migrant-related topic, presenting them in the most negative and even provocative light possible. Simultaneously with the main task of diverting Russians' attention, the Kremlin is also preparing the grounds for the forcible enrollment of migrants in the army by inciting hatred towards them.

An equally important focus of the Kremlin's propaganda this fall is increasing indoctrination in Russian schools and various educational institutions. For children and teenagers of all ages, the Russian authorities are creating and promoting more and more programs of so-called patriotic education, ranging from forming the state-loyal mindset towards both the war in Ukraine and the general course of the government, to promoting the need to have as many children as possible due to serious problems in demography after COVID 19 and the so-called "Special Military Operation".

The BRICS Summit in Russia: Reality and Propaganda

The BRICS summit held in Russia can be considered a propagandist success for the Kremlin, as it created an image of Russia's participation in global politics, refuting the narrative of Putin's isolation and attracting leaders of influential countries, mostly with non-democratic systems. The summit provided a platform for dialog between different states. China and Russia bring together countries dissatisfied with the West despite their contradictions, and economic issues were chosen as the framework for unification.

“The longer we live by other people's rules and use other people's platforms, the longer the transition to a fairer economic system will last¹,” President Putin said at the summit, setting the tone for the further propagandist narrative. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova and other propagandists continued to emphasize the BRICS format's opposition to the “aggressive” West.

The main outcome of the summit was the “Kazan Declaration,” which partially reflects the Kremlin's anti-Western narrative². It mentions “the importance of fair staff representation in the UN Secretariat and other international organizations,” which is in line with Putin's calls to consider the interests of a multipolar world. The declaration's paragraphs condemning Israel also match Moscow's rhetoric: “We condemn Israeli attacks against humanitarian operations.” To highlight this position, Russian propagandist and the head of the Russia Today propaganda media outlet Margarita Simonyan emphasized the involvement of RT in covering the conflict from the pro-Palestinian side³ during her meeting with Mahmoud Abbas.

The topics important to the Kremlin - opposing sanctions and creating an alternative to the dollar - were reflected in the final document in the form of general declarations of intent. The position of the BRICS countries on the war in Ukraine was expressed cautiously, without mentioning specific peace initiatives, despite expectations that India's and Brazil's proposals would be noted.

The BRICS leaders refrained from making harsh statements, despite the Kremlin's positioning of this association as a key element of the anti-Western

1 <https://news.ru/amp/world/hvatit-zhit-po-chuzhim-pravilam-o-chem-govoril-putin-na-sammite-briks/>

2 <https://www.google.com/url?q=http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/B2eZUcdAfrcRSj2RuUOSPqXerDKnMs.pdf&sa=D&source>

3 <https://t.me/margaritasimonyan/14411>

coalition of the “global South”. The only country to speak out with anti-Western rhetoric was Iran, whose President Massoud Pezeshkian criticized the U.S. sanctions policy against Iran and Russia⁴. The leaders of China, India and Turkey remained cautious: China and India are interested in developing the BRICS format, which implies the ability to compromise, while Turkey, a NATO member, has only recently applied to join the bloc.

The Kremlin did not emphasize the summit’s focus on the war in Ukraine, hence it remained a background theme, probably to avoid polarization. Only Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro⁵ openly supported Russia’s actions utilizing the Kremlin’s “Nazism and fascism” narrative. The other leaders limited themselves to general statements of commitment to peaceful conflict resolution.

The BRICS summit can be considered part of the Kremlin’s consistent campaign aimed at building an anti-Western coalition and promoting Vladimir Putin as a representative of the “global South”. In order to secure this role, it is important for Putin to succeed in pushing for “peace on Russia’s terms” and thus declare victory not over Ukraine, but over the “Western curators,” as Russian propaganda calls the countries supporting Kiev. Simultaneously, the Kremlin presents itself as the leader in the peaceful resolution of the war in Ukraine, which it itself unleashed, contrasting the BRICS consolidation around peace efforts with the “radical” position of Ukraine and Western countries. Propaganda to domestic audiences enthusiastically describes the summit as proof of Russia’s and Putin’s personal leadership in the anti-Western coalition. The Kremlin emphasizes that despite attempts to isolate Russia, it maintains an active role in world politics, and that these attempts at isolation have failed. “Putin brilliantly got even with the West at the BRICS summit,” the propaganda outlet State News⁶ wrote. “Putin won this game,” VK Press⁷ titled the piece. “The West is panicked by the BRICS strengthening⁸,” *Parlamentskaya Gazeta* quoted Leonid Slutsky, head of the State Duma’s Foreign Affairs Committee, as saying. The Kremlin also promotes similar narratives to external audiences through its own media projects, such as *Russia Today* and *Ruptly*.

4 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75376>

5 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75377>

6 <https://statenews.ru/obshhestvo/putin-blestyashhe-pokvitalsya-s-zapadom-na-sammite-briks>

7 <https://www.vkpress.ru/life/putin-vyigral-etu-igru-zapadnaya-presa-nazyvaet-sammit-briks-diplomaticeskoy-pobedoy-/?id=180427>

8 <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/leonid-sluckiy-zapad-v-panike-ot-usileniya-briks.html>

Kremlin's anti-migrant campaign

The Kremlin's anti-migrant propaganda campaign has entered an acute phase a year after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The main goals are to prepare the information ground for the forcible sending of migrants to the frontline, (this has become especially noticeable since the winter of 2023)⁹, as well as to shift the attention of Russians from the increasing crime rate due to the return of both the soldiers and criminals from the frontline back to Russian cities. The artificially created buzz around the “crimes of migrants” is supposed to distract the citizens.

Attention to the topic of migrants was reduced prior to the Russian presidential election in March 2024, but after the terrorist attack in the Crocus City Hall this spring, the anti-migrant campaign has reemerged yet again. In September-October, it has reached its peak, with the Kremlin no longer limiting itself to exaggerated newspaper headlines to stir up hatred, but also initiating anti-migrant bills, regulations, and repressions by security agencies.

According to the Levada Center sociological organization, in March 2021, only 15% of respondents considered “the influx of newcomers, migrants” to be an acute problem. By September 2024, this figure had risen to 33%, and the topic of migrants had become the third most important for Russians. This data correlates with the way the topic of migrants was covered in propaganda - the peak of negative attitudes toward migrants coincides with the peak activity of the Kremlin's propaganda on this topic.

The campaign has the widest distribution network - from state and Kremlin-controlled media and various officials and agencies - to bloggers and pro-war Telegram channels. Ignoring serious problems in the economy and rising crime rates due to soldiers returning from war, the entire propaganda machine discusses Russia's “major internal problem” - migrants. This is the narrative that is being presented to a wide audience.

The campaign to “solve the migration issue” was joined by law enforcement agencies initiating cases of illegal migration, claiming an increase in crime among migrants and calling it an internal threat. Last fall, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church noted that migrants who have obtained citizenship do not become closer to Russians in faith and culture. After the terrorist attack in Crocus City Hall, Vladimir Putin instructed to change migration policy, and the head of the Investigative Committee,

9 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/bastrykin-rasskazal-ob-otpravke-migrantov-na-voynu-kak-o-sposobe-sokratitj-ih-chislo/33011748.html>

Alexander Bastrykin, said it was necessary to deal with migration. In the State Duma, the head of the Just Russia political party, Sergei Mironov, is also using the topic of migrants to strengthen the patriotic agenda. Propagandist media emphasize the ethnic aspect of all crimes, creating the image of an enemy and inciting hatred.

The anti-migrant campaign is a key propagandist tool aimed at diverting Russians' attention from real problems to topics suggested by the Kremlin. As part of this campaign, propaganda often links migration to "Western intelligence services," reinforcing the narrative of external pressure on Russia. "Illegal migration has become a dangerous tool for fomenting national discord in Russia by Western special services," Komsomolskaya Pravda wrote, citing a statement by Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev.

The key goals of the Kremlin's anti-migrant campaign include:

- mobilizing society in the context of war and confrontation with the West;
- inciting hatred of migrants in order to forcibly send them to war;
- diverting attention from crimes committed by those returning from war (shifting the focus to "ethnic crime");
- diverting attention from the economic consequences of the war by shifting the blame to migrants allegedly taking the jobs of the citizens.

The propagandist campaign and its general sentiment is fueling the fire of radical nationalist cells that are becoming more active. A prominent regional group of that sort is the organization known as "Russkaya Obshina" ("Russian Community"), which is linked to Konstantin Malofeev¹⁰, a businessman close to the Kremlin. "Russkaya Obshina" has a network of more than 140 regional branches. Despite its declared loyalty to the Kremlin, supporters of the group often resort to uncontrolled violence, breaking the state's monopoly on its use. Such incidents are disadvantageous to the Kremlin because they make migrants look like victims and nationalists look like aggressors. In 2024, nationalist groups committed 133 attacks, ten more than in all of 2023. Between January and September 2024 193 ethnically motivated crimes were committed. The fact that such acts of aggression are not authorized by the Kremlin is confirmed by the Kremlin's propagandist campaigns, and the fact that the most prominent members of the Kremlin's disinformation machine have to publicly condemn attacks by nationalists against people of other nationalities.

The contradictions of Kremlin propaganda regarding migrants are expressed in the dissonance between the promotion of the idea of a

10 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cxrrd7x0353o>

multinational Russia facing common challenges (i.e. war), and the often radical anti-migrant nationalist rhetoric of the same speakers or institutions. On the one hand, the army is presented as a symbol of the unity of nations; on the other hand, propaganda emphasizes the struggle for the Russian language and culture, playing on nationalism.

Contradictions are also intensified in interaction with national republics and diasporas. Citizens subjected to propaganda, as well as nationalist groups, do not see any difference between migrants and people of other ethnicities in general, so conflicts turn into hatred based on ethnicity/looks. The leaders of the regions of ethnic minorities often become subjects of harsh criticism from the so-called “patriotic” groups and bloggers themselves. First and foremost, we are talking about sharp criticism of Chechen public speakers, the military and Ramzan Kadyrov personally. As a result, it is Ramzan Kadyrov who has become the most prominent public figure to actively oppose the tightening of migration policy, even calling the anti-migrant campaign hateful.

However, the Kremlin also needs migrants to work in the economic sectors of construction and transportation, which is periodically mentioned by the Russian officials and obviously further intensifies the contradiction. Meanwhile the law enforcement agencies use migrants as a convenient target to enhance their image by fighting against the problem they have themselves invented and promoted.

The duality can also be seen in the Kremlin’s own policy: on the one hand, the Russian authorities position Russia as a leader among the CIS countries and even a representative of the “global South,” while on the other hand, they support an anti-migrant campaign for a domestic audience.

The Kremlin seeks to control the anti-migrant campaign and restrain nationalist groups by offering them various forms of engagement, but the risk of losing such control exists, as it has already happened in 2013 when mass pogroms against non-Russian nationals took place in the Moscow neighborhood of Biryulevo¹¹. However, if the Kremlin finds ways to control the situation, anti-migrant rhetoric can and probably will be actively implemented by the Kremlin after the war, when the authorities will once again need to distract citizens from domestic problems and direct aggression at one of the most vulnerable groups - migrants. Propaganda can also conceal the rise in crime among those returning from war, shifting the blame to migrants and continuing to fuel xenophobia.

11 https://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2013/10/131014_biryulyovo_aftermath_comments

Kremlin propaganda in education.

After the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin significantly intensified its work on patriotic education of children and youth through the inclusion of a large number of propagandist programs in the educational curriculum. The militarization of school curricula, the emphasis on traditional family values, and the glorification of military actions in Ukraine reflect the purposeful formation of certain attitudes among young people. The significant increase in state funding for patriotic programs testifies to the strategic importance of propaganda in the educational system for the Russian authorities, who thus seek to promote their ideology among Russians from an early age.

The authorities in Russia have consistently added propagandist disciplines to educational programs or strengthened the ideological component of existing subjects. Among the important changes in recent years are:

“Important Conversations”¹² - a series of additional extracurricular classes introduced in the program of primary, secondary and vocational education from 2022. Although declared as extracurricular, in fact the lessons are compulsory.

“Medinsky’s textbook”¹³ - a new Russian history textbook for schools created by former Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky and MGIMO rector Anatoly Torkunov. The textbook promotes propagandist narratives that address both the collapse of the USSR and the war with Ukraine, as well as the Kremlin’s version of the vision of modern Russia as a whole.

“Movement of the First”¹⁴ is a state organization created to form a worldview in teenagers based on traditional values.

In 2024, according to the draft budget submitted to the State Duma, 46 billion rubles (40 billion more than in 2022) to be allocated for the project “Patriotic Education of Russian Citizens”. In April 2024, it became known about plans to create a separate ministry for this area. In addition, in December 2023, provisions were added to the law “On Education in the Russian Federation” to guarantee teachers the right to “respect for human dignity and protection from violence and insults”. While the laws seem to protect teachers, they also serve as a tool to control ideological

12 <https://razgovor.edsoo.ru/>

13 <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A3%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%B1%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%9C%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE>

14 <https://xn--90acagbhgpc7c8c7f.xn--p1ai/>

confrontations between teachers and students and put further pressure on both students and parents. Starting September 1, 2024, the use of cell phones has already been banned in schools. While seemingly unconnected it could be used as a tool to restrict access to information on what is being taught in schools. In many cases, conflicts between teachers and students, including ideologically motivated¹⁵ ones, have become publicly known thanks to the recordings on students' phones¹⁶.

Russian independent project “**NeNorma**” together with the opposition Telegram channel “**Serditaya Chuvashia**” (“Angry Chuvashia”) conducted a study of materials published on the official pages of Chuvash schools. Having analyzed 382 pages of educational institutions in the region from February 24, 2022 to May 31, 2024 (407,054 posts), the researchers noted a rise in publications on military topics. During this period, 66,252 posts on military topics were published - almost 15% of all posts, or every 6-7 posts¹⁷, which also indicates a significant level of militarization of the educational system.

The state continues to introduce new subjects such as a course on “family studies” and **BSDH (OBZR** in Russian) - short for “Basics of Security and Defense of the Homeland”, which are both added to school programs from 2024. The family studies course, developed by the Committee for Family Protection, will be taught up to fifth grade and is aimed at “shaping and promoting the values of marriage and large families”. It has already been introduced in 40 regions. For middle and high schools, “Important Conversations” continues to serve as a major propagandist tool. One of the priorities of these programs is to combat the demographic crisis and increase the birth rate against the backdrop of a significant population decline after the Covid pandemic and the war unleashed by the Kremlin.

The subject “Basics of Security and Defense of the Homeland” includes the module “Military Training. Fundamentals of Military Knowledge”¹⁸, where students will be introduced to basic information on armed forces, their tasks and structure. Trips to the patriotic centers ‘Avangard’ and ‘Patriot’ for training purposes will also be organized within the framework of this program.

In the methodological recommendations¹⁹ for the new school year, war propaganda and traditional values are combined: the authors emphasize

15 https://vogazeta.ru/articles/2022/12/6/CHto_proiskhodit/21481-uchenikov_moskovskoy_shkoly_proveryat_na_propagandu_lgbt_iz_za_video_v_smartfone

16 https://dzen.ru/a/WpJJ2Z4porpc_m1

17 <https://nenorma.pro/publications/73/>

18 https://edsoo.ru/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/frp-obzr_10-11_22032024.pdf

19 https://edsoo.ru/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/09_inf_metod_pismo_obshestvoznanie.pdf

that “the cultivation of selfishness, permissiveness and immorality, the denial of patriotism and family values, the destruction of the family through the promotion of non-traditional relationships” is a threat to young people. Teachers are advised to include the methodology “Our Heroes”²⁰ in their educational program. Among the well known figures such as Suvorov and Gagarin, these materials include the late Daria Dugina - the daughter of radical political scientist Alexander Dugin - as one of the heroes. Daria died in a politically motivated killing related to her and her father’s pro-war views in 2022. Here she is described as “a leader of patriotically minded youth”. The methodology also suggests studying the biography of Sparta battalion commander Vladimir Zhoga, a participant in the war against Ukraine.

The Ministry of Defense project also supports the expansion of UNARMIA²¹ by holding patriotic programs and organizing children’s camps in schools. The project’s website mentions UNARMIA alumni killed in the war in Ukraine. UNARMIA is an all-Russian children’s and youth military-patriotic public movement created in 2016 on the initiative of former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.

Russian authorities also continue to ideologize history, considering it an important tool for creating an image of Russia and its role in the world. In 2023, a decree was signed on the foundations of state policy in the field of history education²², which mentions that Russia faces threats from the “collective West” and needs to strengthen the pan-Russian identity based on traditional values, including among Russians abroad. How this will be done is not specified. History education, according to the decree, will affect kindergartens, schools and universities. According to the Kremlin vision, in 2025 the number of history lessons in Russian schools should increase by 50%.

There are also programs aimed at patriotic education of children from the annexed territories - the regions of Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church indoctrinates²³ Ukrainian children from Donetsk and Luhansk in the Pokrov orphanage according to standard propagandist narratives: traditional values, the fight against the West, and the “liberation” of Donetsk and Luhansk by Russia.

20 <https://edsoo.ru/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/nashi-geroi.-metodicheskie-materialy.pdf>

21 <https://yunarmy.ru/yunarmeyskielagerya/>

22 <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/73989>

23 <https://doxa.team/articles/deport-rpc>

The major narratives of propaganda in education remain the same – a fusion of traditional values, militarism and ideologization of school subjects. This year the emphasis on the problem of demographic decline²⁴ and traditional values among high school students and students of specialized institutions²⁵ has been strengthened.

24 https://vk.com/rodnye_ludi_samara?w=wall-86397444_6238

25 <https://sddsochi.ru/articles/show/pervyj-etap-proekta-fonda-prezidentskikh-grantov-khvatit-proigryvat-zavershen>