7 More Than Slacktivism: Russian Instagram Celebrities at the Outbreak of War in Ukraine

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When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, many Russian celebrities posted black squares and emotional posts opposing the war on Instagram, often using Instagram stories functionality that makes the content disappear after 24 hours. While many of these expressions could cynically be labeled as mere slacktivism or feel-good activism (Morozov 2009) lacking any concrete call to real-life action, in Russian social media, the anti-war sentiment was interpreted by many observers as real resistance (Stokel-Walker 2022) and soon it became clear that those celebrities who opposed the war and called for their powerholders to end it, faced increasing repression, and the promising resistance was shortly ended. While it is common for celebrities to use social media to take a stand in moments of major social or political crises, at least in Western countries, what happened in Russian Instagram was a collision of real grassroots resistance and state-orchestrated propaganda.

Propaganda scholarship has gained interest in recent decades and piling studies and reports on the Kremlin's digital information warfare have focused on troll factories, bot armies, and fake news targeting both local and international audiences, especially after the United States 2016 elections and Brexit (Bastos/Farkas 2019). While bots continue to play a role in amplifying pro-Russia content on social media, especially on Twitter, the increasing use of non-state and human actors (Oleinik 2024; Woolley 2022) in information operations in the fragmented media space calls for rigorous scholarly attention. Propaganda and disinformation are often used interchangeably, leading to overstated interest in hostile or false content. With a focus on social media influencers, new and understudied actors in propaganda research, this study draws from traditional propaganda scholarship, starting with the presumption that to be effective, propaganda must also harness positive feelings (Auerbach/Castronovo, 2013:10; Ellul 1965).

This study focuses on specific form of propaganda, strategic narratives, coherent constructions of past, present and future, put together by political elites to legitimate their actions for domestic and foreign audiences (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin/Roselle 2014). This research studies how digital celebrities mediate, chop, amplify and recontextualize strategic narratives. Using a multimodal discourse analytical

approach and focusing especially on visual representations and national identity narratives/discourses, this research shows how celebrities drew from familiar historical, national, and cultural discourses that the Kremlin had harnessed in its widely studied strategic narratives during the past two decades (Drozdova/Robinson, 2019; Hutchings/Szostek, 2015; Khaldarova/Pantti 2021; Tolz/Hutchings, 2023).

Recognizing the need for a better understanding of trends and practices of modern clandestine or disguised information operations (Farkas/Xia 2023), the interest here is to study Instagram influencers' propagandistic content. The mixture of commercial, entertainment, political and its global and local scope makes Instagram an interesting propaganda outlet. This research focuses on both traditional celebrities and native social media celebrities who have a large follower base and who actively use Instagram to reach their audiences, considering them important nodes in the information ecosystem (Pelevina et al. 2024). Influencer and celebrity are used interchangeably. By focusing on the celebrities who commented on the war but **did not condemn the invasion or criticize the power holders,** the aim of this study is to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1 How did these Instagram celebrities position themselves in relation to the war and the strategic narratives?

RQ 2 How did they harness Instagram to propagate strategic narratives?

This chapter contributes to existing propaganda studies in three ways. First, the main findings indicate that Russian Instagram influencer propaganda visually mimics Instagram activism, or "performative allyship" (Wellman 2022), harnessing strategic narratives that resonate with different target audiences, Russian, Ukrainian and Western, with a focus on ordinary people, appealing to positive emotions and using simple visual and ambiguous appeals. Influencer culture, thoroughly studied by marketing and communications scholars, intertwines with propaganda in the current global digital information environment. Using mainly Instagram stories and posts, this study argues that despite ethical and work economic challenges, this kind of ephemeral content, "extra-hard data" (Özkula, Omena/Gajjala 2024), offers valuable insight in influencer propaganda studies (Leidig 2023).

Russian Digital Propaganda: Information and Entertainment

Traditionally defined as a mode of mass persuasion, intentional or deliberate efforts to win over the public, domestic or foreign, overtly or covertly, shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior (Auerbach/Castronovo 2013; Jowett/O'Donnell 2014: 7), propaganda has (re)gained momentum in the 21st century Russia. During the past decades, the Kremlin has invested in all-encompassing ide-

ological work, indoctrination, and politicization and manipulation of history (e.g. Kukshinov 2020), harnessing state-owned media outlets, television news, political talk shows, as well as cultural production for state propaganda. Putin's regime has increased state control over traditional and social media, gradually after the mass demonstrations in 2011–2012, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Extensive scholarly interest has been in Russian foreign covert, grey, or "disguised" propaganda, especially computational propaganda (Woolley/Howard 2018), "active measures" as they were called in the Soviet era, applied to digital information warfare disseminating fake news and using troll factories, "sock puppets", and bot armies during and after the United States 2016 elections and Brexit referendum (Howard et al. 2018). While the crown jewel of modern Russian overt propaganda, *Russia Today* (later *RT*), and later *Sputnik* target audiences with tailored content in the Western countries and in the Global South (Bradshaw et al. 2024), minor state-affiliated outlets are used to increase polarization among target audiences on polemic topics such as feminism, ethnic and racial issues (Bradshaw et al. 2023). Specific (dis)information campaigns target neighboring strategically important countries, "Near Abroad", where the consumption of Russian information and entertainment has remained high (Szostek 2018b; Rotaru 2018).

In the platform era, propaganda has become increasingly participatory, delegating propagandistic measures to independent actors (Golovchenko et al. 2018). States are shifting from bot-armies to semi-organic measures and using human actors, such as influencers and bloggers (Woolley 2022). While the effectiveness of 'performative authenticity' is recognized, studies in the intersections of popular culture, such as commercial influencer culture and propaganda in the Russian information-entertainment nexus, are still scarce.

Kremlin Strategic Narratives During the Russian War in Ukraine

To understand the techniques states use to win over hearts and minds, IR scholars have developed a concept of strategic narratives. Understood as the soft power of the 21st century (Roselle et al. 2014 referring to Nye, 1990) and a form of propaganda (Colley 2020), strategic narratives refer to the state's intentionally constructed coherent narratives, offering a shared meaning of the past, present, and future put together to shape the behavior of the target audiences, domestic and international (Miskimmon/Laughlin/Roselle 2014). Miskimmon et al. defined three intertwining types of strategic narratives: international system narratives, identity narratives, and issue narratives, that can be studied from the point of view of formation, projection, or reception (2014: 7–12). Discourses are understood to provide the raw material for strategic narratives, and thus, to be successful, narratives must appropriate past discourses that resonate with the popular imaginaries, values, norms, and prevail-

ing stereotypes of the target audience (Loughlin/Miskimmon/Roselle 2017: 37). The capacity of propaganda to evoke emotions is argued to be more important than the factual dimension content (Auerbach/Castronovo 2013).

Strategic narratives have become quite popular among scholars in explaining Russian ambitions on the international scene during the Russian-Ukrainian war. According to previous studies, Russia is represented as a victor over fascism in the Second World War, or "The Great Patriotic War", a crucial element of the Russian collective memory (Malinova 2017; McGlynn 2020). Second, Russia is represented as a great power, a civilized entity with a thousand-year history promoting traditional values opposite to the "demoralized West", constructing especially the United States and NATO as the enemies (Miskimmon/O'Loughlin 2017[1]). Third, Russia is depicted as the leader of the Slavic nations, changing the Soviet era brotherhood of nations discourse to brotherhood of the Slavic nations through which Russia takes the role of the big brother, and regional leader, with a moral obligation to intervene in its neighbors' internal issues if necessary (Khaldarova 2021).

Before the full-scale invasion, Ukraine was portrayed as a little brother, but after the Euromaidan, the narrative was changed to portray the betrayal of the brother, evoking old imagery of fascism and changing it to Nazism demonizing the Ukrainian powerholders and the Kyiv regime or "junta" as neo-Nazis (Khaldarova 2021). The official narrative represents Russians and Ukrainians as one nation (Gulenko 2021), even denying Ukraine's existence as an independent country or a nation. While ordinary Ukrainians, civilians, have been represented as victims, the victimhood narrative seems to have been applied either to the Russian-speaking Ukrainians or Ukrainian/Russian civilians in the Donbas region (Khaldarova 2021), the Ukrainian refugees in Russia (Moen-Larsen 2020; Khaldarova/Pantti, 2021) or, in the case of the Maidan revolution in 2014, the anti-Maidan protesters (Pasitelska 2017). These conflicting representations of Ukrainians as victims and villains continued in the Russian media after the full-scale invasion in 2022.

While strategic narratives focus on states' identities and communicating narratives to foreign audiences, their domestic resonance and compatibility with the collective identities of the nation and the *people* also call for attention (Hinck/Kluver/Cooley 2018). Central to Russian state-promoted national identity and propaganda is the relationship constructed between the strong state and the obedient and apolitical people who respond with full loyalty and patriotism to the state (Drozdova/Robinson 2019). While this *depoliticization* is one of the key strategies for the reduction of political participation in Russia (Kukshinov 2021; Yudin 2019), it is also communicated to foreign audiences. The aim of propaganda is not only to convince or

1 On NATO Hinck, Kluver / Cooley, 2018; see differences between US and Europe, Hutchings / Szostek, 2016

persuade, but also to keep the viewer passive and paranoid or simply hooked and distracted (Alieva et al. 2022; Crilley/Chatterje-Doody 2021).

Instagram as a Commercial-political Propaganda Outlet

Increasing visuality in politics (Veneti et al. 2019) has made Instagram an interesting venue for political and civic communication as well as spreading mis/disinformation and fake news (Mena et al. 2020). Certain features, especially the introduction of Instagram stories and the ability to send private messages and share links and posts using stories, have enabled harnessing Instagram's political potential in non-democratic contexts. Stories have overtaken feeds (posts) as the primary way of sharing content (Constine 2018 cited by Bainotti 2021). However, studies tend to favor platforms and methods that rely on visibility and traceability (Özkula/Reilly/Hayes 2022), thus risking leaving out hidden, ephemeral messages. Despite being harder to trace and study (Bainotti 2021), the "below the radar" activities that these features invite should be included when studying the social affordances beyond Western-centric models (Abidin 2021; Lokot 2020).

Despite the increasing repression and the state surveillance apparatus, the Russian digital sphere had continued to foster critical voices until the current invasion (Makhortykh/Sydorova 2017). Unlike state-affiliated artists, Internet-borne celebrities such as gamers, YouTubers and bloggers enjoyed relative freedom in their content. Especially YouTube and Instagram had become commercial-political spaces, inhibited by traditional celebrities, artists, actors, and comedians who used the platform to cultivate fan relations along with internet-borne celebrities, commercial influencers, and other money-makers, including educated sexologists, finance influencers and many self-made educators, and critical journalists and activists.

Before the current full-scale invasion, Instagram was the fourth most popular social media platform in Russia, after VK, YouTube and Facebook (Global Stats), and the most popular among young women, used by regular people, celebrities, and small businesses. While Ukraine had blocked Russian national television channels and the Russian social media platform VK following the Crimean annexation, Instagram remained popular in both countries, and many Russian and Ukrainian lifestyle influencers had cross-border audiences (Pelevina et al. 2024).

For a long time, Instagram was considered to be a hybrid commercial platform, more devoted to escapism than political deliberation, dominated by female users and beauty influencers, and characterized by the promotion and monetization of the self (Duffy 2017). Much research has focused on influencer marketing. However, recently, lifestyle influencers have started to address political and social issues (Arnesson 2023; Suuronen et al. 2022) and participate in state health information campaigns (Pöyry et al. 2022) as well as propaganda activities (Woolley 2022; Pelev-

ina 2023). Similar techniques that commercial influencers use, have been harnessed by radical, mainly right-wing political influencers (Lewis 2020; Leidig 2023). Influencer's agency often remains in the dark; they may spread, amplify or generate misinformation and propaganda unwittingly (Abidin et al. 2021; Pelevina 2023).

Materials and Methods

After the Russian invasion on 24th February 2022, the author was conducting her PhD on Russian influencers and noticed that many Russian celebrities posted their anti-war statements on Instagram. While some influencers took an explicitly critical position and started sharing critical information and warzone images, many posted abstract and emotional peace statements and rather ambiguous comments. Drastically different from the hostile language of official propaganda, the seemingly apolitical posts of influencers, calling for their followers to calm down and pray for peace, still echoed discourses familiar from official Kremlin propaganda.

Thus, understanding how those influencers who did not explicitly condemn the invasion positioned themselves in relation to the war and how they harnessed Instagram to propagate strategic narratives became the goal of this study. Strategic narratives are understood as consisting of familiar discourses. Recognizing the importance of the context, both the immediate conflict and the wider societal, political, and historical context (Fairclough 1995), previous research on Russian strategic narratives is used to place the (traces of) discourses, subject positions, and representations in their historical context. This study uses a multimodal discourse analytical approach with a special focus on visuality and subject positions. Discourse is understood by using a critical discourse analytical tradition (Fairclough 1995; Hall 1999) as the production of knowledge through language and a way of representing the world from a particular perspective. People draw from different discursive resources or discourses available in the current discourse order. Contexts, the speakers/user's aims and objects affect their choices (Fairclough 1995). In discourse analytical tradition, media products, or texts, can be multimodal entities such as a social media post that contains different modes of communication: written text, video, images, sound, hyperlinks, geotags, hashtags, and emojis (Kress 2011; Rose 2012).

In hybrid media systems, it is typical to choose the data source based on where the discussions emerge (Chadwick 2017; Roselle 2017: 57). Hence, data consists of Instagram stories and posts after the invasion, mostly during the first week, as most war-related posts appeared immediately following the invasion. On 11 March, the Russian Internet watchdog Roskomnadzor declared Meta to be an extremist platform and announced that it would close the platform as a reaction to the company's decision to temporarily allow hate speech against Russians. After that, many Insta-

gram influencers migrated to other platforms and temporarily stopped posting on Instagram.

First, in addition to accounts that the author already followed as part a bigger project focusing on social media influencers' politicization, a list of the 100 most popular accounts in Russia was retrieved from the website Starngate.com website. These included popular internet-borne celebrities such as influencers, gamers, and reality television stars as well as accounts of "traditional celebrities" such as artists, actors, and comedians who were popular on Instagram. Some of them had previously expressed pro-Kremlin sentiments, while most were not political. Data gathering took the form of a media ethnographic approach (Sumiala/Tikka 2020). Stories were saved as screenshots with additional field notes, and some Instagram posts by popular Russian Instagram celebrities were later added. Only posts related to the invasion, in which influencers commented on the war, directly or indirectly, were included in this study, and those explicitly condemning the invasion or criticizing the Kremlin were excluded. Second, the data were organized/coded using Atlas.ti, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The analysis was conducted by going through all the war-related stories and posts several times, first to form an overall picture of the data set focusing on the main content/message. Then, data were analyzed by drawing from existing scholarship on strategic narratives and propaganda by focusing on the following aspects:

- How the influencers addressed the war, their understanding of the war and its reasons?
- Representations of Ukrainians and Russians and other parties of conflict.
- The subject positions of Russian citizens and the influencers themselves in relation to powerholders or the Russian state.
- Style, tone, emotions, and the use of visual elements (such as emojis and visual/textual symbols).
- Use of concepts, vocabulary and word choice, and how those were linked to the previous literature on Kremlin strategic narratives (Pynnöniemi 2016; Khaldarova/Pantti 2021), as well as presented in the pre-recorded speech by the Russian president on 24 February (Kremlin 2022).

Results: Slideshow Propaganda – Mimicking Instagram Activism

When the Russian full-scale invasion started, social media feeds were soon filled with war-related content. Russian missiles hitting apartment buildings in Kyiv were mixed with black squares and emotional posts calling for peace or cease-fire. In the influencers' stories, commenting on the war took either a self-imposed and performative manner or, especially after the first days, was done by referring to fol-

lowers' requests, creating the impression that the influencer was *urged* to comment. Influencers shared their comments and perspectives using written statements and visuals, as well as by integrating messages in typical Instagram posts such as candid selfies or images of a healthy breakfast. Most war-related content appeared in stories and some in posts, whereas reels, as the most novel feature of Instagram content, were used less often. Some war-related stories appeared among other topics and used similar styles and seemed to follow the aesthetic culture of Instagram (Manovich 2020), which was expected, as the algorithmic preferences and content moderation of the platform shape the expression (Leaver et al. 2020). However, posts, pictures/drawings using peace symbolism, or the black square sometimes drastically stood out from the general style of the influencer's controlled, curated, and visually pleasing feed.

Typical posts and stories were either visual statements, images consisting of peace or brotherhood symbolism or black squares and captions including a statement and/or emojis and a #nowar hashtag; or seemingly regular images consisting of an image and a caption that was related to the war either as a direct statement or indirect commentary such lyrics of a song or a phrase. Some posts contained indirect/hidden/ambiguous messages. While Russian influencers generally post in Russian, after the invasion, some of them also posted in English, indicating they were aiming at a wider audience. Posts and stories were sometimes used to mediate different messages.

Amplifying Familiar Discourses

Drawing from previous studies of Russian strategic narratives and propaganda and based on different subject positions, relations to strategic narratives and positions towards the war, five typical discourses emerged that Russian celebrities used when communicating about the war. The discourses are: 1) the peace discourse, 2) the non-participatory discourse, 3) the brotherhood discourse, 4) the humanitarian discourse, and 4) the patriotic discourse.

Peaceful Russian People and the Ambiguity of the #nowar

Many celebrities posted black squares and emotional posts containing peace symbols on their Instagram stories and feed. Many posted statement-style posts using familiar Russian and, to a lesser extent, international peace symbolic, visual elements and emojis such as the globe (*mir* in Russian meaning both world and peace) or a blue sky, hearts, praying hands, doves, and crying emojis 😢 🙏 🌎 🕊️. Posts expressed shock and sadness but also hope. Many used common Russian peace phrases such as "Peaceful sky above our heads". Promoting peace has a long tradition in Rus-

sian political rhetoric and culture and echoes Soviet-era peace discourses uniting all the (socialist) nations of the world. Peace discourse constructs a non-political subject, positioning the influencer/celebrity as one of the ordinary peaceful people.

The peace discourse may appear without the word "war" or warzone imagery and does not indicate the causes or perpetrators of the war. The peace discourse is used in strategic identity narratives that represent Russia as a peaceful country and, thus, sometimes implicitly, Russians as peaceful people. However, while Putin and official propaganda present Russia as a peaceful country explicitly against the provocations of the warmongering West, more specifically NATO and the United States, and the Ukrainian fascists (Szostek 2018a; McGlynn 2020), this image of the enemy is mostly absent in the peace discourse used by celebrities.

Many celebrities shared a black square in their Instagram feed, sometimes with a #nowar hashtag or an anti-war statement. The black square is a typical form of Instagram activism that could be considered "just" slacktivism – in a liberal democratic context. Considering the extreme repression in Russia, even small acts of resistance can be considered risky for regular people and public personalities alike. At the beginning of the war, the same statements and hashtags were used by some Russian state-affiliated social media outlets (Pelevina 2023; Bahenský et al. 2023). Russian propagandists have used social media activism means as part of their propaganda operations during the Black Lives Matter movement (Bradshaw et al. 2023). As many analysts estimated that the Russian powerholders expected the invasion to be over in days or weeks, letting or encouraging Russian people to express their (online) solidarity was likely to have initially been supported by the powerholders. However, as the Ukrainian position of seeing Russia as the sole aggressor was immediately widely recognized internationally (at least in the Western countries), positioning against the war was interpreted in both Russia and abroad as being against Russia and Putin's invasion. As the #nowar hashtag and the "no war" phrase were used by oppositional and critical actors, by demonstrators both locally and internationally, and by celebrities and activists openly opposing the war with a direct critical stance, they became contested symbols. Soon, even mentioning that there is a war, instead of a "special military operation", constructed a critical subject position.

The Non-Participatory Discourse

Highlighting the apolitical position and emphasizing neutrality were common among influencers. Many of them pointed out that their profile or their blog is not political and justified their abstinence from commenting based on their profession as an entertainer, sexologist, fitness trainer, or artist, whose "mission" or "purpose" was to help or entertain all the people. Despite stating that their expertise is not in politics or that one's profession demands neutrality, many of them also stressed that they were constantly following the news and expressed their distress over the

"situation". Many celebrities reported massive feedback and coordinated attacks, sometimes by showing the magnitude of messages and phone calls they had received. When distancing oneself from politics and explicitly neglecting the role of an opinion leader outside one's professional expertise or competence, celebrities passed on the non-political subject position propagated by strategic narratives. While non-participatory discourse (Kukshinov 2021) and the subject position of an apolitical citizen are deeply rooted in the Russian national imagery, highlighting one's non-political positioning is also common among social media influencers in other countries (Suuronen et al. 2022).

Blood Brothers – the Brotherhood Discourse

Many celebrities posted emotional posts highlighting the closeness of the Ukrainian and Russian people, either textually or visually. Some posts contained simple graphic visuals, emojis such as hearts, flags of the two countries, or images of the influencers themselves or their children. Posts generally contained traces of or used symbols of both the peace discourse and the brotherhood discourse. However, while peace discourse is universal, brotherhood discourse is unique to the interpretation of the Russian-Ukrainian relationship. Influencer's personal closeness to Ukrainians was expressed by pointing at having relatives, friends, family or colleagues and followers in Ukraine; some celebrities also stated that they had Ukrainian blood in their veins to highlight the unity and sameness of the two Slavic brother nations. The subject position of the citizens was non-political, and the influencers represented themselves as being one of the ordinary people. Despite the strategic narratives' representation of the unity of the two nations, no direct references to Ukraine being part of Russia and not being a real country or a nation or references to betrayal were made (Khaldarova 2021). The Ukrainian flag was used as an emoji to evoke positive feelings and to represent the brotherhood with the Ukrainian people, and no difference was made explicitly textually or visually between the powerholders and the ordinary people. Constructing closeness and a positive image of the Ukrainian people and promoting peace strengthened the traditional discourses representing Russia as a peaceful nation that does not want war, especially against a brother nation. Flags and shaking hands referred to negotiations between the two sides, which indicated that, unlike the strategic narratives, the war and negotiations would be with Ukraine. This position was later interpreted as false equity by Ukrainians; as if the two countries were equal partners negotiating instead of Russia being the sole aggressor.

However, while seemingly positive and neutral, the geopolitical dimension crucial to the strategic brotherhood narrative may have been expressed between the lines as the story by an influencer shows: "Ukrainians, you have always been and will be a brother nation to Russians. I wish you the strength to live through this. We are

all going to pray for this to end. We didn't choose this path, and we don't want war with you." The text on black background with Russian and Ukrainian flags and an emoji indicating praying was posted as a story soon after the invasion.

Stating that "We do not want war with you" and "we did not choose this path" could be interpreted as meaning that the war was inevitable and caused by someone other than Russia or that the regular Russian people did not choose this path, but the powerholders did. Unlike the official sources or the Russian television news, influencers' independent social media posts often contained only fragments of the strategic narratives making them ambiguous and leaving the interpretation to the reader, likely intentionally.

The Humanitarian Discourse – How to Help

Many celebrities shared links to either international humanitarian organizations such as Save the Children, the Redcross or Russian-origin organizations. Followers were called to help those in need and celebrities showed their active personal participation. The humanitarian framing of the Ukrainian conflict and the emotional discourse representing the Donbas civilians needing help from Russia had been used in strategic narratives and actively articulated on Russian television. According to Khaldarova and Pantti (2021), the suffering of the victims was constantly linked to demonizing the claimed aggressor, including excessive references to the historical memory regarding fascism. The celebrities did not make references to the Ukrainian army and powerholders, NATO, the United States or the "Collective West", neither did they use overtly propagandistic concepts that are generally used to legitimize the Russian intervention, such as genocide, fascism, or denazification.

An example shows how a post shared by many influencers containing links to Russian charity organizations caused some confusion among their followers. The post used typical peace visuals, blue sky and clouds with a text on the image: "How can I help?" (either in English or in Russian). By following the link, it became clear that help was only offered in the occupied territories of the Donbas region and the text on the website was in Russian. One influencer shared the post, and later messages she had received from her followers warning her that any help offered to Ukraine would be considered treason by the state Duma. Even though the humanitarian discourse had been harnessed to the use of strategic narratives and Putin had recognized the independence of the "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, the ambiguity of narratives depicting Ukrainians as both victims and perpetrators seemed to be confusing to the Russian audience. The reception of the post made visible by the influencer showed the fragility of controversial narratives, especially in digital spaces.

From Defensive Patriotism to Loyal Patriot

As the Ukrainian perspective on the war was adopted widely in Europe and the United States, footage of major demonstrations held against the war – and Russia – spread over social media and ordinary Russians were held accountable for the war. This led to an emotional shift towards more defensive positions. Worries about discrimination, racism, and the canceling of the Russian culture increased in influencer's posts, and some influencers mentioned the concept of "Russophobia", a central element in strategic narratives (Darczewska/Żochowski 2015; Khaldarova/Pantti 2021). The feeling of being discriminated against and hated "by the whole world" evoked *defensive patriotism*. The pride in one's home country/nation/Motherland was often articulated in a reactive manner and on a personal level in relation to one's "birthplace" without expressing any direct support for the state and lacking the euphoria caused by the Crimean annexation (Alyukov 2022; Greene/Robertson 2022). Statements such as "We, ordinary Russians, have done nothing wrong" constructed the ordinary people and the influencer as lacking any impact, and hence any responsibility.

While some commonly known pro-Kremlin celebrities posted videos of Putin's support rally held in Moscow in March or shared a Russian weightlifter's video response to Arnold Schwarzenegger's video, strategic narratives were often mediated more indirectly. The loyal collective patriotic discourse highlighted the unity of the Russian people and used a different vocabulary and a more persuasive tone encouraging ordinary people to "calm down" and "avoid panic" or "hysteria". Recurring expressions "We must not agitate" or "provoke" echoed the loyal, patriotic position (Drozdova/Robinson 2019) and the aim of the strategic narratives to enhance the internal coherence of the nation. Some influencers encouraged their followers to stay away from politics, embracing the idea that politics is something that regular people should not participate in but rather stay united behind the powerholders (Yudin 2019). Thus, influencers took the role of an ideological intermediary (Arnesson 2023) or functioned as amplifiers (Abidin 2021), promoting the state strategic narratives' subject positions.

Overtly propagandistic concepts such as "denazification", genocide, or the letter Z, were not found in influencers' posts, and explicitly anti-western discourse(s) were rare. Some celebrities referred to geopolitics by wondering why "the West" did not react to the war in Donbas eight years ago or speculating that someone, implicitly not Russia, benefits from the crisis. An example of an indirect message was observed in relation to the so-called Chanel case. In March, Chanel closed its boutiques in Russia and later refused to sell its products to Russian customers abroad unless they signed a contract promising not to bring the items to the territory of the Russian Federation. This resulted in Russian influencers posting videos cutting up their Chanel bags as a protest. On 24 March, a famous, officially considered pro-Kremlin

celebrity posted a picture on her Instagram feed of herself sitting in a café, holding a book about Coco Chanel and smiling slightly ironically. Coco Chanel links the regular Instagram post to strategic narratives as the connection of Chanel to Nazism was also evoked on April 1st by the Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova who stated that "Chanel should go back to its Nazi square one" (Pravda 2022) connecting the allegations of Coco spying for Nazis with Ukrainian Nazis (Pomerantsev/Weiss 2014; Pynnöniemi 2016). Later in the Instagram stories, the influencer expressed her discontent with Chanel but said that she would not destroy her Chanel purses, as she had already paid for them and speculated that Chanel would most likely return to Russia. The stories directly linking Chanel to current events have already disappeared, while the visually typical Instagram post mediating strategic narratives remains in the influencer's Instagram feed.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to shed light on how Russian Instagram celebrities mediated state strategic narratives immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Several conclusions can be drawn. First, influencer propaganda mimics Instagram activism visually and stylistically. Instead of graphic war imagery, posts used emotional, simplistic, ambiguous and affective-laden visuals and textual statements which, indeed, blend in with performative allyship, harmless slacktivism and real resistance. This strategic ambiguity, while typical of internet culture, such as memes, is also familiar in the Russian post-Soviet or totalitarian communicative style. Celebrities may expect their audiences to understand the fair clues and intertextuality, highlighting the importance of the wider sociocultural context for analysis and the interconnectedness of discursive content and practice on social media platforms.

Second, regarding strategic narratives, this study found that the traditional discourses that are used by Russian propaganda, the peace discourse, the brotherhood discourse, the humanitarian discourse and the non-participatory discourse, were evoked instantly when the full-scale invasion started, and loyal, patriotic discourse emerged reactively. Unlike television programs on official propaganda outlets, celebrities' posts contained fractions or clues of strategic narratives. Influencers avoided explicitly hostile concepts and, instead of stressing the prestige superpower image or the glorious history of the Russian *state*, the focus was on the non-politicalness and peacefulness of the ordinary Russian *people*. Only the loyal, patriotic discourse used a persuasive tone and promoted unity and loyalty of the Russian people, explicitly mediating strategic narratives coming close to Jacques Ellul's (1965) integrative propaganda. While none of the influencers studied shared openly pro-war content, it is important to note that as Instagram influencers generally

report getting shadow-banned for using certain polemic words, the lack of overtly pro-Kremlin content could have been (at least partly) due to platform censorship.

Third, while this chapter argues that highlighting the apoliticalness of the ordinary Russian people and the brotherhood of the two Slavic nations was intentionally aimed at convincing foreign audiences that Russian *people*, implicitly contrary to their leaders, do not embrace violence. The extent to which the influencers wittingly participated in spreading state propaganda remains unclear. While the discourses are familiar from Putin's rhetoric and media discourses both domestically and abroad, the non-participatory discourse and the status of ordinary people vis-à-vis power holders are widely held positions among the Russian people. Therefore, this study concurs that propaganda as a concept remains useful (Farkas 2018). While categorizing abstract anti-war (or pro-peace) attitudes as "fake" or "disinformation" would be problematic, they are best understood in the propaganda framework as intentional attempts to shape perceptions and affect the behavior of a target audience or audiences. Influencers may well function as either propagandists and amplifiers of the official propaganda or unwittingly as so-called "useful idiots".

To conclude, the pressure and the attempts to weaponize social media influencers demonstrate that they are recognized as crucial nodes in the hybrid information system and highlight the relevance of Instagram, and especially Instagram stories, as an ephemeral multimodal and non-traceable way of sharing propaganda. Especially in an authoritarian context, these "below the radar activities" (Abidin 2021) serve propagandistic demands perfectly; in the constant flow of war-related content, affective posts evoke emotions without leaving time for critical reflection. Instagram's ambiguous, affective and ephemeral slideshow style propaganda engaging digital celebrities calls for more scholarly attention.

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