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'BUCHA MASSACRE' NARRATED THROUGH THE EYES OF PRO-KREMLIN MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF SPUTNIK CZ

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The Czech public was shocked when (following a Ukrainian counter-offensive that successfully liberated Bucha – a city in the Kyiv Oblast), photos and videos of Russian atrocities committed on the local residents started flooding the internet. Following the release of footage by the Ukrainian army at the beginning of April, there have been calls from prominent international actors (like the United Nations and Amnesty International) to investigate the extra-judicial executions of civilians.¹ As of writing this article, the International Criminal Court has deployed a 42-member investigative team to Ukraine to collect evidence of possible war crimes.² Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) monitored Sputnik’s section on ‘Demilitarization and Denazification of Ukraine’, and specifically articles reporting on the ‘Bucha Massacre’, to illustrate how Russian state-owned media report the atrocities committed by the Russian Federation’s (RF) army.

Generally, two narratives in the articles were identified. First, Sputnik claimed that the massacre never happened and that it was all Western propaganda. Second, it conceded that the massacre happened, but blamed the Kyiv government. These narratives were sometimes intertwined in the same article.³ As supporting evidence of the claims, Sputnik used comments or official statements provided by the RF’s Ministry of Defense, or the regime’s key figures such as Anatoly Antonov (Ambassador of Russia to the US), Alexander Bastrykin (Director of the Investigative Committee of the RF), or Sergey Lavrov (Minister of Foreign Affairs of the RF). All their claims have since then been refuted.⁴

DEMILITARIZATION AND DENAZIFICATION OF UKRAINE

On 23 February 2022, one day before the invasion was launched, Sputnik started a new section on its website called the ‘Demilitarization and Denazification of Ukraine’. As the name suggests, this section pub-

1 “Ukraine: UN’s Guterres joins call for Bucha war crimes probe”, United Nations News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115522>; “UKRAINE: RUSSIAN FORCES MUST FACE JUSTICE FOR WAR CRIMES IN KYIV OBLAST”, Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/ukraine-russian-forces-must-face-justice-for-war-crimes-in-kyiv-oblast-new-investigation/>

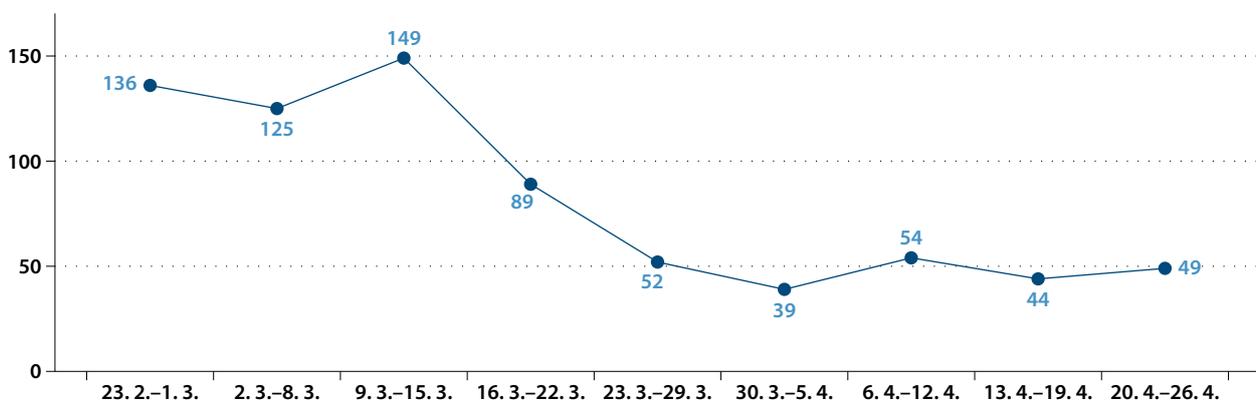
2 “ICC sends war crimes investigative team to Ukraine — as it happened”, Deutsche Welle (DW), <https://www.dw.com/en/icc-sends-war-crimes-investigative-team-to-ukraine-as-it-happened/a-61819498>

3 “Kreml: Rusko kategoricky odmítá jakákoli nařčení z podílu na smrti lidí v ukrajinské Buči”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220404/kreml-rusko-kategoricky-odmita-jakakoli-narцени-z-podilu-na-smrti-lidi-v-ukrajinske-buci-18139659.html>

4 Malachy Browne, David Botti and Haley Willis, “Satellite images show bodies lay in Bucha for weeks, despite Russian claims”, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/04/world/europe/bucha-ukraine-bodies.html?referringSource=articleShare>; Reality Check and BBC Monitoring, “Bucha killings: Satellite image of bodies site contradicts Russian claims”, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60981238>; “Fact check: Atrocities in Bucha not ‘staged’”, Deutsche Welle (DW), <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-atrocities-in-bucha-not-staged/a-61366129>

lishes articles centered on the current conflict in Ukraine. The date of the launch indicates certain pre-invasion preparation of Russian state-owned media for the military offensive. Judging by the content of the new section and the narratives used, it was created specifically to report on the developments of the ‘special military operation’, to legitimize Russian actions in the eyes of its readers, and to deny any allegations against the Russian Federation that may arise.

PSSI monitored the ‘Demilitarization and Denazification’ section for nine weeks from 23 February⁵ to 26 April. Overall, 737 articles were published in this section, with an average of almost 12 articles issued daily. The number of texts produced each week is depicted in the figure below.



‘BUCHA MASSACRE’

Following the retreat of the Russian armed forces from the city of Bucha at the beginning of April, images of corpses lying on the streets with their hands tied began to surface. Subsequently, Russian authorities started denying Russian involvement in the massacre, claiming that all evidence concerning the atrocities committed was fake. However, the claims of the Russian authorities have been debunked many times, and the authenticity of the footage obtained in Bucha after its liberation has been confirmed by renowned open-source intelligence investigative groups such as Bellingcat.⁶

The ‘Bucha Massacre’ has become an infamous symbol of the invasion of Ukraine, and an important case study on the current Russian information war. The search function at Sputnik CZ’s website was used to single out articles about Bucha. Specifically, the keyword and the ‘location tag’ Bucha⁷ were used to search for articles in the ‘Demilitarization and Denazification’ section following the emergence of first evidence of the massacre until the end of our monitoring period. Overall, 23 articles reporting on the events in Bucha were identified. The first one was published on 3 April, the last one on 19 April.

5 I.e., the day when the ‘Demilitarization and Denazification’ section was launched

6 Eliot Higgins, “Russia’s Bucha ‘Facts’ Versus the Evidence”, Bellingcat, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2022/04/04/russias-bucha-facts-versus-the-evidence/>

7 The existence of the Bucha ‘location tag’ on Sputnik’s website suggests yet another systematic preparation of Russia to discredit testimonies from the invasion

SPUTNIK'S NARRATIVES

The first narrative firmly denied Kyiv's statements about the civilian deaths in Bucha. According to Sputnik, the videos of Russian atrocities were a fake created by Ukrainian propaganda, and Russia was thus being framed. It was narrated as a planned media action to discredit Russian actions in Ukraine. Specifically, frequently reiterated was a comment of the RF's Ministry of Defense (MOD) who claimed that the whole situation was a "provocation", and that during the time that Bucha was under the control of the Russian armed forces, not a single local resident suffered any harm.⁸

Another frequently cited claim by the MOD was that the Russian armed forces left the village on 30 March, and that "evidence about the crimes" surfaced only 4 days later,⁹ which, according to them, was proof that the massacre was staged after they departed. This narrative was also reiterated by the RF's Foreign Minister Lavrov, who claimed that after the Russian forces retreated from the area, "during the next three days the mayor there spoke on television that the town was returning to normal life, the armed forces of Ukraine appeared there, showing the streets where there were no corpses. And three days later, they probably decided to organize a similar staging..."¹⁰ However, these claims have also been debunked by independent fact-checkers on multiple occasions. For instance, verification of the allegedly disputed sequence of events in Bucha was done through cross-checking of satellite imagery from varying dates in March (when the city had undoubtedly been under Russian command) with the video provided by Ukrainian soldiers in April.¹¹ The analysis of the fact-checking teams concluded the veracity of the video footage.

The second narrative was contradictory to the first one. Here, the events in Bucha were still called a "provocation" and an "attack" of either Kyiv or the West more broadly against the Russian Federation and its actions (i.e., an attempt to discredit the RF). However, this time Sputnik acknowledged that the events in Bucha happened, but claimed that the Russian Federation could not be blamed for the deaths of the local residents. In other words, the fact that the massacre was real was no longer denied. This narrative was supported by, for instance, claims that the dead civilian bodies might be the outcome of Ukrainian shelling of the city.¹²

CONCLUSION

In its newly established 'Demilitarization and Denazification' section, Sputnik News actively reports the developments of the 'special military operation' and uses the platform to 'debunk' claims made by both Kyiv and the Western media. In the articles examined, Sputnik stressed that Russia rejected all accusations

8 "Ministerstvo obrany RF popřelo obvinění Kyjeva z údajného zabijení civilistů ve vesnici Buča", Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220403/ministerstvo-obrany-rf-popřelo-obvineni-kyjeva-z-udajneho-zabijeni-civilistu-ve-vesnici-buca--1813665.html>

9 Ibid.

10 "Lavrov: Rusko bude odhalovat všechny jasné fake news spojené s ruskou speciální operací na Ukrajině", Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220404/lavrov-rusko-bude-odhalovat-vsechny-jasne-fake-news-spojene-s-ruskou-specialni-operaci-na-ukrajine-18143340.html>

11 Malachy Browne, David Botti and Haley Willis, "Satellite images show bodies lay in Bucha for weeks, despite Russian claims", The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/04/world/europe/bucha-ukraine-bodies.html?referringSource=articleShare>; Reality Check and BBC Monitoring, "Bucha killings: Satellite image of bodies site contradicts Russian claims", BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60981238>; "Fact check: Atrocities in Bucha not 'staged'", Deutsche Welle (DW), <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-atrocities-in-bucha-not-staged/a-61366129>

12 "USA tají informace o ostřelování Buči ukrajinskou armádou, prohlásil velvyslanec Antonov", Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220404/usa-taji-informace-o-ostrelovani-buci-ukrajinskou-armadou-prohlasil-velvyslanec-antonov-18137855.html>

of its involvement in the deaths of people in Bucha, and that the footage that served as evidence of the atrocities was fake. However, in the analyzed period, Sputnik also pursued a contradictory claim, stating that the dead civilian bodies were real and may have been victims of Ukrainian shelling of the city. These claims were used almost interchangeably, sometimes in the same article. Therefore, it can be argued that the disinformation tactics of the Kremlin outlet was to obfuscate Western claims and the available evidence of the crimes, regardless of whether their narratives ended up being contradictory or not, in order to cover up the truth about the ‘Bucha Massacre’.

Russian information war strategy concerning the atrocities committed in Ukraine follows the classical ‘4D Model of Disinformation Campaigns’ where information gets dismissed, distorted, distracted, and dismayed by the disinformation actor in order to cover up an unfavorable story and respond to criticism.¹³ The same strategy was, for instance, used during the annexation of Crimea in 2014,¹⁴ or to cover up the MH17 Malaysia Airlines incident.¹⁵ As Kremlin and its propaganda outlets repeatedly resort to such practices, the EU’s steps to curb the spread of pro-Kremlin manipulative content and propaganda by temporarily suspending Sputnik and RT’s domains¹⁶ was, in this specific case, a reasonable decision as such channels significantly and harmfully distort the truth.



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13 Ben Nimmo, “The 4D Model of Disinformation Campaigns”, Michigan Online, <https://online.umich.edu/teach-outs/disinformation-misinformation-and-fake-news-teach-out/lessons/4d-model-disinformation-campaigns/>

14 Ibid.

15 “MH17”, Bellingcat, <https://www.bellingcat.com/tag/mh17/>

16 “EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik’s broadcasting in the EU”, Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>