

# A Study of the Influence of the War in Ukraine on the Russian Language

Maria Kalmykova, Department of Slavic Studies, March 13, 2023

Supervised by Julia Rochtchina, Department of Slavic Studies

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## Introduction

The war in Ukraine has led to the emergence of new linguistic and political realities, which have had significant impacts on the Russian language, both in Russia and in Ukraine. Now, living in an Orwellian reality, the Russian language has had to become fluid to meet ideological requirements. The Russian language is now controlled and manipulated in order to eliminate opposition and reinforce the state's dominance. The use of new words, phrases, and language patterns reflect the changing attitudes and beliefs of the parties involved in the conflict. New words and expressions have become realized, and old expressions have gained new meaning. The Russian language fundamentally has become a tool for political propaganda and manipulation, as well as a means of asserting national identity and sovereignty. This project explores the ways in which the Russian language has changed since the war in Ukraine started, and how these changes reflect the broader social and political dynamics of the region.

## Materials and Sources

My research was conducted with the use of both Russian pro-government media as well as Russian independent media working abroad, and western media. In order to emphasize how Russian state media differs from outside sources, I utilized examples from Russia's largest and most viewed TV channels such as Первый канал (First channel) and Россия 1 (Russia 1). When it came to finding outside sources, I had to rely on either outlets that the Russian government has deemed to be 'foreign agents' such as Новая Газета (New Newspaper) or Western news outlets such as The New York Times or BBC News Russian (BBC News Русская служба). Utilizing both pro-Russian state media as well as independent media, allowed me to analyze how the Russian language fluctuated with the start of the war from a multitude of perspectives.

### Новояз- Newspeak

The war in Ukraine has led to the emergence of new linguistic and political realities, including the use of 'новояз' – Newspeak. The term was first introduced by George Orwell in his famous novel Nineteen Eighty-Four for fully controlled fictional language of Oceania, a totalitarian superstate (Orwell). Like in Orwell's dystopian Oceania, in contemporary Russia 'новояз' is used by pro-government politicians, military officials, and the state-controlled media when addressing the general public (Черкасов). This language employs inflammatory and emotionally charged terms as well as manipulation of facts. It is associated with the government propaganda and is seen by Russian political opposition as a barrier to effective communication and transparency.

## New Words and Expressions

### СВО (Специальная Военная Операция) - Special Military Operation

"Special military operation" in Ukraine is a euphemism used by the Russian authorities to refer to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The abbreviation became an expression in and of itself, much like the KGB or FSB. СВО (reads: SVO) became its own linguistic unit utilized by media/news outlets and the overall greater population (Амзин). СВО carries its own meaning behind it, a way for the Russian government to attack Ukraine without facing the accusation of violating international law. By utilizing the expression СВО rather than war, people are automatically assumed to be pro-government. From a Western perspective, the Russian use of "special military operation" is simply a euphemism for "war". It's important to note that the expression СВО is utilized at large in Russia, outside media networks contrarily refer to the invasion as a war (Troianovski).

### Z- (Military symbol) Z

By the second week of the war in Ukraine, the Latin letter Z that marks military equipment used to invade Ukraine had become a symbol of support for Russian power and "the special military operation" (Атанесян). The letter is used to substitute the Cyrillic letter 'З'. This new symbol is not only broadcast by itself, it is often accompanied by an additional aspect, for example the slogan "За победу, За наших", properly spelled as "За победу, За наших" (which means "For Victory, For Our People"). When used in such a slogan, Z is supposed to add patriotic significance to it's meaning. It is argued that "Z" is used to create a new national identity, which many Russians lost after the fall of the Soviet Union (Атанесян). The overall use of symbols gives emotion to a certain narrative that the Russian authorities want to convey to people. In this case, "Z" is supposed to evoke a sense of patriotism, devotion, and duty in relation to СВО (the special military operation), as well as separating "us" and "them". "Z" is often painted in the colors of the St. George ribbon - one of the main symbols of modern Russian nationalism. This should equate the actions of the modern Russian army with the victories of the Red Army, especially its contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945.

In the language of the Russian opposition, this letter symbol has a strong negative connotation. Z in and of itself is regarded as a linguistic unit, a word with a concrete meaning behind it. Some examples of this are as follows: Z-музыка, Z-идеология, Z-эстетика, Z-певцы (Z-music, Z-ideology, Z-aesthetic, Z-singers). On the other side of the spectrum the Z symbol is loaded with strong condemnation of those who publicly support and justify the war in Ukraine and (in case of public figures and celebrities) are generously paid by the Russian government for their loyalty. Z-фронт (Z-Front) is a broad term that encapsulates anything to do with the public support of the Special Military Operation, (Шенкман).



Fig 2. Billboard on the Ligovsky Prospekt in St. Petersburg, [#we don't leave our people behind]

## Words and expressions with new meanings/connotations

### Надежный источник VS. Фейки - Trusted Source VS. Fake News

The war in Ukraine has had a significant impact on the notion of a trusted source in Russia, particularly in the context of media and information about the conflict. The Russian government heavily controls and sensors all information related to Ukraine and blocks access to foreign news websites and social media platforms. This has made it difficult for many Russians to access a wide range of information about the conflict and has contributed to a climate of disinformation and propaganda. As a result, some Russians, especially the younger generation, have turned to alternative sources of information, such as independent media outlets and social media, to stay informed about the conflict. The prevalence of disinformation and propaganda in the media has made it more difficult for many Russians to determine what sources of information can be trusted. Some Russians may be more likely to rely on state-controlled media outlets, while others may place greater trust in independent or foreign sources of information. In the government's 'новояз' - the Newspeak the notion of 'надежный источник' is restricted to government approved sources of information. All information from the opposition media is officially branded as "fake news".

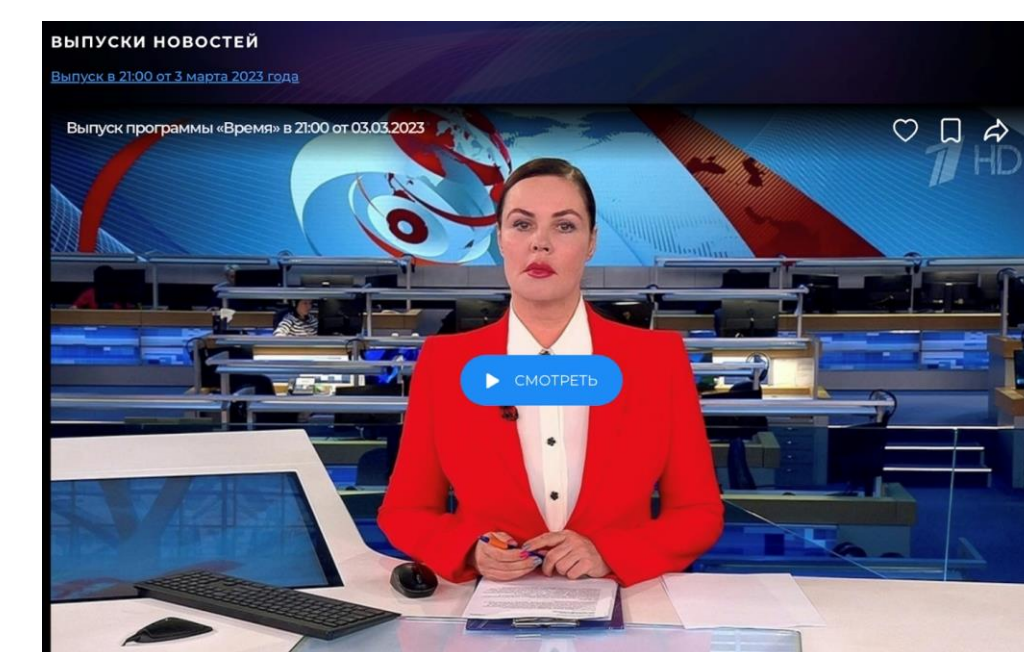


Fig 3. Main state news channel



Fig 4. [Russia 1]

### Отрицательный рост- Negative Growth

Отрицательный рост is a Russian expression that translates to "negative growth" in English. It is often used in the context of economics or finance to describe a situation where there is a decrease in the size, value, or quantity of something over a certain period of time. Negative growth can refer to a decline in a country's GDP (gross domestic product), a drop in the value of a particular asset or investment. Overall, negative growth is seen as a negative development and can have significant economic and social implications. The expression of negative growth during current events has been the way Russian state media and the economic status of the country without putting its citizens into a new and frightening reality of war (Филарова). Negative growth as well as "clap" have been seen as euphemisms for the ongoing war, and a way to keep the general Russian public under a veil of ignorance.

### Иностраный агент- Foreign Agent

The war in Ukraine has had a significant impact on the notion of a "foreign agent" in Russia, particularly in the context of civil society organizations and independent media outlets. The new law signed by Putin in the year 2022 expanded the definition of "foreign agents" to those who receive support of any kind, not just money, from abroad. Anyone who has worked with a "foreign agent" or received funding from one will be included in a new Justice Ministry list of people and groups affiliated with foreign agents (Moscow Times). The term "foreign agent" has become so broad that it now stigmatizes not only individuals (politicians, journalists, celebrities, etc. who openly speak against Putin's government and condemns the invasion of Ukraine) but also organizations. Foreign agents now include a multitude of non-profit organizations, news outlets and mass media, individuals with a high social media presence and unregistered public associations, and the list only grows. Many civil society organizations and independent media outlets have faced increased scrutiny and pressure from the government, including raids, fines, and other forms of harassment. In some cases, groups have been forced to shut down or leave the country altogether. The notion of a "foreign agent" in Russia has thus become associated with suspicion and distrust, particularly in the context of the country's relationship with the West. The government's efforts to crack down on such groups have been viewed by many as an attempt to silence dissent and limit freedom of expression.

### МК: Рок-певица Земфира\* признана иностранным агентом

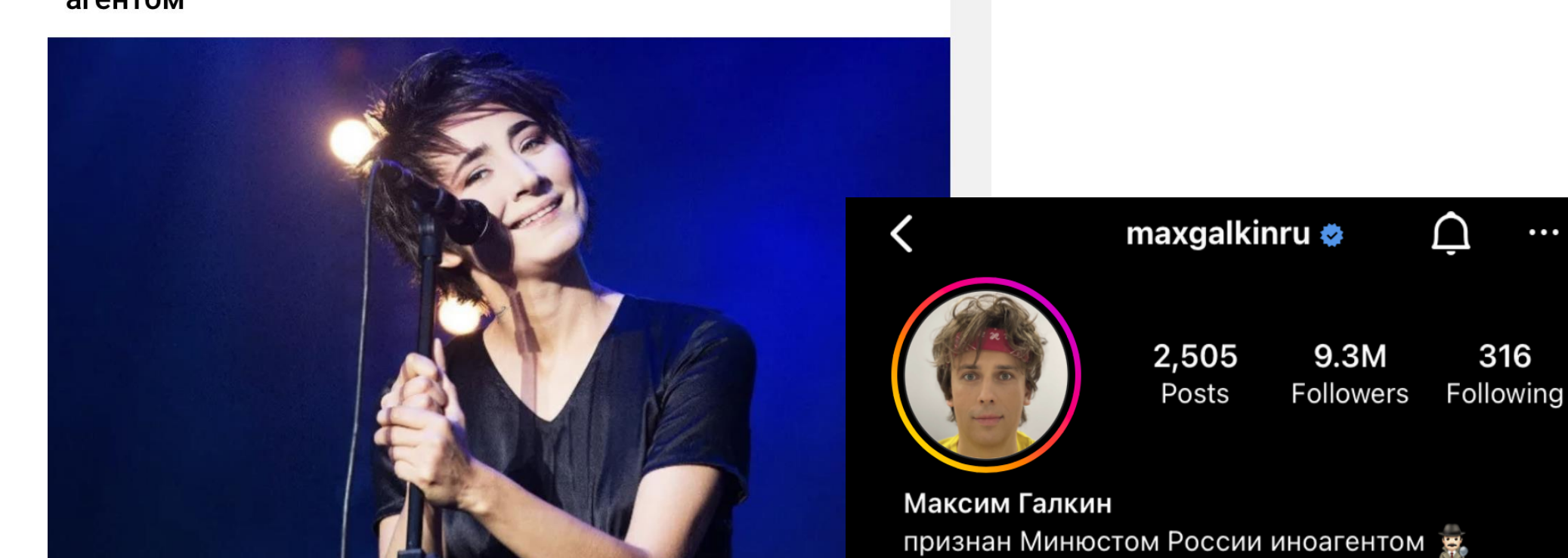


Fig 5. Zemfira, Rock Singer, openly expressed a negative attitude towards the war in Ukraine, status - declared in Russia as a foreign agent

### МК: Максим Галкин, Комедиант, открыто выразил негативное отношение к войне в Украине, статус - объявлен в России иностранным агентом

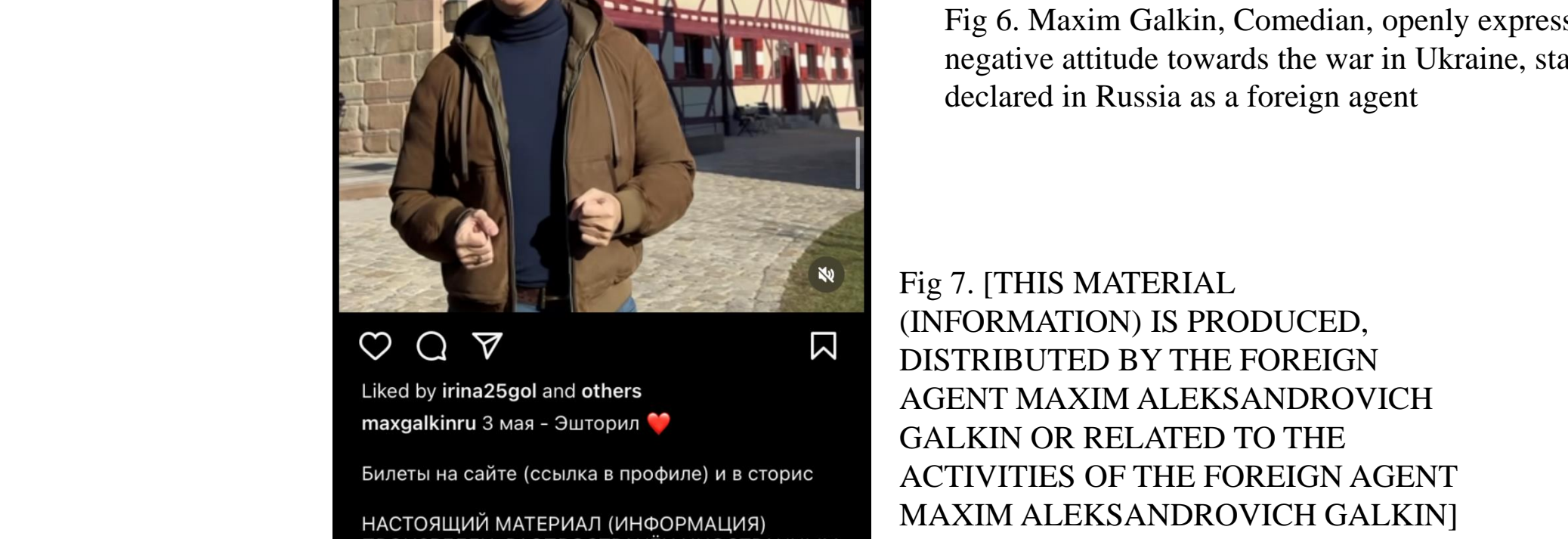


Fig 7. [THIS MATERIAL (INFORMATION) IS PRODUCED, DISTRIBUTED BY THE FOREIGN AGENT MAXIM ALEKSANDROVICH GALKIN OR RELATED TO THE ACTIVITIES OF THE FOREIGN AGENT MAXIM ALEKSANDROVICH GALKIN]

### Война- War

A word that if to describe the Russian invasion to Ukraine, carries enormous consequences such as fines and arrest. One of the most well known examples being a municipal deputy in Moscow who was sentenced to seven years in prison after spreading "fake news" about the Russian army (BBC News). Despite the word "war" being associated with the Great Patriotic War, it is now a clear reflection of what is happening in Ukraine. "War" became something that cannot be said or spread. The war in Ukraine, according to "trusted sources", is a СВО (Special Military Operation) and if you believe otherwise, you are receiving information from outside sources and consequently spreading "fake news". For the older generation, the war (the Great Patriotic War) was/is a source of great pride, however, the younger generation associates this word with current events and feels shame. The expression most commonly accompanied by this word is "нет войне". "no to war". This word is seen as false information that is spread and must be eradicated. It is avoided in the media, and most commonly encountered amongst protesters and foreign agents.

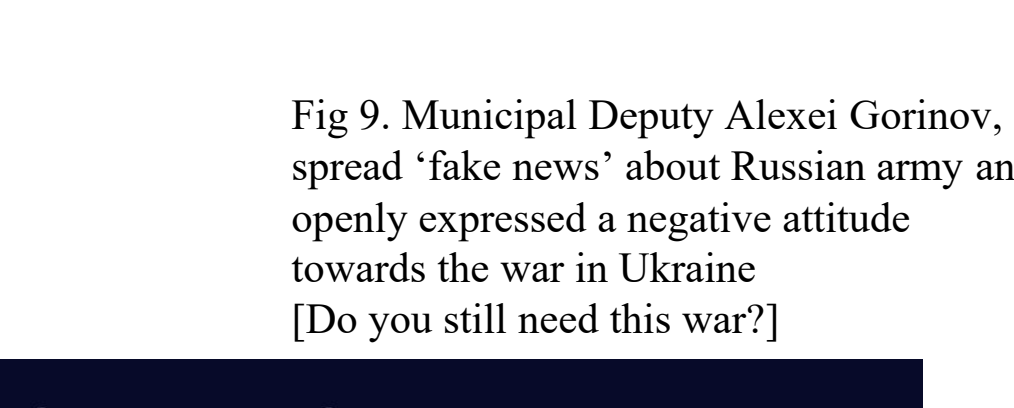


Fig 9. Municipal Deputy Alexei Gorinov, spread "fake news" about Russian army and openly expressed a negative attitude towards the war in Ukraine [Do you still need this war?]

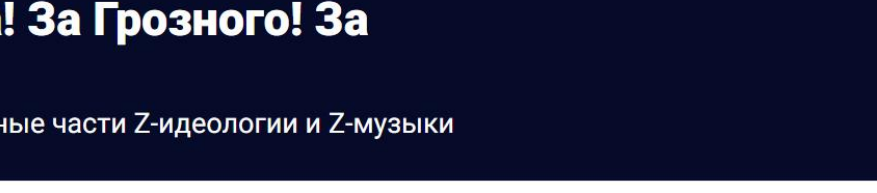
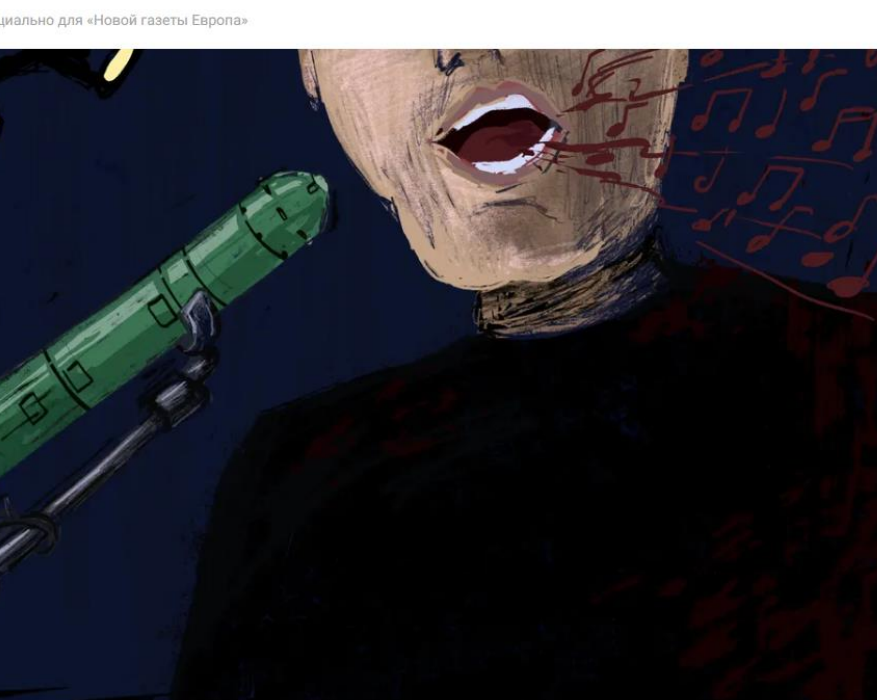


Fig 10. Foreign Agent Source [For Stalin! For Grozniy! For the thug!]



### Хлопок- Clap

A term that in direct translation means a "clap", however in this new political reality is used to describe explosions. In Russian state media, explosions are not referred to as bombings, rather as хлопок. When the Crimean bridge was bombed, the Russian state media referred to it as a "мощный хлопок" - a strong clap (Shevchuk). Russian state media has continuously exchanged the word explosion that is inherently interconnected with war, with clap. By refraining from utilizing language associated with war, Russian state-media cultivates a specific rhetoric regarding what is going on.

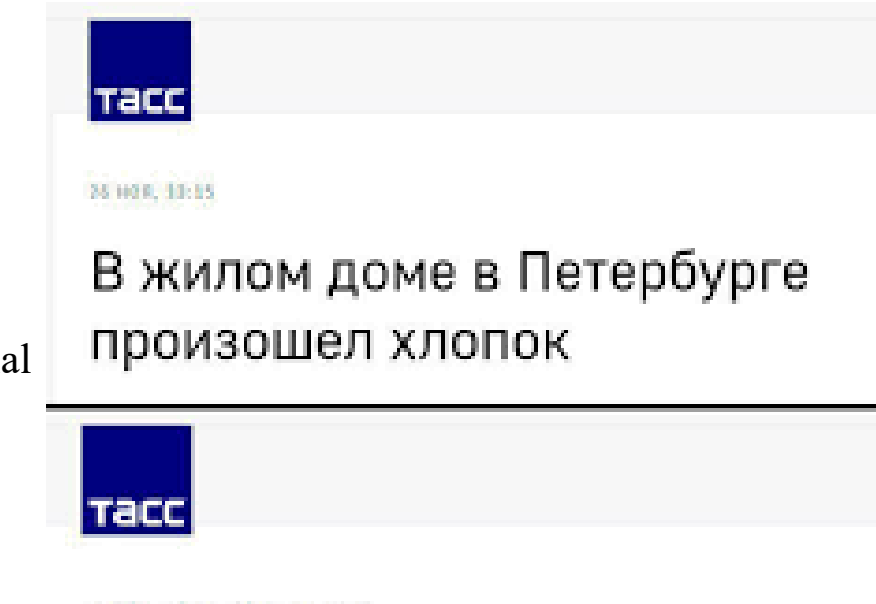


Fig 11. [A "clap" occurred in a residential building in St. Petersburg. An explosion occurred in a residential building in Germany]



## Conclusion

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has had a profound impact on the Russian language and its usage. The Russian state has been utilizing language as a tool to reinforce and propagate its agenda, introducing new words and expressions to explain events in its own terms and shifting the connotations of existing concepts. This manipulation of language, akin to the concept of "Newspeak" in George Orwell's novel 1984, aims to control the minds of the Russian people and ensure their unwavering support for the state. Through the substitution of concepts and veiling of negative realities, the state seeks to create a new reality for the Russian people, one that is acceptable and favorable to the state's interests. Examples of this include referring to a fall in the economy as "negative growth" and characterizing the ongoing conflict in Ukraine as a "Special Military Operation". Furthermore, the state has shifted the connotations and meanings of concepts to pass off negative things as positive, creating a sense of patriotism and loyalty to the state among its citizens. The introduction of the letter 'Z' as a symbol of the ongoing conflict, creating a correlation between the current war and the Great Patriotic War, is an example of the state's use of language to promote a specific agenda. However, the manipulation of language by those in power risks alienating those who value critical thinking and truth-seeking, ultimately undermining the principles of democracy and human rights. It is imperative for individuals to remain vigilant and question the language used by those in power, and to demand transparency and truthful communication. The power of language is immense, and its manipulation for political gain is a dangerous threat to the fabric of a free and open society.

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