
CHAPTER 3

LIE, DENY, JUSTIFY

Russia's approach to criticism about its invasion of Ukraine followed the pattern used for decades by autocratic regimes to deal with controversial actions.

There will be lies, denials or dubious justifications, or all of the above.

President Putin and Vladimir Solovyov, a Russian journalist, television presenter, writer and propagandist known for anti-Ukraine statements, falsely claimed Ukraine struck first, and an invasion was necessary to “de-Nazify” the country. (The 2019 election produced only 2% of the vote for far-right candidates, according to reports, and hardly sufficient to suggest Ukraine was following a path to Nazism.)

“Today is the day on which the righteous de-Nazification of Ukraine begins. A most important day, a day which decides the course of our history,” Solovyov said on his YouTube channel, Solovyov LIVE.

Media technology sites issued warnings about pro-Russian posts that included footage from video games and old military exercises as fake examples of Ukraine attacking Russia.

“There are even two examples of videos on Twitter

today that are actually from war-themed video games, something Russian state media has previously tried to do on multiple occasions,” Gizmodo noted on the Thursday after Russia launched its invasion.

Another stark example was Russia’s insistence that it was not targeting civilians in Ukraine. Yet on March 9, A Russian air strike hit a children’s and maternity hospital. An enraged President Zelensky tweeted: “Direct strike of Russian troops at the maternity hospital. People, children are under the wreckage. Atrocity! How much longer will the world be an accomplice ignoring terror? Close the sky right now! Stop the killings! You have power but you seem to be losing humanity.”

Regional Governor Pavlo Kyrylenko said Russia had carried out the attack on the hospital during an agreed ceasefire that was meant to allow the evacuation of civilians from the besieged southern city.

President Zelensky’s call to “close the sky” was a direct reference to NATO’s refusal to introduce a no-fly zone over Ukraine.

He upped the ante after the hospital in southern Ukraine was attacked, demanding again that Western countries declare a no-fly zone over Ukraine.

“Europeans, you can’t say you didn’t see what happened to Ukrainians. You saw. You know. You have to tighten the sanctions so that Russia no longer has any opportunity to continue this genocide,” he said.

By the middle of March President Zelensky was telling the world that 97 children had been killed in Russian attacks.

Another example of Russian obfuscation: President Putin said several times that only professional soldiers had been sent into Ukraine. The Russian defence ministry however acknowledged after three weeks that some conscripts were taking part in the conflict with Ukraine. Conscripts may also have included prisoners.

It was also revealed that troops from Chechnya were involved in the assault on Kyiv. Reuters news agency reported that Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Russia's Chechnya region and an ally of President Putin, said he had traveled into Ukraine to meet Chechen troops.

Kadyrov, who has described himself as Putin's "foot soldier," posted videos of heavily armed Chechen troops in the Kyiv region as part of Russia's invasion force.

He has been accused several times by the United States and European Union of rights abuses.

Moscow fought two wars with separatists in Chechnya, a mainly Muslim region in southern Russia, after the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union.

President Zelensky has been the subject of a smear campaign by Russia for his stout resistance and preference for alliances with the West.

In one broadcast, state-backed Rossiya 1 TV channel identity Dmitry Kiselyov said President Zelensky appeared

in an “obscene state” and appeared “under the influence of alcohol or hard drugs” and “insane.”

Kiselyov, regarded by some as Putin’s “propagandist-in-chief” said in a news program: “Ukraine’s Western allies tried their best to convey a simple idea to President Zelensky. No-one will send their troops to Ukraine, no-one will close the airspace over Ukraine, because this will lead to a direct clash between the armies of NATO and Russia.

“It is also better for Ukrainians to forget about joining NATO and the EU.

“Ukraine for the USA and Europe is expendable material; its historical mission is to sh*t on Russia and that’s all.

“By the end of the week, Zelensky finally began to understand something. He appeared in such an obscene state that everyone had only one question: Was the head of Ukraine under the influence alcohol or hard drugs? He looked so sluggish and insane.”

Moscow TV programs do not refer to “war” or “invasion” but instead to Vladimir Putin’s “special military operation” to bring “peace” and root out “Nazis”.

According to the state-backed Channel 1 “the service personnel of the Ukrainian army are laying down their weapons and saying that we are one people.”

This outlet and Rossiya 1 both claimed the Zelensky government was in its “death throes,” suggesting the President had fled Kyiv, ignoring evidence to the contrary.

State-run media also has claimed the Russians only just got to Ukraine in time because Ukraine was “merely a few months away from having a nuclear explosive device.”

State TV also aired claims that Ukraine had been involved in bio-warfare research but ahead of the conflict there “all stockpiles and pathogens” were “urgently destroyed.”

China also entered the fray with some wild claims about US involvement in Ukraine, the statements reminiscent of the questions that were asked of China about the origins of the Covid pandemic.

A Chinese official accused the US of running biolabs in the eastern Ukraine, claiming the situation was “dangerous” and that the “safety” of the supposed labs was at risk.

“Under the current circumstances, for the sake of the health and safety of people in Ukraine, the surrounding region and the whole world, we call on all relevant parties to ensure the safety of these laboratories,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said.

“In particular, the US, as the party with the best knowledge of these laboratories, should release relevant details as soon as possible, including what viruses are stored and what research has been conducted.

“What is the real intention of the US? What exactly did it do?”

The conspiracy theory appears to have originated in Russia in early 2020.

In April that year, the US embassy in Ukraine issued a statement hitting back at the rumors, slamming them as “Russian disinformation regarding the strong US-Ukrainian partnership to reduce biological threats.”

It needs to be kept in mind that the bio labs in Ukraine are old ones established in the Soviet era. Ukraine said they were being converted for use as research centers.

The US State Department compiled a Fact v Fiction account of statements made during the conflict.

Some of the fictions espoused by Russia, according to the State Department, include:

- Ukraine and Ukrainian government officials are the aggressor in the Russia-Ukraine relationship.
- The West is pushing Ukraine toward a conflict.
- Russia’s deployment of combat forces is a mere repositioning of troops on its own territory.
- Russia is defending ethnic Russians in Ukraine.
- NATO has plotted against Russia since the end of the Cold War, encircled Russia with forces, broken supposed promises not to enlarge, and threatened Russia’s security with the prospect of Ukrainian membership in the Alliance.
- The West shuns diplomacy and goes straight to measures like sanctions.