"She Played All the Pregnant Women!": Russian Disinformation, Symbolic Annihilation, and the Mariupol Hospital Attack

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On March 9, 2022, the maternity and children's hospital number 3 in Mariupol, Ukraine, was bombed as part of Russia's full-scale war efforts in Ukraine. However, Russian state-aligned media promoted a different narrative: namely, that the bombing itself, as well as the victims on site, were fake. Thus, combining concerns of war, gender, and disinformation, I analytically unfold the state-aligned news media coverage of the Mariupol case in Russia within the framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis. The analysis demonstrates how female agents are stripped of victimhood and symbolically annihilated across the material, introducing the concept of false agency. Meanwhile, the experts in the coverage are solely male and predominantly Russian, pointing to an intersectional and unequal divide based on gender and nationality. Moreover, the analysis illuminates how fact-checking is used as a deliberate tool to legitimize the disinformative coverage within the discourse of information warfare in Russian state-aligned media.

Keywords: Russian disinformation, information warfare, gender, symbolic annihilation, feminist analysis, Russia's war in Ukraine

On March 9, 2022, Maternity and Children's Hospital number three in Mariupol, Ukraine, came under aerial attack (Polglase, Mezzofiore, & Doherty, 2022). The attack was waged by the Russian military as part of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine initiated on February 24, 2022. The hospital was operational, with personnel and patients occupying the buildings. However, the mainstream Russian news media portrayed the attack differently, misleadingly claiming that the Western and Ukrainian portrayal of events was caveated and the bombing itself was staged. The state-aligned Russian coverage of the event became another piece of the Kremlin's disinformation puzzle, which continues to frame the full-scale war in Ukraine as a "special military operation" in the media and political sphere (Tolz & Hutchings, 2023). This study aims to contribute to an analytical account of this single case of *disinformation* (Fallis, 2015) in state-aligned news media in Russia, focusing specifically on the gendered nature of the Mariupol case.

The systematically misleading framing of Ukraine in the Russian state-aligned media since at least 2014 is a well-documented phenomenon (Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Kuzio, 2019; Pynnöniemi & Rácz, 2016; Tsekhanovska & Tsybulska, 2021). The use of gendered narratives in this regard has also been examined (Gaufman, 2022; Voronova, 2017). However, the intersection of Kremlin

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disinformation, media, and gender[1] in the current context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has yet to be scrutinized empirically. This study critically examines what occurs in this intersection through an analysis of the state-aligned news media coverage of the Mariupol case in Russia and aims to answer the following questions: (1) How are women and men constructed and represented in the state-aligned Russian news coverage of the Mariupol case? (2) What roles do these representations (or lack thereof) play in the disinformative construction of the event itself?

In this study, I am not conducting fact-checking[2] on the bombing of the maternity hospital; neither do I aim to feed into and reproduce the posttruth discourse (Spoelstra, 2020). Instead, I subscribe to Fairclough's (1995) normative stance on truth: it is a "slippery business, but abandoning it altogether is surely perverse" (p. 47). I approach the material as a *resistant reader* (Fairclough, 1992), since my critical reading of the content is not what its creators had in mind. The content is accessed as disinformation on the grounds that it fits into Fallis's (2015) definition of disinformation because it: (1) is information; (2) stands in opposition to the actual event on the ground and is hence misleading; and (3) can be perceived as intentional, as it fits within the larger discursive structure promoted by the Russian state. In other words, it is generally strategically deceptive and nonaccidentally so. I do acknowledge that the usage of the news genre in the context of this study might appear contradictory; however, since this is how the content is presented in Russia, I have chosen to keep it.

My positionality in this study is shaped by a feminist epistemological stance, employed in research on Russian disinformation by Edenborg (2021) among others. He proposes that "studying disinformation from a feminist lens treats the gendered, sexualized, and racialized dimensions of Russian narratives (. . .) as crucial rather than accidental" (Edenborg, 2021, p. 499). Apart from this acknowledgment and the commitment to critical self-reflection in the research process, a feminist stance entails an interest in *gender* and *power*, as well as the intersection of the two in different social, political, and cultural settings (Krijnen & Bauwel, 2021; Lazar, 2014). Moreover, according to Kuo & Marwick (2021), *a feminist approach to disinformation* entails being aware of the potentially oppressive nature of representations designed and disseminated with the strategic intent to mislead, sow discord, or do harm to an individual or a group. It means "reframing 'disinformation' from a problem of information pollution to a form of knowledge that is propagated and circulated" (Kuo & Marwick, 2021, p. 3).

Disinformation, Hybrid Warfare and the News

Disinformation can take different forms and be disseminated in an array of ways. In this study, I focus on a specific type of disinformation crafted and presented as news by Russian journalists in state-aligned media outlets. The state-aligned media in Russia are part of a large propaganda and disinformation ecosystem (Oates, 2016) operating within the hybrid authoritarian media systemic framework (Alyukov, 2021). Examining the coverage of the war in Eastern Ukraine on Channel One, the largest TV channel in Russia, Khaldarova and Pantti (2016) found that the outlet was reproducing existing narratives instead of exercising journalistic coverage of

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[1] Gender is understood here as "socially constructed meanings of one's physical sex" (Krijnen & Bauwel, 2021, p. 3).

[2] Fact checking of the Russian portrayal of this case has already been performed by professional fact-checking groups, for instance, EUvsDisinfo (2022) and Vox Ukraine (2022).

events and forming "a context in which other messages can be communicated with greater ease" (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 899). Mass media, in particular television, is seen as a tool by the state rather than as an autonomous institution (Oates, 2016) and is largely compliant with the political and military discourses of the Kremlin (Filimonov & Carpentier, 2021; Yablokov & Schimpfössl, 2020). This fits well with the approach to disinformation as part of hybrid warfare operations waged by states, with Russia frequently used as a case study example (Bjola & Pamment, 2016; Golovchenko, Hartmann, & Adler-Nissen, 2018; Wagnsson & Hellman, 2018). Here, disinformation is understood as an information-based tool used in connection with on-the-ground military actions to achieve a specific strategic aim.

However, it is incorrect to assume that the Kremlin always directly dictates mediated messages in a Soviet-like manner (Becker, 2014). Instead, within the hybrid authoritarian media systemic framework, the state mainly relies on the editors and journalists to pick up on the politically sensitive red lines and develop an internal propaganda compass or "almost a sixth sense" (Yablokov & Schimpfössl, 2020, p. 6). Currently, the editorial red lines related to the war in Ukraine have been drawn up legislatively. According to a law implemented by the Russian Duma in early March 2022, the full-scale war must be defined and portrayed as a good-willed "special military operation" (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Any deviations from this are punishable by up to 15 years in prison (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). These developments naturally influence how events such as the Mariupol bombing are covered in the mass media domestically, and shape how truth is constructed and who is allowed to convey it in the political and media arena.

Remasculinization and Gendered Politics

Putin initiated the project of remasculinization of Russian national identity in 2000 when he first took the presidential seat (Riabov & Riabova, 2014; Voronova, 2017). This strategy entails "politics of identity directed toward creating a positive collective identity of Russians with the help of gender discourse, particularly by promulgating masculine images of Russia" (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 23). It was initially an attempt to reestablish an image of Russia as a strong state, both domestically and internationally, after a decade of post-Soviet chaos and economic instability (Muravyeva, 2017). Coming in as a seemingly strong leader, offering promises of stability and growth, it was easy for Putin to sell the idea of national and political rebranding toward the masculine ideal (Riabov & Riabova, 2014). Mediated images of Putin performing exaggerated masculine tasks, such as tranquilizing a tiger, riding a horse bare-chested, and excelling in martial arts, were thus not an uncommon sight from the very beginning of his rule (Sperling, 2014). This hyper-masculine, and at times sexualized, portrayal of the president, reproduced in the state-aligned Russian media, became one of the strategic ways to legitimize and naturalize Putin's grasp on power (Sperling, 2014). From 2012 on, the traditional values discourse became tied to the remasculinization project, creating a symbolic framework for the promotion of heteronormative political masculinity (Edenborg, 2021). In this political celebration of masculine traits, femininity has symbolically been connected to people, regardless of gender, in subordinate positions (see Sperling, 2014), and nations that Russia seeks to dominate or undermine (see Gaufman, 2022; Voronova, 2017).

Assigning "strongman" characteristics to a leader is not a tendency that is isolated to Putin: leaders often linked to populist ideals, such as Donald Trump, are known to create favorable images of themselves based on their manly appearances and leadership styles (Löffler, Luyt, & Starck, 2020). Thus, although the

patriarchal structure unfolds in context-specific ways, the prioritization and domination of male voices cut across cultural and political borders. As claimed by Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2022), in the Western context, "white men in positions of power have historically occupied a central position within this economy of believability as ideal believable subjects." (p. 3). Although the authors work with the concept of believability in the contextual intersection of #metoo campaigns and posttruth political rhetoric, their argument ties into the general, persistent point in feminist epistemological research that posits the act of truth-telling as an intersectionally gendered practice (Harding, 1991).

Moving beyond the general question of the trustworthiness of women in the media, the specific issue of stereotypical portrayals of women in war coverage could be tied to the process of *symbolic annihilation* (Tuchman, 1978). Symbolic annihilation is understood as "symbolic erasure" (Schneider & Hannem, 2019, p. 742) because of "condemnation, trivialization, or absence of representations of women in the media" (Schneider & Hannem, 2019, p. 742). The argument here is that "by rarely or never showing certain types of persons, the mass media, as cultural mechanisms, (. . .) send a symbolic message to viewers/readers about the societal value of the persons comprising that group" (Klein & Shiffman, 2009, p. 56). When representing women in an unbalanced way, misrepresenting some female experiences, while completely erasing and silencing others, the media also implicitly reproduces the dominant (and often unequal) gendered structures and hierarchies (Harvey, 2020). Symbolic annihilation raises issues that go beyond the mere quantification of women's appearances in the media, asking *how* and *why* women are (mis)represented (Tuchman, 1978). It is important to note that the media is perceived in these studies from a Western standpoint as relatively independent from state influence, albeit being shaped by commercial interests, dominant norms, and political bias. However, the general focus on the underlying mechanisms of power and ideology and how they affect (mis)representations of women in the media is relevant to studies of authoritarian media contexts, particularly when dealing with journalistic portrayals of war, which have an inherent stereotypical preference for masculine framing (Fröhlich, 2016).

Method and Data

This study is methodologically rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), employing the approach of Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995), and complemented by a critical multimodal analysis of discourse (Jancsary, Höllerer, & Meyer, 2016; Machin & Mayr, 2012) to accommodate both the visual and textual aspects of the material. Fairclough centralizes the ideological aspect of CDA and depicts "discursive practices as material forms of ideology" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 87) contributing to the "reproduction or transformation of relations of domination" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 87). Domination should be read here in terms of the Gramscian understanding of hegemony as an unstable equilibrium and a process of constant negotiation rather than continuous dominance. As argued by Jancsary, Höllerer, and Meyer (2016), the multimodal approach is important when examining visually driven media since "visuals are often able to 'disguise' power structures and hegemony as 'objective' representations" (Jancsary et al., 2016, p. 184).

The multimodal approach allows for a focus on how both textual and visual language (in my case, the language of the state-aligned Russian news media) communicates meaning through particular representations of reality (Jancsary et al., 2016). The critical aspect lies in unearthing the covert ideological meanings of these representations, asking who is being portrayed, how, and with what agenda, examining what Machin and Mayr

(2012) call the *representational strategies*. It entails being sensitive to who is potentially silenced, erased, or misrepresented, denaturalizing the presented constructions (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 9). Following the feminist roots of the study, the focus of the analysis is on the gendered aspect of coverage, examining how women (particularly women on the site of the bombing) and men are represented, and how these representations are discursively shaped and legitimized. Here, it is vital to acknowledge my positionality as an outsider looking at the mediated portrayals of the Mariupol case from a digitally provided distance—portrayals that were designed and disseminated for domestic Russian audiences. The results of this study are also tainted by my critical approach and normative view of disinformation as a weapon for Russia's ongoing information warfare efforts. Therefore, I will not be able to account for the diverse readings of the material by the target audience, and neither is it the aim of this study. Naturally, my Ukrainian origin complicates my outsider position. I grew up with Russian as my mother tongue, have been culturally shaped by Russia, and am now observing the full-scale invasion from Denmark through both a professional and a personal lens. Conducting this study has included a great deal of self-reflection and systematic, analytical distancing that has implicitly shaped the results that are presented below.

Including elements of the *Three-Dimensional Model of Discourse* (Fairclough, 1992), combined with the multimodal approach, the analytical framework includes a critical examination of *texts* (understood as communicative events) as well as a study of *discourse practice* and *social practice*. For the analysis of the texts, I focus on *transitivity*—defined as "the study of what people are depicted as doing and refers to who does what to whom, and how" by Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 104)—and *exclusion*, examining the primary agents in the coverage and the representational strategies of the different outlets. Multimodal awareness is vital here, since "just as it is revealing to ask who is backgrounded or excluded linguistically from a text, so it is important to ask the same visually" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 102). An analysis of the discourse practice is performed parallel to the analysis of texts (as recommended by Fairclough, 1992), looking at the format of the texts as well as the intertextual and interdiscursive elements. Here, *narratives* are important to note, since it is not uncommon in discourse-analytical studies to use narrative and discourse interchangeably although they denote different aspects of communication (Forchtner, 2021). I understand a narrative to be a "form of representation" (Fulton, 2005, p. 1) presented as a coherent story that is "historically and culturally positioned to turn information and events into structures that are already meaningful to their audiences" (Fulton, 2005, p. 1).

Data Collection

As this research is a qualitative, multimodal study of media discourses, the corpus had to be of manageable size and contain elements of multimodal communication (Machin & Meyer, 2012). Hence, to begin with, I drew up a set of different limitations and outlined a strategy for a systematic data collection process that was informed by the contextual boundaries of the authoritarian setting of the state-aligned Russian media.

First, the *timeframe* was set from the day of the attack, March 9, and a week onward, until March 16, 2022, to cover the news cycle for the coverage of the event across the different outlets.

Second, since my research focus was the coverage from state-aligned media outlets, I focused solely on outlets that are known to work in discursive alignment with the Kremlin. The choice of outlets was performed based on their *ratings* in Russia, focusing solely on the outlets with the highest ratings at the time of data collection during May–June 2022, as recorded by the Russian ratings monitoring agency,

Medialogia. Moreover, to ensure *diversity of content*, I chose a mix of online news media outlets (Lenta.ru and Gazeta.ru); newspapers with an online presence (Izvestia and Komsomolskaya Pravda); a news agency (TASS); and leading TV channels (Channel One and Rossiya 1). The content gathered from the chosen outlets does not cover the entirety of the state-aligned news coverage of the case at the time. However, I argue the gathered material may be considered representative[3] of the coverage in the given timeframe because of the diverse nature of the outlets sampled and their high popularity in Russia.

Third, to ensure maximum control of the process, I chose to manually scrape the websites of the text-based outlets, using the *keyword* "роддом" ("maternity hospital" in Russian) in the search functions. Although the facility that was hit functioned both as a maternity and a children's hospital (Polglase et al., 2022), the term "maternity hospital" was associated more often with the attack. An additional keyword "Мариуполь" ("Mariupol" in Russian) was tested, but it did not yield additional results related to this specific attack and was discarded. For the TV content, since accessing the content directly from the websites of the TV channels was impossible because of short archival times, I employed an online TV archive for news content from Russia located under the domain www.tv-novosti.ru. The origins and the financial ties of the archive are unknown; however, it has been used in prior research on Russian TV (see Voronova, 2017). The archive does not offer the keyword search option; therefore, I manually scanned the entire body of news content from the two TV channels of interest in the relevant timeframe. This yielded three news clips in which the case was covered.

Finally, it was set as the criterion that the case would be the central story in the news items. This data collection process resulted in a final corpus containing 26 news items: 23 online articles with collocated images and videos and three TV news clips (for an overview of the data, see Appendix A). Before initiating the multimodal critical discourse analysis, I organized and manually coded the material according to the dominant themes. The quotes, as they appear in the analysis, have been translated from Russian to English by me.

Analysis

The gendered nature of the news coverage of the case could be expected, as pregnant women and women with small children were a large part of the patients of Mariupol Maternity and Children's Hospital number three that came under attack on March 9, 2022 (Polglase et al., 2022). Images of some of these women quickly started circulating in Ukrainian and Western news media, as well as on social media platforms (Polglase et al., 2022), reproducing and supporting the discourses of war and female victimhood. In contrast, the state-aligned Russian news reports show a different representation of events, constructed using disinformative narratives about the hospital not being employed for its purposes because of an occupation by the Ukrainian military group, Azov, and the impossibility of the bombing taking place in and of itself. These narratives are used to legitimize the central claim that cuts across the entire body of the analyzed material, namely that the bombing was a staged media stunt conducted strategically by Ukraine within the context of their information warfare efforts for the Western audiences.

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[3] I follow the approach to representativeness of data within the framework of CDA, designing my selection process in a systematic manner "to faithfully reflect the totality of texts in the genre or social domain concerned" (Wodak & Meyer, 2015, p. 236).

The focus on information warfare has geopolitical implications. It is also an actively employed discourse in the analyzed content and the reality that the coverage of the Mariupol bombing exists within, since the disinformative, state-aligned news coverage clashes with the events on the ground, denying their viability. Any critique or deviation from state-approved truth claims is automatically rendered illegitimate. An example of this appears when the Mariupol story and its Ukrainian framing and Western coverage are introduced as "информационный терроризм" [informational terrorism] on Channel One (2022a). Similarly, the Rossiya 1 news anchor introduces the Mariupol story as the latest example of "фейковые новости и постановочные фото и видеосъемки" [fake news and staged photos and video recordings] allegedly created and distributed by the Ukrainians (Rossiya 1, 2022). Within the ontological, pro-Kremlin structure and with the tightening of censorship domestically since February 2022, any information that challenges the narratives surrounding the so-called "special military operation" and portrays Russia as the aggressor is not accepted as plausible (Tolz & Hutchings, 2023). This explains why one of the core, unanimous arguments of the analyzed news coverage is that the portrayal of events stemming from the Western and Ukrainian media is fundamentally and intentionally false. Portraying the Mariupol bombing as a fake event feeds into deeply rooted enemy images constructed by the Kremlin over time, making the whole narrative construction seem sound for the target domestic audiences (Voronova, 2017). Dichotomously gendered representations of supposedly legitimate truth-tellers play a role in this regard.

Representation and Symbolic Annihilation of the Female Victim(s)

According to Machin and Mayr (2012), "there exists no neutral way to represent a person. And all choices will serve to draw attention to certain aspects of identity that will be associated with certain kinds of discourses" (p. 77). There are notable differences in the visual and rhetorical representation of women from the site of the bombing. This representation pattern also varies between the visually driven outlets (the two TV channels and the tabloid newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda) and others. Content from outlets that do not visually portray the women on-site instead features mentions of them in a collectivized, anonymous manner (Izvestia, 2022a; Lenta.ru, 2022). The women are described as "роженицы" [those giving birth], "медсестры" [female nurses], "беременные женщины" [pregnant women], and "пациентки" [female patients], all roles that could be adequately tied to a maternity hospital setting. However, these descriptions are consistently interwoven into one of the aforementioned main narratives, which argue that the hospital was not being used for medical purposes in March 2022 and that it was impossible for the women portrayed at the bombing site to have been occupying these roles. Only in one article from Lenta.ru are the mentions of women colocated with the verb "пострадали" [were harmed] (Lenta.ru, 2022), hinting at their potential victimhood status, but this is countered later in the same paragraph. It is thus heavily emphasized that the group of women mentioned has been falsely constructed as victims. In this process, the women are symbolically annihilated through direct erasure (Tuchman, 1978), as Russian readers neither see the women nor receive any concrete information about them. Instead, the construction of their absence in the stories is used by the journalists to legitimize the central disinformative claim that the entire Mariupol story is a strategic hoax. This results in a double violence against the Ukrainian women present on-site, as they are not only targeted physically by the attack but also assaulted symbolically in the state-aligned Russian news coverage that followed the incident.

The televised content is rich with visuals of the Mariupol women, presenting a mix of photographs from the hospital site (see Figure 1) and visual footage from a social media account of one of the women, Marianna

Podgurskaya (see Figure 3). This pattern also applies to the pieces from KP. Moreover, KP has an original video embedded in all three articles, edited in a fact-checking format, where Marianna is featured. The photographs and videos featuring the women have, in this visually driven editorial process, been recontextualized and employed as proof of the aforementioned dominant narrative that the bombing was a strategically staged event. Here, the visuals are intertextually traced back to Western media outlets, showing the front pages of different newspapers featuring images of women from the bombing on the screen (see Figure 2). Both the TV channels and KP hypervisualize the women while rhetorically erasing them by claiming that all the women presented are actually one woman, Marianna, who acted as multiple female victims. This creates a misalignment between the visual and rhetorical representations. Marianna, who is always mentioned by name and individualized, is thus discursively assigned the collective agency of all the pregnant women at the bombing site.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the opening sequence of the Mariupol story on Вести [News Messages] (Rossiya 1, 2022).

Figure 2. Screenshot of the collection of Western front pages on the Mariupol story, presented in Новости [The News] (Channel One, 2022a, 2022b).

For instance, a KP journalist claims in the article titled "Известная модель сыграла жертву для фотографа в «разбомбленной Россией» больнице Мариуполя" [A famous model played a victim for the photographer in the Mariupol hospital "bombed by Russia"] (Alfimov, 2022) that Marianna played two pregnant women simultaneously and that she had to change makeup for that. The makeup comment is worth dwelling on since Marianna's profession is beauty blogging. When featured in the material, Marianna is presented interchangeably as a "модель" [model] and "бьюти-блогер" [beauty blogger] (Alfimov, 2022; Channel One, 2022a, 2022b; Rossiya 1, 2022), and it is underlined that her performative job makes her a good candidate for the role of the victim(s). This argument is emphasized further when KP and the TV channels juxtapose the images from the bombing with images from Marianna's Instagram profile, taking them out of their original context and using them as proof of Marianna's performative nature (see Figure 3 for an example). Within this disinformative construction that draws on the discourse of information warfare while portraying the bombing as a staged event with no actual victims, the representation of the beauty blogger Marianna as an actress is plausible.
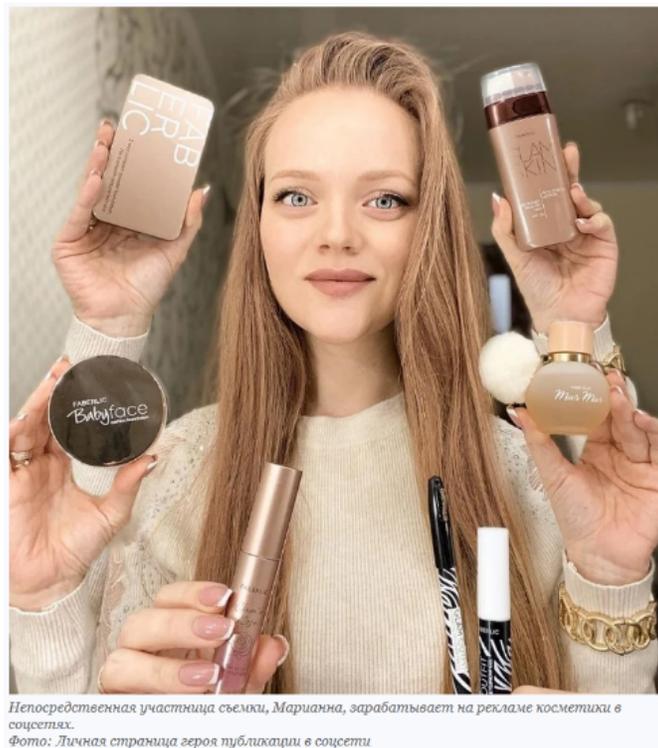
Figure 3. Image from the Komsomolskaya Pravda Article. The Collocated Text Reads: "The Direct Participant of the Photoshoot, Marianna, Makes a Living by Advertising Makeup on Social Media" (Alfimov, 2022).

The emphasis on Marianna's transformative qualities using makeup plays on a stereotypical gendered understanding of a woman as a "natural" expert in enhanced beauty and appearance (Cranny-Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, & Kirkby, 2003). This particular stereotype is also in line with a hegemonic

understanding in Russian society of how a woman ought to be and present herself within the heteronormative framework of traditional values. Stereotypes do not exist in a mediated vacuum and are often derived from (and amplified by) the social and cultural context beyond the media's portrayal of the stereotyped group (Harvey, 2020). Although being represented as stereotypically female in terms of appearance and her upcoming motherhood status (it is made explicit that Marianna is in fact pregnant), Marianna is constructed as an active agent who consciously chose to participate in the information warfare efforts of the Ukrainian state, thereby militarizing her presence in the hospital.

This discourse of deviant, nonpassive femininity feeds into the *vagina dentata* narrative (Gaufman, 2022), in which certain feminized actors are constructed as dangerous and not to be trusted within a securitization framework, which in turn delegitimizes their experiences of reality. This type of representation seemingly breaks with the dominant portrayal of women as weak, passive, and peace-seeking in global war coverage (Fröhlich, 2016). However, when the content is read in a resistant manner, the construction of Marianna as an actively malicious woman may be viewed as a representation of *false agency.* As I argue, *false agency* describes the misleading assignment of agency by a third party to individuals or groups within a framework of disinformation or propaganda. When assigning false agency to Marianna, the state-aligned outlets symbolically annihilate her by *condemning* her actions on disinformative grounds and discrediting her actual on-the-ground experience. Moreover, her agency is framed in negative terms, and her "act" is framed as unconvincing in the reversed fact-checking process performed by the journalists.

A similar example in terms of representation and construction of false agency briefly appears in the news clips from Channel One (2022a, 2022b), in which front pages of different Western outlets are shown featuring another Ukrainian woman covered in blood. The nameless woman is presented as an employee of the Ukrainian Center for Psychological and Informational Operations, allegedly acting as a victim of a recent Russian attack on Ukraine for the camera, not unlike Marianna. An explicit parallel is drawn between Marianna and this particular woman by the Channel One journalist. The two Ukrainian women are both falsely represented as consciously engaging in the act of war-related victimhood, in an alleged setup where the consequences of war on (female) civilians are visually captured and globally distributed to discredit Russia. Here, the intersectional aspect of nationality is important to note, alongside gender. In constructions of Marianna and the aforementioned woman, their nationality is made explicit as Ukrainian—the *other* in the state-aligned media portrayals of the war in Ukraine. This systematic othering and negative framing of Ukraine goes back to at least 2014 (Kuzio, 2019; Voronova, 2017) and has been amplified after the beginning of the full-scale war in February 2022 (Tolz & Hutchings, 2023). This otherness implies suspicion and untrustworthiness while feeding into the anti-Ukraine discourse, promoted actively by the Kremlin (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Kuzio, 2019). A Ukrainian woman in the Russian state-aligned media context can thus be read as potentially untrustworthy on account of both her gender and nationality, which intensifies the potential for systematic symbolic annihilation.

Male Experts and Truth Claims

Across the news items in the corpus, Marianna stands isolated as the sole woman mentioned by name against the backdrop of exclusively Russian male experts who multimodally dominate the coverage. This creates a clear gendered dichotomy, both textually and visually, across the analyzed material. The

three main experts repeatedly drawn upon are Sergey Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Figure 4); Igor Konashenkov, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Defense (Figure 5); and Vasily Nebenzya, permanent representative of Russia to the United Nations (Figure 6). Other male experts appear, such as the head of the Donetsk People's Republic, Denis Pushylin (in the news clip of Rossiya 1), and a deputy representative of Russia to the United Nations, Dmitriy Polyansky (in articles by Izvestia, TASS, and Lenta.ru). However, the above-mentioned three men and their statements form the main pillars of legitimization in the coverage, and they are systematically represented both visually and in written form across the material.

Figure 4. Sergey Lavrov, screenshot of an embedded video (Izvestia, 2022a, 2022b).
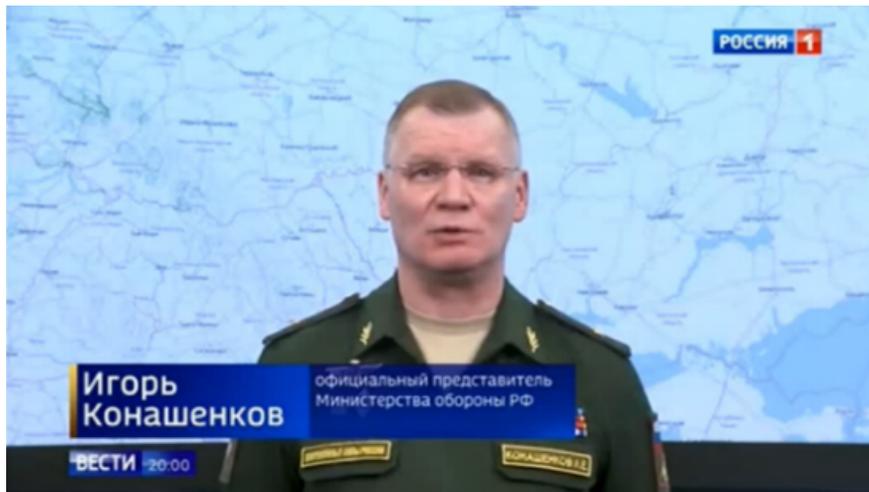
Figure 5. Igor Konashenkov, screenshot of the Вести [News Messages] broadcast on the Mariupol story (Rossiya 1, 2022).

***Figure 6. Vasily Nebenzya, screenshot of Новости [The News] broadcast on the Mariupol story
(Channel One, 2022a).***

What unites the three dominant experts are their influential positions of power as well as the explicit pro-Kremlin political connection and stance. The news coverage is thus driven by an expert ethos of political significance, and in Konashenkov's case, of military influence. All three men are constructed as reliable agents when speaking about the situation in Mariupol, and their statements are quoted uncritically by the journalists. Nebenzya's statement, uttered at the United Nations a few days before the bombing, rests on the claim that the Ukrainian Azov battalion had occupied a hospital in Mariupol, with all patients and personnel displaced. Nebenzya actively militarizes the hospital, stripping it of its care facility purposes. Lavrov then references Nebenzya's claim at a global press conference in Antalya, Turkey, on March 10, the day after the bombing, creating an intertextual connection and narrative continuity. For instance, two Izvestia articles that contain both an embedded video of and written passages from the press conference, quotes Lavrov as stating the following: "этот родильный дом давно захвачен батальоном «Азов» и прочими радикалами" [this maternity hospital has long been seized by the Azov battalion and other radicals] (Izvestia, 2022a, 2022b, 00:29).

With this claim, Lavrov underlines the militarization of the hospital, presenting Nebenzya's statement as facts and ruling out the possibility of any civilian victims on site. In the same statement, Lavrov moreover actively engages with the information war discourse, claiming that Western journalists lack objectivity by repeatedly painting Russia as the aggressor in the war. He states that "не в первый раз мы видим патетические вскрики по поводу так называемых зверств, которые «чинят российские вооруженные силы»" [it is not the first time that we see pathetic screams about the so-called atrocities that are "performed by the Russian armed forces"] (Izvestia, 2022a, 2022b, 00:02). The tone of the statement is sneering, emphasized by the use of "pathetic screams" to describe accounts of Russian assaults on Ukraine, and Lavrov's tone indicates irritation over the question about the bombing. The use of mockery toward antagonistic figures is not unusual in Russian political communication and is a gendered practice, perceived as a way to demasculinize (and thereby delegitimize) the *other* (Gaufman, 2022). Visually, both Lavrov and Nebenzya are sitting behind a desk in a formal setting, wearing suits, and implicitly representing Russia on the global stage, which amplifies their professional ethos and believability in the context of the news stories.

The statements from Lavrov and Nebenzya are supported by the statement of the third male expert, Igor Konashenkov, made in the official video briefing produced and released by the Ministry of Defense on March 10 (the day after the bombing). Konashenkov's military ethos is enacted in the official video, as he starts by listing Russia's military gains in Ukraine and continues commenting on the Mariupol bombing using militarized terms and wearing a military uniform. His affinity with the statement is overall high, and he looks directly into the camera in the course of the video, enacting authority and creating an impression of speaking directly to the audience (Figure 5). By embedding parts of Konashenkov's official statement in the news material (both as textual and audiovisual quotes), the journalists make a direct intertextual link to an official governmental source, following the legal guidelines and censorship rules of reporting on the war in Ukraine within Russia's borders. In the video, Konashenkov addresses the aforementioned discourse of information warfare when he claims that the audiences in Europe and the United States are the main target for the so-called staged event. The three televised news clips and seven of the articles (two from Gazeta.ru, two from Lenta.ru, and three from Izvestia) have this quote directly implemented. The quote and the way it is employed in the coverage rests on a longstanding, frequently mediated propaganda narrative from the Kremlin, dictating that Western media is prone to spreading false information and should not be trusted (Golovchenko et al., 2018). It draws among others on the historical discourse of the Cold War, which promoted a dichotomous understanding of the USSR versus the West on both sides of the Iron Curtain (Korolczuk, 2014).

Both the experts and the journalists that cite them use the truth claim approach and construct their arguments as facts, in contrast to the allegedly fake story of the bombing. In this process, truth becomes an antonym to the narratives of the enemies on the informational battlefield. In some instances, this construction is done by employing different fact-checking strategies, such as pointing out inconsistencies in detail (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). This known fact-checking strategy is here used as a tool for enhancing the legitimacy of the disinformative narratives among the target audiences by presenting them as evidence-based and therefore objective. An example of this is the video compilation produced and distributed by KP in their coverage of the Mariupol case (Alfimov, 2022). Accompanied by fast-paced music and video material from the site, the aforementioned inconsistencies in detail are presented systematically and compiled with quotes from different expert videos—among others those of Lavrov and Konashenkov. The main argument in the video is that the evidence coming from the site of the bombing is illogical and does not hold under scrutiny. One such inconsistency, as claimed in the video, is the aforementioned alleged presence of Marianna on all photographs portraying pregnant women. When combined with the statements from the male experts, the event is thus constructed as staged with high affinity and added entertainment value, actively employing the fact-checking framework.

The examination of the Mariupol coverage underlines a point made in prior research, namely that state-aligned Russian news media largely reproduce narratives approved by the Kremlin rather than reporting on events on the ground (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). However, instead of creating a *fog of falsehood* by "running several parallel narratives" (Pynnöniemi & Rácz, 2016, p. 18), the state-aligned media line up to distribute stories that support coherent overarching narratives in the Mariupol case. The aforementioned intertextual references are key in this regard, as the event is constructed by journalists in the content mainly through quotes from (male) state officials made in contexts outside the news stories (i.e., not in direct interviews with the media outlets). Moreover, male officials make intertextual references to each other, creating a solid web of connections and making the disinformative construction of

the event seem even more plausible and easier to comprehend for the audiences. The hybrid authoritarian framework aids in the creation of these intertextual chains editorially as well as the discursive alignment across the different state-aligned outlets. There is also a consistency in the visual and rhetorical representational strategies when it comes to the male experts: the images and videos of the men from formal settings are embedded consistently across the material, collocated with their statements, setting them apart from the representations of women from the site of the bombing.

Gendered Representations in Context

Social practice is the macro layer of the study and the aspects relevant for understanding the context by which the analyzed material is shaped and which it in turn shapes (Fairclough, 1992). The central contextual aspect of this study is the gendered dimension, the (re)masculinization of Russian politics, and the explicitly patriarchal androcentric state ideology. It intersects and interplays with the other aspects, but the separate emphasis on it is important to bring into question the hegemonic assumptions related to gender that have become commonsensical in the Russian reality, spilling out into the state-aligned media content. As part of the remasculinization project and the centralization of power at the hands of Kremlin officials since the turn of the century, truth-bearing capabilities overwhelmingly belong to political elites in Russia today. Moreover, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the responsibility for the construction of truth has been formally placed in the hands of Kremlin officials and legislatively sealed with laws prohibiting the creation and dissemination of information undermining the Russian armed forces (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Ca. 84% of the Kremlin officials are men (Statista, 2023), making the Russian political realm and the truth construction within it greatly imbalanced in terms of gender.

There is no space in the state-aligned news coverage, and in the Kremlin-supported regime of truth more broadly, for anyone who does not support the hegemonic, domestic discourses approved by the state, regardless of their gender identity, nationality, and sociopolitical status. However, within this regime, some agents are allocated more space and rendered more reliable. Here, Russian men who occupy significant positions in the political and military spheres are continuously constructed as the only reliable, trustworthy sources of the so-called *objective truth.* According to Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2022), *the mandate for objectivity* is built on domination and eradicates certain gendered subjects from 'the realm of truth.' The focus of their analysis is the Western context; however, this theoretical observation is equally applicable in Russia, where the gendered imbalance in believability is ideologically framed, with implicit references to traditional values and moral high ground among other things. This in turn feeds into an antagonistic divide between the masculine, rational "us" who communicate "facts," and the irrational, emotional "them" on the feminine side, who consistently "lie" (Riabov & Riabova, 2014). However, these binary categories are unstable. For instance, the "feminine others," which in this case can be broadly understood as Ukrainian actors and the Western media, are not constructed as stereotypically weak. Instead, within the discursive framework of information war, these "others" are constructed as a threat, "attacking" Russia through communicative means, thus being presented as active rather than passive. Even the actual embodiment of the "feminine other," in the face of the pregnant Marianna, is not represented as a victim and a "damsel in distress" (Gaufman, 2022, p. 4) in need of saving, but as the potentially dangerous *vagina dentata* (Gaufman, 2022). The disinformative construction of war-related events is hence relative in the state-aligned media, as it relies on the denial and oppression of the truth of the "others"—in this particular case

through different forms of symbolic annihilation of the female victims of the maternity hospital bombing in Mariupol. Viewed from a feminist perspective, this systematic symbolic annihilation, denial of victimhood through erasure, and discursive militarization of female civilians is problematic as it contributes to an erroneous understanding among the Russian audiences of Ukrainian women as either collectively malicious and threatening, or untouched by Russia's military assault on Ukraine.

It must also be noted that the construction of a trustworthy, authoritative, and believable image of the male experts, in this case, rests not only on their sociopolitical status but also on the fact that they align with the Kremlin-supported discourses. Hence, although a certain intersectional combination of gender (male) and nationality (Russian), as well as a high political status domestically, boosts an agent's trustworthiness in the mediated sphere in Russia; within the tightly censored regime of truth, the discursive framing of the claims presented matters greatly.

Conclusion

To conclude, the analyzed material of the Mariupol hospital bombing presents a clear gendered dichotomy in terms of representation and discursive construction of the truth. The representation of women is overall rendered through different forms of symbolic annihilation when the content is read as disinformation. This is done editorially by erasing the women from the site of the bombing or, as is the case in the visually driven media, visually representing them, but claiming that they were all actively embodied by one woman: the Ukrainian beauty blogger, Marianna. When portrayed in the news pieces, Marianna is assigned *false agency* in that she is presented as an actress taking an active part in the news media spectacle that the bombing is misleadingly constructed as. Marianna is thus not presented as someone to be trusted, whereas the male experts are. Hence, the state-aligned news coverage does not challenge the status quo in the Russian context, as the gendered power and knowledge hierarchy is discursively upheld across the material, reproducing some of the dominant themes within the Russian information war discourse. The concept of *truth* was found to be vital in the disinformative stories, as both journalists and male experts they quote rely on high-affinity statements and truth claims in their presentation of the hospital attack. Here, fact checking is an important tool, illustrated by the frequent usage of and references to it across the material. Moreover, the hybrid authoritarian media system that enables tight governmental control of the domestic news media, allows for interdiscursive alignment across the different outlets, both on- and offline, and reproduction of similar narratives, which gain legitimacy in the process of wide repetition.

The study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it provides empirical, in-depth insights into a case of Russian disinformation in the context of the ongoing, full-scale war in Ukraine, which continues to be on the radar of political and public interest globally. Second, it combines the study of Russian disinformation with a feminist lens and a gendered focus—a focus that is largely overlooked in studies of malicious information practices by the Kremlin, albeit highly relevant (Edenborg, 2021). Third, it offers new discursive perspectives on the state-aligned Russian news about the war in Ukraine, highlighting the information war discourse as well as the governmental ethos that dominates the content, and shapes who gets to construct the *truth* about events on the ground.

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Appendix A
Table 1. Overview of Data.

	Outlet	Outlet type	Date	Title (in Russian)
	Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP)	Newspaper		
1			9/3 2022	Кто на самом деле разбомбил детскую больницу в Мариуполе
2			10/3 2022	Известная модель сыграла жертву для фотографа в «разбомбленной Россией» больнице Мариуполя
3			11/3 2022	Роддом в Мариуполе: а был ли авиаудар?
	Izvestia	Newspaper		
4			10/3 2022	Лавров заявил о базировании «Азова» в мариупольском роддоме
5			10/3 2022	Бьюти-блогера заподозрили в исполнении роли двух жертв «атаки» на роддом в Мариуполе
6			10/3 2022	Twitter заблокировал аккаунт посольства России в Лондоне из-за поста о роддоме в Мариуполе
7			10/3 2022	Минобороны назвало провокацией заявление об ударе по больнице в Мариуполе
8			10/3 2022	Украинский депутат назвал фейком историю с обстрелом роддома в Мариуполе
9			12/3 2022	Объявление о продаже российских танков на Украине оказалось фейком
10			14/3 2022	Военный историк обвинил Украину в развертывании «психологической войны»
	Lenta.ru	Online news outlet		
11			10/3 2022	Сообщение об ударе по роддому Мариуполя может содержать признаки недостоверного
12			10/3 2022	Лавров назвал роддом в Мариуполе базой батальона «Азов»
13			10/3 2022	Минобороны ответило на фейки западных СМИ о якобы обстреле больницы в Мариуполе
14			12/3 2022	Небензя фотографиями опроверг «авиаудар» России по роддому в Мариуполе
	Gazeta.ru	Online news outlet		

15		10/3 2022	Лавров заявил, что роддом в Мариуполе давно стал базой для экстремистов
16		10/3 2022	В Минобороны РФ заявили, что «авиаудар» по Мариуполю является срежиссированной провокацией
17		11/3 2022	Российского посла вызвали в МИД Эстонии
	TASS	News agency	
18		10/3 2022	Песков заявил, что у него нет данных о ситуации с обстрелом роддома в Мариуполе
19		10/3 2022	Лавров заявил, что роддом в Мариуполе использовался в качестве базы батальона "Азов"
20		10/3 2022	РФ отмечает инсценировку "фотографий" с якобы пациентами больницы в Мариуполе
21		10/3 2022	Аккаунт в Twitter посольства РФ в Лондоне заблокировали после поста о роддоме Мариуполя
22		11/3 2022	Постпредство РФ при ЕС призвало руководство Евросоюза не тиражировать дезинформацию
23		11/3 2022	Небензя: фото из роддома Мариуполя показывают, что он не мог быть обстрелян ракетами
	Pervyy Kanal (Channel 1)	TV	
24		10/3 2022	Новости 21:00
25		13/3 2022	Новости 21:00
	Rossiya 1	TV	
26		10/3 2022	Вести 20:00