

# Pro-Russian narratives in occupied territories of Ukraine

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**How are pro-Russian voices monopolising the information space in occupied Ukrainian territories – and what can European policy-makers do in response? This brief analyses the techniques used by Russia, and the narratives circulating that normalise war within this highly restricted information environment.**

## Summary

Since Russia's occupation of Donbas, millions of Ukrainians have faced the reality of living under foreign rule or finding refuge in other Ukrainian cities or abroad. This policy brief addresses how those who remain in occupied territories are forcibly incorporated into the Russian information space through the exclusion from Ukrainian and Western information sources, Russian state propaganda, and the promotion of local collaborationist narratives. It calls for the strengthening of localised Ukrainian media presence that addresses residents' immediate daily concerns, alongside international advocacy to expose Russian "normalisation" projects as mechanisms for erasing memories about war and enforcing depoliticisation.

## Context

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reintroduced to Europe the forgotten phenomenon of occupation of parts of sovereign territories. Under these conditions, managing information salience is a core aspect of Russia's efforts to control and suppress undesirable information within and beyond its borders.

Pro-Russian media available to citizens in occupied territories disseminate propaganda aimed at legitimising the occupation. Key messages include the glorification of Russia as the saviour of local Russophones, accusations of Ukrainian "aggression" against the Donbas region and demonstrations of the "achievements" of the Russian administration in restoring the destroyed infrastructure. Russian efforts to exert political control over the territories through information manipulation are amplified by local Russia-friendly voices whose narratives seek to normalise, routinise, banalise and de-dramatise the war. These narratives are part of Russia's hybrid warfare techniques, directed at local residents traumatised by the war.

## Key Messages

- Kremlin-sponsored propaganda is projected to local audiences in occupied territories and adjusted to their specific conditions.
- Pro-Russian narratives in occupied territories are replete with references to care and protection that aim to normalise war and legitimize occupation
- Appeals to routine and non-ideological issues of everyday life can be seen as core elements of the occupation regime.
- The conflation of societal, economic and communicative practices displayed by Russia-sympathetic social media influencers reinforces Russia's hybrid policies towards the occupied territories.



## Information salience management in occupied territories

The effectiveness of Russia's information salience management relies on the systematic control of information flows within the occupied territories of Ukraine. Several techniques – together can be described as an “information economy of deception” – increase the salience of pro-Russian discourse while suppressing Ukrainian perspectives.

### 1. Rerouting of internet traffic through Russian networks

The primary mechanism of control involves the physical rerouting of local internet traffic through Russian-controlled infrastructure, effectively incorporating occupied territories into the "RuNet". This transition enables the comprehensive enforcement of Russian state censorship and provides technical basis systematically blocking independent Ukrainian and Western news sources, social networks, and video hosting platforms, many of which are inaccessible without a VPN. The continuous advancement of blocking technologies further complicates access, even for experienced users.

### 2. Priming of Russian content and blocking of independent sources

While global platforms are subject to systematic blocking and throttling, pro-Russian narratives remain accessible via state-approved domestic platforms such as VK Video and RuTube, which are prioritised and technically unobstructed for local audiences. Within this environment, restrictions on audience engagement – including the disabling of comments or the curation of positive emoji reactions – stifle dissent and manufacture an artificial consensus. Telegram channels face comparatively less censorship, providing a residual window for information from Ukrainian sources.

### 3. Marginalisation of Ukrainian content

Ukrainian local news sources achieve lower reach due to fewer distribution channels and reduced posting frequency compared to pro-Russian outlets, particularly in territories occupied prior to 2022. While these sources focus on frontline developments, Russian war crimes, and humanitarian aid, they do not address the localised information needs of local populations.

### 4. Coercive barriers to Ukrainian information access

The risk of sanctions for consuming Ukrainian news, including physical punishment, is the primary barrier to accessing information from Ukraine. Studies report that Ukrainian materials found on mobile devices can result in detention,<sup>1</sup> physical abuse, or home searches. This creates a climate of fear that reinforces information isolation.

### 5. Self-censorship

Beyond direct coercion, self-censorship operates as a powerful mechanism of information suppression. Many individuals refuse to discuss political or military news not only due to fear of repression, but also as a coping strategy to avoid psychological burden. This voluntary withdrawal from political engagement reinforces the depoliticisation imposed by occupation authorities.

### 6. De-factualisation

Through the narratives that are produced and amplified, Russia displaces fact-based reasoning with intentional stigmatisation of Ukraine and the West, substituting reality with imaginary visions of the world based on conspiratorial thinking and anti-intellectualism.

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<sup>1</sup> Rating Group. Report on the results of a comprehensive study of the state of society in the temporarily occupied territories. 26.03.2025. [activegroup.com.ua/2025/03/26/zvit-za-rezultatami-kompleksnogo-doslidzhennya-stanu-suspilstva-na-timchasovo-okupovanix-teritoriyax/](https://activegroup.com.ua/2025/03/26/zvit-za-rezultatami-kompleksnogo-doslidzhennya-stanu-suspilstva-na-timchasovo-okupovanix-teritoriyax/)

**This multi-layered information control apparatus transforms occupied territories into closed information environments thereby reinforcing normalisation narratives.**

## Normalisation narratives

Pro-Russian narratives produced by residents of Ukrainian occupied territories have emerged as a distinct discursive genre. They first developed in 2014 in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” and became particularly visible after Russia occupied Mariupol in March 2022. Hundreds of self-produced visuals posted online present the perspectives of local supporters of Russia.

Our study of these materials revealed how the legitimization of war in the pro-Russian narratives circulating in occupied territories is not only ideological; it is grounded in a specific “entrepreneurship of war”, or “political economy of war”.<sup>2</sup> Control over information flows, combined with material practices such as volunteering, contributes to the justification of occupation. The narratives these materials promote include:

### 1. Showcasing volunteering and charity

Non-profit organisations with names such as “Good People” and “Be Kinder” frequently appear as protagonists of pro-Russian vlogs. They are portrayed as supplying material to help to local residents, as organisers of donation campaigns<sup>3</sup>, or as helping to identify missing people.<sup>4</sup> Volunteering is often organised by the Russian “United Russia” party and in practice merges with “patriotic” education, including study trips to Russian cities and the celebration of Victory Day and other official festivities.<sup>5</sup> “Volunteer” actions organised by pro-Russian organisations are frequently recorded to demonstrate “popular support.” A substantial portion of such “humanitarian actions” serves predominantly propagandistic purposes, something acknowledged even by pro-Russian respondents.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Exposing mobility opportunities

Some pro-Russian vloggers share their emotional experiences of traveling to Russia, portraying it as a vast country full of new impressions and opportunities.<sup>7</sup> Some of these trips are organised by Russian authorities, including the State Duma,<sup>8</sup> while others are framed as private travel. Central to this logic of commodified patriotism are claims of a higher quality of life in Russia compared to in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Oleg Kashirskikh and Jeremy Morris (2025) The Neoliberal “Regime of Truth” as a Framework for Legitimizing War and Mobilization in Russia. Paper presented at LegitRus Capstone Conference, Sofia, September 13.

<sup>3</sup> Dobriy Mariupol. V Mariupole kafe gruzinov i geev, k sozhaleliyu. YouTube, July 23, 2025, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDWkanbhbsg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDWkanbhbsg)

<sup>4</sup> Za Mariupol. Mariupol, kak prokhorodit moy den'. YouTube, June 8, 2022, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BH-OfF2vIB4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BH-OfF2vIB4)

<sup>5</sup> KapKap. Kak ya okazalas' pod Volnovakhoi. Kak legko tvorot' dobro. Dobro na Donbasse. Nedelya volontyorstva. YouTube, February 15, 2024, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzGKVKKoS-w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzGKVKKoS-w)

<sup>6</sup> Rating Group. 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Kak zhivu ya. Semya iz Mariupolia. Eto neveroyatno krasivo. Vostorg. YouTube, January 9, 2024, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2b8jp797tIA&t=1932shttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2b8jp797tIA&t=1932s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2b8jp797tIA&t=1932shttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2b8jp797tIA&t=1932s)

<sup>8</sup> Timur Seidov. Moskva. Mariupol'tsy v Gosudarstvennoi Dume. YouTube, December 17, 2023, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeCS4qRK0Pg&t=752s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeCS4qRK0Pg&t=752s)

<sup>9</sup> Anastasia Kozhevnikova. Tariffs in Russia versus Ukraine: Where It's Cheaper to Live? YouTube, March 29, 2025, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9csXnm1xQ4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9csXnm1xQ4)

### 3. Demonstration of urban rebuilding.

Some pro-Russian vlogs advertise new housing areas in Mariupol aimed at Russians seeking to buy property in this city with low mortgage interest rates.<sup>10</sup> These accounts of urban reconstruction frequently highlight the tourism industry, including hotels and resort areas. Developers, brokers and property sellers thereby contribute to the normalisation of occupation through market mechanisms of incentivisation and consumption. A symbolic example is the Mariupol Drama Theatre, where more than 600 people were killed by a Russian airstrike: instead of memorialising the tragedy, Russia has rebuilt the theatre and announced a new season, inviting opera singers to perform there.

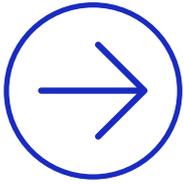
### Policy implications

Russia-sympathetic narratives produced and amplified in occupied territories of Ukraine reveal the prominence of grass-roots legitimisation of Russia's military intervention. The war is presented as a game changer that requires neither logical nor rational explanation. In these vlogs, the war and its repercussions are detached from the everyday life, decoupled from ethical reasoning, and dissociated from economic or financial considerations. This warrants attention, as visual communication formats can produce a depoliticising effect, reducing people's political activity and scrutiny of those in power.

Local narratives mirror and reproduce the discourses of the occupying power. The resulting strategy of normalisation is aimed at securing behavioural control, obedience and loyalty by silencing stories about war violence and instead promoting down-to-earth stories of care and protection. These manipulative narratives de-actualise the memories of recent deaths through self-immersion into the everyday routine. They encourage distancing from the (geo)political reality on the ground and discourage critical assessment. Producers of these narratives avoid politically explicit narratives and instead depict the war as a natural disaster without clear agency, leaving no space for attributing responsibility. They share their positive feelings about the small signs of a relative normalisation of their existence, which becomes an important policy tool legitimising war and securing the loyalty of the occupied population.

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<sup>10</sup> Anastasia Kozhevnikova. Mortgage in Mariupol at 2% - It is a Breakthrough! YouTube, August 16, 2025, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3D0kfn7DoU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3D0kfn7DoU)



## Policy Recommendations

### The Ukrainian Government and Media Regulatory Bodies:

- Lead the expansion of localised content addressing immediate daily concerns – utilities, healthcare access, legal rights - rather than exclusively focusing on frontline news and atrocities.
- Ensure information reaches occupied territories through diverse technical channels, while reframing residents as victims in need of support, not traitors.
- Emphasise that Ukraine remembers its citizens in occupied territories and actively works toward their liberation, reducing vulnerability to pro-Russian narratives that position Russia as their sole protector.
- Maintain consistent presence of voices from temporarily occupied territories within Ukrainian public discourse to prevent their marginalisation as distant “others”.

### International Coalitions (EU, NATO, and the UN):

- Lead coordinated advocacy exposing Russian “normalisation” and reconstruction projects as mechanisms of occupation and the systematic erasure of atrocities.
- Develop targeted engagement strategies for Global South audiences where Russia promotes itself as an anti-colonial actor.
- Expose Russian neocolonialism through concrete examples, including reconstruction projects that function as atrocity erasure rather than genuine recovery.
- Highlight how normalisation operates through economic incentives, mobility privileges, and performative charity coordinated with occupation authorities.

### Civil Society Organizations and NGOs:

- Sustain long-term “memory work” documenting war crimes to counter Russia-sponsored depoliticisation and historical revisionism
- Develop counter-narratives that validate local agency and political resistance, providing an alternative to the “Russian world” construct.

## About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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