

Battle of Memories: Actualization of the past in Russian and Ukrainian memes in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war

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Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated a new dimension of social media use, with enormous amount of user-generated content impacting people's perception of the war (Hoskins & Shchelin, 2023). Many experts highlighted the central role of historic narratives, which have been used by the Russian state for justification of invasion (Zhurzhenko, 2022). Previous studies demonstrated significant role of memes in spreading political messages and shaping public opinion in different contexts (López-Paredes & Carrillo-Andrade, 2022; Paz, 2021; Davis et al., 2018). Makhortykh & Aguilar (2020), Makhortykh (2015) examined memes as part of grassroot remembrance culture in the Post-Soviet context. Our study explores memes with historic references that circulate in Russia and Ukraine in the context of the ongoing war, by asking the following research questions: (RQ1) What kind of memory narratives are actualized in the Russian and Ukrainian memosphere during the ongoing war? (RQ2) What role do digital platforms play in creation and dissemination of the memes related to the war?

The study draws on in-depth qualitative content analysis of 135 memes. The results show high level of instrumentalization of the past for political goals by both sides. The overwhelming majority of memes actualize memories of World War II, with comparisons of the rival side with actors from Nazi Germany. Whereas Russian memes mostly glorify the Soviet past, Ukrainian narratives evolve within postcolonial discourse. One of the key memes of 2022 was a portrait of an old Ukrainian woman with a Soviet flag, which was instrumentalized by Russian propaganda as a symbol of the "true Ukraine" longing for Russia's protection. In the Ukrainian memosphere, the picture was recontextualized as a ghost of the past nobody wanted to return to. This example illustrates highly emotional interpretative struggles about the shared past as well as about national identities that evolve in the midst of the ongoing war.

Besides the core function of memes, namely satirical humor made for public reaction (Milner, 2016), we observe the role of fostering/contestation of national identities, othering of the adversarial side in the war, kindling hatred, and fueling polarization. At the same time, we identified purposefully created memetic campaigns curated by well-organized communities,

which use memes to raise awareness about war atrocities and seek to initiate a more profound public discussion, which relates to the normative role of participatory media of facilitating active citizenship (see Milner, 2016).

Our research demonstrates that, in the Russian case, the memetic grassroots remembrance has been hijacked by the state. Pro-state actors control the major online-platforms in the country and facilitate pro-state meme-production, with narratives largely repeating official statements. By contrast to pro-Russian discourse on Yandex, pro-Ukrainian memes dominated the search results on Google, which supports findings of previous research on source bias of the two search engines (Zavadski&Toepfl, 2019; Kravets&Toepfl, 2021). We discuss the role of platforms as 'affect amplifiers' (Van Dijck, 2007) in spreading mnemonic narratives as well as the role of memetic cultures in shaping of collective memories during a war.

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