

Report

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# Indian media on Ukraine War 2022-2024: PROJECT REPORT

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### **DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE WAR**

In any conflict, propaganda and the spread of false information is commonplace. For example, a study on the coverage of fatalities during the Russia-Ukraine war found that there are two times more emphasis on civilian deaths by the Russian and US media than by the Ukrainian media. The Russians report much lower number of casualties on their side than the West does. Sometimes, the governments use media for their negotiation strategies, treating it instrumentally to get feedback or check the reactions of the world. So, the risk of manipulating public opinion by reporting and commenting remains high. At the same time, the lack of proper media coverage ends with events disappearing from public attention.

#### **a) Examples of misinformation and disinformation in Indian media**

Indian media have been largely covering the war in Ukraine, but some positions and perspectives reflected in the articles could be interpreted in the West as disinformation or misinformation. The following narratives, found by the research team in the Indian media, can be put into such categories:

- NATO is responsible for the war because it had proposed expansion to the East up to the Ukraine border in Russia, seemed to unsettle Russian security. In order to prevent Ukraine from joining the NATO, Russia invaded it. The Ukrainian President Zelenskyy was keen on NATO membership.
- The Global West does not want peace. On the contrary, it wants to weaken Russia by a proxy war through Ukraine. It is Russia who tries to make peace.

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- Russia's war objectives as solely focused on ensuring humane treatment of people with cultural and linguistic ties with Russia. This narrative downplays Russia's territorial ambitions, imperia tendencies, and its role as the aggressor in the conflict.
- The West started the war as was wary of Russia and China coming closer. Also, Russia potentially attacking its neighbours and threatening its former satellite countries like Poland, and Czech Republic is a matter of deep security concern for NATO. After humiliating Russia, the West perhaps wants to take on China.
- The Ukraine government under Zelenskyy has taken a Nazi turn. Russians were concerned about the oppression unleashed by Zelenskyy on Russian-speaking people in the Ukraine region. Zelenskyy is war mongering and wants to drag more countries into the war.
- Ukrainian President is a puppet of the West. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Zelenskyy's peace formula was an ultimatum and suggested that with Western support, Ukraine desired Russia's strategic defeat.
- Russia is a mighty country, a functioning democracy that had never lost any war. It has not snatched Crimea from Ukraine as the former historically belonged to Russia.
- War in Ukraine is a confrontation between the West and the rest of the world, including Global South.

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The following journalists and commentators have reported the war from a Russian point of view:

1. MK Bhadrakumar, former diplomat - Ambassador to Uzbekistan and Turkey
2. Bharat Karnad, National Security expert & author
3. Saeed Naqvi, columnist and commentator
4. Vijay Mishra, freelance journalist
5. Mohan Guruswamy, academic & columnist
6. Aijaz Shahid, columnist & commentator
7. Nirupama Subramanian, National Editor (Strategic Affairs). Writes on India's foreign policy & national security issues
8. Sonal Gupta, Senior Sub-Editor on the news desk, The Indian Express
9. Shubhajit Roy, Diplomatic Editor at The Indian Express
10. Sudhi Ranjan Sen, commentator multimedia
11. Abhijit Bhattacharya, Author & columnist
12. Ira Pandey, Freelance writer

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The reporting of the war from a Russian point of view was found on the following websites:

**a) Newspapers and portals:**

1. The Times of India, New Delhi
2. The Hindustan Times, New Delhi
3. The Patriot, New Delhi
4. The Citizen, New Delhi
5. NewsClick.in
6. thequint.com
7. Scroll.in
8. Republicworld.com
9. News18.com
10. The Firstpost.com

**b) think tank & research organizations**

1. The Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies (IPCS)
2. Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF)
3. Observer Research Foundation (ORF)



Given India's balanced approach to the war, it appears unlikely that Indian media has consciously engaged in distorting the facts. In our point of view, the differences of reporting the war in India and in the West may result from important differences of perception. Despite the fact that India have maintained good relations with Ukraine, including business and large number of students in the country, the role of Russia is obviously more important. Pro-Russian sentiments are deeply rooted in Indian mentality and the way of reporting or commenting the war results from being biased towards Russia that from the intention of creating false narratives.

### **b) Perception of Russia in India**

India shares a long-standing relation with Russia, before that with its forerunner Soviet Union. The deep relations began since 1971, Bangladesh Liberation War, when Soviet Union readily jumped on India's side as against combined antagonism of Britain and United States. The history has it that the Seventh Fleet of US backed by British Navy had anchored in Bay of Bengal, miles away from Bangladesh, in support of the Pakistani army. Then, the Soviet submarines suddenly popped up between Indian Army operating in Bangladesh and the Anglo-American naval forces which in no time backed off. Realising the threat to India's security, New Delhi signed a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with Soviet Union in 1971. This Treaty enables both countries to support each other in multiple ways in the spirit of peace and solidarity. Ever since, both countries have maintained friendly relations based on, 'shared values' and 'common strategic and security interest'. Soviet Union has been supporting India in UNSC by vetoing any resolution on Kashmir that called out India as an occupier, or to prevent any serious discussion on Kashmir. It has been endorsing India's position that Kashmir needs to be settled bilaterally as per the Shimla Agreement of 1972 between India and Pakistan.



There is a segment of foreign policy observers which contends that India's proximity with Soviet Union has compromised her national interest and international image. The principle of Non-Alignment which was the cardinal strategy of India's foreign policy was diluted by the treaty with Soviet Union, and by the Soviet support on Kashmir which committed India to perforce reciprocate the Soviet Union. For instance, in 1956, India was highly critical of Anglo-French attack on Suez Canal whereas it was equivocal on Soviet invasion of Hungary around the same time. Prof. M.L. Sondhi in his book 'Non-Appeasement: A New Direction for India's Foreign Policy' (1972) has given a detailed account of India's loss in committing herself to Soviet Union.

The same strategy towards Russia is still being followed albeit New Delhi is nudging for United States of America. New Delhi has begun to decouple from Russia in its defence transactions, but the conviction of taking an independent and a rational position vis-à-vis Russia particularly in the Ukraine war is still not evident. There has been no thorough and rigorous study or analyses of India's relation with Russia in terms of costs and benefits.

Power dynamic prevailing in a particular situation, national or international, influence media coverage. Following from the above discourses, for and against Russia, the reporting on Ukraine war has been influenced by perceived Russian power and influence on India-Pacific, in view of India's adversarial relations with China and active antagonism with Pakistan. The Indian media has willy-nilly been on the side of Russia on Ukrainian war, a small section sympathizing with Ukraine as a victim of international norms.



### c) Examples of narratives about Poland

On August 27, 2024, so just after a visit of the PM Modi to Poland and Ukraine, ambassador Bhadrakumar published an article about these countries and Eastern Europe on NewsClick. The text is based on Russian narratives. The author gives a short history of Eastern Europe with special attention on divisions within the V4 group. „Slovakian PM Robert Fico, who survived an assassination attempt in May due to his refusal to back the Kiev regime, stands shoulder to shoulder with Orbán. Incidentally, there is a school of thought that the needle of suspicion in the assassination attempt on Fico points to Ukraine’s military intelligence. So much for a common Eastern European stance on Ukraine war!”

The author criticises Mr Modi for engaging into a dialogue with Ukraine and Poland. “Both Orbán and Fico advocate good relations and resumption of beneficial ties with Russia. They thoroughly disapprove of the EU’s sanctions against Russia. Such being the state of play, how could Modi government be so incredibly foolish as to imagine that India’s route to European engagement lies through Kiev and/or disengagement from Russia?”

*Our media pundits are clueless about Central / Eastern Europe. Yet they are advocating India’s disengagement from Russia as a prerequisite of warm relations with Central / Eastern Europe! Why are they doing this? Such perverted logic only promotes American interests to erode India-Russia partnership and thereby erode the country’s strategic autonomy. Going forward, it’s too early to tell on what form Ukraine emerges from this war. Ukraine has unresolved nationality questions. And territories in western Ukraine previously belonged to Poland (which was, of course, compensated with territories of defeated Germany) and Hungary.”*





The author ends with a statement: *“Poland says the 1943-44 massacre of some 100,000 Poles by Ukrainian nationalists was genocide. And today, the crux of the matter, from Russian perspective too, Ukraine’s identity as a sovereign state is built around the same neo-Nazi organisations that collaborated with Hitler’s occupation army to massacre Poles. [Truly, this is a can of worms](#). India has no good reason to meddle with it.”*

While mentioning massacres of Poles in Ukraine during the WWII, the author quotes a website [www.notesfrompoland.com](http://www.notesfrompoland.com), published by a foundation under the same name. It was founded in Kraków in 2014 by Stanley Bill, Director of the Polish Studies Programme at the University of Cambridge. Its mission is to provide *“regular summaries of news from Poland, along with the insights, context and background necessary to make sense of what was happening here”*. The Foundation has an impressive list of advisors, including Olga Tokarczuk, Timothy Garthon Ash and Norman Davies. It is interesting to notice that its articles were used in India to reinforce Russian narratives.

## CONCLUSIONS

India at present pulls a paradoxical perception about its international position. One, it is a fast growing economy with a largest work force, rich in scientific and technical know-how and a sustained democracy, all of which enable and entitle India to play a significant role on the world stage. Some optimists even suggest that it is a ‘superpower’ in the making. That may appear to be a far-fetched wishful thinking at present. But, to be sure, India has the potential to be a world power. India can draw on its rich civilization and long-cherished values, but it lacks resources, although it seems slowly to catch up. Arguably, a country can punch above its weight in international politics by playing to its strengths and making others believe in it. India could perhaps do that.



New Delhi suffers from a few strategic dilemmas. First, it seeks to remain non-aligned, stick to strategical autonomy which is also called multi-alignment, and create a multi-polar world. The other dilemma is the attitudinal aspect. Like the European Union consisting of 27 nation-states gets too embroiled in its internal affairs, with little enthusiasm for internationalism, New Delhi, comprising 28 states with huge populations, seems to be caught in the problems of the Union of India.

Reporting on international relations, Indian media mainly rely on the official sources and largely echoes the government's perspectives. There is a little room for independent analysis as Indian foreign policy is an exclusive and elite domain of the External Affairs Ministry. The non-state actors have limited scope in making or interpreting of India's foreign policy. Since the foreign policy supposedly reflects the national interests, the media tends to reflect the government point of view. The sources include statements by the PM and his ministers, interviews of the policy makers, opinions of current and former diplomats and military. Moreover, the Indian journalists follow the international sources, including Russian and Western news agencies and media.

Although Indian media is not so vocal and vibrant in matters of foreign policy, it is going to change. Indian media has been interrogative and investigative in the past with occasional and short-term downturns. It has the resilience to bounce back. As India is aspiring to be a world power, and in the evolving geo-political scenario, a world role may be thrust upon India, the Indian media will have to assume a greater role in international issues. Also, the cacophonous democracy in India will draw the media into vigorous discussion of India's foreign policy.

Rarely it is seen that international event gets continuous coverage in Indian media. However, the Russia-Ukraine conflict managed to occupy maximum attention and sufficient space in the media for initial few months. It has been continuously reported in bits and pieces as the war is still on.

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Indian media largely framed the Ukrainian war as per their perspectives. Mention of support for the war or opposition to it were low because majority of the stories was neutral. Some editorials, in an uncommon departure from history, took an anti-Russian position which is the exact opposite of the government. Putin was criticised for invading Ukraine and his unviable desire to control the world. One of the reasons for this shift could be the Indian media connection to the popular Western media; Indian media buys news from AP, AFP and Reuters etc. These agencies have demonstrated a Western-bias during the conflict.

During the process of analysis, it was noticed that the newspapers had covered the conflict in detail unlike the recent US-led conflicts in Asia that did not attract comprehensive coverage or empathy from the media houses. At the same time, the Indian media has faced dilemmas as well as criticisms due to the nature of the Russian-Ukraine war and the government response to it. This has threatened to undermine independent journalism.

Indian media largely displayed a pro-Russian stand reflecting the government position. There was not much criticism of the government perception of the war and its long term implications on India. The coverage also lacked in depth ad nuance. This is because there was no attempt to analyse the current foreign policy strategy of strategic autonomy and premise of a multi-polar world. The press misses the point that India is still following a kind of non-alignment in a new strategic garb and that the strategy has not worked in the past nor is likely to deliver in future.

The bias and sensationalism were seen in some media coverage. Bias in favour of Russia was across the board. But some of them gave arguments to substantiate their biases. On the other hand, some unsubstantiated biases bordering on misinformation as well as disinformation could have serious consequences for India's international relations and national interest, let alone the image of the media. There is need for well researched and informed coverage of the war. For instance, the NATO expansion is a hoax. In fact,



Putin's aggression in Ukraine expedited the expansion as Sweden and Finland joined NATO which Putin would not have wanted.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

A survey conducted by Times of India, reported on 25 October, 2022 revealed that Indians were split almost equally in their opinion on the war. On West threatening Russia, 46% believed that it was true; 27% thought that Russia invaded Ukraine; 28% thought it was the Western countries which provoked the war. On ethnic Russians being tortured and harassed by Ukraine government, 42% believed it was true; 46% thought that Ukraine government had fallen into military extremists subscribing to Nazi ideology.

To improve the above, we came to the conclusion that certain interventions need to be made in order to inspire the Indian media and commentators to shed off the pro-Russian mindset. Below, we present the following recommendations:

#### **1. Encourage journalists to interrogate the government**

As foreign policy is not largely discussed in India, the media should put questions to the Indian officials on different international topics, including their biased approach towards Russia. The starting point might be India's national interest. This premise is fundamentally flawed as Russia cannot protect its proxies or partners in terms of economic or military support.

#### **2. Produce well articulated articles around the war**

They should fill the gaps and missing narratives, present different perspectives and views on the war and international affairs. Such texts could be written by rational and



responsible Indian journalists or commentators who publish often or have permanent columns in the mainstream newspapers or portals

### **3. Organise media seminars on war reporting**

They should be dedicated to the international politics and war reporting with a focus on Ukrainian war and fact-based journalism. Crosschecking Indian and Russian sources with a large number of other sources, including Ukraine and the West, might be one of the subjects.

### **4. Organize media seminars on misinformation and false narratives**

Paul Joseph Goebbels, a Nazi leader and propagandist perniciously proved that if you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes truth. Unless the misinformation or falsehood is combatted, it can be seen as reality. The journalists have to be skilled in dispelling misinformation and debunking false news.

### **5. Courses for young journalists on independent and ethical journalism**

It is assumed that media is inherently free in a democracy by virtue of the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and beliefs etc. In India too such rights are provided in the Constitution and statutes. The media is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. Yet, the journalists feel constrained to function independently conforming to journalistic ethics. Is it because of lack of relevant skills or pressure from the vested interest. This needs to be investigated. Young people in India are open for different perspectives, one can build on that. The training should focus on teaching young journalists that the content has to be examined if it is credible and authentic, not the position of the person (what is being said, not who is saying it).



## **6. Organize training for students of journalism on international relations**

The young journalists need to be trained on basics of international politics, research methodology on gathering information and perspectives on India's foreign policy and changing geo-political situation. In fact, a short course on India and the World should be introduced in the schools of Journalism. In the interim, within the project, a crash course on reporting on International affairs could be offered, also, training on tools and techniques of war journalism.

## **7. Organize training for students on media literacy**

Media literacy programmes should help Indian readers and audiences develop critical thinking skills and navigate the complex media landscape. This could be undertaken by students of journalism, political sciences and other social sciences who first learn themselves to handle the social media in a responsible way and then teach other people – their families and friends.

# CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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