

**'More guns, more shells, more intelligence, or we'll see a Russian victory'; News we don't want to hear**

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In the Ukraine war, French and other Western media are failing to report true but unwelcome news

Volodymyr Zelensky is calling the shots in many Western media. His daily videos set the agenda; his talking points and targets are picked up and repeated in the hours that follow by outlets as diverse as the New York Times, Le Monde, Arte, Paris Match, the rolling news channels and public radio. When Western arms shipments were slow to arrive, Libération communicated Kyiv's grievance to the Élysée: 'Military aid, especially from France, is falling well short of its needs' (20 July).

When Western interest in the conflict seemed to be waning, Ukrainian MP Lesia Vasylenko complained in L'Opinion. France Inter's press review amplified her appeal: 'She's imploring Western media not to forget the war. They have as much power as leaders of major countries, and if information dries up, Moscow will take advantage of it ... Yes, there's a risk of fatigue, yes, routine has already set in.' A routine indeed — but that of a media echo chamber which amplifies news favourable to the Ukrainian cause and, with equal determination, discredits anything that contradicts it.

An Amnesty International report on 4 August provided one of the most striking examples of this propagandist filter in action: 'Ukrainian forces have put civilians in harm's way,' it said, 'by establishing bases and operating weapons systems in populated residential areas, including in schools and hospitals.' It added that, of course, 'such violations in no way justify Russia's indiscriminate attacks, which have killed and injured countless civilians' (1). Presenting the report, Amnesty's Agnès Callamard noted, 'The fact of being in a defensive position does not exempt the Ukrainian army from the obligation to respect international humanitarian law' — a classic argument set out in many previous Amnesty press releases condemning Hamas's human rights violations in the Gaza Strip, irrespective of Israeli attacks.

Zelensky didn't see it that way. That evening, he denounced the Amnesty investigation for suggesting that 'the victim and the aggressor are allegedly the same.' The report, he said, 'tries to amnesty the terrorist state'. Again, the media spoke with one voice. Aline Le Bail Kremer lambasted Amnesty on the LCI news channel (5 August), quoting Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel: 'Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim' (a principle Wiesel often set aside over Palestine or Iraq). The problem with the report, journalist Jean-Sébastien Soldaini told France Culture, is that 'by challenging Ukraine, it has unintentionally put the two adversaries on an equal footing' (8 August). Le Monde quoted extensively a 'reserve colonel and Ukrainian military expert', who described Amnesty's investigators as 'useful idiots' who had given Putin 'propaganda gifts'; the paper backed up this charge by stressing that 'the report was well received in Russia' (7-8 August). It neglected to say that Amnesty's Russian office was closed down on 8 April for criticising the Russian authorities too pointedly.

#### Amnesty's steady criticism of Russia

Since the start of 2021, Amnesty's website had published more than 90 updates, press releases and campaign announcements specifically on Russia, criticising the Kremlin, the imprisonment of protesters, restrictions on press freedom and the freedom to demonstrate, the fate of dissident Alexander Navalny, repression of feminist activists and persecution of opponents of the war. Amnesty has issued around 30 statements specifically on Ukraine since the beginning of this year. All of them condemn the Russian invasion and the invader's war crimes and human rights violations, except for one calling on both sides to respect prisoners' rights (2).

But Amnesty, though it hasn't observed 'neutrality' between the aggressor and the aggressed, was deemed to be in the wrong. Because any information that could discourage the mobilisation in favour of a country that,

as French officials keep saying, 'is fighting for values we share', must be discredited on the grounds that it would 'play into Putin's hands'.

Western media have as much power as leaders of major countries. If information dries up, Moscow will take advantage

France Inter

The media, which have made combatting fake news a democratic imperative, are now attacking a new target: true but unwelcome news. Donald Trump, whose every lie is usually dissected, went unchallenged when he announced on 9 August that Russia was 'killing hundreds of thousands of people' in Ukraine. On the other hand, the news media consider it inappropriate to express misgivings about past NATO enlargement, mention Ukraine's non-compliance with the Minsk 2 accords or suggest that Moscow's disinformation is sometimes met with a response in kind from Kyiv. As a symbol of liberal democracy, they confuse Ukraine with its telegenic and courageous president, making his cause a secular religion, and turning questioning him into blasphemy.

No one could reproach Zelensky for helping his invaded country by using a talent in which he far outstrips his Russian enemies. Most of the time, Russia's propaganda is truly execrable, almost laughable. On 9 May on France Info, for example, a Moscow spokesman in Paris claimed that all the civilian victims of the Russian bombings had been killed by Ukrainian Nazis, or they had been staged.

Rooting out Russian disinformation was already easy and it's proving even easier as the definition of the term keeps growing. An American specialist quoted in the New York Times reckoned that Russia 'used both falsified stories and those that were true but tangential to current events in order to distort narratives or hide true intentions' (3).

But who can say for sure what Russia's 'true intentions' are, besides those that the West has duly established: hatred of democracy, desire to rebuild the empire of the tsars, a fascination with Ivan the Terrible, Stalin and Hitler? (The Economist claimed on 30 July that the 'Z' displayed by the Russian army's supporters represented 'half a swastika'.) On 5 August on LCI, 'international consultant' Laurence Haim wondered with a hint of the faux-naïf, 'Can or can't we say anything bad about Ukraine at the moment?'

Bias as moral superiority

When they use Kyiv's language, the media advertise their bias as a sign of moral superiority. They routinely call Putin 'the master in the Kremlin'; in late June the journalist Thomas Cluzel said on France Culture that the town of Sievierodonetsk had been taken 'by the enemy'. They take it for granted that Ukraine's artillery couldn't have targeted the Russian-occupied nuclear power station of Zaporizhzhia in August. They reject a report by the US channel CBS on Western weapons being smuggled into Ukraine, simultaneously claiming that this was 'unproven' and exaggerated, 'obvious' but suspicious since 'many Russian Telegram channels quickly took up and translated this report, as did the Russian press, which amplified it' (Libération, 10 August).

Moralistic finger-wagging often lacks subtlety. On 4 July on France Inter, after a Ukrainian defeat in the Donbass, media celebrities Nicolas Demorand and Léa Salamé soft-soaped a panel of rightwing commentators in an effort to boost the morale of their listeners: analyst François Heisbourg, famous for having spread the American lie about 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq; journalist Laure Mandeville who, with her colleague Isabelle Lasserre, sets the Atlanticist tone in Le Figaro; and the ubiquitous Pierre Servent, a 'consultant' at Le Parisien, who 'specialises in national defence' on TFI and LCI. For Heisbourg, the choice was obvious: 'More guns, more shells, more intelligence, or we'll see a Russian victory.' Mandeville agreed: 'The enemy will advance if we don't stop them.' Salamé added: 'Either we give Ukraine more help, or Putin will win.' Servent summed up: 'We cannot weaken, we need to step up the pressure.' On 24 August a presenter on LCI's morning programme said, in response to a guest's comment, 'The rear guard is us — Western leaders and public opinion.'

It's true that the French media rarely emerge from conflict coverage bathed in glory. In May 2003 a France 2 journalist said of the machine-gunning of an Iraqi bus by US soldiers (14 dead), 'It's a further tough blow for the allied troops, who are trying to get along with the Iraqi population.' Just consider the indignation such a comment would provoke if applied to a Russian air strike...

Almost 20 years later, Western journalists are still as focused on telling their audience what to think rather than providing genuine food for thought. Facts are wrapped in a layer of sermonising; the conviction that explaining a conflict equals justifying the aggressor holds firm; news that is 'tangential' to the desired objective goes unreported: the West responds to authoritarian regimes' puppet media with an illiberal press that defends liberalism. It's the ideal climate for Bernard-Henri Lévy, who inflicted his self-important documentary, *Why Ukraine*, on Arte.

Why do Arte's and France Culture's educated audiences allow themselves to be treated like children? Most of them are middle-class graduates, a demographic reputedly resistant to brainwashing and censorship, and unwilling to be taken in (unlike the supposedly gullible working class). Yet this intellectual elite is especially susceptible to the media's preaching because it confirms that they are on the side of right on every subject, be it political, cultural, ecological or social. Virtue-signalling journalism and values-based diplomacy both thrive on their wilful blindness.

(1) Amnesty International, 'Ukraine: Ukrainian fighting tactics endanger civilians', 4 August 2022.

(2) Figures from [www.amnesty.org/](http://www.amnesty.org/).

(3) Julian E Barnes, 'Russia steps up propaganda war amid tensions with Ukraine', The New York Times, 26 January 2022.

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