

Russia's Political Narratives in *a Tale of Vanya and Mykola* Animation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Animation; political narratives; Russia; Ukraina	This article analyzes an animation titled <i>A Tale of Vanya and Mykola</i> , which was released during Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Specifically, this article examines the political narratives constructed by Russia to legitimize the invasion. Based on Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory and Steven Lukes' concept of power, this study identifies symbols, signs, and visuals that function as ideological control conveyed by Russia to a global audience. The study found that Russia articulates three main political narratives, namely: the historical closeness between Russia and Ukraine, the ideological division caused by external intervention, and global injustice. Through these three political narratives, Russia seeks to resist Western discourse hegemony while justifying the invasion of Ukraine as a defensive and moral act. This study concludes that <i>A Tale of Vanya and Mykola</i> is rich in ideological and political meanings and serves as an instrument of ideological hegemony to control public perception.

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INTRODUCTION

The animated film "A Tale of Vanya and Mykola," released by Russia during its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, provides a clear illustration of the crucial role of media in war strategy (Deryugina, 2022). When military power becomes a destructive and coercive instrument of domination, the media serves a symbolic hegemonic function through ideological discourse and propaganda. The children's animation "A Tale of Vanya and Mykola," which became the focus of this study, was released in March 2022 and produced by the first Russian television channel, Tsargrad (1.rus.ru, 2022; Zhylina, 2022). Despite its presentation as a children's entertainment, the animation actually presents a political narrative imbued with ideological messages directed by Russia at a broader audience. Many media outlets have called this animation an example of propaganda aimed at children in Russia. However, its widespread impact is evident from reposts on YouTube, coverage in various media outlets, and even discussion in academic research, which suggests its audience reaches far beyond the children's age group (Jaakkola, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2023). In Gramsci's terms, this use of popular media can be a form of cultural hegemony that subtly instills and normalizes Russia's actions. Through cultural hegemony, the state can exert its power and shape public perception.

This animation features two main characters, Vanya and Mykola, who are depicted as having a close relationship. The tale of their friendship, which ultimately turns into hostility, leads the audience into the dynamics of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, which is fractured by the presence of a third party. Although presented in a lighthearted style and visuals more suitable for children's viewing, this animation is, in fact, filled with strong political messages. A study by Zhylina (2022) found that the Vanya and Mykola animation successfully positioned the United States and its allies as the main instigators using discourse strategies such as name-calling, glittering generalities, transference, and whataboutism. Western media

considered this animation part of a Russian propaganda strategy aimed at influencing children. This form of propaganda played a role in instilling a collective belief that Russia's military invasion was in line with Russia's moral values and national interests (Guardian, 2022). Similar criticism was also expressed by Keir (2022), who stated that Russia used the media to create doubt, undermine public trust, and deceive audiences by presenting alternative narratives that benefited Russia. Even for the West, Russia uses this film to conceal its military weaknesses in confronting Western powers.

As every country seeks support for its foreign actions, Russia bases its foreign policy on ideology, which shapes its worldview and legitimizes its actions in Ukraine. The propaganda through animation does not stand alone, but rather forms part of Russia's ideological strategy to strengthen the legitimacy of its foreign policy. Every country's foreign policy is always based on a particular ideology that shapes a country's perspective on external conditions, formulates its national interests, and shapes its foreign policy (Gries & Yam, 2020). Ideology also plays a crucial role as a justificatory framework for a country to gain legitimacy in its foreign policy, both internally and externally (Neack, 2019). Domestically, ideology provides a basis for public approval, maintains social cohesion, and mobilizes support for foreign policy. Meanwhile, externally, ideology serves as an instrument to communicate positions, garner sympathy, and strengthen claims of legitimacy on the international stage (Wight, 2023). These efforts are part of ideological control, where political meanings and values are constructed to justify state actions.

The study of political messages in children's animated films, particularly in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, is interesting because it reflects the narrative warfare in modern conflicts. Several previous studies have focused on Russian propaganda through diplomacy, mainstream media, or social media to shape global public opinion (Pomerantsev, 2014; Yablokov, 2015). However, studies on the role of popular media aimed at children as a tool for spreading ideology in international conflicts are still very limited. From an empirical perspective, research on Russia's narrative warfare has mostly examined news, documentaries, or digital media (Hutchings & Tolz, 2015; Szostek, 2017), therefore, analyzing ideology in children's animated films can provide new insights into how Russia utilizes popular media to build legitimacy, shape national identity, and influence public opinion, both domestically and internationally.

This study aims to systematically analyze the political narratives constructed by Russia through the animated film "A Tale of Vanya and Mykola" using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Steven Lukes' concept of power. The research specifically seeks to identify the symbols, signs, and visual representations that function as ideological control mechanisms, and to examine how these elements work to legitimize Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. The benefit of this research lies in its contribution to understanding modern propaganda techniques in international conflicts, particularly how states utilize popular culture as a soft power tool to shape global public perception and justify geopolitical actions.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand the meaning, text, and symbols in the animated film *A Tale of Vanya and Mykola*. The analysis is conducted critically to uncover ideology and the construction of meaning as well as the representation of power. Primary data is sourced from the animated film *A Tale of Vanya and Mykola* to explore the representation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and its ideological content (*Russian Ukraine War Propaganda Cartoon for Kids*, n.d.). The analysis is also supported by secondary data sourced from academic articles, research reports, and literature relevant to the Russia-Ukraine issue. This study is based on the theory of Semiotics, the Concept of Power, and the importance of Ideology as a theoretical foundation.

Roland Barthes's semiotic theory is a key theory in text analysis used to understand social and cultural phenomena, including in the context of international relations (Barthes, 1972). The core of this theory emphasizes the interpretation of signs and how meaning is constructed through the relationships between them. This meaning is constructed through denotation and connotation; denotation refers to the literal and objective meaning of a sign, while connotation encompasses more complex meanings, emerging from the interpretation of denotative meanings and influenced by the values, history, and culture of a particular society. This process of meaning construction can ultimately shape dominant myths or ideologies within a society.

The concept of power is used to understand an actor's ability to achieve goals through various mechanisms (Lukes, 2005). Goals can be realized through decision-making power, where actors consciously or unconsciously make choices, either coercively or non-coercively, including the use of violence, agreements, the creation of obligations, and loyalty. State goals can also be achieved through agenda-setting power, namely the ability to control political issues so that certain issues do not emerge in public. In addition, state goals can also be achieved through ideological control, namely through mind control, where an actor shapes what others think, want, or need through ideological indoctrination or psychological control.

Within this framework, ideology is a crucial dimension supporting a country's foreign policy orientation, along with other dimensions such as security, economics, and world order (Nuechterlein, 1976). Ideology is synonymous with a state's goal of expanding influence and gaining legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. Unlike defense or economic interests, which are material and structural, ideological interests are normative because they relate to a state's efforts to disseminate a set of values, beliefs, and worldviews deemed to be of universal benefit or to reinforce a particular image of its nation in the eyes of a global audience. In other words, through ideological control, a state can shape global perceptions of its motives, identity, morality, and political positions (Nuechterlein, 1976). The dissemination of ideology becomes an instrument for strengthening domestic cohesion while simultaneously building its image and influence abroad. Therefore, ideological interests serve not only as a moral justification for foreign policy but also as a hegemonic tool to instill legitimacy in a state's actions within the international political order.

The integration of Barthes' semiotic theory and Lukes' concept of power enables this study to explore not only how meanings are constructed (through signs and myths), but also how these meanings function as ideological instruments. The synthesis of both perspectives reveals Russia's political narratives - stories that justify its actions, frame moral legitimacy, and shape global perception.

The data analysis process was carried out in stages, starting with semiotic analysis to identify and interpret denotative and connotative meanings. The next stage was to explore the construction of connotative meanings that produce political myths and ideologies that support Russian political narratives. The final stage was to analyze the animation's function as an instrument of narrating political actions in supporting Russia in its military invasion of Ukraine.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A Tale of Vanya and Mykola: A Representation of the Dynamics of Russia-Ukraine Relations

A Tale of Vanya and Mykola is an animated film released during Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in March 2022. This animation was produced by Tsargrad, one of the leading television channels in Russia, which then circulated widely because it was re-uploaded on various YouTube channels, and some even made reviews in the English version (Deryugina, 2022). The film is seen as a form of propaganda that seeks to build legitimacy for Russia's actions (Daily Mail, 2022). Russia launched a military aggression on February 24, 2022, by

attacking several important cities in Ukraine, such as Kyiv, Odessa, Mariupol, and Kharkiv, which claimed many lives and damaged infrastructure in Ukraine (Saeri et al., 2023). Although the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is very complex to be simplified (Widiasa, 2018), in the Russian military attack at that time, the main cause was triggered by the issue of separatism in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, supported by Russia (NIHREIEVA, 2022). Ukraine's actions to maintain control of the region sparked tensions that led to the Russian military invasion.

The entire background of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine is visually presented in this animated film. Russia's perspective is presented simply and emotionally, packaged as a children's show that can be enjoyed by all ages. The simplicity of the visuals and characters depicted in this animated film is imbued with the ideological power used by Russia to assert the legitimacy of its actions. Through a brief screenplay, this film is able to convey a comprehensive message about the dynamics of relations between Russia and Ukraine. The applied semiotic approach, as stated by Barthes (1972) captures the denotative and connotative meanings that shape the ideological myth of Russia's actions. At the denotative level, the images present visual representations that are interpreted as they are. At the connotative level, these signs give rise to deeper associations of meaning, which then all the signs and narratives work to build an ideological framework known as a myth.

Several key sections that demonstrate Russia's efforts to frame the conflict narrative from its perspective are outlined below.

Scene 1.



Source: (1.rus.ru, 2022; Deryugina, 2022)

At the denotative level, this image depicts two main characters: children named Vanya and Mykola. Vanya and Mykola appear close, as evidenced by their camaraderie while playing in the sandpit. Vanya is the character wearing white, blue, and red clothing, while Mykola is the child wearing blue and yellow clothing.

At the connotative level, the colors of the clothing represent the national identities of the two children. Vanya represents Russia, with its white, blue, and red flag, while Mykola represents Ukraine, with its yellow and blue flag. The closeness of the children while playing in the sandpit signifies a harmonious relationship between the two characters.

At the mythic level, this visual narrative builds an understanding of the historical closeness between Russia and Ukraine. Through the symbolism of friendship and closeness, this image emphasizes the idea that the two countries share historical closeness and shared civilizational roots, and is often used to legitimize national and historical unity between the two countries.

Scene 2



Source: (1.rus.ru, 2022; Deryugina, 2022)

At the denotative level, this image presents another character, a boy wearing a red, white, and blue star-patterned shirt. Both children are sitting at a table with open books on the table. The boy wearing the American flag-patterned shirt appears to be whispering something to the boy in the blue and yellow shirt.

At the connotative level, the boy in the blue and yellow shirt represents Ukraine, while the boy in the American flag-patterned shirt represents the United States, a symbolic character often represented as a foreigner or external influence offering advice to Ukraine. The whispering gesture can be interpreted as the American boy informing or giving instructions to the Ukrainian boy.

At the mythic level, this animation depicts Ukraine's seemingly unstable position, easily swayed by external influences. In this context, the United States is represented as a character who likes to influence and interfere in relations between Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine is easily influenced and subject to American commands. This animation conveys both the moral and emotional impression that Ukraine is a country under American control.

Scene 3



Source: (1.rus.ru, 2022; Deryugina, 2022)

At the denotative level, Figure 3 depicts three boys running down a school corridor. The first boy is wearing a blue and yellow shirt, the second boy is wearing a black, blue, and red shirt, and the third boy is wearing a blue and red shirt. The boy in the blue and yellow shirt is seen pulling and coercing the second boy while hitting his friend's back with a stick. The third boy tries to run away to avoid being hit by the first boy.

At the connotative level, the first boy again represents Ukraine, while the second and third boys represent other smaller or weaker regions. The Ukrainian boy exhibits aggressive behavior, becoming the perpetrator of violence against the other children. The two victims also appear to be trying to escape the Ukrainian grip, which continues to coerce and pull them away.

On a mythic level, this visual narrative reinforces Russia's ideological message that Ukraine has been consumed by the influence of foreign powers, becoming uncontrollable and seemingly losing its moral compass. Ukraine has acted arbitrarily against smaller regions attempting to break away from Ukraine. The two regions in question are Donetsk and Luhansk, two Donbas provinces that have been seeking to secede from Ukraine since 2014. The aggressive actions of the children in blue and yellow, on a mythic level, represent Ukraine's oppression of smaller regional entities seeking to secede and become independent from Ukraine.

Scene 4



Source: (1.rus.ru, 2022; Deryugina, 2022)

At the denotative level, the scene features four children standing in a hallway. The four children represent four countries: Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and Germany. The child wearing blue and yellow (Ukraine) was previously holding a stick and using it to hit the other children. However, in this scene, the stick is now held by a child wearing red, white, and blue (Russia). The child wearing the American flag is seen standing on Ukraine's side, making a protective and defensive gesture. Meanwhile, the child wearing black, red, and yellow (Germany) is seen behind them, supporting the Ukrainian and American positions. Russia is depicted as being judged for taking the stick from Ukraine.

Connotatively, the characters' positions and gestures depict the map of power and moral legitimacy in the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Russia, wielding a scepter, is presented as a powerful but misunderstood figure. It appears guilty for wielding a "weapon," even though its actions were in fact a reaction to previous aggression. Ukraine, with the support of the United States and Germany, appears as the party receiving protection and moral justification from the West. The United States' protective gesture demonstrates its hegemonic role as the guardian of world morality, while Germany becomes a symbol of an ally that strengthens the West's political position. Thus, the relationship between the characters reflects an asymmetry of

power: Russia is positioned as the “criminal,” while the Western bloc appears as the “civilized” party entitled to judge.

On a mythic level, this scene constructs a narrative of moral inequality and global injustice. Russia is portrayed not as a pure aggressor, but as a victim of a global discourse system controlled by Western powers. The United States and its allies present themselves as defenders of universal truth, but within this mythic framework, they are instead symbols of ideological power that determine who is considered right and wrong. Through the symbol of children, this animation conveys a simple yet effective moral message: that the world is controlled by forces capable of regulating perception, not by truth itself. Thus, this animation serves as a mean to strengthen Russia's position as a force fighting against injustice and global moral domination.

Russia's Political Narratives

A semiotic analysis of *A Tale of Vanya and Mykola* shows that animation is not merely a visual text, but can also be a propaganda instrument that functions as ideological control (Rosten, 1947). The ability to frame information can be a source of state power. This idea aligns with Lukes's (1974; 2005) argument that power can operate in the form of ideological control. Therefore, messages through language, symbols, and certain signs become important in constructing reality and building awareness. When awareness and acceptance of certain values indicate that subjugation through text and knowledge has occurred, hegemony becomes internalized and naturalized.

This ideological control function is represented in the animation “*A Tale of Vanya and Mykola*.” This film, from a Russian perspective, attempts to raise audience awareness about the legitimacy of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Three important dimensions can be explored within this research: the close historical relationship between Russia and Ukraine, the division of national identity, and moral inequality and global injustice.

The historical relationship between Russia and Ukraine is depicted in an early scene featuring Vanya and Mykola, a pair of close friends who always played and sat together at school. Vanya portrays himself as a protector, always looking out for Mykola when others tease him, like an older sibling feeling responsible for his younger sibling. This scene ideologically reproduces Russia's geopolitical and cultural conception of Ukraine as part of the Russian World, or *Russkiy Mir* (Pieper, 2020).

The *Russkiy Mir* concept stems from the view that Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were historically united under the Kyivan Rus civilization, which served as the political, religious, and cultural center of the East Slavic peoples (Meienberger, 2023). This view has been revived by Vladimir Putin in his speeches, repeatedly stating that Russia and Ukraine are one people and that Kyiv is the spiritual capital of the Russian nation (Gallaher & Kalaitzidis, 2022). The close relationship between the two nations means that the loss of Ukraine would mean the loss of a part of the heart of Russian national identity. Therefore, the *Russkiy Mir* narrative affirms Russia's strong view of Ukraine as an inseparable part of the country.

In the animation *A Tale of Vanya Mykola*, Russia's efforts to protect territories considered part of the great Russian civilization are represented through Vanya's efforts to always protect Mykola from interference from other parties. This reflects Russia's attitude and position as a protector of countries that historically and culturally share the same civilizational roots. In fact, when Mykola shows changes in behavior to become aggressive and likes to attack his friends due to the influence of foreign parties, Vanya always tries to remind him and even takes action to prevent Mykola from falling into even worse behavior. This scene in the film can be understood as a form of symbolic narrative of Russia trying to guide Ukraine back to the right path after going astray and becoming aggressive, especially due to the incitement of Western countries.

The second narrative that Russia seeks to build through this animation is the political message about the ideological split between Russia and Ukraine due to foreign parties. The split in relations between Russia and Ukraine represents the fracturing of the cultural unity that is the main foundation of the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*). The animation shows that the friendship between Vanya and Mykola is ultimately strained due to external influences. Vanya and Mykola, who initially had the same moral awareness, ultimately have to take different paths. Through this representation, Russia tries to build and shape the audience's perspective on who is good and evil in the dynamics of relations between Russia and Ukraine.

The audience is invited to understand that the identity and ideological split between Russia and Ukraine occurred when the character Mykola, who was initially always close to Vanya, decided to distance himself, change classes, change his name to Kolya, and hang out with new friends. At a connotative level, this animation only provides a depiction of social conflict in the relationship between two children who have different views. However, at a connotative level, this scene can be interpreted as a change in Ukrainian identity after separating and declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Ukraine began to distance itself from Russia and change its political and ideological direction (Simon, 2002). Kolya, Mykola's new name, has a bad temper and becomes aggressive after mixing in a new environment that is heavily influenced by the Western environment. He becomes fond of attacking and hitting his innocent friends with a stick. Kolya's aggressive actions, at a connotative level, can be understood as Ukraine's attitude in attacking two cities that can be associated with Donetsk and Luhansk, regions that Russia claims as part of the Russian world and are the main reason for the military intervention in 2022.

The attempt to return Mykola to the right path actually causes a misunderstanding that results in Vanya (Russia) being accused of being the evil party. Through this animation, Russia tries to reverse the perception of itself as an aggressor; in fact, it is actually the victim of misunderstanding, while Ukraine is the party that is misled by the influence of external parties, namely the West, represented by America. Russia's efforts to keep Ukraine under the umbrella of *Russkiy Mir* are further strengthened by data from the Razumkov Centre showing that the number of Ukrainians who still view Russia as a "brother" has decreased drastically from 27% in 2017 to only 3% in 2023 (Kizilov, 2024). Thus, *A Tale of Vanya and Mykola* can also be said to be Russia's attempt to restore moral legitimacy by reaffirming the historical and emotional relationship that stems from the same civilizational roots between the two nations.

On a third level, this animation is used by Russia to convey an ideological message about the emergence of global injustice that has historically placed Russia on the wrong side. This film is not only about the conflict that occurs among children, but also has a broader moral message. Vanya, who is depicted as a protective and peace-loving character, is instead slandered and constructed as a figure who is the source of the problem. Vanya's attempt to take Mykola's stick to prevent him from attacking his friends is instead distorted into a coercive act. At the denotative level, the film simply depicts Vanya's attempt to prevent violence, which is instead distorted as a form of attack. However, at the connotative level, this scene has a deeper meaning. This scene symbolizes how the international world views Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. For Russia, the West's view of it is biased. The West accused it of being the aggressor when Russia invaded Ukraine, but the West chose to remain silent when Ukraine did the same thing in Donetsk and Luhansk.

The myth of injustice against Russia is constructed in this film through visual symbols when Vanya stands alone while all their friends tend to side with Mykola without knowing the truth. These friends can represent the stance of countries that oppose Russia's actions and even represent international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union that condemn Russia's actions. From Russia's perspective, the international community has misunderstood the historical and moral context of its actions. Thus, the animation *A Tale of*

Vanya and Mykola played a role in constructing the ideological claim that Russia's actions are essentially defensive, not unprovoked and aggressive.

This narrative of global injustice was reinforced in Putin's speech about Western attitudes and hegemony. Putin stated that the West created a biased global system that only benefits its interests. While harsh criticism was directed at Russia, which was labeled an aggressor, the West seemed to forget its history of colonialism in India and Africa, as well as its genocide against the indigenous people of the Americas (TASS Russian News Agency, 2025; The Washington Post, 2022). This is what Russia portrayed as Western moral hypocrisy in Putin's speech. The animation "A Tale of Vanya and Mykola" can be said to be a form of counter-narrative communication strategy that challenges the global information hegemony constructed by Western media.

Every foreign policy is always linked to two arenas: domestic and external. In the domestic realm, foreign policy is directed at gaining legitimacy from the public, while in the external realm, foreign policy is expected to strengthen the country's position and image on the international political stage (Wight, 2023). Therefore, the state needs to convey an ideological message in every foreign policy. To achieve this goal, the state can use popular culture media as an instrument for conveying ideological messages, as reflected in the Russian military invasion of Ukraine through the animated film A Tale of Vanya and Mykola. Through the three aspects of the political narratives packaged in the animation A Tale of Vanya and Mykola, Russia exercises power not only manifested coercively, but also through the construction and control of meaning that normalizes Russia's actions against Ukraine while simultaneously attacking narratives that corner Russia. Thus, this animation becomes a subtle persuasive instrument that strengthens Russia's legitimacy in the democratic realm and builds a positive image of Russia on the global stage.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that narrative warfare is an integral part of conventional warfare that relies on military force. While military power operates through physical domination, narrative power operates ideologically by framing the meaning and public perception of a country's political actions. Through the animation "A Tale of Vanya and Mykola," Russia constructs political narratives that portray itself as both a moral protector and a victim of global injustice. These political narratives serve to normalize Russia's invasion of Ukraine, bolster domestic support, and affirm Russia's legitimacy and position in the eyes of the international public. Thus, the animated film becomes an instrument of cultural hegemony that reproduces and disseminates Russian political narratives through subtle yet effective symbolic strategies.

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