

# THE PROBLEM OF CONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF THE «RUSSIAN HERO» IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S ARMED AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

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## INTRODUCTION

At one time, Pliny the Younger wrote that history must not deviate from the truth: *nec historia debet egredi veritatem* (Plin. Ep. 7.33.10). In conditions of armed confrontation, each of the warring sides very often has its own «truth», and each strives to prove that justice is on its side. In antiquity, there existed a belief that the violation of an international treaty would inevitably bring punishment from the gods, for – allowing ourselves to paraphrase Ovid – justice is stronger than weapons (*Ov. Fast.* 3.281). In our own time, the justification of one's righteousness by the parties to an armed conflict serves, on the one hand, to convince the international community that their actions comply with the norms of international law, and on the other, to secure domestic approval of government policy among their own population. One of the instruments for shaping the desired public opinion in Russia is the effort of Russian propaganda to construct the image of the «Russian hero» in the context of armed aggression against Ukraine. The phenomenon of the «hero» long predates our own era. The etymology of the term «hero» (English hero, German Heros, French héros, etc.) can be traced back to the Latin heroes and the Ancient Greek ἥρωες. In one of Plato's dialogues, speaking through Socrates, it is asserted that heroes are demigods – ἡμίθεοι οἱ ἥρωες (Plat. Crat. 398c): all of them were born either of a god who fell in love with a mortal woman, or of a mortal man and a goddess (Plat. Crat. 398d). The majority of heroes of Ancient Greece were venerated within a specific locality and were little known beyond its borders. The center of a hero's cult was his tomb – the heroön (Greek ἡρώιον, Latin heroum), or a cenotaph (Greek κενοτάφιον, literally «empty grave», Latin cenotaphium). Some «heroes» came to be recognized throughout the entire Greek world and even beyond its borders. One such example is Heracles (Greek Ἡρᾱκλῆς, Latin Hercules), one of the few heroes who attained immortality. He was revered not only by all Greeks but also by the

Romans, who worshipped him both as a hero and as a god. An integral component of the hero cult consisted of narratives about their glorious deeds and heroic exploits. Over time, the conviction emerged that a hero could also be an ordinary person who had performed feats for the sake of the fatherland. For his deeds in the service of Athens, Tellus was counted among the heroes; according to tradition, Solon considered him the happiest of all men (Hdt. 1.30.4–5). The same honors were bestowed upon all those who fell for Athens in the Battle of Marathon (Paus. 1.29.4; Thuc. 2.34.5). In this way, a concept of the «hero» took shape that closely resembles the modern one, in which primary emphasis is placed on courage, bravery, and self-sacrifice in battle for the homeland. «National heroes» function as informal symbols of modern states, alongside formal symbols such as the national anthem, coat of arms, and flag. It is therefore only natural that Russian propaganda, in seeking to persuade Russian society of the «justice» of the armed aggression against Ukraine, requires the construction of an image of the «Russian hero». The formation of this image began long before the full-scale invasion, already taking shape during the period of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine. Under present-day conditions, this issue is not merely an academic one but also carries significant practical importance, given the urgent need to counter Russian propaganda.

An analysis of recent studies and publications shows that the problem of constructing the image of the «Russian hero» in the context of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine – particularly in the period preceding the full-scale invasion – has not been adequately reflected in contemporary historiography<sup>1</sup>. Reflections

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<sup>1</sup> Masnenko V., Telvak Vitalii, Yanyshyn B., Telvak Viktoriia. Identity transformation of the Ukrainian Donbas: from the “wild field” to Russian occupation. *Analele Universității din Craiova. Istorie*. 2021. Issue 2 (40). P. 101–114; Telvak V., Ilnytskyi V. A Year of Existential War in Analytical Reflections of the Warsaw Centre for Eastern Studies. *Східноєвропейський історичний вісник*. 2023. Issue 27. P. 249–258; Тельвак В., Масненко В. Теоретична модель студій пам'яті: досвід методологічної трансформації в умовах опору російській агресії. *Zaporizhzhia Historical Review*. 2025. Vol. 10(62). С. 82–91; Masnenko V., Telvak V. Reinterpreting the theoretical model and methodological tools of ‘memory studies’ in the context of the russian-ukrainian war. *Наукові записки Вінницького державного педагогічного університету імені Михайла Коцюбинського. Серія: Історія*. Вип. 53. 2025. С. 180–190; Yaremchuk V., Telvak

on this issue were offered by Oleg Kashin in his article «Putin's Mythological Heroes», published in *The New York Times* on November 8, 2016 (the online version appeared a day earlier under the title «The Making of a Modern Russian Hero»). The Russian journalist's conclusion essentially comes down to the claim that new Russian heroes are produced by an absurd fusion of contemporary media culture with the mythology of the Second World War<sup>1</sup>.

D. Karanov examines the situation surrounding street art objects dedicated to Russia's new heroes in the settlement of Metallostroy, part of the Kolpinsky District of Saint Petersburg. The author concludes that the so-called «Metallostroy triptych», depicting three individuals killed in Donbas, Dagestan, and Syria, is «the result of a policy of masculinity that has been pursued in the settlement of Metallostroy over the past several years»<sup>2</sup>. In Ukrainian historiography, this problem has not yet been studied.

The purpose of the present study is to analyze the actions of Russian propaganda aimed at constructing the image of the «Russian hero» in the period preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

### **1. Motorola-«Hero» - Official Discourse**

With the onset of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Russian propaganda likewise intensified. Political talk shows began to appear on the broadcasts of leading Russian television channels, where topics related to Ukraine are discussed on a daily basis, ensuring high viewership ratings. These programs are conducted

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Vitalii, Masnenko V., Telvak Viktoria. Representation of Ukraine in Russian history textbooks (until 2021). *Danubius*. 2024. Vol. XLII. P. 179–203; Тельвак В., Попов М. Усноісторичні студії історичної пам'яті в умовах російської агресії проти України. *Вісник Черкаського університету: Серія Історичні науки*. 2024. № 2. С. 140–157; Тельвак В., Масненко В. Ukraine Crisis: російсько-українська війна очима кореспондентів «BBC News». *Вісник Черкаського університету: Серія Історичні науки*. 2021. № 2. С. 136–143.

<sup>1</sup> Kashin, O. (08.11.2016). Putin's mythological heroes. *The New York Times*, A. P. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Каранов Д.П. (Не)осознанная индоктринация: визуализация символа украинского кризиса в пригородном спальном микрорайоне Петербурга. *Медийная индоктринация: антропологические исследования* / Отв. ред. В.К. Малькова, В.А. Тишков. М.: ИЭА РАН, 2018. С. 92.

according to strictly designed scripts, and the hosts do not allow participants to deviate from the predetermined agenda. Despite the appearance of debate and the presence on these talk shows of speakers who ostensibly represent differing viewpoints, both the form and content of the presentation – as well as the course of the discussion itself – lead the viewer to a conclusion determined in advance. The topics selected for discussion are coordinated across talk shows on different channels. As a result, the freedom of choice enjoyed by viewers who select one channel or another, or one program or another, is in fact an illusion.

On October 17, 2016, one of the most widely discussed figures in the Russian media space was Arsen Pavlov, also known as Motorola, a native of the city of Ukhta in the Komi Republic, which is part of the Russian Federation. The trigger for this attention was his death, caused by the detonation of an explosive device planted on the cable of an elevator in the entrance of the building where he lived – at No. 121 Cheliuskintsev Street in Donetsk. For example, this event opened the broadcast of the talk show 60 Minutes on the Russia 1 channel: footage from the scene was shown, and the Ukrainian side was branded as the likely party responsible for the killing, and so on<sup>1</sup>.

The newspaper Pravda, the printed organ of Russian communists, responded to this event with an article signed with the initials «V.M.T.», in which the image of Arseniy Pavlov was painted in the brightest colors; twice he was explicitly described as a «hero of the DPR»<sup>2</sup>.

Vitaly Milonov, a deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, proposed establishing a children's club in St. Petersburg and naming it after Arsen Pavlov. It was emphasized that Motorola had «entered eternal immortality through his courageous labor and valor» and that he was «an example on which

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<sup>1</sup> 60 минут Новое ток шоу с Ольгой Скабеевой и Евгением Поповым от 17.10.2016 [электронный ресурс] YouTube. Режим доступа: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Yw7h07Z4-s>. Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 20.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 10.10.2021.

<sup>2</sup> В.М.Т. (18 19.10.2016). Объявивший войну пусть боится. *Правда*. № 116 (30467). С. 3.

our boys and girls should be raised»<sup>1</sup>. The press service of Vitaly Milonov reported that «this could be one of the patriotic youth schools, or simply a secondary general-education school. The name of the deceased could be immortalized in one of the city's toponyms – for example, by naming one of the city's numerous bridges in his honor»<sup>2</sup>. In the Komi Republic, the first gathering of the youth movement Yunarmiya, which began on October 17 and lasted eight days, was dedicated to the memory of Arsen Pavlov. Leonid Krasnoperov, head of the Youth Policy Department of the Komi Ministry of Defense, noted that the decision «to honor the memory of a heroic compatriot» had been made after Motorola's killing: «The decision was taken by colleagues and the leaders of military-patriotic clubs. This is our contemporary hero. We educate our pupils through the heroic experience of our ancestors»<sup>3</sup>. However, a day later Leonid Krasnoperov retracted his words in a comment to the television channel Dozhd. The Ministry of Education and Science of the Komi Republic distanced itself from dedicating the patriotic youth gathering to the memory of Motorola, describing it as a private initiative of an individual official<sup>4</sup>. In the days that followed, the topic remained a focal point of discussion in the Russian mass media, reaching a kind of apogee on October 20, 2016. On that day, talk shows aired footage of Arsen Pavlov's funeral ceremony, which had taken place in Donetsk the previous day. On the NTV talk show Mesto Vstrechi (Meeting Place), at

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<sup>1</sup> Феофанов С. Открыть в Петербурге детский клуб в честь Мотороллы [электронный ресурс] The village. Режим доступа: <https://www.the-village.ru/city/city/247953-motorola-detskiy-klub>. Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 17.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 11.10.2021.

<sup>2</sup> Милонов предлагает назвать школу или мост в Петербурге в честь Моторолы [электронный ресурс] Росбалт. Режим доступа: <https://www.rosbalt.ru/piter/2016/10/17/1559177.html>. Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 17.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 11.10.2021.

<sup>3</sup> Первый слет «Юнarmии» в Коми посвятили памяти Моторолы [электронный ресурс] Медуза. Режим доступа: <https://meduza.io/news/2016/10/18/pervyy-slet-yunarmii-v-komi-posvyatili-ramyati-motoroly>. Дата публікації: 18.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 11.10.2021.

<sup>4</sup> Иванов В. «Официально мы с Украиной не воюем»: в Ухте отказались называть улицу в честь убитого ополченца Моторолы [электронный ресурс] 7x7. Режим доступа: <https://7x7-journal.ru/news/2016/11/09/oficialno-my-s-ukrainoj-ne-voyuem-v-uhte-otkazalis-nazyvat-ulicu-v-chest-ubitogo-opolchenca-motoroly>. Дата публікації: 09.11.2016. Дата перегляду: 11.10.2021.

minutes 26–27 of the broadcast, emphasis was placed on the large crowds attending the farewell ceremony; yet again, accusations were leveled against Ukraine, accompanied by assurances that «Donbas will under no circumstances return to Ukraine»<sup>1</sup>. On the ORT talk show *Vremya Pokazhet* (Time Will Tell), at the 14th minute of the broadcast, one of the guests remarked that they were burying «essentially, a murderer», to which the host objected: «I have killed... and for many people I am quite legitimate». It was further asserted that Motorola was a «national hero of Donbas», and that it was unfortunate that «he died treacherously in an elevator»<sup>2</sup>. In the newspaper *Pravda*, Motorola was described as a «combat commander» and a «hero»<sup>3</sup>. It should be noted that as early as February 2015, the Security Service of Ukraine had formally charged Arsen Pavlov under Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, «Violation of the laws and customs of war». This was reported by the head of the SBU's Main Investigative Department, *Vasyl Vovk*<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, from the perspective of Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, Arsen Pavlov faced arrest followed by criminal prosecution for crimes committed, but by no means extrajudicial execution. It is therefore unsurprising that, subsequently, the version alleging the involvement of Ukrainian security services in Motorola's killing found no confirmation whatsoever.

Thus, within the Russian information space, a process of heroization of the figure of Arsen Pavlov was set in motion. Predictably, in the Ukrainian information space Motorola is an antihero, characterized as a «terrorist», a «war criminal», and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> Место встречи от 20.10.2016. Найдено ли решение по Украине? [электронный ресурс] YouTube. Режим доступа: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuH\\_qSCo8jo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuH_qSCo8jo). Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 20.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 10.10.2021.

<sup>2</sup> *Время покажет* от 20.10.2016. [электронный ресурс] YouTube. Режим доступа: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UBvKdLw4VQ&t=0s>. Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 20.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 10.10.2021.

<sup>3</sup> В.М.Т. (21 24.10.2016). «Нормандская четвёрка» вводит полицию в Донбасс. *Правда*, № 118 (30469). С. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Терористу Моторолі оформили підозру СБУ. [электронный ресурс] Укрінформ. Режим доступа: [https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-other\\_news/1817911-teroristu\\_motoroli\\_oformili\\_pidozru\\_sbu\\_2024584.html](https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-other_news/1817911-teroristu_motoroli_oformili_pidozru_sbu_2024584.html) Дата перегляду: 10.10.2021.

This situation vividly illustrates the state of the information war between Ukraine and Russia. It is therefore hardly surprising that Russian and Ukrainian audiences view Russian aggression and Russian militants in Ukraine from fundamentally different perspectives.

It is evident that within the top leadership of the Russian Federation, the decision to heroize the figure of Motorola did not receive unequivocal support. As a result, the initiatives put forward in this direction did not develop into an organized campaign and, over time, began to fade.

On October 18, 2016, the Russian version of the international online platform Change.org published a petition addressed to the President of the Russian Federation entitled «To Award the Title of Hero of Russia (Posthumously) to Arsen Pavlov, Known by the Call Sign Motorola». In the justificatory section, its author, Khabarovsk resident Valerii Karpov, stated that «young people should be raised on the feats of Motorola»<sup>1</sup>. On October 21, a petition was published on the same website addressed to the governor of Sverdlovsk Oblast and the Yekaterinburg City Duma, proposing that one of Yekaterinburg's streets be named after Arsen Pavlov<sup>2</sup>. The first of these petitions elicited no response from the authorities of the Russian Federation, while the initiative expressed in the second petition was not supported by the mayor of Yekaterinburg, Yevgenii Roizman<sup>3</sup>.

On October 31, 2016, an appeal appeared on the website of the Interregional Public Organization for Civic and Legal Self-Defense

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<sup>1</sup> «На подвигах Моторолы необходимо воспитывать молодёжь», россияне просят присвоить боевику «Мотороле» звание Героя России [электронный ресурс] Вчасно. Режим доступа: <https://vchasnoua.com/donbass/45092-napodvigakh-motoroly-neobkhdimo-vospityvat-molodezh-rossiyane-prosyat-prisvoit-boeviku-motorole-zvanie-geroia-rossii>. Дата публікації: 21.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 18.10.2021.

<sup>2</sup> «Он же наш, красноармеец. На Донбассе что-то делал». Что думают жители Екатеринбурга об идее назвать улицу в честь Моторолы [электронный ресурс] ZNAK. Режим доступа: [https://www.znak.com/2016-10-24/chto\\_dumayut\\_zhiteli\\_ekaterinburga\\_ob\\_idee\\_nazvat\\_ulicu\\_v\\_chest\\_motoroly](https://www.znak.com/2016-10-24/chto_dumayut_zhiteli_ekaterinburga_ob_idee_nazvat_ulicu_v_chest_motoroly). Дата публікації: 24.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 18.10.2021.

<sup>3</sup> Власти Екатеринбурга не станут называть улицу в честь «Моторолы» [электронный ресурс] Харьков. Новостное агентство. Режим доступа: <https://nahnews.org/950928-vlasti-ekaterinburga-ne-stanut-nazyvat-ulicu-v-chest-motoroly>. Дата публікації: 25.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 18.10.2021.

of Citizens of the Russian Federation, Grazhdanskii Patrul (Civic Patrol), addressed to M. N. Osmanov, head of the administration of the municipal formation of the urban district of Ukhta (Russian abbreviation: «MOGO Ukhta»), proposing that Pavlov's memory be commemorated in his hometown by naming one of the streets of Ukhta after him<sup>1</sup>. On November 7, a meeting took place between Magomed Osmanov, the mayor of Ukhta, and Rostislav Antonov, head of the Novosibirsk-based human rights organization Grazhdanskii Patrul. Representatives of numerous public organizations from Ukhta also participated in the meeting. Opponents of commemorating Motorola's memory, among other things, pointed out that officially Russia is not at war with Ukraine and that the Russian president has repeatedly stated that Russia is not a party to the conflict in Ukraine, and so forth. As a result of the discussion, a consensus position was reached: until a historical assessment of the events in the DPR emerges, the issue of commemorating the memory of Arsen Pavlov should not be considered<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Motorola images in public space

Nevertheless, some attempts to incorporate the figure of Motorola into the contemporary pantheon of Russian heroes achieved success at the local level. On October 22, 2016, an idealized image of Arsen Pavlov appeared on one of the transformer substations in the settlement of Metallostroy. This provoked an ambivalent reaction among local residents; however, the head of the local administration rejected proposals to paint over the image, stating in an interview that «this is a portrait of a hero of Donbas, and heroes should be known by sight». This piece of street art was damaged and defaced several times with red and black paint

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<sup>1</sup> Увековечить память Арсения Сергеевича Павлова (Моторолы) в г. Ухта [электронный ресурс] Режим доступа: <https://civilpatrol.info/?q=petition/10066/uvekovechit-pamyat-arseniya-sergeevicha-pavlova-motoroly-v-g-ukhta>. Дата публікації: 31.10.2016. Дата перегляду: 11.10.2021.

<sup>2</sup> Улицы имени Моторолы в Ухте пока не будет [электронный ресурс]. КомиОнлайн. Режим доступа: <https://komionline.ru/node/75371>. Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 08.11.2016. Дата перегляду: 11.10.2021.

and various inscriptions, such as «no to war»<sup>1</sup>. Clearly, a significant portion of society did not support the idea of commemorating Arsen Pavlov through street imagery. Despite this, the damaged image was repeatedly restored and was eventually approved by the Committee for Urban Planning and Architecture. On October 1, 2019, the State Administrative and Technical Inspectorate formally legitimized it<sup>2</sup>. Thus, despite the ambiguity surrounding assessments of Arsen Pavlov's activities even within Russia itself, the image of Motorola as a new Russian hero became part of the urban streetscape of a suburb of Saint Petersburg.

On October 11, 2021, a RIF-112 model boat bearing the hull number «RRO-0992» was launched at the port of Rostov-on-Don. The vessel had been modernized at the facilities of the local joint-stock company RIF. According to the website Radio Liberty, a boat with the same hull number had already been photographed in 2015; at that time, its entire side was adorned with a St. George ribbon and the inscription «70 Years of Victory!». Now, however, the name «Arsen Pavlov» is prominently displayed on the side of the vessel<sup>3</sup>.

Despite these efforts to heroize Arsen Pavlov, it can be stated that his figure remained controversial for Russian society. The recognition of Pavlov as a «Hero of Russia» did not enjoy active support from state institutions. This was due to several factors. In particular, from a legal standpoint, his activities in Ukraine violated Article 359 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, «Mercenarism», paragraph three of which provides for a sentence of three to seven years' imprisonment for a mercenary's participation in an armed conflict or military actions. A mercenary

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<sup>1</sup> Каранов Д.П. (Не)осознанная индоктринация: визуализация символа украинского кризиса в пригородном спальном микрорайоне Петербурга. *Медийная индоктринация: антропологические исследования* / Отв. ред. В.К. Малькова, В.А. Тишков. М.: ИЭА РАН, 2018. С. 85.

<sup>2</sup> ГАТИ одобрило граффити с Моторолой в Металлострое [электронный ресурс] MR7.ru. Режим доступа: <https://mr-7.ru/articles/208669/>. Дата публикации: 01.10.2019. Дата просмотра: 16.10.2021.

<sup>3</sup> Як «Моторола» вбив полоненого «кіборга» [электронный ресурс] BBC News. Україна. Режим доступу: [https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2015/04/150415\\_branovytsky\\_death\\_witn\\_ess\\_sova\\_interview\\_vs](https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2015/04/150415_branovytsky_death_witn_ess_sova_interview_vs). Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 16.04.2015. Дата перегляду: 18.10.2021.

is defined as a person who «acts for the purpose of obtaining material remuneration and is not a citizen of a state participating in an armed conflict or military actions, does not permanently reside on its territory, and is not a person sent to perform official duties»<sup>1</sup>. In this case, we are dealing with a citizen of the Russian Federation who was not sent to Ukraine by any authority to perform official duties. Those who attempted to heroize Arsenii Pavlov claimed that he fought in Donbas for an idea. However, numerous data from open sources indicate that he received substantial material compensation, including real estate. In particular, on May 6, 2016, he received, free of charge, an apartment in Donetsk, at 2D Vatutin Avenue, apartment No. 59<sup>2</sup>.

Abstracting from legal reservations, we must acknowledge that the ethical dimension of the matter likewise offered no grounds for presenting Arsen Pavlov as a role model for Russian – or any other – youth. Of course, war is not a place where people act with kid gloves. Yet there are acts that are fundamentally unacceptable and for which no justification exists under any circumstances. There is credible evidence of Motorola’s violations of the Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war. In particular, there are witnesses to his killing of the captive Ihor Branovytskyi<sup>3</sup>. Motorola himself admitted, in a comment to the Kyiv Post, to executing fifteen prisoners: «I shot fifteen prisoners... No comments... If I want to kill, I kill; if I don’t want to, I don’t»<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации. URL: <https://tulaws.ru/uk/Razdel-XII/Glava-34/Statya-359/> - Дата перегляду: 17.10.2021.

<sup>2</sup> Кому Захарченко подарил квартиры в Донецке [электронный ресурс] // Новости Донбасса. Режим доступа: <https://novosti.dn.ua/article/6187-кому-zakharchenko-podaryl-kvartiry-v-donecke>. Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 07.05.2016. Дата перегляду: 17.10.2021.

<sup>3</sup> «Я 15 пленных расстрелял»: в России именем участника захвата Донбасса назвали катер [электронный ресурс] Радио Свобода. Режим доступа: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/arsen-pavlov-motorola-kater/31505485.html>. Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 12.10.2021. Дата перегляду: 16.10.2021.

<sup>4</sup> Motorola confesses he murdered 15 prisoners. Признание Моторолы в убийстве 15 пленных [электронный ресурс]. YouTube. Режим доступа: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXSctfYItaM>. Назва з екрана. Дата публікації: 06.04.2015. Дата перегляду: 18.10.2021.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Having examined the problem of constructing the image of the «Russian hero» in the period preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we may speak of certain difficulties – both legal and ethical – that Russian propaganda encountered. In October 2016, a process of heroization of the figure of Arsen Pavlov was launched in the Russian information space, while in the Ukrainian information space he is characterized as a «terrorist», a «war criminal», and so forth. Within the top leadership of the Russian Federation, the decision to heroize the figure of Motorola failed to gain unequivocal support. As a result, initiatives in this direction did not develop into an organized campaign and gradually began to fade. Although in practice Russian state structures initiated, organized, and conducted the war against Ukraine, until 2022 Russia officially denied its involvement in hostilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In this context, Russian citizens who fought on the territory of Ukraine formally violated Article 359 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, «Mercenarism», paragraph three of which provides for up to seven years' imprisonment for a mercenary's participation in an armed conflict or military actions. To recognize a figure such as Motorola as a «Russian hero» would have meant officially endorsing all of his actions, including the war crimes he committed. Evidently, at that time the Russian leadership was not prepared to take such a step. Nevertheless, some attempts to incorporate the figure of Motorola into the pantheon of Russian heroes did succeed at the local level. Russian propaganda, for its part, continued to keep its audience in a sustained anti-Ukrainian mobilization.

## **ABSTRACT**

Having examined the problem of constructing the image of the «Russian hero» in the period preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we may speak of certain difficulties – both legal and ethical – that Russian propaganda encountered. In October 2016, a process of heroization of the figure of Arsen Pavlov was launched in the Russian information space, while in the Ukrainian information space he is characterized as a «terrorist», a «war criminal», and so forth. Within the top leadership of the Russian

Federation, the decision to heroize the figure of Motorola failed to gain unequivocal support. As a result, initiatives in this direction did not develop into an organized campaign and gradually began to fade. Although in practice Russian state structures initiated, organized, and conducted the war against Ukraine, until 2022 Russia officially denied its involvement in hostilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. To recognize a figure such as Motorola as a «Russian hero» would have meant officially endorsing all of his actions, including the war crimes he committed. Evidently, at that time the Russian leadership was not prepared to take such a step. Nevertheless, some attempts to incorporate the figure of Motorola into the pantheon of Russian heroes did succeed at the local level. Russian propaganda, for its part, continued to keep its audience in a sustained anti-Ukrainian mobilization.

### **АНОТАЦІЯ**

Розглянувши проблему формування образу «російського героя» напередодні широкомасштабного вторгнення Росії в Україну можемо говорити про певні труднощі, юридичного та етичного характеру, з якими зустрічалася російська пропаганда. У жовтні 2016 року у російському інформаційному просторі було започатковано процес героїзації постаті Арсена Павлова, який в українському інформаційному просторі характеризується як «терорист», «військовий злочинець» *etc.* У вищому керівництві Російської Федерації рішення щодо героїзації постаті Мотороли не знайшло однозначної підтримки. Тому ініціативи у цьому напрямку не вилилися у організовану кампанію і з часом почали згасати. Хоча фактично російські владні структури ініціювали, організували і вели війну проти України, до 2022 року Росія офіційно не визнавала свою причетність до бойових дій у Донецькій та Луганській областях. Визнати «російським героєм» особу на кшталт Мотороли – означало офіційно схвалити всі його діяння, в тому числі і вчинені ним воєнні злочини. Очевидно, вище російське керівництво, на той час, до цього не було готове. Все ж деякі спроби ввести постать Мотороли до пантеону російських героїв мали успіх на місцевому рівні. Російська ж пропаганда продовжувала тримати свою аудиторію в антиукраїнському тонусі.

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