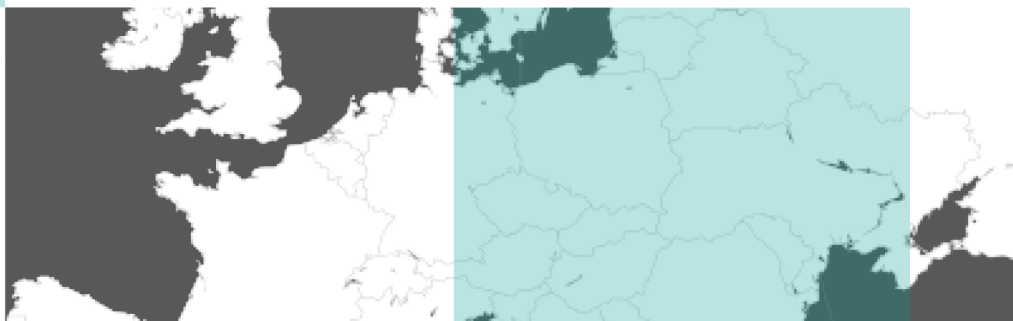


Characteristics of pro-Kremlin Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe and Practical Examples How to Tackle It



**Characteristics of pro-Kremlin Propaganda
in Central and Eastern Europe
and Practical Examples How to Tackle It**

Brno 2018

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Issued by NESEHNUTI in 2018,

18 Kpt. Jarose,

602 00 Brno,

Czech Republic

www.nesehnuti.cz

ISBN: 978-80-87217-41-2.

Printed on recycled paper.

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Characteristics of pro-Kremlin propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe and practical examples how to tackle it

Katerina Dufkova

Introduction

Pro-Kremlin propaganda has become one of the highly discussed topics in past few years, especially in connection with a spread of disinformation and an information war which is classified as a part of so-called “soft power” or “hybrid war”. The phenomenon of propaganda is not new, but it became more apparent currently how powerful well targeted propaganda can be using means such as TV broadcasting, internet or new media; how quickly and effectively it is able to shape and affect politics as well as public opinion. Contributors of this volume agree that the extent of the pro-Kremlin propaganda and its impact made itself more visible during the Ukraine crisis. But almost every commentator mentioned an imminent experience with the propaganda in their own countries which show the range and effect of the phenomena.

The Initiative Way, one of the core program of the Czech non-governmental organization NESEHNUTÍ supports active people and local activists in Eastern Europe, mainly in the South Caucasus and Ukraine. Besides other things, it helps strengthen civil society, protect human rights and the rights of minorities. We work with activists, journalists and active people regardless of their occupation, whose work is also affected by the direct results of propaganda. The atmosphere in society changes, distrust to the democratic institutions is growing and certain topics and activities are being marginalised. Susceptibility to propaganda particularly in Eastern European countries is given by their historical experience, still strong Russian influence, but also other factors such as limited sources of information, insufficient media literacy etc. The key issues for the people working in the area are how to identify, designate and rebut propaganda and disinformation, how to examine and verify facts and what approach to choose.

Therefore, Nesehnutí took the opportunity to gather contributions of experts on the subject of pro-Kremlin propaganda and its activities in the regions of Central and Eastern Europe, namely from Czech Republic, Slovakia, Moldova, Transnistria, Poland, Hungary and Ukraine. The aim was not only to repeat that there is propaganda supported if not organised by Kremlin, but to compare what tools the propaganda uses in different countries, what topics it focuses on, and most importantly to describe what steps are taken to address it in abovementioned countries in Europe. What do states, non-governmental organizations and, possibly, individuals do and can do facing the propaganda and what proved to be effective.

For this reason, the more practical and comparative approach was chosen. The presented texts imply that the pro-Kremlin propaganda has similar features in all considered countries. Although it is obvious that the narrative differs according to a given country or region, the used tools are very similar; disinformation websites, often with a vague ownership structure and anonymous authors, fake news and disinformation spread through social media, the use of trolls to influence public opinion etc. However, the texts were able to present also some effective measures to challenge the propaganda, in some cases direct state actions, but especially a significant reaction that came from the public, non-governmental organizations, independent journalists, academics and in some cases even private figures. All these examples can spark a little optimism in the fight with the propaganda and serve as a lesson of which measures can be taken.

Although the subject of the pro-Kremlin propaganda is currently very topical and discussed and there is a significant number of works available from both an academic as well as journalistic environment, we hope that this publication will contribute to the debate, if only for its geographical scope or the thematic focus. The collection of texts you are holding do not aspire to be a purely academic work, but it aims to capture the current situation in Central and Eastern Europe and give an overview of the measures already taken. The choice of language does not aim only at the audience in the Eastern Europe, but we hope it will find its readers interested in the topic everywhere in Europe.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this collection are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of NESEHNUTÍ.

Czech responses to the pro-Kremlin propaganda

Jonas Syrovatka

Introduction

The issue of pro-Kremlin propaganda (or in other words disinformation or fake news) and its influence on the Czech society and politics has become a frequently discussed topic in the past few years, especially in the context of the Ukraine conflict.¹ The lesson learned is that this fluid phenomena has to be addressed in various ways, requiring the involvement of different actors, which should be at least partially coordinated and communicated with each other.

This articles aims to briefly introduce the existing findings about the pro-Kremlin propaganda in Czech context, identify the actors tackling this challenge and provide the recommendation based on the Czech experience.

Pro-Kremlin propaganda (not only) in the Czech context

At the beginning of the discussion about pro-Kremlin propaganda, it is worth mentioning that this concept is problematic at best. If we understand this term as a reference to the messages brought into the Czech public space by actors connected to the Kremlin, we should promptly conclude that there is only one such (at least publicly known) actor in the Czech media space, namely the Czech branch of the Sputnik News Agency. Aside from this, however, there are other quasi-organizations, website projects, YouTube channels, or Facebook pages, that contribute to the spreading of pro-Kremlin narratives, yet the owners and editorial staff are either unknown or not directly connected with Russia.² But even if we apply a different approach and focus on the content of messages rather than the ownership of individual platforms,

1 Czech debate about the phenomena of hybrid threats between 2014 and 2016 was described by academics Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel in the article *Hybrid Warriors: Reconstructing Security through the Czech 'Russian Hybrid Warfare' Assemblage* that is currently under the reviewing process.

2 Likely the most up to date list of websites with controversial content in Czech and Slovak media space is possible to find on the website Konspiratori.sk.

the problem of a definition is not overcome. Even though it is possible to identify such platforms, individuals, and quasi-organizations that are uncritically supporting Russia's official policy by using their arguments or translating policy positions into Czech, it is usually not the predominant theme. The majority of published articles described the decline that is occurring in Western societies nowadays, and do not mention Russian at all. One could argue that any method of disuniting Western societies is the Kremlin's current strategy, and so these kinds of messages should therefore be labeled as pro-Kremlin propaganda. But, while using this broad approach may be useful in its simplicity, we end up with a somewhat "McCarthyist witch-hunt" of any opinion than is offered by the mainstream media. So what then do we do? Since there is not an easy answer, the only real solution is to be aware of this challenge, and view the concept of pro-Kremlin propaganda as somewhat artificially constructed with very fluid boundaries.

Despite the lack of clarity of the definition described above, there are several well-documented characteristics of sources (occasionally) involved in the spreading of pro-Kremlin propaganda and anti-liberal narratives. Given that there are around fifty platforms of this kind in the Czech environment, they differ in a number of key aspects. Some of them are completely anonymous and heavily spread conspiracy theories and disinformation like the web portal Aeronet, while others are seeking to look genuine and aside from giving space to minor figures and extreme opinions, these platforms also publish regular news coverage or interviews with mainstream politicians or celebrities (like the controversial site Parlamentní listy). There are also web projects for quasi-authentic commentaries of like-minded persons (such as Protiproud or Nová republika). From this caveat of models it is possible to ponder the variety of motivations for creating and promoting such projects. Those platforms might be created and run as business projects, for ideological reasons or tools used for social mobilization.³

³ The Facebook page Zprávy.cz is particularly interesting in this respect since it gathered fans by focusing on the topic of migration, but before the elections in 2017 and 2018 it completely changed its agenda and served as a platform for propagation of particular candidates.

While looking at the content of these platforms it is clear that only a small percentage of them produces original coverage. The vast majority of articles tends to be republished (including the translation of the article from foreign websites). In terms of specific themes, they are changing depending on the course of events, but one of the key narratives that enjoys high popularity is the negative implication of Muslim migration to Europe. Another important feature is that these platforms place a greater emphasis on foreign rather than domestic events. Furthermore, the prevailing tone of the messages is not pro-Kremlin per se, but rather anti-liberal and anti-Western.⁴

Actors engaged in tackling pro-Kremlin propaganda

Since 2014, various actors have been engaged in activities aimed at countering pro-Kremlin propaganda. Those actors and their activities are presented in this chapter.

State institutions and politicians

The institution of the State adjusted its approach to the threat of pro-Kremlin propaganda soon after this matter gained traction in public media and the expert community following the annexation of Crimea. This manifested not only due to the shared threat perception among various institutions responsible for ensuring security, but also because strategic state documents promptly reflected upon this challenge being presented.

Among other newly approved documents is the National Security Audit, adopted in December 2016. Not only was this the first systematic review of all areas of national security in Czech history, including terrorism, extremism, organized crime, and cybersecurity, it also identified how to respond to disinformation campaigns of foreign actors. The main recommendation of the Audit in this respect was establishing the Center against terrorism and hybrid threats within the Ministry of Interior (MoI).⁵ As can be seen from the title, the countering of propaganda is not the only task for this unit. Probably the

⁴ Czech platforms spreading pro-Kremlin narratives are described in detail in the studies “Kdo nás dezinformuje” or “Information warfare on the Internet”.

⁵ Units such as this should be created at all Ministries.

most visible action it has taken was the creation of a Twitter account that serves to debunk disinformation that could endanger national security, and is under the jurisdiction of the MoI. This activity, however, sometimes contributes to the already existing public impression that the Center mainly focuses on propaganda and consequent criticism points out the low activity in this area. But this criticism neglects the fact that debunking is only one of the Center's tasks. In fact the most of its activities (such as preparation of analysis of all different kinds of hybrid threats etc.) are internal and serve for purposes of the MoI and other state institutions.

Some political parties were quite vocal about the problem of tackling propaganda, and hosted several events dedicated to this issue while supporting NGOs active in this field. There was also a visible tendency before Parliamentary elections in October 2017 to not place political commercials on platforms spreading propaganda. Unfortunately, to some extent it also led to the politicization of the terminology, since some politicians started to label all the information that was inconvenient for them as fake news or disinformation. Also, some politicians utilized the influence of propaganda as a simple excuse for their own electoral failures.

Non-governmental sector

NGOs played an important role not only in establishing the issue of propaganda and disinformation as a part of the agenda, but also in finding a way in which to tackle these challenges. They did so on a national level, but also in conjunction with partners from other countries, including the EU East StratCom. While there are several actors dedicated to this area, it is beneficial to describe them according to their main field of expertise.

Among the primary NGOs conducting research in this area, it is possible to include: Evropské hodnoty (EH), Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky (AMO) and Jagello 2000. The most visible NGO regarding this topic was EH, which made state-led propaganda one of its main field of analysis, and thus their representatives participated in the formulation of the chapter "Hybrid Threats" in the Audit, and widely commented on this issue in

the media. For PSSI, this issue was only one of the fields of expertise and its researchers often combined the issue of propaganda with other kinds of influence operations. AMO established and currently operates the Czech branch of the Ukrainian website Stop Fake. Jagello 2000, which specializes mostly on issues related with NATO and the military, focused primarily on bringing the topic of propaganda into these circles.

NGOs which focused mainly on education were Jeden svět na školách (JSNS), a branch of the NGOs Člověk v tísni (People in need), Zvol si Info, and Transitions. While JSNS and Zvol si Info⁶ focused on improving media literacy among high school students, Transitions was more narrowly focused on workshops on fact-checking, mainly for young journalists.

There were also two specific actors in the NGO sector that focused on propaganda. The website Manipulátoři.cz is focused mostly on issues of propaganda, and so helps to bring attention to new projects in this area.⁷ The donor organization Open Society Fund Prague (OSF) significantly entered this area in 2016. It helped to establish communication channels among individual actors, pushed for more coordination, and also applied new research approaches (such as co-organizing the Hackathon marathon solely focused on disinformation that resulted in creating the ICT tool Mindbrella).

Journalists

Journalists not only helped to establish the issue of propaganda in the public space by writing about it, but also conducted several investigative projects and often took part as speakers in debates dedicated to this challenge.

The issues of propaganda first caught the attention of smaller online media platforms (such as Hlídací Pes, Echo 24 or Forum 24). By creating space for such research, NGOs contributed to those platforms which spread knowledge about these issues. However there were also journalists conducting their own investigative work such as Neovlivní.cz, that created the detailed list of platforms involved in spreading

⁶ NGO that started as student project at Masaryk University.

⁷ Together with EH the editors of this website created Facebook group PoPravdě.cz that debunked disinformation that appeared before Presidential elections 2018.

pro-Kremlin narratives, weekly RESPEKT due to whose investigative work the ownership structure of one of the most active disinformation websites, Aeronet, was partly uncovered, or public TV broadcasts on Czech television. The issue of disinformation was also quite extensively covered by daily Hospodářské Noviny and other media are following this trend nowadays.⁸

Academic sphere

Pro-Kremlin propaganda became a subject of analysis also at Czech universities. Generally, it is possible to say that academic researchers became rather distant from researchers in NGOs, and focused more on the theoretical side (including manipulation techniques) of the issue. This however helped them to offer a critical and unbiased reflection on the debate about propaganda, and highlight the limits of current approaches. Academics (mostly focusing on Russia) also played an important role in public debates about Russian influence in the Czech Republic.

The most active in this field was Masaryk University, which conducted several projects focusing mainly on manipulative techniques used by platforms spreading pro-Kremlin narratives. Academics at this university also provided the background and knowledge for the development of the student project, Zvol si info, and actively participated in it even when it established itself as an NGO independent from the academic environment.⁹ Another important contribution to the debate about propaganda was creating the university course dedicated to this issue.

Private sector

The involvement of private companies in the debate about propaganda was rather limited. The individual contributions motivated by personal interest in this issue (such as the occasional analysis of internet content made by Semantic Visions or the organization of the Hackathon by

⁸ For example daily Denik.cz focused mostly on regional news launched new section Deník proti fake news (Deník against fake news).

⁹ NGO Zvol si Info and academics from Masaryk University recently published book Nejlepší kniha o fake news, dezinformacích a manipulacích!!! that is describing the issue of propaganda in form that is comprehensible for broader public.

Ackee) are rather unique. Private companies were also quite reluctant to apply more strict commercial policies, and to not advertise their products on platforms spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda. A typical example of this approach is the popular web browser and commercial provider Seznam.cz, that did not exclude such platforms from the list of websites wherein it publishes advertisements, even though it claimed to do so. This has changed recently, but it was done without boisterous public statements, which illustrates that private companies are still careful when it comes to this matter.

Lessons learned from the Czech experience

As can be seen from the previous chapter, various actors participated in the Czech debate about propaganda and various approaches were applied. The final chapter focuses on the lessons that can be learned from the Czech experience.

Before introducing the practical measures, it is always important to highlight that the issue of propaganda should always be seen in a broader context. It should not be forgotten that it is only one of the tools (arguably not even the most effective one) in the Kremlin's toolbox. Therefore, while we are speaking about this challenge, about which it is always easier to speak since it is easily visible and analyze, we should not forget about other means such as corruption, economic influence, or benefitting from organized crime, all of which are arguably deadlier means of influence. The notion of a broader context also refers to the fact that not every piece of news that is published on the aforementioned platforms should be automatically perceived as a part of a Kremlin-orchestrated campaign. On the contrary, one should always respect that a pluralist society brings a wide variety of opinions, and one should not be tempted to label all uncomfortable opinions as fake news and its authors as Kremlin agents. Overusing these terms and phrases may actually be detrimental to the overall debate.

Maybe even more important than the particular measures applied, however, is the nature of the communal approach in the tackling of propaganda. Since this issue creates numerous challenges, the involved actors should have different backgrounds. The existence of

informal networks may contribute to quicker sharing of information, increased efficiency through collaboration, burden-sharing, learning from other projects and mistakes, and the construction of mutual trust. The different experiences various actors have may help to refresh the debate with new ideas and apply innovative approaches. The discussion among people with varying levels of knowledge may also contribute to translating the messages from an “expert language” to formats that are more comprehensible to the general public. While keeping these microcosms functioning and efficient, there is an indispensable role played by outside coordinators (such as the OSF in the Czech case) that can help to shape the debate with respect to a long-term view, that might be sometimes neglected by researchers in-trenched in a day-to-day routine.

For the short term there are several practices that should be followed. The debunking of disinformation that often comes hand in hand with propaganda should continue, but with the incorporation of technical tools (like artificial intelligence) and the improvement of the ability to hold people spreading disinformation accountable. Not only should public figures face criticism for doing so, but also in some cases, legal steps (for example for defamation or spreading false alarm messages) should be put in place. Public awareness about this issue should be raised further (e. g. by pointing the specific examples where propaganda materialized, resulting in harmful outcomes) and so is thus made into a socially undesirable phenomena. This might make the flow of information between platforms spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda and the media mainstream more difficult. State institutions should evolve their capabilities in strategic communication (meaning their ability to predict potentially divisive issues and be able to answer them in advance), which might help them to build trust between themselves and their citizens. The private sector should also receive greater societal pressure to avoid putting its advertisements on platforms spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda.

Even though the above mentioned techniques might be effective on the tactical level (in a manner of speaking), they do not really solve the deeper problems in societies that are exploited by propaganda. Not only does media literacy have to be included in the school curriculum,

but the educational system should also aim to raise active, critical, and self-confident citizens. The debate about the impact of social networks on the change of democratic procedures and societal cohesion has to be evaluated and deal with. And lastly, but most importantly, the very real social problems and cleavages that are misused by propagandists should be identified and addressed through a proper political response. Because the key task is not to tackle propaganda as such, but strive to achieve resilient societies in which all kinds of social groups will be certain that their opinion is not overlooked.

Special thanks for consultations to Radka Pudilová and to Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel for providing their yet unpublished academic research.

The Slovak experience with increasing information resilience

Juraj Smatana

Presently, there is an ongoing propagandistic campaign of Russia and the so called Islamic State in Slovakia against other E.U. countries. The aim of such campaign is to disrupt the unity of the EU and NATO, disseminate trust in democratic institutions and increase significance of certain anti-system, radical and extremist groups which – at the same time – do not necessarily have to have a positive relation with the Russian Federation. The European Parliament Resolution 2016/2030 (INI)¹ names all the tools used to achieve such goals: ... recognises that the Russian Government is aggressively employing a wide range of tools and instruments, such as think tanks and special foundations (e.g. Russkiy Mir), special authorities (Rossotrudnichestvo), multi-lingual TV stations (e.g. RT), pseudo news agencies and multimedia services (e.g. Sputnik), cross-border social and religious groups, as the regime wants to present itself as the only defender of traditional Christian values, social media and internet trolls to challenge democratic values, divide Europe, gather domestic support and create the perception of failed states in the EU's eastern neighbourhood; stresses that Russia invests relevant financial resources in its disinformation and propaganda instruments engaged either directly by the state or through Kremlin-controlled companies and organisations; underlines that, on the one hand, the Kremlin is funding political parties and other organisations within the EU with the intent of undermining political cohesion, and that, on the other hand, Kremlin propaganda directly targets specific journalists, politicians and individuals in the EU; Recalls that security and intelligence services conclude that Russia has the capacity and intention to conduct operations aimed at destabilising other countries; points out that this often takes the form of support to political extremists and large-scale disinformation and mass media

¹ European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties (2016/2030(INI)). Available online: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2016-0441+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

campaigns; notes, furthermore, that such media companies are present and active in the EU.”

When initial stage of a hybrid war² is conducted in such manner, the traditional tools of a civic society (media, NGOs, academia) do not possess the means to tell apart which propagandistic outputs are a spontaneous reaction to a current problem in the country and which outputs are orchestrated by the enemy power. The propagandists we manage to blame often counterattack by saying “You are paranoid Russiophobians and you blame Putin for all your problems.” For this reason we avoid using terms such as pro-Russian propaganda and pro-Russian websites – when we need to direct attention to some apparent correlation between official Russian Federation stance and some propagandistic outputs distributed in our country, we use terms such as pro-Kremlin propaganda and pro-Kremlin websites. We think that it is not us, but the current political representation of the Russian Federation who is acting anti-Russian by trying to portray the EU as the enemy, by rejecting fundamental values of the Western European civilization and by trying to prevent its neighbouring states to fully integrate into European structures.

The notion that Russia is waging a hybrid war against the EU is a well-established fact confirmed by many European secret service agencies. However, what needs to be considered as well is the fact that Russian efforts act together with many other factors, e.g. the fast spread of internet availability, social media and AI, the change in creating, broadcasting and consuming the media content, the progress in psychological manipulation for the use of PR and advertising etc.

The approach we propose to tackle the above mentioned threats has one significant advantage – the current geopolitical threat serves to identify weak points of our “digital” borders so we can strengthen them immediately which has a long lasting effect on our country’s security when the current threats cease to exist.

We got inspired in Finland.³ In May 2016 the Finnish branch of Sputnik – a website financed by Russian Federation – was closed down

2 Rácz, András: Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine. FIIA Report 43, 2015. Available online: <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/russias-hybrid-war-in-ukraine>.

3 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/01/why-is-finland-able-to-fend-off-putins-information-war/>.

because it had not managed to attract enough readers. The analysis which followed proved that a successful strategy is not debunking all the hoaxes, but rather these:

- “The best way to respond is less by correcting the information, and more about having your own positive narrative and sticking to it.”
- High quality of educational system and thus wide spread high level of critical thinking
- Meticulous government strategy – Finland has a long history of dealing with disruptive Russian influence. The government identified the problem in time: Finnish president Niinistö publicly stated in October 2015 that information war on Finland is a real thing, hired 100 officers in order to identify and understand this war.

Naturally, given its geopolitical location and post-communist history, the Slovak Republic is in a different situation all together.

Selected studies and surveys on the situation in the Slovak Republic

All the following research was conducted and financed by NGOs and their volunteers.

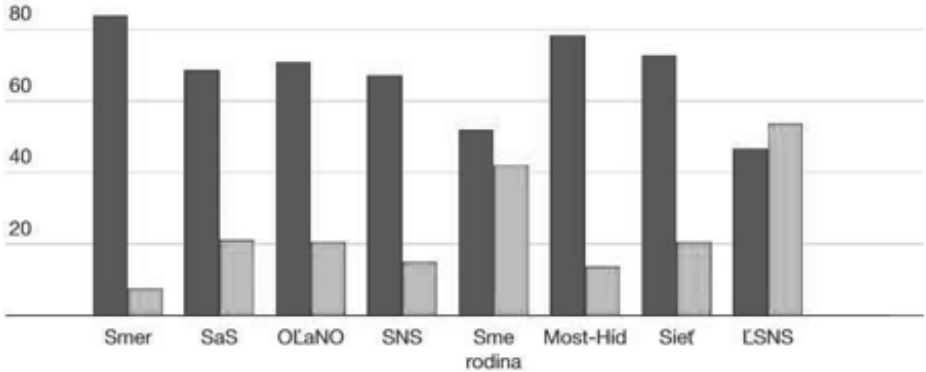
The failure of the legal consistency and corruption clear path for extremism. – Up to 40% of Slovaks consider the quality of democracy as very low and there’s only 26% people who are satisfied with its current state. Two thirds of the survey participants thinks that the way to improve is through larger participation of decent and moral people in running of the state. About the same amount of people would like to see an increase in independence and erudition of the police, prosecutors, judges, and other control and regulatory bodies in order to fight the abuse of power. Dissatisfaction with the abuse of power makes many people turn to extremist measures. One in four Slovaks see the alternative to the current state of affairs in abolition of the parliamentary democracy and installing dictatorship. Up to 28% people would actually welcome going back to the socialist system that was in

place before 1989. There is about 35% of Slovaks who would not mind leaving the EU. The most frustrated by the current state of affairs seem to be the electorate of the extremist party of Mr. Kotleba - ĽSNS.⁴

Disinformation websites are educating people to vote for anti-system and extremist parties. Kotleba's party tried to get into the Parliament in 2010 and 2012 but did not succeed scoring 1,33 and 1,58 %. The amount of corruption or the scale of the Roma problem did not change between 2012 and 2016 when this party scored 8% and got seats in the Parliament. The most significant factors enabling this to happen are – in our opinion – the migrant crisis, full-scale arrival or the disinformation websites and the beginning of Russia-Ukraine conflict. Out of all the electorate, it was only the voters of the Kotleba's party who stated in the survey⁵ that they trust the “alternative” media more than the traditional ones.

Which media do you trust more?

traditional vs. alternative



Source: Slovenská atlantická komisia (SAC) a Inštitút pre stredoeurópsku politiku (CEPI)

A Czech analyst Josef Šlerka proved this fact by conducting a survey⁶: the most likes for disinformation websites such as „Slobodný vysielateľ“

4 <http://www.ineko.sk/clanky/zneuzivanie-moci-zenie-ludi-k-extremizmu>.

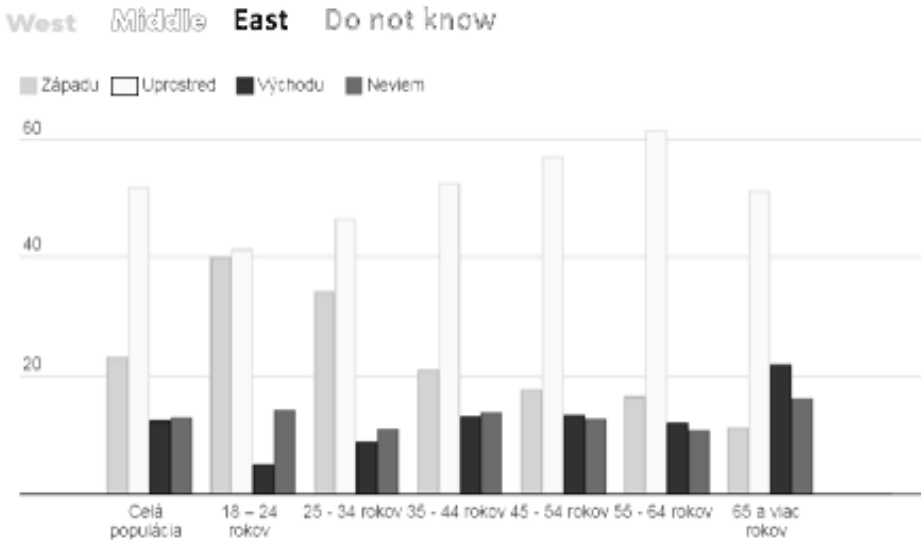
5 <https://dennikn.sk/439321/prieskum-proruske-naladenie-slovakov-mytus-no-klesa-aj-podpora-eu/> (Paywall).

6 Šlerka, Josef: Slovenské voľby a Facebook. Available online: <http://databoutique.cz/post/140337425268/slovensk%C3%A9-volby-a-facebook>,

(The Free Transmitter) and „Zem a Vek“ (The Land and the Time) come from voters of the anti-system parties such as Kotleba’s ĽSNS a Odvaha - veľká národná a proruská koalícia (in English the name of the second party would be The Courage – the big national and pro-russian coalition – however the Courage party scored only 0.13% and did not make the cut).

The Pro-Russian orientation of the Slovaks is a myth. There is only 12% of Slovak population who agree with the statement “The Slovak Republic should be part of the East” as opposed to 23% of Slovaks who agree with the opposite. The majority of the population is leaning towards the “in between East and West” position.

Slovakia should be a part of



Source: Slovenská atlantická komisia (SAC) a Inštitút pre stredoeurópsku politiku (CEPI)

We are wondering where would such a strong Pro-Russian sentiment come from - since the 9th century geographically, the Slovaks have been part of the Western civilization, they use Roman alphabet, there Gothic cathedrals and Renaissance squares all over the country. The only time the Slovaks were part of the Russian sphere of influence was

40 years after the Second World War. We think that this pro-Russian sentiment does not stem from weighing differences between Western and Eastern civilization but from trying to avoid conflict between those two. Since the Russian occupation in 1968 there were only dozens of Slovaks killed as a direct result of the Russian occupation which is a low number compared to the Baltic states and Poland with its grand narratives of the Katyn massacre or the Warsaw uprising. Apart from the communist propaganda which favoured the liberation by the Red Army and stressed out the pan slavic character or the Soviet bloc, there is the pan slavic sentiment of the national language revivalist of the early 19th century. These intellectuals were in dispute with then Austrian and Hungarian elite and idealized the Tsar Russia as some kind of alternative to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The revivalist fell in love with their fictive tale and their poems and other writings are being taught at Slovak schools to this day without providing much of a critical context. The texts of these intellectuals are considered sacred language treasures and are treated as something untouchable.

Situation at the level of state bodies

The minds of the Slovak politicians are often split on this issue and not just amongst various parties – the statements and actions of particular politicians are often contradictory. The former Prime Minister and the leader of the strongest party - SMER-SD Róbert Fico is a perfect example of this. After the undeclared war between Russia and Ukraine broke out, Fico echoed the pro-Kremlin propaganda stating it is a “dispute between Russia and the USA about their influence in Ukraine.”⁷ He openly criticized the sanctions against Russia, but refused to veto them in the Parliament. Fico’s government made it possible for Ukraine not to be dependent on the Russian natural gas supply.⁸ He aimed anti migrant rhetorics at his voters and his government sued

7 Fico: Konflikt na Ukrajine je bojom Ruska s Amerikou. SME, 4. 9. 2014. Available online: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/7366800/fico-konflikt-na-ukrajine-je-bojom-ruska-s-amerikou.html>.

8 Vďaka Slovensku Ukrajina nepotrebuje ruský plyn. Pravda, 29. 8. 2017. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/440101-vdaka-slovensku-ukrajina-nepotrebuje-rusky-plyn/>.

the EU for the migrant quotas.⁹ However, the Slovak Republic was the only V4 country to avoid the judicial hearing thus formally accepting the quotas.¹⁰ After the murder of an investigative journalist Jan Kuciak¹¹ in 2018 there were mass protest all over the country and Fico resigned as Prime Minister while mimicking rhetorics of Viktor Orban, his Hungarian counterpart. During the crisis Fico claimed that it is an attempt to stage a coup organized by a financial tycoon George Soros.¹²

The most stable pro-European sentiments are consistently held by the Slovak president Andrej Kiska. As the only institutional representative he publicly stated that the Slovak Republic is facing a hybrid war. According to Kiska the official security forces “are doing very little, if nothing” against the threat of the hybrid war and targeted propaganda. About the Slovak Republic he said that it is “a target that is not fighting back.”¹³

From a certain perspective the Slovak Republic may seem like an island of stability in the Central Europe: in October 2017 the President, the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the Parliament signed a joint declaration¹⁴, where they stated that “the strategic interest of the Slovak Republic lies in continuing its pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation” and they bound themselves to “pay attention to clear and responsible communication of the pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation of the Slovak Republic when it comes to joint decision in the realm of the EU and NATO, towards other countries and towards its own citizens.”

Three weeks after signing this declaration the Slovak President

9 Ficova vláda dnes podala žalobu na EÚ pre utečenecké kvóty. Denník N, 2. 12. 2015. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/310341/ficova-vlada-dnes-podala-zalobu-eu-utecenecke-kvoty/>.

10 Česko, Maďarsko a Poľsko pôjdu pre kvóty pred súd. Slovensko sa mu vyhne. SME, 7. 12. 2017. Available online: <https://svet.sme.sk/c/20713228/cesko-madar-sko-a-polsko-pojdu-pre-kvoty-pred-sud-slovensko-sa-mu-vyhne.html>.

11 Murder of Ján Kuciak. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_J%C3%A1n_Kuciak.

12 Fico naznačil, že za Kiskovým prejavom môže byť Soros. Hnonline.sk, 5. 3. 2018. Available online: <https://tv.hnonline.sk/politika/1705433-fico-naznacil-ze-za-kiskovym-prejavom-moze-byt-soros-je-to-nebezpecna-cesta-odkazuje-most>.

13 Andrej Kiska: Sme terčom, ktorý sa nebráni. Antipropaganda.sk, 16. 3. 2017. Available online: <http://antipropaganda.sk/andrej-kiska-sme-tercom-ktory-sa-nebrani/>.

14 <https://www.prezident.sk/article/vyhlasenie-prezidenta-predsedu-narodnej-rady-a-predsedu-vlady-k-eu-a-nato/>.

talked about the annexation of Crimea at the European Parliament and the threat of Russian-led propaganda. At the same time the Slovak Parliamentary Speaker Andrej Danko (SNS – Slovak National Party) visited the Russian Parliament upon request of VJaceslav Volodin and talked fervently about “developing common Slavic world.”¹⁵ His servile speech did not mention anything about what was going on at Ukraine at that time, nor did he dare criticise Kremlin policy. The speech was met with thunderous applause. Subsequently both politicians were criticized by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajcak for not consulting his office prior to their speeches.¹⁶

The ambivalence and ambiguity of the Slovak political scene also manifests itself at the Ministry of Defense where there is a conflict building up between people from the openly pro-Russian SNS and pro-European Minister of State Robert Ondrejcsak (MOST-HÍD).

Given these circumstances it is hard not to be under the impression that some Slovak government member’s pro-Russian inclination is buffed only by their strong and heartz relationship to the EU funding. It may seem like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with its openly pro-European and pro-NATO image is part of a different government altogether. However, during the latest Skripal case, the Ministry did not expel any Russian diplomat/spy.

So far the only document approved by the Government of Slovak Republic which is concerned with the problem of a hybrid war is the “White Book”¹⁷ prepared by the Ministry of Defense. Nonetheless, the armed forces would actually be the last institution to get involved in such war.

Within the realm of the Slovak Information Service (SIS) a body called National Security Analytical Centre was established (NBAC – in Slovak)¹⁸ which should be focused on high risk internet threats, radical and militant groups, spreading of hatred etc.

15 <http://mepoforum.sk/staty-regiony/europa/staty-eu-plus/vysehradska-4/slovensko/prejav-predsedu-nr-sr-a-danka-v-statnej-dume-rf/>.

16 Available online: [https://dennikn.sk/943043/kiska-v-europarlamente-kritizoval-rusku-propagandu-danko-hovoril-v-ruskej-dume-o-budovani-slovanskeho-sveta/\(paywall\)](https://dennikn.sk/943043/kiska-v-europarlamente-kritizoval-rusku-propagandu-danko-hovoril-v-ruskej-dume-o-budovani-slovanskeho-sveta/(paywall)).

17 The White Book (on the defense of Slovakia). Available on: <http://www.mod.gov.sk/bielakniha/>.

18 <http://www.sis.gov.sk/o-nas/nbac.html>.

In 2013, before the publication of a now famous article of general Gerasimov on hybrid war, a body called a Situation Centre of the Slovak Republic (SITCEN in Slovak) was founded as a part of the Security Council of the Slovak Government. This Centre is supposed to be the main contact point for national security threats as part of the hybrid war.

The Ministry of Defense created their own internal mechanism for evaluating security threats which is an information source for both NBAC and SITCEN.

All of these institution cannot – naturally – provide any information for the public.

The Slovak Republic has not yet created a similar body – as there is in The Czech Republic – called the Centre for Revealing Terrorism and Hybrid Threats.¹⁹ There is no unified communication strategy of the Slovak Republic and raising awareness about hybrid threats is not part of the common school curriculum on any level near satisfactory. The government is preparing its own Conception for fighting hybrid threats, but according to its critics this paper does not include any structural, institutional and most of all concrete precautions.²⁰

Examples of Good Practise in raising information resilience in Slovakia

A blogger, Jan Bencik, published more than 150 posts which helped to uncover Slovak extremists, neonazis, hoax spreaders, but also illegal mercenaries who fight with pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine thanks to meticulous monitoring of social media and the Internet. Due to information presented by Bencik a Slovak member of the OBSE mission had to step down when it was proven that he publically supported the illegal mercenaries and led extremist rhetorics.²¹ For his work, Bencik had an audition with the Slovak president, received an Biela Vrana

19 <http://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/centrum-proti-terorismu-a-hybridnim-hrozbam.aspx>.

20 Andrej Školkaý: Vyprázdnená Koncepcia boja proti hybridným hrozbám. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/blog/1064684/vyprazdnena-koncepcia-boja-proti-hybridnym-hrozbam/>.

21 Slovák s extrémistickými postojmi končí ako pozorovateľ OBSE. Aktuality, 10. 2. 2017, Available online: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/414484/slovak-s-extremistickymi-nazormi-konci-ako-pozorovatel-obse/>.

(White Crow) 2016 award, he won a Slovak Journalist Prize and the Prize for a European citizen of 2017.²² This „Simon Wiesenthal of the Slovak internet“ was threatened with death and is using police protection.

Monitoring of a very dangerous group of extremist – the paramilitary troops – was conducted by an activist Radovan Branik and a sociologist Grigorij Mesežnikov who published a 59 page analysis of this particular scene and how it is influenced by Russia. It’s available in English too.²³

A CEO of an advertising company called NetSucces Jan Urbancik as an author of a system called KONŠPIRÁTORI.SK²⁴ which cuts off websites with suspicious and froud content from receiving money for advertising. The backbone of the system is a weekly updated blacklist, which is created and managed by a team of 14 experts on the issue while all the benchmarks have been made public. The system provides the clients of the advertising agencies with protection of their brands being connected to controversial content. Currently there are about 107 Slovak and Czech websites. In the first year of its existence the system secured about 17,000 campaigns. The system is being used by over 30 Slovak and Czech advertising agencies, since there is hardly any barrier between the two languages and the media spheres often overlap.

Based on this database a web hosting company called Websupport developed a freely available extension for Google Chrome called „Bullshit detector“, which automatically warns a user when a suspicious website is visited.²⁵ The extension is being used by about 1,100 people.

WebSupport is also giving up all their money which it received from the owners of the websites which have been identified as fraud by KONŠPIRÁTORI.SK and sends them to Slovak Debate Association. Similarly, one of the largest bookstores in Slovakia Martinus presents

22 https://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%A1n_Ben%C4%8D%C3%ADk.

23 Hatred, violence and comprehensive military training – The violent radicalisation and Kremlin connections of Slovak paramilitary, extremist and neo-Nazi groups. http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_SK_20170428.pdf.

24 <https://www.konspiratori.sk/en/>.

25 <https://www.websupport.sk/bullshit-detector>.

books with suspicious content with a warning to use critical thinking when reading them. The proceeds from sales of such books are wired to NGOs who are dedicated to support education.²⁶

An anonymous programmer developed a unique monitoring system BLBEC.ONLINE which has been in place for about a year. On the social network Facebook it currently monitors 797 pages of “nazis, communists, conspiracy theorists, putin-lovers, cheaters, trickster and other scum.”²⁷ There are automatically generated rankings and statistics which enable anyone to see which content in the slovak and czech information sphere is going viral the most. The system provides its users with ability to fulltext search statuses and comment including the deleted ones. In a separate tab you can see a ranking of the most shared content, so in this way the users of the disinformation websites provide data for updating the KONŠPIRÁTORI.SK database.

Newspaper called Denník N has been publishing educational brochures and has been distributing them for free into Slovak schools. The first brochure was on Facebook and conspiracy theories,²⁸ the second was on critical thinking²⁹ and the third one described how media works in general.³⁰ The newspaper gets money for doing so via crowdfunding and teachers and students subscribe voluntarily. A journalist Vladimir Snidl of Dennik N wrote a book called The Truth and the Lies on Facebook.³¹

Several other traditional Slovak media, e.g. the paper SME, dedicated a section of their paper to warn its readership of current fake-news and hoaxes.³² A freelancer Juraj Mesík published a series of articles³³ debunking some popular pro-Kremlin narratives while describing the current state of affairs in Russia. The book of all those articles is being printed.

Due to the pressure of the parliamentary opposition, the media and the public it has been achieved that the National Slovak Press

26 <https://blog.martinus.sk/2016/05/kontroverzne-knihy-sloboda-a-my>

27 <https://blbec.online/>.

28 <https://a-static.projektn.sk/2017/04/dennikN-prirucka-konspiracie.pdf>.

29 <https://a-static.projektn.sk/2017/04/dennikN-prirucka-konspiracie.pdf>.

30 <https://dennikn.sk/1083233/dennik-n-vydava-velky-magazin-o-fungovani-medii-a-praci-novinarov/?ref=mpmbok>.

31 <https://obchod.dennikn.sk/show/54/facebook-pravda-a-loz>.

32 <https://hoax.sme.sk/>.

33 <https://autor.aktuality.sk/juraj-mesik/>.

Agency (TARS) had to cancel its contract with the controversial Russian agency Sputnik.³⁴ 21 of 150 members of the Slovak Parliament signed the petition “Stop fascism” in order to boycott the extremist members of parliament from the Kotleba’s party – ĽSNS.³⁵

The State School Inspection conducts regular quality surveys of extremism in the school’s environment³⁶ and in some cases was able to act effectively (revealing and then preventing a paramilitary group called Slovenski branci from recruiting at several schools, revealing a teacher who openly supported spread of racial hatred etc.)

There are several independent Facebook pages focused on revealing fake news and debunking hoaxes such as Prečo ľudom hrabe?³⁷ (Why do people go nuts?) (39, 000 readers) and Dezinformácie – hoaxy – propaganda³⁸ (11,000 readers) which are run by volunteers. A project called DEMAGOG.SK³⁹ is devoted to systematic fact checking of political debates. A community called #SOMTU⁴⁰ (I am Here) aims to promote decent, active and coordinated debating by entering the most heated discussions on the internet thus trying to eliminate the influence of trolls. The group has about 5850 members.

GLOBSEC is a think tank which publishes analysis and organizes regular security meeting on high international level, where apart from information exchange there are good networking opportunities for politicians, experts, journalists and activists.⁴¹

A project called „Zabudnuté Slovensko“ (Forgotten Slovakia) led by of a former war journalist Andrej Ban travels the regions where the extremist parties repeatedly score high with talks, music performances and documentary screenings.⁴²

34 TASR odstupuje od zmluvy s ruskou informačnou agentúrou Sputnik. <http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/nrsr-vybor-chce-od-sefa-tasr-pocut/251845-clanok.html>.

35 Totálnu izoláciu Kotlebu chce 21 poslancov, zvyšok má výhrady. *Aktuality*, 26. 4. 2016. <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/333092/totalnu-izolaciu-kotlebu-chce-21-poslancov-zvysok-ma-vyhrady/>.

36 http://www.ssiba.sk/admin/fckeditor/editor/userfiles/file/Dokumenty/SPRA-VY/2016/SS_LP_ZS_15_16.pdf.

37 <https://www.facebook.com/PrecoLudomHrabe/>.

38 <https://www.facebook.com/Dezinform%C3%A1cie-Hoaxy-Propaganda-1144754945569773/>.

39 <http://www.demagog.sk/>.

40 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/somtu/>.

41 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Globsec>.

42 <http://www.zabudnuteslovensko.sk/sk/>.

Characteristics of recent pro-Russian propaganda in Poland

Jerzy Targalski

Pro-Russian (not only pro-Kremlin) propaganda in Poland after the Ukrainian Maidan has moved into the phase of an infowar against Polish society and the Polish state. Its goal is to destabilize public opinion and to plunge the political scene into chaos by provoking hostility toward the West, especially the USA, NATO and the European Union (Germany) as well as toward Ukraine and, on a smaller scale, Lithuania, and by cultivating positive attitudes toward Russia as Poland's future ally in Europe. Lukashenko's Belarus is promoted as a model of a regional ally for Poland, while China is perceived as Russia's avatar. When it is not convenient to mention Russia directly, China appears as Poland's best ally assuring the country of its neutral position between a peaceful Russia and an aggressive United States.

In Poland we now have four main topics of pro-Russian propaganda:

1. The alleged Jewish enslavement of Poland
2. The alleged US's plot to involve Poland in a war against a peaceful Russia
3. The alleged Ukrainian threat to the Poles
4. The alleged EU's attack on Catholic Poland.

This propaganda is partially based in reality and uses all the available disinformation measures to engender a sense of insecurity, threat, fear, hate, political treason and a search for the security that only Russia can offer. This kind of propaganda is focused on the patriotic, anti-communist, Catholic, national democrat and nationalist voters and on national communist leftovers – a combination of old communist, anti-Semitic, nationalist loyalty to the Soviet Union and hatred

of the West.¹ The majority of post-communists are loyal to Russia and do accept Russian propaganda's thesis of good relations: We should not irritate or provoke Russia.

The attack on Poland by American Jewish organizations and the campaign of a part of the Israeli political establishment in order to force Poland to recognize its alleged complicity in the Holocaust in order to justify the demand to pay USD 65 billion² in compensation for property for which no heirs have been identified is a fact³, but the Russian propaganda uses these events to instigate anti-Semitic emotions and threatens the Jewish colonization of Poland and destruction of the Polish state in order to break off the Polish-American alliance and to build up a pro-Russian, nationalist, anti-Western political party or orientation.

The left-wing voters are loyal to the German political narrative and the Brussels political narrative. However, the Brussels left-wing political elite attempts to impose gender ideology on us. Russian propaganda uses this attack on our traditional culture and civilization to persuade the Catholics that only Putin's Russia is the defender of conservative values.

It is true that for today's Ukraine, the nationalistic organizations OUN/Bandera and UPA, which perpetrated genocide in Volyn during WWII, are now playing the mythical role of heroes in the independence struggle. However, Russian propaganda targeting the Eastern Poles presents Ukrainians as the main threat to Poland - which can allegedly be saved from future genocide only thanks to an alliance with Russia.

Until now, Lithuania and its policy towards its ethnic Polish minority has been a topic of Russian propaganda on a limited scale. However the visit by Polish president Andrzej Duda to Vilnius in March and the improvement of relations between the two states will

1 The so-called "moczarowcy", e.g., the partisans of the old chief of communist security during the anti-Semitic purge of 1968-1970, Mieczysław Moczar. Now the most well-known representative of the neo-moczarowcy is the actor Wojciech Olszański (ps. Aleksander Jabłonowski) : "Amerykanie chcą walczyć z Rosją w Polsce"; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVJr7yaiVCw> [access: 18.03.2018].

2 Now already USD 300 billion and growing daily.

3 Many Israelis have been taught to believe that the Holocaust was a joint German-Polish enterprise. These sentiments are deeply entrenched in the so called Holocaust religion.

give Russian propaganda a reason to increase its attack by describing the Lithuanian threat to the ethnic Polish minority, who are predominantly pro-Russian.

The European Union is serving as an instrument of German influence, and Poland no more wants to be Berlin's vassal than it wants to become an assembly plant for German industry. Russian propaganda uses Polish emancipation attempts inside the European Union in order to present a united Europe as a threat to Poland.

Russia will save Poland from Jewish occupation

Russian propaganda presents the current Polish Government as "Jewish" and Poland as a "Jewish Land". The governing party Law and Justice is said to have "sold us to the Jews", Putin is the only leader not executing Jewish orders, etc.⁴ "Jew Jarosław Kaczyński prepares the foreigners to kill the Poles" if they resist the Jewish colonization.⁵

According to Stanisław Michalkiewicz, a very popular journalist on the right, "The Jewish occupation might be worse than the Soviet one."⁶ Thanks to the Law and Justice policy of capitulation to the USA and Jews, they will take over as compensation all the real estate in Poland and become a new nobility in our country.⁷ About 150 000 internauts have visited his video on YouTube.

Since Maidan, film director Grzegorz Braun has been campaigning against NATO and the USA as alleged instruments of Jewish power. He has defined Poland as a "Russo-German condominium under a Jewish Board of Trustees".⁸ The United States, acting on an

4 Neon24.pl is the main anti-Semitic website; see, e.g., Krystyna Trzcńska, "Żydy chcą zawłaszczyć całe terytorium SŁOWIAN – POLSKĘ", <http://trzcinska.neon24.pl/post/142897,zydy-chca-zawlaszczyc-cale-terytorium-slowian-polske> [accessed on 18.03.2018].

5 Zbigniew Kękuś, Po Pierwsze Polak odc. (PPP-9). Jak żyd Jarosław Kaczyński przygotowuje sobie obcokrajowców do mordowania Polaków; <https://gloria.tv/video/ZfKvUvm6xHpv2vDc7bwLDmxws> [access: 18.03.2018].

6 "Okupacja żydowska mogłaby być cięższa od sowieckiej" - S. Michalkiewicz: Mag. Polskie Sprawy 10.02.2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGJ93bfWSAo> [access: 18.03.2018].

7 Stanisław Michalkiewicz o konflikcie z Izraelem, roszczeniach, agenturze wpływu i zdradzie Polski? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uFYVZK4yYM> [access: 18.03.2018].

8 "Polska jako rekompensata dla Żydów. Grzegorz Braun analizuje sytuację

order of the Jews, attempts to push Poland into war against Russia to provoke nuclear war on Polish territory in order to annihilate the younger Polish generation and free up room to resettle Jews from Israel. From a NATO bunker in Poland, Jewish officers will control the action. Therefore Braun demands neutrality status for Poland and defines NATO bases in Poland as those of an “occupation army”.

According to a recent variation on these allegations, the Jews will provoke a Polish-Ukrainian war to kill 100 000 young Poles and the Americans will send the Polish Army to a US-Iranian war to annihilate them and make Poland ready for resettlement from Israel by Jews. “From Odessa to Szczecin in the big cities will be created the Jewish insular statehood.”⁹ The impact of this propaganda touches about 250 000 internauts.

Russian agents of influence and their “echo chambers”¹⁰ repeat after Lubianka¹¹: “Russia does not demand 65 billion dollars, Russia does not require implementation of EU directives, Russia does not impose on us emigrants from the American wars. Russia has nothing against banning Bandera’s followers.”¹²

The true objective of this “Jewish operation” is the Polish alliance with the United States.

międzynarodową”, 14 April 2015; <http://narodowikonserwatysci.pl/2015/04/14/polska-jako-rekompensata-dla-zydow-grzegorz-braun-analizuje-sytuacje-miedzynarodowa/> [accessed on 18.03.2018].

9 Grzegorz Braun, “O ostatecznym rozwiązaniu kwestii Polskiej”, roszczeniach żydowskich, PiS i KK!, 6.02.2018 Polska Akcja Narodowo-Konserwatywna „Ojczyzna”; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfXGJe5Mt30>; Grzegorz Braun: jesteśmy świadkami próby ostatecznego rozwiązania kwestii polskiej! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-P0pRPkHiHg> [access: 18.03.2018].

10 A term introduced by Vladimir Volkoff in his book “Le Montage” to define the journalists and intellectuals who repeat thoughtlessly the Soviet propaganda and desinformation theses.

11 The headquarters of the FSB.

12 Marcin Szymański, Polska na celowniku! Czego się obawiali Polacy – SIE ZDAŻYŁO! 12.02.2018 Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny; <https://dziennik-polityczny.com/2018/02/12/polska-celowniku-czego-sie-obawiali-polacy-sie-zdazylo/> [access: 18.03.2018].

USA and NATO bases

The national communists, far-right trolls and echo chambers like to describe the United States as “the exceptional Empire of evil”¹³ or a “criminal state”¹⁴. The most popular Russian thesis is this: The United States is carrying out a policy of aggression, instigating conflicts all over the world, and wants to involve Poland in its colonial policy. Russia is constantly being attacked and encircled by the United States and NATO. Therefore the establishment of the NATO bases, i.e., foreign military forces on Polish territory, means that Poland is under the occupation of the United States. Moreover the NATO bases have been installed in Poland not to defend it, because the Polish people are not threatened by anybody, but to prevent the Polish people’s revolt against the Government, which is a vassal of America, and against its involvement in the war against Russia. Sometimes: “at the behest of the Jews”.

Stanisław Michalkiewicz declares that “Poland is the American saboteur in Eastern Europe”¹⁵ because it gives the US access to its territory for the needs of the US global game against Russia. That means membership in NATO was not Poland’s sovereign decision necessary for its security. Michalkiewicz has recently suggested blackmailing the US if America supports the Jewish demands for compensation for property for which heirs have not been identified by threatening to change: “We will become friends with the Russian chekist Putin ... and Russian arms will move almost 1000 km to the West.”¹⁶ That would mean the destruction of NATO’s Eastern flank.

13 MacGregor, “Nie zniżajmy się do poziomu „Gazety” zwanej „Polską”, neon24.pl 7.03.2018; <http://macgregor.neon24.pl/post/142752,nie-znizajmy-sie-do-poziomu-gazety-zwanej-polska> [accessed on 18.03.2018].

14 Romuald Kałwa, Kilka dowodów na to, że USA są państwem zbrodniczym, neon24.pl 8.03.2018; <http://romualdkałwa.neon24.pl/post/142760,kilka-dowodow-na-to-ze-usa-sa-panstwem-zbrodniczym> [access: 18.03.2018].

15 Wojna o Trójmorze - wykład Stanisława Michalkiewicza w Bytowie, 30.07.2017; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py59kkspFn8> [access: 18.03.2018].

16 Michalkiewicz, Żebrowski, Szwaagrzyk i Rola: “Między młotem a swastyką”! Historyczna debata wRealu24! 27.02.2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-jtW0qASesI&feature=youtu.be&t=1h5> [access: 18.03.2018].

Ukraine as a threat

The nationalists and libertarians repeat after the Russian trolls: Russia does not jeopardize any country, especially Poland, because Russia has no territorial claims to Poland, as Ukraine has. Therefore, the mutual policy of the United States and Ukraine menaces Poland and the Polish people. America has recently paid for the Ukrainian Revolution against Russia to the detriment of Polish interests.

According to the Russian propaganda, Poland and Poles are to be threatened by Ukrainian aggression. Therefore, it lies in the Polish national interests to divide Ukraine into the Polish and Russian spheres of influences. For Poland, an autonomous Ukraine under Russian control is better than Ukraine independent from Russia under United States and German control. Thus, American help for the Ukrainian army is very harmful for the Poles¹⁷.

Pro-Russian propaganda alleges that the Ukrainians employed in Poland (as Gastarbeiter) are arming themselves to commit genocide against the Poles. Fake news about arms smuggled by Ukrainians into Poland is constantly repeated, even by media supporting the Government. Michalkiewicz has frequently spoken publicly about arms smuggling and has suggested a Ukrainian revolt against the Poles like happened during WWII.¹⁸ Recently this thesis has been repeated by the Russian echo chamber “Changes on Earth” website.¹⁹

As a consequence, Russian trolls, echo chambers and agents have succeeded in creating an anti-Ukrainian atmosphere and political lobby which influences the governing elite.

17 Andrzej Zapłaowski is the main scholar in Poland who spreads such theses and is very active in the pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian lobby.

18 Michalkiewicz u Gadowskiego: Stłumienie “wołyńki” sekretnym celem wojsk obrony terytorialnej? Radio Wnet.fm 1.11.2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdFQFl7V2FE> [access: 18.03.2018].

19 John Moll, Ukraińcy przemycają broń do Polski. Czy banderowcy chcą u nas wywołać wojnę domową? Zmiany na Ziemi 23.02.2018; <http://zmiany.naziemi.pl/wiadomosc/ukraincy-przemycaja-bron-do-polski-czy-banderowcy-chca-u-nas-wy-wolac-wojne-domowa> [access: 18.03.2018].

Russia will save Poland for Christianity

Some conservative Catholics are very vulnerable to the so-called conservative message of Putin's Russia,²⁰ especially from the Orthodox chekists.

That message is that the United States is using Islam to destroy Europe, while only Russia gives us hope for the rebirth of Christianity, and especially the rebirth of Catholicism in Europe. Professor Anna Rażny at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow is representative of these circles. As early as 2014 she wrote: "Only the Great Christian Russia can stop Satan's march from the West to the Slavic lands"²¹ Ever since Rażny has preached Putin's Christian mission against the "rotting West" (загнивающий Запад).

The instruments of reflexive control

In Poland there are about 50 to 70 websites²² spreading Russian propaganda, but YouTube is now more effective as an instrument of the infowar. In Poland there are internet TV stations, so-called independent and national ones,²³ and many YouTubers²⁴, who channel Russian propaganda for ideological reasons. Lack of confidence in the corrupt political elite causes conspiracy theories to become popular, especially those hitting at the USA, "the West", and Israel. The internauts prefer conspiratorial, unbelievable explanations and very willingly look for them. Therefore, many YouTubers, as Ator²⁵, in their search for money

20 Institut of Social and Religious Education named after rev. Piotr Skarga and its website Polonia Christiana <http://www.pch24.pl/wydawca,11001,i.html#ixzz59k-TrSN2g>.

21 Anna Rażny, List otwarty do Narodu Rosyjskiego i Władz Federacji Rosyjskiej, March 2014.

22 The most popular: neon24.pl, prawy.pl, wprawo.pl, konserwatyzm.pl, zmi-anynaziemi.pl, wolnemedi.net.

23 For ex. Sumienie Narodu (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIW-WDwYY7QrYGRuG26ptCQg>), E-misja Tv (<https://www.youtube.com/user/eMisjaTv>), Telewizja wrealu24.pl (<https://wrealu24.pl/telewizja-wrealu24-pl/>), Telewizja Narodowa (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYMEBKME_fHTMTulw5YLyvg <https://www.youtube.com/user/EugeniuszSendecki71>) and others.

24 For ex. Jack Caleib focused on anti-Ucrainian propaganda; <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMw9rT8vY81Pr34Y21hqJSA>.

25 Wideoprezentacje; https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCViVL2aOkLWKcF-Vi0_p6u6g.

from Google advertisements, are spreading the theses of the Russian infowar.

Russian propaganda is also consumed by mentally ill or emotionally disturbed persons.

The Russian propaganda perpetrators

Contrary to the popular opinion that thousands of Russian trolls are working in the Polish Internet, I am persuaded that there is a very limited group recruited inside Poland, mainly “useful idiots” from the political right: Nationalists and libertarians do this job. Russia is monitoring Polish society and chooses effective theses very appropriately. Afterwards they are taken up and massively spread by pro-Russian internauts of nationalist and libertarian orientation or by former communist security officers.

The percentage of bots is lower in Poland than in the Baltic States because there is no need for them. The effectiveness of private persons (“useful idiots”) in spreading the news is much higher and cheaper.

Independent Political Daily (NDP)²⁶ is an example of a website published on the Internet by the Russian services in a corrupted version of the Polish language using articles from pro-Russian websites that seem to compile information from official sources but falsify the content instead. Such materials are subsequently promoted on pro-Russian websites and on local Internet forums.

Russian trolls are recruited in Poland generally through the Russian network in the academic environment with the help of pro-Russian scholars. Russian trolls are active as commentators. They immediately appear when some words such as “Ukraine”, “Russia”, “Jews”, or “NATO” are detected in articles on the Internet. Their role is to create an artificially pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, anti-US atmosphere in order to influence politicians.

Domestic commentators play the role of “echo chambers” or amplifiers. They are very active on the Internet for ideological, emotional, or business reasons, or because they are mentally unwell.

²⁶ Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny; <http://dziennik-polityczny.com/>

National democrat or nationalist journalists, intellectuals and scientists in Poland are playing the pro-Russian card not only on ideological grounds, but also because it gives them popularity.

The libertarian, national democrat or nationalist politicians, especially of the younger generation, are consciously playing the anti-Ukrainian and anti-USA card in Poland. Their declaration is “We have our own opinions, and we have to play between Russia/China and the USA in order to preserve the independence of Poland.”

Defense

In Poland, the politicians generally do not see any utility to resisting Russian propaganda because to do so will not provide them with any votes or popularity and may produce effects opposite to what might have been expected. The Russian infowar is directed toward Polish families with Eastern roots, the so-called “East Poles”, especially those from Ukraine. Russian propaganda is useful for gaining votes by playing the anti-Ukrainian card. The politicians are afraid that taking the opposite position may lose them votes and popularity.

So far only some private persons and journalists in Poland are attempting to resist Russian propaganda.²⁷ There are two websites: Russian 5th Column in Poland²⁸, published on Facebook by Marcin Rey and focused on individual persons and their pro-Russian activity, whilst Disinfo_Digest,²⁹ published on Twitter by Kamil Basaj concentrates on Russian fake news³⁰. This is absolutely insufficient and is unable to stop the growing impact of the Russian infowar on the active parts of Polish society.

27 For ex. on twitter: lostson, Ksawery MetaKowalski and others.

28 Rosyjska V kolumna w Polsce; <https://www.facebook.com/RosyjskaVKolumnawPolsce/>.

29 Disinfo_Digest; https://twitter.com/Disinfo_Digest.

30 Kamil Basaj is responsible in the Cybersecurity Foundation for monitoring of the Polish information environment.

Pro-Kremlin propaganda in Hungary

Beatrix Tölgyesi

Introduction

For quite a few years now, Hungary is known as one of the most pro-Russian members of the EU or the Trojan horse of Russia.

It is demonstrated by, among other things, the frequent visits of Vladimir Putin to Hungary (only in 2017, he has been in Hungary two times, in February and August) and the construction of a nuclear power plant in Hungary by Rosatom. According to Slovak foreign policy think-tank GlobSec, Hungary is the most vulnerable to Russian influence among the Visegrád Four¹. At the same time, according to a survey from last year, the Hungarian public – including voters of the ruling Fidesz party – prefers closer ties with the EU, not with Russia and regards the EU as an ally instead of Russia.²

The leaning of the Hungarian government and especially Viktor Orbán towards the leadership style of the Russian president and the ideology promoted by the Kremlin is well known. Hungary is also probably the only country in the region that has not taken any steps to counter Russian propaganda or raise awareness about this issue. For example, looking at the Visegrád group, Poland is participating in the work of the NATO Stratcom CoE in Riga (that is specializing on studying disinformation) and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki; in the Czech Republic, the Ministry of Interior set up the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats; in Slovakia, a team of 12 people was created to counter disinformation and hybrid threats. Poland has even suspended the licence of a radio station that was broadcasting news from Sputnik News Agency. At the same time, Hungary has not joined any of these organizations and there is no governmental institution that would be responsible for fight-

1 Daniel Milo and Katarína Klingová, 'Vulnerability Index. Subversive Russian Influence in Central Europe' (Globsec, 11 April 2017), <https://www.globsec.org/news/vulnerable-visegrad-four-societies/>.

2 Zsolt Kerner, 'Oroszországtól tartanak legjobban a magyarok', 24.hu, 29 August 2017, <https://24.hu/belfold/2017/08/29/oroszorszagtol-tartanak-legjobban-a-magyarok/>.

ing disinformation. (Journalists from one of the biggest online news portals have sent enquires regarding this issue to seven governmental institutions and agencies including Ministry of Interior, the secret services and National Media Authority, and they either did not respond or directed them to other authorities.³)

Having this in mind, it is interesting that the Russian propaganda outlet Sputniknews, although it has 31 editions in different languages, does not have a Hungarian version. About a year ago there were rumours in Hungary that the RT (Russia Today) television channel would launch broadcasting also in Hungarian, but since then, nothing happened. The reason why it is not worth for Russia to spend money on spreading propaganda and disinformation in Hungary is that Hungarian mainstream media does the job themselves. Russian narratives (e. g. about the Malaysia Airlines MH17 or Maidan protesters labelled “terrorists”⁴) have infiltrated into the news of state funded Hungarian television since the crisis in Ukraine, they could be observed on online news portals and in newspapers linked to the government (Origó, Magyar Idők). Having in mind the still mainly pro-Western orientation of the population, it is safe to assume that the aim of the government is to bring them closer to the Kremlin’s worldview with the help of government-spread Russian propaganda⁵. If we look at Hungary and other countries of the region, the main difference is that for Russia, Hungary is not so much a target but rather an ally.

Moreover, Hungary is perhaps not only a consumer of Russian disinformation and propaganda, but also an exporter: there are some hints that Russian media have used narratives produced in Hungary, for example, about far-right extremism and discrimination against the Hungarian minority in Ukraine or regarding the attempt of George Soros to promote migration into the EU.

3 Zsolt Hanula, ‘Gyűlöletből és rettegésből építik az alternatív univerzumot’, Index.Hu, 25 January 2017, https://index.hu/tech/2017/01/25/gyuloletbol_es_rettegesbol_epitik_az_alternativ_univerzumot/.

4 Katri Pynnöniemi and András Rácz, ‘Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine’ (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 10 May 2016), http://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/588/fog_of_falsehood/.

5 Lóránt Győri and Péter Krekó, ‘Russian Disinformation and Extremism in Hungary’, The Warsaw Institute Review (blog), 16 October 2017, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-disinformation-extremism-hungary/>.

The evolution of Russian propaganda in Hungary – the beginning

It is difficult to tell when did exactly Russian propaganda activity start in Hungary, but there have been articles⁶ raising awareness about the issue already back in 2014, at the time of the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine. In the beginning, it was mainly spread on fringe sites and Facebook groups related to extremist organizations or clickbaity fake news portals.

An analysis⁷ by Hungarian think-tank Political Capital Institute in 2014 stated that the Russian propaganda on Hungarian Facebook is part of an international internet campaign. The main characteristics of this campaign were: 1) breaking the “Western news monopoly” or “communication” blockade regarding Eastern Ukraine 2) strengthening and escalating tensions in Eastern Europe including Ukraine (separatists are victims of the “Kiev junta”) 3) using social networks for disinformation purposes including Facebook, blogs, mainstream and far-right media, already existing conspiracy theory sites. According to the study, the central node of the disinformation network in Hungary, is the Facebook page⁸ *Kiállunk Oroszország mellett* (We stand for Russia) – Support Vladimir Putin from Hungary. This page is connected to a number of sites (Hungarian and foreign, mainly Russian), most of which spread disinformation. Its main news sources are Russian media and some far-right Hungarian sites. It has published recruitment videos for joining the separatists in Donbass and openly promotes separatism, including annexing Ukrainian and Romanian territories inhabited by Hungarians to Hungary⁹. Creating conflicts between Eastern European nations based on historical conflicts and fear of revisionism is a well-established tool of Kremlin propaganda but this is a two-way

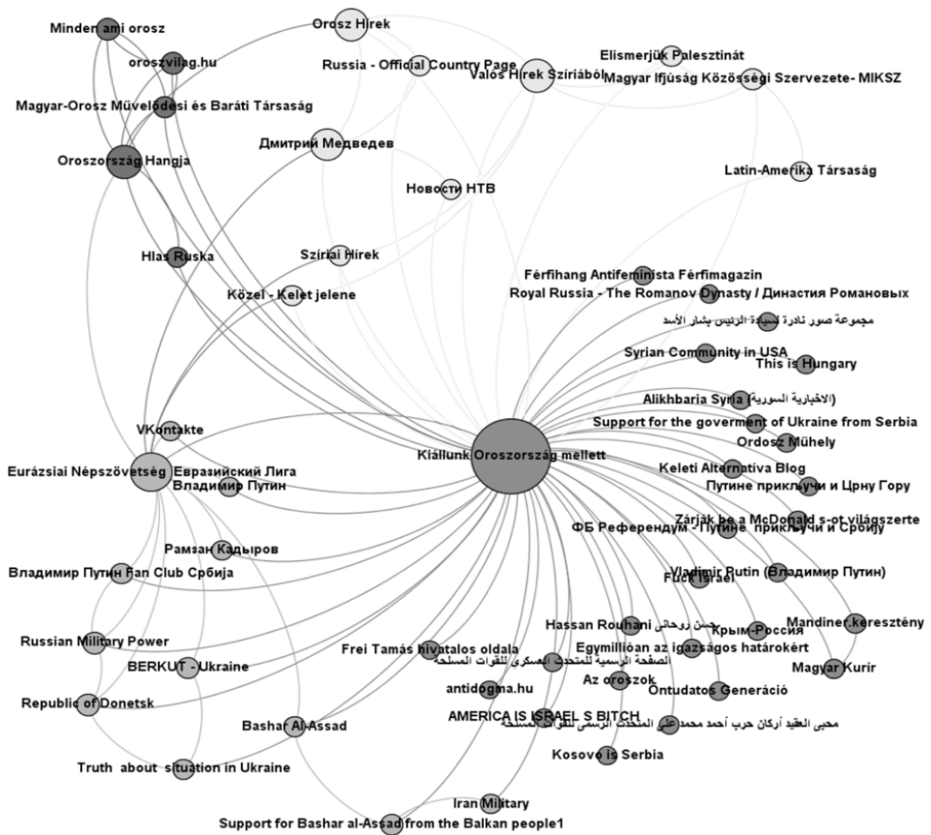
6 László Tamás Papp and Babett Oroszi, ‘Nemzeti radikális hírportálok: Oroszország magyar hangjai’, *Átlátszó*.Hu, 26 August 2014, <https://atlatso.hu/2014/08/26/nemzeti-radikalis-hirportalok-oroszorszag-magyar-hangjai/>; Attila Ara-Kovács, ‘Magyar híroldalak az orosz érdekek szolgálatában’, *Magyar Narancs*, 24 March 2015, <http://magyarnarancs.hu/publicisztika/magyar-hiroldalak-az-orosz-erdekerek-szolgálatában-94264>; J. F., ‘Orosz érdekeket képvisel a magyar szélső-jobb?’, *Transindex*.Ro, 13 April 2015, <http://vilag.transindex.ro/?cikk=25084>.

7 Political Capital, ‘Az orosz kommunikációs hadviselés Ukrajnán túl’, *Cafeblog*, 6 June 2014, <http://politicalradical.cafeblog.hu/>.

8 Currently it has about only 1000 followers.

9 Political Capital.

tool, as Hungary is depicted on Russian news portal Regnum as a revisionist force in order to instill fear and distrust in its neighbours, especially Ukraine.¹⁰



Network of pro-Russian websites, 2014. Source: Political Capital

One article¹¹ from 2014 registered the change in the relation of the Hungarian far-right to Russia: because of historical reasons (two Hungarian uprisings were suppressed by Russia and the Soviet Union respectively), being friendly with Russia was unthinkable in these circles; however, roughly at the same time when the Orbán-government

10 Beatrix Tölgyesi, 'Magyarország-kép az orosz és ukrán médiában, 2016-Ban', KKI-Elemzések, no. E-2017/1. (5 January 2017): 6–9.

11 Papp and Oroszi, 'Nemzeti radikális hírportálok: Oroszország magyar hangjai'.

turned to Russia, they also completely changed their mind. Several internet sites providing far-right content whose affiliation and ownership is not transparent began spreading Russian propaganda. It mirrors in the content – articles related to the conflict in Ukraine were overrepresented in the news and Ukraine is blamed for everything – but the main problem is in the one-sidedness of the interpretation and manipulative tendencies, aggressive tone that is directed to influence emotionally. The authors also noted that an internet-based far-right television channel and a radio station also both operate from Russian servers. Not only the owners of these sites are unknown (they use anonym hosting services), but also the names of the authors, the editors and the administrators are not disclosed.

An analysis¹² conducted by the Hungarian think-tank Political Capital Institute looked behind the propaganda aspect of the T-72 tank scandal. The scandal erupted in 2014 when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs cited a barely known Hungarian far-right portal hidfo.net/ru that claimed that T-72 tanks were transported from Hungary to Ukraine and accused the country with the violation of EU arms export rules. The photos were genuine, but the tanks were delivered not to Ukraine. The Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested against the accusations. The news portal hidfo.net/ru is linked to Russia and a far-right organisation (Magyar Nemzeti Arcvonal – Hungarian National Front¹³). It was also revealed later that this paramilitary organization had drills together with members of the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)¹⁴. The study drew a map of interconnected internet sites that were spreading Russia propaganda. The central site, hidfo.net/ru (it was transferred to a Russian server after the scandal) is conducting Russian propaganda, sympathizes with the far-left in many issues and is anti-Western¹⁵, maintains contacts both with the far-right

12 Putyin üzenőfüzete – A Hidfo.net és a kommunistabarát szélsőjobboldal', PCblog, 28 August 2014, <https://pcblog.atlatszo.hu/2014/08/28/putyin-uzeno-fuzete-a-hidfo-net-es-a-kommunistabar-at-szelsojobboldal/>.

13 The leader of Hungarian National Front István Györkös opened fire and killed a policeman when police wanted to enter his house in 2016.

14 András Dezső and Szabolcs Panyi, 'Orosz diplomaták gyakorlatoztak a rendőrgyilkos brigádjával', Index, 27 October 2016, http://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/27/oros-z_hirszerezok_gyakorlatoztak_a_rendorgyilkos_harcosaiva.

15 Máté Nyusztay, 'Lebukott a Kreml újabb hazai hídfőállása', Népszabadság (Nol.Hu), 28 August 2014, <http://nol.hu/belfold/lebukott-a-kreml-hazai-hidfoalla->

and far-left (communist organizations).¹⁶ The site still operates, as the Russian part of the case was not investigated by the Hungarian authorities. It is closely connected, among others, to a conspiracy theory Facebook site called Titkolt hírek képekben (Concealed news in pictures) and a national radical, far-left news portal, Bal-Rad, that is also supported by a Russian company¹⁷.

One article expressed suspicion that the site hídfő.net was publishing political analyses probably written by foreign diplomats or intelligence officers; it also mentioned a similar portal that had a far-left orientation (transform.hu), and also one (komlomedias.hu) that is mixing neo-Nazi ideas with local news materials. The common points these sites shared: 1) identification with the current politics of the Russian government 2) anti-Western, especially anti-US orientation 3) anti-globalism and potential sympathy with radical Islamism 4) mixing of real and false data in order to influence 5) radical views regarding society and global issues 6) refusal of democracy and liberalism. The article clearly stated that these sites serve foreign interests, although it is difficult to establish whether they are being paid by foreign states or are just useful idiots¹⁸. An interesting fact is that they forecasted the events in Ukraine (separatism, Russian intervention) already in September 2013, probably based on the scenarios made by Alexander Dugin.

The current situation – from the fringes to mainstream pro-government media

Beginning from about 2016–2017, we can see a process where government-linked media has replaced the marginal fake news sites as the

16 Russian propaganda aims both at far-right and far-left groups, because they are both anti-mainstream, anti-globalist so a good environment to spread anti-establishment, anti-Western views. For example: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Russia's%20Far%20Right%20and%20Far%20Left%20Friends_summary_formatted.pdf. Russian propaganda aims both at far-right and far-left groups, because they are both anti-mainstream, anti-globalist so a good environment to spread anti-establishment, anti-Western views. For example: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Russia's%20Far%20Right%20and%20Far%20Left%20Friends_summary_formatted.pdf

17 Nyusztay.

18 Ara-Kovács, 'Magyar híroldalak az orosz érdekek szolgálatában'.

most important outlet of pro-Kremlin propaganda.

An article of Attila Bátorfy and Zsuzsa Szánthó from 2016¹⁹ classified the fake news portals into three types: 1) sites related to Jobbik party or far-right figures; 2) anonymous anti-migrant, pro-Kremlin and pro-Putin sites; 3) classical fake news sites only seeking maximization of traffic and income from ads by presenting political topics.

According to the analysis of the Polish Centre for International Relations, in 2017 there were about 80-100 websites in Hungary spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda, however, based on the number of likes and shares on Facebook, most of them probably do not have a serious impact, only a handful of them are influential²⁰. But the important point is that pro-Kremlin disinformation often appears in mainstream, state-owned media, especially television and newspapers. There is relatively little tailored content, few narratives adjusted to Hungarian audience²¹, but one of these topics is migration which has been a very popular topic in Hungary continuously since 2015, so it was easy for Russia to exploit it.) Therefore these sites mainly spread general, not country-specific materials. The main strategic aims of these materials are the following: to erode trust in the EU; to foster anti-migration and anti-refugee sentiment; to generate and strengthen anti-NATO sentiment; to generate and strengthen anti-Americanism; to discredit Ukraine, by picturing it as a fascist-ruled, aggressor, corrupt, failed state; to discredit liberal values, human rights approach and NGOs dealing with the promotion of these values²². But the main characteristics of the Russian propaganda scene in Hungary is that it strongly overlaps with mainstream media connected with the government.

In 2017, almost all of the local print media was seized by V. Orbán's front man²³. This government media seems to open the gates for

19 Attila Bátorfy and Zsuzsa Szánthó, 'Bivalybasznádi álhírvállalkozók és Oroszország magyar hangjai', Vs.Hu, 7 April 2016, <https://vs.hu/kozelet/osszes/bivalybasznadi-alhivallalkozok-es-oroszorszag-magyar-hangjai-0407#!s0>.

20 Jonáš Syrovatka et al., 'Information Warfare on the Internet: Countering Pro-Kremlin Disinformation in the CEE Countries' (Warsaw: Centre for International Relations, 2017), http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/415_information-warfare-in-the-internet.pdf, 11.

21 Syrovatka et al., 12.

22 Syrovatka et al., 'Information Warfare on the Internet: Countering Pro-Kremlin Disinformation in the CEE Countries', 13.

23 'The Impact of Russia's State-Run Propaganda Apparatus on the Hungarian Online Media– 2010-2017' (Corruption Research Center Budapest, 19 March

Russian propaganda, it is disseminated consciously²⁴.

A study²⁵ based on qualitative and quantitative content analysis compared government-affiliated media and hídfő.ru which they considered a Russian state propaganda portal written in Hungarian (but which has a low impact on the population itself). The analysis showed that there are no statistical differences but, on the contrary, strong similarities between the content and the language of the pro-Kremlin propaganda site and the pro-government news portals.²⁶ These pro-government portals only gave limited space to events that were sensitive to the Russian government, but the independent news portals were significantly different in these points²⁷. The study also included a linguistic profiling which concluded that the articles published on hídfő.ru were probably translations from Russian or written by people whose first language is not Hungarian²⁸ and who have an academic background (university degree) and are familiar with legal terminology²⁹ but this part of the analysis was professionally not convincing in my opinion. Interestingly, one of the portals (mindenegyben.com) spreading pro-Russian propaganda was a very popular site usually hosting clickbait articles and questionable healthcare information.

2018), 7, <http://www.crcb.eu/?p=1350>.

24 'The Impact of Russia's State-Run Propaganda Apparatus on the Hungarian Online Media– 2010-2017', 14.

25 'The Impact of Russia's State-Run Propaganda Apparatus on the Hungarian Online Media– 2010-2017', 9.

26 It was especially apparent in the case of topics related to migrants.

27 'The Impact of Russia's State-Run Propaganda Apparatus on the Hungarian Online Media– 2010-2017', 9.

28 'The Impact of Russia's State-Run Propaganda Apparatus on the Hungarian Online Media– 2010-2017', 44, 48.

29 'The Impact of Russia's State-Run Propaganda Apparatus on the Hungarian Online Media– 2010-2017', 44–47.

Table A: The imaginary geographical distance of news portals analysed from Moscow (hidfo.ru), 2015.09-2017.12, N = 475.617

News portals	Distance from hidfo.ru ¹	Cities	Geographical distance from Moscow ² km	Geographical distance from Moscow ²
index.hu	100	Budapest	1480	100
mno.hu	92	Miskolc	1353	91
origo.hu	57	Volgograd	895	60
pestisracok.hu	54	Zhytomyr	830	56
magyaridok.hu	48	Chernobyl	680	46
mindenegyben.com	37	Penza	541	37
lokal.hu	33	Voronezh	464	31
888.hu	9	Dubna	112	8
hidfo.hu	0	Moscow	0	0

1: Distances are from the estimations of odds of implicit statements „if migrant, then TERROR” and „if migrant, then VIOLENCE”, when the distance between index.hu and hidfo.ru is equal 100.

2: if the geographical distance between Budapest and Moscow = 100;

These cities are in Hungary: Budapest, Miskolc

These cities are in Ukraine: Zhytomyr and Chernobyl

These cities are in Russia: Volgograd, Penza, Voronezh, Dubna, Moscow

Source of geographical distances: <http://bit.ly/2G0vrmR>

Source: CRCB

The latest developments – importing narratives made in Hungary?

It is not only mainstream media that uses stories from pro-Russian sites, but also the other way round, for example, hídfő.ru which is confirmed to have Kremlin connections regularly quotes pro-government sources³⁰.

There are also examples that Hungarian pro-government media goes even further than Kremlin-linked propaganda outlets. For example, in the Skripal-case, an article published on the pro-government news portal Magyar Idők³¹ claimed that the Porton Down laboratory stated that there is no proof whatsoever that the poison originated directly in Russia, while an RT article about the same issue only wrote

30 Anita Kőműves, ‘Target or Ally? Hungary Faces the Election Battle’, VSquare, 3 April 2018, <https://vsquare.org/russia-target-or-ally-hungary-faces-the-elections-battle/>.

31 István Lovas, ‘Brit katonai labor: semmilyen bizonyíték nincs az ideggáz orosz eredetére’, Magyar Idők, 4 April 2018, <https://magyaridok.hu/kulfold/brit-katonai-labor-semmilyen-bizonyitek-nincs-az-ideggaz-orosz-eredetere-2962951/>.

that Porton Down could not confirm the nerve agent was made in Russia and it also cited the head of the laboratory who said the government “used a number of other sources to piece together the conclusions”, and that it was “not their job to say where it was manufactured”³². So the article in Magyar Idők was even more simplifying and propagandistic than RT.

What is even more interesting, according to some experts, even the Kremlin is using narratives made in Hungary about the migration crisis³³, George Soros supporting mass migration into Europe³⁴, issues related to Zakarattia and the spread of the Ukrainian far-right.

As for pro-Kremlin trolling in Hungary, nothing can be known for sure, as there is no information about a “troll factory” like Olgino or Savushkina street in Russia, however, as Mark Zuckerberg said during the Congress hearing³⁵, fake profiles were removed from Facebook before the April elections in Hungary, so there might be some pro-Russian troll activity as well.

32 ‘Unidentified: Porton Down Scientists CANNOT Confirm Nerve Agent Used on Skripals Was Made in Russia’, RT, 3 April 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/423075-porton-down-skripal-proof/>.

33 Ömlenek az álhírek Moszkvából, és beszivárognak a magyar nyilvánosságba (444.hu, 2018), <https://444.hu/2018/03/21/omlenek-az-alhirek-moszkvabol-es-beszivarognak-a-magyar-nyilvánosságba>.

34 Kőműves, ‘Target or Ally? Hungary Faces the Election Battle’.

35 Péter Szabó, ‘Mark Zuckerberg: A magyar választások előtt is töröltünk hamis Facebook-fiókokat’, Index, 10 April 2018, https://index.hu/tech/2018/04/10/mark_zuckerberg_a_magyar_valasztasok_elott_is_toroltunk_hamis_facebook-fiokokat/?token=3aadffa488688bcd02849955e6ddc03b.

Characteristics of Pro-Kremlin Propaganda in Ukraine and the Ways Ukraine Deals with It

Mykhailo Samus

“Hybrid war” vs National Resilience

Some experts often use the term “hybrid war” when describing Russian aggression against Ukraine. Even if it is possible to accept such a definition for the media and general public to easily understand what is happening in occupied Donbas and Crimea, professional analysis and estimations about the situation should rather orient themselves toward the framework of the “new generation warfare” concept or, if you will, “Russian new generation warfare”.

The methods of war Russia uses in Moldova, Georgia, Syria, Ukraine and/or in the EU, USA and other countries are very similar, even though they look different. Russia always conducts a comprehensive attack on the nation, organization (if we are speaking about NATO or the EU) or region with a special focus on the critical vulnerability of the country, region, or organization. This critical vulnerability could be cultural, economical, historical, military, political or informational. It can concern energy, migration, or any other aspect of critical importance for the developmental stability of the concrete state, organization or region.

In recent research into Russian aggression, experts from the Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, Kyiv (CACDS) concluded that identification of the critical vulnerability of a nation, organization or region is a clue to repelling Russian “new generation warfare”. Actually, CACDS experts think the process of identifying critical vulnerability is the main aspect of building an effective national security system within the concept of national resilience (NR).

CACDS understands national resilience as the ability of a nation to adapt (to recover) and to progressively grow under constant negative influence (crises) without compromising its national interests.

In other words, the concept of NR is a reflection (or repulsion) of “hybrid war” (or “new generation warfare”):

- An aggressor using “new generation warfare” methods tries to find critical vulnerabilities inside the nation/victim of aggression in order to destroy it from the inside and the outside;
- The defending nation has to find its own critical vulnerabilities, to fix them, and not allow the aggressor to use them to destroy the nation/victim of aggression.

This is why every nation could become a victim of “new generation warfare”, because every nation has vulnerabilities. It does not matter if the nation is rich, militarily strong, and economically developed. If it has political, informational, migratory or other vulnerabilities it could potentially be a victim of the “new generation warfare” aggression. Just take a look at Russian interference in the US presidential election in 2016, or at Germany with its critical energy vulnerability because of dependence on Russian gas. They already are victims of Russian “new generation warfare” instruments.

The next step in the Russian strategy could be the further activation of the vulnerability (or we can call it the pathological system inside the nation) in the functional target/state system, in which the pathological system consumes the resources of the target-state for its development, wastes the vital energy of the nation, and makes it weak and incapable of defending itself. It works very much like a cancer does.

One basic element of the Russian “new generation warfare” concept is psychological and informational warfare. CACDS does not agree with the approach that defines Russian psychological and informational operations against Ukraine or other nations as just “Pro-Kremlin Propaganda”. Obviously, Russia does not use only “propaganda” with its classical definition as “information that is not objective and is used primarily to influence an audience and further an agenda, often by presenting facts selectively to encourage a particular synthesis or perception, or using loaded language to produce an emotional rather

than a rational response to the information that is presented.”¹

Current Kremlin tactics in psychological and informational warfare belong to the traditional synthetic concept of the Russian/Soviet secret services. The well-known expert on the post-Soviet space James Sherr, in his book *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion* from 2013,² (published even before the Russian aggression against Ukraine) made a great analysis of this. He distinguishes those traditional Russian secret services practices and tactics from the Tsarist and Soviet times which the Kremlin widely uses now:

- Exploitation of division (“divide and influence policies”);
- Exploitation of vulnerability (moral, financial and political);
- Penetration (of opponents and allies);
- Co-optation (“temporary and conditional alliances”, client states and societies);
- Creation of shell companies, “shadow structures” and fronts;
- Use of “agent of influence operations” (lobbyists, PR, consultants);
- Linguistic manipulation;
- Informational struggle (“propaganda”).

As you can see, the Russian/Soviet secret services always have used all of the instruments that we now call “hybrid war”. Certainly, propaganda traditionally was a part of the Russian secret services’ activities. There is no doubt that Russian propaganda and informational warfare has developed significantly in comparison to the 19th or 20th centuries. In fact, modern informational instruments allow even the creation of a

1 Smith, Bruce L. (17 February 2016). “Propaganda”. *britannica.com*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. Retrieved 23 April 2016.

2 James Sherr, “*Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion*”, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 2013.

“parallel reality” and change the consciousness of people to act as the author of an informational attack wants. Actually, modern war should be conducted through a comprehensive approach with an extensive use of covert, psychological, informational operations, false target programming, ideological preparation of the local population, creating a fifth column in the local police, security forces, armed forces, etc. All of these techniques were used by Russia before 2014 in Ukraine to prepare the aggression, occupation, and destruction of Ukraine as an independent state and to integrate it into the “Russkiy mir” (“Russian world”).

Ukrainian informational space was absolutely open to Russian psychological and informational operations before 2014. Moreover, Ukraine (especially in the period 2010-2013) was totally integrated into the Russian informational space. The Kremlin created in Ukraine an artificial “parallel reality” with a “successful Russia with Putin” and “unsuccessful Ukraine without Putin” narrative. As Ukrainians did not know that the real Russia is pretty different from its TV depiction, they wanted to be closer to the apparently successful “Big Brother”. The consequences of these illusions in Ukrainian society could be seen during the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, when a significant part of the Ukrainian people believed Russian TV and Russian propaganda stories. Even when Russia started its aggression against Ukraine in Crimea and Donbas, a lot of Ukrainians did not support the Ukrainian Government because of the confusion caused by Russian psychological informational operations.

Russian propaganda in Ukraine: narratives, myths and instruments

CACDS defines the Russian system of psychological and informational warfare as comprehensive activities in these spheres³:

1. Informational provocations and misinformation with the use of pro-Russian non-governmental organizations or media.

³ Badrak, V, Kozlov D., “The Kremlin’s Information Front”, Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, Kyiv, 2016.

2. Informational operations carried out by Russian scientific, research and academic institutions.
3. Informational and psychological operations carried out by Russian governmental structures, including top state officials.
4. Informational operations following special events and provocations involving Russian military units.
5. Informational and psychological operations and provocations with the involvement of specially trained civilian groups.
6. Informational and psychological operations carried out by foreign politicians or public figures (“opinion leaders” for specific target groups).
7. Informational and psychological operations carried out on the level of international organizations and international conferences.
8. Informational and psychological operations via specific communication channels: books, movies, specially-constructed TV shows, and exploitation of memorials and favorable images of the past.
9. Informational and psychological operations based on the creation and promotion of ratings of politicians and other “opinion leaders”.
10. Large-scale comprehensive informational and psychological operations carried out by artificially created “opinion leaders.”

CACDS experts speak about the attempts of Russian propagandists and informational provocateurs to entrench a number of ideological “fake clichés” for use in different circumstances and on different target audiences. According to the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and the current Head of the Center for Russian Studies, Volodymyr Ohryzko⁴, the following ideas are being promoted:

⁴ Ohryzko, V., “Russian Information and Propaganda War: Selected Methods and

- the Russian national minority is oppressed and persecuted in Ukraine as well as in the West;
- the West considers Russia an enemy and wishes to limit its influence in the international arena;
- the USA and other Western countries were behind the “color revolutions” in several post-Soviet countries and those revolutions were anti-Russian in nature;
- being a “superpower”, Russia is “entitled” to its own sphere of influence; the post-Soviet space is the “objective” choice for such a sphere;
- Russia is the stronghold standing up to the modern-day Fascism; “fascism” is represented by everything labeled as anti-Soviet and anti-Russian;
- Western individualism is destructive, while the collective form of public consciousness corresponds to the traditional Russian mindset;
- Russian Orthodoxy is the only true religion; morals in the West are in decline; Europe is turning into “Gayrope”;
- the alternative to “Gayrope” is the “Russian world” (“Russkiy mir”).

Russian TV was traditionally one of the main instruments for the Russian informational war against Ukraine. According to different estimations, before the Revolution of Dignity and the Russian aggression in 2014, approximately 30% of Ukrainians watched Russian TV channels: Channel One, Russia-24, Russia-1, NTV, TNT and others. In Crimea and the eastern part of Ukraine the amount of Russian TV watchers was significantly higher. In the situation when Ukrainian TV suffered permanent lack of investment and pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine took concrete steps to destroy Ukrainian TV production,⁵

Countermeasures”. In Den, 10.08.2015, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russian-information-and-propaganda-war-some-methods-and-forms-counteract-author-drvolodymyr-ogrysko>.

⁵ Before 2014 Ukrainian TV channels were under political and economical pressure of the Party of Region of the former president Yanukovich; Ukrainian TV-pro-

Russian broadcasting looked attractive, with high-quality informational, analytical and entertainment programs and serials. Ukrainian TV had no chance to compete with Russian TV products. As a result, the Kremlin had total control over Ukrainian TV space before 2013-2014 in which to conduct all possible informational and psychological operations.

Another main instrument and channel for the Russian informational war against Ukraine was the Internet: Russian websites (including news agencies and other news media); search engines (i.e., Yandex); Russian social networks and blogs (Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, LiveJournal); Ukrainian (but pro-Russian) and web media (vesti.ua, strana.ua, korrespondent.net, 2000.ua, AiF.ua, KomsomolskayaPravda.ua). Social networks have opened new opportunities for informational attacks and influences, especially by using bots and trolls. Russian interference in the US presidential elections in 2016 and in European countries have shown that trolls can be very effective in changing the general informational picture and public opinion even in a highly-developed civil society.

Fixing informational vulnerabilities

The Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbas (with massive informational operations on the whole territory of Ukraine) has dramatically changed the situation. The Ukrainian nation (first, civil society and some time later, the state) has found ways to stay alive under permanent psychological and informational attacks. This has been a unique experience in building national resilience. Actually it is possible to say that, because of its successful defense against the Russian total informational war, Ukraine still exists as an independent state and what is more, continues with its reforms on the way towards European integration.

At the same time, it is rather difficult to apply the Ukrainian experience to other European countries directly. As the Russian aggres-

duction didn't have any support from the state funds and even Ukrainian-language music didn't play on TV and radio; there were no Ukrainian-language TV series or movies; actually it is possible to say that Ukrainian pro-Russian political forces followed anti-Ukrainian policy before 2014

sion against Ukraine has appeared not only in the informational sphere but also in traditional conventional warfare with real occupation and annexation of territories, thousands of people killed and millions of migrants, the Ukrainian reaction could be defined rather as a reaction by a nation in a state of war. That is why, in parallel with its “soft” methods based on monitoring the informational space and discovering the fake news of Russian propaganda, the Ukrainian Government often uses “hard” instruments (for instance, prohibition of some Russian websites, social networks and services). For those European states that still do not clearly recognize Russian informational offensive operations as a direct threat to their national security, it will be difficult to use exactly the same approach as Ukraine does. At the same time, for European partners it will be useful to understand how both the “soft” and “hard” instruments are effective in protecting the national informational space. According to recent news from France, a new level of repelling Russian propaganda in Europe has possibly started, as the French Government has started to prepare a new law on fighting fake news.⁶ These steps in Paris could be just the beginning of “hard” policy against Russian propaganda in the EU.

When we discuss the steps made by the Ukrainian Government, then we must mention that together with creating a special ministry to repel Russian propaganda (Ministry of Informational Policy), since 2014 about 80 Russian channels have been prohibited on Ukrainian cable networks - about 95% of all of Russian channels in Ukraine. As a result, the direct influence of Russian TV in the Ukrainian informational space has been significantly reduced. It is still possible to watch Russian channels on the Internet or via satellite, but in reality only 1% of Ukrainians watch or read Russian media to get information.⁷ What is important is that broadcasters are obliged to disclose who their final beneficiaries are to open up the issue of possible Russian media ownership and avoid the creation of “Ukrainian” TV channels and media funded and managed from Russia.

6 “Exclusif: téléchargez la future loi contre les fake news”, Marc Rees, 07.03.2018, <https://www.nextinpact.com/news/106262-exclusif-telecharger-future-loi-contre-fakes-news.htm?skipua=1>.

7 http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/mediaprosvita/research/za_rik_znizilas_dovira_ukraintsiv_do_telekanaliv_ta_internetzmi_doslidzhennya_internets/.

In order to achieve the goal of blocking Russian attempts to influence the Ukrainian informational space through special, focused media content, the Ukrainian Government has prohibited the majority of Russian movies produced since 2013 and all movies containing glorification of the Russian Army and other signs of Russian or Soviet propaganda. At the same time the Ukrainian Government has banned access to the Yandex search engine, to the social networks Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, and to the e-mail service Mail.ru on Ukrainian territory (except in the occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea).

It is obvious that just “hard” governmental actions are not enough to minimize the effectiveness of this propaganda. The experience of the first months of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 shows that without active civil society participation in the building of anti-propaganda measures, governmental actions are pretty weak and ineffective. Only a comprehensive and complex approach to creating a national system of fighting Russian propaganda works. If the governmental steps using “hard” instruments are complemented with broad support from civil society, that could bring about clear success in building a defense against the active influence of the Russian media, the Russian secret services and Russian business money in the national and local media industry.

The Ukrainian experience in the field of building a national resilience system in the informational sphere is a positive example for other countries. Several Ukrainian civil society initiatives have become a practical model of how to deal with Russian propaganda:

- The Information Resistance Group ⁸ is a project by the Center of Military-Political Studies, a non-governmental organization launched in March 2014 to inform Ukrainian and international society about the Russian aggression against Ukraine. It was actually the strongest voice on this topic at that time compared to the Ukrainian Government’s capabilities. Daily reports by the Information Resistance Group, shared mostly by social networks, were sometimes the only source of information from the Ukrainian side of the battlefield. It was extremely important to produce such information to fight the aggressive Russian

8 <http://sprotyv.info/en>.

propaganda at that time.

- Stopfake.org⁹ is the most famous Ukrainian project to counter Russian disinformation. It was created in March 2014 by students and professors of the Mohyla School of Journalism at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. The main goal of Stopfake.org was to find and discover fake news and other information about Ukraine. It is now customary in European countries to monitor the informational space to find false information, but in 2014 Stopfake.org was unique in this sphere and had a huge influence on the process of creating similar tools in Europe.

- Euromaidan Press¹⁰ - This volunteer initiative, created in early 2014, focused on the international audience. Euromaidan Press shared news about the Revolution of Dignity and then extended its activities in order to combat Kremlin disinformation about Ukraine. They write news and analysis in English with a focus on the international audience to provide true information.

- UkraineWorld¹¹ - This project by NGO Internews Ukraine started in 2014 to team up with Ukrainian journalists, activists, and experts working in the sphere of fighting Russian propaganda and disinformation. UkraineWorld unites more than 100 disinformation experts from Ukraine and abroad. Internews Ukraine, Euromaidan Press, StopFake, Ukraine Crisis Media Center, Atlantic Council, European Council on Foreign Relations, the German Council on Foreign Relations and many other organizations have joined the project.

- InformNapalm¹² - This volunteer initiative emerged as a response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine in March 2014. The main mission of InformNapalm is to inform the world about the real role of the Russian Government in the ongoing hybrid conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, other countries of Eastern and Central Europe, and in the Middle East. Now

9 <https://www.stopfake.org/>.

10 <http://euromaidanpress.com/>.

11 <http://ukraineworld.org/>.

12 <https://informnapalm.org/ua/>.

it unites the efforts of more than 30 volunteers from over 10 countries.

- Bastion¹³ – This is an international information consortium of Ukrainian and foreign NGOs designed to repel Russian propaganda. The main idea of this joint initiative of several NGOs acting in the sphere of informational warfare is to coordinate plans and concrete steps in fighting Russian disinformation and informational operations. The members of Bastion are the Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, the Information Resistance Group, InformNapalm, and the Bureau for Counteraction of Hybrid War.

Conclusions and recommendations

The successful results of repelling Russian informational operations in Ukraine are showing that even an unprepared and politically, economically and militarily weak state could adapt and respond to informational aggression. The main condition for this success, according to the basic principles of national resilience, is a highly-developed democratic civil society. In a situation when the state (even the secret services and national security and defense bodies) has just failed to defend the nation from informational attacks, civil society could quickly and effectively build a strong network of decentralized, highly professional specialists who can do this work - sometimes in a chaotic way, but with significant results.

Moreover, the decentralized, chaotic nature of this network is rather impossible to destroy from the outside because it has no joint command center and structure. On the other hand, the self-coordination of this “system without a system” is rather useful for achieving concrete goals.

At the same time, it is obvious that every nation should have its own algorithm for how to build a resilient system to fight aggressive propaganda. It is difficult to apply the Ukrainian experience to other European countries directly. The Ukrainian Government acts now against Russian propaganda, in fact, because it is in a state of war, focusing on “hard” instruments (for instance, prohibition of some Rus-

13 <http://cacds.org.ua/ru/activities/822>.

sian websites, social networks and services). For European states still trying to avoid confrontation with Russia it will be difficult to use the Ukrainian approach in reaction to Russian informational warfare.

CACDS proposes the “mixed” construction of a national informational resilient system to tackle propaganda. The Government and civil society should create a joint network without centralization but with possible coordination for concrete tasks and actions.

The “hard” governmental methods should be an important part of this “mixed” system as well as the active, “soft” instruments promoted by civil society, which should serve as a framework for a comprehensive national system to fight Russian propaganda.

It does make sense to use the Ukrainian experience in creating and organizing such voluntary initiatives as the Information Resistance Group, Stopfake.org, Euromaidan Press, UkraineWorld, InformNapalm, Bastion and others.

However, there are some other concrete recommendations for European nations on how to be better prepared for Russian information aggression:

- Special training courses for journalists on how to deal with Russian propaganda are highly effective tools to stop fake news and narratives.
- The “discussion club” format for journalists and experts on different topics regarding Russia, the post-Soviet space, Ukraine or frozen conflicts is very useful.
- Governments should support any new initiatives and projects of civil society that create a variety of independent actors fighting propaganda. The more the better.
- Governments could create a joint coordination center to communicate, plan and coordinate concrete actions together with voluntary projects of civil society to counter this propaganda. However, it is critically important to avoid strategic coordination, centralization and administration of this “system without a system”. Such a “bureaucratization” of the system could become a critical vulnerability.

- Governments could create a special governmental organization for strategic communication and coordination of counter-propaganda activities by state bodies. NATO and the EU could provide great frameworks for that.
- It could be very useful to create a network of key European media, journalists, and experts to provide systematic links and exchange information, analysis, know-how, etc.
- Never copy the Russian approaches to propaganda and disinformation!

Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova and related countermeasures

Victor Gotisan

Introduction. The Kremlin's propaganda in the post-Soviet space

Russian Federation information propaganda has been present in the Republic of Moldova as well as in former Soviet countries all through the period after 1991. Most of the time this was and is being perceived as a kind of the Kremlin's almost innocent 'soft power', which fell within democracy and freedom of expression principles. Few were the countries to take measures to protect their information space and the experts believe this was one of the factors, which in time made the difference between the situation in which Baltic States find themselves now on one hand and that of the Eastern Partnership countries on the other.

In recent years, Russian Federation began to strengthen and extend its 'soft power' amid corruption, recklessness or complicity of authorities from former Soviet republics. The propaganda issue started to be perceived as a danger only with Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea. 17 July 2014 became the turning point of Russian propaganda in the post-Soviet space, when in Ukraine the separatist forces of the so-called People's Republic of Donetsk shot down the plane of Amsterdam–Kuala Lumpur charter with 298 passengers on board.¹ As a result of this event, the Kremlin's mass media has triggered an aggressive propaganda campaign aiming at imposing on the world opinion the fact that Ukraine is responsible for this tragedy.

The methods used by Russian propaganda are neither new, nor original. Ideologists in the Kremlin overtook the methods of the 1930's and adjusted them to new technologies and media. Beginning with the second decade of the 21st century, ideologists in the Kremlin realised that this 'hard power' control or influence policy (wars, revolutions or ethnic conflicts) in the post-Soviet countries is very costly and becomes more and more inefficient. On top of that, it draws public attention and

¹ BBC, "MH17 Ukraine plane crash: What we know", 28 September 2016, available online at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28357880>.

discontent. This is why the Kremlin has (re)oriented towards the ‘soft power’ policy, which focuses on culture, language, history and most importantly – media. Media outlets created or reinvented over the past ten years and aggressively promoted beyond the borders of the Russian Federation are a confirmation of this assumption: Russia Today, Sputnik, Russia24.

The Russian propaganda in the last ten years by means of media, disinformation campaigns and continuous support to anti-European political and authoritarian forces from different countries has led to government destabilisation, division in society and tension in many countries of the European Union (EU) and Eastern Partnership. The crisis caused by the Kremlin’s propaganda has reached an alarming level in the last years, resembling the Soviet propaganda during the Cold War. This propaganda has brought about a somewhat decrease of trust and efficiency in the EU (see the degree of Euroscepticism which has significantly increased lately in such countries as the Czech Republic, Hungary or Poland). The Russian propaganda via populist parties and politicians have continuously fuelled the European Public Space with disinformation messages aiming to destabilise the situation both in EU member countries and especially in the post-Soviet countries. The main objective of the Russian propaganda is manipulation of reality, destabilisation of countries, stimulating distrust in the democratic process and most recently influencing electoral processes as in case of BREXIT, elections in the USA and even the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova in November 2016.

1. The Republic of Moldova and Russian media propaganda

At a conference, Anne Applebaum stated that Russia “...is already inside Europe” and this is largely due to propaganda media network. For instance, only in Germany approx. 3 million people are watching the Russian TV channel Pervii Kanal, which according to the same Anne Applebaum, “...is using an even more aggressive language than during the Cold War”.² The post-Soviet countries are the ones most

² Please see “Bringing Plurality and Balance to the Russian Language Media Space”, a feasibility study on Russian language media initiatives commissioned and funded by the Government of Netherlands, with a contribution from Latvia, Janu-

exposed to the Kremlin's media propaganda. For example in 9 out of 15 post-Soviet countries, Pervii Kanal is the prime-time TV channel. Also, in the majority of post-Soviet countries at least 3 out of 5 most popular TV channels are Russian: Pervii Kanal, NTV, RTR, Russia 24 or REN TV.³

The Republic of Moldova is one of the countries directly exposed to the Kremlin's propaganda and Russian media outlets rebroadcast in this country are the main proliferation tool in this respect. The last opinion poll from November 2017 shows that 2 out of 4 most popular TV channels in the Republic of Moldova are the Russian ones⁴: Prime TV/Pervii Kanal (58%) and RTR Moldova (23%). Prime TV/Pervii Kanal is first on this popularity top. At the same time, the monitoring reports analysing the content of Russian TV channels rebroadcast in the Republic of Moldova (Pervii Kanal, RTR, REN TV, NTV and STS) have found that '...Russian TV channels rebroadcast in the Republic of Moldova are information propaganda tools of the Russian Federation the only purpose of which is to demonise the European Union, the USA, NATO and in general the democracy as a form of government'.⁵ This situation is similar also on the online segment.⁶ According to Alexa.com half of the 10 most popular online platforms in the Republic of Moldova are the Russian ones: Ok.ru, Vk.com, Mail.ru, Google.ru and Yandex.ru.⁷

The influence of Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova was, also, confirmed by the last presidential elections in 2016,

ary 2015, a short summary may be found at <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/news/bringing-plurality-1/>.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Institute for Public Policy, "Barometer of Public Policy", November 2017, data are available in English at <http://bop.ipp.md/en>.

⁵ Association of Independent Press, "Monitoring Report of TV Russian media outlets broadcasted in Republic of Moldova", April 2017, available in Romanian at <http://www.api.md/news/view/ro-posturile-tv-din-federatia-rusa-dezinformeaza-si-transmit-mesaje-propagandistice-1505>.

⁶ TV and online were took as a baseline, mainly because in the Republic of Moldova, TV and online are the first two most popular media channels in terms of sources of information for general public. According to opinion poll from November 2017, TV is watched daily by 71% of Moldovans; and internet is accessed daily by 49% of Moldovans. Institute for Public Policy, "Barometer of Public Policy", November 2017, data are available in English at <http://bop.ipp.md/en>.

⁷ Alexa.md, "Top 10 Websites: Republic of Moldova, March 2018", available in English at <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/MD>.

when the pro-East candidate of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), Igor Dodon won these elections. Russian media outlets which openly supported this candidate had an important role in the voters' options (NTV, Rent TV, etc.). Further, Dodon was openly supported by the Kremlin. Moreover, the image of Vladimir Putin (election posters and video ads, outdoor billboards, etc.), used by Igor Dodon in the election campaign had a great influence in these presidential elections. For, according to surveys, since 2013 the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin is the most recognised and popular politician in the Republic of Moldova from abroad.⁸

The Russian propaganda via media contributes to division in Moldovan society on geopolitical principles. Data of a survey from June 2017, indicates that the preferences of Moldovans are poised between West and East and the balance is in favour of the Russian Federation and the Eurasian Union. Thus, 57% of respondents believe that the Republic of Moldova should get closer to Russia, the other 43% opt for closeness of the Republic of Moldova with the West and Europe (European Union).⁹ By its propaganda content, the Russian Federation is largely seeking to distort the reality and demonize EU, the USA and NATO as institutions and/or organisations. The Russian propaganda seeks mainly to instil in the citizens of the Republic of Moldova the distrust in the statehood of the country and in its current foreign policy (pro-European integration).¹⁰

2. Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova. Causes.

The issue of Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova has been acknowledged relatively late. It was disregarded for a long time or was not paid attention to. Each time, the Moldovan authorities would jus-

8 Institute for Public Policy, "Barometer of Public Policy", November 2017, data are available in English at <http://bop.ipp.md/en>.

9 Poliexpert, "Socio-Political Poll conducted by the Public Opinion Fund at the request of Poliexpert", July 2017, available in Romanian at <http://poliexpert.md/noutatipublicatii/doc-sondajul-socio-politic-realizat-de-fondul-opinieii-publice-la-solicitarea-companiei-poliexpert.html>.

10 Oazu Nantoi, Alexandru Platon, Aliona Cristei, "Russian Propaganda on "Odnoklassniki". The case of the Republic of Moldova", March 2018, available in Romanian, English and Russian at <http://ipp.md/en/2018-02/propaganda-ruseasca-pe-odnoklassniki-cazul-republicii-moldova/>.

tify their inactivity to solve this challenge by bringing up the argument of ‘no infringement of right of access to information’ of citizens and by fearing to be blamed of ‘media censorship’. In so doing, the Kremlin’s propaganda sets a dilemma for post-Soviet countries. On one hand, it is related to the right to information or access to information, a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution of the country. On the other, it is related to protection of information space.¹¹

In this respect, both theoretically and practically, there are two action scenarios:

1. The first one is ensuring absolute permissiveness concerning access to and accessing of any type/channel of media. This scenario can be applied only when the level of media culture of a society is very high and every individual can differentiate between correct and distorted information. The Republic of Moldova cannot afford this luxury, at least not at this moment in time. Moldova cannot compare itself with states like the Great Britain, Norway, Finland, Sweden or Canada in this regard, where the media consumer is provided the right to media literacy initiatives starting at school;

2. The second scenario could be the protection of information space by monitoring and controlling the external information through: development of a legislative and regulatory framework to prohibit propaganda; functional regulatory bodies to regulate the information space of a society; adopting legal provisions for the regulation of local and external media content; development of a strategy and/or concept aiming at securing the information space of the country.

The ideal solution for post-Soviet countries and thus, of the Republic of Moldova would be the synergy of both scenarios: in the short term to insist on the second scenario (legislative and regulatory framework to limit the propaganda content and regulatory bodies that would do their job properly and on time); and in the long term, to have the first scenario (media education and cultivating critical thinking among media consumers).

¹¹ Victor Gotisan, “How We Protect Ourselves in The Informational Space?”, January 2016, available in English at <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/how-we-protect-ourselves-informational-space>.

If we were to list here the causes contributing to the proliferation of Russian propaganda in the post-Soviet countries and in the Republic of Moldova as a concrete example, these would be:

- In the media space of the Republic of Moldova there are too few local Russian media outlets which could provide quality and competitive content as an alternative to the one produced by the media outlets from the Russian Federation¹²;
- The owners of media, who are most often influential politicians controlling or holding broadcasting licenses and retransmit Russian TV channels are not interested in giving up or filtering the content of these channels. The reason is very simple: this content is selling and is on top of media consumers' audience from the Republic of Moldova. To give it up means losing the audience and thus the money from advertising;
- Regulation institutions do not interfere to counter the propaganda and manipulative content from the outside. In other words, the regulatory institutions (in particular the Broadcasting Coordination Council: BCC) on one hand do not have capacities to monitor and charge the content rebroadcast by media outlets from Moscow; and on the other – very important –, these institutions are influenced by the political factor and therefore are not allowed to do this;
- Poor media culture of the society. Media education is a very important element in countering propaganda, if not the best in this respect;
- There is no strategy, concept or vision (yet) of securing the information space of the Republic of Moldova. Even if there are discussions for some time about the necessity of securing the national media space against external propaganda, manipulation and disinformation attempts, practically speaking, the Moldovan authorities have taken too few concrete measures until now in order to counter the propagan-

¹² According to 2014 National Census, for around 25% Moldovans, Russian language is their daily communication language. National Bureau of Statistics, "2014 National Census", available in Romanian at <http://www.statistica.md/pageview.php?l=ro&idc=479&>.

da from the outside;

- There was no legal and regulatory framework (until February 2018) to prevent and establish certain conditions for retransmission of external media content and thus requiring local media institutions to produce as much as possible their own content and not being parasite on some external media outlets work from abroad.

3. Techniques and tools to counter propaganda. The case of the Republic of Moldova

The information space of the Republic of Moldova was and continues to be very fragile to the Russian propaganda.¹³ However, during the last two years both official institutions and especially media organisations tried to develop, pilot and implement several tools/projects aiming at countering external media propaganda. Every country, which is dependent – the Republic of Moldova being part of this group – on the Kremlin’s information media space has to create its own protective mechanisms and tools, beginning with the establishment of alternative media institutions which will produce quality media content in Russian and ending with the creation of efficient tools, able to prevent and counter the propaganda content broadcast by the Kremlin’s media institutions.¹⁴

What progress have the Republic of Moldova made so far in this respect and what else does it need?

- Quality, correct and ethical media content in Russian. According to the last census for approx. 25% of the population of the Republic of Moldova the Russian language is their daily communication language. For most of these people, the media outlets from the Russian Federa-

13 Please see more details, Tatiana Puiu, Constantin Marin, Vlad Turcanu, Ana Gonta et al, ‘Information security from a media perspective. National study’, Chisinau 2016, available in Romanian at https://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu_Securitatea%20informationala%20din%20perspectiva%20meditativa_2016.pdf.

14 Iulian Chifu, ‘Typing the Information War of Russian Federation’, July 2016, available in Romanian at http://adevarul.ro/international/europa/tipizarea-razboiului-informativ-rusiei-1_577a48e35ab6550cb88ba7cf/index.html.

tion rebroadcast in the Republic of Moldova are the only information source. Thus, the Russian speaking population is deprived of the right to correct information and is connected to an external media space, which very often operates and broadcasts propaganda and manipulative information. Local Russian language media initiatives launched in the last years in the Republic of Moldova – TV8, Newsmaker.md, the Russian version of Ziarul de Gardă – are a good example for the creation of an alternative to the Kremlin’s propaganda media content. However, they are too few to be able to counter the manipulative effect produced and broadcast by the Russian media mastodons.

- Online tools and platforms to counter and combat foreign propaganda and manipulative content. In November 2015, the Association of Independent Press (API) launched the campaign and online platform “Stop Fals!” Its aim – weakening the effects and impact of propaganda and manipulative information, which distorts the reality. Also, at the end of November 2017, Agora.md launched Fact-Checker, which is a module to combat media lies and propaganda.

- Media education and critical thinking. In the long term, this is the most efficient anti-propaganda tool. The Independent Journalism Center from Moldova (IJC) is the main driver in this respect, implementing several projects in the field of media education. In 2017, IJC launched the optional course ‘Education for media’ in the primary school and the initiative was piloted in 20 educational institutions. In 2018 it is planned for the extension of this initiative in even more schools and lyceums in the country. IJC media education projects (and of other media organisations: API, Media Centre for Youth, etc.) aim at developing the critical spirit among the population of the Republic of Moldova.

- Development and adoption of legal provisions aiming to combat external propaganda. In the short and medium term this is one of the most efficient tools. Thus, the acknowledging that propaganda exists needs to be amplified by the assuming at adoption level of legal provisions regarding the security of media and information space of the country.

The Republic of Moldova focused on two tasks in this respect.

1. In October 2017, legal provisions regarding the share of local media content through Law no. 50 from 30 March, 2017, came into force. According to them, media outlets were obliged to broadcast at least 30 percent of local content during prime-time (18.00-24.00).¹⁵ These amendments have the main aim to limit the influence of some of major TV channels which almost exclusively rebroadcast Russian TV content;

2. In February 2018, the legal provisions made to the Audiovisual Code by Law no. 257, known as the 'Anti-propaganda Law', came into force. According to them, bans are sought for external information, analytical, political and military media content coming from the states which have not ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. Russian TV channels fall under this law, because this country has not signed the Convention. The infringement of these amendments by TV and radio channels rebroadcasting content produced by Russian media based outlets could lead to fines of up to 70 thousand MDL (USD 4200). By now, BCC has already fined one media outlet, which violated this law – RTR Moldova – with 50 thousand MDL (USD 3000).¹⁶

Conclusions

Since its independence in 1991, the Republic of Moldova has a complicated relation with the Russian Federation. It is no secret, that Russia undermined the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, interfering in various ways in the internal policy of the country. Russian media was and is a key element in this respect. The goal of Russian

15 Agora.md, 'Mandatory, from October 1st Radio and TV stations must broadcast at least eight hours of local produce daily', September 2017, available in Romanian at <http://agora.md/stiri/37448/obligatoriu--din-1-octombrie-posturile-radio-si-tv-trebuie-sa-difuzeze-zilnic-cel-putin-opt-ore-de-produs-autohton>.

16 The Broadcasting Coordination Council, 'BCC sanctioned a TV station and two service distributors for non-following the audiovisual legislation regarding the security of the information space', February 2018, available in Romanian at <http://cca.md/news/comunicat-de-pres-12>.

propaganda is to keep the Republic of Moldova under the exclusive interests of the Russian Federation. To achieve this goal, the Russian Federation used the most efficient tool – media – through which it promoted and continues to promote a sense of affiliation of this region to the Russian Federation and at the same time to discredit EU and the West in the eyes of Moldovan citizens.

The Moldovan authorities do not have yet a coherent policy/strategy to respond to Russian propaganda. This can be explained to a large extent by the fact that the Moldovan state has not formulated (yet!) a clear direction of its external policy and has not established how to react to Russian propaganda and aggression.¹⁷ However, it is important that both the Moldovan authorities and especially civil society organisations have acknowledged the importance and existence of a clean information and media space immune against external propaganda and during the last two-three years they have made several significant steps towards its building: in the short and medium term – adoption of legal provisions to stop and regulate external media content; in the long term – launching, conducting and implementing media literacy initiatives.

17 Independent Journalism Center, 'Media Situation Index (MSI) in the Republic of Moldova in 2017', January 2018, available in Romanian at <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/indicele-privind-starea-presei-din-republica-moldova-raport-2017>.

Russian propaganda in Transnistria

Aliona Marchkova

Short overview

Transnistria is a narrow strip of land between Ukraine and Moldova along the left bank of River Dniester. It is a self-proclaimed unrecognized republic that is legally part of Moldova, but in fact, it is not under its control and has all the signs of statehood: a constitution, a system of state power and government and its own currency. Transnistria is under the patronage, and, accordingly, the control of the Russian Federation.

In the republic, a pro-Russian mood prevails and the issue of the political status of Transnistria has not been resolved until today. The independence of the territory was recognized by two partially recognized (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and one unrecognized (Nagorno-Karabakh) post-Soviet states. However, Russia does not officially recognize the statehood of Transnistria and openly says that it sees a solution to the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict in Transnistria obtaining a special status within Moldova.

The population of the territory is 475,665 inhabitants (officially), of which more than 33% are Moldovans, 34% are Russians, and more than 26% are Ukrainians¹. There are three state languages - Russian, Ukrainian and Moldovan (in Cyrillic). However, most inhabitants communicate in Russian, including in the state bodies and most educational institutions (with the exception of specialized ones, for example, the Moldovan or Ukrainian secondary schools). Business and official correspondence is also conducted in Russian.

Owners of mass media

The main owners of the media are the state and the private company “Sheriff”, which is a big economic monopoly in Transnistria. Among state media belong television, which broadcasts one channel, radio

¹ According to the results of the last census in Transnistria, which took place in 2015. <https://goo.gl/nnopKi>.

broadcasting, and several printed publications. The company “Sheriff” is the owner of one TV channel, a radio, it is also the only provider of the Internet, telephone and mobile communications, and it owns one of the largest printing houses in the territory. In addition, the company is a provider of digital cable television and broadcasts Russian channels, which are very popular among the population. Thus, almost all information flows are carried out in Russian and with a broad broadcast of Russian information content.

For many years, most of the largest media in Transnistria have been under the control of political groups. In 2016, the company “Sheriff” took not only the majority of seats in the parliament, but also won in the presidential elections, having nominated “its” candidate Vadim Krasnoselsky. With his victory, the firm gained control absolutely over all media in Transnistria: state ones that are officially under the control of the president, and commercial ones, owned by the company itself.

State media is managed by a separate agency, which is named by the State Service of Mass Media. The Service is part of the executive branch, i.e. it is subordinate to the government of the unrecognized republic. The editorial policy of the public media is coordinated with Moscow, through the Ministry of Communications and Mass Media of the Russian Federation, with which the State Service of Mass Media of Transnistria signed a memorandum of cooperation in 2014². The document provides for “the implementation of joint projects and programs in the field of communications, information technologies and mass media” and “support to mass media from Russia and Transnistria in order to post information on friendly relations between the two sides.”

Considering the above-mentioned, the situation with the media is as follows:

1. Virtually all mass media in Transnistria are owned and controlled by the state and an economic monopoly, which has a parliamentary majority and its protégé as president. There are no independent publications in Transnistria.

² <http://www.vestipmr.info/articles/2014/11/11/ministerstvo-svyazi-i-massovyh-kommunikaciy-rf-i-gossluzhba>.

2. Information and news flows are carried out mainly in Russian, which allows broadcasting information from Russia without any hindrance.

3. Since 2014, there has been a formal agreement between the Russian Federation and Transnistria on joint projects in the field of media, which essentially means that Russia oversees the process of creating and disseminating information in the territory.

Thus, ideal conditions for promoting and cultivating Russian propaganda have been created in Transnistria.

Russian propaganda in Transnistria

Since the moment of the republic's self-proclamation, it has positioned itself as a state where there are no interethnic conflicts and ethnic minorities, the idea of equality of all nationalities living on the territory was emphasized. And, although the political course was synchronized with Russia, local politicians conducted a propaganda campaign to create the image of an independent Transnistrian nation. During this period, the influence of the Russian information space was strong, but was not used by the Russian side since it had no interest in doing so. And due to the development of local information space and open discussion websites, which enjoyed immense popularity among the residents of Transnistria, the information of Russian production was not so popular.

In 2013, with the beginning of protests on Maidan in Ukraine, the situation changed dramatically. For a long time, Transnistria refrained from commenting on the events that were taking place. And the reason for this was special political conditions (internal and external) in which it was and is:

1. Ukraine is a territorial neighbor, an economic partner and one of the guarantor states in the settlement of the Transnistrian issue. It would be irrational to call it an enemy.

2. One third of the population of Transnistria are ethnic Ukrainians,

and more than half of the total population has a family, business or cultural ties with the inhabitants of Ukraine. To adopt Russian rhetoric would mean calling its own citizens enemies - fascists or their accomplices.

However, there was no specific information strategy developed for shaping public opinion. Local information producers turned out to be passive, and the broadcasting was filled with Russian information flows.

With the growth of Russia's interests in Ukraine, the influence of media pressure also increased. Due to unrestricted access to the Transnistrian consumer of information, the Russian side was able to disseminate its views openly, addressing the feelings of people who had recently experienced a military conflict. The silence of the local broadcasting was perceived as an agreement of official Transnistria with the position of Russia.

It should be noted that during this period, many of those who identified themselves as Ukrainians experienced an internal conflict based on disagreement and internal resistance to be identified as "junta", "Bandera", "dill" (translator's note: derogatory for a Ukrainian nationalist) and "fascists". Deukrainization in the territory acquired a state color. Media owners did not take a single step to stop or at least reduce aggressive propaganda flows offending the feelings and dignity of ethnic Ukrainians living in Transnistria. Transnistrian channels were broadcasting programs and documentaries of Russian production, denying and distorting the history of Ukraine, its language and culture. All the while in the schools and universities the language, history and culture of Ukraine are taught, and one of the state languages is Ukrainian.

In the rhetoric of local politicians, the concepts of "Russian world", "part of the Russian nation", "we are Russian" became present. These statements in effect completely displaced and replaced the definition of the "Transnistrian nation". "We consider ourselves to be part of the Russian world, we do not separate ourselves from the Russian civilization space. We consider ourselves to be part of Russia - and it's not groundless: there are legal and historical preconditions for this,"

said Transnistrian Foreign Minister Nina Shtanski. “We consider ourselves to be part of the Russian world, citizens of Russia live here, and hundreds of thousands of people of different nationalities identify themselves as Russian compatriots.”

Thus, the following indicators were pushed out of the consciousness of Transnistrians although they had been forming over more than 20 years of the existence of the unrecognized republic - the Transnistrian multiethnic nation, Moldovans, Ukrainians and Russians.

In the Russian broadcasting, which has now become the main one on the territory, the theme of self-proclaimed states is being popularized and the example of Transnistria sounds often; parallels are being drawn with Crimea, Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic. The power of media pressure made it possible to build into the consciousness of the society a previously practically uninteresting and remote Ukrainian discourse and to form a stable negative attitude towards changes in the neighboring country and towards people supporting these changes. Local residents – activists, who openly displayed their pro-Ukrainian stance, were subjected to public disapproval, insults, intimidation and harassment by KGB officers. Following Russia, the Transnistrian special services actively engaged in a search for foreign agents among civic activists and they covered their actions with the fashionable notion of anti-extremism measures.

It will be fair to note that among the TV channels broadcasting in Transnistria are several Ukrainian ones. However, due to the predominant use of Russian language and a high level of trust in Russian sources of information that have heroized the separatist experience of Transnistria, these channels are not popular.

The trust in the content of the Russian information flow is also reinforced by the fact that in Moldova itself, civil society and the ruling political forces are in solidarity with Ukraine and consider the association of Crimea an annexation, and the so-called “Ukrainian crisis” Russia’s open aggression against Ukraine. And if Moldova is a political opponent of Transnistria and it openly criticizes the actions of Russia, the main partner and guarantor of peace in Transnistria, it means that there is no reason to trust the opinion of Moldova, and thus trust Ukraine.

The results of propaganda

The Russian side has completely taken control of the information space and the unanimity of the interpretation of events. This control was confirmed by signing a memorandum of cooperation, which provides for the support of media from Russia and Transnistria. Local journalists do not cover the events in Ukraine or Moldova, neither in other countries. All information received by residents about the outside world is produced in Russia and represents subjective comments by Russian correspondents or newsrooms. In other words, Transnistrian residents receive interpreted information and are deprived of the opportunity to hear a different point of view. In fact, it is one of the variations of censorship.

In the propaganda practice of Transnistria itself, there is already successful experience in the creation of an image of an enemy state. After the military conflict of 1992, Moldova and its authorities were positioned in local media as an aggressor country, occupiers or Nazis. After 20 years of such rhetoric people got used to the established symbols and do not question their use. A new generation of young people has grown up, who operate with these clichés, which carry with them not questions, but ready-made answers that you do not need to think about.

Thanks to local and Russian propaganda, different stages of development of events, different periods had their own set of words-symbols. The system of promoting images or clichés was sufficiently controversial from the point of view of history, but logical from the point of view of psychology. For example, the notion of “fascists” is firmly connected with the past, so it is difficult to apply to modern events. “Junta” with respect to the Ukrainian government was used even after the elections in Ukraine, but later disappeared from the Russian information dictionary, since it was impossible to explain how the Russian president meets with representatives of a “junta”. Nevertheless, in the everyday speech of Transnistrian politicians it has remained.

Through manipulation and propaganda based on frightening people (and in Transnistria, the population has a heightened sense of fear due to the military conflict and instability of more than 26 years),

Russia has further strengthened its position in Transnistria. Transnistrian politicians use this situation in their own interests, blaming on it all economic and social mistakes and failures. During the last parliamentary election campaign, one of the politicians and activists in Transnistria, Natalia Nikiforova, said that neither of the politicians in Transnistria dared either to speak out against Russia or offer a path of the development of the republic other than a pro-Russian one. If this happens, then it will mean a political suicide for this person. Therefore, all politicians in Transnistria, regardless of the level, use Russia's popularity in their PR strategies. Therefore, in 2014, the former speaker of the parliament and the current president proposed to introduce into the Criminal Code of Transnistria a new article providing for punishment for "derogating the merits of the Russian Federation in maintaining peace, security and stability in Transnistria." The changes came into force and the following fall under the new article: "public actions or statements, including those using mass media or information and telecommunication networks, including the Internet, expressing obvious disrespect to the peacekeeping mission of the Russian Federation"³. These actions are punishable by a fine or imprisonment for up to seven years.

And in 2017 another law was adopted - a law on the use of the Russian flag as the second state flag, equal with Transnistrian one.

The result of effective Russian propaganda is the fact that overwhelming majority of voters in Transnistria voted in support of Vladimir Putin - 96.4% in the March 2018 presidential election⁴. The Central Election Commission observed a high turnout at the presidential elections in the Russian Federation: 73,947 citizens took part in the voting. This is a record turnout of Transnistrians in Russian electoral processes. For comparison, in the last presidential election in 2012, 50,368 voters voted.

³ An operative group of Russian troops is located on the territory of Transnistria, which is the successor to the 14th Guards Army, which, after the collapse of the USSR, was transferred under Russia's jurisdiction. The main tasks of the operative group are a peacekeeping mission and a protection of warehouses with ammunition. The Moldovan parliament demands that Russia withdraws its troops from the territory of Transnistria and replaces them with OSCE observers. Transnistria is convinced that it is impossible to refuse the peacekeeping format.

⁴ Transnistria has 200,000 citizens who have Russian citizenship.

In Transnistria, the practice of combating Russian propaganda is not and cannot be applied. However, it can be noted that there are alternative methods that can work successfully - if they are not confrontations, then they are “antidotes”. There are no independent media in Transnistria, but market relations are still working. It is medium and large businesses that require changes in the economy, and these are not possible without political concessions and the development of international partnership. Transnistria cannot survive without developing economic ties with its neighbors. Which means that it is necessary to change views, rhetoric and negotiate.

Conclusion

Pavla Hofmeisterova, Barbora Jelinkova

The published case studies from Central and Eastern Europe show the range of tools and forms pro-Kremlin propaganda takes today. Even though there is a number of particularities arising from specific social, political and historical context of each state, it is possible to identify some common practices and ideas behind it. Let's summarize the main findings and conclusions about pro-Kremlin propaganda which has emerged from the previous texts.

All authors mention that the phenomena of propaganda has traditionally been used by Russian secret services and it was a part of Soviet/Russian policy of influence. What makes it effective today is new informational instruments and technologies. As Samus states, especially social media represents new opportunities for informational attack.

Contributors point out that the new platform for spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda are the websites with so-called alternative news. Both Syrovátka and Smatana stress the news do not necessarily mention Russia explicitly. Usually, it refers to the topics which are not directly related to Russia (e.g. migration crisis). As a common pattern of these websites identified by the authors seems to be the fact it does not publish original content and usually republish articles from pro-Russian websites. Also, as Targalski and Tölgyesi mention, the language used in the articles is signaling the text was not written by the native. As for the language, pro-Kremlin propaganda can be recognised also due to the use of emotional terminology - i.e. junta, fascists, murders (especially in respect with Ukraine). However, pro-Kremlin propaganda uses also mainstream media outlets (the case of Hungary) as well as conspiracy theory websites. The reason why this strategy works is, in Tölgyesi's view, the fact that the audience of conspiracy theory and extremist sites is more receptive to alternative news.

The analysis of Ukrainian, Moldovan and Transnistrian TV broadcasting shows that the most suitable environment for spreading propaganda and desinformation occurs when national media outlets

are weak, underfinanced and producing minimum of original content of questionable quality. Such a media space is then easily filled with the Russian content the quality of which looks better in comparison to domestic TV content. The situation is even more visible in Transnistria. As Marchkova states, original narratives and outlets are missing in Transnistria at all and Russian narratives are officially takeovered instead of it.

All authors agree that the pro-Kremlin propaganda in Europe has boosted when the conflict in Ukraine started. One of its goal, therefore, is to disrupt “Western” reporting about events in Ukraine and replace it with own interpretation and narratives. The presented case studies show that the competition with the West and its narratives is a common characteristic of pro-Kremlin propaganda across the states of Central and Eastern Europe. According to Targalski, the propaganda strives to provoke the hostility in societies toward the West, mainly the EU, NATO and USA. In compliance with it Gotisan says the propaganda aims to stimulate distrust and destabilization in democratic processes which represents western values. This thesis supports also Tölgyesi’s note that one of the target of the propaganda in Hungary is NGOs dealing with human rights issues.

According to Gotisan, the propaganda played an important role during last presidential elections in Moldova when the winner and current president I.Dodon enjoyed various significant support from Moscow. Similar situation occurred during presidential elections in Transnistria and in Poland the current ruling party Law and Justice faces accusations of collaboration with the Jews against Polish people that come from alternative websites. This evidence strengthens the thesis the one of the goals of Russian propaganda is to influence the internal politics and political course in countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Speaking about the aim of pro-Kremlin propaganda, the contributors agree unanimously that using dichotomy such as the West vs. the East, liberal vs. conservative values, unstable postmodernity vs. stable conservatism strives to present Russia as a historical guardian of traditional values who offer the protection to others.

The core strategy of pro-Kremlin propaganda is, according to Samus, searching for vulnerability of a target state. The vulnerability

could be of any kind, in the context of Eastern and Central Europe it usually arises from historical conflicts. Propaganda takes advantage of narratives which are perceived as sensitive one in the given state. For example, in Poland propaganda stirs up fear from “Jewish enslavement” or from Ukrainian fascists. Similarly, Tölgyesi concludes that the propaganda is trying to create conflicts based on history, in Hungarian case it is the topic of Hungarian minority in Zakarpatia.

There are two cases in which Pro-Kremlin propaganda was not even verbalized on governmental/state level. Those are Transnistria and Hungary. Tölgyesi notes that in some cases the pro-governmental media and outlets in Hungary seems to be more propagandistic than the Russian ones (e.g. Skripal case). Moreover, pro-Kremlin propaganda adopts some narratives made in Hungary. The most famous are probably those blaming G. Soros for supporting mass migration into Europe or increasing popularity of far-right extremism in Zakarpatia where Hungarian minority lives.

The cases of Moldova, Poland, Transnistria or Slovakia reveal that one of the tool of pro-Kremlin propaganda are local politicians themselves who are trying to gain popularity from Russian card. These politicians play a role of so-called “useful idiots” and significantly help spread the propaganda in their countries. In Targalski’s opinion thanks to “useful idiots” Kremlin does not need to employ an army of trolls for doing this job in Poland. And not only politicians. In order to create opinion leaders who would support Russian narratives and interpretation in discussed states, Kremlin tends to find its “agents” also on academical ground.

As the case studies in this volume show, there are various actors involved in activities aimed at countering pro-Kremlin propaganda. Often, it seems, the most prompt and active response to the spread of disinformation has come from the bottom – i.e. from the civil society. Bright example of a country that has seen such a civil society activization is Ukraine, with – as Mykhailo Samus puts it - several local initiatives becoming a practical model for how to deal with propaganda (and being replicated in other countries, e.g. Stopfake). As one could expect – journalists have been essential in helping establish the issue of propaganda in the public space. As Juraj Smatana shows on the example of

Slovakia, some of the local media – such as daily SME- have created a special section warning their readers against viral hoaxes, or others (newspaper Denník N) have published handbooks on critical thinking and provided them to schools. Academic sphere has its part to play as well – as Jonáš Syrovátka mentions, e.g. Masaryk University has taken lead in the Czech context, conducting research on manipulative techniques, while providing space for student projects as well.

Governments seem to be slower to react, since – among other reasons - some politicians may make use of propagandist narratives to gain cheap political points, as Jerzy Targalski mentions in the case of Poland. However, the intensity and persistence of disinformation spreading has made them – in most cases – react in some way. Specific situation that Ukraine finds herself in – being not only in information war, but also in real conventional conflict with Russia – has led the local government not only to establish a special ministry (of information policy), but also to adopt „hard“ measures of banning Russian channels, websites and social networks. Moldova, as Victor Gotisan describes, has recently started to adopt legal provisions focusing on strengthening the share of local media content as opposed to the content coming from Russia. In the specific case of Transnistria, however, as Alena Marchkova concludes, any active measures against pro-Kremlin propaganda are unthinkable, given the complete reliance of politicians on Russia as Transnistria’s patron. In the V4 region, Czech Republic has seen the creation of specialized Center against terrorism and hybrid threats under local ministry of interior, while Slovakia has set up an analytical section under its intelligence agency or a special tool on threat analysis under its ministry of foreign affairs. According to Beatrix Tölgyesi, Hungary is an exception – not only it has not created any governmental institution responsible for fighting disinformation, but also its state-owned media have themselves been actively spreading propagandist narratives.

Authors across the V4 and EaP regions involved in producing this volume seem to agree, that path to successful defense against propaganda is based on the long-term commitment and unrelenting focus on the issue (and the corresponding earmarking of capacities and finances), which, however, needs to be complemented with short-term

response and interventions necessary to counter acute threats. Also, as Mykhailo Samus or Jonáš Srovátka underline, involvement of a wide range of independent actors with different backgrounds and approaches is desirable in fighting disinformation – and while a certain coordination among them is necessary, complete centralization should rather be avoided. Adoption of legal measures, such as regulation of external media content, might be necessary in the short-run. Civil society, journalists and academic sphere should be supported in creation of independent initiatives debunking the disinformation and hoaxes. As the cases of Slovakia or Czech Republic show, private companies may be willing to apply stricter commercial policies and start to avoid advertising their products on propagandist platforms – however, there are currently too few of such examples, and private sector should thus be pushed to adopt a more responsible approach. In the long-term, governments, as authors of case studies agree, should support development of state institutions' capacities in strategic communication, focus on the issue of media literacy within their populations, and deal with social problems and societal cleavages that are being misused by propagandists, i.e. on overall strengthening of national resilience of their countries. It is a big task, but as Juraj Smatana in his text reminds us about the inspiring example of Finland – where society identifies itself with country's own positive narrative and is educated in critical thinking and where state representatives have responsibly reflected on the country's past and developed a proper strategy – propaganda can be successfully fought with.

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Aliona Marchkova - founder and ex-chairwoman of legal information center Apriori in Tiraspol, one of the few organizations in Transnistria defending civil rights and promoting freedom of speech and access to information in the region. There has been a unique place „Civil Club no. 19“ working on civic education of the local citizens.

Jerzy Targalski (1952), graduated from the Warsaw University (Faculties of History and Oriental Studies), member of the anti-communist opposition (since 1976), historian and political scientist, lecturer at the Oriental Studies at the Warsaw University (1998-2016), doctorate: Disassembly of the communist system in Jugoslavia (2007), specialisation: the national questions in Central-East and South-East Europe, Soviet and Russian disinformation, perestroika and the role of KGB and GRU in the disassembly of the communist system.

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands



Published with the financial support of International Visegrad Fund
and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

