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DISINFORMATION

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EXPOSING THE ROOTS OF DISINFORMATION ABOUT NATO ENLARGEMENT

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While the use of disinformation as a weapon has always existed, the development of information and communication technologies has greatly simplified it in modern armed conflicts. The topic of NATO enlargement has been significantly overblown with false reports, although it has had its dossier of false information refutation. It is widely perceived as an irritant in NATO-Russia relations. To understand the essence of Russian-Ukrainian relations, the topic of "NATO enlargement" is a false context used as a separate type of disinformation.

While some ponder why Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, President Putin has offered several explanations. In a televised address on the outbreak of war against Ukraine, he said that NATO expansion was a matter of life and death. He accused NATO of supporting anti-Russian governments in a region he considers Russia's "historic lands"[1].

Interpreting the quality of Russian-Ukrainian relations in the context of security threats posed by NATO's eastward enlargement is not a new Russian disinformation technique. But this context may be key in shaping global perceptions of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Since October 2022, the amount of anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO rhetoric on the Internet has increased 75-fold, and replaced COVID-19 as the main topic of disinformation[2].

Before and during the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda claimed that Russia was in danger of being encircled and therefore needed security guarantees from NATO, including denying Ukraine possible membership of the alliance[3]. Gradually, a complex of accusations was formed against NATO in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia: "NATO states were conducting a full-scale military development of Ukraine's

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1   Обращение Президента РФ 24 февраля 2022 г. (Address by the President of the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022), Kremlin, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/67843

2   The Disinformation War: The falsehoods about the Ukraine invasion and how to stop them spreading, Euronews, 25.02.2022, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/02/25/the-disinformation-war-the-falsehoods-about-the-ukraine-invasion-and-how-to-stop-them-spre

3   Соглашение о мерах обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации и государств-членов Организации Североатлантического Договора (проект) (Agreement on Security Measures between the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (draft). [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/]

territory"[4], "under the cover of the Minsk agreements approved by the UN Security Council, the West was purposefully preparing Ukraine for war against our country"[5].

Disinformation as a "Dezinformatsiya": The Features of the Russian Approach

The word "disinformation" is a perfect example of how confusing and ambiguous its use can be. Usually, disinformation is defined as false information that is deliberately and largely covertly disseminated to influence public opinion or conceal the truth[6]. In this sense, it differs significantly from "misinformation", which is false or inaccurate information that is disseminated unknowingly and without the intention of deceiving the public[7]. There is another version of the origin of the word "disinformation", which links it to a literal translation of the Russian word "dezinformatsiya". The word "dezinformatsiya" was used in the name of a special department in the KGB structure in the 1950s, established to spread propaganda. In this paper, we will rely on the integrative concept of disinformation based on the actors, their intentions, and methods[8].

This concept is crucial for an understanding of the Russian approach to the dissemination of disinformation. In this case, "disinformation" is inextricably linked to propaganda (in the sense of "deceptive propaganda"), uses techniques characteristic of the work of special services, targets a perception of information as a way to deal with security threats, and engages top state figures. The latter point is particularly important, because the engagement of top politicians creates a situation where disinformation becomes the basis for political decision-making. For example, "Semantic Visions", a company that identifies disinformation using language patterns on the Internet, found that a large number of messages misleadingly depicting the Ukrainian government as corrupt, neo-Nazi, and Russophobe are "straight from Putin's mouth"[9]. The messages emanating from the Russian president that link anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO rhetoric are broadcast more widely by other actors in Russian politics and state media.

Disinformation is a part of military strategy. The long history of disinformation during war states that when politicians speak, especially about war, you can expect misdirection[10]. This is because there is a

4   Грызлов Б. «Упущенный мир» (Gryzlov B. «Missing Peace»), Российская газета, март 2023

5   Выступление Постоянного представителя В.А. Небензи на пленарном заседании -11й чрезвычайной специальной сессии Генеральной Ассамблеи ООН 22 февраля 2023 г. (Statement by Permanent Representative V.A. Nebenzi to the plenary of the 11th emergency special session of the UN General Assembly, 22 February 2023), https://russiaun.ru/ru/news/220223_n

6   The real story of "Disinformation", Merriam Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/disinformation-meaning-origin

7   Disinformation and Russia's war aggression against Ukraine, OECD, 03.11.2022, https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/

8   Michael Hameleers, Disinformation as a context-bound phenomenon: toward a conceptual clarification integrating actors, intentions and techniques of creation and dissemination, Communication Theory, Volume 33, Issue 1, February 2023, https://academic.oup.com/ct/article/33/1/1/6759692

9   The Disinformation War: The falsehoods about the Ukraine invasion and how to stop them spreading, Euronews, 25.02.2022, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/02/25/the-disinformation-war-the-falsehoods-about-the-ukraine-invasion-and-how-to-stop-them-spre

10 Barry Strauss. The long history of disinformation during the war, Washington Post, 28.04.2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/04/28/long-history-misinformation-during-war/

huge request for information during war. By consuming more information, people try to ensure their safety, sympathise with human suffering, or observe perpetrators being brought to justice.

Disinformation alone does not determine the outcome of a war, but it can have a significant impact on the understanding of the conflict and therefore the possible ways to resolve it. Focus on the actors disseminating untruthful information can prevent further dissemination of disinformation through other communicators in the chain. Disclosing the intentions of the suppliers of disinformation can provide a starting point for legal and political action directed at the causes of the dissemination of intentionally false information. Understanding the different ways in which disinformation is disseminated can help reduce the damaging effects of false messages on public opinion.

Disinformation About NATO Enlargement as a Context of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

The use of false messages as context constitutes a distinct type of disinformation. Putting the real problem in a false frame allows actors to create a favourable interpretation of the problem, and promote their approaches to its resolution.

Russia has never concealed a negative attitude towards NATO's open-door policy, especially regarding its eastward enlargement. In the 1990s, Russian diplomacy sought to use normalisation in relations with the USA, to influence alliance policy. However, the attempt to negotiate some "red lines" that NATO was not supposed

to cross was rejected. The Russian position in the negotiations reflected a failure to influence NATO's decision on enlargement, exploiting the US interest in strengthening democratic tendencies within Russia. As Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (1998-2004) recalled, "the essence of the Russian position agreed upon at that time was to launch, in parallel with NATO enlargement, which Russia was powerless to stop at that time, a negotiation process to create a new architecture of European security"[11].

> *The messages emanating from the Russian president that link anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO rhetoric are broadcast more widely by other actors in Russian politics and state media*

All talk about the new architecture of European security reflected Russia's desire either to obtain a veto over NATO's eastward enlargement, or to fix the geographic limits of this enlargement. Ukraine invariably figured in these discussions. On March 21, 1997, during a meeting with U.S. President Bill Clinton in Helsinki, where relations between the Russian Federation and NATO were discussed, Russian President Boris Yeltsin mentioned Ukraine: "But one thing is very important: enlargement should also not embrace the former Soviet republics. I cannot sign any agreement without such language. Especially Ukraine. If you get them involved, it will create difficulties in our talks with Ukraine on a few issues"[12]. (It is noteworthy that the published documents do not make any reference to earlier agreements between

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11 Иванов И. Россия – НАТО: к истории нынешнего кризиса (Ivanov I. Russia-NATO: towards a history of the current crisis), Russian Council on Foreign Affairs, 03.02.2022, https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rossiya-nato-k-istorii-nyneshnego-krizisa/

12 Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Memorandum of conversation (March 21, 1997). p.106, Presidential Library, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569

the USSR and NATO on non-enlargement. Moreover, it was Boris Yeltsin who asked Bill Clinton for a "gentleman's agreement" that the post-Soviet republics would not be admitted to NATO). On April 4, 2008, Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was present at the NATO summit in Bucharest, spoke of Ukraine as a "very complex state", and made the preservation of its sovereignty dependent on attempts to integrate it into the Euro-Atlantic security space: "And if you also bring in NATO problems, other problems, it can put the statehood itself on the edge of existence"[13].

The claim that NATO enlargement is a conflict factor between Ukraine and Russia is untrue if the roots of the conflict between the two neighbouring states are considered. The source of the conflict was the uncertainty following the collapse of the USSR over future relations between the newly independent states. The hasty signing of the agreement forming a new association – the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – most probably indicated the intention of the new political leadership of the Russian Federation to find a formula for these relations within the framework of the transformation of the post-Soviet space as a kind of integral geopolitical construct. But the "parade of sovereignty" developed in a different way: the splitting up and fragmentation of the once unified space. Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was a consequence of the collapse of the USSR and arose before NATO officially announced its decision to enlarge eastwards. Described by the first Ukrainian President, Leonid Kravchuk, as a "civilised

divorce", this conflict between the former Soviet republics went beyond the "division of the Soviet inheritance". The problem was that the parties to the conflict could not agree on a formula for future relations. The term "strategic partnership", used in official documents, was an aspirational model that had never materialised. Moreover, the term "strategic partnership" concealed many unresolved problems in bilateral relations, making the public in both countries susceptible to Russian propaganda, linking periodic exacerbations of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict to destructive actions by external forces, primarily the West. The use of the NATO enlargement thesis was particularly convenient for Russian propaganda, as it allowed for the securitisation of relations with Ukraine. Over time, Ukraine was transformed from a relatively weak neighbour into a "security threat" to Russia, precisely in the context of a possible NATO enlargement. Thus, the ground was laid for the preventive steps that the Russian leadership would see fit to take to reduce this contrived, non-existent threat.

Turning to the roots of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia allows the context of "NATO enlargement" to be questioned. The conflict between the two post-Soviet republics came to the surface when Presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Boris Yeltsin issued similar decrees in the spring of 1992, putting in writing claims to one object – the Soviet Black Sea Fleet. In this situation, it was decided to start negotiations[14]. There is ample evidence that negotiations between Russia and Ukraine were difficult, and proceeded in an

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13 Выступление Владимира Путина на саммите НАТО (Бухарест, 4 апреля 2008 года) (Vladimir Putin's Speech at NATO summit (Bucharest, 4 April 2008), Unian, http://www.unian.net/politics/110868-vyistuplenie-vladimira-putina-na-sammite-nato-buharest-4-aprelya-2008-goda.html

14 Обставини втрати Україною управління над ЧФ СРСР, поділ флоту та ознаки розкрадання – звіт ТСК (Circumstances of Ukraine›s loss of control over the USSR Black Sea Fleet, division of the fleet and signs of theft – report of the Temporary Investigation Commission), 11.06.2019, https://www.ukrmilitary.com/2019/06/tsk-dodatok1.html

atmosphere of mutual mistrust[15]. In July 1993, the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation adopted a resolution, "On the Status of the City of Sevastopol", which defined the city's affiliation with Russia. The Russian State Duma did the same in October 1996[16]. Although Boris Yeltsin vetoed this document, the Russian delegation could use these parliamentary acts in negotiations with Ukraine, expecting concessions on the status of the Russian Black Sea Fleet on Ukrainian territory.

Not surprisingly, the solution to the problem of dividing the Soviet Union's Black Sea Fleet took a few years, and the final documents ("The Fleet agreements") included a clause regarding the terms of Russia's naval presence on Ukrainian territory. Despite the signing of the political "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation" in 1997, the conflict between the two neighbouring countries was not resolved. Relations deteriorated in the fall of 2003, when construction of a dam from the coast of the Russian Taman Peninsula in the direction of the Ukrainian island of Tuzla started. The situation could not be quickly clarified through diplomatic channels, and the dispute was moved to the public arena.

On December 24, 2003, in Kerch, after tense negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, an "Agreement on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait" was signed, which defined the status of the Sea of Azov as an internal sea of both states, as well as the creation of the Kerch Strait Joint Operating Consortium[17]. The topic "NATO enlargement to the east" was not explicitly articulated. However, the agreement which concluded the Ukrainian-Russian talks contained a clause: "Warships flying the flag of third states could enter the Sea of Azov and pass through the Kerch Strait only at the invitation of Ukraine or Russia, coordinated with the other coastal state"[18].

The documents signed in December 2003, did not delimitate the maritime border, and envisaged further work on the delimitation of the waters of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait. As before the "Tuzla incident", the parties to the conflict did not see eye to eye on this issue. For example, in the Russian parliament, the Ukrainian-Russian treaty drew harsh criticism from deputies of the Rodina party and Communists, who left the session hall in protest. However, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on the issue that "only 'NATO's expansion towards our neighbour' displeases the Russian side in its relations with Ukraine"[19].

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15 Дубинин Ю.В. Как была заложена правовая основа российско-украинских отношений. (Dubinin Y.V. How the legal basis for Russian-Ukrainian relations was laid), Международная жизнь. 2008. № 7. с. 57-76

16 Обставини втрати Україною управління над ЧФ СРСР, поділ флоту та ознаки розкрадання – звіт ТСК (Circumstances of Ukraine›s loss of control over the USSR Black Sea Fleet, division of the fleet and signs of theft – report of the Temporary Investigation Commission), 11.06.2019, https://www.ukrmilitary.com/2019/06/tsk-dodatok1.html

17 Договір між Україною та Російською Федерацією про співробітництво у використанні Азовського моря і Керченської протоки (Treaty between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait), 2003, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_205#Text

18 Договір між Україною та Російською Федерацією про співробітництво у використанні Азовського моря і Керченської протоки (Treaty between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait), 2003, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_205#Text

19 Госдума признала за Украиной косу Тузла (Duma recognizes Ukraine's Tuzla spit). Вебсайт «Крымская линия» от 21 апреля 2004 года, http://politika-crimea.ru/hronology-sobytiy/19-razdely/hronology/82891-protivostoyanie-ukrainy-i-rossii-iz-za-granitsy-v-kerchenskom-prolive-30-sentyabrya-23-oktyabrya-2003-goda

Years of talks, during which Ukrainian and Russian representatives have made directly contradictory public statements about the delimitation border in the Azov Sea, have made little progress. In July 2012, the parties only managed to sign a joint statement on the future delimitation of the maritime border between Russia and Ukraine. Therefore, the likelihood of a renewed territorial dispute has not gone away. Except that the false context of "NATO enlargement to the east" allowed Russian propaganda to present such a threat as a "geopolitical rivalry between Russia and NATO" and a "justification" for Russian expansion, and seizure of a neighbouring state's territory.

> *Linking the problem of relations with Ukraine to NATO's enlargement policy created a favourable interpretation for Russia. It appeared that NATO enlargement had become an escalation factor in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, overshadowing the root causes of the conflict*

In the spring of 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, violating Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Nevertheless, in his "Crimean speech", Vladimir Putin inappropriately explained: "I just can't imagine that we would go to Sevastopol to visit NATO sailors"[20]. As if there were no "Kharkiv agreements" at the time, which allowed the Russian Black Sea Fleet to remain in Crimea until 2042.

Linking the problem of relations with Ukraine to NATO's enlargement policy created a favourable interpretation for Russia. It appeared that NATO enlargement had become an escalation factor in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, overshadowing the root causes of the conflict. Russian propaganda reinforced this view by portraying the alliance's enlargement policy as a threat to Russian security. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference on February 10, 2007, Vladimir Putin made it clear: "And we have a fair right to ask frankly: against whom is this enlargement?"[21] But he could also have posed the question differently: "For what?" However, the question was phrased in such a way as to cast doubt on NATO's "real intentions". The interpretation of NATO enlargement as a security threat concealed the truth about Russia's willingness to use its territorial claims on Ukraine to influence Kyiv's politics.

Gradually, Russian propaganda's coverage of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia became almost inseparable from the false context of "NATO enlargement". Misinformation about NATO enlargement is correlated with some stages of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Thus, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 as an act of aggression was accompanied by Russian propaganda attempts to shift responsibility for the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity onto the alliance: "On the contrary, we were repeatedly deceived, decisions were taken behind our backs, we were put before a fait accompli. This was the case with NATO's eastward expansion, with the deployment of military infrastructure near our borders...

20 Обращение Президента Российской Федерации (18 марта 2014 г.) (Address by the President of the Russian Federation 18 March 2014), Kremlin, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603

21 Выступление и дискуссия на Мюнхенской конференции по вопросам политики безопасности (10 февраля 2007 г.) (Speech and discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy (10 February 2007), Kremlin, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034/videos

And in the case of Ukraine, our Western partners crossed the line, behaving rudely, irresponsibly, and unprofessionally"[22]. The cause of the concentration of Russian troops and equipment on the border with Ukraine in the summer of 2021 (the next stage of conflict escalation) was explained exclusively in propaganda style as "external control", "military development of Ukrainian territory, and deployment of NATO infrastructure"[23]. The subsequent upsurge in the conflict – the recognition of the self-proclaimed republics LNR and DNR, which had received military, political, and financial support from Russia since 2014 – was interpreted by Russian propaganda in the light of Ukraine's accession to NATO as a "direct threat to Russian security"[24]. When announcing the large-scale invasion of Ukraine (the so-called "special military operation"), Vladimir Putin linked his decision to the unacceptability of further expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance's infrastructure. He pointed out that these were Russia's "historical territories" that were being "intensively settled by the armed forces of NATO countries and pumped full of state-of-the-art weapons"[25].

Actors of Disinformation and Their Intentions

The false context of "NATO enlargement", in which Russian propaganda frames a full-scale aggression in Ukraine, appears in the information space in the current phase of the armed conflict.

> **Apart from attempts to shift responsibility to NATO for the war against Ukraine, these intentions include expectations of concessions from the alliance (as a prerequisite for a peaceful settlement) and promotion of the possible options to end the conflict**

The main proponents of the dissemination of the untruthful information are the leaders of the Russian state. Apart from attempts to shift responsibility to NATO for the war against Ukraine, these intentions include expectations of concessions from the alliance (as a prerequisite for a peaceful settlement) and promotion of the possible options to end the conflict. In Putin's scheme of things, "NATO enlargement" is the key to understanding the "background and true causes" of events in Ukraine. The public is offered a stream of accusations against the North Atlantic Alliance for violating the principle of security indivisibility. Following up on this approach, Russian representatives offer Ukraine as a precondition for negotiations, to acknowledge "established geopolitical realities"[26], i.e., the illegal annexation of part of its territory. Finally, the plan proposed by the Russian party to end the conflict is "security guarantees" for the Russian Federation. Moscow again proposes a return to discussion of the draft

22 Обращение Президента Российской Федерации (18 марта 2014 г.) (Address by the President of the Russian Federation 18 March 2014), Kremlin, 2014, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603

23 Путин В. Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев (Putin V. On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians), Kremlin, 12.07.2021, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

24 Путин В. Обращение 21 февраля 2022 (Putin V. Address on 21 February 2022), Kremlin, 2022, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828

25 Путин В. Обращение 24 февраля 2022 г. (Putin V. Address on 24 February 2022), Kremlin, 2022, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/67843

26 Путин В. Россия и Китай – партнерство, устремленное в будущее (Putin V. Russia and China – Partnership for the Future), Kremlin, 19.03.2023, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70743

treaty proposed shortly before the invasion of Ukraine. The essence of the proposals was the return of NATO infrastructure to the 1997 borders, and a moratorium on eastward enlargement[27].

> **The shift in relations with Ukraine in the context of the "NATO eastward expansion" policy relied on long-standing current issues, worldviews, grievances, prejudices, or simply scepticism towards NATO and the West in Russian society**

Russian propaganda interprets relations not only with Ukraine but also with other neighbouring states through the lens of "NATO enlargement". For example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov calls Moldova the next "anti-Russian centre" after Ukraine, meaning that its president Maia Sandu is allegedly eager to join NATO[28]. At the same time, he respects the Georgian government "for its courage" in resisting the pressure of the West[29]. In this context, Putin's warnings at the Bucharest summit about Georgian attempts "under NATO's cover" to restore the country's territorial integrity, and the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war come to mind[30].

Initiated and supported by Russian politicians at the highest echelons of power, disinformation about NATO relies on a chain of untruthful messages. These include some from foreign politicians (first of all, Chinese and Belarusian), representatives of the self-proclaimed LPR-DPR republics annexed to Russia, and former Ukrainian politicians who fled to Russia. All of them, to varying degrees and in different forms, broadcast messages sent on by the Russian political leadership, and contribute to the global understanding of NATO's essence and policies. This can range from "direct accusations" against the alliance, to the format of "exposing fake messages" on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website[31], and even the inclusion of false narratives in the texts of "peace proposals". The 12 points for a political solution to the "Ukrainian crisis", published by the Chinese Foreign Ministry on February 24, 2023, do not name NATO explicitly, but the negative attitude towards the Alliance's open-door policy is unmistakable: "The security of the region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs. The legitimate

27 Соглашение о мерах обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации и государств-членов Организации Североатлантического Договора (проект) (Agreement on Security Measures between the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (draft), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17.12.2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/

28 Лавров намекнул, что после Украины РФ возьмется за Молдову (Lavrov hints that after Ukraine, Russia will take on Moldova), DELO, 02.02.2023, https://delo.ua/ru/politics/lavrov-nameknul-cto-posle-ukrainy-rf-vozmetsya-za-moldovu-410475/

29 Комплименты властям Грузии от Москвы, обеспокоенность Киева и тот самый Гаврилов – что происходит? (Compliments to the Georgian authorities from Moscow, Kiev›s concerns, and that same Gavrilov – what is going on?) , News Georgia, 20.01.2023, https://www.newsgeorgia.ge/komplimenty-vlastjam-gruzii-ot-moskvy-obespokoennost-kieva-i-tot-samyj-gavrilov-chto-proishodit/

30 Выступление Владимира Путина на саммите НАТО (Бухарест, 4 апреля 2008 года) (Vladimir Putin's Speech at NATO summit (Bucharest, 4 April 2008), Unian, http://www.unian.net/politics/110868-vyistuplenie-vladimira-putina-na-sammite-nato-buharest-4-aprelya-2008-goda.html

31 Falsehoods spread by the U.S. on the Ukraine issue: a reality check, Embassy of China to the USA, 2.05.2022, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zmgx/zxxx/202205/t20220503_10681306.htm

interests and security concerns of all countries must be taken seriously and dealt with appropriately"[32]. All this is alongside reports from some ambassadors that directly accuse NATO of escalating the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, for example: "The moves by the US-led #NATO have pushed the #Russia-Ukraine tension to the breaking point"[33]. Representatives of Belarus at the UN General Assembly essentially repeat Russian narratives about "NATO enlargement", calling on delegates to "take into account the root causes of the conflict in and around Ukraine". Referring to Russia and its "legitimate security concerns", they suggest "refraining from supplying weapons to the conflict zone"[34]. Such a scenario would inevitably lead to Ukraine's defeat in the face of a large-scale Russian invasion. A propaganda movie made about dead and wounded children in Luhansk, in addition to accusations against Ukraine, contains the repeated message that Kyiv does not need people, but territory – to deploy NATO bases[35].

The shift in relations with Ukraine in the context of the "NATO eastward expansion" policy relied on long-standing current issues, worldviews, grievances, prejudices, or simply scepticism towards NATO and the West in Russian society. First-hand disinformation simplifies and enhances its impact on citizens' beliefs. By repeating like a mantra that NATO has not changed since the end of the Cold War, Russian leaders have reinforced their citizens' suspicions about the Alliance's "real intentions". But, in essence, this may have been a reaction to an inability to influence NATO policy in Europe.

Combining disinformation with propaganda, over time the thesis about "the mistake of NATO enlargement to the east" was transformed into a demand for security guarantees for the Russian Federation. This approach directly contradicts Ukraine's attempts, as a victim of Russian aggression, to obtain security guarantees as part of the settlement of the conflict. But it is already clear that Ukraine's attitude towards the alliance cannot be put outside the framework of the settlement process when conditions are favourable for it.

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32 China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China, 24.02.2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html

33 Ambassador Hou Yanqi: "The moves by the US-led #NATO have pushed the #Russia-Ukraine tension to the breaking point". 10.03.2022, https://twitter.com/China2ASEAN/status/1501735335339855875

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