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DISINFORMATION

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THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AS A TARGET AND A TOOL IN RUSSIAN INFORMATION AND MANIPULATION CAMPAIGNS

Olga Chyzhova
Ukrainian Prism Europe

Information manipulation campaigns have long been a part of Russia's war machine toolkit, preparing public opinion and laying the ground for military operations. The EU has taken some action to prevent the Kremlin's malign influence on its information space, the European Parliament also being a part of that effort. But as a year of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine clearly demonstrates, these measures were not enough to protect the EU from anti-democracy attacks. This article deals with the narratives of Russian propaganda targeted at the European Parliament, the goals of such information manipulation campaigns, and the role of some Members of the European Parliament in such campaigns. Nonetheless, the EP is the most proactive body in proposing policies to counter Russian propaganda.

Introduction

Information had been weaponised by Russia long before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and even before the start of the Russian – Ukrainian war in 2014. As a part of the Russian hybrid war machine, it had previously been used to shape public opinion and lay out grounds for the kinetic offensive. Currently, Moscow's disinformation and manipulation campaigns are not only anti-Ukrainian, but also anti-EU, anti-NATO, and anti-democracy as such. At the same time, the first European External Action Service Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats points out, that "most of the foreign information manipulation in 2022 had centered on narratives supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine"[1].

The European Union was quite late in recognising the threat of information influence, but has been actively looking for solutions to deter it ever since. In 2015, the EU set up the "East StratCom Task Force" to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns in its Eastern neighbourhood. The unit is tasked to "analyse disinformation trends, explain and expose disinformation narratives, and raise awareness of the negative impact of disinformation that

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1   *1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats. Towards a framework for networked defence*, European External Action Service, February, 2023
   https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf

originates in pro-Kremlin sources"[2]. It manages the project "EUvsDisinfo", which has collected a database of over 15,000 Russian falsifications, with more than 40% of them being about Ukraine and the war against it[3]. The EU states and institutions use a Rapid Alert System (RAS)[4] to share knowledge about disinformation. The Action Plan against Disinformation (2018)[5] and European Democracy Action Plan (2020)[6] were adopted by the European Commission, both addressing the issue of information manipulation.

On February 07, 2023, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), announced the launch of the new EU platform to fight Russian and Chinese disinformation. The Information Sharing and Analysis Centre within the European External Action Service will track information manipulation by foreign actors, and coordinate with the 27 EU countries and the wider community of NGOs[7]. In his keynote speech, HRVP Borrell stated: "Russia is using information manipulation and interference as a crucial instrument of its war against Ukraine with an unprecedented intensity and use of instruments. We have to work along three axes: to anticipate and deter

FIMI (*Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference – author*) activities, to take action in support of Ukraine, and finally – to be ambitious in building resilience to authoritarian regimes"[8].

> *the European Union agreed upon the 10th package of sanctions against Russia, which also included personal sanctions against eight propagandists who publicly backed the war and media executives responsible for propaganda and censorship*

On February 25, 2023, the European Union agreed upon the 10th package of sanctions against Russia, which also included personal sanctions against eight propagandists who publicly backed the war and media executives responsible for propaganda and censorship[9]. The current list of propagandists to be sanctioned in the future was compiled jointly by the EU and the Ukrainian authorities and civil society, and now contains over 150 names[10]. As of March

2   *Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force,* "European External Action Service", 27.10.2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force_en#11234

3   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?date=

4   *Factsheet: Rapid Alert System*, European External Action Service", 15.03.2019 https://eeas.europa.eu/node/59644_en

5   *Action Plan against Disinformation*, European Commission, 5.12.2018, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1615890082555&uri=CELEX%3A52018JC0036

6   *European Democracy Action Plan*, European Commission, 3.12.2020, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A790%3AFIN&qid=1607079662423

7   *Disinformation – EU responses to the threat of foreign information manipulation*, European External Action Service, 8.02.2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/disinformation-%E2%80%93-eu-responses-threat-foreign-information-manipulation_en

8   *Disinformation: Opening speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EEAS Conference on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference*, European External Action Service, 7.02.2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/disinformation-opening-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-eeas-conference_en

9   A. Rettman, *EU sanctions add Russian writers who back the war*, Euobserver, 27.02.2023, https://euobserver.com/world/156761

10 *Polish EU minister says latest sanctions on Russia are stronger than ever*, Polish Press Agency, 25.02.2023, https://www.pap.pl/en/news/news%2C1541844%2Cpolish-eu-minister-says-latest-sanctions-russia-strongest-ever.html

2023, the transmission and distribution (via cable, satellite, IPTV, platforms, websites and apps) of the following Russian media channels is suspended in the EU: Russia Today, Sputnik, Rossiya RTR/RTR Planeta, Rossiya 24/Russia 24, TV Centre International, NTV/NTV Mir, Rossiya 1, REN TV and Pervyi Kanal[11].

> ❝ **the European Parliament and its members have themselves become a target for the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, but also a tool to amplify Moscow's own narratives, create confusion, and polarise societies**

The European Parliament (EP) in its turn has demonstrated more active involvement in countering the disinformation and manipulation campaigns since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion. In March 2022, the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) presented a report[12] with recommendations for a sanctions' regime and other measures on how to stop malign influences in Europe's information space, including rules on online platforms, the media, cybersecurity, international cooperation, and election campaigns[13]. As a result, the EP, in its resolution[14] of March 9, 2022, called for the banning of Russian propaganda channels, RT and Sputnik, more funding for the independent media and fact-checking initiatives, and requesting online platforms and tech companies to detect and block accounts spreading disinformation. The Parliament has also established a new special Committee on Foreign Interference (INGE2), which is to present its recommendations in 2023. The EP was also among the first European institutions to openly push for a special Tribunal for Russian war crimes in Ukraine[15]. The Ukrainian side, including journalists and human rights activists, is calling for the trial of Russian propagandists for incitement to genocide.

At the same time, the European Parliament and its members have themselves become a target for the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, but also a tool to amplify Moscow's own narratives, create confusion, and polarise societies.

This paper aims to study, based on the example of information campaigns involving the European Parliament, how Russia instrumentalises European democratic institutions, procedures, and values, to sow divisions, manipulate information environments, and as a result undermine democracy.

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11 *EU sanctions against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine*, European Commission, https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine_en#sanctioning-disinformation-actors

12 *REPORT on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation*, European Parliament, 8.02.2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0022_EN.html

13 *Foreign interference committee finalizes recommendations*, European Parliament, 3.03.2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20220303STO24640/foreign-interference-committee-finalises-recommendations

14 *European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation*, European Parliament, 9.03.2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0064_EN.html

15 *Ukraine war: MEPs push for special tribunal to punish Russian crimes*, European Parliament, 19.01.2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230113IPR66653/ukraine-war-meps-push-for-special-tribunal-to-punish-russian-crimes

Methodology

The Kremlin's information manipulation campaigns target multiple audiences simultaneously, and are tailored to each of these audiences, both domestically in Russia and externally. While Russia has been successful in spreading its narratives abroad via different channels, analysts point out[16][17] that, for foreign experts, it is very difficult to penetrate the Russian information environment. Multiple reasons can be named and argued for this, the main ones being strict state control over media space, but also (unlike at the time of the Cold War) deep mistrust of Western sources, cultivated by years of work by the Russian propaganda machine. Ironically enough, this also seems to be mainly true for Russian-speaking audiences outside of Russia, including in the EU.

This statement can only be supported by the author's own experience in the first weeks of the full-scale war. After the start of the invasion, volunteers from Ukrainian NGOs and communication experts united in an effort to counter the Russian offensive in the information sphere. Among other goals, we aimed to reach Russian audiences, as at that time it was still believed that they simply were not getting accurate information about the situation, and that is why they were not protesting. The group used all available online channels, from social media and messages to even Google Maps. We were very successful in the first week, getting emotional feedback. Russian propagandists even spread the fake report that the USA had spent millions of dollars on those activities,

while everything was actually done by volunteers. But that initial success was only possible as it seemed the offensive was a surprise for the Russian media as well; they were lost, had not received their playbooks, and were sending contradictory messages. As soon as the propaganda machine kicked in, any connection to the Russian audience was lost, accounts of activists on Telegram channels and social media groups were massively blocked, but most importantly, the responses of the Russian audiences stopped demonstrating any emotional response.

Thus, for the purposes of this research, we focus on Russian-language sources to see how they shape opinion and manage to maintain a strong influence on the above-mentioned target group of Russian-speaking audiences in Russia and abroad.

More specifically, we analyse one section of Russia's Disinformation Ecosystem (the model is offered by Max Glicker, Lukas Mejia, Rachel Chernaskey, and Clint Watts[18]), namely Russia's openly operating media. Some of these outlets are banned in the EU, but their Telegram channels are still functioning and reaching their audiences. We analyse the official Telegram channels of such media:

- RT in Russian (@rt_russian),
- RIA Novosti (@rian_ru),
- Sputnik (@sputniklive),
- Information Agency Regnum (@na_regnum),
- TASS (@tass_agency),
- Zvyezda (@zvezdanews).

16 M. Keylan, *The West Is Failing To Penetrate The Russian Information Space: How We Got Here And What To Do About It*, Forbes, 2.02.2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/melikkaylan/2023/02/02/the-west-is-failing-to-penetrate-the-russian-information-space-how-we-got-here-and-what-to-do-about-it/?sh=6979a79d3b24

17 D.R. Shedd, I. Stradner, *Waging Psychological War Against Russia*, Politico, 9.07.2022, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/09/07/waging-psychological-war-against-russia-00054995

18 M. Glicker, L. Mejia, R. Chernaskey, C. Watts, *Russia's Disinformation Ecosystem – A Snapshot*, Digital Threat Analysis Center, 23.04.2021, https://miburo.substack.com/p/russias-disinformation-ecosystem

The time frame for analysis is for one year, from the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine: 24 February 2022 – 24 February 2023.

It is also worth noting that disinformation is far from the only method Russia uses to reach its goals in the information war. Indeed, in the context of the European Parliament, manipulation of facts is even more widespread. For this reason, we analyse the moods, narratives, and wording of all the messages present on selected channels, in regard to the EP and its individual members (containing the search words "European Parliament", "EP", "MEP", Member of European Parliament – *in Rus. ЕП, Европейский Парламент, евродепутат, депутат Европейского Парламента*).

> **"** **TASS is generally more interested in the daily news, with a specific spotlight aiming to demonstrate the lack of values in the EP and EU in general (40%), while RT mostly aims at legitimising Russian propaganda narratives**

While we have quantitative data from the analysis, we find it rather indicative of certain trends, referring to qualitative content analysis as the main method for the research.

Ways of Instrumentalising the European Parliament in Russian Information Campaigns

The European Parliament remains present on all five Telegram channels in focus throughout the year. In total, 279 messages about the European Parliament, its activities, and its members were detected and analysed. The narratives pushed in these posts can be categorised according to their goal and generally aim for:

- devaluation of the EP's role as an institution – 13%,
- highlighting differences in the EP and legitimising Russian narratives – 25%,
- amplifying the wedge between the overall European and individual national levels and the absence of solidarity in the EU – 15%,
- demonstrating the EP's interference in third countries – 20%,
- portraying Euroatlantic disunity – 4%,
- demonstrating the lack of values in the West – 23%.

Sometimes the messages are copy-pasted across several channels, but most often the same topics are picked up, though the framing is adapted to each channel's style and audience. Among the channels analysed, the most attention to the European Parliament was paid by Sputnik (27%), RT (21%) and TASS (21%). It also appears clear that channels have their "specialisation" on one of the six goals mentioned above. For instance, the vast majority of EP mentions on Sputnik (35%) are focused on demonstrating the EP's interference in third countries, whereas TASS is generally more interested in the daily news, with a specific spotlight aiming to demonstrate the lack of values in the EP and EU in general (40%), while RT mostly aims at legitimising Russian propaganda narratives, with the help of the EP (32%).

Devaluation of the EP's role as an institution. The narrative questioning the EP's legitimacy and powers has long been recurrent in the pro-Kremlin media. It is targeted at both European and Russian audiences. On the one hand, it aims at sowing mistrust in EU institutions, and demonstrating its incapability and ineffectiveness in tackling crises. On the other hand, it is called upon to calm down the Russian public and ensure that measures taken in response to Russian aggression are

not serious, and will not affect the Russian population at all. The disinformation narrative that the EP has no real power has been registered and debunked by the "EUvsDisinfo" project repeatedly since 2015[19].

Campaigns instrumentalising such a narrative have been employed throughout the year, and were especially active at times when the European Parliament adopted decisions concerning Russia. The peak of such campaigns can be observed after the EP's resolutions on the Russian energy resources embargo, listing the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation, calls to create a special tribunal for the Russian and Belarusian leaders, and particularly after Russia's recognition as a sponsor of terrorism. Each such message is accompanied by a comment that the decisions of the EP are not legally binding and have no real consequences. Furthermore, the EP is often portrayed with sarcasm:

- *"I suggest recognizing European Parliament a sponsor of idiotism…",* – @zvyezdanews, 23 November 2022;

- *"Russia doesn't really take to heart the decision of Europarliament…",* – @rt_russian, 27 November 2022;

- *"MFA Chief Sergey Lavrov believes, resolution of EP on recognizing Russia a "sponsor of terrorism" has to be commented on by doctors',* – @tass_agency, 23 November 2022;

- *"…we [Wagner Group – author] announce EP dismissed as of today",* – @rt_russian, 22 November 2022.

This narrative is being spread in 13% of the analysed messages. Its effectiveness highly depends on the lack of knowledge among the audience about the functions and responsibilities of the European Parliament.

Highlighting differences in the EP and legitimisation of Russian narratives. Despite constantly attempting to undermine the EP's role, Russian propaganda uses its resolutions, and especially statements and open letters of certain Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to legitimise its own narratives. Every fourth (25%) of the analysed posts seem to follow this exact aim. We will focus more on the role of the MEPs in the next section, while we will now analyse the most popular narratives.

The EP is most often used on the analysed Telegram channels to amplify such narratives common to Russian media disinformation as:

A. Sanctions do not reach their goal: they have no effect on Russia, but are hurting the EU and member states:

- *"The European Parliament warned of an energy catastrophe due to a possible ban on Russian gas imports",* – @rt_russian, 8 March 2022;

- *"EU predicted catastrophe in case of refusal of Russian gas",* – @na_regnum, 8 March 2022;

- *"An economic war with Russia for the European Union means inevitable losses, and possibly a bitter defeat, and even catastrophe",* – @na_regnum, 7 April 2022.

B. Ukraine is corrupt, does not use aid properly, and its further military support will only cause escalation:

- *"… over the eight years of the conflict, the Ukrainian authorities have not fulfilled their obligations",* – @rt_russian, 24 February 2022;

- *"MEPs opposed the supply of heavy equipment to Ukraine in order to avoid escalation",* – @rian_ru, 26 August 2022;

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19 *Disinfo: The European Parliament Is A Bunch of Extremists with No Real Power*, EUvsDisinfo, 8.12.2022,

- *"Western countries do not want to listen to new demands of Vladimir Zelensky after his lies about a missile attack on Poland"*, – @na_regnum, 20 November 2022;

C. It is not so clear who is responsible for the atrocities in Ukraine:

- *"Even Members of the European Parliament thought about the fact that the events in Bucha were staged and hide the crimes of the Ukrainian Nazis"*, – @na_regnum, 7 April 2022.

- *"EP has not found any evidence for "terrorism sponsorship" of Russia, as MEP Gunnar Beck said"*, – @sputniklive, 12 August 2022.

D. Human rights, especially freedom of speech, are not respected in the EU:

- *"The European Parliament said that media censorship, including the ban on RT and Sputnik, is contrary to the constitutions of EU member states"*, – @rt_russian, 30 March 2022;

- *"European media seek to discredit anyone who offers an alternative view of the Ukrainian conflict"*, – @sputniklive, 7 June 2022.

Amplifying the wedge between the overall European and individual national levels and the absence of solidarity in the EU. Highlighting the EU's disunity, especially on the issues of sanctions against Russia and providing support for Ukraine, was one of the most popular goals of the Russian Telegram channels.

By far the most often mentioned country in this regard was Hungary. On the one hand, Russian propagandists tried to highlight problems with the rule of law in the EU country, on the other hand, to undermine the democratic procedures in the EU itself *("Classic Western Democracy. Deputy Head of the European Parliament Katarina Barly proposed to deprive Hungary of the right*

to vote in the EU. Because Hungary doesn't vote the way Barley thinks is right," – @SputnikLive, 3 June 2033). Prime Minister Victor Orban's sarcastic quote about the corruption scandal in the European Parliament accompanied by memes is intensively spread among all channels to undermine the EP's power *("And then they said that the European Parliament is seriously concerned about corruption in Hungary", – @rian_ru, 12 December 2022)*.

> **Highlighting the EU's disunity, especially on the issues of sanctions against Russia and providing support for Ukraine, was one of the most popular goals of the Russian Telegram channels**

Both Hungary and Italy are also used multiple times to demonstrate the EU's disunity on the issue of sanctions against Russia *("Hungary rejected the idea of the European Parliament on the "fair distribution of gas" between the EU countries in the face of its shortage", – @sputniklive, 18 October 2022; "Italy suffers billions in losses due to anti-Russian sanctions. This is stated in the appeal of the deputies of the European Parliament to the EC", – @rt_russian, 21 March 2022)*.

Latvia is the second most mentioned country in this type of posts. The most frequent topics that are raised about this state are related to the commemoration of the communist past and the rights of its Russian-speaking population. Although they more often portray the wedge within Latvia itself than between Latvia and the EU *("In Latvia, MEP Tatyana Zhdanok was arrested for honouring the memory of Soviet soldiers who liberated Riga", @na_regnum, 9 September 2022)*.

Other topics used to amplify the different positions of the EU member states include

providing aid to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees (*"Strong disagreements arose between the EU countries and the European Parliament, relating, in particular, to assistance to Ukraine, the reception of refugees and the spending of EU funds"*, – @sputniklive, 13 November 2022).

Demonstrating the EP's interference in third countries. Another target for criticism of the European Parliament in the Russian media is its attempts to influence the internal policies in non-EU states, especially "punishing" third states for a pro-Russian position.

Most often, such narratives are addressed at Serbia, its refusal to support sanctions against Russia, and as a result the calls from the EP to block Belgrade's European integration process (*"The President of Serbia stated that after the referendums in Donbas, Zaporizhzhia and the Kherson region, the EU increased pressure on his country, but Belgrade would still not impose sanctions against the Russian Federation"*, – @rt_russian, 1 October 2022).

Quite an intensive campaign to do with Georgia was launched across all analysed Telegram channels, regarding the calls to free the imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili. Such addresses from the EP are also considered to be putting pressure on Tbilisi, and the negative reaction of the Georgian authorities was highlighted (*"We will not allow anyone to blackmail us, tear up the Constitution of Georgia and throw it away"*, – @sputniklive, 16 February 2023).

Among other countries mentioned in this regard were Turkey (*"Democracy in action. The head of the leading faction of the European Parliament threatened Turkey with isolation if Ankara blocked the admission of Finland and Sweden to NATO"* – @sputniklive, 15 May 2022), Armenia (*"the country's "long-standing orientation" to Russia and its CSTO allies allegedly turned out to be*

insufficient to ensure security in the region", – @rt_russian, 28 October 2022), Azerbaijan ("[Aliev] *stressed the inadmissibility of adopting resolutions "accusing Azerbaijan of what it has never done"*, – @sputniklive, 19 July 2022).

Portraying Euroatlantic disunity. To bring down military and financial support for Ukraine, the Russian media are trying to create the appearance of a split between the EU and the USA and also within NATO. The most common narrative used is that the European Union is being dragged into someone else's war, but has to pay for it out of its own pocket. As a rule, such statements are promoted by certain MEPs:

- *"In France, they said that the EU ruins itself and enriches the United States, helping Kyiv"*, – @sputniklive, 20 January 2023;

- *"Irish MEP Mick Wallace called for demonstrations against the US-NATO "proxy war" in Ukraine and accused European politicians of dragging it out"*, – @tass_agency, 25 February 2023;

- *"The North Atlantic Alliance was created by the United States in order for the countries of Europe to serve American imperialism"*, – @tass_agency, June 16 January 2023;

- *"Under pressure from US hawks, EU countries are falling into complete oblivion regarding the supply of increasingly heavy weapons to Zelensky"*, – @tass_agency, 21 January 2023;

- "If an international tribunal is to be created, then the United States should be judged first of all", – @sputniklive, 20 January 2023.

Demonstrating a lack of values in the West. Most of the messages pursuing this goal are constructed as classic news reports, although they mostly contain some manipulative framing. The selection of such news about the European Parliament is very particular, and aims to highlight some faults in the EU

itself and the anti-democratic nature of its decision-making. The largest number of such posts concern the corruption scandal in the EP, as well corruption investigations against former members of the parliament. Quite popular were also the topics of managing the entry of refugees to the EU (*"The EU has proposed building fences at the borders to combat illegal migrants"*, – @rt_russian, 19 December 2022), and banning Russian diplomats and civil servants from accessing their buildings.

Members of the European Parliament as Targets for Attacks and the Voices of Russian Propaganda

Almost half of all the messages (44%) about the European Parliament on the analysed Telegram channels contain the names of parliamentarians. All in all, 66 MEPs are mentioned. As to the country's representation, there are clearly some "favourites" that are being used by Russian propaganda. The frequency of country mentions does not correlate with the total number of MEPs from the given state. For example, most often Telegram channels pinpoint parliamentarians from France – 28 mentions, Germany – 13 mentions, Poland – 11 mentions, Latvia – 10 mentions, Italy – 9 mentions, and Romania – 8 mentions.

In some rare cases (less than 10%), the Russian telegram channels quote MEPs who are supportive of Ukraine. But that is just to highlight its narratives of the "evil west" and the European Parliament as a collection of extremists of all types. These parliamentarians are targets for criticism and sarcasm from Russian propagandists. The names of lawmakers from Poland are brought up in this context, most frequently:

- *"Anna Fotyga called on the European Commission to take "decisive actions" in relation to the Russian Federation"*, – @rt_russian, 31 July 2022;

- *"The member of the European Parliament from Poland [Robert Biedron] called the terrorist attack committed on the Crimea Bridge a "balm for the heart"*, – @sputniklive, 8 October 2022;

- *"Ex-head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ex-Minister of Defence of Poland, Member of the European Parliament Radoslav Sikorsky believes that the West has the right to supply nuclear weapons to Ukraine"*, – @tass_agency, 12 June 2022.

About 27% of the analysed cases of MEPs' statements on the Russian media are neutral regarding the Russian war against Ukraine. Most of them are also used to strengthen Russia's manipulative narratives, including:

- highlighting the weakness of the EU (*"Member European Parliament [Marco Zanni] is concerned about the EU's strategic dependence on third countries, including China"*– @rt_russian, 17 November 2022; Petras Auštrevičius: *"Everything indicates that Russia is winning"*, – @na_regnum, 25 June 2022),

- portraying disregard for human rights in the EU (Sophia inN 't Veld: *"The widespread abuse of spyware in EU countries threatens democracy"*, – @tass_agency, 08 November 2022),

- depicting the aggressive West threatening Russia (*"Member of the European Parliament Tomáš Zdechovský supported the idea of dividing the Kaliningrad region between Poland and the Czech Republic"*, – @sputniklive, 30 September 2022),

- sowing disunity in the EU (*"Romanian MEP Mituța called dangerous not only talk about racial or ethnic "purity", but also Orban himself"*, – @rian_ru, 25 July 2022),

- or just making fun of the EP (*"MEP and former mayor of Riga Nil Ushakov was criticized on social networks for his sneakers (!). Particularly patriotic network users confused the logo of New Balance sneakers with the Z sign"*, – @sputniklive, 7 October 2022).

At the same time, in most cases (63%) the Russian media mention openly pro-Russian Members of the European Parliament or the ones playing into Russian hands. Generally, these are the voices in the democratic institution used to amplify and legitimise the Kremlin's narratives. Each such statement useful to Moscow's propaganda is multiplied across all available Telegram channels.

There is a number of "usual suspects" most often cited on the analysed channels. Each of them has their own topic.

Among the most mentioned MPs is the representative of Latvia, Tatjana Ždanoka. Russian channels circulate her speeches on defending the rights of the Russian-speaking Latvians, and criticism of diminishing communist monuments. The most attention was paid to the case of the detention of the 72-year-old lawmaker at the rally against the demolition of the monument to the liberators.

Similar narratives along with vocal protest against the ban on Russians entering Estonia are often cited, from an Estonian parliamentarian, Yana Toom: *"The Estonian authorities look weak-minded when they deny entry to Russians on already issued visas",* – @na_regnum, 12 August 2022.

French MP Thierry Mariani is often used on the Kremlin's channels as a voice for two of the most popular disinformation narratives, namely that sanctions against Russia are more harmful to the EU and that the partners should stop providing weapons to Ukraine as it causes escalation:

- *"Member of the European Parliament Thierry Mariani predicted a catastrophe for the EU if it refused to import Russian gas",* – @na_regnum, 8 March 2022.

- *Arms supplies to Ukraine... is a deliberate creation of a new source of tension in Europe, which will ultimately harm everyone",* – @na_regnum, 5 June 2022.

The same disinformation and manipulation messages, but also with an emphasis on Euroatlantic disunity, are spread through interviews with Irish MEP Mick Wallace (*"Any war is insane – it's time for people to take to the streets and speak out against this proxy war of the USA and NATO",* – @tass_agency, 24 February 2023) and even former MEP from France Florian Philippot (*"The EU destroys itself and enriches the USA by helping Kyiv",* – @na_regnum, 29 November 2022).

> **" in most cases (63%) the Russian media mention openly pro-Russian Members of the European Parliament or the ones playing into Russian hands. Generally, these are the voices in the democratic institution used to amplify and legitimise the Kremlin's narratives**

The most radical and extreme disinformation narratives are voiced by Italian MEP Francesca Donato and actively promoted across Russian Telegram channels. For her messages about the alleged attribution of atrocities in Bucha and made-up Nazi symbols on President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's shirt, Ms. Donato's profile was even blocked by Facebook. Although this fact was also happily spread by the Kremlin's channels as an example of restrictions on freedom of speech in the West.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The case study of the European Parliament is a manifestation of profound disinformation and manipulation flow, targeted at the institutional framework of the European Union. Russia not only uses distortion of information about the rules and procedures of the EP activities, but also takes advantage of European democratic processes.

Telegram channels analysed in this case study refer to two main audiences. The

first one is the Russian domestic audience. And in this regard, using anti-EU and anti-EP narratives may not cause significant harm. But still, a large share of the audience is Russian-speaking minorities in the EU countries. And active manipulation of the minds of this audience poses greater risk in the mid and long-term perspective.

Let us not forget that the informational component of Russian aggression is directly connected to all other layers of the Russian war machine, including the military hostilities. Such alienation and driving a wedge between national and European levels of government, and injecting mistrust between EU citizens and European institutions, might also present challenges from the short-term perspective.

Elections to the European Parliament in 2024 are on the radar of the Russian special services and propaganda outlets. Russia's aim is clearly to dissuade European voters from casting their ballots for traditional political parties, and for them to give preferences to populist and far-right political groupings. This definitely could change the political scene within the European Union for the next political cycle. Thus, the European Parliament as the core legislation body and platform for political representation has to draw more attention to European policies aimed at resistance to disinformation.

During 2023-2024, the relevant EU institutions involved in fighting disinformation should pay more attention to Russian narratives aimed at discrediting the European Parliament within target audiences in the EU member states. Those MEPs who consciously serve the interest of Russia should be exposed to naming and shaming information campaigns, revealing their roles as puppets in the Russian propaganda machine.

Provided that a big share of Russian propaganda is oriented at splitting national and European levels of European decision-making, the effectiveness of individual country measures taken by the EU will depend on the joint initiatives of EU bodies and national governments in investigating and debunking specific cases of Russian malign influence. It goes without saying that effective countering of propaganda should be coupled with strategic communication efforts, both on the part of the EU and at national levels.

Taking positive note of the new body created by the EU, the Information Sharing and Analysis Centre within the European External Action Service, it is imperative that this institution should be part of coordinated efforts on the level of EU institutions. The case of the EP might be the pilot initiative to deal with in the pre-election period in the EU. Russia tries to reach out to wider audiences, and accordingly, Brussels institutions should not limit themselves only to producing narrow specialised content on Russian disinformation. Ukrainian experience in building the proactive StratCom might be of interest to EU specialists in terms of a robust toolkit, creativity, and time-wise approaches.

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