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## WAR

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# HOW RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS SPREAD PROPAGANDA

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*Since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the issue of information security has become acute for European countries. Russian propagandists use all available channels of communication to promote Russian narratives. The primary focus of this paper is to determine the main social media strategies used by Russian diplomatic agencies to disseminate propagandistic content in the Baltics and Eastern Europe. The countries examined are Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Romania, Moldova, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.*

## Introduction

The field of propaganda studies has traditionally defined propaganda as being intimately connected to media channels such as radio, television, film, newspapers and, in our days – social media.<sup>1</sup> It is a distinctly contemporary phenomenon interwoven with channels of mass communication, which plays a crucial role in modern warfare.

Due to the war in Ukraine, Russia's propagandistic activity demands much attention. Russia has adopted increasingly advanced social media techniques, including sophisticated trolling of news sites, fake hashtags and Twitter campaigns, and close coordination between social media operations and other media.<sup>2</sup> Russian propaganda on social media appears to have multiple objectives. These include strengthening groups that share Russia's point of view, and creating alternative media narratives that match Moscow's interests.

Although Russian propaganda has a worldwide reach, its effect on the so-called near abroad is particularly interesting. The continuous war in Ukraine has created various security challenges, including informational, for all post-Soviet countries. Russia has launched its powerful propagandistic machine in this region for several reasons: to influence the political status quo, to ensure protection from what it calls Western influence, and to conduct a compatriotic policy. The countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltics have vast Russian-speaking communities, whose interests Russia claims to be protecting.

Russian propaganda in the Baltics and Eastern Europe has significantly intensified since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine on February 24th, 2022. The social media pages of the diplomatic missions are one of the most direct sources of Russian misinformation. Moscow tends to use social media activists, website hosts,

1 J. Farkas, C. Neumayer, *Disguised Propaganda from Digital to Social Media*, [in:] J. Hunsinger (ed.) *Second International Handbook of Internet Research*, Springer Dordrecht: 2020, p.3.

2 T. Helmus, E. Bodine-Baron, A. Radin, M. Magnuson, J. Mendelsohn, W. Marcellino, A. Bega, and Z. Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, Rand Corporation: 2018, p.3.

news sources, and others who spread its narratives without the direct command and control of the Russian state. These types of sources make it challenging to distinguish between the personal opinions of internet users and actual propagandistic content. Embassies' pages, on the other hand, fully mirror the central government's views and are, therefore, a suitable object for the analysis of the most common messages of Russian propaganda.

## Vertical Propaganda

A logical starting point for this exploration of propaganda is to look at some definitions. Russian propagandistic attempts can be categorised as vertical propaganda. According to Ellul, vertical propaganda is the type that originates from the elites who rely on mass media to persuade an audience into submission and/or action. This type of propaganda is often effective in getting the audience to take ownership of the constructed narrative, amplifying and extending it. If successful, propaganda does therefore not necessarily rely on a continuous orchestration of the mass media, as "each person seized by it" can, in turn, become their own "propagandist".<sup>3</sup> In this case, social media is the perfect communication channel, as it can act as a tool for mass mobilisation and it grants easier reach to broader audiences.

Vertical propaganda is considered particularly effective in the propaganda of agitation, which is created to mobilise crowds against a portrayed enemy, a "source of all misery". History has seen many examples of its practical usage, like Hitler's campaigns against the Jews or Lenin's campaigns against the Kulaks. These days, Putin's Russia and its campaign against not only Ukrainians but the collective West and what it stands for, have taken their place.

There are many posts on the social media pages of the Russian embassies that focus on the problems of the West, and portray Europe and the United States as a threat.



***The social media pages of the diplomatic missions are one of the most direct sources of Russian misinformation***

A distinguishing characteristic of vertical propaganda is that it derives from the social elites. Considering this, diplomatic missions, which must fully comply with the rules and current policy lines set by the central government, are a perfect channel for spreading established messages.

## Sources of Propaganda

There is very little direct communication between Moscow and the governments of the countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltics. Apart from infrequent public statements from Russian officials, the diplomatic missions seem to be their only fully functioning communicational channel in these countries. Even the ambassadors lack subjectivity: most of them do not have personal pages, and those who do have not updated them in years. Russian diplomats only rarely give comments to the media and do not make any statements that might reveal their own opinions. All recorded public communication is conducted via the social media pages of the diplomatic mission.

The posts on the embassies' pages, however, lack creativity. There is only a small amount of newly created content. On top of that, there is a clear tendency among Russian diplomatic agencies to use the same primary

3 J. Ellul, *Propaganda*, Random House: New York 1973, pp. 3-4.

sources and repeat the exact same messages. To take the Russian Embassy in Romania as an example: in March 2022, out of 548 posts on the Embassy's page, 334 were reposted or simply repeated the statements of Russian governmental representatives, which amounts to approximately 61%.

Russian diplomatic agencies use so-called white propaganda. This is the opposite of disguised propaganda, which can be defined as the deliberate use of disguised sources to manipulate and shape perceptions, so as to achieve the desired outcome.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the posts on the pages of the embassies conduct manipulations without hiding or altering the source.



***The narratives of Russian propaganda have not changed drastically since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. We can see the continuation of the informational campaign launched in 2014, with just a couple of alterations***

Interestingly, these sources are the same for the embassies in all the countries studied. Most of the contents rotates around the statements made by the representatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A perfect illustration of this tendency is what happened on March 11th, 2022, when every embassy shared the comment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the possible provocations and usage of toxic chemicals by "radical Ukrainian groups under the control of US special services' representatives".<sup>5</sup> The most commonly published comments

are from the following individuals: MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov, President Vladimir Putin and MoD spokesman Igor Konashenkov. Among other popular sources are state-controlled news agencies, for example, TASS or RIA Novosti.

Another interesting example of the contents posted on all pages is a so-called study of the archives, called "Archives Remember". In all of the countries mentioned, Russian diplomatic missions quite often post the "real facts" about Ukrainian history, with their main focus on the activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army at the time of World War II. They provide "evidence" in the form of archive documents studied by Russian experts. All embassies in the countries under study have also shared a 46-page long document called "The Truth Behind Events in Ukraine and Donbas Final". This study examines the "crimes that Ukrainian nationalists committed in Donbas" in the last eight years.

Such orchestrated and almost simultaneous publication of the same contents on the embassies' pages all around Eastern Europe and the Baltics might indicate an order from Moscow to do so. Russian propaganda functions as a well-oiled system with all of its actors following the same line.

## **Main Narratives**

The narratives of Russian propaganda have not changed drastically since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. We can see the continuation of the informational campaign launched in 2014, with just a couple of alterations. The main messages of Russian propaganda since 2014 have been the following: the violence in the East of Ukraine

4 J. Farkas, C. Neumayer, *Disguised Propaganda from Digital to Social Media*, [in:] J. Hunsinger (ed.) *Second International Handbook of Internet Research*, Springer Dordrecht: 2020, p.6.

5 MFA Russia, *Radical Ukrainian groups under the control of US special services' representatives have prepared several potential scenarios of using of toxic*, "Twitter", 11 March 2022, [[https://mobile.twitter.com/mfa\\_russia/status/1502310035799564292](https://mobile.twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1502310035799564292)].

is all Kyiv's fault; Ukraine is crawling with Russia-hating neo-Nazis and fascists; it is the US government which is fuelling the crisis behind the scenes, while Russia tries to act as a peacemaker.

Now let us look at some of the posts on the Russian embassy pages from March-April 2022. On March 7th, 2022, the Russian Embassy in Romania posted the following information on Facebook: "The Ukrainian Security Forces and the nationalist Azov battalion are planning to blow up a reactor at the National Research Centre of the Kharkov Institute of Physics and Technology and accuse the Russian Armed Forces of launching projectiles at an experimental nuclear reactor, says Russia's Defence Ministry on Monday"<sup>6</sup> The Diplomatic Mission in Slovakia on March 20th, 2022 shared the following: «Members of the Ukrainian national battalion «Azov» planned to arrange a series of terrorist attacks in Lviv».<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, there seems to be no clear definition of "Ukrainian neo-Nazis". In most cases, Russian propaganda refers to the "Azov" battalion. Sometimes, however, the central government is considered nationalist, as well. In general, Ukraine is pictured as a failed state ruled by an illegitimate government.

The United States' importance for Russia has not changed either. On March 31st, 2022, the Russian Embassy in Slovakia shared an article that criticised American involvement in the conflict with the following comment: «The main reason for the crisis in #Ukraine is the ongoing policy of the #USA and #NATO, which pumped this country with weapons in violation of their obligations».<sup>8</sup> Russia is also pushing a narrative that the US is helping Ukraine develop biological weapons and has numerous laboratories on Ukrainian territory. Ukraine is generally being referred to as "the colony of the US".<sup>9</sup>

The broader picture of demonisation of the collective West is evident. Russian propagandists criticise Western countries for "fuelling the Ukrainian crisis, delivering weapons to the Kiev regime, and provoking a global food crisis and hunger in several states".<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the propagandists keep using "Western experts" to support their views on the war. For example, the page of the Embassy in Bulgaria shared a link to an article written by an American journalist with this comment: "A wonderful investigation was published by American journalists. The scale of the manipulations by Kiev and its Western supporters with public opinion is truly striking".<sup>11</sup>

6 Ambasada Rusiei în România, *The Ukrainian Security Forces and the nationalist Azov battalion are planning to blow up a reactor at the National Research*, "Facebook", 7 March 2022, [https://m.facebook.com/AmbasadaRusa/posts/4141693269267013].

7 *Сдавшийся офицер СБУ сообщил о планировавшихся терактах во Львове* (Surrendered SSU officer reported planned terrorist attacks in Lviv), "LENTA.RU", 19 March 2022 [https://m.lenta.ru/news/2022/03/19/terakti/amp/?fbclid=IwAR1IYqNeLpfViOsKQKBfTKnKIJSyWuLzqZgbOQVjX\_bZ3qMmqRyqMqcyw].

8 *Лавров назвал основной причиной кризиса на Украине политику США и НАТО* (Lavrov called the main cause of the crisis in Ukraine the policy of the United States and NATO), "TASS News", 31 March 2022 [https://tass.ru/politika/14235885?utm\_source=google.com&utm\_medium=organic&utm\_campaign=google.com&utm\_referrer=google.com&fbclid=IwAR3wg-q4HqLe64dJXa7M-6VKneU6lDa1nUJhGptxnxXL1YRG\_de8EST7ZOg].

9 Ambasada Rusiei în România, *Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev believes that the US had been hatching plans for the fate of Ukraine*, "Facebook", 29 March 2022, [https://m.facebook.com/AmbasadaRusa/posts/336838641817936].

10 MFA Russia, *Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily #Nebenzia: Washington and its allies have a choice now*, "Twitter", 30 March 2022, [https://mobile.twitter.com/mfa\_russia/status/1509052517031809026].

11 D. Cohen, *Ukraine's Propaganda War: International PR Firms, DC Lobbyists and CIA Cutouts*, "MintPress News", 22 March 2022, [https://www.mintpressnews.com/ukraine-propaganda-war-international-pr-firms-dc-lobbyists-cia-cutouts/280012/?fbclid=IwAR2rc55pr5JnYKt-v73Feefvr-1j9LevAxF8SnAUW8Q0bzpfsXKJrU6jcc].



Another interesting narrative is the stability of the Russian Federation and its place in the world hierarchy. The embassies post videos of the meetings of the Russian establishment with the representatives of other countries, share statements of the Russian leader about the stability of the currency and general resilience to Western sanctions, and praise Russian commitment to trade fairness and uninterrupted gas/oil supplies.

## Propaganda on Social Media

Moving on to social media, there was a notable change of mind when it came to a preferred platform. Before the invasion, the profiles of the Russian embassies were almost exclusively on Facebook or Twitter. However, the activity of those pages in many of the discussed countries fell to the bare minimum in the middle of March. In some cases, pages even got deleted (for example, the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Moldova).

This sudden change might seem unjustified. After all, Twitter seems to have gained status among the public as the space to go to for political discourse. It is a popular tool for journalists and politicians, and public figures are easily accessible on Twitter, inviting discussion. Additionally, it is relatively easy for a regular person to use. There is no necessity for pictures and videos, the platform is a good discussion ground for live events, and importantly, comments can be brief. Twitter is popular among governmental bodies all around the world. So why abandon it?

The unwillingness of the Russian embassies to continue their propagandistic activities on Twitter can be easily explained by their strong associations with the Russian government. Russian propaganda on

Twitter is, and for a long time has been extremely effective, but only because it was hardly identifiable as such. The Twitter accounts identified as part of the pro-Russia activist community are a perfect example. It is difficult to determine the degree to which these accounts are fake troll accounts or real Twitter users engaged in genuine dialogue, even though they certainly spread Russian propaganda themes and messages. In the case of the embassies' profiles, however, there is no doubt by whom they are controlled. The increase of attention to their tweets due to the war in Ukraine has made them a target for pro-Ukrainian users and has created serious complications.

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Moving on to Facebook, the platform has initiated some efforts to address fake news. Facebook, for example, labels misinformation to warn users that online fact-checkers or Facebook algorithms have identified the contents as suspicious.<sup>12</sup> Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Russia-backed media as well as Facebook pages associated with Moscow have become the main concern for the platform's fact-checkers. At the moment, Meta, the company that owns Facebook, has restricted Russian-backed outlets across the European Union

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12 Meta Business Help Center, *About Fact-Checking on Facebook*, "Facebook", <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/2593586717571940>].

and has been globally demoting contents from state-affiliated media. This increased attention has not only further undermined the truthfulness of the contents posted by the embassies but also made it harder to attract “positive” attention from the users.



***This change in the platform of communication raises another question: who is the target audience? There are several reasons to believe that the social media pages of the Russian embassies see Russian citizens or Russian speakers as the main focus group in the near abroad countries***

However, the main reason for the change in preferred platforms is the state policy of the Russian Federation. Roskomnadzor restricted the use of Facebook and Twitter on the territory of Russia after the Russian media regulator reported “26 cases of discrimination against Russian media and information resources by Facebook”. According to a statement by the Russian media regulator, the blocking of Facebook platforms has been introduced «to prevent violations of the key principles of the free flow of information».<sup>13</sup> Diplomatic missions had to comply with the capital’s new policy line. In most countries, Russian embassies’ pages started disappearing from Twitter and Facebook, but significantly increased their activity on Telegram – a messaging service rarely used by Europeans regularly. More than 80% of Europeans have a

Facebook account, slightly less than 6% use Twitter, while only about 1% of people choose other social media, like Telegram.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Telegram has become increasingly popular among Russians and Russian speakers in different countries in the last few years. Its popularity has grown even greater since February 24th, 2022. Telegram’s share of mobile internet traffic in Russia increased to 63% in the first two weeks of March, up from 48% in the first two weeks of February.<sup>15</sup>

This change in the platform of communication raises another question: who is the target audience? There are several reasons to believe that the social media pages of the Russian embassies see Russian citizens or Russian speakers as the main focus group in the near abroad countries. Their demographic, linguistic, and cultural spheres had been impacted significantly during the Soviet period. Those changes caused long-standing political consequences, including increased vulnerability to Russian influence still current almost three decades later, as Russian-language Kremlin propaganda in these bordering countries still draws on aspects of the shared legacy of the post-Soviet states.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, approximately 25 million ethnic Russians were residing outside of their homeland, creating sizable minorities in many countries. These Soviet-era migrants and their descendants who speak and understand Russian in the former Soviet republics, might be targeted and influenced by Russian-language propaganda. This can be illustrated well with the examples of

13 *Приняты ответные меры на ограничение доступа к российским СМИ* (Response measures taken to restrict access to Russian media), The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, 4 March 2022, [<https://rkn.gov.ru/news/rsoc/news74156.htm>].

14 *Social Media Stats in Europe – April 2022*, “Statcounter”, [<https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/europe>].

15 S. Roach, In Russia, *Telegram has become the messaging app of choice*, “Protocol”, 21 March 2022, [<https://www.protocol.com/bulletins/telegram-whatsapp-meta-russia> access: 10 May 2022].

Latvia and Estonia. When these countries regained independence at the end of the Cold War, they had substantial minorities of people whose families were not from Estonia or Latvia and who primarily used Russian as their native language. To this day, the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia make up almost 30%<sup>16</sup> and 25%<sup>17</sup> of the population respectively. Russian speakers mainly consume Russian state-controlled media and tend to be more likely to adopt the Kremlin's perspective about current events.<sup>18</sup> That is why Moscow focuses on their regional compatriots who speak Russian, hail ancestrally from Russia, and, in some cases, have not been eagerly adopted by their resident countries. They have become the easiest target for ongoing war-related propaganda.

In the specific case of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the information campaign was aimed primarily at the broad Russian-speaking diasporas (including those outside Ukraine) to consolidate it around the idea of a civilizational struggle between the Eurasian culture and the West, while substantiating Russia's push for the status of leading geopolitical actor.

There is evidence that social and economic problems can also offer an opportunity for Russia to exert influence.<sup>19</sup> In the modern context, the popular narrative that Russian speakers are being discriminated against in the West is actively being used as another tool by propagandists. Russia is trying to

push the message that the West is losing its superpower status and therefore is not capable of offering the Russian speakers proper protection or prosperity. The "crisis of values" in Europe and the United States is another popular topic, with the so-called promotion of LGBTQ+ values through propaganda being presented as a threat to the conservative Russian society. Russia, on the other hand, must be associated with traditional values, such as the family and orthodoxy.

## Conclusion

During the full-scale war against Ukraine, the Russian propaganda machine modifies the narratives and spreads the idea that the Western media are escalating and exaggerating the situation, and that the countries of the West are prolonging the conflict by providing Ukraine with weaponry. All of the countries in Europe and the United States are enemies that want to use Ukraine in their broader geostrategic game aimed at the destruction of Russia. Russia, on the contrary, is not guilty of anything because all of its interference aims at promoting peace and denazifying Ukraine. That is how the Kremlin legitimises both the informational war and full-on warfare against any other state.

In discussion of the means to deliver information, the diplomatic agencies, which have become a part of the broader state system propaganda, are being used to

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16 Estonia. *Population: demographic situation, languages and religions*, "European Commission", 1 December 2021, [[https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/estonia/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/estonia/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions_en)].

17 Latvia. *Population: demographic situation, languages and religions*, "European Commission", 1 December 2021, [[https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-40\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-40_en)].

18 T. Helmus, E. Bodine-Baron, A. Radin, M. Magnuson, J. Mendelsohn, W. Marcellino, A. Bega, and Z. Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, Rand Corporation: 2018, p.66.

19 T. Helmus, E. Bodine-Baron, A. Radin, M. Magnuson, J. Mendelsohn, W. Marcellino, A. Bega, and Z. Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, Rand Corporation: 2018, p.69.

spread the Kremlin's messages. The findings show a lack of differentiation in different countries: Russian propaganda tends to use the strategy "one-size-fits-all". There is no variety of narratives; the pages are likely to present information from the same sources, often using the exact same words. Telegram has become the primary communication platform – it has begun replacing other social media platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook, despite being used far less frequently in countries other than Russia.

Russia uses the Russian-speaking communities in the Baltic and Eastern European countries in order to promote its narratives, manipulate facts and try to divert attention from important events and its crimes abroad, as well as to influence the political status quo. The Kremlin tries to pressure those populations' host governments, and provoke unrest in the regions or countries concerned. Moreover, the mere existence of these compatriot

populations can be used to legitimise Russia's status as a global leader whose protection is not only needed but welcomed outside of its borders.

In order to increase resilience to informational threats, it is crucial to study the main strategies of Russian propaganda. The fake stories and their sources must be identified and critically analysed. It is essential to understand the most common narratives and the broader aim of the Russian state-enforced propaganda.

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