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Russia Non-Russian View on Current Russian Politics

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Information security has become a strategically important aspect of international relations. Rapid development of information and communications technologies increases its importance. This paper focuses on the analysis of Russia's capabilities to achieve its foreign policy goals through methods of negative informational impact. Attempts to undermine the information security of Poland and Ukraine and to provoke tensions between the two countries are taken as an example.

Introduction

Information operations are an important tool in the Kremlin's foreign policy arsenal. Russia is systematically trying to influence public opinion worldwide. State intelligence services, fake accounts on social networks, state-funded media, and bot farms, the so-called "troll factories", are all involved in global information warfare that brings uncertainty and unpredictability and almost blurs the line between peace and war. The pillars of Russia's international information operations are multilingual information resources, such as the TV channel *Russia Today (RT)* and news agency *Sputnik*, as well as local alternative media – niche right-wing sites specialising in conspiracy theories and anti-European, anti-American, and anti-liberal content.

Russia invests significantly in its foreign media platforms. For instance, the non-profit organisation TV-Novosti, which owns RT, was subsidised with USD 369.7 million in 2020. The funding amount allocated for the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK), Russian officialdom's mouthpiece in the post-Soviet space, was USD 327.4 million in 2020¹.

Russia's information activities aimed at foreign audiences were detected as a threat by Western societies not so long ago. Particular concerns were caused by the Kremlin's manipulative practices during previous US and French presidential elections (in 2016 and 2017, respectively), as well as the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. From the Kremlin's perspective, the result of information operations abroad

1 *Records at Budget's Expense (Рекорды за счёт бюджета)*, "Secret Mag", 20 April 2020
[<https://secretmag.ru/news/rekordy-za-schyot-byudzheteta-telekanal-russia-today-potratil-22-3-mlrd-rublei-za-god.html>].

turned out to be rather questionable. The Russian government did not receive expected dividends in the diplomatic field. On the contrary, Russia's provocative behaviour has forced Western governments to take a closer look at information security issues. A number of initiatives aimed at raising awareness of citizens and debunking fake news were launched in response.



Russia's information activities aimed at foreign audiences were detected as a threat by Western societies not so long ago. Particular concerns were caused by the Kremlin's manipulative practices during previous US and French presidential elections

Countering Russian social media influence has become especially relevant on the eve of the 2020 US presidential election. How did the platforms handle the challenge? Facebook, for instance, developed partnerships with a bipartisan network of fact-checkers, added prominent labels to disputed stories, and changed the News Feed algorithm to favour posts from friends over links from publishers². Other social networking giants (YouTube, Twitter) also restricted access to manipulative publications of about 20 Russian media (*RIA Novosti, RT, Sputnik, Russia 1, etc.*)³.

For the domestic consumer, Russian propaganda constructs an image of Russia as a "besieged fortress". Therefore, the Kremlin

portrays its information policy as a response to provocative actions of "Western hostile forces". The framework of this narrative was laid out in the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation (adopted in December 2016). In the document, Russia appears as an object of destructive information influence of external forces – states that carry out hostile policy toward Russia, and terrorist organisations. However, in reality, we see the opposite picture, in which Russia continues to invade the information space of other states.

Russia's Information Toolkit in Poland and Ukraine

One of the key priorities of the Kremlin's policy in the region is to freeze Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration and slow down its cooperation with the EU. An obvious way to achieve this goal by means of a non-military toolkit is to provoke new and deepen existing misunderstandings in Ukraine's relations with its Western neighbours.

Poland also has a special place in the Russian anti-Western rhetoric. In the framework of a pro-Russian information paradigm, Poland is portrayed at the forefront of US political and energy interests in Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, even partial success of Russia's attempts to discredit Warsaw's policies in the military-political sphere in the eyes of neighbouring societies may weaken the ability to reach consensus within the EU and NATO, undermining the foundations of the Eastern Partnership policy.

Given the language barrier and cultural differences, the structure and methodology

2 *Labeling State-Controlled Media on Facebook*, "Facebook", June 2020

[<https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/labeling-state-controlled-media/>].

3 *Social Networks Limiting State Media Proposed to Be Blocked in Russia (В России предложили блокировать соцсети, ограничивающие государственные СМИ)*, "BBC", 19 November 2020

[<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-54999609>].


of Russian information activities and impact in Ukraine and Poland differ significantly. Therefore, the tools of Russia's information influence in Poland and Ukraine should be defined.

Poland

Moscow has relatively limited possibilities of influencing Polish society through information activities. There are no TV news channels linked to the Kremlin in Poland, and there are no key information portals actively lobbying Russian disinformation messages. Polish society does not use Russian-language television channels or internet portals due to the low percentage of people speaking Russian. The English-language channel RT, which is available via satellite platforms, is also extremely unpopular – the Poles who have access to English-language channels are much more likely to choose Western sources. Due to the small percentage of people who know Russian, the Telegram platform, which is actively used by Russians for disinformation and propaganda activities, is also not gaining popularity in Poland. Russian platforms such as Vkontakte (VK) or Odnoklassniki (OK) are not recognised as the leading ones, which makes it difficult to obtain data about the number of users. However, it is likely that the level of popularity is in line with the European trend (0.58% of Europeans using social networking platforms used VK in 2020)⁴. We can also assume that the main group using Russian platforms are Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians (including economic migrants) living in Poland, who are increasing the proportion of VK and OK users.

Under such circumstances, Russia is looking for ways to influence Polish society by using

Polish-language portals with controversial and radical content (on the verge of conspiracy theories), fan pages, and groups operating on Facebook or YouTube channels. Russia also attempts to influence the Polish information space through Russian portals that have Polish language versions (e.g., the portal that primarily affects the population of the Baltic states, *Rubaltic.ru*).



Russia is looking for ways to influence Polish society by using Polish-language portals with controversial and radical content (on the verge of conspiracy theories), fan pages, and groups operating on Facebook or YouTube channels

The Russian side also uses pro-Russian or national-radical organisations to lobby for its messages and to organise demonstrations or social actions that build desired narratives and messages. These organisations correspondingly have their own websites and fan pages that popularise the messages close to the Russian propaganda or introduce translations of Russian propaganda articles into the Polish infosphere.

YouTube plays a major role in the process of spreading messages of Russian propaganda in the Polish information space. It is on this platform that recordings of, among others, a few pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian actions are placed, as well as recordings that openly serve Russian disinformation purposes (e.g., arguing against the presence of US troops in Poland or arousing hatred toward Ukrainian migrants).

⁴ *Ranking 2020*, "Najpopularniejsze portale społecznościowe", 01 November 2020 [<https://lepiej-widoczni.pl/najpopularniejsze-portale-spolecznościowe-ranking-2020/>].

There is a noticeable tendency that the Polish language version of the Sputnik portal sets the agenda of disinformation content, which is popularised by alternative portals. It is also noticeable that some of the alternative portals are publishing articles clearly imitating Russian-language publications that have appeared on key information portals of the Russian Federation. Polish alternative portals draw not only on topics and narratives but also on phrases directly from Russian portals, which are actively used for propaganda.

Ukraine

Russia had expanded its presence in the information environment of Ukraine almost without hindrance until 2014. The key resource of Russia's information influence was television, one of the main sources of news for Ukrainians. During the occupation of Crimea and armed intervention in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the Russian propaganda machine was aimed at undermining the foundations of Ukrainian statehood. It is not surprising that the Ukrainian authorities "turned off the tap" of Russian state-sponsored television: Broadcasting of most Russian channels has been banned since the spring of 2014. Moreover, films glorifying Russian military and special forces, as well as Russian cultural figures supporting Russia's policy toward Ukraine, were also banned. As of today, the National Council of Ukraine for Television and Radio Broadcasting has restricted the broadcasting of more than 90 foreign TV channels, the vast majority of which are of Russian origin⁵.

According to a survey, 17% of Ukrainian citizens continue to use Russian media,

and Russian television remains one of the major sources of information for almost 6% of respondents. Russian TV channels are most often watched by respondents over 50 years of age living in the eastern regions of Ukraine (about a quarter of respondents in Donetsk and Zaporizhia regions). It is worth noting that the motivation is quite different: to receive news from Russia, to learn an alternative point of view on the events in Ukraine, to receive news in Russian⁶.



The Russian side also uses pro-Russian or national-radical organisations to lobby for its messages and to organise demonstrations or social actions that build desired narratives and messages


A real challenge in the context of information security of the state is the penetration of Russian narratives through the media network of local agents of Russian influence in Ukraine. A special role in this algorithm is given to Victor Medvedchuk, widely known in Ukraine as Putin's crony. No wonder Medvedchuk is recognised as the main Kremlin voice in Ukraine. In 2018-19, he indirectly acquired three news channels – NewsOne, 112 Ukraine, and ZIK. Thus, Russian propaganda received a "residence permit", which complicates the state's response to pro-Russian "information sabotage" on screen.

However, the effectiveness of these media resources is quite insignificant. First, although TV channels from Medvedchuk's

5 *Ukraine Banned Three Russian Channels – State Rada (В Україні заборонили три російські канали – Нацрада)*, "Radio Svoboda", 27 February 2020 [https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-nacrada-rosijski-kanaly/30458438.html].

6 *17% of Ukrainians Use Russian Media – Poll (Російськими ЗМІ користуються 17% українців – опитування)*, "Interfax", 16 October 2020 [https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/general/695544.html].

political orbit hold leading positions among Ukrainian news channels, the share of their audience on national air varies within only 1-2%. Secondly, although the editorial policy of TV channels usually sounds in tune with the main narratives of Russian propaganda, it is determined in the first place by the party line (“The Opposition Platform for Life”) and its electoral interests. Preference is given to the topics of Russian propaganda that strengthen the party’s position.



A real challenge in the context of information security of the state is the penetration of Russian narratives through the media network of local agents of Russian influence in Ukraine

Social networks remain the main source of news for Ukrainians. Therefore, an important step in enhancing Ukraine’s information resilience and data privacy was taken in May 2017, when Russian social networks VK and OK, as well as Mail.Ru, Yandex services, and a number of other Russian internet resources, were banned for three years. (Recently, President Volodymyr Zelensky extended the ban for another three years. Probably, a similar decision will be made in 2023). As a result, the number of VK visitors dropped more than five times (down to 10% of all Ukrainian internet users), while OK audience decreased threefold⁷.

Lately, the fears of Telegram as a new “Trojan horse” of Russian information influence have spread among the expert community in Ukraine. Thus, attempts to block Telegram

in Russia back in 2018 were perceived by many as a covert attempt to draw public attention to Telegram channels as sources of information and give the appearance of the state’s non-involvement in their activities. Indeed, it may seem suspicious that political Telegram channels began to expand in the Ukrainian segment of Telegram network on the eve of the 2019 election campaign. Moreover, behind the activities of a number of Telegram channels stood representatives of the inner circle of Ukrainian fugitive ex-president Viktor Yanukovich hiding in Russia. However, it is worth noting that despite 5.6 million users of the communication platform in Ukraine as of mid-2020, Telegram channels that cover political topics are less popular, but the popularity has been significantly increasing within the year.

The political situation in Belarus is a clear example of helplessness of a rigid administrative hierarchy when it faces a horizontal social communication network. Hence, the threat of possible Russian influence on information security of Ukraine by means of Telegram is overestimated in some aspects. It is unlikely that the Kremlin will choose a “Telegram Revolution” scenario to destabilise Ukraine because it may turn out to be a shot in its own foot: The use of Telegram as a communication platform for coordinating protests in Belarus and Ukraine will become a clear example of an instrument of civil disobedience in the eyes of the society in Russia. Given the popularity of the messenger among Russians (the number of Telegram users in the Russian Federation has exceeded 30 million⁸), the Kremlin may eventually run into trouble on the domestic political front, especially on the eve of the State Duma elections in September 2021.

7 *Three Years without Vkontakte (Три года без “Вконтакте”), “e-Pravda”, 14 November 2019 [https://www.epravda.com.ua/rus/publications/2019/11/14/653664/].*

8 *Number of Telegram Users in Russia Increased to 30mln (Число пользователей Telegram из России возросло до 30 млн человек), “Kod.ru”, 04 June 2020 [https://kod.ru/telegram-30-mln-users-from-russia/].*

Ukrainian Labour Migrants – Another Horror Story from Russian Propaganda

In the broader aspect, the issue of Ukrainian economic migrants is related to the spread of messages about the threat that Ukrainians pose to Polish workers (overtaking jobs). These messages were expanded to include the plots of banditism and alcoholism, which are supposed to be characteristic features of Ukrainian migrants. The messages popularised by portals involved in the distribution of content similar to Russian propaganda tried to arouse fear and dissatisfaction among the Poles with the presence of Ukrainians.



The Russian government uses the “national memory” policy as a trouble-proof tool for political mobilisation. The war against both internal and external “falsifiers of true history” is an inexhaustible resource for maintaining ratings of the national leader and enhancing state mythology

These narratives were combined with an attempt to spark social rebellion against the Polish government that opened the country to “wild hordes of bandits”. The messages indicated above were, over time, developed with current plots – for example, the threat posed to the society of becoming infected with COVID-19 by Ukrainians coming from a country that is completely unable to cope with the pandemic. In the picture created by the mentioned media centres, Ukrainians became a source of pestilence, banditry – and a source of social tensions. In order to emphasise the level of social anger of the Poles against the Ukrainians, the outlets connected with Russia broadcast the

frequency of attacks on Ukrainian migrants, remind about earlier beatings, and refresh the plots concerning fights between the Poles and Ukrainians.

In Ukraine, pro-Russian media gladly replicate news about conflicts between the Ukrainians and the Poles. This creates a hypertrophied impression of an atmosphere of hatred that seems to prevail between the Poles and Ukrainian migrants. Additionally, Russian media often use derogatory language relative to migrant workers from Ukraine, calling them “Gastarbeiters”.

Ukrainian labour migration is used by the Russian propaganda to construct an image of official Warsaw as a selfish “exploiter” of human resources of Ukraine. At the same time, Warsaw allegedly cultivates “russophobic” sentiments and artificially incites hostility and violence between the Ukrainians and Russians. Thus, Russian media sometimes portray Ukrainian migrants in Poland as “bearers of nationalist ideology” and its propagators.

All Quiet on the Historical Front

The Russian government uses the “national memory” policy as a trouble-proof tool for political mobilisation. The war against both internal and external “falsifiers of true history” is an inexhaustible resource for maintaining ratings of the national leader and enhancing state mythology. Practices of this kind are characteristic of many states that build their pantheons of heroes and adjust their national history in accordance with the political situation. Usually, such agenda does not coincide with the historical vision of other countries. Therefore, the battle over memory becomes more aggressive and fierce year after year. Not surprisingly, the aggressive tone of the Kremlin’s national memory policy is projected onto its foreign policy. This trend, of course, determines the agenda of Poland–Russia relations at the current stage.

The period of 2019-2020 saw a number of important anniversaries in the history of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia (in particular the 80th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, centennial anniversary of the Polish-Soviet War and its culmination – the Battle of Warsaw). Perhaps the harshest historical controversy between Poland and Russia arose over the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz. Ukraine’s ambassador to Poland, Andrii Deshchytisia, noted the following: “Vladimir Putin and his entourage launched a large-scale propaganda campaign accusing Poland of anti-Semitism and responsibility for the outbreak of World War II. The reaction of the Ukrainian side to these false reproaches must be unequivocal: we are in solidarity with Poland”⁹. It should be emphasised that these statements became the leitmotif of the Ukrainian president’s participation in commemoration events in Poland.

However, a fierce confrontation with Warsaw over history did not prevent Russian propaganda from exploiting its favourite topic: Ukrainian nationalists. Russian media gladly picked up critical statements by the ambassadors of Israel and Poland regarding the honouring of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in early January 2020. The response of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was interpreted as evidence of glorifying “Nazi collaborators”¹⁰.

The global coronavirus pandemic has temporarily overshadowed wars on the edges of national memory. However, one of the recent events that served to refresh these narratives was the visit of President Duda of Poland to Ukraine. Media centres have been permanently engaged in popularising Russian propaganda, focusing on the motive of the “Bandera greeting” (“Sława Ukrajini”), which, on the first day of the visit, during the official welcome at Mariyinsky Palace, was shouted out by the president of Poland according to Ukrainian protocol.

Competing Economies

In the picture of the world created by Russian propaganda for Ukrainian audience, Poland appears as Ukraine’s competitor in the European market. In this vein, Russian media reacted to the news about the plans of official Kyiv to start negotiations on the revision of the Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement (in 2021). Ukrainian Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Agriculture Igor Petrashko stated that Ukraine counts on “Poland’s friendly support in this important issue”¹¹.

At the same time, Russian media spread the thesis that the Association Agreement benefits Warsaw “as well as the European Union”, so Ukraine should not expect real support from the Polish side¹². Another almost similar argument is as follows: Polish

9 *Deshchytisia on Russia’s Information Attacks (Дециця - про інформатаки Росії)*, “UkrInform”, 02 January 2020 [<https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/2848593-desica-pro-informataki-rosii-polsa-ne-musit-nicogo-poasnuvati.html>].

10 *“Condemn Once and For All”: Will Israeli and Polish Ambassadors’ Call to Reject Heroization of Bandera Influence Kyiv? («Раз и навсегда осудить»: повлияет ли на Киев призыв послов Израиля и Польши отказаться от героизации Бандеры)*, “RT”, 03 January 2020 [<https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/704449-posly-izrail-polsha-bandera>].

11 *Revision of the Association Agreement: Ukraine Looks Forward to the Start of Negotiations with the EU in 2021 (Перегляд Угоди про асоціацію: Україна розраховує на початок переговорів з ЄС у 2021 році)*, “UkrInform”, 09 September 2020 [<https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-economy/3096013-pereglad-ugodi-pro-asociaciu-ukraina-rozrahovue-na-pocatok-peregovoriv-z-es-u-2021-roci.html>].

12 *Revision of Partnership: Why Kyiv Intends to Change EU Association Agreement (Пересмотр сотрудничества: почему Киев намерен изменить Соглашение об ассоциации с ЕС)*, “RT”, 10 September 2020 [<https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/782045-ukraina-soglashenie-associaciya-es-peregovory-2021>].

entrepreneurs, and hence the government, are not interested in strengthening Ukrainian economy due to the fear of an outflow of labour migrants.

Also, Russian media are trying to spread scepticism concerning cooperation between Ukraine and Poland in the energy sector. The Kremlin's irritation due to the consolidated position of Kyiv and Warsaw over Nord Stream 2 can be easily seen in Russia's attempts to generate mistrust. Moscow attempts to discredit Poland in terms of energy supplies to Ukraine: This is evidenced by a number of publications that critically assess the prospects of a trilateral agreement on the need to strengthen energy security in the region, which was signed on August 31, 2019, by US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine Oleksandr Danilyuk, and Polish Government Plenipotentiary for Strategic Energy Infrastructure Piotr Naimsky (according to the agreement, Poland will supply Ukraine with six billion cubic metres of natural gas in 2021)¹³.

Moreover, Kremlin-controlled media produce a negative information background for the agreements with the Polish company PGNiG over the search for gas deposits in western Ukraine. The main narrative sounds like this: Poland tries to become a regional gas hub through the sale of US gas to Ukraine. According to the interpretation of Russian propagandists, this violates Kyiv's main interest in energy, which is to buy Russian gas directly from Russia¹⁴.

Russian propaganda processes a lot of messages that strike at the image of the Polish

government (stimulating dissatisfaction with the government's actions, taking away part of the electorate and directing it toward parties of a more radical/right-wing nature). According to this narrative, bad (including anti-Russian) actions of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs allegedly lead to the full international isolation of Poland. Poland is to be isolated by the EU and Russia (after J. Biden's victory, there were also reports of impending isolation from the US). Poland is therefore to be condemned to relations with Ukraine and Lithuania, which are presented as weak and insignificant countries. The negative image of Ukraine is being used to create a negative image of the current government and other parties that allegedly seek to be subordinate to the US or Germany (EU). At the same time, a subliminal message is being built, according to which only normalised relations with Russia will allow Poland to strengthen its position in the world.

Conclusions

Deterioration of relations between Kyiv and Warsaw generates a number of benefits for Moscow. Thus, Ukraine and Poland are both in the focus of Russia's propaganda. Russian information warfare is aimed at undermining solidarity between the two states, eroding regional cooperation, and elevating cross-border tensions.

The activities of outlets controlled by the Kremlin or the activity of alternative portals permanently involved in spreading Russian narratives promote a negative image of Ukraine and Ukrainians, aiming to block the possibility of closer cooperation between Warsaw and Kyiv. The actions of the Russian propagandists serve to limit the support

13 *Ukraine, Poland, and US Will Sign a Memorandum on Gas Supply* (Україна, Польща і США підпишуть меморандум про постачання газу), "EuroIntegration", 30 August 2020 [https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2019/08/30/7100236/].

14 *Poland Will Look for Gas in Ukraine and Will Take It* (Польща поищет газ на Украине и заберет его себе), "Lenta.ru", 09 December 2020 [https://lenta.ru/news/2019/12/09/pgnig/].

of the Poles for political forces advocating cooperation with Ukraine, whether in diplomatic, military, or economic space.

Our analysis indicates the following key areas of Russian disinformation activities: manipulations in the sphere of collective memory, constructing a negative image of Ukrainian labour migration to Poland, and undermining energy cooperation.

In the face of such actions on the part of the Russian side, the response of Poland and Ukraine lies in the sphere of education. The goal is to reach out to the citizens with a clear message (accessible analyses), which would continuously reveal the mechanisms and goals of Russian disinformation. An effective tool seems to be the popularisation of social networking platforms that would tell the citizens of Ukraine and Poland (supported by examples of disinformation content – including screens of Russian articles) about the tools and goals of the

Kremlin on the basis of short and simple analyses/explanations.

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