

# New Propaganda and Disinformation Challenges for Visegrad/EaP states in the Changing Environment

November 2022

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November 2022

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<https://isans.org/new-propaganda-and-disinformation-challenges>

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## About iSANS – the International Strategic Action Network for Security

**iSANS** is an international expert initiative established in 2018 and aimed at detecting, analysing and countering hybrid threats against democracy, rule of law and sovereignty of states in Europe and Eurasia.

The initiative's attention is focused on hostile actions and networks of influence, threatening democracy, rule of law and sovereignty and using hybrid tools comprised of fake public initiatives and corrupt political figures serving foreign interests, fake news, disinformation and propaganda tools, networks of hate groups, complemented by the instruments of export of corruption, economic penetration, various covert operations, and military threats.

Experts with diverse academic and practical experience of many years from both sides of the Atlantic joined forces in iSANS to strengthen the resilience of democratic project on all levels, including general public, civil society and the media, academic and expert communities, national governments and international organizations. iSANS experts specialize in Kremlin studies and provide mapping of key Kremlin players involved in malign activities in the region.

While iSANS works on the developments in the larger region of Central and Eastern Europe, it is the situation in Belarus that has been in the focus of iSANS' attention from the very start of its work, as the Kremlin has continuously been building up its attempts to undermine sovereignty and independence of Belarus and establish its political, media, economic, and military control of the country. In 2018-2019, iSANS uncovered the structure of Russian influence networks in Belarus, its main actors and connections between them and produced several analytical reports, created comprehensive classification of pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus and launched an online debunking platform based on it, prepared a regularly updated list of toxic VKonakte public pages and a report based on their 6-month-long monitoring, released an anti-disinformation manual for the administrators of public pages on social media, has published monthly and bi-monthly reviews of anti-Belarusian propaganda and numerous columns on trends and topics of the Belarusian state and pro-Kremlin propaganda, as well as other studies of the propaganda environment and most prolific outlets, including Sputnik Belarus. Since early 2020, iSANS expanded its investigating activities on foreign influence actors and channels and continued to publish its findings.

iSANS also works on investigating Lukashenka's income channels, including the so-called Lukashenka's wallets – businessmen of his close circle.

Since the start of Belarusian revolution in August 2020, iSANS has worked to uncover and counter synchronized Kremlin's and Lukashenka's disinformation and propaganda, exposed involvement of Belarus in Russia's conflict with the West and investigated and exposed Kremlin political and propaganda assistance to Lukashenko, including the landing of the RT propaganda team.

iSANS produced overviews of the main tools and manifestations of repression in Belarus in the course of the counter-revolutionary crackdown against the protesters, civil society, and independent media, and participated in joint efforts to establish international mechanisms of documentation of crimes and accountability of perpetrators.

iSANS has also monitored, analysed and exposed Kremlin-induced Lukashenka's "constitutional reform", aimed at distracting the public from the protests, keeping Lukashenka in control forever, and pacifying the Kremlin.

With the start of Russia's preparation to the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine and the subsequent start of the Russian invasion, iSANS, together with its partners, has worked to document and expose the Lukashenka regime's complicity in the aggression and the occupation of Belarus by Russia. iSANS' monitoring and research work has been focused on military activity on the territory of Belarus and on analysis of regional security threats. A network of iSANS long-time contacts and informants on the ground under the coordination of iSANS Monitoring and Research Unit has been transformed into the Belarusky Hajun project which on the daily basis detects military activity of Russian and Belarusian troops in Belarus and their engagement in the aggression against Ukraine. Belarusky Hajun produces ongoing reporting on these activities and their analysis. These data, along with information on political, legal, economic, social, and other processes in and around Belarus that iSANS collects serve as a basis of iSANS analytical and policy work.

The work of iSANS, together with its partners, on monitoring, analyzing and countering pro-Kremlin propaganda targeting audiences in Belarus and other countries of Eastern and Central Europe has been focused since 2022 on monitoring and analyzing disinformation about the war, justification of war, and incitement to war.

Based on its research and analysis, iSANS develops policy advice and recommendations for actions by various stakeholders, aimed at preserving Belarus' sovereignty, opposing war and occupation, ending repression, developing international accountability mechanisms for perpetrators of international crimes, and laying ground for a democratic transition in Belarus.

iSANS provides its monitoring, analysis and policy advice to a wide range of policy-makers in governments of democratic states and inter-governmental organizations and engages in advocacy with them, offers policy support to democratic forces of Belarus, cooperates with civil society partners, assists in capacity building of media activists, and contributes to public awareness raising and strengthening the resilience of Belarusian society through publications of its expert materials, columns, articles, interviews on its website, social media and YouTube channel as well as on the pages of media partners. iSANS provides strategic analytical advice to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office and regularly interacts with the Transitional Cabinet.

## About the project

The project “New Propaganda and Disinformation Challenges for Visegrad/EaP states in the Changing Environment” has been carried out by iSANS – the International Strategic Action Network for Security in cooperation with its partners, the Institute for Public Affairs (Slovakia), European Expert Association (Ukraine), Prague Security Studies Institute (Czech Republic), and Res Publica Foundation (Poland, in cooperation with ABT Shield), and supported by the International Visegrad Fund. All organisations participating in the project have strong track record in the research of Russian propaganda and its malign influence operations in the region of Eastern and Central Europe.

The idea of the project has been to study changes in the Kremlin's propaganda methods and disinformation narratives in Eastern and Central Europe and to fill in the gap in comparative regional studies focused on analysis of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives and their evolution. The project has focused on three Visegrad countries – Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, and two Eastern Partnership countries – Belarus and Ukraine. All of them have been targets of Kremlin's malign operations and extensive pro-Russian propaganda influence.

When the project was at the planning stage in the summer of 2021, we spoke about a “changing environment” and discussed a likely metamorphosis in the Kremlin management system, including changes in methods of its external influence and narratives of its propaganda. We expected that “by autumn 2021 we will face a modified system of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives targeting CEE countries” that would pose new challenges for them. However, we could not expect that just a few months later the situation in the region would change so drastically.

With the start of the large scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine and the Lukashenka regime’s complicity in the aggression, the focus of the pro-Kremlin propaganda has changed. While its ultimate goal remains to undermine democracy as a concept, destroy the unity of European countries and NATO, to weaken sovereignty of neighboring states and to justify Russian imperial ambitions, its narratives have shifted to war propaganda, justification of the aggression against Ukraine, and disinformation about the war, including denial or silencing of massive war crimes committed by Russian troops and dissemination of “fake news” about actions of Ukrainian armed forces and allies supporting Ukraine.

More than a dozen research articles produced in the course of the project<sup>1</sup> demonstrate this historical evolution of Russian and pro-Kremlin propaganda and help raising awareness of wider audiences about malign influences and security threats the countries of the region are facing.

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<sup>1</sup> See articles at the project page at <https://isans.org/new-propaganda-and-disinformation-challenges>.

Five case studies included in this report review major Russian propaganda narratives and malign influence channels before the invasion of Ukraine and in the first months of the war. We hope that the research findings will allow suggesting more effective ways to counter Russian malign influence, including setting up counter-narratives, developing more efficient policies, and working on enhancing society's resilience to disinformation. Sharing experiences and expertise, and cooperation at the regional level appears to be a much needed response to common security threats.

We hope that the report would be useful to policymakers, experts in information security, media professionals, civil society groups, and will ultimately contribute to the strengthening of resilience of states and societies to pro-Kremlin's malign influences in the region of Eastern and Central Europe and beyond.

## The War that Has Changed Everyone. Ideology and Propaganda

**Yevhen Mahda**, European Expert Association (Ukraine), iSANS expert

*The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022, has changed not only the nature of the confrontation between the two largest post-Soviet republics, but has confirmed the ideological nature of the Kremlin's confrontation with Ukraine, creating a paradigm of a "battle of Good and Evil" in which Russia's chances of winning are slim.*

The history of the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine (or rather, Muscovy and Ukraine – more on this below) is centuries old. This explains why when Ukrainians talk about the current round of the European-scale duel one may hear that this is another day of the ninth year of a war that has been going on for hundreds of years. "History is written by the winners" is a phrase is an appropriate explanation for many Ukrainian citizens' poor awareness of their own history, and not only in the context of the confrontation with Russia. It should be emphasized that had it not been for the annexation of Ukrainian lands in the 17th century, the prospects for the transformation of the Muscovite state into the Russian Empire were unclear. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Russia used Ukraine as a donor for its forming an empire, leading to a perceptible slowdown in the process of the forming of the Ukrainian nation.

It should be emphasized that the military confrontation between Russia and Ukraine in the 21st century has turned out to be more favorable for Kyiv when compared to the 20th century. After the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, Ukraine managed to exist as an independent state for only a few years, unable to withstand the confrontation with the Bolsheviks, White Guards, and Poles. Perhaps the main positive outcomes of the struggle for Ukrainian statehood have been the Unification Act<sup>2</sup>, which united the Ukrainian People's Republic and the Western Ukrainian People's Republic, as well as the emergence of a group of representatives of the military-political elite who were able to continue the struggle for the independence of Ukraine after their defeat.

The declaration of Ukraine's independence did not become synonymous with the creation of an anti-Russian policy by the government. Before the Orange Revolution in 2004, relations between Russia and Ukraine were sometimes tense, but aggressive statements came from representatives of the Russian establishment. Ukraine distinguished itself even with the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, who became a high-ranking executor of the processes of gradual dismantling not only of the ideals of the Revolution on the Maidan, but also of Ukraine's independent foreign policy. The practical implementation of the slogan "Move away from Moscow!" for modern Ukraine became possible after the occupation of Crimea and the agitation of war in the Donbass. Only the undisguised aggression, even though it had been a hybrid war for 8 years, destroyed the illusions within

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30384765.html>

the Ukrainian establishment about the possibility of peaceful coexistence of Russia and Ukraine.

If, after the Kremlin crisis around the island of Kos-Tuzla in the Sea of Azov, Russia managed to impose on Ukraine an agreement on turning the Sea of Azov into an inland sea of Ukraine and Russia with a clear dominance of Russian interests, then in the fall of 2018 the situation was different. Then President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko announced in September 2018 the termination by non-renewal of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Ukraine and Russia<sup>3</sup>. Such is the fate of the document, the signing of which in May 1997 was perceived as a success for Ukrainian diplomacy and the de facto recognition of Ukraine's independence by the Kremlin. After the start of a large-scale invasion of Russian troops, diplomatic relations between Russia and Ukraine were severed in second half of February.<sup>4</sup>

Ukraine, despite the Russian strike on February 24, 2022, and the existence of Russian plans to overthrow Kyiv in three days<sup>5</sup>, survived. The significance of this is great. If before the start of the large-scale invasion the West was influenced by assessments of its own military experts who predicted the imminent collapse of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Ukrainian statehood, then already 7 weeks after the start of the invasion, Ukraine received 155-caliber howitzers and, subsequently, HIMARS MLRS. These artillery components proved to be able to effectively change the situation at the front, shifting Russia's advantage in troop resources and equipment. Although the question of the supply of modern armored vehicles and aircraft remains open, the fact of military and economic assistance from the West is indicative of its interest in Ukraine. Even more, the U.S. managed to overcome its "Afghanistan complex" that formed in 2021 after the Taliban came to power.

The scale of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation does not allow many of those dependent on world politics to be indifferent. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Russian-Ukrainian war is a factor influencing the global security system generally. Today, the world is an interested witness, and millions of citizens of Ukraine are direct participants in the War for the Independence of Ukraine, which entered its open military phase in the thirty-first year of its independent development. The opposing parties are the two former largest republics of the USSR – up until very recently, the metropolis and the colony. The nature of the confrontation emphasizes Russia's imperial essence and the pathological desire of its ruling class to maintain maximum influence in the post-Soviet space. But even eight months of an open military conflict (a full-scale conventional war) has demonstrated the irrevocability of the transformation of the situation not only within both countries, but also globally.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/political/528766.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-60482683>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/08/16/7363509/>

Here are the most illustrative examples:

- Ukraine turning out to be a stable state, contrary to the forecasts of numerous analysts.
- Russia being forced to turn to mass mobilization – a symbol of a full-scale war and a trigger for negative trends within the state.
- Western countries forming a Ramstein coalition and reviving a lend-lease program.
- Poland, which radically changed its political messages and became a reliable backer of Ukraine, accepting more than 2 million Ukrainian refugees<sup>6</sup>.
- China, for which the Russian invasion of Ukraine not only became an obstacle on its way to becoming the world's leading economy, but also being forced to learn from the mistakes of the Russian army given its desire to regain control over Taiwan (Republic of China).
- Turkey trying to play the role of a mediator in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine while developing its own interests.
- Kazakhstan, which is gravitating more and more towards China and thereby setting an example for other states of Central Asia. The statement by the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, who called on Putin during the Russia-Central Asia summit to respect the states in the region, seems especially revealing<sup>7</sup>.
- The states of the South Caucasus, which have become a haven for hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens who have decided to avoid mobilization. At the same time, Georgia is experiencing a conflict between citizens and the authorities over the direction of support for Ukraine. Armenia is gradually moving away from Russian influence and moving towards signing a peace treaty with Azerbaijan, which could significantly reduce Russian influence in the region.

The war for Ukraine's independence involves the tearing down many foundations that seemed unshakable after the collapse of the Soviet Union, including the increasingly likely transformation of Russia. This is evidenced by the scale and intransigence of the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, the course of hostilities, the occupation, and media policy of the aggressor. The stakes currently are very high, precipitating prolonged consequences from the largest war in this century.

One of these are the changes in world Orthodoxy. The creation in 2018 of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), independent of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), became the cornerstone for Russia in losing its status as a "Third Rome." Russia and Ukraine are the states with the largest Orthodox communities, with the UOC being the largest component

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<sup>6</sup> <https://inpoland.net.pl/novosti/obshhestvo/skilki-ukra%D1%97nskikh-bizhenciv-zaraz-perebuvaeh-v-polshhi-onovlena-informaciya/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0pIRt5-eUE>

of the ROC<sup>8</sup>. It is obvious that the public position of the primates of the ROC and the OCU, made clear through calls made from Moscow for the “desatanization of Ukraine”<sup>9</sup>, will lead to changes in the activities of a powerful social institution, formally separated from the state, following the hostilities.

It is indicative that after holding pseudo-referendums in the occupied territories of Ukraine, the catalyst for which was the military defeat of the Russian army in the Kharkiv region, Russia deprived its own borders of sacred immunity. Vladimir Putin’s phrase “Russia’s borders end nowhere”<sup>10</sup> now sounds ambiguous. The resolution of the UN General Assembly on non-recognition of the consequences of pseudo-referendums demonstrated that the world community is on the side of Ukraine<sup>11</sup>. And this already points to impossibility of Russia’s winning the war against Ukraine and convincing the world community of its own victory. Add to this the words of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who has repeatedly stressed that the Alliance cannot allow Russia to win the war against Ukraine<sup>12</sup>. In this case, not only the position of the North Atlantic Alliance as the most powerful military-political organization of the modern world is important (the process of joining Sweden and Finland to NATO only confirming this fact), but also the illusion of the Russian authorities that in Ukraine Russia is at war with NATO.

The scale of the war crimes committed by Russian troops in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion shows that hatred of Ukrainian citizens is an element of Russian state policy. The ideological basis of this is represented by a new version of actions by the Soviet Union in the summer of 1942. At that time the popular poet-commissar Konstantin Simonov wrote the poem “Kill him!”<sup>13</sup>, calling for the killing of German soldiers and officers. This work has become one of the most vivid examples of military propaganda of the Second World War. Its appearance can be justified by aggression from Nazi Germany, but today Russia is the aggressor. Putin’s long-standing statements that Russia could have won the Second World War without the participation of Ukrainians<sup>14</sup> should also be noted here.

The unprovoked armed aggression against Ukraine confirms that Ukraine, democratic and not controlled by Russia, poses a threat to its dominance in the post-Soviet space and its status as a world “great state.” Interestingly, the Kremlin is using 19th and 20th century methods (mass mobilization) in their fight against Ukraine in the largest armed interstate confrontation of the 21st century. At the same time, a declaration of war on Ukraine can

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<sup>8</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87212>

<sup>9</sup> <https://zn.ua/ukr/WORLD/u-rosiji-zahovorili-pro-desatanizatsiju-ukrajini-ta-priznachili-putina-holovnim-ekzortsistom.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-38093222>

<sup>11</sup> <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/10/1433377>

<sup>12</sup> <https://ru.interfax.com.ua/news/general/868199.html>

<sup>13</sup> <https://rustih.ru/konstantin-simonov-esli-dorog-tebe-tvoj-dom/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kabrBYQxjs4>

be ruled out since this would put Ukraine and Russia on the same level – an unacceptable prospect for the Kremlin.

For decades, Soviet and Russian propaganda exploited the myth of Russian-Ukrainian friendship. In 2022, this was buried on the streets of Bucha, Mariupol, Izyum, and other cities that became the sites of massacres of Ukrainian citizens. It is important to consider that the extermination of inhabitants of the occupied territories of Ukraine was often because of their higher standard of living compared to the occupiers<sup>15</sup>.

The large-scale invasion of Russia contributed to fulfilling the real meaning of the provisions of the Constitution of Ukraine, which at the time of adoption in 2019 seemed somewhat academic. This summer's status of a candidate for EU membership<sup>16</sup> and the autumn statement by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky on the country's accelerated entry into the alliance<sup>17</sup> are not only campaigning and propaganda. Their practical implementation will make it possible to talk about the final exit of Ukraine from the sphere of Russian influence. This scenario is categorically unacceptable for the Kremlin, which will do its best to prevent its implementation. At the same time, it should be understood that before the end of hostilities, it is not worth counting on Ukraine's entry into the EU and NATO. Not all members of the European Union and NATO are ready to clash so forcefully with Russia.

The idea of the existence of “a triune Slavic people – Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians” can be called the ideological basis of Russian state propaganda, but only Russians can count on a privileged position in this trinity. Ukrainians and Belarusians – each in their own way – are exploited and discriminated against. And such a balance of power not only determines the logic of the Kremlin's policy, but also significantly narrows its room for maneuver. The current state of relations between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus should, at the very least, alarm the government in Minsk. In the summer of 2021, Vladimir Putin published an article “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians”<sup>18</sup>, which was filled with propaganda clichés and disdain for the Ukrainian state. The situation in Belarus during the reign of Alexander Lukashenko is an illustrative example of the hybrid dismantling of the statehood of a post-Soviet republic in the interests of Russia. Ukraine in this “triangle” in recent months has become an example of the struggle for its own statehood and the restoring of its national history, although formally in Russia and Belarus more attention is paid to issues of historical memory.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://civilvoicesmuseum.org/ru/stories/%22vy-slishkom-horosho-zhivete-mne-eto-ne-nravitsya-skoro-budete-zhit-kak-my%22>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/yes-ukrayina-status-kandydat-na-vstup/31912331.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://suspilne.media/287520-zaava-ukraini-sodo-nato-stala-nespodivankou-dla-administracii-bajdena-politico/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

Modern warfare is not only a confrontation of armies, but also a competition of ideologies and viability of the state. Ukraine passed this test in the face of direct military aggression from a nuclear state. According to a study by the Rating group conducted in August 2022, 93% of Ukrainian citizen respondents believe in their ability to fend off the Russian attack<sup>19</sup>. This figure correlates with the results of the All-Ukrainian referendum held on December 1, 1991 and supports the proclamation of Ukraine's independence by the Verkhovna Rada on August 24, 1991. On the first day of the winter of 1991, more than 90% of the citizens of Ukraine supported the proclamation of Ukraine's independence, while more than 50% of the citizens who took part voted for the independence of Ukraine by secret ballot<sup>20</sup>.

The transition from a hybrid war (indirect impact employing a military component) to a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine will predictably weaken the positions of the "Russian world" in Ukraine. The main reasons for this include the following:

- The most notable pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians were either forced out or voluntarily left the country. The exchange of Azovstal defenders for Russian prisoners, during which Viktor Medvedchuk was transferred to Russia, completed this process.<sup>21</sup>
- Russian language and culture are rapidly losing their positions in Ukraine, which significantly reduces the tools of influence of the "Russian world" on citizens.
- Russian music, literature, art, and sports are losing popularity not only in Ukraine, but also in the world over.

It is worth emphasizing here an interesting feature. Russia was unable to use the potential of Ukrainian political emigrants who settled in Russia after the Revolution of Dignity. The wave of those who disagreed with the events of the Revolution of Dignity turned out to be powerful only at first glance, but the reality was that these allies of Russia turned out to be only "clip carriers" and not key participants in the preparations for the large-scale invasion of Ukraine. This testifies both to the preserving of the imperial paradigm of the Kremlin's thinking and to the limited potential of exploiting the Russian branch of Ukrainian political emigration. On the other hand, there are relatively few Russian citizens who try to prove their loyalty to Ukraine in word and deed. A significant number of them are fighting with weapons in their hands. Ex-parliamentarian Ilya Ponomarev tried to create a political project but was not particularly successful in this<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup>[https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/s\\_mnadcyate\\_zagalnonac\\_onalne\\_opituvannya\\_dentichn\\_st\\_pa\\_tr\\_otizm\\_c\\_nnost\\_17-18\\_serpnja\\_2022.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/s_mnadcyate_zagalnonac_onalne_opituvannya_dentichn_st_pa_tr_otizm_c_nnost_17-18_serpnja_2022.html)

<sup>20</sup> <https://uinp.gov.ua/informaciyi-materialy/vchytelyam/metodychni-rekomendaciyi/informaciyi-materialy-ukrayinskogo-instytutu-nacionalnoyi-pamyati-do-30-richchya-vseukrainskogo-referendumu-1-grudnya-1991-roku>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.slovovidlo.ua/2022/09/22/novyna/polityka/ukrayina-viddala-obmin-rosiyi-medvedchuka-zmi>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRgtATwW4XI>

Obviously, the Russian-Ukrainian war has intensified centrifugal movements in Russia, whose participants are increasingly talking about the need for the collapse of Russia and the creation of dozens of new states on its ruins. This process must be realistically evaluated using the retrospective of the desire for independence of the national republics. The Russian-Ukrainian war, due to the huge losses of the Russian army and aggravated by mass mobilization, is a trigger for internal upheavals within Russia. The dismantling of Russia today does not look like a farfetched scenario for the development of events, since the Russian leadership, through its barbaric actions, has placed itself outside the law.

Since Russia is a presidential republic, it is worth paying attention to the kind of “role exchange” between the presidents of Russia and Ukraine. Volodymyr Zelensky, who had no political experience before being elected head of state, after February 24 turned into a symbol of Ukraine’s resistance and became one of the most popular politicians in the world. Vladimir Putin, who has been in power in various forms for more than 20 years, is seriously degenerating and becoming politically inactive. It is becoming more and more difficult for the master of the Kremlin to respond to the challenges that life throws up for him, and his speech at the Valdai discussion club is the best confirmation of this.<sup>23</sup>

The Russian propaganda machine is continuing to work actively. In drawing attention to the primary tone of statements, it should be emphasized that it often runs on idle, promoting messages that could scarcely be viable in the modern world:

- The very term “special military operation” did not withstand the test of the duration of hostilities, which began with mobilization, the myth of its “partial” nature, and the exchange of prisoners, during which Viktor Medvedchuk, Putin’s godfather, went to Russia in exchange for 150 Azovstal defenders. The semantic construction “special military operation” was supposed to calm public opinion in Russia but failed to handle this.
- The concepts of “denazification” and “demilitarization” turned out to be no less fragile when applied to the realities of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. Russian society simply did not understand them, although it was consistently flooded with stories about how their “grandfathers fought.” It seems that a cognitive dissonance has formed between the image of the Ukrainian people as “fraternal” and the need to “denazify” them. At the same time, the mobilization of those liable for military service essentially removed the need for “denazification” from the agenda. There was no answer to the obvious question about the connection between the process of “denazification” of Ukraine and the nationality of Vladimir Zelensky (who is Jewish).
- Russian propaganda consistently dehumanizes the enemy. The Ukrainian Defense Forces are called “nationalists”, “Nazis”, and “Zelensky’s militants” in propaganda messages, and various war crimes are attributed to them. Violating the norms of

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<sup>23</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>

the Geneva Convention, Russian propagandists are forcing Ukrainian prisoners of war to public “repentance” to serve their own interests.

- Another aspect of the dehumanization of the enemy is the desire to show Ukrainian servicemen as adherents of Nazi ideology. Banned in Russia, the Azov regiment is perceived by local propaganda as part of the Nazi military structure. It is no coincidence that a show trial was being prepared over the captured defenders of Azovstal in Russian-occupied Mariupol<sup>24</sup>. Although Azovstal’s defense leaders escaped Russian captivity during the exchange in September 2022, it cannot be fully argued that the idea of holding such a process has lost its relevance.
- Special attention is given to foreign troops of the Armed Forces of Ukraine who were taken prisoner by Russia. Here we are talking primarily about the marines who were sentenced to death by the “court” of the self-proclaimed DPR but returned home because of an exchange. Violating the Geneva Convention, Russian propagandists publicly showed footage from the interrogation of prisoners, in which they gave evidence Russian authorities needed.
- The theme of a “dirty bomb”, which sounded at the highest political level of Russia in October 2022, was being worked out at the beginning of the large-scale invasion. The capture of the Chernobyl and Zaporozhye nuclear power plants (the most famous and most powerful nuclear power plants in Ukraine) gave rise to discussions about the preparation of a “dirty bomb”. However, in the spring of 2022, this information wave subsided by itself only to be revived in the fall of 2022 through the mouths of representatives of Russia’s top military-political leadership.
- Russian propaganda has not been limited to reports of a “dirty bomb”. On a regular basis, the head of the chemical, bacteriological, and radiation protection forces of the Russian army, General Kirillov, publicly voices insinuations about the possible use of poisonous substances by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, however without any evidence made public.
- A sore point of Russian propaganda could also be called the supply to Ukraine and the use of Western weapons by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Since the delivery of 155-caliber howitzers to Ukraine, which are in service with NATO countries and have a sufficient supply of ammunition, Russian propagandists have been trying to prove that American (European) weapons are not capable of influencing the situation at the front<sup>25</sup>. The situation was aggravated by deliveries of HIMARS MLRS to Ukraine, which then demonstrated their remarkable effectiveness. The destruction of the “transport-charging installation for the HIMARS MLRS”<sup>26</sup> was excitedly written about by Russian media back in the summer of 2022, ignoring the

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2022/08/10/15249038.shtml>

<sup>25</sup> <https://eodaily.com/ru/news/2022/09/06/specoperaciyu-na-ukraine-ne-pomozhet-ostanovit-ni-odno-zapadnoe-oruzhie-ekspert>

<sup>26</sup> <https://voxukraine.org/ru/nepravda-vs-rf-unychtozhyly-puskovuyu-ustanovku-y-transportno-zaryazhayushhuyu-mashynu-himars/>

fact that there was no transport-charging installation for this type of weapon exists. The press secretary for the Russian Ministry of Defense, General Igor Konashenkov, reports almost daily on “interceptions of HIMARS missiles.” At the same time, there is not a single objectively confirmed case of the destruction of a MLRS launcher of this type.

- The Kremlin has succeeded in blurring responsibility for its own actions, which is manifested in several aspects at once. First, the Russian media actively use the phrase “allied forces”<sup>27</sup>, which bring together the Russian army and illegal armed groups created in 2014 in the so-called DPR and LPR, and then in 2022 in other occupied regions of Ukraine. Units created from citizens of Ukraine are more often not voluntary. No less indicative is the fact that the situation in the occupied territories is being commented on by local collaborators, and not by Russian officials. It is interesting that among the fellow travelers of Russia are not only ex-parliamentarians Evgeny Balitsky<sup>28</sup> and Vladimir Saldo<sup>29</sup>, but also the anti-vaccinator Kirill Stremousov<sup>30</sup>, well known for his statements. This situation has not changed even after the pseudo-referenda on the annexation of the occupied territories of Ukraine to Russia.
- At the same time, the actions of Russian troops in the occupied territories of Ukraine have often directly copied the work of Soviet propagandists during their stay in Afghanistan with a “limited contingent of Soviet troops” in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s<sup>31</sup>. If you believe the reports of Russian propagandists, then the military from Russia only take children to school, plant flowers, and water trees.
- Ramzan Kadyrov can safely be called the favorite of Russian propaganda in Ukraine. The head of the Chechen Republic not only skillfully imitated direct participation in hostilities, but also sent his three underage sons to Ukraine, who posed with weapons in their hands<sup>32</sup>. It is worth noting the alliance between Kadyrov and Wagner PMC coordinator Yevgeny Prigozhin, who entered the public sphere by recruiting Russian prisoners to take part in hostilities in Ukraine<sup>33</sup>. The Kadyrov-Prigozhin alliance spoke out with intense criticism of Russian generals<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://iz.ru/1403343/2022-09-29/soiuznye-sily-rossii-i-dnr-nachali-nastuplenie-pod-bakhmutom>

<sup>28</sup> [https://rus.lb.ua/file/person/815\\_balitskiy\\_evgeniy\\_vitalevich.html](https://rus.lb.ua/file/person/815_balitskiy_evgeniy_vitalevich.html)

<sup>29</sup> <https://tass.ru/info/15958209>

<sup>30</sup> <https://ms.detector.media/trendi/post/28056/2021-08-31-prorosiysskyy-trykster-konspirolog-i-vatazhok-antyvaksiv-khto-takyy-kyrylo-stremousov/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://iz.ru/1338333/aleksei-ramm/oblast-mira-kak-segodnia-zhivet-kherson>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/odnih-na-uboy-a-svoih-detey-v-reklamu-zachem-synovjya-kadyrova-ezdili-v-ukrainu/32094770.html>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.svoboda.org/a/prigozhin---o-verbovke-zaklyuchyonnyh-na-voynu-libo-zeki-libo-vashi-deti-/32035673.html>

<sup>34</sup> <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/10/04/kadyrov-i-prigozhin-regulyarno-i-podozritelno-sinhronno-kritikuyut-rossiyskuyu-armiyu-chego-oni-dobivayutsya>

- Coverage of the actions of Russian troops in Ukraine has two components. On the one hand, there are the official videos of the Ministry of Defense, posted on various media platforms. It should be noted again that in Russia the media are legally prohibited from using unofficial sources of information about the conducting of the “special military operation in Ukraine”<sup>35</sup>. However, this does not in the least interfere with the activities of the group of war correspondents (military correspondents), whose practices were worked out back in the Donbass and Syria in previous years of Russian aggression. This kind of media “double-barreled gun” works mainly in situations without any alternative media sources. This describes Russia, which has taken several specific measures to close its information space from foreign influence, since beginning its large-scale invasion of Ukraine<sup>36</sup>.
- It is strange, therefore, to see that Russian propaganda has failed to find a creative approach to conducting “limited” mobilization, which resulted in sending out a significant number of subpoenas to those liable for military service. Since many mobilized individuals were captured by Ukrainians or were killed literally within a month after the announcement of mobilization<sup>37</sup>, the question arises: what is happening in the Russian army and what is the state of the reserves if soldiers and sergeants are transferred to the combat zone without minimal training? Russian propaganda has not been able to answer this question.
- After October 10, official Russian media (RIA Novosti, TASS) began to cover in detail not only the results of the massive missile strikes on civilian targets in Ukraine, aimed at destroying critical infrastructure, but also that air alerts were announced in Ukrainian cities and regional centers. This testifies not to the effectiveness of Russian propaganda, but to its focus primarily on the Russian consumer.

Clearly, a few words about Ukrainian propaganda should be said in the context of the large-scale invasion. It should be noted that trends in the use of propaganda are fundamentally different from the practice in Russia. The principle “Ukraine is not Russia”<sup>38</sup> set forth by Leonid Kuchma is embodied in various manifestations.

- Following Russia’s large-scale invasion, several popular television channels in Ukraine (private channels as well as the parliamentary television channel Rada and Public Broadcasting) united to conduct the United News telethon. Its creation was a necessary step, though the content of the United News telethon has been criticized in professionally<sup>39</sup>. At the same time, Minister of Culture and Information

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60615902>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-60903909>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-63227622>

<sup>38</sup> <https://news.liga.net/politics/news/kuchma-ukraina-ne-rossiya-i-nikogda-ey-ne-stanet-budte-vy-proklyaty>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2022/06/21/7353715/>

Policy Oleksandr Tkachenko is convinced that the current news format should remain until the end of the war<sup>40</sup>.

- Three television channels close to former President Petro Poroshenko (Direct, Channel 5, and Espresso) were cut off from digital broadcasting while retaining the ability to broadcast via satellite, YouTube, and other digital platforms. Attempts to find those responsible for this counter-intuitive decision were unsuccessful<sup>41</sup>. At the same time, it should be noted that all three channels maintained their position of supporting the Ukrainian state and did not slip into indiscriminate criticism.
- The format of daily video messages to the Ukrainian people chosen by Volodymyr Zelensky's team can be called successful. It, among other things, allows for the creation of an antidote to Russian propaganda's allegations about the fugitive President of Ukraine that continually appear in the media<sup>42</sup>. Zelensky's television addresses to parliaments, mainly in the EU and NATO, and other television initiatives of the head of the Ukrainian state have also been quite successful.
- The decisions of the Ukrainian authorities to apply for membership in the European Union and NATO discussed above should be taken together. They make it possible to outline a path for the country's development and to create an image of a "bright future" that is necessary from a technological perspective for the millions of citizens who are going through the most extensive trial of their lives, regardless of age and income level. A "return to civilization" is how the European and Euro-Atlantic vectors of Ukraine can be described and which have been created to be fulfilled.
- An important component of the media confrontation is video footage filmed by the Ukrainian military and employees of other law enforcement agencies while involved directly in combat operations. They qualitatively outperform the "patchwork" products of their Russian counterparts.
- Anonymous Telegram channels managed by the Russian special services can be considered a factor of Russian propaganda against which so far there has not been developed an effective countermeasure<sup>43</sup>. Their integration into the Ukrainian media space began in 2018-2019, subsequently forming an impressive base of subscribers. Today, these tools of influence are focused on the crafting of an alternative reality, the creating of conditions for capitulation, and the forming of preconditions for strengthening Russian influence in Ukraine.
- It should be emphasized that the decisions taken in 2015-2017 to limit the broadcasting of Russian television channels and the spread of Russian social

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-tkachenko-marafon-svoboda-slova/32066666.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://detector.media/infospace/article/199186/2022-05-13-sho-ogo-yak-na-parlamentskomu-komiteti-shukaly-vynnykh-u-vidklyuchenni-5-kanalu-pryamogo-i-espreso-stenograma/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://voxukraine.org/ru/fejk-vladymyr-zelenskyj-sbezhal-yz-ukrayny-posle-vtorzhenyya-rossyy/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.unn.com.ua/ru/news/1969004-sbu-oprilyudnila-spisok-telegram-kanaliv-yaki-koordinuyut-spetssluzhbi-rf>

networks in Ukraine<sup>44</sup>, taken together with the closure of pro-Russian television channels in February 2021<sup>45</sup>, significantly increased Ukraine's information security. At the same time, mechanisms of state censorship have not been officially launched. Paradoxically, the situation is influenced positively by the low level of media literacy among people in Ukraine, many of whose citizens are satisfied with the quality of information coming from the United News telethon.

Ukraine has managed to prove not only its facility for political survival, which has been a discovery for a part of the world establishment, but also a belonging to European political culture and traditions. The Russian-Ukrainian war, therefore, is not only a War for the Independence of Ukraine, but also a realistic opportunity not only to reduce influence of the "Russian world," but also to try to dismantle Russia in its current aggressive form.

The large-scale Russian invasion has significantly changed the perception of what is happening in international relations. We have witnessed a major demythologization of Russia, which is quickly losing features of the appearance of a state claiming to be one of the leaders of the modern world. The redirection of Russian propaganda towards anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism will not be able to qualitatively change the situation, but it may well demonstrate adherence to Soviet methods of propaganda influence. Russia is not only rapidly losing its authority, but in the binary model of relations that the Kremlin is building Russia's actions are becoming synonymous with Evil, while Ukraine and its allies are on the side of Good. Without trying to idealize the fact of a global military confrontation as such, it should be noted that Russia's ideological constructions and reality are increasingly moving apart from one another. The result of this will be that soon (obviously post-war) Russia will see a serious reduction in its ability to influence the world order.

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<sup>44</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D1%83%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BA%D1%83-%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%85-%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%86%D1%81%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B9/a-53445829>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/kanaly-medvedchuk-sankciy-zelenskiy-tv-112-zik-newsone-zaborona/31082909.html>

## “Soldiers in the Information War”: War Propaganda in Belarus

*Andrey Kalikh, iSANS analyst*

### **Introduction**

The Russian war of conquest in Ukraine and ongoing war crimes committed by Russian troops against civilians in the occupied territories have brought in relief the role of each party in the conflict, unanimously regarded by the global community, with Russia as the aggressor, treacherously invading the territory of a sovereign state and violating every conceivable legal and ethical law of war, and with Ukraine as its the victim, fighting for its independence and the lives of its people.

This dual paradigm seems to leave no room for a third player. Still, another country deserves mention among active participants in the armed conflict, even though its soldiers have not (yet) been in the combat zone. Belarus – Russia’s military ally, that placed its territory at the disposal of Russian troops to be used as a springboard to invade Ukraine and has allowed its airspace to be used for missile attacks on Ukrainian cities, while continuing to support the “special military operation” (SMO) financially and politically. Several hundred rocket attacks coming from Belarus have already been recorded while Belarus continues to allow its territory and military infrastructure, including airfields and railways as well as training grounds and training centers to be accessed by Russian troops for the training of recently mobilized Russians. In autumn 2022, Belarus handed over to the Russian Armed Forces more than a hundred tanks, dozens of armored vehicles and military trucks, and thousands of rounds of ammunition. Belarusian state media continue to actively engage in propaganda support for the SMO, synchronizing their publications with the Kremlin’s propaganda machine.

Until the fall of 2020, Belarus managed for a long time to play the part of a quasi-neutral state. Against the backdrop of conflicting neighbors, “neutrality” was a profitable and unoccupied niche, which was opportunistically used by the illegitimate Belarusian “president” Alexander Lukashenka. The image of Belarus as a “peacemaker” trying to bring the belligerents to the negotiating table looked especially convincing in the first years that followed the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the armed conflict in the Donbas, when, under the auspices of the Minsk Agreements, Lukashenka was lucky enough to gather the heads of leading European states, as well as Ukraine and Russia, in his capital. That short-term success made it possible to put off the country’s political and economic isolation, achieve some lifting of sanctions, and partially restore legitimacy to the regime for a time, making Lukashenka seem an equal partner in the negotiations.

However, Lukashenka was unable to make a fool of the European governments for long. The democratic West was horrified to see the bloody crackdown on peaceful protests following the rigged presidential elections in August 2020, and the routing of the

opposition, independent media, and non-governmental organizations. The image of Lukashenka as “peacemaker” was gone for good. Belarus made a bet on strength, on tightening the screws, and on an alliance with the Kremlin. Following this, Lukashenka had no choice but to follow in the wake of the Kremlin’s policy aimed at open confrontation with the West. World leaders turned away from the Belarusian dictator, while the economic isolation and political dependence of his regime on Russia reached new heights.

The shifts in the Belarusian media space offer a vivid illustration of such dependence. Prior to the Russian invasion, Belarusian state media, although reflecting the primary storylines of Russian propaganda, had been directing their main efforts towards the fight against the “internal enemies” – that is, the opposition, civil society and independent media – as well as towards maintaining Belarus’s image as a peaceful and neutral power, which the “collective West” sought to weaken.

As the start of the “special military operation” approached, the main narratives of Belarusian state media changed, with war rhetoric gradually pushing “internal enemies” to the periphery of the media agenda. Internal threats were effectively replaced by external ones. The new geopolitical situation demanded absolute and complete loyalty from the Kremlin’s only ally, leaving it no opportunity to remain in a “neutral” mode. Belarusian society was to be mobilized in the same way as Russian society. The justification and preparation for the aggression against Ukraine was also a good excuse to shift the focus of public attention away from domestic problems. However, the task of justifying for Belarusians the need to provide the country’s territory and infrastructure to the Russian army to be used for the invasion of a brotherly Ukraine turned out to be somewhat more difficult than legitimizing the war in the eyes of the Russians, to whom the narrative of a “besieged fortress” had been introduced over the entirety of Vladimir Putin’s rule. Beginning in November–December 2021, when it became obvious that a “major war” was imminent, the main efforts of state propaganda have been directed towards solving the problem of its legitimization for Belarusian audiences.

The transformation of the propaganda narratives in Belarus has been the prime focus of attention of iSANS experts, whose findings were published in 2020–2022. These publications analyze the changes in the main storylines of Belarusian state media and Russian propaganda resources directed at Belarus. Examples of such materials are available on the iSANS website: [“Pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus: Classification of narratives”](#) (2020); [“Anti-Belarusian propaganda and hate speech in Vkontakte”](#) (2020); [“Justifying the militarization of Belarus and integration with Russia” \(Part 1 and Part 2\)](#) (2021); [“Integration with Russia as salvation from the Nazi West”](#) (2021); [“Anglo-Saxon anti-Belarusian provocations and the Muslim conspiracy”](#) (2021); [“Lukashenko continues to call for war”](#) (2022); [“Together with Russia against Western aggression”](#) (2022); [“Coverage of the Russia-Ukraine War in Sputnik Belarus publications”](#) (2022); [“Storylines of Belarusian state television channels, January-March 2022”](#) (2022); [“Belarusian state television channels increase the level of accusations against Ukraine and the U.S.”](#) (2022); [“War propaganda](#)

has become a real war” (2022); “State television: Europeans are impoverished due to sanctions and Ukrainian refugees are acting insolent” (2022); “Western machinations and ‘denazification’ problems” (2022), etc.

## **Narratives of war in Belarusian propaganda and their main disseminators**

Russian propaganda myths have become an integral part of the Belarusian media agenda and have found their way to the content promoted by major state media. The key plot and semantic lines of the propaganda during the preparation for and start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 can be grouped under the following:

### ***1. Threats and calls to war: Justification of war and Belarus’s participation***

The main source of the stories aimed at justifying Russian aggression against Ukraine, as well as the author of important statements, has been the self-proclaimed president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka. The in-house propagandists of the state media are mainly engaged in as little as working along the ideological directions indicated by Lukashenka.

Unlike in Russian propaganda, one can hardly find any direct calls for murder and violence in the aggressive narratives of Belarusian state television.<sup>46</sup> However, the state and pro-state media use allegory to convey clear and unambiguous threats that could lead to violent actions. From a legal point of view, such statements can be qualified, for example, as “*preparation or conduct of an aggressive war*” under Article 122, as “*war propaganda*” under Article 123, or as “*inciting racial, national, religious or other social hatred or discord*” under Article 130 of the Belarus Criminal Code, as well as in accordance with international law on war propaganda, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Private channels or links to speeches by Belarusian television presenters and commentators, for example, on YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook, are often blocked by social networks themselves and video hosting sites because of the violation of their rules on hate speech or similar statements. In these cases, we provide indirect references to specific statements and add a corresponding note. Also, the European Union restricts access to websites run by several Belarusian media outlets, making it possible to access them using only special tools to bypass such restrictions, such as VPNs. All this somewhat complicates the search for and classification of such quotations and statements for researchers.

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<sup>46</sup> Compare this with the direct calls of Russian propagandists, such as Krasovsky, Simonyan, Mardan, Solovyov and others, to kill Ukrainians, destroy Ukraine and its civilian cities, etc., as well as similar statements made by Russian military officials along with references to the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic” broadcast by Russian media (see Gubarev et al.). See examples in “Top-100 Kremlin political managers: A directory. The Kremlin propaganda machine: a directory of top-100 media managers, public figures, experts, and ideologues.” iSANS, August 2022.

## Threats in speeches by Belarusian propagandists

*“The Head of the Office of the Prime Minister of Poland Michał Dworczyk said that the matter of transferring Polish scrap metal to the Banderites in the form of MiG-29 has not yet been closed. These **psheks** are strange people: their master from Washington said ‘No’ to them, but they continue asking for trouble. **In this scenario, the Warsaw People’s Republic might appear on the world map as well.**”*

(Telegram channel “Nevolf”, March 14, 2022)<sup>47</sup>

*“The combat effectiveness of our army is sufficient to give a drubbing to your entire so-called Baltic-Black Sea Union. This is without even talking about the potential of the union state. But we do not want a destroyed Warsaw and refugees from Lithuania in the Baltic Sea. I swear, we do not. Calm down, Poles, get yourself together, and stop your provocations. There will be no Rzeczpospolita from sea to sea... **But if children’s tears won’t bring you to your senses, then strategic Tu-22M3 aircraft of the Air and Space Forces of the Russian Federation will... Run, you Poles.**”*

(Grigoriy Azaryonok, November 12, 2021)<sup>48</sup>

*“All your vile plans are obvious – you want to unleash a war in Europe. The Poles are distracting the Belarusian troops, while the Banderite psychopaths are attacking Russia. The Poles and the Baltic ‘Vymirates’ [a combination of the words ‘to die out’ and ‘Emirates’] are being drawn in. The European Union is falling apart, Eurasia is winning this war, although suffering losses, and the States are again the world hegemon. **Just remember, you cursed humanoids: you like to start wars, but we are the ones who end them. And we won’t end this one in Vilnius and Warsaw. We’ll end it in London and Washington.**”*

(Grigoriy Azaryonok, December 3, 2021)<sup>49</sup>

*“From now on, the recipe is as follows: beat, beat the Banderites at the front, and beat the liberals in the rear.”*

(Grigoriy Azaryonok, March 19, 2022)<sup>50</sup>

## Justification of the war and Belarus’s participation

**Storyline:** Had Russia not launched a pre-emptive strike, the “collective West” and NATO would have hit Belarus and Russia with the hands of Ukraine.

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<sup>47</sup> <https://t.me/nevolf/9386>

<sup>48</sup> Blocked link: <https://youtu.be/TQk9JQ2XidM?t=137>. Indirect link: <https://www.facebook.com/antifashist.org/posts/3526940240865530>

<sup>49</sup> Blocked link: <https://youtu.be/VIRTeAEPcwk?t=1086>. Indirect link: <https://euroradio.fm/ru/eto-deystvitelno-kak-1941-y-propaganda-pugaet-belorusov-voynoy>

<sup>50</sup> <http://ctv.by/azaryonok-pro-incident-s-poslom-belarusi-na-ukrainskoy-granice-prosto-unichtozhil-nacista-moralno> (link is blocked in the EU)

*“And I will now show you the location from which they planned to attack Belarus. If there had not been a preventive strike on these positions... they would have attacked the troops of Belarus and Russia, which were conducting exercises. **Therefore, we did not unleash this war, our conscience is clear. It’s good that we started.**”*

*(Alexander Lukashenka at a meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow on March 11, 2022)<sup>51</sup>*

*“They accuse Russia of being the aggressor, and us of the same. Had the preventive special operation not started then, a MISSILE ATTACK would have hit Belarus first.”*

*(Speech by Lukashenka during the open lesson “Historical Memory is the Road to the Future!”, September 1, 2022)<sup>52</sup>*

*“Russia cannot lose, Russia cannot fail there, and I, and many Belarusians, support Russia in this. And they prepared for this! Not the Ukrainians, but by those in the west, in the U.S., and they will keep up the pressure to bring Russia to its knees. But Russia cannot kneel!”*

*(Ibid.)<sup>53</sup>*

*“It is clear now that if the military special operation in Ukraine had not started, NATO would have literally launched an attack the next day with the hands of the Banderites and neo-Nazis. Russian soldiers came just in time to save hundreds of thousands of lives.”*

*(Lyudmila Gladkaya, March 4, 2022)<sup>54</sup>*

*“Just today a lot of information has emerged that explains the sudden start of Russia’s special operation to denazify Ukraine. For example, for this exact purpose several anti-aircraft and missile battalions in Ukraine were preparing to attack Russian troops in Belarus and several missile and anti-aircraft battalions were deployed on Ukrainian territory, in the immediate vicinity of the Belarusian border. Gomel and Mozyr were facing a bombing attack. Therefore, Russia launched a pre-emptive strike on those battalions to prevent its losses and the impact thereof on Belarus.”*

*(Ksenia Lebedeva, March 1, 2022)<sup>55</sup>*

*“Of course, I am against the war. There is a nuance, however. If the actual ‘No to War’ calls for a special operation and, let’s face it, a crackdown on the armed Nazis in Ukraine, so be it.”*

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<sup>51</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67963>

<sup>52</sup> [https://t.me/ATN\\_BTRC/73727](https://t.me/ATN_BTRC/73727)

<sup>53</sup> [https://t.me/pul\\_1/6589](https://t.me/pul_1/6589)

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J72UyO-AqVc&t=341s>

<sup>55</sup> [https://youtu.be/\\_zZ-4ZXMzIU?list=PL9rJMLzuPv2552wCv0jBeJBf-KwJrKS7F&t=68](https://youtu.be/_zZ-4ZXMzIU?list=PL9rJMLzuPv2552wCv0jBeJBf-KwJrKS7F&t=68)

(Igor Tur, March 25, 2022)<sup>56</sup>

*“Donbas was suffering the pain of Nazi bullets and bombs with cynical inscriptions like ‘All the best for the children’ for more than 8 years. Nazism and Bandera’s followers spread across the Yellow and Blue Country like cancer cells, which had to be removed surgically.”*

(Ksenia Lebedeva, March 15, 2022)<sup>57</sup>

*“Russia once saved Crimea from bloodshed in 2014. Having been put under sanctions and suffered accusations and cynical bias even in sports arenas in response, Russia had been calling for peace in the Donbas for the past 8 years and preparing for any possible consequences if such calls are ignored. If a special military operation is necessary, Russia will stop at nothing indeed in the name of liberating the territory it borders from fascism, anti-Russian xenophobia, and the atrocities of the radicals.”*

(Maria Petrashko, March 19, 2022)<sup>58</sup>

Storyline: Belarus is a peaceful state. Belarusian military will not participate in the war against Ukraine.

*“I don’t want you to fight. We will only fight (I together with you as the Commander-in-Chief) if our national security is threatened, which is when we are attacked by other states. That’s it. In this case, guys, be ready. I will go first, and you follow me.”*

(Speech by Lukashenka during the open lesson “Historical Memory is the Road to the Future!”, September 1, 2022)<sup>59</sup>

*“Belarus has been a peacekeeping platform, and our President Alexander Lukashenka is currently trying to get the conflicting parties to the negotiating table. This is, however, not the first time when a dialogue is taking place between opposing sides thanks to this man... Let me emphasize this once again: we are not a party to the conflict, and our troops are not participating in hostilities on Ukrainian territory. The role of our army is clear – the President has repeatedly emphasized that **we are covering the western borders so that our Russian brothers are not stabbed in the back.**”*

(Director of the representative office of Mir Interstate Television and Radio Company in Belarus Olga Shpilevskaya at a meeting with troops of the 86<sup>th</sup> Signal Brigade of the Belarusian Armed Forces on March 14, 2022)<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKvmrxIBPGk&t=31s>

<sup>57</sup> <https://youtu.be/WkHwhfjYzsw?list=PL9rJMLzuPv2552wCv0jBeJBf-KwJrKS7F&t=697>

<sup>58</sup> <https://youtu.be/N8Mfopu6-NE?t=5>

<sup>59</sup> [https://t.me/pul\\_1/6586](https://t.me/pul_1/6586)

<sup>60</sup> <https://t.me/modmilby/12352>

*“Igor Sergeenko assured the wives and mothers of servicemen that their husbands and sons would only defend Belarus on their own territory.”*

(Head of the Belarus Presidential Administration Igor Sergeenko at a meeting with servicemen of the 19<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Brigade of the Belarus Armed Forces on March 16, 2022)<sup>61</sup>

## **2. Discreditation and dehumanization of Ukrainians, the Ukrainian government, and the Ukrainian army as a justification for aggression against Ukraine**

Storyline: A Nazi coup took place in Ukraine. Ukraine is a fascist state, “the Third Reich,” and a “satanic state.”

*“It is a beastly state [referring to Ukraine – ed.]. It sang and praised the basest human feelings. It encouraged murder, cultivated bullying, and was only built at the expense of hatred towards Muscovites, nationalists, separatists, or anyone else. And now they’re demonstrating this.”*

(Grigoriy Azaryonok, March 23, 2022)<sup>62</sup>

*“Ukraine is a satanic state. Christ will overcome the devil.”*

(Grigoriy Azaryonok, March 24, 2022)<sup>63</sup>

*“Zelensky is handing Nenka<sup>64</sup> over to the Poles in a brazen way. Will Taras Bulba’s heirs really not stop him!? It is almost impossible to find a rock bottom still left to be hit by this ‘reasonable’ druggie [referring to Zelensky] while ‘caring for the well-being of Ukrainians.”*

(Channel “Zheltye Slivy”, September 4, 2022)<sup>65</sup>

*“These nationalists are the ones who are helping the West to ruin the Ukrainian people. They are the ones who are looking to build another Reich and destroy Russia and its allies who are the heirs to the great USSR and who are preserving historical memory and traditional values.”*

(Lyudmila Gladkaya, April 30, 2022)<sup>66</sup>

*“Unfortunately, a revolution essentially took place in the minds of people in Ukraine: the country has been pumped up with radical elements, Nazi ideas have been promoted, Russian culture has been systematically destroyed, and historical memory*

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<sup>61</sup> <https://t.me/modmilby/12414>.

<sup>62</sup> <https://youtu.be/YqWvkjR4YW8>

<sup>63</sup> <https://youtu.be/9spq2L7zmo4> (The video is unavailable because the associated YouTube account was deleted)

<sup>64</sup> In Ukrainian, “Nenka” means “Mama” and is often used to refer to motherland.

<sup>65</sup> [https://t.me/zheltye\\_slivy\\_premium/3282](https://t.me/zheltye_slivy_premium/3282)

<sup>66</sup> [https://youtu.be/P4\\_iQXVyTc0](https://youtu.be/P4_iQXVyTc0)

*has been uprooted, all while the so-called democratic West has been blind to the monstrous crimes committed there.”*

(Head of the Belarus Presidential Administration Igor Sergeenko at a meeting with servicemen of the 19<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Brigade of the Belarus Armed Forces on March 16, 2022)<sup>67</sup>

**Storyline:** The Ukrainian army does not know how to fight. Belarus does not need to get into the war because the war will not last long.

*“Ukraine will never get to fight against us. This war will last three to four days, tops! There will be no one left to fight against us.”*

(Alexander Lukashenka in an interview with Vladimir Solovyov, February 5, 2022)<sup>68</sup>

This myth was widely promoted by Belarusian propaganda at the beginning of the “major war.” It came as no surprise that the thesis carefully vanished from propagandist rhetoric along with the collapse of the plans of the “special military operation” to “take Kyiv in three days,” the retreat of the Russian troops, and the start of Ukraine’s counteroffensive in May–June 2022. The autumn of 2022 saw another turn in narratives, with an “aggressive Ukraine” threatening peaceful Belarus and raising doubts as to the combat readiness of its armed forces. For example, on October 22, 2022, national television aired a story titled “Does the Belarusian Army Indeed Have no Chance?” which was dedicated to the alleged “combat excellence” of the Belarusian army.<sup>69</sup> The story was a reaction to doubts as to the combat potential of the Belarusian Armed Forces voiced by the Armed Forces of Ukraine.<sup>70</sup>

### **3. Denial, silencing, and justification of war crimes**

**Storyline:** Denial of war crimes committed by the Russian troops using the example of the tragedy in Bucha.

The Ukrainian city of Bucha (Kyiv region, center of the Bucha district) was under Russian occupation from February 27 to March 31, 2022. When the Russian troops retreated, the Ukrainian military discovered numerous bodies of civilians in the streets of the city, including those shot dead with their hands tied behind their backs. There is countless photo and video evidence of this. Women and children among the victims. In early April, the Ukrainian authorities reported that more than 400 bodies of civilians had been found in total. Most of them had bullet wounds rather than shrapnel wounds.<sup>71</sup> On April 7, the Russian news outlet Meduza published a drone video captured in Bucha between March

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<sup>67</sup> <https://t.me/modmilby/12414>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb9jgyJskGE>

<sup>69</sup> “Does the Belarusian Army Indeed Have no Chance?” Disposition. Panorama, October 22, 2022. <https://youtu.be/WNjxg2UkeXU>

<sup>70</sup> “More about this: Belarusian Hajun”, October 24, 2022. [https://t.me/Hajun\\_BY/5633](https://t.me/Hajun_BY/5633)

<sup>71</sup> <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/04/06/kak-ubivali-lyudey-v-buche>

23 and March 30, 2022, showing that people were killed during the Russian occupation of the city.<sup>72</sup>

From the very beginning, as soon as the evidence of the massacres in Bucha was published, Russian leadership, the military command, as well as propaganda media denied any involvement of the Russian military. The media field was pumped with false witness statements and allegations of “fake news” planted by none other than Ukrainians themselves.<sup>73</sup>

At the same time, Belarusian propaganda media not only copied the corresponding statements by Russian officials and the major myths introduced by Russian propaganda media, but also actively participated in the disinformation campaign.

*“What is known at the moment about the ‘videos from Bucha’: ✓ The Ukrainian authorities and the media have distributed footage of people allegedly shot in the city of Bucha, Kyiv region, which the Russian Ministry of Defense referred to as ‘staged.’ ✓ The West wants to turn Bucha into a ‘Ukrainian Srebrenica’ and accuse the Russian side of alleged genocide of the local population, despite the fact that the clumsiness of staging the footage is painfully obvious, according to Mr. Goncharov, the Honorary President of the International Association of Veterans of the Alfa Counter-Terrorism Unit. ✓ This footage can be compared to fake videos of the White Helmets from Syria, believes Mr. Bezpalko, a member of the Council for Interethnic Relations under the Russian President. At the same time, he is sure that the West will make the most of this fake story.”*  
(BelTA, April 3, 2022)<sup>74</sup>

*“The widespread footage of the bodies emerged after the Ukrainian troops had entered the city.”*  
(ONT News, April 4, 2022)<sup>75</sup>

And at the same time, “the Russian Army acts in a humane and victorious manner”:

*“Gustave Le Bon realized a lot: ‘To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know at the same time the art of governing them.’ It doesn’t matter that the Russian Army acts in a humane and victorious way – what’s crucially important is to be able to lie beautifully [referring to the coverage of the war by the Ukrainian side – ed].”*

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<sup>72</sup> <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/04/07/meduza-publikuet-vazhneyshuyu-videozapis-dokazyvayuschuyu-chto-mirnyh-zhiteley-v-buche-ubili-v-to-vremya-kogda-v-gorode-stoyali-rossiyskie-voyska>

<sup>73</sup> See a detailed analysis of fakes and disinformation of the Russian propaganda about the massacre in Bucha: <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/04/06/kak-ubivali-lyudey-v-buche>

<sup>74</sup> [https://t.me/belta\\_telegramm/117329](https://t.me/belta_telegramm/117329)

<sup>75</sup> <https://t.me/ontnews/73797>

(Grigoriy Azaryonok, March 31, 2022)<sup>76</sup>

#### **4. The West is to blame for starting the war. Poland and the Baltic States are the biggest enemies of Belarus**

The promotion of aggressive myths related to Western democratic countries had started long before the plans for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine emerged. Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia were chosen to represent the vanguard of the “collective West” on its eastern frontier. The hostile rhetoric around these countries intensified after the annexation of Crimea and the escalation of aggression in the Donbas. The key narrative has been that the West is to blame for the war in Ukraine.

*“As more than once in our history, the so-called Western partners made the three fraternal peoples, i.e., Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians, bump their heads against each other. But what about us? Why did we fall for it?”*

(Speech by Lukashenka during the open lesson “Historical Memory is the Road to the Future!”, September 1, 2022)<sup>77</sup>

Storyline: Poland plans to seize the western regions of Belarus.

*“For Poland, Belorussia is just a part of the lost eastern territories which should return to the Polish state.”*

(Political scientist Sergei Ivannikov, May 2020)<sup>78</sup>

*“The Poles have their own clearly expressed state ideology, which can be summarized as ‘Greater Poland from sea to sea,’ and they make little secret of it.”*

(Russian propagandist Armen Gasparyan for the Belarusian platform Sputnik.by, September 2020)<sup>79</sup>

*“... If Belarus plunges into chaos because of a ‘color revolution’ (guided by Warsaw), Poland may attempt to control at least its ‘former territories’ (currently the Brest and Grodno regions of Belarus).”*

(IMHOclub, August 2020)<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Blocked link <https://youtu.be/Oud7vPyFxlI?t=92>. Indirect link: [https://pikabu.ru/story/grigoriy\\_azaryonok\\_nevazhno\\_chno\\_russkaya\\_armiya\\_deystvuet\\_gumanno\\_i\\_pobe\\_donosno\\_glavnoe\\_\\_umet\\_krasivo\\_vrat\\_8978052](https://pikabu.ru/story/grigoriy_azaryonok_nevazhno_chno_russkaya_armiya_deystvuet_gumanno_i_pobe_donosno_glavnoe__umet_krasivo_vrat_8978052)

<sup>77</sup> [https://t.me/pul\\_1/6577](https://t.me/pul_1/6577)

<sup>78</sup> <https://ukraina.ru/interview/20200523/1027780990.html> (website is blocked in the EU)

<sup>79</sup> <https://sputnik.by/20200926/Gasparyan-v-Polshe-schitayut-Brest-i-Grodno-vremenno-ottorgnutymi-1045712744.html>

<sup>80</sup> [https://imhoclub.by/ru/material/vizhivet\\_li\\_belorussija](https://imhoclub.by/ru/material/vizhivet_li_belorussija)

Storyline: Poland and the Baltic States are U.S. puppets without their own political strategy or independence.

*“Our western neighbors, Poland and Lithuania, are acting in line with Washington’s policy. They see it as a survival strategy. Their only alternative is to forever remain on the godforsaken outskirts of Europe. And they are making their choice.”*

(Alexander Lukashenka in a message to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly on January 28, 2022)<sup>81</sup>

### **Conclusion: Nothing is true and everything is possible**

The words in the heading are the title of a book by the British Kremlin expert and author Peter Pomerantsev, published in 2014.<sup>82</sup> According to the author, the Russian leadership, which went through the KGB school, views everything that is aired by state media as “a war of information rather than an information war.” He characterizes the practices employed by such media as *Rossia Segodnya*, *Sputnik* or *RT* as follows: *“They are not trying to say that their version of events is true. They say: ‘Everybody lies! No one will tell you the truth!’”*<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, it is quite difficult to convince the reader or viewer that a lie is the truth and the truth is a lie. It is much easier to sow confusion in the minds of the audience: no one is good, and no one is bad – everybody lies. Propaganda achieves its goal when the viewer gives up and remains in doubt after watching television.

The difference between propagandist media and regular media is that the purpose of activities of the former is not to provide impartial reporting to society, but to create narratives necessary for the authorities in society, in other words, **to create and maintain a “false reality” for the immediate benefit of the ruling regime.**<sup>84</sup> This purpose is achieved, among others, through the use of information management tools, disinformation, biased coverage, and the creation and dissemination of false stories, fake news, and other methods.

This is how the war in Ukraine is covered by Russian and Belarusian propaganda media. Research shows that many people distance themselves from the war and avoid taking

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<sup>81</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/Lukashenka-bez-podderzhki-ssha-polsha-i-litva-navsegda-ostanutsja-unyloj-okrainoj-evropy-481699-2022/>

<sup>82</sup> Peter Pomerantsev. *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*. PublicAffairs, 2014.

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/ai-kremlin-propaganda/3617476.html>

<sup>84</sup> Kalikh, Andrey. *Map of the actors in the Donbas conflict: Russian non-state actors*. CivilMPlus, 2021. [https://civilmplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Non-state\\_actors\\_en.pdf](https://civilmplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Non-state_actors_en.pdf)

sides, partially because they doubt they can find any reliable data about events and suspect that each source of information is trying to manipulate them.<sup>85</sup>

As a matter of fact, one of the pillars of the Belarusian propaganda, television presenter Grigoriy Azaryonok, sees his mission exactly in this: *“There is no journalism, and there is no such thing as journalistic ethics. There are soldiers in the information war and those who write the weather forecast. That’s it.”*<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Agitainment. What does modern science know about propaganda and how to deal with it? Novaya Gazeta – Europe, October 24, 2022.

[https://novyagazeta.eu/articles/2022/10/24/agiteinment?utm\\_source=ig.me&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=mdtrueodna-iz-osnovnyh-prichin-voyny-v](https://novyagazeta.eu/articles/2022/10/24/agiteinment?utm_source=ig.me&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=mdtrueodna-iz-osnovnyh-prichin-voyny-v)

<sup>86</sup> Azaryonok, Tur and Mukovozchik debate about journalism in Belarus! As a Matter of Fact talk show, October 11, 2021. <https://youtu.be/SKp3smccmWA>

## Sputnik CZ: The Main Channel of Russian Propaganda in the Czech Republic and the Invasion of Ukraine

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### Introduction

Sputnik CZ was established by the Russian state-owned news agency Rossiya Segodnya in 2014.<sup>87</sup> Sputnik presents itself as a mainstream medium providing objective news coverage, but experts have identified its role as an important tool of Russian propaganda.<sup>88</sup> Although the topic of pro-Russian disinformation acquired traction especially with the onset of the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine, the strong pro-Russian orientation of the Czech disinformation scene has been visible for some time. As the Globsec Trends 2021 report has noted, Sputnik CZ has a central role in the Czech disinformation space and is surrounded by a network of approximately 40 conspiracy websites which republish Sputnik's content and/or help spread its narratives, and thus expand its reach among the Czech audience.<sup>89</sup>

Similarly, research into the so-called gray zone media scene carried out by the Hungarian think-tank Political Capital and their partners, including Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), has uncovered two layers of the Czech disinformation scene. They consist of the older guard of Sputnik CZ and conspiracy websites which were established some 5-10 years ago, and of a newer generation of anti-vaccination oriented outlets and movements which sprung up during the COVID-19 pandemic. These newer outlets have quickly incorporated themselves into the network of conspiracy websites and set up a collaborative relationship of supporting each other's content. Similarly, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these outlets quickly adapted to geopolitical topics and spread pro-Russian/Sputnik's interpretations of the invasion as a special military operation and a reaction to alleged Western provocation.<sup>90</sup>

PSSI monitored the website of Sputnik CZ in the time period of October 2021-May 2022. Our focus was on the website's section "Opinions" which is the primary source of the outlet's manipulative narratives, as opposed to the news section which usually produces more neutral toned content. The format of the "Opinions" section, which often relies on interviews with external entities such as politicians or experts in political science, sociology or economy, also allows the outlet to distance itself from the content to a certain extent. Monitoring of Sputnik's activities is especially important due to the aforementioned special

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<sup>87</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/docs/index.html>

<sup>88</sup> [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND\\_RR2237.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND_RR2237.pdf),  
[https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8414\\_699-blog-sputnik-cz.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8414_699-blog-sputnik-cz.pdf)

<sup>89</sup> [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021\\_final.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021_final.pdf)

<sup>90</sup> [https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/9710\\_politicalcapital-grey-zone-cz.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/9710_politicalcapital-grey-zone-cz.pdf)

role of Sputnik on the Czech scene of conspiracy sites and sites known for spreading disinformation the content of which is often shaped by that of Sputnik.

The goal of the research was to uncover Sputnik's main narratives and target audiences in the monitored period. This report analyzes how they developed in the course of new developments, such as the forming of a new Czech government following the parliamentary election in October 2021 and, mainly, the changing geopolitical environment due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Our research discovered that Sputnik's commentators were able to promptly react to both local Czech context and international events during the monitored period and incorporate them into long-term pro-Russian narratives about Russia as a traditional Czech ally, Czech economic and energy dependence on Russia and alleged Western provocations.

## **Main Narratives**

### ***New Government***

The first quarter of our monitoring (October-December 2021) was dominated by opinion pieces reacting to the results of the Czech parliamentary election, which took place at the beginning of October 2021, and to the forming of the new Czech government towards the end of the year. The parliamentary election saw the end of the minority government of the populist ANO 2011 and center-left Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), externally supported by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). The former government was led by Andrej Babiš from ANO, seen as an acceptable candidate by Sputnik's commentators due to his proclaimed defense of national interests and increasingly anti-immigration stances.<sup>91</sup> He was favored in comparison to the more liberal-conservative coalition of the SPOLU (Together) alliance dominated by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the alliance of the Czech Pirate Party and the Mayors and Independents, who won the election. The current government led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS) is more firmly oriented towards the West, therefore an ideologically unfavorable candidate for Sputnik's commentators, whose negative stance towards this coalition was visible already in its coverage prior to the elections.<sup>92</sup>

Due to the historically highest number of lost votes in the election (around 1 million) given to unsuccessful candidates, Sputnik saw the victorious coalition as an illegitimate government. The million of lost votes was used by Sputnik's authors as an argument in favor of perceiving the new government as "a dictatorship of the minority"<sup>93</sup> which does not represent its citizens or their interests properly, and is therefore undemocratic or even totalitarian. Sputnik's authors also expressed disagreement with the partisan strategy of

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<sup>91</sup> [https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9483\\_pssi-perspectives-15-pandora-papers.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9483_pssi-perspectives-15-pandora-papers.pdf)

<sup>92</sup> [https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9417\\_parliamentary-elections-2021-analysis.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9417_parliamentary-elections-2021-analysis.pdf)

<sup>93</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211013/budouci-vlada-by-mohla-rozpolcenou-ceskou-spolecnost-sjednotit-a-to-proti-sobe-16154465.html>

forming alliances prior to the election, speculating that it led to the victory of parties that would have received an insignificant amount of votes on their own. This argument only reinforced the narrative of the illegitimate victory. The commentators also labeled the government “a regime of limited sovereignty”, because they saw the successful candidates simply as servants of the interests of external actors, be it the EU, NATO, or the US.<sup>94</sup> Majority of this coverage was provided by three Czech authors and long-term collaborators of Sputnik - Vladimír Franta, Alena Novotná, and Jana Petrova.

### ***Preparations for the Invasion***

In retrospect, there were signs of possible planned preparation of the outlet for the invasion of Ukraine through narratives setting up the Russian cause and presenting it as a strong opponent in any confrontation. Even in the last quarter of 2021, alongside reporting on the new Czech government, articles focused on military technology presented Russian military equipment as among the most modernized, reliable, and effective globally. These articles were published by Russian authors such as the military expert and the editor-in-chief of the site MilitaryRussia.ru Dmitry Kornev<sup>95</sup> or Irina Badmajeva from RIA Novosti, the Russian state-owned domestic news agency.<sup>96</sup> To illustrate, Kornev wrote a piece on the new Russian anti-tank missile system called Chrysanthemum-S, in which he claimed: “Objectively, protection from the Chrysanthemum does not exist at this time”.<sup>97</sup> Similar articles also presented Russia’s military technologies as superior and unrivaled.

Sputnik also regularly published articles reacting to the “tensions in Ukraine” which accused NATO, the US, or the West in general of provoking Russia into a confrontation or preparing a war in Europe. These articles written by Czech authors were supported by opinions from domestic figures such as the Czech military expert Jaroslav Štefec<sup>98</sup> or an MEP from the right-wing party Freedom and Direct Democracy, Ivan David.<sup>99</sup> These opinion pieces attributed any potential aggressive behavior to the West and positioned Russia as involuntary intervening in a tense situation. One of the interviewees, political scientist Daniel Solis, stated: “Humanitarian interventions are a common affair nowadays. It is not an attack on Ukraine, but protection of living people on Ukrainian territory, many of which

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<sup>94</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211224/votava-darku-bude-sice-hodne-presto-obcanum-radost-neudelaji-16969421.html>

<sup>95</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211105/sebevrazedny-krok-ruskeho-vojenskeho-namornictva-dovyzbroje-muze-ziskat-zvlastni-drony-16397324.html>

<sup>96</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211118/evropa-pozastavila-projekt-nord-stream-2-a-zvysila-ceny-16551160.html>

<sup>97</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211205/rusko-ma-odpoved-na-tanky-nato-je-to-chryzantema-s-16748044.html>

<sup>98</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211221/stefec-zapad-provokuje-asi-nechape-ze-rusko-pise-novou-kapitolu-svych-ozbrojenych-sil-16940482.html>

<sup>99</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211207/david-k-napeti-na-ukrajine-usa-zrejme-chystaji-valku-v-evrope-rusko-se-na-to-pripravuje-16768951.html>

are Russian citizens”.<sup>100</sup> Future confrontation was admitted to be a possibility, however, only as a Western plan: “Escalation is the intent, not an accidental development. Anything can evolve into an open clash”.<sup>101</sup> Later, gradual continuation of these narratives has been visible since the beginning of the invasion, embodied in the official Russian narratives of a special military operation and genocide of ethnic Russians in Ukraine.

Lastly, possible organized preparation of Sputnik CZ for the invasion was suggested by the fact that the day before the start of the invasion (23 February), the outlet launched a new website section called “Demilitarization and Denazification of Ukraine”. Its very active coverage of an average of 12 articles per day focused solely on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, spreading the aforementioned official Russian interpretation of the conflict.

### ***Russia As A Natural Ally of the Czech Republic***

During the whole monitoring period, the presentation of Russia as a natural ally to the Czech people was a continuous narrative. The suggested traditional bond of the two countries was emphasized by contrasting the European Union, which, supposedly, only limits Czech sovereignty and foreign policy and the policies of which directly clash with Czech national interests. Instead of helping to solve real problems, EU membership allegedly only entails dragging the Czech Republic into irrational projects such as the European Green Deal which are destructive to the country and its economy.<sup>102</sup> The Czech Republic was also seen by Sputnik as the scene of a geopolitical clash between the US and the EU, who constrained Czech development through anti-Russian economic sanctions.<sup>103</sup>

With the transition of power to the new government at the end of 2021, the perception of traditional Czech-Russian relations was a topic mentioned especially in connection with the new Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský. His stated plans to revise Czech-Russian relations were labeled “a doctrine of Russophobia”<sup>104</sup> which will lead to the “death of Czech-Russian relations”.<sup>105</sup> Lipavský’s contradiction of traditional foreign relations was predicted to have a destructive impact on the Czech economy and social affairs as a consequence of this new “Russophobic foreign policy”.<sup>106</sup> In a similar manner, when the

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<sup>100</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211223/treti-ofenziva-ukrajiny-pokud-rusko-nezareaguje-dalsi-provokaci-povedou-uz-proti-samotne-rf-nazor-16964711.html>

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211013/petikoalice-ci-kockopes-se-raduje-brzy-koupi-babis-chybejici-poslance-16153866.html>

<sup>103</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211208/mistrovstvi-sveta-v-kritice-by-petikoalice-mozna-vyhrala-ale-volby-v-listopadu-ne-nazor-16782492.html>

<sup>104</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211017/kolar-sefem-ceskeho-zamini-basta-by-si-umel-predstavit-vetsi-bizar-david-varuje-pred-eskalaci-16199887.html>

<sup>105</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211230/babisovy-prezidentske-sance-jsou-50-na-50-pokud-nebude-zatcen-nazor-17026958.html>

<sup>106</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211017/kolar-sefem-ceskeho-zamini-basta-by-si-umel-predstavit-vetsi-bizar-david-varuje-pred-eskalaci-16199887.html>

Czech Republic promptly reacted to Ukraine's appeals for humanitarian aid and military equipment after the start of the Russian aggression, the Czech Republic was labeled a more and more aggressive country which now prefers "Russophobic" partners instead of "natural and traditional partners".<sup>107</sup>

### ***Dependence on Russia***

Closely connected to the previous narrative, Czech dependence on Russia was a frequent point of emphasis in Sputnik's articles. Czech-Russian relations in the business and the energy sectors were presented as crucial for the well-being of Czech Republic. This perception was used already within the criticism of the new government, when Sputnik claimed Lipavský's reassessment of Czech-Russian relations and distancing from Russia would mean "shooting oneself in the foot".<sup>108</sup> Sputnik offered pessimistic fear-inducing scenarios which suggested that the weakening of Czech-Russian ties would destroy the Czech economy and bring overall poverty and social problems. The Russian share in Czech economy and trade was exaggerated to present Russia as an indispensable partner without whom the Czech Republic is lost. According to Sputnik, the new government's policies would have negative impact mainly on seniors and young families<sup>109</sup> and cause "annihilation of the social state."<sup>110</sup>

After the start of the invasion and the following Western response of support for Ukraine and loosening relations with Russia, Sputnik's commentators emphasized the share of Russian gas and oil in the Czech energy mix. They claimed that further embargoes on these goods would considerably deepen the ongoing economic crisis and would lead to lowering of the living standards in the Czech republic.<sup>111</sup> The general message was that at least at the time being, Central Europe cannot realistically function without Russian gas: "Poland does not have, nor will have in the immediate future, the option to completely refuse Russian gas. That means it does not have a surplus of gas which could be directed to the Czech Republic".<sup>112</sup> Another article warned that long-term Czech goals, such as fulfilling the commitments of the European Green Deal, are also not possible without Russian gas.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20220126213906/>

<https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220126/ceska-vlada-chce-do-chomoutu-s-rusofoby-uvazuje-se-i-o-dalsim-vojenskembrodruzstvi-v-zahranici-17357922.html>

<sup>108</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211208/mistrovstvi-sveta-v-kritice-by-petikoalice-mozna-vyhrala-ale-volby-v-listopadu-ne-nazor-16782492.html>

<sup>109</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211224/votava-darku-bude-sice-hodne-presto-obcanum-radost-neudelaji-16969421.html>

<sup>110</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211119/dalsi-hrebicek-do-nestability-fiala-si-vzal-do-tymu-lidi-kteri-mu-mohou-zlomit-vaz-16565485.html>

<sup>111</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220506/sr-si-nechce-kazit-krev-ani-s-ruskem-ani-s-evropou-prechodna-doba-je-dle-analytika-spravna-18265175.html>

<sup>112</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220429/fiala-usiluje-o-plynovod-v-polsku-cr-pritom-muze-samostatne-nakupovat-plyn-z-de-vime-odkud-potece-18241808.html>

<sup>113</sup>

Manufactured goods (mainly machinery, cars and car parts) was another sector targeted by these fear-inducing narratives. Sputnik used and exaggerated specific examples to underline the supposed inalienability of Czech and Russian economies. The automotive industry, a crucial part of the Czech economy, was one of such targets. An article described in detail the losses the Czech Republic suffers due to canceled exports of the Škoda Auto automobile manufacturer to Russia: “It is a very significant market, on which we bet a lot, we invested in it a lot. Škoda Auto took over the responsibility for managing this region, so it is a very noticeable loss.”<sup>114</sup> Another example were comments on the impact on Czech income from tourism, like the local impact of the loss of Russian clients over the recent years in Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad), a popular spa town in west Bohemia.<sup>115</sup> Using similar narratives, Sputnik attempted to erode the support of the Czech government during the critical situation by claiming the economic sanctions imposed on Russia will make Czech business suffer, with little chance of compensation from a government that does not care of its citizens.<sup>116</sup>

### ***Aggression in Ukraine: Fake or Western?***

Before the Russian aggression in Ukraine started, Sputnik provided two contradicting interpretations of the rising tensions along the Ukrainian borders. The first interpretation denied any possibility of Russian aggression since Russia is resource-rich and the largest country in the world, therefore with no need to usurp foreign territory.<sup>117</sup> The “rumors” about an impending invasion were labeled as Western anti-Russian propaganda and interpreted as NATO simply looking for excuses to deploy more troops to the alliance’s border.<sup>118</sup> At the same time, other articles admitted the possibility of an aggression, but the cause was attributed to Ukraine or the West who were allegedly escalating the tensions through their military supplies to the “Kyiv regime”<sup>119</sup> and effectively replacing “covid hysteria” with “war hysteria”.<sup>120</sup> Alternatively, some commentators claimed that the Russian side had been trying to reach an agreement peacefully from the beginning of the

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<sup>114</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220426/ztraty-skody-mohou-presahnout-20-miliard-experti-odhalili-nasledky-zastaveni-zavodu-v-rf-18227609.html>

<sup>115</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220416/ztraty-karlovych-varu-nasledkem-absence-hostu-z-rf-jsou-v-radech-milionu-cim-si-to-vynahradi-18189752.html>

<sup>116</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20220221123754/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220221/nahradi-brusel-cechum-ztratu-trhu-vyrobce-dronu-primoco-uav-kvuli-sankcim-ukoncinnost-v-rusku-17724612.html>

<sup>117</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220111/usa-maji-zajem-vyprovokovat-konflikt-v-evrope-prileva-lipavsky-olej-do-ohne-nazor-17176489.html>

<sup>118</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20220126115339/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220126/budou-umirat-nase-deti-petr-nemec-vola-po-porazce-ruska-jste-se-uplne-posalreaguj-cesi-17348786.html>

<sup>119</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20220125221029/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220125/my-jsme-v-pii-a-nemame-na-elektrinu-twitter-reaguje-na-chlubeni-adamove-a-fialy-opomoci-ukrajine-17344054.html>

<sup>120</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20220129120643/https://>

[cz.sputniknews.com/20220129/cechum-neunikla-hysterie-kolem-ukrajiny-kdo-neustale-vyhrozuje-jen-jedna-strana-putin-to-teni---17392263.html](https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220129/cechum-neunikla-hysterie-kolem-ukrajiny-kdo-neustale-vyhrozuje-jen-jedna-strana-putin-to-teni---17392263.html)

tensions and was unfairly blamed for the escalation by the West.<sup>121</sup> Instead of trying to solve the growing conflict diplomatically, the West just indulged in planning military exercises, according to Sputnik.<sup>122</sup>

Sputnik was able to provide an exhaustive list of Western provocations which were to blame for the rising tensions in Ukraine. These included accounts of Western allies' unwillingness to meet demands for non-expansion of NATO,<sup>123</sup> the threat of Ukrainian armed forces in Donetsk and Luhansk, or accusations of Ukraine for not abiding by the Minsk agreements.<sup>124</sup> Both the EU and NATO were a target of these narratives as institutions without values or significance. NATO was especially criticized for only functioning as "a smokescreen for American and British war preparations".<sup>125</sup> In fact, US and UK military supplies to Ukraine were mentioned multiple times as the reason for increased Russian military presence in Donbas.<sup>126</sup> The Czech Republic itself was also grouped with the aggressive West because of its solidarity with the Ukrainian government "which wants to fire artillery shells at innocent people living in Donetsk and Luhansk."<sup>127</sup>

When the Russian invasion started, the outlet supported the official Kremlin's narratives on the causes of "the special military operation". These included a Nazi Ukrainian regime which has been carrying out genocide of ethnic Russians in the east of Ukraine, and the Russian responsibility to protect these people. Therefore, the invasion was presented as a legitimate and strictly defensive move. It was supposedly a reaction to the continuous Western provocation and a rational response from a country that "had waited remarkably long" for the West to relent: "This is not the beginning of a war, but an effort to save the planet from a global crisis, as a strategic imbalance is in the offing".<sup>128</sup> The possibility of "denazification" of Ukraine would be a significant achievement, claimed an opinion piece the day after the invasion. Calling it an open conflict was labeled as the West scaring the public with worst-case scenarios.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> [https://web.archive.org/web/20220125221029/https://](https://web.archive.org/web/20220125221029/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220125/my-jsme-v-pii-a-nemame-na-elektrinu-twitter-reaguje-na-chlubeni-adamove-a-fialy-opomoci-ukrajine-17344054.html)

[cz.sputniknews.com/20220125/my-jsme-v-pii-a-nemame-na-elektrinu-twitter-reaguje-na-chlubeni-adamove-a-fialy-opomoci-ukrajine-17344054.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20220125221029/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220125/my-jsme-v-pii-a-nemame-na-elektrinu-twitter-reaguje-na-chlubeni-adamove-a-fialy-opomoci-ukrajine-17344054.html)

<sup>122</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220118/cesti-vojaci-jedou-na-ukrajinu-budou-ucit-ukrajinskou-armadu-jak-bojovat-s-donbasem-17261029.html>

<sup>123</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220119/zbyvaji-jen-dve-moznosti-cesky-diplomat-hodnoti-jednani-ruska-a-nato-17273456.html>

<sup>124</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220120/cesko-jako-valecny-stvac-vlada-chce-prodat-ukrajine-zbrane-a-munici-nazor-17279505.html>

<sup>125</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220213/stefec-petr-pavel-se-myli-nato-jednotne-neni-pro-bidena-je-partner-paradoxne-jen-putin-17604108.html>

<sup>126</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220223/jedni-cesti-dobrovolnici-z-donbasu-do-basy-jinym-metaly-aneb-kdo-chce-valku-nazor-17763427.html>

<sup>127</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220129/volejte-chochouska-jde-o-kalkul-s-ceskou-munici-pro-ukrajinu-a-valecnymi-uprchliky-17393716.html>

<sup>128</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220225/rusko-bylo-donuceno-k-operaci-na-ukrajine-zapad-ztraci-sanci-na-dominanci-nazor-17804581.html>

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

This model of a contradictory double narrative continued in the coverage of the invasion in the following months. Sputnik's reaction to the Bucha massacre is an example. On the one hand, it was labeled as fake, staged by Ukrainians or the Western media with the help of actors and props. On the other hand, some commentators considered the massacre real, albeit carried out by the Ukrainian forces to be used as anti-Russian propaganda and a provocation of Russia to commit actual violence.<sup>130</sup>

The coverage of the invasion also exploited well established pro-Kremlin narratives which target the European Union. Day after the invasion, an opinion piece claimed that Brussels will exploit the "tragic situation" in Ukraine in order to enforce a directive concerning compulsory redistribution of refugees.<sup>131</sup> This demonstrates how pro-Russian outlets manage to effectively take long-standing narratives exploiting local polarized issues and adapt them to new contexts; just in this case, the topic of refugees which has been especially sensitive in the Czech information space since the immigration crisis in 2015.

### **Target audiences**

The Czech Sputnik presents itself as a standard news outlet. The news section of the website indeed provides quite objective and neutrally presented content, although attitudes of the commentators towards the Czech political scene are discernible. This concerns its preferences for the national-conservative opposition and prevalent criticism of the current pro-Western, liberal-conservative government. Manipulative narratives mostly appear in the section "Opinions", which was the focus of our monitoring, and newly in the "Denazification and Demilitarization of Ukraine" section.

This set up shows Sputnik's aspiration for a wider reach across the Czech political spectrum and different parts of the society. Its success is demonstrated by two facts: the Czech variation of Sputnik, together with the Serbian one, are the most successful among Sputnik's 11 local branches based on outreach.<sup>132</sup> Secondly, Sputnik has long been one of the top visited websites known for spreading disinformation on the Czech information scene, with visits amounting up to millions compared to hundreds and tens of thousands in case of other, still popular Czech disinformation outlets.<sup>133</sup> This is what differentiates Sputnik from the rest of the Czech disinformation news outlets, which lie more on the media scene fringes and rely much more on extremist content and conspiracy theories.

However, these disinformation outlets do not operate completely independently of each other. In fact, there is a two-tier mechanism to the Czech disinformation scene. Firstly, pro-

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<sup>130</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220404/vyvadil-o-buci-je-to-dalsi-provokace-cilem-je-prohloubit-nenavist-sveta-proti-rusku-18142375.html>

<sup>131</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220225/evropska-dan-z-uprchlika-brusel-se-vraci-k-povinne-solidarite-17798622.html>

<sup>132</sup> <https://www.investigace.cz/sputnik-news-ceska-republika-dosah/>

<sup>133</sup> [https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8207\\_751-dezinformace-jako-byznys.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8207_751-dezinformace-jako-byznys.pdf)

Kremlin pages led by Sputnik and conspiracy pages formulate their initial anti-West messages. Subsequently, these narratives or conspiracy theories are fed to the second tier of gray zone clickbait and conspiracy media that disseminate them to a wider audience with far-right, Eurosceptic or, following the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-vaccination attitudes.<sup>134</sup>

This mechanism allowed Sputnik to stay among the top visited Czech websites spreading disinformation in the monitored period. During October-December 2021, total visits of the website ranged between 1.9 million and 2.35 million, and with the onset of the invasion in February 2022, it rose to 3.9 million. According to data from March 2022, an average visitor spent more than four minutes on the website and around 55% of the visitors were from the Czech Republic, while 40% were from the neighboring Slovak Republic.<sup>135</sup>

Subsequently, the EU-wide ban, which only allows unconventional means of accessing the site, reduced Sputnik's visits to 220.9K by May.<sup>136</sup> However, Sputnik intensified its activities on other platforms such as the messaging application Telegram. Here, it also faced bans which required re-establishing of its account and resulted in gathering a few thousand subscribers. Sputnik also still posts its articles on its Facebook page, which rose from 139k followers to 150k during our monitoring period.

Sputnik's target audience also has a political dimension. The website has an exclusive access to certain parties and their representatives, who get space for promotion of their agenda as interviewees. Namely, these parties include Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), Tricolour, Communist Party of Czechia and Moravia (KSČM), National Socialists or the Freedomites. What these parties have in common is a nationalistic orientation and rejection of Czech orientation towards Western structures. Their voters are targeted through the political content or even new ones are recruited, which was visible before the parliamentary election of 2021 when the nationalistic parties used the Sputnik's to present and promote their program.

Generally, Sputnik targets nationalists through continuous appeals to Czech national interests, fear-inducing narratives about external actors (such as the EU or US) meddling in the internal affairs of the state, and through attempts to conjure an image of the current government which is not able nor willing to take care of its own citizens and instead acts as an agent of the external actors.

## **Conclusion**

Sputnik CZ confirmed its role as the main channel of Russian propaganda on the Czech information scene in the period of October 2021-May 2022. Thanks to long-term

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<sup>134</sup> [https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9710\\_politicalcapital-grey-zone-cz.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9710_politicalcapital-grey-zone-cz.pdf)

<sup>135</sup> <https://www.investigace.cz/sputnik-news-ceska-republika-dosah/>

<sup>136</sup> According to Similar Web.

collaboration with Czech authors who have provided insights unavailable to foreigners, the site maintained its ability to adapt its narratives to the local Czech context. The popularity of the Czech Sputnik compared to the outlet's other local branches demonstrates the success of this approach. The signs of both long-term and short-term strategic configuration of the outlet for the invasion of Ukraine also suggests close coordination with the Kremlin.

Another visible trend was the continuity of the outlet's narratives which were applied to various local and international events, from the parliamentary election to the invasion of Ukraine and geopolitical issues of a more global character. The overall theme was targeting the readers' insecurities about the fulfillment of their basic needs, such as the functioning of the economy, reliable energy supplies or the government's ability to provide for its own citizens. Russia was presented as an indispensable ally directly linked to the well-being and the development of the Czech economy and energy sector and, therefore, any weakening of the Czech-Russian ties as undesirable.

After the invasion of Ukraine, the EU took steps to address the manipulative activities of Sputnik and the platform was forced to relocate the outlet and regain followers multiple times. Nevertheless, the general Czech disinformation and conspiracy scene continues to closely overlap with the pro-Russian scene and pro-Russian narratives continue to circulate in this media ecosystem. This persistent mechanism poses a number of challenges for experts on disinformation and foreign malign influence, media regulation and strategic government communications. Sputnik's activities constantly work on undermining Czech democratic institutions. They attempt to sow distrust in independent media, the governmental institutions and their ability to manage the current crisis, and overall undermine the country's orientation toward Western institutions.

To counter manipulative narratives, the government will have to examine the underlying societal problems that lead citizens to enjoy reading alternative media and its disinformation content. As the economic situation is, and will likely continue to be strained, many people will seek reassurances that the personal impact of this economic recession will be bearable and surpassable. Accordingly, proactive, timely, clear and persuasive strategic communication on the part of the government will be key in reducing the influence of the disinformation platforms. This includes communicating the government strategy/framework for adapting to greater economic and geopolitical volatility stemming from the Ukraine conflict and reducing to the greatest extent possible risks to Czech businesses and society.

## Disinformation More Effective than Artillery? Pro-Kremlin Narratives in Polish Media within the Context of Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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As in the beginning one could acknowledge that Russia, surprising the world with its lies, was winning the information war long before military actions begun – today this is no longer certain. Russian disinformation encountered for the first time: the effective operation of NATO intelligence, the strength stemming from united EU countries and the excellent propaganda policy pursued by the Ukrainians themselves.

### Introduction

Times of economic uncertainty (crisis caused by the pandemic) and the political uncertainty in Europe (new government in Germany, elections in France etc.) and throughout the world (problems in Afghanistan, tense U.S. relations with China) created convenient conditions in which Russia could pursue active information (disinformation) policy serving its own geopolitical interests.

At the turn of 2021/2022 the main target of Kremlin's disinformation was:

- a) To create an impression that we are dealing with weakening of the U.S. role in international politics and the birth of a new strong alliance between Russia and China;
- b) To present the U.S. as an unreliable NATO member which, in key moments, leaves behind its allies in order to pursue its own political interests;
- c) To suggest that it's high time for such countries like Poland to stop being loyal in its relations towards its ally, the U.S., and start turning in matters of security to such countries like China;
- d) To use and escalate the problem of immigrants on Belorussian-EU border (Poland, Lithuania and Latvia) in order to distract from the approaching war between Russia and Ukraine;
- e) Continuous destabilization of the political situation in Ukraine and accustoming global society with the chaos in Ukraine and an attempt to cause an 'information fatigue' with this topic;
- f) To divide Polish society, weaken support for Ukraine and provoke hostility towards Ukrainians (for deeper analysis see: 'Russia's Digital Battleground: Polish Society', April 2022),
- g) To present Russia as a country whose security is endangered by the actions of the U.S. and Western Europe in attempts to expand their military influence in eastern Europe;

- h) To present NATO as an offensive alliance and the U.S. and Ukraine as countries which aim for war;
- i) To show the helplessness of the diplomatic actions of EU countries and the U.S.;
- j) To break the unity of the West (for further analysis see: 'Divide and rule – how Russia wants to win the new information war', June 2022);
- k) To weaken unity in pertaining to sanctions aimed at Russia by showing that it will be mainly Poland that will pay the price.

This analysis refers to the period between October 2021 and March 2022 (with small exceptions showing, for example, the impact of the war in Ukraine on the public opinion in Poland in the following months) and includes narratives disseminated in both Polish social media as well as press articles. In Poland an openly pro-Russian attitude was never popular and this attitude only escalated after the invasion on February 24, 2022. That is why pro-Kremlin narratives are smuggled mainly in texts and comments aimed at Ukraine and Ukrainians – often they appear under the cover of messages focusing on the defense of Polish interests. Sputnik Polska's website was among the rare examples of openly pro-Kremlin media<sup>137</sup>. However the major propagators of anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee content are the nationalist media as well as profiles and accounts of far-right movements and political parties. The greatest clout is manifested by narratives created by users of social media platforms especially on Twitter (often with a multimillion reach). High-coverage media and articles sometimes are being used to promote pro-Kremlin content (often unknowingly/ unintentionally), and when cited or being referred to in specific contexts or with the 'right' commentary added, they become an excellent springboard for increasing the reach and interactions.

The identified disinformation narratives are so numerous that we decided to group them according to defined themes (subchapter titles). As it is often the case with disinformation, these are intertwined themes which often are mutually contradictory with a changing dynamics. Frequently the starting point was 'facts' reported by clearly partial media, like for example Sputnik Polska, which later were seized upon and disseminated by social media users (e.g. 'Russia wants peaceful solutions of international disputes'<sup>138</sup>, 'Ukraine will attack first'<sup>139</sup>).

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<sup>137</sup> Blocked for propagating pro-Russian content as part of sanction after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in March 2022.

<sup>138</sup> *The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recognizing the Donbas republics: Moscow has insisted for the past 7 yrs. to implement the Minsk agreements – 22.02.2022*, Sputnik Polska; *Lavrov: Russia will be a guarantor of Lugansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic – 22.02.2022*, Sputnik Polska.

<sup>139</sup> *Will the Ukrainian missile reach Moscow? - 30.10.2021*, Sputnik Polska; *Zelensky's prayer for war – 22.11.2021*, Sputnik Poland; *OSCE confirmed that Ukrainian Armed Forces broke the norms of international humanitarian law – 22.02.2022*, Sputnik Polska.

## Smokescreen

The end of 2021 passes by with a dominance of Putin's efficient lies. Washington publicly warns about the planned invasion in Ukraine which Moscow categorically denies. During the next few months the world (including Poland vitally interested in peace behind its eastern border) wants to believe in Russian assurances despite the facts speaking to the contrary (including the conducted troop concentration on the border with Ukraine). The overall resonance of the Kremlin narratives is becoming sharper at the turn of 2021/2022 with, for example, the appearance of messages directly saying about the danger of World War III (Sputnik Polska uses comments made by Trump that Biden's 'incompetence' and 'weakness' will create a danger for the outbreak of WWII<sup>140</sup>). The topic of the potential relocation of the conflict from Ukrainian territory to Poland is becoming a more frequent topic in conversations between Poles. The accompanying atmosphere of horror is keenly used by some of the media ("In case of war, Poland will most probably disappear as a state<sup>141</sup>"). Despite all this, in beginning of 2022 for many Poles and also Ukrainians living in Poland, the new military conflict between Russia and Ukraine is still in the realm of political considerations (political fiction).

### ***Russia as a mediator of the border crisis between Belarus and EU***

Starting in the middle of 2021, Russia creates and uses the chaos resulting from the inflow of immigrants on the territory of Belarus. In this way, attacking Poland and the whole EU, it diverts attention from actions pursued on the Ukrainian border. It is clearly visible how in the fall of 2021 this topic functions as a smokescreen – Belarus is not to be blamed and definitely not Putin who wants to help to solve the problem in a 'humanitarian' way. For example by calling Poland to give up 'forceful actions against the migrants' (also via Sputnik Polska<sup>142</sup>). In this case the propaganda, besides offering false content, depends also on, for example, multiplying information about the tragedies of specific migrants, often children, in order to escalate the atmosphere of chaos and crisis.

This was a successful propaganda action by the Russian and Belarussian forces which to the international public presented Poland as a ruthless and soulless state breaking international law. Accompanying this were also the following narratives: about Poland being left on its own, on attempts to solve the conflict by bypassing Poles as well as the appearance of anti-EU voices ('EU aggression should be met with a strong response', 'we will fight with the occupants from Brussels') and about Poles aspirations ('When the Poles referendums? The MP of Solidarity Poland already knows'). The U.S. was also being discredited. Questions appeared on the Web asking why there are no American soldiers at the border though they are stationed in Poland. According to this narrative, the U.S. is not

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<sup>140</sup> *Trump: Biden's weakness may lead to outburst of World War III* – 30.01.2022, Sputnik Polska.

<sup>141</sup> *In case of war, Poland will most probably disappear as a state*, 24.01.2022, Dziennik Polityczny.

<sup>142</sup> *Russia calls on Poland to stop forceful actions against migrants*, 25.11.2021, Sputnik Polska.

really interested in supporting their own allies and the current U.S. administration is weak and wants good relations with Russia at the cost of Poland. The situation on the Polish-Belarussian borderland revealed that it is fairly easy to introduce elements destabilizing the region. From a propaganda point of view, Belarus and Russia achieved their goal.

### ***The West is divided***

The main goal of Russian information politics and disinformation actions was to destroy the unity of European countries and NATO. Russia wanted to strengthen its position by creating antagonisms between countries and within individual states and their societies. It specializes in blaming the West for the situation in Ukraine.

Even before the war narratives were developed on the Web saying that the U.S. and EU only created impressions that they cared about the security of Eastern Europe, while in reality it is only harsh business interests that count e.g. arms sales or purchase of energy resources ('The rulers of German and France are ready to hand over Ukraine to Kremlin'). Countries such as Germany, France or Hungary are portrayed (in different context and configuration) as more or less Putin's eager allies ('Munich 2.0'). What is very visible within the Polish information space is the play on stereotypes and historical biases and the building of hostility towards EU. The U.S. and Germany receive the most criticism for their passiveness towards Russia ('Germany – NATO's trojan horse'). This fairly easily linked to the topic of the NS2 pipeline.

In the fall of 2021 narratives emerged promoting the thesis that Putin is the greatest winner of the negotiations pertaining to NS2. Russia's president without any concessions received a 'prize' of milliard euros which he was to earn for the gas sent through the new gasoline. All he had to do was to poison Navalny, support the regime of Lukashenko and launch cyberattacks on the U.S.

The supporters of Russian policy announce that the country is back in the game and is today playing a significant role in international politics – the same as once played by the Soviet Union.

### ***The end of the U.S. hegemony***

By the end of 2021, Russia in every possible way is questioning the current world order. The aim is further political and social destabilization, to sow fear and panic, to demonstrate the power of the Russian army increasing its hold around Ukraine. It also aims to show the helplessness of diplomatic actions of European and U.S. leaders. ('Iran and Russia do not treat Biden seriously', 'Biden stooped to Germany's level. Kremlin is using the weaknesses of Western leaders', 'Total catastrophe').

The supporters of former President Trump are also very active. They use a fairly simple message: from the point of view of global security, the relations with Russia during the former U.S. administration were more beneficial to the world, especially for U.S. allies. According to this, Trump was a strong president and admired on the international scene, and Putin respected him ('Where are those now that called president Trump an agent of Putin?'). In this view, President Biden administration appears inept, creating (artificial) conflicts while Biden himself is an ailing man who must stoop down to using dirty political methods in order to stay in power ('falsified' elections in the U.S. are still a very strong theme in Polish social media). Narratives are developed according to which Trump was from the beginning uncomfortable with interest groups wanting to get rich on wars. He supposedly stood up against conflict and if he were to be elected for a next term there would be no war in Ukraine.

According to these messages, the U.S. is both geographically and mentally far away from Europe and if tested they will betray their allies. A belief is developed that Americans lie to Poland and the Polish government, while in reality, they intentionally involve Poland in acts of aggression against Russia. Pro-Russian propaganda more frequently recalls scenes of American citizens and soldiers being evacuated from Afghanistan suggesting the same may await Poles and Ukrainians. More and more Poles do not believe in guarantees of security from NATO countries. Strong use is made of examples from Polish history reminding of the unfulfilled promises of Poland's allies at start of World War II. Often recalled are the Yalta or Teheran agreements which gave up Poland to be ruled by the Soviet Union.

The virtual meeting of the presidents of Russia and the U.S. in December 2021 was very strongly used by Russia's supporters and opponents of American troop presence in Poland. The aim was to build a universal belief about the dominant position of Putin. In their posts they created among Polish citizens the conviction that the American administration came out of this meeting as a loser ('Putin beat Biden and NATO has a problem', 'High anxiety after the Biden-Putin talks. Has the U.S. President let it go?') -as a result Ukraine ('Biden agreed on further Ukraine dependence on Russia') and Poland will lose. In the beginning of January 2022 a narrative appears according to which Biden gives Putin the 'green light' to enter Ukraine. This is based on widely commented remarks of President Biden in which he uses the term 'minor incursions' and is effective enough (not only in Poland) causing Biden's administration to issue an official disclaimer.

President Biden's call to American citizens to leave Ukraine is presented as a defeat and an end of diplomatic actions by the U.S. (the inevitability of war in Ukraine). A publication of the Wall Street Journal is used, informing that the major goal of U.S. troops is the preparation for the evacuation of the U.S. citizens from Ukraine leading to a loss of trust among allies.

According to pro-Kremlin narratives, we are dealing with a weakening role of the U.S. in international politics and the birth of a strong new alliance between Russia and China

('Putin and Xi cement their partnership confronted with pressure from the West'). At the same time, knowing that Polish society will not support an alliance with Russia – China is indicated as an alternative to the 'hegemonic' USA.

### ***NATO is an offensive alliance aimed at Russia***

This narrative is always present in Russian propaganda though this time it gained in force after U.S. public warnings about Russian invasion plans against Ukraine and later with the appearance of Russian 'proposals' to NATO in December 2021 (Russian projects of agreements on 'security guarantees' between Russia and the U.S. and between Russia and NATO member countries). Themes are emerging pertaining to plans on the use of atomic weapons by the U.S. with the danger to Russia, always increasing with the location in Poland of NATO's weapons of mass destruction. Voices are also raised that Biden's goal is 'a personal vendetta against Russia's president (...) most probably on command from the Deep State' ('End of pretenses – Putin is the target').

This narrative becomes stronger in the beginning of 2022. During this time, the U.S. was positioned as state aiming to go to war e.g. by contrasting photos of supposed retreats of Russian army units in Ukraine with photos of U.S. aircraft landing at the airport in Poland (Jasionka near Rzeszów). The goal is to prove that the U.S. troops stationed in Poland de facto constitute a danger to Poland and Poles – they can provoke Russia and turn Poland into a training battleground. This includes the use of remarks made by senator Josh Hawley, one of the close associates of former President Trump, that sending troops to Poland was a mistake and a provocation towards Russia. At the same time an action aimed at discrediting their battle worthiness is being launched (e.g. widely publicized incident: 'Rowdy American soldiers 'fell' into lake Ełckie').

### ***Russia as a guarantor of security in Europe***

Russia aims to portray itself as a power capable of guaranteeing energy and military security in the region.

In view of the developing energy crisis in the fall of 2021, Russia disseminates the thesis that European countries would benefit from giving up expensive deliveries of gas (e.g. from the U.S.), carried out in the name of diversification, and restricting the spot gas market. According to the pro-Russian narrative it would be beneficial for those countries to focus, on the (strategic) long-term cooperation with Russia, which guarantees 'large supplies of gas at a good price' – with the condition that Nord Stream 2 would be operational as quickly as possible. At the same time the EU is criticized for being responsible for the high prices of energy. The aim is to present Russia as a solid economic partner<sup>143</sup>, thanks to which it

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<sup>143</sup>Putin on the gas situation: Europe accuses Russia of covering up its mistakes, and NS 2 may solve them – 13.10.2021, Sputnik Polska; Pieskov: Russia has always fulfilled its obligations as part of the gas supplies to Europe – 24.01.2022, Sputnik Polska.

will not only be able to stabilize the gas prices on the market but also ease the political and economic tensions in various European countries. A positive narrative is being built around NS2 as an investment of real significance that will be quickly felt and visible to every European (the gas prices for households would stabilize thanks to NS2).

Moscow also takes care of its image as a guarantor of military security and a mediator in the region, using to this end, for example, the migrant crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border or the situation in Kazakhstan (Russian 'peace mission' publicized in numerous articles by Sputnik Polska<sup>144</sup>). Starting with the first pieces of information passed on by the American side about the expected Russian invasion in Ukraine, pro-Russian media stresses the peaceful attitude of Russia in fending off any accusations about a planned attack. Russia is presented as a victim of international conspiracy<sup>145</sup>, while Ukraine is the main source of evil and cause of unrest in Eastern Europe. There is an increase in voices about the harassment of the Russian-speaking population of Donbas, the horrors and 'disproportionate aspirations' of Kiev.

According to these theories, Putin is the only leader who is able to understand the current situation in Europe and able to introduce just rule. The example of the cold war is to show that the countries in the East, including Poland, were safer under Russia's protective umbrella. Often the believers in peace and cooperation with Russia are being heard suggesting that this was the reason why Poland was a safe country for so many years ('Putin believes in peaceful resolution of conflict with Ukraine').

### ***Ukraine as the aggressor and an 'artificial creation' that has no right to its own state***

Ukraine is portrayed as the aggressor, a heir and an active believer of Bandera traditions. Sputnik Polska writes extensively, presenting Kiev as the oppressor of people in territories occupied by Russians but also as an inspirator of subversive activities in the whole region e.g. in Georgia (Saakashvili) or Kazakhstan ('Maidan technologies'<sup>146</sup>). Ukrainians are portrayed as cruel murders and Nazis. The Ukrainian president is also discredited as a comedian while at the same time as an oligarch who will do anything to pursue his ambitions at the cost of the Ukrainian state (the broad narrative being: 'Ukraine is a corrupted state governed by oligarchs'). There also appear narratives according to which it is the Jews and their representative in Ukraine (Zelensky) who are responsible for the conflict in Ukraine.

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<sup>144</sup> *Exercises of Russian peace keeping forces in Kazakhstan have started – video – 09.01.2022, Sputnik Polska; During CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) meeting the deployment of peacekeeping forces in Kazakhstan was discussed – 09.01.2022, Sputnik Polska; The commander of the CSTO mission in Kazakhstan: The deployment of peacekeeping forces has stabilize the situation -11.01.2022, Sputnik Polska.*

<sup>145</sup> *Media: Russia will invest trillions of rubles in defense – 3.10.2021, Sputnik Polska; Polish armed forces, even without NATO, are a real threat to the Kaliningrad Oblast – 11.10.2021, Sputnik Polska; Putin: The deployment of American missiles in Europe poses a threat - 1.11.2021, Sputnik Polska.*

<sup>146</sup> *Putin: "Maidan technologies" were used in Kazakhstan – 10.01.2022, Sputnik Polska*

According to these messages, Russia and the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine are the victims of the actions of Ukrainian nationalists<sup>147</sup> and Jewish businesses. Media coverage ‘documenting’ attacks on civilian buildings by Ukrainians and even attacks on ‘Russian territory<sup>148</sup>’ are used. Duplicating information related to the attacks by Armed Forces of Ukraine, planned terrorist attacks in Crimea or Ukrainian plans to acquire atomic weapons<sup>149</sup>. Finally also that Putin was asked for help by the separatists. Sputnik Polska also publicized Kremlin’s message that U.S. is conducting an information campaign in order to hide ‘Kiev’s aggressive intentions<sup>150</sup>’.

Ukrainians are also discredited as a nation without history. Against this backdrop there appear narratives about the planned partitions of Ukraine with the participation of Poland.

The aim of disinformation is to accustom global society to the chaos in Ukraine, an attempt to build information fatigue around this subject and to make public opinion indifferent to what is happening around the topics of Ukraine.

### **Cards on the table – February 24<sup>th</sup> as the turning point**

This war was not meant to happen. In fact everyone agreed (or wanted to agree) that it was not worth for Russia to start an open conflict in Ukraine and everyone willingly believed in Russian assurances. The outburst of war on February 24, 2022 shocked Poles. The moment the war broke out, all significant political forces condemned Russia and stood up for supporting Ukrainians with military and humanitarian assistance. Poles became engaged, on a large scale, in assisting refugees and as a result there was no need to create refugee camps in Poland. Millions of Ukrainians found shelter in Polish homes that offered hospitality.

### ***Ukrainians harm Poles***

The humanitarian crisis in Poland is becoming a fact. Since February 24, 2022, the start of Russia’s aggression, up to August 23, 2022 there were over 5,6 million border crossings from Ukraine<sup>151</sup>. It is now being felt by Poles themselves more and more. Poland has not managed to rebuild its economy after the crisis caused by the pandemic before entering a

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<sup>147</sup> *Kiev does not want peace* – 10.02.2022, Sputnik Polska; *Donbas Republics informed about shootings from the Armed Forces of Ukraine* – 18.02.2022, Sputnik Polska; *A tense situation in Donbas: local militia informs about new shootings from the Ukrainian side*, 22.02.2022, Sputnik Polska.

<sup>148</sup> *Ukrainian missiles on Russian territory: there will another investigation* – 20.02.2022, Sputnik Polska.

<sup>149</sup> *If Ukraine follows the path of production of atomic weapons, it will find itself in international isolation* – 21.02.2022, Sputnik Polska.

<sup>150</sup> *Kremlin: American information campaign is a camouflage for Kiev’s aggressive intentions* – 22.11.2021, Sputnik Polska.

<sup>151</sup> This figure reflects cross-border movements (and not individuals), UNHCR.

new one. High prices of energy, growing inflation and unparallel till now prices of fuel are worsening the social moods each day.

After the first comments criticizing Hungary's attitude towards the conflict in Ukraine, narratives suggesting that it is the right direction for Poland and much safer than the behavior of the authorities are now starting to appear. Orban is presented as a leader who, first of all, cares for his own nation and its security. According to this theory, only Orban in the EU will come as the winner in this conflict because he will retain contracts beneficial to his country and will insure the security (also energy security) of Hungarian citizens. What's more he will not bear any consequences from NATO or EU.

Russia's goal was and continues to be conflicting Ukraine with its western neighbors and closest allies, among which Poland occupies an important place (recalling historical antagonisms and strong activation of nationalist movements). More often voices appear suggesting Poland may become a victim of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict because of its location ('In the name of Bandera's Ukraine we will commit collective suicide'), including a threat of nuclear attack. Ukrainians, especially as refugees, are accused of all kinds of evil – military, economic, social. Ukrainian armed forces are 'dehumanized' through the portrayal of supposed crimes, rapes and tortures and degrading of prisoners (voices have appeared accusing Ukrainians of massacres in Bucha).

The presence of Ukrainian refugees, according to these narratives, is to cause harm to all Poles ('Priority treatment of Ukrainians before Poles is a scandal', 'The spokesman of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has gone CRAZY: We are here as servants of the Ukrainian nation'). Such attitude is fueled by: showing crowded institutions responsible for conferring Polish ID (PESEL) to Ukrainians; suggesting that accepting Ukrainian children to schools and pre-schools will disrupt the educational process of Polish children; presenting Ukrainians as wealthy persons who dupe Poles into offering help and scaring Poles about losing their social benefits in favor of the refugees etc. Hostility towards Ukrainians is incited among Poles by presenting them as drunkards preying on Poland while Zelensky himself – as a degenerate and drug addict. Thus aid for Ukrainians is too generous and unjust towards Polish society ('Overeagerness is worse than communism')

In addition, these narratives aim to incite an atmosphere of fear by spreading untrue information about the sudden rise of crime in regions of Poland, where Ukrainian refugees have appeared. Also they disseminate information suggesting that terrorists from the Middle East enter Poland together with the refugees from Ukraine.

In addition very strong narratives based on the difficult history of both nation (Volhynia massacre, Stepan Bandera, Warsaw Uprising) suggest that Ukrainian nationalism may soon threaten Poland and Poles. Ukrainian refugees are portrayed as epidemiological threat because of low vaccination rates against COVID-19. The current military operations around

the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant remind of the breakdown at the Chernobyl power plant and its consequences for the health of Poles thus capturing their imagination.

### ***NATO and EU will not help because they are weak***

Subsequent actions of Russian propaganda consist of dividing Polish society according to the proven scheme i.e. supporters of NATO and EU and its opponents. Supporters of the far-right previously associated with antivax movement are now activated and engaged in propagating pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian content. The public opinion in Poland is being convinced that NATO policy does not work. As proof for this is the rejection of the Polish proposal for including NATO peace mission in Ukraine in March 2022 (an idea presented by deputy PM J. Kaczyński). A theory is being built, according to which Poland will never be an integral part of the West and will be left on its own with the problems connected to the current humanitarian crisis. All this, even during EU's difficult situation, did not unlock the money for Poland from the National Recovery Plan ('Putin is having fun observing how the Germans with EU hands are attacking Poland').

After President Biden's visit to Warsaw in March 2022, disinformation aims to convince public opinion that the security guarantees for Poland and Ukraine are not reflected in NATO's decisions. The visit itself is presented as a propaganda action which aimed solely at improving the image of the U.S. President and finalize further arms contracts for American firms. The U.S. leader's speech in Warsaw is criticized for not being specific enough since it did not include any proposal of increasing military presence in Poland. This was to be the real guarantee of security for Poland ('What game is Joe Biden playing? Will Poland become a warfare zone?').

### ***Smolensk as the detonator***

The 2010 Smolensk catastrophe is a subject which during the last years divided Polish society the most. Recalling the Smolensk topic in the context of the war in Ukraine, strikes at the core of so-called 'Polish hell'.

In March 2022, the remarks of one of the Russian politicians about the Smolensk assassination (the tweet, later deleted, of Russian deputy PM, Dmitrij Rogozin) gave fuel to conspiracy theories. In connection with the successive anniversary of the Smolensk catastrophe in March/April 2022, a narrative developed in social media based on the remarks of Antoni Macierewicz who said that 'representatives of NATO countries were aware, that it was an assassination'. Voices have also appeared stating that both Biden and Zelensky believe in this version of events.

In the context of the Smolensk catastrophe themes against Donald Tusk are publicized. For many years, the former PM of the Polish government criticized the ruling party in Poland (PiS) for its closeness with Putin's allies in France, Italy and Hungary and the government's

relations with the U.S. which existed during the times of Donald Trump. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the ruling party in Poland started to turn away from openly supporting Putin's allies in Europe. Therefore it needed someone to blame for Putin's actions and thus Donald Tusk and Germany became the target ('Tusk was the most pro-Putin Prime Minister', 'Brotherly armies of Putin and Tusk'). These narratives are rapidly developed by presenting photos from Smolensk catastrophe of 2010 which show PM Donald Tusk and minister Shoigu.

### ***U.S. is the aggressor and agitator of international order***

After President Biden's speech in Warsaw in March 2022 a propaganda action has gained intensity, aiming to show the U.S. as the aggressor, which for years conducted war in many countries destroying the ruling governments and attacking the civilian population. The military actions of the U.S. and Russia over the last few decades (from wars in Korea and Vietnam, to the interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Serbia/Kosovo and Libya up till today's invasion in Ukraine) are presented as being equal. The U.S. are also accused of running laboratories producing biological weapons in Ukrainian territory<sup>152</sup>. According to these theories, Poland and Ukraine have become weapons of political games played by the Biden's administration in order to destroy Russia.

The U.S. is portrayed as a country which has totally subordinated Poland, blindly carrying out all President Biden's decisions ('Poland – America's useful idiot'<sup>153</sup>). The U.S. is blamed for escalating the conflict in Ukraine as well as accused of using Polish hands to carry out a war between Russia and NATO, should Poland hand over MIG-29 aircraft to Ukraine (communication chaos around the issue of the eventual transfer of Polish fighters to Ukraine: on one hand, the U.S. gives a 'green light' for Poland to go ahead; on the other, Poland hands over the aircraft putting at the disposal of the American base in Ramstein). The chaos around the issue of the aircraft transfer to Ukraine allowed for the dissemination of the narrative supporting Russian interests, i.e. making references to disputes between allies and NATO's weaknesses ('White House pushes Poland to war?', 'The U.S. wants to drag Poland into war with Russia')

### **Target audiences**

'Russian aggression in Ukraine triggered in Poland, on one hand, fears about possible escalation of conflict including the use of atomic weapons by Russia, while on other it gave rise to a wave of solidarity with the Ukrainian nation' ('Poles about the support for the fighting Ukraine', CBOS, April 2022).

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<sup>152</sup>Kremlin: *The whole world wants to know what were the U.S. laboratories in Ukraine engaged in* – 09.03.2022, Sputnik Polska; *Russian Ministry of Defense: Experiments with covid were conducted in the laboratories in Ukraine* – 10.03.2022, Sputnik Polska; *Russia's Ambassador appeals to U.S. to stop illegal work in biological warfare* – 10.03.2022, Sputnik Polska.

<sup>153</sup>Szlęzak: *Poland – America's a useful idiot*, Myśl Polska Info, 27.03.2022

With the start of the invasion Poles and Polish political parties univocally stood up against Russia. With the prolonging of the war, Polish society is: a) still willing to help Ukrainian refugees 'at startup' but is becoming more divided in matters of long-term support, b) Poles continue to be scared of the vision of war on Polish territory. Thus pro-Russian disinformation uses the social unrest related to the military and economic threat.

### ***Poles sympathize with Ukrainians but conditions are starting to appear***

- In December 2022 approx. 62% of Poles were of the opinion that NATO should offer military aid to Ukraine in an event of Russia's aggression, 13% of the respondents were of the opposite opinion ([SW Research poll for website rp.pl](#)).
- From a poll conducted before the war by CBOS (['The attitude of others', CBOS, February 2022](#)) it turns out that 41% has a positive attitude towards Ukrainians while 25% has a negative one. In reference to Russians, 29% expressed a favorable attitude while 38% - antipathy/hostility.
- After the invasion, the attitude towards Ukrainian migrants become more favorable. [CBOS research from the period March/April 2022](#) show that 91% of Poles support migrants. While 48% of Poles expressed their positive attitude towards Russians present on Polish territory. Persons with a negative attitude constituted 35% of the respondent group ([IPSOS for OKO.press, March 8-10, 2022](#)).
- Even before the Russian invasion, the Institute for Internet and Social Media Research (IBIMS) informed of dramatic increases in the number of posts with a negative message about Ukrainian refugees which gained popularity in groups with pro-Russian and anti-covid content (['Communique on disinformation about the situation of Ukraine in the internet', February 23, 2022](#)). Content analysis shows that the main goal of the emitted messages at this stage (similar to the cases with content related to vaccinations and COVID-19 in 2021) was to evoke a lack of trust for actions of the government administration and international organization and to incite among Poles a primal fear of Ukrainian citizens living in Poland.
- Together with the prolonged duration of the war there came to light divisions in Polish society on their attitude towards Ukrainians. [CBOS research from July 2022](#) show that in the opinion of Poles, receiving by Poland of refugees from Ukraine will not be, in the long run, beneficial economically (46%) but with 38% of respondents of the opposing view. The majority believes that refugees should receive support in making it through the first months of the war (87%) and in finding a job in Poland (85%) but over half of Poles (56%) believe that we should not provide for Ukrainian refugees during the whole period of duration of the war.

### ***Poles are afraid of war on their territory***

- According to an [IBRIS poll for 'Rzeczpospolita'](#) conducted right after Russia's invasion on Ukraine, the war in Ukraine evoked anxiety in almost 80% of Poles. 65%

of the poll participants asserted that the greatest reason for their anxiety is 'the possibility of direct violation of the security and borders of Poland'. Approx. 72% of Poles believe that Russia could attack Poland.

- In June 2022 over 90% of Poles perceive Putin's Russia as the main danger for our country. At the same time, Poles think positively more often about the U.S., NATO and EU ([Report by Pew Research Center](#)).
- Poles view Russia worse than the Ukrainians evaluate their invader. It can be seen in research results: [Democracy Perception Index 2022](#). To the question: 'Do you believe that your country should break off economic ties with Russia because of the war in Ukraine?' – Poland scored the highest positive response (76%) while Ukraine scored second place (74%).

## Conclusions

The size and the narrative dynamics in the analyzed period is to create, above all, information chaos and atmosphere of uncertainty. Till the last moment, Russians confirmed everyone in their belief that there will be no invasion of Ukraine. Once the war became fact and it turned out that it will not be possible to break the unity of the West – pro-Russian propaganda in Poland hit with great force focusing most of all on anti-Ukrainian tones, sowing confusion in Polish society trying to dissuade Poles from further helping Ukrainians. The difficult economic situation of a large number of Poles will result in a need (both social and political) to blame the conflict in Ukraine for the economic crisis. A greater number of Poles will want an end to the conflict in the east at all cost.

In summer of 2022 it seems that Russian propaganda once confronted with the united front of the West is starting to lose steam and experiencing defeat. Of course, this does not mean the end of Russia's actions but instead a time for searching for new forms and ways of reaching audiences with pro-Russian messages. Winter and the energy crisis - still ahead of us.

## Pro-Kremlin Narratives in Slovakia in the Context of Russia's Aggression against Ukraine and Confrontation with the West

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### Introduction

The military aggression against Ukraine, which was unleashed by the Russian regime in 2014 and which resulted in the illegal annexation of Crimea and the occupation of the part of Donbass, was accompanied from the very beginning by Russia's information and propaganda aggression against the West. Its intention was to justify Russia's imperial expansionist policy towards Ukraine and other sovereign states, the former republics of the Soviet Union, but also to weaken the West, to undermine the unity of Western integration groupings, to disconnect the Central and Eastern European states, new members of the EU and NATO, from their Western allies and partners, as well as to disrupt the foundations of the local liberal-democratic regimes, to devaluate or even to reverse the results of fundamental political and socio-economic reforms carried out in these countries after the fall of the communist regimes, the demise of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the so-called Eastern (aka Soviet) bloc.

On February 2022 Russia militarily invaded Ukraine. The Slovak Republic, as a member state of the European Union and NATO and a neighboring country with Ukraine, took a clear and unambiguous position towards this brutal action: it firmly condemned Russian aggression, supported the massive sanctions imposed by the international community on the aggressor, and stood firmly on the side of Ukraine fighting for its national survival, freedom and independence. Slovakia has shown effective solidarity with Ukraine, providing it with moral, political, diplomatic, humanitarian and military assistance.

Representatives of the Slovak opposition parties took different positions. Although some of them criticized Russia's military invasion, they did not politically support Ukraine as a victim of aggression, rejected the idea of providing effective military aid, blamed the leadership of the Ukrainian state for its active policy of fighting against occupiers, and provoked anti-Ukrainian sentiments among the population. Some of the opposition politicians openly joined the side of the aggressor and acted as agents of Russian influence in their own country.

In this context, it is important to realize that after the 2020 parliamentary elections, some representatives of the current opposition (representatives of the then governing parties before 2020) became actors in the investigation of various corruption cases. Some of them have been convicted, others are under investigation on suspicion of committing crimes. In this situation, these politicians used the case of Russian-Ukrainian war to mobilize their supporters in order to provoke their opposition to the government's policy with the possibility of accusing the authorities that the investigation of corruption cases is actually

political repression aimed at the opposition leaders for their defending the national interests of Slovakia and wishes to have friendly relations with Russia.

The views and activities of pro-Russian actors in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war organically fitted into the broader framework of the branched socio-political ecosystem, promoting the interests of the current Russian regime, its economic, political and ideological influence in Slovakia. This ecosystem was formed in its current relatively developed form after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. It is a networked informal coalition of individual politicians, activists, social organizations and online platforms, which activates and mobilizes its followers when situations arise requiring public advocacy of Russia and its policies with the parallel discrediting its enemies, rivals or victims. Regarding the network of actors of Russian influence in Slovakia, the Slovak intelligence service (SIS) pointed out in its last report: "The activity of pro-Russian activists focused on spreading the narratives aimed at polarizing Slovak society on the basis of value and political conflicts. In the virtual space, an intensification of the spread of pro-Russian narratives was recorded in the evaluated period. The actors who communicated them to the Slovak public generally acted autonomously, but at the same time they were inspired by the topics and contents elaborated in the state media of the Russian Federation. Pro-Russian propaganda messages, including disinformation, were mainly spread by the so-called alternative media operating mostly on the Internet".

Along with other Central European countries, Slovakia became one of the targets of Russian information and propagandist aggression. Actors of Russian influence used favorable – from their point of view – local conditions to their advantage: the existence of pro-Kremlin political forces, the distrust of a part of the population towards liberal democracy and inclination to authoritarianism, the nostalgia of certain social groups for the former communist regime and the prevalence of myths about Slavic solidarity, especially about solidarity with Russia, inherited from the past (19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) when they were a dominant part of the national public discourse. In addition to the support of pro-Russian groups operating on the political and media scene, the actors of the Russian information war concentrated on the spread of historical and modern political narratives, helping the Kremlin's foreign policy and creating more accommodating attitude of Slovakia's population towards the Russian regime.

The activities of pro-Russian forces in Slovakia, social factors of Russian political influence and ideological infiltration, as well as information and propaganda content disseminated by pro-Russian actors have become the objects of monitoring and analysis by Slovak experts. In several studies published in English within the projects implemented in cooperation with foreign partners and donor organizations, experts from the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) addressed various aspects of the activities of proponents of Russian influence in Slovakia. Research also included pro-Russian narratives, their focus, content and bearers.

These were publications devoted to a wide range of events and issues: internal political developments in Slovakia in the context of Russian aggression towards Ukraine after 2014 (*Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, 2016), the use of the so-called traditional values in Russian propaganda in Central Europe (*The Weaponization of Culture: Kremlin's traditional agenda and the export of values to Central Europe*, 2016), the activities of radical and extremist pro-Russian groups (*Hatred, violence and comprehensive military training. The violent radicalisation and Kremlin connections of Slovak paramilitary, extremist and neo-Nazi groups*, 2017), the functioning of systems of “sharp power” of authoritarian regimes against vulnerable democracies (*Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, 2018), Russian interference in European elections (*Investigating Russia's role and the Kremlin's interference in the 2019 EP elections*, 2019), the influence of foreign authoritarian states in the countries of Central Europe (*Russian, Chinese and Turkish authoritarian influence in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia*, 2019), the activities of the actors of Russian influence in the top institutions of the EU, especially in the European parliament (*Authoritarian shadows: Influence of authoritarian third countries on EU institutions*, 2020 and *The specter of authoritarian regimes is haunting Europe: Populist friends seek to help lowering the EU's guard*, 2021), disinformation-conspiracy narratives spread in Central Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic (*The V4's coronavirus infodemic: A window of opportunity to spread distrust in the West*, 2020), specific behavior in the online space of the V4 countries during the escalation of the Russian-Ukraine war (*The Russia-Ukraine war in social media: Inauthentic online behavior in the V4 concerning Russia's war against Ukraine*, 2022).

In 2021, the Institute for Public Affairs published the book *Who is Playing Russian Roulette in Slovakia*, which analyzed the broader historical, cultural and socio-political contexts of the activities of Russian influence's actors in Slovakia.

Research works in the field of monitoring and analysis of disinformation, including those originating from Russia and spread by local actors of Russian influence, were carried out also by experts of the GLOBSEC think tank, who publicized their results in analytical publications. The Slovak portal Infosecurity.sk, which is a joint project of two Bratislava think tanks – Slovak Security Policy Institute (SSPI) a Stratpol – Strategic Policy Institute, has been dealing with the analysis of disinformation and conspiracy narratives for longer time (in June 2022, these two think tanks merged into one organization called the Adapt Institute). One of the main outputs of the Infosecurity.sk portal is the newsletter Disinfo Report.

### **Main pro-Russian narratives and their promoters**

The content and focus of pro-Russian narratives spread in Slovakia at the end of 2021 and in the first half of 2022 were influenced by the Kremlin regime's preparation for a full-scale war with Ukraine (including testing the pre-emptive confrontational steps against the West), as well as the course of this war itself after 24 February 2022. Pro-Russian

disinformation online platforms and individual Slovak politicians were the main spreaders of these narratives. The most known pro-Russian disinformation and conspiratorial platforms in Slovakia included the online dailies *Hlavné správy* (“Main News”), the internet radio *Slobodný vysielateľ* (“Free Broadcaster”), the monthly *Extraplus*, and several dozen smaller online platforms and chat groups in social networks.

In the period when after the Russian invasion the four Slovak disinformation platforms (*Hlavné správy*, *Hlavný denník*, *Infovojna* and *Armádny magazín* (de facto constituent part of *Hlavné správy*) were blocked in accordance with the amendment to the law on the National Security Office (this blockade lasted from the beginning of March till the end of June 2022), the primary role in spreading pro-Kremlin narratives was played by individual politicians. The most committed politicians-disseminators of politically motivated pro-Russian content included Robert Fico and Ľuboš Blaha (both MPs for Smer-SD party, the first is the party’s leader), Milan Uhrík (member of the European Parliament, member of Republika party, who split from the neofascist party ĽSNS in 2021) and the former prominent Christian Democratic politician Jan Čarnogurský.

The main narratives that actors of Russian influence in Slovakia tried to promote in public discourse in order to influence public opinion included narratives dealing with the events that took place at the turn of 2021–2022.

At the end of 2021, they included:

- Russian geopolitical “initiatives” in the form of ultimatums addressed to NATO and the USA and Kremlin’s activities in the field of supplying energy raw materials to Europe (energy blackmail of the West),
- approval of the Slovak-American Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA).
- In the first half of 2022, they included:
  - Russian military “maneuvers” near the border with Ukraine (de facto military encirclement of Ukraine from the north, i.e. from Belarus, from the east and from the south) and preparation for a full scale war,
  - Russia’s invasion of Ukraine
  - Slovakia’s aid to the struggling Ukraine.

### **Before 24 February 2022**

At the end of 2021 Slovak pro-Russian actors received from Moscow a large portion of foreign policy “initiatives” as an inspiration for their propaganda activities. There was a relocation of Russian troops and military equipment around the border with Ukraine, Kremlin’s blackmailing games with energy supplies to Europe and ultimatums addressed to the US and NATO with demands to ensure Russia’s security in a way that would be leading de facto to the disintegration and demise of the North Atlantic Alliance.

In accordance with the Moscow notes, the Slovak Kremlin's advocates searched for the culprits of the ripping conflict in energy area exclusively in the West. The West, not Russia, has caused the crisis by its environmental, energy and pricing policies, by refusing to launch the North Stream 2 pipeline, they argued. It is Russia that has legitimate interests that the West did not want to respect.

In the fall of 2021 Europe began to feel a shortage of natural gas, prices soared, and the issue of certification and commissioning of Nord Stream 2 pipeline came to the fore. As a result, European countries did not have enough gas, however the Kremlin was making it clear that as soon as Nord Stream 2 will start its operation, the cheaper Russian gas will immediately run into Europe. Slovak energy security experts argued that Putin uses gas as a weapon in the geopolitical struggle.

But not everyone in Slovakia agreed with this assessment. Who expressed the different views? These were authors of "alternative" media platforms, fighters "for the truth", and disseminators of conspiracy theories as well as politicians critical to the West. Many of them with inexhaustible energy have been looking during last two years for the culprits of the pandemic, which some considered a phantom, non-existent and invented phenomenon, while others saw it as weapon of Western intelligence services, pharmaceutical companies, and other corporations in the fight against defenseless people in the rest of the world. All of them were, however, united by a pro-Kremlin leaning, adherence to pro-Russian stances, and active support for the domestic and foreign policy steps of Kremlin's leadership.

The main outline of their statements regarding the gas crisis in Europe was predictable: Europe itself is to blame for problems with the supply of Russian gas, Russia bears no responsibility for it, Russia has never used and is not using its energy supplies as an instrument of pressure on European consumers, for Europe there is no other alternative than buying Russian gas, and the commissioning of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline will automatically lead to a resolution of the crisis. All these statements look as if they were carved from patterns of Kremlin propaganda.

Slovak member of the European Parliament (EP) Milan Uhrík was actively involved in the dispute around the causes of the gas crisis in Europe. He is known in the EP for his unequivocal pro-Russian stances, his praise of the Kremlin's foreign and domestic policies, and for his sharp attacks against the EU and NATO, accusations of these organizations of hostility and aggressive policies towards Russia. Uhrík in his [FB post](#), re-published by *Hlavné správy*, the most widely read Slovak pro-Russian online platform, argued that the EU itself was to blame for the jump in energy prices, arguing that the arrogant policies of Europe, which in the fight against climate change reduced electricity production that led to a shortage and increased prices. He had no doubts regarding the main reason for the current gas crisis: "Behind all this are the stupid political decisions of the European Union and individual governments. At the urging of the Americans, European governments first

turned the whole of Europe against Russia, and now they are surprised by the sharp rise in prices and the shortage of gas in Europe, because Russia has started selling gas to other countries, such as China”.

*Hlavné správy* detailed the Kremlin’s interpretation of the gas crisis in Europe, as was presented by Igor Sechin at the Eurasian Economic Forum in Verona, Italy. The head of Rosneft in his speech at this event explained (and *Hlavné správy* helped him to convey this thought to Slovak audience) that America was to blame for all the energy troubles in Europe. It was America that ensured that fuel prices in Europe rose sharply. The outlet added that Vladimir Putin considered the gas shortage in the European market as a result of EU economic policy. It gave a more nuanced picture of the causes of European “gas disaster” in its editorial entitled “Gas is expensive, the Americans and their European puppets are to blame, and the Slovaks will pay for it”. According to *Hlavné správy* “the real culprit of this situation is the United States and their Ukrainian and Polish puppets, who for years have tried to use the European gas market as a weapon in the political struggle against Russia. The mantra of stubborn Russophobes about how the evil Gazprom will go bankrupt if rich Europe stops buying gas from it, and how the good Americans will save Europeans by supplying them with shale gas today sounds like a bad joke with black humor”.

Ukraine, the outlet continued, was acting in concert with Poland, took all possible steps to prevent the commissioning of Nord Stream 2 so that this “purely commercial project: does not hit the incomes of the “Bandera” regime of “Ukraine, or Anti-Russia”. Actors here are allegedly “sounding the alarm that without payment for the transit of Russian gas they will not have enough money to finance their anti-Russian policy, especially the army, which will be used as cannon fodder in the future U.S. war against Russia”.

What were the immediate prospects for the gas crisis? What could be expected here for Europe, including Slovakia? *Hlavné správy* called for vigilance, warning that the struggle was not yet over: “The Poles and Ukrainians failed to block Nord Stream. However, they still have not lost hope that with the help of the U.S. they will be able to block at least the certification process to preserve their own monopoly on Russian gas supplies to Europe. Of course, the Americans and their Polish and Ukrainian puppets do not care at all that some Slovaks will be hurt because of gas prices”.

The nationalist pro-Russian monthly *Extraplus* proposed its “right way out” from the bad situation. In its opinion, Slovakia should follow in Hungary’s footsteps. Budapest signed an agreement with Moscow that would allow Russia to supply gas to Hungary – bypassing Ukraine – via Turkey, Bulgaria, and Serbia. The signing of this agreement has brought great tension to bilateral Hungarian-Ukrainian relations. Ukraine saw Budapest’s move as an unfriendly act. The EU was also not pleased.

*Extraplus* commented: “While the [Slovak] government of [Prime Minister] Eduard Heger is fighting against everything Russian and against Putin, Viktor Orbán is doing everything in order Hungarians feel the consequences of the global situation as little as possible. He contributes to this through the signing of a 15-year contract with Russia’s Gazprom to supply gas at an extremely favorable price. Hungarians will no longer then depend on an unstable Ukraine, as gas will go to Hungary via Serbia. And what about Slovakia? Heger’s government is not at all worried that Slovakia has small gas reserves, pretending that there will be no winter”.

During Russian military “maneuvers” Slovak pro-Kremlin activists have joined the campaign to justify Russia’s behavior, arguing that Russia was not actually taking aggressive action, that it only cares about its legitimate security interests, that Russia’s actions on the border with Ukraine are routine military exercises that each state has the inalienable right to conduct on its territory without threatening anyone. It is Russia’s leadership, they argued, that seeks peace with Ukraine’s government, who, on the other hand, refused to honor the previous agreements and was waging war against its own nation being in full control of America. According to Slovak pro-Kremlin activists, Russia was only defending itself, it is never attacking and never starting any wars. Smer-SD’s politician Ľuboš Blaha, long time known for his pro-Putin views, went further than anyone else. He said that the possibility of Russia’s war against Ukraine is a monstrous “hoax” – a fabrication with the aim of discrediting the peace-loving policies of the Russian state.

Jan Čarnogurský, the former Slovak Prime Minister and Minister of Justice, the current head of the Slovak-Russian Society (one of the main pro-Russian lobbyist organizations in Slovakia), positively reacted to Putin’s absurd ultimatums addressed to the West. In an article under the symptomatic title “It is about the annulment of NATO’s expansion to the East”, published in January 2022, Čarnogurský retells the well-known Russian interpretation of development in the region of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communist regimes, fully agreeing with it – the West (USA, Germany) allegedly made a promise to the USSR that NATO would not expand to the East, but this promise was broken. According to Čarnogurský, at that time “an opinion began to form in the United States, which later resulted in the Wolfowitz doctrine, that the United States should not allow the birth of a power with territory and resources that would allow it to compete with the United States. In practice, these were only Russia and China. No American politician then has repeated the promise not to expand NATO”. These arguments of the former Slovak dissident fully fitted to outline that Vladimir Putin drew as a prelude to his absurd ultimatums to the West.

Čarnogurský continued his considerations: “The West has driven Russia into a geopolitical corner. If he deploys his weapons in Ukraine, a US missile flight to Moscow will take 5 minutes or less. Let the West assure Russia as much as it likes that its missiles will not threaten it, once they are deployed, the West will be able to dictate terms to Russia. The Anglo-Saxons especially have a penchant for the natural resources of Russia”.

But Russia, Čarnogurský rejoices, has an effective response to the aggressive behavior of the United States and NATO – these are hypersonic missiles that overcome all air defense systems. It is this response that predetermines, in his opinion, the success of the ultimatum put forward by Russia to the West. This is how Čarnogurský characterizes the Russian demands – as an ultimatum, while fully agreeing with it: “The reality of the technical characteristics of Russian missiles is evidenced by the radical demands that Putin has now presented to Biden. Putin is effectively demanding that Biden cancel NATO’s eastward expansion. Such demands can be put forward and secured only if there is a military superiority”.

The former politician and nowadays committed pro-Russian activist wishes the success of Russian foreign policy “initiative”. At the same time, he sees a broader picture of the desired consequences of such a development: “Slovakia’s objective interest lies in Russia’s success in the negotiations. If the Russians succeed, then the Americans will not be able to place any weapons on our territory that could make our territory a target for Russian missiles. Russia’s success would save all of Europe from nuclear missile danger, as it would renew the ban on medium-range and short-range missiles, which protects Europe above all. Russia’s success will prevent Ukraine from turning its domestic problems into a European and global problem”.

At the turn of 2021-2022, the Slovak pro-Russian forces, including parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition parties, have been waging political and propaganda attack on the government-led process of signing and ratifying a defense cooperation agreement (DCA) with the U.S. They organized public gatherings of like-minded people, spread false information about the content of the treaty and the consequences of its ratification, incited anti-Western and anti-American sentiments, accused community of those who supported the signing of the treaty of treason. Pro-Russian politicians also described their opponents, pointing out to Russia’s aggressive intentions and the need to strengthen Slovakia’s defense capabilities in this situation in cooperation with NATO partners as “warmongers”. The peculiarity of the situation proceeded from the fact that after Slovakia joined NATO in 2004, the adoption of documents such DCA was a simple thing, purely bureaucratic procedure, and for a long time no one except specialists and government officials paid much attention to it. The ratification of defense agreement between Slovakia and the U.S. in 2022, however, suddenly deviated from this pattern.

A few years ago, Slovakia purchased 14 F-16 jet fighters from the U.S. for its air force. To use them, Slovak army needed to agree with the U.S. on the mode of cooperation with American specialists in Slovakia in the places of jets’ location. The agreement should have been accepted earlier, immediately after the purchase of American fighters under the previous government, headed first by Robert Fico and then by Peter Pellegrini. However, the then other government’s party, pro-Russian Slovak National Party (SNS), which had in its hands the defense ministry, managed to block the whole process. The document was

submitted for approval to Pellegrini's government, but at the request of SNS it was removed from the agenda before the cabinet meeting and put on the back burner.

After the center-right pro-Western government came to power in March 2020, the process of adoption of Slovak-American agreement resumed. However, pro-Russian opponents – from opposition politicians to disinformation media, from post-communists to neofascists – quickly mobilized themselves against the ratification of the agreement. Obscure “peaceful civic initiatives” were attacking the agreement as a document that supposedly undermines Slovakia's sovereignty. They organized rallies in front of the parliament and near the American embassy in the center of Bratislava. The entire parliamentary opposition united their rows, trying to sink the ratification. Representatives of this red-brown alliance stated that the goal of those who supported the ratification is to unleash a war with Russia and to draw Slovakia into it. The fact that it was Russia which at the same exact time was concentrating troops on the border with Ukraine, ready for an invasion, did not trouble them. Parliament, however, has overcome the resistance of pro-Russian opposition and ratified the agreement.

#### **After 24 February 2022**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine shocked Slovakia. Unlike Russia, in which the Kremlin authorities convinced the population of the peaceful nature of the special operation (which was fully consistent with what was being shown on Russian state television), the Slovak population received on all media platforms a true picture of what was happening in neighboring country, including the bombing of cities, residential areas, universities, hospitals, oil storage facilities, and the death of civilians, elderly, women, and children.

The invasion took pro-Russian activists by surprise as it ex-post denied their previous narratives that they had been spreading. They went silent for several days – the unprovoked attack by the Russian military on a peaceful Ukraine was so monstrous and their pre-invasion “predictions” of Russia's “peace-loving” policy were so radically different from what actually happened that they decided it would be better from the tactical point of view to hide in the shadows at least for a short time.

After a certain state of confusion, pro-Russian activists, however, became active again. Although under the pressure of reports about the brutality of Russian aggression, some of them had to criticize the invasion, they continued in their anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. Their intention was to prevent Slovakia from helping Ukraine with the supply of heavy weapons (the S-300 anti-aircraft system, the Zuzana howitzer, MiG-29 jet fighters, helicopters, and tanks etc.) and to create an unfavorable attitude among the population towards Ukraine as a state and towards Ukrainian refugees that Slovakia accepted.

Several prominent members of Smer-SD in the parliament took an active part in the anti-Ukrainian and inherently pro-Russian “peace” campaign, including party chairman Robert

Fico, vice-speaker of parliament Juraj Blanár, chairman of the foreign committee Marian Kéry and already mentioned vice-chairman of Smer-SD Ľuboš Blaha. The military activities of Russia and the atrocities committed by the Russian army on the civilian population of Ukraine were not mentioned at all by these people. Peace, according to their ideas, was supposed to come about when Western countries stop supplying Ukraine with weapons (as a result of which the Russian army would defeat the Ukrainian army) and then the peace negotiations between two states begin. It was actually a proposal for the capitulation of Ukraine.

The role of political leader of the pro-Russian information and propaganda lobby during the Russian-Ukrainian war was played by Robert Fico. There was one important thing about this. Fico is the main figure in a noisy cases of corruption in the upper echelons of power. This corruption took place during the reign of his party. For Fico any agenda that provides an opportunity to enter into a tough confrontation with the incumbent government – anti-COVID policy, investigating corruption schemes, defense cooperation with the United States, or supporting Ukraine in the fight against Russian aggression – is a welcomed opportunity to present himself as a “dissident” and victim of political persecution and thus to generate additional sympathy among potential voters.

And here he was helped by the germinating shoots of poisonous seeds planted by the Kremlin propaganda machine in Central Europe after 2014. Narratives about a friendly Russia, an eternal ally of the Slavic states, about a predatory West seeking to devour the small peoples of Central Europe, about aggressive NATO bloc that surrounds Russia from all sides, about an insidious USA waging war against Russia in Ukraine by hands of their Ukrainian minions – all this is reflected to some extent in the stances expressed by Fico.

He elaborated his party’s response on how the situation around Ukraine should be resolved: “We in Smer talk about supporting negotiations between Ukrainians and Russians. The whole world’s efforts should be concentrated on peace negotiations, because every day of the conflict brings the multiplication of the suffering of innocent people. But what is the reality? Unfortunately, the Slovak government is sending lethal ammunition to Ukraine. It propagandistically incites hatred towards ordinary Russians. The Slovak government supports the unacceptable idea of collective guilt [of the Russians] ... Just look at the speech of American President Biden and his belief that an opportunity has finally been created to eliminate Russia’s mortal enemy”.

In line with the narrative that arms deliveries to Ukraine are only a prelude to war, Fico rejected Slovakia’s sending of its weapon systems to Ukraine fighting against the Russian occupation army: “We call on the government not to even consider handing over the S-300 system to Ukrainian troops. It means the complete elimination of the only functional system we have for our own airspace protection. And politically it means that Slovakia would actively enter the war conflict”. Leader of Smer-SD also rejected the possible transfer of Slovak MiG-29 jet fighters to Ukraine.

Smer-SD's chairman repeatedly stated that Slovakia had nothing to do with the war conflict, that it did not take part in its emergence. He tried to persuade people that the policy of the Slovak government towards the Russian-Ukrainian war was harming citizens: "I personally have a different answer than the government to the question of whether the tax for the conflict in Ukraine should be sharp price growth in Slovakia and a reduction in the standard of living of Slovaks".

Fico refused to be present in the session room of the Slovak parliament on the day when Zelensky addressed Slovak citizens speaking on a teleconference to the MPs (May 2022). Fico called the Ukrainian president a "comedian" and a "liar" who allegedly lied every day and, moreover, harmed the interests of Slovakia by calling on the EU to immediately impose an oil and gas embargo against Russia that according to Fico would create problems for the Slovak economy. "What values are Zelensky talking about fighting for if the fascists are struggling for Ukraine, to whom the Slovak government sends weapons, and in recent years Ukrainians have been killing national minorities in the Donbass", the former Slovak prime minister rhetorically exclaimed to reporters, leaving the parliament session room during Zelensky's speech.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when Vladimir Putin began to threaten the West with a world nuclear war, Fico's close party colleague Ľuboš Blaha began to accuse Slovak officials of fomenting the war, arguing that it was their actions that were leading to an escalation of tension: "You want to be responsible for a nuclear war, you crazy people? The Russians announced that they were putting their nuclear forces on alert. This is where the jokes end. Čaputová [President of Slovakia], Nad' [Minister of Defense], Korčok [Minister of Foreign Affairs] – do you really want to be responsible for the third world war?"

Blaha's public speeches and articles were characterized by sharp anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and open adoration of Russia. In his speech at the Smer-SD rally on the occasion of the end of the Second World War at the memorial of Soviet soldiers in Bratislava on Slavín Hill, Blaha declared: "Let's thank together the Russian nation, because on Slavín we must thank those who liberated this nation from fascism. And fascism is coming back again. President Zuzana Čaputová recently said in the palace that we are all Ukrainians. So let's show her who we are – we are Slovaks! ... We want to take care of the social rights of Slovaks, our seniors, our young families! ... We don't want Bandera's greetings like "Glory to Ukraine" to be heard in Slovakia. We simply do not want fascism here! ... We want peace, we don't want to send weapons to Ukraine, and we want to give bread for Slovaks! Slovakia must be in first place!"

According to Blaha, "the war could have been avoided if Ukraine had been neutral and agreed with Russia not to have NATO weapons on its territory". He claimed that "without weapons from America, the war would have been long over. Today, Ukrainians are dying only because of the West. And Ukraine is just a field where the American war against Russia is being waged, that is the truth. Zelensky sacrificed his nation and Americans cynically let

Ukrainians die for American interests. They will fight against Russia to the last Ukrainian – because it does not hurt them”.

After Zelensky’s speech in the Slovak parliament in May 2022, which Blaha demonstratively ignored, this prominent Smer-SD’s member attacked the head of the Ukrainian state with a post full of invectives and slurs: “Zelensky is a pure populist, demagogue and irresponsible millionaire. He dragged his country into a war that could have been avoided. He promised the voters peace and brought bloodshed. It was enough to guarantee neutrality and sit down with the Russians at the negotiating table. Today, he wants to drag the whole of Europe into the war. He insults us and threatens us. He is in the thrall of the American armories and sacrificed his entire nation. I consider him a warmonger, just like Čaputová, Heger and Korčok, whom he made his provincial spokespersons. It is a shame how they betray the national interests of the Slovak Republic. Although he himself is of Jewish origin, he was unable to stand up against the rampant fascism in Ukraine. He considers it “cool” that the Nazi mass murderer Bandera is a hero for many Ukrainians. Today, he is playing the hero of the nation, but in reality innocent Ukrainians are dying because of him. And he would like innocent Slovaks and Europeans to die because of him. This must not happen! He wants arms from Slovakia. He wants us to disconnect from Russian raw materials. He wants us to hate Russia. We must reject all this. It would be national suicide. Zelensky is an irresponsible gambler and I don’t feel an iota of respect for him”.

Not once in his speeches and articles Blaha mentioned the real causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war, he did not at all consider the responsibility and guilt of Vladimir Putin for the crimes and atrocities committed against the civilian Ukrainian population by the Russian occupying army.

The already mentioned member of the European Parliament, Milan Uhrík, known for his unequivocal support of the policy of the Russian regime, also took an anti-Ukrainian stance in the case of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The day before the Russian invasion, Uhrík wrote in his post on FB: “Ukraine did not respect the Minsk agreement for many years. It remained only on paper. The Ukrainian government teamed up with America to wipe out the majority Russian/Russian speaking areas. After more than 7 years of anti-Russian sanctions, hateful propaganda and the expansion of the American army to the East (yes, also to Slovakia), Russia objectively had no other option than to stop the progress of its opponents”.

Long ago Uhrík demanding the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia for its aggressive policy, and he has not changed his position after Russia has openly invaded Ukraine: “Anti-Russian sanctions do not help Ukraine at all and, first of all, they do not help Slovak citizens. They are ineffective in what they are supposed to achieve (the war is still going on) and they are also harmful to us. Therefore, we should reject economic sanctions. The Slovak government is incompetent, does not care about people and is blind in foreign policy, therefore it only satisfies the needs and demands of foreign structures”.

Jan Čarnogurský joined the post-communist and neo-fascist supporters of Kremlin after Russia invaded Ukraine. He commented enthusiastically on the developments in Ukraine in the first days of invasion in the disinformation-conspiracy internet radio *Slobodný vysieláč*. Čarnogurský argued that the Russian army was not fighting in Ukraine, as there was allegedly no one to fight with, since Ukrainian servicemen, on the advice of Vladimir Putin, were surrendering to the advancing Russian army. With undisguised joy Čarnogurský reported that already in the evening of the same day the Russian army occupied a military airfield 20 kilometers from Kyiv. “It is wonderful!” he proclaimed, “Russian army has occupied or bombed military airfields, achieving its objectives masterfully”. With great understanding (and tacit approval) the former Slovak prime minister reacted to the Kremlin’s desire to “demilitarize” and “denazify” Ukraine, agreeing that “denazification” would mean a change in the political regime there.

In a post published on the website of the Slovak-Russian Society (SRS) in mid-March 2022, Čarnogurský repeated a number of fabrications spread by Kremlin propaganda (the existence of secret American bio-laboratories in Ukraine, false victims during the bombing of an allegedly non-existent maternity hospital in Mariupol, the deployment of heavy weapons by the Ukrainian army in densely populated urban localities with the aim of creating “human shields” from civilians).

In the mentioned article the SRS’ chairman presented the following scenario of developments in Europe after the end of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which in its final part contains a factual recommendation that Slovakia change its foreign policy and civilizational orientation and turn to Russia: “If Russia wins the Ukrainian conflict – and the development of the battlefield is heading towards it – the geopolitical influence of Russia in Europe will increase. President Putin can then go back to his demands on Biden from last December, that the US and NATO return militarily to the state before May 1997. That is, the expansion of NATO to the East will effectively be canceled. Not only that. All international treaties in this space will acquire a different weight, and the cancellation of some will not be unimaginable. ... The Russian concept of the integration of states is different from the Western one, represented by the European Union. In the Russian concept, states do not lose much of their sovereignty as in the EU, but must demonstrate their independent viability. Viable states enter the integration cluster and develop mutual integration while maintaining viability. And for such states, the international support is important”.

#### **Target audience: shifts in opinions<sup>154</sup>**

Slovakia is known for the fact that many of its inhabitants harbor sympathies towards Russia. Among the V4 countries, pro-Russian sentiment is the most widespread here. This

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<sup>154</sup> Source of data used in this section is a study by Zora Bútorová: *Pravicový extrémizmus na Slovensku v súradniciach verejnej mienky* (section *Reakcia verejnosti na vojnu Ruska proti Ukrajine*) in publication: Zora Bútorová – Grigorij Mesežnikov: *Pravicový extrémizmus na Slovensku. Výzva pre demokraciu a európske hodnoty*, Inštitút pre verejné otázky: Bratislava 2022, s. 52 – 58.

is based on the historically rooted concept of a fraternal Slavic nation and gratitude to Russia for the victory over fascism. Almost half of Slovak population considers Russia as an important strategic partner. In accordance with this positive attitude, the Slovak public in January 2022 interpreted the causes of tension on the Russian-Ukrainian border. FOCUS agency research showed that up to 44% attributed responsibility to NATO and the US, while only 35% of respondents blamed Russia.

However, a few weeks of bloody war were enough to change the view of many Slovaks towards Russia. While in 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, according to *ISSP Slovakia 2014 research*, only 19% of people in Slovakia believed that Russia could pose a danger to Slovakia, in April 2022, 50% already thought so. According to the GLOBSEC Trends 2022 research, the share of people who saw a threat in Russia rose dramatically since 2021 – from 20% to 63%, and sympathy for Vladimir Putin dropped from 55% in March 2021 to 28% in March 2022.

Views on the war in Ukraine are, however, quite controversial in Slovakia. As FOCUS agency research for GLOBSEC showed in March 2022, on the one hand, two-thirds of the public (66%) agreed that the conflict in Ukraine is an unprovoked and unjustifiable military aggression by Russia and considered the Ukrainian resistance to the invasion justified (67%). In the opinion of 65% of respondents, “President Putin wants to restore the Russian empire, and therefore he is a threat not only to Ukraine, but also to other countries”. On the other hand, almost half of the Slovaks (47%) were de facto supporters of Ukraine’s capitulation and its submission to the dictates of the Russian regime. These respondents believed that President Zelensky should agree to all Russian conditions and thus should prevent the bloodshed. More than half of the public (57%) agreed with the Kremlin’s argument that Russia rightly considers NATO expansion a threat to its security.

Analysis of the profile of people who are more submissive to pro-Kremlin propaganda revealed that they more often include persons with lower education, people nostalgically recalling the former regime and people preferring a system with a strong and decisive authoritarian leader to modern liberal democracy. Moreover, the pro-Kremlin narratives are more often believed by people subjected to conspiracy beliefs about the Covid-19 disease. Researchers from the Institute of Experimental Psychology of the Center of Social and Psychological Sciences of the Slovak Academy of Sciences came to conclusion that this is a consequence of the fact that conspiracy claims about the pandemic and the war in Ukraine are “spread through the same information channels – for example, through the same groups or profiles on social networks”.

## **Conclusions**

The main pro-Russian narratives propagated in Slovakia by the advocates of Kremlin influence at the turn of 2021–2022 included those that justified Russia’s hostile policy towards the West, its resistance towards the existing liberal system of international

relations and the democratic organization of society. After the unleashed Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the focus of the activities of the holders of pro-Russian ideas shifted to the defense of Russia's invasion and refusal of Western aid to the struggling Ukraine.

The reaction of Slovak social, political and media actors to the war of the Kremlin regime against Ukraine once again confirmed their split in opinions and values. On the one hand, there were democratic forces based on the priority of the universal values of freedom, democracy, human rights, the right of each nation to determine its own destiny, to develop its own statehood freely and sovereignly and, if necessary, to defend it against external aggression. These actors clearly took the side of Ukraine, which was insidiously invaded by the Russian aggressor.

On the other hand, there were actors based on particular values of national egoism, open or hidden ethnic nationalism, mistrust towards integration groupings of which the Slovak Republic is a member state, showing inclinations towards authoritarian practices and sympathy for foreign powers with non-democratic regimes and expansionist foreign policy. These forces did not support Ukraine and joined the side of Russia in an open or camouflaged form.

The main goal of the carriers of pro-Russian narratives was to plant doubts among the Slovak population about the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war, weaken the support of Ukraine from the Slovak state, provoke Slovaks' hostility towards Ukraine and Ukrainians, whitewash the Kremlin's actions, help it to overcome the consequences of sanctions imposed by the West, prevent the strengthening of the EU sanctions regime, and, if possible, weaken it.

The case of the Russian-Ukrainian war and its impact on internal political development and society's atmosphere in Slovakia confirmed that it is in the vital interest of the country and the security of its citizens that the dominant position in the power system of the state be obtained by the forces promoting the priority of freedom and democracy, the effective defense of national statehood and the anchoring of the Slovak Republic in integration groupings of democratic states in cooperation with allies, partners and democratically oriented neighbors. Otherwise, the national interests of Slovakia as a free and democratic country may find themselves at risk or even threatened, resulting from the possible connection of external authoritarian forces with their domestic agents of influence with the intention of changing the country's social order and redirecting its foreign policy orientation.

## Evolution of Pro-Kremlin Propaganda in Eastern and Central Europe during the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Key Takeaways from Country Case Studies

*Yuri Dzhibladze, iSANS*

### Introduction

This overview is based on five case studies of pro-Kremlin propaganda targeting five countries in the region of Eastern and Central Europe: three Visegrad countries – Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, and two Eastern Partnership countries – Belarus and Ukraine. All of these countries have been targets of Kremlin's malign operations and extensive pro-Russian propaganda influence for a long time. These case studies have been conducted within a project “New Propaganda and Disinformation Challenges for Visegrad/EaP states in the Changing Environment” which has been carried out by iSANS – the International Strategic Action Network for Security in cooperation with its partners, the Institute for Public Affairs (Slovakia), European Expert Association (Ukraine), Prague Security Studies Institute (Czech Republic), and Res Publica Foundation (Poland, in cooperation with ABT Shield).

The idea of the project has been to study changes in the Kremlin's propaganda methods and disinformation narratives in Eastern and Central Europe and to fill in the gap in comparative regional studies focused on analysis of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives and their evolution. When the project was at the planning stage in the summer of 2021, we spoke about a “changing environment” and discussed a likely metamorphosis in the Kremlin management system, including changes in methods of its external influence and narratives of its propaganda. We expected that “by autumn 2021 we will face a modified system of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives targeting CEE countries” that would pose new challenges for them. However, we could not expect that just a few months later the situation in the region would change so drastically.

With the start of the large scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine and the Lukashenka regime's complicity in the aggression, the focus of the pro-Kremlin propaganda has changed. While its ultimate goal remains to undermine democracy as a concept, destroy the unity of European countries and NATO, to weaken sovereignty of neighboring states and to justify Russian imperial ambitions, its narratives have shifted to war propaganda, justification of the aggression against Ukraine, and disinformation about the war, including denial or silencing of massive war crimes committed by Russian troops and dissemination of “fake news” about actions of Ukrainian armed forces and allies supporting Ukraine.

Five case studies included in this report review major Russian propaganda narratives and malign influence channels before the invasion of Ukraine and in the first months of the war. We hope that the research findings will allow suggesting more effective ways to counter

Russian malign influence, including setting up counter-narratives, developing more efficient policies, and working on enhancing society's resilience to disinformation. Sharing experiences and expertise, and cooperating at the regional level appears to be a much needed response to common security threats.

The region is in the middle of dramatic and dangerous developments, and the evolution of propaganda and other hybrid tools of Kremlin's malign influence require continuous watching, analysis, and effective counteraction.

### **Goals and target groups of the pro-Kremlin propaganda**

As our **Slovak** and **Polish** experts points out, the military aggression against Ukraine, unleashed by the Russian regime in 2014, was accompanied from the very beginning by Russia's information and propaganda aggression against the West. Its goals are to justify Russia's imperial expansionist policy towards Ukraine and other sovereign states but also to weaken the West, to undermine the unity of Western integration projects, to disconnect the Central and Eastern European states, new members of the EU and NATO, from their Western allies and partners, to destroy the unity of European countries and NATO, as well as to disrupt the foundations of the democratic regimes, to devaluate or even to reverse the results of fundamental political and socio-economic reforms carried out in these countries after the fall of the communist regimes. Russia wants to strengthen its position by creating antagonisms between countries and within individual states and their societies.

In all of the states studied, intensification of the spread of pro-Russian narratives was recorded in the research period. Activity of pro-Russian activists focused on spreading the narratives aimed at polarizing society on the basis of value and political conflicts. The actors who communicated them to the often acted autonomously, but at the same time were inspired by the topics and contents elaborated in the state media of the Russian Federation.

As shown in the case study of the **Czech Republic**, the main tool of the Russian propaganda, Sputnik CZ, targets nationalists through continuous appeals to Czech national interests, fear-inducing narratives about external actors (the EU or US) meddling in the internal affairs of the state, and through attempts to conjure an image of the current government which is not able nor willing to take care of its own citizens and instead acts as an agent of the external actors.

In **Poland**, the times of economic uncertainty, caused by the pandemic, and the political uncertainty in Europe and throughout the world created convenient conditions in which Russia could pursue active disinformation policy serving its geopolitical interests.

The **Slovak** experts have shown that actors of Russian influence used favorable – from their point of view – local conditions to their advantage: the existence of pro-Kremlin political forces, the distrust of a part of the population towards liberal democracy and inclination to

authoritarianism, the nostalgia of certain social groups for the former communist regime and the prevalence of myths about Slavic solidarity, especially about solidarity with Russia, inherited from the past when they were a dominant part of the national public discourse.

In **Slovakia**, analysis of the profile of people who are more submissive to pro-Kremlin propaganda revealed that they more often include persons with lower education, people nostalgically recalling the former regime and people preferring a system with a strong and decisive authoritarian leader to modern liberal democracy. Moreover, the pro-Kremlin narratives are more often believed by people subjected to conspiracy beliefs about the Covid-19 disease. Researchers at the Slovak Academy of Sciences came to conclusion that this is a consequence of the fact that conspiracy claims about the pandemic and the war in Ukraine are “spread through the same information channels – for example, through the same groups or profiles on social networks”.

### **The main tools and messengers**

The case study of **Ukraine** shows that the coverage of the actions of Russian troops in Ukraine, targeting Russian-speaking audiences, including in Ukraine, has three main components. On the one hand, there are the official videos of the Ministry of Defense, posted on various media platforms. At the same time, there is active coverage by a group of “war correspondents” whose practices were worked out back in the Donbass and Syria. However, anonymous Telegram channels managed by the Russian special services can be considered a factor of Russian propaganda against which so far there has not been developed an effective countermeasure. Their integration into the Ukrainian media space began in 2018-2019, subsequently forming an impressive base of subscribers. Today, these tools of influence are focused on the crafting of an alternative reality, the creating of conditions for capitulation, and the forming of preconditions for strengthening Russian influence in Ukraine.

**Belarusian** state media continue to actively engage in propaganda support for the “SMO”, fully synchronizing their publications with the Kremlin’s propaganda machine in which the leading role in projecting Russian influence in Belarus is played by Sputnik Belarus and RT, supported by IA Regnum, TV Tsargrad, и Prigozhin’s RIA FAN. The main source of the stories aimed at justifying Russian aggression against Ukraine, as well as the author of important statements, has been the self-proclaimed president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka. The in-house propagandists of the state media are mainly engaged in as little as working along the ideological directions indicated by Lukashenka, just making more radical statements. Pro-Kremlin non-state “experts” of Belarusian online media, such as IMHO.club и Teleskop, follow the suit.

In the **Czech Republic**, Sputnik CZ presents itself as a mainstream medium providing objective news coverage, but experts have identified its role as an important tool of Russian propaganda. Although the topic of pro-Russian disinformation acquired traction especially

with the onset of the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine, the strong pro-Russian orientation of the Czech disinformation scene has been visible for some time. As the Globsec Trends 2021 report has noted, Sputnik CZ has a central role in the Czech disinformation space and is surrounded by a network of approximately 40 conspiracy websites which republish Sputnik's content and/or help spread its narratives, and thus expand its reach among the Czech audience. The day before the start of the invasion (23 February), the outlet launched a new website section called "Demilitarization and Denazification of Ukraine". Its very active coverage of an average of 12 articles per day focused solely on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, spreading the aforementioned official Russian interpretation of the conflict.

Research into the so-called gray zone media scene has uncovered two layers of the Czech disinformation scene. They consist of the older guard of Sputnik CZ and conspiracy websites which were established some 5-10 years ago, and of a newer generation of anti-vaccination oriented outlets and movements which sprung up during the COVID-19 pandemic. These newer outlets have quickly incorporated themselves into the network of conspiracy websites and set up a collaborative relationship of supporting each other's content. Similarly, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these outlets quickly adapted to geopolitical topics and spread pro-Russian/Sputnik's interpretations of the invasion as a special military operation and a reaction to alleged Western provocation.

In **Poland**, Pro-Kremlin narratives are disseminated in both social media and press articles. These narratives are smuggled mainly in texts and comments about Ukraine and Ukrainians. Sputnik Polska's website is among the rare examples of openly pro-Kremlin media. However, the major propagators of anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee content are the nationalist media as well as profiles and accounts of far-right movements and political parties. The greatest clout is manifested by narratives created by users of social media platforms especially on Twitter. Supporters of the far-right previously associated with antivax movement are now activated in Poland and engaged in propagating pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian content. High-coverage media and articles sometimes are being used to promote pro-Kremlin content and when cited or being referred to in specific contexts or with the 'right' commentary added, they become an excellent springboard for increasing the reach and interactions. Frequently the starting point was 'facts' reported by clearly partial media, like for example Sputnik Polska, which later were seized upon and disseminated by social media users.

While the **Slovak Republic**, as a member state of the European Union and NATO and a neighbouring country with Ukraine, took a clear and unambiguous position towards this brutal action and has shown effective solidarity with Ukraine, representatives of the Slovak opposition parties took different positions. They did not politically support Ukraine as a victim of aggression, rejected the idea of providing effective military aid, blamed the leadership of the Ukrainian state for its active policy of fighting against occupiers, and provoked anti-Ukrainian sentiments among the population. Some of the opposition

politicians openly joined the side of the aggressor and acted as agents of Russian influence in their own country. In this context, it is important to realize that after the 2020 parliamentary elections, some representatives of the current opposition became actors in the investigation of various corruption cases. In this situation, these politicians used the case of Russian-Ukrainian war to mobilize their supporters in order to provoke their opposition to the government's policy with the possibility of accusing the authorities that the investigation of corruption cases is actually political repression aimed at the opposition leaders for their defending the national interests of Slovakia and wishes to have friendly relations with Russia.

The views and activities of pro-Russian actors in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war in **Slovakia** organically fitted into the broader framework of the branched socio-political ecosystem, promoting the interests of the current Russian regime, its economic, political and ideological influence in the country. This ecosystem was formed after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. It is a networked informal coalition of individual politicians, activists, social organizations and online platforms, which activates and mobilizes its followers when situations arise requiring public advocacy of Russia and its policies with the parallel discrediting its enemies, rivals or victims.

The reaction of **Slovak** social, political and media actors to the war of the Kremlin regime against Ukraine once again confirmed their split in opinions and values. On the one hand, there were democratic forces based on the priority of the universal values of freedom, democracy, human rights, the right of each nation to determine its own destiny, to develop its own statehood freely and sovereignly and, if necessary, to defend it against external aggression. These actors clearly took the side of Ukraine, which was insidiously invaded by the Russian aggressor.

On the other hand, there were actors based on particular values of national egoism, open or hidden ethnic nationalism, mistrust towards integration groupings of which the **Slovak Republic** is a member state, showing inclinations towards authoritarian practices and sympathy for foreign powers with non-democratic regimes and expansionist foreign policy. These forces did not support Ukraine and joined the side of Russia in an open or camouflaged form.

Main messengers of the pro-Kremlin propaganda were authors of "alternative" media platforms, fighters "for the truth", and disseminators of conspiracy theories as well as politicians critical to the West. Many of them with inexhaustible energy have been looking during last two years for the culprits of the pandemic, which some considered a phantom, non-existent and invented phenomenon, while others saw it as weapon of Western intelligence services, pharmaceutical companies, and other corporations in the fight against defenceless people in the rest of the world. All of them were, however, united by a pro-Kremlin leaning, adherence to pro-Russian stances, and active support for the domestic and foreign policy steps of Kremlin's leadership.

Pro-Russian propaganda messages, including disinformation, were mainly spread by the so-called alternative media operating mostly on the Internet. In the period when after the Russian invasion the four **Slovak** disinformation platforms were blocked in March-June 2022, the primary role in spreading pro-Kremlin narratives was played by individual influential opposition politicians from both the right wing and the centre spectrum. They justified Russia's hostile policy towards the West, its resistance towards the existing liberal system of international relations and the democratic organization of society. After the unleashed Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the focus of the activities of the holders of pro-Russian ideas shifted to the defence of Russia's invasion and refusal of Western aid to the struggling Ukraine.

The main goal of the carriers of pro-Russian narratives was to plant doubts among the **Slovak** population about the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war, weaken the support of Ukraine from the Slovak state, provoke Slovaks' hostility towards Ukraine and Ukrainians, whitewash the Kremlin's actions, help it to overcome the consequences of sanctions imposed by the West, prevent the strengthening of the EU sanctions regime, and, if possible, weaken it.

### **The main propaganda narratives before the large scale invasion**

As our **Ukrainian** expert argues, the idea of the existence of "a triune Slavic people – Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians" can be called the ideological basis of Russian state propaganda, but only Russians can count on a privileged position in this trinity. Ukrainians and Belarusians – each in their own way – are exploited and discriminated against. In the summer of 2021, Vladimir Putin published an article "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", which was filled with propaganda clichés and disdain for the Ukrainian state. The situation in Belarus during the reign of Alexander Lukashenko is an illustrative example of the hybrid dismantling of the statehood of a post-Soviet republic in the interests of Russia. Ukraine in this "triangle" in recent months has become an example of the struggle for its own statehood and the restoring of its national history.

Until the fall of 2020, **Belarus** managed for a long time to play the part of a quasi-neutral state. Against the backdrop of conflicting neighbours, "neutrality" was a profitable and unoccupied niche, which was opportunistically used by the illegitimate Belarusian "president" Alexander Lukashenka. The image of Belarus as a "peacemaker" trying to bring the belligerents to the negotiating table looked especially convincing in the first years that followed the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the armed conflict in the Donbas, when, under the auspices of the Minsk Agreements, Lukashenka was lucky enough to gather the heads of leading European states, as well as Ukraine and Russia, in his capital. That short-term success made it possible to put off the country's political and economic isolation, achieve some lifting of sanctions, and partially restore legitimacy to the regime for a time, making Lukashenka seem an equal partner in the negotiations.

However, Lukashenka was unable to make a fool of the European governments for long. The democratic West was horrified to see the bloody crackdown on peaceful protests following the rigged presidential elections in August 2020, and the routing of the opposition, independent media, and non-governmental organizations. The image of Lukashenka as “peacemaker” was gone for good. Belarus made a bet on strength, on tightening the screws, and on an alliance with the Kremlin. Following this, Lukashenka had no choice but to follow in the wake of the Kremlin’s policy aimed at open confrontation with the West. World leaders turned away from the **Belarusian** dictator, while the economic isolation and political dependence of his regime on Russia reached new heights.

The shifts in the **Belarusian** media space offer a vivid illustration of such dependence. Prior to the Russian invasion, Belarusian state media, although reflecting the primary storylines of Russian propaganda, had been directing their main efforts towards the fight against the “internal enemies” – that is, the opposition, civil society and independent media – as well as towards maintaining Belarus’s image as a peaceful and neutral power, which the “collective West” sought to weaken.

In the **Czech Republic**, the end of 2021 was dominated by opinion pieces reacting to the results of the Czech parliamentary election and to the forming of the new Czech government. The former government led by Andrej Babiš from ANO was seen as an acceptable candidate by Sputnik’s commentators due to his proclaimed defense of national interests and anti-immigration stances. He was favored by Russian propaganda in comparison to the more liberal-conservative pro-Western coalition alliance which won the election. Due to the historically highest number of votes in the election (around 1 million) given to unsuccessful candidates, Sputnik saw the victorious coalition as an illegitimate government. an argument in favor of perceiving the new government as “a dictatorship of the minority” which does not represent its citizens or their interests properly, and is therefore undemocratic or even totalitarian. The commentators also labeled the government “a regime of limited sovereignty”, because they saw the successful candidates simply as servants of the interests of external actors, be it the EU, NATO, or the US.

During Russia’s preparations for the invasion, pro-Kremlin propaganda in **Czechia** was busy promoting the Russian cause and presenting it as a strong opponent in any confrontation and Russian military equipment as among the most modernized, reliable, and unrivalled globally. It accused NATO, the US, or the West in general of provoking Russia into a confrontation or preparing a war in Europe and positioned Russia as involuntary intervening in a tense situation. It is not an attack on Ukraine, but protection of living people on Ukrainian territory, many of which are the Russian Federation’s citizens.

Before the Russian aggression in Ukraine started, Sputnik CZ provided two contradicting interpretations of the rising tensions along the Ukrainian borders. The first interpretation denied any possibility of Russian aggression since Russia is resource-rich and the largest

country in the world, therefore with no need to usurp foreign territory. The “rumours” about an impending invasion were labelled as Western anti-Russian propaganda and interpreted as NATO simply looking for excuses to deploy more troops to the alliance’s border. At the same time, other articles admitted the possibility of an aggression, but the cause was attributed to Ukraine or the West who were allegedly escalating the tensions through their military supplies to the “Kyiv regime” and effectively replacing “covid hysteria” with “war hysteria”.

Pro-Kremlin actors were able to provide an exhaustive list of Western provocations which were to blame for the rising tensions in Ukraine. These included accounts of Western allies’ unwillingness to meet demands for non-expansion of NATO, the threat of Ukrainian armed forces in Donetsk and Luhansk, or accusations of Ukraine for not abiding by the Minsk agreements. Both the EU and NATO were a target of these narratives as institutions without values or significance. The Czech Republic itself was also grouped with the aggressive West because of its solidarity with the Ukrainian government.

The notion of Russia as natural ally of the **Czech Republic** was a continuous narrative. The suggested traditional bond of the two countries was emphasized by contrasting the European Union, which, supposedly, only limits Czech sovereignty and foreign policy and the policies of which directly clash with Czech national interests. At the same time, the Czech Republic was presented as the scene of a geopolitical clash between the US and the EU, who constrained Czech development through anti-Russian economic sanctions. Attacking the new government at the end of 2021 and the new Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský’s stated plans to revise Czech-Russian relations, the pro-Russian outlets labelled them “a doctrine of Russophobia”, predicted to have a destructive impact on the Czech economy and social. The Czech Republic was also labelled a more and more aggressive country which now prefers “Russophobic” partners instead of “natural and traditional partners”.

Closely connected to the previous narrative, **Czech** dependence on Russia was a frequent point of emphasis. Czech-Russian relations in the business and the energy sectors were presented as crucial for the well-being of Czech Republic. Propaganda offered pessimistic fear-inducing scenarios which suggested that the weakening of Czech-Russian ties would destroy the Czech economy and bring overall poverty and social problems. The Russian share in Czech economy and trade was exaggerated to present Russia as an indispensable partner without whom the Czech Republic is lost.

The theme of dependency on Russian energy supplies was actively exploited: “Central Europe cannot realistically function without Russian gas”. Using similar narratives, Sputnik attempted to erode the support of the Czech government during the critical situation by claiming the economic sanctions imposed on Russia will make Czech business suffer.

In **Poland**, the main goals of Kremlin's disinformation before the massive invasion of Ukraine included creation of an impression that we are dealing with weakening of the U.S. role in international politics; presenting the U.S. as an unreliable NATO member which, in key moments, leaves behind its allies in order to pursue its own political interests; using and escalating the problem of immigrants on Belarussian-EU border in order to distract from the approaching war between Russia and Ukraine; presenting the political situation in Ukraine as continuously unstable and accustoming global society with chaos in Ukraine; dividing **Polish** society, weakening its support for Ukraine and provoking hostility towards Ukrainians; presenting Russia as a country whose security is endangered by the actions of the U.S. and Western Europe in attempts to expand their military influence in eastern Europe; presenting NATO as an offensive alliance and the U.S. and Ukraine as countries which aim for war; showing the helplessness of the diplomatic actions of EU countries and the U.S.; breaking the unity of the West in general and specifically in respect of sanctions aimed at Russia by showing that it will be mainly Western countries that will pay the price.

In **Slovakia**, like in other Central European states, the Kremlin's advocates searched for the culprits of the conflict in energy area exclusively in the West. The West, not Russia, has caused the crisis by its environmental, energy and pricing policies, by refusing to launch the North Stream 2 pipeline, they argued. As soon as Nord Stream 2 will start its operation, the cheaper Russian gas will immediately run into Europe. For Europe there is no other alternative than buying Russian gas, and the commissioning of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline will automatically lead to a resolution of the crisis.

During Russian military "manoeuvres", **Slovak** pro-Kremlin activists have joined the campaign to justify Russia's behaviour, arguing that Russia was not actually taking aggressive action, that it only cares about its legitimate security interests, that Russia's actions on the border with Ukraine are routine military exercises that each state has the inalienable right to conduct on its territory without threatening anyone.

At the turn of 2021-2022, **Slovak** pro-Russian forces, including parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition parties, have been waging political and propaganda attack on the government-led process of signing and ratifying a defence cooperation agreement with the U.S. They organized public gatherings, spread false information about the content of the treaty and the consequences of its ratification, incited anti-Western and anti-American sentiments, accused community of those who supported the signing of the treaty of treason.

### **Changes in narratives after the start of the large-scale Russian aggression**

As our **Ukrainian** partner argues, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has changed not only the nature of the confrontation between the two largest post-Soviet states, but has confirmed the ideological nature of the Kremlin's confrontation with Ukraine. Modern warfare is not only a confrontation of armies, but also a competition of ideologies. The

nature of the confrontation emphasizes Russia's imperial essence and the pathological desire of its ruling class to maintain maximum influence in the post-Soviet space. But even eight months of a full-scale military conflict has demonstrated the irrevocability of the transformation of the situation not only within both countries, but also globally.

Russian propaganda consistently dehumanizes the enemy. The **Ukrainian** Defense Forces are called "nationalists", "Nazis", and "Zelensky's militants" in propaganda messages, and various war crimes are attributed to them. Banned in Russia, the Azov regiment is perceived by local propaganda as part of the Nazi military structure. Violating the norms of the Geneva Convention, Russian propagandists are forcing Ukrainian prisoners of war to public "repentance" to serve their own interests.

Insinuations are regularly made about the possible use by the Armed Forces of **Ukraine** of prohibited arms of mass destruction, poisonous substances and biological weapons, and more recently about preparation to the use of a "dirty nuclear bomb".

In **Belarus**, as the start of the "special military operation" approached, the main narratives of state media changed, with war rhetoric gradually pushing "internal enemies" to the periphery of the media agenda. Internal threats were effectively replaced by external ones. The new geopolitical situation demanded absolute and complete loyalty from the Kremlin's only ally, leaving it no opportunity to remain in a "neutral" mode. Belarusian society was to be mobilized in the same way as Russian society. The justification and preparation for the aggression against Ukraine was also a good excuse to shift the focus of public attention away from domestic problems. However, the task of justifying for Belarusians the need to provide the country's territory and infrastructure to the Russian army to be used for the invasion of a brotherly Ukraine turned out to be somewhat more difficult than legitimizing the war in the eyes of the Russians, to whom the narrative of a "besieged fortress" had been introduced over the entirety of Vladimir Putin's rule. When it became obvious that a "major war" was imminent, the main efforts of state propaganda have been directed towards solving the problem of its legitimization for Belarusian audiences.

Russian propaganda myths have become an integral part of the **Belarusian** media agenda and have found their way to the content promoted by major state media. The key plot and semantic lines of the propaganda during the preparation for and start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 can be grouped under the following:

- threats and calls to war (in respect of Ukraine, Poland, Baltic states, EU in general, the UK and the US);
- justification of war and Belarus's participation in it (had Russia not launched a pre-emptive strike, the "collective West" and NATO would have hit Belarus and Russia with the hands of Ukraine; Belarus is a peaceful state. Belarusian military will not participate in the war against Ukraine);
- discreditation and dehumanization of Ukrainians, the Ukrainian government, and the Ukrainian army as a justification for aggression against Ukraine (A Nazi coup

took place in Ukraine. Ukraine is a fascist state, “the Third Reich,” and a “satanic state”; The Ukrainian army does not know how to fight. Belarus does not need to get into the war because the war will not last long);

- denial, silencing, and justification of war crimes by Russian troops (using the example of the tragedy in Bucha; the Russian Army acts in a humane and victorious manner);
- the West is to blame for starting the war (Poland and the Baltic States are the biggest enemies of Belarus; Poland plans to seize the western regions of Belarus; Poland and the Baltic States are U.S. puppets without their own political strategy or independence).

In **Czechia**, when the Russian invasion started, Sputnik CZ supported the official Kremlin’s narratives on the causes of “the special military operation”. These included a Nazi Ukrainian regime which has been carrying out genocide of ethnic Russians in the east of Ukraine, and the Russian responsibility to protect these people.

The model of Sputnik’s contradictory double narrative continued in the coverage of the invasion. Its reaction to the Bucha massacre is an example. On the one hand, it was labelled as fake, staged by Ukrainians or the Western media with the help of actors and props. On the other hand, some commentators considered the massacre real, albeit carried out by the Ukrainian forces to be used as anti-Russian propaganda and a provocation of Russia to commit actual violence.

Sputnik’s CZ coverage of the invasion also exploited well established pro-Kremlin narratives which target the European Union. The day after the invasion, an opinion piece claimed that Brussels will exploit the “tragic situation” in Ukraine in order to enforce a directive concerning compulsory redistribution of refugees. This demonstrates how pro-Russian outlets manage to effectively take long-standing narratives exploiting local polarized issues and adapt them to new contexts; just in this case, the topic of refugees which has been especially sensitive in the **Czech** information space since the immigration crisis in 2015.

In **Poland**, which hosts the largest number of Ukrainian war refugees, the divisive narrative “Ukrainians harm Poles” has been an important narrative. The humanitarian crisis in Poland is becoming a fact. Since February 24, 2022, the start of Russia’s aggression, up to August 23, 2022 there were over 5,6 million border crossings from Ukraine. It is now being felt by Poles themselves more and more. Poland has not managed to rebuild its economy after the crisis caused by the pandemic before entering a new one. High prices of energy, growing inflation and unparallel prices of fuel are worsening the social moods each day. Ukrainians, especially as refugees, are accused by the pro-Kremlin propaganda of all kinds of evil – military, economic, social. Propaganda outlets are spreading untrue information about the sudden rise of crime in regions of Poland, where Ukrainian refugees have appeared. Aid for Ukrainians is too generous and unjust towards Polish society, they say. After the first comments criticizing Hungary’s attitude towards the conflict in Ukraine,

narratives suggesting that it is the right direction for Poland and much safer than the behavior of the authorities are now starting to appear. Orban is presented as a leader who, first of all, cares for his own nation and its security.

Pro-Russian propaganda targeting **Polish** society has been using very strong narratives based on the difficult history of both nations suggest that Ukrainian nationalism may soon threaten Poland and Poles.

Like in other countries, pro-Kremlin propaganda in **Poland** dehumanizes Ukrainian armed forces are through the portrayal of alleged crimes, rapes and tortures and degrading of prisoners (voices have appeared accusing Ukrainians of massacres in Bucha).

Propaganda aims at convincing the **Poles** that the NATO and EU will not help because they are weak and that the security guarantees for Poland and Ukraine are not reflected in NATO's decisions. At the same time, it tries to show the U.S. as the aggressor, which for years conducted war in many countries destroying the ruling governments and attacking the civilian population. The U.S. are also accused of running laboratories producing biological weapons in Ukrainian territory. According to these theories, Poland and Ukraine have become weapons of political games played by the Biden administration in order to destroy Russia. The U.S. is portrayed as a country which has totally subordinated Poland, blindly carrying out all President Biden's decisions. The U.S. is blamed for escalating the conflict in Ukraine as well as accused of using Polish hands to carry out a war between Russia and NATO, should Poland hand over MIG-29 aircraft to Ukraine.

In **Slovakia**, as in other researched countries, the invasion of Ukraine took pro-Russian activists by surprise as it ex-post denied their previous narratives that they had been spreading. After a certain state of confusion, pro-Russian activists, however, became active again. Although under the pressure of reports about the brutality of Russian aggression, some of them had to criticize the invasion, they continued in their anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. Their intention was to prevent Slovakia from helping Ukraine with the supply of heavy weapons and to create an unfavourable attitude among the population towards Ukraine as a state and towards Ukrainian refugees that Slovakia accepted.

Several prominent **Slovak** opposition politicians took an active part in the anti-Ukrainian and inherently pro-Russian "peace" campaign. The military activities of Russia and the atrocities committed by the Russian army on the civilian population of Ukraine were not mentioned at all by them. Peace, according to their ideas, was supposed to come about when Western countries stop supplying Ukraine with weapons (as a result of which the Russian army would defeat the Ukrainian army) and then the peace negotiations between two states begin. It was actually a proposal for the capitulation of Ukraine.

Narratives about a friendly Russia, an eternal ally of the Slavic states, about a predatory West seeking to devour the small peoples of Central Europe, about aggressive NATO bloc

that surrounds Russia from all sides, about an insidious USA waging war against Russia in Ukraine by hands of their Ukrainian minions – all this is reflected to some extent in the stances expressed by leading opposition politicians in **Slovakia** who act as Russia’s allies and propagandists. They use sharp anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and express open adoration of Russia: “We must thank those who liberated this nation from fascism. And fascism is coming back again”.

They talk about the rampant fascism in Ukraine, call President Zelensky “a pure populist, demagogue and irresponsible millionaire, he wants to drag the whole of Europe into the war.” At the same time, they do not at all consider the responsibility and guilt of Vladimir Putin for the crimes and atrocities committed against the civilian Ukrainian population by the Russian occupying army. Pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia repeated a number of fabrications spread by Kremlin propaganda – the existence of secret American bio-laboratories in Ukraine, false victims during the bombing of an allegedly non-existent maternity hospital in Mariupol, the deployment of heavy weapons by the Ukrainian army in densely populated urban localities with the aim of creating “human shields” from civilians, etc.

Pro-Russian activists claim that the policy of the **Slovak** government towards the Russian-Ukrainian war is harming citizens: the tax for the conflict in Ukraine should be sharp price growth in Slovakia and a reduction in the standard of living of Slovaks”. They insist that anti-Russian sanctions do not help Ukraine at all and, first of all, they do not help Slovak citizens.

### **Success and failures of pro-Russian propaganda during the war**

Pro-Russian propaganda has been successful in many ways, including in the Czech Republic and Poland.

In the **Czech Republic**, Sputnik CZ presents itself as a standard news outlet. The news section of the website indeed provides quite objective and neutrally presented content, although attitudes have clear preferences for the national-conservative opposition and criticise the current pro-Western, liberal-conservative government. Manipulative narratives mostly appear in the section “Opinions” and newly in the “Denazification and Demilitarization of Ukraine” section. Sputnik CZ’s commentators have been able to promptly react to both local Czech context and international events and incorporate them into long-term pro-Russian narratives about Russia as a traditional Czech ally, Czech economic and energy dependence on Russia and alleged Western provocations.

This set up shows Sputnik’s aspiration for a wider reach across the **Czech** political spectrum and different parts of the society. Its success is demonstrated by two facts: the Czech variation of Sputnik, together with the Serbian one, are the most successful among Sputnik’s 11 local branches based on outreach. Secondly, Sputnik has long been one of the

top visited websites known for spreading disinformation on the Czech information scene, with visits amounting up to millions compared to hundreds and tens of thousands in case of other, still popular Czech disinformation outlets. This is what differentiates Sputnik from the rest of the Czech disinformation news outlets, which lie more on the media scene fringes and rely much more on extremist content and conspiracy theories.

These disinformation outlets do not operate completely independently of each other. In fact, there is a two-tier mechanism to the **Czech** disinformation scene. Firstly, pro-Kremlin pages led by Sputnik and conspiracy pages formulate their initial anti-West messages. Subsequently, these narratives or conspiracy theories are fed to the second tier of gray zone clickbait and conspiracy media that disseminate them to a wider audience with far-right, Eurosceptic or, following the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-vaccination attitudes.

This mechanism allowed Sputnik to stay among the top visited **Czech** websites spreading disinformation in the monitored period. During October-December 2021, total visits of the website ranged between 1.9 million and 2.35 million, and with the onset of the invasion in February 2022, it rose to 3.9 million.

Sputnik's target audience also has a political dimension. The website has an exclusive access to certain parties and their representatives, who get space for promotion of their agenda as interviewees. What these parties have in common is a nationalistic orientation and rejection of **Czech** orientation towards Western structures. Their voters are targeted through the political content or even new ones are recruited, which was visible before the parliamentary election of 2021 when the nationalistic parties used the Sputnik's to present and promote their program.

In **Poland**, the size and the narrative dynamics of the pro-Russian propaganda strive to create, above all, information chaos and atmosphere of uncertainty. Till the last moment, Russians convinced everyone that there will be no invasion of Ukraine. Once the war became fact and it turned out that it will not be possible to break the unity of the West, pro-Russian propaganda in Poland hit with great force focusing most of all on anti-Ukrainian tones, sowing confusion in Polish society trying to dissuade Poles from further helping Ukrainians.

The difficult economic situation of a large number of **Poles** will result in a need to blame the conflict in Ukraine for the economic crisis. A greater number of Poles will want an end to the conflict in the east at all cost.

At the same time, in many countries of the region, Kremlin propaganda machine has failed to be effective during the times of large-scale war.

For decades, Soviet and Russian propaganda exploited the myth of Russian-Ukrainian friendship. In 2022, this was buried on the streets of Bucha, Mariupol, Izyum, and other cities that became the sites of massacres of **Ukrainian** citizens.

While the Russian propaganda machine is continuing to work actively during the war, it often runs on idle, as our **Ukrainian** expert states, promoting messages that could scarcely be viable in the modern world. The very term “special military operation” did not withstand the test of the duration of hostilities, and the start of mobilization in Russia whose “partial” nature has proved to be a myth.

The concepts of “denazification” and “demilitarization” turned out to be no less fragile when applied to the realities of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. It seems that a cognitive dissonance has formed between the image of the Ukrainian people as “fraternal” and the need to “denazify” them.

Russian propaganda has failed to find a creative approach to justifying the “limited” mobilization. Since many hundreds of mobilized individuals were captured by Ukrainians or were killed literally within a month after the announcement of mobilization, the question arises: what is happening in the Russian army if soldiers and sergeants are transferred to the combat zone without minimal training? Russian propaganda has not been able to answer this question.

Our **Polish** researchers point out that Russian disinformation has encountered for the first time the effective operation of NATO intelligence, the strength stemming from united EU countries, and the excellent propaganda policy pursued by the Ukrainians themselves. In summer of 2022 Russian propaganda, being confronted with the united front of the West, is starting to lose steam and experiencing defeat. Of course, this does not mean the end of Russia’s actions but instead a time for searching for new forms and ways of reaching audiences with pro-Russian messages.

### **Preliminary conclusions**

Based on the example of Sputnik in the **Czech Republic**, we see the ability of the Kremlin propaganda machine to adapt to a new challenging situation and successfully evolve. The outlet confirmed its role as the main channel of Russian propaganda on the Czech information scene. Thanks to long-term collaboration with Czech authors who have provided insights unavailable to foreigners, the site has maintained its ability to adapt its narratives to the local Czech context. The popularity of the Czech Sputnik compared to the outlet's branches in other countries demonstrates the success of this approach. The signs of both long-term and short-term strategic configuration of the outlet for the invasion of Ukraine suggests close coordination with the Kremlin.

Another visible trend was the continuity of the outlet's narratives which were applied to various local and international events, from the parliamentary election to the invasion of Ukraine and geopolitical issues of a more global character. The overall theme was targeting the readers' insecurities about the fulfilment of their basic needs, such as the functioning of the economy, reliable energy supplies or the government's ability to provide for its own citizens. Russia was presented as an indispensable ally directly linked to the well-being and the development of the **Czech** economy and energy sector and, therefore, any weakening of the Czech-Russian ties as undesirable.

After the invasion of Ukraine, the EU took steps to address the manipulative activities of Sputnik and the platform was forced to relocate the outlet and regain followers multiple times. Nevertheless, the general **Czech** disinformation and conspiracy scene continues to closely overlap with the pro-Russian scene, and pro-Russian narratives continue to circulate in this media ecosystem.

This persistent mechanism poses a number of challenges for experts on disinformation and foreign malign influence, media regulation and strategic government communications, our **Czech** researchers state. Sputnik's activities constantly work on undermining Czech democratic institutions. They attempt to sow distrust in independent media, the governmental institutions and their ability to manage the current crisis, and overall undermine the country's orientation toward Western institutions. To counter manipulative narratives, the government will have to examine the underlying societal problems that lead citizens to enjoy reading alternative media and its disinformation content. As the economic situation is strained, and will likely continue to be so, many people will seek reassurances that the personal impact of this economic recession will be bearable and surpassable.

Accordingly, proactive, timely, clear and persuasive strategic communication on the part of the government will be key in reducing the influence of the disinformation platforms. This includes communicating the government strategy/framework for adapting to greater economic and geopolitical volatility stemming from the Ukraine conflict and reducing to the greatest extent possible risks to **Czech** businesses and society.

Our researchers in **Poland** support this point of view and remind us that the winter and the energy crisis are still ahead of us.

The impact of Russian-Ukrainian war on internal political development and society's atmosphere in **Slovakia** has confirmed that it is in the vital interest of the country and the security of its citizens that the dominant position in the power system of the state be obtained by the forces promoting the priority of freedom and democracy, the effective defence of national statehood and the anchoring of the Slovak Republic in integration groupings of democratic states in cooperation with allies, partners and democratically oriented neighbours. Otherwise, the national interests of Slovakia as a free and democratic country may find themselves at risk or even threatened, resulting from the possible

connection of external authoritarian forces with their domestic agents of influence with the intention of changing the country's social order and redirecting its foreign policy orientation.

Our partner in **Ukraine** has a more optimistic view, despite of all odds. He claims that the large-scale Russian invasion has significantly changed the perception of Russia and of what is happening in international relations in general. We have witnessed a major demythologization of Russia, which is quickly losing features of the appearance of a state claiming to be one of the leaders of the modern world. The redirection of Russian propaganda towards anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism demonstrate adherence to Soviet methods of propaganda influence but has not been able to qualitatively change the trend for the decrease of stance of Russia.

Russia is not only rapidly losing its authority, but in the binary model of relations that the Kremlin is building Russia's actions are becoming synonymous with Evil, while Ukraine and its allies are on the side of Good. Russia's ideological constructions and reality are increasingly moving apart from one another. The result of this will be that Russia will see a serious reduction in its ability to influence the world order in the post-war future.

Ukraine has managed to prove not only its facility for political survival, which has been a discovery for a part of the world establishment, but also a belonging to European political culture and traditions. The Russian-Ukrainian war, therefore, is not only a War for the Independence of Ukraine, but also a realistic opportunity not only to reduce influence of the "Russian world," but also to try to dismantle the Russian aggressive regime.