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Russian propaganda in the West

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Abstract: The article addresses the issue of the effectiveness of Russian propaganda in the West. Although the analysis includes a historical overview of Russian propaganda, it specifically focuses on the present day developments. The argumentation presented in the text is based on the assumption that Russian propaganda is effective as a result of its multi-layer, multi-level reach and absorption in the West.

Keywords: propaganda, Russia, soft power, Western Europe.

Introduction

In popular understanding, the term ‘propaganda’ applies to biased information that is generated with the aim of influencing a given group of people. This interpretation of that concept, very popular in the 20th century, has a strong negative connotation. The latter becomes apparent when the term propaganda is contrasted with other concepts, often used interchangeably, to describe similar phenomena. These concepts include ‘soft power’¹ and ‘public relations’². Unlike in the common use of the language, definitions formed in the fields of social sciences and humanities aim to offer less axiologically burdened explanations.³ However, even in these realms, several definitions of the term ‘propaganda’ co-exist. Most of them stress the ill intentions of the senders or content of the propaganda message. Thus, when describing propaganda

1 J.S. Nye, *Soft power. Jak osiągnąć sukces w polityce światowej* [Soft Power. The Means To Success In World Politics], Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2007.

2 J. Olędzki (ed.), *Public relations we współczesnym świecie: między służbą organizacji i społeczeństwu* [Public relations in the modern world: between service to organizations and society], Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA, 2011.

3 T. Pawłowski, *Tworzenie pojęć i definiowanie w naukach humanistycznych* [Creating and defining concepts in the humanities], Warsaw: Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe (PWN), 1978.

researchers may refer to it as “the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols”⁴ or as “the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient of the appeal to ‘voluntarily’ accept this position as if it were his or her own”⁵. The definition that is often used by today’s researchers of Russian propaganda assumes a wider understanding of the term, i.e. one that puts it in the framework of the whole political process. It also states that propaganda messages are not – as it is popularly assumed – based solely on lies. Instead, these messages were produced from “many different kinds of truth: the outright lie, the half-truth and the truth out of context”⁶. The objective of this article is to examine the effectiveness of Russian propaganda in the West. The argumentation presented below is based on the assumption that Russian propaganda is effective as a result of its multi-layer, multi-level reach and absorption in the West. The latter characteristic has been achieved thanks to what is referred to as a technique of ‘nudging’, i.e. the reshaping of narratives and “pushing them in right direction”⁷.

1. The historical background

● The Bolsheviks were seen as the masters of propaganda since their early days.⁸ Lenin and his supporters were convinced that propaganda would enable them to influence people’s thinking and – even more importantly – create a reality (a new political system), both at home and abroad. To this end, Lenin put forward a thesis of spinning the West against itself. For the Bolshevik leader, the process of “building communism with non-communist hands”⁹ or the help of useful

- 4 H.D. Laswell, ‘The Theory of Propaganda’, *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1927, p. 627.
- 5 A. Pratkanis, E. Aronson, *The Age of Propaganda. The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, New York: W.H. Freeman, 1992, p. 9.
- 6 D. Welsh, *The Third Reich. Politics and Propaganda* (2nd edition), New York, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 5.
- 7 A. Wilson, ‘Russia’s “Nudge” Propaganda’, *New Eastern Europe*, vol. XVI, no. 2, 2015, pp. 28-35.
- 8 M.H. van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine. Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, pp. 2-3.
- 9 P. Pomarantsev, M. Weiss, ‘The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money’, Special Report, *The Interpreter*, 2014, p. 8, http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf (2016-10-20).

idiots and fellow travellers, required “using bourgeois institutions for the purpose of destroying them”¹⁰. Equally important for the effectiveness of the work of the Soviet propagandists aimed at foreigners were the social and cultural changes that took place in the West throughout the 20th century. They generated, with some larger intensity at certain periods, an increased interest in communist ideology among some parts of Western societies, especially in times of political and social turmoil and upheavals. This trend, observed in many European states, was quickly exploited by the Soviets.¹¹ Therefore, when examining the reach of Soviet propaganda abroad, George F. Kennan observed:

“The Soviet leaders were not just making propaganda for their views. They were not just exhorting people to adopt a different outlook on the ordering of society. They were endeavouring to manipulate in a systematic way the political process within other countries. They were organizing groups of followers within those countries, indoctrinating them with an attitude of disloyalty to their own governments, whipping them into disciplined conspirational bodies, training them in the arts of revolutionary action, teaching them how to overthrow governments and how to seize dictatorial power, and finally, as a deliberate and cynical policy, encouraging them to incriminate themselves under the laws of their own governments to a point where any withdrawal to a normal life would become hazardous and unpromising.”¹²

These methods of political manipulation, carried out in Russia and abroad, did not disappear with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nor did they fade away with the demise of the Cold War rhetoric in the early 1990s. Conversely, the history has not ended in the post-Soviet space and Russia’s propaganda has been seeing its further development since. Admittedly, it has entered a new stage, starting in the early days of Vladimir Putin’s first presidency and has been enjoying its heyday since the Duma elections in 2011.¹³

10 Loc. cit.

11 F.C. Barghoorn, *Soviet Foreign Propaganda*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964, pp. 208-209.

12 G.F. Kennan, *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin*, Boston, Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1960, p. 198.

13 Cf. L. Gudkov, director of the Levada Centre who says that today’s Russia propaganda is “aggressive and deceptive (...) worse than anything I witnessed in the Soviet Union”, after: van Herpen, op. cit., p. 1.

Nonetheless, to point to a simple continuity between the Bolshevik or the post-war Soviet propaganda and Kremlin's actions today would be an oversimplification. Nor would it be of much use in justifying the thesis that today's Russian propaganda is extremely effective in reaching audiences in the West. Instead, it is more accurate to agree with Pavlovsky, the former Kremlin political consultant, who points out that the main difference between Soviet propaganda and the one that is being used by today's Russia is that

"in Soviet times the concept of truth was important. Even if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was 'the truth.' Now no one even tries proving the 'truth.' You can just say anything. Create realities."¹⁴

As a result, the border between what is a fact and what is fiction has become utterly blurred.¹⁵ This change has allowed the pro-government Russian media to call the Ukrainian protesters gathered at the Maidan square in 2013-2014 'fascists' as well as to refute accusations of the presence and involvement of Russian soldiers in combat actions taking place in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. The process of creating new realities by blurring the difference between facts and fiction was successfully tested in Russia already in the mid-1990s. At that time a group of the so-called political technologists¹⁶ started to fabricate stories about a fascist-Stalinist threat that had emerged from Yeltsin's opposition. In so doing, the political technologists discovered not only how to effectively discredit political opponents, an art known to humankind since the ancient times, but also how to assist the process of a self-fulfilling prophecy, namely creating the desired reality. The appetite to shape political reality grew among the Kremlin political technologists to the point that Pavlovsky could admit the following: "I first created the idea of the Putin majority – then it became real. Same with the concept of there being 'no alternative' to Putin."¹⁷

14 Pomarantsev and Weiss, op. cit., p. 9.

15 Ibid., p. 10.

16 More on political technologies, see: A. Wilson, *Virtual Politics. Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

17 Pomarantsev and Weiss, op. cit., p. 10.

From the onset, however, it was quite clear to Putin's communication strategists that, for this new reality to get materialized and spread, it was not enough to solely create narratives, including those that were based on the reinterpretation of the recent history, and especially the roots of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, it was necessary to initiate some concrete activities that would allow large social groups, in Russia and abroad, to start believing in the newly created myths to internalize them first in order to be able to reproduce them afterwards. This process, in turn, required institution-building work.¹⁸ Consequently, a long-term process of building and investing in organizations and structures was undertaken. It included establishing (or in some cases reviving) agencies that were officially declared to be focused on promoting Russia and its culture abroad. Among them are such organizations as Rossotrudnichestvo¹⁹, the Russkiy Mir Foundation (Фонд Русский мир)²⁰, the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation²¹ and the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund (Фонд поддержки публичной дипломатии имени А.М. Горчакова)²². These organizations, which in many cases run large offices in major European and American cities, were set up or revitalized, as in the case of the Rossotrudnichestvo, based on an assumption that Russia's image abroad was no longer attractive. This loss in appeal, as it was also assumed, translated into a less friendly attitude among Western societies towards the authorities in Moscow as well as the lack of understanding towards the Kremlin's position and aspirations in internal and external affairs. The reason for the perceived weakening of a Russia-friendly basis outside Russia was also explained by a cut in funding after the immediate collapse of the Soviet Union for many educational, cultural and scientific programmes that had been established and maintained by the Soviet authorities in the post-war period. In the 1990s,

18 Cf. Pavlovsky, who said: "Politics in Russia is not just a form of theatre. You have to build the theatre as well", in: A. Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What it Means for the West*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, p. 24.

19 Россотрудничество [Rossotrudnichestvo], <http://rs.gov.ru/> (2016-03-09).

20 Фонд Русский мир [Russkiy Mir Foundation], <http://russkiymir.ru/en/> (2016-03-09).

21 The Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, <http://www.idc-europe.org/en/The-Institute-of-Democracy-and-Cooperation> (2016-03-09).

22 Фонд поддержки публичной дипломатии имени А.М. Горчакова [Gorchakov Fund], <http://gorchakovfund.ru/> (2016-03-09).

they were either withdrawn or halted.²³ The negative consequences of these decisions were clearly understood by the Kremlin in the 2000s and articulated by Putin on a few different occasions. For example, in his address to foreign ambassadors in 2012, the president of the Russian Federation said:

“Russia’s image abroad is formed not by us and as a result it is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation in our country or Russia’s contribution to global civilization, science and culture. Our country’s policies often suffer from a one-sided portrayal these days. Those who fire guns and launch air strikes here or there are the good guys, while those who warn of the need for restraint and dialogue are for some reason at fault. But our fault lies in our failure to adequately explain our position. This is where we have gone wrong.”²⁴

With these words and numerous other statements and publications, Russia’s president made it clear and explicit that in order to counteract the negative image and the lack of understanding towards Russia’s point of view new activities had to be undertaken. And – what is even more important – they had to be effective and bring change.

The process of initiating activities aimed at improving Russia’s tarnished image abroad by creating adequate narratives and setting up an institutional framework for their development overlapped with the period of a wide popularity of the concept of ‘soft power’. The latter was coined and defined by Joseph S. Nye in the early 2000s and has become very popular in academia and diplomacy ever since. What is more, Nye’s reflections, which were based on many years of empirical observations of the implementation of American foreign policy and the worldwide attraction to American culture and value system, have served as a theoretical foundation for the new paradigm of diplomatic service called ‘public diplomacy’. This new approach to diplomatic work, and foreign policy overall, has been adopted and is now promoted by many countries and international institutions worldwide, including the EU and NATO.

23 V. Panova, ‘Russia’s “Soft” Policies towards the Baltic States’, in: T. Rostoks, A. Spruds (eds), *The Different Faces of ‘Soft Power’: the Baltic States and Eastern Neighbourhood between Russia and the EU*, Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2015, p. 96.

24 V. Putin, Speech to the Ambassadors in July 2012, cited in van Herpen, op. cit., p. 29.

For the Kremlin, however, the term ‘soft power’ has gained a somewhat different meaning than the one that was used by Nye in his original conceptualization or that is used today in its worldwide application. Specifically, as van Herpen points out, the term ‘soft power’ underwent a triple reduction in Russia. The first step was to reduce this broad concept to one of its constituent parts, namely public diplomacy. This characteristic – seemingly in line with the international trend mentioned above – in van Herpen’s view – is yet a departure from Nye’s original definition of soft power, which is perceived as a power emanating from *both* the civil society and the state. In Russia, as van Herpen argues, it has been reduced to being an instrument which is used solely by the state, whether to influence foreign governments or manipulate public opinion abroad. At the same time, “the fact that it is a country’s civil society in particular that produces soft power was lost out of sight”²⁵.

The second reduction, identified by the researcher, was that of soft power becoming “a zero-sum-game with winners and losers”. As van Herpen further explains:

“In Nye’s definition, the soft power of one country does not hinder or diminish the soft power of another country. The four countries that are the world’s soft power champions, the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany, do not fight a ‘soft-power war’ nor do they ‘attack’ the soft power of their ‘rivals’. The only way to become number one in the league of ‘soft power champions’ is to become more attractive.”²⁶

Evidently, Russia does not seem to fit into this group of countries that are recognized as leaders in the area of soft power as clearly in recent years its foreign policy goals have not been focused on co-operation, but domination and regaining influence in the former republics (now often referred to as the near abroad) as well as re-establishing a strong position of an important global player. The latter, of course, indicates the Kremlin’s desire to re-establish the Cold War status of being an equal competitor to the United States.

25 Ibid., p. 27.

26 Loc. cit.

The third, and last, reduction of Nye's original concept by the Kremlin means that soft power is exclusively a constituent part of an overall hard-power game. Consequently, the meaning of soft power becomes totally inverted and can be applied to even illegal activities, such as bribery and espionage abroad, as long as it is useful in achieving the desired results.²⁷

This characteristic of Russia's soft power is probably the key explanation to the question as to why Russia in its propaganda-aimed activities abroad uses many different actors and spends large sums of money to convince others to its perspective and understanding of international affairs. It is fair to assume that it does so to compensate for the loss that is generated by its internal illiberal policies and authoritarian practices which negatively affect Russia's image among democratic societies and international institutions. As Nye has observed, there is nothing more damaging to a country's image abroad than hypocrisy.²⁸

2. Russia's propaganda in the West

Since the early 2000s there has been a change that took place in the West and that allowed for Russian propaganda to effectively expand abroad, throughout Europe and the United States. The most illustrative, but not sole, component of this expansion was the successful launching of Russia Today (now referred to as RT) – a Kremlin-sponsored international TV news channel aimed at becoming a competitor to CNN, BBC World and other global TV news networks, including Al Jazeera. This expansion, which is essential to the understanding of Russia's modern approach to propaganda, has been possible thanks to several reasons.

First, it was the Kremlin's willingness to spend significant sums of money on soft power in general, and specifically on a media project that was directed at a foreign audience. As a result, since its launch in 2005, RT has enjoyed a very generous, even by Western standards, budget, which when the project was started equalled to 23 million US dollars invested in the launching of the channel and which was

²⁷ Loc. cit.

²⁸ Nye, op. cit., p. 184.

accompanied by 47 million US dollars in additional funding. In 2008, the outlet's budget increased by 50 per cent, reaching 80 million US dollars. In 2011, when 380 million was assigned, it tripled. Such funding allowed the station to employ large, and mainly foreign, personnel. It amounted to two thousand employees worldwide in 2011.²⁹ Out of them, around one hundred people worked in Washington D.C. Since 2015, RT has been operating programmes in German, which are tailored to the needs and characteristics of the German viewers. The network is also popular among viewers in countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Italy. Consequently, RT with this country-tailored approach and understanding of the needs of the foreign viewers, has been able to reach an extremely vast audience which is estimated at around 700 million people in more than 100 countries worldwide.³⁰ Without a doubt, the network's success has been also possible thanks to its adhesion to the highest technical standards and determination to offer programming that – at least at first glance – resembles widely respected Western productions. It is even correct to say that it is solely the content of the media productions that distinguishes RT from other channels.

Today, reaching international audience is the easiest on the internet and via social media (Facebook, Twitter). Russian propagandists have exploited different internet channels, turning them into a virtual agora or the so-called echo chambers, i.e. places where messages are constantly repeated to the point that they create their own 'enclosed' system and by so doing allow other messages to drown out. Among the consequences of an increased activity of Kremlin-paid online commentators (popularly known as trolls) there has been an increased mixing of propaganda messages with real information and facts often provided by mainstream media and widely respected sources, also those operating in the West. The most often presented example here is the British daily 'The Guardian'. However, similar observations can be made in regard to many different media outlets published in different European languages. The high effectiveness of this technique has been recorded. Despite the lack of hard data, at the time of the writ-

29 van Herpen, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

30 Russia Today, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/distribution> (2016-01-15).

ing of this paper, it is widely agreed that many of the addressees of the propaganda messages that are published online end up later quoting and re-quoting the artificially generated myths.

Nonetheless, the expansion of RT in particular and that of Russian propaganda in general, as unprecedented as they have been, cannot be solely linked to the Kremlin's lavish spending. It is thus more accurate to agree again with Wilson who states that Russia gets a large scope abroad because "[i]n the 2010s the West was solipsistic, not looking in any particular direction"³¹. This lack of a clear orientation was coupled by a strong departure from positivist, or even neo-positivist thinking in social sciences, which led to a general acceptance that multiple truths and numerous versions of local knowledge co-exist.

This paradigm shift not only has been observed in the methodology of social sciences but also has descended into political life and thus allowed Russia to find new allies in Europe. More specifically, there are some groups in the West who are willing to agree that the information which is generated by the Kremlin for propaganda purposes does not need to go through 'Western filters,' which – as it is assumed – impose an equally biased interpretation of events. Instead, messages coming from Russia should be seen as a kind of 'local knowledge,' that is information which reflects the real situation on the ground and is presented from the perspective of the people who are its participants. This type of information is thus assigned an equal status to other pieces of information, generated in or by the West. It also perfectly fits in the realm of the widely cherished value of the freedom of speech and expression. Its consequences include an abundance of information as well as confusion of facts and truth. In other words, disinformation has been allowed to function in parallel with information.

Overall, the political allies that Russia has found in the West, also thanks to the above mentioned paradigm shift in social sciences and public discourse, can be divided into two main groups. They include both the extreme right and the extreme left. While the latter may be historically explained and better understood (traditional allies of Russia in Europe have always been found on the left), the far right, which includes groups such as France's National Front, Hungary's Jobbik, or

31 Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, op. cit., p. 194.

even UKIP in the United Kingdom, calls for a deeper explanation. In recent years, these groups, known for their brash populism and Euro-sceptic attitudes, have become perceived as effective vehicles for Russian messages. Unsurprisingly, it is their leaders as well as the politicians to whom they appeal that have issued numerous anti-Ukrainian statements, for example, since the Kyiv protests in 2013-2014 and the change in power in Ukraine that followed. Any, even the most rudimentary, content analysis of these messages clearly indicates their one-sided nature and manipulation of facts.³²

Recent opinion polls and election results in numerous European states, such as France where in 2015, Front National received a historically high score in the first round of local elections and was ranked as the most popular party in France³³ but also some central European states, are an illustration of the range of appeal that the anti-liberal political models currently enjoy across Europe. This tolerance towards authoritarianism has been adequately recognized by Russian strategists and it is now being further exploited and fuelled by Russian propaganda, as it is best revealed in the content of RT coverage. By so doing, Russia is said to be exploiting the growing disappointment of Western European societies with the EU and their overall fatigue, also increasingly observed, with subsequent waves of globalization and the risks that accompany it with the recent economic and migration crises being the most illustrative examples.

Their increasing popularity in the West can also be explained by anti-American sentiments, which are often the foundations of numerous conspiracy theories that are willingly generated throughout Europe. The anti-American attitude, which has also been traditionally associated with the left, is now being also noticed among the supporters of the right wing who juxtapose it with Putin's rhetoric on traditional values and a conservative image. In this light, the Russian leader is presented as a defender of normalcy against the excessive permissiveness and decadency of the West. Growing support for such a role model that is being observed (at least among some parts of modern

32 Cf. Pomarantsev and Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

33 A. Chrisafis, 'French elections: Front National makes no gains in final round', *The Guardian*, December 14, 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/13/front-national-fails-to-win-control-of-target-regions-amid-tactical-voting (2016-03-10).

societies) worldwide increases the risk of a possible departure from the democratic model of governance and shows a decrease in adherence to democratic values and critical thinking.

As the world of politics (be it national or international) does not tolerate a vacuum, van Herpen is right in his statement that

“we are now witnessing the emergence of competing political models, of which Putinism is a leading example. These models, although superficially resembling the Western model and presenting themselves as democratic market economies are, in fact, authoritarian semi-state economies. Competition from these alternative models is taking place at a historical moment when the West’s soft power dominance is no longer self-evident”³⁴.

The competition between two political (and economic) models can be best seen on the territory of the former Soviet republics, with Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova being the primary examples. However, even though it is not within the scope of this paper, which focuses on Russian propaganda in the West, it is suffice to say that it is visibly important for the Kremlin to present its own interpretation of the course of events in Eastern Europe to Western audience and continue influencing Western politicians so as not to further increase EU influences in countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and others.

Taking advantage of the subsequent crises in the world and being aware that for Russia they may constitute a window of opportunity to again re-engage in international affairs, the Kremlin has again started to send messages to a wider audience abroad on Russia’s role as an important regional and global power. That is why, already the first months of Russia’s intervention in Syria, despite some tensions with Turkey that resulted from it, were perceived in Europe and the US as an important contribution on behalf of Russia to the global fight against terrorism.

34 van Herpen, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

Conclusions

The assumptions presented in the first part of this paper suggested that the effectiveness of Russian propaganda results from its multi-layer, multi-level reach and absorption in the West and thus has become an element of a larger communication system; especially when looked at from the international relations' perspective. The argumentation presented throughout the text showed phenomena that are currently taking place in the West and which indeed have allowed Russian propaganda to operate freely and expand. The best example of this expansion is the wide presence and reach of RT as well as the omnipresent trolling on the internet.

These activities, despite their officially expressed intentions of being "another point of view", are in fact aimed at disinforming and confusing rather than presenting an unbiased source that meets the widely accepted standards of professional journalism or opinion-making. And even though in many cases they are not outright lies, the majority of such messages contribute to a greater confusion rather than bringing clarity and understanding. Without a doubt, their success would not be possible if there was no fertile ground in the West that has allowed its audiences to absorb and repeat the manipulated messages.

From the perspective of the further stability of the current world order, including the unity of the European project, the current trends in propaganda development are alarming. Not only do they contribute to political manipulation, unfair games between different actors, but also – equally importantly – allow for a dangerous departure from analytical standards (both in the world of academia, policy-making and the media) which are deeply rooted in empirical research and thus opt for interpretation of social phenomena based on facts, not myths.

This negative trend, which stemmed from Russia but is being replicated in other countries, requires attention from both politicians and academics. Therefore, more research on current effects of Russian propaganda is recommended as well as wide educational activities aimed at counteracting it.

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