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RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA – GOALS, NARRATIVES AND ACTORS

GRIGOL JULUKHIDZE

104

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Abstract:

Contemporary Russian propaganda is gradually becoming one of the hardest phenomena to monitor and counter. The Kremlin's disinformation cycle is not only a challenge to any specific geographical area or regional alliance but also to the entire democratic order and system.

A number of resolutions have been adopted regarding this issue. Nowadays, the threat of Russian propaganda is openly discussed not only in academic and research but also in political circles.

According to the report of the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Russia is constantly trying to influence the political processes of Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Austria through cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns and illegal financing (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). In 2016, the European Parliament adopted a special resolution on Russian propaganda and emphasized that the Kremlin's goal is to break up the EU's unity and deteriorate relations with the US and Canada as its strategic partners (EU Parliament Report, 2016). The head of the German Security Bureau, Hans-Georg Maassen, spoke about the direct pressure from Russian intelligence agencies (Eddy, 2016). According to the report of the Czech Security Service, Russia's task is to increase political nihilism in local society and discredit democratic principles (Bezpečnostní Informační Služba, 2015).

In a word, the Kremlin's propaganda is a universal challenge which is an extremely difficult phenomenon to identify and counter-act. One of the main reasons for this outcome is low public awareness and the lack of effective research possibilities.

If in the case of Western countries the research into this discipline is developing quite intensively, there is a huge academic gap in Georgia. That is why this article aims at increasing the visibility of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign by describing the goals, actors and narratives of the Russian global disinformation campaign.

Goals of Russian Propaganda

While discussing the Kremlin's propaganda, we should outline two important facts first and foremost:

1. Vladimir Putin's political manifest: Russia and the Changing World
2. Valery Gerasimov's, Head of the Russian General Staff, new military doctrine

In his article, «Russia and the Changing World,» Vladimir Putin describes the Russian version of «soft power» but it has nothing to do with the classical definition by Joseph Nye. Mr. Nye, an American scientist, considered «soft power» as a mechanism for achieving strategic goals by creating an attractive and successful model (Nye, 2004). In Mr. Putin's case, the abovementioned conception has a completely different definition: «The mechanism for achieving foreign policy goals without the use of force, intervention and aggressive campaign» (Путин, 2012). In the same article, the Russian president stresses the strategic importance of the “reintegration” of Russian compatriots residing abroad. In addition, he is considering various global challenges and notes that «the modern world order and stability is unimaginable without a strong Russia.» He also outlines the principle components of instability which include non-governmental organizations. According to him, some NGOs are the main sources of separatism and extremism which only destabilize countries (he cites the example of the «Arab Spring»).

The importance of “Russian soft power” was stressed by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, as well. The Minister said that this mechanism is the best tool for boosting Russian national interests abroad (Vojtíšková and Novotný, 2016, 21). As a result, almost all Russian international foundations or research organizations are beneficiaries of Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs grants.

The second and also very important fact was the statement of General Valery Gerasimov who declared that 21st century political goals could be achieved through non-military and informative means (Meister, 2016, 3). This initiative became an important aspect of the Russian “hybrid” war. According to General Gerasimov, modern Russia will be capable of neutralizing any threat coming from the West and acting the same way as the European and Americans did while changing the political systems in Georgia, Ukraine and North Africa as a result of this approach (Galeotti, 2014).

“Gerasimov’s Doctrine” is a continuation of the reflections of one of the main ideologists of Russian propaganda, Igor Panarin, a Moscow State University professor and author of “The Information War against Russia”. He is best known for his prediction (made in 1998) according to which the United States would disintegrate within the next few years. He believes that nothing changed in the West after the Cold War and the main task of

contemporary Western policy is to get rid of Russian president and break Russia into 25 parts (Панарин, 2012).

In his book, Igor Panarin speaks of the necessity of using such elements as creating public stereotypes, manipulating people, spreading misinformation and diffusing fabrications (Darczewska, 2014, 15). However, the Kremlin's main ideologist is Aleksandr Dugin (Vojtíšková and Novotný, 2016). According to the Russian scholar, the principles of liberal democracy and, in general, liberalism directly contradict the "Russian idea" (worldview). Mr. Dugin develops the concept of the "Russian world" which is based on Russian culture, language, history and the "Orthodox morale." He predicts the realization of this political vision in the Eurasian space (in the geopolitical area stretching from Cairo to Beijing). The consolidation of the Duginist post-liberal and neo-conservative Eurasian Union will be based on the idea of anti-Americanism and isolated from "Western tendencies" such as LGBT marriage, terrorism, mass migration and so on. In addition, Mr. Dugin, in his book, *The Fourth Political Theory*, criticizes fascism, communism and liberalism as "expired" and dangerous ideologies for family and religious values (Dugin, 2009).

Aleksandr Dugin's political views are very popular both in the Kremlin and in the Russian Church as well (Judah, 2013). According to the Moscow Patriarchate, Vladimir Putin is sent and anointed by God. This narrative is supported by a number of clergymen. Father Dmitri Tsorionov, a Russian Orthodox priest, is among them and he fully justifies Mr. Putin's policy and considers it as God's will (Samadashvili, 2015).

In general, the issue of religious indoctrination is very important in Russia. In 2004, Russian MP Konstantin Kosachev said: "Russia cannot justify its active policy in the post-Soviet space while the West is doing it with a 'banner' of democracy while our actions are evaluated as 'imperialistic.' This is patriotic but not competitive" (Косачев, 2004). Since 2004, a lot of things have changed in Russia and the Kremlin began to work on its "banner" through which the Russian Federation is "justifying" its own political and military interventions abroad. One of the main tools in the new ideological approach is Orthodoxy. There are a number of cases when the Russian Patriarchate is trying to get political dividends through the instrumentalization of religious issues.

The Kremlin manipulates using religious unity in various Orthodox countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece). Thanks to the International

Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations (Международный Фонд Единства Православных Народов), Russia is funding various forums and conferences which aim to criticize and demonize the Western world (as an antagonistic society for the Orthodox Church).

The Kremlin has different approaches in different countries. In France, for example, the goal is to stimulate anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. In Italy, the focus is on business interests such as, for example, the National Energy Company, ENI, buying natural gas from Gazprom and financing pro-Kremlin conferences. A pillar of Russian propaganda in Slavic countries is the idea of Pan-Slavism (the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland). The main weapon in the Baltic region is the Russian-speaking population while in Austria and Switzerland – the neutral positions of local communities (Vojtišková and Novotný, 2016, 25-26).

According to “Gerasimov’s Doctrine,” the main objectives of Russian propaganda are:

- Defensive – to avoid “Colorful Revolutions”/”Arab Spring” and the indoctrination of the local population
- Offensive – to influence Western societies through disinformation and fabrications for “protecting” Russian national interests (Samadashvili, 2015).

As for more specific goals:

- Dissolution of relations between the EU and its strategic partners (the United States and Canada)
- Paralyzing the decision-making process in the EU and NATO structures
- Creating various myths such as LGBT marriage will be legalized, migration will lead to massive criminal and sexual violence, the United States is going to start a war and Central and Eastern European countries will be used as the shields
- Spreading different false doctrines such as the post-Soviet space is the «natural» and legitimate Russian area of influence
- Discrediting the Eastern Partnership states using the Orthodox Church, NGOs and foundations
- Presenting Ukraine as an aggressor and fascist regime
- Promoting the image of an invincible Russia – “No sanction can harm us” (Meister, 2016), (Samadashvili, 2015).

Actors of Russian Propaganda

One of the most important aspects for researching the characteristics and tactics of Russian propaganda is the identification of the main actors. The Kremlin uses different elements for spreading fabrications and chaos - NGOs, foundations, analytical centers, research institutions, expert clubs, television, news agencies, a cyber-army and individuals working in social media:

- Фонд Русский Мир (Russian World Foundation) - founded in 2007 by the Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs. The annual budget is EUR 5.12 million. The main goal is the promotion of the Russian language and culture. The organization operates dozens of research and educational centers worldwide. One of the functions is a selection of "prospective" youth and their preparation for future activities.
- Россотрудничество (Russian Cooperation) – the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation was founded in 2008 by President Dmitri Medvedev's decree. The main goal is to pursue Russian political and economic goals. It operates in 73 countries around the world. The official budget of the organization is EUR 40 million but it will be increased to EUR 115 million by 2020.
- Фонд Горчакова (Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy) - founded in 2010 by President Dmitri Medvedev's decree. The main goal is to support Russia's foreign policy interests. Budget - EUR 660 000.
- Фонд Поддержки и Защиты Прав Соотечественников, Проживающих за Рубежом (Foundation for Supporting Compatriots Living Abroad) - founded in 2011 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia and Russian Cooperation Agency. The main goal is to protect the interests of compatriots living in the Baltic States. The annual budget is EUR 9.1 million.
- Фонд Сотрудничества с Русскоязычной Зарубежной Прессой (Fund for Cooperation with Russian-Language Foreign Media) - founded in 2014 by the Government Commission. The aim of the organization is to introduce the Russian position abroad.

At first glance, the budget of these foundations which have been created for the popularization of Russia is less likely to be comparable to similar Western analogues. For example, in 2014-2015, the budget of the British

Council was EUR 210 million and of the Goethe Institute - EUR 213 million. However, in the case of a pro-Russian foundation, the main problem is the methodology of secret financing and that is why it is impossible to figure out the exact annual budget or income. Such organizations are funded through the «Hawala System» which makes these foundations non-transparent and classified (Samadashvili, 2015).

For legitimizing foreign policy actions, the Kremlin instrumentalizes various analytical centers and research institutes:

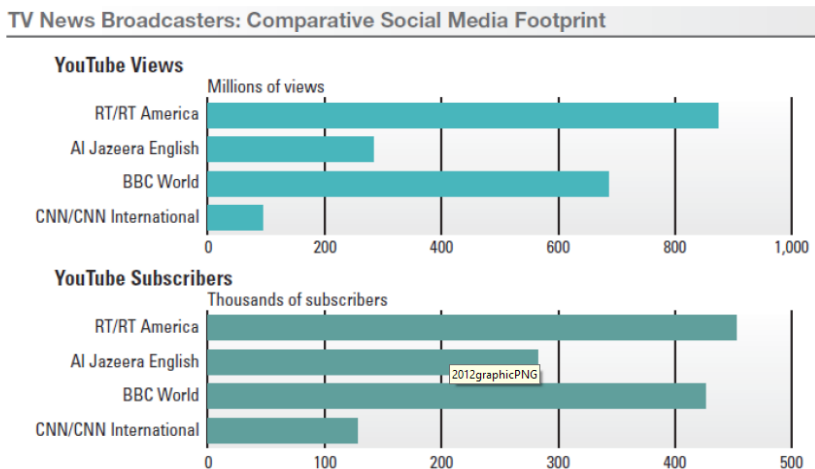
- Валдай (Valdai Discussion Club) - founded in 2004 by the Russian Foreign Affairs and Defense Council. The aim of the organization is to conduct research activities and organize a large conference once a year. This forum is visited by a number of well-known individuals who make pro-Kremlin statements and assessments.
- Russian International Council - founded by President Dmitri Medvedev in 2010. The purpose of this academic research center is to deepen cooperation between Russian and foreign analytical centers. In addition, the organization often publishes analytical papers in support of the Kremlin.
- Русский Институт Стратегических Исследований (Russian Institute of Strategic Investigations) - founded in 1992 and then acquiring the status of a federal scientific institution after a 2009 presidential decree. The purpose of the organization is the publication of papers supportive of the Kremlin's foreign policy.
- Institut de Relations Internationales and Stratégiques (Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies) - one of the leading pro-Russian research centers in Western Europe. Operates in France. Is the beneficiary of Russian World Foundation grant projects.
- Institut Français des Relations Internationales (French Institute of International Relations) - beneficiary of Russian World Foundation grant projects. One of the pro-Kremlin analytical centers in Western Europe.
- Institute of Democracy and Cooperation - founded in Paris in 2008. Prior to 2015, it had an office in New York. The goal of the organization is to support and justify Russia's foreign policy interventions.
- Dialog der Zivilisationen (Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute) – Berlin based think-tank which publishes pro-Russian research and opinion papers. Is a beneficiary of Russian federal grants programs.

- Eurasian Observation Mission for Democracy and Elections - aim of the organization is to legitimize falsified elections (in Russia in the de facto republics of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Crimea) (Samadashvili, 2015).

One of the major and probably the most important tools for Russian propaganda is cable television RT (formerly Russia Today). RT is the second most viewed news channel in the world (after BBC News) and the first to get more than a billion views on the internet (Samadashvili, 2015). RT was originally called Russia Today but was renamed in order to avoid partiality. Its audience comprises more than 700 million. RT broadcasts in more than 100 countries (Reichardt, 2016, 16-17). It is also worth mentioning another flagship of the Russian propaganda machine, the Sputnik web news portal, which operates in 25 languages.

Image 1

“TV News Broadcaster: Comparative Social Media Footprint”



Source: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017

Another significant element of Russian propaganda is a cyber-army which is actively used for suppressing and paralyzing rival sources of information. The official “baptism” of the Russian cyber army was the 2008 Russian-Georgian war (Foxall, 2016). This component was also actively used during the US presidential campaign (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). Apart from that, some hacker attacks were carried out by Russian servers on various European state institutions. One of the most resonant cases was the attempt to break into the database of the Italian Foreign Ministry (Bulfon, 2017).

It is also worth mentioning the internet “troll” system - people who spread disinformation through social media and insult other users for expressing different opinions (those unfavorable to the Kremlin). According to Max Seedon’s research: “On average, a ‘troll’ posts 50 articles per day. Each of them holds six Facebook and ten Twitter accounts and posts at least three to five times a daily” (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2015).

The Kremlin spreads its narrative through leading Western publications as well. „Russia Beyond the Headlines is a Russian government–sponsored insert about Russia featured in major newspapers and websites across 23 countries and in 16 languages, including the *Telegraph* in the UK and the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *International New York Times* in the US. It is co-edited with subeditors at the host papers. Keen to distance itself from Russia Today, RBTH denies it is propaganda and argues that it exists to provide a side of Russia missed by Western journalists, stressing common ties and battling stereotypes” (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2015, 18). It is also worth mentioning PR agencies which strengthen the positions and the image of the Russian Federation abroad through lobbying and political promotion. One of these agencies is Ketchum Inc.

At the same time, Russia seeks to gain political and economic influence on target countries. The main goal is to decrease confidence in democracy and increase public nihilism. The economic impact includes multibillion investment agreements, corrupt transactions and energy deals. As for the political side of the plan, there is the financing and promotion of the ultra-right, Eurosceptic and ultra-left political groups (Conley, 2016). And all of this for achieving a final goal ... the creation of chaos ...

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