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THE WAR IN UKRAINE: RUSSIAN NARRATIVES IN THE MIRROR OF EASTERN EUROPEAN MEDIA

The research based on case-study (cases of Poland and Serbia) and Discourse Analysis of the articles of major Polish and Serbian daily nation-wide quality broadsheet newspapers and online news portals (*Rzeczpospolita*; *Politika*) for a six-month period (February 24 – August 23, 2022).

The research question is: What impact do the official Russian narratives enforce upon media discourses of Russian-Ukrainian war 2022 in Central and South-Eastern Europe (cases of Poland and Serbia)? The hypothesis is that media in Central and South-Eastern Europe repeat the official Russian narratives about Russian-Ukrainian war 2022.

The article is based on a study of the six most popular narratives of this period in Russia ('the legitimization of 'special operation', 'useless western sanctions', 'the West vs. Russia', 'Ukrainian army's crimes', 'provocative western weapons', 'Ukraine loses the war'), identified in the article by Brusylovska and Maksymenko [1] in order to understand: 1) whether they are reflected in the local press, 2) whether they are all reflected, and 3) to what extent they are reflected.

Based on the analysis of 1,831 news reports and articles in Serbian "Politika" [2] and 1,203 – in Polish "Rzeczpospolita" [3] on the topic of Russian-Ukrainian war 2022, 6 main narratives most demanded in the official Russian media were reflected there in different levels.

In particular, "Politika" focuses first of all on the justification of a "special operation" (737 news), and *Rzeczpospolita* on the topic "West against Russia" and question about what we must do for this war end.

In Serbia the Russia-West dichotomy is dominant while describing the "special operation": it was the West brought the Ukrainian nationalists to power in Ukraine; the West armed them for years and sent them against Russia, since the goal of the West is to regime change in Russia with the subsequent collapse and destruction of the state. Thus, the conclusion is

being introduced that Russia is fighting not with Ukraine, but with the West for a just cause – the preservation of its own country, and identity. A special glossary (created in Russia) was introduced in Serbian media. The following most commonly used definitions have been identified: "Russian Spring" in Crimea, Resurrection of Crimea and Sevastopol with Russia, Ukrainian crisis/Civil war in Ukraine, DPR, LPR/People's Republic of Donbas, Special Status of Donbas, The people of Donbas, Russian volunteers, Army of Donbas, Punishers/National battalions/Paramilitary formations of Ukrainian nationalists. The following group of artificially introduced definitions is the most important. DPR, LPR/People's Republic of Donbas, Special Status of Donbas, the people of Donbas are used for the construction of new territories which allows changing the existing geopolitical space and, ultimately, the world order.

There was some evolution during 6 months period of investigation: although the voices of Putin's supporters have weakened over the past six months and the crimes of the Russian army have become obvious to everyone, visible traces of Kremlin manipulation not only in the Serbian, but also in the Polish press do not allow to calm down. It is clear that Russia is paying more attention to propaganda weapons, that many of its narratives have taken root and are now harder to expose and destroy which is necessary to maintain the stability of the existing system of international relations which the Kremlin's actions so persistently undermine.

The next question to be answered is why the Polish and Serbian press react so differently to Kremlin propaganda, sometimes even drawing opposite conclusions from the same input data.

As for Serbia, the main factors that influenced its perception of the Russian-Ukrainian war were the following. First, it is the growth of aggressive nationalism, the revival of the idea of rebuilding Greater Serbia. Therefore, everyone who helps this goal is perceived as friends, others as enemies. In political circles, there was a geopolitical formula according to which Serbia was considered a traditional partner of Russia, and Croatia was considered a traditional partner of Ukraine (this principle of relations between the Soviet and Yugoslav republics was established even during the existence of the USSR and the SFRY). Therefore, Serbia was inclined to listen to the voice of Moscow from the beginning. Secondly, it is religious affiliation. The Serbian Orthodox Church has traditionally been and remains essentially part of the state apparatus (as is the case in Russia). It would seem that Orthodox

Ukrainians should be perceived as close to Serbs people, but the efforts of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to separate from Moscow, obtaining the Tomos, the struggle of churches for property in Ukraine strengthened the negative image of Ukraine in Serbia. Thirdly, it is an anti-Western component of Serbia's ideology. The results of public opinion polls show that support for joining NATO traditionally does not exceed 16 %, while about 70 % oppose it. The negative dynamics of recent years are connected with the NATO operation in Libya, which awakened painful memories of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. Serbian society will not be able to recover for a long time, as evidenced by the portraits of those who died during the bloody disintegration of the SFRY, which are still hanging near the Assembly of with the slogan "We will never forget". Fourthly, and most importantly, Serbia is a traditional partner of the Russian Federation in the Balkans. The three main reasons Russia was important to Serbia were Russia's status as a member of the UN Security Council, which allowed Russia to play a key role in the Kosovo debate; historical, cultural and political ties between the two countries; growing economic influence of Russia in the region. President B. Tadic declared: "Russia has restored its economic and political potential; Russia also provided active support in the issues of Kosovo and Metohija; together with our historical ties it has prompted the strengthening of our relations with Russia" [4, p. 105]. In 2013, Russia and Serbia signed a declaration on strategic partnership.

Over the past decade, Russia has returned to Serbia not with the usual rhetoric of Slavic solidarity, but with rhetoric related to the Kosovo issue and energy supply problems. Since 2008, officials and mass media have focused more and more attention on the growth of Russian investments in Serbia. In terms of total foreign direct investment since the 2000s, Russia has ranked 17th, just behind the United States [5]. Russia entered the Serbian banking sector and believed that the new banks should focus on serving Russian business. The state company "Serbian Gas" was transformed into a joint venture for the construction of a gas pipeline, and Russia received a monopoly on the supply and transit of gas for 30 years. Gazprom acquired a controlling stake in the Serbian oil company NIS, which marked the transfer of control over Serbian gas and oil infrastructure to Russia's Gazprom.

Therefore, Ukraine cannot compete with Russian influence on Serbia in any way. In 2013-2014, the attempted annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine completely froze Ukraine's relations with Serbia.

As long as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is going on, it will not be possible to revive the dialogue between Ukraine and Serbia. Russia absolutely dominates Ukraine in the field of cultural diplomacy as well. This activity is managed on the one hand by the Russian Peace Foundation and on the other hand by the Russian Centre of Science and Culture in Belgrade. RCSC organizes competitions for allocation of state scholarships of the Russian Federation for studies in Russia for citizens of Serbia. The Russian language is popular among students of the University of Belgrade and other universities. Literature in the Russian language is actively published in Serbia, and Olympiads are held on the works of Russian writers with the financial support of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Russia. The Republican Olympiad in the Russian language is held annually in Serbia. The award ceremony is widely covered in the Serbian media; in 2017, it was visited by the President of Serbia, A. Vučić. The Russian language is also taught in many Serbian institutions of secondary education. There are Russian schools in which the educational process is based on Russian educational programs (a school at the Russian Embassy in Belgrade, a private school named after Valentina Tereshkova). A special feature of the cultural diplomacy of the Russian Federation is the involvement of economic giants in it. Thus, the NIS-Gazpromneft company pays considerable attention to the support of the Russian language, implementing the educational program “Energy of Knowledge” since 2013 which includes the organization of Olympiads under the NIS brand, the creation of bilingual Serbian-Russian classes in Serbian secondary education institutions, as well as the allocation of scholarships for the education of Serbian youth in leading Russian universities of the petrochemical profile. Serbian students who receive the NIS-Gazpromneft scholarship, in addition to financial support and regular internships in the company, also have guaranteed employment in the company [6].

As for the mass media in Serbia, the most popular tabloids “Informer”, “Blic”, “Kurir” and “Vechernie novosti” (in Russian) differ in their negative perception of pro-European policy and support of the pro-Russian course, calling the Russian Federation “elder brother”. Conducting an active anti-Ukrainian media campaign in the region [7], the Russian Federation spreads false information about Ukraine in the information space of Serbia, so in 2020 the most resonant fake about the involvement of Ukrainians in the July mass riots became. The Embassy of Ukraine appealed to the mass

media in Serbia not to spread false information about Ukraine and Ukrainian citizens regarding the situation in Serbia [8], but to no avail.

As for Poland, its perception of the Russian-Ukrainian war is determined by one factor – Russia’s expansionist policy is a threat to both Ukraine and Poland. In August 2008, with the Russo-Georgian war, there was a general belief in the real threat from Russia and the need to counter it. Poland adopted an interventionist policy which had rapidly evolved under the circumstances of retrenchment. The policy of retrenchment was not a new one: it had been evident throughout the discussions with Polish intellectual circles since the Second World War, and it had been central prior to the first post-communist governments’ when they came to power in the early 1990s. The “Romantic” interventionist doctrine was re-asserted when Poland became a member of NATO in 1999, mostly because the government was concerned about demonstration of a positive contribution to the Alliance (Reeves, 2016). Today, Poland is guided in its politics by two principles, formulated by one of the creators of the Second Commonwealth, I. Daszynski and the American political scientist of Polish origin, Z. Brzezinski: “There cannot be a free Poland without a free Ukraine and a free Ukraine without a free Poland” [9]; “by maintaining control over Ukraine, Russia can aspire to the role of leader of an expansionist Eurasian empire” [10].

So, after 2014, Poland and Ukraine began the following actions. First of all, Poland took measures to support Ukraine’s diplomatic efforts in the international arena. Poland often criticized Russia’s aggressive policy both internationally and at the EU level. Secondly, Poland took measures to provide material support to Ukraine. Thirdly, measures were taken to strengthen bilateral defence cooperation. In parallel with activities at the state level, during the Euromaidan, and then the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, new features appeared in the social sphere. On the one hand, a new wave of emigration from Ukraine to Poland began. On the other hand, Polish NGOs took measures to help the victims of the bloody events in Kyiv and later in the war in Donbas.

For its part, after 2014, Russia conducted both traditional military operations (annexation of Crimea) and a proxy war strategy: irregular, pseudo-partisan armed groups (Donbas), support of urban guerrillas (unsuccessful attempts to seize power in Kharkiv or Odesa), use of criminal and terrorist activities, cyber-attacks; Russian and pro-Russian media actively shaped the image of the post-revolutionary government as “fascists” and “juntas”.

Similar events were held in the media space of Western countries. In Poland, Russia acted through political forces that were loyal to the Russian Federation (the National Movement, part of the environment of the “Law and Justice” party, the extra-parliamentary party “Zmina”), pro-Russian circles and non-governmental organizations of “Kresowiaks” (former residents of the eastern lands of the Second Poland republics, now Ukraine and Belarus, and their descendants), analytical centres (European Centre for Geopolitical Analysis), websites and individuals working on the Internet (“trolls”), computer programs (“bots”). Some of these organizations receive financial support from Russia; others operate more for ideological reasons. Russia’s main goal was to divide Poland and Ukraine.

What allowed Russia to think that it could succeed in its anti-Ukrainian policy in Poland? The answer is historical problems in the relations between our countries, which the Kremlin is trying to play on. This situation is the result of the history of both countries, the different historical memory of Poles and Ukrainians and, finally, the role of historical politics, which is growing both in Poland and in Ukraine. After 2014, the Russian Federation actively uses these problems to deepen the differences between the two countries. Russian media aimed at a Polish-speaking audience and pro-Russian organizations operating in Poland promote the image of Ukraine as an anti-Polish country dominated by the ideology of “Banderism” [11]. On the other hand, in Ukraine, Russian and pro-Russian mass media intimidate with demands for the return of real estate to its former Polish owners [12; 13] and even with territorial claims from Poland [14].

However, the analysis of the content of “Rzeczpospolita” revealed that this publication never mentions the historical problems in Polish-Ukrainian relations, so it can be concluded that the future is more important for Poles than the past, which is the main difference between the approaches of Serbs and Poles.

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