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EUROPEAN INITIATIVES TO COUNTER RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA. THE ROLE OF GREECE AND CYPRUS

This article examines European efforts to counter Russian propaganda, with a particular focus on Greece and Cyprus as vulnerable actors within the Mediterranean information space. It argues that contemporary international relations are increasingly shaped by information warfare, where digital technologies enable external actors – most notably Russia – to exert influence beyond traditional military domains. Due to historical, cultural, and religious ties with Moscow, as well as internal political and economic challenges, Greece and Cyprus have become susceptible to Russian disinformation campaigns. The study highlights the structural weaknesses in both countries' responses, including the absence of comprehensive national strategies, limited institutional capacity, and insufficient funding for counter-disinformation initiatives. Although the European Union has developed mechanisms such as coordinated monitoring and response systems, their implementation remains inconsistent at the national level. Civil society actors, including fact-checking organizations, play a role in countering false narratives but lack the resources and public trust necessary for substantial impact. The paper further identifies key vectors of Russian influence, including the exploitation of Orthodox religious ties, manipulation of regional conflicts such as Cyprus–Turkey tensions, and dissemination of targeted disinformation narratives aimed at undermining political leadership and social cohesion. Low levels of digital literacy and fragmented media environments exacerbate the effectiveness of such campaigns. In conclusion, both the EU and its member states are currently ill-equipped to effectively counter Russian

propaganda. Addressing this challenge requires a fundamental reconceptualization of information warfare, the development of proactive strategies, increased investment in institutional capacities, and the systematic promotion of media literacy across society.

Keywords: *Russia, Greece, Cyprus, propaganda, disinformation.*

Problem setting. The Mediterranean region, particularly Greece and Cyprus, represents key actors that are vulnerable to Russian information influence due to cultural, economic and historical ties with Moscow, shared Orthodox heritage, and Russia's self-portrayal as a protector of Orthodox peoples. Tense relations with Turkey, the growing importance of the region in the context of the EU's pursuit of energy independence, a large Russian-speaking diaspora, the economic crisis that strengthened Euroscepticism, and other factors have created ground for the spread of Russian narratives that destabilize society and affect national defence capabilities [3].

Analysis of current research and publications. The report by the European Commission, Report on the State of the Digital Decade 2024, assesses the EU's digital development, with emphasis on gaps in digital literacy that directly contribute to societal vulnerability to disinformation. The New Eastern Europe's article highlights region as a "soft target" in Russia's hybrid warfare, contributing a regional security dimension to the analysis while the study by A. Saklaki and A. Gardikiotis explores students' relationship between digital literacy and susceptibility to information influence.

An analytical publication by the European Research Service examines the use of religion as a tool of Russian foreign policy, meanwhile the research by L. Taxitari (2024-2025) provides an empirical basis for the Cypriot case, focusing on audience behavior in terms of the disinformation landscape, and the dynamics of information dissemination. Alongside this, the journalistic analysis by Business Daily complements academic

sources with contemporary examples of Russian propaganda targeting Greece.

The aim of the article is to examine the impact of Russian disinformation on Greece and Cyprus and to assess the effectiveness of responses to hybrid information threats.

Presentation of the main material. The EU has established specialized institutions to study hostile propaganda and bodies designed to protect against foreign information influence. However, the Union as a whole face a problem: member states perceive propaganda solely in a negative sense - as something to defend against – while ignoring a simple truth: it is impossible to win a war by only defending. At both the EU level and the national level, there is an urgent need to rethink the concept of information warfare and launch active campaigns involving information operations [1].

The governments of Greece and Cyprus show clear neglect of this sphere compared to other EU member states. This is evident in the absence of strategies to counter hybrid threats and in difficulties implementing existing EU instruments such as the Rapid Alert System. Combined with insufficient funding, the lack of disinformation-countering centers, and other institutions created in other EU countries (such as Poland and Lithuania), the informational flank of both states remains exposed and vulnerable to attacks from Russia.

At the same time, civil actors countering Russian disinformation remain underfunded. Watchdog NGOs and fact-checking organizations lack resources and thus cannot effectively counter the Kremlin's hybrid activities in the region [1]. According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), Greece consistently ranks low in digital literacy, making its population vulnerable to online falsehoods [2].

Common narratives include conspiracy theories related to global events and politically charged disinformation aimed at discrediting opponents. Cyprus, meanwhile, faces a fragmented media ecosystem influenced by the ongoing division between the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish-controlled north. This division affects the media landscape and amplifies false information by exploiting

intercommunal tensions. Social networks serve as the dominant source of information, yet the population's digital literacy remains insufficient for critically engaging with content leading to the absence of critical thinking skills among the younger generation which exposes them to destructive hostile content. Additionally, the lack of specialized teacher training hinders effective media literacy education [5, p.16].

The main tool of Kremlin propaganda in the regions is the topic of Orthodox religious ties. Putin and Patriarch Kirill have repeatedly visited Mount Athos broadcasting messages about "Orthodox values". For more than a decade, Russia organized forums in Greece under the name "World Public Forum," led by former Russian Railways chief Yakunin, involving Orthodox leaders and populist European politicians such as former Austrian Chancellor Gusenbauer and former European Parliament President Schulz [4].

Shocking articles about Ukrainian President Zelenskyy frequently appear in the Greek and Cypriot information space, alleging luxurious lifestyles – often claimed to be in Cyprus. One of the cases was the attempted dissemination of the fake claim that Zelenskiy bought a casino-hotel in Turkish-occupied Kyrenia, aiming not only to portray him as corrupt but also as a supporter of Turkish occupiers.

The claim was "supported" by the fact that hotel rooms could not be booked on Booking.com. Notably, this piece first appeared in June 2024 on the Turkish platform "OdaTv" and quickly spread across Greek and Cypriot media a week before the European Parliament elections [6].

Moscow resorts not only to covert information attacks but also to open confrontations in the information sphere. Recently, Russian MFA spokesperson Zakharova accused Greece of violating the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, claiming that "the intervention of the Colonels' junta in Cyprus was an attempted annexation by Athens" and that Greece "blocked

international cooperation initiatives on the Republic of Macedonia” until 2018 [7].

This step forms part of a broader information warfare strategy aimed at reviving historical tensions and creating false links with current social and national issues [7].

Clear examples of this strategy include aggressive rhetoric by Russian officials against Greece and its prime minister. After the Greek prime minister’s visit to Odesa in 2025, Kremlin-aligned analyst Stepushova labeled him “foolish” and Greece “neck-deep in debt”. She also accused Athens of “megalomania” and “excessive ambitions” projecting narratives of weakness and incompetence that serve Russia’s strategy of delegitimizing Greek foreign policy.

Nevertheless, fact-checking organizations such as Ellinika Hoaxes and AFP Fact Check Greece play an active role in countering Russian propaganda. Similarly, the recently established t Fact Check Cyprus has signed the Code of Principles and is an active member of the European Digital Media Observatory, regularly participating in fact-checking. However, these efforts are hindered by the lack of a reliable national strategy and low trust in media institutions.

Fact-Check Cyprus and Greece Fact Check cooperated on investigating the above-mentioned “Kyrenia casino” case. No evidence supporting the claim was found: The Vuni Palace Hotel remains under the ownership of the Oscar Group of Companies, and hotel representatives confirmed that Zelenskiy is not a shareholder. The Booking.com argument was dismissed by the fact that the service did not allow bookings from Europe, while no restrictions existed for users from other countries [6].

Cooperation between Greek and Cypriot fact-checking organizations can strengthen the regional fight against disinformation, but due to limited resources, it cannot significantly change the situation without increased funding and scaling through a comprehensive state strategy.

Conclusion. Taking the above-mentioned into account, it can be confidently concluded that at this stage, neither the European Union nor its individual member states – including Greece and Cyprus – are capable of effectively

countering Russian propaganda. All of them require a reconceptualization of information warfare strategy and the formation of a coherent state policy. Implementing such a strategy requires significant funding for state programs and institutions, which is currently impossible due to the lack of awareness and understanding of the problem among national governments.

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ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКІ ІНІЦІАТИВИ У ПРОТИДІЇ РОСІЙСЬКІЙ ПРОПАГАНДІ. РОЛЬ ГРЕЦІЇ ТА КІПРУ

Ця стаття аналізує європейські зусилля з протидії російській пропаганді, з особливим акцентом на Греції та Кіпрі як вразливих акторах у Середземноморському інформаційному просторі. У ній йдеться про те, що сучасні міжнародні відносини дедалі більше формуються під впливом інформаційної війни, де цифрові технології дають змогу зовнішнім акторам – насамперед Росії – здійснювати вплив поза межами традиційних військових сфер. Через історичні, культурні та релігійні зв'язки з Москвою, а також внутрішні політичні й економічні виклики, Греція та Кіпр стали особливо вразливими до російського інформаційного впливу. Дослідження висвітлює структурні слабкості обох держав, зокрема відсутність комплексних національних стратегій, обмежені інституційні спроможності та недостатнє фінансування ініціатив із протидії дезінформації. Хоча Європейський Союз розробив механізми, такі як скоординовані системи моніторингу та реагування, їхня імплементація залишається непослідовною на національному рівні. Актори громадянського суспільства, зокрема організації з фактчекінгу, відіграють певну роль у протидії фейковим наративам, однак

не мають достатніх ресурсів і рівня суспільної довіри для досягнення суттєвого впливу. У статті також визначено ключові вектори російського впливу, зокрема використання православних релігійних зв'язків, маніпулювання регіональними конфліктами, такими як напруженість між Кіпром і Туреччиною, а також поширення цільових дезінформаційних наративів, спрямованих на підірив політичного керівництва та суспільної згуртованості. Низький рівень цифрової грамотності та фрагментоване медійне середовище посилюють ефективність таких кампаній. У висновку зазначається, що як Європейський Союз, так і його держави-члени наразі недостатньо підготовлені для ефективної протидії російській пропаганді. Вирішення цієї проблеми потребує фундаментального переосмислення підходів до інформаційної війни, розробки проактивних стратегій, збільшення інвестицій в інституційні спроможності та системного розвитку медіаграмотності в суспільстві.

Ключові слова: Росія, Греція, Кіпр, пропаганда, дезінформація.

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