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RUSSIA'S PROPAGANDA IMPACT ON THE EAST EUROPE COUNTRIES: CASE OF THE BULGARIA

NATO is to blame for provoking a “special military operation”, as Vladimir Putin called his invasion of Ukraine. Washington helped Kiev build secret biological weapons laboratories. Ukraine is being defended by the Nazis, and the world supports Moscow's attempts to liberate the country from the fascist regime. These and other narratives, as well as conspiracy theories used by Russian propaganda, can be found not only in the Russian media space, but also in the media of other countries. Although the threat from fake news is global, Bulgaria has become the zero (base) point for such disinformation to continue spreading almost uncontrollably within the European Union.

A massive flood of pro-Russian views filled the Bulgarian discourse about the war in Ukraine. Kremlin narratives are repeated by politicians, major media outlets, and experts. So, the logical question is, why is Bulgaria so sensitive and vulnerable to pro-Kremlin influence?

A partial answer to this question can be found in the cultural, historical and religious ties between Bulgaria and Russia. Since the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, when Russia defeated the Turks and ended Ottoman rule in Bulgaria, the local population has had a certain deformation of thinking that sees Russia as its Liberator [6]. The older generation in Bulgaria knows Russia and speaks Russian, they studied Russian at school before the collapse of communism, and they consume information from the Russian media, so

it is easy for them to access the Kremlin version of events. Many of them visited Russia or the Soviet Union for work, as tourists, and so on. Also, we should not forget about the religious context, and how a little more than 80 % of the Bulgarian population professes Orthodox Christianity.

Bulgaria is the country that is most dependent in the EU on imports of Russian energy carriers, not only gas (since April, the Russian Federation has suspended gas supplies to Bulgaria due to the latter's refusal to pay for it in rubles.), but also oil or fuel for the Kozloduy nuclear power plant. "Lukoil" also controls the only Bulgarian oil refinery and more than 50 percent of the country's fuel market. Another important economic factor is 500 thousand Russian tourists a year, as well as Russians who bought real estate in Bulgaria and who are estimated to be about 50 thousand.

The Bulgarian Army, which is part of NATO, has been armed mainly with soviet era weapons and equipment. Soviet aircraft were to undergo maintenance in Russia. Some of the now high-ranking officers were educated in the former Soviet Union and still remain very friendly to Russia. There are even organizations like the Association of reservist officers that aggressively spread Moscow's belligerent rhetoric. The old connections through the special services before 1989 should not be underestimated either. Former employees of the Communist Bulgarian state security agencies are still active in politics and business.

Bulgaria is also the one of the most corrupt countries in the European Union. Thus, according to the annual survey of the Transparency International Association, in 2022 Bulgaria remains in penultimate place from the EU in the rating of "Corruption Perception Index". On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is the highest level of corruption, the EU average is 64. In Bulgaria, this figure is 43. Countries Romania (45), Croatia (47) and Greece (49) [1].

Media literacy (or illiteracy) is also part of the problem. There are frequent cases when, for example, on Facebook you can find links to fake news spread by professional journalists. A significant number of websites and blogs print disinformation directly from Russian sources and spread pro-Kremlin opinions expressed on social media. The fact that this information is published through the media gives it a certain sense of credibility, which is later used by trolls when posting content again on the Facebook. This is a well-established propaganda mechanism that has been used to promote pro-Kremlin sentiment since at least the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The main channels through which Russian propaganda is distributed are local media and digital platforms such as Facebook. The political parties that have ruled Bulgaria for the past 30 years have created a network of subordinate media outlets [3]. But the big reason why Russian propaganda feels at home in Bulgaria is that the Bulgarian media is generally not professional. There are many reasons for this. The oligarchs decide what exactly Bulgarians should read and watch, and the main thing is that it is very difficult to find information about who exactly these oligarchs are, because there is no transparency about media ownership.

One can often find examples of stories of collusion and dissemination of pro-Putin views, even at the highest state level in Bulgaria. For example, after Russia invaded Ukraine in late February, Kirill Petkov had to fire his own defense minister, who constantly called the illegal invasion a “special operation”, using Putin’s favorite euphemism.

In July 2022, a retired government spokeswoman and head of the prime minister’s Office, Lena Boryslavova, said that the Bulgarian intelligence services have data on how Russia pays BGN 4,000 (2,000 USD) a month to public figures, journalists and politicians for spreading its narratives in Bulgarian society. She said: “anyone who freely spits on the EU and NATO, as well as supports Putin's actions in Ukraine, you should know. You screwed up. Those who inspire you to do this get paid. Monthly” [5].

Trolls, fake and anonymous accounts remain an important part of the Russian arsenal in the information war. Researchers from the European non-profit organization Disinformation Situation Center have discovered anonymous accounts that spread Russian propaganda and online harassment of Bulgarians who expressed support for Ukraine. Given the speed and similarity of the attacks, some of the pursuits seem to be coordinated.

An equally important tool of pro-Kremlin influence are Russian embassies, which have become key coordinators for the spread of disinformation, especially after many tech companies began restricting Russian state-run media in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In June 2022, Bulgaria expelled 70 Russian diplomats due to fears that they might be spies. This prompted the Kremlin to threaten Bulgaria with a break of diplomatic relations. The Russian Embassy also spread conspiracy theories that the United States allegedly operates secret BioLabs in Ukraine.

At the end of this study, it is absolutely necessary to pay attention to the existence of pro-Russian political parties in Bulgaria and their influence

on the domestic and foreign policies of the state. In addition to openly pro-Russian parties like “Vazrazhdane”, the new “Bulgarian Rise” political party of former interim Prime Minister Stefan Yanev, and the traditionally pro-Russian Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) – there are other parties that can be called covertly pro-Russian, including the party of former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov GERB (Citizens for Bulgaria’s European Development). So, while Borisov made pro-European and pro-Atlantic statements during his time in power, from 2014 to 2017, he actually served Gazprom’s interests, in particular by building the Bulgarian section of the Turkish Stream – the southern equivalent of the infamous Nord Stream. Borisov’s successor, Kirill Petkov, launched an investigation into the pipeline’s construction before his government was sabotaged by coalition partners, and curtailed the project shortly before the invasion.

In October 2022, the fourth consecutive early parliamentary elections were held, during which the lowest turnout in the last 32 years was recorded. The best result – 25 % – was predictably won by the center-right party of former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, GERB. 20 % of the vote was won by the pro-European political force “We continue the Change”, which is also headed by former Bulgarian Prime Minister Kirill Petkov. On the third place with 14 % there’s the party of ethnic minorities – “Movement for Rights and Freedoms” (DPS). But then, we get an alarming signal – the parties who have their result doubled, namely, 10 % for the pro-Russian “Revival” and 9 % for the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) [2].

Therefore, the influence of pro-Russian parties on the territory of the Bulgarian Republic existed and continues to exist. As an example – last weekend, during a small protest of Russophiles against the Bulgarian government’s provision of military assistance to Ukraine, Kostadin Kostadinov, the founder and chairman of the Nationalist Party “Vozrazhdane”, spoke on the air of bTV, and called the decision of the parliament to provide military assistance to Ukraine an action in the interests of the United States.

As conclusions, we can note that the political consequences of this influence are real. The country is noticeably absent from the list of former Soviet states or satellites that lend a helping hand to Ukraine. Sofia was gripped by a crisis of indecision on providing military aid, which it refused despite Ukraine’s requests. Later, it was reported that the equipment was delivered, but in complete secrecy.

In conclusion, it needs to be said about a study conducted by Globsec, a research organization with an office in Bratislava, Slovakia. It states that in 2022, among the nine EU countries they studied, the greatest changes took place in Bulgarian public opinion. If in 2021 45 % of Bulgarians considered Russia as a strategic partner, in March 2022 it turned out to be only 30 %. The share of respondents who had a positive attitude towards Putin decreased from 70 % to 29 % [4]. But despite some positive developments, 44 % of Bulgarians believe that NATO is responsible for the war in Ukraine, and this figure is the highest among 16 European countries plus UK surveyed in April 2022 by YouGov, an international data research and analytics group [7]. And only 23 % of Bulgarians believe that Russia is responsible for the war against Ukraine, compared to 85 % of Finns and 80 % of Swedes, according to the study. Therefore, based on the number of factors that were analyzed, we can conclude that Bulgaria still has all the prerequisites to be a target of an impactful and crucial influence from the Russian State.

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