

Briefing paper

Russian Media Influence in Southeast Europe:

Key Trends Since the Start of the Kremlin's War in Ukraine and Proposals for Counteraction

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Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has been complemented in the ideational domain by the acceleration of the established Kremlin disinformation strategies, tactics and narratives. This briefing paper highlights the key trends[1] in Russian media influence since the start of the war and their respective manifestation (1) in the international domain; (2) in Southeast Europe and (3) further zooms in on the case of Bulgaria. It offers policy recommendations for stepping up the counteraction of Russia's media operations.

This publication is supported by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs with Meridian International Center as the implementing partner. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State and Meridian International Center.

[1] As first elaborated in Filipova, R., Shopov, V., 2022, *Authoritarians on a Media Offensive in the Midst of War. The Informational Influence of Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States in Southeast Europe*, Konrad Adenauer Stitfung Media Programme South East Europe.

Russia's international strategy

In the international domain, the Kremlin has augmented its tried and tested channels, actors and narratives of disinformation leverage in three main directions. First, **Russia has spearheaded the dissemination of false and manipulative messages about the war on social media, particularly on Telegram and VK** (short form of the original name Vkontakte) (see box 1).

A further pillar of the Kremlin's disinformation strategy over the course of the war in Ukraine has entailed an **enhanced role for Russian Embassies**. In light of the EU's ban on the broadcasting of Russian state-owned channels RT and Sputnik on the territory of the Union – which narrowed the scope for the penetration of Moscow-sanctioned propagandist discourses, the Kremlin's diplomatic representations and their respective social media accounts spearheaded official Russian disinformation activities in cooperation with local pro-Kremlin proxies.

Focal discursive dimensions of the Russia's propagandist strategy have been trained on the **amplification of historical disinformation**. History-based propaganda has been further accompanied by the **attempt to maintain deniability of committed crimes** and **appeal to the moral-emotional sentiments of audiences** via depictions of ostensible atrocities carried out by Ukrainian forces against children and the elderly.

Box 1: Russian disinformation's Telegram strategy

Instead ` of openly cracking down on and blocking Telegram, the Kremlin adjusted to working through the platform in order to embed its propagandist narratives within the social media environment. Availing itself of the support provided by the pro-Putin *Nashi* youth movement, the Russian authorities started to pierce through Telegram's ecosystem not necessarily on the basis of creating their own official channels but by acting through proxies. Especially prominent among the latter is Kristina Potupchik, termed the "grey cardinal" of Telegram, who established a sprawling network of pro-Kremlin channels.*

Since the start of Russia's war in Ukraine, such proxy efforts have been reinforced by the emergence of volunteer "cyber armies", particularly Cyber Front Z. St. Petersburg-based outlet Fontanka.ru's journalist conducted an under-cover investigation of the cyber army's work, revealing that recruitment commenced in early March 2022 with the aim to "debunk" supposedly fake news criticizing Moscow's actions in Ukraine. The job of the cyber soldiers consisted primarily in writing comments supporting the official Russian position on Telegram as well as YouTube.**

Examples of major pro-Kremlin Telegram channels gathering a wide followership since the start of the war:

https://t.me/novosti_voinaa	СМИ Россия Украина/Media Russia Ukraine (~ 2.1 million subscribers)
https://t.me/readovkanews	Readovka (real news) (~ 1.1 million subscribers)
https://t.me/warfakes	Война с фейками/War on fakes (~ 700 000 subscribers)
https://t.me/russica2/10268	НЕЗЫГАРЬ/Nezygar (~ 400 000 subscribers)

* Speaking openly in an interview, Potupchik offered a glimpse into the most effective utilization of Telegram for achieving discursive influence: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBRRCJxGhyU

** On the evolution of the Kremlin's approach to Telegram see https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/
Fontanka.ru's investigation: https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/03/21/70522490/

Russia in the Balkans

The intensification of the preexisting patterns of Russian disinformation on an international scale is also observable in the region of Southeast Europe. The cross-country research reveals that the Kremlin has similarly sharpened already established channels, actors and narratives for disseminating informational influence since the start of the Ukraine war. Four such main trends stand out.

First, **the pervasive informality through which Moscow exercises media influence has persisted**. Instead of directly owning local news sources, Russia has cultivated opaque local patronage networks consisting of media owners, journalists, politicians and businessmen, who maintain financial and political as well as cultural and ideological affinities to (pro)Russian groups and interests and promote the Kremlin's discursive agenda. In addition, the advertising clout that Gazprom and Lukoil have in Balkan media markets (particularly in Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia) frame a journalistic environment of (self)censorship and reporting favorable to the Kremlin.

Second, Russia has continued to tap into the social and cultural proclivities in the region, which predispose significant sections of local populations to view Moscow positively as a result of perceptions of historical, linguistic, ethnic and religious similarities. The overall trend of East-West ambivalences defined by a preference for maintaining good relations with both Western Europe and the US (as models for political and economic development) and Russia (as a focal point of cultural-emotional attachments) has conditioned the prominence of stances leaning towards **neutrality in the standoff between Russia and Ukraine**.

Third, Russia's **reliance on its Embassies for disseminating war propaganda** has been especially visible in the Balkans. Moscow's diplomatic representations in Sofia, Sarajevo and Podgorica, for example, have aggressively aimed to influence internal debates in a pro-Russian direction. Social media continues to represent a major battleground on which Russian disinformation can sway public fears and sentiments so that in addition to Facebook as a widely popular social media platform, Kremlin actors have also started to shift their activities and gain followers on Telegram and Twitter.

Fourth, the **regional diffusion of Russian propaganda through Serbian (social) media channels** remains a main intra-regional conduit of Kremlin interests. The mutual intelligibility of languages of the countries which formerly constituted Yugoslavia creates vulnerabilities for the penetration of Kremlin messaging even in countries such as Croatia, where the mainstream information space is much more insulated from Russian influence.

Case in focus: Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the Russia-favoring dispositions of significant sections of society and political divisions (amounting to a stalemate) as to how to react to the Russia-Ukraine war have enabled and fed into an informational ecosystem that features a wide array of pro-Kremlin actors, who in turn draw on a broad range of sources of disinformation to spearhead Moscow's narratives. There are both politically-affiliated actors and grassroots groups, who make up a large pool of local, pro-Kremlin proxies and are part of Russia's strategy of cultivating opaque local networks of patronage. For its part, the Russian Embassy in Sofia has adopted a strategy of aggressive interference in the domestic informational environment.

As regards the content of messaging, unlike former Yugoslav countries, where the fear of renewed military conflicts similar to those of the 1990s is raised, a distinctive characteristic of the Bulgarian media space since the start of the war in Ukraine is the interlinkage between pro-Russian narratives and the portrayals of domestic political actors. Policies that go against the Russian position have been dubbed as "treasonous" and inimical to the "national interest".

All Russia-tilting sources converge on a general set of pro-Kremlin messages disseminated since the start of the Ukraine war, according to which:

- Bulgarian political elites who stand up to Moscow are "traitors";
- Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria are rich and therefore undeserving of the seemingly lavish welcome provided by the authorities;
- Ukrainian nationalism incited by the West provoked the war;
- A new world order is emerging led by Russia and China;
- Bioweapons are being developed by the US in biolabs in Ukraine with the ulterior goal to target the Russian population. Biolabs conspiracies have been especially prominent in the pro-Russian information ecosystem, being uncritically shared (very often from anonymous websites), rarely subject to content moderation on social media and reaching a wide audience (see box 2).

Box 2: Key actors disseminating conspiracies about biolabs in Bulgaria

- **(Self-styled) journalists** – the case of Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, who has established herself as a major domestic source of biolabs/bioweapons conspiracies. The so-called investigations she conducts into biolabs are published on her website dilyana.bg from where they are widely reprinted in Bulgarian news sources and reposted on social media. In addition, Gaytandzhieva has forged a significant international followership. Her Twitter account @dgaytandzhieva has over 57 000 followers and serves as a hub for international conspiracy theorists.

- **Political actors** – media linked to the Bulgarian Socialist Party such as its official TV channel BSTV have featured Dilyana Gaytandzhieva and uncritically disseminate the narrative about impending biological warfare.* Nationalist party Vazrazhdane promotes biolabs conspiracy theories in its official political discourse, for example, through the statements of its representatives in the Bulgarian Parliament.**

- **The Russian Embassy in Sofia** – its Facebook page promotes and amplifies official Russian disinformation and biolabs conspiracies without having been so far moderated by Meta.***

* BSTV, 2022, 'КОЙ ВОДИ БИОЛОГИЧНА ВОЙНА? ИНТЕРВЮ С ДИЛЯНА ГАЙТАНДЖИЕВА – РАЗСЛЕДВАЩ ЖУРНАЛИСТ', *YouTube* ('Who is conducting biological warfare? Interview with Dilyana Gaytandzhieva). Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmpBlSjwEZ0

** Vazrazhdane, 2022, 'Ангел Георгиев от Възраждане с критичен въпрос за американските биолаборатории и военни бази', *YouTube* ('Angel Georgiev from Vazrazhdane with a critical question about the American biolabs and military bases). Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgeTQ4MeXXo

*** Russian Embassy post from 9 March 2022 quoting Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova on the presence of "evidence" of Ukraine's destruction of bioweapons ostensibly developed with US support: https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid0MpYCy2gCM8gcBV3t2ExdC8FijeG9LxPvnxYebyYDveuX3sNhyWobbQTvVMydHmfCl

Policy recommendations

To tackle the variety of challenges afflicting the informational environment of SEE states, a coordinated approach needs to be forged that unites the efforts of policy-makers, civil society and international actors. A call to action would include the following recommendations:

- **Activate the (counter)intelligence services and publicize intelligence information**, when available, of the political and financial ties between foreign authoritarian actors – primarily Russia as the authoritarian state most deeply enmeshed in the Balkans, and local proxies, who disseminate Kremlin narratives. In this way, murky and informal networks will be exposed to society.

- **Establish strategic communications units on the government level** tasked with monitoring and analyzing foreign authoritarian disinformation as well as coordinating government messaging and counteraction with regard to foreign media influence.

- **Initiate a concerted strategy of positive narration about democracy** and the advantages of living in a free country as a response to authoritarian states' attempt to undermine confidence in democratic arrangements and Russia's inability to provide a positive blueprint for the future (given its overemphasis on historical falsification and lack of a viable social, political and political model to posit as exemplary for others).

- In addition to debunking that retrospectively counters disinformation, **devise pre-emptive strategies** based on pre-bunking that anticipates propagandist messaging and prepares publics in advance (such as through informational campaigns in the form of short video explainers). Draw on the emerging field of inoculation research in Psychology to design a preventive approach to tackling disinformation.

- **Quality journalism should more consistently focus on creating compelling content** that lures readers back to informing themselves from evidence-driven reporting, thus addressing an imbalance, according to which people are attracted to disinformation due to its perception as more interesting and sensationalist.

- **Re-examine the concept and practice of reporting all viewpoints** as a pitfall that may invite the dissemination of disinformation since not all views have equal validity or are backed by a similarly sound argumentation.

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