Information warfare in the Internet

COUNTERING PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION IN THE CEE COUNTRIES

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This paper summarises the project entitled "Information warfare in the Internet. Exposing and countering pro-Kremlin disinformation in the Central and Eastern European Countries" and was financed by the International Visegrad Fund. The project's main goal was to understand the complexity of tools adopted by the Kremlin to manipulate public opinion and affect political, social and business environment in the V4 countries plus Moldova and Ukraine.

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Since 1989, all Russian proposals starting with Gorbachev's "Common European Home" and ending with Medvedev's "New European Security Architecture" have had the same objectives: to abolish or at least to weaken the inner cohesion of the existing Transatlantic and European Institutions (such as NATO and the EU), as well as the presence and influence of the US in Europe. These often country-tailored measures (that accompany Russia' s aggressive activities in the region), go hand-in-hand with the disinformation campaign striving at fragmenting and shaking European unity and undermining Transatlantic relations, jeopardise European security and need to be exposed.

Regarding the methodology used in this project the analysed cases of disinformation/propaganda stories were analysed in the EU East Stratcom Team fashion. The Task Force was set up in 2015 to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. It reports on disinformation on a weekly basis with its main product: Disinformation Review. This is the most important initiative in Europe when it comes to debunking disinformation. Hence, we decided to use its methodology and best practices but also added some new features to the disinformation table. Each of the partners analysed its country's internet media between July and October 2016. The consortium decided that partners know best the disinformation websites landscape in their respective countries, so we decided not to intervene in the decision regarding the websites which were picked for the analysis.

Propaganda/disinformation cases were analysed in terms of the date of an article, its title, link to it, form of output, source of disinformation, section about the source/media news website, "big" subject – the narrative, disinformation/faked or distorted news, disproof/facts on the ground and technique.

As far as trolling is concerned, one article in Poland was analysed with more than 2,000 comments. Some key narratives were drawn from it. Social media trolling was not part of the analysis as well as videos on YouTube.

During the project the consortium initiated cooperation with the EU East Stratcom Team by sending disinformation cases uncovered during the project. The EU East Stratcom Team mainly counts on the work of volunteers. So far, around 30 cases reported from this project were published in the Disinformation Review. Hopefully this cooperation will continue after the project's termination. It is important to note that for example, cases from Poland were the first reported case by a Polish source to appear in the Disinformation Review. This is one of the practical outputs from this project. It should also be mentioned that the Prague Security Studies Institute was the most active contributor from the consortium to the Disinformation Review.

While the main conclusions from analysis are drawn from the cases found in the July-October period we will also assess more general trends in the analysed countries in order to get a bigger picture.

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Czech Republic

Channels

Since the Ukrainian crisis, the subject of disinformation campaigns has received increased attention in the Czech Republic. It has been estimated that there are around 40 websites engaged in such activities.[1] But attention should not be limited only to websites, other channels such as Facebook pages or YouTube can be effectively utilised to project similar messages. The number of authors contributing to these channels is difficult to estimate. The Internet excels in enabling anonymity and even if the author is stated, it may prove difficult to confirm the real source of information. Channels are also interconnected to the extent that in an effort to increase activity, they repost articles from similarly-minded sources.

Only rough estimates can be made about the number of readers. Some of these channels give the number of how many times an article has been viewed, but the relevance of this information is questionable. Also, the numbers on Facebook are not a sufficient indicator either. Firstly, it is not easy to prove if the profiles of followers are not generated through paid campaigns. Secondly, hardly all readers

of alternative news sources are active on social networks. Despite these limitations the number of followers (likes*)* and "*People talking about the website"* (the number of active interactions – likes, shares, comments) on Facebook is used as data for this research. The reach of YouTube channels is assessed according number of subscribers and views. According to several criteria it is possible to divide channels engaged in providing alternative sources of news in the Czech digital space into five groups:

- **Conspiracy websites**
- **Alternative media**
- **"Bridge media"**
- **Facebook pages**
- **YouTube channels**

Conspiracy websites have limited number of posted articles (approximately 5 to 10 per week) and limited group of readers (not only from the quantitative perspective[2] but also in terms of mindset prone to believe in conspiracy theories). Analysing its content, commentaries and "sensational news" outnumber reports about daily events. Texts contain mixture of facts, baseless assumptions and conspiracy theories. Language is very aggressive, emotional and often vulgar. Images and titles used in articles are chosen to evoke strong emotions. The examples of con-

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[1] Echo24 (27. 2. 2015) – http://echo24.cz/a/isYwV/42-ceskych-a-slovenskych-webu-ktere-siri-ruske-lzi

[2] According to the numbers from Facebook.

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spiracy websites are *Aeronet.cz*[3], *Protiproud.cz*[4], *Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies (ISSTRAS)*[5], *Novarepublika.cz*[6] (notable because its founders were capable to organise several public seminars[7]), *Bezpolitickekorektnosti.cz*[8] or *Czechfreepress.cz*[9].

Channels [10]	Likes	People talking about this[11]
Aeronet.cz	2 202	234
Protiproud.cz	13 508	3 081
ISSTRASS	XXX	277 members (FB group)
Czechfreepress.cz	12 197	20
Bezpolitickékorektnosti.cz	19 052	7 324

Alternative media try to look like mainstream news websites. The published reports more or less follow (mostly foreign) daily news. Quotes from official sources are generally presented and articles distinguish between commentary and reports. Language used is fairly moderate. In terms of Facebook outreach the audience can be counted in tens of thousands. The reports often present one side view of events and focus on subject topics that can be viewed as uncomfortable for Western media mainstream. The examples of alternative media are *CZ Sputnik*[12] (the Czech division of Russian state-run *Sputnik*), *Eurodeník.cz,* [13] (outlet owned by Russian businessmen [14]), *ČeskoAktuálně.cz* or else popular

[3] Aeronet.cz – http://aeronet.cz/news/
[4] Protiproud.cz – http://protiproud.parlamentnilisty.cz/
[5] ISSTRAS.cz – http://www.isstras.eu/cs/
[6] Novarepublika.cz – http://www.novarepublika.cz/
[7] Novárepublika.cz (8. 4. 2017) – http://www.novarepublika.cz/2017/04/videa-z-jihlavskeho-seminare-nove.html; Novárepublika.cz (10. 5. 2017) – http://www.novarepublika.cz/2017/05/kvetnovy-klub-nr-2017.html
[8] Bezpolitickekorektnosti.cz – http://www.bezpolitickekorektnosti.cz/
[9] CzechFreePress.cz – http://www.czechfreepress.cz/
[10] Counted 29.05.2017
[11] Number of active interactions – likes, shares, comments

[12] CZ Sputnik.cz – https://cz.sputniknews.com/
[13] Eurodeník.cz – http://eurodenik.cz/
[14] Neovlini.cz (25. 2. 2016) – http://neovlivni.cz/propagandisticky-eurodenik-cz-vlastni-rusti-byznysmeni/

Analysis

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AC24.cz[15] (having roughly 225 000 readers per month[16]). Editors of *AC24.cz* also publish printed magazine *Vědomí*. [17]

Channels[18]	Likes	People talking about this[19]
CZ Sputnik	21 056	3 630
Eurodeník.cz	6 703	5 606
AC24.cz	84 562	14 040
Časopis Vědomí	9 290	354
ČeskoAktuálně.cz	25 197	3 751

The term **"bridge media"** refers to channels already established in media mainstream. These portals can serve as a way to the environment of hardcore conspiracy websites. [20] Language of published articles and especially titles of these articles is highly emotional and can be sometimes disassociated from the text itself. These channels provide space to a wide range of voices, which may give legitimacy to more extreme figures. The authors of published articles are to a large extent disclosed, citations are being referenced and the structure of editorial office is provided as well.[21] However, the space is also given to unknown authors publishing on conspiracy websites. The readership of these channels is comparable with mainstream media. The most prominent "bridge medium" in the Czech information space is *Parlamentnílisty.cz*[22] that has been able to position itself as a key part of Czech media landscape (attracts roughly 800,000 readers per month[23]). Its role a so-called "bridge medium" to conspiracy channels is possible to illustrate on the fact that under the same domain operate websites like *EUportal.cz* [24] , *EUrabia.cz* [25] , *FreeGlobe.cz* [26] spreading disinformation and conspiracies (mostly about Islam or migration). Another

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[15] AC24.cz – http://ac24.cz/
[16] NetMonitor.cz (data for April 2017) – http://www.netmonitor.cz/verejne-vystupy
[17] Vědomí.cz – http://vedomi.cz/
[18] Counted 29. 5. 2017.
[19] Number of active interactions – likes, shares, comments
[20] RESPEKT (22. 1. 2017) – https://www.respekt.cz/politika/parlamentni-listy-jsou-mostem-mezi-serioznimi-informacemi-a-proruskou-manipulaci

[21] See ParlameníLísty.cz – Editorial office – http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/redakce/redakce/
[22] ParlamentníLísty.cz – http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/
[23] NetMonitor.cz (data for April 2017) – http://www.netmonitor.cz/verejne-vystupy
[24] EUportál.cz – http://euportal.parlamentnilisty.cz/default.aspx
[25] EUrabia.cz – http://eurabia.parlamentnilisty.cz/default.aspx
[26] FreeGlobe.cz – http://freeglobe.parlamentnilisty.cz/default.aspx

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"bridge medium" is website *Prvnízprávy*.cz.[27]

Channel[28]	Likes	People talking about this[29]
ParlamentníListy.cz	44 375	7 088

Facebook pages are a different type of channels than those mentioned above. Its content is more diverse and prone to influence its followers. The relevance of these platforms depends on the level of activity of its followers who can spread the content among other users with the same opinion background. The Facebook page *"We are here at home.com"* [30] is mainly focused on issues connected to refugees and the danger of Islamization of Europe. The page *Zprávy (News)* [31] also raises issues connected with Islam and supports Czech president Miloš Zeman. Those two pages are interconnected – its

contact for FB messages is identical (@zpravy).[32]

Channel [33]	Likes	People talking about this[34]
We are here at home.com	83 486	15 593
Zprávy	11 392	4 243

YouTube channels can also have a certain level of influence, especially when combined with other channels. Its appeal can be found in video material. The content of channel *Česká nezávislá vize*[35](*Czech independent TV*), established in 2011 by pensioner Petr Černý, is based on information gathered from other alternative sources of information.[36] Another

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[27] ParlamentníListy.cz/redakce –
http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/redakce/redakce/
[28] Counted 29. 5. 2017.
[29] Number of active interactions – likes, shares, comments.
[30] "We are here at home" –
https://www.facebook.com/zpravy.cz/?fref=ts
[31] Zprávy –
https://www.facebook.com/pg/zpravy/about/?ref=page_internal

[32] We are here at home/contact details
(https://www.facebook.com/pg/zpravy.cz/about/?ref=page_internal) vs. Zprávy/contact details
(https://www.facebook.com/pg/zpravy/about/?ref=page_internal)
[33] Counted 29. 5. 2017.
[34] Number of active interactions – likes, shares, comments.
[35] Česká nezávislá televize –
https://www.youtube.com/user/svobodnatv/about
[36] Aktuálně.cz (30. 4. 2017) –
https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/zadny-sarin-v-syrii-umirali-herci-duchodce-z-decina-vysila-l/r~6bae2a882cb411e7903d0025900fea04/

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YouTube channel *Svobodný vysílač* [37] *(Free transmitter)*, established in 2013, has a diverse content – political commentaries and interviews with minor political figures are mixed with programs about history, lifestyle or conspiracy theories.

Channel[38]	Subscribers	Views
Česká nezávislá televize	7 046	2 472 984
Svobodný vysílač	4 028	2 273 756

Main narratives

The most prominent subject on Czech disinformation channels were issues connected with refugees from Arabic countries and the danger of Islamization of Europe. Specific subjects were cases of violent crimes committed by migrants in European cities, terrorist attacks or consider the application of Islamic law.[39][40][41]

The migration crisis is often portrayed as a planned conspiracy of globalist elite[42][43] or as a demonstration of inability of European politicians to find an effective solution.[44] The xenophobic news reports concerning other ethnicities (such as reports about violence of Gypsies young-

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[37] Svobodný vysílač – https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUJFCkx_UVGGBWIgGZedvKw/videos

[38] Counted 29. 5. 2017.

[39] "Migrants raped 15 year-old not far from Znojmo…"; EUportál (20. 5. 2017) – http://euportal.parlamentnilisty.cz/Articles/17303-uprchlici-znasilnili-nedaleko-od-znojma-15lete-devce-krome-podezreleho-19leteho-afghance-

ktery-je-ve-vazbe-jde-jeste-o-dva-somalce-ve-stejnem-veku.aspx

[40] "Italian cities collapse due to migrants…"; EUportál (21. 5. 2017) – http://euportal.parlamentnilisty.cz/Articles/17307-italska-mesta-kvuli-imigrantum-kolabuji-obyvatelstvo-je-jiz-potreti-za-sebou-na-pokraji-zhrouceni.aspx

[41] "Muslims changed strategy and conquer Wien by migration and natality"; EUportál (1. 5. 2017) – http://euportal.parlamentnilisty.cz/Articles/17146-muslimove-zmenili-strategii-a-dobyvaji-viden-migraci-a-porodnosti-fotografie-z-nichz-mrazi-.aspx

[42] "Migration crisis was planned since the end of World war…"; Parlametnílisty.cz (25. 4. 2017) – http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/rozhovory/Migracni-krize-byla-planovana-od-konce-svetove-valky-muslimove-jsou-jen-loutky-Monstrum-Merkelova-a-ohavna-EU-Snad-Trump-zjisti-ze-je-klaman-Znalec-islamu-z-Kanady-hovori-485173

[43] "Leaked report: Billioner George Soros tries to use migration crisis to strengthen his influence"; Eurodení.cz (17. 8. 2016) – http://eurodenik.cz/zpravy/unikla-zprava-miliardar-george-soros-chce-vyuzit-migracni-krize-k-posileni-sveho-vlivu

[44] "Embarrassed Merkel and confused Czech hosts"; CZSputnik (26. 8. 2016) – http://cz.sputniknews.com/ceskarepublika/20160826/3754997/merkelova-rozpaky-cesko-zmatek-praha.html

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sters [45] or thoughts about Jewish worldwide conspiracy [46]) were minor but also present.

Another popular subject was criticism of Western political elite that had two patterns. The USA was described as aggressive and war-like country which endangers world peace. [47][48] The EU elite was described as weak, naïve and biased due to their political ideology. [49] The subject of election processes in Western countries was also vital. The usual narrative connected with the elections in the US aimed

to discredit the democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. [50][51][52] In the case of French presidential elections Emmanuel Macron was portrayed as a candidate of globalist elite. Subsequently, his victory was characterised as election fraud. [53]

Among other popular narratives was crisis in Ukraine. The country was being regularly illustrated as collapsing and ruled by incompetent government that terrorises its own population. [54] Positive

[45] "Violent Gypsy terrorizes Nachod and police does not do anything; EUportál"(30. 4. 2017) – http://euportal.parlamentnilisty.cz/Articles/17187-agresivni-cikan-terorizuje-nachod-a-stat-s-tim-nic-nedela-podivejte-se-na-reportaz-tv-nova.aspx

[46] "French election won by Rothschild family and Zinonist from London City"; Aeronet.cz (8. 5. 2017) – http://aeronet.cz/news/francouzske-prezidentske-volby-vyhrala-rodina-rothschild-a-sioniste-z-londynskeho-city-byli-jsme-svedky-hry-na-alternativu-prodana-nevesta-nebo-prodane-volby/

[47] "Are USA preparing another false flag operation ins Syria?"; AC24.cz (11. 10. 2016) – http://www.ac24.cz/zpravy-ze-sveta/8940-usa-falesna-vlajka-novinar-americke-letouny-rusko

[48] "USA and Saudis provide free passage for 9,000 ISIS fighters from the Iraqi Mosul to Syria"; Zvědavec.org (15. 10. 2017) – http://www.zvedavec.org/komentare/2016/10/7056-usa-a-saudove-poskytnou-9000-bojovniku-isis-volny-pruchod-z-irackeho-mosulu-do-syrie.htm

[49] "French government is an example of total idiocracy"; Bezpolitickékorektnosti.cz (19. 5. 2017) – http://www.bezpolitickekorektnosti.cz/?p=88984

[50] "Is Hillary an epileptic or possessed by demon?"; Prvnízprávy.cz (30. 6. 2016) – http://prvnizpravy.parlamentnilisty.cz/zpravy/zpravy/je-hillary-epileptickou-nebo-demonem-posedla-video/

[51] "Video: Hillary Clinton just undertook the largest seizure. Right on the stage she had to take a pill", Aeronet (9.6.2016) - http://aeronet.cz/news/video-hillary-clinton-prodelala-svuj-dosud-nejtezsi-zachvat-kasle-behem-projevu-primo-na-podiu-si-musela-vzit-prasek-cz-titulky/

[52] "Satanic network of Hillary Clinton reveleased", New World Order Opposition - http://www.nwoo.org/2016/11/11/satanisticka-sit-hillary-clintonove-odhalena/

[53] "Rockefellers' mason got a key from Elysee palace…"; Protiproud.cz (8. 5. 2017) – http://protiproud.parlamentnilisty.cz/politika/3119-rockefelleruv-zednar-dostal-klice-od-elysejskeho-palace-dalsi-podivne-hlasovani-elity-eu-slavi-opatrne-rec-symbolu-vprimem-prenosu-vypukne-ve-francii-obcanska-valka-lze-prechytracit-dabla.htm

[54] "Ukraine finds itself facing demographic catastrophe"; NWOO (10. 8. 2016) http://www.nwoo.org/2016/08/10/ukrajina-se-ocitla-za-hranici-demograficke-katastrofy/

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narratives about Russia were presented rather occasionally. The **conspiracy websites** and **YouTube channels** portrayed Russia as the main opponent of aggressive USA that project a certain degree of stability. [55] The **alternative media** sought to mention Russia in connection with other than political issues – e.g. successes of its scientists or sportsmen.[56] When it comes to the political elite (mainly President Vladimir Putin) they were presented as skillful statesmen. [57] The content of **"bridge media"** excels in bringing together a wide range of diverse voices (including those unfavorable to Russia), which adds to its uniqueness. Yet, the pool of articles showing Russia as a victim of Western aggression was often presented. For the **Facebook pages** Russian president Vladimir Putin was one

of few politicians mentioned in positive connotations.[58]

Manipulation techniques

The manipulation techniques used by abovementioned channels offering alternative news are diverse. **Conspiracy websites, Facebook pages** and **YouTube channels** use conspiracy theories supported by emotional language, manipulative titles and images. On the other hand, **alternative media** and **"bridge media"** utilised seemingly objective news in order to manipulate the target audience; however, the general technique was the same for all observed channels – to play on target audience negative emotions.

The key findings about manipulation techniques employed by channels from Czech information environment are following:

- **Foreign policy focus** – most of the news on the observed channels described events that occurred abroad. This change only when internal dynamics enable dubious interpretations (e.g. dur-

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[55] "Bomb in Putin's hands…"; Protiproud.cz (25. 5. 2017) –

http://protiproud.parlamentnilisty.cz/politika/3147-bomba-v-putinovych-rukach-silnejsi-nez-atomova-klic-k-tajemstvi-dneska-proc-je-rusko-tak-vojensky-silne-pentagon-ma-tezkou-migrenu-latani-der-a-procitnuti-do-reality-kolik-papirovych-dolaru-je-za-dreveny-rubl.htm

[56] "There can be free medicals for everyone"; SputnikCZ (6. 5. 2017) –

https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/201705065236305-Rusko-bezplatne-leky/

[57] "Focus: Unrecognized mistakes and illusions of the West have come to Putin's realism" ;ČeskoAktuálně.cz (24. 4. 2017) –

http://ceskoaktualne.cz/2017/04/zpravy-ze-sveta/focus-nepriznane-chyby-iluze-zapadu-narazily-na-putinuv-realismus/

[58] EH/Analýza obsahu kampaně We are here at home (21. 6. 2016) –

http://www.evropskehodnoty.cz/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Anal%C3%BDza-obsahu-kampan%C4%9B3.pdf

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ing the political crisis at the beginning of May 2017[596061]).

- **Expressive language** – the use of expressive language and even vulgarism.
- **Manipulative titles** – titles are usually long and emotional (not always in accordance with the rest of the text).
- **Manipulative images**– as an illustration for the text used unrelated images produces negative emotions.
- **Unclear or unverifiable sources** - texts used anonymous sources without further clarifica-

tion or statements referred to dubious authorities[62].

- **Generalization** – texts made general/ hasty conclusions about specific groups based on individual examples[63].
- **Independent experts** – text used "experts" or seeming scientific findings in order to gain more credibility[64].
- **Fake or distorted news** – the statements, information or images are faked or strongly misinterpreted[65].
- **One-side interpretation** – text uncritically accepted the point of view of one side on the described issue.

[59] "Prague Maidan started? Opinion"; CZSputnik (11. 5. 2017) – https://cz.sputniknews.com/ceskarepublika/201705115268163-praha-majda-zahajeni-ivan-kratochvil/
[60] "Babiš: "They can kill me but I will not design." All Parlimanet against Babis; Aeronet.cz (10. 5. 2017) – http://aeronet.cz/news/babis-muzete-me-i-zabit-ale-nebudu-rezignovat-neodejdu-z-politiky-cely-parlament-proti-babisovi-opakuje-se-scenar-jako-z-dob-likvidace-vita-barty-jenom-to-ma-drsnejsi-okraje/
[61] "An incredible massive media campaign led by all means to dehonest Babis…"; EUportál (9. 5. 2017) – http://euportal.parlamentnilisty.cz/Articles/17262-neuveritelna-masivni-medialni-kampan-vedena-vsemi-prostredky-ma-dehonestovat-babise-a-odsoudit-babise-jako-lhare-a-podvodnika-kdyz-uz-neni-mozne-ho-zbavit-prizne-volicu-jinak.aspx

[62] "Ukrainian soldiers bombarded Kiev-controlled suburban Donetsk"; CZSputnik.cz (26. 5. 2017) – https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/201705265357125-ukrajinsti-vojaci--Kyjev-osrewlovani-DLR/
[63] "Machete, axe, knife, pistol, bomb"; Bezpolitickékorketnosti (29. 7. 2016) – http://www.bezpolitickekorektnosti.cz/?p=76801
[64] "Let's face facts – the future of Britain is Muslim"; EUportál (17. 5. 2017) – http://euportal.parlamentnilisty.cz/Articles/17221-priznejme-si-fakta-realisticka-budoucnost-britanie-je-islamska.aspx
[65] "Muslims in North Bohemia practice shooting from machine gun. Preparing combatants for intifada in the Czech Republic?"; Aeronet.cz (7. 7. 2016) – http://aeronet.cz/news/muslimove-na-severu-cech-trenuji-strelby-ze-samopalu-priprava-kombatantu-na-vyhlaseni-intifady-v-ceske-republice-hlavne-at-vlada-nezapomene-lidem-odebrat-zbrane-aby-se-nemohli-branit/

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11

Hungary

Channels

Regarding the channels of pro-Kremlin disinformation, currently there are about 80-100 websites in Hungary spreading the narratives of the Kremlin. However, the decisive majority of them do not seem to have a serious impact, at least it cannot be verified from the number of shares and likes on Facebook, and they remain on the blog sphere. Altogether there are 6-10 propaganda websites which are really influential, and articles posted on them can get easily hundreds of likes and shares on Facebook.

Not all of the above mentioned sites are active in the social media sphere, at least not directly. Due to the lack of "Twitter culture," only Facebook has significant pro-Kremlin sites in Hungarian. Throughout the project we have found and followed only ten Facebook sites, with 2,000 or more supporters and a clear pro-Kremlin stand which share propaganda articles on a regular basis, mainly from hidfo.ru or from RT related sources.

Hungary is characterised by a specific phenomenon regarding the channels of Kremlin disinformation narrative, namely that pro-Kremlin disinformation often appears in the mainstream media too, primarily in channels and newspapers that are either state-owned or influenced by the government. This is an important difference between Hungary and the other Visegrad countries.

Out of mainstream media channels, where pro-Kremlin narrative is often spread, clearly the state news agency MTI is the most important, particularly because it provides news for free, thus is extremely influential throughout Hungary. One needs to add though, that in terms of content, MTI does not publish fake or fabricated news. However, it indeed gives room to such Russian opinions, either of leading politicians or of influential newspapers, which serve as channels of disinformation on multiple levels. This ranges from labelling separatists in Eastern Ukraine as if they were a legitimate state to blaming the United States for the *en masse* death of civilians in Syria.

Besides, all major dailies contain articles that may qualify as parts of pro-Kremlin disinformation. However, there are important differences even between the two right-wing dailies. One of them is a pro-governmental, almost far-right, therefore relatively marginal newspaper which belongs to a controversial, pro-governmental oligarch. There are numerous authors in the staff of these dailies who regularly publish pieces of outright disinformation and anti-NATO, anti-EU propaganda. The background of the journalists is well-known, and many of them have close connections to Russia and Russian ideologies and the whole editorial staff share the same, clear political preferences. In the other conservative, independent daily, often critical towards the government, there are a few journalists, well known of their pro-Russian sentiments. Their leading foreign policy journalist can be characterised as

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Russlandversteher – and a really well-informed expert on Russia – for ages, well before Moscow has started its coordinated disinformation operations. His publications constitute the perfect example of how hard it is to distinguish between honest convictions and intentional disinformation operations. His publications contribute to the presence of the pro-Kremlin narrative in the Hungarian mainstream press discourse.

There are few more examples of more or less established journalists who have been representing standpoints that coalesce today with the Russian narrative, but their stance is more rooted in historical Hungarian pro-Eastern sentiments than in contemporary Russian propaganda (a significant part of Hungarian mythology has lots of Eastern connections.)

It should be noted that several chain mails among the elderly population – a significant tool, as three million retired people live in the country – are also spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda. It is difficult to measure and to reach out to these channels, however their efficiency is much higher than any news portal: the sender knows the receiver and therefore the latter trusts the information more, even if it is just a copy-paste version of a pro-Kremlin article.

Main narratives

In terms of content, our research concluded that pro-Kremlin disinformation against Hungary produced surprisingly few content, tailored specifically to the Hungarian audience. This is an important difference if compared to Poland. Pro-Kremlin dis-informers missed the oppor-

tunity to play on the anti-Romanian, anti-Slovak, nationalist-revisionist attitudes present in certain layers of the Hungarian society.

The only exception was the active spreading of anti-migration content, in which pro-Kremlin disinformation channels actively participated, together with the Hungarian government-controlled media. However, in this particular case Russia's interests and Hungarian government's interests overlapped, because both have been interested in weakening the EU by hampering the elaboration of a common EU-level solution. Due to the already ongoing anti-migration campaign of the Hungarian government, anti-migration "news" spread by pro-Kremlin disinformation channels resonated very well among the Hungarian population. However, even these pieces of "news" cannot be really considered as Hungary-specific content, since they were actively spread elsewhere too.

The reason of this relative absence of Hungary-specific pieces is not known. One possible (though unlikely) explanation might be that they are simply unaware of these possibilities. The second variant is that strategic and operational planners of pro-Kremlin disinformation consider the Hungarian population an already friendly, convinced one, therefore there is no need to conduct a serious information campaign. Another possible explanation might be the sheer shortage of resources: for running information operations against Hungary one needs to employ Hungarians (i.e. it's not that same as commenting and trolling in English,

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which can be done at a sufficient level by anyone, who speaks the language at a medium level), which limits the human resources pool – but again, the exact reasons are unknown.

Another reason for the low-level of targeted propaganda in Hungary might be the factor that most Hungarians – as Slovaks and Czechs – are in favour of a country between the West and the East, as indicated by the latest poll of the GLOBSEC Policy Institute. This means that the Russian objective to decrease trust in the allied partners and institutions has actually been achieved.

Instead, pro-Kremlin disinformation efforts focused on spreading generalised, and not specifically Hungary-focused content. The main strategic aims of the spread narratives were:

• To erode trust in EU;

• To foster anti-migration and anti-refugee sentiment;

• To generate and strengthen anti-NATO sentiment;

• To generate and strengthen anti-Americanism;

• To discredit Ukraine, by picturing it as a fascist-ruled, aggressor, corrupt, failed state;

• To discredit the report of the Joint Investigation Team about the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 flight;

• To discredit liberal values, human rights approach and NGOs dealing with the promotion of these values.

Manipulation techniques

The methods of spreading these contents showed a great variety, ranging from publishing outright fakes to doctored photos, from picturing Eastern-Ukrainian separatists backed by Russia as if they were legitimate, elected actors, to accuse the U.S. of committing war crimes in Syria. Probably the most common way they used was to misinterpret and distort existing, confirmed facts.

A particular feature observed was that pro-Kremlin disinformation likes to circulate and recycle "news" produced by pro-Kremlin disinformation sites in other countries in order to gain extra credibility and multiply the effect of a single piece. A spectacular example was an article produced originally by the globalresearch.ca website about a U.S. Marine F/A-18 fighter aircraft painted to Russian colors, thus accusing the U.S. of preparing false flag bombings in Syria in order to discredit Russia. In fact, the photographed F/A-18 was member of a so-called aggressor squadron used to train U.S. pilots to fight foreign forces, thus the picture itself was real. However, the story about a possible U.S. false flag operation was a complete fake. Nevertheless, it was widely circulated in Hungarian, by referring to "foreign reporters", thus gaining extra credibility.

When it comes to social media channels, we can clearly state that the most influential pro-Kremlin pages were hiding their ideological standpoint, and rather offered

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alternative news. Only content analyses proved that the vast majority of these sites were sharing foreign policy news with solely pro-Russian stand. Since foreign policy news in Hungary are among the least popular ones, any news channel mainly specialising in foreign news and having no advertisement whatsoever – like hidfo.ru – would not follow a real demand or a business-driven approach. Only the second-line of Facebook pages – with approximately 20,000 followers – offered open support for Russia, while Hidfo, the semi-official Kremlin controlled Hungarian news portal is only the 5th most popular among pro-Russian Facebook pages.

Moldova

Channels

Russian influence in Republic of Moldova is very powerful and is channelled through various ways, including by means of several mass-media institutions from Russian Federation which are re-transmitted or broadcast in Moldova, via new media and socialising networks, plus the communication sources of some political formations and other pro-Russian interest groups.

Examples of websites are listed below.
- Kp.md, web page of "Komsomolskaya Pravda" Russian newspaper. According to the data provided by the Bureau for Audit of Circulations and Internet (BATI), the Moldovan edition of the newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda" [66] has one of the largest circulations of newspapers distributed in Moldova, and following the latest calculation of Internet traffic and audience[67], in April 2017, the website Kp.md site had a market share of 7.37% and 132,105 real users (about 270,000 unique visitors). It is published in Russian language. According to the data posted on the Facebook page of KP v Moldova[68], it is being followed and liked by more than 17,500 people; its page in Odnoklassniki network[69] - by more than 19,000 people, in Twitter [70] - by 2,900 people;

- Sputnik.md, branch of Sputnik International, was created by the Russian Federation. In Republic of Moldova, this agency develops various activities on mass-media and public communication segment. It is publishing news and spreads it not only on its website, but also during news programs prepared by Sputnik at some radio stations. It organises press conferences and video conferences to discuss issues of cooperation with Russia and other Eurasian Union countries; it organises training

[66] http://www.bati.md/audit
[67] http://www.bati.md/smtai
[68]
https://www.facebook.com/kpmoldova/?pnref=lhc&rf=265295513562524
[69] https://ok.ru/kpmoldova
[70] https://mobile.twitter.com/KpMoldova

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courses and contests for journalists, students, etc. According to the latest calculation of internet traffic and audience, in April 2017 Sputnik.md site had a market share of 7.34% and 131,567 real users (over 240,000 unique visitors). If consulting the data posted on Sputnik Moldova Facebook page[71], it is being monitored and liked by more than over 6,000 people; by more than 2,500 people in Odnoklassniki [72] , and by about 800 persons in Twitter[73]. The website has both versions: Romanian and Russian; since 2016 it has expanded its activity in Romania;

- Pan.md, webpage of Russian language "Panorama" newspaper. The newspaper and the website are owned by Dmitrii Ciubaşenko, journalist and former candidate for President of Republic of Moldova on behalf of "Our Party" (political pro-Russian formation, led by businessman and mayor of Balti town, Renato Usatîi, who is accused by Moldovan authorities of having committed several crimes, and announced in international search for several months). Renato Usatîi is in Moscow, and from there he is leading Balti Town Hall and his political party. The newspaper and the website were very popular among Russian-speaking popula-

tion in Republic of Moldova. In some periods (especially during election campaigns), the newspaper was published in several thousand copies, but the data on web audience are missing. In 2016, when the publisher Dmitrii Ciubaşenko failed in the first presidential elections round, the newspaper stopped being published. Currently, not even the website pan.md is available. It was published in Russian language;

- Actualitati.md, web portal of the Socialist party (PSRM), the party of the current President of the Republic of Moldova Igor Dodon. The domain of portal "Actualitati.md" was registered by Iuri Vitneanski, who is a councillor on behalf of PSRM in Chisinau Municipal Council. There are no data on the website's audience. It is published in Romanian and Russian languages. In Facebook network, the page of the portal[74] has about 1,700 members, over 2,000 in Odnoklassniki[75], about 200 readers in Twitter[76].

- Ntv.md, webpage of NTV Moldova, branch of Russian NTV channel. NTV Moldova television channel is owned by the Member of Parliament from the Socialist Party, Corneliu Furculiţă, who also owns other media properties: at least one TV channel and a newspaper, all having a

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[71]
https://www.facebook.com/ru.sputnik.md/?fref=ts
[72] https://ok.ru/sputnikmd
[73] https://mobile.twitter.com/sputnikmoldova

[74] https:// www.facebook.com/groups/actualitati.md/?fref=ts
[75] https://ok.ru/group/50677006991507
[76] https://twitter.com/ActualitatiMd

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pro-Russian editorial policy. The data on the website audience of Ntv.md are missing. It is published in Romanian and Russian languages. In Facebook [77], the page has 2,600 observers.

- Gagauzinfo.md, web portal from Gagauz autonomy, it is allegedly believed to belong to the governor of the region Irina Vlah, fact denied by her, and the statutory documents list other people. The website is the most popular online resource in the autonomous region, but there are no official data on the website's audience. It is published in Romanian and Russian languages, the news is indirectly promoting the current leadership of the region, and the portal's editorial policy is in favor of Russia. In Facebook, the page of the portal [78] has 2,900 observers, in Odnoklassniki[79] - about 1,500.

Main narratives

The analysis of the reports clustered within the project entitled "Information warfare in the Internet. Exposing and countering pro-Kremlin disinformation in the Central and Eastern European Countries" in Moldova shows that direct and indirect messages conveyed by the majority of monitored publications are deliber-

ately pursuing the inoculation of several major ideas into the Moldovan public's mentality/thinking and, namely: "Europe soon to dissolve", "The U.S. and Europe challenge Russia that has to defend itself and protect the fair system worldwide", "Chisinau Government is ruled from outside, being unable to decide by itself", "NATO prepares a nuclear war against Russia, and Moldova could turn into a battlefield in this war", "Moldova is likely to repeat Ukraine's fate unless the country's leadership re-orients to Russia", "Republic of Moldova's adherence to EU is impossible, and the Association Agreement goes against the country's interests".

In such a way, some monitored online resources are constantly covering, on big surfaces, the opinions of certain pro-Kremlin experts, who claim that many conflicts in the post-soviet space were exclusively of American origin, and East European countries, including Republic of Moldova, should choose between two development models: "The American model - overwhelming, totalitarian, or the Eurasian - fair, multipolar, preserving the identity and sovereignty of States", highlighting that Moldova has a future only by Russia's side, since "the West will not solve Moldova's problems, but Russia will". Usually, such subjective opinions are not grounded on any factual basis. Nevertheless, they are exposed as facts and stressed in the headlines of respective articles.

The idea that Moldova, as well as the neighbouring countries, Romania and Ukraine, is ruled from the outside by means of certain networks of graduates

[77] https://www.facebook.com/NTV-Moldova-331091417061339/?fref=ts

[78] https://www.facebook.com/gagauzinfo/?fref=ts

[79] https://ok.ru/gagauzinfo

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born by the foundations of American billionaire George Soros and who are, as a matter of fact, American influence agents and pawns piloted by American administration, is insistently propagated by pro-Russian media. It is claimed that the U.S. and Europeans "are buying" Moldova through grants and credits and that there would even exist a conspiracy of the West, the US and NATO against Moldova achieved by means of these influence agents and NGOs which, in reality, are not aiming to develop the country, but acting against it. According to the monitored online resources, the unique salvation for Moldova is becoming closer to Russia and integrating into the Eurasian Union.

Another idea that is frequently circulated by pro-Kremlin sources is that Europe is in the middle of chaos, undergoing a rapid disintegration process, which is irreversible. The Brexit will continue with other similar referenda, EU is morally decaying, failing to be any longer a defender of Christianity and civilization, and conceding in front of aggressive foreigners' invasion. By contrast, Russia is featured as a guardian of the orthodox values, investing tremendous efforts in instating a correct and democratic governance in the world. But these efforts are discredited by persons guided by the US State Department, Soros Foundation, various NATO structures, Romanian Government, which are unjustly accusing of Russia, as their western leaders dictate.

Pro-Russian online sources support and actively promote the parties and other formations/groups which are in favour of denouncing the European pathway for a greater proximity with Russian Federation. This could be especially noticed during the election campaign for presidential elections in Moldova in October-November 2016.

Other false and distorted ideas channelled to the public through the materials published by monitored online sources are:

- "Only the naive and the idiots agree with the utopian idea of Moldova's European integration";
- "The US and EU Commissioners and ambassadors promote homosexual demonstrations";
- "Moldova will be great together with Russia, or will not be at all!";
- "Moldova is a puppet-country, a pawn in the game of the US and the EU against Russia";
- "NATO will transform Moldova into a dominion";
- "Because of the Free Trade Agreement with European Union, Moldovan economy is in decline";
- "The U.S. carries the burden for escalation of war in Syria; the U.S. fails to fulfil its own commitments and defends the terrorist organization Islamic State; Russia is consistent in its fight against terrorism, unlike the U.S."

Manipulation techniques

As for the manipulation techniques used in the articles, these include:
- promotion of fake and stereotyped opinions;
- distortion, speculation and misinterpretation of facts, denaturation of reality (e.g.

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"the government of Romania is no more able to make independent decisions"; "Ukraine is a vassal of the US");

- promotion of the conspiracy theory ("conspiracy of the West, the US and NATO against Moldova"), the assaults to country's sovereignty "as happened in Ukraine and Romania";

- exacerbation, i.e. deliberate intensification of some information elements in order to highlight a specific state of public mood;

- artificial opposition of values and holidays of Eastern / Russian with the Western / European;

- presentation of opinions only of those experts who are in favour of a specific viewpoint regarding the topic discussed, deliberate selection of facts and figures with a view to justify a position;

- use of pejorative language elements to convey some messages and ideas, discredit and insult opponents (e.g. "those who believe in European integration of Moldova are naive and idiots"), use of mocking messages and personal attacks against adversaries, lack of feedback from the accused persons;

- shallow and tendentious presentation of complex subjects;

- premeditated categorization of protagonists in "good" and "bad".

Most of the published texts are disseminating the stereotyped opinions shared by pro-Kremlin experts, some half-truths and even false information with a view to promote (without any right to dispute) the idea that Moldova is doomed to no development without Russia. Usually, the headlines and the text of the articles pre-sent the opinions of a single person, who supports and promotes a specific political option – "pro-Kremlin", in issues related to R. Moldova's present-day and future, Moldova's relationships with EU, NATO and Russian Federation. The headlines, intertitles (e.g. "The USA entire domination", "Eurasian project – solution for Moldova") and the text of the articles with too many speculations unconfirmed by the sources, or by the authors in any way, declarative statements, which place the West on the opposite side, demonising it (e.g. "American concentration camp"), NATO and EU which would bring instability and violence, as compared to Russia and the "Eurasian model of Putin-Nazarbaev" "that would bring fairness, prosperity and respect to countries' statehood" – all these are indicative of the article's propagandistic nature. The absence of alternative opinions for the unique and generously-quoted opinion indicates also the disproportional and propaganda nature of the text.

Slovakia

Channels

There are several channels of communication of pro-Kremlin narratives. First, there are the websites with articles translated from the Russian websites. The Slovak case is particularly interesting, because of the similarities between the Slovak and Czech language. Therefore, many of the articles are either translated from Czech or simply published in the

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Czech language. Examples of websites are listed below.

Zem a vek

www.zemavek.sk

"Mainstream" pro-Kremlin website publishes short articles which are translated into Slovak. They are usually taken from the Axis of Logic, RT, Sputnik, and other sources. A go-to website for the Kremlin enthusiasts. The creator Tibor Rostas is known to have connections to the Russian embassy in Slovakia. He is funding a paper version of Zem a vek which is sold in regular bookstores or paper stands. Their Facebook page is regularly updated and possesses a reach of approximately 26,600 likes. Its editor-in-chief Tibor Eliot Rostas is the main source and distributor of the content. His reach is broad: almost 5,000 friends on Facebook and more than 1,000 followers on Twitter.

Hlavné správy

www.hlavnespravy.sk

A mainstream looking, conservative website. The content is questioning the legitimacy of some of the Slovak governmental representatives and its media outlets. Hlavne spravy is one of the most influential channel of pro-Kremlin propaganda. It uses the ratio 60:40, where the former represents the number of reality based articles and the latter is the share of propagandistic articles. Therefore, the website looks genuine and trustworthy at

first. Articles are usually not sourced and anonymous.

Slobodný vysielač

www.slobodnyvysielac.sk

After Zem a vek, Slobodny vysielac is a very popular website (including radio station) among conspiracy theorists and fans of the Russian president. Slobodny vysielac is a broadcasting company with several shows a day, mostly on the various conspiracy topics with guests which have the same opinion on the matter.

Parlamentné listy

www.parlamentnelisty.sk

Trying to look balanced, this website is offering space for "both sides", so besides conspiracy and pro-Russian websites, the page promotes mainstream news or reports from conferences related to international security.

It is important to note that the pro-Kremlin stories have limited penetration in the mainstream media. The mainstream media often reports on Russian influence and activities in the region. However, in March 2017, there was a story published about the main Slovak press agency TASR, establishing a working relationship with Sputnik, one of the pro-Kremlin press agencies. TASR withdrew from the deal after only a couple of days following the outrage from the civil society and other media organizations. Despite this "success", there is still a serious part of

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public who prefer conspiracy and alternative media over mainstream / traditional media.

Lastly, it is important to note that even several national politicians are using language that is like the one coming from the Kremlin, particularly when talking about NATO, the United States, or security situation in the region. It is still difficult to properly distinguish between those who are directly connected to the Kremlin and those who's ideology and rooted anti-Americanism drive their actions.

Main narratives

The authors and articles mention the big conspiracy theories (i.e. Jewish conspiracy, 9/11 conspiracy theories, etc.) to a lesser extent. The big subjects included NATO-Russia relationship, completely omitting Russian domestic debate. Russian foreign policy is mostly described as good and helpful. The Russian intervention in Ukraine is described as a helping hand to the "oppressed Russian speaking minority". The war in Syria is portrayed as a war against radical terrorism, despite being accused by many countries of assisting the regime of Bashar Assad and bombing civilian targets. The EU project and its institutions are being portrayed as declining and chaotic and the channels are proposing alternatives to *status quo*. The pro-Kremlin media focus on negative news regarding the EU and the West. They do not report on success, only on protests and political scandals, such as resignations. Articles often focus on a debate about leaving the EU or even

proposing alternatives to NATO membership, such as neutrality.

Manipulation techniques

Generalization is one of the most effective manipulation techniques. It can be utilised in many cases. First, the disinformation websites tend to put an equal sign between the United States and NATO. Completely ignoring the complexity and independence of the U.S. foreign policy, each of their action is perceived as a NATO operation / mission.

Mocking/Trolling is being used by politicians, such as Ľuboš Blaha from the SMER-SD party. He also serves as a Chairman of the European Affairs committee at the parliament. In his communication on social media, he likes to mock the reaction by NATO and allies / partners to the Russian threat. He is diminishing the role of Russia's soft power in the region and ignoring relevant examples of the disinformation campaign while blaming NATO and European countries of fear mongering and military buildup. Blaha himself voted for raising Slovak defense budget.

Poland

Channels

The analysis of 30 cases uncovered during the monitoring of over 50 websites in the framework of this project demonstrates that pro-Kremlin propaganda in Poland is extensive (many websites) and

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multi-channelled (mainly via articles on websites and trolling). It is also unique, because of some country-specific narratives and applied techniques. While Facebook (it was not analysed in the specific time-frame) plays an increasingly important role as a tool of disseminating disinformation (often by false amplifiers), Twitter does not play a major role in Poland as regards main disinformation/propaganda channels.

Apart from the Russian government-owned information agency Sputnik and a dodgy news aggregator and political blog: dziennik-polityczny.com, which is probably run by Russian security services[80], it seems that the majority of analysed websites in Poland are home-grown. While Sputnik serves as a reference for many websites, dziennik-polityczny.com   is probably the most disinforming from all of the analysed websites. According to its website, its editor-in-chief is Adam Kamiński. However, as some journalist have found out, this person uses the photo of a Lithuanian orthopaedist and Wojciech Brożek, who cooperates with the portal, uses the photo of a man from New York. This is important because one of the common characteristics of the articles we uncovered is the fact that they are usually written by anonymous authors. This hinders exposing particular

"journalists", which is especially important given the fact that one of our recommendations to counter pro-Kremlin propaganda is to name & shame the authors of those disinformation stories by debunking their stories and putting them in the public spotlight. We will not elaborate on the ownership of the analysed websites, as this was not the goal of this project. This should be the task for investigative journalists, media and security services. Dziennik-polityczny.com is also present on YouTube. Articles produced by this website are often distributed by such websites like Neon24.pl or wiernipolsce1.wordpress.com. Posts with their articles are published on blogs and discussion forums written by anonymous authors (it affects all kind of media, not only right-wing but also liberal ones - like radio Tok fm). It should be stressed that using blogs (but also news sites' comments section) is the most common method used in Poland in terms of distribution of disinformation.

As far as their reach, out of 50 analysed websites the highest reach have five of them:
- zmianynaziemi.pl;
- www.dzienniknarodowy.pl;
- alexjones.pl;
- wolna-polska.pl;
- www.pch24.pl.

[80]   See: https://oko.press/polskie-fejki-rosyjska-dezinformacja/

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The following indicators were taken into account[81]: rank in Poland according to alexa.com – a website tracking traffic, statistics and analytics, the number of likes on Facebook and number of followers on Twitter. Zmianynaziemi.pl also publish its articles on YouTube (they are read by a lector and visual content is presented). However, this should not be overestimated, as we believe the most damaging effect on Polish society and its political elites (yet still negligible) is inflicted by dziennik-polityczny.com, which often serves as the main source of disinformation.

Main narratives

As regards key narratives in Poland, it seems that one of the main objectives of the pro-Kremlin propaganda is to **undermine friendly relations between the societies and governments of Poland and Ukraine**. In order to thwart the reconciliation between the two countries and drive a wedge between them, pro-Kremlin websites in Poland publish many emotional articles, preying on fears and historical resentments. It is mainly (but not only) focused on difficult past between Poland and Ukraine (related to recalling the history of the **Volhynian massacres[82]**, where Ukrainians are por-

trayed as wild and cruel beasts mindlessly slaughtering Poles). This typically Polish narrative is communicated with the particular aim of emotionally moving the reader. Stepan Bandera, who is on the one hand a creation of Soviet propaganda, on the other hand has become part of today's Ukrainian public symbol of the struggle for independence, plays a key role in the Volhynian massacres narrative. Therefore, he is a subject of constant attacks. "Banderowcy" (Bandera supporters), "UPAina" and "Nazis" are words which are quite often used in anti-Ukrainian articles and commentaries below articles. It should be mentioned here that trolling in social media and in commentaries under articles is inextricably linked to Russia's information war toolbox. Russian trolls are very active in Poland. They very often put their comments below articles published on the three biggest and most popular information portals: Wp.pl, Onet.pl and Interia.pl. Their interest is focused upon such topics as NATO, Ukraine, the European Union and Russia. Although sometimes it is difficult to distinguish whether a given commentary is actually an act of Russian trolling, there are some hints leading to such a conclusion, namely, the lack of Polish characters (such as "ł", "ó", "ż") and the use of the

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[81] This methodology of measuring the impact of disinforming websites was only used in Poland.

[82] The Volhynian massacres were anti-Polish genocidal ethnic cleansings conducted by Ukrain-

ian nationalists. The time frame of these massacres was 1943−1945. The perpetrators were the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists−Bandera faction (OUN-B) and its military wing, called the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).

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same argumentation as in numerous pro-Kremlin articles. Commentaries under the article entitled "NATO has to get ready for Russian invasion" regarding the Atlantic Council's report "Arming for Deterrence", published on Onet.pl, may serve as a good example. Main messages expressed in these commentaries (which amounted to over 2000 at the end of last year) were: "Poland will be destroyed by an atomic bomb", "Poland will be left alone", "American military industry is pushing for war", "the Jews are to blame".

Regarding anti-Ukrainian narrative, it is increasingly focused on present issues related to: devastations of cemeteries, monuments or schools both in Poland and Ukraine and Ukraine migrants in Poland. Those incidents which are taking place (probably inspired by a third party), are then used for propaganda purposes. These narratives involve also articles claiming that "Ukrainians claim the East of Poland is the occupied territory of Western Ukraine", that there was a "bloody coup in Ukraine inspired by the USA", linking "Right Sector" with Volhynian massacre or that "there are Polish soldiers in Donbas". The last narrative (based upon a Russian source) is particularly interesting since it has managed to find its way into the mainstream media (Radio RMF 24: "40 Polish soldiers of fortune on the Donbas frontline? This is what Donieck officials say."), as well as since it was quoted under a false title (Sputnik Poland: "MOD: Yes, there are Polish special forces in Donbas. Rozenek was right?").

The second key narrative in Poland, used to disinform/misinform [83] or manipulate public opinion, is related to NATO. During the analysed period disinformation regarding NATO was extensive. One of the reasons for this was NATO Summit in Warsaw, which happened to take place in the beginning of the project (July 2016). A particular method of disinformation was used: fake interviews with top Polish generals who were expressing unfavourable opinions about American allies, as well as about the Summit itself. The purpose of the articles was to undermine the confidence of Poles towards NATO and to impose upon the Polish public opinion the anti-NATO point of view – which has been promoted for a long time by Russia. Two fake interviews were published on the eve of the Warsaw NATO Summit and the first day of the meeting. The first one was published on dziennik-polityczny.com website. Allegedly, top Polish general claimed there that "NATO guarantees were, and are, a fiction and they are not worth the paper, they are written on". [84] The second one

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[83] Misinformation - the act of giving wrong information about something, the wrong information that is given. Disinformation - false information that is given deliberately, especially by government organizations.

[84] "Leutanant General Mirosław Różański: NATO summit - more noise than concrete (actions)"; ndp.neon24.pl (7.7.2016) -
http://ndp.neon24.pl/post/132563,gen-miroslaw-rozanski-nato-wiecej-halasu-niz-konkretow

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entitled: "Marek Tomaszycki: Andrzej Duda initiates hostilities", was first published by someone using a name: Leszek Bobikowski. It was published on the blog section of mpolska24.pl. One of the excerpts from it: "President Andrzej Duda gave the summit an anti-Russian tone in such a way which initiates hostilities. In peacetime generals practice scenarios of war, but the war scenarios are made by politicians".

What is interesting is that the same day Polish radio's (Radio RFM 24) website had published an article entitled: "Brussels portal: Duda initiates hostilities", referring to an article which appeared in www.bruxelles2.eu criticising the hardline position of president Duda towards Russia. It is important to note in this context, that experimental research shows that, to achieve success in disseminating propaganda, the variety of sources matters[85]. To put it in the nutshell: multiple sources are more persuasive than a single source.

The fake interviews with top Polish generals is a common method used in Poland. This has been observed in Poland also after the analysed time-frame. In January dziennik-polityczny.com published another fake interview with a Polish general

("Gen. Wojciechowski HARD on the presence of US troops: American soldiers are to defend Poland. Nonsense!"). This method is quite effective, yet it has a vulnerability: the recipient of the information warfare knows which narratives are important for the initiator of the attack. The main narratives drown from the two fake interviews published on the eve and first day of NATO summit included the following narratives: "West will not help Poland"; "West is homosexual", "In case of the conflict in the East, Polish elites will abandon Poland", "Poland is America's vassal", "NATO is obsolete", "NATO is a tool of America", "The biggest threat today is in the cities in Western Europe. It is terrorism, which people fear the most, not the aggression from Russia". Hence, assuming this website is run by Russian security services, one may assume the above-mentioned narratives are seen as important from the Kremlin point of view.

Another narrative, quite often used in Poland, in accusing Polish authorities of being Russophobic. This very useful narrative from the point of view of the Kremlin, was also present during the analysed period. It seems to grow in importance in Poland because it is universal - it may be applied by pro-Kremlin propaganda in almost every case to discredit Polish authorities or political elites: it justifies all criticism of the policy implemented by the Kremlin. It also serves a specific goal: isolating Poland from the Western allies and portraying its political leaders as emotional, irresponsible and Russophobic.

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[85] See: Paul C . and Matthews M., "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood Propaganda Model. Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It", Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation.

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Manipulation techniques

As far as the manipulation techniques used in the monitored articles, these include:

- providing false facts about Russian involvement in Ukraine;
- providing information, without any source, to cause emotional reaction;
- misleading titles of articles which do not correspond to the rest of the article;
- using old quotes as new information for propaganda purposes;
- conspiracy theories (e.g. chemtrails, NATO's goal is to protect the interests of a small group of elites);
- concealing facts which are not favourable for Russia (e.g. Katyn massacre denial);
- using quotes out of context;
- fake interviews;
- fake statements.

Another tactic used to spread misinformation is publishing articles which seem to be informative but are actually opinions, which makes it hard to report them. **Mixing opinions and facts** is a common pattern observed online especially on the Polish version of Sputnik. Pro-Kremlin propaganda in Poland manages, from time to time, to get into the mainstream media. This affects not only larger parts of the Polish society (compared to fringe media's influence), but also may have a direct impact on bilateral relations between Poland and other countries. One of such fake stories, based on Russian

source (Topnewsrussia.ru), was about Egypt who has allegedly sold two French-built Mistral ships to Russia – which originally commissioned the ships – for USD 1. It was reported by the Polish public news broadcaster (TVP INFO: "Egipt sold mistrals to Russia for 1$").

However, it is important to note that pro-Kremlin's disinformation/propaganda effectiveness is questionable. According to a recent latest poll, NATO membership is accepted by 82 percent of Poles. 59 percent of Poles expressed the conviction that Poland can be sure of the allies' involvement in its possible defence, 28 percent of surveyed Poles had doubts. In this context, it is worth remembering, that one of the narratives in Poland involves a "big subject" that "Poland will be left alone by its allies". The support for EU membership is even higher - with 88 percent supporting membership of Poland in the EU[86].

It is often said that information warfare goes hand in hand with cyberattacks. It was witnessed both in American presidential elections and in French elections when candidates' election headquarters' communications were hacked and information from it was used to attack one of the candidate. In Poland we have also

[86] http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/cbos-88-proc-badanych-popiera-czlonkostwo-polski-w-ue-przeciw-jest-8-proc/3rzrq38

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witnessed hacking combined with information warfare. In January, about 100 municipalities' websites were hacked and prepared message was posted on their websites urging local communities to protest against American forces on Polish soil[87].

Ukraine

Channels

Report is based on outlets StopFake caught on publishing fakes during the mentioned period. We can put the analysed websites in three categories: first are Ukrainian media which are covering news mostly objectively, and pro-Kremlin propaganda is a rare case of slipping in, mischecked or poor journalism (example of it might be NV.ua). Another group are outlets which do have strong ties with Russian media or are basically part of it, like for example Ria Novosti Ukraine (Ukraine's version of Ria Novosti). And the third group will be Ukrainian media which might have strong pro-Kremlin position: big ones (like Vesti-ukr.net, Korrespondent.net etc) or marginal ones, which might have Ukrainian web address but are mostly providing having anti-Ukrainian coverage of events (examples: nk.org.ua, e-gorlovka.com.ua etc) .   And

[87] http://niezalezna.pl/92338-cyberatak-podczas-powitania-amerykanow-w-zaganiu-sluzby-na-tropie-sprawcow

while marginal ones might be poorly presented in social media or not presented at all, which is limiting their reach, other abovementioned groups of outlets are mostly presented in all social networks (Twitter, Facebook,   Vkontakte) from where such stories can be widely spread.

Three main origins of pro-Kremlin disinformation in Ukrainian media were spotted:

- story might appear in Ukrainian media and then being taken on by Russian pro-Kremlin media with quoting 'Ukrainian media' as a source and base, validation of a story. Often Vesti-ukr.com plays this role, being a starting point of fakes for some Kremlin media)

- it might be coming from Kremlin Russian media with Ukrainian media basically channeling them by taking on and spreading some of pro-Kremlin narratives

- it might be a result of poor journalism

- or combination of all above mentioned

Main narratives

All the fake and manipulative stories about events in Ukraine can be grouped into four main theme categories:

- "Ukraine as failed state" theme;
- "Dangerous Ukrainians" theme;
- "Ukraine is breaking Minsk agreements" theme;
- "Everyone loves Russia" theme.

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"Failed state" ("zrada" narrative, which translates from Ukrainian as "betrayal" narrative). It consists of all the disinformation stories which aim is to show that Ukraine authorities are not capable and are not having power in their hands, or are betraying their people by deceiving them and stealing budget resources. It also aims to present Ukraine as if it's falling apart.

Stories are about (but not limited to):

- government isn't capable and country is in complete chaos (like alleged 'hunger riots'[88] in Ukraine or being in a second away from 'energy collapse'[89] for example);
- people are not supportive of government[90];
- minorities demand autonomy[91].

Media that where caught on these topics are: Ria Novosti Ukraine, nk.org.ua, Fakty.ictv.ua, korrespondent.net among others.

Here we should separately include story like the one about the student who was allegedly to be expelled [92] because he asked Ukrainian President 'uncomfortable' question[93] – to present as if authorities behave authoritarian and to fuel people's anger.

The second narrative is about dehumanised and dangerous Ukrainians, which is shown through different types of stories. For example – through mashing together Ukraine and ISIS[94]. Also popular narrative – presenting as if Ukrainian are threatening Russian language or orthodox

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[88] In Ukraine, supermarket and restaurant were seized for food , nk.org.ua,
http://nk.org.ua/ukraina/golodnyie-buntyi-na-ukraine-zahvatili-supermarket-i-restoran-radi-edyi-71401 (19.09.2016)
[89] Atomic scientists: energy collapse and economic disaster await Ukraine , Ria Novosti Ukraine
http://rian.com.ua/analytics/20160821/101502853 9.html (21.08.2016)
[90] Media polls: Disenchanted Ukrainians give up on their government, RIA Novosti Ukraine,
http://rian.com.ua/analytics/20160712/101306338 6.html (12.07.2016)
[91] Ukraine's Gagauz minority demand autonomy, Korrespondent
http://korrespondent.net/ukraine/comunity/37192

08-hahauzskaia-obschyna-ukrayny-khochet-referendum-o-sozdanyy-avtonomyy (18.07. 2016)
[92] The student who asked the President the "uncomfortable" question, is expelled from university , mzm.zp.ua http://mzm.zp.ua/studenta-zadavshego-prezidentu-neudobnyj-vopros-vygonyayut-iz-universiteta (8.10. 2016)
[93] The student who asked the President the "uncomfortable" question, is expelled from university , Antikor.com.ua
https://antikor.com.ua/articles/128242-studen-ta_zadavshego_prezidentu_neudobnyj_vopros_vy gonjajut_iz_universiteta_-_smi (07. 10. 2016)
[94] State Duma deputy: to the south of Ukraine continue to flock Islamic radicals, nk.org.ua
http://nk.org.ua/politika/deputat-gosdumyi-na-yug-ukrainyi-prodoljayut-stekatsya-islamskie-radikalyi-76005 (25.10.2016)

churches[95] – both important elements of "Russian world" (Russkiy Mir) concept.

"Ukraine's breaking Minsk agreements" narrative includes such news as alleged story about UEFA investigating Ukraine on doping scandal[96]. Media that were caught on these themed stories are, among others: e-gorlovka, report-er.com.ua , NV.UA, segodnya.ua.

Examples of "Everyone loves Russia" narrative are stories such as "Europe is lifting sanctions against Russia" or "The Donetsk Republic opens representation in EU" ("The Donetsk People's Republic" being part of "Russian world" narrative). Media such as comments.ua[97], gazeta.ua[98],

Ria Novosti Ukraine, zn.ua (Zerkalo Nedeli)[99] and segodnya.ua were caught on this one. Here we can see how the narrative is being created. Like in "Belgium's lifting sanctions" story – while stating the fact – there was a proposal – media manipulate other elements or even don't mention them – for example that this purely advisory proposal was made by a representative of a party that has only 1 seat in a lower house of a Parliament, as well as that to be implemented it needs to be adopted in the Senate (upper house)[100].

Manipulation techniques

As for main tactics that were used to create fake stories these are:

- using foreign institutions, experts and social media to prove, support and provide seemingly legit basis for the story;

- twisting, misreporting and manipulating of information.

What is important and should be mentioned though, is that Ukrainian media

[95] Orthodox priests have told the Europeans on seizures of churches in Ukraine , Podrobnosti.ua http://podrobnosti.ua/2132357-pravoslavnye-svjaschenniki-rasskazali-evropejtsam-o-zahvatah-hramov-v-ukraine.html (19.09. 2016)

[96] Euro 2016: UEFA will launch an investigation into the case of doping of the Ukrainian national team players, Segodnya.ua http://www.segodnya.ua/sport/tournaments/euro_2016/news/evro-2016-uefa-nachnet-rassledovanie-po-delu-ob-upotreblenii-dopinga-igrokami-sbornoy-ukrainy-730696.html

[97] The DPR announced the opening of its representation in the EU , Comments.ua https://comments.ua/life/556109-boeviki-donbassa-otkrivayut.html (27. 08. 2016)

[98] Belgium may cancel the sanctions against Russia, Gazeta.ua http://gazeta.ua/articles/politics/_belgiya-mozhe-vidminiti-sankciyi-proti-rosiyi/712825 (24. 07. 2016)

[99] Zerkalo Nedeli, The Belgian parliament will consider a resolution on lifting the sanctions against Russia http://zn.ua/WORLD/parlament-belgii-rassmotrit-rezolyuciyu-o-snyatii-sankciy-s-rf-219675_.html (24.07.2016)

[100] Parliament of Belgium proposed to abolish sanctions against the Russian Federation http://www.segodnya.ua/politics/pnews/parlamentu-belgii-predlozhili-otmenit-sankcii-protiv-rf-736533.html(24.07.2016)

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sometimes do react to fakes being refuted, and there are cases when stories were taken down or even there was a debunking of published story, although with no mentioning of previous mistake from the outlet's side (at least no cases were spotted during the period of monitoring). This shows that debunking and social shaming strategy proves to be effective with some of Ukrainian media, as well as we can highly recommend, as additional measure, creating more of quality and truthful media content about Ukraine so as to provide audience with access to quality information – and so that it will be harder for junk news to intrude. Also, educating audience is crucially important. By teaching people critical thinking and media literacy to raise awareness of what media really are, people will be able to defend themselves in cases when media is misused or used as a weapon. It is also important to teach journalists and those responsible for creating media content with the intention that poor journalism cases decrease.

Conclusions and recommendations

The analysis of nearly 200 cases shows that pro-Kremlin narratives in V4 plus Moldova and Ukraine can be both general and country-specific. The former, such as strong anti-NATO narratives, could be observed during the analysed period (July-October 2016) in Hungary, Moldova and Poland. Strong anti-EU narrative could be seen in Moldova and Slovakia.

What unites the analysed websites is their **common and negative approach towards NATO and the European Union**. Some of them do not even mention Russia but rather focus on degrading Western systems, governments or particular ideas or policies, and try to persuade the readers that there is no such thing as objective truth. Those two strategic narratives go hand-in-hand with the foreign policy-goals of Kremlin which is to undermine the cohesion of NATO and EU.

On the other hand, one could observe some specific country-tailored measures. There is a strong anti-Ukrainian narrative in **Poland** (related to Volhynian massacres, "Ukrainians claims the East of Poland is the occupied territory of Western Ukraine",, "bloody coup in Ukraine inspired by the USA" or linking "Right Sector" with Volhynian massacre). It seems in case of Poland, anti-Ukrainian narrative seems to play the most important role.

The most prominent subject on **Czech** disinformation channels were issues connected with refugees from Arabic countries and the danger of Islamization of Europe. Specific subjects were cases of violent crimes committed by migrants in European cities, terrorist attacks or consider the application of Islamic law. The migration crisis is often portrayed as a planned conspiracy of globalist elite or as a demonstration of inability of European politicians to find an effective solution.

In **Moldova**, anti-EU narrative seems to play the most important role. Direct and indirect messages conveyed by the majority of monitored publications are deliber-

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ately pursuing the inoculation of several major ideas into the Moldovan public's mentality/thinking and, namely: "Europe soon to dissolve", "The U.S. and Europe challenge Russia that has to defend itself and protect the fair system worldwide", "Chisinau Government is ruled from outside, being unable to decide by itself", "Moldova is likely to repeat Ukraine's fate unless the country's leadership re-orients to Russia", "Republic of Moldova's adherence to EU is impossible, and the Association Agreement goes against the country's interests". One of the techniques used to spread misinformation is publishing articles which seem to be informative but are actually opinions, which makes it hard to report them. Mixing opinions and facts is a common pattern observed online especially on the Polish version of Sputnik. It was also reported by Ukrainian analysts.

Regarding **Hungary**, surprisingly few content has been uncovered which was tailored specifically to the Hungarian audience. This is an important difference if compared to Poland. The only exception was the active spreading of anti-migration content, in which pro-Russian disinformation channels actively participated, together with the Hungarian government-controlled media.

In **Slovakia**, there are distinguishing features in both subjects and form. In terms of subjects the articles in Slovakia are focusing on anti-Americanism and pro-neutrality and pan-Slavism rather than traditionally pro-Russian views. In form, many articles have grammatical mistakes as they are translated from Russian.

Regarding key narratives in **Ukraine**, we can group misinformation/disinformation stories into four main theme categories: "Ukraine as failed state" theme, "Dangerous Ukrainians" theme, "Ukraine is breaking Minsk agreements" theme and the "Everyone loves Russia" theme.

Even though Twitter does not play a major role in V4 (e.g. in Hungary and Poland) as regards main disinformation/propaganda channels, attention should not be limited only to websites. Other channels such as Facebook pages or YouTube can be effectively utilised to project similar messages.

Recommendations

Academic   Researchers/Think-tanks should concentrate upon:

- Target audience – who are the receivers/groups that can be influenced by these channels employing manipulative techniques and what is the likely impact?

- Authors – what are their motivations? Do they want to "go public" and defend their work? What is the background of described channels? What is the business-model? How high is the level of connectivity among these channels?

- Educate public about the ethic of information – explain the phenomenon to journalists (so that they do not quote the fakes), politicians (so that they do not use borderline channels), companies (so that they do not advertise there), pensioners

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(who may be easily influenced by strongly emotional information), pupils and students (so that they learn to be critical as early as at school level).

Myth-busters

- Be aware about limitations of debunking strategy – what do we want to achieve? Who do we want to inform?

- Present findings in national languages (one of the main difficulties with the East Stratcom products. Disinformation Review should be produced in all EU languages) and through other channels with a wide reach (communicate with mainstream media including TV channels and tabloids).

- Conduct research on new platforms (e.g. Snapchat for younger generation).

- Not only debunk the single fake news but try to look for general patterns/tips – engage groups with tailored messages (e.g. Zvolsiinfo – a group of university students present the challenge of disinformation in schools).

State bodies

- Be aware of propaganda problem and actively communicate with public in order to minimise the possibility of information shortage. Otherwise this can produce greater uncertainty among target audience.

- Encourage Internet companies (such as Facebook or Google) to develop and use tools against fake news, fake profiles and others tools of influence.

Key question – right balance

- Be aware that this challenge should not be given greater space than it deserves – on the one hand it is necessary to be vigilant but on the other greater public attention runs the risk of encouraging disinformation activities.

- Regular meetings between the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence should be conducted with journalists. The latter should be given examples of the disinformation techniques used against the government offices (e.g. false interviews or false statements made by Bartłomiej Misiewicz on Gen. Skrzypczak or false statements by General Różański who allegedly called for protest in Wesoła against minister of defence Antoni Macierewicz).

- Ministries of Education should implement a new subject: critical thinking into the curriculum (following the Swedish example where starting from 2018 children will be taught to distinguish fake news from real ones as early as at primary school). Investment in education is a long-term goal to fight disinformation/propaganda. This change should be preceded by dedicated workshops for teachers, which could be conducted by NGOs.

- An alarm system notifying the key stake-holders (public administration,

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journalists) about an increased risk of disinformation at a particular time (NATO Summit, anniversaries such as 11th of July - National Day of Remembrance of Victims of Genocide perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists against Poles during World War II) should be considered. It could resemble the anti-terrorist alerts.

- Regular workshops for civil servants about ways to counter disinformation should be conducted. In this context, more cooperation is needed between NGOs running projects regarding disinformation and public administration.

- To address the main (anti-Ukrainian) narrative in Poland, which is trying to drive a wedge between Poland and Ukraine, we recommend journalists in both countries to strengthen informal links (by for example setting up a specially dedicated groups in social media which could serve as a hub for pro-Kremlin disinformation related to relations between Poland and Ukraine). Such initiative could serve as a first contact line of defence when suspected news affecting relations between two countries appear and journalists are not sure about the reliability of the source.

- An increased vigilance must be maintained not only in the vicinity of important dates related to political events, anniversaries, etc. (in the case of Poland, it concerned the NATO summit in Warsaw – two fake interviews with the Polish generals, the anniversary of the Volhynian massacre, or the arrival of the US

brigade in Żagań as an reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank) but also during spontaneous riots or events particularly polarising the public. Pro-Kremlin propaganda machine is eagerto take advantage of such events (e.g. the beating of a 14-year-old teenager by her peers in Gdansk and the twisting this story in the Russian/Ukrainian media, or the riots in Ełk connected with the death of 21-year-old Daniel). As indicated above and confirmed by some of the identified narratives, one of the Kremlin's propaganda objectives is to isolate Poland from NATO and the EU. Therefore, the greater the radicalization of events, this picture of Poland becomes more negative, which is in the Kremlin's interest.

- Revealing who is behind the websites which are spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda should be the task for investigative journalists, media and security services.

- Name & shame the authors of those disinformation stories by debunking their stories and putting them in the public spotlight.

- Raising awareness about pro-Kremlin disinformation should be one of the tasks of public media. Putting this topic into the spotlight should be done in major evening news.

- In order to raise awareness among the public, documentary films highlighting the problem of pro-Kremlin disinformation should be supported, produced and aired in the prime time of the public television.

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- Regarding Poland, new institution should be established comprised of journalists, political scientists, historians, linguists. Preferably it should be within the Chancellary of the Prime Minister (it needs a strong mandate). This institution dedicated to monitoring, analysing and foreseeing disinformation should be the hub of the stratcom efforts of the government.

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Partners:

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www.visegradfund.org

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