The Russian information war and propaganda narratives in the European Union and the EU's Eastern Partnership countries

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Abstract—*The European integration has drastically intensified in several European Union's Eastern Partnership countries over recent several years, demonstrated clearly in groundbreaking agreements, decisions and initiatives, seen by these countries as a credible solution to their problems, including to the long-standing conflicts. Not surprisingly, so has the anti-Western rhetoric orchestrated by Russia. The anti-Western Russian information war raised the risks and threats of national security. Furthermore, by aiming at splitting societies and influencing governmental or EU calculations, it can and does hamper the EU's active and fast engagement in its Eastern neighborhood. This paper will explore how Russia utilizes the anti-Western information campaign in the EU and the EU's Eastern Partnership countries and what can be done to counter it.*

Index Terms—**Russia, Information War, Propaganda, EU, Ukraine, Georgia.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The European integration has drastically intensified in several European Union's Eastern Partnership countries over recent several years, demonstrated clearly in groundbreaking agreements, decisions and initiatives, seen by these countries as a credible solution to their problems, including to the long-standing conflicts. Not surprisingly, so has the anti-western rhetoric orchestrated by Russia. Social networks, online media and radio/television channels have been increasingly flooded with disinformation by certain non-governmental organizations and politicians who, financially and ideologically encouraged by the Kremlin-funded institutions, have been in vanguard in this information war and propaganda machine.

The Russian anti-Western information war has been a serious challenge for the EU countries (e.g. Germany, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland) as well. It can't be summarized more clearly than by General Philip Breedlove, NATO's former top commander, who said at the NATO summit in Wales that Russia is waging "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare" [1]. Indeed, "[when] skillfully combined, disinformation, malicious attacks on large-scale information and communication systems, psychological pressure, can be even more dangerous than traditional weapon systems, since they are extremely difficult to discover and combat" [2]. Reference [3] further argues that "Russian propaganda has become an extremely aggressive, well-calculated and effective tool of Moscow's policy internally and abroad".

Russia's state-controlled media, from RT TV to Sputnik multi-media, has been mobilized for the propaganda machine. But countering the Russian information war has been difficult as it has been conducted across various platforms, age and societal groups, languages and transmission methods. Moreover, Russian information war has become more effective taking into consideration the somewhat increasing impatience and frustration of the societies of various Eastern Partnership states caused by the West's perceived indifference towards their European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

The anti-Western Russian information war raised the risks and threats of national security. For example, the head of the U.S. National Intelligence Service James Clapper recently raised in the U.S. Senate the possibility of Tbilisi (Georgia) "slowing or suspending its efforts towards the Euro-Atlantic integration" [4].

More importantly, active Russian lobby in Brussels and in key national capitals as well as assertive anti-Western information war aimed at splitting societies and influencing governmental or EU calculations can and do hamper the EU's active and fast engagement in its Eastern neighbourhood, and this way keep growing instability coming from the regional conflicts. This has been done by "influencing the policies of another government; undermining confidence in its leaders and institutions; disrupting its relations with other nations; and discrediting and weakening governmental and nongovernmental opponents" [5].

Taking the above-mentioned into consideration, this paper will explore various aspects of the information war. In particular, what is information war, how does Russia utilize the anti-Western information campaign in the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries, and what can be done to counter it and to neutralize the threats that the propaganda machine is posing? Ukraine, Georgia, Western European countries and Eastern European states are selected as case studies in the research.

II. INFORMATION WAR

Information warfare is a relatively new doctrinal term in the military lexicon that "encompasses a wide range of non-kinetic forms of human conflict". It is usually understood as "a use and management of information in pursuit of an advantage over an opponent, such as

propaganda, disinformation, and gathering assurances that one's own information is accurate" [6].

Information warfare and propaganda are often used interchangeably. However, theoretically speaking, there is an important difference between these terms. In particular, a "propaganda warfare mostly targets the general population or group of decision makers, painting a picture that stresses the aspects or relations the sponsors want embedded as the key facts", whereas an "information war usually targets professional decision makers and their supporting intelligence and analysis units" [7].

Information warfare may include giving the enemy special information (commonly referred to as 'propaganda') to persuade the enemy to surrender. It may also include "feeding 'disinformation' to one's own people, either to build support for the war effort or to counter the effects of the enemy's propaganda campaign". Another modern dimension of information warfare is often referred as 'cyber warfare' and refers to "creating havoc by disrupting the computers that manage stock exchanges, power grids, air traffic control, telecommunications and defense systems" [6], [8].

III. RUSSIAN INFORMATION WAR IN EUROPE

Russia has placed information war tactics at the center of its foreign policy for many years already [2]. Kremlin's 'information warfare theory' grew bigger and became a crucial element of the 'hybrid warfare', with Aleksander Dugin, one of the prominent ideologists of the Russian nationalism, and Igor Panarin, an ex-KGB officer from the 'information front', being the leading theoreticians of the Kremlin's information war [9]. The whole Russian 'information apparatus' is arguably behind the practices of "trolling, exploiting compatriot communities, infiltrating NGOs, promoting a distorted version of history, augmenting Russia's footprint in foreign media space, using culture as a foreign policy tool", etc. [10].

Russia's propaganda operation is operational via RT TV (formerly, Russia Today), Sputnik multi-media, multi-lingual YouTube channels, and other social media tools, carefully tailored for specific national (e.g. U.K., U.S., GER) and language (e.g. Arabic, Francophone, Russian) audiences, and transferred through continuously varying disinformation messages. Generous funding makes it possible for these media to expand their activities throughout the world and further increase their effectiveness [11], [10].

On operational level, Russian propaganda "is self-consciously post-modern: its purpose is not to convince or convert, but to confuse - to spread enough versions of reality to leave the target audience flailing in moral and even factual relativity, resigned to the unknowability of the world, and unable to find the cognitive basis for policy action" [12]. Scholars also compare it to the older Soviet '4D' strategy – dismiss, distort, distract and dismay [13].

Importantly, the "Putin's Russia doesn't just deal in the petty disinformation, forgeries, lies, leaks, and cyber-sabotage usually associated with information warfare. It reinvents reality that Russia then translates into political action. The notion of 'journalism,' in the sense of reporting 'facts' or 'truth,' is no longer relevant" [1].

Researchers differentiate four general types of Russian propaganda, each with different "modus operandi in a strategically diverse environment: (1) The West's Attention Deficit Disorder: Propaganda as Confusion; (2) Nudge Propaganda; (3) Propaganda at Home: Mobilizing the Putin Majority; (4) Alternative Realities - not just an alternative message, but an alternative reality, with a cast of supporting characters to deliver it" [11], [14].

Within this background, Russia has been accused of conducting a coordinated but undeclared disinformation campaign against a number of EU and NATO countries [15]. The fundamental and overall objective of Russia's media offensive in Europe in general is not "only to justify current Russian government priorities or provide a positive gloss on Russian activities". But, more importantly, rather, "either to perpetuate existing myths about the alleged injustice of Europe's current security environment, or create new tensions which can bring about the collapse of the existing security environment" [15]. In this regard, NATO, EU and their member states are particular targets of Russian information war, and their enlargements are perceived as the aggressive "expansions" of evil threatening Russian security [14], [16]. This is why the nature and rhetoric of the Russian information war is so anti-Western and anti-European.

Reference [17] clearly demonstrates and characterizes the Russian activities in Europe on the example of trolling: "supporters of the French right wing are sent content referring to the defense of Christianity; the post-communist German left is sent memes that refer to pacifism and how American militarism endangers peace; Slovakia gets content speaking about German domination of the EU, etc. The aim here is not to convince all customers of a single, cohesion set of content. The primary purpose… is the disorganization and manipulation of the adversary's public opinion and to disorganize his society".

The so called "near abroad" (i.e. former Soviet Union countries) is under Moscow's special attention. The narrative spreading throughout these countries (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, etc.) "has a less solid ideological base and appeals to a wide range of people with anti-Western, anti-liberal and anti-globalist views… [and paradoxically] equally praises Russia's tsarist and Communist legacies" [10]. Or as reference [12] refers it, a "fluid approach to ideology", "which combines right-wing messages such as intolerance towards homosexuality or Islamist movements with leftist ideas directed against US-style capitalism" [10].

All in all, the "[modern] Russian propaganda is cleverly targeted, technically adept and cynically fact-free" [5].

The following sub-chapters explore several most recent examples of the Russian disinformation and propaganda messages tailored for Western and Eastern Europeans, Ukrainians and Georgians, utilizing the fears and prejudices in these regions and countries and aiming at widening divisions within NATO, EU, Eastern partnership and individual countries.

A. Russian narratives in Western European countries

Russian information war has been polluting the Western Europeans' minds with the following messages for several years [15], [18]: (1) "The NATO and EU enlargement was a 'step too far', an unnecessary move which not only aggravated relations between the West and Russia, but also created an unstable situation in Europe"; (2) "The East

Europeans are ungrateful, unreasonable and hysterically anti-Russian; nobody should listen to what they have to say, or to their imaginary scenarios of doom and gloom, as they will only drag the West into an unnecessary confrontation with Russia"; (3) "The Eastern European countries are neither democratic nor team-players in Europe; all they seek are Western-generated benefits, without offering anything in return"; (4) "The best way of dealing with the East Europeans is either to ignore them altogether or to engage in a security dialogue with Moscow about the 'security challenges' they raise".

B. Russian narratives in Eastern European countries

Eastern Europeans are psychologically pressed by the following Russian propaganda tactics [15], [18]: (1) Encouraging suspicions in the minds of leaders in the new NATO member-states about the readiness of Western nations to come to their aid, if events require it; (2) Raising doubts about NATO's posture and ability to defend its member states; (3) Increasing the divisions in Central and Eastern Europe about any need to invoke the security guarantees offered by NATO if a crisis arise, by nurturing Moscow's good relations with some nations, yet not others'; (4) Promoting the idea that, although the Central and East Europeans may be in NATO and the EU, they are never likely to be taken seriously or considered as equal by their Western partners; (5) Encouraging the idea among electorates in Central and Eastern Europe that there are opportunities for greater economic well-being by cooperating with Moscow; (6) Strengthening the claim that current tensions between Russia and the rest of Europe are not as a result of some actions by Moscow but, rather, just the outcome of a capricious decision taken by Western leaders who have no interest in peace and security; (7) Endorsing the claim that the EU is trying to force these countries to adopt 'perverted' and 'decadent' standards and to take in huge numbers of 'dangerous' migrants, who will carry out rapes, crimes, terrorist acts and welfare abuses.

C. Russian narratives in Ukraine

Russia has been using an advanced and visible form of hybrid warfare in Ukraine since early 2014. Key elements of Russia's information war in Ukraine have been [19], [2]: (1) "Denial and deception operations to conceal or obfuscate the presence of Russian forces in Ukraine, including sending in "little green men" in uniforms without insignia"; (2) "Camouflaging Moscow's goals and objectives in the conflict, which sows fear in some and allows others to persuade themselves that the Kremlin's aims are limited and ultimately acceptable"; (3) "Retaining superficially plausible legality for Russia's actions by denying Moscow's involvement in the conflict, requiring the international community to recognize Russia as an interested power rather than a party to the conflict, and pointing to supposedly-equivalent Western actions"; (4) "Simultaneously threatening the West with military power in the form of overflights of NATO and non-NATO countries' airspace, threats of using Russia's nuclear weapons, and exaggerated claims and demonstrations of Russia's military prowess and success"; (5) "The deployment of a vast and complex global effort to shape the narrative about the Ukraine conflict through formal and social media". In this regard, Russian information channels have relentlessly portrayed the Ukrainian army as murderers, criminals, and Nazi perpetrators (using fabricated stories of crucified children and raped women), while ignoring the causes of the war or discussion of Russia's involvement.

D. Russian information war in Georgia

Georgia is an interesting and useful example for investigating the Russian information war. It was in this country in 2008 (during the Russia-Georgia war) that Russia first time effectively tested its massive propaganda machine. Russia's following actions in Europe and elsewhere were very much adapted based on the lessons taken in Georgia. Therefore, the Georgian case will be explained in more detail.

Russian information war and propaganda machine in Georgia is generally no different compared to the rest of Europe explained above. But particular focus is on traditions-, culture- and prejudices-related messaging, media being the most important tool in the information war. Indeed, media experts smartly assessed Russian territorial adventurism and information war in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova with the following phrase: "With Fire, Sword and TV Programs" [20].

Kremlin's propaganda in Georgia is quite diversified. Russia has several tools at its disposal for the information war, including media, social networks and internet, proxy organizations and funds, pro-Russian politicians, parties and political experts, celebrities, and clergy [21].

By portraying the European integration as an existential threat for Georgian culture, traditions and religion, Russia depicts itself as an Orthodox outpost in Europe and the only savior of Georgia from the Western decadence. However, it is paradoxical for Russia to portray this picture while having 200 years' of historical legacy of brutality against Georgian Orthodox Church, culture, traditions and statehood.

Based on a research on Moscow's soft and hard power policy in Georgia, [22] accurately concludes: "[political] myths are one of Russia's most important propaganda tools in Georgia. Russian propaganda is often built on emotional messages to create and strengthen negative stereotypes of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, discrediting the Western political or cultural space and supporting homophobic and xenophobic opinions among the public. By cultivating these myths, Russia presents itself as Georgia's only ally with a common identity, religious faith, history and culture. Simultaneously, it portrays the West as a threat to all the above-mentioned values".

Who are those Georgian organizations and individuals who openly promote the Kremlin's regional integrationist project, the Eurasian Economic Union, and staunchly oppose European integration? Pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia's civil sector stems from two key organizations: 'Eurasian Institute' and 'Eurasian Choice. Based on careful analysis, scholars indicate to the following linkages [23], [21], [24]: On the one hand, Eurasian Institute is a founder of the 'Young Political Scientists Club' and the 'People's Movement of Georgian-Russian Dialogue and Cooperation. It is also a partner of 'Historical Legacy', 'Lev Gumilev Center', 'Scientific Society of Caucasiologists', 'Center for Globalization', 'Caucasian Cooperation', the information portals 'Sakinformi' and 'Iverioni', and indirectly, the online

portal 'Georgia and the World'. One the other hand, another set of pro-Russian organizations - the 'Erekle II Society' and the internet television 'Patriot TV' - are united under umbrella of European Choice. The latter is also a partner of the 'International Eurasian Movement', led by the ideologist of Kremlin expansionist policy Alexander Dugin.

While Eurasian Institute mainly focuses on analytical activities and outreach through organizing conferences and workshops, Eurasian Choice is committed to social activities by arranging protest rallies and demonstrations. Moreover, as researchers observe, founders of pro-Russian NGOs as well as the participants of their conferences and meetings are mostly the same people. For instance, the former public defender Nana Devdariani is a founder of several pro-Russian organizations, including 'Caucasian Cooperation', 'The Center of Global Studies' and 'People's Orthodox Movement'. The leader of Eurasian Choice Archil Chkoidze also established 'Erekle II Society' [23], [24].

Cultural expansion is another important aspect of Russia's propaganda machine, with Russian language courses offered to Georgian citizens by Eurasian Institute with support of the Russian state-funded organization 'Russkiy Mir', while 'Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund' established the 'Russian-Georgian Society Center' in Tbilisi.

Additionally, the multimedia project 'Sputnik' has also expanded its activities in Georgia. The Georgia's National Communications Commission deprived Sputnik of its radio broadcasting license, but it effectively switched to internet space. Furthermore, Georgian 'Objective TV' as well as less popular cable television 'Dro' and internet television 'Patriot TV' further sharpened their relentless anti-Western rhetoric.

Apart from Sputnik, there are several local web portals that have contributed to spreading the pro-Russian vision of the world, e.g. 'Sakinformi', 'Sakartvelo da Msoplio' and 'Iverioni', all media partners of the Eurasian Institute. Among the local print media, newspaper 'Asaval Dasavali' is the most aggressive denouncer of all Western-related things, followed by less popular 'Newspaper Alia' and a Russian-language monthly 'Svobodnaia Gruzia' [21].

Moreover, an essential part of the Russian information war became the revitalization of anti-Western political parties [25]. Two of them are worth mentioning in this regard: (1) Nino Burjanadze with her pro-Russian political coalition and her frequent voyages to Moscow; and (2) Irma Inashvili with her populist Alliance of Patriots, a staunch critics of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration who succeeded in their efforts to overcome a 5% threshold in the parliamentary elections in Georgia in October 2016. As a result, they have their own fraction in the parliament.

The most widespread myths and disinformation messages and narratives in Georgia disseminated and repeated by these pro-Russian organizations and individuals include [3], [21]: (1) "The U.S./Europe/George Soros fights against Georgian identity, church and traditions"; (2) "Russian and Georgian values are traditional, not like those in the liberal West"; (3) "Russia is a traditional and natural ally, while the West is a temple of decadence and a haven for homosexuals"; (4) "The West imposes homosexuality, incest, pedophilia and perverse mode of life"; (5) "Georgia has to stay with Russia because of its geography, common 200-year history and religion"; (6) "Georgian and Russian people are friendly to each other and only Georgian governments betray this friendship"; (7) "EU Association Agreement enslaves Georgia and destroys Georgian economy and agriculture"; (8) "Events in Ukraine are inspired by the West against Russia"; (9) "NGOs are hired spies of foreign special services and are greedy money eaters"; (10) "Russia - Successor of the Byzantine Empire"; (11) "Gayropa"; (12) "European Union and NATO will never admit Georgia"; (13) "The West is not a reliable partner and Georgia is in an illusion about its Western perspective"; (14) "Eurasian Union is the only choice"; (15) "Only military neutrality will save Georgia"; (16) "The West is worse than Russia"; (17) "The 2008 Russian invasion is a heavenly intervention against Western integration"; (18) "NATO integration would spell irrevocable loss of the disputed Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region"; (19) "If Georgia changes its Euro-Atlantic course and restore its strategic partnership with Russia, the latter will certainly support a peaceful settlement of the conflicts"; (20) "Lugar Laboratory – the U.S. biological weapon program against Russia".

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clearly observable that the Russian information war is blossoming in Georgia and Ukraine in parallel to and in order to hinder their accelerated European integration. Another dimension of this warfare is targeted against the EU member states and aims at splitting the societies, change governmental calculations and this way weaken their engagement (individually or via EU) with the Eastern Partnership countries. If countered properly, the Kremlin propaganda machine will most probably not have a groundbreaking impact on foreign policy priorities of the targeted countries in short and medium term. However, although the Russian disinformation and propaganda messages are fundamentally flawed, if not addressed appropriately together by the government, society and international community, in long term it can widen a political division, contribute to the societal turmoil and deepen the skepticism and anti-Western rhetoric in the above-mentioned countries.

Following activities are resource-intensive but must be implemented to counter the Russian weaponized information that is ferociously undermining not only national security and integration process of the EU and EU's Eastern Partnership countries but seriously hampers the EU's active and fast engagement in and contribution to the solution of problems in its Eastern neighbours [2], [12], [21]: (1) Prevent non-fact-based news broadcasting; (2) Encourage investigative journalism; (3) Contribute to the establishment of knowledgeable and critical 'consumers' of news; (4) Develop a unified and comprehensive policy against Russia's propaganda machine, and its soft power offensive in general; (5) Increase population's awareness of NATO and EU, and clearly explain the benefits of NATO and EU integration to each age or professional groups of the societies; (6) Provide tangible results of the EU and NATO integration as soon as possible. Visa-free regime with the EU could have being probably the mostly visible and plausible of these tangible results; (7) Involve think tanks, along with security and law enforcement agencies, in the identification and systematic analysis of the Russian information war and propaganda machine, and communicate potential threats to the general

public; (8) Establish a centralized and unified counter-propaganda centre or strategic communication center with the goals to identify and react to fake news broadcasting, spread unified messages to domestic and international audiences, and provide relevant information to citizens; (9) Track the Kremlin network – make public all those names and organizations who promote the Russian propaganda machine as well as their financial and ownership affiliations; (10) Media community must react themselves to such blatant spreading of disinformation that exploits and harms the media reputation.

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