

SUMMARY
of
REPORT
on the Study on

Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria

Bulgaria and Russian Propaganda

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BULGARIA AND RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

SUMMARY¹

There have been several studies and reports published regarding the phenomenon of Russia's 'hybrid war' and its use of propaganda and disinformation against the West. These reports have either originated from governmental-institutional sources (NATO,² EU³) or emanated from think tank circles⁴ some of which have been rightfully criticised for dubious methodology and/or explicit political agenda (thus constituting a form of propaganda).⁵ The bulk of these studies and reports appeared in the past three years corresponding thus to the recent period of clear deterioration of relations between Russia and the West.

However, most of these studies and reports do not clearly distinguish between Russian foreign 'policy', 'influence', or 'propaganda' and tend to mesh the three concepts together. More recently, the phenomenon has been reconceptualised as a result of the alleged hacking scandal during the US presidential election campaign as Russian 'interference'. Some studies and reports include country-specific case studies, which usually analyse 'Russian influence in said countries'. Though Bulgaria has mostly been omitted in these studies and reports there are two notable exceptions: one authored by Bulgarian political analyst Dimitar Bechev⁶ which is concerned solely with Bulgaria and another report *The Kremlin Playbook*⁷ by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and the Center for the Study of Democracy in Sofia which deals with several countries including Bulgaria. Both studies have examined the degree of penetration of Russian interests (which are mainly economic) in Bulgaria.

¹ Forthcoming full text publication.

² <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/kremlin-and-daesh-information-activities>

³ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/commentary-means-goals-and-consequences-of-the-pro-kremlin-disinformation-campaign/>

⁴ <http://infowar.cepa.org/index/>

⁵ <http://www.iwm.at/transit/transit-online/countering-fake-news-with-fake-expertise/>

⁶ http://europeanreform.org/files/ND-report-RussiasInfluenceInBulgaria-preview-lo-res_FV.pdf

⁷ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook>

This paper instead highlights the specific nature of what can be considered Russian propaganda concerning Bulgaria and to analyse its main dynamics. In order to contextualise this phenomenon in Bulgaria it is necessary to understand how Russian propaganda presents Bulgaria and its political, economic, social, and cultural development through its media outlets both in Russia and abroad. The purpose of this analysis is to outline the main narratives and topics relating to Bulgaria and how they are represented and instrumentalised. Firstly, it provides a brief discussion of the general framework of the propaganda dynamic as well as the discourses concerning Bulgaria that appear in Russian media outlets. Secondly, it focuses on how Russian propaganda operated in relation to Bulgaria's recent presidential elections. As this paper shows, what is generally regarded as Russian propaganda in Bulgaria tends to be a 'home-grown' phenomenon rather than a foreign-directed or steered influence.

For the international context/audience this analysis is based on the two major outlets that are recognised as Russian propaganda outlets: RT (formerly Russia Today)⁸ and Sputnik News/Sputnik International. Both outlets are multilingual though strikingly no Bulgarian editions exist (RT is more limited language-wise as it is also a TV-outlet while Sputnik is a web-only news media site). This can be ascribed to the fact that either Russian tends to be read/understood well enough in Bulgaria and thus Russian-language media outlets can fulfil this function. It should be noted that the Kremlin-run Russian TV channels such as Rossiya24 are available on Bulgarian cable providers. Additionally, Bulgarian-based outlets that publish Russian-language content or reproduce Russian media content serve a sufficiently satisfactory function not to allocate resources to a specific Bulgarian edition. An alternative hypothesis could be that Bulgaria might not be seen as important enough to be deemed a target for RT or Sputnik (again this mainly applies to Sputnik which has a Turkish and Serbian edition, but no Bulgarian or Greek edition - conversely Sputnik has no Romanian edition, but it has a Moldovan one which can fulfil the former's role).

⁸ The newspaper *Русия днес* (Russia today), which was part of the research project "Anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria", is a Bulgarian bilingual weekly that apart from its name has nothing in common with RT (formerly known as Russia Today).

For the domestic context/audience (Russia and former Soviet republics with Russian speakers) this analysis is based primarily on state-controlled and tabloid media. Given the former's propensity to act as conveyors of propaganda, those Russian outlets which are deemed reliable or independent⁹ have been disregarded at this point (though they should preferably be used for more balanced or critical reporting on Russian affairs). While some of these outlets have been targeted by the authorities or changed ownership or editorial boards due to political pressure, the outlets that are more likely to spread propaganda are the state-run media and the tabloid outlets.

The international Kremlin-funded and state-run outlets like RT have been portrayed as a pillar of the 'hybrid war'.¹⁰ Nevertheless, this assessment should be critically qualified relating to tangible influence since these outlets' market share is in fact quite minimal if not negligible.¹¹ The Russian-language outlets function mainly for the domestic Russian audience (and internet readership) though, as noted above, they are available in Bulgaria. Similarly, though quite some online articles in Russian of dubious origin are reproduced in Bulgaria the recent discussion of the significance of the impact of 'fake news' has been qualified.¹²

Tabloid outlets represent a particularly interesting case especially since they function in similar fashion as in Bulgaria where the media landscape has been subjected to an increasing 'tabloidisation'¹³ suffering from a tendency towards sensationalism instead of in-depth analysis. More so, Russia's tabloid news media site Life/Life News consistently outranks other Russian-language outlets in quoted/shared online content according to the most recent survey¹⁴ of the 30-most cited internet sites. Thus, for the purposes of this analysis at the present point, tabloid media are of primary focus as the regular state-run media often overlap with the above international outlets in content. It is also important to note that in Russia itself TV still carries significantly more weight than purely online media.

⁹ <http://www.rferl.org/content/twenty-russian-news-outlets-you-need-to-read-before-they-get-the-axe/25317371.html>

¹⁰ <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/rt-channel-gets-additional-12-bln-rubles-56375>

¹¹ <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21715031-kremlin-backed-network-inflates-its-viewership-youtube-disaster-videos-rt-propaganda>

¹² <http://www.nber.org/papers/w23089>

¹³ http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/bulgaria

¹⁴ http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/federal_media/

Bulgaria's image -and its instrumental use- or reporting on developments in Bulgaria in the above media outlets should be seen within the general framework of the Russian propaganda narrative and discourses concerning the West, the EU, and NATO. While historically and culturally regarded as rather close to Russia, Bulgaria's membership in both the EU and NATO makes it part of a geopolitical rival bloc nonetheless. Though far not as important as countries like Germany, France, the United Kingdom or Poland, Bulgaria does represent a peculiar case since it borders both non-EU and non-NATO member states which tend to figure within the Kremlin's geopolitical and economic sphere of interest. One can perceive a reproduction of now 'standard tropes' of Russian propaganda discourses¹⁵ applied to Bulgaria with its propaganda image fitting within the broader anti-EU and anti-NATO narrative albeit with some specific topical focuses. Bulgaria tends to be presented as a country potentially friendly to Russia, but hampered and restricted by the EU while acting as an 'American lackey'.¹⁶ The political elite is portrayed as loyal to its 'overlords' i.e. Brussels, Berlin and Washington D.C. though with the occasional erratic reflex.

The most common Bulgarian topics in Russian propaganda relate to: NATO (Balkan air space and Black Sea naval activity); the Ukraine crisis and sanctions against Russia; the refugee crisis; Turkey and the (civil) war in Syria; as well as energy policy (the South Stream/Turkish Stream pipeline projects, shale oil extraction, and the nuclear power plant project at Belene). Additionally, a dichotomy between the Euro-Atlanticist Bulgarian political establishment and a Russia-friendly domestic opposition is repeatedly presented. In the latter case, the opposition is usually depicted by ATAKA and its leader Volen Siderov. ATAKA is never referred to as a far right, xenophobic party, but alternatively as a 'European', 'oppositional' or 'patriotic' party depending on the context of the desired message. The references to ATAKA serve to show resentment against Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic orientation. Here one can also categorise various references emphasising the 'negative outcomes' of the Euro-Atlantic orientation. Finally, the tabloid media offer an additional perspective featuring articles concerning the Bulgarian tourist industry, in particular the summer tourism at the Black Sea coast which often point to 'negative experiences'.

¹⁵ <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/28/dominant-narratives-in-russian-political-and-media-discourse-during-the-crisis/>

¹⁶ See the cluster of synonyms for "lackey" which were derived for the purposes of a search based on the propaganda thesis "Bulgaria's venal elites" in the report "Anti-democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. News Websites and Print Media: 2013-2016. Quantitative Research", II.3. A significant part of the synonymous epithets and phrases for this propaganda thesis, as with other theses, are a direct translation from Russian.

It is worth underlining again that Russian media outlets target the domestic audience and readership in Russia, and the Kremlin's defines 'propaganda outlets' as a matter of national security.¹⁷ Russian-speakers abroad, mainly post-Soviet countries with a Russian-speaking minority or Russian diaspora, constitute a secondary audience and readership. It would be an exaggeration to state that the image of Bulgaria as it is instrumentalised for propaganda in Russian media outlets is directed at the Bulgarian audience and readership (in order to influence it). Rather, Bulgarian-based media fulfil this function more effectively and as such should be considered the main source of Russian propaganda in the country. This provides certain nuance as to what should be regarded as 'Russian propaganda' and what should be more correctly classified as 'pro-Russian propaganda'. There is a need to cross-evaluate the image of Bulgaria in Russian propaganda with the tropes and discourses that are employed by pro-Russian and illiberal media outlets in the country. Of particular importance would be to determine to what degree there exists a 'cross-pollination' or reciprocal influence between Russian media outlets and those present in Bulgaria. While Russian news outlets make use of Bulgarian international news agencies like Novinite or Sofia Globe, it would be useful to gain more insight into the direction of the flow of information.

To illustrate this problem, the recent presidential elections that took place in November 2016 present an interesting case in light of the broader international attention it received. The presidential elections in Bulgaria had been characterised by a rather low-key campaign in which the ultimate winner, Rumen Radev, had been presented a 'pro-Russian' candidate, mainly because the Bulgarian Socialist Party backed him. The elections also coincided with the US and the Moldovan presidential elections. This gave an additional framing of the Bulgarian elections as another possible competition between the West and Russia. Much of the western press coverage picked up on the 'pro-Russian' labelling of Radev with many western articles consequently translated and reprinted in serious Bulgarian media outlets.

¹⁷ <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-propaganda-outlets-declared-important-for-countrys-defense-56786>

In contrast, Russian outlets were rather silent about the issue and, more importantly, so was the Kremlin. Right before the elections took place in late October and early November, two Russian state-owned television channels, TV Tsentr¹⁸ and Rossiya24,¹⁹ broadcasted documentaries on Bulgaria featuring all the standard propaganda tropes while simultaneously casting doubt on Radev's supposed pro-Russian inclinations. Nevertheless, following Radev's victory several Bulgarian outlets began publishing 'voices from Russia' - concretely, fringe figures like Aleksandr Dugin or Leonid Reshetnikov who appeared on a marginal Russian TV channel- to suggest Russian meddling and thus a foreseeable 'turn to Russia' under Radev's presidency.²⁰ Once the 'pro-Russian' stance of Radev was being discussed in Bulgarian and western media, the official Kremlin responses and Russian media began to cautiously mirror them fuelling the narrative in Bulgaria. However, Russian media was relying either on Bulgarian or western sources to make these claims.²¹ Closer examination revealed a peculiar dynamic of western and Bulgarian media egging on the narrative in Russian media. The Russian 'propaganda sting' was thus rather self-inflicted and allowed Russian outlets to exploit or prey 'on the cheap' on what was being published in Bulgaria. While the comments by Dugin and the numerous interviews by Reshetnikov certainly represented propaganda and disinformation, they were made more potent by the coverage and significance assigned to them by serious Bulgarian outlets. In this sense, more readers would read 'about' Russian propaganda than read the propaganda itself.²²

The same pattern then repeated itself at the time of Radev's inauguration when Bulgarian outlets -citing RIA Novosti- began circulating a story of a plan to 'organise a Maidan against Radev'.²³ The problem with this 'propaganda sting' was that the article in RIA Novosti was in fact an op-ed in which the information about a 'conspiratorial plan to organise a Maidan' against Radev was based on 'Bulgarian online media'.²⁴ Closer examination revealed a series of links to an obscure Bulgarian blog post as the source of the story.²⁵ In this sense, the domestic 'home-grown' media play a more significant role whereas the Russian media merely serve to amplify what is initially created in Bulgaria. The 'anti-Radev Maidan' story was ranked as one of the top 'fakes' of the week. Thus, while Russian media certainly has the potential to play a disruptive role in Bulgaria it does so in a rather passive role: the op-

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHEugFcZtiI>

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1I4oeOF41k>

²⁰ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/tom-junes/bulgaria-how-not-to-mistake-russian-propaganda-for-russian-policy>

²¹ <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3143253>

²² <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/moritz-gathmann-colleagues/whole-pravda-about-russian-propaganda>

²³ http://www.clubz.bg/49464-ria_novosti_bylgariq_gotvi_majdan_sreshtu_radev

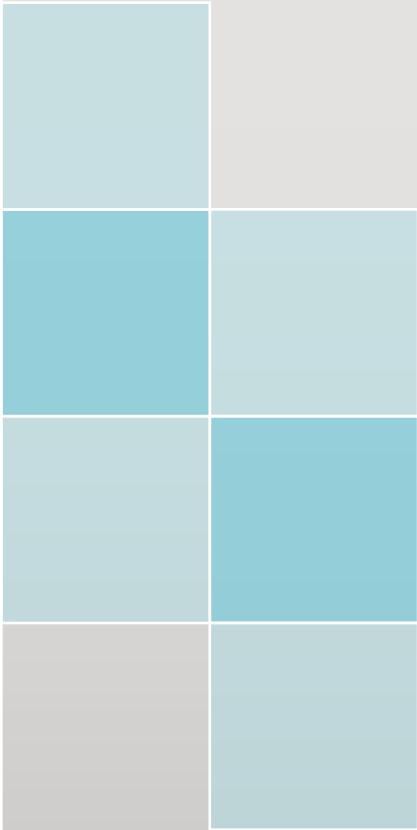
²⁴ <https://ria.ru/analytics/20170118/1485976396.html>

²⁵ http://bgpravda.blogspot.bg/2017/01/blog-post_37.html

ed in RIA Novosti was published for a Russian not a Bulgarian audience and had it not been picked up by Bulgaria media it would most likely have gone unnoticed. In light of this, it is therefore more productive to conceptualise and focus on 'pro-Russian propaganda of Bulgarian origin' as opposed to 'Russian propaganda concerning Bulgaria'.

In conclusion, one can identify common propaganda tropes in the representation of Bulgaria in Russian media with that of the West, the EU, and NATO as a whole. Apart from that, several specific topics relating to Bulgaria feature regularly in the state-run and tabloid media for the consumption of the domestic Russian audience and readership. However, there exists a propaganda framework that is 'home-grown' (of Bulgarian origin) and can be characterised as 'pro-Russian' which at times feed stories to Russian outlets. These, if picked up, can be relayed back in an amplified way to the Bulgarian audience and readership. While there is no doubt that there is a high degree of Russian 'influence' in Bulgaria, the function of propaganda in fact serves rather to distract from this influence than enable it.²⁶ The reason for this is that Russian influence in Bulgaria -which is economic- spans the entire political spectrum and has deeply permeated the Bulgarian business community. In this sense, it is more productive to focus on the domestic outlets in Bulgaria that propagate 'pro-Russian' views as the source for disinformation intended to exert influence on the political process than Russian propaganda as such. More so, while the tabloidisation of the Bulgarian media landscape is a problem in itself, it would be recommendable that serious or independent outlets restrain from amplifying propaganda tropes in a sensationalist manner as happened after the presidential elections. This includes the uncritical reproduction (in Bulgarian) translation of western media articles as also happened at the time of the elections. It would be more effective to promote fact-checking and Bulgarian investigative journalism to counter disinformation and propaganda.

²⁶ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/tom-junes/bulgaria-how-not-to-mistake-russian-propaganda-for-russian-policy>



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