

REPORT

Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria

Part Two.
Online Media in 2017:
Frequency Measurement and Content Analysis

Human and Social Studies
Foundation – Sofia



**AMERICA FOR
BULGARIA
FOUNDATION**

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY	3
METHODOLOGY	9
I. AGGREGATE ANALYSIS OF DATA AND TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOUR MAIN TOPICS UNDER STUDY	12
I.1. THE DECLINE OF EUROPE.....	15
I.2. BULGARIA’S VENAL ELITES.....	19
I.3. THE US/NATO AS GLOBAL HEGEMON/PUPPET-MASTER.....	24
I.4. THE RISE OF RUSSIA	28
I.4.1. “RUSSIA’S INCREASED POLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL MIGHT” AND “THE POWER OF RUSSIAN WEAPONS”	28
I.4.2. RUSSIA’S ENEMIES	34
I.4.3. CRIMEA AND UKRAINE. THE SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA.....	39

SUMMARY

The study on anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgarian media in 2017 applied the methodology used in the study on the 2013–2016 period, combining measurement of the frequency of use of propaganda language in Bulgarian online media with content analysis of publications on selected peak days (see *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. Part One. News Websites and Print Media: 2013 – 2016. Quantitative Research*¹). It covered the four main talking points of Bulgarian populist propaganda, identified in the previous study through semantic analysis: 1. “The Decline of Europe”; 2. “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites”; 3. “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master”; “The Rise of Russia”. The study enabled outlining the trends in the dissemination of populist propaganda in Bulgarian media in 2017: an overall increase as compared to the previous period as well as a change of focus in propaganda strategy – intensification or weakening of activity on the separate talking points and changes in the content of each one of them.

In 2017 there was a relatively low year-on-year increase in publications containing keywords and phrases from the vocabulary of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda. Whereas in 2016 their total number was 35,292, in 2017 it grew to 37,636, or by 6.6%. The increase in the total number of propaganda publications was accompanied by a change in the dynamic of development of the different thematic fields of propaganda. **Compared to the previous year, the number of propaganda publications on the topic of “The Decline of Europe” decreased sharply (-52%), while, conversely, that of publications on the topic of “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites” increased sharply (+46.5%).** There was a certain increase in publications on the topic of “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master” (+17.7%). The topic of “The Rise of Russia” also underwent development depending on the evolution of its sub-topics. The number of publications on the sub-topics of “Russia’s Increased Political and Spiritual Might” and “The Power of Russian Weapons” grew significantly (by +46% and +44%, respectively). Conversely, that of publications on the sub-topics of “Crimea and Ukraine” and “Russia’s Enemies” fell (by -45% and -20%, respectively). Publications on the sub-topic of “The Sanctions against Russia” were comparable in number to 2016, and even increased slightly (+5%).

¹ Available at: http://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/REPORT_PART1_EN.pdf.

THE GENERAL CONCLUSIONS ARE THE FOLLOWING:

1. Open geopolitical propaganda is giving way to propaganda for “domestic use” – Bulgarian anti-democratic populist propaganda is aimed mostly against domestic political and economic opponents, its preferred targets being the reformist political parties and reformist policies such as the judicial reform. In 2017 the number of publications vilifying “venal Sorosoids and un-Bulgarians” in Bulgaria (16,703 articles) almost equalled that of publications on all other topics (a total of 20,933 on the other three main talking points in the same period). For comparison, in 2016 there were 23,898 publications on the other three main talking points and 11,394 publications using the vocabulary of the talking point about “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites” – that is, in 2016 the foreign-political publications were twice as many as the domestic-political ones.
2. There was a slight decline in overall propaganda activity on geopolitical topics (the total number of such publications decreased from 23,898 in 2016 to 20,933 in 2017) and, at the same time, serious internal shifts in activity on the separate geopolitical talking points.
3. The attacks against the EU decreased sharply – obviously because of the continuing high popularity of the EU among Bulgarian citizens as well as because of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.
4. As regards Russia, there is a radical change in propaganda priorities in favour of direct positive propaganda praising Russia’s political and spiritual might and Russian weapons, rather than using defensive propaganda rhetoric to malign Russia’s enemies or justify the annexation of Crimea. The number of publications on the sanctions against Russia remained roughly the same as in 2016, but their focus shifted onto the negative consequences for all of Europe.
5. The US, NATO and the West continue to be the global Arch-Villain. Propaganda activity on this talking point increased, too, although this study found certain changes in the image of the US after Donald Trump’s election as president: the tendency is towards turning NATO and the Pentagon into the privileged enemy (while keeping open the option of portraying Trump as a “friend”).

These general conclusions are supported and specified through content analysis of publications on peak days as follows:

The significant decrease in propaganda publications on the topic of “The Decline of Europe” can be explained with the high, and even growing, popularity of the EU among Bulgarian citizens as well as among the citizens of the other EU member countries – populist propaganda has started refraining from frontal attacks against the EU in order to avoid direct confrontation with the dominant public attitudes. The fact that directly attacking the EU is an unproductive propaganda strategy was demonstrated by the results of the Bulgarian parliamentary elections in March 2017, in which the parties using the extreme rhetoric of populist propaganda failed to win a parliamentary majority. The Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU (1 January – 30 June 2018), for the promotion of which part of the propaganda media received state funding, is also an explanation for the low number of propaganda publications on this topic. The attacks against the EU in 2017 were not just comparatively few in number but also moderate in tone. Their main highlights, however, remained the same as in the previous four years and are the following: accusing the EU of being directly responsible for the migrant wave and for the process of Islamization of Europe; denouncing the moral collapse of the EU, which has moved away from the age-old Christian values and placed its member countries’ national sovereignty in danger; condemning the liberal elites that dominate the EU for being completely destructive in that they have reduced the Union solely to a market and the Europeans’ worldview solely to consumerism. The recommendation of propaganda publications as to how the EU should respond to those threats is urgent and salvatory establishment of closer ties with Russia.

The publications on the topic of “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites” in 2017 attest to a palpable intensification of the trends established in the previous four years. As we already noted in the Report on the 2013–2016 period, although anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria takes its talking points from Russian propaganda and even directly calques part of the latter’s vocabulary, it most often uses them for its own, local tactical purposes. It serves for state capture by the local oligarchs who use the media they own or finance to malign as “foreign agents” and “puppets” and to discredit, by all possible means, their opponents: pro-European parties and politicians, pro-liberal media, human-rights and environmental activists, etc. A privileged target of propaganda publications is the judicial reform and its initiators and supporters. Although Donald Trump’s election as president is not directly relevant to this topic, it is perceived as an encouraging signal that has made Bulgarian anti-democratic populist propaganda more self-confident and arrogant. The tone and language of propaganda publications violate all

standards of professional journalism, turning into a “baseball bat” for ad-hominem attacks on domestic political and economic opponents. The strategy of vilification includes: regular use of the predicates “Sorosoid”, “grant-sponger”, “puppet”, etc.; destruction of the opponents’ professional reputation; suggestions about their legal status (“the defendants”, “the accused”), etc. As regards reformist policies such as the judicial reform, propaganda publications once again omit analysis and arguments, proceeding directly to discredit their initiators and supporters.

The development of the topic of “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master” was marked exclusively by Donald Trump’s election as US president. As a result of this key event, the image of the US in Bulgarian propaganda publications has split into two: the “bad” US of the previous American administrations (Clinton, Bush, Obama), of the American political and business establishment, on the one side; and the “good” US of Trump and the American people, on the other. In the first year of Trump’s presidency, the State Department and the Pentagon continued to be regarded as successors of America’s previous foreign policy. NATO and the Pentagon are the two mutually replaceable names symbolizing the aggression and colonialism of the West. The main propaganda messages on this topic are the following: Trump’s election as president has given rise to expectations of an impending total defeat of the neoliberal, Sorosoid, globalist elites and a radical turn in US foreign policy towards closer ties with Russia; Trump’s statement that “NATO is obsolete” has become a leitmotif of Bulgarian propaganda publications, which are zealously spreading the opinion that NATO is a fragment from the past, an organization without a future; the image of the US as global hegemon reappears whenever US foreign policy directly affects Russia’s interests – as, for instance, the US military intervention in Syria, or the application of the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) to Russian propaganda media.

There is a clear surge in the number of publications on the topics of “Russia’s Increased Political and Spiritual Might” and “The Power of Russian Weapons”. That is because the focus of propaganda shifted from denunciation of Russia’s enemies to direct praise of Russia. Another reason for the change of tone in Bulgaria is the change of tone of the Kremlin’s official spokespersons and media in their effort to “normalize” the annexation of Crimea and to end sanctions by using more peaceful language. Objective grounds for this strategic move are Russia’s return to the international scene through its decisive intervention in the war in Syria, the advance of the Russian arms industry and the expansion of international markets for Russian weapons. In addition, in dealing with these topics, propaganda takes maximum advantage of the Bulgarians’ traditionally warm feelings for and stereotypes about Russia. The main propaganda messages in 2017 were

the following: it is Russia's, not the West's, military intervention that is decisive for ending the war in Syria; unlike NATO and the US, which are aggressors, Russia is a peacemaker and guarantor of justice in Syria; Russian weapons are winning ever larger international markets and are about to enter also into traditional markets for US weapons (Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia); Russia's political and spiritual might is proven by Russia's extraordinary popularity among Bulgarian citizens, as evidenced by NGOs such as the National Movement of Russophiles and the Friends of Russia Association, the annual national conventions of Russophiles at the Koprinka Dam, the celebrations of 3 March, Bulgaria's National Day (the day of Liberation from Ottoman rule following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878), etc.; the Europe-wide division between elites and "the people", where Russophobia is characteristic of the liberal elites (in the Bulgarian case, the political and intellectual elites formed and paid by the West), while the nations and ordinary people in Europe are Russophile-minded.

In 2017 the number of propaganda publications on the topic of "Russia's Enemies" decreased as compared to 2016, the reason for that being not only the shift of focus onto praising Russia but also the change in Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda's attitude towards the US following Donald Trump's election as president. Russia's unquestionable arch-enemy is NATO. The attitude towards the US has become ambiguous: on the one hand, the US is a historical enemy and continues to be perceived as such; on the other hand, Donald Trump's positive image is being superimposed on this negative historical image. The US as enemy is associated with the recent past, with the figures of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, while Donald Trump is seen as a harbinger of a new era: the US will give up its global hegemony and its relations with Russia will change radically. The EU is represented to a much lesser extent as a threat to Russia. Of course, the EU is an enemy insofar as it is still a vassal of the US and is conducting a policy of sanctions against Russia under US pressure. The EU is also accused of Russophobia, but its Russophobia is regarded as an echo of the American one. Besides this, the EU is not viewed as a homogeneous whole; the European countries are differentiated according to their attitudes towards Russia. The attitude of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda towards Angela Merkel and Theresa May is the most negative. Russophobia/Russophilia are interpreted in an interesting way. Russophobia is defined as a disease that is wholly destructive at the national and international levels. Russophilia is identified with the sensible policy each European country ought to follow in order to attain its national interests. This sensible and nationally responsible policy is presumed to be in accord with the priorities and goals of Russian foreign policy.

The tangible decrease in publications on the topic of “Crimea and Ukraine” as well as the slight increase in those on the topic of “The Sanctions against Russia” can be explained with a change in propaganda strategy. The Russian thesis that Crimea is “intrinsically Russian” has already established itself in the Bulgarian public sphere, therefore its constant repetition would only aggravate the division in Bulgarian society. On the other hand, opposition against the sanctions on Russia could win wider public support – even among people who do not share the Russian thesis about Crimea but share the thesis about the negative economic consequences of the sanctions against Russia. The main propaganda messages in 2017 on the topics of “Crimea and Ukraine” and “The Sanctions against Russia” were the following: ever more Western politicians, experts and intellectuals are beginning to share the thesis that Crimea is Russian and that what happened in Ukraine was a coup d’état conducted with active support from the West; the sanctions were introduced by the neoliberal American and European elites, but their consequences are suffered by the European peoples; among the Western politicians who are against the sanctions on Russia are Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, that is, the politicians who express their people’s will and wishes; the sanctions are not only unfair to Russia, but above all disadvantageous for the European countries; Bulgaria’s position cannot be anything other than insistence on lifting the sanctions because Bulgaria has deep historical, spiritual and genotypic ties with Russia.

In 2017 Bulgarian anti-democratic populist propaganda began to change its topography. In the 2013–2016 period it used a map at whose poles were irreconcilable enemies: NATO and the US were at one pole, Russia at the other, while the EU, a vassal of the US, was somewhere in the middle but might possibly reorient itself towards Russia. In 2017, however, propaganda mapped onto this horizontal topography a vertical topography based on the division between elites and peoples. Vertical polarization, until then a background to the horizontal polarization between the West and Russia, has now become dominant: the interests of the arrogant and predatory cosmopolitan elites, called “globalists”, “Sorosoids”, “neoliberals”, are opposed to the interests of the national communities and ordinary people. This opposition permeates all countries – starting from the US, running across the EU countries and reaching Bulgaria. In this opposition Russia is on the side of the European peoples in their fight against the globalists. In the vocabulary of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda, serving your country’s interests means being a friend of Russia. The two things are inseparable and presuppose each other.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted with the SENSIKA automated system. It applied the methodology, developed and used in the study on the 2013–2016 period, for collecting and processing data from SENSIKA’s large database. In 2017 SENSIKA checked in real time and archived the content of more than 3,500 Bulgarian-language websites (online media, blogs, aggregators, forums, social media). The system stores the archived material, enabling users to find information even it was deleted from the internet. All articles and publications are recorded with the time, date, source, and a link to the original publication.

The frequency measurement and content analysis of propaganda publications in Bulgarian media in 2017 were conducted by the same data collection method applied for the 2013–2016 period and described in the Report on *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. Part One*. The study did not include discussion forums and aggregators in order to avoid the effect of erroneous identification of articles and/or accumulation of results due to forum comments or automated content recycling. Social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) were also not included in the study.

The 2017 study borrowed the four main topics (talking points) of Bulgarian populist propaganda from the study on the 2013–2016 period (“The Decline of Europe”, “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites”, “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master”, “The Rise of Russia”) and used the same semantic clusters defining propaganda language on each of the four topics (see Report on Part One at http://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/REPORT_PART1_EN.pdf).² The searches on each topic covered the whole year (from 1 January to 31 December 2017) and used the same keywords and phrases as those for 2013–2016. The quantitative unit of search data is again article/blog post (containing one or more keywords). It must be noted that the results for 2017, received through SENSIKA, include a number of newly established sources and exclude websites that were shut down in the meantime (in 2017 SENSIKA

² As a result, some innovations in the propaganda vocabulary were omitted – for example, the new special label “Da(y) Balgariya” or “DAY Balgariya” (literally meaning “Give, Bulgaria”), a play on the name of the reformist party Da, Balgariya! (Yes, Bulgaria!) suggesting that it wants to take/steal all it can from Bulgaria – functioning from the beginning of 2017, and the general negative (homophobic) label “genders” (*dzhendari*) introduced at the very end of 2017 in the virulent campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. In 2018 “genders” began to be widely used and was included in our study. In 2017, however, the innovations in the propaganda vocabulary were insignificant and that is why we kept the same semantic clusters as those from the previous period in order to guarantee comparability of the results.

archived on average approximately 500 websites and blogs more than in 2016 – this number is given as an average because the system includes and excludes sources in real time, from the moment of their identification or shutdown). Hence, the sources for 2017 are not exactly the same as those for the 2013–2016 period.

SENSIKA identifies all articles in its archive which contain one or more of the keywords specified in the search query and conducts algorithmic frequency measurements (chronological, such as those used in this study, but also by source, etc.). In addition, the system provides direct access to the content of each identified article. As in the frequency measurement of data for the previous period (Chapter III in Report on Part One), in this one too a selection of media was not made – the frequency measurement covered all sources archived in 2017.

In the content analysis, a selection of articles was made (as it was practically impossible to analyze the content of all close to 38,000 articles identified by SENSIKA for 2017). The following criteria were used in the selection:

1. For content analysis of articles on each topic, three or four peak days were selected from SENSIKA's chronological diagrams, on which there was a spike in the number of articles – that is, the frequency of use of the specified keywords and phrases on the respective day peaked and was usually several times higher than the average for the period.
2. The review of the content of articles on the respective day (by title, snippet and first lines, which SENSIKA displays automatically) allowed identifying the most-reprinted articles as well as the public events and issues that aroused propaganda activity. The articles for content analysis were selected precisely by these two criteria: most-reprinted articles covering events that generated propaganda activity on the respective day. An additional criterion in the selection was the identification of articles containing more than one keyword from the relevant semantic cluster, that is, articles that can be identified more categorically as propaganda messages.

To sum up, we can define the following main activities in our study on *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria* in 2017:

- ✓ Use of the SENSIKA system to collect and process a large database;
- ✓ Application of the semantic clusters, identified for the 2013–2016 period, in the review of publications on each of the four main topics under study;
- ✓ Comparison of the quantitative results for 2017, obtained through SENSIKA, with those for the previous four years, and their presentation in tables and charts;
- ✓ Selection of the most widely disseminated, reprinted twice or more, media publications with propaganda content;
- ✓ Content analysis of the selected publications;
- ✓ Identification of the main aspects and trends in the development of each of the four main topics under study.

I. AGGREGATE ANALYSIS OF DATA AND TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOUR MAIN TOPICS UNDER STUDY

In 2017 there was a relatively low year-on-year increase in propaganda publications in Bulgarian media. Whereas in 2016 their total number was 35,292, in 2017 it grew to 37,636, or by 6.6%. The increase in the total number of propaganda publications was accompanied by a change in the dynamic of development of the different thematic fields of propaganda. Compared to the previous year, the number of propaganda publications on the topic of “The Decline of Europe” decreased sharply (-52%), while, conversely, that of publications on the topic of “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites” increased sharply (+46.5%). There was a certain increase in publications on the topic of “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master” (+17.7%). The topic of “The Rise of Russia” also underwent development depending on the evolution of its sub-topics. The number of publications on the sub-topics of “Russia’s Increased Political and Spiritual Might” and “The Power of Russian Weapons” grew significantly (by +46% and +44%, respectively). Conversely, that of publications on the sub-topics of “Crimea and Ukraine” and “Russia’s Enemies” fell (by -45% and -20%, respectively). Publications on the sub-topic of “The Sanctions against Russia” were comparable in number to 2016, and even increased slightly (+5%).

The most obvious trends in the evolution of propaganda publications in 2017 are the following: 1) Geopolitical propaganda is giving way to propaganda for “domestic use” – Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda is aimed mostly against domestic political and economic opponents, its preferred targets being the reformist political parties and reformist policies such as the judicial reform; 2) The attacks against the EU decreased sharply – obviously because of the continuing high popularity of the EU among Bulgarian citizens as well as because of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU; 3) The US and NATO continue to be main targets of Bulgarian anti-democratic populist propaganda, where the tendency after Donald Trump’s election as president is towards turning NATO into the privileged enemy (while keeping open the option of portraying Trump as a “friend”); 4) As regards Russia, there is a radical change in propaganda priorities in favour of direct positive propaganda praising Russia’s political and spiritual might and Russian weapons, rather than using defensive rhetoric to malign Russia’s enemies or justify the annexation of Crimea. The number of publications on the sanctions against

Russia remained roughly the same as in 2016, but their focus shifted onto the negative consequences for all of Europe.

In 2017 Bulgarian anti-democratic populist propaganda began to change its topography. In the 2013–2016 period it used a map at whose poles were irreconcilable enemies: NATO and the US were at one pole, Russia at the other, while the EU, a vassal of the US, was somewhere in the middle but might possibly reorient itself towards Russia. In 2017, however, propaganda mapped onto this horizontal topography a vertical topography based on the division between elites and peoples: the interests of the arrogant and predatory cosmopolitan elites, called “globalists”, “Sorosoids”, “neoliberals”, are opposed to the interests of the national communities and ordinary people. This opposition permeates all countries – starting from the US, running across the EU countries and reaching Bulgaria. In this opposition Russia is on the side of the European peoples in their fight against the globalists. In the vocabulary of Bulgarian anti-democratic populist propaganda, serving your country’s interests means being a friend of Russia. The two things are inseparable and presuppose each other.

Comparative Table. Number of matches in the search results on each topic by year, 2013–2017

	The Power of Russian Weapons	The Sanctions against Russia	Russia’s Enemies	Russia’s Increased Political and Spiritual Might	Crimea and Ukraine	The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master	The Decline of Europe	Bulgaria’s Venal Elites
2013	22	2	54	44	56	69	109	494
2014	219	1141	7387	635	3983	999	359	3114
2015	929	2666	7814	2448	5814	2683	1141	8094
2016	745	4005	7511	1326	6109	2361	1841	11394
2017	1076	4217	6049	1943	3983	2778	887	16703

These results can also be presented as a chart showing the trends over time:

Comparative Chart. Number of matches in the search results on each topic by year, 2013-2017



I.1. THE DECLINE OF EUROPE

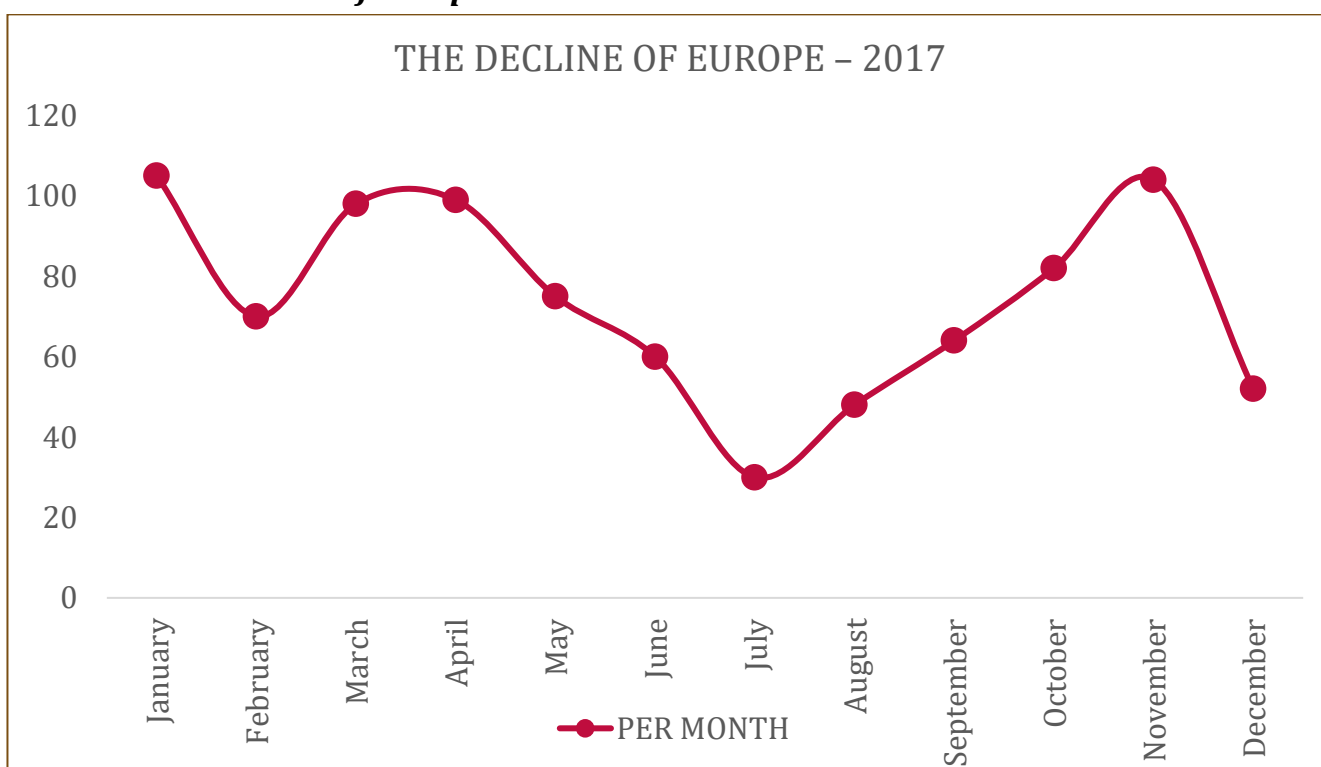
The number of propaganda publications on the topic of “The Decline of Europe” decreased sharply in 2017. SENSIKA found a total of 887 such publications in 2017 as compared to 1,841 in 2016, a decrease of approximately 52%. This decrease in Eurosceptic rhetoric can be explained by several main reasons: 1) All sociological surveys show that, far from declining, the now traditional positive attitudes towards the European Union in Bulgarian society have been growing in recent years.³ Instead of changing the general geopolitical choice of the Bulgarians, Eurosceptic rhetoric has given rise to additional resistance. The political rhetoric dominated by the idea that “democracy has taken away a lot from us” clearly contributed to the loss of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in the March 2017 parliamentary elections. Eurosceptic discourse has turned out to be ineffective in Bulgaria and this is one of the explanations for the decrease in its use. 2) Trump’s election as president and his national-populist and isolationist policy, as a result of which the US has clashed with the EU’s political direction on various fronts, including climate change, trade, the Iran nuclear deal, and Syria, has rendered meaningless the main talking point of Bulgarian anti-European propaganda, namely that “Brussels is a puppet of the US”. This talking point has been partly transformed: Trump is the sovereign leader, while the EU is a “puppet of the global financial elites”. Even so, the EU’s autonomy after Trump’s election and the Brexit referendum is far more visible. 3) The Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU – part of the propaganda media started receiving direct state funding in the second half of 2017 for the promotion of the Bulgarian Presidency. The Bulgarian EU Council Presidency itself was a sufficiently powerful instrument for promoting positive messages about the EU – a direct battle against the EU while Bulgaria was presiding over its Council seemed doomed. 4) In 2017 the European institutions and leaders “spared” Bulgaria, including because of its Presidency of the EU Council, from criticism – about the rule of law, corruption – therefore there was no need to counterattack them!

³ See Boryana Dimitrova, “Influence of Anti-Democratic Propaganda on Bulgarian Public Opinion: Between the Psychological Pressure and the Political Choices”, *Critique & Humanism*, vol. 49, no. 1/2018, pp. 249-270.

Table 1. "The Decline of Europe - 2017", number of publications per month

MONTH	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
PER MONTH	105	70	98	99	75	60	30	48	64	82	104	52
TOTAL	887											

Chart 1. "The Decline of Europe - 2017"



Here are several examples of the most-reprinted publications on this topic on peak days in 2017.

In January the publications on this topic were distributed comparatively evenly across the month. Donald Trump’s inauguration as US president attracted particular attention and was associated with the weakening and possible collapse of the EU. (“Donald Trump reportedly wants EU to collapse after Brexit” – *Petel, Bulfax, Ber bim, Stara Bulgaria*; “Well done to Trump for slapping Merkel in the face” – *Retro*; “Obama, off

with you to the junk closet!!!” – *A-specto, Pan, Bultimes, Pogled.info*.) The spike in publications in March followed a statement by Jean-Claude Juncker in which he made a direct connection between possible instability of the EU and the danger of destabilization of the Western Balkans; in this instance, too, propaganda played up the possibility of a future collapse of the EU (*Pogled.info* commented on Juncker’s position under the title “Juncker threatens with war in Western Balkans if EU collapses”). The spike in April was due above all to the Report on *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria*, published on 11 April. On 9 May the article “Assoc. Prof. Darina Grigorova: 9 May is part of the Russians’ hearts, of their eternal present” appeared in seven media: *Pogled.info, Pan, Bultimes, BGvestnik, BIG5, Svobodno slovo, Rusofili*. The article was published originally on 8 May in *A-specto* under the title “Tanya Dzhoeva interviews historian, Assoc. Prof. Darina Grigorova, about Victory Day, ‘orchestrated Russophobia’, politicians with memory about the nation, and cross-eyed bureaucrats”. The focus of this article is on the civilizational decline of the EU. The peak day in December was 10 December, following Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s reaction to the EU’s position on Donald Trump’s decision to move the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Defending Trump’s decision, Netanyahu criticized the EU’s position as being untenable and unjustified, and this implicitly promoted the idea about the EU’s overall political weakness.

In 2017 the topic of “The Decline of Europe” was characterized not only by a sharp decrease in the number of publications as compared to 2016, but also by moderation in tone. This was probably largely due to the “new spirit of the times” related to Donald Trump’s election as US president, the coming elections in France, Germany and Russia, and the Brexit negotiations. There were no explicitly named figures of the “villain”, although the main propaganda messages remained the same as in 2016:

- Differentiation of Europe from the EU and portrayal of the US as the global hegemon that is imposing its will on the Washington-dependent EU by the political manipulations of the “liberals”, and on the rest of the world by aggression and military power;
- The EU is declared to be anti-Christian in its ideology and legislation, and to be responsible for the processes of Islamization in Europe which are taking place, of course, with active support from the US;
- The EU is dominated by a liberal elite that has emasculated Europe, reducing it solely to a market and limiting the Europeans’ worldview solely to consumerism;

- The EU is incapable of coping with the real threat to Europe – the refugee and terrorist wave from the Middle East stirred up by NATO;
- Europe can save itself from the present crisis by preserving its age-old Christian values and the national sovereignty of its countries, while seeking Russia’s support and permanently strengthening its ties with Russia.

I.2. BULGARIA'S VENAL ELITES

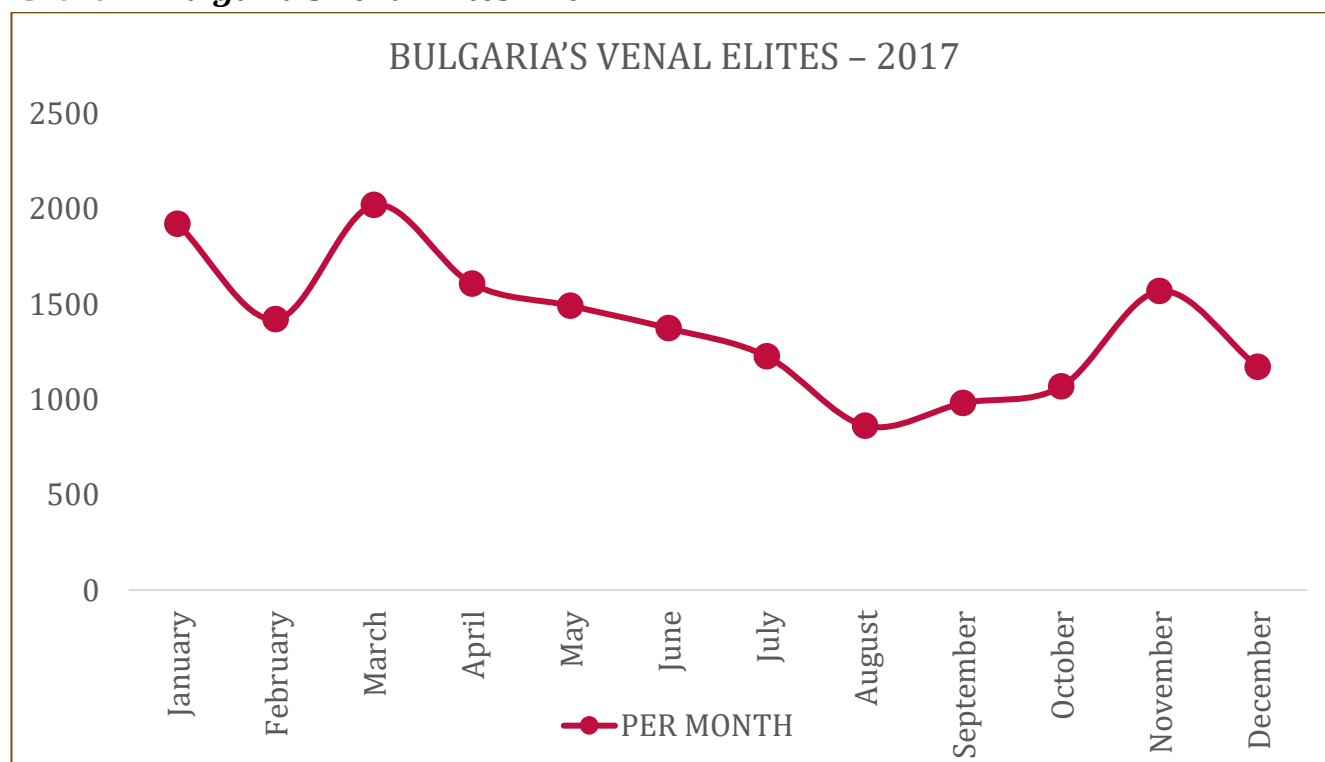
In 2017 the topic of “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites” was among the most-widely represented in Bulgarian propaganda media. SENSIKA found a total of 16,703 publications on this topic as compared to 11,394 in 2016, an increase of approximately 46%. What could this sharp increase be due to?

We noted already in our first Report that although anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria takes its talking points from Russian media, it most often uses them for its own, local tactical purposes. It serves for state capture by the local oligarchs who use the media they own or finance to attack as “foreign agents” and “puppets” everyone who is inconvenient for them: pro-liberal media, human-rights activists, pro-European politicians, etc. This tendency continued and visibly intensified in 2017. Propaganda attacked reformist political parties, such as Yes, Bulgaria!, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB), The Greens and Democratic Bulgaria as well as politicians connected to those parties, such as Hristo Ivanov, Radan Kanev, Rosen Plevneliev, Ivan Kostov, Traycho Traykov and Vladimir Penev. It also attacked the judicial reform and its initiators Hristo Ivanov and Lozan Panov as well as supporters of the judicial reform, such as Kaloyan Topalov, Nadezhda Yordanova and Lyubomir Avdzhiski. Among businesspersons, the main target of anti-democratic propaganda was Ivo Prokopiev, but also Ognyan Donev, Filip Harmandzhiev, etc. Among media, its targets were *Dnevnik* and *Capital*. As for the NGO community, propaganda focused on the Red House Centre for Culture and Debate, the Institute for Market Economy, the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria, the Centre for Liberal Strategies as well as NGO activists, such as Stefan Popov, Ruzha Smilova, Dessislava Gavrilova, Tsvetelina Petkova, Ivet Dobromirova, Emil Dzhasim and Maria Kavlakova. In 2017 Bulgarian anti-democratic populist propaganda packaged all these spheres and names in a unified network of reformers, called “Sorosoids” and “grant-spongers” in propaganda jargon; a network that is obviously seen as a rival for political and economic power. A special place in propaganda publications was also occupied by the America for Bulgaria Foundation, which is directly or indirectly associated with the above-mentioned parties, organizations and persons and whose image is wholly negative – unlike the positive image of Donald Trump that is systematically promoted in propaganda publications.

Table 2. “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites – 2017”, number of publications per month

MONTH	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
PER MONTH	1920	1420	2019	1606	1491	1373	1225	862	981	1068	1568	1170
TOTAL	16703											

Chart 2. “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites – 2017”



Here are several examples of the most-reprinted publications on this topic on peak days in 2017.

The most characteristic titles on the topic of “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites” in January were about the mistakes of President Rosen Plevneliev, the “abuses” of Hristo Ivanov, and the actions of Ivo Prokopiev, cast as one of the arch-villains in 2017, and the so-called Lamb Heads circle. The following quotes are telling of the positions taken by propaganda

publications on this topic in January: “The grant-sponger bunch DAY Balgariya⁴”; “The infernal intention of Ivanov and his mentor Ivan Kostov is to do everything possible to occupy all judicial bodies they haven’t captured yet”; “Ivo Prokopiev – Papa Carlo⁵ of the Bulgarian transition”; “DAY Balgariya is playing the role of a racketeering insurance company”; “The role of a crutch of DAY Balgariya is assigned to the beer alcoholic Radan Kanev. The political midget that was rejected by the new project is now lawyer of the laughingstock Nikolay Nenchev”; “In addition to being one for Radan Kanev, the yellow media have turned into a mouthpiece for Hristo Ivanov and are trying in every possible way to suggest that his empty talk about corruption is authoritative” (*Pan*).

The month with the highest number of publications on the topic of “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites” in 2017 was March, with several top news stories. One of the most widely reprinted was about the US federal budget, passed after Donald Trump took office, which provides for cuts to foreign aid. The conclusion shared by *Trud*, *Blitz* and other media is that the “America for Bulgaria [Foundation] and other NGOs will be compelled to scale down their activities in this country”. The titles of some publications on this topic show that this fake news story was accepted with glee: “Trump stops funds for America for Bulgaria Foundation?” (*Pan*); “Mass panic and fear in central Sofia: Trump cuts off funding for America for Bulgaria” (*Balgarski Zhurnal*).

Another widely reprinted news story in March – by *Blitz*, *Fakti BG*, *Stara Bulgaria*, *Trud*, *Skandal BG*, *PIK* and *ABC News BG* – is titled “Green un-Bulgarians [*bezrodnitsi*] from Da(y) Balgariya slur and defame Bulgaria in made-to-order film on [TV] channel Arte”. The message is more than clear: “the Greens” have made a film ordered and funded from abroad, with which they are smearing the name of their fatherland before the world: “Speaking of the Fatherland, recent years have not seen a more purposeful and consistent smearing of Bulgaria in our country than in the materials, texts, public positions and opinions of the hundred or so ecologists who are pestering Europe and our state” (*Blitz*).

Another widely covered news story in March was the assault in Sofia on historian and Yes, Bulgaria candidate MP Emil Dzhasim. This was the top news story on 23 March, and the most-reprinted titles were the following: “Un-Bulgarian Emil Dzhasim, who smeared [Bulgarian national hero Vasil] Levski, whimpers on Facebook that someone had beaten him up”; “Sorosoid Emil Dzhasim, who made fun of Levski, beaten up”; “Man from [Levski’s home town] Karlovo who mocked Deacon Levski cries on Facebook that he had

⁴ See footnote 2 above.

⁵ The counterpart of Geppetto (Pinocchio’s father) in Alexey Tolstoy’s book *The Golden Key, or the Adventures of Buratino*, which is based on the novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi.

been beaten up". The most-often used epithets about the historian and Yes, Bulgaria candidate MP in March – in media like *Trud*, *Kanal 3*, *Blitz*, *Forum Club Politika*, *Narodna media Spodeli*, *Vlastta*, *Bultimes*, *Velika Bulgaria*, *Top actualno*, *Razkritia*, etc. – are "Sorosoid", "Day Balgariya candidate", "feeder at the America for Bulgaria Foundation's trough", "the Arab Bulgarian", "the Arab", "scandalous historian", "the un-Bulgarian [*bezrodnik*]", "grantee", "denigrator", etc.

In May most publications were devoted to the protests demanding a judicial reform that were conducted under the slogan "We won't keep silent" and led by Hristo Ivanov. They were covered under the following titles: "Successive fiasco of oligarchic protest against [Prosecutor General Sotir] Tsatsarov" (*Blitz*); "The whole of Sofia curses ridiculous protest of paid grant-spongers against Tsatsarov! They blocked traffic and spoiled school-leavers' holiday"; "Fiasco of 'march' for Euro-justice in Varna: [Alexei Petrov, aka] the Tractor's ex-vice-presidential candidate Dushana Petrova, usual protesters and 1 judge" (*Afera.bg*); "Grant-spongers' protest against Tsatsarov stirs up Palace of Justice, too – America for Bulgaria-paid protesters swell [in number]" (*Vchas*). One of the publications describes the protest as follows: "Fewer than 200 puppets of the failed protester-minister Hristo Ivanov gathered on the yellow paving stones [in the centre of Sofia] to fulfil the order against Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov. The fans of same-sex marriage and joints carried placards in defence of the puppet on strings Lozan Panov" (*Blitz*).

In November the spike in publications came from a news story that was again used to discredit certain opponents – namely, the scandal over the paving stones that were removed during the road works on Dondukov Boulevard in Sofia in the autumn of 2017. Although Prime Minister Boyko Borisov linked the incident to the BSP, the titles followed a pre-given talking point: "See how malefactors from the lab projects of [Ivan] Kostov and the Lamb Heads [circle] are deliberately extracting paving stones from Dondukov Blvd in the dead of night" (*Blitz*); "Prime minister blasts degraded activists around Kostov and Lamb Heads who extracted paving stones from Dondukov!" (*Blitz*).

In 2017 the propaganda publications on the topic of "Bulgaria's Venal Elites" attacked mostly persons and political parties, and political and civic initiatives associated with them, that can be defined as reformist:

- The publications on this topic attacked both business rivals and political opponents, and sought to indiscriminately discredit them *ad hominem*. The discrediting strategy included three levels: 1) Use of predicates such as "Sorosoid",

“grant-sponger”, “protester” and “un-Bulgarian” (*bezrodnik*) in order to suggest that the person in question is acting against the nation’s interests and pursuing their own interests with foreign funding and/or is a conduit of foreign interests; 2) Direct denigration of the opponent’s personal and professional qualities: for example, Hristo Ivanov was called, without any arguments whatsoever, “the failed protester-minister”, “the laziest minister”, “puppet on strings”, Radan Kanev was called “the beer alcoholic”, and Lozan Panov “the oligarchy’s puppet”; 3) Suggestions about the opponents’ legal status – Ivo Prokopiev and Ognyan Donev were regularly called “defendants” and “accused” – thereby obviously implying that they have committed crimes.

- The publications on this topic also directly aimed to discredit particular policies – for example, the judicial reform initiated by Hristo Ivanov – without offering any analysis and arguments in this case, too. The discrediting of the judicial reform was done by discrediting the persons fighting for it: above all, Hristo Ivanov and Lozan Panov.

I.3. THE US/NATO AS GLOBAL HEGEMON/PUPPET-MASTER

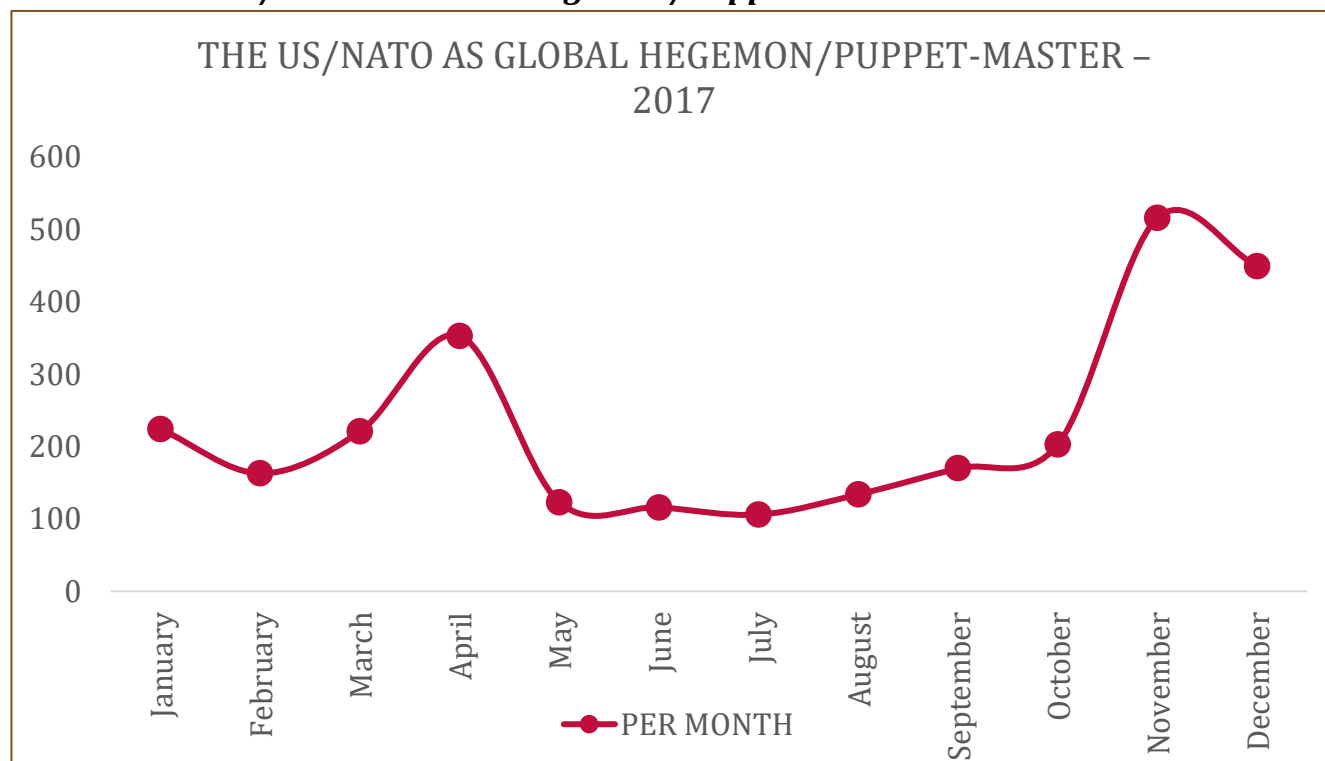
In 2017 the number of propaganda publications on the topic of “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master” increased year-on-year. SENSIKA found 2,778 such publications in 2017 as compared to 2,361 in 2016, an increase of 17.5%. The US and NATO continued to be portrayed inseparably as the global hegemon/puppet-master. Since Donald Trump’s election as president, the image of the US in Bulgarian propaganda publications has split into two: the “bad” US of the previous American administrations (Clinton, Bush, Obama), of the American political and business establishment, on the one side; and the “good” US of Trump and the American people, on the other. In the first year of Trump’s presidency, however, the State Department and the Pentagon continued to be regarded as successors of America’s previous foreign policy. NATO and the Pentagon are the two mutually replaceable names symbolizing the aggression and colonialism of the West.

The main topics in 2017 were: the US intervention in the war in Syria; the activation of an old law (FARA) by the US and the adoption of a new one by Russia, both designating foreign media outlets as “foreign agents”; the US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the planned relocation of the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. A significant number of propaganda publications, identified as such by SENSIKA, were reactions to the HSSF – Sofia’s Report on *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria*. These reactions are analyzed in the article “Analysis of the Media Reactions to the ‘Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria’ Report” (in Bulgarian) by Valentin Valkanov, published in *Critique & Humanism*, vol. 47, no. 1/2017.

Table 3. "The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master - 2017", number of publications per month

MONTH	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
PER MONTH	224	163	221	353	123	116	106	134	170	203	516	449
TOTAL	2778											

Chart 3. "The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master - 2017"



Here are several examples of the most-reprinted publications on this topic on peak days in 2017.

The first spike in publications on the topic of "The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master" was in April and was directly connected to the US participation in the war in Syria. The publications on this issue agreed with the official Russian position, condemning the US intervention as an act of aggression and incitement

of terrorism, while declaring Russian President Vladimir Putin as the sole guarantor of the successful management and resolution of the Syrian crisis (“American aggression in Syria encourages terrorism”; “The American aggression in Syria: only Putin’s self-control saved the world from nuclear war” – *Pogled.info*).

The spike in publications in November and the beginning of December was due to the tension between the US and Russia over laws in the two countries concerning foreign media outlets. The US activated a 1938 law (the Foreign Agents Registration Act, FARA) and registered Russian state-funded media outlet RT (former Russia Today) as a “foreign agent”; “in response to this”, the Russian Duma amended the Foreign Agents Act, extending it to cover not only foreign-funded non-governmental organizations but also media outlets. The publications on this issue are mostly informative, and only some of them point out the “strongly exaggerated” influence of Russian media propaganda in cases such as the US presidential elections, the crisis in Catalonia and Brexit.

The spikes in December followed President Donald Trump’s statement that the US was recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. This statement was not interpreted univocally for, in principle, the US is interpreted ambiguously in propaganda publications: the US of Trump is contrasted with the US of the political establishment and corporations. That is why part of the publications were wholly positive, seeing Trump’s gesture as a sign of correctly oriented will and resoluteness, which his predecessors in the White House had allegedly lacked. Another part of the publications saw President Trump’s statement as a manoeuvre through which he wants to exert pressure on his European allies to the advantage of US interests, or as a result of an unclear deal involving Wall Street, Israel and politicians from the Republican Party.

Generally, in 2017 the publications on the topic of “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master” stuck to the same talking points as in the previous years and continued to represent the US as a real threat to Russia as well as one of the main reasons why Russia has turned to the East in search of new partners and allies. The US continued to be referred to as “global hegemon”, but the uses of this predicate were much more moderate than in the previous years. Most of the publications were comparatively correct reports of news stories published by international news agencies. Still, at least three important points must be noted on this topic:

- Since Donald Trump’s election as president, the media image of the US has changed: it is expected that the US would soon break free from the grip of the

Sorosoid elites, the financial circles and corporations, which would lead to redefinition of its relations with Russia.

- Donald Trump's words that "NATO is obsolete" have become a battle cry for Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda, which has insistently begun to suggest that NATO is a fragment from the past, an organization without a future. Parallel with that, Russia's military might is becoming ever more obvious and the Russian military intervention in Syria is pointed out as "the only solution" to the military conflict.
- The image of the US as global hegemon and aggressor reappears whenever US policy directly affects Russia's positions and interests, as in the case of the application of FARA or the US military intervention in Syria.

I.4. THE RISE OF RUSSIA

I.4.1. “RUSSIA’S INCREASED POLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL MIGHT” AND “THE POWER OF RUSSIAN WEAPONS”

In 2017 there were 1,943 publications on the topic of “Russia’s Increased Political and Spiritual Might” as compared to 1,326 in 2016, an increase of approximately 46%. Similarly, the number of publications on the related topic of “The Power of Russian Weapons” increased from 745 in 2016 to 1,076 in 2017, or by approximately 44%. This sharp increase in publications on the two topics is clearly due to the shift of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda’s focus from denunciation of Russia’s enemies to direct praise of Russia. Praising Russia’s increased political and spiritual might directly resonates with the Bulgarians’ traditionally warm feelings for and stereotypes about Russia. The praise of the power of Russian weapons draws on the advance of Russian military technology in recent years and readily uses Russian media clichés praising the latter. As for the topics of “The Annexation of Crimea” and “The Sanctions against Russia”, the militant vocabulary has been clearly toned down, insofar as the annexation of Crimea is already a fact and does not need to be overemphasized. In general, Russian foreign policy rhetoric has become much more moderate after the West’s weak reaction to the events in Ukraine. The militant rhetoric of Russian foreign policy is reactivated only in particular cases, such as the deployment of US military units in Poland or the delivery of US military hardware to Ukraine. On the topic of sanctions, the focus of Bulgarian propaganda has shifted towards a pragmatic approach: unquestionably, the sanctions are unfair to Russia, yet it is not less important that they are hurting not only Russia but also Europe.

In the selected publications Russia’s political and spiritual might is associated mainly with the country’s return to the international scene through its decisive intervention in the war in Syria and the expansion of international markets for Russian weapons which attests to their high quality: that is, Russia’s political and spiritual might is manifested in its military might. Russia’s political and military might, however, is radically different from that of the West and of the US, in particular. Unlike them, Russia is not an aggressor but a peacemaker and guarantor of justice. Russia’s might is also evident from the country’s great popularity and appeal among the European peoples, more specifically in Bulgaria but also in other countries, which introduces the key distinction between elites and peoples: although the elites are pro-Atlantic and pro-

European, the peoples are not. In this connection, it is stressed that the Bulgarian people continues to be deeply and lastingly attached to Russia.

Table 4. "Russia's Increased Political and Spiritual Might - 2017", publications per month

MONTH	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
PER MONTH	241	210	279	171	118	125	108	147	220	63	112	149
TOTAL	1943											

Chart 4. "Russia's Increased Political and Spiritual Might - 2017"

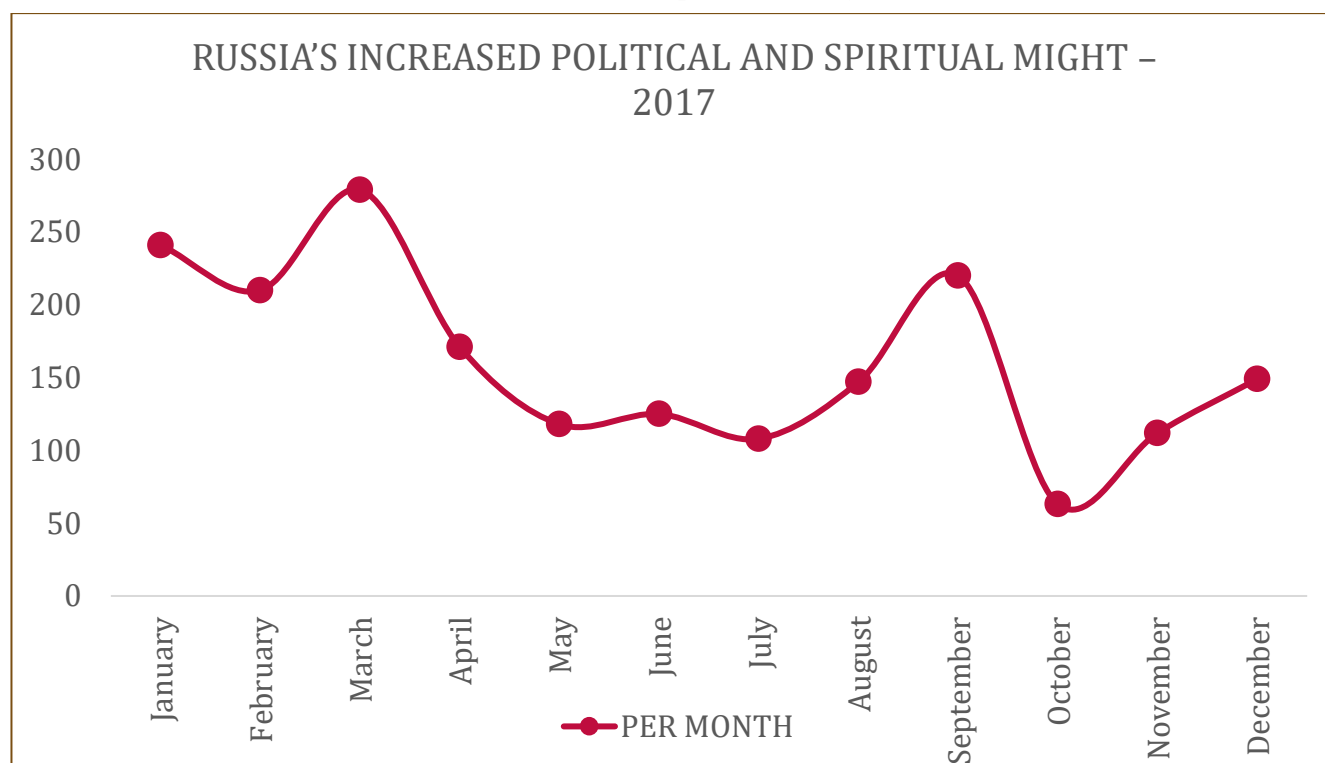


Table 5. “The Power of Russian Weapons – 2017”, publications per month

MONTH	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
PER MONTH	87	53	156	69	71	38	115	93	83	103	79	129
TOTAL	1076											

Chart 5. “The Power of Russian Weapons – 2017”



Here are several examples of the most-reprinted publications on this topic on peak days in 2017.

The top news story in January on the topic of “Russia’s Increased Political and Spiritual Might” was the cooperation between the US president-elect and the Russian president. Trump’s respect and admiration for Putin are pointed out: “Trump’s unhidden admiration for Putin has given rise to great expectations of better relations between Moscow and Washington...” (source: *Klassa*). In another publication from January,

published in *Pogled.info* and based on a Russian translation of an American article from *The National Interest* (“Curt Weldon: U.S. Russia Relations: How Did We Get Here?”), the American author exposes the US attempts to impose their strategic superiority over Russia by interfering in Russia’s political life during Yeltsin’s presidency, as well as the rejection by several successive US administrations of Putin’s years-long well-intentioned attempts to establish friendly relations with the US. This US policy is defined as short-sighted and unsuccessful.

The spike at the end of February came from several publications, one of which reports the news: “Friends of Russia Public Council set up”. The publication summarizes the goals of the new organization: “The mission of Friends of Russia is to unite and popularize – through culture, science, sport and other activities – our common spirit and possibility for building friendship between the peoples of Bulgaria and Russia” (source: *Briagnews*).

The spike in March was, completely explicably, on 3 March, the most-reprinted top news story being “Today Bunardzhika was second Shipka”,⁶ where it is pointed out that on the Bunardzhika Hill Bulgarian and Russian flags were waved side by side and that “flowers were laid at the monument of the Russian liberators by the honorary consuls of Russia and Ukraine, local and central government officials, politicians as well as by dozens of grateful members of the public” (source: *DCnews*).

The next spike was in September, when the top news story – the annual national convention of Russophiles at the Koprinka Dam – was published under several main titles: “12 thousand participants expected at 14th National Convention of Friends of Russia at Koprinka Dam”; “Thousands of Russophiles gather at Koprinka Dam”; “Over 10,000 gather at National Convention of Friends of Russia in Bulgaria”. The publications specially note and quote the addresses of President Rumens Radev and Patriarch Neofit to the convention.

Another spike in September came from an article titled “*Foreign Affairs: Russia has won in Syrian war*” in which Russia is named as winner from the war in Syria: “Judging from everything, Putin will turn out to be the main winner in the Syrian war: he is reviving Russia’s might at relatively modest financial and human costs, returning his country as one of the key players in the Middle East” (source: *Blitz*).

⁶ Bunardzhika Hill in Plovdiv is home to a monument of the Soviet Army, known as Alyosha. Mount Shipka was the site of a crucial battle fought by Bulgarian volunteers and Russian troops against the Turks in the 1877–1887 Russo-Turkish War that led to Bulgaria’s liberation from Ottoman rule, and is now home to a monument of Bulgaria’s Liberation that is regarded as a national shrine.

On the topic of “The Power of Russian Weapons”, the leading article in January is titled “Kremlin agrees with Trump that NATO is obsolete” (source: *Glavo*).

The most-reprinted publication in March was an article titled “Is 3 March only a date” (source: *Trud*), in which the Peace Treaty of San Stefano (signed between Russia and the Ottoman Empire on 3 March 1878) is associated with Russia, while the Treaty of Berlin (formally the Treaty between Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire for the Settlement of Affairs in the East, signed on 13 July 1878) is associated with the West European will to restrict Bulgaria in its just aspirations and to humiliate Russia, as well as to rip the historical bond between the two countries. Another widely-reprinted article in March reported the news that Prof. Ivo Hristov was running for parliament on the BSP ticket and went on to quote his opinions that literally repeat the geopolitical talking points of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda: that “the talking points of the EU and NATO have crashed before our very eyes”, that in Europe and the Balkans “obviously the geometry is changing”. Also pointed out is his opinion that Bulgaria’s national interests within the framework of the EU should be redefined and that Bulgaria should move closer towards the Visegrad Four on the issues of refugees and security (source: *Epicenter*).

The leading article at the end of July, titled “To Washington’s horror: Baghdad sets sights on Moscow-Tehran-Damascus axis”, was reprinted 15 times. The article points out that Iraq had not only concluded a deal on the purchase of Russian tanks but was also obviously seeking to distance itself from Washington and to establish closer relations with Moscow.

The spike in October was also connected to the commercial successes of Russian weapons. The top news story is titled “Saudi Arabia buys \$2 billion worth of Russian weapons” (source: *Standart*). The other top news story in October was an article titled “Russia Shows TERRIFIC Weapon, More Powerful than a NUCLEAR BOMB! Here’s the truth about Russia’s INCREDIBLE MIGHT!” The article promotes “a unique tactical missile equipped with an ultra-high-frequency electromagnetic warhead” which, in addition to extraordinary purely combat properties, also demonstrates the different military philosophy of Russia and the West: “Russia concentrates on weapons that destroy only the opponent’s equipment, sparing manpower. Because that is how the consciousness of Russian people has been formed for centuries. For them, what is truly precious is human life. And it is precisely human life that must be safeguarded, even in the conditions of active combat operations” (source: *Skandalno*).

The last top news story at the end of the year was an article titled “US Congress demands Pentagon report on Russian influence in Western Balkans”, in which the successes of Russian foreign policy are again pointed out through the prism of the West: “Western Europe and the US are worried about Russia’s growing influence in the Balkans and Central Europe. Last month the influential Atlantic Council declared itself in favour of permanent military presence in the Balkans aimed at stabilizing Southeast Europe because of ‘Russia’s growing political pressure in the region’ ...” (source: *Glasove*).

In 2017 the topics of “Russia’s Political and Spiritual Might” and “The Power of Russian Weapons” elaborated on the following talking points:

- Russian weapons are winning ever wider world markets thanks to their high combat properties. Russia is set to attract as clients a number of countries – such as Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia – which have been traditionally, or at least in recent years, in the orbit of the US;
- In the last few years, especially after Russia’s intervention in the war in Syria, Russian foreign policy has been achieving unquestionable successes. But unlike the US and NATO, whose foreign policy is aggressive and colonizing, Russia plays the role of peacemaker, of guarantor of justice in the regions where it intervenes;
- Russia is inventing new, hitherto unseen, weapons with which it is obviously winning superiority over its rivals from NATO, but these weapons are not designed to destroy manpower, but only equipment and infrastructure. The Russian army and Russian military interventions are guided by the characteristic Russian spirituality and humaneness, in contrast to Western materialism and imperialism;
- Russia’s political and spiritual might can be measured by Russia’s great popularity and appeal in different countries across the world. For example, it is often pointed out that in Bulgaria the National Movement of Russophiles is the NGO with the largest number of members. New associations for friendship with Russia, such as Friends of Russia, are constantly being founded; the annual conventions of Russophiles at the Koprinka Dam as well as the conventions on the occasion of 3 March are turning into a demonstration of the strength and endurance of Bulgarian-Russian friendship. It is emphasized that this friendship has deep historical roots and is not subject to political conjunctures, that is, Bulgaria’s membership in the EU and NATO;

- The relations between Russia and the EU countries are ambiguous. The key dividing line in this regard is between the elites and “the people”. Bulgaria provides an eloquent example of this. In Bulgaria, Russophobia is characteristic of the political elites, of part of the intelligentsia and employees of NGOs which have been formed and paid by the West in the last three decades. Contrary to them, the majority of ordinary Bulgarians as well as a small part of the political class are Russophile-minded. To put it in a nutshell: the cosmopolitans and un-Bulgarians are Russophobes, the true patriots are Russophiles.

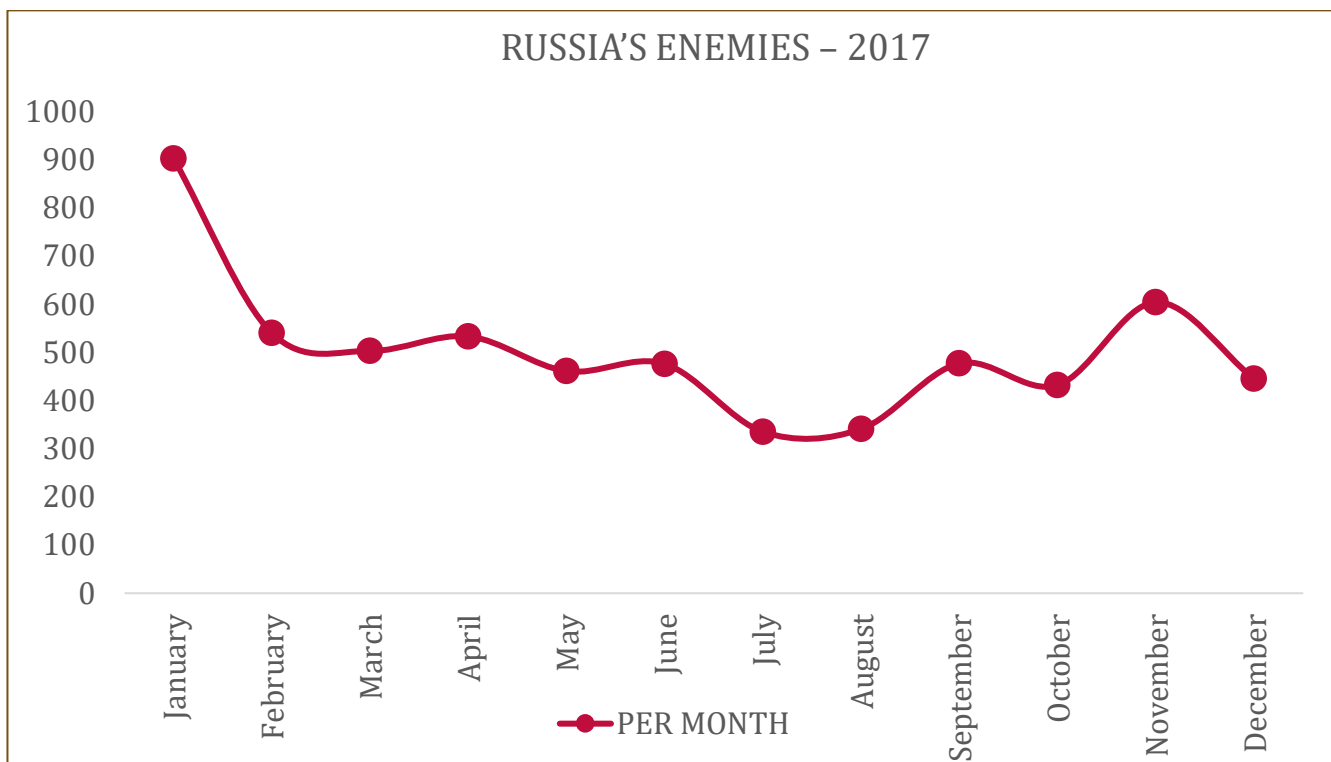
I.4.2. RUSSIA'S ENEMIES

In 2017 there were 6,049 propaganda publications on the topic of “Russia’s Enemies” as compared to 7,511 in 2016, a decrease of 20%. Russia’s enemies continued to be identified collectively as the West, but this collective image is not homogeneous; its different elements have different weight. According to Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda, Russia’s arch-enemy today is NATO. The attitude towards the US has become ambiguous: on the one hand, the US is a historical enemy and continues to be perceived as such; on the other hand, Donald Trump’s positive image is increasingly superimposed on this negative historical image. The EU is to the least extent an enemy of Russia – if we can nevertheless classify it among Russia’s enemies, we must note that its enmity is rather secondary, derivative from the enmity of NATO and the US. Bulgaria is portrayed as a traditionally friendly country which, however, has crossed over to the enemy camp because of several tens of thousands of politicians, experts and NGO employees indoctrinated and paid by the West. Russophobia/Russophilia are interpreted in an interesting way. Russophobia is defined as a disease that is wholly destructive at the national and international levels. Conversely, Russophilia – which does not mean submission to Moscow – is identified with the sensible policy each country ought to follow in order to attain its national interests, a policy that is presumed to be in accord with the priorities and goals of Russian foreign policy. The tone of the articles on this topic is considerably more moderate and restrained than those on the topic of “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites”. The leading point of view in almost all publications is that of Russian institutions, politicians, experts and journalists, or of pro-Russian commentators.

Table 6. "Russia's Enemies - 2017", number of publications per month

MONTH	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
PER MONTH	902	540	503	533	461	476	335	341	477	432	604	445
TOTAL	6049											

Chart 6. "Russia's Enemies - 2017"



Here are several examples of the most-reprinted publications on this topic on peak days in 2017.

In January the spikes in publications on the topic of "Russia's Enemies" were connected to Rumen Radev's inauguration as President of Bulgaria. The RIA Novosti news agency, citing a position of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, spread the fake news that NGOs paid from abroad and mostly by the US were preparing a "Maidan" against Bulgaria's president-elect aimed at destabilizing the country. Commenting on the

presidents-elect Trump and Radev, commentator Boyan Chukov noted that the Russophobic elites, formed through NGOs financed by the US during the Clinton era, were beginning to be replaced in Bulgaria. According to Chukov, the Russophobes were gradually falling out of favour with the new US administration (*Rusofili*).

In January again, the news that a US army brigade and military equipment had arrived in Poland was reported in an apocalyptic tone: “Western media: Unprecedented! US deploys huge army on border with Russia for first time since end of Cold War!” (*Pan*); “Tanks advancing towards Eastern Europe right now!” (*Bradva*).

In February *Pogled.info* reprinted from *Sputnik International* an interview with François Fillon, the Republican candidate in the then upcoming presidential election in France, in which the French politician points out some mistakes in the West’s policy towards Russia. The interview is titled, categorically, “France says ‘no’ to Russophobia” (*Pogled.info*). Another popular news story, about the deployment of a US anti-ballistic missile system in Romania, is presented from the point of view of Russia’s Foreign Ministry: “Russian Foreign [Ministry]: Romania a threat to Russia’s security” (*Epicenter*). A statement of the head of the Fourth European Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, regarding Rumen Radev’s attitude towards Russia, was also an important news story in February. In this statement the Russian diplomat directly binds Bulgaria’s interest to the interests of Russian foreign policy: “For some reason, when a person speaks sensibly and in the interest of his country, he is immediately defined as a Russophile” (*Pan*).

In June the spikes in publications came from two statements. The first one is a statement by Putin at the traditional meeting with representatives of international news agencies during the 21st St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. The news story about this event, originally reported by the TASS news agency, received wide coverage in the Bulgarian media, which highlighted different aspects of Putin’s statement in their headlines:

Variant 1: “Vladimir Putin: Russia isn’t threatening Sweden, but if it joins NATO, Moscow will react to threat”; “Putin warns Sweden against joining NATO”;

Variant 2: “Putin: Russian state doesn’t engage in hacking”; “Hackers are free people, like artists...”

Variant 3: “Putin: Russophobia spills over, but has no future”; “West’s Russophobia won’t last forever”. Putin is quoted as saying: “Russophobia is evident. In some countries it is simply going beyond all bounds. What is the reason for this? In my opinion, this is due to the fact that a multipolar world is being established. This is not to the monopolists’ liking” (*Duma*);

Variant 4: “Putin doesn’t want Merkel as chancellor” (*Tribuna BG*). This title is manipulative, because Putin did not express a direct preference in his statement;

Variant 5: “Putin on Trump: I like such outspoken and frank people”; “Putin: Trump is outspoken, frank and fresh”; “Putin praises Trump for his ‘fresh gaze’ of a novice politician”. In addition to his sympathy for Trump, Putin expressed the opinion that the “Russophobic hysteria” in the US is directed “against the incumbent US President so as not to give him an opportunity to work normally” (*Monitor*).

The second publication is an interview with Leonid Reshetnikov, published in *Bradva* under the title “Russia speaks out with heavy heart and crushes us forever! Here’s who destroyed Bulgaria and why”. The interview repeats some of the main theses of Russian state propaganda: the US has long been striving to destroy Russia: in 1917, in the Second World War, in 1991; “some 50 thousand persons from the Bulgarian elite have been bought by the US and are conducting an anti-Russian policy”; Ukraine is a “geopolitical demon” created by the Soviet regime with the collaboration of Imperial Germany; in today’s world, and more specifically with regard to the war in Syria, Russia is playing the role of “peacemaker”, of “guarantor of justice”; Russia offers the world a “civilizational alternative”: “The main values in the West are the material ones at present too, while in the Russian civilization the spirit has always prevailed over the material and this makes our people unbreakable” (*Bradva*).

In September the sharp spike in publications was connected to the government’s Annual National Security Report for 2016, in which Russia is named as a threat to Bulgaria’s national security. One of the titles under which this news was commented on is “Government’s report that Russia is threat to Bulgaria causes sharp reaction in Parliament” (*Epicenter*). The media and political reactions to the report are analyzed in detail by Konstantin Pavlov in his article “Analysis of the Online Media Reactions to the Government’s Annual National Security Report for 2016” (*Critique & Humanism*, vol. 49, no. 1/2018, pp. 313-356).

November's spike in publications was due to a statement by British Prime Minister Theresa May, who accused Russia of sowing discord in the West, of "meddling in elections and conducting cyberespionage" (*Velika Bulgaria*). This criticism elicited a response from Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova: "In her words, London is also aspiring aggressively towards world leadership and such statements are cynical given the [British] airstrikes in Iraq and Libya" (*Epicenter*).

December's spike in publications was caused by a statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who expressed hope that the EU would break with the inertia of Russophobia which is at the basis of the sanctions against Russia imposed by Washington and obediently applied by Brussels. This news was reported under different titles, such as: "Sergey Lavrov: Russia hopes EU will overcome inertia of Russophobic thinking"; "Kremlin to EU: Stop with Russophobia"; "Let's hope EU will stop toeing the line of the few but aggressive Russophobes".

The last spike in 2017, at the end of December, was connected to a new round of confrontation between Russia and the US, this time caused by the US decision to provide weapons to Ukraine, including Javelin anti-tank missiles: "Russia's Foreign Ministry: US crosses line and announces its intention to supply lethal weapons to Ukraine" (*Pogled.info*, *BGnews*); "Russia blasts US: It's crossed all boundaries by announcing its intention to supply Ukraine with lethal weapons" (*PIK, Pan*).

The portrayal of Russia's enemies by Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda in 2017 can be summarized as follows:

- NATO and the US continue to be Russia's classical, traditional enemies. Propaganda publications are continuing to promote the thesis that the US aims to destroy Russia, to eliminate its sovereignty, to break up Russia and take over its resources. At the same time, however, the negative image of the US is projected mostly onto the past and is associated with the figures of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Donald Trump's election as president is seen as the beginning of a new era: it has raised hopes that the US will eventually give up its role as global hegemon and establish relations of peaceful and mutually advantageous cooperation with Russia.
- The EU is represented to a much lesser extent as an enemy and a threat to Russia. It is an enemy insofar as it is a vassal of the US and is conducting a policy of sanctions against Russia under US pressure. The EU is also accused of Russophobia, but its Russophobia is regarded mostly as an echo of the American

one. Besides this, the EU is not viewed as a homogeneous whole; the European countries are differentiated according to their attitudes towards Russia. As regards the leading European politicians, the attitude of Bulgarian anti-democratic populist propaganda towards Angela Merkel and Theresa May is the most negative. In the case of the latter, this is due to the British prime minister's accusations that Moscow is trying to sow discord in the West by spreading fake news and meddling in elections.

- The attitude towards Bulgaria is ambiguous. On the one hand, propaganda publications claim that there is a thin stratum of politicians and NGOs, formed and financed by the West, who are Russophobic. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of Bulgaria's population is claimed to be friendly towards Russia. Among Bulgarian politicians, President Rumen Radev is portrayed as being particularly well-intentioned and friendly towards Russia.

I.4.3. CRIMEA AND UKRAINE. THE SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

The total number of publications on the topic of "Crimea and Ukraine" was 3,983 in 2017 as compared to 6,109 in 2016, decreasing significantly by approximately 45%, while that of publications on the related topic of "The Sanctions against Russia" was 4,217 as compared to 4,005 in 2016, increasing slightly by approximately 5%. The propaganda logic of this change of focus is probably the following: the Russian thesis that Crimea is "intrinsically Russian" has already established itself in the Bulgarian public sphere, therefore its excessive repetition would only aggravate the division in Bulgarian society, while the thesis that the sanctions against Russia must be lifted could win wider public support – even among people who do not think that Crimea is "intrinsically Russian" but believe that the sanctions have negative economic consequences. The tactical change of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda's focus coincides with the direct task of Russian foreign policy – lifting the sanctions – as well as with the interests of local oligarchic circles which want to expand their economic ties with Moscow.

Table 7. "Crimea and Ukraine - 2017", number of publications per month

MONTH	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
PER MONTH	533	463	499	289	269	302	214	252	208	337	287	330
TOTAL	3983											

Chart 7. "Crimea and Ukraine - 2017"

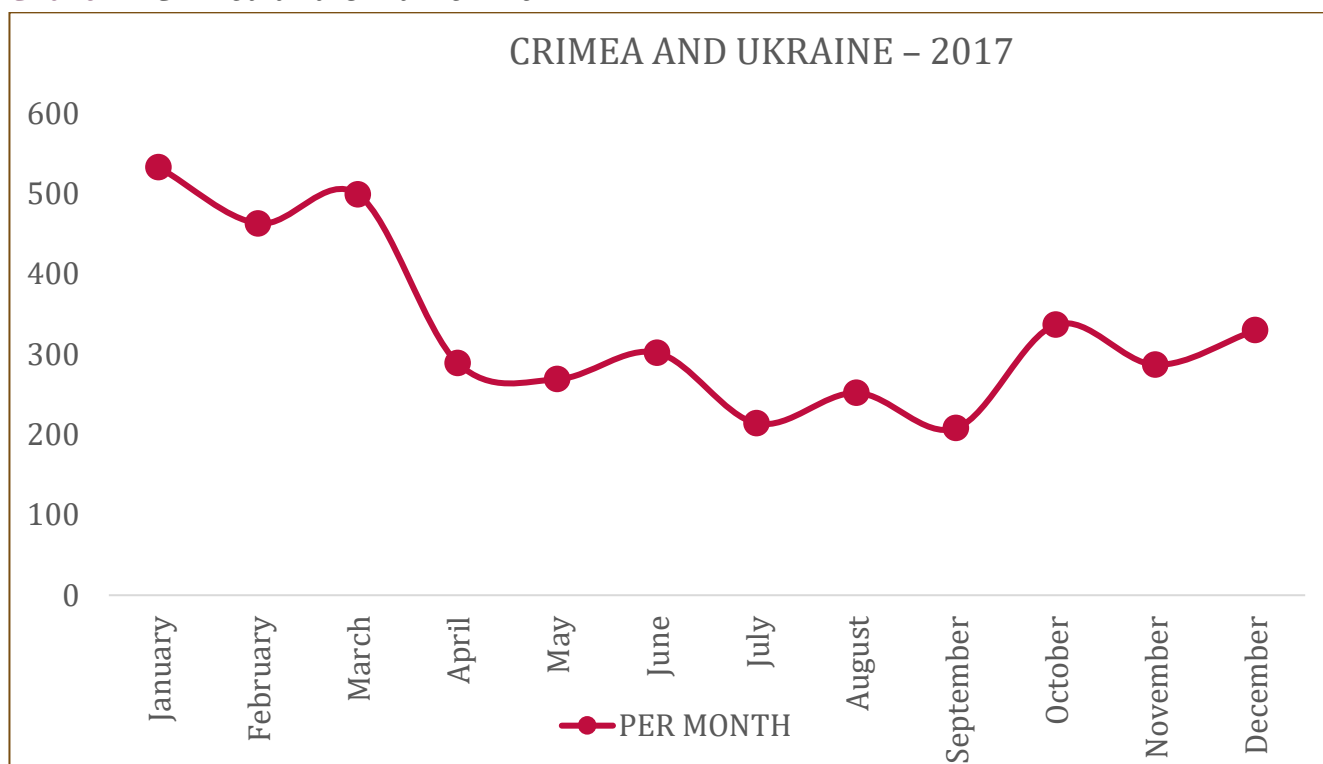


Table 8. "The Sanctions against Russia - 2017", number of publications per month

MONTH	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
PER MONTH	885	659	409	105	176	343	454	382	264	203	228	109
TOTAL	4217											

Chart 8. "The Sanctions against Russia - 2017"



Here are several examples of the most-reprinted publications on this topic on peak days in 2017.

One of the top news stories in January on the topic of "Crimea and Ukraine" was French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen's statement that if she was elected president, she would recognize Crimea as Russian – such as, in her words, it has always been anyway. The article titled "Marine Le Pen vows to recognize Crimea if she becomes president" was reprinted more than 70 times. Another top news story in January was

President Rumen Radev's inauguration speech, published in full, in which he expressed hope that the newly elected US president would help to overcome the crisis in relations between the West and Russia: "The crisis between the EU and NATO on one side and Russia on the other is obvious. Increasing confrontation is not the way to resolve it. The Cold War is a sad experience from the past. ... I believe that the results of the presidential election in the US and the new political situation in the world give hope that dialogue will resume soon" (source: *Pan*).

One of the most-reprinted publications in March was an article titled "Rasmussen drops bombshell: I wouldn't exclude Crimea's recognition". Rasmussen's statement is quoted from *Ruski Dnevnik*: "Former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared that he doesn't exclude the possibility of Crimea's recognition in the future as a 'free entity' at the conference 'US Sanctions on Russia: Evaluating Impacts and Costs' in the US..." (source: *Blitz*). Another significant publication in March was a news story originally published in *Evropeyskaya Pravda*. Titled "German publishing house recognizes Crimea as part of Russia in textbook for migrants", it reports the following brief but portentous news: "A German-language textbook for migrants has been published in Germany, where Crimea is shown on a map as part of Russia, *Evropeyskaya Pravda* reports. The textbook was developed by TELC (The European Language Certificates)" (source: *Petel*).

One of the most significant and popular publications in April was about a statement made by Senator John McCain: "US and EU have turned their backs on Balkans, Senate Armed Forces Committee chief John McCain admits". In it, the US senator focused on the weaker influence of the EU and the US in the Balkans, and more specifically on the situation in Serbia and Macedonia. Although Serbia had agreed to cooperate in the fight against terrorism, according to McCain "it is entirely clear that Russia is trying to expand its influence in the Balkans. The senator mentioned the coup attempt in Montenegro and Serbia's obviously growing influence through fake news from Sputnik and Russia Today. ... The US senator admitted that because of the events in Russia, Ukraine, the Middle East and China, the US has not been paying sufficient attention to the Balkans. Neither has the European Union" (source: *Blitz*).

Oliver Stone's documentary series, *The Putin Interviews*, released in June, was the top news story of that month. It was reprinted more than 50 times under various titles:

Variant 1: "Vladimir Putin: EU and US supported coup in Ukraine";

Variant 2: “Putin: Russia sympathizes with Trump, who is ready to restore relations with Moscow”;

Variant 3: “Putin again denies hacking US election”; “We haven’t been involved in hacking”.

The publications devoted to Oliver Stone’s interviews with Putin highlighted key theses of the Russian president: “Russia’s president underlined that the EU and the US had not wished to understand the main cause of the political crisis in Ukraine and had supported the coup d’état and the forcible seizure of power in the country. ... Of course, we sympathize with Mister Trump ... because he has declared in public his readiness and wish to restore Russian-American relations. ... Russian President Vladimir Putin defined the US decision to deploy US anti-missile defence systems near Russia’s borders as a gross strategic error” (source: *Vchas*, quoted by *Blitz*).

The largest number of publications on the topic of “The Sanctions against Russia” was in January because of the great hopes pinned by the Russian media on the US president-elect. In this connection, the first significant news was the initiative of outgoing President Rosen Plevneliev and another 16 “politicians mostly in Central and Eastern Europe who have formerly held leading positions” (*Dir.bg*) to prepare and send a letter to US President-elect Donald Trump on 9 January. In the letter, published in *The Washington Post*, the politicians call on President-elect Trump to keep a hard line on Moscow. In the article on this subject, titled “Disgraceful Plevneliev screws up big time – dares to incite Trump against Russia!” (*Blitz*), President Plevneliev is called “the misunderstanding from 2 Dondukov [Blvd., the Presidency building]”, “the biggest misunderstanding in Bulgarian politics”, “the pawn who used the presidential institution for personal use almost five years”, “Plevneliev and a pack of Sorosoids”, “the traitor to the national interests and top lobbyist of the *Capital* backroom circle”, “Plevneliev, who can’t represent his own self yet is [Bulgaria’s] head of state on paper until 22 January, has obviously gone completely mad...”

January also saw the publication of an article titled “Vigenin against sanctions”. The article, published in the BSP-affiliated *Duma*, has a clear title presenting the BSP position on the sanctions against Russia as expressed in public by Kristian Vigenin, MEP and former foreign minister in the Plamen Oresharski government. In January again, the media published a statement on the sanctions by President Rumen Radev, made during an interview for France 24. In this interview, the Bulgarian president took an unambiguous position against the sanctions: “Radev also pointed out that the European

Union's sanctions against Russia must be lifted. Asked about the annexation of Crimea, he said that 'theoretically the peninsula belongs to the Ukrainians, and de facto to the Russians.' 'The future of Crimea will be decided by the people of Crimea,' Radev said. He expressed hope that the new US president, Donald Trump, would restore dialogue and trust with Moscow" (*Dnes.bg*). January also saw the publication of an even more widely circulated news story, titled "TASS announces breaking news: Donald Trump names conditions for Russia sanctions lift!" This news was also reported under other titles: "Trump thinking about lifting sanctions on Russia"; "Donald Trump: sanctions on Russia will be lifted if Russia helps us!" The statements of Radev and Trump are reported simultaneously in an article in *Pan* titled "Presidents-elect of US and Bulgaria, Donald Trump and Rumen Radev, speak simultaneously of lifting sanctions on Russia".

Another article in January, by Nedyalko Nedyalkov, published in his media outlet *PIK* and reprinted by *Rusofili*, sets forth all main clichés used in justifying the Bulgarian position in favour of lifting the sanctions against Russia: "Russia' is a liminal and contentious topic in the history and psychology of the Bulgarian nation. However, you don't have to be a statistician to figure out that the majority of Bulgarians have a sacred-bright feeling of love for and gratitude to the ... 'brother-liberators' This is part of the genotype of the Bulgarians – it is a matter of faith, religion and spiritual need that cannot be changed or decoded. Radev won the presidential election because he managed to personify the hope that Bulgaria's warm relations with Moscow will be reanimated. His recent statements to this effect are encouraging. ... If anyone has happened not to understand – Russia has won the ideological war against the Sorosoids, and the well-fed bureaucratic nomenklatura from Brussels is preparing to flee." In the same important month of January, there appeared publications raising once again the issue of Donald Trump's initiative on lifting the sanctions against Russia. They were published in Bulgarian propaganda media under titles in several variants:

Variant 1: "Politico scoop: Trump will lift sanctions against Moscow unilaterally, decree already ready!" (*Blitz, Petel, Pan, Velika Bulgaria, Stara Bulgaria*); "Trump unilaterally lifts sanctions against Russia" (*Pan, Bultimes, Newsfront, bg.TIME.mk, Zora*);

Variant 2: "Confirmed! US softens position on Russia, here's what Trump advisor says" (*Stara Bulgaria, sputnik.bg, Dnes.co.uk*); "White House confirms: Trump considers lifting Russia sanctions" (*Pan, Russia Beyond*);

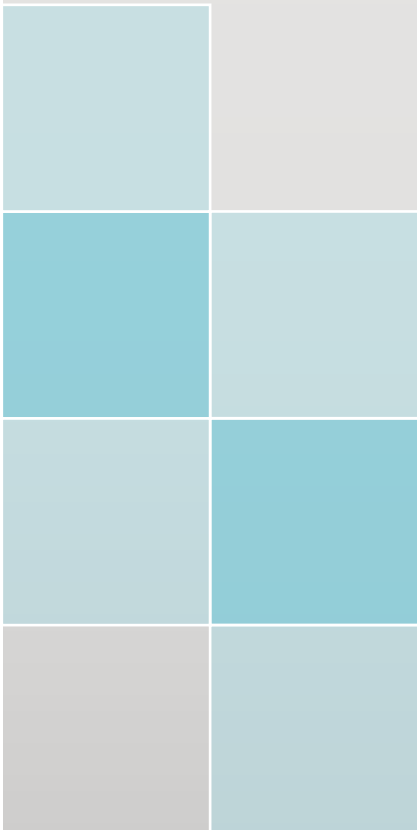
Variant 3: “Top expert reveals: lifting Russia sanctions is in US interests! Trump will do it!”; “Expert explains why lifting Russia sanctions is in US interests” “(reprinted six times: *Blitz, Pan, bg.TIME.mk*, etc.).

The enthusiasm over the coming lifting of the sanctions against Russia gradually cooled, however. As early as in February, Russian analysts questioned the pro-Russian orientation of Trump or Radev. For example, Alexei Toporov wrote the following in his analysis: “But just as Trump turned out not be ‘ours’ but above all an American president acting in his country’s interests which are not always in accord with Russia’s interests, so too the new Bulgarian leader is a pragmatist and a Bulgarian patriot who clearly understands that the rampant Russophobia of his predecessors hasn’t brought his country any dividends. At the same time, Radev is also aware that his country’s withdrawal from the Western camp doesn’t augur anything good for it” (source: *Pogled.info*). At the beginning of spring, the US Congress proposed expanding the sanctions against Russia, this time because of alleged Russian interference in the US presidential election. Ultimately, the sanctions bill was passed with some changes made at the urging of the EU. The news was published in Bulgarian media under the title “New Russia sanctions destroy chances for improving Russia-US relations” (*Pan*).

The main propaganda messages on the topics of “Crimea and Ukraine” and “The Sanctions against Russia” in 2017 were the following:

- Russia has reaffirmed, through its president’s position, the annexation of Crimea. This was a fair and responsible act that is not subject to revision.
- The Russian media, and subsequently the Bulgarian propaganda media, promoted the thesis that more and more Western politicians, experts, artists are convinced that: Crimea is Russian; what happened in Ukraine was a coup d’état conducted with the West’s active support; the sanctions against Russia must be lifted because they are unfair and/or because they hurt not only Russia but also the European countries.
- In Bulgaria, the BSP and President Radev took a position against the sanctions. In propaganda publications by various authors, the Bulgarian position is often justified not simply on political or economic grounds. Bulgaria’s position cannot be other than in favour of lifting the sanctions, because Bulgaria has deep historical, spiritual and genotypic ties with Russia.

- The sanctions against Russia were introduced by the neoliberal US and European elites, but they are harmful to the European peoples. The peoples of the US and Europe do not support the sanctions. The new leaders, such as Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, are precisely the politicians who must carry out their people's will and work towards lifting the sanctions against Russia.



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