

*Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia*  
*(HSSF)*

**Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media**

*Sofia: 2022*

**Summary  
of Report:**

**Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media:  
From Its Entry into Bulgaria in 2013 to the War against Ukraine**

PART ONE

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This study builds on the large-scale collective study on “Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria” within which an analysis was conducted of national-populist and (pro)Russian propaganda in Bulgarian online media for the 2013–2017 period.<sup>1</sup> The present study covers the next five years (2018–2022) and analyzes all Bulgarian-language online media and blogs (except social media). The quantitative measurements were conducted with the SENSIKA automated media monitoring system.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. The Narratives (Talking Points) of Russian Propaganda in Bulgaria

The Russian propaganda package, which is sold globally with small local adaptations, draws heavily on local grassroots critiques of the West. Broadly speaking, it combines leftist critiques of neoliberalism and financial capitalism with rightist critiques of cosmopolitanism and cultural liberalism. A similar mix is also characteristic of other national-populist discourses that have risen in the last decade, of which Russian propaganda attempts to be a “flagship”.

Already in the first cited study of 2017, we found that the narrative of Russian propaganda is built on a **geopolitical conspiratorial logic**. In this logic, there are **four main logical positions (roles)**, which are assigned to different subjects.

Here they are:

**1. A global hegemon/puppet-master (the collective West, the US, NATO),** through **2. its puppets (the Brussels Eurocrats and the venal liberal elites in the individual countries)** is killing the sovereignty of the European peoples, therefore **3. Europe is dying – it is a victim.** The same villain is surrounding and even conducting a war against Russia, which is also a victim – but Russia alone is justly resisting, it is rising from the ashes and is actually Europe’s saviour: **4. Russia is reviving.**

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<sup>1</sup> The study was carried out by a team from the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia. Its results are available in English at: <https://hssfoundation.org/en/anti-liberal-discourses-and-propaganda-messages-in-bulgarian-media/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://sensika.com/>.

Since it was introduced in Bulgaria as a general propaganda language in 2013, this conspiratorial logic has remained unchanged. However, we have found slight contentual variations in the individual sub-narratives that make it up:

1. If ten years ago the role of **global hegemon/puppet-master** was most often assigned to the US/NATO as well as to contextually substituted specific actors (Obama, Merkel, Soros, etc.), now the metonymic variants are condensed into a single subject: “the collective West”. The EU, which in previous periods was treated as “Washington’s puppet”, since the start of the war in Ukraine and the united response against it has become the arch-villain – part of “the collective West”.
2. **The decline of Europe** – this (sub)narrative, according to which Europe is in cultural decline (“infected with liberalism”), “threatened by a migrant invasion”, etc., has been visibly fading since 2017;
3. **Bulgaria’s venal elites** – they are those domestic “puppets” who serve the interests of the villain/hegemon: “Sorosoids”, “grant-spongers”, “genders”, “liberasts”, “paid analysts, politicians, and protesters”, etc. This propaganda tool is often used for settling scores with inconvenient domestic political and economic opponents, it was therefore the first to be widely circulated in Bulgarian media, and until 2017 its frequency of use increased the most. In recent years, however, it has been maintained by inertia, albeit at still high levels.
4. **Russia is rising.** Here, the content innovations are towards a more detailed portrayal of the image of Russia itself and, above all, a militaristic intensification of Russia’s confrontation with Ukraine and the Western world.

We should note that although there are no serious changes, the vocabulary of Russian propaganda was nevertheless consolidated ideologically into a specific **Nazi-imperialist** mix shortly before the war. Instead of the somewhat chaotic attempts to think of the Russian sphere of spiritual and political influence through the lens of “Slavdom”, “Orthodox Christianity”, “Eurasian civilization”, “Soviet internationalism”, etc., primacy is now given to the so-called “Russian world” (“*russkiy mir*”), which has swallowed them up. This has also happened institutionally: instead of various wannabe ideologues (Dugin, Fursov, etc.) competing to define what is Russian, on 12 July 2021 the latter was

nailed down by the ultimate authority – by Putin himself.<sup>3</sup> Arguing for historical, linguistic, ethnic and cultural affinity, Putin insists that the Velikorussians, Belorussians and Malorussians (Ukrainians) are “one people”, a “triune people”, a “large Russian nation”. And everything that opposes this nation – including Ukraine, which, “seduced” by the West, is trying to break away from it – is “anti-Russia”. Accordingly, all the other nationalities and denominations that gravitate around “the triune people” make up the “multi-confessional, multi-national, multi-faceted Russian world”. The “Russian world” denotes the empire, which also has a wider periphery, a hinterland that was naturally formed in the force field of the dominant ethnic group which has been practically extended to a Russian race (“the large Russian nation”, “the triune people”).

And another important thing: if there indeed has been a drastic change in the use of Russian propaganda narratives since 2021, it is that **now the Kremlin’s official spokespersons – Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, Zakharova, Mitrofanova, etc. – are literally repeating propaganda talking points with their respective propaganda vocabulary.** Before that, Russian officials still spoke in a diplomatically more neutral language, leaving the conduct of propaganda to other media and spokespersons. Now the entire Russian state is a mouthpiece for propaganda clichés. Hence the Bulgarian (and world) media – even the most objective and neutral ones – are compelled to quote them. Thus, Russian propaganda has sharply increased its spread.

## **2. Quantitative Measurement of the Spread of Russian Propaganda Narratives in Bulgarian Online Media (2013 – 2022)**

In order to see the spread of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria over a long period, we repeated the measurements we had conducted for the 2013–2017 period, but now for the next five years. That is to say, we conducted keyword searches through the

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<sup>3</sup> Article by Putin: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; translated into Bulgarian: <https://www.zemia-news.bg/index.php/svyat-3/91782-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B8-%D1%83%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5.html>.

SENSIKA system, which archives over 3,500 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs and provides direct access to online articles that contain the specified keywords. The aggregated results cover the period from 1 January 2013 to 17 April 2022. Through SENSIKA, we searched for the same narratives through the same keywords (plus new words introduced into the vocabulary of anti-democratic national-populist and (pro)Russian propaganda after 2017):

1. The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master;
2. The decline of Europe;
3. Bulgaria's venal elites.

As for the fourth narrative, "The Rise of Russia", since we had subdivided it into five sub-narratives in 2017 for the sake of clarity, we now measured it again subdivided into five separate semantic clusters:

1. Russia's increased political and spiritual might – various narratives praising Russia in general;
2. Russia's enemies – antagonistic discourses vilifying Russia's enemies;
3. The power of Russian weapons – direct praise of the Russian army and armaments;
4. The sanctions against Russia – narratives describing Western sanctions as useless and harmful to the countries imposing them;
5. Crimea and Ukraine – narratives insisting that Crimea is Russian and that Ukraine is ruled by Nazis.

Here are the aggregated results for ten years:

- 1. Table: Number of publications, by year, containing the keywords of the different propaganda (sub)narratives. Period: 1 January 2013 – 17 April 2022**

	Russia's increased political and	Russia's enemies	The power of Russian weapons	The sanctions against Russia	Crimia and Ukraine	The decline of Europe	Bulgaria's venal elites	The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master	New keywords only
201	44	54	22	2	56	109	494	69	-
201	365	7,387	219	1,141	3,983	359	3,114	999	-
201	2,448	7,814	929	2,666	5,814	1,14	8,094	2,683	-
201	1,326	7,511	745	4,005	6,109	1,84	11,394	2,361	-
201	1,943	6,049	1,076	4,217	3,983	887	16,703	2,778	-
201	<b>1,952</b>	<b>11,85</b>	<b>2,876</b>	<b>3,050</b>	<b>4,816</b>	<b>1,15</b>	<b>14,666</b>	<b>2,824</b>	<b>5,816</b>
201	<b>1,481</b>	<b>6,424</b>	<b>3,382</b>	<b>1,976</b>	<b>3,782</b>	<b>700</b>	<b>10,649</b>	<b>2,333</b>	<b>5,599</b>
202	<b>2,241</b>	<b>5,959</b>	<b>2,677</b>	<b>1,006</b>	<b>2,892</b>	<b>534</b>	<b>12,437</b>	<b>1,968</b>	<b>4,206</b>
202	<b>1,532</b>	<b>8,579</b>	<b>3,511</b>	<b>1,223</b>	<b>4,675</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>15,000</b>	<b>3,731</b>	<b>6,616</b>
2022 (until	<b>2,172</b>	<b>15,262</b>	<b>4,080</b>	<b>1,949</b>	<b>24,554</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>4,716</b>	<b>3,986</b>	<b>27,087</b>

**Methodological note:** The data from the new measurements for the last five years (**in bold**) show a mechanical increase in the number of publications due to two factors: 1) New keywords included; 2) Over 1,500 new Bulgarian-language websites and blogs that have appeared since 2017 and are archived by SENSIKA. The mechanical increase in the number of publications is distinct between 2017 and 2018, and its approximate size can be estimated from the last column showing the number of articles identified through “new keywords only”.

**Here is a visual representation of the data:**

**Chart 1. Narratives about Russia (2013–2022)**



Light blue line - Russia's increased political and spiritual might

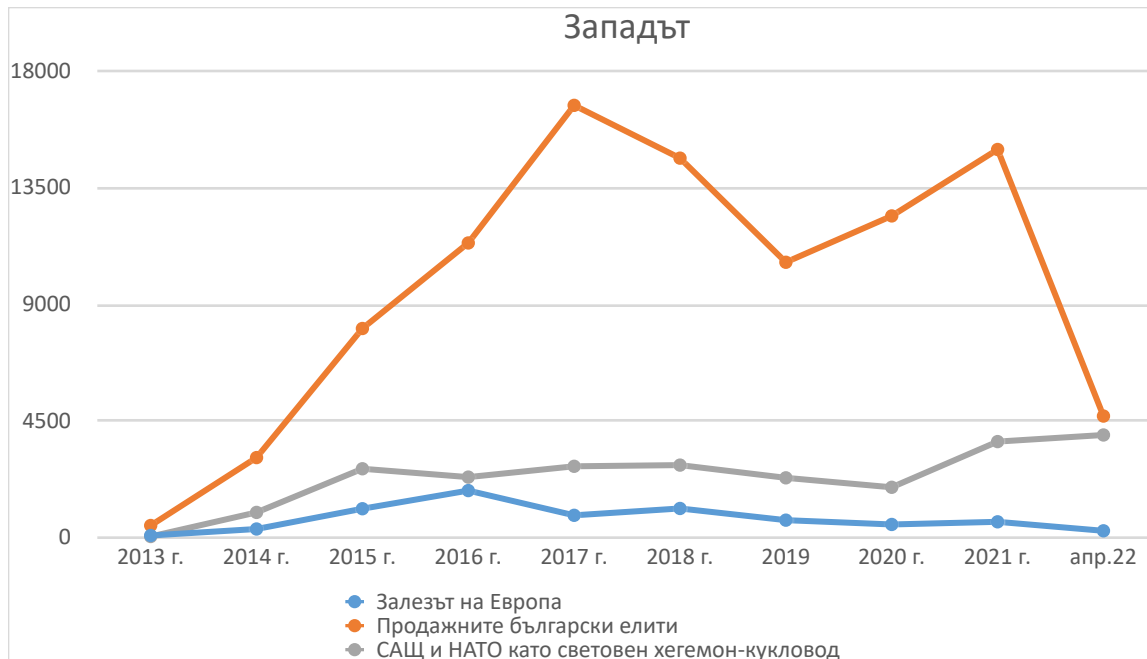
Red line - Russia's enemies

Grey line - The power of Russian weapons

Yellow line - The sanctions against Russia

Dark blue line - Crimea and Ukraine

## Chart 2: Narratives about the West



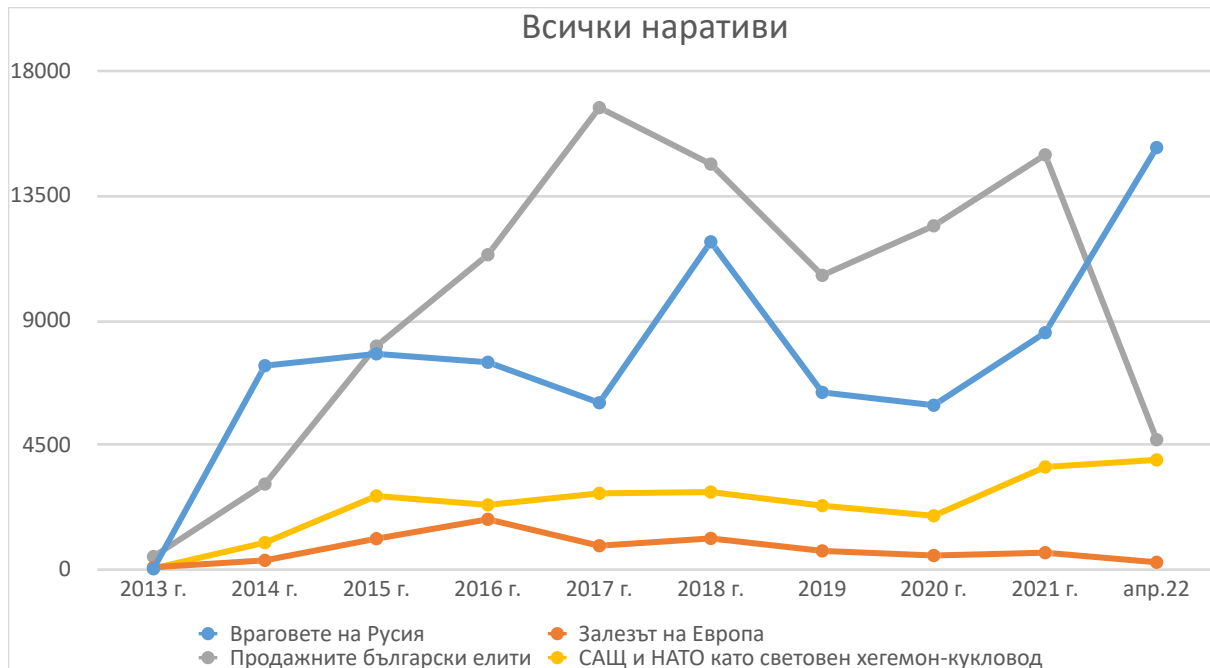
Blue line - The decline of Europe

Red line - Bulgaria's venal elites

Grey line - The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master

**Chart 3: Comparative**





Blue line - Russia's enemies

Red line - The decline of Europe

Grey line - Bulgaria's venal elites

Yellow line - The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master

We should immediately point out a visual illusion due to the way the data were aggregated, which is particularly distinct in their graphic representations. There is a distinct disproportion between the time interval in which the measurement for 2022 was conducted (1 January – 17 April) and all previous years, which were covered in their entirety.

Nevertheless, some conclusions are clear:

In the case of all narratives about Russia and “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master”, the first three and a half months of 2022 – immediately before and after the start of the war against Ukraine – saw more propaganda publications than the entire previous year. Most striking, though easily explained by the war, is the growth in propaganda vilification of “Russia's Enemies”: almost twice as many publications on this topic in the first months of 2022 than in all of 2021. Only two

of the narratives, “The Decline of Europe” and “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites”, received fewer publications than in all of 2021, which creates the illusion of a decline. Without being able to extrapolate with certainty what the propaganda activity will be like by the end of this year, it is still reasonable to assume that, if the war continues and in the absence of other abrupt changes in the situation, the uses of even those two narratives will exceed last year’s. And that the publications on “Russia’s Enemies”, if they keep appearing at a similar rate as in the first three and a half months of 2022, will outnumber those in 2021 by dozens of times.