



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

**How We Have Become
an Enemy in the Eyes of Russia**

IN FOCUS

**The EU as Portrayed
by Kremlin Propaganda**

March 2017

Executive summary

Kristina
Potapova

The EU has been paying increasing attention to the phenomenon of information warfare. However, this has not gone as far as to penetrate the fog of disinformation surrounding the motherland to investigate how the Kremlin's propaganda machine operates in Russia itself. The Kremlin uses internal propaganda both to maintain legitimacy and as a defence mechanism against the outside world. By drawing attention away from domestic problems and creating an environment of fear and impending doom, it portrays an alternative reality in which Russia is surrounded by mythical enemies. The EU is portrayed as an aggressive and expansionist entity that wants to destroy Russia, while at the same time it is depicted as a weak, 'decadent' and 'un-Christian' union that cannot cope with global challenges. On the other hand, the Kremlin's main caveat in doing so, is that Russia's success is inherently connected with the failure of the West and democracy.

This paper scrutinises the Kremlin's propaganda machine and its popular narratives about the EU in order to understand how Russia's media presents the EU and why less than a quarter of the population has a positive opinion of it.

Keywords Information warfare – Russia – Propaganda – Disinformation – Perception of the EU



Introduction

History shows that propaganda is a powerful weapon both in peacetime and in war. Russia's clever use of information is not new. The Kremlin exploits history, culture, language and nationalism in order to influence public opinion, maintain legitimacy and achieve its foreign policy goals. Western experts are becoming more and more concerned about the fog of disinformation in Europe, but it is rare for research to go further and look beyond the fog, at the propaganda situation in the Russian motherland. It is clear that the Kremlin's external propaganda is used to undermine Western policies at a lower cost than other methods by polluting the information environment in order to sow discord and create enough doubt among European citizens to destabilise civil society and undermine trust in governments. In contrast, the Kremlin's internal propaganda is used to defend against an allegedly hostile world by making the Russian people unaware of the reality in the West. A 2015 European Commission-funded study showed that less than a quarter of Russian citizens perceive the EU favourably.¹

The propagandists always try to highlight Russia's superiority in the international arena in terms of its willingness to 'save' the West from decay, while at the same time pointing out the West's failures. They instigate tensions and global challenges in order to create an enemy and a dangerous environment, from which they can then save the world. For this purpose, the EU is linked to three main narratives: first, it is portrayed as an aggressive and expansionist entity, which wants to destroy Russia. Second, it is depicted as a weak union, close to collapse, that cannot deal with any global challenges. Third, if Russia is positioned as a defender of traditional values at home and abroad, Europe is portrayed as having an absence of any moral values. These are only a few examples of the kinds of stories that the Kremlin-controlled media reports to Russian citizens. The Kremlin does not promote its own agenda but rather rejects foreign values and exposes weaknesses in Western democracies. This new, militaristic propaganda has been easily accepted by the post-Soviet mentality of the Russians. Central Russian

¹ The Public Policy and Management Institute, The National Centre for Research on Europe & NFG Research Group, *Analysis of the Perception of the EU and EU's Policies Abroad* (Vilnius, 2015).



TV news is a primary source of information for 84% of Russians,² which partially explains their belief and trust in the state-controlled media's disinformation.

In order to evaluate the tactics of information warfare and to weaken the influence of the Kremlin's propaganda, it is essential to conduct an analysis of Russia's use of information and its target audience inside Russia.

The text is divided into three main parts. The first part describes the hospitable environment for disinformation within Russia, which explains the effectiveness of the Kremlin's propaganda. The second part defines the concept of information warfare and analyses how the propaganda machine works to fulfil the Kremlin's aims. The third part explains how the EU has become an enemy in the eyes of Russians.

This paper analyses Russia's internal propaganda strategy and evaluates popular narratives about the EU to establish why less than a quarter of the Russian population has a positive opinion of the EU. It also provides recommendations to policymakers.

A hospitable environment for disinformation

Many Russians have spent the last 20 years asleep, unaware of global changes. The closed environment in the country has caused people to reject modernity and has left them with archaic worldviews. New, militaristic propaganda has been easily accepted by the post-Soviet mentality of the Russians. In the gap between the end of Soviet propaganda and the arrival of modern propaganda, communication in Yeltsin's Russia was dominated by Soviet intellectuals who blamed Western democracy for the loss of their social benefits.

If Soviet propaganda was built on a coherent ideology of the class struggle, today's ideology consists of contradictory ideas. It is built on conflicting Soviet and imperial myths, conspiracy theories, and ideas

² E. C. Nisbet and S. Mikati, 'Russians Don't Trust the Internet – and It's Making the Country Worse', *The Washington Post*, 18 February 2015, accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/02/18/russians-dont-trust-the-internet-and-its-making-the-country-worse/?utm_term=.77201f748cb3 on 26 January 2017.



from both the extreme right and the extreme left. The lack of a coherent worldview causes propagandists to emphasise emotions rather than meaning, which makes the language used highly aggressive. The idea of making the world simpler, of a return to the past, creates nostalgia for the Soviet era among the older generation. The enthusiasm for the past of the generation born in the 1990s is fascinating, however: their perception of the Soviet era is built on idealised interpretations from TV series and movies.

The narrative of superiority is built on admitting that the West is superior in terms of technology, but that Russia is better adapted for survival and will save the world if a global threat appears. The propagandists are continually pointing out Russia's superiority in the international arena in terms of its willingness to 'save' the West, while at the same time highlighting the West's failures.³ Pro-Kremlin commentators instigate tensions and global challenges to create an enemy and a dangerous environment, from which they can then save the world.

To justify the Kremlin's illegitimate actions, propagandists follow the idea that the state prevails over the interests of society. This view is a paradigm for Russia to position itself as a defender of traditional values at home and abroad. The ideological tool that Russia uses to counter the EU narrative of promoting democracy is the idea of a 'Russian world' which opposes the EU's values and individual human rights.⁴ Another argument of propagandists is that there is always confrontation between Russia and the West. This idea is backed up by the evidence of the Cold War period and the Soviet model of the 'confrontation between two systems', as well as nineteenth-century conservatism. This is where the idea that 'the West wants to destroy Russia and is in confrontation with us' comes from.⁵ The Kremlin's propaganda operates as a defence mechanism that protects Russia from the outside world and thus makes the Russian people unaware of the reality in the West.

³ A. Arkhangelsky, 'Out from the Underground: Russia's New Propagandists', Carnegie Moscow Center, 3 June 2015, accessed at <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=63725> on 25 November 2016.

⁴ V. Vojtiskova et al., *The Bear in Sheep's Clothing. Russia's Government-Funded Organisations in the EU*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2016).

⁵ Arkhangelsky, 'Out from the Underground'.



As a legacy of the Soviet era, with the long experience it provided of adapting to a repressive state, and their unwillingness to come out of their comfort zone and participate in political and civic life, Russians do not believe that they can influence public policy and make a difference politically. For Russians, politics is another dimension of reality that is about their great past and heroic history.⁶ Some Russians consider the state and authority to be the tsar and themselves to be the ‘powerless people’, which explains the lack of state accountability. A large number of Russian citizens would admit that there are domestic problems and an economic crisis in their country, but, at the same time, more than half of the population are not ashamed of the current situation in Russia.⁷ Russians believe that they had never lived as well as they did between 2002 and 2012: living conditions improved in this period and people believe that this will continue and that, for now, they need just to suffer through the current economic problems.⁸

Information warfare: strategy and techniques

As the successor to the USSR, Russia inherited a tradition of utilising information warfare which was directly derived from *spetspropaganda* (special propaganda) theory, first taught as a subject at the Russian Military Institute of Foreign Languages in 1942 and reinstated in 2000.⁹ Most Russian authors consider information warfare to be ‘influencing the consciousness of the masses as part of the rivalry between the different civilizational systems adopted by different countries in the information space by use of special means to control information resources as “information weapons”’.¹⁰ Russia’s information warfare is used to influence the target audience’s values and belief system, perceptions, emotions, reasoning and behaviour in order to maintain the support of the loyal and undermine

⁶ Levada Centre, ‘Хотят ли Русские войны?’ [Do Russians Want War?], 30 May 2016, accessed at www.levada.ru/2016/05/30/hotyat-li-russkie-vojny-2/ on 1 October 2016.

⁷ D. Polygaeva, ‘Социолог Лев гудков об эффективности пропаганды в России’ [Sociologist Lev Gudkov on the Effectiveness of Propaganda in Russia], *The Village*, 16 December 2015, accessed at <http://www.the-village.ru/village/people/city-news/228271-society> on 25 November 2016.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ J. Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study*, Centre for Eastern Studies, Point of View no. 42 (Warsaw, 22 May 2014).

¹⁰ Ibid.



the opposition. While the Kremlin does not use persuasive techniques on international audiences, instead using disinformation to pollute the information environment in order to undermine trust in governments and destabilise civil society, at home Russian propagandists control information flows to promote the idea of Russia's supremacy and of the rivalry between the West and Russia.

Russia's most-watched TV channels are parts of the engine of the Kremlin's propaganda machine. State propaganda relies on the socio-cultural context: the propagandists use symbols, history and arguments that appeal to their target audience. As the content of such propaganda is irrational and illogical, it elicits an emotional response in the recipient, in which the facts, the data and the logical arguments are forgotten and only the impression remains.¹¹ Only 1%–1.5% of Russians look for alternative media sources.¹² Young people use social networks, which provide a wide variety of information and a plurality of voices. However, social media users get their news from ideologically similar groups, aligned closely with their beliefs, and interpret news and facts, or allow politicians and public leaders to interpret them, to suit their own worldview¹³—the one, based on the beliefs, culture and history which the Kremlin-controlled media has shaped so well in recent years.

The Kremlin's monopoly over the information space in Russia makes one thing clear: the rules come from above, and dictate what can and cannot be said on federal channels. TV news, TV shows and even Russian films encourage passivity in viewers, showing them that the world is a very dangerous place and that it is better not to leave one's comfort zone. This causes people to be unaware of reality in the West and also makes individuals believe that they cannot influence their own lives.

The effectiveness of the Kremlin's propaganda is based on three main factors. The first, implemented by state and non-state actors, is that it draws attention away from domestic problems onto the problems caused by the mythical enemies. For propaganda messages to become influential they need to be repeated over and over again. In this respect, the Kremlin's sto-

¹¹ J. Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books Division, 1973).

¹² Polygaeva, 'Социолог Лев гудков об эффективности пропаганды в России' [Sociologist Lev Gudkov on the Effectiveness of Propaganda in Russia].

¹³ A. Shawcross, *Beyond Propaganda. Facts We Can Believe In: How to Make Fact-Checking Better*, Legatum Institute (London, October 2016), accessed at https://lif.blob.core.windows.net/lif/docs/default-source/publications/facts-we-can-believe-in-how-to-make-fact-checking-better_web-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=8 on 23 November 2016.



ries are communicated through a mixture of entertainment, emotions and current affairs to make them more powerful. It would be wrong to assume that TV news and news outlets are the only methods used to spread propaganda. TV series that glorify the victory of the Second World War, and comedy shows which humiliate Europe and the US also play an important role. Humour is a powerful tool that the propagandists use to create the illusion of national supremacy. ‘Whataboutism’¹⁴ and double standards are used tactically when it comes to discussion of the annexation of Crimea, whereby the situation is compared with that of Kosovo and the differences between Russia’s and the West’s soft power go unacknowledged. It is said that the West does not want to understand Russia’s history, mentality and culture, and thus cannot understand Russia’s politics. When Dmitry Kiselyov, the central figure of the government propaganda supporting the deployment of Russian forces in Ukraine¹⁵ and anchor of the TV show *Vesti Nedeli* [News of the Week], claimed that Russia could turn the US into radioactive ash,¹⁶ it created a feeling of superiority among Russians, and fear of the West. By distorting the facts and, to the dismay of the critics, attacking and humiliating US and European politicians, while also attacking local political opposition ‘because they work for Americans’,¹⁷ the audience in Russia is convinced that only Putin can save the world, as he is the only strong and intelligent leader in the international arena. The most popular TV channel within Russia, First Channel,¹⁸ always hints that there are few domestic problems in Russia, but that the situation abroad is far worse; it mainly informs its viewers about Russia’s external enemies, explaining why it is thus vital to focus on foreign affairs.

The second factor is that the Kremlin’s propaganda creates an environment of fear and impending doom that causes uncertainty in society. Such an environment makes people vulnerable, concerned and unsure

¹⁴ ‘Whataboutism’ is the Kremlin’s propaganda technique to distract attention away from criticism of the Kremlin and onto the irrelevant actions of other countries.

¹⁵ According to the EU sanctions list. See Council of the European Union, ‘List of Persons and Entities Under EU Restrictive Measures over the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine’, Press Release, 15 September 2015, accessed at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/09/pdf/20160915-list-of-designated-persons-and-entities_pdf/ on 26 November 2015.

¹⁶ L. Kelly, ‘Russia Can Turn US to Radioactive Ash—Kremlin-Backed Journalist’, *Reuters*, 16 March 2014, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-russia-kiselyov-idUSL6N0MD0P920140316> on 26 November 2016.

¹⁷ P. Pomerantsev, ‘Russia and the Menace of Unreality: How Vladimir Putin is Revolutionizing Information Warfare’, *The Atlantic*, 9 September 2014.

¹⁸ Levada Centre, ‘Российский медиа-ландшафт: телевидение, пресса, Интернет’ [Russia’s Media Landscape: TV, Press, Internet], 17 June 2014, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/old/17-06-2014/rossiiskii-media-landshaft-televidenie-pressa-internet> on 25 November 2016.



of what is coming next. Thus, people do not want to leave their comfort zone: they have neither the willingness to influence government nor the understanding and experience of how it could be done. Watching Russian TV leads to an individual's belief in justice and kindness in the world falling dramatically.¹⁹ This also happens to those who have experienced tragic events. Their belief in their ability to control their own life and in people's kindness also decreases slightly. The media's ostensible aim is to inform Russians about the situation in the world, and this can sometimes lead to such feelings of insecurity. However, the propagandist media has another aim, which is to influence the emotions and behaviour of society and to destabilise the psychological condition of individuals.²⁰

The third factor is that the Kremlin's propaganda discredits unofficial sources and establishes the idea that all media sources lie. Once this has happened, people become sceptical about any opinion that differs from the official one. In this way, propagandists create an alternative reality in which everyone has their own truth and all information is relative. The easy proliferation of fake news and the rapid dissemination of Facebook shares and retweets on the Internet makes it the perfect platform for fulfilling such a concept. The Kremlin employs 'troll factories' to create dozens of comments on the websites of major news outlets, to maintain Facebook accounts and to tweet as much as 50 times a day per account.²¹ The Internet offers a good platform on which to distribute fake photos and reports, which are then later used as 'facts' on Russia's federal TV news and TV shows. The Russian Foreign Ministry and its embassies use Twitter and Facebook. As an example of how this benefits Russia, the Russian Embassy in London posted a cartoon in which members of the Eurozone are portrayed as scared pigs flying the rainbow flag of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and Russia is portrayed as a strong bear. The tweet that accompanies this says: 'If Russia is in decline, why worry? Maybe, real worry is West's decline and that we manage things better'.²² Humour and sarcasm are very persuasive tools. The Russian propagandists flood the social networks with them to show

¹⁹ А.Бессарабова, 'Два дня наедине с телевизором' [Two Days Face to Face with Television], *Novaya Gazeta*, 29 June 2016, accessed at <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/06/29/69088-dva-dnya-naedine-s-televisorom> on 23 November 2016.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Please. Pomerantsev, 'Russia and the Menace of Unreality'.

²² Russian Embassy, Twitter, 22 October 2016, accessed at <https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassy/status/789903797803970560> on 23 November 2016.



that Europe is paranoid about Russia's threat: the idea is promoted that Russia is much stronger than the West and that Europe should first deal with its own problems, such as the economic crisis. Another instrument that is used to sow doubt and confusion is the promotion of conspiracy theories. The latest theory is about the MH17 tragedy and confirms that the truth is a lost cause: the Russian propagandists have spread the idea that it cannot be established whether the aircraft was shot down by a Ukrainian aircraft or attacked by a US operation.²³

The EU: how the image of 'the enemy' was created

Anti-Western propaganda has increased dramatically since the 2011–12 Russian protests,²⁴ with the aim of discrediting the protest movement in Russia. This anti-Western and anti-democratic propaganda campaign became the basis for the anti-Ukrainian wave of propaganda, which portrayed the Ukrainian regime as fascist. At that time the role of the propagandists was to divert attention to the myth that Russia has external enemies and is standing up and fighting for peace. Propaganda increases people's feelings of superiority, which pushes domestic problems, such as the economic crisis, into second place. Confrontation with the West is considered as proof of the re-emerging greatness of Russia. This satisfies people and makes them feel significant. The feeling of belonging to a great Russia is very strong, both for those who are better informed and for the average person. There is only one official trusted image of the world for the majority of Russians, but even many of the better informed, who use alternative independent media, believe that the Russian state's portrayal of the world is correct.²⁵ The main

²³ R. Su, 'Conspiracy Theory: MH17 Actually the Lost MH370, Ukraine Wreckage "Not MH17"', *International Business Times*, 26 July 2014, accessed at <http://www.ibtimes.com.au/conspiracy-theory-mh17-actually-lost-mh370-ukraine-wreckage-not-mh17-1348415> on 23 November 2016; T. Parfitt, 'Russia Says MH17 was Shot Down by Plane Missiles', 14 November 2014, accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/11232683/Russia-says-MH17-was-shot-down-by-plane-missiles.html> on 23 November 2016.

²⁴ The 2011–12 Russian protests began in 2011 as protests against unfair parliamentary elections and continued throughout the country into 2012. Most protesters took to the streets to voice their dissatisfaction with the fact that the state had become unaccountable and authoritarian. See D. Volkov, 'Does Russia's Protest Movement have a Future?', 24 February 2014, accessed at <http://imrussia.org/en/analysis/nation/2184-does-russias-protest-movement-have-a-future> on 25 January 2017.

²⁵ D. Volkov, 'Родина вне критики. Социолог Денис Волков о том, как россияне принимают официальную версию событий' [Motherland Beyond Criticism. Sociologist Denis Volkov on Russians' Perception of Official Version of Events], *Vedomosti*, 17 March 2016, accessed at <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2016/03/18/634111-rodina-kritiki> on 23 November 2016.



narratives may contradict each other, but there is a set of storylines that is repeated frequently and promoted by the pro-Kremlin media.

In a reality in which all media sources lie, the propagandists have a simple story to tell: the US is trying to rule the world, the EU is a puppet of the US, and only Putin's Russia is brave enough and strong enough to stop it. In order to win, it is necessary to create an enemy—to this end the EU is portrayed through three main narratives: first, that it is an aggressive and expansionist entity, which wants to destroy Russia; second, that it is a weak union, close to collapse, which cannot cope with any global challenges; and third that it does not have any moral values, in contrast to Russia, which is positioned as the defender of traditional values at home and abroad.

Having laid out the Soviet history regarding information use and today's militaristic propaganda, we come to an assessment of why there is only a small number of Russians who have positive views of the EU. According to an analysis by the Public Policy and Management Institute, the EU is among the least favourably viewed group of countries and international organisations in Russia.²⁶ Only 23% hold a positive opinion of the EU.²⁷ Overall, public opinion of Russia's relationship with the EU is negative.²⁸ When describing the EU, the most common terms used by Russian respondents were 'hypocritical', 'multicultural' and 'arrogant'.²⁹ Sixty-four per cent of Russians hear about the EU frequently (more or less every day), and the top three information sources in Russia for information about the EU are television, online news and social media.³⁰

Myth 1: the EU is an aggressive and interventionist entity

After the Ukrainian crisis, the EU's image was destroyed. Russian perceptions of the EU in early 2013 were quite positive³¹ in comparison to a year and a half later. At this time 23% of Russians considered Europe as potential aggressors and 23% as the 'guardian of US policy on the Eurasian continent'.³² Most agreed that the West was hostile to

²⁶ The Public Policy and Management Institute, *Analysis of the Perception of the EU*, 308.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 308.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 307–8.

³¹ EU Institute for Security Studies, *Strategic Communications East and South* (France, 2016), 20.

³² *Ibid.*



Russia, which could be seen in sanctions (55%) and in the ‘information war’ (44%).³³ Russian state media promotes the idea that sanctions do not work but rather hurt the EU more, and should even be seen as an opportunity to develop import substitution (in Russia’s own market).³⁴ Forty-one per cent of Russians agree that the West is aggressive towards Russia because of the intention to seize Russia’s natural resources.³⁵ This myth has been spread by Russian public figures such as Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Russian Security Council.³⁶

The EU is condemned for double standards when it comes to the annexation of Crimea.³⁷ On the First Channel TV show *Vremya Pokazet* [Time Will Tell], Leonid Polyakov, a member of the advisory council of the Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research, stated that the EU is a threat to Russia and forces its member states to adopt Rus-sophobic policies, against the wishes of the majority of its societies.³⁸ The same organisation’s director of policy studies, Sergei Markov, has claimed that the West wants to divide Russians, thereby eliminating the Great Russian nation.³⁹

To convince the Russian audience that the negotiations of Ukraine and Georgia with the EU were a bad idea, the pro-Kremlin media disseminated stories about the Eastern Partnership countries only being used for the purpose of relocating refugees and about how the approval of Association Agreements would lead Georgia and Ukraine to accept gay marriage. Stories suggesting that Ukraine would be used as the radioactive waste dump for Europe⁴⁰ have also been created to ensure that Russians are unwilling to join the EU, especially when the EU is

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Ntv.ru*, ‘Путин: “ответные санкции введены для защиты интересов россиян”’ [Putin: ‘Retaliatory Sanctions Imposed to Protect the Interests of Russians’], 18 September 2014, accessed at <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1216396/> on 26 November 2016.

³⁵ EU Institute for Security Studies, *Strategic Communications*, 20.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Russia Today*, ‘Putin: Crimea Similar to Kosovo, West is Rewriting Its Own Rule Book’, 18 March 2014, accessed at <https://www.rt.com/news/putin-address-parliament-crimea-562/> on 26 November 2016.

³⁸ *First Channel*, ‘Время покажет’ [Time Will Tell], 29 January 2016, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bs0T4nqI0Gg> on 26 November 2016.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ A. Samoznev, ‘Виталий Чуркин: Украина превращается в “ядерную свалку” Европы’ [Vitakii Churkin: Ukraine is Becoming the Radioactive Waste Disposal Dump of Europe], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 23 May 2016, accessed at <https://rg.ru/2016/05/23/vitalij-churkin-ukraina-prevrashchaetsia-v-iadernuiu-svalku-evropy.html> on 26 November 2016.



portrayed as paranoid, focusing on imagined threats from Russia and ignoring the real problems to its south.

In reality, up until the illegal annexation of Crimea, the West and Russia had been cooperating for a long time. The EU formalised its cooperation with Russia in a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1994. In 1997 Russia became a member of the G8, until its suspension due to the illegal annexation of Crimea, and since 2012 Russia has been a member of the WTO.⁴¹

Myth 2: the almost-collapsed EU and its challenges

The second myth is that the EU is weak, is facing a lot of challenges and will collapse soon. Any division in the EU or challenge it faces is picked up on and amplified. Europe is accused of excessive tolerance for refugees, which is used to illustrate that equality and democratic rights are not desirable, while suggesting that migration will destroy Europe. Moreover, according to the propagandists, without the help of Russia, Europe will not survive. On the TV programme *Vesti Nedeli* it has been claimed that the EU will soon collapse under the weight of the problems connected to refugees.⁴² The ‘Lisa case’, concerning a girl of Russian origin who was raped by migrants, was one of the disinformation stories that appeared on the main Russian TV channel to illustrate the dangerous situation in Europe.⁴³ On 26 October 2016, First Channel reported that the Austrian Supreme Court had acquitted a refugee of raping a 10-year-old boy because the refugee did not speak German and did not understand that the boy had said ‘no’.⁴⁴ In reality, the Iraqi refugee has not been acquitted and is still in custody, awaiting a new trial which will be held in 2017. The refugee crisis is used in Russian media headlines to incite fear and to convince Rus-

⁴¹ European External Action Service, ‘Disinformation Review Issue 37’, 30 August 2016, accessed at <http://us11.campaign-archive2.com/?u=cd23226ada1699a77000eb60b&id=2b554637e3#awesomeshare> on 26 November 2016.

⁴² *Vesti Nedeli*, ‘Вести Недели с Дмитрием Киселевым’ [The Week’s News with Dmitry Kiselev], 28 February 2016, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVRuUXuqLyQ> on 23 November 2016.

⁴³ NATO, ‘The “Lisa Case”: Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation’, 2016, accessed at <http://nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/lisa-case-germany-target-russian-disinformation/EN/index.htm> on 26 November 2016.

⁴⁴ Deutsche Welle, ‘Как беженца, обвиняемого в Австрии в изнасиловании, “оправдал” только Первый канал’ [First Channel ‘Acquitted’ the Refugee in Austria Accused of Rape], 27 October 2016, accessed at <http://www.dw.com/ru/как-беженца-обвиняемого-в-австрии-в-изнасиловании-оправдал-только-первый-канал/a-36176549> on 23 November 2016.



sians that beyond the country's borders lies a very dangerous world. While the state-controlled media have blamed European tolerance for the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, the news of an Uzbek migrant killing a child in Moscow was not even reported on Russian state TV.⁴⁵

The refugee crisis is not the only narrative used for disinformation: pro-Kremlin media have frequently begun to disinform the Russian audience that fascism and Nazism are on the rise in Europe. To strengthen the image of an enemy, it is necessary to link it with narratives that cause negative feelings. To this end, propagandists are uniting society under the idea of the glorifying victory of the Second World War and are implying that there is a boost in fascism and Nazism taking place beyond Russia's borders. Glorification of the victory over Nazism is used in Russia's state media not only to strengthen the image of the enemy but also to heighten feelings of superiority. Once Russia had defeated the Nazis it would never allow Nazism to rise again. The word 'fascist' in Russian has the meaning of a 'bad' person and is used to a lesser extent in connection with the ideology. The words fascism and Nazism often appear in TV shows and pro-Kremlin news outlets in connection with the West: the *Pravda* news website has claimed that Nazism is on the rise in Europe because of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's policies.⁴⁶ Also when speaking of Germany, Head of the Parliamentary Committee for Security and Anti-Corruption Irina Yarovaya informed the parliament that many countries are encouraging fascism and Nazism as a policy instrument.⁴⁷

Myth 3: a 'decadent' EU

Putin has criticised the West for 'denying moral principles and traditional identities', while positioning Russia as the defender of traditional values. In a speech at the Valdai Club he claimed that many Euro-Atlantic countries are rejecting their roots, including their Christian

⁴⁵ EU Institute for Security Studies, *Strategic Communications*.

⁴⁶ V. Gorschenin, 'Европейский бал "чистокровных арийцев" [European Ball of 'Purebred Aryans']', *Pravda.ru*, 31 May 2016, accessed at <http://www.pravda.ru/world/31-05-2016/1302317-ball-0/> on 23 November 2016.

⁴⁷ *Ren TV*, 'Яровая рассказала о "зловещем знаке возрождения нацизма в мире"' [Yarovaya Tells of an 'Ominous Sign of the Revival of Nazism in the World'], 2 December 2015, accessed at <http://ren.tv/novosti/2015-12-02/yarovaya-rasskazala-o-zloveshchem-znake-vozhrozhdeniya-nacizma-v-mire> on 23 November 2016.



values.⁴⁸ Pro-Kremlin propagandists emphasise Russia's conservative values and Orthodox morals, while suggesting that Europe's values of human rights and gender equality have resulted in attempts to legalise paedophilia.⁴⁹

Democratic values, freedom of speech and gender equality are portrayed as major attacks on Christianity and as the West's attempt to deny the existence of Russian civilisation. On the TV show *Bolshinstvo* [Majority] on NTV, one of the most watched TV channels,⁵⁰ Maksym Shevchenko, the host, stated that the European Parliament promotes the gay movement in Europe and is trying to eliminate the male and female identities in France.⁵¹ The EU is portrayed as decadent and lacking in Christian values. The propagandists are leading the war against Western lifestyles, Western civilisation and Western identity, promoting instead the 'Russian world'—a moral alternative to so-called Gay Europe. In reality, as we know, there are eight political groups in the European Parliament, of which the biggest is the European People's Party, which promotes values derived from Christian Democratic traditions.⁵²

The state-controlled media portrays Russians as traditional, even though public opinion polls show that Russians are relatively liberal in their values. According to the Levada Centre, Russians take quite liberal views on a number of issues. More than half of Russians consider there to be nothing wrong with premarital sex, a third do not view love as a prerequisite for sex and a quarter consider there to be nothing wrong with marital infidelity.⁵³ Only 20% of Russians believe that the government should take any measures to limit or prevent abortions.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ *President of Russia*, 'Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club', 19 September 2013, accessed at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243> on 23 November 2016.

⁴⁹ Gorschenin, 'Европейский бал "чистокровных арийцев"' [European Ball of 'Purebred Aryans'].

⁵⁰ Levada Centre, 'Российский медиа-ландшафт [Russia's Media Landscape].

⁵¹ NTV, 'Bolshinstvo', 12 February 2016, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaogDBURuSw&index=2&list=PLSgy-gJ-dkS8PrhuBZ9u4PiJmMjOSBR8e> on 23 November 2016.

⁵² European Parliamentary Research Service, 'Size of the Political Groups and Proportion of Members in Each Political Group', 25 November 2014, accessed at <https://epthinktank.eu/2014/11/26/european-parliament-facts-and-figures/ep-facts-and-figures-fig-1/> on 23 November 2016.

⁵³ Levada Centre, 'Измены - табу или норма' [Betrayal—A Taboo or a Norm], 19 February 2015, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2015/02/19/izmeny-tabu-ili-norma/> on 23 November 2015.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* This bears comparison with the 40% of Americans who believe abortion should be illegal.



The rise and fall of anti-Western sentiment

During recent years the Kremlin's propaganda has become more aggressive; Russia's domestic policy and control over its non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil activists have been tougher, and the literature available to the public has become increasingly full of aggressive and hostile language that calls for the return of the Cold War. As a result, over the past 16 years Russian society has been a boiling frog.⁵⁵ However, anti-Western sentiment is decreasing slightly as a result of the sanctions in place, the economic situation and the understanding that Russia's policy is causing a fall in living standards. People have become tired of the military hysteria, and anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian sentiment is weakening.⁵⁶ Some 12% of Russians do not believe what the pro-Kremlin media reports.⁵⁷ Talks and threats about a Third World War and nuclear weapons do not necessarily make people believe in such a reality, but they do make people consider the problems should war happen. People consider that *à la guerre comme à la guerre*, and thus take the attitude that 'we must suffer'. Today in Russia there is a continuous battle between the fridge and the TV: society's living conditions versus the state's propaganda. So far the propaganda has done its job successfully, resulting in the reluctance of the majority of Russians to participate in any political protests. Russians have chosen to hide their discontent in depression rather than come out onto the streets to protest.⁵⁸ This economic, political and social depression could last for years.⁵⁹ But only time will tell who the winner is, depending on both whether the contents of the

⁵⁵ A. Plotnikova, 'Российская оппозиция говорит о клептократии, «языке войны» и новом информационном ресурсе' [Russian Opposition Speaks About Kleptocracy, 'Language of War' and New Information Resource], *Golos Ameriki*, 14 October 2016, accessed at <http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/ai-free-russia-forum/3551082.html> on 26 November 2016.

⁵⁶ *Glavkom*, 'Директор «Левада-Центра» Лев Гудков: Российское общество страдает от очень сильных, болезненных комплексов' [Levada Centre Director Lev Gudkov: Russian Society Suffers from Strong Painful Complexes], 9 June 2015, accessed at <http://glavcom.ua/interviews/130004-direktor-%C2%ABlevada-tsentra%C2%BB-lev-gudkov-rossijskoe-obshchestvo-stradaet-ot-ochen-silnyh-boleznennyh-kompleksov.html> on 24 November 2016.

⁵⁷ M. Sokolov, 'Лев Гудков: "12% не поддается телепропаганде"' [Lev Gudkov: '12% of People Are Not Manipulated by Propaganda'], *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 10 February 2016, accessed at <http://www.svoboda.org/a/27543189.html> on 23 November 2016.

⁵⁸ Levada Centre, 'Протестный потенциал' [Protest Potential], 11 November 2016, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/11/protestnyj-potentsial-5/> on 23 November 2016.

⁵⁹ A. Kolesnikov, 'Russia's War: Fridge vs. TV', *The Moscow Times*, 25 October 2015, accessed at <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russias-war-fridge-vs-tv-50460> on 23 November 2016.



refrigerator dramatically decrease and whether blaming mythical enemies for every failure remains an effective solution.

Conclusion

The EU's image has been increasingly damaged by hostile and emotional disinformation messages. By over-emphasising the EU's weaknesses and distorting European values, the Kremlin's propaganda has effectively shaped Russian society's perceptions of the EU. Given the Kremlin's control over media sources, it is complicated to counteract the Kremlin's narratives in Russia. But it should not be forgotten that Russia's clever use of information is a non-military measure used by the authoritarian state to achieve its policy goals. Hence, coherent monitoring of the Russian media and analysis of pro-Kremlin disinformation are of crucial importance. These will help the EU to better predict Russia's future policies and be prepared to react. Even though the European External Action Service (EEAS) East Stratcom Task Force has already started to forecast, address and respond to disinformation, it should become a fully fledged unit of the EEAS and be given the necessary financial assistance.

Moreover, it would be a mistake to believe that the Kremlin's Russian-language propaganda ends within Russian borders. The Russian language is a major immigrant language, spoken widely in the EU.⁶⁰ There is a large Russian-speaking community in the Baltic countries: 326,200 people of Russian origin live in Estonia, 557,100 in Latvia and 176,900 in Lithuania.⁶¹ Russian speakers get their information mostly from Russian TV channels and place a huge amount of trust in Russia's state-controlled media. To weaken the influence of the Kremlin's propaganda, the EU should employ additional staff to build a coherent strategy and an effective narrative for the EU, based on analyses of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives, the target audience and regional differences.

⁶⁰ TNS Opinion & Social, *Special Eurobarometer 386: Europeans and Their Languages* (Brussels, June 2012), accessed at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf on 24 November 2016.

⁶¹ Statistical Office of Estonia, Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, Statistics Lithuania, *2011 Population and Housing Censuses in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania* (2015), accessed at <http://osp.stat.gov.lt/services-portlet/pub-edition-file?id=19698> on 24 November 2016.



The Kremlin tries to unite itself with Russian compatriots and Russians under the concept of the Russian world. This ideology incorporates Russian culture, history, traditions, a shared heritage and Orthodox morals. Aleksandr Dugin, the Russian ideologue, has stated that Eurasianism is the opposite of Western civilisation and that democratic values and liberty are foreign to Russia and should not prevail over the interests of the state.⁶² During Soviet times it was clear that there were two Russian worlds: the one within Soviet borders and the one of Russian emigration. Many intellectuals immigrated to the US and Europe and never associated themselves with the Soviet regime but rather with their motherland, culture and traditions. Nowadays there is only one Russian world, which combines the authoritarian regime there with the Russian language and culture.

However, there are many Russians who share European values and it would be a huge miscommunication to equate Russia, the Russian culture and the Russian language with Russia's current authority. There is a need to counterbalance the concept of the Russian world and to counteract the Kremlin's monopoly over Russian culture and language by not only explaining but differentiating between the Kremlin's pseudo-values and Russian culture and language.

It is no less important in our post-truth world to establish that the discussion is not about subjective versus objective information but about the authoritative state's centralised attempts to achieve its policy goals. There are journalists and news outlets that provide subjective information in various countries because of financial circumstances or the fear of losing their audience, but these cannot be compared with the whole teams of artistic TV show makers and anchors, 'troll factories' and news outlet propagandists who are creating a non-existent reality to achieve the Kremlin's ambitions.

Most importantly the EU can only foster its image as a strong Union if it acts as one. The EU should speak with one voice, especially on maintaining sanctions against Russia and imposing further sanctions on propagandist media staff.

⁶² Vojtiskova et al., *The Bear in Sheep's Clothing*.



Recommendations

- More coherent monitoring of the media and analysis of the Kremlin's disinformation are essential to help the EU better predict Russia's future policies and be prepared to react. To achieve this aim, the EEAS East Stratcom Unit should become a fully fledged unit and be given the necessary financial assistance.
- To weaken the influence of the Kremlin's propaganda, the EU should employ staff to build a coherent strategy and craft an effective narrative for the EU based on the target audience, a regional analysis and research into pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives.
- To improve awareness and highlight the difference between Russia and the Kremlin, it is essential to differentiate between Russian culture, language and traditions, on the one hand, and Russia's current authority, on the other. Moreover, it is no less important to establish that the discussion is not about subjective versus objective information but about the authoritative state's attempts to manipulate audiences to achieve policy goals.
- The EU should speak with one voice, especially on maintaining sanctions against Russia. It should also expand personal sanctions for propagandist media staff.

About the author

Kristina Potapova focuses on research in the area of Russia's information warfare and Russia's influence in the EU. Potapova was a team member at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies from June 2016 to December 2016. Previously, she conducted research on Russia's disinformation campaigns at the International Centre for Defence and Security and worked at the Russia field office of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.



Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and likeminded political values.

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies
Rue du Commerce 20
Brussels, BE 1000

For more information please visit: www.martenscentre.eu

External editing: Communicative English bvba

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.
© Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies 2017

The European Parliament and the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies assume no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or their subsequent use.

Sole responsibility lies with the author of this publication.

