

# **The Shadow of Russian Imperialism: Russian Propaganda Models Since February 2022, and Their Legal Aspect.**

Galena Slavova, PhD ABD, Sofia State University, free lance lecturer and Tianjin Foreign Studies University, PRC for 2022/2023

**The European Union (EU) has not been paying adequate attention to the effect of the Russian propaganda for a long time. When it comes to propaganda termed as ‘democratic,’ ‘communist,’ or things regarding ‘freedom,’ Western societies have been exposed to a real imperial and almost colonial ideological dependence from the former world power of the Soviet Union, which has historically devolved to the terroristic state of the Russian Federation. The consequences of this neglect are now clear to be seen in many political tendencies among certain countries of the former Warsaw Pact, especially in the aspect of public response to the war in Ukraine.**

Some Eastern European countries, already members of the EU, have made some steps in the opposite direction. Poland fits this description. Yet, other countries seem too deeply entrenched in this problem and show how high, in social media and political systems, Russian propaganda has been promoted. Bulgaria fits this description. There are sporadic legislative attempts to solve the problem of Russian propaganda. This includes bans on media outlets like Sputnik and Russia Today, or the expulsion of certain Russian diplomatic staff in several Eastern European countries. Yet, it seems that has come too late. The targeting of high social level propaganda supporters<sup>1</sup> has damaged not only the current situation, but it seems to have had a huge social impact of certain generations in the former Eastern Bloc countries, especially in the Balkans.

This is reflected by the following quote according to Czech strategic communications expert Denisa Hejlová<sup>2</sup>. “The European Union is certainly in an information war with Russia. Sadly, its leaders have only realised this at the cost of many civilian deaths.”

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<sup>1</sup> Zahova, A.: EU underestimates Russian propaganda, EUROACTIV.cz, 10 March 2022

<sup>2</sup> Id

At the same time, summarizing the Russian imperial interest through locating huge number of secret service agents in the Balkans, the investigative journalist Christo Grozev – recently named and targeted by Moscow -- in a January, 2023 podcast interview<sup>3</sup> stated that “There is the concept in two Russian services as GRU (Главное разведывательное управление<sup>4</sup>) and SVR (Служба внешней разведки Российской Федерации<sup>5</sup>) that the Balkans is an easy target. A huge percent of the population consists of pro-Russian supporters who can spread propaganda willingly and freely, and a huge number of people are willing to cooperate, because of the lower socio-economic status., for cheap compensation.” Together with these two factors, Grozev mentioned that Russia always considered Balkans as geo-politically related to the Russian zone of interest, and this propaganda is a way to get Bulgaria back into the Russian sphere. Due to these two reasons there is a disproportionate number of Balkan experts in GRU and SFR services<sup>6</sup>. As a result of this and long before the considered time span here, there was an attempted 2016 coup in Montenegro, and a few months earlier, Bulgarian services prevented a similar coup attempt in Bulgaria, organized by GRU officers. In a way, both of these coups resemble the January 6<sup>th</sup> events in Washington, DC.

This leads one to think of the regulation adopted by the EU Council suspending the Russian outlets of Sputnik and the Russia Today (RT) television. EU countries agreed that these media outlets were used as a weapon of the Russian state. Experts confirm that the ban was the right decision and did not breach press freedom and plurality principles. According to Czech cyber activist Vít Kučík, Sputnik and RT were “...gates for Russian demagogic propaganda to European cyberspace<sup>7</sup>” as hundreds of disinformation websites were retaking reframing their narratives.

Despite previous efforts by EU institutions to stop Russian propaganda, disinformation campaigns have spread across Europe in recent years. For example, the “East Stratcom” group<sup>8</sup> established to combat Russian propaganda was “poorly managed and quite incompetent,” Hejlová said<sup>9</sup>. “Other EU officials, including EU Commissioner Věra Jourová, are also in the wrong for failing to respond adequately to the negative consequences of the

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<sup>3</sup> Kontrakomentar with Asen Genov, 16 Jan 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBaoNxV3Z8E>

<sup>4</sup> GRU/ГРУ is the foreign [military intelligence](#) agency of the [General Staff](#) of the [Armed Forces](#) of the [Russian Federation](#). The GRU controls the military intelligence service and [maintains its own special forces](#) units.

<sup>5</sup> SVR/СВР is Russia's external [intelligence agency](#), focusing mainly on civilian affairs. The SVR RF succeeded the [First Chief Directorate](#) (PGU) of the [KGB](#) in December 1991.<sup>[a]</sup> The SVR has its headquarters in the [Yasenevo District](#) of Moscow

<sup>6</sup> Id 2

<sup>7</sup> Id 1

<sup>8</sup> The East StratCom Task Force is a part of the European External Action Service, focused on “effective communication” and promotion of European Union activities in Eastern Europe and beyond.

<sup>9</sup> Id 1

spread of Russian propaganda on social media and to regulate and penalise its owners,” she added.

Following the decisions and legal measures taken by the Czech government against the Russian propaganda, I will explore here how Russian propaganda has evolved in Bulgaria in the weeks before and since the start of the Ukrainian crisis. Bulgaria is a former Eastern Bloc state, considered one of the most severely affected by Russian imperialistic attempts, experiencing for decades the Russian suppression facilitated by KGB/FSB criminal circles<sup>10</sup>. Sectors of the country have been infiltrated by KGB high-profile legal agents embedded deep into its political and economic structures, and this has thus provided a favourable environment for overt propaganda manipulation of broad circles of Bulgarian society residing within the territory of Bulgaria. One also needs to remember that is a population of Russians residing temporary or permanently in Bulgaria<sup>11</sup>.

Following the research on the matter in this presentation, I will provide statistics data and focus on three aspects of propaganda. These three are: Pro-Russian narratives, transferred through public channels; Russian hybrid cyber terrorism, both on government and sensitive sites; and legal loopholes in Bulgarian national legislation, which has enabled massive Russian propaganda influx after February 2022.

## 1. PRO-RUSSIAN NARRATIVE, TRANSFERRED THROUGH PUBLIC CHANNELS

Pro-Russian narratives have transferred through different channels to the public, and its main topics and themes, including the common trend in topics choice and their propaganda manipulation are logically possible considering several factors. This includes a considerate number of Russian expats residing permanently or temporary in Bulgaria, with a considerate percentage of them being GRU or SVR currently or former associates<sup>12</sup>. There has been decades of neglected manipulation of Bulgarian history towards Russian imperial propaganda including some specific cultural phenomena like superstitious, religious and occult biases, and high-profile media experts and leaders, deliberately funded by Russian services to promulgate Russian propaganda narrative.

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<sup>10</sup> As above mentioned units GRU and SVR

<sup>11</sup> Some lore estimates are up to 500 000 people, yet the national statistic

<sup>12</sup> Id 2 and 3

1.1 The factor related with the number of Russian expats residing in Bulgaria is a controversial one. According to the census of 2011, Russians currently living in Bulgaria numbered at 9978 people (0.13%) of the total population. That is not as much as it was in 2001 when they were almost twice more<sup>13</sup> The 2019 figures presents considerable increase of 31,679 people, yet recent rumours amounts them to bet 500,000 people. That is far exaggerated considering that the total number of expats of all nationalities living in Bulgaria for 2022 is 114,831 people (where the Russian diaspora tops other expat diasporas)<sup>14</sup> Also, there are many Russians continuously travelling on business between several Balkan countries, which makes the effective number of Russians working in and for Bulgaria bigger than what the statistics shows. Definitely a considerable increase of Russian citizens is located in Bulgaria, far more in the 2020s than back in 2001. Most of these people are dealing with business and, as stated by Christo Grozev in an interview, it is not a problem considerable of the number of these businessmen who can be traced back to their associations with GRU at the time<sup>15</sup> Recently, many of the itinerary Russian expats between Balkan countries were outlined as active GRU agents or liaison officers responsible for number of political interventions including Eduard Shishmakov (Едуард Шишмаков) and Vladimir Moiseev (Владимир Николаевич Мойсеев). They were convicted for the Montenegro coup in 2016, and they were confirmed to be visiting Bulgaria numerous times<sup>16</sup>. Consider the numbers of agencies still organizing the immigration of Russians to Bulgaria, no matter the collective European trend to stop Russian migration to EU states after February 2022.

1.2 Simultaneously with the increase of the Russian expat population in Bulgaria, especially at the down of the attack on Ukraine, the Russian media propaganda messages in local media surged 10 times since the beginning of the war against Ukraine. This has been summarized by Dimiter Vatzov, president of Humanitarian and Social Research Foundation (FHSI) which conducted an independent research on the issue<sup>17</sup>. There were average of 39 pro-Kremlin articles daily in Bulgarian online media before February 24, 2022, and since the

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<sup>13</sup> *Население по местоживееене, възраст и етническа група в България през 2011 година.. // НСИ, 2011*  
and *Население по местоживееене, пол и етническа група. // НСИ. Issues of the National Statistic institute of Bulgaria*

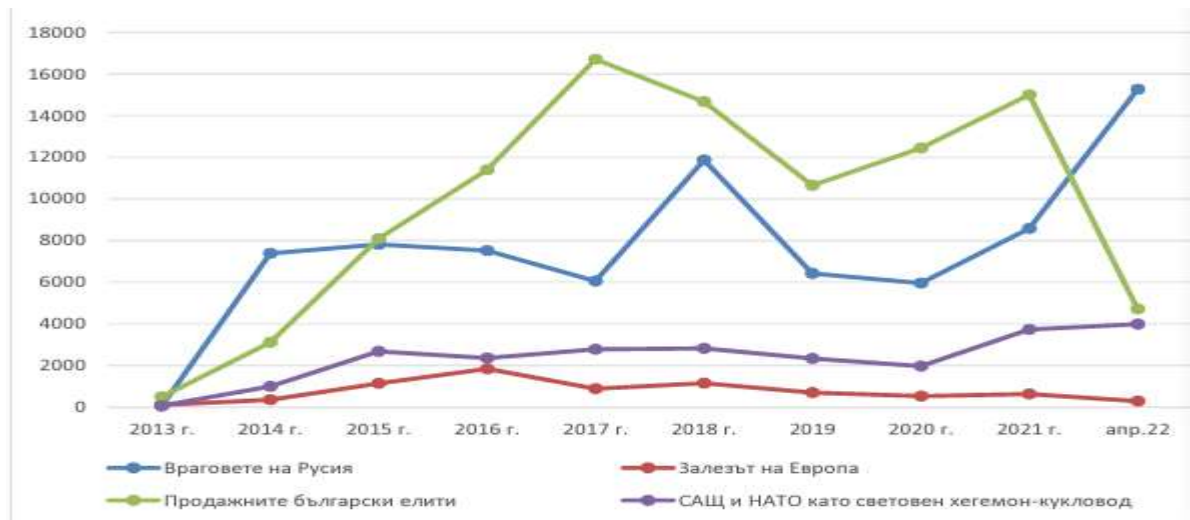
<sup>14</sup> *National Statistics Institute of Bulgaria*: <https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/11490/%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%BE-%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B6%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D1%87%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8>

<sup>15</sup> *Id 1*

<sup>16</sup> *Montenegro coup suspected Russian was frequent traveller to Bulgaria; Mediapool.com, 22 Nov 2018: <https://www.mediapool.bg/zapodozryan-za-neuspeshniya-prevrat-v-chna-gora-ruski-razuznavach-chesto-patuval-do-bulgaria-news286625.html> and Bellingcat research, 2018: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/11/22/second-gru-officer-indicted-montenegro-coup-unmasked/>*

<sup>17</sup> *Europe is dying, Russia will save it: how Russian propaganda in Bulgaria raised 10 times; Svobodna Evropa; 16 May 2022: <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31851762.html>*

war start then pro-Kremlin publication activity raised to 397 articles daily<sup>18</sup>. The following graph can illustrate the increase by years of all pro-Kremlin narratives in Bulgarian online media<sup>19</sup>.



1.3 The topics of these narratives of the pro-Kremlin online media propaganda in Bulgaria and several common topics can be outlined within several general messages<sup>20</sup>. They are as follows:

1. USA and NATO and the Western countries crave for global dominance (vocabulary like ‘collective West’, ‘anti-Russia’, and ‘de-Russification’ are used in the detailed messages)<sup>21</sup>, blue line in the graph;
2. The western-paid liberal elites are helping them in that (words like *genderist*, *commercialists*, and *screaming liberals* are the tokens in these messages) – green line;
3. Europe is dying (tokens are *post-West*, and *USA protectorates*) – red line; and
4. Russia is reviving and becomes inevitably the sole saviour of Europe (token words *highly effective* (weapons), *Russian Triad*, and *Russian World* (русский мир)<sup>22</sup> – purple line.

There are also Russian propaganda statements that economic sanctions against Russia harm only those who imposed them, and that Ukrainian leadership are neo-nazi<sup>23</sup>

These tokens expand to the culturally specific interests in astrology, occultism and the supernatural Bulgaria particularly, which is an aspect of popular culture. All the astrological channels narratives after February, 2022 has projected a total defeat of Ukraine in 3

<sup>18</sup> *Id*

<sup>19</sup> *Id*

<sup>20</sup> Vatzev, D.: Russian propaganda in Bulgarian online media pre and post-Ukranian war time, FHSI, Svobodna Evropa; Msy 2022

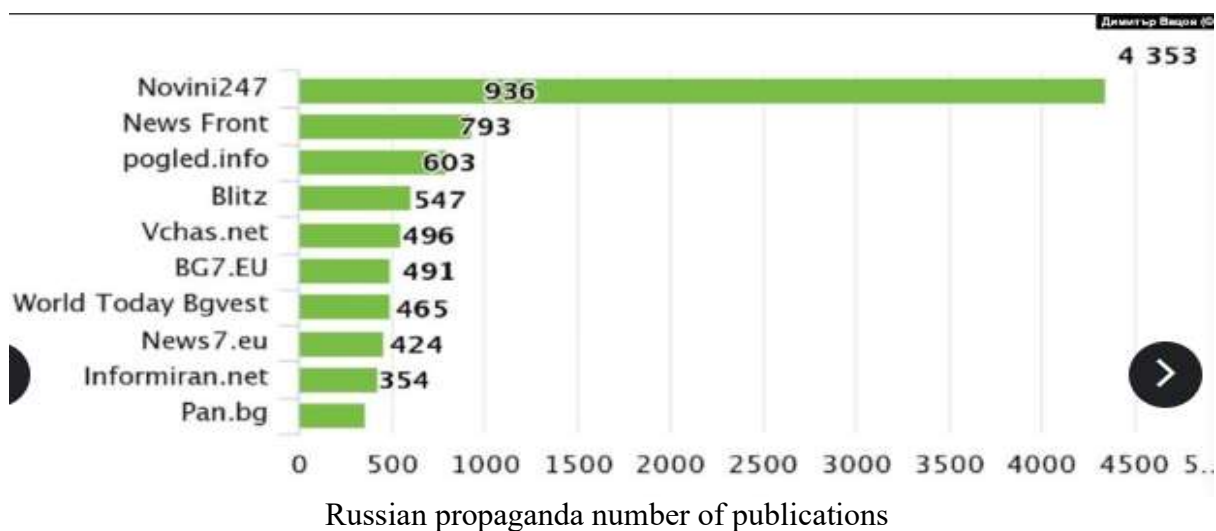
<sup>21</sup> English translation mine from Bulgarian sources

<sup>22</sup> Concept developed by Dugin in his publications.

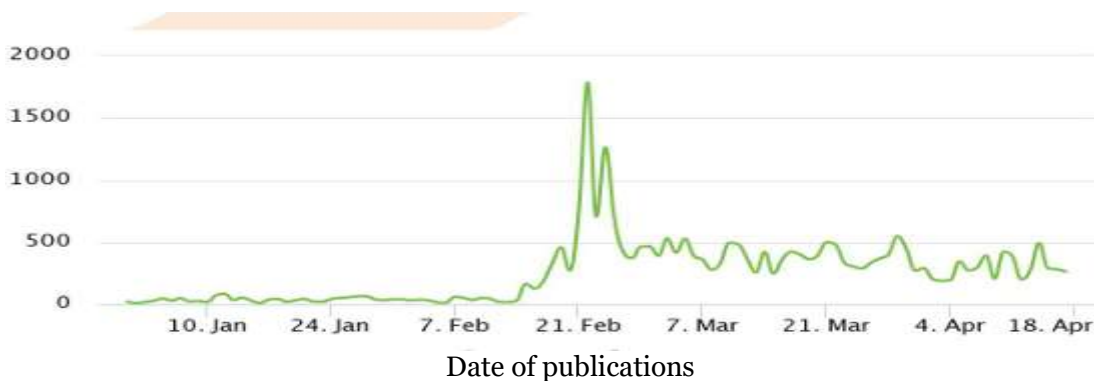
<sup>23</sup> *Id* 18

days/weeks/months, claiming that it is not war but a *minor special operation*. These voices are against any war support, stating that supernatural powers will punish Bulgaria for standing against the eternal Russian state. Some leading astrologist profiles were regularly published as Russian army propaganda, and as Russian church war propaganda video footage. Additionally, there is the propaganda influence on deep subconscious cultural levels of the local population, respectfully regarding middle and late age people in the middle class. This population are predominantly women.

As seen on 8000 sites and blogs content in Bulgarian with automated media monitoring system (SENSIKA), a search of key propaganda words the results in the following<sup>24</sup>;



Leading the pro-Russian media is the Novini247 site, which is an aggregator (bot). Second place is for NewsFront – a media, broadcasting in 10 languages, registered in Russian occupied Crimea. At top 10 of pro-Russian sites are also pogled.info, BLITZ/БЛИЦ, informiran.net and others<sup>25</sup>. The outline pro-Kremlin publications in Bulgaria upon months can be seen in the following graph<sup>26</sup>.



<sup>24</sup> Id

<sup>25</sup> Id

<sup>26</sup> Id

This mean that pro-Kremlin propaganda in Bulgarian online sites has average activity rate of 39 publications daily before the war, and respectfully 397 articles daily straight after the war's start – which means 10 times more, that makes situation much similar to the other point of current research

## 2. RUSSIAN HYBRID CYBER TERRORISM ON GOVERNMENT AND SENSITIVE SITES

The correlation between the media propaganda activity and cyber activity needs to be considered. It comes natural, as the term “hybrid war” includes the concept of “cyber war.” In this case, one should explore several hybrid war factors, triggered by pro-Kremlin agenda in the Balkans, particularly – Bulgaria. The concept of cyber attacks is related to threads or breaches of the information security, and that hinders the access to certain information services and systems. Then one can outline that cyber attacks means malicious activity attempting disruption of institutional sites or critical infrastructure components like power providers, national registers, and more. Bulgaria has been a target of such attacks for years. The hybrid part of it is when these attacks are accomplished by using different online media and numerous fake or machine-generated accounts<sup>27</sup> through different platforms. This includes Facebook, Twitter, forums, and the broadcasting of fake news and propaganda messages. Pro-Kremlin cyber and hybrid attacks are really rather intrusive even for major institutional sites and structures.

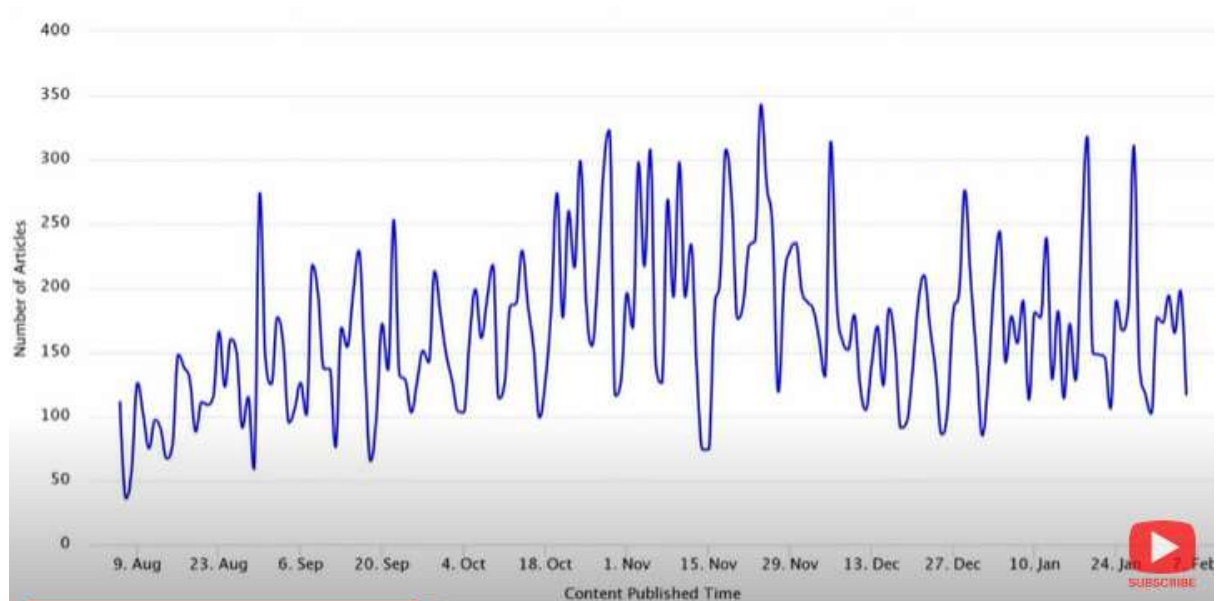
The cyber attacks at the same time overload the servers (a DDOS attack). This pattern of influences is to be seen around the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. Considering the hybrid/cyber interference, we can trace again the basic five narratives, mentioned in the previous part here. These are stable, basic narratives that are also very easy to trace in all different platforms, Facebook, Twitter and so on. The cultural environment in which these pro-Kremlin narratives differ due to the channels promoting it, following different states cultural differences. For example in France, these narratives are usually translated with a lot of cartoons. In Germany, memes are the main introductory media. As for the Balkan and most Eastern Europe countries, is used the concept of Slavic brotherhood and identity with the Russian nation. The Slavonic narrative is vaguely transferred to Poland and

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<sup>27</sup> Podcast Kontrakomentar with Asen Genov, March 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m09EscNcgGI>



Czech Republic, but very strong for Serbia, North Macedonia and Bulgaria<sup>28</sup>. This can be facilitated by internet tools, which are very flexible and allow the tailor-made design of the propaganda narratives. The number of different hybrid publications in different online channels (media, forums, chats, platforms, and more) in Bulgaria can give a clear idea about the intensity of the hybrid cyber attacks related to pro-Kremlin propaganda are aggregated on all five topics<sup>29</sup>.



This graphic presents relatively constant ‘white noise’ of the five pro-Kremlin narratives. This includes a propaganda framework that comprise publication not only in online media, but also in radio, TV and all trolls commenting on internet media platforms. The above graph is for Bulgarian language publications; although some sites are hosted in Russia, Serbia and other countries with big Bulgarian diasporas such as Germany, Netherlands, UK and Spain, Another for other European countries is much similar to this – no considerable peaks, neither drop in it in the aggregated topics.

Yet the intensity of the hybrid attacks dealing with the topic of Ukraine and war through pro-Kremlin sources shows considerable difference from the previous one. The graph is provided by Vassil Velichkov as of New Bulgarian University media research<sup>30</sup>. The average intensity of hybrid publications concerning Ukraine was 200/250 daily, as of January 24, 2022, a month before the attack on Ukraine. Intensity surged to 2000 per day (blogs, forums,

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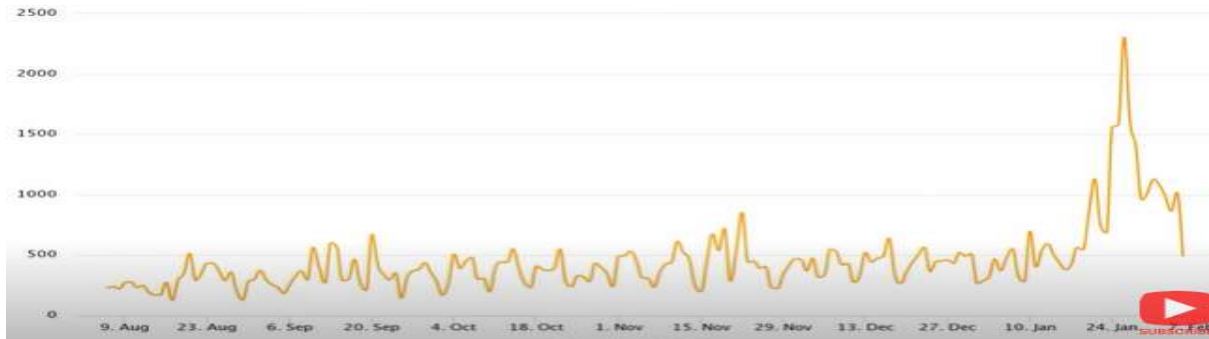
<sup>28</sup> Id

<sup>29</sup> Id

<sup>30</sup> Id



comments on media posts, and more. This narrative includes stories of aggression in Ukraine, chemical/biological Ukrainian threads topics and the topics regarding the Russian army's purported infallibility.



There comes the question how all these propaganda hybrid attacks are funded. The answer for Bulgarian case is rather complex. Depending on the channel in propaganda, if hybrid information is done, there can be three groups of hybrid attacks promoters:

1. Social influencers like journalists, media specialists, public figures and bloggers that are known to be paid for the propaganda they do in their channels. Usually, Bulgarian promoters of this type are known as *4000-bucks-receivers*<sup>31</sup> and there are several channels Russian services remunerate these people. Interesting here is to mention the astrological, occult and paranormal topic blogs and channels, where the speakers/bloggers are influencers to a specific, not well educated and easily convinced audience, which later can disseminate propaganda narrative for free;
2. human bots – paid people that publish hybrid attack content on 8-hours shift daily; and
3. automated bots (NHB-non human bots) – publishing 24/7 intensity around 110/150 publications per hour.

Based on the information collected by companies dealing with cyber security including pro-Kremlin propaganda, it is important to mention the legislation act promulgated by the European Commission (GDPR Regulation<sup>32</sup>) It was promulgated to regulate these activities.

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<sup>31</sup> Бориславова: Русия плаща по 4000 лв месечно на свои говорители в България, DW, June 2022: <https://www.dw.com/bg>

<sup>32</sup> General Data Protection Regulation: Regulation (EU) 2016/679

Unfortunately, the regulation was not so well designed considering the technological flexibility of cyber investigators, as some requirements are over-burdening for their activities. This leads to the third factor of this paper:

### 3. LEGAL LOOPHOLES IN BULGARIAN LEGISLATION

Does Bulgaria have a special legislation considering foreign propaganda influence, as like Czech Republic promulgates as mentioned at the beginning, or not? The answer is definitely no, at this time. Meanwhile this loophole was skilfully used by another part of Russian propaganda aspect influencing Bulgaria – pro-Russian political parties trying to influence on these topics through the Parliament.

A draft legislative act considering attempts against foreign espionage was proposed by Vazrazhdane political party at the beginning of November 2022<sup>33</sup>. The draft was promoted by Vazrazhdane party leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, as a sound attempt to implement an American legislative act into Bulgarian legal system for the benefit of national security. However, the draft proposed by Kostadinov seems a mere literary translation of an already promulgated in Russian Federations legislative act. How does it come that a promoted as American legal text seems to be in reality a Russian legislative act, personally approved by Putin, and tried to be introduced by a party leader, in a Parliament of an European Union member state?

*The Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)* was promulgated in USA in 1939, aiming at limiting the Nazi propaganda in the States at the dawn of the Second World War. However, at the down of Crimea annexation in 2012, Russia introduced Foreign Agents Registration<sup>34</sup>.

FARA has been severely criticised after WWII, as there are almost 90 claims against it. That has led to consistent relaxations in its articles, and it also led its limitation in 1990s to a mere Legal act concerning lobbying in the interest of foreign governments. Opposite is the situation in Russia, where the process of strengthening the measures to the extent that more than 200 media are already pronounced foreign agents and banned.<sup>35</sup>

The Bulgarian political party Vazrazhdane is closely following Putin's approach to promote a Bulgarian translation draft of the Russian Law on foreign agents. This draft requires self-registration of all physical and legal entities on an annual basis, directly or indirectly received

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<sup>33</sup> "Възраждане" предлага скандален проектозакон за медиите; *Facti.bg*, Nov, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022: <https://fakti.bg/bulgaria/726348-vazrazhdane-predlaga-skandalen-proektozakon-za-mediite>

<sup>34</sup> Stoynev, V.; Мракобесният закон на Костадинов: когато чужди агенти викат "дръжте чуждите агенти"; *DW*, Nov 1, 2022: <https://www.dw.com/bg>

<sup>35</sup>.*Id*

material at over 1000 BGN, and it deals with information dissemination in mass and online media, with training, and political activity. Such *agents* are to be further banned to accomplish any activity in state and private kindergartens, schools, universities, hospitals, police structures, the Bulgarian Science Academy, and more. Such entities later are banned to participate in political events and to claim state or local government aid.

Unfortunately as all previous legislative acts proposed from the Vazrazhdane party, this one follows the usual trend of being not professionally composed, lacking judicial expertise in its clauses, with a lot of mistakes in grammar and vocabulary. It lacks precision and simple judicial expertise. The above mentioned party this time presents legal incompetence and not any serious attempt to provide sustainable legal act, regulating the propaganda issues, especially at such politically crucial times. Yet as before was the case, with such legal draft proposals, Vazrazhdane attempts to gain time and divert the public attention focus from some important events towards fruitless political discussions<sup>36</sup>. Meanwhile expected military aid from Bulgarian to Ukraine hung in the balance.

The legal draft act on Foreign Agents Registration did not have a long life and any possibility for promulgation – proposing initially bad an unprofessionally comprised legislative act that never leads to anything useful. Yet, this proposed act can be considered as other pro-Kremlin attempt to interfere in Bulgarian politics and society.

Summarising the above mentioned channels for promoting pro-Kremlin propaganda since beginning of the attack on Ukraine, Bulgaria is a country of special interests, considerate efforts, and funds invested from Putin's regime. Based on former Russian secret services networks, carefully designed and planned on psychological, cultural and social aspects, involving thousands of people, technical equipment, aiming all social levels starting from higher governmental levels an leading to marginal, scarcely educated and low social status social groups, pro-Kremlin propaganda opens a wide hybrid war frontline at the times of real war in Europe.

However, with the continuous loss of Russian army on the real war front, the hybrid war also loses momentum. Russian propaganda's five narratives are naturally refuted by real events. So here comes the interesting moment which we are to see in near future with the problematic propaganda narrative, Are pro-Kremlin propaganda designers tend to change the narrative

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<sup>36</sup> *Id*

adapting it to new reality and how will be this change? Or are all real people channels used as high-profile social influencers going to change their performance as their social image suffers if they continue to insist on the classic propaganda messages? Which of the options are to happen will be seen in coming months? The real war results will be not only the victory on the real battle field, but also on the frontline of the almost invisible hybrid war.