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Strength and weakness of Russian propaganda

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In recent years, Russian propaganda has been particularly aggressive, and the growth of that aggression was directly proportional to the aggressive component in the Kremlin's foreign policy. At the same time, not only Russians but also residents of many other countries, both "near" and "far" abroad, became the objects of "information wars." Recently, there have been trends that, on the one hand, testify to the strengthening of the offensive component of Russian propaganda in Western countries. On the other hand, the shift in emphasis in the Kremlin's information policy opens up additional opportunities to debunk Russian propaganda myths.

Information operations

In terms of form, Russian propaganda can be conditionally divided into so-called "positive propaganda," that is, creating a positive image of one's country within the framework of the traditional understanding of "soft power" and destructive *information operations*, or, in the language of Russian special services, "active measures." The main goal of such "measures" is either the demoralization and destabilization of the enemy or attempts to influence their policy in favor of the adversary's purposes. At the same time, "positive propaganda," that is, the promotion of seemingly

innocent images of a cultural and historical nature, is also often used by Russia for destructive actions.

With some degree of convention, information operations can be divided into three *types*, depending on the tasks they achieve:

1. "**Information noise**," that is, propaganda aimed at discrediting the concept of truth as such, designed to confuse a person and, in principle, deprive her of the opportunity to think critically. This type of propaganda is not intended to create a specific version of events for consumers of disinformation or to shape their beliefs. Its purpose is to create a feeling that objective truth does not exist in principle, and any information can be fabricated. As a result, information about any crime by the Kremlin also starts to be perceived as a fake, "the intrigues of enemies," another grandiose lie, and so on.

This type of propaganda can be described as *disorienting*, and until recently, as noted by researchers¹, it was precisely this type of propaganda that prevailed in the Kremlin's information agenda aimed at Western audiences. According² to **Peter Pomerantsev**, the erosion of moral norms and the debunking of values created a feeling of cynicism, which turns out to be fertile ground for the development of a conspiracy worldview.

2. **Playing on the contradictions** existing in society, exacerbation and aggravation of conflicts between various social groups. In this case, the Kremlin is not yet trying to create a coherent picture of the world for the victims of its propaganda, and only seeks to split and destabilize other countries for its own purposes.

¹ "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model," RAND Corporation, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

² "Russia's Ideology: There Is No Truth," Peter Pomerantsev, 11 December 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/12/opinion/russias-ideology-there-is-no-truth.html>

Sometimes Russia acts in this field openly, for example, revealing old wounds and historical contradictions. In particular, Ukrainian diplomats have repeatedly noted³ that Russia is trying to spoil Polish-Ukrainian relations, including by manipulating ambiguous moments in the history of World War II. Polish researchers solidarized⁴ with them.

Dr. **Hikmet Karcic**, a researcher at the Center for Global Policy in Washington, notes⁵ the same trends in the Balkans. According to him, Russia is promoting a distorted version of World War II in Bosnia and Herzegovina, portraying Moscow as the savior of the Balkans, both in the past and in the present. Karcic emphasizes that the rhetoric of the Kremlin, which is trying to brand all those who disagree with them as "fascists," *"in the Balkans is especially dangerous since it sows further discord in an already polarized society."*

The presidents of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, in their official statement, also condemned Russia for distorting the events leading up to World War II, calling⁶ Russian revisionism *"an unfortunate attempt to falsify history and question the very foundation of a modern, rules-based international order."*

However, the Kremlin often prefers to conduct such operations under a false flag, acting on behalf of citizens of other countries. The indictment⁷ by US Special Attorney **Robert Mueller** against 13 Russians accused of meddling in the 2016 US elections is a perfect illustration. According to the document, the defendants conducted information campaigns on social networks and beyond, using the stolen personal data of American citizens. Their goal was to increase the polarization of

³ "Дешифра рассказал, как Россия работает на ухудшение украинско-польских отношений", Сегодня, 26 января 2019, <https://politics.segodnya.ua/politics/deshchica-rasskazal-kak-rossiya-rabotaet-na-uhudshenie-ukrainsko-polskih-otnosheniy-1211878.html>

⁴ "Polish-Czech relations and Russian disinformation attempts to disturb them," Researchgate, February 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344955231_Polish-Czech_relations_and_Russian_disinformation_attempts_to_disturb_them

⁵ "Russia's Campaign to Rewrite WWII History Is Dividing the Balkans. Just as Putin Intended," Haaretz, September 7, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/premium-russia-s-campaign-to-rewrite-wwii-history-is-dividing-the-balkans-as-putin-intended-1.9134577>

⁶ "Baltics Accuse Russia of Trying to 'Falsify' History on War Anniversary," The Moscow Times, May 7, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/07/baltics-accuse-russia-of-trying-to-falsify-history-on-war-anniversary-a70208>

⁷ U.S. v. Internet Research Agency, et al (1:18-cr-32, District of Columbia), February 16, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1035477/download>

American society, deepen the existing contradictions within it, and discredit the US Democratic candidate, **Hillary Clinton**.

3. "**Ideologies for Export.**" In this case, we are talking about the formation of a harmonious picture of the world among consumers, which is achieved by creating special *mini-ideologies* - separate worldview systems aimed at specific social groups, most often adhering to the most radical views. Many of them are internally contradictory, and almost all of them contradict each other and the true realities of life in Russia. However, all these ideologies are based on the same basic principle: they create a certain picture of the world, which is most appealing to a particular social group, and in which the representatives of this group really want to believe.

In each of these mini-ideologies, there is *an image of an enemy*, moreover, the "enemy" is the category of people that is natural for a certain group to be considered enemies, and which cause the greatest *phobias* in them. For American anarchists, the state was declared as the source of all ills, for nationalists - the "Jewish conspiracy," for religious fanatics - the image of the "liberal Antichrist" and so on. The key point in the construction of "ideology for export" is the *linking* of phenomena and processes (*objects of discrediting*) that are unwanted by the Kremlin to the listed enemies and phobias. As a result, a false logical connection between the object of discrediting and the things most hated and frightening by them is clearly built in the minds of the victim of propaganda, which makes them demonize any phenomena undesirable to the Kremlin.

Improving propaganda techniques

In the last couple of years, one can distinguish some transformation of all the listed types of propaganda. On the one hand, the Kremlin has perfected its skill in ***misleading content***, perfecting the thesis that any criticism of the authorities is the result of a "special operation of the West" and is therefore deceitful by definition. At the same time, the Kremlin's political strategists were able to quite effectively use the very fight against fakes, in fact, "intercepting" this type of activity both from the Russian opposition and from their opponents in the West. For example, the former editor-in-chief of the American website USA Really, the chairman of the media commission of the Public Chamber of Russia, **Alexander Malkevich**, began an extensive campaign "to combat fakes," mirroring the methods of his opponents in 2020.

Malkevich began “countering disinformation” by launching a website⁸ “to combat fakes about coronavirus,” in fact, copying the idea of the Ukrainian project “Stop Fake.” As a next step, Malkevich launched an initiative to expose⁹ “fakes about amendments to the Constitution,” stigmatizing any revealed facts of voter fraud. The result of such efforts is the impression that the main sources of fakes are not the government, but its opponents, so their revelations cannot be trusted.

The Kremlin has also refined its tactics when it comes to *playing on contradictions* in Western societies. In particular, speaking about interference in the American elections in 2020, experts note¹⁰ the growing role of artificial intelligence. With its help, employees of the “troll factory” created photographs of non-existent people, which were then used for fake users of social networks. Secondly, propaganda has often become “two-stage” in nature. Often, the accounts created by Russians initially distributed content not related to elections, and only then, having gained a solid number of subscribers, they began to inspire them with certain electoral preferences.

Third, the “hybrid” nature of Russian propaganda has intensified both in terms of technologies for the dissemination of fake information and its content. Russians increasingly began to hire real Western freelance journalists, who both published their articles on sites affiliated with Russia and tried to break through to independent platforms.

The illusion of a "positive agenda"

However, the most serious trend is the change in the main propaganda concept of the Kremlin. If earlier, as already mentioned, the main emphasis was placed on disorienting content, according to which neither objective truth, nor true democracy, nor observance of the rule of law exists in principle, now propagandists are actively assuring: all the listed values exist, and the only country in

⁸ "В России запустили сайт по борьбе с фейками о коронавирусе," РИА Новости, 29 апреля 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200429/1570726157.html>

⁹ "Разоблачение фейков о поправках в Конституцию," Выбор народа, 23 июня 2020, <http://vybor-naroda.org/stovyborah/169163-razoblachenie-fejkov-o-popravkah-v-konstituciju.html>

¹⁰ "Russia is back, wiler than ever — and it's not alone," Politico, April 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/14/russia-cyberattacks-election-413757>

which they are incarnate is Russia. This postulate can be expressed by the formula voiced¹¹ at the end of December by the editor-in-chief of the RT channel Margarita Simonyan: *"We are not just democracy, we are the last real democracy in this world."*

On the one hand, the emergence of a "positive agenda" is due to the need for a new mobilization of Russians, who are less and less susceptible to propaganda TV shows. In particular, in mid-August last year, a study by **Andrei Andreev**, an employee of the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, was published, according to which¹² the ruling class is getting worse at selling foreign policy threats to Russians. On the contrary, Russians see the main threats within the country, and among them, the main ones are the low standard of living and the deplorable state of medicine.

On the other hand, the rapidly changing world and the growing influence of new geopolitical players present the Kremlin with the ambitious task of proposing some kind of "positive agenda" that would be attractive to other countries and would help Russia find new allies. These attempts are becoming more and more active¹³ against the background of how the Russian leadership is convinced that it is impossible to restore old relations with the West. Consequently, the Kremlin needs to create a more universal ideology than mini-ideologies sold mostly to radical groups.

Such a broader "export ideology" has become a bizarre mixture of "reasonable conservatism" and an unfinished set of leftist ideas, based on two recent statements by Vladimir Putin. Firstly, the Russian leader announced¹⁴ that *"Russia, in shaping its approaches, will be guided by the ideology of*

¹¹ "Мargarita Симоньян о пресс-конференции Владимира Путина в программе 'Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым'," YouTube, December 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOI--trvMA8>

¹² "Бедность и болезни: россияне перестали считать внешнюю угрозу главной для страны," Новые известия, 12 августа 2021 г., <https://newizv.ru/article/general/12-08-2021/bednost-i-bolezni-rossiyane-perestali-schitat-vneshnyuyu-ugrozu-glavnoy-dlya-strany>

¹³ "Russia's Pivot to Asia: A Bet on Chaos," CEPA, December 17, 2021, <https://cepa.org/russias-pivot-to-asia-a-bet-on-chaos/>

¹⁴ "Путин заявил о принципах здорового консерватизма в основе подходов России," Ведомости, 21 октября 2021 г., <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2021/10/21/892404-printsipah-zdorovogo-konservatizma>

healthy conservatism," and secondly, he announced¹⁵ the "exhaustion" of capitalism as an economic system.

Weaknesses of the "new ideology"

By the way, the idea of "healthy conservatism" is not at all new and is a repetition of ideological clichés that have already been used many times. Back in February last year, the Russian theater director **Konstantin Bogomolov** published the Manifesto¹⁶, in which he offered Russia the role of the builder of a "new old Europe" - an alternative to "new European values." In his speech, Putin, in fact, only briefly repeated the main idea of the Manifesto that Moscow should position itself as a center of attraction for "healthy conservative forces" in the international arena.

However, the very fact of the emergence of a "positive agenda", paradoxically, makes Russian propaganda more vulnerable, since it gives more opportunities to refute it. In particular, it becomes much easier to identify contradictions between this and other ideologies created by Moscow, as well as between the country's image, which propagandists are trying to create, and the realities of life in Russia itself.

Unfortunately, Western media often make the mistake of noting the "conservative ideology of Russia" as a given, which helps Moscow maintain its image of "the center of world conservatism." In practice, on the contrary, the Western media need to emphasize that Russia is incapable of becoming such a center, at least because a healthy conservatism based on the inviolability of the concept of freedom, human rights, and the rule of law has not been formed in Russia.

A Western conservative is, in Russian terminology, a "right liberal" - a supporter of free-market capitalism, minimal government interference in people's lives, and the priority of individual rights over the public coercion. A Russian conservative is, most often, an imperialistic statesman who puts the state above the individual, approves any repression in the name of dubious patriotic

¹⁵ "Путин заявил об исчерпании современной модели капитализма," РБК, 21 октября 2021 г., <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/21/10/2021/617182b79a7947da0cfe221a>

¹⁶ "Константин Богомолов. Похищение Европы 2.0," Новая газета, 10 февраля 2021 г., <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/02/10/89120-pohislenie-evropy-2-0>

constructions, and is hostile to the entire Western world. At the same time, unlike Russia, the Western world has a rich tradition of moderate and free conservatism, which has never existed in Russia. Today, this conservatism is going through a crisis, often radicalizing and turning into right-wing populism, but the carriers and traditions of "healthy conservatism" still exist in the West, while they never emerged in Russia.

Unfortunately, not everyone in the West understands this difference. For example, a few years ago, the far-right American organization League of the South created a section in Russian on its website and published an appeal entitled "To Our Russian Friends,"¹⁷ calling the latter "*natural allies in blood, culture, and religion.*" Leaving aside the views of the extreme right, in this case, it would not be superfluous to convey to them at least the truth that Russia is not at all a "Christian state" as it is trying to assure its foreign followers. All other values of the American right, such as freedom, minimizing the role of the government, free possession of arms, and tendencies towards separatism, are also severely suppressed in modern Russia.

The stake on "ideology for export" also gives room for refuting the artificial link between beliefs that are already characteristic of a certain group and the relatively new constructions and "objects for discrediting" imposed by propaganda. All this opens up new opportunities for countering the Kremlin's destructive information operations.

¹⁷ "To our Russian friends," League of the South, July 17, 2018, <https://leagueofthesouth.com/to-our-russian-friends/>