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The Incredible World of Russian Propaganda in the EU

By Thomas Brey

Introduction

Warnings from top Western politicians about Russian state propaganda are increasing. Countless analyses have proven the use of Kremlin propaganda and its toxic effects in detail. It is about influencing presidential elections in the USA and France as well as elections for the European Parliament and parliamentary elections such as the recent one

in Slovakia. The aim of all Moscow's endeavors, using huge resources in terms of money, personnel and technology, is to gain influence over the domestic policies and societies of the target countries in order to steer them in Russia's interests. These so-called soft powers operate in the international media landscapes on all continents of the world. However, the focus of this article is on the problems they cause in countries of the European Union.

Value-orientated propaganda

Propaganda, which is centrally controlled by the Russian state, constantly repeats a few key messages. The repetitions, presented in ever new variations, stick with the audience. This communication strategy is familiar with the former US President Donald Trump, who mantra-like claimed that his victory in the last election in 2020 was “stolen” from him by current President Joe Biden. His supporters still believe this to this day, contrary to all the facts. The most important statements of the Kremlin propaganda are identical in all EU countries, even if a few individual contents are presented on a country-specific basis.

Russian state media are described as truth-loving and in the interests of the population.

As an overarching narrative, Russian propaganda uses many examples to “prove” that the authoritarian Russian (and Chinese) political system is vastly superior to parliamentary democracies in the West. Democratic forms of government are dysfunctional, whereas the Russian system is extremely effective. Consequently, Western authorities, governments, parties and state institutions are portrayed as incapable of solving the many

current problems in their countries. “The intention is to undermine trust in government agencies and to provoke or deepen social divisions through polarizing issues,” warned the German Ministry of the Interior. Moscow invokes an allegedly natural antagonism between political and economic elites and the peoples of Europe. According to this, the leaders are permanently acting against their own citizens for their own benefit. According to this interpretation, the top representatives of politics and business control and censor the European media, which has been disavowed as “mainstream”. Without exception, they all have the goal of dumbing down the people, deceiving and manipulating them in the interests of the elites. They are synchronized and without the freedom to develop, they all report the same thing. In contrast, Russian state media are described as alternative and truth-loving media in the interests of the broadest sections of the population.

LGBTQ people are denounced as degenerate people who threaten traditional religious values.

Another major topic - derived from the alleged superiority of Russia’s socio-political system over that of the West - is the LGBTQ community. While President Vladimir Putin has been

stylized for many years as the guardian of supposedly Christian values and the traditional family, LGBTQ people form the projection surface for vilification and hatred. LGBTQ people are denounced as degenerate people who threaten all traditional religious values. Transgender people are stylized as a threat to children in particular, but even to the male and female genders in general. Homosexuality is equated with pedophilia, LGBTQ people with Nazis. The differences between West and East are described as a culture war in which the EU, the UN, McDonald's, feminism, the Hungarian philanthropist George Soros, Western entertainment culture and Barbie are allegedly important anti-Russian players.

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For many years, Kremlin propaganda demonized Muslims. Migrants to Europe of Muslim faith were stigmatized as "barbarians" and "destroyers of the West". Mass immigration threatened national European identities and led to "Islamisation". Following the spectacular Koran burnings in Sweden this summer, however, the propaganda has undergone a rapid change in content. Now the Kremlin presents itself as the protector of Muslims gagged by the West. Even the Russian Patriarch

Cyril I says, "Muslims are our brothers. We know that in some countries the religious feelings of these people are not respected." These words are astonishing coming from a cleric who, as a former KGB intelligence officer, justified Russia's utterly unholy war against its Ukrainian neighbor in pseudo-theological terms. In contrast, not a word is wasted on the complicated discussion of values in the West about the relationship between the postulates of "freedom of religion" and "freedom of opinion". The circumvention of these legal subtleties is particularly striking against the backdrop of Russia's media landscape, which has been rigorously cleansed of all criticism.

The prominent Russian war ideologue Alexander Dugin sees a supposedly progressive "collapse of the world of office workers and beauty bloggers, transgender persons and climate activists, human rights defenders and hipsters as well as migrants and feminists". The expected collapse of Western lifestyles and European and American societies has been presented in an apocalyptic tone for years. According to this scenario, banks and stock exchanges will collapse first, followed inevitably by the entire capitalist economic systems. We will see concrete examples of this propaganda later in the chapters on individual EU countries.

How Russian propaganda “justifies” the war of aggression

The central theme of the Kremlin’s propaganda machine is the war of aggression against Ukraine. It begins with the often refuted false statement that Russia was threatened by the expansion of NATO and had to protect itself preventively from a planned NATO attack through the “special military operation” (as this war is euphemistically called). A historically much-used form of populism is also applied here: The perpetrators are transformed into alleged victims. The second propaganda theory: Ukraine is not a democratic state, is being exploited by Nazis and oligarchs and is serving the West as a proxy for the destruction of Russia. It is also falsely claimed that Ukraine historically belongs to Russia, which is particularly true for the Crimean peninsula, which was occupied and annexed in 2014, as well as for the eastern Ukrainian Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk), which was occupied in the same year.

The central theme of the Kremlin’s propaganda is the war against Ukraine.

The Russian attack is also being historically exaggerated. Putin himself has drawn a parallel with the Second World War: “We are again being

threatened with German tanks with crosses on their sides. And they want to fight Russia again on Ukrainian soil - with the hands of Hitler’s successors”. And: “They want to create a new axis, like the one created in the 1930s by the fascist regimes in Germany, Italy and militaristic Japan”. Just like back then, Russia is the bulwark against the threat of evil. Russian media repeatedly brand the EU as the “Fourth Reich”, alluding to the Third Reich of the German National Socialists. They frequently convey the accusations made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the EU she leads are “racist and Nazi”. They are working on an “attempt to find a final solution to the Russian question”.

Another prime example of Russian propaganda is the issue of peace efforts. Putin and other top politicians have repeatedly assured that Moscow is ready for peace talks, but only if Ukraine recognizes the “new realities”, i.e. permanently accepts the occupation of large parts of its country by Russia. In this sense, Russia is not offering any credible peace options, only ultimatums for Ukraine’s capitulation. On the other hand, Moscow rejects any Ukrainian initiative because it does not recognize the statehood and sovereignty of its neighboring country. Russian propaganda repeats mantra-like that the West, as a supporter of Ukraine, is not interested in peace. On the other hand, it

is claimed that the US and the EU are waiting for Ukraine to fail militarily in order to force negotiations on peace. Former President Dmitry Medvedev, who has attracted attention as a warmonger (threatening to launch nuclear attacks on Western capitals and nuclear power plants), claims like a mantra that peace will come the moment the West stops supplying weapons to Ukraine.

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At the G20 summit in New Delhi in March, the international audience burst out laughing when the Russian foreign minister claimed that his country was doing everything it could to end the war in Ukraine. In contrast, Moscow is doing everything it can to deny its far-reaching international isolation. Russian propaganda never tires of portraying an alleged culture war between Russia and China, as well as some other countries such as Brazil and India, and the collective West. This “battle”, which is decisive for the future, is about the destruction of today’s Western-dominated world (which in turn is instrumentalized by the USA) and the establishment of a truly democratic multipolar international order. Small countries should also find their place and have influence here, it is promised.

Propaganda methods

The starting point for all of Russia’s propaganda strategies are the state media RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik. In March 2022, the EU banned the electronic broadcasting of these two agencies, but not - as is often falsely reported - the work of the associated journalists and their editorial offices. However, RT and Sputnik were regularly able to circumvent this ban using various technical tricks. In addition, large and prominent media outlets across Europe were falsified this summer. Russian propaganda was disseminated on so-called doppelgänger sites that looked deceptively similar to the traditional appearance of these media. Many of the deceived readers remained unaware of this manipulation. This summer, the French government reported that such fake sites had also appeared in Lithuania, Latvia, the UK, the USA, Israel and the United Arab Emirates in addition to France. In Germany, for example, the websites of the most important news magazine “Spiegel”, the highest-circulation daily newspaper “Bild” and prominent news portals such as “t-online” were faked.

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The fictitious content always suggests a pro-Russian narrative. The focus of the propaganda is the claim that the sanctions harm the West far more than Russia and are responsible for all economic problems in Europe and the USA. This largest covert disinformation campaign to date is aimed at threatening the population with hunger and poverty if the sanctions against Russia are not lifted. The problem is that many genuine accounts pick up on these messages, share them and thus unwittingly spread Russian propaganda. Sometimes the deceptions are so real that they even make it into the biggest national media. The public broadcaster Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF) demonstrably used two videos from pro-Russian channels to illustrate its report on corruption in Ukraine.

Diplomatic missions are a linchpin in the dissemination of Russian propaganda in Europe. In addition to embassies and consulates, this also applies to cultural institutes. In the Austrian capital Vienna, the “Russian House” has become the subject of political discussion in recent months as a “propaganda branch of Moscow”. In Berlin, the public prosecutor’s office is investigating the local institute with the same name. It is supposed to function as a scientific and cultural center, but in fact it regularly engages in propaganda.

Most important accelerators of Russian propaganda are Chinese TikTok and Russian Telegram channels.

By far the most important accelerators of Russian propaganda are social media, above all the Chinese TikTok and the Russian Telegram channels. Facebook and YouTube are other massively used channels for Moscow’s disinformation campaign. Finally, the messenger X (formerly Twitter) plays a central role in Russia’s propaganda center. According to an analysis by the EU, pro-Russian fake content on social media increased by 22 per cent between January and May 2023 alone. This increase was mainly due to the X platform, where such content increased by as much as 36 per cent. At the behest of the new X owner Elon Musk, the floodgates have been opened to all kinds of propaganda. The negative labelling of Russian state media has been abolished and Moscow’s propagandists can make their contributions even more visible via the affordable Blue Check verification program.

The countries targeted (selection)

Germany occupies a prominent place in Russia’s foreign policy and thus also in its propaganda in Europe. The aim is to turn large sections of

the population against the government with theories such as “Without Russian energy, Germany risks freezing in winter”, “The sanctions against Russia are to blame for the high inflation and, above all, the dramatic rise in food prices”, “Germany is just a puppet of the US”, “Without German weapons, there will be peace in Ukraine”, “Germany’s future and its industrial sales markets lie in the resource-rich East and not in the West”. These narratives are taken up by German “alternative media”, which can be found in large numbers in the right-wing, left-wing and nationalist camps. They encounter a traditionally pro-Russian and anti-American attitude among comparatively broad sections of the population. According to a survey conducted this spring, almost a fifth of Germans believe that the Russian war of aggression is a reaction by Russia to an alleged provocation by NATO without any alternative - a significant increase compared to the previous year.

Germany occupies a prominent place in Russia’s foreign policy and in its propaganda in Europe.

This preconception means that people who are already in “fundamental opposition to the system” readily adopt Russian narratives such as the imminent collapse of first the economy and then the socio-political system in Germany.

Signs of such a scenario propagated by Russia are - if you believe the propaganda - “the collapse of the German automotive industry”. The insolvency of the niche manufacturer B-ON, which had to lay off all of its 170 employees this September, is a case in point. The bankruptcies of some prominent fashion brands such as Hallhuber, Peek&Cloppenburg or well-known shoe retailers such as Görz or Reno are interpreted in the same sense as harbingers of the major economic collapse. According to experts, however, these are companies that are in no way relevant to the market.

France is also the focus of Russia’s “multimillion-euro weapon of mass manipulation”, as EU Vice-President Věra Jourová puts it. It began with the social protests of the “yellow waistcoats” over the pension reform and continued with the coronavirus, climate protection, migration and decolonization as well as Islam and racism: Russian propaganda tried to intensify hatred and opposing attitudes to the point of irreconcilability on all of these topics in order to destabilize society. The actions of the French police were contrasted with a peaceful Moscow and Budapest. The aim was to “prove” that political systems with strongmen like Putin or Viktor Orbán have a clear advantage over liberal democracies. The arrests in France and the brutal repression of women in Iran were put on the same level. The violence in French cities

was compared to the crimes in the destroyed Ukrainian city of Mariupol.

French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna recently warned against these Russian disinformation campaigns after the Foreign Digital Influence Monitoring Center (VIGINUM) presented its analysis over a period of twelve months. The effect of Russian propaganda was characterized as “undermining fundamental national interests”. The Foreign Minister spoke of “hybrid warfare” after Russian hackers themselves duplicated the Ministry’s official website and spread Russian fake news *en masse*. For example, it was claimed there that Paris wanted to introduce a war tax because of the cost of arms deliveries to Ukraine. A fictitious radioactive cloud allegedly heading towards France from the east was used to cause fear among uninformed citizens.

Effect of Russian propaganda was characterized as “undermining fundamental national interests.”

Russian propaganda has an easy time in Hungary because it encounters a socio-political climate that is similarly constructed to that in Russia: in the “illiberal democracy” proclaimed by Orbán, he controls the media, parliament and judiciary. The separation of powers and human rights are undermined. Like Putin, he presents

himself as the “savior of the Christian West” and the traditional heterosexual family. Despite all EU sanctions, Hungary continues to purchase gas and oil from Russia on a large scale. This summer, Russia even received the green light from Budapest (and the EU) to build two new nuclear reactors in Paks. In return, Orbán is doing everything he can to make a consistent EU policy towards Russia and Ukraine impossible. It is true that the EU has blocked billions of euros in funding to Hungary due to gross violations of the rule of law. However, Orbán has good leverage thanks to the unanimity principle: after Turkey, the only thing missing was Hungary’s approval for Sweden to join NATO. Hungarian territory is blocked for arms deliveries to Ukraine, and Budapest wants to block EU funds to Ukraine in future. Orbán last embarrassed Brussels in mid-October with his demonstrative meeting with Putin in Beijing at the Chinese Silk Road Summit.

Russian propaganda scored particularly well in Slovakia.

Russian propaganda scored particularly well in Slovakia. Here, the parliamentary elections at the end of September brought Robert Fico, who is protected by Moscow, to power as head of government. The fact that Russian disinformation also fell on fertile ground here is due to the high approval rating of 27 per cent

of citizens for Putin, as surveys have shown. Fico has announced a policy entirely in line with Russia's wishes: no more arms deliveries to Ukraine, good relations with Moscow, which is actually fighting against the US in Ukraine. This policy meets with similar public opinion: more than half of Slovaks believe that it was not Russia but "the West" that started the war against Ukraine. In his own words, Fico wants to restructure Slovakia along the lines of the Hungarian model, i.e. fight civil society organizations and put the media and the judiciary on a leash.

Conclusion

Russian propaganda is also falling on fertile ground in Bulgaria, Moscow's closest ally in Soviet times: almost 400 websites spreading Kremlin fake news were recently identified there. What can the Western countries do to prevent the erosion of their democratic

foundations by constant Russian propaganda? There are two ways to do this. Above all, the EU must correct the fake news from the Kremlin on a daily basis. EU-funded journalists can take on this job. By far the most important antidote is creating media literacy among young people and adults so that they can detect misinformation themselves - a major task of education policy for the next few years.

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