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Data: 21/11/2026 07:35:13

DOI:10.17951/we.2025.11.2.57-83 | Wschód Europy • Восток Европы • East of Europe, vol. 11, 2 / 2025

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The Role of Russian Media in the Political Destabilization of Eastern European Countries in the Context of the Russian–Ukrainian War

1. Introduction

Currently, interstate relations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation are extremely tense. Russia, as one of the guarantors of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, violated its obligations and chose aggression. By seizing and annexing Crimea and part of Eastern Ukraine, Russia has proven that it does not adhere to the norms of international law and relevant agreements enshrined in treaties. The aggression of our neighbour has become a problem that worries the whole world, because no one can predict what Putin will do next, and it is this uncertainty that causes concern.

This study investigates the role of Russian media in shaping public opinion across Eastern European countries. The research seeks to clarify how Russian media outlets utilize narratives, framing techniques, and communication strategies to influence political attitudes, cultural perceptions, and social discourse in the region. Using a combination of content analysis and comparative media studies, the article examines the dissemination of Russian information through traditional and digital platforms, assessing its impact on audience reception and opinion formation. Particular attention is given to the interaction between Russian media messages and local media systems, as well as to the policy responses of Eastern European states to perceived information threats. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of media influence in geopolitical contexts and highlight the challenges of safeguarding information sovereignty in the contemporary European information space.

The role of Russian media should be understood within the broader framework of hybrid warfare – a strategy that combines military, informational, economic, and political tools to achieve geopolitical objectives without direct large-scale confrontation. Within this context, media act as a central instrument of influence, enabling the dis-

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semination of propaganda, disinformation, and manipulative narratives designed to polarize societies and undermine trust in democratic institutions. Russian media outlets and affiliated digital platforms function not merely as channels of communication but as strategic actors in the information domain, supporting the russian objectives by shaping perceptions, distorting facts, and legitimizing aggression. Thus, the media dimension of hybrid warfare represents a crucial battleground where control over information equates to control over public consciousness and, ultimately, political stability in Eastern Europe.

Thus, this study aims to clarify the role of Russian media in shaping public opinion in Eastern European countries.

There is already a fairly large number of studies and publications on information security and political processes in Eastern European countries, through which Russian media conduct systematic information campaigns. The use of modern technical capabilities and manipulative technologies indicates the vulnerability of their information space, and sometimes even the unwillingness of these governments to resist media pressure from Russia. Information confrontation has been paid relatively little attention by researchers at the Razumkov Institute, the National Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of Ukraine, Ukrainian researchers, etc. Scientific studies on Russian media policy are primarily studies by Ukrainian researchers, such as V. Gorbulin, I. Melnychuk, O. Nikonorov, G. Khorunzha, etc.

2. Hybrid Warfare and Information Operations: The Strategic Context

Presentation of the main material. According to the authoritative Ukrainian statesman, former director of the National Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Gorbulin, "the world order that existed before 2014 no longer exists[1]. According to him, everyone, especially in the West, must come to terms with this fact and think about how not to lose this war as a whole, because "the very life of the democratic model" is at stake in this war[2]. He says that the fire of hybrid war is burning brighter and brighter. Obviously, such assessments by leading experts are justified, since in the last few years there have been intensive destabilization processes associated, first of all, with Russia's desire to restore its influence on this part of Eastern Europe and regain global leadership in the world order. The director of the National Institute for Strategic Studies also draws attention to the fact that this current "dead end" of European integration, from Brexit to Catalonia, arose precisely because, under the influence of the geo-ideological imperatives of the Cold War, exclusively military-political and political-economic priorities were given to European integration, while cultural-humanitarian factors were removed from the scope of integration issues. "As

[1] В. Горбулін, Світові процеси «гібридної війни» входять у непередбачувані фази. *Censor.net*, 2016. https://ua.censor.net.ua/news/461720/svitovi_protsesy_gibrydnoyi_viyiny_vhodyat_u_neperedbachuvani_fazy_gorbulin (accessed September 10, 2025).

[2] *Ibidem.*

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a result, outwardly successful European and Euro-Atlantic projects turned out to be unable to form a promising response to terrorism and multiculturalism, migration and populism. Thus, Russia is increasingly and effectively playing on such "shortcomings" of the West, overshadowing them, in particular, with its internal spiritual fragments and an external version of geocultural messianism," he said[3].

Russia was able to make very specific efforts by intensifying major internal contradictions and playing on them – first Brexit[4], then what happened in Catalonia, Scotland's readiness to hold another referendum on independence, statements from Venice and Lombardy about the need to grant them greater autonomy – in almost all cases where Russia's involvement is obvious.

Natalia Antelava, a former BBC journalist and co-founder of Coda Story, speaking about fake news, also notes: "Moscow is very good at pushing the right buttons, playing on emotions… The Kremlin media is actively using Ukraine's internal political problems with nationalist discourse – supposedly stories about "Banderaists"[5]. Russian propaganda in eastern Ukraine was especially powerful," she notes. For example, Antelava mentioned another Russian media outlet about the alleged death of a ten-year-old girl during the explosions in Donetsk: "We started to find out who really died. It turned out that no one died and there was no bombing. But people believed it"[6].

The Ambassador of the United States of America, Marie Yovanovitch, stated at one of her media conferences on Radio Liberty that Ukraine is also on the front lines of the information and armed war. According to her, not only Ukrainian journalists are at the forefront of this battle, but also the entire people[7].

In fact, such assessments by responsible politicians and scientists have become more frequent, since their recognition of hybrid war does not remain a fiction and something removed from reality.

Modern information systems and technologies only intensify the already existing effect of the media's lack of control and their irresponsibility towards citizens. This gives politicians easy grounds to use disinformation, propaganda, and fakes on public opinion.

Why should the Russian Federation interfere in the internal affairs of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe? Why should it try to influence their electoral processes

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3 *Ibidem.*

4 Twitter признал участие российских троллей в кампании за «Брекзит». *Deutsche Welle*, 2017. http://www.dw.com/ru/twitter-признал-участие-российских-троллей-в-кампании-за-брекзит/a-42512669 (accessed September 10, 2025).

5 «Росія натискає на правильні кнопки»: як діє пропаганда Кремля за межами РФ. *Deutsche Welle*, 2015. http://www.dw.com/uk/росія-натискає-на-правильні-кнопки-як-діє-пропаганда-кремля-за-межами-рф/a-39346717 (accessed September 10, 2025).

6 *Ibidem.*

7 Посол США заявила, що Україна знаходиться на передовій інформаційної війни. *Radio Svoboda*, 2018,. https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news/28455942.html (accessed September 10, 2025).

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and public opinion? The answer is quite simple. For a long time, Russia has benefited from the weakness and destabilization of its neighbors. Unfortunately, it can be said that geopolitical aspirations have always pushed Russia to actions that contradict the very essence of democracy, because when Europe is weak, it means the victory of the Kremlin, the implementation of various integration scenarios like the "Russian World", most developed by the young Ukrainian researcher Igor Melnychuk (RIP)[8]. These are integration projects in which Ukraine occupies a key place as the largest European state, connecting NATO and Russia. Therefore, this will be a fight for Russia, not only for the loyalty of Ukrainians, but also of their neighbors.

In the modern multipolar world, information confrontation is the main method of maintaining geopolitical balance. The purpose of information confrontation is to protect the interests of the nation in the information and psychological sphere, which includes:

- ensuring security at the geopolitical and information and psychological levels;
- achieving military-political preferences and absolute control over all other countries;
- ensuring the achievement of the goals of the national economy, ideological and artistic sectors, as well as the goals of the information and psychological growth of the nation;
- creating favorable conditions for the transition of the national system of socio-political relations to a new, more advanced and high-tech period of evolutionary development;
- changing the structure of national economic, political, socio-cultural, information and psychological circles in accordance with personal rules for forming an information vision of the world.

As we can see from the events as of mid-2025, this practice, unfortunately, is effective for Russians. Thanks to it, they annexed part of the territory of Ukraine and continue to threaten neighboring states with war.

The end result of a successful information operation, even if it is not fully implemented, should be such that it influences the enemy's choice in a way that contradicts his intentions or prevents their implementation. The goal of information strikes is to create obstacles in the enemy's decision-making process in such a way that, regardless of whether military actions are being conducted or not, the enemy cannot act or wage war in a coordinated and effective way. Ukraine's experience proves that Russia's media policy preceded the full-scale invasion.

[8] І. М. Мельничук, *Інтеграційні проекти Російської Федерації на пострадянському просторі*, Чернівці: ЧНУ, 2015.

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3. Media Channels and Mechanisms of Russian Information Influence

Today, social media and messengers have become the main news channels for many European citizens. Telegram, owned, as we recall, by Russian citizens Pavel and Mykola Durov[9], has gained especially strong new users. So no one can give a 100% guarantee that your personal data or correspondence will not end up in the hands of Russian special services. As for the transparency of the work of news channels, there is no control or moderation at all. Given the enormous number of messages and news, it is increasingly difficult for the reader to understand where the truth is and where the lies are. Therefore, as British journalist Peter Pomerantsev once noted, commenting on the results of the American presidential race, today it is extremely difficult to distinguish truth from lies due to information overload. "If you have a million sources, everything becomes a continuous noise. You no longer separate the truth from the lies, there is so much. Everything becomes a show, and it is the showman who wins," he said[10].

It should be noted that in addition to social networks and instant messengers, Russians continue to actively use television. The most powerful and dynamic among Russian foreign media outlets is undoubtedly the Russia Today (RT) channel, which was founded in 2005 and until recently broadcast in more than 100 countries around the world. Only due to the introduction of sanctions, RT's YouTube channels were blocked in the EU countries and some other countries. Residents of almost all countries can access RT via the Internet, as well as satellite and cable channels. In addition, RT distributes its own product on YouTube. The channel format has allowed it to be dynamically present in the television market in Europe and America. In addition, at the end of 2014, the Sputnik Internet portal, which uses RT's information flow, was launched[11].

The main target group of russian propaganda is the ordinary European population, including the latest wave of emigration from the USSR, Germany, the USA, Canada and Israel, as well as Sweden, Finland, France, Italy and Spain, the Baltic countries and Belarus, and last but not least from Ukraine[12]. For example, in Germany alone, the post-Soviet population is at least 3 million: according to Eurostat, as of the end of November 2024, about 4.2 million Ukrainians have temporary protection status in EU countries. In Germany, there are 1.2 million such people, in Poland – 988 thousand, in the Czech Republic – 385 thousand. At the same time, the Czech Republic has 35.3 Ukrainian refugees

[9] Сором›язливий науковець і тіньовий розробник Telegram. Що відомо про Миколу Дурова. *BBC Ukrainian*. https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c5ylq2p42peo (accessed September 10, 2025).

[10] Померанцев: Трамп це наслідок відсутності ідей про майбутнє. *Hromadske*. https://hromadske.ua/posts/pomerantsev-tramp-tse-naslidok-vidsutnosti-idei-pro-maibutnie (accessed September 10, 2025).

[11] Г. Хоружий, Війна Росії проти України: російська пропаганда як складова «гібридної війни», 2017 http://social-science.com.ua/article/1392 (accessed September 10, 2025)..

[12] Євросоюз боротиметься з російською дезінформацією. *Deutsche Welle*, 2018. http://www.dw.com/uk/євросоюз-боротиметься-з-російською-дезінформацією/a-18329318 (accessed September 10, 2025).

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per 1,000 inhabitants, the highest among all EU countries. Only two other European countries that are not EU members have a higher share: in Moldova – 47.3 Ukrainians per 1,000 inhabitants, and in Montenegro – 34 Ukrainians[13].

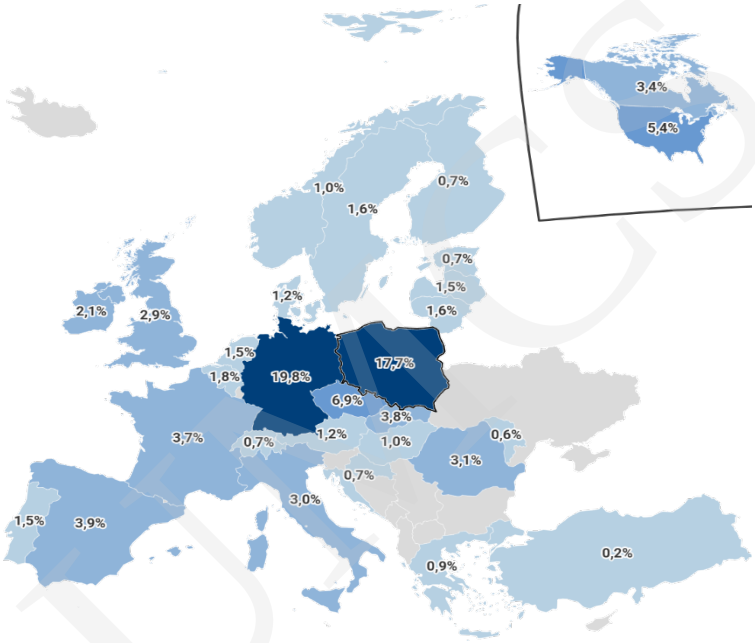


Figure 1. Ukrainian Refugees in Europe and the United States (November 2024).
Source: *Ukrainian Refugees after Three Years Abroad. Fourth Wave of Research*, https://ces.org.ua/refugees_fourth_wave/ (accessed September 15, 2025).

According to experts, the majority of Ukrainian refugees abroad are in Germany (20%) and Poland (18%). The United States of America hosts 5.4% of all refugees, but together with Canada, these two countries have accepted less than 10% of refugees – the main burden is borne by European countries[14].

For most people who left the Soviet Union and emigrated, Russian is the main or most widely spoken language, and in some cases it can even be a free native language, which is effectively exploited by Russian propaganda media. Therefore, consuming Russian news for most Russian-speaking Europeans meant covert propaganda of the Kremlin's key messages.

Russian news agencies masked their actions with the concepts of freedom of speech and free information; therefore, they used these concepts to spread disinformation in

[13] Українські біженці після трьох років за кордоном. Четверта хвиля дослідження. *Center for Economic Strategy*. https://ces.org.ua/refugees_fourth_wave/ (accessed September 10, 2025).
[14] *Ibidem*.

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the American and European media space. As Timothy Snyder, a leading American historian and professor at Yale University, says, "Russian propaganda demonstrates that truth does not really exist"[15].

Modern Russian propaganda was, first of all, actively used to secure Putin's power. Subsequently, by mobilizing the media in Russia and pro-Russian media in our country, the Kremlin significantly increased its influence on the information space of Ukraine. At the same time, Russian propaganda began to work with the population in a more differentiated way. For example, Russian publications in Ukraine and pro-Russian media imposed friendship, cooperation and strategic partnership between the two countries on our citizens. The information influence on citizens of the Russian Federation looked completely different. Actively using the media, in which for many years it was difficult to find more or less objective material about Ukraine, The Kremlin purposefully formed the opinion about the incapacity of the Ukrainian state, fueled anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Russian society.

Such diverse influence, carried out under the leadership of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation, gave rise to a rather different orientation of the societies of the two countries. For example, in various sociological studies, up to 15% of Ukrainian citizens had only certain negative ideas about the Russian Federation. However, about 69% of respondents from the Russian Federation clearly expressed a negative position towards Ukrainians and our country as a whole[16].

Many other examples and facts of Russian-Ukrainian relations and the foreign policy of the Russian Federation over a long period should adjust the "strategic partner" and the possible actions of this partner of our citizens and the international community to a more critical attitude towards us.

The current information policy of the Russian Federation has taken on the character of a selective information war against Ukraine: distortion and twisting of facts, outright lies, Kremlin propaganda fits into the essence of Kremlin policy in general. The media works on the release of the yellow press in offline and online formats. As noted by the expert on information confrontation Oleksandr Levchenko, in fact, from the moment of the birth of our state as an independent entity to this day, a continuous, broad, long-term campaign of the Russian Federation against Ukraine has been conducted. This campaign flickers just as it flares up with governments and political courses in Ukraine, but it was once there and still is. According to the expert, the main strategic goal of the information campaign conducted by the Russian Federation against Ukraine is complete control over the domestic and foreign policy of our state, as well as keeping Ukraine within its geopolitical influence. On the way to achieving this ultimate

[15] Yale Professor Talks Russian Propaganda in Ukraine. *The Emory Wheel*, 2016. http://emorywheel.com/yale-professor-talks-russian-propaganda-in-ukraine/ (accessed September 10, 2025).

[16] Росіяни більше за Україну ненавидять лише одну країну – опитування. *UA.News*. https://ua.news/ua/world/rossyyane-bolshe-ukrayny-nenavydyat-tolko-odnu-stranu-opros (accessed September 10, 2025).

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goal, Russia resorts to various information operations aimed at competing with European integration and promoting its own economic interests, shaping the opinion of the Ukrainian population regarding the legitimacy of the government and the advisability of changing the territorial structure by recognizing the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, creating obstacles on the way to the EU and NATO, the status of the Russian language and the Russian church[17].

Since the end of February 2014, the vast majority of Russian traditional media have joined the information and psychological war against Ukraine and Eastern European Countries, trying to justify the military operation. These are publications such as Izvestia, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Moskovsky Komsomolets, Kommersant, Vzglyad, as well as the news agencies RIA Novosti, ITAR-TASS, ROSBALT, AIS, not only reprint unverified news, but also create outright fake stories (for example, about the alleged transfer to Russia of the Ukrainian Navy ship Hetman Sahaidachny, which was returning to its homeland after an accident. anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden)[18].

The destructive influence of these media is manifested through several key mechanisms. *First*, they employ disinformation and emotional framing to manipulate public perception, presenting Russia as a "defender" of Slavic unity or traditional values while depicting Ukraine and its partners as aggressors or puppets of the West. *Second*, they use selective storytelling and agenda-setting, emphasizing stories that reinforce anti-Western sentiment, highlight instability in Eastern European societies, or exaggerate internal divisions. *Third*, through repetition and amplification across multiple media platforms – television, print, and online – these outlets create an illusion of consensus and credibility, shaping audience attitudes even beyond Russia's borders.

Targeting Eastern European audiences specifically, Russian media adapt their narratives to local contexts: they exploit historical grievances, language proximity, and cultural similarities to increase message acceptance. They also disseminate content via pro-Russian online communities, social media bots, and alternative news portals in local languages to bypass mainstream fact-checking mechanisms.

Ultimately, the content and communication strategies of these media serve to weaken trust in national governments, sow polarization within societies, and erode confidence in European institutions. By shaping the informational environment, Russian media thus contribute to the broader objectives of hybrid warfare – undermining political stability, disorienting the public, and expanding Russia's soft-power influence in Eastern Europe.

Another example was the attempts of TV channels, in particular the satellite channels Rossiya-24 and NTV Mir, to support statements about a mass influx of refugees

[17] П'ять пунктів: ЗМІ розкрили «вимоги» Росії на переговорах з Україною в Стамбулі. *RBC-Ukraine*. https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/p-yat-punktiv-zmi-rozkrili-vimogi-rosiyi-1747429502.html (accessed September 10, 2025).

[18] Флагман ВМФ Украины «Гетман Сагайдачный» перешел на сторону России. *Izvestia*, 2014. http://izvestia.ru/news/566817 (accessed September 10, 2025).

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from Ukraine to Russia with relevant video reports (especially when it was claimed that about 140 thousand Ukrainians had requested political asylum in Russia)[19].

For this purpose, a video from the Ukrainian-Polish border was used, but the availability of real photographic materials from the Ukrainian-Russian border refuted this message[20]. Also, with reference to RIA Novosti[21], the news was reprinted that in Ukraine there was a low turnout of conscripts on the first day of general mobilization, although general mobilization has not yet been announced, and photo and video materials indicate the opposite. On March 6, 2014, the television stations "1-1" and "5-y" were liquidated in the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Earlier, the Russian TV channel "Russia-24" seized the frequencies of the Crimean private television and radio company "Chornomorskaya Teleradiokompaniya". The person in camouflage who blocked the state television and radio company "Krym" in Simferopol also did not have a weapon. In addition, the general director of TRK Stepan Gulevaty called the police, but they did not respond to the request[22]. The main goals of the Russians are aimed at four different target groups: residents of Russia, Crimeans, pro-Russian residents of Ukraine and countries that are observing the conflict and trying to mediate in it:

- to Ukrainians who are anti-Ukrainian, messages should be more hidden and aimed at causing a negative reaction, provoking, intimidating or unbalancing;
- to the residents of Crimea, messages: "we do not shy away from our own", "the head is uneasy in the crown", "restoring order", "Crimea is Russia";
- regarding pro-Russian Ukrainians and those who have concerns: the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government, Ukrainians will not leave you in danger, they are one people, and the power is now in the hands of Bandera supporters, these people will kill you, if you act, we will come to your aid, just ask;
- regarding visitors: "the Ukrainian government is illegitimate", "fascists and extremists" took power, "legitimate President Yanukovych" and other topics;
- "russian-speaking Ukrainians are at risk", "Ukraine is an on-board partner", "there are no Russian military in Crimea, it is self-defense", "dissent is being persecuted in Ukraine";
- about the citizens of Russia itself: "we are a superpower", "we will not leave our people in danger", "the whole world is afraid of us", "our soldiers are not involved in crimes, but the locals adore them very much", "we are resisting world evil"[23].

[19] Поток беженцев из Украины значительно возрос. *Interfax-Russia*, 2014. http://www.interfax-russia.ru/South/main.asp?id=477460 (accessed September 10, 2025).

[20] Фото україно-російського кордону, 2015. http://inpress.ua/uploads/assets/images/Inna/%D0%B32(3).jpg (accessed September 10, 2025).

[21] Явка в первый день мобилизации на Украине низкая. *RIA Novosti*, 2014. http://ria.ru/world/20140302/997790546.html (accessed September 10, 2025).

[22] У Криму відключили 5-ий канал і 1+1, *Ukrainska Pravda*. 2014. http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/03/6/7017872/?attempt=1 (accessed September 10, 2025).

[23] Назар Заноз, Кримська інформаційна війна. *Zaxid.net*, 2016. https://zaxid.net/krimska_informatsiyna_viyna_rosiya_zavdaye_udar_pershoyu_n1305008 (accessed September 10, 2025).

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Russian propaganda is happy to exploit the resource "VKontakte", the former owner of which (the same Pavel Durov) did not deny cooperation with the FSB[24]. This allows Russian special services to gain access to information about any user of this social network. In addition, the Russian authorities traditionally use these platforms as an arena for trolling and discrediting activists and politicians; creating the illusion that there is a huge number of users who disagree with the mainstream sentiments, demonstrating the existence of "alternative" opinions. VKontakte communities are also used to coordinate actions and disseminate information about the rallies of the "Russian Spring"[25].

Alongside traditional media, the Russian social network VKontakte (VK) has become one of the key digital instruments in Russia's hybrid information strategy targeting Eastern European audiences. As one of the most popular social media platforms in the post-Soviet space, VK provides an extensive infrastructure for the dissemination of russian-aligned narratives, propaganda materials, and disinformation campaigns. Its wide user base – particularly among younger demographics in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Baltic states – makes it an effective channel for influencing public opinion, shaping identities, and sustaining pro-Russian sentiment.

The destructive influence of VKontakte manifests in several interrelated dimensions. First, the platform hosts thousands of pro-Russian groups and communities that spread manipulative content, fake news, and conspiracy theories aimed at undermining trust in Western alliances, democratic institutions, and national authorities. Such content frequently exploits sensitive issues – language, religion, history, and security – to amplify polarization and social tension. Second, VK's algorithmic system, which prioritizes engagement over accuracy, facilitates the viral spread of emotionally charged or extremist content, creating echo chambers that reinforce anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian attitudes. Third, the platform has been repeatedly used for coordinated information operations involving state-linked actors, troll farms, and automated bot networks that simulate grassroots support for Russian policies and narratives.

A particularly destructive aspect of VK's influence lies in its data ecosystem and administrative control. Being a Russian-based platform, VK is subject to Russian legislation on data access and surveillance, allowing state security services to monitor users, identify dissent, and manipulate digital communities from within. This creates a hidden asymmetry in the information environment, where users in Eastern Europe are exposed to covert influence operations while their personal data may be exploited for political or intelligence purposes.

Through these mechanisms, VKontakte operates not merely as a social media platform but as a strategic tool of hybrid warfare – one that combines social engineering, digital propaganda, and psychological manipulation. Its influence contributes to the erosion

[24] Борець за свободу чи агент ФСБ: ким є Павло Дуров насправді. *UNIAN*. https://www.unian.ua/world/borec-za-svobodu-chi-agent-fsb-kim-ye-pavlo-durov-naspravdi-12738309.html (accessed September 10, 2025).

[25] *Ibidem*.

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of media literacy, the fragmentation of the public sphere, and the spread of disinformation ecosystems that align with Russian geopolitical interests across Eastern Europe.

It is worth noting that the influence of social media has not yet been considered too great in the matter of forming political positions. Until recent events in Europe and the world, it was believed that social networks could be a platform for political mobilization and the formation of political consciousness of citizens. That is why in the spring of 2017, the Presidential Decree in Ukraine introduced restrictions on the use of Russian social networks, which, according to experts, were accessed by 12-14 million Ukrainians[26].

4. The Cyber Dimension of Hybrid Operations

Disinformation is not the only way to confuse the political situation in Ukraine and Europe. In recent years, Russian hackers have intensified cyberattacks on information resources and government institutions of neighboring states. A similar scenario was previously limited to the realm of imagination and played out only in Hollywood action movies.

On March 3, 2014, Ukrainian media reported massive DDOS attacks on their web resources, including: Censor.NET, Tyzhden.ua, Ukrainska Pravda and others. The 1+1 media group also reported that all information sites of 1+1 Media and the 1+1 channel website were subjected to a DDOS attack[27]. Some state sites were operating intermittently. Thus, the official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine was forcibly downloaded, on which official information about the wanted list of ex-President Viktor Yanukovych appeared, as well as a statement about the training and killing of Russian military personnel with the aim of waging war against Ukraine.

The Security Service reported that since approximately March 20, Russian special services have been regularly spreading various kinds of disinformation with the aim of sowing panic in Ukraine, causing unrest and worsening the situation. In their speeches, including at the UN, officials and representatives of the Russian Federation have made false statements. President Vladimir Putin was asked at a press conference in Moscow whether the Russian military was being used to block Ukrainian military units. He replied that these were the "Crimean self-defense" forces and that the Russian Federation had not taken any part in training these forces. Instead, he accused Lithuania and Poland of training militants for actions in Kyiv that led to the overthrow of the Yanukovych regime.

[26] Указ Президента України №133/2017. Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 28 квітня 2017 року «Про застосування персональних спеціальних економічних та інших обмежувальних заходів (санкцій)». *Official Website of the President of Ukraine*, 2017. https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1332017-21850 (accessed September 10, 2025).

[27] За пів року вторгнення росія скоїла 435 злочинів проти журналістів та медіа – IMI. *Institute of Mass Information (IMI)*. https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/za-piv-roku-vtorgnennya-rosiya-vchynyla-435-zlochyniv-proty-zhurnalistiv-ta-media-imi-i47307 (accessed September 10, 2025).

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Cyberattacks will increasingly be used as an effective tool to destabilize the political situation not only in Europe, but also in Ukraine itself. This is what many researchers believe, since Russian special services may be behind the blocking of state information systems and networks[28]. Large-scale cyberattacks on Ukrainian banks and payment systems increased the vulnerability of the broader regional financial ecosystem. Attackers often used compromised infrastructure to attempt fraud, spread malware, or test offensive capabilities before extending operations into other Eastern European targets. Cyberattacks against Ukrainian energy facilities (notably those associated with BlackEnergy, CrashOverride/Industroyer) illustrated that power outages and energy distribution failures can generate ripple effects in neighboring markets through interconnected energy grids and export–import dependencies. DDoS attacks are frequently accompanied by psychological and informational components – website defacement, dissemination of fake "leaks," and coordinated disinformation campaigns. These hybrid operations intensify panic, reduce confidence in official communication channels, and complicate joint regional responses within NATO and the EU.

Russian DDoS attacks against Ukrainian resources should not be viewed as isolated national events. Even when the technical target is Ukraine, the resulting disruptions often spill over into neighboring countries through interconnected economic systems, cross-border digital services, and shared information environments. These attacks collectively serve the broader objectives of hybrid warfare – destabilization, erosion of trust, and weakening of regional resilience.

5. Country Case Studies in Eastern Europe

In order to be more accessible in Eastern Europe, Russia uses means, mainly of an informational nature, with the main role being given to the Russian media as a means of spreading its foreign policy interests in Europe and the rest of the world. However, these are only components of the Kremlin's larger plan to destabilize Europe, since in almost every one of these states one can easily find political forces that openly promote pro-Russian interests and influence decision-making.

Slovakia presents an interesting picture in terms of its neighborhood with Ukraine, where in recent years there has been a dynamic increase in Russian political presence since 2014. The political flagships of the Russian presence in this country are right-wing organizations and movements that openly advocate the development of Russian-Slovak cooperation. So, these are the main actors of the Russian political presence in Slovakia: "Slovak Conscripts", the Ukrainophobic "Honorary Embassy of Novorossiya", "Night Wolves" and "People's Party – Our Slovakia". In 2016, the parliamentary elections in Slovakia shook the results with 8.04%, bringing 14 mandates to the National Council of

[28] Nakashima, Ellen (2018). Russian military was behind 'NotPetya' cyberattack in Ukraine, CIA concludes. *The Washington Post*, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-military-was-behind-notpetya-cyberattack-in-ukraine-cia-concludes/2018/01/12/048d8506-f7ca-11e7-b34a-b85626af34ef_story.html?utm_term=.7aafa914a137 (accessed September 10, 2025).

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the Slovak Republic. Membership in this party maintains ties with some Kremlin politicians. As the Prosecutor General of Slovakia Jaromir Čyžnár told radiosvoboda.org on May 25, 2017, there is a demand in the office to dissolve the radical version of the People's Party Our Slovakia due to anti-democratic slogans[29].

Slovakia's domestic politics also shape its external positioning. The pro-government press unites the domestic opposition and the Brussels bureaucracy into one hostile camp that is supposedly not interested in the true interests of the Slovak people. This government identifies Donald Trump and the pro-Trump wing of the US Republican Party as its allies in anti-Western/anti-globalist rhetoric; thus, a significant part of the Slovak media is connected to domestic American politics. They may also occasionally align themselves with the radical Trumpists in some pro-Russian anti-Western narratives promoted by Moscow's theses of appeasement. Furthermore, as they are members of NATO and do not share a common border with Russia, the existential threat from the Kremlin is not yet as prevalent among Slovaks as it is among, for example, Poles or the Baltic states. This makes Slovaks quickly believe the claim that by helping Ukraine, Slovakia is jeopardizing its own security for the sake of the interests of others.

Russian agitprop constantly insists that helping Ukraine is the shortest path to escalation and spread of the war. This has again found a new place in domestic Slovak politics. The winner of the presidential election in April 2024, Peter Pellegrini, an ally of the coalition government of the current Prime Minister Robert Fico, in his election campaign called himself a candidate for "peace" and accordingly called his opponents candidates for war. Slovak ruling elites are currently finding the shortest path to an imaginary peace in the policy of appeasement of Moscow.

Fraudulent sampling platforms in Slovakia can be conditionally divided into two groups. The first group consists of the public that focuses on the domestic politics of Slovakia or generally on anti-Western or conspiracy rhetoric, but at the same time shares, in the above-described context, a situationally pro-Russian interpretation of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The most notable of the sample were the Telegram channel ZEM&VEK with 29 thousand subscribers, the Blog investigatívnej **žurnalisticky** (Blog about journalistic investigations) with over 14 thousand subscribers, and the conspiracy Telegram channel with almost 19 thousand subscribers under the name Myroslav Kamensky[30].

The other group includes the public that focuses almost exclusively on covering the Russian-Ukrainian war from the pro-Russian side and spreading Russian propaganda theses on international issues. Such an audience is often no less harsh in its an-

[29] Олександр Никоноров, «Запчели» та «Йоббіки»: З чиєю допомогою Росія «качатиме» Східну Європу. *Depo.ua*. https://dn.depo.ua/ukr/dn/zapcheli-ta-yobbiki-z-chiyeyu-dopomogoyu-rosiya-kachatime-shidnu-yevropu-20170727613262 (accessed September 10, 2025).

[30] Війна слів і сенсів: Центрально-Східна Європа у боротьбі з російськими наративами (підсумковий аналітичний звіт). *Detector Media*, 2024. https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/226165/2024-04-30-viyna-sliv-i-sensiv-tsentralno-skhidna-ievropa-u-borotbi-z-rosiyskymy-naratyvamy-pidsumkovyy-analitychnyy-zvit/ (accessed September 10, 2025).

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ti-Ukrainian rhetoric than the Russian z-channels, most likely coordinated directly from Russia. In this niche, the Telegram channel Casus Belli Live has 36 thousand subscribers, and the Telegram channel Miro Del has over 12 thousand subscribers[31].

The main topic of discussion of Ukraine during the observation period in the relevant channels of the verified sample was the delay in military and financial assistance to Kyiv from both Brussels and Washington.

This was most clearly manifested in the context of the presidential race, which was still ongoing at the time when the monitoring was to be conducted. This combined with several rhetorical intentions of the Slovak ruling coalition: anti-Brussels rhetoric, pro-Trump rhetoric, which could also be used in the pre-election period to accuse the opposition of misusing European funds and irresponsibly preparing for escalation by supporting Ukraine. This is just a channel through which pro-Russian military channels paid maximum attention to Russia's seizure of the strategic initiative on the front, which manifested itself in the occupation of Avdiivka.

The Russian side has been very active in the **Czech Republic** for many years. According to Czech researcher Andrzej Kundra, author of the book "Putin's Agents", the number of employees of the Russian embassy in the Czech Republic deserves special attention, which is quite large for this 10 million-strong Eastern European country. There are also many reasons to believe that this Russian embassy in Prague is the main center of the Russian residence in this part of the Eastern European region. It seems rather absurd to analyze the possible influence of Russia in the Czech Republic against the background of the statements of the current president Miloš Zeman about recognizing the annexation of Crimea as a fait accompli and calls from other European politicians to stop attempts to return Crimea to Ukraine.

In March 2024, the Parliament of the Czech Republic formulated its new official position, setting out a resolution that, in essence, stated that until there is a fundamental change in the current situation, Russia is the greatest threat to European security. The best way to serve the fundamental interests of the Czech Republic is to ensure that Putin does not win his war against Ukraine. Ukraine must not only fully restore its territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, but also effectively deter the Russian regime from further acts of aggression against Europe.

The most visible channels of influence of Russian propaganda in the Czech Republic are efforts to turn Czechs against each other and convince them that their own national interests are above European ones. Compared to other EU member states, they say, the leaders of our republic's neighboring countries, in particular the prime ministers of Hungary and Slovakia, care about their populations. They also claimed to have done more for the Czechs than Prime Minister Petr Fiala and his government. His government only thinks about how to help Ukraine.

Czech President Petr Pavel is also a target for pro-Russian propagandists at home because of his TV series, his significant and firm support for the Ukrainian state, and

[31] *Ibidem.*

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his February initiative to supply 800,000 shells to Ukraine from the Czech Republic and other allies[32]. Propagandists are trying to create the false impression that Pavel is an "investment dependency," meaning that one cannot be sure of his sovereignty as a politician. The Czech head of state supports the country's transition from the koruna to the euro; this is also speculated in the country's information space after 20 years of EU membership, but the transition to the single European currency has not yet taken place.

Whistleblowers in the Czech Republic have also found a way to discredit the current President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. He was perceived not only as "greedy," but also as "ungrateful." Those who constantly increase their demands on partner countries, but remain dissatisfied with any assistance presented as support for Ukraine, are committing its slow murder. Because supposedly everyone already knows that Russia cannot lose this war, in particular, within the framework of this narrative, the immorality of the West is promoted, which knows the outcome of this war in advance and does not take into account that young Ukrainian boys continue to die on the front. Also very popular are the theses of Kremlin propaganda in the Czech Republic about Ukrainian refugees – that they bring only problems, that they want to use subsidies, or that they absolutely do not want to learn the language of the host country.

It is possible to identify five sources that spread pro-Russian views on the war in Ukraine and generally anti-Western statements. First of all, this is the Telegram channel neČT24 (22.2 thousand subscribers)[33]. It positions itself as a "source of news for those who use common sense." However, this is a new account of the Russian propaganda publication Sputnik. In addition, this resource is under sanctions by the European Union. Also important is the Telegram channel **Český** List (7.5 thousand subscribers), which, according to its description, provides uncensored news and analyzes armed conflicts, in particular the Russian-Ukrainian war. Here you can see posts with disinformation about the war in Ukraine, in particular about Russia's opposition to the "collective West". The Czech Telegram channel Ukrajina bez cenzury has 3.1 thousand subscribers, and its resource spreads Russian propaganda. The avatar probably depicts a Russian military man, as well as the letter V (one of the symbols of the Russian invasion of Ukraine). The pro-Russian Telegram channel Co neMÁTE vědět with 6.5 thousand subscribers contains 95% of posts that are simply reposts from another channel, the ZV propagandist with 711 subscribers, which probably indicates some kind of network of Telegram channels run by a single author[34].

Russian special services in **Hungary** have enabled far-right organizations and movements to speak with revanchist slogans against Ukraine, Slovakia, Serbia and Romania – Hungary's neighbors, where the Hungarian population is a minority. In particular, the deputy from the far-right Jobbik party, Bela Kovács, who is accused of spying for the Russian Federation, has colluded with Russian special services. It is known that

[32] *Ibidem.*
[33] *Ibidem.*
[34] *Ibidem.*

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the Hungarian government is the most radical after Ukraine regarding the new law "On Education" in 2017, but it is silent about the fact that there are no schools on its territory with a language of instruction other than the state language (unlike Ukraine, where there are over 600 schools with instruction in in different languages)[35].

The Fidesz party, which has been in government for about 15 years, is different from other Central and Eastern European countries, playing into the Kremlin's hands both with its actions and rhetoric. Changes in Hungarian domestic politics over this period have reduced the quality of democracy: there is an erosion of the system of checks and balances, an expansion of networks of patrons and clients loyal to the government, and the creation of a system of pro-Orbán media.

In foreign policy, the most noticeable trends are confrontation with EU institutions and increased ties with Russia and China. There is every reason to believe that a situation similar to the Hungarian one is a "model for imitation" to which the Kremlin seeks to lead as many European states as possible.

The goals of Russian propaganda in Hungary are rather to consolidate existing beliefs and orientations of the population that supports or helps Russia. First, it works by discrediting EU institutions and strengthening Eurosceptic sentiments among the country's population. Achieving this goal is an additional blow to European solidarity, especially in matters related to support for Ukraine. Secondly, it helps to strengthen the positive image of Viktor Orbán as a national leader who defends the "real" interests of his people in such difficult times; on the one hand, it strengthens the position of Fidesz in Hungary, increasing the stability of the Kremlin-friendly government; on the other hand, such a campaign contributes to the popularization of the "Orbán" position among other politicians in Europe. Russian propaganda is trying to create a negative image of Ukraine in the minds of people as a justification for its military aggression against it, as well as to force the "recipients" to take a position of "non-intervention"[36].

Stefi Deri is a Facebook page with 47 thousand followers. This is the personal page of Hungarian journalist Stefi Deri, who consistently expresses the main ideas on which Fidesz's political course is based at the moment: the opposition of the interests of Brussels and the interests of Hungarians, the inexpediency of economic and military support for Ukraine, as well as the promotion of a policy of appeasement towards Putin's Russia. Hungarian social networks have turned into a field where publications and discussions are conducted about domestic and foreign political events that took place in Hungary from October 2023 to February 2024[37].

One of such topics was the provision of macro-financial assistance to Ukraine by the EU. Viktor Orbán takes a critical position on support for Ukraine not only at the level of rhetoric, but also in the real political actions of the Hungarian government. In particular, due to Hungary's veto, the assistance was not approved at the EU summit

[35] *Ibidem.*
[36] *Ibidem.*
[37] *Ibidem.*

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in December 2023. "Unscrupulous" social media users supported this position of the Hungarian government, as aid to Ukraine was senseless, futile and harmful, as it aggravated relations with Russia. The decision, made on February 1, 2024, only reinforced the theses about the alleged pro-war policy of Brussels and the current political course of the EU, which is perceived as self-destructive.

A certain pattern of coverage of topics related to support for Ukraine, which extends to other socio-political issues, has emerged in the Hungarian media space, due to criticism of the EU leadership. Many political scientists define Viktor Orbán's regime as right-wing populist. The basis of populism is the opposition of the interests of "corrupt elites" and "the people". Unscrupulous authors present many current political events in this logic, where the collective Brussels does indeed abuse its influence and power against ordinary Europeans, but only Hungary is the true defender of their national sovereignty.

Romania does not have strong cultural, historical or economic ties with Russia. It has no common land border, no Russian minority, Romanians do not speak Russian, and there are no Russian radio or TV stations. However, as analysts at EU Disinfo Lab note, Russian influence on the country's local media has noticeably increased over the past few years. The Kremlin's disinformation campaign against the West is aimed not so much at imposing the ideology of the "Russian world" or promoting Russia as a "healthy alternative" to the West as at undermining the unity of Western democracies and making people doubt the correctness of the chosen foreign policy vector.

The propagandists' goal is not to impose loyalty to the Kremlin on Romanian society, but rather to create a hostile attitude towards the West, its structures, policies and initiatives. The "red thread" in the propagandists' information canvas was anti-NATO and anti-American sentiments. This is largely achieved through the promotion of a general suspicion of pax Americana, the accusation that the United States is the main train on the tracks of militarization in the world and the standard-bearer of illegal military intervention.

Ukraine is not a victim of Russian aggression, but rather of the bloody ambitions of the West. The West pushed Ukraine into the abyss to satisfy its aggressive ambitions against Russia, and weakened it by exhausting it with a prolonged military confrontation. There are many "predictions" that after the Ukrainians, Romania will be the next "victim" in the geopolitical plans of the West, if it does not act on the "instructions" of NATO-US. The grotesque images to which this propaganda appealed are that soon Romanian, not American, men who go to war will return home in coffins. Manipulators also tried to play on religious sentiments, highlighting the "brutal persecution" of monks of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by Ukrainian law enforcement officers. They also tried to appeal to the traditional values of some segments of the audience, portraying the West as a hotbed of immorality. The war in Ukraine was covered against the backdrop of the slow but methodical advance of the Russian army, videos from Russian Telegram channels about the alleged mass surrender of Ukrainian servicemen and

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damaged equipment during the fighting, as well as fake video appeals from "wives of mobilized men" who claimed that their husbands were being illegally recruited.

It is evident that in their coverage of the war against Ukraine, they often repeat narratives from Russian Z-channels (including the neo-Nazi DShRG "Rusich"), borrow their visual content with the addition of appropriate watermarks, and borrow from Ukrainian propaganda resources with appropriate tags on photos and videos (in particular, Ukraine.ru) [38]. Although Dan Diakonu's Telegram channel (13.1 thousand subscribers) does not repost from Russian resources, his rhetoric openly resonated with the pro-Kremlin one: The West has lost in the confrontation with Russia, Moscow is confidently achieving the goals of the "SVO", will soon capture Kharkiv, Odessa, Kryvyi Rih and other large Ukrainian cities. Inside the "Antiresist" there is an ironic house with a large number of images that are close to replicating standard propaganda themes: total corruption in Ukraine, Zelensky is ruled from the Western corridor, indecisive and fragmented activity is observed in the West, Biden is a crazy old man, Putin is powerful and self-confident, etc., the Russian army is invincible among others. Some meme pictures were also spread by these authors. Pictures with watermarks are obtained from certain Russian Z-resources (for example, from the Returned to Z War channel). Such is the Info-fresh community on Facebook with 2,000 subscribers, for which RIA Novosti and other propaganda resources are the main source of news. It also quoted the propagandist Kiselyov; even the Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Medvedev; the Russian Ambassador to the UN Nebenzya; many other official "spokesmen" of agitprop, who always need to contextualize and verify their statements[39].

The situation in **Poland** has deteriorated significantly in the past few years, the Polish Senate recently adopted a law on the Institute of National Remembrance of Poland, which provides for criminal punishment for denying the commission of so-called crimes of a nationalist nature against Poles[40]. In our scientific study, we will not play any role in the complex issues of the historical past between Poles and Ukrainians, but will only discuss the growth of anti-Ukrainian sentiment in Poland, as a result, we believe that the increase in labor migration from Ukraine to Poland poses a threat to both the country and its people. It is noteworthy that after the collapse of the USSR, Poles have been actively involved as advocates for Ukrainians in the EU, despite the existence of frank discussions about the complex past between these countries, in just two years this issue has become too political and public. In our opinion, this will only strengthen the power of Russia and cause instability in the region.

In Poland, the activities of Russian influence agents are developed and implemented by a wide range of actors, including Russian diplomats, Russian state media, and media

[38] *Ibidem.*

[39] *Ibidem.*

[40] Сенат Польщі ухвалив скандальний закон, де згадано «українських націоналістів». *Ukrainska Pravda*, February 1, 2018. https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2018/02/1/7170210/ (accessed September 10, 2025).

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and social media actors operating on Polish territory and spreading Russian propaganda narratives. Russian influence agent's operations attempt to exploit the fear caused by the full-scale invasion, economic problems, and historical differences between Poland and Ukraine.

They create localized content in Polish (for example, in 2022 a number of channels were created to distribute pro-Russian content, mainly on Telegram), resort to mass disinformation to maximize the distribution of russian influence agents content, use anonymous proxies to amplify toxic content, etc. Russian influence agents portray Poland as a country on the verge of complete economic collapse and exaggerate the potential negative economic consequences of Warsaw's military aid to Ukraine and refugee reception. He said that current economic problems, such as rising inflation, the fuel crisis, and rising electricity prices, are being exacerbated by support for Ukraine[41].

Poland is one of Kyiv's key strategic allies. Thus, the Russian disinformation campaign in the Polish media space is aimed at negatively portraying Ukraine and Ukrainians on the edge of the conflict in order to spoil relations between Poland and Ukraine. It has three main tendencies: condemning the top military-political leadership of Ukraine, spreading news about the defeats and weakness of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and calling all Ukrainians Nazis – all Ukhkans are Nazis! Another major target apparatus related to this was the adjustment of public opinion against helping Ukraine by denigrating Ukraine, demands to redirect attention to internal problems in Poland, allegedly caused by the "Ukrainian crisis" of an even wider scale.

Support for pro-Western forces in Poland remains above 90%[42]. Russian disinformation is trying to promote narratives about the futility of NATO, the unwillingness of allies to help when there is a need for collective defense, and the military weakness of the alliance compared to Russia and China. At the same time, posts appear that criticize the actions of the EU leadership and demonstrate a clash of interests between Brussels and the Polish people.

The Telegram channels analyzed in this study can be differentiated by several categories. A characteristic feature of such Telegram channels as "Oley w Głowie" (8 thousand) and "Niezależny dziennik politiczny" (12.3 thousand) is that they position themselves as analytical news media and try to present information in the form of clear facts, which makes Russian disinformation less obvious. In addition, a feature of NDP is the design of the project on the YouTube platform and as a separate news site, which provides the publication with the opportunity to reach a wider audience, as well as a stronger informational impact on Polish society[43].

[41] Інформаційні маніпуляції та втручання Кремля в країнах Люблінського трикутника та Молдові: Аналітичний звіт. *Detector Media*, July 30, 2024. https://detector.media/infospace/article/230213/2024-07-30-informatsiyni-manipulyatsii-ta-vtruchannya-kremlya-v-krainakh-lyublinskogo-trykutnyka-ta-moldovi-analitychnyy-zvit/ (accessed September 10, 2025).

[42] *Ibidem.*

[43] *Ibidem.*

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In the Polish information space, issues related to Ukraine and the war with Russia were very relevant. Protests by farmers on the Polish-Ukrainian border were used as an informational pretext to break off relations between society and the political leadership of the two countries. The spirit of alliance in these relations, which characterized the first stage of the full-scale invasion, gradually faded; now it is replaced by growing feelings not only of distrust, but also of irritation. The situation was aggravated by conservative, anti-immigration, and sometimes pro-Russian slogans of Polish farmers, broadcast through malicious channels on Telegram.

Corruption in the Ukrainian government has become one of the manipulative arguments provoking discussions about the appropriateness of providing financial assistance from the EU and the US. To add fuel to the fire, some corruption schemes were mentioned. One of them is an attempt to misappropriate $ 40 million, which was supposed to be used to purchase mortar shells for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Another is the scandal surrounding the work of Hunter Biden, who is now the president of the United States, in the Ukrainian gas company Burisma Holdings. In addition to the position that Ukraine is a completely corrupt state, its political regime was characterized as anti-democratic. The Ukrainian government was called the "authoritarian government of Zelensky" and one that contributes to the spread of corruption.

Another reason against providing funds to Ukraine was Poland's internal problems, which, according to the authors of the Telegram channels, do not receive a proper response from both the Polish government and European institutions. The statement for such posts was one: "first you need to solve Poland's problems, and only then help Ukraine."[44]

The three main recurring themes of pro-Russian propaganda by the leading popular pro-Russian actors in **Bulgaria** were: Western international politics, Ukrainian authorities, and manipulation of the concept of "national sovereignty." The theses of Western propaganda formulate the "wrong" foreign policy of the West towards Russia and Ukraine. First, it is persistently argued that the Russian-Ukrainian war does not belong to either the interests or the influence of the collective West; that it is a matter between the two countries or, at most, an "internal" Russian affair.

Second, the manipulators shift the responsibility for the increased escalation with Russia onto the Western side. Third, they repeatedly raise the topic of the alleged loss of "sovereignty" by European countries and the implementation of "instructions" from the Pentagon (USA). In essence, these are narratives that resonate with the words of official Russian representatives, who are also often quoted on the resources from the analyzed sample. In this way, Russia is trying to deflect responsibility for the war and escalation.

Providing aid to Ukraine is controversial in Bulgarian society, so in order to provoke resistance to the aid, propagandists emphasize that the Ukrainian government is completely corrupt. Thus, the thesis is promoted that the funds sent to Kyiv are embezzled, they do not go to the needs of the front, and "the West is pouring money into the trash".

[44] *Ibidem.*

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This tone is used by right-wing populists in Bulgaria, whose ideologies often coincide with pro-Russian narratives.

Basically, pro-Russian theses are most intensively distributed in Telegram. In the analyzed sample, the following indicative resources can be distinguished: Bulgarian Military Union "Vasil Levski" – has about 13,500 subscribers[45]. Its content almost completely repeats what is part of the Russian narrative. From the events on the front of the Russian-Ukrainian war to the publication of public statements by official Russian officials (especially the spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova). "Glassat na Istinata" is a channel of fans of conspiracy theories, in particular about the "world government of reptiles", who spread the most sensational theses. They have an audience of about 3,200 subscribers[46]. It is noteworthy that conspiracy theory fanatics, "anti-vaccinators", take the side of Russian propaganda. The topic of Ukrainian refugees in the EU in the context of hostile propaganda in the Bulgarian media space was one of the most popular. Another topic that stands out is the provision of Western aid to Ukraine. Both topics were used to discredit EU leaders and local politicians in Eastern Europe within the framework of the already mentioned narrative about lost "sovereignty".

Moldova is Ukraine's only neighbor to which the frozen conflict in Transnistria extends. The autonomous territorial entity of Gagauzia is also located within Moldova; here the Russian language has official status. In Gagauzia, compared to other regions of the country, relatively stronger pro-Russian sentiments are observed. As a result, Russian and pro-Russian media outlets already have a stronger "starting position" here than anywhere else, with the ability to conduct their propaganda in Russian (since most of the openly propagandistic media outlets included in the sample of this cycle of research reports are Russian-speaking) and to use Moldova's internal problems against their interests, both in terms of territorial and ethnic divisions.

Moldova is the poorest of all the countries analyzed and studied, with the lowest GDP per capita (except Ukraine) at US$5,714 compared to US$13,974 in Bulgaria (and higher for all other countries)[47]. This is another issue that Russian propaganda is talking about. These Russians are using issues of regional and linguistic identity, economic problems, "intimidation" and Moldova's integration with Romania to achieve their usual psychological goals. All of this is designed to discredit a pro-European politician, further divide the country, bring Moldova back into Moscow's orbit of influence AND reduce support for Ukraine when it is at war with Russia. The most consumed sources of Russian propaganda disinformation in Moldova are media outlets focused on regional issues AND affiliates within Russian publications themselves.

[45] Війна слів і сенсів: Центрально-Східна Європа у боротьбі з російськими наративами (підсумковий аналітичний звіт). *Detector Media*, 2024. https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/226165/2024-04-30-viyna-sliv-i-sensiv-tsentralno-skhidna-ievropa-u-borotbi-z-rosiyskymy-naratyvamy-pidsumkovyy-analitychnyy-zvit/ (accessed September 10, 2025).

[46] *Ibidem*.

[47] Moldova GDP per capita, *Trading Economics*. 2025. https://tradingeconomics.com/moldova/gdp-per-capita (accessed September 10, 2025).

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Based on the analyzed data, we estimate that Telegram will be the #1 channel for pro-Russian propaganda, followed by Facebook. Of all the propaganda sources examined in this study, "Pridnestroviet" leads in terms of subscribers on Telegram with 74,162 subscribers[48]. The "Gagauz Republic" is in second place with almost 38,000 subscribers. It was found that the next three places in the ranking are occupied by Sputnik Moldova – 27,550; KP.MD – 20,264; Bloknot Moldova – 12,155[49]. All these channels are just some of the many numerous subsidiary channels of the respective Russian media companies. In addition to news in Russian, Sputnik also operates a channel through which it delivers its news to only 1,378 subscribers in Romanian, which actually indicates an orientation towards Russian-language propaganda in this country.

In particular, the regional pro-Russian publication Gagauznews.md, which, in addition to a Telegram channel with 7,622 subscribers, also has a website – a Facebook page with 12,000 and a YouTube channel with eight thousand informants. There are also less popular Telegram channels, which were, however, mentioned in our previous reports and were prominent in the field of pro-Russian propaganda by reposting their messages on other channels. Among such channels, we can mention "WTF Moldova?" (8,639 subscribers) and "Antimaidan 2.0 (Moldovan version)" (3,190 subscribers)[50].

Russian propaganda in Moldova is based on several main themes. Discrediting integration with the European Union and pro-European politicians, regional and cultural contradictions plus Russia's role in them, as well as the war in Ukraine.

The target of propaganda is Moldovan President Maia Sandu, who is pursuing a course of rapprochement with the EU and Ukraine. Russian propaganda calls her a "puppet of the West" and writes about her presidential term as the "Sandu regime".

Another vector of Russian propaganda in Moldova is the channel of internal hatred, which sets the inhabitants of Gagauzia and Transnistria against the rest of Moldovans. Language, history and orientation in foreign policy are beginning to acquire relevant dimensions in their split. The so-called "nationalist" Moldovans, who are allegedly being consolidated with Romania, after which speaking Russian will supposedly be banned in Moldova, are presented as a threat to Russian-speaking Moldovans.

As it turns out, the Russian media space is similar to a platform for forming public opinion both among Russians themselves and among citizens of European states. The main attributes of the Russian media are the use of various myths, in particular regarding Moscow, the narrative covers the territory of the former Kievan Rus, and, as a result, Kiev is also considered to be Rus. It seems to be a well-known saying: we are what we eat, although food is often neglected.

[48] Війна слів і сенсів: Центрально-Східна Європа у боротьбі з російськими наративами (підсумковий аналітичний звіт). *Detector Media*, 2024. https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/226165/2024-04-30-viyna-sliv-i-sensiv-tsentralno-skhidna-ievropa-u-borotbi-z-rosiyskymy-naratyvamy-pidsumkovyy-analitychnyy-zvit/ (accessed September 10, 2025).

[49] *Ibidem.*

[50] *Ibidem.*

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Russian information campaigns are primarily characterized by manipulation of public sentiment, substitution of concepts, cause-and-effect relationships, violation of the principles of history and logic, use of blackmail on the part of the public, dissemination of information and lies. Certain advertising activities of the Russian Federation are attributed to the USA and other NATO countries. As a result, Russia's actions are considered forced, as a form of protection against «Western violence».

It is important to note that the West has begun to understand how significant the role of the Russian media as a propaganda machine in Moscow is. In particular, public organizations are being created in EU countries to preserve the internal information space[51], laws are being introduced at the national level to counter Russian propaganda[52], and the European Parliament has adopted a resolution on combating Russian propaganda[53]. The letter states that the Russian government is conducting propaganda against the European Union and the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). "The Russian government uses a variety of tools, including think tanks and foundations (e.g. Russkiy Mir), special agencies (e.g. Rossotrudnichestvo), multilingual television companies (e.g. RT), news organizations that are considered special (e.g. Sputnik), international religious groups, social networks and Internet trolls, all of which are used to question the democratic nature of the process, sow division in Europe, have domestic support that is considered special, and create the impression of insufficient capacity of its state structures," the resolution says[54].

The European Parliament has called on the European Commission and EU member states to increase funding for «EU democracy instruments» that support media freedom in the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia. In particular, the European Parliament is demanding additional funds for these purposes for the European Endowment for Democracy, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the Eastern Partnership Media Freedom Watch (EaP Media Freedom Watch) and a number of others.

[51] У Польщі створена організація з виявлення і протидії російській пропаганді. *Hromadske*, 2017. https://hromadske.ua/posts/u-polshchi-stvorena-orhanizatsiia-z-vyiavlennia-i-protydii-rosiiskii-propahandi (accessed September 10, 2025).

[52] Голова парламенту Молдови підписав закон про боротьбу з російською пропагандою. *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia (DT.ua)*, 2018. https://dt.ua/WORLD/golova-parlamentu-moldovi-pidpisav-zakon-pro-borotbu-z-rosiyskoyu-propagandoyu-265666_.html (accessed September 10, 2025).

[53] Європарламент ухвалив резолюцію про боротьбу з російською пропагандою. *Deutsche Welle*, 2018. http://www.dw.com/uk/європарламент-ухвалив-резолюцію-про-боротьбу-з-російською-пропагандою/a-36492759

[54] *Ibidem.*

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6. Conclusions

As a result of the research conducted on the role of Russian media in the political destabilization of Eastern European countries in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, we came to the following conclusions:

Russian media, systematically spread disinformation to influence Ukraine, Eastern Europe, and Western audiences. Using distortion, emotional framing, and targeted messaging, they portray Russia as a defender while depicting Ukraine and its allies as aggressors. This propaganda aims to polarize societies, undermine trust in governments and European institutions, and advance Russia's hybrid warfare objectives.

Since 2014, Slovakia has faced Russian influence through right-wing groups, pro-Russian media, and digital platforms. Parties like Our Slovakia and Telegram channels such as ZEM&VEK promote anti-Western narratives and pro-Russian interpretations of the war, exploiting domestic debates and security concerns to shape public opinion and elections.

In the Czech Republic, Russia uses its embassy, political narratives, and digital channels to polarize society, discredit leaders like President Petr Pavel, and undermine support for Ukraine. Key Telegram channels, including neČT24 and **Český** List, spread disinformation on Ukrainian refugees and the war, exploiting domestic sensitivities and mistrust toward European institutions.

In Hungary, Russian intelligence and propaganda leverage far-right parties, media networks, and social media to promote Euroscepticism and pro-Kremlin narratives. Fidesz and Jobbik amplify revanchist rhetoric and opposition to Ukraine aid, while platforms like Stefi Deri's Facebook page consolidate pro-Kremlin orientations and weaken European solidarity.

Romania, despite lacking historical ties to Russia, faces increasing Kremlin disinformation aimed at undermining trust in the West, NATO, and the U.S. Media and social channels like Dan Diakonu's Telegram amplify Russian narratives, portraying the war as Western aggression and fostering skepticism toward Ukraine support.

In Poland, Russian influence exploits historical tensions, economic challenges, and Ukrainian migration. Russian media, diplomats, and Telegram channels such as Oleу w Głowie spread anti-Ukrainian narratives, portraying Ukraine as corrupt and weak, while undermining EU and NATO credibility and polarizing public opinion.

In Bulgaria, pro-Russian propaganda targets Western politics, Ukrainian authorities, and national sovereignty. Channels like Bulgarian Military Union "Vasil Levski" and Glassat na Istinata amplify narratives about corruption and wasted aid, exploiting debates over Ukraine support and refugees to foster Euroscepticism and polarize public opinion.

In Moldova, Russian propaganda exploits regional divisions, linguistic identities, economic challenges, and the Transnistria conflict. Channels like Pridnestroviet, Gagauz Republic, and Sputnik Moldova target pro-European politicians, deepen internal divisions, and promote anti-Ukrainian narratives, leveraging socioeconomic vulnerabilities to weaken trust in European institutions.

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Abstract: The use of information as a weapon in both the foreign and domestic policies of the Russian Federation is not a new phenomenon. However, its sophistication and intensity have increased with each passing year. Recently, the European Union and the United States have acknowledged the significant and often covert influence of Russian media and propaganda, including their impact on electoral processes and the functioning of governmental institutions. They have recognized that the Russian disinformation threat to the United States and its European allies primarily concerns Poland, the Baltic States, and Ukraine.

Moreover, unlike Soviet-era propaganda, contemporary methods of Russian information warfare do not promote the Kremlin's agenda in an overt or categorical manner. Instead, they aim to confuse, mislead, and divert citizens from supporting the European Union and assistance to Ukraine. Russia seeks to undermine support for European values, thereby creating confusion among European allies in order to strengthen its own position. Ethnic, linguistic, cultural, historical, and social differences are deliberately exploited to achieve these objectives.

Recent developments demonstrate that Russia's efforts to exert influence in Europe are integral to its broader hybrid strategy of power projection. Although the crisis in Ukraine drew Western attention to the significance and scope of Russia's information campaigns, the Kremlin's use of disinformation had already been underway prior to the outbreak of the crisis. Russia deliberately and systematically planned its information campaign targeting Ukraine. It expanded its presence in the information space and engaged in the recruitment and financial support of various political actors, civil servants, and public figures in pursuit of its strategic objectives.

Keywords: Russian media, propaganda, media policy, Eastern European countries, cybersecurity, Ukraine.

Rola rosyjskich mediów w politycznej destabilizacji państw Europy Wschodniej w kontekście wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej

Streszczenie: Wykorzystywanie informacji jako narzędzia władzy zarówno w rosyjskiej polityce zagranicznej, jak i wewnętrznej nie jest zjawiskiem nowym. Jednak zakres oraz skuteczność tych działań rosną z roku na rok. Stany Zjednoczone oraz Unia Europejska dopiero w ostatnich latach uznały znaczący i często ukryty wpływ rosyjskich mediów oraz propagandy na nastroje społeczne, w tym na procesy wyborcze oraz funkcjonowanie instytucji państwowych. Państwa zachodnie dostrzegły, że rosyjska dezinformacja wywiera istotny wpływ na Stany Zjednoczone i ich europejskich sojuszników, zwłaszcza w Polsce, państwach bałtyckich oraz na Ukrainie. Co więcej, w przeciwieństwie do propagandy radzieckiej, współczesne metody rosyjskiej wojny informacyjnej nie promują agendy Kremla w sposób otwarty i jednoznaczny. Zamiast tego dążą do dezorientowania, manipulowania oraz odwracania uwagi obywateli od poparcia dla Unii Europejskiej i wsparcia udzielanego Ukrainie. Rosja podejmuje działania mające na celu osłabienie poparcia dla wartości europejskich, wywołując niepewność i podziały wśród europejskich sojuszników, co służy wzmocnieniu jej pozycji. W tym celu wykorzystywane są kwestie etniczne, językowe, kulturowe, historyczne oraz społeczne.

Najnowsze doświadczenia pokazują, że rosyjska propaganda w Europie stanowi istotny element jej hybrydowego podejścia do realizacji celów politycznych. Chociaż kryzys ukraiński zwrócił uwagę Za-

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chodu na znaczenie i rzeczywistą skalę rosyjskiej kampanii informacyjnej, praktyka wykorzystywania przez Kreml dezinformacji ma znacznie dłuższą historię. Rosja w sposób celowy i systematyczny zaplanowała swoją kampanię informacyjną wobec Ukrainy. Było to możliwe dzięki rozszerzeniu obecności w przestrzeni informacyjnej oraz poprzez angażowanie i finansowe wspieranie wybranych polityków, urzędników państwowych i osób publicznych zgodnie z przyjętymi celami strategicznymi.
Słowa kluczowe: media rosyjskie, propaganda, polityka medialna, państwa Europy Wschodniej, cyberbezpieczeństwo, Ukraina.

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