

Information warfare in the Internet

EXPOSING AND COUNTERING PRO-
KREMLIN DISINFORMATION IN THE CEEC



CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS

Analysis

12/2016

www.csm.org.pl



Antoni Wierzejski

CIR's analyst. Graduate of the Institute of International Relations and the Centre for Europe of the University of Warsaw. He participated in an annual scholarship at the Institute of Political Studies in Bordeaux, France. Between 2013-2014 he worked as a journalist in Euractiv.pl, an internet portal specializing in EU issues. He is interested in EU affairs, Polish foreign policy and international security.

A summary of Internet monitoring in Poland.

The analysis of cases gathered in Polish online media in the framework of the project "Information warfare in the Internet. Exposing and countering pro-Kremlin disinformation in the Central and Eastern European Countries" demonstrates that pro-Kremlin propaganda is extensive and multi-channelled. The narratives and "big subjects" uncovered during the monitoring of over 50 web sites involve, among others, the following messages: "Ukraine is falling apart", "NATO is provoking Putin", "NATO acts like Hitler", "NATO is a tool of America", "US will abandon Poland in case of a war", "Polish authorities are Russophobic", "Poland should join fellow Slavs", "Donald Trump is a great opportunity for Europe".

INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE INTERNET

EXPOSING AND COUNTERING PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION IN THE CEEC

| Antoni Wierzejski

2

Regarding the NATO Summit in Warsaw, which happened to take place in the beginning of the project, a particular method of disinformation was used: fake interviews with top Polish generals who were expressing unfavourable opinions about our American allies, as well as about the Summit itself. The purpose of the articles was to undermine the confidence of Poles towards NATO and to impose upon the Polish public opinion the anti-NATO point of view – which has been promoted for a long time by Russia. Fake interviews were published on the eve of the Warsaw NATO Summit and day one of the meeting (“Leutenant General Mirosław Różański : NATO summit - more noise than concrete actions”; “Marek Tomaszycycki: Andrzej Duda initiates hostilities”).

It seems that one of the main objectives of the pro-Kremlin propaganda in Poland is to undermine the friendly relations between the societies and governments of Poland and Ukraine. In order to thwart the reconciliation between the two countries, pro-Kremlin media publish many emotional articles, preying on fears and historical resentments. In the stories we uncovered one could read that "Ukrainians are demanding Poland gives them back a city of Przemyśl with the surrounding counties", "Ukrainians claim

the East of Poland is the occupied territory of Western Ukraine" and “there are Polish soldiers in Donbass”. The last narrative (based upon a Russian source) is particularly interesting since it has managed to find its way into the mainstream media (Radio RMF 24: “40 Polish soldiers of fortune on the Donbas frontline? This is what Donieck officials say.”), as well as since it was quoted under a false title (Sputnik Poland: “MOD: yes, there are Polish special forces in Donbas”). As far as the manipulation techniques used in the monitored articles, these include:

- providing false facts about Russian involvement in Ukraine,
- providing information, without any source, to cause emotional reaction,
- misleading titles of articles which do not correspond to the rest of the article;
- using old quotes as new information for propaganda purposes,
- conspiracy theories (e.g. chemtrails, NATO's goal is to protect the interests of a small group of elites),
- concealing facts which are not favourable for Russia (e.g. Katyn massacre denial),
- using quotes out of context.

One of the common characteristics of the articles we uncovered is the fact that there are usually written by anonymous authors.

INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE INTERNET

EXPOSING AND COUNTERING PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION IN THE CEEC

| Antoni Wierzejski

3

This hinders exposing particular "journalists", which is especially important given the fact that one of our recommendations to counter pro-Kremlin propaganda is to name&shame the authors of those disinformation stories by putting them in the public spotlight.

Another tactic used to spread misinformation¹ is uploading articles which seem to be informative but are actually opinions, which makes it hard to report them. Mixing opinions and facts is a common pattern observed online. What unites the analysed web sites is their common and negative approach towards NATO and the European Union. Some of them do not even mention Russia but rather focus on degrading Western systems, governments or particular ideas or policies, and try to persuade the readers that there is no such thing as objective truth.

The worrisome fact is that pro-Kremlin propaganda manages, from time to time, to get into the mainstream media. This affects not only the society but also may have a direct impact on bilateral relations between

states. One of such fake stories, based on Russian source (Topnewsrussia.ru), was about Egypt who has allegedly sold two French-built Mistral ships to Russia – which originally commissioned the ships – for USD 1. It was reported by the Polish public news broadcaster (TVP INFO: "[Egypt sold mistrals to Russia for 1\\$](#)").

Russia's information war toolbox also includes trolling in social media and in commentaries under articles. Russian trolls are very active in Poland. Very often they are commenting articles published on the three biggest and most popular information portals: Wp.pl, Onet.pl and Interia.pl. Their interest is focused upon such topics as NATO, Ukraine, the European Union and Russia. Although sometimes it is difficult to distinguish whether a given commentary is actually an act of Russian trolling, there are some hints leading to such a conclusion, namely, the lack of Polish characters (such as "ł", "ó", "ź") and the use of the same argumentation as in numerous pro-Kremlin articles. Commentaries under an article untitled "[Nato has to get ready for Russian invasion](#)" regarding the Atlantic Council's report "Arming for Deterrence", published on Onet.pl, may serve as a good example. Main messages expressed in these commen-

¹ Misinformation - the act of giving wrong information about something, the wrong information that is given. Disinformation - false information that is given deliberately, especially by government organizations.

INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE INTERNET

EXPOSING AND COUNTERING PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION IN THE CEEC

| Antoni Wierzejski

4

taries (which amounted to over 2000 at the end of last year) were as follows:

- Poland will be destroyed by an atomic bomb,
- Poland will be left alone,
- American military industry is pushing for war,
- The Jews are to blame.

Author:

Antoni Wierzejski

INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE INTERNET

EXPOSING AND COUNTERING PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION IN THE CEEC

| Antoni Wierzejski

5

The project “Information warfare in the Internet. Exposing and countering pro-Kremlin disinformation in the CEEC” is executed simultaneously by six partners: [Polish Centre for International Relations](#) (the leader), the [Association of Independent Press](#) from Moldova, Hungarian [Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy](#), the [Prague Security Studies Institute](#) from the Czech Republic, [Slovak Foreign Policy Association](#) and Ukrainian [StopFake](#). We monitor online media, trying to capture similarities and differences in disinformation strategies tailored at individual countries participating in the project. Conclusions from our comparative research, as well as recommendations how to counter propaganda, will be presented in a report distributed to decision-makers from our region, the EU and NATO.



The project is co-financed with the International Visegrad Fund.

www.visegradfund.org



Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ul. Mińska 25, 03-808 Warszawa t: +48 22 646 52 67

 www.twitter.com/CIR_CSM

 www.facebook.com/CIR.CSM



CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS