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## **THE EUROPEAN MIRROR OF HYBRID WAR: HOW RUSSIA TRIES TO DESTABILIZE THE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**

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### **Abstract**

The unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine, which is the biggest war after the World War II, has caused a number of problems in Europe and in the whole democratic world, which is concerning regarding the functioning of the international institutions, the security of the countries that are part of international organizations, but aren't members of the EU and NATO, the protection of human rights mechanisms and the lack of mechanisms for the prevention of war and conflicts.

It is clear that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is no accident. The Russian elites, led by President Vladimir Putin, have been preparing for this move for years. Not only have they acted openly, but they have also been waging a hybrid war. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has been going on since 2014, when Russia supported the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics for succession. And before that, Moscow unilaterally annexed Crimea. The European response to Russian aggression has been diplomatic expressions of concern and threats, and some sanctions, which Russia has successfully evaded. It seemed that Europe had consistently adapted to the new geopolitical environment.

But only after 24th of February 2022, all civilization's words stand by Ukraine and the Ukrainians. The Western allies of Ukraine give money and weapons, humanitarian aid, training of military and deminers and take in Ukrainian refugees. The war in Ukraine is in its third year. This analysis elaborates the Russian influence on different levels and the European reactions to their attacks and provocations.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, European countries, Russian aggression, propaganda

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## The information dimension

Russian military doctrine considers information warfare as a permanent ‘war in peacetime’. Under conditions of open aggression in Ukraine the hybrid war has been intensified. For Russia, creating hybrid threats is its main strategy (Polehky, 2021). It includes several aspects that are accompanied by information influence, cyber-attacks, misinformation, disinformation and proper propaganda, etc.

Traditionally, the Russians propagandists play on contradictions, exploiting weaknesses of different societies, and inflating issues that provoke debates. They skillfully raise topics that make people argue with each other, although we have seen this in European countries too, especially during elections. This technique works. They invest resources in one narrative and the other, banging people’s heads together. They adapt well and quickly, but very rarely come up with something new in order not to invest resources in new advertising. They mostly use existing narratives. In all existing discussions in society, Russians raise the temperature of the conversation and divide society (Tsybulska, 2024).

The Russians are also targeting audiences that know little about the war in Ukraine, who often do not have access to Ukrainian media, or who have a trust in the government mass media. This is why they are successful in spreading their messages in some countries, even though many European countries have banned the broadcasting of Russian TV channels. They often use social media to spread conspiracy theories for particular groups.

At the end of August, Meta published a report for the second quarter of 2024 on the information transactions they had uncovered. Of the 7 or 8 disinformation campaigns they highlighted and removed from their platform, most were Russian influence campaigns (Dukach, 2024). It is mainly about the creation of inauthentic profiles, bots and ads.

Another prominent example is the Russian disinformation campaign DoppelGanger, also known as Recent Reliable News (RRN), which was founded in 2022. The primary goal of DoppelGanger is to reduce Western support for Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion. The second goal for the propaganda articles is to be quoted and taken up by the Russian media in order to reach the Russian population through the alternative reality that the Russian power is trying to maintain about the war in Ukraine (Octopus institute site, 2024). It includes a variety of articles and videos in English, German, French, and Ukrainian to undermine support for Ukraine’s government. The promoted narratives aim firstly at sowing doubts among Western public opinion about helping Kyiv and sending military and financial support regarding the impact on their own living conditions. Secondly, the narratives try to erode confidence in institutions, amplifying criticism of the

leaders/institutions/governments' decisions. Finally, the campaign plays on political, societal, religious divisions to increase its impact and weaken solidarity and support among Western countries.

In 2023, the EU DisinfoLab team reported discovering an advertising network of at least 242,000 fake Facebook pages. The ads propagated by the network across the European Union promote both Russian propaganda and consumer scams, suggesting that the advertising network operates for pay (EU Disinfo Lab, 2023). This campaign is likely to cost millions of euros, which Russia is investing to strengthen its information influence and weaken European countries.

The Russian propagandists usually select existing themes and promote them. Russia also uses international topics and events to its advantage in the information space. The methodology and the goal are the same everywhere – to reduce military and humanitarian support to Ukraine (Tsybulska, 2024). In some countries, where there is an anti-NATO, anti-Western sentiment, Russian propaganda also plays on this sentiment. They say that this is the West's war against Russia, that NATO is fighting Russia at the hands of the Ukrainians, and this thesis fits into existing patterns in certain countries.

The war in Ukraine and hybrid warfare are lasting. European countries are fighting against Russian propaganda but it's crucial to create new networks and unite efforts in this struggle. Cooperation is a win-win situation as it allows for the exchange of best practices, leading to the best preparation. Hybrid threats do not recognize borders, so the resilience of neighbors is in the EU's best interest (Hybrid Threats in the Context of European Security, 2021).

## **Political dimension**

Russia's main goal is not only to refuse to support Ukraine, but also to destabilize Western countries. Russian propaganda even portrays the war in Ukraine, which Russia started, as a struggle between "right" values and Western "wrong" ones. Politically, Putin's regime wants to strengthen their influence in Europe.

The Czech analytical project Kremlin Watch Monitor has divided EU countries into three parts according to their reaction to Kremlin propaganda: from Moscow's collaborators to active fighters against disinformation. According to their classification, the Baltic states, Sweden and the United Kingdom are the leaders in countering the Kremlin's disinformation machine, most European countries are "concerned", though not very much, about a third of countries simply deny that the problem exists, and Greece and Cyprus openly support the Kremlin's narratives (Polehky, 2021). On the other hand, this division can be based on the principle of

cooperation with Russia and support for Ukraine. For instance, Hungary has close ties with Russia and prime minister Victor Orban called himself as a “dove of peace” after the diplomatic visits to Ukraine, Russia and China (Texty, 2024).

Before the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin Watch Monitor said that most European countries are not ready to comprehensively investigate and expose Russian influence networks in their countries. Apart from the UK parliamentary bodies, there has been no comprehensive official investigation of Russian influence networks, Russian ties to European political parties or Russian interference in various European elections and referendums on the European continent.

2024 is the election year. Globally, more voters than ever in history will head to the polls as at least 64 countries, representing a combined population of about 49% of the people in the world – are meant to hold national elections, the results of which, for many, will prove consequential for years to come (Time, 2024).

In Europe an important matter were the elections in the European Union. Russia tried to influence the result of the vote. Ukrainian expert Ihor Todorov said that Russian influence is exercised in a variety of ways. First of all, Russian intelligence services sophisticatedly manipulate the principles underlying European democracy. This is supposedly done openly, but one can assume that Russia's ears are “sticking out” behind some slogans, politicians, and their activities. For example, the German politician Sarah Wagenknecht campaigned with the slogan “War or Peace?” - with the idea of the need to end the war and establish peace. But the end of the war is on Russia's terms (Todorov, 2024).

Of course, Russian influence is not limited to legal means. It also includes bribery and political pressure. For example, during the EU elections there were some cases of beatings of parliamentary candidates. It looked like hooliganism, but these are very similar methods of influence, just like the “titushky” in Ukraine who fulfilled various political orders, especially during the Yanukovich presidency.

By the way, in March 2024, there was a scandal in Germany over the fact that Peter Bystron, a Bundestag member from the Alternative for Germany and a candidate for the European Parliament, received cash from a pro-Russian influence network that had been exposed by European intelligence. At the center of the scandal is the pro-Russian website Voice of Europe, which is linked to Viktor Medvedchuk. The journalistic investigation involves amounts of hundreds of thousands of euros that were transferred to politicians (Todorov, 2024).

The recent successes of the far-right AfD and populist BSW parties in the Saxony and Thuringia state elections in September 2024 have led to speculation about potential shifts in national policies on Ukraine and migration (O’Neal, 2024). This issue also is beneficial to Russia.

On the European political stage the Kremlin has sought out and supported influential political figures. These key figures could be supported financially, ideologically or in the media, in exchange for Kremlin support. At the moment, Russia tries to support European radicals and extremist groups. Their political orientation and ideology doesn’t matter but their anti-system factor is essential for Russia. Through these groups and movements, the Kremlin is fomenting confrontation within these countries and deliberately destroying democratic institutions. We can see that citizens of some European countries voted for the right wing. Of course, it might be Russian influence.

Russian speaking people are a dangerous minority for each country. They are a potential base for Russian military and intelligence goals. The "protection" of the Russian minority or "compatriots" abroad, including access to relevant cultural, ideological and patriotic information and education, particularly in the Baltic States, Germany and the Czech Republic, is another pretext for Russia to spread its influence.

The interests of the Russian Federation are often promoted by non-governmental organizations or government-organized NGOs. The aim of their activities is to influence European public opinion and to form an "understanding" of the Russian view of politics (Polehky, 2021) . These organizations play the role of influential actors that use legitimate means of democratic debate to legitimize the Russian regime and policies abroad.

## **Economic dimension**

Prior to the full-scale war in Ukraine, Russia, as a country with vast natural resources and a large market, remained one of the biggest European Union's partners. Given that the war in Ukraine has been going on since 2014, European countries have maintained economic partnership with Russia for years. After the invasion European countries were encouraged to impose sanctions, reduce trade with Russia, and offset any economic and resource dependencies (ECIPE, 2023).

Indeed, in 2021, the total trade turnover between the EU and Russia amounted to €257.5 billion, accounting for 8% of European imports and 4% of EU exports. EU imports amounted to €158.5 billion, dominated by fuels and mining products, energy, timber, iron and steel, and fertilizers. EU exports totalled €99.0 billion in

2021. Most of all, machinery and equipment, vehicles, pharmaceuticals, electrical equipment, and plastics were supplied to Russia. In 2021, Russia was the EU's fifth largest trade partner, representing 5.8% of the EU's total trade in goods with the world (European Commission, 2022).

In 2014, the EU has progressively imposed restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia, initially in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and the deliberate destabilization of Ukraine. The Western sanctions against Russia, imposed after the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Donbas, were the most extensive the Russian Federation has ever experienced (BBC Ukraine, 2016). But these measures in general weren't effective in reality.

Resilience of the Russian economy was due, in particular, to the guarantee of high revenues to the state budget from the sale of energy and raw materials, and the creation of significant internal reserves to support economic activity (Ukrainian Prizm, 2023). Also, the high degree of dependence on energy carriers by the EU countries, which had not taken any meaningful steps to diversify their supplies before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, contributed to the effective sale of energy carriers. At the same time, the Russian Federation expanded the range of countries to which it supplies energy resources, particularly in Asia, and continued to build up its supply volumes, which created the preconditions for their further increase in the context of the war with Ukraine.

After full-scale invasion the EU massively expanded the sanctions (European Commission, 2024). It added a significant number of individuals and organizations to the sanctions list, and adopted unprecedented measures with the aim of weakening Russia's economic base, depriving it of critical technologies and markets, and significantly curtailing its ability to wage war. The sanctions aim to weaken Russia's ability to finance the war and specifically target the political, military and economic elite responsible for the invasion (Councilium, 2023). And the restrictive measures do not target Russian society.

The EU Council has adopted 14 packages of economic and individual sanctions in connection with Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. In total, the EU's restrictive measures against actions that undermine or threaten Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence currently apply to more than 2,300 individuals and legal entities (Ministry Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2024). Their assets are subject to freezing, and EU citizens and companies are prohibited from providing funds to them. Individuals are also subject to an entry ban, which prohibits them from entering or transiting the EU.

In June 2024, The EU Council adopted the 14th package of individual and economic restrictive measures against Russia (Councilium, 2024). The new EU sanctions are aimed at such important sectors of the Russian economy as energy, finance and trade, as well as at combating sanctions circumvention.

The imposition of additional and more stringent economic sanctions after the outbreak of a full-scale war did not have an immediate negative effect on the Russian economy (Ukrainian Prizm, 2023). Moreover, the restrictions were introduced gradually and did not create a situation of complete economic isolation of the Russian Federation.

Obviously, cooperation with Russian business is dangerous although companies close to the Kremlin use economic means to exert political influence in targeted European countries. Their activities were most visible in the energy sector. Strategic energy agreements between European countries and firms help the Kremlin to impose its political and geopolitical interests (Polehky, 2021). By the way, they increase the state's dependence on friendly relations with the Kremlin and can potentially be a tool for blackmailing political leadership.

Representatives of the European institution admit that sanctions against the Russian Federation have been a partial success. There is evidence that Russia is using Turkey, the UAE, Central Asian countries, as well as Georgia and Armenia to circumvent Western sanctions (European Parliament, 2023). Russian leaders also say that sanctions stimulate the search for alternative markets and the development of domestic producers (BBC Ukraine, 2016). Experts predict that an even faster and more significant blow to Russia's economy could be inflicted by introducing much more severe restrictions, up to a complete embargo on major exports from Russia.

## **Security**

In time of the war in Ukraine is taught to guarantee European security in general. The Russian Federation has become the state owning the nuclear weapon so that allows them to blackmail the whole world. This year, Vladimir Putin, enraged by increased Western military and financial support for Ukraine, has again made nuclear threats against countries supporting Ukraine. He has announced that Russia will develop a new class of intermediate-range nuclear weapons and may deploy them near NATO countries (Associated Press News, 2024).

Russia has gained more close cooperation among Asian countries. At the same time, they have been developing a foreign policy vector to Africa and Latin America. One of the biggest Russian partners now is China. Since this country stepped in to support Russia after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in the Donbas in 2014, Moscow has become increasingly reliant on Beijing. This dependence has grown since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. China has reiterated the Russian narrative blaming NATO for the outbreak of the war and, through its exports of goods that contribute to Russia's military-industrial base, it enables Russia to continue the war (Stent, 2024). Putin has, in the past two years, created an “axis of resistance” of countries that facilitate his aggression – China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia.

On the other hand, Russia tries to develop BRICS as the international union, but it isn't an official multilateral organization. This year, BRICS has doubled in size to 10 members. The founding members - China, Russia, Brazil, India, and South Africa - were joined by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Iran (Syrovyy, 2024). The association declares mainly economic goals: deepening cooperation and reforming international financial institutions to strengthen the voice and representation of developing countries. But last time BRICS had ambitions to be an alternative military block as NATO. Analysts point to the gradual militarization of economic cooperation within BRICS (Ivanova, 2024).

Moreover, by occupying foreign lands, Russia has established imaginary borders for itself and created multiple ‘gray zones’ in the region – an issue that would further complicate any future security agreements with Moscow (ICDS, 2024). By failing to honor its previous commitments, Moscow has undermined trust in its very potential to negotiate.

Obviously, it is time for a new system of world security which will be based on the strategy of containment. This strategy, which must begin in Ukraine, does not end with victory in the present war. Effective containment will require renewed commitment to the security of NATO's eastern flank, a concerted strategy to counteract Russian influence in Western societies and globally, and a principled refusal to cede any of Moscow's former vassals in the post-Soviet space to continued domination.

## **Conclusions**

The war in Ukraine, which began as overt Russian aggression against the independent country, has turned into a protracted war of attrition that transcends regional borders. The main theater of hostilities is in



Ukraine, but most European countries have been affected by this war. In addition, Russia is waging a hybrid war against them with the aim of destabilising the internal situation.

Europe's response to Russia's hybrid warfare should therefore be more dynamic. Since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, Europe has consistently adapted to the new geopolitical environment. Russia has used so-called soft power. The activities of pressure groups, combined with the Russian state's administrative and security apparatus, as well as the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, pro-Russian elites, mass culture and the media, can seriously undermine political processes and democratic development in the region.

The main part of Russian activities is accompanied by information operations. Their state propaganda works well and they do not hesitate to use any method or tool. While simple lies are fine for local audiences, for Ukrainians and Europeans they are interested in more sophisticated methods of manipulation. A shining example of these methods is the DoppelGanger disinformation campaign. This type of operation consists of deliberately spreading false or inaccurate information for malicious purposes.

Russian political influence in Europe is based on exacerbating existing problems and supporting radical movements aimed at reducing military aid to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. The main Russian goal is to weaken and destabilise Europe by undermining its unity. While Western countries are reluctant to provide more military aid to Ukraine in order not to provoke Russia, fearing that destabilising a nuclear power could have unintended consequences, Russia is deliberately seeking to destabilise Europe.

Economic leverage and dependence on Russian resources are no exception. In short, trade between the EU and Russia has decreased since the invasion of Ukraine. Not all member states have been able to reduce their trade with Russia; in fact some states have seen an increase in value of trade over the same period. Similarly, the EU sanctions against Russia have not yet had their full impact, as many European companies continue to operate in Russia, thus indirectly supporting its military efforts.

Throughout post-Soviet history, the Russian Federation has sought to dominate the countries and societies it once ruled, attempting to exercise a veto over their domestic politics and foreign relations and to prevent the emergence of democracy. The war in Ukraine is therefore a war for democracy and European values. And the European choice of the Ukrainian people and their faith confirms their willingness to be part of the democratic world and the European community. These efforts, in turn, require the full support of the Ukrainians for the victory of Ukraine and the establishment of a just peace based on territorial integrity and the gradual reconstruction of the country and the restoration of its economy.

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