

IRI Beacon Project Comment for UCMC “Ukraine in Flames”

Russia employed information and psychological operations (INFO- and PSYOPS) against Ukraine and the West for over a decade now. Key components that grew in significance over the years are the use of cyberspace (especially social media and quasi- and fringe media outlets), employment of conspiracy theories and engaging the whole administrative and state media apparatus in the dissemination of selected messages, falsehoods, disinformation and narratives. Escalation of the war in Ukraine and Western response forced Kremlin to change some of its tactics. International Republican Institute’s Beacon Project is monitoring information trends and selected narratives in Central and Eastern European Countries and publishes the findings in the “[Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine](#)”.

Changes in the Russian disinformation since the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine until the end of July 2022

Noticeable during the Covid-19 pandemic and still the Russian *modus operandi*, is the use of anti-vaccine and anti-science narratives, as well as conspiracy theories. The actors engaged in the dissemination of that type of content were also identified as the most active producers of the pro-Russian, anti-Western, anti-NATO and anti-Ukrainian messages. Many of their activities in the Central and Eastern European information space are clearly coordinated, tailored to country or regional specificities.

Other relevant changes in the Russian INFOOPS and PSYOPS include employment of highly violent content, including graphic and video of alleged behaviours of Ukrainian citizens or military personnel, spreading and less coordinated dissemination via old and new networks of suspicious and fringe (usually right-wing radical) accounts and groups on social media, rising share of anti-liberal and ideological content, weaponization of energy and security policies, continuation of the usage of conspiracy theories, and last but not least - utilization of emotional messages, calculated to exploit feelings of fear, helplessness, uncertainty, confusion and distrust to the state and international institutions, rule of law, values and democracy.

The key directions of Russian disinformation after February 24th

Among the key directions of Kremlin disinformation there are:

- Anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee narratives,
- Anti-NATO and anti-US narratives,
- Anti-Russian sanctions narratives,
- Fear building messages and narratives, e.g.: the rising risk of the WWII / nuclear war, inevitable economic crisis, world hunger, humanitarian crisis – all this with a clear anti-Western angle,
- Pro-peace / pro-appeasement narratives,
- Fake news and conspiracy theories about the events in Ukraine and related to Ukraine (e.g. US bio-labs, Ukrainian provocations against Russia, Ukrainians killing civilians or staging “supposedly” Russians attacks).

Changes in the dissemination methods

For the Russian actors it’s getting increasingly more difficult to work with the Western social media, but also in the Western information spaces. This has resulted in a noticeable shift towards producing more content in languages such as Spanish, Portuguese, Indian and Arabic. There are also researched interconnections and overlaps between the Russian propaganda and disinformation activities globally and Chinese ones. What is more, there seems to be more efforts focused on the employment of alternative social media channels and Telegram, in an attempt to: a) bypass the Western response to the Russian disinformation dissemination, b) influence more vulnerable audiences, c) create more favourable environment for Russian foreign policy, especially in the international institutions.

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