

V4+ Security – Strengthening the Eastern Frontier of the V4

Anti-Propaganda Measures in the Security Sphere

Introduction

De-facto, propaganda can be considered as a state information policy, with neither negative nor positive value. It depends on the assumed shape, does it become strategic communication or an aggressive warfare of the country's both internal and external information policy. Under the country (state) in this case we understand not only governments, but other state or state-controlled institutions, including media and lobby groups, as well as political parties (both ruling and in opposition).

In the sphere of defence and security, propaganda can aim strategic communication, but more often, it aims to bring fear, and in this meaning, it can be considered as a part of the so-called hybrid warfare. It can act as a measure of deterrence, showing the strength of an army or other security institutions, and in this capacity, it can be regarded similar to military exercises by its purpose. It also can be aggressive as a first phase of an attack or to be manipulative, so to create fake or misleading perceptions about the current situation, threats, adversary potential and its plans, as well as to initiate arms race. Usually propaganda in the security sphere is closely connected with destabilizing efforts in the political sphere.

What already exists in the EU and NATO?

Both the EU and NATO have announced their intention on future cooperation in response to the hybrid threats (what was confirmed at the NATO Warsaw Summit), however in the sphere of counter-propaganda and tackling disinformation they still prefer to work separately, creating individual task forces within the organizations. Most of the work is currently aimed at strategic communication and “myth-busting” rather than search and analysis of existing propaganda, its channels and possible counter-measures. Many official statements confirm that both organizations see counter-measures only as the spread of their own propaganda – a measure they do not want to repeat after Russia. Such an approach limits perception of the possible tools that can be used to minimize the effect of the Russian propaganda, but not only.

In August 2015 the European Union established a small task force within the European External Action Service (EEAS) to counter Russian propaganda. Among the main functions of the task force (without allocated budget at the first stage) the following were named: look into Russian propaganda and into the needs of journalists in the Eastern Partnership countries – Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, prove readiness to communicate and provide help to journalistic training, and provide

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assistance to the media, which have Russian language versions, in an effort to reach Russian-speaking audiences. The EU's East StratCom Task force should also be engaged in developing communication products and campaigns focused on explaining EU policies in the Eastern Partnership region and creating a positive EU narrative, ad-hoc communication on topical and relevant EU policy issues; myth-busting by analysing trends, explaining narratives and addressing disinformation; etc. Although, the team does not have a task of countering propaganda, it is involved in the correction of disinformation, among others through two weekly newsletters, the Disinformation Review and the Disinformation Digest.

NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, established in 2014, is a multi-nationally NATO-accredited military organization, which is not part of the NATO Command Structure, nor subordinate to any other NATO entity. Its main activities include research on identifying early signals of a hybrid warfare scenario, study Russia's information campaign against Ukraine and how NATO and its members could protect themselves from subversive leverage, support NATO StratCom training and education, as well as study of the use of social media as a weapon in hybrid warfare. It should also develop Academic Magazine "Defence Strategic Communications". As we can see, NATO has a more precise focus, and anti-propaganda concentration, seeing it as an integral part of the hybrid warfare, but also associates it in particular with Russia as a source and Ukraine as the case.

Situation in the Visegrad Four

Historical connections, appealing to the "Slavic unity", protracted feeling of being "New Europe" and border position are the factors influencing targeting of the V4 states and their relative openness - compared for example with North or South Europe- in absorbing propaganda.

For spreading propaganda, both open and covert channels are used. In case of the Visegrad Four states, a wide network of the lobbying and pro-Russian elements are used to support the actions and present them not as Russian ones, but local, internal process. Any criticism of media publications are quickly presented as a violation of the freedom of speech (this demonstrates one of the mechanisms, when an adversary uses principles of the targeted society for its own benefit, while manipulating the meaning). Direct and indirect support of the pro-Russian politicians is also an important element for the security sphere, especially if they are a part of the national parliaments, so they can influence the budgeting in the respected spheres, authorization of the military support and cooperation, etc. Usually, there are representatives of the far-left or far-right parties that become involved.

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Separate group to be named is undeclared intelligence officers serving in the respected Embassies. Recent reports of the V4 intelligence services demonstrated the increased amount of such personnel in the Russian embassies and their intensified activities. Except for the analysis and espionage, many of them, especially under the cover of cultural attaché or political advisor positions, are actively involved in the political discussions in the countries, providing financial support to different NGOs, public events, etc. to spread the necessary ideas and shape the public discourse. As an example, Embassy of Russia in the Czech Republic currently has 120 accredited personal, suggesting the country also serves as a hub for Russian operations.

Possible false disinformation topics include:

- NATO will not secure V4 countries if attack happens.
- NATO forces can attack Russia from the territory of the V4 without consent of the national governments.
- It is NATO, which provoked Russia first by its enlargement, and continued provoking by deployment of the additional forces on the eastern borders.
- NATO is planning to store its nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe.
- Sanctions hurt only the EU member states, but are not effective against Russia so should be lifted.
- Europe is unstable because of migrants; EU policy in this sphere is not acceptable for the Eastern states.
- “Everybody are lying” – creating a public perception that you cannot trust any local media or politician.
- All liberal governments or politicians are “American puppets”.
- Spreading false information about conflict in Ukraine.

The main goals of such propaganda are to bring doubts and divisions inside of the Central and Eastern European societies, but also to support political parties with a more favourable approach towards Russia, euro-sceptics, etc., while undermining trust in the current governments as well as European integration project and in the trustworthiness of NATO as a reliable partner and protector. Very often, the task is not to lie but to create confusion in the societies and infuse contradictions between politicians to promote distrust and instability.

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Situation in Ukraine and Moldova

By opinion of some experts, Ukraine became a laboratory of the information war in 2014. While it can be agreed due to the force and scope of the propaganda used and disinformation involved, neither 2014 can be named as an initial year, nor just Ukraine was a target. Especially after 2008, the activation of propaganda was seen in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia and Baltic states. However, use of the older population to the Russian (Soviet) TV and news from Moscow had been formulating their perceptions and opinions for much longer.

One of the main problems is that both Ukraine and Moldova, comparing to the V4 states can accept information in Russian, and use a lot of Russian sources, including the satellite TV and retransmitting of the Russian TV programs via local channels. If Ukraine has managed partially to decrease this tendency by prohibiting Russian TV, so in Moldova it is still dominant. It can be especially dangerous in the border regions, which sometimes have not had physical possibility to watch their national TV or rejected it due to the language issue. In the security sphere, news programs are not the only element of propaganda, but the entertainment content, as for the long time there have been numerous films and soap operas glorifying Russian military, special and security forces. This content could be considered as pure propaganda aimed not only to the “internal” market, but also to construct an image of power and strength among citizens of other countries, while demonizing their own security forces. Glorification of the Soviet security services was also actively used.

Besides, forged letters and leaking of fake information could be actively used, especially about the arms trade and possible contracts. Ukraine has already witnessed it few years ago when publishing of the fake letter allowed the Azerbaijan authorities to accuse Kyiv of selling weapons to Armenia. Recently Swedish MoD faced the situation of faked letter promoting selling weapons to Ukraine, widely discussed in the country and provoking serious scandals.

Both in Ukraine and in Moldova the disinformation campaigns are aimed to undermine the pro-European sentiments and decrease the trust in national governments. In the security sphere, it also connected with the fear of provocations, and minimization of the army support, as well as presenting this country army not better than the enemy in terms of behavior and violations of cease-fire, human rights, etc. At the same time, they are emphasizing that Russia is not an aggressor, but its reaction is natural as it has a right to secure its spheres of influence by any means. The myth of the extreme economic and energy dependence is also vigorously promoted.

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Possible variants for cooperation between V4, Ukraine and Moldova

One of the main problems is that security sphere is a very closed-door field, **which is not open for public discussions over existing problems and proper strategic communications in case of a necessity to clarify information**, which can be classified. As a result, the emotional consequences of the spread of propaganda prevail over the strict and short comments of the official institutions, such as MoD or intelligence services.

As Russia currently is not able to present an alternative ideology (comparing to the Cold War times), most of its propaganda is aimed on deconstructing rather than constructing reality. While the practice of the last two years demonstrated that the messages used both in Visegrad Four states, Ukraine and Moldova are very similar: euro-skepticism, demonizing NATO and the US, provoking fear and distrust in local governments, supporting particular political parties and activities, opposing sanctions and justifying use of any means to secure Russian spheres of control, which are equal to Soviets.

These similarities present a background for possible cooperation, best practices sharing and joint counter measures both between the governmental structures, civil societies of the described countries and between the civil society and authorities. Security Forces and MoDs are not able to confront propaganda alone and systematically, thus a close cooperation with the respective NGOs and think-tanks are necessary both to outsource some of the work (first of all research component) and to enhance capabilities.

Other possible actions can include:

- To develop a joint communication strategy V4+Ukraine and Moldova with the respective National Action Plans. Development of the proper information strategies on Euro-Atlantic integration and cooperation, including adequate public and educational campaign. Support of the information centres and use of the social networks are needed not only in Ukraine and Moldova, but already in the NATO members-states to counter negative narratives infused by the propaganda.
- To organize journalists' study tours or working trips from Ukraine and Moldova to V4 states, and vice versa to have a possibility to learn about NATO integration of the respective countries, security sector reforms, conflicts zones, anti-terrorist operation on the East of Ukraine and Transnistrian conflict settlement in Moldova with the emphasis on military and security components.
- To create Partnership Training and Education Centre with the emphasis on anti-propaganda and cyber security, as many propaganda activities are closely connected with the cyber security and need a synergy efforts for counter-measures.

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- To establish task forces within the respective countries in the security structures involved cyber security specialists, journalists, specialists in strategic communications and psychological operations, and, linguists to analyse the existing propaganda, crisis cases reaction, etc. To arrange communication between the respective task forces of V4 + UA and MD for information and best practices sharing, joint trainings and possible cooperation.
- Different countries started establishing Counter 'hybrid' threats centre (e.g. Finland, also planned by NATO in Ukraine). It can be beneficial if V4 countries could join such centres or establish joint V4 + Ukraine and Moldova, maybe with Romanian involvement.
- While censorship is not an option, however, improvement of legislation and its active use to follow cases of open disinformation and publishing of fake information should be discussed and considered in the respective parliaments.

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