

CASE STUDY OF THE RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN DURING THE WAR IN UKRAINE – PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES, GOALS, AND IMPACTS

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Josip Mandić*, Darijo Klarić**

Abstract: This study examines strategic importance and use of disinformation and propaganda narrative of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (Russia) about foreign citizens fighting in the war conflict in 2022 on the side of Ukraine. With that regard, Russia uses disinformation as a tool of the information warfare or as a

* Josip Mandić, earned his Master of Laws degree and specialisation in Human Rights Law at the Faculty of Law of University Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at University North, Croatia. He is working with Ministry of Defence for more than 15 years. E-mail: jomandic@unin.hr

** Darijo Klarić completed a Master Degree in Political Science at the Faculty of Political Science, Zagreb University, and finished the study of sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb University. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at the University North, Croatia. He works at the Croatian Ministry of Defence. E-mail: daklaric@unin.hr

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non-lethal weapon and operationalizes it in accordance with „4D Concept - dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay “. Thereby, the disinformation placed by Russia represents a classic example of fake, false, and distorted information designed and distributed with the intention to cause a targeted strategical, operational, or tactical effect. This research is focused on the analysis of distributed disinformation and its media/propaganda effect on the abovementioned topic in the following countries: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. The research methodologies used in this study are content analysis and social network and instant messaging (IM) services analysis. The research has led to the conclusion that a systematic, continuous, and synchronised distribution of disinformation in a form of disinformation campaign can have negative impact on public opinion and trust. Therefore, such designed disinformation efforts require a quick and systematic reaction of the government since one of direct objectives of disinformation is to spread confusion among the public, undermine confidence in public institutions and Government and compromise the process of strategic decision making of the targeted country. To conclude, the likely effect of such disinformation campaign significantly increases as it spreads in a planned, synchronised and aggressive way through official and unofficial sources/communication channels and popular social networks and instant messaging (IM) services.

Keywords: Information warfare, propaganda, disinformation, disinformation campaign, social networks, instant messaging (IM) services.

“The point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.”

Garry Kasparov

Introduction

The use of disinformation in war is as old as the war theory itself. Sun Tzu emphasized that the greatest excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting¹. In more recent times, for example, during communism in the Soviet Union, the Soviet intelligence manual, which was classified as a military secret, contained a sub manual on disinformation, or “dezinformatsiya” in Russian, that began with the following proclaimed maxim in capital letters: *"IF YOU ARE GOOD AT DISINFORMATION, YOU CAN DEAL WITH ANYTHING"*². The strategic importance, but also a certain obsession with disinformation, is also confirmed by the statement of former KGB chief Yuri Andropov, who said: *"disinformation has the effect of cocaine, if you sniff it once or twice, it may not change your life. But if you use it every day, it can make you an addict - a different person"*³. In the modern digital technological environment, disinformation are given more media space and power, and the term *weaponization* of information is used to stress their lethality, penetration, and impact on the targeted population, nation, or society. In this environment, fabricated and false information have a high-profile impact due to the social characteristics of the new *post-fact* and *post-truth* society. At its core, *post-fact* defines a society where information are conditioned and judged by value preferences rather than by real and confirmed facts, while

¹ Sun Tzu (5th century BCE), *The Art of War*.

² Pacepa I.M.; Rychlak J.R. (2013). *Disinformation – Former Spy Chief Reveals Secret Strategies for Undermining freedom, Attacking Religion, and Promoting Terrorism*, WND Books, Washington, DC. p.196.

³ *Ibid.*

post-truth defines a society that is more shaped by emotional impulses, trends, and personal opinions than by objective and verified, credible facts. In such an environment, disinformation, empowered by cutting-edge technology (including AI), become a game-changing instrument for projecting power and influence.

Conceptual definition and doctrinal model of disinformation

According to Soviet and later Russian intelligence practices and modus operandi, disinformation occupy a privileged position in intelligence activities and are integrated into the core business of this state instrument. According to the Soviet/Russian model, the primary goal of intelligence operations is not to gather specific information but to use disinformation in such a way to achieve the desired strategic, operational, or tactical goals and objectives. Freelon and Wells argue that in today's information equilibrium, disinformation messages are the ammunition and non-lethal weapon in modern information warfare, where the intended goal is to subdue opponents rather than to convince them⁴. Other theorists also emphasize the key fact that the aim of the game is not only to destroy the enemy's morale or psyche, but to shape such a perception of reality that is in line with one's own goals and interests. In fact, the focus of disinformation efforts is on the decision-making process. *„Disinformation is produced with the intention to make the adversary change the opinion and bring decisions and assessments in favour of doing harm to itself. Methods and techniques used to weave disinformation manipulate with completeness and objectivity of the source of information, or availability and credibility when reaching the destination“*⁵. During the Cold War, Soviet doctrine - which

⁴ Doroshenko, L.; Lukito J. (2021). „Trollfare: Russia's Disinformation Campaign During Military Conflict in Ukraine“, *International Journal of Communication* 15(2021), 4662–4689, <http://ijoc.org>. USA, Austin, p. 464.

⁵ Tuđman, M. (2008). *Information' theater of operations and information science*, Croatian University Press, Zagreb, p. 129.

was later inherited by the Russian Federation - defined disinformation as an intelligence instrument, categorically defined as part of *active measures*. Accordingly, Roy Godson and Richard Shultz define active measures as "*influencing the policies of other governments, undermining confidence in their leaders and institutions, disrupting relations between nations, and discrediting and weakening government and non-governmental opponents*"⁶. In today's modern media-information environment, disinformation are spread through algorithms of computational propaganda, through various social networks, troll farms and sock puppets. According to experts who thoroughly study the Russian disinformation model, the current Russian disinformation model is based on the *firehose of falsehood*⁷ concept which has two key features: a) high number of channels and messages, and b) brazen willingness to spread partial truths or complete fiction. In other words, the key distinctive features of the Russian propaganda and disinformation model are "*a high volume and multiple channels, fast, continuous, and repetitive messages, a lack of adherence to objective reality, and a lack of adherence to consistency*."⁸. As Alexei Levinson defines: "*Russia's new propaganda is not now about selling a particular worldview, it is about trying to distort information flows and fuel nervousness among European audiences*."⁹.

For example, one of the main Russian propagandists, the editor-in-chief at RT (formerly Russia Today), Margarita Simonyan, regularly practices what Bennett and Livingston call *the*

⁶ Shultz, H.R.; Godson, R. (1984). *Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy*, Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's, p. 2.

⁷ Christopher, P.; Matthews, M. (2016). The Russian 'firehose of falsehood' propaganda model: Why it might work and options to counter it; (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 2.

⁹ Levinson, A. (2015). Public opinion and propaganda in Russia, Stop Fake, July 29, 2015, <http://www.stopfake.org/en/public-opinion-and-propaganda-in-russia/>.

*culture of spin, stating "there is no objectivity - only approximations of the truth by as many different voices as possible"*¹⁰.

However, for now, this type of information warfare (trolls, bots, and other forms of manipulation) is relatively detectable and predictable, but modern tools and tactics are becoming increasingly complex and difficult to counter. In modern Russia, the concept of the disinformation system is further developed, and the implementation of information campaigns is not based on traditional media sources alone, but also on digital media sources and social platforms/networks, using all available and accessible information resources. Accordingly, in 2010, retired Admiral Vladimir Pirumov, former head of the Russian Directorate for Electronic Warfare of the Main Naval Staff, wrote in an article on information confrontation that "*information warfare consists in securing national objectives both in wartime and in peacetime through means and technics of influencing the information resources of the opposing side...and includes influence on the enemy's information system and psychological conditions*"¹¹.

According to Pirumov's model, techniques of information influence include "*disinformation (deception), manipulation (situational or societal), propaganda (conversion, separation, demoralization, desertion, captivity), lobbying, crisis control and blackmail*"¹².

Even more relevantly, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu openly called mass media *weapons* and this so-called

¹⁰ Der Spiegel (2013). The West Never Got Over the Cold War Stereotype, 13 August 2013. in **Vera Michlin-Shapir (2020): The Long Decade of Disinformation**; Defence Strategic Communications; Volume 9; Autumn 2020; NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence; Riga, DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.9.5.

¹¹ Pomerantsev, P.; Weiss, M. (2014). The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money, The Institute of Modern Russia Inc, New York, p.12.

¹² Ibid.

weaponization of mass media is part of information warfare that has a well-developed strategy aimed at "*influencing, disrupting, or corrupting public opinion*"¹³.

The Russian doctrinal model regarding information warfare is also evident in the Russian National Security Strategy of 2009, where measures are put in place to combat global information confrontation, as well as in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2013, where the media and the use of media are defined as significant instruments of the soft power concept¹⁴.

Based on this concept, disinformation are a non-lethal weapon in modern information warfare. Thus, according to the Russian approach, information warfare represents an important concept of Russian strategic thinking. This explains the metamorphoses between information, international relations, and conflicts where perception is the main battleground and the informational and psychological warfare domains are maximized¹⁵.

In the implementation of information warfare and the use of disinformation, Russia operationalizes the *4D approach - dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay*, according to prominent authors. The *4D approach*, first used by Ben Nimmo,¹⁶ can be

¹³ Perry, B. (2015)., Non-Linear Warfare in Ukraine: The Critical Role of Information Operations and Special Operations, *Small Wars Journal*, 11(8) (2015), p. 4–5.

¹⁴ Swedish Ministry of Defense, (2014). *Tools of Destabilization: Russian Soft Power and Non-Military Influence in the Baltic States* Försvarsdepartementet [Swedish Ministry of Defense], December 2014, p. 21–22.

¹⁵ Adamsky, D.D. (2015). *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy*, Proliferation Papers 52 (Paris: Security Studies Center, November 2015), p. 26.

¹⁶ Nimmo, B. (2015). *Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It*, Stop Fake, Central European Policy Institute, May 19, 2015, p. 3.

observed in the case of Russian disinformation campaign at the strategical, operational, and tactical levels through the following examples:

- Dismissal: If Russia dislikes the critics, it launches a systematic defamation campaign at a personal, organizational, or political entity level,
- Distortion: If Russia dislikes certain information, it takes immediate actions to twist or warp the narrative around that information or in other words, change the frame around the information,
- Distraction: If Russia is accused of something, it directly redirects that same accusation to the same or another entity,
- Dismay: Russia uses every opportunity to intimidate its opponents, real or perceived.

The given examples clearly show that the Russian approach to disinformation is very sophisticated and comprehensive, and that its aim is not only to spread false information but also to manipulate public opinion, and discredit opponents. The introduction of the fifth element into this approach, which relates to the division of societies, further confirms Russia's strategy of using disinformation as a political tool. The fifth element is increasingly emphasized in Russian campaign and can be most clearly seen in the attempt to create divisions between Ukraine and Poland, which have significantly improved their relations since the beginning of Russian aggression in Ukraine. Russian disinformation activities are aimed at worsening good Polish-Ukrainian relations and, by creating divisions, discouraging Poland and Poles from supporting Ukraine. Additionally, these disinformation campaign seek to discredit Poland in the international arena and create divisions within the EU and NATO, where Poland plays one of crucial roles in supporting Ukraine. In general, Poland is being portrayed as a historical *russophobic* external enemy. In the example of the disinformation campaign against Poland, we can conclude that Russia uses all five described approaches to

achieve a comprehensive effect on all three levels: strategical, operational, and tactical. It is important to note that disinformation campaigns are not just a problem for countries that are being directly targeted by Russia but also for the international community as they can destabilize regions, affect international relations and security, and create insecurity and mistrust among countries. „The side which gains information prevalence in the information space also reaches hegemony in the real world“¹⁷.

According to various analysts of Russia's information warfare, disinformation are being used with the clear goal of concealing Russia's real objectives. This also creates cover for Russia's military and political activities and preserves the Kremlin's perceived freedom of action. Disinformation campaigns also make it even more difficult for analysts to assess Russia's current military presence in the conflict zone around the globe. Active disinformation campaigns allow Russia greater flexibility in choosing means and methods to worsen the war in Ukraine and expand the range of potential diplomatic solutions that Russia seeks. Meiselman and others, who studied Soviet disinformation during the Cold War, identify three types of disinformation: political disinformation, military disinformation, and economic disinformation¹⁸. While studying Russian disinformation, their presence and objectives are clear but it is difficult to determine their actual impact, although disinformation's negative, destabilizing effects on the legitimacy of institutions and the cohesion of society, as well as on public opinion, are generally acknowledged. According to the some authors the impact of disinformation can be split into the following areas: a) Spread (superficial

¹⁷ Tuđman, M. (2008). *Information' theater of operations and information science*, Croatian University Press, Zagreb, p. 130.

¹⁸ Winifred, M.; Pilon, J.G.; Lenczowski J., etal. (1987). *Soviet Disinformation and the News*. *Political Communication* 4 (1), p. 29–64. doi:10.1080/10584609.1987.9962807.

online/offline behaviour towards dis/misinformation), b) Attitude change or reinforcement (e.g. the psychological effects of dis/misinformation on beliefs, cognition), c) Behaviour change (e.g. altering voting behaviour, disengagement from politics and d) Broader societal impact (e.g. reducing institutional trust, undermining social cohesion)¹⁹.

Therefore, disinformation are conceptualized, structured, and distributed according to the desired intention. However, the general goal is always to distribute disinformation as widely as possible, both offline and online, and to cause a certain political effect, while minimizing political reaction. This is because the disinformation creator wants to avoid systematic and focused analysis of the disinformation content and structure in order not to determine the false or incorrect state that is presented as an a priori factual state. *„Manipulating with objectivity of information leads to false and unprecise presentation of objects (data, events and facts) resulting in false and biased information. The assessment made on the basis of false and biased data and information is not a result of cognitive dysfunction, but of manipulating with cognitive function and cognitive schemes. (People do not make wrong decisions because they do not think 'logically' but because false data are 'planted')“²⁰.*

Indicatively, there is a principle that says that false news spreads faster than true news. A BuzzFeed report showed that the 20 top-performing false election stories achieved more

¹⁹ Colley, T.; Granelli, F.; Althuis J. (2020). Disinformation's Societal Impact: Britain, COVID and Beyond NATO, Defence Strategic Communications, Volume 8; Autumn 2020 NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.8.3

²⁰ Tudman, M. (2008). Information' theater of operations and information science, Croatian University Press, Zagreb, p. 131.

online engagement than the 20 best-performing election stories from 19 major news websites²¹.

Likewise, a study of six false headlines showed that 75% of US citizens put those headlines in the *somewhat* or *very accurate* category²².

The terminology commonly used in the media ranges from *junk news*, *fake news* to disinformation, however, they are not all the same. While both *misinformation* and *disinformation* represent a content that is untrue, incorrect and does not correspond to reality, what separates *misinformation* from *disinformation* is the (lack of) intentional purpose, i.e. in the case of *misinformation*, such content is accidentally distributed, while in the case of *disinformation*, it is intentionally distributed. Furthermore, some authors use additional terminology that conceptually cover the borderline area between these two terms - *mis/disinformation* - and introduce, for example, *xi-sinformation*, that defines those type of information where it is difficult to define the intention of the distributor, and *mal-information*, which defines the intentional and harmful dissemination of basically accurate information²³.

The European Commission has become aware of the growing threat of disinformation and defines them as "*highly persuasive or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and can cause public harm. Public harm includes*

²¹ Silverman, C. (2016). This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook; BuzzFeed News, 16 November 2016. [Accessed 17 December 2018] p. 2.

²² Silverman, C.; Singer-Vine, J. (2016). Most Americans Who See Fake News Believe It, New Survey Says, BuzzFeed News, 6 December 2016. [Accessed 12 December 2019], p. 1.

²³ Armitage R., Vaccari, C. (2021). Misinformation and Disinformation, The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism, Taylor & Francis Group. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349285965>; p. 38.

*threats to the democratic political process and the process of decision-making, as well as to the public good, such as the protection of the health of EU citizens, the environment, or security."*²⁴.

Additionally, Bennett and Livingston define disinformation as "*deliberate falsehood or distortion, often spread as news, to achieve political aims such as discrediting opponents, disrupting political debates, influencing voters, inflaming existing social conflicts, or creating an overall climate of confusion and information paralysis.*"²⁵.

On the other hand, some authors define disinformation as "*falsehood or rumour deliberately spread that may be: (a) propagated as part of a political agenda by an internal group based on ideological biases, with or without malicious intent or (b) part of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, which may undermine national security and resilience*"²⁶.

What is important to notice is that all of these definitions recognize the political aspect of disinformation.

In the digital media environment, disinformation, in all its forms, have a cumulative effect when spread through social media, which became one of the fundamental communication

²⁴ European Commission; Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach; (Communication) COM(2018) 236 final, <https://eurlex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0236>, p. 3-4.

²⁵ Bennett, W.L.; Livingston, S. (2021). *The Disinformation Age Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*; George Washington University; University Printing House, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.3.

²⁶ Jayakumar, S.; Ang, B.,Anwar, N.D. (2021). *Disinformation and Fake News*; Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd., p.7.

channels for influencing public opinion. The disinformation's strong and rapid effect is possible due to the extensive and intensive use of the *anything-goes* mentality among social media users, who are often unaware or insufficiently cautious about the quality and accuracy of the news being distributed, due to the erosion of social norms in online communication. In fact, the distribution of disinformation has been accelerated through the social media/networks. This is due to the widespread, easy and cheap, use of social media, which has challenged or undermined the traditional media's role as information gatekeepers. Both *state* and *non-state* actors can use disinformation in the digital media environment to achieve their goals. The most commonly used models of disinformation in *state actions* include either a) an individual disinformation story or b) a disinformation campaigns or c) disinformation operations or d) some sort of hybrid approach between these three models. A disinformation story is a single false news item placed in an information sphere. A disinformation campaign is a coherent campaign in which multiple false stories, which are related to a particular event, are spread. A disinformation operation is a long-term effort aimed at systematically deceiving an audience, consisting of stories and content that are spread and may not all necessarily be false. In many cases, a disinformation campaign and operation involve inauthentic profiles, which present themselves as real people and produce various forms of *organic content* to influence targeted public²⁷.

„This fragmentation, partial information with exact but incomplete content, is the basis for creating disinformation“²⁸.

²⁷ Cour, la C. (2020). Theorising digital disinformation in international relations, Springer Nature Limited 2020; International Politics; <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00215-x>, p. 4-5.

²⁸ Tuđman, M. (2008). Information' theater of operations and information science, Croatian University Press, Zagreb, p. 125.

The Russian doctrinal model uses all previously described models. Therefore, in the next chapter, the operationalization of disinformation, as a manifestation of systematic information-psychological efforts, will be analysed, providing a better understanding of the mechanisms of disinformation manipulation and ways to combat them.

The structure and dynamics of the disinformation about foreign mercenaries in Ukraine

Researching different ways in which disinformation about the number of foreign mercenaries and the countries they come from was disseminated, we can conclude that it is an integral part of a much broader disinformation campaign that Russia has been systematically and co-ordinately conducting since the beginning of its military operations in Ukraine. These disinformation efforts can be divided into three basic propaganda narratives, which operationalize the pre-defined Russian concept of the *firehose of falsehood*:

- Ukraine is a non-existent state that has historically always been part of Russia, while Ukrainians are actually renegade Russians;
- Ukraine is merely a tool of Western policy aimed at surrounding Russia with hostile NATO states;
- The aggressor (Russia) is the victim, and the victim (Ukraine) is the aggressor.

It is precisely within this last narrative, which promotes claims that justice is on the Russian side and that Russia is only protecting its citizens in Ukraine from a *Nazi* regime, that we can study disinformation regarding the participation of *foreign mercenaries* on the Ukrainian side. By publishing data on *foreign mercenaries* fighting on the side of Ukraine, the Russian side uses so-called *mirror propaganda*, falsely attributing to its opponents' actions or intentions that it has itself.

Namely, it is known that the Wagner mercenary group, which recruits its members all around the globe, plays a very significant role in the aggression against Ukraine under the protection and financing of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU). Russia often uses such disinformation narratives in advance of its military operations, but this mode of operating has already been recognized by the international community as Russian *false pretexts* or *false-flag operations*²⁹.

Therefore, in comprehensive research of the development and disinformation dissemination cycle, it is necessary to define who is who in this cycle, namely, who are the main actors in the Russian disinformation campaign. Therefore, our goal is to identify: (1) Enablers of disinformation (how it was possible to spread disinformation), (2) The use of disinformation (who, when, how, and why spreads disinformation), and (3) Responses to disinformation (who, when, how, and why responds to disinformation)³⁰.

Accordingly, as enablers of disinformation, or key channels for the emergence and spread of disinformation, we have recognized, in concentric circles, 1. Russian state institutions; 2. Russian state-controlled media; and 3. Russian internet trolls. Namely, the news about *foreign mercenaries* was initially published through Russian state institutions (the website of

²⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/us/politics/russia-ukraine-invasion-pretext.html>

³⁰ Cour, la C. (2020). Theorising digital disinformation in international relations, Springer Nature Limited 2020; International Politics; <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00215-x>, p. 2.

the Ministry of Defence³¹, statements by Ministry of Defence spokesperson Igor Konashenkov³², statements by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov³³ and then the same news was spread by Russian state-controlled media such as TASS³⁴ and Russia Today (RT)³⁵.

In addition, the news was spread through various Russian trolls on Telegram channels and popular social networks in Russia such as VK Kontakte and RuTube. It is important to note that the EU has imposed a ban on Russian media outlets RT and Sputnik News due to their active role in spreading Russian disinformation narratives. However, according to independent research, these state-controlled media outlets have found a way to circumvent these sanctions and continue their work, aggressively propagandizing on the EU territory³⁶.

According to E.H. Carr³⁷ all forms of disinformation propaganda have a dual purpose and two targeted groups: a) to increase support from the domestic public for their policies or b) to influence the public policies of actual or potential enemies. In this context, the Russian Ministry of Defence's announcement of the number of *foreign mercenaries* has the same goal. It seeks to make the domestic audience aware that

³¹https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/coutry/more.htm?id=12425594@egNews

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-0YtoeRuFw>

³³ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/moscow-claims-mercenaries-from-western-balkans-fight-in-ukraine/

³⁴ <https://tass.com/defense/1466869>

³⁵ <https://rtde.site/international/141331-russisches-militar-veroeffentlicht-statistik-uber/>

³⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-europe-sanctions-social-media-rt/>

³⁷ Khatib, L.; Esfandiary, D. (2019). Disinformation and Propaganda: Framing the Enemy Within. *International Affairs*, 95(2), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz017>, p. 263-282.

Russia is waging war not only against Ukraine but against the entire West, while also letting the enemy know that their citizens are potential targets and a means to achieve Russian political, military, and media objectives. Given that Russia is aware that the official policies of Western allies are firm and unwavering in their support for Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression, their disinformation campaigns are primarily aimed at the broader foreign public. Moreover, in this case, we believe that Russia targeted both its domestic public and the foreign public. We provide several facts in support of this claim:

- Russia has lost credibility in the international relations since the beginning of its aggression against Ukraine, which is a fundamental precondition for any Russian narrative to be legitimately accepted outside of Russia;
- The announcement of the number of *foreign mercenaries* was primarily disseminated through Telegram and VK Kontakte channels, which are primarily used by the populations of Russia and Ukraine;
- Russia heavily relies on epic and mythical (fabricated) narratives in its communications, which have a significant role in Russian culture but much less so in the Western world.

Regarding the last thesis, it should be said that in the announcement of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation from June 17, 2022³⁸, which contains data on the number of Ukrainian *foreign mercenaries*, the medieval European legend of the *headless horseman* is exaggeratedly emphasized. This legend aims to portray Russia as a victim of the international legion of *headless horsemen* who are haunted by ghosts of the past and seek revenge for their past defeats. In a

³⁸ https://t.me/mod_russia_en/2246

philosophical context, the headless horseman symbolizes the past that never dies, that always haunts the living. Just as the headless horseman cannot overcome his death and constantly seeks revenge, so the West cannot overcome Russian historical successes and seeks revenge and a final showdown with Russia. Another similar mythical narrative that Russia uses is that of the *wild geese*, which was originally used for Irish soldiers who fought as mercenaries on the side of Catholics, especially France, from the 17th to the 20th century. Again, it is emphasized that justice is on the Russian side and its opponents are Western mercenaries whose main motive is money and adventure. In relation to the western public, Russia's announcement regarding the number of *foreign mercenaries* primarily aims to unsettle citizens and foster suspicion towards official institutions. Additionally, the Russian side wants to demotivate potential future foreign fighters who had planned to join the fighting on Ukraine's side. Although the number and impact of foreign fighters do not have a decisive influence on the combat readiness and power of the Ukrainian side, their presence has significant political, media, and moral significance. The presence of foreign fighters certainly intensifies media coverage of the conflict in the countries they come from, but it can also have long-term effects on the public policies of those countries regarding the conflict in which they participate.

For this reason, in addition to the mere announcement of the number of *foreign mercenaries* and their countries of origin, an important part of the Russian Ministry of Defence's announcement relates to the legal status of these individuals in relation to Russia. Specifically, the Russian side clearly states that these individuals will not be treated in accordance with the rules of international humanitarian law, but will be legally labelled as *mercenaries*, with the possibility of trial under Russian rules and lengthy imprisonment. This is, in any case, a very clear demotivating factor for all potential foreign fighters because it unfairly and illegally places them at the mercy of the Russian side without the ability to use the so-called

combatants' privileges that clearly and unambiguously arise from the Geneva Conventions and other rules of international humanitarian law. Thus, Russia considers all foreign citizens who fight on Ukraine's side during the armed conflict to be *foreign mercenaries* and does not recognize their status as *combatants* and *prisoners of war* and the corresponding rights that arise from that status in accordance with the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1977 Additional Protocols I and II ³⁹.

Furthermore, by using the term *foreign mercenaries* or characterizing them as *terrorists*, Russia is once again using disinformation as a tool of information warfare. According to the Geneva Conventions, there are two basic categories of persons during an armed conflict: *civilians* and *combatants*. In other words, the category of *terrorists* does not exist in international conventions or customary law governing armed conflicts, whether they are international or non-international in character.

As a part of their systematic disinformation efforts, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation published information on social media platforms such as VKontakte and Telegram ⁴⁰. on June 17, 2022, regarding the number of *foreign mercenaries* participating on the side of Ukraine in the armed conflict with Russia and the number of casualties of those same individuals. In the post, it is stated that "*... against the background of the growing military failures of the Kiev regime and huge daily losses in personnel and equipment, the influx of foreign mercenaries into Ukraine has not only decreased, but is actually turning in the opposite direction...*"⁴¹.

The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation continues in the same post with "*despite the efforts of the Kiev regime and increased payments, the process of mercenaries leaving*

³⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Geneva-Conventions>

⁴⁰ https://t.me/mod_russia_en/2246

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

for the 'other world' or back to their countries of residence has not been stopped by the Kiev leadership," and that "recent empty statements about nearly 20,000 foreigners fighting against Russian armed forces are just lies"⁴².

In the post, which is accompanied by a tabular presentation of the number of *foreign mercenaries* the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation enters a legal and logical contradiction in the same sentence. According to their claim, "*not only mercenaries who are directly involved in combat operations as part of Ukrainian units are now included in our database. We also consider instructors who came to train, assist in the work and repair of western weapons delivered to Ukraine*"⁴³.

In other words, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation acknowledges the fact that foreign citizens are actually fighting as part of the *regular military units* of Ukraine, which, in accordance with the provisions of international humanitarian law, excludes their legal categorization as *mercenaries*.

In the accompanying tabular presentation, Poland is highlighted as the "*undisputed leader in the number of arrived and deceased mercenaries*"⁴⁴.

According to the data from the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation since the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine, 1831 people have arrived from Poland, of which 378 have died, and 272 *mercenaries* have returned to their homeland. Romania is listed in second place with 504 arrivals, 102 deaths, and 98 returns, while the United Kingdom is third with 422 arrivals, 101 deaths, and 95 returns. Croatia is listed in fourth place, from which, according to this post, 204 people have arrived in Ukraine since February 24,

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

2022, to join the armed conflict on the side of Ukraine. Of those 204 people, according to the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 74 people have died, and 51 people have left Ukrainian territory.

Furthermore, on July 12, 2022, just under a month after the initial announcement, the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation released updated data on the number of *foreign mercenaries* participating on the side of Ukraine in the armed conflict with Russia, as well as the number of casualties⁴⁵.

Along with the updated data presented in a tabular form in the accompanying post, Russia is again using the mirror propaganda by accusing Ukraine for spreading disinformation: "*...as we have already mentioned, contrary to the Kiev regime's false claims of supposedly 20,000 foreign mercenaries who have arrived in Ukraine, their actual number is much smaller. Moreover, it is constantly decreasing,*" and at the same time Russian successes are unfoundedly exaggerated: "*...over the past three weeks, the number of mercenaries in Ukraine has decreased from 3,221 to 2,741 as a result of offensive actions by units of the Russian armed forces and the people's militia of the Luhansk and Donetsk republics.*" The Russian side also targeted disinformation about foreign nationals as *mercenaries* and *soldiers of fortune* who are falsely accused of not having the status of *combatants* according to international humanitarian law, and "*...the best thing that awaits them if they are captured alive is a trial and maximum prison sentences*"⁴⁶.

Although the tabular display shows the number of *foreign mercenaries* from five (5) world regions (Europe, America, Asia, Africa, Australia and Oceania), in this paper we will focus on the five countries from the former Yugoslavia as fol-

⁴⁵ https://t.me/mod_russia_en/2704

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

lows: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro (listed from highest to lowest number of *mercenaries*). It is noticeable that Serbia and Slovenia are not on the list. Politically, the omission of Serbia is significant because 32 convictions are already handed down in Serbia for the participation of Serbian citizens on the pro-Russian side in the war in Ukraine between 2015 and 2018, which highly speaks to the magnitude of departures to the battlefield from Serbia. Moreover, according to estimates from the Embassy of Ukraine in Serbia (from December 2018), more than 300 Serbian citizens went to fight on the pro-Russian side in Ukraine⁴⁷.

Given the fact that Serbia is completely absent from all Russian disinformation narratives, it is easier to spot a targeted and selective approach to other former Yugoslavia countries in Russian propaganda-disinformation campaign.

The dynamics of the disinformation and the response of the targeted countries of Southeast Europe

The announcement by the Russian Ministry of Defence has caused a significant impact in all five analysed countries, particularly in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Relatively less reaction was observed in Montenegro and North Macedonia, although both countries have a history of their citizens participation in armed conflicts in foreign countries. The reactions, which came from both political and expert arena, in most countries were unanimous, although in

⁴⁷ Đurđević, M. (2022). Volunteers from Serbia in Ukraine: Political and military nuisance; Radio Liberty, 24. veljače 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-ukrajina-borci/31718923.html>

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro there were also dissenting voices contrary to the official policies of those two countries. In both countries, such reactions advocating for a more neutral stance towards Russia or an openly pro-Russian stance, came from politicians who maintain close relations with Serbia's official policies. As we mentioned earlier, Croatia ranks fourth overall and first among the former Yugoslav countries on the Russian list of foreign nationals who joined the armed conflict on Ukraine's side. According to the Russian Ministry of Defence's announcement, 204 people arrived in Ukraine from Croatia. Of these 204 people, 74 have died, and 51 have left Ukraine's territory. In Croatia, Russia's propaganda narrative about the 74 Croats who died in Ukraine was quickly debunked. On June 18, 2022 (the day after the Russian announcement), the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an oral statement stating that *"the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not aware of the information provided. This is supported by the fact that the Croatian Embassy in Ukraine has not issued any death certificates since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Therefore, we appeal to refrain from spreading unverified information of a sensitive nature"*⁴⁸.

Also, on the same day, the Government of the Republic of Croatia reacted through the spokesperson of the Government, Marko Milic, who stated that the controversial Russian announcement is *"a complete lie and manipulation"*⁴⁹.

Next to the official rhetoric of Croatian institutions, the Croatian subject matter community promptly reacted, and military analyst Ivica Mandic precisely pointed out that *"...this fake news serves to spoil the relationship between Croatia, or*

⁴⁸ <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/svijet/hrvatska-je-cetvrta-zemlja-iz-europe-po-broju-boraca-u-ukrajini---729320.html>

⁴⁹ Ibid.

other countries mentioned, and Ukraine, to consider Ukraine unreliable as an ally, friend, and partner"⁵⁰.

On the same occasion, Mandić emphasized that Croatia is part of a broader "*...target of such hybrid operations or influence operations in this case*"⁵¹, which was further analysed on the *Zagreb Security* forum website. The first mention of the participation of Croatian citizens in the armed conflict in Ukraine dates to 2014 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, in an official statement, called on "*...Zagreb and other governments whose citizens have been recruited by Ukrainian armed forces to prevent this distorted practice*"⁵².

The Croatian authorities, at that time, confirmed the participation of eight Croatian citizens in the conflict in Ukraine and called them to return to the Republic of Croatia, emphasizing that they "*...do not enjoy institutional support and their departure to the Ukrainian battlefield is not related to any Croatian state institution*"⁵³.

At this time, a peaceful solution to the Ukrainian crisis was still sought through the implementation of the Minsk peace agreement, which also provided for the withdrawal of all foreign armed units, military equipment, and disarmament of all illegal groups under the supervision of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Bosnia and Herzegovina ranked seventh overall and second among the former Yugoslav countries in terms of their citizens participating in the war in Ukraine. According to the

⁵⁰ <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/vojni-analiticar-mandic-ruska-lazna-vijest-o-74-poginula-hrvata-je-udarac-ispod-pojasa-a-ovo-su-im-motivi-20220618>

⁵¹ <https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/Analysis#.Yv0wknZBx9A>

⁵² <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/world/2015/2/12/moskva-trazi-povlacenje-hrvatskih-dobrovoljaca-iz-ukrajine>

⁵³ <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/vesna-pusic-poziva-dragovoljce-da-se-vrate-iz-ukrajine-20150212>

Russian census, 167 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the conflict, of whom 51 were *eliminated* and 46 left Ukraine. On June 19, 2022, the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina issued an official statement stating that "...the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and security agencies have information about the departure of two citizens of BH to the battlefield in Ukraine. Thus, alleged data on the departures and deaths of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as published in some media outlets, citing Russian sources, are false and unreliable. The dissemination of inaccurate and unverified information has a negative effect on the overall security situation and contributes to the disturbance of citizens and the public"⁵⁴.

Subject matter experts mostly agree with this position, stating that "...it is obvious that within the framework of special warfare, unverified and unreliable information is constantly being used, which aims to arouse suspicion, defeatism, and distrust, first towards the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then towards the European Union"⁵⁵ and that although security agencies in Bosnia and Herzegovina that deal with intelligence and counterintelligence work with a lot of inconsistency, ambiguity, and problems, it is not to the extent that "...we would not know the movement of our people and their engagement on one or another side of the conflict"⁵⁶.

It is important to note that the first information about the participation of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina (together with citizens of Albania and Kosovo) came from the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in February 2022 when he

⁵⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOU4uFy_lyg&t=179s

⁵⁵ <https://bhrt.ba/ministarstvo-sigurnosti-bosne-i-hercegovine-narati%C5%A1tu-u-ukrajini-tek-dva-dr%C5%BEavljana-na%C5%A1e-zemlje>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

stated in an interview to Russia Today that the area of the former Yugoslavia is *"far from flourishing"*⁵⁷ and that Kosovo and other Western Balkan countries *"are becoming a field for crime"*⁵⁸ and concluded that this region *"...is a station for recruiting mercenaries who participate in hostilities under the patronage of the United States. There are claims that mercenaries from Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are recruited for transport to Donbas and other countries to destabilize Russia"*⁵⁹.

According to the opinion of BH security expert Safet Music, the goal of Russian propaganda in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been achieved *"...and that is to provoke internal disagreements or deepen existing ones, because some officials and the public in BH absolutely believe in all the information that Russia publishes, and some media outlets have their own correspondents who follow the progress of the Russian army. It is obvious that this is media warfare, planned and synchronized dissemination of disinformation that requires planned and effective responses and countermeasures, which developed and organized states do. Unfortunately, in the complex circumstances in which BH finds itself, a systematic response is much more difficult"*⁶⁰.

Kosovo is listed as the ninth country overall and the third country from the former Yugoslavia, with a total of 156 of its citizens participating in the armed conflict on the side of Ukraine. Of the total number of people from Kosovo, allegedly 61 individuals were *eliminated*, while 60 individuals left Ukraine. It is noteworthy that Russia included Kosovo on the list of countries which citizens are involved in the armed con-

⁵⁷ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/moscow-claims-mercenaries-from-western-balkans-fight-in-ukraine/

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30479399.html>

flict in Ukraine even though Russia does not officially recognize Kosovo as an independent state. One of the first official reactions from Kosovo was from the Chief of Staff of the President of Kosovo, Blerim Vela, who on June 18th, posted a status on his Twitter account claiming that this was disinformation from Russia. He also noted in the same status that the "*Russian Ministry of Defence has published a fabricated list of deceased fighters from various European countries in the war in Ukraine, and that our region should block such information*"⁶¹.

Furthermore, the Kosovar official emphasized that Serbian media under the control of Serbian President Vučić further amplified this Russian narrative. In his statements to Radio Free Europe, Kosovo's Minister of Interior Xhelal Sveçla stated that no citizen of Kosovo is fighting in Ukraine and that Russia's claims are to justify the war in Ukraine, and that it is a publication by "*Putin's agencies*"⁶².

He further added that all Russian claims about Kosovo are Russian propaganda "*...to justify their unjustified and unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, but also to mobilize their own supporters against democratic, freedom-loving countries, among which is the Republic of Kosovo*"⁶³.

The Director of the Kosovo Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), Lulëzim Peci, who is researching Russian disinformation campaigns related to Kosovo, believes that there is nothing true in the lists of *mercenaries* that Russia publishes, as he emphasizes that "*...what Russia says is part of its propaganda directed towards countries with a pro-Western attitude, i.e., those who are with the West. There*

⁶¹ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30479399.html>

⁶² <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/rusia-propagande-kunder-kosoves/31951862.html>

⁶³ Ibid.

is nothing more to it, and, of course, Russia always has Kosovo as a special target"⁶⁴.

Russia, in general, often uses Kosovo and its international recognition as a quasi-justification for its actions in Ukraine, as well as for its efforts to enable independence referendums in parts of occupied Ukraine and their illegal merger with the Russian Federation.

North Macedonia ranks 14th on the list with alleged 79 citizens who went to Ukraine to participate in the armed conflict on the side of Ukraine. According to Russian data, out of the mentioned number, 21 people have been *eliminated* while 19 have left Ukraine. The publication of the controversial list by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation caused relatively less reaction in North Macedonia compared to the three previously mentioned states (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo). At the beginning of military operations in Ukraine, the leader of the National Committee of North Macedonia for the Suppression of Violent Extremism and Terrorism, Zlatko Apostoloski, informed Macedonian media that the state institutions did not register fighters or volunteers for the departure to the battlefields in Ukraine. After the announcement of the Russian list, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia briefly stated that "*...it does not have relevant information about the possible participation of our citizens in the war in Ukraine or the death of our citizens in the war... and that it constantly and carefully monitors the situation through the embassy in Ukraine, and as soon as there is new information, the public will be informed*"⁶⁵.

Security experts point out that such information coming from the Russian media should be taken with strong reservation. Thus, university professor Metodi Janev, in a statement to the

⁶⁴ <https://kosovanews.net/politike/rusia-sndalet-se-pergojuari-kosoven/>

⁶⁵ <https://telma.com.mk/2022/08/10/mnr-nemame-informacii-deka-makedonski-drzhavjani-se-borat-vo-ukraina/>

Macedonian newspaper *Slobodan Pecat* stated that "...if that number already exists, it is not surprising because of the globalisation trends and the result of globalisation is that individuals become sovereign and ready to participate in direct foreign conflict"⁶⁶.

While discussing the problem of foreign mercenaries and returnees from world battlefields, security expert Blagoja Markovski from the *Balkan Security Forum* stressed that these individuals, after their return, represent a real threat to the state on a micro-level. However, information from the Russian side about Macedonian and other foreign citizens participating in the armed conflict in Ukraine should be carefully verified.

Montenegro is listed as the 32nd state overall and the fifth from the region of the former Yugoslavia, in terms of its citizens participating in the armed conflict on the side of Ukraine. Out of the alleged two (2) fighters, one person was eliminated while one person is still in Ukraine. According to media reports, the Montenegrin Ministry of the Interior recorded five adult Montenegrin citizens in Eastern Ukraine, and they have all returned to Montenegro⁶⁷.

The announcement by the Russian Ministry of Defence has sparked discussions in Montenegro's political life, which is divided between those who support the Ukrainian or Russian side. Those who support the Russian side are also advocates of different (closer) relations with Serbia, while the majority of those who support the Ukrainian side strongly support Montenegro's independence from Serbia. This situation has also come to the fore during the vote in the Montenegrin Parliament on the condemnation of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Out of a 76 present MP's, 55 voted in favour of the resolution, 18 were against, and 3 representatives abstained.

⁶⁶ <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/hr/nova-vojna-stari-problemi-somakedonskite-borci-na-stranskite-boishta/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.rtnk.me/me/dru%C5%A1tvo/43003/u-ukrajini-poginuo-jedan-crnogorac,-drugi-i-dalje-ratuje/>

The resolution "...calls on the Montenegrin Government and all political and social actors in the state to unreservedly, openly, and unambiguously condemn this act of aggression, the consequences of which can be immeasurable for European and world peace and security, and therefore, the stability of the region to which Montenegro belongs"⁶⁸.

Russia is also called upon to immediately stop military operations and end the act of aggression, which directly undermines the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, destroys military and civilian facilities, and endangers the lives of millions of people, mostly civilians. However, the adoption of the resolution did not go without dissonant tones in which historical ties with Russia were emphasized. Thus, the representative of the Democratic Front (whose representatives did not support the resolution), Andrija Mandić, stated that "...Montenegro would not exist as a state if Russia had not supported it for over 100 years" and that "everyone knows who will be the winner in the war between Ukraine and Russia," after which "the world will not be the same... because when the special military operation in Ukraine ends, we will all face what we are doing now"⁶⁹.

This study shows what effects disinformation can have on societies with political tensions and/or divisions based on ethnicity, religion, or social status. In such an equilibrium, disinformation is best distributed and acquires new forms, dynamics, and effects. According to Ben Nimmo, the author of the 4D approach (dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay), one of the biggest challenges in studying disinformation operations is measuring their impact. This applies to both the creators of disinformation operations and even more so to the opposing

⁶⁸ <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/crna-gora-usvojila-rezoluciju-osude-ruske-vojne-invazije-na-ukrajinu/>

⁶⁹ <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/skup%C5%A1tina-cg-ve%C4%87ina-osu%C4%91uje-agresiju-rusije-df-ne%C4%87e-podr%C5%BEati-rezoluciju-o-agresij-rusije/6675881.html>

side that is trying to prevent such operations, without reliable information on what the operation originally sought to achieve or what its goals were. Therefore, Nimmo has created so-called "Penetration Scale" (Figure 1)⁷⁰, a comparative model for measuring the impact of disinformation operations and influence operations based on data that is visible, replicated, verifiable, and available from the moment it is published. The penetration scale has six categories, based on whether disinformation remains present on a single (original) platform or travels across multiple platforms and whether it remains in a single interest group or spreads through many interest groups. Platforms can be various social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram) as well as traditional media such as television or radio.

Different degrees on the impact scale have the following characteristics:

- At the lowest end of the scale, first-degree operations only spread within one community on one platform;
- Second-degree operations spread within one community on multiple platforms or spread to multiple communities on the same platform;
- Third-degree operations spread across multiple platforms and reach multiple communities;
- Fourth-degree operations completely leave social media and are amplified by major traditional media (television, radio, internet);
- Fifth-degree operations are amplified by high-profile individuals such as celebrities and political candidates;

⁷⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-breakout-scale-measuring-the-impact-of-influence-operations/>

- Disinformation operations and influence operations reach the sixth degree if they trigger a political reaction or a call for violence.

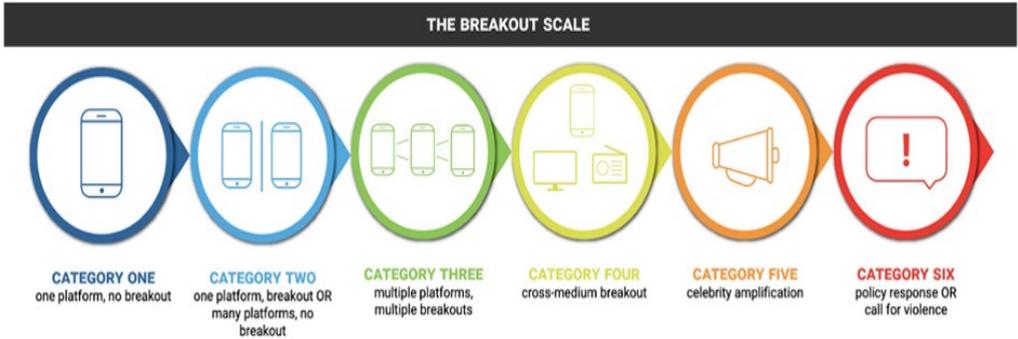


Figure 1: Ben, Nimmo: *Penetration scale*

The Ben Nimmo scale for assessing the impact of Russian disinformation on the number of *foreign mercenaries* in Ukraine indicates that it is a campaign that, according to this analytical model, has reached the highest level because it has caused a multiple political reaction. However, this does not give us a complete picture of the disinformation success, but rather only the reaction to it. On the other hand, if we assume that the main goal of Russian disinformation was to spread confusion in the public, erode cohesion and solidarity in society, and undermine trust in official institutions, we can conclude that Russia did not achieve its desired goals in the five analysed countries. Nevertheless, it is significant to emphasize that these systematic Russian disinformation efforts were not singular individual disinformation stories, but part of a deliberately created disinformation campaign that, however, did not gain the full magnitude of long-term disinformation operations, because even the authors of the disinformation did not later repeat them or give them new forms and dynamics (compared to the initial form).

Although there were differences in the approach to the problems arising from Russian aggression in Ukraine among the

five analysed countries, Russian disinformation did not significantly change the previously established information state. In most countries (Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia) that are on Russia's media propaganda list of so-called *enemy states*, official state politics as well as public opinion have not significantly changed. The same position can also be found in the case of Kosovo, which Russia does not recognize and is therefore not on its *enemy states* list. On the other hand, even in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where sustainable political agreement and national compromise is hard to achieve due to political divisions and long-standing internal disagreements, Russian actions have not caused major changes. What is common to all analysed countries is the fact that all states (including official politics, expert community, and public opinion) very early and straightforwardly recognized that Russian data is fabricated and are part of wider Russian disinformation efforts with a clear political background and agenda. However, those political factors in the analysed five countries who already had pro-Russian attitudes tried to find justification for this Russian action, although they were aware that it was obvious disinformation. This is a consequence of long-standing deep divisions and politicking in these countries (primarily Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro), that are still going through the difficult transition phases.

Conclusion - the role and effect of disinformation on the national security system

It is evident that disinformation, in its essence, are weaponized information and can affect not only public opinion, social cohesion, and solidarity, but also the credibility of government and national security of the targeted state. Disinformation are not only informational ammunition and non-lethal weapons in modern information warfare but also a powerful instrument of influence in achieving information dominance, whether as disinformation operations, disinformation campaigns, or fabricated singular disinformation.

This research was conducted on multiple analytical and operational levels to comprehensively assess the complex impact of disinformation. Accordingly, the magnitude of disinformation (singular story, campaign, or operation) was evaluated, the effect on social cohesion and solidarity was analysed, and the disinformation efforts aimed at eroding institutional trust (legitimacy) on the targeted government or administration were examined. Finally, Ben Nimmo's modelled scale for assessing the impact of disinformation was utilized.

In conclusion, we can state that the Russian announcement regarding *foreign mercenaries* did not achieve the expected disinformation impact in the analysed five countries. In terms of the structure, scope, and objectives of the disinformation about the number of *foreign mercenaries* in Ukraine from this region, Russia has triggered a certain and evident political reaction but did not achieve its set ambitions. In other words, Russia's disinformation ambitions in this campaign were significantly higher than what was achieved. With this planned and systematic disinformation campaign, Russia did not achieve desired polarization and change in attitudes or change in behaviour among the targeted countries and its population. Therefore, Russia did not achieve a wider social-destructive informational effect, such as the erosion or destruction of institutional trust and legitimacy in the targeted government or administration. However, this case also illustrates how systematic, planned, and synchronized disinformation campaigns, combined with emerging media instruments, become a serious and threatening instrument for projecting information dominance and influence. Therefore, they continue to represent a real threat to the security of the targeted states.

Table 1: MORF public post on Telegram, 17.6.2022

NUMBER OF FOREIGN MERCENARIES IN UKRAINE				
Country	Arrived since 24.02.22	Eliminated	Departed	Total on 17.06.22
Europe				
Poland	1831	378	272	1181
Romania	504	102	98	304
United Kingdom	422	101	95	226
Croatia	204	74	51	79
Belarus	197	69	59	69
France	183	59	45	79
Bosnia and Herzegovina	167	51	46	70
Estonia	164	55	49	60
Kosovo	156	61	60	35
Albania	150	42	40	68
Lithuania	130	50	44	36
Portugal	103	19	16	68
Germany	99	33	34	32
North Macedonia	79	21	19	39
Finland	74	20	27	27
Ireland	71	23	14	34
Italy	71	21	24	24
Switzerland	55	15	18	22
Netherlands	42	12	13	17
Sweden	36	5	30	1
Czechia	33	14	15	4
Spain	20	4	4	12
Latvia	18	7	3	8
Norway	15	6	6	3
Belgium	14	2	9	3
Denmark	7	2	2	3
Austria	5	2	1	2
Greece	4	1	2	1
Bulgaria	3		1	2
Slovakia	3		1	2
Moldova	2		1	1
Montenegro	2	1		1
Hungary	1			1
Luxembourg	1			1
Total	4866	1250	1101	2515
America				
Canada	601	162	169	270
USA	530	214	227	89
Bolivia	50	13	25	12
Columbia	40	10	9	21
Brasil	39	12	15	12
Peru	3		1	2
Argentina	2		1	1
Venezuela	1			1
Chile	1			1
Total	1287	411	447	409
Asia				
Georgia	355	120	90	145
Syria	200	80	66	54
Turkey	61	19		42
Israel	35	9	8	18
Republic of Korea	13	4	8	1
Azerbaijan	1	1		0
Iran	1			1
Kazakhstan	1			1
Cyprus	1			1
China	1			1
Uzbekistan	1			1
Japan	1			1
Total	671	233	172	266
Africa				
Nigeria	85	38	35	12
South Africa	25	9	11	5
Senegal	15	4	6	5
Guinea	10	4	4	2
Gabon	5	2	1	2
Liberia	5	2	1	2
Equatorial Guinea	2	1		1
Total	147	60	58	29
Australia and Oceania				
Australia	4	2	1	1
New Zealand	1			1
Total	5	2	1	2
In total	6956	1956	1779	3221

Table 2: MORF public post on Telegram, 12.7.2022.

NUMBER OF FOREIGN MERCENARIES IN UKRAINE					
Country	Arrived since 24.02.22	Eliminated	Departed	Total	***
Europe					
Poland	1835	544	347	944	-237
Romania	504	123	119	262	-42
United Kingdom	429	124	107	198	-28
Belarus	208	78	61	69	
France	185	73	46	66	-13
Portugal	105	20	20	65	-3
Croatia	204	81	58	65	-14
Bosnia and Herzegovina	168	53	56	59	-11
Albania	150	51	45	54	-14
Estonia	164	56	54	54	-6
North Macedonia	79	24	19	36	-3
Germany	101	37	34	30	-2
Ireland	71	26	17	28	-6
Finland	75	20	29	26	-1
Iraly	72	21	26	25	+1
Kosovo	156	69	62	25	-10
Lithuania	131	60	46	25	-11
Switzerland	56	17	19	20	-2
Netherlands	42	13	15	14	-3
Spain	21	6	4	11	-1
Latvia	18	8	4	6	-2
Denmark	8	2	2	4	+1
Norway	16	6	7	3	
Czechia	33	15	15	3	-1
Austria	5	2	1	2	
Belgium	14	3	9	2	-1
Bulgaria	3		1	2	
Slovakia	3		1	2	
Hungary	1			1	
Greece	4	1	2	1	
Luxembourg	1			1	
Moldova	2		1	1	
Montenegro	2	1		1	
Sweden	36	5	30	1	
Total	4902	1539	1257	2106	-409
America					
Canada	605	177	189	239	-31
USA	544	220	235	89	
Columbia	65	14	9	42	+21
Bolivia	50	15	25	10	-2
Brasil	46	19	18	9	-3
Peru	4		1	3	+1
Argentina	2		1	1	
Venezuela	1			1	
Chile	1			1	
Total	1318	445	478	395	-14
Asia					
Georgia	368	170	107	91	-54
Syria	200	94	75	31	-23
Turkey	61	21	20	20	-22
Israel	35	10	11	14	-4
Iran	1			1	
Kazakhstan	1			1	
Cyprus	1			1	
China	1			1	
Republic of Korea	13	4	8	1	
Uzbekistan	1			1	
Japan	1			1	
Azerbaijan	1	1		0	
Total	684	300	221	163	-103
Africa					
Algeria	51			51	+51
Nigeria	85	38	39	8	-4
Senegal	15	4	6	5	
South Africa	25	10	11	4	-1
Gabon	5	2	1	2	
Guinea	10	4	4	2	
Liberia	5	2	1	2	
Equatorial Guinea	2	1		1	
Total	198	61	62	75	+46
Australia and Oceania					
Australia	4	2	1	1	
New Zealand	1			1	
Total	5	2	1	2	
In total	7107	2347	2019	2741	
***	+151	+391	+240	-480	

*** – change of number of foreign mercenaries compared to 17.06.22

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