

OPINION MAKERS AS CORNER STONE OF RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS ON WESTERN BALKAN

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Review paper

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Abstract: Influence operations as a method for achieving geopolitical goals are not new. An integral part of intelligence operations is the projection of influence and shaping of public opinion with the aim of achieving the desired behavior of the victim society and the state. Influence operations as a choice of tactics for achieving political goals can direct their action towards public opinion and political decision makers. The key thing in this conception is the creation of an environment in which the making

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of political decisions is blocked due to the opposition of public opinion.

Keywords: hybrid warfare, influence operations, security, opinion makers

Introduction

The literature often mentions influence operations in the context of information operations, which choose the placement of disinformation, false content, or shaped information as the main work technique. In this paper, we will deal with determining whether influence operations are active measures or reflexive control, and their place and role in hybrid actions. Influence operations, like all other operations, have their own tactics, planners, carriers and goals. Influence operations can be informative in the form of transmitting certain content, but they can also be demonstrations and incitement of discontent through organizing gatherings. The core of influence operations are the holders and the targets. In the case of information influence operations, the main planners deliver content to main carries as mediums for broadcasting information in direction of desired goals. In this paper, we want to investigate a special category of carriers called opinion makers and to better understand some of the key patterns of action, identification and attribution of such operations. Early detection of impact operations is a key to cutting off harmful effects.

Opinion makers represent a very interesting category of actors from the point of view of lack of transparency, real motives and logistics of action. What distinguishes opinion makers from commentators, how to distinguish

a public commentator from an engaged opinion maker? For the purposes of academic research, it is not possible to use intelligence information, and therefore we rely on the method of open data and content analysis. One of the main characteristics of opinion makers as participants in the influence operation is coordination, consistency of views and placement of disinformation. If we look at the category of opinion makers in this triangle, we have the opportunity to identify what is happening and in whose favor, while the very nature of the connections remains in the jurisdiction of the intelligence community. If our goal, based on this scientific work, is to raise awareness and the capacity to recognize and discover opinion makers as bearers of influence operations, we will succeed in that effort. The expert community often disputes whether it is important to attribute or disclose an influence operation. The author's opinion is aimed at preventing influence operations in their development phase. For this reason, this paper deals with the analysis of the phenomenon of opinion makers and their role in influence operations as a form of endangering the security of democratic states and societies.

Disinformation as a key tool in the hybrid war in the Western Balkans

The information content we receive is crucial to how we conclude about certain topics. The available (dis)information contents transformed into knowledge help us to form a value judgment, a political judgment and an opinion on certain social, political and economic issues. During election campaigns, politicians try to present their results or criticize their opponents through

their public performances, videos, printed and online materials.

They do all this in order to gain support, which they gain by highlighting their successes or their opponent's flaws. Similar to politicians, companies strive to present their products as better than the competition. What is the situation with the states? Do countries advertise? What do countries "sell" so they need advertising? When it comes to global competitions, it is their struggle to get others to support their global policy, which we often call the struggle for prestige. Campaigns win allies for support. In a democratic state, decisions are made based on precedures and competence, beside that limitation factor can be the support of public opinion for certain policies. In democratic states, political consequences such as a drop in public support in the upcoming elections in case of unpopular decisions are very likely. That is why we can talk about disinformation, as a factor of external infulence, in creating public opinion only in the case of democratic states. Yes, it is possible to act propagandistically towards the population of autocratic states, but due to censorship and repression, it is unlikely to expect the desired behavior. Using (dis)information as a weapon is not new. In this paper, we want to understand how dictatorial and autocratic regimes from Russia and China (PRC) use the free flow of information content to achieve their geopolitical goals in the Western Balkans, with a focus on Serbia. It is no longer enough to use the available definitions of hybrid warfare, old and new, to understand this domain of national security threats. The definitions of hybrid war are an important starting point that should help in better understanding the threat. Other terms such as

special war, active measures, reflexive control, political war, "like war", cognitive war, informational war and narrative war are also used for hybrid war.

We want to understand that all the above-mentioned terms actually represent a compensation for the lack of military capabilities or it is a substitute for military capabilities to achieve certain goals- impose own will to it's target. Can Russia militarily occupy the Western Balkans? Today, such a scenario is not possible, but that is why Russia can "enslave" the minds of the citizens of the Western Balkans and they can act in accordance with Russian geopolitical interests – to destabilize and prevent membership in the EU and NATO. What is particularly characteristic is that citizens voluntarily consent to the realization of such interests if they are exposed to hybrid actions for too long. Capturing territory without resorting to overt or conventional military force (Gerasimov, 2013) about which the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Valery Gerasimov wrote. Hybrid warfare can be defined as a blend of military, economic, diplomatic, criminal, and informational means to achieve desired political goals (Schadlow, 2015). Russia's hybrid action in the Western Balkans represents a combination of economic, diplomatic, criminal and informational aspects with objective to change social consensus on topics such as EU and NATO integration, USA and regional ethnic reconciliation.

In purpose to understand of hybrid warfare one must capture how adversarial states can exploit the strength of another state by undermining its legal and social institutional structure (Jayamaha, Matisek, 2018). The

hybrid effect seeks to create a favorable environment for the realization of the desired goals of the other state. Article 5 of the NATO treaty recognize hybrid action as an act of war, and at the same time, hybrid action can lead to a combination of sabotage on critical infrastructure and violent riots on the streets. Cyber defence is dealt with in two paragraphs of the Warsaw Summit Communiqué, paragraphs 70 and 71. In these, the heads of state and government ‘reaffirm NATO’s defensive mandate’, that ‘cyber defence is part of NATO’s core task of collective defence’, and that NATO is ready for the Allies to invoke collective defence in response to a significant cyber-attack, the equivalent of an armed attack through cyberspace (CCDCOE, 2016¹).

Hybrid warfare is a political choice, so if ambiguity is its essence, the stated objective must be to leave the enemy wondering as to the multiple political options of the opponent (Mumford, Carlucci, 2023). Political decision-making, or better yet pressure on political decision-making, is the purpose of hybrid war just like conventional war. Clausewitz sees war as breaking the will of the opponent. If the center of gravity of the population's interests is shifted in order to change the priority interests of the citizens, the will actually will be broken without military presence and coercion. In connection with that George Kennan defines political warfare as the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve it national objectives. The range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures, and “white”

¹ <https://ccdcoe.org/incyber-articles/nato-recognises-cyberspace-as-a-domain-of-operations-at-warsaw-summit/>

propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of “friendly” foreign elements, and “black” psychological warfare (Kennan, 1948).

Hybrid action is a planned, organized, pre-prepared, coordinated, cost-effective action of state actors against the civilian population, institutions and interests of sovereign states, with the integral use of the principles of military tactics and intelligence work, primarily subversive action with the ultimate goal of paralyzing society, the state system calculated in coercion in order to achieve certain concessions and the desired behavior of the state as a whole (Životić, Obradović 2022). A subversive action from definition implies usage of influence operations, placement of disinformation, usage of group for pressure. Cost-effective means that to achieve large impact with small resources. Usage of so-called independent opinion makers is very cheap activity instead to organize network of official or non-state organizations. Intelligence component is crucial for estimating threat to national security and it means that hybrid operations are multidimensional and covert by it's nature.

EU defines Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) as a pattern of behavior that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory (EEAS, 2021). Disinformation is both a content and a process. Disinformation—the use of half-truth and non-rational argument to manipulate public opinion in pursuit of

political objectives—is a growing threat to the public sphere in countries around the world (NED, 2017). Unfortunately, in the Western Balkans due to the wars, the transition process and the absence of reforms, there is a very low level of citizens' resilience to fake news, disinformation and political manipulation. In most cases, we have a bias mechanism at work, that is, giving faith to information that we know is not true, but whose content is politically close to us.

A low cognitive base allows easier manipulation of the audience in terms of narrowly specialized and specific topics; a good example refers to the fact that the majority of Serbian citizens consider the PRC to be the largest donor during the Covid-19 pandemic (IEA, 2021), which is not factual. Researchers took this to mean that people are capable of separating truth from falsehood, but absent an external incentive, they often prefer to express support for political positions that are in line with their own (Jackson, 2018). PRC aid during the 2020. pandemic is part of a strategic narrative used by the PRC to present itself as a global savior while the West should be presented as a selfish and incompetent part of the world. If we stay a little longer in the Western Balkans and Serbia, we will see that the delivery, sale and donation of medical equipment and vaccines were used for geopolitical projection and the achievement of supremacy by external actors in order to position themselves ahead of others in the coming post-epidemic period. (CZSA, 2021).

In the FIMI report for 2023 year compiled by the EEAS, Serbia ranks high in terms of targeted disinformation. The country most often targeted was Ukraine, with 160 cases recorded. The United States of

America were targeted by 58 of these cases, followed by Poland (33), Germany (31), France (25) and Serbia (23) (EEAS, 2024). It can be concluded that Serbia, which is smaller in terms of territory and population than Poland, France and Germany, has an extremely high level of cases related to targeted disinformation. The number of incidents is certainly higher and more significant if one takes into account the accessibility and availability of the Serbian language in most countries of the Western Balkans. News portals, YouTube and social networks significantly contribute to the unhindered cross-border spread of disinformation.

The role of opinion makers in spreading anti-Western politics

Influential individuals, popularly called influencers, are an important tool in advertising and propaganda activities. Cambridge dictionary uses term opinion leader as a person whose opinions about something such as a product or issue have a big influence on the opinions of others (Cambridge, 2024). Encyclopedia Britannica defines opinion makers as a person whose opinion influences the opinions of many other people — usually plural (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). Just as well-known and public figures advertise certain products or brands, so in the Western Balkans there are a large number of individuals who advocate the geopolitical interests of Russia and the PRC. These individuals use their reputation and media availability to publicly advocate foreign policy conceptions contrary to the strategic interest - joining the EU.

People in that position can inform, persuade, and manipulate others, as well as serve as role models and provide cues that signal the expected, acceptable or

desirable behavior in a social group (Ognyanova, 2017). These actors, just like in the commercials, use their "expertise" to interpret planetary events and determine value judgments. Opinion leaders pick up information from the media, and this information then gets passed on to less-active members of the public (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 2021). What is a role of pro-Russian opinion makers? Their first and basic role is to create a favorable information environment with the aim of successful placement of Russian sponsored disinformations. The center of their activity is the influence on the public. Influence operations represent one of the special groups of hybrid action. An influence operation is a coordinated, integrated, and synchronized application of diplomatic, information, military, economic, and other national capabilities during times of peace, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict (Siboni, Shuker, 2019).

Instead of lies about "Nazis in Kiev", "biolaboratories", "NATO war against Russia", "Ukraine's attack on Russia" being dismantled and dismissed as baseless claims of Kremlin war propaganda, these theses with activity of opinion makers become legitimate topics for discussions. It is precisely the role of opinion makers to market, elaborate, spread lies in a convincing manner using their personal, professional or public authority. Opinion leaders play an important role within the two-step flow of communication model, where information is transferred from the mass media to the public in two steps: first, from the media to opinion leaders and then from opinion leaders to the larger audience (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). Opinion makers by two-step flow of communication model actually are the ones which place and confirm placed information. One

of the roles of opinion makers associated with Russian war propaganda activities is to lend legitimacy to extremely controversial claims. Instead of being contested, these claims were inserted into the information space and then confirmed as "true" through a coordinated action. In this way, the public, which has a weak cognitive base on a certain issue, takes its position on the basis of expert truth - an expert or non-expert truth - a commentator. If a certain matter is confirmed by several "independent sources", in this case by several opinion makers, the chances are high to accept a certain opinion as a given that is not questioned.

Opinion makers are a type of carrier of attractive content present in conventional media. Opinion makers, who appear on television and newspapers, in a tactical sense, largely apply methods that have been seen in the online sphere, such as sharing and supporting content. That marketing of content, amplification of content, duplication of content and verification of content is an essential parallel. Influence Information Operation is the organized attempt to achieve a specific effect among a target audience, often using illegitimate and manipulative behavior (Pamment, Smith, 2022).

It is characteristic of opinion makers that they act from the position of expert falsehood. This position often stems from their formal education and title. Western commentators quoted by the Kremlin media fall into three broad categories. Firstly, there are those who work, or worked, directly for the Kremlin, but who do not necessarily make their affiliation public. Secondly, there are those who are apparently independent, but support Russia's policies. Third come those

commentators who may not support Russia's narrative, but whose words can be quoted in a way which appears to show that they do (StopFake, 2015). One example is the former Minister of Health of Serbia, who, from the position of director of the Institute of Oncology, claimed for decades that the cancer epidemic "was the result of the nuclear war against Serbia in 1999²." Such claims directly antagonize the citizens of Serbia towards NATO and the West. Where, contrary to scientific claims, the prevailing belief is that ammunition with depleted uranium is the sole culprit for the increase in malignant diseases.

USA Ambassador to NATO in public interview told that Russia is using hybrid tactic and strategy to destabilize Western Balkan, this is their ultimate goal, and for that they use classical instruments. One of the preferred tools is the use of disinformation, which is widely used throughout the region to divide societies from within she concluded³. Professional untruth is one of the most effective ways of pro-Russian opinion makers in Serbia. Using the method of analyzing media content and identifying sentiments, we managed to find some common denominators in relation to 145 identified opinion makers who appear in Serbian print, online and television media. The main characteristics of opinion makers in the service of Russian propaganda in Serbia are:

1. social status/official position

² <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/danica-grujicic-protiv-jugoslavije-je-1999-vodjen-nuklearni-i-hemijski-rat-osiromaseni-uranijum-doveo-i-do-steriliteta-muskaraca/>

³ <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/smit-rusija-koristi-niz-hibridnih-taktika-i-strategija-da-destabilizuje-zapadni>

2. professional background: former military officers, members of the academic community, politicians, journalists
3. non-professional background: commentators without formal title
4. reproduction and distribution of content previously identified as strategic Russian narratives and disinformation
5. disregarding one's own professional knowledge and expertise in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine
6. strong presence of anti-Western attitudes
7. spreading hate speech towards other peoples
8. placement and repeating narratives which are previously debunked
9. material and social satisfaction for their activities
10. belonging to political parties, NGOs and informal initiatives

Attribution and evidence of coordinated action is what represents the challenge when identifying opinion makers. For this reason, we propose the use of content analysis and correlation analysis as a key method for identifying opinion makers as participants in Influence Informative Operations.

Propaganda about Ukrainians as neo-Nazis

"Neo-Nazi racist ideology and practices include militant nationalism and displays of power. Furthermore, they engage in the glorification of Adolf Hitler, who ruled Germany from 1933 to 1945." (Sela-Shayovitz, 2015) The existence of neo-Nazi and radical movements throughout Europe is not alarming, but it is a topic that deserves its place in public discourse. Nevertheless, the story of neo-Nazism in Ukraine has been especially pushed since the beginning of the war

in Ukraine, in order to discredit and present Ukraine as anti-Russia, and to present the Ukrainian army as a Nazi formation. Ever since Putin's announcement that he was going to "denazify" Ukraine, false information about neo-Nazism in Ukraine has been spreading in the Russian and Serbian media. False and offensive news coming from the Russian leadership and pro-government media, such as Putin's statement that the Ukrainian leadership is a "gang of drug addicts and neo-Nazis" or threats that "Ukrainism is a bigger threat to the world than Hitler"⁴ are used as justification for the Russian attack on Ukraine and accepted are by a certain number of opinion makers in Serbia without checking the facts beforehand.

The model of accusing the enemy of Nazism and fascism was tried and used by the Russian and Soviet states as early as 1948. "During the conflict between Stalin and Tito between 1948 and 1953, the Russian newspaper Pravda published a series of articles in which the narrative about Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was gradually changed." (Bistrov, 2008) According to Bistrov, Tito was called a nationalist, fascist, killer of communists, Trotskyist, agent of imperialism, SS member, Great Serbian nationalist, was compared to Hitler and Mussolini, and the leadership of Yugoslavia was called "fascist-Gestapo regime". Bystrov cites the example that on September 5, 1949, the newspaper Pravda announced that "fascist Ranković's executioners are fiercely beating opponents of Tito's regime in prisons and camps, torturing them by flattening them and killing them sadistically." The new Resolution of the Inform

⁴ <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-703184>

biro from 1949 against Tito's regime says that "murderers and spies are in power in the Yugoslav Communist Party."

Fact-checking agencies have recognized a large number of fake news stories aimed at creating the perception of Ukrainians as Nazis. Thus, Volodymyr Zelensky was allegedly photographed wearing the jersey of the Ukrainian football team, on which the Nazi swastika stood instead of the number, which turned out to be a photomontage⁵.

A picture from Russia in which people stand on a plateau so that when viewed from the air they form the number "55" in honor of the 55th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's flight into space, was presented in Serbia as the picture showed Ukrainians forming the shape of a Nazi swastika in honor of Hitler's birthday. The news spread through Serbian and Russian channels that Germany allegedly forbade Ukrainian fighters who are undergoing training in that country to paint Nazi symbols on tanks. And it turned out to be fake news.

Allegedly, Ukrainian fans at the 2022 FIFA World Cup wrote anti-Semitic slogans and insults, which were reported as news. Not only were they not Ukrainian fans, but Ukraine did not even qualify for this tournament.

Pictures from a Ukrainian shopping center that allegedly has a swastika on the stairwell have gone viral in Serbian and Russian public spaces, as has a picture of a Ukrainian tattoo studio that is reportedly offering a 50% discount on Nazi swastika tattoo

⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/techresponses/manipulated-photo-of-ukrainian-president-posing-with-swastika-spreads-on-hungarian-facebook/>

removal to anyone who they travel to Europe. Both photos turned out to be fake.

Inscriptions on Ukrainian uniforms were also often mentioned, and the news that Ukrainian soldiers have messages connected to Nazi camps on their helmets was often mentioned by Serbian opinion makers. Although it has been proven to be an obvious forgery and another photomontage, this news is still occasionally mentioned today in the absence of evidence of neo-Nazism in Ukraine.

A case of video in which fighters of the "Azov" battalion allegedly put a man on a cross and set him on fire. This video has appeared several times and stated as if it was made "a few days ago". The "Azov" battalion itself denied any connection with the video, and the agencies state that the uniforms of the soldiers burning the person in the video are not authentic, that the Ukrainian language spoken in the video is bad, and that it is strange that the video suddenly stops. Although the agencies labeled this video as inauthentic, it is still often mentioned by Serbian opinion makers.

The Serbian and Russian public often talk about the radical anti-Russian narrative rooted in the Ukrainian system, and about the Nazi and anti-Russian ideology of the state apparatus. However, the facts show that even radical nationalism, and especially neo-Nazis, do not have significant support in Ukrainian society and could not be the reason for the outbreak of war. In numbers⁶ it looks like this:

⁶ https://www.rada.gov.ua/en/structure_parlam

- In the 2014 parliamentary elections, after the Russian attack on Ukraine, the radical right-wing party Right Sector won a total of 1.81% of the vote, while the ultra-nationalist Svoboda won 4.71%. These two parties won 7 out of 450 seats in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine;

- In the parliamentary elections of 2019, the entire radical right appears on one list (All-Ukrainian United - Freedom), which wins a total of 2.16% of votes, i.e. 1 mandate.

The so-called "Ukrainian Nazism" is also mentioned in the public discourse in the context of limiting the rights and freedoms of the Russian national minority in Ukraine, and some "bans" of the Russian language. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian Constitution in Article 10 guarantees the free development, use and protection of Russian and other languages of the national minorities of Ukraine. The Law on Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language, which entered into force in 2019, in Article 21 guarantees the right to use the language of the national minority in education in addition to the state language, and in Article 23 the same rights are guaranteed to minorities in cultural life. Article 25 of this Law defines the right to publish media in languages other than the state language, if at least half of that edition is printed in the Ukrainian language, and the same rights are prescribed in Article 26, when it comes to printing and selling books. The largest numbers of electronic editions of relevant Ukrainian media are today still available on Russian.

The Law on National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine, from 2022, with amendments from 2023, confirms and guarantees the rights of all national minorities, namely: 1) self-identification; 2) freedom of public association and peaceful assembly; 3) freedom of expression of attitudes and beliefs, thoughts, speech, conscience and religion; 4) participation in political, economic and social life; 5) use of the language of the national minority (community); 6) education, especially in the languages of national minorities (communities); 7) preserving the cultural identity of the national minority (community). This Law obliges minorities to respect the Constitution, laws and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and it is especially emphasized that when protecting the rights and freedoms of members of national minorities (communities), the popularization or propaganda of the terrorist state (the aggressor state) and its organs, the Russian Nazi totalitarian regime, is prohibited, a symbol of the military invasion of the Russian Nazi totalitarian regime of Ukraine, and creating a positive image of the representatives of the authorities of the terrorist state (aggressor state) and their actions, justifying the armed aggression of the Russian Federation as a terrorist state against Ukraine and the occupation of the territory of Ukraine.

Opinion makers in the Serbian public space often use the argument of the alleged promotion of Nazism as a state policy in Ukraine, or the former Ukraine, as it is often called. As a starting point for denying these allegations, it should certainly be mentioned that the president of Ukraine is a Jew, the commander-in-chief of the defense forces is a Russian, and the minister of defense is a Crimean Tatar, and that there is no similarity between the official policy of Ukraine and

the notorious Nazi regime. In 2015, Ukraine passed the Law Condemning the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Regimes in Ukraine and Prohibiting the Propagation of Their Symbolism. Similar laws were previously passed in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Georgia and other countries, and Ukraine, as part of the implementation of this law, changed a number of names of cities, villages, streets, squares and institutions, which were named after Soviet political or military figures. Opinion makers in Serbia often like to call the city of Bahmut, which is important for Serbian history, by that name after its name from the socialist era - Artyomovsk.

As a confirmation of the anti-Nazi state policy, Ukraine has been celebrating May 8 as the Day of Remembrance and Victory against Nazism in World War II for years. Anti-Semitism, as the first association with neo-Nazism, is at an insignificant level in Ukraine. According to a 2015 survey, Ukraine is the most Jewish-friendly country in all of Eastern Europe, and according to the 2017 Report of the Congress of National Communities of Ukraine, ethnically motivated attacks on Jews are in constant decline from year to year (in 2005 13 people were attacked, in 2017 none). Not a single relevant expert in the study of anti-Semitism disagreed with the labeling of Ukraine as a country promoting neo-Nazism, while a large number of insiders actually condemned this narrative. From all the above, Ukrainian state policy can be called anti-communist, but there are no elements that can call it neo-Nazi.

Conspiracy theories and mass use of unverified data

"In Russia, there is an understanding at the highest state level that the West is actively waging a hybrid war against our motherland." (Panarin 2019) In addition to advocating the neo-Nazism thesis, opinion makers regarding the war in Ukraine advocate and present numerous other unverified information, spins and conspiracy theories, all in the desire to present the war of the "Collective West", as they often say, against Russia, and through Ukraine.

"The Russian information campaign started with the comparison of the Ukrainian government and their Western allies to Nazis, gays, Jews and other groups of people that Russia claimed were part of the conspiracy." (Yuhas, 2014) "Since 2008, the Russian narrative is based on Russian Imperial history as told by popular nineteenth century writer Fyodor Dostoevsky. He claimed that 'Russia's special mission in the world was to create a pan-Slavic Christian empire with Russia at its helm.'" (Kaufman, 2014). "The current Russian operational concept uses military and non-military means that engage simultaneously and rapidly throughout all physical and information domains, through the application of asymmetric and indirect actions." (Selhorst, 2016)

The Russian government, which has promoted conspiracy theories for years, has done so with special intensity since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Radnitz, 2023). Opinion makers in Serbia often accepted narratives from the Russian media that contained unverified information. In the first days of the invasion, we heard that Russia must "denazify"

Ukraine that Russia is not fighting against Ukraine, but is waging a proxy war against the West, that Russia is the victim, not the aggressor. If Russia were locked in a struggle against the combined forces of the US and Europe, using Ukraine as a proxy, then Russia would be the underdog and justified in defending itself. (Radnitz, 2023)

The conspiracy theory about American biolaboratories and biological weapons in Ukraine is one of the first to be launched in the Serbian media space. Opinion makers exploited this topic to the maximum and said that biological weapons programmed to kill Russians are being made in Ukrainian laboratories. Russian officials said they had evidence of the existence of such laboratories in Kharkiv, Lviv and Poltava, but they never made that evidence public. The story also went in the direction that these laboratories experimented with the pathogens of various viruses. Of all this, the only proven fact is that the United States of America funded the work of certain laboratories in Ukraine, some of which dealt with biosecurity measures and some with public health in Ukraine. All allegations related to biological weapons, experimentation with viruses and evidence remained unconfirmed even in the domain of conspiracy theories.

The term "dirty bomb" was used in the rhetoric of opinion makers who presented allegedly verified information from the top of the Russian state, from where accusations were made that Kiev has a "dirty" bomb and plans to use it. Vladimir Putin has said that Ukraine still has Soviet nuclear technology, so there is a possibility that they could build such a bomb. Kiev and Western allies have rejected these claims, but

opinion makers have continued to baselessly support this conspiracy theory. US Nuclear Regulatory Commission defines a "dirty bomb" is a type of "radiological dispersal device" that combines a conventional explosive, such as dynamite, with radioactive material. The terms dirty bomb and RDD are often used interchangeably. Most RDDs would not release enough radiation to kill people or cause severe illness – the conventional explosive itself would be more harmful to people than the radioactive material (NCR, 2022).

Numerous conspiracy theories about Ukraine have been falsely documented in the Serbian media space. Such false information was presented as a contribution to the fact that Ukraine uses propaganda, directs fake scenes of war destruction and invents Russian crimes. Opinion makers have presented false information as fact to support their claims which was detected by Reporters without borders in their report From Russia to Serbia: How RT spreads the Kremlin's propaganda in the Balkans despite EU sanctions (RSF, 2024)⁷. Thus, Serbian influencers announced that news was published from the alleged account of CNN Ukraine, which was also published a year earlier from the fake account of CNN Afghanistan, in which it is stated that one and the same American journalist was killed in those countries. The same media and opinion makers also published footage from the music video, as "proof" that Ukrainians are directing fake scenes of war destruction. Similar recordings were also used during the attempt to discredit the Ukrainian side during the stories about the massacres in Bucha and Irpin. The video in which one

⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/russia-serbia-how-rt-spreads-kremlin-s-propaganda-balkans-despite-eu-sanctions>

of the alleged victims of the massacre gets up from the body bag and lights a cigarette was often mentioned in the Serbian media, despite the fact that it was proven to be a Russian music video from 2020, and not the footage from Bucha.

The impact of the spread of the Russian narrative on Serbian society

The presence of Russian war narratives, if it achieves media dominance, has a negative impact on most areas of a society. First of all, there is a decrease in national resilience which result in need to increase media literacy. National resilience term began to be used in psychology (as one of the individual's properties helping not to change behavior under the adverse influence or trauma), ecology (as an ecosystems' ability to recover from disasters), and social relations (Reznikova, 2023). The promotion of conspiracy narratives, predominantly by pro-Russian opinion makers, has led to a decrease in trust in the process of vaccination of children. Conspiracy theories, if they are promoted with the help of geopolitical vectors - "The West is evil, Russia is good", lead to the creation of several levels of mistrust. First of all, there is distrust in science, in the health system and then in institutions, followed by a decline in political trust. The consequence of this kind of action is maintained on the vulnerability of the population and thus on the overall resilience of the society.

Pro-Russian narratives as part of influence information operations in the long run led to displacement of citizens' foreign policy preferences. Balkan Barometer⁸

⁸ https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/

data for 2023 on the question of public opinion, “do you think EU membership would be good for your economy”, show that only 34% of Serbian citizens believe that it would be a good thing⁹ (as shown at Figure 1).

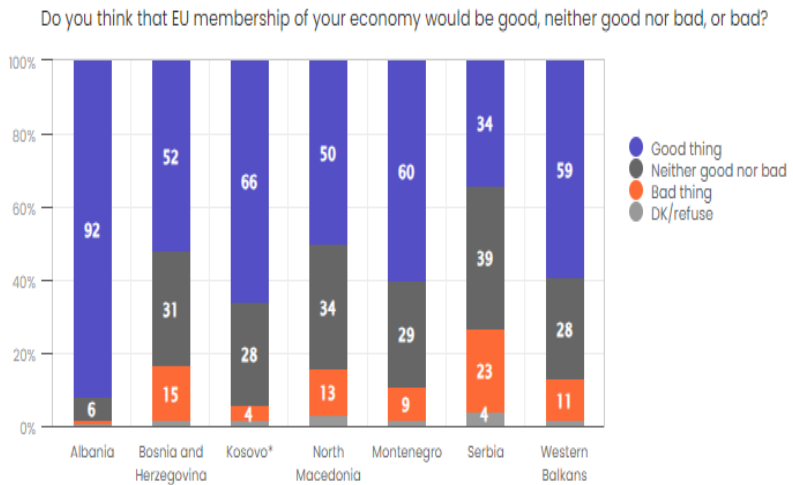


Figure 1. Opinion poll in Serbia about EU membership

The data presented are directly related to the absolute media dominance of pro-Russian opinion makers regarding the fact that Serbian citizens has the lowest opinion that EU is good thing for economy despite the fact of positive EU impact on Serbian economy. Citizens, despite the publicly available and obvious data that the EU is the largest trade partner and investor in Serbia, have a completely different perception of the relationship. Public opinion surveys conducted by the New Third Way organization can help us for better understanding of situation.

⁹ https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/ accessed 21/5/2024

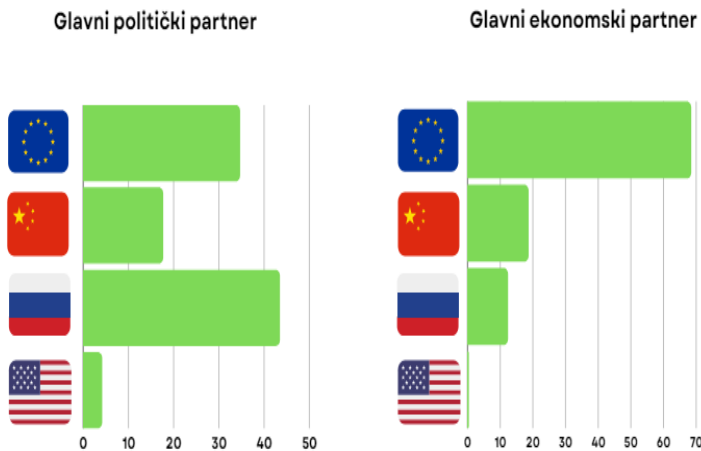


Figure 2. Opinion poll in Serbia about Serbia main economic partner

The public opinion survey was conducted on a representative sample of 2,259 respondents on the territory of Serbia (without Kosovo and Metohija) from December 7 to 9 (Novi Treći Put, 2024). Column on the left (Figure 2) is the main political partner and on the right is main economic partner. The sources from which citizens get information are television (29%), internet portals (27%) and social networks (17%) and they remain the main sources of information about relations between Serbia and Russia (Institute for European Affairs, 2023).

Opinion creators who, with their activity, try to shape planetary events from the aspect which outcome is better for Serbia, with abundant use of long-dismantled disinformation, have access to a total of 56% of the sources from which citizens are informed.

Research by the New Third Way organization for the observed period from November 1 to December 31,

2023, based on a representative sample of 7,437 media articles, finds positive coverage of the relationship with Russia and the People's Republic of China (Figure 3).

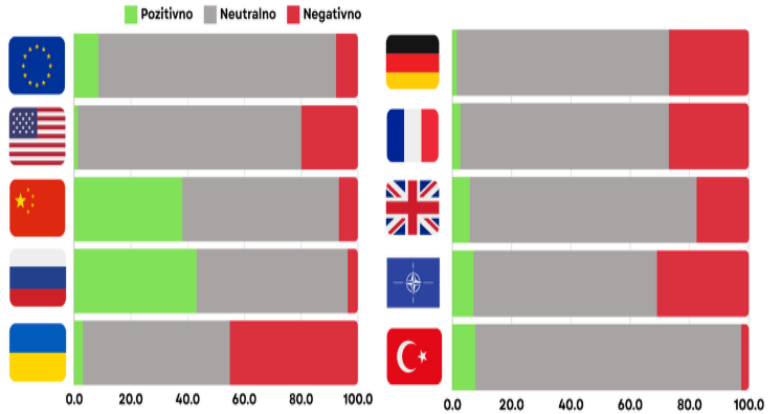


Figure 3. Opinion poll in Serbia on positive approach

Research conducted by IRI shows that support for Serbia's membership in the EU amounts to 40% of respondents' support¹⁰. The support of Serbia's membership in the EU in 2019 amounted to 55%¹¹. The main goal of Russian disinformation is to prevent EU and NATO expansion, not to prevent the introduction of sanctions, when we are talking about the Western Balkans. After the aggression against Ukraine, there was a proliferation of Russian anti-Western campaigns on a larger scale than in the previous period, the number of pro-Russian opinion makers increased, which is easy to measure by the decline in the support of Serbian citizens for EU membership for a period of 5 years. Opinion makers as a phenomenon and tactic, cannot bear full responsibility for anti-European

¹⁰ <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/373129/Istrazivanje-U-Srbiji-opada-podrska-clanstvu-u-EU.html>

¹¹ <https://www.mei.gov.rs/srl/vesti/1589/detaljnije/w/0/podrska-clanstvu-srbije-u-eu-i-dalje-stabilna-55-procenata/>

sentiments. To a large extent, opinion makers are those who will shape each topic in the desired anti-Western and anti-European direction, which gives them a significant influence on public opinion if they are not contained.

Conclusion

Opinion makers represent specific propaganda tool deployed by Russian influence operation. This kind of threat is not new. Those opinion makers act as influencers coming from different professions. Their role is not to give authentic opinion or analysis. It is to increase volume and frequency of propaganda message box which is pre-prepared. In most cases opinion makers do not act as independent actors. They are part of organized communication community. Messages which they spread have synchronization which can be traced on weekly level. On these conclusions authors come up by empirical tools based on direct personal experience with pro-Russian opinion makers. Lack of formal competence is one more characteristics of those opinion makers.

Why opinion makers are corner stone of Russian information operations? First of all, they are establishing public audience which start to listen and believe them. Second, they are in position to promote biased and pro-Russian angle about events and historical facts. Third, small number of them, with formal competences, acting as experts but in reality, they just repeat well-known propaganda narratives. Fourth is, fake diversity of same opinions and conclusions. Large quantities of different persons which promoting same, sometimes c/p word by word,

messages deceiving audience which is not familiar with topic. Fifth, opinion makers are controlled narrators with controlling narratives.

Danger for national security comes from the fact if institutions do not recognize and identify information operation. In the most cases it can be consequence because absences of political will- institutional tolerance for covert activities. Lack of capacities for countering information operations in some cases is beneficial for successful malign outcomes. Opinion makers can be very sophisticated tool in malign influence operations. Reason for that is in nature of the activity which is not a criminal offense. It depends from every unique case when it is investigated. Collection of evidence which will prove existence of covert activity and attribute it as foreign interference, have to be priority but it is not always. Attribution of influence operation is another obstacle. Legal activities like conferences, round tables, different gatherings can be used for providing propaganda messages for opinion makers.

Opinion makers as part of influence operation can disturb official strategic communications. In fragile democracy role of opinion makers is greater. Even in western societies Russia investing in opinion makers labeled as “experts” and experts, disclosed and undisclosed accounts on social networks. Influence on public opinion is part of hybrid threats. In case that influence is developed by secret services we have all elements of foreign interference. On the long ran if information operations are tolerated on high scale sooner or later, they can shift population opinion, values and geopolitical preferences.

Media role is crucial for countering information operations by building capacities for media reporting integrity, engaging with competent experts and professionals, evaluation of content regarding disinformation and propaganda, fake news as well. Values which media company is promoting is also important. Some mechanism can be reduction of advertising for media companies which participating actively in propaganda.

Measures for countering opinion makers have to be designed in democracy, legal and open society manner. Any measure which can be attributed as censorship can be counterproductive.

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