

## MIGRATION IN THE KREMLIN'S DISINFORMATION WAR

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The migration crisis of 2015 was accompanied by a wave of disinformation and fake news related to migrants, meant to influence the public perception of the phenomenon, and which serves Russia's geopolitical interest: a divided European Union and split European societies with leaders whose legitimacy is called into question.

**Keywords:** disinformation; Russian propaganda; European Union; perception; migration; fake news.

In recent years, new forms of struggle for power and hegemony in international relations have been discussed. This fact leads not only to the adoption of new strategies, but also to the design and use of new weapons. Hybrid warfare, for example, implies among other types of technologies also the use of refugees as a weapon<sup>1</sup>. Kelly M. Greenhill asserts that the "exploiting and manipulating outflows created by others" can become a non-military weapon of effective coercion on the international stage, especially if the opponent is a state with a liberal democracy<sup>2</sup>. The aim of the constraint of the adversary is to generate an "domestic conflict" or /and "public dissatisfaction" in the target state, either by diminishing the capacity or by influencing a state's willingness to receive and integrate a number of migrants<sup>3</sup>. This second strategy, called "political agitating", represents an efficient way to increase the gap between the pro and cons in a society, especially in the case of sensitive issues such as migration, which translates into a vulnerability of the leader of the target country, consequently, by a decrease in his ability to negotiate externally<sup>4</sup>. For weak actors, the transformation of migration into a weapon means reaching a political goal that "would be utterly unattainable through military means", and for powerful actors "it would have been too costly"<sup>5</sup>. It is no secret that Russia wants to regain its place as a major global player, implying the control over its former spheres of influence in Europe, and uses therefor all means of warfare to achieve its goal. Because the West's military

technology is superior to its own, Russia is betting on another strategy of "warfare", with non-military means such as disinformation, manipulation campaigns<sup>6</sup>, dissemination of fake news, whose purpose is "shaping their (A/N population in European countries) opinions in favor of Russian objectives"<sup>7</sup>, a strategy that was applied also in 2015, when the migration crisis hit the European Union.

"The day has come when we all have to admit that a word, a camera, a photo, the Internet, and information in general have become yet another type of weapons, yet another component of the armed forces. This weapon can be used in a good and in a bad way", stated the Russian Defense Minister Serghei Shoigu in 2015<sup>8</sup>. So the battlefield is the mind of the people, the population of Western states, often neglected by the Western military strategies<sup>9</sup>, and the aim is "weakening the internal cohesion of societies and strengthening the perceptions of the dysfunctions of the Western democratic and economic system", shows the report of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, "The Kremlin Playbook"<sup>10</sup>. Altering perceptions and destroying cohesion are successful only where there already are institutional deficiencies or issues that polarize public opinion. One such chink in EU's armour speculated by Russia is the migration crisis that started in 2015, when FRONTEX registered 1,8 million illegal border crossings into the EU<sup>11</sup>, and when over 1.2 million migrants applied for asylum in several EU states, a figure twice as large as in the previous year<sup>12</sup>. Most of the asylum seekers in 2015 were Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis<sup>13</sup>. The wave of migration brought to light deficiencies of the European institutions

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and the institutions of the member states, which proved to be unprepared to handle such a large number of migrants, and stimulated populist and extremist political discourses. From the media point of view, the migration crisis resembles the military Operation Desert Storm of 1991, which through its broadcasting in real-time on CNN has captured the attention and influenced the public opinion<sup>14</sup>. In 2015, migrants coming from the sea or the Balkan route to Western Europe were intensely mediatized, flows being broadcast in real time on television and streamed live online. These images have stirred up concerns<sup>15</sup> and polarized opinions in the European Union<sup>16</sup>. Thus, the issue of migration is an extremely fertile ground for the Russian propaganda because it has the potential to split the EU, *"to disrupt European unity and shake EU citizens' confidence in European institutions"* and to question the legitimacy of some leaders of the member states<sup>17</sup>. And Russia's geopolitical interest is having a EU-polyphony of weak voices and weak states.

### **Fake news and Russian propaganda targeting migration**

Media that makes pro-Russian propaganda proved to be *"in large part responsible for the dissemination of migration-related fake news"*<sup>18</sup>. There is plenty of scientific literature on the fake news phenomenon<sup>19</sup>, and from the collection of definitions we draw out three essential aspects *"the low (A/N level) of facticity"*, *"the immediate intention to deceive"* and the attempt *"to appear like real news"*<sup>20</sup>. The type of discourse promoted by the Pro-Russian propaganda, accompanied by fake news, supports the one of the anti-immigration parties and aims to pit, completely false, the image of an *"ailing West"* and that of *"a stable and peaceful Russia"*, who keeps its traditions, values, identity<sup>21</sup>. And in its foreign policy strategy the Kremlin plays the cultural identity card. An official document on Russia's foreign policy from 2010 shows that *"it is increasingly evident, that the global competition takes on a cultural dimension. Among the fundamental games in the international arena the struggle for cultural influence becomes more intense"*<sup>22</sup>. "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" in 2008 underlines that *"Russia will seek its objective perception in the world, develop its own effective means of*

*information influence on public opinion abroad, strengthen the role of the Russian mass media in the international information environment providing them with essential state support"* and that it will *"take necessary measures to repel information threats to its sovereignty and security"*<sup>23</sup>. The most prominent names in the propaganda media mentioned in the document above are Sputnik and Russia Today, whose news is also available in English, French, German, so that their content reaches the EU public directly. The European Union considers the Kremlin's disinformation tactic so dangerous that in 2015 it set up an East StratCom Task Force - as a part of the administration of the the European External Action Service -, whose aim is dismantling and combating the Kremlin's disinformation. An analysis of EUvsDisinfo, part of East StratCom activity, shows that from November 2015 to August 6, 2019, over 6,000 cases of disinformation cases sprout from Russia were identified, and migration is among top 10 topics of disinformation<sup>24</sup>. Another EUvsDisinfo document draws attention to Kremlin misinformation tactics, for example, different messages and different communication channels (eg face-to-face, social media, press) for different target audience categories, an unknown number of communication channels, and communicators<sup>25</sup>. These communicators may include diplomatic staff, secret services, so-called Kremlin-funded NGOs and blogs, trolls and bots on social media<sup>26</sup>, and not least the Kremlin's propaganda media, which spread fake news and, *"stir up confusion"*<sup>27</sup>.

The way in which disinformation works is basically the same: it artificially feeds the negative emotions, fear, anger, disgust, in a certain society, obtaining, for example, a wave of antipathy for the West, for a certain ethnic or sexual minority or an anti-immigration wave<sup>28</sup>. For example, the pro-Russian propaganda media supporting the anti-immigration discourse securitizes migration, transforming it into a threat to the security of European society by linking it with terrorism and increased crime, inducing a state of discomfort and fear among the population<sup>29</sup>. And a highly polarized society *"shaken by strong emotions will behave more irrationally and will be easier to manipulate"*<sup>30</sup>. The EUvsDisinfo plan to combat disinformation at EU level, launched in June

2019, notes that there is evidence for “*a continued and sustained disinformation activity by Russian sources aiming to suppress turnout and influence voter preferences*” in the European Union<sup>31</sup>. The same document shows that “*malicious actors using disinformation to promote extreme views and polarise local debates, including through unfounded attacks on the EU*”, and that this type of discourse was adopted by national actors from the member states<sup>32</sup>.

### **The weapon of disinformation on migration issues**

Claire Wardle, a social media expert, has identified several types of intentional disinformation, including invented content, false context, and manipulated content<sup>33</sup>. We must underline that disinformation mostly retains a grain of truth, it builds around a pre-existing problem, targets a public that is vulnerable to false information<sup>34</sup>. An example of disinformation by providing a wrong context and wrong connections is a Sputnik article on the increase in the number of sexual offences in Sweden, in which the author suggests, without having any evidence, that the Swedish open doors policy is to blame for it<sup>35</sup>. “*Whereas the Swedish political establishment is loath to acknowledge any possible link between immigration, crime and the population’s growing feeling of insecurity, Sweden’s handling of foreign-born felons has triggered concern*”, reports the article, suggesting that migrants are implicitly criminals<sup>36</sup>. After a month the message was taken over by British populist politician Nigel Farage, who wrote on Twitter that “*pro-rata Sweden*” is the country that “*has taken more young, male migrants than any other country in Europe*” and the result is that, “*Malmo is now the rape capital of Europe*”<sup>37</sup>.

The article published by Sputnik and taken over by Farage does not inform that the Swedish law on sexual offences includes more offences since 2013, that unlike other European countries, in Sweden, ten rapes committed in ten days by a man on a woman are registered as being 10 different cases of rape; in addition, an allegation of rape, which was later found to be unfounded, remains in the Swedish sex offences statistics<sup>38</sup>. The number of sex crimes registered in 2015, when Sweden received a large number of migrants, is lower than the previous year<sup>39</sup>. We also have an example of

disinformation by false allegations accompanied by real images: In 2017, after the London Bridge attack, the photo of a woman in hijab at the scene of the attack, which was described as ignoring the victims, was intensely speculated by Russian and anti-immigration propaganda. The Twitter account, with over 16,000 followers, @SouthLoneStar, whose owner described himself as a “*proud Texan and American patriot*”, the one who published the photo with the woman in hijab and made the false allegation, was dismantled as “*one of 2,700 accounts handed over to the US House Intelligence Committee by Twitter as a fake account created in Russia to influence UK and US politics*”<sup>40</sup>. Another disinformation from February 2018, built on false information and a digitally manipulated photography, targeted this time the Russian public. Several Russian news sites and a Russian social media platform reported on a flashmob organized by women in Germany, Sweden, Denmark and other European countries called #sorry, asking Muslim migrant rapists to forgive them because they provoked them through “*depraved behavior and clothing*”<sup>41</sup>. This flashmob did not exist, and the photography in which a young woman from Europe appears holding a sign that says “*Sorry Mustafa*” is flagrantly edited. The real photo was taken in 2014, at an action aimed to support Ukrainian soldiers, and real the says: “*Cold? Think about those who are sleeping in the trenches*”<sup>42</sup>. An already well known example of fabricated content promoted by the Kremlin is the case of Lisa, a German teenager of Russian origin, who was reported to have been raped by migrants in 2016. The news, which stirred up emotions in Germany and gave Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov the opportunity to criticize Germany for hiding the case, initially appeared on an obscure site for Russian expats living in Germany and proved to be fake<sup>43</sup>. Even the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, fell prey to fake news disseminated by the public television station Channel One Russia. The Russian leader said in the fall of 2016 that the Austrian court acquitted an Iraqi migrant who raped a boy because he didn’t speak German and therefore did not understand the victim’s verbal protest<sup>44</sup>. In fact, at the time Putin made this statement, the Iraqi migrant was in custody of the Austrian authorities<sup>45</sup>.

## Conclusions

Migration can become a weapon in the hands of actors aiming at destabilizing opponents, diminishing their bargaining power on the international stage. Russia is the proof, Kremlin is waging a war of disinformation, fake news, in Europe, whose purpose is to influence the perception of the population, weaken the unity of the European Union and deepen distrust in the institutions, democratic processes in the West. The migration crisis was a fertile ground for the Kremlin's disinformation campaign because in the EU and in the member States there were deficiencies in managing the large number of migrants, public opinion was beginning to polarize, and populist politicians felt entitled to keep their anti-immigration discourse. Russian propaganda has supported the anti-immigration discourse, fueling confusion and speculating on the discomfort and fear of citizens of European states. The practice of Russian propaganda consists in the securitization of migration, linking migrants with terrorism, criminality, thus a danger to the security of the member states and the physical security of its citizens. Through its disinformation war in the EU states, the Kremlin is trying to gain a better image for Russia, eager to become again a major global player, opposing the image of a migrant-ridden West, whose identity is in danger, the image of a Russia that defends its values, traditions and cultural identity, basically a model to follow. Russian disinformation, including in the topic of migration, is done through different channels, face-to-face, on social media sites or in the propaganda press, which includes Sputnik and Russia Today, which offer content in several languages spoken in EU countries. The messages of disinformation agents are different for different categories of target-audience, either instigating anti-Western feelings, or hatred towards a certain minority or migrants. Disinformation can take many forms, the common denominator is the intention to deceive and the content with low or zero facticity. We can come up against information out of context, other put in the wrong context, news in which the author intentionally makes wrong connections or we can simply have news completely fabricated. The European Union recognized the danger of Russian disinformation for the security of the EU and its member states and created mechanisms to dismantle

and combat it. In nearly four years, 6,000 cases of misinformation in Russia have been identified, and migration is among the favorite topics.

## NOTES:

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4 *Ibidem*, p. 26 and p. 28.

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