

# Bulgaria as a Russian Propaganda Laboratory

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## Abstract

The paper analyses anti-democratic discourses—far-right populism and overt (pro-)Russian propaganda—in online media in Bulgaria after 2013. The main narratives and their variations are delineated, and the frequency of their dissemination over the years is measured. Using a case study, the story of the birth in 2022 and death in 2024 of the most powerful propaganda machine in the country is presented: a network of 4,000 mushroom websites disseminating one and the same propaganda content. The paper summarises several collective studies of the Human and Social Studies Foundation—Sofia (*HSSF*).

## Introduction

How is it possible for Russian propaganda to claim simultaneously that Russia is the last bastion of conservative Christian European values and that it is the one and only defender of African peoples against European colonial oppression? The contradiction is obvious, but it does not prevent many from believing both these messages together. A series of studies by the Human and Social Studies Foundation—Sofia (HSSF) on anti-democratic discourses (usually pro-Russian national-populist and overtly Russian<sup>1</sup>) in Bulgaria shows that to counter this propaganda we cannot rely merely on fact-checking or logical analysis. Fact-checking and debunking are not effective enough—what is needed is strategic communications based on democratic values.<sup>2</sup>

Below we will show through an analysis of a local socio-political environment where the answer should be sought: in actively counteracting the effectiveness of this propaganda, rather than in exposing its logical inconsistency.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the first step is to diagnose what makes Kremlin propaganda effective among certain social groups in liberal-democratic societies and among certain opportunistic political entrepreneurs attempting to stir up a wave of autocratic sentiments among these same groups.<sup>4</sup>

Before proceeding, let us answer the question of why we should focus on Bulgaria—and more generally, why we should focus on a single country with its political culture and specific political and social institutions and cultural traditions, rather than concentrating on large-scale processes such

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1 When we talk about these two types of discourses in common, we will call them (pro-)Russian.

2 A model like the one offered by Neville Bolt: Neville Bolt, 'Bolt's Paradigm of Strategic Communications', in *Understanding Strategic Communications*, ed. Neville Bolt, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group Publication 3 (Riga: NATO StratCom COE, 2023).

3 Peter Pomerantsev, *How to Win an Information War: The Propagandist Who Outwitted Hitler* (New York: Public Affairs, 2024), pp. xii–xv.

4 Milena Iakimova, *Strah i propaganda* [Fear and Propaganda] (Sofia: East-West Publishers, 2022); Milena Iakimova, 'Propaganda i ozloblenie v digitalnata "voyna sreshtu realnostta"' [Propaganda and Resentment in the Digital 'War against Reality'], in *Digitalni neravenstva* [Digital Inequalities], ed. R. Sroilova (Sofia: St Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2025), ch. 14.

as, say, the crisis of ‘the global paradigm’.<sup>5</sup> This requires first answering the question of what Bulgaria’s place in the Kremlin regime’s hybrid war against Europe is.

## Bulgaria’s Place in the Kremlin’s Hybrid War

Research shows that direct Russian propaganda has been rising steadily on a global scale, particularly after the anti-election protests in Russia in 2011–12,<sup>6</sup> the annexation of Crimea,<sup>7</sup> and the full-scale war against Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> Studies highlight that propaganda has expanded in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as in the Black Sea region, targeting countries such as Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Romania, Georgia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro.<sup>9</sup>

This propaganda campaign is directed at both traditional and social media. It is characterised by high volume, dissemination through multiple channels, repetition, distortion of reality, and lack of commitment to consistency.<sup>10</sup> While analysis often focuses on countries with Russian minorities, where the concept of the ‘Russian world’ (*russkiy mir*, русский мир) serves as a basis for propaganda attempts,<sup>11</sup> the Bulgarian

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- 5 Adam Tooze, ‘Defend Columbia: But from What? A Globalized University Caught in the Crosshairs of Polycrisis’, *Chartbook* № 365, 27 March 2025, available at: <https://adamtoozesubstack.com/p/chartbook-365-defend-columbia-but> [accessed 12 October 2025].
  - 6 S. Oates, ‘Russian Media in the Digital Age: Propaganda Rewired’, *Russian Politics* 1, № 4 (2016), pp. 398–417; T.C. Helmus, E. Bodine-Baron, A. Radin, M. Magnuson, J. Mendelsohn, W. Marcellino and Z. Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe* (RAND Corporation, 2018).
  - 7 Helmus et al. *Russian Social Media Influence*.
  - 8 D. Geissler, D. Bär, N. Pröllochs and S. Feuerriegel, ‘Russian Propaganda on Social Media during the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine’, *EPJ Data Science* 12, № 1 (2023), p. 35; M. Lelich, ‘Victims of Russian Propaganda’, *New Eastern Europe* 3, № 12 (2014), pp. 75–80.
  - 9 G. Julukhidze, ‘How Russian Propaganda Works in Georgia’, *New Eastern Europe* 4, № 42 (2020), pp. 13–19; Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence*; J. Mandić and D. Klarić, ‘Case Study of the Russian Disinformation Campaign during the War in Ukraine—Propaganda Narratives, Goals, and Impacts’, *National Security and the Future* 24, № 2 (2023), pp. 97–140.
  - 10 C. Paul and M. Matthews, ‘The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model’, *RAND Corporation* 2, № 7 (2016), pp. 1–10; E. Fortuin, ‘“Ukraine Commits Genocide on Russians”: The Term “Genocide” in Russian Propaganda’, *Russian Linguistics* 46, № 3 (2022), pp. 313–47; Julukhidze, ‘How Russian Propaganda Works in Georgia’.
  - 11 S. Sukhankin and A. Hurska, ‘Russian Informational and Propaganda Campaign against Ukraine Prior to the Euromaidan (2013–2014): Denying Sovereignty’, *Securitologia* 21 (2015), p. 36.

case is particularly interesting. Unlike many others, Bulgaria has no Russian minority population, yet strong economic and symbolic interests make it highly vulnerable.<sup>12</sup>

Bulgaria is an easy target because of its, so to speak, discursive readiness. By that we mean: the Bulgarian nation-building discourse after the emancipation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century was imbued with a positive image of Russia as a selfless liberator of the 'brotherly Slavic' people from the Ottomans. This image was unquestioned and even strengthened in public language, in history teaching in schools, and in the literary canon during the decades of state socialism.<sup>13</sup> The lack of debate around Bulgarian history after the fall of state socialism leaves this image untouched and ready to use with its insinuation that 'Russophilia' means patriotism. That is one of the reasons why this country was chosen as a research site, but also as a laboratory by Russian propagandists. Another reason for choosing Bulgaria is again opportunistic: its linguistic proximity. Bulgaria also interests Russian political engineers and propagandists because, unlike Serbia with which it shares the above prerequisites, it is a member of the European Union.

Consequently, Bulgaria is among the countries where Russian propaganda is extremely strong, alongside the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> This makes Bulgaria a strategic sphere of interest not only due to its economic and ideological ties, such as historical revisionism, 'Slavic origin', and the Orthodox Church, but also because of its importance in the Black Sea region. At the same time, Bulgaria lacks strong and institutionalised countermeasures against propaganda and disinformation, relying instead on the efforts of NGOs, whose expertise cannot compensate for the absence of state-led responses.

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12 Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence*.

13 A. Hranova, *Istoriografiya i literatura*, vol. 2: *Zhivotat na tri ponyatiya v bulgarskata kultura: vazrazhdane, srednovekovie, robstvo* [Historiography and Literature, vol. 2: The Life of Three Concepts in Bulgarian Culture: Revival, Middle Ages, Slavery] (Sofia: Prosveta Publishers, 2011).

14 Julukhidze, 'How Russian Propaganda Works in Georgia'.

The main goal of Russian propaganda campaigns is to create ‘rifts’ within Western countries, NATO, and the EU.<sup>15</sup> Journalistic investigations confirm that Bulgaria is a highly targeted object of propaganda,<sup>16</sup> while sociological surveys show measurable changes in public attitudes under the influence of these propaganda messages.<sup>17</sup>

We have also attempted to group and organise the narratives of Russian propaganda—an effort made by other authors as well, but often lacking completeness and a systematic approach.<sup>18</sup> A similar description of these narratives can be found in Karpchuk.<sup>19</sup> These are typical across Europe,<sup>20</sup> but they acquire specific local interpretations and adapt to local sentiments.

For more than ten years teams from the HSSF have been researching anti-democratic discourses and Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian media, and they can provide the most complete picture of this phenomenon from 2013 to the present day (2025). The authors are not aware of any other country for which such a comprehensive picture has been produced over such a long period of time. Populist and openly (pro-)Russian narratives, as well as their variations over time, have been analysed typologically; the spokespersons, media, and networks that disseminate them have been examined, as well as the technical means and frequency of dissemination; and sociological methods have been applied to analyse changes in social attitudes as a result of circulated (pro-)Russian propaganda. Equally,

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- 15 V. Torichnyi, T. Biletska, O. Rybshchun, D. Kupriyenko, Y. Ivashkov, and A. Bratko, 'Information and Propaganda Component of the Russian Federation Hybrid Aggression: Conclusions for Developed Democratic Countries on the Experience of Ukraine', *TRAMES* 3 (2021), pp. 355–368; N. Karpchuk, 'The Russian Federation Propaganda Narrative', *Toruńskie Studia Międzynarodowe* 14, № 1 (2021), pp. 19–30.
  - 16 Sopo Gelava, 'Suspicious Facebook Assets Amplify Pro-Kremlin Bulgarian "Mushroom" Websites', *DFRLab*, 26 March 2024, <https://dfrlab.org/2024/03/26/suspicious-facebook-assets-bulgarian-mushroom-websites> [accessed 12 October 2025].
  - 17 Alpha Research and HSSF, 'Social Vulnerability and Propaganda: Summary of the Key Results from a Quantitative and Qualitative Sociological Survey, 2024' [in Bulgarian], available at: [https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/0524\\_Hybrid\\_Propaganda\\_KeyFindings\\_Final.pdf](https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/0524_Hybrid_Propaganda_KeyFindings_Final.pdf) [accessed 12 October 2025].
  - 18 Julukhidze, 'How Russian Propaganda Works in Georgia'; Torichnyi et al., 'Information and Propaganda Component'; D.I. Druga, 'War in Ukraine: Russian Propaganda Themes', *Strategic Impact* 84–85 (2022), pp. 80–93.
  - 19 Karpchuk, 'Russian Federation Propaganda Narrative', pp. 24–25.
  - 20 Ibid.

reverse feedback—the reactions of propagandists to the social reception of their messages—has been captured. And experiments have been conducted on active counteraction through value-oriented strategic communications. The same studies found that Bulgaria is also being used as a laboratory for developing and testing global models—by creating, in the period 2022–24, a network of 4,000 Bulgarian-language mushroom websites linked to social media. This is the most powerful tool hitherto discovered for saturating the media environment with propaganda messages, but probably also for influencing Google algorithms, artificial intelligence, and social networks. The analysis appears here in a condensed form.

The Bulgarian case, therefore, provides an opportunity to understand how Russian propaganda functions in EU countries and how vulnerabilities within different European populations are exploited.

## Russian Propaganda in Bulgaria after 2013 (*Longue Durée* Perspective)

What is Russian propaganda?

The first draft of the Russian propaganda package for internal use in Russia dates back to the Bolotnaya protests of 2011–12.<sup>21</sup> Following the powerful Ukrainian protests of 2013, known as Euromaidan, the package was refined and released in the form of a free ready-to-cook product for global use.

Its main talking points are, broadly, reworkings of discontents immanent to the liberal-democratic world, discontents that the propaganda machine greatly simplifies and converts into geostrategic terms,<sup>22</sup> thus denying their social-critical and transformative potential. These discontents stem from populist uprisings of the masses who feel disenfranchised, left behind, and denied access to the forces that control their lives. This

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21 Oates, 'Russian Media in the Digital Age'.

22 Dimitar Vatsov, 'Is the Hegemony of the West Coming to an End? (And Russian Propaganda as Postmodern Bricolage and Discursive Terror)', *Critique & Humanism* 62, N° 1 (2025), pp. 17–42.

feeling of vulnerability and powerlessness to control their own lives is the source of the effectiveness of anti-democratic and, in particular, Kremlin propaganda in the liberal-democratic world. And Russia's state-controlled media machine, directed by the Kremlin, has greatly contributed to the consolidation of anti-liberal populism into state-sovereign propaganda that aims to sow discord and confrontation both within societies and between states.

In Bulgaria, Russian narratives began to enter the mass media space as early as 2013.<sup>23</sup> Over the summer some of the largest and most enduring anti-government protests broke out across the country. These were triggered by the appointment of the young media mogul Delyan Peevski as chairman of the State Agency for National Security (SANS). Due to the protests, he was forced to resign. But a media group officially owned by his mother,<sup>24</sup> along with other affiliated media outlets, launched a smear campaign against the protesters. At this point the talking points of Russian propaganda were introduced, as developed two years earlier to discredit the Bolotnaya protesters by suggesting that civil action leads to chaos and destruction. As in Moscow in 2011–12, so too in Sofia in 2013: protesters were accused of (1) being 'paid' and 'bought' from outside, by Soros and other Western foundations (later Moscow would directly declare them 'foreign agents'); (2) being sexually and culturally 'perverted'—to be liberal meant to be gay, and vice versa; a propaganda synonymy was constructed between liberalism, human rights, and LGBTQ, while simultaneously inciting disgust and fear towards minority identities. Since Bulgarian and Russian are similar Slavic languages, offensive epithets used to smear protesters (and inconvenient actors) in propaganda are almost directly transferred from Russian into

23 In this paragraph we refer to these HSSF reports: *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria: Part 1. News Websites and Print Media, 2013–2016* (Sofia, 2017), available at: [https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/REPORT\\_PART1\\_ENG.pdf](https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/REPORT_PART1_ENG.pdf); *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria: Part 2. Online Media in 2017* (Sofia, [2018]), available at: [https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ENG\\_REPORT\\_ANTIDEMOCRACY\\_PART2\\_STRANIRAN\\_ENG-1-1.pdf](https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ENG_REPORT_ANTIDEMOCRACY_PART2_STRANIRAN_ENG-1-1.pdf); *Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media: From Its Entry into Bulgaria in 2013 to the War against Ukraine* (Sofia, 2022), available at: <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Abstract-Report-Part-1-eng.pdf> [accessed 12 October 2025].

24 New Bulgarian Media Group: *Commercial Register and Register of Non-Profit Legal Entities*, <https://portal.registryagency.bg/CR/en/Reports/ActiveConditionTabResult?uic=175350761> [accessed 12 October 2025].



Bulgarian, such as *sorosoid* (paid by Soros), *liberast* (liberal-pederast), *tolerast* (tolerant-pederast), *grantoed* (grant guzzler).

Russian propaganda initially entered Bulgaria for domestic use: to discredit internal political and economic opponents. And this was its main function until at least 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine. At this point changes emerged on the information front. These are addressed below.

Certain geopolitical Russian narratives that are more difficult to adapt to local use began to seep into the Bulgarian media space at the end of 2013 (after the early days of the Euromaidan in Ukraine) and especially following the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. At the same time, the first issue of the 'elite' political analysis magazine *Aspecto* was published, in which most of the articles were dedicated to Crimea and justified the annexation. A network of openly pro-Russian websites and newspapers was rapidly formed around *Aspecto*, which often reprinted directly from Russian sources or quoted pro-Russian Western speakers extensively. Thus the Russian propaganda package, meaning all narratives representing the Russian view of the global international order and favouring Russia, entered Bulgaria.

We describe this as a comprehensive propaganda package because, despite variations and frequent changes in narrative, Russian output follows a common conspiratorial grammar. Basic logical laws become irrelevant; they cannot affect it. Hence, there is no Ukrainian nation, but this 'non-existent' nation is fascist. There is no war, but Ukrainians in Bulgaria are not refugees, they are deserters. The main purpose of propaganda is to orchestrate impressions and create reflexes. That is why it offers a simple picture of the world, one beyond the possibility of being questioned for factually verifiable truth. It must be more plausible than the truth.<sup>25</sup> It must be emotionally credible.

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25 Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War against Reality* (London: Faber and Faber, 2019).

Furthermore, we can add that the propaganda package is based on a simple ‘fairy tale logic’, in which there is one Great Villain. In this role the US, NATO, Brussels, the collective West, but also specific figures like Soros, Obama, Merkel, Biden, are metonymically positioned. Who will be specifically singled out depends on the context. In our studies of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, this role is referred to as ‘The US/ NATO as global hegemon/puppet master’ because:

- The Great Villain claims to uphold certain universal values (liberal democracy and human rights). But these values in the propaganda narrative are by no means universal. They are a façade behind which the Villain hides to pursue its self-serving private interests and to oppress nations (ordinary people).
- The Great Villain acts as a puppeteer to disguise its evil intentions, pulling the strings of its marionettes. These are paid agents or useful idiots. In fact, any actor who, in various places and with various means, upholds the values of liberal democracy—through civic protests, civic organisations, parties, media—is metonymically portrayed as a proxy, marionette, or lackey of the Great Villain. The research on propaganda in Bulgaria refers to their role as ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’.
- The victims of the Villain are nations who lose their sovereignty. The EU is depicted as an artificial construct, deliberately created by the Great Villain to take away the sovereignty of the European peoples. In addition, the Villain floods Europe with migrants in order to melt down the ethnic and cultural identities of its peoples, and inundates them with the cultural contagion of liberalism that softens and exhausts them. For all these reasons, a united Europe is unachievable—the EU is doomed to collapse, and the nations in it are dying. This narrative in the research is called ‘The decline of Europe’.

Unsurprisingly the saviour of the European peoples is Russia. Along with other forces from the Global South, Russia will break the hegemony of the West and create a just and balanced multipolar world. Hence the 'rise of Russia' trope. However, 'the rise of Russia' is a label with which we designate multiple and sometimes contradictory sub-narratives (we mentioned that propaganda is not afraid of logical contradictions!). We have dissected six sub-narratives in this package: (1) Russia's increased political and spiritual might; (2) Russia as a civilisational alternative to the West; (3) Russia's enemies; (4) the power of Russian weapons; (5) Crimea and Ukraine; (6) the sanctions against Russia.<sup>26</sup>

For each of these narratives a specific propaganda jargon has been developed over time—a set of relatively stable propaganda epithets and catchphrases (such as 'sorosoids', 'Brussels puppets')—and propagandists periodically update it by adding new words and expressions to its vocabulary. These epithets and catchphrases are intrusive and amplify the propaganda effect of the narratives; however, they can also serve to counteract propaganda. Once analytically isolated, they can now serve as keywords for automated searches of the narratives, their channels, and frequency of distribution. Consequently we used the Sensika automated media monitoring system,<sup>27</sup> which archives over 8000 online sources (websites and blogs) in Bulgarian in real time. When searching by keywords with the option to apply various filters, Sensika not only counts the keywords and the articles and posts that contain them, but also provides direct access to their content. This enabled us to measure the dissemination frequency of the main (pro-)Russian propaganda narratives over a ten-year period between 2013 and 2022, from the moment of their introduction into the Bulgarian media space and including when Russia openly invaded Ukraine and when the Russian propaganda strategy changed (Figure 1).

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26 HSSF, *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria: Part 1*, pp. 26–42.

27 See 'Sensika: The AI Platform for Media and Disinformation Intelligence', <https://sensika.com> [accessed 12 October 2025].

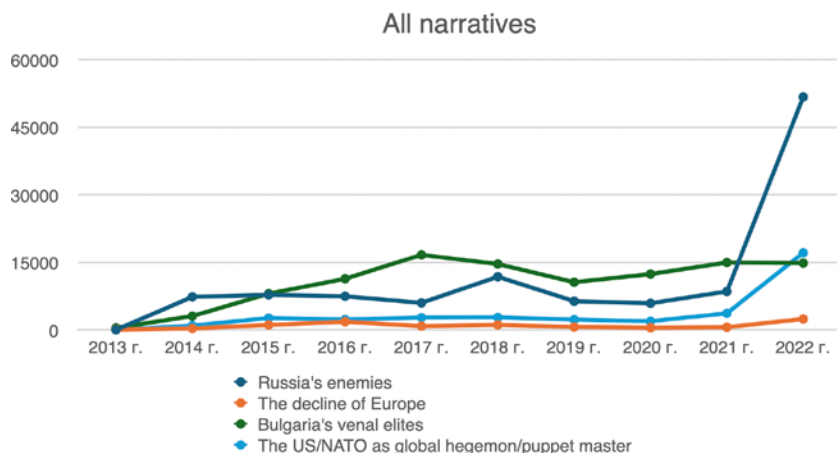


Figure 1. The main (pro-)Russian narratives, 2013–22 (number of online publications in Bulgaria per year, social media excluded)

The first point to note is that a systematic increase in the spread of propaganda narratives can be observed over time, from several hundred publications containing the keywords in 2013 to over 100,000 publications in 2022.

Second, until 2021—the year before the full-scale war against Ukraine—the ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’ narrative (Figure 1, in green) dominated Bulgaria’s media space. This is the narrative through which various pro-democratic local actors—civil protests and movements, independent media, human rights organisations, and pro-European political parties—are vilified by being portrayed as ‘puppets’ of Brussels and Washington. While this narrative is part of Russia’s propaganda package, it can be easily adapted for independent use towards completely different goals on the domestic front. Predominantly, local political and economic actors use it to discredit their local opponents, regardless of the Kremlin’s political agenda. This is precisely the reason for its media dominance until 2022.

Third, in 2022, with the onset of full-scale war, there followed a sharp increase in narratives seeking direct confrontation with the West. There was a sharp increase in the demonisation of the US and NATO as ‘global hegemon and puppet master’. To highlight this effect, the results of a separate search for keywords is included describing ‘Russia’s enemies’: they are ‘Russophobes’, ‘hawks’ who first through NATO expansion and then through support for Ukraine ‘surround Russia’ and ‘wage war’ against it.

With full-scale war, however, not only has the confrontational rhetoric increased, but the Kremlin’s propaganda strategy too has changed more comprehensively.

## The ‘Russian World’ in the Bulgarian Media after 24 February 2022

First, a few words on Russian propaganda in Russia after 2013. Until the start of full-scale war, the dissemination of propaganda in Russia was left primarily to professional propagandists—journalists such as Vladimir Solovyov and Margarita Simonyan—and entire media outlets. Concurrently, Russian officials repeated the main arguments from these propaganda narratives but in more moderate and diplomatic language.

With the full-scale invasion, however, the propaganda narratives became official. Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, and others became their direct spokespersons. There was a further terminological and ideological tightening and hardening of these narratives, as Putin himself set out their ideological framework in a series of articles and speeches.

This process had begun earlier, and can be traced back to Putin’s article ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’ of 12 July 2021.<sup>28</sup> It directly sets out the imperial doctrine of the ‘Russian world’, which

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28 Vladimir Putin, ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’, 12 July 2021, available at: [www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181](http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181) [accessed 12 October 2025].

is multi-ethnic and multi-confessional and has no borders. It extends as far as people speak Russian and love Russian culture, meaning it can expand indefinitely. At the core of this 'Russian world' historically stands 'the large Russian nation, a triune people comprising Velikorussians, Malorussians, and Belorussians'. Accordingly, in light of this historical trinity, this 'large Russian nation', contemporary national distinctions between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians become practically meaningless. Ukraine is said to be an 'artificial state', created by the USSR, which today is part of the 'anti-Russia project', and is ruled by neo-Nazis and 'orchestrated' by the West. It was precisely from this ideological core that, six months later, the official task of the 'special military operation' would be derived—namely, to 'denazify and demilitarise' Ukraine.

We will not go into a detailed analysis of the ideological content of the Russian imperial doctrine known as the 'Russian world'. We mention it only to highlight the changes that are taking place in the dissemination of Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian media space.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that Russian propaganda is becoming more ideologically rigid and terminologically hardened makes it even more recognisable: it is more difficult to blend in with the rhetoric of local national-populists. Speaking the idiolect of the 'Russian world' means that one is openly working for the Kremlin. Therefore, especially after the outbreak of full-scale war, many pro-Russian Bulgarian speakers—journalists and politicians—probably startled by the war, at least temporarily stopped disseminating Russian narratives. After 24 February 2022 only the 'most loyal soldiers' continued to preach on the information front—those suspected of being directly paid or otherwise backed up by the Kremlin.

However, in the days immediately before and after the invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian media skyrocketed (Figure 2). When searching Sensika for a list of keywords containing

29 See HSSF Newsletters from 2023 to 2024 (<https://hssfoundation.org/en/bulletin>); the HSSF report *Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media*; and *Summary Report of the Human and Social Studies Foundation—Sofia: Online Russian and Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria in 2024* (Sofia: HSSF, 2024), available at: <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/doklad-2024-eng.pdf> [accessed 12 October 2025].

specific expressions from the new propaganda vocabulary, the first peaks on 22 and 24 February were clearly visible.

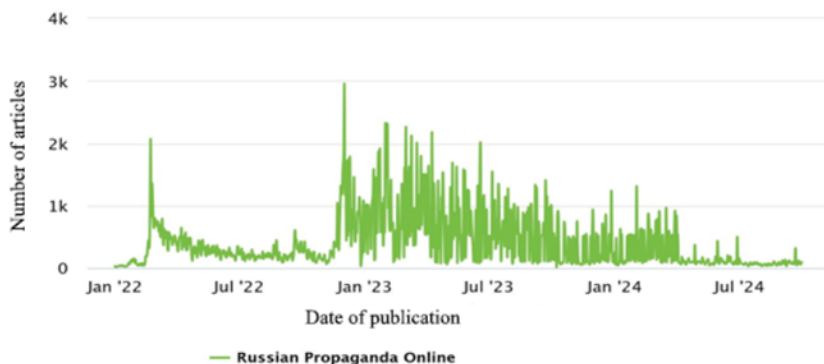


Figure 2. Overt Russian propaganda online in Bulgaria, 1 January 2022–30 September 2024 (number of online publications per day)

In the pre-war period an average of 30 publications containing the keywords circulated online in Bulgarian; by 22 February, when Putin declared the independence of the so-called Donetsk People's Republik and Luhansk People's Republik, Sensika registered 1785 publications for a single day, and on 24 February, when the Russians invaded Ukraine, 1262 publications. In May, propaganda dissemination 'normalised' at nearly 400 publications per day. It had jumped more than 10 times compared to the pre-war period. That figure then gradually declined, with activity reaching an average of 124 publications per day in September. Then, at the end of November, there was a new boom. From 21 November to the end of the year, Sensika identified 32,475 publications, meaning that activity increased more than sixfold compared to the previous month, to an average of nearly 800 posts per day.

What accounted for these peaks? At the initial peak in the first days of the aggression, (pro-)Russian media and spokespersons were mobilised to the extreme. But after the start of the hot war, Russian officials began

to speak explicitly through propaganda jargon. This meant that even serious and independent media outlets, to the extent that they inevitably quoted Russian officials, were obliged to repeat Russian propaganda clichés. And since the focus of media interest at the beginning of the war was naturally concentrated on those official spokespersons, their narratives were multiplied repeatedly.<sup>30</sup>

At this time Russia was portrayed as a tragic victim. On 24 February the eternal ‘saviour’ of Europe launched a pre-emptive strike against the Americans, British, and Poles to prevent them from attacking it. The oxymoron that Russia ‘defensively attacked’ was recycled without much difficulty.

Despite this monochrome and repetitive language, however, Russia’s military invasion of neighbouring Ukraine instantly and irreversibly destroyed Vladimir Putin’s poll ratings in Bulgaria, simultaneously dragging down approval for his country (Figures 3 and 4).

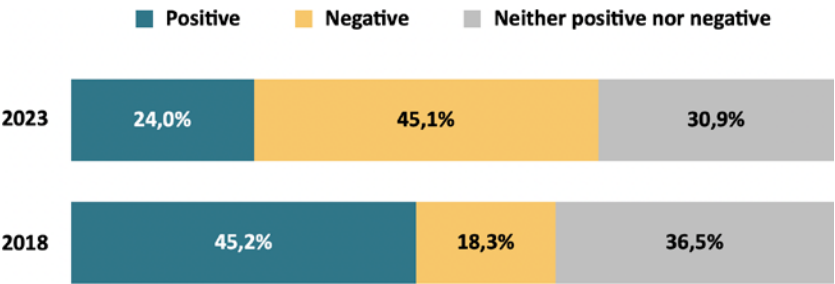


Figure 3. Attitudes towards Vladimir Putin in Bulgaria, 2018 and 2023

Source: Alpha Research and HSSF, ‘Social Vulnerability and Propaganda: Summary of the Key Results from a Quantitative and Qualitative Sociological Survey, 2024’ [in Bulgarian], available at: [https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/0524\\_Hybrid\\_Propaganda\\_KeyFindings\\_Final.pdf](https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/0524_Hybrid_Propaganda_KeyFindings_Final.pdf).

30 The second peak in November 2022 was entirely technology driven, referring to what we call a network of mushroom websites.



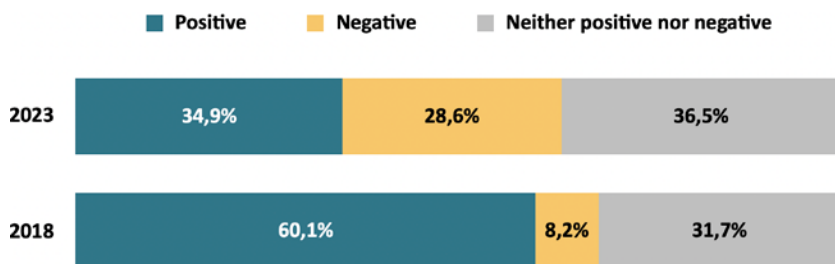


Figure 4. Attitudes toward Russia in Bulgaria, 2018 and 2023

Source: as Figure 3.

Due to this irreparable collapse, caused mainly by the breakdown of the myth of Russian might, the number of articles praising Russia in Bulgarian-language media has shrunk to negligible levels, replaced by articles whose primary and main purpose is to sow doubt, confusion, and discord. Behind the orchestration of such political emotions lie three visible targets: democracy as procedures and institutions, the green transition, and international solidarity.

To return to the unprecedented peak of propaganda activity detected in November 2022, the most powerful tool for (pro-)Russian propaganda used in and outside Bulgaria was deployed: a network of mushroom websites, cloned from several main domains through subdomains that were identical in design and content (Figure 5). The ‘machine of mushroom websites’ (see below) reflects a more general trend for machine-generated or reprinted content to have greater weight in spreading Russian propaganda.

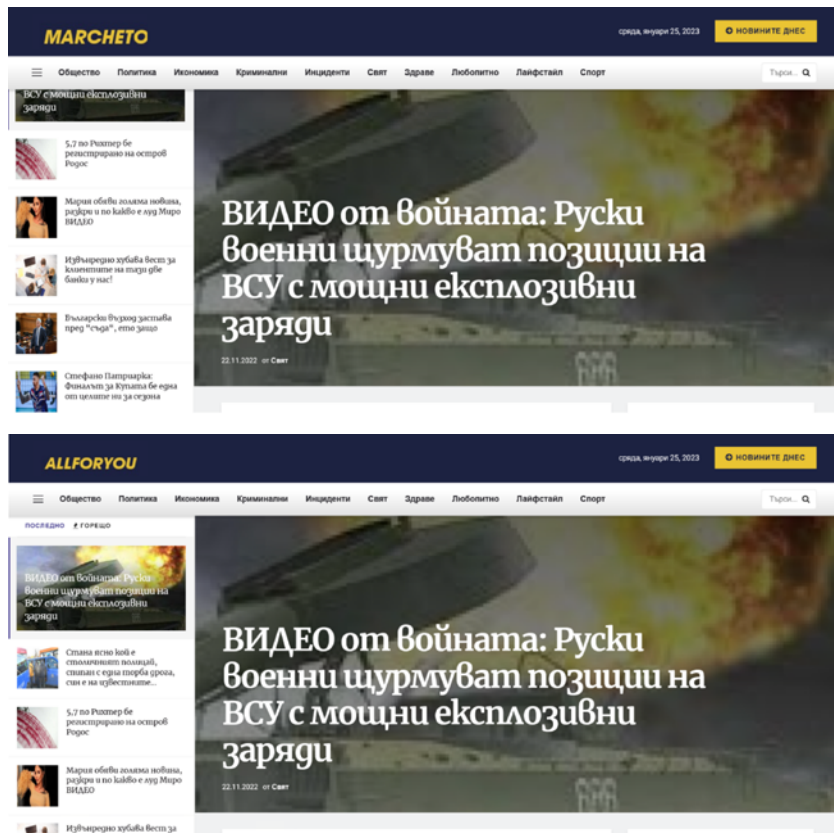


Figure 5. Screenshots of Bulgarian mushroom websites: same domains, design, and content

Another network of mushroom websites, orchestrated by the Kremlin, similar to the one in Bulgaria and now spreading disinformation in the US, Canada, France, and more recently in Moldova and Armenia, has been discovered by Insikt Group at *Recorded Future*.<sup>31</sup> So it may be concluded that Bulgaria was a laboratory for Russian influence and propaganda campaigns because the first network of mushroom websites was built there. Since the Bulgarian network is much larger and more elaborate, it can be assumed also that Bulgaria was the testing ground

31 *CopyCop Deepens Its Playbook with New Websites and Targets* (Insikt Group of Recorded Future, 2025), available at: <https://assets.recordedfuture.com/insikt-report-pdfs/2025/cta-ru-2025-0917.pdf> [accessed 12 October 2025].

on which a model for global use was developed. This effort might be orchestrated by the Kremlin or dominated by financial monetisation goals, or a mixture of both strategies.

The network discovered by our team was later labelled the ‘machine of mushroom websites’. At the height of its development in 2023, over 4,000 mushroom sites were identified, of which about 1000 were active on social networks. In this case ‘active’ means not only that they reprint content and generate traffic, but also that there is a real person behind them—a troll—who shares their content on social media for a fee. The use of social networks in spreading propaganda messages through algorithms, troll farms, or bots has been studied many times, but the mushroom network of sites does something different: it disseminates the same content through paid trolls into personal untraceable profiles.

The machine of mushroom websites will be discussed separately. Here, its share in the dissemination of Russian propaganda is highlighted. While Figure 2 shows the frequency of use of Russian propaganda vocabulary in all Bulgarian-language media, Figure 6 distinguishes how many (pro-)Russian publications are created daily by the mushroom website machine and how many by other media.

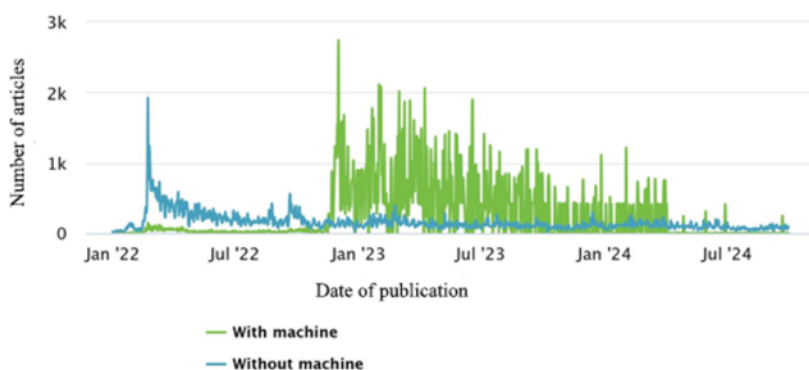


Figure 6. Russian propaganda online in Bulgaria with and without the machine of mushroom websites, 1 January 2022–30 September 2024 (number of online publications per day)

Over the three-year period (1 January 2022–31 December 2024), the machine generated 249,073 (pro-)Russian publications, while all other media outlets together generated 149,932 publications. During the peak months of the machine's operation—the first half of 2023—it generated five times more openly (pro-)Russian publications than all other media outlets combined.

A brief history of the machine follows.

## History of the Machine: The Life and Death of the 'Mushroom Monster'

The machine of mushroom websites, the most powerful tool so far for Russian online propaganda dissemination in Bulgaria, was born in 2022 and died in 2024, due to the efforts of the HSSF team, investigative journalists, and other organisations that exposed its activities and the subsequent investigation of its activities by state authorities.

Key dates in the technological 'life' of the machine from 'birth' to 'death':

**January–February 2022:** The HSSF team detects eight websites disseminating identical content. These first websites were created earlier as separate media, but at the beginning of 2022 they are interconnected in a network reprinting identical content. About 80 per cent of their publications are from Blitz, a news agency often involved in carrying out smear campaigns and allegedly connected to Bulgarian oligarch Delyan Peevski, now leader of the DPS political party (Movement for Rights and Freedoms).

**From 22 November 2022:** The first eight websites have been upgraded with hundreds of mushroom websites – Sensika identifies over 370 mushroom websites actively disseminating identical content. Such multiplication is accomplished by 'cloning' hundreds of subdomains to a few primary domains. This is carried out via the online platform

Share4Pay, which attracts users whose task is to share content from mushroom websites on their private profiles on social media for a fee. The machine of mushroom websites becomes the largest disseminator of online (pro-)Russian content in Bulgaria.

**November 2022–March 2024:** Active mushroom websites gradually increase to over 1000. By ‘active’ we mean mushroom websites accessed by real individuals who share their content on social media. These websites are monitored by SENSIKA.

**November 2022–March 2024:** This period also marks the active dissemination of *direct Russian propaganda* by the machine. Based on shifts in content, this period can be divided into several sub-periods:

- **November 2022–June 2023:** Aggressive Russian propaganda. Low-quality translations (probably AI generated) of frontline reports by Russian ‘military correspondents’ dominate. The impression is given that Russia is winning all battles resoundingly (even when they are actually losing them).
- **July–September 2023:** An attempt to balance the machine’s media policy: Russian propaganda is now framed as one of the ‘two points of view’ on the war against Ukraine. That is, Russian propaganda materials alternate with analyses by Western and Ukrainian experts and media.
- **October 2023–March 2024:** A reversal in messaging: although Russian talking points on the war continue to circulate, they become rare. Instead, materials with a distinctly pro-Ukrainian stance become dominant. In early 2024 the machine begins to systematically delete previously published (pro-)Russian materials, culminating in the complete erasure of Russian propaganda in April.

- **3 April 2024:** *Russian propaganda ‘vanishes into thin air’ from mushroom websites*, as if it had never existed. The machine not only ceases to publish such content but has also retroactively deleted it. All publications previously found by keywords become inaccessible to ordinary users. From this point, they are retrievable only via digital archiving systems such as Sensika. Furthermore, the machine begins to algorithmically block the upload of any material related to ‘Russia’, ‘Kremlin’, ‘Putin’, and similar terms. For the machine, *Russia disappears from the virtual map of the world*.

Despite the disappearance of Russian propaganda on 3 April 2024, mushroom websites themselves did not immediately cease to exist. The machine continued operating for another six months, but its propaganda function shifted entirely towards domestic politics. In fact this redirection began around mid 2023. Several periods can also be distinguished in the work of the machine as a domestic propaganda tool primarily aimed at discrediting political opponents:

**October–December 2023:** As direct Russian propaganda begins to wane, the machine begins to circulate articles promoting Delyan Peevski’s official anti-Russian and pro-Euro-Atlantic positions. (Delyan Peevski publicly took such positions after 2021 when he was sanctioned under the global Magnitsky Act.)

**September 2023–3 July 2024:** During this period the primary target of propaganda attacks and ridicule on the machine’s websites is the reformist coalition PP-DB (We Continue the Change—Democratic Bulgaria), Peevski’s main political opponent.

**3 July–20 October 2024:** Following the 3 July split inside the DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), Ahmed Dogan’s supporters—called ‘derebeys’ (feudal lords) by Peevski—become the primary target of propaganda attacks and ridicule on mushroom websites.

**20 October 2024:** The machine stops uploading new content to the mushroom websites.

**30 November 2024:** The machine's primary domains become inaccessible on the Internet.

The attempt to purge the machine, and its subsequent complete liquidation, has a logical explanation. In early 2023 the HSSF with its 2022 Report<sup>32</sup> alerted the Bulgarian public to the existence and magnitude of the new propaganda tool, and began detailed monitoring of its work in HSSF quarterly newsletters. From late 2023 the issue was taken up not only by Bulgarian and international media outlets but also by various research units, such as the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD),<sup>33</sup> which traced owners of some of the domains; Georgi Angelov at Radio Free Europe;<sup>34</sup> or the Atlantic Council's Washington-based DFRLab,<sup>35</sup> which tracked how the machine operated on Facebook and other social media platforms. This publicity forced those filling the mushroom websites with content to at least ostensibly balance their approach in late 2023, and to begin to remove Russian content by early 2024.

One event abruptly increased pressure on the machine and was perhaps the direct cause of its rapid demise. On 24 February 2024, interviewed by Nikoleta Atanasova on BNR, Dimitar Vatsov explained the nature of the machine and recalled the genesis of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria during the protests against Peevski and Oresharski in 2013.<sup>36</sup>

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32 Summary of the HSSF report *Russian Propaganda in the Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022)* (Sofia: HSSF, 2023), pp. 16–23. Available at: <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Report-ENG.pdf> [accessed 2 November 2025].

33 Todor Galev, *Mrezi za razprostranenie i monetizatsiya na dezinformatsiyata v Bulgariya* [Networks for the Dissemination and Monetization of Disinformation in Bulgaria], 7 December 2023, available at: [https://csd.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/events\\_library/files/2023\\_12/Prezentacija\\_Todor\\_Galev.pdf](https://csd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/events_library/files/2023_12/Prezentacija_Todor_Galev.pdf) [accessed 12 October 2025].

34 Georgi A. Angelov and Andy Heil, 'I Worked for the "Mushroom Machine": Inside Bulgaria's Cash-for-Disinformation Network', *Radio Free Europe*, 19 May 2024, available at: [www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-disinformation-websites-mushrooms-russia/32950283.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-disinformation-websites-mushrooms-russia/32950283.html) [accessed 12 October 2025].

35 Gelava, 'Suspicious Facebook Assets'.

36 See Dimitar Vatsov, 'Peevski parvi vavede ruskite propagandni klisheta v balgarskoto mediyno prostranstvo', *BNR Novini*, 24 February 2024, <https://bnr.bg/hristobotev/post/101953732> [accessed 12 October 2025].

Three days later Peevski officially approached the Interior Ministry, SANS, and the prosecution service, asking: ‘Is there a network of (pro-) Russian bots in Bulgaria, and who is behind it?’

The alert is related to findings of studies by the Human and Social Studies Foundation made public by Prof. Dimitar Vatsov, President of the HSSF Managing Board, which have been published on the Foundation’s website and commented on in the media, and which concern ‘a machine of mushroom websites’ that are nearly 400 in number and produce 2000 publications per day, further amplified through social media, the Interior Ministry’s press centre said.<sup>37</sup>

Peevski brought even more publicity to the problem with the machine. But he also prompted SANS to launch an official investigation into mushroom websites. There is no official public report of the conclusions or outcomes of this investigation. However, the machine’s behaviour in 2024 is telling: it began frantically deleting earlier Russian propaganda publications and, from 3 April 2024, ceased to upload any content about Russia. At the same time, the machine attempted to ‘humour’ Peevski in many ways, attacking his main political opponents—PP-DB and Dogan’s wing of the DPS. However, these attempts failed: the machine was de facto shut down in October–November 2024. However, its cause remains unclear: direct Russian intervention, monetisation, or a mixture of both.

We may joke that, with the unexpected help of Delyan Peevski and SANS, the HSSF team managed in three years to slay the many-headed dragon. But before burying the ‘mushroom monster’, a further point should be added.

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37 See ‘Peevski pita MVR, DANS i prokuratura: Ima li mrežha ot proruski botove u nas i koy stoi zad neya’, *bTV Novinite*, 27 February 2024, <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/peevski-pita-mvr-dans-i-prokuratura-ima-li-mrežha-ot-proruski-botove-u-nas-i-koi-stoi-zad-neja.html> [accessed 18 May 2025].



A new ‘household machine’ had also emerged, targeting a different demographic: mainly housewives, with content focused on health and domestic comfort but subtly infused with political propaganda.

Clearly this was a last-ditch effort to salvage the business model of cloning mushroom websites, either through franchising or direct sales. Despite this attempt, however, almost all the mushroom websites disappeared from the Internet at the end of November 2024. At the very end of 2024 or the beginning of 2025, a final attempt was made to resurrect them. Some became active again, but now automatically redirected to commercial websites—either to one selling household appliances or to the website of Novax Group, a Bulgarian company that sells and installs French swimming pools for luxury villas (Figure 7). In May 2025 there were only five remaining domains (allbg.eu, komentaru.com, mybg.eu, news7.eu, and w365.eu), redirecting to the Novax Group website. At the moment (late November 2025) only the last two are still active.



Figure 7. Screenshot from the Novax Group website (<https://desjoyaux.bg>), to which news7.eu and w365.eu redirect

## How to Counteract

What should we do about Russian propaganda? Debunk it? But (1) it is used promiscuously in all kinds of oligarchic circles, from local Bulgarian oligarchs to tech giants with trillion-dollar profits who all want to replace public regulations with private bargaining and monopolise its benefits; (2) Kremlin circles do not mind being exposed for waging information war—on the contrary, they use exposure to boast about their power. Our team has isolated the following typical Kremlin tactic: confirmation through denial—a way to confirm that troops were sent to Ukraine in 2014, that they poisoned Skripal, or that they killed Navalny. Consider this exchange in October 2025 between Fyodor Lukyanov, host of the 22nd Valdai Discussion Club,<sup>38</sup> and Vladimir Putin about drones over military bases and airports in Europe in autumn 2025:

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, why are you sending that many drones to Denmark?

Vladimir Putin: I promise I will not. I will not send drones to France, Denmark, or Copenhagen. What other destinations can they reach?

Fyodor Lukyanov: They can go anywhere.

Vladimir Putin: Lisbon. Where else? [...] On a serious note, though, we do not even have drones that can go as far as Lisbon. We do have some long-range drones, but there are no targets at this range. This is what matters most in this regard. [...]

Fyodor Lukyanov: You gave a scare to Portugal when you mentioned Lisbon. Their sense of humour may fail

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38 The Valdai Discussion Club is a forum of Russian and foreign propagandists and intellectuals which has become the main format for conducting geopolitical propaganda, at which Vladimir Putin personally makes his signature statements: Valdai Discussion Club, *Programmes*, <https://valdaiclub.com/programmes>.

them, and they may take it seriously. Anyway, to set the record straight, it was a joke.

Vladimir Putin: Why a joke? No.

Fyodor Lukyanov: No?

Vladimir Putin: No.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Pardon me. It was a fair warning then. Also a gentlemanly move.

Vladimir Putin: Forewarned is forearmed.<sup>39</sup>

Although it heavily exploits populist rhetoric and its inherent anti-elitism, Kremlin propaganda is not at all against the rich, nor does it oppose kleptocrats (with whom it appears comfortable). It is against the intelligentsia, against cultural elites. This is precisely why it is so easily and indistinguishably linked to national-conservative projects in European societies, which it encourages in an autocratic direction. And therefore we must assume that its spread is supported by both the Kremlin and populist and autocratic political projects.

Finally, Kremlin propaganda is rarely explicitly pro-Russian, even when carried out by pro-Russian structures, spokespersons, and media outlets (directly pro-Kremlin voices are not its only source in Europe). We have described ideological tightening of Kremlin propaganda under the banner of the 'Russian world' on the eve of full-scale war. But it proved unsuccessful outside Russia. It failed to win supporters abroad; we have already cited data showing that support for Putin has almost halved in Bulgaria (Figure 3). Therefore, at the moment it is noteworthy how exported propaganda is returning to the kind of subversive function recognisable before the war. Its main goal is to sow

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39 President of Russia, 'Valdai Discussion Club Meeting', 2 October 2025, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78134> [accessed 12 October 2025].

discord and polarisation in democratic societies<sup>40</sup> and to weaken their democracy, as well as trust in a rules-based order. The social engineering technique of sowing discord and confrontation has two main components: (a) invest in toxic collective identities based on rejection and hatred (anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-migrant sentiments) and (b) link these toxic identities to national-populist political parties and actors who preach against liberal democracy and the structures of a united Europe.

This social engineering mechanism, which draws us into a spiral of hostile emotions and, by the same token, promotes national-populist parties that reject liberal democracy, is supported and replicated by the opacity of social media algorithms, and by the opacity of those behind technologies such as the mushrooming websites that ‘innocently’ spread content thousands of times in Bulgaria’s small online language-market. Efforts to regulate the work of algorithms and highlight those who target citizens through the network of mushroom websites are subsequently characterised as ‘censorship’.

On 12 August 2025 the US State Department released its annual report on human rights around the world.<sup>41</sup> This year’s report was delayed. Begun under the Biden Administration, it was edited to reflect the priorities of the Trump Administration. The report criticised a number of European countries for ‘deteriorating human rights’, citing regulations on online hate speech, interpreted as a restriction of free speech. It was published after two similar blows to democratic Europe: from Elon Musk, emblematic of corporate power behind Trump’s America,<sup>42</sup> and from Vice President J.D. Vance, politically emblematic of Trump’s America.<sup>43</sup> The attacks follow the same principle: any call for regulation in the

40 Mark Galeotti, ‘When Disinformation Meets Disruption: Russia’s Strategy of Paralysis’, *Critique & Humanism* 62, N° 1 (2025), pp. 7–16.

41 US Department of State, *2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, available at: [www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices](https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices) [accessed 12 October 2025].

42 ADF International, ‘Musk Sets Sights on EU Online Censorship Law after Australian Free Speech Win’, Press Release, 3 July 2025, available at: <https://adfinternational.org/news/musk-sets-sights-on-eu-online-censorship-law> [accessed 12 October 2025].

43 Emily Atkinson, ‘JD Vance Attacks Europe over Free Speech and Migration’, *BBC News*, 15 February 2025, available at: [www.bbc.com/news/articles/ceve3wl21x1o](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ceve3wl21x1o) [accessed 12 October 2025].

liberal-democratic public sphere is presented as censorship and undemocratic, just as Kremlin spokespeople portray it. This suggests that the EU's regulatory efforts<sup>44</sup> are heading in an appropriate direction, and what they lack are efforts to promote regulations among citizens of the free world. Opacity represents a lack of freedom. This task would be complicated were the US administration inclined to use American security guarantees for Europe as a means to pressure European attempts to regulate tech giants. The latter, fearing regulation will affect their profits, make out their concern is for freedom of speech (witness Musk, but also Mark Zuckerberg over the removal of fact-checking, which returned Facebook to its free-speech roots<sup>45</sup>). The removal of regulatory and research tools such as CrowdTangle will lead to ever more pernicious disinformation campaigns praised by the tech giants as 'authentic' content.

Another key lesson to be drawn from the Bulgarian case which is relevant beyond its local context suggests that, no matter how worthy the efforts are to expose lies and misinformation, the fight against disinformation can be and is effectively used as a smokescreen behind which information warfare operations continue to be conducted undisturbed on a global scale. Combating disinformation can only be effective if it is part of and subordinated to an overall communicative strategy to deter information operations against the liberal-democratic political order. Ultimately a war is being waged. Liberal democrats are reducing their response to exposing lies, which is far from being the most effective weapon in the information segment of this war.

Russia will intensify its attack on Europe, and, as we have seen, this attack is the main target of Russian and pro-Russian anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria. Europe is rising up to fight back. Slowly. Let us not forget that Europe is much richer and stronger than Russia, but is still living in peacetime. Russia has put its economy on a military footing and is clearly not preparing for peace. However, it is time for

44 For instance, the Digital Services Act and the European Media Freedom Act.

45 Justin Hendrix, 'Transcript: Mark Zuckerberg Announces Major Changes to Meta's Content Moderation Policies and Operations', *Tech Policy Press*, 7 January 2025, [www.techpolicy.press/transcript-mark-zuckerberg-announces-major-changes-to-metas-content-moderation-policies-and-operations](https://www.techpolicy.press/transcript-mark-zuckerberg-announces-major-changes-to-metas-content-moderation-policies-and-operations) [accessed 12 October 2025].

Europe to relearn how to attack with information, as it did during the Cold War, but now seems to have forgotten: to attack first and foremost with positive messages that directly show the advantages of democracy as a way of life.

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