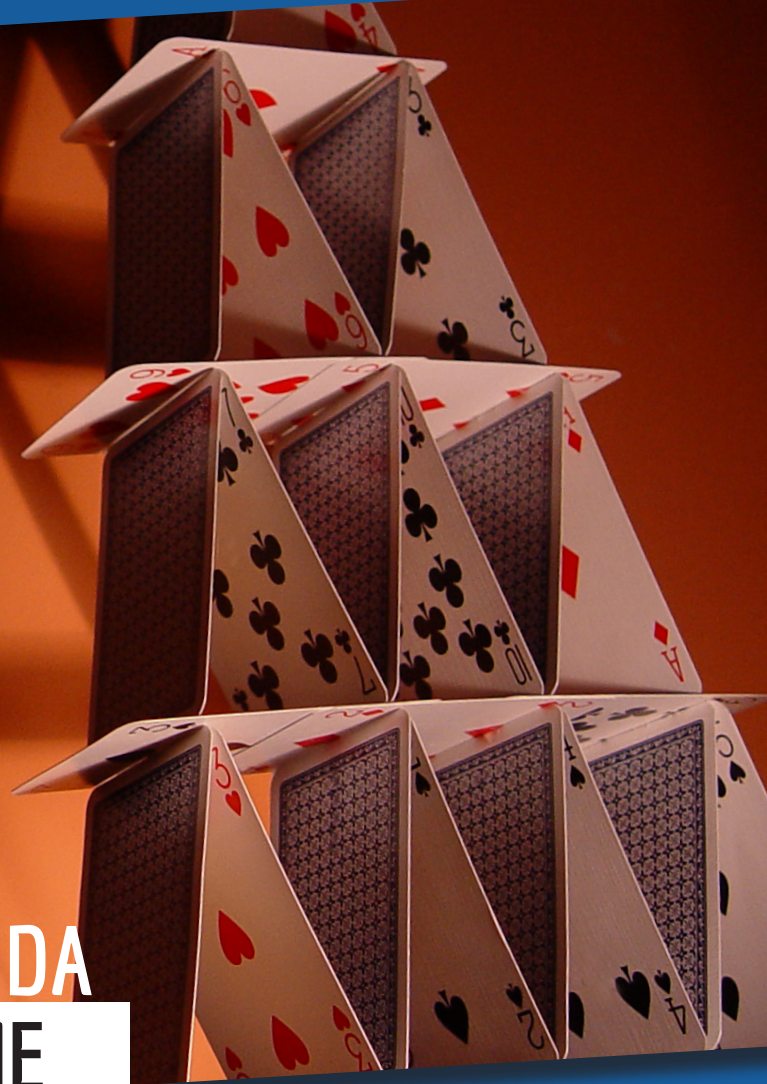


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# RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA CONCERNING UKRAINE DURING THE SYRIAN CAMPAIGN: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO ASSESS INFORMATION ACTIVITIES

STUDY RESULTS

PREPARED BY THE  
NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the Syrian campaign the (dis-) information activities of the Russian Federation concerning Ukraine dropped significantly. Key narratives and topics employed by Russia vis – a –vis Ukraine a) aimed to worsen relations between Ukraine and countries of the European Union; b) repeated and added new details to a previously actively exploited narrative on the illegal, outrageous, violent and aggressive behavior of Ukrainian battalions in the Donbas region; c) drew different connections between Ukraine and the war in Syria and especially DAESH; d) repeated a previously widely spread narrative about the illegal nature of Maidan, and the fascist government in power in Ukraine. Narratives aimed at countries of the European Union strove to increase tension among European countries and between European countries and the United States of America, and to create the impression of growing sympathy towards and support for Russia in the region. Additionally, the narratives aimed at creating ideological clashes and distrust among countries within the European Union and painting a negative image of Ukraine.

## SOURCES

This research is based on the European External Action Service Disinformation reviews for the period under observation. Key narratives and themes of disinformation activities against Ukraine and countries of the European Union have been identified.

An assessment of the intensity of (dis-) information activities was made by analyzing such sources as ria.ru, rt.com.ru, aif.ru, vesti.ru and r24.ru.

## METHODOLOGY

The research is based on qualitative and quantitative content analyses, accompanied by innovative methodology to assess (dis-) information activities. The Bohush Pyramid of Influence method allows for analysis of (dis-)information activities according to the perceived target – at what level of influence is the activity aimed, what perception is it intended to produce, and what kind of consequences are envisioned for this particular (dis-)information activity at this particular level for this particular audience.

## PERIOD UNDER STUDY

The period of the Syrian campaign from September 2015 to March 2016 was a time of information support for the Russian Federation active phase of military operations in Syria. Hereafter, in this study it will be referred to as the Syrian period. In order to ensure the accuracy of the results, given the fact that the official Syrian campaign began only in the last two days of September, the Syrian period is measured and presented in charts from October 2015 to March 2016. For illustrative purposes and strength of comparison, the time frame of the research has been expanded to cover the period from June 2015 to May 2016.

# INTRODUCTION

The Russian Federation leads a complex, well-financed and multipronged informational war targeting different territories and audiences<sup>1</sup>. Informational operations are based on psychological influence and aim to affect the emotional state of actors, the motivation and argumentation for actions, the decision-making and behavior of particular leaders, companies and organizations as well as nations and groups within nations. Modern Russian propaganda is evidently not subject to any censorship. According to Benjamin Ziff, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, modern Russian propaganda is widespread and tends to fill any available media space, creating total informational chaos and provoking distrust towards all media. People simply cannot distinguish truth from lies due to the overwhelming amount of contradictory information and the skillfulness with which lies and half-truths are presented. As Peter Pomerantsev, author of “Nothing is True and Everything is Possible,” noted: “Russia is the avant garde of making the information age the disinformation age” (McKitterick, M.)<sup>2</sup> In the same way, the Syrian campaign changed not only the narratives but also the intensity of the usage of previous top themes, such as

<sup>1</sup> McKitterick, Molly. (03 Nov, 2015). Russian Propaganda: 'The Weaponization of Information'. <http://www.voanews.com/content/russian-propaganda-weaponization-information/3036087.html>

<sup>2</sup> McKitterick, Molly. (03 Nov, 2015). Russian Propaganda: 'The Weaponization of Information'. <http://www.voanews.com/content/russian-propaganda-weaponization-information/3036087.html>

Ukraine, which was one of the key narratives in the (dis-)information activities of the Russian Federation.

This research aims to:

- Identify narratives and topics employed by Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine during the Syrian campaign.
- Assess the change of intensity of information activities during the period under study.
- Identify similarities and differences with regard to intensity and topics of Russian information activities in Ukraine and countries of the European Union during the Syrian campaign.

Preliminarily it is assumed that:

- Russia has failed to realize its goals in Ukraine: the stalemate in the separatist territories can no longer make headlines, and the resilience of the Ukrainian establishment and society has proved to be too difficult to overcome.
- Ukraine is no longer the prime target of Russia's information activities.
- Russia can step up and tone down its information activities at will – with its grip on media and resources at its disposal it is in an advantageous position compared to the targets of the disinformation activities.



This research paper aims to check and provide sound, well-grounded proof or refutation for all of the stated preliminary assumptions.

## REVIEW OF SOURCES

This research is based on an analysis of the sources, which can be divided into three major groups.

**The first group** includes EEAS Disinformation Reviews<sup>3</sup> and Center for European Policy Analysis<sup>4</sup> aggregating resources, providing accumulated, solid data about (dis-) information activities, along with analytical reports.

**The second group** includes sources which have been used both for qualitative and quantitative content analyses. Direct Russian informational influence is conducted through these sources. Russia Today is one of the most watched TV channels, with 24/7 broadcasting in English, Arabic and Spanish. It has an impressively broad audience around the globe. 70 million people watch RT every week, 23 million of them every day. In 2014 RT managed to surpass 2 billion views in YouTube.<sup>5</sup> Vesti.ru (Russia24) is a basic information resource for a whole network of informational resources including radios, TV channels and newspapers (online and printed). This source had been chosen due to its wide reach. Aif.ru is one of the oldest

and most respected sources, thanks to the long and successful history of the offline AiF (Arguments and Facts) magazine. It has a wide range of topics beyond politics and economics and is followed by a variety of different audiences. Ria.ru has the highest intensity of information activities in general and is organized in the form of a speedy 24/7 news website, concerning first of all political and economic issues, both national and international. Targeted audiences depend on quantity range of transmitting channels and types of communication tools. In every country the intensity and the diversity of the Russian signal is different and requires separate research utilizing specific marketing measures.

Data for this table is gathered from the free web-statistic counter – 2ip.ru. Data might vary from counter to counter. This website was chosen as one of the most reliable concerning Russian web-segment.

**The third group** consists of websites, partly identified through EEAS Disinformation Reviews, which couldn't be analyzed quantitatively but contributed significantly in terms of narrative and thematic analysis.

## METHODOLOGY

For quantitative content analysis the following resources have been used: EEAS Disinformation Review (October 2015 – March 2016); Russia Today; R24, Vesti.ru (providing the same content); Aif.ru; Ria.ru.

Qualitative content analysis was based on the specific method of (dis-)informational assessment – Bohush Pyramid of Influence, which allows for assessing different levels of (dis-)information attempts and impact:<sup>6</sup>

3 [http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo/news/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo/news/index_en.htm), last accessed 21.11.2016

4 [https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id\\_plik=2770](https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=2770), last accessed 21.11.2016

5 Iancu, N., Fortuna, A., Bama, C. Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine. P. 209 [https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=Uwy-3DAAAQBAJ&pg=PA209&lpg=PA209&dq=rt+has+1+billion+views+on+youtube&source=bl&ots=5c4uZkn-gOF&sig=3BM9\\_fhdeiPbsdCbH2Bo4JuPFA&hl=ru&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewi\\_6ZvP3c\\_PAhWJlpoKHTxRDxE4ChDoA-QhfMAk#v=onepage&q=rt%20has%201%20billion%20views%20on%20youtube&f=false](https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=Uwy-3DAAAQBAJ&pg=PA209&lpg=PA209&dq=rt+has+1+billion+views+on+youtube&source=bl&ots=5c4uZkn-gOF&sig=3BM9_fhdeiPbsdCbH2Bo4JuPFA&hl=ru&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewi_6ZvP3c_PAhWJlpoKHTxRDxE4ChDoA-QhfMAk#v=onepage&q=rt%20has%201%20billion%20views%20on%20youtube&f=false), last accessed 21.11.2016

6 Bohush, D. Russian Propaganda <http://www.slideshare.net/DenisBohush/russian-propaganda-2015>, last accessed 21.11.2016

	Visitors per day	Visitors per month	Reviews of the website per day	Reviews of the website per month
Ria.ru	1 365 084	16 301 356	4 777 163	127 062 449
Russia24	data not available	data not available	data not available	data not available
AiF	589 962	11 503 904	1 280 143	35 670 162
RT	572 202	14 833 351	1 560 136	58 868 532

**Level 1** - Instinctive and emotional (fear, anxiety, shock).

**Level 2** - Rational (argument picture)

**Level 3** - Semantic (new stereotypes, manipulation of history)

**Level 4** - Archetypical (group instincts, culture)

**Level 1** is obligatory and vital to achieve influence. For this reason murders, shock and fear are key accents in media content about Ukraine. Bombardment of civilians and a coordinated system of rumors play a significant role in spreading the atmosphere of fear and distrust. It is very important to keep people focused at this level, where critical thinking is absent or minimally present. **Examples:** *Media have forgotten about the 286 women who were shot by the Ukrainians; the “Heavenly Hundred” were shot by Maidan activists.*

**Level 2** implies a specific set of arguments and interpretations for every event. For those who try to implement critical thinking and use rational reasoning, Russian propaganda specifically constructs arguments for every event. Although for the outside observer these particular arguments might seem irrelevant, feeble, untrustworthy and

strained, the targeted “consumer” of the information message accepts them as logical, complementary and coherent with his world view. **Examples:** *Odessa governor Mikhail Saakashvili is connected to ISIS<sup>7</sup> via Turkey and USA; Ukrainian forces are transported to Syria to bring down a USA jet and blame Russians for it.*

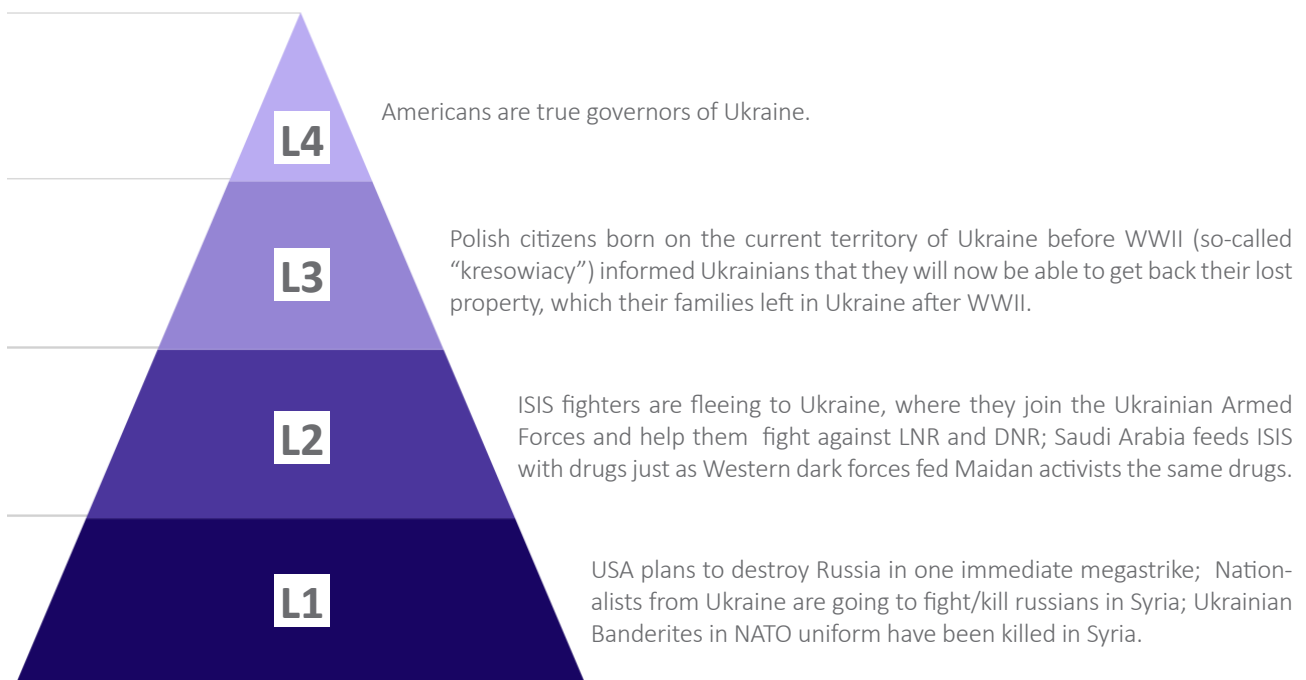
**Level 3** is created for those who read books, educate themselves and require analytical explanations, ensuring that they themselves can make proper, complex conclusions. For this audience historical books and evidence are rewritten from the earliest times to modern times. New maps are drawn; new historical evidence is fabricated and located in different “trustworthy” places to become public when the moment arises. **Examples:** *Polish citizens born on the current territory of Ukraine before the WWII (so-called “kresowiacy”) informed Ukrainians that they will now be able to get back their lost property, which their families left in Ukraine after the WWII.*

<sup>7</sup> Russian media resources and those controlled by the Russian Federation use the term ISIS or ISIL instead of DAESH. Here after the term ISIS instead of DAESH is used in cases of examples taken as direct quotations from the researched media resources.

**Level 4** implies the clash of cultures and identities. It is the level of archetypes, cultural disputes, stereotypes, group and mass instincts. Manipulative strategies used at this level have the most lasting consequences, although their implementation is the most difficult of all levels. **Examples:** *Holodomor, that killed millions of people in the years 1932-33, is a lie invented by the West in close cooperation with Nazi Germany and pro-Nazi Ukrainian nationalists; Russia has always protected Georgia from threats and will continue to do so.*

This model of manipulating strategies is a pyramid, where the ground floor is Level 1 and the pinnacle - Level 4. It should be noted that the form of a pyramid is not accidental; it reflects the intensity of and correlation with the number of information activities. The maximum amount of messages are sent at the first, ground level, provoking negative emotions and fear, and paralyzing the consumer's ability to think clearly and logically. To insert an idea into the "consumer's" mind, the particular idea should be repeated constantly,

preferably during prime time, employing psychological techniques. Level 2 creates logical and pseudo-logical connections tying irrelevant points into one system, where a small percentage of truth is combined with disinformation, twisted facts and objective predictions. To create more stable, connected and "logical" pathways in the target audience, one informational message might include 2 consequential levels of this pyramid. **Level 2 schematically explains "why" something has happened at Level 1; Level 3 gives historical, geographical, political, economic and other strategic background to the explanations at Level 2; Level 4 confirms the validity of Level 3 by invoking global differences between mindsets, cultural biases and identities.** Consequently the major difference between Level 3 and Level 4 lies in historical and cultural context: historical events are inherent to Level 3, while cultural characteristics and questions of identity are inherent to Level 4. All examples used within the pyramids are direct quotes from the analyzed sources, without any changes in form or meaning.





# CHAPTER 1.

## THE INTENSITY OF (DIS-)INFORMATION ACTIVITIES CONCERNING UKRAINE

The following charts provide information about the intensity of information emanating from Russia, and the intensity of information concerning Ukraine. The numbers represent media items in the researched sources in the period under study. They also provide the opportunity to correlate the number of items on Ukraine with the total numbers. As stated previously, in order to keep results accurate, the Syrian period is measured and presented in charts from October 2015 to March 2016. When assessing the Syrian period and the periods before and after, the

March 2016 numbers are divided in two and spread equally, as the Syrian campaign was officially terminated in the middle of March 2016.

Ria.ru has the most intense information flow among all researched sources. Numbers indicate the total number of news and other information entries published by the researched source in the given period. It is evident that quantity of information emanating from Ria.ru is twice as big as the sum from all other sources.

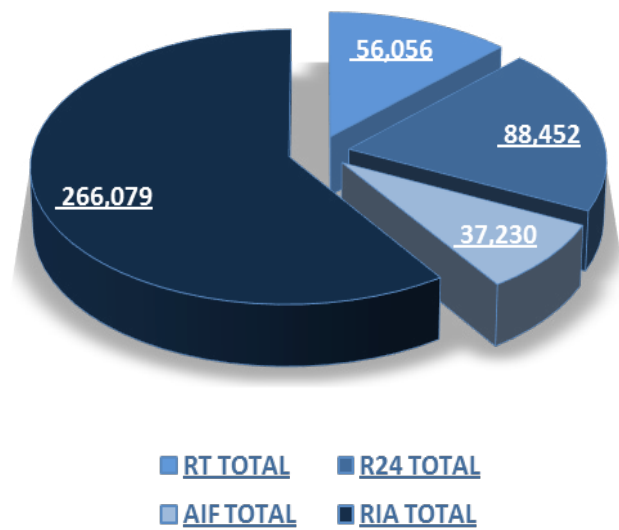
MONTH	TOTAL INFORMATION INTENSITY					
	Year	RussiaToday	Russia24 (vesti.ru)	AIF.ru	Ria.ru	TOTAL
June	2015	4 620	7 290	3 060	21 990	36 960
July	2015	4 774	7 533	3 162	22 723	38 192
August	2015	4 774	7 533	3 162	22 723	38 192
September	2015	4 620	7 290	3 060	21 990	36 960
October	2015	4 774	7 533	3 162	22 723	38 192
November	2015	4 620	7 290	3 060	21 990	36 960
December	2015	4 774	7 533	3 162	22 723	38 192
January	2016	4 620	7 047	3 060	20 524	35 251
February	2016	4 466	7 047	2 958	21 257	35 728
March	2016	4 620	7 533	3 162	22 723	38 038
April	2016	4 774	7 290	3 060	21 990	37 114
May	2016	4 620	7 533	3 162	22 723	38 038
<b>TOTAL #</b>		56 056	88 452	37 230	266 079	<b>447 817</b>
<b>Syrian period</b>		25 564	40 217	16 983	120 579	<b>203 342</b>
<b>Period before and after</b>		30 492	48 236	20 247	145 501	<b>244 475</b>

	<b>INFORMATION INTENSITY CONCERNING UKRAINE</b>					
<b>MONTH</b>	<b>Year</b>	RussiaToday	Russia24 (vesti.ru)	AIF.ru	Ria.ru	<b>TOTAL</b>
June	2015	1 460	830	700	4 739	<b>7 729</b>
July	2015	1 685	834	714	4 387	<b>7 620</b>
August	2015	1 056	651	652	3 615	<b>5 974</b>
September	2015	1 305	680	717	4 107	<b>6 809</b>
October	2015	850	660	514	3743	<b>5 767</b>
November	2015	560	550	428	3 160	<b>4 698</b>
December	2015	592	680	464	3 217	<b>4 953</b>
January	2016	425	490	351	2 136	<b>3 402</b>
February	2016	627	610	521	3 091	<b>4 849</b>
March	2016	519	632	521	3 644	<b>6 316</b>
April	2016	583	642	460	3 576	<b>5 261</b>
May	2016	647	650	458	3 471	<b>5 172</b>
<b>TOTAL #</b>		10 309	7 909	6 500	42 832	<b>67 550</b>
<b>Syrian period</b>		3 314	3 306	2 539	17 169	<b>26 327</b>
<b>Period before and after</b>		6 996	4 603	3 962	25 663	<b>41 223</b>

	<b>TOTAL INFORMATION INTENSITY</b>					
<b>MONTH</b>	<b>Year</b>	RussiaToday	Russia24 (vesti.ru)	AIF.ru	Ria.ru	<b>TOTAL</b>
June	2015	31.6 %	11.4 %	22.9 %	21.6 %	<b>20.9 %</b>
July	2015	35.3 %	11.1 %	22.6 %	19.3 %	<b>11.5 %</b>
August	2015	22.1 %	8.6 %	20.6 %	15.9 %	<b>9.5 %</b>
September	2015	28.2 %	9.3 %	23.4 %	18.7 %	<b>11.1 %</b>
October	2015	17.8 %	8.8 %	16.3 %	16.5 %	<b>9.8 %</b>
November	2015	12.1 %	7.5 %	14.0 %	14.4 %	<b>8.5 %</b>
December	2015	12.4 %	9.0 %	14.7 %	14.2 %	<b>8.4 %</b>
January	2016	9.2 %	7.0 %	11.5 %	10.4 %	<b>6.1 %</b>
February	2016	14.0 %	8.7 %	17.6 %	14.5 %	<b>8.7 %</b>
March	2016	11.2 %	8.4 %	16.5 %	16.0 %	<b>9.6 %</b>
April	2016	12.2 %	8.8 %	15.0 %	16.3 %	<b>9.6 %</b>
May	2016	14.0 %	8.6 %	14.5 %	15.0 %	<b>13.6 %</b>
<b>TOTAL #</b>		18.4 %	8.9 %	17.5 %	16.1 %	<b>25.4 %</b>
<b>Syrian period</b>		13.0 %	8.2 %	14.9 %	14.2 %	<b>21.8 %</b>
<b>Period before and after</b>		22.9 %	9.5 %	19.6 %	17.6 %	<b>28.3 %</b>

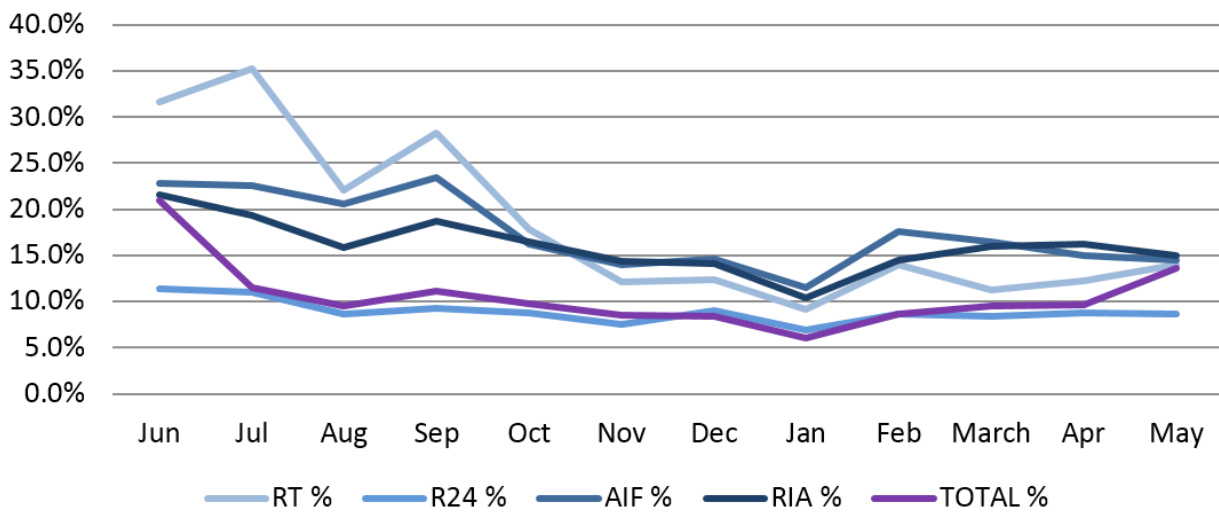
According to the summary table, the number of news entries per day stays almost constant for every month within the period under study. Numbers for a single source differ according to the basic logic of information resources based on the season (a decrease in January due to the New Year and Orthodox Christmas long holidays), the number of days in the month (absolute indexes for February are always slightly lower). The summary table confirms that changes in the overall information intensity practically do not correlate with events on the national or international arena. It does not matter what happens in the world or inside the country, the news feed will stay approximately the same in absolute numbers. It may become only more or less intense concerning a particular event (like a terrorist attack), or a topic (like the war in Syria), or a country (like a targeted enemy – Ukraine). Such a policy has two major consequences. First, it accustoms people reading the particular source to a specific tempo of receiving information. Second, it is easy to raise the significance of any (no matter how irrelevant or minor) topic by increased repetition within the strictly framed number of news entries. If increased intensity of a particular topic needed to be accompanied by an increase in the number of news items overall, it would take much more effort to promote a particular theme or idea, because overall intensity increase would dilute the increased intensity of a particular theme. Increasing intensity within a predetermined framework makes it possible to exert strong influence on the target audience.

### Total informational intensity from June 2015 to May 2016



The diagram on the next page shows almost exact conjunction of trends within the Syrian period for all four analyzed resources, which is confirmed by the consistency with the trend for all resources in total. The intensity of (dis-)information activities concerning Ukraine changes accordingly from one source of information to another and forms an easily recognizable trend for the entire Syrian period. Compared to the intensity of (dis-) information activities before the Syrian period, the intensity of information activities concerning Ukraine decreased more than twice in the Syrian period. It is very important to note that this decrease wasn't equal across every researched source. For some sources, like RT, this index-number dropped from 35% in July'15 to 17% in October'15 and then to 9% in January. At the same time, making allowances for the overall decrease of information activities for every source (either political or not) in January due to long New Year and Christmas

## Intensity of (dis-)information concerning Ukraine from June 2015 - May 2016



Holidays in Orthodox countries, the peak drop for RT and other sources should be estimated relying on next smallest index (after the January index). With this allowance the valid minimum for all assessed sources is for the November 15 – December 15 period, followed by the absolute January minimum. Taking into consideration readjusted numbers the maximum drop in (dis-)information activities concerning Ukraine is visible in RT with 35,3% intensity of information about Ukraine in the overall information published by the channel in July and 12,1% for the same index in November and December.

According to the diagrams the minimum variance in the number of information activities on Ukraine within the Syrian period and beyond was found in the Russia24 source; its maximum point is 11,1% (June) and adjusted valid minimum 7,5% in November (7% in January is absolute minimum for this source). Ria.ru and Aif.ru have almost identical graphs and dynamics of intensity of information activities on Ukraine during and beyond the Syrian period. Before the Syrian period the maximum information intensity on Ukraine occurred in June and September;

within the researched period the maximum drop of intensity was 10 and 8% accordingly. After the officially announced termination of the Syrian campaign, made by President Putin on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2016, most of the researched sources reverted to a relatively similar level of intensity – between 13,6 and 15%, except for Russia24 which stayed at the level of 8,6%, practically stable during the entire period of this research. For some of the researched sources this 14% average represented a serious decrease (RT), for others – a balanced average decrease. This level of intensity allowed for the promotion of key (dis-)information and propaganda ideas, emphasizing and strengthening particular topics in the targeted audience without creating excessive hype around the general object of information activities – Ukraine.

# NARRATIVES AND TOPICS EMPLOYED BY RUSSIA vis-à-vis UKRAINE DURING THE SYRIAN PERIOD (30TH SEPT – 14TH MARCH) AND BEYOND

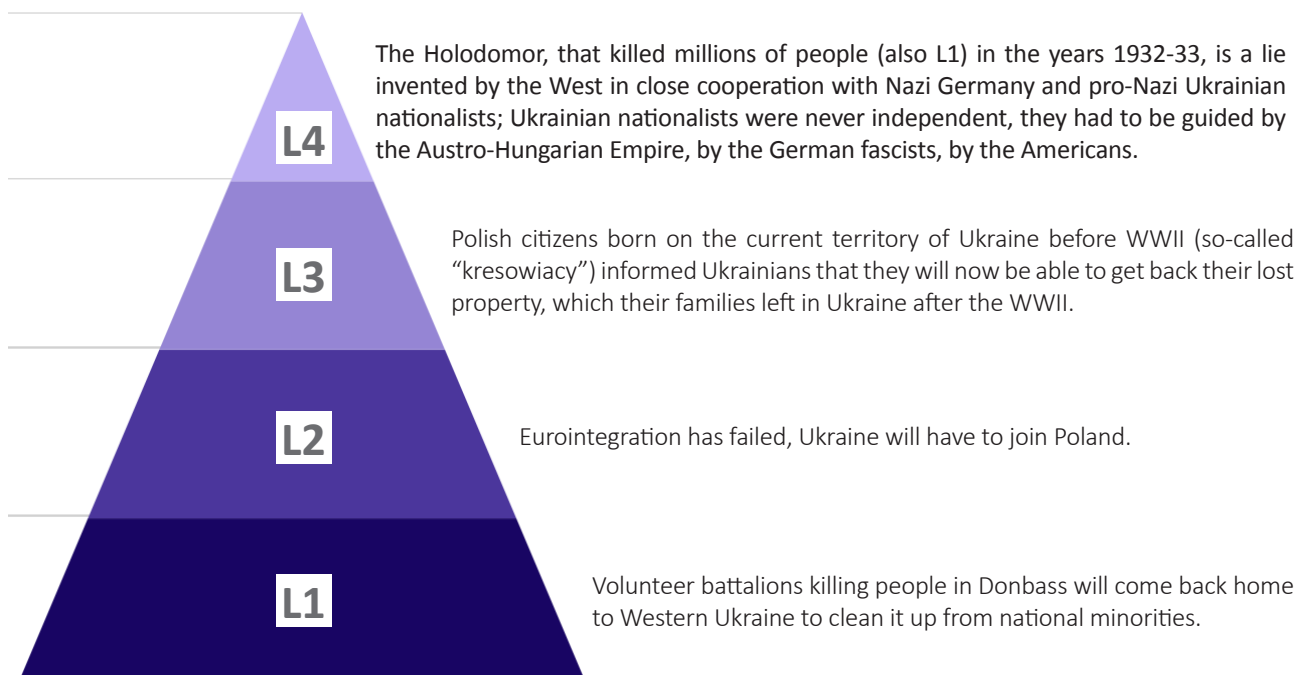
Content analysis of key sources during the period of the Syrian campaign allows the identification of narratives employed by Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine. (Dis-)information activities against Ukraine in this period can be divided according to core themes.

## 1. (Dis-)information activities aimed at worsening relations between Ukraine and countries of the European Union. A key sub-narrative employed includes border issues and historical controversies. Most such news entries are based on reversed historical events.

This narrative is unique in the disinformation activities of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and it is analysed deeply in the third chapter, as it is exploited actively both within Ukraine and in countries of the European Union. It should be noted that in Ukraine this narrative is not used to make people scared of other countries or of former allies, but, presumably, to create a logical connection between the way Russia behaves toward sovereign Ukraine and the way European countries will behave. For the average socially and politically active,

educated Ukrainian, the European vector of development seems more appropriate than strengthening connections with countries of the former USSR, especially the Russian Federation. These propaganda efforts aim to tarnish the reputation of the European Union as a democratic institution treating other countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity with undeniable respect.

Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews 09.11.2015, 28.10.2015, 17.11.2015, 24.11.2015, 23.02.2016, 01.03.2016, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016



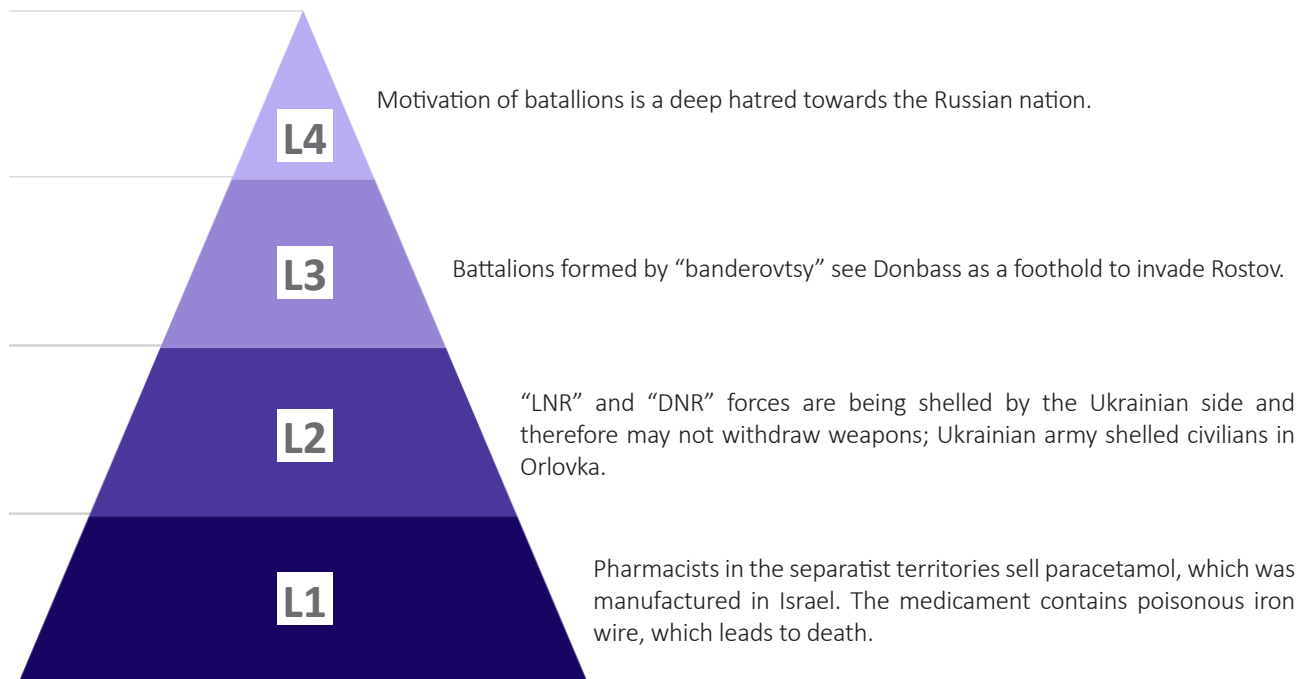


## 2. Repetition and addition of new details to a previously actively exploited narrative concerning illegal, outrageous, violent and aggressive behavior of Ukrainian battalions in the Donbass region.

This narrative remains constant since the beginning of tension in the Donbass region. The same narratives and themes are continuously repeated in order to support the idea of illegal and violent Ukrainian actions in the region. At the same time it should be noted that, with the launching of new narratives (questions about borders within Europe, ISIS being connected to Ukraine and its government), the exploitation of the Donbass narrative has gradually decreased. It can also be connected with an objective decrease in activities of all sides involved during almost the entire period of the Syrian campaign.

Thus the topic mentioned above is covered in Russian and controlled by the Russian Federation Ukrainian media at a level just enough to keep it “alive” and ready to be raised vigorously in case of an immediate propaganda need.

Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews 09.11.2015, 28.10.2015, 17.11.2015, 08.12.2015, 24.11.2015, 22.12.2015, 08.03.2016, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016



### 3. Narratives drawing different connections between Ukraine and the Syrian war, especially DAESH.

This narrative was expected to be exploited in the Russian media as it allows one to connect Ukraine to terrorism and a “world evil” within a new, fresh, and already internationally known concept. DAESH became a sort of political and ideological glue connecting Ukraine with other countries that the Russian Federation sees as enemies and threats – Turkey and the USA. As no particular evidence of physical damage to someone’s life or health had not been found or contrived, the first (ground) level was not used. At the same time, the ideological foundation had been created to connect potential casualties and atrocities in

the Donbas region with DAESH (welcomed by the Ukrainian “fascist” government).

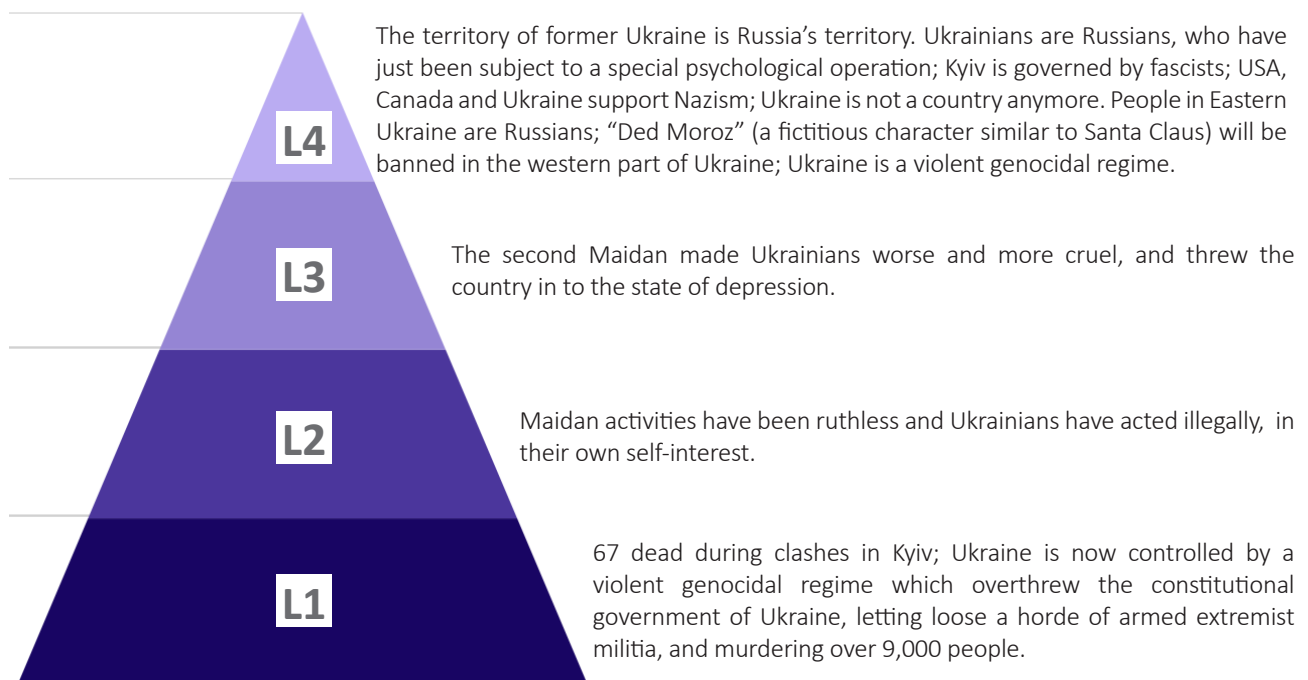
Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews 09.11.2015, 17.11.2015, 08.12.2015, 24.11.2015, 12.01.2016, 16.02.2016, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016



#### 4. Repetition of a previously widely spread narrative about the illegal nature of Maidan, and of the fascist government ruling Ukraine.

Fiercely exaggerating real and contriving false evidence of “anti-Russian” activities and events within Ukraine, **denying that Ukraine is an independent state** ruled by a legitimate government is a narrative that has not in essence changed from the beginning of the Revolution of Dignity in 2013. It is constantly developed by adding new sidelines and themes, such as the connection with Turkey or DAESH.

Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews 28.10.2015, 17.11.2015, 08.12.2015, 24.11.2015, 22.12.2015, 12.01.2016, 09.02.2016, 16.02.2016, 23.02.2016, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016



# RUSSIAN INFORMATION ACTIVITIES IN UKRAINE AND COUNTRIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Within the period of study, the intensity of (dis-)information activity increased, “borrowing” some news feed space from Ukraine. Content analysis of key sources during the period of the Syrian campaign identified narratives employed by Russia vis-à-vis countries of the European Union. (Dis) information activities during the period of the Syrian campaign can be divided according to core themes.

## 1. Increasing tension between European countries and the USA, along with tension within Europe. The Syrian campaign narrative is used intensely.

Tension between two economically and politically strong opponents (the EU and the USA) would be very beneficial to the Russian Federation, hence a huge effort is made to create distrust and exaggerate ideological, cultural, political and economic differences between these two geopolitical subjects. The USA is traditionally, as per the Russian Federation media, accused of supporting terrorism, especially DAESH, creating puppet governments all around the world,

including some of the European countries (Ukraine as the strongest example), and threatening the world order, people or even world’s existence – through the creation of new weapons of mass destruction, etc.

Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews 02.11.2015, 28.10.2015, 17.11.2015, 24.11.2015, 08.12.2015, 15.12.2015, 12.01.2016, 09.02.2016, 16.02.2016, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016



## 2. Stating and emphasizing growing sympathy and support towards Russia in the researched region.

This pyramid clearly shows that Russia aims to create a new sensibility, a new understanding of identity, a new perception of what is good and what is bad in the political arena, a new understanding of who is a friend and who is an enemy for Europe. The overwhelming message aims at creating a new sensibility, reversing truth directly and making Russia the new defender of world peace, the essential and only counterweight to the outrageous and aggressive United States and its supporters.

There is no current territorial or military tension between Russia and the European Union, therefore, there are almost no (dis-) information activities at the first and second levels of the pyramid. The third and fourth level are mostly united in one message in order to provide the target audience with a core identity idea immediately supported with “strategic” evidence.

Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews, 28.10.2015, 17.11.2015, 15.12.2015, 16.02.2016, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016



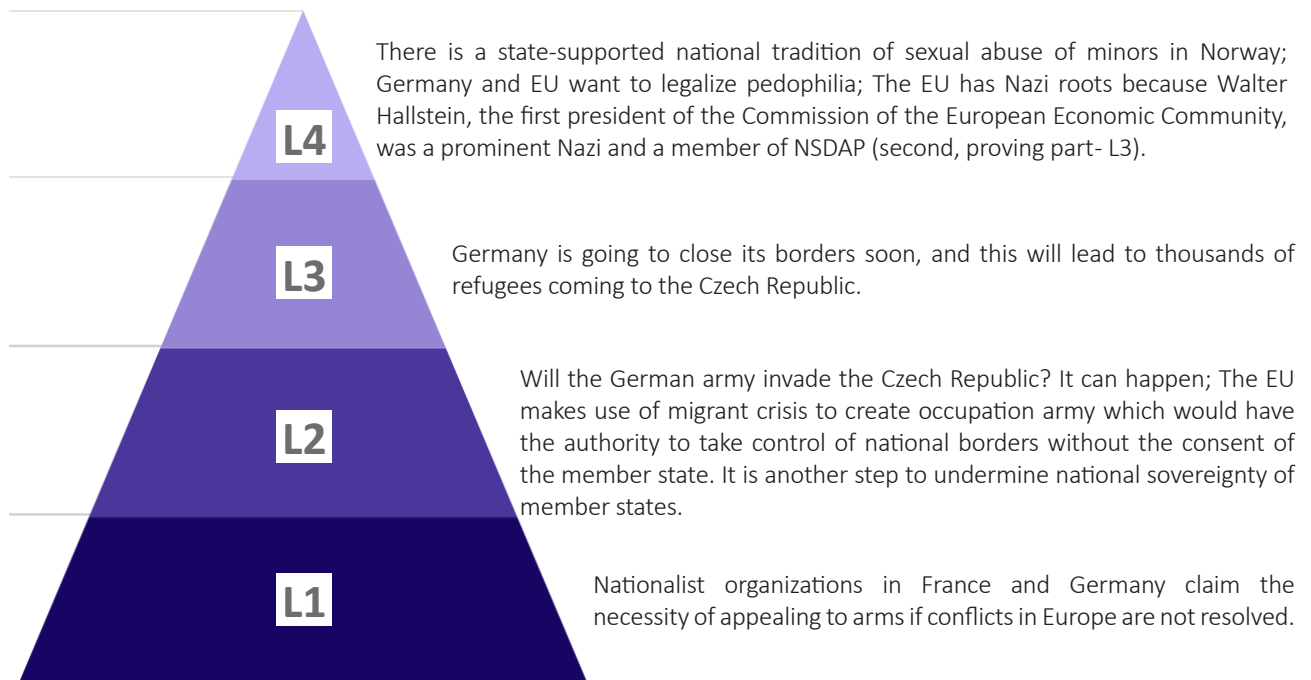


### 3. Creating an ideological clash and distrust among countries within the European Union.

Due to some tension present among different countries within Europe, influence is present at three levels, excluding L1. At the fourth, highest level, Russian propaganda aims to divide European countries on the level of their beliefs and identities. For example, in countries where the church plays a significant role, outrageous information is spread about sexual abuse and the legalization of sexual perversion. This propaganda aims to create the impression that “we” (in Czech Republic or Poland) are not like “them” (in Norway or Sweden);

“we” need to have another ally, who is closer to us in “our” understanding of what is right and acceptable. This disinformation activity is immediately supported with fake statements such as “The pope named Putin as the only one who can save Christianity”, which is aimed create an “ally” in the minds of the audience.

Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews, 17.11.2015, 12.01.2016, 09.02.2016, 16.02.2016, 23.02.2016, 15.03.2016, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016

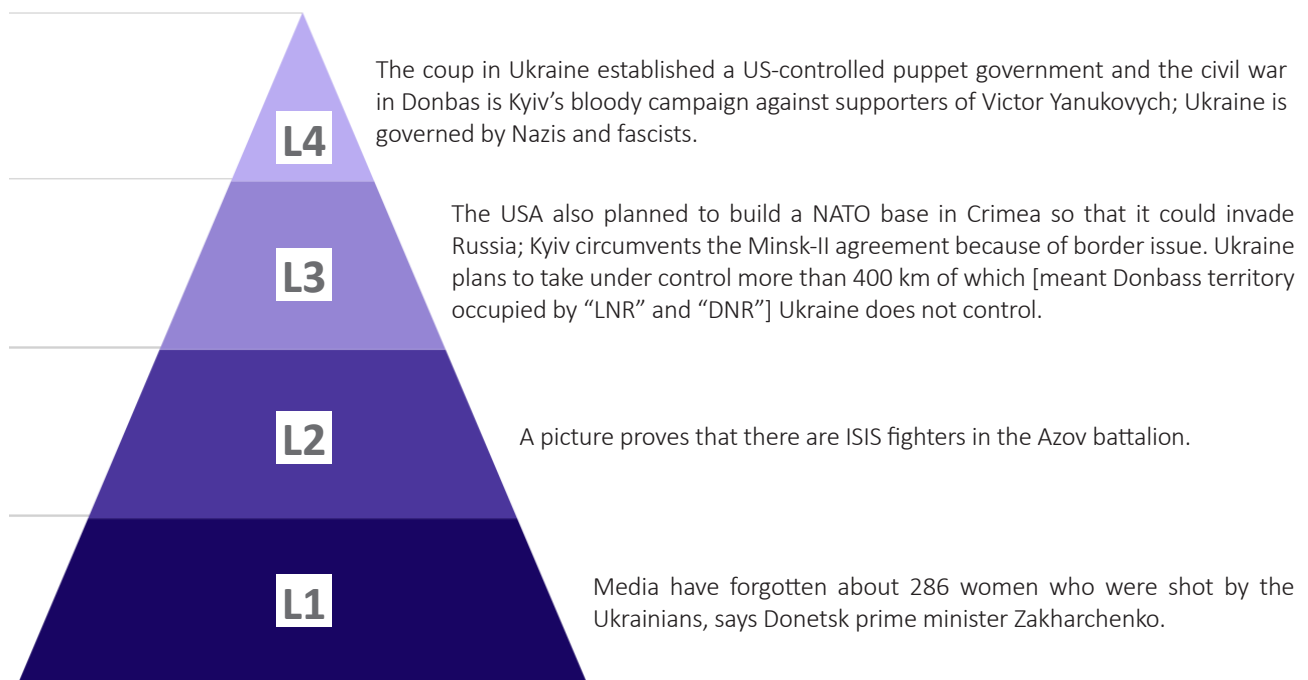


#### 4. Worsening the relations between Ukraine and countries of the European Union, creating a negative image of Ukraine.

Some of the propaganda activities against Ukraine continuously repeat the same narratives which have been exploited during recent years since the beginning of the Revolution of Dignity. The idea that Ukraine is ruled by a fascist government or Ukraine is totally controlled by the USA is still repeated through the entire research period. The same can be said about the situation in the Donbas region: a key narrative for countries of the European Union is that Ukraine is violating the Minsk agreements. It is evident that most people, including citizens of Ukraine, do not have a clear vision about what the Minsk agreements are and how all sides involved should behave. Thus there is an impressive amount of speculation around

this topic. There is one key novelty in the narrative against Ukraine and it is the same novelty as in disinformation activities spread in Ukraine or Russia – Ukrainian active participation in Syrian events (supporting terrorists) along with the DAESH presence in Ukraine, especially in Odessa and Donbas. These narratives are used not only to create a basic perception of connecting Ukraine with terrorism, but at the same time to show Ukraine as another country that threatens Europe with flows of illegal immigrants, undercover terrorists, etc.

Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews, 17.11.2015, 15.12.2015, 22.12.2015, 12.01.2016, 08.12.2015, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016

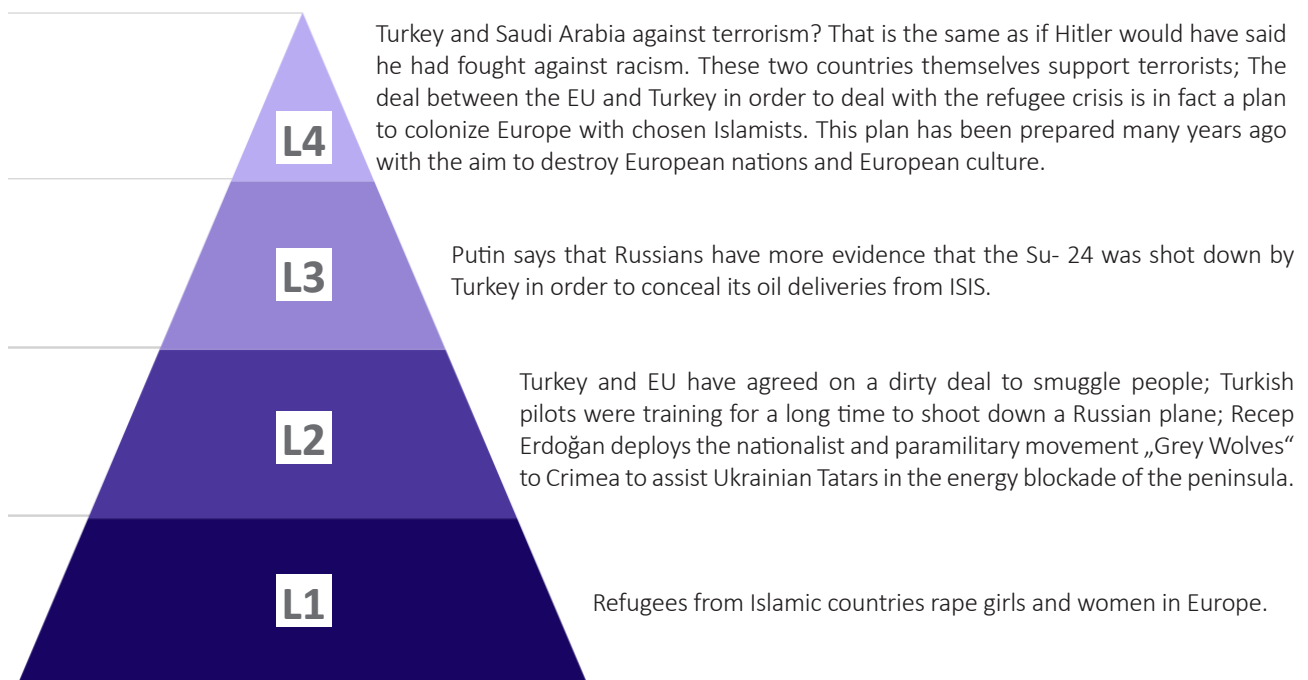


## 5. Anti-Turkish, anti-Muslim world propaganda.

Key narratives against Turkey in the Syrian period have been connected with the shooting down of a Russian plane, which, according to Russian media, never violated Turkish airspace, as well as Erdogan supporting DAESH through buying oil. Turkey was broadly connected with the US, as its ally or “lapdog” for destabilizing the region in order to establish control over Syria, Iran, etc. Russia is shown as a state supporting the legal Syrian government (Assad), while the US and Turkey are shown as provocateurs and sponsors of terrorism. Narratives about the overwhelming and growing danger coming from refugees are used at every level of influence – from the lowest (rapes, murders) up to the highest

(changing the identity of Christian Europe to Muslim).

Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews, 08.12.2015, 22.12.2015, 16.02.2016, 15.03.2016, 22.12.2015, 09.02.2016, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016

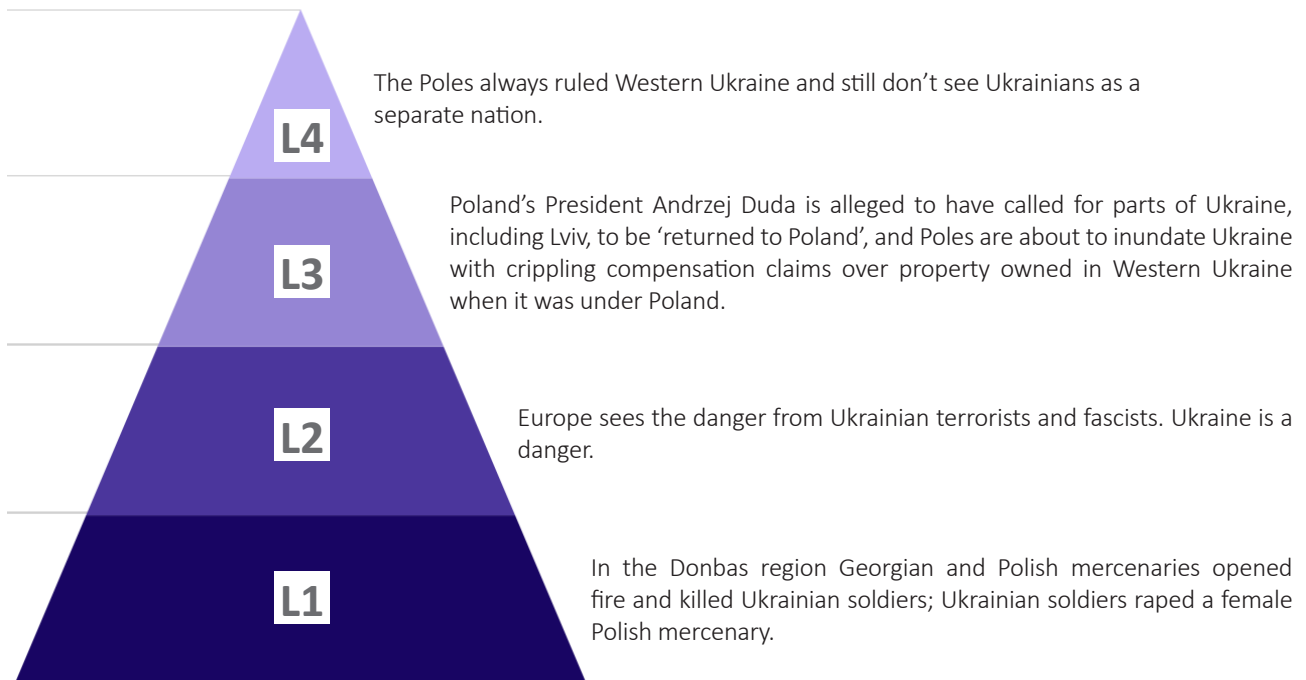


## 6. Information activities that emphasize minor tensions between Poland and Ukraine.

Thematic analysis revealed a new, dangerous and destabilizing trend against Ukraine. Information activities emphasize **minor tensions between Poland and Ukraine** (as well as Ukraine and other neighboring countries), adding a huge amount of fake information and perverted facts to the media pool of both countries and their neighbors. The key idea, partly used previously by the Russian propaganda machine in Czech Republic and Slovakia, is to transform long-gone territorial and

cultural disputes into a new ideological and territorial confrontation. The same scenario, but on a smaller scale, is gradually evolving for Romania and Hungary as these countries also had territorial disagreements in the past.

Source: EU East StratCom Task force, Disinformation Reviews, 08.12.2015, 22.12.2015, 16.02.2016, 15.03.2016, 22.12.2015, 09.02.2016, <http://eeas.europa.eu/euvsdisinfo>, last accessed 21.11.2016



Narratives used by the Russian Federation against Ukraine and countries of the European Union have explicit similarities and logical differences.

**Similarities.** There are many more similarities than differences in (dis-)information activities against Ukraine and countries of the European Union, because the Russian propagandistic machine implements a scaling policy to its activities. For example, the idea of spreading distrust and increasing

tension between bordering countries within the European community is efficiently used in Ukraine on a smaller scale to raise tension among different regions of Ukraine, and later among different groups within those regions. It is very important to note that the disinformation activities "covering" events in the Donbas region are transmitted to Europe almost with the same narrative, more of it, the same messages, tones and words as they are transmitted to the territory of Ukraine

excepting the war zone. It shows once more that Ukrainians have a comparable level of understanding of the so called hybrid-war in Donbas as Europeans, and are not too picky in consuming disinformation provided directly by mass media controlled by the aggressor. This situation also lays bare the low efficiency of current anti-propaganda governmental efforts. Another similarity in (dis-)information activities is promoting the idea of the Russian Federation as a state which aims to bring peace, stability and real democracy. In Ukraine this policy has some peculiarities, the strongest of which is denying the legal legitimacy of the current Ukrainian government and showing Russia as the biggest ideological, political, economic and historical ally of Ukraine.

**Differences.** As it was stated in the very beginning of this paper, Russian propaganda, its (dis-)information activities, cover a big territory and audience, and at the same time are extremely adaptive and flexible according to specific targeted audience groups, goals of disinformation and period of influence. One idea, one narrative, might be presented differently to different targeted groups, for example, the narrative of tension between Ukraine and contiguous countries that is presented differently to Ukrainians, Polish citizens, Hungarians etc. In the Ukraine aggressive statements of officials in bordering countries are emphasized, while Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic receive intense messages about tension between minorities and Ukrainians in the bordering territories, historical rightfulness of any potential territorial claims and potential escalation of conflicts in the bordering

areas<sup>8</sup>. Another difference lies in the field of the key specific narrative of this study – the Syrian campaign. Europe is mostly presented as the current and potential victim of terrorism and danger coming from DAESH (and countries supporting it, including Ukraine and Turkey). Ukraine, at the same time, even via media messages spread in Ukrainian territory, is depicted as a DAESH accessory, or at the very least as a country not able to cope with the growing number of DAESH assailants on its territory.

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8 <http://www.hidfo.ru/2016/01/celkereszt-ben-karpatalja-kenyszerpalyara-allitjak-magyarorszagot/>  
<http://geopolityka.org/komentarze/waclaw-balcero-wicz-czas-zbudowac-mur>  
<http://sevstory.ru/2016/01/prezident-polshi-ukraina-dolzha-dobrovolno-vernut-polskie-zemli.html>, last accessed 21.11.2016



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Russian propaganda is dangerously large, intense and occurs at different levels of influence and perception. Its scale can be compared to the outreach of such international information agencies as BBC. The dangerous nature of this finding is made even more explicit by the overwhelming disinformation and propagandistic nature of the information broadcasted by Russian media resources.

Information activities during the Syrian period and beyond have been systematized and analyzed according to the Pyramid methodology. The strongest impact is from (dis-)information activities at the first, ground level. At the same time the propaganda machine is constructed in a way which enables it to influence even well educated people, with logical and analytical ability and experience. As of the beginning of the Syrian period both the narrative and intensity of the (dis-)information activities against Ukraine changed. Before the period under research Ukraine occupied more than 30% of information flow from some of the analyzed sources (rt.com) and more than 20% from most of the others. With the official beginning of the Syrian campaign these numbers significantly dropped, up to three times compared with the 3 months before the Syrian campaign. It should also be noted that the intensity of news with old narratives

had dropped even more, although it is close to impossible to express it in relative numbers. The Ukrainian narrative, being well-supported earlier, started to be used also as a tool for propaganda supporting Russian activities in Syria. Ukraine started to be shown not only as a threat itself, but as a transfer point for DAESH terrorists. By creating this fake danger at the borders of the Russian Federation and European Union, Russia justified any atrocities committed in Syria, as done for the sake of peace and safety not only of its people, but also of European citizens. The intensity of (dis-)information activities towards Ukraine increased after the termination of Russian Federation activities in Syria, taking a stable position of around 11% (average). Previously this average intensity number was around 22 %, which meant that every fourth (dis-)information entry in the sources under study was about Ukraine, but now only every tenth one is.

Despite preliminary assumptions, Ukraine should still be seen as one of the key targets of Russia's information activities. The quantitative intensity of (dis-)information activities against Ukraine has decreased, but quality and diversity of the propaganda narratives have increased accordingly. Thus, Ukraine remains and, in the foreseeable future, will remain among the main targets of Russian propaganda.

The study revealed that the refugee crisis is not an independent narrative, but one of the key themes used by Russian Federation to increase tension between different countries within Europe and to create and strengthen negative attitudes towards the USA and countries of the Muslim world. The United States of America, along with countries forming the Muslim world, especially Turkey, accompanied Ukraine in the role of the major headliners in the Russian propaganda of the period under research. Such (dis-)information policy creates a new paradigm where Russia is the new European ally, peacemaker and defender of democracy, unlike the USA, occupies the place of a global force of evil, contributing to terrorism worldwide.

Current research shows that decreased intensity of the (dis-)information activities against Ukraine is not a result of Russia failing to realize its goals in Ukraine. The decrease in intensity is almost the same for every analyzed source, which would not be possible if free media forces were at work. Such similarities in the (dis-)information intensity highlight the controlled and systemic character of the (dis-)information activities, and serve as an explicit indicator of the lack of free speech in Russian media. This way it doesn't matter if the stalemate in the separatist territories can or cannot make headlines or if the resilience of the Ukrainian establishment and society has or has not proved to be too difficult to overcome. Russian propaganda is an almost completely independent process that does not rely on external factors either in Ukraine or countries of the European Union. The real situation provides almost no impetus for an increase or decrease in (dis-)information activities concerning a particular narrative.

Thus, the Russian Federation can step up and tone down its (dis-)information activities at will – with its grip on media and resources at its disposal it is in an advantageous position compared to the targets of these activities. This is proven by the consistent character of the narratives across seemingly unconnected media. It is also proven by the intense focus on newly created narratives, such as narratives on the potential conflict between Poland and Ukraine, or Ukraine supporting DAESH, etc. For now, neither Ukraine, nor other countries which have been subjects of this research are able to resist if the Russian Federation decides to step up (dis-)information activities on a particular topic, partly due to the available budget and popularity of and worldwide reach of the resources at its disposal.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Recognize the undeniable fact of Russian disinformation activities' existence and the importance of understanding it. A broad audience should be made aware of the existence and strength of Russian propaganda in different media resources. Political officials and experts should continuously push this issue and cover it on different platforms, not only in Ukraine, but worldwide. These efforts should be systematic and followed by sociological surveys, enabling the development of appropriate ways and means of counterpropaganda. Discussions should include various examples of disinformation and explicit disclaimers.
2. Increase recognition and discussion of different types of disinformation. Discussion should be held on different levels and in different forms, including expert opinions, reviews, shows, comic

shows etc. The broadest possible audience should be addressed: not only the audience which is currently influenced by disinformation activities but also audiences which might be potentially influenced in the nearest future. These activities should aim to form public opinion into an efficient tool that would protect from the effects of propaganda.

3. Base disavowal tools and mechanisms on international standards and frameworks of news broadcasting and receiving. Television remains the key tool for communication. According to the research the most intense disinformation activities from the Russian Federation are launched and sustained through television, supported by radio and internet. The Russian Federation aims to increase its TV presence and strength in as many countries as possible. TV offers the most opportunities to influence broad masses and form public opinion. Consequently, TV requires maximum attention in terms of disavowal measures. It is necessary to analyze the strength and intensity of Russian TV reach as well as the type of disinformation broadcast. Countermeasures should derive from hard data, and be adequate in terms of the particular information and disinformation activities within each particular country. The adequacy of countermeasures is a subject of separate in-depth research.
4. Countermeasures should be developed according to the defined levels of (dis-) information activities. For example, the first and the second levels are mostly transmitted and should be answered through TV, radio and internet, while the

third and the fourth levels should be also addressed through strategic measures like publishing history books, organizing specific educational camps, online-courses, etc.

5. It is necessary to define the target audience of Russian (dis-)information activities in every country of the research interest. This definition depends on the quantity of transmitting channels and types of communication tools. In every country the intensity and the diversity of the Russian signal is different and identifying target audiences requires specific market research.