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**The Pro-Russian Propaganda Machine in Bulgaria,
and the Russian Style Representations of North
Macedonia**

Abstract: The article is based on the large-scale collective research on the topic "Anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria", within which an analysis of the national populist and (pro) Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian online media for 2013-2022 was made.

This article sets out two main tasks:

- 1) To outline the global Russian narratives that circulated in the Bulgarian media space online from 2013 to 2022, as well as to outline the means and ways of their dissemination in 2022 - the year of the full-scale war against Ukraine. Part 1 is dedicated to answering these questions.
- 2) To show how the Russian propaganda package presents the fate of small countries in the global world: how it tries to tempt them to be "sovereign," while, at the same time, not recognizing their capacity to achieve sovereignty. It also shows how Bulgarian speakers denigrate North Macedonia in the same way that Russian propaganda denigrates Ukraine. This is explored in Part 2.

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Introduction

The Bulgarian public was among the first targets and, alas, victims of the Kremlin's anti-democratic propaganda. The full-scale Russian war against Ukraine started on February

24, 2022, but its preparation in Bulgarian media can be traced back to 2013, with its narratives poisoning society's capacity for rational argumentation and ultimately targeting any forms of solidarity. This process is also outlined in "Challenging Online Propaganda and Disinformation in the 21st Century"¹ and especially after the annexation of Crimea for other countries². Some authors claim that there is an intensification of the Russian political warfare against the West (including propaganda) after the onset of the war in Ukraine³. Although Bulgaria does not have a significant Russian minority group, in the country institutional measures to curb propaganda are weak⁴ and it is expected to flourish and have influence on public opinion.

This article sets out two main tasks:

1. To outline the global Russian narratives that circulated in the Bulgarian media space online from 2013 to 2022, as well as to outline the means and ways of their dissemination in 2022 - the year of the full-scale war against Ukraine. Part 1 is dedicated to answering these questions.
2. To show how the Russian propaganda package presents the fate of small countries in the global world: how it tries to tempt them to be "sovereign," while, at the

¹ Gregor and Mlejnková, *Challenging Online Propaganda and Disinformation in the 21st Century*.

² Pavlíková, Šenkýřová, and Drmola, "Propaganda and Disinformation Go Online"; Polyakova et al., "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses"; "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 2.0"; "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 3.0"; Helmus et al., "Russian Social Media Influence." Pavlíková, Šenkýřová, and Drmola, "Propaganda and Disinformation Go Online"; "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 3.0"; Polyakova et al., "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses"; "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 2.0"; Helmus et al., "Russian Social Media Influence."

³ Mareš and Mlejnková, "Propaganda and Disinformation as a Security Threat."

⁴ Hanzelka and Pavlíková, "Institutional Responses of European Countries"; Ognianova, "European Union Sanctions Against Kremlin Propaganda Outlets [in Bulgarian]."

same time, not recognizing their capacity to achieve sovereignty. It also shows how Bulgarian speakers denigrate North Macedonia in the same way that Russian propaganda denigrates Ukraine. This is explored in Part 2.

Part 1 summarizes the results of two of the large-scale collective studies of the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia.⁵

The second part is a separate study carried out by means of content-analysis of a sample of articles from one of the main hubs of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, Pogled-info. With these empirical descriptive tasks, we aim at shedding light on the mechanisms by which Kremlin propaganda is trying to frame our sense of reality with respect to the war against Ukraine, to the institutions, practices and values of democracy and of political pluralism, to the relation between society, power and sovereignty (withdrawing power from society and bestowing it on an uncontrollable and uncontested center of non-political power).

Part 1. The Pro-Russian Propaganda Machine in Bulgaria

1) General Russian narratives

The Russian propaganda package, which is sold globally with small local adaptations, draws heavily on local grass-

⁵ Vatsov, "BG Logics of Propaganda. Part I.Pdf"; Vatsov, "BG Logics of Propaganda. Part II"; Vatsov et al., "Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. Newst Websites and Print Media: 2013-2016. Quantitative Research. News Websites and Print Media."; Yankimova et al., "Is the Propaganda Machine Running out of Fuel? (Dynamics and Transformation of pro-Russian Propaganda Narratives in Bulgaria)"; Znepolski et al., "Online Media in 2017: Frequency Measurement and Content Analysis (Report)."

roots critiques of the West. Broadly speaking, it combines leftist critiques of neoliberalism and financial capitalism with rightist critiques of cosmopolitanism and cultural liberalism.⁶ A similar mix is also characteristic of other national-populist discourses that have risen in the last decade, of which Russian propaganda attempts to appear as a “flagship.”

Already in the first cited study of 2017⁷, we found that the general package of Russian propaganda is built on a **geopolitical, conspiratorial logic**. In this logic, there are **four main logical positions (roles)**, which are assigned to different subjects:

1. A global hegemon/puppet-master (the collective West, the US, NATO), through **2. its puppets (the Brussels Eurocrats and the venal liberal elites in the individual countries)** is killing the sovereignty of the European peoples, therefore⁸ **3. Europe is dying – it is a victim.** The same villain is surrounding and even conducting a war against Russia, which is also a victim – but Russia alone is justly resisting, it is rising from the ashes and is actually Europe’s savior: **4. Russia is reviving.**

Since it was introduced in Bulgaria as a general propaganda language in 2013, this conspiratorial logic has remained unchanged. However, we have found slight contextual variations in the individual sub-narratives since 2021: as a preparation of the hot phase of the war against Ukraine.

⁶ “Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.”

⁷ Znepolski et al., “Online Media in 2017: Frequency Measurement and Content Analysis (Report).”

⁸ Helmus et al., “Russian Social Media Influence”; MacFarquhar, “A Powerful Russian Weapon.”

Firstly, if ten years ago the role of **global hegemon/puppet-master** was most often assigned to the US/NATO as well as to contextually substituted specific actors (Obama, Merkel, Soros, etc.), now, the metonymic variants are condensed into a single subject: “the collective West.” The EU, which in previous periods was treated as “Washington’s puppet,” has, since the start of the war in Ukraine and the united response against it, become the arch-villain – part of “the collective West.”

Secondly, the (sub)narrative about the **cultural decline of Europe** (“infected with liberalism”), “threatened by a migrant invasion,” etc., has been visibly fading since 2017.

Thirdly, the theme for **Bulgaria’s venal elites**, who are described as domestic “puppets” serving the interests of the villain/hegemon: “Sorosoids,” “grant-spongers,” “genders,” “liberasts,” “paid analysts, politicians, and protesters,” etc., is maintained by inertia, albeit still at high levels. This propaganda tool is often used for settling scores with inconvenient domestic political and economic opponents, it was therefore the first to be widely circulated in Bulgarian media, and until 2017 its frequency of use increased the most. After February 24, the domestic uses of the Russian talking points were silenced – maybe its protagonists were shocked in the very beginning of the war - but in the end of March 2022 they were again on the rise.

Fourthly, the (sub)narrative of **Russia’s rise** has growing most dramatically in the last year (see also Veebel, 2016). Innovations in the content here relate mostly to the depicting of a more detailed image of Russia itself and, above

all, to a militaristic intensification of the propaganda that frames Russia's confrontation with Ukraine and the Western world. In any case, the effort of the propaganda media is aimed at creating the impression that Russia and the Russian army are invariably winning at the front even when the facts indicate otherwise⁹.

We should note that although there are no serious changes in the main narratives, the vocabulary of Russian propaganda was nevertheless consolidated ideologically into a specific **Nazi-imperialist** mix shortly before the war. Instead of the somewhat chaotic attempts to think of the Russian sphere of spiritual and political influence through the lens of "Slavdom," "Orthodox Christianity," "Eurasian civilization," "Soviet internationalism," etc., primacy is now given to the so-called "Russian world" ("russkiy mir"), which has swallowed them up. This has also happened institutionally: instead of various wannabe ideologues (Alexander Dugin, Andrey Fursov, etc.) competing to define what is Russian, on 12 July 2021 the latter was nailed down by the ultimate authority – by Putin himself, in a quasi-scientific article.¹⁰ Arguing for historical, linguistic, ethnic and cultural affinity, Putin insists that the Velikorussians, Belorussians and Malorussians (Ukrainians) are "one people," a "triune people," a "large Russian nation."

⁹ Gerber and Zavisca, "Does Russian Propaganda Work?"

¹⁰ Putin's article at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; translated into Bulgarian: <https://www.zemia-news.bg/index.php/svyat-3/91782-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B8-%D1%83%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5.html>.

Further stating that everything that opposes this nation – including Ukraine, which, "seduced" the West, is trying to break away from it – is "anti-Russia." Accordingly, all the other nationalities and denominations that gravitate around "the triune people" make up the "multi-confessional, multi-national, multi-faceted Russian world." The "Russian world" denotes the empire, which also has a wider periphery, a hinterland that was naturally formed in the force field of the dominant ethnic group which has been practically extended to a Russian race ("the large Russian nation," "the triune people").

Another important thing to note: if there indeed has been a drastic change in the use of Russian propaganda narratives since 2021, it is that **now the Kremlin's official spokespersons – Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, Zakharova, the Russian ambassador to Bulgaria Mitrofanova, etc. – are literally repeating propaganda talking points with their respective propaganda vocabulary.** Before that, Russian officials still spoke in a diplomatically more neutral language, leaving the conduct of propaganda to other media and spokespersons. Now the entire Russian state is a mouthpiece for propaganda clichés. Hence the Bulgarian (and world) media – even the most objective and neutral ones – are compelled to quote them. Thus, Russian propaganda has sharply increased its spread.

2) The Spread of Russian Propaganda Narratives in Bulgarian Online Media (2013 – 2022)

In order to see the spread of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria over a long period, we repeated the measurements we had conducted for the 2013–2017 period, but now for

the next five years. That is to say, we conducted keyword searches (from previously defined semantic nests characteristic to each narrative and sub-narrative) through the SENSIKA automated media monitoring system.¹¹ SENSIKA archives over 8,000 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs¹² and provides direct access to online articles that contain the specified keywords. The aggregated results cover the period from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2022. Through SENSIKA, we searched for the same narratives through the same keywords (plus new words introduced into the vocabulary of anti-democratic national-populist and (pro)Russian propaganda after 2017):

The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master;
The decline of Europe;
Bulgaria's venal elites.

Not all publications identified in the measurement are propaganda – up to 20% of the publications quote Russian speakers (mostly officials) or indirectly reference Russian propaganda, but even these publications, insofar as they quote propaganda speech, are a direct indicator of the spread of Russian propaganda.

As for the fourth narrative, “The Rise of Russia,” since we had divided it into five sub-narratives in 2017 for the sake of clarity, is once again measured through five separate subdivided semantic clusters:

- Russia's increased political and spiritual might – various narratives praising Russia in general;
- Russia's enemies – antagonistic discourses vilifying Russia's enemies;
- The power of Russian weapons – direct praise of the Russian army and armaments;
- The sanctions against Russia – narratives describing Western sanctions as useless and harmful to the countries imposing them;
- Crimea and Ukraine – narratives insisting that Crimea is Russian and that Ukraine is ruled by Nazis.

Table 1: Number of publications, by year, containing the keywords of the different propaganda (sub)narratives. Period: 1 January 2013 – 31 December 2022

Year	Russia's increased political and spiritual might	Russia's enemies	The power of Russian weapons	The sanctions against Russia	Crimea and Ukraine	The decline of Europe	Bulgaria's venal elites	The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master	New keywords only
2013	44	54	22	2	56	109	494	69	-
2014	365	7,387	219	1,141	3,983	359	3,114	999	-
2015	2,448	7,814	929	2,666	5,814	1,141	8,094	2,683	-
2016	1,326	7,511	745	4,005	6,109	1,841	11,394	2,361	-
2017	1,943	6,049	1,076	4,217	3,983	887	16,703	2,778	-

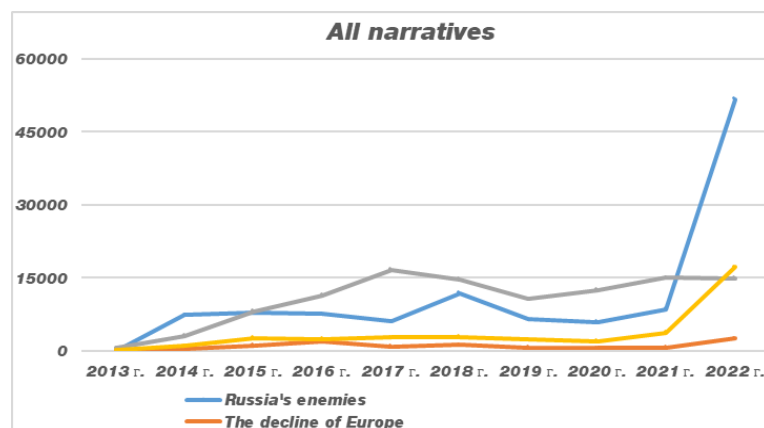
¹¹ <https://sensika.com/>

¹² The number of Bulgarian-language websites is constantly increasing: whereas in 2016 SENSIKA archived approximately 3,000 websites and blogs, by the end of 2022 there were more than 8,000.

2018	1,952	11,859	2,876	3,050	4,816	1,151	14,666	2,824	5,816
2019	1,481	6,424	3,382	1,976	3,782	700	10,649	2,333	5,599
2020	2,241	5,959	2,677	1,006	2,892	534	12,437	1,968	4,206
2021	1,532	8,579	3,511	1,223	4,675	636	15,000	3,731	6,616
2022	8,820	37,446	23,039	7,338	97,977	2,328	14,680	12,134	115,729

Here is a visual representation of the data.

Chart 1: Comparative (number of publications per year, 2013 – 2022)
All narratives



Some conclusions are clear:

In the case of all narratives about Russia and “The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master,” propaganda in 2022 increased significantly compared to the previous year (the increase in the number of publications is from four to 21 times for the narratives about Russia and more than three times for those about the US/NATO). The narrative about “The decline of Europe” started from a very low level and, although it increased almost four times, remains marginal in comparison to the other geopolitical narratives. Only the narrative about “Bulgaria’s venal elites” has kept its level through inertia and has even declined slightly in 2022. This is important: as the war heated up, this narrative, which is usually used by local actors to also vilify local political and economic opponents, and which was the leading narrative for many years, is now giving way to geopolitical narratives; i.e., since the start of the hot war, local uses of the Russian propaganda package have been giving way to direct Russian propaganda.

3. The Spread of Russian Propaganda Narratives During the Hot War (1 January – 31 December 2022): New Technological Solutions

The measurements for this part of the study were also conducted with the SENSIKA automated system. The queries in the Bulgarian online space were conducted through a semantic cluster (a list of keywords) characteristic of the Kremlin’s propaganda vocabulary in the period under study. For example:

"anti-Russia" OR "collective West" OR "Russian world" OR "ethnic bioweapon" OR "Ukrainian fascists" OR Banderites OR denazification OR demilitarization etc.

By searching for keywords from this list for the entire year 2022, SENSIKA found **85,397 publications** (from 1,250 sources). They are distributed over time as follows:



Vertical: Number of publications

Horizontal: Time of publication

Russian propaganda 2022

Chart 2 shows the general dynamics of the spread of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria online. Immediately obvious are two major spikes: 1) around the start of the war; and 2) at the end of November.

The year began with propaganda activity at an average of 39 publications per day, which surged sky-high on 22 February when Putin declared the independence of the so called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (1,785 publications for the day), and on 24 February when the

Russians invaded Ukraine (1,262 publications). In May, propaganda activity levelled off at almost 400 publications per day, i.e., ten times more than in the pre-war period. From then on, it gradually began to decline, dropping to an average of 124 publications per day in September. That was until late November, when it surged again: from November 22nd to the end of the year, SENSIKA identified 32,475 publications, i.e., propaganda activity increased over six times more than in the previous month, to an average of 792 publications per day.

This second surge was strategically engineered – it was the product of nearly 400 newly created anonymous, cloned (mushroom) websites which were recycling the same propaganda messages and which SENSIKA detected and began to archive at an accelerated pace from November 22nd onwards. (The spread of propaganda through aggregators is described in "Trolling for Trump: How Russia is trying to destroy our democracy". The authors made the distinction between "gray" (media publications produced by bots) and "black" (social media content which is user generated by trolls, bots, hackers and honeypots). The system of mushroom websites is a hybrid between the two of them.¹³) Presumably in Bulgaria, these websites were created gradually over the previous few months – most likely, by the platform Share4Pay, which invites users to share content from ready-made websites on social media for a fee.¹⁴ That is, a special astroturfing machine has been created, which is subject to a separate analysis. The sharp surge in propaganda from November 2022 onwards is exclusively due to it.

¹³ "Trolling for Trump."

¹⁴ The detected mushroom websites often publish ads of the platform: <http://share4pay.com/>.

Since the activation of the machine of mushroom websites, as the programmers call them, has radically changed the online environment in Bulgaria, the analysis of the content and sources of Russian propaganda is divided into two: 1) the first surge immediately before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine; and 2) the second surge after the activation of the Machine.

4. First Surge Immediately Before and After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2023

It is impossible to analyze the content of tens of thousands of articles. That is why a content analysis of publications on peak days (i.e., days with the highest number of articles) was performed. This method, developed in the previous HSSF study¹⁵, made it possible to see not only which Russian propaganda talking points are/were the most widely circulated, but also which political and social events Russian propaganda immediately responded to.

This content analysis made it possible to see something else, too: **the surge in Russian propaganda after the beginning of the hot phase of the war, described above, is primarily machine-generated.** Startled by the war, a number of pro-Russian populist speakers – Bulgarian politicians and public figures – condemned the aggression and stopped spinning Russian talking points for at least a month, even though they had often done so before (as well as after). At the end of February and in March, only a few dozen “Bulgarian” mouthpieces of the Kremlin remained

active, but they were hyperactive. However, even they were not the main source of content: in the period under study, the main source of content was direct translations from Russian. The statements of Russian officials and Russian and pro-Russian western analysts are/were translated, but mostly only information that presents/presented convenient facts to create an impression of the constant “victory march” of the Russian troops i.e., the narrative of the victories of the Russian army comes to the fore and somewhat obscures the other narratives, which begin to play a secondary justifying role.

Moreover, 65% of the articles identified by SENSICA for this period were reprints done by bots and anonymous websites. That is, a first and already powerful Machine for disseminating Russian propaganda content – albeit much smaller than the Machine of Mushroom Websites that SENSICA would detect in November 2022 – was already in place before the start of the war

4.1 *The First Dissemination Machine*

February 7 was one of the pre-war mini-peaks with exactly 60 publications. Its dominant news story was fake, claiming that Polish mercenaries and Right Sector nationalists had arrived in the Donbas to prepare terrorist acts. In addition to the fact that this fake news, whose source was RIA Novosti, was typical of the anticipatory propaganda legitimization of the future war, its tracking also exposed one of the Russian propaganda dissemination machines. It works like this: Bulgarian BLITZ News Agency published the article, and eight satellites (anonymous websites iden-

¹⁵ Vatsov et al., “Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. News Websites and Print Media: 2013-2016. Quantitative Research. News Websites and Print Media.”

tical in their design, registered at two IP-addresses) republished it within a few hours, without any change and without any reference to a source: the result was nine separate publications with identical content. Three other websites republished it with minor changes. In all likelihood, all of them uploaded it on Facebook, whereby its dissemination increased exponentially. These were the first indicators of the launching of the machine that we detected.

4.2 "Artillery Preparation" of the War (February 15 – February 24 2022)

The massive propaganda preparations for the war lasted exactly ten days. The carpet-bombing began on February 15 with a sudden 163 publications in a day (against an average of 39 per day until then):

Chart 3: Number of publications per day, 13 February – 24 February 2022



Vertical: Number of publications

Horizontal: Time of publication

The narrative logic of the "artillery preparation" of the war is simple and entirely follows the Russian media narrative: "Ukraine is attacking the Donbas and subjecting the Russian population to genocide, so the Russian population must be defended!" However, until the very beginning of hostilities, Russian media and official spokespersons were denying that there would be hostilities.

4.3 Bulgarian Topics by Date

Although the coverage of the war in the identified publications most often reproduces Russian media outlets, there are nevertheless some local Bulgarian topics.

Periodically, there were "factual" reports, coming from Russian sources, about Bulgarian weapons and ammunition found in Ukraine. These reports played a subversive role: they preemptively propagated the message that, although Bulgarian military aid to Ukraine was not publicly announced, it was nevertheless being provided secretly. In fact, Bulgarian companies were not donating but selling weapons to Ukraine all the time, but the systematic messages subverted the possibility of donation.

A systematic provoker who, through various propaganda statements reached peaks of 400–500 publications that quoted her, was the Russian Ambassador to Bulgaria, Eleonora Mitrofanova.

There was also a surge in activity around the release of the sailors from the Bulgarian merchant ship *Tsarevna* (peaks on 14 and 18 April), who Russian propaganda claimed were

held captive by the Ukrainians and released by the Russians when the latter captured Mariupol.

4.4 *Russian Talking Points "in His Own Voice": President Rumen Radev*

Although most pro-Russian Bulgarian politicians and public speakers fell silent at the beginning of the war, some of them eventually ventured to start repeating Russian talking points in their own voice again.

We analyzed only the statements of President Rumen Radev who, because of his institutional position and – for a certain period – high rating, reached peaks of several hundred publications that reported anything he said.

At the beginning of the war, Radev explicitly and categorically condemned the Russian aggression. In regard to the Russian invasion, he said: "This is absolutely unacceptable. In the 21st century in Europe flying strategic bombers, missiles, air and sea landings with strikes on a sovereign state is categorically unacceptable." (February 24). And the next day, February 25, at the high-level meeting in Warsaw, he said: "It is clear that Russia will win this war, but it will have a very difficult time winning the peace. You don't win with aggression!"

In mid-March 2022, however, he introduced and began to systematically use one of the talking points of the Russian narrative, according to which by helping Ukraine by providing weapons and supplies, the West is actually waging war against Russia. As early as March 18 (less than a

month after the invasion) Radev said that if Bulgaria provided military aid to Ukraine, "this would involve Bulgaria in the war." This argument has since been systematically used by Radev to block all attempts by the government and parliament to decide on the provision of military aid to Ukraine. The fulcrum for "involving the state X [Bulgaria in our case, but the name can be arbitrarily replaced as in the quasi-local advertisements of global trading company chains] in the war" is entirely Russian, because only in the Russian propaganda narrative is Russia the victim of Western aggression, to which the "special operation" is a "pre-emptive response" - the aggressor, according to Russian propaganda, is "anti-Russia," i.e., Ukraine is turned into a "proxy" of the West. If this narrative was true, then support for the "aggressor-Ukraine" would actually constitute involvement in war. However, this is not true; and supporting this untruth is in Russia's direct interest: Russia's adversary – the victim-Ukraine - should not be armed.

In the studied period, this talking point swallowed up all of the other important issues on the public agenda: if Bulgaria stops paying Gazprom in rubles, it will also get involved in the war; if Mitrofanova is expelled, the situation will also be exacerbated; and so on. Even on August 2nd, appointing a caretaker government, Radev set as its main task the prevention of "involving Bulgaria in the war." These two topics – about the provision of arms to Ukraine and gas supplies from Gazprom – stabilized and remained the main focal points of the propaganda agenda in Bulgaria.

5.The Machine of 400 Mushroom Websites

5.1 What Does It Look Like?

At the end of November, the SENSIKA analytical system detected and began to archive a large number of websites that publish identical articles and that are almost identical in design:

Mushroom websites – screenshots; imagine four hundred like these two, circulated on social networks!



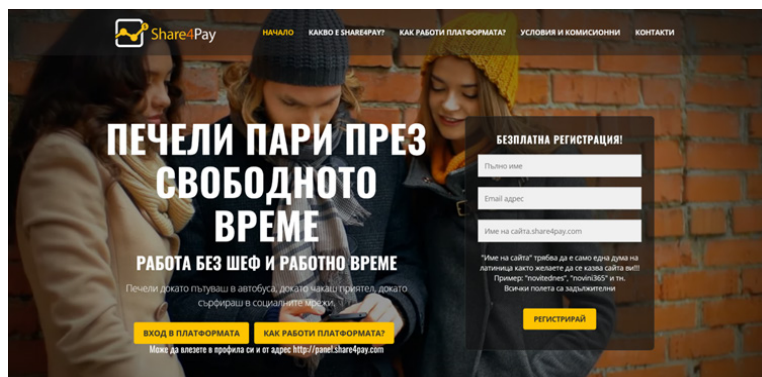
Compared to the other websites, they have several characteristics in common: 1. they are essentially completely anonymous, it is impossible to contact the authors, to trace the sources, to verify anything whatsoever; 2. they have the same domain (zbox7.eu, bgvest.eu, etc.); 3. they have an identical graphical user interface. Besides these three characteristics, there are two distinctive features that distinguish them from one another: first of all, these are the subdomain names: **novini701.dnes24.eu**, **novinar-bg.dnes24.eu**, **news1.dnes24.eu**; the other distinctive feature is the arrangement of the articles pretending to be “news” – this difference is very slight, but present. Programmers and researchers call such websites “mushroom websites”¹⁶ because of their proliferation and propensity to replicate. In Bulgaria, they “sprouted” in late 2022. It cannot be ascertained exactly when they were created – probably within the previous few months – but the SENSIKA team detected and began to archive them on November 22, 2022; by December 10, the system had already covered 370 of them.

Here is a list of the domains detected so far and the corresponding number of subdomains, called clones, of each domain:

zbox7.eu – 25 clones;
 bgvest.eu – 173 clones;
 bg7.eu – 65 clones;
 allbg.eu – 62 clones;
 others – 40 clones in total.

¹⁶ Detailed technical information is provided by Martin Stamenov of SENSIKA in his presentation at an event on “AI Propaganda” held by Ratio BG on 19 January 2023 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJnBoNZSjgo>) [accessed 10 February 2023].

It is likely that the Machine of Mushroom Websites is linked to the platform Share4Pay, which the websites themselves regularly promote. Share4Pay, in turn, offers any user the opportunity to acquire a ready-made website filled with publications, the user's task being to promote the publications and the platform on social media for a fee.



The content that is disseminated and replicated by the Machine of Mushroom Websites is varied, but when it comes to the war in Ukraine it is explicitly pro-Russian. The publications usually refer to unnamed “experts,” politicians or “world media” and are structured in such a way as to seem objective. That is, the machine of mushroom websites also presents non-propaganda content (sport and gossip, as well as sensationalist news can be regularly seen), and it probably has a business model – profiting from advertising (primarily Bulgarian gambling portals). At the same time, geopolitics as part of their media content is distinctly pro-Russian: the business model is combined with a propaganda channel.

5.2 Types of Propaganda Publications on Mushroom Websites

The propaganda publications on mushroom websites covered by our study can be divided into three main types:

- The first type are publications targeted at people who do not read news but rely more on headlines and bolded passages in the text. This is the so-called impression management approach. Users of this type have to be quickly and firmly convinced of Russia's successes and of the failures of Ukraine and the “collective West” at the beginning. Headings are short and self-explanatory: “[Video of the war: DPR fighters destroy AFU stronghold at Vodiani](#)”; in the early days of the machine, there was usually no video in the text of the articles, and the text itself was short, with many errors from the machine translation¹⁷.
- The second type are “morning briefs,” as they call themselves, which pretend to be objective, but are actually meant to build an image of Russia that is at least equal to those of Ukraine and its Western allies. Here the Machine most often cites Russian media – conventional and social.
- The third type are also “morning briefs,” but they are targeted at a different group of readers – those who condemn Russia, but who may still be persuaded to change their position. Most often this is done through references to the Institute for the Study of War (IST) or various Ukrainian services. The general pro-democra-

¹⁷ Half a year later the machine is less clumsy – the translations are better in linguistic quality, there are videos (often by Russian unnamed sources).

cy text of such publications, however, contains short and rhetorically unemphasized pro-Russia messages.

So, the Russian propaganda attempts to intervene in the Bulgarian media environment through artificially generated mechanisms and increases in content, which create an absolutely **alternative reality**. In addition to the fact that these attempts become visible only after an analysis with a specialized tool, they operate beneath the surface of the reflexive perception of the everyday media flow. We cannot measure their real impact, at least not as it is amplified on Facebook and other social networks.

Part 2.

The Small Countries in the Mirror of Russian Propaganda

Having presented the common Russian narratives in the Bulgarian media environment, and having shown the networks and means of their dissemination online, it is now time to shift and narrow the focus of our analysis. In terms of content, so far we have primarily followed the images of Russia and the West as major global actors, as "Great Powers," as well as the presentation of the war against Ukraine as a "preemptive strike," as a "defensive" aggression. Now, on the contrary, we will focus on how small countries are represented by and within the same propaganda package, and we will carry out this analysis in two steps: First, we will see how Russian propaganda promises small countries "sovereignty," which – at the same time and as if by the same token – it does not recognize: it promises them something that they cannot have anyway. Second,

we will then see how various Bulgarian speakers use the Russian propaganda package to deny the sovereignty of neighboring North Macedonia - in the same way that Russian speakers deny the sovereignty of Ukraine.

Here, at first, the analysis will be qualitative, not quantitative - an analysis of the content of selected articles. For the terrain of the analysis, we chose Pogled-info - a Bulgarian news and analytical website and TV channel - which, both through its translations from Russian media and through its "author's" Bulgarian voices, is one of the main hubs of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria.

6) Sovereignty Understood "in Russian"

"Sovereignty" is the main temptation that Russian propaganda offers to local national audiences in small countries - the icing on the cake. "Don't listen to the Masters from Washington and Brussels - be sovereign!" The local national-populists seem to inevitably intercept the sovereigntist rhetoric, and yet, what is sovereignty, understood "in Russian"?

The way of present-day propaganda uses was paved by the concept of "sovereign democracy," first mentioned way back in 2006 in a speech by Vladislav Surkov, Putin's trusted ideologue and adviser. This concept, coined with the hope to be an alternative to Western liberal democracy, dominated the minds of the Kremlin elite for about a decade, but it never managed to become a consistent ideology. Today, even the phrase "sovereign democracy" has fallen out of use - in fact, "democracy" has fallen out of it, but "sovereignty" has remained a supporting pillar in the modern Russian propaganda package.

According to Ivan Krastev, "sovereign democracy" was introduced by Surkov after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine during 2004-2005: "Sovereign democracy is Moscow's answer to the dangerous combination of populist pressure from below and international pressure from above that destroyed Leonid Kuchma's regime."¹⁸ In 2006, the Kremlin felt that the "facade" or "directed democracy" they had been practicing since Yeltsin's time - and that was the Kuchma regime - was still not immune to an outbreak of civil discontent. Civil grievances against the corrupt governments seem to inevitably receive support and legitimization from the international democratic community.

Therefore, the Kremlin elites are trying to rebrand their power through the concept of "sovereignty." They need this term in order to confirm in the first place that the state power is and should be independent of any external influences - in the "Westphalian" sense, no one from outside has the right to interfere in their territory. In the Kremlin, with the word "sovereignty" they specifically state that they should not comply with the international democratic community, with the West. **A sovereign is one who can oppose the USA and the "collective West."** However, they further inverted the meaning of "sovereignty": and went on insisting that **sovereign is that power which is independent not only from external but also from internal oppositions.** Why? Well, because **internal resistances are presented as external:** anyone uncomfortable is presented as a conduit of foreign influence, a puppet of external forces, a foreign agent.

¹⁸ Krastev, "'Sovereign Democracy', Russian-Style."

In the Kremlin, by "sovereignty," they do not understand freedom scattered among citizens, which, after being temporarily delegated by a social contract, becomes state sovereignty. The modern layers in the meaning of the concept have been erased. Sovereign is the state embodied in a single person - Putin, and not the citizens.¹⁹ In fact, the pre-modern concept of indivisible and absolute sovereign power (with added decisionism in the line of Carl Schmitt: as a "sovereign dictatorship") is being rehabilitated, which power does not and should not tolerate opposition: neither from below, from civil protests and insurgences, nor from outside, from international norms and institutions. **Pure imperial power.**

Hence, a main ideological catchphrase of Russian propaganda today is that all velvet and color revolutions, all civil pro-European and pro-democracy protests are "a coup against the legitimate authority, orchestrated by the West." By the way, the word "Maidan" is re-connoted in this way - as a coup led by the West. Thus, any civil activist or journalist who dares to challenge the authority of the sovereign (understood as lordship) is accordingly a "foreign agent," but there is a second important feature of Kremlin usages.

Sovereignty, we said, rests with the state, but **not every state has sovereignty.** Already in 2006, Krastev noticed: "According to the Kremlin, sovereignty is not a right; its meaning is not a seat in the United Nations. For the Krem-

¹⁹ Even the greatest challenges - even Prigogine's rebellion - only confirmed the pure power of the sovereign: "an armed rebellion, although unsuccessful, although it ended with a full pardon of the participants by the sovereign" - <https://pogled.info/svetoven/generalite-i-shoigu-kato-mishena-zapadat-se-opitva-da-zaigrava-s-putin.157908>. Accessed 7 July 2023.

lin, sovereignty is a capacity. It presupposes economic independence, military power and cultural identity."²⁰ Sovereignty *de iure* - as a status of international law - is a fiction, a facade, if it cannot be won *de facto* by force. Small countries - those that practically fail to achieve economic and military self-sufficiency - are internationally incapacitated, they do not achieve "subjectivity." "Subjectivity" becomes an ideological-propaganda synonym for "sovereignty."

Small states in that sense are not even states - they are "quasi-states." They are artificial and temporary entities that are doomed to decay, or, if they do not decay, they remain incapable of activity of their own, rather, doomed to spin by inertia in the gravitational field of some real sovereign. Thus, Ukraine was supposed to break up as an independent state and return to the "Russian world," and the countries of Eastern Europe, according to the Russian security doctrine from 2021, were to leave NATO and, if they did not directly return to the sphere of Russian influence, at a minimum, to declare "neutrality."

Moreover, according to Russian propaganda, small states cannot compensate for their lack of self-sufficiency and strengthen their sovereignty by participating in supranational alliances such as the EU and NATO. This is precisely because by presumption these are not unions between equals, but forms of dictation of another sovereign - the unions are presented as systems of vassalage. At the same time, this other sovereign is worse - he has the claim to be a world hegemon, to dictate everything to everyone.

Here is another ideologue, Alexander Dugin, quoted by Pogled-info:

²⁰ Krastev, "'Sovereign Democracy', Russian-Style."

And most importantly: the current leadership of the White House and the globalist elites of the European Union categorically do not accept even a hint of sovereignty from their vassals or from their opponents. All who are willing to submit to the West are required to completely relinquish sovereignty in favor of a supranational decision-making center. That's the law.²¹

Small countries can therefore strive for sovereignty in only one sense - by giving up liberal-democratic values and withdrawing from the West. Even bigger countries like Turkey have subjectivity i.e. sovereignty, only insofar as they partially oppose the West and balance with Russia - however, if Erdogan had fallen in the May elections and the opposition had come to power, then Turkey would "lose its subjectivity and become another anti-Russian springboard."²²

Small countries, if they imagine that they have sovereignty, look pathetic and ridiculous. This is how pathetic and funny Georgia looked in March this year, during the pro-European protests there:

A small republic, Georgia, decided that it should live like the USA. To have sovereignty, independence in foreign policy, liberal values. Teach us, they said, America, to be like you. This address was a fatal mistake. Georgia is now on the verge of be-

²¹ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/aleksandar-dugin-erdogan-i-suverenitetat-na-turtsiya.153697> Accessed 23 July 23.

²² <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/elena-panina-kak-rusiya-da-razigrat-turskiya-gambit.153886> Accessed 23 July, 2023.

ing thrown into the furnace of war with Russia, led by the West.²³

In fact, small countries, if they imagine that their sovereignty is to defend a liberal-democratic order, inevitably become an “anti-Russian” instrument and, accordingly, are dragged by the West into a war with Russia. Lavrov directly threatens the neighbors of the Russian Federation: “[A]ll the countries located around the Russian Federation must draw conclusions from how dangerous is the course of drawing them into the area of responsibility, into the area of interests of the United States.”²⁴

“Getting involved in the war” is also a favorite cliché of local pro-Russian politicians in Europe (of Radev, Kostadinov, Ninova, etc. in Bulgaria, but not only). Small countries, if they wish to insist on their sovereignty, are displayed by Kremlin propaganda as victims of an illusion who are dragged into war. Thus, for the Kremlin and its propagators, fictitious sovereignty is understood as support for Ukraine and pro-Western orientation and it is equated to war, while real sovereignty is equated to a refusal of support for Ukraine and a withdrawal from democratic values – this is perversely said to be “peace and neutrality.” The only real sovereignty for the little ones is to renounce active sovereignty and seek “neutrality” - to let the “Great Powers” fight each other without taking a stand. After all, the marches for peace and neutrality, organized by pro-Russian organizations throughout Europe, under-

stand sovereignty in exactly this way: as a refusal to actively oppose imperialist aggression, as “neutrality”; and “peace” in this parlance means that Ukraine should surrender immediately.

The pro-Russian “science fiction writer” - and Pogled-info journalist - Simeon Milanov already sees “The death of liberalism as the revival of Westphalian-type sovereignty.”²⁵ In the happy multipolar world of the future, Bulgaria - now “deprived of subjectivity within the dying unipolar world” - will “regain its international subjectivity” through “balances” and “partnerships with international giants and poles such as Russia and China, and why not a future independent [of] Germany and more” (the EU will obviously have collapsed). In this happy world, “Northern Macedonia, which is unviable as a state,” will be forced to bow to Sofia, which will establish “a sort of, let’s say informal protectorate over Skopje.” Russia, which will have unleashed the potential of its sovereignty and in order to protect its interests in the Balkans, will have captured not only the Ukrainian, but also the Romanian Black Sea coast, in order to connect with a land corridor with brotherly Bulgaria and Serbia. Moreover, as a sign of goodwill, Russia will give Bulgaria Northern Dobrudja - in this dream “Bulgaria expands with a territory of 15,500 sq. km, receiving the most fertile lands of the Balkans, a secure geostrategic rear of the Danube Delta, expanding its aquatoria by hundreds of nautical miles, acquiring also oil and gas deposits that are now in the Romanian zone.” In the “Westphalian” multipolar world of Milanov’s future, borders are being redrawn,

²³ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/gruziya-e-tlaskana-kam-voina-s-rusiya.153487>. Accessed 7 July 2023.

²⁴ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/maidanat-v-gruziya-nezavidno-to-badeshhte-na-ukraina-i-novite-zaplahi-osnovnoto-ot-golyamoto-intervyu-sas-sergei-lavrov.153490>. Accessed 7 July 2023.

²⁵ <https://pogled.info/avtorski/Simeon-Milanov/mnogopolyusniyat-svyat-shte-dade-na-balgariya-shansa-da-bade-velika-otnovo.144713>. Accessed 7 July 2023.

regions and populations are being assimilated ethnically and culturally, countries are dying and being born, but Bulgaria never suffers, it only flourishes in its fertile proximity to Russia.

Only one thing fails to be noticed by the Sci-Fi master Mila-nov in his wonderful world of the future. Namely, that the sovereignty in it is not even of the Westphalian type. This is because the Westphalian peace treaties, which ended the religious wars in Europe, were in fact the first modern acts of limiting sovereignty. Through them, the European mon-archs of the 17th century limited their sovereignty only to the territory and population of the state they already ruled - by refusing a sovereign "export of religion" abroad.²⁶ This marks the beginning not only of the modern international order (of mutual respect for territorial sovereignty between states), but also of the political history of modernity more generally. It is because modern political history consists of nothing else but the inventing of new and newer - already internal, democratic - restrictions over the possibility of anyone enjoying absolute sovereignty (restrictions such as the rule of law, the separation of powers, the mandates and practically all the basic values and institutional princi-ples of liberal democracy). The history of modernity, of the emergence of liberal democracy - although this history is certainly not coherent and noncontradictory - is precisely this: it is the history not of the destruction of sovereignty, but of the search for ways to limit it by dispersing it among citizens and between states.

²⁶ This is how the principle "Cuius regio, eius religio" should be read - the sovereign can impose his religion only on the territory of his kingdom.

On the contrary, Russia's current military territorial expan-sion as a practice, as well as sovereignty in the speeches of Russian propagandists as a "theory," do not recognize borders and limitations. Sovereignty is understood as an actual military and economic power that expands as far as it can - until another actual power stops it. It has no moral or legal limitations. Sovereignty understood "in Russian" is pure, i.e. an ever-expanding empire. It leaves no room for free small states, nor for free citizens.

7) Bulgarian Media Representations of North Macedonia Modelled After the Russian Representations of Ukraine

The propaganda war between Bulgaria and North Mace-donia - more precisely between nationalist circles and speakers in both countries - has intensified in recent years. In this war, the Russian propaganda package is being used by both sides as a weapon. Behind the uses of Russian nar-ratives in both countries, direct Russian interference can probably also be detected – the inflaming of nationalisms and the disintegration of the EU and NATO are the real goals of Russian hybrid warfare. However, this is not the task of this analysis. Our task is to see how the Russian propaganda package is adapted to the local national soil and what the local effects of its use are, "regardless of the sponsor," so to speak.

We will now do this unilaterally, only for the Bulgarian me-dia scene: with the particular question of how Bulgarian speakers represent Macedonia through Russian narra-tives. The reverse question – how Macedonians represent Bulgarians through Russian narratives – is also complete-

ly reasonable, but it will remain for another study. Some structural similarities are obvious: just as Russian propaganda today portrays Ukrainians as “Nazis,” Macedonian propaganda portrays Bulgarians as “fascists” - both discursive strategies have their roots in Soviet and Yugoslav propaganda from WWII, although they use different historical realities in their implementation. We documented this process in older HSSF research on Macedonian national-populism in the media²⁷.

One-sidedness in this case is only a matter of methodological limitation of the field. Again, the same goal dictates the refusal to enter into the specific political and historical disputes between the two countries, as well as from the analysis of the specific political events - the requirement to accept Bulgarians in the constitution of Skopje, the closure of Bulgarian cultural clubs there, as well as language and physical manifestations of ethnic hatred - which most often motivate Bulgarian media publications. So, here we will take a formalistic – to a large extent structuralist – approach and analyze only this: Which Russian narratives are readily borrowed by Bulgarian speakers, how and to what extent are they adapted to describe the neighbors from North Macedonia? And what are their main effects?

In our task, the work Ivan Spiridonov, a marginal Bulgarian writer, conspiracy theorist, critic of Satanism and trans-humanism and author of the Kremlin propaganda outlet Pogled-info acts to facilitate the analysis. He has written a short manual for translating Russian propaganda into

Bulgarian nationalist propaganda. A kind of instruction on what the structural analogies (common places, similarities) between Russia and Bulgaria are, on the one hand, and Ukraine and Macedonia, on the other.²⁸ So, let’s discover the five main similarities!

1. All those who do not understand why Russia attacked Ukraine, and Bulgaria’s disputes with Macedonia, are victims of “years-old propaganda, the command post of which is neither in our country, nor in Macedonia or Ukraine”;
2. The task of this “Anglo-Saxon” propaganda is “to create and consolidate a non-existent nation” - Ukrainian and Macedonian respectively;
3. This non-existent - artificial and newly invented - nation must “declare itself to be something more than its neighbors” - according to Hitler, who drew “experience from the Jews, who declared themselves God’s chosen people in ancient times”; the newly invented Ukrainians declare themselves superior to the Russians (the latter are represented as barbarians - “Tatar-Mongols”), and the Macedonians - to the Bulgarians (the latter are called “Turk-Tatars”);
4. Furthermore, this happens when the closest neighbors are declared “the biggest enemies of Ukraine and Macedonia - respectively Russia and Bulgaria.” I.e., Ukraine is turned into “anti-Russia,” while Macedonianism is “anti-Bulgarianism.” The new identity is forged through hatred for the Russians and, accordingly, for the Bulgarians.

²⁷ Vatsov, Donchev, and Alexiev, “The Gun Exploded: The Rise of the Macedonian National-Populism after the Bulgarian Veto.”; Vatsov, Alexiev, and Pavlov, “A Loaded Gun.”

²⁸ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/balkani/deistviyata-na-vlastite-v-rs-makedoniya-pokazvat-che-ukrainski-stsenarii-izobshto-ne-e-izklyuchen-i-na-balkanite.152055> Accessed 22 July 2023.

5. The feeling of ethnic and racial superiority is acquired through “the most unscrupulous theft of the history of the neighbors.”

However, there are also differences, to which the author testifies in the first person, from his travels: “Unlike Ukraine, where there are still people who consider themselves Ukrainians and speak the Ukrainian language, in these lands the “Macedonian nation” and the Macedonian language were invented and imposed only after 1945. Macedonian Bulgarians, at the cost of rivers of blood and tons of ink, were reformatted into a new people - Macedonians.”

There is, of course, a moral: “It also shows us something else - a fratricidal war is easily provoked today. The events in Ukraine should remind us that such a conflict may knock on our door...God forbid. They didn’t decide - they didn’t beat us.” Ivan Spiridonov, of course, is a relatively marginal Bulgarian conspiracy theorist whose writings, despite being published in one of the hubs of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, hardly have any serious public resonance by themselves. However, they are interesting in that they clearly show the “grammar” through which Russian narratives are translated into Bulgarian so that Macedonia is presented “as” Ukraine - as a non-existent nation, as a quasi-state, as an anti-Bulgarian project of the global hegemon.

However, the Russian narratives about Ukraine, translated as Bulgarian narratives about Macedonia are repeated by a number of Bulgarian politicians to varying degrees – more or less literally, more or less exhaustively. To the

highest degree, this discourse is repeated by the politicians from the so-called “patriotic” spectrum: from Volen Siderov, Krasimir Karakachanov and Angel Dzhambazki, then through Slavi Trifonov to the current leader of the third force in the parliament (Vazrazhdane party) - the radical populist and Russophile Kostadin Kostadinov.

Kostadinov: “Ukraine is something like one big Macedonia”; “Countries like Ukraine and Belarus are artificial.” When it comes to the creation of the Macedonian nation after 1944, some Bulgarian communists timidly try to tell Stalin that there is no such thing as a Macedonian self-consciousness. Following this he says: “There is no Belarusian self-awareness in Belarus, but we started working with the people and one appeared.” It’s the same with Ukraine.”; “Bulgaria is an occupied country, it has limited sovereignty. As we were before ‘89’, although now it is dependent on ‘the inexhaustible fantasy of American puppeteers’”²⁹; “Bulgaria and North Macedonia are two countries, but they should be one country - one people, which stretches from the Black Sea to Ohrid”³⁰; “Macedonia is Bulgaria”³¹. Politicians such as Kornelia Ninova (BSP) or President Rumen Radev choose the narratives they quote more carefully. A common feature for them is the use of the conspiratorial plot: on the Macedonian issue, Bulgaria must defend its sovereignty against “external” pressure from Brussels and Washington.³² Moreover, Radev - although actually

²⁹ <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/kostadin-kostadinov-pred-glasove-rusiya-shte-specheli-voynata-nezavisimo-na-kakva-tsena-zashtoto-nyama-drug-polezen-hod> Accessed 22 July 2023.

³⁰ <https://topnovini.bg/novini/889545-kostadinov-se-prevarna-v-persona-non-grata-v-makedoniya>

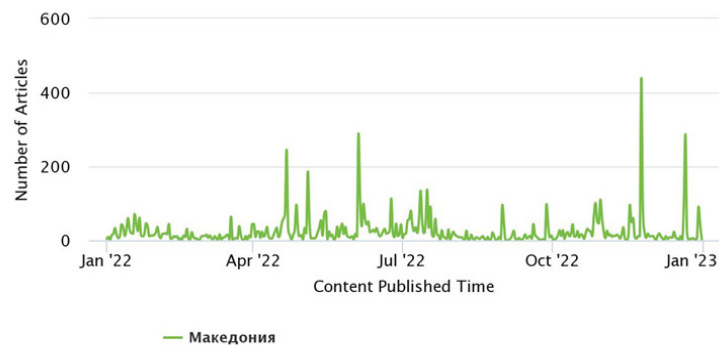
³¹ <https://bgvoice.com/kostadin-kostadinov-makedoniia-e-bulgariiia> Accessed 22 July 2023.

³² <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/sled-izkazvaneto-na-radev-za-rsm-raznopoloch>

provoked in this case by a demonstrative firing of a pistol against the Bulgarian club in Ohrid, i.e., from an anti-Bulgarian manifestation - introduces the thesis: "No one can build their modern identity on an anti-Bulgarian basis."³³

In fact, if there is a propaganda thesis that has been persistently and relatively massively circulated in the Bulgarian media in the last year - including in serious media, not only in propaganda outlets - it is the thesis that Macedonianism increasingly has anti-Bulgarian manifestations. Unfortunately, this is also an effect of actual provocations from the Macedonian side. The automated search for the keyword "anti-Bulgarian" and its derivatives in the SENSIKA system shows that the peak days of the use of this word in the Bulgarian media are also the days after incidents in the neighboring country that can actually be qualified as "anti-Bulgarian": the peaks for 2022 are on June 4 with 289 publications after the burning of the Bulgarian center in Bitola and on November 24 with 439 publications after the shooting at the club in Ohrid.

Graph 4: Number of publications per day containing "anti-Bulgarian" and derivatives (total 8982 publications for the period 01.01 - 31.12.2022)



However, the measurement also shows that the Bulgarian nationalist language, which uses a "translation" of the Russian narratives to present Macedonia and the Macedonians, is not at all that widespread in the Bulgarian media. The frequency of use of such language is tens of times lower than the use of direct (pro)Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian online space. The propaganda vilification of Macedonia is neither a mass practice in the Bulgarian media environment, nor a purposeful and technologically supported strategy.

Although not widespread, this language is harmful in that it portrays the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia as people misled by malicious propaganda from the outside. However, it can be said with a high degree of certainty that the same will apply to the Macedonian nationalist discourses, which present the Bulgarians according to one or another narrative similar to the Russian ones: the Bul-

ni-politicheski-reakcii-v-parlamenta-obzor.html Accessed 22 July 2023.

³³ <https://trafficnews.bg/bulgaria/radev-nikoi-ne-mozhe-da-gradi-svojata-savremenna-282469/> Accessed 22 July 2023.

garians will also be victims of deception and conspiracy. The main function of the Russian propaganda package (but also of national-populism in general) is to show ordinary people - no matter which country they live in – as being not self-sufficient and deluded: incapable of self-determination.

To be sure, the acts of self-determination both, at the individual and group level, are always interwoven into a complex and often ambiguous social and historical fabric. And self-determination, individual and national, is often difficult and associated with traumatic experiences. But what such propaganda narratives do, is that they destroy the possibility of any citizens' self-determination. They – the citizens – are portrayed as deluded and voiceless puppets of foreign powers. Their sovereignty is annihilated in advance.

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