

EU AND NATO STRATEGY TO COUNTER AND PREVENT RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

СТРАТЕГІЯ ЄС ТА НАТО З ПРОТИДІЇ ТА ЗАПОБІГАННЯ ПРОПАГАНДИ РФ

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The main objective of the EU Strategy on Countering Disinformation and the Impact of Information on the International Order is to support media freedom and establish communication with the media.

NATO, keeping pace with the EU, is also trying to work actively to counter disinformation. The Alliance is focusing on preventing disinformation from affecting military operations and preserving the security of its member states.

In addition, NATO is developing a disinformation action plan. It must include increasing resources for research and analysis of disinformation, as well as establishing cooperation with the public. In addition, it is worth mentioning social media, which is still one of the main sources of disinformation. Therefore, developing mechanisms for recognizing fake information and accounts that spread it is a priority for countering propaganda. Detecting disinformation on social media and during information campaigns can not only help raise public awareness, but also ensure a higher level of international security.

A key element in the EU and NATO strategy is, of course, to raise public awareness of the problem of disinformation and propaganda. To this end, many different information campaigns are being conducted to increase media literacy, such as courses and trainings for people working in the media industry to better identify disinformation. Furthermore, increasing access to independent sources of information will provide the public with more truthful news, as there will be no vested interests.

In general, the EU and NATO strategy to counter and prevent Russian propaganda is an important and indispensable part of ensuring international security and stability. The EU and NATO are actively working to develop new initiatives to effectively combat disinformation and propaganda. This is an important part of the strategy to maintain international order and ensure global security in the modern information age.

Key words: EU, disinformation, strategy, cybersecurity, Russia.

Головним завданням Стратегії ЄС з протидії дезінформації та впливу інформації на міжнародний порядок є підтримка медійної свободи та налагодження комунікації зі ЗМІ.

НАТО, не відстаючи від ЄС, також намагається активно працювати над протидією дезінформації. Альянс зосереджує свою увагу на запобіганні впливу дезінформації на військові операції та на збереженні безпеки держав-членів.

До того ж, НАТО розробляє план дій проти дезінформації. Він має обов'язково включати збільшення ресурсів для досліджень та аналізу дезінформації, а також налагодження співпраці з громадськістю. Крім того, варто згадати про соціальні мережі, які досі залишаються одним з головних джерел дезінформації. Через це розробка механізмів для розпізнавання фейкової інформації та акаунтів, які її розповсюджують є пріоритетним для протидії пропаганді. Виявлення дезінформації в соціальних мережах та під час інформаційних кампаній може не лише допомогти підвищити обізнаність громадськості, але й забезпечити вищий рівень міжнародної безпеки.

Ключовим елементом у стратегії ЄС та НАТО, безумовно, є збільшення свідомості громадськості про проблему дезінформації та пропаганди. Для цього проводять безліч різноманітних інформаційних кампаній з метою збільшення медійної грамотності, такі як: курси і тренінги для людей, що працюють у медія-індустрії, щоб ефективніше виявляти дезінформацію. Більше того, збільшення доступу до незалежних джерел інформації надасть громадкості більше правдивих новин, оскільки не буде заікавлених сторін.

Взагалом, стратегія ЄС та НАТО з протидії та запобігання пропаганді РФ є важливою та незамінною деталлю в забезпеченні міжнародної безпеки та стабільності. ЄС та НАТО активно працюють над розробкою нових ініціатив з метою ефективної боротьби з дезінформацією та пропагандою. Це важлива частина стратегії задля підтримки міжнародного порядку та забезпечення глобальної безпеки в сучасну інформаційну епоху.

Ключові слова: ЄС, дезінформація, стратегія, кібербезпека, Росія.

Introduction. The EU and NATO strategy to counter and prevent Russian propaganda is a very important topic in the current political situation. Every day, the amount of disinformation in the world is growing, threatening the international order and the internal stability of individual states. The EU and NATO are committed to countering Russian propaganda for the sake of security that meets international standards.

Analysis of latest research. In recent years, the academic community has been increasingly interested in the strategies of the European Union (EU) and NATO to counter and prevent Russian propaganda. Researchers are actively studying the effectiveness of measures taken by both organizations in response to the challenges posed by Russian information campaigns.

In its official publication “NATO-Russia relations: the facts” [7], NATO not only presents specific facts about relations with Russia, but also lays the groundwork for a better understanding of the context of the conflict between NATO and Russia. This is not a simple list of facts, but an attempt to present a broader picture of the relationship.

The article “EU needs to earmark money to withstand Russia, say Foreign Affairs MEPs” [3] attempts to discuss the need to allocate EU funds to effectively counter Russian aggression. The article emphasizes the real challenges facing the EU and the need to allocate sufficient resources to effectively counter them.

In the article “Countering Russian Disinformation” [8], A. Schwartz and P. Montfort (Center for Strategic and International Studies) conduct an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of the EU and NATO strategies to counter Russian disinformation. The authors not only question the facts, but also analyze their impact and possible consequences.

In doing so, they emphasize the seriousness of the EU-NATO-Russia relationship and emphasize not only the facts, but also a strategic approach to information security.

Highlighting previously unresolved parts of the general problem involves. The purpose of this article is to highlight the current unresolved issues related to the European Union’s (EU) and NATO’s fight against Russian propaganda. One of the most important issues is the need to systematize and classify the threats posed by Russian propaganda. It is currently unclear how to properly systematize these threats in order to respond to them effectively.

Another important issue is the problem of counter-propaganda. Studies do not pay enough attention to the development and implementation of counter-propaganda strategies. It is necessary to find out how to systematically counter Russian disinformation campaigns using Ukraine’s own information tools and effectively reduce their impact.

The impact of Russian propaganda on public opinion in EU and NATO countries should also be

considered. There is a lack of research on the impact of these campaigns on public opinion and attitudes toward important issues. Addressing this issue will help develop more effective strategies for responding to Russian propaganda in the Euro-Atlantic region.

Purpose and objectives. The purpose of this paper was to analyze and evaluate the strategy of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to counteract and prevent propaganda by the Russian Federation. The objectives of the study were several, namely: to consider the main conceptual aspects of the EU and NATO strategies to counter Russian propaganda; to analyze the methods and tools used by the EU and NATO to counter Russian propaganda, including information campaigns, influence programs and cybersecurity measures; to identify the main challenges and threats faced by the EU and NATO in countering Russian propaganda, including the perception of disinformation, manipulation of public opinion and spreading false news; to analyze the successes and shortcomings of the EU and NATO strategies to counter Russian propaganda, assess the effectiveness of the measures taken, and develop recommendations for further improvement of these strategies.

EU and NATO strategy to counter and prevent Russian propaganda. At the level of international organizations, both NATO and the European Union have launched relatively small, low-budget initiatives to combat the problem of disinformation. Chronologically speaking, NATO was the first to do so, with its “NATO-Russia Relations: The Facts” webpage [7]. The strengths of this portal lie in the relative speed with which it was created – in mid-2014 – and its simplicity. It lists 32 of the most common accusations made by Russian officials and media against NATO, and provides NATO’s response in English, French, Russian and Ukrainian.

However, as it primarily addresses the NATO-Russia relationship in a general sense, rather than individual cases of disinformation affecting individual member states, it only challenges a small segment of the overall disinformation spectrum. It is also essentially a passive resource: it is hosted on NATO’s homepage and not regularly promoted to the media and public through other channels. It is managed by the NATO press office, so there is no dedicated staff as such.

The EU StratCom Team, on the other hand, has a small staff. Thus, it is more active and deals with a wider range of disinformation. This group was created within the External Action Service on behalf of the European Council and has three objectives: to explain EU policies, to support journalism and civic engagement, and to expose disinformation [4]. The group fulfills the latter task through two weekly newsletters: “Disinformation Watch on Tuesdays, which discusses disinformation cases submitted by monitors from across the EU, and Disinformation Digest on Fridays,

which identifies key trends. These are distributed to subscribers via email and Twitter.

Launched in September 2015, the initiative has already gained a significant following. However, its scale seems inadequate to the challenge posed by the huge volume of disinformation in the European space. The StratCom team is generally “budget neutral,” which effectively means that all of its staff are paid by their respective governments, not the EU itself. Therefore, they rely on a network of volunteers across Europe to provide them with material, and a gap in volunteers quickly becomes a gap in knowledge.

It is unclear why StratCom has so far allocated so few resources to this issue when the European Council on March 19, 2015 “emphasized the need to challenge Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaigns.” The disinformation reviews and digests are a successful measure; however, providing them with sufficient funding to expand and systematize their work seems to be a belated step. The European Parliament has been slower to take action, although in June 2015, the legislative body approved a resolution calling on the European Commission to “immediately allocate sufficient funding for concrete projects aimed at countering Russian propaganda and disinformation in the EU and beyond” [3].

These measures are generally positive, as different projects and initiatives tend to complement each other rather than contradict each other. It is important that any future projects – both governmental and non-governmental – are designed to be complementary, scalable, affordable, and credible. They can start with minimal staff and funding so that they are not too much of a stretch for potential funders; they must establish governance systems that are robust enough that they cannot credibly be accused of perpetrating disinformation. With these principles in mind, there are a number of initiatives that international institutions could take to strengthen their overall efforts against disinformation. One area in which international coordination is highly desirable is the creation of Russian-language television content to challenge the Kremlin’s current monopoly on information in the Russian-speaking space. This is because the issue of Russian-language information is common to a number of EU countries, and the cost of creating TV content that can compete with high-budget Russian productions will run into millions of euros. However, it should be remembered that Europe is home to thousands of television companies and millions of Russian-speaking people. Thus, there is no need to create a separate broadcasting facility from scratch; rather, governments and international organizations should encourage existing companies to create Russian-language content. Therefore, the EU should consider creating a trust fund for Russian-language television content. The trust fund would pool contributions from interested countries and provide funding to producers

of Russian-language content through a tender process. EU institutions may also offer funding from the EU budget. Taken together, the various national funding streams will be able to create more content than any national contribution alone.

Integration into NATO and the EU has been a necessary shield for the Baltic states. This membership has allowed Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to develop as free and democratic countries that respect individual rights and value Western political principles. Given the history of almost five decades of Soviet occupation, the Baltic states have made impressive progress, successfully transforming into liberal democracies of the European model and integrating into the international arena. On the one hand, this has ensured the military security of the Baltics. But on the other hand, it has made them attractive targets for Russia [2].

Disinformation is a tool that is widely used by a number of states to sow discord, undermine faith in governing institutions, incite fear, and ultimately achieve certain political goals. Over the past few years, Russia, its government agencies, and associated groups have used a combination of social media and disinformation strategies to increase Russian influence, largely by weakening its enemies. This use of disinformation to weaken the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), cast doubt on the European Union, and undermine countries around the world has prompted countries to develop countermeasures. Russian foreign policy has long been aimed at undermining NATO and the European Union; the militarization of disinformation has simply given the Kremlin a new way to achieve its old goals [8].

Russia seeks to achieve its strategic goals in the Baltics through influence operations rather than conventional means. Recognizing the resistance to deepening ties with Russia in the Baltic states, Russia has diversified its messages beyond pro-Russian content. Russia’s strategy is to convince the population that their countries’ current alliance with the West, embrace of democracy, and membership in NATO and the EU are somehow harmful, humiliating, or dangerous. For this purpose, Russia actively uses Russian and local traditional media, social media and the Internet [1].

It should be noted that Russia favors hybrid or threshold warfare: a combination of disinformation and political, economic, and military actions aimed at immobilizing or weakening opponents without provoking an adequate response. Russian propaganda is well-funded and entrenched in the Baltic and European media spaces. The Kremlin develops different realities to manipulate its audience and creates narratives that are beneficial for it and at the same time destructive for its opponents [1].

At the same time, the EU’s European Neighborhood Policy seeks to create a “ring of friends” around the Union and encourages these countries to modern-

ize their political, economic and social policies in a way that harmonizes with the EU model and standards. To this end, the EU uses soft power to strengthen civil society, support independent media, and promote the process of democratic transformation. Therefore, this policy directly contradicts the interests of the Russian leadership and post-Soviet partner states that are at the helm of authoritarian systems [1].

Russia has masterfully honed its propaganda tools, and today it uses numerous and diverse sources of Russian propaganda, so NATO should strongly encourage Allies to limit the spread of disinformation and combat misleading messages. Most importantly, the Alliance and the European Union should step up efforts to reach as many audiences as possible with clear and accurate narratives in support of the Baltic states' goals. Organizations should use all possible means to suppress Russian propaganda and minimize its influence. Citizens should receive truthful and reliable information, and this information should be provided through trusted channels to reveal to the target audience Russia's true plans, as well as threats to the "near abroad" and the international order in general [2].

However, it should be recognized that the West has several advantages: time, allies, transparency. Transparency is a potentially devastating tool against authoritarian regimes because when corruption is exposed, it delegitimizes authoritarian regimes. The strength of the West is in its citizens, in their unity and solidarity. The fear and panic caused by Russia's actions are justified. The West should not be misled by the covert nature of these actions. If the progress and success achieved by the Baltic states is undermined, the credibility of NATO as a security organization, in the broadest sense of the word, will also be significantly undermined [1].

Only recently, Russia has been accused of disinformation operations, with Russian media outlets spreading information linking the Covid-19 pandemic to EU and NATO actions. In addition, the Kremlin's tactics are becoming increasingly sophisticated, combining established practices (dissemination through IRA, RT, Sputnik, and the use of bots to spread narratives) with aggressive hacking, whereby false or misleading stories are published through legitimate accounts [8].

Recognizing this threat, in 2018, the European Council approved a plan to counter Russian cyber threats, which included the creation of a rapid warning system. It serves as a kind of clearinghouse for member states to share information and concerns about suspected disinformation campaigns and discuss "best practices" for responding to these malicious campaigns. RAS (The Rapid Alert System) then shares authoritative accounts in response to false or misleading messages that may be spread by EU member states, civil society groups, and social media companies [8].

NATO has also been targeted by Russian disinformation as the Kremlin seeks to sow discord and incite hostility towards the organization amid the Covid-19 pandemic. False stories have been circulated about NATO's intention to withdraw from Lithuania, and Canadian troops allegedly exposing Latvia to the virus. These stories are aimed at undermining NATO's legitimacy and support, as well as weakening individual member states [8].

Also, a few days after the European Union banned RT for its role in spreading propaganda about the war in Ukraine, Russian media was back in the game. To reach Germans, a new site quickly appeared, which was a copy of the sanctioned RT Deutsch. In Spain, several sites that were copies of RT en Español attracted millions of Spanish-speaking readers. According to a study by the think tank Institute for Strategic Dialogue, more than a hundred websites have appeared to distribute French and English-language RT content. This strategy has allowed Russia's prominent state media outlet to reach potentially millions of people in the 27-nation bloc in direct violation of EU sanctions. This raises questions about how effective Brussels' suppression of Kremlin disinformation has been, allowing RT to easily circumvent a ban that was supposed to stifle Moscow's ability to sow distrust and dissent over the war in Eastern Europe. And yet, throughout the time RT was officially banned in Europe, the state-backed media organization remained one step ahead of EU sanctions, defying its approach by promoting its newly created websites through official social media accounts [5].

The experts identified 12 sites, mostly in German or Spanish, that were exact copies of RT Deutsch or RT en Español, and whose IP addresses and Google analytics identifiers – technical tools used to manage websites – were directly linked to the Kremlin's media organization. Another five sites also mirrored RT's sanctioned sites, but were not hosted on servers linked to Moscow. Another 112 news aggregation sites published RT content along with content from Western media organizations, presumably to generate money from online advertising. All of these sites were accessible from the EU as of July 19. While many of these sites remain relatively obscure on their own, they have gained significant visibility through promotion on social media or by appearing in Google search results [5].

After POLITICO contacted Google about some of RT's newly created sites, the search giant removed the sites from its search results. The company added that it had taken steps to reduce the reach of Kremlin-linked media outlets, including removing them from search recommendations and preventing them from earning money through online advertising. However, in the weeks after Europe imposed sanctions and social media either downplayed Russian disinformation or flagged accounts and content as being asso-

ciated with the Vladimir Putin regime, RT managed to direct people to its newly created sites through its official social media accounts [5].

For example, on Twitter, the RT en Español account, which has millions of followers, encouraged people to visit its new Spanish-language sites that circumvent EU sanctions. In total, posts with links to these affiliated sites in the four major European languages were shared more than 450,000 times by 50,000 individual Twitter users between February and June, according to CrowdTangle, a social media analytics company owned by Meta. “In fact, the main amplifiers of the connections were RT accounts, both on Facebook and Twitter,” said Kata Balint, an analyst at the think tank and co-author of the report. In response, Twitter said that it had stopped distributing any tweets related to Russian state media on its platform, even those that official RT accounts had promoted on the social network. Meta also reported that it had downgraded RT content on its global platform, but declined to comment further “so that people do not bypass our systems” [5].

The EU’s exceptional measure is far-reaching and covers any means of transmission or distribution, such as cable, satellite, Internet Protocol television, internet service providers, video-sharing platforms and programs that carry content from RT and Sputnik. Licenses, permits and distribution agreements have also been suspended. The sanctions apply to Sputnik as well as five legal entities of RT, formerly known as Russia Today: RT English, RT UK, RT DE for German-language reports, RT France and RT en Español for Spanish-language reports [5].

“We are convinced that we have a legal framework and we do expect these measures to be challenged. We have independent courts that will review our measures if there is an application, and we will defend them in court,” an EU official told reporters before the sanctions were published. “[The measures] are also time-limited because they have to remain in place until the aggression in Ukraine stops and until Russia and its media stop carrying out propaganda against the Union and the Member States,” the EU official added [5].

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced plans to ban RT and Sputnik as part of a broader package of sanctions in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In the West, RT has been called a tool of Moscow’s propaganda machine, which aims to manipulate public opinion by spreading pro-Russian rhetoric and justify its invasion, while the EU’s actions are part of a large-scale information war that is unfolding both online and offline. After the ban plans were announced, Google YouTube and News Search, Facebook’s parent company Meta, and TikTok cut access to both outlets (Russia officially asked the three companies to change course). Apple, Microsoft and Google removed them from their mobile app

stores. The Telegram channel RT France was also deactivated [5].

A key part of this Russian effort is a sophisticated propaganda machine that analysts and Western officials say is trying to sow doubt in Western “mainstream media” and even seeks to undermine the very idea of objective truth. Modern technologies have no borders, so misleading stories are easily accessible to EU citizens, including Russian-speaking citizens in the Baltic states, which were once ruled as Soviet satellites from Moscow. “What is obvious is that we don’t have the same means as the Russians,” said an EU diplomatic source, but the EU’s main goal is to monitor Russian news outlets more closely in order to respond as quickly as possible. “It’s not about counter-propaganda, our goal is to set out certain facts and truths more clearly,” said one EU official [1].

For NATO and Europe, this will be a marathon, not a sprint. It is no exaggeration to say that Europe’s history is at a turning point – but, as in the past, crises present an opportunity for the EU to renew itself and reorient itself. Everyone sees the dividends of European integration – a territory of peace, freedom and democracy like no other on earth. But, as Russia’s war of aggression has made crystal clear, this state of affairs is not a given; it is time for the EU to take care of its values and principles.

Europeans are vulnerable to Russian influence because of their open societies, and Russia’s efforts may contribute to increased insecurity in increasingly fragile and fragmented Western societies. However, the EU can protect itself by, among other things, strengthening its own soft power and improving governance in Europe, firmly defending sanctions, improving its knowledge base on Russia, and taking steps to improve pluralism in the Russian-language media space. The European Union should also make a serious offer to its eastern neighbors, including the prospect of EU membership. Moscow is doing everything it can to destabilize and weaken states in order to build a relationship of dependence.

For too long, the EU and NATO have been unproductive in their analysis of events in Russia and other post-Soviet states. In the long term, they must make reform efforts to ensure consolidation in areas where Russian propaganda currently has a soft target. There is always a debate about how firmly and publicly to respond to Russian propaganda operations, especially given Moscow’s propensity for retaliation. In the current environment, European governments should not be held hostage to this risk; on the contrary, they should respond firmly and publicly to all such interventions, regardless of the immediate practical and rhetorical consequences.

First, it should allocate significant funding to the East StratCom team and create a parallel North StratCom team to analyze disinformation from states and non-state actors in the Baltic states. This is a decision

that could be made and implemented quickly, and would contribute to the flow of knowledge on disinformation issues. The credibility of the teams could be ensured by instructing them to focus on incoming disinformation rather than communicating EU policy.

Second, both the EU and NATO should establish member state disinformation working groups to share knowledge, identify common themes, and exchange good practices; if EU and NATO groups could meet jointly, this would further strengthen efforts.

Third, both the EU and NATO should consider establishing trust funds to support non-governmental initiatives that expose disinformation. They should operate under an “arm’s length” policy that requires financial transparency from organizations applying for funding, but leaves editorial decisions in their hands. Unlike the proposed trust fund for content creation, they can be relatively small and focus on filling gaps in the overall knowledge structure.

The regulatory framework should be clearly independent, and any attempt to strengthen the legal framework should set clear and detailed standards, and be evidence-based and proportionate. Standards should be defined and clearly communicated to broadcasters: for example, the fifth section of Ofcom’s Broadcasting Code, which deals with accuracy and due impartiality, contains five pages of rules and definitions, and another sixteen pages of guidance for broadcasters on how to interpret them [6]. The basis for action should be specific incidents and broadcasts, and the level of detail of evidence should go down to the exact form of words or images that are believed to violate broadcasting standards. Sanctions should be proportionate and gradual. A complete ban should be a last resort. A final area in which governments can play a role is in the provision of open-source imagery, especially from satellites.

Finally, the next step for NGOs should be to focus on expanding and consolidating their existing projects and offering education to officials, the public, and the media on how disinformation is produced. Current projects and other initiatives under discussion are developing methods to identify and expose disinformation. However, they are geographically limited and there is an urgent need to expand their coverage to the Baltic States. At the same time, the various groups involved should consider establishing a formal network through which they can exchange ideas and strengthen each other’s work. In each country, they should offer special briefings for politicians and media who are showing a growing interest. These briefings should focus on explaining how disinformation works and how widespread the problem is; they should draw on existing research and case studies and point out where there are gaps in knowledge.

Conclusion. Nevertheless, the Russians do not pose a long-term geopolitical challenge to the West, and European governments should think ahead to re-establishing relations with Russia in the inevitable post-Putin era. Ultimately, Russia is a declining middle-ranked power, and for now it seems to be able to exert disproportionate influence through the concentration of limited resources and political control, as well as a willingness to violate the rules of international behavior. However, this will not last, and the mismanagement of its propaganda is a metaphor for its overall inability to cope with the practical limitations of its position in the long run. Europe needs to find the right balance between protecting itself from Russian propaganda, deterring the Kremlin’s adventurism, and alienating the Russian population.

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