

THE IMPACT OF RUSSIA’S DISINFORMATION ON THE POSITION OF “NEUTRAL STATES” REGARDING THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

‘Real, total war has become information war’. (M. McLuhan)

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Introduction

For a long time, Russia’s international information activities have been aimed at undermining democratic values and deepening existing tensions and confrontations. In exercising its information influence, Russia relies on a multi-level propaganda system formed by state media broadcasting abroad, foreign media financially dependent on Russian corporations, or Moscow-affiliated organizations, experts, and politicians.

The Kremlin’s information operations are a separate element of the global confrontation. One critical dimension of the confrontation between Russia and the West is the competition for the favor of “neutral states”—those who avoid taking a clear position on the Russian-Ukrainian war. In order to change the balance of support for Ukraine in the world, Russia is actively using propaganda narratives adapted to current circumstances and local peculiarities. The Kremlin engages in information warfare in countries that declare their neutrality to fuel the myth of a “world majority” that allegedly supports Russia in its fight against the West.

For Ukraine, the commitment of “neutral states” is vital, especially with respect to the international investigation of war crimes committed by Russia and the limitation of Russia’s ability to offset economic losses due to Western sanctions by expanding foreign cooperation in trade, energy, and technology.

The concept of information influence

In Western scholarship, the concept of “information influence” is defined depending on the methods and subject of influence through a multiple conceptual and categorical apparatus: “information warfare”, “information operation”, “information and psychological operation”, “information terrorism”, etc. The most common methods of information influence include propaganda, disinformation, rumors, provocations, and psychological pressure.

In order to avoid terminological confusion, the authors of this study consider information influence as foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). According to the report of the Strategic Communications Working Group of the European Union External Action Service (EEAS), "Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) describes a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner, by state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory"¹. Thus, according to the EEAS report, the main tool of Russia's information influence is the spread of disinformation.

Thus, in the study, the authors analyze Russia's information influence on the position of "neutral countries" on the issue of war through disinformation and other information influences.

"Neutral" countries as springboards for anti-Ukrainian propaganda of the Russian Federation

This category of "neutral" countries includes states from different regions of the world. First, these are countries that have a constitutionally defined "neutral" status, such as the Republic of Moldova. Secondly, countries that do not have a constitutionally defined neutral status, but are recognized as such through other international treaties or foreign policy declarations, such as Austria, Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland. Third, countries that refrain from condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine: China, India, South Africa and others. Thus, the "neutrality" of countries can be defined as "constitutional" at the level of international obligations, as well as "hidden" when the leaders of certain countries avoid assessments of international events.

It is worth noting the dynamics of internal political processes. For example, Finland and Sweden have decided to join NATO, and Austria and Moldova have faced internal provocations and manipulations around the topic of "neutrality" to block possible assistance to Ukraine and take a stronger stance against Russian aggression. A number of countries in the so-called Global South, which can be classified as "neutral" according to this study, are involved in advocating for conditions for ending the conflict that are favorable to Moscow.

Building relations with "neutral" countries plays a special role in Russian information pressure and propaganda. As a result, some formally "neutral" countries have actually turned into springboards for spreading information influence and anti-Ukrainian propaganda². The countries of the Global South are of particular interest to the Kremlin, as this geographical

¹ 1 st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats, URL: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/uploads/2023/02/EEAS-ThreatReport-February2023-02.pdf>

² Tkach V. F. Special propaganda as an information component of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine (in Ukrainian) / V. F. Tkach // Strategic priorities. Series: : Politics. - 2016. - № 1. - p. 99-109. - Access mode: http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/sppol_2016_1_12.

area has the largest number of countries willing to develop trade and economic ties with Russia despite their declarative support for Ukraine and the risk of facing secondary Western sanctions, and local politicians and media sometimes spread openly pro-Russian messages.

The Kremlin's tools of information influence

The pro-Russian disinformation ecosystem is formed by: 1) mass media, which are openly or covertly supported by the Kremlin; 2) political forces and individual politicians, NGOs and associations of “compatriots” abroad; 3) educational and research institutions; 4) state corporations and companies implementing business projects abroad; 5) the Russian Orthodox Church.

These categories of actors in this study can be defined as conductors of Russia's information influence abroad, aimed at promoting Russian interests and shaping the information agenda in other countries.

The Kremlin's international media: a change of vector. One of the Kremlin's main tools is the media, which broadcasts Russian propaganda to international audiences. Russia Today (RT) remains the undisputed leader by volume of funding. Thus, in 2023, one third of all funds from the Russian federal budget allocated to the Russian propaganda machine will be used to finance RT—28.5 billion out of 88.5 billion rubles³.

As a result of the loss of the main tools of media presence in the Western information space after the imposition of sanctions against RT and Sputnik, the Kremlin has focused its efforts on the Spanish-language direction. The main target audiences of RT's Spanish-language branches are Internet users in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba⁴. Through the retransmission of media from these countries in the information space of neighboring countries, Russian propaganda reaches audiences in North and South America and the Caribbean. As the media of the Global South continue to obtain information from Russian news resources, societies in these countries often form assessments of the Russian-Ukrainian war through the prism of the Kremlin's narratives. This problem became especially acute in the spring of 2022, when, amid a surge in interest in the war, media in the Global South began to turn to Russian sources of information to cover events.

Foreign missions of the Russian Federation that exercise information influence. In addition to news agencies, an important tool of Russia's information influence on foreign audiences is institutional structures located abroad: diplomatic missions, foundations,

³ Federal Law of 06.12.2021 No. 390-FL "On the Federal Budget for 2022 and for the planning period of 2023 and 2024" (in Russian), URL: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202112070016>

⁴ Russia aims Ukraine disinformation at Spanish speakers, URL: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-media-social-media-facebook-144598113c8d911f3ea5dc7c8c4aa09d>

associations, etc. According to experts from the Australian think tank Lowy Institute, as of 2021, Russia had one of the most developed networks of foreign missions in the world (6th place among 61 countries included in the ranking)⁵.

The key operator of the information component of Russia's foreign policy is the federal agency Rossotrudnichestvo, which is subordinate to the Russian Foreign Ministry. In July last year, the agency was subject to the seventh package of EU sanctions. This decision was justified in the motivation part as follows: "Rossotrudnichestvo is the main state agency that projects the Kremlin's soft power and hybrid influence, including the promotion of the so-called 'Russian World' concept. For many years, it has acted as an umbrella organization for a network of Russian compatriots and agents of influence and has funded various public diplomacy and propaganda projects, consolidating the activities of pro-Russian actors and spreading Kremlin narratives, including historical revisionism"⁶. It is worth noting that since the sanctions have limited the possibility of continuing the work of Rossotrudnichestvo in the EU, the agency is "relocating" resources to Central Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The so-called Russian centers of science and culture (Russian Houses and Information and Cultural Centers) operate in almost 80 countries. These subdivisions of the Russian propaganda network operate as embassy departments, thus enjoying the benefits of diplomatic immunity, primarily in the context of security. In 2022 alone, Russian Houses were opened in Sudan, Algeria, Mali, and Egypt, with plans for other countries in Africa, the Middle East, and South America⁷.

The non-governmental track also includes a number of state-established foundations, such as the Russian World, the Gorchakov Foundation for Support of Public Diplomacy, the Foundation for Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Abroad, the Presidential Grants Fund (with a separate public diplomacy program), and the Presidential Foundation for Cultural Initiatives. The Russian Orthodox Church is also involved in information operations through a large number of foreign parishes, public diplomacy institutions (e.g., the Assembly of the Peoples of Eurasia), associations of friendship societies, think tanks, humanitarian organizations, etc.⁸

Science and the "peaceful atom" in the service of propaganda. The education sector is also seen as a means of expanding the geography of information outreach by training political, economic, and scientific elites in developing countries. As of 2022, Russia was ranked 6th in

⁵ Global Diplomacy Index 2021 Country Ranking, URL: <https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/#>

⁶ Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/1270 of 21 July 2022 implementing Regulation (EU) No 269/2014 concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg_impl/2022/1270/oj

⁷ Rossotrudnichestvo to open new centers in Africa (in Russian), URL: <https://news.ru/africa/rossotrudnichestvo-otkroet-novye-centry-v-afrike/>

⁸ Soft power institutions of the Russian Federation abroad: a new perspective (in Russian), URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/instituty-myagkoy-sily-rossiyskoy-federatsii-za-rubezhom-novaya-perspektiva/?sphrase_id=102428729

the world in terms of the number of foreign students, with a total of about 350 thousand people. The “leaders” in terms of the number of students are mainly Central Asian countries, China, India, and Egypt⁹. At the same time, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation is developing scientific diplomacy, in particular, forming a network of science attachés at embassies. Russian language centers operate on the basis of Russian universities, in particular in Greece, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Paraguay.

The activities of the state holding company Rosatom can also be interpreted as a covert tool of Russian propaganda. The company was not subject to sanctions because of the dependence on its services of a number of European countries and the United States. As of today, Rosatom is building and maintaining nuclear power plants in Bangladesh, Belarus, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Hungary, Türkiye, and Vietnam. As a result, the Kremlin continues to strengthen its presence abroad, creating conditions for strategic dependence on services and the Russian technological base in the field of nuclear energy. The Russian “peaceful atom” has opened many doors for Moscow’s information leverage. For example, given that the media in Rosatom’s client countries are usually dependent to some extent on local governments, the company’s external activities indirectly affect the perception of the problem of the occupation of ZNPPs in different regions of the world¹⁰.

To summarize, it is worth noting that the methodology of the Russian propaganda machine is quite typical regardless of the region:

- Consistent work (financial reward for covering favorable topics) with opinion leaders and media commentators who have their own audiences.
- Financial support for expert and analytical resources that broadcast the Russian agenda to local audiences.
- Public support for loyal regimes at the diplomatic level and in the form of statements by Russian officials.
- Holding international forums (for example, the Valdai Club, the Russia-Africa Forum, the Russian-Indian Business Forum, etc.) to recruit loyal experts and media commentators, infiltrating narratives favorable to the Kremlin into the expert community of specific countries, which ensures influence at the political level.

⁹ The role of "soft power" in international relations: modern Russian experience and prospects (in Russian), URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rol-myagkov-sily-v-mezhdunarodnykh-otnosheniyakh-sovremenny-rossiyskiy-opyt-i-perspektivy/?sphrase_id=102428729

¹⁰ Solovian V. Ukrainian Nuclear Plants in the focus of Russian Informational Warfare, UA: Ukraine Analytica · 1 (30), 2023, URL: <https://ukraine-analytica.org/ukrainian-nuclear-plants-in-the-focus-of-russian-information-warfare/>

Narratives of Russian propaganda in the Global South

Unlike Soviet methods, the peculiarity of Russian propaganda in the Global South is that it is not always aimed at winning new supporters of the Russian system and the Kremlin's foreign policy. The ideologues of Putin's Russia are unable to offer an attractive universal image of an alternative worldview. Instead, Russian propaganda focuses on criticizing the West, manipulating and mimicking local discourses.

Russian information influences in the international arena are united by a common idea, which is to deny liberal and democratic values. Therefore, for regimes that resort to anti-Western agendas for domestic or foreign policy mobilization, Russian propaganda theses are often useful. Thus, there is a "symbiosis" of certain narratives of Kremlin propaganda and populism of local political elites.

Fake "anti-colonialism" of the Kremlin. An example of the infiltration of disinformation into the media field of the Global South is the topic of "Western neocolonialism." Russia's self-image of itself as an anti-colonial force opposing the expansionist ambitions of the West is strikingly cynical against the backdrop of an imperial war of aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, Moscow consistently invests information resources in anti-colonial agendas.

In the countries of the African continent, Russian diplomats use public events, conferences, and the media to highlight and "honor" Soviet support for anti-colonial movements of the twentieth century. Moscow officials also regularly emphasize that Russia was one of the few world powers that did not have colonies in Africa and did not participate in the slave trade. Russia offers African audiences a paradoxical view of the war against Ukraine as the latest stage in the struggle against Western colonialism. For example, during a visit to Luanda in early 2023, Lavrov compared Russia's war to "liberate" Ukraine from Western influence to the war for Angola's independence¹¹.

Scaling up the conflict. Moscow is actively "selling" to the Global South a paradigm in which Russia is waging an uncompromising struggle against the United States on the edge of the "world majority" for a new just world order. In this way, Moscow is trying to embed the theme of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the frames of anti-Western discourses that are deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of societies in a number of regions of the world.

At the same time, through the prism of the media zooming in on the war in Ukraine to the level of the global Russia-U.S. confrontation, Kremlin propaganda portrays the fighting as a side story to the West's "existential" crisis. With this perspective, Moscow is trying to restore its international prestige, which has been shaken by the unsuccessful military operation

¹¹ Why Russia Markets Itself as an Anti-Colonial Power to Africans, URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/08/russia-ukraine-colonialism-diplomacy-africa/>

against its much weaker neighbor.

Historical continuity. One of the main emphases of Russian propaganda in the Global South is to focus on the achievements of the past, building a logical chain of continuity from the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the modern Russian Federation. Exploiting the positive image of the Union that has been preserved in a number of countries that received Soviet military and economic aid during the Cold War, Moscow downplays or completely eliminates the contribution of other former Soviet republics to the amount of aid provided to countries that sold their loyalty to the red empire in the twentieth century.

This tactic of information warfare brings the Kremlin visible dividends on the African track. It is noteworthy that the governments of South Africa, Namibia, Angola, and Mozambique often refer to historical ties with Moscow to explain their reluctance to vote for UN resolutions in support of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Nuclear blackmail. The most vulnerable aspect of Russian propaganda is the topic of nuclear blackmail. Obviously, the Kremlin is aware that blackmailing the West in the format of direct and covert threats to use nuclear weapons simultaneously damages Moscow's image in the Global South. Breaking the taboo on the use of nuclear weapons is not beneficial for either side, as Beijing and New Delhi remind Moscow from time to time. Recently, through the mouth of a political scientist close to the Kremlin elite, Sergei Karaganov, the Kremlin has actually admitted that it has reconciled itself to the unacceptability of the use of weapons of mass destruction for the leading countries of the Global South: "For India, other countries of the World Majority [...] the use of nuclear weapons is unacceptable, both for moral and geostrategic reasons... We can hardly count on quick support, even if many in the Global South will feel satisfied..."¹². Therefore, it is unlikely that the Russian propaganda machine will make efforts to convince "neutral" states that a nuclear conflict could benefit the "world majority."

Meanwhile, in the wake of the terrorist attack on the Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant and the large-scale environmental disaster in southern Ukraine, fears about the fate of ZNPP have grown significantly. The threat of a nuclear incident at the nuclear power plant remains a key component of Russia's information strategy in the context of the war with Ukraine. One should recall that in the first days of the full-scale invasion, the Russian leader justified his decision by Kyiv's "desire" to launch a nuclear program. Since then, Moscow has been regularly feeding this narrative. For example, the Chief of the General Staff, the Ministers of Defense, Foreign Affairs, the Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, and other Russian officials have from time to time release information fabrications accusing Ukraine of "nuclear

¹² A hard but necessary decision (in Russian), URL: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/tyazhkoe-no-neobhodimoe-reshenie/>

terrorism" and seeking to acquire a nuclear bomb¹³.

Peace initiatives of "Neutral States" in the context of Russian propaganda

Although Russian propaganda keeps ignoring the objective reality, in the information environment of "neutral" countries, such provocations sometimes work. For example, an Indian news site published the following comment by former Ambassador to Türkiye and Uzbekistan M.K. Bhadrakumar: "...there is always a possibility that Ukraine will try to regain the status of a nuclear power. So, in such an anarchic environment, they can always create a dirty bomb"¹⁴. Manipulations about "Kyiv's nuclear program" or "dirty bomb" are aimed at provoking phobias of nuclear war in the societies of the Global South. As a result, the leaders of countries that remained indifferent to the problem during the first year of a full-scale war are tempted to earn reputational dividends on the theme of "protecting the world" from a nuclear catastrophe.

Therefore, the main goal of infiltrating these narratives into the information space of different regions of the world, according to the Kremlin, is to stimulate peace initiatives of the leaders of the Global South. Recognizing the need to find ways to freeze the war due to the steady deterioration of the configuration on the fronts, Moscow is making every effort to develop peace plans by the parties that have declared their neutrality since February 24, 2022. To date, such examples are the Chinese, African, and Indonesian peace plans. All of them provide for a settlement scenario favorable to Moscow, as they de facto record the aggressor's territorial conquests.

Russian propaganda theses on the "decolonization" of Ukraine are consistent with these initiatives, as a condition for their implementation is the freezing of Kyiv's Euro-Atlantic prospects, which in the Kremlin's interpretation means the "expulsion" of "Western colonizers" from Russia's geopolitical influence. The propaganda narratives that scale up the conflict determine the Kremlin's desire to use peace agreements on Ukraine as a springboard to negotiations with the United States on strategic issues. Hence, the Russian leadership probably sees the peace initiatives of the Global South as an opportunity to secure the support of "neutral" countries amid the protracted confrontation with the West, and to strengthen political cooperation with them within the framework of international organizations, mainly the BRICS and the SCO.

¹³ Absurd and dangerous lie: Kyiv reacts to Shoigu's statement about a "dirty bomb" (in Ukrainian), URL: <https://focus.ua/uk/voennye-novosti/534095-absurdnaya-i-opasnaya-lozh-kiev-otreagiroval-na-zayavlenie-shoygu-o-gryaznoy-bombe>

¹⁴ Russia starts building 'protective dome' at Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-starts-building-protective-dome-at-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-plant/2766586>

Conclusions

In the face of sanctions pressure, the Kremlin's priority is to expand its influence on the countries of the Global South, as this geographical area is home to “neutral states” that seek to maintain political, trade and economic relations with Moscow.

The instruments of Russia's external information leverage include media and organizations, programs for attracting foreign students and scholars, state corporations and companies implementing business projects overseas, and the Russian Orthodox Church, which has a significant number of parishes operating abroad.

Moscow's information activities are aimed at shaping the position of “neutral” countries, which involves further distancing themselves from the Russian-Ukrainian war, not providing assistance to Ukraine and ignoring Russia's war crimes. An essential factor that contributes to the uptake of Russian propaganda is the presence of anti-Western sentiments in local societies or political elites. Therefore, Russia adapts its propaganda narratives to match the socio-political mood of a particular region. The main themes of Russian propaganda regarding the influence on “neutral states” of the Global South include: “neocolonialism of the West,” scaling up the war on the territory of Ukraine to the format of a global Russia-U.S. conflict, manipulation of the history of interstate relations since the Soviet era, and intimidation with a nuclear catastrophe in case of a protracted Ukrainian offensive. As a result, Moscow's information pressure on “neutral states” has a single comprehensive goal—to encourage more parties to join peace initiatives on terms favorable to Russia.

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