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DISINFORMATION IN THE POLISH MEDIA SPACE IN THE FIRST YEAR OF RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

INTRODUCTION

Russian messages creating a false image of the Ukrainian state, the creation of which was said to be a by-product of the Soviet leadership's ill-considered decisions, have intensified since the events of 2014. These messages have undermined the Ukrainian people's rights to independence and sovereignty. At the same time, claims to lands inhabited by Ukrainians were justified. In order to suppress Ukrainian pro-Western aspirations, the Kremlin's disinformation targeted the Ukrainian administration and authorities. In doing so, it created an image of a state incapable of protecting its own citizens and devoid of any chance of integration into the structures of NATO and the European Union. Since the beginning of the crisis, responsibility for the situation in Ukraine has been attributed by the Kremlin's propaganda apparatus to Western countries, accusing them of pursuing policies that threaten Russian interests and security (Dowództwo, 2023: 14).

The first anniversary of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine prompts an analysis of the information warfare taking place alongside military action. The previous year of the Russian invasion was characterised not only by intense military action in Ukraine but also by no less intensified disinformation activities in the space of the internet and social media. After 24 February 2022, for several weeks, topics related to the situation in Ukraine dominated the public and media space in many countries around the world. Among the information, there was a lot of content that was false, untrue, with altered context, outdated, etc. Over time, the topic of the war in Ukraine has ceased to be foregrounded; nevertheless, the phenomenon of disinformation has not diminished. Because Poland is a frontline state, the Russian Federation has undertaken numerous disinformation activities in that country. In addition to conducting hybrid warfare within Ukraine's borders, the Russian Federation also engages in information warfare in Poland and many other countries.

The aim of this article is to analyse the disinformation activities of the Russian Federation and the content of pro-Kremlin disinformation messages present in the Polish information space during the first year of Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine. The motivation for undertaking this topic is the growing phenomenon of disinformation, which is an important element of information warfare (Legucka, 2020). The research area is Polish-language websites and social media. The research period covers

one calendar year – from 24 February 2022 to 23 February 2023. In the course of the research, the following methods were used: content and content analysis and desk research.

The following research questions were formulated in order to realise the purpose of the deliberations conducted: What media were used to spread disinformation? What topics did the content of false narratives focus on? What goals did disinformers choose in the case of the Polish media space?

Based on the research questions, research hypotheses were formulated. It was assumed that disinformation activities primarily covered the Polish internet and social media space. It was assumed that anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee themes dominated among the false messages. It was assumed that the chosen objectives of the disinformers were to create in Poles an aversion to refugees as well as to create anxiety and fear of war.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION

Nowadays, the media performs many functions: it provides information, controls those in power, creates opinions, educates, provides entertainment, etc. In addition to a whole range of benefits, however, the media also provides an area for manipulation and disinformation.

Disinformation is one type of information disorder. Claire Wardle identifies three types of information disorder, distinguished based on the criteria of falsity and harm, i.e. whether the information is false, harmful or both false and harmful. Based on these criteria, it distinguishes the following:

1) misinformation, which occurs when false information is made available that is not intended to cause harm;
2) disinformation, which is false information made available with the intention of causing harm;
3) malinformation, which is information that is either true but made available with the intention of causing harm, or information that is partially true containing a negative, stigmatising, hateful opinion (Wardle, 2017).

Disinformation, according to the official EU definition developed by a team of experts from EU member states led by Prof Madeleine de Cock Buning of Utrecht University, is false, inaccurate or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for profit or to deliberately cause public harm (European Commission, 2018).

The primary mechanism of Russian disinformation is the proliferation of information sources within a specific pattern. This system, referred to as the matryoshka system, is, according to Marek Swierczek, 'perfect disinformation.' We disassemble a matryoshka, a traditional Russian doll, but ultimately discover only a smaller, equally colourful doll inside. It is the same with Russian disinformation: each successive tossed source gains our trust, actually misleading us again (*W krainie*, 2022).

The activation of Russian disinformation on at least several levels simultaneously is guaranteed to be effective. 'The Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda

Ecosystem' consists of five pillars: Official Government Communications, State-Funded Global Messaging, Cultivation of Proxy Sources, Weaponisation of Social Media and Cyber-Enabled Disinformation (Global, 2020: 8). From Russia's perspective, using this ecosystem has three advantages. First, it allows the introduction of multiple variants of the same false narratives to pursue different goals. This is made possible by the different pillars of the ecosystem. Second, it shifts responsibility away from Kremlin officials for the dissemination of blatant and dangerous disinformation, while allowing them to spread it. Third, it creates a media multiplier effect; the various pillars of the ecosystem increase the reach and resonance of disinformation messages (Global, 2020: 5).

Propaganda and disinformation are tools of domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Federation authorities. Their purpose is to shape public opinion and maintain the socio-political regime. Part of the Kremlin's propaganda ecosystem are representatives of the Russian media, who play an important role in spreading a false picture of reality. The most important channel of propaganda influence on society remains state television in Russia. Among the leading propagandists whose activities perpetuate false narrative lines in Russian society are Dmitry Kiselyov, Vladimir Solovyov, Anna Szafran, Mikhail Leontiev, Olga Skabieeva, Yevgeny Popov, Katerina Strizhenova, Anatoly Kuzichev, Artyom Sheynin, Andrey Norkin, Nailya Asker-Zade, Andrey Dobrov, Roman Babayan, Konstantin Malofeyev, and Margarita Simonyan (Gov.pl, 2022).

Disinformation and covert attempts to influence have a long tradition in Russian foreign policy as well (Nehring, 2017), especially during the election period (See more: Łukasik-Turecka, Malužinas, 2023) and are not limited to the post-Soviet space. Poland, as a frontline state, is a frequent target of disinformation activities of the Russian Federation. This was already evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, and current disinformation attacks have been noted in connection with Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

It is easier to fight disinformation distributed through traditional media. Council Regulation (EU) 2022/350 of 1 March 2022 amending Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine was published in March 2022. The document underlines that the Russian Federation conducts continuous and coordinated propaganda activities targeting the civil society of the European Union and neighbouring countries, significantly distorting and manipulating the facts. It was pointed out that the media plays a fundamental role in publicising and supporting the aggression against Ukraine and in destabilising neighbouring countries. Under the new ordinance, broadcasting and other activities facilitating the broadcast of Russia Today and Sputnik were banned. The ban covered the distribution of content by any means, such as cable TV, satellite TV, Internet TV, online video-sharing platforms or applications (Council Regulation, 2022).

Disinformation distributed through new media, including social media, is much more difficult to counter.

Disinformation attacks often have indiscriminate in nature. On 24 February 2022, at around 9:00 a.m., a massive disinformation attack was launched on the Polish web and social media in support of the Russian narrative regarding the conduct of military

operations in Ukraine. It was the largest disinformation attack since the beginning of the year. Around 300 accounts and profiles participated. The attack took place on most major news portals with unrestricted access to comment sections and on Facebook and Twitter feeds (Instytut, 2022a). Massive attacks occurred in the following months, in line with the matryoshka system and the simultaneous use of several pillars of the Russian agitation and propaganda ecosystem.

Organised groups spreading disinformation in the area of Polish social media during the period in question conducted their activities through the implementation of posts in discussion threads. Despite repeated blocking of accounts of such groups by social networks, they continuously created new infrastructures to carry out their activities (Instytut, 2022b).

As the Global Engagement Center highlights in its report, propaganda and disinformation are not spread through only one media platform, and the messages posted by different sources are not uniform (Global, 2022: 5).

New media, particularly online portals and social media, served as the primary platform for disseminating disinformation during the reviewed period. In the case of traditional media, the professional media, disinformation spreaders had fewer chances with the implementation of their messages due to the professional verification of content at the editorial level. Professional journalists are constantly checking information in their work, and therefore content on the war in Ukraine was also verified by them. In the case of web portals or traditional media websites that provided media audiences with space to comment on texts, some editorial offices dealt with disinformation in such a way that they blocked comment spaces under articles on the war in Ukraine for a certain period of time. Portals belonging to Wirtualna Polska, Interia and Polska Press decided on such action immediately after 24 February 2022. Comments under texts about the war were disabled by Wirtualna Polska on both the horizontal portals WP.pl and o2.pl, as well as on thematic services such as Money.pl. The head of the WP.pl portal explained that the decision was due to the increased activity of so-called trolls. He reported that, with the escalation of the conflict, the editors decided to disable comments on all services where they had the technological possibility to do so. This was to prevent comments from becoming a platform for the spread of disinformation by pro-Russian propaganda. Interia, in turn, blocked the possibility to add comments under articles on Wydarzenia and Biznes services for a certain period of time, and Polska Press blocked comments on texts about the war in Ukraine on all its websites: the dailies' websites, the Nasze Miasto portal and thematic services (jsx, tw, 2022). Information for readers explaining the reasons for blocking comments could be found under a number of articles during the analysed period.

The situation was completely different on social media. Due to the nature of this type of media, in which each recipient of the messages is also a sender, it is difficult to count on professional verification of the information before sharing it further. This is due to both the low level of legal knowledge among the average media user and a low awareness of the dangers of disinformation. Consequently, disinformers have made the greatest use of social media, counting on the dissemination of erroneous content by unsuspecting media users.

MAIN DISINFORMATION CONTENT TARGETED BY DISINFORMERS AGAINST POLAND AND ITS ALLIANCE WITH UKRAINE

With the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, it is now possible to show how the Russian Federation carried out disinformation activities on the Polish internet and social media space. It is also now possible to analyse the content of the disinformation messages we received in the media.

Disinformation activities focused on topical issues. The issues of greatest interest were contentious, divisive and emotionally charged. As time passed, disinformation campaigns changed and adapted to the prevailing circumstances.

Before the start of hostilities, Russian disinformation was already active in several information areas. In January 2022, disinformation content concerned perceptions of Russian Federation policy. Putting itself in the role of victim, Russia tried to justify its actions with the need to defend itself. It reproduced theses about the threatened security of the Russian Federation. In addition, false messages appeared in the Polish media space stating that the Ukrainian authorities, instigated by NATO and the West, were allegedly preparing for aggression 'on the Donbas', which would justify Moscow's intervention.

In February 2022, negative wording towards the Ukrainian population began to appear intensively. Difficult events in the history of Poland and Ukraine were invoked, and the cohesion of the NATO alliance was negated. Analysts at the Institute for Internet and Social Media Research recorded above-normal publication activity in the form of interaction of phrases such as the following: 'banderowcy' in contexts describing murderers and infanticide; 'UPA' in the context of murdering Poles; 'Ukrainian refugees' used negatively in relation to the labour market or unemployment (Instytut, 2022e). Poles were threatened that Poland would run out of fuel at petrol stations, that there would be problems withdrawing money from banks and ATMs, as well as problems with food. Disinformation efforts to undermine the brands of Polish companies were also intensified (Instytut, 2022b). The messages directly expressed support for the Russian president. After the outbreak of the war, manipulated messages built on an emotional factor appeared in the space of the Polish-language media. This content was distributed through accounts that had previously disseminated information of content sceptical of vaccination and the coronavirus.

March 2022 saw the implementation of content about the alleged staged bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol. Although unsuccessful, the Russian Federation continued to reproduce deceitful claims in relation to the bombing of the hospital. Audiovisual footage, a deepfake, depicting the Ukrainian president announcing surrender was also released in the media space. The credibility of the video was quickly undermined. Following this ineffective information operation, the first reports of the alleged presence and threat of biological weapons by Ukraine began to emerge.

In the third week of March 2022, the Polish internet and social media space saw a steady dynamic increase in the implementation of anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee content. According to research by the Institute for Internet and Social Media Research, for the first time since the start of hostilities, the number of anti-refugee posts had a greater dynamic and represented a narrative advantage over pro-refugee posts. Pro-

Kremlin disinformation activities focused on two areas: physical security – messages evoking fear, fear for life; and economic security – rising prices, loss of jobs (Instytut, 2022d).

At the beginning of April 2022, a topic appeared in the Polish media space that persisted for an extended period. This topic was the alleged staging of the Bucza massacre. In a similar way to the case of the hospital in Mariupol, false messages were created about the provocation and staging in Bucza. The Russian side referred to the reports from Mariupol and Bucza with the term 'staged provocation' (Musiał-Karg, Łukasik-Turecka, 2023). In mid-April, the implementation of content targeting the perception of refugees increased again. Messages often appeared showing the prospect of a threat being brought to Poland due to its policy towards Ukraine. False content concerning the Polish army appeared in the media space. Messages suggested a desire for Poland to take over Ukrainian territories that historically belonged to Poland.

In May 2022, the creation of disinformation messages regarding Ukrainian society continued, and negative content targeting the perception of the Polish Army was implemented.

At the beginning of June 2022, Russian disinformation was based on false theses about the participation of Polish soldiers in the battles for Severodonetsk. At the same time, material based on alleged plans for Poland's annexation of Ukraine continued to spread. At the end of June, false information began to appear about the search for Ukrainian citizens evading military service.

In July and August 2022, the topic of modernising the Polish Army was revisited. Disinformation messages suggested a reduction in Poland's defence potential in connection with helping Ukraine. These messages were accompanied by information about Poland's alleged desire to occupy Ukraine. Messages were spread about the expansion of the Polish army in connection with Poland's territorial ambitions.

In mid-August 2022, disinformation activities focused on messages weakening Polish-Ukrainian relations. The addressees of this content were both Poles and the Ukrainian community. Fake documents concerning the Ukrainian side's request to rename Belvederska Street after Bandera appeared on social media. At the end of August, the hashtag #StopUkrainisationPoland was very popular. This hashtag was popularised by inauthentic accounts and profiles created for news operations (Fraser, 2022).

At the beginning of September 2022, the Russian propaganda apparatus returned to scaring Poles about the consequences of supporting Ukraine. These actions were intended to create a sense of fear and threat in Polish society. On 30 September 2022, Vladimir Putin announced the annexation of occupied parts of Ukrainian territory. He also once again mentioned the possibility of using nuclear weapons during the so-called 'special operation.' The possibility of Russia's using nuclear weapons was most discussed on Facebook and Twitter. The majority of the discussion took place on the Facebook page 'Reports from Putin's Poland.' According to the Institute for Internet and Social Media Research, the topic generated almost 13,000 interactions on this page during the period under review. Another site of intense discussion was user Lukasz Bok's Twitter account, where more than 10,000 interactions were recorded. Third in terms of popularity, was the tvp.info Facebook page, which garnered over

8.5k interactions. The highest number, almost two thousand comments, was recorded on the Facebook page FAKT24.pl (Instytut, 2022 c).

At the same time, disinformation was provided on Ukraine's possession of nuclear weapons and Ukraine's desire to provoke a nuclear incident.

In the autumn months, the Polish media space repeated claims about the surrender of the Ukrainian army and the evacuation of the Kiev authorities. Messages about Poland's exposure to poverty and energy shortages in connection with aiding Ukraine and its citizens were also reproduced. As highlighted in the Cyber Defence Forces Component Command report, the amplification of messages occurred when the Russian army suffered defeats at the front (Dowództwo, 2023: 19).

In November, messages suggesting that Poland had territorial ambitions to be a state 'from sea to sea' reached the Polish internet and social media space. Recipients of the media learned about the alleged Polish idea of creating a great empire – plans to seize territories of Ukraine, Belarus and for Poland to attack Moscow were suggested. These messages were reinforced with other false messages about rearming the Polish army in preparation for future annexations.

By the end of 2022, an increase in the activity of Belarusian propaganda against Poland was noticeable in the media space. Its disinformation content coincided with Russian narratives.

The beginning of 2023 brought another increase in disinformation messages in Polish-language social media. According to a report prepared by the Institute of Media Monitoring and the Demagogue Association, more than 57,000 comments and posts of an anti-Ukrainian nature were published in January 2023. This represented an increase of 18 per cent compared to December 2022 (*Raport Demagoga i IMM*, 2023).

In February 2023, the trend continued, including false information about financial support for young scientists from Ukraine (*Aby dostać stypendium*, 2023). Disinformers also returned to the topic of the Poles' alleged desire to take back Ukrainian lands that were once Polish (*Reklama w polskim metrze*, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the research, all research hypotheses were positively verified. After 24 February 2022, pro-Kremlin disinformation activities were mainly extended to the Polish Internet and social media space. Traditional media, i.e. the press, radio and television, were a more difficult opponent for disinformation agents due to the professional verification of information before it is posted in the pages of a newspaper or broadcast on radio or television. In the case of internet portals or websites of traditional media, which provided media audiences with space to comment on texts, some editorial offices dealt with disinformation in such a way that they blocked comment spaces under articles on the war in Ukraine for a certain period of time. In turn, due to the nature of social media, it is difficult to count on professional verification of information before it is disseminated further by media users. This is due to the low level of legal knowledge possessed by the average media user as well as low awareness of the dangers of disinformation. Disinformers made the greatest use of

social media, mainly Twitter and Facebook, counting on the sharing of false content by unsuspecting media users.

The subject matter of false messages varied widely; it changed and adapted to the circumstances at hand. Shortly after 24 February 2022, disinformation messages were dominated by consumer themes. Poles were frightened that Poland would run out of fuel and food as a result of the war and the reception of millions of refugees. The availability of funds in banks was also said to be a problem. With the influx of refugees, anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee messages began to dominate. With the commission of further Russian crimes came false content about 'staged provocations.' In the following months, there were recurring themes – scaring Poles about the consequences of supporting Ukraine. From the perspective of the year, it is clear that the dominant themes of disinformation messages were anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee.

The main objectives chosen by the disinformers were to create aversion in Poles towards refugees and to create anxiety and fear of war. Among the objectives that occurred periodically were Russia's attempt to justify its actions with the need to defend itself against the allegedly threatened security of the Russian Federation, or to damage the image of the Polish Army.

In order to achieve these goals in the first year of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, disinformation messages focused on current issues, using contentious issues that divide society and provoke emotions.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse the disinformation activities of the Russian Federation as well as to analyse the content of pro-Kremlin disinformation messages present in the Polish information space during the first year of Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine. The research area is Polish-language internet portals and social media. The research period covers

one calendar year, from 24 February 2022 to 23 February 2023. In the course of the research conducted, the following methods were used: content and content analysis and the analysis of the data found. The following research questions were formulated in order to realise the purpose of the deliberations conducted: What media were used to spread disinformation? What topics did the content of false narratives focus on? What goals did disinformers choose in the case of the Polish media space?

Based on the research questions, research hypotheses were formulated. It was assumed that disinformation activities primarily covered the Polish internet and social media space. It was assumed that anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee themes dominated among the false messages. It was assumed that the disinformers' chosen objectives were to create aversion in Poles towards refugees and to create anxiety and fear of war. As a result of the analyses, all hypotheses were positively verified.

Keywords: disinformation, information warfare, Ukraine, Russia

DEZINFORMACJA W POLSKIEJ PRZESTRZENI MEDIALNEJ W PIERWSZYM ROKU PEŁNOSKALOWEJ AGRESJI ROSJI NA UKRAINĘ

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest analiza działalności dezinformacyjnej Federacji Rosyjskiej, a także analiza treści prokremlowskich przekazów dezinformacyjnych obecnych w polskiej przestrzeni informacyjnej w pierwszym roku pełnoskalowej agresji Rosji w Ukrainie. Obszar badawczy stanowią polskojęzyczne portale internetowe i media społecznościowe. Okres badawczy obejmuje jeden rok kalendarzowy, od 24 lutego 2022 roku do 23 lutego 2023 roku. W toku prowadzonych badań zastosowane zostały metody: analiza zawartości i treści oraz analiza danych zastanych. Aby zrealizować cel prowadzonych rozważań, sformułowano następujące pytania badawcze: Jakie media zostały wykorzystane do szerzenia dezinformacji?, Na jakiej tematyce koncentrowały się treści fałszywych narracji?, Jakie cele obrali dezinformatorzy w przypadku polskiej przestrzeni medialnej?

W oparciu o pytania badawcze sformułowano hipotezy badawcze. Założono, że działaniami dezinformacyjnymi objęto przede wszystkim polską przestrzeń internetu i mediów społecznościowych. Przyjęto, że wśród fałszywych przekazów dominowała tematyka antyukraińska i antyuchodźcza. Założono, że obranymi przez dezinformatorów celami było wytworzenie u Polaków niechęci do uchodźców, a także wywołanie lęku i strachu przed wojną. W wyniku analiz wszystkie hipotezy zostały zweryfikowane pozytywnie

Słowa kluczowe: dezinformacja, wojna informacyjna, Ukraina, Rosja