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Russian propaganda attacks Polish-Ukrainian relations

In recent weeks, Russia has been conducting an intensive propaganda and disinformation campaign aimed at deteriorating relations between Poland and Ukraine. Warsaw is accused of, inter alia, striving to seize and subjugate the western part of Ukraine in the name of the idea of the “great Republic”. Poland is also presented as an irresponsible and Russophobic state, striving to start a war in Europe. The purpose of these actions is an attempt to worsen the tightening Polish-Ukrainian relations, the development of which is unfavorable for Russia. Moreover, these activities are also addressed to Russians to consolidate society.

Poland, like the West in its broader sense, has long been a target of Russian propaganda, and in the case of Poland, an important area has been and remains the issue of Polish-Ukrainian relations, played mainly with the use of historical resentments and emotions related to them.

New threads have emerged in connection with the Russian war against Ukraine and the course of this war, as well as the noticeable tightening of Polish-Ukrainian relations, which clearly arouses Russia's growing irritation. Russia's propaganda and disinformation activities are aimed at deteriorating Polish-Ukrainian relations and discouraging Poles from supporting Ukraine, they serve to discredit Poland in the international arena, and to consolidate Russian society against an external enemy - in this case “Russophobic” Poland.

The impact of Russian actions on Polish-Ukrainian relations. Poland is, in many dimensions, a very important element of international support for Ukraine, which is fighting against aggression. It is therefore in Russia's interest to provoke tensions and conflicts between Poland and Ukraine. Proven instruments are used for this purpose: manipulation referring to emotions (e.g. fear).

In the Russian-language information space, a narrative is being intensively disseminated that the Polish army intended to enter Ukraine in order to seize its western part, including Lviv, as “the historical territory of the Republic of Poland”. According to other versions, Polish soldiers are already occupying part of Ukraine - which is supposed to justify Russian propaganda presenting its own soldiers as “liberators of Ukraine”. This narrative is expanded by reports that Poland intends to create a common state with Ukraine, de facto subordinated to Warsaw.

These manipulations are primarily addressed to Ukrainians, who are to believe that Poland helps them out of its own interest, and that cooperation with Poland is, in fact, a threat to Ukraine. They are also informed about the alleged ill-treatment of Ukrainian citizens, including refugees, by Poles. On the other hand, anti-Ukrainian propaganda is addressed to Poles: supporting Ukraine and helping Ukrainian refugees are not in our interest, and may lead to Poland becoming entangled in war, to an economic crisis, and to the fact that Poles will be “second-class citizens in their own country”. The theme of Polish-Ukrainian historical conflicts, especially the Volhynian massacre, is also consistently used in Poland.

This is accompanied by numerous, often absurd, fake news, aimed at deepening the information chaos and polarization of society, e.g. Poland's President Andrzej Duda's grandfather was an UPA officer, the high price of gasoline in Poland is the result of the transfer of fuels from Poland to Ukraine etc. While in Ukraine Russian actions do not bring visible results, in Poland (and in other Western countries) they find resonance primarily in radical circles: left-wing (however, in Poland they are marginal) and right-wing - hence, among others, strong anti-Semitic, nationalist, anti-system threads - and among supporters of conspiracy theories. In the latter case, Russia uses, for example, anti-vaccination movements, which were largely inspired and strengthened by Russian disinformation activities during the pandemic.

Russian politicians and propagandists take an active part in the anti-Polish and anti-Ukrainian campaign, and are accompanied by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has recently repeatedly emphasized that Belarus will react to Polish plans to seize Western Ukraine. In his rhetoric, Poland may also attack Belarus, hence the justification for keeping the Belarusian armed forces ready.

Discrediting of Poland. Russia consistently presents Poland as an irresponsible, aggressive state, guided by unjustified imperial ambitions and an irrational aversion to Russia. This is to be conditioned by the “historical aggressiveness of the Polish nobility”, and now it may even provoke a nuclear war in Europe.

In recent weeks, many prominent Russian politicians have made such allegations publicly. At the economic forum in St.Petersburg, Vladimir Miedinski, the chairman of the Russian delegation participating in negotiations with Ukraine (and the former minister of culture), stated that Poland wanted to rebuild the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth because “it always wanted to have Ukraine and Russian lands in Malorussia”. Moreover, it is Poland that is blocking the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. Similar opinions were given by, inter alia, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev and head of the Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin.

The Russophobia of Poles is also to be confirmed by the number of Polish mercenaries who are allegedly fighting on the side of Ukraine. In mid-June, the Russian Ministry of Defense published statistics on foreign mercenary arrivals to Ukraine, including people from 64 countries and providing “precise” data on the number of arrivals, dead and those who left Ukraine. Apart from the unreliability of these lists (“the Ministry monitors the stay in Ukraine of every foreign representative”), it is significant that Poland is the leader in these statistics. According to Russia, 1,831 people came to Ukraine from Poland, of which 378 died and 272 returned to Poland. For comparison: 422 people were to come from Great Britain, and 530 from the United States. This is a continuation of the narrative presented since 2014, when there were regular reports that Poles (not only volunteers, but also the army, including LITPOLUKRBRIG soldiers) were to fight in eastern Ukraine.

A symbolic “punishment” for the anti-Russian attitude of Poland was the decision to remove Polish flags from the Katyn cemetery, taken in June by the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and supported by the memorial management and local authorities in Smolensk. Already in April this year there were signals that the Polish cemetery could be used by Russia for a symbolic “retaliation”.

Internal dimension. The anti-Polish campaign is also conducted for the benefit of the internal Russian audience. The prolonged lack of military, even tactical and operational successes, the difficult position of Russia in the political and strategic dimension, and numerous failures in the symbolic dimension (the loss of the cruiser “Moscow”, the actions of Ukrainian special forces on Russian territory, etc.) have a negative impact not only on the image of Russia, but also its potential to influence.

Additionally, both the economic situation and public mood are deteriorating. In these circumstances, the Russian authorities are trying not only to use intimidation and blackmail in the external dimension, but also, internally, to strengthen the “besieged fortress syndrome” and consolidate society to fight the external enemy, which is to be, inter alia, Poland.

Conclusions. Anti-Polish propaganda is a permanent element of Russia's actions aimed at breaking the unity of the West (for example in order to reduce the scale of Western aid to Ukraine). However, the significant rapprochement between Poland and Ukraine visible in recent months, unfavorable and undesirable from the point of view of Russia, as well as the fact that Poland has become a transport hub in the context of arms supplies and aid for Ukraine, and that it actively supports Ukraine in the forum of the European Union and NATO, induced Russia to intensify disinformation and propaganda attacks on Poland.

This is also related to the issue of regional cooperation between Central European states and the attitude of the United States and Great Britain, which are the engine of Western support for Ukraine - both the institutional and international subjectivity of Central Europe and the attitude of the Anglo-Saxons are perceived by Russia as a threat.

Hence the energy and nuclear blackmail, threats of hunger and cyberattacks, as well as activities in the information space. Poland is presented as an adventurous, irresponsible state, striving to start a world war in the name of its own ambitions, i.e. to create “great Poland from sea to sea”. At the same time, it is shown not only as an enemy of Russia, but also of Ukraine, and in fact as a vassal of the United States. These attacks are also accompanied by threats - there have been many public voices in Russia about the need to “de-Nazify” Poland - picked up and used by pro-Russian circles in Poland.

Russia will continue to campaign against Polish-Ukrainian relations. It is and will be addressed to Ukrainians and Poles (to arouse their mutual aversion), but also to Russians and the international environment - primarily in order to discredit Poland.