

Jakub Bornio

Russia's Cognitive Actions Targeting Poland Through the Use of Migrants from the Post-Soviet Area

In their hybrid actions against Poland, Russian intelligence services have been known to carry out various acts of sabotage. Due to the increase in immigration to Poland of the population from the post-Soviet area, it has become a potential asset for the Russian services in their cognitive activities. These activities are aimed at creating specific mental processes, attitudes and behaviours among Polish society that are in line with Russia's objectives.

Russia's cognitive activities in the context of its strategic objectives in Central and Eastern Europe. Russia's strategic objective in relation to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is to expand its political influence within the region to the greatest extent possible. In terms of international security, this objective is pursued by means of a number of initiatives, including the attempts to expel Anglo-Saxon influence from the region, to halt regional integration processes and to replace them with its own political projects; to minimise Western support for Ukraine; and to fuel regional bilateral conflicts in accordance with the *divide et impera* concept. The historical imperial presence of Russia in the region has led to its perception as mostly an undesirable actor, thereby limiting its available instruments of influence. The available tools for building influence in the region are therefore limited to the following: (1) pressure using military force; (2) dependence on imports of energy resources; (3) corrupting elites; and (4) the use of active measures. Each of these instruments possesses the capacity to exert a cognitive influence¹, though it is the use of active measures that remains predominantly associated with the manipulation of the cognitive capacity of specific social groups.

Migration and Russia's cognitive impact capacity. Alongside the economic development of the CEE countries, there has been an evolution and change in the migration tendency in some of them, from emigration to immigration states. This phenomenon has been further exacerbated by external factors, most notably the outbreak of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war and the subsequent wave of refugees it has generated. In the case of Poland, the number of foreigners residing in the country, although difficult to precisely calculate, is estimated to range from approximately 2.5 million to as many as 4 million. The majority of these individuals are citizens of Ukraine, followed by Belarus, with recent years also witnessing an increase in migration from Moldova and Georgia. The presence of a significant population of migrants from the post-Soviet space in Poland, and more broadly in the CEE countries, has enabled Russia and Belarus to exploit them as assets in cognitive activities. This trend has gained considerable momentum in recent years. The efforts to counter these activities have been hindered by several factors, including the liberalisation of border controls, which has been prompted by the coordinated entry procedures associated with the initial phase of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as the operational dynamics of the Schengen area. New forms of employment are also not without influence. These all served to allocate Russian and Belarusian intelligence assets in Poland and to influence susceptible individuals.

¹ Cognitive actions are defined as activities that are designed to influence the perception and cognitive abilities of a target group, with the objective of eliciting a specific response. These actions can be carried out either against the whole population or only against a specific group of it. They involve the long-term reduction of perception, critical thinking, cognitive processes and analysis using a variety of information methods. In this model, appropriately presented information becomes a tool in what has been termed the 'battle for people's minds'. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasise that these activities remain subordinate to overarching strategic objectives.

Russia's *modus operandi* towards the migrants from the post-Soviet area. Russian intelligence typically engages with individuals from the post-Soviet region residing in Poland primarily through social media platforms popular among Russian-speaking communities, such as VKontakte and Telegram, where these individuals often seek employment. Additionally, interactions are facilitated through personal contacts. Russian intelligence typically engage with the residing in Poland population from the post-Soviet area primarily via social media platforms popular in the Russian-speaking space, such as VKontakte or Telegram, where they often seek financial gain, in addition to utilising personal contacts. A pivotal resource from a Russian intelligence perspective in this context is the prevalence of the Russian language. These individuals are tasked with performing simple income-generating activities and, after fostering deeper relationships, engaging in various acts of sabotage. Payment for these services is often made in cryptocurrencies, a practice that facilitates the concealment of both the actions and the individual or entity responsible for their initiation. Notably, the commission of these actions is primarily conducted within the online domain, obviating the need for direct physical interaction. In more sophisticated instances, the establishment of networks of saboteurs is also observed. These acts of sabotage are then used to create information, which is subsequently distributed. In this way, the validity of specific theses can be 'proven' and a narrative created that influences the cognitive abilities of the public/target group in line with Russia's objectives.

Case Studies. Several incidents of this nature have occurred in Poland in recent years. For instance, in August 2023, an incident took place on the Vistula Boulevards in Warsaw, where a group of Polish individuals was assaulted by unidentified persons for refusing to say the slogan "Glory to Ukraine – Glory to Heroes," a phrase associated with the Ukrainian nationalism. Both the slogan and the flag visible in the recording were seemingly intended to imply that the perpetrators were of Ukrainian origin. The incident was recorded and subsequently shared online by various profiles that attributed the perpetrators to Ukrainians, disregarding the information provided by the Warsaw Police Headquarters that the aggressors were Georgian citizens.

In January 2024, the Internal Security Agency (ABW) detained an individual bearing a Ukrainian passport who was allegedly preparing acts of sabotage in relation to an attempt to initiate fires in proximity to critical infrastructure facilities in Wrocław. In October 2024, a series of acts of vandalism were perpetrated by two unidentified young males in the same city. These acts involved the spraying of inscriptions such as 'Our Father Bandera' and 'Glory to UPA', and the painting of red and black flags on various objects². Two of these acts were directed towards objects that were of particular concern to specific social groups. This included the Monument-mausoleum of the murdered Polish population in the South-Eastern Borderlands by the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, and the mural of Wrocław dedicated to Roman Zieliński (see Pic. 1; Pic. 2), the unofficial leader of the football fan community in Wrocław and author of the publication "How I fell in love with Adolf Hitler". It is noteworthy that these two sites are geographically distant from each other and situated in less prominent areas of the city. This suggests that the perpetrators either possessed a clear awareness of the specific sites they were targeting, or were deliberately instructed to devastate particular locations to radicalise certain social groups, such as football fans' communities. This objective was partially achieved.

In Poland, there is also evidence of Russian services coordinating organised criminal activity or locating 'professional criminals' on its territory with a view to destabilising the social situation. In recent years, there has been a problem with the proportional overrepresentation of Georgian citizens in criminal statistics, although it is difficult to estimate how many of the criminal acts are activities inspired by Russian services.

Conclusions. Drawing upon the aforementioned considerations and the case studies, it is evident that a subset of immigrants from the post-Soviet region residing in Poland are susceptible to the influence of Russian and potentially Belarusian intelligence services. This trend has seen a marked intensification in recent years, thereby posing a substantial challenge to state security. Acts of sabotage, such as those delineated above, are characterised by their cost-effectiveness and the ability to obscure the responsibility of the initiators. These acts

² All the inscriptions were associated with the symbols of the Ukrainian nationalism.



of sabotage are intended to generate specific content, subsequently serving as a tool in cognitive warfare. The primary objective is to instigate particular mental processes, attitudes and behaviours among the Polish public that align with Russia's strategic aims. These may encompass, for instance, the undermining of the credibility and trust in state institutions or the effectiveness of its services in combating crime and ensuring public safety. This, in turn, engenders a sense of insecurity, disrupts the social structure, fosters radicalisation, or incites calls for self-righteousness. Acts of sabotage serve to exacerbate national tensions and are meticulously designed to diminish support for the policy of supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians. In this context, the 'Volhynian crime issue' remains a potent catalyst. In extreme cases, the objective of these actions is to intimidate specific social groups, such as those supporting opposition movements in Belarus or Russia, or those engaged in the fight against disinformation and the analysis of Russian actions.

The nature of these acts, which are difficult to track at the commission/inspiration stage, poses significant challenges in terms of prevention. Consequently, in certain instances, it is more effective to address the consequences of these acts in the cognitive domain, that is, in the human mind. A further challenge arises from the fact that, in certain instances, these activities are merely inspired by external actors, such as the Russian intelligence services, or emerge as a consequence of other processes, such as radicalisation, or are perpetrated by individuals who are essentially 'useful idiots'.



Picture 1



Picture 2