



Center *for*
European Policy
Analysis



Propaganda in a New Orbit

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THE ISSUE

Russia's campaign of disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) reaches across linguistic and political barriers and utilizes anti-establishment, protest politicians from both extremes of the political spectrum to discredit Western governments, policies and institutions such as the European Union and NATO, while simultaneously validating the Kremlin's own message.

This study provides an initial overview of how one piece of the Kremlin's media machine—the Sputnik tabloid news site—uses this technique to contribute to the flow of disinformation and pro-Russian messaging.

What counts for Sputnik in its choice of commentators in the Czech Republic and Poland is not balance, but the opposite: one-sided hostility to the mainstream. Sputnik grants disproportionate coverage to protest, anti-establishment and pro-Russian members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from CEE; it does so systematically; and even when it quotes mainstream politicians, it chooses comments that fit the wider narrative of a corrupt, decadent and Russophobic West.

In a European Parliament context, Sputnik embodies the Russian military doctrine of making “wide use of the protest potential” of the legislature to promote the Kremlin's chosen messages of disinformation.

Introduction

Information and disinformation are key elements of Russia's approach to modern warfare. While the annexation of Crimea has been widely labeled a case of "hybrid warfare," Russia's concept of conflict does not distinguish between hybrid and classical warfare: there is simply warfare. According to paragraph 15(a) of Russia's military doctrine, updated and approved in December 2014:

Characteristic features and specifics of current military conflicts are:

- a) integrated employment of military force and political, economic, informational or other non-military measures implemented with a wide use of the protest potential of the population and of special operations forces;¹

Russia's own annexation of Crimea exemplifies this approach. It combined the use of military force with an information assault designed to disrupt and delay Western decision-making, the covert deployment of special forces, and the use of the "protest potential of the population"—those Crimea politicians who were willing to lobby for annexation.

Since the Crimean takeover, Western concerns have focused on the potential for Russia to use disinformation to stir up tensions among ethnic Russians in neighboring countries, especially the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Attention has therefore turned to the Kremlin's stranglehold on Russian-language media and its ability to project disinformation to ethnic Russians in countries such as the Baltic states. The governments of the Baltic states, and the European Union, have launched initiatives to break the information monopoly, calling for the creation of independent Russian-language broadcasters to provide honest and reliable information.

However, the manipulation of information in Russian is only one aspect of Russia's campaign of disinformation in, and about, the states of Central and Eastern Europe. The campaign reaches across linguistic and political barriers, and utilizes anti-establishment, protest politicians from both extremes of the political spectrum to discredit Western governments, policies and institutions such as the European Union and NATO, while simultaneously validating the Kremlin's own message.

This study provides an initial overview of how one piece of the Kremlin's media machine—the Sputnik tabloid news site—uses this technique to contribute to the flow of disinformation and pro-Russian messaging.

Sputnik:

Propaganda in a New Orbit

Sputnik—a subsidiary of the state-owned media conglomerate Rossiya Segodnya—describes itself as a “provider of alternative news content,” a telling phrase that implicitly exonerates it from the need to offer balanced coverage or to report mainstream events, actors and opinions. Based on a study of its online publications, its modus operandi in reporting on each country in the CEE region is to select a small number of anti-establishment politicians and give them substantial coverage, while reporting little or nothing about the representatives of other parties or points of view.

For example, a search of the phrase “Polish MEP” on Sputnik’s English-language site turned up 15 results over the past 12 months.² Poland has the largest number of members of the European Parliament of any of the CEE states—51. Of those, 23 belong to the center-right European People’s Party (EPP), and five to the Socialists, the two most important groupings in the legislature; 19 belong to the Euroskeptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

Given this number and diversity of representatives, and the tendency of MEPs to scatter quotes like confetti to interested journalists, it would be legitimate to assume that Sputnik could find numerous Polish MEPs to cite on issues of importance.

Yet 10 of its 15 reports referred solely to Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a conservative politician who founded his own party (called “Korwin”) and who is not a member of any of the European Parliament’s political groupings. Korwin-Mikke polled just over 3 percent in Poland’s presidential election on May 10th, 2015.³ As a non-aligned MEP, he is out of reach of all the main levers of influence in the legislature. Yet Sputnik published a commentary calling his election to the Parliament in 2014 “the greatest sensation” of the poll and described the anti-EU protest movement to which he belongs in Poland as “one of the fastest growing parties in Poland, appealing to both young and old people.”⁴

By contrast, Sputnik’s coverage of rival presidential candidate and former rock star Pawel Kukiz, who polled six times more votes than Korwin-Mikke, was limited to just two quotes, one from his Facebook page accusing the media of bias, the other from a TV interview lashing out at refugees from Syria.⁵

The journalistic decision to give Korwin-Mikke such disproportionate coverage is striking. In terms of propaganda, however, its logic is clear. Over the past year, Sputnik has variously quoted Korwin-Mikke as opposing EU “totalitarianism”; stating that the snipers who shot anti-government demonstrators in Kiev during the protests of late 2013 and early 2014 were trained by the CIA in Poland; accusing the United States of wanting to start a war of aggression against Russia; saying that Russia should be Poland’s ally against Ukrainian extremists; and claiming that only Russia can end the conflict in Syria.

Equally significantly, a number of these quotes were given directly either to Sputnik or to its sister Russian-language agency, RIA Novosti. This coverage did not include balancing quotes from other, mainstream sources, leaving Korwin-Mikke’s quotes to stand unchallenged as assertions of an alleged truth. Sputnik has presumably used Korwin-Mikke as a regular source of anti-Western and pro-Russian quotes, despite his lack of political importance, precisely because his comments reflect the Kremlin’s chosen narratives; and it has chosen not to balance his comments with other points of view because that would weaken their impact.

Sputnik's Polish-language wire gives Korwin-Mikke similar exposure, quoting him 15 times in the past six months on issues including U.S. hostility to Russia and Ukrainian hostility to Poland.⁶ One particularly striking piece reported on a petition to Ukraine that Korwin-Mikke had signed demanding that Ukraine investigate the detention of "political prisoners."⁷

Korwin-Mikke's co-signatories on that occasion included the Czech Communist MEP Miloslav Ransdorf, who is another go-to source of anti-Western quotes for Sputnik. Over the past four months, this politician has been quoted six times by Sputnik's English service, three times in the shape of interviews given directly to the wire. His comments included a claim that NATO has lost its reason for existence, criticism of the EU's response to the refugee crisis, accusations that the Ukrainian government is undemocratic, and the claim that Europeans are "useful idiots" used by the United States for its own ends.

In five of the six reports, Ransdorf was the only source of commentary; the sixth concerned the petition, which was quoted at length, without any balancing comments.

Of the Czech Republic's 21 MEPs, Sputnik has quoted five others in addition to Ransdorf at various times. Christian Democrat Jaromir Stetina was the focus of one highly critical article after he invited the leader of Ukraine's Azov Battalion to address the legislature. Sputnik's reporting balanced two paragraphs of indirect Stetina quotes with two paragraphs of direct quotes from an analyst calling Stetina "the kind of man who always root(s) for radicals of every hue, from neo-Nazis to Islamic fundamentalists."⁸

Euroskeptic Petr Mach fared better, being quoted three times—twice as attacking the euro, once as attacking the EU's plan to push through quotas on sharing refugees among member states. Mach, like Korwin-Mikke, is the founder of his own anti-EU protest party and its only representative in the European Parliament, where he sits in the Euroskeptic group Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD). As with Korwin-Mikke, stories quoting Mach at length did not provide counterquotes from any other lawmakers. Also like Korwin-Mikke, Mach was approached for comments directly by Sputnik - for an interview on why euro adoption would be bad for his country.⁹ Three others—Christian Democrat Pavel Svoboda, Liberal Martina Dlabajova and Socialist Jan Keller—were quoted once each as criticizing the EU's refugee policies.

Thus, of the 12 recent Sputnik reports quoting Czech MEPs, six quoted the Communist Ransdorf, three the Euroskeptic Mach, two quoted Christian Democrats, and one quoted a Socialist and a Liberal together. Sputnik approached three for interviews: Ransdorf, Mach and Dlabajova.

This almost perfectly inverts the weight of the MEPs' respective groupings in the Parliament. The Christian Democrats are the most numerous, followed by the Socialists, Liberals, Communists and extreme Euroskeptics, in that order.

Again, the decision to prefer politicians from small parties, especially protest ones, over mainstream commentators from larger parties can only realistically be explained by a desire to promote their anti-establishment opinions. This is particularly clear given that Ransdorf belongs to the hard left and Mach to the hardline Euroskeptic right, with their only uniting factor being their opposition to the mainstream.

In other words, what counts for Sputnik in its choice of commentators in the Czech Republic and Poland appears to be, *not balance, but the exact opposite: one-sided hostility to the mainstream.*

A similar pattern applies across CEE. Of Estonia's six MEPs, only two have been mentioned by Sputnik. One—former Foreign Minister Urmas Paet—was one of a number of commentators quoted as criticizing a racist arson attack linked (at least by Sputnik) to an Estonian military officer. The other was independent politician Indrek Tarand, quoted at length and without countervailing voices as calling President Toomas Hendrik Ilves “irresponsible” for his portrayal of Russia.

Of Latvia's eight MEPs, Sputnik has interviewed only one, the left-wing Tatjana Ždanoka, who is barred from public office in her homeland because of her opposition to Latvia's restoration of independence from the USSR in 1991. It has in fact interviewed her twice recently. One interview, picked up from RIA Novosti, focused on her prediction that the Parliament would condemn Russia in a resolution. The other headlined her as saying that the Baltic states are promoting Russophobia in Europe; it did not provide any quotes to represent an alternative point of view. Yet again, Ždanoka is the only member of her party—listed by the Parliament as the Latvian Russian Union—to be represented in the Parliament, where she sits with the Greens, one of its smaller fractions.

The only one of Lithuania's 11 MEPs to be mentioned at all is perhaps an unusual choice: center-right politician Gabrielius Landsbergis, an outspoken critic of Russia. As a regular critic of the Kremlin and a member of a mainstream party, he appears an unusual choice for Sputnik. However, yet again, the content is more important than the speaker. Of his four mentions—all from public comments, none from direct approaches by Sputnik—one was a criticism of Ukraine for failing to implement reforms, while one was a suggestion that Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine form a joint army unit before considering an application to join NATO. Both of these comments could be construed as in line with Kremlin preferences for portraying Ukraine as ineffective and corrupt and opposing any rapid NATO expansion.

The other two concerned the resolution that Landsbergis launched on EU relations with Russia. While he was quoted, his report was glossed by Sputnik—in an ostensible news report rather than an opinion piece—as “nonfactual,” “anti-Russian,” “senseless” and “trying to undermine the possibility of a future dialogue between the EU and Russia.” As such, his inclusion can hardly be presented as an attempt at journalistic balance.

Conclusion

Such cases as these are only the tip of the iceberg. Initial research suggests that Sputnik's policy of providing a platform for anti-establishment and pro-Russian politicians by repeatedly coming to them for comments, while all but excluding mainstream voices, reaches well beyond CEE, and beyond the European Parliament. However, further research lies beyond the scope of this paper.

What is clear is that Sputnik does grant disproportionate coverage to protest, anti-establishment and pro-Russian MEPs from CEE; that it does so systematically; and that even when it quotes mainstream politicians, it chooses comments that fit the wider narrative of a corrupt, decadent and Russophobic West.

As such, at least in a European Parliament context, Sputnik embodies the Russian military doctrine of making "wide use of the protest potential" of the legislature to promote the Kremlin's chosen messages of disinformation.

Endnotes

1. "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," December 25, 2014, <http://www.rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>.
2. For more information see: <http://sputniknews.com/search/?query=Polish+MEP>.
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