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Social Influence Operations of the Russian Federation and Belarus in a Context of Accusations against the Polish Central PSYOPS Group of Conducting Subversive Activity in Belarus

Operacje wpływu społecznego Federacji Rosyjskiej i Białorusi w kontekście oskarżeń Centralnej Grupy Działań Psychologicznych o prowadzenie działalności wyrotowej na Białorusi

• Abstract •

This paper presents basic methods and measures used to conduct social influence operations, indicating their metamorphosis associated with conditions characteristic for shaping public opinion by the Russian Federation and Belarus. Furthermore, the analysis covered mechanisms of informational influence used when creating accusations directed at the Polish Central PSYOPS Group, concerning conducting subversive activities in Belarus. The emphasis is put on their comprehensive nature, enabling effective influence both on international entities, and on individual targets. A significant part of this article concerns an analysis focusing on distribution of information, as well as applied techniques, tools and communication channels, used in social influence operations. The influence and the role of mass media in shaping of awareness was presented, revealing mechanisms for creating the cognitive space.

• Abstrakt •

W artykule ukazano zasadnicze sposoby i środki prowadzenia operacji wpływu społecznego, wskazując na jego przemiany związane z uwarunkowaniami charakterystycznymi dla kreowania opinii publicznej przez Federację Rosyjską i Białoruś. Ponadto poddano analizie mechanizmy oddziaływania informacyjnego wykorzystywane podczas wysuwania oskarżeń wobec Centralnej Grupy Działań Psychologicznych dotyczących prowadzenia działalności wyrotowej na Białorusi. Podkreślono kompleksowość prowadzenia operacji, umożliwiającą skuteczne oddziaływanie zarówno na podmioty międzynarodowe, jak i na pojedyncze obiekty oddziaływania. W treści artykułu znaczące miejsce zajmuje analiza rozpowszechniania informacji, stosowane techniki, narzędzia i kanały komunikacyjne, znajdujące swe zastosowanie w operacjach wpływu społecznego. Zaprezentowane zostały wpływ i rola mediów masowych w kształtowaniu świadomości, co pozwoliło ujawnić mechanizmy kreowania przestrzeni poznawczej.

Keywords: disinformation; influence operation; Russia; Belarus; information warfare; misleading practices

Słowa kluczowe: dezinformacja; operacja wpływu; Rosja; Białoruś; walka informacyjna; wprowadzanie w błąd

Introduction

The aim of this article was to present an evolution of the social influence operations, i.e., a targeted use of a number of techniques and procedures intended to mislead the opponent and public opinion. The research was an attempt at finding answers to the following main research question: What was the course of the process of informational influence conducted in relation to a migration crisis in the Russian and Belarusian information operation? The author analysed reasons for making Poland the main target for the Russian and Belarusian disinformation operations, the objectives of those operations, Belarusian and Russian issues being a target for informational narration directed at Poland, and a basis for effectiveness of those social influence operations.

The information domain becoming a battleground

Information has always greatly influenced our security. News, both true and distorted, have shaped our perception of described events. Similarly as in the past, their contents may become a source of numerous hazards of varying nature and magnitude. The contemporary information flow is characterised by high dynamics, and thus determines international relations, to a large extent stimulated by the civilisational development. The factor that distinguishes 21st century is the increase in the political activity of societies, motivated mainly by completely unrestrained information flow. Those components significantly influence relations between individual entities and result from the security, both on interior national, as well as on international level. The conflicts at the end of the 20th century and the contemporary ones are conducted in a space between peace and war. They are waged without any formal declaration. This status of aggression below the threshold of war, misleading for many, is permanently used by aggressors. At this stage of the fight, non-military measures of acts of war prevail.

Developed countries increasingly intensively involve in creating effective resources and methods to wage the information war. It is a consequence of the increasing importance of information attack and, in consequence, achievement

of established targets during military operations. According to military strategists, a targeted information pressure on political and military administration centres, population and military forces of the enemy may result in a quick and effective achievement of an aim of that pressure, without losses in live forces on both sides. Analyses of the literature on this subjects, as well as of occurring events show that Russians not only use proven methods of conducting information activities, but also creatively develop them, regularly adding new ones to their arsenal.

Referring to information operations, Aleksandr Gelyevich Dugin, the leading ideologist of Russian neo-imperialism and advisor of Russian president Vladimir Putin and his generals, says that when they are effectively conducted, a conflict can be won without a need to ensure in advance that own forces outnumber the enemy, even in a traditional battlefield. This component of the adopted strategy should be considered most original and requiring the greatest attention. One of its manifestations are actions aiming at disrupting public order and destabilising the internal situation. Such situation results in escalation of social tensions, leading to social atomisation and polarisation. In consequence, decision making processes are disrupted, leading to destabilisation of international cooperation. The opponent loses a position of a responsible and reliable partner in the international scene, especially in the economic, energy or other contexts, important from Moscow's point of view. Another, and frequently simultaneous action is creation of a negative image of the opponent, depreciating its authorities, antagonising societies, presenting it as an intolerant, xenophobic, or fascist aggressor. Yet another activity is to create an impression that Russia is more threatening than it actually is, to discourage the West from escalating conflicts and from military involvement in them.

The offensive in media uses both traditional and completely new forms of operation, thus supporting the assumed narration. These activities are closely coordinated with wider goals and operations conducted by Moscow. A range of activities attack across the Western system of values, democracy and trust in national and international institutions. They undermine political, economic and social systems, integration processes, credibility, and the sense of security arising from membership in supranational structures, and decentralising actions aimed at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union and all other forms of trans-Atlantic dialogue and partnership, and at coordination of actions intended to strengthen resistance and defence capabilities against information threats from Russia.

Confirmation of the described course of actions can be found in the published brief on the concept for waging a war of a new generation, presented by General of the Army Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff. The document was officially presented at the Academy of the Armed Forces on January 25, 2014, and

its discussion was published on February 27, 2013 (Kasprzycki, 2018, p. 196). In subsequent year, the updated Military doctrine of the Russian Federation, signed by Russian president Vladimir Putin on December 26, 2014, was published. The doctrine “sanctions” the new generation of wars; this means that a scenario of possible subliminal aggression needs to be taken into account. In this doctrine, also a tendency for moving war hazards and threats to the information space can be noted. In terms of main internal war hazards, activities concerning information influence on the society are also identified, aimed primary at young citizens, to disturb historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions of defending the home country. The above threats should also be treated as those that threaten others. Since we are afraid of them, it means we are aware of their great influence and far-reaching social consequences. That doctrine, characterising features and characteristic of modern war conflicts, also refers to a comprehensive use of military, political, economic, and information forces, and other non-military resources, executed with the use of a potential for protests of the population and forces conducting special operations. It emphasises that the influence on the opponent will take place throughout the entire depth of the territory, in the environment of the global information space. In its doctrine, RF also includes, among the fundamental tasks concerning deterrence and prevention of armed conflicts, the creation of conditions ensuring reduction of risks, the use of information and communication technologies for military and political purposes as a part of implementation of actions contrary to the international law and directed against sovereignty, political independence, territorial integration of countries and representing a threat to the international peace, security, and global and regional stability. That is, in fact, what it does itself to destabilise other countries within its operational interests. It is also worth emphasising the implementation of basic tasks in the field of building and developing the armed forces and state security services, which include ensuring information security for the power departments. Thus, having the sword ready, now the shield is being constructed.

Russian and Belarusian disinformation activities

In the contemporary world, information has become one of the most desirable commodities. Today, the security of a state, or even international communities, to a large extent depends on it and its correct use. Due to a complexity of mechanisms of creating and implementing information in an emergency situation, and in particular, the information policy of Kremlin, many government administrative bodies and organisations of interinstitutional cooperation are involved in this process. Such

advantage achieved by the state apparatus when an emergency situation occurs seems to be priceless. In the discussed situation, the conducted information policy consistent with strategic objectives of the state allows, on one hand, to build trust of own citizens, and on the other, to establish in the international community a narration consistent with own national interests. Zbigniew Brzeziński, a distinguished expert on the security issues, used to say “who makes the first move and releases the information, may impose their own interpretation on the entire event” (Wiśnicki, 2019, p. 14).

Information activities concerning the political situation in Belarus became one of the crucial elements of the information war waged by Russia against the trans-Atlantic and European community. And Poland is the main international entity on which these activities are focused, and through which other international entities are influenced. The country on the Vistula has been accused of interfering with internal affairs of Belarus on numerous occasions.

To fully understand the discussed issues, it is necessary to recall the political and media background of those events. The beginning of the information offensive can be dated to August 2020, when anti-regimen protests stimulated by results of the presidential election rigged by Alexander Lukashenko’s regime, were gaining in strength in Belarus. Starting with this event, we have been noting intensified activities of Russia and Belarus in the information space, directed against certain NATO and European Union states. The main axis for information and psychological activities is formed by Poland, the United States, Lithuania, and Ukraine. The common denominator for all these countries was condemnation of actions undertaken by the ruling circles and support for the protesters. The firm reaction of the international community resulted in numerous accusations of interfering with internal affairs of Belarus, or even of inspiring the colour revolution, issued by governments in Moscow and Minsk. Other claims, frequently used in the social discourse, included instigation and support of separatists trends in the Grodno District, preparing ground for the NATO intervention, conducting the historical policy that depreciated merits of Russia during the World War II, and preparation of an armed coup to remove the last dictator of Europe. It should be emphasised that the basic, although unspoken, aim pursued by the propaganda bodies was to take the attention away from actual causes of social discontent, and to build into awareness of own societies a conviction of being trapped at the international level, which is one of vectors adopted in the Eastern narration. It should also be noted that simultaneously undertaken activities delegitimised citizen initiatives and bottom-up oppositional political activities, presenting them as a collaboration with the external enemy. This multi-aspect operation aimed, on one hand, at consolidating the society

around the government, which thus justified the use of brutal methods of repression necessary for defence against external aggressors, while on the other, at weakening the process of European and trans-Atlantic integration and cooperation. The term ‘colour revolution’ refers to social mass protests against undemocratic authorities. It was first used to characterise protests against Slobodan Milošević in Serbia in 2000, and then the Georgia’s Rose Revolution in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. The term ‘colour revolution’ is also used for mass protests which recently took place in the majority of post-Soviet states and in regions of Middle East and North Africa (e.g., the Arab Spring). In Kremlin opinion, these events were inspired and controlled by the West, to weaken Russian influences in the area of its privileged interests, the proof of which is to be the financial, organisational and training support for non-government organisations that played an important role in coordinating the protests and maintaining social mobilisation. The Russian narration uses the term ‘hybrid war’ to describe the support for democratic transformation offered by the West, and this stands in stark contrast to the western understanding of this term, assigned mainly to aggressive actions undertaken by Russia against Ukraine (Bouchet, 2016).

The author presented the most commonly used disinformation mechanisms (Kupiecki, 2021, p. 16) on a basis of actions undertaken against Poland, using as the example an accusation directed at the Polish Central PSYOPS Group (Polish abbreviation: CGDP) from Bydgoszcz (a Polish military unit specialising in psychological activities – the CGDP soldiers performed such activities, for example, during peace missions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Kacala, 2014, pp. 12–23)) of initiating and controlling mass protests in Belarus. The term ‘black spiders’ refers to the unit’s identification badges (YouTube, 2021a).

Before a detailed discussion, it should be emphasised that disinformation in Russian version is closely associated with traditional diplomacy and “soft power”, as it has a form of trade and cultural associations, and promotes the strategic narration. It is distributed through official sources that interact, with an increased force, to shape the opinion of targets for the activities. The researcher Joanna Darczewska is of the opinion that “for Russia, disinformation is an attractive tool for many reasons: it has an extensive transborder reach, is inexpensive and anonymous, allows hiding the identity of a disinformant, and enables implementation of objectives of the Kremlin policy. Today, multidimensional disinformation campaigns are indispensable for Russia. They lead to weakening of the morale of opponents, introduce chaos and uncertainty in their ranks, and reduce their will to fight, disintegrating their forces and resources. A tendency to expand the executive and conceptual resources for the influencing operations needs to be emphasised” (Darczewska, 2017).

Returning to the main subject, on February 25, 2021, the program *Paniatnaja Polityka* (English: Understandable Truth) was broadcast by the Belarusian national channel TV BT1. The video material was broadcast as a part of a series of weekly Monday reportages, in episode 47 *Psychology of Deception – Black Spiders* (YouTube, 2021b). To increase the range for distribution of this material, it was also published on youtube.com (YouTube, 2021c) and on all main social media: OK (Ok.ru, 2021), VK (VK, 2022), Twitter (TT, 2022), Facebook (FB, 2022), Telegram (T.me, 2022).

The programme host, Sergey Husachenko, suggests that there are “three fists” of Western propaganda aimed at Belarus:

- political – concerning the governmental programme “Solidarity with Belarus”;
- media – concerning financing of TV Bielsat and Radio Racyja; and
- military – concerning the hybrid war conducted by CGDP.

The authors of this programme did not provide any evidence confirming the CGDP involvement in activities in Belarus, and to give the credibility to their thesis, they invited a numerous group of alleged experts to expose supposed hybrid activities of Western special forces. One of them was doctor Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Malkiewicz, a popular Russian journalist and TV personality, who specialises in issues of social and political communications. He is a deputy chairman of the Commission for Development of Information Society, Media, and Mass Communication, and a president of the Foundation for Protection of National Values, established to promote the ideology of *Russkiy Mir* in the Russian Federation and beyond its borders. Without providing sources of information, he said that “200 specialists in psychology, sociology and IT, of whom 70 percent knows several foreign languages”, serve in CGDP. Malkiewicz’s opinion was seconded by Colonel Sergey Vladislavovich Kozlov, an expert in military issues, a veteran of the Special Forces of the Main Directorate, an author of books *Specnaz GRU* and *Specnaz GRU2*, and a journalist specialising in military subjects, mainly publishing studies in journals *Soldier of Success*, *Little Brother*, *Version*, *Specnaz*, or *Sergeant*, awarded the Order of the Red Star and the Order of the Red Banner for his services to the USSR army (Szabelak, 2020). Another expert strengthening those intoxicated contents was Aleksei Avdonin, an analyst from the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, cooperating with numerous news and analytical portals, and an author of the journal *Bankovskiy Vestnik*. Yet another guest of that programme was Thomas Röper, a German journalist living in Russia for 20 years and having a status of an expert on the issues of Russia and Easter Europe, frequently presenting his views in the Voice of Europe channel. The selection of people providing specific information should be noted, ensuring that continuously presented content was as effective as possible. The main theses presented during

the programme included the information that “black spiders identify leaders of opinion in social networks by publishing specific information online, and then communicate with them and recruit for cooperation” (Belsat, 2021), that CGDP consists of headquarters and the intelligence centre. There is a department for information collection and processing that analyses press and other open sources. The second department operates in the area of English-speaking countries. The third one focuses on Eastern Europe. The fourth is created especially for “countries with conflict situation” (Szabelak, 2020). A similar narration was constructed in the programme *Contours*, broadcast by Belarusian national channel ONT (*Kontury*, 2021; Szabelak, 2020), as well as in Russian paper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, where Colonel Kozlov suggested that CGDP is responsible for materials broadcast by Nexta and Nexta Live channels, and that “Polish intelligence, on the U.S. request, recruits and sends Ukrainian saboteurs to Belarus” (Stešin, 2020). In the interview with Dmitry Steshyn, a reporter of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, one of the largest newspapers in Russia, Kozlov argues that “Specially trained people translate protests into conflict situations and direct clashes with authorities. Then the ‘Central Group’ steps in, makes necessary adjustments and coordinates activities. Falsified content [so-called ‘fake news’ – ed.] is published, and our Slavic mentality does not allow us to doubt information sent to us on a messenger or a social network by our friend. Information is published, and then people’s reaction is monitored – if anybody starts to actively comment or distribute the fake news. They contact those activists and propose them cooperation. And people are selected from this mass, and they become provocateurs” (Szabelak, 2020).

The published interview also focuses on functioning tools of influence, listing independent media in Belarusian language operating in Poland, such as TV Bielsat, Radio Racyja and Euroradio in the border region, European Radio for Belarus, and the independent portal Charter 97. Thus, we see here maligning of the opinion and depreciation of media independent from Belarus. The part concerning Polish ambitions represents a significant area of the presented narration. Further in the interview, he says that Poland, after joining the EU and NATO, has “serious ambitions” and that Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania are “territories belonging to the Polish Republic”, and Warsaw dreams about restoring under its leadership that political formation incorporating those countries – so “Polish revanchism will continue to develop”, he adds (Szabelak, 2020). The president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, in his speech before the National Assembly of Belarus said: “This already happened in the history 80 years ago, when Poland participated in the Partition of Czechoslovakia together with Nazi Germany. Today, they want the entire Belarus, not just Eastern Borderland” (Wyrwał, 2022).

The techniques most frequently used by the Russian Federation and Belarus, and applied to the discussed material, should be emphasised. They belong to the arsenal of the propaganda campaign accusing Poland, as well as the Baltic states and the U.S., of conducting subversion operations in Belarus since August 2020. In the analysed material, a number of persuasion techniques were used to develop and emphasise the message. The first of them, appearing at the beginning of analysed material, is a technique called ‘poisoning the well’ in psychology, meaning, presenting at the beginning of a message such information that will influence an audience in a way ensuring that they will understand it in a specific way, even before learning its contents. And this is also the case here. The material was entitled *Psychology of Deception: Black Spiders*, and additionally used an image of a human brain and an image of a hand holding a human figure on strings, which the audience unambiguously associates with information that they will be shown deceit, control or manipulation. The entire picture is completed by the logo of the Polish Central PSYOPS Group, aiming here at automatic association of negative features with the discussed military unit; especially that the CGDP logo contains a sword and a spider. This procedure is called personification, and in this specific case, CGDP soldiers are to be negatively associated with a sword, used to kill, and a spider who by constructing a net destroys an enemy that is much stronger than it. It is worth noting that the picture formed this way appears many times as a shot between individual parts of the material, indicating that the psychological mere-exposure effect was also applied. It is a phenomenon by which the more and more frequently we are exposed to a given subject, the more we are familiar with and accept the presented situation. The exposure effect was applied not only to the described picture, but also to the entire material, which is a continuation of two previous ones; however, in this case CGDP was presented in more detail as that military unit that allegedly conduct information and psychological operations to destabilise situation in Belarus. The professional way in which the broadcast material was prepared should be noted – with rich graphics and computer effects, movement of fixed elements, or presentation of documents increase the audience conviction that the message is authentic, and makes the presented contents more attractive. Furthermore, the audience attention is focused on the nature of provided information, maintained in a convention of disclosing sensational news. The words of the programme host: “We reveal secrets of ‘black spiders’”, repeated many times, are an example here. This sentence is a strong emotional stimulus, influencing the active zone of the recipient. Another technique used to reinforce the message is giving it credibility by specifying a precise location of the unit on the satellite map of the area (“they exist and we know where”), and providing detailed data on CGDP: structures with the Centre of Intelligence and its

tasks specified, the Radio Station as a form of training; and equipment, including the name of an electroacoustic broadcasting system (OMAN) with which CGDP is equipped (in fact, it is at a design stage). The authors applied a method for giving credibility by confirming the disinformation thesis in numerous and various information channels, a technique called in psychology an argument *ad nauseum* (to the point of nausea). It assumes that if something is repeated multiple times, then it is definitely true. Another technique applied is the heuristics of anchoring and adjustment. This technique is based on a very simple mechanism of subjecting to the influence of presented information, even when it is false or incomplete. We use a given information as a base (anchor ourselves) to draw conclusions or express our opinion (we adjust). The technique used belongs to very effective ones, and on this the authors of the programme, who used it, possibly counted. The message is simple, presented in a tabloid style, and adopted to the mass audience. It is clearly stated who is good and who is bad. To improve the credibility, the sender refers to opinions of “experts”, consistent with an official version of leading decision makers. The entire discourse is based on an emotional assessment of presented facts. The discussed material also uses existing stereotypes and cognitive simplifications. The texts quoted above represent another attempt to justify a thesis that external factors are solely responsible for the situation in Belarus, and it is a consequence of intense informational and psychological actions of countries of the West. The authors of those programmes try to give credibility to its message through a clear binary, antinomic division of reality in the message: ‘we – good’, ‘they – bad’. The primary aim of this action is to create in the audience a sense of the “fortress under siege” and to reinforce the citizens’ conviction that the political course of Russian and Belarusian authorities is right.

It should be emphasised that it is not the first time when Belarusian national media look for leaders and causes of mass protests in their country to Poland and its allies. That direction was specified for them by president Alexander Lukashenko already in 1996, when he accused Poland and NATO of interfering with internal affairs of Belarus. According to the Belarusian leader, Poland and Lithuania aim at disrupting the integrity of the country, to occupy the Grodno District. To synchronise efforts in this respect, a special centre coordinating protests probably operates near Warsaw. To prevent possible Polish and Lithuanian invasion, the president concentrated significant military forces near Grodno, which concentration remained there to the end of August 2020. Another example of constructed narration is the accusations made by Russian president Vladimir Putin in 2015, in which he alleged that Poland and the United States trained Ukrainian militia and inspired the revolution on Maidan (Korciszewski, 2017), and sent foreign fighters

from the NATO's Foreign Legion to fights in the Donbass (Rękawek, 2015, p. 1). Furthermore, in March 2017, Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine were accused by the Belarusian president of training and financing the White Legion. That Belarusian national and patriotic organisation, established in the middle of 1990s, was accused of preparing an armed coup. The alleged plot was to be prevented by KGB and end with arrests of 35 of alleged provocateurs accused of founding an illegal armed organisation. The disinformational nature of those allegations is proven by the fact that the organisation ended its activities in 2005, and weapons seized by KGB were replicas used for historical re-enactment.

Conclusion

Disinformation is one of the most serious threats to the contemporary society. Development of modern technologies, including the Internet, provided, e.g., access to many sources of information, and enabled sharing it in a real time and without any limitations. With the speed of its distribution, the possibilities for manipulation and modification of information, and in consequence, creation of false messages, also increased. As Marek Wrzosek, Szymon Markiewicz and Zbigniew Modrzejewski describe in their joint publication, a frequent tool in this area is creating various types of more or less fictional threats (from specific countries, international organisations, international corporations, or criminal groups). Illusions of a lack, of losing something (territory, resources, etc.), myths, stereotypes, collective images of the space (e.g., a community of the Orthodox Church civilisation) are developed and collective historical representations are created (Wrzosek, Markiewicz, & Modrzejewski, 2019, p. 20). This is also true for the discussed research problem, the analysis of which shows that Russian and Belarusian disinformation activities against Poland and other NATO and EU countries aim at magnifying the external threat on one hand, while on the other they are used to discredit all signs of oppositional activities amongst their own citizens. This also means accusing its own society of participation in the colour revolution inspired from outside or a new generation warfare, as well as cooperation with foreign intelligence forces. The regime in Minsk, using tools of soft influence, attempts to delegitimise mass protest movements and to achieve its demobilisation. Poland is presented as one of main external enemies responsible for the situation in Belarus. The evaluation of effectiveness of disinformative influences is difficult due to limited possibilities to conduct opinion polls in Belarus or obtaining reliable results of such surveys. It should be assumed that Russian and Belarusian informative and psychological activities directed against the country on the Vistula

will be continued, having so far a systemic character. Their range and intensity will depend on the current political and military situation. We can expect intensified activities in this areas mainly due to the situation on the Poland-Belarus border and the situation in Ukraine. On the other hand, the goals of Russian and Belarusian actions in the information space will focus on intimidation of societies of countries of the Eastern NATO flank with a threat of an armed conflict, consolidation of Russian and Belarusian society around the alleged continuous threat from the West aiming at overthrowing governments in Moscow and Minsk, and preparing a potential provocation that may turn into a beginning of a kinetic conflict. In this respect, the person of deserter Emil Czeczko, who was talking about mass graves of refugees, is used with increasing intensity. On the other hand, on masking preparations for real kinetic actions against Ukraine. The more so that the suggested violations of human rights, the images of suffering of hundreds of children, who are freezing cold and lacking any medical and logistical facilities, and women camped at the border fence, attract the attention of the Western world, giving an opportunity for less attention-grabbing activities, focusing and rallying, and thus preparing for tough action against Ukraine.

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