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## Methodological Framework of Contemporary Propaganda in the Case of Post-Soviet Countries of the Caspian Sea Region

### Ramy metodologiczne współczesnej propagandy na przykładzie poradzieckich krajów regionu Morza Kaspijskiego

#### • Abstrakt •

Rozwój mediów społecznościowych umożliwia rządów coraz łatwiejszy dostęp do społeczeństwa. Zasoby ropy i gazu w poradzieckich krajach regionu Morza Kaspijskiego sprawiają, że obszary te stają się ogniskiem kampanii propagandowych. Dlatego głównym celem artykułu jest stworzenie mapy współczesnej propagandy poprzez zbadanie jej cech, narzędzi, typów i strategii, ale również ograniczeń, oraz zastosowanie jej do opisu poradzieckich krajów regionu Morza Kaspijskiego. Podstawowa definicja propagandy przebadana została metodą analizy teoretycznej. Natomiast w części empirycznej w artykule przeanalizowano techniki dezinformacji, fałszywe wiadomości, działalność internetowych trolli oraz nagrania wideo jako składowe strategii propagandowej rządów w poradzieckich krajach regionu Morza Kaspijskiego. Jakościowa analiza treści okazała się przydatna do badania wiadomości, tekstów, filmów i obrazów udostępnianych w mediach społecznościowych. Analiza opisowa ma na celu zbadanie różnorodności kampanii propagandowych w omawianym regionie, natomiast metoda wywiadów ustruk-

#### • Abstract •

Development of social media creates possibility for governments of easy access to society. Oil and gas resources in post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region make this region the focal point of propaganda campaigns. Therefore, the main aim of the paper is to create a map of contemporary propaganda by investigating its characteristics, tools, types and strategies as well as limitations, and applying it to the post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region. The main definition of propaganda is investigated with theoretical analysis method. In the empirical part, the paper analyzes disinformation, fake news, trolls, and videos as propaganda strategy of governments in the case of post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region. Qualitative content analysis is useful to investigate news, texts, videos, and images shared on social media. Descriptive analysis is set up to research multiplicity of propaganda campaigns in the mentioned region. Structured interview method will be used with propaganda experts to analyze their opinion on contemporary propaganda and persuasion.

turyzowanych została wykorzystana w dialogu z ekspertami zajmującymi się propagandą do analizy ich opinii na temat współczesnej propagandy i metod perswazji.

Podsumowując, dzięki rozwojowi nowych technologii kampanie propagandowe zyskują na sile perswazji. Nie ulega wątpliwości, że zasady ich działania w miarę upływu czasu będą ewoluować.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Rosja; Kazachstan; perswazja; trolling; Turkmenistan

To summarize, propaganda campaigns are more persuasive according to new technologies. There is no doubt that its working principles will evolve as time goes on. This paper investigates the working principles of contemporary propaganda in the case of post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region. Thus, this work is hoped to create a framework for further analysis of the methodology of contemporary propaganda.

**Keywords:** Russia; Kazakhstan; persuasion; trolling; Turkmenistan

## Introduction

Propaganda is already a familiar phenomenon in society. According to political scientist Harold Lasswell, propaganda “is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols” (Lasswell, 1927). Another definition is that propaganda activities should be perceived as “communications from a government to its own citizens, other governmental personnel, or foreign audiences in general” (Speier, 1950). There is a huge gap between classic and contemporary propaganda. Most people use social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and so on. Using the same platforms makes the possibility for the government to reach members of society straightforwardly. The main reason why people are the victims of this manipulation is that they are not aware of information, whether it is false or true. The majority of social media users accept information they face as true without fact-checking. The believers of misinformation have a huge impact on others. This is how government spreads disinformation between people in social media.

As a result of development in technology, Russian propaganda campaigns became more sophisticated. For instance, during the 2016 USA presidential elections, more than 50,000 Russia-linked bots were used to change the tendency of online voting. Also, the troll factory of Russia affected the public mind of Americans (Hindman & Barash, 2018, pp. 13–16). As has been seen, contemporary propaganda is more active and sophisticated than the traditional one. Thus, this paper investigates characteristics, tools, types and strategies as well as limitations of modern propaganda by analysing it in the case of the post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region. The reason why this region has been selected as a case study in this paper is rising interest in this region because of its natural oil and gas (Fletcher et al., 2018). Different policies in Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan require plenty of propaganda strategies. The multiplicity of propa-

ganda campaigns allows researchers to analyze tools, strategies, techniques, and limitations of modern propaganda in the wider sense.

**The research objective** is to analyze the main work principles of contemporary propaganda campaign in the post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region.

**The main aim** is to create a map of contemporary propaganda by investigating its characteristics, tools, types and strategies as well as limitations, and applying it to the post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region.

**Objectives:**

1. To research the main strategies, techniques, characteristics, and limitations of propaganda and manufacturing of consent;
2. To analyse the efficiency of propaganda in post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region;
3. To create a map of contemporary propaganda in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the case of those countries;
4. To give a conclusion as an evaluation of research.

**Research Method.** The definition of propaganda is investigated with theoretical analysis method. In the empirical part, the paper analyzes disinformation, fake news, trolls, and videos as propaganda strategy of governments in the case of post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region. Qualitative content analysis is useful to investigate news, texts, videos, and images shared on social media. Descriptive analysis is set up to research multiplicity of propaganda campaigns in the mentioned region. Structured interview method will be used with propaganda experts to analyze their opinion on contemporary propaganda and persuasion.

## ***Russia Today as a Propaganda Machine***

Russia is a big factory which uses social media as propaganda. The pro-governmental mainstream media of Russia named *Russia Today* (RT) is an international TV funded by the Russian government (Paul & Matthews, 2016). The program schedules of RT International includes around-the-clock news bulletins, documentaries, talk shows, debates, sports news, and cultural programmes which interpret global events in the view of Russia. RT broadcasts those contents in English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and some Eastern European languages. The channel is claimed to have more than a billion page views (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). RT – known as the main information source in Russia, Caucasus, Caspian region – broadcasts news which carries propaganda purposes (Paul & Matthews, 2016). RT does not only hold anti-Western propaganda, but also

attempts to create fear within other countries of the Caspian Sea region to prevent any further alliance with Europe which contradicts the interests of Kremlin. For instance, few minutes after Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev spoke about his resignation live on Facebook, the RT media shared this news on the website and later on Facebook and Twitter under the title "Kazakhstan to Remain Russia's Key Ally after Nazarbayev Resigns as President" (Russia Today, 2019). In a personal interview with Professor Gintautas Mazeikis, he noted that in this region, all this information is not for a large audience. For Russia and Kazakhstan, the most important thing here is the peaceful transformation of power. Thus, the main target is elites who get 80% or 90% of benefits from relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan (Mazeikis, 2019).

Contemporary Russian propaganda is continuous and very responsive to events. Because they do not reflect objective reality to masses, Russian propagandists do not do fact-checking to confirm the truth of news; they propagate an interpretation of breaking news in favour of their interests. This strategy creates an image of RT as a media channel that broadcasts news first. RT repeated the same above mentioned news with different titles and keywords and interpreted it according to their wishes. So if the people hear any information from others about the resignation of Nazarbayev, they will search it on Google. RT will be on the top among results because they shared this news first and repeated it. So the majority of the audience will trust their interpretations. Shortly, first impressions are very effective (Paul & Matthews, 2016). According to Ian Maynard Begg, Ann Anas, and Suzanne Farinacci (1992), repeated information creates a more truthful image of news in the mind of the audience. Also, repeated statements are more believable than new ones. It was called "illusory truth effect" by Lynn Hasher, David Goldstein, and Thomas Toppino (1977). People who do not have knowledge about the topic tend to believe information repeated many times in news channels. The audience who does not have time and energy for fact-checking, trust the news sources by giving the argument that they heard information frequently (Begg et al., 1992). In a personal interview conducted by the author on May 16, 2019, Professor and activist of Human Rights Robert Van Voren noted that Putin announced that Russia lost 23–30 million people during the Second World War. However, the majority of the population was from Ukraine and Belarus. The audience believed it because they do not check facts (Voren, 2019).

Accordingly, in the news about Nazarbayev with the title "Kazakhstan to Remain Russia's Key Ally after Nazarbayev Resigns as President", RT stressed that alliance of Russia and Kazakhstan had benefit \$17,6 billion last year. Also, according to interpretations of professor in the Commonwealth of the Independent States named Aza

Migranyan, breaking off relations with Russia would be against economical interests of Kazakhstan. Political scientist Vladimir Kornilov's comment also has been placed in this news: "by passing power to people closely connected to him, Nazarbayev expects that there'll be no significant changes in foreign and domestic policy, at least in the coming years" (Russia Today, 2019). As it is obvious to notice, the main aim of this news is to manipulate Kazakhstanis by sending the message that keeping relations with Russia will give benefits to them. The context of news attempts to create fear and uses statistics on Kazakhstani audience that there will be a problem for them if Kazakhstan breaks relations with Russia. The statements which include emotional feelings such as fear or happiness are more convincing (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Also, to strengthen the persuasiveness of news, opinions of political experts such as Aza Migranyan, Vladimir Kornilov and statistic of economic benefits were utilized. According to Petty, Cacioppo, Strathman, and Priester, "peripheral cues" is another factor in increasing the reliability of information (Petty et al., 2005). Information consisting of peripheral cues such as simple claims of experts makes people trust source even without fact-checking (McCroskey & Young, 1981).

### **Counter-Propaganda against Meydan TV**

Unlike pro-governmental media channels, anti-governmental ones are the target of propaganda campaigns. Meydan TV is famous online media channel in Azerbaijan. It has accounts on social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, where the followers are mostly people who are not satisfied with current authority and post essentially anti-governmental comments. Beside them, actions of trolls are visible. Trolling is abused, harassed messages, posts, comments against other users' opinion (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). Internet trolls create fake news, different humiliating contents about admin to spread between users. The trolls I have researched often write derogatory comments intended for admin, some of them are opinions on users such as calling them traitors or liars; they are a threat to the stability of Azerbaijan. Some of them attempt to prove baselessness of shared news by analyzing its content and sources, giving an absurd argument about spuriousness of news. In conclusion, trolls call these posts as false, insubstantial, provocation, propaganda. For instance, one translated version of troll comment: "There are external powers that do not want to see the independent Azerbaijan state strong. They are spreading false, unfounded information and are holding provocation against Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan people. We must stand against this propaganda against our country".

As it has been seen in this comment, troll tries to inject fear into opposite users by showing Meydan TV as an external threat for the independence of Azerbaijan. Thus, “angry messages are more persuasive on the audience” (Desteno et al., 2004). Also, in the last sentence, troll attempts to arise a patriotic feeling of other users by stating to come together and fight against the propaganda of external interests who do not want to see Azerbaijan as an independent country. There are three steps of trolling:

1<sup>st</sup>. *Bait* – the troll baits the target.

2<sup>nd</sup>. *Reaction* – target gives the desired reaction. After many discussions are held, the news is spread within society.

3<sup>rd</sup>. *Reveal* – the truth reveals. Finally, after fact-checking, it is revealed that bombshell of troll is nothin but a dud (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

The fake news makes people have a suspicion about the honesty of the person. For instance, information that Meydan TV is funded by the government was spread and there were some documents about the transfer of money to Meydan TV account. This is a huge shock for the reputation of that media channel. Even after this news was discredited, several numbers of people questioned the honesty of Meydan TV. Emily Thorson calls it “Belief Echoes”. According to her, the “one reason why people keep believing the false statement is a high cost to accepting evidence that contradicts our beliefs” (Thorson, 2016). According to Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “Information that is initially assumed valid but is later retracted or proven false can continue to shape people’s memory and influence their reasoning” (Paul & Matthew, 2016). If an individual is affected by misinformation, he or she will likely not accept new information. Even members of his or her group trusted the same disinformation; there is very little chance that affected members of the group will go against their belief.

The reason why disinformation is effective is that people are lazy to check information from different sources. The readers take the majority of information they have seen on social media as true, or they are weak to distinguish false information from true. According to Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “Even when people are aware that some sources (such as political campaign rhetoric) have the potential to contain misinformation, they still show a poor ability to discriminate between information that is false and information that is correct” (Paul & Matthews, 2016). If the information is provided with evidence such as witnesses of the emergent event, it will be more truthful even it is false, which makes it difficult for the audience to understand its falsity.

Disinformation is spread among the people, users of social media, through ‘cyber troops’ such as government-based trolls, politicians and parties, private con-

tractors, volunteers, paid citizens who are real individuals (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). The bots, however, are a software application which automatically run various tasks (De Paoli, 2016). They create contents which include disinformation, fake news, memes. On Twitter or Facebook, bots share plenty of political messages. For instance, 50 000 Russia-linked bots affected the tendency of online presidential elections in the USA (Heredia, Prusa, & Khoshgoftaar, 2018). There was a huge number of Iranian and Russian troll tweets, and as a result, 770 accounts were suspended by Twitter in August 2018 (Romm, 2018). To find bot accounts among social media accounts of Meydan TV or Radio Liberty, I have used these websites: <https://botometer.iuni.iu.edu/#/> and <https://github.com/IUNetSci/botometer-python>.

When I analyze sharing posts of the bots, one feature which discriminates them from real social media users is on their writing style, i.e., bots do not utilize natural language. Real social media users do not have the energy and time to obey all the grammar and spelling rules of language. For instance, individuals write as follows: *Im, bcs, thats why*. However, bots use natural language such as: *I am, because, that's why*. Text style of bots decreases the efficiency of news to persuade the audience. Because using natural language does not create empathy on social media users, users ignore the troll comments of bots in Facebook or Twitter accounts of Meydan TV.

## **Language and Patriotism as a Propaganda Strategy in the Turkic Countries of the Caspian Sea Region**

The language is another significant factor in propaganda. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia attempts to interfere with the domestic politics of the Caspian Sea countries with soft power by making propaganda campaigns. Although Russia continues its orthodox religion propaganda in Georgia, it is not successful in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan because of the atheist population of those countries. In contrast, in post-Soviet countries, the old generation speaks the Russian language, unlike young people. It helped Kremlin to make their propaganda campaigns on Russian speakers. Also, in Kazakhstan, even young generation speaks Russian more often than English, which makes them use Russian news as a source. Because Turkey and Iran were losing their power in the Caspian Sea region, thus, both countries started to promote Islam religion through institutions, mosques; however, it did not work because of successful Soviet atheist propaganda. According to Professors G. Mazeikis and R.V. Voren, religion arguments do not have valid

power to make propaganda campaigns in those countries (Mazeikis, 2019; Voren, 2019). Therefore, Turkey started to promote the Turkish language, the roots of the Turks, common historical background. Consequently, they launched common TV channels in those Turkish countries, opened Turkish schools, universities in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, which also promote Turkish patriotism. For instances, TV channels such as TRT-Avaz or TRT-Avrasya had different projects, documentary films such as “Ramadan in Kirgizstan”, “Carpets of Azerbaijan”, “Turkmenistan Diary”, “Importance of Kazakhstani Horses”, etc. At first glance, those projects can be seen as usual programs. However, the audience of Caspian region watches those films, most of which are in the Turkish language. As a result, the number of Turkish speakers arose in recent years. The people of this region started to read Turkish-based news. The similarity of the language also helped in orientation to the Turkish language. Conferences, movies, events which show the Turkic cultures of this region attract the attention of the audience. In a personal interview conducted on May 16, 2019, Professor Robert Van Voren noted that “another issue is the Russian language where Putin says ‘I need to defend Russian speaking people because they are our citizens’. Russian is not an international language like English. All those people have the right to use Russian in their own country. By allowing Putin to claim the Russian language, you create a possibility for internal diversity in the country” (Voren, 2019). As mentioned in the quote, language is propagated to create internal issues, which later leads to justifying invading a country by Russia. As it is obvious to see from examples of language, patriotism is another important factor of propaganda.

## **The Motivation for Media Manipulation**

As it has been seen above, Turkey became successful in spreading Turkish ideology, Turkic identity, pan-Turkism. So, first motivation is an ideology – mainstream media and others promote their different ideologies. Different ideologists such as socialists, communists spread propaganda against their oppositions. The participants are motivated to share and propagate different ideological commitments. For instance, in the Caspian Sea region, promotion of Turkic identity by Turkey can be considered ideological propaganda.

The other motivation is money. RT media channel is funded with \$300 million per year by the government (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Radio Liberty in Caspian is funded by the USA to make anti-communist, anti-Russian propaganda. During presidential elections in Azerbaijan, Radio Liberty shared news about



corruption and fraud during election processes, which got the attention of the audience. However, anti-governmental or not pro-governmental media channels do not have governmental sponsor opportunities. Thus, they are obligatory to gain money from advertisements depending on several followers. For instances, the financial source of Meydan TV is provided with the charity of viewers. Therefore, the important point is making money by drawing attention of the audience (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, pp. 27–45).

## Conclusion

Development of modern technology, and thus a rising number of social media users, make it easy for the government to access society and hold effective propaganda campaigns. Because of oil and gas resources in post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region, they became the focal point of those propaganda campaigns. In this region, contemporary propaganda has strong efficiency because of strategies, techniques, characteristics. Although religion and economy are not useful for persuasion, propaganda is mainly focused on language, patriotism and disinformation in this region. The role of ideology is not significant because the main object of contemporary propaganda is to spread disinformation through ‘cyber troops’ and on psychological basis such as responsive, repetitive, continuous and interpretative techniques. By utilizing the abovementioned techniques and different types of disinformation such as trolls or fake news via cyber troops, the truth is revealed at the third stage of disinformation; it is possible to see that contemporary propaganda is not to persuade a majority of society nor is it held for a short term. The main aims are to create “Belief Echoes”, distract news cycle, or to abuse target. Because the audience has a weak sense of fact-checking, propagandists can easily spread disinformation by using different strategies such as emotions, statistics, experts and witnesses, which strengthen persuasiveness of propaganda. Cyber troops as a propaganda tool assist propagandists to penetrate disinformation easily; however, it also creates disadvantage. For instance, the absence of natural language within bots applications does not create empathy in audience, which leads to failure of a propaganda campaign.

To summarize, propaganda campaigns are held according to new technologies, and there is no doubt that its working principles will evolve as time goes on. In conclusion, Figure 1 shows the working principles of Contemporary Propaganda in the case of post-Soviet countries of the Caspian Sea region. This paper created a framework for further analysis of the methodology of contemporary propaganda.

**ANNEX 1****Interview with Professor Gintautas Mazeikis (2019/04/25)**

**1<sup>st</sup> question:** Can you please tell us about your academic background and if you have, or had, practical experience with propaganda?

**Prof. G. Mazeikis:** I am a philosopher, I graduated from Leningrad University, later known as Saint Petersburg University. I was involved in the analysis and studies of symbolical forms of thinking. During the Soviet period, I chose a research on analysis of propaganda. So, I was completely involved into the issue of counter-propaganda in Western countries. Later I took interest in the subject of war and different sources of persuasion – beginning from Perestroika starting from 1986 – so I could follow the development of a whole period of Soviet, Lithuanian and finally contemporary European propaganda. I am doing practical analysis for different companies and Lithuanian government. Sometimes I am involved as an expert of some group in NATO structures.

**2<sup>nd</sup> question:** What are the main factors of successful propaganda in the case of the Caspian Sea region?

**Prof. G. Mazeikis:** I would say everything depends on the skills of the audience and your purposes or objectives which you would like to achieve, and on the instruments which you use. Because audiences are different everywhere, and they are mostly influenced by religious persuasion before. It means, if you would like to cause turbulence among people or just stop them, you could use religious arguments. It is different from Western countries where the economic system is more painful. For example, what Western countries care about are banks, accounts, the situation of the economy – but not religious solutions. Ukraine is in some kind of mixed situation where economical and religious issues and also a national idea play important roles. What I see about the Caspian Sea region, in countries like Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, I would say the case of Kazakhstan is a little bit different because all this information is not for a large audience. Because nobody cares about masses, so-called population, in Russia or Kazakhstan. They do not pay attention to the manipulation mechanisms. This is information for elites. (News is, as I mentioned above, the resignation of Nazarbayev). These elites should be quite peaceful and should not attempt to change the political situation. Kazakhstan and Russia care about the peaceful transformation of Kazakh power. And the main argument for leaders of these oligarchs is economy because the benefits of those elites are 90% or 80% – it depends on the relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan.

Azerbaijan is different from Kazakhstan. Because it is about public intellectuals there, their critique of Azerbaijan's power and corruption. Corruption is everywhere but at different levels and this is the problem of all post-Soviet countries. Hierarchy has a really strong power in Azerbaijan. And they follow this idea that only we can fight against corruption but not public intellectuals or local initiatives. This news was not only addressed for elites but also for public intellectuals such as teachers, or a jour-

nalist who would like to enjoy freedom. These ideas don't work for society. Because both sides say that they are fighting against corruption, but masses don't believe in any fight. I would say these both cases are not about mass propaganda or manipulation of masses. They don't need to use any religious arguments or banking system in these cases because it is about corruption and freedom of speech.

### **Interview with Professor Robert Van Voren (2019/05/16)**

**1<sup>st</sup> question:** Can you please tell us about your academic background and if you have, or had, practical experience with propaganda?

**Prof. R.V. Voren:** I started political life as a human right activist in the Soviet Union, international relations, Helsinki records. My experience with propaganda concerns two periods: the Soviet one and the current period. I started my activism around 1977, combating Soviet propaganda. I can compare that period with what is happening right now. I would say propaganda is the same, but the methodology is different because of modern technology. Currently, my interest mostly focuses on Ukraine because I was active in Maidan and I know details of what happens there after Ukrainian war, and also on Georgia because I have been teaching it since 2010 and because of Russian-Georgian war.

**2<sup>nd</sup> question:** What are the main factors of successful propaganda in the case of the Caspian Sea region?

**Prof. R.V. Voren:** I think if we go back and compare what was then and what is now, the big difference is that the Soviet period had an ideological base. So the Soviet period was very active with peace movement, supporting peace movement in the West not only financially but also ideologically. Now you see that propaganda has no ideological base. But key elements here is a mode of presenting reality as if Russia is surrounded by enemies. It is the same when we go back to 1920, Stalin created the same scenery. But now there is no ideological basis.

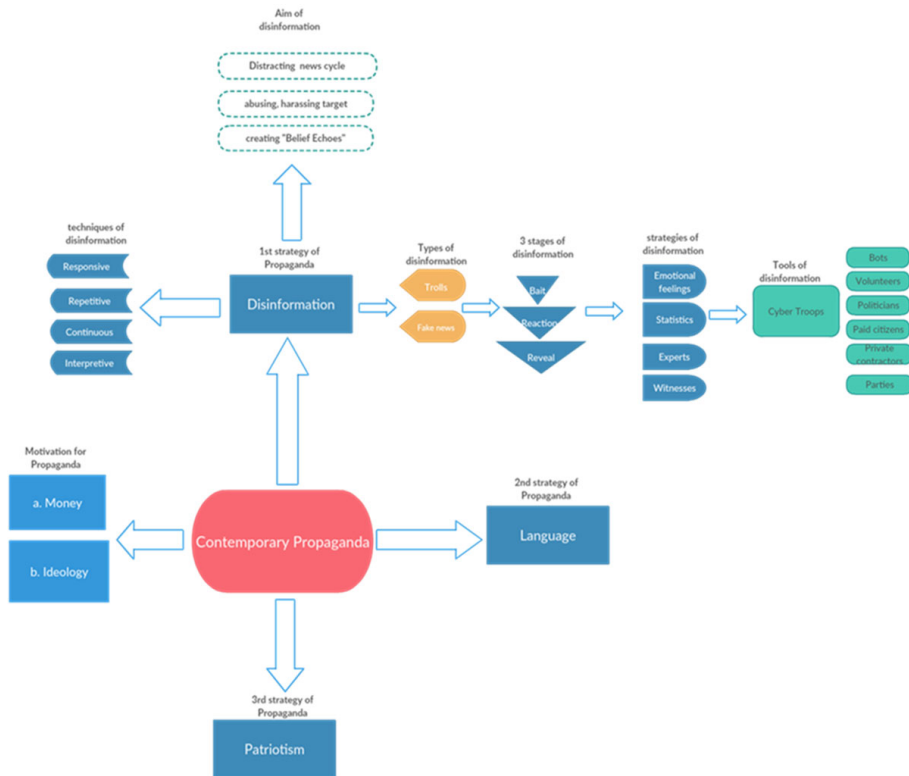
Creating an image of an external enemy is very successful in persuading people to calm down their opposition and ban certain media which are friends of human rights idea. Also, through external enemy scenery, you can find arguments for economic problems.

One particular example for me is the Russian language. Putin is very good in re-writing history. One example: he claims that Russia lost 23 or 30 million people in the Second World War. If you look at the facts, the largest percentage of victims belongs to Belarussians and Ukrainians. But he counts Ukrainians and Belarussians together, as Russians. And people don't check the facts. Another one is the Russian language where Putin says 'I need to defend Russian speaking people because they are our citizens'. Russian is not an international language like English. All those people have the right to use Russian in their own country. By allowing Putin to claim the Russian language, you create a possibility for internal diversity in the country. After Maidan,

Russian became the language of the oppressor, the language of the country that invaded Ukraine, occupied Crimea. Russian is also the language of Andrey Sakharov, of dissidents who are in jail. So, Russia is very good at creating tensions by using modern technology and making issues of things that shouldn't be an issue at all.

ANNEX 2

Figure 1. Map of Working Principles of Contemporary Propaganda in the Case of Post-Soviet Countries of the Caspian Sea Region



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