

UNITED IN FEAR

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Both pro-Kremlin and independent media in Russia tend to oversimplify and ‘tabloidise’ news about the European Union, painting it as weak, excessively tolerant and eager to forsake Christian values. Politicians and media outlets inside the European Union help spread fabricated stories among their constituencies. This circulation of misinformation can have far-reaching implications, and can influence not only the European Union’s relations with Russia and its neighbours, but also its own internal process of integration.

Since the beginning of the military operation in the East of Ukraine in 2014, the West has paid increasing attention to the way the pro-governmental, Moscow-based media portray the European Union, NATO and their members.

The EU-run East StratCom – a Brussels-based team of information specialists seconded from the Member States – collects examples of the Kremlin’s ‘disinformation’ through its network of several hundred contributors from inside the EU and beyond its borders. Examples from May 2016 include the alleged ‘politicisation’ by Europe of the *Eurovision* song contest spread by the Russian TASS national news agency and exaggerating French euroscepticism in a story that misquoted most of the speakers, aired on the main information TV channel *Rossiya 1*.

Pro-Kremlin media indeed regularly portray processes in Europe in a false light and publish stories that are easy to discredit. However, there are certain topics that go beyond disinformation and require deeper analysis. A major theme that runs through the publications and

broadcasts about the European Union and its members is the question of Europe's national and cultural diversity. This diversity is being tested due to the recent migrant crisis, with politicians in several EU Member States using refugees' influx as an argument against the further integration within the EU and against the model of liberal democracy as such. If left unnoticed and not tackled, the hostile attitude to other cultures can become a disruptive influence for European integration, fuelled both endogenously and exogenously.

MULTICULTURALISM AND MIGRANTS: EUROPE'S 'DISEASES'

One of the selling points of European integration is the peaceful co-existence of diverse societies reflected in the Union's motto, "United in diversity". Yet, in Russia this diversity is perceived by many in only a single dimension: 'multiculturalism'.

A 2015 survey¹ by the National Centre for Research on Europe for the European Commission shows that among the EU's ten strategic partners, Russia has the least share of those who have a 'very positive' or 'somewhat positive' view of the European Union at less than 25%. When asked to describe the European Union in one word, Russian respondents' top-three

choices was 'multicultural'. If, in other polled countries, 'multicultural' was understood both in a positive and a negative way, in Russia it was perceived as a negative trait, alongside the 'hypocrisy' and 'arrogance' of the Union.

One cannot say that this comes from a lack of news about the EU: nearly two-thirds of Russians (64%) hear about the EU every day, while for more than 75% of the respondents, this information comes from media. The threat of 'multiculturalism' comes not from being uninformed but rather from being informed in a biased way.

Multiculturalism is not an official policy of the European Union. The effectiveness of a 'multi-culti' approach has been long questioned by the politicians of EU Member States: in October 2010, Angela Merkel admitted that this policy had "utterly failed" in Germany, while in February 2011 David Cameron spoke highly critically of this concept at a Munich security conference. Moreover, there is no agreement between scholars and analysts on what exactly 'multiculturalism' means. But for the pro-Kremlin Russian media, that does not matter as long as this term can be used to demonstrate the dangers of European integration.

"Austria is divided into two parts: one part supports multiculturalism, migrants and

1 http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/fpi/documents/showcases/eu_perceptions_study_executive_summary.pdf

the European integration and another part is against it", a popular online newspaper *Vzgliad.ru* wrote on 25th May 2016, commenting on the results of Austrian elections where a far-right presidential candidate was narrowly defeated by the former Green party leader Alexander van der Bellen.

A wave of articles presenting Europe as too weak to survive the invasion of alien cultures

began in January 2016, after Cologne's New Year's Eve attacks, when a group of men harassed female participants of street celebrations. While later reports proved that the majority of suspects were not refugees but representatives of North African communities², this event gave rise to a

whole series of pro-Kremlin media reports about the intensification of "rape" committed by newly arrived refugees – or migrants in general – in Europe.

The story that got the most attention in the Western media was the February 2016 case of a 13-year-old German teenager,

Lisa F., of Russian origin, who was allegedly "raped for a whole day and night" by a group of migrants while the German police chose to 'hide' that fact (the story was later denounced by the German side). The statements about the girl were made not only in Russia's national media but also by politicians and diplomats, including Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov.

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Refugees are blamed for other crimes as well. A repeated accusation after the Brussels March 22nd bombings was that it was German chancellor Angela Merkel's fault: either because she invited refugees to Europe, and even posed with one of them who "looks like one of the bombers"³,

or because "even after the bombings she continues to defend refugees"⁴. Refugees are portrayed as cynical owners of 'new iPhones' who are coming to Europe for economic reasons, but who also apparently hate Europe because of its involvement in NATO operations and therefore will not take long to retaliate against it⁵.

² <https://decorrespondent.nl/4403/News-after-the-fact-Reporting-on-New-Years-Eve-in-Cologne-with-hindsight/740954526851-d527a047>

³ <http://ren.tv/novosti/2016-03-26/foto-merkel-so-smertnikom-iz-bryusselya-shokirovalo-polzovateley-seti>

⁴ <http://news-front.info/2016/03/23/merkel-voshla-v-obraz-i-dazhe-posle-teraktov-prodolzhaet-zashishhat-bezhencev-nataliya-yankova-germaniya/>

⁵ http://best.kp.ru/msk/europe_migrants/

Not only pro-Kremlin media disseminate the image of the European Union that is too ‘weak’ in its treatment of refugees, and more broadly, representatives of other cultures. “*Migrants already demand that Christians forsake their values: stop celebrating Christmas; stop selling alcohol and pork; stop wearing swimsuits on beaches or sun-tanning in parks – and they demand it aggressively*”, claims the writer Mikhail Veller in his blog⁶ on the website of *Ekho Moskvy*, a radio station that is still regarded by some as one of the last platforms for independent voices in Russia.

THE LANGUAGE OF FEAR KNOWS NO BORDERS

Pro-Kremlin media arbitrarily use publications from the EU media to support their narratives. For that, they use quotes from opinion pieces, presenting them as editorial positions. For example, in the aftermath of the Brussels bombings in March 2016, *Sputnik* website quoted the Italian newspaper’s *Il Giornale* column about the “suicide of Europe”, presenting it as an editorial position of the outlet.⁷ Another common approach is an exaggeration of the scale of the event. “Turkey sends only non-educated migrants to the European Union”, the First TV Channel, *Izvestia* newspaper and TASS news

agencies claimed⁸ in May 2016, quoting *Der Spiegel*’s article⁹. While the article has analysed only several cases of denials of exit permits to highly-skilled and trained Syrian refugees, the Russian leading TV channel presents this as a main trend noticed by “European media”.

The penetration of discourses is mutual: while the Russian media select the most grotesque examples of the downsides of European “multiculturalism”, the EU-based media catch the bait and repeat their claims. The story of a ‘raped by refugees’ girl continuously appeared on Polish, Czech or Hungarian websites already after it was discredited by German media.

It would be unfair to blame the EU media for becoming the source of inspiration for the pro-Kremlin media’s gloomy portrayal of Europe, aimed at Russians and at the broader circle of Russian-speakers, consumers of the Russian media. Even the most respected of media’s stories can be misquoted, distorted or put into a totally new context. In the era of the struggle for clicks, it is also understandable that some online media in the EU extensively use unverified information to attract readership.

However, it would be also unfair not to notice that the amount of ‘anti-EU’ rhetoric on the

6 http://echo.msk.ru/blog/weller_michael/1619776-echo/

7 <http://sputniknews.com/europe/20160327/1037045769/brussels-attack-west-policies-suicide-europe.html>

8 <http://izvestia.ru/news/614772>

9 <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/fluechtlinge-tuerkei-laesst-hochqualifizierte-syrer-nicht-in-eu-ausreisen-a-1093332.html>

THE NETWORK
OF WEBSITES
SUPPORTING
THE MOSCOW
NARRATIVE
ABOUT
EUROPEAN
COUNTRIES
IS GROWING

political scene of European countries has grown, and the refugee crisis is one of the main pretexts politicians use to promote a more xenophobic model of European democracy and European values.

During the parliamentary campaign 2015, the president of Poland's now ruling Law and Justice Party, Jarosław Kaczyński, warned Poles that migrants and refugees carry "parasites and protozoa" that do not harm them but would harm Europeans. During TV debates in September 2015, Kaczynski stated that some regions in Sweden were "governed by Sharia law" prompting the Swedish embassy to deny the claim.¹⁰ In October, his party won a majority in parliament, and while the anti-migrant rhetoric may not be the only reason behind that, one should not disregard it.

Czech President Milos Zeman described the refugee crisis as an "organised invasion" of Europe and threatened his population with migrants installing 'Sharia laws' on the EU territory: *"We'll be deprived of women's beauty, because they'll be covered from head to toe... unfaithful women will be stoned and thieves will have their hands cut off."*¹¹

These statements are in line with the language of fear and xenophobia used by the pro-Kremlin media when referring to migrants and refugees in particular. Some of these statements come from political parties and movements that have been financially supported by the Russian government, such as the French Front National¹², but ironically many come from those who oppose Russia's non-democratic rule, such as the Law and Justice Party in Poland. As a result, a growing number of EU citizens learn that Europe is under the threat of alien invasion and we have to protect our borders, history, culture or religion better to defend ourselves against 'multiculturalism'.

10 <http://natemat.pl/154915,ambasada-szwecji-szybko-odpowiada-na-szariat-kaczynskiego-w-szwecji-mamy-szwedzkie-prawo>

11 http://zpravy.idnes.cz/islamsti-uprchlici-zeman-pravo-saria-dw1-/domaci.aspx?c=A151016_154427_domaci_hro

12 <http://www.politico.eu/article/le-pen-russia-crimea-putin-money-bank-national-front-seeks-russian-cash-for-election-fight/>

IS A WAR OF WORDS A SOLUTION?

The disinformation and distortion campaigns, some claim, are led not only by pro-Kremlin media but by the whole state machinery and popular figures loyal to it, such as pop-singers, sportspeople and writers. The network of websites supporting the Moscow narrative about European countries is growing, repeating and exaggerating both Russia-produced myths and the most controversial and xenophobic statements of the European politicians.

The political response from Europe, and the West more broadly, so far has been mostly limited to setting up several communications agencies tasked with denouncing myths and bringing truth about the EU or about ‘transatlantic values’. However, it would be too tempting to decide that such bodies as Riga-based NATO’s Center for Excellence in Strategic Communication or Brussels-based EU East StratCom are enough to fill the gap in quality information about the real situation in the EU.

Governments and international institutions are not always the best friends of investigative reporting, revealing their wrongdoings, lack of action or in some cases corruption, and are naturally prone to exaggerate their successes and ignore mistakes. Giving them a leading role in ‘fixing’ the situation

could lead to a war of narratives where the non-democratic side would always win, just because it has more experience, resources, determination and less control from the side of its own society in spreading propaganda and in other words, has less barriers to aggressively leading such a war. One also should not be caught by the information war language because even the well-intended West’s attempts to counter propaganda will often be treated as a “propaganda of another kind”, just as the US government’s call to support investigative journalism in the Baltics “to combat Russian propaganda” was interpreted in 2015¹³.

There are two important steps that have to be made by the EU as an institution and its Member States if they want to help citizens both in their countries and outside the Union understand the processes in the EU better. Both require long-term commitments and are not extremely popular among politicians.

The first step is investing in independent media in the Russian language in the Russian-speaking regions; this will enable it to present a deeper and more varied picture of the European Union without ignoring its problems and challenges. The more diverse voices there are, the less black-and-white a

13 <http://gijn.org/2015/08/19/journalism-or-propaganda-lets-help-russian-media-the-right-way/>

picture Russian-speakers will get. While the EU-based media, even being hit by the world industry crisis, are able to survive on the mixture of advertising, subscriptions and new revenue streams, the ones that are based in less democratic and less prosperous countries are in need of funding that would support independent journalism with no political agenda attached. The 'counter-propaganda' money is not something that will help the situation, but systematic support of high-quality journalism will.

The second step would be reassessing the way the European Union and its problems are described inside the EU. Is there a way to check whether the sensationalism that drives media and politicians to the extremes is balanced with fact-based reporting on the EU-relevant problems? And, more importantly, are we perhaps too busy fighting the outside 'enemy' to notice that its values are increasingly shared by local elites throughout old and new EU Member States? Are we, as the EU, even able to explain to our own citizens that refugees, migrants and European integration are not necessarily an 'evil' or a 'good' combination and needs to be tackled in a more nuanced way? Journalistic and citizen initiatives that contribute to this process inside the European Union should be promoted and highlighted, and the issue should be raised in a more systematic way on the highest political level.

Both steps are crucial if the European Union, struggling with its own identity crisis and 'two-speed' approach, is to ever succeed in presenting itself to its neighbours as a peaceful alternative that unites its citizens in all their diversity.



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