

PRESS RELEASE

of

REPORT

on the Study on

# Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria

Part One.

News Websites and Print Media:

2013 – 2016

Quantitative Research

Human and Social Studies Foundation –  
Sofia, 2017



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# ABOUT THE STUDY

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## **STUDY PERIOD:**

1 May 2016 – 31 March 2017

## **SCOPE:**

- 3,080 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs in the 2013–2016 period
- 3,305 publications in eight mainstream media outlets in the period from November 2015 to November 2016

## **METHODOLOGY AND TOOLKIT:**

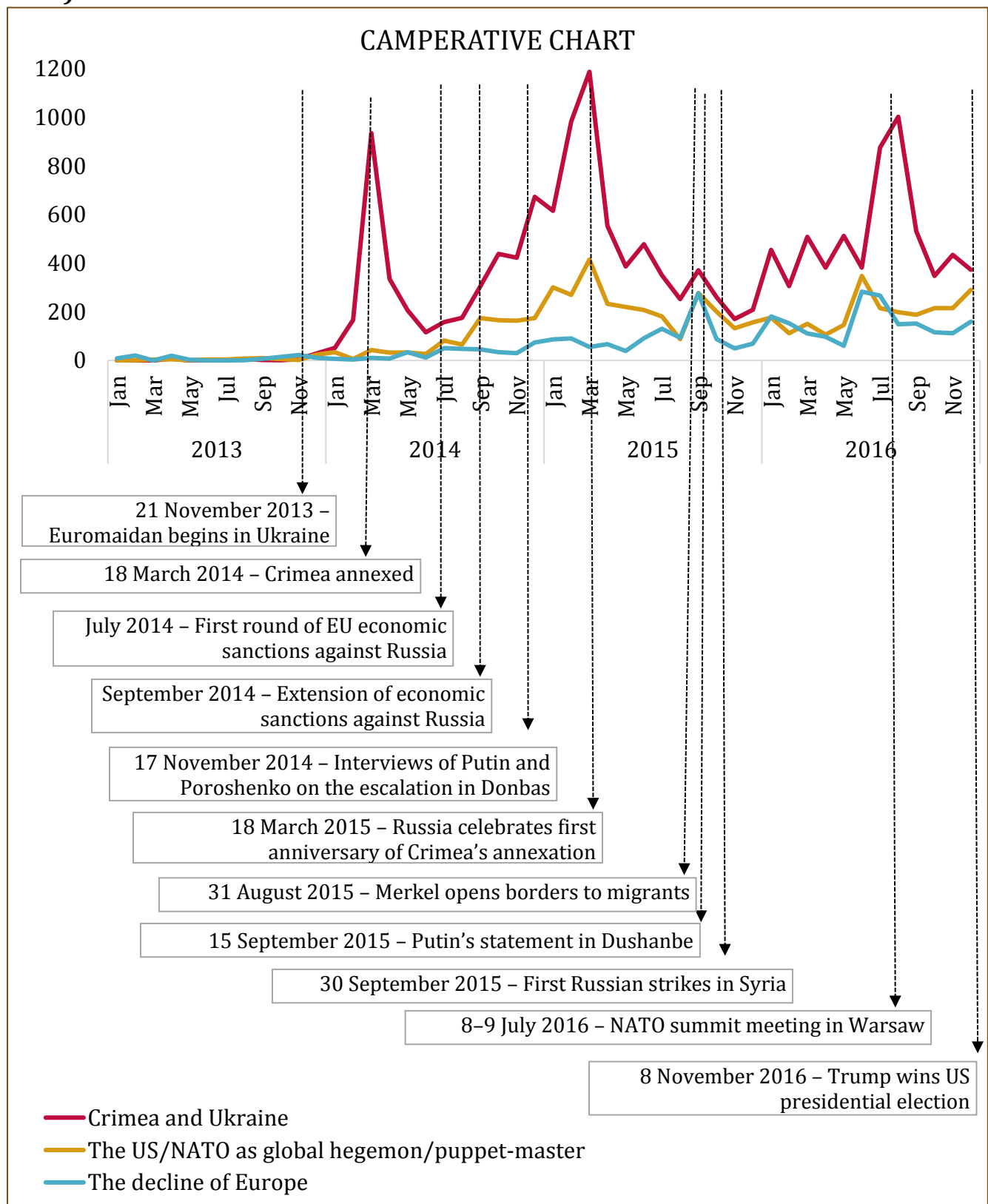
- Semantic analysis based on keywords and phrases;
- Diachronic analysis of the frequency of use of keywords and phrases in 3,080 websites and blogs in the period between 1 January 2013 and 31 December 2016, conducted with the SENSIKA online media monitoring, measurement and analysis system;
- Press-clipping of publications from a typological sample of eight media outlets (Pogled-info, Glasove, Rusiya Dnes, A-specto, Trud, Weekend, Duma, PIK);
- Content analysis and discursive analysis of the archive of press-clipped publications (3,305 in number).

## STUDY RESULTS

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- **In the summer of 2013, there appeared in Bulgaria a systematic anti-democratic propaganda**, which became massive from the first quarter of 2014 onwards. From the summer of 2013 to the end of 2016, the average annual number of anti-democratic propaganda publications increased by more than thirty times.
- Anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria does not invent new formulas. It is **Eurosceptic, anti-institutional, anti-civic, and pro-Russian**.
- **Not a single counter-propaganda media outlet was identified** in the surveyed period (2013–2016).
- Anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria works with negative messages, without positively affirming anything. It systematically rejects the basic principles of liberal democracy: individual rights and the separation of powers.
- **There are four main claims of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda**, which are promoted in practically all publications through repetition and arrangement of impressions, not through arguments:
  - Propaganda claims that **“the US and NATO are a global hegemon/puppet-master** that is conducting a war against Europe”;
  - Propaganda claims that **“the EU is an enemy of Europe. Europe is dying** because it is united”;
  - Propaganda claims that “Russia is a victim of aggression by the West. Despite this, **Russia is rising** and the Russian military actions are peacemaking”;
  - Propaganda claims that “all (media, politicians, activists, etc.) who are calling for the separation of powers are an indistinguishable whole and all of them are **“foreign agents”**”.
- Anti-democratic propaganda publications occasionally point out good examples, such as Brexit, some statements by Viktor Orbán, and other acts undermining trust in EU and NATO membership.
- **Not a single institution** is pointed out as a good example. All good examples are anti-institutional. The newly elected US President Donald Trump is pointed out as a good example before he assumed office. The arguments for this are that he has a negative attitude towards the idea of rights and towards political institutions.

**Chart: Growth of of propaganda discourse over time – foreign-political topics (2013–2016)**



**Note:** The comparative chart juxtaposes the peaks in propaganda-language use with events on the political calendar. It presents the results of three searches for keywords and phrases: “The decline of Europe”, “The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master”, and “Crimea and Ukraine” (the keywords and phrases selected for the search on the latter topic express the official Russian thesis that “Crimea is Russian, while the Euromaidan in Ukraine was a coup orchestrated from the outside and carried out by right-wing fascists”).

The analysis of the number of publications over time shows that:

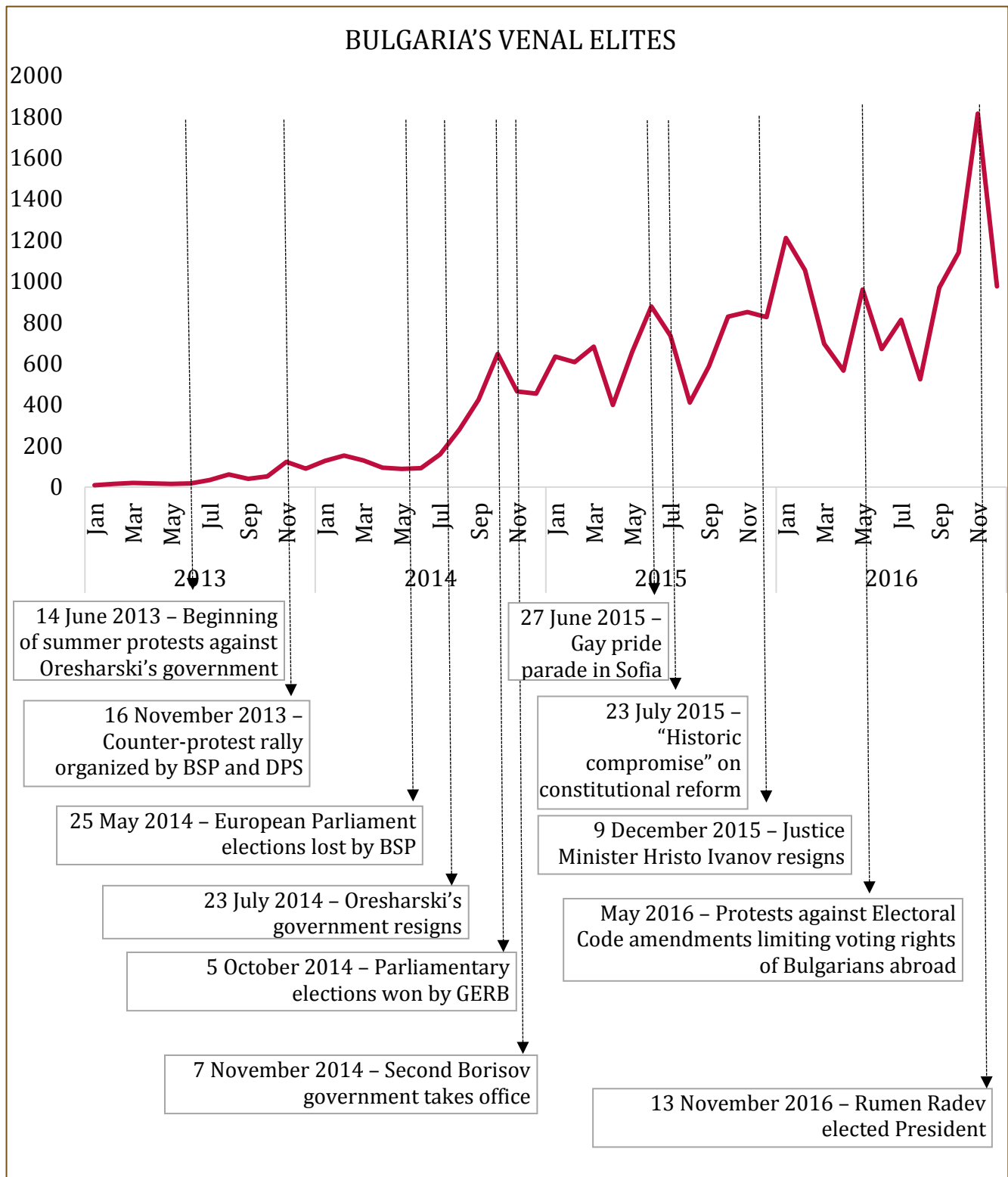
- **Eurosceptic propaganda increased by sixteen times in the four years under review** (from 109 articles in 2013 to 1,841 in 2016).

In the period from **2014 onwards**, which saw the beginning of real growth of Eurosceptic discourse, the latter’s rises and peaks **followed the international and above all the Russian political calendar**. The stable and steady increase in the number of Eurosceptic publications began immediately after the annexation of Crimea (March 2014), responded to the Greek debt crisis and to the imposition of sanctions against Russia, peaked around the first anniversary of the annexation of Crimea (March 2015, 91 publications per month) and the deployment of Russian troops in Syria (September 2015, 277 publications), and then intensified again in response to the NATO summit meeting in Warsaw (July 2016, 283 publications in a single month).

- **In 2013 there was almost no anti-American and anti-NATO rhetoric in the Bulgarian media**. Anti-US and anti-NATO propaganda in Bulgaria is directly linked to the Russian political calendar: it appeared at the end of 2013 (with the beginning of Euromaidan, 40 publications). The steep growth of anti-NATO and anti-American discourse followed the Russian pro-Kremlin press in response to the escalation of the sanctions against Russia, culminating in a record high around Russia’s celebration of the first anniversary of the annexation of Crimea in 2015 (with over 400 articles in a single month).

- Throughout 2013, propaganda activity on the topic of Russia was weak. **It rose steeply already in early 2014 (after the beginning of the Ukrainian events), soared to over 800 publications per month after the annexation of Crimea in March** (which also saw the first steep increase in Eurosceptic publications), and reached a new peak of **1,200 publications per month** around the celebrations of the first anniversary of the annexation in Russia in March 2015.

**Chart: Growth of propaganda discourse on domestic-political topics – discrediting civil society and pro-European political elites**



**The number of publications rejecting the political class, the political elite, particular representatives of the political class and the political elite, particular civic movements, but also the civic process as a whole, increased by twenty-three times:** from 494 in 2013 to 11,394 in 2016. In contrast to the increase in the number of anti-US/anti-NATO publications, which entirely followed only the Russian political calendar, the increase in the number of publications against the Bulgarian political process and institutionalism followed also some domestic political events (the parliamentary elections and the formation of a government in the autumn of 2014, the gay pride parade in Sofia on 27 June 2015, the fake news in January 2016 that “the Turkish slavery” was to be removed from school history curricula). Although Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda is pro-Russian, its prime target is domestic: it serves above all to discredit domestic political and economic opponents.

A control search found that there is a marginal counter-propaganda language which is Russophobic, does not have its own media outlets, and is used much more rarely. The comparative measurement and semantic analysis of the uses of the epithets “Sorosoid” and “*rubladzhiya*” (ruble-paid fifth-columnist) show that:

- The epithet “Sorosoid” has synonyms, while “*rubladzhiya*” does not;
- The use of the epithet “Sorosoid”, without its synonyms, is four times higher than the use of the epithet “*rubladzhiya*”;
- The epithet “Sorosoid” is used actively in mainstream media, while the epithet “*rubladzhiya*” is practically absent in them.

The content analysis of 3,305 propaganda publications from eight typologically different media outlets (Pogled-info, Glasove, Rusiya Dnes, A-specto, Trud, Weekend, Duma, PIK) shows that:

- The number of anonymous articles (i.e., unsigned articles or articles signed with the name of the media outlet that has published them) is almost 1.5 times higher than that of signed articles;
- The largest number of signed articles (56%) are devoted to the topic of “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites”;
- The largest number of anonymous articles (45%) are devoted to the topic of “The Rise of Russia”;
- The dominant genre of the articles on “The Rise of Russia” is that of anonymous news reports;
- The dominant genre of the articles on “The Decline of the West” is that of opinions. They are uniform, repeated, without offering alternative points of view;

- The largest number of anonymous articles is found in the media outlets with the highest intensity of publication of identified propaganda materials: PIK and Pogled-info. The media outlet with the highest number of anonymous publications is PIK – it accounts for 21% of the total publications in the database, but for just 2% of all signed ones;
- Pogled-info practically does not generate content, it reprints – just 197 of the 1,030 publications from Pogled-info in the database were written by staff members for this media outlet. All the rest are reprinted – mostly from Rusiya Dnes, A-specto, Glasove, Duma, Ruski Dnevnik, PIK, Vzglyad. The favorite news agencies of Pogled-info are BGNES, TASS, and Ria Novosti.

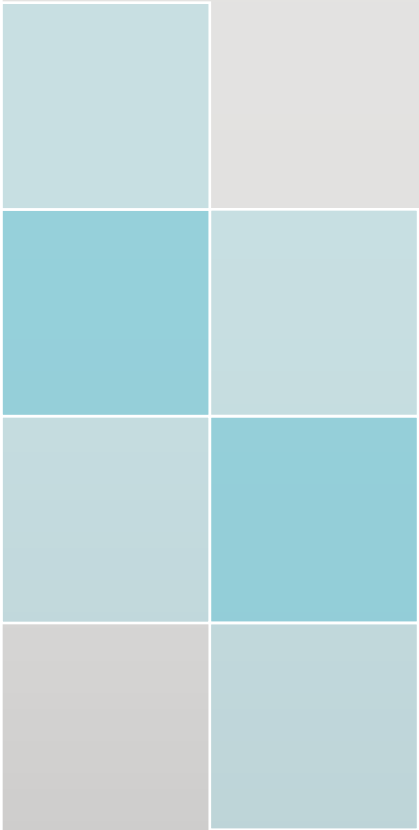
According to their thematic preferences, the media outlets in the sample are of three types:

- Geopolitical propagandists (Rusiya Dnes, A-specto and PIK);
- media outlets using propaganda figures for domestic political purposes (Trud, Duma and Weekend);
- Media outlets combining evenly geopolitical propaganda with domestic political policies (Pogled-info and Glasove).

The results of the structural analysis of the archived publications show their favorite antagonists. The undoubted favorite is the US. The other favorite antagonist is Boyko Borisov. The image of the US as top antagonist appears most frequently in A-specto, followed by Rusiya Dnes. The image of Boyko Borisov is polarized – he appears as the top antagonist very frequently in Duma and Pogled-info, and extremely rarely in PIK and Trud.

The protagonists of the archived publications are much fewer than the antagonists. The favorite protagonist is invariably Russia.





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