

## PRESS RELEASE

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The new Report on **Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. Part Two. Online Media in 2017: Frequency Measurement and Content Analysis** has just been published (<http://hssfoundation.org>). From it you will learn that:

In 2017 anti-democratic populist propaganda in Bulgaria continued, albeit more slowly, to gain momentum. As in the 2013–2016 period, it was **anti-US and anti-NATO, Eurosceptic and pro-Russian**. There was an especially sharp increase in the use of propaganda vocabulary – “Sorosoids”, “un-Bulgarians”, “tolerasts”, “liberasts”, “grant-spongers”, etc. – for **discrediting domestic political and economic opponents**. The circle of media and speakers systematically disseminating anti-democratic populist propaganda remained the same, with insignificant changes.

A measurement of the frequency of use of propaganda epithets in more than 3,500 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs in the period from 1 January to 31 December 2017 was conducted with the SENSIKA automated system.

The frequency measurement was conducted by the same method as that described in the Report on *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. Part One. News Websites and Print Media: 2013 – 2016. Quantitative Research*.<sup>1</sup> It covered the four main topics (talking points) of Bulgarian populist propaganda, identified in the previous study through semantic analysis:

1. “The Decline of Europe”;
2. “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites”;
3. “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master”;
4. “The Rise of Russia”.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: [http://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/REPORT\\_PART1\\_EN.pdf](http://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/REPORT_PART1_EN.pdf).

The frequency measurement was based on the same keywords and phrases identified for the previous period, which allows strict comparability of the results. They are the following:

In 2017 there was a **relatively low overall increase** in publications containing keywords and phrases from the propaganda vocabulary as compared to 2016. Whereas in 2016 their total number was 35,292, in 2017 it grew to 37,636, or by **6.6%**.

The increase in the total number of propaganda publications, however, was accompanied by a **significant change in the dynamic of development of the different thematic fields** of propaganda.

**Compared to the previous year, the number of propaganda publications on the topic of “The Decline of Europe” decreased sharply (-52%), while, conversely, that of publications on the topic of “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites” increased sharply (+46.5%).**

There was also an increase in publications on the topic of “The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master” (+17.7%).

The topic of “The Rise of Russia” also underwent development depending on the evolution of its sub-topics.

The number of publications on the sub-topics of “Russia’s Increased Political and Spiritual Might” and “The Power of Russian Weapons” grew significantly (by +46% and +44%, respectively). Conversely, that of publications on the sub-topics of “Crimea and Ukraine” and “Russia’s Enemies” fell (by -45% and -20%, respectively). Publications on the sub-topic of “The Sanctions against Russia” were comparable in number to 2016, and even increased slightly (+5%).

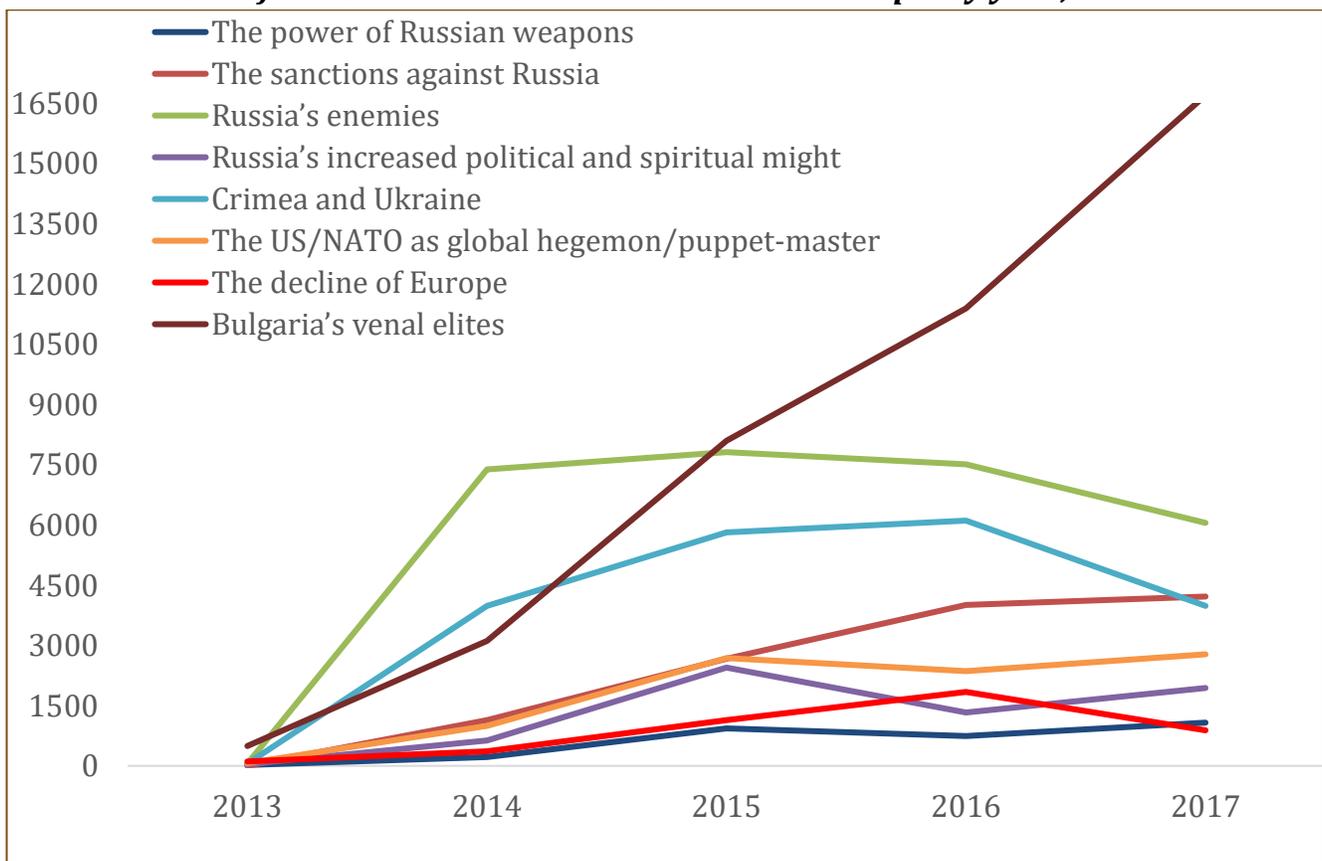
The data from the frequency measurement for the entire 2013–2017 period are as follows:

**Table.** Number of matches in the search results on each topic by year, 2013–2017

	The Power of Russian Weapons	The Sanctions against Russia	Russia's Enemies	Russia's Increased Political and Spiritual Might	Crimea and Ukraine	The US/NATO as Global Hegemon/Puppet-Master	The Decline of Europe	Bulgaria's Venal Elites
<b>2013</b>	22	2	54	44	56	69	109	494
<b>2014</b>	219	1141	7387	635	3983	999	359	3114
<b>2015</b>	929	2666	7814	2448	5814	2683	1141	8094
<b>2016</b>	745	4005	7511	1326	6109	2361	1841	11394
<b>2017</b>	1076	4217	6049	1943	3983	2778	887	16703

These results can also be presented as a chart showing the trends over time:

**Chart.** Number of matches in the search results on each topic by year, 2013–2017



In addition to the frequency measurement, a content analysis was conducted of the most-reprinted publications on peak days of use of the propaganda vocabulary. The combination of frequency measurement and content analysis enabled assessing not only the overall increase in populist propaganda in 2017 as compared to the previous years but also the change of focus of propaganda strategy – intensification or weakening of activity on the separate talking points and changes in the content of each one of them.

THE GENERAL CONCLUSIONS ARE THE FOLLOWING:

- 1. Open geopolitical propaganda is giving way to propaganda for “domestic use”** – Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda is aimed mostly against domestic political and economic opponents, its preferred targets being the reformist political parties and reformist policies such as the judicial reform. In 2017 the number of publications vilifying “venal Sorosoids and un-Bulgarians” in Bulgaria (16,703 articles) almost equalled that of publications on all other topics (a total of 20,933 on the other main talking points in the same period). For comparison, in 2016 there were 23,898 publications on the other three main talking points and 11,394 publications using the vocabulary of the talking point about “Bulgaria’s Venal Elites” – that is, in 2016 the foreign-political publications were twice as many as the domestic-political ones.
- 2. There was a slight decline in overall propaganda activity on geopolitical topics** (the total number of such publications decreased from 23,898 in 2016 to 20,933 in 2017) and, at the same time, **serious internal shifts in activity on the separate geopolitical talking points.**
- 3. The attacks against the EU decreased sharply** – obviously because of the continuing high popularity of the EU among Bulgarian citizens (propagandists do not want to confront public opinion directly) as well as because of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.
- 4. As regards Russia, there is a radical change in propaganda priorities in favour of direct positive propaganda praising Russia’s political and spiritual might and Russian weapons, rather than using defensive propaganda rhetoric to malign Russia’s enemies or justify the annexation of Crimea.** The number of publications on the sanctions against Russia remained roughly the same as in 2016, but their focus shifted pragmatically onto the negative consequences for all of Europe.

5. The US, NATO and the West continue to be the global Arch-Villain. Propaganda activity on this talking point increased, too, although this study found certain changes in the image of the US after Donald Trump's election as president: **the tendency is towards turning NATO and the Pentagon into the privileged enemy (while keeping open the option of portraying Trump as a "friend")**.

These general conclusions are presented in detail in the Report: time charts of propaganda activity on each topic are shown, the tactical changes in the content of each topic are analyzed in detail, and concrete examples are given.