

Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia
(HSSF)

Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media

Sofia: 2022

**Summary
of Report:**

**Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media:
Before and During the War against Ukraine**

1) (January – 31 May 2022)

PART TWO

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- 1. Russian Propaganda Activity in Bulgaria Immediately Before and During the War (1 January – 31 May 2022) – Frequency Distributions**

The measurements for this part of the study were also conducted with the SENSIKA automated system.¹ The searches in Bulgarian online space were conducted through a semantic cluster (a list of keywords) characteristic of the Kremlin's propaganda vocabulary in the period under study. For example:

“anti-Russia” OR “collective West” OR “Russian world” OR “ethnic bioweapon” OR “Ukrainian fascists” OR Banderites OR denazification OR demilitarization etc.

Here is the frequency distribution of the 36,156 publications containing the specified keywords:

Number of publications per day, 1 January – 31 May 2022



Vertical - Number of publications

Horizontal - Time of publication

Before the beginning of the war, the average Russian propaganda activity was 39 publications per day. The absolute peaks were on **22 February**, when Putin

¹ <https://sensika.com/>.

declared the independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (**1,785 publications per day**), and on **24 February**, when the Russians invaded Ukraine (**1,262 publications**). These peaks were followed by a "normalization" of Russian propaganda activity in March – **an average of 397 publications per day**, that is, **Russian propaganda activity soared 10-fold after the beginning of the war**. Gradually, it lost nearly 50% of its initial intensity, declining to an average of 201 publications per day in May. However, Russian propaganda activity was sustained at **levels more than five times higher than those in the pre-war period**.

NB! Not all publications identified in the measurement are propaganda. Content analysis on peak days shows that up to 20% of the publications quote Russian speakers (mostly officials) or indirectly reference Russian propaganda. Although they are not propaganda proper, however, even these publications, insofar as they quote propaganda speech, are a direct indicator of the spread of Russian propaganda.

2. Content Analysis of Publications on Peak Days

A content analysis of publications on peak days (i.e., days with the highest number of articles) was performed. This method² made it possible to see not only which Russian propaganda talking points are the most widely circulated, but also which political and social events Russian propaganda immediately responded to.

This content analysis made it possible to see something else, too: **the surge in Russian propaganda after the beginning of the war, described above, is primarily machine-made**. Startled by the war, a number of pro-Russian populist speakers – Bulgarian politicians and public figures – condemned the aggression and stopped spinning Russian talking points for at least a month, even though they had done so often before (as well as after). At the end of February and in March, only a few dozen "Bulgarian" mouthpieces of the Kremlin remained active, but they were hyperactive. However, even they were not the main source of content: in the period under study, the main source of content was direct translations from Russian. Moreover, 65% of the articles identified by SENSICA were reprints done by bots and anonymous websites. That is, a large-scale recycling machine has been built that produces an extensive output even from a small amount of input content.

² Developed in the previous HSSF study on Bulgarian online media: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/REPORT_PART1_ENG.pdf.

2.1 The Dissemination Machine

February 7 was one of the pre-war mini-peaks with exactly 60 publications. Its dominant news story was fake, claiming that Polish mercenaries and Right Sector nationalists had arrived in the Donbas to prepare terrorist acts. In addition to the fact that this fake news, whose source was RIA Novosti, was typical of the anticipatory propaganda legitimization of the future war, its tracking also exposed one of the Russian propaganda dissemination machines. It works like this: the Bulgarian BLITZ News Agency published the article, and eight satellites (anonymous websites with the same design, registered at two IP-addresses) republished it within a few hours, without any change and without reference to the source: the result was nine separate publications with identical content. Three other websites republished it with minor edits. Most probably all of them uploaded it to Facebook, whereby its dissemination increased exponentially.

2.2 “Artillery Preparation” of the War (15 February – 24 February 2022)

The massive propaganda preparations for war lasted exactly ten days. The carpet-bombing began on 15 February with a sudden 163 publications in a day (against an average of 39 per day until then):

Number of publications per day, 13 February – 24 February 2022



Vertical - Number of publications

Horizontal - Time of publication

The narrative logic of the “artillery preparation” of the war is simple and entirely follows the Russian media narrative: “Ukraine is attacking the Donbas and subjecting the Russian population to genocide, so the Russian population must be defended!” However, until the very beginning of hostilities, Russian media and official spokespersons were denying that there would be hostilities.

2.3 Bulgarian Topics by Date

Although the coverage of the war in the identified publications most often recycles Russian media, there are nevertheless some local Bulgarian topics.

Periodically, there were “factual” reports, coming from Russian sources, about Bulgarian weapons and ammunition found in Ukraine. These reports played a subversive role: they preemptively propagated the message that, although Bulgarian military aid to Ukraine was not publicly announced, it was nevertheless being provided secretly. In fact, Bulgarian companies were not donating but selling weapons for Ukraine all the time, but the systematic messages subverted the possibility of donation.

A systematic provoker who, through various propaganda statements reached peaks of 400–500 publications quoting her, was the Russian Ambassador to Bulgaria, Eleonora Mitrofanova.

There was also a surge in activity around the release of the sailors from the Bulgarian merchant ship *Tsarevna* (peaks on 14 and 18 April), who Russian propaganda claimed were held captive by the Ukrainians and released by the Russians when the latter captured Mariupol.

3. Which Media Outlets Spread Russian Propaganda in Bulgaria?

For the period from 1 January to 31 May 2022, SENSIKA identified a total of 36,156 publications containing the specified keywords. They were distributed among 703 sources. More than half of all publications – 19,066 – came from the top 25 sources:

Table: Number of publications, by media outlet, 1 January – 31 May 2022

Media outlet	Number of publications
1. Novini247	5,833
2. News Front	1,348
3. pogled.info	1,175
4. Blitz	806
5. Informiran.net	805
6. BG7.EU	669
7. World Today Bgvest	656
8. Iskamnovi	586
9. vchas.net	585
10. zanas.eu	579
11. Fakti.bg	521
12. News7.eu	505

13. Blog.bg	500
14. Pan.bg	497
15. BulBoX	464
16. Trud.bg	437
17. News.bg	399
18. Shafaqna	397
19. classa.bg	383
20. NIKISASA	369
21. Epicenter	358
22. Top-novini.eu	344
23. Dir.bg	314
24. Novini.bg	268
25. Vratsa Novini	268

This table does not distinguish between media outlets that are producers of media content, and media outlets that are retransmitters – aggregators (bots) and anonymous websites. The content producers are the Russian hybrid agency News Front, which has a Bulgarian-language version, as well as the pro-Russian Bulgarian media outlets Pogled-info, BLITZ, Trud, Classa, and Epicenter, some of which rank lower – behind the number one, the aggregator Novini247, and the anonymous satellites of BLITZ, five of which occupy the prestigious sixth to tenth places in the ranking.

The analysis of the table shows something important: more than **two-thirds of the dissemination of Russian propaganda on the Bulgarian internet is due to mechanical spreaders – retransmitters of foreign content.**

4. Is There Anti-Russian Propaganda?

An anti-Russian propaganda counter-narrative has already been developed and it is widespread in the Ukrainian media, especially since the beginning of the war. According to it, the Russians are “orcs” or “Rushists” led by the “bunker grandfather” or the “Botox dictator” assisted by the “agrofuehrer” Lukashenko, etc.

The Ukrainian narrative is also found in Bulgarian media, although much less so than the Russian one. A simple test via SENSIKA shows that in the first five months of 2022, the most widespread offensive epithet, “Rushists”, was used in 630 Bulgarian-language online publications, while the Russian equivalent epithet, “Banderites”, was used in 2,056 publications. That is, **the Russian propaganda vocabulary was used 3.3 times more often than the Ukrainian.**

5. Russian Talking Points “in His Own Voice”: President Rumen Radev

Although most pro-Russian Bulgarian politicians and public speakers fell silent at the beginning of the war, some of them eventually ventured to start repeating Russian talking points in their own voice again.

This part of the study analyzed only the statements of President Rumen Radev who, because of his institutional position and high rating, reached peaks of several hundred publications reporting anything he said.

At the beginning of the war, Radev explicitly and categorically condemned the Russian aggression.

In mid-March 2022, however, he introduced and began to systematically use one of the talking points of the Russian narrative, according to which by helping Ukraine by providing weapons and supplies, the West is actually waging war against Russia. On 18 March Radev said that if Bulgaria provided military aid to Ukraine, “this would be involving Bulgaria in the war”. This argument has since been systematically used by Radev to block all attempts by the government and parliament to decide on provision of military aid to Ukraine; moreover, in the period under study, this talking point swallowed up all the other important issues on the public agenda: if Bulgaria stops paying Gazprom in rubles, it will also get involved in the war; if Mitrofanova is expelled, the situation will also be exacerbated; and so on. Even on 2 August, appointing a caretaker government, Radev set as its main task to prevent “involving Bulgaria in the war”.