

SUMMARY
OF REPORT

Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media

(1 January – 31 December 2022)

Human and Social Studies Foundation -
Sofia, 2023



**AMERICA FOR
BULGARIA
FOUNDATION**

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*Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia
(HSSF)*

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
1. BACKGROUND: THE GENERAL NARRATIVES (TALKING POINTS) OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN BULGARIA AND THEIR MUTATIONS OVER TIME (2013 – 2022)	5
2. BACKGROUND: QUANTITATIVE MEASUREMENT OF THE SPREAD OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES IN BULGARIAN ONLINE MEDIA (2013 – 2022)	7
3. RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA ACTIVITY IN BULGARIA IMMEDIATELY BEFORE AND DURING THE WAR (1 JANUARY – 31 DECEMBER 2022) – FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTIONS	10
4. FIRST SURGE IMMEDIATELY BEFORE AND AFTER THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE	12
<i>4.1 THE FIRST DISSEMINATION MACHINE</i>	12
<i>4.2 “ARTILLERY PREPARATION” OF THE WAR (15 FEBRUARY – 24 FEBRUARY 2022)</i>	12
<i>4.3 BULGARIAN TOPICS BY DATE</i>	13
<i>4.4 WHICH MEDIA OUTLETS SPREAD RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA DURING THE FIRST SURGE?</i>	14
5. THE MACHINE OF MUSHROOM WEBSITES	16
<i>5.1 WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?</i>	16
<i>5.2 TYPES OF PROPAGANDA PUBLICATIONS ON MUSHROOM WEBSITES</i>	19
<i>5.3 CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PUBLICATIONS ON PEAK DAYS</i>	19
<i>5.4 WHICH MEDIA OUTLETS SPREAD RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA DURING THE SECOND SURGE?</i>	22
6. RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA ON BULGARIAN FACEBOOK IN 2022	24
7. PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS RUSSIA’S WAR IN UKRAINE AND TOWARDS MAIN PROPAGANDA MESSAGES IDENTIFIED IN THE MEDIA STUDY	26

INTRODUCTION

In the last year (2022), Russian propaganda has spread virulently in Bulgarian online space. Compared to the previous year, 2021, by the end of 2022 it had increased by almost 20 times.

The narratives of Russian propaganda have not changed significantly since they were introduced and began to be disseminated in Bulgarian-language online media in 2013. In this report, we show the slight transformations of the propaganda narrative compared to the previous studies of the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia.

At the beginning of the year, Russian propaganda clichés entered Bulgarian online space literally as direct translations of reports in Russian media or as statements of official spokespersons of the Russian Federation.

It must be noted that there was a radical change in the dissemination of propaganda in the summer of 2021¹ – that was when Russian propaganda finally merged with Russian politics, i.e., the official spokespersons of the Russian Federation became the disseminators of propaganda. This approach has led to a broadening of the scope of propaganda (it entered Bulgarian mainstream media, which inevitably quote Russian spokespersons) and to an increase in the number of propaganda articles. It is also noteworthy, however, that Bulgarian speakers and signed articles have become lost in the overall flow of propaganda.

New technological solutions have also contributed to the spread of propaganda. At the beginning of 2022, a network of aggregators was formed to amplify the Russian perspective on events of the day. At the end of the year, Russian propaganda began to use a new technological means of influencing social media – a powerful Machine of Mushroom Websites that amplifies the dissemination of messages with absolutely identical content, which are generally unrelated to reality, by up to about 400 times.

Russian propaganda also influences public opinion in Bulgaria. Of course, objective information sets the pillars of public perception: since the start of the war of aggression against Ukraine, Putin’s approval rating in Bulgaria has fallen by three times, while his disapproval rating has risen by three times. Approval of Russia has declined as well, albeit not so sharply – Bulgarians seem to lay the blame on the master of the Kremlin. After Russia’s losses on the front, confidence in the power of Russian weapons is also decreasing – the majority of Bulgarians either do not believe in, or are undecided about, their power. Still, Russian propaganda has had its breakthroughs:

The pro-Kremlin propaganda messages identified in this study that can be said to have

¹ We take the turning point to be Putin’s 12 July 2021 article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, in which the main talking points and their corresponding propaganda vocabulary were formulated by the ultimate authority. Until then, propaganda was spread by the Kremlin’s media, but not so directly by government officials and diplomats. Henceforth it became the official language of Russian state spokespersons. See <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [accessed 9 March 2023].

achieved their purpose are:

- 1) that Bulgaria is siding with Ukraine because those in power in Bulgaria are dependent on the Euro-Atlantic partners (and not because Ukraine is the country under attack);
- 2) the claim that the West has dragged Russia into war, and
- 3) that providing military aid to Ukraine means involving Bulgaria in the war.

The present study builds on the large-scale collective study on “Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria” within which an analysis was conducted of national-populist and (pro)Russian propaganda in Bulgarian online media for the 2013–2017 period.² It focuses on the year of the hot war against Ukraine (2022), but it also covers the years before it (2018–2022). Thus, it cumulatively operates with data for a ten-year period (2013–2022) and analyzes all Bulgarian-language online media and blogs. The quantitative measurements were conducted with the SENSIKA automated media monitoring system.³ Additional measurements of the spread of propaganda on Facebook in 2022 were conducted with CrowdTangle. The social reception of propaganda narratives was tested in early 2023 through face-to-face structured interviews.

² The study was carried out by a team from the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia. Its results are available in English at: <https://hssfoundation.org/en/anti-liberal-discourses-and-propaganda-messages-in-bulgarian-media/>.

³ <https://sensika.com/>.

1. Background: The General Narratives (Talking Points) of Russian Propaganda in Bulgaria and Their Mutations over Time (2013 – 2022)

The Russian propaganda package, which is sold globally with small local adaptations, draws heavily on local grassroots critiques of the West. Broadly speaking, it combines leftist critiques of neoliberalism and financial capitalism with rightist critiques of cosmopolitanism and cultural liberalism. A similar mix is also characteristic of other national-populist discourses that have risen in the last decade, of which Russian propaganda attempts to be a “flagship”.

Already in the first cited study of 2017, we found that the narrative of Russian propaganda is built on a **geopolitical conspiratorial logic**. In this logic, there are **four main logical positions (roles)**, which are assigned to different subjects.

Here they are:

1. A global hegemon/puppet-master (the collective West, the US, NATO), through **2. its puppets (the Brussels Eurocrats and the venal liberal elites in the individual countries)** is killing the sovereignty of the European peoples, therefore **3. Europe is dying – it is a victim**. The same villain is surrounding and even conducting a war against Russia, which is also a victim – but Russia alone is justly resisting, it is rising from the ashes and is actually Europe’s saviour: **4. Russia is reviving**.

Since it was introduced in Bulgaria as a general propaganda language in 2013, this conspiratorial logic has remained unchanged. However, we have found slight contentual variations in the individual sub-narratives that make it up:

1. If ten years ago the role of **global hegemon/puppet-master** was most often assigned to the US/NATO as well as to contextually substituted specific actors (Obama, Merkel, Soros, etc.), now the metonymic variants are condensed into a single subject: “the collective West”.

2. **The decline of Europe** – this (sub)narrative, according to which Europe is in cultural decline (“infected with liberalism”), “threatened by a migrant invasion”, etc., has been visibly fading since 2017. The EU, which in previous periods was treated as “Washington’s puppet”, since the start of the war in Ukraine and the united response against it has become the arch-villain – part of “the collective West”;

3. **Bulgaria’s venal elites** – they are those domestic “puppets” who serve the interests of the villain/hegemon: “Sorosoids”, “grant-spongers”, “genders”, “liberasts”, “paid analysts, politicians, and protesters”, etc. This propaganda tool is often used for settling scores with inconvenient domestic political and economic opponents, it was therefore

the first to be widely circulated in Bulgarian media, and until 2017 its frequency of use increased the most. In recent years, however, it has been maintained by inertia, albeit at still high levels.

4. Russia is rising. Here, the content innovations are towards a more detailed portrayal of the image of Russia itself and, above all, a militaristic intensification of Russia's confrontation with Ukraine and the Western world.

We should note that although there are no serious changes, the vocabulary of Russian propaganda was nevertheless consolidated ideologically into a specific “ruscist” (**Nazi-imperialist**) mix shortly before the war. Instead of the somewhat chaotic attempts to think of the Russian sphere of spiritual and political influence through the lens of “Slavdom”, “Orthodox Christianity”, “Eurasian civilization”, “Soviet internationalism”, etc., primacy is now given to the so-called “Russian world” (“*ruskiy mir*”), which has swallowed them up. This has also happened institutionally: instead of various wannabe ideologues (Dugin, Fursov, etc.) competing to define what is Russian, on 12 July 2021 the latter was nailed down by the ultimate authority – by Putin himself.⁴ Arguing for historical, linguistic, ethnic and cultural affinity, Putin insists that the Velikorussians, Belorussians and Malorussians (Ukrainians) are “one people”, a “triune people”, a “large Russian nation”. And everything that opposes this nation – including Ukraine, which, “seduced” by the West, is trying to break away from it – is “anti-Russia”. Accordingly, all the other nationalities and denominations that gravitate around “the triune people” make up the “multi-confessional, multi-national, multi-faceted Russian world”. The “Russian world” denotes the empire, which also has a wider periphery, a hinterland that was naturally formed in the force field of the dominant ethnic group which has been practically extended to a Russian race (“the large Russian nation”, “the triune people”).

And another important thing: if there indeed has been a drastic change in the use of Russian propaganda narratives since 2021, it is that **now the Kremlin's official spokespersons – Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, Zakharova, Mitrofanova, etc. – are literally repeating propaganda talking points with their respective propaganda vocabulary.** Before that, Russian officials still spoke in a diplomatically more neutral language, leaving the conduct of propaganda to other media and spokespersons. Now the entire Russian state is a mouthpiece for propaganda clichés. Hence the Bulgarian (and world) media – even the most objective and neutral ones – are compelled to quote them. Thus, Russian propaganda has sharply increased its spread.

⁴ Article by Putin: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; translated into Bulgarian: <https://www.zemia-news.bg/index.php/svyat-3/91782-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B8-%D1%83%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5.html>.

2. Background: Quantitative Measurement of the Spread of Russian Propaganda Narratives in Bulgarian Online Media (2013 – 2022)

In order to see the spread of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria over a long period, we repeated the measurements we had conducted for the 2013–2017 period, but now for the next five years. That is to say, we conducted keyword searches through the SENSIKA system, which archives over 8,000 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs⁵ and provides direct access to online articles that contain the specified keywords. The aggregated results cover the period from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2022. Through SENSIKA, we searched for the same narratives through the same keywords (plus new words introduced into the vocabulary of anti-democratic national-populist and (pro)Russian propaganda after 2017):

1. The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master;
2. The decline of Europe;
3. Bulgaria's venal elites.

As for the fourth narrative, "The rise of Russia", since we had subdivided it into five sub-narratives in 2017 for the sake of clarity, we now measured it again subdivided into five separate semantic clusters:

1. Russia's increased political and spiritual might – various narratives praising Russia in general;
2. Russia's enemies – antagonistic discourses vilifying Russia's enemies;
3. The power of Russian weapons – direct praise of the Russian army and armaments;
4. The sanctions against Russia – narratives describing Western sanctions as useless and harmful to the countries imposing them;
5. Crimea and Ukraine – narratives insisting that Crimea is Russian and that Ukraine is ruled by Nazis.

⁵ The number of Bulgarian-language websites is constantly increasing: whereas in 2016 SENSIKA archived approximately 3,000 websites and blogs, by the end of 2022 they were more than 8,000.

Here are the aggregated results for ten years:

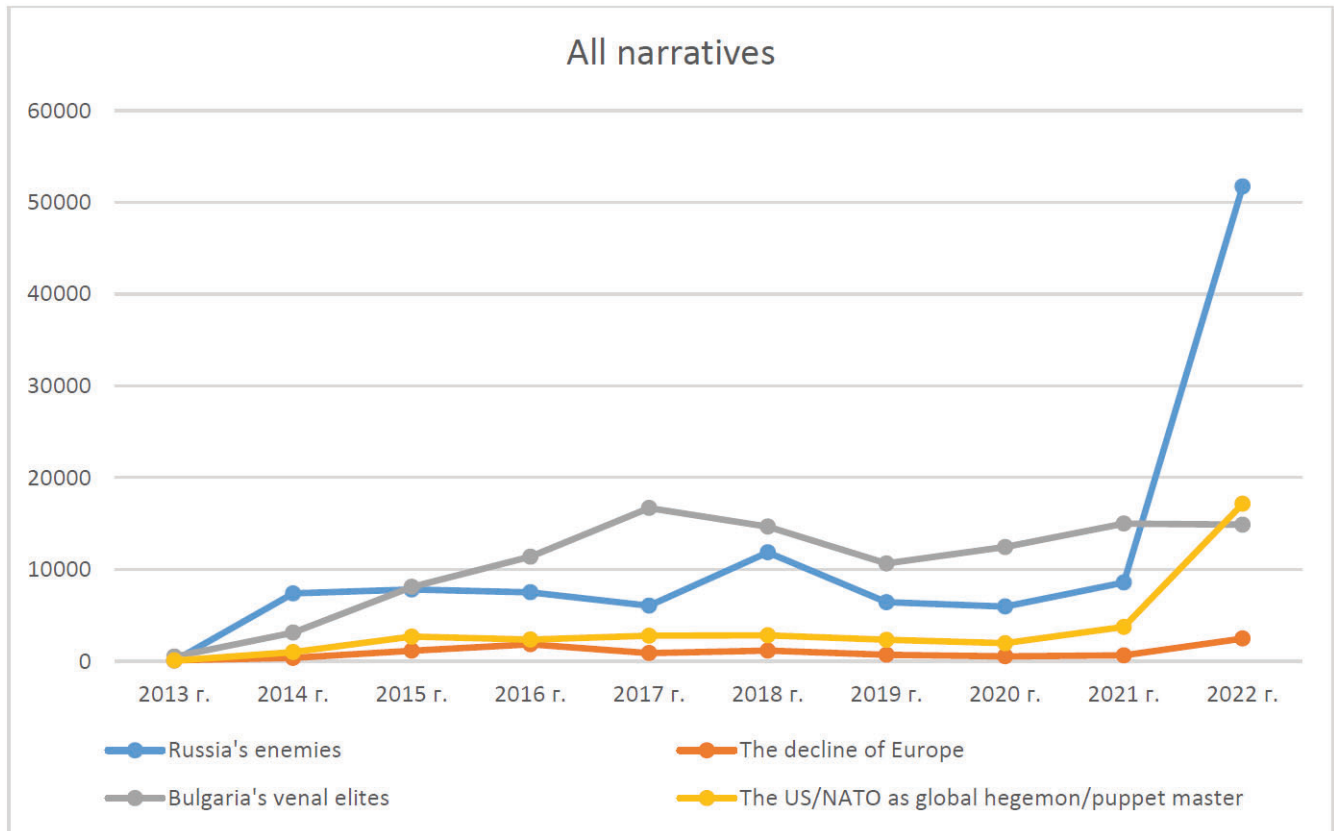
Table 1: Number of publications, by year, containing the keywords of the different propaganda (sub)narratives. Period: 1 January 2013 – 31 December 2022

	Russia's in-creased political and spiritual might	Russia's enemies	The power of Russian weapons	The sanctions against Russia	Crimea and Ukraine	The decline of Europe	Bulgaria's venal elites	The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master	New keywords only
2013	44	54	22	2	56	109	494	69	-
2014	365	7,387	219	1,141	3,983	359	3,114	999	-
2015	2,448	7,814	929	2,666	5,814	1,141	8,094	2,683	-
2016	1,326	7,511	745	4,005	6,109	1,841	11,394	2,361	-
2017	1,943	6,049	1,076	4,217	3,983	887	16,703	2,778	-
2018	1,952	11,859	2,876	3,050	4,816	1,151	14,666	2,824	5,816
2019	1,481	6,424	3,382	1,976	3,782	700	10,649	2,333	5,599
2020	2,241	5,959	2,677	1,006	2,892	534	12,437	1,968	4,206
2021	1,532	8,579	3,511	1,223	4,675	636	15,000	3,731	6,616
2022	8,820	37,446	23,039	7,338	97,977	2,328	14,680	12,134	115,729

Methodological note: The data from the new measurements for the last five years (**in bold**) show a mechanical increase in the number of publications due to two factors: 1) New keywords included; 2) Over 5,000 new Bulgarian-language websites and blogs that have appeared since 2017 and are archived by SENSİKA. The mechanical increase in the number of publications is distinct between 2017 and 2018, and its approximate size can be estimated from the last column showing the number of articles identified through “new keywords only”.

Here is a visual representation of the data:

Chart 1: Comparative (number of publications per year, 2013 – 2022)



Some conclusions are clear:

In the case of all narratives about Russia and “The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master”, propaganda in 2022 increased significantly compared to the previous year (the increase in the number of publications is from four to 21 times for the narratives about Russia and more than three times for those about the US/NATO). The narrative about “The decline of Europe” started from a very low level and, although it increased almost four times, remains marginal in comparison to the other geopolitical narratives. Only the narrative about “Bulgaria’s venal elites” has kept its level by inertia and has even declined slightly in 2022. This is important: as the war heated up, this narrative, which is usually used by local actors to vilify also local political and economic opponents and which was the leading one for many years, is now giving way to geopolitical narratives; i.e., since the start of the hot war, **local uses of the Russian propaganda package have been giving way to direct Russian propaganda.**

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

The measurements for this part of the study were also conducted with the SENSIKA automated system. The queries 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.

By searching for keywords from this list for the entire year 2022, SENSIKA found **85,397 publications** (from 1,250 sources). They are distributed over time as follows:

Chart 2: Russian propaganda in Bulgarian online space (number of publications per day, 1 January – 31 December 2022)

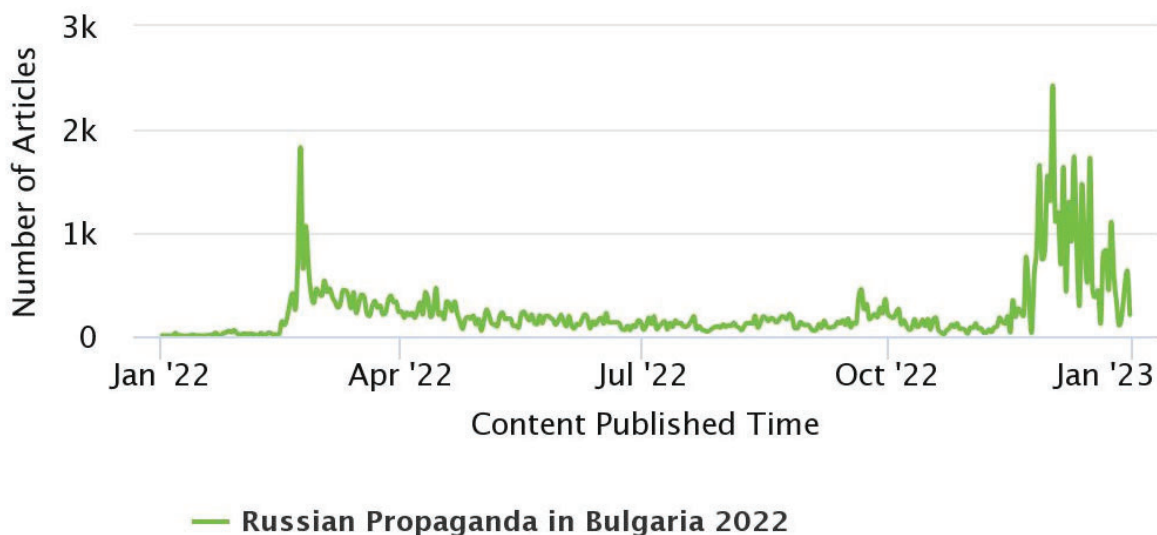


Chart 2 shows the general dynamics of the spread of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria online. Immediately obvious are two major spikes: 1) around the start of the war; and 2) at the end of November.

The year began with propaganda activity at an average of 39 publications per day, which surged sky-high on 22 February when Putin declared the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (1,785 publications for the day), and on 24 February when the Russians invaded Ukraine (1,262 publications). In May, propaganda activity levelled off at almost 400 publications per day, i.e., ten times more than in the pre-war

period. From then on, it gradually began to decline, dropping to an average of 124 publications per day in September. That was until late November, when it surged again: from 22 November to the end of the year, SENSIKA identified 32,475 publications, i.e., propaganda activity increased over six times more than in the previous month, to an average of 792 publications per day.

This second surge was strategically engineered – it was the product of nearly 400 newly created anonymous, cloned websites which were recycling the same propaganda messages and which SENSIKA detected and began to archive at an accelerated pace from 22 November onwards. Presumably, these websites were created gradually over the previous few months – most likely, by the platform Share4Pay, which invites users to share content from ready-made websites on social media for a fee.⁶ That is, a special Astroturfing Machine has been created, which is subject to a separate analysis. The sharp surge in propaganda from November 2022 onwards is exclusively due to it.

Since the activation of the Machine of Mushroom Websites, as the programmers call them, has radically changed the online environment in Bulgaria, the analysis of the content and sources of Russian propaganda is divided into two: 1) First surge immediately before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine; and 2) Second surge after the activation of the Machine.

⁶ The detected mushroom websites often publish ads of the platform Share4Pay.

4. First Surge Immediately Before and After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

It is impossible to analyze the content of tens of thousands of articles. That is why a content analysis of publications on peak days (i.e., days with the highest number of articles) was performed. This method⁷ 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 SENSIKA were reprints done by bots and anonymous websites. That is, a first and already powerful Machine for disseminating Russian propaganda content – albeit much smaller than the Machine of Mushroom Websites that SENSIKA would detect in November 2022 – was already in place before the start of the war.

4.1 *The First 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.

4.2 *“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):

⁷ Developed in the previous HSSF study on Bulgarian online media: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/REPORT_PART1_ENG.pdf.

Chart 3: Number of publications per day, 13 February – 24 February 2022



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.

4.3 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.

4.4 Which Media Outlets Spread Russian Propaganda During the First Surge?

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 2: 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**. And that was even before the activation of the big Machine which we will talk about now:

5. The Machine of Mushroom Websites

5.1 What Does It Look Like?

At the end of November, the SENSIKA analytical system detected and began to archive a large number of websites that publish identical articles and that are almost identical in design:



Compared to the other websites, they have several characteristics in common: 1. they are essentially completely anonymous, it is impossible to contact the authors; 2. they have the same domain (zbox7.eu, bgvest.eu, etc.); 3. they have an identical graphical user interface. Besides these three characteristics, there are two distinctive features that distinguish them from one another: first of all, these are the subdomain names (**novini701.dnes24.eu**, **novinarbg.dnes24.eu**, **news1.dnes24.eu**); the other distinctive feature is the arrangement of the articles pretending to be “news” – this difference is very slight, but present. Programmers and researchers call such websites “mushroom websites”⁸ because of their proliferation and propensity to replicate. In Bulgaria, they “sprouted” in late 2022. It cannot be ascertained exactly when they were created – probably within the previous few months – but the SENSIKA team detected and began to archive them on 22 November 2022; by 10 December, the system had already covered 370 of them.

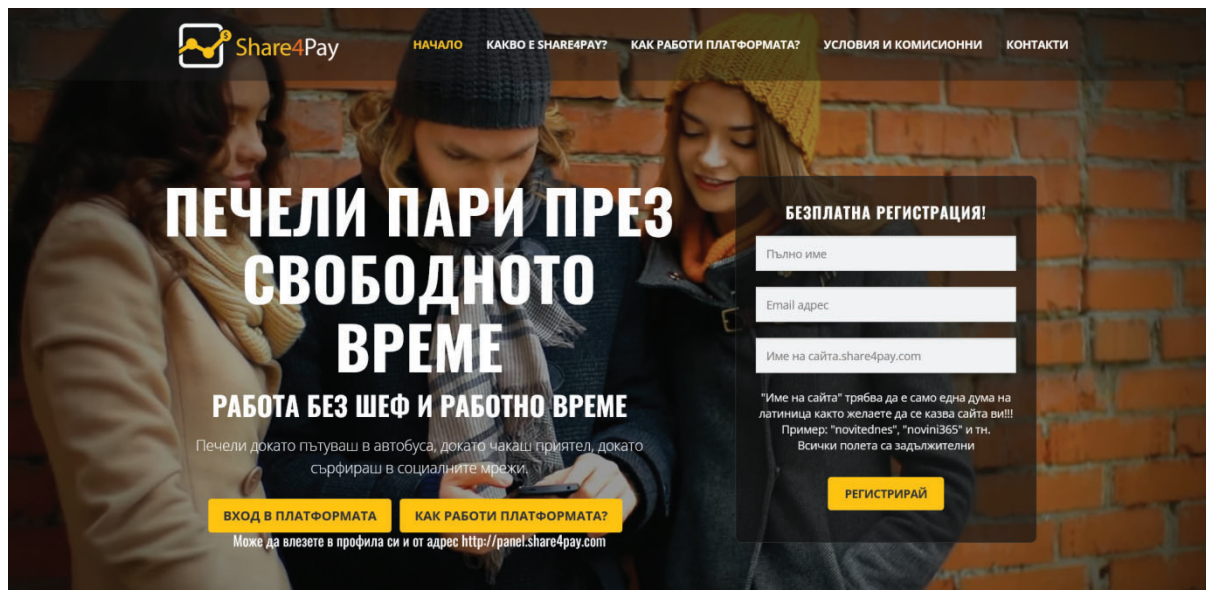
Here is a list of the domains detected so far and the corresponding number of subdomains, called clones, of each domain:

- zbox7.eu – 25 clones;
- bgvest.eu – 173 clones;
- bg7.eu – 65 clones;
- allbg.eu – 62 clones;
- others – 40 clones in total.

It is likely that the Machine of Mushroom Websites is linked to the platform Share4Pay, which the websites themselves regularly promote. Share4Pay, in turn, offers any user the opportunity to acquire a ready-made website filled with publications, the user’s task being to promote the publications and the platform on social media for a fee.

⁸ Detailed technical information is provided by Martin Stamenov of SENSIKA in his presentation at an event on “AI Propaganda” held by Ratio BG on 19 January 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijnBoNZSjgo>) [accessed 10 February 2023].

The platform Share4Pay – a screenshot



The content that is disseminated and replicated by the Machine of Mushroom Websites is varied, but when it comes to the war in Ukraine it is explicitly pro-Russian. The publications usually refer to unnamed “experts”, politicians or “world media” and are structured in such a way as to seem objective. That is, the Machine of Mushroom Websites also presents non-propaganda content, and it probably has a business model – profiting from advertising. At the same time, geopolitics as part of their media content is distinctly pro-Russian: the business model is combined with a propaganda channel.

What is the logic of creating such websites? There are at least two reasons:

In his presentation at the Ratio BG event, Martin Stamenov shows how this type of content can reach media with national coverage (for example, on the scale of bTV). The Machine creates a cloud of publications on the same topic, which is meant to be promoted by Facebook’s algorithms. The news story can find its way into Facebook thanks to a specific set of user characteristics that target precisely this story, which has already become “news” due to its multiple postings, at particular users. It appears in the newsfeed as “suggested for you” content and can thus be spread even more widely.

The second purpose is even more practical – to check what the audience is interested in, by using clickbait. In a large number of these articles, several characteristic features can be found: a loud headline, no author, no source, promise of a video, which is missing. The goal here is “scouting”: to test which news stories generate the most clicks. Facebook is an ideal medium for this campaign – the publication appears on Facebook with a thumbnail which doesn’t provide any substantial information about it; the only thing users can see if they don’t click on the thumbnail is the headline and the picture. Many of the publications on

such mushroom websites are not even informative, as they are visibly machine-translated and parts of them don't make sense.

However, without following the money that funds the Machine, it is impossible to draw a clear balance between the proposed hypotheses: to what extent the Machine is market-oriented and to what extent it is propaganda-oriented, and how exactly!

5.2 Types of Propaganda Publications on Mushroom Websites

The propaganda publications on mushroom websites covered by our study can be divided into three main types:

- The first type are publications targeted at people who do not read news but rely more on headlines and bolded passages in the text. This is the so-called impression management approach. This type of users have to be quickly and firmly convinced of Russia's successes on the front and of the failures of Ukraine and the "collective West";
- The second type are "morning briefs", as they call themselves, which pretend to be objective, but are actually meant to build an image of Russia that is at least equal to those of Ukraine and its Western allies. Here the Machine most often cites Russian media – conventional and social.
- The third type are also "morning briefs", but they are targeted at a different group of readers – those who condemn Russia, but who may still be persuaded to change their position. Most often this is done through references to the Institute for the Study of War (IST) or various Ukrainian services. The general pro-democracy text of such publications, however, contains short and rhetorically unemphasized pro-Russia messages.

The intervention of the Machine of Mushroom Websites in our media analysis accounts for huge spikes in propaganda activity, and many of these spikes are entirely artificial. These spikes are also most often not connected to specific events – the picture of the war is created in the typological way described above, disseminating identical articles every day, with no sensitivity to context. Let us illustrate this with some of the more striking examples.

5.3 Content Analysis of Publications on Peak Days

SENSIKA detected for the first time Bulgarian-language mushroom websites disseminating Russian propaganda on **22 November 2022**, when the system identified 768 publications. Here are the publications shared by the Machine and, respectively, the number of reprints:

- "VIDEO of the war: Kaskad Battalion destroys Ukrainian fighters at Pavlovka" – 184 reprints;⁹
- "ISW report drops bombshell about how Russia's conducting ethnic cleansing

⁹ <https://news.dnes24.eu/848881/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

among Tatars and Ukrainians” – 180 reprints;¹⁰

- “VIDEO of the war: Russian military storms AFU positions with powerful explosive charges” – 174 reprints;¹¹
- “Morning brief: AFU receive high-precision missiles from Turkey, Russia transfers S-400 and Iskander to Belarus” – 80 reprints;¹²
- “New appalling abuse of Russian prisoner of war in Ukraine VIDEO 18” – 38 reprints.¹³

If we subtract the Machine’s shares (656) from the total number of publications on this day (768), we will get 112 publications – which means that in the other online media, we aren’t seeing an increase in propaganda activity compared to the previous period.

Another huge spike in publications was observed on **2 December 2022**, when SENSIKA detected 2,459 publications from 481 sources. The material disseminated by the Machine of Mushroom Websites looks like this:

- “[VIDEO of the war: DPR fighters destroy AFU stronghold at Vodiani](#)” – 423 reprints;¹⁴
- “[Putin talks to Scholz today and reveals why Kiev refuses talks](#)” – 381 reprints;¹⁵
- “ISW report with latest news: will Belarus become part of the aggression?” – 416 reprints;¹⁶
- “[Russian military strikes three foreign mercenary deployment points](#)” – 423 reprints;¹⁷
- “[It’s hell in Donetsk, rocket artillery and Grad \[rockets\] scorch buildings, Kiev avenges Russian missile strikes VIDEO](#)” – 396 reprints;¹⁸
- “[Morning brief: Kiev explains why air raid alert was declared across Ukraine at 2 pm on 1 December, AFU lose some 10,000 troops on this 20-km front](#)” – 331 reprints.¹⁹

The participation of the Machine of Mushroom Websites here is impressive – with a total of 2,370 reprints of the above-mentioned articles, the difference from the total number of publications (2,459) being just 89! While the effectiveness of this type of media speculation with regard to the audience cannot be assessed, this is one of the concrete examples of how

¹⁰ <https://news1.dnes24.eu/848942/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹¹ <https://bg-utro.eu/857872/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹² <https://news.dnes24.eu/848926/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹³ <https://pro4eti.eu/587789> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹⁴ <https://novini701.dnes24.eu/853290/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹⁵ <https://novinarbg.dnes24.eu/853252/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹⁶ <https://bg-sega.dnes24.eu/853162/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹⁷ <https://novoto12.bgvest.eu/853204/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹⁸ <https://news1.dnes24.eu/853338/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹⁹ <https://news1.dnes24.eu/853120/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

an attempt is made to flood the media environment in Bulgaria.

The last example we will give here is from **10 December 2022**, with 1,558 publications from 457 sources:

- [“VIDEO of the war: DPR tanks suppress enemy firing points”](#) – 376 reprints;²⁰
- “Foreign mercenaries refuse to fight in Bakhmut, but Ukrainians duped them” – 365 reprints;²¹
- [“Morning brief: AFU try to storm Lisichansk for the first time, but start to retreat from Soledar”](#) – 30 reprints;²²
- [“VIDEO of the war: AFU try to break through to Soledar, but...”](#) – 367 reprints;²³
- [“VIDEO of the war: DPR snipers stike \[sic\] AFU fighters at Ugledar”](#) – 375 reprints.²⁴

As in the previous two examples, there is a huge difference in the number of publications with and without the participation of the Machine of Mushroom Websites – 1,513 publications are reprints and when we subtract them from the total number of publications (1,558), we are left with just 45. Again, there is no real increase in propaganda publications in the media that are not part of the Machine.

The above examples are sufficiently indicative of Russian propaganda’s attempts to intervene in the Bulgarian media environment through artificially generated mechanisms and increases in content, which create an absolutely alternative reality. In addition to the fact that these attempts become visible mainly upon analysis with a specialized tool, they operate *beneath the surface* of the everyday media flow. We cannot measure their real impact, but we can still say that the more visible these types of attempts at manipulation become, the more clearly we will have to talk about the need to regulate and illuminate the Bulgarian media environment, including social media.

²⁰ <https://bg-utro.eu/865022/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

²¹ <https://livenewsbg.bgvest.eu/856369/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

²² <https://bg-utro.eu/865049/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

²³ <https://infominuti.dnes24.eu/856201/> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

²⁴ <https://pro4eti.eu/594929> et al. [accessed 10 February 2023].

5.4 Which Media Outlets Spread Russian Propaganda During the Second Surge?

The activation of the Machine radically reshuffled – compared to the beginning of the year (see Table 2 above) – the ranking of websites and domains that most often publish articles containing the specified keywords:

Table 3: Number of publications, by media outlet, 22 October – 31 December 2022

Media outlet	Number of publications
1. Novini247	344
2. BGVEST	282
3. BGVest.eu	182
4. Zanas.eu	171
5. Zbox7.eu	170
6. Maugly	160
7. BG7.eu	158
8. Infobg	156
9. novini1	149
10. novinarbg	142
11. Juventus	137
12. pogled.info	127
13. Infoforyou	83
14. Bgandworld	82
15. News Front	73
16. Classa.bg	70
17. Actualno.com	64
18. hothotnews.zanas.eu	63
19. Djoninews	58
20. novinite22	58
21. Novinivini	58
22. Partner	58
23. 1234bg	57
24. Bvv	57
25. Miminovini	57

In the SENSIKA ranking, the top disseminator is once again the aggregator Novini247, which is not part of the Machine. In the previous ranking, however, next came human-run

media outlets: NewsFront, pogled.info and BLITZ. Following the activation of the Machine, its main domains are ranked in second to seventh places, while the Russian hybrid agency NewsFront drops from second to 15th place, the Bulgarian pro-Russia website pogled.info drops from third to 12th place, and the BLITZ “News Agency” drops out of the top 25. In the current ranking, there are only another two human-run media outlets: Classa.bg and Actualno.com,²⁵ in 16th and 17th place respectively.

With the entry of the Machine, Bulgarian online space has become completely dominated by it. The algorithmic dissemination of propaganda by anonymous websites, which was also high (65%) at the beginning of 2022, now reaches 89%: out of a total of 3,016 articles published by the top 25 media outlets for the monitored period, only 334 articles (11% of the total) were published in media outlets that are known to be run by real people (NewsFront, pogled.info, Classa.bg and Actualno.com).

²⁵ Actualno.com is not a tendentious pro-Russian website – most of the articles on it identified through the specified keywords quote Russian sources.

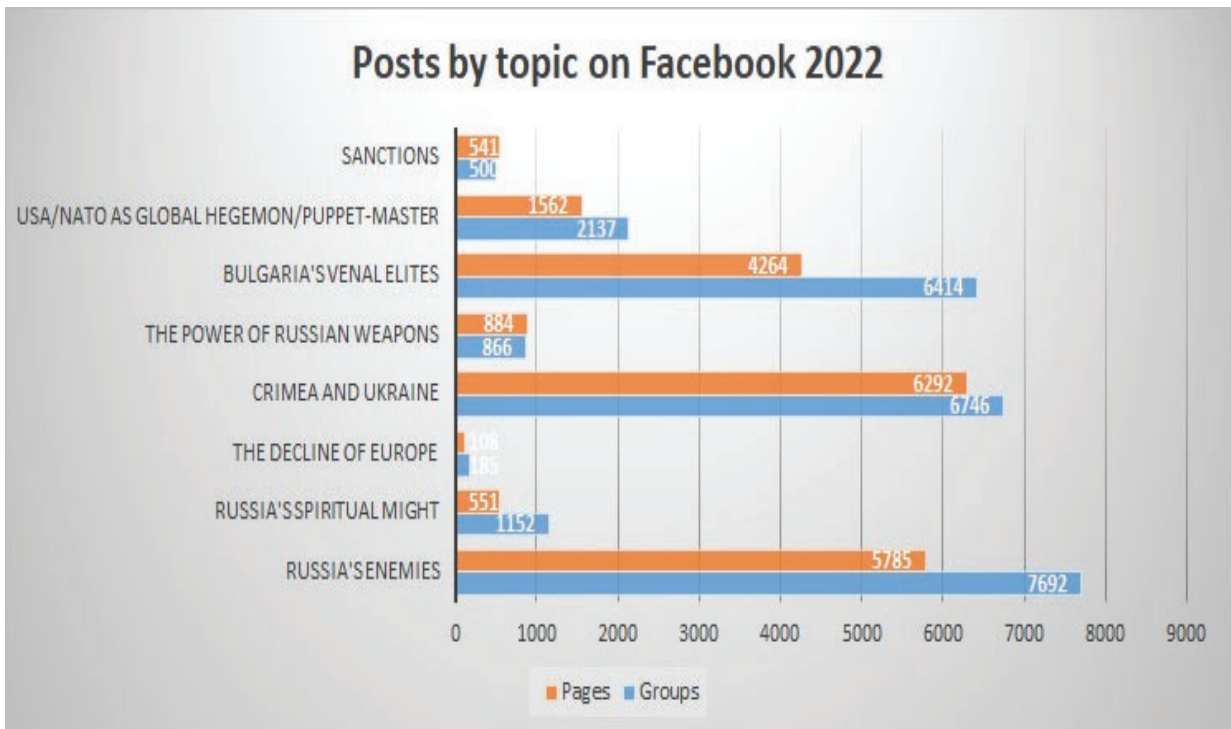
6. Russian Propaganda on Bulgarian Facebook in 2022

Facebook was studied using the same semantic clusters (keyword strings) that were identified in the study of the main propaganda narratives on news websites and blogs, but the search and measurement tool used in this case was CrowdTangle – i.e., Meta’s own tool. This study covers only public Facebook groups and pages.

The Bulgarian-language online space on Facebook has been extremely active not only since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine but also throughout 2022. The total number of posts on all topics covered by this study is 25,692 posts on groups and 19,987 posts on pages, with interactions with posts on groups and on pages numbering 1,563,845 and 7,657,474 respectively. These numbers clearly show the difference in the *success rate* between the two types of posts, on groups and on pages – the success rate of posts on pages is more than 4.5 times higher than that of posts on groups. It would be reasonable to assume that the interest provoked by posts on pages is significantly higher because there are a large number of pages that share propaganda posts without being expected to do so; in other words, pages that do not present themselves as informative/news pages but as commercial or entertainment pages are sharing propaganda, which thus reaches a wider audience. Unlike Facebook pages, Facebook groups are created by people who share a common interest or passion, they are more closed, but they have a more interactive function, involving all members of the group. Sharing on them is more free and their structure is often horizontal, unlike the vertical structure of Facebook pages (in the case of pages, sharing is one-way, from the administrators down, and followers are more like clients). The aim of Facebook pages is to gain popularity by sharing content related to news, business, products or services. Facebook groups are created as communities of interest, where members are often also content generators.

Of the narratives studied through the semantic clusters, three more popular ones stand out: “Russia’s enemies” (7,692 posts on groups and 5,785 posts on pages); “Crimea and Ukraine” (6,746 posts on groups and 6,292 posts on pages); and “Bulgaria’s venal elites” (6,414 posts on groups and 4,264 posts on pages). The least popular topic is “The decline of Europe” (185 posts on groups and 108 posts on pages). The above-mentioned three topics get the most comments, shares and likes, those on pages often outnumbering those on groups several times over.

Chart 4: Number of propaganda posts on main narratives of Russian propaganda on Bulgarian Facebook in 2022



It must be noted that both on pages and on groups, there are communities that declare themselves entirely in support of Russia – the pages of Kostadin Kostadinov, Pogled.info, and Martin Karbovski, and the group “GEN. RUMEN RADEV PRESIDENT – PRESIDENT, SECOND TERM!”.

7. Public Attitudes Towards Russia's War in Ukraine and Towards Main Propaganda Messages Identified in the Media Study

The public opinion survey under this study was conducted among the Bulgarian population aged over 18 by Alpha Research between 16 and 27 January 2023, through tablet-assisted face-to-face structured interviews at respondents' homes. The sample size is 1,007 effective interviews. Respondents were selected by two-stage stratified random sampling by region and type of settlement, with quotas for gender, age and education, according to Census 2021 data. The survey is representative of the attitudes of the Bulgarian population.

The pro-Kremlin propaganda messages identified in this study that can be said to have achieved their purpose are:

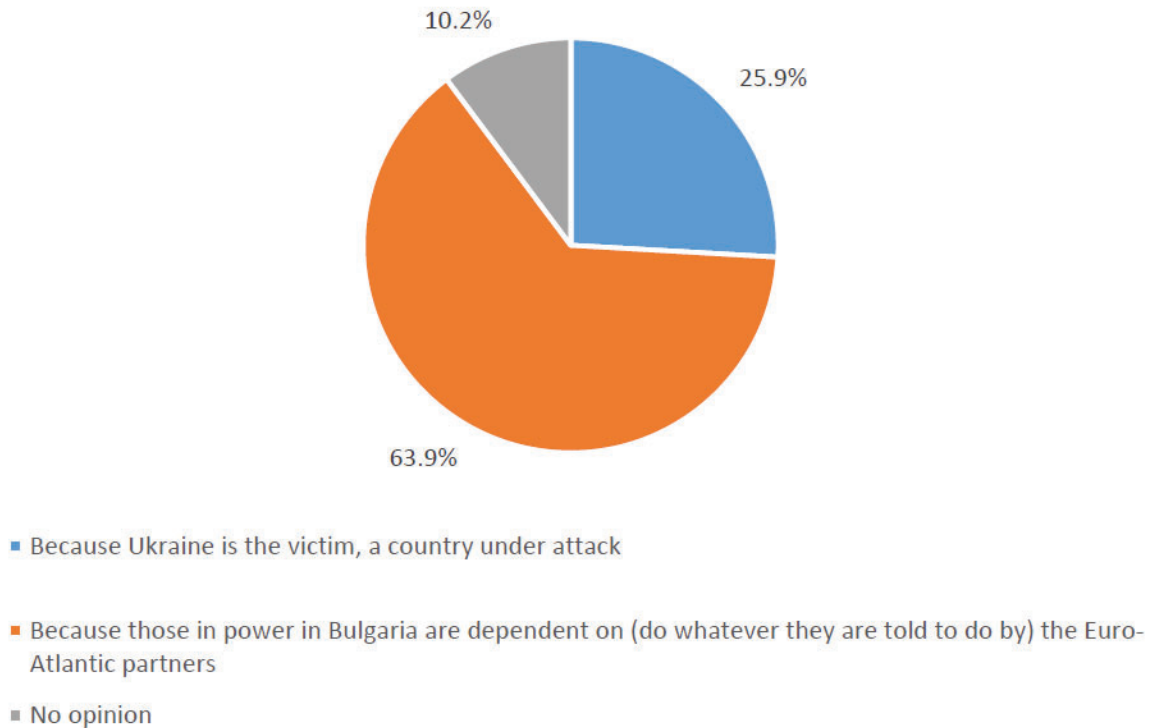
- 1) that Bulgaria is siding with Ukraine because those in power in Bulgaria are dependent on the Euro-Atlantic partners (and not because Ukraine is the country under attack);
- 2) the claim that the West has dragged Russia into war, and
- 3) that providing military aid to Ukraine means involving Bulgaria in the war.

In short, the majority of adult Bulgarians do not perceive siding with Ukraine and providing military aid to Ukraine as solidarity. The minority who do so are Sofia residents, highly educated people and supporters of pro-Euro-Atlantic parties except for the DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms). The largest proportions of Bulgarians who support the theses of pro-Russia propaganda are – predictably – among the supporters of the Vazrazhdane (Revival) party, the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) for Bulgaria, and in small towns and villages. This last is noteworthy, as the social environment in this type of settlements implies more intensive personal contact, and hence, exchange of opinions.

We should bear in mind, however, that respondents' positions on the questions asked depend mostly on their party-political affiliations.

Chart 5: Why, in your opinion, has Bulgaria sided with Ukraine in Russia’s war against it?

Why, in your opinion, has Bulgaria sided with Ukraine in Russia’s war against it?

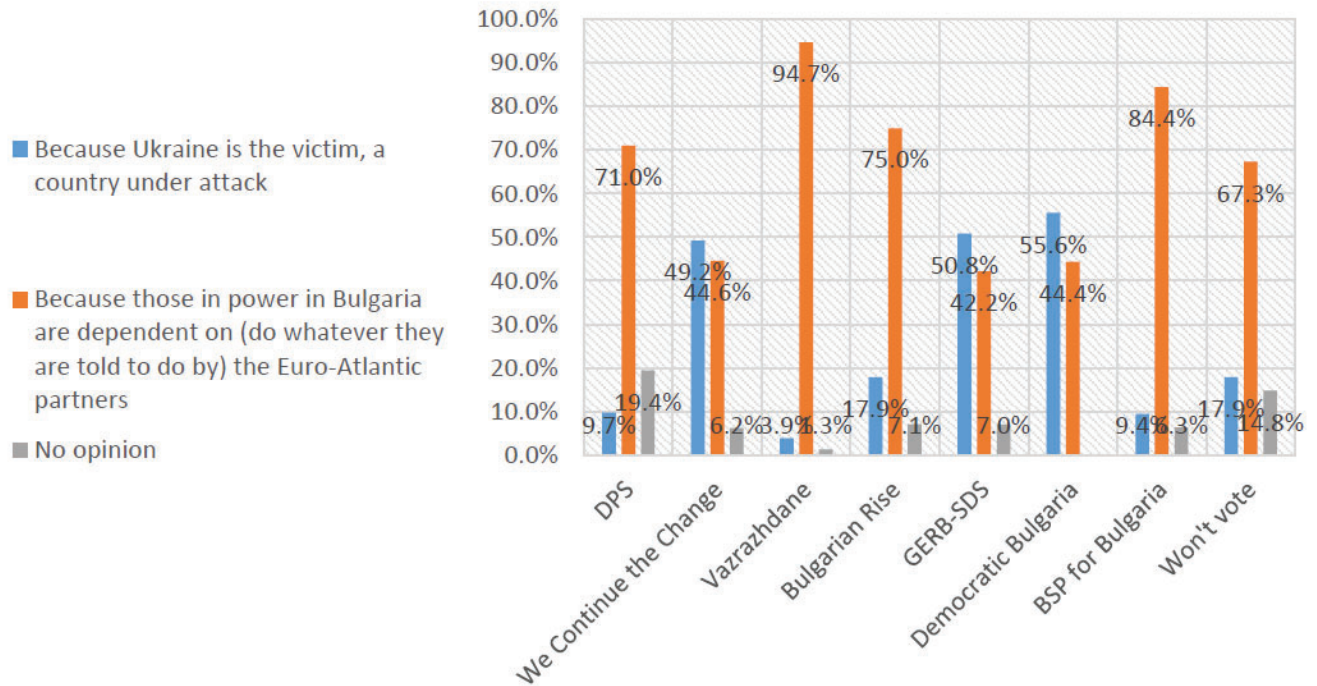


Almost two-thirds of the respondents chose to answer this question with the talking point that those in power in Bulgaria do whatever they are told to do by the Euro-Atlantic partners. The exception are Sofia residents, among whom the two theses have an almost equal number of supporters. It is noteworthy that among people aged 41 to 60, as well as among those with higher education, there are slightly more who see siding with Ukraine as an expression of solidarity with the victim of an attack.

The supporters of the parties with a declared Euro-Atlantic orientation (with one interesting exception) took a different position on this issue – among them the percentage of those who think that Bulgaria is siding with the victim and hence supporting Ukraine is the highest. The symptomatic exception are the voters of the DPS, whose position coincides with that of the voters of explicitly Russophile parties.

Chart 6: Why, in your opinion, has Bulgaria sided with Ukraine in Russia’s war against it?

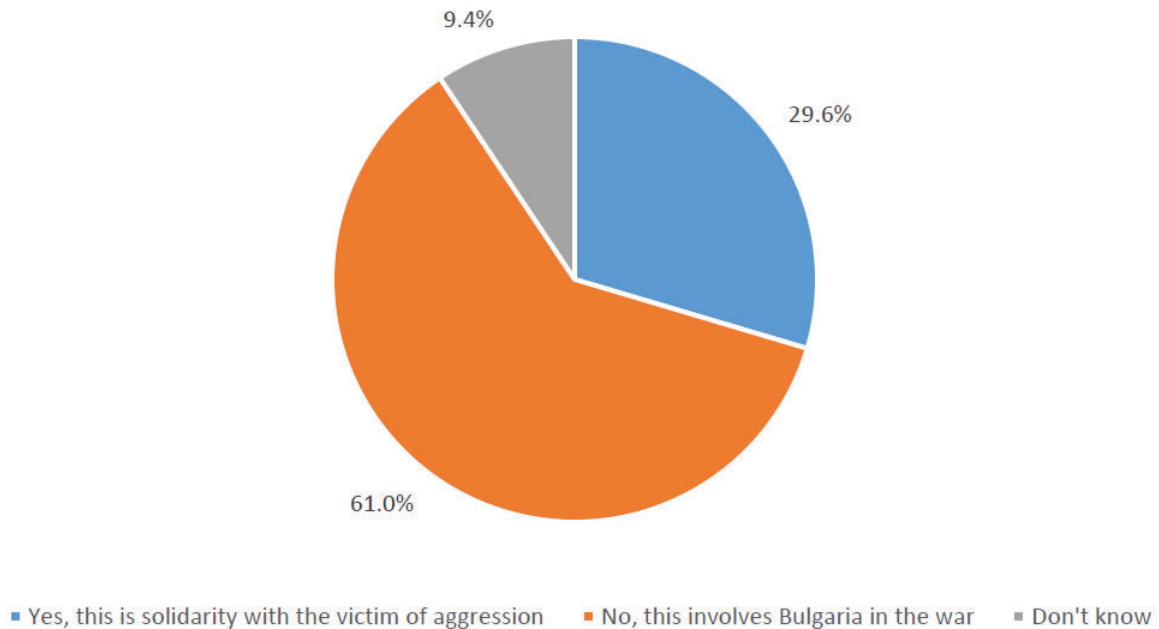
Why, in your opinion, has Bulgaria sided with Ukraine in Russia’s war against it?



The distribution of opinions on the question of whether Bulgaria should provide military assistance to Ukraine is very similar.

Chart 7: In your opinion, should Bulgaria provide military aid to Ukraine?

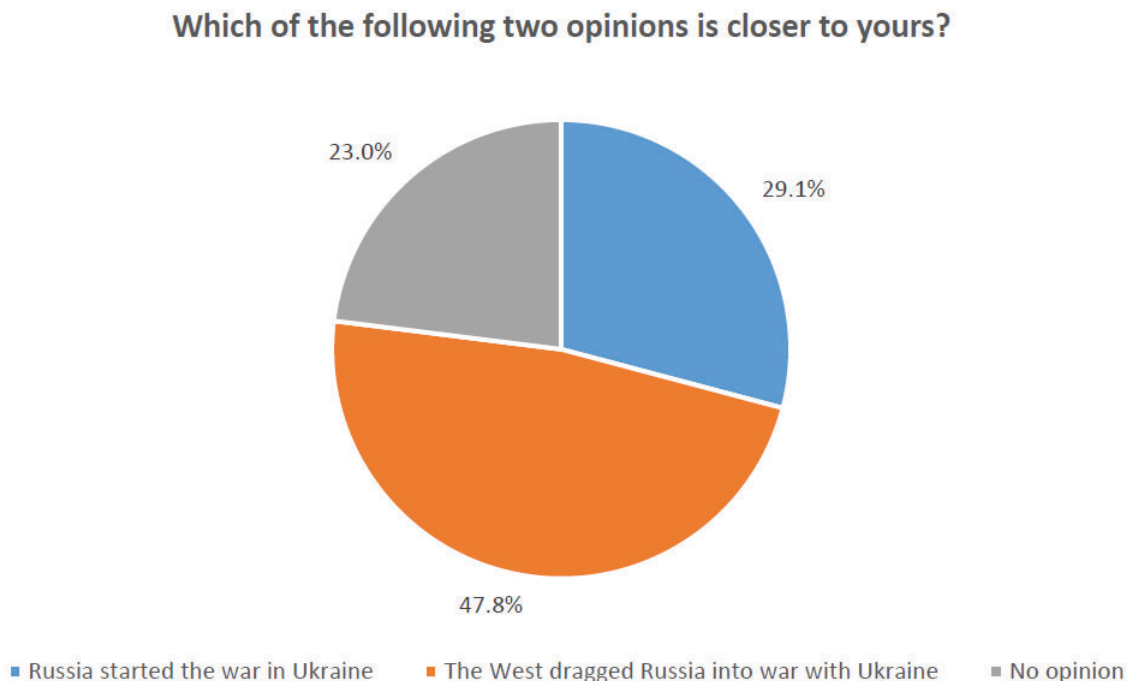
In your opinion, should Bulgaria provide military aid to Ukraine?



Still, it should be noted that the share of respondents to this question who declared solidarity is almost four percentage points higher than the share of those who explained Bulgarian support for Ukraine by the fact that it is the attacked country. The explicit mention of solidarity with the victim puts this question in a different frame. Nevertheless, the widely promoted, including by official spokespersons and institutions, thesis that providing military support for Ukraine means involving Bulgaria in the war is quite widely shared.

At first glance, most respondents also support the third propaganda thesis: that the West has dragged Russia into the war. It is noteworthy, however, that its supporters are quite fewer than those of the previous one – 47.8%, versus 63.9% who think that the reason why Bulgaria has sided with Ukraine is that those in power are dependent on the Euro-Atlantic partners. The difference comes mainly from the higher percentage of respondents who have no opinion on this question, although there is also a slight increase in the share of those who support the thesis that the war was started by Russia.

Chart 8: Which of the following two opinions is closer to yours?



Again, the proportion of respondents who think that Russia started the war is higher among Sofia residents, among people with higher education, and among those aged 41 to 50. Expectedly, electoral preferences are the most significant factor on this question as well: more than three-quarters of the respondents who are voters of the BSP and Vazrazhdane support this propaganda talking point. On this question, too, DPS supporters tend to be in the same camp as those of the BSP and Vazrazhdane, but we should stress that almost a third of them are undecided. The proportion of respondents who have no opinion is higher only among those who declared that they would not vote. The thesis that Russia started the war is the leading one among the supporters of We Continue the Change, GERB-SDS and Democratic Bulgaria (between 52% and 60%).

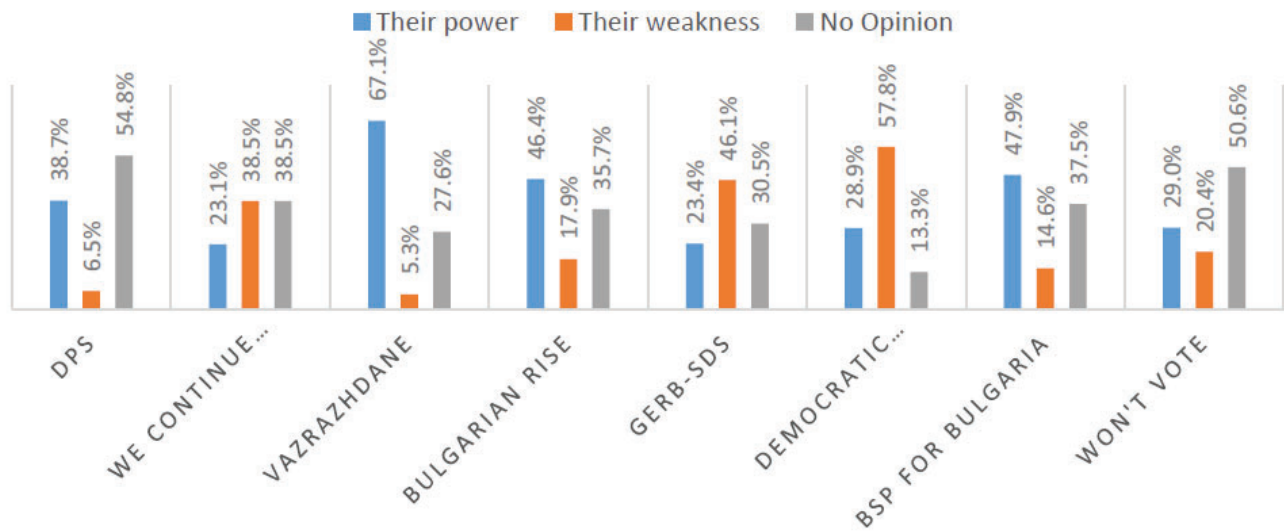
The propaganda talking points that resonate less with Bulgarians are those about Russia's military superiority.

The proportion of those who have no opinion about who is the expected winner of the war is high: 21.4%. A majority of 43% expect the war to drag on for a long time without an ultimate winner.

There is also visible indecision about the question of whether the war has hitherto revealed the power or the weakness of Russian weapons: quite a few of the supporters of the Russophile and pro-Kremlin parties likewise cannot express an opinion on it.

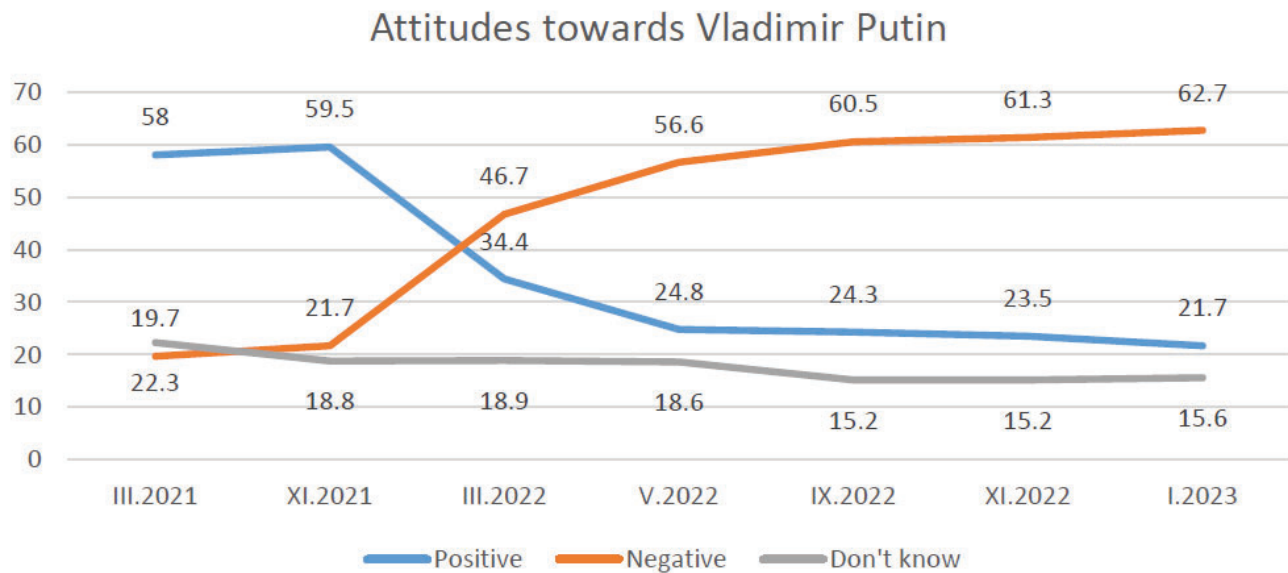
Chart 9: Considering the course of Russia’s war against Ukraine, what do you think: has the war demonstrated the power of Russian weapons and the Russian army, or their weakness?

CONSIDERING THE COURSE OF RUSSIA’S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE, WHAT DO YOU THINK: HAS THE WAR DEMONSTRATED THE POWER OF RUSSIAN WEAPONS AND THE RUSSIAN ARMY, OR THEIR WEAKNESS?



At the same time, Russian President Putin’s approval rating in Bulgaria is on a clear downward trend: since the start of the war, the number of Bulgarians expressing a positive attitude towards him has been steadily decreasing. This decline is on account of also steadily rising negative attitudes, not of growing indecision of public opinion. The turning point that abruptly changed attitudes towards Vladimir Putin was Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, when his approval rating dropped by almost half and was significantly overtaken by his disapproval rating. Since then, it has been consistently declining: from 34.4% in March 2022 to 21.7% in January 2023.

Chart 10: Attitudes towards Vladimir Putin



From the autumn of 2021 to the autumn of 2022, positive attitudes towards Putin dropped by more than half (from 59.5% in September 2021 to 24.3% in September 2022). Over almost the same period, positive attitudes towards Russia have also declined, but much less (from 61% in October 2021 to 49% in October 2022) and remain higher than negative attitudes, although they have eroded since the start of the war.

It is quite likely that the “good country, bad leaders” syndrome is at work here – the country Russia as a metaphysical good.