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RUSSIAN *ONLINE* PROPAGANDA IN BULGARIA

In this newsletter, we present the activity, narratives and speakers of Russian propaganda disseminated in Bulgarian online media in the first quarter of 2023. The propaganda wave was already rising in early 2022, and has remained high in 2023. The dissemination of its narratives has increased by up to 20 times. This increase is due, firstly, to new technological solutions¹ – most notably, the formation of a Machine of Mushroom Websites which amplifies the spread of messages both on social media and Google. The Machine consists of more than 370 anonymous pseudo-news websites with identical design and content, which disseminated a few articles with pro-Russian content every day in the first quarter of 2023, thus often publishing more than 2,000 articles per day. Secondly, the profile of propaganda dissemination has changed – the official spokespersons of the Russian Federation have become the main channels of Russian propaganda. These are Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, Zakharova, Mitrofanova, etc., who are literally repeating propaganda talking points with their respective vocabulary. Hence, their dissemination has sharply increased as all media, both Bulgarian and international – even the objective ones – are compelled to quote them. In Bulgaria, along with translations from Russian, the Kremlin's narratives are also circulated by a number of local speakers.

This newsletter analyzes the overall propaganda activity, the activity of the Machine of Mushroom Websites, the change in narratives, and the main messages of (pro)Russian propaganda spread by its local speakers.

¹ Summary of Report: Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022), see <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Report-ENG.pdf> [accessed 3 May 2023].



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CONTENTS:

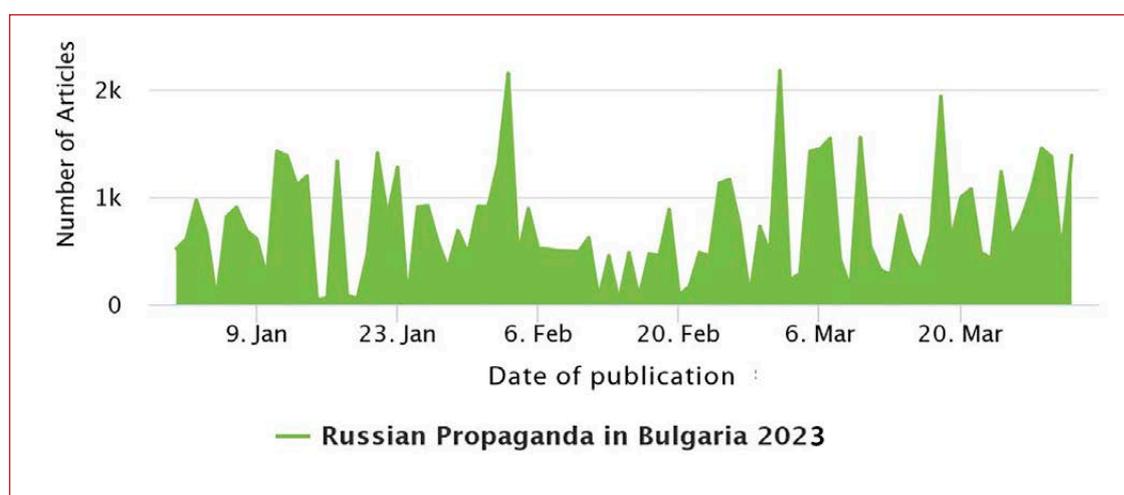
1. Overall Propaganda Activity.	3
A) The Machine of Mushroom Websites.	3
B) Share4Pay.	4
C) "News" from the Frontline: The Russians Are Invariably Winning.	4
D) The Dissemination Networks: Blitz and Mushroom Websites; and Other Curiosities.	5
2. Review of Russian Propaganda Talking Points.	9
A) China and Civilization-States.	10
B) Propaganda Preparations for Erdogan's Possible Loss in the 14 May 2023 Elections in Turkey.	11
C) Discrediting the Protests in Tbilisi: The West Is Organizing a Maidan in Georgia and Thus Opening a Second Front Against Moscow.	13
D) How the War Is Going.	14
E) Domestic Political Topics.	14
3. Russian Propaganda Speakers in Bulgaria.	15
A) RUMEN RADEV.	16
B) KORNELIYA NINOVA.	19
C) KOSTADIN KOSTADINOV.	20
D) PETAR VOLGIN.	27
E) MARTIN KARBOVSKI.	31
4. Facebook.	35
A) January 2023.	35
B) February 2023.	37
C) March 2023.	39



1. Overall Propaganda Activity

Chart 1 below shows the **overall pro-Russian propaganda activity in Bulgarian online media for the period from 1 January to 31 March 2023**. It was measured by the SENSIKA automated media monitoring system. **For the first quarter of 2023, SENSIKA identified 65,437 online articles** that contain keywords typical of Russian propaganda: *Russian world, Banderites, Ukrainian Nazis, denazification, etc.*

Chart 1. Russian online propaganda in Bulgaria (1 January – 31 March 2023)



If we exclude all posts on Facebook and other social media, we get an average of 727 pro-Russian publications per day, their number often reaching 1,300–1,400 per day (the absolute peaks were on 3 February, with 2,149 publications, and 2 March, with 2,176). Of all those publications, about 90% were machine-recycled. What does this mean?

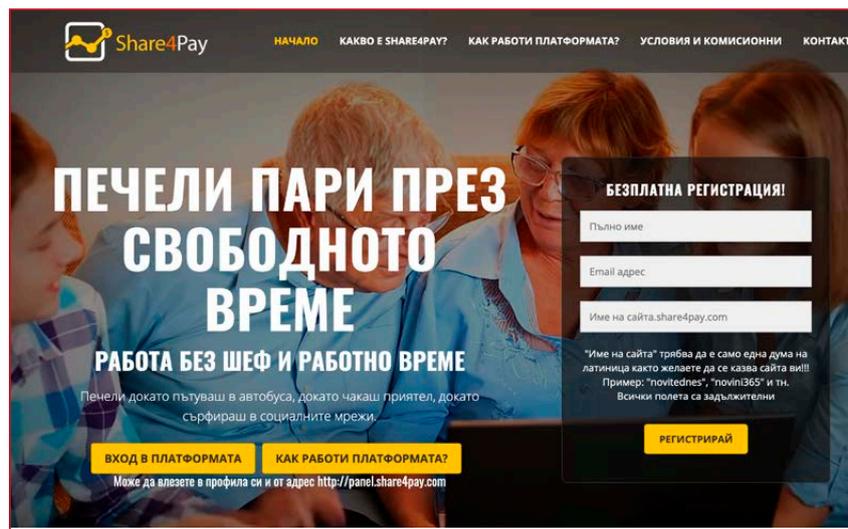
A) The Machine of Mushroom Websites

The “Machine” consists of more than 370 anonymous websites with almost identical design (based on two main models) and identical content (they publish the same articles). They have four main domains (**dnes24.eu, zbox7.eu, bgvest.eu, allbg.eu**), from which subdomains are cloned – for example, **novini701.dnes24.eu, novinarbg.dnes24.eu, news1.dnes24.eu**, etc. In recent months, all of them have been running Winbet ads in a central place, at the top of the website:



Of the **65,437 online articles** identified through keywords by SENSIKA for the first quarter of 2023, approximately **60,000 articles were reprints disseminated by the Machine** (each article was reprinted between 60 and 480 times by the mushroom websites).

B) Share4Pay



It is likely that the Machine of Mushroom Websites is linked to the platform Share4Pay, which the websites themselves regularly advertise. In turn, Share4Pay offers users the opportunity to get a ready-made website, their task being to share content from this website on social media for a fee.

C) "News" from the Frontline: The Russians Are Invariably Winning

The Machine covers a wide range of topics – from sports to celebrity gossip to political news. However, Russian propaganda is concentrated in one thematic segment: "coverage" of the war



against Ukraine. There, mushroom websites systematically create the impression of the superiority of the Russian army and try to present its victorious march.

Sometimes this is done by presenting actual events. The highest peak of publications in January was in the period between 11 and 13 January, when the small town of Soledar fell. Most of the publications in this period are of the type: “PMC Wagner close cauldron at Soledar, Prigozhin shows VIDEO of catacombs.”² Russian victories are presented against the backdrop of the hypocrisy of the West: “Gen. De Gaulle’s grandson: People becoming aware of Americans’ perverse games in Ukraine.”³

In their coverage of the war, however, the mushroom websites do not at all stick to the factual truth. The highest propaganda peak was on 2 March, when the Machine spun 2,176 publications containing the specified keywords. More than a third of them are due to two entirely fake news stories: “VIDEO of the war: Su-25s strike Leopard 2 positions near Bakhmut” (with 425 reprints)⁴ and “Morning brief: AFU announce whether there’s order to withdraw from Bakhmut, first Leopard with Polish mercenaries captured” (with 326 reprints).⁵ By the end of March there was no evidence, confirmed by reliable non-Russian sources, that Western Leopard tanks had been sent to the frontline, let alone that any had been captured (“with its Polish crew”!).

The second-highest peak was on 3 February – 2,149 pro-Russian publications for the day – and the main impression the Machine created was of a major Russian offensive that was in fact non-existent: “ISW report with hot news of major Russian offensive in Donbas” (426 reprints).⁶ Despite the misleading headline, this article refutes itself by correctly quoting ISW: “ISW has not observed any evidence that Russian forces have restored sufficient combat power to defeat Ukraine’s forces in eastern Ukraine.”

However, the fire of victory on 3 February was fanned up further by “VIDEO of the war: Battle for Ugledar continues” (429 reprints; the video promised in the headline is missing)⁷ – in reality, the February attempt to attack Ugledar would become one of Russia’s worst defeats, but in this “report” the Russians win resoundingly.

The hit of the day, beyond the wildest science fiction, is found in the quasi-objectivist “War brief” with which the mushroom websites bombard us daily: “Rogozin sends combat robots to destroy Abrams and Leopard tanks.” As we said, there were no Abrams and Leopard tanks on the battlefield yet, but the former head of Roscosmos’s robots of the future were already destroying them. This “news” found its way into the Machine via the sports websites <https://sportove.info/419800/> and <https://ludsport.fun/758695/>.

D) The Dissemination Networks: Blitz and Mushroom Websites; and Other Curiosities

The mushroom websites are bots, but their content was often reprinted also by human-run websites.

The Blitz News Agency is obviously substantially linked to the Machine. Checking five peak days in the first quarter of 2023, we found that all 23 articles recycled by mushroom websites

2 <https://news1.dnes24.eu/868529/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

3 <https://rusokoska.allbg.eu/877177/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

4 <https://nvn24sedem.bgvest.eu/888102/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

5 <https://bg-sega.dnes24.eu/887962/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

6 <https://haira.dnes24.eu/877242/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

7 <https://bg-utro.eu/886139/> [accessed 25 April 2023].



were also reprinted from or by Blitz – the content of the articles is identical, and no source is given (either in Blitz or on the mushroom websites). It is noteworthy that in 14 of the 23 cases studied, Blitz was the first to publish the relevant article, which then began to be reprinted by mushroom websites five–ten minutes later. Thus, in about two hours the article was recycled on average about 400 times. In nine of the 23 cases, however, mushroom websites were the first to publish the article, which was subsequently reprinted by Blitz in the small hours of the next day.

The screenshot shows the Blitz website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with categories: Новини, Спорт, Шоу, Здраве, Жената, Почивка, Авто, and Bookmaker. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with sub-categories: ОБЩЕСТВО, ВОЙНАТА, ИЗБОРИ 2023, ПОЛИТИКА, ВАЙРЪЛ, ИКОНОМИКА, КРИМИНАЛНИ, ИНЦИДЕНТИ, СВЯТ, ЗДРАВЕ, ЛАЙФСТАЙЛ, and ЛЮБОПИТ. The main content area features a large image of an MSC container ship with the headline "Need to Book with MSC Again?". Below the image is a sub-headline "Бойци на ЧВК "Вагнер" разбиха елитно украинското подразделение на името на Борис Джонсън" and a short summary: "Украинските военни обичат да използват западни имена и атрибути, например носят нашивки с американски знамена". The article metadata includes "Киев, Украйна", "02 Март 2023, 11:40", "34419 прочита", "18 коментара", and "Автор: БЛИЦ". To the right of the article is a MODIVO advertisement with the text "LET'S GO SHOPPING" and a "40%" discount tag.

The screenshot shows the MADNEW website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with categories: Общество, Политика, Икономика, Криминали, Инциденти, Свет, Здраве, Любопитно, Лайфстайл, Спорт. The main content area features a large image of a man in a suit with the headline "Бойци на ЧВК "Вагнер" разбиха елитно украинското подразделение на името на Борис Джонсън". The article metadata includes "Киев, Украйна", "02 Март 2023, 11:40", "34419 прочита", "18 коментара", and "Автор: БЛИЦ". To the left of the main article are several smaller news items with thumbnails and titles.



Sometimes other non-anonymous or semi-anonymous media outlets intervened in the chain of recycling Russian propaganda. Blitz often reprinted from them, and then the relevant article was picked up by the Machine of Mushroom Websites.

The 11 January article about De Gaulle's grandson was published first at 8.02 a.m. by Classa:

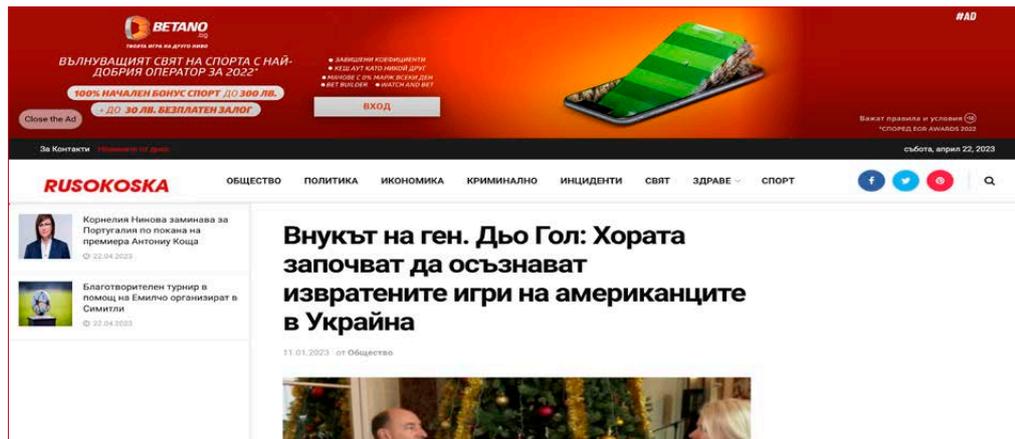
The screenshot shows the Classa website interface. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation links for 'Вход', 'Регистрация', and 'Архив'. The main header features the 'КЛАСА classa.bg' logo. Below the header, a navigation menu lists various categories: 'ОТ ДНЕС(121)', 'БЪЛГАРИЯ', 'БИЗНЕС', 'СВЯТ', 'НАУКА', 'ТЕХНО', 'МЕДИИ', 'АНАЛИЗИ', 'КУЛТУРА', 'ЕКО', 'СПОРТ', and 'ОТ НЕТА'. The main content area displays an article titled 'Внукът на ген. Дьо Гол: Хората започват да осъзнават извратените игри на американците в Украйна'. The article includes a photo of a man in a suit, publication details (classa.bg, 11.01.2023), and social media sharing options. A sidebar on the right contains a 'ДАКСИ' advertisement and a section for 'НАЙ-ЧЕТЕНИ СТАТИИ:' with a link to an article about a church in Kyiv.

Then at 8.23 a.m. it was reprinted by Blitz:

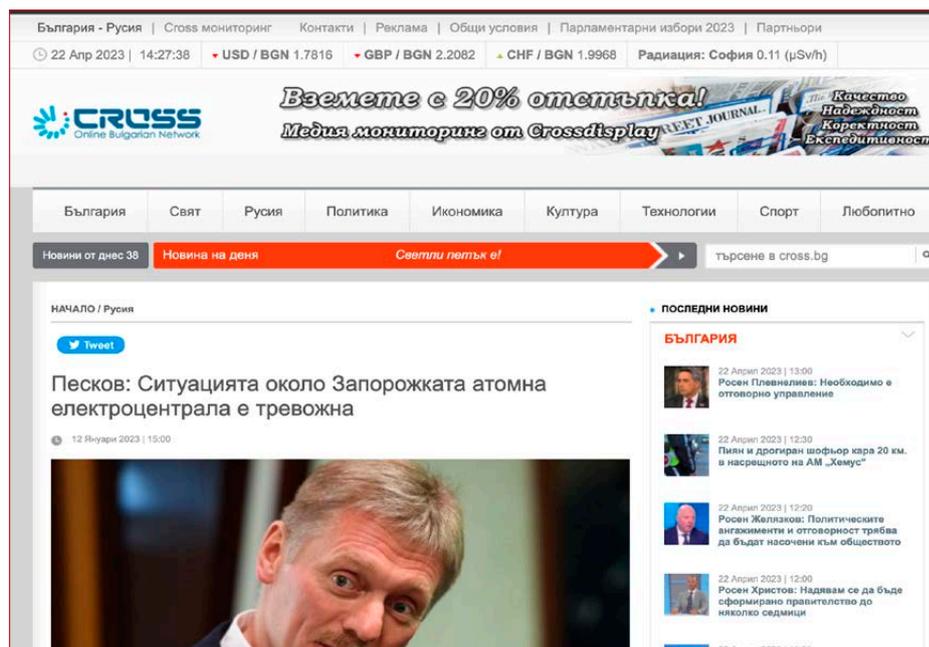
The screenshot shows the Blitz website interface. The top navigation bar includes 'Новини', 'Спорт', 'Шоу', 'Здраве', 'Жената', 'Почивка', 'Авто', and 'Bookmaker'. Below this, there are sub-navigation links for 'ОБЩЕСТВО', 'ВОЙНАТА', 'ИЗБОРИ 2023', 'ПОЛИТИКА', 'ВАЙРЪЛ', 'ИКОНОМИКА', 'КРИМИНАЛНИ', 'ИНЦИДЕНТИ', 'СВЯТ', and 'ЗДРАВЕ'. The main content area features an advertisement for 'Агро Гуми В Медина' with a photo of a tractor. Below the ad is the article titled 'Внукът на ген. Дьо Гол: Хората започват да се осъзнават за извратените игри на американците в Украйна'. The article text discusses the consequences of the current crisis in Europe and mentions the grandfather of De Gaulle. It includes a photo of a man and a woman in front of a Christmas tree. Metadata at the bottom of the article indicates it was published in Paris, France, on January 11, 2023, at 08:23, with 39715 reads and 20 comments.



And after 9 a.m. it was reprinted 64 times by mushroom websites:



In another case – on 12 January – an article headlined “Peskov: Situation around Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant is alarming” was published first by the CROSS agency (cross.bg) which, in addition to maintaining a pro-Russian news website, advertises other services it offers: creating customized websites and internet influence analysis. The article was picked up from CROSS by Blitz⁸ and mushroom websites.



In other cases, Blitz summarized propaganda publications of other media outlets, and its summaries were subsequently reprinted by the Machine. We found such a case on 2 March: “Reversal: Sea of flowers for burnt Russian tank in Berlin, Ukrainian flag trampled VIDEO”⁹ – the article summarizes information from a week earlier, published by Duma and Glasove.¹⁰

8 https://Blitz.bg/svyat/peskov-situatsiyata-okolo-zaporozhkata-atomna-elektrotsentrala-e-trevozhna_news930909.html [accessed 25 April 2023].

9 https://Blitz.bg/svyat/obrat-more-ot-tsvetya-za-izgoryal-ruski-tank-v-berlin-a-ukrainskoto-zname-stpkano-video_news939373.html [accessed 25 April 2023].

10 <https://duma.bg/berlin-obsipa-s-tsvetya-ruski-tank-n271234>; <https://glasove.com/novini/zhiteli-na-berlin-podnasyat-tsvetya-na-ruski-tank-vapreki-protesta-na-proukrainski-aktivisti> [accessed 25 April 2023].



2. Review of Russian Propaganda Talking Points

Highlights: Russian propaganda is becoming ever more overtly imperial. In the Bulgarian media field during the first quarter of 2023, the Kremlin is working for China: China is good at everything, even at democracy. Sovereignty is only for the big and, above all, the well-armed. Being Georgia and wanting sovereignty? How ridiculous: the frog wishing to be as big as the ox...

The Kremlin is preparing for Erdogan's loss, the culprit was found even ten years ago. The US is to blame for everything, and the Collective West looks less collective in Putin's speech after Xi Jinping's visit. Russian and Chinese propaganda are beginning to merge, Bulgarian-language propaganda media are now republishing content not only from Russian propaganda channels such as Tsargrad and News Front but also from the website of the China Media Group (CMG) and China Radio International (CRI). It's time to intimidate the former Soviet republics and satellite states.

Russian propaganda talking points have not changed significantly in recent years. Here we trace their use regarding the war in Ukraine in the first quarter of 2023. The conclusions presented in this newsletter are based primarily on two of the main websites whose editorial staff support the Russian point of view, namely Pogled Info and Glasove. These two media outlets are different and mutually complementary. Yavor Dachkov of Glasove is also a contributor to Pogled Info. Glasove devotes much more space to domestic politics, and its coverage of the geopolitical issues of Ukraine and the war is more intellectual and upholds the Russian point of view with more replications of conservative Western voices.

All geopolitical articles from Pogled Info, virtually without exception, appear on the aggregator Novini 24/7. However, there are curious differences: if Pogled Info is the primary source, then the aggregator ought to publish identical content. But, for example, the headline of an article from Pogled Info where Ukraine is a “former Soviet Slavic republic and an even more former Polish province”, has obviously been edited in translation on Novini 24/7, where Ukraine is a “former Russian Slavic republic”. Pogled Info and Novini 24/7 are not necessarily DIRECTLY interlinked channels – the translation is probably machine-generated, although the articles on Novini 24/7 are published with the Pogled Info logo. These publications have common Russian sources – in one case, an article reviewing Russia's growing number of friends, the common source is News Front;¹¹ on 1 March 2023 the article appeared, following the pattern described above, first on Pogled Info¹² and then on Novini 24/7.¹³ The source is Ukraina.ru.

11 <https://news-front.info/2023/02/28/umenie-rossii-sokrashhat-kolichestvo-vragov-javljaetsja-istokom-nashej-sily-i-prichinobolshinstva-nashih-pobed/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

12 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/proizhodat-na-ruskata-sila-zashto-rusija-nikoga-ne-zapochva-voina-a-avinagi-pecheli.153005> [accessed 25 April 2023].

13 https://novini247.com/novini/trideset-strani-ot-nato-evropeyski-darjavi-koito-ne-sa-chlenove_5883644.html [accessed 25 April 2023].



The main talking points of propaganda media in the first quarter of 2023 were geopolitical. They were focused on China, the upcoming elections in Turkey, and the protests in Georgia. The interpretive schemes in which these focuses were articulated are the following:

- ▶ **China, the good giant looking in bewilderment at the follies of the West;**
- ▶ **The US is meddling in the elections in Turkey (due on 14 May 2023), Erdogan's opponents are "puppets" of the West;**
- ▶ **Following the model of the Maidan and the colour revolutions, the West is opening a second front in Georgia against Moscow, the war is expanding.**

The interpretive propaganda media (as well as the Machine of Mushroom Websites) tried to maintain the impression that **Ukraine is losing the war and that Western military aid is over-rated in terms of effectiveness. On this topic, propaganda discourse underwent a change in the first three months of 2023: in January, it was still dominated by threats of a third world war against countries supplying tanks and air defence systems to Ukraine. In February and March, it was downplaying these supplies and promoting the narrative of the attrition of the Ukrainian army.**

The geopolitical talking points were complemented with domestic political topics. Propaganda media supported the new populist pro-Kremlin coalition, The Left! (at least until its failure to enter Parliament in the 2 April 2023 elections), and claimed vociferously that **the April 2023 elections in Bulgaria are a choice between war and peace.** After the elections, this narrative was slightly modified – if there is a coalition between the first two coalitions (GERB-SDS and PP-DB), Bulgaria will enter the war.

Here are some clarifications and specifications:

In the first three months of 2023, the propaganda effort to maintain the geopolitical framing of the war continued: the war is not a war, it is Russia's inevitable self-defence (as if it were a continuation of the Battle of Stalingrad, as if, as Dmitry Glukhovskiy says, WWII had never ended). The West, which actually started the war, is losing it, and this is leading to economic decline.

A) China and Civilization-States

China stands by Russia. China, like Russia, is a huge civilization-state. Let's not forget that one of the dimensions of this concept is that these are entities that don't know or recognize the idea of borders.

On the pro-China talking points, though, propaganda media are cautious (as if not to upset Xi). China is a good giant that doesn't want to take sides but that can see, with its huge eyes, who is good. **Russian and Chinese propaganda are beginning to merge, Bulgarian-language propaganda media are now republishing content not only from Russian propaganda channels such as Tsargrad and News Front but also from the website of the China Media Group (CMG) and China Radio International (CRI).** And Bulgarian voices of pro-Kremlin propaganda (for example, Kostadin Kostadinov and Petar Gerasimov) are publishing articles on the CRI website to vilify Ukraine – ostensibly as independent European observers and politicians.¹⁴

Generally, China was one of the central topics for Pogled Info in the period under review – and not only with the overt hopes that Russia will be supported militarily and economically by China. Pogled Info even dealt with topics such as: recipes for Chinese pastries, what experiments

¹⁴ <https://bulgarian.cri.cn/2023/04/28/ARTIcpUlep3GrLZ9oRf3YqN5230428.shtml?spm=C50839.PHMU2QqEUswp.EwMshjdpGFUS.5> [accessed 25 April 2023].



Chinese scientists are doing, how many parks there are in Shanghai, whom Xi sent a congratulatory telegram to, etc., mainly reprinted from the CRI website.¹⁵ They covered a wide range of topics, but the main impression they give is how technologically advanced China is, how it can financially prop up Russia, and how democracy isn't one thing. Particularly curious is a combination of articles claiming that CMG and a Russian agency will cooperate, and that CMG had reportedly conducted an international survey according to which over 84% of respondents think that democracy is different in different cultures and that the unique form of Chinese democracy explains China's progress:

China's whole-process people's democracy differs significantly from the Western political, historical and cultural model. According to 75.4% of respondents, it is thanks to its political system, which differs from the European and American systems, that China has achieved its development successes. The percentage of people who think so among Africans is 83.1%.

This survey includes 3,776 valid responses from 35 countries, including developed countries such as the United States, Britain, France and Germany, and developing countries such as Namibia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and others.¹⁶

In March, pro-Russian propaganda on Glasove likewise promoted pro-China messages. On 30 March 2023 it published three articles about China's wise might. This had been prepared in advance: at the end of February, Glasove repeatedly highlighted Putin's keynote speech delivered on 21 February 2023 on the eve of the anniversary of the war,¹⁷ commenting on this speech in the context of the Chinese foreign minister's visit to Russia at the time and Xi Jinping's expected visit. Glasove trumpeted, in an almost apocalyptic tone, that the alliance between Russia and China is frightening the West: "Britain: Xi and Putin have declared new cold war on the West".¹⁸ Putin's speech itself wasn't focused on China, it repeats a familiar narrative: the Ukraine project is an anti-Russia project launched back in the 19th century by Austria-Hungary. These lands that have been fought on since the neo-Nazi coup of 2014 are historical Russian lands.

B) Propaganda Preparations for Erdogan's Possible Loss in the 14 May 2023 Elections in Turkey

The upcoming elections in Turkey on 14 May 2023 underwent an interpretive metamorphosis from a realpolitik mode to a purely propaganda one: the US is preparing a coup in Turkey, the treacherous Anglo-Saxons are planning to "exacerbate the problem with the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles".¹⁹ The propaganda scheme is a familiar one, it has been applied to every civic movement: the manipulation is that these are Maidans, Maidans and colour revolutions are one and the same thing, and they are organized by the US.

This is the realpolitik perspective, in which the choice between Erdogan and the opposition is a choice between bad and worse. Russia is preparing for elections in Turkey ("How Russia can play the Turkish gambit"²⁰ by Elena Panina). The choice between Erdogan and his opposition is a

15 <https://bulgarian.cri.cn/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

16 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/pogled-kitai/anketa-na-kmg-v-sveta-nyama-edna-demokratiya-koyato-da-prevazhzhda-druga.153881> [accessed 25 April 2023].

17 <https://glasove.com/novini/na-zhivo-obrashteniето-na-putin-kam-ruskite-deputati> [accessed 5 October 2023].

18 <https://glasove.com/komentari/velikobritaniya-si-i-putin-obyaviha-nova-studena-voyna-na-zapada> [accessed 5 October 2023].

19 <https://novinite-dnes.eu/bosnenskiyat-ekspert-galiyashevich-datata-na-kontranastapleniето-v-ukrajna-pryako-zavisi-ot-rezultatite-ot-prezidentskite-izbori-v-turczija/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

20 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/elena-panina-kak-rusija-da-razigrae-turskiya-gambit.153886> [accessed 25 April 2023].



choice between “bad” and “very bad” because Erdogan will not let NATO ships into the Bosphorus lest he lose relevance, but the opposition, his “pro-Western opponents”, will. The situation is assessed as follows:

*This is an unfavourable situation for Russia, blocking the Bosphorus for NATO is a very important factor for Russia. ... **If the opposition wins, Turkey could largely lose its subjectivity and become yet another anti-Russian springboard. ... What should Russia do in such a situation? The conclusion is obvious: help Erdogan sustain his strength and capabilities, while being aware that this is not an ally but a temporary ad-hoc companion, and at the same time prepare for the possibility of an opposition victory in Turkey.***²¹

In her article, Elena Panina continues thus:

*But we, while supporting Erdogan, have to work out options in case his opponents win. **And this means examining the relations within a coalition capable of coming to power, identifying its weaknesses, its conflicts of interest, the possibilities of paralyzing its work after the elections.***²²

Similarities can be sought with other countries as well.

In this narrative, Erdogan’s place has changed – he is listed among Russia’s friends. On 18 March 2023, Dugin stepped in to explain the ties between Russia and Erdogan with the latter’s likewise insistence on sovereignty. In an article headlined “Dugin: Erdogan’s main focus is sovereignty”, Erdogan’s enemies are described as puppets of the West:

*And most importantly: the current White House leadership and the globalist elites of the European Union categorically won’t accept even a hint of sovereignty from their vassals or their opponents. Anyone who is willing to submit to the West must completely renounce their sovereignty in favour of a supranational decision-making centre. This is the law.*²³

This is the reason why this narrative is based on a conspiratorial logic – this is why the West will remove Erdogan.

After Lavrov’s visit to Turkey in early April, another article appeared. In it, Lavrov on his visit to Turkey, smiling benignly, responds to a Russian journalist’s question about Russia’s position on the Turkish elections with “Did you mistake me for someone else?” Such a question could only be asked of Americans because “Moscow doesn’t interfere in any country’s elections like the US does”,²⁴ writes Zornitsa Ilieva in Pogled Info.

The now classical propaganda scheme of creating analogies is used: NGO intervention – Maidans – colour revolutions. This is how the US is meddling also in the Turkish elections.

Intertwined with this is the second thread: stoking anti-Americanism. America is at the root of terrorism, the Georgian protests, Erdogan’s possible loss in the Turkish presidential elections, etc. This dovetails quite seamlessly with predictions of a second civil war in the States. The US (the Anglo-Saxons) interferes, Russia respects sovereignty and independence. At the same time, however, Georgian demands for sovereignty are absolutely ridiculous. To see this, let’s move on to the third focus.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/aleksandar-dugin-erdogan-i-suverenitetat-na-turtsiya.153697> [accessed 25 April 2023].

²⁴ <https://pogled.info/avtorski/Zornitsa-Ilieva/lavrov-v-ankara-a-na-horizonta-nov-red.154552> [accessed 25 April 2023].



C) Discrediting the Protests in Tbilisi: The West Is Organizing a Maidan in Georgia and Thus Opening a Second Front Against Moscow

The main function of this narrative is to fearmonger. The protests in Georgia were first described as riots: “the riots in the centre of Tbilisi organized on 7–8 March by opponents of the law on foreign agents”, who aim at the “Ukrainization of Georgia”.²⁵ Foreign interference in Georgia’s domestic politics and a “violent overthrow of the government by the EU and the US” are implied.

The narrative was subsequently modified and hardened in order to fearmonger: in Georgia, the West is opening a second front against Russia, taking a step towards a world war:

In Georgia, there is a “threat to the Euro-Atlantic future” of the country – at least according to the US State Department. Indeed, Tbilisi is adopting a law [on “agents of foreign influence”] aimed at combating foreign influence – moreover, coming not from Russia, but from the US, Soros, and a number of Western NGOs.²⁶

The peak was at the rise of the protests, but it came with the dissemination of Lavrov’s interview on Channel One’s political talk show “The Great Game” (“*Bolshaya Igra*”). In the interview, Lavrov – in his typical manner – threatens: the former Soviet countries (“countries located around the Russian Federation”) should draw conclusions about “how dangerous is the course of involvement in the zone of responsibility, in the zone of interests of the United States.”²⁷

Another republished article appeared on 12 March:

A small republic, Georgia, has decided that it should live like the US. That it should have sovereignty, independence in foreign policy, liberal values. Teach us, they said, America, to be like you. And that address was a fatal mistake. Georgia is now one step away from being thrown into the furnace of the war with Russia conducted by the West.²⁸

The article reveals Russia’s imperial arrogance: **sovereignty is not for the small ones but – as we have seen from Russia’s self-preparation for the elections in Turkey – for the big and well-armed. Those who are big and well-armed may have a foreign policy independent of Russia. But Georgia is a laughing stock.** The article repeatedly reiterates the trope that the war in Ukraine is the West’s war against Russia. But it also identifies the protests with both the Maidan and the colour revolutions.

A specific term has been coined for this narrative figure: “Ukrainization”, and it means precisely this – a demand for an independent (from Russia) foreign policy and respect for rights. Through the term “Ukrainization”, however, these demands become pejorative and delegitimized. Or at least an attempt is made to delegitimize them, and if it doesn’t work – intimidation.

In general, the war is expanding, the West is dragging Georgia into the war, and Ukraine is dragging Kazakhstan into it. The “Banderites” are manipulating the Kazakh opposition.

25 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/kak-gruziya-izbegna-ukrainizatsiyata.154430> [accessed 25 April 2023].

26 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/gruzinskite-vlasti-nasochiha-kam-amerika-sobstvenite-%D1%9D-orazhiya.153317> [accessed 25 April 2023].

27 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/maidanat-v-gruziya-nezavidnoto-badeshte-na-ukraina-i-novite-zaplahi-osnovnoto-ot-golyamoto-intervyu-sas-sergei-lavrov.153490> [accessed 25 April 2023].

28 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/gruziya-e-tlaskana-kam-voina-s-rusiyu.153487> [accessed 25 April 2023].



D) How the War Is Going

In the first quarter of 2023, the media outside the Machine of Mushroom Websites were also trying to create the impression of a “Ukrainian loss in Bakhmut” and to convey the message that Ukraine is losing the war. Here is an example from Svobodno Slovo of 11 March 2023:

The more the situation in Ukraine is heading towards a denouement which consists of the loss of Zelensky and the Collective Globalist West backing him, the more coercion on countries for certain reasons will increase. We are one such country that depends directly on the outcome of the war. What is happening in Georgia is directly linked to the imminent need to declare and explain that the West is losing this war.²⁹

The message constantly conveyed was that the West would probably not deliver the promised armaments, and that even if it did, they are not that effective at all.

E) Domestic Political Topics

Pogled Info and Glasove widely propagated the opinion that the April 2023 elections in Bulgaria are a choice between war and peace. Both propaganda websites backed The Left!

We conclude this section with two specific local examples. Neshka Robeva slamming intellectuals on TV Pogled: “these intellectuals are talking nonsense”, “when they explain that the Soviet Union had occupied us, they forget to say that we were at war. We may not have declared war on the Soviet Union during WWII, but we were in the exact same situation as we are in now. We were allies of Germany – why are they playing the fool, pretending not to know?!”³⁰ Intellectuals are discredited by being equated with NGOs.

Another Bulgarian thread (Anastasia Gesheva): the hypocrisy of those in power in Bulgaria, who celebrate the rescue of Bulgarian Jews from Nazism but ally themselves with the “revived Nazism in Ukraine” and participate in the “revival of Nazism in Europe and in our country”.³¹

29 <https://svobodnoslovo.eu/komentar/voynata-v-ukrayna-vse-oshte-prodalzhava-samo-zashtoto-rusiya-i-zapada-se-boryat-kak-tochno-da-prodalzhi-sveta-inache-otdavana-da-e-priklyuchila/53294> [accessed 25 April 2023].

30 <https://pogled.info/tv/alternativen-pogled/neshka-robeva-ako-borisov-napravi-pravitelstvo-koeto-da-ni-vkara-vav-voinata-shte-e-balgaroubiets.154723> [accessed 25 April 2023].

31 <https://svobodnoslovo.eu/komentar/voynata-v-ukrayna-vse-oshte-prodalzhava-samo-zashtoto-rusiya-i-zapada-se-boryat-kak-tochno-da-prodalzhi-sveta-inache-otdavana-da-e-priklyuchila/53294> [accessed 25 April 2023].



3. Russian Propaganda Speakers in Bulgaria

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Russian propaganda has spread virulently in Bulgarian online space. Its main narratives have not changed significantly in recent years, although some have undergone slight changes in nuance and intensity. As a general trend for 2022, there has been a several-fold quantitative increase in the online dissemination of these narratives – between five and 20 times. This increase is due both to new technological solutions³² and to the change in the profile of propaganda disseminators – the official spokespersons of the Russian Federation have become its main disseminators. This happened after the publication of Putin’s article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” on 12 July 2021, in which the main propaganda vocabulary was formulated by the ultimate authority. Until then, the main disseminators were the Kremlin media, but after that they were joined by officials: Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, Zakharova, Mitrofanova, etc., are literally repeating propaganda talking points with their respective vocabulary. Hence, their spread has increased sharply as all media, both Bulgarian and international – even the objective ones – are compelled to quote them.

Although the main mode of dissemination is direct translation of articles from Russian, the Kremlin’s narratives are also circulated by a number of local speakers, whose activity waned somewhat after the start of the war in Ukraine, but some of them have subsequently become more active.

This part of the report will focus on some of the most significant mouthpieces of Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian public sphere: President Rumen Radev, party leaders Korneliya Ninova (BSP) and Kostadin Kostadinov (Vazrazhdane [Revival]), and journalists Petar Volgin and Martin Karbovski. Why them? First of all, because of their public significance and audibility: the president as the first representative of a state institution tasked with uniting Bulgarian society, with being the commander-in-chief of Bulgaria’s armed forces, and in the current political crisis, with appointing a caretaker government. Ninova and Kostadinov as leaders of parliamentary parties. Kostadinov is also one of the mightiest mouthpieces of Kremlin propaganda on Facebook. Volgin as a popular host of a current affairs talk show on Bulgarian National Radio and a recognizable voice in the public sphere. Karbovski as a popular journalist, also at the forefront of online propaganda dissemination. In previously published reports,³³ we have found that all five actively reproduce narratives from the Kremlin propaganda machine, and their public audibility makes them significant disseminators of this propaganda.

32 Summary of Report: Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022), see <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Report-ENG.pdf> [accessed 3 May 2023].

33 Summary of Report: Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022), see <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Report-ENG.pdf> [accessed 3 May 2023]; Summary of Report: Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (Part Two): Before and During the War against Ukraine (1 January – 31 May 2022), see <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Abstract-Report-Part-2-eng.pdf> [accessed 3 May 2023]; Summary of Report: Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (Part Three): Facebook (1 January – 9 May 2022), see <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Abstract-Report-Part-3-eng-2.pdf> [accessed 3 May 2023].



A) RUMEN RADEV

President Rumen Radev strictly sticks to one of the Kremlin's talking points that have been most deftly reworked for domestic use: the position in favour of neutrality. He thus takes a firm stance against supplying military aid to Ukraine.

In the first quarter of 2023, the most widely covered event associated with Radev and his rhetoric of neutrality was his statement (on 22 February) on the day before the European Council meeting in Brussels (held on 23 and 24 February). In it Radev made it clear that Bulgaria wouldn't directly provide shells to Ukraine, but might export shells to other countries. At the same time, Radev said that Bulgaria is "an important part of the European mechanism of consolidating peace".

РАДЕВ С МОЩЕН ЗАЛП: НЕДОПУСТИМО Е БЪЛГАРИЯ ДА Е ВОЕНЕН ДОНОР НА УКРАИНА, ВИНОВНИ СА...

сряда, 22 февруари 2023 / 13:45 / Темата на деня



RADEV FIRES BROADSIDE: IT'S INADMISSIBLE FOR BULGARIA TO BE MILITARY DONOR TO UKRAINE, THEY ARE TO BLAME...³⁴

On 22 February, SENSIKA detected 640 reprints of the president's statement that some parties regard the Bulgarian army as a "donor" to the Ukrainian army:

It's inadmissible for a considerable part of our political parties to view the armed forces not as a guarantor of the territorial integrity and security of the country, but as a donor of military aid to the army of Ukraine.³⁵

The notion that the integrity of the body of Bulgarian security is being violated and that flesh is being torn from it is a way of instilling fear against which the president uses the call for peace, which resonates with his vision of "strategic autonomy". One of the Kremlin's lines of attacking the West is that of the lost autonomy of the European states and the EU, which have become the "servants" of the US. Radev demonstrates synchrony with this element of the conspiratorial logic of Russian propaganda. The president combines the Kremlin talking point about Bulgaria's lost autonomy with fearmongering among Bulgarians that they remain defenceless despite the country's NATO membership, on the one hand, and on the other, he inculcates a negative

³⁴ <https://politikata.net/538043/> [accessed 1 May 2023].

³⁵ Ibid.



attitude towards aid to Ukraine and attacks the parties that claim to be Euro-Atlantic – actions that altogether work for the Kremlin’s goals.

Rumen Radev’s position is supported by Ivo Hristov, Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) MEP and the president’s former chief of staff, who repeated Korneliya Ninova’s phrase for GERB-SDS and PP-DB, “coalition of war”, stressing that precisely Radev is the last guarantee that Bulgaria “wouldn’t be involved in the war”, if we recall that old talking point.³⁶ According to Hristov, We Continue the Change (PP) and Democratic Bulgaria (DB) formed a pre-election coalition under external pressure. They are pushing Bulgaria towards war, and GERB and Borisov may be forced to form a coalition with them again under external pressure, although Borisov “maybe” doesn’t wish to involve Bulgaria in the war. Hristov sees an attack against the presidential institution because Radev “is standing in the way of the parties of war, he is also standing in the way of the parties of the status quo, and what’s more, has been doing so for a long time now”, which would lead to his removal under external pressure (by the “right-wing parties”).

Hristov’s position was reprinted abundantly by the Machine – 413 times on 23 February, a day before the first anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Иво Христов: Президентът е последната институционална преграда пред въвлечането на България във войната

23.02.2023 от Политика



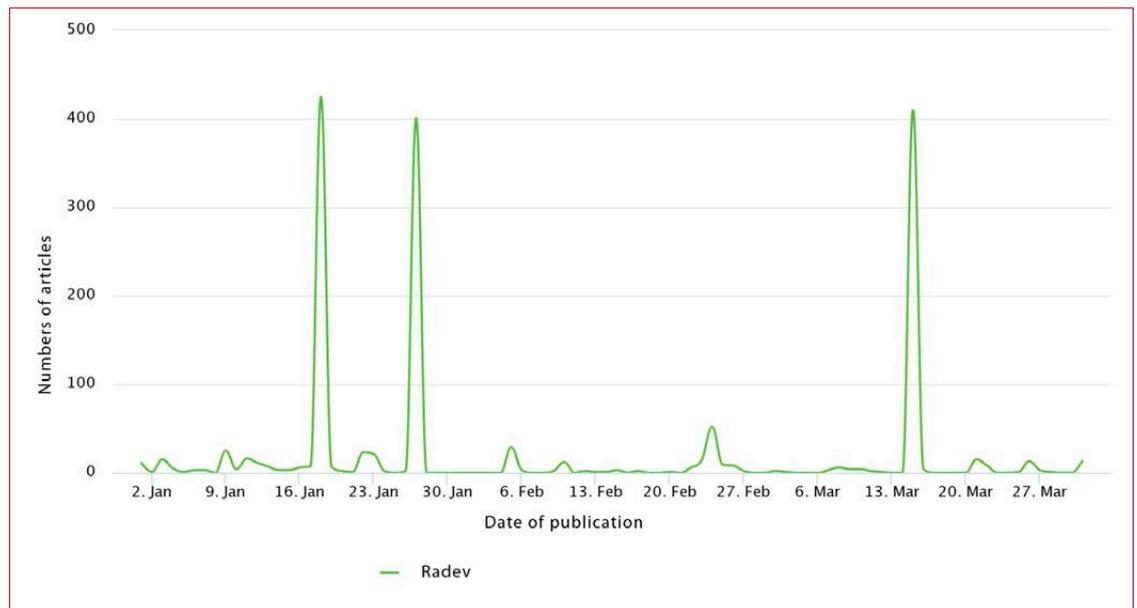
Ivo Hristov: President last institutional barrier to Bulgaria’s involvement in war³⁷

³⁶ <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Abstract-Report-Part-1-eng.pdf> [accessed 27 April 2023].

³⁷ <https://oferti.allbg.eu/893113/> [accessed 27 April 2023].



Radev's well-known phrase about the "warmongers" had three peaks in the first quarter of the year:



The first one, on 18 January (425 publications, mainly by the Machine), and the second one, on 27 January (401), were due to an article in *Die Welt* about Bulgaria's role and aid to Ukraine, in which Radev is a side-figure. In this article, the German daily revealed Bulgaria's large-scale aid to Ukraine at the beginning of the war. The article, headlined "The country that secretly saved Ukraine", caused a wide public response since the then regular government of Kiril Petkov formally did not admit that it was exporting military aid to Ukraine, but it was widely believed that the final destination of the ammunition, weapons, etc., purchased by third countries was precisely the frontline in Ukraine. The minister of economy and industry at that time was BSP leader Korneliya Ninova, who firmly insisted that Bulgaria wasn't exporting combat equipment to Ukraine. After the publication of the article in *Die Welt*, she was sharply criticized for having misled the public. Petkov was also criticized – for not revealing the final destination of the exported equipment, presumably to avoid further aggravating an already extremely tense and complex situation in the then ruling four-party coalition (although it wasn't a coalition in the classical sense, because three of the parties in it had signed coalition agreements only with the winner of the elections, PP, but not with one another). At the time of publication of the article in question, the Petkov government was no longer in office and the country was ruled by a caretaker government appointed by the president.

The third peak was a critical Facebook post on 15 March by Ninova addressed at Radev (410 publications), asking him questions related to potential military aid to Ukraine, including through joint reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank with Romania.³⁸

The end of Herro Mustafa's term as US ambassador to Bulgaria gave Radev an occasion to demonstrate his alternating positions on the war. Speaking in front of her, as he also does in front of Bulgaria's European partners, he called it "Russia's brutal war against Ukraine".³⁹

38 <https://www.standartnews.com/balgariya-politika/ninova-s-tri-ostri-vprosa-km-radev-zaplashi-go-519332.html> [accessed 7 October 2023].

39 <https://hothotnews.bgvest.eu/887069/> [accessed 8 May 2023].



B) KORNELIYA NINOVA

President Radev and BSP leader Korneliya Ninova seem to be locked in a race over the use of the talking point about involving Bulgaria in the war and the demands for peace. Insofar as the BSP is at a disadvantage, with a rapidly shrinking electorate, Ninova's criticisms of Radev are fierce:

The president's statement is contradictory, because although he expresses in front of us and in front of the people disagreement with the provision of military aid, he has signed the papers on the provision of ammunition, and I've understood that the Ministry of Defence will give its reserves to [military plant] VMZ Sopot and they will be exported via the plant.

That is to say, there's a dose of hypocrisy in this behaviour. It's even more surprising that asked whether he would arrest Putin if he comes to Bulgaria, Rumen Radev won't answer and beats around the bush.⁴⁰

Either way, Ninova's rhetoric is moving closer to that of the Kremlin in the same way as Radev's – calls for peace and neutrality, aggressive reactions to any talk of aid for Ukraine.

Another Kremlin talking point used by Ninova is about the sanctions against Russia:

We will appeal for Bulgaria's neutrality, for not supplying arms, for stopping hostilities, for peace talks. We have declared ourselves against the sanctions against Russia, from which Europe has suffered the most – they have led to an energy, economic and social crisis.⁴¹

Ninova thus supports the thesis that the sanctions are ineffective and hurt primarily the European countries. Here the aim of the Russian propaganda tactic is twofold: to undermine confidence in the effectiveness of the sanctions and to instill economic fears – mainly of a price rise.

Yavor Bozhankov's expulsion from the BSP parliamentary group after he sharply criticized the Socialists' policy on aid to Ukraine is also highly indicative of Ninova's pro-Russian position.

In the first quarter of 2023, most of what Ninova said about the war in Ukraine had to do with the article in *Die Welt*. So fierce was her defensive attack that she went so far as to file a lawsuit against the caretaker Minister of Economy and Industry Nikola Stoyanov because, after all, the article in the German daily was, according to her, "commissioned":

Now, why has this issue been raised and why has Die Welt written this? What's more, with a commissioned article – I agree with President Radev. Entirely commissioned, we saw what it's worth. Whoever commissioned it has to explain themselves – I have in mind Kiro [Petkov] and Asen [Vasilev].⁴²

In her race against Radev over who is the greatest fighter for peace, Ninova also found a reciprocal equivalent who aims to discredit her political rivals who are in favour of providing aid to Ukraine, those she calls "parties of war". The BSP leader suggested that there is a similar struggle between GERB and PP-DB over who is more critical of the Kremlin's actions and more supportive of Ukraine:

⁴⁰ <https://top-novini.eu/640327> [accessed 3 May 2023].

⁴¹ <https://novinilive.allbg.eu/889265/> [accessed 3 May 2023].

⁴² <https://epicenter.bg/article/Korneliya-Ninova--Zavezhdam-porednoto-delo-sreshtu-ministar-Nikola-Stoyanov-/306261/2/0> [accessed 3 May 2023].



*Borisov says: I arranged the weapons for Ukraine. DB, not to be outdone, say: We propose condemning the Holodomor. PP are saying to themselves: Now we'll say through Die Welt that it's we who saved Ukraine. Who believes that it's we who saved Ukraine in this colossal war and pouring of billions from all over the world? And that it's we who saved Ukraine with the output of VMZ Sopot?*⁴³



Този човек го уволних за данни за корупция. Сигнал за това има и в прокуратурата.

Корнелия Нинова: Завеждам поредното дело срещу министър Никола Стоянов

5865 | 22 ян. 2023 | 23:18

Служебният министър на икономиката Стоянов лъже в БТВ, че днес съм казала, че съм знаела за износ за Украйна. Нито днес, нито когато и да било съм произнасяла това. И преди и сега твърдя, че нито един патрон не е изнесен за Украйна.

Корнелия Нинова: Завеждам поредното дело срещу министър Никола Стоянов

I fired this man because of evidence of corruption. It's also been reported to the prosecutor's office.
Korneliya Ninova: I'm filing yet another lawsuit against Minister Nikola Stoyanov⁴⁴

C) KOSTADIN KOSTADINOV

Kostadinov has opened the doors of Bulgarian politics to Kremlin talking points even more widely than Radev and Ninova. His pro-Russian positions are clearly stated and his media presence is impressive. In the first quarter of 2023, SENSIKA detected 31,101 publications containing his name (in some he is only mentioned or discussed). According to a study we have already published, among the political speakers spreading Kremlin propaganda he has the highest average number of likes on his posts on the Facebook page "Kostadin Kostadinov" (5,198 in the period between 1 January and 9 May 2022).⁴⁵

We will distinguish several repertoires of Kostadinov, which he deftly uses through a number of Russian propaganda narratives. Firstly, he tries to oppose everything that is the West: from the Bulgarian Euro-Atlantic parties (even those that tend to be Euro-Atlantic merely in words), through the EU, all the way to the US which, in the spirit of the already mentioned conspiratorial logic of Kremlin propaganda, is at the root of all evil. They are:

- ▶ 1. The US controls our statesmen in order to promote its interests, which are opposed to the Bulgarian ones. Bulgaria's domestic and foreign policy is decided in the US embassy, and the agents of US influence include the political parties that identify themselves as Euro-Atlantic (in the first place, PP and DB, in the second – GERB, while DPS enjoys much more modest attention). In this version, Bulgarian interests coincide with the Russian ones;

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ <https://epicenter.bg/article/Korneliya-Ninova--Zavezhdam-porednoto-delo-sreshtu-ministar-Nikola-Stoyanov-/306261/2/0> [accessed 27 April 2023].–

⁴⁵ Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media. Facebook Media (1 January – 9 May 2022) PART THREE [in Bulgarian]; see <https://hssfoundation.org/%d1%80%d1%83%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b0-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d0%bf%d0%b0%d0%b3%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b4%d0%b0-%d0%b2-%d0%b1%d1%8a%d0%bb%d0%b3%d0%b0%d1%80%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5-%d0%bc%d0%b5%d0%b4-3/> [accessed 2 May 2023].



- ▶ 2. Bulgaria's entry into the eurozone will increase poverty. Thus, under the pretext of financial independence, signatures are being collected for a referendum to postpone the introduction of the euro, announced with the protectionist and nationalist slogan "Referendum on retaining the Bulgarian lev".

In addition to these two narratives, Kostadinov uses two classical talking points of Kremlin propaganda:

- ▶ 1. The sanctions against Russia are harming us more, while the Russian economy is in a flourishing condition;
- ▶ 2. Providing aid to Ukraine is dragging us into war.

These two talking points are sub-narratives of the main narrative, "Russia is rising". The first is meant to persuade us that the sanctions against Russia are ineffective – they have no effect on the strong Russian economy and are more harmful to the countries and peoples of the European Union.⁴⁶ The second is aimed to delegitimize provision of military aid to Ukraine, instilling fear that this drags the countries providing such aid into the war.

Костадинов: В България е пълно с американски агенти, изолирани сме от Русия

06.01.2023 от Политика



Kostadinov: Bulgaria's full of US agents, we're isolated from Russia⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Summary of Report: Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022), see <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Report-ENG.pdf> [accessed 2 May 2023].

⁴⁷ <https://rosipres.bg7.eu/875351/> [accessed 27 April 2023].



Костадин Костадинов: Американският посланик да спре да шета из държавните ни учреждения и да кадрува

31.03.2023 , 15:03 | Автор : Мануела Янева



Kostadin Kostadinov: US ambassador should stop going around our state institutions and dictating appointments⁴⁸

Kostadinov focuses on the subject of peace, the economic consequences of the war for Bulgaria and criticism of the parties supporting provision of aid to Ukraine, through the thesis that we are being dragged into the war. The Vazrazhdane leader, however, does not interfere in the competition between Korneliya Ninova and Rumen Radev for who is the bigger peace-lover. He builds his political image by criticizing the Euro-Atlantic parties, vilifying them as “puppets” heavily dependent on foreign embassies and countries, and instilling the belief that Bulgaria will never prosper as long as it is someone’s “vassal state”. As a function of this dependence, Kostadinov points to aid to Ukraine as involving the country in a war with which we have nothing to do. He goes so far as to imply that if something is not done about it, Bulgarian citizens will be sent to the frontline against their will. Kostadinov is thus developing a sort of ideology of fear based on Kremlin talking points, which works in the interests of the Russian Federation and against domestic political opponents.

⁴⁸ <https://www.gramofona.com/izbori-2023/kostadin-kostadinov-amerikanskiyat-poslanik-da-spre-da-sheta-iz-darjavnite-ni-uchrejdeniya-i-da-kadruva> [accessed 27 April 2023].



Войната в Украйна трябва да спре максимално бързо



ИЗБЕРИ СВОБОДАТА

Политика

Костадинов: Войната в Украйна трябва да спре максимално бързо

28.03.2023

Войната в Украйна трябва да бъде спряна максимално бързо, защото тя ще доведе до много сериозни икономически последици за нас.

Опасността за нас от включването в конфликта става много сериозна. Това каза председателят на „Възраждане“ Костадин Костадинов в предаването „Денят започва с Георги Любенов“ по БНТ.

Според него опасността конфликтът да се разрасне и да стане световен е реална.

Kostadinov: War in Ukraine must stop as soon as possible⁴⁹

Another narrative used by Kostadinov is Bulgaria's entry into the eurozone and adoption of the euro. The Vazrazhdane party initiated a petition for a referendum on postponing the adoption of the euro, also known as "referendum on retaining the lev". A tactic that certainly helped boost their result in the April elections, despite its zero practical value, as Bulgarian law prohibits referendums on issues regulated by international instruments (which is why Vazrazhdane is proposing "postponing" the adoption of the euro, not revoking the treaty with the EU that obliges Bulgaria to join the eurozone). This did not stop Kostadinov from engaging in political demagoguery in an attempt to convince the Bulgarians that the adoption of the euro would lead to a deepening of the economic crisis and further impoverishment of the people. To this end, he manipulatively used both comparisons with other countries that have already adopted the euro, and a patriotic message: against the elimination of the intrinsically Bulgarian lev and the loss of the country's independence. Another argument against the referendum is that Bulgaria has been under a currency board arrangement (initially pegged to the German mark) since 1997, when it went through a severe crisis of hyperinflation, therefore the exchange rate between the lev and the euro is fixed – that is, the connection between the two currencies is already fundamental.

⁴⁹ <https://novinata.bg/politika/kostadinov-voynata-v-ukrayna-trqbva-da-spre-maksimalno-barzo/> [accessed 27 April 2023].



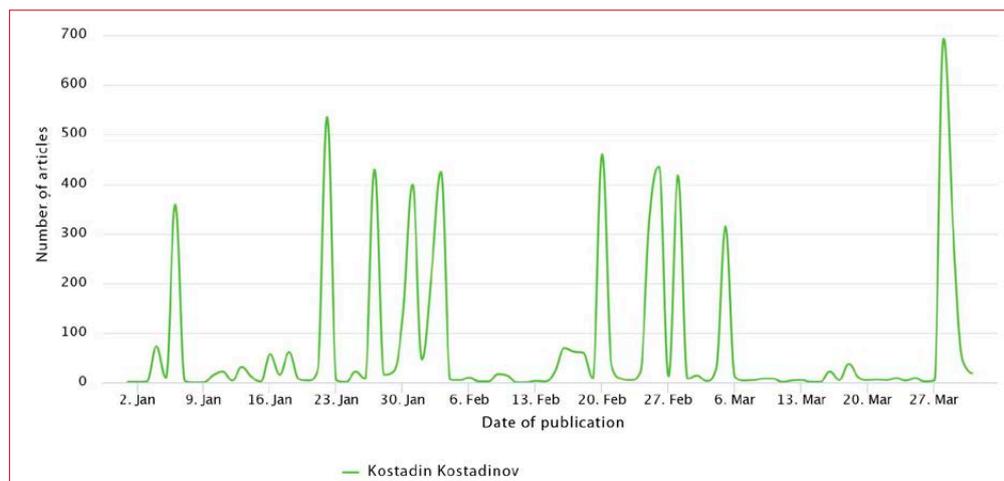
Here is a telling example of Kostadinov’s fearmongering:

If we adopt the euro next year, it will mean a calamity in the full sense of the word. And remember well what I’m telling you, because we’ll be talking again... The euro means total doom for the Bulgarian economy and a devastating, inhuman impoverishment of the population.

Inflation will go through the roof, prices will skyrocket and there will be no alternative for the people except mass riots. People will lose their savings. Understand this now, because then it will be too late. The exchange rate of the lev [to the euro] won’t be 1.95 when we enter the eurozone and de facto they will rob us of our savings.⁵⁰

Chart 2 below shows the dynamics of articles containing the keywords “Kostadin Kostadinov” and “referendum”.

Chart 2. Peaks in propaganda activity about the referendum on the “Bulgarian lev” (1 January – 31 March 2023)



KOSTADIN KOSTADINOV: IT WILL BE A CALAMITY IF WE ADOPT THE EURO NOW! BID FAREWELL TO YOUR SAVINGS BECAUSE...⁵¹

⁵⁰ <https://portal-21.com/2693/kostadin-kostadinov/> [accessed 27 April 2023].

⁵¹ <https://portal-21.com/2693/kostadin-kostadinov/> [accessed 27 April 2023].



Among the articles related to Kostadinov in the first quarter of 2023, there is one about the case in which his son attacked a schoolmate who was “in favour of the euro, not the lev”. This aroused Kostadinov’s fatherly pride. Kostadinov Jr was collecting signatures at the school where he is in Grade 12 when a schoolmate confronted him. According to the article, an altercation ensued in which the schoolmate was beaten and the lists of signatures restored; commenting on the case, Kostadinov Sr said he “saw nothing wrong and was even a proud parent”.

КОСТАДИН КОСТАДИНОВ ГОРД: СИНЪТ МИ ПРЕБИ СЪУЧЕНИК, КОЙТО Е ЗА ЕВРОТО, А НЕ ЗА ЛЕВА!

Михаил Николов 29.01.2023 Виж 3 мнения

Костадин Костадинов е възпитал децата си в своите ценности!

KOSTADIN KOSTADINOV PROUD: MY SON BEAT UP A SCHOOLMATE WHO'S IN FAVOUR OF THE EURO, NOT THE LEV!

Kostadin Kostadinov has taught his children his values!⁵²

In the first quarter of 2023, there were another two events involving Kostadinov that are noteworthy:

- ▶ 1. “Kostya Kopeykin” became an official patent;⁵³
- ▶ 2. Kostadinov’s appearance on the current affairs talk show “Face to Face” hosted by journalist Tsvetanka Rizova.⁵⁴

One of Kostadinov’s mocking nicknames is Kopeykin or Kostya Kopeykin, inspired by his and his party’s outspoken pro-Kremlin views. Perhaps to control the use of the nickname or simply as a symbolic gesture and response to the mockery, fellow-members of Vazrazhdane patented “Kostya Kopeykin” at the Patent Office on 11 January 2023.

Another public appearance that again drew attention to Kostadinov was his participation on 28 March in the current affairs talk show “Face to Face” (“*Litse v Litse*”) hosted by Tsvetanka Rizova. During the interview she asked him whether calling Vazrazhdane a pro-Kremlin party would be an insult, to which Kostadinov answered, “No, on the contrary”, and went on to accuse the US of hypocrisy because “in the name of human rights” it had bombed Syria, and 25 years ago it had “democratically bombed Yugoslavia”.⁵⁵

Kostadinov’s rhetoric leaves the impression that his biggest political enemy is the Democratic Bulgaria (*Demokraticzna Balgariya*, DB) coalition, which he calls “Snitch Bulgaria” (*Donosnicheska Balgariya*) – 2,189 mentions in publications related to him in the first quarter of 2023. He used the expression both in Parliament and in national TV and radio studios. Kostadinov’s narrative that the liberal parties are serving US interests and turning Bulgaria into a US colony includes the sub-narrative that they are snitches (*donosnitsi*), i.e., US informers – hence the pejorative pun on the abbreviation of Democratic Bulgaria’s name. During the election campaign, journalists often reprimanded him whenever he used the phrase to refer to the coalition, but after the campaign they disappeared (including when he used the phrase when speaking in Parliament).

52 <https://zona98.com/1324/kostadin-kostadinov/> [accessed 27 April 2023].

53 <https://novinite-dnes.eu/chestito-kostya-kopekjin-veche-e-oficialen-patent/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

54 <https://senpay.bg7.eu/911179/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

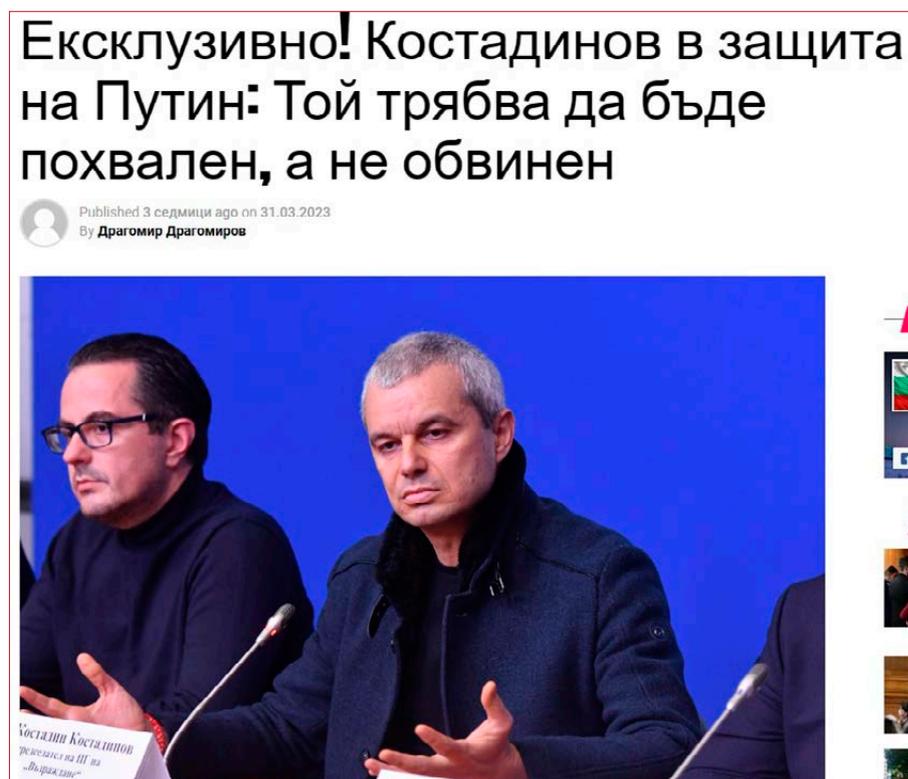
55 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zpJ6Pvojn8&ab_channel=bTVMediaGroup [accessed 3 May 2023].



Related to this narrative is a use of the conspiracy rhetoric around “Zionism” and the name of George Soros in an anonymous article.⁵⁶ Kostadinov is portrayed as the only one who puts up “resistance” against “Zionism” and Soros, whose protégés according to the article are the members of DB and GERB, Daniel Lorer and Daniel Mitov respectively.

Kostadinov’s geopolitical orientation is clear: he defends Putin, and everything anti-Russian is paid-for, including the public opinion polls that find an increase in Bulgaria’s critical attitude towards Russia. Here is what he stated:

The public opinion polls that show that Bulgarians have begun to have a critical attitude towards Russia are paid for by the omnipresent US embassy. That is why we have proposed a law on the registration of foreign agents, which is copied from the American law. The daily anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian propaganda is achieving the exact opposite effect.⁵⁷



Exclusive! Kostadinov in defence of Putin: He must be praised, not accused⁵⁸

This article refers also to another leitmotif of Kostadinov’s anti-Western rhetoric: his coveted law on foreign agents. This is what such a law would look like:

⁵⁶ <http://bgsniper.com/sniper/19020-1> [accessed 3 May 2023].

⁵⁷ https://demokrat.bg/archives/18839?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=%25d0%25b5%25d0%25ba%25d1%2581%25d0%25ba%25d0%25bb%25d1%2583%25d0%25b7%25d0%25b8%25d0%25b2%25d0%25bd%25d0%25be-%25d0%25ba%25d0%25be%25d1%2581%25d1%2582%25d0%25b0%25d0%25b4%25d0%25b8%25d0%25bd%25d0%25be%25d0%25b2-%25d0%25b2-%25d0%25b7%25d0%25b0%25d1%2589%25d0%25b8%25d1%2582%25d0%25b0-%25d0%25bd%25d0%25b0-%25d0%25bf%25d1%2583 [accessed 25 April 2023].

⁵⁸ https://demokrat.bg/archives/18839?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=%25d0%25b5%25d0%25ba%25d1%2581%25d0%25ba%25d0%25bb%25d1%2583%25d0%25b7%25d0%25b8%25d0%25b2%25d0%25bd%25d0%25be-%25d0%25ba%25d0%25be%25d1%2581%25d1%2582%25d0%25b0%25d0%25b4%25d0%25b8%25d0%25bd%25d0%25be%25d0%25b2-%25d0%25b2-%25d0%25b7%25d0%25b0%25d1%2589%25d0%25b8%25d1%2582%25d0%25b0-%25d0%25bd%25d0%25b0-%25d0%25bf%25d1%2583 [accessed 27 April 2023].



It requires the self-registration of all natural and legal persons who have received, directly or indirectly, financial or material support in excess of BGN 1,000 per year and are engaged in dissemination of information through the media, in training and in political activity. Such “agents“ are prohibited from conducting activities in state-run and private kindergartens, schools and higher education institutions, hospitals, structures of the Interior Ministry and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, etc. They are prohibited from participating in political activities and from receiving state and municipal funding. (Veselin Stoynev, Deutsche Welle, reprinted by Mediapool, “Kostadinov’s obscurantist law: when foreign agents cry ‘catch foreign agents’”)⁵⁹

Among those labeled as foreign agents by Kostadinov are various political parties, media outlets and NGOs, such as the America for Bulgaria Foundation, Economedia, Mediapool, Free Europe, Deutsche Welle, and the Konrad Adenauer and Friedrich Naumann foundations, etc.

D) PETAR VOLGIN

Petar Volgin has become a modern classic of anti-Western and pro-Russian rhetoric. One of the narratives directly originating from the Kremlin that he uses most often is that certain political parties want to drag Bulgaria into the war.

PP-DB define themselves as “the good guys” who would allegedly overcome the status quo and corruption, they claim to be the bearers of everything “modern, liberal and progressive”. GERB-SDS, on the other hand, insist that they are [hitherto] unseen “professionals”, that they are the only ones who have the capacity to govern and to right the “wrongs” caused by their incompetent political opponents. The problem is that whatever differences there might be between the two coalitions, they all disappear instantly when it comes to Bulgaria’s foreign policy. On this issue, there is complete and worrying unanimity between the two formations of war. Therefore, it makes no difference whether you’ll vote for one or for the other. For whichever of these formations forms a government, the consequences on the most important issue, namely that of war and peace, will be the same. These parties will do their utmost to involve Bulgaria as actively as possible in the fighting, including through direct participation of our troops there. It’s good to remember this when we go to vote on Sunday. When you vote for the parties of war, there’s no way you can get anything but war, right?⁶⁰

Entirely logical also is the other narrative, according to which the two coalitions are completely dependent on the US and are even competing for who is “the most righteous Euro-Atlanticist”. This, in turn, is harmful for Bulgaria and would further worsen the situation in the country:

PP-DB and GERB-SDS have long been fighting for the title “most righteous Euro-Atlanticist” and would stop at nothing to deserve it.⁶¹

You shouldn’t doubt at all that if Bulgaria is governed by PP-DB, GERB-SDS or a coalition between them, we will have the most hawkish government possible, which can do stupendously silly things.⁶²

⁵⁹ <https://www.mediapool.bg/mrakobesniyat-zakon-na-kostadinov-kogato-chuzhdi-agenti-vikat-drazhte-chuzhdite-agenti-news341449.html> [accessed 3 May 2023].

⁶⁰ https://retro.bg/komentari/strongpetr-volgin-pp-db-i-gerb-sds-ni-butat-vv-voynatastrongbr-nbspbr-nbspbr-nbsp_33808.html [accessed 3 May 2023].

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.



Петър Волгин: ПП-ДБ и ГЕРБ-СДС ни бутат във

Коментари • 30 март 2023, 17:23



Petar Volgin: PP-DB, GERB-SDS pushing us into war⁶³

Despite Volgin's leftist leanings, it turns out that the far-right Kostadin Kostadinov reacts positively to posts on his Facebook profile.

Петър Волгин
30 март в 18:48 ч. · 🌐

ПП-ДБ и ГЕРБ-СДС влизат в титанични сблъсъци по всякакви теми. Готови са да си издерат очите, когато става дума за енергетика, доходи, борба с корупцията...Но има един-единствен въпрос, по който и двете коалиции са единодушни. Там различия няма. И едните, и другите искат да прашае още и още оръжия на Украйна. И едните, и другите с две ръце ще подкрепят всякакво участие на България във войната. Включително и с жива сила. Толкова е голямо желанието им да спечелят приза за най-предан евроатлантик, че и двете формации са готови да сторят и най-голямата възможна беля.

Гласуването както за ПП-ДБ, така и за ГЕРБ-СДС е глас за продължаване на войната. И за още по-безмозъчно ангажиране на България с глупостите на евроатлантически лагер.

<https://retro.bg/.../strongpetr-volgin-pp-db-i-gerb-sds-ni...>

RETRO.BG
Петър Волгин: ПП-ДБ и ГЕРБ-СДС ни бутат във войната
Retro.bg

Петър Волгин: ПП-ДБ и ГЕРБ-СДС ни бутат във войната Коментари 30 март 2023, 17:23 0 коментара автор Петър Волгин Добре е да си припомним, че България не участва във во...

👍 Костадин Костадинов и 951 други 2 коментара 111 споделяния

64

63 https://retro.bg/komentari/strongpetr-volgin-pp-db-i-gerb-sds-ni-butat-vv-voynatastrongbr-nbspbr-nbspbr-nbsp_33808.html [accessed 27 April 2023].

64 <https://www.facebook.com/petar.petrov.56829> [accessed 27 April 2023].



Support for Ukraine is cause for attack. In the spirit of the Kremlin narrative, Volgin defends the thesis that Bulgaria's position on the war is due to conformism towards our Western partners. This takes agency away from the country and the people, turning them into mere mouthpieces for Euro-Atlantic positions without the possibility of independent and free self-determination. That is to say, the thesis of sovereigntism, which is central to domestic criticisms of EU policies, is being repeated again. In fact, this is a topic that has been left entirely in the hands of local propagandists.

"Слава Украине!" - писъкът на нагаждача, на подлизуркото и на хамелеона



За никаква смелост не става дума. Говорим за чист и неподправен конформизъм на едно обидно елементарно ниво

"Slava Ukraine!" ["Glory to Ukraine!"] – the scream of the timeserver, of the toady and of the chameleon

It's not about courage at all. We're talking about pure and unadulterated conformism on an insultingly elementary level⁶⁵

Petar Volgin leaves the impression that his main ideological task is to vilify Bulgarian Euro-Atlanticism and liberalism, and even conservatism, insofar as Borisov, being suspected of Russophobia, also attracts his ire.⁶⁶

A curious thesis promoted by Volgin is that the so-called "liberal community" doesn't like Bulgarians and Bulgaria. The representatives of the so-called "urban right", the liberals, the ones also called "zhaltopavetnitsi" ("people from the yellow brick road"), etc., are haughty and don't understand or even despise ordinary Bulgarians who don't profess liberal values, but are rather traditionalists and/or conservatives. This narrative contrasts the "intellectuals", pro-Western liberals, etc., with ordinary Bulgarians. Thus, the Western-oriented elite begins to appear alienated from the problems of "the Bulgarians", from inequalities, etc.:

These are people who aren't interested in the least in the problems that most Bulgarians are concerned about. Moreover, the smart-and-beautiful [umnokrasivitet] represented in politics quite openly distances itself from the concerns of its compatriots. According to those who constantly brag about allegedly professing some "Euro-Atlantic values" unseen by any normal person, most of us Bulgarians are ignorant and have no idea of "contemporary fashions".⁶⁷

65 http://www.realzoom.org/2023/03/blog-post_825.html [accessed 27 April 2023].

66 <https://newsmakers.bg7.eu/904793/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

67 <https://lentata.com/komentar-na-petr-volgin-blgarskiyat-liberalen-elit-ne-haresva-blgariya> [accessed 27 April 2023].



Коментар на Петър Волгин: Българският либерален елит не харесва България



08-01-2023г.

1725

Петър Волгин



Commentary by Petar Volgin: Bulgarian liberal elite doesn't like Bulgaria⁶⁸

Петър Волгин: ПП и ДБ да станат едно – едно общо безмозъчно и евроатлантическо нищо

22.01.2023 от Политика



Petar Volgin: PP and DB should become one – one common brainless and Euro-Atlantic nothing⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ <https://bg7.eu/881642/> [accessed 27 April 2023]



Yavor Bozhankov, who was expelled from the BSP parliamentary group for his outspoken position on the war in Ukraine, cannot be spared Volgin's ire, of course:

You are encouraging turncoatism, you are saying "Bravo!" for a behaviour that has made many normal Bulgarians loathe politics. When you look lovingly at such creatures, you are actually endorsing political nomadism, party-hopping.

In effect, you are declaring that it is perfectly in order for voters to be lied to, and for it to be not the principled politicians who come to the fore, but the tricksters, opportunists and timeservers.



Volgin: Why are creatures like Bozhankov given a platform at all?⁷⁰

E) MARTIN KARBOVSKI

Martin Karbovski's presence in SENSİKA in the first quarter of 2023 was modest. The system detected two peaks with his name:

- ▶ 26 February, 343 publications by the Machine: "Little Toshko explains why he wants GERB in power instead of 'those half-idiots from PP' or the one with the disgusting looks VIDEO"⁷¹ (there is no video);
- ▶ 19 March, 303 publications by the Machine: "Speaking to Karbovski, Tsvetanov threatens Borisov: If I were [interior] minister, I would investigate him."⁷²

Both articles are on domestic political issues that convey a general sense of venality, incompetence, thievery and corruption on the part of all representatives of the local Euro-Atlantic elite – a narrative the Kremlin continues to use, albeit less intensely than most other narratives. This is the topic of "Bulgaria's venal elites".

⁷⁰ <https://liubomir.bgvest.eu/875420/> [accessed 27 April 2023].

⁷¹ <https://eli.bgvest.eu/886147/> [accessed 25 April 2023]. The person quoted is Todor Slavkov, the grandson of former communist dictator Todor Zhivkov.

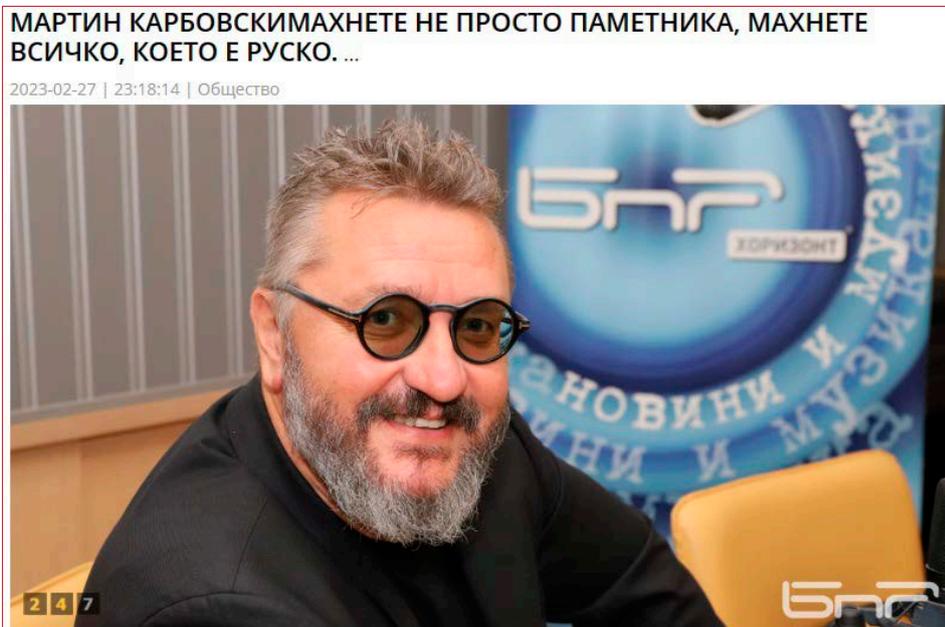
⁷² <https://novini687.bgvest.eu/897019/> [accessed 25 April 2023]. The person quoted is Tsvetan Tsvetanov, former interior minister and right-hand man of Boyko Borisov in GERB, who was expelled from the party.



Karbovski's position on the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia is interesting. In an emotional post, he misrepresents the decision to remove the monument, framing it as an erasure of national memory and a denial of our own history and nature. He even quips ironically:

"Remove not just the monument, remove everything Soviet. For example, erase Russia from the map with an eraser, write that there's a sea, some tiny ocean there.

That way you will please the new politicians.



MARTIN KARBOVSKI: REMOVE NOT JUST THE MONUMENT, REMOVE EVERYTHING RUSSIAN...⁷³

The journalist is one of the most prominent and fierce defenders of "the alternative opinion" that is usually a cover for Kremlin propaganda narratives. Hence, summaries of his new podcast,⁷⁴ which has been broadcast on YouTube for several months now, often become conduits for these narratives. At present (April 2023), his YouTube channel has 122,000 subscribers.

⁷³ https://novini247.com/novini/martin-karbovskimahnete-ne-prosto-pametnika-mahnete-vsichko-koeto-e-rusko_5870966.html [accessed 27 April 2023].

⁷⁴ https://www.youtube.com/@Martin_Karbovski [accessed 27 April 2023].



As noted above, statements of some of his guests appear also on various websites that are monitored by SENSIKA.

България е КОЛОНИЯ на САЩ экс-военният америк...
БЪЛГАРИТЕ СТЕ ПО-НИСШИ ОТ АМЕРИКАНЦИТЕ
 Watch on YouTube
CENSORED

Според Ритър България е колониален поданик на САЩ. Отношения като господар към роб.

YOU BULGARIANS ARE INFERIOR TO AMERICANS

According to Ritter, Bulgaria is a colonial subject of the US. A master-to-slave relationship.⁷⁵



Supplement to the magazine *Murzilka*, No. 6, June 1931

⁷⁵ <https://trakiaworld.com/2023/02/18/%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%82-%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%8A%D1%80-%D0%B1%D0%B8%D1%88%D0%B2-%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B5%D1%80-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B0%D1%89-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B1/> [accessed 27 April 2023].



Русофобията в България е мотивирана с пари и обещания за политическото бъдеще



By The Sofia Times
Published 2023-01-15



Russophobia in Bulgaria motivated with money and promises of political future⁷⁶

Among the guests on Karbovski's podcasts are prominent proponents of Kremlin narratives, such as Kostadin Kostadinov, Valentin Vatshev, Ivo Hristov, Neshka Robeva, etc., but the absolute culmination came after the period under review, on 19 April, when his guest was Eleonora Mitrofanova.

Karbovksi has almost stopped updating one of his Facebook pages, he has probably redirected his team's efforts to the podcast. Despite their active work and rapid recruitment of an immoderate number of guests, the foreign policy line they promote is unequivocally pro-Russian. It is usually disguised in the form of patriotism, protection of Bulgarian interests, preservation of national independence and cultural identity – a widely observed tactic in Bulgarian public and political discourse.

76 <https://thesofiatimes.com/komentar/44141/%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B8%D1%8F%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B5-%D0%BC%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81/> [accessed 27 April 2023].



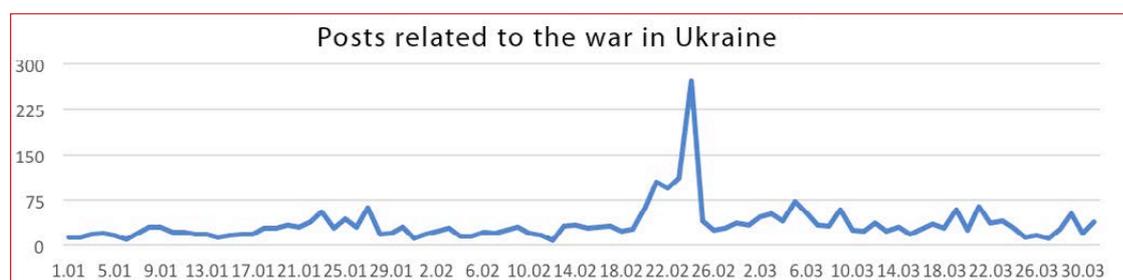
4. Facebook

The significant development of social media in recent decades has inevitably had an impact on both the social and media environments. Hence the growing need for their monitoring and analysis. Major events have particular resonance on online platforms, and in particular on the most popular social media platform in Bulgaria: Facebook. Here we present a quantitative review of the most popular posts (with the highest number of interactions) on public Facebook pages and groups for the period from 1 January to 31 March 2023. Data were collected by means of CrowdTangle. CrowdTangle covers posts on public pages, groups, and verified public profiles of individuals that have had more than 110,000 likes since 2014 or that have been manually added to the CrowdTangle list, as well as public posts that are ad-free and do not target specific groups.

A) January 2023

In the first month of 2023, political and social issues were somewhat eclipsed by the overall festive atmosphere. The military situation in Ukraine continued to be a major cornerstone in determining the country's policy. Domestically, the issue of inflation topped the agenda – some political players used it in their campaigns for the upcoming April elections. Anti-European sentiments and the theses of the opponents of the adoption of the euro prevailed. The issue of “rising inflation” in Croatia was used as an argument against adopting the euro in Bulgaria. Let us recall that on 1 January 2023, Croatia became the latest EU member state to adopt the euro. At the end of the month, fears of soaring inflation in Croatia *were dispelled* by the officially announced inflation rate (0.2%).

Chart 1. Posts related to the war in Ukraine (1 January – 31 March 2023)



Posts related to the war in Ukraine

The undoubtedly **most popular video** on Bulgarian Facebook in January was related to the burning topic of inflation and the adoption of the euro. The sensitive nature of this topic has made it fruitful for a number of political actors with a populist bent. In January, bTV (later also Nova TV) aired an **interview with economist Steve Hanke**, who advised Bulgarians to keep their savings in levs instead of in “euro, an unstable currency”. He also claimed that Bulgaria’s entry into the eurozone would be a trap that should be avoided. Hanke’s thesis was used by

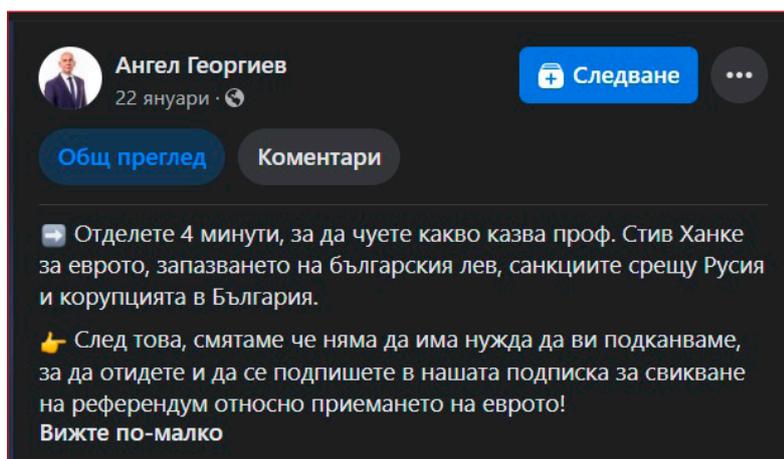


politicians of the Vazrazhdane party as an additional argument in favour of the referendum on retaining the lev.

The video was shared the most times by Vazrazhdane's *page* and by Angel Georgiev, who is a member of the party. It garnered a total of over 700,000 views and over 20,000 interactions. The curious thing in Georgiev's post is that he ties the adoption of the euro to the sanctions imposed by the European Union against the Russian Federation.



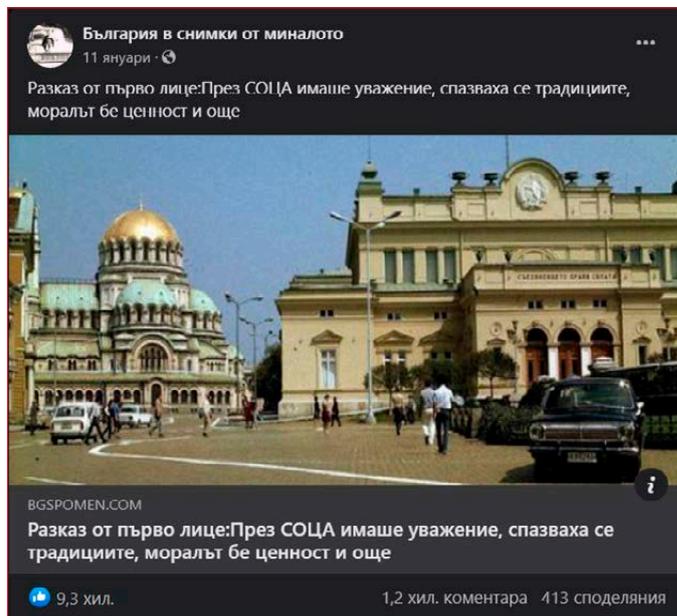
Hanke repeated the talking point that the sanctions imposed by Europe on Russia were working, but they were hurting EU countries much more than they were hurting Russia. He also claimed that this was the reason for the fall of the Bulgarian government. By promoting this view, he created the impression that Europe was indirectly to blame for the political instability in Bulgaria.



Apart from the lower activity on political issues that is typical for the holidays (including the many name days in January), at the beginning of the month a number of posts related in one way or another to the past years of socialism attracted heightened interest – the topics of this type of posts can be summarized under the term **socialist nostalgia**. A *post* praising the quality of the 5-watt batteries produced in 1972 in Nikopol garnered over 517,000 views. *Another*, which



calls for the return of conscription “of yore”, generated over 17,000 interactions. Two posts on two different pages *on 10* and *11 January*, highlighting the morality of socialism and the degradation of society after the democratic changes, aroused curiosity. They garnered over 9,000 interactions each.



I remember my first leave as a conscript. Coming home to my village. My then girlfriend is waiting for me in the yard. I open the gate and she comes running with a glass of vodka and a piece of pastrami. Words fail her – her trembling hands speak louder than “I love you”.

From a post on the page Memories of the People’s Republic

B) February 2023

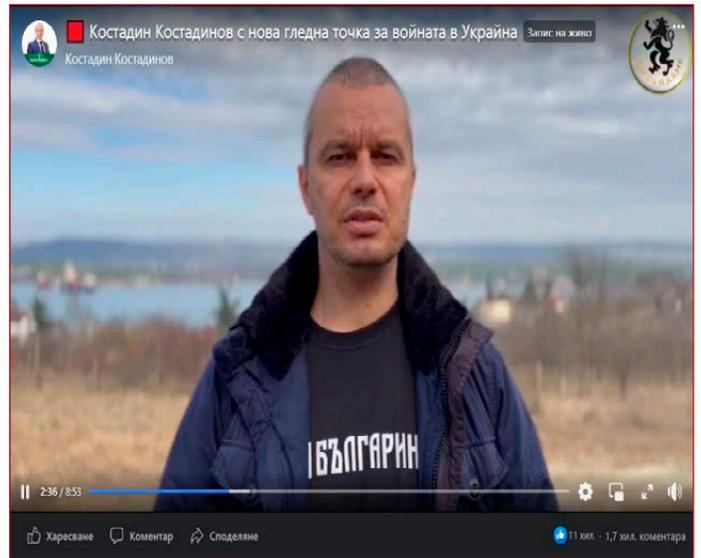
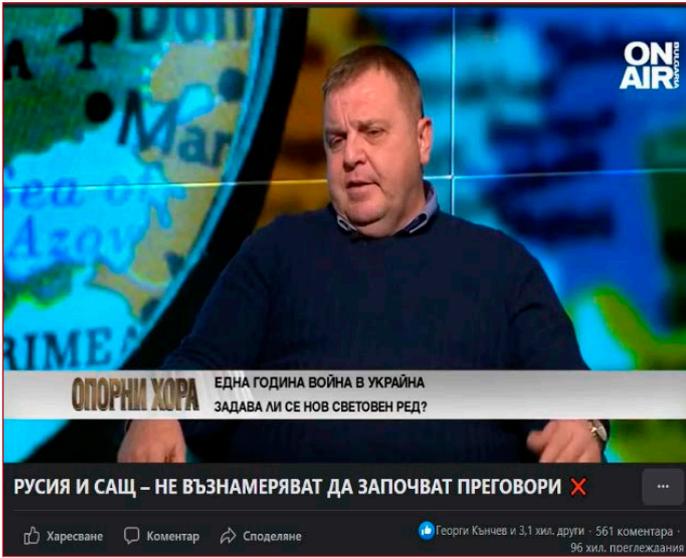
February was marked by two major events. Let us not forget the date 24 February – a year since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. As the date approached, there were growing expectations for the start of a new Russian offensive that would make breakthroughs along the frontline, thereby guaranteeing events that would be taken up by Russian propaganda. On average, there were 34 propaganda posts on Bulgarian Facebook per day related to the war in Ukraine. The other major event, albeit outside the political sphere, was the devastating earthquake in Turkey on 6 February, which was inevitably a dominant topic on social media.

On the morning of 24 February, the leader of the populist party Vazrazhdane, **Kostadin Kostadinov, went live on Facebook, generating over 13,000 interactions and** reaffirming to his followers most of the already known talking points on the war:

- ▶ The war in Ukraine is a “civil war”;
- ▶ Providing aid to Ukraine would make Bulgaria a party to the conflict;
- ▶ After the 2 April elections, “the US aims to install a government that will drag the country into the conflict”;
- ▶ “The US is waging a proxy war on the territory of Ukraine”;
- ▶ Russia is “slowly but surely crushing the Ukrainian army”.



Also noteworthy is **Krasimir Karakachanov's appearance** on a Bulgaria On Air show on 28 February, in which he defended very similar, if not identical, arguments to Kostadinov's.



Fantiki (candy wrappers),
1920s–1930s





In February, the other political figure using the argument that providing military aid to Ukraine means dragging Bulgaria into war was *President Rumen Radev*, who emphasized the need to prevent the formation of a “coalition of warmongers”.

As the April elections approached, there was an increase in sharing of **posts related to nostalgia for socialism** and the lost benefits of the pre-1989 regime. The topics include recollections of *the great Bulgarian People’s Army, the wealth of cooperative farms (TKZS) and Komsomol brigades*.



One of the popular figures of the recent past, Kevork Kevorkian, in a *post* about the earthquake in Turkey, mentioned casually that the EU would donate six and a half million euros to Turkey for reconstruction, also noting that the EU had already donated over three billion six hundred million euros to Ukraine.

A total of over **230,000 interactions** were generated by a *video* of rapper Ustata in which, in his own words, he “teaches” history to Bulgarian and Macedonian politicians. In rap style, he recycles much of the national-populist language that has been used for political purposes for decades now. The video was posted on over a hundred pages and resulted in a series of media appearances by the rapper.

C) March 2023

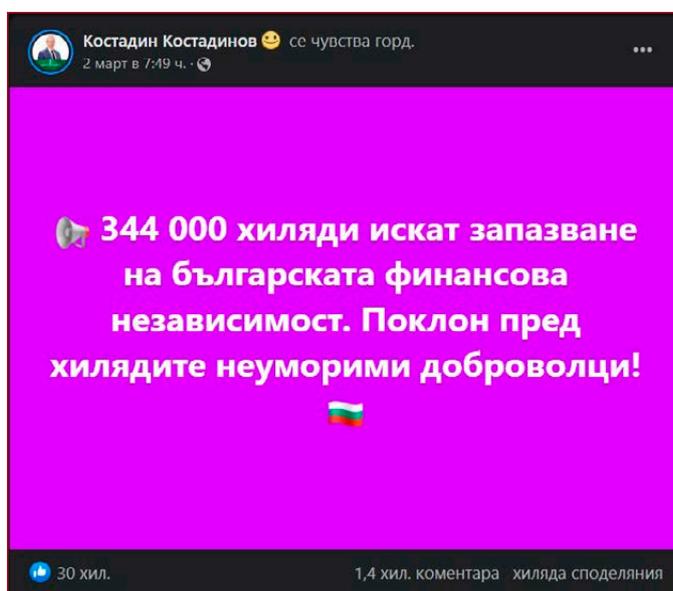
March was very important as it was the month of campaigning for the 2 April elections. The month began with 3 March, “Liberation Day”, the celebration of which has caused controversy in Bulgarian society in recent years. As will become apparent in the highlights of the month, Facebook was dominated primarily by political slogans and attempts to secure more votes in the upcoming elections. The war in Ukraine was an issue both in and outside of political campaigns. The February trend of an average of 34 propaganda posts on Bulgarian Facebook per day related to the war in Ukraine was maintained in March, but there were no spikes throughout the month. One of the dominant topics was related to the so-called Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, whose plaque was smashed at the end of February – the BSP, as part of its election campaign, decided to restore it.



The last week of March saw a wave of bomb threats against Bulgarian schools, which caused alarm and discontent in society. President Rumen Radev and Interior Minister Ivan Demerdzhiev described these acts as “possible hybrid attacks”.



As part of their election campaigns, Vazrazhdane, There Is Such a People (ITN), and the BSP set out to initiate national referendums on various issues:



Vazrazhdane’s referendum is on retaining the Bulgarian lev and postponing the adoption of the euro until 2043. This referendum managed to become part of the public debate and collected a considerable number of signatures. The admissibility of this type of referendum remains in doubt, as it concerns issues related to international treaties and agreements.



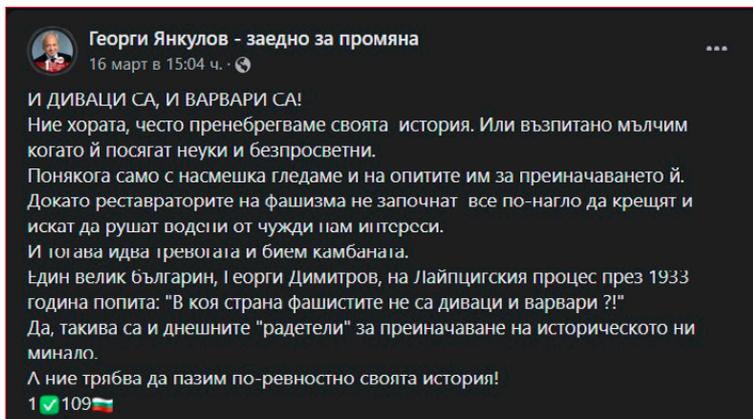
(The screenshot on the previous page shows that Kostadinov's post – which reads “344,000 want preservation of Bulgaria’s financial independence. Let’s honour the thousands of tireless volunteers!” – garnered over 30,000 likes and one thousand shares.)

BSP leader Korneliya Ninova established an Initiative Committee and also launched a petition to initiate a national referendum related to the education system, and more specifically, on banning “gender ideology” in schools. This is another talking point of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria. Among the members of the Initiative Committee are public figures such as Vladislav Karamfilov – Vargala, Neshka Robeva, Emil Kostadinov, etc.



We want to protect the biological sex of male and female, to prevent our becoming “parent 1” and “parent 2”. We want to be mothers and fathers, we want our children to be a boy and a girl, not something third.

This post garnered over 18,000 reactions and a thousand shares.





In tune with the referendum, **the issue of the removal of the Monument to the Soviet Army** was the other pillar in the BSP's election campaign. The curious thing in this narrative is that party members sought to expand the debate by trying to speak of monuments *in general*. On 9 March the BSP organized a protest against the dismantling of the monument, under the slogan "Keep memory alive".

Georgi Yankulov, MP candidate of the BSP, *declared* those who want to remove the monument "savages and barbarians", quoting Georgi Dimitrov at the Leipzig Trial of 1933: "In what country are the fascists not savages and barbarians?"

The third referendum, that of ITN, is on convening a Grand National Assembly to change the form of government from a parliamentary to a presidential republic. The idea of a presidential republic has been trying to find its way onto the political agenda at least since the start of the political crisis after the last regular parliamentary elections in April 2021.

Two of the most popular and commented-on posts in March were posted on 3 March: the *first post* is a video uploaded on the page of the paramilitary organization Military Union – BNO Shipka. The video, titled "How to shock Europeans – just let a real woman in women's clothes out on the street. Our Telegram channel with a daily...", shows a well-dressed woman walking along the streets of European cities, attracting many curious glances. Apart from the title, there is nothing impressive about this video, but it is precisely the title that attracts the viewer's gaze with its clear message: normalcy is disappearing from Europe and even beautiful women are now something abnormal. The video garnered over 1,000,000 views and around 19,000 interactions in total.



The *second post*, again on 3 March, is an attempt to *rehash* a Russian song from the 1940s, “Under the Balkan Stars” (“*Pod zvezdami balkanskimi*”). The way in which this song is presented – “Russian song dedicated to Bulgaria blows up internet!” – is curious, as the lyrics make it clear that the song refers to the so-called trans-Danubian province. The post garnered over 16,000 interactions.

Опознай България, за да я обикнеш
3 март в 13:34 ч. · 🌐

Историята помни, че в Русия са границите на Стара Велика България, въпреки че в песента се пее само за Дунавска България!
Песента е поздрав от Русия към България и се изпълнява от една от любимите на руснаците певици - Вика Цыганова с участието на великолепен хор.

Золото Шансона
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👍❤️ 16 хил. 1,3 хил. коментара 1,8 хил. споделяния

*“Bulgaria is a fine country,
but Russia is the best of all!”*

From “Under the Balkan Stars”, 1944