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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 third 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 three to seven articles with pro-Russian content every day in the third quarter of 2023, thus often publishing more than 3,000 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 6 November 2023].



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Murzilka magazine,
No. 12, December 1925



Introduction

In this newsletter, we present the activity, narratives and speakers of Russian propaganda disseminated in the third quarter of 2023 in Bulgarian online media and on the most popular social media platform in Bulgaria, Facebook.

Recall: The propaganda wave rose about ten days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and has intensified further in 2023. The dissemination of Russian narratives has increased by up to 20 times in the last year and a half and this increase is due, firstly, to new technological solutions.² A network of mushroom websites has been formed around the Blitz News Agency – we call it the Machine. The Machine consists of more than 370 anonymous pseudo-news websites with identical design and content, which disseminate an average of three to nine explicitly pro-Russian propaganda articles every day. These websites circulate each article hundreds of times and thus further lead to the spread of Russian propaganda on social media.

Secondly, the profile of Russian propaganda dissemination has changed since the start of the full-scale war – 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 obliged to quote them. In Bulgaria, along with translations from Russian, the Kremlin's narratives are also circulated by a number of local speakers, including some leading politicians. Bulgarian pro-Russian speakers in official positions use only some of the elements of the Russian propaganda package and most often try to paraphrase them “in their own words”.

This newsletter analyzes the overall propaganda activity in the third quarter of 2023, the change in narratives compared to the previous two quarters, the activity of the Machine of Mushroom Websites, the main messages of selected local pro-Russian speakers (Rumen Radev, Korneliya Ninova, Kostadin Kostadinov, Martin Karbovski, and Petar Volgin), and the propaganda posts on Bulgarian Facebook with the highest number of interactions.

In sum: Using a list of Russian propaganda keywords, the SENSIKA automated media monitoring system identified 93,792 online publications for the July – September 2023 period. This means that an average of 1,020 publications per day reproduced key phrases of Russian propaganda. There was a standard overall decline in media activity during the summer holiday season. If mushroom websites are excluded from the measurement, we are left with only 16,299 publications – i.e., the Machine of Mushroom Websites accounted for approximately 83% of the overall propaganda activity.

In the period under review, there were no significant changes in Russian propaganda narratives. Here are the highlights of the third quarter of 2023:

² 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 6 November 2023].

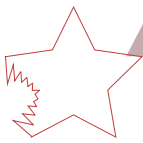


- ▶ **Criticizing Western colonialism** so as to attract left-wing social and political actors to pro-Russian positions;
- ▶ The thesis that **by resisting Russian aggression, Kiev is committing genocide against the Ukrainian people**;
- ▶ Describing the idea of **dismantling the Monument to the Soviet Army (MSA) in Sofia (the Soviet Red Army is presented on the monument as Bulgaria's "liberator" from fascism in 1944) as "alienation [otrodyavane] from history" and comparing the MSA to "Shipka"** (monument to Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman rule by the Russian imperial army in 1878);
- ▶ **Equating Euro-Atlanticists and critics of the war with fascists and neo-Nazis.**

And while Russian propaganda increasingly penetrated the Bulgarian political debate, becoming a framework for making sense of local processes, it also spread extensively on Facebook, the most popular social media platform in Bulgaria. Part of the posts related to local events – such as the negative coverage of the dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia and of the regular government's proposal for changing Bulgaria's national holiday – enjoyed a large number of interactions. Propagandistic pro-Russian messages also penetrated pop culture – through Vladislav Slavov's songs and the nostalgia for socialism, for instance.

In the third quarter of 2023, the Machine of Mushroom Websites continued to evolve – there was a change in its thematic sections as reports from the frontline gave way numerically to commentary pieces. The reports from the frontline also started to look more balanced, alternating between Russian and Ukrainian sources. Often, however, they mixed sources within one and the same article, thereby giving rise to absurdities – for example, it is not clear who is "the enemy" and who are "ours". The alternation of sources implied that the Russian perspective is as valid as the Ukrainian and the Western ones. This means that the Machine is switching from "direct manipulation" to "deep ploughing": the seeds of the Russian perspective must be sown even in those readers who do not believe it. In the period under review, direct Russian propaganda was spread through commentary pieces – by quoting specially selected **Western analysts who criticize the West and praise Russia** – i.e., propaganda was presented as internal criticism; by presenting Zelensky as weak and humbled in contrast to Putin, Peskov, Lavrov and Medvedev, who wag their fingers threateningly at the West; in commentary articles on Bulgaria, mushroom websites also began to recycle Russian propaganda narratives, but did so cautiously, most often by quoting politicians.

The Bulgarian pro-Russian speakers – Rumen Radev, Korneliya Ninova, Kostadin Kostadinov, Martin Karbovski, and Peter Volgin, whom we regularly monitor – were also active during the period under review. **They unanimously opposed the provision of ammunition to Ukraine as part of the EU's joint initiative.** But they also promoted Russian theses on other topics: **sanctions are harmful to the EU and Bulgaria; the law on domestic violence will lead to the "selling of the souls of Bulgarian children"; "the people" is against the Euro-Atlanticists on the issue of joining the Eurozone**; etc. Some of them persistently drew **an analogy between Euro-Atlanticists and fascists.**



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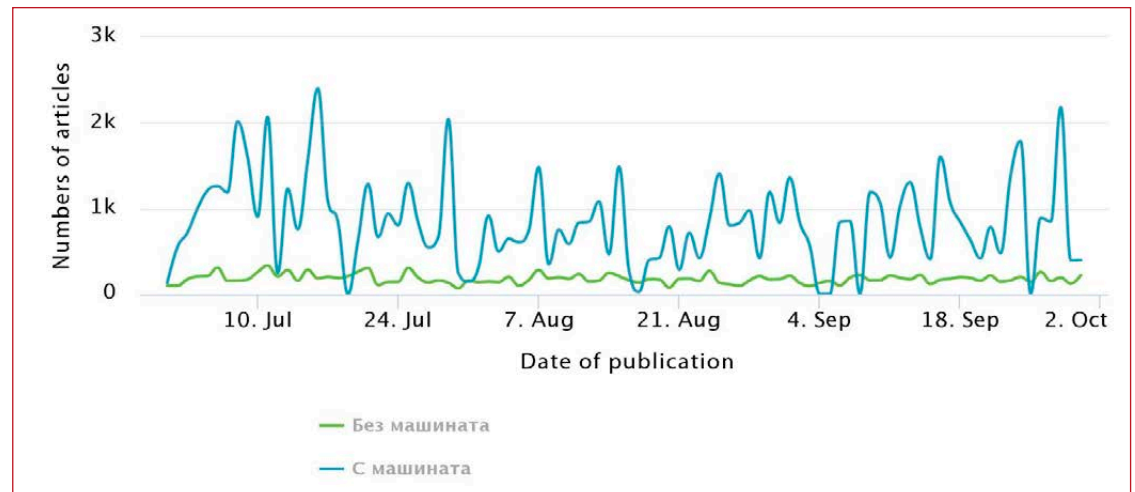
1. Overall Propaganda Activity

In this newsletter, we offer data for the third quarter of 2023 about more than 8,000 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs. We monitor Russian and pro-Russian propaganda on them by keywords.

Using our list of keywords,³ in the third quarter of 2023 the SENSIKA automated media monitoring system⁴ identified 93,792 publications containing them. They were distributed over time as follows:

Chart 1. Publications containing specified keywords (1 July – 30 September 2023).

In blue: total number of publications; in green: number of publications, excluding Machine of Mushroom Websites.



In the period under review, an average of 1,020 publications per day reproduced the key phrases of Russian propaganda. There was a standard overall decline in media activity during the summer holiday season. If we exclude the publications of mushroom websites from the 93,792 Bulgarian-language publications containing the specified keywords, we are left with only 16,299 for the third quarter of 2023 (Chart 1). This leaves a daily average of 177 publications for the entire Bulgarian internet, excluding the Machine. The Machine of Mushroom Websites accounted for 83% of overall propaganda activity, while all other websites accounted for 17%.

Reminder: The Machine consists of more than 370 anonymous websites with almost identical design and identical content (they publish the same articles). The mushroom websites mostly

³ See the exact list of keywords (in Bulgarian) at: <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/%D0%94%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4-%D0%A0%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%92%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0-%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82.pdf> [accessed 28 October 2023]

⁴ <https://sensika.com/> [accessed 28 October 2023]





reprint material from the Blitz News Agency and, together with Blitz, they form a network of influence. They are probably also linked to the platform Share4Pay, which is systematically promoted by those same websites and which pays users for sharing content from ready-made websites on social media. Hence it is perfectly reasonable to assume that behind every mushroom website there is a user who is committed to sharing its publications.

The Machine doesn't publish only propaganda content. In the third quarter of 2023, the Machine's bots published a total of more than 7 million publications (more precisely: 7,082,075 articles). That is, the mushroom websites published an average of almost 77,000 publications per day,

their activity surpassing 100,000 reprints per day on peak days. The rest of the articles published by the mushroom websites provided information about or commented on sporting events, sensational stories, health issues, and even neutrally presented political news. This shows that the Machine of Mushroom Websites is based on a business model and is profit-oriented also beyond propaganda dissemination.

◀ Here are the top 20 media outlets disseminating Russian propaganda in the period under review.

There are no surprises compared to the previous quarters. The leader by number of reprints is the aggregator Novini 247. The top 20 include several well-known Russian or explicitly pro-Russian propaganda channels: Pogled Info, News Front, Classa.bg, and Informiran.bg. Without being a propaganda media outlet, the Bulgarian News Agency (BTA) ranks 16th: the explanation is simple – BTA is obliged to follow the international news feed and to quote Russian official spokespersons, who are also the main disseminators of propaganda language. However, the most serious cumulative effect is produced by the mushroom websites of the Machine – recognizable among the top 20 are several of their main domains: BGVEST/BGVest.eu, zbox7.eu, BG/bg7.eu, maugly, Zanas.eu.

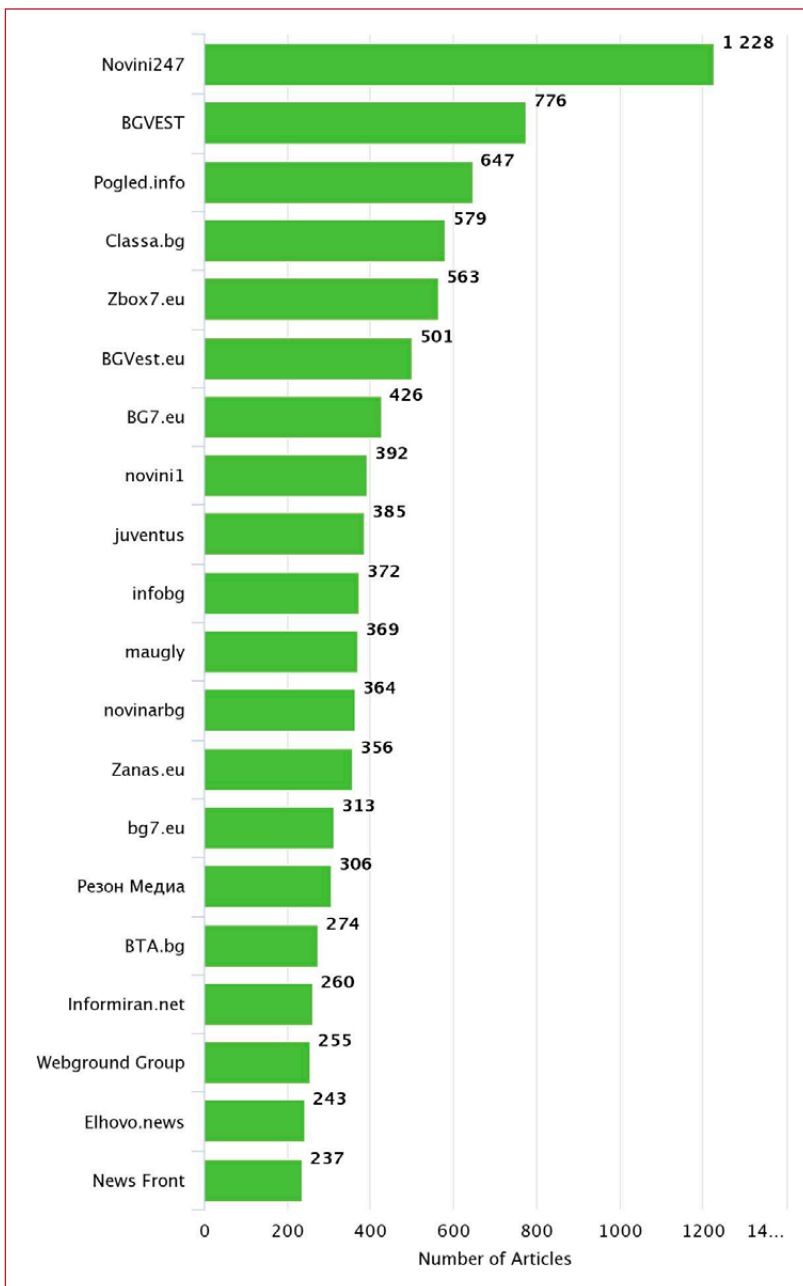
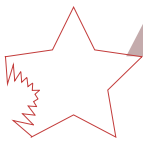


Chart 2. Top 20 media outlets by number of articles containing specific keywords



2. Events, Topics, Narratives from the Third Quarter of 2023

The Human and Social Studies Foundation monitors the main narratives of Russian online propaganda promoted by two human-run media outlets: Pogled Info and Glasove. Other channels linked to them are also cited: Classa, Lentata, etc. The main goal is to track what shifts are observed in these narratives, as well as how Russian propaganda enters Bulgaria to frame local events. The highlights of the third quarter of 2023 are:

- ▶ Attracting left-wing social and political actors by criticizing Western colonialism;
- ▶ Kiev is committing genocide against the Ukrainian people;
- ▶ Describing the idea of dismantling the Monument to the Soviet Army (MSA) in Sofia (the Soviet Red Army is presented on the monument as Bulgaria's "liberator" from fascism in 1944) as "alienation [otrodyavane] from history" and comparing the MSA to "Shipka" (monument to Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman rule by the Russian imperial army in 1878);
- ▶ Equating Euro-Atlanticists and critics of the war with fascists and neo-Nazis.

The July – September 2023 period did not live up to expectations of a summer lull. One of the reasons was probably the intensified activity of Russian official spokespersons – Lavrov, Zakharova, Peskov, Medvedev (the main issuer of nuclear threats) – after Prigozhin's mutiny. Russian society was presented in their statements as solidary and stable.⁵ These narratives subsequently shifted to the destruction of Ukrainian (and Western) military equipment, Putin's approval in the Russian Federation,⁶ and positive assessments of Russia's economic situation.⁷ And while Russia is on the rise, the unity and strength of the US and the EU is crumbling,⁸ therefore support for Ukraine is beginning to look problematic. The main new trend that became evident in the period under review is the geostrategic line of **bashing Western colonialism**, thereby enticing left-wing social and political actors in the liberal-democratic world (temporarily repelled in the first months of the war) to once again bind the Left to the pro-Russian: Down with colonialism!

In addition to renewing the flirtation with the Left, this narrative thread was used when praising positions of official China or official Iran – under the name of multilateralism. **The thesis regarding Western colonialism was opposed to that of a multipolar world** – most often Russia, China and India were presented as rivaling the "hegemon", the US,⁹ they are the bearers of "global stability". This thesis was also rehashed through high-level meetings during which Russian officials were given extensive coverage. These are: the BRICS summit in South Africa;¹⁰

5 <https://trud.bg/%D0%BF%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D1%81%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%89%D1%83-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D1%81%D0%B5-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8-%D1%85%D0%B8%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0/> [accessed 25 September 2023].

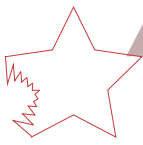
6 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/doverieto-na-rusnatsite-kam-putin-nadhvarlya-77 [accessed 25 September 2023].

7 https://glasove.com/public_html/ikonomika/ruskata-ikonomika-mozhe-da-se-vazstanovi-ot-udara-na-sanktsiite-oshte-dogodina; https://glasove.com/public_html/biznes/standard-end-puars-promishlenoto-proizvodstvo-v-rusiya-uskoryava-tempasi-na-rastezh [accessed 25 September 2023].

8 Europe is described by Rumén Petkov as having been pushed to the frontline of the war initiated by the US. Putin himself imposed the thesis about the "suicidal loss of independence on the part of European politicians". On the US, see https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/prouchvane-na-cnn-mnozinstvoto-ot-amerikantsite-sa-protiv-poveche-amerikanska-pomosht-za-ukrayna; [accessed 25 September 2023].

9 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/van-i-v-moskva-kitay-e-gotov-da-raboti-s-rusiya-za-formirane-na-mnogopolyusen-svyat [accessed 25 September 2023].

10 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/briks-opit-za-kolektivna-geopoliticheska-emantsipatsiya> [accessed 25 September 2023]; https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/putin-briks-se-protivopostavya-na-neokolonialnata-politika-i-opitite-za-hegemoniya-v-sveta; https://glasove.com/public_html/ikonomika/dilma-rusef-bankata-na-briks-iska-da-namali-zavisimostta-ot-dolara-shte-otpuska-zaemi-v-mestni-valuti [accessed 25 September 2023].



forums related to Africa and Latin America (“the leaders of the ‘golden billion’ countries”, the Russia – Latin America Conference;¹¹ the Russia–Africa forum); including in direct interpretations by Putin – as rivals of the hegemon, which is pursuing a neocolonial policy. Various events also allowed the anti-colonial rhetoric to gain ground – the military coup in Niger was represented as a battle for decolonization. Russia’s position was portrayed as that of an empire of an entirely different kind¹² – it helps nations in their battle for decolonization. But while Africa is trying to rid itself of “Western colonialism”,¹³ we are taking the latter’s place.¹⁴ The thesis regarding colonialism was also used against key European countries such as France, which was criticized for hypocrisy: France insists on democracy in Niger but does nothing about the dire economic situation in the country and takes advantage of it as a major supplier of uranium.¹⁵ Even Kostadin Kostadinov himself asked, “why aren’t there any Niger flags on the [Facebook] profiles” of the “yellow-brick [zhaltopavetni] misanthropes”.¹⁶

Another relatively newly emerging talking point during the period under review is the claim of the Kremlin’s spokespersons, translated and published in Pogled Info and Glasove, that **Kiev is committing “genocide against the Ukrainian people” with its counteroffensive**. This talking point latched on to the already much-used and somewhat hackneyed claims about the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive (it was monotonously presented as a failure, with huge casualties according to the estimates of “Western media”,¹⁷ the morale of the troops is low according to “eyewitness” accounts,¹⁸ the Western military equipment has been destroyed, etc.). The narrative of the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive went on to imply that the expectations of the “collective West” have been let down and that the latter is willing to abandon Ukraine. However, despite the long-publicized failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, it is obviously continuing.¹⁹ Hence the newly promoted talking point about the genocide against its own people. Another approach that reinforced this narrative should also be highlighted here: reports of damage on Russian territory reinforcing the view that the war should be fought on Ukrainian territory. Part of the described “Russian territories”, however, are places in the newly declared republics, such as Donetsk. Maria Zakharova’s statement that the strikes on the Crimean bridge and Crimea were “acts of sabotage” is in the same vein – sabotage is a crime against the state.²⁰ It is also noteworthy that the Ukrainian attacks were presented as terrorism against civilians.²¹

In the third quarter of 2023, a number of Bulgarian events were reframed in line with Russian propaganda talking points. The conduct of political struggles through propaganda theses helped to deeply embed the narratives in public consciousness.

11 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/putin-stranite-ot-zlatniya-miliard-ekspluatirat-tseliya-ostanal-svyat.161104> [accessed 25 September 2023].

12 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/dekolonizatsiyata-kato-prikritie-za-kolonizatsiya.160362> [accessed 25 September 2023].

13 https://glasove.com/public_html/na-fokus/kolonializmat-e-zhiv-zapadat-iztochva-afrika-a-niger-se-bori-za-svoboda-i-badeshteto-na-detsata-si [accessed 25 September 2023].

14 https://glasove.com/public_html/vashite-glasove/chitateli-na-glasove-may-shte-ima-povsemesten-afrikanski-maydan [accessed 25 September 2023].

15 https://glasove.com/public_html/komentari/makron-mnogo-go-e-grizha-za-niger-ottam-frantsiya-vzima-13-ot-neobhodimiya-uran-a-290-detsa-umirat-ot-glad-vseki-den [accessed 25 September 2023].

16 “Yellow-brick [zhaltopavetni]”, from the yellow brick road in the centre of Sofia – a special offensive epithet for Sofia’s old urban elite which is pro-European. https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/kostadinov-zashto-nyama-nigerski-znamenta-po-profilite-plach-za-nigerskite-detsa-i-prizivi-za-voenna-pomosh-ot-rodnite-zhaltopavetni-mizantropi [accessed 25 September 2023].

17 https://glasove.com/public_html/na-fokus/bbc-zagubite-na-ukrayna-rastat-vseki-den-grobishtata-sa-prepalneni; https://glasove.com/public_html/na-fokus/vashington-post-spored-amerikanskoto-razuznavane-ukrayna-nyama-da-uspee-da-postigne-osnovnata-tsel-na-ofanzivata; <https://glasove.com/intervyuta/ukrainski-voynitsi-pred-kiev-post-duhat-ni-e-mnogo-nisak-za-vseki-100-metra-zemya-gubim-4-5-mazhe-hvarlyat-ni-napred-kato-meso>; https://glasove.com/public_html/komentari/symur-harsh-tsru-e-predupredilo-blinken-che-kontraofanzivata-na-kiev-shte-se-provali [accessed 25 September 2023].

18 https://glasove.com/public_html/na-fokus/razkaz-na-edin-polyak-ot-ukrayna-veche-nyama-hora-koito-da-se-biyat-choveshките-zagubi-sa-ogromni-zapadnata-tehnika-gori-kato-klechki-za-zabi [accessed 25 September 2023].

19 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/putin-ukrainskata-kontraofanziva-se-provali [accessed 25 September 2023].

20 https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1900335/ [accessed 12 December 2023].

21 https://glasove.com/public_html/na-fokus/zhak-bo-ukrainsite-si-chupyat-zabite-v-ruskata-otbrana-atakite-im-s-dronove-sresh-tu-mirni-zhiteli-sa-terorizam [accessed 25 September 2023].





A) The Removal of the Monument to the Soviet Army and the Proposal for a New National Holiday

One of the first events that provoked Russian propaganda to adapt to domestic political issues was the removal of the Monument to the Soviet Army (MSA) in Sofia and the proposal for a new national holiday. The main purpose was to establish a chain of equivalence between the MSA and Shipka and to suggest that whoever is against the MSA is destroying history. This line of reasoning was applied to a series of events, mainly related to the battle for and against the fencing off and the forthcoming dismantling of the MSA; as well as to the proposal to change Bulgaria's national holiday from 3 March²² to 24 May.²³ These two topics were also interconnected in a statement by the Ambassador of the Russian Federation – the idea of changing Bulgaria's national holiday gave Mitrofanova a reason to repeat one of the key talking points of Russian propaganda: the Bulgarian politicians are “venal puppets on strings” who “are trying to cancel everything Russian”, to “rewrite” history, and to dismantle the Monument to the Soviet Army.²⁴ The idea of changing the national holiday was also presented as illegitimate since the prevalent public opinion was claimed to be against it.²⁵

The chain of equivalence that the local speakers of the Kremlin's talking points were trying to create and establish is: aid to Ukraine=national nihilism=destroying the MSA=reviling the “Rozhen Pylon”²⁶ =denying Shipka=“denying history” (the unspoken assumption in most cases, apart from Karbovski's bluntness, that links this chain is “they have alienated [otrodiha] us from Russia”). Attempts were made to create a chain of equivalence between the MSA and Shipka (whoever denies the MSA also denies Shipka, and thus denies history). This is Rumen Radev's territory; he tried out this interpretation first on 13 July at the inauguration ceremony of the flagpole at Rozhen and subsequently repeated it many times.

We will very briefly trace a series of events in which this chain was forged. On the whole, August was uninteresting until the MSA was declared private state property and its imminent relocation was announced. The Left! and Vazrazhdane erected a tent camp to protect the MSA, and things got heated after FC Levski fans held up a banner reading “dismantle”, threw smoke bombs and broke the monument's dedication panel. This was followed by statements by Kostadin Kostadinov and, accordingly, ridicule from the fans. But Olga Skabeyeva stepped in and said that Bulgaria was Ukraine 2.0;²⁷ before her, Karbovski wrote on Lentata a fatherly admonition to “the boys”, and then published a second piece – that “this is how it had all started” in Ukraine, too:

I'm writing briefly because I know you don't read much.

Boys from Levski, today you made a clear bid for and invitation to civil war. ... But you should know one thing – if breaking and removing monuments just because someone has paid for it becomes a tradition, if memory and recollections are removed because

22 The day of the signing in 1878 of the Preliminary Peace Treaty of San Stefano between the Russian and the Ottoman empires, which ended the 1877–1878 Russo-Turkish War and provided for the establishment of an autonomous Bulgarian state for the first time in modern history. This day was declared Bulgaria's national holiday in 1991.

23 The Day of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius, of the Bulgarian alphabet, education and culture, and of Slavonic literature. During the period under review, the We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) political coalition proposed declaring 24 May instead of 3 March as Bulgaria's national holiday by a constitutional amendment, but the proposal did not meet with either political or broad public support. However, it was used widely for propaganda purposes.

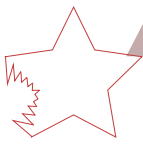
24 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/mitrofanova-s-porachkov-entuziazam-balgarskite-polititsi-se-opitvat-da-otmenyat-vsichko-svarzano-s-rusiya [accessed 25 September 2023].

25 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/galap-blizo-70-ot-balgarite-ne-podkrepyat-smyana-na-3-mart-s-24-may [accessed 25 September 2023].

26 On the initiative of pro-Russian President Rumen Radev, the tallest flagpole in the EU (111 m), which flies the Bulgarian flag, was erected at Rozhen meadows (near the border with Greece and North Macedonia). This initiative met with ironic objections from the liberal-democratic community, but its opponents were called “un-Bulgarians” (*bezrodnitsi*) by President Radev at the inauguration ceremony of the flagpole on 13 July. Soon after, Radev also announced the creation of a national movement called “Third of March”. See <https://www.dw.com/bg/bezrodnici-radev-li-kazva-koj-moze-da-se-narece-blgarin/a-66586653> [accessed 22 December 2023].

27 https://blitz.bg/obshtestvo/top-tv-ruska-zhurnalistka-blgariya-se-prevrshcha-v-ukrayna-2_news970762.html [accessed 25 September 2023].





*someone is strong these days, if this is done on order from abroad – you should know that after the MSA, [the monument to] the Tsar Liberator will fall. Then [the monument at] Shipka will fall.
And after Shipka, Levski will fall.²⁸*

Velislava Dareva continued this line of reasoning on 11 September 2023 by equating Euro-Atlanticism with the denial of Soviet monuments and hence of Nazism, and arguing that whoever demands the removal of Soviet monuments is a neo-Nazi and denies fascism. She thus claimed, in so many words, that Euro-Atlanticism is identical to Nazism:

In yet another bout of “decommunization and de-Russification”, the Banderites dumped Fučík’s memorial plaque in Kiev on the scrap heap. ... Neo-Nazis are rampaging in front of the Mound of Brotherhood and the Monument to the Red Army [in Sofia], at the foot of Alyosha [another Soviet Army monument in Plovdiv]. Ferocious savages and barbarians. They bow at the black marble wall [monument in Sofia to the victims of communism] on which are written the names of the murderers of Geo Milev, Yosif Herbst, Nikola Vaptsarov, the children from Yastrebino, and more than 300 other Bulgarian children who were killed by fascism.

This abomination has no end.

Back in the past, the Nazis couldn’t get enough of shooting, hanging, guillotining living anti-fascists. Today the neo-Nazis can’t get enough of killing the already killed anti-fascists.

First they defamed them, blew up their monuments, desecrated their graves, defiled their memory and death, declared them criminals and condemned them as criminals. Then they erased them from time and memory, and condemned them to oblivion, and dumped them into the gutter of history as if they had never existed.

A murder without end and satiety. What passion! What vengeance!

In the name of “Euro-Atlantic values”.

The only “Euro-Atlantic value” has turned out to be neo-Nazism.

The Fourth Reich has crossed the threshold of time.²⁹

Here we will conclude with another article by Velislava Dareva, although it is related to the Ukrainian website Myrotvorets (Peacebuilder), because **it once again shows the desire to call all critics of the war “Nazis” or “fascists”**:

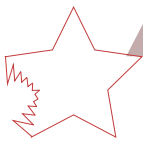
It is enough for a journalist from any country to write that there is no “Russia-Ukraine” war; that this is a war of the “civilized” West against Russia; that this is a proxy war and the proxy is Ukraine; that the regime in Kiev has a neo-Nazi philosophy, ideology, policy and practice; that the “civilized” West is propping up, legitimizing, financing and arming a neo-Nazi regime without caring a fig about any Ukraine. That the “civilized” West has declared the Ukronazis to be the foremost humanitarians and guardians of Euro-Atlantic values. That the war against Russia is ultimately a war against Europe. And that Europe is committing suicide to please the US. And from the European Parliament will come the Banderite chant “Slava Ukraine!” [“Glory to Ukraine!”]... All that’s left is for the MEPs to fling out their arms in a Nazi salute!

Write this and your entry into “Purgatory” is guaranteed. I’ve been writing it since 2014!³⁰

28 <https://www.lentata.com/otkloniyavane-na-pokana-za-grazhdanska-voyna> [accessed 25 September 2023].

29 <https://pogled.info/avtorski/Velislava-Dareva/zhurnalstat-i-glutnitsata-80-godini-ot-gibelta-na-yulius-fuchik.160370> [accessed 2 October 2023].

30 <https://pogled.info/avtorski/Velislava-Dareva/dosie-smartotvoret.158920> [accessed 2 October 2023].



B) Zelensky's Visit to Sofia

Another key event in the period under review that made local and Russian spokespersons and mouthpieces speak unanimously was Zelensky's visit to Sofia on 6 July 2023. The scene was prepared by an interpretation by Petar Vitanov, head of the Delegation of Bulgarian Socialists in the European Parliament, who claimed that he doesn't want to believe that Zelensky might ask for aid in the form of air defence systems as well as buy the reactors from the Belene nuclear power plant.³¹ In the run-up to Zelensky's visit, other publications also fanned tension over these two issues: the provision of arms and the sale of the reactors.³² On the day of the visit itself, 6 July, the organizers of the so-called marches for peace and neutrality were planning to hold a protest against it outside the government headquarters. On the occasion of Zelensky's visit to Bulgaria, Pogled Info promoted the two main lines directly from the Russian thesis articulated by Lavrov: the visit aims to involve more countries in the conflict; and the thesis, appropriated for domestic political use, that Bulgaria has lost its sovereignty. Before briefly demonstrating them, let us mention that since obviously nothing has changed as regards Bulgaria's sovereignty after Zelensky's visit and his meeting with President Rumen Radev who, at the highest level, expressed concerns about Bulgaria's sovereignty if it helps Ukraine, after the initial lament for the loss of Bulgarian sovereignty this motif was suspended (at least temporarily).

But with regard to the initial reaction of the local speakers of the Kremlin's point of view, it is worth reading Velislava Dareva's article in *Novo Vreme*, reprinted by Pogled Info:

...the baseness of the so-called "Bulgarian democratic community", which is neither Bulgarian nor democratic, nor is it a community. It is a pack of servants who have proclaimed themselves prophets, masters, elite. A fake elite, proud in their vileness and misery. That is a vileness of spirit, a misery of morals. And that is sacrilegious. That is the greatness of the "chosen folks" who are obsessed with their complexes, manias, phobias and pathologies. ... The parade of servants ... who are hysterical [because they are hiding from the fact that the] war did not start on 24 February 2022. The war started with a US-funded neo-Nazi coup d'état on 22 February 2014. And it has been going on for 9 years and 7 months.³³

The thesis regarding the loss of sovereignty would be subsequently picked up in a synchronized way along two pre-prepared lines: the provision of weapons and the sale of the Belene nuclear reactors. Ivo Hristov, currently an MEP, and Maria Zakharova, Lavrov's spokesperson, commented on the event in this interpretive key.

Ivo Hristov suggested that Zelensky is Bulgaria's new head of state, who has been "externally appointed", and that providing military aid and selling the Belene reactors to Ukraine means dragging Bulgaria into war:

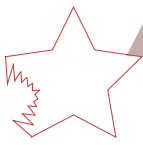
Bulgaria has a new, externally appointed head of state who arrived on a Bulgarian government plane to reap vassal support from the territory's governors, to get weapons, and to take away our nuclear reactors.

31 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/petar-vitanov-po-vazhno-ot-poseshthenieto-na-zelenski-e-negovoto-sadarzhanie [accessed 2 October 2023].

32 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/posreshstame-zelenski-sas-speshno-reshenie-za-oshte-orazhiya; https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/naprezhenie-v-parlamenta-zaradi-proekt-za-prodazhba-na-oborudvane-za-aets-belene-na-ukrayna; https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/ninova-iskame-ostavkata-na-tagarev-vreden-e-za-natsionalnata-sigurnost [accessed 2 October 2023].

33 <https://pogled.info/avtorski/Velislava-Dareva/zelenski-i-praidat-na-demokratichnata-obshtnost.158186> [accessed 2 October 2023].





After a century and a half of existence, today we are bidding farewell to the illusion that we are a state. The farewell ceremonies will take place in front of the portraits of the Revivalists that hang on the walls on either side of Dondukov [Bvd. in Sofia, i.e. in the government headquarters and the President's office].³⁴

The thesis regarding the loss of sovereignty was rehashed in terms of the sale of the Belene nuclear reactors through a direct Russian interpretation. Maria Zakharova told Karbovski: giving the Belene nuclear reactors means loss of sovereignty. Karbovski hurried to write it in his own words, too:

The national interest is being eaten up these days in a matter of hours, not of days and years as we've become used to. And as was the case under other governments. It is as if the alien that was sucking the Bulgarian juices has gone into turbo mode. Since it is forbidden to call this process by old terms, it is time to call it "Bulgarophagy". Suddenly, in a matter of hours, they decided that the Belene NPP will not be built and that they will sell within a month equipment that can produce energy.³⁵

Let us make a short digression to consider what sovereignty Russian-style means because, we have said it before, Russian propaganda sovereignties are actually two: one is for the empire and the other is for the satellites. When it comes to satellites, we have seen that sovereignty is lost upon any disengagement from Russia. But what about sovereignty for the empire? On 27 July, Pogled Info published Dugin's new keynote text, "The Clock of History Strikes the Patriot's Hour", with its specifically despotic understanding of sovereignty. Patriots are those who are loyal to the tsar; to maintain this loyalty, boyars have to be killed from time to time – and they know that this is their "vocation", for which they are rewarded with high status and wealth in their lifetime.³⁶

Let us return to the coverage of Zelensky's visit and the agreements reached during his visit. Karbovski went on to call Zelensky a PR-project-monster.³⁷ Attempts to label Zelensky a "comedian" have long since been abandoned, and in connection with his visit Karbovski even officially buried this label (on account of Zelensky being a PR-project-monster). And replaced it with "the star of the Bulgaria restaurant" (because of the metaphor that Bulgaria's politicians are waiters serving foreign interests). The article rehashes the threat that Bulgarians will start receiving call-ups (read: "for the war"). The waiter metaphor is relatively persistent and was used in other articles as well.³⁸

Zelensky's visit was also commented upon by Kostadin Kostadinov, Borislav Gutsanov, Iliyana Yotova, Alexander Marinov, and Korneliya Ninova, among others. Kostadinov claimed that it wasn't wanted by the Bulgarian citizens,³⁹ while BSP MP Borislav Gutsanov defined Bulgaria's involvement in a military conflict as a "real threat", and Alexander Marinov said that the meeting was a "trap" for the president.⁴⁰ The day after the visit, Vice President Iliyana Yotova said the government was trying to hide something from the Bulgarians – the commitments it had undertaken to Ukraine. Zelensky's visit was also interpreted as a "victory for Ukraine" and a "loss for Bulgaria" – in the words of Korneliya Ninova. In her account, the loss is related, on the one

34 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/ivo-hristov-zelenski-doyde-za-da-pozhane-vasalna-podkrepa-proshtavame-se-s-ilyuziyata-che-sme-darzhava [accessed 2 October 2023].

35 <https://svobodnoslovo.eu/bulgaria/balgarofagi/112843> [accessed 2 October 2023].

36 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/aleksandar-dugin-chasovnikat-na-istoriyata-pokazva-chasa-na-patriota.158758> [accessed 2 October 2023].

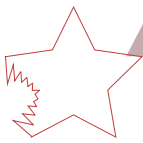
37 <https://www.lentata.com/zelenski-zvezdata-na-restoranta-12> [accessed 2 October 2023].

38 <https://www.lentata.com/ako-ministrите-byaha-blgari> [accessed 2 October 2023].

39 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/vazrazhdane-predotvratihme-poseshteniето-na-zelenski-v-narodnoto-sabranie [accessed 2 October 2023].

40 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/prof-aleksandar-marinov-denkov-naredi-na-radev-da-se-sreshtne-sas-zelenski-beshe-kapan [accessed 2 October 2023].





hand, to Bulgaria's energy independence, and on the other, to the division of society.⁴¹ There were articles on the Belene nuclear power plant – for example, by Kuzman Iliev of Trud,⁴² and by Yavor Kuyumdzhiev⁴³ – in which the sale of the reactors is defined as a mistake.

Solomon Passy's statement that Zelensky is the Ukrainian Levski provided additional fuel for those covering the visit in the Kremlin's interpretive key: sacrilege, let's spit on Passy; a mockery of Levski's memory and work.⁴⁴ And whoever talks about banning the party that released an anti-Semitic collage with the image of Passy is a fascist (the original publication is on Lentata). Karbovski and Dareva were the main voices in condemning people as fascists.⁴⁵

In this case we see how the local propagandists, who recovered their wits after the beginning of the war, began to act in synchrony and with advance preparation of the interpretations of the event.

The local propagandists, however, did not address the events of the next day, when Zelensky, visiting Turkey, negotiated with Erdogan the return of the captured commanders of the Azov regiment. The Russian propagandists, however, found it hard to accept and slammed Erdogan's betrayal which, they urged, had to be avenged.

C) Other Topics

In the third quarter of 2023, the domestic political uses of Kremlin propaganda continued with comments on the series of economic actions of the government and the parliamentary majority, and the subsequent protests against them – of grain farmers, miners, power plant workers; the revocation of the derogation for import of Russian oil and the cancellation of Lukoil's concession to run the Rosenets oil terminal; the resumption of grain imports from Ukraine. There was nothing particularly innovative here, the thesis being that this is a loss of sovereignty and independence, that the protesters against these anti-national measures remained unheard by the politicians, and that the Bulgarians are easy to buy – just like natives, promise them 36 monthly wages as severance pay and they will stop protesting. In a nutshell, whatever there was that was decent Bulgarian – Lukoil, Belene, grain, levs – was killed by the sell-out waiters, i.e., the regular government.⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that in the third quarter of 2023 Russian propaganda, besides already relying heavily on its Bulgarian speakers, relied also on the European Union's internal critics – these were voices from Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Such voices were most evident in the preparation of the topic of Ukrainian grain imports – Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are the countries that refused such imports. For example, a direct conspiracy theory was promoted: Ukrainian grain is American,⁴⁷ it is of inferior quality (for glue and plywood⁴⁸) and will enter EU markets. The local speakers of Russian propaganda were thus additionally reinforced.

The closure of the Russian church in Sofia after Vassian, the head of the church, was exposed

41 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/korneliya-ninova-zelenski-specheli-ot-vizitata-balgariya-zagubi-a-prezidentat-beshe-unizhen [accessed 2 October 2023].

42 https://glasove.com/public_html/komentari/zatvorihme-chinno-4-bloka-v-kozloduy-pod-vanshen-natisk-sega-sashtoto-s-reaktorite-za-belene [accessed 2 October 2023].

43 <https://www.lentata.com/yavor-kuyumdzhiev-s-prodazhba-na-reaktorite-kazvame-dovizhdane-na-yadrenata-energetika> [accessed 22 December 2023]

44 <https://pogled.info/bulgarski/da-se-gavri-nyakoi-s-pametta-i-deloto-na-levski-e-poveche-ot-tsinizam-naglost-e.158311> [accessed 2 October 2023].

45 <https://svobodnoslovo.eu/komentar/kakav-evropeyski-sayuz-e-tova/113499>

46 See, e.g., <https://pogled.eu/%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B8-%D0%BA%D1%83%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%88-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD/> [accessed 2 October 2023].

47 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/zarnoproizvoditeli-ukrainskoto-zarno-vsahntnost-e-amerikansko-na-firmite-monsanto-i-dyupont [accessed 25 September 2023].

48 https://glasove.com/public_html/intervyuta/razsledvane-v-polsha-yadem-hlyab-ot-nad-100-tona-ukrainska-pshenitsa-prednaznachena-za-proizvodstvo-na-lepila-i-shperplat [accessed 25 September 2023].





as a Russian spy and expelled from Bulgaria together with two other priests in the last ten days of September, also provoked a loud but not innovative reaction. On this event, Glasove covered a number of local speakers of Russian propaganda: Ivo Hristov on Petar Volgin's radio show "Politicheski NEkorektno" (Politically INcorrect), where the main logic was the repetition of the talking point about Bulgaria's lost sovereignty⁴⁹ (Bulgaria has "never had a position on anything", the Bulgarian political class has a "servant mentality"); the position of Ivan Stambolov – Sula that the relevant investigation had not been made public⁵⁰ and hence – a priest was expelled, not a spy, the actions of the institutions are not legitimate; the positions of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church – in particular, of Metropolitan Naum of Ruse, who called for reopening the Russian church, and of Metropolitan Daniil of Vidin, who expressed his bitterness,⁵¹ the protests of Sunday (25 September) initiated by Kostadin Kostadinov, etc. At the end of the period under review, an interview was published with Father Yevgeny Pavelchuk, one of the priests at the Russian church who was expelled from Bulgaria, who urged: "don't believe what the Bulgarian special services are accusing us of", the accusations are a lie,⁵² the espionage affairs are a fabrication of the state administration which has been taken over by the "Euro-Atlanticists". According to the Russian interpretation, there would be unfavourable consequences for the initiators of the expulsion.⁵³

Also noteworthy is another thread which, although it did not get extensive coverage, is essential in characterizing Russian propaganda narratives – that of gender ideology and violence against women. On the one hand, any topic that involves gender and sexuality is of interest to propagandists because it can be used to slam the policies of a variety of actors: the EU, individual countries (most often Germany), etc. On the other hand, violence against women is also traditionally part of this thread. Thus, around the case of the disfigured girl Debora, brutally cut with a box cutter in Stara Zagora, the propaganda channels maintained extremely conservative theses to exonerate the abuser. They promoted various non-synchronized positions about the law on domestic violence: that it is unnecessary, that it was hastily formulated, but also that the issue of domestic violence was only used to cover up "Bulgaria's involvement in war".⁵⁴ Referring to the protests against violence against women, on 31 July Rumen Radev said that this was part of the anti-Russian upsurge, another part of which, according to him, was the bill to amend the Constitution that would curtail the President's options to form extra-parliamentary governments.

* * *

The China line remained constant in this quarter as well, with articles about China's business successes and opening-up to the world abounding in Pogled Info; as well as detailed reports about President Xi's statements and meetings – inspections in the army, statements at a seminar, a meeting with teachers. Russian propaganda toned down to a minimum the threats that

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- 49 https://glasove.com/public_html/biznes/prof-ivo-hristov-zatvoryaneto-na-ruskata-tsarkva-oshte-vednazh-pokaza-sluginskiya-mantalitet-na-politicheskata-ni-klasa [accessed 25 September 2023].
- 50 https://glasove.com/public_html/na-fokus/sglobkata-pokaza-krayno-nevezhestvo-i-nahlu-ot-kesarevoto-v-bozhieto-kato-izgoni-ruskite-sveshtenitsi-i-zatvori-ruskata-tsarkva [accessed 25 September 2023].
- 51 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/mitropolit-kiprian-svetiyat-sinod-shte-zasedava-za-ruskata-tsarkva-v-nachaloto-na-oktomvri [accessed 25 September 2023]; https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/rusenski-mitropolit-naum-ruskata-tsarkva-ne-na-moskva-i-ne-mozhe-da-bade-zatvorena-ot-stranichni-litsa-sofiyskiyat-mitropolit-vednaga-da-ya-otvori; https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/vidinskiyat-mitropolit-daniil-izrazi-ogorchenieto-si-ot-izgonvaneto-na-ruski-sveshtenitsi [accessed 25 September 2023].
- 52 <https://glasove.com/intervyuta/progoneniyat-o-evgeniy-pavelchuk-ot-ruskata-tsarkva-nyamame-nikakva-vina-sluzhim-na-boga-i-horata-ne-se-mesim-v-politikata>; https://glasove.com/public_html/na-fokus/izmislenite-shpionski-aferi-v-sofiya-i-london [accessed 25 September 2023].
- 53 https://glasove.com/public_html/novini/rusiya-privika-poslanika-ni-v-moskva-duhovnitsite-byaha-izgoneni-po-koshtunsten-i-oskarbitelen-nachin-za-initsiatorite-shte-ima-nepriyatni-posleditsi [accessed 25 September 2023].
- 54 https://glasove.com/public_html/intervyuta/chitateli-na-glasove-dokato-ni-vkarvat-vav-voynata-za-zabluda-veche-tsyala-sedmitsa-ni-prozhektirat-trilara-domashno-nasilie [accessed 2 October 2023].





Europe is doomed without Russian energy sources, but now the propaganda line was that Europe is doomed without China. As for the abandonment of the narrative about a Europe doomed to cold and hunger, it was not only carried out but also explicitly stated by Alexander Dugin on 30 September:

And here we don't have to harbour illusions – in fact, the West doesn't depend on us for almost anything substantial. And if it does, then it intensively looks for a substitute. And most often finds it. Trying to blackmail the West with some natural resources or something else is unlikely to have any effect. It's a good thing that we've stopped comforting ourselves about the "harsh European winter that Europe supposedly won't live through without us". It lived through the last one and will also live through this one. And Ukraine won't fall apart on its own and won't surrender. Until we destroy it and force it to capitulate. We ourselves must learn to live without the West. At all.⁵⁵

This is what it means to be a civilization-state – to not depend on anything or anyone. If it remains connected to the "collective West", Russia will be as if tied to a decaying corpse:

It's not enough for it [the "collective West"] to perish, it wants to drag everyone else along with it into the abyss. Look at Ukraine, see what they've done to it... A poisoned, perverted, psychologically broken people. A destroyed state.⁵⁶

55 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/aleksandar-dugin-da-skasame-s-tsvilizatsiyata-na-smartta.161103> [accessed 2 October 2023].
56 Ibid.



Murzilka magazine,
No. 6, June 1933, p. 15



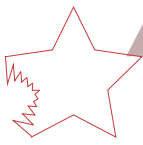
ЗНАЕШЬ ЛИ ТЫ, 228 683
ЧТО ТАКОЕ ЗАЕМ ПЕРВОГО ГОДА
ВТОРОЙ ПЯТИЛЕТКИ?

Мы все подписались на заем „Первого года 2-й пятилетки“ и проверяем, подписались ли наши родители.

Мы вызываем ребят нулевых групп всех школ проверить дома, все ли подписались на заем.
Нулевые группы 3-й ФЭД ФОНС

ВОЖАТЫЕ ЗВЕЗДОЧЕК:

- 1^я Богданов Витя 8 лет
- 2^я Кушкова Дуня 8 лет
- 3^я Орлов Алик 8 лет



Dimitar Vatsov

3. The Machine of Mushroom Websites

A) Peak Days of the Machine

We analyzed twelve peak days during the third quarter of 2023 (four each per month). Table 1 shows the days with the highest number of publications from Chart 1.

Table 1. Peak days (number of publications per day; 1 July – 30 September 2023)

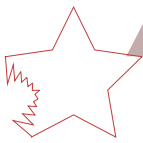
Date	Total number of publications containing specified keywords	Number of basic publications reprinted extensively by the Machine
8 July	2,172	5
11 July	2,404	7
16 July	2,582	7
29 July	2,177	5
7 August	1,762	5
15 August	1,691	4
25 August	1,542	5
30 August	1,361	3
1 September	1,573	4
16 September	1,771	5
24 September	1,985	5
28 September	2,370	6

To begin with, it should be noted that the connection between Blitz and the mushroom websites is inextricable. Of all 61 articles reprinted by the Machine on its peak days during the third quarter, 52 were also published by Blitz. In other words, 85% of the articles identified via the specified keywords were recycled simultaneously by Blitz and the mushroom websites. They operated as one Machine for influencing public opinion.

On each of these peak days, there were several (between three and seven) main (“basic”) publications, each one of which was reprinted on average about 400 times by the mushroom websites. The sum of the respective number of reprints of the basic publications makes up the largest part of the total number of publications for the day (in the second column).

As in the previous issues of this newsletter, it is these basic publications – 61 in the third quarter of 2023 – that were subjected to a content analysis: they are the sample. We will not present the detailed day-by-day analysis here, but only the summarized conclusions with some examples.

The basic publications are classified into two main types: Reports from the frontline, and Other. Again, the Reports from the frontline are very important – 23 of the articles create the illusion that they are reporting directly from the scene of events. Yet whereas in the previous quarter



Reports from the frontline accounted for 58% of all articles (40 out of 69), their share now dropped significantly (23 out of 61, i.e., 38%). Conversely, the share of those classified as Other rose sharply (62%).

B) Reports from the Frontline

B 1. How “our line of defence” turned out to be Russian

Screenshot 1⁵⁷



The anonymous Machine does not have its own correspondents on the frontline, but it creates a sense of reporting “from the scene of events” through striking headlines and saturation with visual material (VIDEO).⁵⁸ Although the sources are not given, all articles are translations. In the second quarter of 2023, we found a certain improvement in the quality of the translations – most likely due to the involvement of human proofreading or significant improvement in machine translation. The mushroom websites now showed an evolution in terms of content. If in the second quarter of 2023 they reprinted material primarily from Russian sources (most often from the Telegram channels of Russian war correspondents), now they were trying to pursue a “more balanced policy”:

- ▶ In the third quarter of 2023, the Machine more often alternated between “Russian” and “Ukrainian” sources in its reports from the frontline.

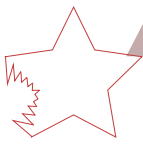
In the previous quarter, there was such a tendency in the rubric MORNING BRIEF: ..., while the short formats with a VIDEO were unequivocally pro-Russian. Now they were sometimes pro-Russian.⁵⁹

However, some longer articles are made up of translations from both Russian and Ukrainian sources, which are cobbled together incoherently, occasionally to the point of absurdity: the reader often wonders who exactly in this paragraph are “ours” and who is “the enemy”. Sometimes Blitz and the mushroom websites even forgot that they are translating from Russian Telegram channels and, as they did not use quotation marks in the main text of the article, they reproduced the Russian perspective as literally “ours”:

⁵⁷ <https://bg-utro.eu/991023/> [accessed 22 December 2023].

⁵⁸ See issues 1 and 2 of this newsletter for the previous two quarters of 2023.

⁵⁹ <https://bg-utro.eu/988077/> [accessed 19 October 2023].



Friday, 22 September, in the Zaporozhye direction, was marked by heavy fighting near the village of Novoprokopovka. Here the Ukrainian armed forces tried to break through our line of defence.⁶⁰

Despite these curiosities, which show the very poor quality of journalism at Blitz and its robotic satellites, there was a significant change in the third quarter of 2023: in the previous quarter, Blitz and the mushroom websites conducted almost unequivocal pro-Russian propaganda through the reports from the frontline (at least through the short pieces under the rubrics with VIDEO), while now pro-Russian propaganda was presented as the “other point of view” on the war: by alternating sources, it was presented as if it were as valid as the Ukrainian and the Western ones.

Conclusion: The Machine is switching from “direct manipulation” to “deep ploughing”: the seeds of the Russian perspective must be sown even in those readers who do not believe it. This switch probably also has another purpose: to make it harder for the Machine to be accused of operating as a one-way Russian propaganda channel – it now seemingly pursues a “more balanced policy”. This “turn” is probably also an effect of our previous studies.⁶¹

But if in the third quarter of 2023 the reports from the frontline were relatively “balanced”, direct Russian propaganda was spread much more through:

C) Other Publications of the Machine

As in the previous quarters, the rubric “Other” included a variety of commentary publications. However, there are some distinct new trends here as well. Firstly, as noted above, there was a significant increase in the overall share of commentary articles in the sample relative to the “reports from the frontline”. Whereas in the previous quarter, 42% of the articles in the sample were classified as “Other” (29 of 69 articles), now this category accounted for 62% (38 of 61). The preliminary hypothesis is: impression management, i.e., creating an impression that the Russians are invariably winning on the front, is giving way to a focus on commentary articles. Secondly, in contrast to the previous quarters, there are several commentary articles that are explicitly pro-Ukrainian. Still, most commentary articles remained monumentally Russian and pro-Russian. Thirdly, for the first time in the sample based on “Russian” keywords, there are several articles commenting on Bulgarian political life.

In terms of content, the commentary articles can be classified into several typological categories:

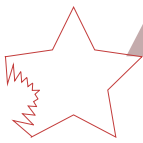
C 1. General commentary articles quoting Western media and speakers. “Or how the West is criticizing itself and praising Russia”

Although they quote Western sources, almost all “Western” articles explicitly promote Russian propaganda narratives. It is true that very often, genuine Western speakers promote Russian talking points. That is, the general comments were selected and arranged so as to create an unambiguous picture: “The West is criticizing itself and praising Russia.”

In the period under review, several key narratives were used, most of all: “Russian military

60 https://blitz.bg/svyat/zapadni-medii-ofitseri-na-nato-stanakha-na-parcheta-otgovort-za-sevastopol-s-nevidimi-raketi_news977686.html [accessed 23 October 2023]

61 See issues 1 and 2 of this newsletter for the previous two quarters of 2023.



might and Ukraine's loss in the war.”⁶² Articles from ultraconservative and pro-Putin magazines (*The American Conservative*) as well as from more liberal and pro-Ukrainian media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Economist* were used for impression management – articles were selected that cast doubt on the current Ukrainian counteroffensive.⁶³

The Russian talking point that “NATO shouldn't expand and neither Ukraine nor Sweden should join NATO” was spun together with the prediction of Russia's inevitable victory.⁶⁴ The headline “Biden tough on Ukraine: We can't risk war with Russia” gives the impression that the US will never risk war with Russia, although Biden was only making a point before the NATO summit in Vilnius: Ukraine cannot be admitted before the war with Russia is over, as its admission would trigger Article 5 and NATO would de facto be at war. According to well-selected “Western experts” and media, Russia's armaments are superior to the West's.⁶⁵

In this race between Western speakers and media to reproduce the Russian talking points, the most general narrative was also bound to come into play: “*About the US as the global villain/hegemon.*” This hegemon is steadily weakening economically,⁶⁶ therefore the US will be forced to declare a fictitious “moral victory” in Ukraine and withdraw from there, so that it can muster its last strength to counter China.⁶⁷ The masterpiece in the collection, a sort of short handbook of Russian talking points, is an article from the Polish website *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny*.⁶⁸ Other narratives used by the Machine are: “*Europe is doomed to collapse*”,⁶⁹ as interpreted by the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*, or “*the sanctions against Russia are useless and harmful to Europe and the world.*”⁷⁰

In conclusion: Practically all quoted comments by Western speakers promoted Russian propaganda. But this propaganda was represented as internal criticism: Western experts criticizing the collective West.

62 <https://novinarbg.dnes24.eu/955551/> reprinted on the next day by Blitz: https://blitz.bg/svyat/american-conservative-kakvo-shche-stane-ako-rusiya-specheli-voynata-v-ukrayna_news963568.html [accessed 24 October 2023].

63 <https://prihod.eu/999756/>; <https://blitz.bg/search?q=The+Economist%3A+%D0%9F%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0+%D0%BD%D0%B0+%D0%97%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B0+%D0%BA%D1%8A%D0%BC+%D0%A3%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0+%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%B8+%D0%BE%D1%82+%D0%B4%D0%B2%D0%B0+%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B8+%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0>; <https://uspehbg.bg7.eu/998299/>; https://blitz.bg/svyat/smneniyata-na-sashch-za-ukrainski-probiv-se-zasilvat_news976893.html [accessed 24 October 2023]

64 https://blitz.bg/svyat/baydn-s-tezhki-dumi-za-ukrayna-ne-mozhem-da-riskuvame-voyna-s-rusiya_news963621.html [accessed 25 October 2023]

65 <https://bg-utro.eu/988117/>; on the next day: https://blitz.bg/svyat/us-voenen-ekspert-ruskite-khipervukovi-raketi-tsrkon-zastrashavat-vms-na-sashch_news971160.html; <https://novini701.dnes24.eu/989473/>; https://blitz.bg/nauka-i-tehnologii/nyt-bitkata-na-vzdushnite-razuznavaniya-letyashchiyat-radar-a-50u-vleze-v-opashkata-na-amerikanskiya-auaks_news977273.html [accessed 25 October 2023]

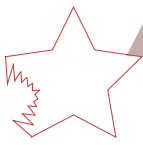
66 https://blitz.bg/ikonomika/dunya-indiya-vkara-poreden-gol-vv-vratata-na-dolara_news971876.html [accessed 25 October 2023]

67 <https://ceshmany61.bg7.eu/975464/>; https://blitz.bg/analizi-i-komentari/pepe-eskobar-neokonite-na-baydn-shche-obyavyat-moralna-pobeda-v-ukrayna-i-shche-nasochat-orzhivata-si-km-kitay_news966846.html [accessed 25 October 2023]

68 <https://prihod.eu/999710/>; on the next day: https://blitz.bg/svyat/ndp-sedinenite-shchati-vvlyakokha-evropa-vv-voyna_news977682.html [accessed 25 October 2023]

69 <http://skandalno.net/euractiv-%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D1%80-%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B7-195078/>; and with a slightly modified headline: https://blitz.bg/svyat/lidert-na-alternativa-za-germaniya-posochi-kakvo-e-bdeshcheto-na-evropa_news965006.html [accessed 24 October 2023]

70 https://blitz.bg/ikonomika/udar-po-dzhoba-ide-globalno-poskpvane-na-benzina-veshchae-oshche-inflatsiya_news967208.html [accessed 26 October 2023]



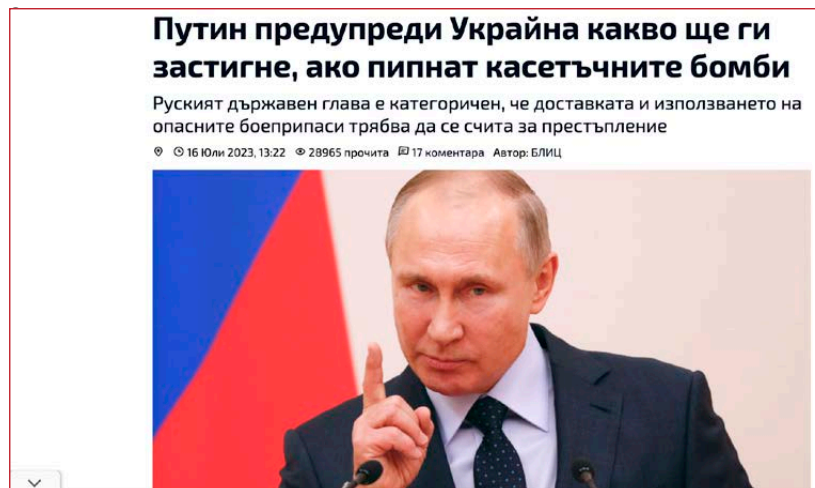
C 2. General commentary articles quoting Russian and Ukrainian sources. Putin vs Zelensky

In the third quarter of 2023, three of the five commentary articles quoting Zelensky or commenting on events he was involved in are evaluatively neutral and some of them even sound pro-Ukrainian. A balance is also seemingly sought here for the first time: there are only a few more articles in the sample (eight) that present the positions of official spokespersons of the Russian Federation.

However, there is no balance if one looks at the overall scenography of representation of the two sides. On the one hand, the only one whom the Machine presented as the spokesperson of Ukraine is Zelensky himself, who in two of the five articles is portrayed as wanting impossible things, and therefore, as being weak, humbled, insecure, and even a liar.⁷¹ On the other hand, the spokespersons of the Russian Federation are an entire army: besides Putin, also represented in the sample are Peskov, Lavrov and Medvedev. *They are standing in full height, “wagging their finger”, directly reproaching Ukraine and the West, and threatening them with punishments.* Not only the headlines and texts but also the visual material works for this representation with wagging fingers and threatening faces.⁷²

Let us give an example: “Putin warns Ukraine what will befall them if they touch cluster bombs” (16 July; 402 reprints).

Screenshot 2⁷³



Conclusion: Despite the relative balance in the representation of Ukrainian and Russian spokespersons, the scenography of their representation by the Machine is distinctly pro-Russian.

C 3. Commentary articles on Bulgaria

It was surprising that in the first half of 2023, Blitz and its satellite mushroom websites did not use Bulgarian topics and events to conduct Russian propaganda.⁷⁴ In the third quarter of the

71 <https://novinarbg.dnes24.eu/956777/>; https://blitz.bg/politika/zelenski-si-prizna-kakvo-iska-ot-sreshchata-vv-vilnyus_news964047.html; <https://ludsport.pro/800332/>; https://blitz.bg/svyat/zapadt-ima-nov-vpros-km-zelenski-kde-e-himars_news970028.html [accessed 26 October 2023]

72 https://blitz.bg/svyat/putin-predupredi-ukrayna-kakvo-shche-gi-zastigne-ako-pipnat-kasetchnite-bombi_news965002.html; <https://livenewsbg.bgvest.eu/988263/>; https://blitz.bg/svyat/lavrov-razmakha-prst-na-zapada-obyavi-greshkata-mu-vv-voynata-s-ukrayna_news976906.html; https://blitz.bg/svyat/medvedev-pozhelava-na-sda-v-khaga-boleznenata-smrt-zaradi-reshenie-za-putin_news967317.html [accessed 26 October 2023]

73 https://blitz.bg/svyat/putin-predupredi-ukrayna-kakvo-shche-gi-zastigne-ako-pipnat-kasetchnite-bombi_news965002.html [accessed 26 October 2023].

74 See issues 1 and 2 of this newsletter for the previous two quarters of 2023.





year, the situation changed radically as Russian narratives began making their way into the domestic political terrain. However, they did so cautiously. Five of the six commentary articles on domestic political issues in the sample contain a propaganda element, in three of which it is offered in passing. In all five, Russian propaganda is presented not in the journalistic text of the article, but indirectly – by quoting speakers.

The first “Bulgarian” article in the sample is not propagandistic – on the contrary, it reports how the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) has convicted the newspaper *Trud* for reprinting a Russian propaganda article containing hate speech.⁷⁵ The second article is covertly pro-Russian and propagandistic. It is related to a specific event – the inauguration of the 111-metre flagpole with the national flag at Rozhen under the auspices of President Rumen Radev. It carefully and subtly reproduces the Russian narrative of “*neutrality on the war, i.e., refusal to provide military and financial aid to Ukraine in the name of peace*” – a narrative also promoted by President Rumen Radev himself and by other pro-Russian actors in Bulgaria. The article introduces the patriot Col. Boris Gadzharov, who tells his story at Rozhen – the story of his ancestors, who liberated the Rhodopes, and his own story as an officer, a veteran of the Cambodia mission. And as if by the way “The patriot called for the unification of the Bulgarians and peace, not war.”⁷⁶ The third article is also not overtly propagandistic: “First split in PP-DB, apple of discord turns out to be Burgas.”⁷⁷ The article is about Konstantin Bachiyski, the mayoral candidate of We Continue the Change (PP) in Burgas: “Bachiyski has demonstrated that he supports Vazrazhdane’s ideology with regard to Russia more than PP’s. In 2022, he voted ‘abstain’ on new sanctions against Russia over the war in Ukraine. In his words, ‘because he works for the Bulgarian state interest.’” By reproducing PP’s arguments in his defence, the article implicitly supports the pro-Russian candidate.

The talking point that “*the sanctions against Russia are harming the Bulgarian economy*” is promoted in the headline and subheading of the article “War hits seaside property market hard in Bulgaria, Russians en masse... There’s a serious problem with money transfers which, due to sanctions, are impossible to bank accounts in Russia”,⁷⁸ although the article itself explains that nothing fatal is happening to the seaside property market and that Russians rarely sell their resort homes in Bulgaria.

The last two “Bulgarian” articles in the sample are overtly propagandistic insofar as they quote verbatim two explicitly (pro)Russian propaganda speakers, Mitrofanova and Kostadinov. The article quoting an interview with Mitrofanova for TASS promotes the main Russian narrative about Bulgaria, namely that “*the West through its proxies – the local political elites – is trying to push the Bulgarian people away from Russia, but the people is not giving in and is keeping its warm feelings for the liberators.*”⁷⁹ The Machine also reprinted verbatim and with no comment a Facebook post by Kostadinov, the leader of Vazrazhdane, under the headline: “Kostadinov raises 4 important questions about Bulgarians arrested for spying.”⁸⁰ The case of the three Bulgarians arrested in the UK for suspected espionage on behalf of Russia is told colourfully by Kostadinov in the following double key:

Either Britain is treating us Bulgarians as non-humans and demonstrating utter contempt

75 <https://news.dnes24.eu/957093/> [accessed 26 October 2023]

76 <https://bg-utro.eu/969406/>; https://blitz.bg/obshtestvo/potomk-na-osvoboditelya-na-rodopite-i-veteran-ot-kambodzha-razvyva-znameto-na-rozhen-snimki_news965058.html [accessed 26 October 2023]

77 <https://prihod.eu/979729/>; https://blitz.bg/politika/prvo-raztseplenie-v-pp-db-yablkata-na-razdora-se-okaza-burgas_news968724.html [accessed 26 October 2023]

78 https://blitz.bg/ikonomika/voynata-udari-zhestoko-imotniya-pazar-po-moreto-u-nas-rusnatsite-masovo_news971452.html [accessed 27 October 2023]

79 <https://bg-utro.eu/990037/> [accessed 27 October 2023]

80 <https://livenewsbg.bgvest.eu/973720/>; https://blitz.bg/politika/kostadinov-postavi-4-vazhni-vprosa-za-arestuvanite-za-snpionazh-blgari_news970178.html [accessed 27 October 2023]





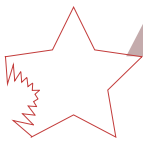
for our citizens and our state, or we are witnessing yet another episode of the endless psychological and information war of the US against Russia.

Actually, this "either..., or" should be read as "both": *"The West both despises and uses the Bulgarians as pawns in its information war against Russia."*

In conclusion: The mushroom websites have begun to recycle Russian propaganda narratives to frame also domestic political events and issues, but this is done cautiously, most often by "quoting" propaganda speakers. So far, no specific political strategy can be detected in the use of Russian propaganda on the domestic front. The Machine's sensitivity to coverage of real events is also growing. If in the previous quarters the Machine was focused on creating a phantasmatic reality of constant Russian victories on the frontline, now the "reports from the front-line" have become more varied (showing Russian losses, too), while in the general commentary articles and in those on Bulgarian topics the Russian narratives work by covering a wider range of foreign and domestic political events.



Murzilka magazine,
No. 4-5, April-May 1931



Valentin Valkanov

4. Russian Propaganda Speakers in Bulgaria

The HSSF regularly monitors the statements of five important public Bulgarian speakers who verifiably (albeit to different degrees and in different modalities) promote the narratives of Russian propaganda. In 2023, they are President Rumen Radev, the leaders of the BSP and Vazrazhdane – Korneliya Ninova and Kostadin Kostadinov – as well as two journalists: Peter Volgin, the host of a current affairs talk show on the public-service Bulgarian National Radio (BNR), and Martin Karbovski, a social media influencer. Here are their pro-Russian messages in the third quarter of 2023.

A) RUMEN RADEV

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Bulgaria on 6 July included a meeting with Rumen Radev. This meeting was yet another occasion for the Bulgarian president to articulate his ambivalent position on the war. He stated that a peaceful solution should be sought and declared himself against providing military aid to Ukraine, while at the same time expressing solidarity with its people:

First, I want to express our solidarity with the people of Ukraine and with the victims of this cruel war which is raging on even as we speak. On the very first day of its outbreak, I condemned the aggression against your country. ... This declaration is an important step in the development of our relations, but I do not accept the provision of ammunition, especially from the reserves of the Bulgarian army. As President and Commander-in-Chief, I have responsibilities not to weaken Bulgaria's defence capabilities.⁸¹

July also saw the inauguration of the flagpole at Rozhen, which became a field of discursive struggle, including a geopolitical one. Rumen Radev was a guest at the inauguration ceremony, and in his speech he combined several narratives used by local speakers of pro-Russian propaganda. There he again commented on the war, uttering one of his most telling lines on the subject:

Ukraine insists on fighting this war, but the whole of Europe is footing the bill.⁸²

Thus, the president successfully combined the narrative against Ukraine that praises Russia's actions as moral, with the talking point against Europe's sanctions which are backfiring and harming Europe more than the Russian economy.

Neither did Radev miss the opportunity to attack the liberal and democratic community, which criticized the construction of the flagpole, in one of his harsher remarks, harsher even than that about the "warmongers":

⁸¹ <https://poleznoe.bg7.eu/964429/> [accessed 3 November 2023].

⁸² <https://www.standartnews.com/balgariya-politika/rumen-radev-na-rozhen-za-upravlyavashchite-i-voynata-v-ukrayna-529792.html> [accessed 3 November 2023].



Today we say no to the nihilism and un-Bulgarianness [bezrodie] that have catastrophically failed in their dishonour by trying to smear and stifle this initiative.⁸³

Thus, anyone who criticizes and doubts the sincerity or legitimacy of the project was branded a nihilist and an “un-Bulgarian” [bezrodnik].

Screenshot 3⁸⁴



Radev at Rozhen: Today we say “no” to nihilism and un-Bulgarianness

Love for Bulgaria is everlasting, head of state adds

B. KORNELIYA NINOVA

The BSP leader has a clear and systematic position against providing military aid to Ukraine. In the third quarter of 2023, Ninova found an occasion to say that the ruling Euro-Atlantic majority is selling Bulgaria in the “shameful” act of granting aid to the invaded country – the announcement of a donation of APCs to Ukraine in July. To this she added the dispute over the concession for the Rosenets oil terminal, which the government announced it would cancel:

Today is one of the most shameful days in Bulgarian politics and one of the most ominous in parliamentary practice. The ruling GERB-SDS, PP-DB and DPS have brutally trampled, with boots, the Constitution, laws, rules. ... I say again – brutal, brazen and arrogant behaviour of self-conceited people who are seizing control of the state in every way.⁸⁵ Literally in ten hours, they sold Bulgaria several times and betrayed the Bulgarian people. Today they submitted decisions to provide APCs to Ukraine – free of charge. In the words of [Defence] Minister Tagarev, Bulgaria won't receive any compensation for this military aid. They are canceling the concession for the Rosenets oil terminal without any analysis.⁸⁶

In the same statement, Ninova also touched on a third topic that is part of the populist agenda of her rhetoric: the law on domestic violence. In her account, its good intentions are just a cover

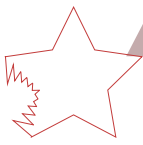
83 <https://www.marica.bg/region/smolqn/rumen-radev-izdigna-tribagrenika-na-rojen> [accessed 3 November 2023].

84 <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/radev-ot-rozhen-dnes-kazvame-ne-na-nihilizma-i-bezrodiето.html> [accessed 22 December 2023].

85 <https://epicenter.bg/article/Korneliya-Ninova--Dnes-e-edin-ot-nay-pozornite-dni-v-politikata/321293/2/0> [accessed 3 November 2023].

86 Ibid.





for “selling the souls of Bulgarian children”:

They will continue with [the remaining draft amendments to] the law on domestic violence – they will also sell your children at the end of this workday because this law, hidden behind the good intentions of supporting women and child victims of domestic violence, essentially constitutes selling the souls of Bulgarian children.⁸⁷

To frame this collage of topics, Ninova gave these political clashes a clear geopolitical slant:

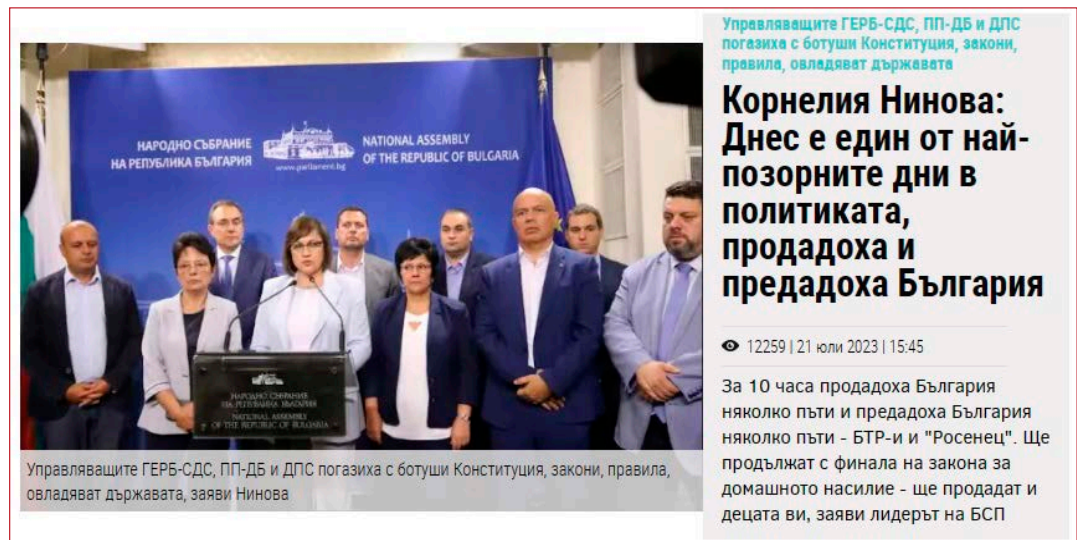
When you have a different opinion, when you have a free opinion, when you defend the Bulgarian interest, you immediately get labeled with a cliché: “servants of Russia”, “servants of Putin”, and I don’t know what.⁸⁸

The Bulgarian so-called “Euro-Atlanticists” are destroying European values and European interests.⁸⁹

Europe was surprisingly cast as a positive character here, but only so that Ninova could explain that the European values are being trampled on by actions she considers “fascist” and “brutal”:

This is how – without dialogue, without normal conversation, without discussion – in a brutal, fascist, extremist manner, they are trampling everything in the name of satisfying their own corporate interests and saving their skins from justice.⁹⁰

Screenshot 4⁹¹



Ruling GERB-SDS, PP-DB and DPS trample Constitution, laws, rules, seize control of state
Korneliya Ninova: Today's one of the most shameful days in politics, they've sold and betrayed Bulgaria

Ninova also claimed that a world war might break out if Ukraine is admitted to NATO, because this would pit the Alliance against Russia. She also saw a danger for Bulgaria which, according to her, could become a “frontline” state and victim:

*The BSP won’t support the declaration on Ukraine’s NATO membership.⁹²
 The serious and big member states – the US, Germany, France, Hungary – are expressing*

87 Ibid.

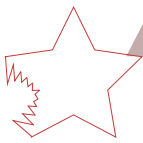
88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 <https://epicenter.bg/article/Korneliya-Ninova--Dnes-e-edin-ot-nay-pozornite-dni-v-politikata/321293/2/0> [accessed 22 December 2023].

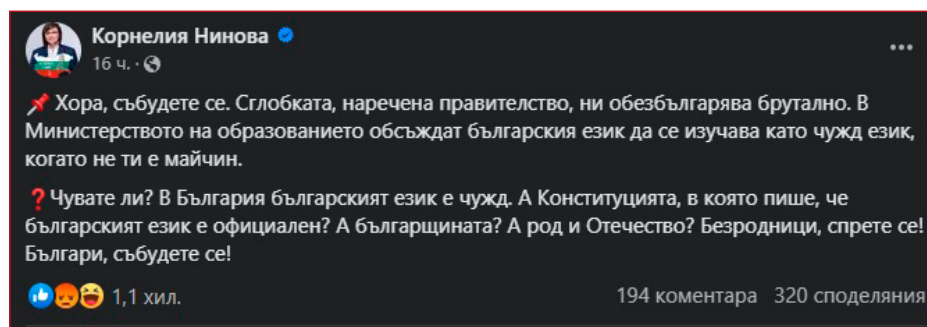
92 <https://djadja.bg/964067/> [accessed 3 November 2023].



reservations and there are statements even by Biden and Stoltenberg that they should abstain at this stage from taking a position on Ukraine's admission to NATO and that this would pit the whole Alliance against Russia, which would mean a world war ... we may be turned not only into a frontline state but also into a victim of this war.⁹³

One of the most telling displays of BSP leader Korneliya Ninova's geopolitical affiliation in the period under review was her reaction to a fake news story by Yanka Takeva, who announced that the Ministry of Education and Science was about to decide that Bulgarian would be taught as a foreign language to pupils whose mother tongue is other than Bulgarian. In a Facebook post, Ninova declared that the government was "de-Bulgarifying us" and that those in power were "un-Bulgarians" (*bezrodnitsi*). She thus stood shoulder to shoulder with other local speakers of Kremlin propaganda, who just as systematically and regularly accuse Bulgarians with pro-Western views and the political class that represents them of betraying their homeland and serving foreign (usually American) interests.

Screenshot 5⁹⁴



C) KOSTADIN KOSTADINOV

The Vazrazhdane leader saw Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Bulgaria as an attempt to involve the country in the war. Kostadinov called Zelensky as well as the Bulgarian political class which supports Ukraine's efforts "national traitors" and defined Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov as an "American prime minister". According to Kostadinov, they were all planning a civil war in Bulgaria:

Today our national traitors will meet with the greatest national traitor. With someone who sacrificed his nation for the sake of American interests. The President of Ukraine is not going to our President, but to the American Prime Minister Denkov. He is coming for us, for our homes, for our children, for our country. He is coming to provoke and annoy us. Because the American envoy has only one goal – a civil war in Bulgaria, and then to involve us in a large-scale military conflict.⁹⁵

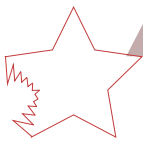
It is a curious fact that this statement of Kostadinov was also disseminated by the Russian news agency TASS, one of the most powerful institutional mouthpieces of the Kremlin and its official spokespersons.

The Vazrazhdane leader's attacks were also naturally directed against Defence Minister Todor Tagarev, who is strongly in favour of military support for Ukraine and provides equipment, am-

⁹³ *ibid.*

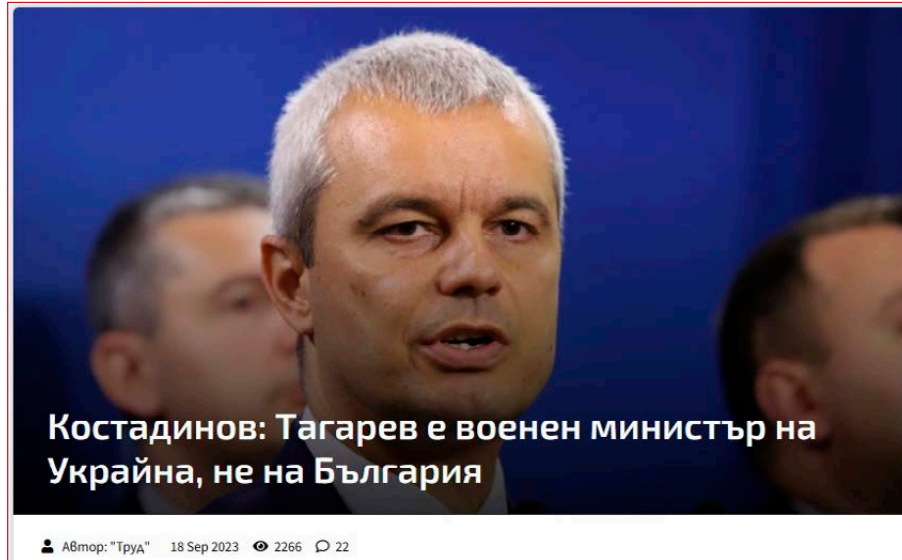
⁹⁴ https://www.facebook.com/NinovaKorneliya/posts/864458971704540/?paipv=0&eav=AfY2p8A2eFr-9wze1jy73_mPDhkHS1ne7PscuyPiRXaa19LoM-79p5s7_MA5ohNhd2s&_rdr [accessed 5.01.2024]

⁹⁵ <https://www.big5.bg/2023/07/06/%d1%82%d0%b0%d1%81%d1%81-%d1%86%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b8%d1%80%d0%b0-%d0%ba%d0%be%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b0%d0%b4%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%be%d0%b2-%d0%bf%d0%be%d1%81%d0%b5%d1%89%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%b5%d1%82%d0%be-%d0%bd/> [accessed 4 November 2023].



munition, etc. to the invaded country. In Kostadinov’s rhetoric, this was also interpreted as a betrayal of the national interest at the expense of a foreign one.

Screenshot 6⁹⁶



Kostadinov: Tagarev is war minister of Ukraine, not of Bulgaria

In July, Vazrazhdane’s proposal for a referendum on “retaining the Bulgarian lev” was finally rejected. This was one of the main issues for the party and its speakers for a long time, which they used mainly to consolidate public support. It is also a good example of the populism and demagoguery in which the nationalist party clothes the political agenda in the country, attaching various apocalyptic scenarios to Bulgaria’s entry into the eurozone:

Yesterday Vazrazhdane approached the Constitutional Court about the crime committed by the triple coalition, PP-DB, DPS and GERB, by rejecting the referendum on retaining the lev. We collected 49 signatures (we were supported by ITN and independent MP Radostin Vasilev). After the President showed himself to be a coward and sided with the criminals, the Constitutional Court has remained the last institution in the state that is called upon to protect the law and the Constitution of Bulgaria.⁹⁷

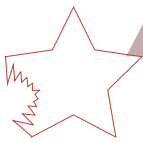
D) PETAR VOLGIN

A classic line of attack for BNR host Petar Volgin against the Bulgarian liberal community – and especially against its political representatives – is that they don’t understand and are out of touch with the “real” problems of most of their compatriots. In the third quarter of 2023, Volgin used the Bulgarian government’s efforts to secure the country’s entry into the eurozone as an occasion for promoting this line:

The rotating prime minister reportedly said that the most important task of his government was “the fuller Euro-Atlantic integration of Bulgaria”, including the rapid entry into the eurozone. This is yet another proof of the total divergence of the interests of normal people with those of the ruling politicians. ... Most of us are concerned about our incomes, about

96 <https://trud.bg/костадинов-този-военен-министър-е-министър-на-украйна-не-на-българия/> [accessed 22 December 2023].

97 <https://www.plovdiv24.bg/novini/Bylgaria/Liderut-na-Vuzrazhdane-Kostadin-Kostadinov-s-obidni-kvalifikacii-za-prezidenta-i-upravlyavashтите-1753735> [accessed 4 November 2023].



health – our own and that of our loved ones, about the education of our children. The thing is that the likes of the rotating prime minister have no such problems. ... That is why they are so concerned about “faster entry into the eurozone” and “fuller Euro-Atlantic integration”. The Brussels “adzhenda” is not at all interesting to normal Bulgarians. They have enough serious problems to worry about. And “Euro-Atlanticism” is for those who have happened to find themselves in power and for the eager-beaver wannabe power-holders.⁹⁸

Volgin also penned an article commenting on the case of a university professor who praised Hitler in a Facebook post. In this article, the BNR host draws attention to the reactions of the liberal and democratic community, or rather, as he states, the lack of a reaction. The Euro-Atlantic community, according to Volgin, is incapable of “recognizing the blatant fascism in its ranks” but “will concoct fascism where there isn’t any”. The professor, Volgin says, is part of that community – hence the journalist’s accusation against the latter. In the same article, he defends Council for Electronic Media (CEM) Chairperson Sonya Momchilova, who denied the Bucha massacre, and Vazrazhdane, who were investigated for fascist acts. For the so-called “vigilant civil society”, Volgin continues, “it’s no problem even to ‘praise’ Hitler if it only puts ‘Down with Russia!’ at the end of the lampoon”:

What is this silence over such an overt fascist display due to? It is due to the fact that the author of the paean to Hitler, as well as the websites that reprinted it, belong to “our side”. They are staunch Euro-Atlanticists and equally staunch Russophobes. You have noticed, haven’t you, that today it is enough to praise Brussels, to slam Russia, and from then on you will be forgiven anything. You can write the biggest nonsense or the most horrible abomination, such as praising Hitler, but if you put the sentence “Down with Russia!” at the beginning and end of the lampoon, the so-called “vigilant civil society” won’t make a problem for you. It will even applaud the abomination you’ve created. The Euro-Atlantic community will concoct fascism where there isn’t any, but it will never recognize the blatant fascism in its ranks.⁹⁹

Screenshot 7¹⁰⁰

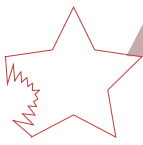


On Hitler and double standards

98 <https://www.dunavmost.com/novini/petar-volgin-povecheto-ot-nas-se-valnuvat-za-dohodite-i-za-zdraveto-si-a-ne-za-evrozonata> [accessed 4 November 2023].

99 <https://spravedlivanews.bg/life-news/%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%85%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%80-%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B8/> [accessed 4 November 2023].

100 <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101845629/komentar-na-petar-volgin-za-fenovete-na-hitler-i-dvoinite-standarti> [accessed 22 December 2023].



E) MARTIN KARBOVSKI

Among Martin Karbovski's guests in the third quarter of 2023 was Maria Zakharova, spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. She is not the first Kremlin official to appear on his podcast, but she is even closer to the inner workings of the Kremlin than Eleonora Mitrofanova, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Bulgaria.

Quite predictably, Zakharova went through a wide range of propaganda narratives touching on the current events of mid-July, but also through the fundamental narratives through which the Kremlin's hybrid machine attacks public discourses in Bulgaria. Among the topics were the website Myrotvorets, Prigozhin's mutiny, speculation about attacks with nuclear weapons, discussion of Russophobic sentiments, arms supplies to Ukraine, the US policy of "economic occupation of the European Union", etc. The West was accused of conducting a hybrid war against Russia, the conflict in Ukraine being part of this war. According to Zakharova, the main villain is the US and the EU is a victim:

... the entire might of the Western world, first of all the US and Britain, are at war with us, and the EU is being used by them.¹⁰¹

But what's frightening for you is something else – the main blow is directed indirectly – against the EU, this is the dream of the US – to destroy the EU economy.¹⁰²

Among the topics was also the much-discussed in Bulgaria sale of the Russian nuclear reactors for the non-existent Belene nuclear power plant to Ukraine. This gave Zakharova reason to declare the Ukrainian forces terrorist:

Do you know who you're going to sell your nuclear reactors to – to people who have turned to extremist terrorist activity, who shelled the Zaporozhye nuclear power plant, who recently blew up an ammonia pipeline on their own territory.¹⁰³

In addition to giving a free platform to Kremlin spokespersons, Karbovski also regularly conducts thematic domestic political criticism. It is directed against those in power who, in the third quarter of 2023, were accused of complicity with the Bulgarian mafia. The journalist called this "system" "mutro-fascism" and used the occasion to counter various attacks on Russia:

Today there is a new mutro-fascism that is only good at propaganda. I read that the floods are because of the Russians' construction projects on the Black Sea coast, that Russia killed Levski. This is propaganda. We have a much worse problem – we have a system that is really starting to look a bit like crypto-fascism, like proto-fascism.¹⁰⁴

His position was directed specifically against the liberal parties in the government of the country, PP-DB, which he accused of complicity with Boyko Borisov, and claimed that the "shrill ones at the top" (probably meaning precisely those two formations) are dependent:

Ordinary people must understand that the shrill ones at the top are puppets and that you shouldn't quarrel with the puppets, but see where this hand [i.e., puppet-master] comes from.¹⁰⁵

101 <https://glasove.com/intervyuta/mariya-zaharova-pred-karbovski-prodavate-yadrenite-si-reaktori-na-hora-koito-strelyat-po-aets-i-vdignaha-vav-vazduha-kahovka> [accessed 4 November 2023].

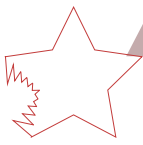
102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

104 <https://noviniblog.bgvest.eu/983883/> [accessed 4 November 2023].

105 Ibid.



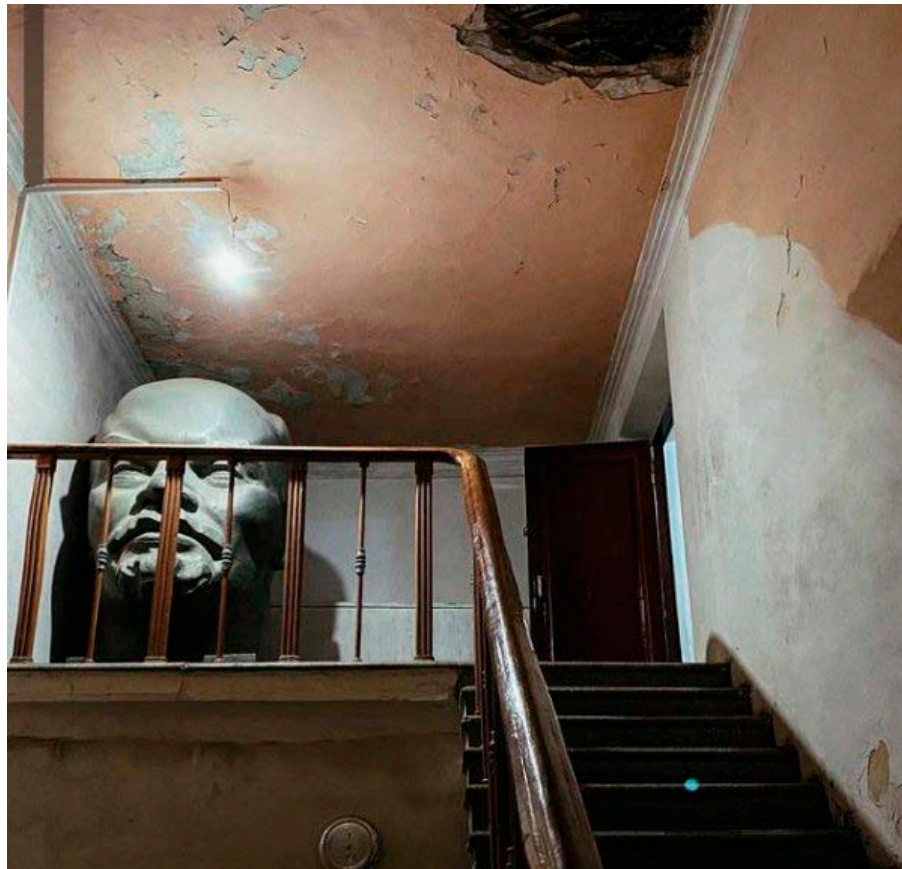


Thus, the local political elites are slammed, and the victim, as before, remains the Bulgarian people, on which is imposed a “mutro-fascist” regime capable of “giving birth to monsters”.

Screenshot 8¹⁰⁶



Martin Karbovski: Sedesars embrace mafia, they'd promised me I'd live in a normal Europe



107

Lenin bust hidden in an apartment building stairwell in Khujand, Tajikistan

Photo: Artyom Kushneruk

106 By 22 December 2023, the article had been deleted from the Machine's websites. See original BNR publication: <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101875446> [accessed 22 December 2023].

107 https://www.facebook.com/sovietvisuals/photos/a.1161549980577911/509331083_7401786/?type=3 [accessed 4 December 2023].



Liubomir Donchev

5. Russian Propaganda on Facebook

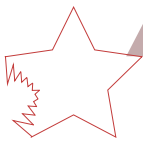
Although they are largely defined as holiday months, July, August and September 2023 abounded in political events, which resonated also on social media. July began with one of the major foreign policy events in Bulgaria, Volodymyr Zelensky's visit. The debates it sparked focused on two topics: the provision of arms and ammunition to Ukraine, and the sale of the unused equipment for the Belene nuclear power plant. In the last week of July, Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov put forward the idea of changing Bulgaria's national holiday from 3 March to 24 May. This, in turn, provoked much of the propaganda political speakers – even President Rumen Radev decided to defend 3 March as a national holiday by announcing a national movement called “Third of March”.

One of the major events in August was the initiation of the procedure for the relocation of the Monument to the Soviet Army from the Prince's Garden in Sofia. This act literally ignited the passions of all defenders and lovers of the pre-1989 regime and led to the erection of a tent camp to protect the monument. The camp, albeit a small one, remained in place after the end of September. The political actors sharing a tent in this camp were from the well-known-to-us political formations The Left! and Vazrazhdane, and there were also participants from the more marginal parties of the coalition Neutral Bulgaria, Russophiles for the Revival of the Fatherland, the Party of Bulgarian Communists, and the Bulgarian Communist Party. September was marked by two major protests: that of grain farmers, who threatened to block Sofia; and that of coal miners and coal-fired power plant workers. Meanwhile, the Bulgarian intelligence services expelled the head of the Russian church in the country, Vassian Zmeyev, who a year earlier had been identified as a Russian spy by the authorities in North Macedonia. This act sparked a small protest in defence of Zmeyev which was attended by the Russian Ambassador herself, Eleonora Mitrofanova.

Let us see which were the most popular posts on Bulgarian Facebook that generated the highest number of interactions in the period under review.

A) July 2023

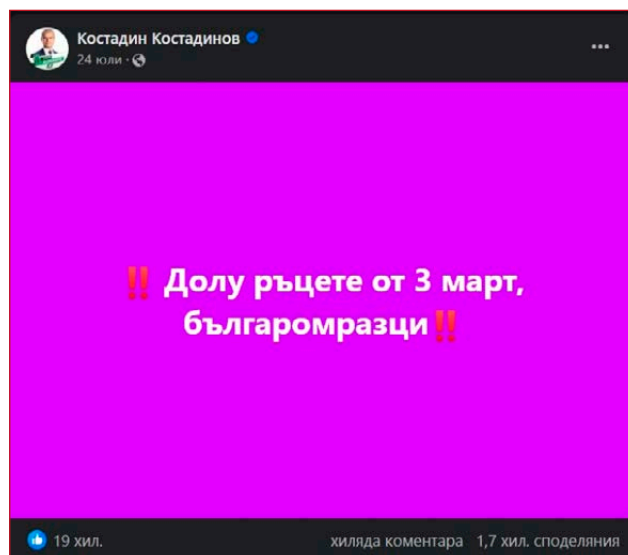
As in the whole Western world, Volodymyr Zelensky's attendance of the NATO summit in Vilnius became a leading event in the media and on social networks in Bulgaria, too. ABV leader Rumen Petkov, who has become active over the last year, did not miss the opportunity to post a scathing *video* about the Ukrainian president, which garnered over 315,000 views and 22,000 interactions. The vicious epithets used by Petkov for Zelensky are comparable only to those in the statements of Russian arch-propagandist Vladimir Solovyov: “the pathetic Zelensky who went around sloppily dressed and unwanted by anyone” and “Zelensky's insolence and ridiculousness”. Rumen Petkov listed no less than four main talking points of the Russian propaganda machine: Ukraine is losing the war, Russia is triumphing on the battlefield; Zelensky is begging for money while stealing from the Ukrainian people; the US wants the war to continue; Europe is being bled and destroyed.



Rumen Petkov's second most popular *video* in July – with 187,000 views and 15,800 interactions – is devoted to Zelensky's visit to Sofia. The difference between the two videos lies in their purpose. Whereas the first video is about the geopolitical situation and aims to humiliate Zelensky and downplay his role, the second is aimed against the domestic political enemies: Nikolay Denkov, Todor Tagarev and Kiril Petkov.

President Radev also did not miss to emphasize his position on the war in Ukraine, declaring: "At the moment, we are constantly hearing the word 'victory' from both sides, but we would like to hear more the word 'peace' and to see leading efforts to achieve it." This statement was *posted* on the president's main Facebook page in connection with his meeting with Zelensky in Sofia, but it artfully concealed *the real highlight of the meeting*: Zelensky's pertinent criticism of the Bulgarian commander-in-chief about his position on the war in Ukraine and military aid from the West.

The other event that sparked a wide debate was the choice of a new national holiday. Nikolay Denkov said that he would work towards changing Bulgaria's national holiday from 3 March to 24 May. Let us see what position the pro-Russian speakers in Bulgaria took on this issue.



!! Hands off 3 March, Bulgarian haters!!

Kostadin Kostadinov *declared* in Parliament that he is against changing Bulgaria's national holiday (187,000 views), noting that the PP-DP coalition was already drawing "blood-red" lines in Bulgarian society. He resumed the already proven speculation about the website Myrotvorets (during her appearance on Martin Karbovski's podcast in July, Maria Zakharova described the Ukrainian website Myrotvorets as a list of potential targets of the Ukrainian services. Factcheck. *bg refuted* this claim). Kostadinov tried to introduce the paradoxical phrase "fascist-democrats".

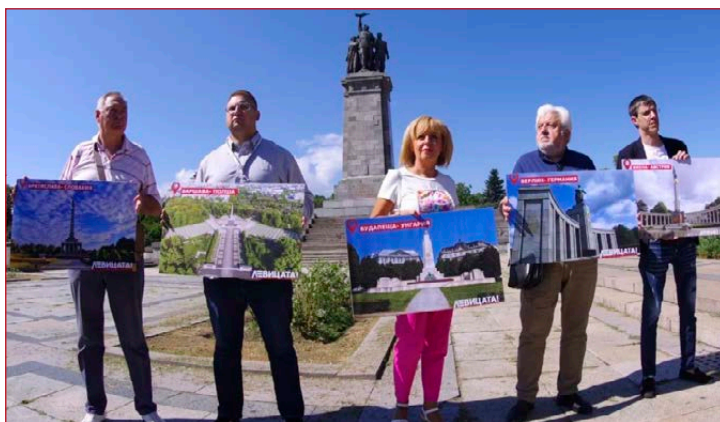


His speech ended with the now proverbial claim for the lovers of the Russian perspective that those in power are “dragging us into a war with Russia”. Kostadinov’s caustic language was in tone with the language of another political “hero”, Rumen Radev, who, at the inauguration of the 111-metre flagpole at Rozhen, *accused* everyone who was against the erection of the flagpole of nihilism and “un-Bulgarianness” (*bezrodie*). Radev took a stance in defence of 3 March as Bulgaria’s national holiday in his *speech* a month later at the Shipka Peak.

Neshka Robeva, in an *appearance* on Alexander Simov’s current affairs show on BSTV, argued that 3 March should be Bulgaria’s national holiday because, were it not for Bulgaria’s liberation by Russia from Ottoman rule, there would have been nothing else for us to celebrate. According to her, the Bulgarians could not have liberated themselves on their own, and this is evidenced by a bunch of examples listed by Robeva: the Bulgarians had betrayed Vasil Levski, the Bulgarians had thrown out the young men who were ready to participate in the April 1876 Uprising, to be later handed over to the “*zaptiyes*” (Ottoman gendarmerie), etc.

B) August 2023

The issue of changing Bulgaria’s national holiday continued to be on the agenda in August thanks mostly to Rumen Radev’s above-mentioned *speech* at the Shipka Peak in which he announced a national movement called “Third of March”. The president’s speech will go down in history for declaring 3 March *the red line of our patience*, the speech itself essentially being a continuation of his thesis about the *nihilists and “un-Bulgarians” (bezrodnitsi)* expounded at Rozhen. The curious thing here is that two weeks earlier, Kostadinov also spoke of *red lines*, but with a bloody tinge.



In August 2023, the tensions over the Monument to the Soviet Army and its removal from the Prince’s Garden in Sofia, which have resurfaced every year, escalated into a direct confrontation between the defenders of the monument and the citizens demanding its relocation. In view of the coming local elections, this issue marked the beginning of the election campaign of Maya

Manolova and the coalition The Left!, who became the most ardent defenders of the monument. They were joined by the editor-in-chief of one of the biggest propaganda websites in Bulgaria, Rumen Petkov of Pogled Info (not to be confused with the ABV leader of the same name). Vazrazhdane and Kostadin Kostadinov seemed to drop behind in the race for the biggest champion of the cause. After the FC Levski fans clearly declared their position in favour of the relocation of the monument, Kostadinov called them janissaries, degenerates and fascists in a Facebook post. A few hours later, Kostadinov removed the post from his Facebook profile, but this did not change the subsequent reactions both from *organized fans* of Levski and from the *football club*. The MSA defenders organized a tent camp to watch over the integrity of the monument slated for relocation, with daily live streams. In terms of number of views, a *live stream* by Maya Manolova of 25 August, which showed workers fencing off the monument, stands out



THE SUMERIAN DEITY (DEMON) LILITH

THE STATUE OF ST SOPHIA

Костадин Костадинов 2 h · 🌐

Снощи млади дегенерати, запалянковци на "Левски", след мача на своя отбор са набрали смелост да нападнат няколко жени в палатките, пазещи паметника на съветската армия в София. Били са 30 (част от тях криминално проявени), жените - 3, на годините на майките им. Съвременните еничари няма как да знаят, че точно това са правили и техните предшественици, еничарите от времето на Османската империя. Нарочно са ги пращали по родните места, за да разплачат и поругаят собствените си майки.

А сегашните еничари няма как да го знаят, защото това е премахнато от учебниците по история. По същия начин искат да премахнат и паметника, символ на антифашизма, за да реабилитират фашизма, като просто премахнат паметта за антифашистката борба.

Е, няма да стане. Следващият път, когато подобни дегенерати решат да се пробват, няма да има жени. Още нещо - надявам се нормалните привърженици на футболния отбор да се разграничат и поне да се извинят на жените за нападението над тях. Заради подобни типове футболните мачове станаха място, на което никой родител няма да заведе детето си. И на финала -

(over 350,000 views). The live stream lasted over 120 minutes and featured, in addition to Maya Manolova, Rumens Petkov of ABV, Traycho Traykov, and participants in the camp. The debate over the MSA's removal revived a talking point from the strong years of Volens Siderov and his Ataka party – the call for removing the monument to the American pilots in Sofia. With this *post* (19,480 interactions) Kostadinov confirmed the hypothesis that Vazrazhdane are increasingly promoting the established propaganda narratives of the populist parties in Bulgaria. A *reaction came* also from several public figures calling for the removal of the statue of St Sophia in the centre of Sofia which, they argued, "isn't even a monument", it is a pagan symbol, it is illegal, and doesn't correspond to the prevalent Christian values in Bulgaria. Vazrazhdane MP Slavcho Krumov described the statue as a "goddess of death and prostitution". A photo claiming that the statue of St Sophia is a replica of a demon from Sumerian mythology was circulated on Facebook. The BNT's fact-checking team reacted to the false claim *by proving* that this is a photo of the statue in Sofia taken by a drone several years ago.



C) September 2023

The events around the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia continued in September, but with fading popularity as the area was fenced off with metal sheets and the structure itself was covered with scaffolding and safety netting. Maya Manolova tried to hold the public's attention with several live streams, the most popular one being *a live stream* of 15 September in which she claims that defenders of the monument were being arrested. The video has some 294,000 views and over 10,000 interactions.

Two protests attracted attention in September: of grain farmers, who demanded continuing restrictions on grain imports from Ukraine; and of coal-fired power plant workers and coal miners against the so-called Green Deal and for a just transition from coal. The grain farmers' protest turned out to be more curious, as in it there were outright lies and disinformation about the quality of Ukrainian grain. In *a live stream* of 20 September (334,000 views

and over 14,000 interactions), independent MP Radostin Vasilev speculated that Ukrainian grain may be radioactive and may have been treated with poor-quality chemicals that could be harmful to the health of Bulgarians. In the context of the disputes over the admission of Ukrainian grain to the Bulgarian market, *a video* of Volen Siderov from the time when he was an MP was posted on Facebook. In it he explains in detail about the dependence of the Bulgarian Parliament on the EU and EU bureaucrats. Siderov's speech is against corruption in the EU and the hypocrisy of France and Germany, which define us as a country in which there is corruption. In general, he defines Bulgaria as extremely dependent on foreign ambassadors who defend foreign interests at the expense of our national interest. The video has almost 466,000 views, making it one of the most viewed on Bulgarian Facebook in September.

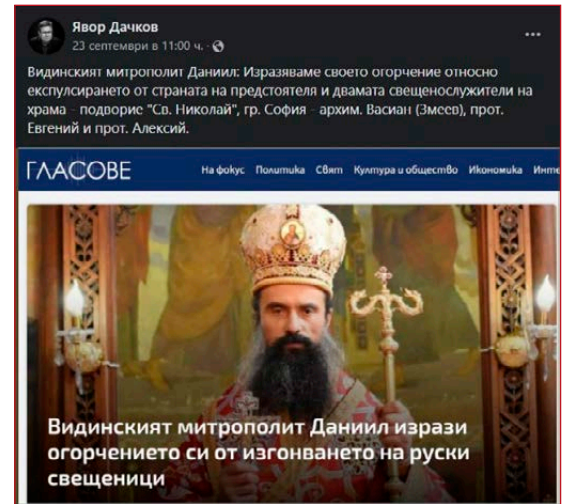
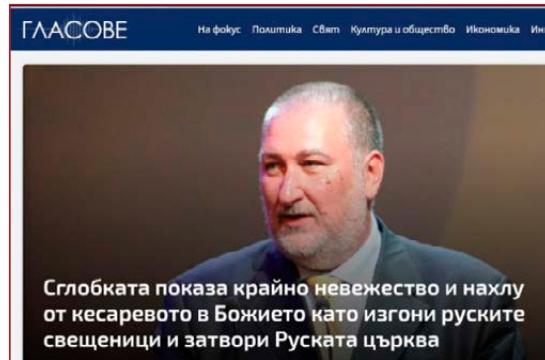


Radostin Vasilev

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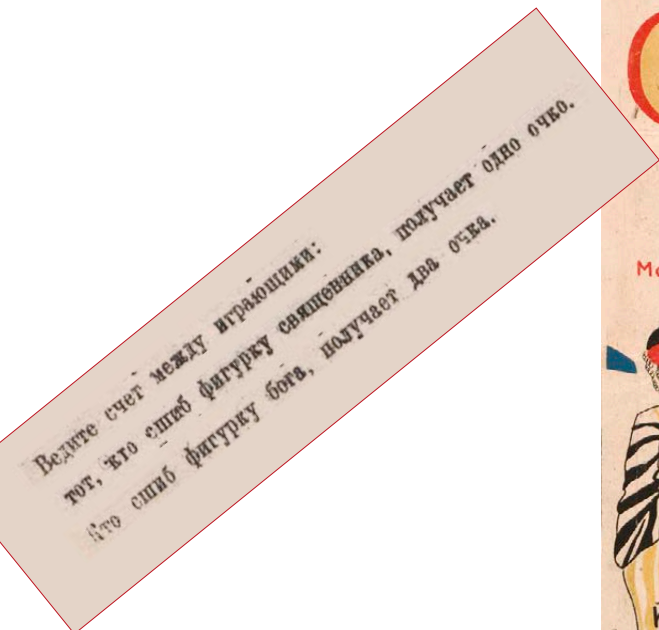


The expulsion of the Russian cleric Zmeyev was also much discussed on Facebook. One of the defenders of the “alternative” point of view, Yavor Dachkov, shared, including via his news portal Glasove, a number of posts indirectly defending the expelled cleric and the right of the Russian church to have clergy in Bulgaria.



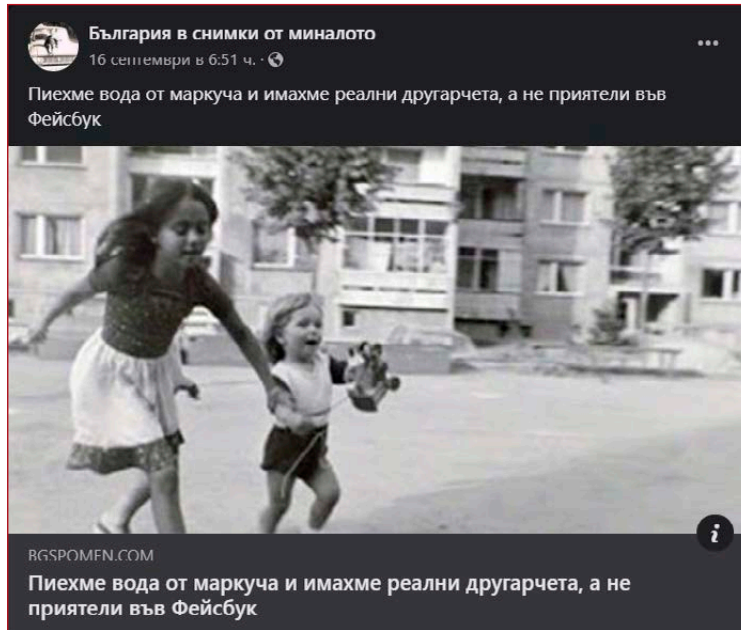
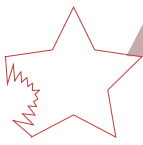
Assemblage shows extreme ignorance and barges from the Cesarean into the Divine by expelling Russian clerics and closing down Russian church

Metropolitan Daniil of Vidin expresses bitterness at expulsion of Russian clerics

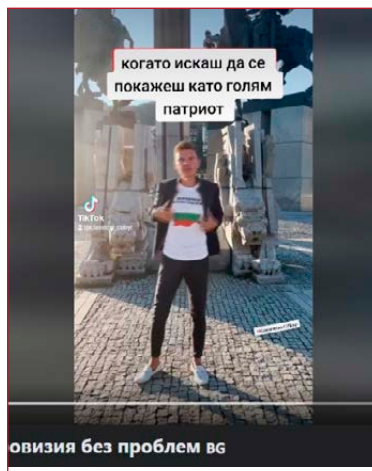


Murzilka magazine, No. 3, March 1932



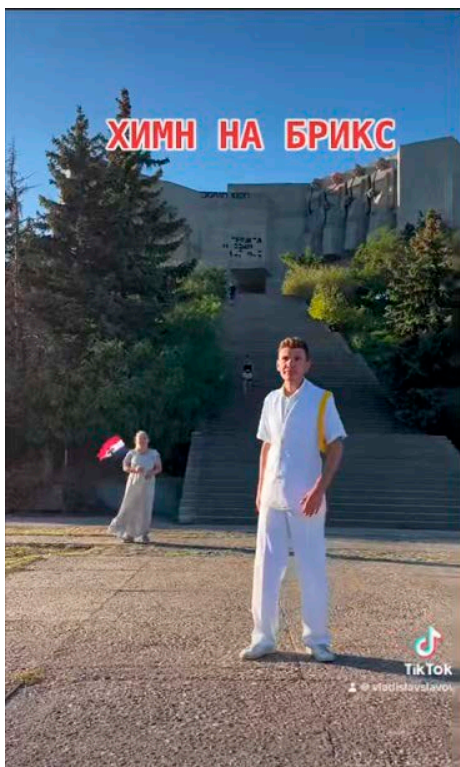


September 2023 also saw a comeback of nostalgic posts about socialism defined as socialist nostalgia (whose number had declined somewhat in the previous months). One such post, which has over 21,000 interactions, takes us back to our childhood when “We drank water from the hose and had real friends, not friends on Facebook.”



In the third quarter of 2023, and not only, controversial singer Vladislav Slavov gained popularity, impressing Bulgarian Facebook users with several songs dedicated to patriotic themes, but also to the war in Ukraine.

In *one of the videos*, Slavov sings a revised version of the popular patriotic song “If I Die or if I’m Killed” (“*Ako umra, il zagina*”) – in the lyrics he sings that he will always celebrate 3 March as Bulgaria’s national holiday. The video has over 500,000 views.



In *another video*, of 5 August, called “Un-Bulgarians” (“Bezrodnitsi”) about two weeks after President Rumen Radev popularized this definition, Slavov performs the popular patriotic song “Who Sewed the Flag?” (“Koy ushi bayraka?”) with his own lyrics. This video has a distinct geopolitical focus – Zelensky is referred to as a “Ukrainian thief [apasha]” who comes and demands our weapons. In response, the Bulgarian Parliament shouts, “The new Levski is Zelensky, we give you everything instantly!” But then the Bulgarian people intervenes and replies, “Don’t give anything, it’s so little and it’s been defended with blood. Don’t betray Levski, don’t betray your honour, and shout ‘Bulgaria!’”

◀ ANTHEM OF BRICS

Slavov’s last *video* in the third quarter of 2023 praises the failed BRICS economic project to the tune of the popular Italian guerrilla song “Bella Ciao!” In the video, a woman waves the Samara flag in front of the Park-Monument of Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship in Varna, while Slavov himself is dressed in a caricature of a parade uniform.