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2024

RUSSIAN *ONLINE* PROPAGANDA IN BULGARIA

In this newsletter, we present the activity, narratives and speakers of Russian propaganda disseminated in the first quarter of 2024 in Bulgarian online media as well as on Bulgarian Facebook.



“We and our president are for peace!”, child’s drawing

<https://englishrussia.com/2018/05/23/kids-drawings-of-putin-photos/>



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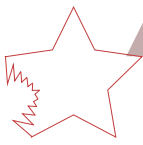
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Introduction

In this newsletter, we present the activity, narratives and speakers of Russian propaganda disseminated in the first quarter of 2024 in Bulgarian online media and on the most popular social media platform in Bulgaria, Facebook.

A. Brief Background

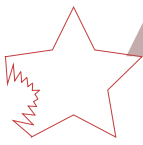
Recall: The propaganda wave in Bulgaria rose about ten days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and intensified further in 2023. The dissemination of Russian narratives increased in 2023 and this increase was due, firstly, to new technological solutions.¹ A network of mushroom websites was formed around the Blitz News Agency – we call it the Machine. The Machine consists of more than 10,000 anonymous pseudo-news websites with identical design and content: between 400 and 700 of them are active on a daily basis (many of them die, but others sprout like mushrooms). These websites circulate each article hundreds of times and thus further lead to the spread of Russian propaganda on social media. In 2023, a total of 346,385 reprints of articles containing the vocabulary of (pro)Russian propaganda were disseminated by the Machine. However, we will find out what happened to it in the first quarter of 2024 in this newsletter.

Secondly, the profile of Russian propaganda dissemination has changed since the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine – 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”.

B. What's New in 2024

A major new development in the first quarter of 2024 is **the sharp decline in content using Russian propaganda keywords in Bulgarian online media**. Between January and March 2024, SENSIKA identified a decrease of over 30% in the dissemination of propaganda messages compared to the previous quarter (October–December 2023). This decline is part of a sustained trend and is due to a change in the operation of the **Machine of Mushroom Websites, which appears to have started purging itself of propaganda content**. This dramatic turnaround is due to the exposure of propaganda websites and the subsequent investigation into them by the

¹ Summary of Report: *Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022)*, see <https://hssfoundation.org/4191/> [accessed 26 April 2024].



State Agency for National Security (SANS), which was prompted by our publications. The Machine has not only begun deleting previous content containing our specified keywords but has also introduced an algorithm to purge Russia-related topics from past, present, and future content. **For the mushroom websites, the Russia they once massively propagandized no longer exists and never did.** In other words, **the Machine is no longer what it used to be.**

Nevertheless, the websites of the Machine were still among the top disseminators during the period under review. These findings necessitated further investigation by the team of the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia (HSSF). The research keywords were updated to cover new propaganda narratives and theses. We thus found that Russian propaganda has not disappeared from the Machine – it has shifted its focus and is now operating on the domestic front. Since the beginning of 2024, mushroom websites have zeroed in on one target, massively vilifying one political formation: the We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) coalition.

As for **Russian propaganda outside the Machine** – in **other pro-Russian online media in Bulgaria** – **its narratives have not changed significantly** in the first quarter of 2024.

- ▶ **The heavy fixation on vilifying the West continued**, without any significant positive focus on Russia – the exception being traditional values, whose bearer is Russia, represented as the protector of European values against Europe itself.
- ▶ The first quarter of 2024 also saw the widespread promotion of the **Kremlin's logic of false syllogisms: 1. Question: "Who stands to benefit?" 2. Answer: "X" (X most often being the West). Therefore, 3. "X did it."** This quasi-logic was cynically applied to the death of Alexei Navalny: "If Navalny dies, this will discredit Russia. Who stands to benefit from discrediting Russia? The West. Therefore, the West killed Navalny." This pseudo-logic also underlies another typical Kremlin tactic: **confirmation by denial**. This involves issuing a denial so blatantly false and smug that it becomes a confirmation: we categorically deny sending troops to Ukraine in 2014, shooting down Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, poisoning Skripal, killing Navalny. The denial is so ostentatiously categorical and formal that everyone reads it as cynical confirmation.
- ▶ During the period under review, there were also changes in **the ideology of Russian propaganda, which has become increasingly militarized and talks ever more often about a war between NATO and Russia or even about a Third World War**. Emphasis was placed on events presented from the Russian point of view as "war preparations". Thus, actions by Western countries to ensure the protection of their territory in the event of a Russian military intervention, or military aid for the actually invaded Ukraine, were reinterpreted as direct "war preparations" or "sending in troops". At the end of the first quarter of 2024, with the presidential "elections" of 15–17 March 2024 in the Russian Federation, there were even clearer signs of the **formation of a klepto-military ideology of Russian society**.

The first quarter of 2024 saw a **slight toning down of the rhetoric of the five Bulgarian pro-Russian speakers monitored in this study, who typically present themselves as "peace-lovers": Rumen Radev, Korneliya Ninova, Kostadin Kostadinov, Petar Volgin, and Martin Karbovski**. However, this moderation was only in comparison to their extremely harsh rhetoric during the last months of 2023.

- ▶ An event that triggered a wider response among our "peace-lovers" was the position of French President Emmanuel Macron. During the conference in support of Ukraine held in Paris in late February, Macron did not rule out the possibility of a future deployment of Western troops to assist the invaded country. Such a sovereign decision could be taken by any European country independently, but none – let alone Bulgaria – has taken this decision. However, Macron's statement allowed pro-Russian speakers to once again exploit the fear that Bulgarians would be forcibly sent to the frontline and that Bulgaria would be "even more directly involved in the war".
- ▶ In domestic politics, the events that had the greatest public resonance were those around the failed government rotation, which was discussed through propaganda clichés about American



control over Bulgarian politics and the venality of the country's democratic and liberal elites – “lackeys” and “puppets on strings” who follow a foreign agenda.

- ▶ Curious highlights of the period under review were the comments about the Vazrazhdane party's draft law on Bulgaria's exit from NATO, as well as Martin Karbovski's not new but very expressive attempt to equate liberalism with fascism and liberal-democratic governance with dictatorship.

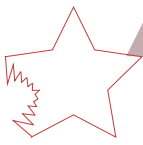
In the first quarter of 2024, social media continued to be preoccupied with similar topics as in the previous ones:

- ▶ The dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army in the Prince's Garden in central Sofia continued to be discussed and the fake news about the pending “dismantling” of the Shipka Monument was further spread. This debate reached Plovdiv, where the presence of the so-called Alyosha monument was indeed called into question – and its defenders rose up.
- ▶ The date of Bulgaria's national holiday, 3 March, continued to be a source of division due to Russia's ambiguous role in the country's history. In the days leading up to the celebration of 3 March, representatives of the pro-Russian parties in the country – Vazrazhdane, the BSP, and the coalition The Left! – did not fail to express their gratitude to the Russian Federation.



From social media:

<https://englishrussia.com/2018/12/12/hand-made-knitted-slippers-tanks-order-here-if-you-want/>



Dimitar Vatsov and Liubomir Donchev

1. Overall Propaganda Activity

1.1. Russian Propaganda Vocabulary Updated

We have updated the list of keywords with which we make frequency measurements of Russian propaganda. Why and how?

Propaganda in general – and contemporary Russian propaganda in particular, which we are studying here – is an artificially hardened and simplified language designed to wedge itself and seep into natural language. Let us recall: the strategic goal of any propaganda is to “hammer” certain schematic clichés into people’s heads so that these people will begin to think and react emotionally according to them: the clichés must become the grammar of their thinking and behaviour.² To this end, propagandists often artificially stabilize the meaning of certain words and expressions and insistently repeat them – thus forming a specific propaganda vocabulary (idiolect). This deliberately hardened vocabulary has two main functions. Firstly, it makes it **easier to express and remember the more general talking points** or narratives of propaganda – those clichéd interpretations of the world that propagandists want to impose. But also, secondly, the specific propaganda vocabulary **shapes identities**: it works as a jargon that unites the group that uses it, pitting that group against all those who “don’t speak our language”.

Kremlin propaganda today has also elaborated such a schematic vocabulary, and some of its words and phrases are easily recognizable: “Russian world”, “denazification”, “collective West”, etc. It is this specific vocabulary – once we have identified more of its emblematic words and phrases through discursive and semantic analysis – that serves us for quantitative measurements. We use its elements as keywords in search queries via the SENSIKA automated media monitoring system.³ Through it, we track – across more than 8,000 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs – who uses our keywords, when exactly and on what occasion, as well as how often and via what channels they repeat them.

But the propaganda vocabulary is also undergoing changes – language, however deliberately simplified and controlled, is a dynamic reality. That is why the keywords need to be periodically updated. The old semantic cluster on which we have based our measurements of Russian propaganda in the last two years, was identified in May 2022 and was only slightly revised in May 2023.⁴ Now, however, before we began tracking who is using the propaganda vocabulary and

2 Vatsov, D. Logics of Propaganda. Part One. Populism and Propaganda: Dangerous Liaisons and Family Resemblances. *Critique & Humanism*, vol. 49, 1/2018, pp. 71–106.

3 See <https://sensika.com/> [accessed 26 April 2024].

4 See the old keywords (in Bulgarian) in *Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (Part Two): Before and During the War against Ukraine (1 January – 31 May 2022)*, pp. 3–4. Available (in Bulgarian) at: <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Доклад.-Руската-пропаганда.-Преди-и-по време-на-войната-2022.pdf> [accessed 24 April 2024].





how in 2024, we had to comprehensively update our keywords. Our aim was to reduce “statistical dispersion”, which is an unavoidable feature of the method but which must be controlled if the results are to be reliable. We use the term “statistical dispersion” to refer to the following effect: for every keyword search in a relatively large and heterogeneous text base (more than 8,000 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs over long periods of time⁵), the search results include articles containing the specified keywords but using them either with a different meaning or in a completely different context – that is, they are not used for propaganda purposes. Over time, the number of such articles in search results for a given set of keywords increases. Of course, we have also added new words and phrases that have come into specific propagandistic use. Some of them – such as “Western colonialism” and “American imperialism” – are not exactly new: they are part of the repertoire of both classical Marxism and a number of critical discourses. Current analyses, however, show that in most of their media uses, they are “expropriated” by (pro)Russian propaganda.

Recently, a specific version of a now classic conspiracy theory has been gaining traction. According to it, *Bulgaria has lost its sovereignty and Bulgarian politicians are merely figureheads acting under the dictates of foreign puppeteers – of Washington and Brussels.* “The Embassy” – by default, the US embassy – is increasingly used as a byword for the “puppeteer” issuing orders to their local puppets. “Kozyak” – the name of the street where the US embassy in Sofia is located – is also used as a synonym for the latter. During the last regular government, the puppeteer took on a more personified form: “Galya from the Embassy” was identified as the figure behind the “assemblage” (*sglobka* – the Nikolay Denkov government), orchestrating the actions of the parties supporting the government – of both GERB and PP-DB.⁶ However, searching only for “the Embassy” yields many irrelevant results, often referring to other embassies – i.e., its use is not always propagandistic. That is why in our list of keywords we included only “Galya from the Embassy” and “Kozyak”, as they are unequivocal propaganda markers.

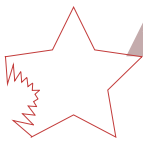
These and other similar changes in our main list of keywords have significantly reduced (though not entirely eliminated) the likelihood that articles which are completely irrelevant to the Russian propaganda package will appear in the search results. Such “statistical dispersion” is inevitable. However, after the revision of the keyword list, it has been reduced to less than 10%.

However, there is no way to technically reduce another type of “statistical dispersion” characteristic of the method: articles that do not conduct (pro)Russian propaganda but merely quote (pro)Russian speakers and, by repeating their words, inevitably appear in the search results. As we have noted repeatedly, since the summer of 2021, and especially since the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine, the number of such articles in our samples has increased significantly. The reason is that since then, official Russian spokespersons – Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, Zakharova, Mitrofanova, etc. – who used to speak in more neutral diplomatic language, have started to directly use the vocabulary and talking points of Russian propaganda (until then, it was conducted primarily by the Kremlin-controlled media). This fact, in turn, has automatically compelled all media, including neutral ones, to quote Russian officials in order to cover events. Thus, the objective media – unintentionally – become disseminators of the Kremlin’s language and talking points even when they explicitly criticize them.

5 The period depends on the time range set by the researcher in SENSİKA – it can vary from minutes to ten years.

6 See, e.g., https://lupa.bg/news/kabinetat-visit-na-galya-ot-posolstvoto_286607news.html [accessed 14 May 2024].





Recently, we have also witnessed another specific shift within the propaganda flow. New speakers are emerging who present themselves entirely as “Bulgarian patriots” – attempts are being made to establish a national-conservative alternative to the liberal status quo. These “patriots” adopt a significant part of the repertoire of Russian propaganda: the narratives about fighting against the “dictates of Washington and Brussels” or defending “traditional values”. But they rhetorically package them entirely as part of “Bulgarian sovereignty” and the “Bulgarian national interest”. Of course, these national-populists are more or less openly pro-Russian: not only in their rhetoric but also in their political actions. And if Viktor Orbán is their emblematic leader in Europe, in Bulgaria Rumen Radev has followed suit. But as a matter of fact, more and more speakers are taking this stance. We saw such a swarm of populist voices before the start of the full-scale war. But on 24 February 2022, many of them freaked out and fell silent, so the propaganda discourse remained for a while purely and explicitly Russian and pro-Russian. However, now that the war has become positional and “normalized”, the number of those eager to exploit Russian clichés for their “patriotic” benefit is once again on the rise.

So – be warned! – by way of our SENSIKA searches, we capture and measure the overall dissemination of a **murky propaganda flow** in which Russian talking points have both direct proxy uses directly serving the Kremlin, and local national-populist uses – local players adapting and applying them for their own political and economic ends. But it is not just the distinction between direct Kremlin propaganda and local national-populist voices that is somewhat blurred in this murky flow. Also blurred in it is the distinction between direct or literal uses of Russian propaganda vocabulary, on the one hand, and its quotation, including by serious and authoritative media outlets that criticize Russian propaganda, on the other.

Here is the updated semantic cluster – the list of keywords (in Bulgarian) we will be using from now on to make all frequency measurements:⁷

“anti-Russia” OR “anti Russia” OR “post-West” OR “the Russian world” OR “Russian world” OR “denazif⁸” OR “de-Russificat^{*}” OR “de-Russif^{*}” OR “anti-Russian sentiment” OR “the anti-Russian sentiments” OR “anti-Russian statements” OR “the anti-Russian statements” OR “anti-Russian hysteria” OR “the anti-Russian hysteria” OR “Russophob^{*}” OR “Atlanticist^{*}” OR “Western colonialists” OR “the Western colonialists” OR “the Western colonialism” OR “Western colonialism” OR “Euro-Atlantic colonialism” OR “the Euro-Atlantic colonialism” OR “the collective West” OR “American imperialism” OR “the American imperialism” OR “against Russia” OR “repressions against Russian-speakers” OR “the repressions against Russian-speakers” OR “ethnic bioweaponry” OR “Russia cornered” OR “NATO aggression” OR “NATO’s aggression” OR “commentariat^{*}” OR “Ukrainian nationalists” OR “the Ukrainian nationalists” OR “Ukrainian fascists” OR “the Ukrainian fascists” OR “liberal-fascists” OR “the liberal-fascists” OR “liberal fascists” OR “the liberal fascists” OR “liberal fascism” OR “the liberal fascism” OR “Banderit^{*}” OR “Donetsk People’s Republic” OR “the Donetsk People’s Republic” OR “DPR” OR “Lugansk People’s Republic” OR “the Lugansk People’s Republic” OR “LPR” OR “to strike Russia” OR “the change of power in Kiev” OR “the coup in Kiev” OR “a coup in Kiev” OR “the criminal regime in Kiev” OR “Nazi regime in Kiev” OR

⁷ See the list in Bulgarian in Appendix.

⁸ The asterisk at the end of single words stands in for all possible endings of the word. Quotation marks indicate exact phrase searches.



“the Nazi regime in Kiev” OR “Ukrainian Nazi regime” OR
 “the Ukrainian Nazi regime” OR “battering ram against Russia” OR
 “against the Russian world” OR “US protectorate” OR “United States protectorate” OR
 “the American protectorate” OR “American protectorate” OR
 “Euro-Atlantic protectorate” OR “the Euro-Atlantic protectorate” OR
 “American puppet” OR “the American puppet” OR “American puppets” OR
 “the American puppets” OR “US puppets” OR “the US puppets” OR
 “US puppet” OR “the US puppet” OR “puppet regime” OR “the puppet regime” OR
 “puppet government” OR “the puppet government” OR “American masters” OR
 “the American masters” OR “Euro-Atlantic masters” OR
 “the Euro-Atlantic masters” OR “Galya from the Embassy” OR “Kozyak” OR
 “American toadies” OR “the American toadies” OR “Euro-Atlantic toadies” OR
 “the Euro-Atlantic toadies” OR “Euro-Atlantic hawks” OR “the Euro-Atlantic hawks” OR
 “coalition against Russia” OR “the coalition against Russia” OR
 “Ukrainian neo-Nazis” OR “the Ukrainian neo-Nazis” OR “the nationalists of Kiev” OR
 “the nationalists in Kiev” OR “Ukrainian nationalist battalions” OR
 “the Ukrainian nationalist battalions” OR “proxy-force” OR “proxy force” OR
 “the 2014 coup” OR “quasi-state Ukraine” OR “quasistate Ukraine”

1.2. Machine Frantically Whitewashes Its Propagandistic Past

Here is a reminder for those who haven’t read our previous studies:

The Machine consists of more than 400 anonymous bot websites with identical content and similar design. In reality, there are many more – probably thousands, but there is a high turn-over among them: some die (become defunct) while others sprout like “mushrooms”. Most of our measurements over the past year have shown an average of slightly over 400 active websites at any given time, the maximum activity detected to date being in an instance where the same article was simultaneously recycled by 720 mushroom websites.

Most of the mushroom websites are created as sub-domains of four main domains: bgvest.eu, allbg.eu, bg7.eu and zbox7.eu. There are also others: novden.eu, prihod.eu, bg-utro.eu, 4eti.eu, etc. All of them gravitate around the Blitz News Agency, as over 80% of their media content is reprinted from it. In addition, they are linked to the content-sharing platform share4pay.com – Share4Pay seeks to recruit users, providing them with ready-made mushroom news websites and promising to pay them for sharing content from those websites on social media. Georgi A. Angelov of RFE/RL’s Bulgarian Service has recounted his experience in “working” for the Machine of Mushroom Websites via Share4Pay for a day,⁹ for which he was not paid anything. Both Angelov and the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) have measured the impact of mushroom websites on Facebook¹⁰ – and found that it is quite significant. The Center for the Study of Democracy, DFRLab, and Georgi A. Angelov have tracked down some of the individuals who own the companies producing the websites of the Machine.

9 <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/saytove-gabi--mashina--dezinformatsiya-rusija/32889599.html>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-disinformation-websites-mushrooms-russia/32950283.html> [accessed 26 May 2024].

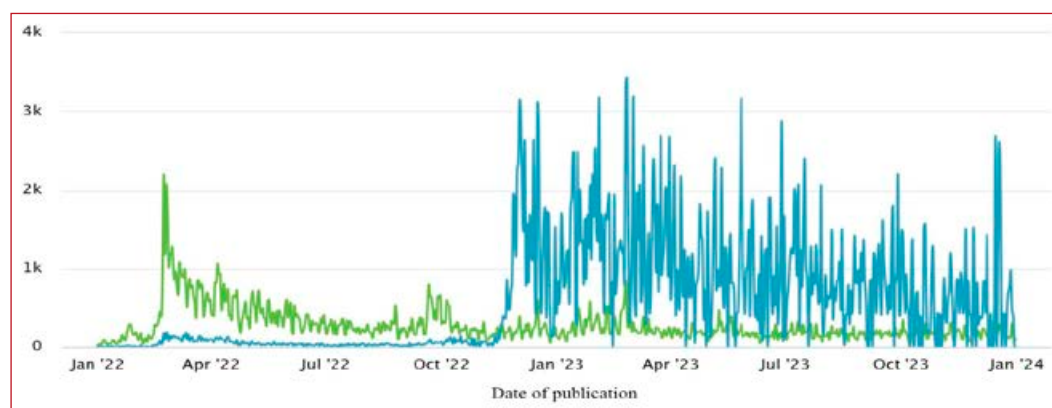
10 <https://dfrlab.org/2024/03/26/suspicious-facebook-assets-bulgarian-mushroom-websites/> [accessed 26 May 2024].



We first identified a small prototype of the Machine (a network of eight satellite websites of Blitz) back at the beginning of 2022.¹¹ The prototype was developed as a big Machine of more than 370 websites in November 2022. Since then, mushroom websites have been the most powerful tool for online dissemination of any media content in Bulgaria.

In the beginning, the Machine was also the biggest disseminator of Russian propaganda. After it went into operation in full swing in November 2022, the dissemination of Russian talking points increased by more than 10 times:

Chart 1. SENSIKA: Propaganda activity in 2022 and 2023, by day (1 January 2022 – 31 December 2023). In blue: total number of articles; in green: number of articles, excluding Machine of Mushroom Websites.¹²



After we publicly exposed the propaganda activities of the Machine in our 2023 reports and newsletters as well as in a number of media publications, sometime in mid-2023 it began to change its behaviour. In the second and third quarters, and especially in the fourth quarter of 2023, there was a sharp decline in the number of publications containing the specified keywords.¹³ The nature of publications also changed: whereas in late 2022 and early 2023 the articles were mainly poor machine translations of reports by Russian war correspondents from the frontline in Ukraine, often containing false information, they gradually became more professional reviews in which, alongside the Western one, the “Russian point of view” began to be presented through references rather than through literal repetition of Russian sources.

In the first quarter of 2024, we witnessed an even more dramatic change in the Machine’s behaviour.

11 Summary of Report: Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (Part Two): Before and During the War against Ukraine (1 January – 31 May 2022), p. 5, see <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Abstract-Report-Part-2-eng.pdf> [accessed 26 May 2024].

12 Reprinted from Summary Report of the HSSF on Russian Online Propaganda in Bulgaria in 2023, p. 5, Chart 2, available (in Bulgarian) at: <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/doklad-bg.pdf> [accessed 26 May 2024].

13 Ibid., p. 4.



It is due to two main factors. First, Russian propaganda on mushroom websites has become a central research and media issue taken up by many other Bulgarian and foreign organizations, including national and global media outlets.¹⁴ Second, on 27 February 2024, DPS leader Delyan Peevski approached the Interior Ministry, SANS and the prosecution service with an alert, asking them: “Is there a network of pro-Russian bots in Bulgaria, and who is behind it?” “The alert is prompted by data on results of studies by the *Human and Social Studies Foundation* made public by Prof. Dimitar Vatsov, President of the HSFF Managing Board, which have been published on the Foundation’s website and commented on in the media.”¹⁵ The prosecution service indeed assigned SANS to conduct an investigation, in which one of the authors of these lines has already been summoned to testify.

Reacting to these events, **the Machine of Mushroom Websites began to urgently whitewash its past and to preemptively cleanse its present and future.**

First, **it has deleted all published material containing our specific keywords** – at least those on our old list (we are only now providing access to the new one). Furthermore, all material containing non-specific words such as “Putin”, “Russia” and “Russian Federation” has also been deleted. Currently, nothing related to Russia can be found on the mushroom websites; although plenty of old material about sports, sensationalism, and even domestic politics remains available online. Thus, to the average internet user, it appears that the mushroom websites have never published anything about Russia – let alone Russian propaganda. However, both SENSIKA and other online archiving platforms archive deleted publications on their servers, ensuring that they can be analyzed.

What is even more remarkable is that after 3 April 2024 – this goes beyond the timeframe of the current issue of the newsletter, but we cannot ignore it¹⁶ – the Machine of Mushroom Websites did not just purge pro-Russian content back in time, it stopped publishing such content altogether:

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- 14 The national television and radio stations as well as almost all Bulgarian-language news websites have already carried reports about the Machine. For global interest in the issue, see, e.g., Tony Wesolowsky, ‘Mushroom Websites’ Spread A Deluge Of Disinformation In Bulgaria, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-disinformation-mushroom-websites/32893788.html> [accessed 26 May 2024].
 - 15 <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/peevski-pita-mvr-dans-i-prokuraturata-ima-li-mrezha-ot-proruski-botove-u-nas-i-koj-stoi-zad-neja.html> [accessed 26 May 2024].
 - 16 There is no reason why we should not analytically take advantage of the time distance from the first quarter of the year, which allows us to see at least partially what happened after it. The opportunity to do so came about thanks to a delay in analysis due to the need to update the keywords.

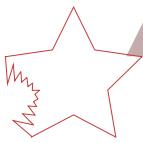
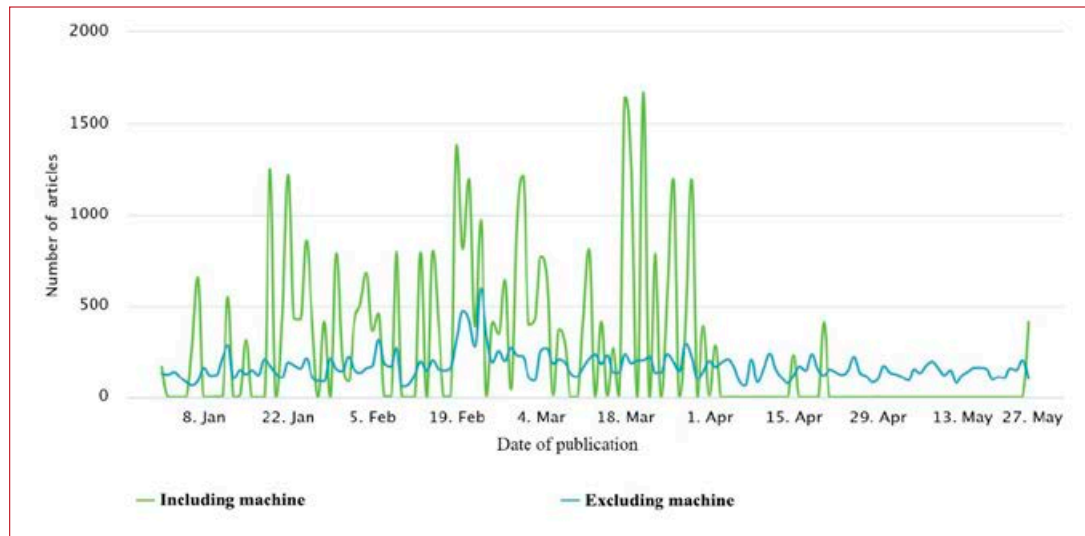


Chart 2. SENSIKA: Propaganda activity from 1 January 2024 to 24 May 2024, by day. In green: total number of articles; in blue: number of articles, excluding Machine of Mushroom Websites.

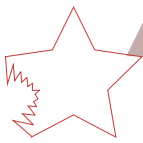


Since 3 April 2024, the propaganda activity of the Machine appears to have been discontinued, at least regarding material using our publicly available keywords.¹⁷ SENSIKA detects keywords in old publications because it archives published material even if it is subsequently deleted, but it cannot archive something that has not been uploaded at all. Thus, no pro-Russian propaganda, at least at first glance, was published on the Machine after 3 April. The only exception was on 27 April, when an article containing the phrase “puppet government”¹⁸ was reprinted 198 times by the mushroom websites. However, this phrase is one of the new additions to our updated list and was not on the old list. This leads us to a hypothesis: the mushroom websites have been algorithmically instructed to delete past content and, from 3 April onwards, not to publish new content containing our old keywords. Remarkably, we’ve set a standard for identifying Bulgarian-language Russian propaganda, and consequently, how to purge oneself of it!

Furthermore, it appears that mushroom websites are now being algorithmically purged not only backwards but also forwards in time. As we said, going “belt and braces”, the Machine has expanded our keyword list and added some more general ones (“Putin”, “Russia”, “Russian Federation”, and possibly others), thus completely excluding the possibility of publishing any Russian-themed content.

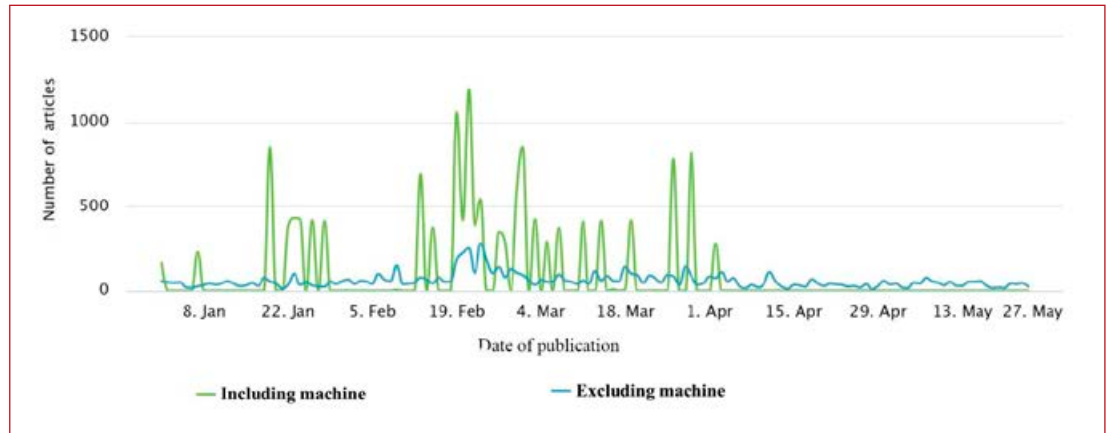
¹⁷ See note 4 above.

¹⁸ This article is not pro-Russian propaganda, it is an effect of “statistical dispersion”: it reports that Gen. Atanas Atanasov called Dimitar Glavchev’s government a “puppet government”. What we have here is rather a counter-propaganda use of the propaganda phrase.



Here are the results of a SENSIKA search for the word “Putin” alone:

Chart 3. SENSIKA: Number of articles containing the word “Putin” published from 1 January 2024 to 24 May 2024, by day. In green: total number of articles; in blue: number of articles, excluding Machine of Mushroom Websites.



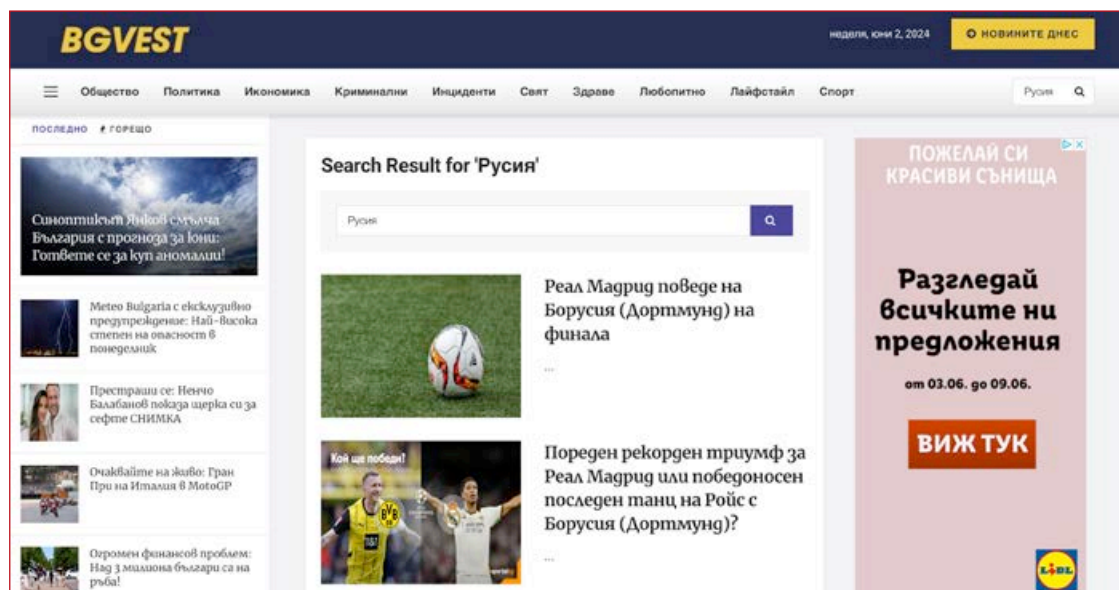
All media, whether propaganda ones or not, have continued to comment on Putin. However, since 3 April, only the mushroom websites have not dared even mention his name. The sole exception was on 12 April, when 401 mushroom websites recycled the article “Georgi Vuldzhev: Petkov is an idiot, Vasilev is a crook, and Hristo Ivanov is...”,¹⁹ which mentions Putin, but with his name in all caps: “Now Nikolay Denkov should give another interview to the Financial Times, to explain to them how PUTIN is attacking the reputation of the Good Forces also through NGOs funded by [the] America for Bulgaria [Foundation].” It seems that the purging algorithm has not been coded to recognize uppercase words (Fix it, colleagues!).

It is even more remarkable that the mushroom websites have heard absolutely nothing about Russia since 3 April. Furthermore, if we run a search not via SENSIKA, which has a long memory that goes back to before 3 April, but through the mushroom websites themselves, we will see that they have never ever heard of the country Russia. We chose to test the four main domains from which the mushroom subdomains are cloned: bgvest.eu, bg7.eu, allbg.eu and zbox.eu.

¹⁹ <https://iveto1975i.bg7.eu/1073304/> [accessed 26 May 2024].



Screenshot of Search Result for “Russia”, bgvest.eu20



The search for “Russia” returned dozens of articles about the football team Borussia Dortmund, part of whose name matches the search term, but not a single article about the country Russia. If you ask the mushroom websites nowadays, there is no such country, nor has there ever been.

Curiously, the fourth main domain was unavailable – instead, an announcement that it was for sale for \$2,999 came up.

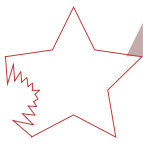
1.3. Overall Dissemination and Peak Days in the First Quarter of 2024

However, this abrupt change – Russia disappearing not from the world map, but from the virtual map of mushroom websites – occurred at the beginning of the second quarter. We will deal with it again when we analyze the second quarter. Now let us go back to the first quarter of 2024. What happened during this period?

For comparability, we first present measurement data on the old keywords, the ones used to make the measurements in 2023.

In the first quarter of the year (January–March 2024), SENSIKA identified **48,605 online articles** containing the old keywords. This marked a consecutive decline – by more than 30% – compared to the previous quarter (October–December 2023), when SENSIKA identified **69,910 articles** containing the same keywords. The decline is even more significant and is part of a sustained trend when viewed over a longer time horizon – relative to early 2023. If we compare the first quarter of 2024 with the first quarter of 2023 (when SENSIKA identified 150,040 articles),

20 <https://bgvest.eu/?s=%D0%A0%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F> [accessed 27 May 2024].



we will find that **the dissemination of (pro)Russian propaganda online has declined by more than threefold in one year.**²¹ Here we can see how much of this decline is due to the Machine of Mushroom Websites:

Table 1. Propaganda dissemination in 2023 and early 2024 by quarter
(number of publications on Bulgarian-language websites and blogs)

Period	Total number of publications	Machine of Mushroom Websites	Other websites and blogs
January–March 2023	150,040	126,225	23,815
April–June 2023	105,741	88,907	16,843
July–September 2023	93,792	77,493	16,299
October–December 2023	69,910	53,760	16,150
January–March 2024	49,605	32,173	16,432

It is evident that almost all of the decline is due to the Machine of Mushroom Websites – compared to the first quarter of 2023, in January–March 2024 it disseminated almost four times fewer articles containing the old keywords. In contrast, the propaganda flow outside the Machine remained steady, with all other online sources disseminating slightly over 16,000 articles with the (pro)Russian vocabulary for four consecutive quarters. The conclusion by this indicator as well is clear: **The Machine is being purged of (pro)Russian content.**

This conclusion is also confirmed by the updated keyword list with which – after excluding irrelevant articles – we identified 30,345 articles in the first quarter of 2024.

²¹ See HSSF Newsletter, no. 4/2023, p. 6, available (in Bulgarian) at: <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/%D0%B1%D0%B3-%D0%B1%D1%8E%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D0%B1%D1%804-1.pdf> [accessed 15 May 2024].

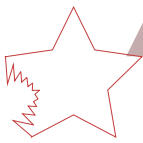
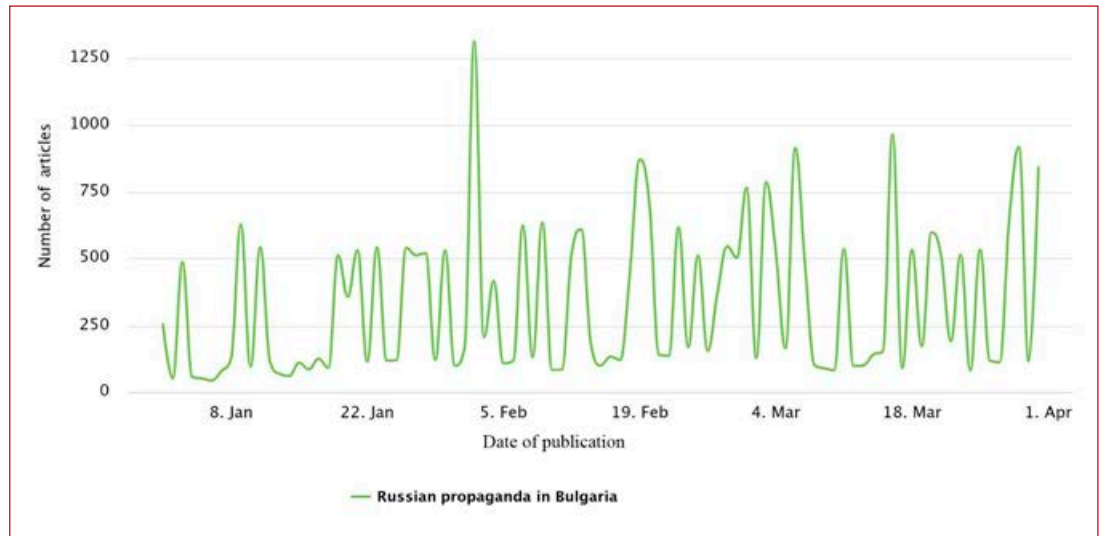


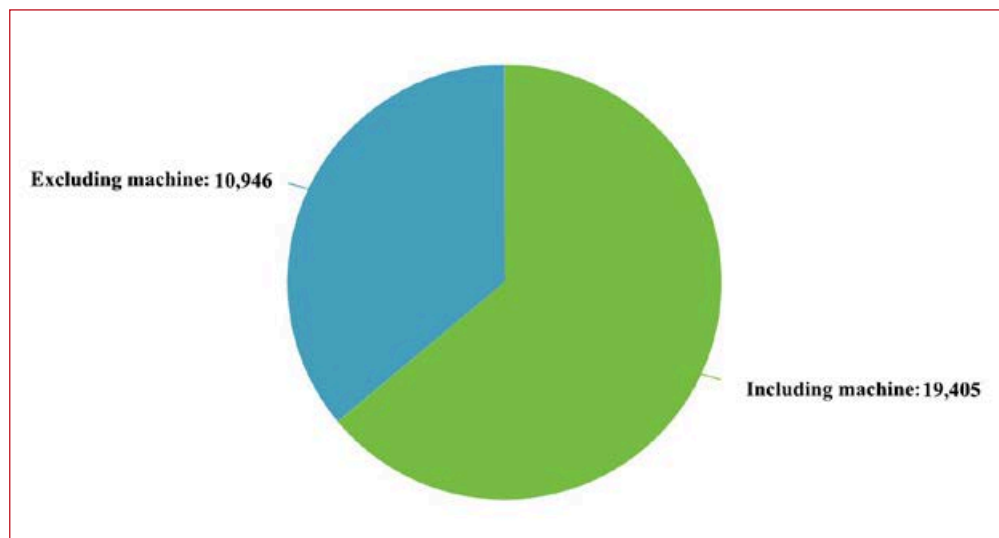
Chart 4. SENSIKA: Number of articles per day, 1 January – 31 March 2024. Total 30,345 articles containing updated keywords.



Thanks mostly to the purging of the Machine (but also due to the exclusion of irrelevant articles), the average propaganda activity for the period has dropped – in the first quarter of 2024, it was 334 articles per day.

As with the old keyword list, search results based on the updated list show that the Machine accounted for about two-thirds of total propaganda activity in January–March 2024:

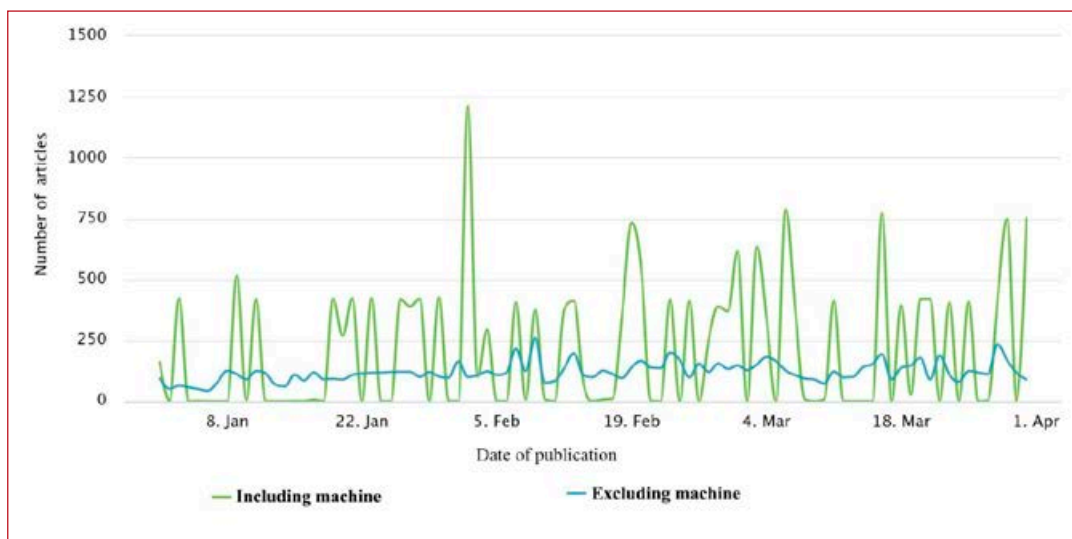
Chart 5. SENSIKA: Number of articles in the first quarter of 2024 (total 30,345) – including and excluding the Machine.



Unlike the other online sources that regularly use the (pro)Russian propaganda vocabulary, the Machine was not activated every day:



Chart 6. SENSIKA: Number of articles per day, 1 January – 31 March 2024 – including and excluding the Machine.



Although the Machine was not activated every day, it accounted for the peak days (the days with the highest number of publications) in the period under review, when its hundreds of mushroom websites circulated from one to three articles containing the specified keywords.

Here are the peak days – two for each month – in the first quarter of 2024:

Table 2. Peak days (number of publications per day, 1 January – 31 March 2024)

Date	Total number of online publications and reprints containing specified keywords	Total number of reprints circulated only by the Machine	Number of basic publications reprinted by the Machine
9 January 2024	627	516	1
23 January 2024	540	423	1
2 February 2024	1,311	1,212	3
19 February 2024	870	732	2
6 March 2024	913	787	2
16 March 2024	962	771	2

Based on a content analysis of the publications on these particular peak days, conclusions will be drawn in the following paragraphs of this section. Before that, however, let us see which were the main sources that circulated the vocabulary of Russian propaganda in the first quarter of 2024:

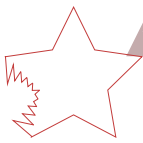
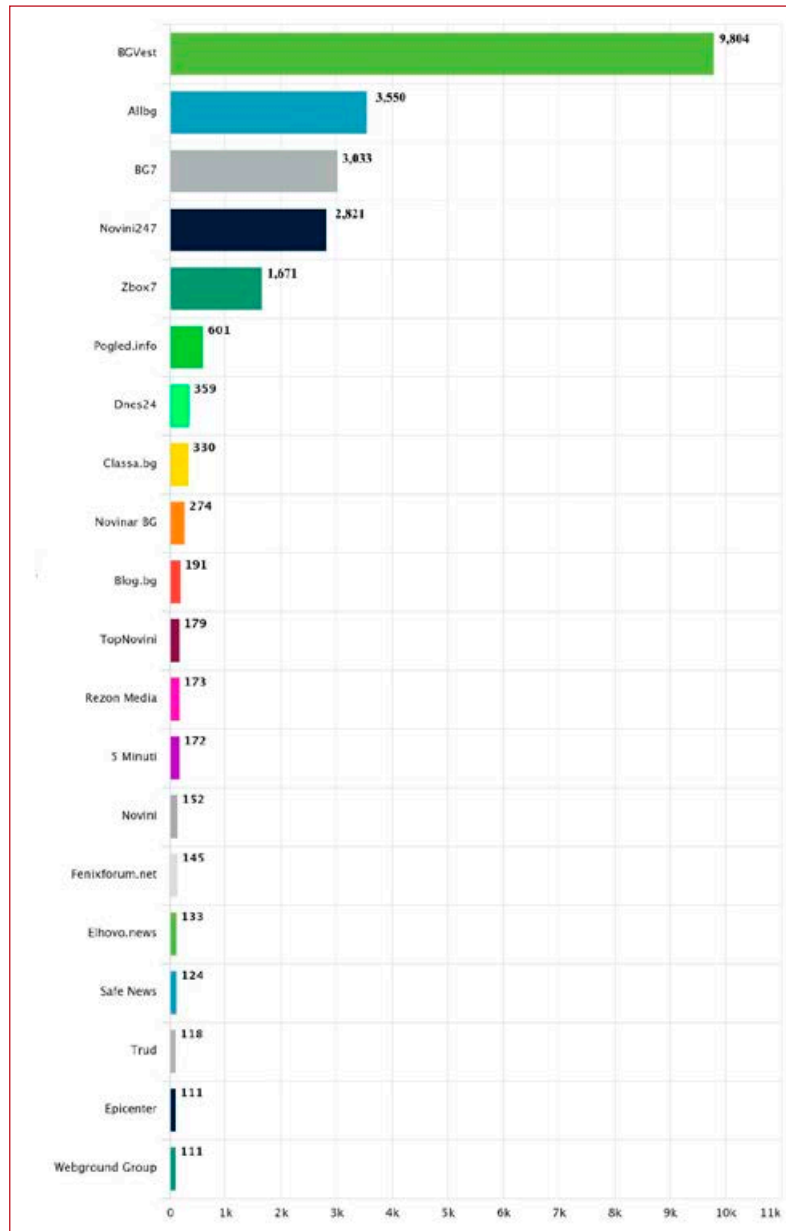


Chart 7. SENSIKA: Top 20 media outlets by number of articles containing specified keywords, 1 January – 31 March 2024.



There were no significant shifts in the ranking of (pro)Russian propagandists in the first quarter of 2024. Four of the top five positions – first, second, third, and fifth – are held by the four main domains of the Machine of Mushroom Websites (BGVest, Allbg, BG7, and Zbox7), along with their subdomains. Among them, in fourth place, is the aggregator Novini247 which, however, is also linked to the Machine according to Georgi A. Angelov’s investigation. And only after them – in sixth place – is the main “authorial” hub of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria: Pogled Info. Two other “authorial” media outlets, Trud and Epicenter, are only at the end of the top 20 in the first quarter of 2024. It is noteworthy that the relatively new propaganda channel Safe News appears in the ranking for the first time.



1.4. Content Analysis of Publications on Peak Days: Residual Breakthroughs of (Pro)Russian Propaganda Voices

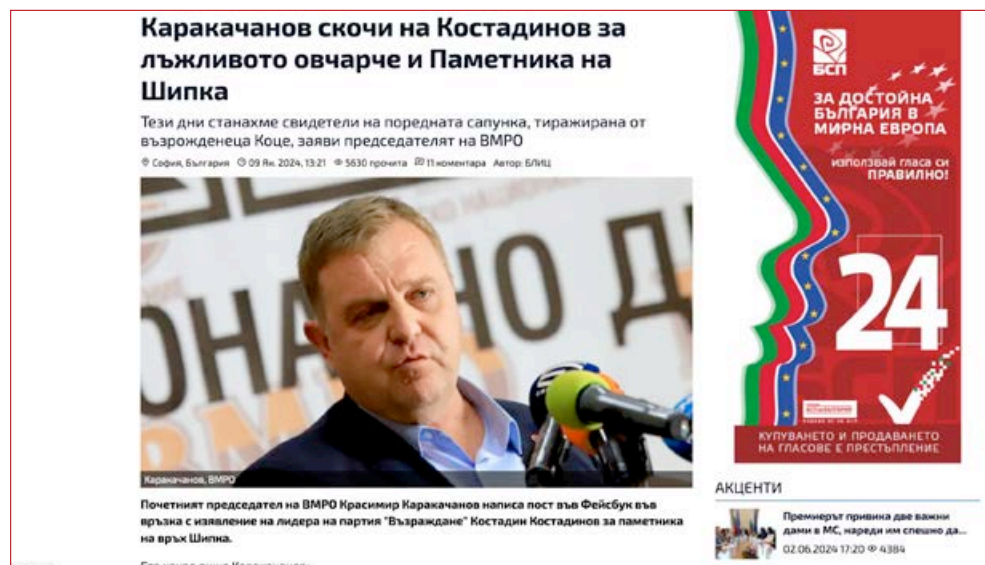
Having found a decline and even a purging of Russian propaganda from the Machine by many indicators, we reduced the sample of peak days in the first quarter of 2024 by half (six days instead of twelve as in the previous quarters).

On the six days with the highest number of publications in the first quarter of 2024, the mushroom websites reprinted a total of eleven basic publications, circulating them 4,441 times, or an average of 404 times per publication. Of these eleven publications, nine were reprinted from Blitz. Again, nine of these eleven publications were subsequently deleted from the Machine because they contained our old keywords. Only two of them remain available on the mushroom websites, as they were found with new keywords. However, all of these publications – whether deleted or not – have been archived by SENSIKA.

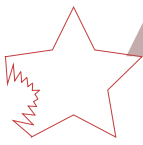
There are no irrelevant articles in the search results for the peak days in the period under review – all eleven basic publications feature the (pro)Russian propaganda vocabulary. As we have already noted, this does not mean that these publications are explicitly propagandistic. The propaganda vocabulary appears in them through quotations of mostly Russian or Bulgarian spokespersons, even when the (pro)Russian point of view is not dominant in them. For example, some of them provide an overview of the situation on the frontline in Ukraine by quoting mainly Western sources, most often ISW (Institute for the Study of War). Among them is even one article that sounds explicitly pro-Ukrainian, as it recounts the thesis of Ukrainian General Pavlyuk.²²

Still, several articles explicitly promote Russian talking points, though not on their own behalf but through the speakers they quote.

The most interesting article in terms of content is “Karakachanov lays into Kostadinov about boy who cried wolf and [about] Shipka Monument”,²³ as it shows how flexible and amenable to internal shifts and transformations the (pro)Russian narratives are.



22 https://blitz.bg/svyat/vishh-general-obyasni-provala-na-ruskiya-plan-da-prevzemem-kiiev-za-3-dni_news1003093.html [accessed 2 June 2024].
23 https://blitz.bg/politika/karakachanov-skochi-na-kostadinov-za-lzhlivoto-ovcharche-i-pametnika-na-shipka_news995947.html [accessed 2 June 2024].



This article is the most reprinted one in the sample, with a total of 516 reprints under two different headlines on 9 January 2024. It quotes a post by Krasimir Karakachanov, who lambasts the “sham Euro-Atlanticists” for their “schizophrenic Russophobia” and even attempts to introduce a new term in the propaganda vocabulary, “*nakolenkadzhii*” (roughly translated as “kneeling scum”). However, a special search in SENSIKA showed that this term has not been adopted by other speakers and remains unique to Karakachanov. In his post, Karakachanov vies with Kostadin Kostadinov for a place under the sun on nationalist turf and accuses the latter – rightfully – of lying that there were plans to demolish the Shipka Monument after the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia. As a historian, Karakachanov positions himself between “Kotse [Kostadin], the boy who cried wolf”, and the “sham Euro-Atlanticists”:

*But both the “Euro-Atlanticists” and our Kotse don’t distinguish between Russia and the USSR, between the Soviet army and the Russian liberator army. And if public opinion on the monument to the Soviet army in Sofia and others of the sort is divided because there are people who don’t want monuments to foreign armies that fought against Bulgaria – be they Soviet or American – I am convinced that when it comes to the monuments of the war for the liberation of Bulgaria from Turkish slavery, 90% of the people are in favour of their preservation and that even those of the current ruling assemblage [sglobka] won’t get it into their birdbrain minds to touch them.*²⁴

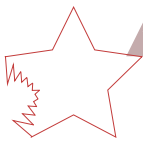
In sync with Karakachanov – in an attempt to undermine “Euro-Atlanticism” – on 2 February, Vezhdi Rashidov also joined in, quoted in the article “Rashidov drops bombshell about Galya from the embassy, who runs the country”:²⁵



Let us recall that although this talking point is old – “The Embassy (Kozyak) orchestrates politics in Bulgaria” – the specification “Galya from the Embassy” is an authorial innovation of Rashidov’s. When in August 2023 he was forced to resign from the National Assembly because of obscene statements, he himself explained his departure with the intervention of “Galya from the Embassy”. In contrast to Karakachanov’s *nakolenkadzhii*, this coinage by Rashidov – “Galya from

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Since “Galya from the embassy” is one of the new keywords, the article, at least until the publication of this newsletter, is still available on the mushroom websites: see, e.g., <https://iveto19751.bg7.eu/1048710/> [accessed 2 June 2024].



the Embassy” – was widely accepted and has become part of the standard propaganda arsenal used to undermine domestic political opponents. In this case, Rashidov only rehashed it with paternal pride.

Another explicit propaganda article of 2 February is headlined “Ex-US officer: To guarantee Crimea’s security, Russia will have to...”²⁶



Actually, the quoted speaker is Scott Ritter, one of the standard and most frequently quoted arch-propagandists of Putin in the West, a former US intelligence officer who now repeats all the Kremlin’s talking points from the position of an “independent Western expert”:

Ukraine’s Odessa-based armed forces pose a direct threat to the [Crimean] peninsula. Moscow won’t leave such a “lever” of pressure unattended – the city will have to be liberated.

“Russia won’t allow Kiev to control this city,” he noted, adding that “the Nazi regime will be liquidated after the end of hostilities.”²⁷

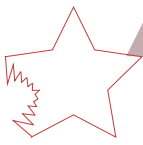
The Putinist chorus in the sample includes Emir Kosturica, long known for his pro-Kremlin sentiments. What is curious here, however, is the headline that frames the article: “Everyone heeds these words of Emir Kusturica about Russophobia and war”.²⁸ There’s no way people – and “everyone” at that – won’t hear the deep truth from the legendary director!

This concludes the content analysis of publications on the six peak days in the first quarter of 2024. As the last four (out of a total of eleven) articles we have discussed show, despite the efforts to disguise (pro)Russian propaganda in the Machine as objective quoting of speakers and sources rather than as mushroom websites’ own text, it still made distinct breakthroughs. Later, the explicitly propaganda articles were deleted from the Machine’s content.

²⁶ https://blitz.bg/analizi-i-komentari/bivsh-us-ofitser-za-da-garantira-sigurnostta-na-krim-rusiya-shche-tryabva-da_news999844.html [accessed 2 June 2024].

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ https://blitz.bg/svyat/vsichki-se-vslushakha-v-tezi-dumi-na-emir-kusturitsa-za-rusofobiyata-i-voynata_news1005889.html [accessed 2 June 2024].



However, another hypothesis was also suggested by the analysis of the peak day sample. Namely, that (pro)Russian propaganda is not disappearing from the Machine, it is only changing its target and function. Going “belt and braces”, the Machine – since mid-2023, but now as if with a knife after April 3, 2024 – has been purging its mushroom websites of geopolitical narratives and repurposing itself for domestic political use.

Let us recall that in late 2022 and the first half of 2023, pro-Russian reports from the frontline abounded in the Machine, while Bulgarian domestic politics was virtually absent.²⁹ Gradually, in the second half of 2023, reports from the frontline gave way to commentaries and Bulgarian news; by the end of the year, Peevski himself emerged as a figure massively circulated by the Machine.³⁰ Since 3 April 2024, not only has the weight of geopolitics decreased – even Russia and Putin have disappeared from the virtual map of the world created by the Machine.

Our hypothesis was that, despite all this, Russian propaganda has not disappeared from the Machine. On the contrary, its narratives have simply been redirected to operate on the domestic front. Let us check!

1.5. The Machine’s New Propaganda Function: “All Against PP-DB!”

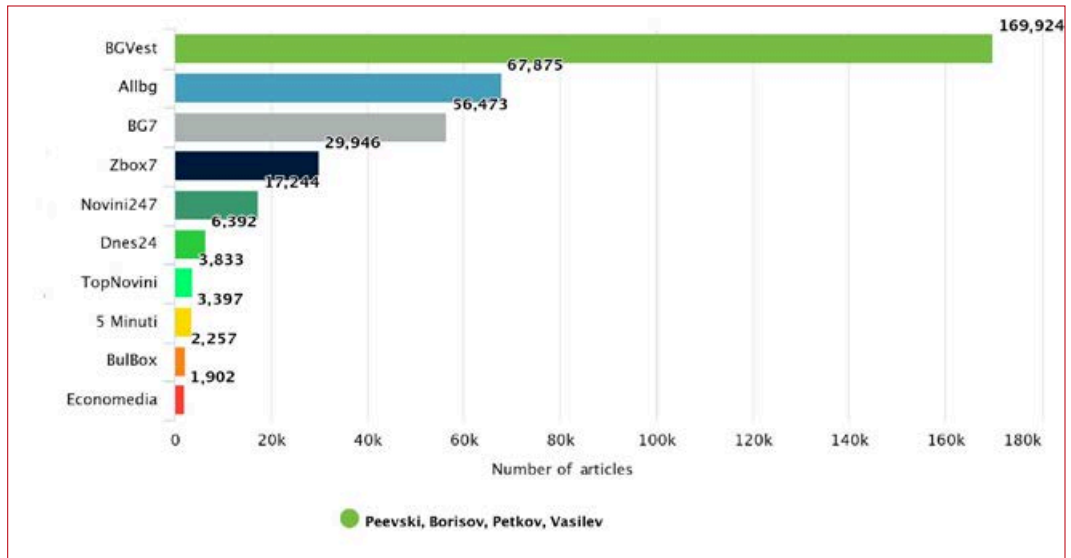
To check how the Machine covered domestic politics in the first quarter of 2024, we ran a new SENSIKA search, but this time only for the names of some of the key politicians backing Nikolay Denkov’s regular government (the so-called “assemblage”). Our keywords were “Peevski”, “Borisov”, “Petkov”, and “Vasilev”. Almost half a million – 467,940 articles – mentioned the names of the four politicians (an average of 5,142 articles per day). And the Machine – with its four main domains – again dominated the online media field (324,219 reprints by BGWest, Allbg, BG7 and Zbox7 and their subdomains):

²⁹ See HSSF Newsletter, no. 2/2023, p. 9, available at: <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/final-en-newsletter-2.pdf> [accessed 2 June 2024].

³⁰ See HSSF Newsletter, no. 3/2023, p. 19, available at: <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/final-en-newsletter-3.pdf> [accessed 2 June 2024].

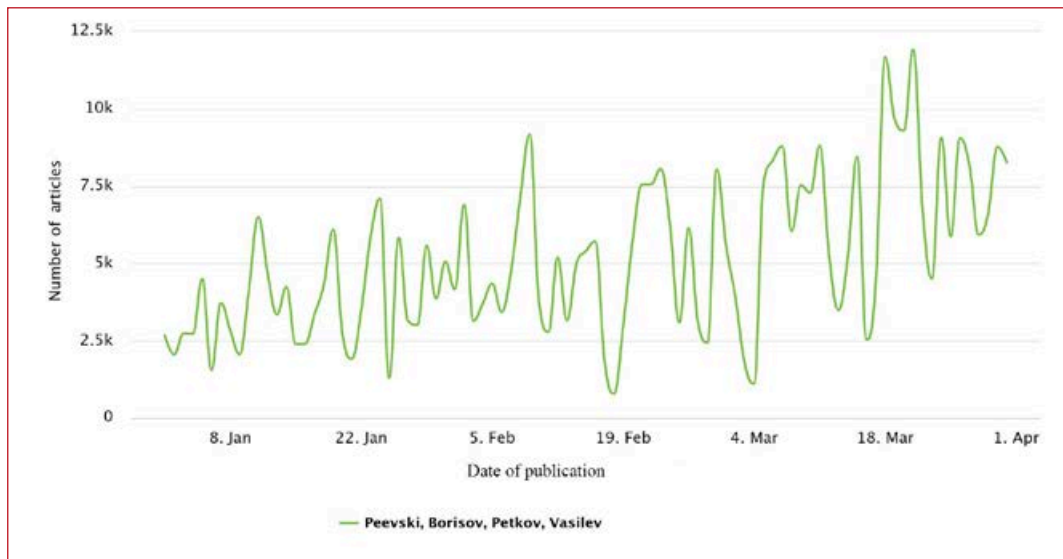


Chart 8. SENSIKA: Number of articles by source, 1 January – 31 March 2024 (Search results for “Peevski”, “Borisov”, Petkov”, “Vasilev”).

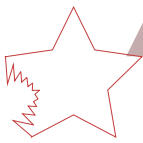


The articles mentioning the names of the four politicians were almost evenly distributed over the period under review, increasing slightly in the second half of March, when the debates intensified and the government ultimately fell because of the failed rotation of prime ministers.

Chart 9. SENSIKA: Number of articles referring to “Peevski”, “Borisov”, “Petkov”, and “Vasilev”, by day (1 January – 31 March 2024).

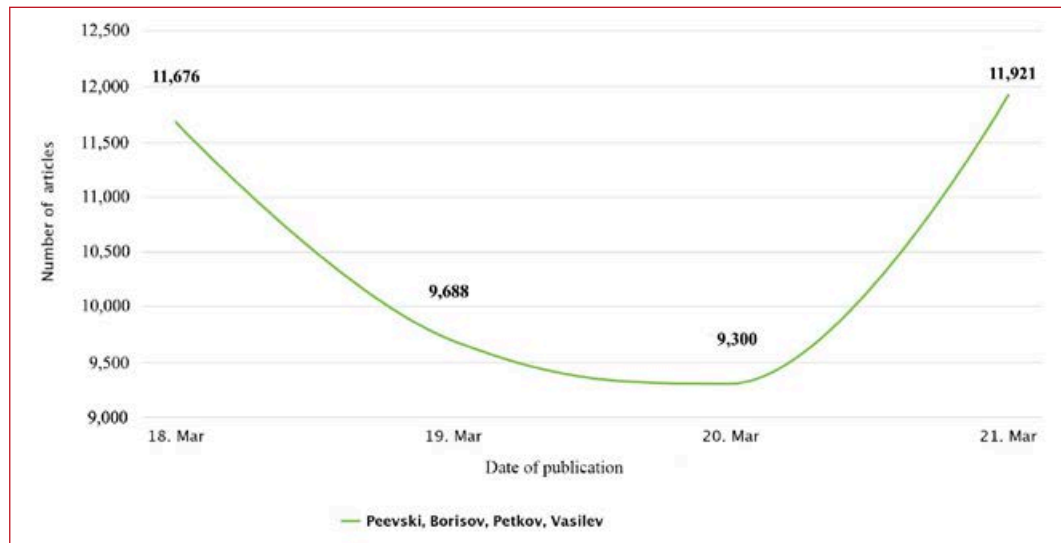


As a matter of fact, the most distinct peak, between 18 and 21 March 2024, coincides precisely with the final breakdown of the negotiations between the political parties supporting the government. We will analyze it in more detail.



This peak consists of 42,585 articles, distributed over four days as follows:

Chart 10. SENSIKA: Number of articles referring to “Peevski”, “Borisov”, “Petkov”, and “Vasilev”, by day (18–21 March 2024).



Out of all the articles published on the four days in question, 31,450 were published by the Machine (74%). In fact, its mushroom websites circulated 91 articles containing the names of the four politicians, reprinting each article an average of 346 times. Most of these articles were reprinted from Blitz.

Of these 91 articles that we content-analyzed, more than half are politically biased – they have a **verifiable domestic political propaganda function**. However, this function is not affirmative – the propaganda Machine was not explicitly promoting any political formation. Instead, its function is **subversive** – targeting a specific political formation: PP-DB (the We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria coalition).

There are basically two methods by which the image of PP-DB was systematically subverted:

- ▶ First, all their political opponents, as well as other public speakers who are explicitly critical of them, were given the floor en masse.
- ▶ Secondly, through the headlines and the editorial text, PP-DB were tendentiously portrayed either as “weaklings” – cornered, helpless, kneeling and pleading, or – conversely, as strong and active, but therefore “to blame” – for various abuses or mistakes ascribed to them, but most of all for the failure of the negotiations on government rotation and for the imminent early elections.

1.5.1. Who Is Quoted by Mushroom Websites?

Here are some statistics on the speakers quoted in the 91 articles in question. Let us note that party leaders are the most frequently quoted, but since other party representatives are also given the floor, we have calculated the total number of speakers by party/coalition:

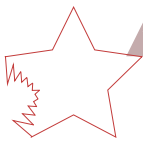


Table 3: Number of articles in the sample quoting party speakers

Main speaker	Number of articles
GERB representative	29
DPS representative	6
PP-DB representative	19
ITN representative	5
Vazrazhdane representative	2
BSP representative	3
Other (experts and representatives of other non-party institutions)	27

Notably, there is a significant disproportion between the number of articles quoting representatives of the two political formations that constituted the so-called “assemblage” (the Denkov government), which were engaged in fierce negotiations during the period in question: 19 articles for PP-DB and 29 for GERB. It is important to note that all speakers of the “opposition” parties primarily targeted PP-DB (with the exception of the BSP, which also criticized GERB). A total of 45 articles quote political speakers who criticized PP-DB to varying degrees, while PP-DB were given the floor to defend themselves only in the aforementioned 19 articles. The proportion is similar among the other “experts”: 18 were explicitly critical of PP-DB, none openly supported them, and nine remained neutral.

Here are some examples:

Although he is quoted in only two articles in the sample, Vazrazhdane leader Kostadin Kostadinov was particularly vitriolic:

I’ve seen humiliation, but I’d never seen anything like PP-DB’s current self-humiliation before.

Kiro [Kiril Petkov] and company are literally begging Boyko and company on their knees to take them into government. This is what Vazrazhdane leader Kostadin Kostadinov wrote on his Facebook profile.³¹

Of course, the article’s headline also reinforces Kostadinov’s message.

No less vitriolic was Slavi Trifonov:

The irony is that you are pathetic, yet you pretend to be a man. This is how Slavi Trifonov addressed Kiril Petkov after last night’s extraordinary briefing, writes dnes.bg.³²

By the way, GERB speakers, especially Borisov and the participants in the negotiations, as well as Peevski, were more restrained in their criticisms of PP-DB – they avoided using too strong language. Still, GERB “spearheads” like Delyan Dobrev were given a free hand to lash out at PP-DB:

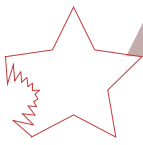
Dobrev with scandalous disclosure: Asen Vasilev squandered BGN 4.5 bln, money’s unaccounted for.³³

This chorus was complemented by a number of specially selected “other” speakers.

31 <https://novinarbg.allbg.eu/1064691/> [accessed 2 June 2024].

32 <https://intersno.bgvest.eu/1053837/> [accessed 2 June 2024].

33 <https://otbyala.zbox7.eu/1055095/> [accessed 9 June 2024].



For example, Alexander Marinov of the President's Office, which is supposed to be non-partisan, said the following about the ongoing negotiations:

*Radev adviser: We're witnessing brutal pressure and blackmail. Borisov, with the active assistance of Peevski, has pushed Kiril and Asen into a corner. PP-DB are falling apart like a house of cards...*³⁴

Among the "experts", we also find an open apologia to Borisov:

*Boyko Borisov made a hyper-move, [he's made] the realization of the rotation and of a government on the GERB mandate look like a saving act, "if he doesn't form a government and [Bulgaria] goes to elections, he'll go with the self-confidence of a man who has put his opponents in a meaningless posture". This is what Parvan Simeonov said in an interview for BNR.*³⁵

We could go on with the list, but the message of the Machine is already clear.

1.5.2. Headlines and Editorial Text

Here are some of the techniques used by the anonymous authors of these articles, most of them coming from Blitz, to give the impression that PP-DB have been discredited in one way or another.

For brevity, we will quote only the headlines, but the same "ploys" are often also used in the text of the articles. We have put the "expressive means" in **italics and bold**:

a) Belittling PP-DB's strength and role: they lie, they are weak, perfidious, cornered, defeated, kicked out, etc.

- ▶ "**Petkov, Lorer beat around the bush** about talks, while in parliament... TV",³⁶
- ▶ "Heart-stopping hours: **Petkov admits** writing to Borisov, **gets hardest blow**",³⁷
- ▶ "Experts with **gloomy scenario for PP-DB** after mandate return",³⁸
- ▶ "Slavi's man **outlines PP-DB's grave fate**, warns of big danger",³⁹
- ▶ "Balabanov **routs 'Mr Eurozone'**, tells why ITN toppled PP-DB",⁴⁰
- ▶ "**Kostadinov trashes Kiro** and company for **self-humiliation**",⁴¹
- ▶ "Déjà vu: **Borisov trumps PP** with 2014 approach, walks on cliff edge because of...";⁴²
- ▶ "Ganev: **Borisov can afford to play on edge and exert pressure to the end** to achieve his goal",⁴³

34 <https://bulgaria24.top-novini.eu/816934> [accessed 9 June 2024].

35 <https://hype.allbg.eu/1064669/> [accessed 9 June 2024].

36 In what follows, we first give a link to the article on one of the mushroom websites and then, if it is reprinted from Blitz, a link to Blitz: <https://hellblog.bgvest.eu/1054863/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/petkov-i-lorer-shikalkavyat-za-pregovorite-a-v-parlamenta-blits-tv_news1008471.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

37 <https://slavihou.bgvest.eu/1053835/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/petkov-prizna-che-pisal-na-borisov-poluchil-nay-tezhkiya-udar_news1007861.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

38 <https://livenewsbg.bgvest.eu/1054457/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/eksperti-s-mrachen-stsenarij-za-pp-db-sled-vrshchaneto-na-mandata_news1008191.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

39 <https://otbyala.zbox7.eu/1055097/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/chovek-na-slavi-ocherta-tezhkata-sdba-na-pp-db-predupredi-za-golyama-opasnost_news1008595.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

40 <https://novini778.bgvest.eu/1054865/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/balabanov-razbi-mistr-evrozona-i-kaza-zashcho-itn-sa-butnali-pp-db_news1008461.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

41 <https://novinarbg.allbg.eu/1064691/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/kostadinov-popilya-kiro-i-kompaniya-za-samounizhenieto_news1007905.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

42 <https://truehunt3r.bgvest.eu/1053839/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/dezhavyu-borisov-tsakal-pp-s-podkhod-ot-2014-a-khodi-po-rba-na-skalata-zaradi_news1007850.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

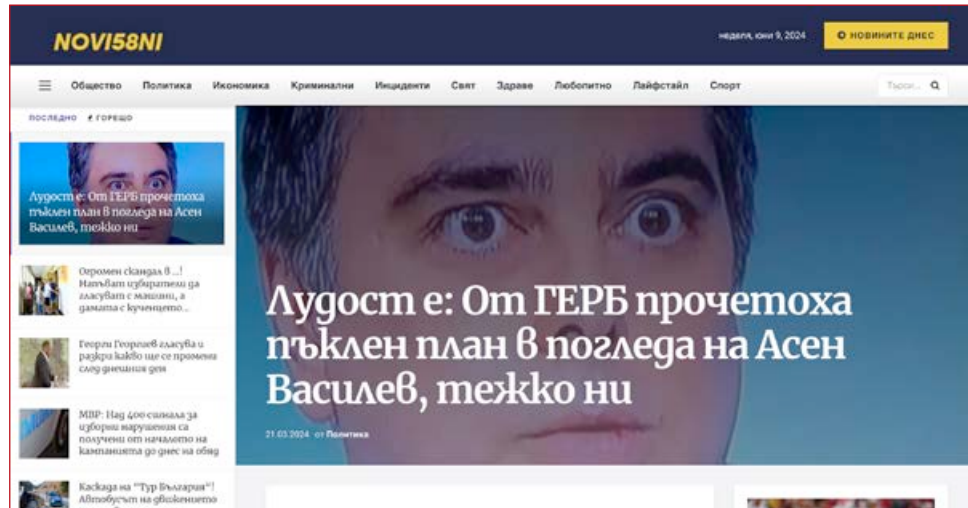
43 <https://azinfo419.bgvest.eu/1053829/> [accessed 9 June 2024].



- ▶ “GERB-SDS **give Asen Vasilev the boot for good**: This is the only option for a cabinet!”,⁴⁴
- ▶ “**Tick-tock**: GERB announces how many hours PP-DB have to avoid [snap] elections”,⁴⁵
- ▶ “Boyko Borisov discloses Asen Vasilev’s **perfidious** plan”,⁴⁶
- ▶ “Fierce scandal: Vazrazhdane exposes **dangerous PP scheme**, accuses them of...”,⁴⁷

And perfidy can descend into madness:

- ▶ “**It’s madness**: GERB see **fiendish plan in Asen Vasilev’s eyes, woe betide us**”.⁴⁸



And so on.

b) When PP-DB are nevertheless strong and active, then they are destructive: they drop bombshells, sabotage things...

- ▶ “Negotiations continue: **Petkov, Ivanov inflame passions**”,⁴⁹
- ▶ “**That’s a new one: Denkov drops veritable bombshell** after meeting with Radev, Gabriel sets new ultimatum and... VIDEO”,⁵⁰
- ▶ “**Strife continues! Denkov** with first comments on proposed cabinet”,⁵¹
- ▶ “**Bombshell! PP-DB to form government** of...”,⁵²
- ▶ “**He [Vasilev] blows up state: Asen Vasilev gives Mariya Gabriel the boot** for good, lashes out at Borisov too”,⁵³
- ▶ “Temenuzhka Petkova: **PP-DB organize sabotage**, want new elections”,⁵⁴
- ▶ “**Sabotage** from the start: **Sacheva exposes Asen Vasilev** with recording and words about “this Gabriel”.⁵⁵

44 <https://rahkov.bgvest.eu/1054895/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/gerb-sds-okonchatelno-bikha-shuta-na-asen-vasilev-tova-e-edinstveniyat-variant-za-kabinet_news1008491.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

45 <https://infonovini.allbg.eu/1065301/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/tik-tak-gerb-oglasia-kolko-chasa-imat-pp-db-za-da-ne-khodim-na-izbori_news1008388.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

46 <https://intersno.bgvest.eu/1054849/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/borisov-izdade-kovarniya-plan-na-vasilev-blits-tv_news1008470.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

47 <https://novini45.bgvest.eu/1053983/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/besen-skandal-vrazhdane-razkri-opasna-skema-na-pp-obvinikha-gj-v_news1007895.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

48 <https://novi58ni.bgvest.eu/1054746/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/ludost-e-ot-gerb-prochetokha-pklen-plan-v-pogleda-na-asen-vasilev-tezhko-ni_news1008420.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

49 <https://miminovini.zbox7.eu/1054083/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/pregovorite-prodlzhavat-petkov-i-ivanov-nazhezikhka-strastite_news1007986.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

50 <https://newsmakers.bg7.eu/1064626/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/denkov-s-istinska-bomba-sled-sreshchata-s-radev-gabriel-dala-nov-ultimatum-i-video_news1007932.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

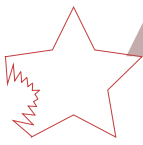
51 <https://bulgaria20.zbox7.eu/1054381/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/razdort-prodlzhava-denkov-s-neochakvan-komentar-za-predlozheniya-kabinet-ot-gerb_news1008189.htm [accessed 9 June 2024].

52 <https://novini1010.bg7.eu/1065041/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/analizi-i-komentari/bomba-pp-db-shcheli-da-pravyat-pravitelstvo-na_news1008157.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

53 <https://newsforu.bgvest.eu/1054609/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/vzviri-drzhavata-asen-vasilev-bi-shuta-na-mariya-gabriel-okonchatelno-udari-i-po-borisov_news1008390.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

54 <https://novinite00.allbg.eu/1065373/> [accessed 9 June 2024].

55 <https://novite71.bgvest.eu/1054837/>; Blitz: <https://blitz.bg/politika/sabotazh-ot-samoto-nachalo-sacheva-izoblichi-asen-vasilev>

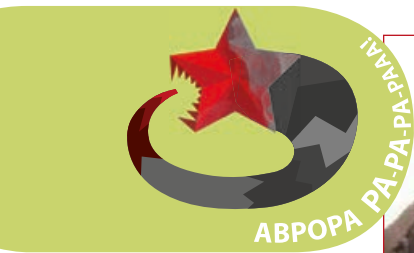


And to top it all – the same “news” under two different headlines with a total of 811 reprints:

- ▶ **“Scandalous: Kiril Petkov ran amok at important meeting, broke bottles on table TV”;**⁵⁶
- ▶ **“Scandal grows: Petkov smashed bottles in Parliament because of Lena TV.”**⁵⁷

In this paragraph, we gave examples of articles whose headlines use propagandistic distortion of information for domestic political purposes: smearing one formation, PP-DB. After further checking, we found that out of the 22 sample articles from mushroom websites, 91% (20 articles) were reprinted from Blitz. We can safely say that the negative propaganda campaign of the Machine of Mushroom Websites follows very closely the propaganda campaign of Blitz, but now – especially after 3 April – only in its domestic political segment. That is because Blitz – at least for the time being and unlike the Machine – is not purging itself of geopolitical (pro)Russian propaganda. But the Machine reprinted it less and less often – stopping altogether after 3 April. However, domestic political narratives continue to flow from Blitz to the Machine (and very rarely vice versa).

But isn't domestic political propaganda (pro)Russian as well? Especially when it is directed against PP-DB, the most distinctly Euro-Atlantic and anti-corruption coalition in Bulgaria at present. We will leave this question open.

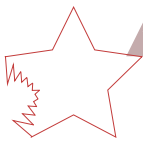


From social media:

<https://englishrussia.com/2018/05/10/funny-photos-with-putin/>

⁵⁶ <https://novi58ni.bgvest.eu/1054617/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/skandalno-kiril-petkov-vilnyal-na-vazhna-sreshcha-chupil-shisheta-v-masata-blits-tv_news1008274.html [accessed 9 June 2024].

⁵⁷ <https://nova212.bgvest.eu/1054971/>; Blitz: https://blitz.bg/politika/skandalt-se-razrastva-petkov-troshil-shisheta-v-ns-zaradi-lena-blits-tv_news1008481.html [accessed 9 June 2024].



Milena Iakimova and Veronika Dimitrova

2. Russian Propaganda and Disinformation Narratives in the First Quarter of 2024

Highlights:

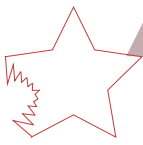
- ▶ In the first three months of 2024, **Russian propaganda continued to be heavily fixated on the West**: regardless of the circumstances, propagandists and Russian officials focused intently on the West, without showcasing any aspects of Russia they are proud of – there is nothing to be proud of in Russia, except for the so-called traditional values which, however, are European, not Russian; this is used to portray Russia as the protector of European values against Europe itself. This talking point is part of a systematic effort to divide Europe. However, its use for a full ten years now unequivocally points to something beyond realpolitik – the dependence of Russian identity on the Western gaze: Russia wants the West to acknowledge that it has been defeated by Russia on its own turf.
- ▶ **In this quarter, the Kremlin’s logic of false syllogisms was promoted in a particularly cynical manner: Question: “Who stands to benefit?” 2. Answer: “X” (X most often being the West). Therefore, 3. “X did it.”** Besides being false, such a syllogism is also cynical because it was applied to Alexei Navalny’s death (the West stood to benefit from discrediting the Russian Federation, therefore the West killed Navalny). Moreover, it is intertwined with another typical Kremlin tactic: that of **confirmation by denial**, a denial and lies so blatantly smug that they become a way of confirming that Russia sent troops to Ukraine in 2014, poisoned Skripal, killed Navalny.

Sometimes this logical scheme of “Who stands to benefit? Ah, so it’s them!” is maintained dramatically – someone with an American name comes along and insinuates that there are rumours that this is what happened. (See, for example, Scott Bennett after the attempted assassination of Robert Fico in the second quarter of 2024.⁵⁸)

- ▶ **The ideology of Russian propaganda has become increasingly militarized** and talks ever more often about a war between NATO and Russia or even about a Third World War. In the period under review, emphasis was placed on events presented from the Russian point of view as “war preparations”. Thus, actions by Western countries to ensure their own defence in the event of a Russian military aggression were reinterpreted as direct “war preparations” or “sending in troops”. It is clear that these strategies for framing certain processes in European countries switch the roles of the aggressor and the victim. At the end of the first quarter of 2024, with the presidential “elections” of 15–17 March 2024 in the Russian Federation, there were even clearer signs of the **formation of a klepto-military ideology of Russian society**.

Although it makes generous use of populist language and its inherent anti-elitism, Russian propaganda is by no means against the rich, nor is it against kleptocrats (with whom it seems to get along well). It is against the intelligentsia, against the cultural elites. This is precisely why it so easily connects, to the point of indistinguishability, with national-conservative projects in European societies.

58 https://www.dnevnik.bg/sviat/2024/05/17/4626916_vulna_ot_dezinformaciia_sled_napadenieto_nad_fico/?ref=home_layer2 [accessed 27 May 2024].



It can be predicted that such projects are more important to Russian propaganda than the radical right and left ones. It can also be expected that Russian propaganda will use national-conservative theses to promote the talking point that the EU is falling apart because it doesn't import Russian gas, which overlaps with the thesis that Europe is doomed because of the Green Deal: "The EU's aquarium, closed by Russia, will begin to show cracks. It will become obvious that green energy isn't a panacea and won't solve the systemic problems of energy shortage in Europe."⁵⁹

- ▶ **The transition to more brutal forms of authoritarianism** is evident in the death of Alexei Navalny, announced on 16 February 2024, and the reactions of propaganda speakers.

A month after Navalny's death, during the presidential "elections" in Russia, it was explicitly acknowledged that the country was moving – albeit not quickly enough – in this direction which, moreover, was the right one: Yury Tavrsky argued that the time had come to abandon Western political technologies in Russia – he was referring to multi-party elections – because they were causing divisions within the active part of society. It was time to create a single party. It should have no ideology, simply being the "Party of Victory" (recall the last quarter of 2023, when Darina Grigorova and Velislava Dareva also promoted the winner/loser distinction as the sole valid political difference). Tavrsky, however, proposed a comprehensive party-political system whose description is worth quoting at length:

It is proposed to create a modern national political organization, a Party of Victory reflecting the traditions of Russian history and the contemporary rise of society under the conditions of mobilization. Initially, it will unite servicepersons returning from the SMO [Special Military Operation] and activists of the volunteer movements, entrepreneurs, scientists, cultural activists and media outlets that have proven their patriotism, as well as entire veteran, women's, and youth structures.

It is proposed that the ideological basis of the Victory Party should be Vladimir Putin's ideas as a set of his statements on domestic political, economic, civilizational, foreign policy, and other issues.

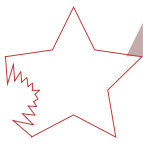
The lack of a coherent system of the national leader's views, set out in the form of fundamental publications as well as thematic collections in print and electronic form, is a shortcoming of the pro-government structures speaking on his behalf. The effectiveness of theoretical writings and thematic collections, accessible to a wide range of people in modern conditions, has been proven by the experience of China.⁶⁰

The party is of victory, the ideology is whatever the leader says, the fault is never his.

- ▶ Of quite a different order is the last talking point of Kremlin propaganda we noticed during the first quarter of 2024: investment in the talking point about "national currencies". This is an investment in two things: in disintegration and discord (of and in Europe); and in a strategy to practically circumvent the effects of the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation.
- ▶ Judging by the Bulgarian-language Russian mouthpiece Pogled Info and the more moderate Glasove, the pro-Kremlin political strategies in Bulgaria are betting on two cards: the national-conservative one and that of The Left! The latter overlaps to some extent with the BSP representatives in the Sofia City Council, who are at war with Korneliya Ninova.

⁵⁹ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/bez-ruski-gaz-evrosayuzat-shte-bade-razkasan-otvatre.167019> [accessed 27 May 2024].

⁶⁰ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/yurii-tavrovski-nuzhno-ni-e-preformatirane-na-politicheskata-struktura-po-kitaiskiya-model.167004> [accessed 27 May 2024].



2.1. Foreign Policy Events and Topics

Tucker Carlson's Interview with Vladimir Putin

The first three months of 2024 abounded in domestic political and geopolitical events, as well as in speeches and statements by Vladimir Putin.

Tucker Carlson's interview with Putin, conducted on 6 February 2024, was the top story in the Russian articles translated and published by the Bulgarian-language media outlet Pogled Info.

On the evening of 6 February, the fired Fox News host Tucker Carlson took and recorded a two-hour interview with Putin in the Kremlin, which he hyped up and released on 8 February. At 7.02 a.m. on 9 February, the interview, translated and transcribed, was posted on Mediamall.⁶¹



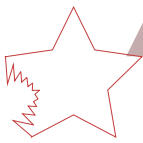
According to Mediamall, the translation was taken from Ot Upor, which is another hybrid media outlet that is part of Mediamall's consortium.

The main talking point about the interview is that Putin delivered a history lesson, making the Russians' motives understandable to Americans. And that he explained to the Americans that he would negotiate peace with them (but take as much as he wanted from Ukraine "both in terms of geography and content"). The main point is that Putin said he knew the US wanted peace talks, according to an article republished on 15 February 2024 by Pogled Info from Tsargrad.⁶²

Overall, this article has two targets: to justify the mediocrity of Putin's historical narrative, arguing that Putin had to keep his narrative simple so as to be understood by an American audience. The other aim is to try to imply that this is an interview, although Putin simply couldn't resist needling Carlson, at some points in a very petty and smug way, about being a failed CIA applicant.

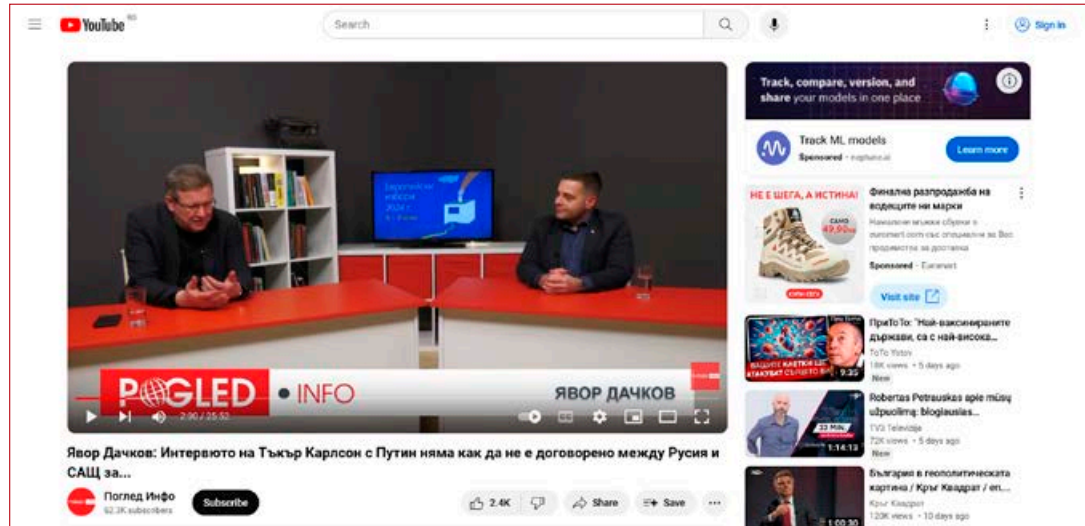
⁶¹ <https://mediamall.info/news/intervyuto-na-takar-karlsan-s-vladimir-putin-eto-kakvo-kaza-ruskiyat-prezident-video-11496news.html> [accessed 27 May 2024].

⁶² <https://pogled.info/svetoven/vizitata-na-takar-karlsan-v-moskva-spetsialna-misiya-ot-imeto-na-tramp.165884> [accessed 27 May 2024].



On 9 and 10 February 2024, the Bulgarian voices of propaganda also spoke out.⁶³ Yavor Dachkov, in an interview for Pogled Info, says:

*I very much want him to win... I want him to get to Poland, to end this corrupt diabolical collapsing power of the West, of the American West.*⁶⁴



Dachkov sounds very daring, but he is actually parroting Putin’s interview, who said – elaborating on his general position that the victim got what they deserved – that Poland had provoked Hitler to attack it. That is, Dachkov’s courage is carbon-copied or, in today’s terms, copy-pasted.

Putin has turned out to be a much smarter player, says Dachkov, because if he had taken (Ukraine?) quickly, this would have been billed as aggression, while now... Host Simeon Milanov interjects: “the global South.”

The line taken is not to praise Trump, but to say, “Look what America has come to – this idiot epitomizes normalcy. And opposite him is dementia.”

A week after the Carlson interview, Putin gave an interview about the interview, in which he explained Carlson’s softness as a very perfidious strategy which he, Putin, had countered cunningly: “Then Putin was asked how he reacted to Carlson’s questions. The West was disappointed that there was no sharp communication.”

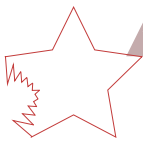
I think that your Carlson is a dangerous man. I thought he would behave in an aggressive manner and would ask so-called sharp questions. Not only was I prepared for that, I wanted it, since it would provide me with an opportunity to respond likewise sharply, which, I believe, would give a certain special character to our whole conversation.

*However, he opted for different tactics, he tried to interrupt me several times, but still, surprisingly for a Western journalist, he was patient, he listened to my long speeches, especially those related to history, and did not let me do what I would have been ready to do. That is why, to tell the truth, I did not fully enjoy that interview. But he acted strictly according to his plan, and he did what he intended.*⁶⁵

⁶³ <https://www.lentata.com/smyana-na-mestata-2024> [accessed 27 May 2024].

⁶⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngtdECpNcEk> [accessed 27 May 2024].

⁶⁵ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/zadkulisieto-na-besedata-s-takar-karlsan-politikata-na-tramp-i-deistviyata-v-ukraina-novo-intervyu-na-vladimir-putin.165955> [accessed 27 May 2024]. English version: <https://tass.com/politics/1746581> [accessed 27 May 2024]



Other interviews with Putin (“Putin: Biden is the better option for Russia”) and clarifications on some topics touched upon in the Carlson interview were also published:

The situation around Ukraine is only a matter of tactical position for the West, but for Russia it is a matter of life and death. This is what Russian President Vladimir Putin told journalist Pavel Zarubin, commenting on the “historical part” of his interview by Tucker Carlson, TASS reports. The interest in the interview by American journalist Tucker Carlson is related to the world’s desire to get acquainted with an alternative point of view and to understand the truth, Putin said.⁶⁶

It is evident that following Tucker Carlson’s interview with Putin, various speakers (including Bulgarian ones) scrambled to praise it,⁶⁷ to translate and reprint material about it. Although Putin himself has a different opinion, the interview is described in the headlines as phenomenal and discussed in numerous articles.⁶⁸

Attention then shifted also to Tucker Carlson, who praised Russia: “Tucker Carlson: Food in Russia four times cheaper than in US. When you see how Russians live, you’ll turn radically against our leaders.”⁶⁹ But who also spread the Kremlin’s talking points: “Tucker Carlson: US financial aid to Ukraine delays inevitable peace.”⁷⁰

On 20 February, Tsargrad TV devoted yet another programme to Carlson’s interview with Putin. The programme is called “Hidden Meanings”, which are interpreted by Tsargrad’s political observer Andrei Perla on the air of “The First Russian” channel (as Tsargrad brands itself).⁷¹ There are several highlights, the most important one being about the “future international” of “normal people” “among whom, by the way, is Mr Carlson himself” as well as many other Republicans.⁷²

“In this sense, as in the case with Trump, we may even be enemies. But normal human traditional enemies,” Perla said.⁷³

This means that Trump’s supporters are fighting for “country and people”, not for “the transnational corporations”.

This is one of the many propaganda guises of the **denunciation of the international legal order** (the other is the “new form of colonialism”). Here it is in the idea of “normal people”: Putin and Carlson have “laid the first stone” of a new international order – “the global community of normal people” versus “the US and corporations”. Yet another move is being made in the systematic game of disavowing human rights as synonymous with “the US and corporations”. At the same time, this is meant to test the ground for a **bid for an alternative globalization** led by Russia.

2024].

66 <https://glasove.com/novini/putin-za-rusiya-situatsiyata-okolo-ukrayna-e-vapros-na-zhivot-i-smart> [accessed 27 May 2024].

67 “Zakharova: White House hysterical over Putin interview” (<https://glasove.com/novini/zakharova-beliyat-dom-izpadna-v-isteriyasled-intervyuto-s-putin> [accessed 27 May 2024]); “Peskov: The most important thing in Carlson’s interview is [that it made it possible] for Putin to be heard. If he is heard, then more people will wonder whether he is right” (<https://glasove.com/na-fokus/peskov-glavnoto-v-intervyuto-na-karlsan-e-putin-da-bade-chut-ako-bade-chut-poveche-hora-shte-se-zamislyat-dali-e-prav> [accessed 27 May 2024]).

68 See, e.g., “Prime Minister Brnabić: Tucker Carlson will visit Serbia, he did phenomenal interview with Putin” (<https://glasove.com/tehnologii/premierat-barnabich-takar-karlsan-shte-poseti-sarbiya-toy-napravi-fenomenalno-intervyu-s-putin> [accessed 27 May 2024]).

69 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/takar-karlsan-v-rusiya-hranata-e-chetiri-pati-po-evtina-ot-sasht-kato-vidite-kak-zhiveyat-rusnatsite-shte-se-nastroite-radikalno-sreshtu-nashite-lideri> [accessed 27 May 2024].

70 <https://glasove.com/novini/takar-karlsan-finansovata-pomosht-na-sasht-za-ukrayna-zabavya-neizbezniya-mir> [accessed 27 May 2024].

71 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/rusiya-e-gotova-da-spre-svo-no-ima-edno-edinstveno-uslovie.166098> [accessed 27 May 2024].

72 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/rusiya-e-gotova-da-spre-svo-no-ima-edno-edinstveno-uslovie.166098> [accessed 27 May 2024].

73 Ibid.





The Death of Alexei Navalny

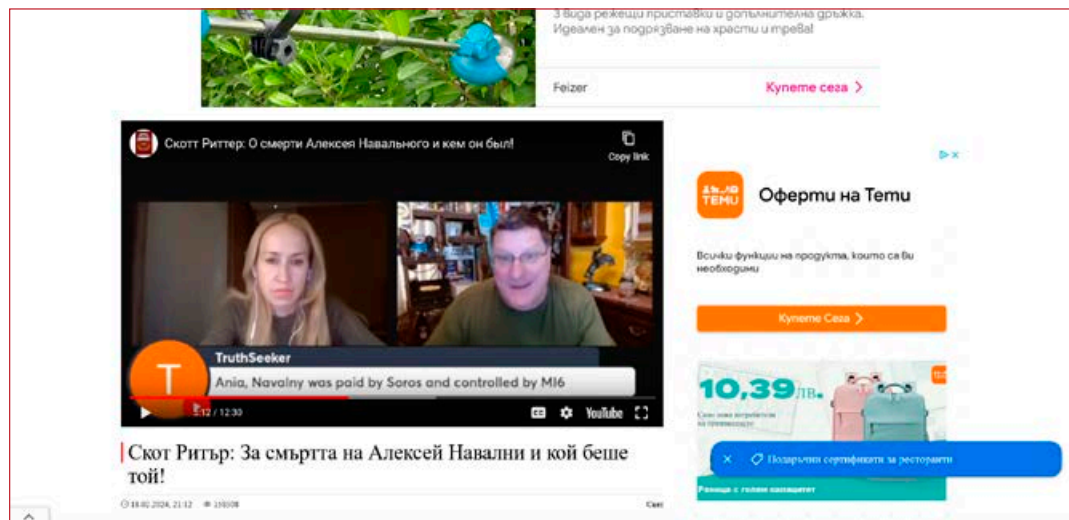
On 16 February 2024, it was announced that Alexei Navalny had died at the penal colony in the town of Kharp, north of the Arctic Circle. Russian propaganda media were in no hurry to report this news.

Their Bulgarian counterparts were lightning-fast. Here is how Yavor Dachkov peddled the “cui bono” thesis:

Putin, who did a two-hour interview for the American public which was watched by half a billion people and which was rational from start to finish, decides two weeks later – most irrationally and without any reason, obviously self-detrimentally – to kill a man who is no threat to him and who is going to be in a penal colony for decades. This happens on the day that Russia mows down the Ukrainian army and the debut of its new commander-in-chief, the US Senate goes on recess and again postpones aid to Kiev, and the security conference in Munich opens with the news about Navalny and his widow, who herself announces that at this moment, being with Blinken, Macron and Von der Leyen is more important than being with her children. Incidentally, at the same conference in 2007, Putin delivered his first highly reasoned speech in which he described what would happen if the West did not stop playing dumb and bullying Russia.⁷⁴

On 18 February, Pogled Info also began to indulge in speculation: Navalny had “indeed” died of a blood clot, yet not of any blood clot but of a blood clot “caused” by the Pfizer vaccine. Pogled Info’s “reliable” sources are comments on X.⁷⁵

In general, the published explanations came from the West: Pogled Info posted a video of Scott Ritter in which he tells us that Alexander (sic!) Navalny was a “disgusting human being” and was accused of corruption. He hated Russia and loved the West. His funding came from an NGO that was a front for the CIA.⁷⁶



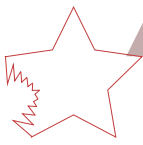
Former journalist and MEP Ivo Hristov also commented on Navalny’s death: “What about

74 <https://afera.bg/%D0%BF%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%B2-%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D1%87%D0%BE%D0%B2/> [accessed 27 May 2024].

75 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/tvardi-se-che-navalni-e-ubit-ot-Pfizer.166023> [accessed 27 May 2024].

76 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/skot-ritar-za-smartta-na-aleksei-navalni-i-koi-beshe-toi.166024> [accessed 27 May 2024].





Assange?” asks Hristov. “According to the MEP, radical dissent is deadly always and everywhere.”⁷⁷ That is to say, an attempt was made to eclipse the issue of Navalny’s death by that of Julian Assange’s imprisonment.⁷⁸

Navalny’s death was commented on in terms that Putin did not stand to benefit from his death – Navalny was to be exchanged for other prisoners and had died of natural causes.⁷⁹ The cynical inference was thus imposed in a propaganda logic of confirmation by denial: therefore, the West killed him.

Military Aid to Ukraine

Following this accumulation of key events, Pogled Info published an article that doesn’t say much about the renewal of propaganda narratives but, it seems to us, is very telling of the mindset behind them. The article tells us that the fact that Reuters (i.e., the enemy’s news agency) has come out with an exclusive that the US will not negotiate with Russia for a ceasefire in Ukraine is clearly a signal that US elites want to negotiate with Putin:

*Reuters is obviously not just going to come out with an exclusive on an issue that is supposedly over and done with. All this suggests that after Vladimir Putin’s interview with Tucker Carlson, some of the American elites are sending a signal that they are ready for a new round of talks with Russia.*⁸⁰

Pogled Info published the article on 18 February 2024, the author is Yuri Baranchik, and the source is discred.ru.

On 23 February 2024, Valentin Vatshev appeared on a TV Pogled Info show hosted by Simeon Milanov and said that the victory of the Russians at Avdeyevka was a moral victory of one side. But in his view, what seemed to be more important was that this victory would give US Republicans grounds to stall on providing military aid to Ukraine.⁸¹ This hope is also reflected in other articles published in Glasove. In the first quarter of 2024, the propaganda media kept repeating the thesis that Russia was gradually winning the war and going on the offensive, while the sanctions allegedly had the opposite effect – they boosted the Russian economy.⁸² They thus also attempted to stress that military aid to Ukraine must be stopped.⁸³ Ukraine was losing the war and Western weapons were being destroyed on Ukrainian territory – Patriots,⁸⁴ Abrams tanks, etc. As a result of the sanctions, Russia had become a major military producer. Putin himself, in a statement about the “superiority” of Russian weapons over those of NATO, again mentioned the imperial line to give a prediction about the future of the war:

77 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/evropa/ivo-hristov-riskat-ot-razpad-na-es-e-realen.166002> [accessed 27 May 2024].

78 See also <https://glasove.com/novini/sbzh-v-zashtita-na-osnovatelya-na-uikilyks-osvobodete-asanzh-zhurnalistikata-ne-e-prestaplenie>; <https://glasove.com/novini/sadebniyat-linch-sreshtu-dzhulian-asanzh-prodalzhava> [accessed 27 May 2024].

79 <https://glasove.com/novini/shefat-na-ruskoto-razuznavane-navalni-pochina-ot-estestvena-smart-horata-imat-tazi-osobenost-rano-ili-kasno-umirat> [accessed 27 May 2024].

80 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/koga-shte-zapochnat-rusko-amerikanskite-pregovori-za-ukraina.165996> [accessed 27 May 2024].

81 <https://pogled.info/tv/alternativen-pogled/valentin-vatsev-ruskata-pobeda-pri-avdeevka-argument-za-republikantsite-da-otkazhat-podkrepa-na-ukraina.166215> [accessed 27 May 2024].

82 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/prof-galbrayt-sanktsiite-za-rusiya-s-lyubov>; <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/nyuzuik-rusiya-pobedi-zapada-vav-voynata-na-sanktsii-ruskata-ikonomika-raste-s-barzi-tempove>; <https://glasove.com/ikonomika/nivoto-na-bednost-v-rusiya-e-na-istoricheski-minimum-v-balgariya-bednite-sa-dva-pati-poveche>; <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/borel-es-ne-vizhda-svetlina-v-kraya-na-ukrainskiya-tunel-sanktsiite-sreshtu-rusiya-ne-unishtozhiha-ruskata-otbranitelna-industriya>; <https://glasove.com/biznes/mishustin-rastat-na-bvp-na-rusiya-prez-2023-g-shte-dostigne-do-4-sled-prerazglezhdane>; <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/faynenshal-tayms-mvf-povishava-prognozata-za-rastezha-na-rusiya-voynata-stimulira-ikonomikata> [accessed 27 May 2024].

83 <https://glasove.com/novini/florian-filipo-palno-bezumie-e-ideyata-da-se-izpolzvat-spestyavaniya-za-da-se-pomogne-na-kiev> [accessed 27 May 2024].

84 <https://glasove.com/komentari/forbes-ukrainskata-pvo-se-olyulyava-v-nay-vazhniya-moment-rusiya-unishtozhi-dve-us-ustanovki-patriot> [accessed 27 May 2024].





*The unity of multinational and multi-confessional Russia, a common attitude to what is happening, and a common concern for the future guarantee its victory.*⁸⁵

In addition to this picture, there were recurrent reports that the EU countries and leading economies were in recession. Europe was turning into a “quagmire” and the only way out seemed to be an alliance with Russia.⁸⁶

The Presidential “Elections” in Russia, 15–17 March 2024

On 15 March, voting began in the presidential so-called elections in the Russian Federation, which ended on 17 March 2024 with a staggeringly implausible 87% casting their ballot for a fifth term for Vladimir Putin who, Mark Galeotti notes, had a glum demeanour at his inauguration despite this stunning result.⁸⁷

From 12 to 15 March, the raids by the Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russia Legion into the Belgorod and Kursk regions were presented as unsuccessful attempts by “Ukrainian saboteurs” to “break through into Russian territory”.⁸⁸ “Experts” claimed that these actions were aimed at disrupting the Russian presidential elections. In his quoted version, so did Vladimir Putin: “As I said earlier, these militarily senseless and humanitarily criminal actions were aimed at disrupting the elections for the President of Russia,” the Russian leader said.⁸⁹

Regarding the protest actions at polling stations (pouring green dye into ballot boxes, setting ballot boxes on fire, throwing Molotov cocktails), the reading public had to be persuaded that no one in Russia would do such a thing, these were people in trouble – in debt, broke – who weren’t doing it for political or ideological reasons, but because they had been promised money or some other relief from their crushing woes. This was the helplessness of Russia’s enemies in the face of the fact that “the people of Russia are actively and voluntarily going to the polls”: “There is an obvious controlled, orchestrated process in the actions with *zelyonka* [green dye] and arson, which has nothing to do with the political views of the participants in these provocations,”⁹⁰ said Alexander Brod, chairman of the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights and chairman of the Independent Public Monitoring Association.

According to this expert, voting was active and voluntary, therefore all attempts to demonstrate any mass protests by opponents of the elections failed:

*“The most heinous technologies are used – provocateurs find people who are in a difficult situation and incite them to commit a serious criminal offence. There is no idea behind these actions – the participants themselves admit that some of them had been promised that their debt would be written off, and others that they would be paid a significant sum,” he clarified.*⁹¹

85 <https://glasove.com/novini/putin-novite-ruski-orazhiya-prevazhohdat-tezi-na-nato> [accessed 27 May 2024].

86 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/yakov-kedmi-evropa-e-v-tresavishte-ot-koeto-mozhe-da-se-izmakne-edinstveno-v-sayuz-s-rusija> [accessed 27 May 2024].

87 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtFZ5B29b1I> [accessed 27 May 2024].

88 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/ukraina/otblasnaha-ukrainskite-diversanti-ot-ruskite-granitsi.167052> [accessed 27 May 2024].

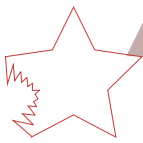
English version: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/deliberations/73657/print> [accessed 27 May 2024].

89 Ibid.

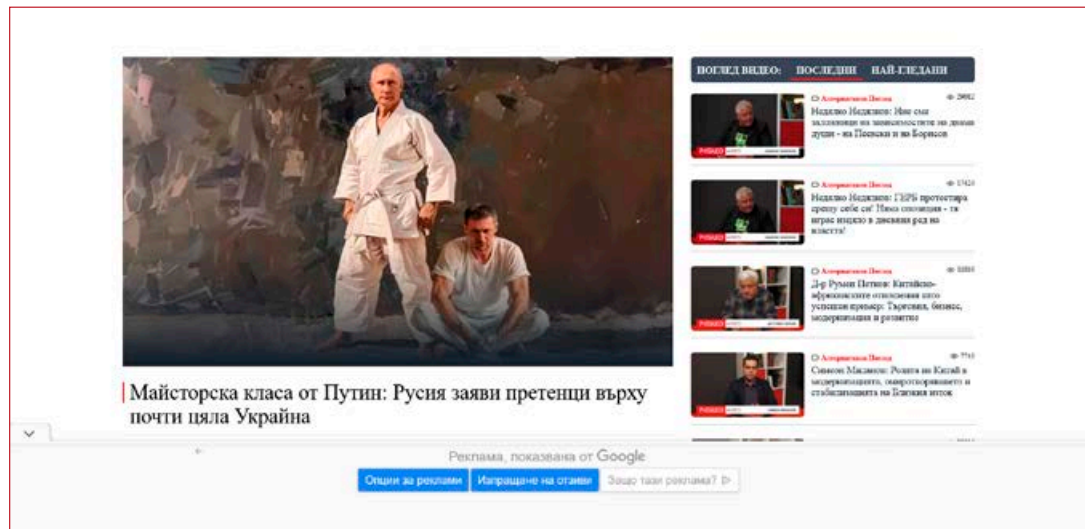
90 <https://pogled.info/svetoven/ukraina/ukrainskiyat-plan-rusnatsite-da-badat-splasheni-predi-izborite-se-provali.167053> [accessed 27 May 2024].

91 Ibid.





On 13 March, Putin gave an interview to Dmitry Kiselyov for Rossiya 1 and RIA Novosti, to which Pogled Info devoted five articles on 15 March. One of them, “Putin displays masterclass: Russia claims almost all of Ukraine”,⁹² by Sergei Latyshev, has a curious illustration:



In fact, this interview was part of a series of at least three speeches in the run-up to the elections: “A major – more than an hour and a half long – interview with Vladimir Putin completed the cycle of not just major, but literally programmatic speeches of the president in recent weeks. It was the third after the Tucker Carlson interview and the message to the Federal Assembly.”⁹³ In the above-noted article by Latyshev, we read:

And one more interesting nuance. Answering a question by Kiselyov about how Moscow would react to the hypothetical appearance of US troops in Ukraine, Putin said:

We know what American troops in the Russian territory are. These are invaders. That is how we will treat them even if they appear in the territory of Ukraine, and they understand it.

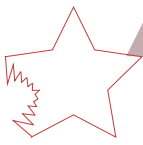
*This remark shows that for Putin, and for most of our citizens, Russia and Ukraine are the same thing: Russian land. That is why we will fight for it to the end, because it is an existential issue for Russians.*⁹⁴

As the Russian army advanced into Ukraine, the latter was declared a “territory” ruled by the “Kiev regime”. Claims that this is Russian land intensified in the first quarter of 2024.

⁹² <https://pogled.info/svetoven/ukraina/maistorska-klasa-ot-putin-rusiya-zayavi-pretentsi-varhu-pochti-tsyala-ukraina.166977> [accessed 27 May 2024].

⁹³ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/na-rusiya-nyama-da-%D1%9D-dadat-dvadeset-godini-pokoi-no-shte-mine-i-bez-tyah.166965> [accessed 27 May 2024].

⁹⁴ <https://pogled.info/svetoven/ukraina/maistorska-klasa-ot-putin-rusiya-zayavi-pretentsi-varhu-pochti-tsyala-ukraina.166977> [accessed 27 May 2024]. English version of Putin's interview by Kiselyov: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73648> [accessed 27 May 2024].



“NATO-Russia War in the Making”

One of the propaganda topics that continued during the quarter under review, following the logic of the so-called “military Schengen” from the end of the previous year, is that of NATO’s war preparations against Russia. The propaganda media tried to suggest that any measures taken by NATO member states were equivalent to preparation for war. Alongside the Russian talking points and positions, a number of facts were framed in this way: NATO exercises⁹⁵ were assessed as a return to the Cold War,⁹⁶ the readiness for such a war⁹⁷ was equated with “preparations for war”,⁹⁸ the deployment of NATO forces in Europe,⁹⁹ the discussion on deploying anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile systems in Bulgaria,¹⁰⁰ etc. Russian official spokespersons warned of the consequences of a war between Russia and NATO. Medvedev predicted an “apocalypse” and said that Russia would be “forced” to “respond asymmetrically” and use missiles “with special warheads”.¹⁰¹

The topic continued after the emergency meeting of EU leaders on Ukraine convened by Emmanuel Macron at the Élysée Palace. Ahead of the meeting, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico claimed that some countries were considering sending troops to Ukraine.¹⁰² French President Emmanuel **Macron said that he did “not unequivocally rule out the possibility of sending ground forces of Western countries to the Northern Military District zone”. Although Macron was referring to the future, (pro)Russian channels and media claimed he was speaking about the present,** persistently interpreting his statement as a call for a new Waterloo.¹⁰³ In a harsh response, “Lavrov advises Macron to use his head for more rational thoughts”:

*It seems to me that those who not only express such thoughts, but even admit them in their heads, should still use that head for more rational thoughts, safer for Europe.*¹⁰⁴

Dmitry Peskov, Press Secretary of the Russian President, declared:

*We have already heard everything else the French president had to say and taken it into account. We are well aware of Mr Macron’s position on the need to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia. [...] We have also taken note of a very wide range of opinions on the issue. Indeed, there is no consensus. A number of countries that took part in the Paris event maintain a rather reasonable stance on the possible danger that such a step would create and the potential danger of being involved in a hot conflict on the battlefield. It’s certainly not in line with those countries’ interests and they need to understand that.*¹⁰⁵

95 <https://glasove.com/novini/nato-s-nay-mashtabnite-si-ucheniya-ot-desetiletia-s-okolo-90-000-voenni-stsenariyat-rusko-napadenie> [accessed 27 May 2024].

96 <https://epicenter.bg/article/Rusiya--Ucheniyata-na-NATO--quot-Nepokolebim-zashtitnik-quot--oznachavat-vrashtane-kam-shemite-ot-Studenata-voyna/338730/7/0> [accessed 27 May 2024].

97 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/shefat-na-voenniya-komitet-na-nato-tryabva-da-se-gotvim-za-voyna-s-rusiya-prez-sledvashtite-20-godini> [accessed 27 May 2024].

98 <https://trud.bg/%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D1%8A%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80%D1%83%D0%BC%D1%8A%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F/> [accessed 27 May 2024].

99 <https://glasove.com/novini/faynenshal-tayms-nato-gotvi-plan-za-razpolagane-na-voenni-sili-v-tsyala-evropa> [accessed 27 May 2024].

100 <https://glasove.com/novini/tagarev-obsadil-v-sasht-razpolagane-na-protivovazdushni-i-protivokorabni-raketni-kompleksi-v-balgariya> [accessed 27 May 2024].

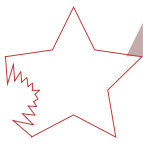
101 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/medvedev-predskaza-apokalipsis-v-sluchay-na-voyna-mezhdu-rusiya-i-nato> [accessed 27 May 2024].

102 <https://glasove.com/novini/robert-fitso-zapadni-darzhavi-obmislyat-dvustranni-sporazumeniya-za-izprashthane-na-voyski-v-ukrayna> [accessed 27 May 2024].

103 <https://glasove.com/novini/chitateli-na-glasove-makron-plache-za-novo-vaterlo> [accessed 27 May 2024].

104 <https://glasove.com/novini/lavrov-posavetva-makron-da-izpolzva-glavata-si-za-po-ratsionalni-misli> [accessed 27 May 2024].

105 <https://glasove.com/novini/kremal-konfliktat-nato-rusiya-e-neizbezhen-ako-v-ukrayna-badat-izpratani-zapadni-voyski> [accessed 27 May 2024]. English version: <https://tass.com/politics/1752175> [accessed 27 May 2024].



Propaganda media portrayed Macron as a madman and criminal,¹⁰⁶ interpreting his statement as a manifestation of political ineptitude. His statement was recalled on numerous occasions in subsequent interviews with him and in statements by Russian official spokespersons. Perhaps this was an attempt to reassure Russian society.

President Rumen Radev also weighed in on the topic, “Radev after meeting with Nataša Musar: They’re testing public opinion on sending troops to Ukraine”, and said:

*Sending troops, albeit on the basis of a bilateral agreement, from a NATO country to Ukraine means a global clash. In Paris, public opinion on sending troops of individual countries to Ukraine has begun to be tested.*¹⁰⁷

Elena Yoncheva also warned that sending troops to Ukraine was “on the table for discussion”:¹⁰⁸

*On Monday evening, France’s President Emmanuel Macron began talking about the possibility of sending European troops, troops of NATO countries, to Ukraine. Maybe – as a result of bilateral agreements, it’s not clear for now. But it is obvious that this topic is already being raised, that it’s already on the table for discussion. I am very concerned.*¹⁰⁹

Other articles treated Macron’s statement as an admission of a factual situation: “Bild: Small number of Western troops already in Ukraine, helping Ukrainian armed forces”¹¹⁰ – this is a fake news story that pretends to be quoting Bild and the Financial Times, but its source is TASS and the links to the “original” articles have been replaced. Russian propaganda sought to create an impression by focusing on Western media, and thus found itself trapped into using more and more outright lies.

In the same logic, training Ukrainian troops was equated with sending troops to Ukraine:

*The troops of Western countries are already on the territory of Ukraine, this is a well-known fact. This is what former Austrian foreign minister Karin Kneissl told TASS at the World Youth Festival. The former head of the Austrian Foreign Ministry noted that British armed forces were already training Ukrainian special forces.*¹¹¹

This case shows how the idea that French and Western troops in general were already in Ukraine¹¹² was propagated through the repetition of a statement, the removal of its context, and its distortion. This talking point was also promoted in the context of domestic politics in Bulgaria, and local speakers of Russian propaganda began warning about the consequences.

¹⁰⁶ <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/marko-travaljo-makron-i-umirashtite-zapadni-lideri-lazhtsi-otkachalki-i-prestapnitsi> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹⁰⁷ <https://glasove.com/novini/radev-sled-sreshta-s-natasha-musar-testvat-obshtestvenoto-mnenie-za-izprashtane-na-voyski-v-ukrayna> [accessed 27 May 2024].

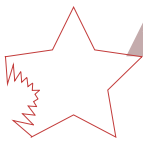
¹⁰⁸ <https://glasove.com/novini/elena-yoncheva-pred-euronews-ochevidno-izprashtaneto-na-voyski-v-ukrayna-veche-e-na-masata-za-obsazhdane> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ <https://glasove.com/novini/bild-malak-broy-zapadni-voenni-veche-sa-v-ukrayna-i-pomagat-na-ukrainskite-vaorazheni-sili> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹¹¹ https://glasove.com/novini/karin-knaysal-zapadnite-voyski-veche-sa-v-ukrayna#google_vignette [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹¹² <https://glasove.com/novini/tolstoy-predupredi-makron-ruskata-armiya-shte-ubie-vsichki-frenski-voynitsi-v-ukrayna> [accessed 27 May 2024].



The topic continued with a statement by Lavrov that the US was preparing for a NATO-Russia conflict: “Lavrov: Obviously US has plans for military clash between Russia and NATO”,¹¹³ “Lavrov: Russia will deploy additional weapons in response to Finland and Sweden joining NATO.”¹¹⁴ And possibly in connection with the upcoming European Parliamentary elections, the “EU’s American Queen Ursula von der Leyen” was presented as “preparing the bloc for war”:

*Ask most Europeans what they think about the EU, and they’ll tell you it’s relentlessly dull. It’s all bureaucrats in statement eyewear overseeing arcane regulations about the curvature of cucumbers; impenetrable corridors in the staid outposts of Luxembourg and Strasbourg; and a multiplicity of councils, commissions, parliaments and courts – the precise remit of each entirely mystifying to the layman. [...] Nor does the drumbeat of war stop there. On Tuesday, the Commission is set to unveil a “sweeping” European **defence industry strategy**, which will shift the EU’s defence industry to a war-footing, while “upending the way it finances and sells arms”. Von der Leyen has said it will aim to “turbocharge our defence industrial capacity over the next five years”, with a focus on joint procurement. [...] In the end, while an independent European defence industry and foreign policy may very well seem prudent in the current geopolitical context, Von der Leyen’s approach is not. At present, her rhetoric and actions do little more than mimic the kind of stale neoconservatism favoured by some in Washington. She does not seek to articulate her own vision or supply a real alternative, but rather aims to fill the theoretical vacuum left by a withdrawing US with the fading empire’s own logic.*

Yet the muscular approach to defence also serves a more self-interested political purpose. Ahead of this June’s European Parliamentary elections, Von der Leyen is courting the European Right. This marks a departure from 2019, when she was regarded as something of a CDU liberal. Back then, she championed gender issues, such as childcare for working mothers, as well as green policies. Come June, however, it is the populist Right who are projected to prosper.¹¹⁵

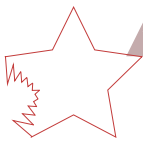
The Terrorist Attack at Crocus City Hall

On 22 March 2024, a deadly terrorist attack was carried out at Moscow’s Crocus City Hall concert venue. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. However, the propaganda version was along the lines of “it’s not important who’s claimed responsibility, what’s important is whose interest it is in”.

113 <https://glasove.com/novini/lavrov-ochevidno-sasht-imat-planove-za-voenen-sblasak-mezhdu-rusiya-i-nato> [accessed 27 May 2024].

114 <https://glasove.com/novini/lavrov-rusiya-shte-razpolozhi-dopalnitelni-orazhiya-v-otgovor-na-razshiryavaveto-na-nato-s-finlandiya-i-shvetsiya> [accessed 27 May 2024].

115 <https://glasove.com/intervyuta/amerikanskata-kralitsa-na-es-ursula-fon-der-layen-gotvi-bloka-za-voyna>, translated into Bulgarian from English. Original article available at: <https://unherd.com/2024/03/the-eus-american-queen/> [accessed 27 May 2024].



According to this line of reasoning promoted by Putin, “Russia cannot be the target of terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists, since it is an example of interfaith unity and harmony”.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the attack was in the interest of “our enemies” and was therefore their doing. This hypothetical was transformed into a certainty by being provided with a conspiracy theory.

Here we see the use of the Kremlin’s manual on logic, which essentially boils down to “whoever we thought was to blame is actually to blame”. This operation, as we have noted, is used many times. It is important to distinguish when, and for what purpose. The hypothesis – Mark Galeotti’s in this case – is that the purpose was to distract public attention from Islam because migrant workers from Central Asia, who are crucial to Russia’s militarized economy, are already targets of xenophobia and stigmatization by Russians.¹¹⁷ In other words, neither Putin, nor the Kremlin, nor the average Russian believes that Kiev was involved in the attack, but public attention was drawn away from the rising tide of xenophobia against Islam and Muslims in the Russian Federation. Putting the blame on Ukraine and the West was an intentional distraction.

Only a day after the attack, a quick attempt was made to frame it as a Ukrainian intervention with the knowledge of the US. Russian propaganda and official positions launched the conspiracy theory that the terrorists were recruited through the Ukrainian embassy in Tajikistan,¹¹⁸ and Vladimir Putin claimed that the terrorists had planned to escape to Ukraine.¹¹⁹ Boyan Chukov made the same claim.¹²⁰ And after Islamic State claimed responsibility, Lavrov “recalled” that the Americans had created terrorist “structures and organizations which later became Al-Qaeda. Then they began to use it to punish and provoke undesirable regimes in the Middle East and other regions.”¹²¹ Maria Zakharova also declared that the US and Ukraine, respectively, were trying to bail themselves out by mentioning the Islamic State.¹²²

*The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman recalled that previously, the US intervention in Middle Eastern affairs had led to the emergence, strengthening and institutionalization of a number of radical and terrorist groups that remain active in the region even today.*¹²³

Russia’s FSB subsequently blamed the US, UK and Ukraine for the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall: “The US, UK and Ukraine are behind the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall. This was announced to journalists by the head of the Russian Federal Security Service, Alexander Bortnikov...”¹²⁴ This version was confirmed in a series of statements by Russian official spokespersons. Public attention was distracted.

116 <http://efir.info/2024/04/08/%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%be%d1%80%d0%b8%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5-%d0%be%d1%82-%d0%ba%d1%80%d0%be%d0%ba%d1%83%d1%81-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%b4%d0%b0%d0%b4%d0%be%d1%85%d0%b0-%d1%81%d0%b2%d0%be%d1%8f/> [accessed 27 May 2024].

117 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtFZ5B29b1I> [accessed 27 May 2024].

118 <https://epicenter.bg/article/Ruski-medii--Teroristite-ot--quot-Krokus-quot--sa-verbuvani-chrez-ukrainskoto-posolstvo-v-Tadjikistan/344608/7/0> [accessed 27 May 2024].

119 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/putin-ukrayna-e-podgotvila-prozorets-za-byagstvo-na-streltsite-ot-krokus> [accessed 27 May 2024].

120 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/boyan-chukov-teroristite-sa-avatar-na-moshtna-spetsialna-sluzhba> [accessed 27 May 2024].

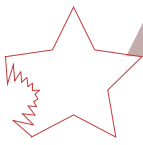
121 <https://epicenter.bg/article/Lavrov--Vampire-vse-oshte-se-opitvat-da-poddarzhvat-neokolonialno-gospodstvo/344667/7/0> [accessed 27 May 2024]. English version: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/rso/1940549/ [accessed 27 May 2024].

122 <https://glasove.com/novini/zaharova-sasht-se-opitvat-da-opravdavvat-sebe-si-i-rezhima-na-zelenski-za-teroristichniya-akt-s-plashiloto-na-islyamska-darzhava> [accessed 27 May 2024]. English version: <https://tass.com/world/1765181> [accessed 27 May 2024].

123 Ibid.

124 <https://www.glasove.com/novini/fsb-na-rusiya-obvini-sasht-velikobritaniya-i-ukrayna-za-terora-v-krokus-siti> [accessed 27 May 2024].





2.2. Domestic Political Events and Topics

Schengen

In the first quarter of 2024, one of the key topics that continued to be abundantly discussed with propaganda talking points from the previous period (October–December 2023) was the decision on Bulgaria’s accession to the Schengen Area by air and sea. The articles on the subject interpreted the decision as a failure of the ruling coalition,¹²⁵ stressing that this was a “semi-Schengen” or partial Schengen. Bulgarians were described as unequal Europeans and “second-hand people”.¹²⁶ The main warning circulating in the propaganda channels was that, according to the Dublin agreements, Bulgaria would turn into “the world’s largest refugee camp, where Bulgarians will gradually become a minority” (according to Vazrazhdane leader Kostadin Kostadinov¹²⁷). A series of articles disseminated the message that Syrians and Afghans would be accepted in Bulgaria and that they would “inundate” Bulgaria, with some articles repeating their number: 6,000.¹²⁸ In this way, national interests were counterposed to EU policies, i.e., the topic of sovereignty was relished (by Korneliya Ninova, sociologist Kancho Stoychev, and others).

The talking point that, due to migration and the EU’s refugee policy, crime is on the rise in a number of European countries, was also persistently promoted.¹²⁹ In an interview for Epicenter, Meglena Plugchieva said that the West was becoming a victim of refugees:

The Western press is sounding the alarm that Berlin – like London – is a white minority city. All red lines have been crossed, the city is overwhelmed by refugees – from Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, North Africa, plus the refugees from the war in Ukraine. We are talking about people with a different mentality, different culture, different level of education. Afghans are the most problematic because they constitute the criminogenic contingent that has led to a rise in crime. In Germany, official statistics show that in the first half of 2023, crime was three times higher than in 2022. Sexual crimes against women reached horrific proportions between 2015 and 2023, the number of reported cases alone being over 7,000. There are neighbourhoods where the police dare not enter. This year, too, Berlin was a battlefield on New Year’s Eve!¹³⁰

Several articles debunking claims on the subject of the acceptance of refugees (Syrians and Afghans) and the rise in crime were published by the fact-checking platform Factcheck.bg, against which a campaign was launched: the fact-checkers were called PolitiCheck¹³¹ and

125 <https://glasove.com/novini/petar-vitanov-nyamame-patna-karta-za-shengen-po-susha-tozi-protse-mozhe-da-prodalzhi-godini>; <https://glasove.com/novini/daniela-bobeva-kakav-pozitiven-efekt-ot-chastichniya-shengen-nashiyat-iznos-e-po-suhozemni-patishta> [accessed 27 May 2024].

126 <https://glasove.com/intervyuta/kancho-stoychev-nay-vazhnoto-pri-dogan-e-globalniyat-pogled-svetat-e-drug-a-nie-prodalzhavame-da-zhiveem-v-evrotsentrichnata-si-ilyuziya> [accessed 27 May 2024].

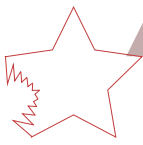
127 <https://glasove.com/novini/kostadinov-v-zamyana-na-vazdushen-i-voden-shengen-balgariya-shte-stane-nay-golemiya-bezhanski-lager-v-sveta> [accessed 27 May 2024].

128 <https://trud.bg/%D1%89%D0%B5-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BC-%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8F%D1%82%D0%B8-%D1%81-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8-%D1%81%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%89%D1%83-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%83-%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%B8-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BC%D1%8A%D0%BB%D1%87%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE/>; <https://glasove.com/novini/trifonov-pokaza-avstriyski-dokument-prez-2022-g-balgariya-se-e-saglasila-da-pribere-6-619-migranti> [accessed 27 May 2024].

129 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/plugchieva-zaradi-afganistantsite-prestapnostta-v-germaniya-se-e-uvlichila-tri-pati-es-e-pred-vzriv> [accessed 27 May 2024].

130 Ibid.

131 <https://trud.bg/%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%82-%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BA-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%82-%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B0-factcheckbg-%D0%BB%D1%8A%D0%B6%D0%B5-%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B0-%D1%83%D0%B2-%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D1%8A%D0%BF%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D0%B3%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B8-%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8/>; <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/proverka-na>



described as “former employees of Ivo Prokopiev” and “truth commissioners” on Facebook,¹³² as they would allegedly have the power to regulate the content of the most used social media platform in Bulgaria without being held to account:

Meta, the company that runs Facebook, has announced a partnership with Bulgaria’s fact-check.bg. This means that they will now have the authority to determine what constitutes disinformation on Facebook and, once they identify it as such, to flag it as “disinformation” and thus reduce its distribution – effectively suppressing any news they deem false. What’s more, once a page receives a certain number of disinformation flags, Facebook significantly reduces its distribution and doesn’t allow it to advertise. [...] Factcheck.bg will have the power to determine what remains visible and what gets heavily “stifled” without anyone holding them accountable. According to information on how Meta fact-checkers operate, if they suppress specific content and you complain, the fact-checkers themselves will review your complaint and decide whether to correct it. That is, they are given the final say. It’s worth noting that Meta writes about how it requires its fact-checkers to be certified by the International Fact-Checking Network [IFCN]. Currently, factcheck.bg is NOT listed on the IFCN website as a certified fact-checker. [...] The project manager of factcheck.bg is a longtime manager of Dnevnik, Ivo Prokopiev’s website.¹³³

Later, the government itself was accused of spreading disinformation.¹³⁴

Another topic through which the Schengen decision was discussed during the period under review is that of border security. Firstly, Kostadin Kostadinov stated that the border fence was full of holes.¹³⁵ Secondly, certain claims made by the Executive Director of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) were criticized, the implication being that if the institutions and their responses are powerless to manage the flow of migrants into the EU, then nation-states should take matters into their own hands.¹³⁶ This issue was also used to criticize the EU and repeat the talking point on sovereignty:

The abdication of the senior European official is an emanation of the state of the Union whose leadership can ensure neither the security nor the well-being of its citizens. Along these lines, the message to those who want to turn the European Union into a federation state is clear: this cannot happen, because a state can only exist if the people within its borders feel a sense of belonging to it, but the peoples of Europe are increasingly aware that the current elites are leading them towards poverty and insecurity.¹³⁷

faktchekarite-pokazva-che-lazhat-i-za-bezhantsite-balgariya-e-podpisala-dopalnitelno-sporazumenie-za-priem-v-zamyana-na-shengen [accessed 27 May 2024].

132 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/bivshi-sluzhiteli-na-ivo-prokopiev-stavat-komisari-na-istinata-vav-feysbuk-kato-faktchekari> [accessed 27 May 2024].

133 <https://trud.bg/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%B2-%D1%84%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%B1%D1%83%D0%BA-%D1%89%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B0-factcheckbg-%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D1%8F%D1%81%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%81/> [accessed 27 May 2024].

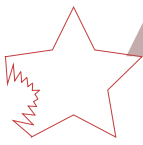
134 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/proverka-na-faktite-pravitelstvoto-lazhe-za-migrantite-i-razprostranyava-dezinformatsiya> [accessed 27 May 2024].

135 <https://glasove.com/novini/vazrazhdane-ogradata-na-granitsata-prilicha-na-shveysarsko-sirene-dupka-do-dupka> [accessed 27 May 2024].

136 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/za-kakvo-sa-ni-chinovnitsite-ot-bryuksel-shtom-nishto-ne-mozhe-da-spre-pritoka-na-migranti-kam-es> [accessed 27 May 2024].

137 Ibid.





In short, accepting migrants destroys “the ethno-cultural fabric of the host society and creates the conditions for a clash of tense social groups, for protests and disorder”,¹³⁸ says Kalina Androlova. Schengen was framed in two ways – either as a political failure or as a decision that would lead to the destruction of Bulgarian society, conceived of as nationally homogeneous, not founded on the idea of citizenship. It is clear that the second line of interpretation encourages and incites the formation of extreme conservative attitudes.

A similar logic is followed in a post by Alexander Urumov, published by Safe News, in which the talking points on “war preparations” and Bulgaria’s accession to the Schengen Area are used to delegitimize the ruling government:

Bulgaria is currently ruled by the most sinister and most devious anti-Bulgarian government, which is preparing for war with one hand and opening the door to an Islamic invasion with the other.

And it’s all supposed to be about “Schengen and the eurozone”, blah, blah, blah!¹³⁹

Incidents involving refugees in Sofia were also discussed in the context of migration. The general message, referring to the “war of migrants against the country”, was “It’s on in Bulgaria too. God help us!”¹⁴⁰ (article by Viktor Blaskov).

The Monument to the Soviet Army

The topic of the removal of the Monument to the Soviet Army (MSA) from the centre of Sofia was discussed also in the first quarter of 2024, mainly through the Russian interpretation. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova described the dismantling of the monument as an act carried out on “someone else’s order” and recalled the talking point about the erasure of Bulgarian history:

The bet is on violently changing the consciousness of their own population, infecting it with hatred, and poisoning relations between the countries. Again, this, like in the situation with Ukraine, and what we are talking about in the context of Moldova and many other countries, will cause irreparable harm to the people of Bulgaria itself. [...] It is a pity that they (part of the political elite of Bulgaria) do not understand that they are harming themselves by turning away from their own past and devaluing it and the memory of their own heroes for the sake of dubious political trends and carrying out someone else’s order.¹⁴¹

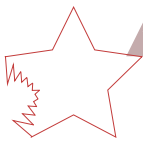
¹³⁸ <https://glasove.com/komentari/kalina-androlova-manipulirat-ni-da-mislim-che-kato-priemame-migranti-sluzhim-na-dobra-kauza-a-vsashtnost-unishtozhavame-domovete-si> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹³⁹ <https://safenews.bg/urumov-nachelo-e-naj-lukavoto-antibalgarsko-pravitelstvo-s-ednata-raka-podgotvya-vojna-a-s-drugata-otvaryva-vratite-za-islyamska-invaziya/> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹⁴⁰ <https://trud.bg/%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B5-%D0%B8-%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%BE%D1%89/> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹⁴¹ <https://glasove.com/novini/mariya-zaharova-demontiraneto-na-ruski-pametnitsi-po-chuzhda-porachka-shte-nanese-nepopravima-vreda-na-balgariya> [accessed 27 May 2024]. English version: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1925275/#8 [accessed 27 May 2024].





Toma Bikov and Borislav Gutsanov later repeated that the dismantling was illegal.¹⁴²

This topic segued into that of the general attitude towards Soviet monuments from the communist period in Bulgaria, and thus the idea of dismantling the monument in Plovdiv known as Alyosha was again presented from the Russian point of view,¹⁴³ namely in a statement of the State Duma regarding “the provocative and cynical proposal of the members of the Plovdiv Municipal Council from the party ‘Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria’ (DSB) to dismantle the monument to the Soviet soldier-liberator ‘Alyosha’ by the end of 2024”:

*This barbaric initiative, if supported by the Plovdiv Municipal Council, will bring great shame to both the initiators and the legislative and executive authorities of the city and will clearly demonstrate the inadequacy and political short-sightedness of the Plovdiv authorities. [...] We urge the members of the Plovdiv Municipal Council not to take the lead of provocateurs and to make the necessary efforts to preserve cultural and historical monuments and other objects of material and spiritual culture in accordance with the agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria on co-operation in the field of culture, education, and science.*¹⁴⁴

A day after the publication of this news, the ABV party of the coalition The Left! declared itself against the attempts to “substitute history” and the destruction of the Alyosha monument.¹⁴⁵

The Russian Federation appealed to UNESCO to prevent the removal of the Alyosha monument in Plovdiv.¹⁴⁶ Ivan Melnikov (Vice President of the Russian section of the International Human Rights Commission and Director of the Foundation for the Protection of National Historical Heritage) asked UNESCO:

*On the basis of the appeal, I ask you to take measures to protect the monuments to the liberators of the Soviet Army and to raise the issue of condemning the actions of the Bulgarian authorities to destroy the monuments to the liberators, and [of] the inadmissibility of violating international law as well as of violating the rights of national minorities and rehabilitating Nazism.*¹⁴⁷

These statements and protests clearly show the Russian connection as well as the main interpretive thread: the removal of Soviet monuments is equated with the rehabilitation of Nazism, but also with Russophobia and a desire to eradicate Russian culture.¹⁴⁸

142 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/toma-bikov-pred-glasove-demontiraha-pametnika-na-savetskata-armiya-bez-misal-za-posle-da-ne-ostane-v-tozi-vid-sledvashite-dvaysetina-godini>; https://glasove.com/novini/gutsanov-razrushavaneto-na-pametnika-na-savetskata-armiya-e-nezakonno-denkov-pravi-chadar-nad-oblastniya-upravitel-na-sofiya#google_vignette [accessed 27 May 2024].

143 <https://glasove.com/novini/darzhavnata-duma-podgotvya-izyavlenie-sreshthu-varvarkata-initsiativa-za-demontirane-na-alyosha> [accessed 27 May 2024]. English version: <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/58625/> [accessed 27 May 2024].

144 Ibid.

145 <https://glasove.com/novini/levitsata-abv-se-obyavi-sreshthu-opitite-za-podmyana-na-istoriyata-i-razrushavaneto-na-pametnika-na-alyosha> [accessed 27 May 2024].

146 <https://glasove.com/novini/rusiya-poiska-ot-shefa-na-yunesko-da-predotvрати-premahvaneto-na-pametnika-alyosha-v-plovdiv> [accessed 27 May 2024].

147 <https://glasove.com/na-fokus/doyche-vele-chehite-sa-tvardo-protiv-evroto> [accessed 27 May 2024].

148 See also <https://glasove.com/novini/medvedev-odesa-varni-se-u-doma-rusiya-te-ochakva> [accessed 27 May 2024].

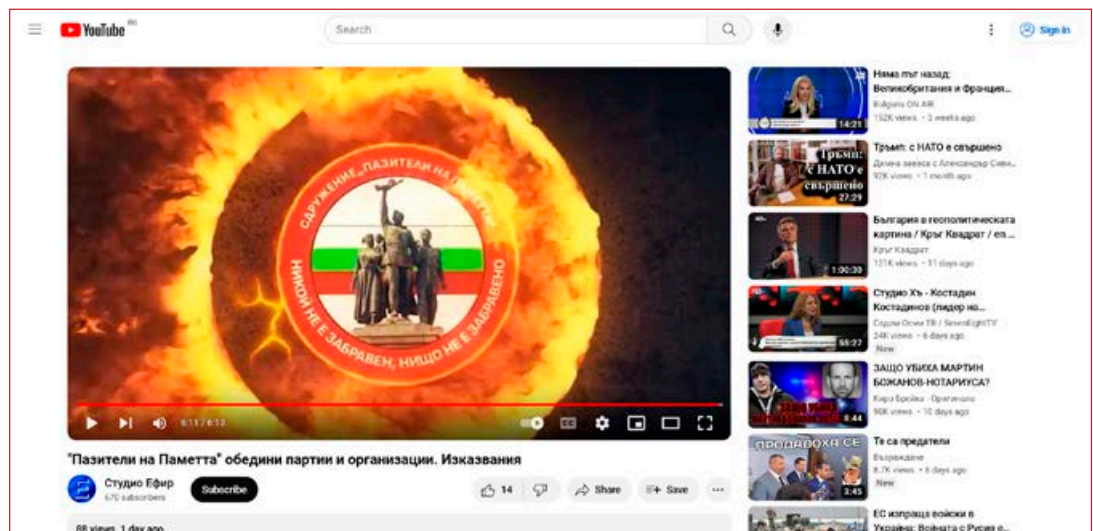
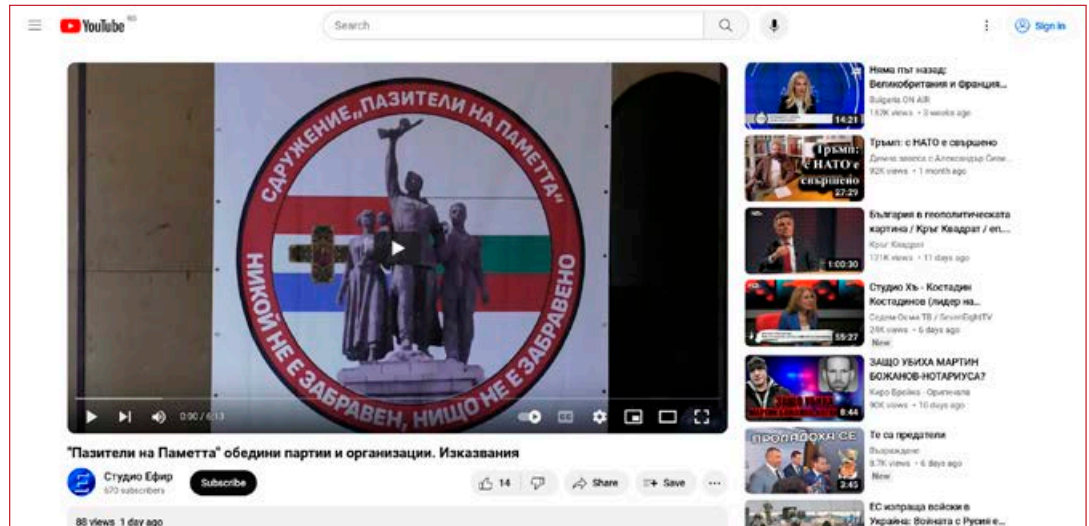




Building a Putin's International

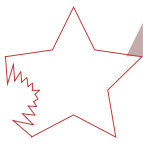
Another noteworthy event in the first quarter of 2024 was the establishment of an alliance of pro-Kremlin parties in Bulgaria on 13 February:

*On 13 February, a General Assembly of the future Guardians of Memory Association was held, at which an Initiative Committee was established. [...] **Guests at the event were representatives of Vazrazhdane, Russophiles for the Revival of the Fatherland, The Left!, the Bulgarian Antifascist Union, the BSP and the Russia-Bulgaria Friendship Association, as well as many citizens sympathetic to the cause.***¹⁴⁹



Representatives of various party and media circles also participated in a United Russia forum in Moscow (14–17 February 2024). The Kremlin's new line of appropriating social-critical language was played out at the forum – that of “criticism” of the so-called “modern practices of neocolonialism”, as the international legal order is referred to in the Russian propaganda narrative. The forum was called “For the Freedom of Nations”. “The [Bulgarian] delegation includes Rumen Petkov, Chairman of the ABV party, Vladimir Trifonov, Deputy Chairman of ABV,

¹⁴⁹ https://t.me/s/efir_info; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kaMvsnvnto> [accessed 27 May 2024].



and Dr. Rumen Petkov, Editor-in-Chief of Pogled Info”, the media outlet wrote on 16 February 2024.¹⁵⁰ Among the speakers at the forum were ABV Chairman Rumen Petkov, who delivered a statement in the section on “Political and legal aspects of counteraction against modern forms of neocolonialism”; Vladimir Marinov, who spoke on the topic of “Unlawful foreign interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states as one of the dangerous manifestations of neocolonialism in the 21st century”; and Pogled Info’s Rumen Petkov, who presented a statement in the section on “Destructive manifestations of neocolonialism in the information space and humanitarian sphere”.¹⁵¹

Pogled Info covered the delegation’s presentations at the forum. Here is an excerpt from the statement of ABV Chairman Rumen Petkov:

*The European Union is becoming like a colony of the United States and the vivid proof is the countless sanctions imposed – from Cuba 63 years ago to Russia in the last three. But the most striking example is the decision to provide 50 billion euros to Ukraine so that the massacre of Ukrainian and Russian men will continue, for which the European Union received a pat on the back from President Biden.*¹⁵²

His namesake, Rumen Petkov of Pogled Info, was also outspoken at the forum:

In a state of neocolonial dependence, most Eastern European states exist formally and de jure rather than de facto. The lack of real state sovereignty means that the media and cultural-informational environment is completely subordinated to the dominant narratives in the Western world, and especially in the metropolis of the Hegemon. And to be specific, it should be noted that of the three largest television stations in Bulgaria, two are privately owned and the long arms of the United States Central Intelligence Agency can be seen in them. The most-watched private television station, Nova TV, is controlled by a shady Serbian businessman who is allegedly in partnership with former CIA chief General David Petraeus.

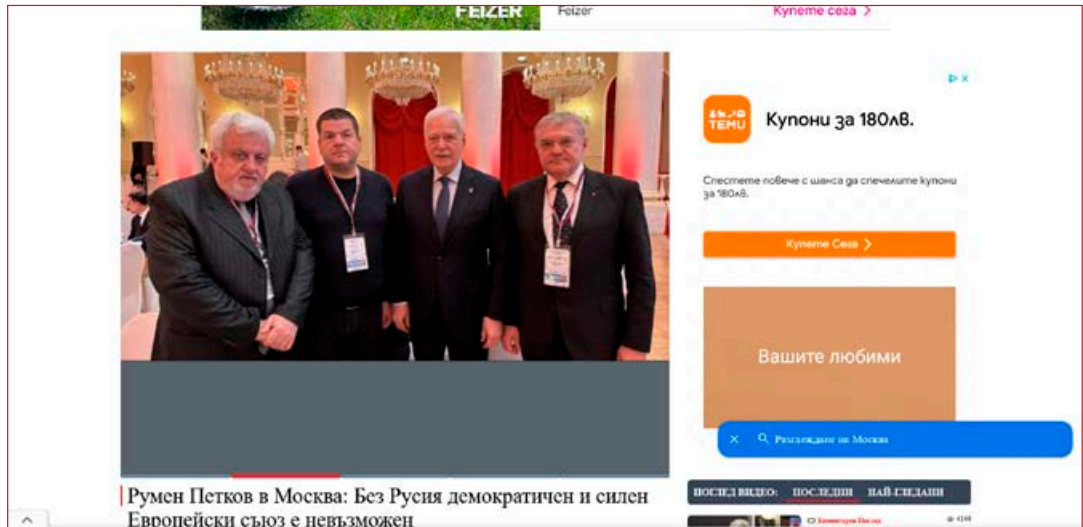
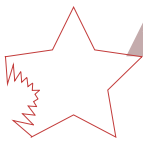
*The result is that on the major TV channels, when it comes to politics, international or domestic, only representatives of NGOs linked to the George Soros network and funded by the America for Bulgaria Foundation are invited, as well as members of the ruling right-liberal coalition.*¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ <https://pogled.info/tv/alternativen-pogled/balgarska-delegatsiya-e-v-moskva-na-mezhdunarodna-konferentsiya-za-svoboda-na-natsiite.165943> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹⁵¹ <https://pogled.info/bulgarski/po-pokana-na-partiya-edinna-rusiya-predstaviteli-na-abv-zaminavat-na-forum-za-svobodata-na-natsiite-v-moskva.165868> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹⁵² <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/v-moskva-rumen-petkov-prizova-za-ostar-otpor-sreshtu-savremennite-metodi-na-kolonizatsiya.165944> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹⁵³ <https://pogled.info/avtorski/Rumen-Petkov/d-r-rumen-petkov-balgariya-v-usloviyata-na-informatsionna-neokolonialna-zavisimost.166025> [accessed 27 May 2024].



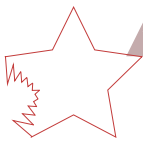
Other

Throughout the period under review, the Kremlin's voices in Bulgaria vilified the government members backed by the PP-DB coalition. They lambasted Tagarev's and Denkov's visits to the US, the Ministry of Defence leadership, and so on.



Russian vs American Winnie-the-Pooh

<https://englishrussia.com/2017/04/14/most-crazy-russian-tattoos/>



Valentin Valkanov

3. Russian Propaganda Speakers in Bulgaria

3.1. RUMEN RADEV

In the first quarter of 2024, President Radev's rhetoric on major domestic political issues became somewhat more moderate. His positions, although not so extreme, did not change significantly, but although his sharp statements decreased in number, he continued to fearmonger about the war in Ukraine.

During the period under review, Radev had several meetings with leaders of neighbouring and EU countries, which he used as opportunities to speak out on this issue. At one such meeting, with Slovenian President Nataša Pirc Musar, he commented on Emmanuel Macron's statement that he did not rule out a future deployment of Western ground troops in Ukraine. Radev harshly criticized this potential scenario, suggesting it meant a third world war or a potential nuclear conflict:

Sending troops, albeit on the basis of a bilateral agreement, from a NATO country to Ukraine means a global clash. It means a huge increase in the risk of a nuclear conflict. [...] I believe that European leaders will show enough sense and a very balanced approach in supporting Ukraine, so that we do not end up with an extraordinary escalation and the risk of a third world war and a nuclear conflict.¹⁵⁴

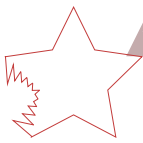
Screenshot 1¹⁵⁵



Radev: Sending troops from a NATO country to Ukraine means global clash (Video)

154 <https://euractiv.bg/section/all/news/%D1%80%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B2-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B0/> [accessed 22 May 2024].

155 <https://www.24chasa.bg/bulgaria/article/17253526> [accessed 22 May 2024].



As in the previous quarters, Radev continued to call for a peaceful resolution to the hostilities, and even claimed there was an escalation in the statements of some world leaders. He spoke at the Third Antalya Diplomacy Forum, which was attended by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean, and Turkish President Recep Erdogan, among others. There, he reiterated his opposition to providing military aid to Ukraine, once again invoking the biggest threat that Putin himself often uses – nuclear weapons:

Restoring dialogue between Russia and Ukraine by diplomatic means is especially relevant given the recent escalation of hostilities. The statements of world leaders in the past few days give cause for concern. We cannot, under any circumstances, take decisions that will lead to an expansion of this clash, both territorially and in terms of the use of new weapons. If it comes to the use of nuclear weapons, everything will lose its meaning.¹⁵⁶

Regarding domestic political issues, Radev remained true to his populist style. His comment on the tensions surrounding Defence Minister Todor Tagarev was framed in the context of the war in Ukraine. Radev noted that according to PP-DB, Tagarev was well-liked in Ukraine, but according to GERB-SDS, he was not doing enough for the invaded country. In Radev's account, Tagarev, along with both PP-DB and GERB-SDS, were preoccupied with the war in Ukraine and showed a complete disregard for the Bulgarian army and national security – a key talking point in the Kremlin's narrative of the venal local elites and the loss of national sovereignty and security. This is how pro-Kremlin speakers in Bulgaria attempt to delegitimize any aid to Ukraine:

When will these people ask if the defence minister is well-liked in the Bulgarian Army and what is he doing for Bulgaria's security? I expect to see a minister who will do his best and work for Bulgaria's security as a priority.¹⁵⁷

The first quarter of 2024 did not give Rumen Radev many occasions to speak sharply on domestic political issues. He appeared to have toned down his rhetoric, adopting a more moderate stance during the negotiations on the cabinet rotation and following the resignation of Denkov and his government.

3.2. KORNELIYA NINOVA

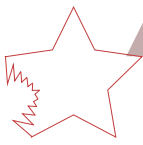
Compared to the end of 2023, the first quarter of 2024 did not give also BSP leader Korneliya Ninova many occasions for a massive presence in the media. During this period, propaganda against the so-called "gender ideology", one of the key issues for Ninova and her party, was practically absent from her rhetoric.

Ninova's rhetoric on the issues of Bulgaria's eurozone and Schengen accession did not change significantly, although she often used them to criticize the ruling majority. Discussing Bulgaria's full membership in Schengen, Ninova resorted to a well-known argument of the anti-European discourse on the acceptance of "unlimited numbers of asylum seekers in Western countries".¹⁵⁸ According to her, the government had concluded such an agreement. In another statement, she spoke of "migrant criminals", giving the general impression of an influx of convicted migrants

¹⁵⁶ <https://epicenter.bg/article/Radev-za-Ukrayna-sled-sreshti-s-Erdogan-i-Orban--Izvyavleniyata-na-svetovni-lideri-budyat-trevoga/342428/2/0> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ <https://www.segabg.com/hot/category-bulgaria/bsp-obvini-kabineta-sdelka-shengen-sreshtu-migranti> [accessed 22 May 2024].



into the country, when in fact the case she was referring to involved the return of 24 people from Germany to Bulgaria, of whom six were Bulgarian citizens serving sentences for various crimes.¹⁵⁹

Korneliya Ninova's positions on the war in Ukraine remained unchanged during the period under review. Like Radev, she used Macron's statement about a future potential deployment of European troops in Ukraine to exploit fears of such a decision, which she claimed would directly drag the country into the war:

Bulgaria's engagement in the war in Ukraine by sending ground troops means directly dragging Bulgaria into war. And if so far the public and the people have kept quiet, forgiving the mistakes of the assemblage, I am sure that in this case the Bulgarian people will come out and sweep you away. I am sure that the majority of us Bulgarians do not agree that our husbands, our fathers, our children and our sons should be sent as cannon fodder in this war.¹⁶⁰

Screenshot 2¹⁶¹



Korneliya Ninova: Sending troops to Ukraine will directly drag Bulgaria into war

Ninova continued her statement in the National Assembly with fearsome warnings about “creeping fascism” because of a classified report on military aid sent to Ukraine:

Yesterday, Mr Borisov revealed that there was a report in [Parliament's] Classified Information Registry containing an account of what military aid has been sent to Ukraine so far. Do you know who has access to this report? The leaders of the ruling parties. But all leaders of opposition parliamentary groups have been denied access to this information. Mr Kostadinov, Mr Yordanov, we don't have access to the classified report in the Classified Information Registry to see what's going on. [...] This is another step towards fascism. Yesterday, they wanted to deny you participation in [parliamentary] committees – a fundamental right of every MP elected by a group of Bulgarian citizens. Today, they are also restricting our lawful access to information. What follows from this?¹⁶²

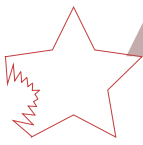
Ninova was particularly critical of Defence Minister Todor Tagarev, accusing him of being

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/bsp-migranti-prestapnitsi-balgari/32843929.html> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁶⁰ <https://bulgaria20.zbox7.eu/1047630/> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.



directly responsible for “dragging Bulgaria into the war”:

*One of the most harmful people for Bulgaria’s politics at present is Tagarev. He has been harmful from the start. I leave aside the fact that he’s worked for Ukraine’s military. [...] Tagarev is trying to drag Bulgaria into war.*¹⁶³

Just like Radev, Ninova appeared to have toned down her rhetoric during the events surrounding the failed government rotation. Still, she found occasions to sharply criticize the defence minister, her main “argument” being that by providing military aid to Ukraine, Bulgaria was “being dragged into the war”.

3.3. KOSTADIN KOSTADINOV

The rhetoric of the Vazrazhdane leader was as staunchly pro-Russian as ever in the first quarter of 2024. The issues he exploited remained consistent, and some of the events that triggered his accusations were the same as those used for propaganda purposes by other politicians monitored in this study.

Kostadinov also used Macron’s statement that the possibility of a future deployment of European troops in Ukraine could not be ruled out, to stoke fears in Bulgarian society. He also claimed that “a reduction in the mobilization reserve is being prepared so that these weapons can be sent to Ukraine”¹⁶⁴ – another fearmongering line that directly serves the Kremlin by framing aid to an invaded country as being detrimental to national security.

Another convenient topic for Kostadinov is migration. During the period under review, he discussed it again in connection with Schengen, specifically focusing on the landing of a plane with returned asylum seekers from Germany. According to Kostadinov, the government had lied that no refugees would be returned to Bulgaria and was trying to conceal the plane’s landing. Building on this topic, he introduced another – that of “media dictatorship”. He linked it to a PP-DB-sponsored draft law amending the *Electronic Communications Act*, which aims to combat fake news. Kostadinov claimed that this draft law would impose a “dictatorship on social media” by the very state that “spreads fake news” about the returned refugees. He thus tried to amplify fearmongering about refugees with the conspiratorial thesis of an impending state “dictatorship” and “censorship” by a government that “lies”:

*This is the law that will also impose a dictatorship on social media, where both videos with content not controlled by the government and any different point of view can still be shown relatively safely. [...] By this draft law, free speech, but not only free speech, different points of view in general, will be put in the prison camp of media dictatorship.*¹⁶⁵

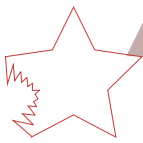
Kostadinov sought to delegitimize the fight against fake news and disinformation by delegitimizing the government and playing on the fear of migrants. He specifically accused PP-DB, the sponsors of the draft law, of “lying”, as well as Nikolay Denkov himself of “lying” about the return of refugees.

A significant event for Kostadinov was also the submission to Parliament by him and his party of a draft law on Bulgaria’s exit from NATO on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the country’s NATO accession – an act with a dual function. On the one hand, this was a categorical

¹⁶³ <https://albenap.bg7eu/1041200/> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁶⁴ <https://aktualno21.bg7eu/1067325/> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.



act proving the nationalists' clear position against the defensive alliance and Bulgaria's pro-Western orientation; on the other, it was an act aimed at publicity. In addition, the draft law gave Kostadinov the opportunity for an extensive declaration in the National Assembly through which he conveyed a number of negative messages about Bulgaria's NATO membership: from the general futility of the Alliance and the thesis that membership in it had led to the destruction of Bulgaria's military power, including the abolition of conscription, to the danger to national security. All this, he claimed, had been achieved "under the dictates of the US" and "with the support of Brussels" and "the local powers-that-be":

Twenty years after joining NATO, the Bulgarian armed forces are on the brink of survival, our national security and defence is undermined. The publicity mantras that NATO membership would not only bring us guarantees of national security without us doing anything, but would also bring us general well-being and economic prosperity, have turned out to be a big publicity lie devoid of content.

Today, we are told everywhere that NATO is a guarantee for our security; the truth is that NATO is the biggest threat to Bulgarian national security. NATO has disarmed us, NATO has occupied us, NATO is threatening us. Twenty years we couldn't leave NATO even if we wanted to.¹⁶⁶

Screenshot 3¹⁶⁷



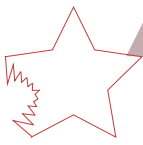
Kostadin Kostadinov on NATO: It's the biggest threat to our national security

In this line of rhetoric, Kostadinov made a series of accusations against Bulgarian politicians – from Defence Minister Todor Tagarev to the widely disapproved Delyan Peevski who, according to Kostadinov, is also “dependent on the US” because he is on the Magnitsky list, and therefore serves the narratives of the US as a hegemon that controls the “local venal elite”.

Another line of propaganda often promoted by pro-Russian speakers in Bulgaria concerns historical memory and culture. In the first quarter of 2024, Kostadinov accused Defence Minister

¹⁶⁶ <https://www.iskra.bg/kostadin-kostadinov-za-nato-to-e-naj-golyamata-zaplaha-za-nacjonalnata-ni-sigurnost/> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.



Tagarev of seeking to erase Bulgarian memory after Tagarev called for corrections in history textbooks that suggest gratitude to Russia. The Vazrazhdane leader also referred to the scandal surrounding the poem “I am a Bulgarian child” (*Az sam balgarche*). Following an article on the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) website which suggested that children of immigrants should not be required to learn this poem by heart, many were led to believe the fake news that it would be removed from the school curriculum. The scandal was easily blown up into a culture war, in which Kostadinov again saw the long arm of the West:

Look at this screenshot. It's from the American local cable radio network [radiotochka] Free Europe, owned by the US. According to it, the poem “I am a Bulgarian child” should be removed from textbooks and Bulgarian children should start learning from the children of illegal immigrants.

Do I have to explain to you once again that the US wants to destroy Bulgaria and the Bulgarian people? [...] It is time to free not only Bulgaria but also Europe from the toxic American rule!¹⁶⁸

The war against Bulgarian national memory won't stop. [...] Currently, the Euro-Atlantic crowd is troubled by Bulgarian historical memory, by the historical truth, by the truth in general, as this is a rule of falsehood.¹⁶⁹

During the period under review, Kostadinov's position on the war in Ukraine remained unchanged, being completely in line with the narratives put out by the Kremlin that the situation in Europe is deteriorating and the EU is disintegrating under internal pressure:

Europe is shaken by social protests precisely against the policies of Ursula von der Leyen, and with her EC the war in Ukraine is being incited and encouraged and this could lead to a war between NATO countries. War is knocking on our doorstep and the only force that can stop it is Vazrazhdane with allies such as Alternative for Germany, among others.¹⁷⁰

Kostadinov again blamed the US for the failure of the referendum on the Bulgarian lev – saying he had seen the US ambassador's car in front of the Constitutional Court a day before his petition in the case was lodged. Of course:

The truth is clear – we are being ruled directly by the US, by the Biden administration.¹⁷¹

3.4. PETAR VOLGIN

In March, Petar Volgin announced that he would be running for MEP with the support of Vazrazhdane. His online presence in the first quarter of 2024 was quite modest, with about 1,000 publications detected by the SENSIKA system, one-third of which are reprints of an article on the Constitutional Court's position on the referendum against the euro, where he is only mentioned. However, there was no significant change in the pro-Russian narratives he shares and in the positions and tactics he uses to discredit the pro-Western community in Bulgaria.

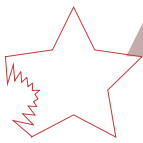
One of the main talking points Volgin borrows from the Kremlin package is about the

¹⁶⁸ <https://epicenter.bg/article/Kostadinov-skochi-sreshtu--quot-Svobodna-Evropa-quot--Iskat-da-premahnat--quot-Az-sam-balgarche-quot--ot-uchebnitsite-/337980/2/0> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁶⁹ <https://vazrazhdane.bg/%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D1%83%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%B1%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%BE/> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁷⁰ <https://klukadnes7.bgvest.eu/1051588/> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁷¹ https://blitz.bg/politika/kostadin-kostadinov-khvrli-rkavitsata-tova-be-skrit-drzhaven-prevrat_news1006980.html [accessed 22 May 2024].



“dependence” of the ruling local democratic and liberal elites on their “American masters”. This time, the journalist added to the usual targets of his attacks, PP-DB, their partners in the ruling majority until recently, GERB-SDS, commenting on the negotiations before the final failure of the government rotation. Would-be prime minister Mariya Gabriel, he said, used “Brussels Newspeak” in order to “succeed in politics”, while the new government depended on the pressure the US embassy would exert on the two political formations:

Speaking of our most important foreign partner, the hypothesis that it is up to them whether there will be a government or not seems more and more realistic. If the Embassy exerts a strong enough influence on the partners in power, they will instantly forget about their quarrels and renew their marital coalition vows. Or if our American friends deem they have more important things to do and happen to let their Bulgarian wards out of control, we might end up with early elections. The saddest thing about this situation is that once again Bulgaria’s fate is being decided elsewhere. It’s our bad luck that we’ve never been governed by people who are responsible and independent enough not to let foreign factors order us what to do.¹⁷²

Screenshot 4¹⁷³



Petar Volgin: Embassy to decide, again

In another article, Volgin took a different view, claiming that PP-DB and GERB-SDS had “long since come to an understanding”. However, there is no difference in the Kremlin narrative he promotes in it, while referring also to the war in Ukraine which, in his account, is supported by the “Euro-Atlantic elites” and is “inflicting huge losses on the European economies”:

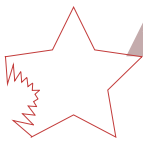
Nothing will change in the way those in power speak and act. On the one hand, they will swear they love Bulgaria, but on the other they will do whatever their Euro-Atlantic partners order them to. The big problem here is that the former cannot be synchronized with the latter. Simply because the Euro-Atlantic elites have their own goals, which often don’t coincide with ours. For example, people like Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and their likes want the war in Ukraine to go on as long as possible and constantly insist that more weapons and money be poured into this meat grinder.¹⁷⁴

Volgin used the same talking point in commenting on Macron’s statement that he did not rule out a future deployment of Western ground forces in Ukraine. Warning about the threat of a

172 <https://epicenter.bg/article/Petar-Volgin--Pak-Posolstvoto-shte-reshava/344582/11/0> [accessed 22 May 2024].

173 Ibid.

174 <https://www.big5.bg/2024/03/09/%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%8A%D1%80-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B0-%D1%84%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81-%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B4%D0%B0/> [accessed 22 May 2024].



world war, Volgin also blamed Nikolay Denkov, who he claimed was similar to the French president's type of politician – a “puppet on strings”, the classic figure of the local elite in Kremlin narratives:

Such people have no normal vision for the future and have no idea what to do, beyond their servile attitude to supranational circles and capital. People like Macron may very well ignite a world war just to prove themselves as orthodox Atlanticists. There is no difference between Macron and Denkov, for example. Both have no will of their own, both are mere puppets on strings, both have the typical lackey's thinking and behaviour.¹⁷⁵

Volgin suggested that in the event of such a scenario, the Bulgarian authorities would be the “first” to send volunteers:

Today's ruling highlife doesn't want Bulgaria to be independent. They obviously picture Bulgaria as a compliant little screw in some mechanism, in this situation the Euro-Atlantic one. Someone in Brussels or in Washington presses the command button and the Bulgarian screw turns obediently in the set direction. Tomorrow, to take an example, some “talented” politician like Macron will call for NATO countries to send troops to Ukraine and ask for volunteers. And then the ruling yes-men in Sofia will be the first to raise their hands and gleefully shout, “We'll send volunteers! We'll be the first to send volunteers because we are the staunchest Euro-Atlanticists!”¹⁷⁶

Volgin concludes his article with an analogy with the time of socialism when the Bulgarian state was in a vassal relationship with the USSR, claiming that now the hegemon has simply been replaced and it is the US. Such analogies are also regularly drawn by his colleague Martin Karbovski.

Tucker Carlson's interview with Putin and the reactions that followed gave Volgin the opportunity to use another propaganda line that is characteristic of him: censorship and political correctness, a propaganda fiction of the Kremlin that makes its speakers look like victims:

The chiefs in Brussels and the bosses in Washington are incapable of winning by the force of arguments and that is why they are using the arguments of force. They don't like something? So they ban it! They disagree with some concept? So they declare it “disinformation” and ban it too! [...]

In the interview in question, Vladimir Putin spoke as any head of state should. He defended his country's interests. Yes, Bulgarian government officials don't do that. They usually defend some vague “Euro-Atlantic” values and it never occurs to them that they should look after the Bulgarian national interest first and foremost. [...]

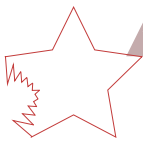
The Russian president demonstrated a profound knowledge – both of history and of today's economic and geopolitical situation. [...]

The main reason why Tucker Carlson and Vladimir Putin infuriated establishment politicians and analysts was that they totally ignored political correctness. They freely expressed their own thoughts instead of repeating pseudo-liberal talking points. And as you well know, slaves don't hate their masters the most. Slaves hate the most those who are free.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ https://www.facebook.com/petar.petrov.56829/posts/7916080348449591?ref=embed_post [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁷⁶ https://novini247.com/novini/v-nachaloto-na-sedmitsata-emanyuel-makron-ne-izklyuchi-vazmojnosta-za_7554539.html [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁷⁷ <https://epicenter.bg/article/Petar-Volgin--Takar--intervyuto-i-svobodata/340645/11/0> [accessed 22 May 2024].



3.5. MARTIN KARBOVSKI

In the first quarter of 2024, Karbovski's presence in the online media space also declined in quantitative terms. In terms of content, however, there were no major changes in his public positions, focusing on the topics of the betrayal, destruction and collapse of the Bulgarian people and identity. There are specific culprits for that: the elites clearly identified in the Kremlin's narratives as the hegemon's compliant lackeys. Counterposed to them is the figure of the Bulgarian people – a widely used image in populist anti-democratic and pro-Kremlin propaganda discourse. This general image serves the conspiratorial logic of Russian propaganda, which tries to present a simple picture of the good guys and the bad guys in the world – the “collective West” exerting its power over ordinary people, whose only saviour is Russia.

In the classic rhetoric of this propaganda, the main culprit for the civilizational collapse of Europe and the West is liberalism. Karbovski often compares liberalism to the totalitarianisms of socialism and fascism, and he reiterated this comparison at the end of March 2024. The central message of his article is already evident from the headline: “The harm of liberalism is equal to the harm of fascism”. The article goes on to call for the lustration of liberalism (there was no lustration of communism in Bulgaria). It suggests that “the idea of a People's Court is bubbling in the national mind”,¹⁷⁸ and portrays the sins of liberalism as existential:

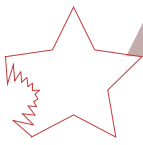
- ▶ Liberalism “destroyed hundreds of lives of extraordinary and ordinary people. It did so quietly and not so quietly – through trial by the ‘comrades’ court’ of technology and social networks, and through a horrific ostracization that even those who love communism would envy.”
- ▶ Liberalism is “a heresy that has destroyed the foundations of our society. It has failed everywhere in the world, despite being presented as rights and freedoms – it was a mere manipulation conceived in the sin of the dying Western imperialism.”
- ▶ The agent of liberalism is the non-governmental sector, which should bear “special blame and punishment” – “Earning one's livelihood by destroying the state while receiving a fee from a foreign organization should be noted as a crime against the people.”¹⁷⁹

Once people realize how harmful liberalism has been to society, its harm “should be stopped” – “no person and organization that have worked in this betrayal should be forgiven”. But Karbovski – unlike Volgin, who also bandies about the idea of a People's Court as a solution to various problems – is not actually calling for certain people or groups to be condemned by the people. Rather, he argues that they, the liberals, are the judges, the destroyers of lives, the ones who put those they disagree with on trial at “comrades' courts”.

The means of “destruction” that Karbovski attributes to liberalism are interesting: “technology and social networks”. One of the significant topics for Kremlin propaganda speakers in Bulgaria is “censorship”, as they label any criticism or action against their theses. To counteract this, they try to delegitimize any attempt at fact-checking, but also at regulation in general in the media space, including social media. Mobilization against potential control in technological and media space was a prominent theme among propagandists in the first quarter of 2024. Any regulation against disinformation was portrayed as a form of anti-utopia and dictatorship, with liberal individuals at its core – no longer just elites, but also ordinary consumers and citizens. The message, through association with totalitarianisms, was thus completed and clearly articulated:

¹⁷⁸ <https://www.lentata.com/vredata-ot-liberalizma-e-ravnosilna-na-vredata-ot-fashizma> [accessed 22 May 2024].

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.



*Liberalism is death, a plague, a curse against our future, equal to the damage of an aggressive totalitarianism like fascism.*¹⁸⁰

And perhaps the “comrades’ court” is not a “People’s Court” – Karbovski clearly identifies the bad guys and calls for them to be “held accountable”, but it remains unclear, as it were, whether the People’s Court is a method of the bad guys, or of the good guys who will take responsibility to “lustrate” the plague of liberalism personified by “politicians, public figures, intelligentsia and ordinary tricksters of the era”.

Screenshot 5¹⁸¹



The harm of liberalism is equal to the harm of fascism

Karbovski’s indirect emotional messages also commented on democracy as “a farce that showed that here we need a strong arm and a man loyal to his people”¹⁸² in an article railing against two different images of democracy – on the one hand, democracy “gave birth to Borisov” and “charlatans”, while on the other there has appeared “some scumbag political scientist who claims that having new elections would be SUICIDE”. The journalist thus deftly leaves a vague message that will be understood unambiguously by those convinced that “a strong arm and a man loyal to his people are needed here”, but without counterposing them to the democratic process – thus suggesting that there is no contradiction between democracy and a “strong arm”. We see that propagandists are beginning to call more and more explicitly for authoritarianism.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

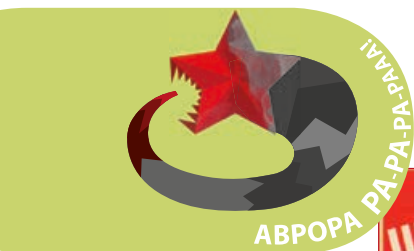
¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² <https://pogled.eu/%D1%84%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81-%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%87%D0%B5-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F/> [accessed 22 May 2024].



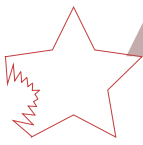
The topic of betrayal was also elaborated on by some of the more prominent guests on Karbovski's YouTube podcast, such as Steve Hanke, who directly used the Kremlin talking point about the venality of the Bulgarian political class which “really takes its orders from Brussels and Washington”.¹⁸³ To back up his point, Hanke stated that the introduction of the currency board, of which he was the ideologue, had been done independently by Bulgarian politicians, not under orders from Washington and Brussels – the propaganda line against joining the eurozone.

However, according to Velislava Dareva, also a guest on Karbovski's podcast, there were betrayals on a much larger scale. The main topics in her interview were “the approaching Fourth Reich and the Deep State”, “the West's war against Russia”, “the caste of the privileged”, “the rabid centrifuge of censorship”, “the ritual suicide” of Europe and Bulgaria, and “the one-size-fits-all-regimes Bulgarian minions of power who are working to wipe us out”. Her unambiguous messages thoroughly covered the Kremlin's corpus of core narratives of external forces using the venal local elites to destroy us – key talking points of the conspiracy construct that (pro)Russian propaganda uses to endlessly expand its media package of ready-to-use narratives.



“Women in collective farms are a great force” (Stalin), 1933, Soviet poster, N. Pinus

183 <https://www.novinite.bg/articles/247741/Bashtata-na-valutniya-bord-v-Balgariya-prof-Stiv-Hanke-Provalite-na-darjavata-vi-sa-dva-korupciya-i-losha-efektivnost-na-pravitelstvoto> [accessed 22 May 2024].



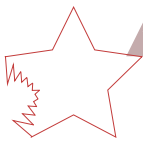
Liubomir Donchev

4. Russian Propaganda on Facebook

4.1. January 2024

A month after the dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army, the discontent among its defenders continued to amplify propaganda voices. Kostadin Kostadinov attempted to stoke sentiments against the ruling coalition in a *live appearance* (119,000 views and 8,600 interactions), claiming that the planned three-year restoration of the Shipka Monument was intended





to prevent events from being held on the site, particularly the Third of March celebrations. Kostadinov also claimed that it was quite possible the monument would “fall” during the restoration, just as the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia had “fallen”.

A boosted *post* by Ivan Marinov in which he quotes Alexander Konstantinov, former Plovdiv deputy mayor from the BSP, generated over 8,600 interactions. Konstantinov praises the role of the Alyosha monument in Plovdiv, ranking it alongside the monuments of Sasho Sladura and Milyo Ludiya. He says:

The Alyosha monument has become part of this eternal atmosphere. Unlike other monuments, it has its prototype – an ordinary Russian soldier. This monument has long since become part of the cityscape, thousands have visited it on their wedding day, thousands have received their first kiss on this hill.

Kristian Vigenin also joined in the defence of the monument, with a *question*: In whose way does Alyosha stand?

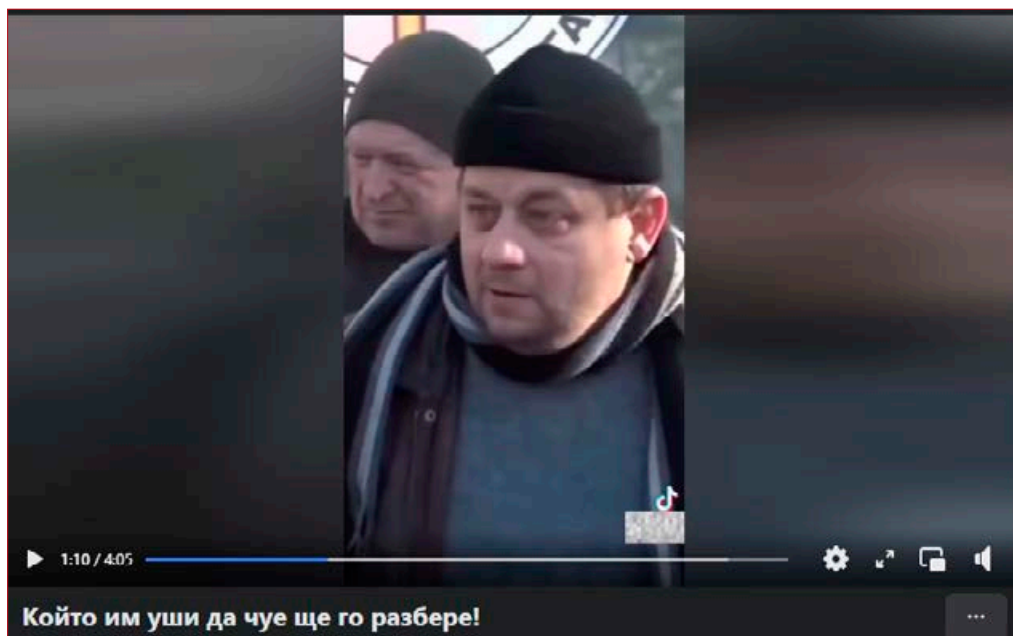


The disinformation about the dismantling of the Shipka Monument provoked the Facebook page “Golden Bulgaria” (Zlatna Balgariya), which is close to the Historical Park and Ivelin Mihaylov, to declare itself in its defence. In the short *video* of previous celebrations of the Third of March, besides painted Bulgarian flags, several flags of the Russian Federation are also visible.

In another context, but also through the narratives of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, Nikolay Markov appeared at a protest in front of the US embassy. His statement is full of threats against various social groups: against the perpetrators of the removal of the Monument to the Soviet



Army, against the ruling coalition’s “pro-Nazi” policy, and against all those who have “plundered” the country “under the auspices of the US and the EU”. The *video* garnered over 483,000 views and about 23,000 interactions. Two things are curious about it: first, it was posted on the Facebook page “*Nationalists*”, which in 2019 was created under the name “Communists”; and second, the protest at which Markov made this statement was organized by the Ataka party, whose flag is also visible in the video.



Among the daily posts of pro-Russian speakers in Bulgaria in January 2024, we found a *video* in Russian with nearly 600,000 views and 22,000 interactions, which shows how Sofia celebrated the centenary of its liberation from “Turkish slavery” in 1978. In essence, the video shows how Bulgarians grateful for their liberation thank Russia: by enumerating a number of streets and boulevards that are named after Russians, by broadcasting Russian films, etc.



Vladimir Putin, child’s drawing
<https://englishrussia.com/2018/05/23/kids-drawings-of-putin-photos/>



4.2. February 2024

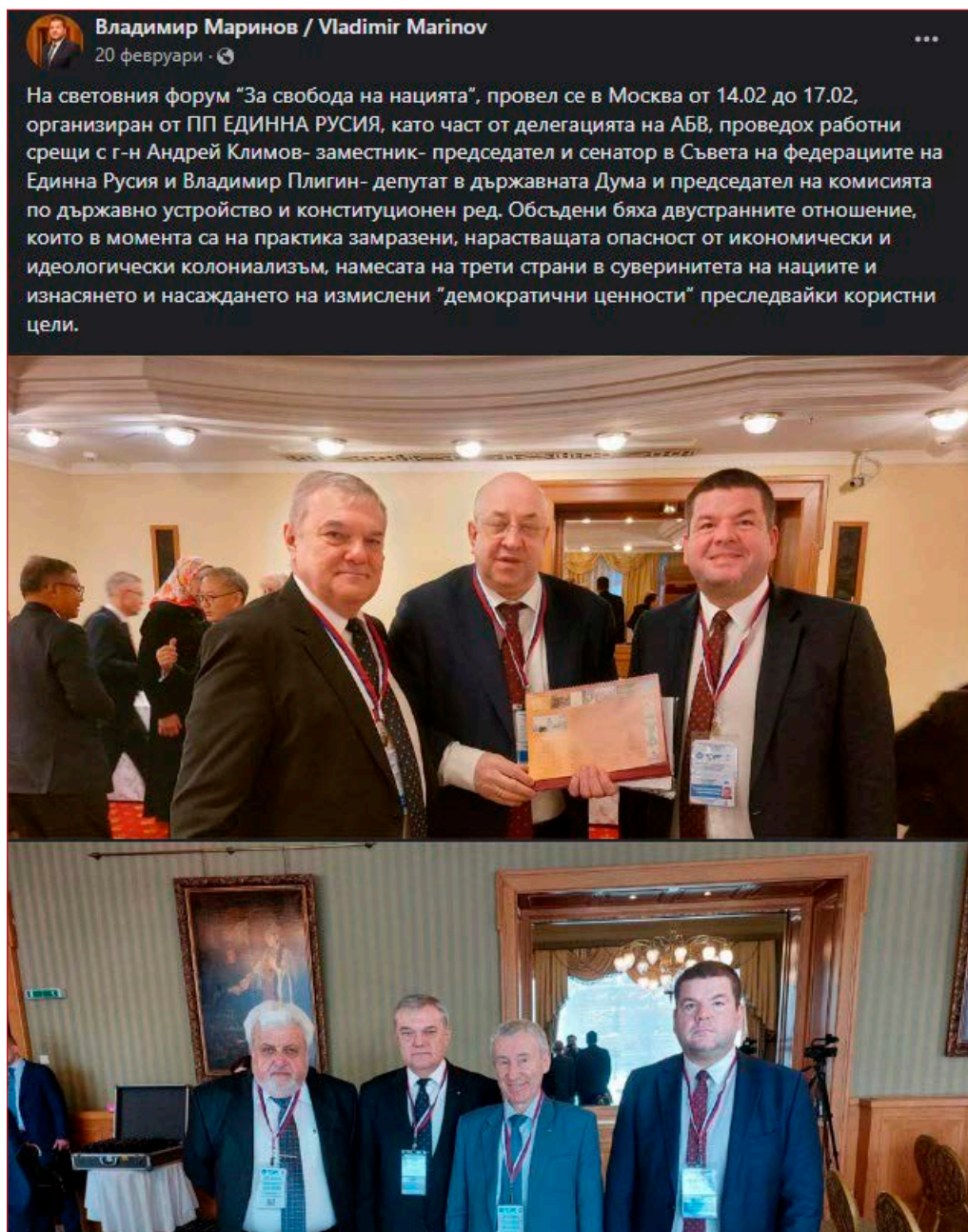
In February 2024, there was a slight decrease in pro-Russian activity, at least in terms of significant Facebook posts. On 19 February, a *video* called “This is the Russian Bear” generated about 150,000 views and slightly over 9,800 interactions. The video shows a tipsy Russian waving the Soviet flag and dancing in the snow with a bear.





On 20 February, BSP MP Vladimir Marinov boosted a *post* proving his presence, together with ABV's Rumen Petkov and Pogled Info's Rumen Petkov, at the United Russia's world forum in Moscow. Particularly interesting is the text in the post, in which Marinov reports on the topics discussed at the forum, including:

the growing danger of ideological colonialism, interference of third countries in the sovereignty of nations, and the export and inculcation of made-up "democratic values" in pursuit of self-interested goals.





On 29 February, Marinov boosted another *post*, which generated over 6,800 interactions. In it, he officially invites Eleonora Mitrofanova to celebrate the Third of March together in the village of Brestnik. The photo is remarkable for its composition: it shows Marinov and Mitrofanova standing in front of portraits of Vladimir Putin and Sergei Lavrov, flanked by two Russian flags.





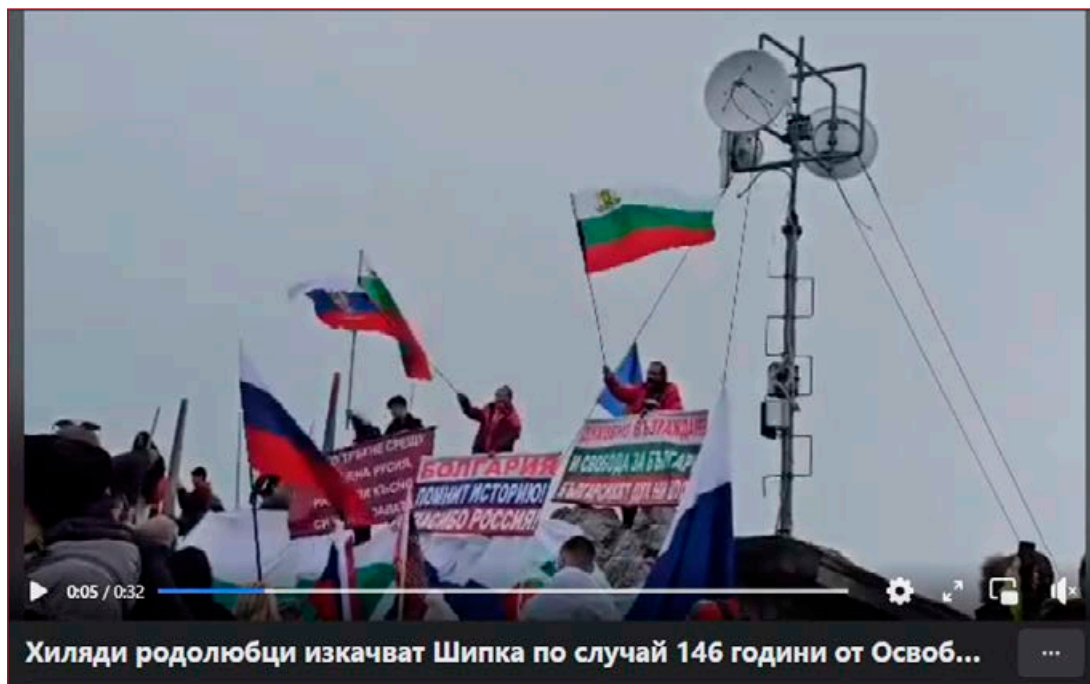
The usual posts related to the nostalgia for socialism in Bulgaria can also be noted: about young women under socialism who “not only held an AK-47 in their hands but also field-stripped and reassembled it within a set time” (21,500 interactions) and about the old banknotes, the “money with which our parents and grandparents built Bulgaria!” (6,700 interactions).





4.3. March 2024

For several years now, not only Bulgarian but also Russian flags have been flown at the Third of March celebrations at Shipka. The historical flag of the Russian Empire from the time of the Russo-Turkish War has been completely replaced by that of the Russian Federation. In a [video](#) on the “Telegraf” page (273,000 views and 2,700 interactions), several Bulgarian flags are visible among the Russian ones.





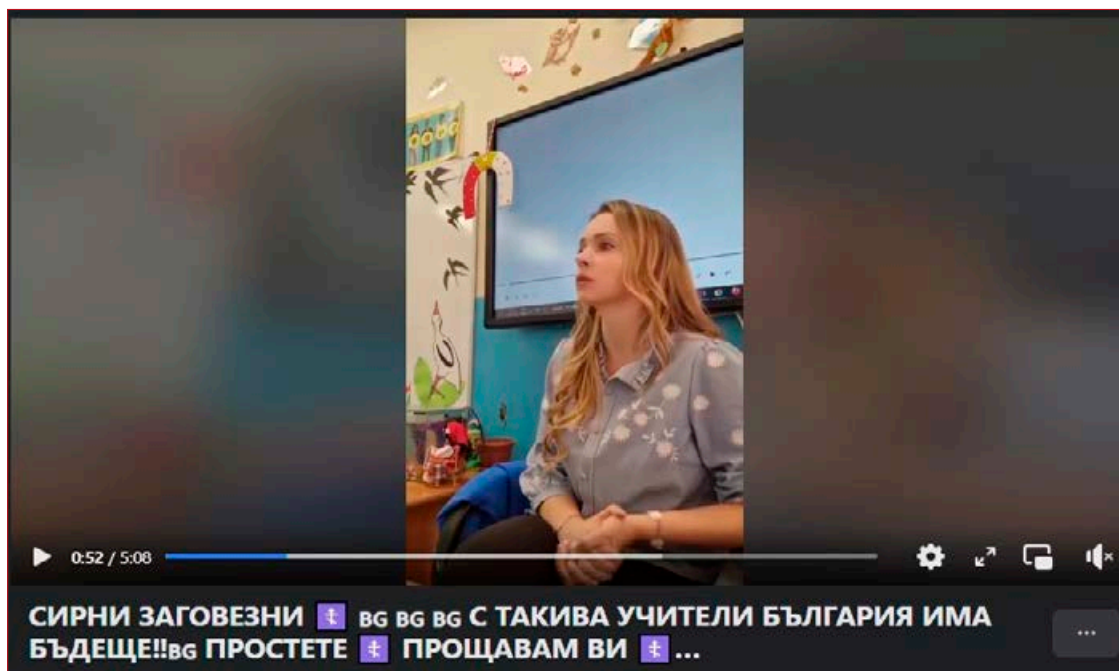
Another *video* of Third of March celebrations, posted by the Facebook page “Golden Bulgaria”, shows numerous flags of the Russian Federation, often even more than the Bulgarian flag. The video garnered 324,000 views and 32,000 interactions. The video’s author also posted a *photo* showing the Bulgarian and Russian flags, adding that “we shouldn’t forget with whom we fought together, side by side against the Ottoman enslaver”.



“Golden Bulgaria” dominated Bulgarian Facebook in March also with another *video*, showing a young primary school teacher explaining the Bulgarian custom of Sirni Zagovezni (Cheesefare Sunday; 612,000 views and 24,000 interactions). At first glance, everything seems to be in order until the teacher starts comparing the American Halloween with the Bulgarian Sirni Zagovezni. When the children show that they are more familiar with Halloween, the teacher asks them, “Are we Bulgarian or American?” promptly following up with another provocative question: “Do you think any American, on the other side of the earth, celebrates Sirni Zagovezni?” What is disturbing about the video is, on the one hand, the child audience, and on the other, the artificial opposition of “our” versus “foreign” holidays that is used to promote the thesis of loss of identity and “Bulgarianness”.



Why do we celebrate Halloween and don't celebrate Sirni Zagovezni?





Appendix: Updated List of Keywords in Bulgarian

„анти-Русия“ OR „анти Русия“ OR „пост-запад“ OR
„руският свят“ OR „руския свят“ OR „руски свят“ OR
„денацифи*“ OR „дерусификац*“ OR „дерусифицир*“ OR
„антируския „настроения“ OR „антируските настроения“ OR
„антируски изказвания“ OR „антируските изказвания“ OR
„антируска истерия“ OR „антируската истерия“ OR „русофоб*“ OR
„атлантисти*“ OR „западни колониалисти“ OR
„западните колониалисти“ OR „западния колониализъм“ OR
„западният колониализъм“ OR „евроатлантически колониализъм“ OR
„евроатлантическия колониализъм“ OR „евроатлантическият колониализъм“ OR
„колективният Запад“ OR „колективния Запад“ OR
„колективен Запад“ OR „американски империализъм“ OR
„американския империализъм“ OR „американският империализъм“ OR
„против Русия“ OR „репресии срещу рускоговорящите“ OR
„репресиите срещу рускоговорящите“ OR „етническо биооръжие“ OR
„русия в ъгъла“ OR „агресия на НАТО“ OR „агресията на НАТО“ OR
„коментарият*“ OR „украински националисти“ OR
„украинските националисти“ OR „украински фашисти“ OR
„украинските фашисти“ OR „либерал-фашисти“ OR
„либерал-фашистите“ OR „либерални фашисти“ OR
„либералните фашисти“ OR „либералния фашизъм“ OR
„либералният фашизъм“ OR „либерален фашизъм“ OR „бандеров*“ OR
„Донетцка народна република“ OR „Донетцката народна република“ OR
„ДНР“ OR „Луганска народна република“ OR
„Луганската народна република“ OR „ЛНР“ OR „да удари Русия“ OR
„смяната на Властта в Киев“ OR „превратът в Киев“ OR
„преврат в Киев“ OR „преврата в Киев“ OR
„престъпния режим в Киев“ OR „престъпният режим в Киев“ OR
„нацистки режим в Киев“ OR „нацисткия режим в Киев“ OR
„нацисткия режим в Киев“ OR „украински нацистки режим“ OR
„украинския нацистки режим“ OR „украинският нацистки режим“ OR
„таран срещу Русия“ OR „срещу руския свят“ OR
„протекторат на САЩ“ OR „протекторат на съединените щати“ OR
„американския протекторат“ OR „американски протекторат“ OR
„американският протекторат“ OR „евроатлантически протекторат“ OR
„евроатлантическия протекторат“ OR „американска марионетка“ OR
„американската марионетка“ OR „американски марионетки“ OR
„американските марионетки“ OR „марионетки на САЩ“ OR
„марионетките на САЩ“ OR „марионетка на САЩ“ OR
„марионетката на САЩ“ OR „марионетен режим“ OR
„марионетния режим“ OR „марионетният режим“ OR
„марионетно правителство“ OR „марионетното правителство“ OR





„американски господари“ OR „американските господари“ OR
„евроатлантически господари“ OR „евроатлантическите господари“ OR
„Галя от Посолството“ OR „Козяк“ OR „американски подлози“ OR
„американските подлози“ OR „евроатлантически подлози“ OR
„евроатлантическите подлози“ OR „евроатлантически ястреби“ OR
„евроатлантическите ястреби“ OR „коалиция срещу Русия“ OR
„коалицията срещу Русия“ OR „украински неонацисти“ OR
„украинските неонацисти“ OR „националистите от Киев“ OR
„националистите в Киев“ OR „украински националистически батальони“ OR
„украинските националистически батальони“ OR „прокси-сила“ OR
„прокси сила“ OR „преврата от 2014“ OR
„квизи-държава Украйна“ OR „квизидържава Украйна“