

## CULTURAL IDENTITY AS TOOL OF RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE: EXAMPLES FROM SLOVAKIA

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, the „information warfare“ is becoming more and more common term within the international relations, as an effective tool of combat involving minimal cost. Since March 2014, several European countries have faced massive propaganda and disinformation campaigns originating in the Russian Federation. The Central European countries are no exception. Disinformation portals, which are being visited at least once or twice a week by up to 34 % of Slovaks, use the concept of Pan-Slavism and the idea of Slavic culture and identity. Statistics prove that many people in the V4 countries do not want to be part either of “the East” nor “the West”, many people consider Vladimir Putin more sympathetic than Angela Merkel, and many people also think NATO is no longer relevant to European security. In contrary, they believe Russia should become part of the European security structures.

**Keywords:** information warfare, Russian Federation, Slavs, Pan-Slavism.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Main purpose of the article is to analyse how Kremlin uses the concept of cultural identity in its information warfare in the V4 countries<sup>1</sup>. Kremlin in its disinformation campaigns is often arguing that citizens of the Visegrad states share the same cultural identity and language with Russians and therefore they should be part of the Slavic empire or eastern culture. In such disinformation campaigns Slavic culture and common values plays major role. Main argument used by Kremlin is that all Slavic and Baltic countries share common interests and follow common goals, because they share common history, language, culture, habits and heritage. Same rhetoric is also used by extreme right-wing parties, which are using strong nationally oriented and anti-western narrative. It is also used by parties and individuals, who are against membership of the Visegrad countries in the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO). It is clear that concept of common cultural identity plays major role in Russian disinformation campaigns in Visegrad region and without a doubt, it is also attractive and popular among nationalists and extreme right parties.

Therefore, authors' main aim is to analyse, how Russia or more precisely, Kremlin, exploits the concept of cultural identity in shaping its anti-western and pro-Russian narrative. Article begins with context analysis and definition of information warfare and cultural identity and explanation, why it is particularly successful in some countries. Then it proceeds to the analysis of particular examples of disinformation campaigns related to Slavic culture and shared Slavic values in Slovakia.

### 2 INFORMATION WARFARE

Information warfare became one of the most common used terms in international relations and foreign and security policy. Many experts consider information warfare to be a very powerful tool in international affairs, which is capable to influence significantly whole nations and alliances without significant efforts or investments. It is caused mainly by its flexible, asymmetric and abstract nature. It can be easily used by any state without even taking borders into consideration. It can take many forms, such as psychological operation, electronic warfare, information operations or cyber operations. Each of these forms has its own pros and cons, and generally it is extremely difficult to counter such actions. The main tools of information warfare are internet and social media, which provide information warfare with whole new battleground. Information warfare is subpart of more complex hybrid warfare, which is composed of 4 main components: information warfare, psychological operations, cyber operations and the use of special forces. Hybrid warfare cannot be considered as a new phenomenon, it was part of conflicts hundreds years ago, but currently, the information era and new technologies creates very specific environment, where hybrid tactics are very useful and effective. Hybrid warfare relies mostly on unconventional tools (soft power) and it is difficult to define it as war between two or more conventional armies<sup>2</sup>.

Since March 2014, European countries are facing massive information warfare and disinformation campaigns originating from the Russian Federation. These disinformation campaigns are supposed to undermine the trust of citizens in democratic political system, domestic and European institutions, local political elites and western values. Other goal of Russian disinformation campaigns is to create chaos

<sup>1</sup> For purpose of this article authors define the Visegrad countries as follows – Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, which are part of the Central Europe.

<sup>2</sup> ČIŽIK, T. 2017. Baltic States – How to React to “New Warfare” in the Context of the Article V?

in the minds of citizens and create the situation, when nobody knows, which information is false and which is correct. Information warfare itself cannot be considered as a new phenomenon in the armed conflicts, however in today's information era, the Internet and the social media have provide information warfare with a new battleground, where the main target groups are not militaries, but the minds of civilians.

Information warfare can be considered as a very powerful geopolitical tool, which can negatively influence any European state without direct use of military or hard power. Russian information warfare and propaganda have a clear geopolitical context. Disinformation campaigns are carefully prepared by experts and tailor-made for each state, not only in the close neighborhood of Russia such as Ukraine and Georgia, but also for NATO and the EU member states<sup>3</sup>.

In Russian disinformation campaigns, the strong emphasis is given on so called – Pan-Slavism, Russian culture and common values. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.), Pan-Slavism is 19<sup>th</sup>-century movement that recognized a common ethnic background among the various Slav peoples of eastern and east central Europe and sought to unite those peoples for the achievement of common cultural and political goals. Slavic culture and Slavic identity is often being used as a central concept in various disinformation media.

Such - according to them - “alternative” websites, can be found in any of the Visegrad state. Their main purpose is to share as much false information as possible and to create chaos in the minds of its citizens. Since 2014, there are traceable massive investments of the Russian Federation in media. A case in point, the budget for the RT agency (formerly Russia Today) in the period 2007-2015 was approximately 120 million USD, peaking in 2013-2014 with 400 million USD. Sputnik News in conjunction with Ria Novosti have a combined operating budget of 200 million USD per year, not to mention the local media involved in the spreading of propaganda<sup>4</sup>. Without any doubts, Russia's investments into development of tools of information warfare are not coincidence. In Russian Military doctrine from December 2014, information is treated as cheap and universal weapon, which is easily accessible and permeated all states borders without restrictions<sup>5</sup>. According to the Military Doctrine<sup>6</sup>, one of the main internal military risks for the Russian Federation are “subversive information activities

against the population, especially young citizens of the State, aimed at undermining historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions related to the defense of the Motherland”. Based on previous quotation, it can be assumed that Russia is clearly aware of the power of information.

### 3 CULTURAL IDENTITY

According to Ibrahim and Heuer<sup>7</sup> “the concept of cultural identity refers to familial and cultural dimensions of a person's identity, and how other perceive him or her, i.e., factors that are salient to a person's identity both as perceived by the individual and how others perceive the person's identity”. According to Ennaji<sup>8</sup>, “cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture”. It is no surprise that Kremlin is playing cultural identity card in Visegrad region to its advantage.

“The entire Central Europe region has suffered, in the last 100 years at least, from much turmoil, which has resulted in a degree of instability of political and economic institutions. The region has also been fairly isolated from mainstream of world politics”. The Central European countries share same history, culture, language<sup>9</sup>, habits and symbols. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, majority of the Central European states was part of the Habsburg Empire and in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century they were under the Soviet dominance<sup>10</sup>. They were part of the Soviet Union for almost 45 years. Therefore, it is logical that citizens of the Central European countries consider themselves, to some extent, as a part of the East. However, it is necessary to mention that there is a difference between young generation and older people, who feel nostalgic about the Soviet Union.

In case of the Central Europe, Russian disinformation campaigns are using mainly alternative and social media platforms to spread as much false information as possible. However, Kremlin also exploits the fact that Baltic states has sizeable Russian minority. “Due to Soviet Russification policies, Latvia and Estonia are the most exposed, as 26.9 percent of 2-million strong Latvia's populations are ethnic Russians and 24,8 % of 1,3 million of Estonians, while Lithuania has

<sup>3</sup> ČIŽIK, T. 2017a. *Russian Information Warfare in Central Europe*.

<sup>4</sup> DELFI. 2015. Kremlin's millions: How Russia funds NGOs in Baltics (3).

<sup>5</sup> ČIŽIK, T. 2017b. *Information Warfare as a Geopolitical Tool*.

<sup>6</sup> *Theatrum Belli*. 2015. *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*.

<sup>7</sup> IBRAHIM, F.A., HEUER, J. R. 2016. *Cultural and Social Justice Counseling*. p.15.

<sup>8</sup> ENNAJI, M. 2005. *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity and Education in Morocco*. p.19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Except Hungary.

<sup>10</sup> PEHE, J. 2002. “Central European Identity in Politics”. *Conference on Central European Identity*.

5,8 percent Russian population out of 2,9 million”<sup>11</sup>

In addition, most of the Central European countries are considered as Slavic countries (except Hungary and Baltic states), and therefore Kremlin is extensively using Slavic culture and common Russian culture as a main topic in its disinformation campaigns, as it will be discussed later.

However, not only Russian-speaking minorities, but also ethnic Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians are exposed to Russian language propaganda. According to surveys, 39 percent of those Estonians, who prefer viewing news in multiple languages, watch Russian TV channels<sup>12</sup>. In Latvia, the weekly reach of Russian TV channels is 48 percent<sup>13</sup> and 13 percent of Lithuanians watch news via Russian TV channels at least once a day<sup>14</sup>.

As it was mentioned above, Kremlin uses alternative websites to spread disinformation to specific groups of people. The most recent researches show that this tactics is very successful. Research<sup>15</sup> done by Globsec Policy Institute in September 2017 points out that 33 percent of Czechs, 39 percent of Hungarians, 45 percent of Poles and 21 percent of Slovaks would like to be part of the West. On the other side, 5 percent of Czechs, 5 percent of Hungarians, 3 percent of Poles and 9 percent of Slovaks would like to be part of the East. However, there are huge number of citizens of these countries, who would like to be “somewhere between” the West and East – 41 percent of Czechs and Hungarians, 35 percent of Poles and 42 percents of Slovaks. Such numbers show that half of the citizens of Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia do not want to be part neither of the West nor the East.

In addition, Globsec’s research showed that in three out of four of the Visegrad countries, the public is more sympathetic to Vladimir Putin than to Angela Merkel<sup>16</sup>. In Slovakia, 41 percent of the population finds Vladimir Putin sympathetic, however, only 19 percent said the same for Merkel. In Hungary, 44 percent of the population considers Putin sympathetic. In Czech Republic, it is 32 percent. However, in Poland, only 10 percent of Poles finds Putin sympathetic and 59 percent of Poles find Angela Merkel sympathetic. It is necessary to mention that during last years, due to their historical experiences with Russians, Poles have often warned other European countries of Russian aggressive actions. It comes as a no surprise that from the Central European countries, Putin is the least sympathetic foreign leader in Poland.

As it was argued in previous part, majority of the citizens of V4 countries does not want be part neither of the West nor the East, but on the other side, they like Vladimir Putin more than other foreign leaders. This suggests, to some extent, that Kremlin’s tactics of using pan-Slavism yields relevant results and definitely can influence public opinion in different countries.

International Republican Institute (IRI) also conducted research<sup>17</sup> on public opinion in V4 countries, which included questions about citizen’s sources of political news, trust in political system, opinions on the national and regional context and issues of identity. When asked about the Vladimir Putin’s Russia defending Christendom and traditional European values, 18 percent of Hungarians, 14 percent of Poles, 27 percent of Czechs and 41 percent of Slovaks agreed that “Russia has taken the side of traditional European values”, according to this research. Moreover, 24 percent of Hungarians, 21 percent of Poles, 38 percent of Czechs and 37 percent of Slovaks think that „Russia and Putin can be allies against the EU that is pushing us to abandon our values”.

IRI’s research showed also alarming phenomena, negative attitude of V4 citizens towards NATO, with 41 percent of Hungarians, 35 percent of Poles, 50 percent of Czechs and 53 percent of Slovaks thinking that NATO is no longer important for European security and the approach to security should be rethought. Also 54 percent of Hungarians, 35 percent of Poles, 59 percent of Czechs and 75 percent of Slovaks thinks that “Russia should be considered a partner in European security and brought into European security structures”. Also, 41 percent of Hungarians, 27 percent of Poles, 44 percent of Czechs and 60 percent of Slovaks thinks that “the United States should not play a role in European security, and in the fact its presence in Europe increases tensions and insecurity”.

While Kremlin is exploiting situation to spread as much disinformation as possible through social media and disinformation websites (in which Russia is being portrayed as a victim of the West and NATO aggressive policy), large audiences are using social media as their main source of information every days. According to IRI’s research, it is 40 percent of Slovaks, 47 percent of Czechs, 34 percent of Poles and 41 percent of Hungarians are using social media everyday as their main source of information. According to ongoing research of Centre for

<sup>11</sup> ŠUKYTÉ, D. 2017. *Russian Information Warfare in the Baltic States and Possibilities to Resist*. p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> SAAR POLL OÜ. 2014. *Current Events and Different Sources of Information*. p. 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> BALTIC COURSE. 2016. *Non-Latvians youngsters do not watch Latvian public television*.

<sup>14</sup> ŠUKYTÉ, D. 2017. *Russian Information Warfare in the Baltic States and Possibilities to Resist*. p. 122.

<sup>15</sup> GLOBSEC POLICY INSTITUTE. 2017. *Globsec Trends 2017: Mixed Messages and Signs of Hope from Central & Eastern Europe*.

<sup>16</sup> KREKÓ, P. 2017. *Merkel’s Next Challenge: Defeating Putin in Central Eastern Europe*. *Atlantic Council*.

<sup>17</sup> INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE. 2017. *Public opinion in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia*.

European and North Atlantic Affairs<sup>18</sup> (CENAA), this number is even larger when it comes to younger generation. Research has shown that almost 70 percent of young people<sup>19</sup> in Slovakia are using social media (Facebook) as their main source of political information.

Moreover, according to the same research, 27 percent of Poles and 24 percent of Slovaks, Czechs and Hungarians think that *“major media is not concerned with factual and correct reporting of a story, but instead is focused on propagating a narrative that serves a particular interest”*. Even though the majority of people think that major media is (or at least is trying to be) professional and unbiased, on average one out of four persons think it is biased.

IRI's research<sup>20</sup> also revealed that 15 percent of Hungarians, 12 percent of Czechs and 10 percent of Slovaks and Poles read these outlets because *“major media outlets are biased and refuse to acknowledge simple truths. Alternative sources are willing to tell the truth”*. At least once or twice a week those sources are visited by 36 percent of Hungarians, 34 percent of Czechs and Slovaks and 21 percent of Poles.

According to ongoing research of (CENAA), 23 percent of young people are using mainly disinformation media, such as Hlavné správy, Slobodný vysielateľ, Zem a Vek, as their main source of information.

#### 4 EXAMPLES FROM SLOVAKIA

What particular examples of disinformation campaigns related to cultural identity can be found on disinformation websites, which portray themselves as alternative media offering different point of view or revealing the truth?

To begin with the concept of the Slavic culture that is popular on disinformation websites. Little research on website Hlavné správy, Zem a Vek or Slobodný vysielateľ, has revealed, that keyword of “Slavic”, “Slavs” or “Pan-Slavism” appears in tens of articles.

These articles spread conspiracy theories stressing that Slavic culture is much older than it is officially presented. They claim that history of Slavic culture was artificially changed. Hlavné správy's article “Traces of Slavs and making-up of a history”<sup>21</sup>, which claims that *“history of many nations was intentionally made-up, classified and manipulated by historians”*,

can be used as an example. It claims that history of Slavs can be traced back to Egyptian Pharaohs, or even Mesopotamia. As another article “Chairman of NGO Slavica Miloš Zverina: ‘No one remembers golden ages of Slavs, when they lived as a one nation, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to Alaska’.”<sup>22</sup> suggests, there should have been times in the past, where Slavs were living in larger areas, yet there are *“creators of the official history”*, who prevent us from knowing the truth.

Very same example can be found in another Slovak “alternative” source of information called *Zem a Vek*, where in article “Slavs are second-class for the West, the future lies in Slavic union”<sup>23</sup> it is claimed that it is *“necessary to create an international organization, which will consist of ethnic Slavs – the most numerous group in Europe”*. Main purpose of this international organization, according to author, will be the preservation of national identity of Slavic countries. The very same article with same wording appears in all major disinformation websites – *Zem a Vek*, *Slobodný vysielateľ*, *Hlavné správy*, *Na palette*. In total, this article in four media has more than 4.7k shares on social media, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest. This article, particularly on website *Na palette* (with 2.8k shares), is also the most shared article on social media, which contains word “Slavs”, in the last year, in whole Slovakia.

Article “Slovaks – ethnic authenticity record holders?”<sup>24</sup> focuses also on the ethnic origins. Nevertheless, this time it discusses origins of Slovaks. It says that according to the genetic research of Dr. Ferák, almost 85 % of Slovaks has genes, which appeared in our area 8 000 years ago, stressing that we are the ones who lived under the High Tatras even back then. Moreover, according to the article we are *“the oldest ethnic group in Europe. Our genes appeared in Europe already 20-50 thousand years ago”*.

Other messages in these disinformation media, centre on the primacy of the Slavic culture, which is supposed to be better than other cultures, with Slavs serving as an example to other nations. This idea appears for example in the article at Hlavné správy “Annual Slavic meeting: Slavs should be lighthouse in the sea of multicultural and political chaos”<sup>25</sup>. As the title suggests, authors claims that Slavs are the ones who can navigate others in difficult times.

Similar idea appears in yet another article from *Zem a Vek* “Slavs do not need life advices from

<sup>18</sup> Research outcomes will be available in November 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Young people – high-school students between the age of 15 and 21.

<sup>20</sup> INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE. 2017. *Public opinion in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia*.

<sup>21</sup> *Hlavné správy*. 2016. *Stopy Slovanov a prekrúcanie histórie*.

<sup>22</sup> *Hlavné správy*. 2017b. *Predseda OZ Slavica Miloš Zverina: „Zlaté časy Slovanov, keď žili ako jeden veľký*

*národ od brehov Atlantického oceánu po Aljašku, si už nikto nepamätá“*.

<sup>23</sup> *Zem a Vek*. 2017. *Pre Západ sú Slovania druhotriedni, budúcnosť je slovanská únia*

<sup>24</sup> *Hlavné správy*. 2016 b. *Slováci – rekordérmi etnickej authenticity?*

<sup>25</sup> *Hlavné správy*. 2017. *Jubilejný Všeslovanský zjazd: Slovania by mali byť majákom v mori multikultúrneho a politického chaosu*.

Germans or Americans”<sup>26</sup>. Author of this article refers to the books of Czech psychologist Jiřina Prekopová, which should prove that the situation in the West is much worse than in the Czech Republic or Slovakia and that there is decadence in Germany, with many spoiled children and people divorce. Author believes there is our “5000 years old Slavic rightness, which the world is jealous about” and that we are “giving away our rightness in the times, when other European nations are lost in their being”. Article became very popular, scoring 1.5k shares on social media. This article is also the second-most shared article on social media, which contains word “Slavs”, in the last year, in whole Slovakia.

## 5 CONCLUSION

As it has been argued in previous parts of this article, Russia throughout disinformation websites is clearly using cultural identity of the Central European states to achieve its strategic objective – to influence and manipulate minds of citizens and to undermine their trust into existing political system, domestic and European institutions and democracy as such and so to reverse their pro-Western orientation.

According to the most recent researches, it is also clear that this tactic is very successful not only among young generation, but also among general public. From a long-term perspective, such actions have potential to significantly influence the core values of citizens of the Central European countries, as can be currently seen in Hungary, where its government is in the clash with the European Union.

“Tailor-made” disinformation campaigns represent the most imminent and dangerous threat for European security architecture. In fact, European countries are still not able to properly address this threat, mainly due to complexity of information warfare and therefore it will be difficult to improve security of the citizens of the Central European countries without massive investments into education and development of critical thinking, improving knowledge of young generation about history and historical development of international affairs in last 70 years and without cooperation of all state and non-state actors.

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<sup>26</sup> *Zem a Vek*. 2017b. Slovania nepotrebujú recepty na život od Nemcov či Američanov.

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