Ireneusz Ciosek*
ORCID: 0000-0002-7517-5329

AGGRAVATING UNCERTAINTY – RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE WEST

ABSTRACT

According to vast evidence material, Russia actively tries to influence the situation in Western societies by creating and aggravating uncertainty with the usage of weaponized information. It can be treated as an important part of Russian application of sharp power in the West. The purpose of the article is to explore the selected exemplifications of Russian activities and create a map of disruptive operations against the Western "hearts and minds". The main scientific methods used in the study are desk research and content analysis. The employment of these methods is crucial to conduct the study of official Russian documents and identified cases of anti-Western information operations.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, sharp power, information warfare, uncertainty, The West, NATO, EU

1. INTRODUCTION

For Russia, the trajectory of global changes shows that "the global economic and political dominance of the traditional western powers" is eroding. Russia perceives itself to be in the state of geopolitical clash with the West. The logic of resistance consolidates society around "besieged fortress" with exposed borders (Torkunov, 2018) and "explains" economic and social defects of the system. The only way to break this siege is to return to the status of true superpower with ability to project values, realize vital interests, sometimes with "always legitimate" use of coercion and military power.

  According to Russian strategic documents, "soft power has become an integral part of efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives. This primarily includes the tools offered by civil

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  * Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce (Poland), e-mail: iciosek@ujk.edu.pl

society as well as various methods and technologies – from information and communication, to humanitarian and other types" (*Foreign Policy Concept*, 2016). *Soft power*, a concept created by Joseph Nye is defined as a model of obtaining state's objectives in international politics by attracting others to admire the values of the state, emulating its example and not forcing them to change their behavior by threat of military power or any other form of coercion (Nye, 2005, p. 5–6). However, the Russian policies can be classified as an exercise of *sharp power* rather than of *soft power*. Christopher Walker (2018, p. 11–12) defines it as an "approach to international affairs that typically involves efforts at censorship, or the use of manipulation to sap the integrity of independent institutions". It has the effect of limiting free expression and distorting the political environment". Walker describes the term *sharp*, as a metaphor of "piercing, penetrating, or perforating" the political environment.

Russian information operations seek to capitalize on vulnerabilities generated by civil society in the West and disrupt institutions of democratic societies. All spheres, where the information weaponry can be deployed, will be hit by this asset, originating from sophisticated Russian active measures arsenal. These activities deepen the divisions within Western societies and divert social opinions from not only liberal democracy, civil liberties, but from the West as an ideal, or a cultural, social, political and geopolitical concept. Russia operates information weapons through several channels, and their "payload" is tailored to different audiences. Russian operations are performed by classic media outlets, users and profiles in social media ecosystem.

Social uncertainty is defined as the "degree to which a person's uncertainty about [...] their own future states and actions depends on their uncertainty about the states and actions of others" (Kappes et al., 2019). Western societies are facing a deep, multidimensional crisis – problems with democratic systems legitimacy, rise of populism and political extremism, anti-elite backlash, cultural and identity-related tensions fueled or ignited by mass migration from the Middle East and North Africa are important "streams" within this complex problem, and most recently, SARS-CoV-19 public health emergency. These problems are generating severe uncertainty in all Western societies. This negative state with all following emotions is being aggravated by Russian information warfare waged against the EU and the United States. Weaponized information is "piercing" crisis-torn societies, "penetrating" traditional democratic institution and "perforating" social structures.

The scientific literature analyzing the question of Russian information war against the West is extensive and still growing. The majority of those positions concerns the general question of Russian strategies, objectives and fields of activity, i. e. Boyd-Barret (2019); Galeotti, (2019); Jonsson (2019); Stengel (2019); Van Herpen (2015). There is also a sizeable body of articles in scientific journals, i.e. Abrams (2016); Aro (2016); Berzina (2018); Dawson & Innes (2019); Lanoszka (2019); Lukito (2020); McGeehan (2018); Mejias & Vokuev (2017); Thomas (2014); Thornton (2015). It is necessary to include the output of analytic documents stemming from international think tanks (i.e. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Cato Institute, Center for European Policy Analysis, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Centre for Eastern Studies, Council on Foreign Relations, Eastern Europe Studies Center, European Council on Foreign Relations, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Prague Security Studies Institute, Rand Corporation, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, The Casimir Pulaski Foundation). It is also impossible to overlook EU and NATO analytic institutions, particularly East StratCom Task Force and NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. The subject is also broadly analyzed by international media outlets.

From the perspective of author's analysis there are positions that refer (but not explicitly) to social uncertainty and activities targeting democratic institutions in the West: Marshall, Goodman, Zowghi & da Rimini (2015); *Pomerantsev (2019);* Bennet & Livingston (2018); Freivogel (2017); Nisbet & Kamenchuk (2019). The main objective of the author is to identify the cases of Russian information war instruments inducing uncertainty and all emotions related thereto in Western societies and to pinpoint their effects. The analysis must be preceded by the outline of research methodology.

2. METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Scientific instruments employed to explore the subject matter are centered around broadly understood content analysis and desk research, anchored in social sciences methodological framework.

Desk research is a type of secondary analysis of qualitative data. There is no one commonly accepted definition thereof. However, the broadly used basic principle of it states that it involves the analysis of pre-existing data (Heaton, 2012, p. 2–3). It aims to address questions which were not analyzed by other researchers. Desk research instruments are used to collect and structure the body of empirical material, first and foremost from online media outlets. Therefore, the methodology must also include content analysis, which is placed somewhere between political science coupled with media-related science *and* communication sciences. It asks the question of why the content was created, what was the context of its creation and what are the impact and consequences of its presence (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 21).

Examples of Russian information operations are selected from the broad set of cases, from 2016–2019 period, when several important events in the Western world occurred: U.S. presidential campaign and Donald Trump election, Brexit and activation of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty by United Kingdom, war against *Daesh* (ISIS), migration and terrorist attacks in Europe, prolongation of Russian aggression against the Ukraine, enhancing NATO's Eastern Flank and general social problems in EU and U.S. (the rise of populism, social unrest).

Considering the outlined research problem and methodology, the author puts following hypothesis: *Russian information war means, and methods are aggravating uncertainty in crisis-hit Western societies*. In order to verify it, several questions must be answered: *what are the strategies of Russian information war? What are the cases of weaponized information aggravating uncertainty in Western societies? What are the effects of these Russian operations?*

Firstly, the place of information in Russian strategies and a rationale behind efforts to aggravate social uncertainty in the West should be explained.

2.1. RUSSIAN STRATEGIC LENS

For Russia, the trajectory of global changes shows that "the global economic and political dominance of the traditional Western powers" is eroding (*Foreign Policy Concept*, 2016). Russia perceives itself to be in the state of geopolitical clash – admittedly below the level of war, but with high level of intensity (Freedman, 2018, p. 27) – with Russia regarding itself as being located in the very center of Eurasia, being endowed with distinctive identity, derived from the classic concept of Mackinder's *Heartland* (Kubyshkin & Sergunin, 2015, pp. 38–39) According to a study of Russia-based scientists, the broad socio-political scene and

"Russian mindset" is filled by the *imperial nationalism,* narrative invented by integration of ethnic and civic nationalisms (Ponarin & Komin, 2018, p. 2). It is also important to notice that geopolitics is currently fully integrated with the Russian messianism (Świder, 2016, p. 36). The "origins of Russian conduct", to invoke George Kennan's famous *Long Telegram*, is a complex issue, where different explanatory sets should be taken into consideration. According to Elias Götz (2017, p. 48), several can be identified: "decisionmaker accounts focusing on Putin's mindset and worldviews; domestic political accounts emphasizing the Kremlin's interest in preventing internal unrest and democratization spillover; ideational accounts highlighting the role of Russia's national self-understanding and desire for international status".

Many believe that president Vladimir Putin is the sole leader and the creator of all Russian policies. There is also a lot of speculation about the models of power distribution within the top echelon of Russian authorities, which is possibly more diffused with Putin as a "moderator", "real tsar reincarnated", who hovers above the mutually competing groups, which are too weak and too disunited to challenge his rule" (Nalbandov, 2016, p. 88).

Preventing internal unrest, in Russia symbolized by Western backed *color revolutions* (Deyermond, 2016, pp. 963–964), is the question of great importance for ruling elites. Placing their country in position of constant pressure and threat generated by the Western, "expansive, consumptionist, hedonistic powers" (Tsygankov, 2018, p. 104) helps to draw sharp boundaries of its own identity, spiritual heritage of Christian Orthodoxy and "Russian soul". The maintenance of fear within society is beneficial both for the persistence of the regime and for its goals abroad. The logic of resistance consolidates society around "besieged fortress" with exposed borders (Torkunov, 2018) and "explains" economic and social defects of the system. The only way to break this siege is to return to the status of a true superpower with an ability to project values, realize vital interests, sometimes with "always legitimate" use of coercion and military power. It is also important to acknowledge the role of offensively minded military and intelligence establishment, *siloviki*, in the shaping of foreign policy (Rivera, Werning & Rivera, 2018, pp. 226–227).

However, territory – always crucial for the Russian mindset – is no longer the only one spatial dimension of Russian thinking about its own identity and set of imperatives. The broadly understood *cyberspace*, a space without the territory, was raised to a key role in Russian views about strategic directions of both external and internal policies. Russia recognizes the role of highly efficient *sharp power* tools (although the documents described them as *soft power*), deployed in new, networked media. Their role is explained in *Foreign Policy Concept* (2016): "In addition to traditional methods of diplomacy, <<soft power>> has become an integral part of efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives. This primarily includes the tools offered by civil society, as well as various methods and technologies – from information and communication, to humanitarian and other types". It can be assumed that within this understanding of the notion, Russia seeks to capitalize on vulnerabilities generated by the very existence of civil society in all of its manifestation in the West. "Tools offered" by rapid technological development are employed as instruments of achieving advantage on the international stage. Information can be recognized as the most important in this context.

Doctrine of Information Security (2016) elaborates Russian perception of the information environment and introduces a catalogue of vital national interests, indicating the major threat vectors, areas of vulnerabilities along with objectives to achieve in order to build resilience on social, economic, political and military level. Consequently, in Russian strategic thought,

information war is understood as an: "impingement on massive consciousness within the interstate rivalry of civilization systems in information sphere that is using specific methods of control of information resources as an information weapon" (Darczewska, 2014, p. 12).

As it can be noticed, the military and nonmilitary, technological and social domains are interlocked in one set of activities. Information warfare is therefore a type of permanent activity (Giles, 2016, p. 11). As opposed to the West, Russia adopted holistic approach to this question. The main space of battle of Russian information war is cyberspace, which (as opposed to the West, mainly NATO) is treated holistically – not only as a strictly technical domain, but also a sphere wherein users are constantly present and create a myriad of interactions.

Measures of Russian information war – manipulation and fabrication of information, disinformation, social maneuvering – are applied first and foremost in heterogeneous cyberspace (Aleksandrowicz, 2016, pp. 32–34). Russia is using an immense array of different means to reshape this sphere in accordance with her interests. NATO Defence College *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* (Giles, 2016, p. 16) quotes Russian authors (S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov) stating that: "Information and psychological warfare will come on top of all forms and methods of operations in future wars to achieve superiority in troop and weapon control and to erode the morale and psychological spirit of the opposing side's armed forces personnel and population. Indeed, information warfare and psychological operations lay much of the groundwork for victory". Information warfare is therefore an important asset in geopolitical rivalry with the West. The decisive advantages of this weapon are low-cost/high impact parameters. Information warfare is not limited by state boundaries and can be thus universally applied.

Western societies are exhaustively researched by Russian intelligence apparatus. All spheres in which the information weaponry is deployed suffers negative consequences and sometimes, the cascade effects are triggered. Russian state authorities operate on the basis of very insightful understanding of contemporary social processes, trajectories of technological development and correlations of the former and the latter. Therefore, it can be presumed that Russian doctrines discussed above are well adapted to their main target; that is, to Western social and political systems. Hence, their vulnerabilities, creating the space where Russia deploys her information weaponry, must be outlined.

2.2. THE SPACE OF BATTLE

The world has entered the post-truth era, where there is no "(…) truth or lies, but a third category of ambiguous statements that are not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie" (Keyes, 2004, p. 15). Eclectic compilations of truths and lies, all bent and mixed together in a way that creates an immeasurable area yielding itself to various interpretations or modifications, are being extensively used. It is an amorphous material which can be molded in a desired way to perform a desired function. The civil society in the West makes itself vulnerable due to its deep digital connectedness or digital dependency. What is more, inherent pluralism and openness of Western societies creates another "set" of weak spots, attracting offensive actions by potential adversaries (Goldsmith & Rusell, 2018, pp. 9–10). Rapid development of communication technologies opened a Pandora Box of new threats and risks – "by-products" of progress (Beck, 2012, p. 20). This extending catalogue is still not fully and properly un-

derstood in Western societies. What is more, the state of general crisis of the West discussed earlier complements the structure of "fertile ground" for Russian disruptive measures.

Internauts, or "networked" individuals, are locked in so called "echo chambers" (Colleoni et. al., 2014, p. 319)*,* where they "meet" only with narratives and views compatible with each other's. These are grey zones were information impingement creates alternative worlds, blurring the lines of the real and imagined conflicts. Social media are not the obvious "first choice" as platforms through which geopolitical rivalry is channeled. However, in hybrid warfare, which combines military and non-military means of conduct, this type of media is a very important front. The point where properly structured information enters the Internet and passages hubs, generating "swarms" (organization of multiple autonomous individuals, creating a community which is defined by circumstances and character) constitute a specific kind of "forward edge of battle area".

The Russian information warfare puts achievements of modern technology, lifestyle and many others which have their origins in the West, against its societies, creatively using vectors of social currents. Multi-layered combination of subversive tactics applied by Russia against the West is nothing new. The so called "active measures" (Darczewska, Żochowski 2017: 8) are known from Soviet aggressive policies, but now, they are "armed" with high-end technologies, thus making Western vulnerability even more pronounced (not only in terms of "hard" critical cyber-systems entwining world and people's lives). The repertoire of modern 'active measures' differs little from that used during the Cold War. These techniques are implemented both by locutionary means (disinformation and propaganda) and by actual actions (subversion, provocation, protest actions, paramilitary actions, etc.). The latest innovations mainly rely on the use of new means of communication, which have expanded the special services' opportunities for action. The Internet has abolished the old barriers to information and communication; it provides access to information in real time, making it easier for the special services to effect the rapid penetration of their targets".

British journalist, Peter Pomerantsev has analyzed Russian handbook, designed for students and politicians. What is thereby meant is 2011 edition of *Information-Psychological War Operations: A Short Encyclopedia and Reference Guide*. According to this handbook, information weaponry "acts like an invisible radiation" (Pomerantsev, p. 2015). Pomerantsev states that due to information impingement, a confused individual is put in the "hall of mirrors". It is a place in which nothing is what it seems to be. Such context may, under certain conditions, constitute a "starting platform" for cascading crises. Technologically driven information war, waged by Russia along with saturation of public sphere with fake news, conspiracy narratives can (apart from constructing and deconstructing political views and preferences) generate massive, physical effects, panic and real crises (Chen, 2017).

There is a large casebook of documented and well-analyzed instances of Russian interference in democratic processes in the West and other subversive actions. Some cases should be recalled in order to identify the "corridors", through which Russia is bringing about uncertainty and other emotions associated with it. These cases are selected on the basis of main problems of Western political and social systems: growing anti-EU resentment and the rise of extreme political movements; ant-elite backlash in U.S. and EU states; fear of mass migration from conflict zones in the Middle East and North Africa, cultural conflicts and terrorism; fear of possible war between NATO and Russia; spread of conspiracy thinking.

The author assumes that these problems are the main driving forces of uncertainty in the West and therefore are exhaustively exploited in Russian information operations.

2.3. AVENUES OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

Whichever objective is being pursued by Russia, divisions within the Western community can be described as an effect integrating almost all possible desired outcomes. Russian soft impingement is concentrated around the nexus "Russia is good" – "the West is bad" (Shekhovstov, 2018, p. 135). A lot of "streams" of Russian disinformation are filled with content tailored to different audiences (the same narrative will not be equally effective when applied to the populations from i.e. Central Europe, Scandinavia or Western Europe). Russian operations are performed with the help of a vast array of classic media, users and profiles in social media ecosystem. What are the most exemplary motives of Russian narratives against the West? According to EU's East StratCom Task Force, the notion "common people *versus* elites" is one of them, used especially in the election periods. This motive was used extensively before Brexit referendum. Within this narrative, one can point to "evil power" standing behind corrupt elites to "blame for everything" – George Soros, the so called "banksters", Jews, EU bureaucrats and others. Russian disinformation also resorts to alleged manipulations of electoral process conducted by individuals within elites. This narrative is nothing new, but with the help of modern networked media, it has immense power of influence. This notion has almost infinite power to explain everything in a way that would depict Russia in a favourable way (*5 Common Pro-Kremlin*, 2019). Conspiracy mindset is also being taken advantage of during crisis situations, especially in cases of terrorist attacks, active shooters, plane crashes, and social unrests. A detailed study conducted in University of Washington showed hard evidence of this phenomena. As one of the researchers, Kate Starbird (2017), said: "[…] a similar kind of rumor kept showing up, over and over again, after each of the man-made crisis events—a conspiracy theory or "alternative narrative" of the event that claimed it either didn't happen or that it was perpetrated by someone other than the current suspects. […] For every man-made crisis event we studied, we found evidence of alternative narratives, often shared by some of the same accounts and connected to some of the same online sites".

That is when the conspiracy narratives, used as an ammunition in information warfare, reached a fertile ground and obtained the peak of their effectiveness. This is the moment when knowledge "forbidden" by elites is reaching surface with power multiplied by the velocity of "information highway". What K. Starbird has observed is a by-product of the decline of trust in traditional (or *mainstream*, which has increasingly negative connotations) media. The state of uncertainty can be therefore easily reinforced to influence collective imagination by creating alternative worlds interlocked with well-known and simple explaining narratives – conspiracies.

Similarly, conspiracy narrative based on anti-elite resentments appeared during the height of "Yellow Vests" protest in France, which attracted great attention of Russian media outlets and social network entities. One example is particularly evocative. During the protest in December 2018, an armored carrier of French police was used in action. Networks exploded with posts about alleged EU mercenary force deployed to suppress the protesters (*Non, l'Union européenne*, 2018) and hashtags "#Frexit", "#Otangohome" (NATO go home). EU was portrayed as an occupying force and a tool in hands of elites, denying realization of society's interests. The news was of course debunked by mainstream media – the vehicle was part of European Gendarmerie Force, which took part in the formation training exercises (Mathiot, 2018). But when one writes EuroGendFor, Google search engine suggests connection with *gilets jeunes*. When searching for that phrase, links to YouTube conspiracy loaded videos are

first to be seen. A lot of people can add this case as an example of vast conspiracy against the ordinary people. Why aren't conspirators arrested and put on trial? Why isn't the unambiguous evidence is found? Because "they" are so effective. Russian network of dispersed sources in Internet and media outlets are exploiting these emotions and using them against the EU and the U.S.

They contain so many disinformation narratives about the United States herself – for example the notion of "deep state" used so often by president Donald Trump is exploited by authors from Russian media ecosystem, sometimes mistranslated as "big state (Swiridow, 2019). The United States also "plans" to use NATO military power to thwart ambitions of countries opposing "Western policies" (Chiesa, 2019) and "installs" political leaders in the EU (Mautner, 2019).

The disinformation campaigns target the feeling of traditional values being endangered by openness of the West. In Russian narrative, the western societies are under increasing pressure from feminists, LGBT and overall decadence and dictature of "political correctness". According to Russian propaganda the West is "rotting", and Russia itself is the only power which cultivate traditional values. As "Pravda's" Lyuba Lulko (2016) puts it: "It appears that it is not Russia that imposes Christian values on the world, but God himself guides Russia to help our civilization survive. Policies of same-sex marriage and genderless children, juvenile justice and promotion of homosexuality is a way to the degradation of man, who, as we remember, was created after the image and likeness of God."

Putting collectiveness against Western individualism and, as East StratCom analysts say, Russian dedication to values and opposition to Western liberties is "always expressed from a position of moral high ground, in which the silent majority, committed to decency and traditionalism, is under attack from liberal <<tyranny>>" (*5 Common Pro-Kremlin*, 2019). Democracy itself is also portrayed as an illegitimate political system being also equated with above-mentioned "liberal tyranny". At this point, the "elites vs common people" notions is inextricably intertwined with "threat to traditional values". According to Kremlin and its supporters in the West, only Russia is the just answer.

Another "stream" of Russian disinformation exploits the motive of lost sovereignty in Western states. According to this motive, nations of the West are being deprived of their sovereignty by EU and NATO. There are voices, that the United States are occupying force in Europe. Within this narrative, one can came across another motive: West is in the state of collapse. There is also identifiable notion of ridiculing everything, even based on compelling evidence, which contradicts pro-Kremlin narratives. The "Hahaganda" as it is called, is almost in every corner of the social networks – "Did Russia interfere? Of course, Russia is responsible for everything from flying discs to global warming". There is a very interesting example of the deployment of this tool – the confusion about allegedly Russian submarine, spotted in waters in Stockholm's vicinity (*Certainly Russian'* 2018). Swedish scholars call these, and similar, practices "pollution" of information environment (Kragh, Åsberg, 2017, p. 35).

As it can be seen, Russian disinformation activities are complex phenomenon. The affected individuals, societies are put in complicated situation, in which there is no confidence about cornerstones of democracy, with conspiracy theories (both brand new and old ones) being omnipresent in Internet discussion forums. This "hall of mirrors", as Peter Pomerantsev described it, creates permissive environment for reshaping political opinions and moods. It adds to a state of deep anxiety in Western societies. Confused individuals are too tired from

attention crush with a plethora of news coming from almost everywhere to search for deep sources. Russian disinformation is almost perfectly executed and hidden behind sophisticated structure and number of articles, posts, tweets, videos and others. Therefore, the source of particular news is virtually impossible to find. It is a perfect definition of so-called *narrative laundering* (Shekhovstov, 2018, p. 136). It opens a door to shaping views on the basis of faith, not facts and thus aggravates overall uncertainty.

2.4. AWARE AND OBLIVIOUS BENEFICIARIES

Russian support of different political and social movements is the subject of detailed studies in scientific and journalistic circles. It can be assumed that Western states' institutions, especially security and intelligence services are also working on this issue.

The profile of those movements, however very complex, has several ideological intersections – Euroscepticism, nationalism, identitarianism (Ebner, 2019), inclination to soft forms of authoritarianism, xenophobic postures, simplistic narratives and, sometimes, clearly pro-Russian stances (Matteo Salvini of Italian Lega or Marine Le Pen of French Front National to name a few). It should be noted that populist movements are "stretched" from right-leaning to left-leaning (Mudde, 2004, p. 548–549), but the far-right groups can be described as the most evocative example, mainly because of their recent electoral successes.

Far-right political parties and circles supporting their worldviews are staring at Russia. In 2013, the then leader of Hungarian Jobbik, Gábor Vrona, gave a lecture in Moscow's Lomonosov University, during which he described America as the "deformed offspring of Europe" and the EU as a "traitor of our continent". According to Vrona, Russia "represents Europe much better than either of the two above, as it preserves its traditions and does not follow the culture of money and the masses" (*Gábor Vona had a lecture*, 2018). Marine Le Pen, the Front National controversial leader names Vladimir Putin "a patriot", who is "attached to the sovereignty of his people (sic!)" (Laruelle, 2015: 20). Marine le Pen was accused of accepting Russian financial support (Houeix, 2017), which she strongly denies. Italian Lega's Matteo Salvini also endorses Putin's Russia policies (Johnson & Ghiglione, 2018) and is also accused of financial ties to Kremlin (*Denaro russo per la Lega*, 2019). The network of Western far-right connections to Russia is vast, as Anton Shekhovtsov argues, based on extensive research of this problem. As it can be seen, there are strong similarities between ideologies of populists and the current line of Russian foreign policy.

The recent populist revival is often qualified as exclusively Russian enterprise, which aims to create divisions in the West and weaken it. It is far-reaching simplification of very complicated political, social and economic processes, the beginning of which can be traced back to 2008 economic crisis and gradual loss of trust to broadly defined, traditional elites. The structural crisis of the West was exploited by the Russian side. As it was indicated, when analyzing the Russian foreign policy fundaments, the social currents in the West are deeply investigated, put in historical contexts, extrapolated and used as a weapon. Capitalizing on Western openness, Russia creates sophisticated narratives, integrating truths, lies, fears, emotions, beliefs, hopes and technological dependence of confused societies. Those feelings are being amplified by Russian active measures; and as a result, the divisions and wedges are built. Far-right movements are therefore harnessed to Russian strategic activities. It must be mentioned, that these ties are as old as modern offensive Russian policies toward the

West – their origins can be traced back to the Cold War, as A. Shekhovtsov (2018, pp. 1–18, pp. 24:40) evidences in his detailed study of far-right "Russian connection".

The effect of covert or overt support for those movements is a situation in which a confused European or American citizen asks himself or herself whether the traditional parties, leaders, international alliances actually serve his/her interests. Uncertainty in the context of legitimacy of political and social institutions might threaten the stability and prosperity of the West. Aggravating it constitutes a major threat to the security.

2.5. A PERFECT STORM: ISLAM, MIGRATION AND TERRORISM:

"Save our children", "No attacks from immigrants on our children" – these slogans where used during "spontaneous" demonstrations in Russian-German communities in Berlin (Rutenberg, 2017). The protests were caused by alleged kidnapping of 13-year old girl, who, according to her family, was "abducted and gang-raped by southern-looking men". The outrage was sparked by the popular Russian TV station, Channel One (McGuiness, 2016). The station reported, that "after 30 hours, according to the aunt, Lisa, [the girl was] beaten and raped, was thrown out onto the street". While German authorities were investigating the case, far-right movements demonstrated their anger over Chancellor Angela Merkel open-door policy towards migration from the war-torn Middle East and North Africa with slogans like "Stop Foreign Infiltration!" and "Secure Borders!" (Rutenberg, 2017). The protests have not gathered masses but caught the attention of RT (Russia Today) and were reported by Sputnik. As it transpired, the investigation established that Lisa F. had consensual sex with 23-year old man 3 months earlier, who was late found guilty of sexual abuse (*Man found guilty*, 2019).

RT, Sputnik and dozens of social media accounts spread the rape-version of the story. Russian Foreign Ministry issued official statement, and Sergei Lavrov elaborated on the case during an official conference. Russian embassy contacted German authorities. The state apparatus was engaged in what seemed to be a support operation for this well-structured and directed disinformation, thus multiplying the latter's strength. The information about alleged involvement of migrants from the Middle East worked as a weapon with which Germany was attacked. It was identified by *Bundesnachrichtendienst* (BND, Federal Intelligence Service) as well as NATO civil authorities and military command in Brussels and Mons (*The "Lisa case"*, 2019).

The important element of this narrative were alleged actions of German officials to cover the "truth" about the effects of open-door policy. "Muslim invaders raping women" is the symbol, a "metaphor of genesis" of the fall of EU and the West as a whole. Refugees and migrants entering EU from the south are portrayed as the crucial element of conspiracy of the "leftists", elites and George Soros, all of whom want to destroy Christian values, European nation states, and force homosexuality, introduce Marxism-leaning totalitarianism in the super-state ruled by corporations. Amid these contradictions, every confused and angry citizen of the West can find simple explanations. Consequently, the "evil powers" of the West are fueling migrations from Middle East and Africa and supporting (or even establishing) Islamic terrorist organizations like Daesh. Terrorism, creation of "Sharia no-go zones" in European cities are important elements of the sophisticated "strategy" elaborated below. The elites are allegedly redefining the whole Western world. They use "political correctness

terror", "tolerance dictatorship" to cover the real aims. There is one remedy: Russia is the only power in the world, having will and resources to save "Christian civilization" (Michel, 2017).

Exploiting this particular vulnerability is especially effective. Uncertainty generated by the lack of efficiency and legitimacy of governments managing the migration crisis is an important type of social emotion. "Targeting" these emotions by Russian information weapons has severe influence on social and political stability of the West.

2.6. NUCLEAR FEAR AND THE STRANGE CASE OF BEN MARKING

Ben Marking is a name of deleted YouTube profile, which, since 2016, had published fake videos, designated as "fictional dramatization" featuring a scenario of the Third World War, starting with an escalating tension between NATO and Russia. One of the videos shows an anchor of the BBC News, who emerges with breaking news after the interruption of regular broadcast, informing about the skirmish between NATO and Russian naval and air forces in the Baltic sea. The coverage is interlaced with archival images of NATO foreign and defense ministers arriving at HQ in Brussels put in the context of confrontation. The tensions escalate rapidly with successful Russian airborne and land assaults on Poland, Baltic states, Romania, Finland. Video shows archival images of Vladimir Putin overseeing an operations center of Russian ministry of defense with information bar transmitting news about ongoing fighting on NATO's Eastern Flank and mobilization in NATO. It is being reported that Turkey is refusing access to its airspace for NATO planes, effectively breaking North Atlantic Treaty. The unfolding crisis quickly enters the nuclear phase, commenced with Russian tactical nuclear strike on supply convoy in Baltic sea. The video informs about president Putin's claiming to "defend cultural and political rights in former soviet states". Information bar states that Reuters reports several nuclear detonations in eastern Poland, where NATO deployed tactical nuclear warheads against Russian forces and Russian strategic missiles strikes against early warning systems in UK, United States and Greenland. Warsaw is hit by 1 megaton thermonuclear warhead. The video shows UK Ministry of Defence nuclear attack warning and abruptly ends with alarm signal and black screen (*Nuclear Emergency Broadcast*, 2016).

The video was perfectly staged. BBC studio and TV broadcast were so detailed, that it is impossible to tell the difference. There were 9 updated materials uploaded by Ben Marking YouTube profile, tailored to UK, United States, Canada and Australia. Then, the profile was deleted. Why is this case so interesting? The edited and shortened video, with slightly different plot (assuming the confrontation starts in Eastern Mediterranean) was re-uploaded but without the "fictional" designation. What is interesting, the voice posing as retired British general is talking about Russian superiority and "outgunned NATO". This material circulated in social media and Whatsapp igniting controversies and fear. BBC issued an official statement with explanation (Bell, 2018).

As it turned out, the actor from original version of the video, Mark Ryes, told "The Daily Telegraph" reporters that he was employed by Benchmarking Assessment Group (Irish headhunting company, established in 2006) to perform the role of news anchor in a video that will be used as a "psychometric test". The aim of this test was to examine clients' reaction "in a disaster scenario". The actor made the video and sent it to the Group, not knowing the final shape thereof. When asked about the situation, David Ringwood from the Group maintained that "he did not remember making the video and did not respond to further requests for comment" (Horner, 2018).

The similarity between Benchmarking Assessment Group and Ben Marking profile is striking. The video was originally posted during the times of the discussion about the security of Baltic states and Suwalki Gap in Poland and decisions about NATO's new forward presence on the Eastern Flank with deterrent posture. The video shows almost unchecked Russian forces advancing in the region, destruction of NATO assets in Romania and first nuclear strike which is not concluded with NATO's surrender. What follows is the beginning of nuclear warfare with Russian tactical and strategic advantage in all theatres.

The attentive observer can see traces of Russian military doctrine which assumes the possibility of combat use of nuclear weapons with the aim of "de-escalation". This strategic posture is nothing new in Russian military thought, within which "De-escalation of aggression is forcing the enemy to halt military action by a threat to deliver or by actual delivery of strikes of varying intensity with reliance on conventional and (or) nuclear weapons." (Schneider, 2018, p. 362). A detailed plan of using nuclear capacities is, of course, secret, but every country conducts sophisticated information and disinformation activities to cover the real aims and the scope of projected use of these potentials. The message of this video is unmistakable – NATO has no chances for escaping a defeat. There is no safe place – cities (Warsaw, Brussels) are hit. NATO strategic potentials are useless – missile defense base in Deveselu, Romania is destroyed; early warning stations in Fylingdales, UK; Thule Greenland; Clear, United States are destroyed. Russian conventional and unconventional military power is superior.

One might wonder whether it was Western ("Rome is burning, it is required to build adequate capabilities") or Russian ("have no hope, we will win") disinformation. The public sphere in Western world is filled with reports of Russian disinformation. To think about Ben Marking videos as a Russian operation is natural. The reflection about "omnipotent" Russia alone serves the realization of Kremlin's objectives. The campaign against crisis-thorn Western societies aims at deepening the divisions, confusion and apathy and generating severe uncertainty. A clear vision of nuclear apocalypse after the refusal to back down under Russian armed pressure can serve these aims effectively. The potential of these videos generating panic, when aired i.e. in hacked systems in airports, is very high.

As of January 2020, the author of the article was not able to find any information about the Benchmarking Assessment Group in online open sources. David Ringwood is currently a "Vice President of Client Development for the EMEA Region" for Management Research Group (2019). The explanation of the Ben Marking videos remains unknown.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The narratives about Russian information warfare waged against the EU and United States, the ubiquitous disinformation, fake news and propaganda have become a constant element of discourse in the West. The public sphere is filled with questions of whether those assumptions are a reflection of the reality or just another element of multi-layered and sophisticated disinformation activities of the whole Russian state apparatus or else – they are only a projection of individual and collective fears in uncertain times. According to the evidence gathered, Russia actively tries to influence the situation in Western societies, especially with the usage of weaponized information. Western states do not know what is the angle of the attack or sometimes even whether the attack is under way. Exploiting existing problems in the West adds another layer of "strategic confusion" about the direction it is heading for.

Russian *sharp power* toolbox's most powerful instrument serves to wreak havoc in people's hearts and minds, but not to win them. The information warfare trades on distrust for elites, media and general crisis in the West, where the discourse is loaded with "the end of civilization narrative". It diverts Western societies from the sharp perception of the threat lurking. Russian activities contribute to the creation and strengthening of the "crippled epistemologies" (Hardin, 2002, pp. 13–14) with false, simplified judgments. The democratic institutions' legitimacy, collective perceptions of reality and social stability are being pierced, perforated and penetrated by Russian information weapons, a form of *sharp power* application. The uncertainty already present in crisis-hit Western societies is therefore aggravated.

It is critical to raise consciousness that this vast array of disinformation is effortlessly weaponized in the cyberspace and deployed along the "fault lines" of Western societies.

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