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# Peculiarities of the information warfare of the Russian Federation in Poland in the period before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

UDC 327.5:316

DOI [https://doi.org/10.24195/2414-](https://doi.org/10.24195/2414-9616.2024-6.8)

9616.2024-6.8

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*The article investigates the mechanisms and impact of Russian disinformation and propaganda in Poland during the period leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. It provides an analysis of how Russian narratives targeted Polish society to undermine its cohesion, weaken its support for Ukraine, and destabilize the region of Central-East Europe..*

*Poland as a main advocate of Ukraine in Europe become one of the main targets of Russian disinformation activities abroad. Russian narratives were spread through a network of pro-Russian websites (e.g., Sputnik, RT) and niche portals like dziennik-polityczny.com, xportal.pl, and obserwatorpolityczny.pl. These sites often employed tactics like reproducing Russian media content and disseminating conspiracy theories.*

*Social media platforms were also instrumental in propagating Russian messages, with fake accounts and groups amplifying anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian, and anti-Semitic rhetoric.*

*The publication underscores the systematic nature of Russian disinformation in Poland during the prewar period. By leveraging digital platforms, aligning with local political actors like the Confederation, and exploiting socio-political grievances, Russia sought to destabilize Poland and weaken its support for Ukraine. The content disseminated by pro-Russian social media platforms consistently blamed Ukraine for the conflict in the Donbas region, while framing the West, including the USA and the EU, as unreliable and manipulative partners for Poland. Furthermore, the analysis identifies the alignment of Russian disinformation campaigns with domestic political forces in Poland, particularly the Confederation party. Key figures like Janusz Korwin-Mikke actively echoed Kremlin narratives, contributing to the propagation of anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. «The Confederation» political party, a coalition of far-right and populist political factions, played a pivotal role in amplifying Russian narratives.*

**Key words:** Russian disinformation, propaganda, Poland, Ukraine, Kremlin narratives, digital platforms, Confederation.

**Introduction.** In the period preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Federation engaged in widespread propaganda dissemination on a global scale. Poland was no exception, becoming a key target of Russian propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at exposing and exacerbating divisions within Polish society while promoting Russian narratives among Polish citizens. A central focus of this disinformation campaign was Ukraine, which represented a pivotal objective of Russian foreign policy – namely, the reintegration of former post-Soviet states into a new geopolitical framework under Russian influence.

To achieve this objective, it was essential for Russia to undermine Ukraine's access to assistance and support from its Western neighbors, particularly Poland, which had emerged as one of Ukraine's most significant allies. Poland, both historically and presently, remains highly vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation operations. These efforts have manifested in numerous actions targeting not only Ukraine but also Europe and other geopolitical adversaries, such as the United States, which are viewed as key rivals of Russia in Central and Eastern Europe.

Furthermore, Russia continues to wield influence over Central European states through indirect mechanisms, such as political partnerships and covert influ-

ence campaigns, which are evident in various countries across the region.

This article examines the primary methods of Russian propaganda and disinformation warfare that have impacted Polish society, particularly in the period leading up to the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, when Russian troops launched coordinated attacks on Ukraine from both Russian and Belarusian borders.

**The study's objectives** are to investigate the Polish portals that contain content that coincides with official Russian narratives, revealing pro-Russian portals in Poland in the time before full-scale invasion of Russia to Ukraine. Also, the article's objectives include peculiar messages disseminated by pro-Russian portals against Ukraine and the West.

**Research methods** includes secondary data from reliable sources, such as reports by the Centre for the Analysis of Propaganda and Disinformation (CAPD), the Center for International Relations, OKO Press, as well as the analysis of the research provided by Polish, and Ukrainian political scholars. The analysis includes content from various Polish-language portals and their alignment with Russian disinformation campaigns.

**Results.** A report by the Centre for the Analysis of Propaganda and Disinformation was published in 2019, discussing the results of monitoring specific Pol-

ish websites from March 15 to April 15, 2019. (which was the aim of the research in this study as well), treated it as a source of data, conducted a secondary analysis of the results presented in it, and focused on a detailed description of specific actions taken by selected portals and citing examples of disinformation tactics used. The mentioned report is a very important and reliable study, which was included in this study to understand the essence of Russian disinformation in Poland on the eve of the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, which erupted on February 24, 2022, for obtaining relevant information about the main directions of the Russian disinformation campaign.

Russian media outlets disseminate their «alternative perspective» on global events not only via official channels but also through supplementary information platforms, including digital media. A report by the Center for International Relations (CSM) identifies over 50 pro-Russian websites operating in Poland, which disseminate disinformation through trusted local entities aligned with similar political ideologies [13]. In contrast, OKO.Press, a news service specializing in investigative journalism and fact-checking, reports that approximately 23 such websites feature content linked to sources like Sputnik, RT, or Voice of Europe [8, 9]. Notably, these «niche websites» exhibit significant variability in reach, attracting audiences ranging from tens of thousands to several million visits per month [6].

Russian media outlets disseminate their so-called «alternative perspective» on global events not only through official channels but also via supplementary platforms, including digital media. A report by the Center for International Relations (CSM) identified over 50 pro-Russian websites operating in Poland [13]. These websites propagate disinformation through trusted local entities aligned with similar political ideologies [6]. In contrast, OKO.Press, a news service specializing in investigative journalism and fact-checking, reports that approximately 23 such websites feature content linked to sources such as Sputnik, RT, or Voice of Europe [8, 9]. These «niche websites» demonstrate significant variability in audience reach, attracting between tens of thousands and several million visits per month [6].

Several notable characteristics of these websites can be observed. They often mediate content from similar portals or replicate materials directly from Sputnik; publish articles espousing explicit (and sometimes extreme) right-wing views; disseminate conspiracy theories; operate on both Polish and foreign servers; and lack verifiable information about their editorial boards. For instance, the website Dziennik-polityczny.com claims Adam Kaminski as its editor-in-chief. Kaminski is an active Facebook user who frequently shares links to articles from his portal, as well as content from other anti-Ukrainian, anti-American, or anti-refugee websites. He also pro-

motes articles from the «Independent Political Daily» (Niezależny dziennik polityczny, NDP) [13] portal in various Facebook groups. These groups, which boast over 15,000 members, include «Patriots» (Patrioci), «Poles Not Only in Poland» (Polacy nie tylko w Polsce), «Patriotic Poland» (Patriotyczna Polska), «Polish-Russian Friendship» (Przyjaźń polsko-rosyjska), and «Dissolve the European Union – Official» (Rozwiązać Unię Europejską – official) [5, 8].

At this juncture, it is important to highlight websites such as Xportal.pl and Obserwatorpolityczny.pl. The latter features publications on current events, history, ideas, politics, and economics, with a reach of approximately 41,000 visitors per month [9]. According to its editor-in-chief, Bartosz Bekier, the portal's mission is to «present facts often overlooked in the official media discourse» [10]. Notably, the portal has cited information sourced from the Russian station NTV, and Bartosz Bekier himself has appeared on the station multiple times.

According to Olga Jastrzębska [5], the content on this portal often adopts an anti-Ukrainian stance, openly supporting Novorossiia – a Russian geopolitical project aimed at seizing occupied Ukrainian territories in the country's east, which was envisioned as a precursor to the broader disintegration of Ukraine [5]. The portal's rhetoric frequently employs negative language regarding the Ukrainian government and its citizens.

The second website, Xportal.pl, has a smaller reach, attracting approximately 31,000 visitors per month [5]. However, it warrants attention due to its association with the «Russkiy Mir Foundation» («Russian World Foundation»), an organization linked to Kremlin-affiliated oligarchs such as Konstantin Malofeev. The site also offers a Russian-language version and publishes content, particularly by a contributor using the pseudonym «Krakauer», that glorifies Russian policies and emphasizes alleged Russophobia among Poles [5]. The portal describes its mission as «unveiling the mechanisms governing politics by exposing patterns and moderating free speech for authors interested in publishing content on political events and phenomena, as well as those related to politics».

To synthesize these observations, it is worthwhile to analyze the role of such portals in spreading Russian disinformation. A report by the Center for the Analysis of Propaganda and Disinformation (CAPD), published in May 2019, examined selected Polish-language websites over the period of March 15 to April 15, 2019 [6]. Since this analysis conducted by a Polish think tank covered a broad range of research topics and provided material relevant to the questions posed in this study, the findings were used as a key data source.

The case study on Poland was structured in two stages: first, a secondary analysis of data from

the aforementioned CAPD report, and second, an additional investigation conducted by Katarzyna Savrańska, which focused on portals employing various disinformation techniques [12].

The CAPD report under discussion analyzed eight websites: pl.sputniknews.com, kresy.pl, alex-jones.pl, zmianynaziemi.pl, nczas.com, neon24.pl, magnapolonia.org, and dziennik-polityczny.com. The study aimed to identify key messages and narratives regarding the European Parliament (EP) elections, the image of the European Union during the pre-election period, and Russia's portrayal and actions in various contexts. A total of 279 publications were analyzed using the media monitoring tools «Versus» and «Google Advanced Search» [6]. Each article was classified based on its emotional tone, resulting in three categories.

The analysis revealed that most messages had a negative tone, with specific topics deliberately framed in a negative light. According to the report, many of these publications either republished Russian narratives verbatim or disrupted the logical structure of the text by, for instance, including three statements from Russian officials alongside only one from a Western counterpart, or by omitting the broader context of events entirely [5].

Some topics were consistently (100% of cases) presented with a negative connotation, such as discussions involving Israel, France, Germany, and Petro Poroshenko. Conversely, content related to the political party «Konfederacja KORWiN Braun Liroy Narodowcy» (commonly referred to as «Confederation») was presented exclusively in a positive light. Additionally, the Polish editorial board of «Sputnik» published seven interviews during the study period, five of which featured representatives of the «Confederation», accounting for over 70% of the portal's content concerning Poland, Europe, and the election campaign [11].

In the analysis, coverage of Russia's image was negative in only 31% of cases, while the majority of content (58%) was neutral [5]. Narratives related to Russia frequently emphasized threats of World War III in Europe and portrayed Russia's actions as countermeasures against perceived threats from the West. These themes were framed within the context of Western and NATO provocations. Additional narratives depicted the so-called «mythical» Russian disinformation campaign as a distraction by the West from its own internal issues. Other key narratives included claims that Russia harbored no hostile intentions toward Ukraine, expressed concern about the situation in Ukraine from Russia's perspective, denied the presence of Russian forces in Ukraine, and suggested the potential for dialogue with Ukraine contingent upon a change in Kyiv's government.

In the Polish context, Russia was portrayed ambivalently. On one hand, narratives emphasized the need

for cooperation with Russia as an equal partner [5]. On the other hand, similar to the policies of Germany and France, Russia's policies were presented as equally detrimental to Poland.

The portrayal of Ukraine on the analyzed portals was predominantly negative, with 47% of the content casting the country in an unfavorable light. Narratives depicted Ukraine as a weak and façade state that threatened neighboring countries, lacked democratic structures, and was governed by an oligarchic system that exploited its resources. The portals emphasized an artificially sustained conflict with Russia and presented recurring themes such as allegations that Petro Poroshenko fostered destabilization in Ukrainian-Russian relations, descriptions of a war-weary society longing for peace, claims that the annexation of Crimea was legal, warnings of a potential World War III if Ukraine joined NATO, and efforts to undermine Polish-Ukrainian relations [12].

Similarly, coverage of Poland was overwhelmingly negative, with 71% of articles featuring adverse themes. A broad range of narratives emerged in 2019, including the denial of Polish sovereignty and assertions that the political elite were incompetent, corrupt, or subservient to external powers; claims of threats to Poland from the United States and Jewish interests; portrayals of Poland's subjectivity as being undermined by the West; negative consequences of Poland's membership in the European Union; allegations of potential armed conflict involving Poland with either the West or Russia; advocacy for Poland to regain its sovereignty and shift its political discourse. In addition, the following themes can be seen: assertions that U.S. military support for Poland exposed the country to potential Russian retaliation, as Russia sought to defend itself against NATO aggression; claims that Western actors (including the EU, the U.S., Germany, and Israel) acted to Poland's detriment, exploiting the country for their interests; allegations that opposition parties such as Civic Platform and Spring worked against Poland's national interests, serving Western patrons, and defending German domination in Europe; Calls for Poland to establish an alternative balance of power to free itself from dependence on German (EU), American, or Israeli influence, and opposition to what was described as the «colonization» of Poland by Ukrainians. These narratives positioned the «Confederation» political party as the sole force advocating for Polish sovereignty and defending the country's interests. The party was portrayed as a safeguard against perceived threats from the EU, Israel, and other foreign powers, and its success in elections was framed as essential to Poland's future [8, 9].

According to Ukrainian political scholar Stanislav Zelichovski, «Confederation» could be considered as the United Far-Right party that encompassed almost all Far-Right movements in Poland and became a sig-

nificant political force in the Polish political scene in recent years before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 [1]. First and foremost, its rhetoric and activities are anti-systemic, anti-immigration, anti-Western, and anti-Ukrainian, which is why its theses are often difficult to distinguish from Kremlin propaganda. The path of this political force began in October 2018, when MP Jakub Kulesza decided to join the party of the odious politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke's New Hope/KORWIN. A little later, efforts began to form an alliance between KORWIN and the National Movement. In December 2018, both political forces decided to run jointly in the European Parliament elections.

In January 2019, the group was joined by other far-right forces: Grzegorz Brown's organization «Rise» and Piotr Lyroj-Marzec's Effective party» (pl. «Skuteczni Piotra Liroya-Marca»). In February of the same year, the group adopted the official name «Confederation of KORWIN Brown Lyroj», and in March, the «Confederation» parliamentary group was created in the Sejm [7].

In the 2019 European Parliament elections, the Confederation garnered more than 600 thousand votes, which secured it fourth place. In the same year, a federal political party, the Confederation of Freedom and Independence, was founded.

In 2019, in the Polish parliamentary elections, the Confederation won more than a million votes (6.81%) and was represented in the Sejm by 11 MPs. At the same time, a united parliamentary group «Confederation» was created, with Jakub Kulesza as its chairman and Krzysztof Bosak as its deputy [1]. In 2018, G. Brown stated that «Ukraine is a fiction. And it is a dangerous fiction. The fiction of an independent state as a civilized partner and the fiction of a sovereign nation with which we can finally normalize neighbourly relations».

Another important part of the Confederation political party was «New Hope», which was a right-wing, liberal-conservative, Eurosceptic political force founded by Janusz Korwin-Mikke. After his resignation, the party was headed by Slavomir Mencen.

J. Korwin-Mikke argues that the separatist Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic, which are not recognized by any country in the world except Russia, are full-fledged states, that the consequences of the bombing of the hospital in Mariupol are just a montage of the Ukrainian government [1].

The cited analysis shows that there is a certain correlation between the narratives appearing in some alternative sources and the messages of the official Russian media. Moreover, it should be noted that in the meantime, media monitoring (including social media) was also carried out by other organizations, as the «flooding» of disinformation in the information space took place throughout the European Union. In Poland, on the other hand, despite the activity

of the aforementioned portals, the spread of disinformation in social media is also noted. Thus, fake accounts or groups with a specific focus spread sources and/or narratives that coincide with Russian messages, or even directly quote, for example, «RT» or «Sputnik» [3]. One example of such activity in Poland is the networks of accounts operating on Facebook (FB) and Twitter (TT) detected in the last weeks before the elections. Fan pages on FB refer to anti-Semitic, pro-Kremlin, anti-EU content and support for the «Confederation» and groups refer to a «patriotic worldview» [14]. What's more, some fan pages «impersonate» Polish mainstream media, which can contribute to the credibility and willingness of users to read the publications that appear [1]. Grid accounts on TT operate similarly, spreading disinformation by linking content from «RT» or the Polish version of Sputnik», pro-Russian anti-Semitic, anti-Ukrainian, and anti-Muslim portals, as well as those of nationalists and small blogs [9].

**Conclusion.** This study has examined the mechanisms and scope of Russian disinformation warfare in Poland during the period preceding the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Through the analysis of pro-Russian broadcasts and numerous portals established by agents of Russian influence, the research highlights the strategies employed to disseminate disinformation and promote Kremlin narratives.

Poland, as a key advocate for Ukraine in Europe, emerged as a primary target of these disinformation activities. The dissemination channels included prominent platforms such as Sputnik, RT, and Voice of Europe, as well as Polish-language portals like *dziennik-polityczny.com*, *xportal.pl*, and *obserwator-polityczny.pl*. Social media played a pivotal role, with newsgroups such as «Patriots», «Poles not only in Poland», «Patriotic Poland», «Polish-Russian Friendship», and «Dissolve the European Union – official» amplifying anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western narratives.

The content disseminated by these platforms consistently blamed Ukraine for the conflict in the Donbas region, while framing the West, including the USA and the EU, as unreliable and manipulative partners for Poland. Furthermore, the analysis identifies the alignment of Russian disinformation campaigns with domestic political forces in Poland, particularly the Confederation party. Key figures like Janusz Korwin-Mikke actively echoed Kremlin narratives, contributing to the propagation of anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric.

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## Особливості інформаційної війни Російської Федерації в Польщі у період перед повномасштабним вторгненням в Україну

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*У статті досліджуються механізми та вплив російської дезінформації та пропаганди в Польщі в період, що передував повномасштабному вторгненню Росії в Україну 24 лютого 2022 року. У ній проаналізовано, як російські нарративи впливали на польське суспільство з метою підірвати його згуртованість, послабити підтримку України та дестабілізувати регіон Центрально-Східної Європи.*

*Польща як головний адвокат України в Європі стала однією з головних мішеней російської дезінформаційної діяльності за кордоном. Російські нарративи поширювалися через мережу проросійських веб-сайтів (наприклад, Sputnik, RT) та нішевих порталів, таких як [dziennik-polityczny.com](http://dziennik-polityczny.com), [xportal.pl](http://xportal.pl) та [obserwatorpolityczny.pl](http://obserwatorpolityczny.pl). Ці сайти часто використовували такі тактики, як відтворення російського медіа-контенту та поширення теорій змови.*

*Платформи соціальних мереж також відігравали важливу роль у поширенні російських меседжів: фейкові акаунти та групи посилювали антизахідну, антиукраїнську та антисемітську риторичку.*

*У публікації підкреслюється систематичний характер російської дезінформації в Польщі у довоєнний період. Використовуючи цифрові платформи, співпрацюючи з місцевими політичними гравцями, такими як Конфедерація, та експлуатуючи соціально-політичне невдоволення, Росія прагнула дестабілізувати Польщу та послабити її підтримку України. Контент, поширюваний проросійськими соціальними мережами, постійно покладав відповідальність за конфлікт на Донбасі на Україну, а Захід, зокрема США та ЄС, зображувався як ненадійний і маніпулятивний партнер Польщі. Крім того, аналіз виявив узгодженість російських дезінформаційних кампаній з внутрішніми політичними силами Польщі, зокрема з партією «Конфедерація». Такі ключові фігури, як Януш Корвін-Мікке, активно повторювали кремлівські нарративи, сприяючи поширенню антизахідної та антиукраїнської риторички. Політична партія «Конфедерація» як коаліція ультраправих і популістських політичних фракцій, відіграла ключову роль у посиленні російських нарративів.*

**Ключові слова:** російська дезінформація, пропаганда, Польща, Україна, кремлівські нарративи, цифрові платформи, Конфедерація.