

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE MEDIA SECTORS OF THE BLACK SEA COUNTRIES

**TOOLS, NARRATIVES AND POLICY OPTIONS
FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE**

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**CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY**

The report explores Russia's corporate presence and influence in the media sectors of five Black Sea countries (Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia) by providing deeper understanding of the links between media ownership and anti-Western propaganda and disinformation. Corruption networks and soft media power have allowed Russia to benefit from inherent governance deficits in these Black Sea countries to infiltrate businesses, and to shape political narratives and environments in the region. Russia has sought to expand its influence in the media sectors of the Black Sea countries through applying a variety of direct and indirect tools, including a complex mixture of ownership-networks and untraceable subcontracts for the retransmission rights of the official Russian media to domestic companies; obscuring media ownership and funding streams, particularly in the online domain, etc.

Through an in-depth content analysis of three media outlets with different degrees of pro-Russian orientation in each of the five countries, the report shows how different type of media are used for resurgence of Brezhnev-era-type propaganda, irrespective of the economic, political and social differences across the countries. The results highlight that the degree of consistently reproduced similarities in the pro-Russian narratives among the media outlets is very high despite the differences in formal editorial policies, claimed financial and management independence and (in)formal economic and political links.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Black Sea region has been subject to increasing pressure and uncertainty, following Russia's occupation of parts of Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine in 2014, and the continuing military stand-off to NATO in the Black Sea and beyond after the intervention in Syria in 2015. These developments have demonstrated Moscow's determination to revise the post-Cold War order by applying pressure through hard- and soft-power instruments on both members and associate partners of the EU and NATO in order to undermine Euro-Atlantic cohesion and unity. A particularly prominently deployed weapon of choice of the Kremlin has been media propaganda and disinformation.

The current report examines Russia's presence and tactics in the media sectors of five Black Sea countries, by assessing the relationship between the Kremlin's corporate and financial footprint in the media outlets of these states and the dissemination of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda content. The report confirms that the **patterns of ownership, economic dependency and (in)formal political links of media outlets** in the countries under investigation to pro-Russian groups and interests are correlated with and reflected into **corresponding trends of employing Russia-originating propaganda narratives**. There are degrees of consistently reproduced similarities and differences among the media outlets, whereby in addition to the significant commonalities of narration and style as part of their general pro-Russian tilt, the online newspapers also display differentiations (relevant across all states). The latter stem from the fact that the greater the political-economic enmeshment with Russian interests, the more congruously and undeviatingly the content of Russian narratives is matched, the less analytical variation and nationally-originating perspectives are included and the more explicitly biased the style of communication is.

The report identifies common trends in the Russia-linked end of the online media spectrum in Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia. The differences among the states are shaped by national specificities (informing various levels of susceptibility to Russian influence). These differences are reflected in the distinct characteristics of the national media landscapes and in the peculiar discourses and modes of message communication (in addition to the cross-regionally shared forms of Russian propagandist narration), which are in turn likely to affect the level of differentiation between types of political-economic entanglement and patterns of content provision.

The analytical investigation covered the period encompassing the years 2015, 2016 and 2017; focused on the **three general themes of the war in Syria, Russia-linked energy issues and the Kremlin meddling in foreign elections**; selected three media outlets in each country from the pro-Russian end of the journalistic spectrum, which outlets also exhibited different levels of enmeshment

with Russian interests; and determined formal criteria for the search and identification of the articles subject to content analysis.

The overall Russian influence on the media sectors of Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia has become more visible in recent years and has been established through the deployment of a diverse set of instruments – in addition to and beyond ownership and financial ties. For instance, ‘diffusion-proofing’ is a preferred Kremlin strategy, whereby Russia does not aim to completely prevent information (especially originating in and concerning the West) from reaching domestic (in the Black sea countries) and foreign audiences but, rather, counterbalances Western coverage with a pro-Russian twist. This strategy is achieved through the Kremlin’s support for a media apparatus that includes international and in-country outlets and channels that reinforce each other’s messages (such as *TASS*, *Rossiia Segodnya*, *Russia Today*). A further soft-power technique of influence is related to conferring honors and awards on pro-Russian media and their staff abroad, typically in relation to cultural or educational projects and/or achievements.

The resilience of the five countries under investigation has been far from sufficient for resisting Russian pressure. Indeed, despite the major distinctions among these states (regarding print media publishing activities and retail sales, TV and radio production, programming, broadcasting, distribution and online media trends), a crucial similarity is linked to the **heavy vulnerability to influences from political and economic interests, especially through ownership and funding streams**. The lack of transparency of media ownership patterns, combined with weakly enforced legal provisions, has been reinforced by the dependence on large commercial advertisers in small advertisement markets as well as by the oligarchization of the media markets of the five countries (whereby oligarchic networks exhibit close ties to Russian businesses).

The comparative findings aggregated from the country-specific investigations allow drawing conclusions about *cross-case similarities and differences along three main dimensions*.

The first comparative dimension includes the identification of generalized **commonalities of pro-Russian propaganda enunciation and communication** present among all the selected media outlets in Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia. There is a congruent representation of topics and narratives in relation to the themes of the war in Syria, energy and election meddling, which matches the propagandist discourses emanating from the Kremlin. The war in Syria receives the most coverage, followed by Russia-linked energy issues, and the Russian meddling in elections. Additionally, the media outlets in the five countries display a general resemblance in terms of stylistic modes of transmission of the pro-Russian topics and narratives (with a predominant preference for emotional influencing and sensationalism as opposed to evidence-based reporting). News coverage based on references to Russian sources and (pro-) Russian opinions without consistent authorship attribution is also privileged. Overall, such attitude-inducing modes of message transmission result in the binary depiction of Russia in positive and of the West in negative terms.

The second comparative dimension is linked to the substantiation of the argument that in addition to overarching trends of pro-Kremlin journalistic suasion, **different**

degrees of political-economic enmeshment with (pro-) Russian interests are reflected in differentiated patterns of propaganda narration and dissemination:

- One degree of enmeshment encompassing **domestic media, which have a broad national audience and claim formal independence from (observable) links to Russia through ownership** (although there can be informal or hidden affiliations to Russian groups and interests), is characterized by the following journalistic features: the inclusion of empirically varied and analytically nuanced articles with an occasional focus on alternative (anti-Russian) positions, conceptual framing and more rounded as opposed to one-sided and twisted reporting; the incorporation of locally-sensitive, relevant and originating perspectives; a greater emphasis on a neutral communication of messages.
- The second degree of enmeshment, embodied by **small-scale media outlets with clearly traceable links to Russia through ownership**, is characterized by a wider and more detailed treatment of issue areas, the provision of analytical framing and attention to nationally-relevant perspectives. Yet, these features are distinguished by more overt partisanship, sweeping analytical and historical generalizations and a more diluted commitment to neutral reporting.
- The third degree of enmeshment, referring to **Sputnik-style media**, where the national editions of this outlet disseminate officially-sanctioned pro-Kremlin content, is delineated by the scarcity of nationally-relevant and sensitive viewpoints as well as the simplest, most repetitive and explicitly biased form of message transmission.

The third comparative dimension encompasses the observation that the distinctive features of the national media landscapes frame specific discourses on Russia-related developments and thus further shape the relationship between types of ownership and patterns of propaganda.

As regards **Bulgaria**, there are three clearly differentiated patterns of content provision that could be attributed to the weaker presence of an inherited official Russian media impact on Bulgarian media (such as the absence of Soviet descended channels, the decline of the Russian language, a very small number of outlets operating in Bulgaria but originating in Russia).

In **Ukraine**, the overall political context, which is severely critical of and attempts to resist Russian military aggression on Ukrainian territory and has introduced restrictions on Russia – originating broadcasting, circumscribes the extent and intensity of propagation of Kremlin narratives. These limitations are especially observed by pro-Russian media outlets claiming nation-wide readership. Similarly, **Georgia's** vigorous assertion of its European identity and Euro-Atlantic vector of development as well as the limited segment of Georgians, who inform themselves from Russia-originating channels (primarily trusted by the Russian ethnic minority), means that the public discourse cannot be completely overrun by Kremlin messaging.

In **Moldova** and **Armenia**, there is a much more unified and overlapping propagation of Russian narratives not least because of these countries' retention of extensive media ties to Russia. Such ties have encompassed the presence of a wide range of Russia-originating outlets (including the continued operation of

Soviet-inherited sources) and a significant popularity and knowledge of the Russian language.

The established similarities and differences among the five states under investigation allows the identification of **policy recommendations** that are not only country-specific but also propose cross-regionally applicable ways of tackling Russian propaganda and in particular:

- **Assert strong EU leadership and launch an EU joint response:**
 - **Build resilience against media capture.** In the last decade, the EU response to Kremlin hybrid attacks is still fragmented and un-coordinated. Thus, it should further strengthen and integrate initiatives like the East StratCom Task Force with the European External Action Service, research funding on disinformation, propaganda and related cyber-security threats under the EU framework programs for research and innovation (FP7, H2020), policy research and advice by the European Institute for Security Studies, etc. Moreover, further coordination with the relevant NATO and US efforts is also necessary. The EU needs to design and declare a strong and comprehensive policy response to the Russian hybrid threat, including aiming at building and enforcing the resilience of EU member states against media capture and foreign malign economic and political influence in the media sector, particularly focusing on online media¹.
 - **Build expertise** for both identifying and tackling hybrid threats, incl. through setting the respective priorities in EU programs for research and innovation, and in cooperation with the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, the European Network and Information Security Agency, European Defence Agency, the European Institute for Security Studies and other relevant institutions.
 - **Establish a high-level task force** within the European Anti-Fraud Office, entitled to trace and investigate covert Russian-linked financial flows related to the media sectors of the EU member and candidate states, and the Eastern Neighborhood countries.
 - **Encourage EU institutions and member states to enhance anti-corruption and development assistance mechanisms** to help the most vulnerable countries build greater resilience to Russian influence.²
 - **Strengthen the EU legislation on anti-money laundering, financial transparency and shell companies** with a focus on transparency and accountability of media companies in the member states and in countries, in which the EU promotes media freedom and transparency.

¹ For a more detailed discussion on possible tools and measures, see US Congress (2018), Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security, A Minority Staff Report prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations, January 10, 2018, US Government Publishing Office, Washington: 2018.

² This recommendations targets more widely the overall Russian economic influence in Europe and was proposed initially in: Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

- In the Black Sea region, the EU should **use its Eastern Partnership initiative to extend its efforts on tackling media capture** through improving media ownership transparency and countering Russian disinformation and propaganda. Better integration of the Eastern Partnership initiatives with these in the Western Balkans and in the new member states of the EU in relation to Russia and its disinformation and propaganda activities, is also necessary.
- **Facilitate the development of high professional standards in the media sectors** across the EU and the Black Sea region through encouraging self-regulation and enforcement of existing regulatory frameworks, related to media freedom and transparency.
- **Accelerate and facilitate the cross-border learning, engagement, pooling of expertise and sharing of experience** through the creation of common platforms to identify and tackle pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation, and through the development of networks of support (for instance, through early warning and rapid assistance in cases of attacks on journalists).
- **Strengthen the administrative and professional capacity of national media regulatory bodies** and the introduction and stricter enforcement of legislation on the **transparency of media ownership** as well as on accountability of **state allocation of advertising and financing to media** are particularly important among the Black Sea countries
- Facilitate existing and create new **independent public monitoring tools** (e.g. following the model of the EU Disinformation Review online platform), which consistently highlight, reveal, and challenge Russian propaganda and disinformation, following the rules of impartial news reporting and research.
- Elaborate **new techniques for identifying fake news, propaganda and disinformation** such as browser plugins, site rankings, etc.
- Educate and train the general public how to recognize biased coverage and obtain reliable information (such as by rigorously checking news sources, references and author details).

INTRODUCTION

The level of uncertainty in the Black Sea region has increased considerably since Russia annexed Crimea and incited the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Together with the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, it was a new high in a trend, dating back to at least 2004, which awoke the West to the fact that the Kremlin seeks active revision of European post-Cold War agreements, and has engaged all possible means, including military, economic, energy, and soft power³. All countries in the Black Sea region but in particular non-EU and non-NATO members have witnessed a growing malign Russian interference. One particularly nascent problem has been the media propaganda, disinformation and fake news, which coupled with exploitation of persisting governance deficits in the region render local democratic debates increasingly poisoned and prone to extreme populist views⁴.

Russia has been able to exploit its non-transparent political, economic and social influence in the former Soviet bloc to undermine the unity of the Euro-Atlantic community on countering the threat from the East. The conflict in eastern Ukraine has demonstrated that despite the concerted US and EU sanctions against Russia, the Kremlin regime has been determined and able to continue its bellicose foreign policy. The impact of this renewed assertiveness has been felt strongly beyond Ukraine, where Russia has been able to leverage its role as the main energy supplier to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and in particular to the Black Sea and Western Balkans regions, to expand its economic and political influence⁵.

The tools Russia has used in expanding its influence are not new to the region or globally.⁶ They include **a mixture of state capture instruments, media propaganda and disinformation, as well as geopolitical pressure**, which have swayed governments in the region, including those of some NATO and EU members, to adopt policies that are not consistent with their national strategic priorities in the fields of foreign policy, energy and national economic development but benefit the interests of Russia. The roots of this malign influence go back to the 1990s and 2000s, when Russia has used and reinforced the governance

³ Mankoff, J. (2016), *Russia's Challenge to the European Security Order*.

⁴ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

⁵ Shentov, O. (eds) (2018). *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming).

⁶ For state capture see specifically CSD (2018), *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks*, and Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield;

For media propaganda and disinformation see specifically U.S. Government Publishing Office (2018), *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security*; and Meister, S. (2016), *Isolation and Propaganda: The Roots and Instruments of Russia's Disinformation Campaign*.

deficits and vulnerabilities in the CEE countries, using its political and economic power.

The current report aims at shedding light on **Russia's presence and tactics in the media sectors of five Black Sea countries** (Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia) through deeper understanding of the links between media ownership and anti-Western propaganda as part of the tools of the Russian malign influence in the region. Together with Soviet-era-inspired active measures such as media manipulation and the spread of fake news, the Kremlin has employed also meddling in pre-election campaigns, and the financing of political parties and NGOs. The links between the use of hard and soft power were made visible during the early stages of Russia's intervention in Ukraine following the 2013 Maidan protests that toppled Ukraine's former president, Viktor Yanukovich. The image created by Russian-controlled media that the revolution was a fascist coup supported by the US and the EU was used by the Kremlin to quickly justify a Russian intervention in Crimea. The arrival of "little green men" in Crimea was preceded by a loud media and disinformation campaign implanting the perception that the authorities in Kyiv had backed paramilitary neo-Nazi groups terrorizing the Russian-speaking population.

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE PATTERNS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION MEDIA

Media propaganda and disinformation have become decisive for Russia to benefit from the persisting governance deficits in the Black Sea region countries. With the attraction of the “alternative” Eurasian Economic Union model of governance and integration fading, the Kremlin’s agenda has shifted towards disrupting further integration of the ex-Communist countries into the Euro-Atlantic area, while undermining their efforts to uphold integrity and governance standards. Using media propaganda and disinformation, Russia has also aimed to weaken the credibility and moral authority of the European Union and NATO, particularly among aspiring members such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia but also among EU and NATO members.⁷

To better understand how Russia has been able to use traditional and non-traditional media to spread propaganda and disinformation in the Black Sea region, one should take a closer look at the media market in Central and Eastern Europe. The Russian influence in the media sector of the region has become more and more visible in recent years. **Russia has been expanding its direct and indirect support to both Russia-owned and domestic pro-Russian media over the last five years.** The media has played an important role in Russia’s hybrid warfare, as it has a very high impact and importance in the political process and in the institutional checks and balances in EU democracies.⁸

Russia takes its media presence seriously. Domestically, **the Kremlin bolsters its media machine via regulatory mechanisms.** In October 2014, foreign ownership of Russia media was restricted to 20 percent. Roskomnadzor, the federal media oversight agency, has engaged in several waves of restricting access: it blacklisted about 185 news websites in 2012 and another 85 major opposition websites in 2014. Holding bloggers responsible for readers’ comments (if they have more than 3,000 readers) is another serious threat to freedom of speech and alternative media development in Russia. Simultaneously with restricting foreign access to its domestic media market, Russia engages in conventional and non-conventional methods of **infiltrating the European information space.** The Kremlin-affiliated media outlets are used to both control coverage of events domestically and disseminate information beyond Russia’s borders. This strategy, labeled “diffusion proofing”⁹, does not necessarily aim to prevent certain events or pieces of

⁷ GLOBSEC (2016), *Central Europe under the fire of propaganda: Public opinion poll analysis in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.*

⁸ For a review of the threat of Russia propaganda in Europe, see Heather A. Conley, *Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe* (Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 3, 2015), available at: http://csis.org/files/attachments/ts151103_Conley.pdf.

⁹ The term was coined by Karrie Koesel and Valerie Bunce. See: Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce, *Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers*, *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 11, Issue 03, September 2015: 753-768.

information from reaching domestic or foreign audiences. Instead, it is a carefully crafted strategy of **counter-balancing Western coverage with a pro-Russian twist**. This process includes several steps that rely on framing an existing event of potential mass interest either domestically, within the Central and Eastern European region or within Europe as a whole.

To achieve its strategy of “diffusion proofing” not only internally in Russia but also at global, European, and country levels, **Russia supports a media apparatus** that includes international and in-country formally and informally controlled or inspired by the Kremlin policy media outlets and information channels that interact and reinforce one another.¹⁰ Prominent examples of global and Europe-wide, influence-peddling include the activities of the two major Russian news agencies TASS and *Rossiia Segodnya*, as well as of the international TV channel RT, formerly branded by its full name *Russia Today*. All of them are state-owned and have provided pro-government coverage ever since. TASS is one of the largest news agencies worldwide. *Rossiia Segodnya* was created by an Executive Order of the President of Russia in December 2013, incorporating the former incumbent news agency *RIA Novosti*. In November 2014 *RIA Novosti* launched the *Sputnik International* online platform as the international replacement of *RIA Novosti* news service and the international radio service *Voice of Russia*. The state-funded international TV channel RT is owned by the “Independent Not-for-profit Organisation TV-Novosti” – an NGO established by *RIA Novosti* in 2005. In 2007 *TV-Novosti* established also the “international multimedia project Russia Beyond ... with the aim to become the major source [of information] for Russian culture, tourism, education, language, business and many others”¹¹. Russia Beyond which is part of the analyzed media outlets in the current report, acts as an online tabloid-style media, supplementing the prominent *Sputnik* political and economic presence. The interactions and the interweaving of these major news agencies and media, controlled and funded by the Russian Government, despite their claimed formal autonomy thereof, are visible in the fact that since December 2013 three of them – the TV channel RT, the news agency *Rossiia Segodnya* and the multimedia platform *Russia Beyond*, have Ms Margarita Simonyan for their editor-in-chief.¹²

Some of the Russian-related influence in the media sector is less immediately obvious, however. For instance, *The Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company* (known as VGTRK after the Russian-language abbreviation of the name), which owns 5 TV channels (among them the major channel *Rossiia 1* and its international edition *RTR Planeta* broadcasted in Europe, the U.S., the Near East and North Africa), 4 radio stations and several online news-platforms (among them Vesti.ru – the third most popular news web-portal in Russia)¹³ have owned since a decade a share in Euronews and Russia’s representatives have stayed at the Euronews’ Supervisory board.¹⁴ Even though Russia controlled share in *Euronews* declined from 16.9% in 2009 to 7.5% in 2015 and then to 2.29% in 2017, two

¹⁰ Yalamov, T. (2018), *Russian Influence, Trust in Media and Media Capture*. In: Shentov, O. (eds) (2018). *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming)

¹¹ Russia Beyond official web-site at: <https://bg.rbth.com/about>, accesses on July 21, 2018.

¹² According to information on the official web-sites of Russia Beyond <https://bg.rbth.com/about>, *Rossiia Segodnya* http://россиясегодня.рф/executive_team/ and *Russia Today* <https://www.rt.com/about-us/management>, all accesses on July 21, 2018.

¹³ VGTRK official web-site accessed on 18.07.2018 at <http://vtrk.com/#page/221>.

¹⁴ Shentov, O. (eds) (2018). *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming)

of Russia's representatives have stayed on at the 12-member supervisory board until 2016. One has since remained on the board.¹⁵ Some foreign media have expressed their concern about some "pro-Russia colored" stories in *Euronews*, while Ukrainian investigative journalists even accused it for spreading disinformation and fake news in its coverage of the Ukrainian civil war.¹⁶ Moreover, substantial part of the *Euronews* coverage in Ukraine is produced by Inter Media Group Limited, which is owned by oligarchs Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Liovochkin – both relates to the pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich.¹⁷

Unlike the case of *Euronews*, the retransmission of Russian TV and radio stations in foreign countries looks as an obvious example of direct and easily traceable influence. However, the **complex mixture of ownership-networks and particularly, subcontracting the rights for retransmission to domestic companies operating often outside the media sector**, makes the case not so obvious. A good example for this is *RTR Planeta* TV channel (owned by VGTRK – the shareholder in *Euronews*), which has become infamous in recent years, when its retransmission from Sweden to Lithuania was suspended three times for different periods – most recently for a whole year until February 2019, due to **incitement to hatred**. In all three cases, the European Commission, which is required to assess the measures taken by the national authorities according to the *Audiovisual Media Services Directive*¹⁸, confirmed the decisions and the violations of the EU law.¹⁹ *RTR Planeta*, which claims to have about 30 million people audience worldwide, is broadcasted in all five Black Sea countries, analyzed in the current report.²⁰ In a telling typical case, the rights for retransmission of *RTR Planeta* in Bulgaria are held by a local company (Marlin Media Ltd.) and unlike the information about the company's ownership, management and financials, which is publicly accessible, there is no official information about the contracts for retransmission and their financial dimensions. However, at least in this case, the company has only *RTR Planeta* in its portfolio and at the same time is fully owned by a group of Russian citizens.²¹ The company's annual financial records show that it is a loss-making company in the last 3 years but despite the business logic it continues to function. Even though the company is registered outside the media sector in Bulgaria, it is a clear example of one of the possible ways of channeling Russia influence to the same sector.

In addition to economic and political mechanisms for supporting and strengthening the position of pro-Russian media abroad, Kremlin uses actively **other soft power**

¹⁵ Euronews Might Become Less Objective After Selling 25 % Stake to NBC, Sputnik International, 01.06.2017, accessed on 17.07.2018 at <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201706011054217301-euronews-nbc-vgtrk-deal-media/>.

¹⁶ How Moscow is spreading its propaganda using EU-funded media, by Alex Bosk, 03.12.2017, accessed on 12.07.2018 at <https://informnapalm.org/en/moscow-spreading-propaganda-using-eu-funded-media/>.

¹⁷ See for instance <https://ukraine.mom-rsf.org/en/ukraine/owners/companies/detail/company/company/show/inter-media-group/>.

¹⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32010L0013>.

¹⁹ Lithuania's decision to suspend broadcast of the Russian language channel "RTR Planeta" complies with EU rules, EC, 08.05.2018, accessed on 12.07.2017 at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/lithuanias-decision-suspend-broadcast-russian-language-channel-rtr-planeta-complies-eu-rules>.

²⁰ Lithuania suspends the transmission of Russian-language RT Planeta (Литва отново спира разпространението на рускоезичната RTR Planeta), accessed on 05.08.2018 at <https://nellyo.wordpress.com/2018/08/04/rtr/>.

²¹ According to the official web-site of the company <http://marlinmedia.eu/bg/za-nas/> and information in the Commercial Register as of 26.07.2018.

instruments such as official endorsement of their work through **awarding the media or their staff with various honor-signs**, related to the cultural or educational sphere. (although this is not a distinctive characteristic of Russian policy for supporting friendly media). An example of such an indirect Russian influence in the Black Sea countries' media sectors through establishing hidden links between policy, business and culture is the Bulgarian publisher of the newspapers *Zemia* (analyzed as an example in the current report) and the bi-lingual Russian/Bulgarian newspaper *Russia dnes* (Russia today). The co-founder and editor-in-chief of the two newspapers Ms. Svetlana Sharenkova²² has been honored in 2013 by the Russian President Vladimir Putin for her overall activities supporting Russian-Bulgarian relations, while a year later *Rusia dnes* was awarded the Annual Media Prize of the Russian Federation. In a similar example in Georgia, one of the members of the Public Council of the pro-Russian media outlet *Historical Heritage* Mr. Aleksandre Chachia, a Moscow-based political analyst, was awarded in 2014 by the Russian President Vladimir Putin with the Order of Honor for his contribution to strengthening friendship and cooperation with the Russian Federation.

As the above examples demonstrate, Russia uses a diverse set of instruments (direct corporate ownership of media being only one of them) to push into the public space in the Black Sea region targeted both nuanced pro-Russian propaganda and fake news and disinformation that get requoted and republished in a number of other unrelated media outlets after that. In such a way, Russia sows mistrust in society by deepening political divides with the ultimate goal of breaking up the functioning of fledgling democratic institutions. While the EU and NATO member-states have built some capacity, albeit not fully adequate, to withstand the external pressure via media standards and rule of law, the **resilience capacity of post-Soviet countries in the Black Sea region has remained much lower**. Perhaps the most troubling consequence of the expansion of the Russian disinformation and propaganda campaign in the region is that it has **amplified the ongoing shift in the national political life towards authoritarian and nationalistic directions**. At the same time, the weakening of governance standards within the region, and the West's seemingly weak response to it²³, has contributed to the rise of political and economic forces that seek to undermine the Euro-Atlantic orientation of these countries and foster closer ties with Moscow.

Although in many European countries, incl. in the Black Sea region (e.g. Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine) the national regulatory framework puts **formal requirements for different degree of transparency of the funding and/or ownership of the media**, the implementation of these requirements is problematic. In many cases, the existing requirements cover only particular types of media or certain features of funding and ownership, which hinders the identification and analysis of tools and channels for covert foreign influence over the media. For instance, the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture maintained a public register of final beneficial owners of print media but the electronic media (TV, radio and online media) are not subject to disclosing the same information. In Georgia, the requirement

²² According to the Register of the submitted declarations regarding Article 7, par.3 of the Law for compulsory deposit of printed media as of 14.06.2018, Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, accessed on 12.07.2018 at <http://mc.government.bg/page.php?p=58&s=429&sp=67&t=63&z=436>.

²³ Babayan, N. (2016), *The In-Betweeners: The Eastern Partnership Countries and the Russia-West Conflict, 2015 – 2016* Paper Series No. 5, Transatlantic Academy, Washington D.C.

for financial transparency, which requires quarterly reports about the media sources of financing applies only to broadcasting media and in addition, it is not fully enforced since major TV channels have challenged it in the court. In other countries like Armenia, there is no specific legislation about disclosing media financing and ownership and moreover, the financial and ownership information for certain types of companies is not publicly accessible. On the other end of the spectrum are countries like Ukraine, where since 2015 the newly enacted legislation has required TVs and radios to disclose their final beneficial ownership, while the registration procedure for print media makes companies' financial and direct ownership information also publicly accessible.

Pro-Russian media have successfully used the limitations to the enforcement of transparency measures in Black Sea countries in order to hide their **ownership and funding**. It is the most clearly visible in the case of the **online media sector**, which remains **an exception from the transparency measures**. It is subject only to general regulations regarding legal entities in the respective country but because of the specifics of the internet it features the highest degree of anonymity and possibilities for hiding ownership and decision-making structures. The use of foreign web-servers and services, which allow for full anonymity of both the owner and the content creators and editors (if different), as well as the restrictions of the EU General Data Protection Regulation for disclosing the so called "WHOIS" information on domain name holders, which entered into force recently, make **the online media the most non-transparent part of the media sector**. At the same time, the possibilities for publishing, aggregating, processing and re-publishing of information, including through the use of automated AI-based systems, have boomed in the last decade and offer practically unlimited opportunities for content creation and dissemination, even without considerable initial investment. For instance, this practice has been exposed in journalistic investigations of Bulgarian news-centered web-sites²⁴, not associated with major existing media. The investigation has identified 65 related web-sites. Even though the majority of them has mastered only small audiences according to the available usage statistics, the top 10 generated more than 5 million user clicks (impressions) per month. The investigation has revealed an important common characteristic. Most of the web-sites publish news with clear pro-Russian and anti-Western, anti-NATO and anti-EU narratives, including creating and disseminating fake or manipulated news.²⁵ In the majority of cases, the information about the ownership of these web-sites has been missing and even if some data could be found in WHOIS databases, business registers and other public sources, it showed that behind the web-site is either a single physical person or a micro company with neglectful capital and one or at most two employees. Yet, due to the multiplying effect of the entire network of these web-sites, the indiscriminate social media consumption patterns of most users, and due to low professional journalistic standards, they have been often used by both state-funded national media and a large number of people as source of "original" and trustful information.

²⁴ Capital weekly, *The smoke-screen of the false media* (Димната завеса на мнимите медии), 18.12.2015, accessed on 20.02.2018 at https://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_rekla-ma/2015/12/18/2672535_dimnata_zavesa_na_mnimite_medii/.

²⁵ Another investigation by a private blogger revealed that most of these web-sites feature advertisements through the adnow.com platform, owned by a London based company, which has Russian citizens as its final beneficiary owners and top managers. See: *Strange media* (Странни медии), Milen Georgiev's personal blog, accessed on 20.02.2018 at <http://mileng.eu/A/B/Osvetlyavane-na-mediite/>.

LINKS BETWEEN MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE BLACK SEA COUNTRIES

As a continuation of the assessment of **the economic aspects of the Kremlin's soft power influence** previously carried out by CSD,²⁶ this report examines the links between media ownership and dissemination of Russian propaganda narratives in the media sectors of five Black Sea countries – Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia. The report sets out to compare and contrast the media situation in states of the region that exhibit varying degrees of integration in the Euro-Atlantic community, are subject to different levels of Russian power assertion and corresponding resilience to it as well as display distinct extents of democratisation, especially in terms of freedom of expression. All of these factors chart out the overall susceptibility of the respective state to Russian influence.

Among the five countries **Bulgaria** is the one **most integrated in Euro-Atlantic structures**, having become a member of the EU in 2007 and of NATO in 2004. Yet, it is vulnerable economically and politically to Russian influence, further embodying characteristics of a captured state.²⁷ **Georgia** and **Ukraine** are associate partners of the EU and receive advice, assistance and support for their reform efforts (including in the defence sector) in the framework of the Georgia-NATO and Ukraine-NATO Commission.²⁸ These two states have **displayed significant persistence in their Euro-Atlantic aspirations** even in the face of Russian objection leading to a loss of territory and direct military intervention such as the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 and the Ukrainian crisis that began in late 2013.²⁹

Moldova has stayed the course of European integration but with a **weak enthusiasm for reform and strong vulnerability to Russian pressure**. Indeed, weak state institutions, an ineffective judiciary, significant developmental challenges

²⁶ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

Shentov, O. (eds.) (2018), *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming)

Center for the Study of Democracy, *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks*, 2018.

²⁷ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *Bulgaria: What State Capture Looks Like*, in *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield, 42–47. In the Freedom House index 0 denotes most free and 100 – least free press status: Freedom House (2017), *Freedom of the Press 2017: Bulgaria*.

²⁸ NATO (2009), *Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration*.

²⁹ Neil MacFarlane (2012), *Georgia: National Security Concept versus National Security*, Chatham House, 20.; Hennadiy Maksak and Olga Mashtaler (2017), *Ukraine in the Coordinates of the Eastern Partnership 2017-2020*, Ukrainian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 48.

(including poverty and inequality),³⁰ partly free press freedom status³¹ have facilitated the capture of Moldovan politics by oligarchs.³² All of these trends have derailed Moldovan society's hopes that reforms on the European model would be successfully carried out and would lead to a better quality of life.³³ The unrecognised entity of Transnistria, where ethnic Russians form a majority of the population, provides further leverage to Moscow in attempting to divert Chisinau from the Euro-Atlantic path.

Armenia has **opted out of the Association Agreement** with the EU, preferring to conduct foreign policies that hedge between East and West. Yet, a policy of 'complementarity' between the Eastern and Western vector is belied by Armenia's strategic partnership with Russia (not least given Moscow's military base on Armenian territory) and political-military reliance on the Kremlin in Yerevan's conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Domestically, the weakening of the course of reform have further distanced the country from European standards although the recent protests against entrenched political power may change this trend.³⁴

The Media Landscape

In terms of media sectors, the five countries are characterized with many similarities despite their different political and economic pathways and geo-political environment. According to the Freedom of the Press ranking³⁵, in the last twenty years the five countries have displayed **similar trajectories regarding the media independence** as measured by the legal environment for the media, political pressures that influence media policies, and economic factors that affect access to news and information. However, some differences should be highlighted. Bulgaria and Georgia have "partly free" media, with Bulgaria being closer to the group of countries with independent ("free") media. Bulgaria is the country though, which demonstrates a trend of worsening of its position since 2001, while Georgia has advanced, particularly after 2009. On the contrary, Armenia has the worst ranking for the whole period after 1994, even though it has advanced slightly in the last five years. Ukraine and Moldova have passed through dynamic changes crossing the border between "partly free" and "not free" media in different stages of their development, but like Armenia, have advanced in the last years (particularly visible for Ukraine after 2014).

³⁰ Alison Mutler (2012), *European Aspiration and Human Development of the Republic of Moldova*, National Human Development Report.

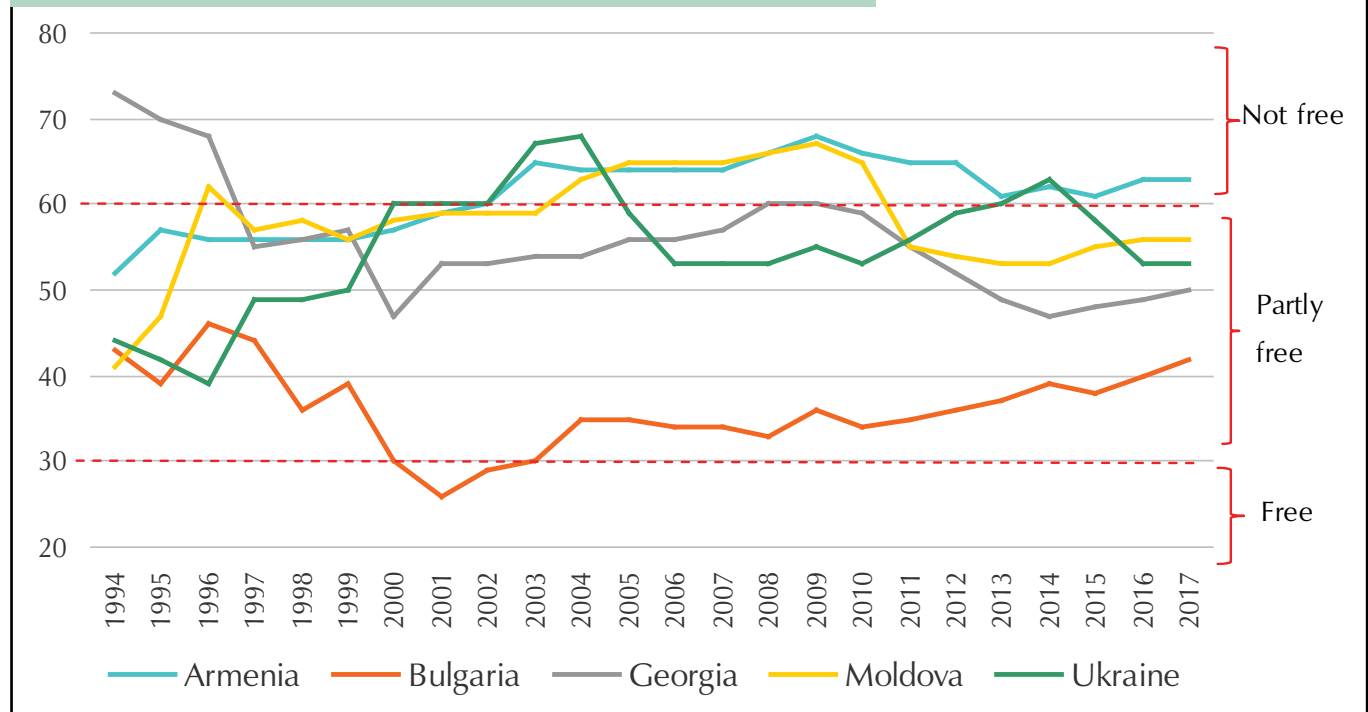
³¹ Freedom House (2017), *Freedom of the Press 2017: Moldova*.

³² Hrant Kostanyan (2016), *Why Moldova's European Integration Is Failing*, Centre for European Policy Studies.

³³ Victor Chirila (2015), *A Focus on Moldova, in Eastern Partnership Revisited. Associated Countries in Focus*, ed. Grzegorz Gromadzki and Bastian Sendhardt, Stefan Batory Foundation/Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

³⁴ Mikael Zolyan (2018), *Inside the Explosive Case Against Armenia's Ex-President*, Carnegie Moscow Center.

³⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press*, accessed on 17.08.2018 at <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press>.

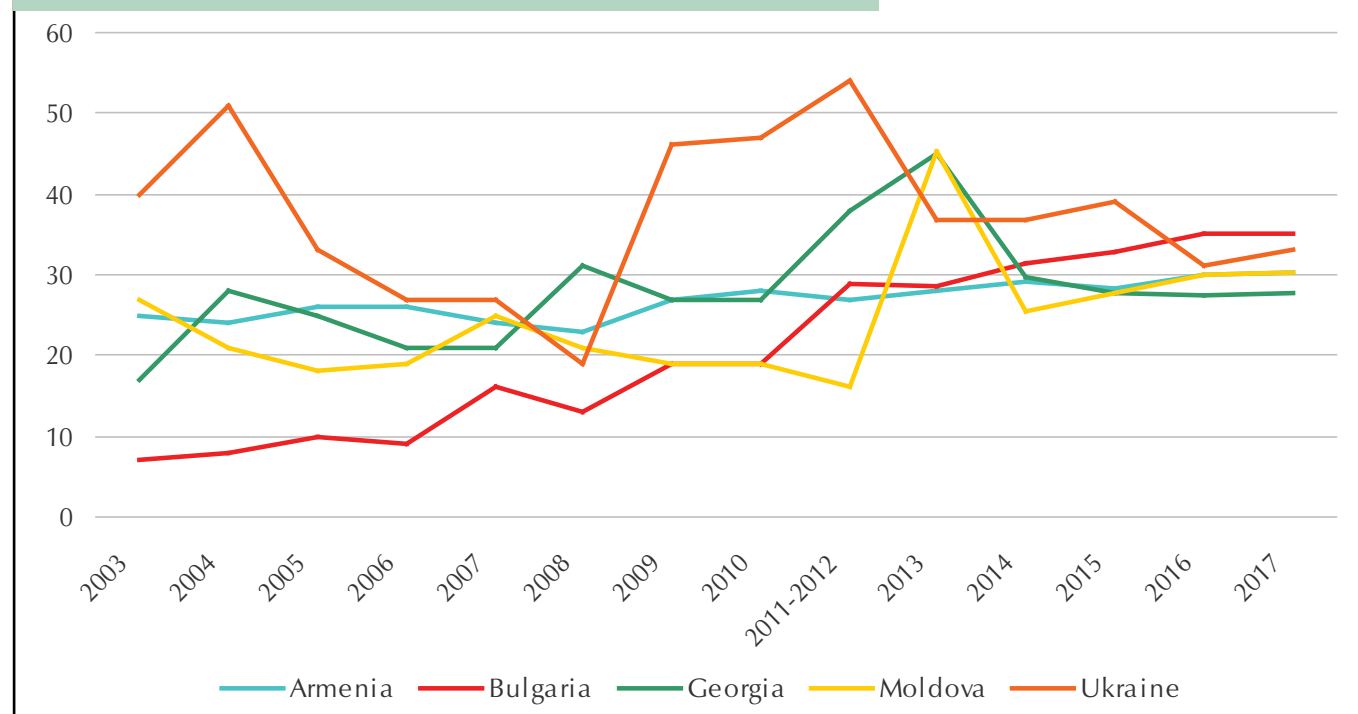
FIGURE 1. FREEDOM OF THE PRESS RANKING FOR FIVE BLACK SEA COUNTRIES (1994 – 2017)

Source: *Freedom of the Press*, Freedom House.

The World Press Freedom Index,³⁶ which also assess the independence of the media, the quality of the legislative framework and the safety of journalists shows slightly different picture of the media freedom in these countries. Again, all five countries have similar rankings with Bulgaria starting from the best position in 2003 and worsening it to the level of the other four countries until 2017. Instead of Armenia, here Ukraine has the worst score during the whole period but again it makes considerable improvement after 2012. Georgia, Moldova and Armenia have comparable trends of slight improvement in their positions for the whole period, with Moldova demonstrating the highest improvement among them after 2014.

³⁶ Reporters without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index*, accessed on 17.08.2018 at <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

FIGURE 2. WORLD PRESS FREEDOM INDEX FOR FIVE BLACK SEA COUNTRIES (2003 – 2017)



Source: World Press Freedom Index, Reporters without Borders.

Despite some differences in the countries' ranking, both assessments underline the common similarity among them – **the media in these countries has been heavily vulnerable to influences from political and economic interests**, mainly through their ownership and funding streams. Particularly, the lack of transparency regarding media ownership is pointed out as one of the major factors, which allows the capture of the media sectors by private interests. As the country case studies in this report show, the small size of the advertisement markets in Bulgaria, Moldova and Armenia and the shift of advertisement budgets to online media in the past decade, have increased the vulnerability and dependence of the media sectors from large commercial advertisers and the state.

The assessments of the media independence highlight also the common trend of **oligarchization of the media sectors** in all five countries. It has been particularly visible and detrimental in the cases of Bulgaria and Ukraine. The oligarchization, which goes hand in hand with market concentration, have reinforced the vulnerability of media companies to external economic and political influence related not only to the private interest of their owners but also to the interests of the owner's business partners and political associates and allies. As both the Ukrainian and Bulgarian cases in this report, as well as

previous studies have highlighted³⁷, the oligarchic networks in the Black Sea countries have often established connections to Russian-related businesses (including publicly funded Russia-led large infrastructural projects), as well as to domestic political leaders who maintain good relations with Russia. Moreover, the **coupling of media ownership with strong political relations to top-level officials** and political leaders have two important spillover effects. On the one side, it supports the concentration of both public and private funds in chosen media companies, often tightly related to Russian foreign policy or pro-Russian private interests, even if the (public) funds are not intended to be used for such an aim. On the other side, even though government censorship has been officially denied in all of the countries, the coupling of media ownership with political links, offers to the national governments a major tool for effective control over the editorial policy in favor of local and foreign (e.g. Russian) political or economic interests, even though the official position of the government is balanced and neutral regarding the same issues.

Despite the similarities in the assessment of media independence in the five countries, there are major differences among them regarding the size and internal division of their media sectors, as well as the degree of direct and indirect foreign, including Russian, economic footprint. For the purpose of the analysis, **the media sector is defined as covering four sub-sectors**: i) print media publishing activities, ii) TV and radio production, programming, broadcasting and distribution, iii) online media activities, and iv) retail sale of print media.³⁸ Despite the differences in terms of the size of national economy and population, Bulgaria and Ukraine have similar media sectors in terms of number of companies (respectively 5161 and 5789 in 2016), while the Moldavian³⁹ media sector is 7 times smaller (731 companies in 2016). When the total annual turnover of the companies and number of employees are considered, the Ukrainian media sector is respectively 40% and 60% bigger than the Bulgarian and more than 95% bigger than the Moldavian one.

³⁷ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

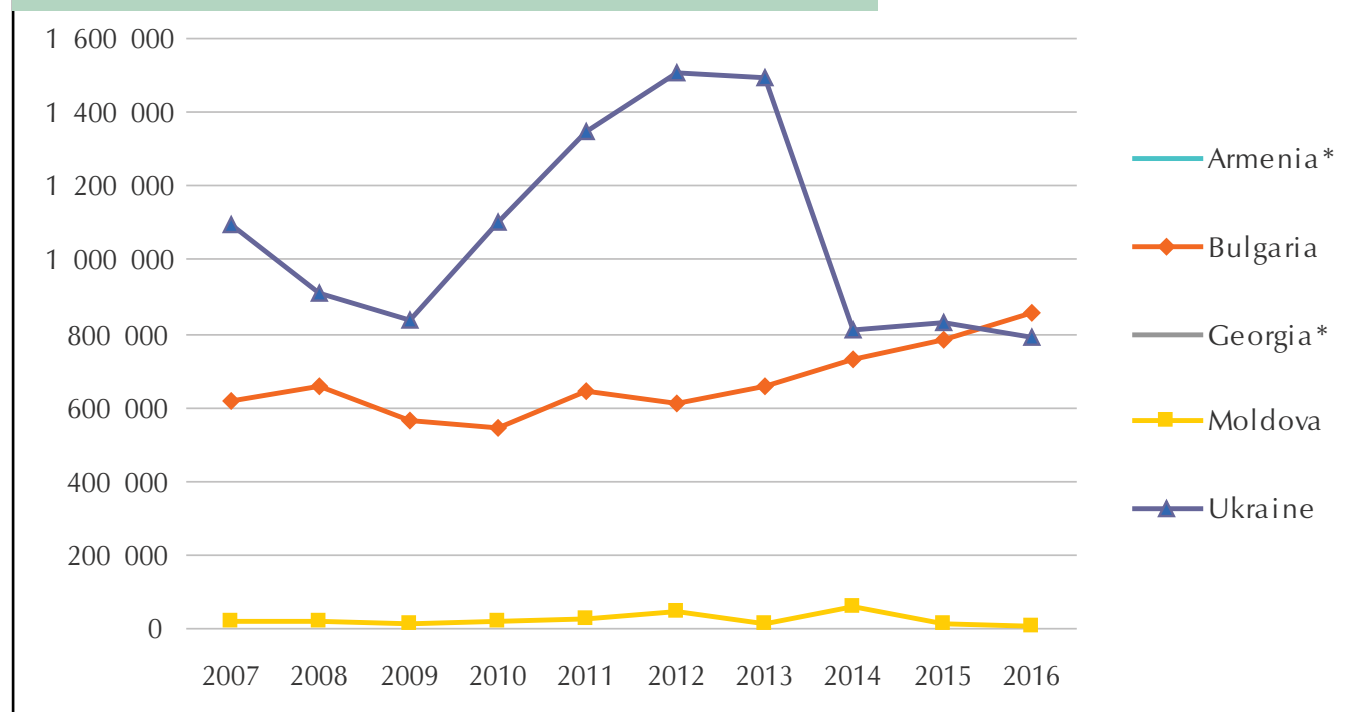
Shentov, O. (eds.) (2018), *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming)

Center for the Study of Democracy, *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks*, 2018.

³⁸ According to the international classification of main economic activities NACE Rev.2, this coverage includes the following NACE codes: 4762: Retail sale of newspapers and stationery in specialized stores; 5813: Publishing of newspapers; 5814: Publishing of journals and periodicals; 5819: Other publishing activities 5911: Motion picture, video and television program production activities; 5912: Motion picture, video and television program post-production activities; 5913: Motion picture, video and television program distribution activities; 6010: Radio broadcasting; 6020: Television programming and broadcasting activities; 6312: Web portals; 6391: News agency activities; 6399: Other information service activities not elsewhere classified.

³⁹ Due to the lack of availability of comparable data, parts of the regional comparative analysis, such as of the size, turnover, employees, etc. includes only some of the five countries under investigation.

FIGURE 3. ANNUAL TURNOVER OF THE COMPANIES IN THE MEDIA SECTORS OF BULGARIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE (THOUSANDS EUR)



Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases. (* Missing data)

The company data for Armenia are not publicly accessible neither through paid proprietary databases⁴⁰, nor through national commercial and other public registers.⁴¹ The respective data for Georgia are available only partially, covering only some of the relevant sub-sectors.⁴² The **lack of publicly accessible information** about the companies in two of the analyzed countries, as well as the different degrees of the data gaps for the other countries are one of the major barriers, hindering the transparency and independence of the media sectors in the Black Sea region.

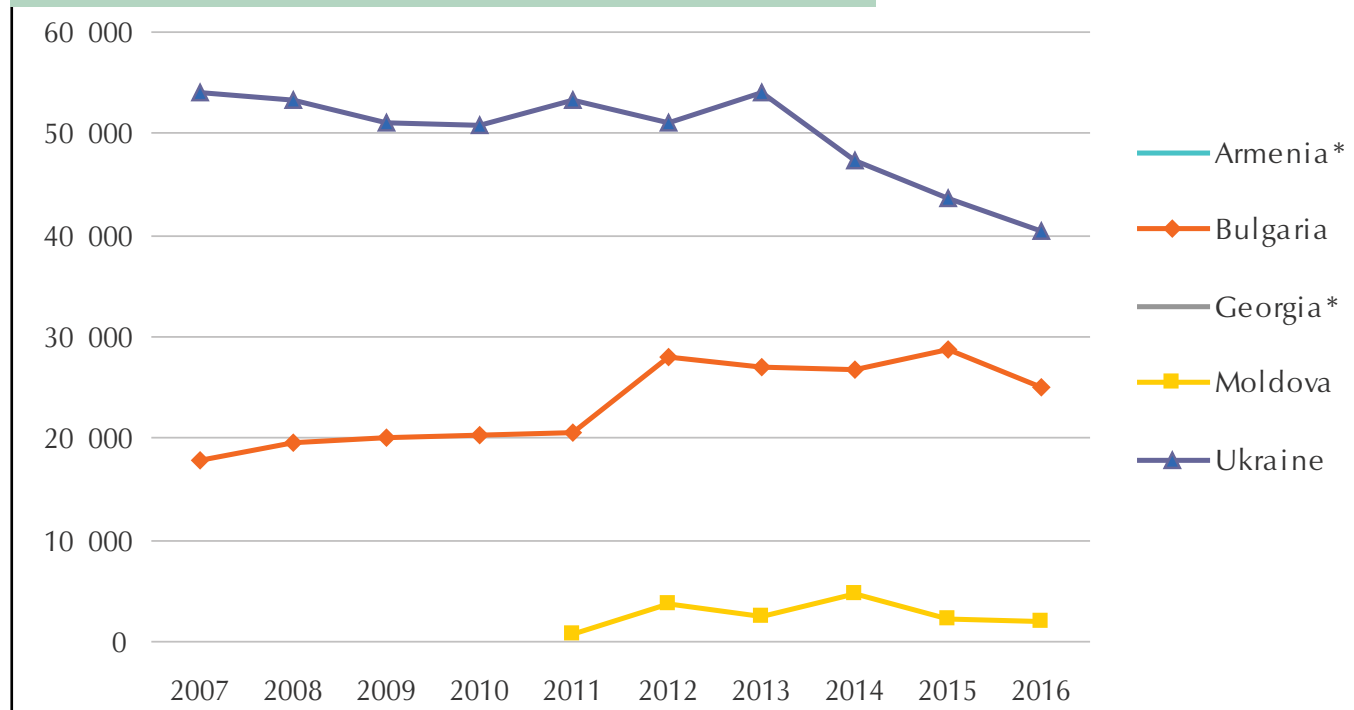
The analysis reveals **two different trends of pro-Russian influence in the media sectors** of the Black Sea countries.

In countries where the official Russian media are not well present (e.g. Bulgaria) or even banned (e.g. in Ukraine), the media ownership is only one of the less used tools for influence in the media sector. The most often used tools rely on the engagement of larger communities of content creators and providers loyal to

⁴⁰ <https://www.bvdinfo.com/en-gb/our-products/data/international/amadeus>.

⁴¹ The official aggregated statistical data could not be used for the subsequent analysis, which relies on mapping the networks of ownership and exploring the foreign corporate presence in the respective country and for that reason, have not been used here.

⁴² The data are available for 5 out of the total 12 sub-sectors according to NACE Rev. 2 classification, and namely: 5813: Publishing of newspapers; 5814: Publishing of journals and periodicals; 5819: Other publishing activities; 6020: Television programming and broadcasting activities; 6391: News agency activities.

FIGURE 4. ANNUAL AVERAGE NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES IN THE MEDIA SECTORS OF BULGARIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE

Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases.

or dependent on Russia – RSS aggregator sites, small and medium online news platforms, independent journalists, individual bloggers and social-media opinion-makers, internet trolls, etc. In addition, indirectly-controlled non-media companies, that are used for influencing media decision-making and agenda-setting through (in)formal links, PR and marketing budgets, topics-setting, support for political, cultural, science and education, and sport activities, business/political relations with external stakeholders, etc. also play an important role.

In the countries, where the official Kremlin media and media, controlled legally through Russian ownership, management or funding (e.g. Armenia, Georgia and partially Moldova), have strong presence, the same tools are used to reinforce the susceptibility to Russian influence, however they are only supporting the mainstream official media. In all countries (including outside the Black Sea region or Central and Eastern Europe), where Russia maintains directly or indirectly controlled media, they are used for malign influence over the national internal and foreign policies in favor of Kremlin's economic and political interests. This has become possible due to the fact that democratic institutions, including the regulatory oversight of the media sectors in the West, have been functioning since the end of Cold War, on the assumption that the times of hostile Brezhnev-era propaganda have already passed.

Russia's Corporate Footprint in the Media Sectors of Bulgaria and Ukraine

Taking into consideration the limitations and gaps in the data, the report presents below an analysis of the foreign corporate economic footprint only for Bulgaria and Ukraine. According to the location of media companies' ultimate beneficial owners the two countries differ considerably. In addition to the approximately 5000 companies having final domestic ownership, foreign ultimate beneficial owners are less common and come primarily from the USA (15 companies), some tax-heaven countries like the United Arab Emirates, Lichtenstein and British Virgin Islands (17 companies in total) and the EU (29 companies in total). The Bulgarian media companies with Russian ultimate beneficial owners are only two. In Ukraine the situation is different. The media companies with foreign beneficial owners are about seven times more than in Bulgaria and the biggest group among them are Russian companies (211), followed by Cyprus (124 companies), Brazilian, Dutch, and British ones. The share of companies with foreign ultimate beneficial owners, registered in tax-heaven countries out of all companies with foreign owners in Ukraine is much lower than in Bulgaria, as is the share of companies with owners, registered in the EU.

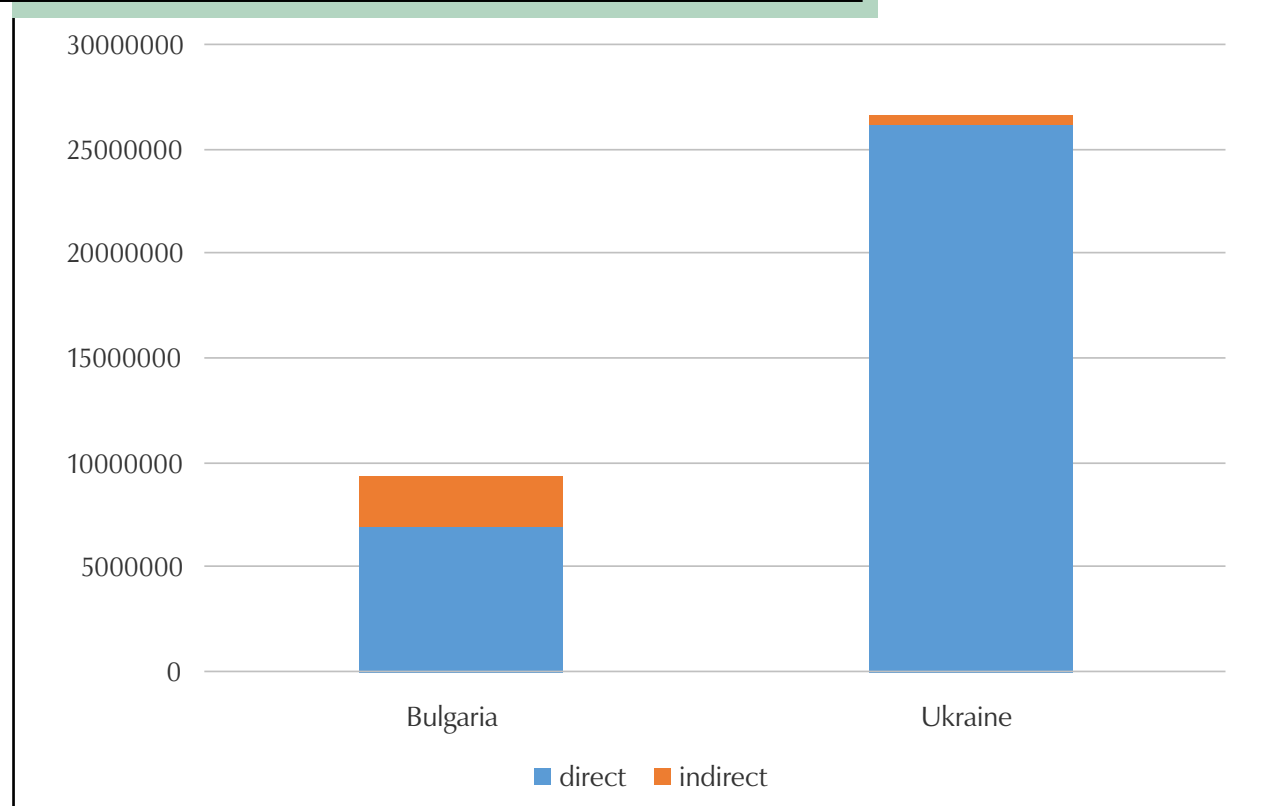
TABLE 1: SELECTED LOCATIONS OF FOREIGN FINAL BENEFICIAL OWNERS IN THE MEDIA SECTORS OF BULGARIA AND UKRAINE

Country of beneficial owner	No of foreign beneficial owners		No of companies	
	Bulgaria	Ukraine	Bulgaria	Ukraine
USA	15	15	15	12
UAE	8		8	
Austria	5	6	5	6
Great Britain	5	27	5	22
Greece	5		5	
LI..	6		5	
VG	5	26	4	21
BZ	3	28	3	26
CH	3	1	3	1
DE	3	1	3	1
CY	2	128	2	124
FR	2	5	2	4
RU	6	241	2	211
NL		29		26
...				
TOTAL	86	572	77	515

Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases

The differences in the number of companies with foreign ultimate beneficial owners predetermine also the differences in the Russian economic footprint in the media sectors of Bulgaria and Ukraine. **Russia's corporate footprint in Ukraine** as measured by the turnover of media companies ultimately owned by Russian entities **is much higher than in Bulgaria**. Yet, the relative share of indirect Russian footprint⁴³ in Bulgaria is higher than in Ukraine, which reveals the different in-roads of the Russian influence in the two countries. The strategy is likely to change as the Ukrainian government gears further towards reducing Russia's direct influence on its economy, media and politics.

FIGURE 5: RUSSIAN CORPORATE FOOTPRINT IN THE MEDIA SECTORS OF BULGARIA AND UKRAINE (AVERAGE ANNUAL TURNOVER FOR 2014-2016)

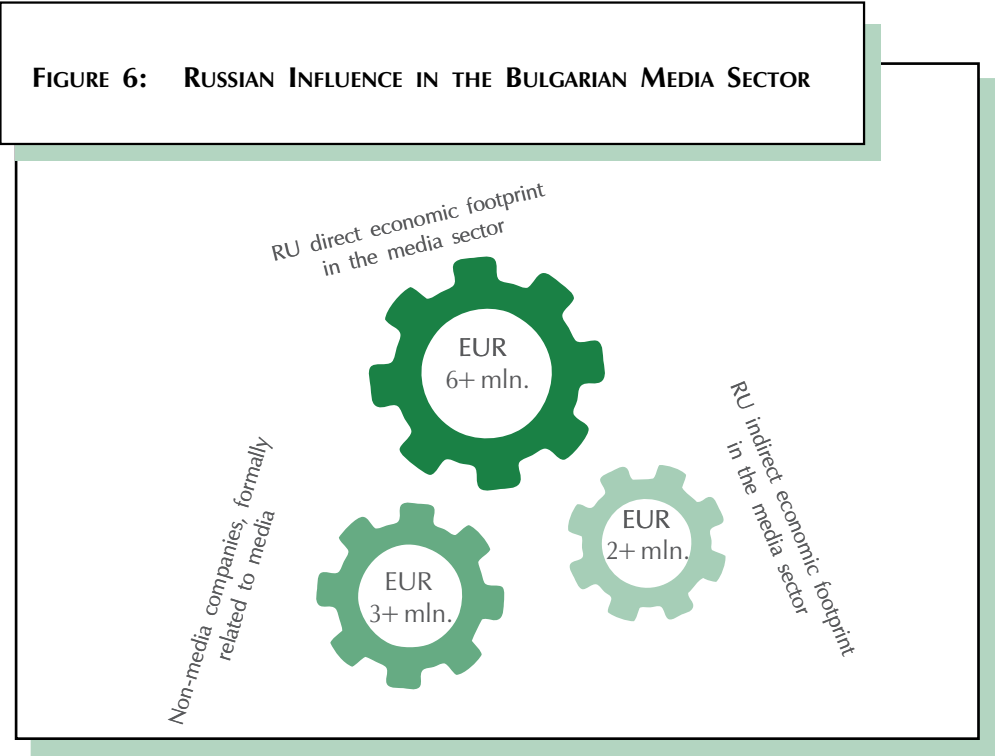


Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases.

In the case of Bulgaria, Russia-related companies influence the media sector through their subsidiaries or indirectly-controlled by them companies outside the media sector. The mechanisms for such an influence could be very different. Some of these companies are big advertisers (e.g. energy or telecommunication

⁴³ The direct economic footprint measures the average annual turnover for the last 3 available years (2014-2016) of all companies from the respective country that have a Russian legal or physical person as the ultimate beneficial owner (UBO) of a minimum of 50.01% of the company's shares. The indirect economic footprint measures the average annual turnover for the same 3-year period of two sub-categories of companies: i) subsidiaries of the companies from the first group, belonging to the media sector and ii) media companies that are not legally related to Russian UBOs but their domestic owners have strong pro-Russian political and/or economic links. The 3-year period is used due to the gaps in the data (i.e. data not available for the last year).

companies in Bulgaria), which pay for specific media campaigns through their subsidiaries in order to hide the real source of the information message. Other companies become financial donors of pro-Russian political, cultural or educational activities, etc. Estimates show that Russia’s direct economic footprint through ownership of media companies in Bulgaria is almost on par with its indirect control mechanisms



Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases.

MAPPING THE PRO-RUSSIAN NARRATIVES IN THE BLACK SEA COUNTRIES' MEDIA

Through an analysis of three pro-Russia media outlets in each of the five Black Sea countries, the report shows how different type of media are used for resurgence of the Brezhnev-era Russian propaganda, irrespective of the economic, political and social differences across the countries. The selected media belong to **three sub-groups according to the degree of their pro-Russian political-economic enmeshment**:

- The first sub-group includes **domestic media with a broad national audience and some degree of pro-Russian enmeshment**, despite they claim formal independence from (observable) links to Russia through ownership, top management or declared editorial policy. There can still be informal or hidden affiliations to Russian groups and interests.
- The second sub-group includes **small-scale media outlets with clearly traceable links to Russia** through ownership or top management placements and with a small but entrenched audience. The rationale behind the news provision of these outlets is based on spreading content obtained for free from Russian media sources, while also generating authentic content reused by news agencies in Russia as evidence of the propagation of pro-Kremlin views in other countries.
- The third sub-group includes **Sputnik-type media outlets** or the national edition of this website if available. This type of outlet targets the non-Russian audience abroad and as of 2018 operates more than 30 country-versions. Sputnik is one of the major channels for creating and delivering official pro-Kremlin content, being further involved in reinforcing and channeling the dissemination of fake news that originate in formally independent domestic news sources.⁴⁴

The current report's hypothesis is that the level of pro-Russian political-economic enmeshment of the media in terms of patterns of ownership and management control, as well as of (in)formal economic and political links, will not change the corresponding trends of employing Russia-originating propaganda narratives and conveying these narratives through specific journalistic-stylistic means. That is, **the degree of consistently reproduced similarities among the media outlets form the three sub-groups will be very high** despite the differences in the formal editorial policies, claimed financial and management independence and formal economic and political links. However, if differences in the pro-Russian narratives

⁴⁴ *Sputnik International* was established by the government-owned news agency *Rossiia Segodnya* in November 2014 as a combination of news agency, news website platform and radio broadcasting service, incorporating the former *RIA Novosti* news service and the international radio service *Voice of Russia*.

exist among the media outlets, they will be much weaker than the shared commonalities of narration and style as part of their general pro-Russian tilt. Still, the media outlets could differ in such a way that the greater the political-economic enmeshment with Russian interests, the more congruously and undeviatingly the content of Russian narratives is matched, the less analytical variation and nationally-originating perspectives are included and the more explicitly biased the style of communication is.

Following expert assessment and formal criteria for the existence of pro-Russian narratives in the media, three media outlets, each of them belonging to one of the above sub-groups were selected in each of the countries. At the next step using a common search strategy, all articles covering three preliminary agreed topics were identified and when needed – sampled further to the threshold of at most 900 articles in total for the three media. The selected **topics** include:

- presentation of **Russia-related energy issues** (e.g. large international or domestic energy infrastructural projects such as the gas pipeline projects South Stream, Nord Stream 2, Turkish Stream, etc.)
- suspected **Russian meddling in foreign elections**
- the **war in Syria**

Some disclaimers apply to the analysis. The assessment does not claim to draw conclusions about the whole of the countries' media landscapes or to evaluate the degree of the propaganda and disinformation narratives against benchmarks or in comparison to similar non-Russian or pro-Western media outlets. The selected timeframe between 2015 and 2017 encompasses the period immediately following 2014, which year was a high mark in Russia-West tensions, marking the intensification of Russian information warfare,⁴⁵ the consolidation of Russia's conservative discourse, and the emergence of Western counter-measures. The Russian discourse became comprised of a set of Kremlin-sanctioned lines of argumentation about politics and international relations.⁴⁶ Hence, the report traces the corresponding intensified propagation (and even imposition) of Moscow narratives within the Black Sea region in relation to the three themes of war in Syria, election meddling and Russian energy projects, which represent some of the most critical and frequently occurring topics in Russia-West relations.

The findings of the five-country analysis allows drawing conclusions about cross-case similarities and differences along **two main dimensions**. The first includes the identification of generalized **commonalities of pro-Russian propaganda enunciation and communication** exhibited in those segments of the media landscapes of the five states demonstrating pro-Russian leanings and entanglement.

⁴⁵ Margarita Jaitner (2015), *Russian Information Warfare: Lessons from Ukraine*, in *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, ed. Kenneth Geers, Tallinn: NATO CCD COE Publications; Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely (2015), *Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine*, The Journal of Slavic Military Studies 28, no. 1.

⁴⁶ On Russia as a unique civilization promoting patriotism, state authority, traditional family values, balance of power and spheres of influence, see *Izvestiya*, *Минкультуры изложило 'Основы государственной культурной политики'* (The Ministry of Culture Has Put Forward 'The Foundations of State Culture Policy'), April 10, 2014.; Vladimir Putin, *Обращение Президента Российской Федерации*, (Address by the President of the Russian Federation), March 18, 2014.; Fyodor Lukyanov (2014), *Игра по правилам и без* (A Game with and without Rules), *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 5.

The second dimension encompasses the observation that national distinctiveness (especially as regards level of vulnerability to Russian influence) imparts characteristic features of the national media landscape, frames specific discourses on Russia-related developments and thus further shapes the hypothesized **relationship between types of ownership and patterns of propaganda**.

Common Features of Pro-Russian Propaganda

A key conclusion reached in all country-level analyses highlights the **presence of shared attributes of pro-Kremlin propaganda dissemination** common to all media with Russian inclinations and/or ties (i.e., as a generalized overlay to the differentiations stemming from the more specific gradations of those inclinations and ties). There is also a similar overall trend of transmitting pro-Russian propaganda. Accordingly, the examined outlets in Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia converge on the **propagation of overlapping content through analogous journalistic techniques**. In particular, there is a congruent representation of topics and narratives in relation to the themes of the war in Syria, Russian energy projects and Russian meddling in foreign elections, which matches the propagandist discourses emanating from the Kremlin.

The war in Syria is the most heavily present theme across the selected media sources (41% of all articles in Bulgaria, 42% in Ukraine, 60% in Georgia, 65% in Moldova, 40% in Armenia). The specific topics that receive the greatest coverage concern Russia's diplomatic and military role in Syria. The main corresponding narratives assert the views that Moscow is the only actor, which contributes to the resolution of the crisis, consequently attaining international authority and influence; that Russia's military role is legitimate (since it is based on Syria leader Bashar al-Assad's request), successful and leads to the defeat of terrorism, all the while demonstrating the superiority of Russian military equipment and technological advancement, which can give the Kremlin the edge in a potential war with the West. Further key topics that are similarly covered in the five countries concern the Western diplomatic and military role in the Syrian crisis as well as Russia-West relations. The core lines of argumentation state that the American involvement in the war is illegitimate, only confirms that Washington pursues its selfish interests, escalates tensions, refuses to cooperate with Russia (on equal terms and in the name of finding a peaceful resolution) but that it is also a declining power. Relatedly, cross-country coverage of the topic of terrorism conveys the idea that the US supports Islamic State, aims at undermining Assad and obstructing the Kremlin's efforts to defeat the terrorists. Moreover, the topic of the chemical weapons attacks is identically framed in a way that aims to establish the Syrian President's innocence, the West's lack of evidence of the Assad government's guilt, suggesting instead that America tested its chemical weapons in Syria. The US airstrikes in response to the chemical attacks are said to have been incapable of causing material damage to the military infrastructure of the Damascus regime but led to civilian casualties. The questions of regional diplomacy and Russian-Turkish relations are also commonly discussed. The successes of the diplomatic and military cooperation between Moscow, Ankara and Tehran in terms of guaranteeing the peace process in Syria are extolled – as are the positive results of the Russian-Turkish partnership. Yet, the latter issue

also features coverage of the vicissitudes of bilateral ties so that Turkey's downing of a Russian plane in November 2015 has been reflected in the media presentation of Ankara as a treacherous actor, sponsoring terrorism. The thaw in relations, however, reversed the critical treatment of Turkey. The final recurrent topic of pro-Russian propaganda analogously considered in the five countries is linked to the international consequences of the Syrian crisis, whereby a key narrative holds that Europe is being inundated with refugees, who have been infiltrated by terrorists that will Islamize Europe.

These shared topics and narratives – both separately disseminated within and also common across the five countries under investigation, resonate with Russia-originating propaganda. Examples of officially-sanctioned Russian views and analyses of politics and international relations with regard to the war on Syria:

On Russia's diplomatic role in the Syrian conflict: George Gavrilis (2016), *No Can Russia's Peace Plan for Syria Work?*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2.

On Russia's military involvement in Syria: Ruslan Pukhov (2017), *Moscow-Based Think Tank Director: Russia's Unexpected Military Victory in Syria*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4; Dmitry Gorenburg (2016), *What Russia's Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in Its Capabilities*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2; Fyodor Lukyanov (2016), *No Why Putin's Policy in Syria Has Laid the Groundwork for a Political Settlement*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 3.

On terrorism: Andrei Skriba and Dmitry Novikov (2016), *The Middle East: The Main Trends*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2.

On US strikes on Syria as a breach of international law and yet another instance of interference in the affairs of Middle Eastern states: Vitaly Naumkin (2018), *New Tripartite Aggression in Syria Brings Mixed Results*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2.

On Russian-Turkish relations: Ayse Zarakol (2017), *"Moscow-Based Think Tank Director: Russia's Unexpected Military Victory in Syria"*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2; Alexey Grivach (2015), *Turkey Shoots Down Its Own Gas Hub*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4.

On regional diplomacy, the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran: Alexander Maryasov, "Do Russian-Iranian Relations Constitute a Strategic Partnership?," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 2 (2018).; Sergey Minasyan (2015), *The Syrian Gambit*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4; Mark Katz (2018), *Middle East Crisis: Foreign Interference and an Orgy of Extremism*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2.

On Russia-West relations in the context of Syria: Yoshiko Herrera, Andrew Kydd, and Fyodor Lukyanov (2016), *Yes, the U.S. and Russia Can Cooperate to End the Syrian Civil War. Here's Why.*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 1.

On the Western role in Syria: Vitaly Naumkin (2015), *Middle East Crisis: Foreign Interference and an Orgy of Extremism*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 3; Alistair Crooke (2017), *Russia Has Dissolved America's Uni-Polar Project in the Middle East*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4.

On the international consequences of the Syrian crisis: Fyodor Lukyanov (2017), *Here's Why U.S.-Russia Military Conflict Over Syria Is Looking More And More Likely*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2; Sergey Karaganov (2017), *Mutual Assured Deterrence*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 1.

Energy is the second most extensively covered theme in the selected online media outlets (39% of all articles in Bulgaria, 38% in Ukraine, 35% in Georgia, 24% in Moldova, 36% in Armenia). Apart from the primary emphasis placed on bilateral energy issues concerning Russia and each of the case countries, significant attention is devoted to the discussion of large-scale Russian energy projects in Europe, including Turkish Stream, South Stream and Nord Stream II. With regard to Turkish Stream, a shared pro-Russian propagandist discourse

maintains that the pipeline is a major economic undertaking contributing to Turkey's security of gas supply and to Greece's economy, given that the latter will become a transit entry point for Turkish Stream gas into European countries. South Stream is said to have been of huge economic importance to Southern Europe. It is further argued that Nord Stream II will be conducive to Western Europe's and above all Germany's interests in the energy sphere both because of the profitability of the project and the circumvention of Ukraine as an unreliable gas transit route. Additionally, the topic of US involvement in European energy markets is typically present, whereby the pro-Russian narratives refer to aggressive American promotion of its liquefied gas, which is said to be motivated by the desire to dominate Europe and squeeze Russia out of European energy markets.

Examples of officially-sanctioned Russian views and analyses of politics and international relations with regard to elections:

On South Stream: Alexei Grivach (2016), *Black Sea Stream: The Planned Russian Pipeline to the South Returns to the Agenda*, Valdai Discussion Club; Igbal Guliyev (2016), *Pipe Dreams: Russia at the Gas Flows' Crossroads*, Russian International Affairs Council.

On Turkish Stream: Grivach, *Black Sea Stream: The Planned Russian Pipeline to the South Returns to the Agenda*; Alexei Grivach (2015), *Is the Turkish Stream Pipeline Stalled or Frozen?*, Valdai Discussion Club; Vladimir Likhachev (2016), *State and Prospects of Russia–Turkey Energy Relations*, Russian International Affairs Council.

On Nord Stream (2): Marat Terterov (2017), *Amid Regulators vs. Markets Struggle, the Nord Stream 2 Saga Continues*, Valdai Discussion Club; Igor Yushkov (2018), *The Fight for Nord Stream 2: The Interests of All the Players Involved*, Russian International Affairs Council; Viktor Katona (2016), *Despite the Sanctions and Ukraine*.

On liquefied gas: Terterov, *Amid Regulators vs. Markets Struggle, the Nord Stream 2 Saga Continues*; Yushkov, *The Fight for Nord Stream 2: The Interests of All the Players Involved*.

The third theme under review – that of **Russian meddling in foreign elections has received comparatively the least media attention** in pro-Russian media (20% of all articles in Bulgaria, 5% in Georgia, 20% in Ukraine, 11% in Moldova, 24% in Armenia). The topic of the Russian meddling in the US Presidential elections in 2016 is most frequently discussed, with similar cross-country narratives arguing that accusations of Moscow's interference represent a groundless, laughable joke and that the Democratic party (especially former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and former President Barack Obama) are trying to find excuses for their 2016 elections loss by shifting the blame towards Russia through fabricated accusations, further fomented by the liberal media and the CIA. Another topic covered by the selected pro-Russia media outlets in all five countries concerns allegations of Russian meddling in European elections (above all in France, Germany, the UK), which are also dismissed as a matter of mainstream politicians' deliberately constructed threat to keep people voting for them. Nevertheless, the increasing prominence of political figures, parties and policy outcomes favoring Russian positions (such as Marine Le Pen in France, Alternative for Germany, the result of the Brexit referendum) are presented as evidence of Russia's general and President Vladimir Putin's personal political influence. A final topic similarly conveyed in the five countries is related to the charge levelled at the West and the US, in particular – that it is Washington, rather than Moscow, that has always meddled in electoral processes worldwide and in Russia specifically.

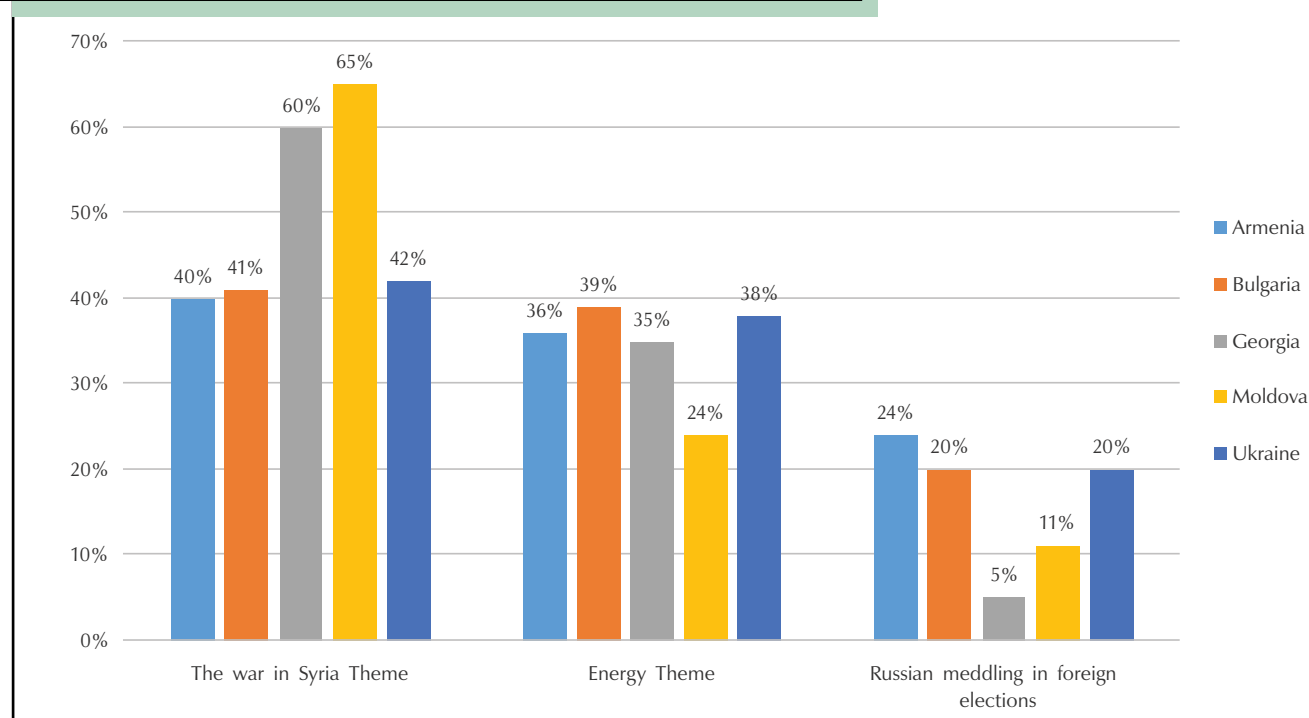
Examples of officially-sanctioned Russian views and analyses of politics and international relations with regard to energy:

On Russian meddling in the US elections: Pavel Sharikov (2017), *'Russian Hackers' in the US Election: Myths and Reality*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 3; Yelena Chernenko and Julien Nocetti (2017), *"A Cyber Revolt in the Making"*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4.

On Russian meddling in European elections: Lenta.ru, *Лавров Опроверг Вмешательство России В Немецкие Выборы* (Lavrov Refutes Claims about Russian Meddling in the German Elections), August 30, 2017.; Rossiyskaya Gazeta, *Путин Ответил На Обвинения Во 'Вмешательстве' в Выборы Во Франции*, May 29, 2017.; Vladimir Kornilov, *Британские Депутаты — О 'российском Вмешательстве': Это Придумал Ленин*, RIA Novosti, December 25, 2017.

On Western meddling in elections: Fyodor Lukyanov (2016), *Putin Is Giving America a Taste of Its Own Medicine*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4.

FIGURE 7. THEME COVERAGE ACROSS THE MEDIA OUTLETS OF THE FIVE SELECTED COUNTRIES



Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

All of the selected media outlets in the five case countries display a **general resemblance in terms of the stylistic modes of transmission of the pro-Russian topics and narratives**. In particular, the overall preference for emotional influencing and sensationalism as opposed to evidence-based reporting results in the prevailing deployment of strongly evaluative epithets, exaggeration (usually of Russian actions, characteristics and capabilities), irony (in order to condescendingly ridicule an opponent's policy position), the evocation of moral opprobrium, inculcation of pessimistic attitudes, cultivation of hatred and hostility (most often of the West),

generation of panic, promotion of conspiracies, creation of manipulative layout (so that the headings deliberately shape impressions or convey information that may be unrelated to the material in the body of the article).

These generally shared techniques of suasion correspond to Russia-originating journalistic modes of shaping attitudes. Examples:

On the specific Russian propaganda techniques of simplistic messaging, diffusion-proofing, sowing distrust: Center for the Study of Democracy, *Media (In)Dependence in Bulgaria: Risks and Trends*, Policy Brief No 60, May 2016

On the presentation of a black-and-white picture of the world, epithets that imply more than they describe, a priori statements, citation of experts out of context, among others: Goble Paul, *15-Point Checklist of Putin Regime's Propaganda Techniques*, *Euromaidanpress*, April 19, 2016.

On the provision of emotionally-coloured content: Goble Paul, *Moscow Propaganda Works By Confusing Fact and Fiction and Providing Emotional Stories*, *Pomerantsev Says*, *Windon on Eurasia - New Series*, September 13, 2015.

On stressing abstract themes that cannot be measured and accusing the West of the same wrongdoings as Russia is accused: Goble Paul, *Russian Propaganda Different and Much More Disturbing than Its Soviet Predecessor*, *Euromaidanpress*, September 3, 2015.

On the social psychological dynamics behind Russian propaganda techniques of multiple source referencing, repetitive coverage, absence of commitment to objectivity and consistency: Chrishopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model*, 2016.

On embedded links and other uses of social media: Jim Rutenberg (2017), *RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War*, 2017.

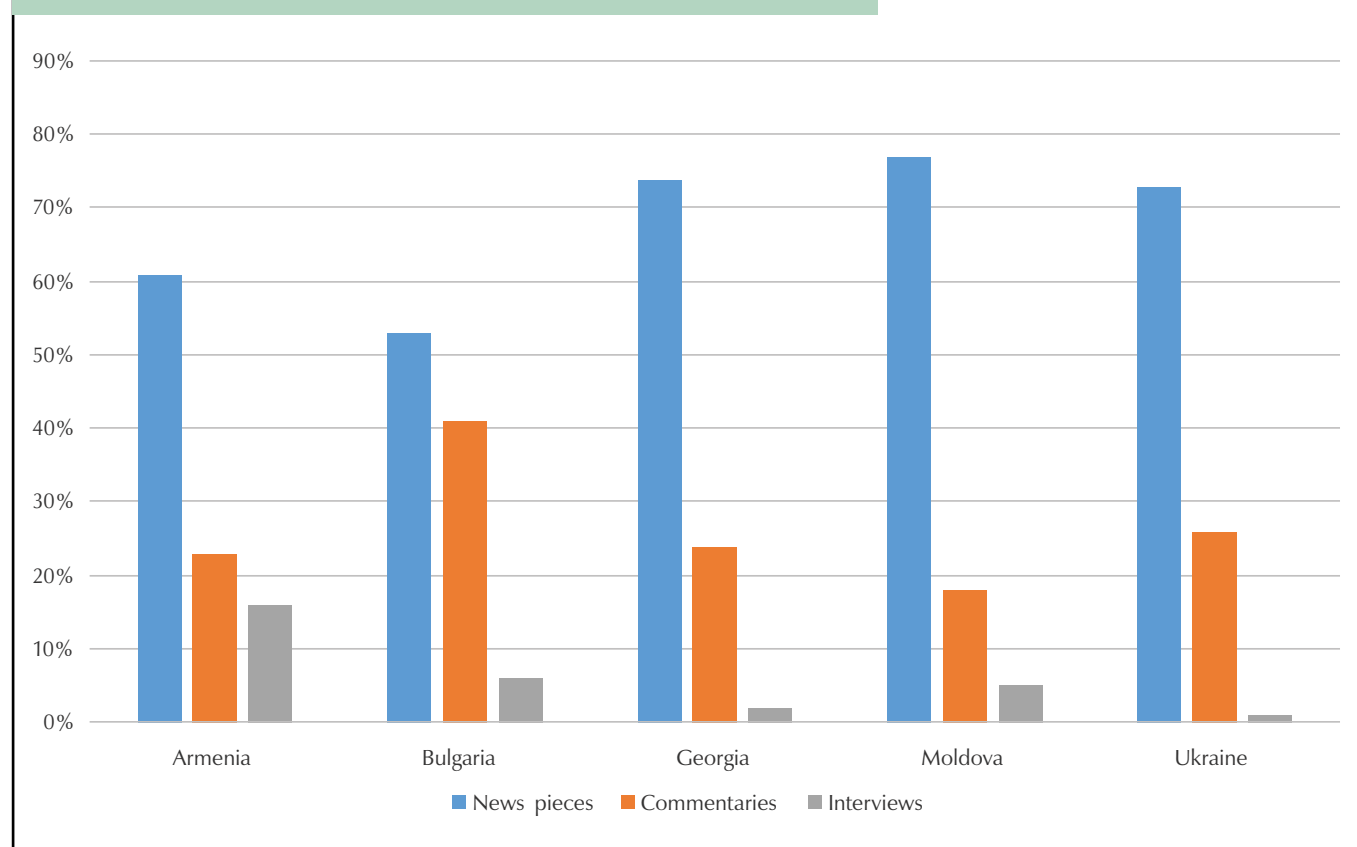
On news tweets, non-attributed comments on web pages, troll and bot social media accounts, fake hashtag and Twitter campaigns: Todd Helmus et al. (2018), *Russian Social Media Influence Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, RAND Corporation.

On dismissal of critics, distortion of facts, distracting from the main issue, dismaying the audience: Ben Nimmo (2015), *Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It*.

On trolling: Ben Nimmo (2018), *Russia's Full Spectrum Propaganda*.

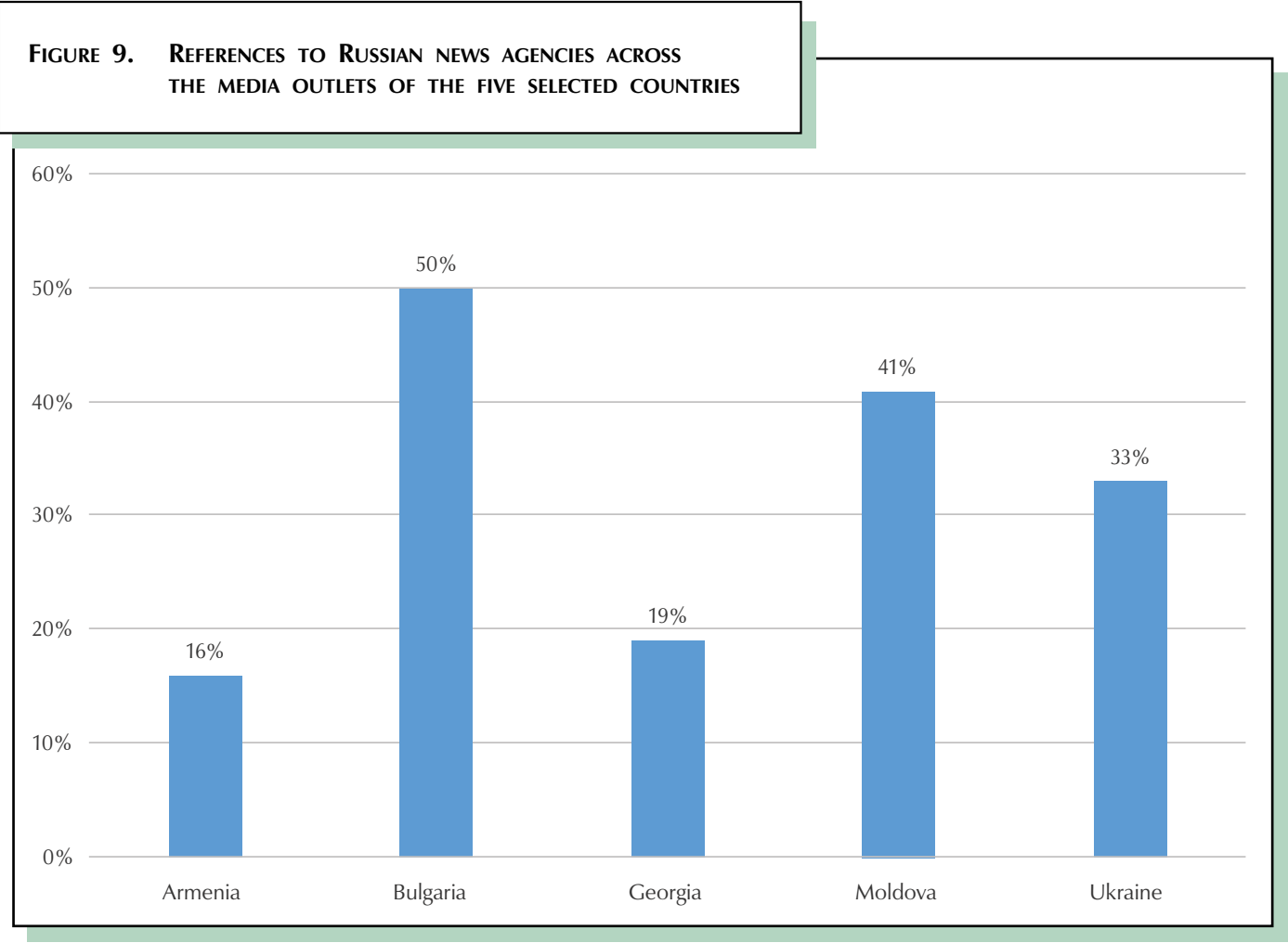
With respect to types of articles, referencing, quotations and authorship, the examined media outlets in the five case countries tend to **privilege news reporting based on Russian sources and (pro-) Russian opinions without consistent authorship attribution**. The greatest number of articles in the country cases represent news pieces (53% in Bulgaria, 73% in Ukraine, 74% in Georgia, 77% in Moldova, 61% in Armenia), followed by commentaries (41% in Bulgaria, 26% in Ukraine, 24% in Georgia, 18% in Moldova, 23% in Armenia), and interviews (6% in Bulgaria, 1% in Ukraine, 2% in Georgia, 5% in Moldova, 16% in Armenia).

FIGURE 8. TYPES OF ARTICLES PREDOMINANT ACROSS THE MEDIA OUTLETS OF THE FIVE SELECTED COUNTRIES



Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

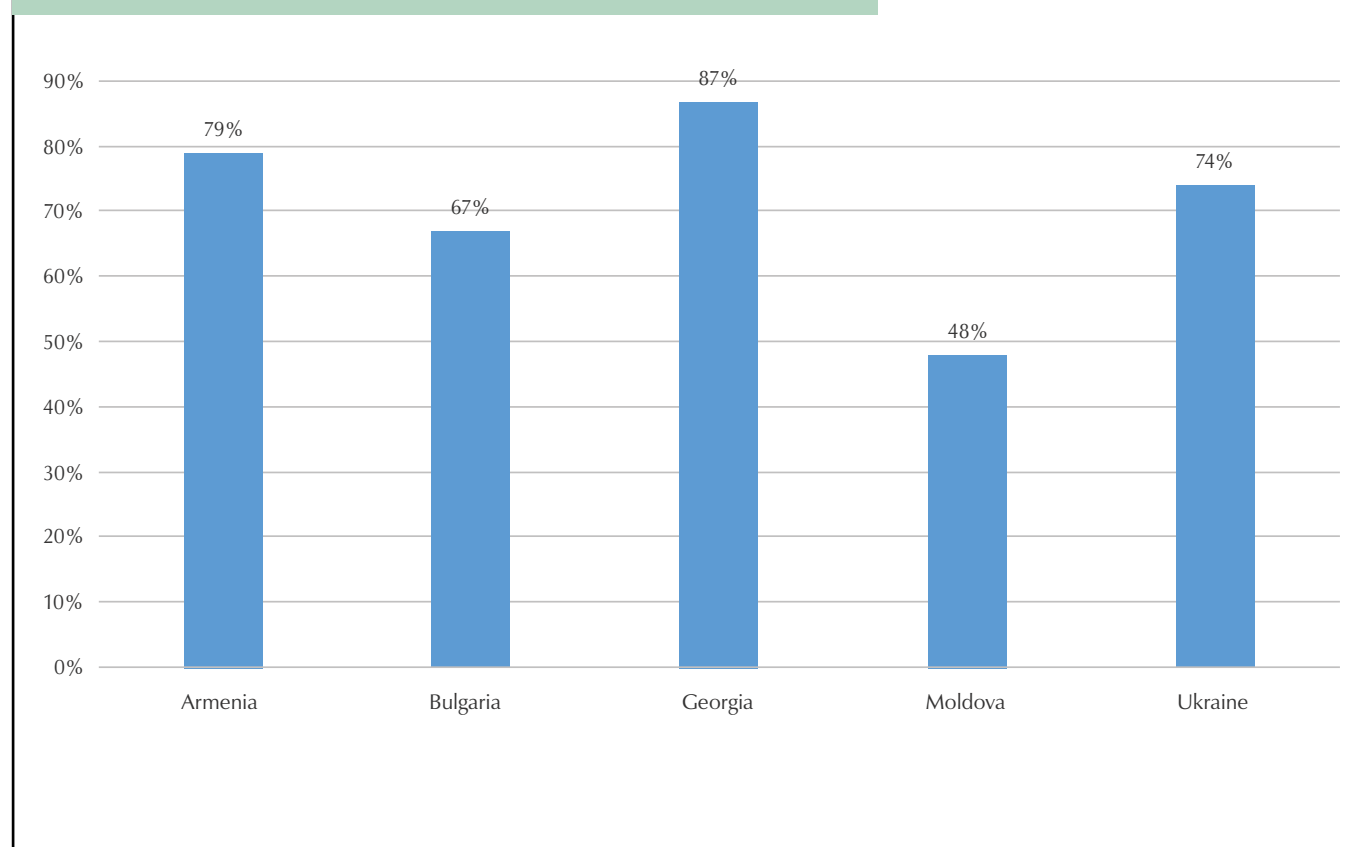
There is a significant **reliance on references to Russian news agencies** (50% in Bulgaria, 33% in Ukraine, 19% in Georgia, 41% in Moldova, 16% in Armenia). Although these figures do not constitute the majority of cited sources, the qualitative country-specific analyses show that referencing non-Russian sources (primarily Western and national ones) is done with the purpose of demonstrating a seeming appearance of objectivity based on mentioning multiple agencies from various countries. Yet, the information obtained from Western sources is usually distorted, misrepresented and misquoted so that it can support and fit into Russian propagandist discourses.



Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

Finally, most articles are anonymous or attributed to an editorial team (67% of all pieces in Bulgaria, 74% in Ukraine, 87% in Georgia, 48% in Moldova, 79% in Armenia), with the commentators in analytical articles routinely being of pro-Russian disposition or origin and with questionable credentials.

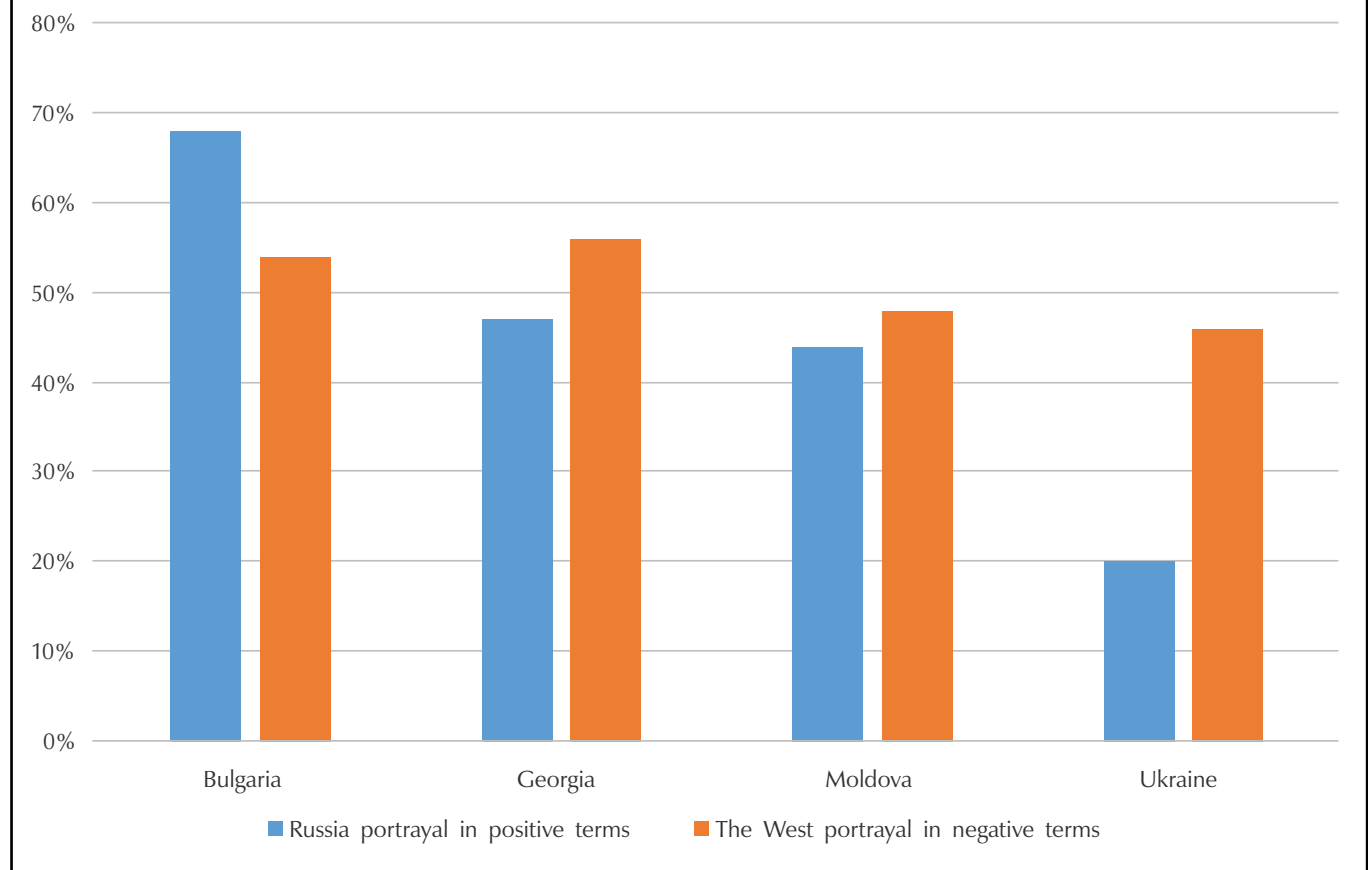
FIGURE 10. SHARE OF ANONYMOUS ARTICLES ACROSS THE MEDIA OUTLETS OF THE FIVE SELECTED COUNTRIES



Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

Overall, such suasive, attitude-inducing modes of message transmission result in a **binary portrayal of Russia in explicitly positive terms** (68% in Bulgaria, 20% in Ukraine, 47% in Georgia, 44% of all articles in Moldova) **and of the West – in negative terms** (54% in Bulgaria, 46% in Ukraine, 56% in Georgia, 48% in Moldova), whereby the presence of neutral portrayals is belied by the employment of subliminal influencing techniques. More specifically, Russia is generally depicted across the media outlets in the five states as a powerful global actor that evokes respect and is morally superior, while also being a victim of Western hostility, ploys and double standards. President Vladimir Putin is presented as a shrewd, rational and skillful world statesman. Conversely, the image painted of the US (as the Western actor receiving the most media coverage in the chosen media outlets) is that of an aggressive, manipulative, selfish power that sows international instability.

FIGURE 11. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF RUSSIA AND THE WEST ACROSS THE MEDIA OUTLETS OF THE FIVE SELECTED COUNTRIES



Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

Apart from generally resembling each other with regard to shared trends of pro-Russian content and style of media coverage, there are degrees of **similarities and differences among the three types of media outlets** in each of the countries under investigation, as shaped by the degree of **political-economic enmeshment with Russian groups and interests**.

First, those **media outlets** in the five states, which claim the status of **nation-wide sources of information** with a broad audience and formal independence from pro-Russian financial entanglements (yet maintaining hidden ties to Russian groups and interests) display common characteristics of narrative enunciation and dissemination. Such outlets include **more empirically varied and analytically nuanced articles**, distinguished by occasional focus on alternative positions (i.e., anti-Russian ones), the consideration of a wider array of issues (in order to provide more rounded – as opposed to one-sided or twisted, reporting) and can even feature some conceptual framing. Moreover, this type of media outlet incorporates **locally-sensitive, relevant and original perspectives** as against a wholesale imposition of Russian propaganda. Stylistically, there is a greater

emphasis on **neutral communication of messages** that is still implicitly biased but stops short of overt manipulation of reader attitudes.⁴⁷

The second type of **media outlets**, have a smaller but devoted readership and **display more conspicuously identifiable ties to Russian interests and groups**. They are characterized by at least two features. Similarly, to the first group of media sources, they include a wider and more detailed treatment of issue areas pertinent to given news, the provision of some analytical framing and attention to nationally-relevant perspectives. However, the distinctiveness of such attributes lies in the more **overt partisanship, sweeping justification of Russian actions** through dubious analytical and historical conclusions and **generalizations** as well as a more diluted commitment to neutral reporting, which blends into explicit suasion.

The third type of **media outlets** are **of Russian origin**. They are characterized by the most direct and obvious ownership links to Russian groups as well as by the **purposeful commitment to disseminate Kremlin propaganda content** to foreign audiences through the national editions of these outlets. A key distinguishing attribute is linked to **the scarcity of nationally-relevant and sensitive perspectives** so that Russian narratives are pre-imposed on the domestic readership. Moreover, this group of online newspapers feature **the simplest, most repetitive and explicitly biased form of message transmission**.

Differences in Pro-Russian Propaganda

The findings of the national assessments warrant the conclusion that **greater vulnerability to Kremlin influence leads to a less differentiated media sector**, where outlets similarly and overlappingly promote Russian propagandist narratives so that the correlation between types of entanglement and corresponding patterns of content provision is obscured and diluted (as is especially the case in Moldova and Armenia).

Being a NATO and EU, **Bulgaria** seems less vulnerable to Russian propaganda in contrast to the post-Soviet states in the study, although the country displays the highest degree of Russian economic influence in the new EU member states.⁴⁸ Unlike these nations, which gained independence after 1991, Bulgaria retained its (at least formally independent) state structures and separate centralized media broadcasting during the Cold War. After 1989, the country did not have to grapple with the legacy of the Soviet media system (that was present across the constituent republics of the USSR). Moreover, the post-communist decline⁴⁹ of the Russian language in Bulgaria has meant that by the 2010s only 16.9% of

⁴⁷ A more detailed treatment of these findings, including examples as well as further illustrations of the relationship between a given degree of enmeshment with Russian interests and a corresponding pattern of propaganda elaboration and dissemination are provided in the relevant country-specific analyses.

⁴⁸ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

⁴⁹ Eurostat (2017), *Foreign Language Learning Statistics*.

secondary school pupils study that language.⁵⁰ Therefore, the weaker presence of a deliberate, inherited and overarching Russian impact on the Bulgarian media leaves **greater room for diverse rather than unified outcomes of pro-Russian propaganda dissemination.**

Ukraine and Georgia are the post-Soviet states that have exhibited most resilience to Russian influence, which has allowed for **a differentiated rather than all-out propagation of Kremlin messages.** As the country-specific analysis makes clear, the Ukrainian national context, most recently characterized by the goal to resist Russian political and military aggression in the eastern part of the country, frames both the distinctive features of the media landscape and the contours of generally acceptable public discourses. Since Moscow's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine, Kyiv government's position has been severely critical of Russian actions, with scrutiny of Russia-originating broadcasting being tightened, and the prohibition of broadcasting of Russian TV channels. Also, 75% of the content of national television channels is required to be in the Ukrainian language. The online media space is bilingual so that news websites usually have both a Ukrainian and Russian language version.⁵¹ The last remnants of the post-Soviet media heritage are being further purged so that the regionally-based newspapers descended from Soviet times have to become privatized, instead of being financially enmeshed with local authority bodies.⁵²

These distinctive characteristics of the Ukrainian political and media landscape **circumscribe the extent and intensity of propagation of Kremlin narratives,** which limitations are observed especially by pro-Russian media outlets claiming nation-wide readership. Such outlets pay tribute to the general political direction of criticizing Russian actions (for instance through a portrayal of Moscow as a malicious power and refraining from recognizing such taboo issues as the occupied status of Crimea, Russian military aggression in eastern Ukraine and the puppet governments of Luhansk and Donetsk), while at the same time including positive reviews of Moscow and unfavorable depictions of Ukrainian politics.

Georgia is another example of a post-Soviet country that has vigorously asserted its European identity and Euro-Atlantic vector of social, political, economic and geopolitical development. This is coupled with a media landscape, where only 18%⁵³ of Georgians watch news on non-Georgian TV channels, half of which are Russian. And it is primarily ethnic minorities (Armenian, Azerbaijani), who trust Russian broadcasters and whose access to Russian media as a source of information is higher than that of Georgians (29% and 16 %, respectively)⁵⁴. Moreover, only small former Soviet media outlets have continued their operation

⁵⁰ Eurostat (2017), *60 % of Lower Secondary Level Pupils Studied More than One Foreign Language in 2015.*

⁵¹ Texty (2017), *Українці підтримують зміцнення позицій української мови, але в багатьох сферах і далі домінує російська (Інфографіка)* (Ukrainians support strengthening of Ukrainian language, but in the most of areas, Russian still dominates (infographics)), available at: http://texty.org.ua/pg/article/editorial/read/80744/Ukrajinci_pidtrymujut_zmicnenna_pozycij_ukrajinskoji_movy_ale. [Accessed 29.08.2018]

⁵² Cheremnykh, V. (2018), *Роздержавлення ЗМІ: до кінця реформи 9 місяців і 554 nereformovanih vidannia* (Privatization of media: 9 months left for the reform, 554 outlets remain underreformed), Detector Media, available at: <https://detector.media/rinok/article/135988/2018-03-26-rozderzhavlennya-zmi-do-kintsya-reformi-9-misyatsiv-i-554-nereformovanikh-vidannya/>. [Accessed 29.08.2018]

⁵³ NDI Georgia (2018), *Results of March 2018 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.*

⁵⁴ NDI Georgia (2018), *Results of March 2018 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.*

in the country (such as former *Komunist* renamed into *Saqartvelos Respublika*). Therefore, despite the increasing strength of pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia, especially as related by 'ethno-nationalist'-oriented sources (claiming that Georgia's identity is being lost not least due to the imitation of the Western model), **the public discourse cannot be completely overrun by Kremlin messaging**. This applies particularly to the theme of energy, where Georgia's post-2006 efforts to wean itself off from dependence on Russian gas have shaped public discourse in such a way that even pro-Russian media have portrayed in a critical manner the renewed negotiations between Tbilisi and Gazprom on Russian gas transit and supplies. Yet, such a negative portrayal did not prevent media outlets entangled with Russian interests to simultaneously condemn the opposition political forces for obstructing cooperation with Gazprom and support the Tbilisi government's position that deeper ties with Russia's company would not endanger Georgia's energy security.

In contrast to Ukraine and Georgia, however, **Moldova** and **Armenia** have demonstrated much less resistance to Moscow's political and media influence, which reduces the diversity of propaganda presentation and dissemination in the direction of **a more unified and overlapping propagation of Russian narratives** across news sources displaying different types of enmeshment with pro-Russian interests. The media landscape in Moldova has retained extensive ties to Russia not least on the basis of a significant continuation of Soviet-era journalistic channels and dependencies. As is clarified in the country-specific assessment, 40% of the Moldovan population is informed by Russia-originating news sources, some of the largest of which represent former Soviet outlets such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Argumenty i Fakty* and *Perviy Kanal*. Accordingly, such outlets are read in the original Russian language, with the majority of the authors being anonymized or coming from Russia rather than from Moldova. Moreover, Moscow intensified its information warfare on Chisinau following the onset of the Transnistrian conflict in 1992 and the Ukrainian crisis in late 2013. As a result of the significant depth and extent of Russian influence on the general Moldovan political and media landscape (as opposed to a targeted and circumscribed effect on particular outlets through ownership ties), the differentiation between a given type of political-economic enmeshment and a corresponding pattern of pro-Russian narrative elaboration and dissemination is less clearly observable in the Moldovan case as there is much **more overlap and similarity of content and journalistic techniques in the three selected types of media**.

In **Armenia** politics and media remain heavily influenced by Russia. The Soviet-era media ties have been maintained so that a vast array of Russian outlets operate in Armenia, including *Perviy Kanal*, *RTR Planeta* and *Kultura*. Moreover, the continuing existence of a wider range of Russia-originating news sources is conditioned by the popularity of the Russian language since it is Armenia's second unofficial language, in which the population is well-versed. Additionally, the overwhelming anonymization of articles typical of Armenian media further facilitates the proliferation of propaganda, preventing the verification and the opportunity to check the affiliations of the authors. The Russian domination of Armenia's media landscape means that **ties to Russian interest and groups are ubiquitous** – rather than concentrated within a pro-Russian media segment, which dilutes the distinctiveness of the link between a degree of political-economic enmeshment and a corresponding pattern of propaganda narration and communication.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The most worrying commonalities between Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia are the ties of dependency to Russia and the corresponding enunciation of pro-Kremlin propagandist discourses, the shared trends of oligarchization of the media sectors, the resource-deficient media advertising environments, the alarming backsliding of journalistic standards, and the decline of print media and increase in digitalization (characterized by faster, low-cost content distribution, easier access to and intake of information as against quality, time-intensive reporting). A number of recommendations can be put forward to counter the negative effects of these commonalities:

On European and regional level:

- **Assert strong EU leadership and launch an EU joint response:**
 - **Build resilience against media capture.** In the last decade, the European Union and its Member States have reacted mostly ad-hoc towards the evidently targeted and coordinated Kremlin hybrid attacks. The EU response is still fragmented across different policy domains and institutions. It should further strengthen and integrate initiatives like the East StratCom Task Force with the European External Action Service, research funding on disinformation, propaganda and related cyber-security threats under the EU framework programs for research and innovation (FP7, H2020), policy research and advice by the European Institute for Security Studies, etc. Moreover, the coordination of EU- with relevant NATO and US efforts is also fragmented. Therefore, the EU needs to design and declare a strong and comprehensive policy response to the Russian hybrid threat, including aiming at building and enforcing the resilience of EU member states against media capture and foreign malign economic and political influence in the media sector, particularly focusing on online media⁵⁵.
 - **Build expertise** for both identifying and tackling hybrid threats, incl. through setting the respective priorities in EU programs for research and innovation, and in cooperation with the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, the European Network and Information Security Agency, European Defence Agency, the European Institute for Security Studies and other relevant institutions.
 - **Establish a high-level task force** within the European Anti-Fraud Office, entitled to trace and investigate covert Russian-linked financial flows related

⁵⁵ For a more detailed discussion on possible tools and measures, see US Congress (2018), Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security, A Minority Staff Report prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations, January 10, 2018, US Government Publishing Office, Washington: 2018.

to the media sectors of the EU member and candidate states, and the Eastern Neighborhood countries.

- o **Encourage EU institutions and member states to enhance anti-corruption and development assistance mechanisms** to help the most vulnerable countries build greater resilience to Russian influence.⁵⁶
- o **Strengthen the EU legislation on anti-money laundering, financial transparency and shell companies** with a focus on transparency and accountability of media companies in the member states and in countries, in which the EU promotes media freedom and transparency.
- In the Black Sea region, the EU should **use its Eastern Partnership initiative to extend its efforts on tackling media capture** through improving media ownership transparency and countering Russian disinformation and propaganda. Building an integrated approach with NATO for better coverage of the region through coordinated efforts and initiatives would be decisive for the sustainability of the actions. The EU in particular should also aim to better integrate its Eastern Partnership initiatives with these in the Western Balkans and in the new member states of the EU in relation to Russia and its disinformation and propaganda activities.
- **Facilitate the development of high professional standards in the media sectors** across the EU and the Black Sea region through encouraging self-regulation and enforcement of existing regulatory frameworks, related to media freedom and transparency. Overall, the joint effects of civil society pressure, legislative initiatives and regional cooperation should make more transparent patterns of ownership and political-economic dependencies, contribute to **the observance of high standards of journalism**, whereby objective, quality content is presented in a manner that is appealing to audiences through accessible, story-based, interactively-framed reporting (thus making high quality journalism responsive to the demands of digitalization) and encourage entrepreneurial approaches to raising revenue on the basis of innovative business models for advertising.
- **Accelerate and facilitate the cross-border learning, engagement, pooling of expertise and sharing of experience** through the creation of common platforms to identify and tackle pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation, and through the development of networks of support (for instance, through early warning and rapid assistance in cases of attacks on journalists).

On the national level:

- The governments of the Black sea countries should be able to **recognize the depth and extent of their countries' vulnerability to Russian propaganda** both societally (through polling, for instance) and in terms of security (through gathering intelligence information), which can affect the ability to unequivocally pursue national policy goals, such as Euro-Atlantic integration for example. Such recognition can highlight the level of urgency of adopting measures against Kremlin narratives as part of the political agenda.

⁵⁶ This recommendations targets more widely the overall Russian economic influence in Europe and was proposed initially in: Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

- **Strengthen the administrative and professional capacity of national media regulatory bodies** and the introduction and stricter enforcement of legislation on the **transparency of media ownership** as well as on accountability of **state allocation of advertising and financing to media** are particularly important in this regard among the Black Sea countries.

On the civil society and expert community level,

Raising public awareness by active citizens and professionals (journalists, academics and IT experts) aiming to identify and tackle pro-Russian propaganda and the vested interests related to the media sectors, as well as to raise the public's media and digital literacy is of crucial importance for building greater resilience towards Russian malign influence in the Black Sea region.

- Facilitate existing and create new **independent public monitoring tools** (e.g. following the model of the EU Disinformation Review online platform), which consistently highlight, reveal, and challenge Russian propaganda and disinformation, following the rules of impartial news reporting and research. Moreover, the ownership, political and economic links of media outlets should be traceable and exposed for public scrutiny through these tools.
- Elaborate **new techniques for identifying fake news, propaganda and disinformation** such as browser plugins, site rankings, etc.
- Educate and train the general public how to recognize biased coverage and obtain reliable information (such as by rigorously checking news sources, references and author details).

Furthermore, the distinctive characteristics of the five national contexts (as related to varying levels of susceptibility to Kremlin influence) shape nuanced differentiations in countering the Russian narratives.

- As a member of the EU, **Bulgaria** should make fuller use of, be more tightly bound to and advocate the development of European provisions in the media sphere. In addition to the upcoming Code of practice on online disinformation,⁵⁷ the European Commission can introduce more stringent rules and monitoring in relation to the ways in which national governments allocate ESIF funding to the media.

Moreover, the European Parliament's Resolution on media pluralism and media freedom⁵⁸ should be strictly observed and implemented in Bulgaria and other EU Member States (beyond a non-binding, consultative form) as it contains key provisions linked to the establishment of new socially sustainable economic models for media financing, counteracting fake news, application of tight media ownership regulations.

Conversely, the violation of requirements for independent and objective journalism should lead to more frequent and effective Bulgarian liability under the European Court of Human Rights' rules regarding freedom of expression

⁵⁷ European Commission (2018), *A Draft Code of Practice on Online Disinformation*.

⁵⁸ European Parliament (2018), *European Parliament Resolution of 3 May 2018 on Media Pluralism and Media Freedom in the European Union*.

(not least through information campaigns for citizens and media supervisory bodies on how and under what circumstances to file lawsuits in the Court).

- As regards **Ukraine**, which finds itself in a state of active informational warfare with Moscow following the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine, control should be strengthened over the implementation of the existing legal requirements regarding information activity, especially in terms of assumption of responsibility for hate speech, claims of violence, glorification of the Soviet past, justification of Russian military aggression.

The fiscal agencies and security services should strictly investigate and sanction illegal payments in media or unclear sources of funding. At the same time, given the importance of media freedom and independence to the development of the fledgling Ukrainian democracy, the country should adopt strong provisions for guaranteeing the right to information, including through engaging more directly its EU counterparts in capacity building and oversight.

- In **Georgia**, the requirement for financial transparency (as part of the *Law on Broadcasting* of 2013) is only applicable to broadcast media. However, the provisions under the law on filing quarterly reports about sources of financing, including a breakdown of revenues from advertising, sponsorship, telemarketing and contributions from owners or any other person to the Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC) should also be extended to online media.

Through its association with the EU Georgia should seek to further expand the independence and professionalism of its media, focusing in particular on improving transparency of ownership and exposing media – business – politics links.

- As far as **Moldova** is concerned, the parliament has voted in a new law, which stipulates that the informative, analytical, military and political programs that are permitted to be broadcast in Moldova should only originate in the EU, Canada and the US, as well as in the countries that have ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. Russia has not ratified this document, which means that starting from 12 February 2018, when the legislative act comes into force, programs produced in that country are no longer broadcast on Moldovan territory. Those who violate these provisions will be fined (at least 3 000 Euros).

Although being a first important step, this law is insufficient provided the lax enforcement environment in the country. The law also does not cover the online environment, in which media financed by Russia continue to operate and manipulate. Thus, the Moldovan government should increase the level of enforcement of the law and develop additional mechanisms for limiting the pro-Russian propaganda but also for guaranteeing more quality information reaches its citizens.

- In **Armenia**, Russian television channels have a terrestrial broadcast, which is regulated by an inter-state agreement that takes precedence over national legislation. As a counterweight to the heavy Russian media influence in the South Caucasian country, cooperation should be established with Western media in order to translate in Armenian quality articles from reputable Western sources and disseminate them to the public. The government should

use available EU funding to further strengthen local independent investigative journalism, including among pro-Russian media.

Provided the very high dependence of Armenia on Russia for energy and general security provision, as well as for economic development, it is unlikely that media capture and self censorship in the country would be overcome without further strong efforts towards diversification of its economic and energy development channels.

- Overall, with regard to the **Eastern Partnership** (EP) countries of the Black Sea region, the EU should take more concrete and financially underwritten initiatives to raise journalistic standards. In addition to EP summit declarations⁵⁹ recognizing the importance of free journalism and the organization of EP media conferences⁶⁰ aimed at discussing the challenges faced by the media, the EU can better leverage its influence if it bases its model of engagement on practices employed in relation to the Western Balkans. Such practices – backed up by funds allocation, include regional training and support programs to improve the quality of journalism, technical assistance to public service media, implementation of schemes supporting civil society organizations focused on advocacy for independent media.⁶¹

Moreover, in order to further counter the vicious cycle of financial dependency and biased, substandard journalism propagating Russian narratives, Western governmental, non-governmental and international institutions should make available more grants, training opportunities for journalists (in world acclaimed media such as the BBC and CNN) as well as competitions for quality reporting in the post-Soviet states of the Black Sea region. Encouraging participation in such international fora as the European Press Prize, the Festival of Media Global, World Media Awards, the Journalism Fund, can contribute to the recognition of objective and independent journalistic work and gaining insight into best media practices not least through networking with established media professionals from around the world.

⁵⁹ General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union (2017), *Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit*.

⁶⁰ European Union External Action (2017), *Tackling Challenges for Independent Media in Eastern Partnership Countries*.

⁶¹ European Commission (2017), *The European Union Steps up Support to Independent Media in the Western Balkans*.

COUNTRY REPORTS

BULGARIA

Introduction

Bulgaria's general media landscape has undergone significant transformations (especially accelerating in the 2010s) with regard to type of media dominating news transmission and intake, ownership trends and corresponding pro-Russian propaganda narratives as well as freedom of expression and quality of journalism.

The **decline of print media** has represented an ongoing tendency shaped by decreasing public trust, low personal disposable incomes, loss of share in the advertising market and shrinking circulation. The downward spiral in newspaper readership has become dramatically visible after 2014, with only 11% of the Bulgarian population reading print media. In the 2001-2013 period that figure is on average above 50%.⁶² The growing importance of digitalization has shifted the balance in favor of online media platforms.^{63,64} The focus on quantity, speed of dissemination and sensationalism instead of the quality of analytical-investigative journalism have become landmark traits of the Bulgarian online media platforms, for which the number of reader clicks has turned into the ultimate measure of success.⁶⁵ In 2018, online media represent the primary source of news for 88% of the Bulgarian population, followed by TV – 84% and print media – 23%.⁶⁶

The Bulgarian media landscape has also been dramatically affected by **changing ownership** trends. The combined consequences of digitalization (whereby traditional print and TV advertising has been increasingly spurned in favor of global digital advertising dominated by Facebook and Google) and the 2008 financial and economic crisis (which made peripheral countries with small markets like Bulgaria much less attractive for the realization of shrinking investment funds) led to the **outflow of foreign (media) investors**. This outflow freed space that

⁶² For a more detailed treatment of these issues, see Center for the Study of Democracy (2016), *Media (In)Dependence in Bulgaria: Risks and Trends*, 2–3.

⁶³ Velislava Antonova and Andrian Georgiev (2013), *Проучване на дигиталните медии: България* (A Study of Digital Media: Bulgaria), Open Society Foundations, 45.

⁶⁴ Andrey Velchev, *Възможности на онлайн медиите за влияние* (Opportunities for Influence of the Online Media), Luboslovie, n.d.

⁶⁵ Velislava Antonova and Andrian Georgiev (2013), *Проучване на дигиталните медии: България* (A Study of Digital Media: Bulgaria), Open Society Foundations, 46.

⁶⁶ Nic Newman et al. (2018), *Bulgaria*, Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018, 68.

has since been occupied by local oligarchic groups, seizing control of most of Bulgaria's media companies.⁶⁷

The concentration of media ownership, the penetration of media monopolies, oligarchic interests and politics combined with state resources allocated to the media sector, and the capturing of independent regulators have exercised a **pernicious influence on the content and quality of the Bulgarian media output**.⁶⁸ Bulgaria's position on international rankings on freedom of the press and quality of journalism has continuously deteriorated in the past decade. For instance, Freedom House classifies Bulgaria's press freedom status in 2017 as partly free on the basis of a score of 42 out of 100 points⁶⁹ a considerable slump from a high of 29/100 in 2002, corresponding to a fully free press status.⁷⁰

The deterioration of the overall media environment in the country, has aided the proliferation of pro-Kremlin propaganda,⁷¹ in particular in online media outlets, which utilize such propaganda as a function of and in the service of political-oligarchic interests and dependencies. Indeed, the current report finds out that the patterns of ownership, economic dependency and (in)formal political links to pro-Russian groups and interests in Bulgaria are reflected into corresponding trends of employing Russia-originating propaganda narratives and conveying these narratives through specific journalistic-stylistic means in pro-Russian media outlets in Bulgaria.

Selection of Media Outlets

The analysis of the Bulgarian media environment follows the methodological approach of the report. It covers the years 2015, 2016, 2017, the three specific themes (war in Syria, election meddling, energy), the techniques for searching and designating news material, and the procedure for selecting the three online pro-Russian news sources.

⁶⁷ Additional information on these trends can be found here: Center for the Study of Democracy (2016), *Media (In)Dependence in Bulgaria: Risks and Trends*, 1.

Union of Publishers in Bulgaria (2018), *The Media Freedom White Paper*, 6.

Stefan Antonov (2013), *The Age of the Oligarchs: How a Group of Political and Economic Magnates Have Taken Control of Bulgaria*, Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper, 52–64.

⁶⁸ Orlin Spassov, Nelly Ognyanova, and Nikoleta Daskalova (2016), *Media Pluralism Monitor 2016. Monitoring Risks for Media Pluralism in the EU and Beyond. Country Report: Bulgaria*, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 5.

Declaration of participants in the conference Media Freedom and Pluralism (2018), *Media Freedom in Europe: Code Red*, 4–5.

⁶⁹ Freedom House (2017), *Freedom of the Press 2017: Bulgaria*.

⁷⁰ Freedom House (2002), *Freedom of the Press 2002: Bulgaria*.
Media Sustainability Index 2017, *Bulgaria*.

⁷¹ Some analysts trace the amplified introduction of the pro-Russian propaganda discourse in Bulgarian media to 2013, when the anti-government protests taking place at the time could be discredited by interested parties on the basis of Kremlin-inspired narratives of politics and international relations: Dimitar Vatsov and Milena Yakimova (2017), *Популизъм, локални интереси и руска пропаганда* (Populism, Local Interests and Russian Propaganda), Kultura; Tom Junes (2016), *Bulgaria: How Not to Mistake Russian Propaganda for Russian Policy*, Open Democracy.

The choice of the three media outlets is based on expert opinion guided by two sets of criteria: first, the media outlets should display generally pro-Kremlin positions; and second, the media outlets should have three different levels of political-economic enmeshment with (pro-) Russian interests and groups. Based on these criteria, the three outlets chosen for in-depth analysis of pro-Russian content are the online versions of *Trud*, *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond*.

Trud refers to the case of outlets with a broad audience, formally independent from but informally affiliated to Russian groups and interests. The outlet ranks third among the biggest Bulgarian dailies. *Trud* is published by Trud Media EOOD, fully owned by Blaskov Media Plc., with Petyo Blaskov⁷² being the beneficial owner and editor-in-chief. Blaskov has publicly alleged close relations to the owner of the largest media group in Bulgaria, politician and local business tycoon Delyan Peevski, who is said to control about 80% of the print media market and 90% of all companies maintaining print media distribution in Bulgaria.⁷³ Although official public registers and journalistic investigations do not provide information that links Blaskov to Russian economic or political interests, his business associate Peevski is known to have had large business interest in Russian energy projects, such as South Stream.

Zemia exemplifies the second case of political-economic enmeshment, featuring smaller national outlets with traceable links to Russian groups and interests. It appears in both print and online format and is the official media outlet of the *Central Cooperative Union*, the largest national association of local cooperatives. *Zemia* as well as the bi-lingual Russian-Bulgarian weekly *Rusiya dnes* (*Russia Today*) are owned respectively by Koopmedia Ltd. and BRIP Bulgarian-Russian Information Pool Ltd. The ultimate beneficial owner and general manager of both companies is Svetlana Sharenkova. She has been a registered member of the Bulgarian Socialist Party's national governing body since 2014 and features among the founders and managers of organizations supporting closer ties to Russia (such as the Bulgaria-Russia Association, the Bulgarian-Russian Chamber of Commerce, the National Movement of Russophiles). In 2013, Sharenkova was awarded a medal of friendship (i.e., *Druzhba* medal) by Russian President Vladimir Putin for her contribution to the development of Russian-Bulgarian relations.⁷⁴

Russia Beyond illustrates the case of the third degree of political-economic enmeshment, characterized by the national dissemination of Russia-originating media outlets. It was established in 2007 by *TV-Novosti*, an NGO created in 2005 by Russian state-owned news agency *RIA Novosti*. The same NGO owns state-funded TV channel *Russia Today*. *Russia Beyond* is an online news, tabloid-style platform, aiming to spread information about Russian culture, language, politics and business in Bulgaria.

⁷² Capital Daily, *Кой Е Петьо Блъсков* (Who Is Petyo Blaskov), April 25, 2014.

⁷³ Vesislava Antonova, *Блъсков Купува 'Труд'* (Blaskov Buys 'Trud'), Capital Daily, April 21, 2014.

⁷⁴ Darik News, *Светлана Шаренкова беше удостоена с орден 'Дружба'* (Svetlana Sharenkova Is Awarded with 'Druzhba' Medal), March 21, 2013.

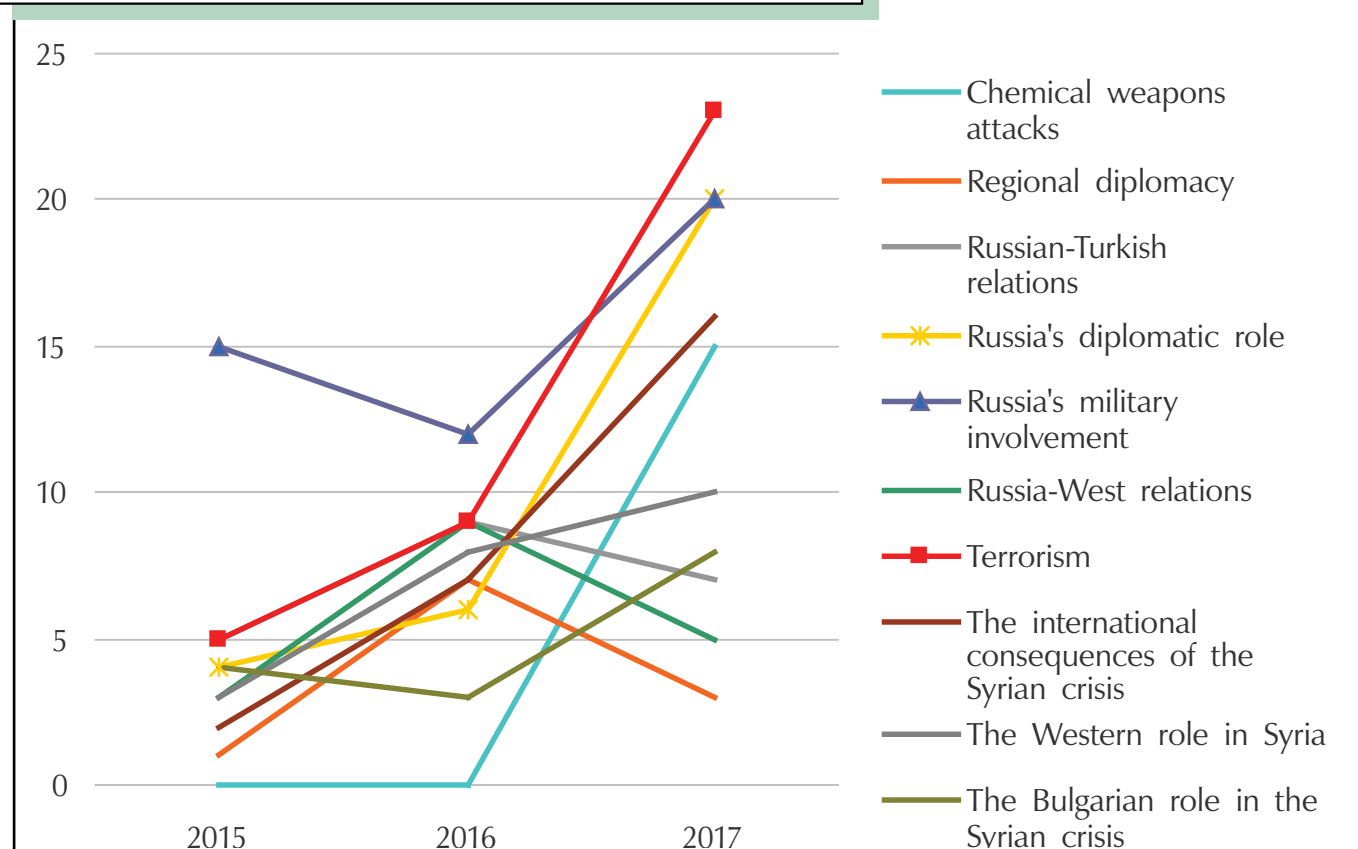
Comparative Analysis of *Trud*, *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond*

This section of the report provides three separate, theme-focused, comparative analyses of *Trud*, *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond*, each based on the same structure that first presents the commonalities of topic coverage, narrative enunciation and styles of message transmission and then elaborates on media-specific distinctions of these dimensions.

Theme 1. War in Syria

The three media outlets espouse a number of generally shared pro-Russian propaganda narratives grouped around 10 common topics with regard to the overarching theme of the war in Syria. The most frequently covered topics concern terrorism, Russia's military involvement and Russia's diplomatic role in the Syrian conflict.

FIGURE 12. MAIN TOPICS IN THE COVERAGE OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Terrorism represents a prime common topic, where shared narratives portray Russia as leading the way in combating Islamic State, while it is conversely implied that the West supports terrorism through weapons supplies.

The second common topic with regard to the Syrian conflict is linked to **Moscow's military involvement**, which is justified by all media outlets as being legitimate and legal given that it was initiated upon Bashar al-Assad's request. The main goal of the Russian military involvement as well as reason for withdrawal is portrayed as the defeat of terrorism, all the while the course of the operation has provided a testing ground for new and superior Russian military equipment and for gaining invaluable military experience.

The third topic concerns **Russia's diplomatic role** in the Syrian conflict, whereby all outlets emphasize that Moscow contributes to the peaceful political resolution of the Syrian crisis. In doing so, the Kremlin pursues the key goals of supporting national sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as opposing foreign intervention in domestic affairs – both as general priorities in international relations and specifically in relation to the Syrian state. Ultimately, these diplomatic objectives and activities in Syria have restored and confirmed Russia's role as an insurmountable great global power.

Fourth, the topic of **Russian-Turkish relations** receives a two-pronged treatment so that Turkey is on the one hand argued to be a treacherous international actor, prone to disloyalty and unpredictable actions, but on the other – also a partner of Moscow. Coordinated bilateral efforts are said to contribute to fighting terrorism and finding a political resolution of the Syrian crisis.

Fifth, the subject of **regional diplomacy in the Middle East** is commonly discussed as a matter of a successful diplomatic initiative conducted by Russia, Iran and Turkey for solving the Syrian crisis. According to the predominant narratives in the three pro-Russian media Moscow has enlisted Teheran and Ankara as guarantors of the peace process, while also managing to establish cooperation with Israel.

The sixth common topic is related to **Russia-West relations** in the context of Syria. All three media outlets promote the narrative that Moscow will not accept anything other than an equal partnership with Washington and if the US (and Europe) is serious about fighting terrorism in Syria, then it has to establish cooperation with Russia.

A seventh topic is specifically devoted to the **Western diplomatic role** in Syria. The shared narration holds that the international relations of the Syrian conflict have showed that the US is no longer a global hegemon. Moreover, Europe is in decline, standing by helplessly as the great powers are trying to solve the Syrian conflict. Overall, the Western democracy-promotion effort in the Middle East has been portrayed as a failure.

Eighth, the subject of the **chemical weapons attacks** in Syria evokes a defense by all three media of Assad's innocence and the rebels' guilt as the real perpetrators. The American response to the chemical attacks, in the form of air strikes, is argued to have caused humanitarian and material damage that ultimately served to prop up the terrorists.

The ninth theme of the international consequences of the Syrian crisis is commonly interpreted along the dimensions of **Europe's inundation with migrants** that are infiltrated by terrorists, of a global conflict likely to ensue from an escalation of the stand-off over Syria and of the ushering in of a new world

order without a hegemon as a result of the development of great-power relations over the course of the crisis.

Finally, the shared focus on the Bulgarian role in Syria contains a narrative about **Bulgarian culpability** as a supplier of weapons to the terrorists on the demand and through the US and its allies.

The above-presented shared characteristics of topic coverage and corresponding propagandist interpretation among the three media outlets are further informed by **commonalities in the general journalistic-stylistic means of message transmission**. More specifically, as regards the prevailing literary figures, *Trud*, *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond* all tend to promote attitudinal connotations on the basis of straightforwardly positive or negative evaluative epithets and superlative descriptions,⁷⁵ where a comparative assessment that can serve as evidence of a rank ordering is not provided. If comparisons are made, they are usually couched in terms of binary, black-and-white distinctions,⁷⁶ similarly unsupported by reliable factual information. Indeed, categorical statements about superiority and the rightfulness of one's actions (i.e., Russia's) follow an emotionally- and metaphorically-colored⁷⁷ language aiming to evoke outrage and moral opprobrium as opposed to evidence-based evaluation. Ultimately, exaggeration⁷⁸ and hyperbolization serve to inflate Russia's role and capacities and yield themselves to the extrapolation of generalizations from local situations or a single opinion. Likewise, dubious and sweeping conclusions and analytical links tend to be drawn from historical and geopolitical parallels and analogies.⁷⁹

However, the outlets also exhibit **differences** in terms of the content and style of Syria-related dissemination of information.

⁷⁵ As in the superlative description of Putin being a 'world energy king', who provides 'leadership', 'orders the music' and ultimately represents the 'new Middle Eastern hegemon': Valentin Hadjiiski, 'Блумбърз': Путин е новият цар на ОПЕК. Неочакваното лидерство на Русия в Световната енергийна геополитика е факт, с който САЩ трябва да се съобразяват (Bloomberg: Putin Is OPEC's New King. Unexpectedly, Russia's Leadership in World Energy Geopolitics Is a Fact, with which the US has to Comply), *Trud*, December 6, 2017.

⁷⁶ For example, Russia is powerful, sets the agenda, possesses timeless historical predominance in the Middle East, while the EU is weak, dependent, in historical decline: Dimitar Gardev, *Новата подялба на Близкия Изток, този път без ЕС. Българския премиер директно разкритикува липсата на европейска дипломация при войните в Арабския свят* (The New Division of the Middle East, This Time without the EU. The Bulgarian Prime Minister Directly Criticised the Lack of European Diplomacy towards the Wars in the Arab World), *Trud*, November 30, 2017.

⁷⁷ For instance, the resurgence of Russian power after exceptional weakness is conveyed through the metaphor of a bear – humiliated, in pain, temporarily withdrawn into its burrow, but subsequently undergoing healing and rebirth: Emil Spahiisky, *Сирийското блато излекува руската мечка. Изненадващо за мнозина наблюдатели, Кремъл вместо да потъне, обра всички дивидентни* (The Syrian Swamp Healed the Russian Bear. To Many Observers' Surprise, instead of Floundering, the Kremlin Reaped All the Benefits), *Trud*, December 13, 2017.

⁷⁸ An example is *Russia Beyond's* portrayal of Western reactions to Russia's aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov in terms of uncontrollable panic and fear. It is claimed that the aircraft carrier is the most discussed topic in British media without the provision of evidence of such overwhelming concern: *Russia Beyond*, *ТВ 'Звезда': Защо НАТО изпадна в истерия при вида на 'Адмирал Кузнецов'* (TV Zvezda: Why NATO Becomes Hysterical at the Sight of Admiral Kuznetsov), October 24, 2016.

⁷⁹ Such as the historical analogy with the former Yugoslavia – the US is argued to have no right to criticise Russia's actions in Syria because Washington bombed Yugoslavia: *Zemia*, *Двоен стандарт* (Double Standard), November 1, 2016.

Trud's content on Syria is distinguished by lines of argumentation that stem from and are responsive to the Bulgarian national context without displaying overt partisanship, by the presentation of more conceptual and historical – yet still biased, analyses of international political developments as well as by a greater commitment to a neutral-formal format of news transmission that in the very least stops short of outright deception and fabrication.

More specifically, **a distinctive, nationally-specific narrative in terms of Russian-Turkish relations** concerns the consistently espoused view (regardless of fluctuations in the relationship between Moscow and Ankara), according to which developments in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy are dangerous to Bulgaria. This is most probably intended to hark back to the Bulgarian patriotic memory of the 'Ottoman yoke' and the Turkish military threat during the Cold War. The narrative holds that Turkey is a country with neo-Ottoman ambitions, distancing itself from European democratic principles. Hence, Ankara has become only a formal member of NATO and the Turkish-Bulgarian border will represent a frontline in the new Cold War. Turkey is also suspected of fomenting religious and ethnic tensions as some internal pro-Turkish political forces in Bulgaria are said to be President Recep Erdogan's fifth column.

Moreover, the commonly shared pro-Russian propaganda narrative (as part of the topic of the international consequences of the Syrian crisis) that there could be an escalation into a global conflict is expanded by *Trud* on the basis of considering the likely implications of such an escalation for Bulgaria and Eastern Europe. It is maintained that the internationalization of the Syrian civil war might begin in the eastern frontiers of Europe – the Balkans and the Baltic Sea area, whereby the fight for Aleppo will determine the fate of those regions, given the latter's geostrategic connectedness to Syria. The implicit message still supports Russian propaganda – that only Moscow can liberate Aleppo from the terrorists and that Russia will prevail over NATO in a standoff over the Balkans – but nevertheless involves a locally sensitive perspective on the matter.

Similarly, apart from the moral opprobrium evoked against Bulgarian weapons exports to Syria, which narrative is an important function of Russia's general concern about Western weapons supplies on the global market, *Trud* provides a wider consideration of Bulgaria's own strategic place in relation to the Syrian crisis. The argument sounds a warning that Bulgaria is too mired in domestic problems to be able to grasp the enormity of and geopolitical risks entailed in the crisis. It is acknowledged that Bulgaria can find a solution to these risks within the Euro-Atlantic framework of security but more specifically through regional cooperation in order to be able to better assert national interests. Thus, there is at once an enunciation of a local apprehension that still subliminally speaks to anti-Western narratives in that fully-fledged cooperation within the EU and NATO is attempted to be diluted through a call for regional partnership.

The trend towards the provision of a conceptual-historical overlay can be illustrated with the elaboration of the Russian domestic turmoil and external humiliation in the post-Cold War order as a recent (one-sidedly interpreted) historical background of the narrative of Moscow's great-power resurgence in the Syrian conflict (as part of the topic on Russia's diplomatic role in Syria). Also, terrorism tends to be placed within a wider (still pro-Russian) frame of the West's formerly imperial policies towards the Middle East as well as contemporary

democracy-promotion efforts and ‘neoliberal strategies’ of multiculturalism, tolerance and political correctness.

In terms of mode of message transmission regarding Syria, *Trud* provides a **clearer differentiation between news articles and commentaries/interviews**, whereby the relation of news is conducted in an apparently neutral manner. The literary figures that are commonly shared among the three media outlets and are aimed at achieving strong reader suasion (as argued earlier in this section) are confined in *Trud*'s case above all to op-eds and analytical reports. In contrast, news pieces convey a particular connotation much more subliminally – rather than explicitly, for instance, on the basis of sowing doubt⁸⁰ by leaving some information unaccounted for or employing past indefinite tense⁸¹ in Bulgarian. Such stylistic uses can make a statement/action appear conditional and uncertain, thus creating mistrust in an actor's judgement and activities. Also, covert attitude framing can take place through ordering an article's layout in such a way that the headline and introductory sentences shape the primary, pro-Russian impression of the reader and only subsequently is the Western/alternative viewpoint given some consideration. Similarly, statistics, figures, scenarios can be manipulatively presented⁸² so that even if the whole information is conveyed, there is biased sequencing and an accentuation on a preferred part of that information.

The distinctiveness of ***Zemia's coverage of Syria*** lies in the incorporation of lines of argumentation that are derived from the Bulgarian national context and are further characterized by **an overt, pro-BSP⁸³ partisan bent**, in the proliferation of sweeping historical generalizations and analogies and in the transmission of news that is neutral as regards format rather than the substance of forms of expression.

In particular, the topic of the Bulgarian role in the Syrian crisis is related through **a specific narrative that strongly condemns Bulgaria's support for the US strikes** as a breach of international law and an example of Sofia's submissiveness to Washington. Government politicians are accused of making Bulgaria an ally of Islamic State and derailing Bulgarian-Russian relations. The BSP's opposition to such policies is defended on the basis of the party's adherence to Russian propagated positions extolling the virtues of UN legal rules and national

⁸⁰ For instance, information about the US's capture is being related but the end of the article sows subliminal doubt since the Americans were unaware of Al Baghdadi's location shortly before his capture. This leaves open questions about whose help the US availed itself of in order to carry out the operation: *Trud* online, *Лидерът на 'Ислямска държава' е в плен на американски военни в Сирия* (The Leader of Islamic State Has Been Captured by American Militia in Syria), December 17, 2017.

⁸¹ As in *Trud* online, *Джихадисти се добрили до български оръжия. Иначе доставките, предимно от САЩ и Саудитска Арабия, били за сирийски опозиционери* (Jihadists Got Hold of Bulgarian Weaponry as Well. Otherwise, the Supplies – Mainly from the US and Saudi Arabia, Were Meant For the Syrian Opposition).

⁸² For instance, the title states as a fact the results of the scenario that predicts the highest rise in Muslim population in Europe. It is only later in the article that all of the scenarios are discussed. Conversely, the lowest estimate of the Muslim population in Bulgaria is presented in the title.: *Trud*, *Мюсюлманското население на Европа ще се увеличи до 14%. При един от вариантите дялът на изповядващите исляма у нас намалява* (The Muslim Population in Europe Will Reach 14%. In One of the Scenarios the Share of Muslims in Bulgaria Is Set to Decrease)," November 30, 2017.

⁸³ BSP has been the main opposition party in the Bulgarian parliament for the period under review (2015 – 2017). BSP is the heir of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

sovereignty as against the global hegemon's (US) double standards and interference in the domestic affairs of Syria.

Dubious historical explanations and analogies abound in the justification of the rightfulness of Russia's actions as well as the West's wrongdoings and victimization of Moscow. For example, as regards the topic of the Western role in Syria, the American accusation that the Kremlin is committing war crimes is dismissed on the basis of the argument that it was the US that conducted the first military aggression in Europe after 1945 by bombing the civilian population of Yugoslavia. Then Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov's decision for a U-turn while on the plane bound for a meeting with the American Vice President represented a morally outraged reaction against the breach of international law that has symbolized Moscow's promotion of equal and mutually beneficial international relations ever since.

The proclamation of a new world order (as part of the international consequences of the Syrian crisis) is explained by the **US's general post-Cold War foreign policy failures** as manifested in the specific situation of the Syrian crisis. Instability, the proliferation of terrorism and migration are said to be the direct result of Washington's attempt to create a divisible system of international security, interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries, sideline international institutions such as the UN and humiliate Russia.

In terms of stylistic forms of message dissemination, *Zemia* maintains a **formal differentiation between news articles and commentaries/interviews** on the basis of the apparent neutrality of the former. However, such neutrality is belied by the use of literary figures that go beyond implicit attitude-formation (as in *Trud*) in the direction of the **distortion of news** through the misrepresentation of Western sources;⁸⁴ the presentation of unrelated and inconsistent information within an article in order to reinforce an idea by shifting the focus, exaggerating and/or downplaying a strand of narration;⁸⁵ drawing conclusions from unavailable classified documents; the suggestion of conspiratorial motives. Apart from the commonly shared modes of suasion among the three outlets, the intensity of influencing in *Zemia's* commentaries and interviews is heightened on the basis of **deploying personal insults** at Bulgarian and Western politicians⁸⁶ not favored by the newspaper as well as irony and satire⁸⁷ to discredit an actor (which techniques are not observed in *Trud*, in particular).

⁸⁴ Former UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond is cited as characterising President Putin as the almighty leader who can solve the Syrian crisis. But the context in which Hammond said this was to criticise rather than praise Putin: *Zemia*, *Саудистка Арабия е разположила бойни самолети в Турция* (Saudi Arabia Has Sent Fighter Jets to Turkey), February 15, 2016. Original article and Hammond's statement: Samuel Osborne, *Putin Could End Syrian Civil War 'by Making a Phone Call', Philip Hammond Says*, The Independent, February 14, 2016.

⁸⁵ An example of inconsistent information – an article presents French information that Palmyra has been taken over by the terrorists but then immediately Russian officials are quoted as claiming that Palmyra has been liberated. It is not clear what actually happened, the French source's news is downplayed: *Zemia*, *Бунтовниците в Алепо трябва да избират между капитулация или смърт* (The Rebels in Aleppo Have to Choose between Capitulation and Death), December 12, 2016.

⁸⁶ As in Yuri Mihalkov, *2015-a – от украинската изолация на Владимир Путин до сирийското изолване на Обама* (2015 – From the Ukrainian Isolation of Vladimir Putin to the Syrian Isolation of Obama), *Zemia*, December 1, 2015.

⁸⁷ An example of the use of satirical, rhetorical questions to undermine a statement that NATO is a defensive organisation and Russia is an aggressor: Hristina Hristova, *Американски тонус за България* (Bulgaria's American Impetus), *Zemia*, February 11, 2015.

The distinctiveness of *Russia Beyond's* coverage of Syria is more readily observable with regard to the **absence of perspectives arising from the Bulgarian national context**, the greater emphasis placed on an awe-inspiring presentation of Russian military prowess and the lack of an even surface-level commitment to objectivity and separation between types of articles so that all pieces convey simplistic and overtly biased messages.

More specifically, the primary concern of **targeting the Russian population** (without any urgent relevance to Bulgaria) is especially demonstrated in relation to the repetitive justification of Russia's military involvement in Syria and the possibility of American recognition of the need to cooperate with Moscow on equal terms.⁸⁸ Putin's decision for the involvement is explained by the goal to fight terrorism and prevent its infiltration into Russia. But the decision can also be inconsistently justified as being informed by a logic intent on preserving and maximizing the Kremlin's power and prestige in the international scene. The expenses over the course of the military operation are said to be outdone by the proceeds from the export of military hardware (given the latter's achievement of global fame generating demand). The withdrawal of Russian forces is argued to show that a limited but short escalation can change the situation on the ground, thus countering domestic (Russian) fears of lengthy entanglement and high human and financial costs on the model of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.⁸⁹

Additionally, *Russia Beyond* features **an overrepresentation of militaristic narratives** that convey the awe-inspiring character of the Russian military. Russia's soldiers are presented as making heroic sacrifices, while extensive praise of Russian weapons (cruise missiles, anti-aircraft missile system, reconnaissance aircraft, tanks, electronic warfare equipment) extols their global technological superiority.

As regards means of narrative communication, **the difference between news articles and commentaries is blurred in *Russia Beyond*** (unlike in *Trud* and *Zemlia*), which makes all types of pieces explicitly and similarly biased. On top of the literary figures of attitude formation common to all three outlets, *Russia Beyond* employs stylistic modes aimed at amplifying suasion through a strategy of dispelling myths on the basis of access to information claimed to be unavailable to anyone else,⁹⁰ discrediting information by branding it fake news⁹¹ or disproving it by one (Russian) opinion, providing simplistic explanations of complex issues,

⁸⁸ Andrew Radin and Clint Reach (2017), *Russian Views of the International Order*, RAND Corporation.

⁸⁹ Charles Sullivan (2018), *Sidestepping a Quagmire: Russia, Syria, and the Lessons of the Soviet-Afghan War*, *Asian Affairs* 49, no. 1: 48–55.

⁹⁰ For instance, an RT documentary is claimed to be presenting the real, truthful condition of the Russian army because of the journalists' access to the very heart of the organisation. Thus, they are well-positioned to dispel myths: Boris Egorov, *Какво е да си руски войник? Гледайте новото реалити шоу на Русия* (What Is It like to Be a Russian Soldier? Watch Russia's New Reality Show), *Russia Beyond*, August 26, 2017.

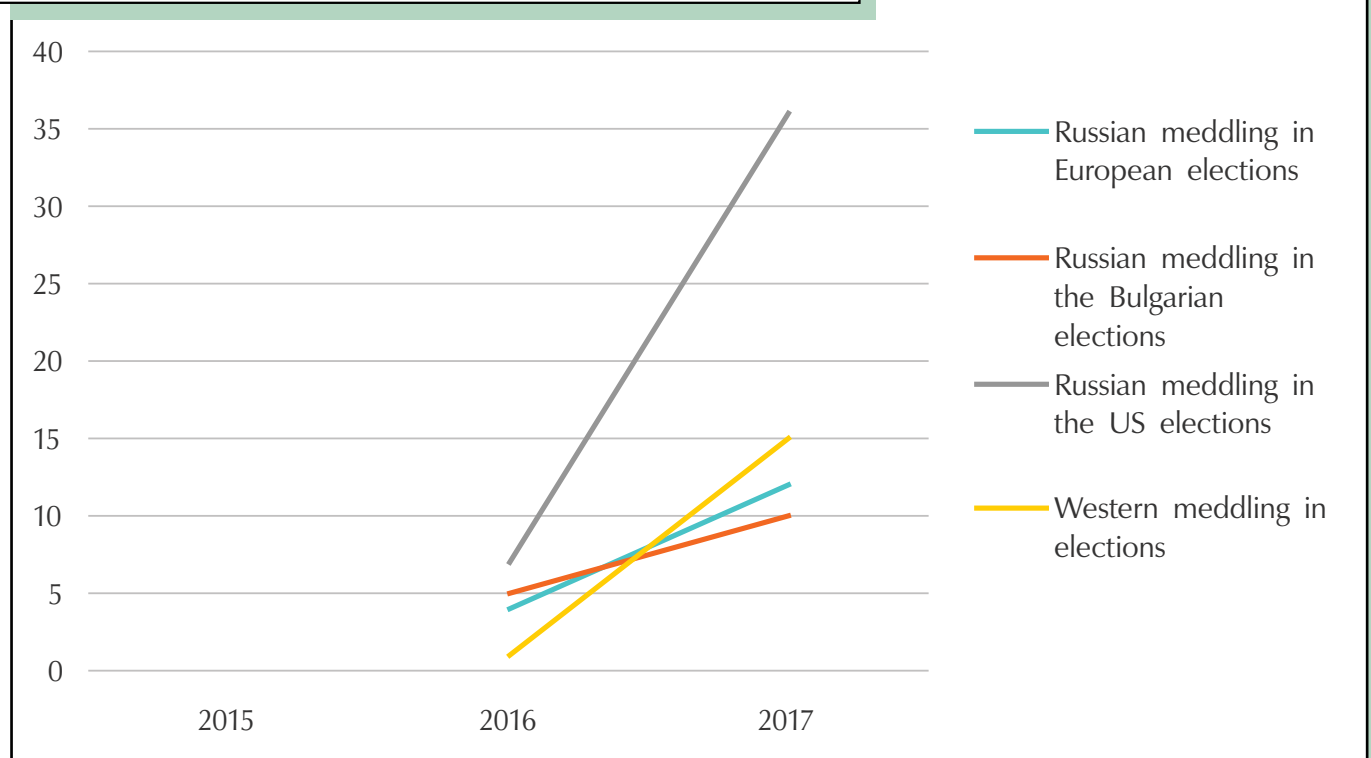
⁹¹ All reports implicating the Syrian regime are discredited on the basis of unconfirmed claims. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is said to have been involved in many scandals and fake news reports. Reuters' citation of the White Helmets is groundless given that the latter represents an anti-Assad organisation, producing fake reports for which they have received an Oscar: *Russia Beyond*, *Химическата атака в Сирия: кой е виновен и какво предстои?* (The Chemical Attack in Syria: Who Is Responsible and What Will Happen?), April 7, 2017.

attributing consistent policy motives on the view of one source and attributing Russia's own motives to the West.⁹²

Theme 2. Election Meddling

The second overarching theme of election meddling is commonly discussed in the three media outlets under investigation and can be subdivided into **four main topics**, informed by generally disseminated pro-Russian narratives.

FIGURE 13. MAIN TOPICS IN THE COVERAGE OF RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN FOREIGN ELECTIONS



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

The first topic concerns **Russia's (alleged) meddling in the US Presidential elections** of 2016. The most prevalent and generic propaganda account on which the three newspapers converge holds that accusations of Moscow's interference in the American electoral process represent a preposterous joke as there is no evidence to support such accusations that ultimately amount to a Russophobe conspiracy. The three outlets more specifically argue that the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton have fomented claims of Russian meddling in order to find a scapegoat for their own election loss. Hence, the **'plot'** of the Kremlin's

⁹² For instance, citation of a BBC documentary is as evidence that the West is planning for a nuclear confrontation with Russia and that this supposedly highlights a consistent Western assumption about this possibility. Accusing the West of preparing for a nuclear war although it is Russian media foment the likelihood of this: Russia Beyond, *НАТО срещу Русия: защо се говори за Трета световна война?* (NATO against Russia: Why Is There Talk of a Third World War?), February 22, 2016.

involvement is instigated by internal American politics. The liberal media in the US have contributed to the plot in that they have demonized Putin and Russia, subserviently colluding with the mainstream political establishment's attempt to carry out a coup against Donald Trump. For their part, Trump and Putin have established mutual rapport over Russia's innocence. Ultimately, even if Russian hackers were responsible for the cyber attacks, their guilt is diminished by the West's own reciprocal meddling in elections around the world.

Second, the issue of **Russian meddling in European elections** is also discussed. The shared narrative states that the alleged meddling is a deliberately constructed threat inspired by American politics, for which there has been no proof whatsoever, and which has been disseminated by the respective establishment politicians ahead of respectively the French Presidential, German Federal and British General elections in 2017 as well as at the time of the UK's EU membership referendum.

Third, a distinctive continuation of the topic on Russian meddling in European elections is linked to the Bulgarian context. The three newspapers generally maintain that **claims about the role of the 'Russia hand' in Bulgaria's elections are a false**, Western-sponsored conspiracy playing onto internal Bulgarian political competition. In the specific context of the Bulgarian Presidential elections of 2016, General Leonid Reshetnikov is defended as not having interfered prior to the popular vote in favor of BSP's candidate General Rumen Radev.

The fourth topic is related to **the West's alleged meddling in elections**, whereby the shared narrative disseminates the view that the US – and especially the CIA, encroach on electoral processes worldwide, including on Russian Presidential elections.

The **commonly espoused pro-Russian narratives are propagated through similar stylistic modes**. In terms of literary figures, there is a strong reliance on evaluative epithets,⁹³ the promotion of conspiracies,⁹⁴ the use of irony, sarcasm, mockery of accusations of Russian meddling in elections⁹⁵ as ways of forming attitudes on the basis of emotional manipulation, condescending laughter and moral indignation as opposed to reliable evidence. The preference for sensationalist vs. proof-based narration allows drawing dubious and sweeping conclusions from

⁹³ For example, to argue that it is not Russian hackers but the Western politicians and media that are disseminating fake news, an article uses exaggerated negative comparisons to Goebbels' media propaganda techniques and manipulation of public consciousness and the Holy Inquisition: *Teofan Germanov, Двоен аршин криво мери* (Double Standards Are the Wrong Measure), *Zemia*, November 15, 2017.

⁹⁴ A claim that there is a Western plot to purge all Russian influence in the Balkans through the dissemination of accusations of Russian interference in the Bulgarian elections: *Russia Beyond, За изборите в България и отношенията с Русия: какво може да се очаква?* (On the Bulgarian Elections and Relations with Russia: What Can Be Expected?), March 27, 2017.

⁹⁵ Putin's moral superiority is conveyed through his sarcastic and condescending dismissal of all concerns about Russian interference. He mocks the supposedly incompetent and hysterical Western politicians and journalists.

Russian hackers are compared to freelance painters that are patriotic and may decide to respond to Western hostility but this is not high political business: *Milena Boicheva, Русофобията навлезе в зоната на комичното* (Russophobia Has Entered the Zone of Comedy), *Trud*, June 8, 2017.

unjustified historical and analytical parallels, which in turn serve to exaggerate or downplay the qualities of an actor/policy/activity.⁹⁶

However, despite the above-presented commonalities characteristic of all three media outlets under investigation, there are **distinctions in the content and style of coverage** of the theme of election meddling.

As regards *Trud*, a point of differentiation is **the provision of a wider treatment of issue areas** pertinent to Russia's (alleged) interference in electoral processes, the occupation of a less partisan position on the Russian role in the Bulgarian Presidential vote and the separation between news articles and commentaries/interviews, with the former relying on more subliminal rather than overtly biased influencing strategies.

More specifically, the media outlet discusses in greater detail (especially in contrast to *Russia Beyond*) developments linked to the topics of Russian meddling in the US and European elections, nevertheless interpreted in line with Russian narratives. For instance, consideration is given to the question of James Comey's dismissal. It is suggested that there was an organized attack on Comey as part of the Democrats' conspiratorial attempts to harm President Trump, as the latter could not have had a logical reason to oppose the former FBI Director, who disclosed Presidential Candidate Hillary Clinton's emails. Additionally, the deeper motivation behind Russian hacking accusations is attributed to the West's desire to foment the idea that Moscow is waging hybrid warfare, which could be used as a pretext for triggering NATO's Article 5 (facilitating the escalation of military tensions with the Kremlin) and for continued imposition of sanctions. The phenomenon of trolling is further examined and its consequences are concluded to be less than significant in determining election results. This is argued to be so because the effects of trolling are primarily confined to the consolidation of views already formed.

Trud lends less partisan support, which agrees with the outlet's presentation of a more (party)politically balanced face to the domestic readership. Yet, *Trud* also dismisses General Reshetnikov's involvement in the selection of General Rumen Radev as BSP's Presidential candidate at a meeting with party leader Kornelia Ninova but contends the Russia supported claim in the wake of the scandal that the Bulgarian socialists have become less reliable partners to Russia. The newspaper gives an edge to Reshetnikov's account that Ninova disseminated fake news about the meeting, which is said to confirm the untrustworthiness of the socialists (as part of their general tendency to occupy pro-Russian positions prior to elections and reverse them once in power).

In terms of the stylistic techniques of message communication, *Trud's* coverage of election meddling is based on a two-pronged differentiation between news articles and commentaries/interviews. The former are characterized by their apparent neutrality, which entails conveying a particular connotation much more subliminally than overtly. This is achieved by sowing doubt in the credulity and rightfulness of an actor's judgement and actions such as through leaving

⁹⁶ For instance, the impression of a sense of urgency, wishful thinking, impending defeat is created in relation to Theresa May's accusations of Russian wrongdoings through historical analogies – Britain returning to the times of Napoleon and Hitler: Valentin Hadjiiski, *Защо Тереза Мей набегу 'плашилото' Путин* (Why Theresa May Has Singled out Putin as a 'Scarecrow'), *Trud*, November 20, 2017.

information unaccounted for (to keep the reader guessing about ulterior motives), placing words and phrases in quotation marks,⁹⁷ using past indefinite tenses in Bulgarian to underline conditionality and uncertainty. Exaggeration, magnification of scale, binary distinctions and mockery are further modes of implicit framing of attitudes.⁹⁸ In contrast, styles of much more explicit message transmission common to the three media outlets are reserved in *Trud* for commentaries and interviews. Added to these is the employment of muddled and circular counterfactuals,⁹⁹ the immediate dismissal of alternative viewpoints without any evidence, attribution of Russia's own motives to the West.¹⁰⁰

Zemia provides a wider and more detailed treatment of issue areas linked to the theme of election meddling **distinctively featuring a greater preoccupation with discrediting President Barack Obama's and hailing President Trump's administration**. Such partisan leanings also crystallize in *Zemia's* pro-BSP discussion of Bulgarian politics. The stylistic techniques of message transmission are focused on a formalistic differentiation between news and commentaries/interviews as the former do not completely refrain from explicit bias.

In particular, *Zemia's* coverage of the topic of Russian meddling in the US elections takes on partisan contours since the narrative is propagated that the outgoing Obama administration disseminated fake news about Moscow's interference in the electoral process. The alleged goal of such disinformation is claimed to have been aimed at undermining the legitimacy of the newly elected President and damaging Russian-American relations. Ultimately, a strong assertion is made that hacking accusations represent Russophobe-inspired propaganda carried out by failed politicians (like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama) searching for a scapegoat for their own fiascos. On the other hand, Donald Trump's presumed hatred of media lies and desire to cooperate with the Kremlin are positively assessed.

Zemia's nationally-focused concern with the embellishment of BSP's image (paradoxically) leads to an incongruence with Russian perspectives on the Bulgarian party-political scene that do not extend unequivocal support to the

⁹⁷ As an article that relates a piece of news manipulatively – the title uses the word 'hunt' (alluding to a witch hunt). Facebook's joining a global initiative is conveyed in quotation marks as that initiative involves identifying trustworthy sources of information, ethics and transparency standards (thus sowing doubt that this is indeed the case): *Trud* online, *Фейсбук ще лови руската пропаганда с ново приложение* (Facebook Will Hunt for Russian Propaganda through a New Application), November 23, 2017.

⁹⁸ For instance, although not mentioned explicitly, the West lurks in the background as an instigator of views that Russian hackers meddled even in Ecuador. The article makes a mockery of these claims, sarcastically alluding to Ecuador's insignificance (its biggest advantage being that it is a top exporter of bananas): Georgi Nikolov, *Ленин Морено – Ленин от Еквадор* (Lenin Moreno – Lenin from Ecuador), *Trud*, April 10, 2017.

⁹⁹ An interview can use a muddled and circular counterfactual without being questioned about this – if Russia were to blame for election interference, there would be a pro-Russian government now because the Bulgarians are pro-Russian. The subliminal suggestion is that even if Russia interfered it would be so in alignment with Bulgarian preferences: Petyo Blaskov, *Генерал-лейтенант и кандидат на историческите науки пред 'Труд': Русия трудно и мъчително се връща на своя исторически път* (Leonid Reshetnikov, General-Lieutenant and Candidate in the Historical Sciences, for *Trud*: Russia Is Returning on Its Historical Path, June 6, 2017.

¹⁰⁰ A rhetorical strategy of defending oneself by throwing doubt on everyone else's actions – it was not Russian but American hackers that may have interfered in the US elections: *Trud* online, *Зад намесата в американските избори в САЩ може да стоят и американски хакери, Путин* (American Hackers May Be behind the Meddling in the US Presidential Elections, Putin Declared), June 3, 2017.

Bulgarian socialists. Russia's narrative that dismisses the Kremlin's involvement in foreign electoral processes is enunciated but the newspaper includes a justification of Kornelia Ninova's actions. It is stressed that the party takes its decisions independently of foreign influences, with General Rashetnikov being incapable of encroaching on the Bulgarian electoral dynamics given his compromised professional credentials.

In terms of stylistic modes of narrative communication, *Zemia's* news pieces retain apparent neutrality, whereby subliminal influencing (on the basis of sowing doubt by leaving information accounted for and the uncritical citation of Russian sources, for instance)¹⁰¹ is mixed with the use of evaluative epithets (including insulting and lurid comparisons)¹⁰² and the layout of news articles in the midst of shorter pieces and colored boxes of information that convey an overt attitude.¹⁰³ These techniques blur the difference from the explicit suasion strategies employed by commentaries and interviews, as focused on shaping attitudes through emotional rather than evidence-based narration (such as the evocation of moral outrage, use of satire, extraction of generalizations from specific events).

Russia Beyond is distinguished by the publication of simpler and shorter messages that aim to create confusion through inconsistent coverage relating discordant information. Moreover, the coverage of Bulgarian elections is refracted through the prism of Russia's relations with the West rather than necessarily as a concern with political developments in Bulgaria. Stylistically, *Russia Beyond* is not characterized by a clear differentiation between news pieces and commentaries/interviews.

The outlet relates the narrative that Emmanuel Macron's victory in the French Presidential elections is evidence enough that Moscow did not interfere given its preference for Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen. However, *Russia Beyond's* publications elaborate on this preference, arguing that many of the French Presidential candidates shared pro-Putin views in the form of conservative opposition to gay marriage, secularism and American hegemony. The media portrays a victorious mood that surrounds the (supposed) trend towards the formation of a pro-Russian coalition in the EU so that from hitherto isolated Moscow now has many allies in Europe, with Putin being a source of support for far-right parties in France, Bulgaria, Estonia, Moldova, the Netherlands, Greece, Hungary. So despite Russian denial of elections meddling, the clearly expressed candidate preferences and delight in the consolidation of a Russia-friendly bloc in Europe combined with the high praise accorded to the abilities of Russian hackers shape a subliminally and inconsistently conveyed idea that the Kremlin may have influenced electoral outcomes.

¹⁰¹ An apparently neutral article that nevertheless cites Trump's qualification of intelligence information about Russian meddling as fake news and sows doubt about the veracity of the intelligence notes: *Zemia*, *Американското разузнаване подвежда Тръмп, че Русия е събираща компромати срещу него* (The American Intelligence Is Deceiving Trump That Russia Has Gathered Discrediting Information against Him), January 12, 2017.

¹⁰² As in *Zemia*, *Деградация. Путин за фалшификациите на администрацията* (Degradation. Putin on the Administration's Falsifications), January 25, 2017.

¹⁰³ For instance, the main body of an article seems to present an even-handed presentation of the unfolding situation around Michael Flynn's resignation. However, a coloured box suggests that he was removed because of his positive attitude to Russia: *Zemia*, *Съветникът на Тръмп по Националната сигурност подаде оставка* (Trump's Advisor on National Security Has Submitted His Resignation), Trud, February 15, 2017.

Russia Beyond comments on accusations of Russian meddling in Bulgarian elections especially through the prism of Russia-West dynamics. The claim is propagated that accounts of Moscow's instruction of BSP on how to ensure Rumen Radev's victory in the Bulgarian Presidential elections were intentional, having purposefully appeared in American news outlets (such as the Wall Street Journal) as part of Russophobia and internal American problems. The US and UK are argued to be deliberately disseminating the Russian meddling scare in order to purge all traces of cooperation between Balkan countries and the Kremlin.

In respect of modes of narrative transmission, ***Russia Beyond* does not maintain a clear separation between news articles and commentaries/interviews** so that the literary figures commonly shared among the three news outlets under investigation are applied to all pieces. Further techniques include assertions about the conduct of an extensive overview of material (such as opinions), which is in actuality based on a few sources only. Similarly, the presentation of many options/scenarios is belied by there being only one plausible choice among these. Likewise, (many) biased, pro-Russian Western sources¹⁰⁴ can be cited as being ostensibly representative of the prevailing Western view. In general, the inclusion of significantly more embedded links than in *Trud* and *Russia Beyond* serves the same purpose of creating the impression of rigorous and many-sided backing up of the conveyed information, which reference, however, overwhelmingly to Russian sources or other *Russia Beyond* articles. A prominent stylistic means of communication also marks out the difference between the statements of Russian officials promoting an air of objectivity, neutrality, even-handedness, and generic expert opinion, whose task is focused on enunciating Russian propaganda narratives in a more forcefully explicit way.¹⁰⁵ Finally, personal insults¹⁰⁶ at Western politicians feature in publications as well.

Theme 3. Energy

The final theme, whose coverage is investigated by the report, concerns energy. It is examined by all three media outlets within the rubric of **six topics**, informed by commonly referred to narratives.

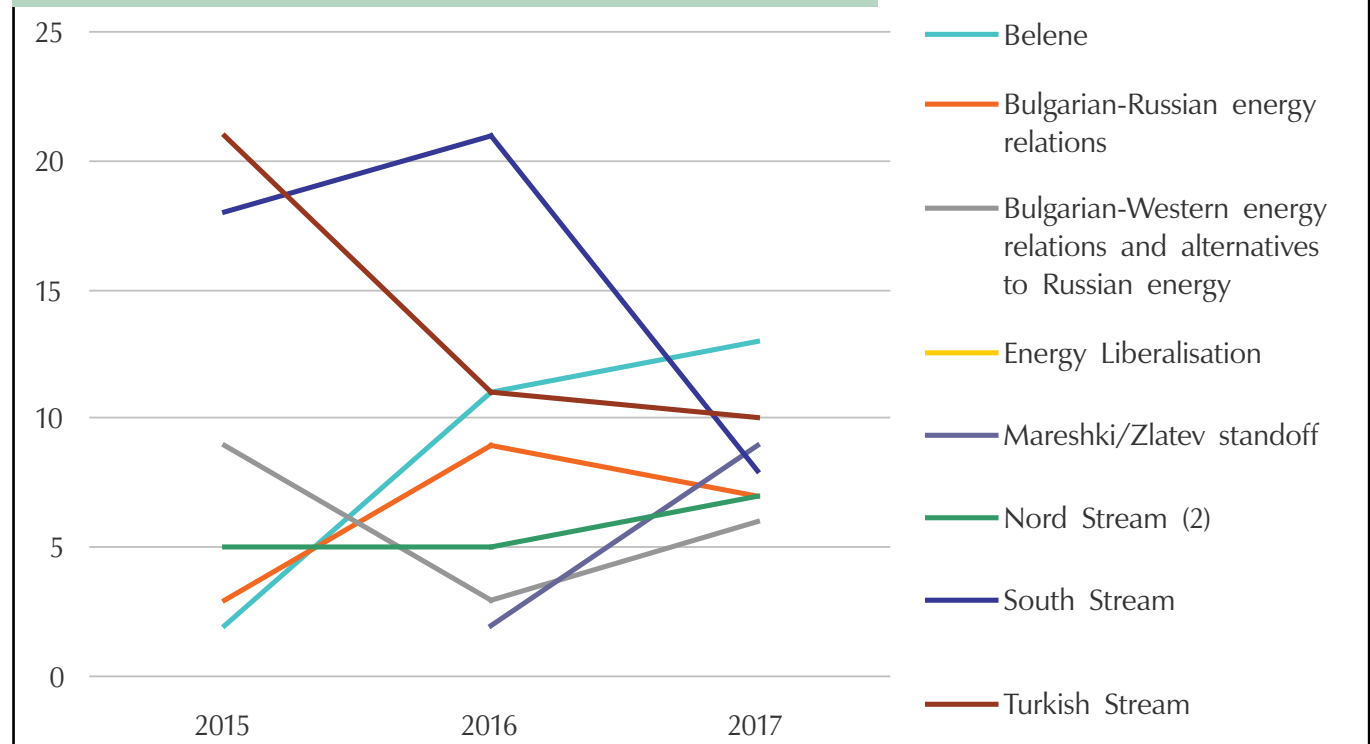
First, the issue area of **South Stream** is represented in such a way as to above all explain the cancellation of the pipeline project as a matter of Bulgaria's fault and the country's submissiveness to the pressure of the European Commission. According to the prevailing narrative the cancellation took place despite South Stream's contribution to the economic interests of Bulgaria, in particular, and Southern Europe, in general. Having indeed eventually realized the losses it has incurred, Sofia began to seek the renewal of the project. Nevertheless, the

¹⁰⁴ An article cites Earl Rasmussen from the Eurasia Center, who portrays the American accusations of Russian elections meddling as an example of absurd and unprofessional state leadership: *Russia Beyond*, *Като нападат Путин, САЩ искат да повлияят на президентските избори* (Peskov: By Attacking Putin the US Wants to Interfere in the Presidential Elections), January 29, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Official statements of top Russian politicians about Rumen Radev's election as President are much more cautious than the generic expert-political comments about the pro-Russian qualities of Radev, which also suggest that Radev's defence of national interests gets immediately branded as Russophile sentiments. So cooperation with Russia is objectively determined: *Russia Beyond*, *Руски дипломат за Радев: ако човек говори разумно, го изкарват русофил* (A Russian Diplomat about Radev: If One Talks Sensibly, They Are Accused of Russophile Sentiments), February 9, 2017.

¹⁰⁶ As in *Russia Beyond*, *Захарова нарече администрацията на Обама група озлобени неудачници* (Zaharova Calls Obama's Administration a 'Bunch of Foreign Policy Failures'), December 30, 2016.

FIGURE 14. MAIN TOPICS IN THE COVERAGE OF ENERGY



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

narrative holds that Russian politicians and business officials demonstrated firmness in their decision to abandon the pipeline plans.

The second common topic is linked to **Turkish Stream**. The newspapers press the pro-Russian point that the decision to construct the pipeline is informed by economic rather than political considerations. However, the twists and turns of Russian-Turkish relations led to divergent narratives on the project. Turkey's downing of a Russian plane represented an act of hostile betrayal but Ankara's economic dependence on Turkish Stream meant that it started begging Russia for the renewal of pipeline negotiations. As bilateral ties improved, Turkish Stream once again began to be regarded as a lynchpin in the consolidation of the Russian-Turkish partnership. Additionally, the speculation has been entertained that Bulgaria may be the entry point for the European part of the pipeline. The pro-Russian narrative goes so far as to ascertain that since Sofia proved to be unreliable in its dealings with Moscow, the rightful retribution would be the selection of Greece as the entry point.

Third, the issue of **Nord Stream 2** is commonly argued to be dividing Europe between east and west. Western European states and especially Germany approve of the project for legal and commercial reasons. On the other hand, Central and East European states, spearheaded by Poland, oppose the pipeline on Russophobic grounds as well as in their attempt to maintain the Ukrainian gas transit route (so as not to allow Kiev's isolation from European-Russian energy and political affairs).

Fourth, the topic of the **Belene nuclear power plant** is related to pro-Russian narratives that convey the financial, economic and environmental feasibility of the project, which can turn Bulgaria into a regional energy center. Without Belene, the narrative goes, Sofia falls out of the global energy competition. The sub-theme of the International Court of Arbitration's ruling awarding damages to Russia's Atomstroyexport for the reactors commissioned for Belene is narrated in a binary form. Russia lawfully followed the rules of the contract, which is confirmed by the justifiable court decision, while Bulgaria was rightfully made to pay a high price for its unreliability. Also, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences' report on the viability of Belene is said to be authoritative and reason enough to kick-start the political process for the renewal of the plant's construction.

The fifth common topic is focused on the overall state of **Bulgarian-Russian energy relations**. The general line of argumentation holds that the Russian energy projects are beneficial for Bulgaria. Hence, the latter should maintain good relations with Moscow as a matter of pragmatic economic interest but also of historical and cultural disposition. The vacillation with regard to those projects is explained by internal Bulgarian politicking.

Finally, the media outlets consider the question of **Bulgarian-Western energy relations** and alternatives to Russian energy supplies. In this regard, the US is asserted to be a power that aims to establish domineering control over the European (and particularly Central-East European) energy markets by pushing through sales of liquefied natural gas. The Western-supported Southern Gas Corridor is not a viable alternative to Russian gas. For its part, the EU is claimed to be an obstacle to the realization of Bulgarian-Russian energy projects, only giving empty promises to Bulgaria, which it cannot fulfill.

The above-presented topics and corresponding narratives are **communicated through similarly deployed stylistic modes**. As in the case of the coverage of the war in Syria and election meddling, the three media outlets converge on an emotional-sensationalist rather than evidence-based transmission of messages, including the use of straightforwardly positive or negative evaluative epithets, superlative descriptions without accompanying comparative assessments,¹⁰⁷ vivid metaphorical illustrations,¹⁰⁸ black-and-white binary distinctions,¹⁰⁹ evocation of moral outrage, pessimism, impending threats and conspiracies.¹¹⁰ Sidelineing evidential argumentation further facilitates drawing dubious and sweeping conclusions from unjustified historical and analytical analogies.

¹⁰⁷ For instance, the portrayal of Turkish Stream as a powerful project having the potential to change regional and international energy relations, leaving out many losers, including Europe: Yevgeny Satanovsky, *Политическа игра на газови тръби* (A Political Game of Gas Pipelines), *Trud*, August 29, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ A dramatic metaphor compares those who oppose Nord Stream 2 in the West to cannibals, who want to become vegetarian – rapacious in their attitude to Russia but will end up with no gas and will have to streamline their economies: Russia Beyond, *Рогозин за позицията на САЩ по Северен поток: гемаши на канибали* (Rogozin on the US's Position Regarding Nord Stream: 'A Cannibals' Demarche'), June 27, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Such as a differentiation between 'new' Europe, which is Russophobic, and 'old' Europe that is friendly towards Russia and business-minded: Russia Beyond, *'Експерт': Кой и защо е против Северен поток 2 в Европа* ('Expert': Who Is against Nord Stream 2 in Europe and Why), December 15, 2015.

¹¹⁰ For instance, suggesting that there is a conspiracy and hidden scenario for America to become a dominant energy market player in Europe through liquefied gas: Goran Yonov, *Пъзелът на енергийния сценарий – американски шистов газ и за България* (The Puzzle of the Energy Scenario – American Shale Gas Also for Bulgaria), *Zemla*, November 10, 2015.

Further to the above-presented similarities among the three news outlets, there are also specific **differences in narrative elaboration and transmission**.

***Trud* is distinguished by the occasional inclusion of alternative viewpoints** that dispute Russian propaganda narratives. Moreover, *Trud* covers a wider array of locally-relevant issues in respect of the theme of energy. Stylistically, the newspaper maintains a difference between news pieces and commentaries/interviews, with the latter being characterized by more explicit suasion techniques.

Although *Trud* elaborates the pro-Russian narratives shared in common with the other two media outlets, it intermittently introduces opposing perspectives not found in *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond*. For instance, with regard to Bulgarian-Russian energy relations, an alternative view states that the Russian-Bulgarian energy projects (especially South Stream, Belene, the Burgas-Alexandroupoli pipeline) were politically rather than economically motivated realizable and that their implementation might lead to negative political-economic consequences for Bulgaria. Similarly, the pro-Russian bent of presentation of the topic of Nord Stream 2 is diluted by the contrary perspective that the pipeline will undermine the EU's energy security, with the countries through which it is planned to pass putting their selfish interests above EU solidarity and to the detriment of European states that will be circumvented. Indeed, there are articles, which argued that as the EU takes a key place in Bulgarian-Western energy relations, Brussels should support the strategy of Bulgaria's decreasing reliance on coal and nuclear energy and increasing focus on renewables and interconnectors.

Stylistically, ***Trud* maintains a differentiation between news pieces and commentaries/interviews** based on degrees of explicit suasion strategies. The relation of news is informed by subtler, subliminal connotations directed at sowing doubt in the rightfulness of an actor's statements and actions by leaving some information unaccounted for (thus creating suspicion in the reader) as well as by circulating rumors and inconsistencies (within an article or among articles).¹¹¹ The layout of pieces can also be manipulatively presented so that the headline and introductory sentences instill the first impression, with alternative/Western viewpoints being briefly subsequently mentioned. On the other hand, commentaries and interviews are characterized by the more overt techniques of influence common to the three news outlets, as argued earlier in this section. Further to these techniques, the media outlet makes **evidence-deficient repetitive assertions**,¹¹² dismisses perspectives on the grounds of Russophobia and fake

¹¹¹ It is asserted that Boiko Borisov got a 'hint' from Russia about the renewal of talks on South Stream in an article, which information is disproved in another article on the next day, where the same information is repeated but with a very different connotation – that South Stream will not be revived: *Trud* online, *Рестарт на проекта 'Южен Поток' до седмици* (Moscow: There Is No Change, South Stream Has Been Cancelled), January 11, 2016.; *Trud* online, *Москва: няма промяна, 'Южен Поток' е спрян* (Moscow: There Is No Change, South Stream Has Been Cancelled), January 11, 2016.

¹¹² Repetitive assertions about the high costs and lack of clarity of liquefied gas exports: Nina Dyulgerova, *Ще пробие ли газоват дипломация на САЩ през Полша* (Will the US's Gas Diplomacy Make Inroads through Poland?), *Trud*, July 8, 2017.

news, deploys irony,¹¹³ presses interviewees that express an alternative opinion with questions that try to fit the interviewees' words into a preferred narrative.¹¹⁴

As far as *Zemia* is concerned, **the elaborate congruence with pro-Russian narratives is distinctly coupled with locally-focused partisan support** for the opposition (BSP) and denunciation of the government (headed by the GERB party – Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria), yet in contrast to Moscow's readiness to cooperate with the latter party. The difference between news articles and commentaries/interviews is maintained above all on the formalistic-formatting level (i.e., layout and authorship) but blurred on the level of literary figures employed.

The topic of **Bulgarian-Russian energy relations is conveyed through bipartisan juxtaposition**. The socialists are argued to be the only political force in the country that is serious about the restart and realization of joint projects with Moscow (Belene, South Stream, Burgas-Alexandroupoli pipeline). The BSP considers that these projects are justified by Bulgaria's national interest, having provided a chance to the country to become central to the energy markets of Southeast Europe. The left's key lines of argumentation are related uncritically, including the position that the construction of Belene and a gas connection to Russia are the only solutions to energy poverty and alleged energy production deficits in Bulgaria. On the contrary, the governments is claimed to have been betraying Bulgaria's national interests through hesitancy and submissiveness to the West.

In respect of the topic of Bulgarian-Western energy relations, the media outlet enunciates socialist-inspired criticisms of the American power plants in the country (Maritsa Iztok 1 and 3) as charging exorbitant prices for electricity and receiving inordinate state aid. Also, the gas interconnector between Bulgaria and Greece is asserted to be a stalling project not likely to be realized in the near future.

With regard to the style of content transmission, *Zemia* features a formalistic separation between news articles and commentaries/interviews as a matter of length (news pieces are shorter, more concise and usually written by the editorial team) as well as of some techniques specific to the outlet's news reporting (including placing an apparently neutral article in the midst of pieces that promote a particular viewpoint¹¹⁵ and presentation of contrasting and unrelated information within the same article in order to reinforce a message through

¹¹³ Deployment of irony by claiming that the construction of Belene would have cost way less than the decaying Belene 'swamp': Anna Zarkova, *Гьолът 'Белене' ни става все по-скъп* (The Belene Swamp Is Costing Us Ever More), *Trud*, November 23, 2015.

¹¹⁴ An example relates to an interviewer, who tries to press the question about the importance of South Stream and to find a more positive outlook on the part of the interviewee (otherwise critical of the pipeline project): Lyuben Lesidrenski, *Красен Станчев: 'Белене' е театър с изкупуване на 'Лада'* (Krasen Stanchev: Belene Is a Theatre for Buying a Lada), August 9, 2017.

¹¹⁵ An apparently neutral piece of information carries a big headline that stresses Russia's insistence that Bulgaria pay its dues and that the money will have to come from state coffers. The surrounding smaller news pieces announce that Russia is going to build a nuclear power plant in Iran so selling the equipment to that country is not possible. Another article relates the news that Bulgargaz will raise prices. The message – stopping Belene is not financially viable: *Zemia*, *Русия настоява за срок за изплащане на дълга за 'Белене'* (Russia Insists on a Deadline for the Indemnity Payment), September 12, 2016.

shifting focus, exaggeration or downplaying).¹¹⁶ Otherwise, the more explicit means of narrative communication common to the three media can be observed in all types of *Zemia* articles.

Russia Beyond is distinguished by the provision of a Russian interpretation of Bulgarian political developments in relation to energy, a more detailed consideration of energy-focused propaganda narratives that most actively and relevantly speak to the official Russian political agenda. *Russia Beyond* does not maintain a clear differentiation between news articles and commentaries/interviews, employing overtly biased literary figures in all instances.

A prominent Russian narrative with regard to Bulgaria negatively evaluates the imposed 'monopoly' of the pro-Western orientation in the country, which thwarts other possible, historically conditioned vectors of pro-Russian strategic orientation. Accordingly, the South Stream pipeline project is argued to have been devised by Moscow to help Bulgaria economically and free it from dependence on EU funds. Pessimistic Russian assessments of Sofia's competitiveness in global energy markets is derived from the decision against the building of the Belene nuclear power plant and Rosatom's consequent exclusion of Bulgaria from the company's international priorities. The swings in Bulgarian-Russian energy relations are explained away as internal politicking and the vicissitudes of voters' preferences without an exploration of the wider Bulgarian debates about the actual feasibility of the joint energy projects.

***Russia Beyond* delivers narrative elaborations that are most closely linked to the Russian political agenda.** For instance, Moscow's long-standing ambition to determine the direction of European affairs in a co-equal manner with the powerful West European states is reflected in the fact that even only a situational possibility of agreement on the construction of Nord Stream leads the Kremlin to pronounce the pipeline as the most viable project that solves all problems with Russian energy supplies to Europe. Negotiations over South Stream and Turkish Stream are denigrated as a form of leverage over Western Europe – rather than important end-goals. The deterioration in Russian-Turkish relations over the downing of a Russian plane by Ankara resulted in news coverage that stressed the unstable political situation in Turkey and disseminated the view that the prospects of President Erdogan staying in power were ever murkier. To justify the argument that nuclear energy is the most reliable, environmentally friendly and safest form of energy, *Russia Beyond* focuses on the official Russian concern to debunk the severity of Chernobyl's consequences. It is maintained there is no evidence of a link between radiation and genetic mutations and environmental disaster beyond the immediate surroundings, with the accident ultimately promoting scientific breakthroughs in the sphere of medicine.

Stylistically, *Russia Beyond* blends article types to the extent that explicitly **attitude-shaping literary figures are ubiquitous**. And on top of the styles of communication shared by the three media outlets there are also techniques based on providing

¹¹⁶ For instance, a contrast between the first half of an article, where Minister of Energy Petkova's efforts to persuade Alexey Miller to cooperate with Bulgaria are presented, and the second half, where it is made clear that Bulgaria will be bypassed by Turkish Stream. Message conveyed – it's too late for Bulgaria to ingratiate itself: *Zemia*, *Европа търси път към 'Турски Поток'* (Europe Is Looking for a Way into Turkish Stream), June 14, 2017.

many unsubstantiated examples that promote the same view,¹¹⁷ making assertions supported with misleading or irrelevant information,¹¹⁸ misrepresenting Western sources in order to make them fit with the Russian narratives,¹¹⁹ attributing Russia's own motives to the West, attributing blame without considering the evidence,¹²⁰ marking out the difference between Russian officials' (seemingly) even-handed statements and experts' justification of propagandist discourses. The visual material in relation to the theme of energy is generally mundane.

Common Trends in Russian Propaganda in Bulgaria

The preceding analysis of *Trud*, *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond's* coverage of the overarching themes of the war in Syria, election meddling and energy allows **drawing general comparative conclusions regarding** the presence of consistently regularized **similarities and differences in** the three outlets' **content and style of Russian propaganda dissemination** across all themes. Apart from the shared characteristics in narrative elaboration and modes of message transmission common to media with pro-Russian entanglement, the distinctions between pro-Russian media in Bulgaria are shaped by the depth and extent of such entanglement. The greater a media outlet's level of political-economic enmeshment with (pro-) Russian groups and interests (through ownership patterns and/or (in) formal connections), the more fixedly and undeviatingly the outlet relates Russian narratives through more explicitly biased literary-presentational techniques.

As regards **commonalities**, the theme-specific analyses have demonstrated that the there media outlets **persistently propagate, resonate with and converge on the key general narratives of Russian propaganda** in relation to the war in Syria, election meddling and energy. Stylistically, the three outlets exhibit a preponderant reliance on sensationalist vs. proof-based transmission of messages

¹¹⁷ To make more expressive the point that without Belene Bulgaria will be consigned to the periphery, the article lists many states in which Russia may build NPPs and supply nuclear fuel, although these constructions and supply arrangements are not all settled: Russia Beyond, Finmarket.ru: *Росатом сложи символична точка на АЕЦ Беле* (Finmarket.ru: Rosatom Put a Symbolic Full Stop on Belene), March 24, 2017.

¹¹⁸ For instance, in illustrating the point that Bulgaria remains on the periphery and does not get transit revenues as a result of not cooperating with Russia, the article refers to the Russia-Turkey agreement on Turkish Stream, which is only about transfers of gas to Turkey via the sea route. It is not about the second leg of gas planned for Europe: Russia Beyond, *Турски поток ще лиши България от газови доходи* (Turkish Stream Will Deprive Bulgaria of Gas Revenues), March 16, 2017.

¹¹⁹ For instance, a focus laid on Bulgaria's opposition to Nord Stream 2 although the RFE article cited does not single out Sofia but announces the position of all of the East European countries coming out against the pipeline.

The subliminal message – emphasising the Bulgarian position with regard to Nord Stream 2 as Bulgaria was at the forefront of the decision to cancel SS: Russia Beyond, *България се обяви против строителството на Северен Поток 2* (Bulgaria Has Come out against Nord Stream 2), November 27, 2015.

¹²⁰ Such as creating the impression that everyone is so concerned with Turkish Stream that they constantly disseminate fake information and create scenarios to derail the project. Actually, the article tries to reverse the reason for the zig-zagging of the project, which has been a function of the unstable Russian-Turkish relationship and Moscow's search for an alternative to SS: Russia Beyond, *Сложните цели на Турски Поток* (The Complicated Goals of Turkish Stream), August 28, 2015.

informed by emotionally- and metaphorically-colored language aiming to frame reader attitudes. **Prominently deployed techniques** include binary, black-and-white distinctions, evocation of moral opprobrium, exaggeration, sarcasm, dubious and sweeping conclusions drawn from unjustified historical and geopolitical parallels, promotion of conspiracies and the impression of impending threat, the extrapolation of generalizations from local situations and/or single opinions.

With respect to referencing, quotations and authorship, *Trud*, *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond* resemble each other in terms of **a significant focus on Russian news agencies**, constituting 31.2%, 39.8 % and 77.7%, respectively, of source references. The lower figures for *Trud* and *Zemia* should not obscure the **biased representation of non-Russian sources**, especially Western ones, which are nevertheless cited to keep an appearance of objectivity. Forms of distortion, such as taking information out of context to adjust it to Kremlin-inspired propaganda or making that information look illogical/laughable are often employed too. Leaning on the messages conveyed by Russian news agencies leads to a ubiquitous **quotation of Russian officials**, whose statements are presented as a matter of undisputable fact, seemingly obviating the lack of need for the consideration of alternative views.

The shared tendencies of narrative elaboration and forms of journalistic expression result in **the binary portrayal of Russia and related institutions/projects/politicians** in positive (68.2% of all positive portrayals) and of the West and related institutions/projects/politicians in negative terms (53.8% of all negative portrayals) across the three themes. Russia is thus commonly described as a resurgent global power that is morally superior, benevolent and responsible, acting out of self-defense due to being subject to victimization and unjust treatment on the part of the West. Moreover, President Vladimir Putin has attained the status of a masterful, authoritative, pragmatic, rational, compromise-prone, realistic world leader. In contrast, the image constructed of the US is that of a duplicitous aggressor and declining hegemon, wreaking havoc on international security.

There are **three degrees of differentiated distance regarding content and style between the media outlets**. In *Trud's* case, thematic examinations confirm a consistent pattern of narrative enunciation, which – despite close adherence to Russian propaganda, is also characterized by two main distinctive features. The first is the presence of wider and more varied discussions – i.e., through greater conceptual framing and the occasional inclusion of alternative viewpoints. The second feature is related to the nuancing of analyses and news reporting on the basis of the consideration of perspectives that stem from and are responsive to the Bulgarian national context (as opposed to a blanket application of Russian propaganda narratives). Relatedly, 21.6% of referenced sources are Bulgarian. The broader array of locally-relevant issues and opinions is not combined with overt partisanship. A more moderate position with respect to the party-political scene in Bulgaria is thus occupied.

Trud also aims at a more neutral-formal format of news reporting. News pieces and commentaries/interviews are differentiated on the basis of the former's apparent neutrality delineated by the subliminal promotion of particular connotations, in contrast to overt attitude framing attained through explicitly biased literary techniques in commentaries and interviews. Correspondingly, there is a high proportion (48.7%) of seemingly even-handed portrayals of actors (yet still attitudinally tinged). *Trud* focuses on the portrayal of Bulgaria's image, while

there are limited descriptions of the main political parties in the country. The outlet ensures a level of transparency by the fact that there are no anonymized authors or unattributed articles.

Zemia is distinguished in terms of content provision above all on the basis of lines of argumentation that are derived from and are responsive to the Bulgarian national context (hence, 24.7% of cited media sources are Bulgarian), yet lending overt and consistent partisan support. Paradoxically, despite the outlet's generally unequivocal commitment to Russian narrative enunciation, advocacy for the socialists represents a point of divergence from Russian views that show skepticism about the left's reliability as a partnering political force for Moscow in Bulgaria. *Zemia* also features a wider and more detailed treatment of issue areas pertinent to the given themes, including analytical framing, where, however, sweeping and lengthy historical-geopolitical generalizations abound.

Stylistically, *Zemia* maintains a formalistic differentiation between news articles and commentaries/interviews. But the literary figures employed go beyond implicit attitude-formation in the direction of explicit suasion strategies. Visualization techniques in respect of news articles are aimed at exerting influence on the reader by providing images and captions unrelated to the content of the written material, conveying pieces of attitude-inducing extraneous information. The outlet's transparency is weakened by the presence of unattributed articles, which constitute 6.1% of the total number of pieces.

Russia Beyond is distinctly characterized by the absence of perspectives that arise from and speak to the Bulgarian national context. Instead, **the Russian political agenda is imposed on the Bulgarian readership**. When Bulgaria-linked developments are discussed, they are related through a Russian interpretive prism. Only 1.6% of cited sources are of Bulgarian origin. Moreover, the outlet features the simplest and shortest form of narrative elaboration that most straightforwardly, repetitively and relevantly speaks to the official Russian political agenda.

In terms of modes of message transmission, *Russia Beyond* does not maintain a clear separation between news articles and commentaries/interviews so that the lack of a commitment to objectivity leads to an omnipresent application of literary figures conveying explicit bias. Hence, the portrayals of actors are either strongly positive or negative. The outstandingly high number of embedded links (91.3% of all embedded links) in contrast to *Trud* and *Zemia* aims to create the impression of rigorous and many-sided backing up of the reported material. Most links, however, overwhelmingly refer to the outlets's own articles or other Russian media. The level of *Russia Beyond's* transparency is diminished by the most significant percentage (38.4%) of unattributed articles among the three analysed outlets.

UKRAINE

Introduction

The Ukrainian media exists in a severely constraining environment. The weak economic condition of the country hinders proper private media sector penetration. TV holds more than half of the advertising market, with Internet adding another quarter, followed by the much smaller outdoor and press. Due to the low income levels (the average monthly salary is \$177¹²¹), media are not able to sell content to their audiences. Consequently, media are to a great extent **dependent on their owners to subsidize them**, on sponsorship and financial donations from business and political actors, which undermines their neutrality and independence. Owners use their media as a tool to promote their business and political interests. Although government censorship has effectively disappeared since 2014, the owners' censorship is acknowledged as a key threat to freedom of the media in Ukraine.

National media are mostly **concentrated in several media holdings** belonging to different business and oligarchic groups¹²². The key players include:

- StarLightMedia: STB, ICTV, Novyi TV-channels and other, less popular TV-channels (M1, M2, OCE), focused mostly on entertainment; owner: Viktor Pinchuk;
- Inter Media Group: Inter TV-channel etc.; owners: Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Liovochkin, close associates of former President Viktor Yanukovich;
- Media Group Ukraina: Ukraina TV-channel, Segodnia newspaper, other media outlets; owner: Rynat Akhmetov, a close associate of Yanukovich;
- 1+1 Media Holding: 1+1, 2+2 TV-channels, UNIAN agency and other, less popular media outlets (TET, PlusPlus, Bigudi, UNIAN TV, 1+1 International TV-channels; Glavred.info, Telekritika, Dusia websites; 1+1 Production); owner: Ihor Kolomoisky;
- 5 Channel, owner: Petro Poroshenko.

¹²¹ State Statistics Service of Ukraine (2017), *Розподіл населення за рівнем середньодушових еквівалентних загальних доходів* (Population stratification due to average equivalent general incomes), available at: http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/operativ/operativ2007/gdvdg_rik/XLS/roz2010_xls_u.xls [Accessed 10.08.2018].

¹²² Rybak, V. (2018), *Yes, Ukraine's Oligarchs Own the Airwaves but Their Days Are Numbered*, January 29, 2018, The Atlantic Council of the United States, Washington D.C., Available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/yes-ukraine-s-oligarchs-own-the-airwaves-but-here-s-why-their-days-are-numbered> [Accesses 29.08.2018].

Along with these large media groups, **a segment of independent media exists**, mostly online or among local press providers. Independent outlets like LB.ua, DT.ua, Ukrainska Pravda, Hromadske TV and Hromadske Radio are popular although they cannot compete with the oligarch-owned media. Such media rely mostly on international donor funding and are financially vulnerable.

Media ownership is not sufficiently transparent. Since 2015, legislation has required broadcasters (TV and radio) to disclose their final beneficial owners. Print media need state registration, which also enables information about the structure of ownership. According to the available data, among the TV, radio and print outlets that have social and political focus and attract a significant part of the audience Russian government or business entities do not appear as (co-) owners. Online media require no license and their ownership is often hidden. Thus, experts assume the existence of outlets created, financed and controlled by the Kremlin.¹²³

TV remains the key news source for 86% of the Ukrainians. Online media (27%) and social networks (26%) are also important. Russian media have no noticeable share in media consumption, amounting to 5% of all media, not least because broadcasting of Russian TV-channels is prohibited in Ukraine. However, access to these channels can be obtained via satellite and the Internet (yet the level of trust in them is critically low (1%).¹²⁴ Therefore, Russian media do not play an important role in spreading Kremlin propaganda in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, there is **a range of media outlets linked to pro-Russian business or political actors**, and these outlets are repeatedly accused of manipulations in favour of the Kremlin. Monitoring¹²⁵ undertaken by civil society consistently reveals a close correspondence between the discourse of these media outlets, and of those controlled by the Kremlin.¹²⁶

Selection of Media Outlets

As no evidence of Russian ownership of media is available in Ukraine, for the purpose of this research, three media outlets were selected, whose ties with pro-Kremlin businesses are easily observable. These media include the following online outlets:

¹²³ See, for example: Babak, A., Matychak, T., Moroz, V., others (2017), Words and Wars: Ukraine facing Kremlin propaganda. Kyiv: KIC.

¹²⁴ Detector Media, KIIS (2018), *Протидія російській пропаганді та медіаграмотність: результати всеукраїнського опитування громадської думки* (Countering Russian propaganda, and media literacy: the results of all-Ukrainian public opinion poll), available at: http://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2016/136017/DM_KMIS_engl_WEB-2.pdf. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹²⁵ Burkovskiy, P. (2018), Як «Страна.уа» зображає Україну агресором (How Strana.ua manifests Ukraine as aggressor), MediaSapiens, available at: http://ms.detector.media/monitoring/advocacy_and_influence/yak_stranaua_zobrazhae_ukrainu_agresorom/. [Accessed 13.08.2018]; Shutov, R. (2014), *Metamorphoses of Russian propaganda*, «Vesti» newspaper, MediaSapiens, available at: http://ms.detector.media/monitoring/in_english/metamorphoses_of_russian_propaganda_vesti_newspaper/. [Accessed 13.08.2018]

¹²⁶ DPR, or Donetsk Public Republic – a military group supported by Kremlin, that controls part of the Donetsk oblast of Ukraine. In 2014, they shot MH17. Acknowledged by the Ukrainian court as a terrorist organisation.

1. Vesti-ukr.ua – an online version of *Vesti* newspaper. The *Vesti* media group is notorious for its opaque financing model and ownership structure; there is evidence of its ties to Oleksandr Klimenko, formerly a minister on the Yanukovich team, wanted by Interpol. *Vesti* is frequently blamed for destabilising the social and political situation in Ukraine¹²⁷. In 2017, it attracted the attention of the Ukrainian security forces for (possible) links to the Kremlin;
2. Strana.ua – an online media outlet focused on political, economic and social developments in Ukraine. The web-site was established by Ihor Huzhva, known as the owner of *Vesti* media group in 2013-2016 (since January 2018 he has sought asylum in Austria). The financing model is vague, with monitoring having revealed anti-Ukrainian narratives and fake news content.
3. Timer – a regional online resource from Odessa providing local news, but also covering global politics. Since 2014, *Timer* has demonstrated openly anti-Kyiv and anti-Western positions. Its editorial policy aims to legitimise Kremlin aggression against Ukraine, supporting pro-Russian proxies in the region. There is evidence that the outlet belongs to pro-Russian businessman and politician Ihor Markov (arrested in Italy in August 2018).

Comparative Analysis of *Vesti-ukr.ua*, *Strana.ua* and *Timer*

Theme 1. War in Syria

In terms of news coverage, both *Vesti* and *Strana.ua* mostly **adhere to standards of neutral reporting**. In 2015-2017, they published news about the Kremlin's aggressive actions in Syria; the bombing of Aleppo; the hostile position of Russian representatives at the UN Security Council; Western sanctions linked to Moscow's support for Assad. Quite often, news releases reported news in an unbiased manner. For instance: *"In Syria, Russian general Asapov is killed; Ukraine called him a commander of "DPR army";*¹²⁸ *"Combatants in Syria shot Russian helicopter";*¹²⁹ *"In Moscow, a protest demonstration against war in Syria gathered".*¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Shutov, R. (2015), *Раскачка по плану* (Rocking on target), MediaSapiens, available at: http://ms.detector.media/monitoring/advocacy_and_influence/raskachka_po_planu/. [Accessed 26.07.2018]; Shutov, R. (2015), *Метаморфози російської пропаганди*. Газета «Вести» (Metamorphosis of Russian propaganda. Vesti newspaper), MediaSapiens, available at: http://ms.detector.media/monitoring/advocacy_and_influence/metamorfozi_rossijskoi_propagandi_gazeta_vesti/. [Accessed 26.07.2018]

¹²⁸ Strana.ua (2017), *В Сирії погіб російський генерал Асапов, якого Україна називала командиром «армії ДНР»* (In Syria, Russian general Asapov is killed; Ukraine called him a commander of "DPR army"), available at: <https://strana.ua/news/94662-v-sirii-ot-razryva-miny-na-peredovoj-pohib-rossijskij-heneral-asapov.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹²⁹ Vesti (2016), *Боевики в Сирії сбили російський вертолет* (Combatants in Syria shot Russian helicopter), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/159720-boeviki-v-sirii-sbili-rossijskij-vertolet>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹³⁰ Vesti (2015), *В Москві собрався мітинг проти війни в Сирії* (In Moscow, a protest demonstration against war in Syria gathered), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/119451-v-moskve-startoval-miting-protiv-voyny-v-sirii>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

In some of their news reporting, *Vesti* make a special emphasis on the hostile and aggressive style of the Kremlin policy, which warrants drawing a conclusion about the negative attitude of the outlet towards Moscow. In these publications, the Russian policy is condemned, or even mocked: “RF Ministry of Defense “proved” cooperation between US and ISIS with screenshots from the mobile game”;¹³¹ “Russia used vacuum bombs in Aleppo”;¹³² “A sausage also looks like d*ck’. In the net, a parody on Russia representative in UN got mega popularity”.¹³³

Both *Vesti* and *Strana.ua* actively reported Russian bombing of US allies and of humanitarian missions; the declarations and political actions of Western countries and their leaders against aggressive Russian actions; the economic background of Moscow’s intervention in Syria, etc.

However, along with that, *Strana.ua* tends to spread conspiracy theories. In its special manner of composing articles (they look like a compilation of comments of different experts sharing different theories of what is happening behind the curtains), the outlet creates the impression that global politics is incomprehensible, with powerful global actors playing their game, in which Ukraine is merely a toy.

The topic of the **war in Syria is frequently linked to the war in Donbas**; the two conflicts are described as components of one single confrontation between the USA and Russia. This goes in line with the narratives that the Kremlin disseminates in Ukraine. Monitoring of the Kremlin propaganda in Ukraine reveals similar narratives have been repeatedly spread, as: Ukraine obeys its Western masters; Ukraine is a failed state; the war in Donbas is a war between Washington and Moscow, etc. The following headings demonstrate clear correlation between *Vesti* and *Strana* discourse with those narratives of the Kremlin: “Putin offered Trump to start with a clean sheet and forget about Ukraine – media”;¹³⁴ “Seizure of Aleppo is the second Stalingrad’: events in Syria can make Ukraine an exchange coin”;¹³⁵ “New meeting between Putin and Trump. How did Kyiv remain

¹³¹ Vesti (2017), Минобороны РФ «доказала» взаимодействие США с ИГИЛ скриншотами с мобильной игры (RF Ministry of Defense “proved” cooperation between US and ISIS with screenshots from the mobile game), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/265191-minooborony-rf-dokazala-vzaimodejstvie-ssha-s-ihil-snimkami-s-kompjuternoj-ihry>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹³² Vesti (2016), Россия сбросила на Алеппо вакуумные бомбы (Russia used vacuum bombs in Aleppo), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/202547-roccija-cbrocila-na-aleppo-vakuumnye-bomby>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹³³ Vesti (2017), «Колбаса тоже на х** похожа». В сети стала мегапопулярной пародия на выступление постпреда России в ООН (“A sausage also looks like d*ck”. In the net, a parody on Russia representative in UN got mega popularity), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/234514-kolbasa-tozhe-na-kh-pokhozha-v-seti-mehapopuljarnoj-stala-parodija-na-vystuplenie-postpreda-rossii-v-oon>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹³⁴ Strana.ua (2017), Путин предложил Трампу начать с чистого листа и забыть про Украину – СМИ (Putin offered Trump to start with a clean sheet and forget about Ukraine – media), available at: <https://strana.ua/news/92497-putin-predlahal-trampu-zabyt-proshloe-vkljuchaja-ahressiju-rf-v-ukraine.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹³⁵ Kharchenko, A. (2016), «Захват Алеппо – это второй Сталинград»: события в Сирии могут сделать Украину разменной монетой (“Seizure of Aleppo is the second Stalingrad”: events in Syria can make Ukraine an exchange coin), Vesti, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/215304-zakhvat-aleppo-eto-vtoroj-ctalinhrad-cobyttija-v-cirii-mohut-cdelat-ukrainu-razmennoj-monetoj>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

without advocates";¹³⁶ *"After Aleppo bombings, they started to discuss surrender of Ukraine for the peace in Syria"*.¹³⁷

Generally, both *Vesti* and *Strana.ua* describe Russia as an aggressive, hostile, dangerous player that follows no rules. Yet, these outlets stress that **despite being so cruel and rude, Moscow is a global player**. Russia gained acknowledgement as an equal to the USA; it forced everyone to take its stances in consideration, having become a crucial part of all global processes. *"RF and USA have no other way but to negotiate"*¹³⁸. Without any references or examples of statements, *Strana.ua* argues that *"in each speech, where relations with Russia are touched upon, representatives of the American administration stress that, along with all the contradictions with Moscow, they expect the continuation of constructive cooperation in Syria. ... In general, the weight that RF gained in the Middle East makes it a very important partner for Washington..."*¹³⁹

In general, the Kremlin is portrayed in the selected outlets as a winner in the Syrian war: *"Contrary to the limited gains of the? Soviet army contingent in Afghanistan, they [Russian soldiers] will leave Syria as winners"*.¹⁴⁰

Furthermore, there are other important messages that correlate with the Kremlin narratives aimed at the Ukrainian audience. It is frequently stated that the Western allies will soon abandon Ukraine and it will capitulate. The myth of a possible "great deal" between Trump and Putin is repeatedly mentioned¹⁴¹. According to the monitored media, the economic crisis in Ukraine is very deep, and in any case much deeper than in Russia. Ukrainian authorities wage a disastrous war instead of searching for a dialogue with Russia; close economic, social and cultural ties with Russia are evident and inevitable. *"The deterioration of the Ukrainian economy looks much more serious. The asymmetry is evident when the smaller actor loses in a conflict much more than the bigger one. The key economic indicators demonstrate the same: over the last 2 years, the real incomes of Russians decreased by 5%, but those of*

¹³⁶ Kharchenko, A. (2017), *Новая встреча Путина с Трампом. Почему Киев остался без адвокатов* (New meeting between Putin and Trump. How did Kyiv remain without advocates), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/263981-ruka-kieva-pochemu-na-vstreche-trampa-i-putina-u-ukrainy-net-advokatov>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹³⁷ Kharchenko, A. (2016), *Из-за бомбежек Алеппо заговорили о «сдаче» Украины ради мира в Сирии* (After Aleppo bombings, they started to discuss surrender of Ukraine for the peace in Syria), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/202330-iz-za-bombezhek-aleppo-zahovorili-o-cdache-ukrainy-radi-mira-v-cirii>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹³⁸ *Vesti* (2017), *Война в Сирии. «У РФ и США нет другого выхода, только договариваться»* (War in Syria. "RF and USA have no other way but to negotiate"), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/233981-u-rf-i-ssha-net-druhoho-vykroda-tolko-dohovarivatsja>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹³⁹ Oleg Voloshin (2017), *Мировая политика в 2017 году. Репетиция концерта* (World policy in 2017. Rehearsal of the concert), *Strana.ua*, available at: <https://strana.ua/articles/analysis/114491-mirovaja-politika-v-2017-hodu-repetitsija-simfonicheskoho-orkestra.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁴⁰ *Strana.ua* (2017), *Саакашвили на свободе, Яценюк и Аваков дают показания, Путин уходит из Сирии* (Saakashvili in freedom; Yatseniuk and Avakov give witnesses; Putin quits Syria), available at: <https://strana.ua/articles/analysis/110863-saakashvili-na-svobode-jatsenjuk-i-avakov-na-sude-po-janukovichu-putin-ukhodit-iz-sirii.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁴¹ For example: Kharchenko, A. (2016), *Из-за бомбежек Алеппо заговорили о «сдаче» Украины ради мира в Сирии* (After Aleppo bombings, they started to discuss surrender of Ukraine for the peace in Syria), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/202330-iz-za-bombezhek-aleppo-zahovorili-o-cdache-ukrainy-radi-mira-v-cirii>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]; Studennikova, G. (2017), *Схема для Трампа. «Крым – России, Донбасс – Украине»* (Scheme for Trump. "Crimea to Russia, Donbas to Ukraine), *Strana.ua*, available at: <https://strana.ua/articles/analysis/47419-krym-rossii-donbass-ukraine.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

the Ukrainians – by 27%. And Kyiv should consider this while building its further political course. It should not ignore the economic trends for long”.¹⁴²

The monitored media, and the experts they quote, **make Kyiv appear responsible for the war in Donbas**; allegedly, Kyiv undermines the implementation of the Minsk agreements. *“If a compromise [between RF and USA] is achieved, this will mean that all the arrangements about Donbas are still in force, and the West will continue exerting pressure on Kyiv towards implementing the political part of the Minsk agreements. Hence, the scheduled demilitarisation of the demarcation line will be de facto accepted”*.¹⁴³ It is repeatedly stressed that there is a rise of far-right extremism in Ukraine supported by the government¹⁴⁴; that Kyiv plays dirty games: it interferes in the US elections, and supplies nuclear elements for North Korean missiles¹⁴⁵.

The sources that the two media outlets refer to in their news also show pro-Russian bias. In the selected articles of *Strana.ua*, 17 out of 40 sources are Kremlin officials or Russian media. For *Vesti*, this share is 21 out of 56.

The third selected outlet – **Timer** – is not so frequent in reporting global political developments, however it is much more **strongly anti-Western**. In its reports on Syria, it **focuses on the success of the Russian fight against ISIS**¹⁴⁶. Russian troops are *“exterminating whole caravans of living force and equipment of the adversary”*¹⁴⁷. They *“applied high-precision weapons not to damage ancient artifacts”* in Palmira¹⁴⁸. *“Without the interference of the Russian aviation in late September 2015, ISIS would have already settled in Damascus. New recruits had been continuously joining ISIS through the border with Turkey ... until Russians came to Syria’s aid.”*¹⁴⁹ The cruelties

¹⁴² Blinov, A. (2016), *Крах России. Сколько можно ждать* (Russia’s crush. How long should we wait), Strana.ua, available at: <http://longread.strana.ua/krah-rossii>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁴³ Rafal, A. (2016), *От Алеппо до Донецка. Отношения России и США по Сирии перешли в фазу острого конфликта. Что это значит для Украины* (From Aleppo to Donetsk. Relations between Russia and USA turned to the phase of deep conflict. What this means for Ukraine), Strana.ua, available at: <https://strana.ua/articles/analysis/34017-vozmozhno-li-stolknovenie-rossii-i-ssha-v-sirii.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁴⁴ Skibitskaya, Ju. (2016), *Убийство Бузины и призывы к ИГИЛ. История «Миротворца»* (Murder of Busyna and claims to ISIS. History of Myrotvorets), Strana.ua, available at: <https://strana.ua/articles/reconstruction/12709-ubijstvo-buziny-i-prizvyvy-k-igil-istoriya-mirotvorca.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁴⁵ Kharchenko, A. (2017), *Новая встреча Путина с Трампом. Почему Киев остался без адвокатов* (New meeting between Putin and Trump. How did Kyiv remain without advocates), Vesti, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/263981-ruka-kiyeva-pochemu-na-vstreche-trampa-i-putina-u-ukrainy-net-advokatov>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁴⁶ (2017), *В Сирии убили русского генерала* (In Syria, Russian general is killed), Timer, available at: http://timer-odessa.net/news/v_sirii_ubili_russkogo_generala_138.html. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁴⁷ Grebtsov, V. (2016), *Дайджест международных новостей: «Война и мир» меж Алеппо и Мосулом и «Американская трагедия» миссис Клинтон* (Digest of international news: “Peace and war” between Aleppo and Mosul, and Mrs. Clinton’s “American Tragedy”), Timer, available at: http://timer-odessa.net/statji/daydjest_mejdunarodnih_novostey_voyna_s_ig_ot_sirii_do_filippin_dumi_evropi_o_samostoyatelnosti_i_vihod_ssha_iz_parijskogo_sogla.html. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁴⁸ Grebtsov, V. (2016), *Дайджест международных новостей: освобождение Пальмиры, война с джихадистами от Нигерии до Йемена, пасхальные теракты и эрдогановы сложности* (Digest of international news: liberation of Palmira, war against jihadis from Nigeria to Yemen, Easter terrorist attacks and Erdogan’s difficulties), Timer, available at: http://timer-odessa.net/statji/daydjest_mejdunarodnih_novostey_887.html. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁴⁹ Grebtsov, V. (2015), *Сирия: Война всех против всех?* (Syria: the war of everyone against everyone?), Timer, available at: http://timer-odessa.net/statji/siriya_voyna_vseh_protiv_vseh_755.html. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

carried out by the Russian army, as well as the chemical attacks waged by the Assad government, were silenced in *Timer*.

In December 2015, an extensive article was published providing a background of the Syrian conflict¹⁵⁰. In this publication, Bashar al-Assad appears (surprisingly) as a modern-minded, progressive leader. The anti-Assad uprisings were the result of his policy of “political and, especially, economic liberalisation”, and the activity of foreign charitable foundations. “Religious communities united around President Bashar Assad as the only leader standing up for the freedom of religion/religious toleration? in Syria”. **The forces fighting against Assad are “radicals” paid by Turkey and Saudi Arabia.**

On April 1, 2016 *Timer* issued a satirical editorial publication in the format of a pamphlet that **conveyed the worldview communicated by the Kremlin**: chaos, lawlessness, hypocrisy and deep crisis in the West. The world is dangerous, and truth is relative: “The tolerant German citizens respond to the wave of rape incidents by taking in more “peaceful refugees”... and with marches of men wearing female clothes. Relatives and neighbors of victims in the terrorist attacks in Brussels draw with chalks claims for peace on the asphalt... The President of the United States assumes that the defeat of Islamic fanatics in Syria by Russian troops is a sign of Russia's weakness. He says that the use of armed force is a sign of the weakness of losers in politics. And he forgets about the doings of his own country in Iraq, Libya and Yugoslavia... There is a split to absurdity between the notorious standards of international law and democracy. And no one notices this. Truly, losing a sense of humor is a sign of insanity!”

Theme 2. Election Meddling

The topic on Russian interference in elections is **absent in *Timer*, but significantly focused on in *Strana.ua* and *Vesti***. However, both outlets occasionally stress that there is **no clear evidence of such interference**¹⁵¹ (the phrase “alleged interference” is widely used). Instead, the Ukrainian role in the US elections occupies most of the attention. In this regard, **the Manafort case** is actively reported by both outlets. In 2017 Paul Manafort, Donald Trump's campaign chairman in 2016 was charged with illegal lobbying in favor of the Ukrainian government of the former president Viktor Yanukovich. Though Mr. Manafort provided his illegal services to the Kremlin as well, the *Vesti* and *Strana.ua* shift the attention from Russian interference in US elections to portray only the Ukraine case: “It is Ukraine, not Russia, that interfered in the US elections. How the Trump's team try to hide the scandal with his son”;¹⁵² “Manafort is pressed to witness against Trump: will the scandal of the

¹⁵⁰ Grebtsov, V. (2015), *Сирия: Война всех против всех?* (Syria: the war of everyone against everyone?), *Timer*, available at: http://timer-odessa.net/statji/siriya_voyna_vseh_protiv_vseh_755.html. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁵¹ *Strana.ua* (2017), *Выборы в Германии. Кто будет править главной страной Евросоюза* (Germany elections: who is going to rule the main state of EU), available at: <https://strana.ua/news/94389-vybory-v-hermanii-2017-kto-prokhodit-v-bundestah-rejtinhi.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁵² *Vesti* (2017), «В выборы в США вмешивалась Украина, а не Россия». Как у Трампа заминают скандал с сыном (“This is Ukraine, not Russia interfered in US elections”. How they at Trump's hush up the scandal with his son), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/247119-v-vybory-v-ssha-vmeshivalas-ukraina-a-ne-rossija-kak-u-trampa-zaminajut-novyj-skandal>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

century hit Ukraine?";¹⁵³ *"Pal Ivanych's conspiracy. What Manafort is blamed for and what this means for Ukraine"*¹⁵⁴.

However, there are news pieces (most of them in *Vesti*), where Russia is depicted as a malicious power: *"FBI: Russia 'hacked' computers of Republicans"*;¹⁵⁵ *"Zuckerberg told about Russian interference in US elections via Facebook"*.¹⁵⁶

The US is depicted as decisively anti-Russian, while Europe (Germany above all) is more constructive and pragmatic, seeking reconciliation with the Kremlin. In this context, the news piece of December 24, 2017 titled *"Lithuanian Premier Grybauskaite decided that it is better to have friendship with Russia than war"*¹⁵⁷ (*Strana.ua*) is quite illustrative. Very often similar politicians' words appear distorted or manipulated in the heading: Ms.Grybauskaite stated that communication should continue, but good relations with Moscow will be restored only if Russia changed its approach (in particular, stopped interfering in elections). However, the heading carries another message: European leaders are tired of confrontation with Moscow and are looking for compromises.

Another manipulation with headings can be found in a news piece of December 16, 2017 titled *"All the political ads in Facebook will be censored by special forces"*¹⁵⁸ (*Strana.ua*). It informs that, after the scandal with Russian interference in the US elections, Facebook will hire specialists (perhaps, former officers of the security services) to monitor election ads. Hence, it is about Facebook, not security forces; and monitoring, not censorship.

Theme 3. Energy

In the selected for analysis media outlets, the topic of Russian energy carriers is reported along two dimensions: international (Russian gas, oil, coal import to the EU, Asia etc.) and domestic (purchase of Russian coal and gas for Ukrainian purposes, and gas transit through Ukraine).

¹⁵³ Kharchenko, A. (2017), *Манафорта дожимают раги показаний на Трампа: зацепит ли Киев скандал века* (Manafort is pressed for witnesses against Trump: will the scandal of the century hit Ukraine), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/266321-manaforta-dozhimajut-radi-pokazaniy-na-trampa-zatsepit-li-kiev-skandal-veka>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁵⁴ Studennikova, G. (2017), *Заговор Пал Иваныча. В чем ФБР обвиняет Манафорта и что это значит для Трампа и Украины* (Pal Ivanych's conspiracy. What Manafort is blamed for and what this means for Ukraine), *Strana.ua*, available at: <https://strana.ua/articles/analysis/101799-pol-manafort-sdalsja-fbr-vse-podrobnosti-dela-i-kak-ono-svjazano-s-ukrainoj.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁵⁵ *Vesti* (2017), *ФБР: Россия «ломала» компьютеры республиканцев* (FBI: Russia "hacked" computers of Republicans), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/219201-fbr-roccija-lomala-kompjutyery-recpublikantsev>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁵⁶ *Vesti* (2017), *Цукерберг рассказал о российском вмешательстве в выборы США через Facebook* (Zuckerberg told about Russian interference in US elections via Facebook), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/257627-tsukerberh-rasskazal-o-rossijskom-vmeshatelstve-v-vybory-ssha-cherez-facebook>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁵⁷ *Strana.ua* (2017), *Премьер Литвы Грибаускайте решила, что с Россией лучше дружить, чем воевать* (Lithuanian Premier Grybauskaite decided that this is better to have a friendship with Russia, than war), available at: <https://strana.ua/news/113700-s-rossiej-luchshe-druzhit-chem-voevat-dalja-hribauskajte.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁵⁸ *Strana.ua* (2017), *Всю политическую рекламу в Facebook будут цензурировать спецслужбы* (All the political ads in Facebook will be censored by special forces), available at: <https://strana.ua/news/98981-facebook-najmet-amerikanskikh-spetssluzhbitov-dlja-analiza-politreklamy-v-sotsseti.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

As regards **the international dimension**, a number of reports can be identified in *Vesti* that stress the dangerous nature of the Kremlin's energy policy: "Poroshenko: Nord Stream 2 is directed against the EU";¹⁵⁹ "Ukraine's losses from Nord Stream 2 are estimated in the Rada";¹⁶⁰ "Politiken: Nord Stream 2 will strangle Ukraine".¹⁶¹ *Strana.ua* reports on Russia's global energy policy only occasionally, with its publications relating the Kremlin's actions in a neutral manner. The **key message is that EU actors are interested in cooperation with Russia** in this domain: "Hungary agreed with Gazprom to expand Turk Stream";¹⁶² "An Austrian company transferred EUR 200 mln for Nord Stream 2";¹⁶³ "EU lawyers concluded that Nord Stream 2 is entirely an economic project that requires no negotiations between Russia and EU".¹⁶⁴

The key purpose of the sanctions that the US imposed against Nord Stream 2, as *Vesti* reports it, is "to push the RF out from the gas market"¹⁶⁵. "Starting from 1970s, [the USA] has been trying to limit USSR's, and now – Russia's, access to the European energy market"¹⁶⁶. Europe is not happy with this. The sanctions "can prevent Germany from becoming the biggest gas hub in Europe"¹⁶⁷.

As regards the Ukrainian **domestic dimension**, there are several topics closely related to the Kremlin's policy in the energy field that are sensitive for the Ukrainian society, and are therefore subject to manipulation by *Strana.ua*, *Vesti* and *Timer*. Ukrainian energy security is significantly dependent on Russian energy supplies and coal from the occupied Donbas. Since the war with Russia continues, and the coal deposits are under Moscow's effective control, there is a risk that one day the country will remain without energy supplies. Although

¹⁵⁹ *Vesti* (2017), *Порошенко: «Северный поток-2» направлен против всего Евросоюза* (Poroshenko: Nord Stream 2 is directed against all the EU), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/politika/244113-poroshenko-severnyj-potok-2-napravlen-protiv-vseho-evrosojuza>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁶⁰ *Vesti* (2017), *В Раде оценили потери Украины от «Северного потока-2»* (In Rada, the Ukraine's losses due to Nord Stream 2 are estimated), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/strana/260687-v-rade-otsenili-poteri-ukrainy-ot-severnoho-potoka-2>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁶¹ *Vesti* (2017), *Politiken: «Северный поток-2» задушит Украину* (Politiken: Nord Stream 2 will strangle Ukraine), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/strana/230388-severnyj-potok-2-zadushit-ukrainu-kobolev-dal-intervju-datskoj-politiken>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁶² *Strana.ua* (2017), *Венгрия договорилась с Газпром о продлении «Турецкого потока»* (Hungary agreed with Gazprom to expand Turk Stream), available at: <https://strana.ua/news/79844-vengriya-dogovorilas-s-gazpromom-o-prodlenii-tureckogo-potoka.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁶³ *Strana.ua* (2017), *Австрийская компания перечислила 200 млн евро на «Северный поток – 2»* (An Austrian company transferred EUR 200 mln for Nord Stream 2), available at: <https://strana.ua/news/86644-avstrijskaja-kompanija-perechislila-200-mln-na-severnyj-potok-2.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁶⁴ *Strana.ua* (2017), *Юристы Евросоюза решили, что «Северный поток-2» чисто экономический проект, не требующий переговоров России и ЕС* (EU lawyers concluded that Nord Stream 2 is entirely economic project that requires no negotiations between Russia and EU), available at: <https://strana.ua/news/96005-severnyj-potok-2-ne-trebuets-politicheskikh-perehovrov-es-i-rossii.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁶⁵ Riabokon, A. (2017), *Санкции против РФ: Россия теряет Европу как рынок сбыта газа* (Sanctions against RF: Russia loses Europe as a sales market for its gas), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/250567-sanktsii-protiv-rf-rossija-terjaet-evropu-kak-rynok-sbyta-haza>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁶⁶ Nikulin, A. (2017). «Большой газовый пирог»: почему Европа не считается с интересами Украины ("Great Gas Pie": why Europe does not consider Ukraine's interests), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/244127-evropejskij-hazovyj-piroh-pochemu-hermanija-ne-stanet-schitatsja-s-problemami-ukrainy>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁶⁷ Riabokon, A. (2017), *Санкции против РФ: Россия теряет Европу как рынок сбыта газа* (Sanctions against RF: Russia loses Europe as a sales market for its gas), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/250567-sanktsii-protiv-rf-rossija-terjaet-evropu-kak-rynok-sbyta-haza>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

the government has taken necessary measures¹⁶⁸, publications appear on a regular basis that **stimulate the fear of blackouts and absence of heating** (especially in autumn, before the heating season).

The media provided a frightening picture of **the upcoming cold apocalypse**. In 2017, *Vesti* published a long article¹⁶⁹ with panic-stricken subtitles: *“Threat of mass blackouts... When should we expect the blackouts to start... Who will suffer blackouts... It will not be only ordinary citizens to suffer blackouts... What will happen with the [US] dollar rate... What will happen with the Internet...”* (Allegedly, the dollar rate will fly up and the Internet may be switched off because of a lack of coal to produce electricity.) In another article of *Vesti*, the only expert opinion provided was highly emotional and biased: *“Moscow is not in a hurry. And it is still ready to watch the dying convulsions of Ukrainian energy and metal industries without Donbas coal. The Kremlin wants to see: will Kyiv be able to find alternative coal suppliers? Will there be any protests when blackouts begin? Will unemployed metallurgists march to Kyiv? Will [US] dollar be exchanged for 40-50 hryvnias?”*¹⁷⁰

In this situation, according to *Vesti* and *Strana.ua*, **the only solution is to restore trade relations with Russia**. The outlets consistently condemn the Ukrainian government for its refusal to purchase coal from Russia during the war.

In a detailed article about the situation in the energy sector¹⁷¹, *Vesti* provides an extended citation of Oleksandr Klymenko: *“The only problem is that the authorities want to fill their pockets with money gained in energy deals, while others want to receive their share too. ... Talking about Groisman and his government, Semenchenko and his railways sitters [organizer and participants in the blockade respectively], about “bloody anthracite from Donbas” and Rotterdam coal, I cannot refrain from recalling a well-known saying : “When one starts talking about patriotism, this means that they want to steal more”. This is a leitmotiv of both the current story about the so-called energy emergency situation, and everything that’s going on in our country over the last three years”*. *Vesti* introduced Klymenko as a leader of a political party; however, it did not state that he was a former member of government during the Presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, who is now in exile in Moscow. Besides, his words were put in an article paragraph with the subtitle “Experts’ version” and he was the only expert, whose position was presented (which speaks of the absence of alternative viewpoints). These two violations of journalist standards point at the scarcity of editorial neutrality. The activists, who carried out the *blockade* were repeatedly called “radicals”. The complicated political event was explained in line with the narratives of Ukraine as a battlefield of oligarchs, and the growing far-right threat in the country.

¹⁶⁸ Hromadske (2017), *Опалювальний сезон-2017: чи готова Україна до зими?* (Heating season 2017: is Ukraine ready for winter?), available at: <https://hromadske.ua/posts/opaliuvalnyi-sezon-2017-do-zymy-hotovi> [Accessed 13.08.2018]

¹⁶⁹ Belovodskaya, D. (2017), *ЧП в українській енергетиці вступило в силу. І що тепер?* (Emergency Situation in Ukrainian energetics came into force. What’s next?), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/strana/225700-chrezvychnajnoe-polozhenie-v-ukrainskoj-enerhetike-vstupilo-v-silu-i-cto-teper>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁷⁰ Nikulin, A. (2017), *Новости України: странная посылка подростку из АТО и загнанный в тупик Порошенко* (News of Ukraine: strange parcel to a teen in ATO and trapped Poroshenko), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/strana/231827-novosti-ukrainy--231827>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁷¹ Belovodskaya, D. (2017), *ЧП в українській енергетиці вступило в силу. І що тепер?* (Emergency Situation in Ukrainian energetics came into force. What’s next?), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/strana/225700-chrezvychnajnoe-polozhenie-v-ukrainskoj-enerhetike-vstupilo-v-silu-i-cto-teper>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

Another domestic energy-related topic that was in the spotlight of media during these years was **the lawsuit at the Stockholm Arbitration Court** between Ukrainian *Naftogaz* and Russian *Gazprom*. The Russian side demanded a compensation of 56 billion USD for the supplied gas. The Ukrainian side won the case, and the sum of the debt was dramatically cut – to 2 billion USD. However, *Vesti* and *Strana.ua* make an effort at depicting this victory as a defeat. In an article titled *“What was that? Whose is the victory? “Ъ” explained how much the Stockholm victory cost to Naftogaz. Vesti concludes: “Naftogaz will pay Gazprom 2 USD for a moral victory”*.¹⁷² *„It is Ukraine that owes us 2 billion USD”: Gazprom sounded its version of the Naftogaz’ “victory” in Stockholm*”¹⁷³. News with such headings manipulatively shift the emphasis from the positive results of the court ruling; instead, they concentrate on the fact that the debt still exists. *“The court’s resolution is evidently a compromise. However, due to this compromise, Gazprom owes nothing to Naftogaz, while Naftogaz owes 2 billion USD to Gazprom”*.¹⁷⁴ *Strana.ua* quotes its permanent commentator Dmytro Marunych: *“To report on Naftogaz’ victory, when multibillion debts remained, is propaganda targeted at the domestic audience. Naftogaz will have to pay more than 2 billion of USD, and it is unclear where this money will be found”*.¹⁷⁵ Again, no alternative point of view was provided.

Vesti pays attention to another energy-related topic that was not reported by *Strana.ua* or *Timer*: **Russian nuclear supplies**. Only four articles related to the issue have been identified. However, all those articles conveyed messages firmly in line with the Kremlin propaganda. They **spread panic and fear**. For example, there is a report with the emotional heading *“One step to nuclear catastrophe: why the number of accidents in Ukrainian nuclear plants grows dramatically”*, accompanied by a picture of a nuclear mushroom¹⁷⁶. Another example of a manipulative and frightening heading is the following: *“Nuclear experiments conducted by the government: what stands behind the emergency situations in nuclear plants, and is there any danger to the population”*. *“Nuclear experiments”* refer to a number of political decisions entailed by the war with Russia. The first was linked to a change of the nuclear supplier from Russian to American; the second was the refusal to purchase Russian coal for the power plants that increased the share of nuclear energy in Ukraine. Here, *Vesti* condemns the government for such decisions and calls them politically biased. *“The current government ... refuses to invite Russian*

¹⁷² Vesti (2017), *Что это было? Чья победа? «Ъ» объяснил, во сколько «Нафтогазу» обоилась победа в Стокгольме* (What was that? Whose is the victory? “Ъ” explained how much the Stockholm victory cost to Naftogaz), available at: <https://business.vesti-ukr.com/finance/270757-cto-eto-bylo-chja-pobeda-objasnil-vo-skolko-naftogazu-oboshlas-peremoha-v-stokholme>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁷³ Vesti (2017), *«Это Украина должна нам \$2 млрд»: Газпром озвучил свою версию «победы» Нафтогаза в Стокгольме* (This is Ukraine that owes us \$2 billion”: Gazprom sounded its version of the Naftogaz’ “victory” in Stockholm), available at: <https://business.vesti-ukr.com/finance/270738-eto-ukraina-dolzha-nam-2-mlrd-gazprom-ozvuchil-svoju-versiju-pobedy-naftogaza-v-stokholme>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁷⁴ Studennikova, G. (2017), *«За газ платят только трусы». Что означает решение суда в Стокгольме и отгаст ли «Нефтегаз» \$2 млрд «Газпрому»* (“Only cowards pay for gas”. What does Stockholm court resolution means, and if Naftogaz will pay \$2 billion to Gazprom), Strana.ua, available at: <https://strana.ua/articles/113503-cto-oznachaet-reshenie-stokholmskoho-arbitrazha-po-hazovomu-sporu-naftogaza-i-hazproma.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Vesti (2017), *В шаге от ядерной катастрофы: почему в Украине резко растет число аварий на АЭС* (One step to nuclear catastrophe: why the number of accidents in Ukrainian nuclear plants grows dramatically), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/strana/235013-v-shahe-ot-jadernoj-katastrofy-pochemu-v-ukraine-rezko-rastet-chislo-avarij-na-aes>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

scientists as they represent 'an aggressor state'¹⁷⁷. "The energy produced from nuclear plants increased because of a lack of coal – the result of a transport blockade of Donbas supported personally by President Poroshenko".¹⁷⁸

As in the case of coal, Vesti promotes Russia as a reliable supplier: "American [nuclear] fuel is 30% worse than Russian... In the Czech Republic ... they refused to import nuclear fuel from the US and switched to Russian heat-emitting elements because they had to stop reactors frequently in order to change the defective cartridges since American fuel leaked".¹⁷⁹ In terms of the US, the narrative related to nuclear suppliers is the same as with coal: it aggressively promotes its interests, and Ukraine obeys to the detriment of its own interests: "The West has insistently pushed forward the Westinghouse company ... as an alternative fuel supplier to nuclear plants in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. The purpose was to undermine Russian interests in the region".¹⁸⁰

Compared with Vesti and Strana.ua, Timer was less active in covering energy-related topics. Once it spread fake news about the mayor of Henichesk (small town close to occupied Crimea), who according to the outlet had requested gas supplies from Putin¹⁸¹ (later, when it turned out that this was fake news, the outlet mentioned this case again, but this time in an apparently ironic manner¹⁸²). An interesting article was published in August 2017¹⁸³ about the transit of Russian gas, with anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian messages being mainstreamed. In particular, the Euromaidan (rather than Russian military aggression) is provided as the reason for all economic problems in Ukraine: "The [Crisis] was catalyzed as a consequence of the victory of the Maidan, after which the country was directed in the wrong way of the Baltic states". Initiative groups who organized a blockade of the occupied territories were labelled as far-right violent radicals ("The state lost its monopoly on the means of violence at the expense of different paramilitary 'patriotic' formations. The illustrative example is the blockade..."). **Ukraine is depicted as a failed state contrary to strong and successful Russia.** The article contained glorification of the Soviet past: "Due to infrastructure created during

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Vesti (2017), *Ядерные эксперименты власти: что стоит за ЧП на АЭС и есть ли опасность для населения* (Nuclear experiments of government: what stands behind the emergency situations in nuclear plants, and is there any danger for population), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/strana/260369-jadernye-eksperimenty-vlasti-cto-stoit-za-chp-na-aes-i-est-li-opasnost-dlja-naselenija>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Vesti (2017), *Вопреки предостережениям экспертов «Энергоатом» закупает у Westinghouse еще 6 партий ядерного топлива* (Despite experts' warnings, Energoatom purchases 6 more consignments of nuclear fuel from Westinghouse), available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/strana/236150-vopreki-predosterezenijam-ekspertov-enerhoatom-zakupat-u-westinghouse-eshche-6-partij-jadernoho-topliva>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁸¹ Timer (2016), *Россия начала поставки газа в Генчиск в ответ на обращение мэра города к Путину* (Russia started gas supplies to Henychesk after the town major appeal to Putin), available at: http://timer-odessa.net/news/rossiya_nachala_postavki_gaza_v_genichesk_v_otvet_na_obraschenie_mera_goroda_k_putinu_883.html. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁸² Tkachev, Ju.; Ryzhanov, K. (2016), *Судья Бурян, пацанячий поступок и мэр Генчиска: десятка политических мемов 2016-го года* (Judge Buran, patzan act and mayor of Henychesk: top 10 political mems of 2016), Timer, available at: http://timer-odessa.net/statji/sudya_buran_patsanyachiy_postupok_i_mer_genicheska_desyatka_politicheskikh_memov_2016_go_goda_758.html. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁸³ Gayevskiy, D. (2017), *Транзитные возможности Украины отправлены под нож дехоммунизации* (Transit capacity of Ukraine is put under the knife of de-communisation), Timer, available at: http://timer-odessa.net/statji/tranzitnie_vozmojnosti_ukraini_otpravleni_pod_noj_dekommunizatsii_303.html. [Accessed 23.07.2018].

the “malfeasant” Soviet epoch...”, the governmental de-communisation policy is condemned. The heading “*The transit capacity of Ukraine is put under the knife of de-communisation*” makes a negative parallel between policy in the field of economy and ideology.

Common Trends in Russian Propaganda in Ukraine

Despite notable differences, the selected media construct a virtual reality that to a large degree corresponds to the Kremlin’s propaganda narratives. Mixed with critical articles, camouflaged as an expert opinion or position of the Western media, the **messages about a strong Russia, failed Ukraine, and divided West are repeatedly promoted in their discourse.**

Contrary to *Timer* which plays the role of an alternative source of news (typical for conspiracy and other quasi-media), *Vesti* and *Strana.ua* position themselves as mainstream, independent media outlets for the wider audience. Hence, typically, the latter two don’t employ tools of fully-fledged propaganda such as fakes, labelling, or hate speech. In most of their publications, they manifest their devotedness to journalism standards of neutrality and balance, though there are a number of cases, in which these standards have evidently been violated, as demonstrated earlier in this report. This is particularly so in the case of *Vesti*: its authors prefer not to communicate any opinions of their own, but give the floor to a number of different experts, who sound out different conspiracy theories. In *Vesti* and *Strana.ua*, we can find a number of publications where Russia is negatively portrayed, which is most probably intended to allow the editors to avert criticisms of biased reporting.

Despite their seeming neutrality, subtle, but effective manipulative methods may be observed in these outlets’ content. One of the most used tools is manipulations of the news agenda. Indeed, the outlets under investigation pay more attention to the topics and news that highlight those aspects of social and political life that correspond with pro-Kremlin narratives, and at the same time silence others, which do not directly correspond to Moscow propaganda. The most illustrative example is the Manafort case, which has received excessive attention in order to put an emphasis on Ukrainian interference in the US elections and remove the spotlight from Russia.

This national assessment contains many examples of manipulations with headings, when the heading of an article is discrepant (conveys a completely different meaning) with the content of the article. Often, in trying to make an appearance of presenting expert opinion, the outlets refer to biased, or doubtful experts. *Vesti* refers to alleged commentators, whose identity and publications cannot be verified such as: Friedrich Ermler, titled as “*expert from a European analytical centre from Brussels*”; John Maccenzie, an “*American analyst*”; Daniil Vishnevskiy, a “*political scientist*”; Charles Fargo, an “*American journalist*”. This puts in doubt the quality, competency, and independence of the provided expert opinion. In another example, comments from an “*American journalist*” named Michael Hoffman are published.¹⁸⁴ There is a famous conspiracy theorist and Holocaust denier that has

¹⁸⁴ Kharchenko, A. (2017), *Обострение в Сирии: почему ссору США и РФ назвали постановкой* (Escalation in Syria: why a quarrel between USA and RF is called a staging), *Vesti*, available at: <https://vesti-ukr.com/mir/233644-obostrenie-v-sirii-pochemu-ssoru-ssha-i-rf-nazvali-postanovkoj->. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

the same name but the reader cannot verify from the quotes that they refer to the same person.¹⁸⁵ *Strana.ua* often quotes Western media or politicians, but rarely provides a direct link to the original source.¹⁸⁶ On September 13, 2017 it published an evidently biased compilation of opinions taken from Facebook¹⁸⁷; the outlet quoted completely unknown users, whose identity should be checked (for example, some accounts have been proven fake).

In the Ukrainian public discourse, it is unacceptable to recognize the occupation of Crimea and military aggression of Russia in the East of Ukraine, as well as legitimize the puppet governments in Luhansk and Donetsk. Both *Vesti* and *Strana.ua* follow this mainstream line (*Timer* does not). Their general attitude to Russia is negative, but this does not restrain them from promoting narratives close to the Kremlin. Some of the most common narratives are:

- **Russia** is malicious, aggressive and dangerous, violating international norms but it managed to become a global player and one must accept the fact that the world (and the West) have to take its interests into consideration. Putin finally forced the world to respect Russia. In the Middle East, the Kremlin played a dangerous game and won. Through military power, gas, and aggressive, but strategically effective foreign policy, Moscow sets its own global agenda.
- **The US** is situationally anti-Russian as Washington is guided above all by its own economic interests. Hence, sanctions are merely a tool to increase US profits in gas and other markets (and do not target their stated policy aims of punishing Russia for its incursion in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine). In general, Washington is seeking a mutually beneficial *modus operandi* with Moscow, and the contours of a “Great Deal” are being negotiated behind the curtains. US policy (both domestic and foreign) is a mixture of different business interests and internal corruption.
- **The EU** is also focused (only) on its own economic interest, and this interest is much closer to Russia’s than America’s. European states (and particularly Germany as a leading country in Europe) are not happy with Washington’s anti-Russian activities; they try to escape US domination, and, one after the other, attempt to establish cooperation with Russia.
- **Ukraine** is a weak country, almost a failed state. Its strategy is limited to waiting for Western support, consuming its financial assistance and blindly confronting Russia. This confrontation is short-sighted because Ukraine and Russia are deeply entangled with each other, economically, culturally, socially, and what Kyiv is doing is breaking these ties without any alternative strategy. The war in Donbas is merely a conflict between the US and Russia, with Kyiv being a puppet in Washington’s hands. Yet, in the near future the allies will abandon Kyiv, leaving it defeated.

¹⁸⁵ Michael A. Hoffman II, *Wikipedia*, available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_A._Hoffman_II. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁸⁶ For example, here: (2017), *Новые санкции США против России могут вызвать конфликт ЕС и Вашингтона – европейские СМИ* (New US sanctions against Russia may cause conflict between EU and Washington – European media), *Strana.ua*, available at: <https://strana.ua/news/84133-novye-sankcii-ssha-protiv-rossii-k-ukraine-otnosheniya-ne-imeyut-smi.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁸⁷ *Strana.ua* (2017), «Дикий совок!» Как украинские чиновники американский уголь под гимн встречали (“Wild sovok!” How Ukrainian officials greeted American coal with anthems), available at: <https://strana.ua/video/92618-dikij-sovok-pojavilos-video-kak-ukrainskie-chinovniki-amerikanskij-antratsit-vstrechali.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

Finally, **in a third of the cases, the selected outlets use Russian media as their primary source of information.** Reprinting propaganda materials from Russian government-controlled media have also been identified. The main topics selected for review in the current research have been reported in the context of other sub-topics. In particular, the Russian operation in Syria is linked with global politics and world diplomacy, the war in Donbas, the Minsk peace process and Russian aggression against Ukraine, ISIS and Islamic fundamentalism in other parts of the world (Iraq), anti-Russian sanctions,¹⁸⁸ deep crisis of the European idea and Western civilization; and the migration crisis.¹⁸⁹ Russian interference in elections is linked with Ukrainian interference in elections in US, anti-Russian sanctions, global politics and world diplomacy. Russian influence in the field of energy is connected with energy supplies to Ukraine, availability of resources for heating during the winter period, prices for gas and electricity for the population, the Stockholm trial between Naftogaz and Gazprom, the future of the Ukrainian transit pipelines, the blockade of the occupied territories of Ukraine (citizen protests against the supply of Russian coal and coal from the occupied parts of Donbas), import of American coal to Ukraine, the degradation of the Ukrainian nuclear industry, anti-Russian sanctions, US economic interests in Europe and Ukraine, and tensions between the US and EU member states.

¹⁸⁸ Strana.ua (2017), *Пять главных вопросов о новых санкциях США против России* (Five key questions about new US sanctions against Russia), available at: <https://strana.ua/news/85287-pyat-glavnyh-voprosov-o-novyh-sankciyah-ssha-protiv-moskvy.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

¹⁸⁹ Strana.ua writes: “[Migrants] preserve their [culture and religion] and even persistently endeavor to adopt European liberal lifestyle to their religious and esthetic ideas. The challenge of creeping islamisation has already buried the concept of multiculturalism” Oleg Voloshin (2017), *Мировая политика в 2017 году. Репетиция концерта* (World policy in 2017. Rehearsal of the concert), available at: <https://strana.ua/articles/analysis/114491-mirovaja-politika-v-2017-hodu-repetitsija-simfonicheskoho-orkestra-.html>. [Accessed 23.07.2018]

GEORGIA

Introduction

Although Georgia has the most pluralistic and free media environment in the South Caucasus, it remains among partly free countries on a global scale. According to the *Freedom of the Press Index*,¹⁹⁰ Georgia ranks 50th in 2017, showing a gradual slip compared to previous years (49th in 2016, 48th in 2015, 47th in 2014).

Competing political interests have been the driving factors ensuring pluralism and shaping the media environment in Georgia. **Instrumentalisation of media for political gains** and the impact of outside investments in a limited media market is a general pattern observed over the last decades. The decline in the international freedom of the press ranking is mainly attributed to the attempts of the Georgian Dream (GD) ruling party to change the ownership of a media outlet critical to the government. Late Russian tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili, who held executive positions at various Russian companies in the 1990s (LogoVAZ, Russia's largest automobile dealer), as well as Russian TV-6 and ORT channels, founded one of the largest broadcasting companies, TV Channel *Imedi*,¹⁹¹ in Georgia in 2001. Billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili who made his fortune in metals and banking in Russia¹⁹² and allegedly owned 1% of shares in Gazprom, launched TV Channel 9 in Georgia ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2012 and defeated incumbent President Mikheil Saakashvili and his ruling UNM party.

The majority of citizens (85%) receive information about Georgian politics and current affairs from television, while the Internet is a source of information for 43%, print media for 5% and radio only for 1%,¹⁹³ according to a recent survey conducted by the US National Democratic Institute (NDI). The same survey¹⁹⁴ indicates that access to Russian media as a source of information is higher in settlements densely populated by Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities (29%) than in Georgian ones (16%).

¹⁹⁰ Freedomhouse.org. (2018), *Freedom of the press*, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/georgia> [Accessed 13 Jul. 2018].

¹⁹¹ Media Meter. (n.d.), *TV Imedi*, available at: <http://mediameter.ge/en/media-profiles/tv-imeri>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

¹⁹² Forbes (2018), # 456 *Bidzina Ivanishvili*, available at: <https://www.forbes.com/profile/bidzina-ivanishvili/#11ef14884598>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

¹⁹³ National Democratic Institute (NDI) and CRRC (2018), *Results of March 2018 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia*, Public attitudes in Georgia, p.77, available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_March_2018_Public%20Presentation_English_final.pdf. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018].

¹⁹⁴ National Democratic Institute (NDI) and CRRC (2018), *Results of March 2018 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia*, Public attitudes in Georgia, available at: <http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2018ge/NGEOWATCH-by-ETHNOCODE/>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018].

The **official pro-Kremlin media channels are less popular in Georgia than ethno-nationalistic media outlets pursuing the same goals**. The ethno-nationalistic concept, neither Russian nor Western, is central to mobilizing Georgians against anti-Western causes via Georgian-language media platforms. As content analysis¹⁹⁵ of Georgian-language media shows, in contrast to 2016 and 2015, when **negative messages targeted loss of ethnic, religious or gender identity**, in 2017, a dominant topic was the foreign policy with messages aimed at **increasing the polarization on the foreign policy orientation** of the country. This change in the communication of pro-Kremlin actors shows that “loss of identity” was a rather tactical message, while the messaging aimed at demonizing Georgia’s Western partners (USA, NATO, EU) is of a strategic nature.

Requirements for financial transparency are applicable to broadcast media alone. Amendments introduced to the Law on Broadcasting in 2013 made it compulsory for all broadcasters to file quarterly reports about their sources of financing, including a breakdown of revenues from advertising, sponsorship, telemarketing and contributions from owners or any other person to the Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC). However, the requirement to disclose sources of financing is **not fully enforced** since major TV channels have challenged this provision in court. The case is still pending, thus hindering the full implementation of financial disclosure requirements. Still, broadcasters’ financial disclosure regulations only provide general information whether certain media outlet is financially sustainable or dependent on contributions.

Selection of Media Outlets

From the list of media outlets registered in Georgia, three media outlets from the pro-Russian spectrum were selected for this study, which meet the selection criteria because of their Russian government ownership (*Sputnik-Georgia*), affiliation with pro-Kremlin actors, and anti-Western content (*Georgia & the World – Geworld*, *Tbilisi* 24 – TB24).

*Sputnik Georgia*¹⁹⁶ which is part of *Sputnik* multimedia international project established under decree of the President of Russia, has been operating in Georgia since November 2014, although it has only been officially registered on 23 January 2015. Initially, the media outlet launched an illegal radio broadcasting, but after the GNCC imposed sanctions, it stopped using the radio frequency and switched to an online platform publishing multimedia materials of anti-Western content there. The owner of 100% of the shares in *Sputnik-Georgia* LLC is Anton (Tato) Laskhishvili who has been the editor-in-chief of Russian language newspaper *Svobodnaya Gruzia* since 1991¹⁹⁷.

The founder of the newspaper *Georgia & the World* (Geworld) and its online edition www.geworld.ge¹⁹⁸ is *Historical Heritage* Ltd. The establishment of *Historical*

¹⁹⁵ Media Development Foundation (2018), *Anti-Western Propaganda, 2017*, available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/89>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018].

¹⁹⁶ Sputnik Georgia is at 147th place in Georgian ranking according to Alexa Global Ranking system as for 7 February.

¹⁹⁷ Media Meter. (n.d.), *Sputnik-Georgia*, available at: <http://mediameter.ge/en/media-profiles/sputnik-georgia>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

¹⁹⁸ Georgia and the World is at 439th place in Georgian ranking according to Alexa Global Ranking system as for 7 February.

Heritage in 2009 was publicly welcomed by the then President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev. One of the members of the public council of *Historical Heritage* is Aleksandre Chachia, a Moscow-based political analyst, whom, on February 13, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded the Order of Honor for his great contribution to strengthening friendship and cooperation with the Russian Federation. Along with anti-Western attitudes, the publication is notorious for its Turkophobic, racist and homophobic content¹⁹⁹.

News agency *Tbilisi 24* Ltd ²⁰⁰ was registered in the Public Registry on 26 March 2015. Its owners are Gocha Nachkebia (50%) and Maia Shaishmelashvili (50% of the shares). The media outlet is affiliated with the *Centrists* political party, led by Vladimir Bedukadze. In its pre-election video, the *Centrist* party promised voters to legalise Russian military bases in Georgia, restore visa-free regime with Russia and issue Russian pensions²⁰¹.

Comparative Analysis of *Sputnik-Georgia*, *Geworld* and *TB 24*

Theme 1. War in Syria

Developments in Syria is **the most frequently covered theme** in all three media outlets (*Sputnik-Georgia*, *Geworld.ge*, *TB24*) which may be explained by the geopolitical setting and importance of the topic for the region. Out of 604 articles, a total of 366 (60%) are dedicated to Syria.

The most heavily covered sub-topic in relation to Syria is **the role of Russia and the RSII coalition**²⁰² in the Syrian conflict (32.4%, 188 articles), followed by activities of the US and US-led coalition²⁰³ (27.2%, 158), bilateral relations on Syrian developments between different actors, including Russia-US, Russia-Turkey (13.6%, 79). Turkey (7.1%, 41 articles) is counted separately from the US-led coalition since the official position of Ankara and attitudes of media outlets towards Turkey are conflicting over the monitored period.

¹⁹⁹ Media Meter. (n.d.). *Geworld*, available at: <http://mediameter.ge/en/media-profiles/geworld>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018].

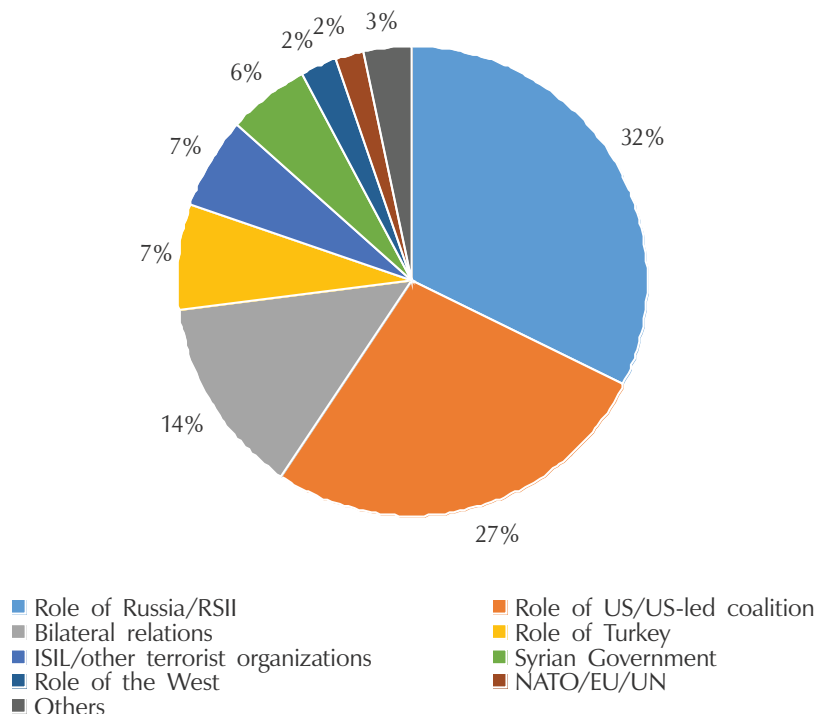
²⁰⁰ Tbilisi 24 is at 8583th place in Georgian ranking according to Alexa Global Ranking system as for 7 February.

²⁰¹ Media Meter. (n.d.). *Tbilisi 24*, available at: <http://mediameter.ge/en/media-profiles/tbilisi-24>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018].

²⁰² RSII coalition against ISIL, also referred to as 4+1 consisting of Russia, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah of Lebanon.

²⁰³ United States, Australia, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Turkey, Netherlands, Jordan, Morocco, Spain, United Kingdom.

FIGURE 15. TOPICS RELATED TO THE WAR IN SYRIA



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Russia's military presence and operations in Syria is the most frequently covered subtopic (55 articles) aimed at **showcasing Russia's military power and influence in the region**. Compared to Russia, military activities of the US and US-led coalition receive a limited coverage (36 articles) and this difference is even more apparent in reporting on the fight of Russia and Syrian government against terrorism and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), on the one hand, and Turkey and US/US-led coalition, on the other hand (Russia – 53, Syria – 18, Turkey – 5, US/US-led coalition – 4 articles). Russia's support for the Syrian Army and the President of Syria Bashar Al-Assad also receives considerable coverage (34 articles), while the position of the US and the Western institutions against Assad's regime is less emphasised (US – 7, West/NATO/EU/UN – 2 articles). Allegations that the **US (65) and NATO/UN (7) encourage terrorism** and that **the Turkish leadership has ties with ISIL** (11 articles) are also frequently reported.

Tone of coverage towards the actors

Differential attitudes towards actors transpire in the particular connotations of coverage. The **US and US-led coalition are negatively presented** 190 times (out of 282), alongside ISIL and other terrorist organisations (174). In contrast to the US and coalition member countries, Russia (6) and the Syrian government (10) receive a minimal negative coverage, while **in the case of Russia, positive coverage prevails** (150) over a neutral tone (86). The Syrian government is also

mostly presented in either neutral (208) or positive (26) terms, whereas positive or neutral mentioning of the US and US-led coalition is significantly lower (8 positive, 84 neutral articles).

Main Narratives

The US/US-led coalition. Questioning the legitimacy of the American military presence in Syria and at the same time **justifying Russian presence** as a matter of Assad's request are key narratives typical of all three media outlets. The activities of the US-led coalition are either omitted or reported negatively, emphasizing that the airstrikes launched by the coalition did not have the relevant mandate from the Syrian government or failed to have a significant effect on ongoing developments on the ground.

Another narrative observed in all media under investigation is the allegation that **the US supports and encourages terrorist groups in Syria** (e.g. *"Uncle Sam disguised in sheep's clothing. From Al-Qaeda to ISIS"*).²⁰⁴ *Geworld* goes even further and develops the conspiracy that the leader of ISIL, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi is, in fact, a spy of Mossad which suggests that ISIL is controlled by the US and Israel. Unlike *Geworld*, *Sputnik-Georgia* is spreading the same narrative based on single sources, while frequently presenting the views of those respondents who accuse the US of having ties with ISIL and other terrorist organisations.

Additionally, the narrative that **the US and US-led coalition are not really fighting terrorism but targeting Bashar al-Assad** is common for the selected media outlets. All of the three media outlets try to justify Assad's regime, insisting that allegations of Bashar al-Assad's deployment of chemical weapons are unfounded and invented to legitimise the unlawful American airstrikes against Assad. This narrative is most intense in *Geworld's* publications, which claim that the US is violating the sovereignty of Syria. As for *Sputnik*, respondents note that the US is quite experienced in using brutal methods to solve problems in the Middle East.

Russia. In contrast to the US/US-led coalition, attitudes towards Russia are mainly positive in the majority of the articles. Media outlets emphasised that **Russia is the only legitimate actor** who really fights terrorism in Syria in accordance with international law. Accusations by the US and the Western countries of Russia's targeting civilians in Syria, are portrayed as information warfare waged by the US against Russia. It is asserted that the US had never presented any evidence to support its accusations about the chemical attack by Assad or bombing of the civilians by Russia. For example, a *Sputnik-Georgia* article²⁰⁵ titled *"The West Reluctantly Welcomed Russia's Airstrikes in Syria"*, on the one hand, extols the superiority of Russia's military power in Syria, claiming that only Russia is really combating ISIL, while on the other hand, criticizes the US and its allies for "false accusations" against Russia.

²⁰⁴ Georgia and the World (2015), *ჭილოფში ამოცნობილი ძია სემი ანუ "ალ ჯაიდადან"* "ისლამურ სახელმწიფომდე (Uncle Sam recognised in sheep's clothing. From Al-Qaeda to ISIS), available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/6657/>. [Accessed 13 Jul. 2018]

²⁰⁵ Sputnik Georgia. (2015), *დასავლეთმა სირიაში რუსეთის ავიადარტყმები უხალისოდ მოიწონა* (The West Reluctantly Welcomed Russia's Airstrikes in Syria), available at: <https://sputnkne.ws/hZjS>. [Accessed 13 Jul. 2018]

All three media outlets focus heavily on **Russia's military power** and activities in Syria (e.g.: "*Putin's Syrian Katahajime*²⁰⁶– *do you understand what you have done?*").²⁰⁷

Bilateral relations. US-Russia cooperation in Syria in the fight against terrorism is mainly covered by *Sputnik-Georgia*. Negotiations between the US and Russia is **the only topic where the US is presented either positively, or neutrally**. In all other cases, America's and its allies' activities in Syria are conveyed in a negative manner.

Russia is portrayed as an actor open to cooperation with any state in the fight against terrorism. The statement that Moscow is willing to join efforts with the US/US-led coalition but the latter refuses bilateral cooperation and the sharing of intelligence data, is one of the most widespread narratives. Based on this narrative, the US and its anti-terrorist operations are described as selfish, deceitful, based on the pursuit of geopolitical interests, including towards the Middle East energy resources, whereas Russia and its allies are portrayed as the only actors whose sincere goal is to defeat terrorism.

Coverage of the Russia-Turkey relationship in Syria is inconsistent. The bilateral confrontation is mainly addressed after the downing of the Russian jet by Turkey. After the incident pro-Kremlin actors disseminated three main anti-Turkish narratives: that Turkey encourages terrorist groups in Syria and buys oil from ISIL, that no Russian aircraft had violated the Turkish airspace, and that the Russian jet might have violated the airspace, however during the war this is acceptable, especially when countries are allies and are fighting against a common enemy.

Two factors influenced the change of the narratives and the attitudes towards Turkey. First, criticizing of US activities in Syria by Erdogan; and second, the normalization of the Russia-Turkey relationship and cooperation over Syrian issues. For instance, during the period of November-December 2015, TB24 (right after the downing of the Russian jet) was vocal in condemning Turkey, but after a year and a half, the media outlet was disseminating the narrative that Turkey, a former adversary of Assad and a weapons supplier to ISIL, now became an ally of Russia in the fight against terrorism.

The Syrian government. The **use of chemical weapons in Syria** is the most discussed issue, with the main narrative being again directed against the US. It is claimed that the story about the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad is **entirely invented by the US** in order to overthrow his regime. American attacks against Syrian military bases are portrayed as a violation of Syria's sovereignty. TB 24 emphasises that Syria has already destroyed its chemical weapons and drew a parallel between the US airstrikes and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Judo choking technique performed from the rear with one hand around the front of the neck grabbing the collar. The other hand is placed under the arm and behind the neck.

²⁰⁷ Georgia and the World. (2015), *პუტინის სირიული კატა ჰაჯიმე – ახლა მაინც თუ ხვდებით, რა ჩაიდინეთ?! (Putin's Syrian Katahajime– do you understand what have you done?)*, available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/7136/>. [Accessed 13 Jul. 2018]

²⁰⁸ Tbilisi 24. (2017), *ესაა აგრესია სუვერენულ სახელმწიფოზე : აშშ-ს თავდასხმა სირიის სახელისუფლო ბაზებზე (This is an Aggression towards the Sovereign State: US Attack on Syria's Government Bases)*, available at: <https://goo.gl/1P1X9U>. [Accessed 13 Jul. 2018]

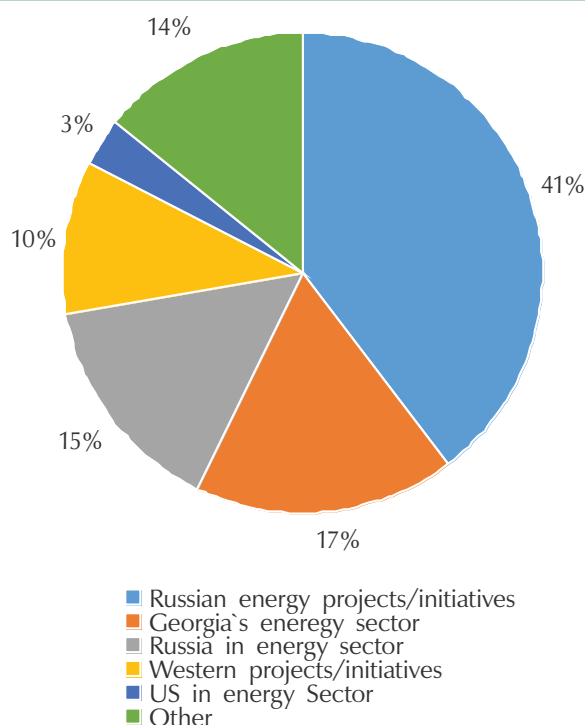
The Georgian context. From the selected media outlets, only Sputnik-Georgia and Geworld cover the **involvement of Georgian citizens in the terrorist organisations in Syria**. Unlike Sputnik-Georgia, Geworld addresses this issue more dramatically and portrays the enrolment of Georgian citizens in ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra as the main challenge to Georgia's national security. Geworld claimed that this situation is **the result of the US policy in Georgia**. Consequently, Geworld appeals to the government of Georgia to cooperate with Russia and Iran in the fight against terrorism.

Theme 2. Energy

Publications concerning **Russia's interests in the energy sector** are the second most extensively covered theme in the selected three media outlets (Sputnik-Georgia, Geworld, TB24). Out of 604 analyzed articles 212 (35%) are categorised under this topic.

The most frequently reported sub-topic is **Russia-backed energy projects/initiatives**²⁰⁹ (96 articles) which is mainly covered from Georgian perspective since Georgia-Gazprom relations (74 out of 96) overshadows other initiatives. Georgia's energy sector is the most frequently mentioned issue (42) after Russian energy

FIGURE 16. TOPICS RELATED TO RUSSIAN INTEREST IN ENERGY ISSUES



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

²⁰⁹ South Stream, Blue Stream, North-South energy Corridor, Nord Stream / Nord Stream2, TurkStream, North South Main Gas Pipeline (NSMGP), Trans-Balkan gas Pipeline, Gazprom (Russian gas transfer to Armenia via Georgia).

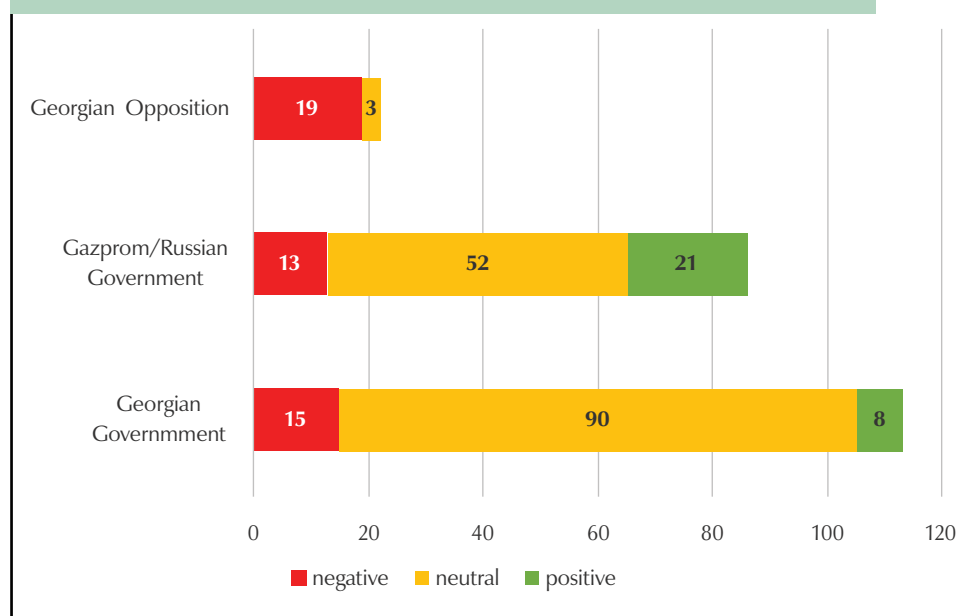
projects/initiatives and mainly covered issues related to the import of Iranian (16) and Azerbaijani gas (15) to Georgia. Russian energy resources and cooperation of Russian Federation with other actors, including Russia's gas transit to Europe are counted separately (Russia in energy sector).

Tone of coverage towards actors

Unlike the topic of the war in Syria, attitudes towards actors in the case of Russia's interests in the energy sphere are **not sharply divided across "positive Russia vs. negative US/West" lines**. A negative connotation is equally observed towards all actors except for the West-supported projects which are mainly covered either neutrally (26) or positively (7 articles). Although the US is not frequently mentioned, its negative (9) coverage exceeds the neutral (4) one.

A **negative tone towards Russia-supported projects is highest in the case of energy (14)**, as compared to the two other themes under investigation concerning the war in Syria and election meddling. It is mostly related to the topic of Gazprom-Georgia negotiations on transit issues. Negative attitudes towards Gazprom can be explained by the critical discourse created by the Georgian opposition and civil society organisations (CSOs) regarding Georgian-Gazprom deals rather than the editorial policies of the selected media outlets. Moreover, all media outlets negatively (19) cover the Georgian opposition because of their critical position on cooperation with the Russian company Gazprom.

FIGURE 17. TONE OF COVERAGE TOWARDS THE ACTORS RELATED TO GEORGIA-GAZPROM RELATIONS



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Main Narratives

Georgia-Gazprom relations. Georgia has had tense relations with Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union because Russia has been using the energy dependence of post-Soviet Georgia as a form of political leverage.²¹⁰ In 2007 Georgia stops consuming natural gas from Russia. The country is no longer dependent on Gazprom, since it covers 90% of its natural gas needs from Azerbaijan and receives only 10% of its total supply from Russia as a transit country through which Russia supplies gas to Armenia. Against this background, renewed negotiations between Georgia and Gazprom which have started in 2015 and an agreement has been reached in 2017 to change the payment scheme according to which Georgia receives payment instead of natural gas supply for transit rights on its territory. The agreement is highly criticised by the opposition. The deal is perceived as non-transparent and against Tbilisi's strategic interests focused on reducing and eliminating its dependence on Gazprom.

All of the three selected media mostly cover the Georgian Government's official position on Gazprom asserting that this process is no threat to Georgia's energy security. Expert opinions and statements by Georgian officials on **Georgia-Gazprom relations include the following narratives:**

- It is normal for Georgia to have relations with Gazprom and this is an international practice: *"Eastern European, western European, Asian and Caucasian countries have been cooperating with Gazprom... Georgia's former and previous governments cooperated with Gazprom too. There has never been any problem"* (statement by the Minister of Energy of Georgia).²¹¹
- The whole of Europe depends on Russian energy resources: *"Bidzina Ivanishvili: the whole of Europe is supplied with Russian gas and it is not a crime if Georgia buys it"*²¹².
- Russia may possibly give up on Georgia as a transit country and start supplying gas to Armenia via Iran: *"Gas pipeline from Iran will fully satisfy Armenia's gas demands"*²¹³.

²¹⁰ The price of Russian gas shot up (in 2005), and then in early 2006 the pipeline from Russia to Georgia was blown up and for some reason it took weeks to repair while Georgia (and Armenia) was freezing in the dark. Georgia was lucky to rid itself of this dependence when the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline was launched soon after. (Sharashenidze, T. (2018), *Georgia's Gazprom mystery*, ECFR, available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_Georgias_Gazprom_mystery5061. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018])

²¹¹ Tbilisi 24 (2015), კახი კალაძე – არანაირი პრობლემა არ არსებობს, ღია კარებს ამტკრევენ (Kakhi Kaladze – There is not any problem, they are breaking down open doors), available at: <https://bit.ly/2lpUDW0>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²¹² Georgia and the World (2015), ბიძინა ივანიშვილი: რუსული გაზით მთელი ევროპა მარაგდება და, საქართველომ რომ იყიდოს, ამაში არავითარი კრიმინალი არ არის (Bidzina Ivanishvili: the whole of Europe is supplied with Russian gas and it is not a crime if Georgia buys it), available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/7269/>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²¹³ Sputnik-Georgia (2016), გაზსადენი ირანიდან სრულად დააკმაყოფილებს სომხეთის მოთხოვნებს. (Gas pipeline from Iran will fully satisfy Armenia's gas demands), available at: <https://bit.ly/2rleoGP>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

- Gazprom is the only option for Georgia to avoid a gas shortfall: *"Azerbaijan cannot supply additional natural gas volumes to Georgia for technical reasons. So Georgia has to overcome its natural gas shortage by means of Russian gas"*²¹⁴.
- Purchasing natural gas from Gazprom serves the aim to diversify Georgia's energy sources: *"Thanks to a new deal [with Gazprom] Georgia will diversify its natural gas sources which is very important for the country"*²¹⁵.
- The government aims to solve tensions between Georgia and Russia while opposition protests hinder this process: *"The government confirms that it wants to establish warm relations with Russia", "Republican party as an enemy of the country is against normalization of the relationship between Georgia and Russia by attacking the Gazprom deal"*²¹⁶.

Azerbaijani and Iranian energy resources. All three media outlets cover the **import of Azerbaijani and Iranian natural resources** from a local perspective. Azerbaijan is often mentioned as Georgia's main natural gas supplier. *Sputnik* also underlines the role of Georgia-Azerbaijan cooperation in some energy projects which aim to supply natural gas from the Caspian region to Europe via Georgia, such as the Southern Gas Corridor and AGRI. But TB24 and *Geworld* have **never mentioned western-supported energy projects** with the participation of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Furthermore, *Geworld* even **questiones the reliability of cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia** in the energy sector by stating that *"Azerbaijan, not Russia, can challenge Georgia's energy security."*²¹⁷

The possibility of importing natural gas from Iran to Georgia is an issue that *Sputnik Georgia* focused on. *Sputnik Georgia* covers negotiations between Iran and Georgia on gas purchase and different import routes, but many articles dedicated to this topic question the implementation of such a deal by pointing out in the interviews with experts that *"it is technically impossible"*.²¹⁸

Russia and energy. All the three media outlets **regard Russia as a key player in the global energy market** and emphasise its richness in energy resources. *Geworld* and TB24 underline Russia's dominance in the energy sector as an imminent reality which makes the West jealous. According to *Geworld*, *"The West wants to overtake Russia's natural resources that have caused turbulences (wars, crises) from Napoleon to Trump"*.²¹⁹ TB24 reported about *"16 surprising facts about Russia"*

²¹⁴ Sputnik-Georgia (2016), აზერბაიჯანს არ შეუძლია სრულად დააკმაყოფილოს საქართველოს მოთხოვნა ბუნებრივ აირზე. (Azerbaijan cannot fully satisfy Georgia's natural gas demands), available at: <https://bit.ly/2HN2qAQ>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²¹⁵ Sputnik Georgia (2017), ექსპერტი: „გაზპრომთან“ გაფორმებული ახალი ხელშეკრულება საქართველოსთვის მომგებიანია (Expert: A new deal with Gazprom is profitable for Georgia), available at: <https://bit.ly/2w9UT9I>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²¹⁶ Tbilisi 24 (2017), ხელისუფლება ადასტურებს, რომ მას ნამდვილად რუსეთთან ურთიერთობის დათბობა სურს (The government confirms that it wants to establish warm relations with Russia), available at: <https://bit.ly/2rf4bfN>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²¹⁷ Georgia and the World (2016), ივანიშვილის პასიანსი დიდ საკადრაკო დაფაზე (Ivanishvili's play in the grand chessboard), available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/7640/>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²¹⁸ Sputnik Georgia (2015), ექსპერტები: „ირანული გაზის შემენა მომავლის პერსპექტივაა“ (Experts: Purchasing Iranian gas is a future perspective), available at: <https://bit.ly/2KxBliO>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²¹⁹ Georgia and the World (2016), აურზაურის მიზეზი რუსეთის უზარმაზარი ბუნებრივი რესურსების დაუფლების სურვილია (The reason of turbulence is a wish to overtake Russia's huge amount of natural resources), available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/9155/>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

emphasizing the length of Russian pipelines against the circumference of the earth and the amount of Russia's energy resources.²²⁰ *Sputnik-Georgia* is more focused on Russia's energy projects and initiatives as a manifestation of political leverage. *"If Russia had implemented South Stream or TurkStream (as it was considered by Russia), its influence on the Balkan States would have increased. But the EU managed to hamper these energy projects."*²²¹

The US and energy. The US is the most negatively presented actor in all the media outlets. The majority of publications in this category were dedicated to **American liquefied gas transits to Europe.** *Sputnik-Georgia* claimed that *"The US wants to suppress Gazprom and squeeze it out of the European market, also, the US pursues commercial goals as it wants to start exporting liquefied natural gas (LNG) to European markets."*²²² TB 24 reported *"As a result of imposing sanctions against Russia the EU lost \$97 billion in 2014-2015, while the US received substantial gains from selling liquefied natural gas to Europe and coal products to Ukraine."*²²³ *Geworld* claims that the American interest in the energy field provokes crises and turbulences all over the world. *"A protest rally in Skopje is provoked by the US since Macedonia opposes the imposition of sanctions on Russia and supports TurkiStream."*²²⁴ Also, it accuses the US of creating ISIL in order to establish control over Iraqi oil.²²⁵

Energy projects and initiatives. All media outlets are more focused on Russian energy projects and initiatives than Western ones. Energy projects – TurkStream and Nord Stream 2 which aim to import Russian natural gas to Europe are covered most extensively. *Sputnik-Georgia* emphasised that *"TAP is considered an alternative to TurkStream and intended to weaken Europe's dependence on Russian gas. But the capacity of the TAP pipeline is lower than the capacity of TurkStream"*²²⁶. Also, an expert for Sputnik claimed: *"If the TurkStream is implemented, the importance of TAP and TANAP will decrease"*.²²⁷

As for differences between the media outlets, *Geworld* and TB24 does not mention Western energy projects. *Geworld* dedicated only one publication to the EU-backed Three Seas Initiative.

²²⁰ Tbilisi 24 (2017), 16 საკვირველი ფაქტი რუსეთის შესახებ (16 surprising facts about Russia), available at: <https://bit.ly/2HQSEhj>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²²¹ Sputnik-Georgia (2015), ევროკავშირმა რუსეთი ბალკანეთის ქვეყნებისთვის გაზის მიწოდებას ჩამოაშორა (EU keeps Russia apart from providing natural gas to Balkan States), available at: <https://bit.ly/2I9BBpQ>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²²² Sputnik-Georgia (2016), საბერძნეთში ტრანსადრიატიკული გაზსადენის მშენებლობა იწყება (Construction of Trans-Adriatic gas pipeline is starting in Greece), available at: <https://bit.ly/2rkqU9n>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²²³ Tbilisi 24 (2017), რუსული სანქციებით ევროპამ 97 მილიარდი აშშ \$ ზარალი განიცადა. (EU's loss is \$97 billion as a result of Russia's sanctions), available at: <https://bit.ly/2B63v3j>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²²⁴ Georgia and the World (2015), აშშ-მა მაკედონიაში "მაიდანი" აამუშავა (US enabled "Maidan" in Macedonia), available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/6744/>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²²⁵ Georgia and the World (2016), ჯულიან ასანჯი ამხელს – "ისლამური სახელმწიფო" აშშ-მა შექმნა (Julian Assange reveals: „Islamic State is created by US"), available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/7590/>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²²⁶ Sputnik-Georgia (2016), საბერძნეთში ტრანსადრიატიკული გაზსადენის მშენებლობა იწყება (Construction of Trans-Adriatic gas pipeline is starting in Greece), available at: <https://bit.ly/2rkqU9n>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²²⁷ Sputnik-Georgia (2016), ნიკა ჩიტაძე: პროექტი „თურქული ნაკადი“ საქართველოს ინტერესებს ეწინააღმდეგება (Nika Chitadze: TurkStream contradicts interests of Georgia), available at: <https://bit.ly/2HNrUxS>. [Accessed 15 Jul. 2018]

Regarding Russian energy projects, *Sputnik-Georgia* and TB-24 emphasise their positive implication for European countries as well as Georgia and Azerbaijan. *Sputnik-Georgia* asserted that *“As a result of negotiations on Nord Stream 2 Germany has become the greatest transit country supplying Russian gas to Europe and has strengthened its influence on the Balkan states”*.²²⁸ TB24 quoted the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, as saying that *“TurkStream gas pipeline as well as the creation of a gas transit hub in Greece will enable Greece to pay its debt. The EU should be grateful to Russia for that”*.²²⁹ Furthermore, *Sputnik-Georgia* suggested that *“South Stream has a great political and economic importance for Georgia, Azerbaijan and Europe”*.²³⁰

Geworld reported that sanctions against Russia have not affected Nord Stream's efficiency and according to the decisions of the German court, the volume of Russian gas transfers to Germany have increased by 40%.²³¹

Theme 3. Election Meddling

Russian meddling in elections is **the least covered theme** by the selected media outlets, reaching only 55 publications during the period under investigation. It should be also underlined that out of 55 articles only 32 are directly dedicated to Russia's interference in electoral process, while the remaining 22 either indirectly mention the topic or just represent a background story.

The most analysed articles (67.5%, 39 articles) concern Russian meddling in the US elections, follows by the topic of the appearance of pro-Russian candidates in Europe (15.5%, 9 articles). As Figure 4 shows, other topics – related to US/EU meddling in the elections of different countries (5.2%, 3 articles), Russia's meddling in German (3.4%, 2), British (3.4%, 2), French (3.4%, 2) and Dutch elections (1.7%, 1) were addressed relatively randomly.

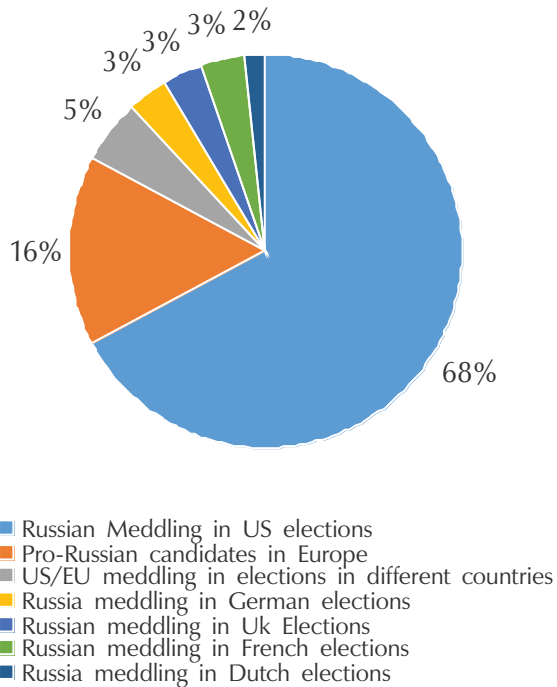
²²⁸ Sputnik-Georgia (2015), ევროკავშირმა რუსეთი ბალკანეთის ქვეყნებისთვის გაზის მიწოდებას ჩამოაშორა (EU keeps Russia apart from providing natural gas to Balkan States), available at: <https://bit.ly/2l9BBpQ>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²²⁹ Tbilisi 24 (2015), რუსეთი ევროკავშირისგან აპლოდისმენტებს ელოდება (Russia is waiting for applause from the European Union), available at: <https://bit.ly/2HOCuRc>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²³⁰ Sputnik-Georgia (2015), ალიევი: აზერბაიჯანული გაზი ასი წლის შემდეგაც ყველასთვის იქნება საკმარისი (Aliyev: Azerbaijan's oil will be sufficient after 100 years), available at: <https://bit.ly/2rk8zKq>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018].

²³¹ Georgia and the World (2017), რუსეთის წინააღმდეგ მიმართულმა ამერიკულმა სანქციებმა ევროკავშირის დარტყა (American sanctions against Russia affected on EU), available at: <http://American sanctions against Russia affected on EU>. [Accessed 15 Jul. 2018]

FIGURE 18. TOPICS RELATED TO RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN ELECTIONS



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Tone of coverage towards actors

The most frequently mentioned actor is Russia, including President Vladimir Putin. In spite of the fact that the topic of meddling in elections has negative connotation towards Russia, all of the three media outlets mostly **present Russia either positively (33) or neutrally (31)**. There are only 2 two cases out of 66 publications in total of negative presentation. In contrast to Russia, **the US** (US administration, officials) **is portrayed either negatively (23) or neutrally (12)**. The same attitude is observed towards the US institutions – the CIA and the FBI (negative – 9, neutral – 3) and Barack Obama as acting and former president of America (negative -2, neutral-2).

Different attitudes are revealed towards the candidates in the 2016 US presidential election. All media outlets present the Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton mostly either negatively (6) or neutrally (4), while Republican Donald Trump is mainly mentioned neutrally (20) and only 3 times negatively.

The EU and European countries are generally presented in a neutral (19) or negative (11) manner, whereas a positive attitude is shown only in relation to Marine Le Pen – France's far-right presidential candidate (2).

Main Narratives

Russian meddling in the US elections. The majority of analysed articles **doubt Russia's interference in the US elections** due to a lack of evidence suggesting that *"there is no evidence of Trump-Russia ties and Russia's interference in the US elections"*,²³² *"The CIA investigation of Russia's interference in the US elections is 'madness'"*,²³³ *"The FBI could not find a connection between Trump and the Russian Government"*.²³⁴

Attempts to justify allegations about Russia by counter accusations that "blaming Russia" is part of the US election campaign is another narrative revealed in *Geworld*: *"Russia's influence on US elections is a mythic problem and hysteria ... during the pre-election campaign it aims to shift people's focus from essential problems onto so-called Russian hackers, spies, agents of influence!"*²³⁵

The articles in the pre-election period are assertive and humiliating to then Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. A publication by *Geworld* claims that *"Clinton's election campaign is focused on brutal forms of chauvinism, paranoia and conspiracy theories to distract attention from political scandals related to herself"*. Moreover, Hillary Clinton was accused of inventing a fiction of Russia's interference in the election as part of the campaign: *"Focusing on Russia's spying activities serves the aim to conceal that Clinton promises few benefits to American society"*.²³⁶

Pro-Russian candidates in Europe. The role of Russia in European elections is mainly described in terms of **providing support for and encouragement of pro-Russian candidates in the EU** rather than as a matter of direct meddling. Articles underline the ties of European politicians with Russia as in the case of French Presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, who had *"visited Russia aiming to obtain financial sources for her election campaign"*.²³⁷

The narrative that *"Putin's friends" hold cabinet positions and win elections in Europe* is aimed at portraying a powerful image of President Putin and Russia. The **newly elected Presidents of Moldova, Bulgaria and Germany were exemplified as pro-Russian candidates**, who have strong ties with Russian

²³² Georgia and the World (2017), *The American Thinker*: დემოკრატებო, ან წარმოადგინეთ რუსეთთან ტრამპის მორიგების საბუთები, ან მორჩით ლაცობას! (The American Thinker: Democrats! Either present proofs of Trump's ties with Russia or stop gossiping!), available at: <https://bit.ly/2ryBDhr>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²³³ Georgia and the World (2017), RT: ათასი გვერდი და არავითარი დასკვნა (RT:1000 pages and no conclusion), available at: <https://bit.ly/2JGBzTn>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²³⁴ Sputnik-Georgia (2016), გვბ-მ ტრამპის რუსეთის ხელისუფლებასთან კავშირი ვერ დაადგინა. (FBI could not find the connection of Trump to the Russian Government), available at: <https://bit.ly/2HGvBWk>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Georgia and the World (2016), ჰილარი კლინტონს მოგვინებთი პარანოია დაემართა | საქართველო და მსოფლიო, available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/8695/>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²³⁷ Georgia and World (2017), ევროპული მომავლის მშენებლობა საფრანგეთის საპრეზიდენტო არჩევნების დასრულებისთანავე დაიწყება (Building the future of Europe will start after finishing french presidential elections), available at: <https://bit.ly/2l0qHTp>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

officials and support Russia's policies.²³⁸ The victory of pro-Russian candidates was labelled "Russia's cautious tactics".²³⁹

Similarly to the issue of the US elections, Russia's interference in European elections is considered a "made-up story" in the frame of election campaign: *"one of the instruments of internal political struggle is frightening voters with „Evil Russians“*".²⁴⁰

Very often **alternative truths** are called up, i.e. **everyone except Russia is meddling in elections**. Counter-accusations that countries other than Russia are interfering in elections of neighbouring countries is a narrative aimed at putting the burden of guilt on the Western countries. *Geworld* claimed that *"Not Russian hackers but extremists from the US have meddled in German elections"*.²⁴¹ Furthermore, *Geworld* suggested that the US has meddled in elections of different countries many times including in the Russian election in 1996 which was won by Boris Yeltsin²⁴². There are suspicious that in the Russian presidential elections in 1996, it was Yeltsin's main rival, communist leader Gennadi Zyuganov who had actually won or would have won in case of the fair election campaign.

Sputnik Georgia published the results of a survey conducted by *Sputnik.Mnesia*, which suggests that *„Residents of France, Great Britain, Poland and Germany share the opinion that the US influences the elections in other countries, not Russia“*. The same survey claims that the EU and the UK have influence on elections in different countries.²⁴³

Common Trends in Russian Propaganda

The investigation of the content and style of *Sputnik-Georgia*, *Geworld* and TB24 has revealed the following trends:

²³⁸ Georgia and the World (2016), "ნიუ იორკ ტაიმსი": ახალი ევროპელი პრეზიდენტები რუსეთისკენ შებრუნდნენ ("New York Times": New European presidents turned to Russia), available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/9059/>. [Accessed 14 Jul. 2018]

²³⁹ Tbilisi 24 (2017), რუსეთის ფრთხილმა ტაქტიკამ შედეგი გამოიღო. მან დაიწყო გერმანიის პოლიტიკური ლანდშაფტის შეცვლა, მისი მთავარი უპირატესობა ის არის, რომ გრძელ თამაშს თამაშობს, რამდენიმე წლით წინ იხედება (Russia's cautious tactics has resulted. It started to change Germany's political landscape, his main advantage is that he plays a long game, looks several years ahead), available at: <https://bit.ly/2HFM64F>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²⁴⁰ Sputnik-Georgia.com (2017), სენატორი მოროზოვი: ტერეზა მეი ამომრჩევლებს „ბოროტი რუსებით“ აშინებს (Senator Morozov: Theresa May frightens voters with „Evil Russia“), available at: <https://sputnik-georgia.com/russia/20170313/235181786/tereza-mei-amomrchevlebs-boroti-rusebit-ashinebs.html>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²⁴¹ Georgia and the World (2017), *USA Today*: გერმანიის არჩევნებში "რუსი ჰაკერები" კი არ ჩარეულან, არამედ ექსტრემისტები აშშ-დან. (USA Today: Not Russian hackers but extremists from US have meddled in German elections), available at: <https://bit.ly/2wouxN0>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²⁴² Georgia and the World (2017), *The Nation*: ტრამპისა და რუსეთის წინააღმდეგ ამერიკული მედიის ინსინუაციები ნეომაკარტიზმი და სიგიჟეა (The Nation: Insinuations of american media against Trump and Russia ia neomacartism and hysteria), available at: <https://bit.ly/2L82ZU2>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

²⁴³ Sputnik-Georgia (2017), ევროპელების აზრით, აშშ სხვა ქვეყნებში არჩევნებზე გავლენას ახდენს (Europeans consider that the US effects on elections in different countries), available at: <https://bit.ly/2w4rXA4>. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2018]

War in Syria

- All three media outlets are more focused on developments in Syria than energy issues or Russia's meddling in elections which may be explained by the geopolitical settings and importance of the Syrian conflict for the region.
- The role of Russia and the RSII coalition in the Syrian conflict is the most frequently covered topic aimed at showing the Kremlin's military power and influence in the region.
- The different attitudes are revealed in the tone of coverage towards the actors. The US and US-led coalition are mostly presented negatively, alongside ISIL and other terrorist organisations, while Russia is mostly presented either positively or neutrally.
- Key narratives in all three media outlets are related to questioning the legitimacy of the US military presence in Syria and at the same time justifying the Russian presence by request of Syrian President Assad. The activities of the US and US-led coalition are either neglected or reported negatively downplaying their role in the ongoing processes.
- Accusations that instead of real fight against terrorism, the US itself supports and encourages terrorist groups in Syria are dominant in all three media outlets.
- Media monitoring subjects also are insisting that accusations of the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad are unfounded and invented to legitimise US's unlawful airstrikes against Assad.
- All media outlets present enrollment of Georgian citizens in ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra as the challenge to Georgia's national security. *Geworld* relates this situation to US policy and suggests that Georgia should cooperate with Russia and Iran in the fight against terrorism.

Energy Issues Related to Russia's Interests

- Russia's interest in the energy sector is a less popular topic than issues related to Syria, only 35% of analysed articles are categorised under this topic.
- Articles concerning Russia's interests in the energy sector do not suggest simple dichotomy of "positive Russia" vs "negative US/West" as it is identified in relation to the other two topics. Attitudes towards actors under this topic are more inconsistent, but publications extensively cover Russian projects and initiatives while US is mentioned only in 8 articles out of a total of 204.
- Relatively negative coverage of Russia-supported projects in energy is mainly related to the negative experience of energy deficit created by Russia after the fall of USSR and is discussed in context of Georgia-Gazprom relations.
- The identified negative attitudes towards Gazprom and respectively towards Russia in all three media outlets are boosted by the critical discourse created by Georgian opposition and CSOs regarding to Georgian-Gazprom deal and it does not reflect editorial policy of any monitored media outlets. Moreover, all three media outlets mention Georgian opposition in negative context

because of their protest on Georgia's cooperation with Gazprom. So in spite of challenging background of Georgian-Russian tense relations in the field of energy, all media outlets try to justify Georgia-Gazprom cooperation and portray it as an appropriate and rational choice

- Azerbaijani and Iranian natural gas import to Georgia is covered as an alternative to Russian natural gas and it is used as an argument to prove that Georgia does not depend on Russia's energy resources. Azerbaijani and Iranian gas import to Georgia is used to strengthen narrative, that the cooperation between Georgia and Gazprom doesn't pose a threat to Georgia's energy security.
- Articles dedicated to energy issues aim at portraying Russia as the most important actor in the global energy market. All media outlets are mentioning Russia's richness of energy resources.
- Articles under this topic represent the US activities in the energy sector mostly negatively.

Russian Meddling in Elections

- All three media outlets are the least focused on Russian meddling in elections than the other monitored themes.
- The most analysed articles concern Russian meddling in the US elections, followed by the topic of emergence of pro-Russian candidates in Europe (15,5%, 9 articles). Articles related to Russian meddling in election mostly cover Russian meddling in US elections. Also, the second most popular topic is emergence of Pro-Russian candidates in Europe.
- Russia and its President Vladimir Putin are the most frequently mentioned actors. It is a common trend to all researched media outlets that they cover Russia mostly positively in spite of the fact that the topic of meddling in elections has negative connotation towards Russia. Unlike Russia, the US (US administration, officials, and institutions) is portrayed mostly negatively or neutrally and the same attitude is identified towards Barack Obama as acting and former president of US.
- All media outlets try to portray Russian meddling in the US election as solely "allegation" lacking solid "evidence", while Russian interference in European elections is presented as a "made-up story" in the frame of election campaign.
- The articles dedicated to Russian meddling in US elections aim at showing "division" in American society and institutions by emphasizing disagreements between CIA and president of the US.
- All researched media outlets are focused on counter-allegations that other countries, not Russia, are interfering in elections of foreign countries. Counter-allegations are emphasised to "legitimise" Russia's meddling in elections.
- The narrative that "Putin's friends" (in Moldova, Bulgaria and Germany) are winning elections in Europe is aimed at creating powerful image of President Vladimir Putin and Russia.

MOLDOVA

Introduction

Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova has started already in the Soviet period, when the country passed through Soviet Russification, with the media playing an important role in manipulating the citizens and promoting Soviet ideas. In the timeframe between 1945 and 1990, a significant number of newspapers in Moldova are published in the Russian language, and the Soviet TV stations have been promoting the policy of the Communist Party in all of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union.

Despite Moldova's declaration of independence, the **Russian media continue to exercise substantial influence** upon the Moldovan society. Given the lack of local quality products, the citizens continue to inform themselves from the media produced in Moscow. The former Soviet media sources, such as "Komsomolskaya Pravda" and "Argumenty i Fakty" or TV broadcast station "Pervyi Kanal", have remained on the Moldovan market, and over the years have strengthened their audience positions, promoting the Russian Federation's policies. Not willing to loosen its grip on the former Soviet states, Russia started to use new methods of manipulation through the media. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, **the information war began after the declaration of independence and the onset of the Transnistrian conflict** (1992). Moscow has applied the same tactics of disinformation in respect to this conflict, like the ones used in other conflicts in former Soviet republics (e.g. in Abkhazia, Georgia or Donbas, Ukraine). Politicians in Chisinau have generally tolerated the presence of Russian media in the Republic of Moldova.

A new stage in the evolution of propaganda and manipulation began with the outbreak of the armed conflict in the neighbouring Ukraine. Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu stated in 2012 that **the media is one of the new types of modern weapons**, which over the years had contributed to Russia's victories but also defeats. Thus, the political class in Moscow passed to a more aggressive stage of the employment of media as means of control, making extensive use of new information technologies – particularly, the Internet and its social networking products. In the case of Moldova, where **40% of the population is being informed by the news produced in Moscow**²⁴⁴, these new methods have proven their effectiveness, and the means of propaganda and disinformation have

²⁴⁴ Institute for Public Policies, *Public Opinion Barometer*, Chisinau, p. 32, available at: <http://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Rezultate-sondaj-Partea-I.pdf>, November, 2017. [Accessed May, 2018]

contributed to the polarisation of society against the background of the Russian incited standoff between West and East.²⁴⁵

The **poor development of Moldovan media and the strong political control** over it have aided the proliferation of Russian propaganda in the country. The worsening of the situation in the field of freedom of the press and freedom of journalists has been attested by international organisations. Freedom House places the Republic of Moldova among the countries with partially free press (118th place).²⁴⁶ According to the Word Press Freedom Index of the International Organization “Journalists without Borders”,²⁴⁷ in 2017 Moldova ranked 80th out of 180 countries from around the world included in this ranking. The country slid by four positions compared to 2016, not least due to the fact that “the editorial policy of Moldovan media institutions is influenced by political interests of their owners, and the major challenges are journalistic independence and transparency of media ownership”.

The most critical issue Moldova faces with regards to pro-Russian media is that since the declaration of independence Russian media sources have been broadcasted on the territory of the country without any restriction. Thus, Russian propaganda has been allowed to flow directly to the citizens and influence their political preferences becoming an issue of national security.

At the beginning of 2018, the Parliament in Chisinau voted a new law, which stipulates that the informative, analytical, military and political programs that are permitted to be broadcast in Moldova should come only from the EU, Canada and the US, as well as from countries that have ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. The Russian Federation has not ratified the document, which means that from 12 February 2018, when the legislative act has come into force, programs produced in Russia are no longer broadcast on the territory of Moldova. This provision however is insufficient to stop pro-Russian propaganda, since in the on-line environment, the media financed by the Russian Federation continue to manipulate. The current research has clearly shown that the number of propaganda articles has increased in recent years. Thus, more legislative interventions by the state authorities are necessary, as is the development of educational programs by the Moldovan media and NGOs.

Another critical issue is that some pro-Russian policymakers control media sources that continue to support the Kremlin regime by spreading fake news. The Moldovan authorities should ensure higher transparency of media ownership and free the advertising market from political interference and interest groups.

²⁴⁵ Institute for Public Policies, *Public Opinion Barometer*, Chisinau, available at: http://ipp.md/old/public/files/Barometru/Brosura_BOP_05.2012.pdf, April, 2012. [Accessed May, 2018]

Institute for Public Policies, *Public Opinion Barometer*, Chisinau, p. 69, available at: <http://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Rezultate-sondaj-Partea-I.pdf>, November, 2017. [Accessed May, 2018]

²⁴⁶ Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2017*, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2017>.

²⁴⁷ Reporter ohne Grenzen, *Rangliste der Pressefreiheit 2017*, available at: <https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/moldau/?L=0>.

Selection of Media Outlets

According to a POB poll (November, 2017)²⁴⁸, **online media ranks second in terms of sources of information** most frequently consulted by Moldavians. Some 23.6% of respondents stated they get informed from the Internet and trust the information placed on Internet sites. At the same time, about 39.1% said they obtain information from Russian media sources.

The current research has focused on **three of the most important media sources, which have links and/or receive funding from the Russian Federation:**

The *Sputnik Agency* belongs to, and is a part of the International Information Agency Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today), which was established with a presidential decree by Vladimir Putin. In Moldova, the *sputnik.md* website is owned by “Rossiya Segodnya” LTD, which representative is Vladimir Novosadiuc²⁴⁹. *Sputnik.md*²⁵⁰ is a subdivision of the international Sputnik agency created by the Russian Federation for the purpose of promoting Russian politics abroad. In Moldova, this agency carries out various activities related to media and public communication: it publishes news which is disseminated not only on their web-site but also on some radio stations within news bulletins produced by Sputnik, organizes press conferences, video-conferences to discuss topics related to collaboration with Russia and other countries of the Eurasian Union, organizes trainings and competitions for journalists, students, etc. According to the latest measurement of Internet traffic and audience, in October 2017 *Sputnik.md* had a market share of 12.5% and more than 226 000 real users (over 270 000 unique visitors).²⁵¹ According to the data displayed on the Facebook page of Sputnik Moldova,²⁵² it is being followed and liked by over 13 000 people; in Odnoklassniki (a local popular social network) – by over 5000 people,²⁵³ in Twitter – by about 800.²⁵⁴ The site is being edited in Romanian and Russian and since 2016 has expanded its activity in Romania.

Komsomolskaya Pravda is a daily Russian tabloid newspaper, founded on 13 March 1925. The newspaper is published in Russia with a local insert that covers issues from Moldova. Launched in 1996 in Moldova. Edited in Russian and covers politics, economics, and social issues. The founder in Moldova is a Russian company Publishing house “Komsomolskaya Pravda” JSC²⁵⁵. In addition, one of the most popular Russian online sources in Moldova is www.kp.md, the website of the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. According to the Bureau of Audit of

²⁴⁸ Institute for Public Policies, *Public Opinion Barometer*, Chisinau, available at: <http://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Rezultate-sondaj-Partea-I.pdf>, November, 2017. [Accessed May, 2018]

²⁴⁹ Ziariul de Gardă (2016), *Transparency and owners of media*, Chisinau, available at: <http://www.zdg.md/ru/?p=3330>.

²⁵⁰ Sputnik Moldova, Official web-site, available at: www.sputnik.md.

²⁵¹ Bureau of Audit of Circulations Internet (2017), *Study on the Measurement of Internet Traffic and Audience (SMTAI)*, Chisinau, available at: <http://www.bati.md/smtai>.

²⁵² Sputnik Moldova, Official Facebook page, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/ru.sputnik.md/?fref=ts>.

²⁵³ Sputnik Moldova, Official OK.ru page, available at: <https://ok.ru/sputnikmd>.

²⁵⁴ Sputnik Moldova, Official Twitter page, available at: <https://twitter.com/sputnikmoldova>.

²⁵⁵ State Registration Chamber, State Companies Register, available at: <http://cis.gov.md/>. [Accessed August, 2018]

Circulations Internet (BACI),²⁵⁶ the Moldovan edition of the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* is the newspaper with one of the largest circulation among those distributed in Moldova, and according to the latest measurement of Internet traffic and audience in April 2017 *Kp.md* scored a market share of 7.4% or 120 000 real users (about 270 thousand unique visitors) per month.²⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that both the newspaper and the on-line version appear only in Russian language and lack a version in the official Moldovan language. According to Facebook data, the page of “Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove” is being followed and liked by more than 26 000 people,²⁵⁸ and the Odnoklassniki page (a popular social networking site in the Russian Federation) – by over 19 000 people,²⁵⁹ additionally having 3200 followers on Twitter.²⁶⁰

Moldavskie Vedemosti newspaper was found in 1995. While the publication was sold several times, it is now owned by the Periodic Publication “Moldavskie Vedemosti” SRL led by Victor Ciobu²⁶¹. Although there is no evidence which directly links it to owners from the Russian Federation, since 2014, *Moldavskie Vedemosti* has published several articles with a clear pro-Russian and anti-Western bias. The publication has been targeted several times by various reports of non-governmental organisations as a fake mass media source²⁶². The newspaper appears in a printed version, and according to official data, the Moldovan edition has a circulation of more than 90 000 copies per year. Currently *Moldavskie vedomosti* is published on a weekly basis. It is edited in Russian and covers social, economic and political topics. There is no data related to the audience of its website, however on Facebook the publication is followed by over 3600 people²⁶³ and on Odnoklassniki – by over 2300.²⁶⁴

Comparative Analysis of *Sputnik Moldova*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Moldavskie Vedomosti*

The current report reviewed a total of 652 articles from the three media outlets in Moldova: 308 links were analysed on the portal www.sputnik.md, 231 on www.kp.md and 113 on www.vedomosti.md.

Theme 1. War in Syria

The most important narratives concerning the Syrian conflict in the three selected Moldovan media include the following.

²⁵⁶ Bureau of Audit of Circulations Internet (2017), *Audit of Circulations*, available at: <http://www.bati.md/audit>.

²⁵⁷ Bureau of Audit of Circulations Internet (2017), *Study on the Measurement of Internet Traffic and Audience (SMTAI)*, Chisinau, available at: <http://www.bati.md/smtai>.

²⁵⁸ Komsomolskaya Pravda, Official Facebook page, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/kpmoldova/>.

²⁵⁹ Komsomolskaya Pravda, Official OK.ru page, available at: <https://ok.ru/kpmoldova>.

²⁶⁰ Komsomolskaya Pravda, Official Twitter page, available at: <https://twitter.com/KpMoldova>.

²⁶¹ State Registration Chamber, State Companies Register. Accessed August, 2018, available at: <http://cis.gov.md/>.

²⁶² Stop Fals Moldova, *FALS: The EU plans to destroy the vineyards in Romania, followed by those in Moldova*, Chisinau, 17 april 2018, available at: <https://stopfals.md/article/fals-ue-planifica-distrugerea-viilor-din-romania-urmeaza-cele-din-r-moldova-179998?lang=ro>.

²⁶³ Moldavskie Vedomosti, Official Facebook page, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/moldvedomosti/about/>.

²⁶⁴ Moldavskie Vedomosti, Official OK.ru page, available at: <https://ok.ru/moldvedomosti>.

Russia helps to resolve the conflict in Syria. The vast majority of analysed articles present the Russian Federation as a force that helps the conflict resolution in Syria. One of the causes of intervention in this country is the struggle with terrorist organisations, such as the Islamic State. Furthermore, most articles cite the declarations of the main political actors in the Russian Federation, as well as some pro-Kremlin foreign analysts, who argue that Moscow is the only power that can solve this conflict. Thus, journalists address issues related to the military operations of the Russian Armed Forces and the humanitarian aid that the Kremlin provides to the civilian population of Syria. On the other hand, the articles invoke the idea that the USA and Western states are doing nothing to help Russia, but quite the opposite, create problems.

The US guilty of escalating the war in Syria. All analysed articles blame the US for escalating the conflict in Syria and for financing terrorism. Most headings convey the idea that the US is a state that does not cooperate with the Russian Federation in the fight against terrorism, with journalists pointing the finger at US leaders. Similarly, the US is accused of attacking Syrian forces and destroying the democratic processes in Syria. All three analysed media outlets produce fake news stating that the US is using lethal chemical weapons, forbidden globally, in the Syrian conflict. Accordingly, Russian officials severely criticize US policy and claim that the West tests its weapons in Syria. They bring charges not only against the US, but also against international organisations such as NATO and the EU.

The fight against Islamic State. Another topic raised by Russian-sponsored media is the danger posed by terrorist organisations, which wage a war against the Syrian population. This is stated as one of the main reasons why the Russian Federation has military presence in the region. Journalists again put in the foreground the fact that the West collaborates with and militarily supports the terrorist organisations, and through these examples tries to convince the public that Russia's fight against terrorism is also a struggle against the West. The Islamists are presented as a danger to all humanity, and in many cases their crimes are elaborately described. In addition, most articles create a false perception that the Russian Federation is always winning in this fight. At the same time, some articles suggest that terrorist organisations are planning to attack several states, including Russia. For example, on December 22, 2016, the *sputnik.md* portal published a news piece titled „*Russian Air Force in Syria: 71 000 Attacks, 35 000 Terrorists Killed*”²⁶⁵. The article published a report of the Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu, who made a summary of Russia's air campaign in Syria. He argued that since the beginning of the operation, Russian planes have launched 71 000 attacks on terrorist infrastructures, eliminating 725 training camps, 405 weapons production locations, 1 500 pieces of military equipment, 35 000 militants, including 204 field commanders.

Bashar al-Assad's regime. The Russian Federation's support for the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is prominently featured in the analysed material. The Damascus government is presented as being on excellent terms with Russia. The articles pay special attention to Bashar al-Assad's official meetings with Vladimir Putin, during which the US and NATO member states are criticised. Journalists are using the image of the Syrian President to achieve two objectives/

²⁶⁵ Sputnik.md (anonymous), *Russian Air Force in Syria: 71.000 Attacks, 35.000 Terrorists Killed*, Sputnik Moldova, Chisinau, 22.12.2016, available at: <https://ro.sputnik.md/Rusia/20161222/10464915/bilantul-razboiului-din-siria.html>.

goals. Firstly, to motivate the Russian Federation's military intervention in Syria and secondly, to portray him as an exponent of the anti-Western struggle. In most of the articles analysed, Bashar al-Assad is pictured as a powerful leader, fighting terrorist organisations.

Russian weapons used in the war. Another aspect of Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova through the prism of the conflict in Syria is related to exaggerating the military power of the Russian Federation. Journalists write tendentiously about the weapons used in the operation, as well as the modern military technologies that Moscow possesses. The authors of the articles suggest that Russia is much more technologically advanced than the Western states, and this supremacy can be decisive in a potential war between Washington and Moscow. Moreover, Russian military operations in Syria are presented as successful, helping to solve the military conflict. In many articles, the Russian armed forces and their potential are described in detail.

Syrian refugees invade Europe. Another recurring narrative, which is subject to manipulation, is related to the consequences of the war in Syria. A large part of the articles identifies the problem of Syrian refugees and the danger of their massive migration to the EU. Journalists present this situation as a real danger to European states, stressing that the coalition partners and the US are responsible for it. The articles underline that terrorists are hiding among refugees, and could launch attacks in Europe. Moscow-funded media use refugees as a scarecrow for the Moldovan public, invoking the fact that they could islamise Christian Europe.

The consequences of the war in Syria for Moldova. The Russian-financed media also broach the potential consequences of the Syrian conflict for the Republic of Moldova. Journalists speculate that such a conflict could also burst out in Moldova if the Chisinau authorities continue to collaborate with Western states and organisations. Also, journalists use as a scarecrow the fact that Moldova could be invaded by Islamic refugees and terrorists. Indeed, a fake news publication appeared ahead of the Presidential election in Moldova in 2016, stating that if the leader of the oppositional Party of Action and Solidarity, Maia Sandu, won the election, Moldova would be invaded by 30 000 Syrians. According to media experts in Chisinau, due to the multiplication of this news by several media sources financed by the Russian Federation, the elections were won by the representative of the Socialist Party, Igor Dodon, who favours a pro-Kremlin policy. For example, on 24 October 2016, *Vedomosti.md* portal, published an article titled *"Sandu promised Europeans that she would accept more than 30,000 Syrian refugees in Moldova"*²⁶⁶. The article states that Moldova's Presidential candidate Maya Sandu promised German Chancellor Angela Merkel that if she wins the presidential election, she will accept more than 30 000 Syrian refugees in Moldova.

²⁶⁶ Vedomosti.md (anonymous), *Sandu promised Europeans that she would accept more than 30,000 Syrian refugees in Moldova*, Moldavskie Vedomosti, Chisinau, 24.10.2016, available at: <http://www.vedomosti.md/news/sandu-poobeshala-evropejcam-chto-primet-v-moldove-bolee-30-000/index.html>.

Theme 2. Election meddling

The most common narratives of pro-Russian outlets analysed in the current report related to the Russian Federation's meddling in elections across the globe include the following.

Russia's involvement in the US presidential elections. Since the announcement of the results of the US presidential election, Washington has been accusing the Russian Federation that it has been actively meddling in the American electoral process. This statement is vehemently rejected by the Russian-funded media through the publication of several analytical articles, which tendentious character is directed at the defence of the Russian Federation. In this context, 74 articles are published, where the authors make tough statements against the US, and promote the idea that Russia does not have enough leverage to influence elections in other countries.

Attacks against the Democrats; support for Trump. The analysed articles show that Russian-funded media have published articles over the course of the US election campaign, which blame and denigrate the image of ex-President, Barack Obama, as well as of Democratic party candidate, Hillary Clinton. On the other hand, they strongly promote Donald Trump's candidacy, who is described as a potentially strong would-be president that will intensively cooperate with the Russian Federation. Most of the analysed articles have a tendentious character, and the rhetoric is very aggressive. Furthermore, Vladimir Putin is portrayed not as an "enemy", but as a friend of the US. For example, on 25 September 2016, *sputnik.md* published an article titled *American Press: "Clinton insists on aggressive politics towards Russia"*²⁶⁷, where it is argued that Moscow is wrongly accused. The Sputnik reporter writes that in the case of a victory in the election, Hillary Clinton intends to take a harder position towards Russia than Donald Trump or Barack Obama, and the war in Syria will be a first test in this regard.

Counterattacks against the US. A total of 43 analytical articles cite pro-Russian experts who promote the idea that it is not the Russian Federation, but the USA that has been actively meddling in the electoral processes of other states. Thus, a false perception is created that Washington, which has sufficient financial resources at its disposal, rather than Russia carries out cyber-attacks in countries where the US has hidden interests. The US is presented as an aggressive state, which has contributed to the outbreak of several revolutions in third world countries, and because of interference in electoral processes it has caused bloodshed.

The myth of Russian hackers and trolls. Another subject discussed by Russian-funded media is the involvement of Moscow-financed hackers and trolls in the electoral processes of America and other countries. In most of the articles reviewed, there is a tendency to deny these accusations and demonstrate that the Russian Federation has neither the financial nor the logistical resources to undertake any cyber-attacks. It also points out that the West intentionally uses these recriminations to impose new sanctions on Moscow, but also to create an impression that Donald Trump's victory has not been a democratic one. A total of 35 articles employ propaganda methods, like the utilisation of anonymous

²⁶⁷ Sputnik.md (anonymous), *American Press: Clinton insists on aggressive politics towards Russia*, Sputnik Moldova, Chisinau, 25.09.2016, available at: <https://sputnik.md/world/20160925/9172762/clinton-putin-rusia-razboi.html>.

sources without verification of information, and make assertions of some suspected international hackers who attack the US, manipulating public opinion through aggressive messages. For example, on 27 October 2016, the *Vedomosti Moldova* published an article titled *“Putin explained why Russia cannot attack NATO countries and influence elections in USA”*²⁶⁸. The article analyses Putin’s statements, which exhibit a surprise about the accusations levelled at the Russian Federation. The Russian President is quoted arguing that *“I would like to have such a propaganda machine in Russia. But this, unfortunately, is not so. We do not have such global media like CNN, BBC and some others. We have no such opportunities yet”*.

Theme 3. Energy

The most important narratives regarding energy issues and/or the interests of the Russian Federation include the following.

Moldova’s dependence on Russian natural gas supplies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Moldova remained dependent on gas supplies from the Russian Federation. This dependence has been consistently exploited by Moscow for political and economic blackmail. The analysis of the articles in the three media outlets shows that the most frequently used narrative is about the importance of natural gas supplies to Moldova, pointing out that Chisinau has no alternative, and Gazprom is the only company that delivers gas to Moldova. A total of 101 of the reports refer to the negotiations between Gazprom and authorities in Chisinau on the price of Russian gas. It is constantly emphasised that when Russia decreases gas prices or when a new agreement is signed, Moscow does some favour to Moldova. Another theme is Moldova’s gas debt to Gazprom, which exceeds US\$600 million. In the published articles it is constantly stressed that the Republic of Moldova cannot pay this debt and will remain energy dependent on Russia. For example, on 19 May 2015, the *sputnik.md* portal published a piece of news titled *“Cheaper Russian Gas for Moldova”*²⁶⁹. The article underlines that the Russian Federation continuously reduces gas prices for Moldovan consumers, so Moscow is presented as a positive factor for the energy security in the region.

Gas transit. Another common narrative concerns Russian gas transit through Moldovan territory. This topic is couched in positive terms because the pipeline passing through the country is the only one that supplies the Balkan countries with Russian gas, holding great economic potential for Chisinau (including profits from transit revenues). Thus, pro-Russian media create the false perception that without the Russian gas many Balkan countries would not survive the cold winters. There is also a strong emphasis on promoting Gazprom as a powerful company, which contributes to the energy security of the countries in the region. For example, on 03 January 2016, *Moldavskie Vedomosti* published an article titled *„Moldova extended the contract with Gazprom by one more year”*.²⁷⁰ The article focuses

²⁶⁸ Vedomosti.md (anonymous), *Putin explained why Russia cannot attack NATO countries and influence elections in USA*, Moldavskie Vedomosti, Chisinau, 27.10.2016, available at: <http://www.vedomosti.md/news/putin-obyasnil-pochemu-rossiya-ne-mozhet-napast-na-strany-na/index.html>

²⁶⁹ Sputnik.md (anonymous), *Cheaper Russian Gas for Moldova*, Sputnik Moldova, Chisinau, 19.05.2015, available at: <https://sputnik.md/moldova/20150519/170921.html>.

²⁷⁰ Vedomosti.md (anonymous), *Moldova extended the contract with Gazprom by one more year*, Moldavskie Vedomosti, Chisinau, 03.01.2016, available at: <http://www.vedomosti.md/news/moldova-prodlila-kontrakty-s-gazpromom-eshe-na-god>.

on the economic importance of the Republic of Moldova for the transit of Russian gas to the Balkans.

The Ukraine crisis and its effects on Russian gas supply. Another important narrative used in Russian-funded media is the crisis in Ukraine and the dangers that it holds for Russian gas supplies in Europe and in Moldova in particular. The journalists use the conflict in Ukraine as a scapegoat, emphasizing that because of Ukraine, the citizens in Europe and Moldova could remain without gas. This type of propaganda is also employed with regard to the case of the Republic of Moldova, which has a single source of gas supply – the Russian Federation. Moreover, the analysed articles create a negative perception of the authorities in Ukraine who are guilty of potential gas supply issues energy disasters that may arise in the future. For example, on 24 February 2015, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published a news story titled “Moldova’s dependence on transit: Gazprom will turn off gas in two days, will it affect us?”²⁷¹. The article refers to the news that the Russian Federation wants to stop gas supplies to Ukraine due to outstanding debt, and this could affect the Republic of Moldova, which receives gas from Gazprom pipelines passing through Ukraine.

Turkish Stream. The pro-Russian outlet narrate about the construction and importance of the Turkish Stream project for European energy security. The analysed articles present the “understandable” position of the Russian Federation, which due to political problems with Ukraine needs to look for an alternative gas pipeline that would bring Russian gas to the Balkans. Moscow is worried about this issue, which is hence discussed at high level between Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Turkish Stream is pictured as a successful project, which will have major benefits for the Balkan countries. And, the Russian Federation is presented as a saviour of the energy security in the region.

Nord Stream 2. In addition to Turkish Stream, the Nord Stream 2 project is presented in articles as another alternative route of Russian gas delivery to European Union countries. Journalists emphasize its importance for Europe’s energy security, but also that this gas pipeline will have a major economic impact and will lower the price of gas for European consumers. At the same time, the articles stress that the Russian Federation is forced to build this gas pipeline due to political problems with Ukraine, and Nord Stream transit will eliminate the probability of Russian gas supply cuts to the EU.

Common Trends in Russian Propaganda in Moldova

Techniques of dissemination. In the articles published by Russian-funded media, the anti-American, anti-European and anti-Western messages are systematically transmitted and promoted extensively. This has as objective to influence the attitudes and beliefs of Moldovan citizens, trying to promote the idea that only the Russian Federation is capable of solving the biggest problems around the world. These messages have a pronounced propaganda character, and the techniques of dissemination are most diverse, including:

²⁷¹ Kp.md (anonymous), *Moldova’s dependence on transit: Gazprom will turn off gas in two days, will it affect us?*, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Chisinau, 24.02.15, available at: <https://www.kp.md/daily/26346/3228455/>.

- **Selective presentation of the facts.** The Russian media has broadcast only the articles that are convenient to the Russian Federation's geopolitical aims;
- **Unilateral presentation of facts or news from a single source.** The analysis showed that most of the materials were taken from official Russian sources, without considering other sources;
- **Utilisation of anonymous sources** without verification of information from independent sources;
- **Exaggeration of facts and events.** In all the analysed topics, the Russian media try to emphasize certain topics that they present in binary/black and white terms;
- **Emotional influencing** in order to promote certain messages or discredit people or groups;
- **Interpreting/commenting on the facts.** All analysed articles are characterised by the violation of deontological norms, as the journalist imposes his/her own opinion;
- **Inaccurate citation and interpretation of the source of the message.** This is a technique by which the messages of the sources are selectively quoted and nuanced by the journalist's formulations, so that the general message transmitted is made to correspond to the interests of the transmitter;
- **Citation of unknown or non-credible experts;**
- **The repetition of false ideas** in order to give them credibility;
- **Labelling or applying negative ratings** in order to weaken the person's authority or to discredit them;
- **The selection of titles/images in a tendentious manner** so that actors and groups are presented in a negative light, or images unrelated to the title of article are used, but which emphasise the propagandist idea in the article;
- **Promoting the conspiracy theory** that a new cold war will soon erupt, and russia will win;
- **Criticism of Western values;**
- **Promotion of the Russian Federation's military power, energy and financial power.**

Type of published articles. The quantitative analysis shows that the Russian-funded media mostly published news pieces and less interviews, reports or commentaries by pro-Russian experts. Thus, *sputnik.md* features 299 news pieces, 8 commentaries and 4 interviews. The *kp.md* newspaper has published 127 news articles, 77 reports / commentaries and 27 interviews. *Vedomosti.md* published 79 news pieces, 30 reports / commentaries and 4 interviews.

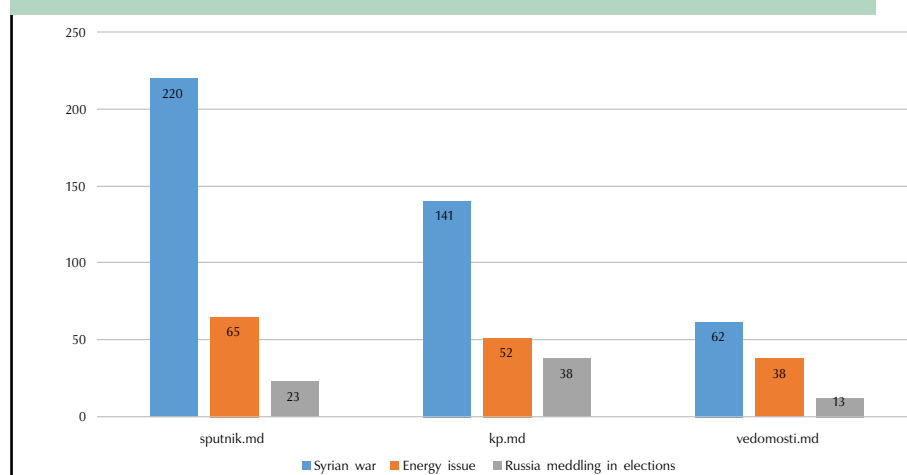
Authors. A specific feature of the articles published by the pro-Russian media is that many do not have authors, or very often the authors are located in Moscow. *Sputnik.md* has published the greatest number of anonymous articles – 296, with only 12 articles having author attribution. The articles in *Kp.md* are mostly written by authors from the Russian Federation (218 out of 231). *Vedomosti.md* has published only 7 attributed pieces materials and 106 anonymous articles. These figures show that articles are often commissioned, possibly by a group of authors who prefer to remain anonymous in order not to be blamed for manipulation.

Reference sources. All published articles by pro-Russian media sources refer to other media sources, creating the perception among readers that articles are not manipulating but truthful due to the citation of many other outlets. The analysis shows that the three media outlets referred to different news agencies, including Russian and international media. *Sputnik.md* has published 116 materials quoting news agencies, 40 articles quoting international media source and 21 Russian media. *Kp.md* has published 121 articles citing Russian media source, 40 referencing international sources and 15 – news agencies. *Vedomosti.md* has never cited news agencies, but has had 11 mentions of international media source and 9 – of Russian media.

As regards to the specific names of the media sources referred to: *Sputnik.md* – RIA Novosti – 50, Sputnik International – 29, Russia Today – 14, Sputnik France – 5; *kp.md* – Reuters – 15, Radio “Komsomolskaya Pravda” – 14, RIA Novosti – 11, TASS – 5; *Vedomosti.md* – INFOTAG, Moldova – 12, RIA Novosti – 6, IPN.md – 4, Sputnik – 4. In summary, the most cited media of all three analysed sources is the Russian agency RIA Novosti, which has been referenced 67 times.

Themes and related topics. The report focused on the examination of the three overarching themes related to the war in Syria, election meddling, and energy. As regards the first theme, subject *sputnik.md* has published the greatest number of articles – 220. In contrast 23 articles have published on the issue of Russian meddling in foreign elections and cyber attacks, and 65 articles – on the Russian

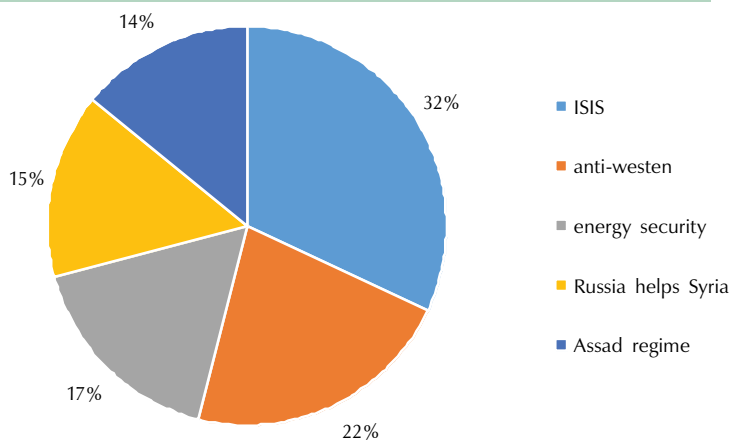
FIGURE 19. THE NUMBER OF PUBLISHED ARTICLES ON THE THREE MAIN THEMES



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Federation's energy interests and gas deliveries. The newspaper and the portal *kp.md* have published 141 items on the war in Syrian, 38 on election meddling and 52 on energy. Also, *vedomosti.md* has published 62 articles on the Syrian conflict, 13 – on election meddling and 38 – on energy. In terms of sub-topics, the five most commonly mentioned ones by *sputnik.md* are: ISIS and Islamic State – 68 articles; anti-Western – 47; energy security – 36; Russia helps Syria – 32; Assad regime – 30.

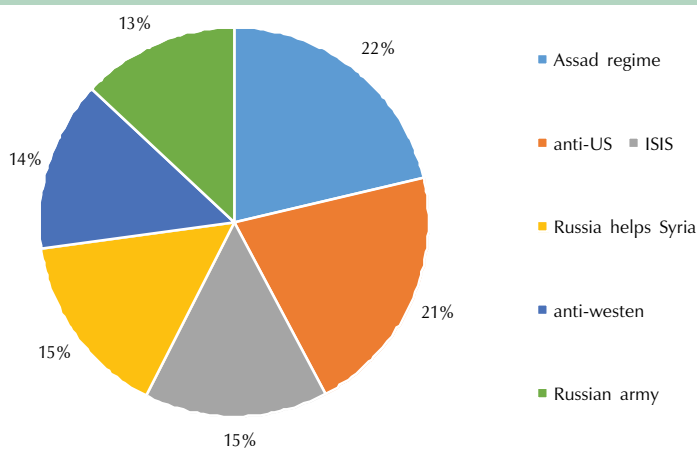
FIGURE 20. TOP SUB-TOPICS PUBLISHED ON SPUTNIK.MD



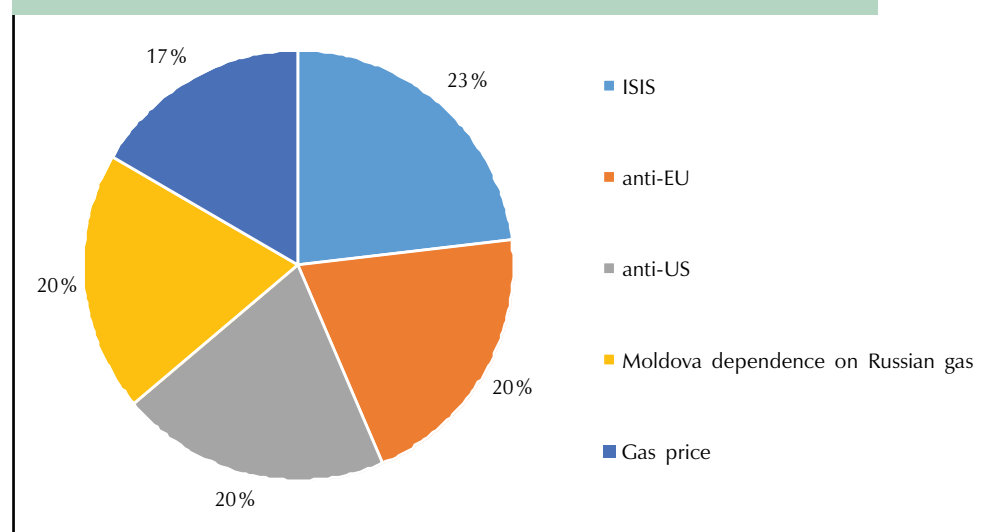
Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

In addition, top 6 of the sub-topics mentioned by *kp.md* are: Assad Regime – 64 entries; anti-US – 62; ISIS – 46; Russia helps Syria – 46; anti-Western – 42; Russian Army – 39.

FIGURE 21. TOP SUB-TOPICS PUBLISHED ON KP.MD



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

FIGURE 22. TOP SUB-TOPICS PUBLISHED ON *VEDOMOSTI.MD*

Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Vedomosti.md most frequently reported on the following key sub-topics: ISIS – 32, anti – EU – 28, anti – US – 28, Moldovan dependence on Russian gas – 27, gas price – 23.

Major actors. The pro-Russian media in the Republic of Moldova has used the names of several political figures for propaganda purposes. Reporting on leaders and important people from the Russian Federation is positive, while Western politicians are generally portrayed negatively. Most articles demonstrate Russia's supremacy over the West. The main actors about which *sputnik.md* writes are: Russia – 140, ISIS – 95, USA – 79, Vladimir Putin – 71, Bashar al – Assad – 52, Gazprom – 44. *Kp.md* focused on the following actors: Russia – 130, ISIS – 89, the US – 89, Bashar al – Assad – 55, Vladimir Putin – 48. *Vedomosti.md* focuses on the following actors: EU – 35, Russia – 34, Gazprom – 32, US – 30, Vladimir Putin – 30. The top three mentions of each article are only analysed.

In regard to the media outlets' most frequently referred actors, **the manipulative tendencies and attitudes are extreme**, and the actors are either presented highly positively or highly negatively. The most positively portrayed actors are Russia – 44%, Vladimir Putin – 22%, Bashar al-Assad – 16%, Gazprom – 16%, Sergey Lavrov – 2%. On the other hand, the most negatively pictured players in the pro-Russian media outlets are: ISIS – 36%, USA – 34%, EU – 14%, Donald Trump – 12%, Moldova – 4%.

ARMENIA

Introduction

The media domain in Armenia is on standby, following the velvet revolution in the spring of 2018. Many problems have accumulated that **range from self-censorship of journalists to transparency of the media owners**. Experts expect changes in media ownership as well as a process of review and realignment of editorial freedoms and values.

Newspapers in Armenia have low and declining circulation (up to 3000). Television has long dominated the media market as the most widespread source of information, especially in the country's regions. In the course of time, however, the Internet has been gaining a more important role as a source of information. As of 2016, 64.2% of the population in Armenia uses the Internet²⁷². In 2016, the number of people considering television as a source of information has dropped by 3% compared to 2010, while **the number of those considering the Internet as a primary source of information has tripled**, increasing²⁷³ from 16% to 50%²⁷⁴. Traditional media outlets are moving online to keep up with audience/reader habits, creating a highly competitive online media market. However, the **long-standing challenges of traditional media persist**, including lack of professionalism, unethical journalism, and heavily politicized editorial lines.

Armenian media is **driven by political influences and owners, and not by audience demand**. The number of mass media in Armenia is much greater than the limited advertising market can support. In a well-developed market, the size of the ad market comprises 1-1.4 % of the total GDP. In Armenia it is about 0.2% of GDP²⁷⁵. According to the Freedom House 2017, the Armenian press is not free²⁷⁶, and the Armenian Internet is partly free²⁷⁷.

The issue of the **transparency of media owners in Armenia is problematic**. It is possible to find out the names of the owners in the case of Limited Liability Companies LLCs, because official documents for LLC are open. The Armenian legislation sets a fee of 3200 Armenian drams (6.7 USD) for that though.

²⁷² Gayane Asryan, *6.5 Out of 10 Are Internet Users in Armenia*, 17.11.2017, available at: <https://media.am/en/internet-users-in-armenia>.

²⁷³ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Life in Transition: A Decade of Measuring Transition*, available at: <http://litsonline-ebrd.com/countries/armenia/>.

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²⁷⁵ The World Bank, *GDP of Armenia in 2017 was 11.537 Billion USD*, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=AM>; Media.am, *Armenian Media Market was 23-24 Million USD according experts*, available at <https://media.am/en/advertising-market-Armenia>.

²⁷⁶ Freedom House, *Freedom of The Press 2017*, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/armenia>.

²⁷⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom of the Net 2017*, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/armenia>.

However, in the case of other forms of company incorporation, like Closed Joint Stock Company (CJSC) shareholders names are hidden. Armenian legislation makes it impossible to determine the identity of the owners of those TVs that are closed joint-stock companies.

A vast array of pro-Russian media are on offer in Armenia. Three Russian TV channels are licensed to broadcast – Pervy Kanal, RTR Planeta, and Kultura. Specifically covering current affairs, RTR Planeta and Pervy Kanal reflect the Russian government's official line. In addition, there is a plethora of channels in Russian which air via cable TV. There is no data about the viewership of cable TV/the Cable Television, yet people generally use Internet Protocol television IPTV services that are included in the subscription for the package of their landline phone and monthly internet services. Russian is the unofficial second language in the country and people watch films in Russian including those broadcast by Armenian stations and follow the news in Russian. The result is that what most Armenians know about international events, like the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Eastern Ukraine, is from Russian sources.

Selection of Media Outlets

Three media have been selected for the research – *news.am*, *Iravunk* and *Sputnik Armenia*, respectively representing an outlet with Russian affiliation, an outlet with a big audience and a smaller outlet having clear pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives.

News.am is one of the most read web-sites with a large number of followers. According to the data of similarweb²⁷⁸ – professionalized in web-site ratings, this web-site is the first in the list of the Armenian news web-sites. The audience of *News.am* consists of 14.11 million monthly visits.²⁷⁹ *News.am* is available in Armenian, Russian, English and Turkish. The owner of the website is News.am LLC. The main shareholder is Armenika Kiviryan and his brother Argishti Kivirayn.²⁸⁰ Armenika Kiviryan was the representative of Russian Regnum News Agency in the South Caucasus.²⁸¹

Iravunk is more known as a print media. It belongs to the Union of Constitutional Rights political party espousing conservative-nationalistic values. The web-site is known for its anti-Western and pro-Russian publications. It has been involved in judicial proceedings²⁸² due to its publications. The owner of *Iravunk* is *Iravunk Media LLC*.²⁸³ The main owner of the newspaper and its website is Hayk

²⁷⁸ SimilarWeb, Top websites of Armenia, available at: <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/armenia>.

²⁷⁹ SimilarWeb, News.am Analytics, available at: <https://www.similarweb.com/website/news.am>.

²⁸⁰ Electronic Register of Republic of Armenia, News.am LLC, available at: <https://www.e-register.am/am/companies/233787>

²⁸¹ Electronic Register of Republic of Armenia, Regnum, available at: <https://www.e-register.am/am/companies/238527>

²⁸² Karlen Aslanyan, *Activists Decry Libel Case Ruling In Favor Of Pro-Government Newspaper*, 31.10.2014, available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/26668119.html>.

²⁸³ About Us Page, *Iravunk* website, available at: <https://iravunk.com/page/6>.

Babukhanyan,²⁸⁴ head of the Union of Constitutional Rights and MP at the Armenian National Assembly.²⁸⁵ Iravunk Media LLC offers a subscription for Armenian versions of Russian media outlets *Komsomolskaya Pravda Armenii* and *Argumenti Nedeli Armenii*.²⁸⁶ *Iravunk* is available in Armenian and Russian.

Sputnik Armenia is the Armenian version of the Russian *Sputnik*. The website is part of Russian *Sputnik News Agency* launched on November 10, 2014 by the Russian media group *Rossiia Segodnya*.²⁸⁷ The web-site is available in Armenian and Russian. Moreover, the web-site is described²⁸⁸ in the same way as *Sputnik International's* web-site. It is not mentioned that *Sputnik* is of Russian origin. If the reader is not aware that *Sputnik Armenia* is a Russian web-site, he/she should make specific efforts to find that out.

Comparative Analysis of *news.am*, *Iravunk* and *Sputnik Armenia*

Theme 1. The War in Syria

Over the three years subject to the report's investigation, 319 articles on the topic of the Syrian conflict have been published in the three monitored web-sites, out of which 105 articles appeared on the *Sputnik Armenia* website, 116 articles – on *news.am* and 98 articles – on *Iravunk*. It should be noted that the topic of the Syrian conflict is of specific interest for the Armenian media, because there is a large Armenian community in Syria. According to the data provided by the RA's Ministry of Diaspora, Armenia has accepted about 20 thousand Syrian refugees.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁴ Electronic Register of Republic of Armenia, Iravunk Media LLC, available at: <https://www.e-register.am/am/companies/942634>.

²⁸⁵ Profile of MP Hayk Babukhanyan, National Assembly of Armenia website, available at: <http://parliament.am/deputies.php?sel=details&ID=1180&lang=eng>.

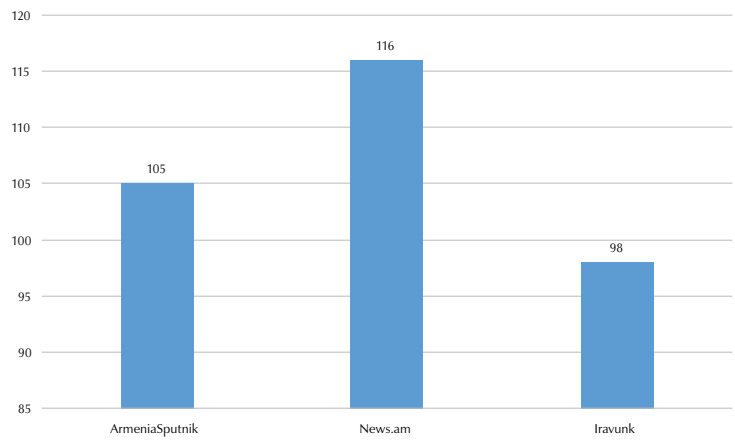
²⁸⁶ Subscription Page, Iravunk website, available at: <https://iravunk.com/page/3>.

²⁸⁷ About Us Page, Sputnik Website, available at: <https://sputniknews.com/docs/about/index.html>.

²⁸⁸ About Sputnik webpage, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/docs/about/index.html>.

²⁸⁹ ArmenPress, 20 thousand Syrian-Armenians live in Armenia, 04.10.2016, available at: <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/862430/20-thousand-syrian-armenians-live-in-armenia.html>.

FIGURE 23. WAR IN SYRIA: NUMBER OF ARTICLES

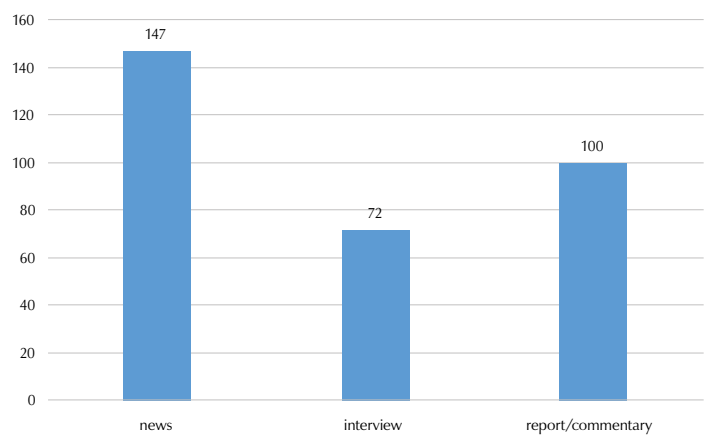


Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

227 of these articles are anonymous – replications, translations, short news, and press releases. The author’s name is mentioned in 92 articles. Some of the articles are about the humanitarian dimension of the crisis, including stories and photos of families that have moved to Armenia.

About half of the articles (147) are news; 100 articles include comments and analysis. 72 articles are interviews. It is noteworthy that one of the main topics of the analysis and interviews is the problem of the Armenian community in Syria and the possible influence of the conflict on Armenia.

FIGURE 24. WAR IN SYRIA: TYPES OF ARTICLES



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

180 articles do not have any reference to another source. Reference in 58 articles is made to Russian official sources and media. There are 55 references to English, German and French media. There are also cases, where the sources are Arabic, Turkish or Armenian.

In 14 articles, there is a second reference source. Only in one case does the article have a third reference source.

In the media monitored in 2015-2017, the main sub-topics related to the general Syrian theme are the ceasefire in Syria, the Russian military operation in Syria, Moscow's humanitarian assistance, the Armenian humanitarian assistance in Syria, problems of the Syrian-Armenian community, the US position in Syria, Russian-Turkish negotiations on the Syrian issue, Assad's visit to Russia, Russia's assistance to Assad, and Putin-Assad negotiations.

A large number of the sub-topics concern **Russia's role in the Syrian conflict**, including Russian aviation activities; Assad's gratitude to Putin for the assistance given to Syria; the failure of the US's projects because of successful Russian military activities in Syria; the US's and Turkey's failure to overthrow Assad as a result of Moscow's support for his regime; the Russian Federation as a guarantor of the ceasefire in Syria; Russia's leading position in the Syrian conflict; Aleppo Armenians' expectations from the RF's intervention in the city; Russia as Assad's ally in combating terrorism, Russian-Armenian humanitarian aid to Syria.

The **main narrative** of this topic in the monitored media is that **Russia has carried out a successful military operation** in Syria and promotes the resolution of the Syrian conflict. A parallel narrative holds that the West and particularly the United States are losing influence in Syria.²⁹⁰ The continuation of those messages is that the Russian army operates effectively in Syria and justifies the hopes and expectations of the international community²⁹¹ and that the successful Russian actions in Syria have changed the course of the lengthy conflict.²⁹²

Another common narrative is that due to its involvement in Syria, 'Russia has strengthened its international authority as a superpower'.²⁹³ Interviews with Russian and pro-Russian experts are common in articles²⁹⁴ as well.

²⁹⁰ Rostislav Ishchenko, Կովկասն առանց Ռուսաստանի. երեկ, այսօր, վաղը (Caucassus without Russia: yesterday, today and tomorrow), Sputnik Armenia, 01.07.2015, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/analytics/20150701/62201.html>.

²⁹¹ Sputnik Armenia, Սիրիահայերը Ռուսաստանի դեսպանատան մոտ շնորհակալություն հայտնեցին Վլադիմիր Պուտինին (Syrian-Armenians Thanked Vladimir Putin In Front Of Russian Embassy), 19.10.2015, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/armenia/20151019/888962.html>.

²⁹² Kerob Sargsyan, Ընդունել սիրիական ձախողումը (To Accept Syrian Failure), 12.02.2016, available at: http://old.iravunk.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=33082:2016-02-12-10-31-09&catid=111:2012-05-23-10-05-14&Itemid=158.

²⁹³ Sputnik Armenia, Փորձագետ. Ռուսաստանը Սիրիա մտնելով ամրապնդեց միջազգային հեղինակությունը (Russia strengthened international authority as a superpower and the main role-player), 09.10.2015, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/politics/20151009/833863.html>.

²⁹⁴ Hrant Safaryan, «Միջազգային ահաբեկչության դեմ հաղթանակի այլընտրանք գոյություն չունի», հարցազրույց ՌԴ նորագույն պետությունների ինստիտուտի տնօրեն, ռուս քաղաքագետ Ալեքսեյ Մարտինովի հետ (No Alternative To Victory Over International Terrorism: Interview With Alexey Martinov, Political Scientist, Director Of Institute Of Russian Modern Countries), 15.12.2015, available at: http://old.iravunk.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=31963:l-r&catid=48:handipum&Itemid=114.

The condition of the Syrian Armenians, who found refuge in Armenia, is also presented in pro-Russian terms. The articles tell about the Syrian-Armenian community's support for the Russian operation. For instance, a headline representative of the aforementioned idea states that 'A Few Dozen of Syrian-Armenian People in Front of the Embassy of Russian Federation in Armenia Thanked Russia for the Assistance to Syrian Government and for Fighting against Extremists'.²⁹⁵

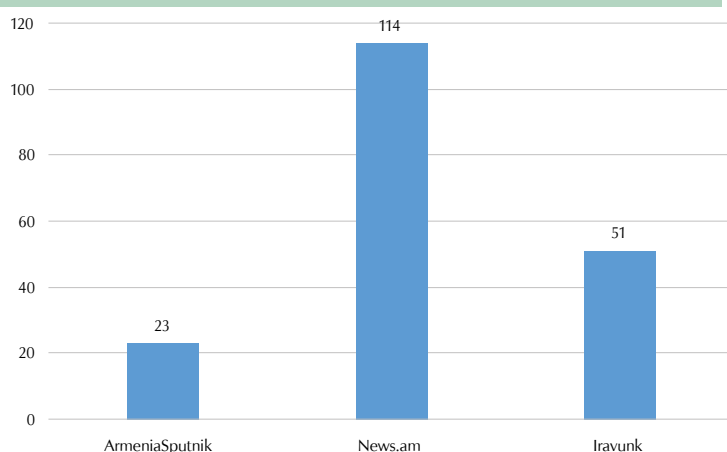
Theme 2. Election Interference

Over the period under investigation, 188 articles have been published in the three web-sites on the topic of Russian interference in elections around the world; 23 of those articles have been published on *Sputnik Armenia*, 114 on *news.am* and 51 on *Iravunk*.

Most of the articles (167) are anonymous. Such a **high number of anonymous articles** shows that the topic of Russia's possible role in election meddling is mainly presented in the Armenian media through translations and republications. There are no analytical articles and interviews, which further shows the lack of local expertise or interest in investigating the topic.

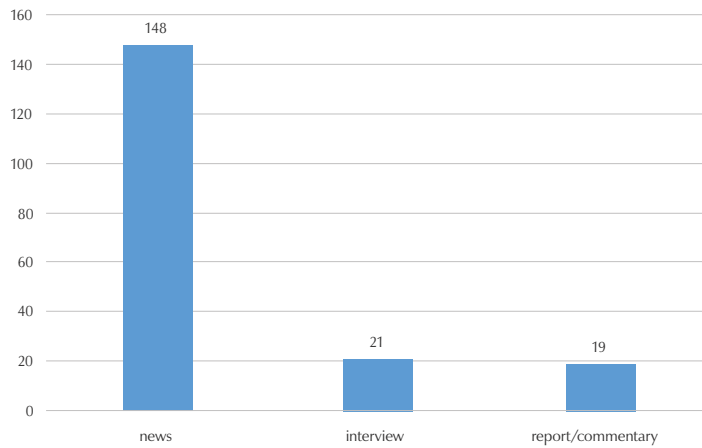
About two-thirds of the 188 articles – 148 articles – are news. 19 articles contain comments and analysis and 21 articles are interviews.

FIGURE 25. NUMBER OF ARTICLES ON RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN ELECTIONS



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

²⁹⁵ Sputnik Armenia, Միլիահայերը ՌԴ դեսպանատան մոտ շնորհակալություն հայտնեցին Պուտինին (Syrian-Armenians Thanked Vladimir Putin In Front Of Russian Embassy), 19.10.2015, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/armenia/20151019/888962.html>.

FIGURE 26. ELECTION INTERFERENCE: TYPES OF ARTICLES

Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Some 49 of the articles do not refer to any source. Compared to the other two topics of the research this is a small number. This means that when publishing on this topic the media mainly have referred to the source that they used compared to the other two topics.

It is noteworthy that in the publications on this topic, the three selected media refer more frequently to Western media. The main references for this topic are AP, BBC, CNN, Reuters, Bloomberg, Le Figaro, WSJ. The number of Western references is 107 out of 188 articles. The number of references to the media of Russian origin is 27. In the case of 19 articles out of the examined 188, there is a second reference. There are no articles with a third reference source. Among the 188 articles on the election topic, there are 10 publications that present the views of Margarita Simonyan, the manager of the Russian RT news channel.

The **main sub-topics related to the theme** of Russian elections meddling during 2015-2017 in the monitored media sources are: Russia's possible interference in the US elections, the assessment of the heads of different countries on US elections interference, the opinions of cyber security experts and possible sanctions against Russia. Below are the **most common narratives** used as exemplified by some articles on the above sub-topics: Russia denies its influence on the US elections, cyber security experts reject the accusation of Russia's interference in the US elections, Russia's intervention in the US elections is against Clinton, the calls for sanctions against Russia over its interference in the elections.

These articles are mainly republished and discuss the narrative of the possible interference of Russia in elections and particularly in the 2016 US Presidential elections. It is noteworthy that the Armenian media has also published articles, promoting the view that the allegations of Russian interference are false. For

example, an article presents²⁹⁶ a survey conducted by *Sputnik*, which expresses the view that it is not Russia but the US that interferes in the elections of other countries. This view has been additionally reinforced with relevant infographics.

The narrative of the possible Russian interference in the US election campaign develops a number of sub-narrative strands. The latter are linked to the presentation of both the Russian viewpoint (the Russian authorities deny the allegations of attempts at influencing the US election process)²⁹⁷ and the American stance (a new set of sanctions has been imposed on Russia's alleged intervention in the 2016 US election).²⁹⁸ In this case the issue is presented in a more unbiased manner.

One of the narratives linked to the US is related to the news that Washington has decided to implement programs aimed at tackling Russian propaganda in Europe and Eurasia, including Armenia. The US Congress plans to provide \$ 100 million to counteract 'Russia's influence and aggression' and support civil society in Europe and Eurasia.²⁹⁹ Although the article is in a news style, it is critical towards the US.

From quantitative point of view, the **US is the most prominently discussed actor**, which includes the current President Trump, the former Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and the former President Barack Obama. As such the US is mentioned as an actor in 135 articles out of 188. There is **a negative attitude towards the US** in 9 articles, and in the other cases the articles are neutral, mostly because neutral articles are mainly republications. Articles with negative attitude are only against the USA and EU countries. No negative attitude towards Russia are recorded.

Theme 3. Energy

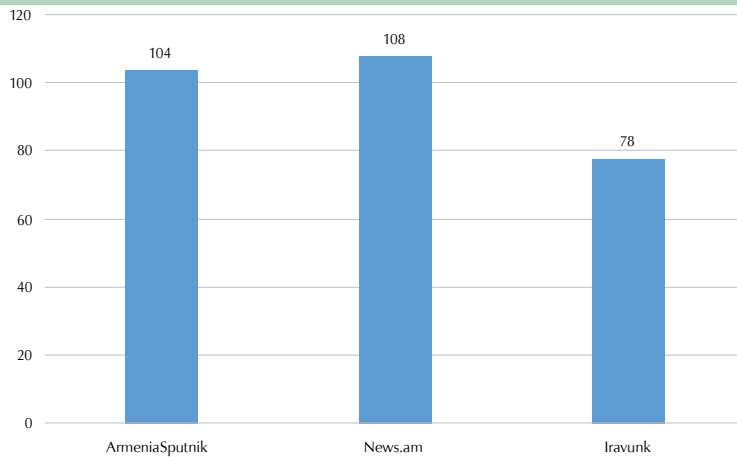
Over the three years under observation, the three web-sites published 290 articles on the topic of energy, out of which *Armenia Sputnik* published 104, *news.am* – 108, and *Iravunk* – 78.

²⁹⁶ Sputnik Armenia, Եվրոպացիները կարծում են, որ մյուս երկրների ընտրությունների վրա ազդում է ԱՄՆ-ն, ոչ թե Ռուսաստանը (Not Russia, but the US Intervention in Elections in Other Countries), 12.10.2017, available at: https://armeniasputnik.am/press_release/20171012/9022709/yntrutyunner-ashxarh.html.

²⁹⁷ News.am, CNN. Ռուսաստանի թեման կենտրոնական տեղ է զբաղեցնում ԱՄՆ-ի նախագահի ընտրություններում (Russian Theme Has Key Role during Presidential Elections in USA: CNN), 15.09.2016, available at: <https://news.am/arm/news/346581.html>.

²⁹⁸ News.am, ԱՄՆ սենատը հաստատել է Ռուսաստանի դեմ նոր պատժամիջոցների մասին օրինագիծը (US Senate Approves New Actions Bill against Russia), 14.06.2017, available at: <https://news.am/arm/news/395395.html>.

²⁹⁹ Iravunk, ԱՄՆ կարևոր նախաձեռնություն Հայաստանում, (և ոչ միայն) ռուսական շանտաժի դեմ (An Important Initiative in Armenia (and not only) Against Russian Blackmail), 07.05.2017, available at: <https://www.iravunk.com/news/29175>.

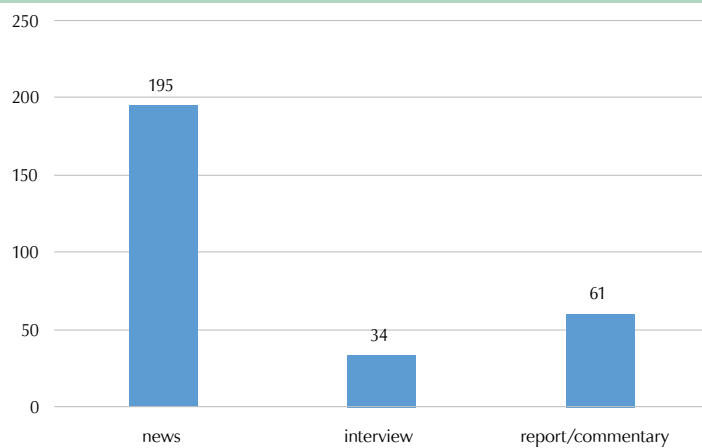
FIGURE 27. ENERGY: NUMBER OF ARTICLES

Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Most of the articles (229) are anonymous – republications, translations, short news, and press releases. Only 61 articles have authors. This is a typical feature of Armenian media, where news web-sites do not generally publish the names of authors.

The overwhelming number of the articles – 195 – is news. Only 61 articles include comments and analysis. 34 articles are interviews. The meager presence of analytical articles is another characteristic of the Armenian media landscape.

Some 205 of the articles have **no reference to any source**; 46 of the articles refer to Russian official sources and media. In the other cases, the references

FIGURE 28. ENERGY: TYPES OF ARTICLES

Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

are Armenian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, American and European. Only 3 articles have a second reference source. There are no articles with a third reference source in the observed period.

One-source articles are typical for news in Armenian media. They transmit information but without providing the full picture. It is noteworthy that the Russian sources – news web-sites, energy corporations and state press releases are an important source for the Armenian media. For the owners of the news web-sites it is easier to work with Russian sources, which are best known and accessible in Armenia.

Most of the sub-topics related to the energy theme in the pro-Russian media monitored in 2015-2017 concern the activity of **the Russian energy giant Gazprom in Armenia**, including the role of Gazprom in boosting gas supplies to the Republic of Armenia (RA), the maintenance of the price of gas imported to Armenia in 2018, the currency in which Russian gas is paid for, the new price of gas supply to the RA and the import of gas products from Russia to Armenia without customs duty. The second large group of sub-topics concern the activity of **the Metsmor Nuclear Power Plant**, including its operation, the prolongation of its activities and the EU's insistence that it should be closed down.

The **main pro-Russian article narratives** in relation to energy include:

A. Russia sells gas to Armenia at a special price and has reviewed and reduced the gas price,³⁰⁰ Gazprom is one of the biggest taxpayers in Armenia,³⁰¹ Yerevan does not have any problems with Gazprom.³⁰²

B. The nuclear power plant built during the Soviet years continues to operate and is under the management of Russian state corporation Rosatom. The most commonly mentioned narratives in this relation include:

Specialists quoted in the outlets insist, the modern technologies used by Rosatom allow the prolongation of the functioning of the reactors by at least 10 years without any risk in case of proper use,³⁰³ the exploitation of the nuclear power plant has been extended and large-scale resources have been invested, Russia's

³⁰⁰ News.am, Հայաստանը պայմանավորվել է Ռուսաստանի հետ գազի գնի նվազման շուրջ. 1000 խմ-ն 165 դոլարից կդառնա 150 (Armenia Agrees on Reduction of Gas Price with Russia: 1000 Cubic Meters' Cost From \$ 165 Will Become \$ 150), 07.04.2016, available at: <https://news.am/arm/news/321124.html>.

³⁰¹ Sputnik Armenia, Ռուսական մոնոպոլիստը՝ Հայաստանի խոշոր հարկատուների առաջին հորիզոնականում (Russian Monopolist Ranks First among Armenia's Largest Taxpayers.), 27.04.2017, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/economy/20170427/7150240/armenia-harkatu-gazprom.html>.

³⁰² Zhora Khachatryan, ՀՀ էներգետիկ համակարգի զարգացման հնարավորությունները (The Opportunities of Development of RA Energy System.), Iravunk, 08.05.2015, available at: http://old.iravunk.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26667:2012-04-04-19-36-17&catid=52:ntesutyun&Itemid=116.

³⁰³ Arman Vanesqeghyan, Առանց ատոմակայանի կյանք չկա. 10 տարի՝ ռազմավարական որոշում ընդունելու համար (There is no Life Without Nuclear Power Station: A Decade For Make a Strategic Decision.), Sputnik Armenia, 03.05.2017, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/analytics/20170503/7204843/armenia-atomakayan-iran.html>.

provision of a \$ 270 million loan will increase the level of technical security and upgrading.³⁰⁴

The demand of the EU that Armenia close down its NPP is directed against Russia, which requirement is just the beginning.³⁰⁵ The next step will be the demand for withdrawal of the Russian military base from Gyumri.

C. Russian energy projects in the region and collaboration with Turkey, a country which has closed its border with Armenia.³⁰⁶ In this case the narratives are of an informative rather than analytical nature. The Turkish side has requested Gazprom to increase gas supplies from Russia, and Gazprom is going to provide a gas discount to the Turkish side.³⁰⁷

The analysis of the articles shows that the attitude is mainly neutral. Only one of the articles about Gazprom is positive.³⁰⁸ It tells the story of the gas price negotiations between Armenia and Russia and presents Gazprom as a neutral negotiator. The article that conveys a negative attitude to the European Union also refers to Russia in positive terms.³⁰⁹

Common Trends in the Russian Propaganda

The general lines of Russian propaganda in the Armenian on-line media are summarized in this section. Those include: active presence of Russian players, topics and narratives, use of Russian sources, a more positive attitude towards the Russian narratives and a more negative attitude towards the West. In the three web-sites under investigation, the research identified 797 articles published in relation to the three general themes of the war in Syria, elections interference and energy. Among those there are 290 articles on the topic of energy, 319 articles – about the Syrian conflict and 188 articles – about alleged Russian interference in elections.

³⁰⁴ Zvart Khachatryan, «Հայաստանի ատոմակայանը տարածաշրջանում դիրքավորման լավագույն ռեսուրսն է» (Nuclear Power Plant of Armenia is The Best Resource in The Region), Iravunk, 08.11.2017, available at: <https://iravunk.com/news/43606>.

³⁰⁵ Vladimir Lepyokhin, Ինչո՞ւ Հայաստանը զիջումներ չի ստանա ԵՄ-ից. բացահայտում ենք «գործընկերության մասին» միջերը (Why RA Will Not Get Any Compromise From EU? Discovering Myths About 'Partnership'), Sputnik Armenia, 21.10.2017, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/analytics/20171021/9137192/inchu-hayastany-zijumner-chi-stana-em-ic-gortsynkerutyanyan-masin-mifery.html>.

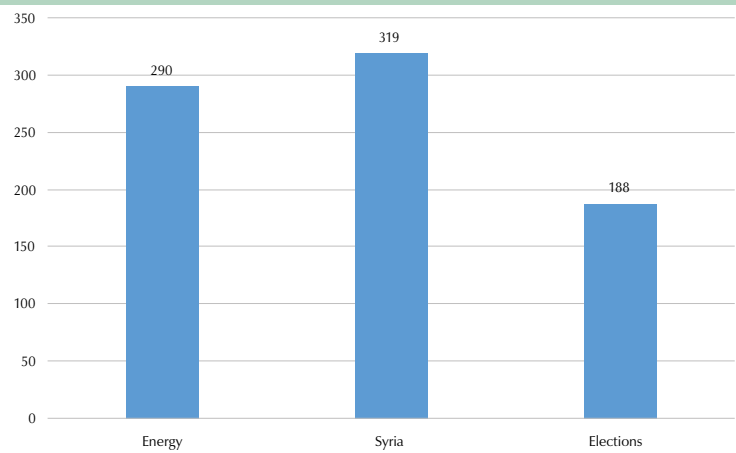
³⁰⁶ Kerob Sargsyan, Թիլերսոնն է՞լ Ալիսին թողեց «օդից կախված» (Does Tillerson Leave Aliev „On The Air“ As Well?), Iravunk, 12.07.2017, available at: <https://www.iravunk.com/news/34691>.

³⁰⁷ Iravunk, «Գազպրոմ»-ը 10 տոկոսով ավելացնելու է Թուրքիային ռուսական գազի մատակարարումները (Gazprom Will Increase Russian Gas Supplies To Turkey By 10%.), 28.10.2016, available at: <https://iravunk.com/news/13788>.

³⁰⁸ Kerob Sargsyan, Ռեա՞լ է հոսանքի և գազի էժանացման հեռանկարը (Is The Perspective Of Gas Price Decrease Real?), Iravunk, 26.01.2016, available at: http://old.iravunk.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32689:2016-01-26-10-29-03&catid=52:ntesutyun&Itemid=116.

³⁰⁹ Vladimir Lepyokhin, Ինչո՞ւ Հայաստանը զիջումներ չի ստանա ԵՄ-ից. բացահայտում ենք «գործընկերության մասին» միջերը (Why RA Will Not Get Any Compromise From EU ? Discovering Myths About 'Partnership'), Sputnik Armenia, 21.10.2017, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/analytics/20171021/9137192/inchu-hayastany-zijumner-chi-stana-em-ic-gortsynkerutyanyan-masin-mifery.html>.

FIGURE 29. NUMBER OF ARTICLES ON ALL THEMES

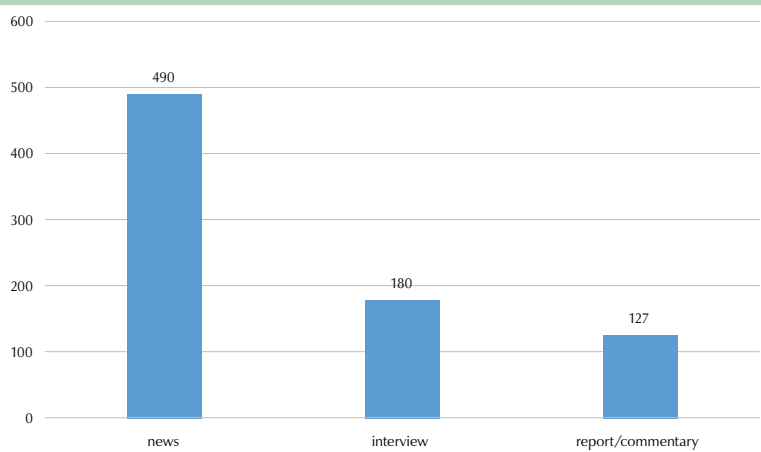


Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

The largest number of publications has been about the Syrian conflict. In the case of Armenia, the presence of a large Armenian community in Syria makes the theme a highly significant, nationally-relevant issue. The Armenian media has focused on the problems of the Armenian community in the midst of war and on the fate of about 20 thousand Armenians that have moved from Syria to Armenia.

The energy issues are also prioritized in the media. Russia is an important player in the energy sector of Armenia, Gazprom is the main supplier of gas to the country, the largest Armenian Thermal Power Plant of Hrazdan is Russian, the Armenian Metsamor NPP has been handed over to the management of Rosatom.

FIGURE 30. ALL ARTICLES BY TYPE



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

The topic of Russian interference around the world and particularly in the US elections is less presented in the monitored media. The topic has been represented mainly in the form of news. Among the most plausible explanations is that the Armenian media shy from angering Russia on this issue.

More than half of the identified articles – 490 – are news pieces. Commentaries and analytical articles are the second most common form of media material (180). Interviews take the third place (127).

It should be highlighted that more than two-thirds of the articles – 627 – are **anonymous** and do not have an author. This means that these articles are either translations or republications from other Armenian, Russian or Western sources, or are news releases. Articles with no authors are specific for the Armenian media. The news web-sites do not see the need to mention the name of the authors.

There are a lot of articles with only a single reference. The cases when an article contains two or three references are much rarer. Some 552 of the analysed articles **do not have a reference at all**. Articles with references to Russian sources amount to 131 of the the material under investigation. References to US, EU, British, Israeli, Turkish and Armenian sources are available in 328.

The **abundance of Russian sources** used by the media outlets is conditioned on the popularity of the Russian language in Armenia. It is much easier for the Armenian journalists to use Russian sources; the Russian web-sites are more common in Armenia. Russian television is accessible for everyone. It is convenient for the local journalists to present the news based on Russian sources.

The Russian influence is also felt when examining the sub-topics in the monitored media. The majority of the sub-topics about energy are related to **the activity of Gazprom and Rosatom in Armenia**. These two companies receive a wide coverage. Gazprom and Rosatom play an important role in the Armenian energy system.

The question over the continuing operation of the Armenian nuclear power plant and the proposal of the European Union to stop the operation of the NPP represent a painful issue for Armenia. It is mainly covered in the monitored media in a neutral or negative way. *Sputnik Armenia*, is especially active, citing experts to promote the thesis that the provisions in the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement that Yerevan has signed with the EU can cause an energy crises in Armenia.³¹⁰ The former Minister of Defense of Armenia Vagharshak Harutyunyan has stated that if it is not for Russia, the Armenians will lose the nuclear plant.

In the reviewed articles, there is also a tendency to portray positively the dependence of Armenia on Russian gas. For example, in a news article³¹¹ on

³¹⁰ Sputnik Armenia, ԵՄ-ն նոր «ցուրտ ու մութ» տարիներ է խոստանում Հայաստանին. փորձագետներ (The EU Promises new “Cold and Dark” years to Armenia: The Experts), 15.10.2017, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/armenia/20171015/9064236/armenia-atomakayan-em.html>.

³¹¹ News.am, Հայաստանի համար ռուսական գազը դեռևս ամենաէժանն է՞մ էներգետիկայի նախարար (Russian gas is still the cheapest for Armenia: The Minister of Energy), 20.10.2017, available at: <https://news.am/arm/news/416453.html>.

news.am the RA Minister of Energy argues that Iran cannot supply gas to Armenia at prices lower than those offered by Russia.

In the articles on the Syrian topic Russia is portrayed most extensively. Namely, among the 319 reviewed articles there are only two that do not concern the Russian presence in Syria as a topic. Russia's image in general, Russian President Putin, the Russian military are the first or second players in 207 articles out of the 319 articles reviewed.

In terms of the sub-topics of the Syrian conflict, **Russia's role is also prominently covered.** It is argued that through its presence in Syria, Russia helped the Syrian people and the Armenians residing there. The article³¹² titled "*The Rescue of the Armenians, or Who Benefited from the Russian Participation in the Syrian Conflict*" presents the viewpoint of an Afghanistan War veteran and former Commander of the RA Armed forces, General-Lieutenant Norat Ter-Grigoryants. He maintains that 'The Russian Aerospace Forces supported the Syrian state and people, among which there are many Armenians'.

The three selected outlets cite experts to promote certain views. For instance,³¹³ an expert notes that 'Russia is conducting military actions in Syria in line with the international legal norms, and upon the request of the Syrian leadership, and I don't think that any sensible person can be against it'.

The topic of the alleged Russian interference in the elections of foreign countries is the only one in which the number of references to Western sources exceed references to Russian sources. Some 107 out of 188 articles are translations and republications from Western media. On the other hand these articles from the Western media are just republications and carry information not analysis or opinions.

In general, there are a few publications among the reviewed articles that are rich in analytical content, reference many sources and are stylized as commentaries. In *Sputnik Armenia*, where the article type is a report or a commentary in all the 8 cases experts are either pro-Russian or express pro-Russian positions.

There are a number of cases, where positive or negative attitudes are expressed with the help of attitudinally tinged titles as in the following: 'Attack on the Armenian NPP: a Blow to Moscow through Yerevan',³¹⁴ 'The US and Azerbaijan

³¹² Sputnik Armenia, Հայերի փրկությունը կամ սիրիական հակամարտությունում ով շահեց Ռուսաստանի մասնակցությունից (Rescue of the Armenians, or who benefited from the Russian Participation in the Syrian Conflict), 30.09.2017, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/exclusive/20170930/8858343/siria-rusastan-ter-grigoryanc-sargis-grigoryan.html>.

³¹³ Sputnik Armenia, Փորձագետ. Ռուսաստանը կլուծի Սիրիայում ԻՊ ահաբեկիչների հետ կապված խնդիրները (The Expert: Russia Will Solve the Issues Connected with the IS terrorists in Syria), 01.10.2015, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/politics/20151001/778082.html>.

³¹⁴ Vladimir Lepyokhin, Հարձակում հայկական ԱԷԿ-ի վրա. հարված Մոսկվային՝ Երևանի միջոցով (Attack on the Armenian NPP: a Blow to Moscow Through Yerevan), 30.11.2017, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/analytics/20171130/9635283/armenia-rusastan-atomakayan.html>.

Unite in Gas War against the RF',³¹⁵ 'The Americans Support the Terrorists',³¹⁶ 'Putin Defeated Trump',³¹⁷ 'Vladimir Putin Re-Born in Syria'.³¹⁸ This latter article also shows trends specific in terms of the image provided to illustrate the text. The article is a translation from the Russian *lenta.ru* and tells the story of a new-born baby in the Tartous region of Syria, who was named Vladimir Putin. The title directs attention to the fact that a photo is included, where the image of the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the baby wrapped in the Russian flag are presented.

News.am usually incorporates one photo per article. *Sputnik Armenia* applies the principle of publishing the same photo many times in relation to the same topic. *Iravunk* usually employs the cartoon genre, complementing the negative tones of the articles.³¹⁹ The author of an article³²⁰ expresses the opinion illustrated with a cartoon that with the election of Donald Trump as US President, liberal sentiments around the world will decrease.

Overall, **the extent of presentation of Russia-favourable information in Armenia is not typical for other post-Soviet countries.** There are no Armenian media with Russian investments as such (probably because this is not seen as needed to achieve the goals of Russian influence). But the Russian state television channels are available in Armenia through terrestrial broadcast and most of the sport, entertainment, adventure channels of cable television are in the Russian language.

Practically **everyone in Armenia speaks or at least understands Russian**³²¹ and hence listens and watches Russian media. Part of the local Armenian TV channels show Hollywood or European films without Armenian translation and in Russian. The Russian propaganda is transmitted through standard and on-line television on the basis of quality shows, educational and entertaining programs. This helps to maintain the audience of those channels.

There is **a large Armenian diaspora in Russia.** According to a census held in 2010 1.182 million Armenians reside in Russia. Russia is a place for temporary work for many Armenians. All these people themselves disseminate information by word of mouth. They create a positive image of Russia in oral conversations

³¹⁵ Kerob Sargsyan, ԱՄՆ-ը ու Ադրբեջանը միավորվել են ՌԴ-ի հետ գազային պատերազմում (The US and Azerbaijan Unite in Gas War against the RF), 05.05.2015, available at: http://www.old.iravunk.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26521:2012-04-04-19-07-00&catid=111:2012-05-23-10-05-14&Itemid=158.

³¹⁶ Sputnik Armenia, Ամերիկացիներն աջակցում են ահաբեկիչներին (The Americans Supports the Terrorists), 30.09.2016, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/politics/20160930/5042057/Amerikaci-siria-rusastan-asad.html>.

³¹⁷ Iravunk, Պուտինը հաղթեց Թրամփին (Putin Defeated Trump), 14.12.2016, available at: <https://www.iravunk.com/news/17882>.

³¹⁸ Iravunk, Սիրիայում Վլադիմիր Պուտին է լույս աշխարհ եկել (լուսանկար) (Vladimir Putin Born in Syria (an image)), 09.05.2017, available at: <https://www.iravunk.com/news/29350>.

³¹⁹ Kerob Sargsyan, Ինչպես հասկանալ Պուտինի հետ հանդիպման շեմին Էրդողանի հիստերիաները (How understand Erdogan's hysteria on the eve of his meeting with Putin?), 03.03.2017, available at: <https://iravunk.com/news/24046>.

³²⁰ Kerob Sargsyan, Պատահական չէր, որ Թրամփի ընտրվելուն առաջինն արձագանքեց դոլարը, First Response to Trump's election was the Dollar, 11.11.2016, available at: <https://www.iravunk.com/news/14899>.

³²¹ Caucasus Barometer 2017, *Knowledge of Russian in Armenia*, available at: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2015am/KNOWRUS>.

with their relatives, and thus generally re-enforce the positive attitude to Russia in Armenia.

Therefore, it should be concluded that Russian propaganda is readily transmitted in Armenia and this is unlikely to change. The Armenian media have limited resources, and they often rely on freely available highr quality Russian sources to keep their readership informed. At the same time Russian politics has still a big influence on the Armenian society and politics, which is reflected in the work of the media too.