Russian disinformation and propaganda in Southeastern Europe as acts of hybrid war

by

Ioannis Koutroudes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF DIGITAL MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND JOURNALISM
Specialization: Risk Communication and Crisis Journalism

Supervisor: Prof. Nikos Panagiotou
September 2019
ABBREVIATIONS

EU: European Union

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

USA: United States of America
ABSTRACT

Russian propaganda and disinformation have been very pressing issues throughout Europe in recent years. As Bechev (2017, p. 1 – 23) says, Southeastern Europe in particular has been the target of Russian information campaigns ever since the war in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Southeastern Europe has been traditionally an important area in the strategic planning of the Kremlin. This research has shown that Southeastern Europe has been filled with both “troll factories” and pro–Kremlin domestic media outlets. Similarly, pro–Russian domestic media have infiltrated the media markets in Southeast European countries. Pro–Russian media in Southeastern Europe reproduces strong anti–West narratives which undermine the prestige and the interests of the West in the region. Western leaders are mocked and Western values are presented in a rather derogatory way. Conversely, pro–Russian media maintains a strong pro–Kremlin attitude by perpetuating stories about the cultural, religious, economic bonds between Southeast European nations and Russia. Common narratives also include the face of Vladimir Putin and the superiority of Russian military. Despite the above situation, the impact and the extent of pro–Kremlin propaganda and disinformation in Southeastern Europe has not been adequately studied. This situation underlines the necessity for more research into the field.

Key words: propaganda, disinformation, Southeastern Europe, Russia, Serbia, “troll – factories”, Sputnik, anti – NATO / anti – West narratives, pro – Kremlin narratives
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to explain the phenomenon of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Southeastern Europe. We have chosen the case study of Southeastern Europe for several reasons which are explained below. In recent years, Southeast European nations have become the battleground between Russia and the West. Russia is taking advantage of the region’s economic stagnation and political corruption in order to spread its propaganda and take these countries within its sphere of influence. Historically speaking, most of the countries in the region, especially Serbia and Bulgaria maintain close ties with Russia. Throughout the 20th century, these countries were part of the Soviet block and were under immense Russian influence. After the fall of communism, things changed. Yugoslavia disintegrated into several smaller countries with serious ethnic and economic problems, while Bulgaria and Romania became parliamentary republics.

Today, Southeast European nations are strategically important both for EU and NATO. Some of the countries in the region like Albania and Serbia are candidate countries for EU membership while others are in the middle of negotiating accession agreements with the EU (e.g. Bosnia–Herzegovina). This situation highlights the importance of the situation and underlines the necessity to understand the phenomenon of Russian soft power in the region. Russian soft power in the region comes in many forms ranging from economic infiltration to organized information campaigns. However, this thesis only focuses on issues related to media propaganda and disinformation techniques. Issues related to economic relationships or culture, therefore, will not be addressed. This thesis analyzes issues related to propaganda and disinformation. These phenomena are examined from the perspective of hybrid warfare as they are perceived as such.

Finally, regarding its structure, this thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 provides a theoretical overview of the basic terms which are used throughout this thesis. These terms are hybrid warfare, propaganda and disinformation. Chapter 2 is a description of the research design of this thesis. It explains the initial research hypotheses, research questions, data collection
techniques and research limitations. Chapter 3 explains the findings of this research and analyzes the basic characteristics of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Southeastern Europe. The discussion of the findings is based upon the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 1.
CHAPTER 1
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to present the theoretical debate surrounding the terms used in this thesis. These terms are hybrid warfare, propaganda and disinformation. The presentation of the terms includes the theoretical debate surrounding them and their basic characteristics.

1.1 Hybrid Warfare

In 2014, the term hybrid warfare came into prominence. That’s the time when Russia annexed Crimea by supporting autonomist Russian-speakers in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Russia also crushed Ukrainian armed forces in border clashes in the Eastern part of the country. Similarly, in the Middle East, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) trounced the Iraqi Army and its Western allies. This made both the West suffer one of the most humiliating defeats in modern history. ISIS forces seized Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul and declared the ISIS caliphate on June 29, 2014. These events were considered by many analysts as hybrid warfare acts. Despite gaining prominence in 2014, hybrid warfare has been used to describe changes in the character of modern warfare ever since 2005. The term was widely used to describe Hezbollah’s actions in the 2006 Lebanon War. On the other hand, some observers and strategic analysts have even questioned the contemporary origins of hybrid warfare. According to their analysis, hybrid warfare lies in the Balkan Wars in the 1990s and the subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia. (Hashim, 2017).

1.1.1 Definition of hybrid warfare

To begin with, it is difficult to fully define hybrid warfare. The term is a Western concept which seeks to explain warfare which is not conducted in regular means. Researchers do not agree on what constitutes hybrid warfare and when hybrid war started emerging in modern strategic discourse. Many
academics place the origins of hybrid warfare in Antiquity, while others believe that hybrid warfare is a product of the Cold-war era. This new concept entails more expanded and complicated roles for all forces involved. In specific, the hybrid war concept requires a new approach to the development and more effective use of a state’s armed forces. Forces and war operations should support the political, informational and economic goals of a particular power. Hybrid warfare acts range from purely humanitarian missions to the establishment of a hostile environment through traditional means of war. In this part of my thesis, there is presented the theoretical debate about the nature of hybrid warfare. It has to be noted that the debate about hybrid warfare started with the definition of hybrid threats or challenges.

The concept of a hybrid threat and subsequently warfare is often associated with the military theorist Frank Hoffman. His work “The Rise of Hybrid Wars” (2007) laid the foundations for a broader discussion on the nature of hybrid warfare. In academia and in the world of strategic thinking, his analysis has generated much debate and is regarded as an authoritative and controversial discourse on the issue. Hoffman builds upon much of the theory that has emerged since the end of the Cold War and attempts to characterize both hybrid threats and the operational environment into which hybrid warfare takes place. Hoffman’s theory attempts to bridge the gap between the linear characterizations of regular and irregular warfare in the contemporary operational environment. Hoffman starts his analysis by elaborating on the concept of compound warfare. Compound wars are major conflicts which feature important regular and irregular components fighting simultaneously in a unified direction. Compound warfare exploits the advantages of each kind of force and it has the ability to increase the nature of various threats during the conflict. Hoffman argues that hybrid threats will continue to emerge in modern war environments. Hoffman (2007, p. 29) defines a hybrid threat as: “any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal activities in the battle space to obtain their political objectives.” This definition shows that Hoffman identifies four critical characteristics: conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behavior.
Moreover, Hoffman (2008) illustrates how hybrid threats were materialized through Hezbollah. Hoffman explains in detail the hybrid methods employed by Hezbollah. These methods essentially included the blurring and blending of all forms of war operations. Its highly disciplined, well-trained distributed units used a mixture of guerrilla tactics and high-tech technology in densely urban centers. Hoffman also underlines that hybrid warfare does not mean the end of conventional warfare. Hybrid warfare does not represent the end of conventional warfare. On the contrary, it does signify that a new more complicated factor has come for defense planning and policy-makers in the 21st century. Hybrid warfare causes additional sorts of dangers to which a modern state needs to be resilient. Hoffman believes that future adversaries will apply multiple modes of war simultaneously to exploit a state’s weaknesses. Adversaries will use an optimal blend of tactics that favor their own strategic culture, geography and priorities. While Hoffman’s insights into the hybrid concept are compelling, they are oriented more to the tactical and operational level than strategic application (Tiehonven, 2016, p. 8 - 10).

Furthermore, Glenn (2009) expands the debate between compound warfare and hybrid threats. He interprets compound warfare as “[…] synergy and combinations at the strategic level, but not the complexity, fusion and simultaneity we anticipate at the operational and even tactical levels in war where one or both sides is blending and fusing the full range of methods and modes of conflict into the battle space”. Glenn (2009) also analyzes the transformation Hezbollah underwent to become a hybrid force that achieved significant strategic effects during their 2006 war with Israel. Glenn advocates that “Hezbollah is more than a military force and therein lies its real strength. It has political, social, diplomatic and informational components that provide bedrock support for its military organization”. He further explains that “the key to Hezbollah’s strength is a capability many developed nations seek as they pursue their international objectives: an effective “comprehensive approach”.” Just like Hoffman, Glenn showed that Hezbollah had evolved into an actor which acted like a typical state although it was an organization. With regards to hybrid warfare, Glenn says that hybrid conflict is a concept whose character is better described alongside other terms which better clarify the notion of
“hybrid”. “Hybrid” in its several forms fails to clear the high hurdle and, therefore should not attain status as part of a formal doctrine (Glenn, 2009).

Additionally, army Colonel John McCuen (McCuen, 2008, p. 107 – 108) discusses hybrid wars in terms of a struggle for the control and support of the combat zone’s indigenous population. McCuen defines hybrid wars as a combination of symmetrical and asymmetrical war operations in which combattant forces conduct conventional military operations while they simultaneously try to secure and stabilize control over the combat zone’s indigenous population. McCuen moves further into defining the combatants in a hybrid conflict situation. Based on his analysis, he explains that hybrid conflicts today transpire in three asymmetric battlegrounds and not on conventional battlegrounds: the conflict zone population, the home front population and the international community. McCuen’s analysis embraces both the psychological domain and the use of all instruments of national power in the pursuit of strategic ends. In hybrid warfare, achieving strategic objectives requires success in all of these diverse conventional and asymmetrical battlegrounds.

Moreover, the European Union (EU) defines hybrid threats as activities which combine conventional and unconventional, military and non-military means. These means of war can be used in a coordinated way by state or non-state actors to achieve specific political and economic goals. Hybrid campaigns are multidimensional because they combine coercive and subversive measures and use both conventional and unconventional tools and tactics. Another important characteristic of hybrid threats is that they have been designed to be difficult to detect. These threats target critical vulnerabilities of a particular actor and seek to create confusion which can hinder effective decision-making. Regarding disinformation, which is the research topic of this thesis, the EU has expanded its capacity to detect disinformation and also come up with effective measures against it. The EU has been trying to counter and respond to disinformation threats by detecting malicious activities and their sources. It has to be noted that disinformation threats come both from within and outside the European Union (Kocijancic & Osorio, 2018).
1.1.2 Basic characteristics of hybrid warfare

Despite the above theoretical debate, a simple definition of hybrid war would include the following. Hybrid warfare includes the deployment of comprehensive and highly complex military activities whose aim is to maximize non-violent economic and political influence to a particular adversary. Hybrid warfare aims at reforming hostile governments and social movements. Bond (2007, p. 4) advocates that hybrid warfare tactics are used in failing and failed states. Hybrid warfare is also related to a full range of non-conventional weapons, support units and regular military equipment. (Bond, 2007).

To begin with, hybrid warfare aims not so much at destroying an enemy actor, but mostly at disrupting its stability. Hybrid warfare strategies target mainly the economy and political stability of a particular state. That’s why states involved in hybrid war situations engage in terrorism or trade war activities. The main aim of hybrid war is to allow a certain state to take control of the society it wants to afflict and to manipulate policy-makers into totally different pathways. Although researchers cannot fully provide us with a comprehensive definition of hybrid war, they have concluded to the basic characteristics of hybrid warfare. These characteristics fall into certain categories: profile of the adversaries, warzone, war tactics and communication methods. The basic characteristics of hybrid warfare are the following:

a) Non-standard, complex or fluid adversaries
During the 19th century, adversaries were clear. Empires were fighting against other empires. Armies fought in the name of their emperor. However, this is not the case today as the nature of war adversaries has become more complex. For instance, Hezbollah or ISIS are terrorist organizations without solid territory and organized political institutions. They are undoubtedly war adversaries, but they are not regular opponents as they lack the characteristics of a defined war opponent (McCuen, 2008, p. 108; Glenn, 2009; Deep, 2015).

b) Irregular and conventional war tactics
These may include covert operations under state control and espionage, infiltration or enlistment of non-governmental actors, including organized criminal groups, terrorists, and extremist political, religious, and ethnic or
sectarian organizations. Hybrid threats are comprised of a mix of soldiers, terrorists, guerrilla fighters and criminals. Again in the 19th century, traditional warfare followed the Clausewitzian war tactics. Armies used conventional weapons and fought in a predefined front. Today, warfronts combine various elements as the nature of war has moved to formerly peaceful areas. This remark is best illustrated by the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 as they clearly showed that ISIS had moved the Syrian conflict to Europe. Additionally, the Web is now emerging as the new battlefield as social media and blogging are transforming the nature of war (Jasper & Moreland, 2014).

c) High-tech and state of the art technology
These are also important characteristics of hybrid conflict. Hybrid warfare combatants utilize the most sophisticated weapons not just in terms of battlefield warfare, but also in terms of technological development. For example, during the Israel–Hezbollah War in 2006, decentralized Hezbollah forces composed of mixed guerrillas and regular troops were armed with precision missiles, short and medium range rockets, unmanned aerial vehicles and advanced improvised explosive devices. Hezbollah forces managed to shoot down Israeli helicopters, to severely damage a patrol boat with a cruise missile and to destroy heavily armored tanks by firing guided missiles from hidden spots (Deep, 2015).

d) Use of social media, mass communication and propaganda
Social media and mass communication channels are powerful tools for hybrid opponents as they allow them to internally undermine a state. At the same time, disinformation and fake news are also important hybrid warfare acts. According to the US State Department (2014), the key issue in hybrid warfare is the control of the flow of information. This means that whoever takes control of the spread of information to a group of people will eventually gain advantage over its enemy. This has become evident in recent years especially in the case of Eastern Ukraine where Russia used all available mainstream media to disseminate its propaganda and disinformation (Jasper & Moreland, 2014; Doughtery, 2014). Svetoka (2016) went a step further by comparing two case studies of the use of social media as hybrid warfare tools. The one case study was Russia vs Ukraine and the other ISIS/Daesh.

1.1.3 Russia and hybrid warfare
In recent years and especially after the events in Ukraine, Russia’s aggressive policy has been associated with hybrid warfare. The essence of Russia’s tactics is precisely to try to avoid shooting as much as possible and then to ensure that whatever shooting takes place is on the terms that suit her best. Russia has blended the use of a variety of strategies ranging from gangster allies to media propaganda. This strategic thinking relies heavily on previous Soviet military operations. Many Western analysts have suggested that the Russian operations in Crimea and subsequently in Eastern Ukraine have heralded the emergence of a new Russian form of “hybrid warfare” reflected in what is now known as “Gerasimov doctrine” (Madeira, 2014). Specifically, the concept of hybrid war is a Western concept which is not present in Russian military thought and, therefore, does not adequately convey Russian perspectives and practices. This situation has created a confusion in strategic planning. This is something that Western analysts have recognized. That’s why many analysts are arguing the limitations of the term “Gerasimov doctrine” and “Russian hybrid warfare”.

To begin with, Valery Gerasimov is a top Russian military official appointed by Vladimir Putin in 2012 as chief of the Russian armed forces. Gerasimov was born in the city of Kazan in the Ural region of Russia. After starting his military career at the late 1980s in the then USSR, Gerasimov was appointed head of the Russian army by President Putin. In 2013, just one year before the events in Crimea, Gerasimov published an article which explained the new strategic plans of Russia. The ideas presented in his article are known in the West as “Gerasimov Doctrine”. Gerasimov’s article is obviously an important source for understanding Russian thinking, particularly the efforts of the Russian leadership to adapt to warfare in the 21st century, rather than harking back to an earlier period and a return to the Cold War and how the Russian military has sought to learn how to neutralize the West’s conventional military superiority. Below, there follows a brief analysis of the “Gerasimov Doctrine” and of the debate it has created in the West (Bartles, 2016, p. 30–38).

Although Russia’s tactics are not entirely new, they were given a particular attention simply by the characteristics of the contemporary world and contemporary warfare. Gerasimov (2013) recognized this change and mentioned
it in the beginning of his article. More specifically, he states that “Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template”. Gerasimov also outlines a new age in which “the role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown and in many cases, they have exceeded the power of weapons in their effectiveness”. With regards to the role of states, he mentions that: [A] perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a morass of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war”. Furthermore, he also points to the important roles of special operations forces and “internal opposition to create a permanently operational front through the entire territory of the enemy s state” and “the blurring of the lines between war and peace”. Gerasimov uses the Arab Spring as an example of his analysis. In fact, he goes even further by giving the Russian perspective on the Arab Spring. Gerasimov believes that the events of the Arab Spring were triggered by the West. For him, the West is characterized for its: “broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures – applied in potential with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including actions of information war and special operations forces. The use of peacekeeping and crisis regulation forces is preferred only after a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.

On the other hand, in the West, Russian hybrid warfare represents a method of operating that relies on proxies and maximizes confusion along with uncertainty. The labels hybrid warfare and Gerasimov doctrine have spurred much discussion about the limit between war and peace and about Russian asymmetric challenges which include economic manipulation, disinformation and propaganda and the use of well–armored paramilitaries. This dimension of Gerasimov’s article is often pulled out of context. Researchers have said that the way Gerasimov’s article has been used in attempting to understand Russian actions in Ukraine and potential threats to NATO is both non-inclusive and exaggerating (Monaghan, 2016; Galleoti, 2016).

First of all, Monaghan (2016) wrote an article where he stressed that Gerasimov’s article just reflected a series of long–term views that had already
been taking place under Gerasimov’s predecessor, Nikolai Makarov. This implies that Gerasimov did not in fact say something new about Russian strategic thinking. Gerasimov’s article was a response to developments happening elsewhere in the world and illustrated how Russia perceived the evolution of Western war fighting tactics. Of course, this does not refute the role of Gerasimov’s ideas in Crimea and the war in Ukraine. Monaghan also underlines that Gerasimov’s article is an attempt to frame a conceptual response to the complex situation that emerged with the Arab Spring and shows how warfare has changed since the end of the Cold War.

Secondly, Galleoti (2016) emphasized that Gerasimov’s article just initiated the debate about evolving Russian power and the range of Moscow’s tools. It laid particular emphasis on the role of information and strategic communication schemes. This subsequently emphasized the need for better coordination between NATO and the EU. Moreover, Monaghan (2016) advocated that Gerasimov’s article poses certain theoretical and philosophical issues concerning Russian foreign policy. Gerasimov analyzes notions like the nature of modern war, sufficient preparation and effective war strategies. This reflects a long and ongoing debate within the Russian military about the nature of war and how to best defend Russian interests in an increasingly competitive international environment. Such debates appear to include questions about the need for constant readiness forces and the requirements for short or longer war fighting, the role of reserves in successfully enduring a longer war and about Western military capacities.

Thirdly, Galleoti (2016) emphasized that the West forgets that the Russian armed forces are still in a period of experimentation and learning. Russian military thinking has been rapidly evolving by absorbing lessons from the events in Ukraine, the involvement in Syria and West’s response. This does not suggest that after years of neglect the Russian armed forces have suddenly become invincible. On the contrary, Russian armed forces continue to face numerous internal problems.

Monaghan (2016) expands the debate by saying that the Western understanding of the evolution of the Russian military should not fall behind. Just as Russia is learning from present and past experiences, the West should do so. Even after the situation in Ukraine and the Russian intervention in the
war in Syria, the discussion on “hybrid warfare” has become the bedrock of the wider public policy and media debate about Russian actions. While some Western military observers are creating a picture in which Russia will be in a position to develop a “new generation” warfare, which will rely heavily on non–conventional means of warfare, NATO and the EU should not fall behind. More specifically, the discussion concerned potential further “hybrid” threats to NATO member states need to experiment with themselves by finding new ways to responding and deterring Russia’s actions. The term Russian “hybrid war” and remain a central aspect of the media and public policy debate in NATO and its member states as they explore and try to grasp Russian “ambiguous warfare” (Monaghan, 2016).

To sum up, there are a variety of reasons why Russia favors military operations in which the open use of forces which is often presented as peacekeeping missions or crisis regulation interventions. Russia’s strategies became evident not just in Ukraine, but also in Georgia. Despite the size of its military, Russia’s forces remain antiquated and poorly trained. In 2008, Russia employed a wide variety of hybrid tactics ranging from friendly fire incidents, communications mix-ups and vehicle breakdowns that showed for the first time after the collapse of the USSR the evolution of Russian military thinking. In fact, Cohen and Hamilton (2011) had mentioned Ukraine as a potential target for Russian aggressive policy in the future. They believed that the war in Georgia was a prelude to Russia’s hybrid war tactics. As in Ukraine, Russia exploited the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet area.
1.2 Propaganda

The definition of propaganda has been puzzling academics and journalists throughout the twentieth century for a variety of political and historical reasons. The systematic study of propaganda and its mechanisms started shortly after WWII and continued throughout the Cold War, where propaganda played a crucial role in the hands of both sides. The 20th century was full of historical events which underlined the importance of propaganda and propaganda mechanisms. Propaganda has been studied in history, journalism, political science, sociology and psychology. In journalism studies, propaganda is related to the study of how news management shapes information by emphasizing the positive features of a particular situation or institution and downplaying negative ones. Propaganda has been associated with totalitarian control and is regarded as the deliberate attempt to alter or maintain an advantageous balance of power which is crucial to the sustainability of a particular propagandist. The goal of propaganda is to convey an ideology to an audience with a specific objective. Propaganda entails a careful and well-organized plan of manipulation which is used to communicate a particular objective to an audience. The final objective of propaganda is to reinforce or modify the attitudes and behavior of an audience (Jowett & O’Donnel, 2012). Below, there is provided a historical evolution of the theoretical debate concerning the definitions of propaganda.

1.2.1 Definitions of propaganda

First of all, one prominent postwar analyst who focused on propaganda was Jacques Ellul. Ellul focused on propaganda as a technique itself and he regarded propaganda as a sociological phenomenon. Ellul, however, believed that propaganda is a product of the postwar mass society. According to his analysis, propaganda makes people participate in important institutional events such as elections, celebrations and memorials (Ellul, 1962, p. 61). Terence H. Qualter was also one of the first to emphasize the role of the audience. For
him, propaganda has to adopt to the particular needs of the audience which is targeting (Qualter, 1962).

Furthermore, Alex Carey regarded propaganda as “communications where the form and content is selected with the single-minded purpose of bringing some target audience to adopt attitudes and beliefs chosen in advance by the sponsors of the communications” (Carey, 1997, p. 27). Shawn J. Parry-Gilles also studied the propaganda production during the Cold War. In his analysis, he defined propaganda as “strategically devised messages that are disseminated to masses of people by an institution for the purpose of generating action benefiting its source” (Parry-Gilles, 2002, p. xxvi).

Finally, the most recent and full definition of propaganda belongs to Jowett and O’Donnel. In their book, they provide their own definition of propaganda. Unlike the above definitions, their analysis focuses upon the communicative aspects of propaganda. They characterize propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (p. 7). Their definition adds certain important characteristics to the whole propaganda debate. First of all, propaganda is seen as a deliberate act. This implies that propaganda is a precise communication attempt whose objective has been defined a priori. Propaganda producers must select the most effective strategy to promote an ideology and maintain the advantageous position of the propagandist. Secondly, propaganda is systematic. This implies that propaganda disseminates a specific message to an audience with organized regularity (Jowett & O’Donnel, 2012).

1.2.2 Characteristics of Propaganda

To begin with, the characteristics of propaganda follow the basic communication chain. In order to identify propaganda, researchers need to understand the producers of propaganda, what kind of messages they want to disseminate and with what kind of means. Finally, they must identify the target group which is affected by a certain propaganda campaign. Throughout their analysis, Jowett & O’Donnel (2012, p. 289–307), compiled the ten most fundamental characteristics of propaganda which can be found in every
propaganda campaign. It has to be noted that similar research in the field has focused on specific characteristics of propaganda (Romerstein, 2008; Stanley, 2016; Metaxas, 2018; Aro, 2018). The characteristics of propaganda are the following:

1. The ideology or the purpose of a propaganda campaign
The purpose of propaganda may be to influence people to either adopt beliefs and attitudes that resonate with those of a propagandist or to engage in certain patterns of behavior. Preserving the legitimacy of an institution or organization is also of utmost importance. A very recent study by Klimeš and Marinelli (2018) focused exactly on this dimension of propaganda by analyzing the ideology of pro-Xi Jinping propaganda in China. Another research regarding propaganda context has been done by Stanley (2016, p. 223–269).

2. The political / economic / social / historical context in which a propaganda campaign occurs
When studying propaganda, it’s very important to be aware of the events which have taken place prior to the establishment of a propaganda campaign. What is the prevailing public mood? It is also important to know and understand the historical background.

3. Identification of the propagandist (organization or person)
Who is producing propaganda? The source of propaganda can be an institution or organization and the propagandist can be its leader or agent.

4. The structure of the propaganda organization
Propaganda campaigns originate from a strong and centralized authority that produces a consistent messages through a complicated structure. With regards to that, media selection is also important. What kind of media should be used in order for a propaganda campaign to be successful?

5. The target audience
Propagandists choose a target audience based on effectiveness. This means that the propaganda message is aimed at the audience which is most likely to be useful to the purpose of a propagandist. The traditional propaganda audience is usually a mass audience, but that is not always the case with modern propaganda.

6. Media utilization techniques
Modern propaganda uses all modern and mainstream media available — from Press, radio, television, film, the Internet to museum exhibitions. Also, media editing effects such as tone, sound or image resolution can have a conditioning effect upon a massive audience (Metaxas, 2018).

7. Special techniques to maximize effect
Propaganda techniques are too complex to be limited to a short list. However, since this thesis does not contribute to the theoretical debate about propaganda a small list of the most widely – used persuasion techniques is given. These are the following: creating resonance with the existing opinions or beliefs of a particular audience, referencing to high – profile sources, physical reactions like face – to – face contact, visual symbolization techniques, use of specific language and special editing effects such as soundtracks (Stanley, 2016, p. 125 – 178; Jowett & O’Donnel, 2012, p. 299 - 305) These characteristics have been studied both in the cases of Russian propaganda in Ukraine (Doughtery 2014).

8. Audience reaction to various techniques
This can be in the form of voting, joining organizations, making contributions, purchasing the propagandist’s merchandise, forming local groups that are suborganizations for the main institution or acting in crowds.

9. Counterpropaganda methods
Counterpropaganda is likely in a free society where media are competitive. Wherever the media is completely controlled, counterpropaganda can be found underground (Romerstein, 2008, p. 137 – 180). Romerstein gives a full analysis of counterpropaganda and its methods. This thesis focuses only on the characteristics of pro – Kremlin propaganda in Southeastern Europe. For space purposes, discussion will not proceed onto counterpropaganda techniques.

10. Effects of propaganda campaigns on a particular group of people
The most important effect is whether the purpose of the propaganda has been fulfilled. Evaluation of the success of a propaganda campaign is directed towards the achievement of its goals. The effectiveness of the propaganda means used is also of utmost importance. Aro (2016) conducted an interesting research where she discovered that Russian trolls made many journalists fearful of making anti – Russian comments in social media platforms.
1.3 Disinformation, Misinformation and Malinformation

Much of the discourse on propaganda revolves around three essential terms: misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. Therefore, it is important to distinguish true from false messages and messages that are created, produced or distributed by certain “agents” totally on purpose. Wardle and Derakshan (2017, p. 20 - 25) define the three above mentioned phenomena as information disorders. The same definition has been adopted by other researchers in the field. One notable research is the one conducted by Bunegru, Gray, Venturini and Mauri (2017, p. 6 – 14) where they studied online trolling in Facebook and Twitter. Throughout their research, they used the term “information disorders”. Wardle (2018), in fact went a step further by compiling a glossary standardizing all the most widely used in the field of information disorders. This thesis uses the definitions provided by Wardle’s glossary and mentions news examples which illustrate the points made.

1.3.1. Definitions of Disinformation, Misinformation, Malinformation

First of all, according to Wardle and Derekshan’s (2017) analysis, disinformation is defined as pieces of information which are false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country. The 2017 French Presidential election provides useful examples of disinformation. One of the most highly circulated hoaxes of the campaign were the false articles which claimed that Emanuel Macron was funded directly by Saudi Arabia. These pieces of disinformation were circulated by a sophisticated fake version of the Belgian newspaper Le Soir. Another example was the circulation of online documents claiming that Macron had opened an offshore bank account in the Bahamas. Finally, disinformation content circulated via Twitter in which networks of individuals simultaneously started resharing identical hashtags and messages which spread rumours and false stories about Macron’s family status.
Similarly, Wardle and Darakshan define misinformation as pieces of information which are false, but not created with the intention of causing harm to an organization, person or political party. The people sharing this type of content are rarely doing that to cause harm. Most of the times, it’s about accidental mistakes in the transmission of information. An example of misinformation comes again from the French elections. For instance, the terrorist attack on the Champs Elysees on 20 April 2017 triggered a misinformation chaos on social media. Individuals started publishing a number of rumours saying that a second policeman had been killed. Another example of misinformation comes from a big research conducted by Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2017, p. 1146 - 1151). The researchers found that “falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information” and that “the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for other types of fake news”. The researchers studied the tweeting and retweeting of 126,000 statements during the entire lifespan of Twitter, they more precisely concluded that the truth rarely diffused to more than 1,000 people while the top 1 percent of fake news “routinely diffused between 1,000 and 100,000 people”.

However, it has to be noted that many people confuse disinformation with misinformation. Discussions of misinformation and disinformation often suffer from imprecise term definitions. Most of the times, disinformation is used alongside misinformation. The usage of the two terms also suffers from a lack of consistency. This confusion may partly be due to the lack of definitions and theories in this kind of research which may be a product of the field’s interdisciplinarity. Many of the terms used in the field are also used in other disciplines as well. It is often unclear, however, how the usage differs from one context to the other (Chen et al., 2015). Finally, the EU’s interinstitutional database clearly notes that disinformation should not be confused with misinformation.

Finally, malinformation concerns pieces of information that are true, but are used to inflict harm on a person, political organization or country. One striking example of malinformation took place when Emmanuel Macron’s emails were leaked the Friday before the run–off vote. Although the information contained in the emails was true, Macron’s campaign allegedly
included false information to diminish the impact of any potential leak. However, by releasing private information to the public minutes before the media blackout in France, it was soon realized that the leak was designed to harm Macron’s campaign.

### 1.3.2 Characteristics of Disinformation

Wardle and Derakshan (2017, p. 20–22) suggest their own mode of analysis for disinformation. Their theory is based on the fundamental chain of communication: agent – message – receiver. Their analysis takes into consideration important qualitative characteristics of all parts of the communication chain. Disinformation analysis goes as following. Agents or disinformation producers are involved in all three phases of the disinformation production chain – creation, production and distribution – and may have different motivations.

Secondly, with regards to messages, they can be communicated by agents in a variety of ways ranging from in person communication (e.g. gossip, speeches) and print forms (e.g. newspaper articles or pamphlets) to audiovisual formats (e.g. images, videos, motion - graphics, edited audio - clip, memes). While much of the current discussion about “fake news” and disinformation has focused on fabricated text articles and social media posts, disinformation appears in visual formats as well. This is an important point because technologies for analysing text are different from those for analysing still and moving images.

Finally, there is the audience which is targeted by disinformation. Audiences are not passive recipients of information. An audience is made up of many individuals, each of which interprets messages according to sociocultural status, political stances or personal experiences. Understanding the traditional aspect of communication is critical for discerning how and why individuals react to messages in different ways. The types of information people consume and the ways in which they understand it is significantly impacted by people’s self – identity. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). To begin with, Wardle and Derakshan start their disinformation analysis scheme by providing seven
important criteria about disinformation producers, which help us understand agents or disinformation producers. The seven criteria are the following:

1. **Status of agents**

Agents can be official state or private actors, like intelligence services, political parties or news media outlets. They can also be unofficial groups of people, like activist citizen groups or NGOs. Manwick and Lewis (2016, p. 7-21) elaborate on the profile of the actors by mentioning other categories as well. These include a wide range of prominent online trolls producers, gamers, ideologues, conspiracy theorists or even politicians who exert much influence on the society and play a distinct role in media manipulation efforts. In fact, they hold the power to amplify particular messages and make otherwise fringe beliefs get mainstream coverage.

2. **Organization**

How organized are they? Is there a structure in the organization of a disinformation production agent? Agents can work individually, or in tightly-organized groups (e.g. PR firms, lobbying groups or “troll factories). Especially, in the case of Southeastern Europe, the role of “troll factories” has been very important in the production of disinformation content. Linvill and Warren (2018) studied the structure of “troll factories” and concluded to four types of “troll factories”. According to their analysis, there are four types of trolls online: right troll, left troll, news feed, hashtag gamer and fearmongers.

3. **Motivation.**

Why do agents produce disinformation? There are four potential motivating factors behind disinformation production (Wardle & Derekshan, . These may be financial reasons: profiting from disinformation through advertising. This became evident during the 2016 US presidential election when disinformation was constructed by people with no ideological agenda. Such content was produced and spread by people who were seeking money with - out fame. Motivation can also be political by discrediting a political candidate in an election and influencing public opinion, or even social by connecting with a certain group online. Finally, motivation can also be psychological as disinformation producers seek prestige within their communities. This last remark is underlined by Manwick and Lewis (2016, p. 27 -31) as disinformation producers may also partake in media manipulation campaigns as
a way of gaining status and acceptance within their online communities. On Facebook and Twitter, for instance, status is generated through likes, shares and comments, so users are incentivized to create content that will resonate with their friends, followers and groups. Motivation behind disinformation production has been an issue which has also been addressed by other researchers, such as Morgan (2018, p. 39 - 43) who places particular emphasis upon the psychological and economical benefits arising from this activity.

4. Target Audiences
Different agents target different audiences. These audiences can vary from consumers and social groups to whole society.

5. Use of Automated Technology and other tools
This characteristic is about an agent’s ability to automate the creation and dissemination of messages online has become much easier and cheaper. For instance, modern social media culture has given rise to memes. These images are strategically created as propaganda by alt-right users to spread elements of their ideology to the rest of the society (Metaxas, 2018; Manwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 33 - 36).

6. Misleading or Harmful Purpose.
An agent may intend to deliberately mislead or harm its target audience. Manwick and Lewis (2016, p. 45) add that disinformation producers target general trust towards the media by reducing the credibility of media. People who do not trust the media are less likely to access accurate information, which has civic and political ramifications.

Furthermore, the role of the messages is also important in disinformation. The following additional criteria provide us with information about how to understand and analyze disinformation content and messages. It has to be noted that when researchers analyze disinformation, they ought to engage in a combined analysis of the above and the following criteria depending on their research.

1. Durability of the message
Some messages are designed to stay on track for long-term periods (e.g. throughout an entire war). Other messages are designed for the shorter periods (during an election) or just one moment, as in the case of an individual message during a breaking news event.
2. Accuracy
The accuracy of a message is also important to examine. For inaccurate information, there is a scale of accuracy from false connection (e.g. a clickbait headline that is mismatched with its article’s content) to 100% fabricated information (e.g. information that Clinton was a founding member of ISIS).

3. Legality of a message
The message might be illegal, as in the cases of recognized hate speech, intellectual property violations, privacy infringements or harassment.

4. Source of the message
The message may use official branding (e.g. logos) unofficially or it may steal the name or image of an individual (e.g. a well-known journalist) in order to appear credible.

5. Target audience
The agent has an intended audience in mind (the audience they want to influence), but this is different to the target of the message (those who are being discredited). The target can be an individual (e.g. a candidate or a political or business leader), an organisation (e.g. a private firm or a government agency), a social group (e.g. a race, ethnicity) or an entire society.

1.3.3 “Fake News”
The term “fake news” only emerged around the end of the 19th century due to the relative novelty of the word “fake”. Generally, “fake news” refers to intentionally incorrect or misleading pieces of information spread by a news organization mainly for political purposes. Although there is no universally-accepted definition, “fake news” generally refers to misleading content found online and, especially on social media platforms. In other words, it means everything from tabloid “clickbait” content to totally fabricated stories. The term first appeared by Donald Trump and the American alt-right media during the 2016 presidential campaign. From an academic standpoint, “fake news” is a particularly difficult concept for researchers to work with. An analysis by the British newspaper Telegraph has discerned five types of fake news, including intentionally deceptive content, jokes taken at face value, large-scale hoaxes, slanted reporting of real facts and coverage where the truth may be uncertain.
or contentious (Carson, 2019). An extensive study by Tandoc et al. (2018) found, 
academic articles between 2003 and 2017 used the term “fake news” to refer to a 
range of different phenomena including news satire, news parody, fabrication, 
manipulation, advertising and propaganda.

First of all, a paper by Allcott and Gentzkow (2016, p. 231) defines 
“fake news as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could 
mislead readers”. Klein and Wueller (2017) leave out the impact of the 
information on the reader and employ the following working definition: “the 
online publication of intentionally or knowingly false statements of fact”. Bakir 
and McStay (2018) define fake news in another way: “as either wholly false 
or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or 
context”. Gelfert (2018, p. 86) made an attempt to build on the previous 
definitions and suggests defining fake news as “the deliberate presentation of 
typically false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading 
by design”.

On the other hand, Rini (2018) has offered one of the most extensive 
definitions so far. Rini defines “fake news” as false news stories which are 
purport to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the 
conventions of traditional media reportage. This is known by their creators to 
be significantly false. These stories are transmitted with two goals: first, to be 
widely re-transmitted and, secondly to deceive at least a small part of its 
audience. Moreover, legally speaking, the concept of “fake news” becomes 
even more vague, as illustrated by the recent debates around the efforts to 
introduce national “anti-fake news” laws. For instance, in France, the law 
against the “manipulation of information” defines fake news as “any allegation 
of a fact that is inaccurate or misleading”, which is likely to “distort the 
fairness of the election. In Italy, the proposed, but not approved bill in 2017 
defined “fake news” as false, exaggerated, or biased news reports which 
circulated online.

However, two main problems have been recognized in the discourse 
concerning “fake news”. First of all, Martens (Martens et als, 2018) has 
pointed out that there is no consensus on the definition of “fake news”. The 
definitions discussed above tend to be constructed around four core dimensions: 
the type of information, the falsity of information, the intention of the creator
and the consequences of their dissemination of information, including personal (e.g. perception of the receiver) and social effects (e.g. disruption of democratic processes). The last two dimensions better underline one important characteristic of “fake news”: “fake news” are not wholly false stories, but rather a mix of deliberate falsehoods with well-known truths employing a false context or manipulative images alongside with verified or non-verified news stories.

Secodly, despite the above theoretical and legal debate, “fake news” is not a functioning term anymore. Recent experience indicates that the term “fake news” is not enough to describe the complexity of disinformation and its impact upon politics. Researchers like Wardle (2017), Zuckerman (2017) and journalists like Sullivan (2016) have said that the term “fake news” has become inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of misinformation and disinformation. Zuckerman has expanded the debate by advocating that “fake news” is a vague and ambiguous term that spans everything from false balance, propaganda and disinformation. A similar problem with the term “fake news” was identified by the European Commission’s High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (2018, p. 10-11). More specifically, the HLEG found the term “fake news” to be “inadequate to capture the complex problem of disinformation” which involves not necessarily “fake”, but fabricated content and practices going beyond the conventional news. The HLEG prefers instead the term disinformation instead.

1.1.4 Propaganda, disinformation or “fake news”?

Concerning the differences among the terms “propaganda”, “disinformation” and “fake news”, researchers are divided as to what differentiates all the above terms. Whether or not and to what extent these terms overlap is subject to a big debate. With regards to “fake news” and as presented above, there is a lack of consistency among researchers and journalists using the term “fake news”. Besides, “fake news” as a term is getting more and more obsolete and is replaced by the term disinformation. With regards to disinformation, experts agree that it is a relatively new word as most researchers trace it back to the Russian word dezinformatsiya, which Soviet policy-makers in the 1950s defined
as dissemination of false reports through the media which intended to mislead public opinion (Taylor, 2016). One notable example of Soviet disinformation was the case with AIDS “invading” India (Boghdart, 2010). Other researchers suggest that the earliest use of the term originates in 1930s Nazi Germany, where there was an official disinformation service. Whatever the case disinformation is much younger than propaganda. One popular distinction between disinformation and propaganda holds that disinformation describes politically motivated messages designed to trigger public distrust and paranoia. Analysts generally agree that disinformation is always purposeful and not necessarily composed of outright lies or fabricated stories. Disinformation is composed of relatively true facts, stripped of context or blended with false claims to support a message and always constitutes part of a larger plan. Others consider disinformation and propaganda to be totally different terms. Propaganda, on the other hand, originates in the 1600s and generally refers to the selective use of information for a specific political effect. Some define propaganda as the use of irrational arguments to either promote or undermine a political idea and, therefore, use disinformation as an alternative name for propaganda (Jackson, 2017). Despite the above debate, certain political institutions, like the European Parliament use both propaganda and disinformation interchangeably while some scholars either avoid defining all the above terms altogether or use them interchangeably.
CHAPTER 2
RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this chapter is to present the reasons why I chose to study the case of Southeastern Europe, to analyze the research methodology which I followed and to provide the basic research questions which I used to conclude to my results. This chapter is divided into three subchapters with each one focusing on a specific aspect of my methodology.

2.1 Case Study Selection

This thesis follows a qualitative research methodology based on the analysis of a case study. There is a big theoretical debate concerning the definition and analysis of case studies. Yin (2009, p. 46) defines a case study as “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. A qualitative case study method allows to explore a phenomenon within its context using diverse data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Gerring (2004, p. 342) believes that case study research involves “intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of unit observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time”. Baxter and Jack along with Baškarada (2008, p. 544–559; 2014, p. 1–25) advocate that case studies provide an opportunity for the researcher to gain an holistic view of the research problem and facilitate explaining of a particular research question or situation. Although there are several sub- categories of case studies research, the case study of this thesis is a descriptive one. Gerring stresses that descriptive case studies describe different characteristics of a phenomenon within its context and therefore can also be used for theory building (Gerring, 2004).

To begin with, the reasons why the case study of Southeastern Europe was chosen for this thesis are the following: firstly, Southeastern Europe is a region strongly connected to Russia. Balkan countries share many things with Russia ranging from common Slavic cultural roots to religion and communist
past. Most of the states in Southeastern Europe are primarily Orthodox and still cling to the preaching of the Moscow Patriarchate. Historically speaking, Russia had also active role in the independence process of the states in the region ever since the beginning of the 20th century. In the case of Bulgaria, for instance, Russia liberated the country after years of Ottoman rule. This historical and cultural affinity highlights the glamor and prestige Russia enjoys in the national consciousness of these states.

Secondly, the region’s cultural affinity to Russia has made it a perfect target for Russian propaganda and disinformation. In recent years, especially after the events in Ukraine, countries in Southeastern Europe are experiencing a surge in Russian media influence. Sputnik and RT are surging news media in Serbia and Bosnia, while Russian oligarchs are controlling a large part of North Macedonia’s media market. At the same time, “troll factories” which produce relentlessly disinformation have popped up in North Macedonia and Albania. This situation necessitates the need to study how Russian propaganda and disinformation have been working in the region and how they have altered the media environment in Southeastern Europe.

Finally, academic and research interest in Southeastern Europe has diminished over the recent years. After the end of war in former Yugoslavia, interest in the political and social developments in the region has fallen. Instead, academic interest has shifted more to the situation in Ukraine and Central Asia. For this reason, this lack of interest highlights the necessity to refocus interest in Southeastern Europe and to better understand the complexity of Russian influence in the region. Therefore, my thesis is a first contribution to this ongoing debate.

In conclusion, the most important aspect of the planning process focuses on identifying the research questions and some theoretical issues for a case study analysis. These issues are related to the case study method, data collection and research limitations (Yin, 2009; Baškarada, 2014). Clearly defining my research hypothesis has been the most important step in my entire project. Below, there follows the presentation of my fundamental research hypotheses. The findings of this research will be presented in the third chapter of the thesis.
2.2 Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses of this thesis are the following:

**Hypothesis No1**
Russia is exploiting the region’s corrupted governments and stagnant economy in order to establish non-trackable “troll factories” or increase the effect of pro–Kremlin outlets. Cultural bonds with Russia make the region a priority place in Kremlin’s strategic planning.

**Hypothesis No2**
Russian propaganda and disinformation revolve around a certain axis. Pro–Kremlin media perpetuate a negative representation of the West and core Western values, such as LGBTQ rights. On the contrary, pro–Kremlin portray Russia as the “motherland” of all Slavic people. In this respect, Vladimir Putin has a central role as he is perceived both as the leader of the Slavic world and as the defender of Orthodoxy against the West’s atheist turn.

**Hypothesis No3**
Russia is using ethnic conflicts in the region to spread its propaganda and create allies in a region very close to the EU. How do pro–Kremlin media portray the ethnic conflicts in Bosnia–Herzegovina or North Macedonia? How are all sides presented in pro–Russia narratives? Is special emphasis being given to one side?
2.3 Data collection

The selected data collection methods to respond to the above hypotheses are interviews and cyber – observation of pro – Kremlin media outlets in Southeastern European countries.

First of all, the reason why interviews were chosen, is the language barrier. As it will be explained in the end of this thesis, language has been the basic research limitation. Since I am not fluent in the spoken languages of Southeastern Europe, I cannot have access to original content from news media in Southeastern Europe. Therefore, the only way to gain an insight to the subject is through interviews with experts from the examined region who have worked on the phenomenon of Russian propaganda and disinformation.

Regarding interview theory, there are three fundamental types of research interviews: structured, semi – structured and unstructured. Structured interviews are verbally administered questionnaires, in which a list of already defined questions are asked, with little or no variation and with no scope for follow – up questions. Consequently, they are relatively quick and easy to administer and may be of particular use. However, by their very nature, they only allow for limited participant responses and are, therefore, of little use if 'depth' is required (Gill et al., 2008, p. 291).

Furthermore, the second stage of interviewing was interview planning. Structured interviews were chosen over semi or non – structured interviews. The interviews were conducted online via e - mails. The sample of this research includes experts and journalists who have worked on the issue of Russian propaganda. Secondly, the questions in the e – mail interviews were based on the propaganda and disinformation analysis schemes presented in Chapter 1. All the interview questions aimed at answering the research hypotheses presented above. Based on this analysis, these are the interview questions which were asked to the interviewees:

Q1) Who produces propaganda and disinformation content in Southeastern Europe and how ?

Both Jowett & O’ Donnel’s (2012) and Wardle & Derakshan’s (2017) models stress the importance of the producer. Particular emphasis is being
given to the identity and status of the propagandist. In my case, I am interested in the role of “troll – factories” and the ways they use to spread propaganda and disinformation content. My research interest also focuses on the role of Russian – speaking media in various Southeast European countries. My thesis will focus on issues related to media ownership and transparency.

Q2) What narratives are perpetuated by pro – Kremlin media in Southeastern Europe?

The purpose of this question is to help me conclude to the basic patterns which are perpetuated in pro – Russian information campaigns in Southeastern Europe. I want to sketch the main narratives which are found in pro – Russian media in Southeastern Europe. I also want to figure out how Russian propaganda exploits ethnic conflicts in Southeastern Europe in order to influence politics and local populations in the region.

Q3) Does pro – Kremlin propaganda target Southeastern European audiences or not?

This question is important because it lets me figure out how Russian propaganda works. In 2016, it was revealed that “troll factories” in the country were exporting trolls to the US in an effort to influence American voters. This shows that trolls produced in North Macedonia did not target North Macedonian voters, but American ones. This remark raises important questions about the audiences that troll – factories have.

Q4) What groups are mostly affected by Russian propaganda and disinformation?

This question sketches out the groups which are mostly influenced by pro – Kremlin propaganda. It is evident that pro – Kremlin propaganda and disinformation in Southeastern Europe have been associated with the rise of the far – right and Church influence in the region.

Furthermore, the second research method is cyber – ethnography. Online observations of pro – Kremlin online media in Southeastern Europe were made. Various websites were chosen from Serbia, Romania, Bosnia – Herzegovina, Moldova, Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Greece. The selected websites are Sputnik (Serbia – Romania - Greece), RBTH Srbija and Vostok.rs from Serbia,
Magazni Cedmica and Vijesti.me from Montenegro. More information about the history and the status of the above media outlets will be provided in Chapter 3.

Online observation allows the study of the media effects and techniques used by pro-Kremlin media in order to grasp popular attention. The observations focused on the audiovisual effects, photos and caricatures, site organization and ads placement in pro-Kremlin media in Balkan countries. With regards to its theory, cyber-ethnography or netnography first emerged in academic discourse at the beginning of the 21st century with the most notable academic work on the subject being the one by Ward (1999). In her paper, Ward analyzes the characteristics of virtual communities and lays the foundation for the establishment of other cyber-related data collection methods, such as online interviews, online content analysis or social media analysis.

---

1 This thesis focuses only on the following countries: Bulgaria, Serbia, North Macedonia, Romania, Albania. Due to cultural affinity with Romania, Moldova is also analyzed. Turkey is not included in this thesis.
2.4 Data Analysis

This research was conducted into two phases: during the first phase, the necessary data was collected through interviews and systematic online observation of the content of pro–Kremlin media outlets. The data for this thesis was collected between May 1st, 2019 and July 31st, 2019. The reason why this particular time period was selected is because we wanted to see how elections in Europe (May 23rd - 26th, 2019) would affect the production of propaganda and disinformation. Would pro–Russian propaganda and disinformation be different prior or ahead of Europe’s elections?

With regards to research methods, the online interviews were conducted via e–mail in June 2019. The interviews were analyzed based on discourse analysis. As soon as the interviews were completed, the responses of the interviewees were compiled into a single body of data and the basic characteristics of Russian propaganda and disinformation were concluded.

After that, online observation of pro–Kremlin media outlets was conducted in order to confirm the previously collected data. The data from observation were collected from May 1st to July 31st. The outlets which were regularly examined within this time period are mentioned above (p. 30 – 31). Finally, a bibliographical and online research was conducted for more academic and journalistic sources which could substantiat the results of the online observations and interviews.
2.5 Limitations of the study

This study has encountered two important difficulties. First of all, one substantial limitation of this research has been the language barrier. Since I am not fluent in the spoken languages of the region, I was not in a position to conduct an independent content analysis which could fully substantiate the arguments presented in this thesis. This difficulty also did not allow the studying of the content of particular outlets. In addition to that, many of the interviewees were not willing to share more information because of the sensitivity of the research topic. Since this research topic constitutes a trending news topic as well, many interviewees were not able to disclose more information about the production or the patterns of pro–Russia propaganda in Southeastern Europe. Finally, unfortunately, this study did not focus on issues related to counter–propaganda and counter–disinformation methods. The field of counter–propaganda is a rapidly developing field and its literature exceeds by far the limits of the present MA thesis. Countering Russian disinformation in Southeastern Europe is a recommended research topic which will definitely puzzle academics and journalists in the future.


CHAPTER 3
FINDINGS

Within Europe, the Balkans appear particularly vulnerable to fake or manipulated news narratives. The Open Society Institute’s Media Literacy Index lists Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Bosnia, Albania, and North Macedonia as the European states least equipped to identify and push back at fake news due to lagging education systems and poor political literacy. With irredentism lingering in the Balkan far right, such messages are alarming. Given rising internet penetration rates across the region, growing smart phones usage in key countries and the popularity of social media, Russia’s use of mobile platforms to cultivate influence will likely continue to increase in the coming years. The narratives conveyed through these media are geared toward diminishing public support in the region for integration with Western political, economic and security institutions. By highlighting Serbian or Orthodox victimhood, these messages also risk complicating conflict reconciliation efforts.

The table below presents the fundamental characteristics of Russian propaganda and disinformation based on the conducted interviews. The table is divided into three sections with each one focusing on a particular chain of the disinformation and propaganda production chain presented in Chapter 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Production</strong></th>
<th><strong>“Troll factories”</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Russian media outlets (e.g. Sputnik Srbja / Serbia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>Pro – Kremlin narratives / Anti-West messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mocking of Western leaders or institutions or values (e.g. LGBT rights)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on arms and war rhetoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploitation of ethnic conflicts (e.g. Bosnia vs Republika Sprska / Serbia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Russian – speaking minorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>far – right groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orthodox Church</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Table 1 visualizes the findings gathered by the interviews described in Chapter 2.
3.1 Production of propaganda and disinformation

The production of propaganda and disinformation content is conducted by two factors: “troll factories” and pro–Russian media. Pro–Russian media can either include purely Russian media (e.g. Sputnik) or domestic pro–Russian media which reproduce content exclusively from Russian–speaking media (e.g. Kremlin in Montenegro or Argumenti i Fakti in Serbia).  

3.1.1 Trolling activity and “trolling” factories

One important aspect of Russian propaganda in Southeastern Europe is the use of the so–called “trolling factories”. Troll factories are also known as Russia's troll army, Russian bots, Putinbots or Kremlinbots. “Troll factories” are anonymous and state–sponsored Russian firms which produce disinformation and propaganda content which targets other states. According to MacFarquhar (2018), participants in troll factories work in groups and produce disinformation content which is disseminated through social media platforms or blogs. In the case of Southeastern Europe, North Macedonia and Albania have been used as “troll factories” spots. Corruption and unemployment have made these countries ideal targets for disinformation production. Young people have found professional training and employment in “troll factories” especially during the 2016 US Presidential election. Yet, the official connection between Russia and Balkan trolling remains sketchy (Stronski & Hymes, 2019). This means that public authorities in the region are still trying to find ways to connect Russia with Balkan trolling.  

To begin with, North Macedonia has been investigating whether Russia tried to take advantage of North Macedonia’s unemployment rate and cyber crime prevalence in order to use the country as a spot for trolls production. It is speculated that Russia used North Macedonia as a “troll factory” spot in order to outsource its disinformation campaigns. According to analysts Stronski

---

2 Interview with analyst on Balkan affairs

3 However, this thesis briefly mentions this phenomenon in order to show that Balkan countries are being used as trolling spots. In case of an official investigation, this part of this thesis will be updated with the latest discussion.
and Himes (2019), Russia’s disinformation campaigns were moved to North Macedonia after having been conducted in other locations. Investigations in the Guardian and Buzzfeed connected Russia, North Macedonian “troll factories” with pro- Trump political advertising (Tynan, 2016; Silverman et als., 2018)

Furthermore, a similar phenomenon took place in Albania. It was proved that “troll factories” had been a profiting business in the country since 2016. Just as in North Macedonia, “troll factories” had been a profitable business for young unemployed people. Similarly, all fake news websites provided pro- Trump political advertising. However, site owners denied direct Russian involvement. (Triest & Grim, 2017).

3.1.2 Prevailance of pro -Russian media

The second means of promoting Russian propaganda and disinformation is pro – Russian media. Pro – Russian media is divided into categories: domestic pro – Russian media using the language of the state in which they are operating and purely Russian media, such as Sputnik. Russian media also takes advantage of the corrupted media market in Southeastern Europe by providing content to local outlets for free or at extremely low cost. In addition to these clearly pro - Russian media outlets often take content directly from Sputnik, RBTH, or other Russian information sources, such as RT. This thesis uses examples from various pro – Kremlin media in Southeastern Europe.

These sources have proliferated since 2015 in Serbia and Montenegro, and yet, their funding sources are obscure. First of all, in Serbia alone, there has been a surge in Russian – funded media since 2015. In Serbia, two Russian - funded media outlets operate. These are Sputnik Srbjia (also in Cyrillic) and Russia Beyond Srbija (only in Latin). Sputnik Srbjia opened in 2015 and broadcasts all across Serbian – speaking regions of Southeastern Europe including Republika Sprska and the northern Serb – inhabited part of Kosovo. Sputnik has also launched an app in Serbian which according to statistics released by Sputnik, was downloaded over 100,000 times. Under the slogan "Sputnik Tells the Untold" Russia has also launched Sputnik - affiliated radio programs in Serbian which are transmitted by local radio stations throughout
Sputnik's appeal lies in its design, extensive use of social media and accessibility. Most Serbian media outlets cannot afford to pay for content from credible news agencies and Russian sources are usually free of charge. Under Sputnik’s policy, anyone can republish its content for free as long as Sputnik is credited (Šajkaš, 2016). The case of Sputnik Srbija has been thoroughly studied by researchers Stefanov and Vladimirov (2018, p. 21–23). The researchers indicated that Sputnik Srbija is part of Russia’s media changing strategy. Sputnik has been the successor of other pro–Russian media outlets in the country. In this way, Sputnik Srbija managed to concentrate all pro–Russian media in one central outlet which has the ability to provide other outlets with its own content. At the same time, RT is also available on cable throughout Serbia, but only in English and not in Serbian. There are also several other pro-Russian web portals operating in Serbian such as the Vostok.rs and Kremlin.rs. However, these websites are not that popular as Sputnik (Jankuloska, 2018; Assenova, 2019).

Besides the above, a large number of pro–Russian mainstream media has infiltrated Serbia’s media market. One notable example is the case of the Russian newspaper Argumenty i Fakty. Originally founded in 1978, Argumenty i Fakty is now owned by a private bank in Moscow which maintains close ties to the Kremlin. On its official Russian website, Argumenty i Fakty boasts of being the “largest and most popular weekly publication in Russia” and says that it “leads the Russian press abroad” (Rudic, 2018). This newspaper entered the Serbian media market with coverage that endorsed the official Kremlin line, criticised the West and denied allegations of Moscow’s involvement in the Skripal case or in Eastern Ukraine. Argumenty i Fakty had also been printed in Montenegro in 2011 at the peak of the Russian business boom in the country. Finally, it closed down in 2015, together with the Montenegrin edition of another popular Russian newspaper, Komsomolskaya Pravda. Another example of pro-Russian print media are the widely-read Serbian weekly magazine Nedeljnik with its monthly supplement, R Magazin. Both media outlets are funded by the Russian government and compiled by Russia Beyond the Headlines, a multilingual resource on Russian politics and culture sponsored by Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Russia’s state newspaper (Šajkaš, 2016; Šajkaš & Mijović, 2016). This last service, Russia Beyond (Rossiya Segondya) has also
launched a suspicious app available in many Balkan languages. This app is called RBTH Daily and it’s available in Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian, Serbian and Slovenian. The news app is free and available in 14 languages (Assenova, 2019).

In Kosovo, pro-Russian media exerts massive influence in Northern Kosovo, the Serb-inhabited part of Kosovo. RT and Sputnik Serbia spread the narrative that the Kosovar government is a threat to the Serb’s existence and Kosovo is a failed state that is unable to function. So far, the government of Kosovo has been unable to establish Serbian media, which could counter the negative narrative coming from Belgrade’s Russian-funded media; therefore, the local population can only rely on the Serbia-centered, pro-Russian coverage (Kallaba, 2017, p. 23-27). A similar situation exists in Bosnia-Herzegovina where pro-Russian media are active in Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority federal republic of Bosnia. As in Serbia and Kosovo, Russian-funded media promote irredentist agendas and question the sovereignty and the borders of the states involved. Although active, pro-Russian media in Bosnia and Kosovo target only Serbian-speaking populations. There are no indications of pro-Russian targeting towards Kosovar Albanians or Muslim Bosnians. Relevant research has shown that Muslim populations in the Balkans are mostly influenced by Turkish or Gulf-funded media.

Moreover, Montenegro has a large number of pro-Russian media outlets. In the case of Montenegro, pro-Russian websites are of Montenegrin origin. These websites operate only with Montenegrin reporters. Investigations have not shown the involvement of Russian journalists in these outlets. The large majority of them publishes content directly from other pro-Russian outlets in Serbia. On the contrary, the prevalence of openly Russian media like Sputnik is limited. For instance, one of the most famous outlets which proudly advocates pro-Russian politics is IN4S (in4s.net), well established not only in Montenegro and Serbia, but in the whole Serbian-speaking region. Another example is the DAN daily, which today maintains a generally anti-Western orientation, although it previously acted as a loud opponent of Montenegrin membership in NATO and supported pro-Russian sentiments in the country. Another pro-Kremlin website which has attracted attention is the Vijesti.me (vijesti.me). A recent study (Kaić, 2019) showed that in just two months in
early 2019, Vijesti published 751 articles, pieces of information or texts about Milo Đukanović where 80% of which was negative and only 2% neutral. According to the same study, the impact of this medium was somehow different than other pro–Russia media in Montenegro. Further research needs to be done in order to fully evaluate the impact of pro–Russian media in Montenegro.

Furthermore, another interesting case of pro–Russian propaganda and disinformation is that of Moldova. Russian propaganda and disinformation are widespread in Moldova. A study by Curacaru (2018, p. 210–236) concluded that the Moldovan media market is largely controlled by Russian media outlets which have infiltrated the country. According to the study, Moldova demonstrated a low level of resistance to Russian propaganda (Curacaru, 2018). According to independent researcher Saran (2016, p. 8), Moldova legislated in favor of the unlimited dissemination of pro–Russian content in its media outlets while restricting the access of Western journalists to the country’s affairs and limiting the circulation of West–produced content. This legislation has paved the way for the dissemination of pro - Russian propaganda and disinformation (Saran, 2018, p. 4 - 7).

On the other hand, Russia’s media infiltration in the region is less powerful in Romania. Romania is implementing strict legislation against Russian disinformation and propaganda as shown in a study compiled by Moga (2018, p. 266–281). In fact, along with Lithuania, Romania is one of least resilient East European states to Russian propaganda and disinformation. Although there is a Sputnik Romania version, it is one of the few pro–Russia outlets in the country. In fact, Sputnik Romania broadcasts both in Romania and Moldova through its Moldova–based HQ.

Finally, due to frozen foreign relations, as Cohen and Radin show (p. 63 – 78, 2019) Romania and Bulgaria are suspicious towards pro – Kremlin media. In 2017, Romanian state Television revoked the license of a Russian TV channel over fears of dissemination of disinformation and propaganda. Romania is also not susceptible to Russian propaganda and disinformation because of its language. Romanian is a Latin language and, therefore, Russian narratives are cannot be as widespread as in other parts of Southeastern Europe. A similar situation is taking place in Bulgaria where pro – Russian media have limited
influence on the public. Despite a few pro–Kremlin websites, Bulgaria has not a big presence of influential pro–Kremlin networks like Sputnik. On the contrary, Bulgarian media has rejected pro–Kremlin narratives and move towards a pro–European profile.
3.2 Content of propaganda and disinformation messages

This sub-chapter is divided into three parts: in the first part, there are provided the main anti-West narratives, in the second the main pro-Russian narratives and in the last the narratives which exploit ethnic conflicts in the region. Russian–supported media features strong anti-West narratives which reinforce local resentment towards the EU, the USA or Balkan politicians who support the West. Main anti-West patterns in pro-Russia media in the region include: mocking of Western leaders, anti-NATO sentiment, rejection of Western values (LGBT rights or secularism) and minority targeting. These narratives generally present the West as the cause of the region’s democratic deficiencies, economic stagnation and prolonged ethnic divisions. This kind of anti-West narrative paves the way for pro-Kremlin narratives. Pro-West feeling declines while pro-Russian sentiment manages to gain momentum.

3.2.1 Strategic use of humor

Pro-Russian media in Southeastern Europe mock Western leaders. The purpose of this tactic is to undermine the image and prestige of Western leaders to the eyes of the public of Balkan countries. For example, all versions of Sputnik in Southeastern Europe (Serbia, Romania, Greece) depict Western leaders as silly, stupid or disoriented. This pattern is accompanied by articles and photos which depict Western leaders in awkward moments. Pro-Russian media utilize humor as a weapon creating the so-called hahaganda. In fact, the use of satirical images and humor has been a powerful tool in the hands of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. This tool has been used in the Baltics and in particular in Estonia and Southeastern Europe (Ozolina et al., p. 6 – 33, 2017). In this study, Ozolina along with her team analyzed many case studies from the Baltics where Western leaders were mocked in late night shows. In the end, the research team concluded to the strategic use of humor in Russian information campaigns. Similarly, in Southeastern Europe,
Western leaders are mocked in such a way as to make the public lose trust in them. The pictures below are examples of this coverage.


The above two images from Sputnik Srbija and Sputnik Romania are two clear and recent examples of how pro-Russian media mocks European leaders undermining their prestige and stirring a hahaganda sentiment to the Serbian and Romanian public respectively. Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron are depicted in a rather humorous and demeaning way. In this way, it is implied that West is governed by stupid people which lack political prestige and
dynamism. This negative coverage paves the way for a glorifying presentation of Vladimir Putin. As it will be shown below, Vladimir Putin is presented in a positive way. He is seen as the leader who has the courage and stamina necessary for leading a country. Coverage also targets the political decisions of Western leaders. The articles essentially feature commentary which mocks important decisions and undermine the importance of these decisions to the public opinion.

3.2.2 Fabrication of history and anti – NATO narratives

Pro–Kremlin media promotes distorted versions of historical events in order to amplify the effect of pro–Kremlin propaganda. Fabricated historical events are shaped through anti–NATO narratives. In order to construct an effective anti–NATO discourse, pro–Russian media outlets utilize direct or indirect ways of attacking NATO. Direct ways include clear anti–NATO messages and patterns like NATO aggression against Serbia or NATO encircling Serbia, Russia’s closest ally. Indirect ways include the use of historical events to outline a historical narrative which reinforces pro–Russian nationalist feelings and diminishes respect or admiration of the West. In other words, pro–Kremlin media distort history in order to create a chain of events which fits pro–Russian narratives. The fabrication of history has been a widely–used tool by pro–Russian propaganda all across Eastern Europe and its use started again in Soviet times (Sultanescu, p. 79- 80, 2019; Kintsurashvilli, p. 28, 2017).

This kind of narrative is substantiated by stories which focus on the superiority of Russian weapons or the historical prestige of the Red Army during the 20th century. Given lingering resentment over NATO’s 1999 bombing campaign of Serbia, these narratives can find sympathetic audiences among ethnic Serbs all across Southeastern Europe. In fact, one prominent example of the above situation is the Sputnik–produced series “Serbia is not forgotten” (Srbija pamti). The series is streamed for free by Sputnik Serbia and it is comprised of 20 episodes. Each of these episodes focuses on various phases of the NATO bombing of Serbia. The series was produced in order to
instill anger over NATO and the West. Coverage is sensational and focuses upon the human cost of the NATO bombings.

As it will be explained below, anti–NATO feelings are also supported by false stories accusing the West of supporting Muslim minorities or Albanian irredentism in the Southeastern Europe. Russian propaganda highlights an alleged Western preference for defending Muslim groups in the Balkans (implying Bosnians, Albanians) at the expense of Orthodox Christians (Serbs, Greeks).

Moreover, strong anti–NATO narratives have been spotted in pro–Russian media in Montenegro. Anti–NATO narratives in Montenegro promote pro–Serbian messages in an effort to stir sympathy for the Serbian people as they were bombarded by NATO during the 1990s. Although Montenegro joined NATO in 2016, various pro–Russian (anti–NATO) media outlets still operate in the country (Semanić, 2019; Tomovic, 2017). Pro–Russian media in Montenegro rely heavily on news and sources provided by pro–Russian media in Serbia. Prominent media outlets which supply Montenegro’s media with pro–Russian narratives are Sputnik Srbija and Russia Beyond SERBIA (Tomovic, 2017). All anti–NATO outlets reproduce conspiracy theories presenting NATO as a force which will destroy Montenegrin traditional values such as religion. Additionally, anti–NATO outlets mock Western leaders such as Emmanuel Macron or Balkan politicians who maintain a pro–West profile including...
Montenegro’s president, Dukanovic. Below, there follow examples of anti-NATO media coverage in Montenegro.

Picture 4: An image from pro-Russian website Sedmica. NATO is mocked as the replacement of Orthodoxy in Montenegro. 28/6/2019. Source: http://www.sedmica.me/rgefr/

Finally, the headlines below are examples of pure fabrication of history.

1) Непријатељски гест Пољске према Русији којим је згазила и сопствену историју (Poland's hostile gesture towards Russia, which has crushed its own history, 25/7/2019, Sputnik Srbija)

2) Како је СССР планирао да једним таласом збрише Америку са лица Земље (As the USSR planned to wipe America off the face of the Earth in a single wave, RBTH Srbija, 31/7/2019).

3.2.3. The Superiority of Russian Arms

Pro–Russian media focuses extensively on issues related with arms, and the military. Russian military propaganda has been a recurring theme ever since Soviet times. Russian military propaganda has been used extensively in Ukraine and Crimea (Luzin, 2019). Coverage is sensational and focuses upon creating a sense of awe for Russian arms to the public. Russia is trying to gain respect and admiration by displaying and perpetuating the image of a powerful country with state of the art war technology. For instance, all Sputnik outlets in
Southeastern Europe frequently cover issues related to arms. Sputnik journalists make use of pictures which display the abilities of Russian weapons. Similarly, arms coverage also features stories of the popularity of Russian weapons. For example, emphasis is given upon the decision of Turkey to purchase S–400 missiles from Russia. In this way, pro–Russian media implies that Russian weapons are more developed than NATO weapons and that even NATO countries recognize Russia’s military superiority.

1) Маневри руске морнарице у Црном мору (Maneuvers of the Russian Navy in the Black Sea, 20/7/2019, Vostok.rs)

2) Објављен снимак вежби гађања на Црном мору (A shot of shooting on the Black Sea was released, 19/7/2019, RBTH Srbija)

3) Prima tranșă de sisteme de rachete rusești S-400 a fost livrată în Turcia (The first installment of S-400 Russian missile systems was delivered to Turkey, 12/7/2019, Sputnik Romania)

4) МО Русије отворило сајт: Све што треба да знате о Главној војно-поморској паради у Санкт Петербургу (MoD of Russia opens the site: All you need to know about the Main Military Naval Parade in St. Petersburg, 23/7/2019, RBTH Srbija)

Below, there follow two examples of the above remarks. This is particularly evident in the case of Serbian media. Serbian media has been surged with reports about Russian arms. This kind of coverage helps Moscow saturate the regional political discourse with its own views on world events. The Serbian language version fosters negative attitudes toward the West, glorifies the Russian military and highlights Serbian military cooperation with Russia by promoting headlines such as “Russia will rescue Serbia’s military aviation,” and “Russia tests weapons under NATO’s nose.” The purpose of these stories is to cement the idea that Russia, not the EU or the U.S., is Serbia’s natural ally and the savior of all Serbian–speaking populations in Southeastern Europe (Eisentraut & de Leon, 2018).
3.2.3. Shared Culture and Values

Another dimension of pro-Kremlin narratives in Southeastern Europe is culture. Coverage includes stories about common language, cultural ancestry and Orthodoxy. In this way, Russia presents itself as an inheritor ally to Southeast European countries (Bechev, 2017). This kind of coverage is also evident in the case of major political events. In this way, Russia is trying to enhance its international presence by creating a sphere of allies based on pan-Slavism. Russia is presented in a positive way as it is seen as the motherland of all Slavic nations in Europe. Despite pro-Kremlin media in Southeastern Europe, even RT features stories which highlight the cultural unity between
Russia and Southeast European nations. Below, there are some examples of this coverage.

Picture 7: Vladimir Putin with Serbian president, Vucic. This RT article is titled as NATO, church & brotherhood of arms: Vladimir Putin visits Belgrade. 18/1/2019. Source: https://www.rt.com/news/449079-putin-serbia-church-nato/

Picture 8: Students at a cultural festival in Serbia where a famous Russian violinist participated. The image was published in RBTH Srbija. 11/07/2019. Source: https://rs.rbth.com/arts/86469-basmet-otvorio-festival-kustendorf

Russia also uses cultural affairs as a means to promote propaganda and disinformation. One recent example is the movie “Brothers by guns”, a pro-Russian movie that accuses the EU of encouraging fascism in Ukraine, made by the Serbian journalist Miodrag Zarkovic, was promoted this weekend in the northern Serbian city of Novi Sad at a public institution, the Cultural Centre. Below, there are some recent headlines from pro–Russian cultural portals.
1) Како су Руси прославили ноћ Ивана Купале 2019? (How did the Russians celebrate the night of Ivan Kupala 2019? RBTH Srbija, 9/7/2019)

The article refers to a common Serbian and Russian religious feast. This kind of coverage underlines the religious and Slavic ties among all Slavic nations in Eastern Europe.

2) Руски свет у малом: Сибирске лутке које ће вам прирасти за срце (Russian world in small: Siberian dolls that will grow for your heart, RBTH Srbija, 4/7/2019).

This article is rather a marketing promotion of Russian folk life in Siberia. The article is in Serbian and features a sensational representation of life in rural Russia.

3) Београд био домаћин Међународног форума дипломаца Русије (Belgrade hosted the International Diploma Forum of Russia, 2/7/2019, Sputnik Srbija)

This headline underlines the cultural ties between Serbia and Russia presenting the Serbian capital as the host of an important Russian cultural institution.

3.2.4. Orthodoxy under attack

Pro–Kremlin media in Southeastern Europe, especially those originating from Serbia and Montenegro feature strong narratives which advocate that Orthodoxy and Orthodox values are under threat. This kind of coverage attacks Western values like LGBT rights and Western habits like yoga. This kind of coverage is also accompanied by common conspiracy theories which present the West including the EU as institutions which seek to destroy Orthodoxy and Orthodox values by promoting same–sex marriages and oriental practices such as yoga. Academically speaking, the use of Orthodoxy has been a recurring theme in pro–Kremlin narratives through the post–Soviet space (Kintsurashvilli, p. 24, 2017). This kind of coverage is rampant in pro–Kremlin websites in Montenegro. Sputnik Romania also runs a column dedicated to religious affairs. Below, there are some examples of this kind of coverage.
1) Јога је анти-хришћанска филозофија! (Yoga is an anti-Christian philosophy!, 14/6/2019, Magazni Sedmica)

2) НАЈВРЕДНИЈА ИКОНА: Заштитница Византије! (THE MOST STORY: Protector of Byzantium!, 16/7/2019, Magazni Sedmica)

This article was accompanied by images of Jesus Christ. The author claimed that the protector of Byzantium was Jesus. In Serbian thought, the Byzantium is seen as the beacon of Orthodox values in the world. After the fall of Byzantium, Russia gained this role. This narrative is also accompanied strong visual effects such as satirical images which better amplify the impact of pro–Kremlin propaganda. These satirical images combine Orthodoxy, Serbian and Montenegrin national identity and the West. The West is presented as destroying churches or burning the Serbian and sometimes even the Russian flag.

3) Duminica Mare: care este adevărata semnificație a Rusaliilor (Great Sunday: what is the true significance of Pentecost, 16/6/2019, Sputnik Romania)

Sputnik Romania has in fact devoted one single column exclusively for covering Orthodox affairs. Regular topics include important Orthodox feasts, mocking of Pope Francis and various religious festivals.

3.2.6. The brand of Vladimir Putin

One important characteristic of Russian propaganda in Southeastern Europe is the idolization of Vladimir Putin. Putin’s public image has been a recurring theme in many academic papers and media investigations (Riabov & Riabova, p. 23 -35, 2014; Mikhailova, p. 65 –79, 2013). In most of the part of this research, Putin is described as a cultural and celebrity icon. The same applies to the case of Southeastern Europe. Pro–Russian media do engage in regular idolization of Vladimir Putin. Main patterns repeated are “the cool guy” and
“the tough man”. Many researchers are talking about the “celebrity” and the “hero” Vladimir Putin. Pro–Kremlin media in Southeastern Europe depict Vladimir Putin as the ultimate global leader who has the power and the strength to lead a country. In other cases, Putin is presented as a sensitive leader whose image has nothing to do with the image that the West is having about him. Putin’s coverage is accompanied by photos which depict Vladimir Putin as a “cool guy” or “charismatic leader” (Tempest, 2016).

1) Путин и Ђинпинг у обиласку Санкт Петербурга (Putin and Ginping on a tour of St. Petersburg, 7/6/2019, Vostok.rs)
2) Putin: Rusia este interesată de reluarea relațiilor depline cu UE (Putin: Russia is interested in resuming full relations with the EU, 4/7/2019, Sputnik Romania)

In Serbian media, the most popular political figure to be pictured and covered in many pro–Kremlin media is Vladimir Putin. For example, on the front pages of the Tabloid Informer, just after the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, is Vladimir Putin. Putin’s coverage dominated the cover pages more than 60 times in 2018. Throughout this coverage, Putin receives unusually positive coverage. Similarly, the tabloid Srpski Telegraf devoted 223 pages to Vladimir Putin and his messages of support to Serbia, Kosovo and President Vučić. In this way, Putin managed to be depicted as Serbia’s most loyal and truthful ally (Hajdari & Colbrone, 2019).

Putin’s coverage comes in contrast with the coverage of Western leaders. On the contrary, Western leaders are mocked and depicted in a humiliating way. This makes the public question the prestige of Western leaders and paves the way for the positive representation of Vladimir Putin. Putin becomes the hero of the people and is seen as the only loyal and serious world leader.
3.2.7. Exploitation of Ethnic Conflicts

One of the most important characteristics of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Southeastern Europe is the exploitation of ethnic conflicts in the region. As illustrated above, pro–Russian media exploit regional antagonisms and deep historical problems in order to pave the way for its propaganda and disinformation. This remark has been evident in the cases of Bosnia–Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Pro–Russian media adopts an approach which polarizes the public and stirs negative sentiments within the society. For this reason, pro–Russian media makes extensive use of conspiracy theories, derogatory characterizations for the opposite sides or anti–minority stances. This subschapter analyzes the examples of Bosnia, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

To begin with, the main active pro–Russian outlet in Bosnia which influences local affairs is Sputnik Sbrija. In a study conducted by the fact–checking platform Raskrinkavanje (Cvjetićanin et als., 2019), it was revealed that Sputnik coverage of Bosnia–Herzegovina had an editorial bias towards the ruling party in Republika Srpska, the Serb–majority federal republic of Bosnia. The analysis also showed that Sputnik had acted as the main campaign outlet for the republic’s leading presidential candidate, Milorad Dodik. Sputnik coverage was strongly anti–Western and pro–Russian. Several
EU countries, as well as NATO were presented as threats to the Serbs, Republika Srpska or presidential candidate, Milorad Dodik. The candidate’s opponents were labeled as “puppets” of foreign actors and implicated in several conspiracy theories about alleged coup plans or “color revolutions” in Bosnia or Republika Sprka. The analysis also found that Sputnik and RTRS, a public broadcaster in the Republika Srpska, appeared as the main “connectors” between media in Serbia and media in Bosnia. According to the research, Sputnik also played a prominent role in the shaping of narratives about “West vs. Russia”. The above research highlights that Russian media targets specifically the Serbs in Republika Sprska. In fact, Russian media present Russia as the savior of all Serbs, including those in the ethnic Serb - majority entity Republika Srpska. With regards to social media disinformation, Salvo (2018) also detected a sudden increase in the activity of Twitter accounts which heavily promoted pro-Russian narratives and advocated Serbian separatism in Republika Srpska. Geopolitically speaking, Moscow has been consistently pushing for the independence of Republika Srpska. Vladimir Putin has expressed his active support for local politicians. In fact, Putin has met several local politicians in previous years (Eisentraut & de Leon, 2018). Russia knows that keeping Bosnia and Herzegovina politically fractured will weaken the country’s prospect for EU and NATO membership. Moreover, in North Macedonia, Russia exploited the country’s foreign negotiations with Greece over its name dispute. In fact, during the negotiations process, North Macedonia proved to be a fertile ground for Russian disinformation and propaganda. North Macedonian officials have blamed Russia - backed online groups for proliferating false articles and Facebook posts as a way to heighten ethnic divisions in the country, influence negatively participation in the ratifying referendum and provoke public anger (Harding et als., 2017). It has to be noted that most of these groups were originating outside the country in order not to be detected by North Macedonian security services. In fact, nearly 40 news websites were popping up each day on Facebook to encourage people to boycott the referendum over the ramification of the country’s name change. Most of these websites were deliberately screening images and promoting content which targeted the country’s ethnic Albanian minority, evoked memories of an old armed conflict.
in 2001 between the government and Albanians (Barnes & Santora, 2018; Samurokov, 2019). In fact, pro–Russian media in the country had also adopt anti–West messages in an effort to terrorize the public against the U.S. and Europe. One commonly - used pattern was that the U.S. and Europe were promoting the idea of “Greater Albania”, Albanian irredentism, and that this constituted the utter betrayal of Macedonia and Macedonian heritage. Pro–Russian media wanted to show that the West was betraying North Macedonia and that only Russia stood against that (Eisentraut & de Leon, 2018). Besides media campaigns, Russia actively used culture in order to spread propaganda. During the negotiations, the Russian embassy in Skopje had encouraged the creation of many “cultural associations” between Macedonians and Russians which promoted the common heritage between the two nations. The Russian embassy even opened a Russian cultural center in the capital.

Furthermore, in Serbia, the situation is not different from the above described countries. Pro–Russian Serbian media portray Croats as “Ustashe” (pejorative name for Croats) and Albanians as “Shiptars” (pejorative name for Kosovo Albanians). These names bring back memories of WWII and Kosovo war. Both events constituted historical dramas in Serbian history. For instance, the pro–Russian magazine Informer claimed that the Kosovars will attack Serb–inhabited North Kosovo provoking a new war in the region. The alleged purpose of the attack would be to evict Serbians from Kosovo. None of these sensationalist and unfounded announcements ever got materialised. The purpose of these announcements was to provoke negative feelings towards the Croats or the Albanians. With regards to this situation, pro–Russian media also include detailed coverage of political and social affairs in these countries. The coverage is of course biased and mocking stirring a sense of revenge and superiority for the other side. Sputnik Srbija frequently uploads articles and reports about Albanian politics while using mocking images of Albanian political figures. The purpose of this tactic is to undermine the prestige of these figures and of the country in general to the Serbian public. Below there follow some examples of this kind of coverage. Below, there follow some headlines which clearly illustrate the above situation.

1) Veliki albanski lobista nova Trampova desna ruka (Great Albanian lobbyist new Trump's right hand, Sputnik Srbija, 1/8/2019)
2) Rat u Hrvatskoj nije završen, Srbi sa zebnjom čekaju 2022. (The war in Croatia is not over, Serbs are anxiously awaiting 2022, Sputnik Srbija, 30/7/2019).

Many pro–Russian tabloids also make use of false war rhetoric. The tabloid Alo also claimed that Kosovo and Albania would merge on January 1st 2019 which also never materialized. Additionally, the tabloids Informer and Srpski Telegraf announced in 2018 265 occasions of war and conflicts on their front pages. However, these incidents were pure imagination (Janjic, 2018). The pattern in these tabloids consists of extreme war rhetoric and ethnic / minority targeting. Articles reposted by these local websites have included anti–NATO or anti–EU viewpoints and called for the unification of ethnic Serbs from Serbia, Montenegro, North Kosovo and Bosnia’s Republika Srpska into a single political entity that should maintain close ties to Russia and Vladimir Putin. Janjic (2018) has also shown that all the above tabloids have developed numerous manipulation techniques such as drawing people’s words out of context, inaccurate communication of research, biased reporting, frivolous lying and invented stories. The reasons why these media have chosen this editorial policy varies from promoting specific political goals to simply increasing clicks and media profit.

A similar situation is transpiring in Moldova where pro–Russian media tries to mingle with Moldova’s internal affairs. In 2018, pro–Russian media perpetuated stories of an upcoming Romanian–backed Maidan which would threw Moldova into a series of political and economical unrest. In Russian media discourse, the word “Maidan” has a negative meaning because it is associated with the political unrest in Ukraine. On the other hand, the term has a positive meaning in the West because it is perceived as the symbol of Ukraine’s pro–European uprising. According to the Romanescu’s (2018) analysis for Polygraph.info, pro–Russian media in Moldova perpetuated messages that Romania along with the aid of the US and Europe is preparing a coup in Moldova’s capital in order to entangle the country to the West. Pro–Russian websites also promoted messages that fascists will take over the Moldovan government creating a climate of fear and agony. Of course, the purpose of this media campaign was to stir anti–West sentiments in the
country and promote the image of Russia as the truth–teller to the Moldovan people. The West was presented as corrupted and fascist and, thus, eager to destroy Moldova. Russian media implied that only Russian could save the country from this situation. Pro–Russian media also exploited old historical issues, such as the proposed unification of Moldova and Romania at the beginning of the 20th century in order to create chaos in the country. Russia’s main purpose has been to disrupt Moldova’s agreements with the EU and the US. In fact, in 2016, Romania tried to increase its media presence in Moldova by giving incentives to Romanian media to broadcast in Moldova. The aim of this effort was to boost the use of the Romanian language and promote EU and Western social values (Chiriac, 2016). Similarly, the Moldovan government has tried to ban certain pro–Russian from broadcasting in the country fearing the spread of disinformation or propaganda content. A survey in 2017 found that 54% of Moldovans trust pro–Russian media in the country and hold a positive image of Vladimir Putin (Rosca, 2017; Barbarosie & Coalson, 2018).
CONCLUSION

Finally, this thesis has managed to explain the basic characteristics of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation in Southeastern Europe and analyze the means and content which is spread via pro-Kremlin media in Southeastern Europe. Besides these, this thesis also presented the theoretical debate in media studies about hybrid warfare, propaganda, disinformation and “fake news”. This thesis examined closely Southeastern Europe, a region which has been ignored by academia and media interest for years after the fall of communism. This thesis has managed both to confirm its initial research hypotheses and more importantly, come up with future research recommendations.

The results of this research constitute a useful contribution to the ongoing academic and media debate about Russian propaganda and disinformation. In addition to this, this research has shown that Russian propaganda and disinformation is a geographically diverse phenomenon as it varies across Europe and the globe. However, this does not infer that the results of this thesis are absolute and cannot change in the future. Experience has shown that disinformation and propaganda are phenomena which have the ability to adopt to different political and economic circumstances. This remark means that if sociopolitical circumstances change, the pattern of Russian disinformation may also change. This situation calls, of course, for further research in the field. Further research must be undertaken in order to fully understand and ultimately tackle propaganda and disinformation not only in Southeastern Europe, but also in other parts of Europe like the Batlics (Doughtery & Kaljurand, 2016, p. 16 - 19). Besides information campaigns, Russian influence in Southeastern Europe can also be found in other fields such as economic investments, defense and energy (Cohen & Racid, 2019).

The situation above paves the way for more research into developing counter-propaganda and counter-disinformation techniques. Policy-makers, journalists, academics and media organizations could team up in order to develop state of the art techniques which will have the ability to detect suspicious content. Although media monitors and fact-checking organizations have been developed in the region, democratic standards in the region are
among the lowest on the European continent. Yet, fact–checkers in Southeastern Europe report various problems and threats while doing their job (Cvjetičanin et als., 2019). Civil society in Southerastern Europe has historically faced tremendous challenges and the above situations just confirms this remark. This situation implies that countering propaganda and disinformation requires deep structural reforms within the political systems of these countries. The examples of Bulgaria and Romania prove that Southeastern Europe has indeed strong democratic prospects, but stil a lot remains to be done. Democratic reforms and increased media freedom will definitely create a prosperous and disinformation–resilient environment which wil promote civil liberties and freedom.
BIBLIOGRAPHY & SOURCES


Not”, p. 106. Available at: https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf [Accessed at 18/7/2019].


