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## THEMATIC PATTERNS OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

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**Abstract.** The article presents a description of a text collection representing disinformation messages about the war in Ukraine published on one of the Telegram channels in order to influence the Russian-speaking community in Germany. The main subjects that Russian propaganda used at the beginning of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine were determined on the basis of deductive thematic analysis, content analysis, and semantic and stylistic analysis of the texts. It has been established that the similarity of the subjects of Russian disinformation and the identity of their coverage in different countries allows us to talk about a full-fledged system of moderation by official Russia not only traditional media, but also social networks; a special news selection for commenting, the so-called agenda, and a certain way of commenting them. The same type set of topics and the identity of their coverage in different countries gives reason to conclude that they have been transformed into peculiar patterns, according to which a carefully constructed image unfolds through the story. The task: to compromise Ukraine, as well as European countries and politicians who did not support the Kremlin's military aggression; to impose a favorable for Russian vision of its attack on Ukraine; to cause panic with threats of global military conflict with the use of nuclear weapons among European citizens, and an energy and food crisis in Europe; to destabilize the domestic political situation within Germany; to demonize the image of the US to divert attention from the real aggressor and to compromise the partnership between the European Union and the US.

**Key words:** Russian-speaking community, Germany, the war in Ukraine, Telegram, disinformation in social networks, media.

**Introduction.** Thematic analysis as one of the intellectual and textual research methods helps to reveal the main ideas or meanings encoded in the messages, to understand the most important thing – what is purpose of the communication. The concepts of "theme" and "thematic selectivity" are directly related to the theory of agenda setting, which became the object of scientific analysis back in the 70s in the 20th century, originating from the times of the "Cold War" between the West and the socialist camp. However, it is extremely relevant even now in the learning of the new types of wars, which are called "hybrid warfare".

Agenda concept theorists M. McCombson and D. Shaw proved that the subject matter of the messages published in the media and the importance given to such messages by information consumers are directly proportional to each other. Satisfying the human need for orientation (it concerns the necessity of understanding what is happening around), the media act as an important knowledge supplier and interpreter about the world and events in it (M. McCombs, D. Shaw, 1972). The consequence of this is the increasing subordination of people and societies to the ideas promoted by traditional and new media. Information consumers become vulnerable to informational influence, instead, the media turn into tools of manipulation.

The UN Human Rights Council recognized the manipulation of information as a violation of human rights, a direct threat to democracy and security in the world, and called on states to unite to oppose disinformation by creating an environment free from information abuse.

Foreign information intervention needs scrupulous attention not only networks, which are called the most important and state-of-the-art weaponry (Demartino, 2020: 9). Russia's infor-

mation intervention in Ukraine demonstrates how disinformation has created a fake information reality, where real, unprovoked, full-scale military aggression against a sovereign state has become possible. Russian information intervention is studied by Patrick Duggan, Oscar Johnson, Robert Sealy, Yana Puglerin, Stefan Meister, Yolanta Darchevska, Janis Berzins, Ulrik Franke, Andrii Demartino, Peter Pomerantsev, Georgy Pocheptsov, and others. Researchers note that even though the subject of information and communication technologies as one of the key elements of the Russian strategy implementation of external aggression has acquired scientific importance and research interest, it remains the least studied. There is also a lack of information base, and general approaches to the research ignore a wide range of practical techniques and methods of Russian disinformation influence.

**The purpose** of our research is to study the content of one of the Telegram channels, which is aimed at the Russian-speaking community in Germany, to form a collection of disinformation texts about Russia's war against Ukraine, to identify the key issues of Russian disinformation, and to describe them.

**Research methods.** Such methods as discourse analysis, content analysis, deductive thematic analysis, as well as semantic and stylistic analysis were used to achieve the goal.

**The research information base.** The content analysis results of the telegram channel "Germany from the first person", later renamed to "N Kremlin Valley N", which were published in March 2022, are presented here. "Germany from the first person" / "IN Kremlin Valley N" is one of the typical disinformation public telegram channels that began to work actively after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The unprovoked military aggression against a sovereign state, the failure of the Russian blitzkrieg, which task was to capture Kyiv in three days and the whole of Ukraine in two weeks, as well as the immediate solidarity protest of the majority of European and world states against the Russian invasion demanded the maximum information intervention from the aggressor state. Russia is exerting its best efforts to influence the citizens of other European states to ensure a unified, favorable Russian view on the beginning and course of the war in Ukraine, as well as to achieve the desired final result in this war.

The analyzed channel is purely propagandistic, open to dissemination, multiplication of misinformation, and creation of mass effect. Therefore, Telegram users having discovered disinformation complained about the violation of their right to receive reliable information. The channel was sanctioned but immediately resumed its work under a different name, keeping all the previous content, but significantly losing its audience. Before closing, the audience of "Germany from the first person" was 89,257 people; under the name "IN Kremlin Valley N" the resource gathered 45,300 readers.

The first messages are dated March 9, 2022. 430 messages were published from the first day of the channel's operation until March 31. The target audience is the Russian-speaking community of Germany and Russian citizens. A considerable number of Russian-speaking citizens live in Germany.

A considerable number of Russian-speaking citizens live in Germany. Data from open sources indicate that there are 4-4.5 million Russians in the country. These are mostly descendants of ethnic Germans who left German lands in the 18th–19th centuries and immigrated to Russia, and during the 20th century the descendants of these German emigrants returned to Germany forming one of the largest communities of immigrants, which are called "Russian Germans". Another part of the Russian-speaking community in Germany is made up of citizens of various nationalities who are natives of the former Soviet Union or the new states formed on its ruins.

Precisely this audience is a consumer of Russian information content in Germany, and through this community Russian disinformation tries to achieve its goals, namely: to ensure support for pro-Russian ideas, to change the perception of real events to the perception favorable to the aggressor, to cause distrust in the German authorities and objective media, to radicalize society, and to cause political and social chaos.

Telegram is one of the largest social media platforms that are actively used in the world. The global survey of Statista company shows that this mobile application will have half a billion users worldwide in 2022, making Telegram one of the top five most downloaded applications in the world. In 2021, approximately three-quarters of Telegram users chose the application specifically to receive the latest news (Statista, 2022). At the same time, Telegram is called the least open network for external monitoring, and anonymity, the ability to publish files of various formats and large sizes without indicating the author makes it easy to spread aggressive content.

The thematic analysis of the published texts made it possible to identify the following meta-themes of Russian disinformation, which was spread by the channel at the beginning of the Russian aggression:

1. Sanctions against Russia and the energy crisis in Europe. United Europe should be separated.
2. Russia and its president Vladimir Putin.
3. Ukraine and its president Volodymyr Zelensky.
4. The USA, President Joe Biden, and NATO.
5. Germany, Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and German politicians.
6. The Russian army in Ukraine.
7. Ukrainian refugees.

**Sanctions and the energy crisis in Europe.** Most often the channel published texts united by the topic of sanctions against Russia as a punishment for the invasion of Ukraine, as well as about the energy crisis that awaits Europe due to the announcement of sanctions against Russia. The goal is to deny the effectiveness of sanctions, to show their worthlessness, as well as the inability of the Western Europe countries and the USA to be effective in opposing Russia and helping Ukraine.

In the reports dealing with the subject of sanctions, it is mentioned that they will not have any serious consequences, because only luxury brands, such as Gucci, McDonald's, and Coca Cola will allegedly leave Russia. Sanctions will not harm the Russian economy; on the contrary, they will be the cause of its development. Instead, Europe and the world did a lot of harm to themselves by punishing Russia with sanctions.

The dominant topic "energy collapse" has two sub-topics – bicycles instead of cars in Europe, because gasoline and gas prices are very high due to the lack of Russian energy resources, and strikes due to high fuel prices in various European countries.

Despite the optimism of Russian propagandists that the sanctions do not harm the Russian economy, the latter already feels and will continue to feel their devastating consequences for itself, and therefore disinformation channels are trying to sway public opinion on the subject of a cold and hungry winter in Europe, high fuel prices, cause dissatisfaction with the actions, in particular, of the German government, which supported sanctions against Russia.

Russia does not like the solidarity of European countries that condemn Russian aggression and impose sanctions. Accordingly, Russian propagandists exploit one of the archetypal propaganda narratives: the good East and the evil West. The East represents powerful Orthodox Russia with its patriarchal values, and the West represents "degenerate" Europe with its liberal values. Besides, Russian propaganda aggressively manipulates the historical past of European states, artificially heating administrative-territorial conflicts: "Poland divided Ukraine and determined the territory that is going to take for itself." "Germany claims the western part of Poland, and Poland wants to take the Kaliningrad region, which Germany also claims."

**Russia and its President Vladimir Putin.** The propaganda channel presents the topic "President of Russia Vladimir Putin" as follows: "he is the most influential person in the world, who is respected in America and Europe, although he is feared", "Putin is a serious person. Everyone thinks that he scares and he will not warn twice (about the use of nuclear weapons)", "Poland on its knees will beg Putin to join it Russia to get rid of NATO's terror."

After US President Joe Biden's statement that Putin is a war criminal, the narrative becomes aggressive and defensive at the same time: "none of the Western leaders would dare to say to Putin's face that he is a war criminal, and the press can write anything"; "now the whole world blames Putin for all their failures"; "Putin is hated because he is inconvenient for the USA, Yeltsin could be twisted and turned, because what this drunkard would do."

About Russia, the channel informs like this: "... there will never be a deficit in Russia. Russia does not need Europe and America. Russia has everything necessary for the development." "Russia is a too humane country. Russia had to give 2–3 days to all peaceful people to leave the country and then, simply bomb all of Ukraine to smithereens."

So, these texts serve the myth about Russia as a world superpower, with a powerful economy, nuclear weapons, and a strong army that opposes aggressive America. Allegedly, only Russia provides balance in the bipolar world, no one, except Russia, can oppose the USA, which seeks to destroy Europe and rule the whole world. This narrative is fed by the images of Soviet Cold War propaganda. Its task is to cause fear, and panic, increase the constant feeling of danger, and anxiety and form an opinion about Russia / Putin as the only right partner, capable of protecting and resisting evil.

**Ukraine and its president Volodymyr Zelenskiy.** Against the background of deep disappointment with Putin, President Zelenskiy in March gained high popularity and authority in the world due to his resistance to Russia. The world press told a lot about Zelenskiy as a courageous president. Through its channels, Russian propaganda spreads information that tries to undermine the authority of the Ukrainian leader, destroy belief in him and convince both Russians and the world community of Putin's greatness, even though his army has begun to suffer its first defeats.

Russian disinformation developed the topic "President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskiy" in the following narratives: "Zelenskiy is an actor who has no idea what politics is", "Zelenskiy lost the country due to unprofessionalism, and if he had agreed to fulfill the Minsk agreements, he would have had gas pipeline, and a strong ally in the person of Putin", "Zelenskiy is a drug addict, he escaped to Poland a long time ago, he is not in Kyiv", "Zelenskiy is a weak person, "National Corps" and "Azov" prepared a coup to overthrow Zelenskiy, that is why he escaped", "Zelenskiy should be on his knees asking Putin for negotiations." This narrative after the failure of the Russian blitzkrieg in Ukraine is transformed into "Zelenskiy does not agree to negotiations, postpones them because he wants to make money from the war."

The topic "Ukraine" in the corresponding texts collection is presented as follows: "Ukraine has never existed and now it will become a part of the Russian state, so other countries should not interfere in the affairs of Russia or other states that once belonged to the Soviet Union." "Ukraine has never been humiliated as much as the Americans are doing now. Ukraine is a thing that is acted out by other countries. Europe betrayed Ukraine." "Ukraine is shrinking territorially every day, Russian soldiers feel at home there." "Ukraine is ready to sign the capitulation agreement, to give up territorial claims regarding Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk regions."

"In Ukraine, the state supports the Nazis, the president, and his children are also Nazis, and school textbooks write about Nazis from the Azov battalion." "Victoria Nuland tells about secret laboratories for the production of chemical weapons operating in Ukraine."

Conclusion: constructing the topic "Ukraine", Russian propagandists have a goal, firstly, to develop a negative image of Ukraine and Ukrainians, to form the opinion that Ukraine, its president, and the government are the source of aggression that must be eliminated, that Russia is performing a rescue mission for throughout Europe and the world, destroying a negative target. Secondly, Ukraine, like Georgia, is deserved to be punished because it did not choose a pro-Russian course of development but strives for European integration, so it is the source of its problems. Russia punishes such people so that others do not want to follow. Thirdly, Ukraine is not a state at all; it is a part of Russia. The Ukrainian government is weak and pathetic; you don't have to deal with it. Russia is great and strong,

and peace and prosperity in Europe and the world depend on it, you should not bet on a weak Ukraine, let Putin do what he wants because the fate of the former Soviet republics, Europe, and the world depends on him. Supporting Ukraine does not make sense, but it can provoke a global conflict with the use of nuclear weapons.

**The USA, Joe Biden, and NATO.** The topic "the US President Joe Biden" is disclosed by the Telegram channel as follows: "Joe Biden is a war criminal; he is the main American aggressor."

The topic "the United States of America and NATO" serves to divert the community's attention from Russia's crime and its army in Ukraine, and instead to focus on the USA and NATO and their participation in military conflicts in the world: "The USA planned to attack Russia first, but Trump prevented". The idea that Russia defends itself is cultivated, and America kills people by interfering in the internal politics of other states. Claims against America go as far as "invaders on Indian lands", and "slave" labor of blacks for white Europeans". Accordingly, "it's time to punish the US for terrorism in other countries."

It should be noted that the topic of the United States belongs to the "eternal" topics of Russian propaganda, which it has inherited since the Cold War, and since then it has not stopped developing it for both domestic and foreign audiences. A consortium of public organizations investigating Russian propaganda in eleven European countries since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine records the simultaneous deployment of the ominous image of the United States in other countries as well, that only confirms the conclusion about the purposeful nature of spreading such messages (Pasichnyi, 2021; Riaboshtan, Iluk, 2022).

NATO appears as a powerless organization that is not capable of being a reliable partner: "NATO cannot be trusted, these are frivolous people", "in the French parliament they advocated leaving NATO", "NATO does not believe in the victory of the Ukrainians, NATO does not believe in itself either because knows that everything will end with Russia's victory, but they are just making money on the war".

Summarizing, we note that the main purpose of the stories about the USA and NATO is to convince that not Russia, but the USA and NATO are responsible for the conflict in Ukraine, they provoked it, they put Ukraine under attack, and now they have left it without appropriate help. Ukrainians are not fighting for their country, but are a bargaining chip in the US intrigues.

Moreover, official Russia is very concerned about the political partnership between the United States and the European Union, this political unity is outside the strategic interests of modern Russia, accordingly, and numerous messages are aimed at compromising the United States. Russia actively exploits various stereotypical images of the United States, which were used by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It promotes the conspiracy theory that the US is "jealous" of Europe because the European economy is booming and the American economy is in decline, so the US specifically unleashed a military conflict in Europe to weaken the European Union.

**Germany and its politicians.** The resource highlights this topic as follows: "Germany is a non-independent state that depends on the USA"; "there is no freedom of speech"; "If you express an alternative opinion, you will be immediately taken by the police immediately and they "put you on the bottle" (an allusion to particularly brutal sexual torture), take away your property", "90% of German citizens are homeless (that is, they do not own real estate), they do not understand politics because they are forced to work hard to pay for migrants."

Scientists, who are studying the influence of Russian propaganda on European countries, say that one of the tasks of this activity is to show the failure of democracy as a social order. Using the democratic principles of freedom of thought and freedom of the press, the possibilities of an "open society", Russia directs its efforts to fight against democracy (Pasichnik, 2021: 74).

Further, the theme of "Germany and its policies" unfolds as follows: supporting Ukraine, "the Germans are provoking the Russians", "if Putin decides to bomb this former fascist country, then

we must ask him to allow those Russian citizens who currently live in Germany to return to Russia". "Does not Germany want a war with Russia for the third time? If Germany gets involved in a military conflict with Russia now it will end in Germany's defeat again, so the Germans should protest against aid to Ukraine." "Life in Germany became uneasy because of providing aid to Ukraine." "German politicians are weak, it is impossible to listen to them; they look like frightened hares, in contrast to brave, self-confident, intelligent Russian politicians." "Merkel has more courage than Scholz." "Scholz will lose to Putin."

Therefore, the main goal of the narrative "Germany and its politicians" is to undermine trust in the country's government, to cause protests, because Germany does not care about its citizens, only migrants receive benefits, and Germans are forced to work excessively, without rest to ensure this political course of the government. There is no freedom of speech here, the state can take away private property, and henceforth, due to Ukraine's support, there will also be high fuel prices and food shortages.

Another important task of Russian propaganda in this narrative is to create fear of war among German citizens. Convince that the German government, not supporting Putin and Russia, not approving Russia's attack on Ukraine, is creating conditions for a war on German territory and Russia is a strong country, historically Germany has lost to Russia and is losing now. And again the question will arise - who Berlin will belong to?

Russia aggressively perceives the refusal of other countries to support its political course. It is generous to those politicians who have pro-Russian views and directs flows of misinformation at opponents.

**The Russian army in Ukraine.** This topic has the following development: "Russian troops in Ukraine are protecting truly Russian lands", that is, they came to liberate their territories from Ukrainian "Nazis", and not invaded a sovereign state. "The Russian army is the most powerful in the world and only idiots can dare to fight with it." "The Russian army did not win an instant victory in Ukraine, because it treats the civilian population humanely, behind which the Ukrainian army is hiding." "Russian troops protect world peace and confront the biggest global threat - the USA." The Ukrainian military is joining the ranks of the Russian army, and the violence of the Russian military against the civilian population and the terror in the occupied territories is fictional and staged.

**Ukrainian refugees.** In the geopolitical strategy of the Kremlin, refugees have become an instrument for pressure on Europeans, because it changes their usual way of life, and accordingly, often causes dissatisfaction with the policies of governments that accept refugees from the war in their countries. This was the case with the refugees from Syria, and it is the same with the refugees from Ukraine. Russian propagandists, knowing about the complex political debate within Germany regarding refugees, as well as responding to the solidarity of Germans and other Europeans in supporting refugees from Ukraine, are actively developing this topic.

Therefore, the channel informs its readers about, firstly, "while Ukrainian men are fighting, their women who fled to Germany "offer" themselves to other men". "They are a living commodity for the German and global sex industry." And secondly, those Ukrainian refugees worsen the well-being of Germans: "As long as Ukrainian refugees are enjoying in Germany, the Germans themselves have to tighten their belts." This is how attention is shifted from the colossal humanitarian catastrophe, the cause of which is the war launched by Russia against Ukraine; shift the emphasis - and Ukrainian refugees are not victims of war, but those who deserve condemnation and should be deprived of support.

The topic of Ukrainian refugees is divided into two subtopics. Here we note that mainly women and minor children are fleeing the war in Ukraine. Therefore, the channel tells its readers that, firstly, "while Ukrainian men are fighting, their women who fled to Germany "offer" themselves to other men." "They are a living commodity for the German and global sex industry". And secondly, Ukrainian refugees worsen the well-being of Germans: "As long as Ukrainian refugees are enjoying

life in Germany, the Germans themselves have to tighten their belts." This is how attention is shifted from the colossal humanitarian catastrophe, the cause of which is the war launched by Russia against Ukraine; shift the emphasis – and Ukrainian refugees are not victims of the war, but those who deserve condemnation and should be deprived of support.

**Conclusions.** Thus, we have studied, in detail, the text collections formed on the messages content of the Russian disinformation telegram channel "Germany from the first person" / "IN Kremlin Valley N", and have compared them with the results of other research about Russian disinformation deals with the war in Ukraine, which is aimed at European countries, and have come to the following conclusions: the similarity of the topics of Russian disinformation and the identity of their coverage in different countries allows us to talk about a full-fledged system of moderation by official Russia not only traditional media, but also social networks; a special selection of news for commenting, the so-called agenda, and a certain way of commenting on them.

The same set of topics and the identity of their coverage in different countries give reason to conclude about their transformation into peculiar patterns, according to which a carefully constructed image unfolds through the story, for example, Ukraine is a Nazi country and a source of danger, Germany is an undemocratic country that exploits its citizens to keep migrants; Germany is a weak country that lost all wars to Russia; Russia is a politically, economically, and culturally powerful state; Putin is a world leader, Zelenskyi is a drug addict and a clown, etc.

A detailed description of the research topics helps to draw the following conclusions regarding the goals of Russian disinformation: to compromise Ukraine, as well as European countries and politicians who did not support the Kremlin's military aggression; to impose a favorable for Russia's vision of military operations in Ukraine; to cause panic because of threats of a global military conflict using nuclear weapons among the citizens in European states and because of the energy and food crisis in Europe; to destabilize the domestic political situation inside Germany; to demonize the US image to divert attention from the real aggressor and to compromise the partnership between the European Union and the US. Analysis of the content of Telegram channels allows us to talk about the management of their information flows.

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