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In the Shadow of the Russian Bear: The Use of Pro-Russian Propaganda in Slovakia

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Citation

Zitnanska, E. (2022). *In the Shadow of the Russian Bear: The Use of Pro-Russian Propaganda in Slovakia*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

BSc. International Relations & Organizations
Leiden University
Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences



**Universiteit
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Bachelor Thesis

**In the Shadow of the Russian Bear:
The Use of Pro-Russian Propaganda in Slovakia**

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Word count: 7998

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Introduction

Even though the Cold War ended over three decades ago, the race for world hegemony has never truly ended. More specifically, since Vladimir Putin became the leader of the Russian Federation in the late 1990s, there has been a continuous effort to re-establish the reputation, as well as the geopolitical standing of Russia via various means of influence (Karpchuk, 2021). One of the most efficient, yet subtle means of soft power which the Kremlin deploys on its path to restore “Russia’s glory” is propaganda, not only within Russia itself but even more so within the international political scene (Karpchuk, 2021). The propaganda deployed by the Kremlin is unique in many senses, most notably by being predominantly focused on discrediting others rather than promoting itself. Its aim is to target countries within the European Union or members of NATO, destabilize the existing political order, and make Russian influence prevail (Čížik, 2017).

Today, there are no doubts regarding the fact the Kremlin has unleashed international information warfare (Smoleňová, 2015). Similarly, there is a consensus that Russian propaganda presents a significant global challenge and a serious security threat to the stability of democratic regimes around the world (Julukhidze, 2018). Pro-Russian propaganda can be considered a very powerful geopolitical tool, which can negatively influence any European state without using hard power. Russian information warfare and propaganda have a clear geopolitical context. These tools are carefully prepared by experts and tailor-made for each state (Čížik, 2017). To disseminate propaganda amongst the population, the Kremlin deploys various strategies and means of influence. However, many other sources produce extensive pro-Russian content without being explicitly connected to Russia. The presence of such sources within countries is concerning since they effectively serve as propaganda amplifiers, yet their motivation behind the spread of propaganda is not exactly clear.

In this sense, the Central and Eastern European regions, namely the Visegrad countries, are a particularly relevant target for pro-Russian propaganda due to their historical connection with Russia. Within this group of countries, Slovakia stands out as the country with particularly high pro-Russian public opinion. This thesis is therefore examining the mechanisms of pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia, as well as the themes which shape such disinformation efforts. More specifically, it will examine the content from the Facebook page of Ľuboš Blaha, a Slovak politician whose page is considered to be the most influential pro-Russian online source in Slovakia. Based on the empirical data retrieved from this page, this thesis will aim to answer

the following question: How are the themes of pro-Russian propaganda disseminated in Slovakia connected to the objectives of Russian propaganda?

The thesis will first review the existing literature on the topic of pro-Russian propaganda, both the nature of the propaganda in general and the one disseminated in Slovakia in particular. The next section focuses on the methodology and the research design employed in this study. Next, the empirical data will be presented within the themes and narratives present in the pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia. The empirical data will be subsequently analyzed in the context of the general themes of pro-Russian propaganda to determine what connection it has to the objectives of Russian propaganda. Ultimately, the findings regarding the connection of the pro-Russian themes to the objectives of Russian propaganda will be presented at the end of this paper.

Literature review

The subject of pro-Russian propaganda has been on the radar of researchers for years. In this section, I will present the main contributions from the literature on this topic before presenting my theoretical framework. The objective of Russian propaganda is, first and foremost, to undermine the existing establishment of the West (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016). Instead of promoting itself or its ideology, Russia aims to polarize society, undermine the existing democratic order and create a general sense of societal distrust (Šuplata & Nič, 2016). This derives from the Kremlin's narrative that Western superpowers, namely the United States, seek global domination, strive to attack the traditional European values, and replace them with their own liberal values. Western alliances, as well as the progressive and liberal nature of democracy, are portrayed as decadent and threatening to the integrity of European states. Russia, on the other hand, presents itself as a defender of traditional values and conservatism, which is supposed to ensure stability and proclaims moral superiority over the "decadent West" (Mesežnikov & Pleschová, 2017). Any attempts to challenge the views presented by pro-Russian or "alternative" sources are portrayed as attempts at "Western brainwashing" or "a return to the one-truth era" (Smoleňová, 2015). The Kremlin's primary motive is to target the broad public, but its secondary aim is to also influence political decision-making amongst the governments via pressures derived from societal attitudes (Čížik, 2017) and therefore maximize its influence in the targeted region (Julukhidze, 2018).

Another crucial feature of Russian propaganda is the unique, custom-made nature of propaganda that targets individual countries according to their specific attitudes and political trends. The Kremlin does so to maximize its spread and engagement with the propaganda, and consequently increase its influence in the targeted region (Čížik & Masariková, 2018). The Kremlin can be directly involved in the manufacturing and dissemination of propaganda or can even create or finance different channels of influence. However, the spread of pro-Russian content can also come from sources within the country of interest with no formal connection to Russia. These internal sources do not merely share Russian propaganda per se, but instead, copy or interpret the themes used in the propaganda and present it in a way that is more comprehensive and relatable for the targeted audience (Smoleňová, 2015).

Although the spread of pro-Russian propaganda can be considered a global security threat, certain geopolitical regions, such as post-Communist countries and countries within a proximate geographic range are targeted more frequently and more intensely. It is commonly

aimed at the countries of Central Eastern Europe, which were all Communist satellite states and now figure as the “Western Alliance’s frontline states” (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016). One of the reasons why this region is targeted by pro-Russian propaganda is that they may be perceived as a threat to Russia since they are politically distancing themselves from the Russian political model. However, it is also due to these countries’ political, historical, and cultural similarities and the notion of the “Slavic brotherhood,” appealing to their common cultural identity (Čížik, 2017). It therefore evokes an impression of a common Slavic identity with common views and values, which Russia exploits to reinforce these countries’ sense of belonging. This is especially relevant in the context of globalization and multiculturalism which, according to Russia, endangers the traditional values and integrity of Slavic nations (Čížik & Masariková, 2018). This notion can therefore reinforce Communist nostalgia amongst older generations, as well as it can create new sympathizers and supporters of the Russian political regime. This seems to be most predominantly the case of Slovakia.

According to Višňovský (2020), Slovakia is, out of all other Visegrad countries, the least critical of Russia and is considered to be amongst the most vulnerable towards pro-Russian influences. This might be the case for numerous reasons. The notion of having a “special relationship” with Russia based on cultural and linguistic similarities seems to be one of great significance amongst the Slovak population. Mesežnikov and Pleschová (2017) called this notion “a historical Russophilia,” based on the narrative that Russia, the great power, has always been a protector of the small, defenseless Slovakia. Pro-Russian sources also reinforce the narrative of the Russian nation as the liberators of Slovakia from fascism, even though in 1968, Slovakia’s territory was occupied by the armies of the Warsaw Pact under the supervision of the USSR (Mesežnikov & Pleschová, 2018). Similarly, despite the oppressive nature of the former communist regime, many people are nostalgic about the USSR, claiming that life under communism brought many advantages that liberalism could never deliver (Štefančík, 2020). Communist nostalgia in combination with the potential disillusionment from liberalism creates a rather receptive audience towards the claims of pro-Russian propaganda.

Theoretical framework

What are the mechanisms through which pro-Russian propaganda spreads? What content is disseminated through such channels? This section lays the theoretical foundation for the study of pro-Russian propaganda in general, as well as propaganda disseminated specifically in Slovakia. Firstly, the term “propaganda” itself, according to Henderson et al. (2016), entails false, misleading, or one-sided information that manipulates a mass audience and is advantageous to the propagandist. This definition applies to the case of propaganda deployed by the Kremlin, as it disseminates false or misleading content. In comparison to regular propaganda, Russian propaganda is special in the sense that it does not necessarily persuade the targeted audience of its political ideology as much as it aims to create chaos, uncertainty, and a climate where no one is to be trusted. The content of the propaganda does not need to be verifiable, credible, or factual as it aspires to first spark doubt that gradually transforms into systematic distrust among its audience (Nimmo, 2019). The term “pro-Russian propaganda” used in this research entails content disseminated by sources that are not formally linked to Russia and their motives behind spreading this content are usually unknown (Smoleňová, 2015). However, they also contribute to the ultimate objectives of the Kremlin-made Russian propaganda. Unlike Russian propaganda, pro-Russian propaganda often puts Russia in contrast with Western countries and shows that although the Russian political regime is not perfect, it is superior to other superpowers. It celebrates any supposed achievements of the Russian Federation, both contemporary and from the past, and it marginalizes or distracts from any controversial activities of the Kremlin. In other words, this is done through the use of anti-Western, pro-Russian themes that can serve different functions; some merely spread contrarian views and attitudes, some directly endorse the Russian political regime and its past, as well as contemporary achievements.

The effect of Russian propaganda has a theoretical background in the work “Propaganda: The Formulation of Men’s Attitudes” by Jacques Ellul. Ellul (1973) explains that propaganda is a technique used by bodies of authority to influence public opinions by targeting masses through its individual members. The content of propaganda usually aims to influence opinions and attitudes through psychological means by targeting individuals within specific groups. This is because these psychological means are proven to make individuals more responsive and engaged with the content of the propaganda, rather than if the means were to be of a factual or educational nature (Ellul, 1973). However, the propagandist first needs to

create a “fertile soil” that serves as a precondition for the propaganda to resonate with its audience, to assure both continual support and support in times of crisis. This “fertile soil” is, according to Ellul (1973), created by a systematic and continuous spread of an organized myth that addresses all the realms of the targeted individual, both the private and public, the conscious or unconscious. In the long run, this organized myth strives to affect one’s overall perception of the world, emotions, and actions by offering a one-sided and uncontested perspective. In other words, the source of propaganda must create a “fertile soil” in which any planted propaganda will prosper. In the case of Russian propaganda, this “fertile soil” entails the continuous discreditation of the Western political order via systematic propaganda. When the audience is repeatedly exposed to this narrative over a long period, it slowly transforms into a “rebellious” ideological default. The societal climate becomes gradually more doubtful and distrusting of everything conventional, and the audience grows more responsive to the deployed pro-Russian propaganda. Ultimately, once this organized myth resonates and settles amongst the audience, it means that the precondition for the success of the objectives of pro-Kremlin propaganda has been established.

Based on this theoretical background, this thesis investigates the mechanisms through which pro-Russian propaganda is spread in Slovakia, as well as the main themes disseminated through such channels. Building on this foundation, the next section develops the methodology and research design of this thesis.

Research Design & Methodology

This research aims to show how the various themes used by pro-Russian propaganda create a “fertile soil” for the success of Russian propaganda - to deceive and muddle its audience, create a general sense of chaos and distrust that ultimately plays to the advantage of the Russian political regime. To analyze this phenomenon, I will conduct a single case study focusing solely on Slovakia and its exposure to pro-Russian propaganda. This decision is based on the observation that Slovakia holds the strongest continuous support for the Russian political regime out of all other countries in the Visegrad group.

According to the yearly reports published by the GLOBSEC Institute, over 10% of Slovaks preferred their national geopolitical orientation to be leaning towards Russia rather than the West in the years 2019 and 2020. The remaining countries of the Visegrad group, in contrast, had their societal preferences toward the East around or below 5% in this time. These differences make the study of pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia a particularly pressing concern. About half of all respondents believed that Slovakia’s geopolitical orientation should be equally distributed between the East and West, with a median of 10.5% of people preferring the orientation towards the East (Hajdu et al., 2019; 2020). In both years of 2019 and 2020, over 15% of the population wanted Slovakia to leave the EU and around 30% wanted to leave NATO. Above 60% believed that Russia did not present a security threat and almost 50% believed that the West and the liberal democratic order were decadent (Hajdu et al., 2019; 2020). In 2019, almost 70% of the respondents believed mainstream media to be unreliable and 49% perceived Vladimir Putin as a positive and credible leader (Hajdu et al., 2019). In 2020, a shocking 38.9% of Slovaks did not believe that the COVID-19 pandemic existed or believed it was developed by the West with ulterior motives (Hajdu et al., 2020).

How can we study the mechanisms and content of pro-Russian propaganda? Given the difficulties associated with isolating the effects of misinformation on public opinion, this study focuses on the mechanisms of the content of pro-Russian propaganda. This will be partly conducted through a qualitative content analysis of the posts from the arguably most influential source of pro-Russian content on Slovak social media - the Facebook page of a Slovak politician Ľuboš Blaha. Blaha is known as the most active pro-Russian advocate amongst all Slovak politicians. He is a vice-chairman of the SMER-SD (Direction - Social Democracy) political party which was in power for almost 12 years until the parliamentary elections in 2020 and are now in opposition. Blaha has been in Slovak politics since 2012, but he only grew to

prominence around the time his Facebook profile was created in 2018. This can be seen through the drastic increase in preferential votes he received in the parliamentary elections in 2016, in which he received only around 2.7 thousand votes (Struhárik, 2020). In the elections of 2020, in contrast, he received over 60 thousand preferential votes.

Blaha's Facebook page has been the most successful political Facebook page in Slovakia since 2019, only one year after its launch (Trnka, 2022). Since then, the page has generated over 25 million interactions and over 4 million shares, resulting in a total of almost 175 thousand followers (Gerulata, 2022). According to data from the Gerulata institute, Blaha is the leading online source of pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia with extreme influence (Gerulata, 2022). According to data available from prior analyses, Blaha's page had already defeated the impact and influence of all other conspiracy websites and social media pages in Slovakia since 2019 (Struhárik, 2020). This source was thus chosen as a prime example of how influential sources take over themes of Russian propaganda and consequently produce their own pro-Russian content. The empirical evidence, more specifically the posts on Blaha's Facebook page from the years 2019 and 2020, will be chosen according to the content that will account for the common themes addressed in pro-Russian propaganda in Blaha's posts. These themes include criticism of the United States, the West, Western institutions and alliances such as the EU or NATO, discreditation of mainstream media, and the liberal democratic order. Furthermore, it will address explicit praise of Russia's past and current political system and appeals to Communist nostalgia. For pragmatic reasons, these topics will be discussed in different clusters. The first cluster accounts for Communist nostalgia and the other, predominantly Slovakia-specific narratives. The second cluster takes the criticism of liberalism and the West, of institutions and mainstream media. The third and last cluster will be addressing the explicit praise of Russian politics and its representatives. These posts serve as examples of how the aforementioned themes are interpreted and adapted for the Slovak audience. These study analyses will look at what terminology and notions Blaha uses, how he frames geopolitical events, and how it aligns with the themes of pro-Russian propaganda. It is important to state that many of the pro-Russian propaganda themes are expressed in clusters consisting of narratives that are more relatable and digestible to the Slovak audience. These narratives are then consequently used in order to create a "fertile soil" that facilitates pro-Russian propaganda to pursue its objectives. Ultimately, this analysis aims to distinguish which themes pursue which objectives - either deceive and create distrust, or endorse Russia and its politics by undermining the rest of the world.

The next section turns to the empirical analysis. It presents the results of a content analysis of all posts on Blaha's Facebook profile between 2019 and 2020. The posts are grouped by pro-Russian themes according to the overall message they try to convey (and objectives they try to pursue). The subsequent section then puts these empirical findings into a larger context and analyzes the significance of the themes emerging from the content analysis.

Results & Analysis

This analysis puts the empirical data into perspective with the pro-Russian narratives disseminated specifically in Slovakia, which are then also aligned with the general themes of pro-Russian propaganda. The analysis accounts for all the mentioned clusters, however, they are not always equally accounted for. The extent to which various clusters were involved and elaborated on within the analysis depends on the amount of empirical data present in each individual cluster and on the extent of their relevance to the overall argument. All the empirical data presented below are quotes that refer to the Facebook profile of Ľuboš Blaha. Because this data comes from a single source, the references will indicate the exact data that the given post was published.

Russia is a friend, Russia is our liberator, Communist nostalgia, Russophobia

The first common narrative of pro-Russian propaganda disseminated in Slovakia is the notion of Russia being “a friend” to the Slovak nation. According to Štefánčík (2020), this is an appeal to the historical “friendship” between the USSR and the Czechoslovak Socialist state prior to 1989. Ultimately, it is expressing the wish to establish the extensive cooperation between Slovakia and Russia and redirect Slovakia’s geopolitical orientation to the East rather than the West.

The mentions of Russia as a friend and liberator are one of the most common narratives that Blaha uses in his posts. Most frequently, he does so whilst refuting the criticism directed towards Russia. This can be seen in Blaha’s post after a state employee released a critical post about Russia. Blaha stressed that Russia is a “friend and an ally” to Slovakia, stating that such provocations threatened the amicable relations Slovakia had been continuously maintaining with the Russian Federation (March 6th, 2019). Similarly, when Blaha traveled to Russia to meet with numerous Russian political representatives, he stated that the Russian Federation was the “global protector of peace” and emphasized that Russia was Slovakia’s friend regardless of what the “American pugs” thought of it (July 1st, 2019). It can also be seen in Blaha’s post following the Slovak government’s decision to expel three Russian diplomats after they were accused of misusing their visas. Blaha shared a post in which he stated that the government should “not trigger conflicts with a friend state that Slovakia is so heavily dependent on” (August 13th, 2020).

Another dimension of this narrative is Russia as the liberator of Slovakia from fascism, which refers to the liberation of Slovakia by the Red Army during the Second World War. The sources of pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia consider the resurgence of fascism to be one of the greatest contemporary challenges and Russia as a role model in combating it (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016).

This can be seen in Blaha's post regarding his visit to the Red Army memorial "Slavín" in Bratislava, stating that the "decadent liberals" pay no respect to the true "Slovak liberators" from fascism and lack respect for the Soviet Union and "their immense sacrifice" (April 4th, 2019). He linked this to the rise of fascism in European countries which allegedly "celebrate fascist leaders instead of the real Soviet heroes" and concluded that Slovakia needed to join forces with Russia in the fight against fascism. On a different occasion, Blaha criticized liberals for "not showing the respect that our liberators, the Red Army, deserve" and he used the catchphrase "All for Red Army" (February 21st, 2020). Furthermore, during the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Blaha said that it is not only Slovakia but also the majority of Central Europe that should "always forever remain grateful to the Red Army and the Communists for liberating them from fascism." He also stated that there were "five times more Slavs murdered by the Nazis than Jews", but mainstream liberal media "do not regard this as relevant." He emphasized that it was important to remember "who the real liberator is," before "history is rewritten where Russians are villains and Americans are heroes" (May 6th, 2020). Moreover, Blaha shared a photo from a Soviet graveyard in Slovakia, stating that "every time I have the opportunity, I visit monuments in honor of the Red Army that passed whilst liberating Slovakia." He also added that liberals would want to destroy all the legacies with Communist symbolism as an "attempt to rewrite history" (October 18th, 2020).

Furthermore, pro-Russian sources make nostalgic remarks about the Communist times in Slovakia. They create misleading claims about the benefits of the previous political regime which are accredited to the USSR and consequentially to contemporary Russia (Štefánčík, 2020).

Before the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, Blaha posted a video in which he dissects a campaign released by the American Embassy in Slovakia. He asked "the Americans to stop brainwashing the Slovak nation," claiming that "Slovaks have not yet forgotten the prosperity, employment, accommodations, health care, and safety" that came with socialism since, according to Blaha, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic used to belong to the "strongest and most developed" states of the world (October 29th, 2019). Consequently, Blaha

stated that the “notion around murderous communists and innocent victims are liberal lies” because communists “were helping and protecting the Slovak population.” Instead, he claimed it was the United States that “organized a maidan” in 1989 and “took over Slovakia” (November 20th, 2019). Furthermore, Blaha got criticized by liberal politicians for using Communist symbols and terminology such as “Čest’ práci” (Honor work), “Súdruhovia” (Comrades), and the symbols of communism, the scythe and hammer. He reacted by accusing “the hamburger children” and “stupid kids of America” of being Russophobic (September 28th, 2019). On August 21st, 2020, the day on which Slovakia remembers the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968, Blaha criticized “mainstream rightists” for blaming contemporary Russia for the invasion, stating that since the USSR no longer exists, Russia cannot be held accountable for its past actions. Although he admitted that not everything within the past regime was flawless, he stated that the “real invasion of the Slovak nation came with the presence of American soldiers on Slovak territory” (August 21st, 2020). On a different occasion, Blaha posted a picture of himself holding a framed photo of Gustáv Husák, a former president of Communist Czechoslovakia. He said that he deeply admired Husák, for it was during his rule that there was “order, apartments were being built, the living standard grew, and people had social benefits.” After Husák, the president was replaced with an “American clown (Václav Havel)” who “handed the nation into Western hands” (February 10th, 2020).

This leads to the last dimension of this narrative, Russophobia, a notion that sources of pro-Russian propaganda use to “discredit liberal democracy and Slovakia’s pro-Western agenda” (Mesežnikov & Pleschová, 2017). It refers to the opposition of liberals towards Russia based on the grounds of a supposed ethnic prejudice rather than Russia's political ideology.

Blaha uses this term frequently, labeling individuals and organizations as Russophobic for their cautious or critical approach towards Russia. It can be seen in the post regarding the “Teachers against disinformation” initiative created by the Slovak Progressive political party in cooperation with the GLOBSEC Institute. The initiative discusses early warning signs of young extremists, such as holding an anti-immigration stance, having a receptive view of Russian politics, or reading alternative media. Blaha calls this brainwashing, a return to a “one truth era” which suppresses critical thinking and enhances Russophobia (January 12th, 2019). In another post, Blaha discussed the criticism he received from the “liberal coffeeplace” after visiting Russia. He stated that “everyone is attacking me because I am not a Russophobe” and because he is not afraid to say the truth about “the Slovak liberators from fascism” (July 9th, 2019). It can also be seen in Blaha’s post in which he claimed that Western nations “are terrified of the strength and power” of the contemporary Russian Federation and that is ultimately the

reason why they spread “naive Russophobia - they fear competition” (October 7th, 2020). In a different post, Blaha addressed his “Russophobic friends” and said that “it made no sense to still feel resentment and blame Russia for the occupation in 1968” because the Russian Federation has since “undergone a significant transformation and should thus not be held accountable.” Instead, the Russian nation should “be remembered as its liberator, not its enemy” (August 22nd, 2020).

Analysis

All of the abovementioned narratives aim to enhance the image of the Russian Federation and restore its past reputation. For instance, Blaha’s frequent reference to Russia as “a liberator” suggests that Slovaks should not only remain eternally grateful to Russia and the Red Army for intervening during the Second World War but more so for their “continuous fight against fascism.” Pro-Russian propaganda, as it can also be seen in the above presented empirical data, often presents the narrative of fascism as one of the greatest contemporary global threats and Russia is the only nation that has bravely fought against it. Instead, according to Blaha, Russia is villainized by the liberal Western world. This narrative, therefore, puts Russia not only in a position of Slovakia’s underappreciated defender but a nation Slovakia should admire and look up to. The notion of Russia as “a friend” builds on this, as Blaha emphasizes the importance of maintaining good relations with such a formidable superpower. It also implies that for as long as Slovakia maintains its amicable relations with Russia, Russia does not present a threat.

Furthermore, the use of Communist nostalgia aims to reinforce a deceptive perception of the supposed prosperity and well-being of Slovakia as a former USSR satellite state had under the Communist regime. This line of thought aims to convince people that although the past regime was not flawless, the living standard, as well as the values Communism presented were superior to those of the contemporary, “decadent” democratic regime. This is not only targeted at those who lived through Communism and either forgot the oppressive nature of that regime, or those who are disillusioned by the current democratic system. It is also aimed at manipulating the generation that only lived through democracy and thus cannot objectively compare the two regimes.

Ultimately, the notion of Russophobia seems to be used arbitrarily towards any criticism directed toward Russia. It makes this criticism seem proofless and strictly based on

the villainized, unfair image and prejudice that the West holds against Russia. This practically makes it impossible to express doubts or concerns about the activities of the Russian political leadership, as it is instantly interpreted as an attack, an act of aggression, or even an act of racism.

This cluster of narratives promotes the Russian political ideology to some extent, but it rather aims to create a notion that although Russia's political past and present actions are not perfect, at least they do not deceive and manipulate as much as the Western powers.

Attacks on liberal democracy, the West, the United States, Western alliances and institutions, mainstream media

The second common cluster of narratives of the pro-Russian propaganda present in Slovakia has to do with attacks on liberal democracy and its various attributes. This notion is based on the “decadence” of the liberal political regime and its values that are not in line with “the traditional, conservative values of Slavic nations” (Mesežnikov & Pleschová, 2017).

Blaha expressed these views when he defended Vladimir Putin who claimed that “liberalism is dead and a relic.” He explained that liberalism was the ideology of the upper, wealthy social class and leads to inequality and unfreedom and that Putin is correct (June 24th, 2019). On a different occasion, Blaha deliberated on the disrespect of liberals towards the “exceptionally wise, deep and confident Russian nation” in comparison to the “decadent West”. He described Putin's criticism of liberalism and globalization as “incredibly insightful” and Putin as a real leader in comparison to Western representatives. He stated that “poodles will remain poodles and bears will remain bears” about Western leaders “daring to criticize” Russian politics (June 9th, 2019). This narrative can also be seen in the context of the international governance of the pandemic. Blaha stated that the EU practically ceased to exist and failed its members since there was “no aid nor solidarity coming from the West amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.” He marked this as the definitive failure of liberalism and emphasized the importance of cooperating with the East since they had “shown more interest in the global wellbeing than the West ever has” (March 16, 2020).

The next narrative within this cluster is the attacks on the West and the United States. This narrative suggests that the United States is a collapsing superpower that wants to dominate the world through its expansive, aggressive politics (Smoleňová, 2015). The West, its

institutions, and alliances such as the EU and NATO, are perceived as American puppets, corrupt, and morally inferior to Russia.

Blaha addressed this in his post, where he shared a picture of a Soviet memorial whilst praising the new Russian hypersonic glide vehicle *Avantgard* which “the Americans could never match, let alone defeat” (December 28th, 2019). He also stated that Slovakia is not a “Western colony,” but a proud and sovereign state that wants to have amicable relations with its “brothers in the East” (June 5th, 2019). Similarly, he sarcastically stated his regret about not being able to join the NATO parliamentary assembly that took place in Bratislava. Besides criticizing NATO’s involvement in international conflicts, he called NATO Russophobic, a provocateur of Russia’s sovereignty, and a “slave to American interests” (June 4th, 2019). Blaha claimed that it is not Russia, but the United States and NATO that have an aggressive and expansive foreign policy. Lastly, he praised the Slovaks for finally “opening its eyes” and seeing “the rise of Russia and the fall of the West” (July 3rd, 2019). Moreover, he accused the French president Emmanuel Macron of being Slavophobic and stated that various Western leaders are continuously racist towards all Slavic nations. He compared it to the racism perpetrated against “Africans, Muslims, and Jews,” but according to Blaha, racism against Slavs is ignored and tolerated (November 2nd). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Blaha blamed the US for spreading fake news about its aid and the aid from NATO to European countries. He repeatedly stated that liberalism is failing, since the only real aid Europe received came from the East (March 30th, 2020). At one point, Blaha deliberated on whether the COVID-19 pandemic is an “American biological weapon,” arguing that it is a “legitimate hypothesis” that many leaders in “the East” consider to be credible (March 17th, 2020). In the context of the poisoning of the Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny, Blaha criticized the EU for imposing sanctions on Russia after “Navalny’s tonsillitis,” calling it a fatal mistake given the fact that the Central Eastern European region is dependent on Russian gas. Furthermore, he called Navalny a “ruthless thief and liar” who is in reality “paid by American intelligence services.” He eventually deliberated that this is a result of “sheer Russophobia” and a Western attempt to “destroy and take over the Russian Federation just like in the 90s” (October 15th, 2020).

The last theme in this cluster is criticism of the mainstream media. The pro-Russian sources aim to discredit mainstream media, claiming that they are manipulative, biased, and spread the American agenda with no space for an alternative narrative (Julukhidze, 2018).

This can be seen in one of Blaha’s posts, where he shared that he gave an interview to the “Channel One Russia” television channel, talking about how “various Slovak mainstream

media and NGOs are financed by Western powers to discredit Russia” (October 25th, 2019). Ultimately, the use of derogatory terms mentioned above, such as the “liberal coffee-place” and “American poodles,” also refers to the notion that mainstream media are only serving American interests and are thus not to be trusted. Similarly, he addressed the mainstream, liberal media which wrote about the American involvement in pandemic aid and stated: “Do not read corporate media outlets. Throw away SME and Dennik N and use your brain” (March 30th, 2020). Following Navalny’s poisoning, Blaha claimed that Slovak media “blindly followed the West” in accusing Putin’s involvement without any evidence. He stated that this whole incident is an “intelligence game” and doubted that Navalny was poisoned by novichok, let alone by anyone connected to Putin or the Kremlin (September 5th, 2020).

Analysis

This cluster of narratives is a prime example of pro-Russian propaganda’s attempt to undermine the credibility of Western countries. Blaha repeatedly made statements about the “decadent liberalism,” “liberalism as a relic” or the “liberalism in decline,” aiming to discredit not only the ideology itself but also all the countries that promote liberal values, namely great Western powers. Anything connected to liberalism is corrupt, liberals are naive and their values are morally inferior. The aim is to convince the audience that liberalism is inconsistent, unstable, deceptive, and disregards the needs and interests of nations outside of the West. Consequently, as Blaha repeatedly claimed, any country or leader who promotes the Western agenda and liberalism automatically promotes “Western propaganda” and becomes an “agent to the American interests.” Similarly, all actors who actively oppose the Russian political system, such as Navalny, are also accused of being financed and directed by the United States, as Blaha claimed in one of his posts. Whatever the real intentions of these political actors may be, they are automatically dismissed as a provocateur or a puppet of the West.

Western countries, namely the United States, and its allies and institutions such as the EU and NATO are portrayed as aggressive, selfish, and expansive towards both its member states as well as towards other superpowers such as Russia. Russia is, on the other hand, depicted as a victim of the aggressive, expansive politics of the West and its apparatuses. This line of thought can frequently be seen in Blaha’s posts. All Russian political actions are justified under the premise of their defense and the defense of smaller and weaker surrounding countries. Western institutions are portrayed as incapable and unwilling to provide for them or

protect them, on the contrary, they cause even more harm. This was especially the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, where Blaha accused both the EU and NATO of the negligence of its smaller, “less significant” member states, undermining their competence and doubting their intentions. In other words, these narrative claims that smaller countries such as Slovakia must suffer the consequences of the West’s neglect and reckless actions. This narrative thus creates a major contrast between the self-indulged, incompetent West and the self-less, well-organized Russia devoted to maintaining global order and peace.

Lastly, Blaha sheds a lot of criticism on mainstream media that criticize Russia, aiming to undermine the media’s credibility. Mainstream media outlets are also accused of presenting American interests and promoting American or Western liberal propaganda. Anything mainstream is, through the lens of pro-Russian propaganda, connected to the West and is to be considered “brainwashing.” The narrative presented by Blaha and in pro-Russian propaganda more generally, is that the mainstream needs to be challenged and people should turn to alternative narratives and explanations. Blaha essentially states that turning to alternative media is connected to critical thinking, whereas following mainstream media is naive. This is even though these alternative media outlets are often directly financed by the Kremlin and their content is based on conspiracy theories or half-truths.

Emphasizing the fall of the West strengthens the impression that the normative political ally is no longer reliable and countries such as Slovakia need an alternative, which can be found in Russia. This narrative also aims to persuade the audience that the “Western liberal progressiveness” is not progressive but decadent, whereas real progress takes place in Russia. The combination of conspiracies, such as the United States developing the COVID-19 virus, with assumptions about the instability of the liberal political order or the real intentions of Western actors creates an atmosphere in which no one knows who to believe. The general impression that these narratives create is that everyone is lying, and no one knows the truth, but since Russia “is brave enough to challenge the mainstream and the prevalent political system,” they appear to be more reliable and capable than anyone else.

Praise of the Russian political system and Vladimir Putin

The last cluster of predominant narratives used in pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia is the explicit praise of Russian politics, the Kremlin, its allies, and its leader Vladimir Putin. This is done not only to show the political and moral superiority of Russia over other world

superpowers but also to portray Russia and its leadership as a rational actor that only responds to Western aggression (Smoleňová, 2015).

This is best shown in Blaha's video from the Red Square in Moscow. In the video, he stated that Slovaks had been fed lies about Russia being "weak and backward," whereas it is "beautiful, wise and powerful." He said that although his generation was told to learn about the Western culture, he instead "fell in love with the divine Russian culture" by rebelling against the authorities. He also stated that the West claims that "communists destroyed Russia," but he refuted this by saying that it was only after the communists came to power that Russia became a world superpower (July 3rd, 2019). Moreover, Blaha wished Vladimir Putin a happy birthday, calling him the "greatest and most experienced world leader" who was a "hero to Russians and an inspiration to Slovaks" for "revitalizing the Russian Federation." He also stated that under Putin's rule, Russia represented the "opposite to the decadent West" and that the "West attacks him because they fear him, as they should" (October 7th, 2019). Blaha once again congratulated Putin the following year, stating that before Putin came to power, Russia was "depleted by Yeltsin's reckless capitalism" and that it was "in the hands of oligarchs and American NGOs." According to Blaha, Putin "got rid of all American influences," and restored "the prosperity and authority" of the Russian nation (October 7th, 2019). In the context of COVID-19, Blaha condemned the government's criticism of Russia and their containment of the pandemic, saying that this was a "security hazard to set against a nuclear superpower and a nation Slovaks should be looking up to." He continued by stating that the Slovaks "have always felt closer to the Russian Federation than to the US and do not consider Russia to be a threat" not because "they believe in propaganda, but because they have critical thinking" (April 19th, 2020). After the expulsion of the three Russian diplomats in 2020, Blaha called this event a "Russophobic arbitrary act of aggression," that would "most likely be followed by a punishment from their side." He said that the Slovak government should "treat Russia as the great power that they are, politely, with respect and dignity" (August 13th, 2020).

As mentioned above, this praise also applies to allies of the Russian political regime, who are directly connected to the Kremlin.

For instance, Blaha posted about his visit to the Russian embassy in Slovakia, expressing strong sympathies toward the Russian ambassador at the time. His conversation with the ambassador allegedly addressed the "largest contemporary threat in the region - fascism and Russophobia" (January 15th, 2019). Later in 2019, he posted pictures from the headquarters of the Russian motorcycle club "Night Wolves" that "serves as a paramilitary and propaganda arm of the Putin regime" (Snyder, 2018). Blaha yet again mocked the criticism of

the “American pugs” regarding the meeting and joked that the “great Russian bear” must indeed be contemplating how to deal with the Slovak “liberal morons” (July 2nd, 2019). After the protests following the fraudulent Belarusian presidential elections in 2020 were met with violence and police brutality, many pro-Russian propaganda sources started accusing the West of organizing a new color revolution, through the opposition and the protesters (Fedor, 2020). This narrative can be seen in one of Blaha’s posts, where he stated that “liberal media made the country’s regime sound like a big gulag and demonized Lukashenko.” He claimed that the reports from the revolts were propaganda pieces that were meant to manipulate public views and overthrow the Belarusian regime. He concluded by saying that the West should respect the Belarusian sovereignty so that its nation “does not have to experience the disillusionment of liberalism” (August 13th, 2020).

Analysis

This cluster of narratives is used for the extensive praise of the Kremlin, its leader Vladimir Putin, and Russia as a nation via subjective, uncritical perspectives. In contrast with the first cluster of narratives, these narratives are strongly emotionally charged, and the praise of the regime is not necessarily based on facts or any proof. Once again, Russia is put into contrast with the “decadent West,” where sources such as Blaha criticize the prevalent Western culture that the “Slovaks are forced to adapt to” and stress how underappreciated the “beautiful, wise and powerful” Russian nation is. Sympathies towards the East, more specifically Russia, are presented as a sign of rebellion against the “constraints” of the prevalent Western system.

Another aim of these narratives is to enhance societal support and admiration towards Russia and its leadership, which is on the verge of fear. For instance, Blaha stated that Slovak political actions that contradict the amicable relations with Russia “would be likely followed by a punishment from their side” in the context of Slovakia’s expulsion of Russian diplomats. This narrative almost suggests that Russia should be uncritically worshiped as this unpredictable, formidable superpower, but also precariously feared, otherwise it might lead to negative repercussions. This can also be linked to the praise towards the Russian political leader, Vladimir Putin. The extensive praise for the “revitalization of the Russian Federation” and “getting rid of American influences” and the use of superlatives such as “the greatest leader in the world and a hero,” contribute to the creation of a certain cult of personality. Putin should, according to this perspective, be unchallenged and feared, but simultaneously also perceived

as an extremely skilled, experienced, and rational leader who acts in the best interest of his nation.

Similarly, it is logical that pro-Russian propaganda sources support Russian allies. Especially if these allies are prominent political actors, such as the Russian ambassador or even the Belarusian president Lukashenko, with a direct link to the Kremlin or Putin, such as the Night Wolves, praising them and defending their credibility also increases the credibility of pro-Russian propaganda sources. If the actions and narratives presented by figures of authority can be justified, it is easier to justify the actions and narratives disseminated by other, lower-ranking pro-Russian sources. These sources do not have to strictly stand behind everything these Russian allies do; it suffices to say that their actions are still more justifiable than those of the West.

These narratives aim to distract the audience from unpopular or controversial political actions by excessively celebrating the glory of the nation, creating a deceiving perspective on the contemporary political situation in Russia. As stated above, these narratives are built on emotions instead of facts. This branch of pro-Russian propaganda is, besides sheer deceiving and distracting, meant to “win over the hearts of people,” rather than just winning the minds.

Conclusion

Ultimately, after the thorough analysis of the empirical data presented above, it is plausible to create a link between the themes of pro-Russian propaganda disseminated in Slovakia and the objectives of Russian propaganda. The empirical data shows that the pro-Russian source used in this thesis, Blaha’s Facebook profile, actively uses some of the predominant themes of pro-Russian propaganda, such as the discreditation of the liberal political order and the Western world, or the endorsement of the Russian political regime. On different occasions, Blaha utilizes pro-Russian narratives that are specific for the cultural and historical context of Slovakia, which makes the content resonate more amongst his audience. The themes within Blaha’s content can be directly connected to the objectives of Russian propaganda. Attacking the Western world and its political ideology can be perceived as an attack of the Western political stability fuels societal uncertainty and chaos, which is a crucial objective of Russian propaganda. The attacks on anything connected to the normative Western narrative, such as mainstream media, encourage people to hold contrarian views against

anything conventional and look for alternative sources of information and authority. Finally, the endorsement and praise towards the Russian political regime aims to restore Russia's image and reputation, both in the present and past. It does not necessarily justify the Russian political controversies, but rather it distracts the audience from the negative aspects and creates a deceiving narrative of Russia representing the alternative to the "decadent West." In the bigger picture, the immense number of attacks and spread of information, albeit based on half-truths or conspiracies, deceives people into distrusting their governments, institutions, or anything else that is connected to the democratic political system. The significance of this finding lies with the fact that he is the most influential online pro-Russian source in Slovakia and thus can potentially have a significant influence on the pro-Russian discourse within the country, which seriously threatens the security and stability of Europe.

This research has its obvious limitations. The results of this research are based on a single case study and the empirical data are also retrieved from a single source. Despite justifying the selection of both, the findings cannot be generalized on a wider scale, neither for different countries nor for different pro-Russian sources in Slovakia. Additionally, the empirical data has also been retrieved from two specific years, making the results inapplicable to any different time frame. For further research on the topic of pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia and its themes used towards the audience, it would be insightful to consider a variety of different sources with different narratives used in their discourse. It would also be insightful to measure the actual influence of these sources on the audience and their attitudes towards the Russian political system. Given the significance of this topic in the contemporary world, this thesis could serve as a starting point for scholars and political scientists to acknowledge the presence of pro-Russian propaganda in foreign countries and research its implications.

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