

Kremlin's Wars in the Gray Zone and Beyond

Conversation with Dr. Anton Shekhovtsov, Ukrainian disinformation expert



Dr. Anton Shekhovtsov, picture of EFOR

Full transcript of live event held at Romanian Diplomatic Institute on 15th of March 2024.

Liliana Popescu, IDR director

I would like to wish everybody a warm welcome to this event, which was organized in a rather short time, but old friendships and connections matter in such moments. My friend, Sorin Ioniță, thought that the Romanian Diplomatic Institute would be a good place venue for this event and he was right. So, I'm very pleased to have as guest, Dr. Anton Shekhovtsov, who is a Ukrainian political scientist and he is specialized in the European radical right and its connection to the Kremlin, a subject that concerns some of us, or maybe all, and maybe that's why we are here. His latest book, which he brought with him, [*Russian Political Warfare*](#), is on sale here but you can order it online too: Essays on Kremlin propaganda in Europe and the neighborhood, 2020-2023. We are now in 2024 and I'm sure that there have been new developments.

I think that one of the very beneficial developments would be for us to realize that we are at war or at least warfare. I'm very pleased that I have two students of mine here and I had a course today, Foreign Policy and Diplomacy, and this is how I started the course. Do you think that Romania is at war? And there were one or two hands up and in the end I think I brought enough arguments to make them understand that at least we are in a gray war to quote former MI6 director. But anyway, I don't want to monopolize. Let me invite Dr. Shekhovtsov to present, to make his presentation. Thank you.



Liliana Popescu (left) and Dr. Anton Shekhovtsov (right), picture of EFOR

Anton Shekhovtsov

Thank you very much for hosting me for the institute and thank you for the audience for this interest. I hope that we will also have a time in the second half of this event for the discussion. I must straight away just to congratulate the perfect gender balance of the panel. This is something that needs to be recreated at many West European institutions where I sometimes talk as well. I was advised that the audience will be quite mixed in the sense that some of you are students, some of you are experts, some of you are diplomats and ambassadors. So, I try to structure the discussion that I will have with you in a way that probably would have interest to all elements of the audience. And I want to start with some theoretical considerations then moving slowly or sort of zooming in particular developments that are happening today. But before I do that, let me just explain to you what I do.

I'm originally from Ukraine, from Sevastopol, where I haven't been for now more than 10 years already because of the annexation, because of the occupation. But at the same time, my main sort of education came from the UK where I did my PhD. And now I live in Austria where I on the one hand lead a very small NGO [Center for Democratic Integrity](#) that looks in particular at attempts of authoritarian regimes to influence politics and societies in Europe, mostly it's China, Russia. And at the same time, I do academic work. I'm affiliated with the Center of European University and also University of Vienna. My research background is the far right this is where I come academically come from. But in recent years, I also developed an interest in Russian politics and as a crossover between these two fields, the relations between Russia and the far right in the West.

Connections and relations which are quite dynamic. They're not frozen. There are interesting developments. There are negative developments, but also positive developments in a way in this field. But I'm sure we will have an opportunity to talk about this. So, some of the terms that I will operate and some of the terms that I use in my studies is political warfare, but also malign influence. Talking about the Kremlin's malign influence in Europe or in the West in general and

the global South. So, I'd like to present to you some of the theoretical discussions, theoretical considerations. And I will start by saying that talking about malign influence, we should not forget there is also a concept of influence. What is influence? It is the power to have an effect on people and if we're talking about international relations, everybody or every country which feels that they have something to say, that they are competing in a particular area, every country, every nation tries to exert influence on another nation and this a normal process. There is nothing malign in this just idea of influence, of trying to convince others to accept our ideas, to accept our concepts, to accept our ways of life, or dealing with very small things, with small developments, even maybe economic developments. So, we're trying to influence other people. In particular, during peacetime, during a normal situation, how we can influence the relations between countries?

Usually, there are many ways, obviously, but I would in particular talk about soft power. The soft power concept was first introduced by Joseph Nye back in the 90s, maybe even the end of the 1980s, and it's about influencing other nation through affinity or attraction using resources such as a nation, political values, culture and foreign policy. Actually using soft power in order to influence other nations has a very normative effect because influencing others through soft power means that it is to show that we share the same values, we have the same values, we have this cultural background that we can share with you, and this also strengthens cooperation and the values to which we refer. We have the same values and these values are good. So, we should be together, we should cooperate and this is how we try to influence people. Another way, influence in peacetime it is obviously through diplomacy. Diplomacy is a practice of conducting negotiations and dialogue between individuals and nations to achieve specific goals while maintaining peaceful relations. So, of course, diplomacy, traditional diplomacy, but also public diplomacy, contribute to the dialogue between nations and this is also one of the ways to influence. So, this peacetime and this influence, traditional influence, soft power, public diplomacy, it's on the one side of the developments, on the other side, you have a conventional war or kinetic war. This is when soft power does not work anymore, there are no shared values, we are at war with another nation, diplomatic relations are usually ruined, we cannot really talk to each other the way that we talked. So, a conventional war in which direct physical force is actively used to engage an adversary and compel them to fulfill our will.

If during peacetime, we also want other nations to somehow follow us and fulfill our will, but we do it in a good way: shared values, diplomacy, dialogue, et cetera. With kinetic war, obviously, it is through violence, it is through war. But, this is one of the main points, between these two states, between peacetime and the conventional war, there is a huge gray area, which some would refer to as political warfare. It's a concept that was introduced first by the Brits during the Second World War. There was an institution closely linked to the British anti-German, well, anti-Nazi propaganda apparatus. It was the political warfare executive that first introduced this terminology of political warfare and tried quite actively to influence the politics of the Third Reich, of Nazi Germany, to undermine the will of Germans to conduct the war.

It was not the first use of political warfare, obviously, but it was the first time when this term was introduced. Political war, as we can define it today, is about influencing the behavior, thinking of other nations using instruments and methods, which go beyond traditional diplomacy, which go beyond soft power, but stop short of instruments and methods of a conventional war. So, it is a place, it's a huge gray area in between these types of influence. And for this political warfare, if we are talking about influence, it is rather what I would define as malign influence. Some of the concepts, because the idea of political warfare was reintroduced after the Second World War, and this is related mostly to American officials who decided that during the Cold War, we would not like to have a high-order war with the Soviet Union, with our main adversary, but we would rather engage in political war.

George Kennan defined the political war as employment of all means at a nation's command, short of war to achieve its national objectives and then he listed some of the methods of political warfare. This is no longer diplomacy, this is not soft power, and yet this is not a conventional war. Probably the closest instrument that still part of political warfare, but not yet conventional

war, is the support for paramilitary groups, for the various separatist movements inside the country that we consider to be our adversary, but it still falls into the category of political war, rather than being a typical conventional war. Probably I will just very briefly mention one of the key differences between the understanding of political war in the West, and specifically in the U.S., compared to the political warfare of the Soviet Union, and that during the Cold War period.

For the U.S., political warfare would not really translate into a conventional war. They were separate and they were considered to be separate, while for the Soviet Union, political warfare did not have this limitation and it could develop into a conventional war from the failures of political warfare (14:08-14:40). Soviet Union with their "active measures" (активные мероприятия), which was the term for political warfare during the Soviet times, would easily go from political war to a conventional war, while Americans and the West in general would often stop. So if political warfare did not work, they would not go further. So political warfare has its own advantages and one advantage is that being engaged in political war helps avoid mass casualties. And it is also cheaper to execute.

A very obvious example, if we take the realities of today: the entire annual budget probably for RT, or for any other Russian disinformation channels, could be the cost of maybe two, three tanks. So, it's much cheaper to employ the propaganda machine and probably achieve the same results that a war could bring, but it would be cheaper than to have tanks operating and it also allows for maximum plausible deniability (15:32-16:07). It's very difficult in many cases to establish the origins of disinformation and propaganda, while it's much easier when we have physical presence of the troops. It also has its own disadvantages, its effects take longer to develop. People who are engaged in political warfare never know when exactly it will have effect. Also, its intended impact is difficult to measure. Sometimes, in the attempt to understand how effective or how efficient the propaganda machine or disinformation machine, people just start counting how many times a particular post on Facebook was shared. We cannot say that it's about efficiency, but this is how desperate people are when they try to measure the actual success, the actual impact. And of course, political warfare often produces undesirable consequences. A couple of examples. In 2015, the Russian disinformation machine produced this idea in Germany that there was a girl named Lisa that was raped by some migrants from the Middle East or some other countries and there was a huge scandal. There were protests organized around this bit of disinformation coming from the Russian side, but at the same, even Sergei Lavrov, foreign minister of the Russian Federation, supported that narrative and helped spread it. When the Germans realized that was a bit of a disinformation, their eyes were opened to the workings of the Russian propaganda machine because before that case, so-called Lisa case, many were not sure if the Russians were actually involved in propaganda against Germany. And that is exactly the example of how political warfare may produce undesirable consequences.

Another example is most likely from the Cold War, when the Americans would support some of the paramilitary groups in Latin America. Those paramilitary groups would get support from the US, especially financial support, material support, and then, they would just cut any ties with Americans and pursue their own independent agenda that would sometimes be even to be in the opposition to the interest of the US. So again, political warfare may produce these undesirable consequences.

Going back to the Russian political warfare, **like what and why Russia is doing now or in the last 10-15 years, maybe even more, 20 years, I would distinguish two strategic objectives. One is to protect Russian society from Western ideological, political, cultural and other influences believed to undermine the grip on power held by the Putin regime.**(19:15-19:50) There is this very pragmatic approach, so we are in power and we want to protect our power, we want to protect our regime, and we presume that the West is trying to undermine our regime through various means, through various instruments. There's also an ideological explanation to this, why exactly, so what is the strategic objective ideologically? Well, this is we

have our Russian civilization, which is a separate civilization from the West, and the West has always been trying to undermine us.

There is this eternal war between the West and the East. Currently, the West is represented by the US and by the American allies in Europe, and the East is now represented by us, by Russia, by the Russian civilization. So, in order to protect this Russian civilization, we need to protect the Russian society, the Russian population from those Western influences, because these are enemy influences. And as many of you may know, especially after the Second World War, countries very rarely declare wars in each other. Actually, since the end of the Second World War, there was around 12 declarations of war. All the other military conflicts they are driven by the desire to defend themselves. To protect them, this is why they attack other people or other nations.



Dr. Anton Shekhovtsov, screen capture of Euronews live transmission

So this is not a war, we just are engaged in in the defense, active defense. So what is Russia now doing? It can be also explained by the strategic objective to protect the Russian civilization from what they believe to be a malign influence from the West. And of course, another strategic objective is to advance political, economic, and security interests of Putin and Russia on the international stage.(21:43-22:05) This is about shaping the environment in which Russia is situated, by changing that environment, making it more conducive to the Russian interests. However, they are defined by the Kremlin So we protect ourselves, but also we want to change their environment. So there is the ecology of being protected, the environment that should be conducive to our interests. And obviously, political warfare is also about instruments, it's about tools of political warfare. And this is not an exhaustive list, but I just wanted for you to see that almost everything can be used for political warfare. Actors may build political alliances with the opposition forces in the nations that are considered adversary. For example, the research that I mentioned to you in the very beginning on the relations between Russia and the far right. When Russia *is sort of* supporting in one way or another, far-right political forces that are most likely in the opposition to sort of centrist governments, center right or center left governments in Europe. So, this is about building political alliances and trying to exert influence to advance your own foreign policy agenda through political alliances. Then in this era in elections, trying to sway the elections using agents of influence and front

organizations and fake NGOs and think tanks, using law for corrupt purposes, sometimes even the pandemics. During the pandemic, 2020, probably you remember those stories of Russian aid to Italy and Serbia. That aid was mostly useless, but for the reputation in order to show that Russia is trying to help even European countries, even NATO countries such as Italy, they're sending help and the EU is not helping, NATO is not helping, but Russia is coming to help.

So it is used for political warfare as well and you see many other instruments. But being more specific, if we are talking about giving names to those instruments that are very often used now or were used in the past, this list or this table is about Russian actors.

So who are those coordinators? Who are the sources of political warfare in the Russian Federation? I am of an opinion which you may oppose and some colleagues would probably not agree with me, but my opinion that there is no one center in the Russian Federation that manages all political warfare. There is no one military desk from which all the decisions are coming. I'm of an opinion that there are different, sometimes even competing centers of power and centers of political warfare in the Russian Federation, that have messages from the Kremlin. They know what should be done and what is expected from them. And they try themselves to carry out orders that were never given by the Kremlin, but they believe that by implementing those orders, by implementing bits of political warfare, they can be rewarded by the Kremlin for what they're doing.

And there are many actors. Obviously, some of them are directly linked to the state. And first and foremost, those are [Siloviki](#). This is a Russian term for people who are related to power ministries, such as the defense ministry, or the main directorate of the general staff, the GRU, federal security services, and other services, basically. Siloviki are people who have access to the military power or the power of violence. Then there are official structures, presidential administration may be engaged in some of the parts of political warfare. Foreign ministry, committees of international affairs, of the [state Duma](#), for example, many of the contacts, especially for political alliances, using political alliances for political warfare, objectives around by the parliament. I don't think that Russian parliament is a real parliament, but this is how it's called. And they are also trying to build relations with representatives of European parliaments and parliaments across the world.

Then there are political forces, [United Russia](#), the liberal democratic party of Russia, communist party, business community, specifically dealing with the energy supplies, Gazprom, [Rosneft](#), but also bank structures like Raiffeisen Bank, state-sponsored media, [RT](#) and Sputnik, social media propaganda networks. Internet research agency may not be that popular anymore because of the death of their boss, [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), a death that was quite expected after his failed coup last year. And then obviously there are Russian think tanks and foundations, Rosnetrudny Chistovar, which was sanctioned by the EU right after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. And then there were traditionalist bloc, Russian Orthodox Church and anti-LGBT organizations. So, these are many sources from Russia that are engaged in this Russian political warfare. Who are those facilitators of Russian political warfare in the West, in Europe, in particular?

The Russian *siloviki* would often collaborate and collude with transnational organized crime organizations, with paramilitary groups. If you heard a recent story on the killing of a Russian helicopter pilot who stole a helicopter from Russia, brought it to Ukraine. He was given protection by Ukraine, but then he decided that he asked to be issued a fake passport and he would go to live in Spain, where he was recently killed. The perpetrators have not yet been found, but the thing is that especially in Spain, Russian organized crime and connections with the organized crime are quite strong. So most likely, that murder was coordinated by the Siloviki using all those criminal networks in Spain. Then there are Russian official structures would collaborate, in the West, with friendly academics, expert journalists and celebrities. Russian political forces would try to build relations with also political forces in Europe and or front organizations such as

business community, business partners of Russian companies. State-sponsored media would cooperate with websites, amplifying Russian program and narratives.

Here we could also mention, especially after 2022, various independent or so-called independent influences on the West, like YouTube bloggers, who would not have any direct link to the Russian state media organizations, but who would collaborate with them secretly. (31:08-31:29) Margarita Simonian, the editor-in-chief of RT, right after RT was banned by the EU in the beginning of March 2022, she said that they are going to use some sort of underground guerrilla methods of information, and what she meant in the end is that this covered collaboration between RT and allegedly independent influences in the West. RT became really toxic and Twitter had to mark RT as a Russian state-sponsored organization and people who would work for RT would also be marked as a person working for the Russian state organizations.

But if you look like an independent blogger, nobody would be able to produce this connection and you would still be regarded as an independent influencer, as an independent vlogger or blogger. So that was these underground methods of collaborating with like-minded individuals in the West. Social media propaganda networks, working with particular individuals from the anti-establishment organizations, from the far right to the far left, think tanks and foundations would again engage with friendly Western academics, experts and journalists and the traditional block, the National Orthodox Churches, anti-LGBT organizations. So these links, they are not extremely strict. There is a level of free development. Some coordinators may also work with other facilitators of Russian political warfare in the West. There may be some also overlaps, but in general, I think the picture is as it was presented here.

Now, zooming in and going closer to our period at the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian War in 2014, that started with the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine in spring 2014. So, what are main reasons as I see them? What are the strategic objectives today of the Russian Federation concerning and how this political warfare is used, and why it is used? It is to undermine Western military, economic and political support for Ukraine and to distrust towards the Ukrainian leadership, domestically and internationally. And in the end, it is to destroy the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian national identity. That's in Putin's mind or in the minds of those who are very close to Putin, the mere existence of Ukraine undermines the worldview and the idea of the Russian civilization, because they believe that Ukrainians are just confused Russians. They cannot accept the idea that Ukraine can modernize along the Western lines and join the West because the foundation of the idea of the concept of Russian civilization, is that Ukraine cannot be part of the West. But, if you have this successful example of one part of your civilization becoming part of the West, then the whole structure of your concept is ruined. This is why this Ukrainian problem needs to be solved by just the destruction of it.

I showed you that table with various tools and instruments of political warfare, now I want to zoom in more in this disinformation and propaganda issues and identify for you some of these narratives and some of the audiences, because I do believe it is very important to understand that the Russian propaganda machine is targeting not only the Western countries, but also its own domestic audience, the Ukrainian audience, and also more recently the global South. I also identify two types of narratives of the propaganda machine related to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. One type of narrative is strategic narratives, which reflect the genuine understanding or interpretation of the Russian political elites of the conflict with Ukraine and the conflict with the West. This is not simply a lie, this is what they actually believe in. This is not necessarily correct what they believe in, but they genuinely believe in this. This is their honest delusion, at least. And usually these strategic narratives, they're more or less coherent. They are quite logical. Again, not necessarily they're right, not necessarily correct, but they're coherent.

And another type of narratives which I identify as tactical narratives. They just serve as individual steps that aim to strengthen the validity of strategic narratives or more often to address emergent information threats. Unlike strategic narratives, these technical narratives are less coherent. They are usually very often they're based on emotions. They may emerge, they may die away,

and they may reemerge again. So, this is something that is not necessarily very important. There are many more tactical narratives, obviously, and then strategic narratives.



Dr. Anton Shekhovtsov, picture of EFOR

Technical narratives may oppose each other because it doesn't really matter what they are right or wrong. They may be incoherent, but their main objective is just to support these strategic narratives. I identify four main audiences of this Ukraine war-related Russian propaganda: domestic audience in Russia, Ukrainian audience, Western audience, audience of the global South. Obviously, we can make distinctions between audiences in the Baltic states, an audience in Portugal, or audience in Hungary, and audience in Sweden, they may be different, but for a more or less big picture, I guess this distinction into four audiences makes sense. So, for example, strategic narratives for Russian domestic audience, what they tell their own population, how they justify the so-called special military operation is that the Ukrainian nation does not exist.

Ukrainians are confused on manipulated Russians. It just probably, the Austrians or the Poles manipulated Russians into believing that they're somehow different from the Russians, and then you suddenly have Ukrainians out of nothing, out of manipulation. The Ukrainian state is not real and as a country, Ukraine was granted existence only by Russia. I'm sure you know this idea about Lenin being the father of the Ukrainian nation. In Ukraine, there's a project of anti-Russia, everything that is Ukrainian is anti-Russian. This actually relates the idea of denazification of Ukraine as one of the objectives of the special military operation. I'm sure many of you don't know, and this is something that I got to know also quite recently.

You know that the book, *Mein Kampf*, by Adolf Hitler, when it was translated, one of the first translations of this book into Russian for the political leaders of the Soviet Union was done in an extremely manipulative way. They manipulated the translation in order to identify the main victims or the main targets of the Nazi Germany, not the Jews, but the Slavic people. They just cut some of the original pieces of Hitler's book in order to show that the Russians were the main target of fascism and not the Jews. And from this, you have an interpretation of fascism as something deeply, first anti-Soviet, but also anti-Russian. And the idea is that if you have those people who we are not Russians, or who would criticize Russia, and especially Ukrainians who would say they are Ukrainians, they are not Russians, almost automatically you can qualify them as fascists.

So if they deny that they are Russians, if they are against Russia, then through this history of Soviet misuse of the ideology of it, or deliberate misinterpretation of it. Basically, you can define everything that is anti-Russian, or if you see anti-Russian, this is necessarily fascist. This also

explains much of this confusion when Russia would say that those European fascists are against Russia, there is a revival of Nazis. And at the same time, they would invite people coming from the far-right organizations to advance Russian foreign policy interests, but if they are pro-Kremlin, if they are pro-Russian, they can't be fascists. Because fascism is deeply anti-Russian, this is the interpretation, and this is how it is, this problem is solved in the minds of the Russian political elites. So anti-Russia is a sovereign Ukraine as a project of anti-Russia, but necessarily Ukraine is a fascist regime which needs to be denazified, which means Ukraine needs to be de-Ukrainized. It needs to stop being Ukrainian and start being Russian.

These are strategic narratives for the Russian audience. Then they have many tactical narratives that are short-lived. The war is not a war, it's a special military operation. This is actually understandable, very rarely nations declare wars after the Second World War. And especially in criminal code of the Russian Federation, it is a criminal offense to start a war. So, Putin obviously could not go strictly against the criminal code, and he could not start with the aggression.

It was a special military operation. And also, many people actually laugh at this, ridicule the idea, it's a special military operation for three days. Actually, it was meant to be three days. And they were quite close to finish everything in three days if they were able to take out the Ukrainian leadership. Ukraine, obviously, I'm sure would not have the same military support from Western allies in the same degree. Ukrainians who oppose Russian rule are Nazis. NATO uses Ukraine to attack Russia, no, and especially after the first victories of the Ukrainian military on the battlefield, they could no longer say, "ah, those Ukrainians". We were defeated somehow, but not by Ukrainians, because Ukrainians, you know, it's not a real nation, they cannot fight. No, it was NATO who defeated us.

Russia is fighting against NATO. It's a way to sort of psychologically explain why Russia had to withdraw from some of the territories that it managed to occupy in the first weeks of the invasion. Russia never lost to wars, which is obviously untrue. The tactical narrative of Russians is that they will necessarily win and there is no other chance. I want to focus again very briefly this Ukraine's lead as a Satanist. It was a very peculiar narrative that emerged right after the Russia declared this partial mobilization in autumn 2022.

They declared partial mobilization and there was an incident in one of the military camps in the Russian Federation when two recruits from Muslim background, they shot around 10 other Russian officers and soldiers. And the reason why they would do this is that the commander of that unit insulted Islam and Muslim faith. So those soldiers were quite angry and they just shot the people from their own unit. And at that time also there was a fear on the part of some Russian commanders and military personnel that there could be this inter-religious conflict in inside the Russian troops, inside the Russian military machine in order to interfaith conflict and to explain to them that it doesn't really matter what your faith is, you are anyway fighting against Satan or Sheitan or any other diabolical figure that is the leadership of Ukraine.

The Christians, Orthodox Christians and Muslims and probably Buddhists, they all find unity in this fight against Ukraine, which is Satanic. That is the narrative. Sometimes it actually goes away and then the [Ramzan Kadyrov](#) will again somehow use this narrative or [Dmitry Medvedev](#), the former president of the Russian Federation. But usually this is a narrative that emerges then days out, then re-emerges again. I want just to show you another technical narrative in order to prove you that they may not be coherent. In Putin's words, Ukraine is a fascist country, it's a fascist regime. But at the same time at the end of the last year, he would say that Ukraine is not a country, it's not a real state, it doesn't have an ideology.

If Ukraine has no ideology, how can you say it's fascist? Because fascist is an ideology. On the one hand, you say that Ukraine is a fascist country because you want to undermine Western or liberal countries support for Ukraine. But then you say Ukraine is not even a country because it serves the interest of undermining support for Ukraine. Why do you support something that is not even a country? It doesn't really matter if those tactical narratives are coherent as long as they serve the strategic narratives. Ukraine audience, of course, they cannot straightforwardly

say that Ukraine does not exist. Now they would say Russians and Ukrainians are brother of the nations. They would say Ukraine is part of the Russian civilization. Ukraine can only be successful together with Russia.

There is also a difference what Ukrainian audience either they are in occupied territories and on the territories still in the sovereign Ukraine. There is this difference as well. The tactical narrative is that Ukrainian leadership betrays the interest of the ordinary Ukrainian people. The West will fight Russia to the last Ukrainian. So the West is Ukrainians. They need to surrender because otherwise, no, the West is fighting against them and using them as a cannon fodder. So this is one of the narratives. Then this gay roper narrative, the West is degenerate and Ukraine should not join it because of the LGBT. Narrative for the Western audiences, strategic Russia is a global power that has a right to have its own sphere of influence in Ukraine belongs there. Ukraine, as part of the West poses as an existential threat to Russia. The West is encircling Russia.

And these are strategic narratives. They actually believe in what they're saying here. But then there are many more tactical narratives for the Western audience. The West is Russophobic and somehow hates Russia. This is why the West is doing what it is doing. Western sanctions are damaging for European businesses. Ukraine is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. It cannot be part of the West. Ukraine has an immense Nazi problem. Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Many more European support for Ukraine will result in the geopolitical decline of Europe. The US is playing its European allies. It's against the interest of European sovereign states that there are nuclear threats.

For the Global South, it's a little bit different because some of the narratives that are used for Western audiences, for Russian audiences, they would not work for the Global South, especially for geographically distant areas like Latin America and Africa. And specifically, because there is obviously a problem for many, not even for Russia, to understand why the Global South or Latin American countries or African countries, why they should rather support Ukraine. For them, as you may imagine, one white nation is killing other white nation. So, what's the actual difference? Is it our problem? Is it our war? They would rather use narratives that are closed, that are sensitive for the Global South such as Russia is the leader of the global anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist front. The West is using the Ukraine war to reclaim global domination, so Ukraine here is actually not in the focus.

It's not about Ukraine. It's about the West. It's about the Western imperialism. Ukraine is part of the Russian legitimate sphere of influence. The tactical narratives like Western support for Ukraine is driven by Western anti-Russian racism. Racism is a sensitive issue for the Global South but nazism, probably not, because this is something on the outskirts of the discussions in the Global South. Ukraine with Western support endangers global food security, which is a very important and insensitive issue for the Global South. Ukraine is developing biological weapons with Western support. And these biological weapons are a very sensitive issue for the Global South, especially for Africa, where there are a lot of conspiracy theories about the West inventing various biological weapons in order to control the size of populations in Africa. It is about using already existing conspiracy narratives and putting some anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian elements into that.

So, obviously, all these narratives, they may overlap. The strategic narratives for the Global South can be used by far-left activists in the West. Or some of the narratives that are tailored for the Russian domestic audience, especially, traditionalist or even Ukrainian audience, but traditionalist about this anti-LGBT rhetoric, that can be also used and can be useful for the Western right-wing forces. And even this idea about biological weapons, this idea is very popular with right-wing conspiracy theories in the US. So, there may be overlaps. Again, this is not a strict classification, but I think it gives you this picture how Russia is using particular sensitive issues, exploiting weaknesses to influence. I would say, Russia is exerting malign influence because it goes against the values of Western societies, of the European values, and how Russia, in many ways, can be successful.

I am sure that you know whether these narratives are efficient. If you heard any of this, then Russia has achieved at least one-third of its objective. It managed to deliver those narratives to you, personally, either via the media or your colleagues or maybe your friends, so that was the delivery about these narratives. It doesn't mean that they were 100% successful, but I would say 30%. If you or your colleagues or friends believe that some of these narratives are legitimate points of view, I think the efficiency is like two-thirds, 60%. And of course, if some other people believe that this is the actual truth, then it's 100% success. But again, with political warfare, it's very difficult to measure the success. With conventional war, it's easy, because you have a rocket, you hit a target, you are 100% successful. But with the disinformation narratives with propaganda, you never know. It may work today, it may work tomorrow, or maybe in one year, or it may not work at all.

I will stop here. I was also going to go through other topics, but we can do it during our discussion. Thank you very much for your interest and attention.

Liliana Popescu, IDR director

I think this was an excellent presentation and I'm sure that the students here appreciated the systematic character, not only the substance of what you said, but also the systematic matter in which you presented. Thank you very much on their behalf as well as ours as hosts.

Sorin Ioniță, EFOR president

This event is part of long-term effort to make connections with the Ukrainian thinking community, with the Ukrainian NGOs from the part of us, [Expert Forum](#). And I think we need that, particularly in Romania, because we have historically a blind spot towards the east. This is a space we don't understand very well, we don't have a tradition in speaking the languages, reading and understanding. So, we need to make these connections to understand better what is going there, to understand the perspective. This is why we have Anton here in Bucharest. And this connection between the Kremlin world and the European extreme right, which is going to influence the European elections that we are going to have in June, it's something very important we need to discuss. And I will start with two difficult questions for Anton. One is about the real life, the other is about the propaganda online. Speaking about this [Modus Operandi](#) of Kremlin and the Siloviki and the elites, : on the one hand, you can have Putin and the whole hierarchy giving orders, shoot this guy, eliminate this guy or do this and that in Europe, so there is a certain chain of command.

On the other hand, we know that there is a certain ecosystem that you described around the Kremlin of semi-independent operators, and maybe state actors, non-state actors, oligarch or marginals from society. They took part in the invasion of Crimea, bikers, [Malofeev](#), religious actors, who, in a way, as you described, anticipate the unspoken wishes of Kremlin. They move forward out of their own initiative, and probably expect a reward after that if they are successful; if not, not, and this is very advantageous for Kremlin because it's deniable. These guys move independently. My question for you is, what is the balance between these things? Because at least here in Romania or in Europe, we tend to interpret every event as a direct order from Putin. Navalny, was a direct order from Putin, or was some semi-independent actor moving, some top siloviki who was hating Navalny personally and he did it without Putin's direct knowledge. Same, [Nemtsov](#) and the other cases, or cases in Europe. What is your feeling about that?

Anton Shekhovtsov

All these cases, I think they are quite different. I will just share my own opinions about who could be behind those things. I think in Nemtsov's case, it was not the Kremlin. I think it was, most likely, the [Khadirov](#)'s guys, or Khadirov who acted independently and thinking that he was doing something great for the Kremlin, or responding to maybe the wishes, as he interpreted them, the wishes of Putin, or maybe some other. I think with Navalny, it is, for me, quite clear that it's Putin himself.

It was, I don't think that he gave a direct order to kill Navalny in that prison camp, but the order was given several years ago already when he was still in force. And sending Navalny to that prison camp, to that colony, that was just a very slow execution. Those are conditions of life where you cannot really live, especially after the poisoning, and Novichok poisoning obviously had a very damaging impact on Navalny's health. It was very clear, right after he was arrested, after his return to Russia, that they will do something with him. The only chance for him was to be exchanged. But anyway, the idea is that it all depends on individual cases. And indeed, of course, there are many, even freelancers, maybe not that important, but who want to enter that political warfare, and maybe offer some of the instruments, some of the successes, if they are successful.

And in this connection, I want to tell you that I myself saw, while researching, while doing this research on Russian political warfare, I saw a lot of failed campaigns. I saw a lot of failed projects of the Russian political warfare that simply did not work for one reason or another. And one other thing is that we are actually quite lucky that Russia is such a corrupt society, because you can have money from one oligarch and businessman, obviously he or she will not do it directly, but that would be a chain of that money, of those payments to a particular person who does actual political warfare. And this money is being stolen on all the stages because of corruption. This is good and we are really lucky. I mean, if all those resources went straight to the people who actually carry out those operations, we would have been in a worse situation.

So we are lucky in this sense. But indeed there are siloviki, there are state sponsored operations, but there are a lot of operations, especially when it comes to maybe journalists and political forces, sometimes even other experts. There is a lot of freelance.

Sorin Ioniță

Okay, and the other related is about propaganda and the influence. Okay, they do a lot and you showed the instruments and the strategic and the tactical narratives. What about us? I mean, I'll put it in the collective West. Do you think it's realistic that at some point we use more strategic than the Western resources and the deep knowledge about the Russian society of the Ukrainians, the Baltics, the Moldavians to turn the table? Why don't we do active measures towards the Russian society to undermine all these narratives? Because my feeling is we are very passive in this. Is it a realistic prospect or I'm just naive thinking this way?



(left to right) Otilia Nuțu, Liliana Popescu, Dr. Anton Shekhovtsov, Sorin Ioniță, picture of EFOR

Anton Shekhovtsov

The West does political warfare against the Russian Federation. For example, one of the instruments of political warfare used by the West is economic sanctions, economic coercion. The West is also does political alliances with the Russian democratic opposition. This is also part of political warfare. Russians are supporting the far right in Europe while the West is supporting the pro-democratic, pro-Western opposition in the Russian Federation. But the problem I think is what I mentioned with these limitations of political warfare. The West is limited in what it can do because of the democratic procedures. The West cannot really allow for so many freelancers to be engaged in the activities that go beyond sometimes even legal limitations. It's very difficult for the West to conduct this.

Another limitation is, for example, I know I don't want to give any names now, but I know several pro-Western Russian organizations that are based in the West and they support the Russian opposition. They are being very active actually in working on the sanctions, but at the same time they are unable to support the Russian armed resistance to the Kremlin regime. Now, you probably heard of those military groups in Ukraine, the Russian volunteer corps and Siberian battalion. Many organizations in the West are not able to support them because that would be support for the armed resistance inside Russia. And in many cases, because of the democratic procedures they are unable to support them. And then you basically fragment some of the Russian opposition forces. So, the West is trying to do its own political warfare. You know that in Brussels there is a [STRATCOM](#), Strategic Communication.

This is what we call propaganda when we don't want to use this word, because propaganda is something dirty, and strategic communication is nice. Although this propaganda is only targeting basically the European states or the EU, so they would know what things are propaganda or disinformation or fake news and what's not. It's not targeting the Russians. If you remember there was several initiatives to launch Russian language TV and program. This is also political warfare. This is also strategic communication with the Russians, trying to convince them, trying to change their mindset, trying to change their worldviews, but there are many limitations. I do think it's probably important to look from a bit different angle in this situation with political warfare. And this is an example from history.

1956, there was almost a revolution in Hungary. There was an uprising against the pro-Soviet, pro-socialist regime. Part of this revolution, one major factor, probably not the most important, one major factor in that some people decided to rise up against the pro-Soviet government was the work of the [Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty](#), which was at that time funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. It was basically a black propaganda and they were successful. So, they convinced the population to rise up against the socialist regime and they did this. And then the Soviets just bring tanks. So, it's all over. You can be very successful with political warfare, but for the Soviets, and as I said, there is no limit for them. So, the Americans would stop. They were successful with political warfare, but that's it, because political warfare can never be part of the conventional war.

And for the Soviets, just, so what? Okay, good. You did good. And we bring tanks. And then it's all over.

Sorin Ioniță

I was thinking more countries like Latvia or Moldova, where you have a substantial section of the population, which is part of the [Ruskiy Mir](#). They are prisoners in the propaganda. They only watch [Perviy Kanal](#), and they get their worldview from these sources. But the Russians do not control the territory. We don't have, like in Moldova, a Russian speaking channel to give them an objective view of world affairs. And this is a very big problem, because we leave them there. We don't care about this portion of the Ruskiy Mir and they have no alternative in the Russian language. And Russian is important, because that's the limit of the bubble. They don't listen to anything else, but to things that come in Russian. And we never made this effort to have a clean, nice channel TV, good with professional images, to reflect an objective view of the world affairs for them. And then they will continue to watch Perviy Kanal and all these guys.

Anton Shekhovtsov

But it really depends on the size of those communities, because it's one thing when the Baltic states are dealing with their Russian speaking communities. And honestly, I think the threat was at that time exaggerated, because Russian speaking Estonians, they can compare how life is in Russia and how life is in Estonia. So, there wasn't much of a nostalgia about anything Russian. But it really depends on the size. Obviously, there are also Russian speakers in Portugal, but I don't think it makes actual sense to have any sort of media targeting particular Russian speaking Portuguese. So it depends on the size of those communities.

Liliana Popescu

I also want to make a comment and actually want to ask you: it's obvious that there is an asymmetry between the so-called collective West, I have an objection to that, and Russia, because I think there are proof, but I don't know how closed they are in terms of exposures of the citizens to internet, to social media. I know that they have open YouTube, if I'm right. And I know that they closed Twitter, X, Facebook, the Russian public. I'm talking about the asymmetry between the Russian public and the so-called Western public, because I think this matters a lot. So, if you would like to comment on that.

Anton Shekhovtsov

It's actually a great question. And I want to answer it again with a very brief reference to the history and to the Cold War, especially in the 1980s.

And some of you may have heard of the so-called [Operation Infektion](#) or Operation Detroit. That was about basically a Soviet active measure aiming to show that the emergence of AIDS was linked to the secret laboratories in the US, so that this global pandemic was produced by the Americans. And in order to do this, they had to publish this piece in an Indian newspaper, [Patriot](#), and then they would have another person in GDR who would refer to that article in India and produce this exposure of the Americans being behind AIDS. So at that time, it actually took them several years in order to plant this narrative in the Western media environment. And it's still alive. This idea that AIDS was created by the Americans still alive in many pockets of the, even American society. So they were hugely successful.

But now it takes you maybe a day or two days in order to plant a Russian narrative, disinformation narrative, into the American, Western media space. Which is, not only open, it's shut open. It's just, welcoming everything that you can put. So of course, and this is in a huge contrast to what the Russian authorities are doing for the Russian environment. It's not that they cannot access Facebook. They can. No, it's not that they cannot access YouTube. They can. But this is, it's a small number and also the majority of the Russians, they take the information from TV. And TV, you switch on, it's only Kremlin approved TV stations. You cannot have any independent media on the TV. And this is the main source of information for them. So, they have essentially closed their information system while they are using the openness of the Western information system to attack it. And this is a problem that actually, there is very difficult to find solution. It's not impossible if we put ourselves this question. But then the question will be, whether we are not, or whether we actually becoming those who we are fighting against. So, there will be always this democratic discussion. How far we can go, how far we can control. You know, there is a consensus essentially in Western societies about propaganda. It is allowed during the elections and it is allowed in the business relations. So, advertisement is propaganda, right? Political parties competing with each other in the elections is propaganda, but it is allowed. There is a consensus, it is fine. But when the government uses propaganda on their own citizens, then democratic societies have problems.

Liliana Popescu

Yes, at the same time, if we accept that we are under political warfare situation, we need to acknowledge that. But the thing is, I think that it's difficult to persuade a large majority of citizens here and in other countries in the West of this. That's my view.

Sorin Ioniță

My point is to target the Russian public, not our public.

Anton Shekhovtsov

The problem is that they have closed this information system. They are defending their own information environment from us.

Ana Otilia Nitu, EFOR

I also have two questions. The first one is actually more of a comment leading to a question. So in the past two years in the Western media, there have been a lot of dubious articles. For example, when there was the explosion of [Nord Stream 2](#). There was a story that there might be some two Ukrainians with a boat going by themselves or maybe paid by Zelensky. Then there was the rumor in autumn, at the critical moment, last autumn that Putin might be open to negotiations. (1:16:54-1:17:32) Another story as well, the story about [Patrushev](#) organizing the death of Prigojin without, you know, trying to absorb Putin from any kind of involvement saying that he may have been only informed. Some of these are debunked later. Others are debunked only in Russian speaking audiences, like for example, what [Christo Grozev](#) is doing on [TV Dozhd](#).

But I'm wondering to what extent is there a sense that these are active measures of Russia or there are simply vulnerabilities of the Western media in the sense that we in the West are not so prepared to deal with the depth of lies and we are much more vulnerable to fake information, dubious sources, or don't go through the same rigor that we should be going to check from 10 sources certain pieces of information. And in this particular sensitive moment, how can we better manage this information which can actually influence the West to know into less support for Ukraine? So, to what extent is it Russian intervention or Western vulnerability? And to what extent this Western vulnerability has a solution? We can do something about it.

Anton Shekhovtsov

These three examples that you presented, I think they are all quite different in their nature, actually, with the explosions and with the destruction of Nord Stream 2. Well, we don't know. A colleague of mine, [Andreas Umland](#), wrote a very interesting post saying that those people who say that was Ukrainians, were actually giving Ukrainians a lot of credit that they were able to carry out such a brilliant operation. No, let me be fair with you. Ukraine was interested in destroying Nord Stream 2. I'm not saying that. We all were. And if Ukrainians managed to do this and now, they have this plausible deniability cudros to Ukraine. You know, when it all happened also, there was a Twitter post by [Radoslaw Sikorski](#), now current foreign minister of Poland, thanking the US for the destruction of Nord Stream 2.

So, we don't know whoever was behind and we can only speculate. Maybe we will know in some time. But I think this piece is different from other examples. As for the death of Prigojin, I wonder if you didn't have that feeling after Prigojin stopped his raid on Moscow, that he was a dead man walking. There was no chance that he would survive what he tried to do. That was sort of high treasure in the eyes of the Siloviki clan of Putin. It was just a matter of time. It was very clear that he would be dead. And Putin would not probably even need to say directly to Patrushev to do something he would only say: "We have to deal with this somehow, or something else". Obviously, Putin would not do it personally, of course.

And the third example was about negotiation. This, I think, is a very clear activity in the European piece of political warfare, bit of political warfare on Russians apart. This is to send a message that Russia is open to negotiations, which means that the West should no longer provide military support for Ukraine, because it just prolongs the war that could otherwise be ended with negotiations. And this gives more time for the Russians, because the more time they have, the better it is for their war effort. So this, I have no doubts that this narrative was planted in the Western media. This is just a bit of disinformation. What can we do about this? With some things, we cannot do anything. And let me be fair, this is my genuine perspective that for some things, there are no countermeasures at all. Except for social resilience, building that resilience, which takes years, and not days and not a couple of workshops for the media workers. It takes years, it is about media literacy. Another thing is that I also don't think that debunking works somehow efficiently. I was quite skeptical for a very long time about this, because it has to do with psychology. And because it has to do a lot with psychology, I think another instrument could be much more efficient. This is pre-bunking, which is based on the theory in communication theory about inoculation. When we are not aware, when we have no direct knowledge about a particular development or event that happens somewhere in the world, we we psychologically are inclined tend as humans to believe in the first interpretation of that event or development that we hear or read.

If we don't know anything about this, the first thing that we read about this, we will believe in this. And we will also defend this interpretation against later interpretations. We can be reconvinced, but generally, just psychologically, we will stick to this first interpretation, which means that it is very important for the media, but for also those organizations like STRATCOM, to come up quickly with fact-based objective interpretation of particular events. Because the longer it takes for Western institutions and objective media, free media, to come up with these objective interpretation, the more you will have conspiracy theories and disinformation around it, and people will not even listen to your interpretation. It's just about time. It's very simple. It's really about the period of time during which those conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives can be developed. One, in my opinion, brilliant example of how pre-bunking works.

It's what the US and the UK and some other allies started doing back in 2021, saying Russia is gearing up for the invasion of Ukraine. And compare that situation to the end of February 2014, when those little green men appeared in Crimea, and Russia was given several weeks of basically plausible deniability, saying: "That's not us, those may be pro-Russian separatists in Crimea". And everybody was confused because they didn't wear any insignia. And that gave Russia a crucial time of two, three weeks to do what they actually did. There was this confusion in the Western mind. The services, obviously, I have no doubt that the secret services of the West knew what was going on, but politically and for the establishment they think "Russians are saying that's not them, so maybe it is the case, maybe it's not, but we don't know how we can act upon something that we don't know."

And then when the 24th of February 2022 happened, everybody knew what was happening because the US and the UK pre-bunked anything that Russia could have produced to explain what was going on. They had no chance to convince anyone or even confuse anyone about what was going on. And just to give you an example from this more focused research of mine, Marine Le Pen on the 24th of February 2022, the person who took the 9 million euros loan from the Russian bank back in 2013, unequivocally condemned the Russian invasion on the same day because nobody could be fooled anymore what was going on. That was the success of the pre-bunking strategy, of the inoculation theory. The US and the UK inoculated us and the international community about what would be happening in the future. So, we were ready for any lies that Russia would like to produce.

Liliana Popescu

I just wanted to come back to this so-called collective west. It's true that we are using inverted commas when used that, but we are using the narrative imposed by Moscow. And I think this is

wrong. And I think maybe we can think as we call ourselves the collective west. What can the collective west really do, not only to react, but actually to act? Because this inoculated idea that it's the west, it comes as a continuation of the Cold War, saying "the capitalists, the bad guys are there". "Look, Global South or New South, what are they actually doing?"

Sorin Ioniță

Or, maybe, we can continue to use it, but sarcastically, as I did, in order to pre-bunk Putin's narrative.

Iulian Fota

Thank you very much for the invitation and for the opportunity to have a question. You had a very interesting presentation, but I want to take also some personal benefit from your presence here. And my question is about Romania. I mean, starting from your deep experience on European far right, and I guess also on Russian far right. My question is, do you have anything to tell us about the Romanian far right? And in your long years research, you notice anything interesting about our Romanian far right, and maybe some possible connections with the Russian far right. Thank you.

Researcher at Law Research Institute, Romanian Academy

Do you think there are two kinds of Ukrainian in Putin's mind? Those who are in the West in Halic, Volhynia, perhaps Greco-Catholic who are irreducible, and who cannot be longer be converted, and those in the South center and in east who can easily be re-russified because when in every evening when I try to enter on Facebook, Twitter to see how the front is in Avdiivka there are thousands of [vatniks](#) on the internet who bombard me with the maps of Medvedev with the little part of Ukraine and they try to insert a narrative which is very interesting for the Romanian far-right about Cernăuți and all the things. Thank you.

Sorin Ioniță

Yes, thank you. That map is very popular with Romania's year because he gives us [Vinnytsia Oblast](#) which is quite an innovative idea.

Journalist, Wall Street Journal

Some years ago I remember you were talking about the mimetic power of Russia. and I think this is very insidious and more dangerous even than conspiracy theories because this works very well with global western media and especially Romanian media to treat Russia like a normal power and I will give you an example from my experience. I was a news editor for years for a major TV station the largest TV station in Romania and the guys who were writing the foreign news were always asking me "Why don't we ask the Russian embassy or the North Korean embassy? Why don't we ask them for their point of view?" and I was trying to explain to them there's nothing you can ask them and they were complaining all the time. It's not fair, why don't we treat them as a normal as a normal country and as a normal diplomatic power? Thank you.

Anton Shekhovtsov

As for the relations between say Romanian far-right. There were several organizations but mostly on the fringes when I was looking at the Romanian context I cannot say that I was specifically, you know being really focused on the Romanian case But there were some fringe organizations that were very close to the Russians like the new you knew you new right I think in the romanians and Noua Dreaptă. That were quite close to the sort of Russian new Eurasian thinking. But in 2015 I was following I was trying to follow also what Vadim Tudor had to say about this but he died quite quickly so we We couldn't know how he would develop because he was not known in particular of being pro-russian But at the same time he had this idea obviously of a greater Romania And where parts of Ukraine would be part of this so he would always Talk about Ukrainian stealing parts of the Romanian land. So that would be interesting to see but it's not possible now as for Romania is in many ways. I guess lucky because of this historical skepticism

towards Russia despite the shared religion of Christian orthodoxy But those are usually in my opinion small organizations and smaller far-right forces in Romania that are being blatantly openly progression and Yes, I know I am now told about other parties just AUR yes But this is something that I must tell you honestly, I haven't looked closely into this As for the second question can I remember this ?

Yes, so obviously there are so many approaches to those Ukrainians I remember one of the at least early explanations coming from this geopolitical Jupiter far-right geopolitical authors in Russia where they would say that Basically the entire Ukraine has to be part of the Russian Empire Except for three West Ukrainian oblasts who are Greek Catholic and we will not be able to Russianize them anyway, they are trouble and we don't really need them. So they can be an independent Ukraine or the remnants of independent Ukraine or they can go to Poland or you know Romania, Hungary may take some of those other territories...

Sorin Ioniță

No, Romania has successfully oppressed and suppressed its own Greek Catholics, so it won't take another lot!

Public: ha ha

Anton Shekhovtsov

... so we don't need them anyway. Then there was this idea because there are so many of them. Yes, we cannot really put them into one or two coherent categories.

So those were irredeemable Ukrainians, we cannot do anything about them. It just but now with many radicals They would say yes, so mostly entire Ukraine we can we can include them in the in this Russian civilization Russian world and those who cannot be Corrected They should just be killed and it so happens that now it is the majority of Ukrainians who needs to be corrected by de-nazifying them meaning by killing them.

It's a genocidal program, you know, it's not about you know Change the ideology every but every Ukrainian who believes that he has a Ukrainian identity identifies him as or herself as a as a Ukrainian and Rejecting the being included violently into the Russian Civilizational project is a Nazi, you know hence the the the notification again, this is a genocidal program But there are so many maps as a many maps of this so it's now You know being very brief With my answers that it's not two categories. It's more and also What changed is that like what we do with those categories?

Many say that those normal Ukrainians who can be parsed again part of the Russian civilization project they are a minority, but the majority needs to be just dealt with and and Mimetic power yes, I didn't mention this but I do believe it's it's an interesting concept that I developed and it has to do a lot with with this trouble of of the Russian language of Russian official language and the Kremlin language Kremlin speak But uses the same words that we associate with a particular phenomenon, but They don't actually Belong to the that category that Russia wants to be presented, but maybe now it's a bit different: it wants to be presented like a normal country with normal institutions and this is and this is a huge psychological and linguistic problem. So when they say they have a parliament It is not a parliament.

They use this word Parliament in in our interpretation immediately because when we understand this world we have an we have in mind this institution where a debate takes place where political parties exist that the that there is an actual opposition that there are debates and arguments about alternatives of Russian political developments. It does not exist. There is no such thing when they say we hold elections, these are not elections. But we we are trapped linguistically in this huge trouble. The best explanation that I could probably produce to explain this is the Russian Potemkin village. It's a Potemkin state It's not a real state and those state institutions are not those state institution The the constitutional court is not a court at all. They don't care about the institution their constitution, which actually in reality it's a nice democratic document,

but they don't live based on that document and you can you know, those are not opposition parties that are present in the in the parliament. This is not a real opposition It's just a theater.

It's like a theatrical play and The audience are those voters who go but this is this is all You know pre-designed roles for those people and this is this is a problem and this I think is the What what you referred to is much more sinister because they are using the same words to produce Particular images in our minds and those are wrong images I cannot even say that those are unfree and unfair elections because that will give a legitimacy of a bad Process, but this is not even the election. This is not a plebiscite Russia It's a war but Russia still organized these elections, but Ukraine doesn't you know, we all know why Ukraine can't organize elections, of course, but They give this example like look Russia might be more democratic than Ukraine because they do this as elections

Doru Costea, former ambassador

Congratulations for the organization of this meeting and thank you very much doctor for the presentation of your book I'm eyeing that stack over there hoping that I'll grab one We are a couple of points I try to be very short Of course, I will fail first of all, I think that we are trapped as Mr. Ioniță said.

And it's a and you said also I think in our language We are very happily using a war political warfare, but we don't want to use propaganda. then We don't have but to change what we understand by it and understand that this is a concept. Rule by law and not the rule of law. That's a very interesting thing which happens to China, but let's don't go there. The second point is that I There are there were several points several moments when you mentioned The Russian narrative we are not the West quote unquote All right, then what are you? Because this raises a huge problem for anybody who has a modicum of knowledge of Russian history. Peter the Great is one of the counselors for mr. Putin. Right. Well Peter the Great wanted through Europeanize, Russia so did Katarina the Great. So what are we talking about here?

If Russia is not the West and we are persuaded that Russia is not the West. Let's agree that we Mean by West something that we agree to mean and don't develop that right? It is not the West fine Then what shall we do with it? Russia is not going anywhere the day after So the question is how are we going to deal with the right with Russia the day after I Don't want to Go although is the extreme attempting to play on hypothesis The day after means Russia's defeated meaning what? The day after means Russia is victorious meaning what? So let's just say the day after. Right ceasefire how can we what can we do with Russia and last ?

Have that's a very personal thing and I I apologize for being too personal perhaps but Since we are talking about perceptions Because this is what political warfare is Perception it means that reality is Perceived some way in a way or another so we have Reality and now we have virtual reality as if reality before was not enough this quite discouraging and I think that there are there is a tendency to Allow for a doomsday scenario To come because we can't do anything about that we can't go beyond the limits of democracy in order to fight Autocracy who don't care and send tanks in Hungary just like we said and so on and so forth so what can we do?

Question hence the question perhaps the answer here would be to reform continuously and give examples and I wrap it up by recalling what Sentence I loved in your expose Russians living in Estonia know what it means So they don't believe the other Russians, that's the key. Thank you.

Anton Shekhovtsov

Thank you very much for your question actually You may know there is there is an initiative in Brussels of the European Parliament the Brussels dialogue and it specifically It's had a conference last year called *Russia the day after* what they meant by this is the the day after say the fall of Putin of the Putin regime so what we can do about this what I think will happen Because I think much of much of all what's happening is dependent on personality of Putin of on his personal obsessions on his personal mental state. And the day after I think there will be a very

Short window of opportunity for the West to do something about Russia and think what will happen is a sort of a deal that we that will be proposed to the Russian elites That's You basically need to give some of some gifts Us some of the figures for the Hague for the International Criminal Court Those people would be like people like Shoigu you know some of the commanders may be Gherasimov, so that will be an exchange Patrushev, Naryshkin , so you know this you love a key the clan maybe up to I don't know 10 20 people yes, and then there will be a deal that Russia will be proposed some some sort of a not contract, but some settlements that it can be gradually probably gradually becoming you know or accept being accepted into the Western community again into the international community again the progressive lifting of the sanctions in exchange for particular steps from from the Russian Side there is a problem though, which we should take into consideration

So Putin in a way is a consensus figure for the political elites But not only not only political elites, but also business elites in the Russian Federation. So what is happening now in since since Russia is developing a war economy. Much of its infrastructure and business project they move into the direction of sustaining the war and this is a long-term These are long-term projects so essentially the elites are now directly benefiting from the war going on So the question is even if Putin goes Would the elites be happy with ending the war because they benefit from this I do believe that it would still be possible because if they benefit Economically they can be bought and I think that the West will be able to suggest Nice nice amounts of money to just buy them. Yes, this is this is what do you do with corrupt people? You just buy them.

There is no other way And there could be a deal yet to get some of the people the process of the criminal court. I do agree that it's mostly a mafia state. Although now I would also describe Putin as a sort of a kleptocrat several years ago, but now I I reject this identification He has developed a worldview on the basis of which he acts he has the his historical delusions of grandeur he has a Mission a historical mission to destroy Ukraine.

He has an even a messianist mission for for for Russia for the Russian civilization, so he has developed this and he will not Stop, you know, he can only be stopped He will not negotiate because how can you propose to a person to negotiate his place in the Russian history? He will not negotiate.

This is something, you know, this is about his legacy There is nothing else to persuade him to to behave in a different way, but other people I think they are much more pragmatic and they corrupt and they can be bought.

Sânziana Iancu, the Euro-Atlantic Resilience Center.

My question for you today would be how one has political warfare That we talked about in compassing both soft power and more Assertive measures such as cyber operations information warfare influenced international perceptions and diplomatic relations during the conflict with Russia and What implications does it does this have for the future of conflict resolution and international law?

Victor Caraculacu, Senior Editor, Romanian National Radio

Can you comment on the very recent declaration Statements coming from Paris from president. Emmanuel Macron about possible plausible Involvement of Western powers European powers in Ukrainian conflict. Thank you!

Anton Shekhovtsov

With political warfare, you know, it's one thing disinformation and cyber warfare is something something very different when At least when we when we hear this term cyber warfare We probably imagine a room of people with their laptops, you know being engaged in Some cyber operations. This is not how it works cyber operations are mostly about the disruption of the of The hardware and sometimes software.

This is not a real warfare cyber operations more they are Much more efficient when they're part of the conventional war to disrupt the operation to disrupt the you know commands and interactions and communications, but None of the none of the cyber operations in the recent history had a sort of lasting effect If they're not about hacking and if they're not about stealing some sensitive information Do you remember probably you remember how many times the well except for the most recent hack of the Bundeswehr secret meeting but how many times the Russians stole information and hacked the Bundeswehr They did it several times and now I wonder just why they haven't used anything probably because communications between German politicians were so boring. There was basically nothing to leak But they did this that was you know cyber operations and so what? there was not the real cyber warfare and Obviously implications are enormous with disinformation.

Let me give you one example Also about the success. Because as I said during my presentation, it's very difficult to measure success, but sometimes it's so obvious is I don't Know very politically correct with the success of disinformation is like identifying pornography It's very difficult to identifying what but when you see it, you know that yes it is so with the success of these political warfare and especially disinformation operations One example is that during the discussions among the American political establishment in the US about the aid for Ukraine. They used the narratives that came right from the Russian disinformation sources and also fringe ones not even state-controlled media, but really fringe websites that would spread conspiracy theories about President Zelensky Using financial aid from the US and American taxpayers to pay to buy yolks to pay, you know luxury boats and that was spread and

That was coming from really fringe, marginal websites and they became parts of the discussions between parliamentarians and Congressmen and congresswomen in the US and I found that a huge success I cannot actually imagine how this whole, you know You know links worked how this fringe narrative traveled to the American establishment a huge success. Yes, and implications are enormous imagine now though now basically the the American aid is blocked and Partly because of the success of those narratives and similar narratives.

So imagine you create You spend five minutes to create this theory on the internet and post somewhere on the fringe website and you block billions tens of billions of dollars In aid for for the country that defend itself from the genocide invasion Just imagine and this is also about this openness of in the information system. This is just this unimaginable and yes, it shows the huge implications of disinformation Even if it's not if even if not so much was invested initially into the spread of that disinformation.

Last one about the military in Ukraine. No, look Macron is playing a great game in my opinion. He creates this Yes strategic ambiguity that's the great word How would you say it in French because I think it's beautiful in the French "ambiguïté stratégique" Exactly, I think if it didn't sound too well in the French. We would not use it So yes, he he's doing this. I also know and actually some of my colleagues Took a very active part in this.

It's promoting the idea that the right in France in French There was an idea that the Ukrainian war is our war and we you know We're not only Helping Ukraine to win this war, but this is a this is our war in which we should actually take part and that was That was a narrative that appeared right after the invasion or even before that that in France but this is also our war and we have to take part in this and Whether the French will send the troops to Ukraine now They are being even more specific and this is interesting because I like Macron but I will I never t thought that he would go that far you know, it is the legacy and Yes, you know Molly and You know, he was humiliated in a way by the Wagner group, right and he had to come back with something but yes, this is this is a very interesting development and There was but this this also did not appear in the vacuum if you remember there was a proposition by Former NATO general secretary who now works with the Ukrainian government remind Rasmus Rasmussen Right and he proposed that well Western Western countries should send troops to Ukraine to defend those territories which are under sovereign control If Ukraine should be admitted to NATO But the NATO troops

will only protect those territories that are now currently under the control of the Ukrainian government while Ukrainians will be given all the necessary hardware and military power to reclaim the lost territory. So that was his plan So this Macron's ideas did not appear just out of the blue That was part of the discussions part of the international discussions, but also part of very specifically French discussions in in France So that's a good dynamic.

Sorin Ioniță

I guess “ambigüité stratégique” sounds even better in French than in English. It comes more naturally somehow ...

What should we expect after these so-called Russian elections is do you expect something very quickly and spectacular to change in the Kremlin's elite? Some heads chopped off or something after this he becomes more stabilized after these elections.

Anton Shekhovtsov

What I do expect is that they will be doing Alternative polling, probably even a focus groups to to measure the actual popularity of Putin and depending on the findings of their research Well, which will never be public obviously They will have to make a decision on the further mobilization whether it will be open mobilization Whether it would be like full-fledged Mobilization in contrast to his so-called partial mobilization. So that would be that will be a decision that has to be made and another point I think this mostly concerns those people who still live in Russia.

I do think that You know this this has already started this almost open Terror against even the remnants of the most vegetarian types of the opposition in Russia we have seen arrests of even people who collected signatures from for one of the More or less democratic, but obviously not democratic candidates for these so-called elections So they are they're using now openly like instruments of terror terrorizing the population which may become even worse after the election, but that will depend on this what I said the the actual research into the Yes, focus groups on they will of course say it's 80 85 percent He will win with with this number But but they will also make do their best in order to understand was the actual popularity and on that Many field actions will depend.

Sorin Ioniță

So your prediction is back to the 1930s, the Red terror on broad scale

Anton Shekhovtsov

Well, Russia has already thousands I guess of political prisoners. There is still a way to go unfortunately because Stalin figured that was you know millions. Yes, so You know, Ivan the terrible is More appropriate in my view. So the repressions will be higher or lower depending on his popularity, but probably a reverse correlation.

I mean if he's not that popular Probably they will but that was mostly it's not about repressions, but the but the mobilization how far they can go because They actually they do research into these older social sentiments like what the people really think or what they really believe And they try to because much of what Putin is doing obviously there is this conventional warfare element But with the domestic audience, there is a lot of also political technology. I don't know how it will spread Is in Romanian, you know this this theatrical politics, you know about again about imitation of everything There's a not real political processes in political technology. It's all manipulated so but they are still looking at the real numbers and the real sentiments and they try to you know be cautious sometimes, Sometimes they just openly start terrorizing people but sometimes they still think about how they can go. Thank you.

Sorin Ioniță

And we said we would finish now, but we are Romanians and it's hard. So that's just last one. Would it make any difference if Western powers don't recognize Putin after these elections? because that's a solution of Yulia Navalnaya. Is there any practicality in this?

Anton Shekhovtsov

First of all, this will not happen this There is a huge opposition to not recognizing Putin as the president's reelected president and this huge opposition the US, Germany, Hungary, so a very diverse number of States and the Western community as for whether it will make any difference symbolically, yes, but in practical terms. No. Oh He will he will not do this he will he will not do this obviously and they will always Western leaders will always need you know, someone to talk to anyway It was quite fine with Lukashenko because Lukashenko does not matter, you know in the bigger picture. With Putin it will not be that easy and this is not this is not happen.

Sorin Ioniță

Time to thank all of you starting with the audience and the media, and our hosts the Diplomatic Institute and Liliana especially and thank you Anton for being here. There are still three or four books as I can see and it is our Key performance indicator to leave you without any book when you go back to Vienna tomorrow.

Anton Shekhovtsov

Let me thank Sorin and Otilia and Expert Forum for thinking of the diplomatic Institute to host this event which was extremely interesting and very rich in content and We are looking forward to seeing you in Bucharest again. Yes, thank you very much for having me for hosting me for this discussion Really much appreciate it. Thank you.



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