

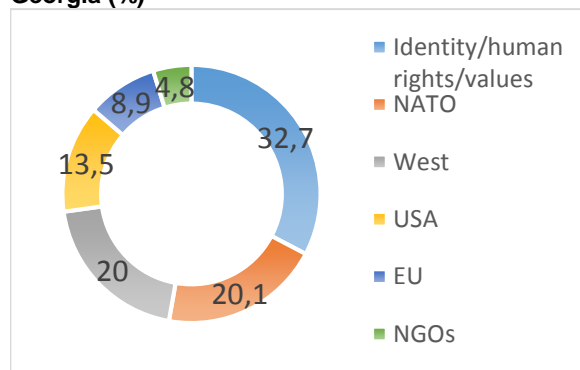
Mapping the Links between Russian Influence and Media Capture in Black Sea Countries

Russia's influence over the media sector in Central and East Europe and its effect on democratic governance in these countries has become a growing concern. To address these issues, the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) has engaged in analyzing the Russian economic footprint and ownership links in the media sector in the Black Sea region. The preliminary results¹ provide an overview of the tools used by Russian-controlled media for disseminating content and political messages.

In **Bulgaria**, media ownership is not the primary means of influence, but rather the Russia-backed community of content creators and providers such as online news platforms, independent journalists, bloggers and internet trolls. The existence of Russia-related non-media companies from the energy, real estate and banking sectors in the shareholding and management of media companies also influences to a large extent the decisions-making and agenda-setting. In addition, the dissemination of pro-Russian and anti-Western or anti-EU narratives gain important political backup by party initiatives and officially expressed positions on diverse topics, or by biased representation of selected Russia-related national and international infrastructure projects (e.g. in energy) or of selected Russia-related activities and events in the fields of culture, science and education, sport, and international policy. The preliminary analysis of media ownership in Bulgaria, based on corporate databases, shows three sub-groups of companies. The first one, which is the smallest – with less than EUR 0,5 mln annual turnover in 2016, comprises of media companies, directly owned or controlled by Russian legal or physical entities. The second, bigger group with about EUR 3 – 5 mln annual turnover in 2016, includes media companies either related to the first group or having considerable shareholding or management links with Russian-led businesses. The third, biggest group with about EUR 20-25 mln annual turnover in 2016, includes non-media companies from sectors such as energy, real estate, banking and financing, etc. that are formally related to Bulgarian independent media companies but at the same time have also considerable shareholding or management links to Russia. The second and particularly, the third group of companies could be seen as potential influencers to media through their marketing budgets, opportunities for agenda setting and dissemination of information. The interactions between the companies from the three groups are hidden for the general audience and even for the media experts but they could clarify the links between Russian economic footprint in the country and media discourses and narratives.

In **Georgia** the media is the main source of anti-western messages, followed by the pro-Russian political agenda of some political parties. The most common media propaganda methods used are the fake news, photo fabrications, conspiracy theories and demonization of NATO, the European Union and the European values. The country is faced by numerous challenges in the media sector: a trend of legitimization of pro-Kremlin media outlets through service contracts; scarce financial resources of local media; and political polarization. The Freedom House's Press Freedom Index 2017 ranks Georgia with total score of 50 (0 being most free, and 100 – least free). In 2016, there was an increase seen in messages against NATO (20.1%)². This increase was further proved by results of public opinion polls: while in 2013 November, the support for the integration into NATO comprised 81%, it decreased to 61% in 2016³. The EU and the Association Agreement were equated to the obligation to receive migrants and the threat of terrorism while visa liberalization and European integration were equated to a demographic threat. The main source of anti-western messages in the media can be divided into two groups: openly pro-Kremlin outlets (Georgia & World, Sakinformi, Politicano) and anti-liberal, ethno-nationalist platforms (Obieqtivi TV, Asaval-Dasavali, Alia) with qualitatively identical messages. In that

Figure 1. Typology of anti-Western messages in Georgia (%)



Note: based on 1,258 anti-Western messages were analyzed in Georgian media outlets and other sources.

Source: [Anti-Western Propaganda](#), Media Development Foundation, UN Association of Georgia, 2016.

¹ Based on the discussion from the workshop "[Mapping the Links between Russian Influence and Media Capture in the Black Sea Countries](#)", held on 22 February 2018 at the Center for the Study of Democracy.

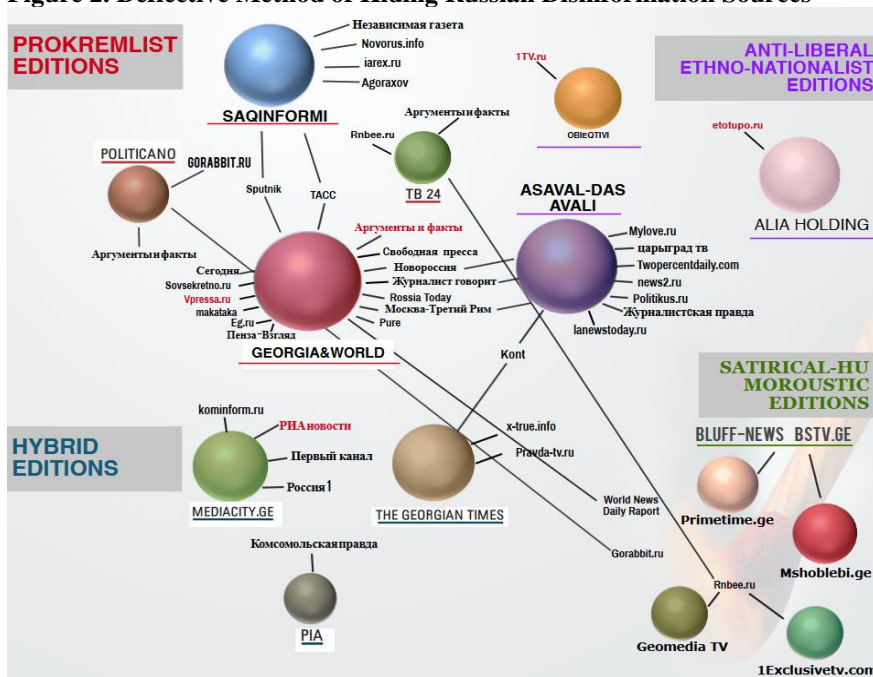
² [Anti-Western Propaganda](#), Media Development Foundation, UN Association of Georgia, 2016.

³ NDI (2016), [Public Attitudes in Georgia](#).

context, more efforts are necessary for the exposure of disinformation, not only in mainstream media but also of smaller platforms which are multiplied by means of social networks. Media literacy programs must be introduced so that citizens develop skills of checking fake information and avoid being consumers and disseminators of disinformation⁴. A good example in that respect provides the [Myth Detector](#) website.

To legitimize the message propaganda platforms conceal original sources. Propagandists actively utilize deflective or source-concealing model. The receiver perceives the information as coming from direct sources and does not associate it with the initial source. The chart below shows the various methods of hiding Russian disinformation sources. The highlighted with red color media on the Figure 2 below shows those Russian outlets that have been identified openly in the material published in the Georgian media. In most of the cases, the Georgian media concealed Russian primary sources⁵.

Figure 2. Deflective Method of Hiding Russian Disinformation Sources



Source: [Anti-Western Propaganda](#), Media Development Foundation, UN Association of Georgia, 2016.

The **Armenian** media landscape can also be described as one lacking freedom of speech and influenced by the strong economic involvement of Russia. Russian television plays prominent role due to the significant Russian diaspora in Armenia and use of Russian language. Three Russian TV state channels are licenced to broadcast - Pervy Kanal (1st Channel), RTR Planeta, and Kultura, as well as a plethora of channels which air via cable TV. In Armenia the Russian propaganda often uses the so called “traveling” topics that is recurrent topics across the scope, for example the NGOs and civil society representatives as, “the West’s fifth column.” An example can be presented through the message “The delivery of the weaponry to the participants of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by Russia is a measure to maintain a balance of forces. If Russia did not supply it, someone else would do it with worse consequences for security.” Another approach used by the propaganda is the direct targeting of Western institutions, e.g.: “The European Union, its institutions and policies (the Schengen Agreement, Neighborhood policy, social policy, security, etc.) are coming to an end.” Armenia was one of the 18 countries surveyed in 2015 by the Washington-based Pew Research Center on religious beliefs and national belonging. The research showed that 71 percent of Armenians favour “strong ties with Russia” versus a bare 8 percent calling for stronger relations with the European Union (EU); in addition, 83% of Armenians agree that a “Strong Russia is needed to counterbalance the West”, while 71% of surveyed people admit that “Our national values are in conflict with Western values”. Even on issues not directly connected to Russia, public opinion seems to think along the same lines. A total of 79 percent of Armenians consider the collapse of the Soviet Union a bad thing and only 15 percent consider it good.

⁴ [Anti-Western Propaganda](#), Media Development Foundation, UN Association of Georgia, 2016.

⁵ [Anti-Western Propaganda](#), Media Development Foundation, UN Association of Georgia, 2016.

Table 1. Differences in former Soviet republics on ties with Russia and EU

% in each former Soviet republic which declares that it is more important for their country to have strong ties with Russia, the European Union or both

	Russia	European Union	Both equally (vol.)
Armenia	71%	8%	18%
Belarus	47	17	30
Moldova	43	15	33
Georgia	26	33	35
Latvia	14	29	50
Ukraine*	11	57	22
Estonia	8	43	46
Lithuania	6	36	54

*Data for Ukraine are from a 2015 Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes survey.

Source: Survey conducted June 2015-July 2016 in 18 countries. "[Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe](#)", PEW Research Center.

Ukraine presents a special case. Due to the 'active' conflict between Russia and Ukraine at the moment, the media is focused more on the anti-war rhetoric. Rather than direct anti-western propaganda, Kremlin aims at shaping internal social conflicts. Media outlets evade the glorification of Russia, as well as discussing the issue of Crimea. The media topics are instead concentrated on depicting the Ukrainian government, its attempts for reforms and closing ties with the EU as harmful for the Ukrainian society. As a result, the trust in the government and the state is undermined. To counter this influence, several legal provisions are in force since spring 2014: broadcasting of above 80 Russian TV-channels is prohibited in Ukraine; a number of Russian-made films is prohibited in TV and cinema; and broadcasters are obliged to disclose their final beneficiaries. Despite the restrictive measures, large share of population still has free access to Kremlin-controlled media (via satellite and online; in air from Russia or Russia-controlled territories), but the audience of the latter shank (up to 8%) due to loss of trust (not more than 2%)⁶. Still, Kremlin-made narratives remain widely spread among Ukrainian media due to the oligarch nature of media ownership and the lack of professional capacity among Ukrainian journalists. Ukrainian media are never profit-making and exist due to external investments. In general, national media landscape is divided between business clans determining their discourse to achieve economic and political benefits. Talking about media that act officially on the territories controlled by Ukrainian government, there are just few marginal outlets that evidently support Kremlin's aggression (such as *Timer* in Odesa region). Other outlets camouflage their propaganda behind the mask of false patriotism and adherence to democratic values, and "alternative" or "opposition" point of view. The experts point out⁷ that not the positive evaluation of the Kremlin's actions (which is in principle unacceptable in Ukrainian situation) is important, but the spreading of narratives close to the Kremlin one's and creating the social climate that contributes to accomplishing the objectives of the Kremlin in Ukraine.⁸

Russian propaganda and disinformation tactics are evident in **Moldova** since the Transnistrian conflict in 1992. With the recent outbreak of the conflict in neighboring Ukraine, Russia has transitioned to a more aggressive stage of media use as means of control. The biggest television channels, which are the primary source of information in Moldova, are owned by pro-Russian oligarchs. Historically, in the period between 1945 and 1990 a big number of newspapers in Moldova were edited in Russian language, and the soviet TV stations were constantly promoting the policy of the Communist Party in all republics members of the Soviet Union. Despite the changes in the 80s, the Russian media continued to exercise a huge influence upon the Moldovan society. Given the process of russification as well as lack of local quality products, the citizens continued to inform themselves from the media produced in Moscow. The former Soviet media sources, such as "Komsomolskaya Pravda" and "Argumenty i Fakty" or TV broadcast stations "Pervyi Kanal", have remained on the Moldovan market, and over the years have strengthened their audience positions, continuing to promote the Russian Federation policy. A total of 45.9% of citizens trust the news broadcasted on TV. Prime TV (which is rebroadcasting the Russian station Pervyi Kanal - considered by the experts to be the most propagandistic channel) is ranked first in the preference of the audience (57.8%), followed by RTR Rossia - 23.3% and NTV - 18, 5%⁹. The Association of Independent Press (API) carried out in 2017 the monitoring¹⁰ of 5 Russian television stations that are rebroadcasted in Moldova and concluded that the Russian media uses a huge number of information manipulation and propaganda techniques. Within this

⁶ [Survey of Russian Propaganda Influence on Public Opinion in Ukraine Findings // Detector Media.](#)

⁷ Kremlin Influence Index 2017: Joint Research Report, Kyiv: Detector Media, 2017, p. 41.

⁸ The text on Ukraine is based on a background paper by Mr. Roman Shutov, Program Director, Detector Media.

⁹ [Public Opinion Barometer, November, 2017](#)

¹⁰ [Final Monitoring Report of television stations from the Russian Federation that are rebroadcast in the Republic of Moldova](#)

media landscape, the West and its values are vilified, portraying US, NATO and EU as responsible for the military conflicts around the world. As a result people's opinions and perceptions of EU change. According to the Public Opinion Barometer, a poll conducted by the Institute for Public Policies and one of the most credible exercises, in 2011, 64% of the respondents were in favour of Moldova's accession to the EU, and 15% were against¹¹. One year later, these values constituted 52% and 30%, correspondingly.¹² In November 2017, the number of people who would vote in favour of EU membership decreased to 47%.¹³ On the other side, in favour of accession to the Customs Union (Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan), a matter that has never been on the government agenda, unlike the one related to EU integration, would vote 43% of respondents. Another issue that led to the development of the phenomenon of Russian propaganda was the poor development of Moldovan media and political control of the press. Freedom House in its "Freedom of the Press" report places the Republic of Moldova in the top countries with partially free press.¹⁴ At the same time, according to the Word Press Freedom Index of the International Organization "Journalists without Borders",¹⁵ in 2017 Moldova ranked 80th out of 180 countries from around the world, losing four positions compared to 2016 due to fact that "the editorial policy of Moldovan media institutions is influenced by political interests of their owners, and the major challenges are journalistic independence and transparency of media ownership". In 2015, amendments to the Broadcasting Code were approved, requiring radio and TV broadcasters to make public the names of the owners. Thus, it was founded that Russian TV stations rebroadcasted in Moldova belong to or are affiliated to the governing and pro-russian political from Moldova. According to the Audiovisual Coordinating Council¹⁶, Perviy Kanal is rebroadcasted in Moldova by Prime TV and STS are owed by the leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova. NTV and TNT are owned by proxies and affiliates related to the pro-Russian Party of Socialists and to the current President of the Republic of Moldova. RTR is broadcasted in Moldova by a Russian company. Russian stations broadcast unilateral information and propaganda messages that are constantly manipulating the public opinion. The messages convey that EU is morally degrading and is about to face break-up, while the US and NATO only pursue war and destabilization; the situation in the EU in general and in some EU member countries, such as France or Germany, is presented in gloomy colours, the leaders of these countries are ridiculed and labelled, to emphasize their lack of perspicacity, dependence on the will of US leaders and inability to solve crisis situations¹⁷.

¹¹ [Public Opinion Barometer, May, 2011](#)

¹² [Public Opinion Barometer, April, 2012](#)

¹³ [Public Opinion Barometer, November, 2017](#)

¹⁴ [Freedom of the Press 2017](#)

¹⁵ [Rangliste der Pressefreiheit 2017](#)

¹⁶ [Statement on Transparency of Property, ACC](#)

¹⁷ The text on Moldova is based on a background paper by Mr. Simion Ciochină, Communication Officer, IPRE, and Journalist, Deutsche Welle.