

**RUSSIAN INFLUENCE
IN THE MEDIA SECTORS
OF THE BLACK SEA COUNTRIES**

**TOOLS, NARRATIVES AND POLICY OPTIONS
FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE**



**CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY**

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The report explores Russia's corporate presence and influence in the media sectors of five Black Sea countries (Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia) by providing a deeper understanding of the links between media ownership and anti-Western propaganda and disinformation. Corruption networks and soft media power have allowed Russia to benefit from inherent governance deficits in these Black Sea countries to infiltrate businesses, and to shape political narratives and environments in the region. Russia has sought to expand its influence in the media sectors of the Black sea countries through applying a variety of direct and indirect tools, including a complex mixture of ownership-networks and untraceable subcontracts for the retransmission rights of the official Russian media to domestic companies; obscuring media ownership and funding streams, particularly in the online domain, etc.

On the basis of an in-depth content analysis of three media outlets with different degrees of pro-Russian orientation in each of the five countries, the report shows how various types of media are used for the resurgence of Brezhnev-era-type propaganda, irrespective of the economic, political and social differentiations across the countries. The results highlight that the level of consistently reproduced similarities of narration and style of pro-Russian propaganda among the media outlets is high, while the differences in such narration and style are determined by the media outlets' degree of political-economic enmeshment with (pro-) Russian groups and interests.

The report has been prepared by a team of authors, including: **Dr. Rumena Filipova**, Analyst, Economic Program, Center for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria; **Dr. Todor Galev**, Senior analyst, Economic Program, Center for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria; **Ms. Tamar Kintsurashvili**, Executive director, Media Development Foundation, Georgia; **Ms. Ana Chitaladze**, Researcher, Media Development Foundation, Georgia; **Ms. Sopho Gelava**, Researcher, Media Development Foundation, Georgia; **Mr. Simion Ciocina**, Communication Manager, Institute for European Policies and Reforms, Moldova; **Dr. Roman Shutov**, Strategic Advisor for Eastern Partnership Programme, Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, Ukraine; **Mr. Gegham Vardanyan**, Editor in Chief, Media Initiatives Center, Armenia; **Ms. Nouneh Sarkissian**, Managing Director, Media Initiatives Center, Armenia; **Ms. Anahit Harutyunyan**, Armenia.

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Editorial Board:

Dr. Ognian Shentov, Chairman, Center for the Study of Democracy

Dr. Todor Galev, Senior Analyst, Economic Program, Center for the Study of Democracy

Ruslan Stefanov, Director, Economic Program, Center for the Study of Democracy

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5 Alexander Zhendov Str., Sofia 1113
tel.: (+359 2) 971 3000
fax: (+359 2) 971 2233
www.csd.bg, csd@online.bg

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Black Sea region has been subject to increasing pressure and uncertainty, following Russia's occupation of parts of Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine in 2014, and the continuing military stand-off to NATO in the Black Sea and beyond after the intervention in Syria in 2015. These developments have demonstrated Moscow's determination to revise the post-Cold War order by applying pressure through hard- and soft-power instruments on both members and associate partners of the EU and NATO in order to undermine Euro-Atlantic cohesion and unity. A particularly prominently deployed weapon of choice of the Kremlin has been media propaganda and disinformation.

The current report examines Russia's presence and tactics in the media sectors of five Black Sea countries, by assessing the relationship between the Kremlin's corporate and financial footprint in the media outlets of these states and the dissemination of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda content. The report confirms that the **patterns of ownership, economic dependency and (in)formal political links of media outlets** in the countries under investigation to pro-Russian groups and interests are correlated with and reflected into **corresponding trends of employing Russia-originating propaganda narratives**. That is, **there are significant, consistently reproduced similarities of narration and style among the media outlets, given these sources' general pro-Russian tilt**. Still, the media outlets differ in such a way that the greater the political-economic enmeshment with Russian interests, the more congruously and undeviatingly the content of Russian narratives is matched, the less analytical variation and nationally-originating perspectives are included and the more explicitly biased the style of communication is.

The report identifies common trends in the Russia-linked end of the media spectrum in Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia. The differences among the states are shaped by national specificities (informing various levels of susceptibility to Russian influence). These differences are reflected in the distinct characteristics of the national media landscapes and in the peculiar discourses and modes of message communication (in addition to the cross-regionally shared forms of Russian propagandist narration), which are in turn likely to affect the level of differentiation between types of political-economic entanglement and patterns of content provision.

The analytical investigation covered the period encompassing the years 2015, 2016 and 2017; focused on the **three general themes of the war in Syria, Russia-linked energy issues and the Kremlin's meddling in foreign elections**; selected three media outlets in each country from the pro-Russian end of the journalistic spectrum, which outlets also exhibited different levels of enmeshment with

Russian interests; and determined formal criteria for the search and identification of the articles subject to content analysis.

The overall Russian influence on the media sectors of Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia has become more visible in recent years and has been established through the deployment of a diverse set of instruments – in addition to and beyond ownership and financial ties. For instance, ‘diffusion-proofing’ is a preferred Kremlin strategy, whereby Russia does not aim to completely prevent information (especially originating in and concerning the West) from reaching domestic (in the Black sea countries) and foreign audiences but, rather, counterbalances Western coverage with a pro-Russian twist. This strategy is achieved through the Kremlin’s support for a media apparatus that includes international and in-country outlets and channels that reinforce each other’s messages (such as *TASS*, *Rossiya Segodnya*, *Russia Today*).

The resilience of the five countries under investigation has been far from sufficient for resisting Russian pressure. Indeed, despite the major distinctions among these states (regarding print media publishing activities and retail sales, TV and radio production, programming, broadcasting, distribution and online media trends), a crucial similarity is linked to the **heavy vulnerability to influences from political and economic interests, especially through ownership and funding streams**. The lack of transparency of media ownership patterns, combined with weakly enforced legal provisions, has been reinforced by the dependence on large commercial advertisers in small advertisement markets as well as by the oligarchization of the media markets of the five countries (whereby oligarchic networks exhibit close ties to Russian businesses).¹ Oligarchization has been particularly visible and detrimental in the cases of Bulgaria and Ukraine.

As this report and previous studies have highlighted,² the oligarchic networks in the Black Sea counties have often established connections to Russia-related businesses (including publicly funded Russia-led large infrastructural projects), as well as to domestic political leaders who maintain good relations with Moscow. Moreover, the **coupling of media ownership with strong political relations to top-level officials** and political leaders has two important spillover effects. First, such a coupling supports the concentration of both public and private funds in chosen media companies, often tightly linked to Russian foreign policy or pro-Russian private interests. Second, the coupling of media ownership with political relations offers to the national governments a major tool for effective control over editorial policy in favor of local and foreign (e.g. Russian) political or economic interests, even though the official position of the government is balanced and neutral regarding the same issues.

The analysis reveals **two different trends of Russian influence in the media sectors** of the Black Sea countries. In countries where the official Russian media are not widely or at all present (e.g. Bulgaria) or even banned (e.g. in Ukraine),

¹ Freedom House, Freedom of the Press, 2018
Reporters without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index*.

² Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.
Shentov, O. (eds.) (2018), *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming)
Center for the Study of Democracy, *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks*, 2018.

media ownership is only one of the tools for influence in the media sector. Other, more frequently employed tools, focus on the engagement of larger communities of content creators and providers loyal to or dependent on Russia. In addition, indirectly-controlled non-media companies are used for influencing media decision-making and agenda-setting through (in)formal links, PR and marketing budgets, support for Russia-related events, etc. In the countries, where the official Kremlin media and media, controlled legally through Russian ownership, management or funding (e.g. Armenia, Georgia and partially Moldova), have strong presence, the same tools are used to reinforce susceptibility to Russian influence as complementary to direct media ownership. Even beyond the Black Sea region, Russia's maintenance of directly or indirectly controlled media is utilized for exercising malign influence over national internal and foreign policies in favor of the Kremlin's economic and political interests. This has become possible due to the fact that since the end of the Cold War, democratic institutions (including the regulatory oversight of the media sectors in the West) have been functioning on the assumption that the times of hostile Brezhnev-era propaganda have already passed.

The comparative findings aggregated from the country-specific investigations allow drawing conclusions about **cross-case similarities and differences along three main dimensions**.

The first comparative dimension includes the identification of generalized **commonalities of pro-Russian propaganda enunciation and communication** present among all the selected media outlets in Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia. There is a congruent representation of topics and narratives in relation to the themes of the war in Syria, energy and election meddling, which matches the propagandist discourses emanating from the Kremlin. The war in Syria receives the most coverage, followed by Russia-linked energy issues, and the Russian meddling in elections. Additionally, the media outlets in the five countries display a general resemblance in terms of stylistic modes of transmission of the pro-Russian topics and narratives (with a predominant preference for emotional influencing and sensationalism as opposed to evidence-based reporting). News coverage based on references to Russian sources and (pro-) Russian opinions without consistent authorship attribution is also privileged. Overall, such attitude-inducing modes of message transmission result in the binary depiction of Russia in positive and of the West in negative terms.

The second comparative dimension is linked to the substantiation of the argument that in addition to overarching trends of pro-Kremlin journalistic suasion, **different degrees of political-economic enmeshment with (pro-) Russian interests are reflected in differentiated patterns of propaganda** narration and dissemination:

- One degree of enmeshment encompassing **domestic media, which have a broad national audience and claim formal independence from (observable) links to Russia through ownership** (although there can be informal or hidden affiliations to Russian groups and interests), is characterized by the following journalistic features: the inclusion of empirically varied and analytically nuanced articles with an occasional focus on alternative (anti-Russian) positions, conceptual framing and more rounded as opposed to one-sided and twisted reporting; the incorporation of locally-sensitive, relevant and originating perspectives; a greater emphasis on a neutral communication of messages.

- The second degree of enmeshment, embodied by **small-scale media outlets with clearly traceable links to Russia through ownership**, is characterized by a wider and more detailed treatment of issue areas, the provision of analytical framing and attention to nationally-relevant perspectives. Yet, these features are distinguished by more overt partisanship, sweeping analytical and historical generalizations and a more diluted commitment to neutral reporting.
- The third degree of enmeshment, referring to **Sputnik-style media**, where the national editions of this outlet disseminate officially-sanctioned pro-Kremlin content, is delineated by the scarcity of nationally-relevant and sensitive viewpoints as well as the simplest, most repetitive and explicitly biased form of message transmission.

The third comparative dimension encompasses the observation that the distinctive features of the national media landscapes frame specific discourses on Russia-related developments and thus further shape the relationship between types of ownership and patterns of propaganda.

As regards **Bulgaria**, there are three clearly differentiated patterns of content provision that could be attributed to the weaker presence of an inherited official Russian media impact on Bulgarian media (such as the absence of Soviet descended channels, the decline of the Russian language, a very small number of outlets operating in Bulgaria but originating in Russia).

In **Ukraine**, the overall political context, which is severely critical of and attempts to resist Russian military aggression on Ukrainian territory and has introduced restrictions on Russia-originating broadcasting, circumscribes the extent and intensity of propagation of Kremlin narratives. These limitations are especially observed by pro-Russian media outlets claiming nation-wide readership. Similarly, **Georgia's** vigorous assertion of its European identity and Euro-Atlantic vector of development as well as the limited segment of Georgians, who inform themselves from Russia-originating channels (primarily trusted by the Russian ethnic minority), means that the public discourse cannot be completely overrun by Kremlin messaging.

In **Moldova** and **Armenia**, there is a much more unified and overlapping propagation of Russian narratives not least because of these countries' retention of extensive media ties to Russia. Such ties have encompassed the presence of a wide range of Russia-originating outlets (including the continued operation of Soviet-inherited sources) and a significant popularity and knowledge of the Russian language.

The established similarities and differences among the five states under investigation allows the identification of **policy recommendations** that are not only country-specific but also propose cross-regionally applicable ways of tackling Russian propaganda and in particular:

- Assert strong EU leadership and launch an EU joint response:
 - **Build resilience against media capture.** In the last decade, the EU response to Kremlin hybrid attacks is still fragmented and un-coordinated. Thus, it should further strengthen and integrate initiatives like the East StratCom Task Force with the European External Action Service, research

funding on disinformation, propaganda and related cyber-security threats under the EU framework programs for research and innovation (FP7, H2020), policy research and advice by the European Institute for Security Studies, etc. Moreover, further coordination with the relevant NATO and US efforts is also necessary. The EU needs to design and declare a strong and comprehensive policy response to the Russian hybrid threat, including aiming at building and enforcing the resilience of EU member states against media capture and foreign malign economic and political influence in the media sector, particularly focusing on online media.³

- **Build expertise** for both identifying and tackling hybrid threats, especially through setting the respective priorities in EU programs for research and innovation, and in cooperation with the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, the European Network and Information Security Agency, European Defence Agency, the European Institute for Security Studies and other relevant institutions.
- **Establish a high-level task force** within the European Anti-Fraud Office, entitled to trace and investigate covert Russian-linked financial flows related to the media sectors of the EU member and candidate states, and the Eastern Neighborhood countries.
- **Encourage EU institutions and member states to enhance anti-corruption and development assistance mechanisms** to help the most vulnerable countries build greater resilience to Russian influence.⁴
- **Strengthen the EU legislation on anti-money laundering, financial transparency and shell companies** with a focus on transparency and accountability of media companies in the member states and in countries, in which the EU promotes media freedom and transparency.
- In the Black Sea region, the EU should **use its Eastern Partnership initiative to extend its efforts on tackling media capture** by improving media ownership transparency and countering Russian disinformation and propaganda. Better integration of the Eastern Partnership initiatives with those in the Western Balkans and in the new member states of the EU in relation to Russia and its disinformation and propaganda activities is also necessary.
- **Facilitate the development of high professional standards in the media sectors** across the EU and the Black Sea region by encouraging self-regulation and enforcement of existing regulatory frameworks, related to media freedom and transparency.
- **Accelerate and facilitate the cross-border learning, engagement, pooling of expertise and sharing of experience** through the creation of common platforms to identify and tackle pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation,

³ For a more detailed discussion on possible tools and measures, see US Congress (2018), *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security*, A Minority Staff Report prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations, January 10, 2018, US Government Publishing Office, Washington: 2018.

⁴ This recommendation targets more widely the overall Russian economic influence in Europe and was proposed initially in: Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

and through the development of networks of support (for instance, through early warning and rapid assistance in cases of attacks on journalists).

- **Strengthen the administrative and professional capacity of national media regulatory bodies** and introduce stricter enforcement of legislation on the **transparency of media ownership** as well as on accountability of **state allocation of advertising and financing to media** in the Black Sea countries.
- Facilitate existing and create new **independent public monitoring tools** (e.g. following the model of the EU Disinformation Review online platform), which consistently highlight, reveal, and challenge Russian propaganda and disinformation, following the rules of impartial news reporting and research.
- Elaborate **new techniques for identifying fake news, propaganda and disinformation** such as browser plugins, site rankings, etc.
- Educate and train the general public how to recognize biased coverage and obtain reliable information (such as by rigorously checking news sources, references and author details).

INTRODUCTION

The level of uncertainty in the Black Sea region has increased considerably since Russia annexed Crimea and began its intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2013. Together with the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, it was a new high in a trend, dating back to at least 2004, which awoke the West to the fact that the Kremlin seeks active revision of European post-Cold War agreements, and has engaged all possible means, including military, economic, energy, and soft power.⁵ All countries in the Black Sea region but in particular non-EU and non-NATO members have witnessed a growing malign Russian interference. An especially critical problem has been media propaganda, disinformation and fake news, which, coupled with exploitation of persisting governance deficits in the region, render local democratic debates increasingly poisoned and prone to extreme populist views.⁶

Russia has been able to exploit its non-transparent political, economic and social influence in the former Soviet bloc to undermine the unity of the Euro-Atlantic community on countering the threat from the East. The Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine has demonstrated that despite the concerted US and EU sanctions against Russia, the Kremlin regime has been determined and able to continue its bellicose foreign policy. The impact of this renewed assertiveness has been felt strongly beyond Ukraine, where Russia has been able to leverage its role as the main energy supplier to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and in particular to the Black Sea and Western Balkans regions, to expand its economic and political influence.⁷

The tools Russia has used in expanding its influence are not new to the region or globally. They include **a mixture of state capture instruments, media propaganda and disinformation, as well as geopolitical pressure.**⁸ Through them the governments in the region, including those of some NATO and EU members, have been swayed to adopt policies that are not consistent with their national strategic priorities in the fields of foreign policy, energy and national

⁵ Mankoff, J. (2016), *Russia's Challenge to the European Security Order*.

⁶ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

⁷ Shentov, O. (eds) (2018). *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming).

⁸ For state capture see Center for the Study of Democracy (2018), *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks*, Center for the Study of Democracy (2016), *State Capture Diagnostics Roadmap*

For media propaganda and disinformation see US Congress (2018), *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security*, A Minority Staff Report prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations, January 10, 2018, US Government Publishing Office, Washington: 2018.; and

Meister, S. (2016), *Isolation and Propaganda: The Roots and Instruments of Russia's Disinformation Campaign*.

economic development but benefit the interests of Russia. The roots of this malign influence go back to the 1990s and 2000s, when Russia started availing itself of and reinforcing the governance deficits and vulnerabilities in the CEE countries, using its political and economic power.

The current report aims at shedding light on **Russia's presence and tactics in the media sectors of five Black Sea countries** (Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia) through a deeper understanding of the links between media ownership and anti-Western propaganda as part of the tools of the Russian malign influence in the region. Together with Soviet-era-inspired active measures such as media manipulation and the spread of fake news, the Kremlin has employed meddling in pre-election campaigns, and the financing of political parties and NGOs. The links between the use of hard and soft power were made visible during the early stages of Russia's intervention in Ukraine following the 2013 Maidan protests that toppled Ukraine's former president, Viktor Yanukovich. The image created by Russian-controlled media that the revolution was a fascist coup supported by the US and the EU was used by the Kremlin to quickly justify a Russian intervention in Crimea. The arrival of "little green men" in Crimea was preceded by a loud media and disinformation campaign instilling the perception that the authorities in Kyiv had backed paramilitary neo-Nazi groups terrorizing the Russian-speaking population.

PATTERNS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE MEDIA OF THE BLACK SEA REGION

Media propaganda and disinformation have become decisive for Russia to benefit from the persisting governance deficits in the Black Sea region countries. With the attraction of the “alternative” Eurasian Economic Union model of governance and integration fading, the Kremlin’s agenda has shifted towards disrupting the further integration of the ex-communist countries into the Euro-Atlantic area, while undermining their efforts to uphold integrity and governance standards. Using media propaganda and disinformation, Russia has also aimed to weaken the credibility and moral authority of the European Union and NATO, particularly among aspiring members such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia but also among EU and NATO members.⁹

To better understand how Moscow has been able to use traditional and non-traditional media to spread propaganda and disinformation in the Black Sea region, one should take a closer look at the media market in Central and Eastern Europe. The Russian influence in the media sector of the region has become more and more visible in recent years. **Russia has been expanding its direct and indirect support to both Russia-owned and domestic pro-Russian media over the last five years.** The media has played an important role in the Kremlin’s hybrid warfare, as it has a very high impact and importance in the political process and in the institutional checks and balances in EU democracies.¹⁰ Moscow’s exercise of media leverage has been supported by a diverse set of instruments.

- Domestically, **the Kremlin bolsters its media machine via regulatory mechanisms.** In October 2014, foreign ownership of Russia media was restricted to 20 percent. Roskomnadzor, the federal media oversight agency, has engaged in several waves of restricting independent media: it blacklisted about 185 news websites in 2012 and another 85 major opposition websites in 2014. Holding bloggers responsible for readers’ comments (if they have more than 3,000 readers) is another serious threat to freedom of speech and alternative media development in Russia.
- Simultaneously with restricting foreign access to its domestic media market, Russia engages in conventional and non-conventional methods of **infiltrating the European information space.** The Kremlin-affiliated media outlets are used to both control coverage of events domestically and disseminate information

⁹ GLOBSEC (2016), *Central Europe under the fire of propaganda: Public opinion poll analysis in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.*

¹⁰ For a review of the threat of Russia propaganda in Europe, see Heather A. Conley, *Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe* (Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 3, 2015).

beyond Russia's borders. This strategy, labeled "diffusion proofing",¹¹ does not necessarily aim to prevent certain events or pieces of information from reaching domestic or foreign audiences. Instead, it is a carefully crafted strategy of **counter-balancing Western coverage with a pro-Russian twist**.

- o To achieve its strategy of "diffusion proofing" not only internally in Russia but also at global, European, and country levels, **Russia supports a media apparatus** that includes international and in-country formally and informally Kremlin-controlled media outlets and information channels that interact and reinforce one another.¹² Prominent examples of global and Europe-wide, influence-peddling include the activities of the two major Russian news agencies *TASS* and *Rossiia Segodnya*, as well as of the international TV channel *RT*, formerly branded by its full name *Russia Today*. All of them are state-owned and have provided pro-government coverage ever since. *TASS* is one of the largest news agencies worldwide. *Rossiia Segodnya* was created by an Executive Order of the President of Russia in December 2013, incorporating the former incumbent news agency *RIA Novosti*. In November 2014 *RIA Novosti* launched the *Sputnik International* online platform as the international replacement of *RIA Novosti* news service and the international radio service *Voice of Russia*. The state-funded international TV channel *RT* is owned by the "Independent Not-for-profit Organisation TV-Novosti" – an NGO established by *RIA Novosti* in 2005. In 2007 *TV-Novosti* established also the "international multimedia project *Russia Beyond* ... with the aim to become the major source [of information] for Russian culture, tourism, education, language, business and many others".¹³ *Russia Beyond*, which is part of the analyzed media outlets in the current report, acts as an online tabloid-style media, supplementing the prominent *Sputnik* presence. The interactions and the interweaving of these major news agencies and media, controlled and funded by the Russian government, despite their claimed formal autonomy thereof, are visible in the fact that since December 2013 three of them – the TV channel *RT*, the news agency *Rossiia Segodnya* and the multimedia platform *Russia Beyond*, have Ms Margarita Simonyan as their editor-in-chief.¹⁴
- o Some of the Russian-related influence in the media sector is less immediately obvious, however. For instance, *The Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company* (known as *VGTRK* standing for the Russian-language abbreviation of the name), which owns 5 TV channels (among them the major channel *Rossiia 1* and its international edition *RTR Planeta* broadcasted in Europe, the U.S., the Near East and North Africa), 4 radio stations and several online news-platforms (among them *Vesti.ru* – the third most popular news web-portal in Russia)¹⁵ have owned for a decade a share in *Euronews*, with Russia's representatives sitting on the *Euronews'* Supervisory board.¹⁶

¹¹ The term was coined by Karrie Koesel and Valerie Bunce. See: Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce, *Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers*, Perspectives on Politics, Vol. 11, Issue 03, September 2015: 753-768.

¹² Yalamov, T. (2018), *Russian Influence, Trust in Media and Media Capture*. In: Shentov, O. (eds) (2018). *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming)

¹³ *Russia Beyond's* official web-site.

¹⁴ According to information on the official web-sites of *Russia Beyond*, *Rossiia Segodnya* and *Russia Today*.

¹⁵ *VGTRK* official web-site.

¹⁶ Yalamov, T. (2018), *Russian Influence, Trust in Media and Media Capture*. In: Shentov, O. (eds) (2018). *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming)

Even though Russia controlled shares in *Euronews* declined from 16.9% in 2009 to 7.5% in 2015 and then to 2.29% in 2017, two of Russia's representatives have stayed on the 12-member supervisory board until 2016. One has since remained on the board.¹⁷ Some foreign media have expressed their concern about "pro-Russia colored" stories in *Euronews*, while Ukrainian investigative journalists even accused it of spreading disinformation and fake news in its coverage of Ukraine.¹⁸ Moreover, a substantial part of the *Euronews* coverage in Ukraine is produced by *Inter Media Group Limited*, which is owned by oligarchs Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Liovochkin – both related to the pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich.¹⁹

- o Unlike the case of *Euronews*, the retransmission of Russian TV and radio stations in foreign countries looks like an obvious example of direct and easily traceable influence. However, the **complex mixture of ownership-networks and particularly, subcontracting the rights for retransmission to domestic companies operating often outside the media sector**, makes the case not so obvious. A good example for this is *RTR Planeta* TV channel (owned by VGTRK – the shareholder in *Euronews*), which has become infamous in recent years, when its retransmission from Sweden to Lithuania was suspended three times for different periods – most recently for a whole year until February 2019, due to **incitement of hatred**. In all three cases, the European Commission, which is required to assess the measures taken by the national authorities according to the *Audiovisual Media Services Directive*,²⁰ confirmed the decisions and the violations of the EU law.²¹ *RTR Planeta*, which claims to have about 30 million people audience worldwide, is broadcasted in all five Black Sea countries, analyzed in the current report.²² In a telling case, the rights for retransmission of *RTR Planeta* in Bulgaria are held by a local company (*Marlin Media Ltd.*) and unlike the information about the company's ownership, management and financials, which is publicly accessible, there is no official information about the contracts for retransmission and their financial dimensions. However, at least in this case, the company has only *RTR Planeta* in its portfolio, including offering advertisement spots in the channel, and at the same time is fully owned by a group of Russian citizens.²³ The company's annual financial records show that it is a loss-making company in the last 3 years but contrary to business logic it continues to function. Even though the company is registered outside the media sector in Bulgaria, it is a clear example of one of the possible ways of channeling Russia influence to the same sector.

¹⁷ Euronews Might Become Less Objective After Selling 25% Stake to NBC, *Sputnik International*, 01.06.2017.

¹⁸ How Moscow is spreading its propaganda using EU-funded media, by Alex Bosk, 03.12.2017.

¹⁹ See, for instance, information on Intern Media Group on the official website of Media Ownership Monitor Ukraine.

²⁰ Directive 2010/13/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 March 2010 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services.

²¹ Lithuania's decision to suspend broadcast of the Russian language channel "RTR Planeta" complies with EU rules, EC, 08.05.2018.

²² Lithuania suspends the transmission of Russian-language RT Planeta (Литва отново спира разпространението на рускоезичната RTR Planeta), *Media Law (Медийно право)*.

²³ According to the official web-site of the company and information in the Commercial Register as of 26.07.2018.

- In addition to economic and political mechanisms for supporting and strengthening the position of pro-Russian media abroad, the Kremlin uses actively **other soft power instruments** such as **awarding media or their staff with various honors**, related to the cultural or educational sphere (although this is not a distinctive characteristic of Russian policy for supporting friendly media). An example of such an indirect Russian influence in the Black Sea countries' media sectors through establishing hidden links between policy, business and culture is the Bulgarian publisher of the newspapers *Zemia* (analyzed as an example in the current report) and the bi-lingual Russian/Bulgarian newspaper *Russia dnes* (*Russia today*). The co-founder and editor-in-chief of the two newspapers Ms. Svetlana Sharenkova²⁴ was honored in 2013 by the Russian President Vladimir Putin for her overall activities supporting Russian-Bulgarian relations, while a year later *Rusia dnes* was awarded the Annual Media Prize of the Russian Federation. In a similar example in Georgia, one of the members of the Public Council of the pro-Russian media outlet *Historical Heritage* Mr. Aleksandre Chachia, a Moscow-based political analyst, was awarded in 2014 by the Russian President Vladimir Putin with the Order of Honor for his contribution to strengthening friendship and cooperation with the Russian Federation.

As the above examples demonstrate, Russia uses a diverse set of instruments (direct corporate ownership of media being only one of them) to push into the public space in the Black Sea region both nuanced pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation that get requoted and republished in a number of other unrelated media outlets after that. In such a way, Russia sows mistrust in society by deepening political divides with the ultimate goal of breaking up the functioning of fledgling democratic institutions. While the EU and NATO member-states have built some capacity, albeit not fully adequate, to withstand the external pressure via media standards and rule of law, the **resilience capacity of post-Soviet countries in the Black Sea region has remained much lower**. Perhaps the most troubling consequence of the expansion of the Russian disinformation and propaganda campaign in the region is that it has **amplified the ongoing shift in the national political life towards authoritarian and nationalistic directions**. At the same time, the weakening of governance standards within the region, and the West's seemingly weak response to it,²⁵ has contributed to the rise of political and economic forces that seek to undermine the Euro-Atlantic orientation of these countries and foster closer ties with Moscow.

Although in many European countries, including in the Black Sea region (e.g. Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine) the national regulatory framework puts **formal requirements for the transparency of the funding and/or ownership of the media**, the implementation of these requirements is problematic. In many cases, the existing requirements cover only particular types of media or certain features of funding and ownership, which hinders the identification and analysis of tools and channels for covert foreign influence over the media. For instance, the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture maintained a public register of final beneficial owners of print media but the electronic media (TV, radio and online media) are not subject to disclosing the same information. In Georgia, the requirement for financial transparency through quarterly reports about the financing sources,

²⁴ According to the Register of the submitted declarations regarding Article 7, par.3 of the Law for compulsory deposit of printed media as of 14.06.2018, *Bulgarian Ministry of Culture*.

²⁵ Babayan, N. (2016), *The In-Betweeners: The Eastern Partnership Countries and the Russia-West Conflict*, 2015 – 2016 Paper Series No. 5, Transatlantic Academy, Washington D.C.

applies only to broadcasting media and in addition, it is not fully enforced since major TV channels have challenged it in court. In other countries like Armenia, there is no specific legislation about disclosing media financing and ownership and, moreover, the information for certain types of companies is not publicly accessible. On the other end of the spectrum are countries like Ukraine, where since 2015 the newly enacted legislation has required TVs and radios to disclose their final beneficial ownership, while the registration procedure for print media makes companies' financial and direct ownership information also publicly available.

Pro-Russian media have successfully used the limitations to the enforcement of transparency measures in Black Sea countries in order to hide their **ownership and funding**. This is most clearly visible in the case of the **online media sector**, which remains **an exception from the transparency measures**. It is subject only to general regulations regarding legal entities in the respective country but because of the specifics of the internet it features the highest degree of anonymity and possibilities for hiding ownership and decision-making structures. The use of foreign web-servers and services, which allow for full anonymity of both the owner and the content creators and editors (if different), as well as the restrictions of the EU General Data Protection Regulation for disclosing the so called "WHOIS" information on domain name holders, which entered into force recently, make **the online media the most non-transparent part of the media sector**. At the same time, the possibilities for publishing, aggregating, processing and re-publishing of information, including through the use of automated Artificial Intelligence-based systems, have boomed in the last decade and offer practically unlimited opportunities for content creation and dissemination, even without considerable initial investment. For instance, this practice has been exposed in journalistic investigations of Bulgarian news web-sites,²⁶ not associated with major existing media. The investigation has identified 65 related web-sites. Although the majority of them has mastered only small audiences according to the available usage statistics, the top 10 generated more than 5 million user clicks (impressions) per month. The investigation has revealed an important common characteristic. Most of the web-sites publish news with clear pro-Russian and anti-Western, anti-NATO and anti-EU narratives, including creating and disseminating fake or manipulated news.²⁷ In the majority of cases, the information about the ownership of these web-sites has been missing and even if some data could be found in WHOIS databases, national business registers and other public sources, it shows that behind the web-site stands either a single physical person or a micro company with negligible capital and one or at most two employees. Yet, due to the multiplying effect of the entire network of these web-sites, the indiscriminate consumption patterns of most users, and due to low professional journalistic standards, they have been often used by both state-funded national media and a large number of people as a source of "original" and trustful information.

²⁶ Capital weekly, *The smoke-screen of the false media* (Димната завеса на мнимите медии), 18.12.2015.

²⁷ Another investigation by a private blogger revealed that most of these web-sites feature advertisements through the adnow.com platform, owned by a London-based company, which has Russian citizens as its final beneficial owners and top managers. See: Strange media (Странни медии), Milen Georgiev's personal blog.

LINKS BETWEEN MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE BLACK SEA COUNTRIES

As a continuation of the assessment of **the economic aspects of the Kremlin's soft power influence** previously carried out by CSD,²⁸ this report examines the links between media ownership and dissemination of Russian propaganda narratives in the media sectors of five Black Sea countries – Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia. The report sets out to compare and contrast the media situation in states that exhibit varying degrees of integration in the Euro-Atlantic community, are subject to different levels of Russian power assertion and corresponding resilience to it as well as display distinct extents of democratisation, especially in terms of freedom of expression. All of these factors chart out the overall susceptibility of the respective state to Russian influence.

Among the five countries **Bulgaria** is the one **most integrated in Euro-Atlantic structures**, having become a member of of NATO in 2004 and of the EU in 2007. Yet, it is vulnerable economically and politically to Russian influence, further embodying characteristics of a captured state.²⁹ **Georgia** and **Ukraine** are associate partners of the EU and receive advice, assistance and support for their reform efforts (including in the defence sector) in the framework of the Georgia-NATO and Ukraine-NATO Commission.³⁰ These two states have **displayed significant persistence in their Euro-Atlantic aspirations** even in the face of Russian objection leading to a loss of territory and direct military intervention such as the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 and the Russian intervention in Ukraine that began in late 2013.³¹

Moldova has stayed the course of European integration but with a **weak enthusiasm for reform and strong vulnerability to Russian pressure**. Indeed, weak state institutions, an ineffective judiciary, significant developmental challenges (including poverty and inequality),³² partly free press freedom status³³ have

²⁸ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

Shentov, O. (eds.) (2018), *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming)

Center for the Study of Democracy (2018) *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks*,

²⁹ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *Bulgaria: What State Capture Looks Like*, in *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield, 42–47.

³⁰ NATO (2009), *Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration*.

³¹ Neil MacFarlane (2012), *Georgia: National Security Concept versus National Security*, Chatham House, 20.; Hennadiy Maksak and Olga Mashtaler (2017), *Ukraine in the Coordinates of the Eastern Partnership 2017-2020*, Ukrainian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 48.

³² Alison Mutler (2012), *European Aspiration and Human Development of the Republic of Moldova*, National Human Development Report.

³³ Freedom House (2017), *Freedom of the Press 2017: Moldova*.

facilitated the capture of Moldovan politics by oligarchs.³⁴ All of these trends have derailed Moldovan society's hopes that reforms on the European model would be successfully carried out and would lead to a better quality of life.³⁵ The unrecognized entity of Transnistria, where ethnic Russians form a majority of the population, provides further leverage to Moscow in attempting to divert Chisinau from the Euro-Atlantic path.

Armenia has **opted out of the Association Agreement** with the EU, preferring to conduct foreign policies that hedge between East and West. Yet, a policy of "complementarity" between the Eastern and Western vector is belied by Armenia's strategic partnership with Russia (not least given Moscow's military base on Armenian territory) and political-military reliance on the Kremlin in Yerevan's conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation – both organization having been led by the Russian Federation. Domestically, the weakening of the course of reform have further distanced the country from European standards although the recent protests against entrenched political power may change this trend.³⁶

The Media Landscape

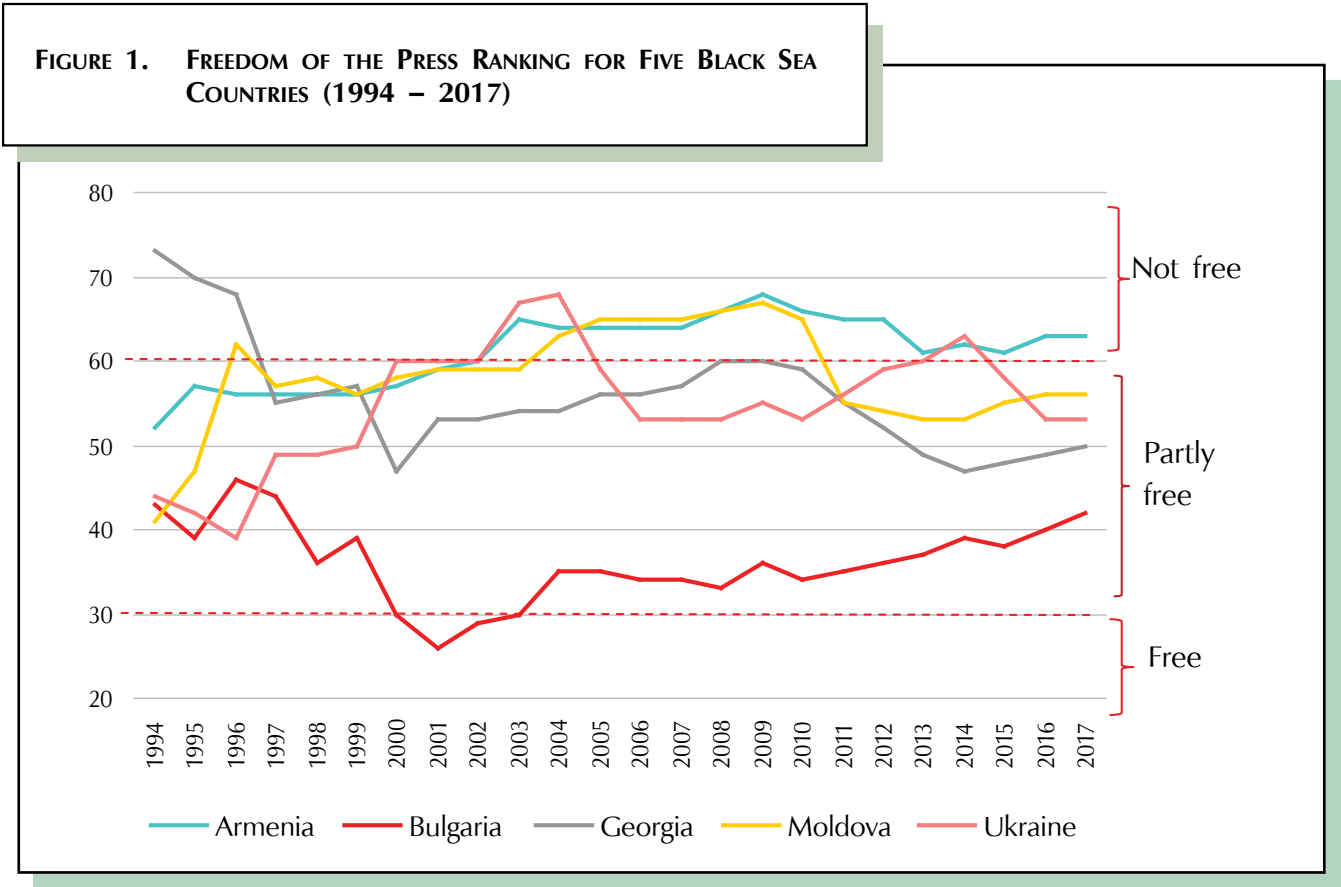
According to the Freedom of the Press ranking,³⁷ in the last twenty years the five countries have displayed **similar trajectories regarding media independence** as measured by the legal environment for the media, political pressures that influence media policies, and economic factors that affect access to news and information. However, Bulgaria and Georgia have "partly free" media, with Bulgaria being closer to the group of countries with independent ("free") media. Yet, Bulgaria is the country, which demonstrates a trend of worsening of its position since 2001, while Georgia has advanced, particularly after 2009. On the contrary, Armenia has the worst ranking for the whole period after 1994, even though it has advanced slightly in the last five years. Ukraine and Moldova have passed through dynamic changes crossing the border between "partly free" and "not free" media in different stages of their development, but like Armenia, have advanced in the last years (particularly visible for Ukraine after 2014).

³⁴ Hrant Kostanyan (2016), *Why Moldova's European Integration Is Failing*, Centre for European Policy Studies.

³⁵ Victor Chirila (2015), *A Focus on Moldova*, in *Eastern Partnership Revisited. Associated Countries in Focus*, ed. Grzegorz Gromadzki and Bastian Sendhardt, Stefan Batory Foundation/Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

³⁶ Mikael Zolyan (2018), *Inside the Explosive Case Against Armenia's Ex-President*, Carnegie Moscow Center.

³⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press*.

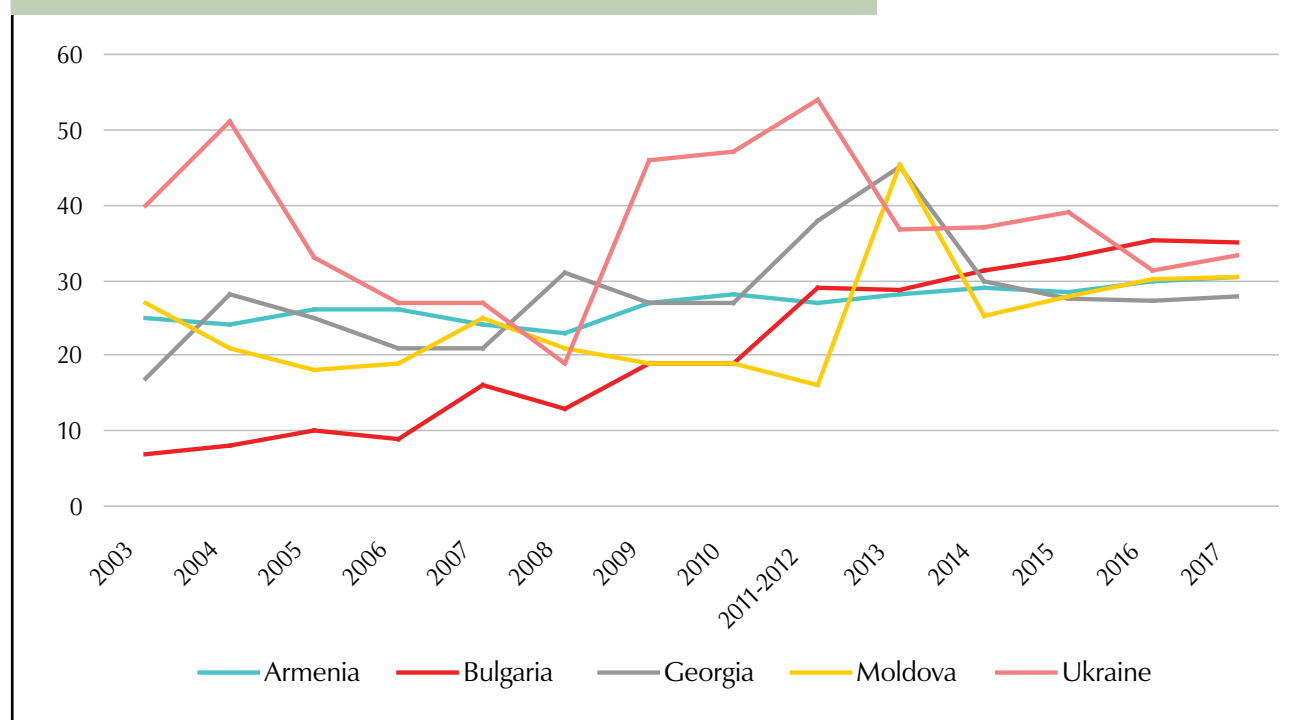


Source: *Freedom of the Press*, Freedom House.

The World Press Freedom Index,³⁸ which also assesses the independence of the media, the quality of the legislative framework and the safety of journalists shows a slightly different picture of the media freedom in these countries. Again, all five countries have similar rankings, with Bulgaria starting from the best position in 2003 and declining to the level of the other four countries until 2017. Instead of Armenia, here Ukraine has the worst score during the whole period but again it makes considerable progress after 2012. Georgia, Moldova and Armenia have comparable trends of slight improvement in their positions for the whole period, with Moldova demonstrating the highest improvement among them after 2014.

³⁸ Reporters without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index*.

FIGURE 2. WORLD PRESS FREEDOM INDEX FOR FIVE BLACK SEA COUNTRIES (2003 – 2017)



Source: World Press Freedom Index, Reporters without Borders

Both rankings are underwritten by important similarities and differences.

- A key shared feature concerns the fact that **the media in these countries have been heavily vulnerable to influences from political and economic interests**, mainly through their ownership and funding streams. In particular, the lack of transparency regarding media ownership is pointed out as one of the major factors, which allows the capture of the media sectors by private interests. As the country cases in this report show, the small size of the advertisement markets in Bulgaria, Moldova and Armenia and the shift of advertisement budgets to online media in the past decade, have increased the vulnerability and dependence of the media sectors from large commercial advertisers and the state.
- Another common trend in all of the five countries is linked to the **oligarchization of the media sectors**. This has been particularly visible and detrimental in the cases of Bulgaria and Ukraine. The oligarchization, which goes hand in hand with **market concentration**, has reinforced the vulnerability of media companies to external economic and political influence related not only to the private interest of their owners but also to the interests of the owner's business partners and political associates and allies. As both the Ukrainian and Bulgarian cases in this report show, as well as previous studies

have highlighted,³⁹ the oligarchic networks in the Black Sea countries have often established connections to Russian-related businesses (including publicly funded Russia-led large infrastructural projects), and to domestic political leaders who maintain good relations with Russia. Moreover, the **coupling of media ownership with strong political relations to top-level officials** and political leaders have two important spillover effects. First, such a coupling supports the concentration of both public and private funds in chosen media companies, often tightly related to Russian foreign policy or pro-Russian private interests. Second, despite the fact that government censorship has been officially denied in all of the countries, the coupling of media ownership with political links offers to the national governments a major tool for effective control over the editorial policy in favor of local and foreign (e.g. Russian) political or economic interests, although the official position of the government is balanced and neutral regarding the same issues.

- Despite the similarities in the assessment of media independence in the five countries, there are major differences among them regarding the size and internal division of their media sectors, as well as the degree of direct and indirect foreign, including the Russian economic footprint. For the purpose of the analysis, **the media sector is defined as covering four sub-sectors**: i) print media publishing activities, ii) TV and radio production, programming, broadcasting and distribution, iii) online media activities, and iv) retail sale of print media.⁴⁰ Although diverging as regards national economic and population indicators, Bulgaria and Ukraine have similar media sectors in terms of number of companies (respectively 5161 and 5789 in 2016), while the Moldovan⁴¹ media sector is 7 times smaller (731 companies in 2016). When the total annual turnover of the companies and number of employees are considered, the Ukrainian media sector is respectively 40% and 60% bigger than the Bulgarian and more than 95% bigger than Moldova's. The company data for Armenia are not publicly accessible either through paid proprietary databases,⁴² or through national commercial and other public registers.⁴³ The respective data for Georgia are available only partially, covering only some of the relevant

³⁹ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

Shentov, O. (eds.) (2018), *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge (forthcoming)

Center for the Study of Democracy, *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks*, 2018.

⁴⁰ According to the International Classification of Main Economic Activities (NACE) Rev.2, this coverage includes the following NACE codes: 4762: Retail sale of newspapers and stationery in specialized stores; 5813: Publishing of newspapers; 5814: Publishing of journals and periodicals; 5819: Other publishing activities 5911: Motion picture, video and television program production activities; 5912: Motion picture, video and television program post-production activities; 5913: Motion picture, video and television program distribution activities; 6010: Radio broadcasting; 6020: Television programming and broadcasting activities; 6312: Web portals; 6391: News agency activities; 6399: Other information service activities not elsewhere classified.

⁴¹ Due to the lack of availability of comparable data, parts of the regional comparative analysis, such as of the size, turnover, employees, etc. includes only some of the five countries under investigation.

⁴² Amadeus database official website.

⁴³ The official aggregated statistical data could not be used for the subsequent analysis, which relies on mapping the networks of ownership and exploring the foreign corporate presence in the respective country and for that reason, have not been used here.

sub-sectors.⁴⁴ The **lack of publicly accessible information** about the companies in two of the analyzed countries, as well as the different degrees of the data gaps for the other countries are one of the major barriers, hindering the transparency and independence of the media sectors in the Black Sea region.

Overall, the analysis reveals **two different trends of Russian influence in the**

FIGURE 3. ANNUAL TURNOVER OF THE COMPANIES IN THE MEDIA SECTORS OF BULGARIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE (THOUSANDS EUR)



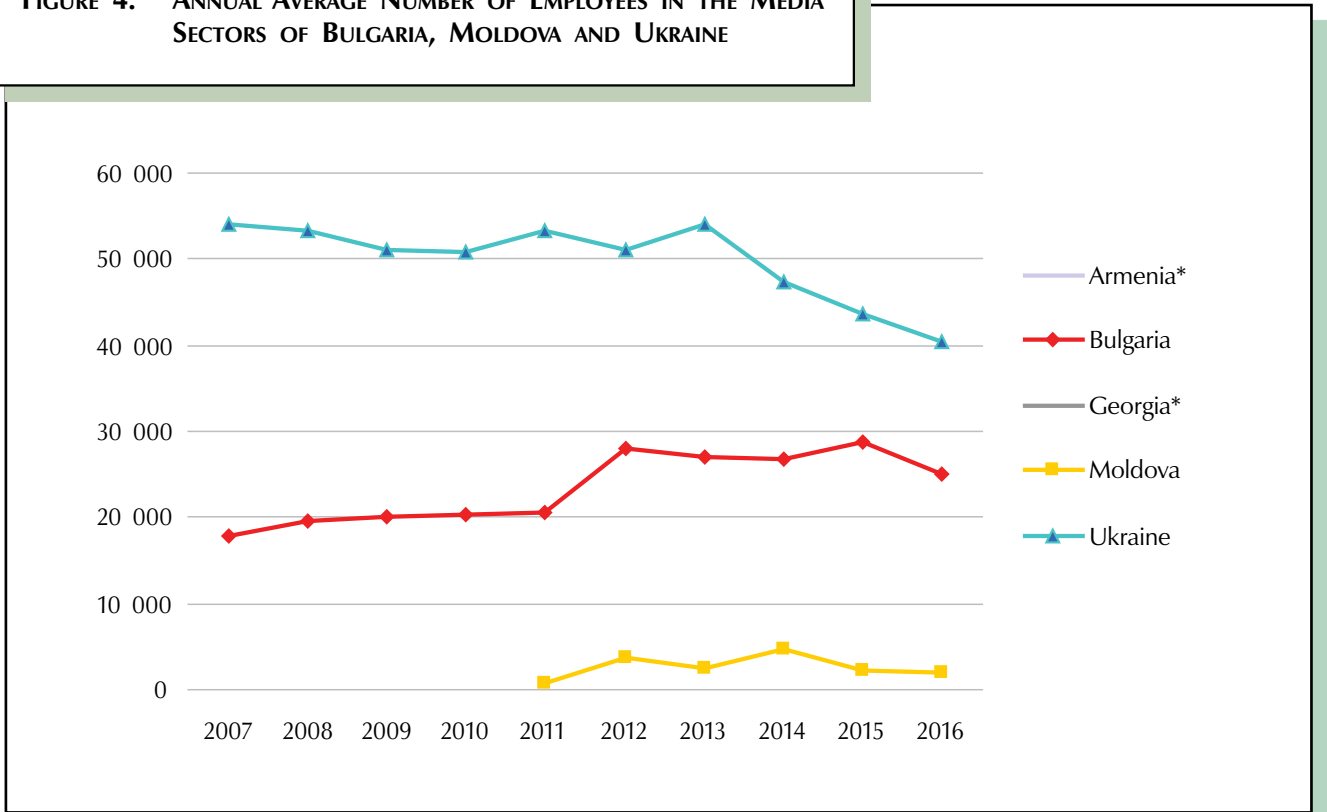
Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases

media sectors of the Black Sea countries.

In countries where the official Russian media are not widely present (e.g. Bulgaria) or even banned (e.g. in Ukraine), media ownership is only one of the tools deployed for influence in the media sector. The most often used tools rely on the engagement of larger communities of content creators and providers loyal to or dependent on Russia – RSS aggregator sites, small and medium online news platforms, independent journalists, individual bloggers and social-media opinion-makers, internet trolls, etc. In addition, indirectly-controlled non-media companies, utilized for influencing media decision-making and agenda-setting through (in) formal links, PR and marketing budgets, topics-setting, support for political, cultural, science and education, and sport activities, business/political relations with external stakeholders, etc. also play an important role.

⁴⁴ The data are available for 5 out of the total 12 sub-sectors according to NACE Rev.2 classification, and namely: 5813: Publishing of newspapers; 5814: Publishing of journals and periodicals; 5819: Other publishing activities; 6020: Television programming and broadcasting activities; 6391: News agency activities.

FIGURE 4. ANNUAL AVERAGE NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES IN THE MEDIA SECTORS OF BULGARIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE



Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases (*missing data).

In countries, where the official Kremlin media and media, controlled legally through Russian ownership, management or funding (e.g. Armenia, Georgia and partially Moldova), have strong presence, the same tools are used to reinforce the susceptibility to Russian influence, as complementary to direct media ownership the mainstream official media. In all countries (beyond the Black Sea region or Central and Eastern Europe), where Russia maintains directly or indirectly controlled media, they are employed for malign influence over the national internal and foreign policies in favor of Kremlin’s economic and political interests. This has become possible due to the fact that since the end of the Cold War democratic institutions in the West have been functioning on the assumption that the times of hostile Brezhnev-era propaganda have already passed.

Russia's Corporate Footprint in the Media Sectors of Bulgaria and Ukraine

Taking into consideration the limitations and gaps in the data, the report presents below an analysis of the foreign corporate economic footprint only for Bulgaria and Ukraine. According to the location of media companies' ultimate beneficial owners the two countries differ considerably. In addition to the approximately 5000 companies having final domestic ownership, foreign ultimate beneficial owners are less common in Bulgaria and come primarily from the USA (15 companies), some tax-heaven countries like the United Arab Emirates, Lichtenstein and British Virgin Islands (17 companies in total) and the EU (29 companies in total). The Bulgarian media companies with Russian ultimate beneficial owners are only two. In Ukraine the situation is different. In addition to the approximately 5200 companies with final domestic ownership, companies with foreign beneficial owners are about seven times more than in Bulgaria and the biggest group among them are Russian companies (211), followed by Cyprus (124 companies), Brazilian, Dutch, and British ones. The share of companies with foreign ultimate beneficial owners, registered in tax-heaven countries out of all companies with

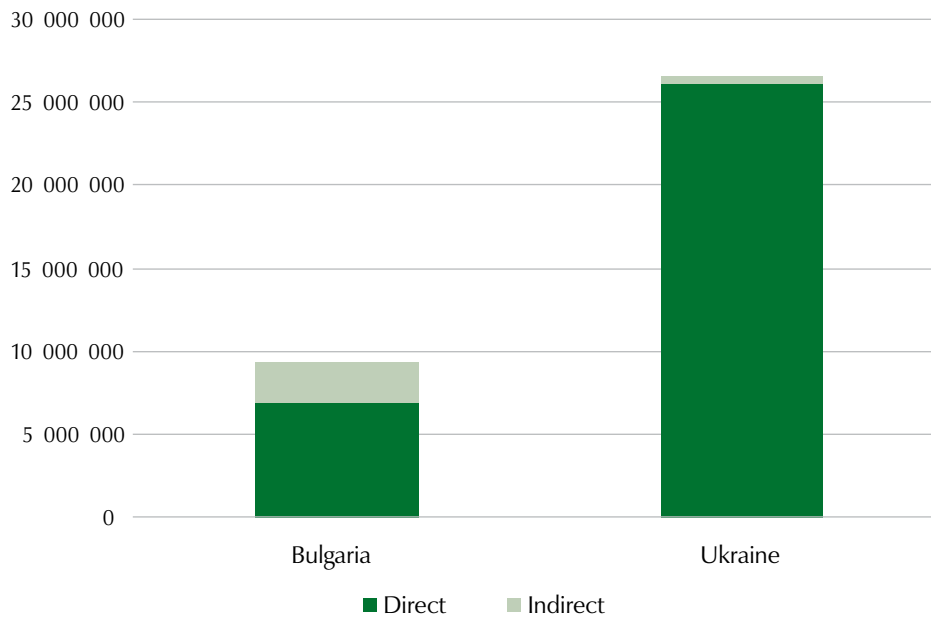
TABLE 1: SELECTED LOCATIONS OF FOREIGN FINAL BENEFICIAL OWNERS IN THE MEDIA SECTORS OF BULGARIA AND UKRAINE

| Country of beneficial owner | No of foreign beneficial owners | | No of companies | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------|-----------------|------------|
| | Bulgaria | Ukraine | Bulgaria | Ukraine |
| United States | 15 | 15 | 15 | 12 |
| United Arab Emirates | 8 | | 8 | |
| Austria | 5 | 6 | 5 | 6 |
| Great Britain | 5 | 27 | 5 | 22 |
| Greece | 5 | | 5 | |
| Liechtenstein | 6 | | 5 | |
| British Virgin Islands | 5 | 26 | 4 | 21 |
| Belize | 3 | 28 | 3 | 26 |
| Switzerland | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Germany | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Cyprus | 2 | 128 | 2 | 124 |
| France | 2 | 5 | 2 | 4 |
| Russia | 6 | 241 | 2 | 211 |
| The Netherlands | | 29 | | 26 |
| Other | 18 | 65 | 15 | 61 |
| TOTAL | 86 | 572 | 77 | 515 |

Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases.

foreign owners in Ukraine is much lower than in Bulgaria, as is the share of companies with owners, registered in the EU.

FIGURE 5: RUSSIAN CORPORATE FOOTPRINT IN THE MEDIA SECTORS OF BULGARIA AND UKRAINE (AVERAGE ANNUAL TURNOVER FOR 2014-2016)



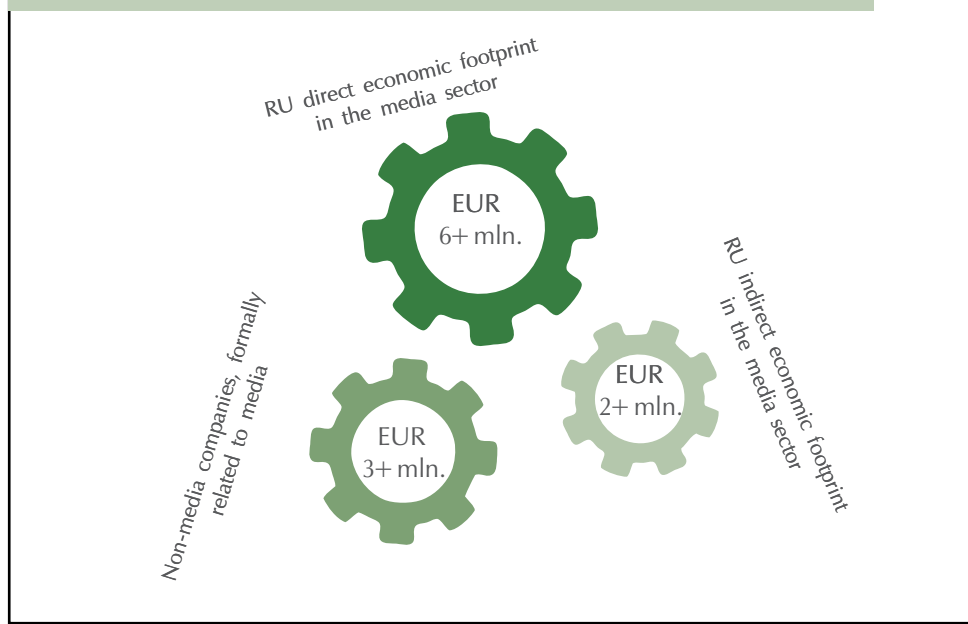
Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases.

The differences in the number of companies with foreign ultimate beneficial owners predetermine also the differences in the Russian economic footprint in the media sectors of Bulgaria and Ukraine. **Russia's corporate footprint in Ukraine** as measured by the turnover of media companies ultimately owned by Russian entities **is much higher than in Bulgaria**. Yet, the relative share of indirect Russian footprint⁴⁵ in Bulgaria is higher than in Ukraine, which reveals the different in-roads of the Russian influence in the two countries. The strategy is likely to change as the Ukrainian government gears further towards reducing Russia's direct influence on its economy, media and politics.

⁴⁵ The direct economic footprint measures the average annual turnover for the last 3 available years (2014-2016) of all companies from the respective country that have a Russian legal or physical person as the ultimate beneficial owner (UBO) of a minimum of 50.01% of the company's shares. The indirect economic footprint measures the average annual turnover for the same 3-year period of two sub-categories of companies: i) subsidiaries of the companies from the first group, belonging to the media sector and ii) media companies that are not legally related to Russian UBOs but their domestic owners have strong pro-Russian political and/or economic links. The 3-year period is used due to the gaps in the data (i.e. data not available for the last year).

In the case of Bulgaria, Russia-related companies influence the media sector through their subsidiaries or indirectly-controlled by them companies outside the media sector. The mechanisms for such an influence could be very different. Some of these companies are big advertisers (e.g. energy or telecommunication companies in Bulgaria), which pay for specific media campaigns through their subsidiaries in order to hide the real source of information. Other companies become financial donors of pro-Russian political, cultural or educational activities, etc. Estimates show that Russia's direct economic footprint through ownership of media companies in Bulgaria is almost on a par with its indirect control mechanism.

FIGURE 6: RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE BULGARIAN MEDIA SECTOR



Source: CSD calculations based on commercial corporate databases.

MAPPING THE PRO-RUSSIAN NARRATIVES IN THE BLACK SEA COUNTRIES' MEDIA

On the basis of an analysis of three pro-Russia media outlets in each of the five Black Sea countries, the report shows how various types of media are used for the resurgence of the Brezhnev-era Russian propaganda. The selected media belong to **three sub-groups according to the degree of their pro-Russian political-economic enmeshment:**

- The first sub-group includes **domestic media with a broad national audience** (among the top10 in each country) and **some degree of pro-Russian enmeshment**, although they claim formal independence from (observable) links to Russia through ownership, top management or declared editorial policy. There can still be informal or hidden affiliations to Russian groups and interests.
- The second sub-group includes **small-scale media outlets with clearly traceable links to Russia** through ownership or top management placements and with a small but entrenched audience. The rationale behind the news provision of these outlets is based on spreading content obtained from Russian media sources, while also generating authentic content reused by news agencies in Russia as evidence of the propagation of pro-Kremlin views in other countries.
- The third sub-group includes **Sputnik-type media outlets** or the national edition of this website if available. *Sputnik* targets the non-Russian audience abroad and as of 2018 operates more than 30 country-versions. *Sputnik* is one of the major channels for creating and delivering official pro-Kremlin content, being further involved in reinforcing and channeling the dissemination of fake news that originate in formally independent domestic news sources.⁴⁶

The main finding of the current report is that the **patterns of ownership, economic dependency and (in)formal political links of media outlets** in the countries under investigation to pro-Russian groups and interests are correlated with and reflected **into corresponding trends of employing Russia-originating propaganda narratives**. That is, **there are significant, consistently reproduced similarities of narration and style among the media outlets, given these sources' general pro-Russian tilt**. Still, the media outlets differ in such a way that the greater the political-economic enmeshment with Russian interests, the more congruously and undeviatingly the content of Russian narratives is matched,

⁴⁶ *Sputnik International* was established by the government-owned news agency *Rossiia Segodnya* in November 2014 as a combination of news agency, news website platform and radio broadcasting service, incorporating the former *RIA Novosti* news service and the international radio service *Voice of Russia*.

the less analytical variation and nationally-originating perspectives are included and the more explicitly biased the style of communication is.

Following expert assessment and formal criteria for the determination of the presence of pro-Russian narratives in the media, three media outlets were selected in the five countries, each of them belonging to one of the above sub-groups. The next step of the research focused on the deployment of a common search strategy so that all articles covering the following three preliminarily selected topics could be identified and coded.

- presentation of **Russia-related energy issues** (e.g. large international or domestic energy infrastructural projects such as the gas pipeline projects South Stream, Nord Stream 2, Turkish Stream, Belene nuclear power plant, etc.)
- suspected **Russian meddling in foreign elections**
- the **war in Syria**

Some disclaimers apply to the analysis. The assessment does not claim to draw conclusions about the whole of the countries' media landscapes or to evaluate the degree of the propaganda and disinformation narratives against benchmarks or in comparison to similar non-Russian or pro-Western media outlets. The selected timeframe between 2015 and 2017 encompasses the period immediately following 2014, which year was a crunch time in Russia-West tensions, marking the intensification of Russian information warfare,⁴⁷ the consolidation of Russia's conservative discourse, and the emergence of Western counter-measures. The Russian discourse began to be characterized by a set of Kremlin-sanctioned lines of argumentation about politics and international relations.⁴⁸ Hence, the report traces the corresponding intensified propagation (and even imposition) of Moscow narratives within the Black Sea region in relation to the three themes of the war in Syria, election meddling and Russian energy projects, which represent some of the most critical and frequently occurring topics in Russia-West relations.

The five-country analysis has yielded cross-case similarities and differences along **two main dimensions**. The first includes the identification of generalized **commonalities of pro-Russian propaganda enunciation and communication** exhibited in those segments of the media landscapes of the five states demonstrating pro-Russian leanings and entanglement. The second dimension encompasses the observation that national distinctiveness (especially as regards level of vulnerability to Russian influence) imparts characteristic features of the national media landscape, frames specific discourses on Russia-related developments and thus further shapes the hypothesized **relationship between types of ownership and patterns of propaganda**.

⁴⁷ Margarita Jaitner (2015), *Russian Information Warfare: Lessons from Ukraine*, in *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, ed. Kenneth Geers, Tallinn: NATO CCD COE Publications; Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely (2015), *Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine*, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 1.

⁴⁸ On Russia as a unique civilization promoting patriotism, state authority, traditional family values, balance of power and spheres of influence, see *Izvestiya*, *Минкультуры изложило 'Основы государственной культурной политики'* (The Ministry of Culture Has Put Forward 'The Foundations of State Culture Policy'), April 10, 2014.; Vladimir Putin, *Обращение Президента Российской Федерации*, (Address by the President of the Russian Federation), March 18, 2014.; Fyodor Lukyanov (2014), *Игра по правилам и без* (A Game with and without Rules), *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 5.

Common Features of Pro-Russian Propaganda

A key conclusion reached in all of the country-focused explorations highlights the presence of shared attributes of pro-Kremlin propaganda dissemination common to all media with Russian inclinations and ties (i.e., as a generalized overlay to the differentiations stemming from the more specific gradations of those inclinations and ties). And indeed, the aggregate comparative consideration of this conclusion across the five cases also reveals a similar overall trend of transmitting pro-Russian propaganda. According to this trend, the examined outlets in Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia converge on the propagation of overlapping content through analogous journalistic techniques. In particular, there is a congruent representation of topics and narratives in relation to the themes of Syria, energy and elections, which matches the propagandist discourses emanating from the Kremlin.

The war in Syria is the most heavily present theme across the selected media sources (41% of all articles in Bulgaria, 42% in Ukraine, 60% in Georgia, 65% in Moldova, 40% in Armenia). The specific topics that receive the greatest coverage concern Russia's diplomatic and military role in Syria. The main corresponding narratives assert the views that Moscow is the only actor, which contributes to the resolution of the crisis, consequently attaining international authority and influence; that Russia's military role is legitimate (since it is based on Syria leader Bashar al-Assad's request), successful and leads to the defeat of terrorism, all the while demonstrating the superiority of Russian military equipment and technological advancement, which can give the Kremlin the edge in a potential war with the West. Further key topics that are similarly covered in the five countries concern the Western diplomatic and military role in the Syrian crisis as well as Russia-West relations. The core lines of argumentation state that the illegitimate American involvement in the war, in particular, has not only shown that Washington pursues its selfish interests, escalates tensions, refuses to cooperate with Russia (on equal terms and in the name of finding a peaceful resolution) but that it is also a declining power. Relatedly, cross-country coverage of the topic of terrorism conveys the idea that the US supports Islamic State, aims at undermining Assad and obstructing the Kremlin's efforts to defeat the terrorists. Moreover, the topic of the chemical weapons attacks is identically framed in a way that aims to establish the Syrian President's innocence, the West's lack of evidence of the Assad government's guilt, suggesting instead that America tested its chemical weapons in Syria. The US airstrikes in response to the chemical attacks are said to have been incapable of causing material damage to the military infrastructure of the Damascus regime but led to civilian casualties. The questions of regional diplomacy and Russian-Turkish relations are also commonly discussed. The successes of the diplomatic and military cooperation between Moscow, Ankara and Tehran in terms of guaranteeing the peace process in Syria are extolled – as are the positive results of the Russian-Turkish partnership. Yet, the latter issue also features coverage of the vicissitudes of bilateral ties so that Turkey's downing of a Russian plane in November 2015 has been reflected in the media presentation of Ankara as a treacherous actor, sponsoring terrorism. The thaw in relations, however, reversed the critical treatment of Turkey. The final recurrent topic of pro-Russian propaganda analogously considered in the five countries is linked to the international consequences of the Syrian crisis, whereby a key narrative holds that Europe is being inundated with refugees, who have been infiltrated by terrorists that will Islamize Europe.

These shared topics and narratives - both separately disseminated within and also common across the five countries under investigation, resonate with Russia-originating propaganda. Examples of officially-sanctioned Russian views and analyses of politics and international relations with regard to the war on Syria:

- On Russia's diplomatic role in the Syrian conflict: George Gavriliis (2016), *No Can Russia's Peace Plan for Syria Work?*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2.
- On Russia's military involvement in Syria: Ruslan Pukhov (2017), *Moscow-Based Think Tank Director: Russia's Unexpected Military Victory in Syria*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4; Dmitry Gorenburg (2016), *What Russia's Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in Its Capabilities*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2; Fyodor Lukyanov (2016), *No Why Putin's Policy in Syria Has Laid the Groundwork for a Political Settlement*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 3.
- On terrorism: Andrei Skriba and Dmitry Novikov (2016), *The Middle East: The Main Trends*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2.
- On US strikes on Syria as a breach of international law and yet another instance of interference in the affairs of Middle Eastern states: Vitaly Naumkin (2018), *New Tripartite Aggression in Syria Brings Mixed Results*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2.
- On Russian-Turkish relations: Ayse Zarakol (2017), *"Moscow-Based Think Tank Director: Russia's Unexpected Military Victory in Syria"*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2; Alexey Grivach (2015), *Turkey Shoots Down Its Own Gas Hub*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4.
- On regional diplomacy, the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran: Alexander Maryasov, "Do Russian-Iranian Relations Constitute a Strategic Partnership?" *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 2 (2018).; Sergey Minasyan (2015), *The Syrian Gambit*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4; Mark Katz (2018), *Middle East Crisis: Foreign Interference and an Orgy of Extremism*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2.
- On Russia-West relations in the context of Syria: Yoshiko Herrera, Andrew Kydd, and Fyodor Lukyanov (2016), *Yes, the U.S. and Russia Can Cooperate to End the Syrian Civil War. Here's Why.*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 1.
- On the Western role in Syria: Vitaly Naumkin (2015), *Middle East Crisis: Foreign Interference and an Orgy of Extremism*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 3; Alistair Crooke (2017), *Russia Has Dissolved America's Uni-Polar Project in the Middle East*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4.
- On the international consequences of the Syrian crisis: Fyodor Lukyanov (2017), *Here's Why U.S.-Russia Military Conflict Over Syria Is Looking More And More Likely*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 2; Sergey Karaganov (2017), *Mutual Assured Deterrence*, Russia in Global Affairs, no. 1.

Energy is the second most extensively covered theme in the selected media outlets (39% of all articles in Bulgaria, 38% in Ukraine, 35% in Georgia, 24% in Moldova, 36% in Armenia). Apart from the primary emphasis placed on bilateral energy issues concerning Russia and each of the case countries, significant attention is devoted to the discussion of large-scale Russian energy projects in Europe, including Turkish Stream, South Stream and Nord Stream 2. With regard to Turkish Stream, a shared pro-Russian propagandist discourse maintains that the pipeline is a major economic undertaking contributing to Turkey's security of gas supply and to Greece's economy, given that the latter will become a transit entry point for Turkish Stream gas into European countries. South Stream is said to have been of huge economic importance to Southern Europe. It is further argued that Nord Stream 2 will be conducive to Western Europe's and above all Germany's interests in the energy sphere both because of the profitability of the project and the circumvention of Ukraine as an unreliable gas transit route. Additionally, the topic of US involvement in European energy markets is typically present, whereby the pro-Russian narratives refer to aggressive American promotion of its liquefied gas, which is said to be motivated by the desire to dominate Europe and squeeze Russia out of European energy markets.

Examples of officially-sanctioned Russian views and analyses of politics and international relations with regard to energy:

- On South Stream: Alexei Grivach (2016), *Black Sea Stream: The Planned Russian Pipeline to the South Returns to the Agenda*, Valdai Discussion Club; Iqbal Guliyev (2016), *Pipe Dreams: Russia at the Gas Flows' Crossroads*, Russian International Affairs Council.
- On Turkish Stream: Grivach, *Black Sea Stream: The Planned Russian Pipeline to the South Returns to the Agenda*; Alexei Grivach (2015), *Is the Turkish Stream Pipeline Stalled or Frozen?*, Valdai Discussion Club; Vladimir Likhachev (2016), *State and Prospects of Russia–Turkey Energy Relations*, Russian International Affairs Council.
- On Nord Stream (2): Marat Terterov (2017), *Amid Regulators vs. Markets Struggle, the Nord Stream 2 Saga Continues*, Valdai Discussion Club; Igor Yushkov (2018), *The Fight for Nord Stream 2: The Interests of All the Players Involved*, Russian International Affairs Council; Viktor Katona (2016), *Despite the Sanctions and Ukraine*.
- On liquefied gas: Terterov, *Amid Regulators vs. Markets Struggle, the Nord Stream 2 Saga Continues*; Yushkov, *The Fight for Nord Stream 2: The Interests of All the Players Involved*.

The third theme under review – that of **Russian meddling in foreign elections, has received comparatively the least media attention** in pro-Russian media (20% of all articles in Bulgaria, 5% in Georgia, 20% in Ukraine, 11% in Moldova, 24% in Armenia). The topic of the Russian meddling in the US Presidential elections in 2016 is most frequently discussed, with similar cross-country narratives arguing that accusations of Moscow's interference represent a groundless, laughable joke and that the Democratic party (especially former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and former President Barack Obama) are trying to find excuses for their 2016 elections loss by shifting the blame towards Russia through fabricated accusations, further fomented by the liberal media and the CIA. Another topic covered by the selected media outlets in all five countries concerns allegations of Russian meddling in European elections (above all in France, Germany, and the UK), which are also dismissed as a matter of mainstream politicians' deliberately constructed threat to keep people voting for them. Nevertheless, the increasing prominence of political figures, parties and policy outcomes favoring Russian positions (such as Marine Le Pen in France, Alternative for Germany, the result of the Brexit referendum) are presented as evidence of Russia's general and President Vladimir Putin's personal political influence. A final topic similarly conveyed in the five countries is related to the charge levelled at the West and the US, in particular – that it is Washington, rather than Moscow, that has always meddled in electoral processes worldwide and in Russia specifically.

Examples of officially-sanctioned Russian views and analyses of politics and international relations with regard to energy:

- On Russian meddling in the US elections: Pavel Sharikov (2017), *'Russian Hackers' in the US Election: Myths and Reality*, *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 3; Yelena Chernenko and Julien Nocetti (2017), *"A Cyber Revolt in the Making"*, *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 4.
- On Russian meddling in European elections: Lenta.ru, *Лавров Опроверг Вмешательство России В Немецкие Выборы* (Lavrov Refutes Claims about Russian Meddling in the German Elections), August 30, 2017.; Rossiyskaya Gazeta, *Путин Ответил На Обвинения Во 'вмешательстве' в Выборы Во Франции*, May 29, 2017.; Vladimir Kornilov, *Британские Депутаты — О 'российском Вмешательстве': Это Прогнул Ленин*, *RIA Novosti*, December 25, 2017.
- On Western meddling in elections: Fyodor Lukyanov (2016), *Putin Is Giving America a Taste of Its Own Medicine*, *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 4.

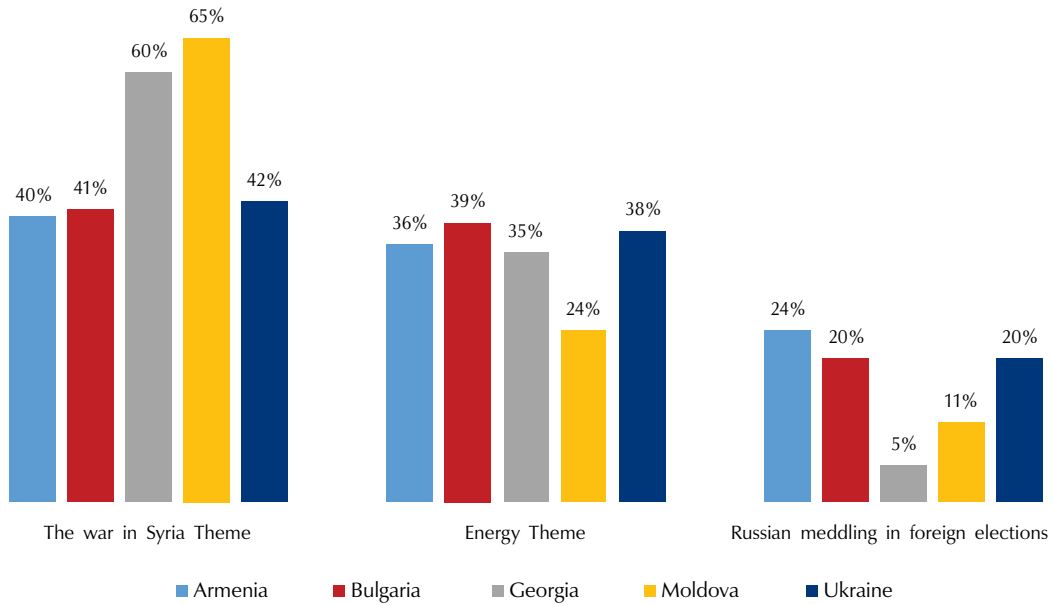
All of the selected media outlets in the five countries display a **general resemblance in terms of the stylistic modes of transmission of the pro-Russian topics and narratives**. In particular, the overall preference for emotional influencing and sensationalism as opposed to evidence-based reporting results in the prevailing deployment of strongly evaluative epithets, exaggeration (usually of Russian actions, characteristics and capabilities), irony (in order to condescendingly ridicule an opponent's policy position), the evocation of moral opprobrium, inculcation of pessimistic attitudes, cultivation of hatred and hostility (most often of the West), generation of panic, promotion of conspiracies, and creation of manipulative layout (so that the headings deliberately shape impressions or convey information that may be unrelated to the material in the body of the article).

These generally shared techniques of suasion correspond to Russia-originating journalistic modes of shaping attitudes. Examples:

- On the specific Russian propaganda techniques of simplistic messaging, diffusion-proofing, sowing distrust:
- Center for the Study of Democracy, *Media (In)Dependence in Bulgaria: Risks and Trends*, Policy Brief No 60, May 2016
- On the presentation of a black-and-white picture of the world, epithets that imply more than they describe, a priori statements, citation of experts out of context, among others: Goble Paul, *15-Point Checklist of Putin Regime's Propaganda Techniques*, *Euromaidanpress*, April 19, 2016.
- On the provision of emotionally-coloured content: Goble Paul, *Moscow Propaganda Works By Confusing Fact and Fiction and Providing Emotional Stories*, *Pomerantsev Says*, Windon on Eurasia - New Series, September 13, 2015.
- On stressing abstract themes that cannot be measured and accusing the West of the same wrongdoings as Russia is accused: Goble Paul, *Russian Propaganda Different and Much More Disturbing than Its Soviet Predecessor*, *Euromaidanpress*, September 3, 2015.
- On the social psychological dynamics behind Russian propaganda techniques of multiple source referencing, repetitive coverage, absence of commitment to objectivity and consistency: Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model*, 2016.
- On embedded links and other uses of social media: Jim Rutenberg (2017), *RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War*, 2017.
- On news tweets, non-attributed comments on web pages, troll and bot social media accounts, fake hashtag and Twitter campaigns: Todd Helmus et al. (2018), *Russian Social Media Influence Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, RAND Corporation.
- On dismissal of critics, distortion of facts, distracting from the main issue, dismaying the audience: Ben Nimmo (2015), *Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It*.
- On trolling: Ben Nimmo (2018), *Russia's Full Spectrum Propaganda*.

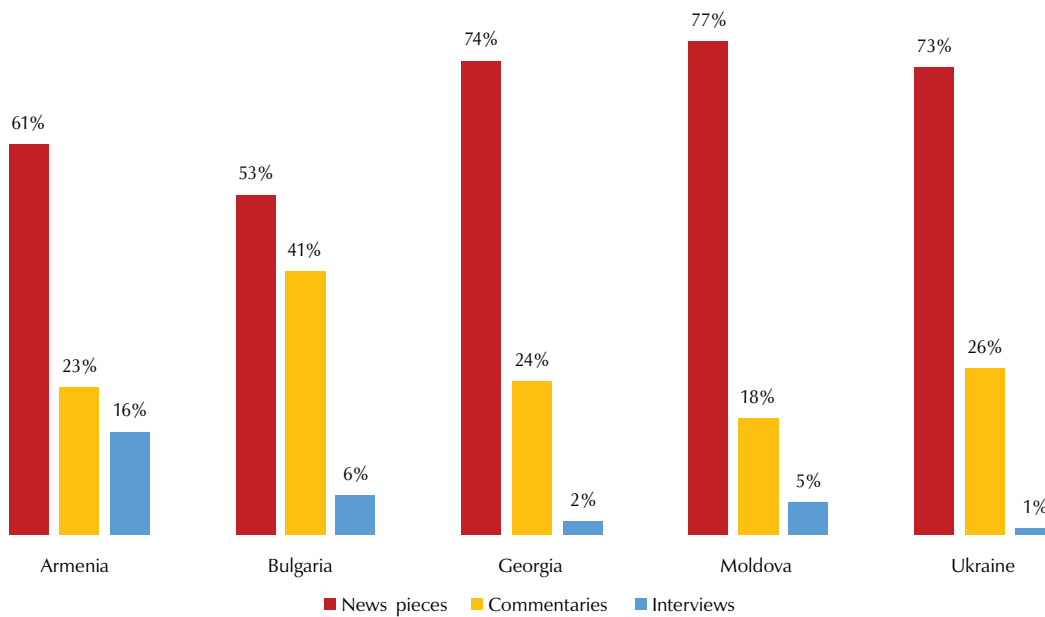
With respect to types of articles, referencing, quotations and authorship, the examined media outlets in the five case countries tend to **privilege news reporting based on Russian sources and (pro-) Russian opinions without consistent authorship attribution**. The greatest number of articles in the country cases represent news pieces, followed by commentaries and interviews.

FIGURE 7. THEME COVERAGE ACROSS THE MEDIA OUTLETS



Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

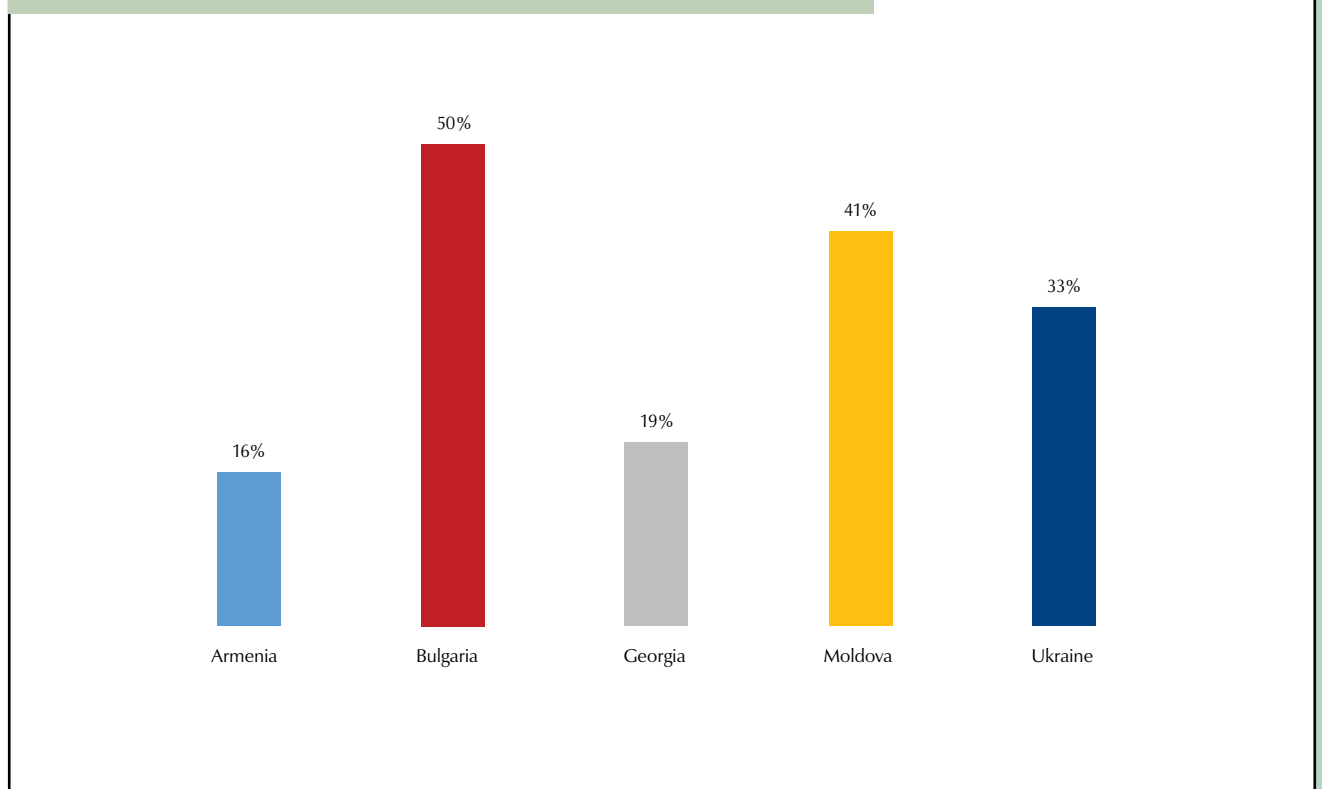
FIGURE 8. TYPES OF ARTICLES PREDOMINANT ACROSS THE MEDIA OUTLETS



Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

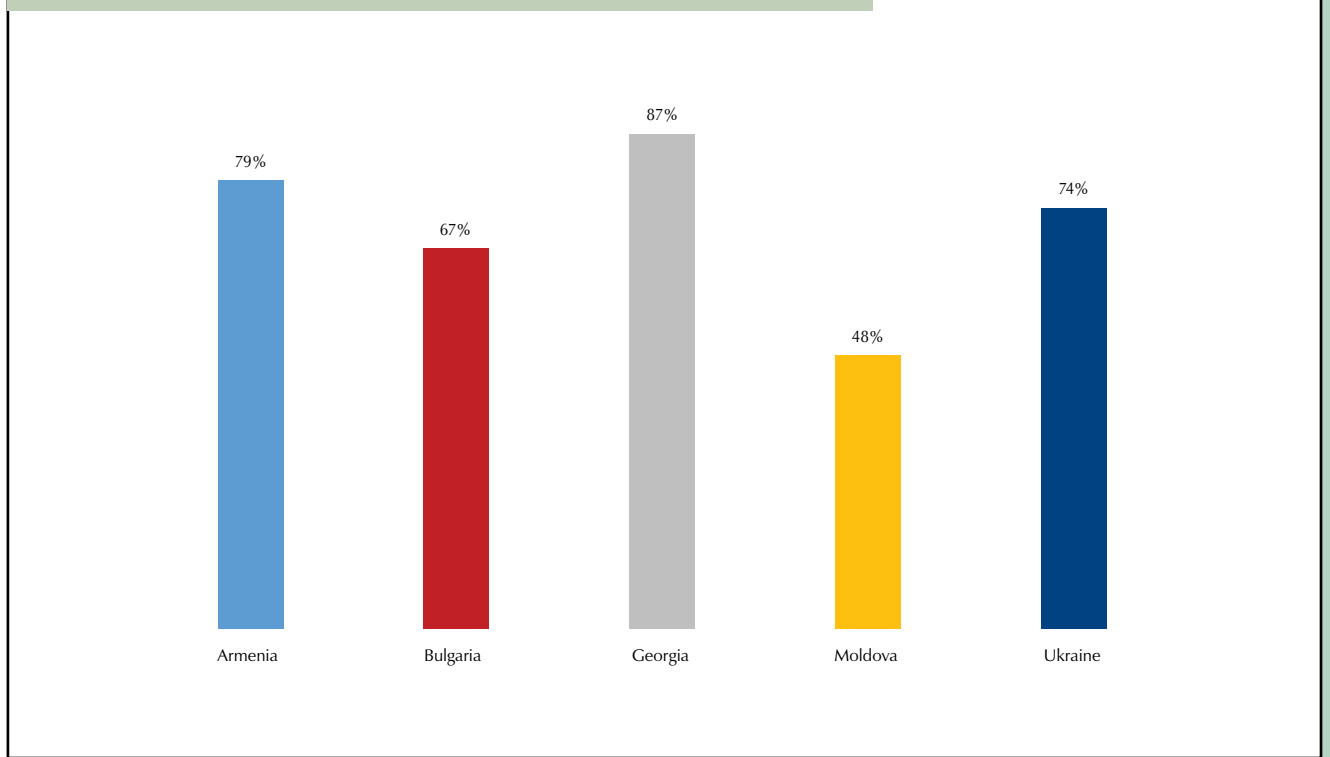
There is a significant **reliance on references to Russian news agencies**. Although these figures do not constitute the majority of cited sources, the qualitative country-specific analyses show that referencing non-Russian sources (primarily Western and national ones) is done with the purpose of demonstrating a seeming appearance of objectivity based on mentioning multiple agencies from various countries. Yet, the information obtained from Western sources is usually distorted, misrepresented and misquoted so that it can support and fit into Russian propagandist discourses.

FIGURE 9. REFERENCES TO RUSSIAN NEWS AGENCIES ACROSS THE MEDIA OUTLETS OF THE FIVE SELECTED COUNTRIES



Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

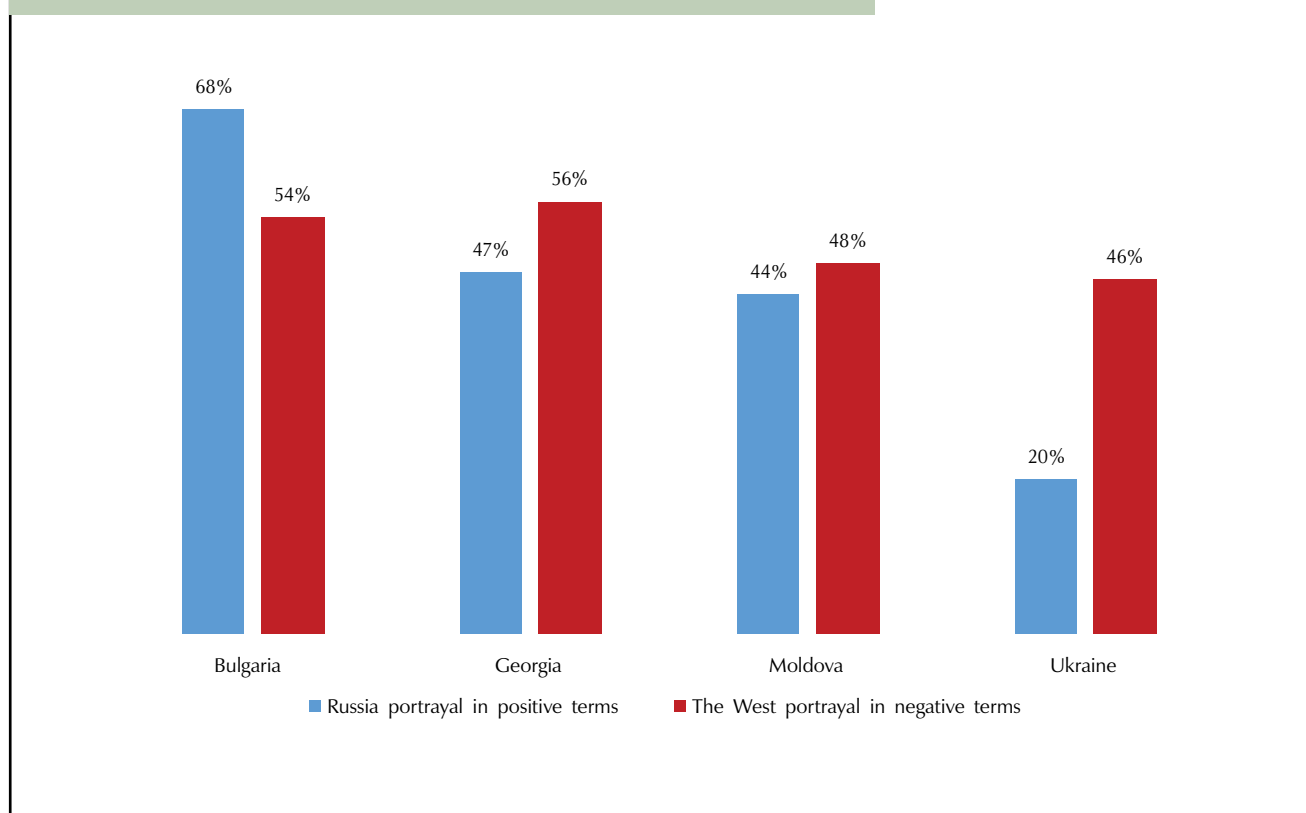
Finally, most articles are anonymous or attributed to an editorial team, with the commentators in analytical articles routinely being of pro-Russian disposition or origin and with questionable credentials.

**FIGURE 10. SHARE OF ANONYMOUS ARTICLES
ACROSS THE MEDIA OUTLETS**

Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

The attitude-inducing modes of message transmission result in a **binary portrayal of Russia in explicitly positive terms and of the West – in negative terms**, whereby the presence of neutral portrayals is belied by the employment of subliminal influencing techniques. More specifically, Russia is generally depicted across the media outlets in the five states as a powerful global actor that evokes respect and is morally superior, while also being a victim of Western hostility, ploys and double standards. President Vladimir Putin is presented as a shrewd, rational and skillful world statesman. Conversely, the image painted of the US (as the Western actor receiving the most media coverage in the chosen media outlets) is that of an aggressive, manipulative, selfish power that sows international instability.

FIGURE 11. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF RUSSIA AND THE WEST ACROSS THE MEDIA OUTLETS



Source: CSD comparative analysis, 2018.

Apart from generally resembling each other with regard to shared trends of pro-Russian content and style of media coverage, there are degrees of **similarities and differences among the three types of media outlets** in each of the countries under investigation, as shaped by the degree of **political-economic enmeshment with Russian groups and interests**.

First, those **media outlets**, which claim the status of **nation-wide sources of information** with a broad audience and formal independence from pro-Russian financial entanglements (yet maintaining hidden ties to Russian groups and interests), display common characteristics of narrative enunciation and dissemination. Such outlets include **more empirically varied and analytically nuanced articles**, distinguished by occasional focus on alternative positions (i.e., anti-Russian ones), the consideration of a wider array of issues (in order to provide more rounded – as opposed to one-sided or twisted, reporting) and can even feature some conceptual framing. Moreover, this type of media outlet incorporates **locally-sensitive, relevant and original perspectives** as against a wholesale imposition of Russian propaganda. Stylistically, there is a greater emphasis on **neutral**

communication of messages that is still implicitly biased but stops short of overt manipulation of reader attitudes.⁴⁹

The second type of **media outlets have a smaller but devoted readership and display more conspicuously identifiable ties to Russian interests and groups.** They are characterized by at least two features. Similarly, to the first group of media sources, they include a wider and more detailed treatment of issue areas pertinent to given news, the provision of some analytical framing and attention to nationally-relevant perspectives. However, the distinctiveness of such attributes lies in the more **overt partisanship, sweeping justification of Russian actions** through dubious analytical and historical conclusions and **generalizations** as well as a more diluted commitment to neutral reporting, which blends into explicit suasion.

The third type of **media outlets are of Russian origin.** They are characterized by the most direct and obvious ownership links to Russian groups as well as by the **purposeful commitment to disseminate Kremlin propaganda content** to foreign audiences through the national editions of these outlets. A key distinguishing attribute is linked to **the scarcity of nationally-relevant and sensitive perspectives** so that Russian narratives are pre-imposed on the domestic readership. Moreover, this group of online newspapers feature **the simplest, most repetitive and explicitly biased form of message transmission.**

Differences in Pro-Russian Propaganda

The findings of the national assessments warrant the conclusion that **greater vulnerability to Kremlin influence leads to a less differentiated media sector,** where outlets similarly and overlappingly promote Russian propagandist narratives so that the correlation between types of entanglement and corresponding patterns of content provision is obscured and diluted (as is especially the case in Moldova and Armenia).

- Being a NATO and EU member, **Bulgaria** seems less vulnerable to Russian propaganda in contrast to the post-Soviet states in the study, although the country displays the highest degree of Russian economic influence in the new EU member states.⁵⁰ Unlike these nations, which gained independence after 1991, Bulgaria retained its (at least formally independent) state structures and separate centralized media broadcasting during the Cold War. After 1989, the country did not have to grapple with the legacy of the Soviet media system (that was present across the constituent republics of the USSR). Moreover, the post-communist decline⁵¹ of the Russian language in Bulgaria has meant that by the 2010s only 16.9% of secondary school pupils study that language.⁵²

⁴⁹ A more detailed treatment of these findings, including examples as well as further illustrations of the relationship between a given degree of enmeshment with Russian interests and a corresponding pattern of propaganda elaboration and dissemination are provided in the relevant country reports below-specific analyses.

⁵⁰ Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

⁵¹ Eurostat (2017), *Foreign Language Learning Statistics*.

⁵² Eurostat (2017), *60% of Lower Secondary Level Pupils Studied More than One Foreign Language in 2015*.

Therefore, the weaker presence of a deliberate, inherited and overarching Russian impact on the Bulgarian media leaves **greater room for diverse rather than unified outcomes of pro-Russian propaganda dissemination.**

- **Ukraine and Georgia** are the post-Soviet states that have exhibited most resilience to Russian influence, which has allowed for **a differentiated rather than all-out propagation of Kremlin messages.** As the country-specific analysis makes clear, the Ukrainian national context, most recently characterized by the goal to resist Russian political and military aggression in the eastern part of the country, frames both the distinctive features of the media landscape and the contours of generally acceptable public discourses. Since Moscow's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine, the Kyiv government's position has been severely critical of Russian actions, with scrutiny of Russia-originating broadcasting being tightened, and the prohibition of broadcasting of Russian TV channels. Also, 75% of the content of national television channels is required to be in the Ukrainian language. The online media space is bilingual so that news websites usually have both a Ukrainian and Russian language version.⁵³ The last remnants of the post-Soviet media heritage are being further purged so that the regionally-based newspapers descended from Soviet times have to become privatized, instead of being financially enmeshed with local authority bodies.⁵⁴

These distinctive characteristics of the Ukrainian political and media landscape **circumscribe the extent and intensity of propagation of Kremlin narratives,** which limitations are observed especially by pro-Russian media outlets claiming nation-wide readership. Such outlets pay tribute to the general political direction of criticizing Russian actions (for instance through a portrayal of Moscow as a malicious power and refraining from recognizing such taboo issues as the occupied status of Crimea, Russian military aggression in eastern Ukraine and the puppet governments of Luhansk and Donetsk), while at the same time including positive reviews of Moscow and unfavorable depictions of Ukrainian politics.

Georgia is another example of a post-Soviet country that has vigorously asserted its European identity and Euro-Atlantic vector of social, political, economic and geopolitical development. This is coupled with a media landscape, where only 18%⁵⁵ of Georgians watch news on non-Georgian TV channels, half of which are Russian. And it is primarily ethnic minorities (Armenian, Azerbaijani), who trust Russian broadcasters and whose access to Russian media as a source of information is higher than that of Georgians (29% and 16%, respectively).⁵⁶ Moreover, only small former Soviet media outlets have continued their operation in the country (such as former *Komunist* renamed into *Saqartvelos Respublika*). Therefore, despite the increasing strength of pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia, especially as related by "ethno-nationalist"-oriented sources (claiming that Georgia's identity is being lost not least due to the imitation of the Western model), **the public discourse cannot be completely overrun by Kremlin messaging.** This

⁵³ Texty (2017), *Українці підтримують зміцнення позицій української мови, але в багатьох сферах і далі домінує російська (Інфографіка)* (Ukrainians support strengthening of Ukrainian language, but in the most of areas, Russian still dominates (infographics)).

⁵⁴ Cheremnykh, V. (2018), *Роздержавлення ЗМІ: до кінця реформи 9 місяців і 554 неререформованих видання* (Privatization of media: 9 months left for the reform, 554 outlets remain underreformed), Detector Media.

⁵⁵ NDI Georgia (2018), *Results of March 2018 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.*

⁵⁶ Ibid.

applies particularly to the theme of energy, where Georgia's post-2006 efforts to wean itself off from dependence on Russian gas have shaped public discourse in such a way that even pro-Russian media have portrayed in a critical manner the renewed negotiations between Tbilisi and Gazprom on Russian gas transit and supplies. Yet, such a negative portrayal did not prevent media outlets entangled with Russian interests to simultaneously condemn the opposition political forces for obstructing cooperation with Gazprom and support the Tbilisi government's position that deeper ties with Russia's company would not endanger Georgia's energy security.

- In contrast to Ukraine and Georgia, however, **Moldova** and **Armenia** have demonstrated much less resistance to Moscow's political and media influence, which reduces the diversity of propaganda presentation and dissemination in the direction of **a more unified and overlapping propagation of Russian narratives** across news sources displaying different types of enmeshment with pro-Russian interests. The media landscape in Moldova has retained extensive ties to Russia not least on the basis of a significant continuation of Soviet-era journalistic channels and dependencies. As is clarified in the country-based assessments, 40% of the Moldovan population is informed by Russia-originating news sources, some of the largest of which represent former Soviet outlets such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Argumenty i Fakty* and *Perviy Kanal*. Accordingly, such outlets are read in the original Russian language, with the majority of the authors being anonymized or coming from Russia rather than from Moldova. Moreover, Moscow intensified its information warfare on Chisinau following the onset of the Transnistrian conflict in 1992 and the Russian intervention in Ukraine in late 2013. As a result of the significant depth and extent of Russian influence on the general Moldovan political and media landscape (as opposed to a targeted and circumscribed effect on particular outlets through ownership ties), the differentiation between a given type of political-economic enmeshment and a corresponding pattern of pro-Russian narrative elaboration and dissemination is less clearly observable in the Moldovan case as there is much **more overlap and similarity of content and journalistic techniques in the three selected types of media**.

In **Armenia** politics and media remain heavily influenced by Russia. The Soviet-era media ties have been maintained so that a vast array of Russian outlets operate in Armenia, including *Perviy Kanal*, *RTR Planeta* and *Kultura*. Moreover, the continuing existence of a wider range of Russia-originating news sources is conditioned by the popularity of the Russian language since it is Armenia's second unofficial language, in which the population is well-versed. Additionally, the overwhelming anonymization of articles typical of Armenian media further facilitates the proliferation of propaganda, preventing the verification and the opportunity to check the affiliations of the authors. The Russian domination of Armenia's media landscape means that **ties to Russian interest and groups are ubiquitous** – rather than concentrated within a pro-Russian media segment, which dilutes the distinctiveness of the link between a degree of political-economic enmeshment and a corresponding pattern of propaganda narration and communication.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The most worrying commonalities between Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia are the ties of dependency to Russia and the corresponding enunciation of pro-Kremlin propagandist discourses, the shared trends of oligarchization of the media sectors, the resource-deficient media advertising environments, the alarming backsliding of journalistic standards, and the decline of print media and increase in digitalization (characterized by faster, low-cost content distribution, easier access to and intake of information as against quality, time-intensive reporting). A number of recommendations can be put forward to counter the negative effects of these commonalities:

On the European and regional level:

- **Assert strong EU leadership and launch an EU joint response:**
 - **Build resilience against media capture.** In the last decade, the European Union and its member states have reacted mostly ad-hoc towards coordinated Kremlin hybrid attacks. The EU response is still fragmented across different policy domains and institutions. It should further strengthen and integrate initiatives like the East StratCom Task Force with the European External Action Service, research funding on disinformation, propaganda and related cyber-security threats under the EU framework programs for research and innovation (FP7, H2020), policy research and advice by the European Institute for Security Studies, etc. Moreover, the coordination of EU- with relevant NATO and US efforts is also problematic. Therefore, the EU needs to design and declare a strong and comprehensive policy response to the Russian hybrid threat, including aiming at building and enforcing the resilience of EU member states against media capture and foreign malign economic and political influence in the media sector, particularly focusing on online media.⁵⁷
 - **Build expertise** for both identifying and tackling hybrid threats, especially by setting the respective priorities in EU programs for research and innovation, and in cooperation with the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, the European Network and Information Security Agency, the European Defence Agency, the European Institute for Security Studies and other relevant institutions.
 - **Establish a high-level task force** within the European Anti-Fraud Office, entitled to trace and investigate covert Russian-linked financial flows related

⁵⁷ For a more detailed discussion on possible tools and measures, see US Congress (2018), Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security, A Minority Staff Report prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations, January 10, 2018, US Government Publishing Office, Washington: 2018.

to the media sectors of the EU member and candidate states, and the Eastern Neighborhood countries.

- **Encourage EU institutions and member states to enhance anti-corruption and development assistance mechanisms** to help the most vulnerable countries build greater resilience to Russian influence.⁵⁸
 - **Strengthen the EU legislation on anti-money laundering, financial transparency and shell companies** with a focus on transparency and accountability of media companies in the member states and in countries, in which the EU promotes media freedom and transparency.
- In the Black Sea region, the EU should **use its Eastern Partnership initiative to extend its efforts at tackling media capture** by improving media ownership transparency and countering Russian disinformation and propaganda. Building an integrated approach with NATO for better coverage of the region through coordinated efforts and initiatives would be decisive for the sustainability of the actions. The EU in particular should also aim to better integrate its Eastern Partnership initiatives with those in the Western Balkans and in the new member states of the EU in relation to Russia and its disinformation and propaganda activities.
- **Facilitate the development of high professional standards in the media sectors** across the EU and the Black Sea region on the basis of encouraging self-regulation and enforcement of existing regulatory frameworks, related to media freedom and transparency.
- Overall, the joint effects of civil society pressure, legislative initiatives and regional cooperation should make more transparent patterns of ownership and political-economic dependencies, contribute to **the observance of high standards of journalism**, whereby objective, quality content is presented in a manner that is appealing to audiences through accessible, story-based, interactively-framed reporting (thus making high quality journalism responsive to the demands of digitalization) and encourage entrepreneurial approaches to raising revenue on the basis of innovative business models for advertising.
- **Accelerate and facilitate the cross-border learning, engagement, pooling of expertise and sharing of experience** through the creation of common platforms to identify and tackle pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation, and through the development of networks of support (for instance, through early warning and rapid assistance in cases of attacks on journalists).

On the national level:

- The governments of the Black Sea countries should be able to **recognize the depth and extent of their countries' vulnerability to Russian propaganda** both societally (through polling, for instance) and in terms of security (through gathering intelligence information), which can affect the ability to unequivocally pursue national policy goals, such as Euro-Atlantic integration. Such recognition

⁵⁸ This recommendation targets more widely the overall Russian economic influence in Europe and was proposed initially in: Heather Conley et al. (2016), *The Kremlin Playbook Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield.

can highlight the level of urgency of adopting measures against Kremlin narratives as part of the political agenda.

- **Strengthen the administrative and professional capacity of national media regulatory bodies** and stricter enforcement of legislation on the **transparency of media ownership** as well as on accountability of **state allocation of advertising and financing to media** in the Black Sea countries.

On the civil society and expert community level:

Raising public awareness by active citizens and professionals (journalists, academics and IT experts) aiming to identify and tackle pro-Russian propaganda and the vested interests related to the media sectors, as well as to raise the public's media and digital literacy is of crucial importance for building greater resilience towards Russian malign influence in the Black Sea region.

- Facilitate existing and create new **independent public monitoring tools** (e.g. following the model of the EU Disinformation Review online platform), which consistently highlight, reveal, and challenge Russian propaganda and disinformation, following the rules of impartial news reporting and research. Moreover, the ownership, political and economic links of media outlets should be traceable and exposed for public scrutiny through these tools.
- Elaborate **new techniques for identifying fake news, propaganda and disinformation** such as browser plugins, site rankings, etc.
- Educate and train the general public how to recognize biased coverage and obtain reliable information (such as by rigorously checking news sources, references and author details).

Furthermore, the distinctive characteristics of the five national contexts (as related to varying levels of susceptibility to Kremlin influence) shape nuanced differentiations in countering the Russian narratives.

- As a member of the EU, **Bulgaria** should make fuller use of, be more tightly bound to and advocate the development of European provisions in the media sphere. In addition to the upcoming Code of practice on online disinformation,⁵⁹ the European Commission can introduce more stringent rules and monitoring in relation to the ways in which national governments allocate ESIF funding to the media.

Moreover, the European Parliament's Resolution on media pluralism and media freedom⁶⁰ should be strictly observed and implemented in Bulgaria and other EU member states (beyond a non-binding, consultative form) as it contains key provisions linked to the establishment of new socially sustainable economic models for media financing, counteracting fake news, application of tight media ownership regulations.

⁵⁹ European Commission (2018), *A Draft Code of Practice on Online Disinformation*.

⁶⁰ European Parliament (2018), *European Parliament Resolution of 3 May 2018 on Media Pluralism and Media Freedom in the European Union*.

Conversely, the violation of requirements for independent and objective journalism should lead to more frequent and effective Bulgarian liability under the European Court of Human Rights' rules regarding freedom of expression (not least through information campaigns for citizens and media supervisory bodies on how and under what circumstances to file lawsuits in the Court).

- As regards **Ukraine**, which finds itself in a state of active informational warfare with Moscow following the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine, control should be strengthened over the implementation of the existing legal requirements regarding information activity, especially in terms of assumption of responsibility for hate speech, claims of violence, glorification of the Soviet past, justification of Russian military aggression.

The fiscal agencies and security services should strictly investigate and sanction illegal payments in media or unclear sources of funding. At the same time, given the importance of media freedom and independence to the development of the fledgling Ukrainian democracy, the country should adopt strong provisions for guaranteeing the right to information, including through engaging more directly its EU counterparts in capacity building and oversight.

- In **Georgia**, the requirement for financial transparency (as part of the *Law on Broadcasting* of 2013) is only applicable to broadcast media. However, the provisions under the law on filing quarterly reports about sources of financing, including a breakdown of revenues from advertising, sponsorship, telemarketing and contributions from owners or any other person to the Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC) should also be extended to online media.

Through its association with the EU Georgia should seek to further expand the independence and professionalism of its media, focusing in particular on improving transparency of ownership and exposing media – business – politics links.

- As far as **Moldova** is concerned, the parliament has voted in a new law, which stipulates that the informative, analytical, military and political programs that are permitted to be broadcast in Moldova should only originate in the EU, Canada and the US, as well as in the countries that have ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. Russia has not ratified this document, which means that starting from 12 February 2018, when the legislative act comes into force, programs produced in that country are no longer broadcast on Moldovan territory. Those who violate these provisions will be fined (at least 3 000 Euros).

Although being a first important step, this law is insufficient provided the lax enforcement environment in the country. The law also does not cover the online environment, in which media financed by Russia continue to operate and manipulate. Thus, the Moldovan government should increase the level of enforcement of the law and develop additional mechanisms for limiting the pro-Russian propaganda but also for guaranteeing more quality information reaches its citizens.

- In **Armenia**, Russian television channels have a terrestrial broadcast, which is regulated by an inter-state agreement that takes precedence over national

legislation. As a counterweight to the heavy Russian media influence in the South Caucasian country, cooperation should be established with Western media in order to translate in Armenian quality articles from reputable Western sources and disseminate them to the public. The government should use available EU funding to further strengthen local independent investigative journalism, including among pro-Russian media.

Provided the very high dependence of Armenia on Russia for energy and general security provision, as well as for economic development, it is unlikely that media capture and self censorship in the country would be overcome without further strong efforts towards diversification of its economic and energy development channels.

- Overall, with regard to the **Eastern Partnership** (EP) countries of the Black Sea region, the EU should take more concrete and financially underwritten initiatives to raise journalistic standards. In addition to EP summit declarations⁶¹ recognizing the importance of free journalism and the organization of EP media conferences⁶² aimed at discussing the challenges faced by the media, the EU can better leverage its influence if it bases its model of engagement on practices employed in relation to the Western Balkans. Such practices – backed up by funds allocation, include regional training and support programs to improve the quality of journalism, technical assistance to public service media, implementation of schemes supporting civil society organizations focused on advocacy for independent media.⁶³

Moreover, in order to further counter the vicious cycle of financial dependency and biased, substandard journalism propagating Russian narratives, Western governmental, non-governmental and international institutions should make available more grants, training opportunities for journalists (in world acclaimed media such as the BBC and CNN) as well as competitions for quality reporting in the post-Soviet states of the Black Sea region. Encouraging participation in such international fora as the European Press Prize, the Festival of Media Global, World Media Awards, the Journalism Fund, can contribute to the recognition of objective and independent journalistic work and gaining insight into best media practices not least through networking with established media professionals from around the world.

⁶¹ General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union (2017), *Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit*.

⁶² European Union External Action (2017), *Tackling Challenges for Independent Media in Eastern Partnership Countries*.

⁶³ European Commission (2017), *The European Union Steps up Support to Independent Media in the Western Balkans*.

CASE STUDIES

BULGARIA

Bulgaria's general media landscape has undergone significant transformations (especially accelerating in the 2010s) characterized by the decline of print media,⁶⁴ the rise of online media,^{65,66} plummeting journalistic standards^{67,68} and changing media ownership patterns. As regards the latter, the combined consequences of digitalization (whereby traditional print and TV advertising has been increasingly spurned in favor of global digital advertising dominated by Facebook and Google) and the 2008 financial and economic crisis (which made peripheral countries with small markets like Bulgaria much less attractive for the realization of shrinking investment funds) led to the **outflow of foreign (media) investors**. This outflow freed space that has since been occupied by local oligarchic groups, seizing control of most of Bulgaria's media companies.⁶⁹

Thus, the deterioration of the overall media environment in the country has aided the proliferation of pro-Kremlin propaganda,⁷⁰ in particular in online media outlets, which utilize such propaganda as a function of and in the service of political-oligarchic interests and dependencies. Indeed, the current investigation finds out that the patterns of ownership, economic dependency and (in)formal political links to pro-Russian groups and interests in Bulgaria are reflected into corresponding trends of employing Russia-originating propaganda narratives and conveying these narratives through specific journalistic-stylistic means in pro-Russian media outlets in Bulgaria. That is,

⁶⁴ For a more detailed treatment of these issues, see Center for the Study of Democracy (2016), *Media (In)Dependence in Bulgaria: Risks and Trends*, 2–3.

⁶⁵ Velislava Antonova and Andrian Georgiev (2013), *Проучване на дигиталните медии: България* (A Study of Digital Media: Bulgaria), Open Society Foundations, 45.

⁶⁶ Andrey Velchev, *Възможности на онлайн медиите за влияние* (Opportunities for Influence of the Online Media), Luboslovie, n.d.

⁶⁷ Freedom House (2017), *Freedom of the Press 2017: Bulgaria*.

⁶⁸ Freedom House (2002), *Freedom of the Press 2002: Bulgaria*.
Media Sustainability Index 2017, *Bulgaria*.

⁶⁹ Additional information on these trends can be found here: Center for the Study of Democracy (2016), *Media (In)Dependence in Bulgaria: Risks and Trends*, 1.
Union of Publishers in Bulgaria (2018), *The Media Freedom White Paper*, 6.
Stefan Antonov (2013), *The Age of the Oligarchs: How a Group of Political and Economic Magnates Have Taken Control of Bulgaria*, Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper, 52–64.

⁷⁰ Some analysts trace the amplified introduction of the pro-Russian propaganda discourse in Bulgarian media to 2013, when the anti-government protests taking place at the time could be discredited by interested parties on the basis of Kremlin-inspired narratives of politics and international relations: Dimitar Vatsov and Milena Yakimova (2017), *Популизъм, локални интереси и руска пропаганда* (Populism, Local Interests and Russian Propaganda), Kultura; Tom Junes (2016), *Bulgaria: How Not to Mistake Russian Propaganda for Russian Policy*, Open Democracy.

the content analysis of *Trud*, *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond*'s coverage of the overarching themes of the war in Syria, election meddling and energy allows **drawing general comparative conclusions regarding** the presence of consistently regularized **similarities and differences** in the three outlets' **content and style of Russian propaganda dissemination** across all themes. Apart from the shared characteristics in narrative elaboration and modes of message transmission common to media with pro-Russian entanglement, the distinctions between pro-Russian media in Bulgaria are shaped by the depth and extent of such entanglement. The greater a media outlet's level of political-economic enmeshment with (pro-) Russian groups and interests (through ownership patterns and/or (in)formal connections), the more fixedly and undeviatingly the outlet relates Russian narratives through more explicitly biased literary-presentational techniques.

Methodologically, the choice of the three media outlets is based on expert opinion guided by two sets of criteria: first, the media outlets should display generally pro-Kremlin positions; and second, the media outlets should have three different levels of political-economic enmeshment with (pro-) Russian interests and groups. Based on these criteria, the three outlets chosen for in-depth analysis of pro-Russian content are the online versions of *Trud*, *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond*. *Trud* refers to the case of outlets with a broad audience, formally independent from but informally affiliated to Russian groups and interests.^{71,72} *Zemia* exemplifies the second case of political-economic enmeshment, featuring smaller national outlets with traceable links to Russian groups and interests.⁷³ *Russia Beyond* illustrates the case of the third degree of political-economic enmeshment, characterized by the national dissemination of Russia-originating media outlets.⁷⁴

As regards the **commonalities of narration**, the theme-specific analyses have demonstrated that the three media outlets **persistently propagate, resonate with and converge on the key general narratives of Russian propaganda**. In relation to the theme of the war in Syria, **terrorism** represents a prime common topic, where shared narratives portray Russia as leading the way in combating Islamic State, while it is conversely implied that the West supports terrorism through weapons supplies. Moscow's military involvement is justified by all media outlets as being legitimate and legal given that it was initiated upon Bashar al-Assad's request. The main goal of the Russian military involvement as well as reason for withdrawal is portrayed as the defeat of terrorism, all the while the course of the operation has provided a testing ground for new and superior Russian military equipment and for gaining invaluable military experience.

With respect to elections, the most commonly covered topic concerns **Russia's (alleged) meddling in the US Presidential elections** of 2016. The

⁷¹ Petyo Blaskov is the beneficial owner and editor in chief of *Trud: Capital Daily*, *Кой е Петьо Блъсков* (Who Is Petyo Blaskov), April 25, 2014.

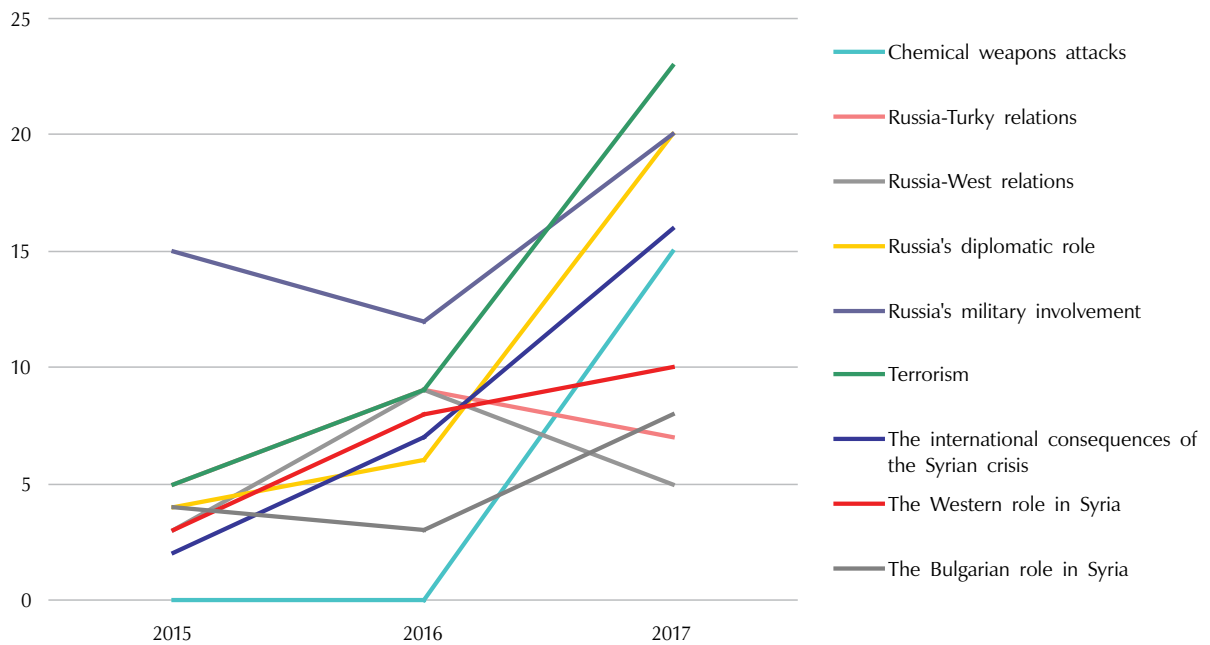
⁷² Vesislava Antonova, *Блъсков купува 'Труд'* (Blaskov Buys 'Trud'), *Capital Daily*, April 21, 2014.

⁷³ The ultimate beneficial owner and general manager of the companies possessing *Zemia* is Svetlana Sharenkova: *Дарик Нюз*, *Светлана Шаренкова беше удостоена с орден 'Дружба'* (Svetlana Sharenkova Is Awarded with 'Druzhiba' Medal), March 21, 2013.

⁷⁴ *Russia Beyond* was established in 2007 by *TV-Novosti*, an NGO created in 2005 by Russian state-owned news agency *RIA Novosti*. The same NGO owns state-funded TV channel *Russia Today*. *Russia Beyond* is an online news, tabloid-style platform, aiming to spread information about Russian culture, language, politics and business in Bulgaria.

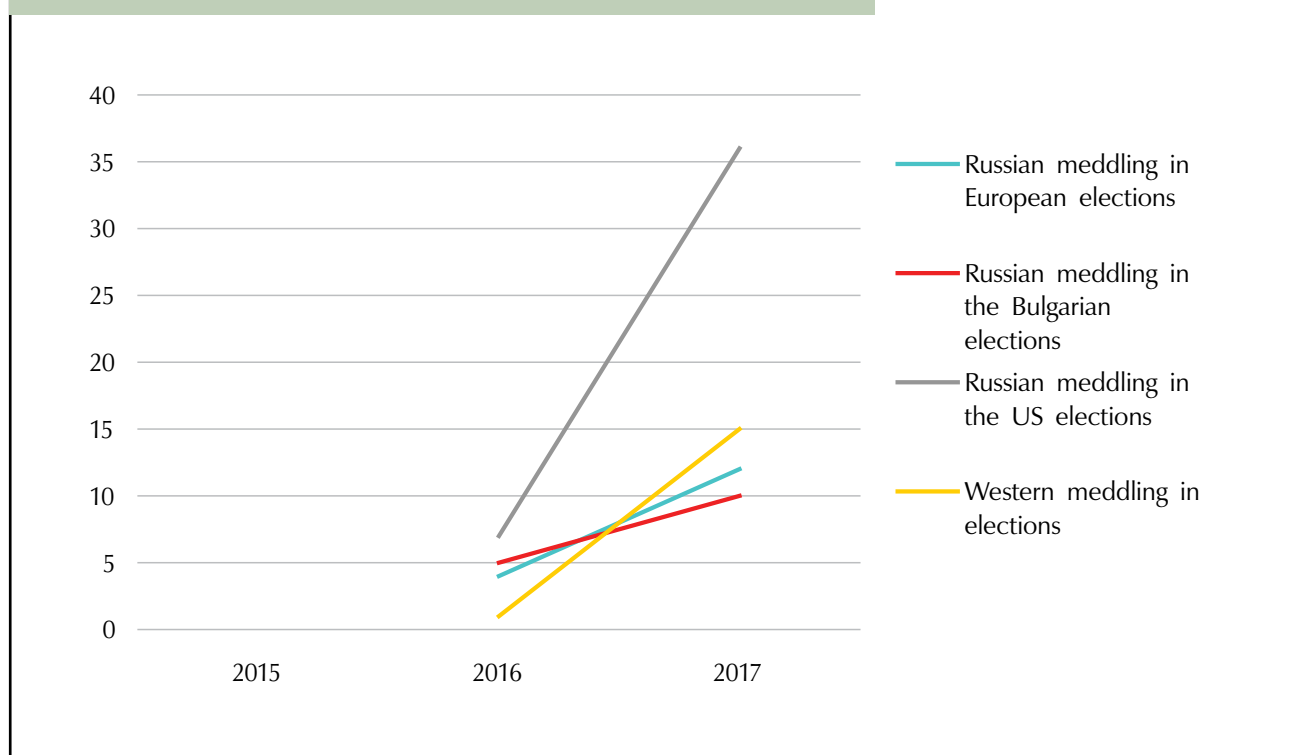
most prevalent and generic propaganda account on which the three newspapers converge holds that accusations of Moscow’s interference in the American electoral process represent a preposterous joke as there is no evidence to support such accusations that ultimately amount to a Russophobe conspiracy. The three outlets more specifically argue that the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton have fomented claims of Russian meddling in order to find a scapegoat for their own election loss. Hence, the ‘plot’ of the Kremlin’s involvement is instigated by internal American politics.

FIGURE 12. MAIN TOPICS IN THE COVERAGE OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

FIGURE 13. MAIN TOPICS IN THE COVERAGE OF RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN FOREIGN ELECTIONS



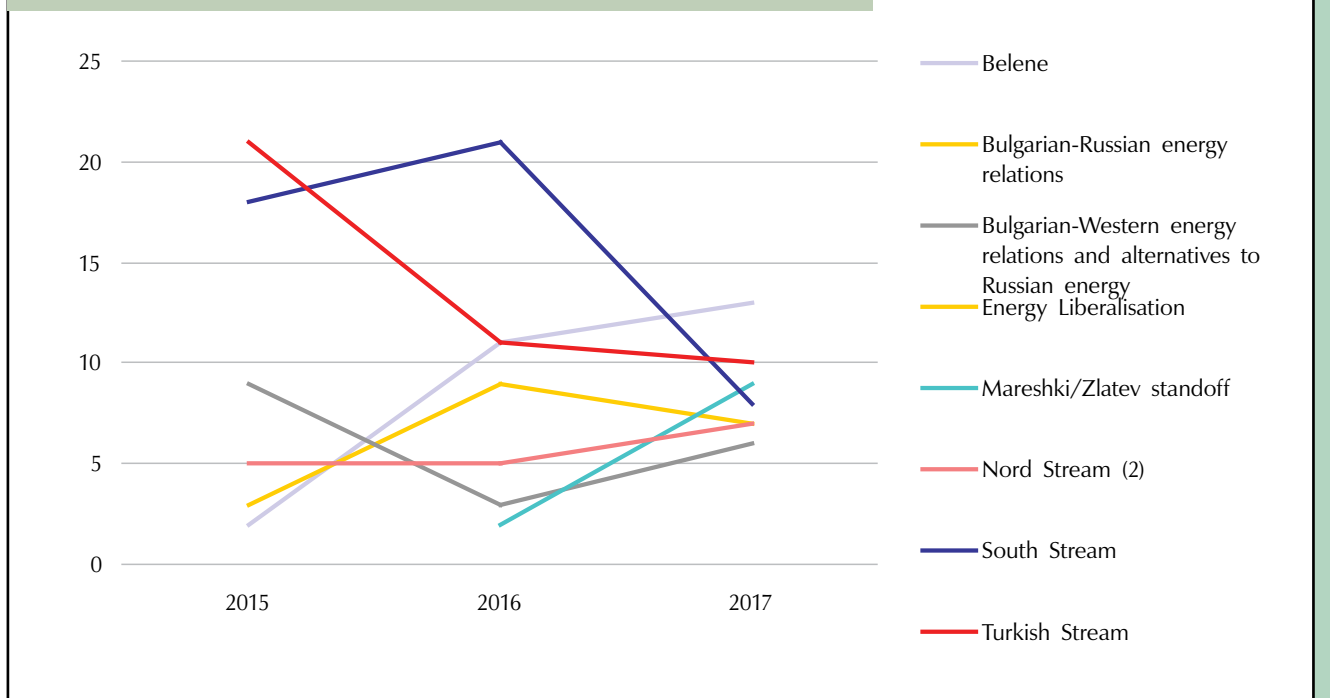
Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

As far as the theme of energy is concerned, **South Stream** is most frequently focused on in such a way as to above all explain the cancellation of the pipeline project as a matter of Bulgaria's fault and the country's submissiveness to the pressure of the European Commission. According to the prevailing narrative, the cancellation took place despite South Stream's contribution to the economic interests of Bulgaria, in particular, and Southern Europe, in general. Having indeed eventually realized the losses it had incurred, Sofia began to seek the renewal of the project. Nevertheless, the narrative holds that Russian politicians and business officials demonstrated firmness in their decision to abandon the pipeline plans.

Stylistically, the three outlets exhibit a preponderant reliance on sensationalist vs. proof-based transmission of messages informed by emotionally- and metaphorically-colored language aiming to frame reader attitudes.⁷⁵ **Prominently deployed**

⁷⁵ For instance, the resurgence of Russian power after exceptional weakness is conveyed through the metaphor of a bear – humiliated, in pain, temporarily withdrawn into its burrow, but subsequently undergoing healing and rebirth: Emil Spahiisky, *Сирийското блато излекува руската мечка. Изненадващо за мнозина наблюдатели, Кремъл вместо да потъне, обра всички дивидентни* (The Syrian Swamp Healed the Russian Bear. To Many Observers' Surprise, instead of Floundering, the Kremlin Reaped All the Benefits), Trud, December 13, 2017.

FIGURE 14. MAIN TOPICS IN THE COVERAGE OF ENERGY



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

techniques include binary, black-and-white distinctions,⁷⁶ evocation of moral opprobrium, exaggeration,⁷⁷ sarcasm, dubious and sweeping conclusions drawn from unjustified historical and geopolitical parallels, promotion of conspiracies⁷⁸ and the impression of impending threat, the extrapolation of generalizations from local situations and/or single opinions.

With respect to referencing, quotations and authorship, *Trud*, *Zemia* and *Russia Beyond* resemble each other in terms of **a significant focus on Russian news agencies**, constituting 31.2%, 39.8 % and 77.7%, respectively, of source references. The lower figures for *Trud* and *Zemia* should not obscure the **biased representation of non-Russian sources**, especially Western ones, which are nevertheless cited to keep an appearance of objectivity. Forms of distortion, such as taking

⁷⁶ For example, Russia is powerful, sets the agenda, possesses timeless historical predominance in the Middle East, while the EU is weak, dependent, in historical decline: Dimitar Gardev, *Новама подялба на Близкия Изток, този път без ЕС. Българския премиер директно разкритикува липсата на европейска дипломация при войните в Арабския свят* (The New Division of the Middle East, This Time without the EU. The Bulgarian Prime Minister Directly Criticised the Lack of European Diplomacy towards the Wars in the Arab World), *Trud*, November 30, 2017.

⁷⁷ For example, to argue that it is not Russian hackers but the Western politicians and media that are disseminating fake news, an article uses exaggerated negative comparisons to Goebbels' media propaganda techniques and manipulation of public consciousness and the Holy Inquisition: Teofan Germanov, *Двоен аршин криво мери* (Double Standards Are the Wrong Measure), *Zemia*, November 15, 2017.

⁷⁸ For instance, suggesting that there is a conspiracy and hidden scenario for America to become a dominant energy market player in Europe through liquefied gas: Goran Yonov, *Пъзелът на енергийния сценарий – американски шистов газ и за България* (The Puzzle of the Energy Scenario – American Shale Gas Also for Bulgaria), *Zemia*, November 10, 2015.

information out of context to adjust it to Kremlin-inspired propaganda or making that information look illogical/laughable are often employed too. Leaning on the messages conveyed by Russian news agencies leads to a ubiquitous **quotation of Russian officials**, whose statements are presented as a matter of undisputable fact, seemingly obviating the need for the consideration of alternative views.

The shared tendencies of narrative elaboration and forms of journalistic expression result in **the binary portrayal of Russia and related institutions/projects/politicians** in positive (68.2% of all positive portrayals) and of the West and related institutions/projects/politicians in negative terms (53.8% of all negative portrayals) across the three themes. Russia is thus commonly described as a resurgent global power that is morally superior, benevolent and responsible, acting out of self-defense due to being subject to victimization and unjust treatment on the part of the West. Moreover, President Vladimir Putin has attained the status of a masterful, authoritative, pragmatic, rational, compromise-prone, realistic world leader. In contrast, the image constructed of the US is that of a duplicitous aggressor and declining hegemon, wreaking havoc on international security.

There are **three degrees of differentiated distance regarding content and style between the media outlets**. In *Trud's* case, thematic examinations confirm a consistent pattern of narrative enunciation, which – despite close adherence to Russian propaganda, is also characterized by two main distinctive features. The first is the presence of wider and more varied discussions – i.e., through greater conceptual framing and the occasional inclusion of alternative viewpoints. For instance, with regard to Bulgarian-Russian energy relations, an alternative view states that the Russian-Bulgarian energy projects (especially South Stream, Belene, the Burgas-Alexandroupoli pipeline) were politically rather than economically motivated and that their implementation might lead to negative political-economic consequences for Bulgaria. The second feature is related to the nuancing of analyses and news reporting on the basis of the consideration of perspectives that stem from and are responsive to the Bulgarian national context (as opposed to a blanket application of Russian propaganda narratives). Relatedly, 21.6% of referenced sources are Bulgarian. The broader array of locally-relevant issues and opinions is not combined with overt partisanship. A more moderate position with respect to the party-political scene in Bulgaria is thus occupied. More specifically, a distinctive, nationally-specific narrative in terms of the topic of Russian-Turkish relations concerns the consistently espoused view (regardless of fluctuations in the relationship between Moscow and Ankara), according to which developments in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy are dangerous to Bulgaria. This is most probably intended to hark back to the Bulgarian patriotic memory of the 'Ottoman yoke' (when Bulgaria was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire) and the Turkish military threat during the Cold War.

Trud also aims at a more neutral-formal format of news reporting. News pieces and commentaries/interviews are differentiated on the basis of the former's apparent neutrality delineated by the subliminal promotion of particular connotations,⁷⁹ in contrast to overt attitude framing attained through explicitly

⁷⁹ Subliminal connotations can be promoted on the basis of sowing doubt. For instance, information about the US's capture is being related but the end of the article sows subliminal doubt since the Americans were unaware of Al Baghdadi's location shortly before his capture. This leaves open questions about whose help the US availed itself of in order to carry out the operation: *Trud* online, *Лидерът на 'Ислямска държава' е в плен на американски военни в Сирия* (The Leader of Islamic State Has Been Captured by American Militia in Syria), December 17, 2017.

biased literary techniques in commentaries and interviews. Correspondingly, there is a high proportion (48.7%) of seemingly even-handed portrayals of actors (yet still attitudinally tinged). *Trud* focuses on the portrayal of Bulgaria's image, while there are limited descriptions of the main political parties in the country. The outlet ensures a level of transparency by the fact that there are no anonymized authors or unattributed articles.

Zemia is distinguished in terms of content provision above all on the basis of lines of argumentation that are derived from and are responsive to the Bulgarian national context (hence, 24.7% of cited media sources are Bulgarian), yet lending overt and consistent partisan support. For example, the topic of Bulgarian-Russian energy relations is conveyed through bipartisan juxtaposition. The socialists are argued to be the only political force in the country that is serious about the restart and realization of joint projects with Moscow (Belene, South Stream, Burgas-Alexandroupoli pipeline). Paradoxically, despite the outlet's generally unequivocal commitment to Russian narrative enunciation, advocacy for the socialists represents a point of divergence from Russian views that show skepticism about the left's reliability as a partnering political force for Moscow in Bulgaria. *Zemia* also features a wider and more detailed treatment of issue areas pertinent to the given themes, including analytical framing, where, however, sweeping and lengthy historical-geopolitical generalizations abound. For instance, the American accusation that the Kremlin is committing war crimes is dismissed on the basis of the argument that it was the US that conducted the first military aggression in Europe after 1945 by bombing the civilian population of Yugoslavia.

Stylistically, *Zemia* maintains a formalistic differentiation between news articles and commentaries/interviews. But the literary figures employed go beyond implicit attitude-formation in the direction of explicit suasion strategies.⁸⁰ Visualization techniques in respect of news articles are aimed at exerting influence on the reader by providing images and captions unrelated to the content of the written material, conveying pieces of attitude-inducing extraneous information. The outlet's transparency is weakened by the presence of unattributed articles, which constitute 6.1% of the total number of pieces.

Russia Beyond is distinctly characterized by the absence of perspectives that arise from and speak to the Bulgarian national context. Instead, the Russian political agenda is imposed on the Bulgarian readership. When Bulgaria-linked developments are discussed, they are related through a Russian interpretive prism. For instance, *Russia Beyond* comments on accusations of Russian meddling in Bulgarian elections especially through the prism of Russia-West dynamics. The claim is propagated that accounts of Moscow's instruction of the Bulgarian Socialist Party on how to ensure Rumen Radev's victory in the Bulgarian Presidential elections were intentional, having purposefully appeared in American news outlets (such as *The Wall Street Journal*) as part of Russophobia and internal American problems. Only 1.6% of cited sources are of Bulgarian origin. Moreover, the outlet features the simplest and shortest form of narrative elaboration that most straightforwardly, repetitively and relevantly speaks to the official Russian political agenda. More specifically, the primary concern of targeting the Russian population (without any urgent relevance to Bulgaria) is especially demonstrated in relation to the repetitive justification of Russia's military involvement in Syria. The withdrawal of

⁸⁰ For instance, subliminal influencing can be mixed with the use of evaluative epithets (including insulting and lurid comparisons) as in *Zemia*, *Деградация. Путин за фалшификациите на администрацията* (Degradation. Putin on the Administration's Falsifications), January 25, 2017.

Russian forces is argued to show that a limited but short escalation can change the situation on the ground, thus countering domestic (Russian) fears of lengthy entanglement and high human and financial costs on the model of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.⁸¹

In terms of modes of message transmission, *Russia Beyond* does not maintain a clear separation between news articles and commentaries/interviews so that the lack of a commitment to objectivity leads to an omnipresent application of literary figures conveying explicit bias.⁸² Hence, the portrayals of actors are either strongly positive or negative. The outstandingly high number of embedded links (91.3% of all embedded links) in contrast to *Trud* and *Zemlia* aims to create the impression of rigorous and many-sided backing up of the reported material. Most links, however, overwhelmingly refer to the outlet's own articles or other Russian media. The level of *Russia Beyond's* transparency is diminished by the most significant percentage (38.4%) of unattributed articles among the three analyzed outlets.

⁸¹ Charles Sullivan (2018), *Sidestepping a Quagmire: Russia, Syria, and the Lessons of the Soviet-Afghan War*, *Asian Affairs* 49, no. 1: 48–55.

⁸² Explicitly biased techniques can be based on providing many unsubstantiated examples that promote the same view, making assertions supported with misleading or irrelevant information, misrepresenting Western sources in order to make them fit with the Russian narratives, attributing Russia's own motives to the West, attributing blame without considering the evidence, marking out the difference between Russian officials' (seemingly) even-handed statements and experts' justification of propagandist discourses. For instance, focus is laid on Bulgaria's opposition to Nord Stream 2 although the RFE article cited does not single out Sofia but announces the position of all of the East European countries coming out against the pipeline. The intended message emphasizes the Bulgarian position with regard to Nord Stream 2 as Bulgaria was at the forefront of the decision to cancel South Stream: *Russia Beyond*, *България се обяви против строителството на Северен Поток 2* (Bulgaria Has Come out against Nord Stream 2), November 27, 2015.

UKRAINE

The Ukrainian media exists in a severely constraining environment. The weak economic condition of the country hinders proper private media sector penetration. TV holds more than half of the advertising market, with Internet adding another quarter, followed by the much smaller outdoor and press. Due to the low income levels (the average monthly salary is \$177),⁸³ media are not able to sell content to their audiences. Consequently, media are to a great extent **dependent on their owners to subsidize them**, on sponsorship and financial donations from business and political actors, which undermines their neutrality and independence. Owners use their media as a tool to promote their business and political interests. Although government censorship has effectively disappeared since 2014, the owners' censorship is acknowledged as a key threat to freedom of the media in Ukraine.

Indeed, **media ownership is not sufficiently transparent**. Since 2015, legislation has required broadcasters (TV and radio) to disclose their final beneficial owners. Print media need state registration, which also enables information about the structure of ownership. According to the available data, among the TV, radio and print outlets that have social and political focus and attract a significant part of the audience Russian government or business entities do not appear as (co-) owners. Online media require no license and their ownership is often hidden. Thus, experts assume the existence of outlets created, financed and controlled by the Kremlin.⁸⁴

Methodologically, as no evidence of Russian ownership of media is available in Ukraine, for the purpose of this research, three media outlets were selected, whose ties with pro-Kremlin businesses are easily observable. These media include the following online outlets:

1. Vesti-ukr.ua – an online version of *Vesti* newspaper. The *Vesti* media group is notorious for its opaque financing model and ownership structure; there is evidence of its ties to Oleksandr Klimenko, formerly a minister on the Yanukovich team, wanted by Interpol. *Vesti* is frequently blamed for destabilising the social and political situation in Ukraine⁸⁵. In 2017, it attracted the attention of the Ukrainian security forces for (possible) links to the Kremlin;

⁸³ State Statistics Service of Ukraine (2017), *Розподіл населення за рівнем середньодушових еквівалентних загальних доходів* (Population stratification due to average equivalent general incomes).

⁸⁴ See, for example: Babak, A., Matychak, T., Moroz, V., others (2017), *Words and Wars: Ukraine facing Kremlin propaganda*. Kyiv: KIC.

⁸⁵ Shutov, R. (2015), *Раскачка по плану* (Rocking on target), MediaSapiens.
Shutov, R. (2015), *Метаморфози російської пропаганди*. Газета «Вести» (Metamorphosis of Russian propaganda. Vesti newspaper), MediaSapiens.

2. Strana.ua – an online media outlet focused on political, economic and social developments in Ukraine. The web-site was established by Ihor Huzhva, known as the owner of *Vesti* media group in 2013-2016 (since January 2018 he has sought asylum in Austria). The financing model is vague, with monitoring having revealed anti-Ukrainian narratives and fake news content.
3. Timer – a regional online resource from Odessa providing local news, but also covering global politics. Since 2014, *Timer* has demonstrated openly anti-Kyiv and anti-Western positions. Its editorial policy aims to legitimise Kremlin aggression against Ukraine, supporting pro-Russian proxies in the region. There is evidence that the outlet belongs to pro-Russian businessman and politician Ihor Markov (arrested in Italy in August 2018).

Overall, the selected media construct a virtual reality that to a large degree corresponds to the Kremlin's propaganda narratives. Mixed with critical articles, camouflaged as an expert opinion or position of the Western media, the **messages about a strong Russia, failed Ukraine, and divided West are repeatedly promoted** in their discourse.

In terms of the similarities among the three media outlets, despite their seeming neutrality, subtle, but effective manipulative methods may be observed in these outlets' content. One of the most used tools is **manipulations of the news agenda**. Indeed, the online sources under investigation pay more attention to the topics and news that highlight those aspects of social and political life that correspond with pro-Kremlin narratives, and at the same time silence others, which do not directly correspond to Moscow propaganda. The most illustrate example is the Manafort case, which has received excessive attention in order to put an emphasis on Ukrainian interference in the US elections and remove the spotlight from Russia.

There are many examples of **manipulations with headings**, when the heading of an article is discrepant (conveys a completely different meaning) from the content of the article. Often, in trying to make an appearance of presenting expert opinion, the outlets refer to biased, or doubtful experts. *Vesti* refers to alleged commentators, whose identity and publications cannot be verified such as: Friedrich Ermler, titled as "expert from a European analytical center from Brussels"; John Mackenzie, an "American analyst"; Daniil Vishnevskiy, a "political scientist"; Charles Fargo, an "American journalist". This puts in doubt the quality, competence, and independence of the provided expert opinion. In another example, comments from an "American journalist" named Michael Hoffman are published.⁸⁶ There is a famous conspiracy theorist and Holocaust denier that has the same name but the reader cannot verify from the quotes that they refer to the same person.⁸⁷ *Strana.ua* often quotes Western media or politicians, but rarely provides a direct link to the original source.⁸⁸ On September 13, 2017 it published an evidently biased compilation of opinions taken from Facebook;⁸⁹ the outlet

⁸⁶ Kharchenko, A. (2017), *Обострение в Сирии: почему ссору США и РФ назвали постановкой* (Escalation in Syria: why a quarrel between USA and RF is called a staging), *Vesti*.

⁸⁷ Michael A. Hoffman II, *Wikipedia*.

⁸⁸ For example, here: (2017), *Новые санкции США против России могут вызвать конфликт ЕС и Вашингтона – европейские СМИ* (New US sanctions against Russia may cause conflict between EU and Washington – European media), *Strana.ua*.

⁸⁹ *Strana.ua* (2017), «Дикий совок!» Как украинские чиновники американский уголь под гимн встречали ("Wild sovok!" How Ukrainian officials greeted American coal with anthems).

quoted completely unknown users, whose identity should be checked (for example, some accounts have been proven fake).

In the Ukrainian public discourse, it is unacceptable to recognize the occupation of Crimea and military aggression of Russia in the East of Ukraine, as well as legitimize the puppet governments in Luhansk and Donetsk. Both *Vesti* and *Strana.ua* follow this mainstream line (*Timer* does not). Their general attitude to Russia is negative, but this does not restrain them from promoting **narratives close to the Kremlin**. Some of the most common narratives are:

- **Russia** is aggressive and dangerous, violating international norms but it managed to become a global player and one must accept the fact that the world (and the West) have to take its interests into consideration. Putin finally forced the world to respect Russia. In the Middle East, the Kremlin played a dangerous game and won. Through military power, gas, and aggressive, but strategically effective foreign policy, Moscow sets its own global agenda.
- **The US** is situationally anti-Russian as Washington is guided above all by its own economic interests. Hence, sanctions are merely a tool to increase US profits in gas and other markets (and do not target their stated policy aims of punishing Russia for its incursion in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine). In general, Washington is seeking a mutually beneficial modus operandi with Moscow, and the contours of a “Great Deal” are being negotiated behind the curtains. US policy (both domestic and foreign) is a mixture of different business interests and internal corruption.
- **The EU** is also focused (only) on its own economic interest, and this interest is much closer to Russia’s than America’s. European states (and particularly Germany as a leading country in Europe) are not happy with Washington’s anti-Russian activities; they try to escape US domination, and, one after the other, attempt to establish cooperation with Russia.
- **Ukraine** is a weak country, almost a failed state. Its strategy is limited to waiting for Western support, consuming its financial assistance and blindly confronting Russia. This confrontation is short-sighted because Ukraine and Russia are deeply entangled with each other, economically, culturally, socially, and what Kyiv is doing is breaking these ties without any alternative strategy. The war in Donbas is merely a conflict between the US and Russia, with Kyiv being a puppet in Washington’s hands. Yet, in the near future the allies will abandon Kyiv, leaving it defeated.

In a third of the cases, the selected outlets use Russian media as their primary source of information. Reprinting propaganda materials from Russian government-controlled media have also been identified.

The main themes selected for review in the current research have been reported in the context of other topics. In particular, the Russian operation in Syria is linked with global politics and world diplomacy, the war in Donbas, the Minsk peace process and Russian aggression against Ukraine, ISIS and Islamic fundamentalism in other parts of the world (Iraq), anti-Russian sanctions,⁹⁰ deep

⁹⁰ Strana.ua (2017), *Пять главных вопросов о новых санкциях США против России* (Five key questions about new US sanctions against Russia).

crisis of the European idea and Western civilization; and the migration crisis.⁹¹ Russian interference in elections is linked with Ukrainian interference in elections in the US,⁹² anti-Russian sanctions, global politics and world diplomacy. Russian influence in the field of energy is connected with energy supplies to Ukraine, availability of resources for heating during the winter period,⁹³ prices for gas and electricity for the population, the Stockholm trial between Naftogaz and Gazprom,⁹⁴ the future of the Ukrainian transit pipelines,⁹⁵ the blockade of the occupied territories of Ukraine (citizen protests against the supply of Russian coal and coal from the occupied parts of Donbas), import of American coal to Ukraine, the degradation of the Ukrainian nuclear industry,⁹⁶ anti-Russian sanctions, US economic interests in Europe and Ukraine, and tensions between the US and EU member states.

As regards **the differences between the outlets**, instances of the inclusion of alternative, anti-Russian viewpoints are found in Ukraine's *Vesti*, whose critical attitude to the Kremlin's actions in Syria is reflected in the description of those actions as hostile and aggressive. *Timer* also includes critical and nationally-sensitive coverage as *Vesti* but exhibits partisan leanings in that, for example, it blames the Kyiv authorities for problems in the Ukrainian energy sector and Russian-Ukrainian energy relations by criticizing the government's decommunization policy (which strains ties to Moscow as the former Soviet center) and lack of control over 'radical nationalists', instead glorifying the Soviet past (when the energy sector infrastructure on Ukraine's territory was created). In contrast, *Strana.ua* communicates Kremlin views on Ukrainian-related developments, which views supersede and are pre-imposed on local opinions. For instance, it is argued that if a grand bargain is reached over Syria between Russian President Putin and American President Trump, Ukraine will be abandoned by its Western allies, who will further go along with Russian preferences for the settlement of the situation in Donbas.

⁹¹ Strana.ua writes: "[Migrants] preserve their [culture and religion] and even persistently endeavor to adopt European liberal lifestyle to their religious and esthetic ideas. The challenge of creeping islamisation has already buried the concept of multiculturalism" Oleg Voloshin (2017), *Мировая политика в 2017 году. Репетиция концерта* (World policy in 2017. Rehearsal of the concert).

⁹² Vesti (2017), «В выборы в США вмешивалась Украина, а не Россия». Как у Трампа заминают скандал с сыном ("This is Ukraine, not Russia interfered in US elections". How they at Trump's hush up the scandal with his son).

⁹³ Belovodskaya, D. (2017), *ЧП в украинской энергетике вступило в силу. И что теперь?* (Emergency Situation in Ukrainian energetics came into force. What's next?), Vesti.

⁹⁴ Studennikova, G. (2017), «За газ платят только трусы». Что означает решение суда в Стокгольме и отгаст ли «Нефтегаз» \$2 млрд «Газпрому» ("Only cowards pay for gas". What does Stockholm court resolution means, and if Naftogaz will pay \$2 billion to Gazprom), Strana.ua.

⁹⁵ Gayevskiy, D. (2017), *Транзитные возможности Украины отправлены под нож декоммунизации* (Transit capacity of Ukraine is put under the knife of de-communisation), Timer.

⁹⁶ Vesti (2017), *В шаге от ядерной катастрофы: почему в Украине резко растет число аварий на АЭС* (One step to nuclear catastrophe: why the number of accidents in Ukrainian nuclear plants grows dramatically).

GEORGIA

Although Georgia has the most pluralistic and free media environment in the South Caucasus, it remains among partly free countries on a global scale. According to the *Freedom of the Press Index*,⁹⁷ Georgia ranks 50th in 2017, showing a gradual slip compared to previous years (49th in 2016, 48th in 2015, 47th in 2014).

Instrumentalization of media for political gains and the impact of outside investments in a limited media market is a general pattern observed over the last decades. The decline in the international freedom of the press ranking is mainly attributed to the attempts of the Georgian Dream (GD) ruling party to change the ownership of a media outlet critical to the government.

The **official pro-Kremlin media channels are less popular in Georgia than ethno-nationalistic media outlets pursuing the same goals**. The ethno-nationalistic concept, neither Russian nor Western, is central to mobilizing Georgians against anti-Western causes via Georgian-language media platforms. As content analysis⁹⁸ of Georgian-language media shows, in contrast to 2016 and 2015, when **negative messages targeted loss of ethnic, religious or gender identity**, in 2017, a dominant topic was the foreign policy with messages aimed at **increasing the polarization on the foreign policy orientation** of the country. This change in the communication of pro-Kremlin actors shows that “loss of identity” was a rather tactical message, while the messaging aimed at demonizing Georgia’s Western partners (USA, NATO, EU) is of a strategic nature.

Requirements for financial transparency are applicable to broadcast media alone. Amendments introduced to the Law on Broadcasting in 2013 made it compulsory for all broadcasters to file quarterly reports about their sources of financing, including a breakdown of revenues from advertising, sponsorship, telemarketing and contributions from owners or any other person to the Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC). However, the requirement to disclose sources of financing is **not fully enforced** since major TV channels have challenged this provision in court. The case is still pending, thus hindering the full implementation of financial disclosure requirements. Still, broadcasters’ financial disclosure regulations only provide general information whether certain media outlet is financially sustainable or dependent on contributions.

From the list of media outlets registered in Georgia, three media outlets from the pro-Russian spectrum were selected for this study, which meet the selection criteria because of their Russian government ownership, affiliation with pro-Kremlin actors, and anti-Western content.

⁹⁷ Freedomhouse.org. (2018), *Freedom of the press*.

⁹⁸ Media Development Foundation (2018), *Anti-Western Propaganda, 2017*.

*Sputnik Georgia*⁹⁹ which is part of *Sputnik* multimedia international project established under decree of the President of Russia, has been operating in Georgia since November 2014, although it has only been officially registered on 23 January 2015. Initially, the media outlet launched an illegal radio broadcasting, but after the GNCC imposed sanctions, it stopped using the radio frequency and switched to an online platform publishing multimedia materials of anti-Western content there. The owner of 100% of the shares in *Sputnik-Georgia* LLC is Anton (Tato) Laskhishvili who has been the editor-in-chief of Russian language newspaper *Svobodnaya Gruzija* since 1991.¹⁰⁰

The founder of the newspaper *Georgia & the World* (*Geworld*) and its online edition www.geworld.ge¹⁰¹ is *Historical Heritage* Ltd. The establishment of *Historical Heritage* in 2009 was publicly welcomed by the then President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev. One of the members of the public council of *Historical Heritage* is Aleksandre Chachia, a Moscow-based political analyst, whom, on February 13, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded the Order of Honor for his great contribution to strengthening friendship and cooperation with the Russian Federation. Along with anti-Western attitudes, the publication is notorious for its Turkophobic, racist and homophobic content.¹⁰²

News agency *Tbilisi 24* Ltd ¹⁰³ was registered in the Public Registry on 26 March 2015. Its owners are Gocha Nachkebia (50%) and Maia Shaishmelashvili (50% of the shares). The media outlet is affiliated with the *Centrists* political party, led by Vladimir Bedukadze. In its pre-election video, the *Centrist* party promised voters to legalize Russian military bases in Georgia, restore visa-free regime with Russia and issue Russian pensions.¹⁰⁴

The investigation of the content and style of *Geworld*, *Tbilisi 24* and *Sputnik-Georgia* has revealed similar and contrasting trends. The following similarities among the three media outlets in the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives have been found.

The War in Syria

- All three media outlets are more focused on developments in Syria than energy issues or Russia's meddling in elections which may be explained by the geopolitical settings and importance of the Syrian conflict for the region.
- The role of Russia and the RSII coalition in the Syrian conflict is the most frequently covered topic aimed at showing the Kremlin's military power and influence in the region.

⁹⁹ *Sputnik Georgia* is at 147th place in Georgian ranking according to Alexa Global Ranking system as for 7 February.

¹⁰⁰ Media Meter. (n.d.), *Sputnik-Georgia*.

¹⁰¹ *Georgia and the World* is at 439th place in Georgian ranking according to Alexa Global Ranking system as for 7 February.

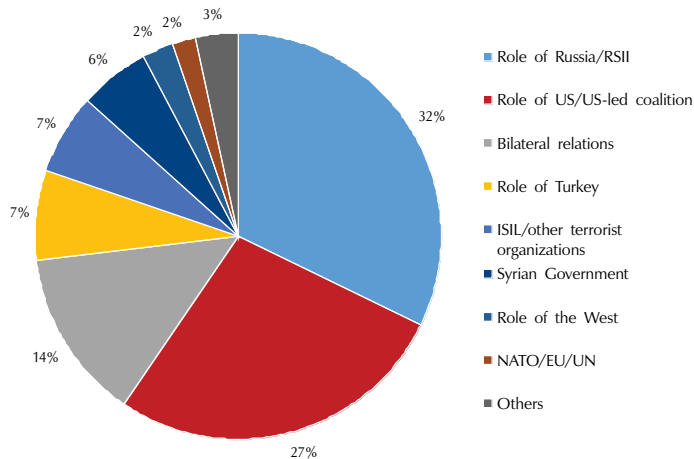
¹⁰² Media Meter. (n.d.). *Geworld*.

¹⁰³ *Tbilisi 24* is at 8583th place in Georgian ranking according to Alexa Global Ranking system as for 7 February.

¹⁰⁴ Media Meter. (n.d.). *Tbilisi 24*.

- The different attitudes are revealed in the tone of coverage towards the actors. The US and US-led coalition are mostly presented negatively, alongside ISIL and other terrorist organizations, while Russia is mostly presented either positively or neutrally.
- Key narratives in all three media outlets are related to questioning the legitimacy of the US military presence in Syria and at the same time justifying the Russian presence by request of Syrian President Assad. The activities of the US and US-led coalition are either neglected or reported negatively downplaying their role in the ongoing processes.
- Accusations that instead of real fight against terrorism, the US itself supports and encourages terrorist groups in Syria are dominant in all three media outlets.
- Media monitoring subjects insist that accusations of the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad are unfounded and invented to legitimize US's unlawful airstrikes against Assad.
- All media outlets present the enrollment of Georgian citizens in ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra as a challenge to Georgia's national security.

FIGURE 15. TOPICS RELATED TO THE WAR IN SYRIA



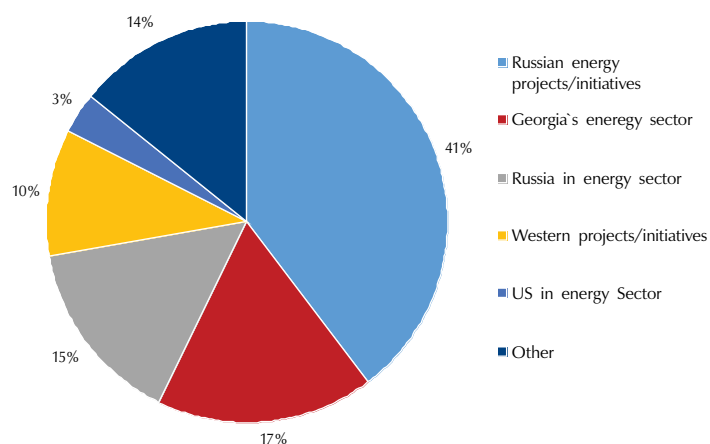
Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Energy Issues Related to Russia's Interests

- Russia's interest in the energy sector is a less popular topic than issues related to Syria, only 35% of analyzed articles are categorized under this topic.

- Articles concerning Russia's interests in the energy sector do not suggest a simple dichotomy of "positive Russia" vs "negative US/West" as it is identified in relation to the other two topics. Attitudes towards actors under this topic are more inconsistent, but publications extensively cover Russian projects and initiatives while US is mentioned only in 8 articles out of a total of 204.
- A relatively negative coverage of Russia-supported projects in energy is mainly related to the negative experience of energy deficit created by Russia after the fall of USSR and is discussed in the context of Georgia-Gazprom relations.
- The identified negative attitudes towards Gazprom and respectively towards Russia in all three media outlets are boosted by the critical discourse created by Georgian opposition and CSOs regarding to Georgian-Gazprom deal and it does not reflect editorial policy of any monitored media outlets. Moreover, all three media outlets mention the Georgian opposition in a negative context because of their protest against Georgia's cooperation with Gazprom. So in spite of the challenging background of Georgian-Russian relations in the field of energy, all media outlets try to justify Georgia-Gazprom cooperation and portray it as an appropriate and rational choice.
- Azerbaijani and Iranian natural gas import to Georgia is covered as an alternative to Russian natural gas and it is used as an argument to prove that Georgia does not depend on Russia's energy resources. Azerbaijani and Iranian gas import to Georgia is used to strengthen the narrative that cooperation between Georgia and Gazprom doesn't pose a threat to Georgia's energy security.

FIGURE 16. Topics Related to Russian Interest in Energy Issues



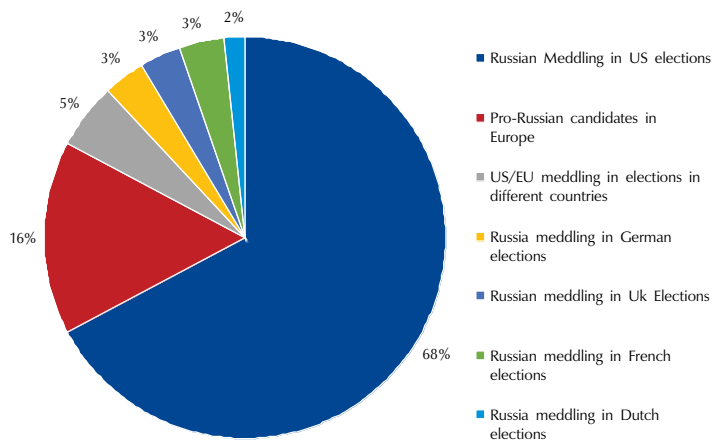
Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

- Articles dedicated to energy issues aim at portraying Russia as the most important actor in the global energy market. All media outlets are mentioning Russia's richness of energy resources.
- Articles under this topic represent the US activities in the energy sector mostly negatively.

Russian Meddling in Elections

- All three media outlets are the least focused on Russian meddling in elections than the other monitored themes.
- The most analyzed articles concern Russian meddling in the US elections, followed by the topic of emergence of pro-Russian candidates in Europe (15,5%, 9 articles). Articles related to Russian meddling in election mostly cover Russian meddling in the US elections. Also, the second most popular topic is the emergence of pro-Russian candidates in Europe.
- Russia and its President Vladimir Putin are the most frequently mentioned actors. It is a common trend in all media outlets that they cover Russia mostly positively in spite of the fact that the topic of meddling in elections has a negative connotation with respect to Russia. Unlike Russia, the US (the administration, officials, and institutions) is portrayed mostly negatively or neutrally and the same attitude is identified towards Barack Obama as acting and former president of US.
- All media outlets try to portray Russian meddling in the US election as solely an "allegation" lacking solid "evidence", while Russian interference in European elections is presented as a "made-up story" in the frame of the election campaign.
- The articles dedicated to Russian meddling in US elections aim at showing "division" in American society and institutions by emphasizing the disagreements between the CIA and the US President.
- All media outlets under investigation are focused on counter-allegations that other countries, not Russia, are interfering in the elections of foreign countries. Counter-allegations are emphasized to "legitimize" Russia's meddling in elections.
- The narrative that "Putin's friends" (in Moldova, Bulgaria and Germany) are winning elections in Europe is aimed at creating a powerful image of President Vladimir Putin and Russia.

FIGURE 17. TOPICS RELATED TO RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN ELECTIONS



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

As regards **the differences between the media outlets**, Georgia's *Geworld* emphasizes the nationally-relevant dimension of the Syrian crisis linked to the involvement of Georgian citizens in terrorist organizations in the war-torn country, which is presented as a key challenge to Georgia's national security. *Tbilisi 24* tends to provide sweeping justifications of Russian actions through dubious analytical and historical conclusions and generalizations. For instance, the online media demonstrates the importance of cooperating with Russia in the sphere of energy on the basis of a generalized assessment of the amount of Russian energy resources and length of Russian pipelines measured against the circumference of the earth. *Sputnik-Georgia's* tenuous commitment to publishing independent and objective information is particularly evident in the outlet's reprinting of a survey conducted by *Sputnik.Mnesia*, which claims – on the basis of murky and dubious methodology, that citizens of European countries consider that it is the US rather than Russia that interferes in elections.

MOLDOVA

Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova has started already in the Soviet period, when the country passed through Soviet Russification, with the media playing an important role in manipulating the citizens and promoting Soviet ideas. In the timeframe between 1945 and 1990, a significant number of newspapers in Moldova are published in the Russian language, and the Soviet TV stations have been promoting the policy of the Communist Party in all of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union.

Despite Moldova's declaration of independence, the **Russian media continue to exercise substantial influence** upon the Moldovan society. Given the lack of local quality products, the citizens continue 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 station *Pervyi Kanal*, have remained on the Moldovan market, and over the years have strengthened their audience positions, promoting the Russian Federation's policies. Thus, the most critical issue Moldova faces with regards to pro-Russian media is that since the declaration of independence Russian media sources have been broadcast on the territory of the country without any restriction. Hence, Russian propaganda has been allowed to flow directly to the citizens and influence their political preferences.

At the beginning of 2018, the Parliament in Chisinau voted a new law, which stipulates that the informative, analytical, military and political programs that are permitted to be broadcast in Moldova should come only from the EU, Canada and the US, as well as from countries that have ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. The Russian Federation has not ratified the document, which means that from 12 February 2018, when the legislative act has come into force, programs produced in Russia are no longer broadcast on the territory of Moldova. This provision however is insufficient to stop pro-Russian propaganda, since in the on-line environment, the media financed by the Russian Federation continue to manipulate.

Three of the most important media sources, which have links and/or receive funding from the Russian Federation, have been selected for investigation.

The *Sputnik Agency* belongs to, and is a part of the International Information Agency *Rossiia Segodnya (Russia Today)*, which was established with a presidential decree by Vladimir Putin. In Moldova, the *sputnik.md* website is owned by *Rossiia Segodnya LTD*, whose representative is Vladimir Novosadiuc.¹⁰⁵ *Sputnik.md*¹⁰⁶ is a subdivision of the international *Sputnik* agency created by the Russian Federation for the purpose of promoting Russian politics abroad. According to the latest

¹⁰⁵ Ziariul de Gardă (2016), *Transparency and owners of media*, Chisinau.

¹⁰⁶ Sputnik Moldova, Official web-site.

measurement of Internet traffic and audience, in October 2017 *Sputnik.md* had a market share of 12.5% and more than 226 000 real users (over 270 000 unique visitors).¹⁰⁷ The site is being edited in Romanian and Russian and since 2016 has expanded its activity in Romania.

Komsomolskaya Pravda is a daily Russian tabloid newspaper, founded on 13 March 1925. The newspaper is published in Russia with a local edition that covers issues from Moldova, whose founder is the Russian company Publishing house *Komsomolskaya Pravda JSC*.¹⁰⁸ The website of the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* – www.kp.md, is one of the most popular Russian online sources in Moldova. According to the Bureau of Audit of Circulations Internet (BACI),¹⁰⁹ the Moldovan edition of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* is the newspaper with one of the largest circulation among those distributed in Moldova, and according to the latest measurement of Internet traffic and audience in April 2017 *kp.md* scored a market share of 7.4% or 120 000 real users (about 270 thousand unique visitors) per month.¹¹⁰ It is interesting to note that both the newspaper and the on-line version appear only in the Russian language and lack a version in the official Moldovan language.

The *Moldavskie Vedemosti* newspaper was founded in 1995. While the publication was sold several times, it is now owned by the periodic publication *Moldavskie Vedemosti SRL* led by Victor Ciobu.¹¹¹ Although there is no evidence which directly links it to owners from the Russian Federation, since 2014 *Moldavskie Vedemosti* has published several articles with a clear pro-Russian and anti-Western bias. The publication has been targeted by various reports of non-governmental organisations as a fake mass media source.¹¹² The newspaper appears in a print version, and according to official data, the Moldovan edition has a circulation of more than 90 000 copies per year. Currently *Moldavskie vedomosti* is published on a weekly basis. It is edited in Russian and covers social, economic and political topics.

The content analysis of the three media outlets has revealed **the following similarities**.

Techniques of dissemination. In the articles published by Russian-funded media, the anti-American, anti-European and anti-Western messages are systematically transmitted and promoted extensively. This has as objective to influence the attitudes and beliefs of Moldovan citizens, trying to promote the idea that only the Russian Federation is capable of solving the biggest problems around the world. These messages have a pronounced propaganda character, and the techniques of dissemination are most diverse, including:

¹⁰⁷ Bureau of Audit of Circulations Internet (2017), *Study on the Measurement of Internet Traffic and Audience (SMTAI)*, Chisinau.

¹⁰⁸ State Registration Chamber, State Companies Register.

¹⁰⁹ Bureau of Audit of Circulations Internet (2017), *Audit of Circulations*.

¹¹⁰ Bureau of Audit of Circulations Internet (2017), *Study on the Measurement of Internet Traffic and Audience (SMTAI)*, Chisinau.

¹¹¹ State Registration Chamber, State Companies Register. Accessed August, 2018.

¹¹² Stop Fals Moldova, *FALS: The EU plans to destroy the vineyards in Romania, followed by those in Moldova*, Chisinau, 17 april 2018.

- **Selective presentation of the facts.** The Russian media has broadcast only the articles that are convenient to the Russian Federation's geopolitical aims;
- **Unilateral presentation of facts or news from a single source.** The analysis showed that most of the materials were taken from official Russian sources, without considering other sources;
- **Utilisation of anonymous sources** without verification of information from independent sources;
- **Exaggeration of facts and events.** In all the analysed topics, the Russian media try to emphasize certain topics that they present in binary/black and white terms;
- **Emotional influencing** in order to promote certain messages or discredit people or groups;
- **Interpreting/commenting on the facts.** All analysed articles are characterised by the violation of deontological norms, as the journalist imposes his/her own opinion;
- **Inaccurate citation and interpretation of the source of the message.** This is a technique by which the messages of the sources are selectively quoted and nuanced by the journalist's formulations, so that the general message transmitted is made to correspond to the interests of the transmitter;
- **Citation of unknown or non-credible experts;**
- **The repetition of false ideas** in order to give them credibility;
- **Labelling or applying negative ratings** in order to weaken the person's authority or to discredit them;
- **The selection of titles/images in a tendentious manner** so that actors and groups are presented in a negative light, or images unrelated to the title of article are used, but which emphasise the propagandist idea in the article;
- **Promoting the conspiracy theory** that a new cold war will soon erupt, and Russia will win;
- **Criticism of Western values;**
- **Promotion of the Russian Federation's military power, energy and financial power.**

Type of published articles. The quantitative analysis shows that the Russian-funded media mostly published news pieces and less interviews, reports or commentaries by pro-Russian experts. Thus, *sputnik.md* features 299 news pieces, 8 commentaries and 4 interviews. The *kp.md* newspaper has published 127 news articles, 77 reports / commentaries and 27 interviews. *Vedomosti.md* published 79 news pieces, 30 reports / commentaries and 4 interviews.

Authors. A specific feature of the articles published by the pro-Russian media is that many do not have authors, or very often the authors are located in Moscow. *Sputnik.md* has published the greatest number of anonymous articles – 296, with only 12 articles having author attribution. The articles in *Kp.md* are mostly written

by authors from the Russian Federation (218 out of 231). *Vedomosti.md* has published only 7 attributed pieces materials and 106 anonymous articles. These figures show that articles are often commissioned, possibly by a group of authors who prefer to remain anonymous in order not to be blamed for manipulation.

Reference sources. All published articles by pro-Russian media sources refer to other media sources, creating the perception among readers that articles are not manipulating but truthful due to the citation of many other outlets. The analysis shows that the three media outlets referred to different news agencies, including Russian and international media. *Sputnik.md* has published 116 materials quoting news agencies, 40 articles quoting international media source and 21 Russian media. *Kp.md* has published 121 articles citing Russian media source, 40 referencing international sources and 15 – news agencies. *Vedomosti.md* has never cited news agencies, but has had 11 mentions of international media source and 9 – of Russian media.

As regards to the specific names of the media sources referred to: *Sputnik.md* – RIA Novosti – 50, Sputnik International – 29, Russia Today – 14, Sputnik France – 5; *Kp.md* – Reuters – 15, Radio “Komsomolskaya Pravda” – 14, RIA Novosti – 11, TASS – 5; *Vedomosti.md* – INFOTAG, Moldova – 12, RIA Novosti – 6, IPN.md – 4, Sputnik – 4. In summary, the most cited media of all three analysed sources is the Russian agency RIA Novosti, which has been referenced 67 times.

Themes and related topics. The report focused on the examination of the three overarching themes related to the war in Syria, election meddling, and energy. As regards the first theme, *sputnik.md* has published the greatest number of articles – 220. In contrast 23 articles have been published on the issue of Russian meddling in foreign elections and cyber attacks, and 65 articles – on the Russian Federation’s energy interests and gas deliveries. The newspaper and the portal *Kp.md* have published 141 items on the war in Syrian, 38 – on election meddling and 52 – on energy. Also, *vedomosti.md* has published 62 articles on the Syrian conflict, 13 – on election meddling and 38 – on energy.

The most important narratives concerning the Syrian conflict in the three selected Moldovan media include the following: Russia helps to resolve the conflict in Syria, the US is guilty of escalating the war in Syria, Moscow successfully fights Islamic State, Bashar al-Assad’s regime is stable and on excellent terms with the Kremlin, the Russian weapons used in the war are of superior quality to those of the West, Syrian refugees invade Europe, the consequences of the war in Syria for Moldova would encompass an influx of refugees.

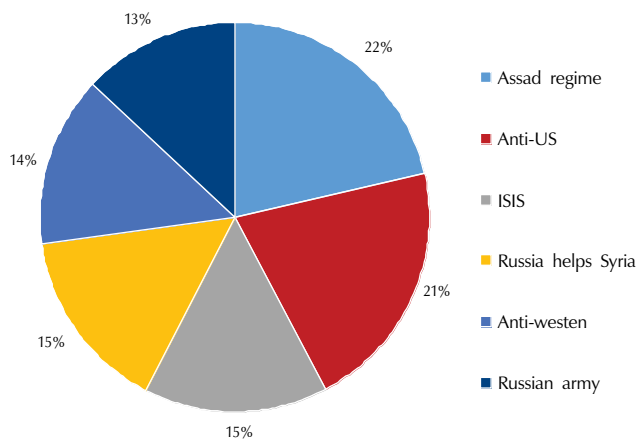
The most common narratives related to the Russian Federation’s meddling in elections across the globe include the following: claims of Russian interference in the US Presidential elections in 2016 are ridiculous, the Democrats search for a scapegoat in the face of Moscow, Donald Trump wants to establish a reasonable relationship with Russia, it is not the Russian Federation, but the USA that has been actively meddling in the electoral processes of other states, accusations levelled against Russian hackers are denied, demonstrating that the Russian Federation has neither the financial nor the logistical resources to undertake any cyber-attacks.

The most important narratives regarding energy issues and/or the interests of the Russian Federation include the following: Moldova is dependent on Russian

natural gas supplies and hence it should maintain good relations with Moscow, Russian gas transit through Moldova to the Balkans is strategically important, because of Ukraine, the citizens in Europe and Moldova could remain without gas, Turkish Stream is pictured as a successful project, which will have major benefits for the Balkan countries, the Nord Stream 2 project is presented as another alternative route of Russian gas delivery to European Union countries.

Overall, the top topics mentioned by *kp.md* are: Assad’s Regime – 64 entries; anti-US – 62; ISIS – 46; Russia helps Syria – 46; anti-Western – 42; Russian Army – 39.

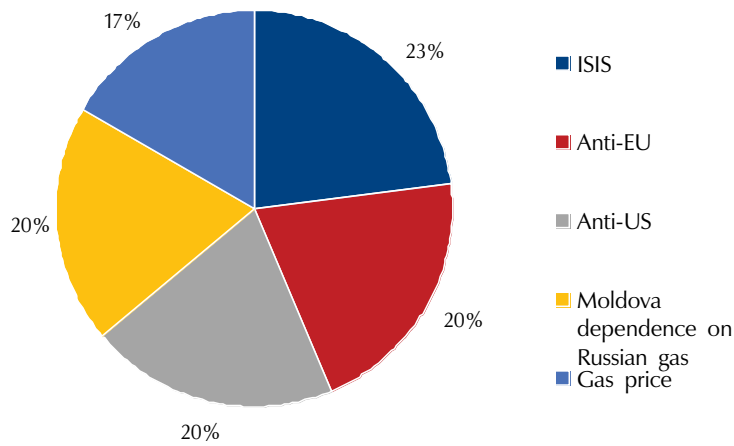
FIGURE 18. TOP TOPICS PUBLISHED ON *KP.MD*



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Vedomosti.md most frequently reported on the following key topics: ISIS – 32, anti – EU – 28, anti – US – 28, Moldovan dependence on Russian gas – 27, gas price – 23.

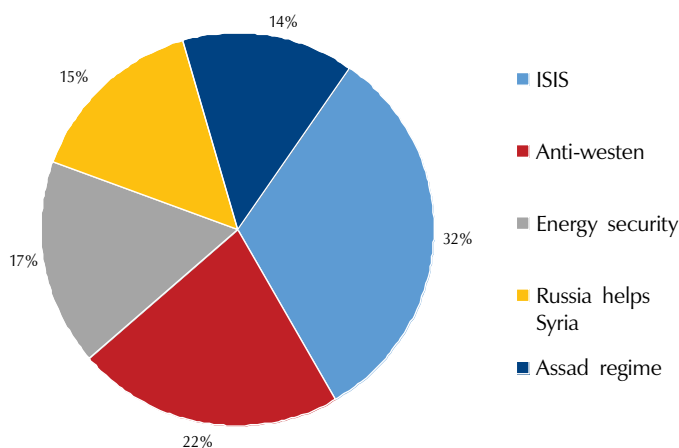
FIGURE 19. TOP TOPICS PUBLISHED ON VEDOMOSTI.MD



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

The five most commonly mentioned topics by *sputnik.md* are: ISIS and Islamic State – 68 articles; anti-Western – 47; energy security – 36; Russia helps Syria – 32; Assad regime – 30.

FIGURE 20. TOP TOPICS PUBLISHED ON SPUTNIK.MD



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Major actors. The pro-Russian media in the Republic of Moldova has used the names of several political figures for propaganda purposes. Reporting on leaders

and important people from the Russian Federation is positive, while Western politicians are generally portrayed negatively. Most articles demonstrate Russia's supremacy over the West. The main actors about which *sputnik.md* writes are: Russia – 140, ISIS – 95, USA – 79, Vladimir Putin – 71, Bashar al – Assad – 52, Gazprom – 44. *Kp.md* focused on the following actors: Russia – 130, ISIS – 89, the US – 89, Bashar al – Assad – 55, Vladimir Putin – 48. *Vedomosti.md* focuses on the following actors: EU – 35, Russia – 34, Gazprom – 32, US – 30, Vladimir Putin – 30. The top three mentions of each article are only analysed.

With regard to the media outlets' most frequently referred actors, **the manipulative tendencies and attitudes are extreme**, and the actors are either presented highly positively or highly negatively. The most positively portrayed actors are Russia – 44%, Vladimir Putin – 22%, Bashar al-Assad – 16%, Gazprom – 16%, Sergey Lavrov – 2%. On the other hand, the most negatively pictured players in the pro-Russian media outlets are: ISIS – 36%, USA – 34%, EU – 14%, Donald Trump – 12%, Moldova – 4%.

In terms of **the differences among the three media outlets**, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* occasionally includes alternative viewpoints and nationally-relevant coverage. For instance, the online source alerts to the locally-sensitive issue of gas supplies from Russia through Ukraine, which may cease in the midst of the Moscow's intervention in Ukraine. *Moldavskie Vedomosti* also features locally-sensitive issues but these are couched through a partisan lens. For example, the media outlet lent partisan support to and impacted public opinion in favor of Igor Dodon (the candidate of the Socialist Party in the Presidential elections of 2016) by discrediting the leader and Presidential candidate of the opposition Party of Action and Solidarity – Maia Sandu, in the context of the consequences of the Syrian war for Moldova. The outlet argued that the country would be flooded by thousands of Syrian refugees, given that Sandu had promised as much to German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the event of victory in the elections. An explicitly-biased, proof-deficient exaggeration of Russia's role in Syria is conveyed in *Sputnik-Moldova* through the impression that Moscow is consistently scoring successes in the Syrian crisis. Striking statistics (measuring thousands of Russian attacks as well as thousands of eliminated terrorists) are taken from reports of the Russian Ministry of Defense.

ARMENIA

The media domain in Armenia is in a standby mode, following the velvet revolution in the spring of 2018. Many problems have accumulated that **range from the self-censorship of journalists to the transparency of the media owners**. Experts expect changes in media ownership as well as a process of review and realignment of editorial freedoms and values.

Armenian media is **driven by political influences and owners, and not by audience demand**. The number of mass media in Armenia is much greater than the limited advertising market can support. In a well-developed market, the size of the ad market comprises 1-1.4 % of the total GDP. In Armenia it is about 0.2% of GDP.¹¹³ According to the Freedom House ranking for 2017, the Armenian press is not free,¹¹⁴ the Armenian Internet is partly free.¹¹⁵

The issue of the **transparency of media owners in Armenia is problematic**. It is possible to find out the names of the owners in the case of Limited Liability Companies LLCs, because official documents for LLC are open. The Armenian legislation sets a fee of 3200 Armenian drams (6.7 USD) for that though. However, in the case of other forms of company incorporation, like Closed Joint Stock Company (CJSC) shareholders names are hidden. Armenian legislation makes it impossible to determine the identity of the owners of those TVs that are closed joint-stock companies.

A vast array of pro-Russian media are on offer in Armenia. Three Russian TV channels are licensed to broadcast – *Pervy Kanal*, *RTR Planeta*, and *Kultura*. Specifically covering current affairs, *RTR Planeta* and *Pervy Kanal* reflect the Russian government's official line. In addition, there is a plethora of channels in Russian which air via cable TV. There is no data about the viewership of cable TV/the Cable Television, yet people generally use Internet Protocol television IPTV services that are included in the subscription for the package of their landline phone and monthly Internet services. Russian is the unofficial second language in the country and people watch films in Russian including those broadcast by Armenian stations and follow the news in Russian. The result is that what most Armenians know about international events, like the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Eastern Ukraine, is from Russian sources.

The investigation of the Armenian media landscape has focused on three media outlets – *news.am*, *Iravunk* and *Sputnik Armenia*, respectively representing an outlet with Russian affiliation, an outlet with a big audience and a smaller outlet having clear pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives.

¹¹³ The World Bank, *GDP of Armenia in 2017 was 11.537 Billion USD*.
Media.am, Armenian Media Market was 23-24 Million USD according experts.

¹¹⁴ Freedom House, *Freedom of The Press 2017*.

¹¹⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom of the Net 2017*.

News.am is one of the most read web-sites with a large number of followers. According to the data of similarweb¹¹⁶ – professionalized in web-site ratings, this web-site is the first in the list of the Armenian news web-sites. The audience of *News.am* consists of 14.11 million monthly visits.¹¹⁷ *News.am* is available in Armenian, Russian, English and Turkish. The owner of the website is News.am LLC. The main shareholder is Armenika Kiviryan and his brother Argishti Kivirayn.¹¹⁸ Armenika Kiviryan was the representative of Russian Regnum News Agency in the South Caucasus.¹¹⁹

Iravunk is more known as a print media. It belongs to the Union of Constitutional Rights political party espousing conservative-nationalistic values. The web-site is known for its anti-Western and pro-Russian publications. It has been involved in judicial proceedings¹²⁰ due to its publications. The owner of *Iravunk* is Iravunk Media LLC.¹²¹ The main owner of the newspaper and its website is Hayk Babukhanyan,¹²² head of the Union of Constitutional Rights and MP at the Armenian National Assembly.¹²³ Iravunk Media LLC offers a subscription for Armenian versions of Russian media outlets *Komsomolskaya Pravda Armenii* and *Argumenti Nedeli Armenii*.¹²⁴ *Iravunk* is available in Armenian and Russian.

Sputnik Armenia is the Armenian version of the Russian *Sputnik*. The web-site is part of Russian *Sputnik* News Agency launched on November 10, 2014 by the Russian media group *Rossiya Segodnya*.¹²⁵ The web-site is available in Armenian and Russian. Moreover, the web-site is described¹²⁶ in the same way as *Sputnik' International's* web-site. It is not mentioned that *Sputnik* is of Russian origin. If the reader is not aware that *Sputnik Armenia* is a Russian web-site, he/she should make specific efforts to find that out.

The general lines of Russian propaganda in the Armenian online media include the following: active presence of Russian players, topics and narratives, use of Russian sources, a more positive attitude towards the Russian narratives and a more negative attitude towards the West. In the three web-sites under investigation, the research identified 797 articles published in relation to the three general themes of the war in Syria, elections interference and energy. Among those there are 290 articles on the topic of energy, 319 articles – about the Syrian conflict and 188 articles – about alleged Russian interference in elections.

The largest number of publications has been about the Syrian conflict. In the case of Armenia, the presence of a large Armenian community in Syria makes the theme a highly significant, nationally-relevant issue. The Armenian media has focused on the problems of the Armenian community in the midst

¹¹⁶ SimilarWeb, Top websites of Armenia.

¹¹⁷ SimilarWeb, News.am Analytics.

¹¹⁸ Electronic Register of Republic of Armenia, News.am LLC.

¹¹⁹ Electronic Register of Republic of Armenia, Regnum.

¹²⁰ Karlen Aslanyan, *Activists Decry Libel Case Ruling In Favor Of Pro-Government Newspaper*, 31.10.2014.

¹²¹ About Us Page, Iravunk website.

¹²² Electronic Register of Republic of Armenia, Iravunk Media LLC.

¹²³ Profile of MP Hayk Babukhanyan, National Assembly of Armenia website.

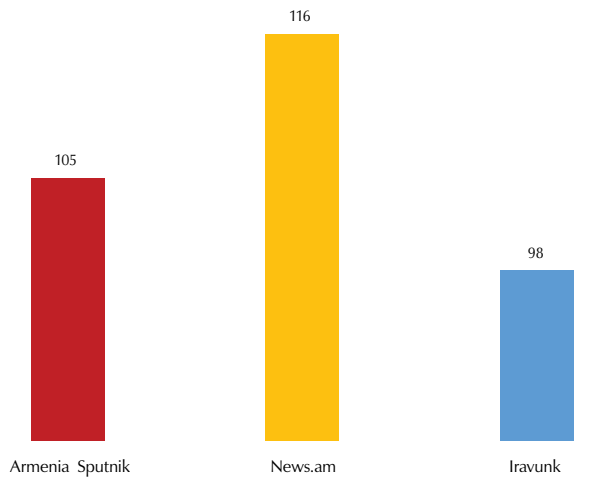
¹²⁴ Subscription Page, Iravunk website.

¹²⁵ About Us Page, Sputnik Website.

¹²⁶ About Sputnik webpage.

of war and on the fate of about 20 000 Armenians that have moved from Syria to Armenia.

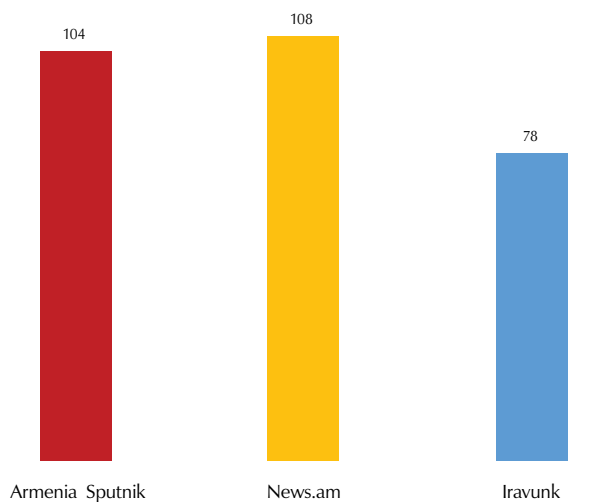
FIGURE 21. WAR IN SYRIA: NUMBER OF ARTICLES



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

The energy issues are also prioritized in the media. Russia is an important player in the energy sector of Armenia, Gazprom is the main supplier of gas to the country, the largest Armenian Thermal Power Plant of Hrazdan is

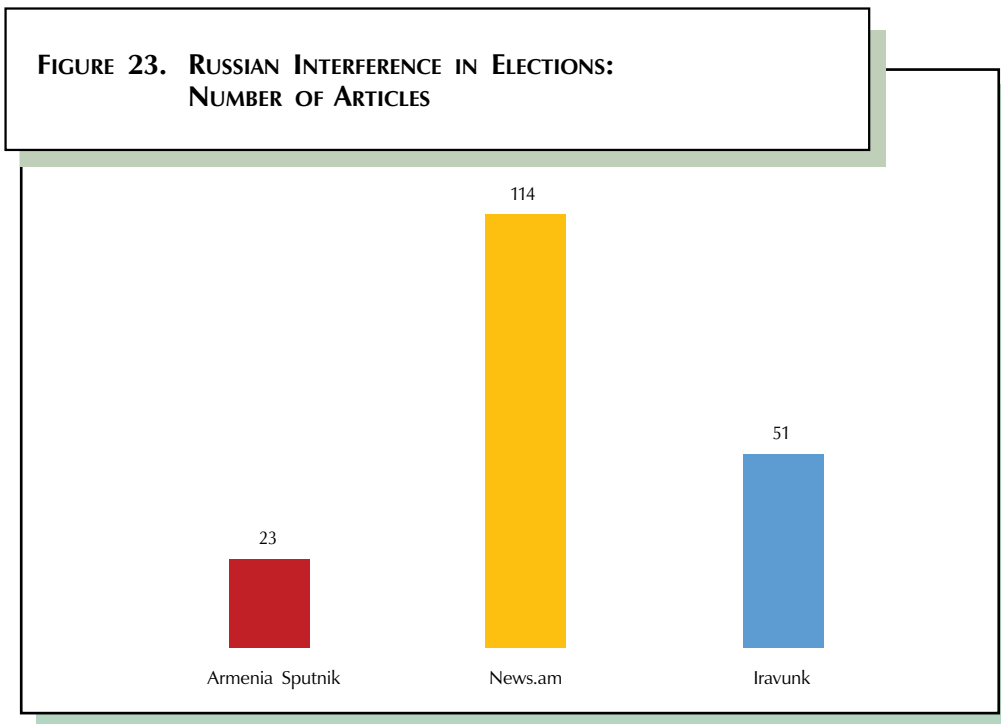
FIGURE 22. ENERGY: NUMBER OF ARTICLES



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

Russian, the Armenian Metsamor NPP has been handed over to the management of Rosatom.

The topic of Russian interference around the world and particularly in the US elections is less presented in the monitored media. The topic has been represented mainly in the form of news. Among the most plausible explanations is that the Armenian media shy away from provoking Russia on this issue.



Source: Comparative analysis of the selected media, 2018.

More than half of the identified articles (490) are news pieces. Commentaries and analytical articles are the second most common form of media material (180). Interviews take the third place (127).

It should be highlighted that more than two-thirds of the articles – 627 – are **anonymous** and do not have an author. This means that these articles are either translations or republications from other Armenian, Russian or Western sources, or are news releases. Articles with no authors are specific for the Armenian media.

There are a lot of articles with only a single reference. The cases when an article contains two or three references are much rarer. Some 552 of the analyzed articles **do not have a reference at all**. Articles with references to Russian sources amount to 131 of the material under investigation. References to American, EU, British, Israeli, Turkish and Armenian sources are available in 328 articles.

The **abundance of Russian sources** used by the media outlets is conditioned by the popularity of the Russian language in Armenia. It is much easier for the Armenian journalists to use Russian sources, the Russian web-sites are

more common in Armenia. Russian television is accessible for everyone. It is convenient for the local journalists to present the news based on Russian sources.

The Russian influence is also felt when examining the topics related the three main themes in the monitored media.

In terms of the topics related to the Syrian conflict, **Russia's role is prominently covered**. It is argued that through its presence in Syria, Russia helped the Syrian people and the Armenians residing there. The article¹²⁷ titled '*The Rescue of the Armenians, or Who Benefited from the Russian Participation in the Syrian Conflict*' presents the viewpoint of an Afghanistan War veteran and former Commander of the RA Armed forces, General-Lieutenant Norat Ter-Grigoryants. He maintains that 'The Russian Aerospace Forces supported the Syrian state and people, among which there are many Armenians'. The three selected outlets cite experts to promote certain views. For instance,¹²⁸ an expert notes that 'Russia is conducting military actions in Syria in line with the international legal norms, and upon the request of the Syrian leadership, and I don't think that any sensible person can be against it'.

The majority of the topics about energy are linked to **the activity of Gazprom and Rosatom in Armenia**. These two companies receive a wide coverage. Gazprom and Rosatom play an important role in the Armenian energy system.

The question of the continuing operation of the Armenian nuclear power plant and the proposal of the European Union to stop the operation of the NPP represent a painful issue for Armenia. It is mainly covered in the monitored media in a neutral or negative way. *Sputnik Armenia* is especially active citing experts to promote the thesis that the provisions in the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement that Yerevan has signed with the EU can cause an energy crises in Armenia.¹²⁹ The former Minister of Defense of Armenia Vagharshak Harutyunyan has stated that if it is not for Russia, the Armenians will lose the nuclear plant.

In the reviewed articles, there is also a tendency to portray positively the dependence of Armenia on Russian gas. For example, in a news article¹³⁰ on *news.am* the RA Minister of Energy argues that Iran cannot supply gas to Armenia at prices lower than those offered by Russia.

The theme of the alleged Russian interference in the elections of foreign countries is the only one in which the number of references to Western sources exceed references to Russian sources. Some 107 out of 188 articles

¹²⁷ Sputnik Armenia, Հայերի փրկությունը կամ սիրիական հակամարտությունում ով շահեց Ռուսաստանի մասնակցությունից (Rescue of the Armenians, or who benefited from the Russian Participation in the Syrian Conflict), 30.09.2017.

¹²⁸ Sputnik Armenia, Փորձագետ. Ռուսաստանը կլուծի Սիրիայում ԻՊ ահաբեկիչների հետ կապված խնդիրները (The Expert: Russia Will Solve the Issues Connected with the IS terrorists in Syria), 01.10.2015.

¹²⁹ Sputnik Armenia, ԵՄ-ն նոր «ցուրտ ու մութ» տարիներ է խոստանում Հայաստանին. փորձագետներ (The EU Promises new "Cold and Dark" years to Armenia: The Experts), 15.10.2017.

¹³⁰ News.am, Հայաստանի համար ռուսական գազը դեռևս ամենաեժանն է? Էներգետիկայի նախարար (Russian gas is still the cheapest for Armenia: The Minister of Energy), 20.10.2017.

are translations and republications from Western media. On the other hand, these articles from the Western media are just republications and carry information – not analysis or opinions, that is misrepresented in order to fit Russian narratives. The main topics related to the theme of Russian elections meddling include Russia's possible interference in the US elections, the assessment of the heads of different countries of claims about US elections interference, the opinions of cyber security experts and possible sanctions against Russia. The most common narratives focus on the lines that **Russia denies influence on the US elections**, cyber security experts reject the accusations of Russian interference in the US elections, accusations of Russian intervention are fabricated by Hillary Clinton, calls for sanctions against Moscow over its alleged meddling in elections are motivated by Russophobia.

As regards the differences among the media outlets, *news.am* sometimes conveys news in an even-handed way. For instance, it tried to present a balanced coverage of the question of Moscow's alleged meddling in the American elections relating both the Russian denial of accusations of interference as well as the justifiability of the US's imposition of sanctions on the Kremlin. *Iravunk's* similar occasional claim to ostensibly neutral reporting is however diluted on the basis of a frequent use of attitudinally tinged headings. In contrast, *Sputnik-Armenia* is not focused on an even seeming neutrality or the incorporation of locally-relevant perspectives. For instance, the outlet sidelines the communication of local discussions on Armenian nuclear energy by actively and repetitively presenting the Kremlin narrative that the EU's provision that Armenia's nuclear power plant be closed down due to the obsolete technology is shaped by ulterior Western motives. The latter aim at causing an energy crisis in the country and worsening Yerevan's relations with Moscow.

Overall, **the extent of presentation of Russia-favorable information in Armenia is not typical for other post-Soviet countries**. There are no Armenian media with Russian investments as such (probably because this is not seen as needed to achieve the goals of Russian influence). But the Russian state television channels are available in Armenia through terrestrial broadcast and most of the sport, entertainment, adventure channels of cable television are in the Russian language.

Practically **everyone in Armenia speaks or at least understands Russian**¹³¹ and hence listens and watches Russian media. Part of the local Armenian TV channels show Hollywood or European films without Armenian translation and in Russian. The Russian propaganda is transmitted through standard and on-line television on the basis of quality shows, educational and entertaining programs. This helps to maintain the audience of those channels.

There is **a large Armenian diaspora in Russia**. According to a census held in 2010 1.182 million Armenians reside in Russia. Russia is a place for temporary work for many Armenians. All these people themselves disseminate information by word of mouth. They create a positive image of Russia in oral conversations with their relatives, and thus generally re-enforce the positive attitude to Russia in Armenia.

¹³¹ Caucasus Barometer 2017, *Knowledge of Russian in Armenia*.

Therefore, it should be concluded that Russian propaganda is readily transmitted in Armenia and this is unlikely to change. The Armenian media have limited resources, and they often rely on freely available high quality Russian sources to keep their readership informed. At the same time Russian politics has still a big influence on the Armenian society and politics, which is reflected in the work of the media too.

